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**The ‘second Jezebel’: Representations of the  
sixth-century Queen Brunhild**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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University of Glasgow

School of Humanities

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the sixth-century Merovingian Queen Brunhild. By examining seven of the divergent sources which present the queen, the construction of Brunhild, or multiple Brunhilds, is analysed through gendered, literary and political lenses. Rather than attempting to reconcile the extremities of depictions of this queen, during her life and after her death, I demonstrate that Brunhild is a series of historical and textual problems at different political moments. I also show that the themes *damnatio memoriae*, *feud* and *queenship*, commonly used to analyse her career, are inadequate to understand the queen herself, the authors who wrote about her, and the age in which they lived.

Three main themes within Brunhild's extensive career allow the exploration of the tensions inherent within the seven main sources which present her. The 'construction of queenship' is an examination into Brunhild's move from Visigothic princess to Frankish queen, a transition often dismissed, but one which proves pivotal to understanding the queen's later Visigothic dealings. The ways in which authors recognised her at the point of marriage is nuanced by their political context, looking back on the queen upon her husband's death. The 'politics of survival' goes on to study Brunhild's relationship with the church: first, the positive associations between a queen and piety, and then, the results when that relationship goes awry. It is Brunhild's tension with the church which labels her 'the second Jezebel'. Finally, 'dynasty and destruction' explores Brunhild's relationship with her offspring. During three regencies, spanning three generations, the queen's connection to her family was critiqued in different ways. Her involvement in Visigothic succession politics to the end of her career is examined, alongside Brunhild's maternal image, and finally the accounts of her death. How Brunhild's physical and political body is neutralised is crucial to understanding each author's motives.

There is no other early medieval queen with the textual afterlife of Brunhild and this thesis is the first full examination of the extremities of her representation. Subjected, it has been said, to *damnatio memoriae*, the vilification, or more literally, destruction of memory, Brunhild and her textual manifestation is read in an entirely new way. The contemporary recognition of this queen, together with her textual representation, betray a tension which illustrates that Brunhild was, in fact, more alive after she was dead.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Primary Sources

<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
<i>Chron.</i>	Fredegar, <i>Chronicle and its continuations</i> , <i>MGH SSRM II</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1888)
<i>JBChron.</i>	John of Biclarum, <i>Chronicle</i>
<i>DLH</i>	Gregory of Tours, <i>Decem Libri Historiarum</i> , <i>MGH SSRM I.I</i> , ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison (Hanover, 1951).
<i>EA</i>	<i>Epistolae Austrasicae</i> , <i>MGH Epp. III</i> , ed. W. Gundlach (Berlin, 1892)
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
AA	<i>Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
Epp.	<i>Epistolae</i>
Poet.	<i>Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini</i>
SSRM	<i>Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum</i>
<i>LHF</i>	<i>Liber Historiae Francorum</i> , <i>MGH SSRM II</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1888)
<i>OP</i>	Venantius Fortunatus, <i>Opera Poetica</i> , <i>MGH AA IV.I</i> , ed. F. Leo (Berlin, 1881)
<i>Reg.</i>	Gregory the Great, <i>Registrum Epistolarum</i> , <i>CCSL 140A</i> , ed. D. Norberg (Turnhout, 1981-2)
<i>VC</i>	Jonas of Bobbio, <i>Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani</i> , <i>MGH SSRM IV</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover; 1905)
<i>VD</i>	Sisebut, <i>Vita Desiderii</i> , <i>MGH SSRM IV</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1905)
<i>VR</i>	<i>Vita S. Radegundis</i> , <i>MGH SSRM II</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1888)
<i>VR2</i>	<i>Vita S. Radegundis 2</i> , <i>MGH SSRM II</i> , ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1888)

### Secondary Sources

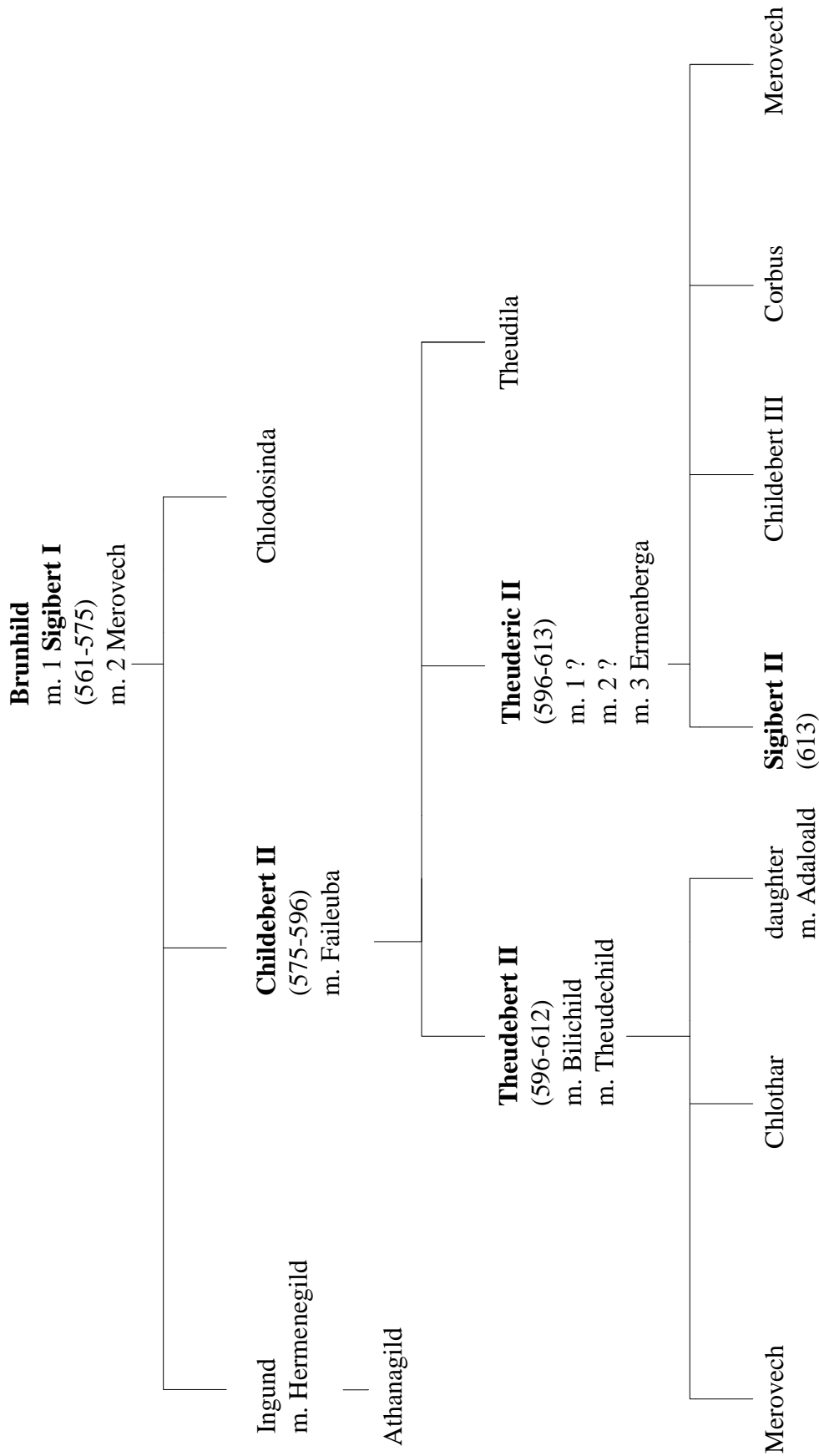
<i>GEMW</i>	<i>Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900</i> , eds. L. Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith (Cambridge, 2004)
<i>MK</i>	Wood. I., <i>The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751</i> (London, 1994)

## Chronology

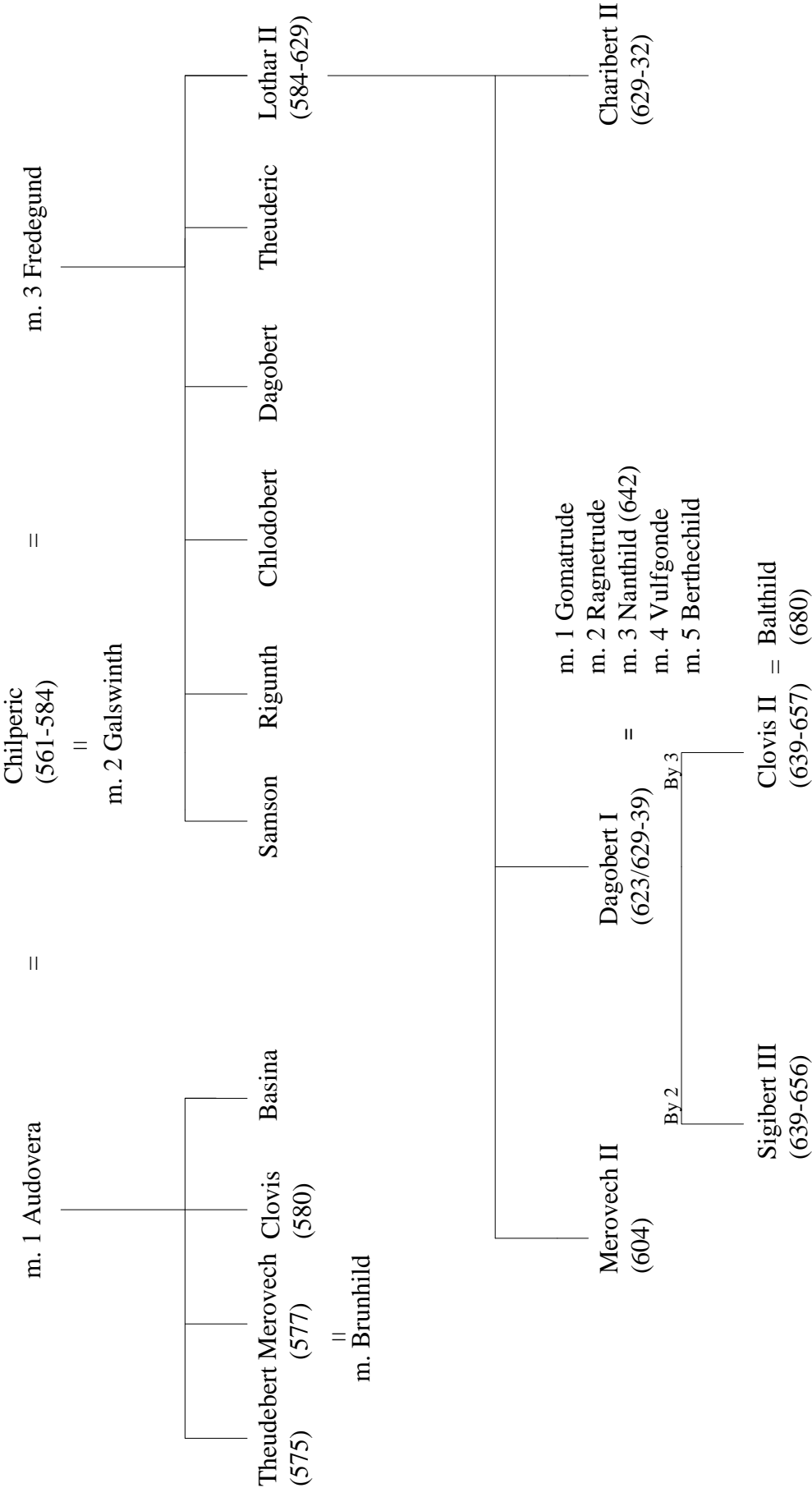
543	Brunhild born to the Visigothic King Athanagild
567	Marriage of Brunhild to Sigibert I of Austrasia
c.569	Death of Galswinth
570	Birth of Childebert II
575	Assassination of Sigibert I, and accession of infant Childebert II, for whom Brunhild acts as regent
576	Marriage of Brunhild to Merovech
579	Marriage of Ingund to Hermenegild; Hermenegild rebellion
584	Capture of Ingund by the Byzantines; Birth of Lothar II; Assassination of Chilperic
585	Majority of Childebert II; Death of Ingund
587	Treaty of Andelot
590	Papal accession of Gregory the Great
592	Arrival of the Irish monk Columbanus to Gaul; Death of Guntram
594	Death of Gregory of Tours
595/6	Death of Childebert II: Brunhild's grandsons, Theudebert II and Theuderic II, become kings of Austrasia and Burgundy respectively, and Brunhild acts as regent for both
596	Augustine is despatched from Rome on the mission to the English
597	Death of Queen Fredegund
c.600	Death of Venantius Fortunatus
603	Deposition of Desiderius of Vienne
604	Death of Gregory the Great
607	Martyrdom of Desiderius of Vienne
609	Exile of Columbanus
613	Capture and execution of Brunhild by Lothar II of Soissons
615	Death of Columbanus at Bobbio (Italy)

- 621 King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* is completed
- 640s The *Vita Columbani* written by Jonas of Bobbio
- 660s Fredegar's *Chronicle* written
- 727 *Liber Historiae Francorum* written

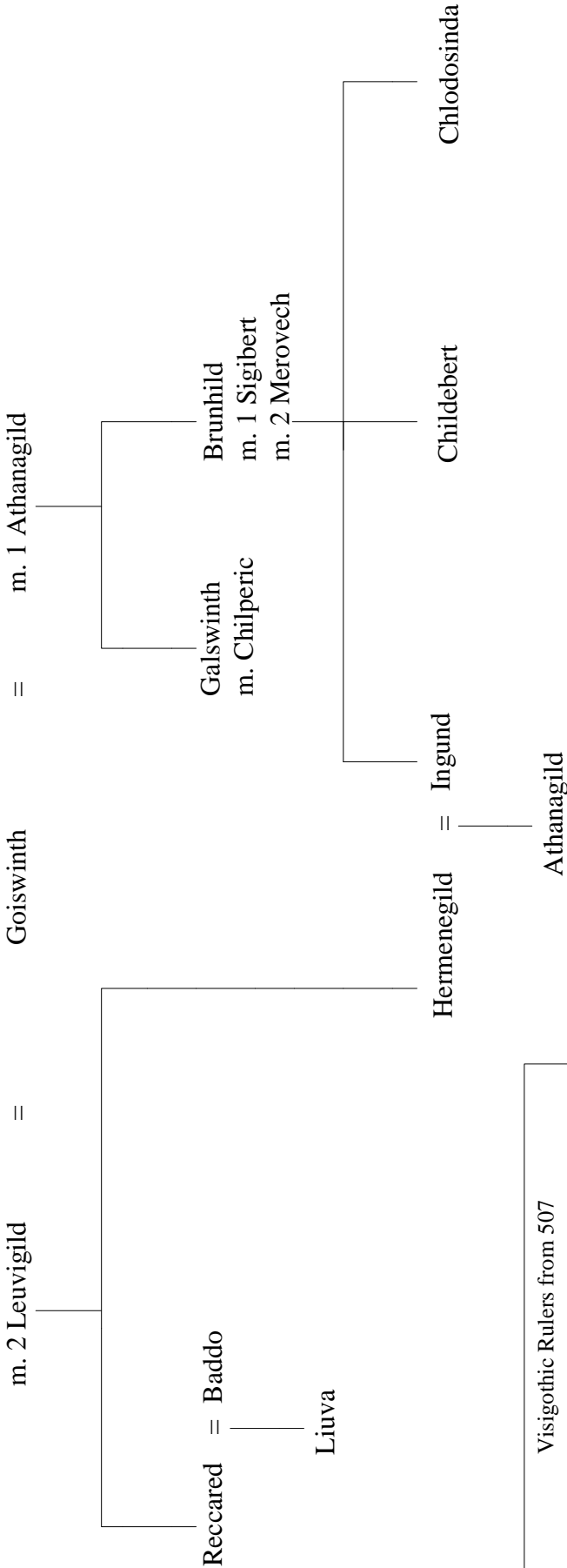
Brunhild’s Line



The Rival Line



The Visigothic Line



Visigothic Rulers from 507
Gesalic
Amalaric
Theudis (d. 548)
Theudiscus (548-549)
Agila (549-54)
Athanagild (554-568) – first King to die of natural causes since 484.
Liuvia (571/573)
Leuwigild (d. 586)
579 Hermengild Rebellion
Reccared (d. 601)
Liuvia (d. 603)
Witteric (d. 610)
Gundemar (d. 611/12)
Sisebut (d. 620)

## Introduction

### The 'second Jezebel'

#### Introduction

The sixth century Merovingian queen Brunhild is a figure of extremes, lauded by Pope Gregory the Great as 'most excellent daughter'<sup>1</sup> and later defiled as 'the enemy of Christianity'.<sup>2</sup> Her move from Visigothic princess to Frankish queen in 567 began an extraordinary career, including three regencies, spanning three generations. At the age of seventy, the most violent of deaths ended Brunhild's life in 613: it was a death unprecedented and unreplicated for any queen.

This thesis will attempt to address the current absence of a sustained monograph examining Brunhild which analyses her, not through biography, but through her diverse textual representations, spanning over one hundred and fifty years. The various lenses through which the queen will be examined are mutually informative in making sense not only of Brunhild, but of the political contexts from which her construction arises. I will draw attention to the lack of appropriate existing vocabulary and models to make sense of Brunhild and the unique place she held in history and texts, and attempt to provide new ways of reading her. There is no figure in Merovingian history with the textual afterlife of Brunhild, whereby a contemporary individual has been subjected to such continuous active reworking of their representation.

The image of Brunhild which has endured is that of the 'second Jezebel',<sup>3</sup> the title given to the queen by the Italian monk Jonas of Bobbio in the 640s, and which formed the focus of the seminal 1978 article by Janet Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels'.<sup>4</sup> Nelson placed Brunhild firmly onto the Merovingian stage and, instead of examining the label itself,

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<sup>1</sup> *Reg.* 8.4.

<sup>2</sup> *VD* 20.

<sup>3</sup> *VC* I.31. There is little evidence surrounding the historical figure who has recently attracted more critical attention: Marjo C.A. Korpel, 'Fit for a Queen: Jezebel's Royal Seal', *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34:2 (2008) pp. 32-37 and the fictional work by Lesley Hazelton, *Jezebel: The Untold Story of the Bible's Harlot Queen* (New York, 2007). In the Old Testament, the daughter of a Phoenician king, Jezebel, was married to the King of Israel, Ahab. She is said to murder at will (I Kings 18:4) and acted as regent for twelve years during the reign of her son (II Kings 10:13). She was thrown from a window and trampled by horses (II Kings 9:30-37).

<sup>4</sup> Janet L. Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history', *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford, 1978) pp. 31-77, reprinted in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. L. Little and B. Rosenwein (Oxford, 1998) pp. 219-253 – page references are from the latter. The fullest scholarly introductions to Brunhild remain Godefroid Kurth, *La Reine Brunehaut*, *Études franques*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1919) pp. 265-356 with his insight into the nineteenth century historiography and Eugen Ewig, 'Studien zur merowingischen Dynastie', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 8 (1974) pp. 15-59.



focused on the significance of this queen's political career. The consideration of the queen's role at court has been developed by Nelson in various other places, and more recently, she has considered the female role in the *representation* of the court's values, and therefore in the very construction of that society.<sup>5</sup>

Representation has been pivotal to developing scholars' understanding of historical actors and certainly Brunhild, with the relationship between genres, history and the so-called 'semiotic challenge' proving a key tension to unpack.<sup>6</sup> Ian Wood has shown that the Merovingian family was not born, but made:<sup>7</sup> in recognising the *constructedness* of the structure in which Brunhild forms a part, historians need to probe further into what royal women actually did, or more aptly, what they are represented as doing. With a limited range of stereotypes available to critique royal women, authors tended to situate their depictions within the dichotomy of the good versus the bad, but this goes little way to explain the unique representation of Brunhild. The key distinction with this queen is not simply between positive and negative images, but between life and death. To the term *representation*, then, I will add that of *recognition* to this study, to analyse the ways in which Brunhild was understood during her life as a historical actor, and then how she was used after her death as a textual construction.

Men such as Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus worked alongside the ruler, viewing her in 'real' time in unfolding political situations that they themselves were often a part of. Upon Brunhild's death came a different set of authors, depicting a queen who, at least in theory, should have been politically 'neutralised'. She has traditionally been viewed as being subjected to *damnatio memoriae*, a vilification, or more literally destruction, of memory upon her death.<sup>8</sup> This thesis aims to illustrate that Brunhild is never more alive, never more potent, than when she is dead. The *damnatio* is an umbrella under which Brunhild's experience loses its unique quality. Instead, in following Rosenfeld, we accept that 'memory is not so much a record of a remembered item as a procedure',<sup>9</sup> we may investigate what that procedure looked like for the early medieval author, the

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<sup>5</sup> Janet L. Nelson, 'Gendering courts in the early medieval west', *GEMW*, p.195.

<sup>6</sup> See Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Ian Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family', *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, eds. R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger and H. Reimitz (Leiden, 2003) p.164.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Flower, 'Rethinking "Damnatio Memoriae": The Case of Cn. Calpurnius Piso Pater in AD 20', *Classical Antiquity* 17:2 (1998) pp. 155-186, covers the historiography on the term. Eric Varner has shown that the label has been used uncritically by modern scholars and the attempts to blacken womens' characters for posterity have, in some cases, reinforced their political importance: 'Portraits, Plots and Politics: *Damnatio Memoriae* and the Images of Imperial Women', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001) pp. 41-93.

<sup>9</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (California, 2000) p.197.

contemporary reader, and the modern historian understanding this queen. The dichotomy inherent within the representations of Brunhild may well have pervaded the historiography itself: modern scholars have sought to confirm or discredit the characterisation, and thus significant aspects of Brunhild's career are either foregrounded or dismissed. Some have attempted to 'rehabilitate' the queen by examining her motherhood, or her piety; others focused on her violence, in particular the pursuit of the alleged blood-feud with the almost equally infamous Fredegund. As with *damnatio*, the feud has become a short-hand to categorise the political rivalry between these two women, but is unsatisfactory to explain the complexities of this unique period of female rule.<sup>10</sup> Our early medieval characters may act in ways authors or historians may not expect; they may change over the course of a career or through different texts, and this requires a new methodology.

Taking two major distinct, but overlapping, discourses and models – gendered and political, historical and literary – I will reflect on the ways in which the key stakeholders in texts depicting Brunhild (Gregory of Tours or Pope Gregory the Great as examples) differ from the later authors who seek to vilify the queen after her death. Julia Smith has rightly asserted that 'gender is in essence about power relationships and the language which legitimates or denies their existence'.<sup>11</sup> Using gendered and literary theories together, this study will consider the shift in discourse between historical actor and textual cipher that has never been given sustained analysis. There are seven literary sources which will feature here, ranging from the most central source of the sixth century, the *Decem Libri Historiarum*, through poetry and hagiography to the eighth-century *Liber Historiae Francorum*. Alongside the expected variety of male-written sources, this study offers the rare opportunity to explore the 'odd one out': housed in a collection known as the *Epistolae Austrasicae*, Brunhild's extant letters require the same level of criticism as their male-authored counterparts.

The examination of Brunhild through a gendered and political reading means that one must take a clear position on what can be understood in light of the 'linguistic turn'. When the skills of those types of criticism form part of the Brunhild 'toolkit', this does not

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<sup>10</sup> The theme of the 'feud' has had significant staying power in studies of Brunhild: her most recent biographer calls it the 'motor' which drives her rivalry with Fredegund – Bruno Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut* (Paris, 2008) p.326. The participation of these queens in violence was pursued within a theme of gender studies that sought to challenge very specific cultural assumptions about gender roles. See Nira Pancer, 'La vengeance féminine revisitée: Le cas de Grégoire de Tours', *La Vengeance 400-1200*, eds. D. Barthélemy, F. Bougard and R. Le Jan (Rome, 2006) pp. 307-324, Régine Le Jan, 'La vengeance d'Adèle ou la construction d'une légende noire', *La Vengeance*, pp. 325-40 and Barbara Rosenwein, 'Les émotions de la vengeance', *La Vengeance*, pp. 237-256. These interpretations, however, do not encompass the literary challenges of the texts which present the violence. Most recently, Jennifer McRobbie has identified that violence committed or encouraged by women was becoming less and less acceptable in the sixth century, through a myriad of competing discourses: '*Gender and Violence in the Histories of Gregory of Tours*', PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Julia M.H. Smith, 'Introduction: gendering an early medieval world', *GEMW*, p.7.

mean that representation overtakes historicity. This study explores the construction of a textual identity, while maintaining that the context in which such a construction is made can be meaningful and is historical.

### Gender as an ‘essential’ category

Reading from Joan Kelly’s seminal ‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’ in 1976 to Julia Smith’s 2001 question, ‘Did Women Have a Transformation of the Roman World?’, scholars have asked how the insertion of women into the traditional historical narrative affects our knowledge of events.<sup>12</sup> The ubiquity of gender in early medieval texts is now apparent: it has moved from a ‘useful’ category of analysis to essential, no more so than for a fully historicised understanding of this Merovingian political landscape. Yet scholars are still to find the best methodological framework to support the study of gender, particularly when one adds to the mix the representation of it. As a result of the ‘linguistic turn’, something of a catch-all phrase for various divergent critiques of historical paradigms, language is now contextualised as itself constituting historical events, rather than simply reflecting a supposed historical reality. Reality and representation, then, have created a key theme into which the study of gender must continue to assert itself.<sup>13</sup>

The impossibility of writing, and even reading, a female life remains contested, with a vast bibliography surrounding developments between feminist theory, language and the ‘self’. The most recent monograph on Brunhild, by Bruno Dumézil, has attempted to write this biography, and in so doing has illustrated the potential pitfalls of the approach itself. Charting Brunhild’s rise to power from as far back as the third century, Dumézil’s desire to give Brunhild her place within French history uses much of the subjunctive mood and the reader is shown what the queen felt and foresaw throughout her career.<sup>14</sup> Taking very little account of the gendered and textual challenges surrounding the queen’s representation, the attempt at biography and desire to get towards a ‘true’ Brunhild cannot be sustained.

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<sup>12</sup> Joan Kelly, ‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. R. Bridenthal, C. Coonz and S. Stuard (Boston, 1977) pp. 137-64; Julia M.H. Smith, ‘Did Women Have a Transformation of the Roman World?’, *Gendering the Middle Ages*, eds. P. Stafford and A. B. Mulder-Bakker (Oxford, 2001) pp. 22-41. More recently, see A. Shepard and G. Walker eds., *Gender and Change: Agency, Chronology and Periodisation* (Oxford, 2009), Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca, 2009) and Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850* (Manchester, 2011) on understanding female identity.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Poovey, ‘Feminism and Deconstruction’, *Feminist Studies* 14:1 (1988) pp. 51-65 for the beginnings of this consideration.

<sup>14</sup> See Roger Collins’ ‘Review of “La reine Brunehaut”’, *Early Medieval Europe* 18:2 (2010) pp. 229-230.

This thesis cannot concern itself with the meta-narrative of female visibility,<sup>15</sup> but instead critiques the ‘doing and undoing’, if one follows Judith Butler’s method, of Brunhild’s gendered identity, or identities, across one hundred and fifty years.<sup>16</sup> Inherited literary traditions, in particular biblical tropes, inform the portrait created by these texts.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, when Gregory of Tours describes one queen as a ‘wicked and cruel woman’, Nelson has shown that the bishop is proving that she ‘performed as advertised’.<sup>18</sup> A welcome new gendered reading of the *DLH* has successfully argued that Gregory uses biblical tropes to describe the women within his text, and engages directly with the positive and negative roles that women played in his society.<sup>19</sup> The crucial point, however, is that women may not be passive in their construction. Art critic John Berger once said: ‘men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’.<sup>20</sup> One must not forget that women themselves interact with, perhaps are even complicit in, the images surrounding them.

Biblically-literate queens might be inspired in their conduct by the example of Old Testament exemplars,<sup>21</sup> or themselves become paragons to inspire later generations as they departed their homelands to marry heretical kings.<sup>22</sup> Jezebel is perhaps the most-cited biblical example of a bad woman: from Brunhild, to the seventh-century Balthild, and tenth-century Ælfthryth, the label was applied to queens who overstepped constructed gender limitations. The virulence of the accusations toward each of these women shows the desire to associate assertive women with the Old Testament figure.<sup>23</sup> Brunhild, however, may threaten to jump out at any moment of the gender ‘boxes’ one may place her within: she may be at once the ‘Jezebel’, but to Gregory the Great is ‘God’s most faithful daughter’.<sup>24</sup> Andrew Beresford has recently traced the nuances between Greek, Latin and Castilian versions of the stories of two ‘holy harlots’, St. Thaïs and St. Pelagia, and the changes reflect different sins and virtues not only of the harlot, but perhaps more

<sup>15</sup> Susan Mosher Stuard, ‘The Chase After Theory: Considering Medieval Women’, *Gender and History* 4:2 (1992) pp. 134-56 and Judith M. Bennett, ‘Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide’, *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. D. Aers (London, 1992) pp. 147-75.

<sup>16</sup> Judith M. Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> See Helen J. Swift, *Gender, Writing, and Performance: Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France (1440-1538)* (Oxford, 2008) on the ‘constructedness’ of these traditions.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, ‘Gendering courts’, *GEMW*, p.187. See *DLH* III.4 and III.7.

<sup>19</sup> McRobbie, ‘*Gender and Violence*’.

<sup>20</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972) p.86.

<sup>21</sup> Louisa Huneycutt, ‘Intercession and the High-Medieval Queen: The Esther Topos’, *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, eds. J. Carpenter and S-B. MacLean (Chicago, 1995) pp. 126-146.

<sup>22</sup> Queen Clotild is the exemplar of such activity: see Janet L. Nelson, ‘Queens as Converters of kings in the earlier middle ages’, *Agire da donna: Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (Secoli VI-X)*, ed. M.C. La Rocca (Turnhout, 2007) pp. 95-107.

<sup>23</sup> Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, 2006) particularly pp. 125-163; also Nicholas Vincent, ‘Isabella of Angoulême: John’s Jezebel’, *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. S. Church (Woodbridge, 1999) pp. 165-219.

<sup>24</sup> *Reg.* 8.4.

importantly, of the spiritual advisor.<sup>25</sup> The multiplicity of representations, then, demands a new methodological framework to understand the relationship between men and women, both historically and textually.

I have chosen the female life cycle as an interpretative framework through which to view Brunhild, as she moves through a series of gendered identities in her career: from king's daughter to king's wife, to widow, through to regent for four heirs. Pauline Stafford, five years after Nelson's 'Jezebel' article, began considering the challenges, and more specifically agency, surrounding the stages of that cycle and Lees and Overing have continued, analysing the roles which form an integral part of a gendered reading: the wife, mother and widow are roles predicated by their relationship to men. The link between female agency and the status of male relatives, then, defines the woman's identity as relational, and not independent.<sup>26</sup> This cannot be the case in a study of queen Brunhild, for whom the female life cycle is constantly in collusion with the political cycle, by virtue of her position as queen. She is not just a daughter, but a king's daughter; not a wife, but a king's wife; not a mother, but a regent.

Brunhild's are simultaneously gendered and political roles, therefore her actions within her familial relationships take on a much wider significance. For Nelson, female agency during the period discussed in this study should be understood less as a gauge of a woman's power or empowerment than as a measure of her 'room for manoeuvre'.<sup>27</sup> Brunhild's agency was constantly re-assessed by ruptures in both the female life cycle and political cycle also, and there were certainly moments at which the 'room to manoeuvre' was little. The queen's power, however, came from her ability to manipulate the key relationships around her when she needed them – foreground them, destroy them even – but that she needed men to achieve power does not mean that power is diminished. The historical relationships between men and women must be exactly that – relational – and the interpretative framework of the female life cycle must do two things: establish the relationships which come out of the gendered roles, and sit alongside the political life cycle when a queen is being discussed. Brunhild's connections to men – bishop, poet, pope and monk – not only influenced her personal power, but perhaps more importantly, influenced the queen's representation. This was a representation forged not only by men, but by Brunhild herself. Historians are now much more aware of the 'shift of perspective'

<sup>25</sup> Andrew M. Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots: Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature* (Woodbridge, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Batsford, 1983) and reprinted (Athens, 1998) – page references are from the latter. Clare Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 2001); Elisabeth van Houts in her *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200* (Basingstoke, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Janet L. Nelson, 'The wary widow', *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. W. Davies and P. Fouracre (Cambridge, 1995) pp. 82-113.

required when considering the domination of historical representation by men, with their louder voices and even mightier pens, but have yet to arrive at a successful model which addresses male and female portraits of one individual.<sup>28</sup> Women were ‘good to think with’,<sup>29</sup> but the rarity of female writers in the early medieval period has meant that little work has been done to critique how one inserts the female voice into the established historical paradigm. Gendered and literary theories have become trains running on separate tracks, and in the application of different sets of historiographical issues to divergent sources, studies of Brunhild have not been able to reconcile the extreme images presented.<sup>30</sup> One of the newest themes in gender studies is crucial to unpacking the images of this queen and of other historical figures – the collaboration between men and women.

Not only is a woman a literary tool through which the male representing her may ‘think through’ their own position, or cultural surroundings; a woman is an active agent of that culture’s transmission. She is a historical reality within the textual image of her, and the degree to which the woman is made historically available to the reader says much about the author’s relationship with her. What appears to be a portrait of a woman may indeed be more about a man: Elizabeth Clark has influentially argued that Melania the Younger is absent from her *vita*, that she is simply a tool for her brother Gregory of Nyssa to ‘think with’;<sup>31</sup> Leslie Brubaker has shown the way in which the transgressions of the Byzantine empress Theodora cannot be separated from that of the emperor.<sup>32</sup> There is a fascinating collusion at play which needs to be teased out: early medieval studies have yet to move with the same pace as those of mystics or witchcraft. Later medieval mystic studies are now considering the relationship with the male confessor, amanuensis or scribe

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<sup>28</sup> When male and female representations are placed at opposite ends of an imagined spectrum, a tension is created. See Elspeth Whitney, ‘The Witch ‘She’/ The Historian ‘He’: Gender and the Historiography of the European Witch Hunts’, *Journal of Women’s History* 7:3 (1995) pp. 77-101; on the influence of post-modern theories to this tension, Elizabeth Clark, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the “Linguistic Turn”’, *Church History* 67 (1998), p.3 in particular.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988) p.153, drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London, 1969) p.496. Levi-Strauss cautioned against the reduction of women to the status of symbols. As ‘words do not speak, while women do’, women themselves are producers of signs: *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963) p.61.

<sup>30</sup> Seminal sources have had literary theory acknowledged, but been largely gender blind. Gregory of Tours has long been denied a gendered reading, now addressed through McRobbie, ‘*Gender and Violence*’. See Michael Roberts, ‘Venantius Fortunatus’ Elegy on the Death of Galswintha’, *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, eds. R.W. Mathisen and D. Shanzer (Aldershot, 2001) pp. 298-312, which analyses the gendered roles created; then Michael Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus* (Michigan, 2009) which takes literary theory as its main priority, backgrounding gender.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, ‘The Lady Vanishes’, especially pp.18-30 - as a counter-argument, see David Brakke, ‘The Lady Appears: Materialisations of “Woman” in Early Monastic Literature’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003) pp. 387-402.

<sup>32</sup> Leslie Brubaker, ‘Sex, lies and textuality: the *Secret History* of Prokopios and the rhetoric of gender in sixth-century Byzantium’, *GEMW*, pp. 83-101; similar issues are examined by Joanna Royle on the images of Christina of Markyate: ‘*Transitional Holiness in the Twelfth Century: The Social and Spiritual Identity of Domina Christina of Markyate*’, PhD thesis, University of Glasgow (2008).

as key to understanding female spirituality and male conceptions of it.<sup>33</sup> An emerging female voice may only be heard by unpicking the layers through which it comes to us: John Coakley's 2006 work has taken the most textual and historical approach, and several works have followed in this vein, most recently from Kate Cooper, who returns to the multiple voices at work in the prison memoir of the third-century martyr Perpetua.<sup>34</sup>

How did Brunhild herself understand her own voice, for she would have been as aware as any of the unique place her letters would hold in a male world; and how do we as historians situate the female voice within the polyphony of male ones? Female strategies of self-authorisation in writing, according to Jane Chance, have been extensive enough to constitute a 'tradition of dissonance' and, in authorising the female writing subject, might be thought to constitute a political act. The desire to define woman's 'different voice'<sup>35</sup> has been, in some places, as much political as gendered in motive. I will not insert Brunhild's voice into an existing male historiography, but understand that adding the female voice must require a shift in the vision through which we examine these texts. The queen participates in the same fields of representation as do men; she is complicit in the images created of her, to differing extents, over one hundred and fifty years. Brunhild's contemporary, queen and monastic foundress Radegund, was as involved in the creation of her own image by various authors,<sup>36</sup> and was surely cognisant of the influence that the image would have on later generations of nuns. We may not ask how representative these authors are of the life they are presenting, but what the images tell us about the relationship between subject and author. This is one of the main strands that gender theory has neglected – the implicit tension between reality and representation. The historical and political reality the woman was living in may be entirely distinct from that of a male author; only in unpacking that tension can female authors be examined with as critical an eye as male ones.

Gender, then, is essential to an understanding of how Brunhild can be both 'Jezebel' and 'faithful daughter' but is a category which cannot be taken in isolation. The challenges of the 'linguistic turn' have prompted divergent questions about how we deal with women, but understanding the language through which the images come to us does

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<sup>33</sup> John Coakley, *Women, Men & Spiritual Power: Female Saints & Their Male Collaborators* (New York, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Kate Cooper, 'A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage', *Gender History* 23:3 (2011) pp.685-702.

<sup>35</sup> For a useful summary, Barrie Ruth Strauss, 'Skirting the Texts: Feminisms' Re-Readings of Medieval and Renaissance Texts', *Exemplaria* 4:1 (1992) pp. 1-4 in particular and Jane Chance, 'Introduction', *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Gainesville, 1996) p.17.

<sup>36</sup> See Julia M. H. Smith, 'Radegundis peccatrix: Authorisations of Virginity in Late Antique Gaul', *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown*, eds. P. Rousseau and E. Papoutsakis (Farnham, 2009) pp. 303-326.

not make those images any less meaningful. I will consider the collaboration between male and female images of Brunhild, and those relationships which pervaded her historical reality, as distinct from those authors who wrote about her after her death. The female life cycle will be considered in conjunction with that of the political life cycle, and the relationships encompassed therein are re-assessed constantly. A tension between historical reality and representation, then, becomes key to understanding gender as it does to the political contexts in which Brunhild is considered.

### **The politics of power**

Just as gendered and literary theories have progressed significantly from Nelson's 1978 work on Brunhild, the other major theme to have developed is political history. Nelson was responding to two major trends in her exploration of the queen – the German master narrative scholars, and Michael Wallace-Hadrill's broadening vision of what politics in the early middle ages actually meant: central to the approach was the understanding of both the structure of the society and the thoughts of its leading writers. Previously, religious history and cultural history had been viewed as distinct from political history; Nelson was reacting to the bifocation in her examination of Brunhild. Since, the study of political history, certainly in an early medieval context, has progressed considerably. The early medieval state is now a conceptual framework in which we must consider both the institutions and the people within it; politics and political categories are fluid, and one of those is kingship, or more aptly here, 'queenship'. How we now consider this term, and the authors who conceptualise it, is pivotal to a new reading of Brunhild.

### **Queenship**

It seems the most simple of conclusions that, in order to find her way onto the main stage of Merovingian politics, Brunhild moved from king's daughter to king's wife, two entirely gendered roles, and then on to mother and widow. In choosing the female life cycle as an interpretative framework through which both a gendered and political reading can be made, Brunhild is not only a woman, but a queen, and therefore her study must not only take account of gendered criticism, but also of political historiography. In the 1960s, the study of 'queenship' as an office which may inform our understanding of medieval society became an important area of research, and transformed with Stafford's 1983 work until the 1990s, when the focus began to fall on the ideologies and representations of the



office itself.<sup>37</sup> More recently, the emphasis seems to have been on late medieval and early modern visions of queenship, whether in a specific location or timeframe.<sup>38</sup> Only most recently has the emphasis come to fall on the ‘rituals and rhetoric’ of the office.<sup>39</sup> Much historiography has focused on later medieval queens and their performance of the institutionalised ‘queenship’, but the lack of critique for the early middle ages may be symptomatic of the historical reality.

With no official ceremony denoting an early medieval woman as a queen – the first example we can find is with the Carolingian queen Bertrada in 751<sup>40</sup> – discussing Brunhild’s role as part of Merovingian ‘queenship’ may not be simple. This study will analyse two women who found themselves at the heads of the two rival factions of the Merovingian family: Fredegund, the low-born serving woman, and Brunhild, the Visigothic princess, have entirely different paths to power and may not be so easily applied to traditional views of ‘queenship’. Régine Le Jan’s most recent attempt to define dowry as the public legitimisation of a queen may prove useful with more analysis, but the fact remains that with a range of sexual relationships within that society, ‘queenship’ may not be the most useful term for the experiences of powerful women.<sup>41</sup>

We should ask how the term ‘queenship’ can be better teased apart: how did authors recognise, or even reject, Brunhild as ‘queen’ both during and after her life? If, as Stafford has rightly pointed out, ‘women in general and queens in particular enjoyed little of that ‘magisterial’ authority that was considered legitimate’,<sup>42</sup> then we need to think of other ways in which these authors legitimated, or vilified, the political creatures about whom they wrote. The collusion of the political and female life cycles is key: Andrew Rabin has argued that Ælfthryth’s influence crossed not just political lines but gendered ones as well – family and gender linked her with one litigant; royal power and political

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<sup>37</sup> See John Carmi Parsons, ed., *Medieval Queenship* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994); Anne Duggan ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Theresa Earenfricht, ed., *Queenship and Political Power in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Aldershot, 2005); Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women*; Erin Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Liz Oakley-Brown and Louise J. Wilkinson, eds., *The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship: Medieval to Early Modern* (Dublin, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Janet L. Nelson, ‘Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making and the Shaping of Medieval Queenship’, *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997) pp. 301-315 for a discussion of the earliest surviving coronation ordines from the Carolingian era; for the coronations of queens and empresses in the Holy Roman Empire from the tenth to fourteenth centuries, see Karl-Ulrich Jäschke, ‘From Famous Empresses to Unspectacular Queens: The Romano-German Empire to Margaret of Brabant, Countess of Luxemburg and Queen of the Romans (d.1311)’, *Queens and Queenship*, pp. 75-108.

<sup>41</sup> See Pauline Stafford, ‘Queens and Queenship’, *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500-1100* (Chichester, 2009) pp. 459-476; J.A. Smith, ‘The Earliest Queen-making Rites’, *Church History* 66:1 (1997) pp. 18-35; Régine Le Jan, ‘Douaires et Pouvoirs des Reines en Francie et en Germanie’, *Dots et Douaires dans le Haut Moyen Âge*, eds. F. Bougard, L. Feller and R. Le Jan (Rome, 2002) p.460.

<sup>42</sup> Pauline Stafford, ‘The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries’, *Medieval Queenship*, ed. J.C. Parsons (New York, 1993) pp. 143-168.

interest connected her to the other.<sup>43</sup> The ability to move between different categories of identity means that ‘queen’ is only one of a variety of personae to unravel.

We know that our authors called Brunhild *regina*: they recognised certain women as queens, without taking the time to tell us why. In this study about recognition, I will consider how each author constructs their expectations of the woman in their own political circumstances. As regent for three generations, Brunhild was a ruler in every sense of the word, and ‘ruling the people, and ruling children, were...two intimately linked spheres of queenly activity’.<sup>44</sup> Though the bearing of an heir was crucial, in Merovingian Gaul, it did not cement a queen’s position. It is the intercession, the amount of influence, which was viewed as dangerous. Both Brunhild and Fredegund would come under scrutiny for the use of female incitement on male rulers. They did not transcend their gender, become something other than a *female* ruler, but their experience was shaped by it. Politics and gender are inextricably linked, and ‘queenship’, then, is not an institutionalised entity for this thesis, but rather a fluid concept through which each author thinks differently about the female rule they are depicting.

### The politicisation of texts

Brunhild is a political creature as are the authors who surround her. The political moments being written *about* are entirely distinct from the political moments they are written *in*, for multiple Brunhilds exist over one hundred and fifty years. I can find no other early medieval individual for whom such a tension exists, across so many different sources, genres and timeframes.

Early medieval courts were both ‘mental construct and social microcosm’<sup>45</sup> and authors attempted to *understand* the women before them in their own context. Some of the authors I will study are working alongside the queen, some distanced from her by some hundred years. Each manipulates representations of a queen in different ways – ‘each eye sees a different picture’<sup>46</sup> and that can affect both how the author intended the image to be read, and how different readerships understood the image. The thread of gender studies which has recognised the collusion between men and women may also support us in a politicised reading of our sources. Returning to late mystics, Julian of Norwich wrote two versions of a text, each betraying a different self-understanding, not least in relation to

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew Rabin, ‘Female Advocacy and Royal Protection in Tenth-Century England: The Legal Career of Queen Ælfthryth’ *Speculum* 84:2 (2009) p.277.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson, ‘Queen-Making’, p.305.

<sup>45</sup> Nelson, ‘Gendering Courts’, p.195.

<sup>46</sup> Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, 1984) p.51.

gender and authority.<sup>47</sup> In considering queen Brunhild, we are not examining two versions, but seven, and there are many more which fall outwith the boundaries of this study. Gender and authority are entirely linked here: Brunhild's legitimation of her own authority is set alongside sources which recognise her in entirely different ways. Each has its own political agenda, and with this in mind, I should introduce the seven sources to be considered here.

## The seven sides of Brunhild

### *Decem Libri Historiarum*

The most seminal historical work of the sixth century is Gregory of Tours' *Decem Libri Historiarum*, the *Ten Books of Histories*, or more contentiously, the *History of the Franks*.<sup>48</sup> Gregory (539-94) came from one of the great Gallo-Roman senatorial families and in his twenty-one years as bishop of Tours, engaged in a variety of literary activities.<sup>49</sup> The filter through which we view Gregory's world must be contextualised: the bishop was in the midst of a city which rival kings often occupied and devastated, and as a result is an author inextricably enmeshed within the political world he represents. His very position is partly owed to the queen who forms the subject of this study, and Gregory himself features in a quarter of the chapters within the text.<sup>50</sup>

The *DLH*'s ten books are Gregory's personal and episodic narrative: previous interpretations of the work as disordered have now been moulded into understanding it as the conscious working of a politically-astute author. Books I to IV represent the bishop looking back; while V to X are his contemporary world. Amongst continuing debates over the form, and dating of this work, this study will follow Halsall's argument that if there was any single event which may have compelled Gregory to write, it was the assassination of Sigibert I, in 575.<sup>51</sup> While the author appealed for his text to be handed to posterity

<sup>47</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1995) p.176.

<sup>48</sup> For this re-working of Gregory's text as a 'Frankish history', and the persistence of the title, see Walter Goffart, 'From *Historiae* to *Historia Francorum* and back again: Aspects of the textual history of Gregory of Tours', *Religion, Culture and Society in the Early Middle Ages. Studies in Honor of Richard E. Sullivan*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and J.J. Contreni (Kalamazoo, 1987) pp. 55-76; also Martin Heinzelmann, 'Grégoire de Tours: père de l'histoire de France?', *Histoire de France, historiens de la France*, eds. Y. Bercé and P. Contamine (Paris, 1994) pp. 19-45. Ian Wood and Guy Halsall have written widely on the challenges of the author – see in particular Wood, 'The Individuality of Gregory of Tours', *The World of Gregory of Tours*, eds. K. Mitchell and I.N. Wood (Leiden, 2002) pp. 29-46 and Halsall, 'Nero and Herod? The Death of Chilperic and Gregory's Writings of History', *The World of Gregory of Tours*, pp. 337-351.

<sup>49</sup> In the *DLH* X.31, Gregory details some of his works, including seven books of *Miracles*, the *Lives of the Fathers*, *Commentaries on the Psalms* and *Offices of the Church*. However, Gregory also composed a wide variety of religious works that cannot be encompassed here, but I fully acknowledge the importance of the religious dimension to Gregory's textual activities.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory features in 67 of the 265 chapters within the text.

<sup>51</sup> Guy Halsall, 'The Preface to Book V of Gregory of Tours' Histories: Its Form, Context and Significance', *English Historical Review* CXXII: 496 (2007) pp. 297-317. For a recent opposing argument, see Alexander

exactly as he had left it, an abridged version of Gregory's text had circulated with some popularity by the seventh century, and the use of the reworked text in both Fredegar's *Chronicle* and the *Liber Historiae Francorum* illustrate the importance of the *DLH* through to the eighth century.<sup>52</sup>

There are a variety of lenses through which one may view Gregory's world in this text: political, literary and gendered, the latter perhaps the most neglected. Because he writes in response to the rupture of Brunhild's husband's death, the bishop sees the queen in 'real time' and their relationship unfolds within an ever-changing Merovingian political landscape.

### Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus

Venantius Fortunatus (c.540-600) had a classical education in Ravenna, before arriving in Gaul at the end of 565, intending to visit the tomb of St Martin. The next year, he entered court life in his delivery of both a panegyric and an epithalamium – praise poems – at the marriage of Sigibert I to Brunhild at Metz. The following ten years form Fortunatus' most intense poetic activity - the first seven of eleven books of his poetry date to this period – but the poet eventually settled in Poitiers, as the close friend of Queen Radegund: he later became bishop of the city.

It was with Gregory of Tours that Fortunatus forged his strongest ties: over 30 poems are written either about, or at the request of, the bishop of Tours: Fortunatus dedicated his first collection of *Carmina*, as well as his verse *Life of Saint Martin*, to the bishop.<sup>53</sup> Debate over the date of publication for this collection continues,<sup>54</sup> but I will argue that it was published around 576, the year after Sigibert I's death – a fact which will form a large part of my analysis of his representations. A second collection was published around 587, comprising books 8 and 9, and a final collection was assembled during the 590s: (the

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Callander Murray, 'Chronology and the Composition of the Histories of Gregory of Tours', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1:1 (2008) pp. 157-196.

<sup>52</sup> For a comprehensive survey of this six-book recension, see Martin Heinzelmann and Pascale Bourgain, 'L'oeuvre de Grégoire de Tours: la diffusion des manuscrits', *Grégoire de Tours et l'espace gaulois*, eds. N. Gauthier and H. Galinié (Tours, 1997) pp. 274-317. Some versions of Gregory's text also survive from the Carolingian period and the version of the work that the editors of the *MGH*, Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, deemed the 'best and most complete' manuscript, was one produced at the end of the eleventh century at Montecassino.

<sup>53</sup> Fortunatus was also author of a number of the Lives of the Saints and his *Vita Sancti Martini* was a prose work, composed in four books. For the most recent work on the poet, see Michael Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow* and Joseph Pucci, *Poems to Friends: Venantius Fortunatus* (Indianapolis, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> For the history of these debates, see Marc Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat: Poèmes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994-2004) vol.1 pp. lxxiii-lxxi; Dominique Tardi, *Fortunat: Étude sur un dernier représentant de la poésie latine dans la Gaule mérovingienne* (Paris, 1927) pp. 92-96; Judith George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul* (Oxford, 1992) pp. 207-11; Wilhelm Meyer, *Der Gelegenheitsdichter Venantius Fortunatus* 4:5 (Berlin, 1901) pp. 25-29.

poet's last work can be dated to 591).<sup>55</sup> After Fortunatus, there is no significant poet in Gaul for two centuries, and the last manuscript of this poet comes from the eleventh century.

The ornate stylistics of Fortunatus have previously accorded the poet the label 'venal flatterer':<sup>56</sup> certainly, while 23 letters to secular figures attest to the poet's cultural and political movements, his work is much more than hollow words. He provides a pivotal window into our sixth-century world. Commissioned specifically to represent Brunhild at her entry to Merovingian political life, the poet's vision of the queen is tied into his political and cultural surroundings, and Fortunatus' changing attitude towards the queen is symptomatic of changes in Merovingian realities and in ways of representing 'queenship'.

### Vita Columbani

Described by Ian Wood potentially as the 'most important hagiographical text written in Western Europe in the seventh century',<sup>57</sup> Jonas of Bobbio's *Life of Columbanus* is now being studied as a transitional text, a caesura between both changing monastic landscapes and ways of writing about them.<sup>58</sup> Notable for the sheer length and breadth of its content, the text – written in the early 640s – tells the tale of the Irish monk Columbanus (540-615), famed for his missionary work and foundations, most notably Luxeuil and Bobbio in the Frankish and Lombard kingdoms. Its author entered the monastery at Bobbio shortly after the holy man's death in 615, and was commissioned by one of its abbots to write the hagiography<sup>59</sup> – he is, therefore, distanced by around 35 years from his protagonist, yet is imbued with the values of a Columbanian monk.<sup>60</sup>

The form of this text has proved a challenge for historians: this study will focus on book I of the *Vita Columbani*, which traces the life of the holy man.<sup>61</sup> We have no manuscript of this text from the seventh or eighth century, thus debate over the reception of this work continues. The almost-verbatim use of the text in Fredegar's *Chronicle*, along

<sup>55</sup> The last poem is X.4, celebrating the ordination of Gregory of Tours' deacon to bishop of Poitiers in 591.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London, 1926) p.237.

<sup>57</sup> Translation by Ian Wood, 'Jonas of Bobbio, The Abbots of Bobbio from the Life of St Columbanus', *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. T. Head (London, 2000) pp. 111-136.

<sup>58</sup> See Marilyn Dunn, 'Columbanus, charisma and the revolt of the monks of Bobbio', *Peritia* 20 (2008) pp. 1-27; Albrecht Diem, 'Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity: Jonas of Bobbio and the End of the Holy Man', *Speculum* 82:3 (2007) pp. 521-559; Alexander O'Hara, 'The *Vita Columbani* in Merovingian Gaul', *Early Medieval Europe* 17:2 (2009) pp. 126-153.

<sup>59</sup> Jonas was responsible for the *Vitae* of Saints Vedast and John; also the *Vitae* of abbots Attala and Bertulf of Bobbio, Eustace of Luxeuil and the abbess Burgundofara of Faremoutiers.

<sup>60</sup> Clare Stancliffe, 'Jonas' *Life of Columbanus and his Disciples*', *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, eds. J. Carey, M. Herbert and P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 2001) p.191.

<sup>61</sup> I follow the argument that the text was comprised of two books, the second tracing the activities at Bobbio after Columbanus' death. Different versions of the *Life* circulated, I find it probable, for each Columbanian monastery: in book 2, the Athala section would have been added on for Bobbio; the Eustasius section for Luxeuil; the Burgundofara section for Faremoutiers.

with potentially four other texts written within sixty years of Jonas's creation, suggests that previous interpretations of the VC as being intended for a monastic audience, and not widely disseminated, must now be discarded.<sup>62</sup> That the first work to borrow from the VC is a history, and not a hagiography, should prompt historians to examine a much broader audience for the work.

This study will focus on the dramatic encounters between Columbanus and leading Merovingians in book I of the text, illustrating the unusual levels of historicity within a hagiographical text. The holy man's relationship with queen Brunhild creates Jonas's image of her as the 'Jezebel', the representation which would achieve such longevity.

### *Epistolae Austrasicae*

As the only source which allows the reader to see queen Brunhild through her own eyes, and the least studied of all sources surrounding her, the letters contained within the *Epistolae Austrasicae* may appear like the 'other'. The collection is composed of the letters of various magnates and, alongside the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus, provides our 'fullest insights' into the late sixth-century Frankish court.<sup>63</sup>

There are forty-eight letters in total, the earliest a verse epistle from the 460s, and the last dated to around 590 - our only copy of the collection is a ninth-century one, from Lorsch.<sup>64</sup> The *EA*'s first letter is King Clovis' emotional response to his daughter's death, but the collection also features leading members of the aristocracy and church. While this collection has been perceived as a model to provide 'examples of correct usage'<sup>65</sup> to the court, I will follow Goubert's argument that the collection was compiled at the end of the sixth century, at the court of Brunhild and Childebert,<sup>66</sup> specifically to address their weakening political situation. This study will suggest that Brunhild may not only have played a role in editing her own, and her son's, letters, but then may also been involved in the compilation of the collection itself at her chancery – two aspects of authorial control which are inextricably linked, but prompt very different questions about diplomacy and female rule. The most recent scholarship on the collection still identifies with only one theme in Brunhild's letters: the emotion she illustrates while seeking her grandson's

<sup>62</sup> For the most recent overview of this debate, see O'Hara, 'The *Vita Columbani* in Merovingian Gaul'.

<sup>63</sup> *MK*, p.71.

<sup>64</sup> Ian Wood, 'Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul', *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990) p.72.

<sup>65</sup> Ian Wood, 'Letters and Letter-Collections from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: The Prose Works of Avitus of Vienne', in *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Memory of Denis L. T. Bethell*, ed. M. Meyer (London, 1993) p.39.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Goubert, *Byzance Avant l'Islam*, 2 vols, vol. I (Paris, 1951) p.95.

release in the ‘Athanagild episode’.<sup>67</sup> Here, this will be opened up to encompass much wider discussions concerning Brunhild’s international activities.

### *Passio Desiderii*

King Sisebut was king of Spain from 612 to 621, during which time he became the only Visigothic king to have achieved a reputation as a Latin author. His only hagiography, the *Life and Passion of St Desiderius*, is a unique textual output with a nuanced approach to the genre. The work takes as its protagonist the Frankish bishop of Vienne, exiled in 603 and martyred in 607, a saint with no recorded cult in Spain, which makes Sisebut’s decision to select him as his subject interesting.<sup>68</sup> After various confrontations, Brunhild, it is claimed, is responsible for the death of Desiderius, thus this is a text written by a Visigothic king concerning the evil activities of a Visigothic princess. This hagiography does not end with the death of its protagonist, but that of queen Brunhild: as Fontaine has shown, it is not so much ‘life and passion’ of Desiderius as the ‘crime and punishment’ of his persecutors.<sup>69</sup>

This work appears to have been responding to Brunhild’s Spanish activities, and I will approach it as a Visigothic king appealing to a Visigothic audience with a specific political message. The work is notable for its emphasis on the perversion of the fundamental expectations of royalty, and its vocabulary is focused on Brunhild’s destruction of the kingdom after the death of Desiderius. Writing after her death, Sisebut is able to distance himself from this Visigothic princess, and in doing so, appeals to the new Merovingian regime under Lothar I. Within existing manuscripts, the *Vita Desiderii* is placed in the middle of the *Epistolarium Visigothicum*. Also contained within this collection are three diplomatic letters from Count Bulgar, dated from 610-12, when Sisebut’s predecessor, Witteric, had increasingly hostile relations with Brunhild and her grandson, Theuderic. This text, then, cannot be seen in isolation, but as part of a wider work damning the queen’s influence.

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Gillett, ‘Love and Grief in Post-Imperial Diplomacy: The Letters of Brunhild’, *Studies in Emotions and Power in the Late Roman World: papers in honour of Ron Newbold*, eds. B. Sidwell and D. Dzino (Piscataway, 2010) pp. 127-165.

<sup>68</sup> There is a seventh-century anonymous *Vita Desiderii*, local to Vienne, which circulated before Sisebut’s work and a further anonymous *Vita Desiderii*, composed during the eighth century, with a more extravagant and gossipy tone. The insistence on a more oral tradition in that text gives it a further sense of locality to Gaul - see the introduction to Krusch’s edition of the *vitae*, in *MGH SSRM III* pp. 620-9.

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Fontaine, ‘King Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography’, *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches*, ed. E James (Oxford, 1980) p.122.

### Chronicle of Fredegar

‘As with peeling an onion, each skin that is identified and removed simply reveals another skin’.<sup>70</sup> Whether discussing the authorship, the form, even the content, Wallace-Hadrill’s assessment of Fredegar’s *Chronicle* could not be more apt. Our only source for the Frankish kingdom from the late 590s to 642, the *Chronicle* provides, as Gregory of Tours did, a history of Gaul from the fall of the Roman empire to the beginning of the Carolingian period. It is *the* political tract of the 660s.

While the name Fredegar is almost certainly incorrect, this study will use it for convenience, and debates over the authorship of this text continue.<sup>71</sup> The work is derived from a number of non-original texts, amongst which are a six-book version of Gregory of Tours’ *Decem Libri Historiarum*.<sup>72</sup> The 93 chapters, ending in 584, composes the third of four ‘books’ assigned to the *Chronicle* - the fourth takes its reader from the 24<sup>th</sup> year of Guntram, King of Burgundy, in 584 to the death of Flaochad, mayor of the Burgundian palace in 642. I will follow the argument that there was a single manuscript by one author composed around 660 at the Burgundian court, and focus on books III and IV in this study.

Most important in a study of Brunhild is that this author used Gregory of Tours’ text as one of its series of building blocks, reformed in a way applicable to his own political agenda, while still retaining its core of validity. There are 23 pieces of interpolated material inserted into Gregory’s text, varying from insertions of place names to much longer expansion. This version received much more attention than that of the sixth century – four of the five groups of manuscript tradition are found in the ninth century, particularly in the north of France.<sup>73</sup> The fact that the abridged version of Gregory’s text is the one which received much wider readership cannot be overlooked<sup>74</sup> and, therefore, the representation of Brunhild is manipulated from Gregory’s original intention. The image of Brunhild provided in ‘real time’ by the bishop of Tours is nuanced after her death by an author entirely distanced from the queen.

Fredegar’s use of the section of the *Vita Columbani* which attests to the queen’s antagonism with the holy man is the first use of the *Vita* in a historical work. It attests to the enduring memory and importance of this queen after her death, an issue this study will

<sup>70</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, trans., *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its continuations* (New York, 1960) pp. xxvii.

<sup>71</sup> With the exception of Gregory of Tours and Einhard, no other Frankish historical writer is known by name, so the debate over a name may not need to be an issue. For the most comprehensive study of the *Chronicle*, see Roger Collins, *Die Fredegar- Chroniken* (Hanover, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> The work also contains the *Liber Conversationis* of Hippolytus; the chronicle of Hydatius; the chronicle of Eusebius in Jerome’s translation; the writings of Isidore of Seville and a chronicle we consider to be Fredegar’s original work, along with two chronologies of popes and kings.

<sup>73</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (Toronto, 1982) p.78.

<sup>74</sup> Collins, ‘Fredegar’, p.242.



analyse in detail.<sup>75</sup> For the author of this work, Merovingian society was going to the dogs,<sup>76</sup> and Brunhild's queenship is part of a much wider engagement with a perceived weakening dynasty. The volume of place names and individual names suggests that the author wanted to give his work a political validity, and his use of direct speech and oral tradition suggests that he is tapping into dialogues surrounding the queen that historians may not be able to put their finger on, but are pivotal to understanding the changing visions of Brunhild thirty years after her assassination.

### *Liber Historiae Francorum*

The *Liber Historiae Francorum* is the last of the three major works of history from the Merovingian period: after the *Decem Libri Historiarum* and the *Chronicle*, the *LHF* gives its reader the transition from the Merovingians to the Carolingians, ending its tale in 727. This was a work copied extensively – the number of manuscripts in circulation was far superior to those of Gregory or Fredegar, becoming the most widely read of all early medieval Frankish histories. Rosamond McKitterick presented the case excellently, when she stated that this text struck chords with medieval audiences which modern ones have failed to hear.<sup>77</sup> Of the three historical works above, the *LHF* has received the least attention, and most certainly the least comment on its representation of Brunhild.

The *LHF* has a sensational quality that matches its 'bestseller' accolade: it is a tale of kings and queens that may, or may not, have been authored by a woman,<sup>78</sup> but was written by a Neustrian Frank writing north of the Loire, potentially in Soissons. The treatment of chronology is cavalier, and there is no interest in the use of archival material. It appears that this work was intended for a very specific group of people, with the author *using* Brunhild a hundred years after her death as part of a political strategy. With its Neustrian origin, the text promotes the rivalry between Brunhild and her Neustrian enemy, Fredegund. The primary method is the use of Gregory's *Decem Libri Historiarum*: the *LHF* entirely subverts the characterisations within the earlier text.

With the exception of the last ten chapters of the *LHF*, the majority of the earlier sections of the text are in fact derived from Gregory's *Decem Libri Historiarum*. The author does not ask the reader to consider what they borrow, delete, or add to Gregory's tale, and instead demands the text to be read on its own terms. The text is given an

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<sup>75</sup> As Ian Wood has pointed out, it is not surprising that Fredegar knew of the *Vita Columbani* so soon after its composition, given the extent of noble patronage of monastic houses by the middle of the seventh century - *MK*, p.54.

<sup>76</sup> *MK*, p.152.

<sup>77</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2004) p.86.

<sup>78</sup> See Janet Nelson, 'Perceptions du pouvoir chez les historiennes du haut moyen âge', *Les Femmes au moyen âge*, ed. M. Rouche (Paris, 1990) pp. 77-85.

authority that a ninth-century reader would not have questioned: the earliest manuscript of the *LHF* we have postdates the text by over sixty years, and is of unknown origin. Gregory's work is used as a six-book redaction, as Fredegar had employed it, but shortens the *DLH* to thirty chapters. Within those chapters, however, there are almost a hundred cases where the *LHF* author adds to Gregory. In considering Brunhild, this author is distanced from the protagonist and is able to superimpose his own political surroundings and agenda upon a work that was contemporary with the queen. The *LHF* uses the past to validate its present.

### The political surroundings

To differing extents, each author writing about Brunhild is inserted into the queen's story: each claims to provide the authoritative picture as 'the one who really *knows* her', taking a phrase from recent mystic studies.<sup>79</sup> The challenge, and fascinating opportunity, is that we are working with some authors who really did *know* her, were part of her political career, and others who simply claimed the authority by manipulating those earlier authors' representations.

Recognising that these writers were not only authors, but political individuals, is important. Kathleen Mitchell called for the understanding of Gregory of Tours as both bishop and writer, but this has been applied in some places and not in others,<sup>80</sup> yet it is clear that the bolstering of episcopal authority was high on Gregory's agenda.<sup>81</sup> He is not simply writing about Brunhild, but about himself, and if one takes this approach with each text, each author is doing something different based on their own contexts. For the later writers, Fredegar and the *LHF* author take the time to give us place names and individual names that others do not, and the amount of historicity is significant. This could be what Roland Barthes called 'the effect of the real': features which are included to give additional conviction to the writer's fabrications.<sup>82</sup> Where authors manipulate the words of Gregory of Tours, they insert what appear to be real details to mask deception.

What choices was Brunhild making in her own representation? Having considered the pitfalls of looking for a distinct female strategy, and instead turned to the collusion between men and women, one should now turn to the process through which that occurs. A

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<sup>79</sup> Coakley, *Women, Men & Spiritual Power*, p.166 - one of the most interesting discussions in the text is that of Margaret Ebner and Henry of Nördlingen in the early fourteenth century, where Henry changes his representation of the mystic Margaret, depending on his own power.

<sup>80</sup> Kathleen Mitchell, '*History and Christian Society in Sixth-Century Gaul: An Historiographical Analysis of Gregory of Tours Decem Libri Historiarum*', PhD thesis, Michigan State University (1983) p.7.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Brown, *Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours* (Reading, 1977); Adriaan Breukelaar, *Historiography and Episcopal Authority in Sixth-Century Gaul* (Göttingen, 1994).

<sup>82</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (New York, 1986) pp. 141-148.

queen would not have written a letter in her own hand, and there is an editorial process of potentially multiple men – dictation, correction, copying, possibly training – that filter the way in which the queen’s voice comes to us. One should remember that the composition of a work and the physical act of writing it down may be distinct: again, mystic studies have delved much further into this tension – Bridget of Sweden even dictated to her scribes and checked the accuracy of their recordings;<sup>83</sup> Angela of Foligno’s confessor describes her frustration with the accounts of her visions that he had written down.<sup>84</sup> The rarity of the female voice in the early middle ages means that scholars have still to unpack all the various processes through which that voice is heard.

From there, we turn to transmission, itself a political act when the images being disseminated are those of a queen. Did the authors’ desired vision turn out the same as how people received it? This study will delve into the realm of gossip and rumour, and we simply cannot know how the representations of Brunhild were received, or changed over time. It is no coincidence that many of our post-structuralist critical theorists, from Eco to Kristeva, began their careers with the challenges of medieval literature, from whose work medieval texts, and their manuscript traditions are ‘conspicuously multivoiced productions’.<sup>85</sup> The polyphonic nature of these texts, using the term Bakhtin would have, opens up the texts, examining not only male and female influences in writing, but the process through which that work is transmitted to the reader, and also I would suggest to how it is received. From structure to language to genre, each of our authors engages directly with the political world in which they are writing, a world in which Brunhild is still a hot topic to discuss, no matter if they are writing in the 620s or the 720s.

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<sup>83</sup> See Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: a Twelfth-Century Visionary* (Philadelphia, 1992); Rosalynn Voaden, ‘God’s Almighty Hand: Women Co-Writing the Book’ *Women, the Book and the Godly*, eds. L. Smith and J. Taylor (Cambridge, 1995) pp. 55-66; Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Boston, 1996).

<sup>84</sup> Paul Lachance, ed. and trans., *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works* (New York, 1993) pp. 137-8.

<sup>85</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius and the Epic Truth* (Ithaca, 1994) p.113. See also Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987) pp. 1-25. Gerda Heydemann is the only scholar to have begun to trace the textual tensions of the latter sources concerning the queen, and their echoes: ‘Zur Gestaltung der Rolle Brunhildes in merowingischer Historiographie’, *Texts and Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. R Corradini, R Meens, C Pössel and P Shaw (Vienna, 2006) pp. 73-85 - this has been very useful.

## **The trajectory of the ‘second Jezebel’**

In order to attempt a gendered, political and literary reading of Brunhild, I will trace three distinct areas of Brunhild’s career, using the framework of the life cycle as an interpretative, but not static, structure. The first section of this study will consider the beginnings of ‘queenship’, and the transition, first, from king’s daughter to king’s wife, and then from wife to widow. These significant symbolic and political journeys have often been neglected in studies of the queen, and yet to understand Brunhild’s extraordinary career, one has to understand its beginnings: I will consider the ways in which authors Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus ‘switch on’ Brunhild upon the death of her husband, and use very specific textual and political strategies in their images of her entry to the kingdom. The second part of the thesis will explore the strategies of political survival necessary for Brunhild as a widow. The exercise of her power through her relationship with the church, and its leading figures, will be the theme examined, for it sums up the crux of the historian’s challenge: while living, Brunhild has supported a mission more than anyone else; when dead, she becomes the ‘Jezebel’. After considering Brunhild’s positive relations with Pope Gregory the Great and her role in episcopal elections, I will examine her squabbles with both the holy man Columbanus and the bishop Desiderius of Vienne, which become hinges around which later authors are able to vilify the queen. The final part of this examination will consider critically the term ‘dynasty’ and Brunhild’s role within it. Historians are used to considering Brunhild’s destruction of her family structure, but I will step back to analyse Brunhild’s enduring involvement in Visigothic succession politics first. Discussing the manipulation of Gregory of Tours’ images within the *LHF*, Brunhild’s role in the demise of her line, alongside that of her enemy Fredegund, will be critiqued. Finally, I will examine Brunhild’s death in detail, for the way in which each author differently tries to deal with both the physical and political body of this queen is entirely significant for how historians have read her. Brunhild as the ‘Jezebel’ will be unravelled through this study to uncover not the one true Brunhild, but multiple Brunhilds.

## Chapter 1

### The beginnings of a ‘queen’

**‘Over difficult mountains you pick a level way; nothing obstructs lovers  
whom the gods wish to unite’.<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

Brunhild’s extensive career includes several transitions: from king’s daughter to king’s wife, to widow, to regent, to murder victim. Those stages are marked by the larger context of her move from historical actor to textual cipher. The queen’s unprecedented and spectacular assassination has attracted the most attention, yet in retracing the steps of this Visigothic princess turned Frankish queen, the beginning becomes as important as the end.

Scholars interested in the movements of queens tend have largely started their analysis at the point of marriage, as this act forms the first major stage of the female life cycle.<sup>2</sup> The journey to marriage, however – summarised above by the poet Venantius Fortunatus – requires a closer reading: a woman does not move distinctly from king’s daughter to king’s wife. I will argue that female journeys, both literal and theoretical, participate in the same fields of representation as those of kings, and that in an arena of competing discourses, authors understand Brunhild’s marriage differently, depending on the political context in which they write. As a royal woman moved from the land of her father to that of her husband, her life cycle became inextricably linked with the political cycle.<sup>3</sup> How she negotiated that tension would pave the way to her success, or timely demise.

The Merovingian family was not born, but made; political construct, not biological unit.<sup>4</sup> With everything to play for, then, what made a ruler legitimate and who, indeed, called the political shots in Merovingian Gaul? The act of recognition has become

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<sup>1</sup> *OP* VI.1, lines 115-117: translations in this thesis are adapted from Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat: Poèmes* and Judith George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems* (Liverpool, 1995). Any significant changes from the translations of these authors are highlighted.

<sup>2</sup> The physical movements of queens are fascinating, yet rarely recorded: Mary Taylor Simeti has herself retraced the steps of the twelfth-century queen Constance of Hauteville: *Travels with a Medieval Queen: The Journey of a Sicilian Princess* (London, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Nelson, ‘Charlemagne - pater optimus?’, *Am Vorabend der Kaiser Krönung: Das Epos ‘Karolus Magnus et Leo papa’ und der Papstbesuch in Paderborn 799*, eds. P. Godman, J. Jarnut and P. Johanek (Berlin, 2002) pp. 269 -281 for the reciprocal relationships between the domestic and the politico-jural domain.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Wood, ‘Deconstructing the Merovingian Family’, pp. 149-171.

influential to studies of both dynasty and identity,<sup>5</sup> as the contemporary act through which, for example, a princess-turned-queen is accepted by the kingdom's elite. It is the validation of the historical actor in the exact political moment. Underestimated, however, is the way in which the act is textualised: as each author understands the moment differently, tensions might emerge. Brunhild becoming a Merovingian king's wife is an example, as her acceptance is a contested issue within our sources, thus the textual constructions linked to the legitimisation of power allow us a better understanding of the renegotiation of that power.<sup>6</sup> This thesis will consider recognition as a process, one for both historical actors and for the authors representing the political moment. The two may well be separated by time and motives but cannot be unmeshed: when a woman enters the court, she creates a 'stir'.<sup>7</sup>

What did it mean for Brunhild to move from Visigothic king's daughter to Merovingian king's wife? When Fortunatus declares that Brunhild is *unde magis pollens regina uocatur*,<sup>8</sup> what did this actually convey to divergent parties to this marriage – to Brunhild, her father, her husband, the Merovingian elite, other authors? For Brunhild and her father, an enduring Visigothic connection to the Franks may have been in mind: this is the aspect of the queen's career which has been given the least attention, and will be rebalanced here. In Nelson's seminal article, she argued that a Visigothic princess may keep in touch with her fatherland, but then developed this by examining the Hermenegild rebellion, which will be analysed in chapter six.<sup>9</sup> I will take this argument further and suggest that Brunhild made a conscious effort, not only to connect herself with her homeland, but to extend her power there throughout her career. Her activities did not come

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 164-6. Walter Pohl, considering discourses of ethnic identity, also sees recognition and communication as keys – see 'Social Language, Identities and the Control of Discourse', *East and West: Modes of Communication: Proceedings of the First Plenary Conference at Merida*, eds. E. Chrysos and I.N. Wood (Leiden, 1999) p.138; also Wood on 'Royal Succession and Legitimation in the Roman West, 419-536', *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. S. Airlie, W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (Vienna, 2006) pp. 59-72. The vocabularies surrounding 'dynasty' and succession will be critiqued later in this study.

<sup>6</sup> See Julia M.H. Smith, "'Carrying the cares of the state": gender perspectives on early medieval Staatlichkeit', *Der Frühmittelalterliche Staat-Europäische Perspektiven*, eds. W. Pohl and V. Wieser (Vienna, 2009) pp. 227-239.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Pohl, 'Gender and ethnicity in the early Middle Ages', *GEMW*, pp. 40-41- he argues that women entering the court create a 'stir in discourse' in which women become 'textual strategies': this is pivotal to my extension of the term 'recognition'.

<sup>8</sup> *OP* VI.1, line 55 – 'growing more mighty, she is hailed as a queen'.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels'; for the development of Brunhild's Visigothic connection, 'A propos des femmes royales dans les rapports entre le monde wisigothique et le monde franc à l'époque de Reccared', originally published in *El Concilio III de Toledo, XIV Centenario 589-1989* (Toledo, 1990) and reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others* (Aldershot, 1999) pp. 465-476.

from sentimental attachment, but from an astute politician<sup>10</sup> – they are the actions of a queen, but come from her foregrounding of the identity she possessed as a Visigothic king's daughter.

The challenge of negotiating Brunhild's enduring Visigothic 'identity' is also with the term itself, which has developed its complexity recently, through studies of ethnicity for example.<sup>11</sup> What remains is the need to reconcile the polyphonic, potentially entirely contradictory, identities that a queen may have in a career and the textual, gendered and political contexts through which we read them: Guy Halsall's concept of the 'hand' in a game of cards is particularly useful.<sup>12</sup> There are moments at which a woman may play her desired hand, at moments of political strength, but others in which the hand is forced; the latter would be the case for many kings' daughters in this period, sent to marry a foreign king. The negotiation of the female and political life cycles would determine the hand played. Female agency, then, concerns the way in which that hand is played, the 'room for manoeuvre' in Nelson's words.<sup>13</sup> For Brunhild, this begins with the journey from royal daughter to royal wife.

This chapter will build on some of the themes put forward in the introduction to this study and consider the ways in which Fortunatus' and Gregory's representations of Brunhild's marriage itself feed into one another, Gregory's understanding of the political context surrounding the marriage, and Fortunatus' challenge of presenting a situation where it all goes wrong. Recognition and representation will be hinges of analysis: the woman herself, and the authors textualising her, work within an exact political context, in which various parties *understand* her marriage differently.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Goffart, 'Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius II and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)', *Traditio* 13 (1957) pp. 73-118: he argued that 'sentimental ties' were created between the Visigoths and Franks upon Brunhild's marriage (p.83).

<sup>11</sup> Pohl, 'Gender and Ethnicity': ethnicity as a theme through which to examine Brunhild is outwith the realms of this study, but Pohl attests that ethnic identity in this culturally-dominant late Roman environment would not have been as self-assured as we may have previously believed, p.42. I agree with this suggestion.

<sup>12</sup> Guy Halsall, 'Social Identities and Social Relationships In Early Merovingian Gaul', *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. I.N.Wood (Woodbridge, 1998) p.141: he refers to ethnicity, religious belief, age, gender, family, a 'fictive' kinship group, settlement location and rank/class as interchangeable cards in a 'hand' which changes dependent on the political circumstances.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, 'The wary widow', pp. 82-113.

## From royal daughter to royal wife

There is no Latin term for the king's daughter, therefore no institutionalised role of 'princess'. The position was not one of inherent strength, yet the revolt of the nuns at Poitiers is a vignette devoted to royal daughters with 'airs and graces'.<sup>14</sup> Clotild, who led the uprising, 'boasted herself the daughter of the late king Charibert',<sup>15</sup> and Gregory seems to imply that her behaviour did not match her status, but as ever, doesn't inform us what he expects. Kings were, in theory, unique - though there are pretenders to the Merovingian throne - but queens could be duplicated.<sup>16</sup> Royal women could be deployed as 'cultural agents',<sup>17</sup> or low-born women could be taken as bedfellows to be dispensed with at will. Fredegund, the slave, may have become an infamous queen, but retaining the king's affection was not so simple for the likes of Deuteria, Ingoberg and Ingund.<sup>18</sup> With no ritual of marriage,<sup>19</sup> or assumed process through which a woman moved from 'princess' to 'queen', the way in which one views female identity at this stage in the life cycle requires further critique.

In suggesting that 'queenship' may be more literary construct than historical reality in this period, one must consider that how these women conceived of their status may not be the same as the representation of it. Merovingian terms like *uxor*, *conjux*, *concubina* potentially tell us more about how an author is categorising the woman than about the reality of her experience.<sup>20</sup> Stafford's queen as 'office-holder' is more aspirational than actual<sup>21</sup> in the period discussed here, and this study's consideration of 'queenship'

<sup>14</sup> *MK*, p.120 – see *DLH* books IX and X for the revolt.

<sup>15</sup> *DLH* IX.39 – all translations are made after consultation of O.M. Dalton, *The History of the Franks by Gregory of Tours*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1927) and any significant discordances will be highlighted.

<sup>16</sup> See Pauline Stafford, 'Powerful Women in the Early Middle Ages: queens and abbesses', *The Medieval World*, eds. P. Linehan and J.L. Nelson (London, 2001) p.399.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, 'Gendering courts', *GEMW*, p.195.

<sup>18</sup> Deuteria murdered her own daughter, threatened by her beauty: Theudebert I abandoned her regardless (*DLH* III.26 & 27); Lothar I had asked his wife Ingund to find her sister an appropriate husband, but when he saw her decided to marry her himself (*DLH* IV.3); Charibert I's wife Ingoberg did everything she could to prevent the king seeking out the beautiful daughter of a wool-worker (*DLH* IV.26).

<sup>19</sup> For marriage, see the comprehensive article by Ruth Mazo Karras, 'The history of marriage and the myth of Friedelehe', *Early Medieval Europe* 14:2 (2006) pp. 119-151: she suggests that scholars 'know' what marriage is, and therefore read those preconceptions back onto the early middle ages.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Erin Thomas Dailey, whose paper on 'Merovingian Polygamy' at the *International Medieval Congress*, University of Leeds (July 2010) prompted me to re-consider the authority historians have previously applied to early medieval terminology of relationships.

<sup>21</sup> Stafford, 'The Portrayal of Royal Women', pp. 143-168. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, considering the eleventh-century Ælfthryth, felt that authors' efforts to highlight the dangers of authoritative queenship are anxieties about queenly power becoming institutionalised (p.143); alongside Nelson's suggestion that Ælfthryth was the first royal consort to be formally crowned, the dialogue on emerging queenship becomes very interesting. See Janet L. Nelson, 'The Second English *Ordo*', *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1986) pp. 372-73, and an interesting response from Michael Lapidge, 'Byrhtferth and Oswald', *St. Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence*, eds. N. Brooks and C. Cubitt (London, 1996) particularly pp. 72-3.



illuminates the political and textual agendas which underpin a queen's activities. The systems of representation were systems of power, in which both individual identities, and that of the state, were being forged.<sup>22</sup> I will consider Venantius Fortunatus' depiction of Brunhild's marriage from his privileged position at the event, before considering Gregory's understanding of its importance within his political context. In doing so, I suggest that Gregory was not only aware of, but was heavily influenced by, his poet friend's interpretation of the queen.

### **'You...surpass the ranks of girls'.<sup>23</sup>**

Sigibert was Fortunatus' first Frankish patron, and was the first Merovingian ruler to receive encomiastic treatment, through both an epithalamium, a classical poem written for the bride on her way to the bridal chamber and a panegyric, a formal praise poem, to the king at the court at Metz, in 566. Fortunatus is writing in real time.<sup>24</sup> His poems would have been delivered orally, a crucial fact to bear in mind: his presence at the event and the act of publicly declaring the joy of this marriage are pivotal to how others would have perceived the event. Victor Turner, while studying rituals such as marriage, suggested the moment as the opportunity for society to 'cut out a piece of itself for inspection'.<sup>25</sup> As the leading men of the Merovingian kingdom came to hear Fortunatus' words, the poet does indeed hold the moment to the light and tests it – the role he played in active discourses surrounding rulership cannot be understated. There are two aspects of the poetry I will highlight here: the use of metaphor in conveying the Roman nature of this alliance, and the importance of presenting Sigibert and Brunhild as Christian rulers.

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<sup>22</sup> The importance of the audience cannot be underestimated: see Josianne Barbier, 'Un rituel politique à la cour mérovingienne: l'audience royale', *L'audience: Rituels et cadres spatiaux dans l'Antiquité et le haut Moyen Age*, eds. J.P. Caillet and M. Sot (Paris, 2007) pp. 241-263. Barbier discusses the more formal audience with the king, but many of the points can be applied elsewhere; also Soichi Sato, 'Texte de silence ou silence du texte: essai de deconstruction des Historiarum Libri Decem de Grégoire de Tours', *Journal of Studies for the Integrated Text Science* 1:1 (2003) pp. 13-29.

<sup>23</sup> *OP* VI.1, line 130.

<sup>24</sup> Fortunatus would travel widely over the years: he saw Galswinth arrive for her marriage and accompanied Brunhild and her son on a journey. He delivered poems to various members of the court, corresponded with various bishops from both Chilperic and Sigibert's kingdoms, and patrons also. Later situating himself with Queen Radegund at her convent in Poitiers, we cannot underestimate Fortunatus' privileged position within Merovingian networks of power.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, ed. V. Turner (Ithaca, 1967) pp. 93-111 at p.97: through this activity, language can be remodelled and re-arranged, potentially through the creation of a new 'metalanguage' to describe the ritual.

Wood has shown that Merovingian kings, in the sixth century, were attempting to cultivate a political ideology that consciously looked back at the Roman past.<sup>26</sup> Fortunatus' language cultivates Roman metaphors through the bride and groom, the result of his own familiarity with classical tradition.<sup>27</sup> In the panegyric framework, the mention of a queen was optional, but rarely taken up,<sup>28</sup> thus here the very specific mention of Brunhild, both in the title of the poem, and in its content, illustrate her importance to the success of the kingdom. She is presented with the formulaic virtues of the late Roman panegyric:

Beautiful, modest, decorous, intelligent, dutiful, pleasing and good; superior in her character, her appearance and her nobility.<sup>29</sup>

Fortunatus highlights her nobility in the same way as Gregory of Tours will be shown to. When the subject could not boast these tropes, the poet had to deviate from the traditional form: concerning parentage, modesty and beauty, Fredegund's position, for example, was more than a little shaky.<sup>30</sup> In the epithalamium, the palace is said to be benefiting from Caesar's marriage – *dum prosperitate superna regia caesareo proficit aula iugo*.<sup>31</sup> Fortunatus is using a very unique kind of language: *caesareo* is used only in one other place by the poet, and he uses the terms *imperare* and *triumphare* uniquely in this poem.<sup>32</sup> It is an overtly political language being used for a political end. Sigibert is being compared to the Roman tradition: this goes beyond simple literary trope and invests the king with an authority from the imperial structure. Brunhild takes on the role of Venus, and Sigibert Cupid, and both gods speak of the virtues of the individuals – together, however, 'as much as you, a glorious maiden, are seen to outshine the ranks of girls, so you, Sigibert, surpass the husbands'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> MK, p.69.

<sup>27</sup> See Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.119, who has suggested that 'without doubt' Gogo (who accompanied Brunhild to Gaul) would have told the poet what to include: this goes too far. In all probability, there may have been some degree of input from the king's advisers as to a general tone, but the Latin tradition of the genres gave the poet all the literary tropes he required and his own classical education was comprehensive.

<sup>28</sup> Judith George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, p.33, n.46. There are only two praise poems directed towards empresses in their own right: Julian on Eusebia and Claudian on Serena (see Smith, 'Carrying the cares of the state') – the late 3<sup>rd</sup>/early 4<sup>th</sup> century handbook by Menander Rhetor stated that an empress of 'great worth and honour' might be mentioned in the section devoted to an emperor's 'sophrosyne', but Fortunatus does not do this with Brunhild.

<sup>29</sup> OP VI.1a, lines 35-37.

<sup>30</sup> Only the LHF calls Fredegund 'beautiful' - see chapter 35. Fredegund cannot boast the lineage of Brunhild, and Fortunatus must replace the conventional ways of praising a woman, with what she can offer a king (OP IX.1 and see Smith, 'Carrying the cares of the state' for a comprehensive analysis of the poem's political and literary context).

<sup>31</sup> OP VI.1, line 15.

<sup>32</sup> See George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, pp. 26-27 – she states that *caesarius* is only used on one other occasion, in poem I.15 concerning Placidia. I have found no other examples of the term.

<sup>33</sup> OP VI.1, line 130.

The language in these poems engages directly with the quality of bride and the marriage, ‘fertile in its chaste bed...gets fresh offspring’.<sup>34</sup> Fortunatus connects the change in the status of wife to the change in the status of sons. Despite Gregory’s declaration that, whatever a mother’s birth, all the king’s children are legitimate,<sup>35</sup> the very fact that he has to say it suggests that discourses were changing on the subject. One year after this marriage, bishops came together at the Council of Tours to legislate, in particular, on chastity and incest in both clergy and laity: the canons contained within the Council of Tours may be seen as a direct response to the sexual practices of the sons of Lothar I.<sup>36</sup> Fortunatus, then, may have been responding to circulating discourses by highlighting the chastity of Brunhild, specifically connecting her lack of ‘hurtful shame’ to growth in power, whereby she is hailed as a queen.<sup>37</sup> For the poet, Brunhild’s unique quality is this chastity and he is signalling a change, one which suggested Sigibert as the only king to offer ‘certainty’ when it came to his dynastic line.<sup>38</sup>

Part of the symbolism of the Roman alliance is the importance of being *seen* as a Christian ruler. Gregory puts it quite simply: two Arian princesses, two Catholic kings, and a swift conversion. In the panegyric to Sigibert, however, Fortunatus takes the time to make Brunhild the symbol for Christian rulership, whereby she is not given by her father to Sigibert, but by Christ:

Christ then joined Queen Brunhild to Himself in love, for her merits, when He gave her to you...before she had pleased only man, however, but now behold she pleases God.<sup>39</sup>

We should assume that, before her marriage, Brunhild was trained in the ways of a Catholic queen, and despite recent attempts to suggest the queen remained ‘Arian’,<sup>40</sup> a term now accepted by historians as entirely contentious, it is safe to say that a refusal to become publicly Catholic would have been ‘political suicide’.<sup>41</sup> If, indeed, Nicetius, bishop

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<sup>34</sup> *OP* VI.1, line 9.

<sup>35</sup> *DLH* V.20.

<sup>36</sup> The detail of the Council of Tours is contained within *Les canons des conciles mérovingiens: VIe-VIIe siècles*, eds. J. Gaudemet and B. Basdevant-Gaudemet (Paris, 1989). Gregory’s declaration is in response to bishop Sagittarius of Gap’s suggestion that King Guntram’s sons could never succeed as their mother was a servant (*DLH* V.20.) See Ian Wood, ‘Incest, Law and the Bible in sixth-century Gaul’, *Early Medieval Europe* 7:3 (1998) pp. 291-303 and *MK*, pp. 104-5 on the argument that the legislation of this council was a direct response to the practices of the kings studied here.

<sup>37</sup> *OP* VI.1, lines 115-117.

<sup>38</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.119.

<sup>39</sup> *OP* VI.1a, lines 32-42.

<sup>40</sup> John Martyn, *Pope Gregory and the Brides of Christ* (Newcastle, 2009) p.25 – he suggests that much of Pope Gregory the Great’s correspondence with the queen was his attempt to convert her to the orthodox faith. This view can be discounted.

<sup>41</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.129.

of Trier, was involved in negotiations surrounding the marriage, as Gregory may suggest, he would have likely been the individual to train Brunhild. In the 560s, he had written to Clotild's granddaughter – Chlodoswintha, queen of the Lombards – to ask her to bring the Lombard kingdom away from heresy and into the Catholic religion.<sup>42</sup> His desire to use women to improve the kingdom's faith could well have extended to Brunhild. It may have been he who presided over the conversion process itself, whereby the Visigothic princess would have been inserted into the baptismal pool. Gregory only reports the reversal of the procedure years later, when Brunhild's daughter, Ingund, is bloodied, stripped and thrown into the pool by her mother-in-law, Goiswinth, in order to re-baptise her into what he calls the 'Arian heresy.'<sup>43</sup> Fortunatus, then, presents Brunhild as a Christian ruler and her marriage as a Roman alliance to show that something had changed in Merovingian society with her arrival. His words may be both responding to dialogues already present at court, and attempting to create new images to resonate around that court after the marriage.

### The acceptance of Brunhild

At the ceremony, Fortunatus states that 'in the marriage of the king the people see their hearts' desires'.<sup>44</sup> This connects with the expected *consensus* within a royal panegyric, the acclaim of people for their king.<sup>45</sup> Yet here there is particular emphasis on *who* has come together to celebrate: the palace glows with the arrivals and in a series of ranks the leading magnates of the king encircled him, *culmina tot procerum concurrent culmen ad unum*.<sup>46</sup> The use of alliteration emphasises the universal approval for the marriage, and the public nature of the event. Fortunatus would have known the political resonance of his works and Julia Smith has pointed out that his attentive reading of Claudian would have highlighted the values of panegyric to 'warn, persuade or urge a specific course of action'.<sup>47</sup> Fortunatus wrote an encomium for Charibert a year after Brunhild's marriage, in which the poet specifically addressed the people to acknowledge

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<sup>42</sup> EA no.8. See also Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (Cambridge, 2002) on 'Christianising' women.

<sup>43</sup> DLH V.38.

<sup>44</sup> OP VI.1, lines 22-3.

<sup>45</sup> For more on consensus, see Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (London, 1981) particularly pp. 46-8.

<sup>46</sup> OP VI.1, lines 17-19.

<sup>47</sup> See Smith, 'Carrying the cares of the state', p.232 and for the relationship with Claudian, see Sven Blomgren, 'De Venantio Fortunato Lucani Claudianique imitatore', *Eranos* 48 (1950) pp. 150-156.

the king's lordship: 'Love him, Paris'.<sup>48</sup> We cannot be certain whether Fortunatus edited his work before publication: it is possible that he embellished, or nuanced, certain details upon the death of Brunhild's husband in order to support her position, or he may indeed have published exactly as he presented the poetry at the time. I suggest, however, that he would have understood the importance of his words within a changing Merovingian political context, and may well have edited his language to suit it.

Fortunatus was attuned to the importance of acknowledgement, then, and Gregory of Tours may be following his lead in his depiction of the very public nature of Sigibert's marriage:

The king, assembling the leading men of his kingdom, ordering a banquet to be prepared, received her as his wife with every appearance of joy and happiness. She was subject to Arianism, but she was converted.<sup>49</sup>

Universal acceptance is, again, the key here: this is a marriage celebrated by the court, and all of its members – combined with Gregory's delight at Brunhild's Catholicism, happiness is enjoyed by all. Both authors understood the way in which their work was not only history, or poetry, but both gendered and political discourse: Fortunatus selects specific aspects of female rulership to highlight and Gregory may well allude to those images in his account.

While Fortunatus orally presented his poem at the time of Brunhild's marriage in 566, I suggest that he and Gregory may have nuanced their visions of the episode in light of Sigibert's death in 575, as this is when both Fortunatus' poetry was published and I suggest Gregory's text was written. Both men are using their historical present to create a textual past for Brunhild. Giving validation to her past, both may have hoped to strengthen the position of the queen at a point of vulnerability in her career – widowhood. That Gregory's presentation of the acceptance was important is confirmed by the way that Fredegar's *Chronicle* would manipulate it, in the later attempts to vilify the queen. Fredegar removes the list of Brunhild's qualities, the conversion, and potentially most importantly, the presence and assumed consent of the aristocracy.<sup>50</sup> Brunhild's acceptance into the Frankish kingdom, then, becomes a hinge around which authors attempt to legitimise, or de-legitimise, her authority. Fortunatus and Gregory were using their present to depict Brunhild's past, in order to protect her future; those later authors had the privilege

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<sup>48</sup> *OP* VI.2, lines 9-10 – the dating of this poem has recently been challenged by Marc Widdowson, 'Merovingian partitions: a 'genealogical charter'?' *Early Medieval Europe* 17:1 (2009) pp. 1-22.

<sup>49</sup> *DLH* IV.27.

<sup>50</sup> *Chron.* III.14.

of knowing she was dead and simply re-created her past. There are entirely different political dynamics inherent within the textual reconstructions of Brunhild, and our earlier authors are living within the political reality they are presenting. I will now consider Gregory's presentation of the context which surrounds Brunhild's marriage: not only was he examining the context from the vantage point of the marriage having taken place, but also potentially had the words of Venantius Fortunatus to call upon.

### **The arms race for brides**

In 561, the Merovingian king Lothar I died and his kingdom was divided between his four sons, the partitions of which have been recently explored as themselves part of Gregory of Tours' 'artifices and agendas'.<sup>51</sup> The bishop presents Chilperic, ruling from Soissons, negatively from the outset, but sees something different in Sigibert, ruling from Rheims, as the king mentioned most frequently in the *DLH*'s account until 575. The presentation of this ruler's desire to marry is entirely positive:

King Sigibert observed that his brothers were taking wives who were completely unworthy of them and were so far degrading themselves as to even marry their own servants. He therefore sent an embassy loaded with gifts to Spain and asked for the hand of Brunhild, the daughter of King Athanagild.<sup>52</sup>

This king, then, was making a conscious attempt to seek an alliance with a bride of quality, specifically setting himself apart from his brothers – Charibert had dismissed his wife for shepherdesses and daughters of wool-workers;<sup>53</sup> Guntram took a series of mistresses and dismissed them at will;<sup>54</sup> Chilperic had to repudiate numerous wives in order to marry Galswinth.<sup>55</sup> Gregory's structure here supports his message: he moves consecutively from the degrading relationships of the brothers through to Sigibert's choice.

We are at a point of tension both historically and textually: there were many queens whose births were not recorded, but were considered to have legitimate sons – Austrechild, Faileuba, Nanthild, Balthild and even Fredegund are among them. Yet there are clear signs

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<sup>51</sup> Widdowson has recently questioned the validity of the partitions of 511 and 561 in the Merovingian kingdom, suggesting that Gregory of Tours reconfigured them in the light of the Treaty of Andelot in 587, the 'live' issue at the time he was writing – 'Merovingian partitions'. This has implications when we connect it with this study's argument that Gregory recast Brunhild's representation in the light of Sigibert's death: at the key political moments, Gregory is reworking his images.

<sup>52</sup> *DLH* IV.27. See Ryan Crisp, 'Marriage and Alliance in the Merovingian Kingdoms 481-639', PhD Thesis, Ohio State University (2003) on the much wider contexts of foreign dynastic marriages, and the seminal work by Ewig, particularly 'Studien zur merowingischen Dynastie', pp. 15-59.

<sup>53</sup> *DLH* IV.26.

<sup>54</sup> *DLH* IV.27.

<sup>55</sup> *DLH* IV.28.

that, as Gregory was writing, the range of Merovingian relationships were becoming subject to criticism: I suggest that, not only was he feeding into Fortunatus' emphasis on Brunhild's chastity as a differentiating marker, but the Council of Tours' issues noted above, in 567, and then discourses around the years of Sigibert's death in 575. Within three years of that death, Gregory argued with bishop Sagittarius as to the legitimacy of Guntram's sons, because of the origins of the mother.<sup>56</sup> For Gregory, as for his poet friend, Sigibert's choice had been crucial:

This young woman was elegant in form, lovely to look at, chaste and decorous in her behaviour, prudent in her judgement and of good address.<sup>57</sup>

All are desired attributes and the most classic of literary tropes, as Fortunatus had highlighted.<sup>58</sup> Gregory does not give the detail of the embassies sent to the country, but it has been suggested that bishop Nicetius of Trier conducted the negotiations, and a man of Sigibert's guard, Gogo, accompanied Brunhild from Spain to Gaul.<sup>59</sup> Gogo becomes influential in Brunhild's career, so the suggestion that their connection began at this early stage is entirely possible: he would become the *nutritor* of Brunhild's son, and a chief member of the embassies the queen sent to Byzantium.

In seeking the highest-quality foreign bride, Sigibert set into motion an arms race that his competitive brother could not ignore, now desiring the sister of Brunhild, Galswinth:

He told the messengers to say that he promised to dismiss all the others, if only he were deemed worthy of receiving one of royal blood, befitting his own rank.<sup>60</sup>

Chilperic already had his women – he had placed his first wife, Audovera, in a nunnery, having fallen in love with her servant, the infamous Fredegund. Gregory represents the king's plea to King Athanagild as one of self-deprecation and humility, and makes it clear that Galswinth will be of a very different status– those to be repudiated are *uxores* and Galswinth is described *sociata coniugio*. Galswinth was the older sister of Brunhild – one may question why Sigibert had selected the younger, but it can be safely assumed that Chilperic's choice said more about his competition with Sigibert than it did about

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<sup>56</sup> *DLH* V.20.

<sup>57</sup> *DLH* IV.27.

<sup>58</sup> See Valerie Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World*, pp. 1-26 on the tropes through which female beauty and behaviour is described.

<sup>59</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.116 – Dumézil suggests that the bishop's prestigious position, his contacts with Italy, made him the right man for the job. The evidence, however, is not present.

<sup>60</sup> *DLH* IV.28.

Galswinth's attributes. For Sigibert, this was a first marriage; for Chilperic, a political response.

### **The Visigothic position in 566**

Court interaction between the Frankish and Visigothic kingdoms is clear in a variety of sources, many of which will be expanded upon in the later discussion on the Hermengild rebellion.<sup>61</sup> Between the fourth and sixth century, this kingdom had undergone a number of changes<sup>62</sup> and in 566, King Athanagild found himself in a precarious dynastic position. One may imagine the king having been brought up with the traditions of the Visigothic ruling elite, knowing that marriage alliances over the past fifty years had benefits in holding back Frankish expansion into Spain.<sup>63</sup>

It is little coincidence that the last Visigothic-Frankish marriage that Gregory refers to, before that of Brunhild, is one that ends in blood: the Frankish Clotild, daughter of Clovis, was sent to Spain to marry Amalaric: according to Gregory, her Catholicism caused her to be treated so badly that she sent home a towel stained with her blood.<sup>64</sup> Her brother set off immediately for Spain, and during the invasion, Amalaric was killed in 531. This is the image which sets up the position in 566: Amalaric had been the last member of one Spanish line, and for the next twenty years, Visigothic nobles competed for the throne. Athanagild was a general in a civil war when he became king. It is the Visigothic sources to which we must turn here, in particular Isidore of Seville, who illustrates that from the 550s onwards, warfare was endemic between Spain and the imperial south: ultimately, continuous disturbance had a destructive impact on social, cultural and economic life in Spain.<sup>65</sup>

Athanagild and his wife Goiswinth had no sons, a pivotal point. They, therefore, had no dynastic succession on which to draw; the Merovingians had a single, but divided dynasty. We cannot say what assumptions Athanagild's daughters had of their position within their family structure. When Sigibert appealed to the Visigothic king, the latter received gifts happily, and agreed to the marriage of his younger daughter; when Chilperic

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<sup>61</sup> Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711* (Oxford, 2004) p.42. As with any study of early medieval society, the problem of sources permeates a discussion of the Visigoths.

<sup>62</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.182: from political organisation to religion to culture, the Visigoths had changed their identity considerably.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996) p.233 and p.277.

<sup>64</sup> *DLH* III.10.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.183.



swiftly did the same, Athanagild must have been delighted at the promise of succession improved by not one, but two daughters. It is little wonder that Athanagild believed Chilperic's plea that he would repudiate his other wives, and then sent Galswinth with a 'large dowry',<sup>66</sup> just as he had with Brunhild. How, then, should we understand Athanagild's motives: did he look for succession through the female, rather than male, line? This is a hypothesis which we may only hint at here, but may prove interesting – there are challenges for a king with only daughters at his disposal.<sup>67</sup> There was something different, I propose, about this family: the Visigothic king's wife, Goiswinth, is a character who has received little attention, but I will suggest was at the forefront of Visigothic succession politics after her husband's death. It is reasonable to assume that she had built up her knowledge during her marriage, and therefore may well have been in the background of Athanagild's decisions here. Could it be that a woman was part of the plan to ensure her daughters' success?<sup>68</sup> It is a line worth pursuing.

### **The creation of a 'queen'?**

The Visigothic kingdom had, in theory, strengthened its dynastic promise, and two brothers in the Merovingian kingdom had marked a change in the quality of bride, and type of alliance sought. One marriage would be celebrated by Fortunatus; the other he would have to confront for its disastrous consequences. A 'queen' cannot be made as easily as we may once have thought – this is as much a challenge to unpack as what *made* a Merovingian marriage itself. Thus far, recognition has been explored as a literary construct, but it is clear that there were some accessories, if one may call them that, to a union. The transactions surrounding these marriages inform our understanding of the *value* assigned to these women, by both their Visigothic father and their Frankish husbands.

### The gifts of a king's daughter

'Nullum sine dote fiat conjugium': 'Let there be no marriage without dos'.<sup>69</sup> This statement, from Pope Leo I in the middle of the fifth century, has previously been used as a benchmark with which to distinguish marriage from concubinage.<sup>70</sup> In view of the range

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<sup>66</sup>DLH IV.28.

<sup>67</sup> Nelson, 'Charlemagne – pater optimus?', pp. 275-77 in particular.

<sup>68</sup> Certainly, Fortunatus' representation of Goiswinth in his elegy to Galswinth does not suggest her agency in this regard, but this may be a rhetorical strategy.

<sup>69</sup> See Karras, 'The history of marriage', p.139.

<sup>70</sup> Karras, 'The history of marriage', pp. 139-40 on the dangers of generalisation; also Diana Owen Hughes, 'From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe', *Journal of Family History* 3:3 (1978) who shows

of Merovingian unions, such distinctions may pose more problems than opportunities – Gregory of Tours does refer to both *dowry* and *morgengabe*, distinguishing between gifts given by parents and given upon marriage, but Merovingian relationships were not dictated by such terminology.<sup>71</sup> Instead of using the language to pre-empt the validity of the union, we should attempt to understand something of what these transfers may have represented to the individuals concerned. Josiane Barbier, studying documentary evidence from the sixth to the early ninth century, illustrated that 73 % of marriages refer to the transfer of goods at the occasion of the marriage.<sup>72</sup> Considering Brunhild and Galswinth, the potential for exchanges would presumably have been discussed through the negotiation process. While Merovingian sources do not give focus to goods given by parents to their daughters on the occasion of marriage, Visigothic law suggests that it was an important part of the process, at least in theory.<sup>73</sup>

Athanagild had the opportunity to strengthen his position with the marriage of two daughters to two Merovingian kings, and he would not have sent his daughters off without valuable goods to complement the symbolic value of the two women.<sup>74</sup> Gregory informs us that Brunhild was sent *cum magnos thesauros*, with great treasures, and Chilperic loved Galswinth specifically *because* she brought such great wealth with her.<sup>75</sup> Gregory uses the same phrase for both women – *magnos thesauros* for Galswinth also - in order, it is probable, to reinforce the size of the goods sent from Spain to Gaul.<sup>76</sup> When our author also comments that Galswinth came *cum magnos opibus*, from *ops*, translated best as

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that the concept of marriage without dowry being different from one with, is not attested until the Carolingian period, p.266.

<sup>71</sup> When Gregory describes the terms of the Treaty of Andelot (*DLH* IX.20) he refers to those items which have been given in dowry and in *morgengabe*.

<sup>72</sup> Josiane Barbier, 'Dotes, Donations après rapt et donations mutuelles', *Dots et Douaires dans le haut moyen Âge*, eds. F. Bougard, L. Feller and R. Le Jan (Rome, 2002) pp. 357-8. She studied 59 formulas: only 20 occurrences of the word 'dos' appeared, alone or in a compound expression – again, the challenge of terminology remains.

<sup>73</sup> 'Leges Visigothorum', *MGH Leges nationum Germanicarum*, vol. I, clauses III.1 and 5. As with most legislation, however, there is the challenge of understanding whether the clauses were actioned in reality.

<sup>74</sup> Matthias Hardt, 'Royal treasures and representation in the early middle ages', *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*, eds. W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (Leiden, 1998) pp. 255-280; Florin Curta, 'Merovingian and Carolingian Gift Giving', *Speculum* 81:3 (2006) pp. 671-699 and Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (London, 1988) – this work is interesting for showing previous problems with a feminist reading.

<sup>75</sup> *DLH* IV.27 and IV.28.

<sup>76</sup> *DLH* IV.27.

‘wealth’, it may be easy to use ‘dowry’, as translators from Dalton to Thorpe have done, but it is not necessarily helpful to use such terminology.<sup>77</sup>

Dumézil provides a list of items that Brunhild would have brought with her, with some entirely conjecture and others more likely: Athanagild’s daughter presumably travelled with fine clothing and jewels.<sup>78</sup> From Gregory’s later depiction of the dowry sent with Fredegund’s daughter Rigunth to Spain, we may see the extent to which a king’s daughter may be ‘invested’ with a value that was both literal and symbolic: upon seeing his daughter leaving with fifty wagon-loads of goods, including gold, silver and clothing, Chilperic worried that there was nothing left in the royal treasury!<sup>79</sup> There may also have been lands which the king’s daughter was given by her father: these may have remained her property, but their management became entrusted to her new husband.<sup>80</sup> Dumézil has pinpointed one area which he suggests could have formed part of Brunhild’s dowry – this is an area referred to as *Arisitensis vicus* by Gregory. He informs us that this area had fifteen parishes within it, part of Sigibert’s territory, but had been previously occupied by the Goths.<sup>81</sup> I have highlighted its position in Figure 1.1 – it is a line of enquiry which may be pursued further, but there is no documentary evidence confirming Arisitum as part of Brunhild’s dowry. Gregory understood, at least, that Brunhild and Galswinth had been sent to the Merovingian kingdom with treasures which matched their worth. When Galswinth begged to go home (for she had not come so far to see Chilperic continue his illicit relations), she offered to leave the treasures she had brought, suggesting that she understood that her own value no longer matched that of the goods that surrounded her – or, at least, her treatment did not match her value.<sup>82</sup>

*Morgengabe*, the label which denotes the gifts given from husband to wife the morning after the consummation of their marriage, had a different symbolic value to those given from king to his daughter. Any riches given at this point denoted the king’s power and his ability to dispense wealth – in dispensing it to his wife, he was ‘investing’ in her. Gifts could be made at determined moments in the life of the queen, moments at which the female and political life cycle merged: marriage and the birth of children are the obvious examples. Yet we have little detail as to what those exchanges contained, perhaps attesting

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<sup>77</sup> O.M. Dalton, *The History of the Franks* and Lewis Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks* (London, 1974) – these are simply examples of how translators in different periods have defaulted to use the word ‘dowry’.

<sup>78</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.114.

<sup>79</sup> *DLH* VI.45.

<sup>80</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.114.

<sup>81</sup> *DLH* V.5.

<sup>82</sup> *DLH* IV.28.

to the regularity of them as part of court life. The content of these gifts may have been undergoing a change in value in this period,<sup>83</sup> from moveable goods to donations of landed wealth. Again, we have no idea what gifts Sigibert gave his new bride and comparisons with the burial goods of other queens are not necessarily illustrative.<sup>84</sup> Here, I will focus on some interesting lines of enquiry around land, before moving on to potential implications of an early acquisition of wealth.

## Land

Stephen White and Barbara Rosenwein, exploring anthropological models of gift exchange, saw property exchange as the ‘social glue’ of the central middle ages.<sup>85</sup> With the changeable political landscape in the Merovingian kingdom, however, came the constant reassessment of borders - Gregory identifies kingdoms in terms of cities, and their rulers.<sup>86</sup> It was through those cities that kings dispensed their legislation, administered justice and acquired revenue. When a king gave land to his queen, then, he not only gave her a share in the royal assets of the kingdom, but more importantly, allowed her to participate in the same systems of representation that he did as king.

Gregory and Fortunatus say nothing of Brunhild’s lands during her marriage – Gregory goes into detail only when discussing the Treaty of Andelot, in 587. The later documentary evidence that we must rely on, then, presents its challenges: we cannot tell which lands were given to Brunhild at the point of marriage. A diploma from Sigibert III, in the middle of the seventh century, referred to a *villa* called Tribonum, next to Cologne, which was *a fisco Brunichildae reginae*.<sup>87</sup> The same diploma asserts that the town housed Goths, which may suggest that Brunhild placed Gothic personnel there to protect her interests. Fortunatus’ elegy to Galswinth, as we will see, suggests that a queen could have loyal followers surrounding her: here, it is a reasonable assumption that Brunhild brought

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<sup>83</sup> See Owen Hughes, ‘From Brideprice to dowry’, p.269.

<sup>84</sup> Dumézil goes too far in suggesting that, in saying that Sigibert would have given her an ornamental plate she had seen at Toledo in 551; he also compares her with the burial goods of Queen Arnegund, mother of Chilperic, who died around 570. For some of the work on status and burial goods, see the updated commentary in Guy Halsall, ‘Female status and power in early Merovingian central Austrasia: the burial evidence’, *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009*, ed. G. Halsall (Leiden, 2010) pp. 289-314 and also the largely re-written ‘Material Culture, Sex, Gender, Sexuality and Transgression in Sixth-Century Gaul’ pp. 323-55 in the same work.

<sup>85</sup> See Stephen White, *Custom, Kinship and Gifts to the Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France 1050-1150* (Chapel Hill, 1988) and Barbara Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny’s Property, 909-1049* (Ithaca, 1989).

<sup>86</sup> Simon T. Loseby, ‘Gregory’s Cities: Urban Functions in Sixth-Century Gaul’ *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. I.N. Wood (Woodbridge, 1998) p.245.

<sup>87</sup> Theo Kölzer, ‘Die Urkunden der Merowinger’, *MGH Diplomata Regnum Francorum e stirpe Merovingica* 2 vols., vol I (Hanover, 2001) no. 77.

with her to Gaul the personnel, including servants and potentially advisors, to administrate on her behalf. There is no suggestion in the diploma that this land was Brunhild's in name only: with the installation of Goths, there is evidence to suggest that this land was hers to manage. Kölzer points out that Tribonum was seized by Lothar II, upon his murder of Brunhild in 613.<sup>88</sup> This study will illustrate that Lothar engaged with, and reconfigured, Brunhild's political links after her death; the fact that he seized Tribonum at her demise, then, points to its significance during the queen's life.

Bishop Romulf's tenth century testament referred to lands held by Brunhild in Rheims, later exchanged for lands she preferred at Metz.<sup>89</sup> There is no evidence that she installed Gothic personnel in these lands, but it is a reasonable suggestion: in placing people loyal to her in these areas, Brunhild could call upon that loyalty when she needed it. Taking these three areas together – Cologne, Rheims and Metz – creates a triangle:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Flodoard de Reims, 'Historia Remensis Ecclesiae', *Die Geschichte der Reimser Kirche*, ed. M. Stratmann, *MGH Scriptores* 36 (Hanover, 1902) II.4.

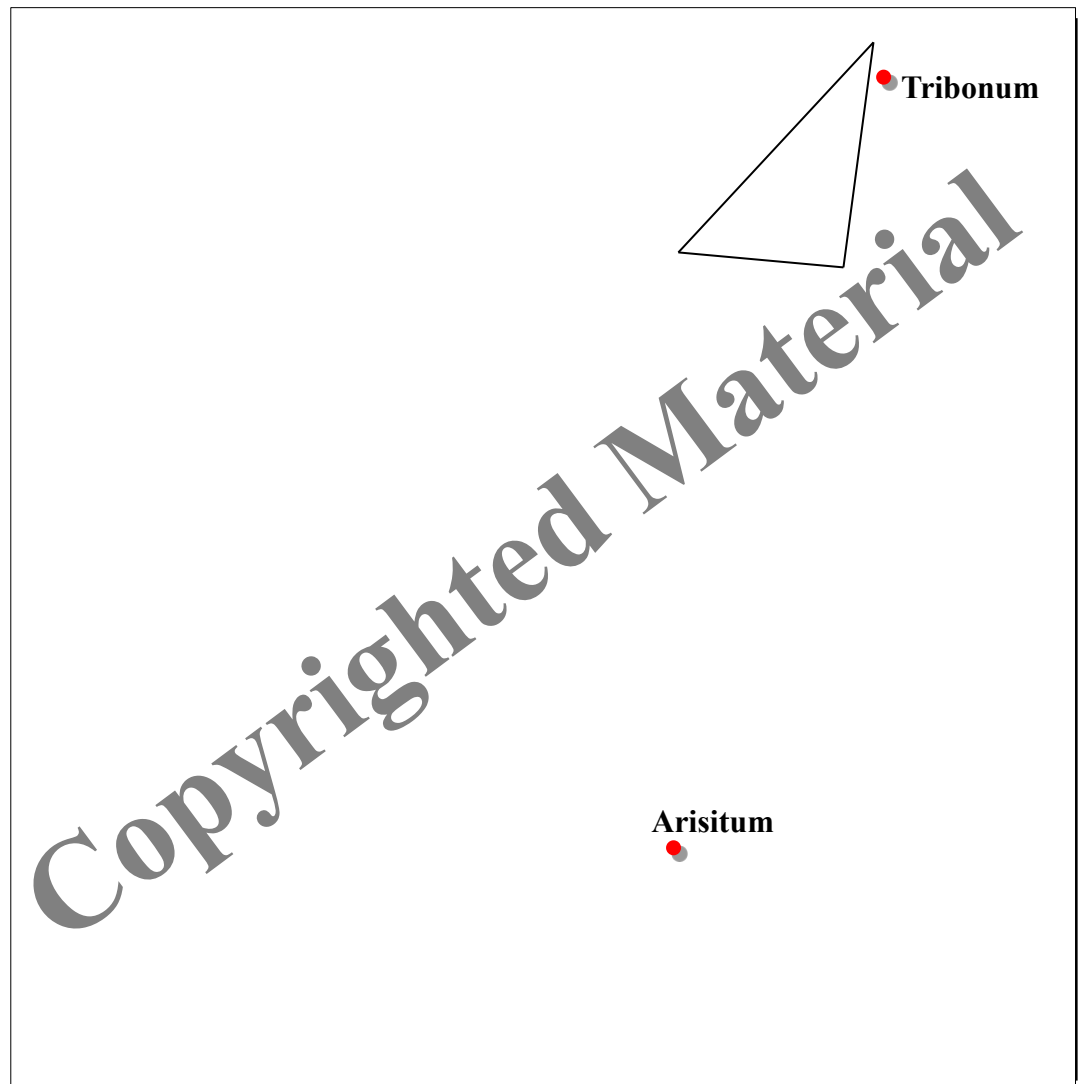


Figure 1.1 Brunhild's potential *morgengabe*<sup>90</sup>

While Dumézil asserts that this triangle delineates the 'geography of [Sigibert's] power',<sup>91</sup> there are two challenges: first, Brunhild did not hold lands in these areas simultaneously (she exchanged lands in Rheims for Metz) and second, we cannot be convinced that Sigibert gave Brunhild these lands as *morgengabe*. It is an attractive hypothesis, for one particular reason – it is clear that Sigibert and Chilperic were involved in an arms-race for brides. Chilperic's contract with the Visigothic king, in particular, was a contract of exclusivity not previously seen. It is highly unlikely that Sigibert would not have given Brunhild a significant morning-gift, particularly when we see his brother giving Galswinth an extravagant one. Tribonum could well have formed part of Brunhild's *morgengabe*, as may Rheims, but Metz came (according to the source we have) as a result of Brunhild's

<sup>90</sup> Maps are taken from Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.536: this author's maps are particularly useful for their distinctions between the lands of different kings, and of the main cities in Merovingian Gaul. I have used my own triangle, and inclusion of Arisitum and Tribonum to better understand the reaches of power.

<sup>91</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.126

own political dealings. There is the distinct possibility that Brunhild's *morgengabe* is described in sources that are now lost to us. The *morgengabe* given to Galswinth is unprecedented – not mentioned by Gregory at the time of her marriage, we find out its enormity only in the Treaty of Andelot in 587, the terms of which are contained within the *DLH*.<sup>92</sup> Five Aquitanian cities were given to the queen: Bordeaux, Limoges, Cahors, Lescar and Cieutat:

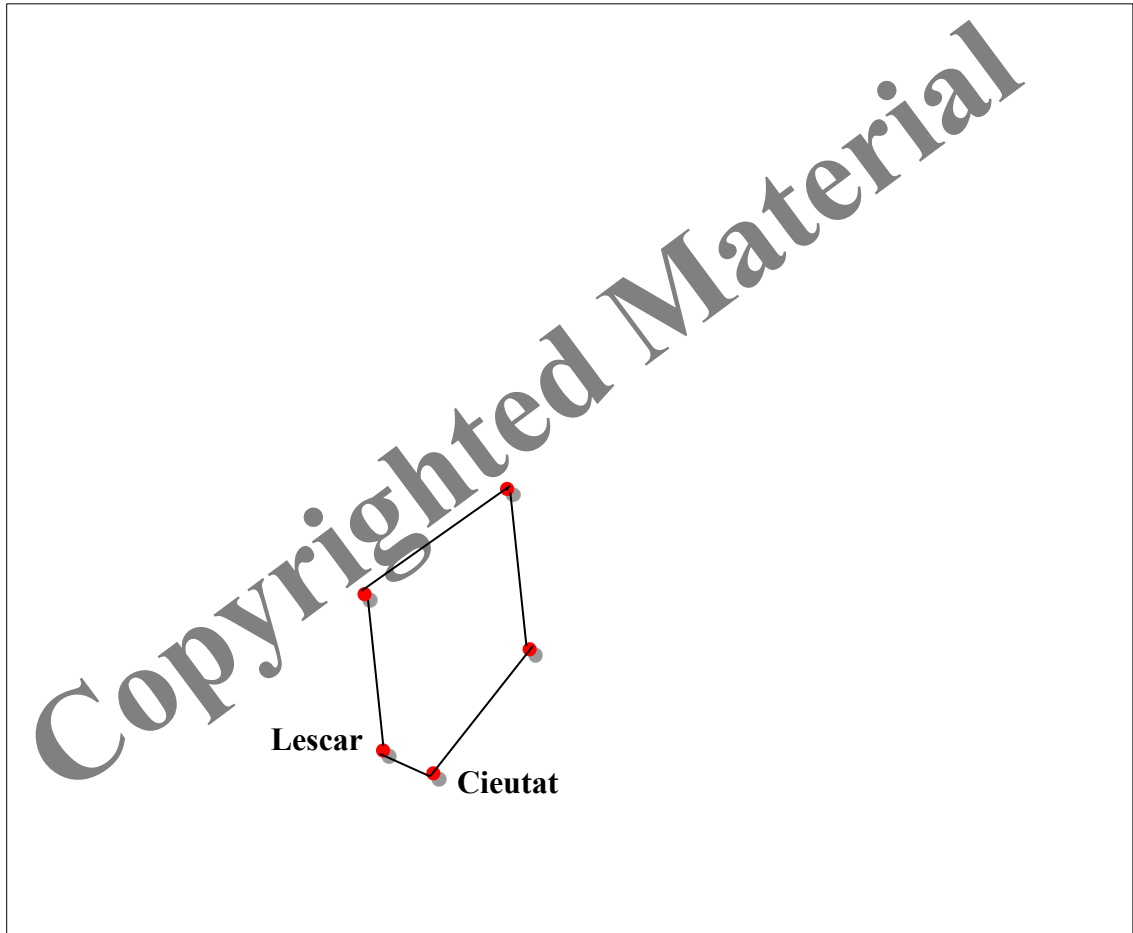


Figure 1.2 Galswinth's *morgengabe*<sup>93</sup>

The public statement of this gift cannot be underestimated, to both the Visigothic and Merovingian Kingdoms. To king Athanagild, Nelson suggests Chilperic was giving the guarantee of the future of sons and grandsons; Le Jan goes even further and states that these cities formed a sort of 'regnum'.<sup>94</sup> We may have few points of comparison, but the excessive nature of this gift seems apparent.<sup>95</sup> Why this huge gift and why do we only hear about it from Gregory some twenty years later? This gift was about perception: Chilperic

<sup>92</sup> *DLH* IX.20.

<sup>93</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.536 for the map itself, onto which I have added two of the five cities, and connected them.

<sup>94</sup> Janet L. Nelson, 'A propos des femmes', p.465; Regine Le Jan, 'Douaires et Pouvoirs des Reines en Francie et en Germanie', p.461.

<sup>95</sup> Nelson, 'A propos des femmes' p.469 and Wood, *MK*, p.123.

had entered into an exclusive contract with the Visigothic king, and this was a public statement that he was ‘investing’ in his new queen in the most extravagant way. He was symbolically giving her a share in his assets. Gregory’s silence on these land exchanges emphasises that representation and reality are two different things. Boundaries were contested, specifically between Chilperic and Sigibert, and ‘kingship may have been in worse shape than Gregory lets on’.<sup>96</sup> Gregory says nothing of either king’s daughter acquiring territory – as he was writing in the tumult of Sigibert’s death, tension surrounding these lands may have prompted his silence: he, perhaps, had no idea what would happen. Only in 587, in detailing the terms of the Treaty of Andelot, does Gregory feel safe to remember Brunhild’s desire to reclaim her sister’s lands.<sup>97</sup>

The irony surrounding the experience of Brunhild and Galswinth is that, if one was only to examine the evidence of the transactions surrounding the marriages, one may believe that Galswinth, with her immense dowry and five cities, was the sister with the greater access to power. She, on the outside, looked like the one invested with the greatest value. And yet the name remembered by history is Brunhild, for Galswinth would be written out of history almost as soon as she was written in. A comparison of Gregory’s and Fortunatus’ presentations of Galswinth’s doomed marriage with Brunhild’s illustrates that the literary constructs at play are part of a complex network of tense political relations. The poet and the bishop tread the political tightrope of how to deal with a murdered queen.

**‘You have not made the sort of journey I prayed for’.**<sup>98</sup>

Gregory and Fortunatus promote the strength of Brunhild’s marriage and lament the brevity of that of her sister to Chilperic. After begging to go home, and enduring Chilperic’s multiple excuses on his enduring relations with Fredegund, Galswinth was found strangled in her bed, evidently on the king’s orders.<sup>99</sup> Gregory contains the arrival, and death, of Galswinth in one chapter, and in doing so, is able to illustrate the transience of her position. He turns the victim into a martyr: in front of Galswinth’s tomb, a lamp falls without breaking, and ‘everyone...knew a miracle had occurred’.<sup>100</sup> This is a key rhetorical

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<sup>96</sup> Widdowson, ‘Merovingian partitions’, p.7 – see *DLH* V.48.

<sup>97</sup> *DLH* IX.20.

<sup>98</sup> *OP* VI.5, lines 285-6.

<sup>99</sup> *DLH* IV.28.

<sup>100</sup> *DLH* IV.28.



trick taken, I would suggest, from the images created by Fortunatus in his elegy to the queen.<sup>101</sup>

Fortunatus writes a poem to Galswinth that has received much critical attention, even if the woman who is its subject has not.<sup>102</sup> As a result, strands of literary theory have been effectively used, as to some extent have gender, but they have before been two trains on separate tracks – I hope to rebalance those readings here. In this poem, Fortunatus has to respond to the political ‘hot potato’ of the queen’s suspicious death, while remembering he is relying on the patronage of Merovingian rulers. Of the ‘two towers’ sent by Toledo to Gaul, one remains strong, and the other has fallen, leaving him in a delicate position.

The poet describes, in detail, the physical journey from Spain to Gaul, and, therefore, the movement from royal daughter to royal wife. Galswinth is particularly well received in Poitiers, part of Sigibert’s lands, and this is where Fortunatus himself watched her pass by – clearly, he was still in the inner circle of Sigibert and Brunhild a year after their marriage. Former queen Radegund met with the princess at her convent in Poitiers, and subsequently is said to mourn her death.<sup>103</sup> Fortunatus describes how Galswinth won over her new people – through gifts and words, she earned respect and *utque fidelis ei sit gens armata, per arma iurat iure suo, se quoque lege ligat*.<sup>104</sup> I would suggest this should be translated as: ‘the armed ranks are loyal to her and through arms swear in their own right, and bind themselves by law’. Judith George goes too far in suggesting that they swear an ‘oath’,<sup>105</sup> for this would be unprecedented in Merovingian sources. Fortunatus is evoking the queen’s acceptance by her people, while retaining a certain distance from her king, which is the important point here. I suggest the translation, in line with Reydellet’s, that the armed ranks, through their weapons, offered Galswinth fidelity and invokes the ‘law’ as meaning Catholicism, particularly in light of the recent conversion. These men, he suggests, were willing to promote the Catholic cause in her name – really, just an affirmation of her religion here.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *OP* VI.5.

<sup>102</sup> See Gregson Davis, ‘*Ad sidera notus*: strategies of lament and consolation in Fortunatus’ *De Gelesuintha*, *Agon* 1 (1967) pp. 118-34; George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems* and Roberts, ‘Venantius Fortunatus’ *Elegy on the Death of Galswintha*, pp. 298-311; Elaine M. Ragland, ‘Fear, Loathing and Deadly Rivalry in the Frankish Polygamous Royal Family’, *Fear and its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. A. Scott and C. Kosso (Turnhout, 2002) pp. 125-136.

<sup>103</sup> Radegund’s involvement with these affairs is a fascinating avenue which requires further study, yet we have no evidence connecting Brunhild with Radegund.

<sup>104</sup> *OP* VI.5, lines 241-2.

<sup>105</sup> George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, p.47.

<sup>106</sup> See Marc Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, vol.2, p.70, n.65.

After her unexplained death, Fortunatus focuses on Galswinth as a foreign bride, in keeping with the traditions of the elegy, in which death away from home was a particular cause for lamentation.<sup>107</sup> Leaving her mother at the threshold of their kingdoms, the Visigothic daughter cries:

“Whom I pray, shall I find as a stranger in a foreign land, whither none of you come, fellow countrymen, friend, parent?”<sup>108</sup>

The use of direct speech gives pathos, evoking something unnatural about the journey Galswinth has made: Galswinth is now ‘broken’, moved from her ‘own soil’. In suggesting that she has never settled in the Merovingian kingdom, Fortunatus is able to distance himself somewhat from the murder of a Merovingian queen, and does so by assuming a series of female positions. It removes the political sensitivity of her death, and makes this a tale of women torn apart, not by marriage, but by *improba sors*. Fortunatus can only imagine Brunhild’s reaction to her sister’s death:

“Why, o deepest sorrow, have you divided us on death’s path who were reared together, who were joined by these lands?”... Here the sister, there the distraught mother, with shared tears.<sup>109</sup>

There is no mention of Galswinth as wife or of her husband whatsoever – she can only occupy her place in her natal family, as sister and daughter. While Régine Le Jan has shown that the rupture between the natal and marriage family ‘est souvent définitive’,<sup>110</sup> Fortunatus is forced to foreground the Visigothic identity in order to temper the politically sensitive Merovingian situation. When Galswinth dies, her journey as a queen stops and she has nowhere to go – she is written out of history.

A comparison between the consolation poem to Galswinth and the epithalamium to Sigibert and Brunhild illustrates how different these two womens’ careers were. On paper, they were exactly the same: they were probably educated together and made the same physical journey, yet while the poems concerning Brunhild applaud the strength of her union, that concerning Galswinth does not even name her husband. The words at the beginning of this chapter stated that ‘nothing’ obstructs lovers whom the ‘gods wish to unite’. If the poetry examined here tells us anything, it is that the historical reality and the textual construction of it can be very different. For Galswinth, the political life cycle and female life cycle have collided. The political context forces her ‘hand’: she may have been

<sup>107</sup> George, *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, p.40.

<sup>108</sup> *OP* VI.5, lines 145-7.

<sup>109</sup> *OP* VI.5, lines 297 and 348.

<sup>110</sup> Régine Le Jan, ‘D’une cour à l’autre: Les voyages des reines de Francie au Xe siècle’, *Femmes, pouvoir et société dans le haut Moyen Âge*, ed. R. Le Jan (Paris, 2001) p. 73.

safe as a daughter and a sister, but she was murdered as a wife. Brunhild, however, would defend her sister: not, as has been suggested by many, through the pursuit of a ‘feud’ with Fredegund; but instead in the pursuit of her five cities. There is a tantalising vignette which may suggest that, even after Galswinth’s death, her personnel remained loyal to her: when Fredegund attempted to exhort one of Galswinth’s cities for taxation, a riot broke out.<sup>111</sup> This chapter began by considering the literary constructions of marriage and of a queen, but in considering the more tangible transactions which accompany that process, one begins to understand the complex identities and networks which problematise the movement from a king’s daughter to a king’s wife.

## Conclusion

If we accept the definition of female power as having the ‘means of strategic action’,<sup>112</sup> the act of marriage itself was not the beginnings of power. I have suggested recognition and representation as keys to understanding the challenging issues of ‘queenship’: recognition may include the negotiation process, the act of marriage itself, the giving of gifts, but coupled with this is the representation of these acts. The two strands may indeed be in conflict.

Venantius Fortunatus writes in ‘real time’, in a changing political situation and invariably must deal with the politically sensitive issues which surround him, from the marriages of royal daughters to the murders of royal wives. In 566, he wrote poetry which is intended to celebrate a new type of marriage, invested with all of the classic literary tropes he can use to symbolise something different about his political present. When he publishes his first book of poetry, however, he is presenting his work in an entirely different political context, a context in which Gregory of Tours also writes. Both men are working around political uncertainty, and their depiction of Brunhild post-575, or post-Sigibert, is entirely nuanced by that uncertainty. They tread the lines of what can and cannot be safely said. Representations of Brunhild’s marriage, then, were key to legitimising her in the wake of her husband’s death: they not only plug into an unfolding

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<sup>111</sup> In 579, ten years after Galswinth’s death, a tax riot occurred in Limoges, after which Fredegund is said to throw the tax demands from ‘her own cities’ onto the fire. As Limoges had been one of Galswinth’s cities, may we conjecture that its control passed to Fredegund? It is worth considering that loyal followers to Galswinth saw this taxation as the last straw – see *DLH* V.4 and V.34.

<sup>112</sup> Pauline Stafford, quoted by Anne Duggan, in ‘Introduction’, *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997) p. xvii. This introduction is a very useful overview of many of the issues surrounding agency and power.

political situation by constructing their ‘queen’, but also manipulate images of her for the future.

Alongside the challenges of representation, the institutionalisation of ‘queenship’, for some, lies in the ‘accessories’ I have posed here: treasure, dowry, *morgengabe*. In Nelson’s earliest work on Brunhild, she associated Merovingian queens with treasures.<sup>113</sup> More recently, the gifts given to a queen upon her marriage by her king, to Le Jan have constituted ‘un statut spécifique de la regina’.<sup>114</sup> If Galswinth’s death tells us anything, it is that *value* was entirely subjective. The access to wealth was, indeed, potential access to power,<sup>115</sup> but the political context entirely dictated how that power revealed itself, and more importantly dictated the way in which that power was represented. We may now move on to consider the ways in which Brunhild, and Fredegund, created networks of support for themselves while married, that they would later be forced to rely upon at that crucial moment of potential weakness – widowhood.

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<sup>113</sup> Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’, p.243.

<sup>114</sup> Le Jan, ‘Douaires et Pouvoirs’, p.483.

<sup>115</sup> See Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*, pp. 104-6.

## Chapter 2

### From king's wife to widow

**‘As if by your desire, counsel, and instigation, the most glorious lord king Sigibert wishes ardently to destroy this region. We do not say this as though we believe it’.<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

If the transition from *princess* to *queen* is more shorthand than historical reality in the early middle ages, the role of the king's wife deserves more critical attention. There is relative silence in the contemporary sources surrounding Brunhild's role as Sigibert's spouse, matched by certain historians, for example Dumézil suggesting that, at the point of marriage, she was a wife, ‘rien de plus’.<sup>2</sup> The challenge is that he does not take the time to explain what that actually meant for Brunhild: the textual silence does not mean that historians should not attempt to understand what the king's wife actually did. Brunhild may have begun her career as the king's bedfellow – Nelson in 1978 emphasised her absolute dependence on her husband's favour<sup>3</sup> – but certainly by 575, was being perceived by some as having a persuasive voice over her husband. The words above, from an often neglected letter from bishop Germanus of Paris to Brunhild, contained within the *Epistolae Austrasicae*, attest the bishop's expectation of a queen's wifely and political influence. In a real-time source, the bishop identifies agency in the role of the queen: not only is Brunhild here identified as powerful enough to prevent the destruction of the *regio* of Paris (Germanus' real concern), but is indeed pinpointed as the very cause of the problem. By 575, the bishop knew the difficulties of what he calls *consortium*, the coexistence of multiple Merovingian kingdoms and the propensity of the brothers within them to fight one another, and saw his bishopric under threat. The dating and quality of this evidence is crucial to understanding the perceived agency of Brunhild in her early career.

Sixth-century authors may not elaborate on the daily activities of a female ruler, but bishop Germanus' letter makes clear that a woman may establish herself within a network of influence. It is the nature of that influence which becomes contested in Brunhild's

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<sup>1</sup> EA no.9 – ‘Quasi vestro voto, consilio et instigatione domnus gloriosissimus Sigibertus rex tam arduae hanc vellit perdere regionem. Non propterea haec dicimus, quasi a nobis credatur’.

<sup>2</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.113.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’, p.223.

career: the persuasive voice is a gendered voice <sup>4</sup> and studies of queenship often focus on the positive female counsel of women upon their husbands, particularly in encouraging their religious conversion.<sup>5</sup> Germanus is imploring Brunhild to use her influence in what he deems the correct way. Fortunatus and Gregory stay almost silent on Brunhild's wifely attributes, so how should the scholar treat the critical space between that silence and the words of a bishop, who treads the line between a queen who counsels and one who instigates? The incitement of men became a theme that later authors would use to vilify the queen, and we may see the beginnings of that attack here. The rupture of Sigibert's death is seismic, not only for Brunhild and her children's futures, but for the sources which feature her, thus the representation of Brunhild as a wife must be given much more critical attention than it has previously. Gregory and Fortunatus know the ending of her marriage: they are writing about her role as a wife when she has already become a widow, and that may be a distinction that proves pivotal, but has not been examined before.

The activities of a king's wife, the transition to a king's widow, alongside a trajectory of influence and the ability to 'muster' support, between 566 and 575, the year of Sigibert's assassination, form the concerns of this chapter. I suggested that the access to gifts given to Brunhild upon marriage allowed potential access to wealth, and land in particular gave the opportunity to establish bases with loyal personnel. Those key areas – moveable wealth, land and the establishment of networks of loyalty – would become pivotal upon the death of Sigibert. They are, as Stafford put it, the 'raw materials'<sup>6</sup> of political power. In understanding the queen's position as the collusion between the female life cycle and the political one, the death of a king may leave a woman in an increasingly vulnerable situation: without those 'materials' to fall back upon, she may lose all political agency. What is most significant about both Brunhild, and her enemy Fredegund, is that they become the dominant players of the end of the sixth-century upon becoming widows. Is this because they had established the ground-work upon becoming a wife or because of key strategies of survival implemented upon losing their husbands?

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<sup>4</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Converters', p.107.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Rabin, 'Female Advocacy and Royal Protection in Tenth-Century England: The Legal Career of Queen Ælfthryth', *Speculum* 84:2 (2009) pp. 261-288; Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, 'Signifying Gender and Empire', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34:1 (2004) pp. 1-16 and Stacey Klein, 'Reading Queenship in Cynewulf's *Elene*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33:1 (2003) pp. 47-89.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex, 800-1066', *Past and Present* 91:1 (1981) pp. 3-27, at p.5.

### Influence seen and not heard, or heard and not seen?

So formulaic is Gregory's praise for her attributes upon her marriage that it tells us more about his expectations than about Brunhild herself. There is no mention of Brunhild in Gregory's tale, thereafter, until the ominous year of 575 – she is rendered textually silent as a wife, then, to come to life again in text as a widow. Why his reticence to discuss the woman who, we will discover, was key in his appointment? The author's rhetorical talent of keeping quiet was self-preservation: uncertain as to the stability of his position, it was safer not to highlight the positive connection with Sigibert's wife.

There are plausible suggestions we can make: Brunhild would have remained at her husband's side at official occasions and accompanied him on his travels. More importantly, however, she would have conversed and learned from some of the most influential individuals within Frankish society; we cannot forget that she would have had to learn a new language and customs. It is probable that the men closest to Sigibert would have been influential on the queen, particularly in the earliest days of her career. Fortunatus composes a panegyric to the *domesticus* Conda, the royal tutor of Sigibert,<sup>7</sup> who may have advised Brunhild on court activity before his death soon after the royal marriage. The main contact for Brunhild, however, I would suggest, was Gogo. Having accompanied her from Spain, he would have been the queen's closest ally upon entering Gaul: Fortunatus wrote to Gogo of his influence in Brunhild's wedding<sup>8</sup> and the queen appears to have made an effort to keep Gogo close. When Conda died, Gogo inherited many of his roles at the palace. While Gregory and Fortunatus remain fairly quiet on this,<sup>9</sup> Fredegar asserted that Gogo became 'mayor of the palace'.<sup>10</sup> He is a repeating figure within the *Epistolae Austrasicae* – four surviving letters feature him working within Brunhild's chancery, and attest his importance.<sup>11</sup>

The *Epistolae* can support us in attempting to re-create some of Brunhild's networks of influence, a task which has not been completed before. I have suggested that the collection was composed at the end of the sixth century, potentially with some degree

<sup>7</sup> *OP* VII.16.

<sup>8</sup> *OP* VII.1 – 'your eloquence...summons all to hasten here' (lines 13-15) and 'you bring the greatest joy for the noble king from the lands of Spain' (lines 41-42).

<sup>9</sup> In *OP* VII.4 Fortunatus hints at the role of *major domus* but never uses the title as Fredegar does (lines 25-6). For the difficulty of interpreting the passage and the dating of the post itself, see Pierre Riché, *Éducation et Culture dans l'occident barbare (VIe – VIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1962) pp. 238-239 and Wood, *MK*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>10</sup> *Chron.* III.59 – whether that role officially existed or not in the 570s, he clearly had influence at court.

<sup>11</sup> *EA* 13, 16, 22, 48; on the careers of men such as Conda and Gogo at the Merovingian court, see J.R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume 3 A.D. 527-641* (Cambridge, 1992) and K. Selle-Hosbach, *Prosopographie merowingischer Amsträger in der Zeit von 511 bis 613*, PhD thesis, University of Bonn (1974).

of editorial influence from Brunhild herself. Many of the individuals contained within the collection feature in the earliest stages of Brunhild's career: Gogo, Nicetius of Trier and Duke Lupus of Champagne are particular examples. This is one of the reasons it is necessary to place letter collections within a cultural and a political context: when we know from the collection the messengers Brunhild entrusted with her communication, we can trace those individuals back to earlier in her career. It is clear that the king's wife created a network of personnel that she could trust from an early stage, and continued to rely upon those men some twenty years later. We may begin to understand the political networks a queen may create and build, but of course there are contacts that we simply cannot trace: aristocrats, potentially other women, and almost certainly prominent bishops.

Brunhild's relationship with bishop Nicetius of Trier began in Spain. His presumably swift education in the benefits of conversion to Catholicism may have taught the queen the political importance of a reciprocal bond with the church. Most of what we know about this connection is the consequence of it all going wrong, but there may be multiple more positive connections with churchmen at the beginning of her career that simply are not recorded. Whether or not these individuals proved their loyalty with cash (the issue of simony will be addressed in chapter three) Brunhild needed allies. Gregory's silence about Brunhild's activities may have been because of his connection with the queen. The bishop's predecessor in Tours, Eufronius, had supported Sigibert in Queen Radegund's desire for the True Cross in 568, and was a cousin of Gregory's mother. Sigibert understood Tours as an influential area, in which he needed loyalty. His confirmation of Gregory, then, represented the attempt to ensure that loyalty in 573, upon Eufronius' death, and Fortunatus is clear that Brunhild had something to do with it as well: he states that *huic Sigisbertus ouans fauet et Brunichildis honori*.<sup>12</sup> That she is inserted into this hexameter is important, a political statement on her influence. The bishop of Rouen, Praetextatus, also became close to the queen, the relationship presumably fostered through her various connections upon marriage. Not only did Brunhild entrust him with her property upon leaving Rouen in 574 and going to Paris, presumably knowing that there was a chance her husband may be killed,<sup>13</sup> but he would be accused of bribing people to act against Chilperic's interests<sup>14</sup> and married Brunhild to Merovech.<sup>15</sup> Gregory and Praetextatus are two examples of relationships built at the earliest stages of Brunhild's career: the following chapter will examine Brunhild's involvement in episcopal

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<sup>12</sup> *OP* V.3 line 15; also V.11.

<sup>13</sup> *DLH* V.18.

<sup>14</sup> *DLH* V.17.

<sup>15</sup> *DLH* V.2.



appointments further, but at this stage it is apparent that even while Sigibert was still alive, Brunhild was developing key church relationships.

A foreign queen, who had to be taught the new customs, religion, language of her new kingdom, might participate in the same systems of power and representation as her king, but may be viewed entirely differently. As has been pointed out, she may become ‘naturalised’ amongst her new people, but never belonged in the same way that the king did.<sup>16</sup> That said, loyalty could be built, and while the king may have one set of bonds with his kingdom, a queen could, and had to, develop her own bonds in order to have any form of power. The raw materials – land and wealth – meant very little unless there was a network of loyalty and influence surrounding them. How the queen developed that network was pivotal when the political rupture of the king’s death came, and the representation of her agency is crucial: we now see Gregory and Fortunatus working with, and potentially *for*, Brunhild, and the implications of this have never been fully examined.

### **The road to assassination**

Gregory’s structural representation of Brunhild is significant: she moves from one chapter as new wife to the next, in which the queen and her children come to join Sigibert in Paris, and swiftly see his death.<sup>17</sup> In 574, the king planned to march against his brother Chilperic and ‘lightning was observed to flicker across the sky, just as we saw it before Lothar’s death’.<sup>18</sup> Gregory writes knowing how this tale will end, thus the depiction of Sigibert must be tinted, as the king has left behind a queen who must now be supported, perhaps also illustrated in the way in which the third brother, Guntram of Burgundy, is not foregrounded in this chapter. Bishop Germanus, fearing the destruction of his city, sent to Sigibert that if he set out with the intention of sparing his brother’s life, he would be victorious; if he had other plans, he would die.<sup>19</sup>

We return to the letter which began this chapter, sent to Brunhild in the same year that Gregory attests Germanus warned Sigibert of his impending doom. At this early stage of the queen’s career, Germanus felt it was through her *consilium* or her *instigatio*, her counsel or her instigation, that the kingdom may be saved or destroyed. This is the only real-time source which highlights Brunhild’s role as instigator, and the label would be

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson, ‘Queens as Converters’, p.101.

<sup>17</sup> *DLH* IV.50.

<sup>18</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>19</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

replicated in almost every later source which critiques the queen. The difference here is that she is advising her husband, rather than her offspring. Germanus desired to reform the wayward Merovingian kings: he excommunicated Charibert, it was his diplomacy which supported Queen Radegund in her attempt to achieve independence from Lothar,<sup>20</sup> and he had a key relationship with that queen and with Fortunatus.<sup>21</sup> Germanus, as we can see further through Fortunatus' *vita* of the bishop, was firmly a part of the political realities he sought to change. The rumours he refers to suggest that Sigibert will lead the kingdom into civil war on his queen's advice, but of course Germanus himself does not believe it – he simply dares to suggest it.

After multiple biblical allusions surrounding the divine hand of revenge and remedies of correction, Germanus focuses in on Sigibert and Chilperic:

If they destroy that kingdom, neither you nor your children will derive great triumph. This region rejoiced to have received you, for it seemed to see salvation not destruction through you.<sup>22</sup>

At no stage does the bishop mention one important key to the hostility between the two brothers, the murder of Brunhild's sister Galswinth. The bishop places the opportunity to resist bloodshed, and conversely the blame should it occur, at Brunhild's door: the 'words that are circulating' surround the queen, and not the men involved. While Germanus may use the allusions of Cain and Abel, Saul and David, he is very clear that salvation or destruction lies in the queen's hands. Yet we cannot say if this was the bishop's view alone, whether there were already rumours surrounding Brunhild's advice to the king at court, and if so, what she had advised upon. The bishop reverts to one of his expectations of a queen's role: he compares Brunhild's role to that of queen Esther, through whom 'salvation was granted to her people', and therefore provides the analogy of what should be, against what she may become.<sup>23</sup>

Germanus appears to be consciously provocative in the role he is assigning to the queen, potentially so that he can test Brunhild's response. He implores her to show the perfection of her own faith to the kingdom, so that she can save it from destruction. The queen's faith had changed but nine years before – had she established herself as a Catholic queen, with activities we cannot tell from our sources? This very lengthy letter appears to

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<sup>20</sup> VR chapter 7.

<sup>21</sup> Fortunatus not only dedicated his *Vita Marcelli* to the bishop, but wrote positively about his role in poems II.9 and VIII.2, and most importantly lauded the bishop in his *Vita Germani*.

<sup>22</sup> EA no.9.

<sup>23</sup> See Mayke de Jong, 'Exegesis for an Empress', *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power & Gifts in Context*, eds. E. Cohen and M.de Jong (Leiden, 2001) pp. 69-100 for a particularly interesting Carolingian examination of how the image of Esther is used in a work dedicated to the empress Judith.

probe the role of the queen as a wife, and certainly, to one of the most influential bishops in the Frankish realm, Brunhild was one to watch by 575. Germanus' predictions were incorrect: it would not be civil war that destroyed Brunhild's husband, but instead the woman who would remain Brunhild's enemy for the rest of the sixth century, and thus dictate Frankish politics for that duration – Fredegund:

Two young men who had been suborned by Queen Fredegund then came up to Sigibert... They pretended that they had something to discuss with him, but they struck him on both sides.<sup>24</sup>

The matter-of-fact approach from Gregory is countered by Fredegar's more elaborate tale of the assassination, in which Fredegund gets the men drunk and herself tells her husband about his brother's death, rather than a messenger.<sup>25</sup> Sigibert's chamberlain, Charegisel was killed with him, and Sigila, who had joined the king as a Goth, was seriously injured – he must have been close to the king, for Chilperic would later torture him to death.<sup>26</sup> Ciuciol, count of the palace to Sigibert, had his head cut off.<sup>27</sup> By murdering Sigibert's closest men, Fredegund and Chilperic had the opportunity to cut Brunhild as far off from her connections and resources as possible. Simultaneously, we are told of the referendary Siggo, appointed in 575 as the legal secretary to Sigibert, just before he died, who was now appointed by Chilperic to fulfil the same position.<sup>28</sup> However, Gregory then tells us that this individual deserted his new king and went to King Childebert instead, losing his property. Chilperic was either murdering those connected to his brother, or attempting to suborn them for his own purposes. After his brother's death, Chilperic came from Tournai with his wife and sons, dressed Sigibert's corpse and buried it in Lambres.<sup>29</sup> The prediction of Sigibert's death begins this chapter, and his death ends both the chapter and book IV in Gregory's text: textually, it is a rupture as much as it was in reality.

As to Brunhild's position, Gregory tells us that she was 'prostrate with anguish and grief' and was placed in isolation. First, her son Childebert II was taken from her: Duke Gundovald took the infant, 'snatching him from imminent death' and removed him to a secret location.<sup>30</sup> This duke was one of Sigibert's military commanders, and had fought against Chilperic's eldest son Theudebert.<sup>31</sup> Fredegar, as usual, tells a more dramatic tale: he states that the infant king was placed in a bag and given through a window to a

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<sup>24</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>25</sup> *Chron.* IV.32.

<sup>26</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>27</sup> *DLH* V.18.

<sup>28</sup> We learn that his predecessor, Theuthaire, had entered the church (*DLH* IX.33).

<sup>29</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>30</sup> *DLH* V.1.

<sup>31</sup> *DLH* IV.47.

messenger who rode with him to Metz.<sup>32</sup> Gregory states that the duke assembled the Austrasian people and proclaimed Childebert king – it is clear that the protection of that line had fallen to the aristocracy, as opposed to the queen herself, left in Paris without her male heir. Chilperic seized her and placed her in custody at Meaux, along with daughters Ingund and Chlodoswinth. He took possession of her treasure, of course.<sup>33</sup>

Upon Sigibert's death, was Brunhild in a position of extreme vulnerability? Separated from her son and her treasure, many of her aristocratic supporters no doubt present at the accession of her son, Brunhild was without connections. Not simply just a challenge at the time, there is a challenge for us as historians: how do we deal with the woman who is now unattached?

### **The widow**

As Nelson has pointed out, widows and women are distinct, yet overlapping categories.<sup>34</sup> At the close of the sixth century, two of Western Europe's most influential entities, Merovingian Gaul and Lombard Italy, were dominated not only by queens, but widows: Brunhild, Fredegund and Theodelinda. Clearly, then, they could be powerful: as transmitters of land and power, many widows remained active in the secular world.<sup>35</sup> The position of a royal widow, however, meant that she was open to attack from political enemies, and there could be a 'ready-made discourse' available to allow them to criticise queens.<sup>36</sup> Support would be ambivalent in those early stages, and in considering the stages of the life cycle, the death of a husband was a major point at which identity must be once again re-evaluated. A husband's death 'signalled a moment of choice',<sup>37</sup> but while Brunhild may have retained her unique connection with kingship, without her treasure, supporters and her male child, she was essentially at Chilperic's mercy.

It is now clear that we cannot underestimate the rupture of Sigibert's death and its historical and literary impacts: Gregory of Tours writes specifically because of it, and Fortunatus' books I to VII were published less than a year after. They are bringing her past to the present, I suggest, building support for the queen when she most needed it.

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<sup>32</sup> *Chron.* III.72.

<sup>33</sup> *DLH* V.2.

<sup>34</sup> Nelson, 'The wary widow', p.65.

<sup>35</sup> Simon MacLean, 'Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe', *Past and Present* 178:1 (2003) p.6.

<sup>36</sup> MacLean, 'Queenship', p.7. While this applies this to the Carolingian period, we can read these discourses back in different ways on the Merovingian period.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson, 'The wary widow', p.68.

Fortunatus' published collection contained the epithalamium, with the language of Venus and Cupid, two kingdoms under 'one bond'. That reality of the marriage was no longer there, and yet the published words may have created a renewed vibrancy about the marriage, and its one remaining member. Was it an attempt to buy empathy for the queen? It is entirely possible – the circles around which this sort of poetry would have circulated were members of the aristocracy whose support Brunhild would have needed. Not only did that collection contain poems about the marriage, but also the elegy to Galswinth. Read together, these poems could not only create support for the surviving queen, but stir antagonism toward the king responsible for her sister's death – Chilperic. If that elegy was created specifically to target public emotion<sup>38</sup> and was read at the time of her death, its publication in this collection would have had a heightened political effect. In book VII, the poet also places his poems to Gogo and to Lupus, Duke of Champagne, who had served Sigibert in a variety of military and diplomatic affairs. Lupus appears to have fostered Fortunatus as Gogo did upon his arrival<sup>39</sup> and a poem to Conda, the *domesticus*, states that 'kings changed, but you did not change your offices'.<sup>40</sup>

Fortunatus features, then, those closest to King Sigibert and applauds them. Is it a coincidence that 'many of those who had left King Sigibert's kingdom to join Chilperic now abandoned that king'?<sup>41</sup> Even more interesting is that Fredegar has Gogo murdered by Sigibert soon after Brunhild's arrival, even though he died in 581.<sup>42</sup> He removes one of Brunhild's key allies so that he is not around later in her story. Just as the public acceptance of Brunhild at the point of marriage becomes a hinge that later authors manipulate, so does Brunhild's position at the point of widowhood. Fredegar wants to make her truly alone, whereas Fortunatus and Gregory attempt to textually surround Brunhild with strength and loyalty. The impact of the publishing of their works in 576/7 may not be traceable, but it seems fairly probable that these authors were contributing to a much wider range of oral discourses surrounding a very tumultuous political situation.

At the end of 575, Brunhild was most certainly in a position of weakness, testified by the fact that those authors loyal to her felt impelled to some form of action. Kurth, and others, once viewed the period 576-584 - the years after Sigibert's death to that of Childebert's majority - as 'eight years of humiliation' for Brunhild at the hands of the

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<sup>38</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.117.

<sup>39</sup> *OP* VII.8.

<sup>40</sup> *OP* VII.16.

<sup>41</sup> *DLH* V.3.

<sup>42</sup> *Chron.* III.59 and *DLH* VI.1.

Austrasian aristocracy.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, humiliation may have been Chilperic's goal for his brother's wife, but the political decisions made by Brunhild at this pivotal moment ensured her enduring success. Certainly, as part of Sigibert's networks of support outlived him, the queen still had a hand to play.

### **From one man to other men...**

In 576, Brunhild and Audovera, Chilperic's first wife, found themselves in the same town, both captives of the king of Neustria. Could they have met? Perhaps, seeming that both women were moved to Rouen: it is possible, then, that they forged the following plan together – that Merovech, the son of Chilperic, would come to Rouen on the pretext of visiting his mother and 'there he joined Queen Brunhild and made her his wife',<sup>44</sup> the ceremony presided over by bishop Praetextatus. The plan was mutually advantageous: for Audovera, it was the last chance for any sort of power, and for Merovech, was an attempt at political power. As Fredegund had now had a son called Samson, Merovech may not necessarily have been first choice for succession. The marriage to Brunhild was indeed incestuous, yet the queen must have seen it as the way of securing her position, perhaps looking to her Visigothic mother, who had saved her own place on the throne by marrying Leuvigild upon her husband's death.

The ensuing drama, as Chilperic desired to separate them and they sought sanctuary within the walls of the church, was a diversion from the fact that troops were moving into Soissons, in an attempt to drive out Fredegund and Clovis, another of Chilperic's sons. What/ who was behind it? Chilperic believed that it was Merovech's plan, however, one may argue that Brunhild was a pivotal part of it, and perhaps it was supported by a greater number of people as a result of Gregory and Fortunatus' support for Brunhild being published. This is conjecture, but worth raising. At the end of 577, Brunhild became a widow for the second time in two years, and there is little evidence that it affected her greatly.<sup>45</sup>

As Brunhild and Fredegund realise their fragility as widows, both substitute the connection to their husband with an attempt to connect with another man – for Brunhild, it was a strategic decision of Chilperic's son Merovech, and for Fredegund, it was King

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<sup>43</sup> Kurth, 'La Reine Brunehaut', p.293.

<sup>44</sup> *DLH* V.2.

<sup>45</sup> *DLH* V.18.

Guntram. She is said to declare that ‘I shall declare myself his humble servant’.<sup>46</sup> Upon Chilperic’s death in 584, Brunhild’s son Childebert is said to have immediately asked his uncle to hand over the ‘murderess’, responsible for the deaths of his aunt, father, uncle and cousins.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps this was a symbolic declaration from Childebert in the year of his majority, or perhaps this was more his mother’s desire than his own. Guntram, however, would not, for he had taken the queen into his protection. The protection of a man, then, could result in the widows’ success or failure. Alongside the protection of men, however, was the power that came from the production of a male heir.

Historians have long understood that the key to a queen’s success, or failure, could be in their male offspring. Gregory informs us that any child of a king was legitimate, even if women themselves were dispensable. Sigibert and Chilperics’ marriages were signs that expectations were changing, and dynastic succession was a major concern for the stakeholders in the Frankish kingdom, the four sons of Lothar. The very language of ‘dynasty’ will be critiqued in the third section of this study, as will Brunhild’s relationships with her family. She acts as a regent to three generations, and that authority over her male relatives is a pivot of the criticism that later surrounds her. Fredegund, meanwhile, not only embarks on a murderous spree against her step-children, but is allowed her variety of vices in the *LHF* precisely because she is the mother of Lothar II.

Brunhild’s first marriage was the symbol of dynastic change: she and Sigibert were destined to ‘fulfil vows with children’.<sup>48</sup> Chroniclers do not take note of every royal birth in an era of high infant mortality rates and Gregory’s tales of the deaths of Fredegund’s young sons highlight this vulnerability. The first child we know of for Brunhild and Sigibert was a daughter called Ingund, named after the king’s mother and born within the first year of their marriage. It is she who Brunhild would later use to enhance the Visigothic connection, with fatal consequences for the young princess. A daughter was useful, but did not offer the security of a son. In 570, Brunhild gave birth to Childebert, the name of Sigibert’s uncle. This could be viewed as a strange decision – Childebert I, who had died in 558, had triumphed against the Visigoths in battle – thus it is safe to assume the queen did not make the decision. The names of these first two children, then, were deliberately Frankish and rooted Sigibert within his family structure (he did not have the same mother as Chilperic.) While Gregory does not refer to the child’s birth, Brunhild did have another daughter named Chlodowintha. Her name does not appear to have originated

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<sup>46</sup> *DLH* VII.5.

<sup>47</sup> *DLH* VII.7.

<sup>48</sup> *OP* VI.1a, line 142.

from the paternal family, but instead appears to have been an amalgamation of Merovingian and Visigothic parts.<sup>49</sup> Does this suggest Brunhild's growing influence on her husband?<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the queen hoped that her daughters could act as her connection to the Visigothic kingdom, through later marriages, or it is possible that her power was indeed growing by this point, and her husband gave her the decision on her daughter's name.

While at the end of 575, Brunhild had her son taken from her, she must have known that if she could retain a position within a palace, as she did through her marriage to Merovech, then she may then be able to retain power until her son's majority. Childebert II was a key to that power: Gogo was made his tutor.<sup>51</sup> We cannot be certain whether Brunhild herself made the appointment, but it is probable that she had a hand in the decision, and illustrated that while she did not have control of her child, she was keeping her loyal supporters beside him. Brunhild did not gain control until 581, when she refused to name a successor to Gogo: she had had her closest ally training her son for the tasks she wanted him to achieve in the Merovingian kingdom, and then herself took over.

Thus far, I have considered the networks of loyalty that Brunhild would have built up, and had to call upon at her vulnerable moment. However, that loyalty may have had to be bought, and the queen's continuing access to wealth was an access to continued power. When Brunhild left for Paris in 574, she left her treasures with the bishop Praetextatus for a reason:<sup>52</sup> she must have known, in the context of civil war, that her husband's demise was a possibility. She was attempting to protect herself and her future, and she was clever to do so, for what goods she did have with her were taken by Chilperic upon Sigibert's death. Similarly, upon Chilperic's death in 584, Fredegund brought with her to Paris items that she had hidden within the city walls – the rest, back at Chelles, was confiscated by treasury officials and transported to Brunhild's son Childebert II, who was nearby at Meaux.<sup>53</sup>

The whereabouts of a king's wealth was a crucial point for any would-be successor. It could mark transfers of power, and its very mobility made it a tool in the fluidity of early medieval politics and in particular, succession politics. For both Fredegund and Brunhild to lose their treasure was a setback, for it represents part of the web of influence for these

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<sup>49</sup> Chlodo- we can find in Chlodovech (Clovis) or Chlodomer (Clodomir), while – winth may have referred to Galswinth or Goiswinth, both women closest to Brunhild.

<sup>50</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.133.

<sup>51</sup> *DLH* V.46 – for the role of the royal tutor see Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', pp. 223-4.

<sup>52</sup> *DLH* V.18.

<sup>53</sup> *DLH* VII.4.



queens. As Stafford has highlighted, it enabled a queen 'to operate within that system',<sup>54</sup> which I have suggested was different to that of a king, but still operated within the same fields of representation. Four Merovingian royal widows and several wives held some or all of their husband's treasure, and most of the time we only know of this because of the succession struggles which follow: Fredegund, Brunhild, Theudechild and Nantechild.<sup>55</sup> There may, of course, be more that we do not know of.

Brunhild may have now gained her *morgengabe* and her dowry upon Sigibert's death, but we cannot say how Brunhild administered her lands before his demise. The Goths she brought with her may have been situated in some areas around *Arisitum*, and she may well have had the support of some of the closest members of Sigibert's court in how to use these lands. Fredegund's attempts to tax Chilperic's cities ended in disaster, and we do not know about Brunhild's fiscal activities. What we do know is that Brunhild did have access to lands through which she could exert significant influence, and while treasure could be taken away as an exercise of power at the death of a king, it could also be utilised as a method through which women could achieve power. The fact that Brunhild fought until 587, with the Treaty of Andelot, to acquire her sister's lands from her *morgengabe*, itself suggests that she knew the importance of having resources at her disposal throughout her career.

## Conclusion

While kings have an inherent system of loyalty, developed during their youth at court, queens to a great extent had to construct their networks of connection, their systems of power, from scratch. Not only did this offer them great opportunities, but also could create inherent oppositions. There is a difference between the groups of individuals which surround a queen, such as her immediate household and family, and the political alliances which are forged. The former may indeed come as a result of being the wife of a king, but it is the latter which would ensure her success. Networks could reach far and wide, and include kings, queens, bishops, dukes, popes amongst others. The resources at a queen's disposal were inextricably linked to these intricate webs, and those resources changed at different stages in the life cycle - later in her life, Brunhild would have to create a new set of allies in Burgundy, after being deposed from Austrasia.

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<sup>54</sup> Pauline Stafford, 'Queens and Treasure in the Early Middle Ages', *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. E.M. Tyler (York, 2000) p.66.

<sup>55</sup> Stafford, 'Queens and Treasure', p.72.

This section has examined Brunhild's transition from king's daughter, to king's wife, to king's widow, the segment of her career which has received the least critical attention. Yet to understand this queen's end, we must first understand her beginning, for there are themes which should be considered throughout the extraordinary career of Brunhild: the tension between *recognition* and *representation*, the importance of Brunhild's Visigothic roots, and the establishment of networks of influence are crucial to understanding the Brunhild who features in Gregory and Fortunatus' works and comparing her to those later authors who sought to vilify her.

The rupture of Sigibert's death, and the ensuing death of Chilperic, meant that two widows were at the helm of the Merovingian kingdom, and both intended to rule over sons who would succeed. That rivalry is characterised dramatically by Gregory of Tours, who states of Brunhild and Fredegund, that 'hatred, which grew up between them long ago, sprouts new shoots and does not wither.'<sup>56</sup> This is not the language of the feud, I suggest, but more of political reality: in order for one line to succeed over the whole Merovingian kingdom, the other would have to fall. These were the politics of survival, and it is those machinations that this thesis will now turn. From the different kinds of relationships established in this section, I will now focus on one aspect – Brunhild's encounters with the church. It is this theme which gives the scholar the extremities of this queen's representation: Pope Gregory the Great's assertion that she is 'God's daughter' is countered by the beginnings of the 'Jezebel' in the *Vita Columbani*. Religion may be the mode of the coming chapters, but each vignette is read within its political and literary context, for it is clear that each author, whether using the epistolary form or the hagiographical genre, is attempting to understand Brunhild in an entirely different way.

Brunhild needed to have episcopal allies, and her involvement with elections caught the attention of the pope. Conversely, when those allies became enemies, Brunhild meted out her own brand of justice. The coming section encapsulates the challenges which faced Brunhild as a queen attempting to ensure her continuing power; and the modern historian, attempting to understand the entirely divergent representations of this, now, 'Jezebel'.

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<sup>56</sup> DLH V.27.

## Chapter 3

### The politics of survival: the relationship with the church

**‘Indeed some are amazed at your Christianity...’<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

The relationships forged at the beginning of Brunhild’s career were cards to be played when the political situation demanded. When Sigibert died, the political and female life cycle collided, and this queen needed all the resources and connections she had developed, in order to maintain agency. One of the most pivotal of these relationships was with the church. The connection between piety and queenship is well established elsewhere, and Brunhild had a ‘well-worn model of pious royal queens to emulate’, ranging from Clotild to Radegund.<sup>2</sup> Yet in a study of Brunhild, many have been so focused on the ‘second Jezebel’, the queen invoking God’s *displeasure*, that the queen’s positive relationship with the church has been somewhat neglected. If one were to read only the *Vita Columbani* or the *Vita Desiderii*, for example, one would assume that this queen was not part of any networks of patronage or religious activity: this, however, is simply not the case.

Church and state may not be separated in Merovingian Gaul and both kings and queens required key contacts within the church. It is the types of authority which distinguish them, and bishops in particular appear to have wielded significant power, so much so that Chilperic lamented that ‘there is no one with any power left except the bishops’.<sup>3</sup> Bishops were often from senatorial families, and the need for aristocratic support cannot be underestimated, but should be dealt with separately.<sup>4</sup> If the

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<sup>1</sup> *Reg.* 11.48 – all Latin translations are taken from the Norberg edition of Gregory the Great’s letters in the *CCSL*, but I follow the numbering within the *MGH*.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 1999) p.49. Clotild had a high reputation for piety, living an almost monastic life at Tours after her lord’s death: her textual representation will be further explored in chapter 7. Radegund, however, is the more likely model for some of Brunhild’s activities: Sigibert supported Radegund in acquiring a piece of the True Cross from Byzantium; she was involved in the veneration of the shrine of St.Martin, a saint with whom Brunhild also developed links (*VR*2 I.12 and I.14 - she offered gifts at the shrine and the ‘cell’ at Candes, where the saint had died); and Radegund was linked to Fortunatus and Gregory also. Fortunatus became bishop of Poitiers and wrote one of the two *vitae* of Radegund; and she referred to Gregory of Tours as *devotus vir*, *Dei plenus* (*VR* II.23).

<sup>3</sup> *DLH* VI.46.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Stafford covers the ‘common motif of liaison between queen and court official’, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*, p.125. Wood has suggested that, in terms of open power struggles, there is little difference between the ambitions of lay aristocrats and senior clergy, *MK*, p.76. The aristocratic tensions cannot be encapsulated in this study, but some of their issues are examined in chapter 8.

Merovingians thought largely in terms of *territoria*<sup>5</sup> and the bishop was the central figure of that location, he was politically crucial. Samuel Dill went so far as to venture that ‘never in the long history of the church of Rome did the bishops wield a greater power than in sixth-century Gaul’.<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Tours’ understanding of the power structures he perceived is evident, as in the last and longest chapter of the *DLH*, he presents a list of the bishops of Tours, modelled on the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*, a list of the popes of Rome.<sup>7</sup> Gregory is at once prominent churchman and self-conscious author; we cannot differentiate the two, and thus when Gregory presents his own unique lineage, it says perhaps more about him than it does about the church.<sup>8</sup>

Gregory, alongside Venantius Fortunatus, had a privileged position from which to view the reciprocal relationship between a queen and churchmen, and moreover, between a queen and public piety. Fortunatus himself had extensive correspondence with bishops, wrote various *vitae* of them, and, of course, became bishop of Poitiers as a result of his relationship with queen Radegund. Both men were inextricably linked to the religious and political worlds about which they wrote. How, then, did this affect the representation of Brunhild? We have already seen the emphasis on the queen’s conversion, and on being recognised as a Christian ruler, upon her marriage in 566: before she pleased only man, but ‘now behold she pleases God’.<sup>9</sup> After this, both men spend little time referring to the queen’s religious activities. While for the latter, this may simply be a consequence of the genres of poetry he wrote, for Gregory, it points to his own involvement with the queen’s religious activities. The bishop of Tours was indebted to the queen for his own position, and as a result is fairly silent on the presence, or absence, of royal intervention in other episcopal elections.<sup>10</sup>

Religious activities were weapons in a political arsenal that a queen required at specific moments and this chapter will consider Brunhild’s positive role within the church through her correspondence with Pope Gregory the Great. The queen’s support for the

<sup>5</sup> John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983) p.49; also Thomas Noble, ‘Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church’, *The World of Gregory of Tours*, eds. K. Mitchell and I.N. Wood (Leiden, 2002) pp. 145-162.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age*, p.502.

<sup>7</sup> *DLH* X.31.

<sup>8</sup> See Ian Wood, ‘Family and friendship in the west’, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XIV, eds. A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (Cambridge, 2000) pp. 416-436. Not only could Gregory boast a relationship with 17 previous bishops of Tours, he could also claim descent from one of the Lyon martyrs of 177. Walter Goffart’s interpretation of Gregory separated him as a ‘native of Clermont and resident of Tours’ from the ‘self-conscious author’. We cannot make those two labels mutually exclusive: *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988) p.193.

<sup>9</sup> *OP* VI.1.

<sup>10</sup> Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, p.173.

mission to England is one theme used by certain historians, such as Wood, as a counterpoint to the violence of her reign. Alongside her maternal instincts, which will be examined in chapter six, Brunhild's perceived piety is the main hook upon which some may seek to 'rehabilitate' the image of the queen. This section of the thesis does not aim to confirm, or deny, Brunhild's piety, but examine how authors use the mode of religion to represent the queen in a certain way. If one were to conduct a superficial reading of the correspondence between Brunhild and the pope, one would not question the queen's religious activities. Traditionally, scholars of Gregory the Great read his correspondence through a very different historiographical lens than I will apply here, for not enough has been done to examine its rhetoric, and more specifically, how that rhetoric fits within the greater context of changing Merovingian politics at the turn of the seventh century. Alongside the Augustinian mission, Frankish church reform is the main discussion point, and most pivotal is that we see both pope and queen as political and textual actors, invested with different kinds of authority.

The information preserved within these letters, housed within the pope's *register*, may only be the tip of the epistolary iceberg<sup>11</sup> and the irony about a genre which should be by its essence dialogical is that is most often rendered overwhelmingly one-sided. Letters by women, particularly, tend to survive mainly through the letter collections of men, another example of the challenges of *reading* women in the early middle ages. Brunhild is a veritable exception to the norm that we do not have 'independent sender-transmission collections'<sup>12</sup> for women, in that we have letters preserved that claim to be Brunhild's voice, in the *Epistolae Austrasicae*. There, we have only Brunhild's side of the dialogue. In the correspondence with Gregory, however, the queen's voice is rendered silent. Wood has argued that the communication between the queen and Pope Gregory I is between two self-conscious writers.<sup>13</sup> We actually have no idea what persona Brunhild is creating, for she is not a 'writer' in this instance (certainly not that we have evidence of).<sup>14</sup> There are reasonable assumptions which may be made of the political game-playing that Gregory

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Garrison, "'Send More Socks': On Mentality and the Preservation Context of Medieval Letters", *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. M. Mostert (Turnhout, 1999) p.69; see also Marco Mostert, *New Approaches to Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, 1999) pp. 15-41; Margaret Mullett, 'Byzantium: A Friendly Society?', *Past and Present* 118:1 (1988) p.22 - there is so much we may not be able to trace.

<sup>12</sup> Garrison, 'Send More Socks', p.76.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Wood, 'Augustine and Gaul', *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. R. Gameson (Stroud, 1999) p.74.

<sup>14</sup> It is an oddity that the most recent translator of Gregory's letters does not discuss Brunhild while listing the female correspondents of the pope: John Martyn, ed., *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, 3 vols. (Toronto, 2004).

certainly alludes to, but without any of the queen's responses to the pope, we may need to stop short of being so declarative about her 'writing' stance.

Gregory the Great was pope from 590 to 604, in which time he built up a plethora of female correspondents, from empresses and queens to wealthy widows, and French, Italian and Sicilian noblewomen. The longest of all his letters is to a woman, the sister of the Byzantine emperor Maurice.<sup>15</sup> His persuasive rhetorical style meant that several of those widows were influenced to establish monastic foundations, either from their husband's money or their own bequests in wills.<sup>16</sup> The desire is to strip away the *topoi* and addresses inherent in the genre, to find something of the 'real' tone of these letters and the people within. What becomes clear, however, is that Gregory's exalted language is key to his agenda. He addresses female rulers, in particular, not as gendered creatures, but as political creatures, perhaps using a gendered language, but for political effect.

### **From pope to queen**

The letters tabled below range in content from the earliest known interactions, with Gregory applauding Brunhild for her governance of the realm and the education of her son, through to his clear requests for support for the Augustinian mission, Frankish church reform and finally to the provisions of churches. The letters were sent in batches, a result of the logistics of carrying messages across great distance, thus it will be most useful not to take each letter individually, but to consider them in the clusters in which they were sent.

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<sup>15</sup> *Reg.* 11.27, at almost 301 lines in translation.

<sup>16</sup> See the letter to the lady Theodosia (4.810) and for others, 2.11, 3.58, 3.59 and 9.165. The lady Pompeiana built a convent in Caligari (1.46), Lavinia a monastery in Corsica (1.50), Capitulana a monastery in Syracuse (10.1), Januaria an oratory in Sicily (9.181), Juliana in Sardinia and Flora in Rome both supported the completion of convents (10.1 and 9.181).

BATCH DATE	LETTER NUMBER	RECIPIENT
August 595	5.60	Childebert
September 595	6.5	Brunhild
	6.6	Childebert
	6.10	Candidus
July 596	6.51	Theuderic and Theudebert
	6.52	Pelagius of Tours and Serenus of Marseilles
	6.53	Servants of God
	6.54	Virgil of Arles
	6.55	Desiderius of Vienne and Syagrius of Autun
	6.56	Protasius of Aix
	6.57	Stephen of Lérins
	6.59	Arigius of Gaul
	6.60	Brunhild
July 596	6.58	Brunhild
September 597	8.4	Brunhild
July 599	9.212	Wantilonus and Arigius of Gaul
	9.213	Brunhild
	9.226	Asclepiodatus
July 599	9.214	Brunhild
	9.216	Theuderic and Theudebert
July 599	9.227	Theuderic and Theudebert
June 601	11.46	Brunhild
	11.47	Theuderic
	11.48	Brunhild
	11.49	Brunhild
	11.50	Theudebert
	11.51	Lothar
November 602	13.5	Brunhild
	13.7	Theuderic
	13.10	Talasía

Figure 3.1 The selected correspondence from Gregory to Brunhild

What prompted pope Gregory the Great to write to Frankish rulers in 595/6, the years in which his correspondence significantly multiplies? The pope does not appear to have been, previously, particularly concerned with Frankish affairs, or at least did not preserve the correspondence.<sup>17</sup> It is his desire to reform the Frankish church which prompted the pope to write to Brunhild's son Childebert in August 595, and that theme takes up two-thirds of the pope's 68 letters to Gaul. Gregory had sent the priest John and the deacon Sabinian with the pallium to Virgil of Arles, in response to a request from Childebert to do so.<sup>18</sup> This tells us two things: not only was Gregory legitimising the new archbishop, but also appears to have been complying with a royal request. As a result, he appointed Candidus to oversee matters in Gaul and Gregory wrote the next month to ask for the support of the queen for his candidate.<sup>19</sup> The pope focuses on Brunhild's education of her son, stating that she had not only 'preserved for him the glory of temporal things....but also provided the prizes of eternal life' and implored her to continue with her 'words of exhortation'. He is appealing to Brunhild's positive influence, an interesting parallel to our usual association of Brunhild with the negative *instigante regina*.

The desire to reform the Frankish church cannot be separated from Gregory's desire to evangelise the English people, and in July 596, the pope asked for Brunhild's assistance in this matter. He applauded the *excellantiae vestrae christianitas*, the 'Christianity of your excellence', and this becomes a stylistic device through which the pope appeals to the queen. She is lauded for her piety, and then reminded to focus *devote et studiose*, devoutly and studiously, on the cause of the faith. Gregory stated that he had learned that the English desired to become Christian, but did not have the priests to support this. In order to save them from *aeterna damnatio*,<sup>20</sup> Gregory sent Augustine with a group of priests to support the evangelisation. What does the pope want from the queen? Playing on her excellence, which is of course accustomed to readiness for good works, Gregory asked for the queen's protection for Augustine, and her support of his work. Only then would she receive eternal rest with the saints. The exalted language applauding the queen's piety is cleverly tempered with the consequences should she not act upon it. As is normal practice, this letter was sent as part of a batch carried by Candidus, and therefore we should consider its message alongside others sent at the same time. The pope wrote to prominent bishops within Gaul on the subject of Augustine's work, but also to Brunhild's grandsons

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<sup>17</sup> Only six of his letters addressed to Gaul are within the first five books of the Register, and these letters are confined to the Provence area. There are two main exceptions to this: letters 5.59, which addressed all the bishops in Childebert's kingdom, and 5.60, addressed to Childebert, related above, sent simultaneously.

<sup>18</sup> *Reg.* 5.60.

<sup>19</sup> For Candidus see 5.18, 5.31, 6.21, 9.222.

<sup>20</sup> *Reg.* 6.57.



Theuderic and Theudebert. The message of this letter is essentially the same as that to their grandmother, but the language is very different. While he does speak of their ‘devout minds’,<sup>21</sup> there is none of the elevated rhetoric. Gregory was aware of the political reality within Gaul: while he wrote to Theuderic and Theudebert together, I would suggest that the pope knew who the driving force behind any support would be, and focused his persuasive skill there.

It may be no coincidence, then, that a separate letter was also sent in July 596, addressed to the queen and making more tangible her support. Gregory refers to the theme of Brunhild’s own letters, which so completely conveyed her religious mind that the pope could do nothing but grant her ‘demands’ freely.<sup>22</sup> Without the other side of the epistolary dialogue, we simply cannot know what linguistic styling Brunhild herself employed to persuade the pope of whatever she was asking. Gregory stated that it was ‘not proper’ to deny her previous requests, and therefore must comply. He therefore sent relics of Saints Peter and Paul, in accordance with ‘the request of your excellency’. The pope does remind Brunhild, however, that the relics must not be afflicted by neglect or damage. We cannot know when Brunhild had made the request, and there is no other evidence of her involvement with relics, though I have hinted that there is more to be made of her involvement in Sigibert’s support for Radegund’s acquisition of the True Cross.

The acquisition of relics, a physical and tangible example of public piety, was a vehicle of power that has been well acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> It is not certain that these specific relics had been requested, but it is tempting to think so, for in Gregory’s letter to Theuderic and Theudebert, he refers at the end to Saint Peter’s intercession for them.<sup>24</sup> Was Gregory’s letter to her grandsons a hint that support for the English mission would result in his support for their grandmother’s request? It is entirely possible, and we cannot underestimate the level of prestige that would have come from the relics of such important saints, particularly when there was a widespread cult of St Peter in late antique Gaul.<sup>25</sup> We don’t know how long Brunhild had been asking, but Gregory was waiting for a politically apt moment to comply. It was a symbol of the pope’s authority that he could bestow such an important gift, and a symbol of Brunhild’s prestige that she might receive it. The fact

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<sup>21</sup> *Reg.* 6.51.

<sup>22</sup> *Reg.* 6.58.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular Patrick Geary, ‘Sacred commodities: the circulation of medieval relics’, *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspectives*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 169-194; Conrad Leyser, ‘The temptations of cult: Roman martyr piety in the age of Gregory the Great’, *Early Medieval Europe* 9:3 (2000) pp. 289-307 and Julia M.H. Smith, ‘Rulers and Relics, c.750 – c.950: Treasure on Earth, Treasure in Heaven’, *Past and Present* 206:5 (2010) pp. 73-96.

<sup>24</sup> *Reg.* 6.51.

<sup>25</sup> Noble, ‘Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church’, p.153.

that this letter was sent separately was an attempt to give the illusion that the request for support for the English was a separate issue.

But why did Gregory need *this* queen's support? The closest kingdom to Kent was that whose capital was Soissons, ruled by the Neustrian Lothar and regent Fredegund. Not appealing to them at this stage was a sign that Gregory was attuned to the changing political realities within the Merovingian kingdom. Fredegund was elderly (she died in 597) and not necessarily useful. In Gregory's request to Brunhild's grandsons, he states that it is the *sacerdotes qui in vicino*, churchmen in the vicinity, who had not been responsive to the desire of the English to become Christian.<sup>26</sup> We should take this to mean that it was the Frankish clergy, who had been unsupportive. Gregory, then, needed support from within the Frankish kingdom, and needed the person who was best placed to influence that. Brunhild, meanwhile, was at a juncture in these years, just as she had been upon the death of her husband. The death of her son Childebert II in 596, for whom she had acted as regent, must have been difficult, and that of Fredegund a year later was a break, for she had been at the heart of Brunhild's political activities for the past twenty years. Gregory's request, then, presented an opportunity for Brunhild to strengthen her own authority, alongside that of her grandchildren. Wood has illustrated Gregory's shrewdness, in understanding the political position of Kent in relation to Frankish Gaul.<sup>27</sup> He knew that he was directing a mission to people who were thought to be, in some way, under Frankish influence. Frankish kings, throughout the sixth century, had been able to control much of the North Sea, including the channel, and a letter sent in 596 by Gregory to Theuderic and Theudebert illustrates that Gregory believed that Kent was subject to them.<sup>28</sup> It appears from Procopius that the Merovingians had been claiming overlordship in southern England in the 550s, when an embassy sent to Constantinople declared that the Franks ruled over Brittia, which must have been in Britain somewhere.<sup>29</sup> By actively working through lands directly opposite those of Lothar, Brunhild could exert increased pressure on the Neustrian king. She had under her control, at least at this stage, both her Austrasian and Burgundian grandsons and it is little coincidence that, in 600, the two brothers attacked Lothar. It is useful, then, to think of the mission to the English as an exercise of Brunhild's power and a specific attempt to restrict the authority of her rival

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<sup>26</sup> *Reg.* 6.57.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, 'Augustine and Gaul' p.71. We should also bear in mind the evidence for the chronology of the mission itself: see Ian Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury', *Speculum* 69:1 (1994) pp. 1-17 and Robert Markus, 'The Chronology of the Gregorian Mission to England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14:1 (1963) pp. 16-30.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Yorke, 'Gregory of Tours and Sixth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', *The World of Gregory of Tours*, eds. K. Mitchell and I. Wood (Leiden, 2002) p.127; *Reg.* 6.51.

<sup>29</sup> *Wars* VIII. 20, 8-10.

Lothar. It became a tool in her political arsenal with which she could potentially remind the young Neustrian king that his mother might no longer be here, but she certainly was.

The political motives within the correspondence between Brunhild and Gregory are whispers weaving their way amongst the literary tropes of the epistolary genre. In the period 598-99, there are 240 letters from Gregory to Gaul attempting to ply both the Frankish bishops and their rulers. Robert Markus calls Brunhild the ‘pivot’<sup>30</sup> of Gregory’s hopes by 599, and a game of political and religious persuasion emerges, as both parties realised that they had to give something to get something in return. Gregory had already given the queen the relics of Peter and Paul; she had supported the mission to the English, and continued to do so until the turn of the century. She obviously knew that her enduring support was worth something. In 597, Brunhild used the actions of her bishop Syagrius of Autun, a favourite, as a bargaining point: she wanted the pallium, the vestment which served as a symbol of the jurisdiction bestowed by the Holy See, for her prelate. The pallium was traditionally bestowed as the sign of superior authority: the traditional custom was to keep it near the tomb of St. Peter (some of whose relics Brunhild had just acquired) and then for it to be requested in person.<sup>31</sup> It is in response to Brunhild’s request that the pope called her ‘most excellent daughter’, *excellentissima filia*, but in the same sentence states that ‘it becomes you...that you should be subject to the ruler’.<sup>32</sup> Just as Brunhild made her people subject to her, she should subject herself to God. Gregory acknowledged the contribution of Syagrius, but highlighted that her candidate was entangled in debates over doctrine, and more aptly, that is not the person who shouts the loudest who may receive the pallium: ‘[it] should not be given to one asking strongly except as merit demanded’.<sup>33</sup> Gregory’s tactic is to remind the queen that there were several abuses lying undealt with in the Frankish church, and she should focus her attention there.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of his remonstrance, Gregory informed the queen that he was sending her a certain codex, ‘since we hurry to participate in the goodness of your study’.<sup>35</sup> If this was the bible, perhaps this is a prompt to Brunhild that she should be walking the walk, as

<sup>30</sup> Robert Markus, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (London, 1983) p.173.

<sup>31</sup> Markus also points out that not only had Syagrius not asked for the pallium in person, but he was also tainted by the potential schism at Autun - *From Augustine to Gregory the Great*, p.173.

<sup>32</sup> *Reg.* 8.4.

<sup>33</sup> *Reg.* 8.4.

<sup>34</sup> *Reg.* 8.4. See also Luce Pietri, *La ville de Tours du IV<sup>e</sup> au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Naissance d’une cité chrétienne* (Rome, 1983): Pietri concluded that the bishop of Autun played a principal part in Augustine’s consecration. In *Reg.* 6.55, Gregory requested that Syagrius provide assistance for Augustine, but it was addressed equally to bishop Desiderius of Vienne. Desiderius had not yet incurred the wrath of Brunhild, so it could be him. If this scenario is correct, then the papal vicar, Virgil of Arles, had been sidelined and Syagrius had assumed a central position in the Gallic hierarchy (see pp. 170-2).

<sup>35</sup> *Reg.* 8.4.

well as talking the talk. It is also a prompt to the historian that there is a textual hinterland surrounding this text which we cannot touch, a hinterland in which Brunhild was very much involved in cultural and literary activities. Brunhild's request, then, was not met with support in 597. Two years later, however, it was granted, dispensing with the traditions that the pope had referred to. Gregory must have believed that he needed support from this queen, for he would have not have given up the pallium so easily if this was not the case. So what did he want?

### Simony

The eradication of simony, the act of buying church office, was on the top of Gregory's agenda, alongside halting the ordination of laymen.<sup>36</sup> As early as 595, as Virgilius of Arles became papal vicar, the pope asked that he and Brunhild's son Childebert heed the request, as he complained that no-one could gain a bishopric in the Frankish kingdom without paying for it.<sup>37</sup> In subsequent letters, simony becomes a formula within Gregory's agenda. I suggest here that Brunhild's involvement with episcopal elections might well have caught the pope's eye, and he was waiting for the opportunity to raise his concerns with the queen.

The tale of Gregory's election is simply one example of the issues surrounding royal involvement, the importance of key personnel in a period of political change, and most importantly, the representation of those political processes. Brunhild, after her husband's death, ensured that key locations had men in them who would be loyal to her. Metz, the site of Brunhild's marriage and the political capital of Austrasia, was symbolically and politically crucial: Sigibert had placed a man close to Gogo, who we have already seen was Brunhild's close ally, in the role of bishop. His widow then placed Agilulf, a close friend of Fortunatus, and then Pappolus, who had been assistant to Gogo, in the role.<sup>38</sup> In 586, after the death of the bishop of Rodez, Gregory tells us of 'scandalous rivalries' for the position, but a priest is rejected and Innocentius, the count of Javols, was elected, 'he being the candidate whom Queen Brunhild supported'.<sup>39</sup> As Nelson has highlighted, Brunhild had a vested interest in the diocese,<sup>40</sup> as it was contiguous with that

<sup>36</sup> Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine to Canterbury', p.5.

<sup>37</sup> See Wood, 'Augustine and Gaul', p.80.

<sup>38</sup> *OP* appendix VII for Agilulf; *OP* VI.8 for Pappolus.

<sup>39</sup> *DLH* VI.38.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p.236. The Treaty of Andelot in 587, terms of which are given in *DLH* IX.20, gave queen Brunhild a certain level of security. The cities, properties and revenues belonging to Brunhild, her daughter, and Faileuba, her daughter-in-law, were guaranteed.

of Cahors. Since her sister's death, Brunhild had striven to reclaim her sister's morning-gift from her marriage to Chilperic, which included Cahors. When Innocentius was in place, he was able to exert some pressure, which meant Brunhild went on to possess Cahors. Elections were one political moment, while Nelson is correct to insist that there was a long-term investment here in specific territories.<sup>41</sup> In ensuring she controlled the episcopal power there, and now having acquired Cahors alongside Rodez, Brunhild had played her hand well.

In 588, Ageric, bishop of Verdun, died and the 'citizens agreed in the choice of Charimer'.<sup>42</sup> Charimer was a referendary who we are told was appointed 'bishop by royal decree, while Buccovald was passed over'. The hint from Gregory of Tours is that there was royal pressure applied, and there is little coincidence that, in the next sentence, we are told of the death of Licerius, bishop of Arles, succeeded by Virgilius, with the support of bishop Syagrius of Autun, the close supporter of Brunhild. One chapter later, we are told of the death of Deuterius, bishop of Vence, to whose position Pronimius was appointed. Pronimius had gone to Septimania 'for some reason or other', and had been given appointment there. When Brunhild's daughter Ingund was escorted to Spain to be married, Pronimius, seemingly, advised her to keep away from Arian heresy. The Visigothic Leuvigild was enraged and sent an assassin, but Pronimius had already been warned by informants from Gaul, and returned to make his way to the palace of Brunhild's son Childebert. He received the bishopric of Vence 'through the king's favour'.<sup>43</sup> It may well be that Pronimius was sent into Septimania, in readiness for the princess' marriage. It is little coincidence, I would suggest, that he is informed of his planned doom and comes straight back to the court of Brunhild and Childebert.

These relationships are sporadically littered around our texts: Fortunatus explicitly connects Brunhild to the appointment of Plato, archdeacon of Tours, to bishop in 591<sup>44</sup> and the nomination by Brunhild of an aristocrat from Cahors for the episcopate at Auxerre seems to have left its mark on Fredegar.<sup>45</sup> Domnolus, the replacement for Desiderius at Vienne, appears to have been Brunhild's appointee.<sup>46</sup> These few cases are examples of what I would suggest was a developing network of influence being built by Brunhild. It seems that she specifically targeted certain areas to ensure her enduring loyalty and control: Tours was a key and contested area and Gregory was pivotal to its success; Metz

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<sup>41</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p.237.

<sup>42</sup> *DLH* IX.23.

<sup>43</sup> *DLH* IX.24.

<sup>44</sup> *DLH* X.14.

<sup>45</sup> *Chron.* IV.19.

<sup>46</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p.236.

was the heart of the Austrasian court; Rodez and Cahors were strategically placed and symbols of her growing political success; Vence tells us something of Brunhild's enduring Visigothic links. These appointments should not be underestimated, for they are examples of Brunhild's exercise of power in the religious sphere. The Carolingian version of the *Vita Eligii* was very clear that the contagion of simony had 'infected' the Catholic faith 'most greatly from the time of the wretched Queen Brunhild'.<sup>47</sup>

Pope Gregory the Great, then, may have been looking to the Frankish kingdom, and felt that Brunhild's exercise of patronage was turning into blatant corruption of church practice. Not only did he appeal to Brunhild and Childebert over simony, but then to Theudebert and Theuderic and finally to Lothar.<sup>48</sup> Yet it was Brunhild he asked to hold a council specifically to root out these issues in 599.<sup>49</sup> Tellingly, he desired for it to be presided over, not by Brunhild's bishop Syagrius of Autun, but by his own candidate. Markus has put this down to the 'weakening' position of Brunhild at the turn of the seventh century. If Brunhild's authority was weakening, one may ask why the vast majority of correspondence between queen and pope comes from these years, why it was specifically Brunhild Gregory asked for support for, with the English mission. More aptly, why he changed his mind and sent the pallium to Syagrius in 599. It is this letter which states that 'we sent the pallium...because he had shown himself vigorously devoted in preaching to the English...he should also be advanced in the spiritual order'.<sup>50</sup> The point here is that the pallium is given because Syagrius deserves it, not because Brunhild wanted it.

Gregory cleverly juxtaposes parts of his argument in ways which betray his strategy: he links the honour of the pallium to the Augustinian mission and then on to Frankish church reform. As soon as he reminded the queen that he sent the religious symbol, he stated that 'we are amazed that in your kingdom you allow Jews to hold Christian possessions'.<sup>51</sup> The pope castigated Brunhild for her liberal treatment, an issue he had previously written to Candidus about: he is 'appalled' at a situation which is *omnino grave execrandumque*.<sup>52</sup> He copied the exact same paragraph to Brunhild as he did to her

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<sup>47</sup> *Vita Eligii* II.1, p.694. See also Elphège Vacandard, 'Les Élections Épiscopales', *Études De Critique Et D'histoire Religieuse* (Paris, 1905), who called Brunhild the 'mauvaise génie' in the house of Sigibert, specifically for her involvement in elections, p.159.

<sup>48</sup> *Reg.* 5.60.

<sup>49</sup> *Reg.* 9.213.

<sup>50</sup> *Reg.* 9.213.

<sup>51</sup> *Reg.* 9.213.

<sup>52</sup> *Reg.* 7.21, dated May 597.

grandsons, simply changing the plurals to denote the two young kings.<sup>53</sup> The pope, then, gave in order to get something back.

### **Cat and mouse game**

Gregory clearly recognised that Syagrius was in the queen's pocket when he desired his own man to lead a council, and Brunhild's response was not forthcoming. In probing the boundaries of Brunhild's authority, in picking her favourites, Gregory still found himself without his council. It is fair to assume that Gregory expected Syagrius to maintain his side of the bargain, having given him the pallium, and persuade Brunhild. He even approached bishops Ætharius of Lyons, Desiderius of Vienne (Brunhild's foe) and Virgil of Arles to ask for their support in this regard.<sup>54</sup> In 602, he was still asking whether he could send a legate, and ultimately, the council never took place. Brunhild had won the battle, and the eradication of simony remained elusive to the pope.

Meanwhile, in 601, the pope sent another group of monks to England to reinforce the mission, and Gregory's requests for support, again, reflected the changing realities of the Merovingian political situation. Just as he had avoided writing to Fredegund for the first mission, the pope now realised that her son's power was growing. Various royal figures were approached, but Lothar II now joined the list of correspondents.<sup>55</sup> Gregory's decision to now appeal to Brunhild's rival suggests that he was changing his strategy; at the same time Aetharius of Lyon was asking for the pallium, but Gregory said that he wanted to see results first. Gregory's changing approach is reflected by his change in language. While the letters speak to us through the mode of religion, the political machinations which underpin them reveal very clever tactics at play. In the batch of letters sent on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 601, Gregory sought to contact the widest sector of Frankish society. The tone and language in his letter to Brunhild is entirely positive: there is no mention of the council the pope had yet to see materialise. God 'filled you so with the love of the Christian religion' and:

Indeed some are amazed at your Christianity, to whom your benefits up to now are less known, but to us, who have already experienced them, it is not cause for wonder but for rejoicing.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Reg.* 9.214 and 9.216.

<sup>54</sup> See *Reg.* 9.209 and 9.223.

<sup>55</sup> *Reg.* 11.51 for Lothar; 11.46-50 for the batch.

<sup>56</sup> *Reg.* 11.48.

Brunhild had done more for the mission than anyone else except God.<sup>57</sup> While this elevated rhetoric is to some extent expected, the fact that it does not match that given to any other ruler does deserve attention. Wood has suggested that this letter shows Brunhild's role as 'far out-stretching the requirements of politics'.<sup>58</sup> If we take this letter in isolation, certainly it betrays Brunhild's public piety in exalted language, but it cannot be the full story. Of particular interest is Robert Markus' suggestion that the titles assigned to Brunhild, such as 'glorious', 'most excellent', 'daughter' simply denote a desire to use established forms of address, in the distinction between emperors and Germanic rulers.<sup>59</sup> We may not read emotion or piety into titles alone.

Examining one letter in isolation, we may safely assume that Brunhild had religious desires, but the wider political context illustrates a much more self-conscious political machine at play. In each letter from the same batch, Gregory has a slightly different agenda. He wrote of Brunhild's recently sent pages of writings which 'bear witness to the way your excellence embraced our urging'.<sup>60</sup> We simply cannot know the persona presented by Brunhild in these letters. But Gregory found it appropriate in this letter to refer to the synod directly, and more specifically connected the conquering of the 'interior enemy' to the ability to conquer 'external adversaries'.<sup>61</sup> The use of the parallel *interior* and *exterior* highlights the connection between the two, and Gregory is fairly clear that should Brunhild wish to prevail over opposing nations, she should accept the commands of the Lord. The pope displayed an entirely different tone in another letter, which began with a quotation from scripture: 'Justice raises the nation up, sin makes the people miserable'.<sup>62</sup> It had 'come to us by report' that certain priests in Gaul were living wickedly and the pope's words are somewhat threatening:

Look, therefore, to your soul, look to your grandsons, whom you wish to reign happily, look to the provinces and, before our creator moves his hand to strike, think studiously on correcting this crime, lest he strike more sharply the longer he mercifully waits.<sup>63</sup>

This is the fear of God: sin and crime had affected the Frankish kingdom and the threat is simple. If Brunhild wished her grandchildren to reign happily and save her soul, she would

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<sup>57</sup> *Reg.* 11.48.

<sup>58</sup> *MK* p.127.

<sup>59</sup> Markus, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great*, p.163.

<sup>60</sup> *Reg.* 11.49.

<sup>61</sup> *Reg.* 11.49.

<sup>62</sup> *Reg.* 11.46 – Prov. 14:34.

<sup>63</sup> *Reg.* 11.46.



eradicate simony from her kingdom. The fact that Brunhild hadn't held the council by 602 suggests that there is more evolving than 'unquestioning piety', as Wood would hope.<sup>64</sup>

What sort of game was Brunhild playing, not arranging a council? In 601, Brunhild was expelled by one grandson, Theudebert, and crossed over to the other, Theuderic. It is entirely possible that Brunhild was holding off on any particular stance, and relying on the fact that Gregory still desired the persuasion she had over both men. The positive religious influence of women has been much critiqued.<sup>65</sup> One example of such a woman is the Frankish contemporary Bertha, daughter of Charibert I. She married King Aethelbert of Kent, and Gregory the Great wrote to her on the same day as he did Brunhild, in 601. Bede, the only early narrative account of the conversion of the English, tells us only of Frankish interpreters joining Augustine. There is no role for Brunhild and Bertha's influence is silenced also. There is some evidence of a continued link between England and Francia as a result of the activity. Bertha's daughter Ethelberga felt able to send her children to Dagobert I for protection after the death of her husband Edwin,<sup>66</sup> and Sigibert of East Anglia fled to the kingdom.<sup>67</sup> In 614, at the council of Paris, Lothar invited two Kentish churchmen to join him,<sup>68</sup> one of whom was among the party from 601. This is far from coincidence: Lothar was clearly reconfiguring Brunhild's involvement, and Gregory's celebration of it, by linking Kent to his regime after her death. As a result, we begin to understand just how influential Brunhild's role could be, and there are Frankish-English political connections which different authors foreground, or background, based on their religious and political motives.

The Augustinian mission, then, reveals tensions in not only the representations of royal women, but also in the way we have read them. 'God's most excellent daughter' is Gregory's rhetorical trick, but Bede simply deletes her out of the story.<sup>69</sup> Moving on to consider Brunhild's foundations, then, we may consider the very public activity of investing religious locations with political support; and yet there still appear to be political and textual games at play when Gregory tells us of Brunhild's activities.

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<sup>64</sup> Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine to Canterbury', p.16.

<sup>65</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Converters' in particular.

<sup>66</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, II.20.

<sup>67</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, III.18.

<sup>68</sup> *Concilia Galliae a. 511-695*, CCSL ed. Charles de Clercq, 148A (Turnhout, 1963) p.282.

<sup>69</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, I.23, 24.

## Brunhild's foundations

Brunhild evidently realised the power of public piety and the physical expressions of it: her desire for relics of Peter and Paul, and for the pallium, illustrate that the queen understood the benefits of being *seen* as a pious figure. I have already suggested that she had a range of devout royal queens from which to draw, from Clotild to the most recent role model of Radegund. This woman's ability to tread the very fine line between queen and saint was crucial: she knew the privileges of keeping her contacts within the secular realm, while being portrayed as an intensely religious figure. She played the 'queen' card at one moment; the 'nun' at another.

Brunhild's enemy Fredegund also knew how to play the card of piety, it appears, when she was feeling politically vulnerable. This is most evident when the queen believed she was losing her heirs. Her husband fell ill, as did her sons Dagobert and Chlodobert, and Gregory tells us Fredegund persuaded Chilperic to burn the tax registers and said: 'we may still lose our children, but we shall at least escape eternal damnation'.<sup>70</sup> The pious act Fredegund indulges in is nothing but a last-ditch effort to ensure her salvation. It is only when her political power is at its weakest that she realises her soul may also be in danger, and acts accordingly. Gregory tells us it is a little late in the day for such an outpouring. When their son Chlodobert died, Chilperic and Fredegund became lavish in alms to cathedrals, churches and the poor.<sup>71</sup> Later, when Lothar became ill, Fredegund 'vowed that she would donate a great sum of money to the church of Saint Martin. That was why he recovered'.<sup>72</sup> The connection with a saint is particularly powerful, when Brunhild cultivated the relationship with the very same saint. Brunhild used Martin's connection with Tours as a political tool with which she could play upon both her religious patronage and her political needs in the *civitas*. Fredegund similarly realised that intercessory power was not going to be enough: she sabotaged the campaign of King Guntram, and ordered the prisoners to be released, 'in another attempt to save [Lothar's] life'.<sup>73</sup> Fredegund had little interest in Christian morality, or in religious devotion. Christian discourses, and traditionally 'queenly' activities, could be used as tools in the 'politics of survival', in order to strengthen a weakened position.

The only source we have attesting Brunhild's holy activities is her correspondence with the pope. Other authors, from Jonas of Bobbio to Fredegar, not only silenced her

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<sup>70</sup> *DLH* V.34.

<sup>71</sup> *DLH* V.34.

<sup>72</sup> *DLH* X.11.

<sup>73</sup> *DLH* X.11.

piety, but specifically edit their stories in order to present Brunhild as an impious villain. The evidence from Gregory the Great, however, supports the conclusion that, particularly in Brunhild's later years, she was keen to apply her authority to the religious sphere. In 602, Brunhild endowed three institutions at Autun: a hospital, a church and a convent. Two letters confirm those privileges, sent to Brunhild and her grandson. Gregory informed the queen:

You so guide your heart to love of divine worship and arranging peace for venerable places, as if you had no other care...we assert that the nation of the Franks is happy before others which has deserved to possess a queen so endowed with all goodness.<sup>74</sup>

He learnt from Brunhild's letters that she had built a church for St. Martin outside Autun, alongside a monastery and hospital. As a result, the pope has 'indulged privileges to those places for the peace and protection of the inhabitants, as you wished, and we did not allow even the slightest delay in embracing the desires of your excellence'. There are two points here: first, it is clear that Brunhild had requested privileges, and second, the pope reminded the queen that he had acquiesced without delay: this is, I suggest, touching on Brunhild's lack of compliance with Gregory's request for the church council. Even more interesting, however, is the mystery which follows Gregory's privileges. Markus suggested that these plans were drawn up at Brunhild's court and submitted to Gregory.<sup>75</sup>

Brunhild had sent two of her legates, Burgoald and Guarmaric, with the queen's writings, to the pope to convey *secretum*, the secret conversation: apparently, they had disclosed everything that they were charged with.<sup>76</sup> We have no idea to what this is referring: the pope simply replied that he would indicate at a later time what would be done. We may make certain suggestions, however: it is apparent that, in 602, not only had a church council not happened, but that Brunhild was still very involved in the election process. Gregory asserted that he found a certain Mena, a co-bishop, innocent of the charges made against him: the letter does not say whether the charges came from the queen. Then a 'certain bishop' appeared to be mentally incapacitated: Gregory reminded the queen that only when illness meant he could not perform his duties would another be appointed, and certainly not before. He then stated that 'you also asked whether a certain bigamist could attain holy orders'. Gregory forbade the request and remonstrated that it should not be in Brunhild's time that such a thing be done against canonical rule. Only at the end did he mention the synod again, reminding the queen of the life of the soul and

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<sup>74</sup> *Reg.* 13.5.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Markus, *Gregory the Great and his world* (Cambridge, 1997) p.72.

<sup>76</sup> The two men are mentioned again in *Reg.* 13.7 to Theuderic.

stability of the kingdom. More interestingly, he never wrote to Brunhild asking about her dispensation of justice – instead he wrote to Childebert on multiple occasions, asking him not to punish without full evidence. Complaints must have reached him, for in later years, the pope decided to intervene in specific cases.<sup>77</sup>

In 602, the pope also wrote to the abbess Talasia, and informed her that, according to the letters of ‘our eminent royal children Brunild and her grandson Theuderic’, he would grant and confirm the privileges to the monastery of holy Mary at Autun. He is very clear in this letter about the rules of this monastery, particularly those surrounding the ‘opportunity for avarice’;<sup>78</sup> specifically that none of its property, present or future, may be touched, that only the king with the consent of the nuns may appoint an abbess, and most importantly concerning elections, that no-one may accept a bribe for a nomination, nor depose an abbess without the judgement of a panel of six bishops. This letter is much more than the confirmation of privileges for an institution. Brunhild may well have been genuinely increasingly pious in her later years, and if we read this letter alone, this may be our only conclusion. Yet the start of the seventh century has much more going on. I have already suggested that there was a game of cat-and-mouse ongoing with Gregory, as regards a church council for simony, (by 602 Brunhild had still not complied with the request) and Brunhild had just been expelled by one grandson and moved on to another. Only one year later would she also attempt to summon the holy man Columbanus and the bishop Desiderius of Vienne to a church council, to answer charges. Brunhild, then, was still having high-profile arguments with churchmen at the same time that she was endowing foundations – there is a larger context than the outpouring of piety, and instead Brunhild’s foundations should be seen as a political strategy, alongside her confrontations.

Autun was strategic for the queen: it was not part of Brunhild’s deceased husband’s territory, but instead was in Burgundy, ruled over by Guntram until his death in 593. In 587, however, Brunhild, Childebert II and Guntram had entered into the Treaty of Andelot, whose terms are preserved in the *Decem Libri Historiarum*, which made Brunhild’s son Guntram’s successor. If Brunhild was extending her influence in the 590s in both Spain and England, she was also consolidating power within Burgundy. In the later stages of Guntram’s life, Autun, along with Chalon, had been focuses of his piety. After his death, however, Brunhild appears to have taken over Guntram’s networks at Autun, and reconfigured them to her own advantage. In 599, Gregory had also endowed one of Childebert II’s foundations – potentially with Brunhild’s instigation. Barbara Rosenwein

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<sup>77</sup> See *Reg.* 9.215, 227, 219, 224, 225.

<sup>78</sup> *Reg.* 13.10.

has seen Autun as the example of Brunhild pushing boundaries and ‘distributed her largess almost as if she wished to touch every possible sort of establishment’.<sup>79</sup> She was marking off the realms of her own authority. The evidence suggests that Brunhild’s power was not necessarily waning, but perhaps with her expulsion by one grandson, the queen felt the need to give a public symbol of her enduring influence. She was specifically targeting those areas which had been awarded to her as part of the Treaty of Andelot. By placing Syagrius there, Brunhild was attempting to ensure loyalty. The activity of influencing religious networks appears to be a pattern: I have already suggested that Lothar II takes Brunhild’s after her death and reconfigures them to validate his own regime; she had simply done the same with Guntram twenty years earlier. It is no irony that this activity – the extension of influence, the limits of authority – are the very same issues about which Brunhild came into conflict with the holy Columbanus, and which Jonas of Bobbio focuses on in his vilification of the queen.

Brunhild would rededicate this church at Autun to St Martin, making a connection with the most important saint in this period. Again, as ‘one of the most prominent and significant aspects of cultural life,’<sup>80</sup> the connection of queens with saints’ cults was important. The very political act of distributing relics was a further way of strengthening the town. The cult of St Martin, in which Brunhild had significant involvement, was the most important, and James suggests that there were few places in northern Gaul, far from a church dedicated to that saint, and containing relics.<sup>81</sup> By entering the religious, and the political world, of saints’ cults, Brunhild had a dual position: the pious and the powerful queen. In my conclusion to this study, I consider the potential tomb of Brunhild in this church which offers the suggestion that Brunhild would have been venerated in her foundation. The queen’s foundations may not be read, then, as an outpouring of religious devotion in Brunhild’s twilight years, but political strategies which must be placed into a much wider context. As she is endowing institutions, she is launching attacks on some of the most prominent holy men in the kingdom: it is never as simple as to suggest Brunhild is ‘pious’ or the ‘Jezebel’.

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<sup>79</sup> Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*, p.49.

<sup>80</sup> Yitzhak Hen, *Culture & Religion in Merovingian Gaul A.D. 481-751* (Leiden, 1995) p.82. See *OP* X.1 on Fortunatus and St Martin.

<sup>81</sup> Edward James, *The Origins of France: From Clovis to the Capetians, 500-1000* (London, 1982) p.55.

## Conclusion

‘God’s most excellent daughter’ is not the label that other contemporary authors writing about Brunhild would consider using, and is not the label historians have approached the queen with either. Accustomed as we are to the ‘second Jezebel’, it is tempting to read Pope Gregory’s correspondence as the golden nuggets, through which one may attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ the queen. Surely the pope saw something in the queen that others have missed, or chosen to ignore? The answer is that neither contemporary author, nor modern historian, has necessarily ‘missed’ anything: Brunhild is a series of historical and textual problems, and representations were a question of what fitted the authors’ agenda, and readings of Brunhild a question of the historians’ agenda and the historiographical framework with which they approach the sources.

There are questions we have never really asked: why do we have none of the queen’s responses, and what does it mean for our interpretation of both Gregory and Brunhild, based on the fact we have only one side of the dialogue? Then again, our other authors present her with a one-sided dialogue as well. It is entirely possible that, because we are reading letters, we have felt that Brunhild is ‘living’ in some way; perhaps, that we can see the ‘real’ Brunhild through epistolary correspondence in a way we cannot elsewhere? Labels like ‘excellent daughter’ show us much about Gregory’s rhetorical tricks and ability to write to ruling women, but they mask the political realities of this royal woman’s existence. Gregory’s correspondence illustrates that Brunhild was deeply involved with religious activities – here the Augustinian mission, issues of Frankish church reform and the endowment of religious foundations - but those activities were politically motivated. The pope consistently acknowledged the crucial role that female rulers could play in the promotion of Christianity. His religious dealings with Theodelinda in the Lombard kingdom, with Bertha in England, and with Brunhild, illustrate that Gregory appealed to who he perceived was best placed to support him in a specific political moment. Wood has spoken of the ‘horizons’ of Brunhild’s diplomacy<sup>82</sup> and those horizons should now be growing. This queen was international – her concerns ranged from Spain, now to England as well. As a major player in the Augustinian mission, Brunhild could play the ‘pious’ card when she required, and make requests for symbols of that piety when she desired. The attempt to see the ‘good’ in Brunhild, based on her piety, then, is misdirected, but understandable. As the founder of charitable foundations in Burgundy, she could have easily been presented as the helper of the poor and needy, in the mode of late

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<sup>82</sup> *MK* p.128.

antique empresses, whom this study cannot explore, but would be an area of further research. Here, it is not to diminish Brunhild's piety to say that it was politically nuanced, but simply say that piety was part of the politics of survival.

She may, at once, declare her devotion to a monastery and be calling churchmen to councils set to ruin their careers. It is to that which we now turn, and to authors who turn our queen from 'excellent daughter' to the 'Jezebel'.

## Chapter 4

### The beginnings of the ‘Jezebel’

**‘Much evil hast thou brought in this world, but no worse deed than this, that thou hast caused one of the Lord’s bishops to be put to death’.<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

The words above are directed, not toward Brunhild, but her enemy Fredegund. Bishop Praetextatus of Rouen was a favourite of Brunhild; Chilperic and Fredegund had the bishop removed from his see, exiled, and in the process, attempted to bribe Gregory of Tours, to his well-publicised outrage.<sup>2</sup> By 586, Praetextatus had returned to Rouen, where ‘bitter words’ were exchanged with Fredegund and she left him *felle fervens*, seething with bitter wrath.<sup>3</sup> The churchman was stabbed by an assassin, and he called out for help, but none of the surrounding clergy came to his aid. Fredegund arrived with two of her dukes and was seemingly horrified: ‘O holy bishop, that a deed like this should be done while you performed your holy office. May the villain be pointed out to us who has dared to perform this act!’ Praetextatus, aware of her sarcasm, replied: ‘And who has done these things, if not that person who has murdered kings, often shed innocent blood and done so many evil deeds?’ Fredegund most kindly offered her skilled physicians to heal the bishop, but he declined and warned that ‘God shall avenge my blood upon thy head’.<sup>4</sup> Almost as soon as she left, the bishop died. This vignette, with the intensity of direct speech, has all of the drama we expect more in Fredegar’s *Chronicle* than in the *DLH*. As the bishop left this world, these words to the queen resound for the reader:

‘I have been and shall remain a bishop; but as for you, you shall not forever enjoy royal power’.<sup>5</sup>

On the political chessboard, the relationship between king and bishop is pivotal and well documented; such is both the close co-operation and conflict which ensued. That between a queen and her churchmen, however, has not yet received such attention. In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which Brunhild used episcopal appointments to

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<sup>1</sup> *DLH* VII.31.

<sup>2</sup> *DLH* V.18.

<sup>3</sup> *DLH* VIII.31.

<sup>4</sup> *DLH* VIII.31.

<sup>5</sup> *DLH* VIII.31.



create connections she could utilise when required, and had a relationship with Pope Gregory the Great, whereby both needed the others' support. The benefits of being *presented* as a pious queen, particularly when politically vulnerable, are apparent; when the relationship between the queen and the church, and its leading men, flourished, it was beneficial for all concerned. The vignette surrounding Fredegund and Praetextatus, however, represents the result when the relationship turns sour, and what happens when a queen exacts a very public form of revenge. Brunhild's tense interactions with two particular churchmen are part of a larger context of Merovingian holy men who were removed from office, exiled, or murdered. In the delicate balance between two kinds of authority, secular and holy, a situation could turn literally on a knife-edge - of the eighteen bishops murdered in Francia between 580 and 754, all but one died as a result of a confrontation with rulers.<sup>6</sup> Since two rival women were at the helm of the Frankish kingdom in the latter half of the sixth century, it is clear that queens actively participated in what has been called the 'cycle de la *Bischofsmord*'.<sup>7</sup> Balthild, who died around 665, was said to have been responsible for the deaths of nine bishops,<sup>8</sup> an exceptional level of violence against holy men: she, like Brunhild, was a 'Jezebel'.

What could turn the relationship sour? Speaking out against the queen was risky business: when Fredegund had Praetextatus murdered, and Brunhild the abbot Lupentius of Javols, they did so because of 'libellous remarks'.<sup>9</sup> Lupentius' murder is particularly interesting as it is recorded in a contemporary source, unlike those men explored here, and Gregory seems uneasy in recalling Brunhild's form of justice. Recognition and representation are pivotal to this study, and when bishops speak against queens, they are publicly *recognising* them in a certain way. Despite the fact that all kings' sons were supposedly legitimate in Merovingian Gaul, the accusation of adultery against the queen remained a 'powerful weapon in the bishop's armoury'.<sup>10</sup> Praetextatus certainly cried 'adultery' against Fredegund, though we cannot safely say what the accusation of Lupentius against Brunhild was. Columbanus, the subject of this chapter, most certainly engaged with issues of recognition when he refused to baptise the queen's grandchildren.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Fouracre, 'Why were so many bishops killed in Merovingian Francia?', *Bischofsmord im Mittelalter*, eds. N. Fryde and D. Reitz (Göttingen, 2003) p.13 - the exception is Praejectus of Clermont, who died in 676.

<sup>7</sup> Nira Gradowicz-Pancer, 'Femmes royales et violences anti-épiscopales à l'époque mérovingienne: Frédégonde et le meurtre de l'évêque Prétextat', *Bischofsmord im Mittelalter*, p.38.

<sup>8</sup> We can only actually identify one, Aunemund of Lyon, but the fact that she is said to have committed that crime is significant. Compare this with Fredegar's assertion that Brunhild was responsible for the death of ten kings: these are rhetorical strategies employed by authors to escalate the violent potential of the queen involved.

<sup>9</sup> *DLH* VI.37.

<sup>10</sup> Fouracre, 'Why were so many bishops killed', p.18.

Due to the connection with sexual behaviours, the confrontation between queen and bishop may appear to have an intensely gendered flavour. Nira Pancer, in particular, has endeavoured to explore both Brunhild and Fredegund as employing specifically female strategies in their acts of violence, particularly against churchmen. I have already suggested that the concept of the 'feud', which Pancer subscribes to, is not satisfactory to explain the relationship between these queens. Gender is a tool through which authors may nuance a tension in a particular way, but the confrontations themselves do not have to come from gendered strategies.

It is the 'game of challenge and counter-attack'<sup>11</sup> which may liberate us from strategies of gender, into strategies of power. Those in positions of power were, by nature, targets for criticism and had to respond publicly to an affront, if they were to participate in the dynamics of court politics. The two churchmen to be explored here, the holy man Columbanus and bishop Desiderius of Vienne, argue with Brunhild to different ends: Columbanus died a natural death in 615, while Desiderius has the dramatic ending of martyrdom in 607. The two men probably knew of each other: their connection has most recently been given attention by Yaniv Fox.<sup>12</sup> The texts through which I will examine the conflicts are hagiographical, with the specific conventions of that genre, but are entirely different in tone and aim. King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii*, written around 620, and Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Columbani*, written in the 640s, deal with their protagonists' conflict with queen Brunhild, but place their emphases in very different places. I will not examine these texts chronologically. The *Vita Columbani* retains its holy man as the star of its show, using Brunhild as a counter to his actions. King Sisebut's text entirely subverts the expected characterisation of the hagiographic genre, thus I wish to examine the more traditional text, before moving on to the *Vita Desiderii*. Both authors are safe in the knowledge that Brunhild is no longer alive, and are now manipulating her from historical actor to textual cipher. They use second-hand knowledge to create a caricature of this queen, and as a result the 'Jezebel' is born.

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<sup>11</sup> Gradowicz-Pancer, 'Femmes royales', p.43.

<sup>12</sup> Yaniv Fox, 'The bishop and the monk: Desiderius of Vienne and the Columbanian movement', *Early Medieval Europe* 20:2 (2012) pp. 176-194.

### Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Columbani*

Columbanus was born in 540 and was an Irish missionary: he travelled to the Frankish court and created foundations at Annegray and Luxeuil. In his some twenty years in the Frankish kingdom, the holy man conflicted with other bishops, particularly over the dating of Easter, and was called to a council in 603 to answer charges on the matter: he declined to attend. Simultaneously, he began to wage war against vice in Brunhild's royal court, the results of which are examined here. Brunhild attempted to imprison and exile the holy man, unsuccessfully, and he was embraced at the rival court of Lothar II. In 611, Columbanus supported Brunhild's grandson Theudebert, who was her enemy at the time, and from there travelled to the Lombard kingdom in 612, where he founded Bobbio and died peacefully in 615.

Described by Ian Wood as potentially the most important hagiographical text written in Western Europe in the seventh century,<sup>13</sup> the *Vita Columbani* may tell the life of this holy man, but it is certainly not all that the work aims to achieve. Scholarship on this work has recently moved with pace, while its author has not had the same attention. Historians now see Gregory of Tours himself as a crucial element of the study of the *DLH*, while Jonas has not been given that level of critique. He forged his career in the Merovingian kingdom, entering the monastery at Bobbio shortly after Columbanus' death in 615. He remained there, secretary to two abbots, one of whom would commission him to write this text.<sup>14</sup> The work is now being seen as transitional:<sup>15</sup> stepping back from its religious reception, it is clear that the *Vita Columbani* created an image of Brunhild which would resound in textual echoes, copied almost exactly in Fredegar's *Chronicle* and beyond. While this study must focus on book I of the text, it is current debate over the two book structure which focuses attention on the intended audience, which now should be extended to include royal and aristocratic circles.<sup>16</sup> The timeless quality of hagiography is

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<sup>13</sup> Wood, 'Jonas of Bobbio', p.112.

<sup>14</sup> Jonas also wrote the *Vita* of the pre-Columbanian abbot John of Réomé, who died around 544, so Jonas understood the hagiographic models well - see *Vita Johannis abbatis Reomaensis*, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SSRM III*, pp. 502-17.

<sup>15</sup> O'Hara, 'The *Vita Columbani* in Merovingian Gaul', pp. 126-153 on the international nature of the work; Diem, 'Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity', pp. 521-560 on the lessons Jonas wished to teach and Dunn, 'Columbanus, charisma and the revolt of the monks of Bobbio', pp. 1-27 on the connection between charismatic and monastic rule.

<sup>16</sup> This study focuses on book I of the VC, as only this contains details about Brunhild. Considering the challenges to authority in the VC, book I deals with challenge from outside (the corrupt court) and book II with Columbanus' successors and internal challenge. Different versions of the *Life*, it has been suggested, circulated for each Columbanian monastery - the Athala section, then, would have been added on for Bobbio; the Eustasius section for Luxeuil; the Burgundofara section for Faremoutiers. See Ian Wood, 'Jonas, the Merovingians and Pope Honorius: *Diplomata* and the *Vita Columbani*', *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. A.C. Murray (Toronto, 1998) p.103. O'Hara has used contemporary works to trace the VC's influence. By exploring

distilled into exact historical detailing in this work: it is indeed a ‘who’s who’<sup>17</sup> and gives the full flavour of the political turbulence at the end of the sixth century. Columbanus is the connective tissue within this Merovingian story: it is he who liaises between Brunhild, her grandsons Theuderic and Theudebert, and Lothar, amongst various members of the aristocracy: is this history or hagiography?<sup>18</sup>

Jonas looks back on an argument which occurred 35 years before, in the light of his own political situation. This chapter will explore two rhetorical strategies which Jonas employs in his creation of the ‘Jezebel’: the first is to deliberately deceive the reader into thinking that Brunhild and her family had no positive links with Columbanus before the argument itself, effectively removing her from the holy man’s history. This strategy of deception is, by no means, exclusive to discussions of Brunhild in the *Vita Columbani*. Charles-Edwards and Dunn have, in particular, illustrated that Jonas, in the latter’s words ‘stands accused of deliberate concealment’<sup>19</sup> in a variety of areas within his writing. In order to promote his own agenda, this author has the ability to omit, background information or deliberately fabricate it. He applies the technique of silence regarding Brunhild’s positive associations with Columbanian monasticism so that, when he is ready, Jonas is able to introduce the queen with the strongest vitriol. Because Columbanus must be whiter-than-white in this work, such is the nature of hagiography, Brunhild is forced to become blacker-than-black. Jonas also creates Lothar II, Brunhild’s rival as her foil within the text: he is the model of how rulership should be done, and I will deal with his characterisation separately.

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Fredegar’s *Chronicle*, the *Vita Germani*, *Passio Praeiectionis*, the *Vita Sadalberga* and the *Vita Wandregiseli*, he uses the fact that parts of the *Vita Columbani* were copied in these five texts, written in different areas, within sixty years of Jonas’ original text, to show that there was a much more rapid and wider dissemination than previously thought. I have reservations about his approach, especially when he examines Fredegar: O’Hara, ‘The *Vita Columbani*’.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Geary, ‘Saints, Scholars and Society: The Elusive Goal’, *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, ed. S. Sticca (New York, 1996) p.228.

<sup>18</sup> Clare Stancliffe has examined this problem, concluding that ‘we should not use a hagiographical work as a historical source unless we have first studied it in its own right’, in ‘Jonas’ *Life of Columbanus and his Disciples*’, pp. 189-192.

<sup>19</sup> See T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000) and Marilyn Dunn, ‘Columbanus, charisma and the revolt of the monks of Bobbio’, *Peritia* 20 (2008) p.7.

## The silencing of Brunhild

Jonas is careful to provide no other challenge to Columbanus in book I, other than Brunhild, though the holy man's extant five letters, as well as book II, confirm antagonism toward him: three large cases of internal dissension are conveniently missed out: the Easter debate between Columbanus and the Gallic bishops; dissension within his own group of monks and the argument between Columbanus and Gallus, with the former excommunicating the latter.<sup>20</sup> In removing any sense of hostility towards the holy man, Jonas is able to make it simple: this is a fight between royal and holy power, between Brunhild and Columbanus. There are two main issues through which Jonas is able to, first, silence any positive influence from queen Brunhild: the holy man's introduction to Gaul and the patronage of his foundations, or apparent lack thereof. The former seems very simple:

Tales about Columbanus spread to the court of King Sigibert, who ruled at this time with honour over the two Frankish kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy.<sup>21</sup>

The holy man is said to arrive, then, at the court before 575, the year of Sigibert's death. That king is said to have ruled 'with honour': as we have already seen, Sigibert's rule was seen positively by most authors. Jonas, however, uses the king's name incorrectly - one of Columbanus's letters to the Gallic bishops, written in 603, states that he had been there for twelve years.<sup>22</sup> The result is that Sigibert had been dead for over a decade by the time Columbanus arrived, leaving two kings who could have met the holy man: Guntram, Sigibert's brother or Childebert, Sigibert's son. The former is a possibility, as Annegray, Columbanus's first foundation, had been part of Guntram's territory. It is much more likely, however, that Columbanus met Childebert: he had received Guntram's kingdom of Burgundy upon his death, and as a result was the only king who technically ruled over two Frankish kingdoms. Furthermore, one manuscript does use the name Childebert instead of Sigibert.<sup>23</sup>

The use of Sigibert's name is not a naïve author's mistake, but a deception invested with political nuancing. The entrance of Columbanus, and the manipulation of the king's name, marks the beginning of Jonas editing out any positive influence from Brunhild's

<sup>20</sup> Stancliffe, "Jonas' *Life of Columbanus*", pp. 197-8; also Donald Bullough, 'The Career of Columbanus', in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. M. Lapidge (Woodbridge, 1997) pp. 1-28.

<sup>21</sup> VC I.12. Translations are made with reference to Edward Peters, ed., *Monks, Bishops and Pagans: Christian Culture in Gaul and Italy, 500-700* (Philadelphia, 1975) pp. 75-113 and Ian Wood, 'Jonas of Bobbio', pp. 111-136.

<sup>22</sup> Later in the VC, Jonas states that Columbanus's exile in 610 was twenty years after his entry to the Frankish kingdom (I.20).

<sup>23</sup> Wood, 'Jonas, the Merovingians' - the Metz manuscript names the king as Childebert and omits the words 'cuius superius fecimus mentionem' after the name of Sigibert in I.18.

family, simultaneously legitimising the line under which he was working, that of Lothar II. In a world where recognition and representation were of key importance, Jonas was plugging in to his current political reality. It is no coincidence that, in the Edict of Paris in 614, Sigibert was the only king that Lothar publicly recognised as a predecessor.<sup>24</sup> One particular group of manuscripts uses the name Sigibert in place of Childebert, containing one of the oldest extant manuscripts, produced near Rheims in the second half of the seventh century.<sup>25</sup> The manuscript tradition deserves more attention, particularly with a focus on which texts use which name, and where those texts were produced. In this case, it seems clear that Jonas suppressed the involvement of the Brunhild line in those areas with a strong Columbanian connection. Those communities would still have required royal support by the time Jonas was writing, so it was necessary, in a text such as this, to appeal to the correct political players. Childebert was not recognised by the new regime, Sigibert was, and Jonas uses the figure that was politically appropriate.

The king who first met Columbanus asked him to remain *intra terminos Galliarum*<sup>26</sup> – Theuderic and Lothar would later ask the same. From the outset, however, Jonas makes clear that the holy man cannot be restrained within a king's borders: all further confrontations revolve around the limits of authority, royal vs secular space, and the breach of those boundaries. Jonas is then able to minimise the royal support offered to the holy man by Brunhild's family. He created two foundations after his welcome: Annegray and Luxeuil. Jonas provides no sense of royal patronage or support for these two foundations, yet it is evident that this was far from the case, and looking to the context for that royal expectation highlights the fact that Jonas may be disingenuous here. Guntram had founded the basilicas of St Marcellus and St Symphorian at Chalon, Childebert founded St Medard at Soissons, and his mother actively supported her foundations at Autun, as we have already seen. When Columbanus entered the Frankish kingdom, he went to the court; when he entered the Lombard kingdom, he headed for the court. It therefore seems odd that the holy man went to the Frankish court, but apparently needed no royal support for his foundations. This is especially strange when Jonas represents the king as understanding some form of reciprocal relationship with the holy man. Jonas inserts a speech into the mouth of the king, stating that Columbanus should 'provide things that are useful for our salvation'.<sup>27</sup> The suggestion here is that Columbanus should provide

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<sup>24</sup> See O'Hara 'The *Vita Columbani*' on the manuscript tradition: the A3 group of manuscripts of the *Vita Columbani* uses the name Sigibert, rather than Childebert. For the edict of 614, see Lothar II, *Edictum*, ed. A. Boretius, *MGH Capit. N.S. I* (Hanover, 1883) pp. 20-3 at p.22.

<sup>25</sup> O'Hara, 'The *Vita Columbani*', p.135.

<sup>26</sup> VC I.12.

<sup>27</sup> VC I.12.

intercessory prayers. The king had said that, should the holy man not leave, ‘everything he wanted would be done’.<sup>28</sup> Jonas has done something clever here: he has connected the idea of royal support with the condition that Columbanus not leave Childebert’s territory. As Columbanus refuses, royal support is rendered moot.

When the holy man refused assistance, the king recommended that a hermitage would be the most appropriate way of life for him; Columbanus selected Annegray, in the Vosges mountains. To read Jonas literally, one assumes that the king donating this land was Sigibert, as we are still meant to believe he was the king Columbanus met. Jonas, then, has to move the date of this foundation back, in order to convince his reader it was the father, not the son. Again, this is a case of a politicised editing eye, yet the reader simply is swept ahead, and told that the numbers of Columbanus’s followers had increased so greatly, that he sought a larger location at Luxeuil.<sup>29</sup> Again, this is a venture by Columbanus alone, yet Wood has shown that such a *castrum* would have, in all probability, been founded with royal support.<sup>30</sup> There is certainly evidence that Luxeuil benefited from not only support in its foundation, but enjoyed enduring patronage. The *Vita Sadalberga* states that Luxeuil was built *ex munificentia Childeberti Regis*, though this is a reworked manuscript.<sup>31</sup> Only this text explicitly identifies Childebert as the religious patron of this foundation, but the *Vita Agili* refers to concessions made to Luxeuil by Brunhild and her grandson Theuderic, after Columbanus had left the monastery.<sup>32</sup> It seems apparent that Columbanus received support<sup>33</sup> and suggests that there was a reciprocal relationship in place between Brunhild’s family and the holy man, before it turned awry.

Lothar II may have publicly deleted Brunhild and her family from Merovingian history by declaring Sigibert his only legal predecessor, but it was not so simple to remove the traces of her influence on the political landscape. Lothar’s actions as soon as Brunhild is assassinated simply confirm how politically active she had been, as he actively reworked her key relationships. He supported Luxeuil after Columbanus left for Italy,<sup>34</sup> and according to Wood, Luxeuil becomes one of the epicentres of the *damnatio memoriae*

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<sup>28</sup> VC I.12.

<sup>29</sup> VC I.17.

<sup>30</sup> Wood, ‘Jonas, the Merovingians’, p.106. He states that it is unlikely that this walled *castrum* would have had no owner. In Anglo-Saxon England, those sites were in royal hands.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.106.

<sup>32</sup> *Vita s. Agili abbatis Resbacensis*, ed. J. Mabillon, AASS OSB II.11.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Rosenwein has suggested that the land was donated by Brunhild’s grandson – whether it was Childebert or Theuderic, she has suggested that ‘in the light of Brunhild’s activities at Autun, it is very likely that she and her progeny greeted Columbanus warmly’: *Negotiating Space*. pp. 50-1.

<sup>34</sup> VC I.30.

against the queen.<sup>35</sup> Though I have illustrated that the term is flawed, we may say that Luxeuil became a centre for Brunhild's vilification. Lothar employed a clever strategy of taking those foundations Brunhild had been linked with, and reconfiguring them to support his new regime. Lothar and his son Dagobert were among the main benefactors of the Columbanian monasticism as a result. Why would the new regime have found it so important to work with Luxeuil had it not been a site of importance for Brunhild?

If one recognises that Childebert actually granted Annegray to the saint, and that Theuderic and Brunhild gave concessions to Luxeuil, then this positive influence on Columbanian monasticism had to be edited out by Jonas. These foundations retain royal patronage, but with a different king at the helm, a king bent on recasting the previous regime in a negative light. The link between Luxeuil and royalty would continue into the end of the seventh-century: Wood argues its use as a high class prison, a status which closely associated institutions with the Merovingian family.<sup>36</sup> Jonas himself would come to understand its importance: he was summoned in 659 to a council at Chalon, by Clovis II and Balthild (the other 'Jezebel') after the king had secured the papal privilege for Luxeuil. By the time this text circulated, its audience may well have known the present royal support for Columbanian monasticism and Jonas now ensured that they knew nothing of the support given by the previous regime. Within the first scenes of Columbanus's introduction to the Merovingian court, then, Jonas has deceived us at two points, in an effort to remove Brunhild's line from a positive influence on Columbanian monasticism. He has deleted the queen and her progeny from the tale, and in so doing, has recognised and validated the regime under which he was working.

### **The good and the bad relationship**

The key to the showdown between Brunhild and Columbanus is the holy man's public refusal to baptise the queen's grandsons. Before Jonas introduces the queen, however, he shows how a positive relationship with Columbanus yielded political success. Within a text full of named individuals, members of the aristocracy are used by Jonas to form mirrors to the royal encounters. The duke Wandelen and his wife Flavia came to Columbanus, lamented their great wealth, and lack of a son to leave it to.<sup>37</sup> A very royal

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<sup>35</sup> Wood, 'Jonas, the Merovingians', p.107.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.107: he uses St Calais as a further example.

<sup>37</sup> VC I.22.



problem, one could say, and one Queen Fredegund voiced particularly well.<sup>38</sup> The holy man prayed on their behalf, Flavia gave birth and Columbanus consecrated the child. Jonas goes on to tell us:

Later on, the child was educated in the monastery and taught wisdom. He became bishop of Besançon, which he remains. Out of love for St. Columbanus, he founded a monastery under Columbanus' rule...A second son, Ramelen, founded a monastery too.<sup>39</sup>

Jonas teases his reader from his all-knowing position. He is about to tell us of a queen who ill advises her grandsons, wants to have them baptised, and according to him, has no personal piety whatsoever. How better to set up the distinction than with members of the aristocracy who played the game as the holy man wanted? The result of Columbanus' favour to Wandelen is two children who become active participants in Columbanian monasticism, whose family would go on to have some of the highest positions at the court of Dagobert I.<sup>40</sup> Because Jonas has deleted the involvement of Brunhild's family, he has set up a very clear distinction between those who are recognised by the holy man, and those who are not, and most importantly, the consequences of it.

When Brunhild's grandson Theuderic is introduced, he heeds the holy man's power: he 'often came to him and humbly begged his prayers'.<sup>41</sup> This first characterisation of the king places him in a position of submission, recognising the need for intercessory prayer and acknowledging Columbanus' reputation: Theuderic 'thought he was fortunate to have St. Columbanus in the kingdom'.<sup>42</sup> We are simply told of Brunhild that, after Sigibert's death, the kingdom passed to Childebert through her influence, and after his death, she ruled alongside her grandsons.<sup>43</sup> Jonas waits to characterise the queen in the framework of corrupt royal behaviour:

As he [Theuderic] very often visited Columbanus, the holy man began to reprove him because he sinned with concubines, and did not satisfy himself with the comforts of a lawful wife, in order to beget royal children from an honoured queen, and not bastards by his concubines. After this reproof from Columbanus, the king promised to abstain from such sinful conduct. But the old serpent came to his grandmother Brunhild, who was a second Jezebel, and aroused her pride against the holy man, because she saw that Theuderic was obedient to him. She feared that her

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<sup>38</sup> *DLH* V.26.

<sup>39</sup> *VC* I.22.

<sup>40</sup> Alain Dierkens, 'Prolégomènes à une histoire des relations culturelles entre les îles britanniques et le continent pendant le Haut Moyen Âge', *La Neustrie: Les pays au nord de la Loire de 650 à 850*, ed. H. Atsma, 2 vols (Sigmaringen, 1989) pp. 371-393.

<sup>41</sup> *VC* I.31.

<sup>42</sup> *VC* I.31.

<sup>43</sup> *VC* I.31.

power and honour would be lessened if, after the expulsion of the concubines, a queen should rule the court.<sup>44</sup>

The 'second Jezebel' is born: Brunhild is specifically created as antithetical to the holy man's values. As a result, the biblical allusion, of the Jezebel whose influence led the whole of Israel to idolatry, hits home. To Brunhild, the relationship between Theuderic and Columbanus overstepped the mark: the holy man was stepping on the queens' toes in his castigation of her grandson's behaviour. The boundaries of sacred and secular space, of conflicting authorities, are introduced here, and both Brunhild and Columbanus are invested with the power that they embody. Displaying Theuderic's obedience to the holy man only goes to reinforce, through Jonas' images, Brunhild's evil *influence* over not only her husband, but now her grandson as well.

Theuderic was doing nothing new as a Merovingian king, in his keeping of concubines, just as Columbanus was doing nothing new in berating a king over his morals. This, however, is not about the taking of concubines, but about the limits of authority. When Brunhild took offence to Columbanus' authority over her grandson, she turned into both 'serpent' and 'Jezebel'. The biblical imagery is powerful because there has been no biblical analogy so far in this text for royal figures. Brunhild appears concerned over the recognition of a legitimate queen at court. At no point does Jonas refer to Brunhild as *regina* – she is always Theuderic's grandmother: he never recognises her as what he perceives as royal. In becoming regent to both son and grandsons, Brunhild was able to retain power, but it is entirely possible that with this potential bride, Brunhild felt that she might return to a weakened position once more – where did she fit if she was not regent?

Jonas sets up Brunhild and Columbanus, then, as the antitheses of one another – both want to have influence, but they are invested with entirely different kinds of authority. The showdown which follows is the clash between those powers:

She saw him enter the court and led to him the illegitimate sons of Theuderic. When Columbanus saw her, he asked what she wanted of him. Brunhild answered: 'These are the king's sons; give them thy blessing'. He replied: 'Know that these boys will never bear the royal sceptre, for they were begotten in sin'. Enraged, she told the boys to go. After this Columbanus left the court and a loud cracking noise was heard. The whole house trembled and everyone shook with fear. But that did not avail to curb the wrath of the wretched woman.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> VC I.31.

<sup>45</sup> VC I.32.

This incident takes place in the royal villa of Bruyères-le-Chatel, a space that is consciously referred to as the *aula regia*.<sup>46</sup> Both Brunhild and Columbanus make only one statement each of direct speech toward the other, and that is in this chapter. The structures of their declarations mirror each other, as does the syntax in the Latin: Brunhild states that because her grandchildren are royal, they must be blessed; Columbanus states that because they are illegitimate, they will never be truly royal. The intensity of direct speech reinforces the different types of power they hold. For Brunhild, it is enough that these men are king's sons. In refusing to bless them, Columbanus not only refuses to recognise them, but refuses them political success as a result. The earthquake which occurs as the holy man leaves the court is the ominous sign that a rupture has occurred. When a rupture occurs in Brunhild's life, she spurs into action.

### Testing the boundaries of authority

Upon Columbanus' refusal to baptise her grandsons, Brunhild's tactic is to cut him off from any support, another reason why it seems so evident that she had given royal support to him previously. No-one was allowed to leave or enter Luxeuil, and no supplies could be given: it is an effective blockade. Columbanus then went to the court, but refused to enter the palace. Theuderic sent out food, but Columbanus asserted that 'the mouth of the Lord's servant should not be defiled by the food of one who shuts out God's servant from his own dwelling, and the dwelling of others'.<sup>47</sup> The king is being attacked here for not allowing Columbanus into his own space. All of the food dishes miraculously broke, and this is the only point within the text that Brunhild herself is represented as nervous:

Full of anxiety, he [Theuderic] together with his grandmother, hastened to Columbanus early in the morning. Both begged him to forgive their past sins and promised amendment. With his fears quieted, Columbanus returned to his convent. But they failed to keep their promises, and very soon the persecutions were renewed with increased hostility by the king, who continued in his former sinful course. Then Columbanus sent him a letter full of reproaches, and threatened him excommunication if he did not amend his conduct.<sup>48</sup>

Jonas uses his miracles with rhetorical flair: they occur only when boundaries have been crossed. The first, the earthquake, occurred as Columbanus stepped away from the royal court; the second, dishes breaking, is a result of him not being allowed into his own monastery. After the cat-and-mouse game of promising reform, then returning to normal

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<sup>46</sup> VC I.32.

<sup>47</sup> VC I.32.

<sup>48</sup> VC I.32.

behaviours, comes the threat of excommunication. This moment has been given focus by scholarship, and for good reason: Columbanus threatens a break between sacred and secular power, and it is here that Jonas takes us away from hagiographic tradition. Debate may continue as to whether the holy man was in a position to be able to excommunicate the king,<sup>49</sup> but its place in this text is of paramount importance, and we should consider Jonas' reasons for featuring it.

In Gregory of Tours' *Life of Nicetius*, the bishop of Trier (an early ally of Brunhild) reproached king Theuderic I (d.533/4) for his immoral behaviour, and threatened some supporters of the king with excommunication. The bishop's problem? The king's men had allowed horses to destroy land which belonged to the church, thus they had violated the boundaries of sacred space.<sup>50</sup> According to Diem, this is the text which provided the model for the representation of Columbanus' threat, as there are no other extant Merovingian texts describing the excommunication of a king.<sup>51</sup> Gregory, however, does not present us with the threat of a king's excommunication: Nicetius never actually addresses Theuderic I. He simply states that just because he is appointed by a king, he does not have to tolerate evil actions; this statement may be the model for Columbanus', in that founding a monastery does not give a king the right to violate its boundaries.<sup>52</sup> There are further avenues to explore in the comparison between the two texts: the names in the *Life of Nicetius* are the same as those in the *Vita Columbani*: Sigibert, Theuderic, Theudebert and Lothar. Jonas is perhaps pointing the reader to Gregory's text, in order to show other examples of what happens when a king falls foul of the holy man. To take the textual echo further, one must think back to when Jonas presents Sigibert as the king Columbanus first makes contact with – it has been suggested that Sigibert's name is used as the link between the two texts.<sup>53</sup> I propose that, if this was the case, it was an afterthought for Jonas – it is much more persuasive that Jonas used the name Sigibert as a deliberate rhetorical strategy against Brunhild's family. In the excommunication link, it is entirely possible that Jonas was harking back to the earlier model, but proving that his holy man is doing something entirely different with Brunhild's grandson. While Nicetius could only castigate the king's supporters, Columbanus goes directly after royalty.

Brunhild has, thus far, cut Columbanus off from resources, and then begins a campaign against him personally: she incites not only the king against him, but all nobles,

<sup>49</sup> The legality of the act is pursued by Diem, 'Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity', p.530.

<sup>50</sup> *Vita Nicetii Episcopi Lugdunensis, MGH SSRM III*, ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1889) pp. 518-524.

<sup>51</sup> Diem, 'Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity', p.531.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.531.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.532.

court members and specifically bishops.<sup>54</sup> She succeeded in this task, so that the holy man was forced to ‘answer for his faith or leave the country’.<sup>55</sup> While Jonas may want us to believe that the queen’s incitement, as usual, is the driving force, Brunhild’s success here cannot simply have been a result of her powers of persuasion. Her ‘incitement’ may be a topos of this text, and others, but this is one of the moments where Jonas skirts over underlying issues between the holy man and surrounding churchmen. In so doing, he can focus on the battle between royal and holy authority. Everything is a test: when Theuderic goes to Luxeuil, pushed by his grandmother, he is refused entry into the monastery. He argues with Columbanus, asserting that ‘all Christians’ should have access to the *septa secretoria*. By ‘all Christians’, presumably we should read ‘Theuderic’. This interaction, like the showdown with Brunhild, is reported in direct speech, again giving it a heightened intensity. Columbanus threatens that to undermine the monastery’s regulations will result in the destruction of the king’s family and his kingdom. The demise of Brunhild’s line, then, is directly connected to the violation of sacred space: only then does the king, who had stepped into the refectory, stand back.<sup>56</sup> Only when those boundaries are tested do we see them so clearly defined.

Jonas may have been plugging in to his own political reality once more – by the time he was writing, episcopal exemptions were in place, as were immunities granted by royalty to holy establishments: in essence, it was well understood that the *septa secretoria* was not to be accessed by ‘all Christians’.<sup>57</sup> A reader of the *Vita Columbani*, then, may have found it particularly outrageous that a king should assume his right to enter Columbanus’ monastery. This rhetorical strategy by Jonas only works because of the political context he is writing within. The inaccessibility of that space was new to Theuderic, but not new by the time Jonas was writing. Mayke de Jong has used the Brunhild-Columbanus confrontation as the opposition between the sacred space of Luxeuil and the ‘unholy space of a contaminated court’.<sup>58</sup> Yet Brunhild and her grandsons’ strategies are presented differently: Brunhild does not enter Luxeuil, but tries to cut it off from outside. She removes royal support in order to test Columbanus, and prove that he needs it, illustrating that she could destroy what we now know she probably had a hand in

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<sup>54</sup> VC I.33.

<sup>55</sup> VC I.33.

<sup>56</sup> VC I.33.

<sup>57</sup> Diem, ‘Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity’, p.535. There is a full bibliography surrounding this theme, best studied by Ian Wood, Barbara Rosenwein and Mayke De Jong: in particular, see De Jong, ‘Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms’, *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. M. De Jong, F. Theuvs and C. van Rhijn (Leiden, 2001) pp. 291-329.

<sup>58</sup> De Jong, ‘Monastic prisoners or opting out?’, p.297.

creating. Theuderic goes further and actually attempts to manipulate the nature of monastic space, which is very different. Jonas has, by this point, taken an argument over the blessing of royal grandchildren and extended it out to the confrontation between the *locus sanctus* and the *aula regia*. Monastic boundaries are part of the topography of political power<sup>59</sup> - Brunhild's activities at Autun have shown that those spaces can be used effectively to bolster a queen's 'arsenal', whereas here we see a queen wrestling with the very nature of her inclusion into it.

Theuderic left Columbanus with the following taunt: 'You want me to honour you with the crown of martyrdom; do not believe that I am so foolish as to commit such a crime'.<sup>60</sup> The king went back to court and ordered his leading men to retrieve Columbanus, who report that he will not leave unless dragged out. When the king's soldiers attempted to arrest Columbanus, he was invisible to them and the only soldier who made his way into the monastery saw the holy man through a window, quietly reading a book. The calm of the saint is pitted against the anarchy of the soldiers – they attempt to penetrate the monastery walls, but cannot. It is most certainly not about the holy man any more, but about the protection of holy space. Finally, the nobleman Baudulf took Columbanus from the monastery and to a prison in Besançon: he escaped and released all of Theuderic's prisoners.<sup>61</sup> This could be seen as a topos of the hagiography, as Merovingian saints often freed droves of prisoners,<sup>62</sup> but there is something more going on here. Jonas is making the statement that the holy man could release prisoners held within a royal space under the jurisdiction of royal authority.

Only at this point does Jonas specifically connect the holy man, and his text, with Lothar's regime: Columbanus predicted that within three years, Lothar II would rule.<sup>63</sup> The prediction is the rupture within the text – Theuderic attempted once more to contain the holy man, but failed at every turn; simultaneously, Jonas introduces Lothar, who shows the positive relationship that may emerge between holy and royal authority. Testing the boundaries of authority, then, has allowed Jonas to set up the distinction between Brunhild and the holy man, and her actions may only result in her demise.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.309.

<sup>60</sup> VC I.33.

<sup>61</sup> VC I.34-5.

<sup>62</sup> De Jong, 'Monastic prisoners or opting out?', p.311.

<sup>63</sup> VC I.39.

### The end of Brunhild's line and the promotion of Lothar

The account of Brunhild, and her family's, demise, rounds off the epic battle between good and evil in this text. Columbanus is represented as the link between the three men involved, Theudebert, Theuderic and Lothar, and those who reject his advice fail; those who heed it triumph.

Columbanus told Theudebert, lest he should lose the civil war and also lose his place in heaven, that he should become a cleric, *in ecclesia positus*.<sup>64</sup> Jonas presents this suggestion as subject to ridicule from the court, saying that never had a Merovingian who was raised to a kingdom been heard of becoming a cleric of his own will.<sup>65</sup> This passage has been examined under the 'kings opt out' umbrella, but it is, for our purposes, the threat once more by Columbanus that, should he not yield to sacred power, it will destroy him. Yet it is not holy authority which ultimately destroys Theudebert, but his own grandmother, according to Jonas. When Theudebert was captured, he was sent to her; we should imagine here that Brunhild was aware of Columbanus's proposition, and threat – *furens*, that topos we now so associate with Brunhild, the queen made Theudebert a cleric; then days later ordered his murder.<sup>66</sup> To connect Columbanus's threat with Brunhild's actions makes sense. Columbanus offered the king one way out, to remove himself from the court, and yield himself to the religious life. Brunhild beats Columbanus to the punch: she, not he, makes her grandson a cleric; but she also has him murdered. This may have been a warning to the holy man not to underestimate her: she had taken his idea, and manipulated it to the extent that she had allowed the murder of her own grandson.

Brunhild then made her great-grandson Sigibert king. According to Jonas, it is specifically because of Columbanus's prophecy that Lothar gathered an army against the queen.<sup>67</sup> Both her grandsons were now gone, and only Brunhild herself stood in Lothar's way. As Jonas presents it, however, Columbanus is at the crux of the political situation: it is only because of his advice that Lothar succeeds. Brunhild's gruesome torture and death, saved for the end of this study, follows, along with that of the young Sigibert and his three brothers. Jonas can now state that the 'whole family of Theuderic' had been destroyed and 'Columbanus's prophecy had been literally fulfilled'.<sup>68</sup> Jonas paints the individuals within this tale with fairly crude strokes, and he can only portray Brunhild and her family in this way because of the context in which he writes – were he to have written fifty years before,

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<sup>64</sup> VC I.57.

<sup>65</sup> VC I.57.

<sup>66</sup> VC I.57.

<sup>67</sup> VC I.58.

<sup>68</sup> VC I.58.

his artwork would have been very different. Lothar is presented as the hero since it is he who ruled as Jonas was writing, and represents the support that Columbanian monasticism still required. I have kept the Lothar material together here, in order to illustrate the parallels which Jonas sets up within the text.

Lothar is used in the *Vita Columbani* as the foil to Theuderic: his is the way in which a king should deal with a holy man. Columbanus went to Lothar's court, certainly by the end of the first decade of the seventh century. The king is said to already be aware of the injustices done to the holy man. In reading the welcome given to Columbanus by Lothar, one is immediately reminded of the holy man's entrance to the Frankish kingdom. Lothar, as Childebert had done, begged Columbanus to remain within his borders and the holy man refuses.<sup>69</sup> A further intra-textual echo follows, in which Columbanus began to pass judgement on the practices of Lothar's court. From here, there is an entirely different tone to the Theuderic incident: Lothar promised to change his ways, and Jonas confirms that he did, according to Columbanus's command.<sup>70</sup> The king is said to 'rejoice in the blessing'<sup>71</sup> he received. The holy man is described as a 'heavenly gift' and the word *munus* is then used another four times to describe the Lothar-Columbanus relationship.<sup>72</sup> This section of the text is contrasted with the Theuderic-Columbanus confrontation. As a result, Jonas perfectly highlights that one line has been doomed, and Lothar's line has the holy man's blessing.

When civil war erupted between Theuderic and Theudebert, both asked Lothar for aid, and he duly asked the holy man's assistance. In one of his multiple prophecies regarding Lothar, Columbanus advised that he should not ally himself with either man, since he would receive both kingdoms within three years. Lothar, 'full of faith' awaited that time and triumphed.<sup>73</sup> The king who disrespected the holy man is now dead, but the one who heeded sacred authority was victorious. The language is entirely different when Lothar is discussed – he is a king who actively seeks out the advice of the holy man for political matters, he rejoices in that advice, and it is due to his 'faith' that he triumphs. Although he had asked Columbanus to remain in Neustria, when the holy man refused, Lothar understood that such a man could not be constrained by royal authority.

When Lothar does in fact gain all three kingdoms, just as the holy man had prophesied, he asked Columbanus once more to return to him, from his new foundation at

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<sup>69</sup> VC I.47.

<sup>70</sup> VC I.48.

<sup>71</sup> VC I.48.

<sup>72</sup> VC I.48.

<sup>73</sup> VC I.48.



Bobbio. This, according to Diem, is another transitional moment within the text: in a work full of lessons, this final one is no longer about how to respect the holy man, but how to treat a monastery appropriately.<sup>74</sup> This moment coincides with Columbanus's death and has a sense of handing-over: this is about how a king should treat the community now. Columbanus asked the king to show royal protection over Luxeuil, and we are told of the 'compact' made between the two. The language used in this section is replicated in immunity charters and episcopal exemptions, and it has been suggested that this section of the text draws on a charter given to Luxeuil, that no longer survives.<sup>75</sup> That cannot be proved, but it is clear that other charters display Lothar's line's support for Columbanian communities.

Brunhild's demise is a certainty and it is this relationship, between Lothar and Columbanus, which is presented as the model: the juxtapositioning of Lothar's promise to protect the monasteries with Columbanus's death gives a sense of royal responsibility. This is the way in which royal encounters should proceed, and this part of the text speaks out to Lothar's successors.

### **Conclusion: Safe from rebuke and the creation of the 'Jezebel'**

Jonas was distanced by a generation from the woman he was vilifying – there was no-one left from her line who could argue with his representation. The image that he creates of Brunhild as the 'Jezebel' would resound both in contemporary textual echoes and almost all future historiography concerning the queen. Using the framework of hagiography, Jonas is able to construct the attack against Brunhild in two main ways: omitting all positive religious influence she exercised, and then creating a specifically female and royal sense of evil. That evil comes from testing the boundaries of holy and secular authority. Brunhild is the scapegoat of the *Vita Columbani*, for its protagonist is the saviour in a tense Merovingian political landscape.

In highlighting the confrontation between ruler and holy man, Jonas is exploring a real historical tension from a very different historical and textual vantage point. He is writing about a confrontation between Brunhild and Columbanus, when in his political reality, he is really writing about the confrontation between Brunhild and Lothar, the king under which he is working. The analogy of the 'Jezebel' allows Brunhild to become a

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<sup>74</sup> VC I.30.

<sup>75</sup> Diem, 'Monks, Kings and the Transformation of Sanctity', p.540.

cipher through which Jonas can legitimate his own king, and promote his own future in his historical present.

Jonas retains the models and topoi of his genre, while imbuing them with a political nuancing that is unprecedented in Merovingian hagiography. Both of its time and timeless, Jonas is able to make Brunhild black because Columbanus is white, and the holy man succeeds whereas the queen meets a more fitting end. The main distinction between this, and the *Vita Desiderii*, is that Columbanus survives. The text we will now explore takes the hagiographical genre and does something entirely different – it makes Brunhild the star of the show and lets its reader know much more about the ‘great friend to the wicked’.

## Chapter 5

### The Visigothic king, Visigothic princess, and the Frankish bishop

#### ‘Her damnable gifts led me to death’.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

If Jonas of Bobbio takes the hagiographic mould and nuances it with political detailing in the *Vita Columbani*, King Sisebut turns it inside out in his *Vita Desiderii*. It is most unusual for a Visigothic king to write a hagiography, even more so one of a Frankish bishop and his confrontation with a Visigothic princess. But the king had little interest in the legitimisation of his eponymous protagonist; instead, Sisebut selects the genre as a way *into* Brunhild – she is the star of this text.

Desiderius was of noble origin, a teacher at the episcopal school at Vienne before his election to one of the wealthiest, and most influential, sees in Gaul.<sup>2</sup> He was brought to answer charges at Chalon-sur-Saône, the Burgundian residence of Brunhild and her grandson Theuderic, in 603 (the same council to which Columbanus was invited to account for his dating of Easter).<sup>3</sup> Exiled for four years on a secluded island, Desiderius was ordered to return by the king and queen. Reinstated to his see, the bishop invoked the wrath of Brunhild once more, was removed by royal guards, and led to a field on the outskirts of Lyon, where he was beaten to death in 607 – the site of his murder still bears his name.<sup>4</sup> Three extant *vitae* feature Desiderius of Vienne, amongst several other works. The anonymous *Passio Desiderii*, which originated from Vienne, was written shortly after the bishop’s murder, and Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii* followed around 621.<sup>5</sup> Fredegar’s *Chronicle*

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<sup>1</sup> VD 9.

<sup>2</sup> VD 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Odette Pontal, *Histoire des conciles mérovingiens* (Paris, 1989) p.177. The connection between Desiderius and Columbanus is a pressing theme in current research. Jonas’ *Vita Columbani* includes the death of Desiderius (VC I.27), but he does not mention that both men were called to the same council to answer charges. Columbanus declined to attend. It is possible that Brunhild called both men to answer her at one time, desiring to teach them both a lesson. Their relationship deserves further critical attention : see Yaniv Fox, ‘The bishop and the monk’, pp. 176-194 and Claire Stancliffe, ‘Columbanus and the Gallic Bishops’, *Auctoritas: Mélanges offerts au professeur Olivier Guillot*, ed. G. Constable and M. Rouche (Paris, 2006) pp. 205-215.

<sup>4</sup> Didier-Sur-Chalaronne.

<sup>5</sup> See José Carlos Martín, ‘Une nouvelle édition critique de la “Vita Desiderii” de Sisebut, accompagnée de quelques réflexions concernant la date des “Sententiae” et du “De uiris illustribus” d’Isidore de Séville’, *Hagiographica* 7 (2000) pp. 127-80; Ian Wood, ‘Forgery in Merovingian hagiography’, *Fälschungen im Mittelalter, MGH Schriften* 33 vol.5 (Hanover, 1998) pp. 369-384 : Wood handles Bruno Krusch’s suggestion that the anonymous *Passio* was not an authentic seventh century text and I follow his conclusion to the *Passio Desiderii*, that ‘it seems best to accept the claims...at face value’, p.374.

features the bishop, as did other *vitae*, including those of Arigius of Gap, Rusticula of Arles and, of course, Columbanus.<sup>6</sup>

Collins compared him to Alfred the Great,<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Hadrill called him ‘the most sophisticated of any barbarian king’,<sup>8</sup> but historians are still not quite sure what to make of king Sisebut.<sup>9</sup> Reigning from 612 to 621, Sisebut was the only Visigothic ruler to have achieved a reputation as a Latin author, and his extant letters illustrate his devotion to education and piety, his language full of quotations from Jerome to Gregory the Great.<sup>10</sup> Sisebut wrote to the Lombard king Adaloald, but more his mother Theodelinda, acting as his regent, to complain about what he perceived as persistent ‘Arianism’ among the Lombards. The Visigothic king also encouraged his illegitimate son’s desire to become a monk, and drove religious reform.<sup>11</sup> Hillgarth has noted that, for Spain, we have series of laws and church councils, but very few lives of Saints; while for France, we have a great many lives of Saints, but very few laws.<sup>12</sup> So why did Sisebut choose to contribute a hagiography? The king’s piety has, for some scholars, been key to his decision: for Hen, it had a ‘central role’<sup>13</sup> and Martyn asserted that religion was the only motive.<sup>14</sup> This conclusion entirely masks any political agenda: Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii* is a unique text and I will propose that, potentially more than any of the other texts examined here, this hagiography is ‘plugged in’ to its political reality.<sup>15</sup> Bar three short chapters introducing the holy man, and a few miracles, this work is devoted to the characterisation of Brunhild and we must attempt to understand what prompted a Visigothic king to deliver political diatribe against a Visigothic princess, within a religious framework.

Sisebut would have had access to a wide range of hagiographical literature, and there is evidence that Severus’ *Life of St Martin* was key in a ‘renaissance’ of texts,

<sup>6</sup> ‘Vita Sancti Arigii episcopi Vapincensis’, *Analecta Bollandiana* II (1892) pp. 348-401 – prior to his execution, Desiderius sought support from his friend Arigius, thus this text is inherently hostile to Brunhild. See also ‘Vita Rusticulae sive Marciae abbatissae Arelatensis’, *MGH SSRM IV*, pp. 337-351 and the VC.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000* (London, 1983) p.45.

<sup>8</sup> John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, *The Barbarian West: 400-1000* (Oxford, 1996) p.101.

<sup>9</sup> For the most recent themes of research, see Yitzhak Hen, ‘A Visigothic king in search of an identity – Sisebutus Gothorum gloriosissimus princeps’, *Ego Trouble: Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. R. Corradini et al (Vienna, 2010) pp. 89-100.

<sup>10</sup> See Yitzhak Hen, *Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West* (Hampshire, 2007) p.136 – there are five letters written by the king, and three written to him, preserved within one late eighth century manuscript copied in Spain.

<sup>11</sup> *Chron.* IV.33 on Sisebut’s anxiety over blood spilt in his reign.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hillgarth, ‘Popular Religion in Visigothic Spain’, *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches*, ed. E. James (Oxford, 1980) p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Hen, *Roman Barbarians*, p.137.

<sup>14</sup> John Martyn, trans., *King Sisebut and the Culture of Visigothic Spain* (Lampeter, 2008) p.4.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the relationship between hagiographers and their historical realities, see Geary, ‘Saints, Scholars and Society’, pp. 226-257; Felice Lifshitz, ‘Beyond Positivism and Genre: “Hagiographical” Texts and Historical Narrative’, *Viator* 25 (1994) pp. 95-113; Martin Heinzelmann, ‘Neue Aspekte der biographischen und hagiographischen Literatur in der lateinischen Welt’, *Francia* I (1973) pp. 27-44.

through the influence of Isidore of Seville, one of Spain's most prominent authors.<sup>16</sup> Scholars who read the *Vita Desiderii* as an outpouring of piety tend to look for its reception in the religious sphere: Martyn has studied its influence on the *Life of Saint Masona*<sup>17</sup> and the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, and Fear has suggested that St Braulio of Saragossa's *Life of St Aemilian*, written around 25 years after Sisebut's text, displays similar images.<sup>18</sup> In Spain, then, historians have sought to trace the *Vita Desiderii* as a religious work, yet the reception in Gaul is not particularly clear.<sup>19</sup> The sources analysed in this study do not seem to borrow from Sisebut's text: Fredegar's *Chronicle* makes the bishop Arigius of Lyons responsible for Desiderius' death, rather than those individuals Sisebut presents, the *Vita Columbani* swiftly mentions the bishop and the *LHF* does not mention Desiderius. These brief notes on the reception of this *Vita Desiderii* may point to the fact that this was less a text intended for the Franks, than a Visigothic text intended for a specifically Visigothic audience.

Reception, of course, is entirely distinct from audience, though they may overlap. In what context was Sisebut writing and for whom? The relationship between Sisebut and Isidore of Seville may be drawn out: Isidore tells us much of what we know about the king;<sup>20</sup> he dedicated the first draft of his *Etymologiae* to him; Sisebut wrote a poem to match *The Divisions of Nature* and it has been suggested that the king commissioned the *History of the Goths*.<sup>21</sup> There is little to substantiate this, but it is enough to say that Sisebut was deeply connected to the transmission of Visigothic history and culture: the court at Toledo became a centre of cultural activity under the king.<sup>22</sup> The 'best' manuscripts of the *Vita* come from Oviedo, the city which would officially become the capital of the Spanish Asturias, in the early ninth century - was this text intended to be preserved as an official document within the royal chancery?<sup>23</sup> Written by a king, the work is invested with certain authority: by virtue of his position, the work was most likely to be preserved. Sisebut, I propose, was looking to a both an immediate, and a future, Visigothic audience, attempting to filter memories of Brunhild for a contemporary audience and create an image that future

<sup>16</sup> Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', p.127.

<sup>17</sup> Martyn, *King Sisebut*, pp. 121-199.

<sup>18</sup> A.T. Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers* (Liverpool, 1997) pp. 8-14.

<sup>19</sup> Martyn, *King Sisebut*, p.18 – he states that there certainly was an audience in Gaul, but cannot fully substantiate any textual echoes.

<sup>20</sup> For the Latin texts of Isidore, see *CCSL*; for translation, *Isidore of Seville's History of the Goths, Vandals and Suevi*, eds. G. Donini and G.B. Ford Jnr. (Leiden, 1966) chapter 60 on the king's attributes.

<sup>21</sup> Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> For the historiographical tradition of Visigothic Spain around the reign of Sisebut, see Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, pp. 70-75.

<sup>23</sup> Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', p.136.

audiences would receive, and take as authoritative. So how does a Visigothic king end up writing about a Frankish bishop to do this?

Historians who seek to read the *Vita Desiderii* only through a religious lens spend little time questioning why Sisebut makes this choice. Cults in Spain did venerate both Spanish and non-Spanish martyrs, but the king had saints on his doorstep, should he have wished to write about them: St Leocadia of Toledo would have been a perfect choice, since Sisebut reconstructed the basilica there in her honour.<sup>24</sup> Yet he selected Desiderius, who had died in 607, a Frankish saint with no cult in Spain. From where did the king draw his information? Sisebut informs his reader that he is working from ‘reliable testimony’,<sup>25</sup> that usual trope of hagiography. Yet the details the king gives on Desiderius’ origins are swift and sketchy – either Sisebut did not have the information, or, as is more likely, it was not important. Desiderius was a well-known figure, as a result of his prolific letter writing to important correspondents –there would have been ‘strands of oral tradition, following Desiderius’ *fama*, all the way from Burgundy to Toledo.<sup>26</sup> Sisebut may also have had access to the anonymous *Passio Desiderii*, created in Vienne upon the bishop’s murder. In his desire to address the problem of Brunhild, I suggest that the king found at his fingertips a freshly martyred saint, about whom he had enough information to use the structures of hagiography, to do something quite unexpected.

The *Vita Desiderii*, then, is not about the life of a saint, but about the concerns of Visigothic Spain and an extraordinary Visigothic princess, who may have gone in body, but whose political ghost was not so easy to get rid of. Sisebut attempts to present the authoritative vision of Brunhild and the hagiographical genre, and his choice of saint, allowed him characters, structures and prescriptive images that could be manipulated to political effect. This chapter will, firstly, consider the Brunhild ‘noise’ that Sisebut seems to be responding to in this text: he appears to be working around active tensions and dialogues around the queen and attempting to manipulate them. The context of Visigothic politics is crucial, a theme not fully developed in previous studies, but it seems clear that Sisebut is responding to Brunhild’s increasingly fractious relationship with her Spanish counterparts before her death. Secondly, I will consider various aspects of Brunhild’s characterisation within the text. Having established that she becomes the focus of this work, Brunhild’s confrontation with Desiderius is represented very differently to that with Columbanus. I will consider two main aspects of the king’s depiction: the accusations

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<sup>24</sup> Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, p.xxvii.

<sup>25</sup> VD 1.

<sup>26</sup> Fontaine, ‘King Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography’, p.111.

against the bishop, more specifically the creation of a female character to parallel Brunhild, and the development of what almost becomes a treatise on rulership.

### The Visigothic connection

Sisebut began his reign in 612; Brunhild was murdered a year later. It has been pointed out that, by the time Sisebut wrote, Brunhild had died, as if the distance between them was vast.<sup>27</sup> We cannot determine when the king began his work, but it is fair to say that the queen's death was certainly more pressing to Sisebut than it was to Jonas. Those at the Visigothic court, I put forward, would have been aware of this queen's activities and the text reads as if Sisebut is attempting to shut a ghost firmly within a coffin, but it is refusing to seal shut. Not only is Sisebut himself working with the textual memory of Brunhild, but he is dealing with the social memory of her also – unlike Jonas, he is dealing with someone who may still be a real historical and political problem. I refrain from using the buzz-phrase 'collective memory',<sup>28</sup> for it seems particularly clear in Brunhild's case that not everyone would possess the same memories of the queen. Tapping into that historiography, however, can help us understand just how important the 'buzz' around Brunhild may have been. Paul Dutton examined the dramatic increase in dream texts after the death of the emperor Charlemagne, in 814.<sup>29</sup> He studied them as a response: while the emperor lived, it was not safe to criticise him; yet after his death, authors could put into text all of the things people were whispering, but could not come out and say. It is no coincidence that I have compared Brunhild's textual afterlife to that of Charlemagne, for we are considering similar issues here: individuals are responding to a queen's death, evaluating the way in which she is remembered, filtering and editing those memories. So we have a Visigothic king, reflecting on the activities of an infamous Visigothic princess, and that connection is the reason why Sisebut finds it so pressing to neutralise her.

This study has, thus far, suggested that the assumption that Brunhild loses her Visigothic identity upon leaving her homeland is too restrictive a reading of her. At the beginning of her career, Brunhild retained Visigothic personnel who she would then call upon when needed, and the next section of this thesis will examine what I will call the 'Visigothic hand', Brunhild's continuing involvement with Visigothic succession politics.

<sup>27</sup> Hen, 'A Visigothic king', p.91 – he downplays the timescales.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge, 1998) and Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, 1994) p.89.

Some twenty years before Sisebut became king, Brunhild was sending her daughter to marry a Visigothic prince and, alongside her Visigothic mother Goiswinth, may have been behind Hermenegild's revolt against his father. This may have been one of the 'whispers' in Sisebut's ear. In 586, Brunhild also sought to retrieve a potential Visigothic heir from captivity, as part of the 'Athanagild episode'. Marriage alliances and succession machinations were weapons in Brunhild's armoury, and her involvement in the Visigothic realm throughout her career cannot have gone unnoticed: these events were within living memory of Sisebut and his court.

Closer to Sisebut's reign, there is evidence that links between the Visigothic and Frankish realms were becoming fragile, even destructive. As Brunhild's power began to fluctuate, moving from one grandson to another, and Lothar's power began to grow, the queen appears to have focused more on consolidating power in Gaul, than in looking out to Spain. In 606, Brunhild arranged the marriage of her grandson, Theuderic, to Ermenberga, the daughter of the Visigothic king Witteric. Upon the princess' arrival, Brunhild appears to have had an attack of jealousy, and fearing the loss of her personal influence, sent the princess back home, disgraced and without her dowry.<sup>30</sup> As a Visigothic princess herself, Brunhild would have known exactly what dishonour she was sending this young girl back to, so a fit of jealousy is presumably not the full story. Ermenberga's father, Witteric, was enraged by the slight and entered into an alliance with Lothar, Brunhild's other grandson Theudebert, and the Lombard king Agilulf, against Theuderic. Nothing came of this alliance,<sup>31</sup> but it is an example of tension building against Brunhild and Theuderic, a tension that feeds into the texts surrounding it. It may be no coincidence that, after many a high profile Visigothic-Frankish marriage, this incident with Ermenberga meant that no marriage alliance between the two kingdoms ever occurred again.

The fractious diplomatic relations between Visigothic and Frankish kingdoms, in the late years of Brunhild's career, are related only by a series of three letters from a Count Bulgar, preserved in the *Epistolarium Wisigothicum*.<sup>32</sup> The count worked under King Gundemar, the predecessor of Sisebut, and Bulgar relates that Gundemar had 'inherited the hostility' of Witteric towards Brunhild and Theuderic. The count states that Brunhild and Theuderic attempted to incite the ruler of the Avars to attack Theudebert. Gundemar and Theudebert, Theuderic's brother, are then said to have entered into alliance negotiations,

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<sup>30</sup> *Chron.* IV.27.

<sup>31</sup> *Chron.* IV.30.

<sup>32</sup> 'Epistulae Bulgarinis Comitibus', *Miscellanea Wisigothica* ed. Juan Gil (Seville, 1972) pp. 30-44, letters 11-13.



with the Visigothic king paying the Franks.<sup>33</sup> Collins has looked at this as a unique moment, the only one in the entire history of the Spanish kingdom in which a Visigothic monarch was so closely involved in Frankish disputes.<sup>34</sup> This, again, illustrates how inextricable Brunhild's Visigothic identity is within her career and how pervasive she was within Visigothic politics.

The third letter by Bulgar, is the most illuminating – Visigothic ambassadors had been seized by Frankish troops in 611, thus in retaliation the Visigoths occupied two towns which belonged to Brunhild, Corneillan and Juvignac.<sup>35</sup> These were not any two towns: as I examined in chapter 1, when Brunhild and her sister Galswinth were sent to the Frankish court to marry, Galswinth was given a unique dowry, including various lands. After Galswinth was murdered, Brunhild worked throughout her career to reclaim those lands, some of which were handed to her by the death of King Guntram, as part of the Treaty of Andelot in 587. The southern towns in Septimania were part of that dowry, but had fallen into Visigothic hands, under King Recared. Septimania was a highly strategic area – during Brunhild's career, King Guntram of Burgundy had attempted to invade twice. When he died, however, and Brunhild acquired some of her sister's lands, King Recared returned Corneillan and Juvignac to her as well, as a gesture of goodwill.<sup>36</sup> The diplomatic incident of 611, then, was a political statement – Brunhild had stopped Visigothic men entering her territory, thus they would take that land away from her. These letters have rarely been analysed when considering Brunhild's career, and yet they reveal her enduring influence in Visigothic politics until the end of her life. It eliminates previous interpretations, such as that of Krusch, of Brunhild's political weakness towards the end of her life: she appears to be at her most potent and a queen of dual identity, Visigothic and Frankish.

To return to Sisebut and his *Vita Desiderii*, the king was not creating a character from thin air – by the time he was writing, certainly at court, there was a pre-existing understanding of Brunhild and Theuderic as an evil combination: Fontaine calls them a 'chancery formula'.<sup>37</sup> That formula could then be replicated and manipulated. A hagiography, with all its imagery, drama and characterisation has much more power than the diplomatic language of a letter, and potentially much greater audience and reach. If the *vita* were to be read out, the images were much more likely to resonate within the popular imagination. Sisebut takes the formula of hagiography and gives it extraordinary re-

<sup>33</sup> *Miscellanea Wisigothica*, letter 11.

<sup>34</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, p.161.

<sup>35</sup> *Miscellanea Wisigothica*, letter 13.

<sup>36</sup> *DLH* IX.1.

<sup>37</sup> Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', p.122; For a different view to Fontaine, see Hen, 'A Visigothic king'.

working, in order to create a new vision of Visigothic-Frankish relations. Unlike Jonas of Bobbio, who invoked the name of Lothar II in order to legitimise the new Merovingian line, Sisebut refrains from doing this. This may seem strange – the anonymous *Passio Desiderii* informs its reader that Lothar was involved in developing the cult of Desiderius after Brunhild's death.<sup>38</sup> As Lothar involved himself with Columbanus, and his monasticism, particularly after Brunhild's death, he did the same with Desiderius: he actively supported those who the queen had slighted. One of the most fascinating ways we can see this in action comes from the seventh century *Vita Rusticulae*. Soon after 613, the year of Brunhild's death, the abbess of Arles, Rusticula, was removed from her monastery. Accused of having hidden one of the great grandsons of Brunhild, she was taken under guard to Paris. As she travelled through Vienne, she asked whether she could pray at the tomb of Desiderius. Lothar saw that she had publicly shown her devotion to an enemy of Brunhild, freed her and reinstated her to the abbey.<sup>39</sup> This one moment illustrates the way in which Lothar's regime worked: rehabilitating the victims of the old regime, and denouncing Brunhild simultaneously.

Yet Sisebut does not mention Lothar, and there may be two reasons for this: first, Brunhild was not long gone, thus it may be that Sisebut did not yet know how the now fractious relationship with Frankish Gaul would continue. Second, it was not his desire to validate Merovingian Gaul in any way – though his protagonist was a Frankish bishop, his real emphasis was on Visigothic Spain. Only four names in this text are supplied: Desiderius, Brunhild, Theuderic and Justa. Those are the protagonists, and the other figures in the text are shadows. Sisebut creates a text which focuses any Visigothic hostility toward the Franks on the figure of Brunhild. All previous hostilities can be pinned to her, thus the representation would not be unfavourable towards the new Frankish king, but not necessarily validate him either. Fontaine put it excellently when he stated that the black picture of Brunhild became the 'white paper' for the Toledo government.<sup>40</sup>

Understanding the perspective from which Sisebut creates his vision of Brunhild is pivotal; more than any other author in this study, I suggest, he is dealing with the tension between Brunhild as a real historical problem and as a textual creation. Where Jonas silences and deceives, Sisebut creates, and the cipher he conjures up is the most striking of all our images of Brunhild.

<sup>38</sup> 'Passio sancti Desiderii episcopi Viennensis', *Analecta Bollandiana* 9 (1892) pp. 250-262, I.12.

<sup>39</sup> 'Vita Rusticulae sive Marciae abbatissae Arelatensis', *MGH SSRM IV*, ed. B. Krusch (Hanover, 1902) p.347.

<sup>40</sup> Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', p.123.

## The shadowy accuser

The first accusations against Desiderius do not come from Brunhild and her grandson Theuderic, but from an unnamed character, with all the typical imagery of the devil:

The enemy of the faithful and friend of the faithless, the devisor and friend of death, groaned and, having armed himself with every kind of weapon, came himself to fight the soldier of Christ... spewing forth disgraceful slander which he made all the greater through his own malign nature, he defamed the athlete of God.<sup>41</sup>

The reader can see the highly rhetorical style this author is employing – *aversus conversis et conversus aversis*, enemy of the faithful and friend of the faithless, is an example of the very clever play on words that Sisebut employs to reinforce specific imagery to his reader. This character is not named, but invested with the characteristics of the devil. He ‘stung with a serpent’s poison’ and made accusations about Desiderius to various colleagues.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Desiderius is ‘armed with the weapons of the spirit’,<sup>43</sup> and is the ‘servant of the Saviour’.<sup>44</sup> The apocalyptic imagery collides with that of the martyr, creating a striking distinction that would be apparent to any audience. Martyn has suggested the accuser might be bishop Aridius of Lyons, who had succeeded Syagrius, a man with his own problems with Desiderius.<sup>45</sup> Fredegar did explicitly name the powerful bishop and close friend of the queen – he mentions him twice as involved in the bishop’s assassination.<sup>46</sup> When we consider the text as a whole, however, Protadius emerges as a more likely figure. He had received honours in the same year Desiderius was exiled, and became *major Domus* of the palace two years later, at the queen’s instigation.<sup>47</sup> Fredegar’s account of the events does structurally connect Desiderius’ banishment with Protadius’ promotion.<sup>48</sup> That Protadius was Brunhild’s supposed lover also adds to the mix,<sup>49</sup> since the rest of the text focuses on sexual allegations, the sexual imagery the court and the noblewoman Justa.

Having set up Desiderius as the victim of vicious gossip, Sisebut is able to focus on the corruption of the royal court, embodied as follows:

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<sup>41</sup> VD 4 – translations here are adapted from Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers* and, on occasion, to Martyn’s *King Sisebut*, but this is less reliable.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Martyn, *King Sisebut*, p.19.

<sup>46</sup> *Chron.* IV.24 and IV.32.

<sup>47</sup> *Chron.* IV.24.

<sup>48</sup> *Chron.* IV.27; for Fredegar’s awareness of the *Vita Desiderii*, see Ian Wood, ‘Forgery in Merovingian hagiography’.

<sup>49</sup> *Chron.* IV.18.

Theuderic ruled, a man with all types of stupidity, and as a woman who enthused over the very worst vices, Brunhild was a great friend of the wicked.<sup>50</sup>

Theuderic is almost dismissed, as a man of no political acumen; Brunhild is immediately painted in the blackest of tones. That ‘friend of the wicked’ echoes the earlier characterisation of the Desiderius’ accuser as the ‘friend of the faithless’, perhaps a clever way of Sisebut hinting at the connection between the two. Now, in his introduction of a new character to this story, Sisebut signals that he is doing something quite unexpected with this hagiography.

After the gossip the ‘man of pernicious mind’ spreads around the court, he joins with Brunhild. Using his narrative skill, Sisebut presents their actions thus:

Together, they met a lady who was of noble birth, but deformed in mind. She was called Justa, disgraced by her actions. She had an honourable name, but her deeds were dishonourable. She was lacking in virtues and was possessed by a huge number of vices. When prepared, she made a complaint to the court that she had been ravished by the most blessed Desiderius. All were amazed that the servant of God should have been implicated in such things, but they were sure that the charges against him would be exposed as false. Yet those presiding, due to schemes they had prepared beforehand, gave in rash daring a most unjust sentence against the innocent man. At once, men were sent to punish him, they stripped him of his rank and exiled him to a monastery on an island.<sup>51</sup>

The narrative texts concerning Desiderius agree that he was brought before a church council, in order to answer certain charges. Fredegar places this incident at the Council of Châlons-sur-Marne, held in 603.<sup>52</sup> Sisebut’s text, however, is the only one to say what that charge was – a rape allegation. Allegations of sexual misbehaviour permeate the relationship between holy men and royalty, though it is traditionally the court being criticised for its lax morality. For this text to be the only one to mention a sexual charge is significant: the rape allegation is clearly a serious one.<sup>53</sup> It gives the text a heightened drama, but also beckons the reader to see the allegation as preposterous, for the ‘soldier of Christ’ can surely not be guilty of this sexualised activity. What is baffling is that historians have generally accepted this allegation and not asked why it appears no other text. The real question, however, is: who was Justa?

From Bruno Krusch, with his definitive edition of the Latin text, to the most recent translation by John Martyn, this strange individual called Justa has never been critiqued. She is mentioned in no other text, nor in any other documentary material, yet the reader is

<sup>50</sup> VD 4.

<sup>51</sup> VD 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Chron.* IV.27.

<sup>53</sup> For another rape accusation against a bishop, see John Martyn, *A Translation of Abbot Leontios’ Life of Saint Gregory, Bishop of Agrigento* (Lampeter, 2004).

asked to accept that Brunhild knew this noblewoman and manipulated her into making this evil allegation. This scene, I will suggest, tells us much about both Sisebut's authorial control and his political manipulation: the creation of Justa is a literary weapon within the king's armoury. Justa is not a Germanic name, which should automatically put us on alert. A prosopography of the Visigothic kings of Toledo, however, reveals various men called Justus in the Visigothic kingdom, but also reveals something of that enigmatic name Justa.<sup>54</sup> Sisebut is almost using the name as an abstract noun, of righteousness, or in this case, unrighteousness. *Iusta*, the feminine form of *iustus*, means 'just', 'lawful'. She, in this text, I suggest, is the doubling of Brunhild: she reproduces the queen. Sisebut is, later, able to put a speech into the mouth of this fictitious individual, in a way he cannot put a speech into the queen's mouth. It is all about authorial control, and Sisebut uses his poetic skill, the structure and metre of certain phrases, to reinforce his message and appeal to his reader's memory.

This play on words is a large part of Sisebut's literary attack – *decus in nomine sed dedecus magis in opere* is an example. The polarity between good and bad is set up in the figure of this woman – *bonis* and *malis* are juxtaposed, as are *veritate* and *crimine*. It is significant that the woman makes an accusation 'when prepared', making apparent that Brunhild is the puppet-master. Sisebut shows Desiderius as embracing his exile, a trope to contrast with the evil acts of those at court.<sup>55</sup> While away, Desiderius performed various miracles and Brunhild and Theuderic have an attack of conscience:

The talk amongst the people brought to the attention of Theuderic and Brunhild, at the same time, that the servant of God, exalted through his magnificent miracles and the grace of the power of the Almighty, had been given a power to hear which, all the more, could not be contradicted. At once, anxious and struck with the greatest of dread, they carefully examined the facts of this important matter.<sup>56</sup>

The importance of the 'whispers' I have referred to becomes apparent here: it is the 'talk amongst the people' that causes Theuderic and Brunhild to pause.

Sisebut has created a female reproduction for Brunhild, to essentially double her evil, and has presented the corrupt court as terrified by the bishop's miracles. To scare them further, 'divine vengeance' is exacted upon the 'sorceror of the wicked plan', for

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<sup>54</sup> Luis Garcia Moreno, *Prosopografía del Reino Visigodo de Toledo* (Salamanca, 1974) p.31: We are told of the count Adulfus, who can be identified as part of the Selua family in the Narbonne. His mother Justa is features in the *Vita Fructuosi* chapter 15, but this text concerns a saint who died in 665, so comes some forty years after the *Vita Desiderii*.

<sup>55</sup> The anonymous *Life of Arigius of Vapin*, who died in 604, features Desiderius: 'Vita Sancti Arigii episcopi Vapincensis', *Analecta Bollandiana* II (1892) pp. 348-401. In chapter 11, Desiderius is presented as on the verge of suicide after the accusations, and relied on the consolation of Arigius.

<sup>56</sup> VD 8.

whom we may possibly read Protadius. The vengeance is exacted by the mob, and the power of the masses is used by Sisebut as a warning, even an omen, of what happens when the tide turns against an individual.

The accuser's crimes, his vices of greed and slander, are said to have 'roused the common people to destroy the vile monster'.<sup>57</sup> Particularly interesting is a reference to him as a 'sorcerer'. This, I believe, was an attempt to hook into the Visigothic audience reading this text: the Visigothic law code concerns itself very much with magic, and multiple church councils confront the fact that magic is a greater concern than idolatry.<sup>58</sup> For a contemporary audience, the idea of someone employing magic would have been immediately understood, and was possibly a warning as to the sort of activity to be concerned with in Gaul. When the people take matters into their own hands, they do so in front of the king. The rioting Burgundian mob drag the accuser to his death: 'the wretch lost both his life and his damned soul, and at the time of his death, he entered the gates of Hell of his own free will'.<sup>59</sup>

Intentionally biblical and emphatic, this death is followed by that of Justa. The juxtapositioning reinforces the link between, potentially, Protadius and Justa, or more accurately, Protadius and Brunhild. This section is unique to any of the texts examining Desiderius and is the first time in which direct speech is used:

'I recognise the crime contrived against the servant of God, I recognise the cause of it, and I moreover recognise the punishment that I deserve. May the Almighty Avenger respond to the inventor Brunhild, may he bring down the penalties upon her in his vengeance, may his avenging right hand inflict punishing torments. Her persuasion dragged me to my doom, her damnable gifts led me to death, and her fatal promises led me beyond salvation'.

When she had finished speaking, the author of all sins slew her through torture and suffocation and carried her off to burn with him forever, in the burning flames of divine vengeance.<sup>60</sup>

Fontaine, who does not question that Justa was real or that Brunhild would have been affected by her death, does suggest that this speech should be read critically. He suggests that we should examine it in the manner of the confessions of the possessed during

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<sup>57</sup> VD 8.

<sup>58</sup> The Visigothic code does not contain laws against idolatry, though (like earlier Arian legislation) it is concerned with magic and divination. See 'Leges Wisigothorum', *MGH Leges Nationum Germanicarum* vol. 1, ed. K. Zeumer (Hanover, 1902) pp. 257-60 for VI.2-5; for other councils concerned with magic see IV Toledo 29; Merida 15; V Toledo 4.

<sup>59</sup> VD 8: Martyn translates the mob as being one of Burgundian troops, but it is important to state that troops aren't mentioned here. It is Fredegar (IV.27) who states that Protadius was lynched by troops at Quierzy-sur-Oise, while on campaign with Theuderic and Theudebert in 605.

<sup>60</sup> VD 9.

exorcism, in the ancient hagiographical tradition of the martyrs.<sup>61</sup> Stepping back from the speech, more critical attention should focus on the idea that Justa did not exist, and is created as a rhetorical double for Brunhild. The speech could well be a speech from Brunhild, predicting her own fate, and with all the intensity of direct speech, Sisebut is specifically drawing attention to this part of the text.

The very first sentence is so carefully constructed – *illa iniuste Iusta et iuste dicam iniusta* – that it draws the reader's attention. Its rhetorical polish points to the fact we are referring to a fictitious individual, whose purpose in this text is to allow Sisebut a certain artistic freedom. The blame, in Justa's speech, lies entirely with Brunhild: we may note that there is no mention of Theuderic. There is something very gendered, politicised and rhetorical going on in this text: this is a speech directly from the mouth of a woman who has made a rape allegation, a woman connected with the death, perhaps, of the queen's lover, and the blame is laid at the door of the queen herself. This could have been Brunhild's fate.

### **Rotten in the state of Denmark**

Brunhild and Theuderic are terrified upon hearing of the deaths of these two individuals, acknowledging that their deaths had arisen from divine punishment.<sup>62</sup> In case they may be penalised by similar punishment, 'feigning piety', they ordered that Desiderius be returned to his see. The bishop rejected their offer, prompting sincere repentance from the king and queen: when he returned to the court, 'the wretches fell to the ground before his feet, humbling themselves'.<sup>63</sup> Desiderius was recalled from exile in 607, though by then, Brunhild had already exacted her revenge on those who had taken the lead in killing Protadius – according to Fredegar, she had Uncelen mutilated and stripped of his wealth and honour, and Wulf executed.<sup>64</sup> On his return, Desiderius performed various miracles – refilling water containers with wine and feeding the hungry with fish brought by an eagle.<sup>65</sup> Something changes, however, at this point in the text. Having presented the confrontation between 'Justa' and Desiderius, and dispensed with those who made the allegations, Sisebut moves on to focus on the rulership of Brunhild and Theuderic. Something is rotten:

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<sup>61</sup> Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', p.112.

<sup>62</sup> VD 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> *Chron.* IV.28 and IV.29.

<sup>65</sup> VD 14.

When Theuderic and Brunhild alike were seen not to be doing good, but harm to their realm, destroying rather than ruling, full of vice and the sin of perjury, they sacrilegiously abandoned the promises of the oath, treacherously not living to it, nor leaving anything free from their sins and crimes, the martyr of God examined these sins, and the bishop resounded the trumpet blast in the manner of the prophet and devoted himself totally to driving out their sins, so that he might bring those to God whom the Devil had made strangers to him.<sup>66</sup>

This piece of text directly refers to Brunhild and Theuderic's rulership – *non prodesse sed obesse, magis perdere quam regere*, destroying rather than ruling. The sibilant rhyme attracts attention, and rhyming forces ideas into the memory. It reads like a handbook of what not to do – they are not doing good, but harming their realm. After that, we have terms like *infecti, referti, deserentes*, which have a force and a resonance, giving Brunhild and Theuderic these qualities one by one. Simultaneously, the trumpet blast signals the righteousness of the bishop. The action is punctuated by short phrases, full of rhyme, and Sisebut is appealing to his audience to remember his words here. It is no coincidence that this section features the text's only biblical reference, from James V.20. By placing these words in the mouth of Desiderius, the bishop is given heightened authority and his desire to save the king and queen from damnation is set against the frenzied sin of the court members.

The bishop's protestations are in vain, and Sisebut deploys a full range of imagery relating to the Devil: the 'cunning serpent' held Brunhild and Theuderic, they were held in 'chains'.<sup>67</sup> The positive attributes which a kingdom should have are contradicted here, and the raucousness of the court is contrasted with the measured calm of the bishop:

The enemy of mankind, seeing the undiminished constancy of the bishop's human kindness, spent all of his time in the hearts of Brunhild and Theuderic, never leaving them as if they were his own home. In commanding tones, he drove them further to the destruction that they deserved, for he promised to deliver them the first place in his punishments, if they could extract the soul of the soldier of Christ from his corporeal chains. Without delay, the king's sacrilegious mouth, equipped always for foul speech, snarled out his sentence with impiety as follows:

'It is our pleasure that Desiderius, hostile to our life and enemy to our actions, be punished with stones and afflicted with all manner of tortures'.<sup>68</sup>

This is the second, and final, moment of direct speech: Brunhild may not make the order, but she is included in the diatribe when Sisebut uses 'they' as opposed to 'he', referring to Theuderic. Desiderius now becomes the martyr and the word is repeated twice in the final

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<sup>66</sup> VD 15.

<sup>67</sup> VD 15.

<sup>68</sup> VD 16.



sentence of that section, to further emphasise the distinction between royal corruption and holy authority.

The account of the death of Desiderius is one of frenzied mob mentality. The group which drags the bishop from his church is contrasted with the ‘massive crowd’ that weeps at the sight of their ‘shepherd’ being taken from them.<sup>69</sup> The anonymous *Passio* gives more detail about the event, stating that three counts came to arrest the bishop: Effa, Gaisefred, and Beto.<sup>70</sup> The language is savage and animalistic, and as the holy man breathed out his spirit, one of the mob took a club and broke the bishop’s neck, and ‘his soul abandoned its fleshy guise and freed itself from corporeal chains, joining triumphant with his colleagues in the heavens’.<sup>71</sup> This final phrase is in hexameter, the classic composition the perfect contrast to the frenzied behaviour.

The anonymous *Passio*, again, invests its tale with much more historical immediacy, as it gives greater detail, and exact place names. This is not the place to analyse that text in detail, but certain parallels can be drawn with Sisebut’s text. The death of the bishop stands out as a particular point of discordance between the two. It is quite obvious that, in a hagiographical text, the death of the protagonist is the major focal point. Here, it is the manner of the death which creates discrepancy. The anonymous *Passio* suggests that the violence of Desiderius’ death is down to misfortune, and takes place at Chalaronne. It is said that Desiderius was meant to be beheaded, but due to the masses of people surrounding the bishop, Theuderic’s troops were forced to strike him with a single stone, then beheaded him with a sharp rock.<sup>72</sup> The specific form of this violent death, then, is almost non-intentional. Sisebut’s version, however, is clear that stoning is specifically Theuderic’s decree.<sup>73</sup>

This is a rhetorical strategy in itself: when Theuderic orders this violent death, he is invested with a greater sense of evil than if it had happened by accident, rather than design. Sisebut, by this point, is directly engaging with the register of rulership as much as he is working within a hagiography. He has now dealt with the death of his protagonist, the natural end for a hagiography, bar perhaps posthumous miracles. The Visigothic king, however, subverts the traditional martyr narrative entirely: in using the language of rulership, he twists it to deal with the death of a political figure. Theuderic is easily dispensed with – we are told that ‘abandoning God, or having been abandoned by God’, he

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<sup>69</sup> VD 17.

<sup>70</sup> *Passio Desiderii*, I.15.

<sup>71</sup> VD 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Passio Desiderii*, I.18.

<sup>73</sup> Gregory of Tours refers to stoning as a punishment in multiple places, see *DLH* III.36, IV.49, IX.35, X.10.

was seized by a bowel disease, and was cast into Hell for eternity.<sup>74</sup> Brunhild, however, deserves a much greater characterisation, her death a much more intensive treatment:

Brunhild, lost and doomed to die, lost her source of consolation and, with fear, was tortured by conscience, knowing that her guilt had placed her at the forefront in committing the crime, thus the vengeance which would follow would demand even more her punishment.<sup>75</sup>

From other sources, we know that, by this point, with no other grandchildren to put in Theuderic's place, Brunhild had attempted to put her great-grandson, Sigibert, an infant, on the throne. It is particularly poignant to imagine Brunhild here as a Lady Macbeth, desperate and tortured by her deeds. Sisebut, however, refuses to yield any sympathy toward the queen, and, as he has done before, criticises not only her morality, but her rulership also. His resulting depiction of her political demise, and violent end, will be handled in chapter 8 of this study, and we may say here that he continues to manipulate martyr imagery to the end: he places her within a religious framework and creates the image of the female heretic. It is an unprecedented and unreplicated death that summarises what Sisebut achieves in the *Vita Desiderii*: he tackles a real historical problem head on, and uses all of his rhetorical flair in the attempt to turn the queen from social actor to textual cipher.

## Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to do two things: to consider Sisebut's position while writing this text, his motivations, his textual surroundings; and, second, see how that manifests itself in the characterisation within the text. Brunhild presented a unique character in the Visigothic history, a character that sometimes threatens to jump out of the boxes that authors attempt to create. This text is a commentary on the nature of royal office, and the consequences that follow when that office is misused. Sisebut is dealing with a ghost, yet there are a myriad of whispers surrounding that ghost. Her importance as a social actor is reinforced by the sheer effort that goes into her creation as a textual cipher in the *Vita Desiderii*. Sisebut is responding to a queen who had real potency in Visigothic Spain right up until the end of her career, and I believe that there is so much 'noise' about the queen we simply cannot trace.

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<sup>74</sup> Fear has shown that Theuderic's death sounds similar to the death of Judas as described in Acts I.18 - given that the Visigothic kingdom had only converted from 'Arianism' in 579 the allusion would not have been lost on Sisebut's audience. Again, then, this is about feeding into a Visigothic audience, and their contemporary concerns: see *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>75</sup> VD 20.

Both Desiderius and Columbanus are invested by their authors with a holy authority that is pitted against the corruption of the court. Brunhild may have been attempting to teach them both a lesson by inviting them to answer charges at the same court in 603. Theuderic, we should remember, taunts Columbanus in the *Vita Columbani* that he would not award him the crown of martyrdom; Desiderius, Jonas states, does receive that award.<sup>76</sup> I agree with Ian Wood that this is not a ‘cruel joke’<sup>77</sup> on the part of Jonas, but is a strategy employed by the author to exploit the prestige of his own protagonist. He does not allow us to forget that Columbanus is the only one to survive the story. In the *Vita Columbani*, Jonas’ authorial skill manifests itself in deliberate deception and the setting up of boundary lines between court and monastery. For Sisebut, it is the combination of the creation of a character to reproduce Brunhild, and the critique of her rulership, that allows the author to go many stages further in his vilification. Both authors use the structures of hagiography to make a political statement, and both educated men turn the skill of creating positive memories of their saints into dealing with the negative ones of an infamous queen.

Both men participate in the transition of Brunhild from historical actor to textual cipher and both invest Brunhild’s name with a new kind of image – Sisebut inverts the martyr narrative to create the heretic and Jonas spawned the ‘Jezebel’, the image which would diffuse so widely. The expectation of a hagiography is that the holy individual is the star of the show and in accepting the images and the text itself, the reader participates in the message of the text. The importance of a name cannot be underestimated – Radegund and Gertrude, for example, worked miracles for those who simply remembered and trusted their names.<sup>78</sup> Brunhild’s name is invested with the opposite kind of imagery, wrapped within the hagiographical package, so how should we read her? We don’t know what *vitae* looked like on the page – we must remember that only one seventh century life, the *Vita Wandrigriseli*, survives in a Merovingian copy – and we can’t be sure how they were performed. Certainly, we cannot be sure how a ‘hidden meaning’ can be understood, but I suggest that the *vita* almost becomes lived when it is believed, for that is what the text is intended to do, legitimise the saint. Yet, in these cases, Brunhild is a large part of the message and there is a machinery of religious and political persuasion at play.

For Sisebut in particular, Brunhild was a real social actor within living memory; twenty years later, Jonas of Bobbio created the ‘Jezebel’ and Fredegar would use his

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<sup>76</sup> VC I.27.

<sup>77</sup> Ian Wood, ‘The *Vita Columbani* and Merovingian hagiography’, *Peritia* 1(1982) pp. 70-1.

<sup>78</sup> VR2, pp. 389-90 and *Vita Gertrudis*, pp. 458-9.

depiction almost word for word, and then change various other vignettes of the queen. The relationship between a queen and her churchmen could be entirely beneficial, as we saw in Brunhild's correspondence with Gregory the Great, but what we have seen here is the textual manifestation when the relationship turns sour. The relationship becomes good for these authors to 'think with', according to their own political agenda. Or more aptly, as Patrick Geary put it, things are good 'to remember with'.<sup>79</sup>

With 'remembering' in mind, we should turn to the final section of this study, and to Brunhild's relationship with succession politics. The queen's destruction of her family line has been the dominant representation, and must now be critiqued. Sisebut was responding to Brunhild's Visigothic activities, and the 'Visigothic hand' in Brunhild's game of cards is a counterpoint to the image of Brunhild as the ruin of her heirs.

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<sup>79</sup> Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, p.20.

## Chapter 6

### Playing the Visigothic ‘hand’

**‘I do not lose the daughter entirely if, God helping, her progeny is preserved’.<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

The Visigothic dimension of Brunhild’s career remains the least studied: Nelson’s ‘Queens as Jezebels’ made its importance clear, and the historian continued to draw on the connection between the lines in Spain and Gaul in other studies. Other scholars, however, have given little attention to the queen’s Visigothic identity, and where it has been studied, have focused less on issues of succession than on emotional connections. The analysis of the two political moments to be studied in this chapter, the Hermenegild rebellion and the so-called ‘Athanagild episode’, has prompted reference to the ‘sentimental ties’ which connected Brunhild once more to her homeland, or to the ‘maternal instincts’ through which she lamented the capture of a Visigothic grandson. In this thesis, a grandmother was regent to three kings – the female role is a political role and I will argue here that the queen’s pursuit of dynastic strength forms the larger context for each of the vignettes examined.

The link between Brunhild and her homeland is only one thread of a series of networks which this thesis uses to illustrate the queen as not only Frankish, but international. Gregory the Great highlighted her link with the Augustinian mission in England; the Athanagild episode takes us to Byzantium: the queen’s desire to secure her own power and that of her family required her to play many different ‘hands’ at different moments. King Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii* illustrated that Brunhild’s Visigothic identity was played out until the very end of her career: his representation of her entirely revolves, I have suggested, around the hostility the queen’s Spanish activities had created. It is now time to go back and understand how different political moments prompted the ruler to reach out to her homeland: the Hermenegild rebellion is the first example, after Brunhild’s marriage, of this desire to foreground the Visigothic self. Recasting the motives behind this contested rebellion, I will argue that Brunhild sent her daughter to marry a Visigothic prince for a very specific reason: to situate herself as a force in the Spanish succession, alongside her mother Goiswinth. The Athanagild episode, whereby the queen sought the release of her captured grandson from Byzantine forces, will be re-thought also: instead of

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<sup>1</sup> EA 27.

being the moment selected by historians to show Brunhild's 'human' side, I will now suggest that the incident was almost entirely politically motivated. Brunhild's grandson was a pawn in a changing political game between the Franks and the Byzantines, and the queen's letters change in tone and language as that game unfolds. Both political moments not only inform our understanding of Brunhild as an international queen, but also how we may place women as a controlling force within succession struggles.

### **The Hermenegild Rebellion**

In 575, King Sigibert was assassinated and Brunhild left widowed: the Hermenegild rebellion takes place in 579, and activities in between suggest that, upon her husband's death, the queen was working on building an insurance policy in Spain. Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus reflect, as we have seen, on Brunhild's position within the Frankish court from this vantage point of her widowhood, but in so doing fail to illustrate any political intentions outside of Gaul. With her marriage to her enemy's son Merovech, Brunhild made a statement of intent within the Frankish realm, but her almost immediate organisation of the marriage of her daughter allowed her to reach out into the Spanish court. That marriage set into motion events which would culminate in what is referred to as the 'Hermenegild rebellion'.

In 579, Ingund was sent with much 'pomp and circumstance'<sup>2</sup> to marry the Visigothic prince Hermenegild. The Visigothic king Leuwigild established this son, by his first wife, Theodosia, as his subordinate king in the south of the peninsula, with the capital at Seville, and his other son Reccared was established in the north. Later in 579, Hermenegild revolted against his father in Seville and other cities; in effect, this was a repudiation of Leuwigild's authority in these areas and not much more. There was no violence between father and son for the following three years, though Hermenegild was captured and escaped. In 582, violence began and Hermenegild was re-captured when Cordoba fell in 584. By this time, Ingund had borne a son, Athanagild, but they were both in Byzantine hands. Sent into exile, Hermenegild was eventually murdered in 585 at Tarragona by an unknown named Sisbert: while both Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great assigned the murder to both Leuwigild and Reccared, there is no certainty.

This may be the brief narrative of events, into which it may seem difficult to place the Frankish queen. Brunhild, however, was responding swiftly to her vulnerability after

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<sup>2</sup> *DLH* V.38.

the death of her king: in quickly changing Merovingian politics, there were no assurances with her own marriage to Merovech. Reaching out to Visigothic Spain, the queen was attempting to strengthen a different network. I will develop Nelson's attractive hypothesis that Brunhild was at the forefront of the Hermenegild rebellion, alongside her mother, the Visigothic queen Goiswinth.<sup>3</sup> With the marriage between Brunhild's daughter and Hermenegild, both Goiswinth and Brunhild could use the alliance to strengthen Visigothic and Frankish lines of succession, ensuring their own power at the same time. The resulting rebellion will be used as a way of analysing these women's larger influence over succession politics in this period.

### The Frankish and Visigothic context

As with most events relating to Brunhild, the three sources featuring the revolt present contradictory accounts: the *Chronicle* of John of Biclarum (c.590), Isidore of Seville's *History of the Goths* (c.625) and Gregory of Tour's *Decem Libri Historiarum*. If Gregory lamented the lack of literary culture in his own time, one treads into even murkier waters in Visigothic historiography: as has been shown, the Visigoths lacked the lineage of the Franks and this was mirrored in its texts: the Goths 'had no history'.<sup>4</sup> By 579, the year of the rebellion, it is clear that the Visigothic kingdom was attuned to the challenges presented by warfare and succession struggles.<sup>5</sup> After 541, there was no dynastic succession. Upon Athanagild's death, his widow Goiswinth must have felt the vulnerability of her situation, and her following act was pivotal to Visigothic politics in the end of the sixth century. With the Visigothic system one of election, this was less favourable to the power of a queen.<sup>6</sup> Goiswinth did, as her daughter would later do and the Lombard queen Theodelinda did, and married swiftly: in Goiswinth's case, to Athanagild's successor Leuvigild. Nelson has shown the importance of this move: taking hold of the keys of the kingdom as a 'parente puissante', she assured the succession.<sup>7</sup> Goiswinth may have not had sons, but she had daughters, both of whom she had sent to the Frankish kingdom to marry. Fortunatus had projected her grief as one of those daughters, Galswinth, had met her sorry end. A waiting game, I suggest, followed. The Visigothic queen was able to watch from afar as Brunhild had a son and daughters, all of whom would be important in the preservation of the line of succession.

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson, 'A propos des femmes', p.469.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Baxter Wolf, in his introduction to *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (Liverpool, 1990) p.1.

<sup>5</sup> See Heather, *The Goths*, p.233 and p.277 in particular; alongside Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.61; also footnotes from chapter one for further detail.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, 'A propos des femmes', p.469.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.469.

Brunhild's marriage to Merovech was both a clever act of political revenge against Chilperic and instant security. There is no correspondence extant between Goiswinth and Brunhild, but I offer the suggestion that they may well have interacted over the long-term strategy. Brunhild had an infant son in Childebert II, for whom she could act as regent, but that may not have been enough at this vulnerable time. It may well have been the Visigothic queen who suggested the marriage of her granddaughter to an available Visigothic prince, as the beginnings of the strengthening of the succession. Goffart once called the marriage plans the result of the 'sentimental ties'<sup>8</sup> between the two courts, between mother and daughter protecting each other. Such an interpretation belies the political landscape and the machinations therein. These were politically astute women, and Goiswinth in particular appears to have been working with very little maternal instinct at play here. While negotiations progressed for Ingund and Hermenegild, a marriage agreement between Reccared and Rigunth (the daughter of Chilperic) was also finalised: in fact, Rigunth would begin her journey with an enormous dowry, but the retinue was attacked and Chilperic's death made the marriage worthless.<sup>9</sup> This was Brunhild's mother planning an alliance between her daughter's enemy and another Visigothic prince, working at the head of two essentially competing alliances. Sentiment had very little to do with this woman's activities, and proves that she deserves far greater scholarly attention as a political actor and figurehead of this Visigothic family.

To return to Brunhild, the marriage of her daughter Ingund provided the queen with a long-term political strategy within the Visigothic kingdom, and there is evidence within the early Spanish chronicles of female marriage partners used as the beginning of a power struggle.<sup>10</sup> The success of that strategy becomes clear with the Athanagild episode, but what is so fascinating and unusual at this early stage is that two women may be at the helm, in 579, of two family lines in two different countries.

#### The marriage of Ingund to Hermenegild

The marriage of Ingund is the reverse of that of her mother – Brunhild and Galswinth had been two Arian princesses united with two Catholic kings and, according to Gregory of Tours, the conversion to Catholicism was speedy and painless. Ingund went to

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<sup>8</sup> Goffart, 'Byzantine Policy in the West', p.83.

<sup>9</sup> *DLH* VI.32.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Pick, 'Gender in the Early Spanish Chronicles: from John of Biclar to Pelayo of Oviedo', *La Corónica* 32:3 (2004) pp. 227-48: Pick highlights that there is a particular concern with the acquisition and loss of power through both conquest and alliance. Female characters are specifically referred to as war booty, marriage partners, or sources of discord in a power struggle, pp. 229-32. Gregory of Tours does something slightly different with this idea: Deuteria invites the Frankish king first into her town and into her bed, suggesting the acceptance of the town to Frankish rule – see *DLH* III.22.



Spain as a Catholic princess marrying an Arian king and, in normal circumstances, the refusal to convert would have been ‘political suicide’.<sup>11</sup> The conversion of Ingund is contradictory in our sources, and will be discussed in due course. The marriage meant that two families were connected – one, I would suggest with Brunhild at the helm and the other with Goiswinth, and with this alliance, Goiswinth was not only grandmother to Ingund, but step-mother-in-law also.

It should be made clear that Brunhild is not mentioned in any of our sources as having a role in the marriage, or resulting rebellion, but the following hypothesis is not without substance. One of Brunhild’s bishops, Elafius, was placed in Spain in those pivotal years of 579/80. The fact that Ingund’s son was named Athanagild, the name of the maternal grandfather, suggests that there was a clear link being made between the Frankish and Visigothic dynasties; that it was a name linked only to the women, and had nothing to do with Hermenegild, is equally significant. That Brunhild had a pivotal role is entirely probable and there may well be an ‘axe feminine’<sup>12</sup> between mother and daughter. At the point of the marriage, Goiswinth had the south of the peninsula ruled by heirs to her first husband Sigibert: while Collins is not convinced that the queen intended a separate monarchy to be established there,<sup>13</sup> one should stop and consider the possibility. I believe it is entirely possible that Goiswinth and Brunhild imagined a separate dynasty emerging from Seville, eventually ruled by a son called Athanagild, in homage to Brunhild’s father. Having set out the hypothesis, then, one should look to the three contradictory sources: the two Visigothic sources first, followed by Gregory’s most fascinating representation of the ‘evil’ Goiswinth.

#### John of Biclarum’s *Chronicle*

After seventeen years study in Constantinople, John returned to Spain c.576, the year after Sigibert’s death, to be arrested by King Leuwigild and sent to exile in Barcelona for ten years. Only the accession of Reccared and the Council of Toledo in 589 secured John’s release, and appointment to the see of Gerona. It was amongst those religious and political tensions that he wrote an instalment to a universal Mediterranean chronicle. It is a text with a rich history, and John’s contribution takes it up until the year 590. I would argue that John’s work is highly politically sensitive as it focuses specifically on Spanish

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<sup>11</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.129.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson, ‘A propos des femmes’, p.469.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.57.

affairs: he makes effective parallels between the year of the emperor and that of the Visigothic kings he discusses, but it is more of a Spanish history than anything else.<sup>14</sup>

The religious dimension of this revolt continues to create contention, while the theme I wish to analyse, that of female dynastic ambition, has rarely been given attention. The debate centres on whether Hermenegild converted to Catholicism prior to the revolt of 579, thus suggesting that the revolt had a religious motive, or whether the conversion came after the revolt. Alongside that, the question is raised as to whether Ingund attempted to convert her husband to Catholicism. It is clear that Hermenegild was Catholic by the time of his capture of 584, but there are up to six years prior which still contribute to debate.<sup>15</sup> I do not plan to analyse that debate, only the three sources which mention it. John writes in 590, five years after Hermenegild's murder: he could have presented Hermenegild as the martyr who had perished at the hands of an Arian tyrant. Yet he did not – it was Gregory the Great, in fact, who would cast Hermenegild as the Catholic martyr in 594.<sup>16</sup> With that context in mind, one can examine John's representation: according to this author, the rebellion of Hermenegild comes at a time of peace under King Leuvigild:

A domestic quarrel disturbed his security from external enemies...his son Hermenegild, with a faction loyal to the queen Goiswinth, seized power illegitimately and broke out in open revolt in the city of Seville. He made other cities and fortresses rebel with him against his father, causing greater destruction in the province of Spain – to Goth and Romans alike – than any attack by external enemies.<sup>17</sup>

John emphasises the distinction between internal and external unrest, particularly with the use of 'domestic'. He is the only author who directly connects the revolt to Goiswinth, suggesting he revolted *factione Goswinthae reginae*.<sup>18</sup> To John, this is not a small affair, but instead more destructive to Spain than any military campaign. At the helm of this unrest were Hermenegild and Goiswinth: not only may the queen be the instigator of the event, but it is her own followers who support it. The author continues to make this a dramatic tale – we know that, after the three years of non-violence involved making diplomatic alliances, John turns it into a constant fierce battle. Hermenegild in 580 sent

<sup>14</sup> A detailed study of John's *Chronicle* is in Suzanne Teillet, *Des Goths à la nation gothique: les origines de l'idée de nation en occident du Ve au VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1984) pp. 428-55. Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 3-6 traces the history of this text: it began as a universal chronicle from Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century and continued fifty years later by Jerome. Later continuations come from Prosper of Aquitaine and Victor of Tunnuna: Victor's instalment takes the chronicle to 567, where John of Biclarum begins. While there are most probably others who contributed to the chronicle, these are the only authors whom John directly refers to.

<sup>15</sup> See Jocelyn Hillgarth, 'Coins and Chronicles: Propaganda in Sixth-Century Spain and the Byzantine background', *Historia* 15 (1966) pp. 438-508.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 3.31; see also *DLH* V.38, VIII.28, IX.16.

<sup>17</sup> *JBChron*.55.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, 'A propos des femmes', p.469.

Bishop Leander of Seville (Isidore's brother) on an embassy to Constantinople<sup>19</sup> - he was attempting to secure Byzantine support. John, however, only tells us that King Miro of the Suevi came to assist Leuvigild in Seville, and died there.<sup>20</sup>

As John continues to tell the story of Hermenegild's flight from Seville, his capture and exile, the author also relates Leuvigild sending his son, Reccared, to deal with an attack from the Franks in the region of Narbonne. King Guntram, at the head of the Frankish army, went to battle with the Visigoths with the following results:

The Franks were put to flight, their camp was seized, and the army was slaughtered by the Goths.<sup>21</sup>

Up until this point, there has been no Frankish influence whatsoever: the marriage to Ingund has not been mentioned. John only introduces the Franks in battle with the Visigoths. Is this because he was writing under Reccared, and wished to record his successes? Most probably, but this battle is more significant than John suggests. It was the first Frankish assault in many years, certainly since the rule of Brunhild's father, Athanagild. By this point, in 585, Ingund had died in Constantinople, the infant Athanagild was a hostage, and Brunhild's ambitions in the Visigothic realm were looking weak. It was not Brunhild at the head of the army, but Guntram of Burgundy. That said, I believe we can hypothesize Brunhild and Goiswinth working at this stage to secure some form of success: this may have come from convincing Hermenegild to join the Franks. Collins has suggested this is a possibility as Hermenegild was killed in Tarragona, or Reccared may have simply suspected this and had his brother killed.<sup>22</sup>

John does not link the rebellion to the account of this battle, but they appear fundamentally connected: relations between the Franks and the Visigoths had gone from marriage to war, and I believe that we can find Hermenegild at both events. John may only assign blame to Goiswinth, but it is entirely probable that it was the 'axe feminine' at work, and as the situation worsened, Brunhild intervened with either Guntram or Hermenegild to ensure at least the Frankish position was secured.

### Isidore of Seville's *History of the Goths*

Isidore of Seville was presented in the previous chapter as the friend of the Visigothic king Sisebut – we return here to his textual influence. Following on from John's

<sup>19</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.17 – it may have been the possibility of Byzantine intervention that made Leuvigild act against his son in 583.

<sup>20</sup> *JBChron.* 66.

<sup>21</sup> *JBChron.* 75 for quotation; also 91.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, p.23.

instalment of the universal chronicle, ending in 590, Isidore brought the chronicle to 615. In addition, he summarised the earlier versions to create one narrative of the Gothic kings from Adam to Sisebut.<sup>23</sup> His contribution to this text, however, is little in comparison to his greater work on the *History of the Gothic Kings*. If this chronicle recalls the years of Sisebut's reign (612-21), it is a reasonable assumption that Isidore's *History* was written shortly after Sisebut's death.<sup>24</sup> As the Gothic army began its final campaign against the imperial Cartagena, Isidore began a work specifically focusing on the Visigoths, and where John had begun to concentrate more on Spanish affairs, Isidore used a new text to devote himself entirely to these affairs.

Bearing in mind King Sisebut's textual campaign against Brunhild, I offer the hypothesis that Isidore was similarly working on recasting the Gothic monarchy in the 620s, and may have therefore examined the Hermenegild rebellion in a nuanced way. Isidore is much more distinct in his treatment of Leuwigild and Reccared – Leuwigild's corruption stemmed from being an 'Arian' king: his military activity is cast as 'destructive', rather than protective, as John views it. Reccared, however, is treated similarly by John and Isidore: he is the vision of proper kingship.<sup>25</sup>

Isidore gives us very little detail about the revolt: there is no suggestion as to Hermenegild's aims, simply a sentence on the event: 'Then he [Leuwigild] laid siege to his son Hermenegild, who was in revolt against his dominion, and defeated him'.<sup>26</sup> That is the end of it, but what Isidore does give more detail on is Leuwigild's 'Arianism': the 'error of impiety' tarnished his military successes<sup>27</sup> and he launched a 'persecution against the Catholics'.<sup>28</sup> Isidore, then, tells us more about Leuwigild than he does about Hermenegild, and nothing about Brunhild or Goiswinth. This, I would suggest, was part of the plan he and King Sisebut shared, attempting to remove Brunhild and her family from the history of the Visigothic kingdom.

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<sup>23</sup> See Paul Bassett, 'The Use of History in the *Chronicon* of Isidore of Seville', *History and Theory* 15 (1976) pp. 278-92.

<sup>24</sup> I suggested in the previous chapter that Sisebut may have asked Isidore to compose the *History*. It is also important to note that there are two surviving versions of the Chronicle – one which ends with Sisebut's death in 621 and another which ends in 625, with Suinthila's success at Cartagena. This would suggest that the sponsorship of the monarchy may have been present for both the chronicle and the *History*.

<sup>25</sup> See Marc Reydellet, 'La conception du souverain chez Isidore de Seville', *Isidoriana: Estudios sobre San Isidoro de Sevilla en el XIV centenario de su nacimiento*, ed. M.C. Diaz y Diaz (Leon, 1961) pp. 457-66.

<sup>26</sup> Heather, *The Goths*, chapter 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 50.

Gregory of Tours's *DLH*

Gregory of Tours does not necessarily give a full description of the revolt, but what he does provide is a fascinating representation of Goiswinth. The author tells a forceful and violent tale: when her granddaughter arrives in Spain, Gregory makes no mention the family relationship and Goiswinth attempts to persuade Ingund to convert to Arianism. Gregory gives the young princess a passionate speech: 'I hereby confirm that I believe this with all my heart and that I will never go back on this article of faith'.<sup>29</sup> Violence ensues between the two women, culminating in Ingund being thrown into the baptismal pool.<sup>30</sup> We know that conversion was a gendered act,<sup>31</sup> but it can never be seen in isolation from its political context.

I have suggested that Brunhild was trained in the court culture of the Franks before she entered the kingdom. It seems reasonable to suggest that Brunhild would have taught her own daughter, to prepare her for a Visigothic life that Brunhild herself had known well. Did she tell her daughter to refuse to convert? I would think not, and the idea that a girl under the age of thirteen could launch such an ardent refusal to convert seems to go too far, unless perhaps Gregory is drawing on the martyr narrative of such refusal. For a man whose position was dependent upon Brunhild, Gregory presents her mother in the blackest of shades – is this about his anti-Arian agenda, or is he manipulating tropes of heretic queens? When Leuvigild marries Goiswinth, she is identified as 'the mother of Brunhild'.<sup>32</sup> After this, there is no sense of the connection. Gregory is clear that there was Catholic persecution rife in Spain, and unlike any other source, the person behind this 'horror' was Goiswinth.<sup>33</sup> In fact, to read the depiction, we would think we were reading about another author's vision of her daughter, as Goiswinth was branded as 'infamous before all her peoples'.<sup>34</sup>

Turning to the revolt, this is a battle against what he considered to be an Arian heretic: Gregory shows that Hermenegild joined with the emperor Tiberius, confirming there is a Byzantine link at play, but differs from John and Isidore in stating that the Suevic king came to assist Hermenegild, not Leuvigild.<sup>35</sup> We can imagine that Gregory wrote about the rebellion in 585/6, for that is when he states that he learned of the conversion from Spanish travellers coming to him while he was in Rome, potentially followers of

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<sup>29</sup> *DLH* V.38.

<sup>30</sup> *DLH* V.38.

<sup>31</sup> Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, p.117; Nelson, 'Queens as Converters'.

<sup>32</sup> *DLH* IV.38.

<sup>33</sup> *DLH* V.38.

<sup>34</sup> *DLH* V.38.

<sup>35</sup> *DLH* V.38.

Goiswinth's stepsons, hence his hostility toward her. With that in mind, his account of Frankish/Visigothic relations becomes nuanced. In 585, Gregory tells us that Leuvigild sent presents to Childebert II for he was worried that the king might avenge his sister's death<sup>36</sup> - even more significantly, he states that Guntram's attempts in Spain were an act of vengeance for Ingund's death also.<sup>37</sup> This contributes to the hypothesis proposed: after the death of Ingund, relations were deteriorating and Brunhild acted upon this, perhaps even convincing Guntram to invade. Even more persuasively, after the death of her husband Leuvigild, Goiswinth acted to improve relations again. She allied with Reccared to head up the Visigothic kingdom and reached out for yet another marriage alliance with the Franks: Reccared sent envoys to both Childebert II and Guntram in 586.<sup>38</sup> In that embassy to Brunhild and Childebert, Gregory of Tours recounts the words of the legates:

Our master orders us to whisper a word in your ear about Chlodosind, the sister of one of you and the daughter of the other. He suggests that if she were to marry him, the peace which is promised between you might the more easily be maintained.<sup>39</sup>

Peace is intrinsically linked to successful marriage alliances between two kingdoms. This evidence illustrates Brunhild engaged in succession politics – the later sources may focus on the disastrous results of it, but here it is clear that the Visigothic princess retains her origins, and takes example from her mother in how to 'do' succession struggles. In this case, Childebert had been planning to give his sister to the Lombards, but this embassy encouraged him otherwise. Naturally, Gregory suggests that the decision came down to the fact that the Visigoths were 'people converted to the Catholic faith',<sup>40</sup> but there was more at play. Nelson once asked if Brunhild had imposed as a condition of the marriage the conversion of Visigothic kingdom to Catholicism,<sup>41</sup> but this seems to neglect the wider movements occurring within the Visigothic kingdom: it is sometimes possible to overstate Brunhild's strength, without placing it in context.

### Women at the helm of the family

The Hermenegild rebellion fuses the political family and issues of conversion. We should shift from debate as to whether the conversion was pre/post revolt to instead ask what other factors could be at play. I offer the suggestion that there was this 'axe feminine' at work, attempting to create a strong Visigothic-Frankish dynasty in the south of Spain, a

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<sup>36</sup> *DLH* VI.38.

<sup>37</sup> *DLH* VI.38.

<sup>38</sup> *DLH* IX.1.

<sup>39</sup> *DLH* IX.16.

<sup>40</sup> *DLH* IX.16.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson, 'A propos des femmes', p.469

return to the reign of Athanagild.<sup>42</sup> That state could then have been Catholicised: in so doing, Hermenegild and Ingund would have achieved proper control of Spain, had the rebellion succeeded. Hermenegild's brother, Reccared, would achieve it upon his accession. We should begin to examine Goiswinth with the same critical eye as we do Brunhild. There is a long-term political strategy at play and Goiswinth's politics – her move from one husband to another, from husband to stepson – ensured that she maintained political agency. The implications for a study of Brunhild are more far-reaching than has been acknowledged previously: how much Brunhild can have learnt from her mother cannot be traced, but I suggest it is no coincidence that both employed very complementary strategies as part of the 'politics of survival'. This continues with Brunhild's search for her hostage grandson Athanagild.

## **The 'Athanagild episode'**

### Introduction

By 584, Hermenegild's rebellion looked so bleak in its outcome that his wife, Ingund, fled with their young son Athanagild. She was captured by the Byzantine authorities and on her way to Constantinople, Ingund died in Carthage. Athanagild survived the journey and was taken as a hostage to the Byzantine capital, presided over by the emperor Maurice. The authorities used their custody of Ingund, and now of her son, to induce Childebert to participate in a war against the Lombards in Northern Italy. I will argue that the 'Athanagild episode' tells us much more than that Brunhild may have cared for her offspring. This grandson was named after Brunhild's father and was a Visigothic heir: it is his Visigothic identity which was so important for the queen to preserve. After her husband's death, Brunhild had created a marriage alliance and possibly supported a rebellion, in order to promote her Visigothic agenda. Now, with her daughter dead and grandson hostage, that hope had been significantly weakened. The desire to protect Athanagild revolves around the protection of the line of succession.

John Berger famously stated that 'men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at',<sup>43</sup> as noted in this study's introduction. Thus far, authors from Gregory of Tours to King Sisebut have been examined as individuals themselves negotiating female power from very specific vantage points. Yet this is also the analysis of

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<sup>42</sup> When Brunhild was vilified in the Spanish sources, her father also began to suffer in seventh-century Spanish sources.

<sup>43</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.7.

how historians reconcile the rare female voice with the polyphony of male ones. Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus provide varying degrees of feminisation and Brunhild's voice at this early stage of her career is rendered fairly silent. One may recall that Fortunatus imagines the queen's response to her sister's death, but not her husband's. Subsequently, the hagiographical texts which sought to vilify her invoke direct speech: the reader is asked to imagine the female voice, but the scholar must accept that this is a constructed voice, entirely submerged in the agenda of the author. Gregory the Great's correspondence with the queen is, of course, a challenge whereby we may only infer the responses which came to the pope: the female side of the epistolary dialogue is entirely absent. Only, then, in discussing succession are we asked to confront the issue of Brunhild's potentially emergent voice. It is a voice which only becomes heard after her husband's death, while acting as regent, and is a voice which continues to prompt debate.

The 'Athanagild Episode' is more accurately the series of letters between the Frankish and Byzantine courts discussing the desired release of Brunhild's grandson. Housed within a collection called the *Epistolae Austrasicae*, within this series are letters from both Brunhild and Childebert II, which offer the rarest of opportunities to analyse a woman voicing her own role in diplomacy. Placing this 'episode' within the contexts of the letter collection (a much understudied source), the female voice and wider discussions on Brunhild and Visigothic politics allows that voice to be inserted back into the historiography on the queen in an entirely new way. I will suggest that this queen was a diplomatic 'machine' who knew how the 'machine works'<sup>44</sup> and how to use her language to political effect. Here, the historians' reluctance to read the instruction manual on certain occasions will be rectified. There is a process we must acknowledge – the female voice comes to us through male filters that we must attempt to unravel, so this chapter will not argue that we are reading the 'pure' authorial voice of Brunhild. If a female voice can be heard, it is sounded through multiple levels. Not only may the queen have been self-fashioning through letters in her own name, but may also have had a supervisory role in those of her son, still an adolescent. In considering that the *Epistolae Austrasicae* was compiled at the court of Brunhild and Childebert at the end of the sixth century (this chapter will offer some potential figures and locations for the activity) we must ask whether the letters were edited at the point of compilation. Ultimately, Brunhild's image of diplomacy needs a great deal of unravelling.

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<sup>44</sup> Italo Calvino, 'Cybernetics and ghosts', *The Literature Machine: essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London, 1997) p.6.



### The model of diplomacy?

Brunhild's letters are a fundamental part of what Andrew Gillett has called 'diplomatic traffic',<sup>45</sup> for they illustrate the relations between two colliding power structures in the Frankish and Byzantine courts. Before examining the fate of the infant Athanagild, it is important to understand something of the context of diplomatic discourse, and the challenges of inserting the female voice within it. The study of letter collections as a vehicle for diplomacy has been covered by Giles Constable and more recently by Gillett and Mullett, amongst others.<sup>46</sup> The *Epistolae Austrasicae* was compiled in the context of a sharp decline of surviving letters, after the middle of the sixth century.<sup>47</sup> As the mid-sixth century is also the only period of Byzantine literary history without generic study also,<sup>48</sup> it appears as though the study of Frankish-Byzantine relations has suffered a lack of literary analysis. However, Gregory does show us the regularity of movement between Frankish and Byzantine courts,<sup>49</sup> and Fredegar's *Chronicle* also uses embassy narratives as a key strand to understand the machinations of the political structures it discusses.<sup>50</sup>

The occasion of editorial collection of letters is distinct from the political moment in which two diplomatic respondents sought political change. Previous studies of the 'Athanagild episode' have often treated it as the exact political moment, almost frozen in time. Brunhild's representation, then, has not been developed into the wider framework of either the rest of the letter collection, her career, or the wider source material about her. The main point about Gregory the Great's correspondence was that one half of the epistolary dialogue was missing, therefore rendering our explanation of Brunhild's requests supposition. When reading the 'Athanagild episode', extant is only the Frankish viewpoint. In a genre in which responding, or not responding, carries 'such meaning',<sup>51</sup> the fact that we have only the Frankish side of the argument is telling. There is political game at play in which the Byzantine voice is rendered silent, and the Frankish voice authoritative. It is necessary, then, to bear in mind that a queen's hopes for her grandson's

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533* (Cambridge, 2003) p.271.

<sup>46</sup> Giles Constable, 'Letters and Letter-Collections', *Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge Occidental fasc. 17, A-II* (Turnhout, 1976) p.13.

<sup>47</sup> Constable assigns this to the 'disturbed conditions of the time and also to changes in literary fashion which made the collection of letters less common', p.30. Only in the late eighth and early ninth centuries do we see a revival in letter collections, which is when our source for the *EA* comes from.

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Mullett, 'The Madness of Genre', *Homo Byzantinus, Papers in Honor of Alexander Kazhdan*, eds. A.Cutler and S. Franklin (Washington, 1992) p.237.

<sup>49</sup> *DLH* see IV.40, VI.2, VIII.18, X.2, X.3, X.4.

<sup>50</sup> Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication*, p.268. He comments that Fredegar uses embassies as a 'literary construct' and should be approached in that way, using an embassy primarily for a confrontational and dramatic narrative.

<sup>51</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, 1982) p.121.

release should be read within the context of the power structures through which diplomacy occurs. The textual manifestations of diplomacy can present challenges which should be considered before making judgements on the content of one incident.

The fact that we have only the Frankish ‘side’ of any argument in the *Epistolae Austrasicae* is a most important detail, and Ian Wood has argued that, along with the poetry of Fortunatus, the *EA* gives our fullest insight into late sixth-century Frankish court circles.<sup>52</sup> There are multiple areas to explore: first, the content of the letters we seek to examine, but more importantly, perhaps, the collection’s form and *raison d’être*. This is crucial to understanding the function of both the letters and the series. There is no detailed study of the collection as yet – Halsall and Wood have both offered interesting suggestions, but upcoming works by both Andrew Gillett and Bruno Dumézil will attempt to unravel the series in much greater depth. This chapter will begin to ask questions of the source material, questions which will, with further research, illuminate Brunhild’s career much further than I am able to here.

The *Epistolae Austrasicae* is composed of letters of various magnates – 48 letters in total, dating from the 460s to around 590.<sup>53</sup> Our only copy of the collection is a ninth-century manuscript, from Lorsch. Wood, among others, has used this series as an example of a model letter collection.<sup>54</sup> To analyse them as ‘examples of correct usage’ for the purpose of education implies them as machines of diplomacy, to be used as models of good style. The episode we are analysing here is of an exact political situation involving a unique family, and therefore is not representative necessarily of the rest of the collection’s focus. From the first letter, recounting King Clovis’ emotional response to his daughter’s death, through the letters to the emperor Justinian and King Theudebald, and the bishop of Trier, there is an expectation within these letters of the understanding of diplomatic protocol. The first 23 items are mostly from, or to, bishops – in chapter 3, I illustrated the power of the bishop in Merovingian Gaul. Therefore, almost half of the collection is devoted to issues inside Gaul itself, or more pertinently, to Austrasia. Metz and Trier emerge as focal points and multiple letters come from bishop Nicetius of Trier and Gogo, two of Brunhild’s closest allies, as examined at the beginning of this study.

The question is: who might have been responsible for a collection featuring such correspondents and its preservation? I believe that there is the possibility that Brunhild’s

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<sup>52</sup> *MK*, p.71.

<sup>53</sup> Wood, ‘Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul’, p.72.

<sup>54</sup> *MK*, p.74. Interestingly, Wood puts the *EA* within the same framework as the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, which contain the letters of Amalasuintha, another rare example of female writing, with similar questions surrounding the layers through which one traces the female voice.

royal servants, her ‘Romanised’ Franks, were in charge of an Austrasian chancery at Metz. Nicetius, as it has been successfully established by Raymond Van Dam, had a wide influence and reputation that mirrored the extensive interests of the Austrasian rulers in central Gaul, Europe and Byzantine Italy.<sup>55</sup> Gogo, I have already shown, was a key figure in Sigibert and Brunhild’s retinue, and he was a ‘Romanised Frank’ familiar enough with classical culture to write his own letters and poems – Fortunatus called him ‘another Cicero.’<sup>56</sup> The Austrasian kingdom had remained open to the influence of the Romans and their classical culture, and shaping a Merovingian administration was an ongoing process. It is entirely possible that aristocratic men belonging to the area were in charge of the compilation of these letters, and a chancery at Metz. Trier, as a large Roman city, and Metz as a government centre, would have had trained bureaucrats who knew how to keep an archive. It is crucial, then, not to examine the communications with Byzantium, explored in this chapter, with a tunnel vision: those communications are recorded in a series specifically called the ‘Austrasian letters’, and here I have offered a suggestion as to the preservation of the series. That tunnel vision has also been previously extended to the potential for the female voice, which must now be placed in context.

### The female voice

Brunhild is not the only woman featured within the *Epistolae Austrasicae*: Nicetius wrote to the Lombard queen Chlodosind and we have letters to the Byzantine empress, supposedly in Brunhild’s hand. The point is that, out of 48 items, four come from Brunhild. Yet whenever the queen’s positive attributes are sought for, every instance involves the use of one of the letters critiqued here: phrases of affective language are pulled from their diplomatic context to show that Brunhild really did care about her offspring. A limited analysis results and what begins as a letter collection examining the diplomacy between political individuals is reduced to a grandmother pleading to bring her family back together. The female life cycle is separated from the political one through this type of critique – the diplomacy of a queen is reduced to the emotions of a grandmother. The female voice, then, has been largely examined as a maternal voice, and among the established polyphony of male authors writing about Brunhild, it is easy to see why her voice has proved hard to integrate. The maternal voice is more difficult to reconcile than if Brunhild’s voice is seen as a diplomatic one, as keenly attuned to the political structures in which it is transmitted as any of the male authors. The result is that historians have

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Van Dam, ‘Merovingian Gaul and the Frankish conquests’, *The New Cambridge Medieval History vol. 1: c.500-700*, ed. P. Fouracre (Cambridge, 2005) particularly pp. 215-216.

<sup>56</sup> *OP.* VII.2 and VII.3.

previously done one of two things: disregard the *EA* as a source for the queen,<sup>57</sup> or used the ‘Athanagild episode’ solely to counteract the vilification of the queen. If we consider certain analogues – Cassiodorus’ *Variae*, Pope Gregory’s *Registers*, even the letters of Queen Radegund – it is clear that the female authorial voice is entirely contentious. Historians see Cassiodorus and Fortunatus, now, as the force behind Amalasuintha or Radegund; we must question if we may ever argue that Brunhild personally wrote the letters in her own name, and therefore if a female voice can be heard. It is not simply a voice we can hear on the pages to which her name is assigned, but that does not mean that it is to be dismissed. It is her influence that I wish to consider here: her influence over the words used in those letters bearing her name; her supervisory influence over letters assigned to her son, Childebert II; her influence over the selection of her closest men to act as envoys to deliver the oral messages of the letters; finally, her influence over the compilation and preservation of those letters and the collection they created.

If the *EA* was compiled at the end of the sixth century at the court of Brunhild and her son, in a form of chancery,<sup>58</sup> there are many issues to consider for the representation of that female voice. We have no Byzantine responses to the ‘Athanagild episode’: was, then, the collection assembled from Brunhild’s drafts, or a copy? Perhaps the queen’s officials at the chancery re-edited the collection before it was compiled? Did they even use all letters, or select certain ones? Since the episode does not end with the successful recovery of Brunhild’s grandson, how better to present the Austrasian queen, at a time when the doors were closing in upon her reign, than as a woman devoted to her dynasty? At a time when she had moved from one grandson to another, been taken hostage and been rebelled against, perhaps the importance of a chancery, containing the diplomatic relations of this queen and her court, was crucial. In the letters examined here, Brunhild appears to beg for her grandson’s release. As those around her attacked her for her destruction of the family line, this attempt to recover a family member is a potential counterpoint. Historians, most certainly, have used it as such.

For Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, letters are accessible to women due to the ‘directness with which they convey ideas and emotions because of the immediate availability of audience’.<sup>59</sup> Peter Dronke argues that a woman’s motivation for writing is a

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<sup>57</sup> Dumézil, uses the Athanagild letters as an appendix, perpetuating the tension of the source, by placing them to one side.

<sup>58</sup> Goubert, *Byzance Avant l’Islam*, p.95.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, ‘Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages’, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993) p.1.

response to her ‘inner needs’.<sup>60</sup> If we follow this argument, repeated in many other areas also, we restrict ourselves. This thesis will not advocate an essentialist female discourse, and certainly does not equate affective language with female discourse.<sup>61</sup> Emotion and affective language are discourses amongst many others such as power, succession, survival. We do not see a woman fighting against a current of subordination in the male sources,<sup>62</sup> but instead doing two things: writing in a very specific political circumstance, looking to preserve the succession, but also potentially ensuring that the diplomatic discourse is preserved through her own chancery. In terms of the arguments within the letters, I will argue that gender is deployed as a tool. Whether Brunhild herself constructed the language used, or dictated it, I suggest that a series of identities are used, for diplomatic and political effect, with the specific intention of seeing the Visigothic heir returned to Brunhild’s control.<sup>63</sup>

After the exile of Aegidius and the Neustrian party in 583, Brunhild had placed her hand much more firmly on foreign policy – her interest in diplomatic connections with Byzantium, then, are not surprising. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Brunhild was an international queen, who sought to ensure that many avenues for her continuing power were kept open. By fashioning good relations between Austrasia and Byzantium, she could call upon them when she needed to, as she did here. Full titles are used for etiquette and emphatic compliments, which were part of Byzantine diplomacy. She had to find formulas capable of interesting the Byzantine court in the fate of her grandson Athanagild, and that is what these letters seek to achieve.

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (203) to Marguerite Porete (1310)* (Cambridge, 1984) p.xi.

<sup>61</sup> See the famous article by Helene Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Feminisms: An anthology of literary theory and criticism*, eds. R. Warhol and D. Herndl (NJ, 1991) p.43 - ‘It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, encoded - which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist’.

<sup>62</sup> Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, ‘Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages’, p.5.

<sup>63</sup> See Catherine Brown, ‘Muliebriter: Doing Gender in the Letters of Heloise’, *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. J. Chance (Gainesville, 1996) p.42 – she analyses the letters of Heloise, and reads them as a way in which Heloise can navigate her way through a series of gendered roles, putting herself in a position in which she can control her own representation. A comparison with two other female authors of early medieval Europe cannot be covered here but has proved useful in understanding strategies of representation. Queen Amalasuintha of Italy, in the early fifth century, corresponded widely, and her letters are preserved in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus – see Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 1994) p.72. Her letters show her desire for personal and political survival, in the wake of growing hostility toward her. Radegund, a familiar name in this study, also provides a useful comparison, similarly contained within *The Writings of Medieval Women*. Her poetry and correspondence with Fortunatus show Radegund presenting a series of different *personae*, particularly when looking back on her Thuringian past, p.95.

### The 'Athanagild episode' in context

Three main embassies were sent from the Frankish court to the Byzantine court, under the rule of Brunhild and Childebert, which can be reconstructed from both the *DLH* and Fredegar's *Chronicle*. While Ewig declared diplomatic isolation between the two courts, it seems clear that these three embassies were part of a more fluid relationship.<sup>64</sup> The first took place after the Lombard campaign of 585, and deals with three main issues: a potential peace agreement with the Lombards, the announcement of Childebert's majority, and the captivity of Athanagild.<sup>65</sup> The second embassy to the Byzantine court can be estimated to have taken place in late 587, or early 588. The main concern of these letters appears to be the breakdown in relations between the two courts, resulting from Childebert's procrastination over involvement with the Lombards. The final embassy can be estimated to the end of 588, or early 589, by which time the emperor Maurice had become tired of Frankish procrastination. It reveals a fraught political situation, on the back of which Childebert launched his last Italian campaign. Of the 23 letters within the *EA* which deal with Frankish-Byzantine relations, seven refer to Athanagild and are all dated within the collection as 584 or 585. However, we know that they were sent as part of the same embassy, from the end of 585, or the start of 586, but delivered in two different groups by two different sets of messengers. The incident surrounding Athanagild, then, forms only one aspect of a wider context of fraught relations, mainly concerning Frankish involvement in the Lombard war. It is within a landscape of diplomacy, negotiation and political tension that the infant becomes a weapon to be used by both parties. The following seven letters concerning the child will be considered:

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<sup>64</sup> Helm recorded 79 Byzantine embassies between 300 and 565 and Lounghis counts 170 Byzantine embassies to the west between 408 and 800. See Euangelos Chrysos, 'Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 300-800', *Byzantine Diplomacy: Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990* eds. J. Shepard and S. Franklin (Aldershot, 1992) p.31.

<sup>65</sup> These letters were taken back and forth by two different groups of messengers.

Number	Correspondents
26	Brunhild to Maurice (584)
27	Brunhild to Athanagild (584)
28	Childebert to Athanagild (584)
43	Childebert to the adoptive son of Maurice, Theodosius (585)
44	Brunhild 'to the empress' (585)
45	Childebert to the patriarch of Constantinople (585)
47	Childebert to Maurice (584/5)

Figure 6.1 The correspondence of the 'Athanagild episode'

The letter at the bottom of the table, from Childebert II to the emperor Maurice, has been given very little attention, and yet can be persuasively argued to refer to Athanagild.<sup>66</sup> Traditionally, one letter is given analysis by historians; this study will explore more. These letters will be analysed to explore the types of language used for diplomacy here, and to examine Brunhild's influence over her own letters, but also potentially those of Childebert as well.<sup>67</sup> Under the queen's surveillance, they identify with wider discourses of power and rulership. It is useful, then, to look at the letters from Brunhild and Childebert to Athanagild as a pair, to test Brunhild's potential influence over the language used in both:

#### Brunhild to Athanagild

To the glorious Lord, named with unutterable desire, sweetest grandson, King Athanagild, Queen Brunhild.

A desired opportunity of great happiness has come to me, dearest grandson, through which I might be brought to the loveable eyes of the face I desire by letter, and partly consoled, in which my sweetest daughter may be recalled to me, whom sins have taken away. I do not lose the daughter entirely if, God helping, her progeny is preserved for me...I indicate to the most pious emperor, through our legates certain conditions, ordering some things to be intimated orally.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> This is letter 47 in the collection.

<sup>67</sup> Goubert referred to Brunhild as 'l'instigatrice' - *Byzance Avant l'Islam I*, p.99.

<sup>68</sup> EA 27.

The most immediate point to note is that, of course, an infant grandson would not be the true recipient of this letter. This creates a certain distance from the emotion contained within, that has not been addressed in previous analyses. If one imagines, then, that the emperor Maurice is the intended recipient, the notion of family as represented in this letter takes on a completely different nuance. On one level, family ties in that sense of the kin group are clearly invoked – ‘dearest grandson’, ‘loveable eyes’. It is not the kin group, however, that the queen is necessarily concerned about, but instead the survival of the political family. Using the framework of a seemingly personal moment from grandmother to grandson betrays the way in which diplomacy is remoulded – affective language nuances a political message. The address, *dulcissimo nepoti, Athanagyldo regi*, ‘sweetest grandson, King Athanagild’, is significant for its calculated choice of vocabulary. Athanagild was not a king, and to represent him thus does two things: it shows the preoccupation with succession, and also acts as a potential warning to the emperor, as Maurice is reminded that he keeps captive a ruler. It is through a deliberate juxtapositioning of the affective and the political that this letter comes to life. Referring to her progeny, the queen makes it apparent that a daughter’s death is unfortunate, but the loss of *proles*, specifically referring to descendants, is unacceptable.

The death of Hermenegild and her daughter Ingund had placed the Visigothic succession in jeopardy. Athanagild, with his potential claim to not only the Visigothic throne, but the Frankish one also, was a weapon Brunhild needed to preserve – and the letter which bears her name states that the progeny must survive ‘for me’. This letter is not an emotional declaration of love, but a warning to the emperor: as soon as Athanagild is named as a king, this message speaks of the ‘opportunity’ which may secure his release. It is clear that Brunhild, or whoever is writing in her name, is withholding information – if Maurice was using Athanagild as a tool in securing Frankish participation in the Lombard wars, the Frankish rulers are able to use Athanagild in the same way. Through self-conscious censorship, and understanding of the minutiae of diplomacy, information may be withheld to seemingly portray Brunhild in a position of control.<sup>69</sup> Looking at the letter in full, the political machine running through it may now seem obvious. It has been seen much more transparently, previously, in Brunhild’s correspondence with Gregory the Great, but the sense of perspective has been lost when considering the ‘Athanagild episode’. In understanding the need for diplomacy with Byzantium, and the importance of

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<sup>69</sup> Janet Altman has spoken about the information in a letter having the potential to create a ‘consciously erected barrier’: that is what is happening here: *Epistolarity*, p.23.



the authorial voice portrayed to do so, one may begin to analyse how negotiations manifest themselves in the letter of Childebert II to his nephew:

Childebert to Athanagild

Most glorious master and always distinguished sweetest grandson, King Athanagild, King Childebert.

We are supported through ready advantage, by means of which we show affection to our relations and eloquence that we demonstrate in our correspondence. By the notable renown of your grace, therefore, we who are near to you, wish assurance for your safety and our happiness, which is a human desire and private mystery. We sent our legates to the most tranquil Roman Emperor, by the grace of God, for our common advantage, through the intervention of the emperor or more fortunately through God's intervention.<sup>70</sup>

These two letters, paired together, were part of the first embassy to the Byzantine court, where letters 25-39 and 43-47 were sent, by two different groups of messengers (this we know from the subscription to letter 43).<sup>71</sup> The two letters above then were sent as part of a group which dealt with other issues, most prominently Childebert's accession and the importance of a Byzantine alliance. Athanagild, then, is just one of the strands of diplomatic negotiation, but reading the letters alone, a limited analysis may result. Note the address to this letter – Childebert addresses Athanagild in the exact vocabulary that the letter from Brunhild did. This cannot be a coincidence, I suggest, and shows the clever way in which the two letters become foils of one another. The affective language presented through a queen is distilled into a much more official language, seeking peace and reconciliation. While Brunhild's letter probes the emperor more, by speaking of the 'opportunity' that can secure her grandson's release, here Childebert speaks of the 'certainty' of an agreement. Brunhild's and Childebert's are complimentary arguments, and there is a real potential that Brunhild was a sort of 'moving spirit'<sup>72</sup> in Childebert's letters. Further evidence comes from the queen:

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<sup>70</sup> EA 28.

<sup>71</sup> Letters 23-39 were sent through messengers Ennodius, Grippo, Radan and Eusebius, while 43-47 were sent by Babo and Grippo. We are told of the distinction between the two different groups in the body of EA 25 and the subscription of 43.

<sup>72</sup> Goubert, *Byzance Avant l'Islam I*, p.173.

### Brunhild to Maurice

To our most distinguished son, King Childebert, the letter directed from the clemency of your most serene sovereignty has arrived, and we have counselled peace.<sup>73</sup>

This letter, which appears in the collection directly before the two examined above, and sent with that first group of messengers, would appear to show the queen as the driving force between diplomatic relations and the potential for peace. The emperor is advised that the young king has received his letter, but he receives his reply in the queen's name and this letter specifically says that 'we' have counselled peace. This occurs throughout the letter: I suggest, then, that Brunhild may well have had supervisory influence over her son's correspondence, and that together, their letters display a carefully constructed negotiation over Athanagild, but the need for Byzantine alliance more generally.

Brunhild appears as though she is participating, then, in the discourses of rulership and diplomacy, not in essentialist female discourse, and again, I acknowledge that it is unlikely that she wrote her argument herself. Understanding the importance of those filters of any female voice, then, it is time to re-evaluate the letter which has been given the greatest attention in the past. This letter, from Brunhild 'to the empress', comes from the second group of messengers, headed by Babo and Grippo, and was the second written to an empress. Letter 29, directed to the 'renowned empress Anastasia' had advised, quite simply, that legates would disclose what had been charged, and that the 'allied favour of princes brings benefits to the subject regions.'<sup>74</sup> There is no direct mention of Athanagild, then, so the second letter, I would suggest, introduces the topic as one integral to the wider context of unfolding diplomatic exchanges. Andrew Gillett's most recent analysis has shown a complex function to emotional imagery. He suggests that what we see unfolding is a form of script to be performed as part of the embassies, through which emotional scenarios are used to bring pressure upon the emperor.<sup>75</sup> This is a new direction in the exploration of these letters, and one which I am developing here. In Brunhild's letter to the empress Anastasia, there is a very emotional tone at play:

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<sup>73</sup> EA 26.

<sup>74</sup> EA 29.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Gillett, 'Love and Grief in Post-Imperial Diplomacy: The Letters of Brunhild', *Studies in Emotions and Power in the Late Roman World: papers in honour of Ron Newbold*, eds. B. Sidwell and D. Dzino (Piscataway, 2010) pp. 127-165.

### Brunhild to the empress

In the Name of the Lord, to the Empress.

The time I have desired, most serene Empress, Christ protecting, has arrived, and the proclaimer and friend of your empire, my most excellent son, King Childebert, has attained the age in which he can work on his own, through legates, with the most pious emperor, your husband...

And since most tranquil Empress, by chance the infancy of my young grandson has been acquainted with wandering, and that innocent child of tender years is now a captive, I ask, through the Redeemer of all men, that you would not see the most pious Theodosius taken from you, the sweet son separated from the embrace of his mother, so always will your eyes be delighted by his presence, and your viscera charmed as the imperial birth delighted you. With Christ's favour, I ask that you order that I may receive my little one, that my viscera may be comforted by his embrace, which sighs with gravest sorrow at the absence of the grandchild. As I lost a daughter, I may not lose the sweet pledge from her that remains, and as I am tortured by the death of the child, I may be comforted by you by the swift release of the dear captive. As you see me grieving and him innocent, you may receive the mercy of glory from God, the universal redeemer, and with Christ's favour, with the captive freed, the charity between both peoples may be multiplied and the term of peace extended. The end.<sup>76</sup>

The first, and mostly neglected, question is: who was the empress? The examination of Byzantine political structures, and the empresses within them, is a fascinating comparison against the Frankish world that this study cannot encapsulate; however, work by Lynda Garland, Judith Herrin and Liz James, in particular, can illuminate us at this stage on the details examined here.<sup>77</sup> This is a world in which the title *augusta* was not automatically conferred by marriage, thus being the emperor's wife did not necessarily make a woman the empress – the contemporary John of Ephesos tells of the challenges this created. The previous emperor, Tiberius, had taken as his wife Ino; confusion arises as she changed her name to the imperial Anastasia.<sup>78</sup> Tiberius' successor, Maurice, came to the throne in 582, and had married Anastasia's daughter, Constantina. As a result, there is some debate as to whether the letter examined here is to the still formal empress Anastasia, or to the emperor's wife Constantina. My suggestion here is that it is addressed to the latter – the letter specifically refers to 'your husband' but also to the empress's young son.

The division in the text presented here is my own, to illustrate the limits of previous analyses. Largely ignoring the first half of this letter, historians have stripmined the source to the Athanagild content. This must bring to the forefront questions about constructed

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<sup>76</sup> EA 44.

<sup>77</sup> See Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London, 2001); Judith Herrin, 'The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium', *Past and Present* 169:1 (2000) pp. 3-35 and Lynda M. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204* (London, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 54-56.

emotions.<sup>79</sup> The emphasis on grieving, sorrow and loss is a rhetorical technique used by the author of this letter, not as Dronke once suggested, the key reason why we know this was written by Brunhild herself.<sup>80</sup> Fortunatus was able to write with a very affective female vocabulary for Radegund and Goiswinth, Cassiodorus for Amalasuintha, so this does not tell us anything. In this case, presenting the role of the mother is a rhetorical strategy that one can only see once we set aside the emotional ‘lens’ through which this letter has been seen in the past. Althoff’s performative analysis of emotion is much more useful here – as a way in which power is negotiated, we can see emotion as a tool within Brunhild’s strategy, rather than equating the queen with emotion only.<sup>81</sup>

These letters reveal a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of communication and negotiation. Clearly, whatever ‘opportunity’ the queen had spoken of previously had not come to fruition (the date on this letter is 585) thus the correspondence must take a different approach here. Brunhild asks the empress to compare her position with the queen’s – she invites her reader to look at her in a particular role. In the previous letter to Athanagild, I highlighted the phrase: ‘I do not lose the daughter entirely if... her progeny is preserved for me’. From this letter to the empress comes a similar phrase: ‘As I lost a daughter, I may not lose the sweet pledge from her that remains’. The repetition here cannot be coincidental, with the language reconfigured from one letter to the next. Between 527 and 1204, seven empresses ruled as regents for young sons – this is a world in which the maternal and the political fused as it did in the Frankish kingdom.

Re-reading the first half of the letter, then, with what we now understand about the second, allows us to see a series of constructed languages and personae.<sup>82</sup> That first half announces Childebert’s majority and is entirely political in content – it is the language of diplomacy. In asking that her son take part more firmly in later negotiations, the Frankish position is made clear – Brunhild is to be the one in control at this stage. That control is as a ruler, and the language is separated in this letter between the language of rulership and the affective language of the mother. Yet it is all part of a diplomatic context that previous studies have backgrounded. Ultimately, the ‘Athanagild episode’ confronts issues of

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<sup>79</sup> Pauline Stafford, ‘Review Article: Parents and Children in the Early Middle Ages’, *Early Medieval Europe* 10:2 (2001) p.258.

<sup>80</sup> Dronke, *Women Writers*, p.77 - ‘While there are those official aspects to the letters which in principle could stem from a secretary, there are also wholly personal moments, which it would be far-fetched to believe had been penned for her’.

<sup>81</sup> Barbara Rosenwein, ‘Worrying about Emotions in History’, *American Historical Review* 107:3 (2002) p.832; Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, trans. C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2004) p.73.

<sup>82</sup> Goubert, *Byzance Avant l’Islam I*, p.113. Hodgkin had previously believed that this letter came from 588, along with the letter from Brunhild to Athanagild. It now seems clear that this letter comes from 585, with the original letter to Athanagild written in 584.

succession, not only concerning the infant, but also the announcement of Childebert's majority. The queen here is acutely aware of the life cycle of her family, and the position she holds within it.<sup>83</sup>

It is unfortunate, and yet potentially a conscious decision, that we do not have the empress's response, nor can we be clear about Byzantine female literary practices in this period.<sup>84</sup> Both women held a pivotal position in the cohesion of the political family, yet I can find no other contemporary example of the 'mother' being penned in such detail. On a surface inspection, these letters are the 'golden nuggets' through which the vilified Brunhild can be counterbalanced. How better to diffuse Fredegar's assertion that the queen was responsible for the death of ten kings, many of which her own family, with the unique female voice declaring her love for her grandson? If these letters were specifically preserved at Brunhild's own court, they could be used in different situations as the need demanded it. The desire to read a female voice has meant finding a voice which fits female roles – the mother or the grandmother.<sup>85</sup> However, what we see here is a position of rulership, in which negotiations are fluid and crucial: the language used, then, can be contradictory, move through a series of stages, and potentially be entirely inconsistent.

In dealing with the state, the family is a rhetorical tool which can be invoked, not only by women, but by men also. Letters between the emperor Maurice and Childebert illustrate that Athanagild was a tool, through which Frankish participation in the Lombard war could be secured. In one, Maurice asserts that: 'renown of your rule is twice illustrated for you through a son, three times protected by the reign of a grandson'.<sup>86</sup> This is essentially a warning, and it is warning that I believe the Frankish court responded to, through Brunhild in her first letter, to Athanagild. Maurice closes the letter by saying that action is necessary 'on account of your reputation and that of your sons and grandsons. We had agreed to an oath of allegiance so that your father, the most Christian of leaders, by this action will be daily delivered from worry about you'.<sup>87</sup> The emperor clearly invokes the family line, in looking forward and back. The reference to Sigibert is the warning that Childebert may not only ruin his name, but that of his father also. If, as I have suggested,

<sup>83</sup> Stafford, 'Review Article: Parents and Children', p.261.

<sup>84</sup> Margaret Mullett, 'Writing in early mediaeval Byzantium', *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990) p.156. She has commented that there were 'women *literati* at most periods of Byzantine history, though there may well have been fewer than in societies whose literacy practices are frequently compared with Byzantium'.

<sup>85</sup> Clarissa Atkinson highlighted the tension in the fact that, while not all women are mothers, all mothers are women, a point which has been previously unhistoricised, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1991) p.5.

<sup>86</sup> EA 40.

<sup>87</sup> EA 40.

Brunhild may have been a supervisor of Childebert's correspondence, then the queen is being made aware that the reputation, and future, of the line is at stake. In recognising the Merovingian family as a *constructed* entity, we must focus more on the political family than the affective language of the kin group.<sup>88</sup>

### Childebert's correspondence

If Maurice uses the family as a tool, Childebert does the same: I will briefly examine the letter to Theodosius and to the patriarch, before introducing the most mysterious letter we will encounter, one from Childebert to the emperor Maurice.

First, Childebert writes to the son of Maurice, Theodosius. It is this letter which elicits the response from Maurice to Childebert, involving Sigibert and warning him about his future as a ruler. The content of this letter, then, had an effect. In this plea, Childebert appeals as a son of a king to a man in the same position. Just as Brunhild had asked the empress to view her as a mother, Childebert appeals in the exact same way here. This letter specifically situates Athanagild within the kin group, 'an orphan without relations'.<sup>89</sup> Immediately after, however, Childebert places Athanagild within the political family cycle, alluding I believe to his own development as a ruler. He speaks of Athanagild's 'years of minority', and that it is better he 'grow to manhood'. Placing the responsibility on the future emperor's shoulders, Childebert asks: 'do not let him experience the misery of more lamentable wanderings'. Simultaneously, Childebert wrote to the patriarch of Constantinople, focusing on his religious responsibility, in allowing this atrocity against the infant to take place. This is the only letter in which there is a sense of dishonour committed against Brunhild's daughter, Ingund: 'our very young nephew has been taken to the imperial city from a mother cheated'.<sup>90</sup>

The final letter is one largely disregarded in any discussion of the 'Athanagild episode'. I believe it to have been sent along with the two letters discussed above, in that first embassy to the Byzantine court, by the second group of messengers. It reads as follows:

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<sup>88</sup> Ian Wood, in his instance on that political and constructed family, himself succumbs to the declaration that she was 'for the most part devoted to her descendants', - *MK*, p. 237.

<sup>89</sup> *EA* 34.

<sup>90</sup> *EA* 31.

### Childebert to Maurice

Since we sought that servant of yours, our relative, the son of Scaptimund, to stay with us in the royal city where we are strong, we entreat you by pious prayer, that he who would act by your example in governing the Roman state very happily by succession, to allow his desires through your tranquillity for either his life to be seemed worthy and his eternal majesty to be fulfilled, when you order the servant, through your calmness, to be released to us.<sup>91</sup>

The keen reader will note that there is no mention of Athanagild – only a relative taken hostage, whom Childebert is concerned for. Certainly, there is no evidence of a ‘Scaptimund’ in any other contemporary source, which is what should make the reader look more closely. In the notes accompanying the *MGH*, Gundlach admitted ignorance about this figure, though later in the *Neues Archiv*, he suggested that the son of Scaptimund was a distant relative, ‘probably taken prisoner at the same time as Ingund and Athanagild’.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Troya believed that this figure was a Visigothic relative of Brunhild, perhaps a nephew or cousin of her father, Athanagild.<sup>93</sup> Reverdy believed it to be a companion of Athanagild, taken prisoner at the same time, but still a relative of Childebert, while Hodgkin saw it as another name for Hermenegild.<sup>94</sup> The ‘son of Scaptimund’ has been given very little attention since, until Gillett’s recent work, yet as it is clear that this figure was a member of Brunhild’s family, he must be re-considered. In that first embassy, we do not have one letter directly to the emperor concerning Athanagild- that is, until we re-evaluate this letter. The use of dynastic language and the insistence on this individual being a member of Childebert’s family point in one direction – that the individual is Athanagild. Goubert began the palaeographical reasoning to this suggestion, but did not take it far enough. Instead of ‘Filium Scaptimundi’, as the manuscript suggests, the reading could be ‘Filium sctae Ingundis’ or ‘sctae puellae Ingundis’, either the son of Saint Ingund or the son of the young female saint Ingund.<sup>95</sup> Alternative possibilities are ‘Sor. N-trae Ingundis’, our sister Ingund, or ‘S. Captae Ingundis’, the son of our captive sister Ingund.

If we imagine that this letter was the first, concerning Athanagild, from Childebert to the emperor, then it is clear that both voices from the Frankish court were required to do different things. Brunhild and her son’s authorial voices, with all the various filters applied, show different kinds of language to attempt to move negotiations forward. To call Brunhild

<sup>91</sup> EA 47.

<sup>92</sup> Goubert, *Byzance Avant l’Islam I*, p.118.

<sup>93</sup> Troya in Goubert, *Byzance Avant l’Islam I*, p.119.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p.120.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p.120.

a self-conscious author may go too far – it is unlikely that she herself wrote the letters in her name. I believe, however, that there is evidence that she would have had influence over both the language of this diplomacy and that of her son. This section has only examined the Athanagild letters with a new perspective; the work which could follow should focus on the preservation of those letters, in the *Epistolae Austrasicae*. We may conjecture that the collection was compiled at her court, I suggest in the form of a chancery at Metz or Trier, supported by bureaucrats in her retinue. The use of the letters, in their contemporary context, we cannot be certain of. Is it possible that Brunhild had a hand in which letters were preserved? Possibly. This queen had the ability to understand the political machine of which she was a part, and used it to great effect. In this case, the Frankish court desired a Visigothic grandson, for immediately political effect, but the discourse of that diplomacy was preserved in a letter collection I hope to see examined in depth.

## Conclusion

Both the Hermenegild rebellion and the Athanagild episode highlight Brunhild's enduring involvement in Visigothic politics. More than that, they highlight the challenges around the representation of female involvement in succession struggles. Goiswinth is a figure who should now be foregrounded as a pivotal player in Visigothic activities in this period, and the connection with her daughter should be played out. The examination of Brunhild's desire to retrieve her grandson has taken us into an examination of the discourses of female rule, and the potential for a female voice. Brunhild was a series of *personae*, constructed not perhaps by herself in her letters, but by those men who wrote about her. The way in which one man's images, that of Gregory of Tours, are manipulated by another's, the *LHF* author, forms the basis of the next chapter. It is the female involvement with succession which allows the eighth-century author to entirely subvert Gregory's representations, and which now allows us to consider the historical and textual relationship between Brunhild and Fredegund.



## Chapter 7

### The destruction of ‘dynasty’

**‘If they may not rule, for what reason did I raise them?’<sup>1</sup>**

#### Introduction

The words of Queen Clotild, wife of Clovis I, encapsulate the female role in the politics of succession explored within the last of this study’s historical works, the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum*, a work which takes its reader through the transition from the Merovingians to the Carolingians and ends its tale in 727. This chapter will focus on the editorial decisions made within this work, specifically in relation to the images of women. The way in which the author uses Gregory of Tours’ *Decem Libri Historiarum*, filters, edits and even entirely subverts the representations for the *LHF*, are symptomatic of their motives, writing in an entirely different political context from the bishop. For Gregory, a Frankish king was a Christian king – his presentation of the Frankish origin story attests their holy blood.<sup>2</sup> The *LHF* author dismisses the religious link to the origin story, and looks for only one thing in its king: to be a member of a royal line. The politics of succession, or ‘dynasty’, will be the focus of this chapter.

Four men in particular are given applause in the *LHF*: Clovis, Lothar II, Dagobert I and Childebert III. Of those four, the first two are connected to very powerful women in the text: Clotild as the wife of Clovis and Fredegund as the mother of Lothar II. For Nelson, it was the level of attention paid to women in this work that led her to suggest that both the *LHF* and the anonymous *Annales Mettenses Priores*, were written by women.<sup>3</sup> It is a possibility that this study cannot debate, but recognises: the crucial point for our purposes here is that historians had not previously directly engaged with the repertoire of women presented within the *LHF*. Alongside this, I would propose that historians are still not entirely sure how to examine these late Merovingian women’s relationship with succession. Brunhild was a regent for three generations; Fredegund was a regent for her son; as was Clotild. How did they themselves live the experience of succession – did they think of their family lines as a *dynasty*? No, for this is a contemporary term which we as historians use to categorise a line of succession. Ultimately, there is no textbook definition for dynasty in Merovingian Gaul, even less so a definition for the female role within it.

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<sup>1</sup> *LHF* 24.

<sup>2</sup> *DLH* - book I covers the beginnings of church history and how it relates to Gregory’s present time.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Nelson, ‘Gender and Genre in Women Historians of the Early Middle Ages’, *The Frankish World, 750-900* (London, 1996) p.196.

McNamara, in 2003, revisited the ‘power of women through the family’<sup>4</sup> and Wood traced women in the Pippinid family in 2004<sup>5</sup>: recently, then, historians have been asking just how we understand female participation in succession politics. How these women understood the collusion of the female and political cycle may be entirely different to the textual representation of it. The vocabulary can be a limitation to our understanding. I refrained, in the previous chapter, from suggesting that Brunhild was involved with dynasty, and here I wish to examine the *LHF*’s portrayal of regents and succession politics. In this chapter, I will consider Brunhild and Fredegund alongside each other more fully than I have anywhere else.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, the number of manuscripts in circulation of the *LHF* far exceeded those of Gregory and Fredegar, according to this work its ‘bestseller’ accolade. The various challenges associated with this text had often led to its dismissal by historians, presented excellently by Rosamond McKitterick when she stated that the *LHF* struck chords with medieval audiences which modern ones have failed to hear.<sup>6</sup> The contentious issues surrounding this work have been outlined in the introduction to this study, thus do not need to be repeated here, with the exception of some key points. The earliest manuscript we have of the *LHF* postdates the work by over sixty years, and it is a manuscript full of editorial challenges. Of the almost ninety pages of edited text, only around ten contain events which could have happened within its author’s lifetime – only in chapters 43 to 53 does the *LHF*’s author write an independent account of the events at the turn of the eighth century. The author, however, never alludes to his sources for the rest of his account, and instead asks for the *LHF* to be read on its own terms. As a result, the historian’s analysis of its intertextuality may threaten to lead one down the garden path into the linguistic ‘prison house’,<sup>7</sup> as Patrick Geary put it. Conclusions are not out of reach in a study of the *LHF*, while admitting that it is a work which may raise more questions than it answers.

The complexities surrounding the authorship of this text may once have diminished its authority in some historians’ eyes, but that no longer is the case.<sup>8</sup> From Krusch’s early

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<sup>4</sup> McNamara, J.A., ‘Women and Power through the Family Revisited’, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. M.C.Erler and M. Kowaleski (Ithaca, 2003) pp. 17-30.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Wood, ‘Genealogy defined by women: the case of the Pippinids’, *GEMW*, pp. 234-256.

<sup>6</sup> McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Geary, *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (Vienna, 1994) p.11.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Goffart called for historians to not diminish the authority of a text without a clear authorship, the challenges of which he encountered when analysing Fredegar: ‘The Fredegar Problem Reconsidered’, *Speculum* 38:2 (1963) p. 206.

suggestion of Rouen,<sup>9</sup> to Kurth's suggestion of a monastic authorship, from Saint-Denis,<sup>10</sup> through to Gerberding's secular author penning at the same monastery,<sup>11</sup> and finally Nelson's suggestion of a *female* author from Notre Dame Soissons,<sup>12</sup> debate rages as to the location, perhaps even gender, of this author. Despite the anonymity, more than any other work in this study, the *LHF*'s intentions seem the clearest: a Neustrian persuasion permeates this text.<sup>13</sup> In this work, *Franci* represents a very specific group of Neustrian elites, which may enhance the partiality of the work, but also contributes to this study's consideration of the importance of memory, particularly social memory. For McKitterick, this is the work which focuses on creating that 'shared social memory'.<sup>14</sup> While King Sisebut's *Passio Desiderii* attempted to manipulate the memory of a once-Visigothic princess, the *LHF* attempts to create a history of a particular group, namely those in Soissons. This is a highly nuanced text, in which creating the history involves manipulating past images to fit the aims of the author – the image of Brunhild, then, is absolutely key to promoting a Neustrian agenda.

I will be using the *LHF* within its Merovingian context, not examining women such as Brunhild and Fredegund through the looking glass of the Carolingian rise to power, as has been done in the past.<sup>15</sup> Yet while other chronicles detail the rise of the Pippinids in detail, it is given relatively little treatment in the *LHF*,<sup>16</sup> and using this as an example, I wish to focus on the way in which the *LHF* author looks back upon the Merovingians, rather than look forward.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruno Krusch, in his introduction to the *LHF* in *MGH SSRM II*, p.275.

<sup>10</sup> Godefroid Kurth, 'Étude critique sur le *Liber Historiae Francorum*', *Études franques*, Vol. 2 (Paris, 1919) pp. 47-52.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians and the Liber Historiae Francorum* (Oxford, 1987) pp. 148-50.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson, 'Gender and Genre', p.195.

<sup>13</sup> As McKitterick put it, 'the raison d'être could be...the definition of a people by means of its history', *History and Memory*, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> McKitterick, *History and Memory*, p.85.

<sup>15</sup> *MK*, p.257.

<sup>16</sup> See Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow, 2000) pp. 6-7.

## Women and succession

This is a work in which a woman is measured against her role in perpetuating the royal line. Nelson showed, in 1978, that regency ‘imposed its own time-limit and tenure was non-renewable’.<sup>17</sup> Rule alongside a male relative, as Brunhild discovered, could be a fickle business: she was expelled by one grandson, and moved on to another. Yet the *LHF* does not appear interested in the vulnerability of the role, but instead in its strength when it succeeds.

The first queen we are introduced to is Basina, an adulteress, just as Fredegund was represented. That adultery was unimportant, however, because:

She had a son and called him Clovis. He was the greatest of all the kings of the Franks and a very brave warrior.<sup>18</sup>

As the mother of Clovis, Basina is assigned her value within the *LHF*: the first vision of a queen that the reader sees, then, is one which accords her a pivotal role as the mother of an heir. This continues with the representation of Clotild, the wife of Clovis, who is given what can only be described as a *gesta* within this text.

She is the vision in the *LHF* of what it should mean to be a queen – I refrain from using ‘queenship’ - and it is Clotild’s role, I would argue, that is the one against which all future queens in the text are measured. Women, as the bearers of sons, are the key source of legitimacy for the *LHF* author. Not only does Clotild fulfil this role, but she does so with the utmost Christian piety – it is she who is said to baptise her king, his sisters, the army and then the entire Frankish people. Not only does she raise her own sons, she then raises the sons of her enemy. She is the ultimate queen-regent. When her own sons demand that she hand over the orphans she is raising, they give her two options: either they are to be tonsured or killed. It is at this moment that Clotild is said to raise the most apt question in the *LHF*: ‘If they may not rule, for what reason did I raise them?’<sup>19</sup> These are potentially the most pivotal words for understanding the author’s view of women in this work. Clotild would rather see the orphans dead than disgraced, so hands them over and ensures their proper Christian burial. She prays that civil war does not erupt between her sons and shows complete piety until the end of her days.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’, p. 235.

<sup>18</sup> *LHF* 7.

<sup>19</sup> *LHF* 24.

<sup>20</sup> The civil war that she prevents is a point of comparison with Brunhild, who is said to cause the feud between her grandsons by the *VC*, *VD*, *Chronicle* and *LHF*.

Clotild is the model of ‘how to do’ motherhood within this text – it is not about maternal feeling, in that very modern sense, but about the very political notion of succession, which was developed in the previous chapter. Looking later on in the *LHF*, Nelson focused on the representations of Balthild, Ansfléd and Plectrud. It is useful to remember that Fredegar, writing at the start of the 660s, was viewing feminine power through the experiences of regencies of women such as Balthild –he stated that one of Lothar’s main faults is the fact that he listened to women too much.<sup>21</sup> To Fredegar, on opening the door to women, one opened the door to disorder. The *LHF* author, however, has no such view.

Each of the three women mentioned above are said to hold positions of power. The author has little concern for the ethics through which power is wielded: he refers to both Balthild and Ansfléd as both cunning and forceful,<sup>22</sup> in much a similar way as Fredegund is described; furthermore, Ansfléd instigates the murder of Berchar.<sup>23</sup> Yet each of these three women is given a commanding position within her family’s structure: Plectrud is even named as a governmental figure after her husband’s death, whereas the king was not named as such.<sup>24</sup> The point is this: the prominence of women in this text should open up a variety of questions about the representations of female figures at the crux of their political family.

### **Gregory of Tours and the *LHF***

This chapter will focus on those sections of the *LHF* which are manipulated from the *Decem Libri Historiarum*: far from being ‘not worth mentioning’,<sup>25</sup> they are integral to a study of Queen Brunhild. This is simply a snapshot through which further studies of Brunhild’s image in the *LHF* may begin, and develops the key arguments made by Nelson and Gerberding, in particular, in their nuanced readings of the text. Not at any stage does the author of the *LHF* refer the reader back to Gregory’s original work, nor does he distinguish between the information he borrows and the new accounts. I will analyse the way in which the *LHF* manipulates the images of Brunhild, and her counterpart Fredegund, from those offered by Gregory of Tours, and how this contributes to the wider theme of

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<sup>21</sup> *Chron.* IV.42.

<sup>22</sup> *LHF* 42;45.

<sup>23</sup> *LHF* 42.

<sup>24</sup> See Paul Fouracre and Richard Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) pp. 92-94.

<sup>25</sup> McKitterick refers here to past interpretations of the text - *History and Memory*, p.10.

Brunhild's destruction of 'dynasty', work that has not been given enough attention previously.

The *LHF* author uses Gregory in a six book redaction and shortens it to thirty short chapters: the manuscript challenge identified in the introduction need not be repeated. How the *LHF* author completes his textual excavation of the *Decem Libri Historiarum* is pivotal to understanding changing representations of Brunhild. This author gives the *LHF* an authority that is deceptive, just as King Sisebut attempted to provide the authoritative vision of the queen in his *Vita Desiderii*, for a very specific Visigothic audience. The location of the *LHF* author, and the changes this creates, is symptomatic of the seamless way in which Gregory's text is assimilated into the *LHF*: where Gregory said that places were on one side, the *LHF* author said that they were on the other.<sup>26</sup> Soissons is the key to understanding much of the author's bias - Gregory of Tours' *Decem Libri Historiarum* emphasised the importance of Soissons as a centre for Clovis's career: it was the palace for many of the Neustrian kings, and Clovis had made it his principal residence. The *LHF* author highlights Soissons as the location of Pippin's election: it is a way of pinpointing, in one location, the transition between the Merovingians and the Carolingians. However, the use of Soissons does one more pivotal thing: when the *Franci* represent the Neustrian people, the Neustrian / Austrasian divide becomes more deeply felt.

The most infamous Austrasian queen at this author's disposal was Brunhild, and her enemy so conveniently, was the Neustrian queen Fredegund, often in residence at Soissons. The battle lines are drawn. One can imagine that, at Soissons, oral tales had passed down over generations at court about these two queens – this text, with its free sense of structure and chronology seems, more than any other, to feed into those tales. The women presented by the *LHF* author are allowed the full range of that author's rhetorical capabilities: we have the tales of Clovis's pursuit of Clotild, but even better, in Fredegund, the author has a character he can insert into sensational tales. The godmother trick, the murder of Sigibert, her clandestine affair with Landeric, her victory over the Austrasians – all are tales not given to us in any other text. Once we understand the wider context of a Neustrian / Austrasian divide, and the importance of story-telling, we can look to the editorial decisions that the *LHF* author makes over Gregory's text.

In Gregory of Tours' *Decem Libri Historiarum*, the two great rivals Brunhild and Fredegund are quite simply represented thus: Brunhild, good; Fredegund, evil. This study

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<sup>26</sup> See Bernard Bachrach, 'Introduction', *Liber Historiae Francorum*, ed. and trans. B. Bachrach (Kansas, 1973) p.21.

has analysed Gregory's depiction of Brunhild in some detail, some points of which will be repeated here. For that author, Fredegund was the villainess of the piece, alongside her husband Chilperic. Brunhild, as we have seen, was responsible for Gregory's position at Tours in 573, thus she is given a much more delicate treatment. The representation of these women by the *LHF* author entirely subverts that of Gregory of Tours so that its reader sees: Fredegund, good; Brunhild, evil. While the author concedes that Fredegund was an adulteress, we are told that she was beautiful and exceedingly clever.<sup>27</sup> Fortunatus, one may recall, did not have at his disposal the usual tropes to describe an ideal queen, when considering Fredegund, and instead had to mould his representation in the light of his wider aim, perhaps staying out of trouble. The *LHF* author faced a similar challenge: he had to admit that Fredegund was an adulteress, for he goes on to tell the raucous tale which surrounds it. However, the author finds a language that still presents her as a queen in favourable terms. To find that language, the *LHF* author is forced to depart from Gregory's presentation: he engages with the relationship with succession, that the bishop had not seen materialise in the same way the *LHF* author had. Gregory died in 594; he had only seen Brunhild act as regent for her son and did not have the opportunity to see both her and Fredegund end their lives in very different ways than he might have desired; the *LHF* author had the benefit of knowing how the story ends: in Fredegund's Christian burial, and Brunhild's fiery demise, the *LHF* author successfully subverts Gregory's original images, so that they match the ends of the queens they describe.

While Fredegund gave birth to the celebrated Lothar and was responsible for the Neustrian victory over the Austrasians, Brunhild is shown to have pursued a destructive path within her own family. She is said to urge Theuderic II to attack Lothar, his godfather, and then to attack his brother Theudebert II. From there, she is said to have killed Theudebert's children, poison her grandson Theuderic, and then kill his children as well.<sup>28</sup> Presented as the enemy of God, she is held responsible for those royal murders, as the *Franci* clamour for her to die, with every manner of torture. The representation of Brunhild's death will be treated in the next chapter, but it is enough to say here that, while Fredegund's resting place is a Christian burial ground, Brunhild's is in the fire. Why, then, does Brunhild suffer such a fall from the grace Gregory had accorded her? As I have said, the *LHF* author knew the end of the story. By 727, the dissemination of the *Passio Desiderii*, and more specifically, the *Vita Columbani*, must have had an effect upon this author – certainly this is not a work with ecclesiastical intent, but the fact that much of the

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<sup>27</sup> *LHF* 31.

<sup>28</sup> *LHF* 35.

*Vita Columbani* focuses on Brunhild's destruction of her family line cannot have gone entirely unnoticed. More aptly, as the Merovingian swansong grew louder and louder, this Neustrian author had at his disposal an Austrasian queen who had destroyed her line, and a Neustrian one who had a celebrated Merovingian son in Lothar II. It seems perfectly viable that quite simply, Brunhild suffered in the *LHF* because she had made the mistake of being the enemy of the Soissons queen Fredegund.<sup>29</sup>

The additions that the *LHF* author provides to Gregory's original text range from Kurth's estimation of 30,<sup>30</sup> most of which were geographical, to Gerberding's 80.<sup>31</sup> Much work has been done on the greater emphasis given to the *Franci* as active political agents in the *LHF*,<sup>32</sup> but the focus here will be on those changes which affect the representations of Brunhild and Fredegund. In chapters 31 to 34 of the *LHF*, the author inserts Fredegund into Gregory's parallel account more than five times – after Gregory has ended his tale upon his death, the *LHF* author is free to put Fredegund into the narrative much more frequently in his own account. It is prudent to examine the manipulation of Gregory's accounts in turn.

### The aftermath of Galswinth's death

The first change comes when Chilperic murders his wife Galswinth, Brunhild's sister. The ramifications of this death have been examined in an earlier chapter and, while Gregory hints at Fredegund's involvement, he cannot overtly declare it. Gregory, therefore, simply states that Chilperic ordered a servant to strangle his queen.<sup>33</sup> The *LHF*'s interpretation of the event states what Gregory could not: Chilperic murdered his wife due to 'Fredegund's evil advice'.<sup>34</sup> From Jonas of Bobbio to King Sisebut, we have seen the trope of the queen who offers 'evil advice': usually attributed to Brunhild, the first mention of Fredegund in the *LHF* illustrates her murderous capabilities. This may seem inconsistent

<sup>29</sup> It seems like no coincidence that the *LHF* author adds a Soissons connection to his representation of Clotild: in chapter 12, the author states that Clovis and Clotild were married in Soissons, a location Gregory omits. The *LHF* author attempts to create links between two of its celebrated queens, and link them in terms of a very Neustrian-centred vision of succession politics.

<sup>30</sup> Kurth, 'Étude critique', pp. 53-6.

<sup>31</sup> Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians*, p.148.

<sup>32</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, pp. 163-5 - as an example, the tale of Clovis and Clotild's courtship is accompanied by the mention of Clovis's advisor Aurelian. Fredegund mentions him also, but in the *LHF* it is Aurelian who is said to have encouraged Clovis to convert. Chapter 13 of the *LHF* also features an entirely new account, concerning Aurelian's efforts to take Clotild's treasure.

<sup>33</sup> *DLH* IV.28.

<sup>34</sup> *LHF* 31.



with the favourable picture the *LHF* provides, but to address this, I must consider the *LHF*'s second change simultaneously.

The reader is returned to the tale of Chilperic's first wife, Audovera. Gregory simply mentions that she was dismissed by her husband, but the *LHF* gives a fascinating tale of a young Fredegund's deception. The author tells us that Fredegund was of low rank, serving her mistress Audovera. Upon the birth of a daughter, Fredegund suggested to Audovera that the child must be baptised before the king's return. The bishop is prepared, but there was no lady present to act as godmother to the child, thus Fredegund suggested to the queen that with no-one able to equal Audovera, the queen herself should hold her. Fredegund immediately goes outside to meet the king and asks a probing question:

‘With whom will my lord king sleep this night, because my lady the queen is concerned with being a mother to your daughter Childasinda?’ And he said: ‘If I cannot sleep with her, I will sleep with you’.<sup>35</sup>

This vignette has it all: sex, treachery, court intrigue. Recalled in direct speech, the moment is given immediacy. The discerning reader would recognise instantly that this would not be Gregory's presentation of such a moment, but it is seamlessly integrated into Gregory's narrative. Fredegund has successfully duped her queen, resulting in Audovera's expulsion to a monastery with her infant child, named for the first time in the *LHF*. A modern viewpoint may not comprehend the problem here: when Audovera held her child out, she inadvertently became godmother to her own child. To Chilperic, this was a shameful act which allowed him to repudiate his queen.<sup>36</sup> Did the event occur? In all probability, it did not. In the only in-depth study of this episode, Pauline Taylor showed that the law forbidding a godparent to marry a parent was not recorded before 692.<sup>37</sup> As Fredegund cannot have known of this law, this incident must be entirely constructed by the author in 727. Perhaps oral tales in Soissons had been passed down, asking how Fredegund became a queen. A more likely rationale may be that, in the early eighth century, further legislation on godparent marriage emerged,<sup>38</sup> and the *LHF* author was finding a place in Gregory's accounts to insert contemporary concerns, applicable to his audience.

I have pointed at the death of Sigibert I as a rupture in more ways than one – for Brunhild, for the Merovingian line, for textual representations of Merovingian history. Gregory of Tours blamed Fredegund for the murder – indeed, it is his biggest example of

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<sup>35</sup> *LHF* 31.

<sup>36</sup> See the key study on early medieval parenthood by Joseph Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> Pauline Taylor, ‘Fredegundis and Audovera’, *Modern Language Notes* 43:2 (1928) pp. 94-95.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.95.

her villainy. Far from attempting to rehabilitate her, the *LHF* provides its readers with the speech in which she convinced the murderers to do the deed.<sup>39</sup> Without Chilperic's knowledge, she promised two men wealth if they succeeded and prayers for their soul if they were caught. After the murder was confirmed, it is Fredegund who was said to have announced the good news to her husband, whereas in Gregory's account, the king learned of his brother's death from messengers.<sup>40</sup> These three changes from Gregory's account make events so much more sensational: Fredegund is a woman who will do anything to become queen, and then will do anything to ensure her king is the only king. The murderous and cunning qualities that Fredegund exhibits are never presented in a negative light: her story is a roaring, epic tale, full of dramatic vignettes that would excite a contemporary audience.

The most titillating of these focuses on Fredegund's adultery – the *LHF* author not only admits it, but instead gives a full description of it: again, a sign that he or she looked for a very specific virtue in women. Chilperic went on the hunt and Fredegund was washing her hair, when a male hit her on the buttocks: it was her king. Believing it was her lover Landeric, she betrayed herself and her adultery and the king was enraged. Fredegund was forced to move into action and went to her lover:

‘Let us send someone who will kill him and who will shout that Childebert the treacherous king of Austrasia did it. And when the king has been killed, we will rule with my son Lothar’....The murderers whom the queen had sent clamoured: ‘Ambush, ambush, this is what King Childebert of Austrasia did to our lord’.<sup>41</sup>

Not only, then, is Fredegund shown as an adulteress, but also a traitor and a murderer. Not only has she murdered Sigibert, but now her own king. She is said to make Landeric mayor of the palace – in fact, Landeric is not attested in this role until the 600s, so that is an invention of the author, as is presumably the whole incident. The fifth addition to Gregory I will approach separately, but let us take these four: Fredegund is an entirely incoherent character, full of these sensational tales. What Ruth Morse has done so successfully, in analysing medieval narrative style, is show that characters do not have to be consistent – they serve a particular purpose in a particular moment of the text.<sup>42</sup> These sensational tales feel like a combination of oral tales and this author's invention. In one of bishop Desiderius' letters, he once said:

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<sup>39</sup> *LHF* 32.

<sup>40</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>41</sup> *LHF* 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages*, pp. 34-40 in particular.

‘I would like, if I were able, to participate in holy conversation with you often, so that just as we used to entertain each other with stories when we were laymen in the court of the most serene King Lothar, so even now, although we have given up that aimlessness completely, we may savour the sweet teachings of Christ’.<sup>43</sup>

If, at the court of Lothar, stories abounded, there is no reason why individuals like Fredegund and Brunhild would not have been featured: these were exceptional women and one must understand the importance of those oral traditions feeding into a constructed social memory.

### Where is Brunhild?

Up until this point, Brunhild is almost entirely absent: where Gregory called her ‘elegant in all that she did, lovely to behold’<sup>44</sup> upon her marriage to Sigibert, the *LHF* author removed these accolades and said nothing. Brunhild’s lot was only thrown in with Fredegund when she married Merovech, Chilperic’s son. As Brunhild threatened to penetrate the Neustrian line, Fredegund burst into action, informing Chilperic that his son was responsible for an uprising against him.<sup>45</sup> The queen also prompted her husband to levy a huge tax across the realm,<sup>46</sup> which I suggested, in chapter 2, may have resulted in an uprising against her. The *LHF* author makes it clear that Fredegund was in control of Chilperic, in a way that Gregory of Tours did not imply. She is at the head of her dynasty, in the same way that Brunhild is now presented to the *LHF* readers in control of hers:

In those days great quarrels arose between Chilperic and Childebert, his nephew. Indeed, Fredegund and Brunhild incited them on both sides.<sup>47</sup>

The language places the two queens in antithetical positions, at the head of rival lines, and this is the theme which the *LHF* author follows throughout. The queens are dealt with in a condensed period of the text, which allows tension to swiftly build – chapters 31-37 cover Fredegund’s career, and 31-40 Brunhild’s. The sensationalism in these chapters matches the ‘bestseller’ accolade of this text. More than a hundred years after their deaths, these two queens must have been prevalent enough in the imagination to accord them this intense treatment. Over the seven chapters which analyse both women together, Walter Pohl’s concept of the early medieval text acting as a ‘construction kit’<sup>48</sup> comes to the fore.

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<sup>43</sup> *Epistolae Desiderii* I.10.

<sup>44</sup> *DLH* IV.35.

<sup>45</sup> *LHF* 33.

<sup>46</sup> *LHF* 33.

<sup>47</sup> *LHF* 35.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Pohl, ‘History in fragments: Montecassino’s politics of memory’, *Early Medieval Europe* 10:3 (2001), p.344.

The *LHF* author foregrounds Fredegund in Gregory's account, backgrounds Brunhild, and then makes both women the head of family lines, one which will succeed, one which will fail. The editorial decisions made by the author are pivotal to our understanding of changing representations of Brunhild.

Gregory's interpretation of the family structure is simple: Brunhild's regency with Childebert is entirely successful, while Fredegund's most destructive qualities emerge on considering her relationship with her family. She rejected her dying son Samson, and later attempted to shut her daughter Ringunth's head inside a chest, as she had dared to tell her mother to get back to her original role as servant, and leave the high-flying to her.<sup>49</sup> None of this finds its way into the *LHF* – its author is firmly in control of the painter's brush, in such a way that he or she can wash over the images of the past, and manipulate them for the present.

The author's use of structure also assists in the creation of his images. Chapter 35, for example, begins with the birth of the great king Lothar:

In these days, Fredegund gave birth to another son whom they called Lothar. After this he went on to become a great king and was the father of Dagobert.<sup>50</sup>

The following is the end sentence of the chapter:

Fredegund, however, with the young King Lothar and with Landeric whom they chose as mayor of the palace, remained in the kingdom. Also, the Franks established the before-mentioned young King Lothar over them in the kingdom.<sup>51</sup>

Fredegund is there at the beginning and end, at Lothar's birth and at his accession. The middle part which I have omitted is the part which I have already examined: the murder of Chilperic. An important part indeed, the *LHF* author chooses to frame his representation of Fredegund with her maternal activities. He forgives her the murder of Chilperic, of Brunhild's husband Sigibert also, her adultery, all because she is the mother of Lothar. The structuring in this chapter means that the first and last lines are the ones the reader will remember: that skeleton is symptomatic of her characterisation: you will not remember the assassinations, but her motherhood instead.

If I have suggested that King Sisebut gave Brunhild her Lady Macbeth moment of guilt in the *Passio Desiderii*, the *LHF* author allowed Fredegund her Macbeth moment also. This is the fifth addition to Gregory and allows the queen responsibility for victory

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<sup>49</sup> *DLH* V.18 and V.24.

<sup>50</sup> *LHF* 35.

<sup>51</sup> *LHF* 35.

over the Austrasians. Childebert launched an attack against the queen and she carried the young Lothar in her arms to battle:

Mounted on their horses and with the young king Lothar being carried in her arms, they came as far as Droisy...with Fredegund and young Lothar they killed the largest part of that army, a countless number, a very large force, from the highest to the lowest.<sup>52</sup>

The queen is so politically astute that she is able to deceive the enemy with woodland in the same way as one sees within the Scottish play.<sup>53</sup> Precedents for Shakespeare aside, it is clear that the *LHF* author takes care to manipulate the images derived from Gregory in such a way that one may not even find it necessary to go back to the original. Fredegund is the force behind king Lothar and she is accorded virtue because of it. While Fredegund preserves her line, Brunhild murders no-one *but* her own line in this text. This is the exact opposite of Gregory's distinction, but it is the representation that the *LHF* author aims to create.

It is no coincidence that it is as queen Fredegund dies, that Brunhild's evil is allowed to jump into action:

She was buried in the basilica of Saint Vincent the martyr at Paris. Theuderic, the king of Burgundy, was handsome and energetic and very hot-headed. With the evil counsel of his grandmother Brunhild he gathered a very large army from Burgundy and led it against Lothar, his cousin.<sup>54</sup>

While Fredegund's evil counsel was with her husband, Brunhild's is with her royal line, and that is the key distinction. The chapter begins with Fredegund's Christian burial, and ends with Brunhild's destruction of her familial links. Fredegund only used direct speech in her encounters with her lover and her husband – the *LHF* author does not present her speaking with her son. Brunhild, however, is presented with direct speech to her grandsons. That speech is full of the 'evil counsel' already described. She said to Theuderic:

'Why do you neglect and why do you not demand your father's 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 of your father?' When Theuderic heard this and since he was fierce in heart, he mobilised a large army and directed it against his brother Theudebert.<sup>55</sup>

This is a pivotal moment within the *LHF* – Fredegund suggests that Theudebert was the son of a gardener, but this text makes him the son of a concubine. The direct speech gives

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<sup>52</sup> *LHF* 36.

<sup>53</sup> William Shakespeare, 'Macbeth', *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Ware, 1996) V.V, p.883.

<sup>54</sup> *LHF* 37.

<sup>55</sup> *LHF* 38.

immediacy to the fact that Brunhild is directly engaged with the destruction of the family line: she outright declares the illegitimacy of her grandson and encourages civil war between them. The severing of the familial link between the two men allowed Theuderic the rationale to march on Theudebert. The end of the chapter is as follows:

Theuderic returned to the city of Metz and Queen Brunhild came to him there. Having seized the boys, he killed the sons of Theudebert. Indeed, he dashed out the brains of the youngest who was still in the white of baptism, by striking him against a stone.<sup>56</sup>

The violence at the end of this chapter is striking, particularly because it affects a member of the royal line. The *LHF* author's keen sense of structure is shown here also: for Fredegund, a chapter began showing her son's birth and ended with his glorious accession. For Brunhild, a chapter begins with her incitement of civil war and ends with the violent death of her infant great-grandson. It is these points which are pivotal in understanding how the *LHF* author may have begun by manipulating Gregory's images, but then moves on to create an entirely coherent, structured sense of Fredegund as positive, Brunhild as evil. Where Clothild protected those children who were not even hers, Brunhild directly targeted those who were closest to her.

After Theuderic died, Theudebert wished to take his daughter for his wife:

Brunhild said to him: 'How can you take the daughter of your brother?' and he answered: 'Did you not tell me that he was not my brother? Why have you made me sin so that I have killed my brother? Evil woman!' And unsheathing his sword, he wished to kill her...Thus she hated him very much and slipped him a poisonous potion by the hand of wicked agents. King Theuderic was ignorant of this and drank the potion. Brunhild then killed his young sons.<sup>57</sup>

Again, the use of direct speech focuses the reader on Brunhild's evil. After Brunhild's lies, she confirmed that her two grandsons were indeed brothers, thus Theudebert has murdered his own family under pretence. This is the only text in which we find this episode, in which Theuderic turned on his grandmother and she gets her revenge. This is a memorable scene in which Brunhild's own quest for power is emphasised. The *LHF* author has no interest in power for power's sake, nor an individual's authority, but only how it contributes to the royal line.

At this stage, I must introduce one other queen whose activities in the *LHF* deserve some consideration: Balthild, wife of Clovis II, the Neustrian king from 639 to 658. The scandal surrounding this queen has been well documented by Nelson, examining Balthild

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<sup>56</sup> *LHF* 38.

<sup>57</sup> *LHF* 39.

as the ‘Jezebel’.<sup>58</sup> The comparison between her and Brunhild is not made in the *LHF*, nor can it even be implied by its reader, for the author passes over the majority of Balthild’s career in silence.<sup>59</sup> With the help of Ebroin, Balthild became a political force, ousting bishops and replacing them with her own men, in an attempt to centralise her authority: all similar to Brunhild. Balthild’s story is practically deleted from the *LHF* and the question is why. She was queen-regent, and had three sons who became kings, so had a pivotal role in succession politics in the same way as Brunhild did. It cannot be because of the queen’s origins as a slave, for Fredegund came from the same background. The issue seems to be that Balthild was a Neustrian queen: any representation of her colours a representation of the *Franci*, the group the *LHF* author focuses on. Balthild was married to an unsuccessful king: perhaps the *LHF* attempts to expunge the memory of a *roi fainéant* and, as a result, expunges that of his wife also. It is an inconsistency which deserves greater attention elsewhere, but the point is that the *LHF* author had another queen with such similar issues at his disposal, but he omits her. Why? Because she was a Neustrian queen.

## Conclusion

It is Brunhild’s evil desires with the destruction of her family line that lead her to her violent end, whereas Fredegund’s positive Neustrian influence led her to a Christian burial. Brunhild would do anything, it seems, to stay in power: when Lothar apprehended her at the end of her days, she comes to him as an old ‘Jezebel’, in her eighties, and attempted to marry him. She has no interest in her Austrasian line. What Lothar asks her is pivotal:

‘O enemy of the Lord, why have you done so much evil and dared to kill so many of the royal line?’.<sup>60</sup>

This is the point of the *LHF*: Brunhild had gone too far by involving herself in succession politics, to disastrous ends. It is a question which is the exact opposite of that Clothild once raised. It is important that Brunhild’s voice is now silenced, and Lothar is allowed his speech, the implications of which are reviewed in the following chapter.

The attack on Brunhild in the *LHF* does two things. It takes one of the only texts sympathetic to the queen, filters it, and completely subverts it. The queen becomes a caricature of her former self, and another queen takes Brunhild’s place at the forefront of

<sup>58</sup> Janet Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’.

<sup>59</sup> See Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians*, pp. 67-9 for the silence in the *LHF* on Balthild’s career.

<sup>60</sup> *LHF* 40.

the text. Historians view Gregory's text as seminal, as it should be, and yet for a medieval audience, it was the *LHF*'s vision of Brunhild which was far more likely to have been read. Carolingian authors were writing at a time when the role of Carolingian women in succession was contentious. Charlemagne had repudiated the authority of the empress Irene as unnatural, for she was a woman, and this is far from the only case. The way in which the *LHF* is used is intrinsically linked with the perceptions of female power circulating in the Carolingian period, and cannot be ignored. In the high middle ages, that idea of the 'arts of memory' was given much greater attention than in the Merovingian age, but I would argue that each of the authors investigated in this study engage with that idea of creating a memory of this individual. Once one accepts the value of an image, particularly as it is represented in a text, one actively participates in the construction of a memory around it. The *LHF*, more than any other work, deliberately targets the memories of one group of people – the Neustrians. The key, for the author, to understanding female power was to understand succession: the benefit of hindsight allowed him to see that where Fredegund had succeeded, Brunhild had failed.

The implications of critiquing the very term 'dynasty' are both historical and textual: did Brunhild and Fredegund understand that they were at the helm of a family structure? It is likely that they did, but they did not understand that structure as a dynasty. We must begin to open up our understandings of what dynasty meant in early medieval Europe, and specifically in late Merovingian Gaul. If we think textually, if the *LHF* author was in fact a woman, should we read its vision of family politics in a different way? If I have suggested both male and female authors use gender as a tool, then perhaps not. What is pivotal is that the political machinations of these women are linked to their role in the family cycle – they are mothers and regents. They are female roles, but are not necessarily defined by gender. With this in mind, we begin to ask who Brunhild was when the political walls began to close in: what roles was she performing, and what had she done to deserve such a death?



## Chapter 8

### The body may be destroyed...

**‘The stalk which emerges from the soil will not wither until its root is severed’.<sup>1</sup>**

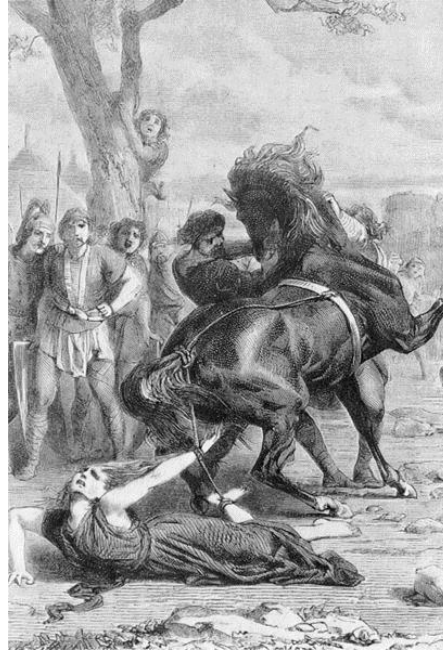


Figure 8.1: A nineteenth-century vision of the death of Brunhild.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

King Chilperic utters the above words in his correspondence with bishop Egidius of Rheims. Letters were produced at the bishop's trial for his involvement in a plot to murder Childebert II, which declared that 'Brunhild was to be destroyed first and her son killed afterwards'.<sup>3</sup> In her first regency, then, the queen was identified as the 'root' of her family tree, and the source of its power. It was a power, as has been illustrated, perceived negatively by those who came into conflict with it: in order to sever Brunhild's line, *she* would have to go. What Chilperic did not know is that, after his death in 584, the queen would go on to perform another thirty years of regencies for her grandsons and great-grandsons. Numerous assassination attempts would come and go, but Brunhild was not so easy to dispense with.

The sheer length of Brunhild's career – here explored as her transition from king's daughter to king's wife, her activities within the 'politics of survival', and her engagement

<sup>1</sup> *DLH* X.19.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Philippoteaux and Eugène Girardet, 'The Torture of Brunhild', *The Masterpieces of French Art* vol. I, ed. by W. Armstrong (Philadelphia, 1883) p.70.

<sup>3</sup> *DLH* X.19.

with the line of succession – has been well acknowledged, and yet the unique end of that tenure has not been given the attention it deserves. Brunhild cannot exit the historical stage quietly: the sheer political force of this queen meant that she could never be relegated to a monastery, like Chilperic's wife Audovera; could not enjoy 'holy retirement' like Clotild or Radegund; could not be assassinated as discreetly as her sister Galswinth. The distinction between the 'good' and the 'bad' death, effectively examined by Paul Binski,<sup>4</sup> is no more so apparent than between Brunhild and her rival Fredegund. Despite the latter's violent activities, the loyal *LHF* states that the queen was 'old and full of days', and was buried in the basilica of Saint Vincent, at Paris.<sup>5</sup> By 'full of days', we may read that Fredegund's political usefulness was over – unlike her rival – and she is accorded a Christian burial and peaceful end. Everything is the opposite with Brunhild: hers is the 'bad' death *par excellence*.

Previous historiographical trends in royal death, burial, and commemoration tended to focus on the king, as only the king's demise marked a change in the transmission of power.<sup>6</sup> John Carmi Parsons' study of the burials of English queens up to 1500 is significant as one of the first studies to focus on a queen's death,<sup>7</sup> and while this has proved a useful starting point, it is apparent that our ruler's end is so unique that the limited historiography on female demise may not be particularly useful. There is no other Merovingian, nor early medieval evidence, of Brunhild's type of death, and certainly no other queen on record who meets such a dramatic fate, bar the Old Testament 'Jezebel' herself (and only in one specific detail).<sup>8</sup> Any focus on Brunhild's end has been on its 'particularly public and barbarous' quality,<sup>9</sup> but not on the unique nature of it: the only comparison I might find is to the sixteenth-century Mary, Queen of Scots, also subject to a

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London, 1996) p.47: the representations of death are binary: the good death was a death in the bosom of the church, a guarantor of the future for the living and dead; a bad death contravened the preparedness and virtue of the Christian norm.

<sup>5</sup> *LHF* 37.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Hallam, 'Royal Burial and the Cult of Kingship in France and England, 1060-1330', *Journal of Medieval History* 8:4 (1982) pp. 359-81; Michael Evans, *The Death of Kings-Royal Deaths in Medieval England* (London, 2003); Janet L. Nelson, 'Carolingian royal funerals', in *Rituals of Power From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. F. Theuvs and J. Nelson (Leiden, 2000) pp. 131-184. Also *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, eds. G. Althoff, J. Fried and P. Geary (Cambridge, 2002), in particular John W. Bernhardt, 'King Henry II of Germany: Royal Self-Representation and Historical Memory', pp. 39-70. For the woman's expected role within these structures, see Van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe*.

<sup>7</sup> John Carmi Parsons, 'Never was a body buried in England with such solemnity and honour': The Burials and Posthumous Commemorations of English Queens to 1500', *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997) pp. 317-337.

<sup>8</sup> The Old Testament queen was ordered to be thrown from a window by Jehu and her body was trampled by horses: see II *Kings*: 30-37.

<sup>9</sup> *MK*, p.134; see also Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', who called Brunhild's death a 'dreadful fate', p.223 and Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, pp. 386-88.

political execution ordered by a member of her family.<sup>10</sup> In common was their political authority: both had meddled with the line of succession. Evans has pointed out that the violence of a queen's death is directly related to her authority: if queens did not 'wield power, they never needed to be violently removed'.<sup>11</sup> Brunhild's demise is precisely *because* of her agency: she was at the heart of her Merovingian family, and the desire to neutralise Brunhild's physical body was about neutralising her political power, and 'severing' the root.

Our queen's end is turned by some authors into a 'spectacle', something to be viewed, and of course a violent death is 'inherently more entertaining' than a peaceful end.<sup>12</sup> There are various lenses through which both the early medieval writer, and we as historians, may view the unprecedented end of this female ruler. From a gendered perspective, the wider framework of male violence over women as some form of social control is best examined during the witch-hunts of reformation England,<sup>13</sup> but may not necessarily apply in our sixth-century world. It is a graphic death for a female that may no longer go uncritiqued. Anthropological models surrounding the body may support the discussion of certain authors' representations,<sup>14</sup> particularly when we know that female bodies were 'dangerous', both to men and society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> At her end, Brunhild becomes an 'an object for the male gaze',<sup>16</sup> both in terms of the men actually watching her death, and those telling the tale of the demise. The question is: what kind of object is she; more aptly, what kind of body?

The details of Brunhild's death are nuanced depending on the context in which authors wished the queen to feature. How she is *recognised* at the moment of her death is key to the *representation* of it thereafter. It cannot be forgotten that those authors closest to

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<sup>10</sup> The very fact that a sixteenth-century queen provides the only potential comparison for Brunhild's death is significant: Mary Queen of Scots was herself part of various intrigues and her death for the crime of treason was ordered by Elizabeth I, her step-sister, who worried that the execution of a queen would set a discreditable precedent (not such a concern in Merovingian society): see John Guy, *"My heart is my own": The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 2004) and Rosalind K. Marshall, *Mary Queen of Scots: Truth or Lies* (Edinburgh, 2010). Marshall's work is particularly interesting, closely reading the queen's own letters: this would be a fascinating comparison with Brunhild to pursue.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.214.

<sup>12</sup> Binski, *Medieval Death*, p.47.

<sup>13</sup> See Marianne Hester 'The Witch-craze in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth- Century England as Social Control of Women', *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* eds. J. Radford and D.E.H. Russell (New York, 1992) pp. 27-39.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas has been particularly useful: *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (London, 1992) p.3.

<sup>16</sup> See Margaret Miles, 'The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Nudity, Gender and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture', *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. R. Suleiman (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 193-208.

Brunhild, writing about her in ‘real time’ - Gregory of Tours, Fortunatus, Gregory the Great – were gone; instead, we have our authors writing with the benefit of hindsight, understanding Brunhild in an entirely different way. How, then, does Sisebut’s view in the 620s, in the aftermath of Brunhild’s death, differ from those of Jonas of Bobbio and Fredegar writing in different countries in the 640s and 660s; and how do they differ to the representation given by the *LHF* in 727? The transition from historical actor to textual cipher is entirely fluid: the desire to be rid of the former only results in a proliferation of the latter. The vitriol with which each of our authors desires to be rid of the ‘second Jezebel’ indicates her absolutely pivotal place as a real historical actor in Merovingian politics.

### King Sisebut’s ‘crime and punishment’

King Sisebut, we have established, turns to the register of rulership in the second half of the *Vita Desiderii* in order to attack Brunhild on a political level. Simultaneously, he subverts the traditional framework of a martyr narrative: Desiderius does not end the text bearing his name; Brunhild does, and therefore her death requires special attention.

Grandson Theuderic is easily dispensed with, cast into Hell for eternity;<sup>17</sup> the queen has her Lady Macbeth moment, tortured by ‘dark matters’.<sup>18</sup> Sisebut uses the opportunity to critique not only her morality, but her failing leadership. He is clear that she declared war on Lothar, and when the battle came, inspired by God, her troops fled this ‘most wicked of women’ and Brunhild is captured.<sup>19</sup> This is the only source which suggests that she was combative, and is a textual and political strategy for the Visigothic king to affirm that Brunhild was at the helm of all sorts of diplomatic tensions.<sup>20</sup> Once captured, the queen is subjected to the most public of deaths and I will use this description as the preliminary basis for a discussion of other authors’ details of her death:

I will not be ashamed to say how we learnt about it from common gossip. There is a twisted animal with quite an immense body, and it has some curves by nature, that is to say, the top of its back is more swollen and narrower, and has a higher place for its other limbs, sufficient for a burden and extremely appropriate, and among

<sup>17</sup> A.T. Fear has shown that Theuderic’s death reads similar to the death of Judas as described in *Acts* 1:18 - given that the Visigothic kingdom had only converted from Arianism in 579, the allusion would not have been lost on Sisebut’s audience. The king is feeding specifically into a Visigothic cultural and political context, with its contemporary concerns: see *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>18</sup> *VD* 19.

<sup>19</sup> *VD* 20.

<sup>20</sup> *VC* I.58 states that Lothar gathered an army due to Columbanus’ prophecy; *Chron.* IV.42 suggests that Brunhild had to amass her forces in response to the aristocratic attack and the *LHF* 40 states that Lothar raised an army to meet Brunhild and feign alliance with her.

beasts of burden, it is far superior in other ways. That queen, stripped of her clothing, was lifted up on top of its central part and led along before her enemies' faces, ignominiously. For some time she provided a most sorry spectacle for those awaiting her. Later she was bound to untamed steeds and dragged through pathless, rugged places. So the inflamed horses pulled apart her body, already broken by old age, and her nameless and bloody limbs, pulled apart, were spread out, widely scattered. Thus her soul, freed from mortal flesh, and cast down to eternal punishments not undeservedly, was bound to be burnt by bubbling billows of pitch.<sup>21</sup>

Sisebut's depiction of Brunhild's death is our most 'vibrant', if we may call it that. The king specifically refers to the 'common gossip' which surrounds Brunhild's death: he wants to distance himself from any textual precedent, and root the work in a contemporary context, whereby these 'whispers' have circulated.

Some suspension of disbelief may be needed when reading this queen's death: as I have said, it does not seem to have any other resonance in the Merovingian world and is not featured in any Roman, Visigothic or Frankish law. In considering that Brunhild was not only a woman, but a queen, and seventy years old, it is easy to see that one may want to turn away from such a spectacle. Sisebut, in subverting martyr tropes, almost creates an 'arena' here in which he deals with a political actor. One is reminded of the earliest female martyrs, such as Perpetua, the young mother who was martyred at Carthage in 203. She was stripped of clothing in the arena, exposing a breast still dripping from maternal milk; the audience shuddered at the sight.<sup>22</sup> Brunhild's lack of clothing elicits an entirely different response. Perpetua's audience recognised that there was something shocking about the sight; the audience here are baying for Brunhild's blood, it seems. Perpetua had to guide her executioner's arm to her throat; our queen did not even get the personal touch. There is so much more to be made of the link with martyr texts, particularly with late antique women, a connection that has not been made before, and deserves greater attention. Sisebut uses prescribed images and manipulates them to reinforce Brunhild's political evil, which is outside any traditional expectations. She could not be contained in life, and authors struggle to contain her in text.

Stripped of her clothing, and therefore of garments which defined her superior status, Brunhild is no longer a woman and no longer a queen: she not only is de-gendered but de-politicised. The animal upon which she is placed is described in detail by Sisebut,

<sup>21</sup> VD 21.

<sup>22</sup> See Kate Cooper, 'Authority and Resistance'; Brent Shaw, 'The Passion of Perpetua', *Past and Present* 139:1 (1993) pp. 3-45; Judith Perkins, 'The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body in the *Passion of Perpetua*', *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, eds. T. Penner and C. Vander Stichele (Leiden, 2007) pp. 313-332; for the Latin text and English translation, see Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972) pp. 106-131.

and the choice of camel was exotic and unusual. Gregory of Tours mentions the creature once: Guntram's army found camels at the side of the Garonne river, laden with silver and gold.<sup>23</sup> Lothar's decision to use a foreign creature may have been intended to reinforce Brunhild's foreign roots, or Dumézil suggests that it was political goading: Brunhild had once been allied with the Avars and the Byzantines, and this was where her foreign allegiances had left her.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the choice of beast, it is the act of political humiliation which is pivotal. Led before her enemies' eyes, we are once again taken back to the Roman world, as if we are at a triumph, seeing an 'enemy of the state', a Cleopatra perhaps, being paraded in front of the victorious leader. There is evidence of parade by a camel being used as a Byzantine form of humiliation, but we have a more contemporary example also: in 590, the Visigothic duke Argimund was paraded in the streets of Toledo on a donkey, having plotted against king Reccared.<sup>25</sup> This is significant as a Visigothic precedent: Sisebut may have, at once, been harking back to a late antique political context and appealing to a contemporary audience, who may have been attuned to the severity of this kind of humiliation. The Visigothic princess is reduced to a Visigothic dishonour. This is a 'social' death for Brunhild: she is being recognised in the political moment as an enemy of the state, and her political significance is being reduced, little by little.

The queen is 'already broken by old age' upon her dragging by horses. This should elicit sympathy also, but Sisebut does not present the words in that way: it is matter of fact, and yet the king does want to reinforce the age of the queen for a reason. Is it that she is politically *over*? The closest example of this torture comes from Gregory of Tours: he recalls that the Thuringians bound two hundred Frankish girls' arms around the necks of horses, tearing them limb from limb.<sup>26</sup> These details are related in a speech by King Theuderic, the uncle of Brunhild's husband Sigibert, lamenting the tortures done to his people. The inhabitants of Gaul did not like this kind of punishment then (it is interesting that it was done to women) and now Lothar specifically chooses it to deal with this Merovingian queen. When she is pulled apart, it is not just her physical body which is torn to pieces; but her political being as well. Brunhild, as the root of her family tree, is now literally and metaphorically destroyed.

The actual act of pulling Brunhild apart is political, gendered and literary all in one. Much work has been done on the act of quartering the body in later medieval England, the

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<sup>23</sup> *DLH* VII.35.

<sup>24</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.386.

<sup>25</sup> *JBChron.* chapter 93.

<sup>26</sup> *DLH* III.7.

political symbolism of the punishment for treason.<sup>27</sup> Most recently, Valerie Hope has returned to the ‘bad’ Roman death of emperors Galba and Vitellius (AD 69) and shown that their abuse, and fall, from power was graphically mirrored by the abuse and torture of their bodies, and subsequent corpse abuse.<sup>28</sup> It is not enough to kill an enemy, but to utterly destroy the corporeal manifestation, and this is a path down which studies of Brunhild have rarely gone. Brunhild has had a social death as well as a political one. The division of the body is incredibly significant: all Sisebut tells us is that her limbs were scattered widely. Only the Visigothic king and the *LHF* author find it pertinent to discuss the fate of the queen’s remains, but if we are thinking about Brunhild as potential heretic and traitor, the fate of that body is important.

In a traditional martyr narrative, the soul and the body would be separated at the point of martyrdom so that the martyr’s soul would join God, and the body would be reformed to its whole state. Sisebut uses the beginnings of such a narrative, with ‘her soul was thus freed from its mortal flesh’, but then quickly tells us she is intended for eternal punishment in perpetual flames. With her limbs scattered, Sisebut again manipulates martyr tropes. Limbs would be collected at the death of the martyr to be used as relics for veneration: everyone wants a piece of the saint. Here, they are left scattered across a desolate landscape. Brunhild’s is the death not of a martyr; but a heretic, and this political element is pivotal. Evans has used the accounts of the burials of William the Conqueror and Henry I, who died with bodies that were far from whole, to show a kind of ‘anti-hagiography’ at play.<sup>29</sup> In images of decay and dispersal, authors reversed the very bodily qualities associated with sainthood and stressed the lack of sanctity in their royal protagonists.<sup>30</sup> There is something both political and religious, then, about how we consider the destruction of Brunhild’s body.

The denial of burial, such as Fredegund had received, alongside the division of the body, was presumably an attempt to ensure that there could be no later veneration of the queen’s remains; that this might well have occurred will be explored later, when I consider the *LHF* and surviving evidence of the queen’s tomb. In Sisebut’s hagiography, which should focus on the protagonist’s tomb, miracles, and cult, we as readers are instead engaged with a queen who is literally obliterated on the political landscape. This has all

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<sup>27</sup> In particular John Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2004) and Danielle Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2008), both of which provide overviews of the historiography on treason and execution.

<sup>28</sup> Valerie M. Hope, *Roman Death: The Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (London, 2009) pp. 60-64 in particular.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, *The Death of Kings*, p.77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

been about political theatre, for both Lothar and for the Visigothic king. The ‘spectacle’ Sisebut has created is indicative of his awareness of Brunhild’s enduring political sensitivity.

The ‘sorry spectacle’ is exactly that: something to be viewed. Enemies watched her historical death, but we as readers also view the death as a scene within a text, and it cannot fail to draw attention. A visual image is imprinted upon the mind of the reader and this queen’s death may not be forgotten easily. Mary Carruthers has shown that the use of gruesome imagery, fixing an image onto the reader’s mind, was used by authors since antiquity, and points to Prudentius’ *Psychomachia*, which staged virtues and vices in combat, in a very graphic way.<sup>31</sup> Brent Shaw has examined the powerful responses arising from the shock value of Christian martyr texts.<sup>32</sup> Sisebut knows the importance of history, of committing to memory, and the important thing is *how* Brunhild is remembered: ‘The vision of the dead enters the souls of the living’.<sup>33</sup>

This is not *damnatio memoriae*, the destruction of memory in the sense of removal of it: it is vilification. For those educated enough, in ecclesiastical or court circles, the text would resonate for its subversion of the traditional martyr narrative tropes; for others, the political humiliation would resonate around the court; for more, the sheer image of Brunhild’s gruesome death would be enough to remember. The language is that of destruction, the destruction of a religious and political evil. We cannot underestimate its shock factor, even for somewhere as violent as Merovingian Gaul – for not only a queen, but a seventy year old woman. The fact that the last line – ‘bound to be burnt by bubbling billows of pitch’ - is presented in hexameter is an appeal to the reader’s memory. What should be the positive images of a martyr’s triumphant death are, in fact, the negative images of an evil queen: only this text mentions the queen’s lack of clothing and her soul, traditional martyr images.

This will be our most in-depth discussion of the details of Brunhild’s death, for we may now focus on the differences with which each author nuances their tale. What, then, has Sisebut attempted to achieve with his rhetorical tricks? The unique representation here is of Brunhild as both heretic and political actor: she may simultaneously act as an enemy of the state and an enemy of God. This text, following on from the anonymous *Vita Desiderii*, is the closest to the actual death of Brunhild. It seems apparent from reading

<sup>31</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, p.130; also Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Alongside Shaw’s ‘The Passion of Perpetua’, see ‘Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4:3 (1996) pp. 269-312.

<sup>33</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, p.54.



each of the depictions of her death that this one is dealing with the ‘hottest’ of political topics. Brunhild is radiating a political charge that we cannot touch for fear of being burned by it; she is the image through which Sisebut navigates his way towards new diplomatic relations. All previous hostilities are pinned upon the queen, her coffin sealed, and Sisebut hoped that the Visigoths and Franks could forget the ‘sorry’ figure he had presented.

### **The ‘Jezebel’ is destroyed**

Unlike the *Vita Desiderii*, the *Vita Columbani* ensures that its holy man remains the focus of the work. Columbanus is the link between the Theudebert, Theuderic and Lothar at the end of this text, and Brunhild’s demise is specifically linked to her transgression of the holy man’s boundaries. In not heeding his words, she has become the ‘Jezebel’ and Jonas presents her end as that of the royal, female evil who has transgressed against the ‘whiter-than-white’ holy man.

At the end of chapter four of this study, Brunhild had Theudebert shut in a monastery and murdered.<sup>34</sup> She had usurped the holy man’s authority: he had threatened that, should Theudebert not comply in yielding to sacred power, sacred power would destroy him. Brunhild ensures that her grandson dies with her own form of justice. Thereafter, Theuderic dies and Sigibert II is crowned. The details of Brunhild’s death have Columbanus at the fore:

Lothar thought of Columbanus’ prophecy and gathered together an army to reconquer the land which belonged to him. Sigibert with his troops advanced to attack him, but was captured, together with his five brothers and great-grandmother Brunhild, by Lothar. The latter had the boys killed, one by one, but Brunhild he had placed first on a camel in mockery and so exhibited to her all enemies round about; then she was bound to the tails of wild horses and thus perished wretchedly. As the whole family of Theuderic was now exterminated, Lothar ruled alone over the three kingdoms, and Columbanus’ prophecy had been literally fulfilled.<sup>35</sup>

It is specifically because of Columbanus’ prophecy that Lothar gathers his army. Unlike Sisebut’s assertion that Brunhild brought the fight to the Neustrian king, Jonas puts the pro-activity in Lothar’s, or more aptly his holy man’s, hands. Also unlike the Visigothic king’s account, Jonas’ highlights the capture of the queen’s great-grandson and his five brothers: as they are murdered one at a time, it is as if Jonas is picking off the members of Brunhild’s line, before getting to the queen; removing the various branches, before dealing

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<sup>34</sup> VC I.57.

<sup>35</sup> VC I.58.

with the root. Is it possible that questions had been asked about what happened to the great-grandsons of Brunhild? As we will see with Fredegar's *Chronicle*, the fate of these children is contentious and important because they were heirs of Brunhild. It may be that rumours had circulated of the survival of one, if not more, and Jonas wished to neutralise the line entirely.

The death of the queen has a different nuance entirely to that provided by Sisebut. It does not have the same grotesque images of the physical body, but focuses on the political body. The emphasis is once again that she was 'exhibited' in front of her enemies, but her body is fairly quickly dispensed with. There is no ripping of limbs; it appears that her death is simply from being dragged. Since it is Jonas who has labelled the queen the 'Jezebel', perhaps he focuses on one detail, the death by horse, in order to make the link between his queen and the Old Testament figure; perhaps knowing the details of the queen's death prompted him to call her the 'Jezebel' in the first place? Jonas' dramatic lighting, however, is not on Brunhild and it is Columbanus who book-ends the beginning of this chapter and its end. The holy man's prophecy is fulfilled with the deaths of the 'whole family of Theuderic'.<sup>36</sup> There is political and narrative closure to the tale of Brunhild in the *Vita Columbani*. While Sisebut is struggling to deal with a politically-charged entity, almost radiating as if nuclear, Jonas knows by the 640s the benefits Columbanian monasticism has enjoyed from the new regime. There is something going on that we cannot substantiate with his insistence on the death of Brunhild's line. She has been neutralised, but he is concerned with the fact the rest are also. The whispers surrounding Brunhild's death may not be clear, but it feels as though Jonas is responding to something.

It is only through a comparison with the other representations of the queen's death that we understand just how politically sensitive that of Sisebut becomes. In the representations which follow, Brunhild is still a political problem, but in very different contexts – she is being textually manipulated depending on the vantage point of the author. The somewhat crude strokes with which Jonas paints the queen are a direct result of his own context, safe in the monastery at Bobbio. It was Lothar's support for Columbanian monasticism that Jonas required at the time he was writing, and we have already seen the ways in which Lothar subverted any of Brunhild's religious and political links after her death. A campaign against Brunhild's activities was still in action, I would suggest: the historical actors and authors were still dealing with the political after-effects of this queen.

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<sup>36</sup> VC I.58.

### The death of kings in the *Chronicle*

Writing in the 640s, from the monastery at Bobbio, Jonas was distanced by almost thirty years from the death of Brunhild. Studies of the queen have often shown the link between the *Vita Columbani* and Fredegar's *Chronicle*, in terms of the latter's narrative borrowings from the former. What we have not done is challenged *why* Fredegar borrows specific parts, and adds others, more specifically in his representation of Brunhild's death. How has the political situation moved on and why is it important to recreate the queen in a different light again, this time from the political vantage point of the Burgundian kingdom in the 660s?

The *Chronicle*'s depiction of the queen's demise is sensitive to the political context, which in a vein similar to that of the *Vita Desiderii*, suggests that Brunhild was still on the agenda. I have suggested that one author was writing this work, but that he was drawing on oral tales, potentially texts that we simply do not have. Fredegar attacks Brunhild on both a gendered and a political level. He is essentially building on the representation within the *Vita Columbani* for his own purposes, having already copied almost verbatim the tale of Brunhild's showdown with Columbanus, mentioned the death of Desiderius, and labelled Brunhild the 'Jezebel'. His reader has already invested in the image of Brunhild as the royal evil pitted against the holy man, but Fredegar switches to a different register in the tale of the queen's demise. He targets her political weakness in the lead up to her death and provides gendered images, through Brunhild's association with her supposed lover Protadius.

The insistence on Brunhild's weakness begins with the transition from Theudebert to Theuderic: she was 'hunted out of Austrasia' and was 'wandering alone' when a poor man found her and took her to her other grandson. Protadius was made mayor of the Burgundian palace and was 'monstrously' cruel. Tellingly, he harassed everyone, 'not least the Burgundians, every man of whom he made his enemy'.<sup>37</sup> As this text was written at the Burgundian court, Fredegar is plugging into his own political context and making it relevant to his readership. This is also the first text, as highlighted by the previous chapter, where Theudebert's legitimacy is brought into question. Brunhild urges Theuderic to attack his brother on the basis that 'he was a gardener's son'.<sup>38</sup> The story of Columbanus comes only six chapters before Brunhild's end, so we move fairly swiftly from our label of the

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<sup>37</sup> *Chron.* IV.27.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Jezebel’, through her evil machinations with her grandsons, to the point at which she orders the murder of one of her aristocratic leaders, Warnachar. This move resulted in dissension amongst her men:

The notables of Burgundy, however, bishops as well as secular lords, feared and hated Brunhild; and they took counsel with Warnachar to ensure that none of Theuderic’s sons should escape: all should be killed with Brunhild and their kingdom given to Lothar. And this, in effect, is what happened.<sup>39</sup>

In Fredegar’s account, and his alone, it is the Burgundian aristocracy who take the lead in Brunhild’s demise – it is they who ‘saw to it’ that Brunhild was arrested at the villa of Orbe, along with Theudila, her great-granddaughter; nowhere else is this woman mentioned. The level of detail on the political manoeuvrings is much greater here. Appealing specifically to a Burgundian audience who may have heard the tale of this queen Brunhild, Fredegar is attempting to ‘suppress’ Brunhild while promoting the Burgundian agenda. Lothar, we are told:

Had Sigibert and Corbus, sons of Theuderic, killed but for Merovech he felt a godfather’s affection and ordered him to be sent in secrecy to Neustria and placed under Count Ingobad’s protection. Merovech continued living there for some years. Brunhild was brought before Lothar, who was boiling with fury against her. He charged her with the death of ten Frankish kings – namely, Sigibert, Merovech, his father Chilperic, Theudebert and his son Lothar, Lothar’s son and the other Merovech, Theuderic and Theuderic’s three sons who had just perished. She was tormented for three days with a diversity of tortures, and then on his orders was led through the ranks on a camel. Finally she was tied by her hair, one arm and one leg to the tail of an unbroken horse and she was cut to shreds by its hooves at the pace it went.<sup>40</sup>

Brunhild’s death had, in fact, been predicted earlier in Fredegar’s text. The author cites – or invents – the prophecy of the Sybil who announces that with the coming of Brunhild, many will perish.<sup>41</sup> It is a dramatic literary trope that the priestess who, according to St Augustine, had announced the arrival of Christ, equally predicts the reign of Brunhild, and the consequences of it. For the first time, Brunhild is accused of the death of ten kings, including both first and second husbands, Chilperic, her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren. Of these deaths, only that of Theudebert and his son could reliably be attributed to the queen. It is entirely possible that she was implicated in the death of Chilperic, for it fitted her needs after the death of her husband Sigibert, but the *LHF* is very clear that Fredegund was responsible for his murder.<sup>42</sup> Fredegar even gives us the name of

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<sup>39</sup> *Chron.* IV.41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* IV.42.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* III.59.

<sup>42</sup> *LHF* 35.

the assassin earlier in the text.<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Tours, of course, blamed Fredegund for the death of Sigibert also, and there is no reason to suggest that, at this early stage in her career, Brunhild was responsible for the death of her husband.<sup>44</sup> It is the accusation itself which is the political act. We should bear in mind that Sigibert was the only legal predecessor from Brunhild's line who Lothar publicly acknowledged, in the edict of Paris the year after Brunhild's death. The suggestion that Brunhild was responsible for his death is significant. Lothar probably knew that she was not behind most of the murders, but this was a political character assassination. Could it be that rumour still abounded as to who was responsible for the violence; perhaps even implicating the new king Lothar? Pinning the blame on one woman cut across the whispers. It is interesting that the two hagiographies make no mention of the accusations, but by the 660s, when the gossip would be expected to have quietened, Brunhild has to be made responsible for the major deaths of her era. This is a political and rhetorical strategy, I suggest, a way of taking the key male political players of the past century and pinning their demise on one woman.

The death itself seems to have developed again since Jonas' interpretation. Fredegar adds that she endured three days of torture. This reinforces that 'enemy of the state' idea: she must be subjected to a punishment which befits her status as a murderer of royalty. He makes it only one horse which kills Brunhild and why he has changed this detail from Jonas' representation, we cannot say. Perhaps he had information Jonas did not, from his privileged position at court and within Gaul itself? There is none of the grotesque imagery of Sisebut's presentation, and Brunhild is 'cut to shreds' as opposed to being pulled apart. While in other texts, Brunhild's death ends a chapter, so has a sense of closure, the *Chronicle* does not do this. It simply continues with its tale, stating that Warnachar became mayor of the palace in Burgundy and the entire Frankish kingdom was now united. More interestingly, though, it finishes the chapter with the warning that Lothar 'took too much notice of the views of women young and old'.<sup>45</sup> This chapter may, then, end with Brunhild in a slightly hidden fashion: we know what happens when women incite their male counterparts, and this is Fredegar's warning to the new king. When one opens the door to women, one opens the door to danger.

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<sup>43</sup> In *Chron.* III.93, Fredegar names the assassin as Falco – Goubert, in *Byzance Avant l'Islam*, p.38 calls this calumny because Fredegar alone makes the charge, p.38. Goffart, in *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, thought it 'hardly suggests an invention', p.136. I follow the argument that Brunhild was not in a position to murder her husband at this early stage in her career; authors read back the violence in her later activities and imposed it upon a time at which she may have been entirely happy as the king's wife.

<sup>44</sup> *DLH* IV.51.

<sup>45</sup> *Chron.* IV.42.

The nuancing of Brunhild's death in Fredegar's *Chronicle* concerns itself with the Burgundian political context of the 660s. While it was fine to copy almost verbatim certain aspects from the *Vita Columbani*, the section on Brunhild's death required some differentiation. This is the first work to blame the queen for the succession of royal deaths: she is created as the enemy of the state, the traitor. It, unlike other texts, plugs into a growing sensitivity about the dangers of female activity at court, even hinting that the new king may fall into the Brunhild trap.

### **The destroyer of royalty in the *LHF***

The previous chapter explored the *LHF*'s manipulation, in particular, of Gregory of Tours' images of Brunhild and Fredegund. Its focus on succession, and in our queen's case, the destruction of it, continues in its portrayal of Brunhild's death. This is the text most distanced from the political sensitivities of the queen's demise, and yet it still illustrates that she was a 'hot topic' more than one hundred years later.

The *LHF*, like Fredegar's *Chronicle*, reinforces Brunhild's political weakness: after the death of Brunhild's grandsons, the Burgundians and Austrasians immediately raised Lothar to the kingship of all three kingdoms.<sup>46</sup> There is no mention of the young Sigibert II being crowned – he has been deleted from history by the *LHF*. Throughout this study, we have considered recognition. While other authors talk about Brunhild being paraded in front of the army, none discuss the response to what they are seeing. We, as readers, have a response, particularly to the voyeuristic images King Sisebut describes, but we have little sense of how the audience then *recognised* Brunhild upon her death, how they understood what they were seeing. The *LHF* does something different. In removing Sigibert II from the narrative, the author has refused to recognise the last member of Brunhild's line, as well as his brothers. He also places all the recognition in the hands of the army: it is they, not Lothar, who decide that death is the fate for Brunhild.

This must be considered more critically than it has previously. Lothar, we are told, mobilised an army and appears to have pretended that he would marry the queen in some form of alliance. What follows is unique to this text:

She, in fact, adorned in royal dress, came to him at the fortified place on the river Tiron. When he [Lothar] saw her he said: 'O enemy of the Lord, why have you done so much evil and dared to kill so many of the royal line?' Then the army of

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<sup>46</sup> *LHF* 40.

the Franks and Burgundians joined into one, all shouted together that death would be most fitting for the very wicked Brunhild.<sup>47</sup>

The *LHF* engages directly with Brunhild as the ‘Jezebel’ here: just as the Old Testament queen used seduction to her advantage,<sup>48</sup> so now does Brunhild. The eighty year old queen ‘titivates herself’<sup>49</sup> as Nelson put it, before the king in regal garb and attempts a last-ditch effort at survival. There is something pathetic about the image, and this is the only text which sexualises Brunhild in this way. Both Fredegar and the *LHF* author talk of Brunhild’s lover Protadius, and the latter continues that sexualised element with Brunhild’s attempt on Lothar here. She is a gendered creation in this moment, but quickly becomes the political evil of the Jezebel as well. This is the only depiction of her death to use any form of direct speech, and in line with the *LHF* author’s other uses of it, speech adds immediacy and draws attention to the scene. As the only words spoken, the words resonate: the evil is dynastic, the crime that of royal murder.

This text does not name the victims, and retains its narrative continuity as a result: the point is simply that the crime has been committed. Now Brunhild’s fate is in the hands of the army, who ‘all shouted together’ to ask for her death. I have already stated that this is the only text to place Brunhild’s fate away from Lothar. The recognition of the queen, *how* she is perceived at that moment, is put in the hands of the surrounding people. That they all ask for her death is a political and rhetorical act: one thing if the enemy king wants her dead; another if, apparently, all the Franks do. The emphasis is that Brunhild’s own people have entirely deserted her, and even worse, desire her death.

Just as Fredegar was nuancing from the Burgundian perspective, we know that the *LHF* author was doing so from the Neustrian. There is something politically sensitive as we read the tale of Brunhild’s death. Why the need to emphasise that the whole army asked for her death, where other sources say that Lothar ordered it? Had there been a backlash against her death, against Lothar? The actual details of her death sound quite similar to what we have seen before, at least at the start:

Then King Lothar ordered that she be lifted on to a camel and led around through the entire army. Then she was tied to the feet of wild horses and torn apart limb from limb. Finally she died. Her final grave was the fire. Her bones were burnt. The king, in fact, having made peace all around, returned home.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *LHF* 40.

<sup>48</sup> II *Kings* 30: Jezebel adorns herself with mascara and displays herself at the window.

<sup>49</sup> Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’, p.257.

<sup>50</sup> *LHF* 40.

We know that Brunhild had come to Lothar in the best of her royal finery. While Sisebut may say that she was stripped of it, the *LHF* author does not say so. We are, then, to assume that she died wearing the best of her queenly garments and this is significant. A powerful, and female, individual was being killed before the audience; once again, we are reminded that she was led before the ‘entire’ army, an army we now think had appealed for this death. We return, however, to Sisebut’s vision of Brunhild’s death, when we learn that there was more than one horse, that the horses were wild, and she was torn ‘limb from limb’. Is it possible that the *LHF* author had access to the *Vita Desiderii*, written the closest to her death? – the links one can begin to forge are fascinating. It is not enough for this author to state that ‘finally she died’, but to go on to connect in with religious imagery, stating that her grave was the fire, and her bones were burnt. There is something very political and religious going on here which takes us back to the political ‘charge’ of Brunhild.

In the discussion of the *Vita Desiderii*, I discussed the importance of a traitor’s body being physically, and politically, pulled apart. The emphasis here seems to be on what happens after the death itself. Michael Evans points out that, for cases of traitors’ destroyed bodies, ‘if there were no body, it would be as if he had never lived’.<sup>51</sup> Bodily dissolution and reconstitution were symbolic of damnation and salvation. While Sisebut emphasises that the soul and the body were separated, and Brunhild was cast into hell, he doesn’t actually say anything about what physically happens to Brunhild’s body, and in fact neither do any of our other authors. The *LHF* wants to make it very clear that Brunhild’s bones were burnt; that there is nothing left of her. The comparison must also be made with the *LHF*’s insistence that the rival Fredegund was in proper Christian repose, buried in Paris. It as if the author wants it to be that she never existed; and yet by highlighting it, it suggests that even in the 720s, Brunhild was still a problematic figure.

The *LHF* author appears to be writing in a climate where feminine power constitutes danger, just as Fredegar warned.<sup>52</sup> Could it be that there was a group of individuals who wanted to venerate Brunhild after her death? It is entirely possible, and I would suggest probable (think of those who would have been loyal at her foundations, for example). Gregory of Tours tells the tale of King Sigismund, murdered by Chlodomer in 524.<sup>53</sup> His followers, we learn from his *vita*, went to collect what was left of the king’s body in order to venerate it. His bones were brought back to Agaune by the abbot

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<sup>51</sup> Evans, *The Death of Kings*, p.81.

<sup>52</sup> See Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, p.407.

<sup>53</sup> *DLH* III.6.



Venerandus and a cult emerged.<sup>54</sup> At the very beginning of this study, I suggested that the loyalty shown towards Galswinth may have manifested itself in a tax riot against the rival Fredegund. Brunhild had an extensive career, built many contacts: she knew the benefits of loyalty and showed what happened when her expectations were not met. It is entirely possible that there were still loyal followers who would have desired her bodily remains, even if only to bury them correctly, but the point is that the *LHF* author wants to remove that option – I will go on in the conclusion to this study to discuss the tomb of Brunhild. The *LHF* author has to highlight that the entire Frankish population wanted her death and that her body was burnt. Not only would I suggest that he is following on from Sisebut's representation of her death; but he is responding to the political sensitivity around this queen. There may well have been a backlash against Brunhild's death that we simply cannot trace because of the veil of vilification through which we are forced to read the queen.

## Conclusion

“The horror of that moment”, the king went on, “I shall never, never forget.” “You will, though”, the Queen said, “if you don't make a memorandum of it”.<sup>55</sup>

Brunhild's death is a horror: but it is a horror in many different ways. It is an unprecedented, and unreplicated, moment in which a pivotal figure in Frankish history meets her end. Yet it is a horror for authors in various forms: in the same way that we cannot take our eyes from a horrific vignette, these authors *use* Brunhild's death to create 'scenes' to fit their own purposes.

We expect Brunhild to become a textual cipher more and more as we distance ourselves from the date of her death. And yet the irony is that the more attention she is given textually, the more it reinforces her key importance as a real historical actor. Ultimately, there is no other figure in Merovingian politics with the textual afterlife of Brunhild. Certainly, every figure we study, in some sense or another, has a textual afterlife, for historians only have representations – the newest work on Henry VIII, for example, is entitled *Henry VIII and his Afterlives*.<sup>56</sup> For Brunhild, however, there was continuous active reworking of her representation that I cannot find for any other contemporary individual. Placing the vignettes of her death together simply reinforces the point that the

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<sup>54</sup> See the 'Passio Sigismundi', *MGH SSRM II*, chapter 10.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London, 2007) p.91.

<sup>56</sup> *Henry VIII and his Afterlives: Literature, Politics and Art*, eds. M. Rankin, C. Highley and J.N. King (Cambridge, 2009).

politics of the past seem to form the context for future visions of Brunhild: she becomes a spectacle, an image to be reused as the need demanded. There are so many whispers we cannot detect: what sort of pressure was Sisebut responding to because of Brunhild's Visigothic hostilities? What was Jonas hoping for in his legitimization of Lothar? What was the gossip at the Burgundian and Neustrian courts that Fredegar and the *LHF* author were drawing on?

Whether the change is from one horse, to multiple; torn limb from limb or dragged; clothed or non-clothed, these decisions are not arbitrary and tell us something about what each author is doing with the queen. Not only does the depiction of her death span over a hundred years, but also geography – we are dealing with contexts in Gaul, Italy and Spain. Like the 'Jezebel', Brunhild had to meet a 'dreadful fate',<sup>57</sup> as Nelson put it in her seminal article 35 years ago. But what we now must understand is that there is a fluid connection between the recognition of Brunhild at the point of her death and the textual representation of it. In dealing with death, Parsons suggests that the queen had 'two bodies', one on display, and one hidden. Her tomb was the blank canvas on which an image could be created.<sup>58</sup> Brunhild may have had her material tomb, as we will see, but it was the 'hidden' which had such endurance. Her tomb, in effect, is the textual representations given to us, and we have more than one blank canvas on which to read Brunhild. Most probably, we have multiple blank canvases on which to read multiple Brunhilds.

The Old Testament queen Jezebel's body was spread 'like dung' across the fields. The reason: 'so that no one will be able to say: This was Jezebel'.<sup>59</sup> Brunhild's body was pulled apart so that no-one could doubt the dissolution of her political authority. However, in the textual representations which followed, the irony is that she was at her most written about when dead (the age old problem of posthumous popularity.) Our authors may have destroyed her body, but far from completing any *damnatio memoriae*, they helped to create a legend.

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<sup>57</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p.223.

<sup>58</sup> Parsons, 'Never was a body buried', p.333.

<sup>59</sup> II *Kings* 37.

## Conclusion

### The ‘Jezebel’ reconsidered

#### One last piece of the puzzle



Figure 9.1 The Barberini Diptych.<sup>1</sup>

This photograph depicts the only extant near-complete leaf of an imperial ivory, known as the ‘Barberini diptych’. A diptych was a ‘particularly fancy’<sup>2</sup> brand of ivory writing tablet often used for display: it is not certain that this piece actually belonged to a diptych, that is to say that there was a second set of plaques, forming a second leaf with another portrait. It takes its name from the fact it was given to Cardinal Barberini in the early seventeenth century, but most recent scholarship suggests that the ivory was created in the workshops of Constantinople in the second quarter of the sixth century.<sup>3</sup> On its central section is most likely featured the emperor Justinian (527-65),<sup>4</sup> mounted in triumph

<sup>1</sup> ‘Leaf of a diptych: the emperor triumphant’, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/leaf-diptych-emperor-triumphant> [accessed 27th October 2012].

<sup>2</sup> Kim Bowes, ‘Ivory lists: Consular diptychs, Christian appropriation and polemics of time in Late Antiquity’, *Art History* 24:3 (2001) p.338.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.341.

<sup>4</sup> There is a marked resemblance to portraits of Constantinople (324-340), but most commentators on the piece have focused on Justinian or Anastasius (491-518). However, examining themes such as the reliefs upon the episcopal throne in Ravenna, scholarship has veered towards the creation of this ivory in the Constantinople workshops in the second quarter of the sixth century, and that it represents the triumphal portrait of an emperor who had come to accord with the Persians in 532. For more information, see Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Les ivoires médiévaux* (Paris, 2003), chapter 9 in particular.

and surrounded by traditional figures, such as Winged Victories, Christ and the vanquished barbarian.

The modern uses of consular diptychs have been multifarious, explored by art historians, historians and prosopographers.<sup>5</sup> Not one preserves its wax text in original form; therefore half of the message may be lost to us. How, then, does this Byzantine piece of art fit into the Brunhild puzzle? The key is on the back of this impressive work: flat and smooth, it is streaked with lines engraved later, it appears, over old ink inscriptions – there is an impossibility of dating the script closely. What remains is a list of the names of various key figures in seventh century Merovingian history, written in Merovingian script and only partially preserved: Childebert, Theudebert, Theuderic, Lothar, Sigibert, Childebert, Athanagild, Faileuba and Ingund. All, then, are relatives of queen Brunhild. Questions abound: how did Merovingian names find their way onto a piece of Byzantine art? What was the piece intended for, and who was behind the deletion of the wax text, dismissed for the memory of Brunhild's family?

Two main arguments have been put forward: the first is that we may safely assume that all of these individuals were dead when this text was inscribed.<sup>6</sup> Gerberding, following on from Thomas, suggests that the piece tells us more about the rise of the Carolingians than it does the Merovingians it features: created by clerics of the Pippinid faction, the piece was an attempt to promote the cause of Grimoald at the start of the 650s. The omissions of kings such as Sigibert II, Dagobert I and II are, in this argument, omissions because of the political sensitivity surrounding each ruler. We have no evidence of this piece's travels from its conception, not even until the seventeenth century. It is no coincidence, however, that the final four names are those of Brunhild's son, grandson, daughter-in-law and daughter. Could it actually be that this piece was housed at the Byzantine court, until given as a gift to the queen during her correspondence with the emperor Maurice and empress Anastasia during the 'Athanagild episode'? In a world of diplomatic exchanges and gifts, as we have seen throughout this study, it is entirely possible that the queen ordered the list to be inscribed, potentially during her fight to reclaim her grandson, and offered it to the church as a votive image, as Wood has put forward.<sup>7</sup> The consular list which, typically, was written on the back of a diptych was, by

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<sup>5</sup> See Bowes, 'Ivory lists', p.341, for the developments of the historiography of diptych studies.

<sup>6</sup> See Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians*, p. 57 for the development of the argument originally posed by Heinz Thomas, 'Die Namenliste des Diptychon Barberini und der Sturz des Hausmeiers Grimoald', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 25 (1969) pp. 17-63.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family', p.175.

definition, an object of memory – recording the names and years of serving consuls, students memorised the lists.

The strangeness of this inscription of Brunhild's family<sup>8</sup> has been commented upon, but perhaps it is not strange at all. A queen who worked throughout her life to secure the continuing power of her line may well have desired that line to be remembered in a way she herself could control. As popularity for these consular lists developed in the fifth and sixth centuries, and the concept of using such lists for prayers for the dead developed in the seventh,<sup>9</sup> perhaps Brunhild was attempting to *define* her family for posterity. The ivory may well have been intended for one of the queen's endowed foundations: it is not simply a list of names, I suggest, but a definition of a family intended for remembrance. It is a piece of evidence which may show a greater agency for the queen than her letters within the *Epistolae Austrasicae*, but also is itself a diplomatic object, sent potentially at the same time as letters were moving between Byzantium and the Frankish kingdom.

This one enigmatic piece of art sums up so much of the puzzle that Brunhild poses for the historian. Her name is omitted from the ivory: where, then, does this queen fit into the Merovingian family and into its history? The diptych highlights that there is so much about this ruler that early medieval individuals may be *responding to*, and yet the modern scholar cannot quite get at. There is a political, historical and textual potency surrounding this queen which extends far beyond this study: the Barberini ivory may be one example of Brunhild's attempt to control the representation of her family, but she could never have anticipated just how large the textual game would become after her death and what a pivotal character she would remain within it. The historical queen became a myth, a legend.

### **The Brunhild beyond**

Bruno Dumézil's biography of Brunhild ends with 'la légende':<sup>10</sup> this study has examined the seven sources which give the queen the most thorough examination, but it is clear that the manipulation of her character goes much further. In fact, her biographer calls her a 'caricature' within two generations of her death, where this study would be inclined to use the phrase 'textual cipher'. Authors manipulate their vision on Brunhild based on different aspects of their own historical reality, and that is what Dumézil misses in his

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.176.

<sup>9</sup> Bowes, 'Ivory lists', p.347.

<sup>10</sup> Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*, pp. 389-420.

interpretation. This queen is not simply a name to be invoked, but was a name applied to situations which fitted the authors' contemporary concerns. For example, the *Vita Eligii*, first composed in the middle of the seventh century, but subject to various revisions in the Carolingian period, called the 'wretched' Brunhild the precedent for the development of simony in the kingdom, clearly an issue which had never gone away.<sup>11</sup> Fredegar and the *LHF* author made their concerns with the perils of female power clear. Yet Queen Balthild, another 'Jezebel', was also examined by other authors as a saint as well as the sinner:<sup>12</sup> despite all of Brunhild's pious activities we have seen through this study – the Augustinian mission, her endowments, the relationship with St Martin – Brunhild never was allowed a *vita*. As female power became more and more dangerous, Brunhild was its exemplar, for she had the full potency of the 'Jezebel' title. Both the *Chronicle of Moissac*, and the *Life of Saint Menelaus*,<sup>13</sup> thought to have been compiled in the tenth century, focus on the grisly demise that is justice for this Frankish queen: her crime is female influence, and they take their inspiration from the long torture of the queen described by Fredegar.

Was it all bad press for Brunhild? Possibly not: with the Carolingian period's most intense copying of scripts and cultural 'renaissance', best studied by Rosamond McKitterick,<sup>14</sup> sources which provide a more nuanced vision of the queen were disseminated. The *register* of Pope Gregory the Great was widely cascaded across Europe; Paul the Deacon found interest in Venantius Fortunatus in the 780s and produced a vision of Brunhild which is much more generous than others created after her death;<sup>15</sup> and at the start of the ninth century, a librarian at Lorsch copied the letters known as the *Epistolae Austrasicae*. Simultaneously, religious sources of the Carolingian period began to call upon the queen's pious activities: Aimon de Fleury gives a list of foundations and gifts which attest to the queen's particular veneration of Saint Martin;<sup>16</sup> the *gesta* of the bishops of Auxerre list the donations of both Brunhild and Lothar II.<sup>17</sup> Constance Bouchard's examination of this work has shown discrepancies over Brunhild's *propinquus* Desiderius of Autun. While Fredegar attested Desiderius was a poor man before his appointment, the *gesta* claims him to be a noble, in fact a close relative of the queen. The work is now being

<sup>11</sup> See Hen, *Culture & Religion*, p.196.

<sup>12</sup> The *vita* of Balthild was written soon after her death in 680, presumably by the community at her foundation at Chelles – a translation and analysis of the text features in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, eds. J.A. McNamara, J.E. Halborg and E.G. Whatley (Durham, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> 'Chronicon Moissiacense', *MGH SS I*, p.286 and 'Vita Menelei Abbatis Menatensis', *MGH SSRM V*, pp. 129-157.

<sup>14</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989) remains a seminal starting point; see also *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*.

<sup>15</sup> *History of the Lombards: Paul the Deacon* – see the translation by W.D. Foulke and ed. E. Peters (Philadelphia, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Aimon de Fleury, *Historia Francorum* III and IV, chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Les Gestes des évêques d'Auxerre*, trans. M. Sot (Paris, 2002) p.8.

seen as a crucial source for the ninth-century ‘exercise of memory.’<sup>18</sup> A further *vita* specifically refers to the mausoleum built in dedication to St. Martin at Brunhild’s foundation at Autun.<sup>19</sup> – it is at this point, then, that one should turn to the issue of Brunhild’s tomb. None of our more contemporary sources describe a tomb: as was illustrated in the previous chapter, so keen to rid her body and her soul from the Merovingian landscape, they do not mention any structure of remembrance. Yet we do have evidence for what was alleged to be the tomb of Brunhild at Autun: the structure was moved around the church on several occasions during the middle ages, and destroyed during the French Revolution in 1793, but not before someone had made the effort to draw it.<sup>20</sup> The antique marble tomb was opened in 1632, supposedly to ‘silence doubts’ as to the authenticity of the ashes within. The discovery of a lead coffin, ashes and a spur was considered sufficient proof for positive identification of the queen. Bonnie Effros has shown that the contrast between the honour given to Brunhild in the seventeenth century and her execution in the seventh could ‘not be more revealing of the excavation’s dual purposes of early modern royal and monastic self-promotion.’<sup>21</sup> From material remains to textual, the historian may, of course, delve still further into legend to trace Brunhild to the epic poem the *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>22</sup> Manuscripts of this poem go from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, and its story is based loosely on the events of the fifth and sixth centuries. Brunhild is transformed into the queen of Iceland and very little can be compared with the sixth-century queen other than her royal status.

Ultimately, the ‘seven sides’ of Brunhild examined in this study are only a part of a vast textual landscape which surrounds this queen: it is an unprecedented and unreplicated refashioning of a queen. There is not one Brunhild, but multiple Brunhilds. The dedication of one chapter to the textual challenges surrounding her, as Dumézil’s biographical approach has done, belies the most pivotal of distinctions in a study of Brunhild: it is her very potency as a historical actor which is inextricably linked to the textual reconstructions of her. The task of employing such diverse and discordant sources in the reconstruction of

<sup>18</sup> Constance B. Bouchard, ‘Episcopal Gesta and the Creation of a Useful Past in Ninth-Century Auxerre’, *Speculum* 84:1 (2009) pp. 1-35. For the issue of Desiderius, see *Chron.* IV.19 and *Les Gestes*, p.85.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Vita Hugonis, monachi Aeduensis et priore Enziacensis’, *AASS II Apr. II*, p.761.

<sup>20</sup> The drawing of the tomb of Brunhild is contained within the volume by Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *Le roi est mort: études sur les funérailles, les sépultures et les tombeaux des rois de France jusqu’à la fin du 13e siècle* (Geneva, c1975) fig. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (London, 2003) p.25. See also Jacques-Gabriel Bulliot, *Essai historique sur l’Abbaye de Saint Martin d’Autun de l’ordre de Saint Benoît* (Autun, 1849) no. 163; Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore, 1971) and Edouard Salin, *La civilisation mérovingienne d’après les sépultures, les textes et la laboratoire* (Paris, 1952) on the meanings of a lead coffin.

<sup>22</sup> See the prose translation of *The Nibelungenlied*, trans. by A.T. Hatto (London, 1965) which has extensive historical appendices.

early medieval society, and early medieval women, is never a simple one; what this queen does is further problematize the way in which historians may use our most seminal sources. Scholars have previously placed all of these divergent Brunhilds together: I am attempting to tease them apart. At the beginning of this study, I suggested that three main areas had moved on in early medieval studies since Janet Nelson's pivotal article on Brunhild: gender history, the study of texts, and political history. Now, at the end, I suggest that this queen should prompt the scholar to move these on still further.

### Re-constructing the Merovingian family

Ian Wood crucially deconstructed the Merovingian family, and asserted that it was made, not born.<sup>23</sup> It was 'made' not only in terms of the different dynastic figures which featured within it, but now I suggest because of different authors' constructions of it. Perhaps the time has come to *re-construct* the Merovingian family once more.

The unique nature of the political moment being studied here has been acknowledged by scholars such as Nelson and Wood, who both confirm that female rule such as we see here is replicated by no other early medieval state.<sup>24</sup> The implications of this, however, have never fully been played out: historians have so often looked to umbrella terms, such as 'queenship' or 'feud' to attempt to understanding the lightning in the bottle. Yet it is clear that our early medieval authors were attuned to the pivotal place women like Brunhild and Fredegund held, and the power they were wielding. Did they understand the unusual nature of it? Perhaps, but they seemed more concerned with the ramifications of the female political influence they were seeing – they were afraid of the *instigante regina*.

This phrase is not simply a rhetorical trick, but a way in which those looking upon Brunhild attempted to understand the authority that she was wielding. Nelson once pointed out that the persuasive voice was a gendered voice,<sup>25</sup> and whether it was one of her family being murdered, or a political opponent, it is explained as occurring *instigante Brunechilde* or *instigante regina*.<sup>26</sup> The bishop Germanus warned the queen about her levels of influence over her husband; the aristocracy lamented Brunhild's authority over her son, and these concerns are presented to us in letters: they were a call to action. Moving one

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<sup>23</sup> Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family'.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p.287 and *MK*, p.120.

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, 'Queens as Converters'.

<sup>26</sup> See *Chron.* alone for its references to the phrase: IV.18, IV.21, IV.24, IV.26, IV.28, IV.29.



step further, however, men like Fredegar and the *LHF* author were viewing this queen's influence in the light of other women exerting such authority: it is no coincidence that both authors warn Brunhild's successor, Lothar II, of the perils of female guidance. They saw another queen who would become the 'Jezebel', in Balthild, and were working within a culture of growing critique against female authority. Whether in the contemporary moment, attempting to affect political change, or after Brunhild's death, authors are presenting a *response* to Brunhild as much as a representation of her.

There is something unique about the experience of Brunhild and the political landscape in which she features that may now demand a *re-gendering* of the Merovingian political family. The female cycle provided an interpretative framework at the beginning of this study, but the roles contained within simply cannot hold women like Brunhild and Fredegund, who jump out of the interpretative boxes we attempt to contain them within. This study began with three genealogies: placing women at the helm of the three lines featured is not an attempt to make women 'visible', as so many gender studies have done, but is entirely representative of their place within the familial and political structure. Gregory of Tours, one may recall, gives King Chilperic the speech that Brunhild is the 'root' of the family tree that must be severed.<sup>27</sup> Our Merovingian stories are much less about Sigibert and Chilperic than they are about Brunhild and Fredegund – one almost wishes that *The Long-Haired Kings* or *The Merovingian Kingdoms* had switched focus to its long-haired queens while discussing that period in history. Previously, studies of Brunhild have focused on the regencies themselves as the examples of Brunhild's relationship with succession. Here, Brunhild has been shown as an international queen, who worked to protect the position of her family members in a larger context than previously acknowledged. Gregory the Great's correspondence with the queen may tell us about the Augustinian mission, but it also informs us about Brunhild's attempts to develop her power in England. The Hermenegild rebellion may no longer just tell us about Visigothic power struggles, but about Brunhild and her mother's attempts to take control of the Visigothic line itself. The 'Athanagild episode' is not about the maternal desire to reclaim a captured grandson, but about the political need to preserve a Visigothic and Frankish heir. Even at the very end, when her grandson Theuderic dies, Brunhild acts to protect her line. In having Sigibert II elevated to the throne, she was performing a novel act in terms of Merovingian succession, but it seemed the only way to ensure the survival of her family. Brunhild's is not simply a persuasive voice, moving the males in her life to

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<sup>27</sup> *DLH* X.19.

action: she should be seen as a controlling figure. One may even ask: is she any different from a king?

This question may prompt us to a final critique of the term ‘queenship’, established at the beginning of this study as a challenge when applying to this period. Women like Brunhild and Fredegund had very different paths to power – one a king’s daughter, one a slave – but can they be said to perform ‘queenship’? They both perform female rule, but the attempt to place their experience under an enforced vision of institutionalised rule denigrates the unique nature of that experience. Female agency, female power and female empowerment are different strands to unpack; but it is necessary to do so in order to fully understand this early medieval experience. Each of those strands is affected not only by the woman herself, but the diverse textual reconstructions of each issue – each eye sees a different picture. The extremities of representation are symptomatic of the challenges authors faced in *understanding* these powerful women. Wood once suggested that Radegund as ascetic and Brunhild as Jezebel appear to be the two extremes of Merovingian queenship.<sup>28</sup> This study has illustrated that the images created by early medieval authors are fluid: these women are not indicative of ‘queenship’ but of a much broader understanding of a unique period of female rule. Wood’s interpretation, then, implies a stable yardstick, without real definition of the fairly static images that he saw at either ends of his spectrum. This can no longer hold up against the complex and changing images of queenship that are present within our early medieval texts.

Women like Radegund, I have hinted, should in new studies be examined more as Merovingian queen than as ascetic – I believe that there is much about Radegund that suggests she retains much of her royal status as a hand to play in order to get what she wants. She plays a power game in the same way Brunhild does, and the link between Radegund and our queen would make truly fascinating study. When Radegund appealed to Brunhild’s husband, Sigibert I, for support in obtaining the True Cross, and she met Galswinth on her way to her wedding, I find it incredible that she would have had no link with Brunhild – it is one of these tantalising connections that we may not yet be able to put our finger on. We associate Radegund with the positive, and Brunhild the negative, because of *representations*, and as a result I would suggest polarising them is not useful: in order to fully understand female authority in its various guises, the historian must break some of the arbitrary barriers which make representations static.

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<sup>28</sup> *MK*, p.234.

Are the political strategies that Brunhild follows really so different from that of a king? She is involved in diplomatic activities, she rules alongside her husband, infant sons and grandsons. She participates in the same systems of representation as a king: authors like King Sisebut, Fredegar and the *LHF* author specifically focus on her role as a ruler to critique her. She destroys the kingdom, rather than protecting it, so Sisebut tells us. There is only one moment I can find in which Brunhild's gender is specifically flagged up in the real-time political moment for inspection. Brunhild goes onto the battlefield and steps between Lupus, duke of Champagne, one of her staunchest of supporters, and Ursio and Berthefred, the leaders of the aristocratic party, who had taken control of her infant son Childebert II. In order to prevent war, Brunhild is presented *praecingens se viriliter*.<sup>29</sup> This could be translated as Brunhild arming herself literally with men's arms, essentially presenting herself as a man. This goes too far, I suggest – I would be inclined to suggest that she armed herself more figuratively with a man's courage, or honour. It is Ursio's reaction to her position on the battlefield which is more interesting: his is a critique of what he saw as the 'wrong' picture, of a wife dominating a husband's kingdom. In the direct speech recorded by Gregory of Tours, the word *regina* is consciously omitted: the distinction is between *vir* and *mulier*. Ursio specifically critiques Brunhild, then, as a woman, and not as a ruler. Yet Gregory is casting Brunhild as the biblical Judith, the widow who saved Israel from impending massacre. The use of *viriliter* in the vulgate Bible is applied only to Judith, and in the *DLH* is applied only to Brunhild. To Gregory, then, the position of widow is an esteemed and powerful one; to Brunhild's aristocratic critics a role she was pushing too far. The emphasis on a gendered picture of Brunhild, then, may be pointedly active in this one passage, but it is not necessarily representative of the political landscape.

Gender is a hand to be played, or not played, not only by the historical actors themselves, but by early medieval authors who use it as a tool in their arsenal, with which to praise or critique. If, as Jennifer McRobbie has concluded from her study of the *DLH*, Gregory of Tours was an active agent in the formulation of what would become normative gender roles based on the gradual Christianisation of the sixth century,<sup>30</sup> then the roles of our most seminal authors have significant implications. They were not reacting passively to the gendered world around them, but themselves *creating* and *manipulating* contemporary expectations of gendered roles, based on their own agendas. Those agendas could be complex and contradictory: they may have been colleagues and friends, but

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<sup>29</sup> *DLH* VI.2.

<sup>30</sup> McRobbie, 'Gender and Violence'.

Gregory of Tours had very different political motives than Venantius Fortunatus, working from the grace of royalty who gave him work. They had different agendas to the seventh-century authors, who were actively responding to women who, in their opinions, had gone too far. We have to destabilise the previous interpretative frameworks of gender in order to understand the entirely active roles that contemporary authors had in the *construction* of gender roles.

The most pivotal of distinctions with Brunhild is not the gendered pictures, nor the political ones, but between the recognition of the queen in the political moment, and the textual reconstruction of her later. This is the tension which has never been fully played out in a study of Brunhild, but is one that can be applied in so many other areas of early medieval study. Brunhild in this study is not so much a biographical personage, but a series of problems, both historical and political. Three main stages of the queen's career have been examined: the beginnings of a 'queen', the politics of survival and succession and destruction. In each stage, alongside representation comes recognition, at the political moment being described. In the first stages of Brunhild's career, Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours are attempting to legitimise her in the wake of her husband's death; from there, Brunhild had to rely upon the networks she had created and play different political hands at different moments. I chose the relationship with the church, for it became so intrinsic to Brunhild's representation: if one read only the correspondence with Gregory the Great, there would be little reason to see Brunhild as the 'Jezebel'. She supports the Augustinian mission, is involved in episcopal elections (a little too much it seems) and endows foundations – all in the repertoire of a pious queen. Yet it is precisely her relationship with the church's holy men which accords her the famous title – her piety is essentially eradicated by Jonas of Bobbio and King Sisebut as they take the hagiographical genre, and remould it in order to discuss this queen. Finally, Brunhild's relationship with succession becomes the crux upon which later authors critique the queen, but also the theme which historians seeking to rehabilitate the queen focus upon. Her epistolary desire to reclaim a captured grandson must illustrate to us her maternal instincts; surely she cannot just murder her own family? A series of letters never tell us the full story; likewise, Fredegar's assertion that Brunhild murdered ten kings must be treated as critically – it is Brunhild's relationship with the line of inheritance that sets her apart. Three generations of regencies mark an extensive political career, and the potency of that career is reinforced by the manner in which the queen had to be destroyed.

That this queen was such a political threat is highlighted by the sheer violence, and public nature of her death; she had a historical potency which was matched by her textual

vilification. Wallace-Hadrill found central to Merovingian studies the sheer brutality of early medieval life,<sup>31</sup> yet the final chapter of this study illustrated that no-one has examined Brunhild's violent death with a critical eye. She is made responsible for the death of ten kings, an accusation which cannot be found for any other early medieval ruler; Balthild, the other Jezebel, may well have been behind the deaths of multiple bishops, but only Brunhild is associated with this most heinous destruction of royalty. She is an 'enemy of the state', and a comparison with those imperial women who suffered *damnatio memoriae*, even an analysis of the infamous Cleopatra, would be a step in a new direction. It makes sense that a queen so deeply involved with the machinations of succession would have this turned against her, so that she is responsible for the destruction of it as well. Previous studies have spoken of Brunhild's weakening position at the beginning of the seventh century, expelled by one grandson, rebelled against by her aristocracy – she is no more forceful, I suggest, than in her later years. She was at her most dangerous then to Lothar, and that is why she must be dispensed with in such brutal fashion. The very concept of *dynasty* should be problematized as an implication of this study: it has been made clear that there is a lack of vocabulary to describe the political family, and the Merovingian understanding of it. The real issue may not be who rules, whose family, but who was really calling the shots in Merovingian society – both textually and politically. This study may, in fact, suggest that the Merovingian understanding of 'dynasty' was fundamentally, if only implicitly, patrilinear, not just in the biological recognition, but perhaps more importantly, in the agency which shapes and controls it. Unpacking what the definition of this *constructed* political family really is has ramifications, not only for how we view the Merovingian family, but potentially other early medieval structures for whom we have previously superimposed a dynastic vocabulary that may not truly fit.

When Brunhild transgresses against dynasty, she is punished with a death that has no comparison to any other early medieval queen: it is a political death, comparable, I suggest, only to Mary Queen of Scots, who was also murdered by a relative. That fact in itself must point to the power of Queen Brunhild, and is matched by her successor's activities upon her death. Within one year, Lothar had created an edict naming Sigibert I as his only legal predecessor. He, therefore, rejected the *decretum* of Childebert, most probably with Brunhild behind it, and disconnected himself legally and publicly from any of the queen's line.<sup>32</sup> Not only did he attempt to dismiss any links to the previous regime, but actively attempted to reconfigure any positive connections Brunhild may have

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<sup>31</sup> John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (London, 1962) p.27.

<sup>32</sup> *Capitularia Merowingica* 9.9.14.

developed, and rehabilitate victims of the previous regime. Lothar actively supported Columbanian monasticism – the *Vita Columbani*, as we have seen, makes him a sort of hero – and developed the cult of Desiderius, therefore supported two key figures that Brunhild had wronged. He takes over her links at Autun after her death, and makes Luxeuil a focus of the vilification of this queen. He was attempting to deconstruct the historical Brunhild, to chip away at her influence. It is one thing if authors simply took up pre-existing language of evil women to de-legitimize this queen; it is quite another if simultaneously her successor had to murder her so brutally, and work to manipulate her historical links, and then enact a process of textual slander of her as well.

The challenge to the historian analysing Brunhild is that she *is* unprecedented and unreplicated, not only in the manner of her death. If we make her normal, we are completely missing the point on both the nature of her female experience and her royal experience. Not only that, but which Brunhild do we choose to make the ‘norm’? This thesis should show that it may be more fruitful to stop looking for one Brunhild, and instead begin to look at the many refractions of her instead.

### **Re-constructing the textual Brunhilds**

The most remarkable thing about Brunhild may have been, before now, the sheer longevity of her career, long acknowledged by Ian Wood, Janet Nelson and other scholars who have written about her. This study could well have been a biographical one, tracing this long trajectory of a political career with ebbs and flows. In doing so, however, I might have neglected what is truly remarkable about Brunhild: the variety and endurance of the queen’s textual representation. Women were not just good to ‘think with’, but as Patrick Geary pointed out of texts,<sup>33</sup> were good to ‘remember with’, and the latter is more important, if not more so, than the former in a study of this queen.

So many have focused on the fact that the Merovingians as a collective were subjected to *damnatio memoriae*, by their Carolingian counterparts, that Brunhild may have become another of its victims. It is easy to see why: the vilification aspect is most certainly there in later representations of Brunhild. But if this study tells us anything it is that this queen certainly did not fall subject to a *destruction* of memory. The shorthand that previous historians may have found useful to describe the manipulation of this queen’s

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<sup>33</sup> Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, p.23.

representation after her death is dismissive of what actually happens: Brunhild is never as alive as after her death.

If Brunhild was good to ‘remember with’, she meant entirely different things to each author who wrote about her. Men like Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus were inextricably linked to the changing political situation Brunhild herself was affecting, and both owed their positions in part to her. They are not remembering Brunhild, so much as attempting to legitimise her in the historical present, when she needed the support. 575, the year of King Sigibert’s death, becomes a rupture in the historical and textual senses, as both Gregory and Fortunatus are impelled to present a picture of Brunhild which had to promote her in this most vulnerable of states: the Merovingian widow. That is entirely different from men like Jonas of Bobbio or King Sisebut, who are using Brunhild, at least in theory, to remember their eponymous saints, Columbanus and Desiderius. The hagiographical genre is intended to work with the positive memories of the saint – while Jonas of Bobbio maintains his focus on Columbanus, using Brunhild as the scapegoat to highlight the saint’s positive attributes, we have seen that King Sisebut simply uses Desiderius as the way into Brunhild. He specifically targets memories of the queen being forged after her death in the Visigothic kingdom, and works to manipulate them.

No longer are we being ‘hoodwinked’<sup>34</sup> into taking our Merovingian authors at face value: how then, should we revisit our most seminal of early medieval sources in light of a study of Brunhild? As this study has made the clear distinction between the historical moment being described and the moment it is written, the very process through which these early medieval figures are reconstructed needs further critique. Authorship, audience, dissemination, manuscript tradition – all of these are issues which entirely permeate a reading of Brunhild. And there is so much further work to be done. Those oft-neglected chapters of Gregory of Tours, redesigned by both Fredegar and the *LHF* author in order to create their vilified queen, may be unpacked so much further: where do we find these different versions of the manuscript and what may they tell us about the posthumous gossip surrounding this queen? This does not have to plunge historians into the chasm of post-modern theory, but the use of network theory may support our understanding of how the links between these various texts work. If one takes the seven sources described here, all are connected in one way or another. Gregory and Fortunatus were friends; Fredegar copies the *Vita Columbani*, Gregory of Tours is used possibly by all? There are networks of influence which are not only historical, but textual. The process of historical re-creation,

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<sup>34</sup> *MK*, p.28.

even myth-making if we take Brunhild's representation up to the *Nibelungenlied*, is problematized by the re-use of what we may call 'contaminated' sources in later compilations. Gregory's vision of Brunhild is entirely different to the one presented by the *LHF*, almost the exact opposite, and these manipulations may be unpacked so much further, for other historical personages and other events recounted.

Unpacking these webs prompts us to open up the historiographical frameworks with which these texts have been examined. Gregory the Great's *register* has, of course, been examined with a different set of historiographical issues than Venantius Fortunatus' poetry or Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Columbani*. What the newest studies of the latter have been most successful in doing is attempting to read the source with new lenses. In doing the same with our other sources, we allow the representation of Brunhild to become as fluid as we now know it is. Our most seminal sources deserve to be re-critiqued: if one follows the argument that Gregory of Tours was writing in the light of Sigibert's death, protecting his own position and playing the political game, what could that then tell us about his other works? What does it tell us about his relationship to others *in* his works? The political 'ruptures' that Gregory, Fortunatus and Fredegar are responding to are matched by breaks within the texts themselves and point to the sheer potency of Brunhild as a historical actor. Gregory is making a retrospective discussion on the queen from the vantage point of her husband's death: he is attempting to create a positive influence for her in 575. Fortunatus publishes at that point also. Fredegar, as we have seen, laments the queen's influence: the coup of 613 and her death form not only a break in the history of the Merovingian kingdom, but in Fredegar's text. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that 575 has become so influential to discussions of the authorship of Gregory's text and 613 to those concerning the *Chronicle*. Brunhild is at the political crux of both.

### **Re-constructing gendered voices**

Working alongside these male attempts to understand Brunhild is, of course, Brunhild's own voice and own actions: she attempts to represent her own vision of female rule. I have suggested that, not only is she responsible for her own letters, but also those of her son. Furthermore, it is possible that Brunhild was involved in the compilation of the *Epistolae Austrasicae* at her Austrasian court: as a result, she may have edited her own letters and selected those which presented her rulership in a particular way. At the end of the sixth century, this queen was facing attack from rival kings and a fractious aristocracy: her letters, which revolve solely on the topic of the young Athanagild, may also potentially



be read as a constructed *response* to dialogues surrounding Brunhild. There is so much that Brunhild may have been doing to promote the remembrance of herself, and her family, that we simply cannot put our finger on. If the *gesta* of the bishops of Auxerre attest that a donation was made in the name of Ingund, Brunhild's murdered daughter, to the church, the queen may well have been attempting to have the memory of her daughter preserved. Likewise, the mystery of the Barberini diptych could point to Brunhild attempting to memorialise the members of her family.

If a study of Brunhild tells us anything, then, it is that arbitrary labels and distinctions may be shorthand that historians use in their attempts to understand the figures they study, but they are not necessarily representative of the historical experience, and in fact, may be misleading. What must be broken as a result is the binary of male and female representation. This study has examined Brunhild's voice with the same gendered and political reading as any of the men. She is attempting to change her political situation in the self-conscious presentation of different personae in her letters, and potentially is also working to create a representation of herself for posterity, in the collection of them.

Gender and literary theory, at the end of this study, are trains on parallel tracks, with many stop-overs in between. The understanding that female lives are constructed has here not been a hindrance to understanding the pivotal nature of that life. It is the very constructedness of it which points to its historical importance! As a result of this study, there are many implications of a simultaneously gendered and literary reading: this could be applied not only to women, but perhaps more importantly, to men. Re-reading women like Radegund, who are apparently at once queen and saint; or Balthild, once saint and sinner, is one thing; but re-reading men like Chilperic I or Charlemagne in the light of what we have learnt here would be fascinating. Julia Smith was absolutely correct that no-one has done a gendered reading of Merovingian kingship.<sup>35</sup> Chilperic I suffers the same extremities of representation as does Brunhild, but has never been given a gendered and literary reading. Charlemagne is the only potential comparison I can find for Brunhild, in respect of the divergent and enduring textual representations of their characters – two of the most recent works on the emperor specifically examine his textual and material remains.<sup>36</sup> An analysis of his gendered images, as they collude with his political life cycle,

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, 'Carrying the cares of the state'.

<sup>36</sup> See Matthew Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: The Legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (Oxford, 2011), which analyses three texts reporting Charlemagne's visits to the east and shows how a repertoire of images fed into 'imaginative spaces' which made the first crusade possible. Also *Charlemagne et les objets: Des thésaurisations carolingiennes aux constructions mémorielles*, ed. P. Cordez (Oxford, 2012), which examines the memories attached to material objects associated with Charlemagne.

would be particularly interesting, set against that of a Merovingian king – do we see the same tradition of Merovingian weakness/ Carolingian strength when we consider gendered images?

### **The ‘Jezebel’ reconsidered**

How did royal individuals make themselves ‘present’? How do we know who was ‘in’ and was ‘out’ at the royal court? Scholars are now devoting critical attention to the charisma of the holy man: what about the charisma of the royal personage? The Merovingian landscape has changed as a result of a study of Brunhild, and the wider implications revolve around how both contemporary authors, and we as historians, ‘activate’ different individuals on that political landscape.

The genealogies at the beginning of this thesis come alive with the representations of our authors: Brunhild truly was at the crux of her family line, as was Fredegund, and as was her mother Goiswinth. Their power was inherited not only from their own position as the wives of kings, but from the way in which each moved through the rhythms of violent Merovingian and Visigothic life. They ‘presenced’ themselves within their families, within the political landscape, and ultimately, within the textual landscape as well. The categories into which their unique experiences have been inserted – *feud*, *queenship*, *damnatio memoriae* – say less about the authors who wrote about them, than about historians’ still limited vocabulary. The time has come to see our ‘Jezebel’ as a character whose historical and textual potency is unmatched in early medieval society. Making her the norm is not the solution; understanding the multiplicity of the refractions of early medieval characters is.

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