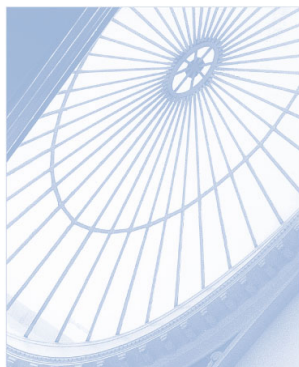


Zitierhinweis

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BOOK REVIEWS

E. T. DAILEY, *Radegund: The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen*, Women in Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 232 pp. ISBN 978 0 197 69920 1. £17.99

Rarely has the life of a female figure of the early Middle Ages been as rich and as well documented as that of Radegund (c.520–87). Born a princess in sixth-century Thuringia, she was abducted as a spoil of war during the destruction of the kingdom in 531 and married to a Frankish king, before retreating to a monastic life in her own foundation in Poitiers, where she finally died. It is therefore not surprising that her life has attracted the attention of biographers, both early medieval and modern. The latest product of this effort to explore Radegund's biography is Erin Thomas Dailey's monograph.

The introduction starts with a close look at the perception of Radegund as the protector of Poitiers in later centuries, when myths had already clouded her historicity, followed by a concise overview of the main sources and reflections on terminology. The subsequent text is divided into a total of eight large chapters, six of which are dedicated to Radegund's biography, while two more cover the fate of her convent and her afterlife as a saint. Chapter one begins with the traumatic early experience that would shape Radegund's life. Having lost her father as a child, she fell to the Franks as a prize when they attacked her homeland. She was deported to the royal villa of Athies and never saw her family (apart from her brother) or Thuringia again. Between 535 and 540, Radegund was forced to marry the much older Chlothar, to whom she had been assigned as prey at the end of the war, in Soissons. The marriage remained childless, apparently due to the Thuringian princess's infertility.

However, her status as a Merovingian queen clearly had an effect on Radegund's personal lifestyle and attitudes, as chapter two shows. Here the reader meets a self-confident woman, equipped with

possessions and property that made her a powerful figure in her husband's realm. Without family ties, she turned to the clergy and ecclesiastical institutions in search of support. To achieve her goal, Radegund used acts of piety and benefactions, through which she also presented herself as a holy queen. Even when she had to consent to sexual intercourse, she did so only reluctantly and with the firm intention of purifying herself afterwards through atonement. That is, at least, the portrayal found in the sources, which Dailey calls into question: in the face of female competition at court, Radegund's position depended primarily on the birth of a son. Her childlessness was probably not intentional; the realization of her infertility may have made messages about the benefits of an ascetic life more attractive to her. Her pursuit of a different way of life increasingly alienated her from Chlothar. But it took another traumatic experience to bring about the end of the marriage: the murder of Radegund's brother, which set her free. Dailey argues that the Thuringian prince might have been held as a hostage by Chlothar to keep his sister under control, or that he simply became expendable when the Merovingian king lost interest in his marriage, perhaps due to the queen's infertility.

Chapter three describes how Radegund took the initiative and virtually forced Bishop Médard of Soissons to consecrate her and thus enable her to enter the monastery. In the remark, found in Venantius Fortunatus' life of the queen, that the bishop had ordained Radegund as a *diacona* (deaconess), Dailey sees only a complementary title to 'nun', from which no further conclusions can be drawn. Chapter four then begins the presentation of Radegund's life and work under the rule of Chlothar's sons after 561. The chapter takes up Radegund's activities among the successive Merovingian rulers of Poitiers, such as Charibert I, during whose term of office a dispute over his marriage to Marcovefa arose, and Sigibert I, with whose help Radegund acquired the Holy Cross relic.

The fifth chapter covers Radegund's efforts to obtain parts of the Holy Cross for her monastery in Poitiers. It explores the queen's close ties to Byzantium, and the associated difficulties with the local bishop Maroveus. To him, the increased importance of Radegund's foundation, which was associated with the acquisition of relics, posed a major problem. Maroveus evaded Radegund's request that he install

the relic in the convent by leaving Poitiers on horseback. Apparently he feared both that the new relic would compete with the remains of Saint Hilarius of Poitiers, from whom his episcopal authority was derived, and that Radegund might weaken his authority. The fact that it was Bishop Euphronius of Tours who finally granted Radegund's request sheds significant light on the events. The queen's actions seem to have been motivated to a large extent by her attempt to imitate the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, which Radegund did in ignorance of unflattering details from her life. In the end, Helena became a role model for Radegund suitable to her position as holy queen.

Chapter six starts with the death of Radegund on 13 August 587 and ends with her funeral, which took place under the supervision of Gregory of Tours. In between, the chapter is devoted to the architectural design of her convent, comparing it to other important churches housing relics of the Holy Cross within their walls. The convent was built in such a way that it appeared like a new Jerusalem—or rather recreated the biblical landscape of the city. The chapter also deals with life in the community, which essentially followed the rule of Caesarius of Arles, but adapted it according to Radegund's own ideas. She formed the convent into a court that 'functioned rather like her own royal treasury' (p. 118).

The last two chapters describe the afterlife of the convent and its buildings in the years and centuries after Radegund's death. Chapter seven covers the conflict between Abbess Leubovera and several nuns, particularly those from the royal family, who may have seen themselves as natural successors to Radegund. The fact that Merovingian kings and bishops intervened in the dispute, and ultimately decided it, shows once again the great importance of Holy Cross Abbey in Poitiers. As chapter eight shows, this was also evident in the Carolingian period, when the relics were given a new vessel, and in the centuries afterwards, during which the convent repeatedly fell victim to political activities. Sometimes this had destructive consequences, such as in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, when Holy Cross was razed to the ground. Only Radegund's funerary church survived. Dailey identifies the eleventh century as a turning point for the veneration of Radegund as a saint in the Middle Ages. Changes

in the architecture of her church, a different reliquary, and a new illuminated manuscript of the saint's life originally written by Venantius Fortunatus testify that her cult was reinvented during this time and that the church was opened to pilgrims, to the benefit of the monastic community. The chapter concludes with comments on the role of violence in Radegund's life and summary reflections on her biography. Two appendices follow: one contains the English translation of Radegund's famous letter to the bishops (*Dominis sanctis*), in which she explains her intentions in founding the monastery and asks for her legacy to be preserved after her death. The other appendix shows a partial pedigree of the Merovingian family. The monograph ends with an extensive bibliography and an index.

The book presents Radegund as a self-confident woman who worked thoughtfully towards her goals and who did not shy away from using her position and prestige for her own purposes. It is a balanced mix of a scholarly approach to the topic and an easy-to-read presentation. A great advantage of the book is that the author wrote his biography very close to the sources. Quotations from early medieval texts are repeatedly presented, and then carefully contextualized and explained. Gender is consistently taken into account, creating a fresh perspective on the historical figure. Dailey's arguments are always based on the state of the art; divergent opinions are addressed. The book also contains new thoughts and theses that will have a stimulating effect on future research. At the same time, it is written in such a way that it can be easily understood by non-specialist readers. The maps, illustrations of objects, and building floor plans further contribute to making the text accessible to a wider audience. Experts, students, and laypeople can therefore read the book with benefit. Anyone wishing to learn more about Radegund in the future will have to read Erin Thomas Dailey's biography.

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