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Civilizing Merovingian Gaul

The Lives of Monegund,
Radegund, and Balthild

IN HOLY SCRIPTURE WOMEN EXPRESS their piety through domestic service to godly men and the impoverished.¹ In John (12.1–2), Martha, the sister of Lazarus, feeds Jesus and the apostles: “Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.” Early medieval hagiographers reproduce the biblical image of the faithful serving woman to underscore the conventional piety of female saints, such as Radegund of Holy Cross, who became the “new Martha” (*nova Martha*) of Merovingian Gaul: “She did not cease from feeding the weak and blind food with a spoon. Two women were present with her for this purpose, but Radegund alone ministered at table. Like a *nova Martha*, she bustled about until the brothers were both rich in their cups and convivial.”² Merovingian sacred biographies, including Radegund’s, couple iconoclastic depictions of women’s charismatic and institutional authority with more traditional motifs of domesticity, charity, and claustration.

In their *vitae* Merovingian women usurp many of the sacerdotal, pastoral, and administrative functions of the male hierarchy.³ Hagiographers portray cloistered women as mystically performing the sacrificial action of the mass and baptizing the sick. Holy women bury the dead, hear confession, absolve sinners, and, like priests, they preach, teach, and proselytize. They impose communal penance on monasteries and even entire villages, and they administer the cult of the dead by procuring relics and building saints’ shrines. The tombs of female saints consecrate both material objects and human beings. The same sacred biographers who so exalt female saints, however, also characterize women’s piety within the framework of a feminized household and folkloric domesticity.⁴ Female Merovingian

saints demonstrate their steadfast faith in God by spinning altar cloths, baking bread, and making candles. They cheerfully perform menial tasks, such as cleaning latrines, dusting altars, and washing saints’ tombs; they nurse, bathe, and feed the poor. And, by rejecting royal dress and jewelry in favor of haircloth, they conform to the theology of the cosmetic. Their *vitae* promote women’s submission to male altar servants and highlight the cloister as the locus of female sanctity. Merovingian hagiographers illustrate their hallowed lives with the unique imagery of a Germanic population that is in the process of blending with a Gallo-Roman one; thus, Merovingian *vitae* present hagiographical motifs in a singular way. Yet the hagiographers who created the corpus of female *vitae* in early medieval Gaul employed biblical rhetoric to achieve goals similar to those of their Mediterranean and eastern counterparts—the empowering and bridling of female sanctity.

Fifth- and sixth-century Gaul witnessed the fusion of northern Germanic tribes with a Romanized Gallic population that was ruled both by bishops and Frankish military leaders who eventually became the *reges Francorum*.⁵ The Merovingians (i.e., the royal dynasty that ruled what is now France, Belgium, and the Rhineland between 450 and 751) accelerated the process of making saints, sanctifying entire families, and creating monastic communities.⁶ Monasticism in early France can be traced to the diffusion of eastern ascetic principles through an aristocratic group of fifth-century Romanized Gauls who lived in Aquitaine and the Rhône Valley, and along the Mediterranean coast. Gallo-Roman aristocrats, some of whom had received ascetic instruction in Egypt and Constantinople, introduced eastern-style monasticism at a handful of major sites, including Tours, Marseilles, Lérins, Arles, Jura, and Poitiers.⁷ The Gallo-Roman episcopacy gradually established control over the various ad hoc monastic organizations that developed around the cults of famous saints, such as Martin of Tours, founder of Marmoutier and Ligugé.⁸ Bishops sought to incorporate all individual ascetics into the structure of the church hierarchy to prevent the creation of unofficial sects that might evolve around the magnetic personalities of non-consecrated holy women and men. Under episcopal and royal guidance, monasteries became critical units of political, economic, and missionary activity.

Whereas early medieval male houses tended to be concentrated in the countryside, walled towns, urban basilicas, and private households safeguarded neophyte female communities.⁹ The first significant women’s cloisters in Gaul were located at Marseilles, Jura, Vienne, Tours, Arles, and Poitiers, and these early houses were often connected to renowned

male institutions, such as that of John Cassian's at Marseilles. The influential bishop and monastic regulator, Caesarius of Arles, composed the primary monastic rule for women in early medieval Francia. Several important Gallo-Roman cloisters followed Caesarius's women's *regula*, including those at Arles, Poitiers, Metz, and Laon.¹⁰ The rule imposed strict isolation and claustration on the nuns and emphasized working wool, modest dress, and mild asceticism.

Several historians of early monasticism have noted that women's access to financial resources and donatives has always been more limited than men's, and that female houses depended on both the patronage of royal women and the post-mortem cult of saintly founders.¹¹ Frankish queens may have been attracted to the life of organized asceticism because they already served as secular caretakers of vast estates and dispensers of the royal fisc, and the cloister provided them the opportunity to expand their diplomatic, financial, and administrative skills.¹² Since philanthropy was such an essential component of female sanctity, royal nuns who had private access to ancestral estates, treasures-hoards, and political alliances were viewed as ideal saints.¹³ Queens ruled women's communities with royal authority and endowed them with both land and portable treasures.

Royal women were also instrumental in the promotion of renowned cults, including those of Saint Genovefa of Paris and Saint Martin of Tours. Queen Chlotild (d. 544), the wife of the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, Clovis I (c. 465–511), established a shrine for Genovefa and constructed several women's monasteries before she retired to the basilica of Saint Peter at Tours.¹⁴ A number of important Frankish holy women, including Queen Chlotild, Papula, Ingtrude, Radegund, Ultragotha, and Monegund, chose sites associated with the legendary Martin of Tours to inspire their spiritual lives.¹⁵ In particular, Radegund's foundation at Poitiers became one of the most influential women's houses of early medieval Gaul, and her community developed into such an important diplomatic and religious center that it challenged the authority of a local bishop.¹⁶ By the sixth century, women had no hierarchical alternative to male church offices, and the cloister had become the institutional place for female ascetics. Merovingian hagiographical *vitae* played an important role in promoting the cloister's spiritual efficacy for repentant noble women.

Monegund: Mediator of Celestial Medicine

In the 590s, the hagiographer and bishop Gregory of Tours completed a compilation of Gallic saints' lives known as the *Liber vitae patrum* (book

of the lives of the fathers).¹⁷ Curiously, Gregory chose to include the life of one woman among the twenty sacred biographies of illustrious bishops, abbots, and ascetics. Gregory's interest in the holy woman's life stemmed from the promotion and celebration of his familial see at Tours.¹⁸ According to Gregory, Monegund made the pilgrimage to Tours only because of the prominence of the *cultus* of Martin.¹⁹ As sixth-century hagiographical texts attest, Martin's shrine had the power to captivate Christians not only in the Touraine but as far away as northern France, the homeland of Saint Monegund. Part of the rhetorical strategy of the *Liber vitae patrum* lay in the institutionalization of independent, charismatic holy women and men who had attached themselves to important shrines and basilicas.²⁰ Gregory therefore incorporated Monegund's autonomous life at Tours into the larger framework of the institutionalization of Martin's cult.

Gregory of Tours begins the *Vita Monegundis* with a description of the holy woman's former life in the world. Monegund is from the northern Frankish village of Chartres. She fulfills her parents' desire that she marry, and she eventually gives birth to two girls. When both daughters die from a fever, Monegund goes through intense mourning and uncontrollable weeping. According to Gregory, Monegund finds solace not in the comforting words of her husband, relatives, and friends, but in holy scripture; only the Bible inspires her to end her lamentations and inaugurate a life of penance.²¹ Monegund removes her mourning garb and immures herself in a narrow cell attached to her familial home. Gregory describes her vault as a desert-like ascetic tomb with only one window. In this oratory, the penitent spends her time renouncing the vanities of the world, rejecting her earthly marriage, and praying for the sins of both herself and the Franks. A domestic servant brings her barley flour, ashes, and water, from which Monegund makes bread. She distributes the remainder of the food from her household to the poor. Monegund's servant, however, abandons the duty of ministering to the saint to return to a mundane existence. Monegund therefore suffers five days without food until God miraculously sends snow (Exodus 16.14–15) from which she draws water to make her bread. After these initial healings, she deserts her husband and household at Chartres to travel to the basilica of Saint Martin at Tours.²²

On the way to Tours, Monegund lingers at the village of Esvres in the Touraine to celebrate the festival of Saint Médard of Soissons, whose relics were enshrined at the local basilica.²³ During the mass, Monegund miraculously bursts open a young girl's malignant tumor by employing the sign of the cross over the rotting flesh. She then makes her way to Tours, prostrates herself before the shrine of the blessed Martin, and moves into a cell

attached to the basilica.²⁴ She continues her desert-like rituals of praying, fasting, and keeping vigils. Strict enclosure endows her with the charism of healing, and her magnetic spirituality attracts a small crowd of female disciples who form a prayer community that supports itself by weaving mats and baking bread.²⁵ Monegund ends her life among her disciples, but before she dies she comforts them by placing them in the care of the blessed Martin and by blessing their oil and salt supply. The nuns use these *beneficia* to continue the salvific process begun by Monegund of healing the sick and the possessed. The community buries the saint in her cell, and her shrine becomes a focal point of pilgrimage and worship.

Gregory's ecstatic portrayal of the reclusive Monegund transcends traditional gender boundaries. The anchorite transforms her earthly body into a spiritual one in imitation of the greatest Hebrew and Christian holy men of antiquity. Like the renowned ex-soldier Martin of Tours, she heals using the Christian weapons of prayer and oil,²⁶ and, in imitation of the famous Gallo-Roman ascetic Germanus of Auxerre, she fashions her bread from a mixture of barley flour and ashes.²⁷ Her abandonment of husband, family, and native village of Chartres confers upon her the desert gifts of healing by laying on of hands and exorcizing by means of the *signum crucis*. Like the charismatic doctors of the desert, Monegund cures the diseased with herbal medicines. God feeds the saint in her oratory, just as divine power had nourished the prophets in the desert. Monegund feasts directly from God's grace and, in turn, she feeds other Christians.²⁸ She also weaves mats from interlaced twigs, and, in imitation of the desert fathers, she sleeps on coarse sacks. In desert fashion, the charismatic *amma* attracts a band of disciples who form a community around her cell.

In the prologue to the *vita*, Gregory compares Christian dogma to a "stable of celestial medicine." Monegund is thus a Christ-like dispenser of celestial medicine, for like a priest, she distributes grace to the Franks.²⁹ In fact, there are several eucharistic images in the *vita*. The bishop asserts that, by traveling to Tours, Monegund drinks from a "priestly fountain" and thereby is "able to lay open the avenue to the grove of Paradise."³⁰ The saint reconciles a blind female sinner to God's grace by miraculously healing her eyes with the *signum crucis*.³¹ She also blesses oil and salt, two elements used by the male priesthood to perform exorcisms and baptisms.³² Finally, her tomb functions as a consecrated altar wherein divine power sanctifies the many material objects and human bodies that come into contact with it.³³

In addition to presenting Monegund as a faith healer and desert-like ascetic, Gregory stresses her connection with the Hebrew Job, whose suf-

ferings signified divine favor. Medieval theologians interpreted Job's torment as a foreshadowing of the passion of Christ on the cross. Monegund, like Melania the Younger, initiates her religious retreat precisely at the moment of her greatest earthly ordeal, the deaths of her two daughters. In his *vita*, Gregory uses the mother's grief to transform her into a Frankish Job, for, like Job, she eventually recognizes her terrible loss as part of the divine plan. In response, Monegund disrobes, renounces her earthly family and marriage, and begins a life of penance. She symbolically enacts the verse from the book of Job (1.21): "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." She divests herself of her earthly possessions and reclothes herself, thereby evoking the image of self-baptism.³⁴ Monegund's *vita* functions as a proof-text that God creates *beneficia* from human suffering, for the Lord remakes Monegund, who was helpless to prevent the deaths of her children, into a faith healer. The didactic message in Gregory's *Vita Monegundis* is that God's grace triumphs over earthly sufferings and divine medicine prevails over temporal healing arts.

Although Gregory depicts Monegund as a Christ-like intermediary between paradise and earth, he also softens the independent charisma of his subject saint by situating her power within the institutional setting of the *cultus* of Martin of Tours. Indeed, in many ways, Martin is the cardinal figure of the *vita*. Gregory compares Martin and Monegund to Solomon and the queen of Sheba: "Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. And Solomon answered all of her questions" (1 Kings 10.1–3). The biblical encounter between Solomon and the queen of Sheba provides a context for viewing the life of Monegund. In Gregory's redaction of the Hebrew legend, Tours becomes the "New Jerusalem," and Monegund undertakes her journey to seek the advice of the godly Martin, who thereafter serves as Monegund's spiritual director, answering "all her questions."

Dead altar servants miraculously counsel Monegund on her most significant actions. Saint Martin authorizes Monegund's abandonment of her husband, even though such a desertion violates Paul's teachings on marriage: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives" (1 Corinthians 7.39).³⁵ She travels to Esvres to join in the religious festivals held in honor of Saint Médard of Soissons, and her unerring reverence for Médard endows her with the gift of healing a young girl of a deadly tumor. At Tours,

she attaches herself to the basilica of Martin, and her hermitage becomes the locus of her apostolic powers of healing and exorcism. Gregory emphasizes, however, that Monegund's healings do not overshadow those of the blessed Martin, for Monegund commands a blind woman not to seek a cure from her: "Does not Saint Martin live here, who each day shines with the work of his miracles? Go to him and pray that he may deign to visit you. For I am only a sinner; what can I do?"³⁶ While dying, Monegund entrusts her disciples to the care of Martin, their "shepherd."³⁷ After her death, Monegund miraculously instructs a blind man that he must seek a cure not at her shrine but at the basilica of holy Martin: "Go then to the feet of the blessed Martin and prostrate yourself in front of him."³⁸

The *Life of Monegund* presents the reader with a striking re-creation of desert asceticism within the context of an urban shrine in Gaul. In Gregory's sacred portrait, Monegund is a spiritual doctor who dispenses the medicine of heaven without clerical intervention.³⁹ Through the abandonment of both her marriage and her native town of Chartres, Monegund becomes a salvific force in the lives of the inhabitants of the Touraine. She cures the deaf and blind; and she blesses oil and salt, and these two elements of priestly baptism and exorcism continue to work miracles after her death.⁴⁰ Gregory represents Monegund's small cell next to the basilica of Saint Martin as a consecrated space. By crossing the threshold of Monegund's tomb, the afflicted "drink in the resurrection" and receive a divine cure. The saint's powers hallow both material objects and afflicted humans.⁴¹ In Gregory's portrayal, Monegund's authority seems to rival apostolic and priestly powers; but that possibility is undercut by the hagiographer's assurance that Monegund was part of a community busy with baking and weaving and that the saint limited her miracle working to healing the sick. Gregory also links Monegund's spiritual success to her intense identification with her mystical shepherd Martin.⁴² While certain aspects of Monegund's *vita* resemble those of the great ammai of the eastern deserts, the self-entombment of the ascetic was secured in an institutional setting dominated by male saintly authority. The *Vita Monegundis* was part of a process whereby Merovingian bishops were restraining potentially disruptive asceticism, particularly as practiced by females, by placing it under hierarchical supervision.

Radegund: The New Martha of Gaul

The *vitae* of the Merovingian Queen Radegund of Poitiers (c. 518–587) created an influential model of female piety for following generations of

noble and royal holy women.⁴³ In addition to the widely disseminated sixth-century text authored by the Italian poet and later bishop of Poitiers, Fortunatus, another seventh-century life of Radegund was written by Baudonivia, a nun of Holy Cross.⁴⁴ That both a woman and a man chronicle the life of this cloistered holy woman provides a rare opportunity to compare gendered accounts. In describing Radegund's independence and charismatic power, Fortunatus seems to be fitting the Frankish queen into the gender-inverted molds of a Merovingian Elijah, Samuel, and Christ.⁴⁵ He tempers these radical gender inversions, however, by rationalizing Radegund's most aggressive expressions of independence and by feminizing her miracle working. The female saint's life is thus rendered paradoxical by her male hagiographer's choice to couple the *topoi* of heroic martyrdom with folkloric domesticity. The bishop's Radegund on the whole resembles the charitable, domestic women servants in the New Testament and more closely fits the model of a Merovingian Martha than that of a great prophet. Baudonivia, who boasted that she had been "nourished from the cradle" by the queen, portrays a Radegund who is an astute politician, a destroyer of pagan shrines, and an active participant in the cult of the dead.⁴⁶ These male- and female-authored texts share many similar spiritual motifs, although the female version emphasizes Radegund's pastoral and administrative achievements whereas the male-authored text dismisses the queen's authority outside of the cloister and emphasizes her domestic duties within the convent.

Fortunatus begins his *Life of Radegund* by describing the saint's tumultuous childhood. When Radegund is about twelve years old, the Franks defeat her uncle, the Thuringian ruler, Hermanfred, and divide his household among themselves.⁴⁷ Radegund falls to the lot of King Chlotar, and the victorious Franks deposit her at the royal villa of Athiès in the Vermandois.⁴⁸ At Athiès, Radegund receives an education in grammar and domestic labors, and she begins to train the children who are with her in the art of penance.⁴⁹ She lives at Athiès for about ten years before Chlotar marries her at Soissons. Fortunatus stresses, however, that after the wedding Radegund lives as an ascetic and is truly married not to Chlotar but to Christ. She dispenses the royal fisc to monasteries, independent hermits, and the poor. She transforms the villa at Athiès into a hospice for destitute and leprous women. During the course of her earthly marriage, she multiplies both her munificence and her self-mortification. Finally, she flees from Chlotar to Bishop Médard of Noyon-Tournai, who consecrates the queen as a deacon and veils her.⁵⁰ After her consecration, Radegund travels to a number of pilgrimage sites around the Touraine, including Tours, Candes,

and Saix. During this Gallic *itinera*, she increases her poor relief, nursing, and philanthropy. She eventually leaves Saix and constructs her own institution at Poitiers.⁵¹

At Poitiers, she moves into a small cell, where she fasts, prays, and wears sackcloth and ashes. She refuses the office of abbess in order to devote herself more fully to a life of humble service, just as Melania the Younger had refused to govern her own convent in Jerusalem. She also vigorously engages in the domestic chores of the convent and visits the diseased in the convent's infirmary. According to Fortunatus, Radegund's life embodies the ascetic discipline and household labors of the *regula* of Caesarius of Arles.⁵² Her self-entombment, *askesis*, and philanthropy bestow upon her the charisms of healing, exorcism, and resurrection. She dies at Holy Cross, and her piety, self-denial, and faith reportedly result in many post-mortem miracles at her shrine.

Bishop Fortunatus fashions the Merovingian queen into a woman-prophet, female-Christ, and Frankish martyr. Her ascetic and miraculous activity also parallel the famous *acta* of the male saints, Martin of Tours and Germanus of Auxerre. Fortunatus endows her holy body with extraordinary charismatic powers and arresting acts of self-mortification. In fact, Fortunatus's Radegund engages in the most brutal ascetic rituals of any female Merovingian saint, and her putrefaction of the flesh rivals the charismatic authority of most early medieval male saints.⁵³ She achieves the status of superhuman martyr, institutional confessor, and grace-dispensing priest. The bishop's *vita* suggests that Radegund's self-martyrdom, liturgical usurpations, and miraculous activity invert traditional images of women's subservience.

Fortunatus evokes the image of martyrdom throughout Radegund's sacred biography, beginning with the story of her childhood abduction. He compares the child Radegund, captive at the Frankish court at Athiès, with the ancient Israelites, who were enslaved, subjugated, and oppressed by war. During her confinement at the villa of Athiès, Radegund becomes a child-martyr and pseudo-priest. She confides in her playmates that she desires to wear the crown of Christian martyrdom, and she commands the other children to construct a wooden cross and organizes them into a band of tractable penitents. Under Radegund's charge, the ritual procession of toddlers marches into the villa's oratory, surrounds the altar, and chants psalms. This unusual depiction of Frankish children's liturgical play has a eucharistic focus; Radegund, before leading her company into the basilica, stages a child's version of the last supper with table scraps and ceremonial

hand washing.⁵⁴ Like the child-Jesus (Luke 2.41–52), Radegund's true home is the Temple. Fortunatus uses the standard hagiographical *topos* of the wise child as evidence of Radegund's future sanctity, and, in doing so, he has Radegund impersonate the sacerdotal functions of the consecrated priesthood.

As an adult, Radegund's continual defiance of masculine authority inverts the traditional gender hierarchy of male-female. She abandons her earthly marriage in favor of a celestial union. As Christ's bride, she prefers praying on the cold ground next to the privy to sleeping in a royal bed, a scene depicted in the eleventh-century illustrated version of the *vita* (Figure 4).⁵⁵ She dons monastic vestments and persuades Bishop Médard to consecrate her as a deacon and to veil her. Her financial support of the male hierarchy and of monasticism places important holy men in the position of being the economic clients of a woman, while her desert-style punishment of her body rivals that of any Frankish holy man.

In imitation of the superhuman acts of the desert fathers, Radegund rigorously fasts, wears heavy chains, and brands her flesh with a red-hot crucifix. She cheerfully cleans latrines and punishes her body with coarse goat hair. Fortunatus provides gruesome details of her self-imposed corruption of the flesh. During Lent, she drinks only two pints of water and her throat becomes so parched that she cannot even chant the litany.⁵⁶ Her Lenten diet consists of roots and herbs, with bread reserved for Sundays. She thus suffers constantly from burning thirst and intense hunger. In preparation for Holy Week, Radegund squeezes massive amounts of blood out of her body by encasing herself in Syrian-style iron fetters that cut into her flesh.⁵⁷ Even though the stiff barbs of her hair cloth scrape the flesh off her limbs, she subjects them to further torment by carrying a basin brimming with burning coals. Like Germanus of Auxerre, Radegund sleeps on a bed of ashes and covers herself with a hair cloth.⁵⁸ Fortunatus proclaims that these terrifying feats of self-mortification mark the holy woman as a martyr even though the historical age of persecution has ended.⁵⁹

In Fortunatus's rendition, Radegund's grueling *askesis* empowers her with the wonder-working abilities of Martin of Tours, Michael the warrior-angel, and the prophet Elijah. She heals the blind by impressing the *signum crucis* on their eyes, expels demons by trampling on the necks of their victims, and resurrects the dead. Like Christ, she ministers to lepers, the poor, and the diseased. Fortunatus places her powers of healing in a sacerdotal context; Radegund cures the sick by immersing them in baths, a symbolic act which clearly recreates the baptism of catechumens.⁶⁰ A *monacha*

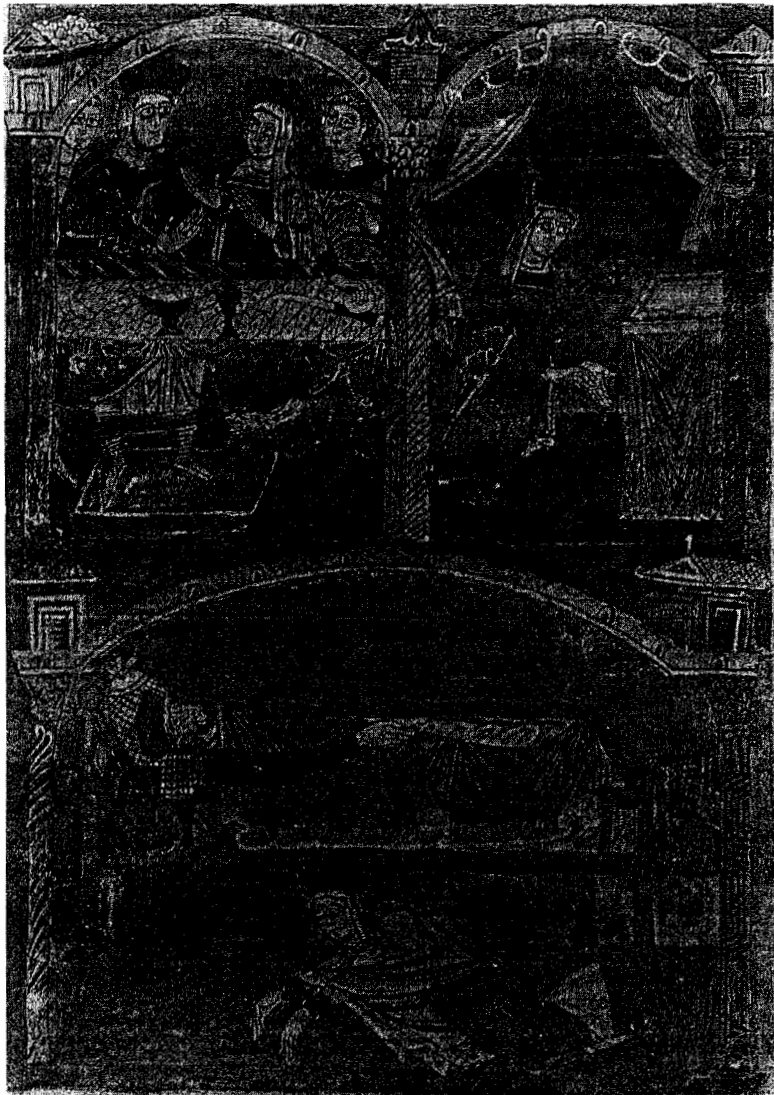


Figure 4. "Saint Radegund at the table with the king, praying in her oratory, and prostrate on the floor." Ms. 250, fol. 24r. End of the eleventh century. Bibliothèque Municipale, Poitiers, France. Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

Animia, who suffers from a dropsical swelling, mystically envisions being baptized by the saint. Radegund comes to Animia in a dream and orders her to strip and lower herself into a bath. Radegund then pours oil over the sick woman's head and reclathes her in a new garment, after which Animia awakes from the dream in a state of pristine health. Like Radegund's actions, early baptism was comprised of prayer, exorcism, anointing, disrobing, bathing, and reclathing. These rituals were symbolic of the removal of postlapsarian flesh and the resurrection of the spirit.⁶¹ Just as Radegund's mystical baptism of Animia evokes priestly baptism, the banquets the queen gives for beggars and lepers involves her dispensing wine to the congregation in a quasi-liturgical manner.⁶²

Fortunatus exercises constraint, however, in his representation of Radegund as a powerful saint. He weakens the force of the queen's spiritual rebirth and rejection of her husband by suggesting that she was compelled to do so by the nature of her marriage. According to Fortunatus, Radegund's marriage to Chlotar was a *Raubebe*, or a Germanic "captive marriage," because the king acquired his future bride as a war trophy.⁶³ Radegund, who had wanted to remain chaste for her celestial groom, heroically cleanses her body after sexual intercourse. Fortunatus reports that Radegund would leave her husband's bed at night, put on a goat-hair mantle, and pray by the latrine to convince Christ that she was unadulterated.⁶⁴ Here, Fortunatus places Radegund's holy life within the framework of epic accounts of female martyrs who endure physical torture to preserve their bodily purity.

Fortunatus describes Radegund's request to be consecrated by Bishop Médard not to depict an influential holy woman but to justify the abandonment of her marriage. A number of historians have questioned the likelihood of Radegund's confirmation as deacon because sixth-century episcopal legislation had been passed to abolish the women's diaconate.⁶⁵ It is quite possible, then, that the hagiographer fabricated a formal title and institutional consecration to mitigate the queen's scandalous desertion of her husband, just as Gregory of Tours used the celestial sanction of Saint Martin to justify Monegund's abandonment of her marriage.⁶⁶ Fortunatus suggests that the consecration was hastily carried out because Chlotar's courtiers were ridiculing both the king and his peculiar bride.⁶⁷ Radegund's *imitatio Christi* had made her the object of derision among Chlotar's supporters who, according to the male hagiographer, used to joke that the king was married to a monk, not a queen.⁶⁸ Fortunatus's description of Radegund's consecration may not be an affirmation of

women's institutional authority; its inclusion in the narrative apparently attenuates Radegund's rebellion against the traditional female role of wife and mother by creating a title that would legitimate her independence.

A similar legitimization is at work when Fortunatus places Radegund's charismatic abilities only within a feminine, domestic, and even child-like environment. Radegund plays at being a priest like the boy-Samuel: "Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy girded with a linen ephod" (1 Samuel 2.18). Fortunatus draws on this image of the boy-prophet: "[Radegund] carried out these things in the manner of the little cleric, Samuel."⁶⁹ During her lifetime, she heals only powerless women and children. Even her emulation of the ecstatic abilities of Elijah and Martin of Tours involves the nursing and resurrection of infants. Only one post-mortem miracle of the *vita* involves the healing of a man, the secular official, Domnolenus, who suffers from a throat disease. Significantly, however, Radegund promises to cure Domnolenus only if he will agree to dedicate an oratory to the greatest of all male saints, Martin of Tours.⁷⁰ Radegund thereby serves as the "helpmeet" of Martin.

Like Gerontius with Melania the Younger, Fortunatus provides detailed descriptions of Radegund's philanthropy, claiming that even hermits could not hide from her charity, that she decorates the altars of pious men with gold and jewelry, and that she divests herself of all her wealth.⁷¹ She dispenses the royal fisc throughout Gaul, just as the Augusta Helena distributed the imperial treasury in the Holy Land, and, in imitation of Helena, Radegund secures the release of prisoners through political arbitration and miraculous intervention.⁷²

Fortunatus presents the queen's conversion to the life of radical asceticism through the hagiographical *topos* of changed garments.⁷³ He enumerates Radegund's rejection of the opulent clothing of the Merovingian aristocracy by providing the most elaborate literary account of Merovingian women's aristocratic dress.⁷⁴ She prostrates herself at the threshold of basilicas and places her noble costume on "the table of divine glory."⁷⁵ She commissions another holy woman, the *monacha* Pia, to design a special linen tunic with goat-hair lining. The *vitae* of both Melania the Younger and Radegund of Holy Cross suggest that charity and proper ascetic attire are integral aspects of feminine spirituality and serve to eradicate the association of women with self-indulgence. The reclothing of the Merovingian queen in fetid animal hair preaches to other women the necessity of throwing off the earthly body. Fortunatus, like Gerontius and Jerome, uses the theology of the cosmetic to feminize the spirituality of his saint.

Throughout the *vita*, Fortunatus circumscribes Radegund's charismatic asceticism within the domestic and feminine environment of the cloister. Instead of officiating at the altar, she cleans it with her tunic. She also scrubs the pavement surrounding the sacrificial table and, with great reverence, carries the sacred dust in her apron and places it outside the church. Fortunatus's Radegund is an ascetic housekeeper who miraculously finds dirt in the kitchen and uses her spindle, the symbol of her chastity and domesticity, to exorcize demons in the guise of mice.⁷⁶ She grinds flour, lights fires, and polishes the shoes of her nuns. Similarly, Martin of Tours, while he was still in the Roman army, cleaned the boots of his domestic servant and ministered to him at table.⁷⁷ Martin's hagiographer Sulpicius Severus, however, includes these examples of Martin's domestic piety primarily to validate his rejection of the military hierarchy and does not allow Martin's table ministry to dominate his *vita*, as Fortunatus does in his life of Radegund.

The queen also washes the hair of destitute women who come to her at the royal villa of Athiès, and she ministers to the poor by cleansing their skin, extracting vermin, and combing their hair. She prepares drinks for them, gives them new clothes, carves their meat, and wipes their mouths with napkins.⁷⁸ She rubs ointment on women lepers and kisses them on the face. She also bathes the feet of visiting holy men with warm water and serves drinks to them.⁷⁹ Fortunatus accentuates domestic imagery not only because Radegund's immaculate housekeeping reflects the cloister's interior purity of spirit but also because such household piety accommodates the imposing image of the saint within the biblical *topos* of contrite serving women. The hagiographer inverts the model of dynamic queenship by re-fashioning Radegund as a humble servant.

Radegund's performance of such household activities follows the evangelical pattern of women's domestic service to the apostles and to Christ. The synoptic gospels recount Jesus' resurrection of Peter's mother-in-law, who, immediately upon rising, waits upon the men (Mark 1.30–31; Matthew 8.14–15; Luke 4.38–39). The evangelists similarly present Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, who dispenses food and drink to Jesus and the apostles, as the paradigm for women's service to men. Significantly, Fortunatus renames Radegund the "new Martha" (*nova Martha*) because of her domestic service to the apostles of Gaul.⁸⁰

Fortunatus's *Life of Radegund* illustrates the paradoxical treatment of holy women by sacred biographers. The male writer combines the gruesome *acta* of the saints and martyrs with folkloric domesticity and biblical

women's table ministry. Radegund's nursing, feeding, and philanthropy symbolically heal the endemic factionalism and violence of Merovingian politics; she, like Helena, is a *mediatrix gratiae* for the Frankish kingdom. In Fortunatus's sacred fiction, the saint usurps the liturgical and miraculous authority of the male priesthood, but only within the context of childhood play, the theology of the cosmetic, and miraculous housekeeping. Within this paradigm of female holiness, Radegund is a domestic martyr, with a *vita activa* which is distinctively feminine.

Both Fortunatus and the female hagiographer, the nun Baudonivia, employ the conventional representations of female piety, such as table ministry, claustration, and healing. The difference between the two texts is one of emphasis. Fortunatus focuses on the queen's activity as that of a Merovingian Martha, whereas Baudonivia recounts Radegund's life within the context of relic hunting, political arbitration, and pastoral duty.⁸¹ Both hagiographers use similar models: the *vitae* of Hebrew and Christian holy men and the lives of contemporary Gallo-Roman saints, including Martin of Tours and Germanus of Auxerre.⁸² They also replicate elements in the influential life of Saint Helena. Whereas Fortunatus's Radegund imitates Helena's philanthropy and domestic service, Baudonivia's Radegund duplicates Helena's role as a charismatic archaeologist and active missionary. Baudonivia's account highlights her mentor's contribution to the public vitality and power of the convent of Holy Cross and acknowledges its influence on the history of her own people. In order to achieve this goal, Baudonivia empowers Radegund and restrains the authority of the important men in her life, just as she ignores the male figures in the Helena legends to focus on the Augusta's independent acts.⁸³

Baudonivia suggests that, during her earthly marriage, Radegund is not a victim of sexual pollution but a model laywoman.⁸⁴ There is no mention in this life of Radegund's consecration as deacon by the Bishop Médard. Radegund finds her "helpmeet" in the person of the bishop of Paris, Germanus, who helps convince the ineffectual king that he will have to free his queen of her marital bonds.⁸⁵ The major focus of Baudonivia's *vita* is the queen's active ministry, imperial authority, and orchestration of the cult of the dead. In imitation of Saint Martin, Radegund destroys an ancient Frankish shrine (*fanum*) and converts the pagans who had defended it.⁸⁶ Fortunatus excludes from his sacred biography both Radegund's foundation of Holy Cross and her successful procurement of a piece of the true cross from the Holy Land.⁸⁷ In Baudonivia's account, however, Radegund is a Merovingian spiritual empress who uses her contacts with

the patriarch of Jerusalem and the Byzantine emperor to retrieve ornate editions of the gospels, the *lignum crucis*, and other relics of important martyrs. Baudonivia proudly proclaims that "what Helena did in the East, Radegund did in Gaul."⁸⁸ Her relic hunting rouses the envy of the local bishop, Maroveus of Poitiers, who unsuccessfully attempts to block the arrival of the *lignum crucis* at Holy Cross.⁸⁹ Moreover, as Baudonivia recounts, Radegund's charismatic powers protect the sacred boundaries of the cloister, such as when she exorcizes the devil in the guise of thousands of goats standing on the convent's wall.⁹⁰ During her life and after her death, the queen's miraculous power cures the diseased and the possessed. Her shrine and its associated *beneficia* consecrate all objects that come into contact with it, and her tomb-shroud (*pallia*) heals important church officials.⁹¹

Although Baudonivia underscores her spiritual mother's political acumen and authoritative control over the relics of the cross, she nonetheless frames Radegund's piety within acceptable rhetoric. Baudonivia offers a brief depiction of Radegund as a devout table-minister who bustles about as a servant.⁹² She replaces her fine linen with sackcloth and ashes and wears fingerless gloves made from old boots. She washes the feet of the destitute and cleanses them with her veil, but refuses to wipe them with her hair in accordance with the apostle Paul's commandment that women should keep their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11.5–10).⁹³ In general, however, the female hagiographer's portrayal of the Merovingian holy woman accentuates pastoral duty over domestic service. It may be that Baudonivia alludes to the queen's household devotion primarily to make Radegund's substantial authority more acceptable to a seventh-century audience that would expect the queen's active ministry to be compatible with female domestic piety.

Balthild: A Royal Handmaid of God

The controversial life of the Anglo-Saxon slave and later Frankish queen, Balthild (c.630s–680), composed by an anonymous nun of Chelles, furthers the hagiographical motif of the authoritative woman as God's humble handmaid (*ancilla Dei*). The hagiographer states that Balthild's life fits the pattern of the charitable queen-saints of the sixth century, including Chlotild, Ultragotha, and Radegund.⁹⁴ In fact, Fortunatus's *Life of Radegund* is the primary model for the life of the seventh-century Merovingian queen. Balthild's hagiographer tells us that she ascended the Frankish so-

cial hierarchy from the position of household bondswoman to be the most important queen of her century.⁹⁵ After the death of her husband Clovis II in 657, Balthild continued his program of ecclesiastical and monastic reform. She acquired relics, revitalized the cults of early Gallic saints, appointed abbots and bishops, and supported several prominent cloisters including Chelles, Corbie, Jumièges, Fontanelle, Logium, Luxeuil, and Faremoutiers.⁹⁶ Balthild acts as a peacemaker among the Frankish provinces of Neustria, Austrasia, and Burgundy, and as regent for her son, Chlotar III, king of Neustria, until she left politics for a life of holy retirement at Chelles.⁹⁷

Balthild's *vita* presents a remarkable account of an authoritative female whose regency combined sacred and secular aspects of monarchy, mediating both court politics and the hallowed cult of the dead. Balthild's *Hausherrschaft* ("houserule") empowered her to distribute the royal patrimony to the poor, arbitrate factionalism among the nobles, and ceremoniously receive important diplomats and churchmen. As a royal nun, she continued to manipulate political alliances, clothe the poor, and minister at table. She exploited the *Hausherrschaft* model of early medieval queenship to extend her political influence over both the church and nobility.⁹⁸ This formidable woman, however, was not without her detractors. Nearly contemporary hagiographical sources denounce Balthild as a new "Jezebel," who initiated the murder of nine bishops and poisoned Frankish politics with her machinations.⁹⁹ Indeed, it is likely that the queen's retirement to the convent at Chelles was less an act of pious devotion than a forced political exile.¹⁰⁰ Balthild's hagiographer, however, refashions the queen's controversial political life by subordinating worldly authority to her domestic piety.

Balthild, like Radegund, begins her spiritual journey as a captive in a noble Frankish household (c. 641).¹⁰¹ According to the hagiographer, the Anglo-Saxon slave's pious demeanor and refined manners attract the attention of Erchinoald, the mayor of the palace of Neustria.¹⁰² Erchinoald selects Balthild as his personal cupbearer, and, after the death of his wife, he attempts to marry her. The hagiographer contends that Balthild escapes this earthly marriage because she is already dedicated to her heavenly spouse Christ—a consideration that apparently did not prevent her eventual marriage to the Merovingian king, Clovis II (c. 648).¹⁰³ The latter appoints the holy man Genesis as Balthild's spiritual overseer, and the queen ministers to the poor and to the church through him.¹⁰⁴ She also engages in extensive church reform and strives to eliminate simony, infanticide, and

the slave trade. She sends letters to bishops and abbots, advising them to adhere to monastic *regulae*; she endows monasteries and important basilicas with land, sends gifts to the papacy, and reestablishes the veneration of important saints.¹⁰⁵ When she withdraws to her own holy house of Chelles (c. 664/665), she becomes a model nun and humbly serves the abbess Bertilla.¹⁰⁶ Balthild dies on June 30, 680, and God bestows on her tomb the ability to cure those suffering from fevers, toothaches, and demonic possession.¹⁰⁷

The anonymous biographer of Queen Balthild transforms a career of political power into a life of feminized charity, domesticity, and claustration in imitation of previous Merovingian holy queens such as Radegund. Balthild is an Israelite-like captive, a victim of a Germanic *Rauwebe*, a charitable queen of an earthly king, and a true bride of the celestial groom. Balthild's life as a bondswoman foreshadows her saintly piety. Her overlord, Erchinoald, honors her as a perfect housekeeper, and she obediently ministers to his table and washes the feet of the elders of his household. She brings bathing water to Erchinoald's family and lays out their clothing. When Erchinoald wishes to make Balthild his bride, "she hid herself secretly in a corner and threw some vile rags over herself" to remain pure to her divine husband, Christ.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the hagiographer depicts Erchinoald's sexual pursuit of the Anglo-Saxon bondswoman in order to replicate the hagiographical motif of heroic chastity found in the *Life of Radegund*.¹⁰⁹ As Clovis II's queen, Balthild assumes the dutiful roles of mother, nurse, and humble disciple of the male priesthood.¹¹⁰ She feeds and clothes the poor, buries the dead, and dispenses the royal patrimony to ascetics and the church hierarchy, but only under the pious guidance of the priest Genesis, who serves as her almoner.¹¹¹ And, in imitation of Radegund, Balthild bequeaths her lavish girdle to the monks at Curbio, thereby rejecting the vanities of the royal court.¹¹²

Instead of presenting Balthild as an independent royal regent, the hagiographer focuses on her role as the peacemaker among her sons.¹¹³ She never misuses royal authority, but rather issues commands that enrich the church, reform monasticism, and further diplomatic ties with Rome. She prohibits the sale of Christian captives and protects the cult of the holy dead. According to the *vita*, the queen's retirement to Chelles is a voluntary exile not a political imprisonment.¹¹⁴ In fact, the hagiographer emphasizes that an alliance of Frankish nobles attempted to keep her from entering religious life by plotting to murder the bishop who had encouraged her to do so.¹¹⁵ Balthild herself is never linked with episcopal murder;

instead, the queen enlists the political support of a number of bishops.¹¹⁶ At Chelles, her household duties rival those of the lowliest servant: "She would valiantly take care of the dirtiest cleaning jobs for the sisters in the kitchen, personally cleaning up the dung from the latrine. And she did all this gladly and in perfect joy of spirit, doing such humble service for Christ's sake."¹¹⁷ The hagiographer adds that Balthild had occupied herself with similarly unpleasant domestic tasks even while she was queen. She humbly submits to the authority of the abbess, Bertilla, just as Melania and Radegund placed themselves under the authority of the spiritual overseers of their communities. Engaging in vigils, nursing, and poor relief, Balthild is the model nun.

At Chelles, Balthild suffers from a disease of the bowels, but commends herself to divine medicine rather than temporal cures. Before her death, she envisions a celestial ladder, leading from the altar of her church to heaven; the deaths of the greatest saints were accompanied by such visions.¹¹⁸ The hagiographer concludes Balthild's *vita* by acknowledging the wonder-working abilities of her shrine and by featuring the creation of Balthild's *cultus* at several important churches. Finally, the sacred biographer extols the evangelical perfection of the queen who ended her life as a "true nun."¹¹⁹

The *Life of Balthild of Chelles* is a strange narrative of a saint. Although the hagiographer proclaims that she was an exemplary recluse, the text itself provides no account of the queen's asceticism or *charismata*. In her *vitae*, Radegund crucifies herself, conquers the devil, and resurrects the dead, but Balthild neither enacts any miracles while she is alive nor does she live a spectacularly abstemious life. In fact, once Balthild retires to her community of Chelles, her cloistered existence is entirely constructed around conventions established in previous lives of devout queens. The hagiographer even includes synopses of the lives of other great Merovingian royal saints, such as Chlotild, Ultragotha, and Radegund, to show how Balthild's holy life conforms to these earlier *vitae*. Like Radegund, Balthild is a captive in a foreign household, a bride of Christ, and a domestic martyr. In her sacred biography, Queen Chlotild civilizes her pagan husband by converting him to Christianity; she also promotes the cult of the holy dead in Paris and pioneers a religious institution at Chelles dedicated to Saint George. Similarly, Balthild's charity humanizes Clovis II's reign, which contemporary chronicles report was characterized by degeneracy, violence, and alcoholism.¹²⁰ The image of Balthild as an ecstatic arbitrator of Germanic brutality is an apocalyptic *topos* from Hebrew scrip-

ture (Ezekiel 36–37). The queen is the peacemaker between the Burgundians and the Franks, just as Ezekiel prophesies the miraculous union of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.¹²¹

The image of Balthild as a *mediatrix gratiae* for the bellicose Germanic tribes is also based on the late antique lives of Mediterranean saints, particularly the *Vita Helenae*. Helena's philanthropy and humble domestic piety counter the political and geographic ruptures of the late empire and humanize Constantine's *imperium*. In like fashion, the domestic and charitable lives of Chlotild and Balthild humanize the warrior aristocracy of the Frankish kingdoms. As mediator of their conversion, Chlotild is the vessel of redemption for the Franks: "The queen did not cease to tell the king that he should worship God and desert the vain idols he honored."¹²² Balthild also conforms to Chlotild's sacred portrait in that she revitalizes shrines in Paris and establishes a women's community at Chelles. In imitation of Ultragotha, the wife of King Childebert, Balthild patronizes male monasticism and nurses the poor. Her charity and ministry to the poor soften the barbarous reign of her husband.

The *vitae* of Chlotild, Ultragotha, and Radegund provided Balthild's hagiographer with an acceptable biographical niche in which to place the controversial rule of the seventh-century queen. In effect, the hagiographer may have been simply extending the political punishment inflicted on Balthild by enemies during her life: immuring her within a convent, keeping her securely within conventional pieties. Not all contemporary sources were so accommodating, however. Stephanus, in his early eighth-century life of the Anglo-Saxon holy man and bishop, Wilfrid of York, compares Balthild to the depraved Jezebel of Hebrew scripture. According to Stephanus, Wilfrid received his clerical tonsure from the bishop of Lyons, Dalfinus, who, along with eight other bishops, was summoned to the Frankish court and executed in the presence of Balthild. Stephanus claims that it was Balthild, a "malicious queen" (*malivola regina*), who gave the order to massacre the holy men: "For at that time there was an evil-hearted queen named Balthild who persecuted the church of God. Even as of old the wicked Queen Jezebel slew the prophets of God, so she, though sparing the priests and deacons, gave command to slay nine bishops, one of whom was this Bishop Dalfinus."¹²³

In fact, Balthild was probably not such an exemplary instrument of the devil. In all likelihood, Balthild had nothing to do with the murder of the nine bishops, and Wilfrid himself was not present at their slaughter.¹²⁴ Wilfrid's hagiographer, Stephanus, was less concerned for the historical ac-

curacy of his account of politics at the Frankish court than for refashioning events within a biblical framework to establish his hero as an Anglo-Saxon Elijah. Within that context, Balthild, the most important woman at the court, fell neatly into place as Elijah's nemesis, the depraved queen Jezebel.¹²⁵ Certainly the construction of gender played a pivotal role in the vilification of Balthild. Jezebel (1 Kings 21) is the personification of human apostasy from God, who induces men to do evil, to reject God, and to eat sacrificial food. No male biblical figure could evoke such an image of human depravity and fleshly sin. Early medieval churchmen, such as Stephanus, inherited an ancient sacred discourse concerning the pernicious influence of powerful women on politics, and they applied this narrative to the lives of powerful contemporary queens.¹²⁶

Balthild's *vita* functions as a kind of *apologia* for a provocative career in politics. It also serves as an advertisement for the religious community at Chelles as well as evidence of the success of the post-mortem *cultus* of the queen.¹²⁷ In the *Life of Balthild of Chelles*, the queen is shown usurping the political and administrative functions of Merovingian kings and Christian bishops. At the same time, the hagiographer tempers Balthild's assertive power by embedding it in a life replete with domestic, charitable, and submissive rhetoric. Balthild's biographer demonstrates the use of hagiographical rhetoric for conservative purposes; the royal woman who overstepped her authority as regent is posthumously accommodated within the hagiographical model of the biblical serving woman. The intent of the anonymous hagiographer is clear at the conclusion of the *vita*, which celebrates the conventional attributes: "To her followers, she left a holy example of humility and patience, mildness and overflowing zest for loving; nay more, infinite mercy, astute and prudent vigilance, pure confessions."¹²⁸

The corpus of Merovingian women's lives exemplifies the paradoxical treatment of female saints by sacred biographers. In numerous ways, Merovingian female saints appropriate the functions of the consecrated male priesthood. Monegund dispenses grace throughout the warring Frankish kingdoms as if she were a eucharist celebrant. Radegund mystically baptizes the sick, anoints the dying, and occupies Christ's chair at Frankish re-creations of the last supper. She is a Merovingian Helena, who transforms Gaul into a Christian province and dispenses the "medicine of salvation" among the Franks. Balthild is a female bishop who takes an active role in appointing church officials, promoting the ecclesiastical economy, and reforming clerical morality. The hagiographers of these three women,

however, soften such imposing images of female authority by employing conventional domestic rhetoric.

Vitae of holy women concentrate on the pious service of the Martha figure and the desert motif of an immured woman as a receptacle of grace. Gregory of Tours recasts the independent Monegund into a miraculous nurse and pious attendant of the post-mortem cults of the bishop-saints of Gaul. By secluding herself in a desert-like cell, Monegund becomes a repository of divine power. Radegund is a domestic martyr who brands her flesh and wears heavy chains; but she also dusts altars, cleans latrines, and tends the cloister's hearth. Radegund's ability to resurrect the dead, exorcize demons, and dispel disease stems from her self-imprisonment in an ascetic crypt and from her uncompromising adherence to the Rule of Caesarius.¹²⁹ The constructed, hagiographical image of Balthild uses the domestic-martyr *topos* created in Fortunatus's *Life of Radegund* to tame the seventh-century queen's controversial rule in Gaul. Balthild's anonymous biographer places her *vita* within the context of the hallowed lives of the great Merovingian philanthropists, Chlotild, Ultragotha, and Radegund. While the historical Balthild was an important monastic and clerical reformer, the hagiographical Balthild is a holy housekeeper, ministering to Frankish noblemen and cloistered nuns. Frankish churchmen chose to juxtapose the conflicting images of the holy woman as Christ crucified and domestic minister to prophetic men. These early medieval hagiographers created enigmatic portraits of their subjects to instruct lay, monastic, and clerical audiences that, although female saints can literally become Christ, they nonetheless continue to serve as the submissive attendants of male priests. Only consecrated men, who officiate at God's sacrificial table, provide the unique and ecstatic link between human communities and the divine. The *vitae* of female saints, however, also fulfill a distinctive role, for the conversion of Merovingian noblewomen to the life of cloistered virtue offers the salvific power of the cross to all Germanic and Celtic peoples.

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