Radegund of Gaul: Deacon of the Church

Prize of War

Radegund was born sometime between 518 and 521 C.E. in Thuringia. The Thuringian kingdom was located in what is now central Germany. United by dialect, the Thuringians were a loosely organized group of pagan tribes governed by several kings. Tension between rival kings and their factions often led to discord. Records of its inhabitants and its history prior to 531 are scarce.

Radegund was born into the political turmoil that would become commonplace in her life. She was a Thuringian princess whose life was often less than a fairy tale. At a young age she and her unnamed brother were orphaned after their parents were killed by her uncle, Hermanfred. Hermanfred had plotted with the Frankish ruling dynasty, the Merovingians, to divide her parents’ land and wealth between them. But when Hermanfred failed to deliver half of the land to the Merovingians, they came to collect. Hermanfred’s treachery, coupled with increased Thuringian-Frankish tension led to a Frankish invasion. The Franks overthrew Hermanfred and in the aftermath both the Merovingian and Thuringian royal households were in ruins.

The Franks took Radegund and her brother as spoils of war. Her aunt and cousin fled into Byzantium, settling in Constantinople. The Frankish King of Soissons, Clothar I (497-561), “gambled with his brothers and won the young princess” on the battlefield.¹ Radegund recalled the trauma of this experience years later in her poem, The Thuringian War, which gave gruesome details about the battle that stole her childhood.

Alas, the corpses lie shamefully unburied on the field,
An entire people, strewn in a common grave.
Not Troy alone must mourn her ruins:
The Thuringian land suffered equal slaughter.²

The Franks returned to their newly expanded kingdom with many confiscated goods including Radegund and her brother. Once they reached Gaul, Radegund was separated from her brother, the only family
member she had left. She was deposited at the royal villa of Athies in Vermandois where she learned she was to become the wife of King Clothar I, whom she did not know.

In Athies, Radegund learned to read and write and was taught domestic skills. She was also educated in Latin and Greek. For the first time, she was exposed to Christianity and began to pray to the martyrs. In fact, she took to the practice of charitable asceticism with great zeal. One of her biographers, Venantius Fortunatus (530-609), wrote that she “would often converse with other children about her desire to be a martyr if the chance came in her time.”3 In addition to her studies she cared for the children of Athies. She taught them to build wooden crosses, which they would then carry while parading as a band of penitents singing psalms.4

Reluctant Queen
In 538 Radegund was summoned from Athies to become the official queen of Clothar I. Clothar had previously married his brother’s widow, Guntheuc, as was the custom of the time. Guntheuc had three sons by that marriage. Two were subsequently assassinated by Clothar and one, Clodoald, was later canonized (St. Cloud). Neither Radegund nor Guntheuc had children by Clothar though he later fathered seven sons and two daughters by three other wives.

Radegund was now surrounded by Clothar’s wives and children. The palace was full of unfamiliar people who had little in common with her. Using her education to find her niche, Radegund began to exert her political prowess and understanding of Christianity in royal circles. She soon made a name for herself through almsgiving, devotion, and concern for the underprivileged. Her charity led to the establishment of several hospitals and shelters. It was at this time that she began her ascetic practices. She restricted her intake of food to lentils and beans, barely slept, spent her nights in prayer vigils, and wore coarse hair garments under her royal dress. Rumors of these practices circulated and her great faith came to define her character.

Radegund could not escape the consummation of her marriage to Clothar but she was frequently able to excuse herself from unwanted marital visits by claiming hygienic needs. Forced to live with a cruel man who had abducted her, and murdered his own relatives, Radegund did not submit to his tyranny.

Consecrated Deacon
Radegund remained with Clothar until 550. Upon learning that he had orchestrated her brother’s murder, she feared for her own safety and fled the palace. Clothar had now removed the last obstacle from his claim to total authority over Thuringia. No male Thuringian heir survived. In desperation, Radegund sought help from the bishop of Noyon, Medard, himself a close friend and advisor of Clothar. Medard tried to send Radegund back to Clothar, but she refused, even threatening God’s wrath upon Medard. An account of this event is captured in Fortunatus’ work:

She left the king and went straight to holy Medard at Noyon. She earnestly begged that she might change her garments and be consecrated to God … entered the sacristy put on monastic garb and proceeded straight to the altar, saying to the blessed Medard: “If you hesitate to consecrate me, and fear man more than God, Pastor, God will require God’s sheep’s soul from your hand.” Thunderstruck by that argument, he laid his hand on her and consecrated her a deaconess.5

As a married woman Radegund could not be accepted into a religious order. Medard therefore consecrated her a female deacon, sidestepping the rules barring her entry. She traded her royal garments for monastic garb and remained to serve the Church as a deacon. Though the king tried several times to remove her, he was unsuccessful.

Carolyn Osiek believes Radegund’s diaconal ordination is an “indication that earlier canonical prohibitions against consecrations and ordinations of deaconesses were, for a long time, simply a dead letter in Gaul and that, as late as the end of the 6th century, women were still put in office.”6

The role of a female deacon had close ties to religious orders. These women served female catechumens, the poor, sick, and imprisoned. Radegund’s status as a female deacon allowed her entry into a religious community while still acknowledging that she was both married and a queen. The historical text states clearly that she removed her royal garments and donned monastic
robes. Scholars argue whether monastic robes were something that women in the religious order would have worn, but it does remind the reader that Radegund’s practices and devotion often paralleled those of great men in the church. The bishop had consecrated her a deacon and performed the rites necessary to do so.

After being consecrated a female deacon, Radegund began to travel. She hoped to be free of the obligations of marriage and life in the royal court. She made a pilgrimage to Tours and visited the shrine of Martin, whose ascetic practices and spirituality were akin to her own. During this journey she learned Clothar planned to capture her and make her return to the palace. Fearing abduction, she travelled to an estate she owned at Saix in Poitou. She contacted the bishop of Paris, Germaine, and asked him to intercede. Though the church’s authority in Gaul was not minor, it was closely linked to the power of the crown and often overlapped. Germaine reluctantly agreed to mediate Radegund’s request for freedom from her marriage to Clothar. Germaine persuaded Clothar to release Radegund from his household and to fund her work in the church. In fact, in the years that followed, Clothar underwrote the foundation of several institutions including a hospice at Radegund’s villa in Saix.

Though she herself did not care for worldly possessions Radegund saw their value in bettering the lives of others. With great fervor, she threw herself into almsgiving travelling throughout Gaul leaving clothing, gold, and gems for the poor. Radegund used her personal wealth to build hospitals and minister to the poor and sick. While at Saix she “followed a simple vegetarian diet and soon developed a reputation as a contemplative and mystic.” She opened her villa to pilgrims, and fed, bathed, and cared for them with her own hands.

**Daughters, I Chose You**

In the mid 550’s Radegund, with support from King Clothar, founded a monastery at Poitiers. Clothar provided the land and buildings and Radegund obtained a copy of the religious Rule of Arles. It required the women to live in cloister, isolated from the outside community, for their own safety. It also “provided for the recitation of eighteen psalms during the night office, six psalms during each of the day offices, and scripture readings during vigils.” It gave authority to the abbess of the community and prohibited her from transferring her authority to any bishop. The abbess was responsible for securing the safety and spiritual well being of the community.

At Poitiers, Radegund sponsored a community of women who cared for the lives of the sick and indigent. Since her family had been taken from her she created her own. A nun of that monastery, and later biographer, Baudonivia, noted that she would tell her sisters, “Daughters, I chose you. You are my light and my life. You are my rest and all my happiness, my new plantation.” No longer an orphan or a captive wife, Radegund had at last found her place. She became a beacon of light for spiritual travelers. Her fame continued to grow. Though not yet a member of the monastery herself because of her marriage to Clothar, many women were drawn to join it because of her holiness.

**Spiritual Guide**

After Clothar died in 561 Radegund at last entered the monastery. Though the Rule required her to live in the cloister, she lived in a cell adjacent to the building and continued to travel and correspond with those outside. She was asked to serve as the abbess, but declined and installed her friend Agnes instead. Radegund served as a spiritual guide to her sisters and lived the example of the Rule in practice. She continued austerities begun at the palace but increased them in both frequency and vigor.

Radegund had a talent for pastoral care and spiritual direction. She dedicated time to private prayer, studied and preached daily, and was well versed in the writings of early church leaders. She shared her own experiences with women in the community who sought her guidance, including her service of others, her travels, and her visions. She instructed women in spiritual practices never expecting them to take on a task she had not already performed.

While at Poitiers, Radegund met Venantius Fortunatus, the Italian poet who was highly popular with Franks in the 6th century. She and the abbess, Agnes, formed a friendship with him, writing and visiting often. Fortunatus penned Radegund’s first biography shortly after her death.
Fortunatus shows us that Radegund was a talented writer and composed poems and letters that expressed her experiences in vivid language. Though only few survive, they provide insight into her life. She wrote to family and friends as well as to other political leaders. She expressed the need for peace and urged them to avoid war. Her work, The Thuringian War, written to her cousin exiled in Constantinople, conveys her longing for family and the pain she experienced at seeing her kinsmen slaughtered on the battlefield:

Anguish is private and public both to me.
Fate was kind to those
whom the enemy struck down.
I, the sole survivor, must weep for them all.
Not only must I mourn the near ones who died:
I also grieve for those still blessed with life.10

Like many Christians of her time, Radegund was known to reverence the relics of saints. She travelled to their shrines and brought relics back to venerate at the monastery. She believed the relics brought her closer to the saints in her meditation. Radegund’s political skills proved quite astute when, sometime in 567-578, she was able to secure what was believed to be a relic of the true cross. Owning such a relic brought fame and greater authority to her monastery. Accounts of Radegund’s ability to perform miraculous healings and expel demons began to circulate, some of which are included in Fortunatus’ biography.

Radegund died unexpectedly on August 13, 587. She was greatly mourned by her community.

**Legacy**

Radegund was a leader and friend to her sisters at Poitiers. Though her young life was defined by death, loss and mourning, she was able to overcome her pain and work for peace. Her humble service and maternal care for the poor and sick, along with her intellectual and persuasive abilities, earned her the freedom she desired. She is a shining example of how “women were capable of forging their own spiritual ideal by drawing on values associated with female identity.”11 As a female deacon she was a spiritual guide for many and her charity was renowned.

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 the local bishop.”12 She pushed herself to be better, to be an example of good works, and though “she was merciful to others, she judged herself.”13 In her biographies her devotion to God and the service of others is paramount. She serves as a “declaration of women’s capacity to embody Christ.”14 Surely, God had come to dwell within her.

**References**

2Ibid, 66.
3Ibid, 71.
4Ibid, 71.
5Ibid, 75.
8Ibid, 147.
9Sainted Women, 91.
10Ibid, 66.
13Sainted Women, 90.