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Radegund of Poitiers in Modern Scholarship: Recurrent Themes and Portrayals

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Abstract

Radegund of Poitiers (520–587) was a princess of the Thuringian kingdom, wife to the Merovingian king Clothar I, and ultimately *domina* of the abbey of Sainte-Croix in Poitiers. The literary persona of Saint Radegund, as constructed by the poet-hagiographer Venantius Fortunatus and, a few years later, by the nun Baudonivia, underpins the historical figure. The saint exerted a significant cultural influence across Frankish territories, and over the ages her image has been continuously received, reinterpreted, and expanded. The purpose of this study is to provide a survey of the critical reception of Radegund's character, in order to explore how modern scholarship has interpreted and reimagined her persona over time.

Keywords: Radegund of Poitiers; fictional portrait; critical reception

1. Introduction

Radegund of Poitiers, more widely known as Saint Radegund, emerges as a central figure of the Merovingian period, both for her pivotal role in the development of female monasticism in medieval Gaul¹ and for the remarkable breadth of her literary reception. This latter had its starting point in the poetry and hagiography composed by her close friend and confidant Venantius Fortunatus, developed through the work of the *monialis* Baudonivia, and was further expanded across the centuries. Radegund appears in numerous works, including Hildebert of Lavardin's *Vita* (12th-century France), Henry Bradshaw's *Lyfe of Saynt Radegunde* (16th-century England), Étienne Moquot and Joseph Dumonteil's *Vies de Radegonde* (17th-century France), and Agostino Lampugnani's *Vita di s. Radegonda* (17th-century Italy), as well as in modern novels such as Rachilde's (1905) *Le Meneur de Louves*, Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* (O'Faolain 1975), and Régine Deforges' *La révolte des nonnes* (1981), alongside other recent literary and artistic productions². As a result, Radegund has consistently attracted scholarly interest, with generations of readers seeking to discern the essential characteristics of her *persona*. As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, a *fil rouge* connects these fictional and critical portrayals: Radegund has been variously represented as an ascetic saint, a warrior of faith, a passionate woman in love, a shrewd and capable political leader, a nurturing mother figure, and, in sum, a character who challenges conventional gender norms. All these facets of Radegund's identity are already present *in nuce* in the first Merovingian *Vitae*, yet each subsequent fictional portrait—from Hildebert to the present day—has chosen to emphasize one or more aspects in accordance with the ideological needs of its author. Scholars have done the same, albeit through different methodologies: they have analyzed the Merovingian



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hagiographies, selectively highlighting specific aspects of Radegund's complex identity, in line with their respective research aims.

Thus, the purpose of this contribution is to examine how the main traits of Radegund of Poitiers' character have been analyzed in scholarly portrayals, particularly by those who have closely studied the Merovingian *Vitae* of Radegund. In order to achieve this goal, I will begin with a short biographic profile, followed by a concise analysis of key scholarly contributions. Rather than claiming to offer a wholly original interpretation of Radegund, this study aims to survey how the multiple facets of her figure—particularly her sanctity, queenship, literary activity, and gender—have been explored, emphasized, or redefined in modern scholarship³.

Radegund was born in the first half of 6th century⁴ in the Thuringian kingdom as the daughter of king Bertachar. Following the Frankish invasion of Thuringia, she was seized by king Clothar as part of his war spoils, compelled to marry the Merovingian ruler, and then brought to the royal palace in Soissons. After some time serving as queen at the Merovingian court, Radegund could not endure her courtly life anymore, experiencing a profound spiritual unrest. She eventually fled to Noyon, where she asked Bishop Medardus to consecrate her as a deaconess⁵. Once she took her religious vows, she decided to never return to Soissons, and negotiated an arrangement with her former husband: with his financial support, she would establish a monastery in Aquitaine dedicated to the Holy Mother, which would also function as an outpost for Merovingian authority in the region. Radegund thus became *domina* (but never abbess, formally speaking) of the monastery in the city of Poitiers. From there, she addressed a letter to the Byzantine emperor Justin II, requesting that a relic of the True Cross be sent to her foundation. Upon receiving the fragment, the monastery was renamed *Sainte-Croix* (Holy Cross)⁶. Radegund died around 587 and was soon canonized⁷.

The first author to shape a literary version of Radegund's life was someone closely connected to her: her guest, friend, and confidant Venantius Fortunatus⁸. The Italian poet arrived at the monastery of Sainte-Croix in 567, where he spent a considerable amount of time as a guest of the nuns. During his stay, he developed a profound spiritual bond with the *domina*, composing a number of refined verses dedicated to her⁹. Fortunatus is also credited with the *Vita Radegundis*¹⁰, the earliest hagiographical account of Radegund's life, written after the queen's death¹¹.

Several years later, the nun Baudonivia composed a second hagiography of Radegund, explicitly claiming her work to be the second book of the *Vita Radegundis* (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888, II, *praefatio*). Baudonivia's text significantly departs from that of Venantius (Leonardi 1983; Consolino 1988; Gäbe 1989; Leclercq 1989; Cristiani 1991; Rouché 1995; Manzoli 2023a). Although her Latin may lack the polished style mastered by the Italian poet¹², this second biography is of great interest, as it offers an alternative portrayal of Radegund from a unique perspective—that of a fellow sister within the abbey¹³. In addition to Fortunatus and Baudonivia, brief references to saint Radegund also appear in the works of the historian Gregory of Tours¹⁴. The bishop mentions her in his *Decem Libri Historiarum*¹⁵, as well as in his hagiographical collections, *In gloria martyrum* and *In gloria confessorum*¹⁶. Between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, a third *Vita Radegundis* was composed by Hildebert of Lavardin. This text draws heavily on the works of both Venantius and Baudonivia, reusing and adapting their material to elaborate a portrait of the Merovingian saint that would resonate with Hildebert's own ecclesiological context¹⁷.

In the early modern period, the story of Saint Radegund made its way to English literature. Between 1508 and 1527, Henry Bradshaw authored the *Lyfe of Saynt Radegunde*¹⁸, a peculiar narrative where Radegund is portrayed as having taken vows of virginity prior to becoming abbess of Sainte-Croix. This deviation likely reflects Bradshaw's political

concerns amid the turbulent religious debate of sixteenth-century England¹⁹. His depiction might be meant to enhance both the political and theological authority of the Merovingian queen by presenting her as the legitimate sovereign of her monastery.

Radegund's story later returned to France in the 17th century, when post-Tridentine Europe transformed her into a symbolic weapon in the struggle against Protestantism. Two French *Vies de Radegonde*, written by Moquot (1621) and Dumonteil (1627), depict the holy queen as a soldier of Christ fighting pagans—an allegory for the Catholic crusade against the Huguenots (Rudolph 2022, pp. 276–79). In Italy, the monk Agostino Lampugnani composed a hagiography titled *Della vita di S. Radegonda che di gran regina si fece monaca di S. Benedetto* (Lampugnani 1649). Lampugnani emphasizes Radegund's *servitium* not only as a handmaiden of God, but also as a servant of the people, highlighting her actions in support of the common folk (Manzoli 2021, forthcoming a).

In the 20th and the 21st centuries, Radegund's figure transcended traditional boundaries of genre and literary form. The story of a medieval woman who renounced her husband and took control of her own destiny has captivated both scholars and artists, inspiring new interpretations that cast her in a different light. Although it is not my purpose here to catalog every work inspired by Radegund's legend, one notable example deserves mention: *Women in the Wall* (O'Faolain 1975) is a novel that, through the lens of mystical literature, presents a sensuous and passionate portrayal of a woman deeply enamored with the poet Venantius. Another project aimed at reimagining Radegund's literary *persona* is currently under development through a collaboration between Sapienza University of Rome and the CNR.

In short, these are the most significant stages of Radegund's evolving literary and cultural reception across the centuries. As stated earlier, a detailed analysis of each individual work falls beyond the scope of this paper, and it has already been explored elsewhere. Nevertheless, I deemed it necessary to highlight the peculiar features of the saint that emerge in the work of each of these authors in response to their own ideological perspectives or to the demands of their historical context. I will now attempt to outline how critical scholarship has approached the subject of Radegund's identity, in order to show which facets of her personality have emerged in the scholars' portrayals.

But first, a preliminary remark is necessary. The philological dimension remains the most evident gap in the study of this literary tradition: to date, no modern critical edition of either Venantius' or Baudonivia's *Vitae Radegundis* exists. The standard reference edition for both hagiographies remains the one published in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, edited by Bruno Krusch in 1888 (*De vita sanctae Radegundis libri duo*) (Venantius Fortunatus–Baudonivia 1888). Although both texts have been translated into several modern languages throughout the twentieth century²⁰, they have never been the subject of a comprehensive philological endeavor. As a result, the true extent of the transmission and dissemination of the Latin *Vitae* during the Middle Ages remains unclear, due to the lack of systematic research on the manuscript tradition²¹. The *editio princeps* of Venantius' *Vita* was prepared by the Italian Bonino Mombrizio (Mombrizio 1910) and printed in Milan in 1475; it was based on a single manuscript. Baudonivia's *Vita* was first printed in 1573 by Lorenz Sauer (Surius 1573), who referred to the nun as “Bandomina”. However, Sauer openly admitted that he had altered the style of the text to enhance its readability, stating that he “*nonnihil eliminavit*” the author's original language (Surius 1573, p. 629). In 1668, Jean Mabillon (1668) incorporated three additional manuscripts into the *recensio* established by Mombrizio and Sauer. Later, in 1737, Guillaume Cuypers (1737) proposed significant emendations to Mabillon's edition based on a (now lost) manuscript discovered at the abbey of Vaultuissant. This brief philological history of the two original *Vitae Radegundis* culminated in 1885, when Krusch produced the first critical edition of Venantius' *Vita* (Venantius Fortunatus 1885) for

the *MGH*, followed by Baudonivia's *Vita* in 1888 (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888): they appear together under the title *De vita sanctae Radegundis libri duo*. Since then, despite numerous modern translations, no critical edition based on an accurate study of the Latin texts has been carried out. This constitutes a major gap in the scholarship on the earliest hagiographies of Radegund²².

2. The Saint

The long history of studies concerning Radegund's sanctity begins in her own city of Poitiers. In the 16th century, the Poitevin historian Jean Bouchet authored the *Histoire et chronique de Clotaire, premier de ce nom, VII roy de Fraçoys et monarque des Gaules* (1517)²³. Bouchet's work, however, is far from being an objective historiographical account; rather, it is closer to a manual for 16th century ladies, both bourgeois and aristocratic. As Rudolph observes, "a close reading of Bouchet's prologue suggests that he designed the *Histoire* as a guidebook for women of all different sexual statuses who were interested in living more virtuous lives by following an exemplar to which they could relate" (Rudolph 2022, p. 249). Following the narrative structure established by Venantius, Bouchet divides Radegund's life into three phases: wife, queen, and, finally, nun. This structure reflects the fact that by Bouchet's time, Radegund's cult was already well established and widely spread in France: her virtuous life could thus serve as an exemplary model for his intended readership. Unsurprisingly, Bouchet downplays her *contemptus mundi* in the part of the text devoted to her life at Clothar's court: Radegund is first presented as a model wife, who only embraces asceticism after formally taking religious vows.

Bouchet laid the foundation for a long line of religiously motivated studies, each emphasizing the pious, austere, or miraculous aspects of the queen's deeds²⁴. Among these, one must mention the work of Édouard de Fleury, who, in 1847, published an *Histoire de Sainte Radegonde, reine de France au VI^e siècle et patronne de Poitiers* (Fleury 1847). Fleury was the first to decisively shift the focus from Clothar to Radegund herself, with the clear aim of exalting the city of Poitiers by celebrating its patroness saint. His *Histoire* exhibits an antiquarian spirit, as he sought to document physical traces of the saint's presence in the city. Notably, his work contains the most detailed description of the famed *Pas de Dieu* ("Foot of God"), a relic associated with Radegund's tale²⁵. In the church of Sainte-Radegonde in Poitiers, there is a footprint believed to mark the spot where Christ appeared to Radegund one year before her death (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888, II, 20). By dwelling on this episode, Fleury firmly cemented the connection between the saint and the city, presenting Poitiers as the true site of her sanctity²⁶.

An intriguing—and innovative—approach was undertaken by Peter Joerres (1897). His primary objective was to investigate the saint's origins, in order to determine whether she had been a Christian since her birth in Thuringia or had initially adopted Arianism or Paganism. Joerres' study remains of interest to modern scholars as an early example, preceding the 20th century, of attempts to explore the relationship between the saint and the two countries where she lived. French scholars, from Bouchet to Fleury, consistently emphasized Radegund's connection to France, while German scholars such as Joerres preferred to linger on her ties to the Thuringian milieu. This division clearly reflects the ideological weight that shaped these studies²⁷: although the queen of the Franks was undoubtedly a French saint, her German past could not—and should not—be effaced. This phase of religiously framed scholarship came to an end in the early 20th century²⁸ with the publication of *Sainte Radegonde vers 520–587* by Father René Aigrain (1918). Aigrain's work, while still a fundamental tool for any scholar approaching the figure of saint Radegund, essentially represents the culmination and synthesis of the preceding tradition surrounding the Frankish queen.

During the 20th century, scholarly attitude towards the *Vitae Radegundis* shifted towards a more scientific, hagiological perspective and away from explicitly religious or devotional concerns. As a result, numerous hagiologists have sought to analyze the *Vitae* within the broader context of Late Antique and Medieval hagiography. For obvious reasons, I cannot enumerate every study devoted to Radegund; however, it is appropriate to highlight some of the most influential contributions.

In 1952, a major conference on the Merovingian period was held in Poitiers; several papers focused on the patroness of the city. The proceedings, published as *Études mérovingiennes: actes des journées de Poitiers, 1^{er}–3 mai 1952*, included key studies such as Louise Coudanne's essay (Coudanne 1953)—the first entirely dedicated to Baudonivia's *Vita*—and Georges Marié's article (Marié 1952), which contextualized Radegund's monastic role within the framework of Merovingian monasticism. These pioneering works laid the foundation for one of the most innovative approaches to Radegund's sanctity: Jacques Fontaine's seminal article *Hagiographie et politique de Sulpice Sévère à Venance Fortunat* (Fontaine 1976). Fontaine compares the hagiographies of Sulpicius Severus and Venantius Fortunatus, elucidating the legacy of Saint Martin of Tours within the cultural landscape of Frankish Gaul and its connection to the political and ideological objectives of the Merovingian kings. Here, Radegund emerges as Martin's most distinguished successor: her miracles, piety, and sanctity are seen, at least in part, as literary constructs designed to perpetuate the spiritual inheritance of one of Gaul's foremost Christian fathers.

Fontaine's efforts were followed in Italy by Franca Ela Consolino, who was among the first Italian scholars—alongside Leonardi (1989, 2011)—to investigate the figure of the Merovingian queen. Consolino explored the stereotypical elements of Radegund's Medieval portrayals, drawing connections with other Late Antique female saints such as Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, Paula of Rome, and Olympias the Deaconess²⁹. Within this broader hagiographical framework, Radegund assumes the role of the first Medieval heir to a venerable lineage of holy women who shaped Christian history from its earliest centuries. From this perspective, Radegund transcends her status as a merely Poitevin or French saint, becoming a Merovingian representative of an international model of sanctity: an aristocrat who seeks self-abasement in order to become *nobilior* before God³⁰, a monastery *domina* who donates great wealth to the Church in the Roman matronal tradition, and a would-be martyr who inflicts martyrdom upon herself in the absence of external persecution (Oldoni 2022b).

This scholarly tradition continued into the present day, albeit with a notable shift in focus. Two recent essays by Manzoli (2018, 2021) marked an important turning point for 21st-century research. Placed at the intersection of hagiology and gender studies, these works reveal hidden aspects of Radegund's portrayal by Fortunatus and Baudonivia: elements so distinctive that they resist categorization as mere hagiographical stereotypes. In her relationship to God—sublimated into the martyrdom—the nun acquires an unmistakably erotic charge, made explicit through the use of language associated with the female body. Moreover, as a personal friend of Radegund, Fortunatus possessed unique knowledge of the saint³¹, allowing him to include intimate details in his *Vita* that make his literary depiction unusually vivid and original for the sixth century: his Radegund thus became the prototype of female mysticism.

Thus, even with respect to her sainthood, Radegund's *persona* in modern scholarship is neither monolithic nor one-dimensional. Rather, it exists along a spectrum—from Bouchet to Manzoli—shaped by changing ideological, cultural, and scholarly imperatives. Having once served as a model for bourgeois women, she became a miracle-working patroness of Poitiers, a German-born saint with ties to Thuringia, the heir to an ancient Christian

aristocratic tradition of holy *matronae*, and ultimately a mystic that anticipates phenomena that would flourish only in the 11th and 12th centuries.

3. The Queen and *Domina*³²

In this section, I will begin with the end of our scholarly journey: in 2023, Erin Thomas Dailey published a praiseworthy volume titled *Radegund. The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen* (Dailey 2023). As an historian, Dailey seeks to portray the Poitevin woman not primarily as a saint, but rather as a queen and a leading figure in the political landscape of Merovingian Gaul. His work, which intertwines historical and archeological research, results in a redefinition of the power dynamics in 6th century France, revealing that the Thuringian princess played a far more significant role than previously acknowledged. Even after the foundation of the monastery of Sainte-Croix and her withdrawal from the royal court, she remained a *de facto* woman of power. The bishop of the diocese of Poitiers, Maroveus, lost authority as she assumed the position of *domina* of the abbey³³ and became a crucial ally of the Merovingian crown—a conduit between the kings and the monastic Church, exercising extensive authority throughout the region of Aquitaine. Tracing Radegund's role as queen of the Franks during her time at Clothar's side is no easy task, primarily due to the paucity of surviving historical sources. Nevertheless, Dailey's work provides an exceptionally thorough account, carefully considering previous historiography while incorporating intriguing new findings.

Scholars such as Graus (1965), Prinz (1967, 1976), and Ian Wood³⁴ also investigated in great depth how *Heiligkeit* and the Merovingian crown are interwoven in the construction of a Frankish identity, demonstrating that *domina* Radegund represents a crucial link in this indissoluble chain. Clothar commissioned the construction of the Sainte-Croix monastery for her, effectively establishing the abbey as an extension of the palace of Soissons, and thereby strengthening the Crown's influence over the diocese of Poitiers and the wider territory of Aquitaine³⁵. Yet Clothar's wife was acutely aware that, as a woman, she could not rely solely on *de iure* authority, and thus had to secure prestige for herself and her abbey. This necessity explains her determined quest for relics³⁶, culminating in her acquisition of a fragment of the True Cross. Drawing upon her family ties with Constantinople, she obtained a piece of the Holy Cross (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888, II, c. 16.) and consecrated her monastery of Notre-Dame to the Holy Cross itself—an act destined to bring her abbey unprecedented notoriety in Frankish territory. In this way, Poitiers was to be regarded as a Jerusalem in the West. Thus, historians depict Radegund, if not explicitly as a queen, certainly as a lady of great influence, even within the confines of the cloister.

This line of inquiry, which originated in 20th century English and German scholarship, is now yielding its most fruitful results, partly thanks to the integration of perspectives from gender studies. Radegund's position of power has recently been reassessed within the framework of the Merovingian system, alongside other influential women of the time³⁷. The *domina*, together with figures such as Fredegund and Brunhild³⁸, was a queen who asserted her authority in the Frankish realm by assuming the role of Mother of the Kingdom—or *mater regni*³⁹. In her essay *Il tema della madre nella poesia di Venanzio Fortunato* (Manzoli 2015), Manzoli argues that the designation of *mater regni* fits the portrayal of Brunhild in Venantius' poetry, while also suggesting that the label could be extended to other Merovingian queens, including Radegund herself. This view recalls the tenth chapter of Baudonivia's *Vita*, where the nun recounts how, after Clothar's death, the *domina* sent letters to his sons to prevent civil war and spare Gaul from utter destruction. There, Radegund is described as "*de pace sollicita, de salute patriae curiosa*" (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888, II, c. 10.), a depiction markedly different from that of an ascetic woman, forgetful of the secular world. Instead, she appears as a vigilant guardian of the welfare of France, exercising authority

over Clothar's sons—the new Frankish kings—by urging them to make peace, much like a mother compelling her children to end their quarrels. Thus, to be a mother of Frankish kings meant, in essence, to care for the entirety of the Frankish realm.

Her queenship has, of course, been examined not only from a political perspective, but also from a Christian one. It is well known that certain forms of pagan cults persisted in 6th century France, and as a Catholic queen, Radegund was a zealous opponent of these vestiges of pre-Christian religion. She was neither the first nor the last to fight against paganism in France, but [Martínez Maza \(2009\)](#) explored the role of so-called “barbaric queens” in Frankish Gaul ([Martínez Maza 2009](#); [Urso 2013](#)), focusing on Clothilde, Bertha of Kent, and Radegund herself⁴⁰. These women were the most prominent heirs to a legacy first established in the East by Constantine's mother, Helena ([Consolino 1994](#)). The role of Helena's spiritual descendant suited the *domina* of Sainte-Croix perfectly⁴¹: Radegund's active efforts to promote Christianity by fighting pagan resistance are narrated in the opening chapters of the second *Vita Radegundis*, where the queen—not yet a nun—, having learnt of a pagan sanctuary in the countryside, orders her men to burn down all the “*diabolica machinamenta*” ([Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888](#), II, 2). This is arguably the clearest depiction of the saint wearing her royal vestments, for she is marching with her *pompa*, issuing commands in the name of Christianity to her subjects. It is a scene that encapsulates every facet of Radegund's identity: the saint, the queen, and the *mater regni*. Such militant opposition to “the devil's schemes” likely gave rise to a legend that would circulate in the Poitevin milieu for centuries. The tale was first recorded in Bouchet's work ([Bouchet 1517](#)), though its origins are presumably much older: the legend of the *Grand'Goule*, thoroughly examined by Jennifer Edwards in her essay *Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix* ([Edwards 2019](#); [Dailey 2023](#), pp. 1–4). This tale recounts how a vicious dragon, dwelling in the depths of the Clain river and traversing the underground passages of Poitiers, would emerge to crawl inside the monastery of Sainte-Croix and prey upon the nuns. One day, the *domina*, wielding the Cross, a flask of Holy Water, and invoking prayers, succeeded in banishing the fearsome beast. By defending her city and monastery, the holy *domina* was elevated to the stature of a warrior saint.

4. The Writer

Relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to Radegund's personality as a writer⁴². It is nevertheless unquestionable that the Frankish queen authored several epistles and may even have composed poetry. The main issue remains the absence of surviving works, with the sole exception of a single letter. Given that Venantius Fortunatus, in his *Carmina*, refers to Radegund's love of poetry and her habit of composing verse ([Venantius Fortunatus 2017](#), Appendix, 31), it is reasonable to hypothesize that she produced poetic works. Furthermore, as previously discussed, Radegund was a prolific correspondent, addressing letters to prominent contemporaries such as Emperor Justin II, Bishop Germanus, and the sons of Clothar ([Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia](#), II, 7; 10; 16). In addition, Caesaria the Younger wrote three epistles to Radegund and Richilde, which she sent to Sainte-Croix⁴³; as these letters cite the wishes of their recipients, it is evident that an exchange of correspondence took place. Thus, like other Merovingian queens⁴⁴, Radegund undoubtedly composed letters, although most have not survived the passage of time⁴⁵.

In 1888, Charles [Nisard \(1888\)](#) proposed reattributing two poems traditionally ascribed to Venantius Fortunatus—*De excidio Thoringiae* ([Venantius Fortunatus 2017](#), Appendix 1) and the *Epistula ad Artachin* ([Venantius Fortunatus 2017](#), Appendix, 3)—to Radegund. These two versified letters feature a Radegund speaking in the first person. According to Nisard, the deeply emotional portrayal of a grieving Radegund, lamenting her lost homeland

and absorbed in a melancholic reflection, is inconsistent with the typically somber tone of Venantius' poetry. While several scholars have rejected Nisard's thesis⁴⁶, the database *Epistolae—Medieval Women's Letters* (2025) attributes these two poems to Radegund, along with a third text, a letter addressed to Emperor Justin II and Empress Sophia (Venantius Fortunatus 2017, Appendix 2). Nisard's thesis, typical of 19th-century scholarship, reflects the gendered literary biases of his time: he assumes that these poems must be Radegund's because of their *délicatesse*, *vivacité de la plainte*, and because their style appears *aimable*, *gracieux*, and *naïf* (Nisard 1888, pp. 111–14).

The only literary work unanimously accepted as authentically authored by Radegund is the *Letter to the Bishops*, preserved in Gregory of Tours' *Historiae* (Gregory of Tours 1974, IX, p. 42). This distinctive letter, addressed to all the Gallic bishops, shows the *domina* of Sainte-Croix expressing concern for the abbey's future after her death and for the safeguarding of her legacy. In the letter, Radegund entrusts the bishops and kings to protect the monastery, while also revealing an assertive and even threatening tone toward anyone who might dare to plunder, harm, or destroy Sainte-Croix. The text is at once respectful and admonitory, employing a typical formula of Christian epigraphic anathema to warn potential offenders: "*per Patrem et Filium et Spiritum Sanctum, ac diem tremendi iudicii*". This letter remains the subject of scholarly debate, especially with respect to its date of composition⁴⁷. Some, such as Jeffrey (2002), interpret the epistle as a "foundation letter" written early on in the history of the monastery—likely prior to the implementation of Caesarius' *Regula*. Others, including Dailey (2023), contend that the letter is more plausibly a "last will" and a "testament"⁴⁸, composed by an aging Radegund who was "writing with hindsight about the foundation of Holy Cross, and with foresight about her own death" (Dailey 2023, p. 171).

5. The Woman

As previously noted, the methodological revolution introduced by gender studies has profoundly influenced research on the Middle Ages, shedding new light on the interpretation of medieval texts. A figure as complex and powerful as Radegund could not escape such renewed readings. The contribution of these new approaches has been pivotal: for the first time, Radegund has been metaphorically stripped of all her literary veils. Scholars have sought to peel away the hagiographical, political, and authorial layers found in the Latin sources in order to reconstruct an image of the woman herself. Yet, even in this case, it would be erroneous to assume that these scholarly portraits reveal a glimpse of the 'real' Radegund of Poitiers. Rather, they represent yet another form of literary construction—distinct from, but complementary to, previous representations. One particularly significant observation is that many scholars have identified a notable discrepancy between the gender portrayals of the saintly woman in the works of Venantius Fortunatus and Baudonivia, respectively. Consolino emphasized how Fortunatus fashioned a stereotypical depiction of Radegund as a woman, shaped by the classical literary model of the *mulier virilis* or *virago*: a woman who transcends the limits of her gender by assuming masculine virtues (Consolino 1986, 1988, 1989). In such a depiction, Radegund endures abuse and self-imposed martyrdom, exhibiting a resilience uncommon among women (at least in Fortunatus' perception), as faith makes her spiritually and morally steadfast. This process of "de-genderization" reflects the intent of a hagiographer determined to elevate Radegund to the rank of the saintly bishops he wrote about, while simultaneously overcoming the perceived *malus* of her having been born a woman.

Baudonivia, by contrast, diverges significantly from her predecessor. In her *Life of Radegund*, the saint does not conform to any Late Antique literary model. Yet, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the nun's gendered portrayal of the saint, as two different

interpretations persist. Wittern (1994), Coates (1998), and Santorelli (1999), on the one hand, contend that Baudonivia's Radegund remains as a-gendered as Fortunatus' version, albeit from a different perspective. These scholars, building on Fontaine's studies (Fontaine 1976), focus on the nature of her miracles and argue that Radegund acts as a theological and political heir to St. Martin. In their view, she enjoys the royal favor and demonstrates a form of active sanctity that perpetuates the legacy of Tours' revered patron. Conversely, Fonay Wemple (1987) and Manzoli (2023a) dispute the notion that the *imitatio Martini* alone suffices to strip Baudonivia's Radegund of gendered traits. I fully concur with this view, and with Manzoli's innovative interpretation concerning the mystical charge of Radegund's relationship with God. In the second *Vita Radegundis*, the *domina* is explicitly portrayed as a *sponsa Christi*, and the hagiographer employs a lexicon imbued with erotic undertones that would be inconceivable had Baudonivia not thought of her former sister as a woman, eternally betrothed to her Lord. References to Radegund as a *mater regni* operate on the same level: she wields all the instruments of royal authority, while embodying a nurturing maternal figure for both kings and kingdom. Similarly, her exercise of power within the abbey is framed in maternal terms⁴⁹. Although depicted as a strict and adamant spiritual leader, she is also presented as gentle and affectionate in her addresses to her fellow nuns. Baudonivia repeatedly shows Radegund calling the nuns *filiae* and being addressed by them as *mater*. As such, this portrayal—of a passionate lover and a devoted spiritual mother—clearly resists the notion of “a-genderization”; rather, it exemplifies a deliberate process of “re-genderization”, in direct contrast to the masculine figure fashioned by Venantius⁵⁰.

As this analysis has shown, scholarly reconstructions of Radegund of Poitiers—based on the Merovingian *Vitae*—emphasize various facets of her identity. Scholars detected an elegiac quality in some of Venantius' *Carmina* dedicated to Radegund, as well as an erotic charge underlying the vivid depictions of self-imposed martyrdom in the *Vita Radegundis*; these elements have also informed modern reinterpretations of Radegund's life. Likewise, Baudonivia's depiction of the holy queen fighting against paganism and the Devil likely provided the foundation for the post-Tridentine reappropriation of Radegund as a militant saint. By tracing both fictional and scholarly portrayals of Radegund, one can appreciate how each successive reinterpretation selectively emphasizes certain aspects of Radegund's *persona*, be they drawn from Venantius or Baudonivia (or even Gregory of Tours), thereby providing new and multifaceted images of the saint.

Despite the scarcity of direct historical evidence regarding the real Radegund, it is possible to trace the evolving literary and ideological journey of her fictional *persona*, and to observe the historical development of her image across centuries. Such an examination not only illuminates the ways in which she was represented, but also reveals the motives underlying these representations, suggesting that the very shape of a literary character can serve as a lens through which we can explore the cultural and ideological contexts that produced it.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that scholarly essays themselves constitute a distinct literary genre; therefore, the portrayals of Radegund found in critical studies are, as I have sought to highlight, intrinsically shaped by the intellectual and cultural *milieu* in which they are produced.

While the historical Radegund remains elusive, the recurring emphasis on her political agency, her capacity for spiritual leadership, and her exceptional status as both queen and saint suggests that certain aspects of her *persona* did endure, albeit refracted through multiple lenses. In this sense, the figure of Radegund offers a compelling case study: each scholarly portrayal continues to isolate and investigate selected facets of the Thuringian woman's identity. Each new representation elaborates particular aspects of her *persona*—

be it the saint, the queen, the writer, or the woman—thus adding yet another tile to the ever-evolving mosaic of Radegund's legacy.

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Notes

- ¹ On this topic, see [Fonay Wemple \(1984, 1987\)](#), [Helvétius \(2011\)](#), and, for a focus on Radegund's monastery, ([Edwards 2019](#)).
- ² See *infra* for further information. I will not linger on Radegund's literary portraits, because the topic has been thoroughly analyzed by Donatella Manzoli in a detailed article published in 2021 ([Manzoli 2021](#)), as well as in a recent conference held at the Biblioteca Ariostea in Ferrara (23–24 May 2024), where she gave a talk titled *Il percorso (agio)grafico di Radegonda* (the proceedings are currently being published: [Manzoli, forthcoming c](#)). Radegund's rewritings have also been investigated in a PhD thesis, discussed by Anna Katharina [Rudolph \(2022\)](#) at UC Santa Barbara, and titled *Shifting Models of Women's Sanctity and Gender Expectations from the Merovingian Era to the Twenty-first Century*.
- ³ Rouche 1995 provided just a brief overview of historical studies. This work is carried out within the framework of the project MITE (*Make It Explicit: Documenting interpretations of literary fictions with conceptual formal models*): through my paper, I wish to contribute to the project by means of providing a new case-study from medieval literature, and notably through a survey of scholarship aimed at highlighting the main research questions, argumentative strategies, and vocabularies relevant to the discussion on a well-known literary character rooted in European history.
- ⁴ There is great uncertainty among historians about Radegund's year of birth, because historical sources leave no space for precision. For a detailed and insightful discussion of Radegund's chronology, see [Fauquier \(2017\)](#).
- ⁵ This is the record provided by Venantius ([Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888](#), I, 12), but this episode of Radegund's biography is obscure, since it leaves out the ritual needed for being ordered deaconess. Female diaconate was also discouraged by the Church in Merovingian Gaul (see, in general, [Binder \(2017\)](#) and, on this episode of the first *Vita Radegundis*, [Barcellona, forthcoming](#)).
- ⁶ About Radegund's monastery, see at least ([Labande-Mailfert 1986, 1987](#)).
- ⁷ This is just a short biographical profile of Radegund, provided here to highlight the coordinates of the saint's life. For a complete biography see at least [Santorelli \(1999, pp. 9–14\)](#); ([Frugoni 2021](#); [Oldoni 2022b](#); [Dailey 2023](#)).
- ⁸ For further information about Radegund and Venantius' friendship, see ([Williard 2022](#)).
- ⁹ As a reference edition for Venantius' poems, see [Venantius Fortunatus \(2017\)](#). For general information about Venantius' poetry, see the proceedings of three congresses held in Treviso ([Venanzio Fortunato 1993, 2003, 2024](#)), as well as ([Roberts 2009](#); [Manzoli 2016](#)). For an analysis of the poetic portraits of Radegund in Venantius' poems, see at least ([Cristiani 2003](#); [Barcellona 2014](#); [Manzoli 2018](#)). In these verses she is depicted as a devote servant of God and a refined and powerful woman (VIII, 5, 8, 9, etc.) who is educated enough to write poetry (Venantius Fortunatus Appendix, 31), but also a caring mother, deeply devoted to her nuns (VIII, 9). In some *carmina* she even becomes the poet's beloved woman, and the verses take an elegiac nuance (VIII, 8, 9, 10 etc; regarding this latter subject, see [Consolino 1977](#); [Piredda 1997](#)).
- ¹⁰ As a reference edition, see [Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia \(1888, pp. 364–77\)](#).
- ¹¹ Here Venantius lingers on several sides of Radegund's personality: she is seen as a *mulier virilis* (especially in I, 1), an ascetic queen and nun, and a woman with a mystic relationship with the Almighty (see [Manzoli 2018](#) for further details about the importance of Radegund's body in Venantius' hagiography). Venantius' *Vita Radegundis* shows how fond the author was of Radegund, since he proves to know, and to be willing to divulge, intimate details about her physique or her private habits ([Barcellona 2014](#); [Manzoli 2018, 2021](#)).
- ¹² As Baudonivia herself states in ([Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888](#), II, *praefatio* ("*non polito, sed rustico . . . sermone*")). Cfr. ([Consolino 1988](#); [Gäbe 1989](#); [Leonardi 1989](#); [Santorelli 1999](#)).
- ¹³ In this second *Vita Radegundis* the *domina* is portrayed as a holy queen, a *mater regni* who is fervently concerned with her kingdom's stability, in as much as she often takes action to safeguard peace and prosperity, including issuing commands to the kings, the sons of Clothar (II, 10; see [Stafford 1983, p. 10](#)). She is also depicted as a devoted and adored mother to the other nuns, who are inspired by her teachings, and look up to her for spiritual guidance (II, 8, 21, 22, etc.). Furthermore, she is the bride of God. The hagiographer's addition of untold stories on the queen's visions, in which her relationship with the Almighty is intensely physical and characterized by a language imbued with eroticism, vividly enhance the erotic charge found in Venantius' work (II, 3, 4, 20; on this subject see [Santorelli 1999](#); [Manzoli 2023a](#)). Baudonivia wrote her hagiography after two years of turmoil in the

monastery of Sainte-Croix, caused by an uprising of the nuns: for further information on this historical event, see (Levillain 1909; Bikeeva 2014b; Barcellona 2020; Oldoni 2022a).

Gregory focused on the public side of Radegund's tale: for instance, he depicts her funeral and the miracles performed by the Holy Cross following her passing. In his texts she is mostly celebrated as an exemplar and an encouragement for the other nuns, and as a revered figure that the Grace of God has bestowed upon the whole Gaul. For further information regarding Radegund in the *Decem Libri Historiarum*, see the commentary edited by Massimo Oldoni in Gregorio di Tours (2001). On Gregory's pictures of Radegund's holiness in his hagiographical works, see at least Effros (1990).

As reference editions, see (Gregory of Tours 1974; or Gregorio di Tours 2001).

As a reference edition, see (Gregorius Turonensis 1885, 34–111; pp. 284–370).

For a reference edition of Hildebert's *Vita Radegundis*, see Hildebertus (1854). A new critical edition is currently in progress: Francesca De Marco, PhD student at SISMELE, is working on it for her doctoral thesis. Hildebert lived in the post-Gregorian era, when the Catholic Church had adopted the principles of the monastic reform; his Radegund is thus primarily an ascetic woman, committed to martyrdom and abstinence. On Hildebert's work, see (Natali 1993; Manzoli 2021; Rudolph 2022).

As a reference edition, see (Bradshaw 1926). On Bradshaw's *Life* see (Brittain 1925; Natali 1993; Rudolph 2022).

"As several scholars have suggested, Bradshaw may have been inspired to write his life of Radegund because he was particularly affected by the dissolution of St. Radegund's Priory in Cambridge by Bishop Alcock of Ely in 1496. (...) It cannot be a mere coincidence that he decided to write his *Lyfe of Saynt Radegunde* around the same time the Priory was being dissolved" (Rudolph 2022, pp. 235–37).

Venantius' *Vita Radegundis* was translated into French (Aigrain 1910; Garnier 1965; Chauvin and Pon 1995), English (McNamara et al. 1992), Spanish (Pejenaute Rubio 2007), Italian (Landioro 1984; Palermo 1989; Pizzimenti 2005; a new translation by Manzoli is currently in progress), and German (Hubert-Rebenich 2008). Baudonivia's work was translated into French (Aigrain 1910; Labande-Mailfert 1987), English (Thiébaux 1987; McNamara et al. 1992), Spanish (Pejenaute Rubio 2006), and Italian (Santorelli 1999; the author of this paper is currently working on a new Italian translation of Baudonivia's *Vita Radegundis*).

Manzoli (2022) is a crucial exception: the author has conducted extensive research on Venantius' witnesses. See also Krusch's short profiles in *Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia* (1888, pp. 363–64).

There are two main exceptions that I would like to point out here. One is Favreau (1995), which is a diplomatic edition of Venantius' *Vita Radegundis* as it appears in the ms. Poitiers, Médiathèque François Mitterrand, 250, a marvelous Poitevin *codex* that is also finely illuminated. The other one is a work in progress: the author of the present paper is currently working on a critical edition of Baudonivia's *Vita Radegundis*, and he has been able to find 25 manuscripts that transmit the second book of Radegund's biography.

Bouchet (1517); on Bouchet's work see Hamon (1970).

In addition, see the aforementioned (Moquot 1621; Dumonteil 1627).

On the *Pas de Dieu* the most accurate study is still Baudouin (1911).

For further information about the literary representation of Merovingian queenship in the 19th century, see also Aali (2017).

Graus (1965) briefly discussed the ideological burden that weighed on German hagiological studies at the end of the 19th century, especially in opposition to the French cultural *milieu*.

The only exception is, to the best of my knowledge, Adenis-Lamarre (2019). Sœur Odile Adenis-Lamarre is currently a nun in the abbey of Sainte-Croix à La Cossonnière, the convent born from the ashes of Radegund's Sainte-Croix. Her work does not show any claim of scientific research, but it is a product of the nun's devotion for the holy founder of the abbey. However, the book is filled with intriguing anecdotes drawn from the history of Sainte-Croix along the centuries.

(Consolino 1986, 1989). Regarding female sanctity in Late Antique period, see Cooper (1996) for other bibliographic references.

In addition to Consolino's works, see also Bailey (2019).

On this subject, see also Bikeeva (2014a).

The scholarly contributions I analyze in this section often focus on Gregory of Tours' portrayals of Radegund as well.

Barcellona (2020) and Dailey (2023) provide some important information about Radegund and Maroveus' enmity. However, as far as I know, there are no specific contributions dedicated to this topic.

Wood's studies are too many to be mentioned here, but suffice it to cite at least (Wood 2001). More references can be found in Dailey (2023, pp. 603–4).

On this topic, see at least (Barcellona 2020; Manzoli 2021). Leonardi (1983, p. 26) made some important remarks about Radegund's authority, calling her a "autorità meta-vescovile".

Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia (1888, II, 13). On this subject see Moreira (1993).

On this subject, see also Papa (1989).

Fredegund was Chilperic I's concubine and wife. Brunhild, on the other hand, was Sigebert I's wife.

Mater regni is an epithet used by Gerbert of Aurillac to refer to Adelaide of Italy three centuries later (Gerbert d'Aurillac 1993, I, 74; 128).

Regarding the holy queens in Medieval West, see also Folz (1992).
 As Baudonivia explicitly claims (Venantius Fortunatus-Baudonivia 1888, II, 16).
 Although recently an article has been published about Radegund's epistolary strategies and her ability to master even the non-textual elements of the epistolary process: see Flierman and Williard (2025).
 As a reference edition and for further information, see Manzoli (2024). The three epistles were believed to be only one letter until Manzoli's work (see also Césaire d'Arles 1988, pp. 476–95).
 There are several epistles written by Merovingian queens. See at least (Manzoli 2023b, forthcoming b).
 Regarding this subject, see also Cherewatuk (1993).
 Nowadays, the letters are attributed to Radegund only by Thiébaux (1987) and by Cherewatuk (1993), with McNamara et al. (1992) strongly suggesting that they could be ascribed to the Merovingian queen. Yet, I concur with Wallace-Hadrill (1983), who made a convincing hypothesis to support Fortunatus' authorship of the two poems, comparing the poem on the Fall of Thuringia to his "Lament for Galswinth". Bartoli and Manzoli (2024, p. 17), likewise, support the attribution of these poems to Fortunatus, given that they only mention one letter written by Radegund. Flierman–Williard claim that this is "the sole surviving letter that can securely be attributed to her" (Flierman and Williard 2025, p. 311). See at least Wasyl (2015) for further references.
 Beside the aforementioned studies, see (Manzoli, forthcoming b).
 Even Barcellona (2020, p. 147) mentions Radegund's letter, referring to it as a "Testamentum".
 This is the amplification of a topic that is also represented in Venantius' poems. About that, see Manzoli (2015).
 I have presented this view at a recent conference held in Sapienza, University of Rome. The contribution will soon appear in a miscellanea forthcoming.

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