

Sainted Women of the Dark Ages

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY JO ANN MCNAMARA



& JOHN E. HALBORG WITH E. GORDON WHATLEY

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*With much gratitude to
The Friends of the Saints
A goodly company*

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Note on Language and Abbreviations



Throughout our translations we have tried to indicate in the notes particularly difficult or debatable terms. In some cases, we have made consistent choices. Several terms are used to designate bishop, which we have reserved as a translation for *episcopus*. The term *antistes* has been translated throughout as primate and *praesul* as prelate. Pontiff has been left as is. *Pietas* is a complicated concept that should be understood, not in its modern sense but in its antique meaning, as a reciprocal relationship between unequals such as God and human, parent and child, ruler and subject, compounded of respect for the superior and care for the inferior. *Virtus* has many meanings. Where the text allows, we have translated it simply as virtue, but in other cases we have used power and even miracle.¹ Biblical quotes have been cited from the King James version to retain a traditional liturgical flavor, and there virtue appears as strength. The English language does not provide a workable alternative to *mother* to express the distinction our texts make between *genetrix*, the natural mother, and *mater*, the spiritual mother, or between *germana*, the physical sister, and *soror*, the fellow nun. *Sanctimonial* is the most common word for nun found in our texts. In the early lives of Monegund and Radegund, *monacha* is used, with a single appearance of *nonna* in Baudonivia's text. We have therefore used nun for sanctimonial and left the other usages intact. We have retained the slightly pretentious *optimates* for nobles where it appears, and *Quadragesima* for Lent. We have consistently translated Sabbath as Saturday.

1. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 136–65, argues for translating virtues as deeds and follows the thread of this definition to its classical and emerging Christian meanings. He sees classical virtue as correct social action and equates it to Jewish ideas of living correctly by the law prevalent in the Pharisaic movement. With the Christians, sensibility shifts toward a God-directed quality, divorced from social or public behavior. Thus it moved toward becoming a synonym for miracle.

Abbreviations in Footnotes and Bibliography

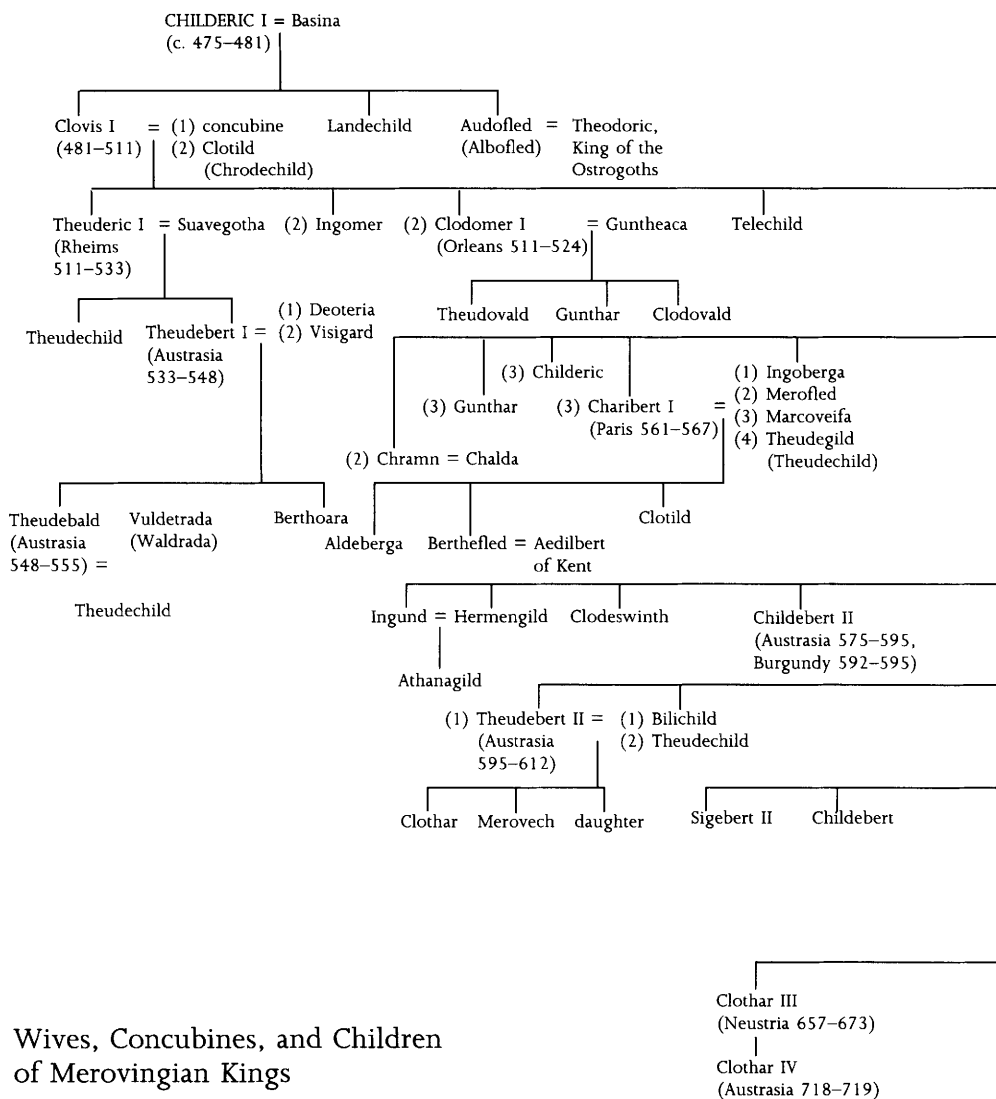
AS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>
ASOSB	<i>Acta Sanctorum Ordinis S. Benedicti</i>
c.	the numbered paragraphs in most standard Latin editions and in our translations.
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina</i> <i>Lexicon</i> = <i>Lexicon Latinitatis Medii Aevi</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptiones Latinorum</i>
CL	<i>Chronicorum Liber quartus cum continuationibus</i>
DACL	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et liturgie</i>
DHGE	<i>Dictionnaire d'histoire et géographie ecclésiastique</i>
HE	<i>History of the English Church and People</i> , by Bede
HF	<i>History of the Franks</i>
LHF	<i>Liber Historiae Francorum</i> , ed. and trans. Bachrach
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> <i>AA</i> = <i>Auctores Antiquiores</i> <i>Diplomata</i> = <i>Diplomata Regum Francorum e Stirpe Merovingica</i> <i>Epistolae</i> = <i>Epistolae Aevi Merovingici Collectae</i> <i>SRM</i> = <i>Scriptores rerum merovingicarum</i> <i>SS</i> = <i>Scriptores</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus</i> , series Latina, ed. J. P. Migne
PG	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus</i> , series Graecae, ed. J. P. Migne

Acknowledgments



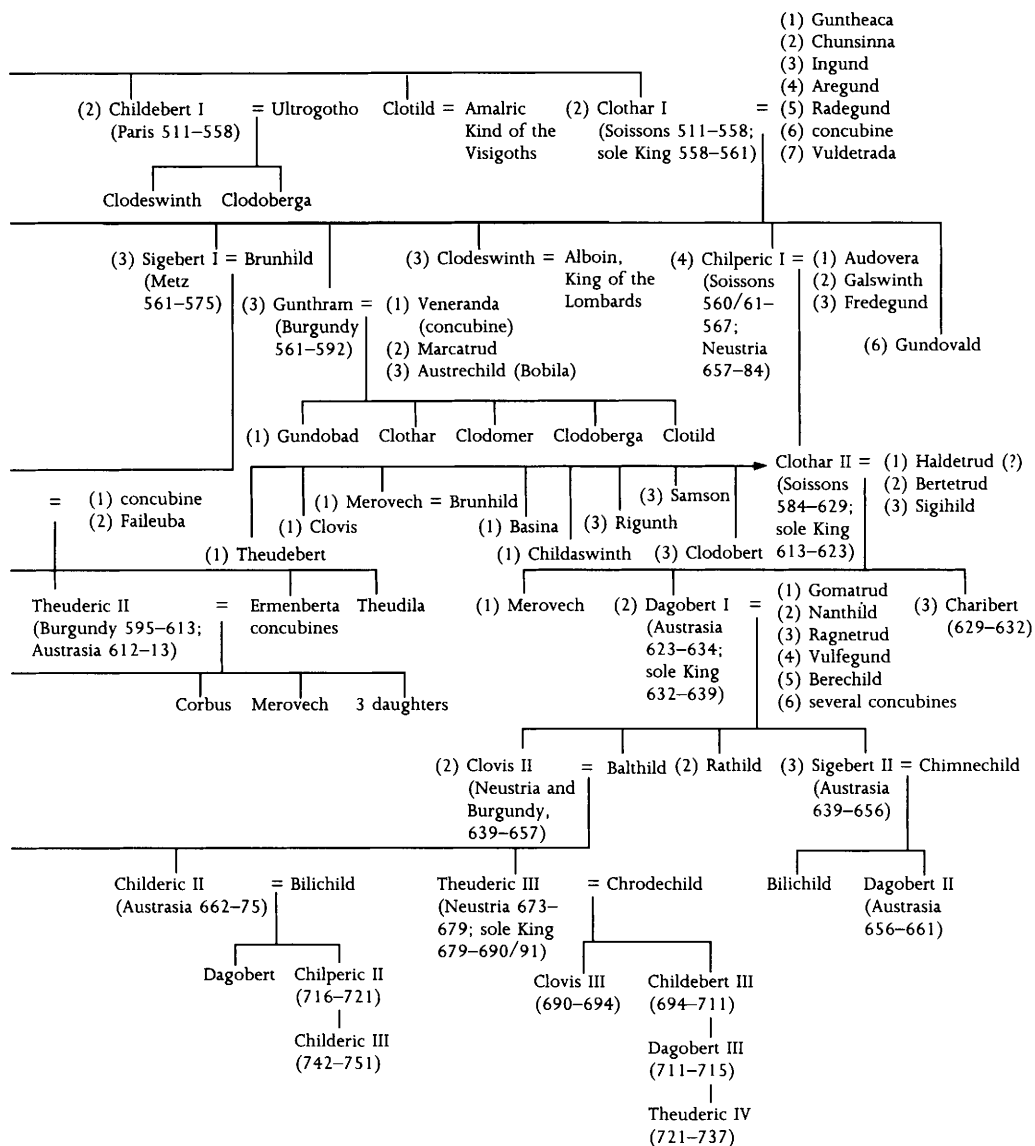
No book can be written in a vacuum, and we have leaned hard on the sympathy of friends and colleagues for several years in creating this one. Some people, however, stand out “like lights upon a candlestick.” We want to render special thanks to Bernard S. Bachrach and Patrick J. Geary for painstaking readings of the manuscript and suggestions that proved enormously helpful. William Daly shared his translation of the life of Genovefa and the drafts of translations of the lives of Radegund and Gertrude of Nivelles by the late John Cox. The members of the Hagiography Group of New York have been uniformly enlightening in our many meetings. William Tighe provided aid and comfort in the final stages. We acknowledge the friendly services of the staff at the Corrigan Library at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Dunwoodie, New York, and the help of the late Magda Gottesman in charge of interlibrary loans at Hunter College. Richard C. Rowson and Reynolds Smith of Duke University Press have given us warm and unfailing support. The good cheer and encouragement of Edmund Clingan always command appreciation, never more so than in his assistance while we made the perilous passage from typewriter to computer. Finally, in many a stormy hour, we sought comfort from our respective cats, Pachelbel, Leibniz, Glatissant, Rollo, and Brumaire.

John Halborg and Jo Ann McNamara worked together on the initial translations. Gordon Whatley gave his critical attention to the lives of Genovefa, Clothild, Monegund, Radegund, Rusticula, and Balthild. The scriptural citations and liturgical notes are by John Halborg. The remaining notes, the Introduction, and the introductions to each saint’s life are by Jo Ann McNamara.

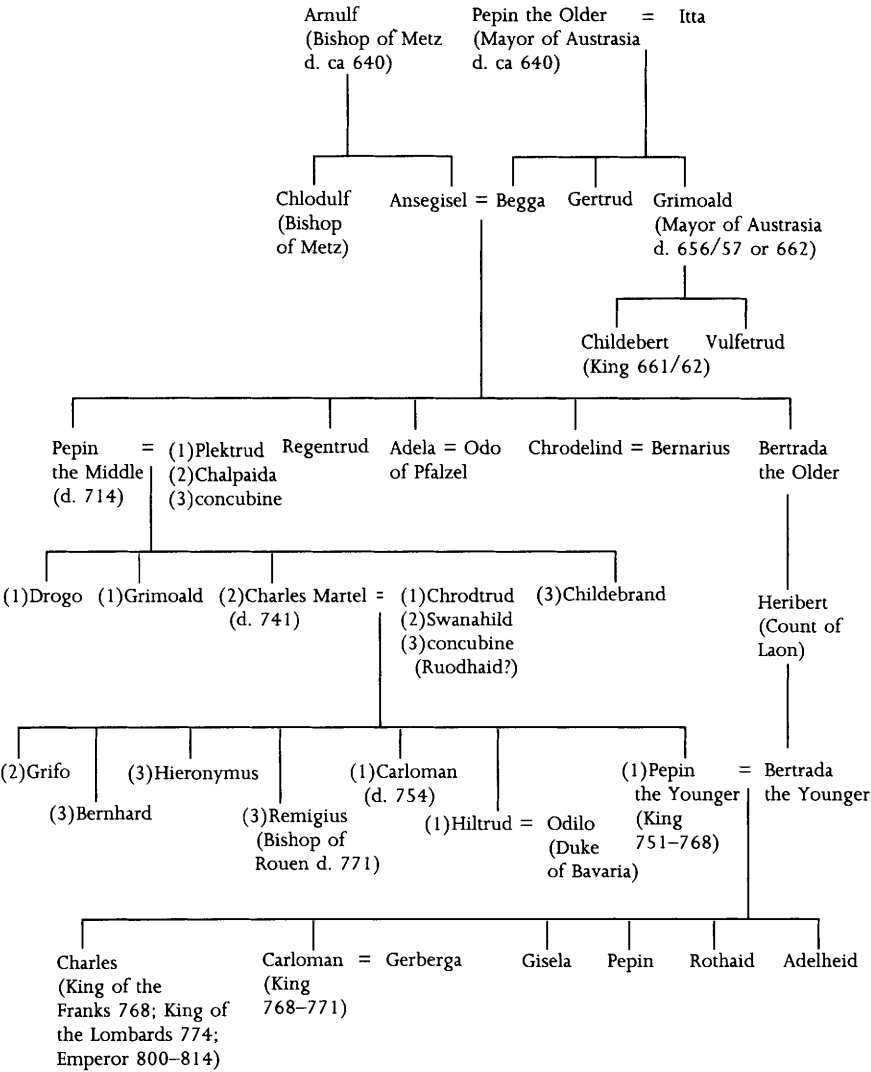


Wives, Concubines, and Children of Merovingian Kings

Source: Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500–900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), viii–ix.



The Ancestors of Charlemagne



Source: Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), x-xi.

*Sainted Women
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Introduction



Behold, here you have the deeds of a saint which you have read or heard piously that you may imitate them. Still in the maiden state, she despised the world and desired heaven. She tamed the lusts of the flesh to love virginity. She harnessed the concupiscence of the eye, which is curiosity, by meditating on divine readings. She trampled down life's ambition, which is pride, with her humility. She despised a mortal spouse to choose one who will never die. When she had riches, she put no hopes in treasures of money but wisely distributed all to the poor. . . . Therefore, imitate what you have read. Live as she lived. Walk as she walked and there is no doubt that you will go where she has gone with the help of the Creator who works His mercy in His saints and gives virtue and fortitude to His people, blessed be God forever. Amen.¹

Here are the biographies of eighteen women who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries, sometimes called the Dark Ages. At the beginning of this book, the land they inhabited was called Roman Gaul. The population were the survivors of a vanished empire. Catholic Christianity defined their sense of identity, and their bishops struggled to maintain the remnants of civil authority against pagan Huns and Franks as well as other Germanic kings who had been converted by Arians, Christians branded as heretics by the Catholics because of their divergent ideas concerning the Trinity. This book introduces noble women who participated in Gaul's violent transformation into the Merovingian kingdoms of Neustria, Burgundy, and Austrasia. It ends just before Frankland, unified at last by the noble ancestors of Charlemagne, began its long career as "eldest daughter of the Roman church," Catholic Christianity's champion against the pagans of the north and the heretics of the south.

It is rare for any age to preserve so large a group of sources dedicated to women's achievements and rarer still for a period so impoverished in sources of any kind. Merovingian hagiography was a flourishing literary genre that offered a rough and inexperienced ruling class a new set of Christian

1. Hucbald of Saint-Amand, *Vita S. Aldegundis virginis*, 35, AS, January 30, 662.

heroic models. Holy women were set beside their violent mates. Their contemporaries worshipped them as saints worthy of the emulation and admiration of future generations. With scriptural quotations and analogies, their biographers stressed their adherence to Christian precepts and their likeness to early Christians martyred for their faith. Originality was no virtue. The cognoscenti were so attuned to the echoes of earlier lives that they could say that all saints shared but a single life.² The saints themselves sought out the similar threads that bound them in a single experience. Holy women, in particular, increasingly filed on to a single path embracing the common discipline of the monastic movement.

Grateful as scholars are for any light on "the dark ages," they have never reached a firm consensus on Merovingian hagiography.³ Sometimes the saint herself has been dismissed as fictitious and her biography ascribed to Carolingian forgers pretending to work from older sources to give themselves a false credibility. Critics, particularly in the nineteenth century, were much in love with ancient paganism and developed fanciful ideas about race memory and the mechanics of cultural transmission. They were swift to discover doublets and *topoi*, reflections of local legends and ancient superstitions.⁴ They came to believe that pagan deities had often been "baptized" as Christian saints by a rural population anxious to retain accustomed rites and cults.

The great modern hagiographer Hippolyte Delehaye broke through the overwrought techniques of literary criticism to secure the historical claims of many saints through coordinating their vitae with their feasts and cult centers.⁵ The lives before us were intended for public reading on the anniversary of the saint's death, or of the translation of her relics, or of the dedication of her basilica, or some other important festivity.⁶ Although debate still continues about the worth of various aspects of their biographies, none of the saints included in this book are now suspected of being ancient goddesses in disguise. Each of them lived a life in historical time. Each one left a legacy of property, a tomb, and her own body as a miracle-working relic, which in many cases is still preserved.⁷ Their worshipers had a serious interest in remembering who they were and what their credentials were. Hagiographers recorded real estate transactions and promoted cults of monastic foundresses to attract new donors to their communities.

2. This is a concept recently elaborated from Gregory of Tours's introduction to his *Life of the Fathers*, by both Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, and Wallace-Hadrill, *Frankish Church*.

3. For an overview of the problems of hagiography as literature, see Graus, *Volk, Herrscher*, chapter 1.

4. An excellent introduction to the problems of hagiography can be found in Aigrain, *L'hagiographie*.

5. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*.

6. Collins, "Observations on the Form," *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, ed. Clarke and Brennan, 105–31.

7. McNamara has examined this question further in "A Legacy of Miracles," 316–52.

Most of these biographies were written by contemporaries. The lives of Clothild, Glodesind, Rictrude, and Waldetrude were written by Carolingians plausibly claiming to base their work on contemporary sources. In our notes, we have tried to summarize the current state of research regarding each one, and readers interested in literary forms may profit by a more detailed comparison of the idiosyncrasies of style than we have been able to provide. As Patrick Geary has pointed out, sainthood and miracles also have their histories. We have rudely cut short those lives that extend into the ninth century and beyond to avoid shifts in sensibilities when new demands were made of old saints.⁸

The *vitae* were intended for frequent recitation within monastic communities for the instruction of the sisters and for public liturgical reading. Carolingian editors often 'improved' the texts to purge them of their barbaric diction, but the wholesale charges of forgery based on literary analysis have now largely been discredited. Where we have both early texts and their Carolingian versions, it is apparent that the later authors concentrated most carefully on the literary ornamentation of texts they considered barbarous in the extreme. They also added scriptural citations with a heavy hand to improve their liturgical use and exegesis to improve their didactic value. They did not, however, add any significant narrative material. The ninth-century author Hucbald of Saint Amand, in his life of Rictrude, and the anonymous eighth-century author of the *Life of Austreberta* make passing reference to authorities with the power to judge the reliability of their work. Skeptics once assumed that the miracles were imagined by hysterical onlookers or cynically added by later scribes. Now, however, there is a growing awareness that chroniclers close to their subjects were as willing to credit the intervention of supernatural forces as more distant reporters. Modern scholarship has tended to beg the question by granting the miracles the reality of a constructed, literary, experience while frankly admitting that direct access to the event must remain out of reach.

Saints had a wide variety of functions in Merovingian Gaul. A hagiographer had first to prove that the subject was a saint. Emulation of martyrs, or at least a demonstrated willingness to be a martyr if necessary, was the first criterion. Some of our heroines faced threats of violence and others were tested by illness, but only Radegund suffered genuine physical torment—and she imposed it upon herself. With Athanasius' life of Antony, martyrdom was extended to the self-imposed suffering of asceticism. Merovingian Gaul inherited its hagiographic tradition from Sulpicius Severus, the fourth-century biographer of Martin of Tours, whose self-mortification was coupled with the

8. Geary, *Furta Sacra*.

threats and hardships of missionary life in a pagan countryside.⁹ In all our other cases, God or destiny made happier uses of his consecrated servants. Consequently, the saint depended heavily on her virtue, God's miraculous power channeled through her, to prove that she was indeed his instrument.

At the beginning of our story, holy women were aligned with the poor and the conquered against unharnessed secular power. As a mediator between two cultures, a woman like Genovefa had to convince the conquering Franks that she and her God were allies worth having.¹⁰ At the same time, her fragility as a woman without official status in the Gallo-Roman hierarchy rendered her innocuous in the context of secular power. Her most famous feat, the prayer marathon that warded the Huns away from Paris, inspired the besieging Franks with respect for Gallic saints. Her miracles proved that the king of Heaven was responsive to their requests. Power, as expressed through miracles, protected Childeric and his successors from the possibility that whatever mercy and indulgence they showed toward the saints and to the poor they championed might be construed as a sign of weakness unbecoming to a warrior.

Hagiographers shaped the historic destiny of the Franks as a divine mission in which women played a leading role. As Clothild's legend developed, the queen converted her husband and his Frankish followers to Catholic Christianity by promising that her God could deliver victory on the battlefield. Clothild matched Clovis's warlike prowess with her supportive prayers and gifts to the church. Within a generation, Frankish Christians adopted the Gallic saints as patrons. The generosity of Clovis and his successors with churches and other signs of honor assured their assistance in the consolidation of their power. They boasted, "The famous race of Franks, whose founder is God . . . is the race which, brave and valiant, threw off in battle the most hard Roman yoke from their necks, and it is the Franks who, after Baptism, have enclosed in gold and precious stones the bodies of the Holy Martyrs whom the Romans had burned by fire, mutilated by the sword, or thrown to the wild beasts."¹¹

Even so, writers and readers, then as now, were ambivalent about miracles.¹² Ecclesiastical officials suspected anything that smacked of magic,

9. Translated by Hoare, *Western Fathers*, 3–46.

10. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, 261ff.

11. Salic Law, Longer Prologue (eighth century), trans. Hillgarth, *Conversion of Western Europe*, 89–90.

12. In a colloquium on hagiography published as *Hagiographie: cultures et sociétés IVe–XIIe siècles*, Vauchez remarks (259) that the expression of doubt is itself a topos of hagiographers. In "La controverse biblique," Van Uytanghe notes (211) that by the early fourth century it was generally believed that miracles were no longer needed to convert pagans. As late as the 390s, Augustine thought their time had passed, but thirty years later he reversed himself and celebrated the miracles attributed to saintly relics. Van Uytanghe cites further evidence for skepticism from Merovingian Gaul.

equally fearful of genuine diabolic powers and the fraudulence of the devil's more mundane human instruments. Martin of Tours and his successor Bishop Gregory prided themselves on exposing false miracles and failed pretenders to sainthood.¹³ Genovefa enjoyed powers of discernment that often enabled her to uncover falsehood and hypocrisy. But despite the opposition of some writers, miracles won the day in Gaul.¹⁴ The counterpower that gave saints, and by extension, their religion, an edge in dealing with the new warrior lords was simply indispensable.

Accordingly, the hagiographer's mission was to ensure that a saint employed "clean" power against "dirty" power, to use Peter Brown's felicitous concept.¹⁵ The test of a miracle was its conformity to Christian teachings. Sulpicius presented Martin as Jesus's imitator, and insisted that his miracles did not stem from human magic but originated with God.¹⁶ Miracles were certified by a literary process of "scriptural stylization," heavily underscoring their orthodox character with biblical citations.¹⁷ Merovingian hagiographers were sensitive to "folkloric" miracles, and their influence weakened as the genre became more firmly articulated. Thus, Genovefa was credited with more purely magical feats, like her dragon-slaying adventure, than later hagiographers would allow. Even so, her biographer modeled her on Martin wherever he could. He carefully distinguished Genovefa from false wonderworkers by stressing the approval of Germanus of Auxerre, a leading Gallic bishop. He even inserted a greeting from Simon Stylites, a famous holy man of the east, to reinforce his heroine's position in the fellowship of the orthodox.

In the late fifth century, when the Gauls had to adjust to the loss of the Roman Empire, communal redefinition was linked to conversion of their conquerors. Martin of Tours became the focus for a new Gallic consciousness.¹⁸ His ingenious successor, Bishop Gregory of Tours, wove an account of Martin's latest miracles into his concept of Frankish history as a divine plan.¹⁹ He linked Martin's prestige with the labors of new saints like Monegund. Bishop Fortunatus also connected his heroine Radegund to Martin and to the saints of the east who sent their relics to help her in the Christianization of

13. Heinzelmann, "Une source de base," discusses the methods of Gregory of Tours and his contemporaries for verifying and recording miracles.

14. Van Uytanghe, "La controverse biblique," 217, cites Bishop Hilarius of Poitiers on Saint Honoratus in particular.

15. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 168.

16. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, 131–32. Sulpicius said that to disbelieve Martin's miracles would be to disbelieve Christ (Dial. I. 26, 5; III. 10, 5 emphasizes the similarity).

17. For an expansion of this argument see Van Uytanghe, "La controverse biblique."

18. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, 235.

19. *Liber de miraculi S. Martini, libri quatuor*, PL 71:913–1008.

Frankland. The homely medical skills of “wise women” like Monegund or Radegund based on cleaning, anointing, and herbal remedies were extended to divine cures beyond the power of earthly medicine. At its peak, healing power mobilized by the sign of the cross protected Rusticula and attested to her innocence of the charges brought by a murderous king and his jealous minions. The protests of demons as they were driven from the holy places they longed to infest, and from the bodies they had seized from unwary Christians, testified to a power that could effectively be deployed to protect holy things and property from the depredations of secular lords.²⁰

Throughout the sixth century, saints stood between the conquered people and their rulers, mitigating the effects of their ongoing fratricidal wars. Radegund extended Genovefa’s role as an advocate for prisoners and for humble people. Repeatedly, she begged God to help the sick and begged the king to help the needy, establishing a ritual whereby women could express the merciful side of royalty without softening the fierce warrior image of the king. This became a traditional role for Merovingian queens. Even Queen Fredegund, whose ruthlessness was far more widely celebrated than her tender heart, persuaded her husband to burn the old Roman tax records, claiming that God sent a plague that threatened her children in revenge for their oppression of the poor. The seventh-century queen Balthild took Radegund as her model and cultivated her spiritual power after she left her throne for a monastery. These holy women and the models they presented through their *vitae* thus played a vital role in the final amalgamation of Franks and Gauls into a working community.

Once the conversion of the Franks had been accomplished, cautious hagiographers began to circumscribe the powers attributed to their heroines. Even when there was no evidence of fraud, the church was wary of people who bypassed clerical intermediacy and tapped directly into divine power. With the seventh-century rapprochement between church authorities and secular monarchs, the power of female saints while they lived on earth diminished. Few of the seventh-century heroines performed miraculous cures until after they were safely dead and buried under the auspices of the local bishop.

In recent years, German historians have developed the thesis that the Germanic aristocracy sought to recover a charisma nullified by their conversion

20. In the lives of Burgundofara and Anstrude, particularly, the holy power of a saintly woman is dramatically opposed to the unholy power of the mayor of the palace, the highest secular official under the king himself. In this regard, we may place the frequent rescues of convicted felons whose only claim to mercy seems to be their faith in the saint’s power.

by cultivating Christian sainthood.²¹ To their unquestioned secular power, they added spiritual power by taking control of ecclesiastical offices.²² The chapels and tombs of sainted relatives were transformed into focal points for family prestige. Women were particularly well suited to this role because they shared the noble blood of their families but could not actively enter into the violent competition of the secular world. They could, however, secure their dowries and inheritances from grasping monarchs by transferring them to God, as did the saints of the Dagobertian period. In the monastic life, they could use family wealth to create prestige on earth and favor in heaven. Like Rictrude, Sadalberga, and Gertrude of Nivelles, they could preserve that same wealth through a line of related abbesses.

Poverty, one of the three traditional monastic virtues, was no recommendation for a Merovingian saint. Our texts trace the patterns of womanly power in an age where caste often transcended gender in the division of social and political authority.²³ The outstanding virtue associated with sainted women in the sixth and seventh centuries was charity, viewed as an adjunct of noble lineage. The first barbarian kings were habituated to an economy of loot and gifts. They displayed their might and prestige by sharing the treasures garnered from their incessant warfare with their warrior companions and with their women. In turn, noble women acted as gift-givers to the poor, complementing the traditional role of men as gift-givers to their peers. Rade Gund obsessively moved the wealth her husband had won from his enemies (among whom were her own people) to the poor who gathered at her door during his nightly banquets. Monegund and Eustadiola lived more closely in the midst of the people they served, giving their husbands' wealth to the poor and to the church, which hagiographers consistently classed with the poor as joint recipients of the saints' largesse.²⁴

As the Frankish ruling class was gradually Christianized, nobles took their places in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, creating the new religion's infrastructure with their money, influence, and administrative abilities.²⁵ Within the dynas-

21. Prinz, "Heiligenkult und Adelsherrschaft im Spiegel merowingischen Hagiographie," 532, builds on the ideas of Weber, *Kulturgeschichtliche Probleme der Merowingerzeit*, 348ff.

22. Wittern, "Frauen zwischen asketischem Ideal," 272–94, has summarized recent German scholarship that charts the shift from the heroic asceticism of the sixth century to the institutionalized aristocratic sanctity of the seventh.

23. Ibid., 272–94, interprets the "intention of the text" to propagate an image of proper Christian behavior of women in the lives of Rade Gund and Balthild, arguing for an increased institutionalization of queenly power from the sixth to the seventh centuries.

24. For further exploration of this notion, see McNamara, "The Need to Give."

25. Werner, "Le rôle d'aristocratie dans la christianisation du nord-est de la Gaule," in *Structures politiques du monde franc*.

tic patterns of the age, women played a central role in this development. Germanic laws protected the rights of women to share in the estates of both fathers and husbands as well as to accumulate gifts of unlimited size. They frequently chose to bring that inheritance to the church in the form of a monastery, which the landed aristocracy found convenient for storing family wealth beyond the reach of greedy suitors. The child Rusticula brought a huge family fortune to the convent in Arles where she was hidden after her rescue from the suitor who had kidnapped her. The crown often resented such sequestering of noble wealth and sometimes attacked it directly. The depredations of the mayor of the palace, Ega, who threatened Burgundofara's establishment, lie in the background of the hagiographer's tale of divine favors showered upon the monastery.

Like poverty, virginity was less highly regarded than in the ascetic models of the late classical world. Nearly half of our saints were married, and most of those had children. Only in the case of Genovefa, the closest to the Roman tradition, was virginity seen to have special potency. Their wealth made these women the objects of competition between their sovereigns and their parents, and even Christ appears as a contending suitor. In the story of Glodesind, a new theme emerges in which the heroine defies parental wishes in order to become a bride of Christ. Sadalberga's father feared to allow her to follow the same course and persuaded her to accept the king's matchmaking. In some cases, like that of Gertrude of Nivelles, the hagiographic convention may have masked paternal desire to keep a daughter and her wealth out of royal control. In that context, the sexual status of the saint—virgin, widow, or separated wife—made little difference, despite the rhetorical flourishes of some of the biographers. Wealth and noble status, rightly employed, were unabashedly offered as qualifications for sainthood. None of these women alienated themselves from their husbands or fathers so far as to lose them.

Family connections strengthened the natural administrative talents of great abbesses, while their active alliance with abbots and bishops (who were sometimes also their relatives) assured them the ecclesiastical support they needed without undermining the liberties of the communities. Their aristocratic rank and self-assurance enabled them to recruit members, publicize their communities, administer estates, and enhance their resources by deploying the spiritual attraction of miracles and relics. Their charitable services and spiritual offerings gave them a secure and necessary place in the developing structure of early medieval society.

Thus Merovingian Gaul produced a new model of sanctity: the great monastic lady, withdrawn from worldly power and worldly comfort but not from the world's misery and strife. Hagiographers praised her as a model of hospitality, a virtue antithetical to the original desert ideal. Abbesses entertained

relatives and other noble travelers, neighborhood magnates, and prelates, who responded with generous gifts. They supported chaplains, working people, pilgrims, invalids, and beggars. They cared for the sick and the poor either temporarily or permanently, as seems to be the case with the five demoniacs housed in the upper stories of Anstrude's monastery. Some noble abbesses acted as peacemakers and as protectors of fugitives and prisoners. Unconsecrated women sought the convent simply for protection while their armed enemies prowled about the sanctuary. Family loyalty entangled the saints in political rivalries that brought violent men into the convent itself. Miracles assured the reader that a sainted woman was a powerful friend and a dangerous enemy, even against armed and violent men.

The clergy are usually classed among the poor beneficiaries of a saint's charity, and to some degree this reflected conditions during the conquest. In the sixth century, when bishops were more closely aligned to the conquered population than to their rulers, noble women enjoyed an independent footing in their relationships with the church hierarchy. The collaboration between Clothild and Bishop Remigius presented in our ninth-century text reflects the ultimate shape of a painfully developed tradition. In sixth-century versions of the story, the bishop appears only after Clothild had completed her risky venture. Bishop Médard was initially hesitant to support Radegund's decision to defy her royal husband. Bishops were subservient to the power of queens, as was Radegund's friend Fortunatus and Balthild's assistant Genesis. Indeed, when a contest of wills developed between her and her bishop, as in the case of her control of the powerful relic of the Holy Cross, Radegund was generally able to have her own way.

However, as the Frankish aristocracy integrated into the hierarchy, the bonds between sainted women and bishops tightened. Some clerical supporters were relatives or friends of the saint's family. Some were not. They provided a counterpower to those secular magnates who put obstacles in her path. Women often worked with bishops or abbots who validated their personal designs and served them as intermediaries with angry husbands, families, and even kings. Miracles during life gave way to visions supporting clerical preaching. Miracles after death depended upon clerical support for the saint's cult. The way to heaven was strait, and seventh-century visionaries were often reminded of the clergy, and of Saint Peter, who controlled its successful passage.

In a practical sense, bishops and abbots gave direction and support to women who wished to give themselves and their fortunes to the church. At the end of the sixth century, the Irish saint Columbanus organized a monastery at Luxeuil that became the center for resuming the painstaking process of converting the pagan peasantry. His monastic rule, which stressed internal

discipline and encouraged external relations with the surrounding rural community, widely replaced the Rule of Caesarius of Arles that cloistered women within cities.²⁶ By 600, Pope Gregory I was promoting the Rule of Benedict of Nursia, written in the latter half of the sixth century, for women as well as men.²⁷ Although rarely adopted in its entirety, many of its elements were in use in Gallic communities. Two rules written expressly for communities of women by Bishop Donatus of Besançon and Abbot Waldebert of Luxeuil indicate that most communities combined individual elements of all these rules as best suited their own needs.²⁸ Bishops often took nuns out of one community and sent them to direct a new sisterhood, as the lives of Bertilla, Sadalberga, and Austreberta demonstrate. Such women with proven records in the communal life became solid links in the networks of women who flocked to the monasteries.

Many of our texts describe the saint as leaving father and mother or husband and children to follow after Christ, exchanging a mortal spouse for an immortal union. None so far despised the world that she did not secure the continued support of noble relatives in her project. They did not inhabit a world lacking in familial sentiment. The plaint of Rusticula's mother for her lost chick and Anstrude's terrible lament for her murdered brother exemplify the power of blood ties. Even the grim Rictrude was defended by her biographer as a proponent of the "spare the rod" school of child-rearing. But their scope was limited. Theis has criticized the popular thesis that seventh-century saints represented the aspirations of an extended kindred.²⁹ He notes that the texts reflect no blood ties beyond the immediate nuclear family.

Seventh-century noblewomen were in an unparalleled position to deploy their resources independently. Our texts insist that they seized upon the monastic life to liberate themselves from the violent secular world and that they sought their own spiritual self-realization. It would be foolish to become so fascinated by their structural position that we forget their own agenda. The monastic life itself was framed in terms of a better and closer family than the world could provide. Moreover, the aristocratic habit of keeping monasteries within the founding family made the community their adopted children. Thus Anstrude's nuns shared her sorrow for the lost Baldwin, and Gertrude's

26. *Regula S. Columbani*, PL 80:209–86.

27. Annotated translation in Meisel and del Mastro, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

28. Donatus episcopi Vesontionensis, *Regula ad virginis*, PL 87:273–98; McNamara and Halborg, "The Rule of Donatus of Besançon: A Working Translation"; Waldebert of Luxeuil, *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines*, PL 88:1053–70.

29. Theis, "Saints sans famille?"

daughters rejoiced in the care of her niece. While the physical mothers of saints are commonly called *genetrices*, the word *mater* was reserved for the role of the abbess within the spiritual family. Similarly *soror*, as opposed to the more physical *germana*, was reserved for sisters in the community. The greatest instances of grief, loss, and familial affection are reserved to the monastic daughters, who regularly bemoan their fate as orphans when their founding mother is taken away from them.

The saintly abbesses in our stories remained astonishingly free to invent their own way of life through the application and interpretation of rules written by men. Our texts helped them to profit from one another's examples. Radegund's correspondence with Abbess Caesaria illuminates a process of sharing experiences through a network of women and men devoted to the monastic experiment. Radegund adopted the rule composed by Caesarius of Arles for his sister's convent.³⁰ She employed his principle of claustration to protect herself from her husband but did not hesitate to correspond with her royal relatives or personally attend the visitors who converged upon her convent.

The care and nurturing of these communities clearly provided much joy to both the mothers and their daughters. But life in the convent was not all sunshine and light. Many women were hustled out of the world as soon as the monastery became an established institution in Gaul, and they had a tendency to pursue their own ambitions with little regard for communal peace. Other women lived temporarily or permanently in monasteries although they had no evident vocation for the religious life. Children were brought into the monastery in infancy. Some were raised to be nuns and successfully embraced their vocation, as did the nun Baudonivia who wrote one of the lives of Radegund. Others completed their education and married, like the niece of Abbess Leubevera, who catered her elaborate wedding party in the Poitiers cloister. Other women were formally imprisoned in convents.

Unlike later convents, the typical Merovingian institution housed women from every rung of the social ladder, and most of the saints used their fortunes to provide shelter for the helpless, like the six female slaves ransomed by Bishop Bercharius in 696 who formed the core of his community at Puellermoutiers. Although women of servile origins were unlikely to be the leaders of any attempt at insubordination, there is no guarantee that they were really prepared to live like nuns. They may have been more interested in improving their social status, a motive recognized and strictly forbidden in the Rules of Donatus and of Waldebert. On the other side, Caesarius had to

30. McCarthy, *Rule for Nuns of Saint Caesarius of Arles*.

restrain the noble sisters of Arles from attempting to turn their humbler sisters into personal servants, an impulse Austreberta punished with miraculous speed.

The lives of saintly abbesses were shaped to exemplify the need for stern discipline within the context of maternal responsibility. To maintain the community, nuns bonded in a fashion generally reserved to men. The imagery of virility, athletic competition, and military service runs throughout these lives. In patronizing the cults of sainted women and encouraging the composition of their vitae, the church not only rewarded women who contributed to the multifaceted monastic mission, but also forged a powerful didactic instrument for the training of new recruits, peculiarly suited to bridge the gaps between classes and races. Their rules firmly stated that the only acceptable distinctions within a community were those of virtue and office. Indeed, the offices themselves—the abbess and prioress elected by the community and their adjutants whom they appointed—were intended to be allotted also as rewards for virtue. The other sisters were ranked according to seniority in religion. The sisters who had been longest in the convent took the lead in choir, at table, and in all processional activity unless they were demoted for some lapse in discipline.

The abbess heard daily confessions from her nuns and gave them necessary penances.³¹ In this manner, they were encouraged to police themselves and to forestall punishment by correcting their faults before they were translated into overt action. Within the community, elaborate lists of crimes and punishments were illustrated by the examples of saints and stories of divine intervention, which the nuns read constantly or heard during their meals and recreational periods.³² In this sense, even our most high-flown miracle stories take on a historical life of their own, as instruments in the formation of the monastic community. The texts shaped the awareness of their hearers and provided them with models for their own lives.

This is particularly noticeable in the collection of stories reported from Faremoutiers in Jonas of Bobbio's biography of Burgundofara. Rewards and punishments for various nuns systematically point up the main characteristics of Columbanus' rule. Nuns were encouraged through their reading to believe that miracles would relieve their daily rounds of menial labor. These stories, preserved and ritually repeated in Merovingian convents, give shape

31. Donatus of Besançon, *Rule*, c. 23. Waldebert advised that a systematic review of faults be undertaken three times a day, *rule*, c. 6.

32. In "Columbanus, His Followers, and the Merovingian Church," Riché argues that private penance and constant reading joined with prayer were the hallmarks of Irish spirituality that left a lasting mark.

and meaning to a dreary and often unwelcome round of daily life for women who willingly or unwillingly struggled to live together in harmony. They illustrate the petty temptations against which the spirit of charity had to strive.

History favors success. To be remembered and serve as examples to the future, saints had to temper their own talents for innovation and leadership with qualities of humility and reverence that recommended them to the male hierarchy who controlled the historical tradition. We have no records of those women who may have attempted unorthodox experiments in living or whose communities failed through poverty or lack of discipline. We have only one example, the suspiciously late life of Waldetrude, of a woman who tried to withdraw totally from the world. Obedience and respect for priests ranks almost as high as charity among the desirable virtues listed in the texts. We might, therefore, best view these histories as a collaboration between the saint, her clerical biographer, and their audience. Initially, the subject framed her aspirations and began to work toward sanctity. Either she appealed to the church for support or the project was initiated by a missionary. The clergy set norms of behavior that would define her success. The saint then acted out the role provided by the clergy, who enshrined the results in a text that would provide guidance for the next aspirant.

At the same time, the texts are increasingly focussed on the rounds of prayer and liturgy that characterize the lives of consecrated women. The regular offices of psalm singing and praying in unison dominated the life of the sisterhoods. The rules they lived by outlined the round of chant adapted to the changing seasons and penalized any sister who put personal inconvenience or necessity above the chain of prayer that bound them together.³³ The monastery was the scene of an ongoing battle against the forces of evil. The nuns were military cohorts, living on the battle lines. The hagiographic texts themselves serve as training manuals and as inspiration. The presence of the devil as a tempter, as a possessor of the unwary, or even as an earthly enemy, is pervasive, replacing the old pagan persecutors as the agent of suffering and the reason for demonstrations of heroic faith.

Confronting demons, people possessed by demons, worshipers of pagan gods, and such representatives of earthly "evil" as the mayors of the palace Ega and Ebroin, the nuns relied on the solidarity bred of training and discipline. The results are first demonstrated in an almost miraculous strength and self-control in the face of both worldly and otherworldly force and finally demonstrations of the divine power at their command. In grief, they com-

33. For a discussion of hagiography as a tool for enforcing monastic rules, see McNamara, "Ordeal of Community."



forted one another, and in want they shared what they had. In times of danger, a cohort of psalm-singing sisters might even drive armed and violent men out of their cloistered precincts.

Throughout the seventh century, there was increased attention to the deathbed as the focal point where sainthood was proved. Abbess Bertilla was shocked when her candidate, Queen Bathild, seemed to die without warning. Fortunately, a discreet sister was able to reassure her that the saint had received all the required revelations of impending death and salvation but concealed them out of consideration for the abbess's own illness. A united sisterhood stood at a dying woman's deathbed to sing her into heaven while her parting revelations strengthened them for their unending struggles to perfect themselves. The troops were thus reassured that they followed a victorious general. The visionary content of seventh-century texts increased,

and the saints were credited with powers of prophecy and illumination directed toward making the promises of bliss in another world concrete. As the saint's miracles in life decreased in number, the power of relics, tombs, and associated artifacts like oil, dust, funeral palls, and candles grew, weapons like the texts themselves in the ongoing battle.

The deeds and even the voices of women speak to us from these documents with a clarity rarely accomplished in historical texts. Although conforming to ecclesiastical prescriptions, at least two of the biographies that follow were written by women who knew their subjects. Others reflect the direct testimony of women within the cloister walls. They lived in a rough and brutal age, an age moderns have condemned as "the dark ages," but from the peril and suffering of their lives they shaped themselves as models of womanly power, womanly achievement, and womanly voices. They did not hide their lights under a bushel, but lit candles in the darkness and set them high upon a candlestick. Today, their light still shines.

Jo Ann McNamara

I

Genovefa

(423–502)



Germanus of Auxerre and Lupus of Troyes first encountered the child Genovefa in her hometown of Nanterre about 429. The Roman world was rapidly crumbling before the advances of Germanic tribes. To the south, Augustine of Hippo was soon to die while a Vandal army stormed the gates of his city. At the northern fringe, Patrick had barely begun his mission to Ireland before Anglo-Saxon invaders began to encroach on the Romanized Britons. The collapse of the Roman Empire left the Catholic church as the only outpost of Roman authority, but the church itself had to cope with various heresies that flourished among the barbarians who had heretofore received Christianity without its accompanying hierarchical structure. The two Gallic bishops were on their way to Britain to rally the Catholic people against the Pelagian heresy. In Roman Gaul, Arian Visigoths had infested the southern provinces and the pagan Franks had established a kingdom in the north around Tournai extending south in Genovefa's lifetime to Soissons, Laon, and finally Paris. The evangelization of the countryside had barely begun.

This translation is drawn from the edition in *AS*, January 3, 137–53, designated the oldest version by Kohler, *Etude critique*. Bruno Krusch supplied a later edition for *MGH*, *SRM* 3:204–38. He was convinced that many things about the vita, including the un-Latin name of the heroine, proved that it was a worthless historical document, a thesis he expounded in detail in “Die Fälschung der Vita Genovefa.” In *Die Heiligen der Merovinger*, 190–96, Bernoulli went even further to argue that Genovefa's historical reality had syncretized with legends of antique Gallic goddesses of corn and rivers. Scholarly debate in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of our own reflected the nationalistic struggles which preceded World War I. French critics represented by Leclercq in the *DACL* and more recently by Riché, “Interêts historiques,” have supported the defense of the Belgian hagiographer Kurth, “*Etude critique*,” against Krusch. The entire argument has most recently been summed up by Heinzelmann and Poulin in *Les vies anciennes*. We have implicitly followed their arguments that the life is authentic, written as claimed by an anonymous monk about 520, in our decision to use the *AS* edition, which appears to lack many of the inaccuracies that so offended Krusch. We accept the opinion of Graus, “*Die Gewalt*,” 192, that this is a Christian fable, not a pagan one. As we have done with all the saints represented in this volume, we have omitted material concerning miracles from a later period.

The little girl whom Germanus picked out of an admiring crowd as a candidate for future sainthood was destined to live a long life. She moved through a wild, half-pagan countryside and lived among excitable people easily moved to excesses of admiration and hostility. In 451, she rallied the people of Paris, her adopted city, against the Huns, led by their savage king Attila. A few years later, as their intermediary with the Frankish king Childeric, she gained the right to collect food for the besieged population and moved him to pardon his condemned prisoners. She was eighty years old or more when she died. Paris had become part of a Frankish kingdom, and its king had become a Catholic Christian. It is perhaps no small aspect of the Frankish success in winning Gallo-Roman loyalty that Clovis's consort Clothild may have commissioned Genovefa's biography and promoted her cult as patron of Paris.¹ The anti-Arian elements in the *Vita Genovefae* would then reflect the queen's own sentiments and her husband's policies.

Inspired by the saintly bishop of Auxerre, Genovefa dedicated her life and her virginity to the service of God. Her asceticism, however, was not defined and regulated by any established rule, nor was her life bounded by the walls of a conventual community. Asceticism had been introduced into Roman Gaul by the saintly Martin of Tours (d. 397) and achieved some popularity among spiritually ambitious aristocrats of the early fifth century. But in the north outside of Tours, it did not result in monasticism, which flourished in the more urban south of France. Queen Clothild retired to Tours after Clovis's death. In Genovefa's vita, anti-Arianism and the heavy use of Martin as a model strongly support the argument that the text originated there. Genovefa lived at home with her mother and then with her godmother. In her later years she may have set up housekeeping with a few companions, but her biographer indicates no formal arrangement and does not mention whether the women who came to her for guidance remained under her roof. The principal monastic foundations in Gaul in Genovefa's time, and the only ones we know of to accept groups of women lay along the Mediterranean, at Marseille, Lérins, and in the Burgundian realm, not very accessible to a Parisian girl.² The first written rule to make an impact in the north was that of the community of Arles founded about 510 by Bishop Caesarius.

1. Heinzelmänn and Poulin, *Les vies anciennes*, 53, suggest that the author was a clerk or a monk from the *schola* of Tours patronized by Clothild during her widowhood. He could have been transferred to the Church of the Holy Apostles in Paris when she built it. He says himself, c. 51, that he decided to write the work eighteen years after Genovefa's death, ca. 520. Twice, c. 8 and c. 30, he declines to repeat things that Genovefa is said to have discerned about people's secret thoughts which suggests a reluctance to offend living persons. Heinzelmänn speculates (80) that the author may have derived his material from the testimony of Bessus the priest, Clothild, and Genovefa herself.

2. Wood, "A Prelude to Columbanus," 3–32.

Thus, despite her consecration, Genovefa was not bound to a rule of stability or claustration. The enduring legend that she was a peasant has now been set aside, and she has been located among the Gallic upper classes.³ She owned fields and went out to harvest them herself. She walked the city streets to church services and made use of the imperial transport services when her religious mission took her out of the city. In brief, whatever the actual date of composition, this life reflects an age when a saintly woman was free, indeed constrained, to create her own models and her own way of life.⁴ Although her social status was higher than French popular tradition would suggest, Gallic instincts were correct. Uniquely among the female saints of Gaul and Frankland, she did not originate from the conquering aristocracy, but from among its victims. She lived in a turbulent age, and she played no small role in its events.

As with the subsequent lives in this volume, brief notices of scholarly criticism of this biography and of specific historical events noted in its pages appear in the footnotes.

The Life of Genovefa, a Virgin of Paris in Gaul



1. The blessed Genovefa was born in the parish of Nanterre which is nearly seven kilometers from the city of Paris.⁵ Her father was called Severus and her mother Gerontia.⁶ I believe that in her earliest years the faithful noticed first her religious devotion and then, in due course, the grace that God conferred upon her.

3. Heinzelmänn and Poulin, *Les vies anciennes*, 28.

4. Some written models existed both in Latin and Greek. Jerome's lengthy eulogies of the noble Roman women who introduced the ascetic life into Italy, edited in J. P. Migne, *PL*, vol. 22, are partially available in English in the Loeb Classical Library edition. See also Gregory of Nyssa's life of his sister Saint Macrina, *Ascetical Works*, trans. Callahan, and Gerontius, *Life of Saint Melania*, trans. Clark. There is no indication in the biography that Genovefa had more than the most rudimentary knowledge of the ascetic tradition. Her biographer relies on the model of Saint Martin in framing her life as outlined extensively by Poulin in his half of Heinzelmänn and Poulin, *Les vies anciennes*.

5. *Millibus*, units of roughly a thousand paces, has been translated as *kilometers* for convenience throughout the volume.

6. These names and Genovefa's own Germanic name convinced Heinzelmänn and Poulin, *Les vies anciennes*, 28, that she was a noble from the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, which would explain Germanus's attention and later her ability to command the *annona*. In his section Heinzelmänn supplies (28–31) a detailed set of references for the other proper names mentioned in the text. He also notes (81–82) that only the lives of Genovefa and of Severin of Noricum among saints of this period lack some indication of social status; since Severin was a consul, the lack of notice does not preclude a high rank for her.