

Report on Venantius Fortunatus' *Life of Radegund*

Examples of Christian literature concerning the saints, known as hagiography, date back to the second century and were prolific throughout the middle ages. One such man best noted for his hagiographical texts as well as his poetry was Venantius Fortunatus. Venantius was born circa 530 in Treviso, Italy and after studying in Ravenna, he travelled across Europe to Gaul. Here he became truly successful, writing a substantial number of literary works for high-ranking political and ecclesiastical figures in Merovingian society. At Poitiers, Venantius met the Frankish Queen Radegund and the two remained close friends. Following her death and canonisation in 587, Venantius began writing her biography, the *Life of Radegund*. He was later elected Bishop of Poitiers around the year 600. The *vita* describes Radegund's transition from a Thuringian princess to becoming a devout nun in the monastery of the Holy Cross at Poitiers. Venantius focuses on Radegund's ascetic practices during her time as both queen and as a nun. Venantius uses the conventional topoi of monastic lives, humility, piety and self-denial, as the main themes in this text and emphasises them throughout.¹ He paints an extreme picture of humility and asceticism with his descriptions of Radegund's violent self-aggression and her ardent domestic service to those less fortunate. Venantius' writing noticeably reflects his great affection for Radegund; one of the reasons he wrote the hagiography was to promote the saint's sanctity. In addition, his close relationship with the saint brings a certain amount of credibility to his work. In regards to the *Life of Radegund*'s use as a historical source, it remains particularly important for the knowledge of early medieval society and Christianity. It offers historians an understanding of the social and cultural history of Merovingian Gaul as well as the general

¹ Wemple, (1981), p. 183.

attitudes and spiritual mentality of people living in this period. However, there are limits to its value as a historical source as both the authorship and the time at which it was written affect its reliability as an accurate historical representation. The passages selected from *Life of Radegund* for this essay are chapters 2, 15, 19 and 34. They have been selected for the insights and understanding they offer in regards to different aspects of early medieval history. Due to the absence of sentence numbers, for ease of referencing, I have subdivided the chapters into smaller numbered sections, indicated by brackets.

2. [1] The most blessed Radegund was of the highest earthly rank, born from the seed of the kings of the barbarian nation of Thuringia. Her grandfather was King Bassin, her paternal uncle, Hermanfred and her father, King Bertechar. But she surpassed her lofty origin by even loftier deeds. [2] She had lived with her noble family only a little while when the victorious Franks devastated the region with barbaric turmoil and, like the Israelites, she departed and migrated from her homeland. [3] The royal girl became part of the plunder of these conquerors and they began to quarrel over their captive. If the contest had not ended with an agreement for her disposition, the kings would have taken up arms against one another. [4] Falling to the lot of the illustrious King Clothar, she was taken to Athies in Vermandois, a royal villa, and her upbringing was entrusted to guardians. [5] The maiden was taught letters and other things suitable to her sex and she would often converse with other children there about her desire to be a martyr if the chance came in her time. [6] Thus even as an adolescent, she displayed the merits of a mature person. She obtained part of what she sought, for, though the church was flourishing in peace, she endured persecution from her own household. While but a small child, she herself brought the scraps left at table to the gathered children, washing the head of each one, seating them on little chairs and offering water for their hands, and she mingled with the infants herself. She would also carry out what she had planned beforehand with Samuel, a little cleric. [7] Following his lead, carrying a wooden cross they had made, singing psalms, the children would troop into the oratory as somber as adults. Radegund herself would polish the pavement with her dress and, collecting the drifting dust around the altar in a napkin, reverently placed it

outside the door rather than sweep it away. [8] When the aforementioned king, having provided the expenses, wished to bring her to Vitry she escaped by night from Athies through Beralcha with a few companions. When he settled with her that she should be made his queen at Soissons, she avoided the trappings of royalty, so she would not grow great in the world but in Him to Whom she was devoted and she remained unchanged by earthly glory.

In this first passage, Venantius portrays the Frankish invasion of Thuringia as unjustified, giving no context as to the cause of the war.² However a contemporary of Venantius, Gregory of Tours gives details of a provoked Frankish attack in his *History of the Franks*. Seeking sole rule of Thuringia, Radegund's uncle Hermanfred had killed his brothers; Bertechar, who was Radegund's father, and Baderic. Gregory describes how Hermanfred broke his agreement with the Frankish King Theuderic, who had helped him defeat Baderic in return for half of Thuringia.³ He then continued to aggravate Theuderic with a 'violent attack' on his lands and with the slaughter of large numbers of Frankish hostages.⁴ According to Gregory of Tours, these actions led to the Franks invasion. Venantius purposefully omits the Thuringian atrocities in his text since it would portray Radegund's family in an unfavourable light, diminishing her noble lineage. The *vita* is also a useful source of information on warfare and the conquest of Thuringia. He emphasises the destructive effect of Frankish conquests during this period⁵ and also the violent nature of rulers, with the Frankish kings prepared to take up arms against each other for the right to

² Venantius, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 2.2.

³ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 3.

⁴ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 3.7.

⁵ Venantius, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 2.2.

Radegund.⁶ Venantius also provides important information on female education. Due to her royal status Radegund was given a good education, eventually becoming learned in Latin, rhetoric and the writings of the church.⁷ Radegund's noble position and high education enabled her to make her voice prominent in church, domestic and political affairs. This reveals that even in a time of gender inequality, certain women of a high status did enjoy a degree of influence and freedom. Likewise Venantius demonstrates the significance of royal marriages in diplomatic scenarios and its use as a tool to gain benefits in Merovingian society. By wedding himself to Radegund, Clothar took advantage of her royal status and was tactically able to consolidate his dominance over Thuringia.

15. [1] From there, in decorous manner, she approached the villa of Saix near the aforesaid town in the territory of Poitiers, her journey ever prospering. Who could recount the countless remarkable things she did there or grasp the special quality of each one? [2] At table she secretly chewed rye or barley bread which she had hidden under a cake to escape notice. [3] For from the time she was veiled, consecrated by Saint Medard, even in illness, she ate nothing but legumes and green vegetables: not fruit nor fish nor eggs. And she drank no drink but honeyed water or perry and would touch no undiluted wine nor any decoction of mead or fermented beer. [4] Then, emulating Saint Germanus' custom, she secretly had a millstone brought to her. Throughout the whole of Quadragesima, she ground fresh flour with her own hands. [5] She continuously distributed each offering to local religious communities, in the amount needed for the meal taken every four days. [6] With that holy woman, acts of mercy were no fewer than the crowds who pressed her; as there was no shortage of those who asked, so was there no shortage in what she gave so that, wonderfully, they could all be satisfied. Where did the exile get such wealth? Whence came the pilgrim's riches?

⁶ Venantius, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 2.3.

⁷ Venantius, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 2.5.

This second section holds historical interest concerning the transition of sainthood over the centuries is demonstrated. Radegund's fasting as part of self-mortification is fuelled by her desire to overcome her weakness and achieve salvation.⁸ In times of persecution, one could achieve salvation through martyrdom, however, in this period, one had to suffer throughout life to become closer to God. This confirms that saintly recognition changed over history to reflect the social standards of the time. The repetition of the word 'secretly', both in describing Radegund's fasting and her grinding of flour during Quadragesima has significance. Here and in other sections of the *vita*, Venantius conveys the idea that he is revealing the secrets of saintliness, while at the same time demonstrating his own authority as the honoured observer of the holy saint.⁹

In grinding flour and baking bread for the community, Radegund imitates exactly the actions of St Germanus. The explicit reference to St Germanus suggests that Venantius may have been relying on literal re-creations of past miracles to emphasise Radegund's holiness. Furthermore, Venantius provides instructions for good Christian behaviour. In this paragraph in particular, Radegund demonstrates admirable Christian virtues such as devotion, humility, generosity and kindness. This is historically significant as it illustrates the dominance of religion in Merovingian society and the attempts of writers to shape the public according to the Christian ideals through hagiography. Radegund's remarkable deeds such as her self-mortification and her charitable activities also offer an important model for saintly behaviour. Her miraculous feats set a certain precedence for other saintly miracles.

⁸ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 15.3.

⁹ Wehlau, (2002), p. 79.

19. [1] Doesn't this make one shudder, this thing she did so sweetly? When lepers arrived and, sounding a warning, came forward, she directed her assistant to inquire with pious concern whence they came or how many there were. [2] Having learned that, she had a table laid with dishes, spoons, little knives, cups and goblets, and wine and she went in herself secretly that none might see her. [3] Seizing some of the leprous women in her embrace, her heart full of love, she kissed their faces. Then, while they were seated at table, she washed their faces and hands with warm water and treated their sores with fresh unguents and fed each one. [4] When they were leaving she offered small gifts of gold and clothing. [5] To this there was scarcely a single witness, but the attendant presumed to chide her softly: "Most holy lady, when you have embraced lepers, who will kiss you?" [6] Pleasantly, she answered: "Really, if you won't kiss me, it's no concern of mine."

The third passage early medieval Christian ideas of sanctity and piety. Here, Venantius describes the practice of self-mortification and the belief that it would allow to become godlier. Radegund suffers through her close contact with the heavily diseased lepers.¹⁰ Venantius promotes the image of her suffering to make her worthy of Christian martyrs who had suffered before her. However, in other sources there are few references to Radegund's extreme tortures. Gregory of Tours makes no reference to such activities and in Baudonivia's *vita* of the saint, she very rarely mortifies herself. Therefore Venantius may have been embellishing certain events in order to enhance her claim as a martyr. The *vita* demonstrates additional historical value, as it confirms that even those from the highest ranks of society were getting involved in charitable, typically monastic activities. Venantius promotes this charitable behaviour throughout and ultimately provides an important model for female piety aimed at noble and royal holy women.¹¹ He stresses how they can use their

¹⁰ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 19.3.

¹¹ Coon, (1997), p. 127.

wealth and influence to improve the welfare of the community, as Radegund does.¹² The passage also reveals interesting perspectives on the importance of social status in Frankish society. Throughout her life Radegund is seen constantly rejecting the traditional female roles of wife and mother. Venantius also emphasises that her desire to live a holy life conflicts directly with her role as queen and her royal status.¹³ Radegund's dedication to sexual abstinence previously incited mockery in the royal court. In this passage, Radegund undermines her queenly status by caring for and serving the lepers in a domestic manner. Her attendant clearly finds Radegund's actions distasteful, scolding her behaviour.¹⁴ This is historically significant as it indicates that a deliberate disregard for one's social status in early medieval society was shunned and could dramatically affect reputation and public opinion. As a historical source, the *vita* enhances the knowledge of medieval notions on sanctity in the sixth century. As in many other hagiographical works, the author presents the saint's detachment from her worldly restrictions and the judgement of others, in this case so that Radegund can perform charitable deeds.¹⁵ She persists in renouncing her worldly station in order to gain a heavenly status.¹⁶ Therefore one can attest that religious beliefs in this period dictated that the transgression of social norms does not serve as a barrier for her pursuit of sanctity.

34. [1] When one of the monachus closest to her suffered because her eye was flooded with a bloody humor, she laid hold of some wormwood which the saint had about her breast for refreshment. [2] When she placed it on her eye, the pain and blood soon fled

¹² Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 19.4.

¹³ Glenn, (2011), p. 60.

¹⁴ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 19.5.

¹⁵ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 19.6.

¹⁶ Effros, (1990), p. 45.

and, from the freshness of the herb, the eye was suddenly clear and bright again. And that reminds me of something I almost passed by in silence. [3] Children were born to the blessed one's agent, Andered, but he scarcely saw them before he lost them and the sorrowing mother had to think about burying her child even while birthing it. [4] During the preparations, the tearful parents wrapped the lifeless babe in the saint's hair cloth. [5] As soon as the infant's body touched that most medicinal garment and those noble rags, he came back from the dead to normal life. Blushing away his tomblike pallor, he rose from the mantle.

This passage firstly offers valuable insights into spiritual mentality of people in Merovingian Gaul. Here Venantius highlights the presence of disease, reflecting a century in which epidemic outbreaks of plague were sweeping across Gaul.¹⁷ He presents forth the medieval notion that holy people could transfer divine powers to close objects illustrated by the magical healing powers of the wormwood and of Radegund's hair cloth.¹⁸ The idea that objects and people in physical proximity to saints would receive powers was widely recognised in the early medieval period as can be seen in the abundance of prized holy relics. From this, it is clear that people in this period believed strongly in the supernatural, in particular the idea that god's powers could, at any time, interfere in their lives. Ruth Wehlau suggests that Venantius emphasised so much of the *vita* on Radegund's ascetic actions in order to promote this concept that the saint's body is a holy place and a source of divine power.¹⁹ Moreover, it is likely that Venantius' own experiences dramatically strengthened his belief in such miracles and also may have reflected his representation of such events. In striking similarity to the afflicted nun, Venantius was cured of an eye disease by the relics of St Martin. Furthermore, the fact that the afflicted nun is cured by Radegund in the

¹⁷ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 34.1.

¹⁸ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 34.

¹⁹ Wehlau, (2002), p.75.

monastery, where several of her other miracles take place is significant. Venantius represents monasteries as very holy places where miracles often occurred; locations in which God's powers could be harnessed for the good of society. Furthermore the case of high infant mortality in this passage offers a beneficial understanding of the general living conditions and features of Frankish society in sixth century.²⁰ An occurrence such as this generally signifies a low standard of living involving poor nutrition, environmental conditions and sanitation and suggests an undeveloped medical infrastructure in society.

To conclude, this essay has demonstrated the great value of the *Life of Radegund* for the study of early medieval history in many different ways. It gives understanding to the spiritual mentality and religious attitudes of people in Merovingian society as well as giving evidence of the conditions in society and social ideals. It gives details of warfare and also offers insight into early medieval Christianity and religious values. However the text does pose certain problems. *Vitae* generally follow traditional formulas. Venantius for example used Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini* as a model for the *Life of Radegund*. This resulted in a focus on Radegund's eremitic ideals in reflecting with those of St Martin. In this way Venantius overlooks the documentation of other important historical events, making the *vita* less reliable as a source for the study of early medieval history, one such example being the saint's founding of her monastery. His own agenda may have affected the reliability of this work. Many hagiographers of the medieval period wished to establish themselves as devout disciples of the saint. Venantius believed no doubt that his intercession with the saint earned him celestial favour. In general the text offers a distorted portrayal of Merovingian royalty.

²⁰ Venantius Fortunatus, *The Life of the Holy Radegund* 34.3.

Venantius himself earned ‘favour and patronage’ from several prominent Merovingian Kings, no doubt his promotion to Bishop of Poitiers was helped by this.²¹ Venantius jumps abruptly over the end of the building of Holy Cross monastery which is described in Baudonivia’s hagiography. The poet may have found this account too unfavourable to the Merovingian King Clothar, whereas Baudonivia, writing later, may not have been concerned with such repercussions.

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²¹ Coates, (2000), p. 1109.

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