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Beyond Brunhild: reassessing women in the Fredegar Chronicle

Emily Quigley*

Scholarly consideration of women in the seventh-century Fredegar chronicle has long been dominated by the author's hostility towards Brunhild, queen of Austrasia. Statistical analysis of Latin world chronicles before AD 900, however, shows that Fredegar's representation of women was unusually high within this tradition. Close examination of the chronicle reveals diverse portrayals of queenship, with women acting as autonomous political actors rather than being defined by their reproductive capacity or their piety, as was common in early medieval chronicles. This article argues that Fredegar saw women as integral actors in his vision of universal history.

The anonymous chronicle of Fredegar provides our only continuous narrative of the Frankish kingdoms between the end of Gregory of Tours's *Decem libri historiarum* in 594 and its abrupt conclusion in 642.[1] Merovingian Gaul has been recognized as a society in which women could exercise considerable political influence, but, with the notable exception of his extensive and contemptuous treatment of Brunhild, queen of Austrasia, Fredegar has received little attention in scholarship by comparison with his better-known predecessor, Bishop

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1 J. Lake, 'Rethinking Fredegar's Prologue', *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 25 (2015), pp. 1–28, at p. 1. The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited sources: *MGH SS rer. Merov.* = *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*; Fredegar = *Chronicarumquae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV,* ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SS rer Merov.* 2 (Hanover, 1888), pp. 10–193; *DLH* = Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 1.1 (Hanover, 1885); *LHF* = *Liber Historiae Francorum*, ed. Krusch, *MGH SS rer Merov.* 2, pp. 215–328.

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Gregory of Tours.[2] The broadest thematic coverage comes from Ian Wood, who recognized that 'running through much of Fredegar's work is the influence of women, sometimes destructive . . . sometimes constructive'.[3] Wood rightly identified the author's concern with the behaviour of queens as a core theme of the chronicle, but his brief survey has remained a rare consideration of women in Fredegar, other than Brunhild. Close analysis of Fredegar's depiction of women can therefore offer new insights into a valuable, yet often overlooked, source for women's lives in early medieval Europe.

It is difficult to ascertain context for the author's approach because there is much uncertainty surrounding the origin of the Fredegar chronicle. It is believed that the text was composed around 660 based on internal evidence, but little can be said about its writer and questions of attribution have dominated scholarship.[4] The name 'Fredegar' was attributed to the author of the chronicle in the sixteenth century, but it is thought to have no connection to the person originally responsible for its composition.[5] The number of authors has been debated, but the presiding, and most compelling, theory of single authorship will be followed here.[6] Roger Collins has suggested that this figure was active in Burgundy and Neustria, possibly moving in high political circles, and was more likely a layperson than a cleric or monk.[7] There is no general consensus about any of these details, though, particularly concerning the author's religious status.[8]

Male pronouns have consistently been used to describe Fredegar, and the possibility of female authorship has only been considered as an aside in footnotes.[9] Janet Nelson identified traits that could tentatively indicate

[2] On women in Gregory of Tours, see E.T. Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Leiden, 2015). On what it meant to be a medieval queen, see P. Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens, GA, 1983).

[3] I. Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables', in A. Scharer and G. Scheibeireiter (eds), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1994), pp. 359–66, at p. 361.

[4] The primary study on Fredegar is R. Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken* (Hanover, 2007), published in German with an unpublished English translation which has been consulted here. See also, R. Collins, 'Fredegar', in P.J. Geary (ed.), *Authors of the Middle Ages* (Abingdon, 2016), vol. 4, pp. 73–138; W. Goffart, 'The Fredegar Problem Reconsidered', *Speculum* 38 (1963), pp. 206–41. For a recent overview of the Fredegar chronicle, see J.T. Palmer, *Merovingian Worlds* (Cambridge, 2025), pp. 41–5.

[5] The name was penned by Claude Fauchet in 1579. See Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 45–9.

[6] In 1888 Krusch proposed a three-author theory, but this has been largely rejected in modern scholarship. For the history of this debate, see Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 32–45.

[7] Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 59–60.

[8] On the author's potential clerical status, see Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables', p. 360; G.I. Halfond, 'The Endorsement of Royal-Episcopal Collaboration in the Fredegar "Chronica"', *Traditio* 70 (2015), pp. 1–28, at pp. 4–5.

[9] See Collins, 'Fredegar', p. 82 (n. 3).

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female composition, including a 'relatively free' style, a 'preoccupation with the play of power within royal families', and 'a marked interest in the political roles of royal women'.[10] Her point must be reiterated, that, in dealing with anonymous early medieval works, the *possibility* of female authorship should at least be considered.[11] When there is evidence of female writers contemporary to Fredegar (for example Baudonivia), and considering the prominent coverage of women in the chronicle, female authorship is not implausible, even if it is less likely than male.[12]

Taken as a whole, the chronicle extends from Creation to the author's own day. It consists of 1) the *Liber generationis*, with added lists of Hebrew rulers and popes;[13] 2) abbreviated versions of the chronicles of Eusebius-Jerome and Hydatius, with interpolations;[14] 3) an epitome of the first six books of Gregory of Tours's *Histories*; and 4) an original section, covering 584 to 642.[15] The focus here will be on the original content in Book IV, as well as the interpolations in Books II and III.[16] A distinction must be made between Fredegar the independent narrator (IV) and Fredegar the epitomizer (I–III). While Book IV most clearly reflects his authorial vision, similar patterns emerge in his treatment of women within the epitomized material. Fredegar was not necessarily the original author of the interpolations in Books II and III, but it can be presumed that he chose them 'consciously and selectively'.[17] These interpolations, like the content of Book IV, reveal the significant role played by women in his historical vision.

Fredegar was working within the medieval Latin chronicle tradition, in which women occupied a marginal space. The role of women in Fredegar is

[10] J.L. Nelson, *Frankish World, 750–900* (London, 2003), p. 197.
[11] Nelson, *Frankish World,* p. 197.
[12] On women and literacy in the early Middle Ages, see R. McKitterick, *Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms, 6th–9th Centuries* (London, 1994), pp. 1–43.
[13] The *Liber generationis* is a Latin translation of a lost Greek chronicle attributed to Hippolytus of Rome in 234/5: ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* 9 (Berlin, 1892), pp. 78–138. On Fredegar's use of the *Liber generationis*, see Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 67–72.
[14] The chronicle of Eusebius went from Abraham to 325, and it was then translated into Latin by Jerome and continued to 378. Hydatius was one of Jerome's continuators, covering 379 to 468. For a key overview of the world chronicle tradition in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, see M. MacCarron, *Bede and Time: Computus, Theology and History in the Early Medieval World* (Abingdon, 2020), pp. 64–73. See also R.W. Burgess and M. Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time: Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD* (Turnhout, 2013), vol. 1, pp. 119–31, 184–7.
[15] On Fredegar's sources, see Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 91–105.
[16] Book I is largely derivative of the *Liber generationis*, lacking the repeated interpolations characteristic of Books II and III.
[17] Halfond, 'The Endorsement of Royal-Episcopal Collaboration', p. 6. The most sustained study of the interpolations in Book III is J.E. Woodruff, 'The "Historia Epitomata" (Third Book) of the "Chronicle" of Fredegar: An Annotated Translation and Historical Analysis of Interpolated Material', Ph.D. thesis, University of Nebraska (1987).

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here assessed in the context of the GENCHRON project.[18] Traditionally, scholars of medieval time-reckoning and chronology have shown little interest in gender as a category of analysis, a deficiency GENCHRON aims to correct by integrating gender into a reappraisal of the concept of time in late antique and early medieval sources. Data analysis has been performed for Latin world chronicles from Eusebius-Jerome (terminating 378) to Bede's longer chronicle in *De temporum ratione* (terminating 725), to ascertain the role of women in these sources.

BurgessWhat constitutes a 'chronicle' continues to be debated, and it is difficult to draw firm boundaries between the genres of chronicle and history.[19] R.W. Burgess and Michael Kulikowski define a 'chronicle' as a historical work which is 'brief, annalistic . . . and extensive in its chronological coverage', and on this basis argue that, given its lack of a strict annalistic chronological framework, Fredegar's work was not a chronicle 'in the ancient sense of the term'.[20] Indeed, the coverage of women in Book IV is statistically more comparable with that found in late antique and early medieval narrative sources, in which women were consistently better represented than in chronicles.[21] This definition therefore has merit, but is perhaps too rigid when applied to Fredegar, who clearly saw himself as following in the tradition of the 'true' chronicles of Jerome and Hydatius. The author also expressed an interest in bringing accuracy to his record of the chronology of peoples, so, despite not employing a 'traditional' chronological apparatus, chronology was a conscious part of his authorial vision.[22] This provides sufficient justification for treating Fredegar's work as a chronicle for comparative purposes, while acknowledging the contested boundaries of the genre.

Women account for 9.96% of total characters recorded in Book IV of Fredegar's text, the highest proportion in any of the chronicles for which data analysis has been completed. It has been argued elsewhere that genre and style were perhaps the main contributory factors in determining the coverage of women in medieval chronicles, with the fewest being found in the male-dominated consular lists, such as the anonymous *Consularia Constantinopolita* (0.23%) and Cassiodorus' *Chronica* (0.79%), and the most appearing in more descriptive chronicles such as Sulpicius Severus' *Chronicorum* (8.93%).[23] In its mix of longer and

[18] 'Time for Women? Gender, Chronology and Historiography before AD 900', a project funded by a Research Ireland Consolidator Laureate grant, IRCLA/2022/2234, PI M. MacCarron: https://www.ucc.ie/en/genchron/.

[19] On the parameters of 'universal chronicles', see I. Wood, 'Universal Chronicles in the Early Medieval West', *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015), pp. 47–60.

[20] Burgess and Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time*, p. 59; pp. 240–1.

[21] See M. MacCarron and E. Quigley, 'Female Voices and Universal History', in D. Miano and H. Inglebert (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Universal History Writing* (Oxford, 2025).

[22] Fredegar IV, *prol.*

[23] On the importance of genre, see MacCarron and Quigley, 'Female Voices'.

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shorter chapters, the Fredegar work is most similar to Bede's 725 chronicle, but that contains only 6.29% women, so this stylistic feature does not fully explain the disproportionate coverage of women within it.

Notably, this elevated presence of women is also seen in the epitomized content of Books II and III. It has been calculated that women comprise 10.65% of total characters in Gregory of Tours's *Histories*, and more specifically 11.57% in Books II to VI, which Fredegar epitomized.[24] Fredegar's epitome of Gregory was heavily abbreviated, but featured a comparatively higher percentage of women, at 14.11%.[25] Similarly, women were also proportionally better represented in Fredegar's abbreviated versions of Eusebius-Jerome and Hydatius than in the originals.[26] Women made up 8.64% of total characters in his version of Eusebius-Jerome (compared to 5.64% in the original work), and 8.79% in his version of Hydatius (compared to 4.48%). Fredegar energetically edited his sources, but certainly not to reduce their coverage of women.

An interesting comparison can be made with the brief and slightly earlier chronicle of Marius, bishop of Avenches, which ends in 581 and offers a Burgundian perspective on events also often recounted by Gregory of Tours.[27] Women played a very minor role in Marius' chronicle, making up only 3.69% of total characters. This partly reflects the consular framework adopted by Marius but also indicates that he did not prioritize records of women's lives. Only one woman was named in the entire chronicle, Queen Austrechild, the wife of the Frankish king Guntram.[28] Another near-contemporary comparison can be made with the continuations of Fredegar, which documented events in Francia from 642 to 768, in which women make up only 6.45% of the characters.[29] The evidence of Marius and Fredegar's continuator further suggests that Fredegar's disproportionately high representation of women was not reflective of a contemporary trend in chronicle writing, but reflects the author's interest in depicting them.

[24] Data on *DLH* was collected by U. Vihervalli as part of 'Women, Conflict and Peace: Gendered Networks in Early Medieval Narratives (c. 330–735)', a project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, RPG 2018-014:https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/genderednetworks/home.

[25] Fischer has observed that Fredegar readily modified Gregory's *Histories* to support his own historical vision: see A. Fischer, 'The Appropriation of History: The Austrasians, Gregory of Tours, and Fredegar', in G. Heydemann and H. Reimitz, *Historiography and Identity II: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout, 2020), pp. 213–36.

[26] Statistics have not been provided for Book I due to technical issues surrounding its format and the data-gathering process.

[27] Marius of Avenches, *Chronica a. CCCCLV–DLXXXI*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* 11 (Berlin, 1894), pp. 232–9.

[28] On strategies of naming and withholding women's names in medieval sources, see J. Hillner, M. MacCarron and U. Vihervalli, 'The Politics of Female Namelessness between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, circa 300 to 750', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15 (2022), pp. 367–401.

[29] On the continuations, see Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 161–272.

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This statistical overview shows that Fredegar's representation of women was unique within the Latin chronicle tradition. From here, specific examples of women will be examined to demonstrate that Fredegar's proportionally high representation of women reflected a clear belief in their significance to universal history. It will be shown that Fredegar's treatment of women cannot be reduced to his animosity towards Brunhild, which has arguably discouraged scholars from exploring his broader portrayals of women. Fredegar in fact presented a range of positive and neutral examples of queenship: the women in his chronicle frequently emerge as autonomous political actors whose importance extended beyond their reproductive roles.

Queens at court: authority and influence

Before turning to Fredegar's broader representations of women, it is necessary first to consider Brunhild, the great villain of his chronicle. Brunhild was a Visigothic princess who came into Merovingian politics as the wife of Sigebert I of Austrasia, then intermittently acted as regent for her son (Childebert II), grandsons (Theudebert II and Theuderic II), and great-grandson (Sigebert II). Brunhild is the woman who appears most in Fredegar, making up 9% of his references to women in Book III and 18.60% in Book IV.[30] The author's attitude towards her offers a vitriolic contrast to the more neutral depictions of the queen by Gregory of Tours and Pope Gregory the Great around seventy years earlier.[31] In his account of Brunhild's marriage to Sigebert, Gregory of Tours praised her as 'elegant in all that she did, lovely to look at, chaste and decorous in her behaviour, wise in her generation and of good address'.[32] Fredegar omitted this statement, and, in stark contrast to Gregory's measured portrayal, asserted that her 'advice caused sufficient evil and bloodshed in Francia to fulfill the Sibyl's prophecy that said, "Bruna comes from the regions of Spain and before

[30] Brunhild makes up 9 of 100 total references to women in Book III, and 16 of 86 in Book IV.

[31] Gregory the Great addressed a series of letters to Brunhild in which he praised her faith, though this praise was shaped by his appeals for her support and must be understood within this context. See, for example, *Registrum epistularum*, VI.58, XI.48, ed. D. Norberg, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [CCSL] 140–140A, 2 vols (Turnhout, 1982).

[32] *DLH* IV.27, trans. L. Thorpe, *The History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 221: 'Erat enim puella elegans opere, venusta aspect, honesta moribus atque decora, prudens consilio et blanda colloquio.' Gregory owed political allegiance to Brunhild and Sigebert, so fear and/or caution may have affected his portrayal. See A.C. Murray, 'Chronology and the Composition of the Histories of Gregory of Tours', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008), pp. 157–96, at p. 193.

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her gaze many peoples will perish"'.[33] Fredegar's interest in visions will be discussed later, but the force of this denunciation is striking, casting the queen as a figure of predestined evil. Immediately after citing this prophecy, Fredegar explained how Brunhild died, explicitly linking her alleged crimes to her later downfall in Book IV.

Fredegar's negative account of Brunhild was typical of the seventh and eighth centuries, mirroring the contempt for her expressed in Jonas's *Vita Columbani* and the anonymous *Liber historiae Francorum*.[34] Considerable scholarship has examined the pronounced hostility towards Brunhild in seventh- and eighth-century sources.[35] A prominent factor in explaining this contempt is that it was the dynasty of Chlothar II, who had accused and killed Brunhild and her relatives, that dominated in Francia after these events.[36] Also significant was Brunhild's conflict with Columbanus; his hagiographer, Jonas of Bobbio, described her as a 'second Jezebel', a denunciation that Fredegar reproduced verbatim.[37] The position and reputation of a Merovingian queen was precarious; women were often used as scapegoats in early medieval politics, as seen in Brunhild being charged by Chlothar with the deaths of ten Frankish kings.[38] Fredegar was certainly not afraid to show bias and omit details that did not suit his narrative, but then this was not exclusive to him, a parallel being Gregory's unfavourable record of Fredegund, the wife of Chilperic I.[39] In fact, Gregory charged Fredegund, via reported speech, with several of the same killings that Fredegar lays at Brunhild's door, showing the flexibility of female scapegoating.[40] Fredegar was writing

[33] Fredegar III.59, trans. A.C. Murray (ed.), *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader* (Toronto, 2008), p. 620: 'Tanta mala et effusione sanguinum a Brunechildis consilium in Francia factae sunt, ut prophetia Saeville impleretur, dicens: "Veniens Bruna de partibus Spaniae, ante cuius conspectum multae gentes peribunt"'. See also III.57, in which Fredegar claimed that Brunhild's original name was Bruna.

[34] Parallel accounts of Brunhild's violent death can be found in *LHF* XL; Jonas of Bobbio, *Vitae Columbani* I.29, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 37 (Hanover, 1905), pp. 144–294, at pp. 186–93; Sisebut, *Vita Desiderii* XXI, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 3 (Hanover, 1896), pp. 630–7.

[35] On the career of Brunhild and her representation in the sources, see J.L. Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels: The Careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History', in D. Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 31–78; B. Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut* (Paris, 2008); E.J. Thomas, 'The "Second Jezebel": Representations of the Sixth-Century Queen Brunhild', Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow (2012).

[36] I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms: 450-751* (Harlow, 1994), p. 126.

[37] Fredegar IV.36; Jonas, *Vitae Columbani* I.18–19. On the representation of Brunhild in Jonas's account, see E. Johnston, 'Movers and Shakers? How Women Shaped the Career of Columbanus', in A. O'Hara (ed.), *Columbanus and the Peoples of Post-Roman Europe* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 69–89.

[38] Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, p. 3. Fredegar IV.42.

[39] Fredegar's depiction of Fredegund was more neutral; he recounted her involvement in the deaths of Sigebert I (III.71) and Clovis, the son of Chilperic (III.84), but did not comment negatively on these.

[40] *DLH* VII.7.

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in an established tradition of pinning blame on the actions of 'bad' women.

Fredegar's contempt for Brunhild could be held to suggest that he disliked the political influence of women, an attitude that can also be seen colouring his comment that Chlothar II 'took too much notice of the views of women young and old, for which his followers censured him'.[41] Other examples include his noting that the mother of the Vandal king Chroc offered 'most wretched' (*nequissimam*) advice to destroy Gaul, and that the empress Sophia's cruelty towards Narses incited him to invite the Lombards into Italy.[42] While these cautions concerning female political influence did appear, his antipathy towards Brunhild was on a different scale. Fredegar's Brunhild was violent, greedy, and despised.[43] His malice towards Brunhild should not be understated, despite it being the 'norm' for his time. The queen met a horrific end: she was tortured and torn apart by horses, at the time of her death an elderly woman.[44] Fredegar did not explicitly applaud this violent act, but he certainly did not condemn it, and the implication is that Brunhild was suitably punished for her crimes. This level of negative commentary about a woman was quite unusual within the wider chronicle tradition, one notable exception being the condemnation of Justina, the mother of Valentinian II, for her Arianism in the 452 and 511 Gallic chronicles.[45] Women were generally included in the chronicles as either exemplary figures or as historically significant actors. Fredegar, however, evidently saw historical value in recording a 'bad' woman, partly following contemporary coverage of Brunhild but also perhaps framing her as a warning about abuse of power. With the remarkable exception of Brunhild though, Fredegar's treatment of queens aligns with the chronicle tradition in including them as models.

That Brunhild was an exception can be seen in Fredegar's use of royal titles. Interestingly, he only described Brunhild as *regina* in the chronicle *capitulae* and in a single narrative reference where she and Bilchildis were spoken of together as *duas reginas*; he never dignifies her personally with

[41] Fredegar IV.42, trans. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar: With Its Continuations* (Oxford, 1960), p. 36: 'posttremum mulierum et puellarum suggestionibus nimium annuens. Ob hoc quidem blasphematur a leudibus'.

[42] Fredegar II.60; III.65.

[43] For example, according to Fredegar, she caused the deaths of Wintrio and Aegyla (IV.18; IV.21) and the Burgundian notables feared and hated her (IV.41).

[44] Fredegar IV.42.

[45] *Chronica Gallica ad annum CCCCLII*, ed. R. Burgess, 'The Gallic Chronicle of 452: A New Critical Edition with a Brief Introduction', in R. Mathisen and D. Shanzer (eds), *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources* (London, 2017), pp. 52–84, at pp. 68–9; *Chronica Gallica ad annum DXI*, ed. R. Burgess, 'The Gallic Chronicle of 511: A New Critical Edition with a Brief Introduction', in Mathisen and Shanzer (eds), *Society and Culture*, pp. 85–100, at p. 94.

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the title within the text.[46] The *Augusta* and *regina* titles were used sparingly in the wider chronicle tradition, especially so in Eusebius-Jerome, but Fredegar made consistent use of *regina*.[47] Berthetrude was described as *regina* four times, Gundeberga ten, and Nanthild nine. Fredegar's use of royal titles was arguably not incidental, but rather a considered means of honouring the status and dynastic role of certain approved women.[48] Fredegar's record of these queens has been overlooked, but they are integral to understanding his perspective on queenship.

Bilchildis, a slave girl bought by Brunhild, who then married Theudebert II, provides a useful starting point. Fredegar stated that she was 'much loved by all the Austrasians because she bore with nobility the simple-mindedness of Theudebert', and that she was often in conflict with Brunhild.[49] Fredegar recorded that a meeting was arranged between the two queens to negotiate peace between Theuderic and Theudebert, but, on the advice of the Austrasians, Bilchildis did not attend.[50] Here Fredegar gives some insight into the active role that Merovingian queens could have in political negotiation, but also shows Bilchildis was astute in listening to her advisers, a shrewdness that is positioned in direct contrast to Theudebert's 'simplicity' (*simplicitatem*).[51] Bilchildis met an unfortunate end two chapters later, when Theudebert killed her and took a new wife, Theudichildis.[52] Fredegar did not make any explicit negative commentary on this, but in the very next chapter Theudebert's downfall was recorded; he lost his kingdom and his young son.[53] The implication is that Theudebert was suitably punished for his murder of the Austrasians' beloved queen.

We see other examples of 'beloved' queens in Berthetrude and Gundeberga.[54] Wood has described Fredegar's depictions of these queens as 'neutral', but this can be contested.[55] Fredegar recorded that, at the instigation of the patrician Alethius, Bishop Leudemund of Sion tried to convince Berthetrude to betray her husband, Chlothar II.[56] The queen was

[46] Fredegar, *Cap*. III.57; IV.35.
[47] See MacCarron and Quigley, 'Female Voices'. On queen-making and royal titles, see Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, pp. 127–34.
[48] On the significance of the *Augusta* title in a Roman context, see J. Hillner, *Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire* (Oxford, 2022), p. 104.
[49] Fredegar IV.35, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, pp. 22–3: 'Bilichildis utilis et a cunctis a Austransiis uehementer diligeretur, simplicitatem Teudeberti honeste conportans.'
[50] Fredegar IV.35.
[51] Moirera has highlighted a theme of seventh-century slaves marrying 'feeble-minded' Merovingian kings, drawing parallels between Bilchildis and Balthild: see I. Moreira, *Balthild of Francia: Anglo-Saxon Slave, Merovingian Queen, and Abolitionist Saint* (Oxford, 2024), p. 20.
[52] Fredegar IV.37.
[53] Fredegar IV.38.
[54] The language used was *diligeretur* for Bilchildis (IV.35), *amauerant* for Berthetrude (IV.46), and *diligebatur* for Gundeberga (IV.51).
[55] Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables', p. 362.
[56] Fredegar IV.44.

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frightened by this and took to her room in tears, and Leudemund 'saw that the conversation had put him in danger'.[57] He subsequently fled and Alethius was executed for his 'wicked plan' (*consilium iniquissimum*). Berthetrude disappears from the chapter after taking to her room, but while her role could therefore be considered superficially 'neutral', the immediate danger to Leudemund and Alethius strongly implies that the failure of their scheme rested on the queen's actions. Shortly after this, Fredegar devotes a whole chapter to the death of Berthetrude, spotlighting the queen within the chronicle record, and stating that 'the king was particularly devoted to her and the whole court recognized her goodness and loved her dearly for it'.[58] Brunhild may have served as a warning about the dangers of over-reliance on women – evident in Fredegar's account of her death appearing in the same chapter as the caution of Chlothar's followers – but Berthetrude was soon afterwards established as a contrasting model of a queen whose presence was valued at court.[59]

Gundeberga, wife first of the Lombard king Arioald and then of his successor Rothari, was also praised by Fredegar. Before divulging the details of her tumultuous life, Fredegar painted a glowing picture of the queen: 'The lovely Queen Gundeberga was in all things good-natured and full of Christian piety. She was generous in almsgiving and universally loved for her bounty.'[60] There are initial parallels between the stories of Gundeberga and Berthetrude; Fredegar recorded that, during her first marriage to Arioald, Gundeberga was propositioned by a Lombard named Adalulf, whom she 'violently refused and spat in his face to show her contempt for him' (a more forceful rejection than Berthetrude's tears).[61] Upon Gundeberga's refusal, Adalulf 'saw that he had endangered his life', mirroring Leudemund's response, but he then reacted differently by accusing the queen of scheming with Duke Taso.[62] Although at first Arioald believed him and exiled her, the matter was resolved in single combat, and when Gundeberga's representative killed Adalulf, she was duly restored as queen. As in the case of Berthetrude, Fredegar clears the queen of any disloyalty, merely observing that she was 'as well disposed to him [Adalulf] as she was to

[57] Fredegar IV.44, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 37: 'Leudemundus cernens se huiuscemodi uerbis habere periculum'.
[58] Fredegar IV.46, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 39: 'quam unico amore Chlotharius dilexerat et omnes leudis bonitate eius cernentes uehementer amauerant'.
[59] Fredegar IV.42–6.
[60] Fredegar IV.51, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, pp. 41–2: 'Gundeberga regina, cum esset pulchra aspecto, benigna in cunctis et piaetate plenissema christiana, aelimosinis larga, praecellenti bonitatem eius, diligebatur a cunctis.'
[61] Fredegar IV.51, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 42: 'Illa fortiter denegans eumque dispiciens in faciem expuit.'
[62] Fredegar IV.51, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 42: 'Adalulfus cernens se uitae periculum habere'.

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all others' on account of her goodness, and shows her to have been vindicated by divine judgement.[63] Subsequently, Fredegar recounts how, after the death of Arioald, Gundeberga married Duke Rothari and used her influence to have him raised to the throne, only then to be confined in seclusion.[64] After Frankish intervention, however, she was released and restored to her former position.[65] Once again Fredegar emphasizes that Gundeberga was the innocent party and in his final comments on her states that 'to her dying day she retained her position and her fortune and lived in contentment, in the midst of royal splendour'.[66] Gundeberga prevailed in Fredegar's narrative despite her recurrent marital strife.

Fredegar emphasized that both Berthetrude and Gundeberga were loved for their 'goodness' (*bonitas*), a quality that he ascribed to only two other characters in Book IV, King Guntram and Pippin, the latter mayor of the palace to the Austrasian king Dagobert I.[67] In short, both women were framed as models of good queenship by Fredegar, in a way that goes beyond the merely 'neutral'. These positive descriptions of queens – with emphasis on good court relations, loyalty, justice, and devotion to almsgiving – mirrored those of Fredegar's preferred kings and mayors. Interestingly, Bilchildis, Berthetrude, and Gundeberga were not recorded as having sons, yet Fredegar nonetheless accorded them independent historical significance. Concerns about childbearing occupied a marginal space in his representations of women in politics. While he typically introduced women at marital age and described them as wives or mothers of royal men, the women he described most favourably were not defined by their reproductive roles. Rather, Fredegar's attention centred on the relationships of queens with their courts.

This focus of Fredegar's led him to maintain a consistent record of queens at court. He lamented that Dagobert had too many concubines to name, but that his queens were Nanthild, Wulfegundis, and Berchildis.[68] Fredegar said nothing more about Wulfegundis or Berchildis, and is our only source for them, but it is interesting that they were identified not in connection with offspring, but merely by virtue of being queens. Naming of royal woman was not consistent within the Latin chronicle tradition, with the exception of the sixth-century chronicle of Marcellinus, which routinely recorded the

[63] Fredegar IV.51, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 42: 'Gundeberga regina eum sicut et citeris diligens.'
[64] Fredegar IV.70.
[65] Fredegar IV.71.
[66] Fredegar IV.71, trans. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 60: 'usque diem obetus sui et gradum dignetatis et opes plurebus ditata rigio culto post feliceter tenuit'.
[67] Fredegar IV.1; IV.61.
[68] Fredegar IV.60.

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births and deaths of imperial women in the eastern Empire.[69] Eusebius named several contemporary Constantinian women, but Jerome added no further imperial women in his continuation.[70] The most contemporary women in Hydatius, the wife and daughters of Valentinian III, were left unnamed.[71] Fredegar did not go as far as Marcellinus – Book IV recorded only the births of royal men – but his explicit naming of Dagobert's queens marks a departure from the chronicles he was continuing.

Of Dagobert's queens, only Nanthild receives extended attention. She barely appears, however, until after Dagobert's death in 639, when she briefly became regent during the minority of her son, Clovis II, before she herself died in 641/2. Female regency was a prominent phenomenon in the late sixth- and seventh-century Frankish kingdoms, and came with real power, most notably some control of the royal finances, as emphasized by Fredegar's observation that Nanthild held one-third of Dagobert's treasure.[72] To exercise power effectively, nevertheless, queen mothers required noble support, and often shared power with a male court official.[73] In the case of Nanthild, Fredegar recorded that she ruled alongside the mayor, Aega, for the first three years of Clovis's rule.[74] Despite stating that Aega ruled *with* Nanthild, in his account of their regency Fredegar's focus was firmly on Aega, detailing his qualities as a ruler, both good and bad.[75] It was only after Aega's death that Nanthild is depicted as playing a more active role, for example by immediately giving 'approval and permission' (*iussionem et permissum*) for the family of Chainulf to destroy Ermenfred's property in retribution for Chainulf's murder, showing her to have authority to

[69] Marcellinus's chronicle covered 379 to 534: *The Chronicle of Marcellinus,* ed. and trans. B Croke (Sydney 1995). On Marcellinus, see B. Croke, *Count Marcellinus and His Chronicle* (Oxford, 2001).

[70] The named Constantinian women in Eusebius-Jerome were: Helena, Constantine's mother, in *Chronicon*, 2322nd year from Abraham (hereafter AAb.), ed. R. Helm (Berlin, 1956); Fausta, Constantine's wife, in AAb. 2324; Constantia, Constantine's sister, in AAb. 2341. Other early fourth-century empresses, Theodora (wife of Constantius I) and Valeria (daughter of Diocletian), were also named: AAb. 2305.

[71] Hydatius, *Chronica Subdita*, ed. R.W. Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana: Two Contemporary Accounts of the Final Years of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 70–123, at pp. 104, 114.

[72] Fredegar IV.85. See Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', p. 75. On women's wealth and patronage, see Y. Hen, 'Gender and the Patronage of Culture in Merovingian Gaul', in L. Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith (eds), *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 217–33.

[73] Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, pp. 152–6. See also, P. Stafford, 'Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages', in Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*, pp. 79–100.

[74] Fredegar IV.79–80: 'Aega uero cum rigina Nantilde quem Dagobertus reliquerat, anno primo regni Chlodouiae, secundo et inmenente tercio eiusdem regni anno condigne palacium gobernat et regnum.'

[75] Fredegar IV.80.

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mete out justice.[76] Nonetheless, Fredegar then dedicated the next chapter to a thorough description of the qualities of Erchinoald, Aega's successor.

Fredegar never detailed Nanthild's qualities as he did the mayors, but he does describe her actions at some length in the chronicle's penultimate chapter, in which she goes to Burgundy with Clovis to win over its bishops and leading men, who then choose Flaochad as mayor.[77] Nanthild then gave her niece, Ragnoberta, to Flaochad in marriage. Fredegar claimed not to know who had arranged this match, but at the very least he indicates that Nanthild approved the marriage, if she had not actively organized it. Here, Nanthild is shown to be shrewd in the preservation of her status. She was aware of her need to ingratiate herself with the Burgundian court and by allowing, or even orchestrating, her niece's marriage to Flaochad, she fostered familial links to consolidate her position in Frankish politics.[78]

Fredegar presented Nanthild as rather calculated in her grip on power, especially so in the insinuation of her nefarious dealings with the Burgundian mayor: 'Flaochad and the queen certainly devised in secret another plan, which is believed not to have been pleasing to God and therefore was not granted success.'[79] Fredegar was vague about the details of this 'secret plan', but his disapproval is evident, and it is possible even that he viewed Nanthild's death soon after as a mark of God's displeasure.[80] That being said, his coverage of Nanthild was, in all, fairly neutral. She was neither as admired as Bilchildis, Berthetrude, or Gundeberga, nor as reviled as Brunhild. Fredegar was accepting, if perhaps not enthusiastic, about Nanthild's exercise of political power, suggesting he did not assume queens invariably abused their power. The scholarly tendency is to focus on Fredegar's depiction of Brunhild, hated by her court, but Fredegar's depictions of Merovingian queens were much more varied than this. As the statistical comparison indicated, in a chronicle tradition that frequently omitted or marginalized royal women, Fredegar stands out for his consistent and detailed record of queenly action.

[76] Fredegar IV.83. On ruler intervention and violence as a legitimate defence of honour, see P. Fouracre, 'Attitudes towards Violence in Seventh- and Eighth-Century Francia', in G. Halsall, *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 60–75, at p. 71.

[77] Fredegar IV.89.

[78] On Nanthild's strategy of ruling through family connections, see Moreira, *Balthild of Francia*, pp. 55–6.

[79] Fredegar IV.89, trans. Murray, p. 488: 'nam alium consilium secrete Flaochatus et Nantildis regina macenauant, quem credetur non fuisse Deo placebelem ideoque non mancepauit effectum'.

[80] It is unclear whether Fredegar did not know the details of the plan, or if he did not wish to disclose them.

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Interpolating women: history and legend

Besides being referenced in the independent narrative of Book IV, women also play a significant role in several of the legendary stories that Fredegar interpolated into his sources in Books II and III, although this material has been given relatively little attention in scholarship due to its lack of historicity.[81] One such account is the tale of Emperor Justinian I (527–65), his general Belisarius, and their wives, a pair of Amazonian sisters named Antonia and Antonina.[82] Stefan Esders, in particular, has explored Fredegar's interest in the East, but his work has focused on the contemporary material; Fredegar's 'legendary narratives', such as the story of Antonina, have received little coverage.[83] Fredegar recounted how the four met in a brothel in Constantinople and subsequently married, before turning to the prominent role played by Antonina in the campaign led by Belisarius against the Vandals in Africa.[84] When Belisarius saw no way to overcome the Vandals and Antonina offered her help, he told his wife that 'this is not an issue in which the counsel of women is useful' and that she had 'nothing valuable to offer in this matter'.[85] In response to Belisarius' dismissal, Antonina quoted I Corinthians VII.14 ('The husband without faith shall be saved by the wife with faith'), implored her husband to be baptized, and then provided strategic advice on how to defeat the

[81] Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, p. 94.

[82] This legend (as well as the one on Theoderic) only survives in the context of Fredegar, but because he did not flag his borrowings it is difficult to determine what is original and what was borrowed from lost sources: Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, pp. 73–4. Fischer has suggested that the stories were most likely transferred from Italy to Merovingian Gaul: A. Fischer, 'Rewriting History: Fredegar's Perspectives on the Mediterranean', in A. Fischer and I. Wood (eds), *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400–800 AD* (London, 2014), pp. 55–76, at p. 58.

[83] See, for example, S. Esders, 'The Prophesied Rule of a "Circumcised People": A Travelling Tradition from the Seventh-Century Mediterranean', in Y. Hen and T.F.X. Noble (eds), *Barbarians and Jews: Jews and Judaism in the Early Medieval West* (Turnhout, 2018), pp. 119–54; S. Esders, 'When Contemporary History Is Caught Up by the Immediate Present: Fredegar's Proleptic Depiction of Emperor Constans II', in S. Esders, Y. Hen, P. Lucas and T. Rotman (eds), *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources* (London, 2022), pp. 141–9. On Fredegar's sustained interest in Byzantine affairs, see L. Sarti, 'Byzantine History and Stories in the Frankish "Chronicle of Fredegar" (c. 613–662)', *Francia* 48 (2021), pp. 3–22.

[84] Fredegar II.62. Fredegar's story, while unreliable, did reflect real characters and events: see J.M. Wallace–Hadrill, 'Fredegar and the History of France', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1958), pp. 527–50, at p. 542. Justinian's wife was named Theodora not Antonia, but Belisarius' wife was named Antonina. In reality the two women were friends, not sisters. On the historical Theodora, see L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527–1204* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 11–39. See also, J.A. Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium: Antonina and the Empress Theodora* (London, 2011).

[85] Fredegar II.62, trans. Murray, p. 607: 'Haec causa consiliare mulieribus non expedit, nec quicquam est tecum in hanc rem utile.'

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Vandals.[86] Belisarius acted on her counsel and Antonina actively led forces in the ensuing conflict; in Fredegar's narrative, the success of the Vandal campaign was because of Antonina.

In another interpolation in Book II, Fredegar introduced the Gothic king Theoderic (493–526) as the son of Macedonian slaves Lilia and Theodorus, who served Idacius and his wife, Eugenia.[87] On her wedding night Lilia dreamed of a tree growing from her womb, but, at her husband's urging, she instead told her mistress that she had seen a foal with two beautiful horses. This falsified dream prompted Idacius and Eugenia to free the couple and adopt Theoderic. Later, during his clash with Odoacer, Theoderic fled the field, only to return after Lilia rebuked him that 'there is no place to run, my son, unless I lift my skirts for you to enter the womb from which you were born', invoking the imagery of her earlier dream of the tree.[88] As with Antonina, Fredegar cast Lilia as an active agent whose intervention directly shaped Theoderic's decisions and the course of events.

A few chapters later, Fredegar suggested that the Vandal king Chroc undertook to destroy Gaul on his mother's advice, as previously mentioned.[89] In all three legends, appearing in quick succession, a woman counsels a male relative on military action. Fredegar's attitude to female-inspired violence seems to have been dictated by its purpose: Antonina and Lilia acted in the context of battle, whereas Chroc's mother promoted senseless destruction.[90] Faith was also an important factor, as while Chroc, and by extension his mother, was 'impious' (*impia*), Antonina was Christian and thus the implication is that her violence was divinely sanctioned. Antonina was modelled as the Christian wife yet went on to occupy a traditionally masculine role of strategist and warrior.

Notably, also in Book II, in the material he derived from Eusebius, Fredegar added the detail that Judith killed Holofernes, information that

[86] Fredegar II.62: 'Salvabitur vir infidelis per mulierem fidelem.'

[87] Fredegar II.57. Theoderic's historical mother was Ereleuva, who took the name 'Eusebia' in baptism: see P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 450. The similarity between 'Eusebia' and Fredegar's 'Eugenia' is noteworthy.

[88] Fredegar II.57, trans. Murray, p. 600: 'Non est, ubi fugias, fili, nisi ut levi vestimenta mea, ut ingredias utero, de quo natus es.' On the story of Theoderic in Fredegar, see S. Borchert, 'Das Bild Theoderichs des Großen in der Chronik des sog. Fredegar', in S. Kolditz and R.C. Müller (eds), *Geschehenes und Geschriebenes: Studien zu Ehren von Günther S. Henrich und Klaus-Peter Maschke* (Leipzig, 2005), pp. 435–52.

[89] Fredegar II.60. Gregory also included a story of Chroc being influenced by his 'wicked mother', but there he was king of the Alamanni, and his mother's speech was not recorded: *DLH* I.32. On the historical figure behind 'Chroc', see J.F. Drinkwater, 'Crocus, "King of the Alamanni"', *Britannia* 40 (2009), pp. 185–95.

[90] On the Chroc episode in Fredegar, see G. Schwedler, 'Lethe and "Delete" – Discarding the Past in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of Fredegar', in A. Goeing, A. Grafton and P. Michel (eds), *Collectors' Knowledge: What Is Kept, What Is Discarded* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 71–96, at pp. 75–83.

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appeared in no other chronicle except Sulpicius' more detailed summary of the Old Testament.[91] Eusebius did mention that Judith's story was written under Cambyses, which was echoed in later chronicles, but for him Judith functioned purely as a chronological marker.[92] Fredegar, however, was much more interested in her actions. Conversely, Fredegar omitted Esther from his summary of Eusebius; Esther and Judith were usually treated similarly within the chronicle tradition, and in no other chronicle examined for the GENCHRON project was one included without the other.[93] It seems that while Esther's courage held little interest for Fredegar, Judith acted as a scriptural precursor to the warrior zeal epitomized by Antonina. Also in Book II, Fredegar added Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban – omitted by Eusebius – and gave a name to Sarah, Abraham's wife, who was an unnamed *libera* in Eusebius.[94] These subtle additions suggest a deliberate effort to preserve and highlight a female presence in early Christian history.

In considering Fredegar's interpolations, a particularly significant figure is Basina, the wife of the early Merovingian king, Childeric I, in Book III. Gregory of Tours offered only a brief account of their marriage, but Fredegar expanded this narrative into a more elaborate story.[95] According to Fredegar, Basina left her husband, the king of Thuringia, for Childeric, then, upon their marriage, she refused sexual intercourse and instructed Childeric on three occasions to recount his dreams. Basina then interpreted these dreams by reference to a prophecy in Daniel VII, presenting them as foretelling the future of the Merovingian dynasty.[96] Childeric's first vision of a lion signalled the strength of the son who was to be born to them, Clovis I. Subsequent visions of animals represented the strength and ferocity of Clovis's sons, while the final vision of 'lesser

[91] Fredegar II.26; Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicorum* II.16, ed. G. de Senneville–Grave, *Sources Chrétiennes* 441 (Paris, 1999).

[92] Eusebius-Jerome, *Chronicon*, AAb. 1487; Bede, *De temporum ratione*, *s.a.* 3431, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, 1977). Meanwhile Isidore recorded that Judith's story was written during the captivity: Isidore, *Chronica minora*, *s.a.* 4679, in *Etymologiae* V.38–9, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911); *Chronica maiora*, *s.a.* 4679, ed. J.C. Martín, CCSL 112 (Turnhout, 2003).

[93] In Eusebius-Jerome it was recorded that the story of Esther was written during the reign of Artaxerxes II (AAb. 1612). This was repeated by later chroniclers, for example: Bede, *De temporum ratione*, *s.a.* 3588; Isidore, *Chronica maiora*, *s.a.* 4832. For a list of texts that the project investigates, see https://www.ucc.ie/en/genchron/data/ (last accessed 14 April 2026).

[94] Fredegar II.2; Eusebius-Jerome, *Chronicon*, AAb. 100. Leah and Rachel were not mentioned in any of the other chronicles analysed, with the exception of Sulpicius Severus (I.8).

[95] *DLH* II.12; Fredegar III.12.

[96] On the origins of the Merovingian dynasty in Fredegar, see A.C. Murray, '*Post Vocantur Merohingii*: Fredegar, Merovech, and "Sacral Kingship"', in A.C. Murray (ed.), *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 121–52; I. Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family', in R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger and H. Reimitz (eds), *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 149–71.

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animals' foreshadowed the dynasty's eventual decline. Fredegar portrayed Basina as a decisive and authoritative figure, pursuing Childeric on her own initiative and directing him in prophetic interpretations. Whereas Gregory emphasized Childeric's abilities, Fredegar reoriented the narrative to centre Basina, presenting her not merely as the vessel for Clovis's birth, but as a figure of independent agency and insight.

Parallels can be drawn between the visionary interpretations of Basina and Lilia.[97] Jesse Keskiaho has highlighted female interpretative control in Fredegar, suggesting that both author and audience were comfortable with laywomen interpreting visions.[98] Basina, however, is unique in the level of control she is accorded. Lilia conveyed a false vision at her husband's prompting, and, as previously mentioned, Brunhild's reputation was shaped by a sibylline prophecy over which she had no agency. By contrast, Basina interpreted dreams independently and decisively, perhaps reflecting her importance in Frankish ancestry.

Beyond Basina, Fredegar showed further interest in female involvement in Frankish origins. It has been noted that while women played no part in Gregory of Tours's account of the origin of the Franks, in Fredegar's account the Franks crossed Europe with their wives, and the wife of Chlodio gave birth to Merovech, the supposed ancestor of the Merovingians.[99] Admittedly, these women were all unnamed, and, as highlighted by Lisa Bitel, they play only a minor role in the Frankish origin story.[100] Nonetheless, Fredegar acknowledged their presence in a way that Gregory did not. Even in these brief references, Fredegar situated women as necessary components of dynastic progression, offering a degree of precedent for the more explicit prominence he accorded to queens in seventh-century Merovingian politics.

From the prominent role of women in Fredegar's interpolations, we can see that his conception of female power and political involvement was much more varied than his depiction of Brunhild would suggest. Despite the concerns he expressed about female political influence in Book IV, his interpolations clearly show that he was quite prepared to go out of his way to depict women as authoritative figures. Fredegar made a conscious choice to add women in Books II and III; from cursory references to Leah and Rachel, to detailed accounts of Basina and Antonina, Fredegar

[97] Wood has highlighted shared themes, such as dreams, across Fredegar's tales: I. Wood, '*Iocundus in fabulis*: The Value of Friendly Advice', in L. Jégou, S. Joye, T. Lienhard and J. Schenider (eds), *Splendor Reginae: Passions, genre et famille* (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 329–39, at p. 338.

[98] J. Keskiaho, *Dreams and Visions in the Early Middle Ages: The Reception and Use of Patristic Ideas, 400–900* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 53–4.

[99] Fredegar II.5–6 and III.2 (wives of the Franks); III.9 (Chlodio's wife). On Gregory's account, see L.M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400–1100* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 50–1.

[100] Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, p. 51.

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happily adapted his sources to ensure women were present. These legendary stories formed an integral part of his historical vision, no less significant than his accounts of the contemporary Merovingians.

Female piety and conversion

What is particularly striking is that, although Fredegar records the highest statistical proportion of women in any early medieval chronicle analysed, their representation is rarely grounded in piety. Elsewhere in the tradition, women typically received the most positive attention as exemplars of faith, often occupying extended narrative space for this reason.[101] Fredegar, however, placed greater emphasis on their political roles. His interest in secular politics has led many to argue for the author's secular background, but it is an oversimplification to claim that he was not interested in religious matters.[102] Fredegar's favourable characterization of Gundeberga's devotion has already been seen, but scholars have also drawn attention to his depiction of women converting their husbands, a common motif in early medieval literature.[103] These episodes can be interrogated further to show that Fredegar tended to foreground women's deeds over their spiritual qualities.

The story of Caesara is in many ways the most straightforward depiction of female piety in the chronicle, as the Persian emperor, Anaulf, converted to Christianity after his wife, Caesara, went to Constantinople to be baptized and refused to return home until her husband agreed to baptism. In Fredegar's narrative, Caesara appears as the model of female piety, beautiful and resolute in her faith.[104] Other of his accounts of women, however, balance a peculiar mixture of violence and piety. As previously discussed, although Antonina converted Belisarius, her piety was only one facet of her characterization, her proclivity for strategy and war dominating the narrative.

A similar combination can be seen in Fredegar's depiction of Clotild, the wife of Clovis I. Clotild's role in the conversion of Clovis is a well-known example of female proselytizing, with Clotild being presented as a model saintly queen by Gregory of Tours, standing firm in her Catholicism.[105] Gregory's Clotild was also a noble defender of

[101] For a full discussion of this argument, see MacCarron and Quigley, 'Female Voices'.
[102] Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables', p. 360.
[103] See Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables', p. 362; Halfond, 'The Endorsement of Royal-Episcopal Collaboration', p. 18.
[104] Fredegar IV.9. On the historical figures who may underlie this 'legendary' story, see Wallace-Hadrill (ed.), *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, p. 7.
[105] Gregory's account of Clovis 'has become the archetypal conversion story of a barbarian king': M. MacCarron, 'Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68 (2017), pp. 650–70, at p. 655.

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Merovingian honour, allowing her grandsons to be killed rather than shorn.[106] These details were partially preserved in Fredegar's epitome of Gregory's account, but he provided additional information besides.[107] Fredegar and Gregory both recorded the slaughter of Clotild's parents and brothers by her uncle Gundobad, king of Burgundy, but Fredegar also added details about Clotild's tense departure from Burgundy with Clovis's men.[108] This included a speech by Aridius, an adviser to Gundobad, which reminded the reader of Gundobad's crimes against Clotild's family. Aridius warned Gundobad to send an army to bring Clotild back, as 'once she is powerful, she will be in a position to avenge her relatives'.[109] In Fredegar's narrative, then, Clotild's power was emphasized; she posed a tangible threat to the Burgundians. Soon Fredegar duly has her ask Clovis's men to plunder and burn Burgundy. When this was done, she remarked 'I give you thanks, omnipotent God, that I see a beginning made in avenging my parents and brothers.'[110] Gregory had also indicated Clotild's thirst for revenge in his account of how the queen sent her sons into Burgundy to avenge her parents, but the bishop did not include her first taste of vengeance. Nira Gradowicz-Pancer has argued that female violence was a 'quasi-permanent feature' of Merovingian society and was tied to issues of personal or family honour, a phenomenon that can be clearly seen in Fredegar's portrayal of Clotild.[111]

Throughout his chronicle, Fredegar did not shy away from depicting women as violent, and while that was certainly a negative feature in Brunhild's case, other female perpetrators of violence were spoken of neutrally or even positively, as seen with Antonina. Amongst the litany of

[106] *DLH* III.18. On this episode, see W. Westenholz, 'Better Dead than Shorn. The Killing of Chlodomer's Sons and the Character of Queen Clotilde', *Early Medieval Europe* 32 (2024), pp. 447–73. On the significance of the Merovingian long hair, see M. Diesenberger, 'Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms', in Corradini, Diesenberger and Reimitz (eds), *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 173–212.

[107] Fredegar's accounts of both episodes were highly abbreviated. All that remained of Clotild's involvement in the death of Chlodomer's sons was a comment that she loved them (III.38). See Westenholz, 'Better Dead than Shorn', p. 462.

[108] Fredegar III.17; *DLH* II.28 (on the murder of Clotild's family). Fredegar III.18–19 (on Clotild's departure from Burgundy).

[109] Fredegar III.19, trans. Murray, p. 616: 'si prevaluerit, iniuria parentum vindecavit'.

[110] Fredegar III.19, trans. Murray, p. 616: 'Gratias tibi ago, Deus omnipotens, quod inicium vindicte de genitoribus et fratribus meis video.'

[111] N. Gradowicz-Pancer, 'De-Gendering Female Violence: Merovingian Female Honour as an "Exchange of Violence"', *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002), pp. 1–18, at pp. 11–12. On the debated level of violence in Merovingian Gaul compared to states that preceded and succeeded it, see W. Liebeschuetz, 'Violence in the Barbarian Successor Kingdoms', in H.A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 37–46, at p. 46; W. Pohl, 'Perceptions of Barbarian Violence', in Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity*, pp. 15–26, at p. 26. See also, R.F. Newbold, 'Interpersonal Violence in Gregory of Tours' *Libri Historiarum*', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 38 (1994), pp. 3–17.

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violent crimes in the chronicle, female involvement was not singled out as especially noteworthy. Like Antonina, Clotild's violence was entangled with her Christianity, echoing Paul Fouracre's assertion that, in Fredegar, 'violence is seen within Christian culture, rather than as opposed to it'.[112] Even in promoting a violent act of plunder, Fredegar highlighted Clotild's faith, framing her revenge plan as divinely sanctioned.[113] As Willum Westenholz emphasizes, Clovis was reduced to an 'ancillary character' in Fredegar's account.[114] Fredegar actively chose to spotlight Clotild and her motivations; while Clotild depended on Clovis's resources, Fredegar was clear that this marriage gave Clotild real power. Her role in converting Clovis was acknowledged, but Fredegar gave far more attention to her dramatic departure from Burgundy.

As a curious comparison, Fredegar added a female conversion narrative in Book II, in his expansion of Eusebius' account of Constantine I. Fredegar inserted the details that the emperor found the cross of Christ with his mother, Helena, in Jerusalem, and that she converted him to Christianity.[115] While legends about Helena circulated in narrative sources such as Rufinus' translation of Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*, this level of interest was unusual within the chronicle tradition. Chroniclers prior to Fredegar tended simply to record that Helena was the concubine mother of Constantine.[116] Only Sulpicius Severus and Isidore mentioned her discovery of the cross; the story was not in the chronicles of Eusebius-Jerome or Hydatius, which Fredegar epitomized.[117] Considering that a great deal of the content Fredegar omitted from Eusebius-Jerome was religious in nature, it is intriguing that he actively chose to add this entry on Helena. One wonders if the episode was included in thematic continuity with Fredegar's accounts of female-led conversion in later books; a story of a woman converting her husband or son appears in every book except the first.[118] Helena

[112] Fouracre, 'Attitudes towards Violence', p. 62.
[113] A parallel story features in the eighth-century *Liber historiae Francorum*, but there Clotild's primary function is as a conduit of male conversion and her personal vengeance plan is secondary to her faith: see *LHF* XI–XII.
[114] Westenholz, 'Better Dead than Shorn', p. 462.
[115] Fredegar II.42. Gregory recorded that Helena found the cross (*DLH* I.36) but made no mention of her role in converting her son. On Helena's time in Palestine, see Hillner, *Helena Augusta,* pp. 204–43; on how Helena cannot have discovered the cross, see Hillner, pp. 232–4.
[116] Eusebius-Jerome, *Chronicon*, AAb. 2322; Cassiodorus, *Chronica*, c. 1035, ed. Mommsen, *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* 11, pp. 120–61; Prosper, *Epitoma Chronicon*, c. 976, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* 9 (Munich, 1981), pp. 385–485. The same information was recorded by Bede in the eighth century: *De temporum ratione*, *s.a.* 4290.
[117] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicorum* II.33–4; Isidore, *Chronica maiora*, *s.a.* 5535.
[118] Potentially significant is Gregory the Great's letter of 601 to the Frankish princess Bertha, in which he urged her to encourage her husband, Æthelberht of Kent, to convert, presenting Helena as a model: Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistularum* XI.35, line 11. Within this cultural milieu, Helena functions as a key exemplar of female influence in conversion.

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perhaps functioned, therefore, as the exemplary standard that Clotild and Caesara were to follow.

Bearing his additional details on Helena in mind, it is noteworthy that Radegund did not feature in Fredegar's epitome of Gregory. In her retrieval of the True Cross from the imperial court, Radegund was compared to Helena by her hagiographers.[119] Gregory had explained that Radegund was the wife of Chlothar I, who turned to God and built a convent in Poitiers, but Fredegar did not include this story.[120] Fredegar was working with a six-book abridgement of Gregory in which numerous chapters were removed – perhaps intended to excise ecclesiastical material or the more autobiographical elements of Gregory's *Histories* – but the chapter in which Gregory briefly described Radegund's marriage and conversion was not one of those taken out.[121] Although Fredegar's inclusion of Jonas's laudatory account of Columbanus suggests his approval of Columbanian monasticism, female asceticism hardly features in the chronicle.[122] While Fredegar cannot be said to have disapproved of female asceticism, it was certainly not a prominent concern for him, and he was not enthusiastic about female chastity. In general, women were of more interest to Fredegar in a secular context. Piety served more as a tool to underscore the virtues of figures he held in esteem – such as the aforementioned Gundeberga, or Pippin – rather than a theme of interest in its own right. In contrast to the wider chronicle tradition, it was political action that brought women into focus for Fredegar; references to piety usually appeared as ancillary details, never as the central subject of his accounts.

Conclusions

Fredegar's chronicle has often been avoided due to its complexities, yet no other early medieval Latin chronicle preserves such a coherent record of

[119] Baudonivia, *De vitae sanctae Radegundis* II.16, ed. Krusch, *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 2, pp. 377–95, at p. 388; Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* V, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 34–111, at p. 39. On Helena and Radegund, see E.T. Dailey, *Radegund: The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 88–110.

[120] *DLH* III.7.

[121] Different historiographical theories have been proposed to explain the chapters removed in the six-book recension of Gregory's *Histories*. For the view that ecclesiastical material was targeted for excision, see W. Goffart, 'From Historiae to Historia Francorum and Back Again: Aspects of the Textual History of Gregory of Tours', in T.F.X. Noble and J.J. Contreni (eds), *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp. 55–76; M. Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 192–201. For the argument that the recension removed autobiographical material, see H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 140–59.

[122] Fredegar recorded that Saedeleuba, the sister of Clotild, became a nun after being exiled by Gundobad (III.17).

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royal women. While still secondary to men, the women of Fredegar's chronicle are dynamic actors. It is important, even so, not to misrepresent Fredegar's approach to women as positive or 'progressive' simply on the basis of the statistically greater proportion of women found in the work. Compare, for example, Bede's chronicle in *De temporum ratione*, which contains proportionally fewer women than Fredegar, but consistently presents them favourably or neutrally. Fredegar's representation of women is decidedly mixed; his female characters are good, bad, and neutral.

Many of these characters were royal, and here the chronicler's attitude was more complex than his loathing for Brunhild might suggest. The warning of Chlothar's followers about over-reliance on female counsel has been commonly used to encapsulate Fredegar's stance, but the evidence suggests that Fredegar was not uniformly wary of female political influence, which he frequently depicted in a positive light. Women in Fredegar's chronicle often exercised agency, and, although they remain a minority of characters, the author consistently carved out space for them within his narrative.

This marks a departure from Fredegar's chronicle sources – Eusebius, Jerome, and Hydatius – a departure that emerges particularly in his interpolations, where he frequently embellished material with tales of powerful women. While this partially reflects the high level of female political involvement in the Merovingian world, it also demonstrates Fredegar's personal interest in representing royal women. Fredegar expected women to be involved in politics and saw this as worthy of historical record. Political engagement was in fact his principal reason for including women; unlike in other chronicles, they did not have to be paragons of piety to merit detailed coverage.

In the absence of biographical information on Fredegar, the precise reasons for his approach to female representation remain obscure. While we cannot assert anything about authorship, the possibility that women may have influenced, or even contributed to, the chronicle – whether through patronage or direct authorship – cannot be entirely discounted. What can be said with confidence, however, is that Fredegar had a clear conception of the significance of women within universal history.

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article are available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18744148.

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