

## Zitierhinweis

Halsall, Guy: review of: E. T. Dailey, Radegund. The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, in: Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike, 26 (2024), p. 613-618, downloaded from Website



## copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

E. T. Dailey: *Radegund. The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023 (Women in Antiquity). XIV, 213 p., 11 ill., 2 maps. £ 71.00/\$ 110.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-765610-5.

Radegund was a princess captured by the Franks when they destroyed the Thuringian kingdom and compelled to marry her captor, King Chlothar I. She later left that marriage to lead a religious life, eventually founding a nunnery in Poitiers and acquiring for it a relic of the Holy Cross. Although an imposing and important figure during her lifetime, shortly after her death her nunnery was rocked by scandal as some of the nuns went into open rebellion against their abbess. Nonetheless her reputation lived on, thanks not least to two *vitae*, by the poet Venantius Fortunatus and the nun Baudonivia. Apart from those two hagiographies, written by people who had known her, Radegund features in Gregory of Tours' works and a number of poems by her biographer Venantius. One of the latter, about the conquest of Thuringia, is cast in Radegund's voice, leading some earlier scholars to suppose it was her composition. Additionally, two letters concerning the foundation of the abbey of Holy Cross, one from and one to Radegund, have been preserved. All of this makes the royal abbess a worthy subject of study.

In his study, E. T. Dailey, whose qualifications to undertake this biography are amply established by his valuable monograph on elite women in Gregory of Tours' writings, takes a chronological approach: chapter 1 covers her life up until she became queen; chapter 2 deals with her career as queen; in chapters 3–6 we read about Radegund's career after she left her husband and became a religious, her time in the nunnery in Poitiers, her endowment of it with a relic of the Holy Cross (giving the nunnery its usual name), and death in August 587. Chapter 7 is a lengthy account of the nuns' revolt in 589. The inclusion of this chapter, of the same order of size as almost all of those dealing with Radegund's life, looks like padding; its relevance to Radegund's biography is limited and a brief synopsis could have been included in the final chapter on her legacy without at all altering the book's argument. A translation of Radegund's letter to various Gallic bishops is given in an appendix and an extensive and valuable bibliography is provided.

There are many positives about this volume. One of Dailey's strengths is an ability to provide astute close readings of passages in the primary sources.

His book is mostly (there are some exceptions) well researched and based upon a thorough awareness not only of the sixth- and seventh-century accounts, but also of modern scholarship in several languages. It is clearly and engagingly written, though occasionally the phrasing becomes rather overwrought or clichéd (“Before Sigibert’s feet returned to earth, he felt the sting of an assassin’s blade [...]” [p. 83]). I appreciated the account of the murder of Chlothar I’s nephews (p. 23) which does not shy away from the horror of the event, where most modern historians tend to pass over this sort of dreadful violence in neutral language as though the passage of time has made it more acceptable. Indeed, the book’s steadfast confrontation of topics such as sexual violence in ways that make the reader remember that these aspects of sixth-century society were as traumatic then as they are now, is praiseworthy. Ironically perhaps, given my comments about its superfluity to a biography of Radegund, the chapter detailing the revolt of the nuns is exceptionally good and probably the best in the book (the introduction is also very well done). It surpasses Dailey’s own earlier treatment of the subject as surely the best analysis of this episode.

This book, however, raises important questions about how one writes a biography of a sixth-century individual. Although the surviving sources for Radegund represent, in sixth-century context, a bounteous haul, in broader historical perspective they amount to a thin evidential base. Even in more amply-documented periods, the simple narrative approach has often been thought unsatisfactory, giving way to more thematic discussions. In the sparsely-documented sixth century, the limitations of a simple chronological arrangement soon become apparent. Dailey’s biography abounds in terms and phrases like “if”, “probably”, or “may [or “would”, or “could”] have been”. Unsubstantiated (because unsubstantiable) assumptions about Radegund’s emotional state or the psychological effects of the events of her life abound. Indeed, the book is peppered with questionable interpretations of all sorts of issues. In itself this is not a problem; this sort of speculation can be interesting and, when thinking about emotional and psychological effects of trauma, possibly valuable (see above). Questionable interpretations are the standard fare of sixth-century history. However, the facts that some topics, such as Radegund’s emotional state, lie entirely in the realm of supposition and imagination, or that the interpretations offered are, given the evidence, often highly speculative needed to be made very explicit. In a volume like this, the problems of the evidence need to be made clear. Instead, the

dubious epistemological status of the claims made is obfuscated with rhetorical devices (“must have”; “will have”) and, especially in a book aimed partly at a non-specialist audience, this is very problematic.

More seriously, ideas that start off as hypotheses sometimes become facts a few pages later. A tendentious argument that Radegund might have played a role in getting the bishops assembled at the Council of Tours to issue an (at best implicit) reprimand to King Charibert for marrying a nun (canons 21–22 of the council’s acts), is admitted to be only an inference on p. 71, but the idea becomes “probable” on p. 72, and is stated as a fact (“her surprisingly successful efforts to rebuke Charibert”) on p. 74. Another example might be found in the hypothesis that Radegund’s brother was called Germanus. The idea that a royal male in a sixth-century Germanic-speaking kingdom in the Elbe valley would be given an unremarkable Latin name is vanishingly unlikely. Clearly the appearance, in Venantius’ *De Excidio Thoringiae*, of the word *germanus* [brother] in references to Radegund’s brother needs no explanation. The shifts between the terms *frater* and *germanus* in the poem result from stylistic variation and, above all, the demands of metre. This is elementary. Nonetheless, though the suggestion that Radegund’s brother was coincidentally named Germanus is admitted as hypothetical on p. 45, by p. 46 the *lectio facillior* – that *germanus* simply means ‘brother’ – is presented merely as an alternative possibility and, by the end of p. 46 and the beginning of p. 47, the brother is unproblematically referred to as Germanus. This tendency to build hypothesis upon hypothesis is visible throughout the book and reaches its apogee in the conclusion (pp. 166–167), where a series of more or less plausible suggestions made in the course of the book are recapitulated as established facts.

Sometimes the writing is hasty and misleading (e.g. the account of the eucharist on p. 38; or the mistranslation of *puer* as ‘slave’ on p. 82). This occasionally produces truly bizarre scenarios. On p. 138, Dailey states that the 100-km journey from Poitiers to Tours undertaken by some of the rebellious nuns “might normally have taken twelve hours”, implying that the nuns could have jogged along steadily at 8.5 km per hour (without a rest) over the equivalent of 2.5 marathons. Instead, according to Dailey, the heavy rain that occurred during the nuns’ trip meant that this journey instead took “a full day and night”. 20–25 km is often considered to be a ‘day’s walk’; the idea that the nuns could cover four or five times that distance even in a day and a night is, to be blunt, absurd. The only explanation is that somehow Dailey,

having specified the correct (100 km) distance, then thought he was discussing a 10-km journey; a reader is entitled to wonder how typical such carelessness is.

The author's grasp of theology is often insecure. Late antique and early medieval writers thought typologically, relating the events of their time to those mentioned in the Bible or other important texts to endow them with particular meaning, particularly concerning the eternal truth of the Bible and its lessons, and the ongoing involvement of God in the affairs of the world. Dailey, like many historians, sometimes uses this point to join the dots between depictions in late antique texts and their scriptural 'types' to suggest one-to-one correlations that are rather too crude. Radegund is likened, simplistically, to Christ (p. 136) and, repeatedly, to the Virgin Mary (e.g. pp. 91–92; 111–112). The language in the sixth-century sources evokes that of the Bible, but it is not necessarily intended to make the reader equate a contemporary person with the figure in the scriptural passage alluded to. Dailey invokes the reference to the Archangel Michael receiving the soul of the Virgin as part of his attempt to argue that Radegund was likened to Mary in contemporary sources, but the Archangel's role in receiving or battling for the souls of the deceased is absolutely commonplace (as indeed the story of the nun Disciola [p. 90] makes clear).

Dailey is weakest when he steps outside the documentary record. On p. 36 (n. 10) he cites Patrick Périn's scepticism (in 1979) about the linkage of the 'Arnegundis' grave at St-Denis with Chlothar's queen, Aregund, as showing that the identification was unconvincing. He seems unaware that Périn has long since changed his mind about that and that (rightly or wrongly) the Arnegund/Aregund identification is now generally accepted. At pp. 124–127, mirroring some of the text-based arguments, a tendentious proposal is made that several late antique churches of the Holy Cross modelled their architecture on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and had a special chamber for the relics of the Cross behind the apse. But in none of the three instances illustrated is it certainly known that this chamber was used to house such a relic and no attention is given to whether such chambers are found in late antique churches *not* dedicated to the Holy Cross. General readers will be misled. When discussing the church of Sainte-Croix in Metz (p. 80; there were actually two churches dedicated to the Holy Cross in Metz before 750), Dailey perpetuates a tradition, convincingly laid to rest by Pierre-Édouard

Wagner in 1987, about the Merovingian palace being located on the Hauts-de-Sainte-Croix.

Given Dailey's ability, this book is disappointing. The responsibility for this cannot, however, be laid simply at his door. The academic culture of the Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom imposes entirely unreasonable demands on younger scholars, especially, to publish monographs regularly, over short time-spans; sadly one can detect its deleterious effects here in the evidence of haste, recycling and padding. Faced with these pressures, young scholars like Dailey do not have the time for reflection that their elders had. More importantly, it seems that Dailey was badly advised about writing for a wider audience. Publishers often have the idea that a non-academic history-consuming audience can only cope with simple stories, hence the narrative structure. Most of the book's weaknesses, however, stem not from scholarly deficiencies on Dailey's part but from this unfortunate organisational choice. It is difficult to imagine a scholar of his ability spending so much time on frequently unconvincing speculation were he not trying to fill out, in a chronologically arranged biography, episodes for which, important as they might have been, no adequate evidence survives. Indeed, the readers of the manuscript did him no favours by allowing passages such as those about Radegund's brother's name or the jogging nuns of Holy Cross to stand. A readership unfamiliar with the problems of the sources and the degree of speculation involved in the interpretations is likely to come away from this book somewhat misled.

Having, for many years, taught older students, drawn from this public, I know that non-specialists can cope with more complex structures, when well written (and Dailey writes very clearly). A thematic structure would have permitted a more satisfying volume, for specialist and non-specialist. Dailey makes very interesting points throughout, but they remain undeveloped; in a thematically-organised book much more could have been made of them. Radegund's career allows reflection on the nature of sixth-century female monasticism; attitudes to female sanctity and the relative value of the virgin and the chaste wife or matron; queenship; the problems that late antique writers had in dealing with female power and authority; how one uses different types of source material; and so on. Exposition of these issues would be both interesting and instructive for a non-academic readership and Dailey has important things to say on all of them. Addressing these themes would have allowed the author to stress how very clearly problematic Radegund

was, something that becomes clear from reading the book, but which he never really confronts.

There is nothing more annoying than a review that says, ‘if it had been me, I would have written a different book’, but I do wish that Dailey had been better advised about the volume’s organisation. A thematic organisation would have allowed him to play more effectively to his strengths and to have produced the much more intellectually significant book of which he is surely capable.

---

Guy Halsall, Durham University  
Honorary Research Professor in the Department of Archaeology  
guy.halsall.academic@gmail.com

**www.plekos.de**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Guy Halsall: Rezension zu: E. T. Dailey: Radegund. The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023 (Women in Antiquity). In: Plekos 26, 2024, S. 613–618 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2024/r-dailey.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

---