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*Women's Quarters, an Influential  
and Political Pole: A Study of the  
Frankish Inner-Court  
(Sixth-Seventh Century)*

Justine Cudorge



## Women's Quarters, an Influential and Political Pole: A Study of the Frankish Inner-Court (Sixth–Seventh Century)

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**Abstract:** The question of women exercising power and influence appears to be central, if not fundamental, to gender studies, as it allows an in-depth reflection on both societal norms and the way we perceive them today. The historian's vision has been biased for a long time by a dichotomic consideration of society, with a clear gendered partition where women would have been confined to the private, domestic sphere. Their actions were thus perceived as inconsequential at best, invisible at worst, for they were perpetually limited to private quarters and familial intimacy, while men's authority and actions supposedly influenced the public sphere and politics in a larger measure. It would be a mistake, however, to keep considering that politics and familial intimacy should be studied separately. The palace environment in particular proves to be especially favorable to women's authority, for they often benefit from a specific access to the sovereign that even major dignitaries can be deprived of, seeing as they are generally not received privately by the ruling dynasty. Studying women's quarters thus brings to light a mosaic of interdependent relationships, of intercessors, factional processes, and intricate political networks. Although women can be, and often are, limited in some specific ways, such as their physical presence within the public space, they can still achieve political relevance and play a key role within the palace hierarchy and court mechanics. In other words, women are not only instrumental in displaying royal authority but can, at times, fully embody it without specifically causing a break with tradition. Merovingian private quarters in particular offer a very meaningful example, in that they are a reflection of the Merovingian matrimonial practice—polygyny. By multiplying the female pole within the palatial structure, power and authority come into play, taking various shapes and influencing many areas of the political and private life of the sovereign.

**Keywords:** gender studies; Merovingian period; sixth century; seventh century; royal women; polygyny

**W**hen addressing the qualities and flaws of Chlothacar II in his *Chronica*, Fredegar could not stop himself from regretting the overwhelming presence of women in the royal entourage, and above all their influence over the *rex*, who presumably “took too much notice of the views of women young and old, for which his followers censured him.”<sup>1</sup> Although quite brief in itself, the testimony sheds an interesting light on the royal *familia* and its multiple poles, particularly the feminine one, which the chronicler finds most active and prone to political intervention. In many ways, it also presents a perfect contrast to the general assumption that women were restricted to certain spaces, silent witnesses of their time and secluded from the political world, when they were not simply considered to be

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<sup>1</sup> *Chron*, IV, 42, in Fredegar, *Chronicarum libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM*, II (Hanover, 1888), 18–93; trans. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar: With Its Continuations* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1960), 36.

a negative influence. In addition to this flawed perception, the historiography of the period tends to draw a distinctive separation between men, whose scope of action were the political and public spheres, and women, who inherently belonged to the private space, that of domesticity, and more trivial matters such as household management.<sup>2</sup> However, subscribing to the belief that the private and intimate life of a sovereign has no correlation whatsoever with the political sphere and the public display of power would be fundamentally counterproductive. Playing an active part in political matters could take many shapes, regardless of gender, and one's influence over political decisions can hardly be summed up with a single, monolithic definition. As it appears, one's physical ability to *hear*, and social opportunity to *be heard*, which were theorized under the name "acoustic dimension," were both fundamental components of political agency. While this gendered dichotomy is now being revised by historians, it still stands in the way of gender studies when it comes to the perception of royal women, particularly when they happen to be part of a royal dynasty reputed falsely for its decadence and family struggles.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, we need to address the proper terminology when it comes to this ensemble of women. Although most women who will be part of this study are commonly referred to as *reginae* in the sources, the terminology in itself is far from being restricted to the only wife of the sovereign. The term *regina* is indeed an onomastic variant based on the word *rex*, meaning "king"; thus, by extension, the *regina* is a woman from the *rex*'s family, with no onomastic distinction between royal wives, daughters, sisters, nieces, or granddaughters—though sexual partners of the sovereign, concubines and wives alike, royal widows, and royal daughters generally form the largest and most represented group. Studying palatial women also implies a focus on a specific environment, that of the court and the royal palace, and the many interactions originating from there, such as reproduction practices, political agency, and royal display of authority in the context of familial intimacy. A. Walthall notes that "They stand at the pinnacle of nested systems of exchange through marriages, reproduction, and labor that bring commoners and elite women together"<sup>4</sup> to frame their scope of influence on an everyday basis.<sup>5</sup> Although the question of

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<sup>2</sup> Régine Le Jan, "Les reines franques du VI<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle: de la sphère privée à la sphère publique?" in *Augusta, Regina, Basilissa. La souveraine de l'Empire romain au Moyen-Âge, entre héritages et métamorphoses*, ed. François Chausson and Sylvain Destephen (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2018), 81.

<sup>3</sup> On the question of intrafamilial struggles, see Samuel D. White, "Clotild's Revenge: Politics, Kinship, and Ideology in the Merovingian Blood Feud," in *Portraits of Medieval and Renaissance Living*, ed. Samuel K. Cohn Jr. and Stephen Epstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 107–130; Nira Gradowicz-Pancer, "De-Gendering Female Violence: Merovingian Female Honour as an 'Exchange of Violence'," *Early Medieval Europe* 11, no. 1 (2003): 1–18; Brandon Taylor Craft, "Queenship, Intrigue and Blood-Feud: Deciphering the Causes of the Merovingian Civil Wars, 561-613," (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2013); Gerhard Lubich, "Inceste, meurtre en famille et guerres civiles. L'héritier, la famille et la dynastie mérovingiens au début du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Inheritance, Law and Religions in the Ancient and Mediaeval Worlds*, ed. Béatrice Caseau-Chevalier and Sabine R. Huebner (Paris: ACHByz, 2014), 215–226.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty. Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California, 2008), 2.

<sup>5</sup> John Carmi Parsons, *Medieval Queenship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Anne J. Duggan, *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997); Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). On the question of Merovingian queenship, see also Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London; Washington, DC: 1998); Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz, "Brunehilde, Bathilde, Hildegarde, Richilde, Gerberge étaient-elles considérées comme des femmes de pouvoir? La perception masculine du pouvoir royal féminin et son évolution du VI<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Femmes de pouvoir et pouvoir des femmes dans l'Occident médiéval et moderne*, ed. Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz and Armel Nayt-Dubois (Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2009), 61–82; Heta Aali, "Merovingian Queenship in Early Nineteenth-Century French Historiography," (PhD dissertation, University of Turku, 2017).

authority and the devolution of power to women has been raised several times,<sup>6</sup> it is most often in the case of the Carolingian period, which benefits from stronger source material in this specific regard, and tends to relegate the Merovingian period to being one of transition from imperial times. Nevertheless, the sixth and seventh centuries, the main focus of this study, form the first phase of a Frankish hegemony over Gaul and its royal elite, which prefigures a palatial and administrative system derived from the system of the Tetrarchy, yet can often be labeled as “Germanic” to shape its proper specificity.

This article aims to explore a specific area of the Gallo-Frank palatial structure, here referred to as “women’s quarters,” in order to study its various exchanges, its hierarchy, and its internal authority. By definition, it is difficult to determine whether such quarters existed when it comes to the Frankish royal elite, since the architectural remains are few and lacking, and fail to provide concrete information on the spatialization of royal quarters in their entirety.<sup>7</sup> In this study, the expression “women’s quarters” will serve to address the place of royal women inside the *palatium*, specifically as a category within a social structure which prompted them, in turn, to interact with diverse members of the royal family, royal dignitaries, servants, and slaves. Studying this specific portion of the *aula regis*, rather than speaking of social networks or social structures, will thus help us perceive royal women as a specific social group, acting *within* and *outside* of the palatial area. In essence, their presence in those specific quarters both allowed and enabled them to intervene in political matters; royal women drew their power directly from their geographic closeness to the center of action. To demonstrate this, I will rely mostly on two principal narrative sources, mainly *Decem Libri Historiarum*<sup>8</sup> by Gregory of Tours and Fredegar’s *Chronica*,<sup>9</sup> which offer a broad collection of female characters. While it may be necessary to interrogate other source materials, such as diplomatic dispatches, hagiographies, and archeological research, these will serve as our primary source of information.

### “Women’s Quarters”: A Privileged Access to the *Rex*

Apart from the inherent complexities of looking at a very large and sometimes very nuanced group of individuals interacting with each other within a specific perimeter, another issue that may arise are the matrimonial practices of the Frankish rulers, whose exact nature is still subject to debate. Several theories have been suggested in order to understand the subtleties of this particular system, ranging from monogamy straddled with periods of concubinage, “serial” monogamy, and finally polygyny—in other words, a man contracting several unions with different women simultaneously. Although this last hypothesis still remains a source of criticism, it seems plausible to justify the presence of several women around a single male partner by the possibility of a practice of polygyny, a hypothesis which will form the cornerstone of this study.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Le Jan, “Les reines franques du VI<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle.”

<sup>7</sup> Josiane Barbier, “Les palais francs avant Charlemagne,” in *Les Carolingiens dans le bassin mosan autour des palais de Herstal et de Jupille*, ed. Florence Close, Alain Dierkens and Alexis Wilkin (Namur, Institut du Patrimoine wallon, 2014), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, ed. corr. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM*, I, (Hanover, 1951), 1–537; trans. O. M. Dalton, *The History of the Franks* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

<sup>9</sup> Frédégaire, *Chronicarum libri IV cum continuationibus*, 18–93; trans. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar*.

<sup>10</sup> On the question of Frankish polygyny, see Ruth Mazo Karras, “The history of marriage and the myth of Friedelehe,” *Early Medieval Europe* 14, no. 2 (2006): 119–151, and Ruth Mazo Karras, “Marriage, Concubinage, and the Law,” in Ruth Mazo Karras, Joel Kaye and E. Ann Matter, *Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 117–129; Martina Hartmann, “Concubina vel regina? Zu einigen Ehefrauen

Moreover, as noted previously by J. Nelson in the case of Carolingians only, it is strongly hinted at by contemporary sources that the Merovingian court may be seen as a spatial environment, in which both men and women shared access to public spaces, yet were greatly divided in terms of private spaces depending on their genders.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, apart from a clear gender division, it is important to look for a more insidious one, such as a familial/outside division.

### **Patronage and Networking: Securing Access Through the Women's Quarters**

The study of women's quarters first implies focusing on what their existence meant for contemporaries as a place of sociability, where alliances could be forged and broken. As mighty and powerful as they could be, the members of the *aula regis* were guaranteed no entry into the private and domestic life of the sovereign. Therefore, intense networking was often the only way for them to gain access to the private quarters, which happened to be the place where the influence and authority of royal women primarily shone. In an effort to gain privileged access to the *rex*, dignitaries then sought the intervention and the partnership of one or several royal women.

Outsiders would often try to place a specific woman inside the royal circle, as evidenced by narrative sources: during the eighth year of the reign of Dagobert I, a young woman, Ragnetrudis, was introduced into the royal bed during a visit to Austrasia.<sup>12</sup> Fredegar, who remains surprisingly terse on the matter, only mentions that this event would later lead to the birth of Dagobert's eldest son, the future Sigebert III. Nevertheless, the situation in itself is shown as particularly significant, especially at a time when Dagobert had become estranged from the Austrasian elite after his move to the Parisian region,<sup>13</sup> a tendency which is later confirmed through another union with a certain Nantechildis.<sup>14</sup> Did the Austrasian *optimates* try to revive the relationship with their former co-*rex*, by countering the rise in power of the Neustrian elite in the royal circle?

While it certainly stands out, the case of Ragnetrudis is far from being an isolated occurrence; and the most notable example is probably that of Bathildis, *regina* of Chlodovech II from around 648-650 to his death in 656-657. If the *Vita Bathildis* is any indication, she was born a Saxon slave, bought and educated in the home of the *maior palatii* Erchinoald, then the most prominent member of the *aula regis*.<sup>15</sup> First appointed *maior palatii* in Neustria under the regency

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und Konkubinen der karolingischen Könige," Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters 63 (2007): 545–568; Martina Hartmann, *Die Königin im frühen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Martina Hartmann, "Zwischen Polygamie und Heiligkeit: merowingische Königinnen," in *Königinnen der Merowinger. Adelsgräber aus den Kirchen von Köln, Saint-Denis, Chelles und Frankfurt*, ed. Kirsti Stöckmann, Egon Wamers, and Patrick Périn (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 19–36; as well as Jan Rüdiger, *All the King's Women: Polygyny and Politics in Europe, 900-1250* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "Was Charlemagne's Court a Courtly Society?," in *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Catherine Cubitt (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2003), vol. 3, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Chron*, IV, 59; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "In the eighth year of his reign, while he was making a royal progress through Austrasia, Dagobert admitted to his bed a girl named Ragnetrudis; and by her he had, in the course of the year, a son named Sigebert," 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Chron*, IV, 60; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "Then he returned to Neustria and, finding that he liked his father Chlothar's residence, decided to make it his home . . ." 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Chron*, IV, 58; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: " . . . and leaving Queen Gomatrudis at the *villa* of Reuilly (where he had married her), he took to wife a maiden of the bed-chamber named Nantechildis and made her queen," 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Vita Sanctae Bathildis*, c. 2, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM, II (Hanover): 477–508; trans. Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992): "Divine Providence called her from across the seas. She, who came here as God's most precious and lofty pearl, was sold at a cheap price.

of Nantechildis, widow of Dagobert I, he saw his influence arise in the wake of her death in 642, where he managed, in partnership with his colleague Flaochad, the Burgundian *maior palatii*, to secure the upper hand on state matters on behalf of the young Chlodovech.<sup>16</sup> The immediate and unexpected death of Flaochad had left him the sole effective ruler of the Gauls, at least until Chlodovech came of age in 648.<sup>17</sup> Placing a woman in the young *rex's* private circle was vital for Erchinoald in order to secure his position, particularly in a period of political transition where an opponent could rise at any time. According to the *Vita Bathildis*, Erchinoald succeeded in his enterprise, and Bathildis remained tied to her former protector until his death in 658, even benefiting from their partnership well into the beginning of her regency.<sup>18</sup>

As a wife and the mother of three sons, and later as a regent, Bathildis offers the example of a successful alliance between protector and protégée within the *aula regis* circle. However, they remain a rare occurrence, as evidenced by the troubled married life of Guntchramn, *rex* of Burgundia. Gregory of Tours first mentions a servant girl, Veneranda, brought up in the *familia* of a member of the *aula regis*, who bore him a son called Gundobad;<sup>19</sup> if her protector had expected to gain any influence from her position, the chronicler never mentions it, which is perhaps a sign that Veneranda failed to achieve political relevance. Guntchramn later married Marcatrudis, daughter of the *dux* Magnacharius, who bore him a short-lived son. More than the loss of her child, Marcatrudis' obsessive behavior was the final strike that caused her to lose the *rex's* favor, after she was accused of poisoning Gundobad, the son of Veneranda.<sup>20</sup> The *dux* Magnacharius proved to be unable to protect his daughter, who was neither a long-standing royal wife nor an efficient regent. However, it is worth noting that Marcatrudis' fall was not his last attempt in influencing Guntchramn, since he also offered Austregildis, possibly a servant girl from his own household, to join his daughter in the royal *familia*—the chronicler notes that she “was from the *familia* of Magnacharius”—and who later gave birth to four children, including two sons.<sup>21</sup>

These examples emphasize how crucial the management of the royal dynasty could be, and the importance of developing intimate and long-lasting ties with the sovereign. Through their reproductive role, women were naturally called to become the mothers of the future generation of rulers, which could (and often did) lead to a political switch between factions in the *aula regis*. They also contribute to shedding light on the constant activity in the women's quarters, where alliances were particularly volatile and versatile: for example, once she became the

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Erchinoald, a Frankish magnate and most illustrious man, acquired her and in his service the girl behaved most honorably. And her pious and admirable manners pleased this prince and all his servants,” 268–269.

<sup>16</sup> *Chron*, IV, 90; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “In this year died Queen Nantechildis. And in the month of September of the same year Flaochad left Paris with King Clovis, his mayor Erchinoald and certain of the Neustrian magnates, and went together to Autun by way of Sens and Auxerre,” 76–77.

<sup>17</sup> Chlodovech was born in 634, according to Fredegar's *Chronica*; see *Chron*, IV, 76.

<sup>18</sup> *Chron*, Cont., 1; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “In his latter years, it is true his mind became affected, and he died after reigning fourteen years. The Franks thereupon made his eldest boy, Chlothar, king, with the queen-mother by his side,” 80.

<sup>19</sup> *DLH*, IV, 25; trans. Dalton: “Now the good king Guntram first took to his bed as concubine Veneranda, the handmaid of one of his subjects, by whom he had a son Gundobad,” 135.

<sup>20</sup> *DLH*, IV, 25; trans. Dalton: “Afterwards he took to wife Marcatrude, daughter of Magnar, and sent his son Gundobad to Orleans. But when Marcatrude had a son of her own, she was jealous of this boy, and went about to compass his death; they say that she sent poison for him to drink, and so destroyed him. After his death she lost her own son by the judgement of God, and incurred the hatred of the king, by whom she was put away, dying not long afterwards,” 135.

<sup>21</sup> *DLH*, IV, 25; trans. Dalton: “After her, the king took to wife Austrechild, also called Bobila, by whom he had two other sons, the elder called Lothar, the younger Chlodomer,” 135.

principal wife of Guntchramn and the mother of his four children, any remaining tie between Austregildis and the household of her former protector, Magnacharius, was severed. The *dux's* two sons later became hostile towards their father's former protégée, going as far as publicly defaming her, which would result in their execution.<sup>22</sup>

### **Channels of Influence and Factions: Women as Pivotal Members**

As we have seen, women's quarters are often the epicenter of political struggles to place one or several women, but political acumen is a vital tool in order for these women to keep their position intact. The broadest, most heteroclitic group of women mentioned in the narrative sources is that of the sexual partners of the *rex*, thus including in the same category royal daughters of foreign rulers (principally Burgundian and Visigothic), daughters from the Frankish or Gallo-Roman elite (mainly *duces* or high dignitaries), and lastly slaves or servants from the royal domains. Naturally, not all of them could achieve political and dynastic relevance, and not all of them could manage to fit in the strict palatial structure; this did not mean, however, that their social standing, or lack thereof, would impact or hinder their future. As we have seen before, Marcatrudis, daughter of a *dux*, could not manage to keep her position as a royal wife after she was accused of poisoning the eldest son of Guntchramn, yet she seems to have been a member of the elite by birth. The same situation can be observed for Galswintha, wife of Chilperich I, who, despite her position as a royal daughter of Athanagild, Visigothic king of Toledo, unexpectedly died in 568—probably murdered—after several months of marital struggle.<sup>23</sup> In both cases, each woman seems to have been unable to produce an efficient network of allies to support her interests.

However, the reign of Chlothacar II offers a stark contrast, with the rise of a strong faction around two sisters, Sichildis and Gomatrudis. Sichildis seems to have been the first one to distinguish herself, first as a concubine or secondary wife to Chlothacar and then as the mother of his son, the future Charibert II.<sup>24</sup> She was a discreet companion until the death of Chlothacar's principal wife, Beretrudis, in 619, which led her to become the main consort of the *rex*. Her sudden rise within the palatial structure allowed her to bestow gratifications on her relatives: her brother, Brodulf, a military officer, became the protector of her young son,<sup>25</sup> and her sister, Gomatrudis, married Dagobert, eldest son of Chlothacar,<sup>26</sup> in 625. If Sichildis cannot be credited for these actions for certain, the union of both sisters with two rulers suggests that a

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<sup>22</sup> *DLH*, V, 17; trans. Dalton: "King Guntram put to the sword two sons of Magnachar, who was already dead, for having openly said hateful and abominable things to Queen Austrechild and her children; their wealth was taken for the royal treasury," 185.

<sup>23</sup> *DLH*, IV, 28; trans. Dalton: "She [Galswintha] soon made constant complaint to the king of the wrongs which she had to endure, declaring that she had no part in his royalty; she craved his permission to return in freedom to her own country, leaving behind her the treasures which she had brought with her. He cleverly dissembled, and appeased her with smooth words. At last he ordered her to be strangled by a slave, so that she was found dead in her bed," 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Gesta Dagob.*, c. 5: "Igitur anno 36. regni Chlotharii Bertedrudis regina, mater Dagoberti, moritur, quam unico amore Chlotharius dilexerat, et omnes ducs bonitatem eius probantes vehementer amaverant. Post cuius obitum Chlotharius rex aliam accepit uxorem nomine Sichildem, de qua habuit filium nomine Hairbetum," *MGH SRM*, II, 402.

<sup>25</sup> *Chron*, IV, 56; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "... Brodulf also started to plot against Dagobert in an attempt to secure the kingdom for his nephew; but in vain, as events were to show," 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Chron*, IV, 53; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "In the forty-second year of Chlothar's reign, Dagobert came royally attired at his father's order with a fine following to Clichy, near Paris; and there, he received in marriage Gomatrudis, sister of Queen Sichildis," 44.



powerful and dynamic faction had vested interest in the matter, and would become more offensive in the later years of the reign of Chlothacar.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that only the absolute determination of a young Dagobert permitted him to overpower this faction once he ascended the throne in 629, which resulted in the execution of Brodulf and the repudiation of Gomatrudis.<sup>28</sup>

Alliances could also be forged between palatial officers and royal women, but only outside of the familial sphere. Brunehilde, then regent for Childebert II, protected the interests of the *dux* Lupus when he was threatened by rival members of the *aula regis* in 581. Not only did the *regina* intervene in person in political matters between high dignitaries of the *regnum* by publicly favoring one man, but she also used it to display her authority and power in a spectacular manner by wearing military regalia among armed contingents.<sup>29</sup> If the chronicler noted that the *dux* was spared by his enemies, his retreat from political affairs after this episode precluded his alliance with Brunehilde from going any further. Another allegiance, that of Fredegund, regent of Chlothacar II, and the dignitary Ansoaldus, also deserves our attention. Once a prominent member of the *aula regis* during the reign of Chilperich I, Ansoaldus formed an alliance with his widow as early as 584, and often supported her interests and those of her infant child, notably during the pledge of allegiance to the young *rex*<sup>30</sup> and when he assumed the role of ambassador at the Burgundian court.<sup>31</sup> He was present again by Fredegund's side in 586 when the Bishop Praetextatus was assassinated. In each case, the interests of both parties were easy to figure out: the women were regents in need of high-ranking officers to support their cause in order to secure their position, while the two dignitaries were trying to wade through political rivalries.

### **Administering Women's Quarters: Financial Management and Feminine Hierarchy**

If the position of royal woman was a strategic one within the *palatium*, to the point of generating interest from multiple parties, we need to determine in which manner their influence translated through the administrative and hierarchical lenses. Sources are generally quiet on the matter,

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<sup>27</sup> *Chron*, IV, 55; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "In the forty-fourth year of Chlothar's reign, the bishops and all the great men of his kingdom, Neustrians as well as Burgundians, assembled at Clichy on the king's business and to consider their country's problems. It was there that a certain Ermanarius, comptroller to Charibert, Chlothar's son, was killed by the followers of Aighyna, the Saxon nobleman. Great bloodshed would have ensued had not Chlothar wisely intervened and done everything to prevent it. On his orders Aighyna retired to Montmartre with many of his warriors. Brodulf, Charibert's uncle, gathered together a force from all parts with the object of falling together with Charibert's himself, upon Aighyna; but Chlothar gave strict instructions to his Burgundians that they were promptly to crush whichever party to the quarrel flouted his decision; and the fear this royal order inspired kept both party quiet," 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Chron*, IV, 58; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "On the very day that he planned to leave Saint-Jean-de-Losne for Chalon and while taking his bath before daybreak, he gave order to kill Brodulf, his brother Charibert's uncle; and this were carried out by the Dukes Amalgar and Arnebert and patrician Willebad . . . and leaving Queen Gomatrudis at the *villa* of Reully (where he had married her), he took to wife a maiden of the bed-chamber named Nantechildis and made her queen," 48–49.

<sup>29</sup> *DLH*, VI, 4; trans. Dalton: "Now Lupus, duke of Champagne, had long been continually harried and despoiled by his enemies, and above all by Ursio and Bertefried, who finally agreed together to take his life, and marched against him with an army. At sight whereof Queen Brunhild, sore at heart for her loyal servant thus unjustly persecuted, armed herself with a man's courage and threw herself between the hostile armies," 234.

<sup>30</sup> *DLH*, VII, 7; trans. Dalton: "The chief men of the kingdom, Ansovald and the rest, rallied round the son of Chilperic, now, as I have said, four months old, and hailed him under the name of Lothar. They exacted from all the cities which had acknowledged the rule of Chilperic an oath of loyalty to Guntram and his nephew Lothar," 290.

<sup>31</sup> *DLH*, VIII, 11; trans. Dalton: "Ansovald, nourishing some suspicion, I know not what, departed from the king without taking leave . . ." 336.

merely alluding to events or letting brief mentions slide through; their interest as source material should therefore be considered carefully, and only ever in relation to their original context. If we subscribe to the rather classical belief that women were confined to private quarters, contemporary sources put a clear emphasis on the management of the royal household, of the personnel and the family, and the importance of women in terms of reproductive practices, as well as easing out the transition between generations.<sup>32</sup> However, as crucial as the production of a royal offspring was, seeing as the chronicles recount numerous births, the role of royal women was not solely limited to this specific role.

It would be wrong to assume that the Merovingian court and the strict organization of the private and domestic life of the sovereign suffered from intense periods of political turmoil, or even from a moral decadence of sorts. It is worth noting that the Frankish *palatium* was a hierarchical pattern directly inherited from the Tetrarchy, and actually bears striking resemblances to the system in use at the same time in Constantinople. In fact, the misrepresentation of the Merovingian court seems to come directly from the permeability within the hierarchy, allowing both men *and* women to rise within the palatial structure—something that seems to have been highly frowned upon by chronicles.

### **Feminine Hierarchy and Royal Authority: Towards a Gynecocracy?**

The hypothetical existence of women's quarters inside the *palatium* would be intrinsically linked to the permeability of its social hierarchy, for they were the visual and concrete representation that women could, and often did, outrank men within the palatial structure, regardless of their personal origins. First, because the sexual partners of the *rex* were, as we have seen before, the largest and most diverse group of individuals gravitating in his private circle. Then, because it was always possible for a slave to become a sexual partner herself, and for a woman of lower origins to rise in power through successful pregnancies. We have studied previously the case of Austregildis, who became the principal wife of Guntchramn after the demotion of her former mistress, Marcatrudis, but other examples can be found: sisters Merofledis and Marcovefa, “daughters of a craftsman”;<sup>33</sup> Theodechildis II, “daughter of a shepherd”;<sup>34</sup> and Bilichildis I<sup>35</sup> and Bathildis, both purchased as slaves. As for Fredegund<sup>36</sup> and Nantechildis,<sup>37</sup> their origins are

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<sup>32</sup> On the question of women being confined only to private quarters, see: Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Fonay Wemple, “The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100,” in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens, GA: The University Of Georgia Press, 1988), 83–101; Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Le Jan, “Les reines franques du VI<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle.”

<sup>33</sup> *DLH*, IV, 26; trans. Dalton: “At this time Ingoberg had in her service two daughters of a certain poor man; one of them was called Marcovefa and wore the religious habit, the other bore the name of Merofled; the king was strongly attracted by them both: I have said that she was the daughter of a worker in wool,” 135.

<sup>34</sup> *DLH*, IV, 26; trans. Dalton: “Another girl he had, daughter of a shepherd; her name was Theudechild, and she is said to have given him a son who was carried to burial immediately upon his birth,” 135.

<sup>35</sup> *Chron*, IV, 35; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “In the thirteenth year of Theuderic's reign, Theudebert had as his wife Bilichildis, whom Brunehildis had bought from merchants,” 22.

<sup>36</sup> The hypothesis of Fredegund's slave origins was brought up by two later sources and remains somewhat questionable: a first mention in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* mentions an “*ex familia infima*” when talking about Fredegund's family (*LHF*, 31), an assumption difficult to dispute in itself. Another mention in *Chronicon Velastinum*, s.a. 567 states that she was born in a family based in the *villa* Vungiscurht, meaning servile. Although it is often difficult to blindly trust later sources, nothing technically challenges this assertion.

<sup>37</sup> *Chron*, IV, 58; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “... he took to wife a maiden of the bed-chamber named Nantechildis and made her queen,” 49.

difficult to determine, although the lack of information could hint at low origins, perhaps even servile for Fredegund.

It is very likely that the concentration of women of multiple backgrounds in the same geographical area may have produced conflicts, and was often the source of numerous rivalries, specifically between favored sexual partners and women from the royal family itself, as evidenced by the episode of the year 606–607. Brunehilde seemingly opposed the marriage of her grandson Theoderich II with Ermenberga, daughter of the Visigothic king Witteric and, with the support of her granddaughter and sister of Theoderich II, Theodelina, refused to grant access to the private quarters of the *rex* to the young bride—and, thus, to let her consummate the union. After only a year, the unfortunate Ermenberga was repudiated and sent back to her father.<sup>38</sup> This example underlines the intense and incessant competition in female spaces, to an extent that sometimes raises numerous questions: what was the motive behind the royal women's immediate rejection of Ermenberga? Was it a simple matter of “jealousy,” as stated by the chronicler?<sup>39</sup> Were Brunehilde and Theodelina opposed to an alliance with Witteric?<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the actual answer, we can at least establish that the interactions between members of the royal *familia* can directly influence alliances engineered by dignitaries and royal officials—ordinarily all men.

Another revealing example of the constant interconnection between women's quarters and political matters is the scandal that brought the *familia* of Childebert II to the verge of collapse in 589. While his principal wife, Faileuba, was recovering from a miscarriage, she was told that a plot was being fomented by several members of the royal *familia*, a *nutritor*, a *nutrix*, a *referendarius* and a *comes stabuli*, whose objective was to get rid of the royal women in the private circle of the *rex*—starting with Faileuba herself, along with her mother-in-law, Brunehilde—in order to replace them with female agents devoted to their cause. As a last resort, they were planning on assassinating Childebert II himself, which would have brought about the regency of his two very young sons.<sup>41</sup> Immediately after hearing the news, Faileuba reached out to her mother-in-law and the plot fell through. This stresses that it was not only possible for members of the *familia* and the *palatium* to establish strategies together, but once again how fundamental women's quarters were in those strategies.

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<sup>38</sup> *Chron*, IV, 30; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “But his grandmother saw to it that Theuderic's marriage was never consummated: the talk of Brunehildis his grandmother and of his sister Theudila poisoned him against his bride. After a year, Ermenberga was deprived of her dowry and sent back to Spain,” 20.

<sup>39</sup> To read more on this theory, see Dick Harrison, *The Age of Abbesses and Queens – Gender and Political Culture in Early Medieval Europe* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998), 225; Nira Pancer, *Sans peur et sans vergogne: de l'honneur et des femmes aux premiers temps mérovingiens (VI-VII siècles)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 229; Erin Thomas Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines, Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 110.

<sup>40</sup> For this second hypothesis, see Luis A. García Moreno, “La Andalucía de San Isidoro,” in *Actas del III Congreso de Historia de Andalucía* (Córdoba, Publicaciones de la Consejería de Cultura y Medio Ambiente de la Junta de Andalucía: Obra Social y Cultural Cajasur, 1994), 573.

<sup>41</sup> *DLH*, IX, 38; trans. Dalton: “While Faileuba, queen of King Childebert, was still weakly, after giving birth to a child which hardly came into the world alive, a rumour reached her ears that a plot was on foot against herself and Queen Brunhild. As soon as she was recovered, she went to the king and revealed all that she had heard to him and to his mother. The report was that Septimina, nurse of the royal children, sought to persuade the king to drive out his mother, forsake his consort, and take another spouse; by this means the conspirators hoped to do with him what they liked, and obtain whatever they chose to ask. If the king would not agree to their plan, they would cause his death by witchcraft, raise his sons to the throne, and rule the kingdom themselves, while the grandmother and mother of the children would be banished just the same. She denounced as implicated in the plot Sunnegisil, count of the stables, Gallomagnus the referendary, and Droctulf, who had been associated with Septimina to aid her in bringing up the young princes,” 408.

### **Economic Power and Administrative Functions: Women's Roles in the Palatium**

If the authority of Merovingian royal women is no longer up for debate, as E. Santinelli pointed out in her article on female power and its evolution from the sixth to the tenth century, the way it was presented remains particularly subject to the interpretation and appreciation of the chroniclers.<sup>42</sup> While they do not specifically reject feminine authority, they still consider that it should be reserved to very specific situations and on strictly established grounds. Narrative sources showcase royal women as legitimate agents with an authority of their own, displayed upon several different circles: the royal *familia*, the dignitaries, notably the *referendarius*, the *maior domus*, the *cubicularius*, the *comes stabuli*, the *nutritor* or the *nutrix*, and the members of the elite and the *aula regis*, like the *comites*, the *duces*, the *proceres*, and later the *maiores palatii*, who would soon gain power and precedence over the others. Women's influence and outreach clearly went beyond the walls of the women's quarters, therefore challenging the idea that royal women were entirely secluded from the outer world.

Among the many aspects covered by the broad scope of action of royal women, one that is perhaps the most important is the household economy, in the context of the domestic life of the *familia*. Gregory of Tours used it to depict his sworn enemy Fredegund, wife of Chilperich I, as a blatantly hysterical woman upon the wedding of her only daughter, Rigund, in 584. When she offered her a string of extravagant gifts as part of her dowry (*inmensum pondus auri argentique sive vestimentorum*), her husband Chilperich and his *optimates* reportedly suspected that her sudden wealth might come from the royal treasury itself—which only prompted a brisk answer from the *regina*, who argued that the money came from the management of her own estates.<sup>43</sup> Later, once she became a widow, Gregory of Tours started depicting her as cruel and tyrannical, punishing servants she had accused of stealing food or money from the royal treasury.<sup>44</sup> These two snippets emphasize two things: one, that *reginae* could draw personal wealth directly from their own estates, mainly *villae*, or by being granted specific rights over the *fiscus* of certain *civitates*; two, that royal women managed them as they pleased, without specific restrictions, and were allowed to sell them as much as to keep them as a source of personal income, like Fredegund. Multiple royal women thus sold personal properties to establish pious foundations: Brunhilde gave away both *villae* of Cuisiacum/Cuisy-en-Almont and Muricinctus/Morsain to the abbey of Saint-Médard de Soissons;<sup>45</sup> in her will, Suavegotha granted her third of the *fiscus* of Virisiacus/Verzy to the

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<sup>42</sup> Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz, "Brunehilde, Bathilde, Hildegarde, Richilde, Gerberge étaient-elles considérées comme des femmes de pouvoir?" 61–82.

<sup>43</sup> *DLH*, VI, 45; trans. Dalton: "Her mother also brought out an immense weight of gold and silver, with fine raiment; so much, that at sight of it the king deemed nothing was left to him. The queen, seeing him vexed, turned to the Franks and said: "Think not that anything here is taken from the treasures of former kings; everything before your eyes I am presenting from my own possessions. For the most glorious king hath given to me generously; but somewhat I have amassed from my own resources, and much I have acquired from the houses granted to me, derived both from the revenues and from the taxes. And ye, too, have yourselves oft-times given me a wealth of gifts; from the sources come the things that now lie before you; nothing here is taken from the public treasure." By these words the king was cozened," 277.

<sup>44</sup> *DLH*, VII, 15; trans. Dalton: "The cooks and bakers, too, and any of the princess's retinue, of whose return from that journey she was informed, she caused to be beaten, stripped, and put in handcuffs. Moreover, she sought, by making abominable charges, to destroy the influence at court of Nectarius, brother of Bishop Baudegisil, asserting that he had stolen many things from the treasure of the late king. She had declared that he had carried off quantities of hides and much wine from the storehouses, and demanded that he should be cast in chains into the darkness of the prison. But the king's tolerance and the aid of Baudegisil prevented it," 296–297.

<sup>45</sup> Josiane Barbier, "Les actes mérovingiens pour Saint-Médard de Soissons: une révision," in *Saint-Médard. Trésors d'une abbaye royale, textes et iconographie réunis par D. Defente* (Paris-Soissons, 1996), 229.

Reims Basilica,<sup>46</sup> and Ingoberga numerous possessions to the churches of Le Mans and Tours, including half of the *villa* of Culturam/Vallée-de-Ronsard;<sup>47</sup> finally, not forgetting the example of Bathildis, who became a great benefactor of religious foundations, like the monastery of Chelles above all, but also to other religious centers, to whom she even gave “entire farms and large forests” according to her *Vita*.<sup>48</sup>

Such management of their estates naturally suggests that *reginae* disposed of suitable administrative personnel, probably ruled by a *maior domus*, who was in charge of the *regina's* affairs, most specifically of collecting taxes and enforcing fiscal reforms. While it might still be difficult to draw a perfect distinction between his attributions and those of the *maior palatii*, we can see that halfway through the sixth century and well into the seventh century those two titles were perceived as different offices, as evidenced by the career of Erchinoald, who served first as *maior domus*, before being elevated under Chlodovech II as *maior domus palatii*.<sup>49</sup> Palace management was considered an official state matter, in the sense that each household assigned to the care of a feminine member of the royal family was directly attached to the Merovingian public administration. This organization translated into the ability for *reginae* to dispose of the royal *fiscus* and the royal treasury, which they sometimes oversaw the partition of between heirs,<sup>50</sup> or by the presence by their side of *referendarii* who, as officials and representatives of the Merovingian rulers, disposed of a personal seal.

Therefore, women's quarters were far from being isolated from the rest of the world, much less from the Merovingian state itself, but rather offered a necessary step for royal officers and officials to rise in the palatial and political hierarchy. Ursicinus, *referendarius* of Ultrogotho, was held in great respect after he retreated into a life of devotion, and was able to successfully seek the position of bishop of Cahors;<sup>51</sup> Leudastes, once a slave operating in the kitchens, became *comes stabuli* of Marcovefa, which later permitted him to become *comes* under Chilperich I; as for Protadius, *patricius* and protégé of Brunehilde, he became *maior palatii* after the death of

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<sup>46</sup> HR, II, 1: “Huius quoque temporibus Suavegotta regina Remensi ecclesie terciam partem ville Virisiaci per testamenti pagniam delegasse reperitur,” MGH SS, XXXVI, 132.

<sup>47</sup> *Test. S. Bertechr.*: “... similiter agrum Culturam eo tempore adquisitum, te, domna here mea aecclesia, habere volo ac decerno; ex quo agro medietatem bonae memoriae domna Ingoberga quondam regina, mea instantia,” in *Actus pontificum Cenomannis in urbe degentium*, ed. G. Busson and A. Ledru (Au Mans: Au siège de la Société, 1901), 104.

<sup>48</sup> *Vita Bath.*, c. 8; trans. McNamara and Halborg: “At Jumièges, the religious man lord Philibert, was given a great wood from the fisc where his community has settled and other gifts and pastures were also conceded from the fisc for the building of this same monastery. And how many great farms and talents of gold and silver did she give to Lord Lagobert at Curbio? She took off a girdle from her regalia, which had encircled her own holy loins and gave it to the brothers to devote to alms. And she dispended all this with a benign and joyous soul, for as the scripture says: “The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.” And likewise to Fontanelle and Logium, she conceded many things. As to Luxeuil and the monasteries in Burgundy, who can tell how many whole farms and innumerable gifts of money she gave? And what did she do for Jouarre, whence she gathered the lady Bertilla abbess of Chelles and other sacred virgins? How many gifts of wealth and land? And similarly she often directed gifts to holy Fara's monastery. And she granted many great estates to the basilicas of the saints and monasteries of the city of Paris, and enriched them with many gifts ...,” 272.

<sup>49</sup> *Chron*, IV, 84; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “Erchinoald, a relation of Dagobert's mother, was made mayor of the palace to Clovis after the death of Aega,” 71.

<sup>50</sup> *Chron*, IV, 85; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “Bishop Chunibert of Cologne and Pippin, mayor of the palace, and certain other Austrasian magnates were sent by Sigebert to Compiègne where, on instructions from Nantechildis and Clovis and with the consent of the mayor Aega, Dagobert's treasure was brought and divided into egal parts. Queen Nantechildis had one-third of all that Dagobert had amassed ...,” 72.

<sup>51</sup> *DLH*, V, 42; trans. Dalton: “For this bishopric there were many candidates, but his own choice fell on Ursicinus, formerly referendary of Queen Ultrogotha,” 213.

Bertoald.<sup>52</sup> It is also worth noting that royal women sometimes intervened to appease palatial tensions: Wisigardis, wife of Theodebert I, publicly supported Asteriolus in his rivalry with Secundinus, and decided to offer him her protection. After her death, Asteriolus faced the wrath of Secundinus, outraged by the support his enemy had received from the late *regina*.<sup>53</sup>

### **Acoustic Dimension of the Women's Quarters: Royal Women and Politics**

While we have established that royal women were bestowed with the upper hand on all domestic matters and monetary management, the manner in which they were able to communicate and managed to secure efficient network with the outside world, and particularly the *aula regis*, is yet to be determined. First of all, while they may not have been granted a political office of their own and thus were deprived of an official political part, royal women's influence was a major element of Merovingian politics, as evidenced by Fredegar's critics towards Chlothacar II and his entourage. Not only were they sometimes requested to take on public duties and display royal authority over a broad scope of people and officers of the Merovingian court and the *palatium*, but they also had access to political matters, notably through pious and charitable work, or through various intercessors who were able to ensure them a solid connection to outside prospects.

Merovingian royal women were active participants through physical and acoustic presence, be it during public events or public hearings, as we have seen before with the intervention of Brunehilde in favor of her ally Lupus, but also Fredegund rendering justice during a banquet.<sup>54</sup> We can also add to the list the political summit held between Guntchramn and Childebert II in 587, ahead of the signature of a treaty, and where we could also find, according to Gregoire of Tours, his mother Brunehilde, his wife Faileuba, and his sister Chlodosuinda III.<sup>55</sup>

### **Hearing Ability and Accessibility to the Political Sphere**

In her work centered around Middle Eastern royal women in the first millennium BCE., Solvang stresses that the absence of agency should not be established in regards to whether or not one is able to express oneself publicly, since it induces a notion of absolute passivity that surely does not reflect their ability to achieve political relevance and authority: in other words, the fact that a person was shown in the sources to be silent, invisible or simply absent is not representative of the power and the agency they could wield.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the study of the ability to listen and to speak publicly is especially revealing of the agency and the scope of actions of royal women in

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<sup>52</sup> *Chron*, IV, 26; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: "In the tenth year of his reign and at the wish of Brunehildis, Theuderic made Protadius mayor of the palace," 18.

<sup>53</sup> *DLH*, III, 33; trans. Dalton: "The king appeased their wrath; but while Secundinus was still swollen and sore from the blows which he had received, a fresh feud began between them. The king espoused the cause of Secundinus, and abandoned to his tender mercies Asteriolus, who was deeply humiliated and deprived of his honours; though these were restored by the influence of Queen Wisigard. Upon her death, Secundinus rose once more against him, and put him to death," 109.

<sup>54</sup> *DLH*, X, 27; trans. Dalton: "In consequence of this quarrel their kinsmen took up the feud, and were more than once admonished by Queen Fredegund to cease from enmity and be reconciled, lest from this obstinate dispute yet greater evil should grow. But when she failed to calm them with conciliatory words she rid herself of both with the axe," 463.

<sup>55</sup> *DLH*, IX, 11; trans. Dalton: "King Guntram concluded peace with his nephew and the queens; they exchanged gifts, and having settled affairs of state on a firm footing, sat down together at a banquet," 381.

<sup>56</sup> Elna K. Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and their Involvement in the House of David* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 9.

their daily life, and was discussed by W. Layher in his work, *Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe*. “For this reason listening is not the same as hearing. The latter term describes a physiological process involving the anatomy of the ear and the cognitive processing of the relevant areas of the brain; it is a sensory perception. Listening, in contrast, presupposes a degree of contact and intellectual engagement that goes beyond the corporeal.”<sup>57</sup>

The Brennacum synod of 580 is an example of this. The event revolved around the trial of Bishop Gregory of Tours, accused by the *comes* Leudastes of insulting and slandering the *regina* Fredegund, whom he even accused of adultery; yet, during the deliberations, it was reported that her daughter, Rigund, was fasting along with her household and praying for justice to be served on behalf of the bishop.<sup>58</sup> Various conclusions can be drawn from this event: first, that Rigund, who was between eleven and fourteen, was very well capable of following the political events of her time, even as important as a public hearing she was not attending, but most vitally that she was able to express herself and be heard outside of her private quarters, and that she had no doubt that her words and actions would be carried outside. As for the significance of these words of benevolence towards the man accused of defaming her mother, rather than seeing in them the beginning of a tangible hostility between the two women, I prefer to follow the theory of S. Filion, who notes that the gesture of Rigund must be understood as the desire to put an end to madness: accusing a bishop of spreading such a scandalous and unfounded rumor would only result in posing him as a victim of a cabal as much as Fredegund herself.<sup>59</sup>

Relayed speech as a form of public exposure in the physical absence of a woman is another interesting concept, particularly because it can potentially come into play even when the individual is deceased. Not only does it presuppose a sufficiently strong initial influence to be able to induce an authority in spite of one's absence but, most importantly, it relies almost entirely on the good will of intercessors, who are charged to deliver and conduct the words on behalf of their original issuer. It is most notably the case of women-led embassies, especially Bilichildis I and Brunehilde, when they attempted to better the relationship between Austrasia and Burgundia: Fredegar's chronicle even states that during this attempt, the two women “irritate each other,” and that Bilichildis “made her annoyance known to Brunehilde.”<sup>60</sup> Both women sent official words through their delegates; some may have been discussed in private with the dignitaries, perhaps others were not. Nevertheless, those words were carried out regardless on behalf of a single individual.

### Public Hearings and Female Pleadings

Not only do women benefit from an acoustic access to the *aula regis*, but other references to narrative sources prove that they were also able to express themselves and be considered as privileged interlocutors, including in the context of political matters, such as the diplomatic

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<sup>57</sup> William Layher, *Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

<sup>58</sup> *DLH*, V, 49; trans. Dalton: “Nor need I conceal the fact that the princess Rigunth, in her sympathy with me in my tribulation, fasted with all her household until one of her servants brought the news that I had accomplished everything as it had been ordained,” 225.

<sup>59</sup> S. Filion, “Histoire et rhétorique: Grégoire de Tours et les guerres civiles mérovingiennes,” (PhD dissertation, Université de Montréal, 2017), 77.

<sup>60</sup> *Chron*, IV, 35; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “... Bilichildis was a woman of spirit and much loved by all the Austrasians because she bore with nobility the simple-mindedness of Theudebert. She not only thought herself in no way inferior to Brunehildis but frequently sent her contemptuous messages. Brunehildis, for her part, reproached her with having been her slave. Finally, when they had thoroughly irritated each other exchanging messages and talk of this sort ...,” 22–23.

exchange between Brunehilde and Bilichildis I. The matter of the reception of embassies and private hearings is indeed an interesting sign of the influence of a particular individual, in the sense that such an event taking place presupposes a two-way recognition between the parties, both in order to make a plea heard, but also for the other party to guarantee a response.

One of the most significant examples of an audience with a royal woman taking place remains that of Beretrudis, wife of Chlothacar II, in the *Chron*, IV, 44: having then taken residence in the *villa* Marilegio, she received bishop Leudemund in her “quarters”—likely private quarters, although it is not specified—who told her of a plot hatched by the *patricius* Alethius which would require her presence for it to be effective.<sup>61</sup> However, Beretrudis refused, and the chronicler reveals that she resorted to very specific gestures to make her discontent known and unravel the plot: she first burst into tears, then made it public that she was locking herself up in her rooms. Several key elements can be observed. First of all, that her initial reaction was in no way symptomatic of a hypothetical lack of authority: if Beretrudis was able to receive a man like Leudemund in audience, then she surely could have had him punished if she had wanted to. The fact that she locked herself up in her rooms was therefore destined to broadcast her outrage under a depreciative light: she withdrew from her obligations as a *regina*, thus relying on the authority of the *rex*, who in turn proved to be the only one able to salvage her honor. In acting this way, Beretrudis protected herself from the repercussions of Leudemund’s attempt to reach out to her might have had. The story was later brought up during her funerals, which prompted praises from her husband and the members of the *aula regis*.

Likewise, Brunehilde, then widow of Sigebert I and mother of Childebert II, presented herself to a synod to petition the *aula regis*, and publicly requested that *optimates* should be sent to investigate the case of the disappearance of her eldest daughter, Ingund II, abducted by Byzantine troops and rumored to be held captive in Carthage<sup>62</sup>. Though she made a moving case in favor of her daughter’s disappearance, according to Gregory of Tours she received very little sympathy and consolations (*consolationis*), and her request was eventually denied. Nevertheless, we can see that it was possible for a royal woman to publicly petition during a significant event and to address herself in front of all the members of the *aula regis*.

## Conclusion

Did royal women really enjoy personal power? The question, though recurring in the historiography of the period, is weighted down by the alleged dynastic decadence of the Merovingian period, where the violence of civil wars supposedly destroyed the social hierarchy

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<sup>61</sup> *Chron*, IV, 44; trans. Wallace-Hadrill: “Bishop Leudemund of Sion came secretly to Queen Bertetrudis and repeated to her, at the instigation of the patrician Alethius, the following falsehood: in this same year Chlotar would die without a doubt and she should privately send all the treasure she could to his city of Sion, where it would be perfectly safe. He added that Alethius was thinking of giving up his wife and of marrying the queen, provided that, being of royal Burgundian blood, he could succeed Chlotar as king. Queen Bertetrudis was frightened at the prospect of what she heard. She burst into tears and took to her room. Leudemund saw that the conversation had put him in danger; so, fleeing during that night to Sion, he finally took refuge at Luxeuil with the Lord Abbot Eustasius. Later, the abbot obtained Chlotar’s pardon for him and permission to return to his city. Meanwhile, Alethius was summoned before Chlotar and his great men at the villa of Mâlay-le-Roi. His wicked plan was laid bare and he was sentenced to be executed,” 36–37.

<sup>62</sup> *DLH*, VIII, 21; trans. Dalton: “While this council was being held, King Childebert met the chief men of his kingdom at his domain of Beslingen, which lies in the midst of the forest of the Ardennes. There Queen Brunhild made plaint to all the notables on behalf of Ingund her daughter, who was still detained in Africa; but scant sympathy did she receive,” 345–346.



and prompted the kingdom's decay. However, the study of Frankish women's quarters permits us to offer a different answer, through the analysis of the private and domestic lives of a ruling family, like the Merovingian dynasty. The center of the royal *familia*, turned towards the reproductive practices that guaranteed the survival of the royal elite, women's quarters were built on an intricate system of alliances and interdependent networks of relationships with the various members of the *aula regis*: placed within the royal circle by powerful protectors with great ambitions, or simply looking to secure their own position with a strong faction able to protect their interests in public and in private, royal women embody the perpetual duality of the matrimonial and familial sides of the royal Merovingian dynasty. Efficient in managing households and estates, financially independent, wielders of fiscal authority, and creators of pious foundations, royal women pose themselves as leaders of factions counting dignitaries and close companions, whose careers they often influence in the long run.

Neither silent nor deprived of agency, they appear to be central figures in the daily management of state matters, both dynastic and political, through gestures and speech. Their position, and even more so, their status, place them as major individuals within the strict hierarchy of the Merovingian court, as highly sought-after intercessors and the personification of the bridge between royal and dynastic intimacy and public administration. Their discretion in narrative sources should not be interpreted as a sign of seclusion from public life outside of regencies; royal women were actually quite invested in the public display of power of the *familia*, through their private audiences, embassies in their own name, and the action of rendering public justice. In many ways their political acumen also paved a way for future notable women, either from the royal elite or the aristocratic one, such as Plectrudis. Wife of Pippin of Herstal, as well as a powerful landowner in her own right, her notable personal wealth and capacity to act as an independent political agent as a widow and later regent for her grandson over Neustria encompass the many different ways for a woman to wield personal authority from within the walls of the *palatium*, while establishing a model for later generations. Thus, from the interdependence between private quarters and political activity was created a connection between two spheres considered too widely distinct to cooperate together, which in the end permits us to understand the political turmoil that shaped the sixth and seventh centuries.