CHAPTER 3

Scandal in Poitiers

Introduction

On the first of March, 589, a group of nuns broke the strictures of their monastic rule and left the convent of Holy Cross in Poitiers. Led by Chlothild and Basina, who boasted they were daughters of two former kings, the nuns journeyed by foot across the sixty miles of muddy roads that led to Tours. They brought with them little more than their grievances against their abbess, Leubovera, and a determination to be heard by the royal court. Assailed by heavy rain and betrayed by their lack of supplies, the nuns arrived in a desperate state. Uninvited they were, but not unwelcome: Gregory offered to host them in Tours throughout the summer so that, in fairer weather, Chlothild could take her complaints to her uncle, King Guntram. Though Poitiers fell outside his jurisdiction, Gregory had a longstanding relationship with Holy Cross, and his own niece, Justina, was prioress (praeposita) of the institution. Yet Gregory soon came to regret his involvement with the wayward nuns, slight though it may have been. Straightaway, several of them took husbands in Tours, and, although Guntram agreed to convene a council to address their grievances, Chlothild and her nuns grew impatient and returned to Poitiers, where they ‘prepared for war’. Assembling a band of ‘thieves, killers, libertines, and every sort of criminal’, Chlothild enforced her claims through an increasingly aggressive approach that, as detailed below, resulted in the sacking of the convent and the desecration of its prized relics. Justina, who had stayed loyal to her abbess, also suffered injuries in the mayhem, which only ended when—by order of the king and with the blessing of Gregory and his fellow bishops—the local comes, Macco, put the revolt down by force, a full year after it had started. With order restored, an angry and perhaps slightly embarrassed

1 Gregory’s words in Historiae, IX. 39 have been taken to imply doubt regarding Chlothild’s royal pedigree. See Widdowson, ‘Merovingian Partitions’, p. 4; and Wood, ‘Deconstructing the Merovingian Family’, p. 158. I am not sure Gregory meant to imply this by writing ‘[Chrodechildis], qui se Chariberti quondam regis filiam adserebat’, which I have translated below as ‘she kept boasting that her father was King Charibert’. As we shall see, regardless of Gregory’s opinions, the events themselves strongly suggest that she was regarded as a member of the royal family.

2 Historiae, IX. 40.
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Gregory joined his colleagues in the cathedral in Poitiers to pass judgement upon Chlothild and Basina. Condemnation also came in the Histories, where Gregory devoted several chapters to this local affair. Never a more dutiful historian than here, Gregory cited official documents in full and supplied both context and background, though he may have asked too much of his material. In a mood to name and shame, and needing to justify his own actions, Gregory marshalled an interpretation of Holy Cross’s history that included questionable details, especially those concerning the early years of the institution.

When Trouble Arrives on the Doorstep

When Chlothild and Basina decided to seek the assistance of the bishop of Tours and, ultimately, the royal court in pursuit of their grievances, they went over the head of their local bishop, Maroveus, and their metropolitan, Gundegisel of Bordeaux. Clearly, their arrogance was to blame. Yet Gregory still needed to explain why he had intervened in a matter that was outside his jurisdiction and offered the nuns his support. As we shall see below, he provided precedent for his actions, but he also insisted that he had been motivated by pastoral concern.

A great scandal arose in the convent of Poitiers when the Devil ensnared the heart of Chlothild. Relying on her royal kinship (for she kept boasting that her father was King Charibert), Chlothild extracted an oath from her fellow nuns to have their abbess, Leubovera, accused of certain crimes and expelled from the monastery, and to select none other than herself to be their new mother superior. Chlothild then departed with forty or more nuns including her cousin, Basina, who was Chilperic’s daughter, saying: ‘I am going to my royal kin so that they will know of our indignity, for here

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