CHAPTER 6

Brunhild and Fredegund, I: Moral Opposites or Kindred Spirits?

Introduction

In 588, Gregory and a colleague named Felix travelled to Chalon-sur-Saône for an important meeting with Guntram, king of Burgundy. They brought a treaty from the king of Austrasia, Childebert II, that offered to renew the alliance between the two kingdoms. After some skilful diplomacy on Gregory’s part, Guntram agreed, but he worried about the meddling of two powerful women: Childebert’s mother, Brunhild, and her longstanding rival in Neustria, Fredegund. Without warning, Guntram turned to Felix and raised the issue accusingly:

‘Tell me, Felix, is it true that you have established a friendly accord between my sister Brunhild and Fredegund, that enemy of God and man?’

Felix denied the charge, and I spoke up: ‘Let the king not doubt that the same “accord” which has bound these two women for so many years still remains—you can be certain the hatred that has long existed between them has not withered but grows anew. If only you, most glorious king, were not so close to her! We are aware that you have often received her emissaries with greater honour than ours.’

The king replied: ‘Know, bishop of God, that I receive her emissaries in a manner that never displaces my esteem for my nephew, King Childebert. How could I enjoin friendship with a woman who has so often sent her men to take my life?’

With this said, the negotiations swiftly moved on to other matters. Gregory had made his point to Guntram, and to his audience: could anyone establish friendship with this enemy of God a man?

1 Historiae, IX. 20. Gregory referred to ‘bishop Felix’ without further specification, but he was probably bishop of Bellay.

2 On the use of amicitia, ‘friendship’, to signify a political alliance, see Buc, The Dangers of Ritual, pp. 24–28; and Wolfgang Fritze, ‘Die fränkische Schwurfreundschaft der Merowingerzeit: Ihr
In the *Histories*, Brunhild and Fredegund appear as political adversaries and moral opposites. Gregory encouraged his audience to compare the two queens by emphasising their differences. He said nothing bad of Brunhild, yet he accused Fredegund of a great many crimes, including murder, sacrilege, witchcraft, and treason. So skilful is Gregory’s presentation that it conceals the remarkable similarities between the two women, who both enjoyed prominence in the Merovingian kingdoms as wives of a reigning king and then as mothers of the next. As we shall see, others writers had different interpretations. A decade and a half after Gregory’s death, Brunhild fell from power. Accused of every regicide of her lifetime, she met a gruesome end. As the *Chronicles* of Fredegar eagerly recounted, her hair, one arm, and one foot were tied to a horse’s tail, and she was dragged until her limbs tore from her body.\(^3\) Indeed, by the seventh century, Brunhild had acquired the reputation of a villainess—no better than the wicked Fredegund of the *Histories*. Scholarship has preferred Gregory’s sympathetic presentation of the queen to this later tradition. As we shall see in Chapter 7, however, Gregory had a close relationship with Brunhild and he was thus in no position to recount her faults.\(^4\) Kind to Brunhild though Gregory was, he had few express compliments or flattering stories to tell of her, perhaps because he lacked the material. He hoped, instead, that a comparison to Fredegund might show Brunhild to be the more preferable—a benign influence on the realm. Through this approach, Gregory justified his political connections to Brunhild and explained his own personal conflict with Fredegund (also discussed in Chapter 7). It is only with the

\(^3\) Fredegar, *Chronicae*, iv. 42.