

A Gilded Cage: The Complex Role of Female Monastic Societies in the Frankish Empire

A thesis submitted by

Quinnlyn I. Cox

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

in

History

Tufts University

May 2026

Adviser: David J. Proctor

Abstract:

Women chose to enter monastic life for a variety of reasons during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods of Frankish history. Whether it was voluntary, involuntary, for political or familial reasons, or to flee a current or prospective husband, examining the reasons why women entered monasteries helps reveal information about what life was like for them, the options they had, and the agency they were able to exert. By examining these reasons, it becomes clear that female monastic institutions cannot be considered wholly a sanctuary for women or a prison but instead inhabit a complex middle ground where instead they functioned as gilded cages, with clear benefits and drawbacks regardless of reason for entrance.

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Unmarried Women	11
Chapter 3: Married Women	35
Chapter 4: Widows	49
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	64

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the Frankish empire, monasteries held a complex role wherein they functioned as vehicles for women's freedom and women's oppression. Through an examination of the reasons why women from the sixth through ninth centuries CE entered monasteries, a better understanding can be had about their lives, choices, autonomy, and the politics around them. Many women in this period joined monastic institutions voluntarily for a multitude of reasons, and many women found monasteries to be sanctuaries. While monastic life was the only acceptable alternative to marriage for women, it was still a choice women could and did make. Monasteries were places void of men and the threats of the outside world, where like-minded women lived together and found solace in their faith. However, despite the beneficial aspects of monasteries, there were women who were forced into them, and there were situations in which monastic institutions functioned as either metaphorical or literal prisons. As a whole, female monastic institutions functioned as a gilded cage: there were protections provided, even for women who were forced into them, as well as loneliness and restrictions even for women who joined willingly. Women frequently joined of their own volition, if occasionally under duress or due to a lack of other options. As such, the monastery did not function wholly as a sanctuary or as a prison but occupied a complex middle ground wherein they resembled a gilded cage – being both physically restricting while allowing for the chance of personal choice and agency.

In the discussion of Frankish women, historians Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Fonay Wemple are predominant in the historiography of Frankish medieval women and tend to have similar arguments. Both historians tend to present the world of monastic women as being inherently political, but in doing so, occasionally don't wholly address the women's agency. In McNamara's 1992 book *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, she provides translations of

hagiographies and other primary source material on female Merovingian saints, along with secondary source contextualization in which she emphasizes the political aspects for why women joined monasteries. The Merovingian world was a complex and violent one, where changes in royal authority, property law, and strength of the Church occasionally positioned women to be valuable political pawns. McNamara brings in King Dagobert, a seventh century Merovingian King who attempted to use strategic marriage alliances to strengthen a royal centralization of power. As recent changes in property laws allowed women to act as transmitters of property and wealth, he tried to marry certain noble women to his allies at court to indirectly gain control of their land and strengthen his power. McNamara argues, using background information and details from the hagiographies, that women joining monastic institutions helped to thwart these plans, which was encouraged by their families.¹ But, through her focus on the complex political and familial reasons behind monastic entrance, she sometimes draws focus away from women's autonomy. When discussing Saint Gertrude, a woman whose hagiography has her vociferously turning down one of Dagobert's marriage schemes to join a convent, McNamara alleges that her actions may have been directed by her father.² While McNamara provides a foundational source successfully arguing the complex reasons behind female saints' monastic entrance, there are places where women's agency could be focused on more. And while her work provides key information supporting the gilded cage aspect of monastic life, she doesn't delve into what it means that so many women were entering convents to avoid marriage or for political means.

In comparison, Wemple's major work, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500-900* published in 1981, focuses on a broader scope of women than just saints. This book is frequently cited by authors of other texts on women of this period and location, and for

¹ Jo Ann McNamara et al., eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 177.

² McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 221.

good reason. She details the establishment of monastic life in the Frankish empire and the involvement women had in it, especially in certain styles of monasticism like Columbanian.³ McNamara does mention Columbanian style monasticism in her chapter on Saint Rictrude, but Wemple is able to go more in depth on women's involvement with the movement.⁴ She also approaches the political angle of monasticism a little less directly and not from the angle of property law and marriage schemes but through the lens of church synods and legal reforms. Overall, though, the focus of the book isn't wholly on monasticism, and she doesn't delve too far into the reasons why women entered monastic societies.

Wemple did very clearly frame monasteries as prisons, even when they were a woman's own choice.⁵ She also acknowledged that in addition to religious vocation, it may have been an avoidance of marriage that led women to the cloister. Furthermore, she brought in a poem by a sixth century bishop that mentioned women desiring monastic life due to the traumas of married life and the grief that comes from losing children or a husband. She argued that this poem could give insight into sixth-century women's psyche and reasons for monasticism.⁶ She brought in other negative aspects of monasticism as well, more so than McNamara was able to (given McNamara's text being focused on saints). She emphasized the restrictions often enhanced by secular and ecclesiastical laws, women who were imprisoned in monasteries or forced into them, and the close monitoring convents had. But Wemple also made sure to note more positive aspects of monasticism that might have drawn women in, like being in a community of likeminded women and being able to rise above the prescribed roles of wife and mother.⁷ Where

³ Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900*, The Middle Ages (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981): 159.

⁴ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 196.

⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 156.

⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 151.

⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 163.

McNamara portrayed monasteries in more of a sanctuary light, Wemple discussed the nuance in greater depth and detailed convents more as gilded cages but emphasized the prison aspect.

Wemple also didn't fully address women's agency. Because of her focus on synodal decrees and secular laws and the increasing restrictions placed on women in general, many of her discussions on women's monastic entrance had more to do with male dominated factors, instead of the ways in which women utilized patriarchal systems to benefit themselves and allow them to join convents they wished to join. McNamara and Wemple were foundational feminist historians in the 1980s and 1990s and acknowledged women's agency more than past historians, but there are still areas of their research missing the full scope of female autonomy in the Frankish empire. Both historians lay the groundwork for a gilded cage reading of monastic life, but in their research don't get all the way there.

Furthermore, with Wemple's work, though entrance into monasteries wasn't the focus, she did provide a breakdown of three phases of hagiographies that provided more information on the admittance to monastic life. In the earliest phase, during the sixth century, there weren't many monasteries and women had to be determined and steadfast if they wished to enter them. The second phase, in the seventh and eighth centuries, monasteries were more common and women were able to join easier with occasional outside intervention to help facilitate it. In the third and final phase, in the ninth century, there were some political changes (like stricter cloistering requirements and reforms that made married life a little better for women) which made religious life a little less appealing and leading to women waiting until widowhood or their children being grown before joining.⁸ These phases helped explain trends in hagiographies and patterns of behavior. It was in the earlier phases that women's monastic life focused more on the

⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 153.

choices being made by them, which made sense given the increasing restrictions passed that Wemple outlined.

One of the chapters Wemple and McNamara co-wrote, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Empire,” also discussed the more undesirable reasons behind monastic admittance. The chapter looked at family structures and followed differing views on divorce by secular and religious authorities and how it changed over time. It brought in different laws and councils and discussed two well-known divorce cases from the ninth century – that of the emperor Louis and his second wife Judith and, more famously, that of Lothar II and his wife Tetberga.⁹ The chapter detailed the period in which the Frankish empire transitioned from polygynous to monogamous, and men (especially kings) sometimes desired to get rid of their current wife to marry their mistress. Originally, it was accepted that if a woman entered a monastery, her husband could thus remarry. Wemple and McNamara argued that later law codes forbidding this practice implied that there were enough men forcing current wives into monasteries to remarry to cause problems.¹⁰ Throughout this chapter and both books written by McNamara and Wemple, they argued that monastic admittance from women who were unmarried, married, and widowed hinged less on religious vocation and more on complex familial or political reasons, and monasteries were portrayed neither in a wholly positive nor negative light. Instead, to varying degrees, monasteries were portrayed as a grey area in between the two, an area in which a gilded cage argument can be found, even though these authors don’t directly focus on it.

Historian Katherine Clark Walter also agreed with the general argument of religious vocation not being the primary reason behind monastic admittance in her book *The Profession of*

⁹ Jo-Ann McNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 106, 108-109.

¹⁰ McNamara and Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” 103.

Widowhood, specifically the chapter “The Widow and the Cloister: Early Medieval Hagiography.” Far more recent than the works by Wemple and McNamara and published in 2018, this chapter focused on how widows were portrayed in hagiographies as well as what life was like for them in the early medieval period. Walter made specific note of the duality of widowhood enabling women to have and wield power while also putting them in a position of vulnerability.¹¹ She also discussed the church’s conflicting views on widows, how they both were people in need of help and charity, as well as women that needed to be controlled. She outlined the transition from a sort of ‘worldly’ widowhood where a woman could stay in her home and still be protected by the church to the almost required admittance into monastic life as a result of synodal decrees.¹² In addition to religious decrees that highly encouraged widows to join a monastery if they wanted protection, she also brought in patterns in hagiographies of widows who wanted to practice ‘worldly’ widowhood but joined convents due to fears of their safety.¹³ Walter contributed to a sense of monasteries as gilded cages, because widows content to live out a religious life in their own homes were increasingly forced into official monastic societies. Therefore, despite the religious nature and desire of many of these widows, their actual admittance into monasteries was less to do with religious desire but fears of safety or pressure from synodal decrees and church officials.

Walter’s focus on widows as a demographic group is also a perspective that other sources don’t focus on as much. These women occupied a fascinating place in society and many of the other sources only mention them briefly. She addressed monastic widowhood in a nuanced way

¹¹ Katherine Clark Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister: Early Medieval Hagiography,” in *The Profession of Widowhood, Widows, Pastoral Care, and Medieval Models of Holiness* (Catholic University of America Press, 2018): 81.

¹² Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 85.

¹³ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 90.

– both acknowledging the benefits, protections, and safety of monasteries and contrasting it with the less desirable circumstances that forced many women into the convent. But there is still room for her argument to be pushed a little further and for her to address choice when it came to these women. While they were often either forced or highly encouraged into the cloister, for many it was still a choice they actively made. Like Wemple and McNamara before her (both of whose books she cites in this chapter) she laid the groundwork of the gilded cage while still leaving out some of the agency of women.

Gregory of Tours, on the other hand, differed significantly from the other mentioned historians in many ways. He was a sixth century bishop and biographer, and his book, *History of the Franks*, is still one of the most used primary source materials used when discussing Frankish history. While he was a religious figure and an ecclesiastical authority as a bishop, like the other authors he too discusses the non-monastic reasons for women's admittance into monastic life. The focus of this book is primarily on the establishment of the Franks and their conversion to Christianity, the conquering of Gaul with detailed histories of the kings, and the events of Gregory's lifetime. Despite this focus, he did mention some important women, including nuns, abbesses, and female saints. For some of the women he named, like unmarried former princess Basina and widowed former queen Theudechild, he clearly defined their entrance into convents as both not having to do with religious vocation but instead trickery and politics.¹⁴ And even though he was a bishop when he wrote this book, he displayed no discernible distaste in the forced monasticism imposed on these women. However, he did focus on the religiosity of other women he discussed. When detailing the life of Radegund, saint and former queen who left her

¹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin Books, 1983), 305, 220-1.

husband for the cloister, he focused on her deep faith that led to her persuading her husband into letting her establish a monastic society.¹⁵

Gregory of Tours is not an unbiased source. He was writing from an ecclesiastical perspective and gave respect and understanding to women who exemplified Christian standards and vilified women he did not like. In addition to this, he only wrote about women whom he found interesting. For Merovingian princesses who led tamer lives and either didn't marry other royalty or went quietly into monastic life, he didn't write about them. But the fact that he mentioned multiple women by name and described their lives and actions is important. Given he was a contemporary historian, he also was more closely connected with some of the women he wrote about and even met with a few. He was involved with a trial Basina was a part of and was familiar with Radegund.¹⁶ Though biased at times, his respect for some of the women, first-hand experience, and firm understanding of the world he lived in makes his book still valuable to this day. His depictions of the women and events they were involved with also, though perhaps unintentionally, portrayed monasteries as gilded cages. They could be sanctuaries (like what he described with Radegund), prisons (like the convent was for Theudechild), or something in between (like it was for Basina). He acknowledged the times women were forced into monasteries, but also crucially did ascribe some agency for other women. His nuanced portrayal of female monastic life fits in well with the other discussed authors and sets the scene for more in-depth historical research.

The historiography on this subject reveals that for women who were unmarried, married, or divorced, there were a multitude of reasons they joined monastic life, and very few of them related to faith. Both medieval and contemporary historians agree on this detail. There were

¹⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 168.

¹⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 571.

politics, changes in laws, fears of safety, familial expectations, and occasionally an overall lack of choice that led Frankish women to the cloister. What's missing in the historiography is a focus purely on why women chose monastic life. It's mentioned briefly in certain articles, books, and chapters, but is never the focus. There has been attention to women's life outside of monasteries and inside of them, but not central examination of what factors drove them to monastic vows. While a lack of primary source material from women, specifically those in monastic societies, makes it difficult to definitively ascertain why they chose to take vows, other source material like hagiographies, letters, and poems can help discern reasons for admittance, and the choices women made to be join. When it comes to discussions around women's admittance into monastic life, the focus isn't always on the woman's agency. This can occasionally be seen in sources like hagiographies where women defy families, husbands, or kings to enter a convent, but attention into the external reasons for monasticism often leads to overlooking the fact that many women actively chose monasteries. It was a choice they could make instead of marriage and even if it was their only choice, it was still something a woman could choose. In a male dominated world, Frankish women found a way to exert some control over their life.

By having a better understanding of why women entered monastic institutions, a fuller picture of their lives is revealed, including what family structures were like, attitudes towards marriage, the ties between politics and religion, and how the change from the Merovingian dynasty to the Carolingian dynasty impacted women's religious vocations. It also reveals information into what women's agency looked like in a highly patriarchal early medieval society with a church that was slowly growing in its power. Monastic life was the only acceptable alternative to marriage provided to women, but it was an option they had and a choice they made. To understand the history of the Frankish Empire, it's necessary to understand the women

of the empire as well. And to fully understand the lives of the women in the empire, it's necessary to also look into the alternative to marriage they were permitted to choose, and what the circumstances were that led them towards monastic life. Across the three marital statuses of women, their reasons for entrance into monasteries varies but was for reasons beyond faith alone. Unmarried women and girls in some ways began with the least amount of power. They were often reliant on fathers or other male relatives, had no money of their own beyond a dowry that they could not access, and had little choice in the question of marriage. But, despite this, these women still worked hard to avoid marriage and create a life of their own in the monastic setting

Chapter 2: Unmarried Women

Evidence of the gilded cage aspect of female monasticism is readily found in the stories of unmarried women. Frequently, a woman's reasons for joining a monastery had little to do with religious vocation. Instead, they joined as a result of child abandonment or oblation, familial expectations, concern over safety, political interests, or an overall desire not to marry. In monasteries, women were provided with safety and security, a community of like-minded women with little to no interaction with men, and a degree of independence. Monasteries contained protections for women not found elsewhere, both physical as well as secular and ecclesiastical. As abbesses, women could wield religious and political power, and through sainthood they could benefit their families. And, while monasteries were used as vehicles for male oppression and certain women were sent to them against their will, there are clear examples of women who were able to use monasticism to benefit themselves.

The first avenue for unmarried women to enter monastic life was found in the practices of child abandonment and child oblation, both of which start to show the dual reality of monasteries as a source of protection and restriction. Child abandonment occurred most frequently in the lower classes, with a slight gender component to the practice as girls were abandoned at a higher rate than boys.¹⁷ Abandoned girls were usually taken in by wealthy families to be workers, or given to monasteries.¹⁸ Child oblation, as a practice, is similar to abandonment. Defined as “the donation... of a child as a permanent gift to a monastery,” oblation was not just a tool used by lower classes but also nobility, who could, with a child given to the church, benefit politically or ecclesiastically. Additionally, having a child in a monastery freed up their shares of an

¹⁷ John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, 1. Vintage books ed (Vintage Books, 1990): 262.

¹⁸ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 264.

inheritance.¹⁹ An example of child oblation comes in the form of two sisters, Herlinda and Renilda. These girls were "offered to God for the remission of their parents' sins" and were sent to a monastery while still quite young.²⁰ In stories of this donation, the parents are praised for their actions, and the daughters lauded for their obedience. Freed child slaves were also given to monasteries. Seventh century Queen Balthild was a former slave herself who attempted to stop the sale of Frankish people into slavery. The children she freed from the practice were donated to monasteries she established, which was also a practice praised in stories of her.²¹

The sources of monastic protection and restriction come not from the exact circumstances in which a child entered, but in the positive and negative aspects of life now afforded to them. There were clear and undeniable benefits for children that entered monastic societies, especially for girls from lower classes. They received an education, food and drink, clean clothes, and a safe place to reside. Additionally, they were protected from the risks of marriage and childbirth and could garner esteem and influence through the practice of their faith. Herlinda and Renilda, who had no say in their monastic vocations, eventually resided in a monastery their parents established for them, and they flourished. They "provided an inspiration in piety and religious service to young women throughout the region,"²² and lived up to the expectations laid on their shoulders by their parents. Through religion and their monastic vows, the two women became influential figures who received more recognition and respect than they would have as wives and mothers. While from the outside both abandonment and oblation can come across as a disposal of unwanted offspring, the reality was more complex. Monasticism provided protection and

¹⁹ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 228, 240.

²⁰ Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900*, The Middle Ages (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981): 153.

²¹ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 215.

²² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 153.

avenues of opportunity some girls may not have otherwise had, even if it was at the expense of some degree of agency. Even for girls who didn't wish to enter monastic life, there were still ways for them to succeed like Herlinda and Renilda did.

Furthermore, Carolingian monasticism encouraged child oblation and early admittance into monastic life. There were commonly held ideas of childhood ascetic purity and the belief that nuns and monks needed to be trained in the monastic vocation from as young an age as possible.²³ The practice of child oblation was common enough that various monastic rules had minimum age requirements to join. Caesarius's Rule, which predated Benedict's rule and was written for female monastic communities in the early sixth century, specified that girls younger than six or seven were not to be admitted, if possible, as they were too young to be taught obedience or how to read.²⁴

The clear benefits and encouragement of the practice don't erase the fact that the children didn't enter wholly of their own volition. When it comes to child oblation, it is likely that the children had little to no choice on the matter. They were young, and the donation occurred "long before the child could comprehend, much less assent to, a monastic vocation."²⁵ But despite this, it was a common practice. A letter from 1051 by Peter Damian, a Benedictine monk and Cardinal, to the bishop of Osimo helps detail this. Though somewhat satirical, the letter mentions in multiple places that even if a girl or boy was forced or tricked into a monastery by their parents, the monastic vows they took still held and they had to abide by the rules imposed on

²³ Mayke de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era: Politics and Rhetoric in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge University Press, 2019): 94.

²⁴ Caesarius of Arles, "Caesarius of Arles: The Rule for Nuns," in *Western Monastic Spirituality: Cassian, Caesarius of Arles, and Benedict*, ed. Roger Haight, Alfred Pach, and Amanda Avila Kaminski, 1st ed. (Fordham University Press, 2019), 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2k24cgj.5>.

²⁵ V. A. Kolve, "Ganymede/Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire," *Speculum* 73, no. 4 (1998): 1023.

them.²⁶ Though the letter is from a different time period and location, the implications of the commonality of child oblation is important, as is the acknowledgement that children were sent to monasteries through force or deception. For these children, monasteries were a gilded cage, where they benefitted and were protected from certain aspects of secular life while also being denied freedoms of it.

Oblation and abandonment were not the only means by which young children were forced into monasticism by their parents. Another avenue occurred when one or both of a child's parents entered monastic life. In the seventh century, Saint Eusebia as well as her siblings (including her well known brother Maurontus) joined this way, after their widowed mother, Rictrude, took vows and joined a monastery in Marchiennes. Despite Eusebia joining at the same time as her mother, she was raised in her great-grandmother Gertrude's convent in Hamay. Eventually, Eusebia and her brother Maurontus did embrace monastic life and developed successful careers and legacies. And, when Eusebia's great-grandmother and abbess died, the young girl, only 12 years of age, was chosen to replace her.²⁷ This would have been a great honor for Eusebia. Abbesses could and did wield a great deal of power and authority and was both the highest rank a woman in Christianity could achieve as well as being the most respected. And, while a highly pious and devout child wasn't an uncommon theme in hagiographies, being appointed abbess at 12 years old would have been virtually unprecedented. It was not a position handed out lightly, but one a nun was elected to for life that also came with a lot of responsibility. But it wasn't just the nuns of the monastery that would have elected Eusebia and allowed her to take up the mantle of abbess. In the Frankish empire in the sixth century, the

²⁶ Peter Damian and Owen J. Blum, "Letter 38," in *Letters, 31-60* (Catholic University of America Press, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9b2whv.14>.

²⁷ Karine Ugé, "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)," in *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, NED-New edition (Boydell & Brewer, 2005): 101-102.

congregation chose the next abbess and then the local bishop would ordain her “if she will be judged worthy of this ministry.”²⁸ Twelve-year-old Eusebia would have been chosen by both her nuns and a bishop in order for her to be an abbess.

The election to the prestigious role of abbess is also the first example of Eusebia fitting into the gilded cage aspect of monasticism. She was forced into the cloister and raised away from her siblings and mother, and grew into a young girl pious and powerful enough to be elected to that position. But even though Eusebia accomplished something extraordinary (which also would have benefitted her family’s reputation and esteem) Rictrude, Eusebia’s mother, was displeased with this turn of events. She thought her daughter too young for the position and was afraid that the slight increase in freedoms granted to abbesses would lead her daughter astray. Eusebia was forced to return to Rictrude’s monastery, once more stripped of agency by her mother. Rictrude had to have a king order her daughter back to Marchiennes before Eusebia abided by the command.²⁹ Part of the significance in this lies in the protections given to abbesses. A letter from 602 CE by Pope Gregory I to an abbess of a different Frankish monastery outlined some of the protections allotted to nuns. He wrote that an abbess should “in no way... be deprived or deposed, unless a case of wrongdoing specifically requires it,” and even then it is only to be done by a council of bishops.³⁰ Rictrude, acting in the role of mother rather than that of fellow abbess, was attempting to more or less ignore that and prevent her daughter from rising in ecclesiastical status. But despite the attempt to once more curb Eusebia’s freedoms, the young girl found a way to work around her mother’s mandate via ignoring it. Each night, she snuck out to visit the

²⁸ Gregory I to Respecta, 596, *Epistolae: Medieval Women’s Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1248.html>.

²⁹ Ugé, “Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130),” 102.

³⁰ Gregory I to Talasia, 602, *Epistolae: Medieval Women’s Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1255.html>.

monastery entrusted to her and attend to it.³¹ Her mother was the cause of her monastic vocation, and she used that same vocation to disobey her mother.

When Rictrude learned of the disobedience, she was furious, and had her son, Maurontus, physically discipline Eusebia. He whipped her so severely that she “fell on the sword of one of the acolytes who were holding her,” causing a severe injury she just barely managed to survive.³² Even after being whipped nearly to death, Eusebia still was determined to go to the monastery she was to be abbess of. Male ecclesiastical authorities tried to convince the young girl to relinquish Hamay and stay with her mother, but Eusebia, even when faced with bishops and abbots, refused. The men “acknowledged their failure to convince her” and “advised Rictrude to let her go back to Hamay.”³³ She died shortly after of the injuries she received from her brother’s whipping, which “kept spitting blood and pus.”³⁴ Her age upon death is not specified, though her mother’s *vita* states it occurred “in the middle of her adolescence” and that “she achieved much in a short time and ended her life quickly.”³⁵ Given the injuries she sustained at the hand of her brother which were not able to heal, it is difficult to imagine she lived much beyond twelve years.

The story of Eusebia illustrates the danger of family and the power of monastic office. She was forced into it but embraced it and achieved the honor and freedom of abbess at a young age. Her mother attempted to restrict her and prevent her from being an abbess, but Eusebia disobeyed. She was made a saint but first had to go through ultimately deadly trials. Her role as an abbess also gave her the authority to refuse the requests of higher ranked male ecclesiastical

³¹ Ugé, “Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130),” 102-103.

³² Ugé, “Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130),” 103.

³³ Ugé, “Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130),” 103.

³⁴ Ugé, “Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130),” 102-103.

³⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “The Life of Rictrude, Abbess of Marchiennes,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 215.

figures. When it comes to her family and the role they played in her untimely death, the hagiographies involving Rictrude, Eusebia, and Maurontus don't portray any of them in a bad light. Eusebia is not criticized for disobedience and technically breaking cloistering requirements, Rictrude is not criticized for ordering the punishment of her daughter, and Maurontus is not criticized for performing punishment to the extent of eventual death. Rictrude's hagiographer, a man named Hucbald, also spent time in the text defending her actions.³⁶ The entire family still became saints.³⁷ For Eusebia, monastic life was alternately a prison and a sanctuary. It was a true gilded cage, both a vehicle of attempted oppression over her, but also a means with which she could gain real power, authority, and respect. She may have been forced into the monastery, but she benefitted from it. As a 12-year-old girl, she turned down a bishop's request, and her decision was respected. A girl without the title of abbess would no doubt not be offered the same courtesy. And the real danger to her came not from the monastic system, but her own family. Her mother, who tried to undo the protected and legitimate election of an abbess and ordered the punishment of Eusebia when the girl was attempting to attend to her duties, and Maurontus, who obeyed his mother too well when given the order to discipline his sister. In the end, the monastic system also offered Eusebia one last protection by supporting her request to go back to her monastery in Hamay, which offered her protection from her family. While she did join monasticism likely before she was old enough to properly consent, the monastic system did attempt to protect her from the real threat to her safety, which was her family. In her short time alive, Eusebia made the most out of monasticism, and like Herlinda and Renilda, gained fame and renown for her actions and piety.

³⁶ Uge, "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)," 103.

³⁷ Uge, "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)," 102.

Not every girl forced into the cloister by her parents embraced it and flourished as Eusebia did, and the gilded cage aspect isn't always as clear. Some women's admittance into the monastic life was a little more complex than abandonment, oblation, or joint joining with parents. This was especially true when royalty was involved, like with Frankish princess Basina in the late sixth century. She was the daughter of King Chilperic and his first wife, and there are varying claims on the cause of her entrance into monastic life. Some modern scholars imply she joined of her own will and was content as a nun.³⁸ Gregory of Tours, a contemporary historian who had interactions with Basina, alleged two slightly contradictory reasons for Basina joining the monastery. The first was that she was tricked by the servants of her father's scheming concubine Fredegund, and the second was that her father had sent her to one.³⁹ She was not donated for the benefit of her family like Herlinda and Renilda were, but because she was an extra daughter. As a result, she was sent to a convent in Poitiers which was founded by a previous Frankish queen, Radegund, who Basina was loosely related to by marriage. While Basina resided in the convent at Poitiers, multiple events occurred adding to the complexities of whether she willingly joined, and whether she embraced monastic life. These complexities, like those of Eusebia, help exemplify the gilded cage aspect of Basina's monasticism. In both cases, the events of the women's lives transition back and forth between imprisonment and voluntary admittance.

The first event occurred while Radegund was still alive. An unspecified amount of time after Basina joined the monastery at Poitiers, her father tried to take her back so she could marry a prince named Recared from Spain. According to Gregory of Tours, "[s]he was unwilling, and

³⁸ Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*, 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed, with American Council of Learned Societies (Harvard University Press, 1998): 110.

³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 305.

the blessed Radegund backed her up.”⁴⁰ The scholar Dyan Elliott does not view this denial of leaving the cloister for marriage to be a true depiction of Basina’s feelings on monastic life. Elliott refers to Poitiers as “Basina’s monastic jail” and claims that “[w]hat had begun as forced enclosure may have led to some medieval correlative to the Stockholm syndrome, temporarily encouraging Basina to identify with her monastic guardians.”⁴¹ Despite Elliott’s assertion, Stockholm Syndrome doesn’t encapsulate the realities of the world Basina lived in. While monastic life was not something Basina chose for herself, it had advantages over marriage to an unknown prince in a far-off country. For one, life in the cloister was familiar. She knew the expectations, requirements, and rules. She likely did not know much about marriage besides what she saw in her own family – which was her father’s mistress having Basina’s brother murdered and her mother forced into a convent and then later murdered. There also were high expectations for a royal bride, including the necessity to produce a male heir and the very real chance she would have had children until it killed her. Basina’s choice to stay was a rational decision, and evidence of her ability to exert some autonomy over herself. And like with Eusebia, it’s another example of the monastery being able to protect women from their own family, as it was her father who tried to remove her. As unwilling as she may have been at first, Basina likely found the cloister preferable to the marriage bed. Monastic life was familiar and had a significant decrease in odds of dying young, whether it be by assassination or childbirth. Remaining as a nun, despite her unwillingness, is a choice that makes sense for Basina.

In the context of Basina actively choosing to remain in the monastery by way of rejecting a proposed marriage, the following events of her life as a leader in a nun rebellion shows

⁴⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 364-365.

⁴¹ Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*, 1st ed, The Middle Ages Series (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 87.

evidence of her as someone who wishes to change monastic life but still stay in it. The rebellion, headed by two nuns willing and able to utilize whatever influence, wealth, and authority they still had from being princesses, showcases both the strength of nuns and the protections of monastic institutions. The nun rebellion occurred in 589, sometime after the death of Agnes, the former abbess, and Radegund. A new abbess came into power named Leubovera who was disliked by the nuns under her which eventually sparked a rebellion. Although Basina is not acknowledged (by contemporary and modern historians) as being the ringleader of the rebellion, she is acknowledged as the co-conspirator and is the only other named nun in Gregory of Tours' retelling of the event. The rebellion itself was initiated by Chrodechild (name also spelled as Clotild), who was another Frankish princess and the daughter of King Charibert. There were a few given reasons for the rebellion. Gregory of Tours, who claims that Chrodechild was 'pretending' to be Charibert's daughter, heavily implied that the cause of the unrest had to do with jealousy. He claimed that Chrodechild was offended that Leubovera was chosen as abbess over herself, given the other woman had no royal ties. However, Chrodechild allegedly told Gregory that it was due to poor treatment from the new abbess, who humiliated them "as if [they] were the offspring of low-born serving women, instead of being the daughters of kings."⁴² Regardless of whether or not Chrodechild's complaints were genuine or self-serving, they were enough to convince other nuns to rebel with her and Basina.

When the rebellion began, it was relatively tame, consisting of a walkout of 40 nuns organized by Chrodechild, who planned to use her royal ties to argue her case of mistreatment. Even the tame start was significant, as the nuns in Poitiers were under strict cloistering requirements which they broke. However, the rebellion did not remain tame, but soon devolved

⁴² Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 526.

into revolts and riots, the nuns hiring a “gang of armed men,” excommunications, looting, some nuns getting married and falling pregnant, violence, the abduction and rescue of an abbess, and finally King Guntram ending it by having a count send his men to slaughter those hired by Chrodechild.⁴³ Once the chaos was over, there was a tribunal of bishops to hear the complaints of Chrodechild and Basina against Leubovera, and her defense. According to the account of Gregory of Tours, who was on the tribunal, Chrodechild and Basina claimed, in addition to more outlandish accusations, that they “could no longer endure the poor food, the lack of clothing, and, indeed, the harsh treatment.”⁴⁴ Leubovera defended herself well, and all the claims laid against her were investigated and dismissed. It was then that the attention turned towards the rebellious nuns, who were looked at more harshly. All were excommunicated, though Basina and Chrodechild were eventually pardoned. In the end, Basina chose to return to the monastery at Poitiers.⁴⁵

The rebellion is a fascinating piece of history. Two nuns, both princesses likely forced into the cloister, fought back against what they perceived as an oppressive and unjust system. It was more than nuns leaving and complaining. These women hired a gang of bandits to support them. They kidnapped their abbess and locked her in a house. People were murdered and nuns fell pregnant. And when it ended, a trial was held where an assortment of ecclesiastical authorities listened to both sides and came to a conclusion based on evidence and investigation. They took the nuns' complaints seriously, even when Chrodechild made outlandish claims like the abbess having “men castrated” to keep “around as eunuchs.”⁴⁶ Then, the trial was wrapped

⁴³ Raymond Van Dam, “Different Saints, Different Cults,” in *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 36-9.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 571.

⁴⁵ Van Dam, “Different Saints, Different Cults,” 39.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 570.

up with two excommunications (of which Basina's was later undone) and advice for the abbess for the future. These nuns caused immense chaos. Their actions led to death, property damage, and looting. But, despite the overall violent time period of Merovingian Frankia, it was allowed to happen. The rebellion wasn't immediately shut down. Even once the band of cut-throats Chrodechild hired had been disbanded, the church leaders still investigated the matter and heard what the rebellious nuns had to say. And the leaders of the rebellion, Basina and Chrodechild, weren't killed. Eusebia died after a severe punishment by her family because she was leaving cloister walls each day to attend to the monastery entrusted to her, but these nuns who caused such chaos and destruction were relatively unharmed in the end. This also shows some of the protections afforded to nuns. Eusebia may have died because of her family's actions, but her punishment was family based, not monastic. Her mother ordered it and her brother administered it. For Basina, it was an ecclesiastical trial with ecclesiastical judges and an ecclesiastical punishment (excommunication) which was later relinquished. Monastic life had clear rules and consequences, which in cases like Basina's, may have afforded her some protection. As a nun she had more protections than she may have had as a daughter.

Basina in many ways exemplifies the gilded cage aspect of monasticism. The evidence does indicate that her father forced her into the monastery but given that the rest of her family was assassinated, that likely saved her.⁴⁷ She also chose to stay when offered a way out, even if that way out was through an unwanted marriage. Additionally, with the nun rebellion, the goal wasn't to leave but to change the way things were. She wasn't happy with the conditions, which was understandable. A good number of noble and royal women ended up in convents, either at a young age or upon widowhood, and the living conditions in monasteries were very different

⁴⁷ Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 87.

from those in noble courts and royal households. The convent at Poitiers followed Caesarius' monastic rule, which outlined most aspects of life, from food to clothes to daily tasks. For women who were accustomed to the extravagances of court life, joining a monastery would have been an adjustment even if they willingly chose to do so. For women and girls who were forced into monasteries, the adjustment would have been even more difficult. But, while the rebellion was going on, unlike some other girls, Basina did not choose to leave when she could have. And after the trial, she ultimately chose to return to the convent at Poitiers and spent the rest of her days there. While there is clear evidence that Basina was forced into monasticism and did not enjoy residing in a convent, time and time again she chose to stay when she could have left, indicating that she knew monastic life was better than any alternative. The convent may have been a place Basina was forced into, but she chose to stay because she knew the protections it provided were more guaranteed than freedoms potentially offered by the outside world. The monastery was her prison, but a prison she knew, that she understood, and, most importantly, that kept her alive.

The theme of monasteries providing women with safety from outside threats was common and a reason why many women joined. Monasteries were relatively protected from the outside world, and from practices that threatened women's wellbeing, like *raptus*. *Raptus* was the practice of abducting young women and girls by men called *raptores* with the intent to marry. It was an issue throughout the history of the Frankish empire, growing into a larger problem in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁴⁸ Merovingian kings saw *raptus* as being "socially disruptive" as it ignored parental authority and could lead to violence.⁴⁹ However, various kings

⁴⁸ Rachel Stone, "The Invention of a Theology of Abduction: Hincmar of Rheims on Raptus," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60, no. 3 (2009): 433.

⁴⁹ Stone, "The Invention of a Theology of Abduction," 434.

and legislative councils had different, and occasionally conflicting, views and punishments on the practice of *raptus*. Early Salic law had *raptus* punished only by a fine, where King Childebert II in 595 had the abductors either exiled or killed, along with the woman if she had agreed to the abduction.⁵⁰ Punishment universally was stricter and more consistent for men who abducted nuns for marriage, with a frequent punishment being excommunication.⁵¹

In addition to stricter and more consistent laws punishing *raptores*, along with increased public censure for the abduction of holy women, it was more difficult to abduct a nun. Instead of residing in private homes, nuns lived in communities designed to ensure the protection of the women that resided in them. Many early convents were established in cities, which provided protection to the women residing in them along with a measure of episcopal oversight. Double monasteries, establishments where a home for monks was attached to a home for nuns, were first established in the Frankish Empire to provide a “practical solution to the problem of instituting female communities outside the cities” and to “protect the nuns.”⁵² Cloistering requirements, found in both monastic rule and secular law, were another measure of protection for nuns, even if they were not always obeyed.⁵³ Cloistering also was a double edged sword, as it kept women safe by keeping them physically restricted. Women were free to exist in an independent community without a husband but were not free to leave the convent. As a result of these protections, female monastic societies could be a refuge for a woman “seeking to escape from

⁵⁰ Stone, “The Invention of a Theology of Abduction,” 434-5.

⁵¹ Stone, “The Invention of a Theology of Abduction,” 435n17.

⁵² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.

⁵³ The Department Of History Of The University Of Pennsylvania, “Laws of Charles the Great,” in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History, Volume VI*, ed. Dana Carleton Munro (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899): 22.

abductors.”⁵⁴ Choosing monastic life was choosing protection at the cost of freedom, and that was a price women were willing to pay.

Evidence of a fear of safety is prevalent in numerous hagiographies of women from all marital backgrounds. *Raptus* and the fear of it is also commonly present, both directly and indirectly. One specific example involving a direct link between *raptus* and monasticism is found in the life of Rusticula, who lived from around 556-632 CE. She joined monastic life young and in a rather interesting manner. Rusticula was from an upper-class family, but her mother was a widow who had recently lost her husband and son in the same short time span. When Rusticula was around five years old, she was abducted by a nobleman who wished for her to be raised by his mother until she was of marrying age.⁵⁵ For girls of this time period, marrying age was usually between 13-15, though on rare occasions it occurred younger at 12, so he would have had to wait at least seven to ten years for her to come of age.⁵⁶ Luckily for Rusticula, she was quickly rescued by an abbess named Liliola who then refused to return the girl to her mother. Her mother pleaded for her to return home, but Rusticula allegedly desired to stay. Liliola was a powerful abbess at the time, and had helped the current king, Guntram, in the past, causing him to owe her a favor. As a result of the favor owed and Rusticula’s pleas, the girl remained in the monastery at Arles.⁵⁷

Rusticula’s mother did try hard to have her daughter returned to her from the monastery. She begged and pleaded and even tried to ply Rusticula with gifts. But monasteries had protections, especially for women who didn’t want to be abducted into marriage. Those protections may have enticed Rusticula to stay more than the gifts would have enticed her to

⁵⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 158.

⁵⁵ McNamara, trans., “The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles,” 123-4.

⁵⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 101.

⁵⁷ McNamara, trans., “The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles, 120.

leave. Despite ties to an old Gallo-Roman family, her widowed mother could not keep her safe. But the abbess Lilliola could, in the walled monastery in a walled city. As seen with Eusebia, monasteries could protect girls both better than their families could, and sometimes from their families. Rusticula's mother had failed once before to protect her, but Lilliola already proved she had the power to rescue the young girl, and the favors from a king to keep her. Unlike Basina, Rusticula wasn't an unneeded extra daughter. She was her mother's last living child. As a result, her mother was denied any chance to use Rusticula as a political pawn and establish a safety net of her own. As a widow with no son to inherit her late husband's lands and wealth, Rusticula's mother was in a precarious position that could result in her losing her money and status. An important marriage between Rusticula and another nobleman could have provided her mother with protections she needed to live the rest of her life securely. But with her daughter firmly in a convent, she likely had little choice but to join one herself. Had her mother consented to Rusticula's joining of the monastery, her admittance would have been very similar to child oblation, as she entered while too young to truly consent, even according to the monastic rule the monastery at Arles abided by.⁵⁸ At five years old, Rusticula wasn't old enough to understand the complexities behind the decision to pursue a monastic vocation. However, she would have been old enough to know where she felt safe. And no doubt like other women and girls fearful of *raptus*, that was behind the cloister walls. For Rusticula, just as it was at times for Basina, the monastery was a refuge.

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, the monastery kept Rusticula safe, and like Eusebia, she flourished and became an abbess young, when she was only 18. She established a convent of her own shortly after her election to monastic office and continued to grow in renown

⁵⁸ Caesarius of Arles, "Caesarius of Arles: The Rule for Nuns," 50.

and esteem. But her popularity was seen by some as a threat, and a bishop named Maximus and Prince Ricomer went to King Clothar and falsely accused her of supporting an unspecified different king. King Clothar ordered Ricomer to investigate the matter, and after a confrontation with Rusticula's nuns, who loved and respected Rusticula dearly, he lied and said that she was guilty of the false charge. She was ordered to come to King Clothar, but refused, as she claimed to only follow the orders of God. Eventually, with reluctance, the governor of the city she resided in persuaded her to leave her monastery and travel to the city the king was in, and she agreed. Once there, she was imprisoned in a monastery cell.⁵⁹ What once was her refuge was briefly turned against her. Rusticula's nuns were furious she had been taken, and after seven days, an "apostolic man" named Domnolus denounced the king "for giving grave offense to God by condemning Christ's handmaid through unjust judgement."⁶⁰ According to Rusticula's hagiography, this terrified King Clothar, and he released her, providing her with whatever she needed to return to her monastery.⁶¹

Rusticula exemplifies the gilded cage aspect of early Frankish monasticism. There was both power and fragility found in a convent, and power found in the title of abbess. Because of her monastic vow she was protected by the authority of God, which even kings listened to on occasion. As a holy woman, the authority granted to her by monastic position was enough to eventually be acknowledged, respected, and even feared by a king. Eusebia shows some of the power the title of abbess can have, and Rusticula brings that authority even further. Her story is one of contradictions and a constant shifting of power from her hands to the hands of others, and back to her again. Being a nun kept her safe but restricted and being elected abbess garnered her

⁵⁹ McNamara, trans., "The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles, 127-129,

⁶⁰ McNamara, trans., "The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles. 129.

⁶¹ McNamara, trans., "The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles, 129.

respect from those around her to the point that when she was summoned by the king, the governor, who had a great deal of respect for her, only urged her into going for fear of his own life. But at the same time, the power and authority she wielded as abbess led to jealous men trying to restrict her further and failing. The fragile nature of monastic safety along with the grand power of it are shown with Rusticula, and the constant duality and contradictions are often what make monasteries gilded cages. Men tried to use the monastic system to oppress her, but the authority given to her by being an abbess granted her freedom and the ability to return to her own convent.

Basina, Eusebia, and Rusticula start to bring into focus the effect politics had on female monasticism. For Basina and Eusebia, internal politics over the choice of an abbess had negative consequences and caused chaos. For Rusticula, external politics almost led to her downfall before her status as abbess protected her. But external political situations also impacted the decision to join. Saint Gertrude, from the seventh century and a different Gertrude than Eusebia's great-grandmother, was a woman who had complex and politically motivated reasons to join a monastery. Like many saints who were contemporary to her, she was from a noble family. During the time in which she lived, King Dagobert was known for his marriage schemes, which involved him trying to centralize royal power by marrying heiresses to his allies at court. His goal in this was to strengthen his allies and weaken provincial nobles, using women as pawns and transmitters of property.⁶² There had been a change in inheritance laws removing restrictions on female inheritance, which granted noble women more power and worth.⁶³ Dagobert attempted to have royal centralization of land and power using women, and families in return used women

⁶² McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 132.

⁶³ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 177.

to divert wealth and property away from him.⁶⁴ During this time period, one of the best ways to divert wealth was for women to join a monastery.

When Dagobert attempted to arrange a match between a young, religious Gertrude and a noble ally of his choice, she vehemently refused and expressed a desire to join the monastic lifestyle. Her mother supported this choice, but nothing occurred for some time.⁶⁵ After 14 years had passed since her proclamation against the arranged marriage, her father passed. After his death Gertrude's mother began the process of establishing a monastery, but she was fearful her daughter would be abducted (possibly in *raptus*). She tonsured Gertrude, protecting her from that potentiality. Gertrude's hagiography alleged that she had rejoiced at being tonsured. Like Rusticula and countless other women, she would find safety behind cloister walls.⁶⁶ When the monastery of Nivelles had finished being built, her mother acted as abbess until she passed and left the mantle to her daughter. Gertrude held the position until she died several years later in part due to weakness caused by excessive asceticism.⁶⁷

What's known of Gertrude is primarily from her hagiography. Like numerous past saints, she was incredibly holy from a young age and desired nothing else besides the monastic life and gladly joined when she first was able. However, it is evident that her joining had less to do with vocation than political maneuverings. There were more political aspects than just the attempted royal centralization by Dagobert. The suitor he wished for Gertrude to marry was a possible usurper for her father's position. McNamara alleges that her desire to enter the religious life "may also have been dictated by her father" and that she "might have been infected by the

⁶⁴ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 196.

⁶⁵ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 221.

⁶⁶ McNamara, trans., "Gertrude, Abbess of Nivelles," in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 224.

⁶⁷ McNamara, trans., "Gertrude, Abbess of Nivelles," 225-6.

tension generated by her father's delicate position and sought escape into celibacy."⁶⁸ Her mother also vocally supported the choice (which could have influenced Gertrude) and was the one to quickly tonsure the girl to protect her from marriage and abduction. But despite these reasons which may have impacted her, it's also important to keep in mind her agency in the matter. Her hagiography has her passionately rejecting the idea of marriage. When it was proposed, "[s]he lost her temper and flatly rejected him [the suitor] with an oath, saying that she would have neither him nor any earthly spouse."⁶⁹ The primary sources present her as being vocal and vehement in her choice, and regardless of her family's influence, that choice needs to be remembered. The monastery was also still a gilded cage for her, in part due to the circumstance behind her joining. Her options were limited to obeying a king trying to gain more power and joining a monastery. While it was her choice to join, it was one made with limited options. The events surrounding Gertrude's entrance into monastic life are indicative of the complex web of politics that caused some women to join, which included both safety and a protection of familial wealth and assets.

Beyond the short term political reasonings and consequences of Gertrude joining monastic life, there were long term political effects as well. In the short term, Gertrude's family prevented part of Dagobert's marriage schemes and kept their wealth and fortune away from him and the royal family. In the long term, it was her family that replaced the Merovingians and she had a contribution to the success. She was a very popular saint, and being related to saints had beneficial impacts on a family. The "sacral connection" she gave helped "to provide the theoretical base that enabled them to supplant the Merovingians" and "gave the dynasty the

⁶⁸ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 220-1.

⁶⁹ McNamara, trans., "Gertrude, Abbess of Nivelles," 223.

ecclesiastical legitimation” that helped stabilize their rule.⁷⁰ While enticed into the cloister for political and safety reasons, it was her role as abbess and saint that gave her family a long lasting impact on the Frankish empire. Like with Rusticula, what started as a desire for safety ended in an important and long-lasting legacy.

Gertrude was not the only woman who entered monastic life due to complex political and familial reasons, even if her impact is perhaps one of the best known. There were other unmarried women sent to the cloister with less of a choice than Gertrude had, like the sisters of Louis the Pious. Charlemagne, their father, by all accounts loved his daughters dearly. But despite this love, he did not permit any of them to wed. While Einhard alleges Charlemagne prevented any marriages because he was overly attached to his daughters, it was politically motivated instead of emotionally.⁷¹ By keeping his daughters unwed, he prevented enhancing the power of whatever noble family they would have been married into, and eliminated the threat to the throne a potential future grandson could present.⁷² But, even though his daughters were not permitted to marry does not mean they were not permitted relationships with men. While some contemporary scholars viewed it as being scandalous, Charlemagne’s daughters were allowed to have lovers and children by them. And, as these children were born out of wedlock in an increasingly Christian empire, they posed very little political threat. Keeping his daughters close also gave them influence in his court, and in his later years, they “exercised considerable

⁷⁰ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 222.

⁷¹ Sylvie Joye, “Carolingian Rulers and Marriage in the Age of Louis the Pious and His Sons,” in *Gender and Historiography: Studies in the Earlier Middle Ages in Honour of Pauline Stafford*, ed. Janet L. Nelson et al. (University of London Press, 2012): 111.

⁷² Matthias Becher and David S. Bachrach, “Charlemagne’s Family and the Arrangement of His Succession,” in *Charlemagne* (Yale University Press, 2003): 124-5.

political influence” and “collectively fulfilled the function of a queen.”⁷³ But the freedom of Charlemagne’s daughters would unfortunately not last beyond him.

When Charlemagne died in 814, he only had one living male heir, Louis the Pious. Louis the Pious was a very different ruler than his father was. One of his first actions was forcing all of his sisters, half-sisters, half-brothers, and cousins into monastic institutions. While he later allowed male relatives back into court, the same was not done with his sisters, and they spent the rest of their days away from court.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, there is not much information on the daughters of Charlemagne, especially following their exile from court and forced placement in convents. While some scholars argue that the reasonings for the exile of Charlemagne’s daughters was part of Louis the Pious’s efforts to push the empire towards monogamy, it was more to do with politics and a “desire to curb their influence.”⁷⁵ His sisters were well liked, and Louis was Charlemagne’s heir because he was the last legitimate son of him, not because he was held in high regard by his father.⁷⁶ It may be true that Louis the Pious, in addition to his political maneuverings, was disgusted by his sisters’ informal relationships over steady marriages, but that was not his primary reason for sending them away.

Louis the Pious’s political machinations are more evident when looking at another woman he forced into the cloister, his father’s cousin, Gundrada. She was a devout woman who often communicated with the scholar Alcuin, and was close to Charlemagne, along with being a part of his entourage.⁷⁷ Her older brother Wala was also a highly influential figure in Charlemagne’s court, and her other brother was involved in the politics of the time as well.⁷⁸

⁷³ Becher and Bachrach, “Charlemagne’s Family and the Arrangement of His Succession,” 125.

⁷⁴ Joye, “Carolingian Rulers and Marriage in the Age of Louis the Pious and His Sons,” 110.

⁷⁵ Becher and Bachrach, “Charlemagne’s Family and the Arrangement of His Succession,” 126.

⁷⁶ Becher and Bachrach, “Charlemagne’s Family and the Arrangement of His Succession,” 131.

⁷⁷ de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era*, 27.

⁷⁸ de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era*, 26.

When Louis the Pious came to power in 814, she and both of her brothers were exiled from court, all sent to various monastic institutions. Gundrada was sent to Poitiers, the monastery established by Radegund and that a little over 200 years prior Basina was forced into.⁷⁹ Unlike with the sisters of Louis the Pious, there is no reason besides politics for this decision. According to one contemporary scholar, Gundrada was “allegedly the only woman who managed to hang on to her chastity in a palace full of delights and passions.”⁸⁰ These women weren’t like Eusebia and Basina, young and heavily reliant on family members prior to monastic entrance. These women were fully grown and politically active and connected in court. They weren’t sent to monasteries out of a lack of anything better to do with them, but because Louis feared them and the power they had or could have. Because they either were current political threats or had the potential to be future political threats to him.

The sisters of Louis the Pious give indications of what was possible for women. The Frankish empire was a world in which there were efforts to restrict women because they had the potential to be a threat. Louis the Pious’s actions, while framed as being for the sake of morality, were because he recognized his female blood relations as being potentially dangerous to him and his role as king. He didn’t care about morals or their souls. He cared about his own rule, and they had the potential to be a threat. In the age of Louis the Pious, women weren’t just pawns for strategic marriages. They could and did wield power and influence and respect. Women could be conduits of power, and one of the only ways to restrict that power was to force monasticism on them. And therein lies some of the dichotomy of monasteries. For unmarried women like Lilliola, Rusticula, Eusebia, and more, monastic life provided them with opportunities to gain power and authority and become a political threat. But for women so involved in politics in the

⁷⁹ de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era*, 29.

⁸⁰ de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era*, 27.

secular world, monasteries were where they were sent so they would be less of a threat. Even if their story largely ends the moment Louis sent them away, these sisters help exemplify the dual roles monasteries had.

In the Merovingian and Carolingian period, the reasons why unmarried women and girls joined monastic societies often was far more than just a desire for religious life. There were complex reasons, largely centered along family desire, fear of safety, and political machinations. With limited primary sources and even fewer from women, discerning precise reasons why each woman joined monastic life is difficult to ascertain. Monasteries were gilded cages, alternately offering freedom and restrictions, providing benefits hand in hand with cloistering requirements. Even in a single woman's life, the circumstances could shift between prison and sanctuary. But, regardless of whether or not becoming a nun was a woman's own choice, influenced by her family or circumstance, or against her will, many women were able to use the male dominated system to their advantage. Once a nun or abbess, a woman was offered protections and had the opportunity to wield genuine authority.

The circumstances leading actively married women into monastic life had similarities and differences. There often was a similar complex web of politics, family, and personal desire, complicated by the presence of living husbands. Married women who entered monasteries willingly often already possessed more power than unmarried women, which showed itself through the magnitude of what they were able to accomplish. But for married women who did not wish to enter a convent, the stakes and risks could likewise be even greater. For married women, the gilded cage is perhaps more present than before, with both the sanctuary and prison aspects of monasticism elevated even more.

Chapter 3: Married Women

Despite their status, married women were on occasion permitted to enter monastic life. Their reasons for joining were often as complex as unmarried women, if not more so, and occasionally involved working around male systems in order to get consent to join. In Frankish society, while a woman could “seek shelter in a monastery if she were mistreated by her husband,” at the same time, “a married woman could not embrace the religious life without her husband’s permission.”⁸¹ There were roles positions in the church, like that of deaconess, that could provide some safety to married women who were not able to fully join the monastic order. But if a woman was determined enough, no matter her marital status, she would find her way to the cloister, which is readily seen. Married women joined for a variety of reasons: for safety, with spouses, and, on some occasions, against their will by husbands wishing to circumvent divorce laws.

Similar to how Rictrude joined monastic life, on occasion families entered together. There are a few instances of married couples joining monastic life together, and cases where women were the driving forces behind their family’s monasticism, like with seventh century Saint Waldetrude and her husband, Saint Madelgar. These particular individuals were a part of “the best documented... family of saints.”⁸² Waldetrude and her husband, along with her sister, parents, and two daughters were all saints.⁸³ According to Waldetrude’s hagiography, it was she who turned her husband towards the monastic life. She “was not content with her own salvation” and it was “the fire of love which glowed sweetly in her” that swayed him towards

⁸¹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 104, 132.

⁸² McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 235.

⁸³ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 235.

monasticism.⁸⁴ Both Walde trude and Madelgar established monastic communities to reside in, and after her husband left to become a monk a bishop advised that Wadeltrude “be enclosed in the monastery which she had already begun to build.”⁸⁵ Walde trude inspired her husband towards joint monastery entrees, and once he did, she was permitted as well. She was the driving force behind their admittance, and her monastic vows gave her more authority in her natal family as well. Walde trude had a younger sister named Aldegund who desired the monastic life, but whose mother was pressuring the younger girl into marriage. Walde trude supported her sister’s monastic desire, and eventually Aldegund was permitted to join the cloister as well, entering a monastery near her sister’s.⁸⁶ Monasticism gave Walde trude the authority to be able to intervene in her family affairs on her sister’s behalf.

Walde trude had an ideal entrance into monastic life for a married woman. She wanted to join, convinced her husband to do so with her, then established a convent and entered. But not every married woman had the same luck. Some women had husbands who wished to use the monastic system against them so that they could get remarried. In the early days of a Christian Frankish empire, monogamy was not yet enforced. Kings had multiple wives and concubines, and the church wasn’t yet strong enough to have sway over that facet of life. But, as time moved on, monogamy became increasingly encouraged and enforced, and divorce and remarriage were likewise increasingly restricted. A way to circumvent this was to have a wife join a monastery, which was made legal and permissible in the 757 Council of Compiegne. If a woman entered a

⁸⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “Walde trude, Abbess of Mons,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 256.

⁸⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “Aldegund, Abbess of Maubeuge,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 239.

⁸⁶ Isabel Moreira, “No Ordinary Visionary: St. Aldegund of Maubeuge,” in *Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul* (Cornell University Press, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvh85dw.14>, 204.

convent and took monastic vows, her husband could remarry. However, a different council, the Council of Verberie, said the opposite. It stated that men were not to be permitted to remarry if their wives joined monastic life, which was “perhaps to protect wives from being forced into the nunnery.”⁸⁷ The necessity of their needing to be a law preventing men from forcing their wives into convents so they could marry their mistresses is indicative both of increasing legal protections for women and that enough men were forcing wives into monasteries that there was the necessity for such a law to come into being.

In Frankish history, there is one particular attempted divorce case that is mentioned extensively: that of King Lothar and his wife Tetberga during the ninth century. Around the same time the events of the divorce were underway, a contemporary historian named Hincmar of Rheims wrote a book on the topic. He was an archbishop who dealt often with divorce or attempted divorce, and in his book wrote that a separation of a couple was permissible if one or both individuals joined a monastery, but even if that occurred, remarriage was not allowed.⁸⁸ His views were more aligned with the Council of Verberie than that of Compiegne, but still, King Lothar persisted. He wanted to divorce Tetberga so that he could marry Waldrada, his concubine, and made numerous attempts to do so, but was ultimately unsuccessful. His efforts began around the year 858. First, he accused her of incest, but she was cleared of those charges in 859. That having failed, he “imprisoned her until she declared herself desirous of exchanging the married state for the life of the convent.”⁸⁹ That also failed. That wasn’t his only attempt to force his wife into the cloister. In 866, he “coerced Tetberga to request separation from the pope on the ground that she was childless and wished to enter a monastery.”⁹⁰ The pope responded that being barren

⁸⁷ McNamara and Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” 103.

⁸⁸ McNamara and Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” 110.

⁸⁹ McNamara and Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” 109.

⁹⁰ McNamara and Wemple, “Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom,” 122n120.

wasn't enough of a reason for a separation and reiterated that Lothar would still be unable to marry if she joined a monastery.⁹¹ He was married to Tetberga until his death in 869.⁹²

Lothar was unsuccessful in his attempts to force his wife into the cloister so he could marry his concubine because despite his authority, he still needed her consent before she could join. It does, however, still give insight into the Frankish world in the mid-ninth century. At this point, the church had gained enough traction and power that it was able to deny a divorce to a king. Additionally, despite changing views on remarriage after one party joins monastic life, Lothar still viewed a monastery as a means to get rid of his wife. His actions of trying to force her to agree to joining also indicate the necessity of her consent. It's also a sign of the precarious position that women were placed in. Tetberga was "politically desirable" but Waldrada had already bore Lothar children, something Tetberga was unable to do.⁹³ Lothar's attempt to force his wife into a convent for the crime of not being able to bear him children likely happened to other women who were not as protected by the church or by their families. But in this case, he failed at doing so, showing some of the autonomy married secular women could have. The Frankish world was a patriarchal one, but there were still limits to male power.

There were other queens who did long for the cloister. Radegund of Thuringia is one such queen, who also remains one of the best examples of a married woman entering monastic life. She is known largely for her sainthood, and the monastery she established, Sainte-Croix at Poitiers, which was one of the most important and influential female monastic societies. But her start as a nun was complicated.⁹⁴ When she was a young child, her uncle (who was a member of the ruling house of Thuringia) broke a pre-existing treaty with the Franks, and the Franks

⁹¹ McNamara and Wemple, "Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom," 122n120.

⁹² McNamara and Wemple, "Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom," 111.

⁹³ McNamara and Wemple, "Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom," 110, 121n111.

⁹⁴ Coon, "Civilizing Merovingian Gaul," 122.

responded with great and overwhelming violence. Most of the ruling house was destroyed by 531, and Radegund, who would have been around 6, was taken to be King Clothar's war bride. She was raised separately until around 540, when she was of marrying age.⁹⁵ According to the hagiography by her dear friend Venantius Fortunatus, Radegund was extremely pious from a young age, and continued that piety even after being made queen.⁹⁶ Radegund did not wish to be wed, and spent "most of her married life trying to escape from her husband into the tranquility of a convent."⁹⁷ She succeeded around 550 CE, after her husband Clothar killed her last remaining brother.⁹⁸ She fled to a church, and begged a bishop to consecrate her. He was hesitant because of her married status, before consecrating her as a deaconess.⁹⁹ Eventually, Radegund was able to convince King Clothar to support her religious life, and she herself credited him as "giving [her] the means" to establish the convent at Poitiers.¹⁰⁰ Because she was married, it wasn't until after her husband consented that Radegund was permitted to more formally join religious life and establish her monastery.

While on the surface the necessity of her husband's consent seems to go against Radegund's autonomy, the fact she was able to receive it is remarkable. In the sixth century, the Frankish empire and surrounding areas were violent. Radegund's own family's downfall was accidentally orchestrated by an uncle who wanted more power. But King Clothar let his wife go. He abducted her when she was a child to be his queen, and she was able to persuade him not

⁹⁵ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 60-1.

⁹⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., "The Life of Holy Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus," in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 71-3.

⁹⁷ Jane Stevenson, "Brothers and Sisters: Women and Monastic Life in Eighth-Century England and Frankia," *Nederlands Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 82, no. 1 (2002): 7.

⁹⁸ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 62.

⁹⁹ McNamara, trans., "The Life of Holy Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus," 75.

¹⁰⁰ Radegund of Thuringia to the Bishops, 561-67, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/914.html>.

only to allow her to become a nun, but also to give her the funds with which to establish a monastery. In the sixth century, the church wasn't as powerful in the Frankish empire as it was in the ninth with Lothar and Tetberga. There was nothing stopping Clothar from either having his wife once more abducted and brought to him or having her killed. While there are indications that he later wanted her back, she didn't return and spent the rest of her days as a nun at Poitiers.

The monastery itself is also another place where Radegund's power and authority flourished. She had it constructed and contacted another abbess, Caesaria II of Arles, to gain a monastic rule for it to follow.¹⁰¹ She could have been made abbess, but instead chose a woman named Agnes for the position and defended her congregations' right to choose an abbess. In a letter to a group of bishops, she wrote that she hoped that no one would interfere with the running of her monastery, and that if one did, "let him incur the judgement of God, the holy cross, the blessed Mary, and the blessed confessors Hilary and Martin to whom I gave over my sisters to be held in care... and let him find them his opponents and persecutors."¹⁰² This letter also has implications that the bishops are included in the groups of people that should leave her monastery be. Radegund also wrote to the Emperor and Empress of Byzantium for relics, and in return was sent pieces of the true cross.¹⁰³ The monastery also gave her some familial authority, like it did Waldetrude. Some years after she established it, her niece by marriage Basina (the same girl who co-led a nun rebellion) was entrusted into her care, and she was able to speak on the girl's behalf to prevent her from being removed for a political marriage. She utilized the power and authority both from her previous role as queen and her current one as nun and founder

¹⁰¹ Caesaria to Radegund of Thuringia and Richild, 550, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/915.html>.

¹⁰² Radegund of Thuringia to the Bishops, 561-67, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/914.html>.

¹⁰³ Radegund of Thuringia to Emperor Justin II and Empress Sophia, 568-569, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/916.html>.

to fully furnish and provide for her monastery, making connections, establishing rules, providing safeguards, and gaining holy relics. But she was still not wholly content in her life.

Just as Radegund tried desperately to join a monastic community, she then tried desperately to get into contact with any living male relative. One attempt at this is found in the poem “The Thuringian War.” The poem was either written by her or by her friend Fortunatus “with her verbal collaboration.”¹⁰⁴ From the point of view of Radegund, it provides insight into her life, beginning with gruesome descriptions of the war that killed her family. After around 40 lines of details of the aftermath of the war, Radegund began entreaties on her cousin, Amalfred, asking if he remembered her and how close they used to be and where he was now. She asked that if they cannot meet again in life, if he could help bear her to her tomb after her death. She ended the poem with a plea to Christ to listen to her prayers and ensure that her poem reached her relatives and a letter was sent to her in return.¹⁰⁵ One notable aspect of the poem, which was essentially a plea for company and connection, occurs a little over halfway through. She writes, “If the monastery’s sacred cloister did not keep me back, / I’d come unheralded to the region where you bide.”¹⁰⁶ So desperate was she for familial connection that her poem made it seem like she would have left the monastery she tried so hard to enter. And leaving the cloister would be no small feat. It would be breaking her vows as a nun. The monastic rule she helped introduce required women to stay inside the monastery walls. A letter from the bishops reiterated this fact, where they wrote that no nun was permitted to leave once they entered, “lest what is held in

¹⁰⁴ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “The Life of Holy Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 65-70.

¹⁰⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “The Thuringian War,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 68.

honor by all should be brought into dishonor by the foul act of one.”¹⁰⁷ If she had left, she wasn’t just risking her own honor and respect, but that of the monastery she’d tried desperately to establish and escape to. Unfortunately, by the time the poem was sent out, her cousin Amalfred had already died.¹⁰⁸

Radegund’s desperation for familial connection and her seemingly willingness to break the monastic rule she herself introduced to the monastery in order to see one of her last remaining family members shows that it wasn’t just religious vocation that led her there, but also to escape her husband. The hagiographies by both Fortunatus and Baudovinia described Radegund as someone who was holy from youth and longed for nothing more than to join religious life. Fortunatus wrote that as a child she would hold pseudo-religious ceremonies with other children and even after becoming queen “avoided the trappings of royalty.”¹⁰⁹ Baudovinia described her destroying pagan shrines while she was still married to King Clothar and also wrote that she lived “as an example of the monastic life while she was still in secular habit.”¹¹⁰ Neither of these biographers mention her desire to reconnect with her family outside of the monastery. Yet this poem, composed either by her or with her years prior to her biographies showed her willing to risk breaking a serious rule to see remaining family. She spent 10 lines detailing the rough traveling conditions she would have been willing to face. She wrote that she would take a ship, and if that ship broke, she would row, and “[i]f by unlucky chance, the planks refused to bear [her], / [she] would come to [him] exhausted from swimming.”¹¹¹ She desperately

¹⁰⁷ Bishops to Radegund of Thuringia, 550’s, *Epistolae: Medieval Women’s Latin Literature*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/913.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Stevenson, “Brothers and Sisters,” 8

¹⁰⁹ McNamara, “The Life of Holy Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus,” 72.

¹¹⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “Book II,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 87.

¹¹¹ McNamara, “The Thuringian War,” 68.

wanted to see him. Despite the lifelong devoutness preached by Fortunatus and Baudovinia, the reason Radegund joined a monastery had less to do with religious desire and more to do with fleeing the husband that kidnapped her after killing most of her family. Radegund was a woman looking for safety, which she found behind a monastery's walls after persuading her husband to let her leave. Radegund is a prime example of the complex reasons causing married women to enter monastic institutions, and how they acted as gilded cages. She entered looking for safety, which was provided, but she wasn't fully content and couldn't find any living relatives. The monastery gave her autonomy and authority and a community of women to look after and be looked after by, but it could not return to her the family she once had.

Radegund was not the only woman who did not wish to marry. Numerous hagiographies of women of all marital statuses (unmarried, married, or widowed) have this same theme. While these hagiographies tend to portray the lack of a desire as a sign of a strong desire for the monastic life and a desire to serve God and preserve their virginity, it also is indicative of marriage being unappealing for women and monasteries being, as stated earlier, the only acceptable alternative. Marriage was often an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience, especially when it came to childbirth, with high rates of infant and maternal mortality. Some indication on the reason women may have decided to pursue monastic life over that of marriage and motherhood can be found in the writings of Fortunatus. As was mentioned earlier, Fortunatus had a close friendship with Radegund and Agnes, whom Radegund appointed as abbess at Poitiers. These three people exchanged numerous correspondence over the years in the form of letters and poems and gifts, and it is clear from reading their writings that there was a great care amongst them all. As a result of these close friendships, Fortunatus was a good source of information on the lives of sixth century women.

In a poem to Agnes, Fortunatus “depicted in vivid metaphors the tribulations of married women” and “[i]n explaining what prompted women to wrench themselves free from sex roles and to embrace monastic life, he pointed with great sensitivity to the traumas of marriage and childbirth, and of a child’s or husband’s death.”¹¹² In this poem of 400 lines, 60 are dedicated to the pain of marriage and childbirth. He detailed the physical discomforts of pregnancy and the pain of stillbirth, where “[s]he was not entitled by her offspring to be called a mother nor yet a virgin.”¹¹³ A woman could pay the price of her virginity, but not receive the gift of motherhood. Fortunatus went on to say that it was even more painful to lose a child after a few years, and how every living child she saw would be a reminder of the one she lost. Worst of all, he wrote, is the loss of a husband. But virgins (ie. nuns), don’t have to deal with this pain. Of them, Fortunatus wrote, “You mourn no deaths, you enjoy happiness without end; your love lives forever.”¹¹⁴ Monasteries offered protection from the consequences and sorrows of married life, even if the price of that safety was physical freedom. While there can be no definitive answer over whether or not childbirth decreased a woman’s life expectancy, and whether or not that may have influenced a desire not to marry and to instead join a monastic community, Fortunatus showed that marriage and childbirth were traumatic for many reasons, and joining a monastery could prevent women from having to experience those traumatic experiences.¹¹⁵ And, unmentioned by Fortunatus but no doubt painful as well, was a woman’s experience with infertility, another trauma that could be prevented by living in a monastery. The life of Saint Sadalberga details

¹¹² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 151.

¹¹³ Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus and Michael Roberts, *Poems*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 46 (Harvard University Press, 2017), 521.

¹¹⁴ Fortunatus and Roberts, *Poems*, 523.

¹¹⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 101, 102.

some of these traumas – the lack of a desire to be married but forced to regardless, the young death of a husband, and the painful struggles of infertility.

Sadalberga was a seventh century saint and abbess who exemplifies women who wanted monastic admittance for purposes of safety and a lack of a desire to marry but were at first denied that avenue. According to her hagiography, Sadalberga was born blind and ill, and was healed at a young age by Saint Eustasius.¹¹⁶ She grew up healthy, beautiful, and graceful, and as a result was then married “against her will” to a man who died two months after their marriage.¹¹⁷ As a widow, Sadalberga wanted “to flee to the refuge of [a] convent” and would have “if sex had not been an impediment and royal snares not entrapped her.”¹¹⁸ As a woman, she technically needed male consent, which would have been a little difficult for a young, healthy widow to receive as she still would have been useful in a marriage agreement. Two years after she became a widow she was once more wed against her will, this time in part due to one of King Dagobert’s marriage schemes.¹¹⁹ Just as it was with Gertrude and other women, it was “an obvious strategy to gain some control over his restless aristocracy.”¹²⁰ So Sadalberga was married, and after some time, she suffered from infertility. She made a promise to God that if she could have children, she would consecrate them into the church. She bore five of whom four lived past infancy, and she made sure all were consecrated, as her goal was for her family to “form a church of Christ.”¹²¹ Fortunately, Sadalberga’s second husband was also devout as she was. With the help of him and a man named Blessed Waldebert, she was able to take up the

¹¹⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “Here begins the life of the Abbess Sadalberga,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 181-2.

¹¹⁷ McNamara, “Abbess Sadalberga,” 182.

¹¹⁸ McNamara, “Abbess Sadalberga,” 183.

¹¹⁹ McNamara, “Abbess Sadalberga,” 182-3.

¹²⁰ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 177.

¹²¹ McNamara, “Abbess Sadalberga,” 184-5.

nun's habit and establish a female monastic society using her paternal inheritance.¹²² After it was built, she "gathered more than a hundred women both from the free nobility and from her own service."¹²³ Later, out of fear of safety for the nuns in the monastery she was establishing, she moved the convent to a city rather than keep it in the countryside.¹²⁴

Unlike Radegund, there is no mention in Sadalberga's hagiography of her being very holy or desiring consecration from a young age. The first mention of her wanting to join a convent comes after her widowhood and could have stemmed more from a desire not to have to experience the traumas of marriage and losing a husband again. And, while technically her husband did need to approve before she was able to become a nun and abbess, her hagiography makes it clear that, like with Waldetrude, Sadalberga was the impetus behind her entire family joining monastic life. Women at this time could be and were drivers behind their family's religiosity. Male consent was more of a formality than anything. If a woman, of any marital status, wanted to become a nun or abbess, she found ways to do so. Sadalberga's life also reveals safety concerns that were had for female monastic homes. The first monastery she established was not behind the walls of a city, and though the area it was in may have been safe during construction, it's described as having "neither stability nor protection" and there were fears of civil wars or other types of unrest that could endanger the women residing there.¹²⁵ It was for these fears over safety that led many monasteries for women to be built in cities, like Sadalberga's later monastery was. The safety provided by monasteries (the lack of husbands, harsher penalties for *raptus*, no possibility of death by childbirth) were significant but couldn't

¹²² McNamara, "Abbess Sadalberga," 185.

¹²³ McNamara, "Abbess Sadalberga," 186.

¹²⁴ McNamara, "Abbess Sadalberga," 185-6.

¹²⁵ McNamara, "Abbess Sadalberga," 186.

always negate the real-world threats that existed. But Sadalberga realized this early and had the means and authority to establish a second monastery.

The circumstances in which a married woman found herself joining a monastic society were often not ideal. Sometimes, like with Radegund, it was out of fear of safety, and a necessity to flee their husbands. Sometimes men tried (and sometimes failed) to force their wives into the cloister so they could remarry, like with Tetberga. But on occasion, a woman wanted to join, was married anyway, and found a way to still enter monastic life. Married women technically needed their husband's consent before they could join monastic life, but that was very clearly a formality in most cases. These women had autonomy and utilized monasticism for their benefit. They established convents, convinced families to join with them, and in the case of Radegund and Sadalberga to an extent, went to great lengths to ensure the safety of the women under their protection. While there was clearly still the gilded cage aspect to monasticism, whether it was not a complete guarantee of safety, loneliness and unhappiness, or choosing monasticism as the only option to escape their marriages, monasteries still benefitted these women, and they used them to their advantage. These women used the complicated position of already being married often to their gain, persuading husbands to either join too or to provide financial support and worked patriarchal systems to their advantage. With unmarried and married women, the reasons for monastic entrance were complex and had less to do with religious vocation than it did safety or a lack of desire to be married in the first place. With widows, those same concerns were still existing. But unlike married and unmarried women, widows had a more complex role in society wherein they could have more freedom or could have more risk, and there were also laws that both benefitted and restricted their ability to exist safely in the monastic world. In this final

marital status of women, the gilded cage, perhaps more than before, is clear in almost every aspect of monastic life.

Chapter 4: Widows

In Frankish society, widows occupied a fascinating and complex role. They were simultaneously protected and vulnerable, and both independent and dependent. Wealthy widows often exerted a degree of control in their life following the death of their husband, allowing them “significant personal and political independence.”¹²⁶ Some of these wealthy and noble widows were able to choose to remarry, become consecrated, or to raise their children and take care of their property.¹²⁷ But this possibility to have choice was not always guaranteed, as there was “a social reality in which the widow’s potential freedom from male control was counterbalanced by the loss of protection a spouse could offer.”¹²⁸ While in some cases widowhood provided a degree of freedom and choice, young widows were often pressured into remarriage, and older widows were usually encouraged to join a monastic community, especially if they lacked financial independence or a relative’s household to live in.¹²⁹ Widows not protected by a monastery or relative were vulnerable to poverty, rape, abduction, and forced remarriage.¹³⁰ As a result of these dangers, widows often sought protection from the church, either by joining monastic communities or becoming consecrated as a *deo sacrata*. A widow’s choice between monastery and possible safety or independence and possible vulnerability help exemplify the gilded cage aspect of monasticism.

The practice of *deo sacrata* (also called *deo devota* or worldly widowhood) allowed women to be consecrated and devote themselves to Christianity without having to be cloistered

¹²⁶ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 80-1.

¹²⁷ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 81.

¹²⁸ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 80.

¹²⁹ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 92-3.

¹³⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 259n43, 105.

in a monastic community. There were benefits for some to choose *deo sacrata* instead of traditional monastic life. Women, widows particularly, were important as “agents for the transmission of land and power” which allowed them to participate in the secular world, and being a *deo sacrata* enabled them to stay in their homes.¹³¹ While not all *deo sacrata* were widows, it could be especially useful for them, as they usually had land, wealth, or children to look after. And it was a common practice. In the sixth century, the number of women (widowed and unmarried) who participated in this at-home monasticism was enough that female asceticism of the time period cannot be measured by convents.¹³² This was a fact that came under increasing scrutiny by men, and starting in the sixth century there were attempts to restrict this type of religious devotion in favor of the cloister.

There were a few different Frankish Councils that commented on widows and their position in the church, and much of the conversation around them seems to focus on fears for the maintenance of their chastity. The Synod of Saint-Jean around 673 stated that veiled women may live in their homes, but if they “live neglectful of their chastity, they should be impelled to revert to a monastery.”¹³³ The seventh century was a time period of increasing episcopal control, and by the end of it, “widows and women who wished to be veiled were ordered into convents.”¹³⁴ Sometime later in 755 during the Council of Verneuil, it was stated that veiled women had to either reside in a monastery or be supervised by a bishop.¹³⁵ But, it wasn’t until the time of Louis the Pious that veiled women who weren’t in monasteries were explicitly criticized. It was at the Synod of Paris around 829 that stated veiled women were evil lest they joined a convent a month

¹³¹ Simon MacLean, “Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe,” *Past & Present*, no. 178 (2003): 6.

¹³² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 157.

¹³³ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 91n43.

¹³⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 166.

¹³⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 166.

after their husband died.¹³⁶ This had to do largely with three factors – the church’s promotion of a specific model of a Christian family, fear that widows (especially young ones) wouldn’t be able to control their chastity, and the concern that they were threats to monogamy.¹³⁷ The easiest way to alleviate the problem, especially with concerns of monogamy and chastity, was to send women to the cloister. Negative views of widows were repeated in the later ninth century by men like Hincmar of Rheims. In his treatise on divorce he stated that younger widows “receive the sacred veil... in order that they may licentiously abuse themselves with more men.”¹³⁸ While a fifth century letter from a bishop to King Clovis implies the protection of widows is both the duty of the church and that of good kings, in later centuries it was increasingly clear that “[t]o be protected by the church, a widow had to join a convent.”¹³⁹ These were women who wanted monastic protection and to devote their life to religion but on their terms. Being forced into the cloister to both devote themselves to Christianity and receive protection shows both the increasing control over women’s lives that occurred as the Christian church grew in strength, and the increasing determination for women to make the most of their circumstances.

For widows, monasteries also had different purposes and functions beyond protection or increasing restrictions on consecrated widowhood. Many widowed women sought out monasteries to avoid remarriage, or because they were free to after an unwilling marriage ended. Monasteries were also a place for women to have a monastic or holy retirement. While monastic retirement wasn’t restricted to women, with various male members of royal families being forced or encouraged into monastic retirement for political or succession reasons, for royal women

¹³⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 167.

¹³⁷ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 92; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 167, 105.

¹³⁸ Hincmar et al., *The Divorce of King Lothar and Queen Theutberga*, Manchester Medieval Sources (Manchester University Press, 2016): 119.

¹³⁹ William M. Daly, “Clovis: How Barbaric, How Pagan?,” *Speculum* 69, no. 3 (1994): 632-3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3040846>; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 105.

especially it was encouraged to enter a monastery.¹⁴⁰ With their husbands dead, if their children were grown, royal women seldom had reason or ability to remain politically active in the secular world. Additionally, like with other marital statuses, monasteries had benefits offered to widows. One of the risks of widowhood was “the threat to her reputation through rumor,” and residing cloistered in a monastery decreased that risk.¹⁴¹ Being in a monastery also allowed women to have a life outside of the prescribed roles of mother and wife. Some widows chose to reside in a convent over being a *deo sacrata* because “the chance to communicate and live with other women holding the same interests and beliefs held an even greater attraction.”¹⁴² In a monastery, there were with like-minded individuals, and a safe place to reside, work, and be devoted to their faith. Monasteries also enabled them to use “their intelligence and administrative talents” which allowed them to “achieve a level of accomplishment in their lives not available to them in the outside world.”¹⁴³ For widows, like unmarried and married women, monasteries functioned as gilded cages with benefits that made them appealing for some, and drawbacks that made them unappealing towards others.

As is apparent from the mixed bag aspects of monastic life, not all widows entered monastic retirement willingly. For some widows, like Theudechild, the cloister was more of a cage than a gilded one, with the beneficial aspects more difficult to ascertain. Theudechild was a sixth century Merovingian queen, born into poverty before being wed to King Charibert I. After Charibert died, Theudechild was, like many women, placed in a precarious position. During this

¹⁴⁰ Janet L. Nelson, “Ninth-Century Vocations of Persons of Mature Years,” in *Essays Offered to Christopher Brooke on the Occasion of His Eightieth Year*, ed. Miri Rubin (University of London Press, 2020):42; Janet L. Nelson, “The Carolingian Moment,” in *Debating Medieval Europe: The Early Middle Ages* (Manchester University Press, 2020): 64.

¹⁴¹ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 81.

¹⁴² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 163.

¹⁴³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 163.

time period, the Merovingians were still polygynous, and she was only one of Charibert's wives. Moreover, according to Gregory of Tours she only bore her husband one son who died shortly after birth.¹⁴⁴ Without a living heir and little to no wealth that wasn't given to her by her deceased husband, she didn't have many options if she wanted to remain in the secular world. To secure herself a future, she sent a letter to Charibert's brother, King Guntram, offering her hand in marriage. A marriage to him would provide her with safety, security, and a foothold in the politics of the land. He sent a letter back, seeming to consent to the match, and urging her to hurry towards him with her riches, which would likely act as a dowry. Unfortunately, it was a trick. When she arrived, he took almost all her wealth and trapped her in the monastery at Arles, the same convent Rusticula would later find sanctuary in.¹⁴⁵ According to Gregory of Tours, the reason he gave was that the treasures that once belonged to his brother were better to be with him than with Theudechild who "was unworthy of [his] brother's bed."¹⁴⁶ Additionally, a marriage between a man and his deceased brother's wife would have been considered incestuous to Christians.¹⁴⁷

Theudechild did not desire monastic life and struggled in it. But she did not lie idly by and tried to gain control of her future once more, attempting at one point to arrange a different marriage for herself with what little riches she had left. Unfortunately, while trying to escape the monastery she was caught by the abbess who as punishment had her beaten severely. She was put under guard and remained confined and unhappy for the rest of her days.¹⁴⁸ For Theudechild, monasticism was more of a prison than a gilded cage. There were few benefits for her. She did

¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 220.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 220-221.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 221.

¹⁴⁷ Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, 221.

originally have some freedom in the monastery, at least enough to try to take back control of her life. She had the means to send and receive letters uninhibited, even if she was eventually found out and caught. Being in a monastery did likely prevent her death in the bloodthirsty world of the Franks. Despite trying to take control of her life twice, the last time also involving attempted disobedience and a breaking of monastic vows, she wasn't executed or assassinated as a result. While these protections were meager, and she still died an unspecified amount of time after being beaten for trying to leave, they were still more than she likely would have gotten in the secular world. For Theudechild the monastery may have been more cage than sanctuary, but she was more or less safe behind its walls.

Much of the information on Theudechild comes from Gregory of Tours who does not depict her well, but instead as a "foolish and vulgar opportunist."¹⁴⁹ In reality, she was a woman trying to survive. Without a living son, she had no political power, and returning to her life as a shepherd's daughter after being queen was likely as undesirable as monastic life was. Like other women, she was vulnerable in her widowed state and there was nothing she could do to prevent the theft of her wealth or the forced confinement. The monastery she was sent to, Arles, was also one where cloistering was strictly adhered to.¹⁵⁰ She went from the relative privilege and freedom of queenship to the relatively enclosed and egalitarian nature of nunhood. While Theudechild was unhappy at Arles, her presence there did benefit and allow the protection of Rusticula. King Guntram had to convince the abbess of Arles, Lilliola, into keeping Theudechild imprisoned at her monastery. In exchange, he owed Lilliola a favor, which she used to keep

¹⁴⁹ John Watkins, "Interdynastic Marriage, Religious Conversion, and the Expansion of Diplomatic Society," in *After Lavinia, A Literary History of Premodern Marriage Diplomacy* (Cornell University Press, 2017): 60.

¹⁵⁰ Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 89.

Rusticula after rescuing her from her abductor.¹⁵¹ The safety of one girl in the convent hinged upon the imprisonment of another. McNamara posits that the reason why Lilliola agreed to the imprisonment in the first place is the funds that were stripped from Theudechild. The money provided to the monastery upon its founding was likely dwindling, and accepting a wealthy widow into a convent usually involved the convent also receiving the widow's wealth. By that point, it could be argued that Theudechild's admittance technically helped care for more girls than Rusticula. This also all shows that in monasteries, women could and did impact the lives and safeties of other women. But while the situation was less than ideal for Theudechild, it does show that kings knew the power an abbess could hold. Guntram couldn't place Theudechild in Arles without the abbess's permission, despite his king status. And the favor he owed her in exchange was enough to let Lilliola keep a child away from her widowed mother. Abbesses had power and authority, and King Guntram knew and respected it.

Medievalist Dyan Elliott wrote that "Theudechild's plight serves as an eloquent warning against women who presume to direct their own matrimonial destiny."¹⁵² Theudechild tried twice to secure her own future and arrange her own marriages to do so with funds that were hers, and twice she was punished harshly for it. Gregory of Tours, the main source of information on her, gives her no sympathy, but instead the sense that her fate, however cruel, was deserved. In reality, widowhood placed Theudechild in a precarious situation where the only tools she had at her disposal was the wealth from her husband and her hand in marriage. It can also be argued, though, that there was a way for Theudechild to use her situation (undesired as it most certainly was) to her benefit. Had she played the game and manipulated the patriarchal world she inhabited, the outcome could have been different. If she had chosen to willingly enter a monastic

¹⁵¹ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 119-120.

¹⁵² Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 89.

retirement after she became a widow or accepted her monastic fate after Guntram tricked her, she may have been able to become an abbess. Multiple former queens and royalty became abbesses, and while Lilliola was far from retirement, she could have either found a different monastery in want of one to transfer to or convince the highly religious King Guntram to allow her to establish her own. As abbess, she would have had more freedom, respect, and authority than she did as a nun, and even could have had political pull like both Lilliola and Rusticula had. Had she tried to manipulate the monastic world for her benefit instead of attempting to manipulate the secular world, the monastery could have been more of a gilded cage than an iron prison.

There were other women who did manipulate the monastic world for their benefit, mainly, the freedom from remarriage the cloister offered. Just as marriage was undesirable for many women, remarriage was as well, and women like Glodesind went to great lengths to avoid it. She was the daughter of a duke from the late sixth and early seventh centuries who was married young, at around 11 or 12. Her husband was a man named Obolenus, and shortly after the marriage he was summoned by the king, imprisoned for a year, and beheaded. The marriage was never consummated. While her hagiography claims that it was not consummated as a result of divine intervention and Glodesind already having “consecrated her body and soul to a celestial spouse,” modern scholars argue it was likely a delay due to her young age.¹⁵³ As a result of her husband’s execution, she was a widow by the age of 12 or 13 and her father wished for her to remarry, but she refused. With her new nuptials approaching, her father hoped his sister could convince Glodesind to remarry, but instead she ran away to a church in the city of Metz.¹⁵⁴ Her hagiography states that she “was determined to die rather than surrender the flower of virginity

¹⁵³ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “Saint Glodesind, Virgin of Metz in Belgica Prima,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 143; McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 138.

¹⁵⁴ McNamara, “Saint Glodesind,” 143-4.

and the ornament of chastity.”¹⁵⁵ By doing this, she openly was in defiance of her father’s wishes.

Her family was not willing to relinquish her to religious life. They tried to tempt her back, but she would not return. They also had a guard posted to the entrance of the church she was hiding in, so that when she left, they could return her home by force or have her punished. But she stayed in the church for a week, neither eating nor drinking, before she was consecrated on the seventh day by an angel. As a result, her family allowed her to join the monastic life. After being trained by her aunt at a monastery in Trier, Glodesind returned to Metz and built a monastery with her family’s consent and endowments and ruled over roughly one hundred nuns. She died around six years later, likely at the age of thirty or so.¹⁵⁶ In Glodesind’s life, the church and monasticism offered her safety multiple times over the course of her life. The church she hid in protected her from nuptials and from her family’s punishments, and the monastery she established further solidified her protection from remarriage. But the monastery was still a gilded cage. It was the only means with which she could avoid marrying again and the consequences that could have. Widowhood alone was not enough to save her from the marriage bed, not while she was young enough to still bear children and from a family that could benefit from the alliances a wedding could bring. Monasticism also allowed her to disobey her father and to defy him. After Glodesind, defiance of parental figures to join monastic societies would become a theme in hagiography. Given the only preceding hagiography that exhibited such themes was that of Saint Thecla and given that no parallels between the two are mentioned or alluded to in Glodesind’s, McNamara writes that Glodesind’s hagiography is “an original story of a desperate

¹⁵⁵ McNamara, “Saint Glodesind,” 144.

¹⁵⁶ McNamara, “Saint Glodesind,” 144-5.

girl.”¹⁵⁷ Like countless other female saints, Glodesind’s desires to avoid marriage were front and center, and it was through monasticism and monasticism alone that she was allowed to be safe from it.

Another aspect of Glodesind to note is her virgin state despite her widowed status, which added an extra level of urgency to her hagiography. As a result, her hagiography has strong comments against marriage. At one point, it reads “let not virgins reckon that true joy can be found in the chains of filthy marriage... after death nothing will sweeten the damage to their modesty.”¹⁵⁸ While hagiographies often depict the time in which they were written rather than the time in which they are set, the themes of both disgust towards marriage and praise towards one’s keeping of their virginity is present in multiple hagiographies, to the point where Glodesind wasn’t the only widowed saint to enter a monastery as a virgin. Saint Sigolena from the seventh century was similar. Married at a young age, Sigolena was determined to maintain her virginity, offering her husband “all her worldly goods” to not have to consummate the marriage or be intimate with him.¹⁵⁹ He accepted, and they lived in a Josephite marriage until his untimely death when she was 24. Her parents tried to pressure her to remarry, but she refused.¹⁶⁰ Like Radegund (whose hagiography hers is modeled after), she was consecrated as a deaconess first, but for Sigolena it was “to avoid the remarriage her parents were urging.”¹⁶¹

As deaconess, there’s indication Sigolena intended to participate in the practice of *deo sacrata*, but there were still dangers and threats to her virginity despite her consecrated status. It’s implied she had no choice but to join the cloister if she wanted to be safe. She convinced her

¹⁵⁷ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 139.

¹⁵⁸ McNamara, “Saint Glodesind,” 144.

¹⁵⁹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 151.

¹⁶⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 151.

¹⁶¹ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 89.

once reluctant father to establish a monastery for her, and quickly moved in. Once in the monastery, she was able to perform monastic life without fear, participating in charity towards the poor and self-mortification.¹⁶² Historian Katherine Clark Walter wrote that “the suggestion that Sigolena’s chastity was imperiled by her secular situation introduced the persistent theme that widow-saints could not maintain celibacy in a worldly environment.”¹⁶³ While those themes were seen in both the writings and councils of the eighth and ninth century, there were dangers for unmarried and widowed women not residing in monasteries that have been discussed. Choosing to enter a monastery could and did provide women with a level of safety they often could not achieve outside of one. The story of Sigolena also once more shows that women did not wish to be married or remarried, and that even if it wasn’t something they originally wanted, monasteries could provide safety. For widows who wanted to practice a form of *deo sacrata* but couldn’t out of increasing restrictions or fears of safety, monasteries offered an alternative, even if they were more a gilded cage where women could trade independence for safety.

Fears of remarriage, *deo sacrata* restrictions, and safety concerns were all reasons widowed women joined monastic society, but just as with unmarried and married women and girls, politics also had a role in monasticism. And, just as trickery was on occasion used against women to force them into the cloister, the reverse could be used as well, to trick a man into letting a woman enter a monastic establishment. One such politically involved and trickster like widow was Rictrude, a woman from the seventh century. While young, she married a man named Adalbald, despite objections from some members of her family. Together, they had four

¹⁶² Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 89-90.

¹⁶³ Walter, “The Widow and the Cloister,” 90.

children (who all eventually joined the religious life) and lived happily before her husband was murdered while traveling by her relatives.¹⁶⁴

Rictrude grieved heavily but found comfort in her faith and became friends with Saint Amand, who was a well-known and influential missionary and bishop.¹⁶⁵ Rictrude lived in a highly political time period. Following her marriage, she resided in the northern part of the Frankish Empire, and had ties to “aristocratic families who patronized the Columbanian movement and used the religious life to enhance their worldly prestige” which “involved transferring property commanded by women to monasteries.”¹⁶⁶ Columbanian monasticism started spreading in the late sixth century with the arrival of Saint Columbanus, who was Irish. Columbanian monasticism started to spread in the Frankish empire in part because of the support he received from wealthy women. He “did not harbor prejudices against women” and “sought their friendship.”¹⁶⁷ He saw their spiritual equality and functioned as a spiritual advisor and baptizer of children. Because of the respect he gave women, they became “enthusiastic supporters of monasticism, encouraging the religious vocation of their children and embracing the ascetic life themselves.”¹⁶⁸ In part because of this, religious life often had a familial component in the seventh century. Like some other women attached to the Columbanian movement, Rictrude brought her daughters with her when she joined monastic life, and her son at some point in his adulthood became a priest.¹⁶⁹ The mother in law of Rictrude was Saint

¹⁶⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, trans., “The Life of Rictrude, Abbess of Marchiennes,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Duke University Press, 1992), 202-4.

¹⁶⁵ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 195.

¹⁶⁶ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 196.

¹⁶⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.

¹⁶⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.

¹⁶⁹ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 196.

Gertrude, mentioned previously, and her husband, son, and three daughters were all saints as well.¹⁷⁰

In part because of her friendship with Saint Amand, she grew determined to join the monastic life. However, King Dagobert was still attempting his marriage schemes and tried to force Rictrude to remarry. The king would not back down despite her refusals, and Rictrude would not give in to the king.¹⁷¹ Despite her widowed status, she was not permitted to join or establish a monastery without the king's consent and resorted to trickery. Rictrude made the king believe she was about to agree to his marriage plans and held a gathering with him there. When the gathering was under way, she asked the king for permission to have the power to do as she wished in her home, which he agreed to, as he saw her raised cup and assumed she would command him to drink, as was a common custom during the time. Instead, she invoked the name of God and veiled herself with a veil she had had blessed by a bishop. The king was furious, but she was permitted to join monastic life and began to establish a monastery.¹⁷² Once Rictrude had that veil on, there was nothing the king could do to change that, and they both knew it. He could no longer use her in his schemes. Rictrude did not want to marry again, and like Sigolena knew there would be safety in a monastery and a monastery alone. But instead of convincing a father to build a monastery, Rictrude used trickery to allow a king to let her join one. Her trickery worked, and she entered Marchiennes and became abbess there, ruling until her death.¹⁷³ And even though she allegedly tricked and embarrassed the king with her plan to allow him to consent to her monastic admittance, there were no negative consequences for her. There was no

¹⁷⁰ McNamara et al., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 196.

¹⁷¹ McNamara, "The Life of Rictrude," 205-6.

¹⁷² McNamara, "The Life of Rictrude," 206-7.

¹⁷³ Ugé, "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)," 101-2.

death, nor banishment, nor any of countless other consequences that likely could occur. Monastic admittance and monastic admittance alone gave her safety from both remarriage and a king.

There are a few important aspects of Rictrude's monastic life. The first is that like both Sigolena and Glodesind, she first attempted worldly widowhood outside of a monastic institution, but "both earthly suitors and diabolical temptation led Rictrude to leave the world for the convent."¹⁷⁴ Like the other examined widows, it wasn't safe enough, from men and temptation, to maintain worldly widowhood outside a convent's walls. Another important aspect is the difference in the hagiography's views on marriage. Sigolena and Glodesind entered the convent as virgins despite also being widows. Rictrude, on the other hand, had borne four children. While Glodesind's hagiography could emphasize her virginity and how that was more important than marriage, Rictrude's hagiography couldn't argue that. Instead, Rictrude's hagiography emphasizes the holiness of both her and her husband by stating that Adalbald only took her as wife "for love of progeny."¹⁷⁵ Part of this difference could be based on the slight differences in time periods the hagiographies were written in. It is theorized that Glodesind's was written prior to the end of the ninth century, where Rictrude's was likely written around 907 CE.¹⁷⁶ It also likely has to do with attempts to emphasize the holiness of widowed saints, regardless of their status upon entering the monastery. As Wemple states, monastic admittance was "routinely offered as a choice to widows seeking an equal status with virgins."¹⁷⁷ While most widows did not enter monasteries still as virgins, widows who were mothers could still be

¹⁷⁴ Walter, "The Widow and the Cloister," 99.

¹⁷⁵ McNamara, "The Life of Rictrude," 203.

¹⁷⁶ McNamara, "Saint Glodesind," 152n40; Ugé, "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)," 98.

¹⁷⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 156.

given the same degree of respect. In a monastery, the status women had prior to entrance did not matter as much as the vows they made upon arriving did.

Widows in this time period entered monastic institutions for a variety of reasons. While being a widow provided a degree of freedom to these women, it could also provide a degree of vulnerability. Financial security was not always guaranteed and could be lost. Sons and male relatives could provide housing or be another obstacle to overcome. And even for women who were *deo sacrata*, there were threats to them. But the option to be a veiled widow or join a monastery provided a choice to women who likely had little options before. And in a monastery, safe from the perils of the outside world, women could establish communities, rule as abbesses, wield power and authority, gain respect, and establish their own saintly legacy. While some women were, like men were, forced into monastic retirement, others chose the role and flourished. And despite the technical requirement of male approval, widows went through great lengths to achieve. As can be seen with Rictrude, when a widow decided to join a monastery, not even a king could stop her. However, monasteries still functioned as gilded cages with clear and noted benefits for widows at the cost of their independence and the ability to still participate in the secular world. Regardless, it was still a choice they could and did make, and many widows used monasteries for their benefit.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The rapid expansion of female monasteries in the Frankish empire from the sixth through ninth centuries shows that the monastic life was desirable for women, and attainable. Women were the ones who pushed monasticism forward, who spread the teachings of Saint Columbanus, who founded monasteries and convents, and who found a sanctuary in their walls. Yet, there were also women forced into convents – the unmarriageable, the promiscuous, the widows – and women who had to choose between an unwanted marriage or/ remarriage and the monastic life. Additionally, there were also women who while in monasteries weren't happy with their quality of life and circumstances. As a result, in this area and time period, monasteries occupied a complex role in society wherein they were both a vehicle of women's choice, agency, and safety as well as being a vehicle for male control over women. In that context, the monastery as a whole functioned as a gilded cage, even for the women who found a sanctuary behind its walls. Understanding this complex role of monasteries and the varied reasons women and girls of all marital statuses joined them helps better understand the realities of women during this time period, and what the relationship between women and religion looked like. Religion played an important part in life and provided women with comfort, satisfaction, and a chance to be something beyond a mother and wife even if their roles in monasteries were still restricted. Additionally, for the women who did not want to be married, religion through monasticism offered them a way out of that life.

Throughout the course of female monasticism in the Frankish empire, monasteries functioned largely as gilded cages. They were an option women could choose and had clear benefits and drawbacks. Women were given safety and opportunities for education and advancement, at the price of physical freedom and independence. A common theme in the stories and hagiographies of women regardless of marital status is the strong desire not to marry, and monasteries were a way to avoid that. Almost all the examined women who entered monasteries of their own volition either were trying to run from a pending or current marriage/remarriage or

were widows who never wanted to be wedded in the first place. And the monastic life, as the only acceptable alternative option, allowed them that refuge, for once a woman took her monastic vows, she could not easily be removed and wed.

Monasteries weren't wholly beneficial or wholly detrimental. It was a give and take relationship where the benefits often went hand and hand with the drawbacks. There were clear and noted instances where monastic life was a weapon wielded against women. Men who tried to use convents as a means of divorce in an increasingly Christianized nation that restricted the practice, or to punish women who tried too hard to take control of their own lives, or to weaken women who posed threats politically. Monasteries were places to send extra daughters and unmarriageable women. It was where men sent women they wanted to be out of sight and out of influence. Behind cloister walls, with physical freedom restricted and a lack of access to secular affairs, monasteries frequently could appear or function as prisons. Even for women who joined willingly, there were often complex reasons behind their admittance. If a woman wanted safety or didn't want marriage, a monastery was her only actionable choice. As time went on, there were increasing restrictions on women by men who sought to control them and sought to use the monastic veil to do so. But the negative attributes of monastic life do not and cannot erase the benefits they still had. And therein lies the gilded cage.

For many women, the monastic situation was one that could be twisted to their benefit. Education, safety, community, and the chance of respect and authority through the role of abbess were benefits. In a monastic environment, women could achieve something beyond the prescribed gender roles and could often challenge traditional authority. Multiple women battled with kings to join and stay in their monasteries. They defied fathers and ran away from husbands. Where they could, they convinced entire families to join with them, turning homes into convents,

husbands into monks, and daughters into nuns. They convinced unwilling men in their life to not only allow them to take the veil but also to fund their monastic establishment, and hagiographies praised them for it. As nuns, they could wield even more authority and respect, gaining favors from kings and protection from secular authorities. Additionally, as both abbesses and founders of monastic communities, women could and did wield significant power. The title of abbess was not one that could be stripped away easily, and afforded a certain degree of agency, protection, and respect, even from kings. Monasteries could and did take away a woman's personal freedom, but it often gave them more than they lost.

Monasteries also enabled women to influence the lives of other women, regardless of marital class, for both good and ill. Monastic women had more authority than secular and were able to convince family members to allow daughters to enter monasteries like Waldegrude did or stay in monasteries like Radegund did. Monastic women were at times, monastic women helped each other, providing safe havens for those in need, education, training, and a family and community. But the influence monastic women could have on the lives of other women had negative aspects as well. Abbesses were interested in keeping their nuns in the convents, which assisted in the restriction of the personal freedom of monastic women. Ultimately, these contradictions help bring about the gilded cage. There were positives, there were drawbacks, and throughout it all were women determined to exercise agency wherever they could.

It would be near impossible to determine with absolute certainty the exact reasons why a woman entered into a monastic establishment. Hagiographies emphasize the religious aspect, the holy nature of these women whose only desire was to be a nun or abbess. Modern scholars like Wemple and McNamara focus on the politics and familial reasons, looking at the marriage schemes of King Dagobert, the desire of Louis the Pious to limit female influence in his court,

and the overall use of women as transmitters of wealth and land and prestige. The reality is more of a middle ground. Religion for women, like it was for men, was often a tool. But instead of being a tool for power or control, it was one of safety and a degree of autonomy. Life in a cloister was difficult. It was restrictive, with harsh rules and a lower quality of life than noble and royal women were likely used to. But at the same time, monasteries were largely devoid of men. It also cannot be overstated that monasteries were a choice women could and did choose. The downsides and negative aspects also cannot and should not be overlooked, nor should the successful attempts of men forcing women into them. Monasteries had a complex role in Frankish society. Wielded both against women and by them, they were the only other choice available besides marriage. As a whole, it is evident that monasteries truly were a gilded cage. Not quite a prison, and not quite a sanctuary, but occupying a grey middle ground between the two.

Primary Source Bibliography

- Bishops. *A letter from Bishops (550's)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters. Accessed October 24, 2024 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/913.html>.
- Caesaria. *A letter from Caesaria, abbess of Arles (c.550)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Literature. Accessed October 24, 2024 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/915.html>.
- Caesarius of Arles. "Caesarius of Arles: The Rule for Nuns." In *Western Monastic Spirituality: Cassian, Caesarius of Arles, and Benedict*, edited by Roger Haight, Alfred Pach, and Amanda Avila Kaminski, 1st ed., 47–90. Fordham University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2k24cgj.5>.
- Damian, Peter, and Owen J. Blum. "Letter 38." In *Letters, 31-60*. Catholic University of America Press, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9b2whv.14>.
- Fortunatus, Venantius Honorius Clementianus, and Michael Roberts. *Poems*. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 46. Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Gregory I. *A letter from Gregory I, pope (596, October)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters. Accessed October 24, 2024 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1248.html>.
- . *A letter from Gregory I, pope (602, November)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters. Accessed October 24, 2024 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1255.html>.
- Gregory of Tours. *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Books, 1983.
- Hincmar, Rachel Stone, and Charles West. *The Divorce of King Lothar and Queen Theutberga*. Manchester Medieval Sources. Manchester University Press, 2016.
- McNamara, Jo Ann, John E. Halborg, E. Gordon Whatley, and American Council of Learned Societies, eds. *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*. Duke University Press, 1992.
- Pennsylvania, The Department Of History Of The University Of. "Laws of Charles the Great." In *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History, Volume VI*, edited by Dana Carleton Munro. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv4s7h0z.7>.
- Radegund of Thuringia. *A letter from Radegund of Thuringia (561-67?)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters. Accessed October 24, 2024 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/914.html>.
- . *A letter from Radegund of Thuringia (568-69)*. Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters. Accessed April 14, 2026 at <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/916.html>.

Secondary Source Bibliography

- Becher, Matthias, and David S. Bachrach. "Charlemagne's Family and the Arrangement of His Succession." In *Charlemagne*. Yale University Press, 2003.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dt00j1.12>.
- Boswell, John. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. 1. Vintage books ed. Vintage Books, 1990.
- Brennan, Brian. "Deathless Marriage and Spiritual Fecundity in Venantius Fortunatus's 'De Virginitate.'" *Traditio* 51 (1996): 73–97.
- Coon, Lynda L. "Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild." In *Sacred Fictions*. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fj3gm.11>.
- Daly, William M. "Clovis: How Barbaric, How Pagan?" *Speculum* 69, no. 3 (1994): 619–64.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3040846>.
- Elliott, Dyan. *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*. 1st ed. The Middle Ages Series. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Jong, Mayke de. *Epitaph for an Era: Politics and Rhetoric in the Carolingian World*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139013710>.
- Joye, Sylvie. "Carolingian Rulers and Marriage in the Age of Louis the Pious and His Sons." In *Gender and Historiography: Studies in the Earlier Middle Ages in Honour of Pauline Stafford*, edited by Janet L. Nelson, Susan Reynolds, and Susan M. Johns. University of London Press, 2012. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5139fw.14>.
- Kolve, V. A. "Ganymede/Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire." *Speculum* 73, no. 4 (1998): 1014–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2887367>.
- MacLean, Simon. "Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe." *Past & Present*, no. 178 (2003): 3–38.
- McNamara, Jo Ann. *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed. With American Council of Learned Societies. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- McNamara, Jo-Ann, and Suzanne F. Wemple. "Marriage and Divorce in the Frankish Kingdom." In *Women in Medieval Society*, edited by Susan Mosher Stuard. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhbhn.7>.
- Moreira, Isabel. "No Ordinary Visionary: St. Aldegund of Maubeuge." In *Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul*. Cornell University Press, 2020.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvvh85dw.14>.
- Nelson, Janet L. "Ninth-Century Vocations of Persons of Mature Years." In *Essays Offered to*

- Christopher Brooke on the Occasion of His Eightieth Year*, edited by Miri Rubin. University of London Press, 2020.
- Nelson, Janet L. "The Carolingian Moment." In *Debating Medieval Europe: The Early Middle Ages*. Manchester University Press, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.28799955.8>.
- Stevenson, Jane. "Brothers and Sisters: Women and Monastic Life in Eighth-Century England and Frankia." *Nederlands Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 82, no. 1 (2002): 1–34.
- Stone, Rachel. "The Invention of a Theology of Abduction: Hincmar of Rheims on Raptus." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60, no. 3 (2009): 433–48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204690900894X>.
- Ugé, Karine. "Saint Rictrude, Her Family and the Abbey of Marchiennes (c. 640–1130)." In *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, NED-New edition. Boydell & Brewer, 2005. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt9qdkfv.13>.
- Van Dam, Raymond. "Different Saints, Different Cults." In *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*. Princeton University Press, 1993. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.cttq9513.6>.
- Walter, Katherine Clark. "The Widow and the Cloister: Early Medieval Hagiography." In *The Profession of Widowhood. Widows, Pastoral Care, and Medieval Models of Holiness*. Catholic University of America Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv80c9fv.8>.
- Watkins, John. "Interdynastic Marriage, Religious Conversion, and the Expansion of Diplomatic Society." In *After Lavinia. A Literary History of Premodern Marriage Diplomacy*. Cornell University Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1qv5qtc.6>.
- Wemple, Suzanne Fonay. *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900. The Middle Ages*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.
- Wood, I. N. *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751: Ian Wood*. Longman, 1994.