

Balthild

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Saint Balthild of Ascania (/ˈbɔːltɪld/;[[]^{2]} Old English: *Bealdhild*, 'bold sword' or 'bold spear; around 626 – January 30, 680), also called **Bathilda**, **Baudour**, or **Bauthieult**, was the wife and queen of Clovis II, the king of Burgundy and Neustria (639–658). Born in around 626–627, two traditions, independent and conflicting, collaborate to form the history of her life. One is a hagiography that was intended to further her successful candidature for sainthood.[[]^{3]} The other is a record of chroniclers, including Jo Ann McNamara, Michael Frassetto and Lynda L. Coon, all of whom have a different, slightly less biased rhetoric when describing her deeds.

Both traditions represent her as an Anglo-Saxon who was originally of elite birth, perhaps a relative of Ricberht of East Anglia, the last pagan king of East Anglia. Ricberht was ousted by Sigeberht, who had spent time as an exile in the Frankish court, during which he had been converted to Christianity. Sigeberht was established as the rightful heir to the throne with Frankish help. Balthild was sold into slavery as a young girl and served in the household of Erchinoald, the mayor of the palace of Neustria to Clovis. There are varying views of what exactly happened to her while in Erchinoald's possession.

Contents

- 1 Hagiographic tradition
- 2 Other sources
- 3 Balthild seal matrix
- 4 Footnotes
- 5 Sources
- 6 Further reading
- 7 External links

Hagiographic tradition

According to *Vita S. Bathildis*,[[]^{4]} Balthild was beautiful, intelligent, modest and attentive to the needs of others. Erchinoald, whose wife had died, was attracted to Balthild and wanted to marry her, but she did not want to marry him. She hid herself away and waited until Erchinoald had remarried. Later, possibly because of Erchinoald, Clovis noticed her and asked for her hand in marriage.[[]^{5]}[[]^{6]}

Saint Balthild



A mediaeval depiction of Bathild

Born	626 or 627
Died	January 30, 680
Honored in	Roman Catholic Church
Canonized	c. 880 by Pope Nicholas I
Major shrine	Abbey of Chelles outside of Paris
Feast	The Roman martyrology says her feast day is January 26; France celebrates it January 30. [[] ^{1]}

Even as queen, Balthild remained humble and modest. She is famous for her charitable service and generous donations. From her donations, the abbeys of Corbie and Chelles were founded: it is likely that others such as Jumièges, Jouarre and Luxeuil were also founded by the queen. She provided support for Saint Claudius of Besançon and his abbey in the Jura Mountains.

Balthild bore Clovis three children, all of whom became kings: Clotaire, Childeric and Theuderic.

When Clovis died (between 655 and 658), his eldest son Clotaire succeeded to the throne, aged five. His mother Balthild acted as the queen regent until he came of age in 664, after which she was forced into a convent. As queen, she was a capable stateswoman. She abolished the practice of trading Christian slaves and strove to free children who had been sold into slavery. This claim is corroborated by Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, who mentions that Balthild and Saint Eloi (who was also known as Eligulus, according to Dado)^[7] “worked together on their favorite charity, the buying and freeing of slaves”.^[8] After Balthild's three children reached adulthood and had become established in their respective territories (Clotaire in Neustria, Childeric in Austrasia, and perhaps Theuderic in Burgundy), Balthild entered an abbey and gave up her royal rank. She dedicated the rest of her life to serving the poor and the infirm.

Balthild died on January 30, 680 and was buried at the Abbey of Chelles, east of Paris. Her *Vita* was written soon after her death, probably by one of the community of Chelles. The *Vita Baldechildis/Vita Bathildis reginae Francorum* in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, as with most of the *vitae* of royal Merovingian-era saints, provides some useful details for the historian. Her official cult began when her remains were transferred from the former abbey to a new church, in 833, under the auspices of Louis the Pious. Balthild was canonised by Pope Nicholas I, around 200 years after her death.

Other sources

Sainted Women of the Dark Ages states that Balthild “was not the first Merovingian queen to begin her career in servitude”.^[9] Other Merovingian queens who arose from servile status include Fredegund, the mother of Clothaire II; Bilichild, the wife of Theudebert of Austrasia; and possibly Nanthild, the mother of Clovis II.^[10] During the minority of Clotaire III, she had to deal with the attempted coup of Grimoald, the major domus of Austrasia, but she enjoyed the continued support of her former master Erchinoald. According to *Sainted Women of the Middle Ages*, he became a sort of 'political mentor' to her throughout her marriage to Clovis II.^[11]

According to some historians, Balthild’s creation of and involvement with monasteries was perhaps an act to “balance or even neutralize the efforts of the aristocratic opposition”.^[12] By installing her supporters as bishops of different sees, she gained even greater power as a ruler.

According to the *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi* by Stephen of Ripon, Bathild was a ruthless ruler, in conflict with the bishops and perhaps responsible for several assassinations.^[13] However, according to *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, sects and Doctrines*, some of these assassinations may not have even occurred. The bishop she so famously murdered, Dalfinus, is not listed as a bishop of Lyon. The story may be written to embellish the life of Wilfrid.^[14]

Balthild seal matrix

A gold seal matrix, which was originally attached to a seal-ring, was uncovered in 1999 by a metal detector in a

field in Postwick, 4.5 miles (7.2 km) east of Norwich, in Norfolk. One side shows a woman's face and her name *BALDAHILDIS* in Frankish lettering. The other side portrays two naked figures, a man and a woman, embracing one another beneath a cross.^[15]

In Merovingian Gaul, one side of the seal was intended to be used with official documents. The other side would have been used only for private papers. Although Frankish *Balthildis*, or the Old English form *Bealdhild*, would not have been an exceptional name at the time, there is a good possibility that it refers to Queen Balthild.^[16] It is uncertain why the seal matrix came to East Anglia. It may have been a gift, or a representative of Balthild may have worn it as a form of identification. It has also been suggested that the seal matrix was returned to Balthild's kin after she died. The seal matrix is in the keeping of the Norwich Castle Museum.



The Balthild seal matrix

Footnotes

1. ^ Attwater, Donald and Catherine Rachel John. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*. 3rd edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. ISBN 0-14-051312-4.
2. ^ US dict: bôl'tîld
3. ^ Geary, Patrick. *Readings in Medieval History: Fourth Edition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. [http://books.google.com/books?id=sXZi1cYsPowC&pg=PA153&dq=Ambush of Geary&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3](http://books.google.com/books?id=sXZi1cYsPowC&pg=PA153&dq=Ambush+of+Geary&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3)
4. ^ Macnamara, Whateley and Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, p. 264.
5. ^ Theuws, De Jong and van Rhijn, *Topographies of Power*, p. 255.
6. ^ Madigan, *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets*, p. 60.
7. ^ First Dado, and Jo Ann McNamara, *The Life of St. Eligius*, (Fordham University, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/eligius.asp> (accessed December 2, 2011)).
8. ^ Schulenburg, Jane. *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. [http://books.google.com/books?id=w8FMjgPTWBUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Forgetful of their sex: female sanctity and society&hl=en&ei=BBfcTtLzOYjj0QH79eTIDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA](http://books.google.com/books?id=w8FMjgPTWBUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Forgetful+of+their+sex:+female+sanctity+and+society&hl=en&ei=BBfcTtLzOYjj0QH79eTIDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA)
9. ^ Jo Ann McNamara, John Halborg, and E. Whatley, *Sainted women of the Dark Ages*, (Duke University Press, 1996), 264-278., 265
10. ^ *ibid*, 264.
11. ^ *ibid* 265.
12. ^ *ibid* 26.
13. ^ Bede reported that Aunemundus, bishop of Lyon, was assassinated at her instigation in 658.
14. ^ Sir William Smith, William George Smith, and Henry Wace, *A dictionary of Christian biography, literature, sects and doctrines*, (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1877)
15. ^ Norwich Castle Museum, First. "Personal seal matrix of Queen Balthild." . <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/SRE4UrwySnWbvBQrsHJoVg>
16. ^ *ibid*.

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- Macnamara, Jo Ann; Whateley, John E., Halborg, E. Gordon (1996). *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*. Duke University Press. ISBN 9780822312161.
- Madigan, Shawn (1998). *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: a Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. ISBN 9780800634209.
- Theuws, Frans; De Jong Mayke and van Rhijn, Carine (2001). *Topographies of Power in the Early*

Middle Ages (<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=QIWJZ7mAMJQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Topographies+of+power+in+the+early+Middle+Ages&hl=en&sa=X&ei=CNGWUIyHBcnT0QWj24CoDg&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>).

Leiden: Koninklijke Brill. ISBN 90-04-11734-2.

- Webster, Leslie. "57. Norwich area, Norfolk: Gold swivelling bezel from a Frankish seal-ring" (http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/treasurerep_199899Pt3.pdf). *Treasure Annual Report 1998 - 1999*. Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Retrieved 2010-10-31.

Further reading

- Attwater, Donald and Catherine Rachel John. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*. 3rd edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. ISBN 0-14-051312-4.
- J.L. Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history" *Medieval Women*, D. Baker, ed. (1978) pp 31–77.
- Alexander Callander Murray, ed. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader* (in series Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures), 1999. Chapter 14 "'Sanctity and politics in the time of Balthild and her sons"

External links

- January 30, 680, Once a Slave, Humble Queen Bathilde Died (<http://chi.gospelcom.net/DAILYF/2003/01/daily-01-30-2003.shtml>).
- St. Bathilde (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02348b.htm>) from the Catholic Encyclopedia.
- Société Internationale pour l'Etude des Femmes de l'Ancien Régime:Bathildis (<http://www.siefar.org/DictionnaireSIEFAR/SFBathilde.html>) (French)
- "Balthild seal matrix" (http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/Whats_On/Virtual_Exhibitions/Anglo_Saxon_and_Viking_Gallery_Trail/Bathild_Seal_Matrix/index.htm), Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service.
- Detailed biography of Saint Bathildis (<http://ourorthodoxlife.blogspot.com/2010/12/saint-bathildis.html>)
- Vita Sanctae Bathildis (<http://ourorthodoxlife.blogspot.com/2010/12/vita-sanctae-bathildis.html>) Official hagiography in translated to English

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