Saint Radegund of Thuringia

The Thuringian Kingdom

In 453, theThuringian Kingdom arose after the defeat and assassination of Attila, king of the Huns. Compared to the current borders the vast empire of Older Thuringia covered modern Thuringia, parts of Hesse, Bavaria and Saxony, as well as Saxony-Anhalt and Lower Saxony. Thuringian Princess Radegund came from this empire. The oldest historically verifiable Thuringian king was named Bisinus, who was Radegund's grandfather. Bisinus reigned over the Thuringian Kingdom as sole ruler. He was married to a woman called Menia, and they had four children: three sons and a daughter.
After the old king's death in 505, his sons Baderic, Herminafrid and Bertachar divided their father's land amongst themselves, with Herminafrid's taking up the most crucial part. After King Baderic (childless) and King Bertachar (father of Radegund) died, Herminafrid took over sole power over the kingdom.
In the battle near the river Unstrut, around the year 531, the Franks, led by King Theuderic and his brother King Clotaire, attacked the Thuringian Kingdom and took possession of it, and in so doing the kingdoms's downfall was sealed.

Thuringian Princess Radegund

Radegund was born around 518 as a daughter of Thuringian King Bertachar. She had several brothers whose names are unknown. Her father and her uncle Baderic died during the resistance against the Frankish expansion, and soon after her birth she became a half-orphan. Together with her younger brother, Radegund grew up at her uncle King Herminafrid's court. Following the virtual destruction of her home, Radegund and her brother were captured by the Franks and carried off to France as spoils of war by King Clotaire.

Radegund in France

Then 13-year-old Radegund was brought to Clotaire's royal estate in Athies (in the county of Vermondois, south of Péronne) "for educational reasons", according to written sources. The Thuringian king's daughter grew up to be a well-educated woman. She was educated in literature, including Latin. Moreover she received an education in religion and was brought up in catholic beliefs. This laid the foundation for her further life: piety coming from deep in her heart as well as constant and lavish charity.

Queen of the Franks

Around the year 540 Merovingian King Clotaire married Radegund and made her his third wife. During their marriage she developed many religious qualities and began to lead a spiritual charitable life, most unusual for a Merovingian queen. Due to her religious way of life she had many arguments and disputes with Clotaire. Their marriage remained childless, but they adopted a girl named Agnes and raised her. She took the death of her brother, who was killed by Frankish soldiers on her husband's order, so hard that she finally separated from Clotaire. The marriage with the Frankish king lasted about 10 years.

Life as a Benefactress and Nun

After the separation from Clotaire, Radegund persuaded the Bishop of Noyon to consecrate her as a deaconess. She then went on a pilgrimage to Tours, where the tomb of Saint Martin, the national saint of the Franks, is situated. After casting off her secular garments, she retreated to an estate in Saix. There, she lived with a group of women holding the same views, leading a life of Christian charity and abstinence. She devoted herself to the poor and helpless, she nursed the sick and weak. In her need for closeness to God, Radegund started to petition for relics from the Holy Land. This gave her a reputation of saintliness.
Having given up a woman of such character and greatness, Clotaire with great remorse, tried to get his former wife back from Saix, which failed.
Radegund, who had managed to take off the shackles of secular life and finally turned to a monastic one, founded a convent in Poitiers around 555/556.
During the construction of the convent, Clotaire backed the undertaking by donations, which were for the benefit of the monastic community as well as for the benefit of Radegund. At the same time these donations laid the foundations of the convent, which was then itself under the permanent protection of Clotaire.
Radegund's daughter Agnes became the first abbess and head of the convent.
Radegund herself lived in the convent as a simple nun. With Clotaire's death in 561 the Frankish Empire was divided between his four sons from whom Radegund requested legal protection for the convent's continued existence.
She also asked for protection and support from the Gallic bishops for her lifework, who granted it in 575.
From 567 on, life in the convent had to be led by the Cesarian Rule, meaning strict seclusion and having no possessions at all. Around the same time Radegund met the Roman poet Venantius Fortunatus and asked him to be the "outward representative". He fulfilled this position for more than 20 years. A close friendship existed between Radegund, Agnes and the poet, which Fortunatus writes about in many verses, letters, and poems.

Around 570 Radegund received two noteworthy fragments of the True Cross (the cross Jesus Christ was crucified on). These were deposited in the convent, which was renamed The Abbey of the Holy Cross (Sainte-Croix).
Radegund died on 13 August 587 and was buried in the convent's adjacent church. Shortly after the year 600 this church was already called Saint Radegund (Sainte-Radegonde).

Honouring Radegund

After Radegund's death her saintly reputation quickly spread throughout the country. About 150 churches chapels in France have been dedicated to her since, as well as churches in England, Austria, Belgium, Italy, and even in Canada and the Republic of the Congo. She is the Patroness of Poitiers and of Jesus College in Cambridge.
On the occasion of the 1300th aniversary of Radegund's death, Pope Leo XIII himself donated in 1887 a golden crown decorated with gems, which was put on the statue of the saint in the Cathedral of Poitiers. In Thuringia, remains of the Chapel near the castle Mühlburg and in Helfta near Eisleben remind us of the famous Thuringian woman.

Radegund Chapel near the Castle Mühlburg

The existence of a former Radegund Chapel near the castle Mühlburg was first mentioned in
1333 in the register of possession of the archbishops of Mainz.
In all probability this chapel could be older, because the foundation walls are from the romanic
times.
In the 1930s Richard Opel from Mühlberg, the keeper of the castle Mühlburg, uncovered the
remains of the medieval Radegund Chapel walls to about two metres , he did it in agreement
with the representative of the castles of Thuringia, Building Engineneer Sesselmann.
In 1945, unfortunately, the walls were pulled down out of ignorance, so that only the foundation
walls are still visible today.
The 1400th anniversary of Radegund's death was remembered during an ecumenical service
in June 1987. A memorial stone was placed within the foundation walls of the chapel reading:

*518 / Radegund of Thuringia / Peace by Reconciliation / + 13.08.587 / Poitiers / France / This
stone has been placed in memory of the 1400th return of the anniversary of the saint's death
within the former Radegund Chapel / AG Mühlburg / Parish.*

Radegund Chapel within the Church Saint Lucas

At the same time a memorial chapel dedicated to Radegund was constructed in the tower of the
Saint Lucas Church in Mühlberg. In this chapel is a cross of meditation formed by Gerd Weber
from Gräfenhain / Thuringia on the accasion of the 1400th anniversary of the death.
The version of the cross is based on the hymn "Vexilla regis prodeunt", which was written by
Venantius Fortunatus, Radegund's biographer, in the year 569.
In summer 2009, Herr Heino Gloystein from Wiefelstede / Oldenburg, donated a Radegund
statue for the chapel. He carved it to express his thanks for the healing of his eyesight.
During the redevelopement of the chapel an altar fragment was integrated. It is from the
Mühlberg church and was found during renovations in the 80s.

Every year, on the Sunday after the 13th of August (death of Radegund), a comemmorative
ceremony takes place in Mühlberg. After an ecomenical service in the Saint Lucas Church a
procession heads to the former Radegund's Chapel near the castle Mühlburg.
So the remembrence of Saint Radegund is kept alive in her Thuringian home.

The Radegund Chapel near the Mühlburg is accessible at any time.
The Chapel in the Saint Lucas Church can be seen during the daily opening times of the church
from 08:00 – 18:00 hours.

Source: "Sainte Radegunde of Thuringia"
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