



THE DARK QUEENS

A gripping tale of power,
ambition and murderous rivalry
in early medieval France

SHELLEY
PUHAK



An Apollo Book

First published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Shelley Puhak, 2022

The moral right of Shelley Puhak to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

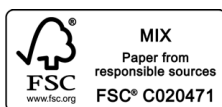
ISBN (HB): 9781801109154

ISBN (E): 9781801109130

Typeset by www.benstudios.co.uk

Maps by Jeff Edwards

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

CHAPTER 1

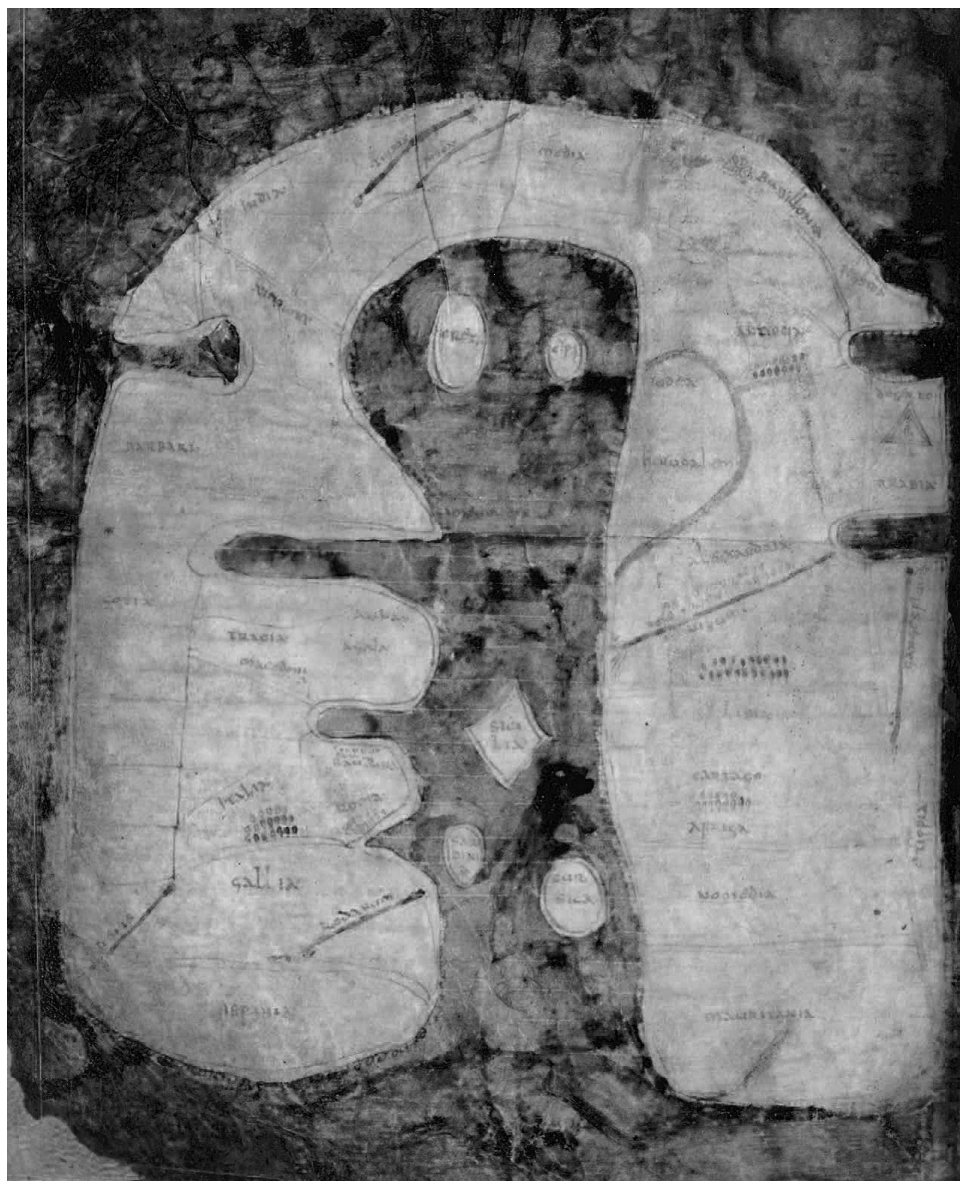
A Wedding in Metz

When Princess Brunhild was led into the great hall, the assembled men jockeyed for a glimpse of her, craning their necks or standing on tiptoe.

It was the spring of 567. The map of the known world, when turned on its side, looked like a pair of lungs. Just two lobes of land, and the white space between them was the Mediterranean Sea. This princess came from the very tip of the left lung, in Spain, and she had just travelled more than one thousand miles, across the snow-capped Pyrenees, through the sunny vineyards of Narbonne, and then up into the land of the Franks. Brunhild had yet to see for herself whether the stories she had heard were true: that in the forests of these Franks, the oaks were so thick that forty men could not drag a fallen one away. Or that among these trees roamed large packs of wolves, some of whom could shapeshift into men. And child-eating dragons, too – although the bishops claimed to have vanquished most of them. The clerics had not managed, though, to vanquish all of the pagans. Villagers still built altars in forest glens and hung on to their wooden idols. Some still offered sacrifice to Woden, or even Thor.

But why, as Brunhild made her way through the crowded hall, was a loud but quavering voice invoking Roman deities at her

THE DARK QUEENS



Merovingian map of the world

wedding – Cupid and Venus, Helios and Mars? None of those assembled Franks, nor their parents or grandparents, would have ever worshipped these gods.

The nervous young man reciting these names was attempting a Roman panegyric, or formal praise poem. His name was Venantius Fortunatus, and this was his first paid commission at a royal court. Fortunatus had recently arrived from Italy, hoping to win acclaim and riches in the land of the Franks. He would have been mindful that performing well at this wedding, King Sigibert's wedding, could launch his career. In Francia, anything or, more precisely, *anyone* associated with classical Rome was all the rage – whether a zither player, a cook or a Latin poet. Of course, another refrain would have been cycling in the back of Fortunatus's mind, too: avoid the king's wrath. Do not slip up.

Princess Brunhild had arrived just days before, trailed by wagons piled high 'with great treasures' – gold and silver coins and ingots; bejewelled goblets, bowls and sceptres; furs and silks – treasure the palace slaves would have still been unloading. Now she was led into what the Franks called their 'Golden Court' to meet her new subjects. It's likely that it was the king's right-hand man, the young Count Gogo, who offered to escort her. He had accompanied her all the way from Spain, and she would have been grateful for a familiar face. Taking Gogo's arm, allowing herself to be guided past those dozens of pairs of curious, eager eyes, did she wonder whether they saw her as just another lustrous treasure, too? A gleaming chalice, a prize mare?

Later, the men in the great hall would have many reasons to fear her. But if they feared anything that day, it was only that she might snicker at them, uncomfortable in their bright finery with their newly shaven cheeks scratched pink. The hall was bedecked with banners and standards; there were thick rugs on the floors and embroidered tapestries on the walls. But if the princess had peeked behind one of these tapestries, she would have noticed

the fresh plaster. The ambitiously named Golden Court was still being patched together, just like the city itself. King Sigibert's palace was really just a repurposed basilica, and his brand-new capital of Metz was a former holiday town that had once served soldiers on Rome's frontier. Despite its new crowds and markets and garrisoned armies, the city was still a far cry from the glittering sophistication of Brunhild's hometown of Toledo.

Metz was, however, a logical spot for a capital, roughly in the middle of Sigibert's territories, at the confluence of two rivers and at the crossing of two old military roads. His kingdom, called Austrasia, ran the whole length of the Rhine. At its northernmost tip were the coastal lowlands of the North Sea, and its southernmost point was Basel in the foothills of the Jura Mountains. Along its eastern border were cities like Cologne and Worms, and along its western border were the rolling hills and vineyards of the Champagne region. Sigibert also owned lands in the Auvergne and ruled over the Mediterranean ports of Nice and Fréjus, which welcomed ships, and people, from all over the known world. In his cities one could find Jews, Christian Goths and pagan Alemanni; Greek and Egyptian doctors; even Syrian merchants.

Yet the size of Sigibert's kingdom, while respectable enough, was not what had secured this marriage. Rather, it was the magnitude of his ambitions. He had asked for the day's festivities to be billed as 'Caesar's marriage'. His assembled men, mostly Frankish warrior-lords, had dressed accordingly. Even though, here and there, a tribal tattoo snaked up a bare arm or leg, they were attired in long linen tunics and bright capes fastened at one shoulder with filigreed brooches. These nobles, and their king, were eager to cloak themselves not just in Roman robes, but in the fallen empire's status and legitimacy.

It was hard not to be obsessed with Rome when one lived inside its former cities' walls and among its castoffs. The former basilica

was now the palace; the old gymnasium had been transformed into a church. Alongside the existing Roman buildings – some crumbling, some so deftly replastered they appeared as they did in their prime – popped up more Germanic ones with thatched roofs and timber halls. What had been the Forum was still a public square full of shops, but now it was surrounded by towering homes that kept adding storeys, with no other way to expand but up.

Sigibert had only to glance around to know what was possible – if he could find the money for repairs and stop the fighting long enough to implement them. The straight Roman roads, though still well travelled, were marred by missing paving stones and cracked concrete. The drainage ditches would clog up, and he could hardly lead a royal procession without someone's cart getting stuck in the mud. A handful of the aqueducts in other cities did still serve, piping in fresh, filtered water for palace baths or public fountains, and a few others dribbled out water for the masses. Metz's own aqueduct, a fourteen-mile feat of engineering, had once enabled public baths, latrines and a sewage system. But repairs had stopped a century or so previously, and now the stone arcaded bridge vaulted over the countryside, useless. The city's vast bath complex, topped by dazzling golden cupolas that dominated the skyline, sat unused. King Sigibert had decided that if he was going to fashion a functioning country out of these bedraggled works, what he needed was a bride.

That year, Sigibert was coming off a series of military defeats. Yet this marriage could revive his political fortunes and replenish his coffers. He had negotiated for months for Brunhild's hand, and his subjects had to have felt hopeful, triumphant even, now that he had secured such a prestigious mate.

Beautiful (*pulchra*), they called her, and lovely to look at (*venusta aspectu*) with a good figure (*elegans corpore*). There is no way for us to judge for ourselves. She appears unnaturally tall and pale in illuminated manuscripts from later in the medieval period;



Drawing of a thirteenth-century sculpture of King Sigibert

voluptuous and glowing in Renaissance portraits; pensive and windswept in Romantic-era prints. But after her death – the statues pulled down, the mosaics obliterated, the manuscripts burned – no contemporary images of her would survive. Thanks to the efforts of kings, bishops, scribes and soldiers, we can never be sure what she looked like as a young bride, nor even as a mature queen. Still, those present that day claimed she was beautiful, and while her enemies would later mock her mercilessly, they never once criticized her looks. There are no mentions of her being unusually short or tall, so one can assume she stood close to the average height for a woman of the period, five feet, four inches tall. And on her wedding day, Brunhild was in the full flush of youth, around eighteen years old, arrayed in the finest embroidered silks her world could muster, with her long hair loose about her shoulders and wreathed in flowers.

As the poet Fortunatus cleared his throat, he would have been relieved that the hyperbole he had composed before he had set eyes on the princess would not fall comically short. He exclaimed that she was a ‘glorious maiden’ with a ‘milk-white’ complexion and lips the colour of roses, a jewel beyond compare. Even if she was not, as Fortunatus claimed, truly a ‘second Venus’, King Sigibert seemed quite pleased with the match, welcoming his bride ‘with every appearance of joy and happiness’. And although she would have been well trained not to display any hint of disappointment, Brunhild would have been relieved, too.

The only contemporary image of her groom that survives is that of his profile on a coin. Sculptures made many centuries later portray him as a tall and lean young man with long blond hair falling in waves to his chin. His features are well proportioned and his expression is kindly; even better, his shoulders are broad and his cheekbones are high. He appears to be a veritable medieval heart-throb.

While these are probably not close likenesses, they have some basis in fact. King Sigibert wore his hair long and it is likely that he was a blond or redhead, like many in his family. Sigibert's name meant 'Magnificent Victory', and he was a renowned warrior, so he would have been fit and muscular and, at thirty-two, at the height of his physical powers. They must have made a striking couple as they stood side by side, the sumptuously attired and immaculately groomed princess, the young and strapping king.

Fortunatus continued his poem, boldly declaring: 'Sigibert, in love, is consumed by passion for Brunhild'. Yet everyone in the hall knew this marriage was not a love match but a carefully negotiated alliance.

What remained of Roman might was now concentrated in the East in Constantinople. Perhaps this 'Caesar's marriage' would be the union that could supplant it.

Across the border, in the neighbouring kingdom of Neustria, another palace overlooked the river Aisne – gentle, green and murky. Here, the news of Sigibert and Brunhild's marriage was met with great interest and alarm. Especially by Sigibert's youngest brother, King Chilperic.

If the sculptures are to be believed, Chilperic looked very similar to Sigibert, although he had curlier hair and a fuller beard. But if they shared certain features, they did not share any brotherly affection. Sigibert and Chilperic *did* share three hundred miles of

border, a border that Chilperic was constantly testing. Chilperic had spent the past few years trying to invade his older brother's kingdom and, in fact, had just launched a new attempt. And now he was furious to be outmanoeuvred.

He was not surprised that Sigibert had married. Chilperic himself had started trying to beget heirs when he was still in his teens – why had his brother waited so long? But now, by choosing a foreign princess for his bride, Sigibert was openly declaring his dynastic ambitions, and Chilperic was livid.

If the king was concerned, his court was concerned. And no one more so than the slave girl. How could she not be? She tracked the king's reaction to every event, no matter how small. It seems that she was, at this point, the king's concubine, although she even could have been his official wife – the records tell us only that the king 'had' her. And that he was besotted.

Chilperic was, admittedly, a king known for impulsive behaviour, and when following his passions, he often took matters to the extreme. He dabbled in poetry, for example, crafting some decidedly mediocre verse, but his literary ambitions would soon have him trying to overhaul the alphabet. When he would later take up theology, he would start by writing a few hymns, before attempting to rewrite the core beliefs of Christianity. And so when he fell for the slave girl, he summarily had his queen – a perfectly suitable woman who had already given him three healthy heirs – hustled off to a convent.

As a slave, the girl's worth was less than that of a hunting dog, less than a cow. And it was a life full of hazards – open fires, undercooked and spoiled food, lice and parasites, and the groping hands of fellow slaves and overlords alike. But she had already survived much worse.

She had been born at the end of the coldest decade in the past two millennia. A volcanic eruption in Iceland had plunged the world into darkness, disrupting harvests. And while the Western

world was gripped by famine, another horseman of the apocalypse had galloped in: *Yersinia pestis*, the bubonic plague, borne into Europe by rats carrying infected fleas. To this enslaved girl and the people in her childhood world, the conditions in the middle of the sixth century must have seemed like the end of days.

To be born in such times could be considered a great misfortune. But it could also be a great opportunity. The air, cold as it was, crackled with possibility for the survivors. Fortunes could be made in a month. A great family could fall, dropping dead in a matter of days. An ambitious family could move into that abandoned villa, elbowing their way into the aristocracy. Even the villa's surviving slaves had cause for hope. They could seize the opportunity to run away and melt into the crowds of refugees. They could comfort a grieving widow or widower on a neighbouring estate and marry their way up. Being enslaved was not an enviable state of affairs, but it could be a temporary one.

But even in a time of such unusual social mobility, the transformation that this girl had pulled off was impressive – from kitchen slave to one of the queen's serving maids, and now the king's companion. Such a rise took iron will, careful planning and the honing of small talents – the ability to slip in and out of a room unnoticed, to intuit which cook or lackey was likely to let slip a choice bit of information. And perhaps, as some of her contemporaries mused, such a rise required dabbling in the dark arts, too.

Temperatures had since stabilized and the initial waves of the plague receded. But it remained an age that favoured the bold. She would later prove herself its equal, capable of quick and decisive action. For now, though, as the king fumed over his brother's foreign bride, the slave girl, Fredegund, was content to watch and wait.