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[redazione.pan@unipa.it](mailto:redazione.pan@unipa.it)

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MATTIA ZANGARI

CANDIDA VELUTI LILIA  
THE BIOGRAPHIES OF ST. MATILDA OF SAXONY  
AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LATIN *AUCTORES*

The aim of this article is to analyse the two biographies of Matilda of Saxony (aka Matilda of Ringelheim) (895-968)<sup>1</sup>, both saint and queen, the wife of King Henry the Fowler (†936) and mother of Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (†973). The two texts can be seen as a focal point for the development of female hagiographies. These two *Vitae* do not only open the way to female dynastic sainthood<sup>2</sup>, but also extol, for the first time, the figure of a saintly queen, the foundress of royal monasteries<sup>3</sup>.

After outlining Mathilde's biography, and briefly commenting on the hagiographical-biographical tradition, the relationship between the two hagiographic texts on the one hand, and the classical and late antique Latin *auctores* on the other will be examined.

A BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Mathilde was a descendant of the Saxon warrior Duke Widukind, who had converted to Christianity<sup>4</sup>. She was the daughter of Dietrich (Theodoric) Count of Westphalia and Reinhild. The future Queen had grown up in Herford Abbey, where she had learnt to read Scripture and was trained in handicrafts<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently she married

<sup>1</sup> The texts to be analysed are: *Vita Mathildis reginae antiquior* (BHL 5683), in *Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde*, B. SCHÜTTE (Hrsg.), in MGH, Script. Rer. Germ., LXVI, Hannover 1994, pp. 107-142 (= *Vita antiquior*); *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* (BHL 5684), *ibid.* pp. 143-202 (= *Vita posterior*). The fundamental commentary is: Schütte, *Untersuchungen zu den Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde*, Hannover 1994 (= *Untersuchungen*). Critical studies concerning the biography of Mathilde are less exhaustive; cfr. A. BARTOLOMEI ROMAGNOLI, *Madri sante nella letteratura medievale*, in M. CHIABÒ, M. GARGANO, R. RONZANI (eds.), *Santa Monica nell'Urbe. Dalla tarda antichità al Rinascimento. Storia, agiografia, arte*, Atti del Convegno (Ostia Antica-Roma, 29-30 settembre 2010), Rome 2011, pp. 53-111, at pp. 73-78; a new version of the same piece can be found in EAD., *Santità e mistica femminile nel Medioevo* Todi 2013, pp. 3-66, at pp. 28-33; M. ZANGARI, *Le due «Vitae» di Matilde di Sassonia: agiografia e memorie di una santa regina*, in S. CRESTI, I. GAGLIARDI (eds.), *Leggere e sostenere. Saggi d'affetto e di Medioevo per Anna Benvenuti*, Florence 2017, pp. 135-165.

<sup>2</sup> On dynastic sainthood see: P. CORBET, *Les saints ottoniens. Saineté dynastique, sainteté royale et sainteté féminine autour l'an Mil*, Sigmaringen 1986, pp. 120-234. It should be recalled that the first hagiography of saintly queens was that of Clotilde (474-545), wife of Clovis 1.

<sup>3</sup> M. PARISSÉ, *Les femmes au monastère dans le Nord de l'Allemagne du IX<sup>e</sup> au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Conditions sociales et religieuses*, in *Frauen in Spätantike und Frauenklöster in Sachsen vom 10. Bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts*, in *Die Salier Reich. 2: Die Reichskirche in der Salierzeit*, Sigmaringen 1991, pp. 465-501; ID., *Les chanoinesses dans l'Empire germanique (IX<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, in *Francia* 6, 1978, pp. 107-126; S. MARTI, P. MARX, *Gästehaus und Abtei: Die Öffnung zur Welt*, in J. FRINGS, J. GERCHOW (Hrsgg.), *Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern: Ruhrlandmuseum: die frühen Klöster und Stifte 500-1200, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Bonn, in Kooperation mit dem Ruhrlandmuseum Essen 2005, pp. 487-502, at pp. 488-489.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita posterior*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita posterior*, pp. 149-150.

the East-Franconian King Henry the Fowler. As well as being beautiful<sup>6</sup>, the saintly sovereign was a mirror of virtue<sup>7</sup>: she was generous, chaste and extremely pious. As a meritorious queen, she took pity on those condemned to death, often interceding on their behalf with her husband King Henry, asking for a pardon<sup>8</sup>. As the years went by, her many pious works and the building of royal monasteries led to her over-spending royal finances, to the extent that Otto, who had succeeded his father, not only asked his mother to pay her debts, but confined her to the royal monastery of Quedlinburg<sup>9</sup>, until Queen Edith – Otto I's wife – begged her husband to allow his mother to return to court, seeing that she believed that it was owing to Otto's unjust banishment of Mathilde that he had been so frequently defeated in his wars<sup>10</sup>. On returning to court with the permission of her repentant son, Mathilde was to become regent when Otto had led his army to Italy. After defeating Berengar II he was crowned emperor<sup>11</sup>. After founding the monasteries of Quedlinburg, Pöhlde and Nordhausen<sup>12</sup>, during her last years Mathilde, of her own accord, retired to monastic life and, in 968, passed away in Quedlinburg monastery<sup>13</sup>. Very shortly after her death she was canonized by acclamation.

#### A PHILOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

As already mentioned, the sequence of events in Mathilde's life, however modified by the *topoi* of hagiography<sup>14</sup>, has been transmitted by two texts: the *Vita antiquior* and the *Vita posterior*, which will be examined more closely here.

There is no certain information about the oldest *recensio*. Scholarly opinion is divided on this. In the views of 19th and 20th century scholars such as Giesebrecht, Jaffé, and Forstemann it dates from the imperial reign of Otto II (955-983), while according to others, i.e. Bernscheuer and Büsing, the *Vita antiquior* belongs to the reign of Otto III (980-1002)<sup>15</sup>. Written in praise of the Liudolfing dynasty<sup>16</sup>, to which Henry the Fowler belonged, the first version might well date back to 973 or 974, owing to the presence of a sorrowful dimension: the tradition of the zealous commemoration of the dead is predominant<sup>17</sup>. The context could have been the recent

<sup>6</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita posterior*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>9</sup> *Vita posterior*, pp. 122-123. The same episode appears in *Vita posterior*, p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> See the description of the foundation of the monastery of Nordhausen cfr. *Vita antiquior*, in *Die Lebensbeschreibungen*, pp. 107-142, a p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> On the *topoi* of female hagiography: M.C. FERRO, *Santità e agiografia al femminile: forme letterarie, tipologie e modelli nel mondo slavo orientale (X-XVII sec.)*, Firenze 2010; ZANGARI, «*Dum puella devotius oraret coram imagine*»: *La Legenda di Agnese da Montepulciano (1268-1317) tra fonti classiche e santità femminile europea*, in ID., *Tre storie di santità femminile tra parole e immagini. Agiografie, memoriali e fabulae depictae fra Due e Trecento*, Tübingen 2019, pp. 89-110; R. GUARNIERI, *Donne e Chiesa tra mistica e istituzioni (secoli XIII-XV)*, Roma 2004, pp. 13-46, 51-62, 117-150.

<sup>15</sup> On the dispute over dating: *Die Lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 9-12.

<sup>16</sup> *Die Lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 138.

death of Otto I<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the fact that the author was most probably a Saxon, as emerges from the research of Bernd Schütte, together with the presence of Otto II in Saxony up to 975, after his father's death, could support the first hypothesis concerning the date<sup>19</sup>. Analysis of the text reveals not only indications of its Saxon origin, mostly lemmas and phrases of the type *patria Saxonum*<sup>20</sup>, but also traces of the influence of Widukind of Corvey, whose *Res gestae Saxonicae* appears to contain references to the *Vita antiquior*, as though the two texts had influenced each other<sup>21</sup>.

As far as the author is concerned, since we are almost certain about the identity of the work's addressees, i.e. the canonesses of the monastery of Quedlinburg, we could argue that we are dealing with a woman<sup>22</sup>. As will be seen later, the author, or authoress must have been quite well educated, seeing that the text mentions Terence, Vergil, Sulpicius Severus, as well as Venantius Fortunatus<sup>23</sup>.

Nowadays, apart from the edition by Schütte – based on the Oxford (o) codex<sup>24</sup> – we also have that of Köpe, 1852 – which is included in the *Patrologia Latina* – and that of Beumann, 1984. Unknown up to the 19th century, the ancient *recensio* was transmitted as an insert in two manuscripts contained in the *Annales palidenses*, arguably proof of its importance in Ottonian hagiography<sup>25</sup>.

Concerning the *Vita posterior*, which was written to illustrate the official exemplary history of the Liudofing dynasty<sup>26</sup> and justify its rule over the Holy Roman Empire, which was damaged by accusations of Otto I having a mother of pagan origins<sup>27</sup> – we can deduce that it dates from the reign of Henry II, who succeeded Otto III. Scholars have suggested a relatively precise date, i.e. from the beginning of Henry's reign, between the summer and autumn of 1002, and 14 February 1014<sup>28</sup>. There are a number of editions of the text: Gamans (1606-1670), the version included in the *Acta Sanctorum*; Leibniz, 1707, closely based on the previous edition Pertz, 1841; the two subsequent editions of the *Acta Sanctorum*; the version of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*<sup>29</sup>.

The *posterior* biography consulted a large number of sources: apart from the *Vita antiquior*, there are many references to the *Vulgate*, the *Epistulae* and the *Vita S. Martini*

<sup>18</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 12-18.

<sup>22</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Untersuchungen*, cit., pp. 72-75.

<sup>25</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 18-42. The mss. transmitted by the *Annales* appear to be: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laudianus misc. 633 (O); Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats und Universitätsbibliothek, 8° Cod. ms. hist. 333 (i.e. the ms. discovered by Pertz in 1842, (G)).

<sup>26</sup> L. BORNSCHEUER, *Miseriae Regum. Untersuchungen zum Krisen- und Todesgedanken in den herrschaftstheologischen Vorstellungen der ottonisch-salischen Zeit*, Berlin 1968, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Untersuchungen*, cit., p. 16. Arguably it was the accusations about her alleged pagan origins that induced the hagiographer of the *posterior* to foreground the queen's piety. We read that she even tied herself to Christ's feet on the crucifix as a sign of devotion according to the practice mentioned in the *Vita Radegundis* by Venantius Fortunatus, cfr. *Vita antiquior*, p. 118.

<sup>28</sup> *Untersuchungen*, cit., pp. 72-75.

<sup>29</sup> The manuscripts on which the tradition is based are in an abbreviated form: B<sub>1</sub> Berlin, Staatsbibliothek-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Fragment 40; D<sub>2</sub> GV (lost) Düsseldorf, Nordrhein-Westfälisches Hauptstaatsarchiv; B Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale 3134 (329-41); K Köln, Historisches Archiv, Chroniken Darstellungen, 263; D<sub>1</sub> Darmstadt, Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek 2709. For a careful examination, cfr. *ibid.* pp. 50-72.

by Sulpicius Severus, the *Vita S. Radegundis* by Venantius Fortunatus, as well as the *Vita Vencezlavi* by Gumpolodus Mantuanus<sup>30</sup>.

There were two versions of the *Vita posterior*: the first, the older one had many links with the History by Widukind of Corvey<sup>31</sup>; the second, more recent, was arguably transmitted by the Greven charterhouse legendarium, dating back to 1460<sup>32</sup>.

Concluding this brief survey, we recall that the editor of our critical edition, in his reconstruction of the *Vita posterior*, referred to the readings in the Düsseldorf (D<sub>2</sub>) codex,<sup>33</sup> which he considered the most reliable, filling out the abbreviations as is customary, replacing the «u» consonant by «v» and using modern punctuation.

The ability of Schütte in providing a convincing reconstruction of the text, together with his skill in making the biographical texts of St. Matilda legible by modern readers is why we decided on his edition – in preference to the others – when facing the problem of the text to use for our study.

#### ON THE RHETORICAL-FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS

Still concerning the most important aspects of the texts, both *Vitae* have some similarities in the prologues. In the *prologus* of the first biography the author addresses the Emperor Otto II asking him to correct the *Vita antiquior*, which is being presented to him. The anonymous writer, since he had dared to write a biography of Mathilde without ever having met her begs the reader's clemency:

[...] *Igitur te huius operis, inperator Otto, iudicem facimus, ut, que forte a nobis praetermissa vel viciose dicta fuerint, sapientium industrie addere vel mutare commendes et, quia tantam materie seriem nos impossibile est ad extremam perducere manum, a te quasi quodam solis splendore clarius inclarescat opus. [...]. Hec autem qui lecturi sunt, fidem dictis adhibeant, petimus nec me quicquam nisi probata scripsisse arbitrentur*<sup>34</sup>.

In addition to the request for the dedicatee's corrections, which the rhetorical structure of both prologues share, the *captatio benevolentiae* is also a common aspect. In the prologue of the *posterior*, King Henry II is asked to correct any mistakes in the work that he had commissioned<sup>35</sup>, though this invitation is paired with a parallel between his laudable virtue and that of his great grandmother Mathilde:

[...] *non minime est virtutis vos pia vestrorum inquirere facta precedentium propinquorum et maxime vestre proave Mathildis illustris regine, cuius vita lucida merito est imitanda et cuius virtus tanto est laudabilior quantus sexus fragilior*<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> *Die lebensbeschreibungen*, cit., pp. 50-72.

<sup>31</sup> *Untersuchungen*, cit., pp. 75-106.

<sup>32</sup> *Untersuchungen*, cit., pp. 75-106.

<sup>33</sup> *Untersuchungen*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>34</sup> *Vita antiquior*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 145.

Apart from entrusting God with the King's protection<sup>37</sup>, a very interesting point is the definition of the *Vita posterior* as a *liber manualis*, a work, though not intended to be read aloud in public, that should be kept on hand (*librum manualem ne feratis in publicum*)<sup>38</sup>. The prologue ends with the classic reference to *detractores*, i.e. the envious<sup>39</sup>.

The narrative sequences, though subjected to more detailed, systematic comment in the *posterior*, have thematic parallels, especially when dealing with Mathilde's charitable works. For example, in both the older and more recent works, the episode of the washing of the feet of poor people, a *topos* of medieval female hagiography which would have a long life is narrated (*ipsa occulte ingrediens manibus propriis sordes diluebat singulis et, [...], pauperibus serviebat quasi ancilla*)<sup>40</sup>.

The shining virtues of the Queen are of fundamental importance and are listed in long sequences, dominating the rhetoric of the two hagio-biographies. Her most important qualities are generosity and humility (*in omni bono opere proficientis [...] et tamen nichilominus caruit palma virginitati proxima humilitate*)<sup>41</sup>. Modesty is just as important (*candida veluti lilia rubentibus rosis intermixta tales dabat ore colores*)<sup>42</sup>, which foregrounds Christian virtues, keeping the classical ones in the background.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL AND LATE ANTIQUE AUCTORES

According to the hagiographers, Mathilde's virtuous acts were partially encouraged by her husband Henry's permissive attitude: he granted his wife complete freedom of action (*Igitur faciles illi consensus praebeuit ad omnia quae desideravit*)<sup>43</sup>. The description of the couple's relationship appears to be a perfect example of marital love<sup>44</sup> and in the two biographies this harmony is communicated by means of references to classical sources, as they pleasantly run through the memories of the two anonymous authors. Let us begin with the older one. For example, the author, tells of how Henry and Mathilde

<sup>37</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 180. The same episode is to be found in the *Vita antiquior*, p. 126. The scene in which the nun washes feet as an act of charity and humility, as was pointed out, is an invariable feature of female hagiography even subsequently. Cfr. for example the case of the Franciscan tertiary Angela da Foligno (1248-1309): *Et postquam ista optulimus eis, lavimus pedes feminarum et lavimus manus hominum, maxime cuiusdam leprosi qui habebat manus valde frigidas vel marcia et perditas. Et bibimus de illa lordura*. Angela de Fulgineo, *Memoriale*, in F. FREZZA, *Liber Lelle. Il libro di Angela da Foligno nel testo del codice di Assisi con versione italiana, note critiche e apparato biblico tratto dal codice di Bagnoregio*, Firenze 2012, pp. 1-186 (a p. 78). The circulation of common themes among texts related to holy women is widely proved by Romana Guarnieri's works, e.g. see: GUARNIERI, *Angela mistica europea*, E. MENESTÒ (a cura di), *Angela da Foligno: terziaria francescana*, Atti del Convegno storico nel VII centenario dell'ingresso della Beata Angela da Foligno nell'Ordine francescano (1291-1991), (Foligno, 17-18-19, XI, 1991), Spoleto 1992, pp. 39-82.

<sup>41</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 153.

<sup>42</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 278.

<sup>44</sup> On the love between a married couple see: I DEUG SU, *L'agiografia del secolo X attraverso le storie d'amore*, W. BERSCHIN (Hrsg.), *Lateinische Kultur im X. Jabrundert*. Actendes I. Internationalen Mittelaetenkongress (Heidelberg, 12-15, IX, 1988), Stuttgart 1991, pp. 154-184.

when engaged enjoyed their pure ‘permitted’ love (*Ibi tandem licito perfruuntur amore*)<sup>45</sup> and to explain the concept he turns to Vergil who, however, he does not quote literally (*et licito tandem sermone fruuntur*)<sup>46</sup>. Henry had seen Mathilde for the first time in a monastery: her snow-white countenance softened by embarrassment proper to modesty shone like the sheen of a lily, which shines even more when placed near the red of roses: *nivea genas permixta ignis rubore, candida veluti lilia rubentibus rosis intermixta tales dabat ore colores*<sup>47</sup>. The reference is again to the Aeneid, the episode in which Lavinia blushes because of her mother, who states that she would rather commit suicide than accept Aeneas as a son-in-law<sup>48</sup>; the contextualisation of similes is quite different, which illustrates the freedom with which the models are recycled and updated, in the case of a repertoire available for use in the hagiographical genre. The anonymous author’s delight in the description of the features of a face, in which emotions are ‘photographed’, strikes the reader on the occasion of the meeting between Otto and his mother when reconciliation had come about: when embracing her penitent son the Queen’s face was lined with tears (*At illa decoras lacrimis infusa per genas*)<sup>49</sup>. Seeing that in Vergil we find, when Lavinia and her mother are mentioned: *accepit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris / flagrantis perfusa genas*, there appears to be uncertainty in the use of the Latin text, because, if the anonymous author had quoted the Aeneid correctly, he would have repeated the Greek style accusative with *infusa genas*. Probably, the biographer was unaware of this syntactic construction and had inserted *per* before *genas*, so as to construct a correct prepositional phrase. It is interesting to note that *per* appears to be ‘recycled’ from the *perfusa* we find in Vergil.

Much space is devoted to the piety of the saintly Queen, who, following the example of St Radegund of Poitiers (520-587)<sup>50</sup> – whose life was certainly known to the two biographers – at night, replaced the marital bed with solitary prayer, subjecting herself to harsh penitence<sup>51</sup>. One of these consisted in tying – or chaining – herself to the feet of Christ from cockcrow to dawn *a primo galli cantu donec aurora crastina primo extulit ortus*<sup>52</sup>. In this case, not only does the author of the *Vita antiquior* follow Venantius Fortunatus from a thematic point of view<sup>53</sup>, – Radegund also used to tie herself to Christ’s feet, like a large number of mystics, up to Maria Domitilla Galluzzi †1671<sup>54</sup>,

<sup>45</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 8, 468.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 115.

<sup>48</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 12, 64-69: *Accipit vocem lacrimis, Lavinia matris / flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem / subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora cucurrit. / Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro / si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa / alba rosa, talis virgo dabat ore colores.*

<sup>49</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 124.

<sup>50</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 14: *Item nocturno tempore cum reclinaret cum principe, rogans se pro humana necessitate consurgere, levans egressa cubiculo, tam diu ante secretum orationi incumbebat.* The link with Venantius Fortunatus was pointed out by Schütte, *Vita antiquior*, p. 118, n. 67.

<sup>51</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Vita antiquior*.

<sup>53</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 17: *Sin autem rex deesset, quis credat qualiter se orationi defunderet, qualiter se tamquam praesentis Christi pedibus alligaret.* For the link with Venantius Fortunatus see Schütte, *Vita antiquior*, p. 118, n. 68.

<sup>54</sup> «Per lo che ottenei più volte da vostra reverenza di star alla porta della chiesa con le mani legate dietro le spalle, con li occhi bendati (...)» M.D. GALLUZZI, *Vita di suor Maria Domitilla Galluzzi narrata da lei stessa*, ms. CS II 19 G 97, Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, cc. 142v-143r, cit. in O. PELOSI, *Tra eros e caritas: le ‘pene d’amore’ di Maria Domitilla Galluzzi*, in *Annali d’Italianistica*,



by way of Clare of Rimini †1346<sup>55</sup> – but interweaves his text referring to Vergil ([...] *ubi primos crastinus ortus / extulerit*)<sup>56</sup>. If the anonymous author of the *Vita antiquior* builds up his profile of Mathilde relying mostly on Vergil and Venantius Fortunatus, when picturing King Henry he was influenced by Terence: precisely the Roman playwright's description of the young Pamphilus in his *Andria*, as was already noted by Schütte<sup>57</sup>. For example, we read that the young Henry was praised without envy and had found friends worthy of him: *et laudem sine invidia et pares inveniebat amicos*<sup>58</sup>. In Terence we read *ita ut facillume sine invidia laudem invenias et amicos pares. . .*<sup>59</sup>; the biographer used *pares* as an adjective, when in Terence it is a verb. It may well be that the anonymous author had not understood Terence's sentence, or he may have wanted to turn *pares* into an adjective thus creating literary funambulism.

The situation is just as complex in the relationship between classical texts and the *Vita posterior* and we will now turn to a number of instances where the link is clearest in Chapter XVI a moment of acute emotional tension is described: the Queen is reading the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great when the Bavarian ambassadors enter the room and give her a number of letters. While reading the letters Mathilde learns of her favourite son's death. His name was also Henry. It is at this point that we can observe the anonymous author's ability in projecting her body language by means of precise descriptions: the Queen's face became pale and her limbs are penetrated by icy shivers, so that the book of *Dialogues* she was reading reflected her desperate gaze:

*Ut ergo cognovit gloriosa regina ex litteris dilectum filium suum ex hac vita migrasse, pallor facie apparuit et gelidus tremor per omnia membra cucurrit et liber, quam in manibus tenebat, cadentem vultum suscepit*<sup>60</sup>.

The author follows Vergil here (*...gelidusque per ima cucurrit / ossa tremor...*)<sup>61</sup>, with reference to the episode of the imagined reaction of the crowd to the false oracle mentioned by the crafty Greek Sinon.

The decontextualisation of Vergil's lines in respect of the themes of the narrative sequences in which Vergil's words are recalled and reused, is particularly evident in this second *recensio*. A good example is the passage in which the reader is told how the Queen used to spend whole nights keeping a vigil (*noctem pervigilem ducere solebat*)<sup>62</sup>. The intention is to foreground Mathilde's boundless generosity, preferring to help the poor by night rather than sleeping: the anonymous author borrows from the *Aeneid* (*...noctem custodia ducit*)<sup>63</sup>, with reference to the Rutulian guards, who actually

13, 1995, pp. 308-322 (a p. 321). About the similarities among the mystic women, see the aforementioned essay: GUARNIERI, *Angela mistica europea*.

<sup>55</sup> *Vita della Beata Chiara da Rimini*, a cura di G. Garampi, Roma 1755, p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 4, 118.

<sup>57</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 112, n. 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 112, n. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Ter. *Andr.* 52, 65-67.

<sup>60</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 177.

<sup>61</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 1, 120.

<sup>62</sup> *Vita posterior*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>63</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 9, 168. Noted by Schütte, *Vita posterior*, n. 141.

spent the night playing. Vergil's masterpiece also inspired the words used by King Otto, who, when approving the building of the monastery of Nordhausen founded by his mother, stated: *Deus secundat vestra incepta*<sup>64</sup>. King Latinus had been moved to reply to Ilioneus, Aeneas' ambassador, acknowledging in the arrival of Aeneas the will of the oracle by saying: *di nostra incepta secundent*<sup>65</sup>.

#### THE BIOGRAPHIES OF MATHILDE AND THE *VITA S. RADEGUNDIS* BY VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS: SOME COMMON THEMES

Returning to models, it could be of interest to note how, in the hagiographic representation of Mathilde, the two anonymous authors make use of themes and motifs already used by Venantius Fortunatus in his portrait of St Radegund (520-587) Queen of the Franks; her hagio-biography<sup>66</sup>, written shortly after the Saint's death<sup>67</sup> for the bishops<sup>68</sup>, became paradigmatic since the anonymous authors made use of the representative morphology, of those *topoi* that Venantius Fortunatus had provided them with. Therefore common themes can be seen between the Life of St Radegund on the one hand and the those of St Matilda on the other.

These similarities appear right from the prologues, since both that of the *Vita posterior* and that of the work by Fortunatus refer to the wondrous sense of devotion of the women, despite the fragile nature of the female sex. This *topos* dates back to the 4th century i.e. that of the *mulier virilis*<sup>69</sup>. In the prologue to the *posterior* we read: [...] *non minime est virtutis vos pia vestrorum inquirere facta precedentium propinquorum et maxime vestre proave Mathildis illustris regine, cuius vita lucida merito est imitanda et cuius virtus tanto est laudabilior quanto sexus fragilior*<sup>70</sup>. As a matter of fact in the *Vita* of Radegund, the biographer states: *Redemptoris nostri tantum dives est largitas, ut in sexu muliebri celebret fortes victorias et corpore fragiliores ipsas reddat feminas virtute mentis inclitae gloriosas*<sup>71</sup>.

Another common theme is the foregrounding of the subject's barbarian origins. Radegund – it is said – came from Thuringia (*Beatissima igitur Radegundis natione barbara de regione Thoringa*)<sup>72</sup>, as was the case with Mathilde, who *traxit egregium genus a venerabili viro Witikino*, therefore a barbarian who *errore captus adorabat ydola*<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 189.

<sup>65</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 7, 259.

<sup>66</sup> See among the studies of the *Vita s. Radegundis* by Fortunatus: J. FONTAINE, *Hagiographie et politique de Sulpice Sévère à Vénance Fortunat*, in *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France* 62, 1976, pp. 113-140; C. LEONARDI, *Fortunato e Baudonivia*, in H. MORDEK (Hrsg.), *Aus Kirche und Reich. Studien zu Theologie, Politik und Recht in Mittelalter. Festschrift für F. Kempf*, Sigmaringen 1983, pp. 23-32.

<sup>67</sup> F.E. CONSOLINO, *Due agiografi per una regina: Radegonda di Turingia fra Fortunato e Baudonivia*, in *Studi Storici* 29, 1, 1988, pp. 143-159 (a p. 144).

<sup>68</sup> CONSOLINO, *Due agiografi*, p. 146.

<sup>69</sup> E. GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile nella biografia e nell'autobiografia cristiana del IV secolo*, Roma 1980, esp. Chap. I.

<sup>70</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rat.* 1, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rat.* 2, 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 148. We can also read in the *antiquior*: *Nam Witikindi duci Saxonie origine traxit a stirpe, qui quondam demonum captus errore, [...] idola adorans» Vita antiquior* (p. 113).

No less important appears to be the Queen's literary education, *capax in studio discipline litteralis*<sup>74</sup>, like Radegund, who *litteris est erudita*<sup>75</sup>; but it is when we come to the two queens' good works that parallels become evident, and this is not only because the anonymous biographers return to this *topos*, but also because they are influenced by their source from a linguistic point of view: in the *vox egeni apud illam numquam inaniter sonuit [...]*<sup>76</sup> the younger anonymous author also recalls that *apud quam nec egeni vox inaniter sonuit [...]*<sup>77</sup> in his source. To return to the description of the Queen's generosity, the biographer of the second *recensio* states that she was convinced that Christ was present in a poor person (*et nudos vestimentis induens non dubitavit se Christi membra tegere sub inopum veste*)<sup>78</sup>, just as Radegund approached the poor *credens sub inopis veste Christi membra se tegere*<sup>79</sup>.

Apart from the themes we have outlined here, another main aspect is that of the Queen's pleading with her husband to show mercy to condemned criminals. This theme is also to be found in the *Vita s. Radegundis*:

*Qualiter vero, si quis pro culpa criminali, ut assolet, a rege deputabatur interfici [...] qualiter concursabat per domesticos fideles, servientes et proceres, quorum blandimentis mulcebat animum principis, donec in ipsa ira regis, unde processerat sors mortis, inde curreret vox salutis*<sup>80</sup>.

On this occasion it is the anonymous author of the older Life who refers to Venantius Fortunatus, whose exact words are repeated:

*Si quis pro culpa criminali, ut assolet, adductus ad tribunal a rege deputabatur interfici, sanctissima regina cruciato condolens blandimentis usque adeo mulcebat animum principis, donec in ipsa ira regis, unde processerat sors mortis, inde procederet vox salutis*<sup>81</sup>.

To complete the picture we can refer to the episode in which Radegund takes off her rich garments as a sign of distancing herself from the pomp of the royal court. She donates them to the monasteries. The future saint places her queenly robe on the altar together with jewels and ornaments; but let us leave the description of the episode to her biographer: *Mox indumentum nobile, quo celeberrima die solebat, pompa comitante, regina procedere, excuta ponit in altare et blattis, gemmis, ornamentis mensam divinae gloriae tot donis onerat per honorem*<sup>82</sup>. Mahtilde discarded her rich robes only after the death of her son Henry. Actually, although after her husband's death she did not stop wearing rich garments and ornaments, it was after her son's death that she forbade public festivities, and, using a play on words, the author of the *posterior* tells how the Queen chose to do without jewellery and turn to the gold of justice and the gems of pity:

<sup>74</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 150. In the *Vita antiquior* we read: *Illorum interea pervenit ad aures quandam [...] fuisse puellam [...] litteralis studio discipline erudiendam*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>75</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 2, 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 180.

<sup>77</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 3, 11.

<sup>78</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 165.

<sup>79</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 3, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 10, 22.

<sup>81</sup> *Vita antiquior*, p. 118.

<sup>82</sup> Ven. Fort. *Vit. Rad.* 13, 29.

*Post obitum enim memorandi regis Heinrici assidue induit coccinum unius coloris, non in publico, sed sub lineo vestimento, et pro decore ornamenti ante se gessit parum auri. Hoc totum tunc deposuit. [...]. Resplenduit in ea aurum iusticie, gemma misericordie [...]*<sup>83</sup>.

This survey of the *Vitae* of Queen Mathilde does not only illustrate the spread of Classical and Late Antique models in the repertoire of sources available to hagiographers in the early middle ages, but also, we hope, the presence of abundant *topoi* for their use in the *Vita* of St Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus. Seeing that the *Vitae* of Mathilde offer a stimulus for the representation of noble ladies planning to found monasteries, as we mentioned at the beginning, it is likely that other hagiographies of women<sup>84</sup> have significant links with the work by Venantius Fortunatus, who as a model would become the foundation of the representation of a new type of female sainthood in the Medieval Holy Roman Empire.

#### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse the two biographies of Matilda of Saxony (aka Matilda of Ringelheim) (895-968), both saint and queen, the wife of King Henry the Fowler (†936) and mother of Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (†973). The two texts can be seen as a focal point for the development of female hagiographies. These two *Vitae* do not only open the way to female dynastic sainthood, but also extol, for the first time, the figure of a saintly queen, the foundress of royal monasteries. After outlining Mathilde's biography, and briefly commenting on the hagiographical-biographical tradition, the relationship between the two hagiographic texts on the one hand, and the classical and late antique Latin *auctores* on the other will be examined.

Questo lavoro è inteso ad analizzare le due biografie di Matilde di Sassonia (895-968), santa e regina, moglie di re Enrico l'Uccellatore (†936) e madre dell'imperatore Ottone I (†973). I due testi possono essere considerati un punto nodale per lo sviluppo dell'agiografia 'al' femminile; le due *Vitae* infatti non solo spalancano la porta alla stagione della santità dinastica femminile, ma celebrano altresì, per la prima volta, la figura della santa regina votata alla costruzione di monasteri reali. Dopo aver delineato brevemente il profilo biografico di Matilde e dopo aver dato alcune indicazioni sulla tradizione delle agio-biografie, si indagano i rapporti fra i due testi agiografici da un lato e gli autori latini della tradizione classica e tardoantica dall'altro.

KEYWORDS: Matilda of Saxony; hagiography; female sainthood; classical *auctores*; Venantius Fortunatus.

Mattia Zangari  
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
zangari.mattia@unive.it

<sup>83</sup> *Vita posterior*, p. 178.

<sup>84</sup> Apart from the hagiography of Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), it would also be useful to study the hagiographies of Agnes of Bohemia (1205-1282) and Anne of Silesia (1203-1265). For an overview see: BARTOLOMEI ROMAGNOLI, *Santità e mistica femminile*, cit., pp. 37-39.