

# Brunhilda of Austrasia (c543–613)

## POWER-HUNGRY VISIGOTHIC PRINCESS

Germanic legends of valkyries may have been based on a strong-willed medieval ruler of northern Europe. **Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough** introduces the real Brunhild

**T**he name Brunhild conjures up images of shield-maidens and valkyries. The legendary figure of Brunhild has a starring role in medieval Norse legends and continental Germanic tradition, later immortalised in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. According to prose and poetic texts from 13th-century Iceland, Brunhild is a valkyrie who might be won only by a man who can pass through a wall of flame – or, in another version, enchanted shields – to reach her. The hero capable of such a feat is Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer; their love story becomes tangled in treachery, and by the end of the narrative, Brunhild has Sigurd murdered.

It is likely that the origins of this legendary Brunhild lie in a historical figure. Brunhilda of Austrasia was a Visigothic princess born around AD 543, probably in what is now central Spain. She may never have collected the dead from the battlefield for the All-Father, nor sung a stirring solo from her funeral pyre, but Brunhilda was a remarkable figure who played an active, often ruthless role in the cut-throat world of sixth-century politics. Hers was a life entangled in the plots and intrigues of the Merovingian dynasty, rulers of the Franks after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century.

Brunhilda was married to Sigebert, grandson of the powerful Clovis I, the first king to unite all the Frankish tribes under one leader. King Sigebert ruled the eastern portion of the Frankish realm, encompassing parts of what is now northern Germany and France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

Sigebert spent much of his time warring against his half-brother, King Chilperic, who ruled in the west.

Brunhilda, meanwhile, was busy with her own battle against Chilperic's wife, the equally powerful and headstrong Fredegund. Brunhilda had a personal reason to hate Fredegund, who had been Chilperic's mistress while the western king was married to Brunhilda's own sister, Galswintha; when Galswintha died in mysterious circumstances, it was rumoured that Chilperic or Fredegund had killed her, leaving the top job vacant for his ambitious mistress.

Brunhilda gained real power only after Sigebert was assassinated in 575 (and following a brief and inglorious marriage to her nephew, which was swiftly declared uncanonical due to their close kinship). She became regent in the name of her young son, Childeburt, at which point she set about tackling the administrative mess that was post-Roman northern Europe. \*1

Under Brunhilda's regency, old roads were repaired, churches and abbeys commissioned, defensive fortifications erected, and the army and tax system restructured. Brunhilda's regency lasted until Childeburt came of age as a teenager, and when he died, aged only 26, she once again assumed control, this time in the name of her grandsons. By now in late middle age, Brunhilda had honed her political ruthlessness, and soon the grandsons were at war with each other. \*2

Desperate to keep power, she supplied her favoured grandson with an endless supply of concubines to dissuade him from acquiring a wife who might challenge her power.

Brunhilda's final regency came as she approached her seventies, this time for her great-grandson. Her nemesis Fredegund had died several years earlier, but the queenly feud outlived her, and would eventually lead to Brunhilda's demise. In 613, Clotaire II, son of Fredegund, accused Brunhilda of responsibility for the deaths of no fewer than 10 Frankish kings – including her own husband, Sigebert, and brother-in-law, Chilperic – and had her sentenced to death. According to the eighth-century *Liber Historiae Francorum* (The History Book of the Franks), she was mounted on the back of a camel, paraded through the army, then torn apart by wild horses. The account ends: "Her final grave was the fire. Her bones were burnt."

The manner of Brunhilda's death echoes that of her legendary counterpart, who burned herself on the pyre of her slain lover Sigurd. Likewise, the tangled web of family tragedies and jealousies that is the defining feature of the German epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs) and the Norse legendary tradition bear a striking resemblance to the bloody feuds and treacheries of sixth-century Merovingian history. If the historical Brunhilda was indeed the inspiration for the shield-maiden-cum- Valkyrie, then she was a fitting role model, with a life as colourful and dramatic as any Wagnerian opera or Norse saga. 🌐

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### Ruthless regent

Brunhilda of Austrasia rose to power by marrying a king, and fought to hold onto power after his death, ruling as regent for her son then grandsons. Eventually battles with her sister-in-law led to her demise – but not before she had controlled the kingdom intermittently over a period of nearly 40 years

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