CHAPTER 1

'The battle of this life'

> When it was noised abroad that Attila the king of the Huns, overcome with savage rage, was laying waste the province of Gaul, the terror-stricken citizens of Paris sought to save their goods and money from his power by moving them to other, safer cities. But Genovefa summoned the matrons of the city and persuaded them to undertake a series of fasts, prayers, and vigils in order to ward off the threatening disaster, as Esther and Judith had done in the past. Agreeing with Genovefa, the women gave themselves up to God and laboured for days in the baptistery – fasting, praying, and keeping watch as she directed. Meanwhile she persuaded the men that they should not remove their goods from Paris because the cities they deemed safer would be devastated by the raging Huns while Paris, guarded by Christ, would remain untouched by her enemies.[1]

This passage, the most famous episode of the sixth-century *Vita Genovefae* or *Life of Saint Genevieve*, reflects a late Roman certainty that miraculous powers and historical events could not be understood in isolation from one another. By organizing the women of Paris to protect Paris from Attila the Hun through their prayers, Genovefa ran a considerable risk. Having followed her advice, the citizens then lost their nerve and threatened her with stoning or drowning as a false prophetess. Yet the saint's ability to mobilize both the male and female property-holders of Paris toward complementary tasks also demands our attention. In the eyes of her sixth-century biographer, the ability of Genovefa and her matrons to turn away a military invasion through the power of prayer, and the ability of a leading, female member of the *curia* to direct a risky but ultimately successful strategy for safeguarding the moveable goods of the town's principal citizens are, fused

[1] *Vita Genovefae* 10 (*MGH SRM* 3, 219), tr. Joanne McNamara and John Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham and London, 1992), 13. Note that the *MGH* edition gives the 'A' recension, *BHL* 3335, now accepted as the earliest version (see n. 6 below). *AASS Jan.*, 1, 138–43 gives the later 'B' recension, *BHL* 3334; this is the text translated in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*.

into a single image of extraordinary *virtus*. As the story is told, the practical decisions of the men of Paris depended directly on their faith in their women-folk, particularly with their ability to call down the powers of heaven to protect the city, and the good judgement of their leader Genovefa.

From the point of view of the Frankish author of the *Vita Genovefae*, the fact that the riches of Paris had not been lost to the Huns, as they would have been had they been moved to the other cities which had indeed been sacked, meant that Paris was a richer and more powerful city when it came into the Frankish kingdom. Even more importantly, it was known that the city had been chosen for protection by divine favour. This was an attribute of great consequence in the early medieval context – that Paris had fallen to the Franks themselves was merely a sign of their own even greater favour – and the importance of this divine sign helps to explain the desire of the Frankish king Clovis (d. 511) to be buried near Genovefa in Paris, in the basilica which he and his queen Clothild built over her tomb.

The story thus illustrates the important interaction between military power and religious ideas at the end of antiquity, a theme to which we will return more than once during the course of the present study. But it has another significance for historians who wish to understand the place of women in this troubled period. Fifth- and sixth-century women could not expect to hold themselves apart from the harsh military realities of their day. The unlucky *domina* could find herself the target of an invader's gratuitous violence – and this even if the army in question was Roman. The *Liber Pontificalis* records the brutality of Belisarius' siege of Naples:

> But hearing that the Goths had made themselves a king [Witiges] against Justinian's wish, he came to the district of Campania close to Naples and with his army embarked on a siege of that city, since its citizens refused to open up to him. Then the patrician gained entry to the city by fighting. Driven by fury he killed both the Goths and all the [Roman] Neapolitan citizens, and embarked on a sack from which he did not even spare the churches, such a sack that he killed husbands by the sword in their wives' presence and eliminated the captured sons and wives of nobles. No one was spared, not *sacerdotes*, not God's servants, not virgin nuns.[2]

[2] *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Duchesne, 3, s.v. Silverius, tr. Ray Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis to AD 715)* (2nd edn, Liverpool, 2000), 54. This passage comes from the first half of the life of Silverius, written c. 538–9 according to Duchesne, rather than from the second, later half, which seens to have been composed in the mid 550s (*Liber Pontificalis*, 1, xxxix–xli, ccxxx–ccxxxii, and 294, n. 15).

It is clear from the above that far from being spared, the 'wives of nobles' were in fact a target category for Belisarius' soldiers. A few lines down, the anonymous compiler recounts the year-long siege of Rome by Witiges; the account makes it clear that the invasion party was only one of the dangers threatening the besieged population:

> During those days the city was under such a siege as totally to prevent anyone leaving or entering it. All private, state and church property was destroyed by fire, while men were cut down by the sword. The sword killed those it killed, famine killed those it killed, pestilence killed those it killed.[3]

Under these circumstances, even clerics and women were called upon to cultivate a version of Christian forbearance little different from the warrior stoicism of the menfolk. In certain circumstances, clerics and Christian women could take an active role in shaping the warrior ethos. That military virtues were not in principle reserved for men only can be seen from a letter addressed by Cassiodorus to the Roman senate in 533, justifying the sole rule of the Gothic queen Amalasuintha, daughter of Theoderic the Great. Amalasuintha had served as regent for her son Athalaric; after his death she attempted to bear the Ostrogothic crown in her own right.[4]

If we are to believe the *Vita Genovefae*, the women of the late Roman provincial aristocracy were perceived as a distinct grouping, sometimes cooperating with, and at other times complementing or correcting the efforts of their men-folk. To pursue the theme, let us turn back to Genovefa and her efforts to support and even guide the Roman military effort, and then to manage the turbulent transition from Roman to Frankish rule in the northern province of Belgica Secunda, covering the period from 429 to 502.[5]

The *Vita Genovefae* has been the subject of an interpretative revolution in the past two decades. Long dismissed by many scholars as a Carolingian legend drawing on the myth of an ancient corn goddess who eventually became the city's patron saint, the *Vita* was not believed to bear reliable information about the fifth or even the sixth century. In 1986, however,

[3] *Liber Pontificalis*, s.v. Silverius, tr. Davis, 54.

[4] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 11.1.10, 14, *MGH AA* 12, 329) stresses her warlike character and virtue, '*quod habet eximium uterque sexus*'; see the discussion in Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997), 77.

[5] After a victory of Clovis over Syagrius c. 486/7, whose precise significance is disputed, at least part of Belgica Secunda was ruled as an independent kingdom by the Franks. A useful summary of the problems involved in assessing the Frankish takeover can be found in Penny MacGeorge, *Late Roman Warlords* (Oxford, 2002), at 114–36.

Martin Heinzelmann and Joseph-Claude Poulin published a study which changed the terms of reference for all future study of the saint. Poulin's detailed assessment of the early manuscript tradition and Heinzelmann's comparison of the earliest recension with other contemporary material including inscriptions and late Roman legal sources brought forth a Genovefa who was nothing like the peasant girl familiar to historians of an earlier generation.[6]

Heinzelmann was able to show, thanks to the earliest version of the *Vita Genovefae* identified by Poulin, that the woman known to the anonymous hagiographer's informants had in fact held the rank of *clarissima femina* within the Roman system of honours.[7] The first *Vita Genovefae*, almost certainly written c. 520, preserved important details about the saint that were airbrushed out by later editors, perhaps because they did not suit the emerging legend. Daughter of Gerontia and Severus, Genovefa seems to have been born around 420 to a distinguished Frankish military family on one side and a member of the Roman administrative class on the other. In the early fifth century distinguished Franks often acquired Roman honours, gave their children Roman names, and 'assimilated' fully to the existing Roman order, so either of Genovefa's Roman-named parents could in principle have come from a Frankish background; one of them must have, given Genovefa's own Frankish name, since Roman families did not give barbarian names to their children.[8] While the details of her parents' background are a matter of speculation, Genovefa clearly inherited substantial land-holdings, along with the rights and obligations of an influential member of the Roman *curia* first of Nanterre and then of Paris (where she came to live, sponsored by a powerful godmother, after the death of her parents).[9]

Her encounters with 'the people of Paris', as well as her exercise of public functions such as organization of the finance and construction of public buildings and supervision of the *annona*, suggest that well into middle age Genovefa's authority was based on property ownership and exalted social standing as much as on her Christian virtues.[10]

[6] Martin Heinzelmann and Joseph-Claude Poulin, *Les Vies anciennes de sainte Geneviève de Paris, études critiques*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, IV[e] Section, Sciences Historiques et Philologiques 329 (Paris and Geneva, 1986).
[7] Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Vies anciennes*, 92.
[8] Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Vies anciennes*, 83.
[9] Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Vies anciennes*, 92, suggests that Genovefa would have held one of the following titles: *principalis*, *patrona civitatis*, *defensor civitatis*, *mater civitatis*, *curator civitatis*, any of which would have carried duties and responsibilities to act on behalf of the city council.
[10] Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Vies anciennes*, 93–8.

Once Clovis' father Childeric (d. 481) had established himself in Northern Gaul,[11] Genovefa, now probably in her sixties, is portrayed as a sort of affectionate thorn in the side of the Frankish monarchy. An early episode of her relationship with Childeric plays with irony on the all-important question of gaining entrance into a fortified city.[12]

> I cannot express the love and veneration that the illustrious Childeric bore her when he was King of the Franks. On one occasion, he went out of the city and ordered the gates to be closed so that Genovefa could not rescue some captives he meant to execute. But a faithful messenger conveyed news of the king's intentions to Genovefa and without delay she set off to save their lives. The people's amazement was wonderful to see when the city gate opened by itself when she touched it without a key. Then, gaining the king's presence, she persuaded him not to behead his captives.[13]

Naturally the warrior king's attempt to close his city against the woman who had stopped Attila comes to nothing. Just as his city cannot remained closed against her, so his will can not hold fast against her powers of persuasion.

There is reason to suspect that the author of the *Vita Genovefae* had in mind an idea of how Genovefa's ability to rally the women of Paris might have been shaped by her own engagement with Christian devotional literature. Shortly after his description of Genovefa's protection of Paris, the hagiographer catalogues the allegorical figures of virtue of the second-century Christian manual, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, suggesting that 'the twelve spiritual virgins described by Hermas ... kept her company'.[14] In fact, the *Shepherd* was precisely the kind of early Christian devotional text that could well have been available to Genovefa or her biographer. It is a particularly appropriate choice. In Book 3 of the *Vita Geonvefae*, the description of the twelve allegorical virgins cited in *Similitudes* 9.15 of the *Shepherd* occurs in the context of the building of a mystical tower from which the virgins themselves are

[11] Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Vies anciennes*, 100, discusses the possibility that Childeric had been appointed as a Roman administrator to Belgica Secunda at the same time as holding royal title among the Franks before taking up arms against the Roman government of Syagrius. The definitive break seems to have taken place with Clovis' victory over Syagrius in 486/7. Although the chronology and topography of the *Vita Genovefae* have yet to be definitively mapped against our fragmentary understanding of the decline of Roman power in the province, the present discussion does not require their resolution.

[12] MacGeorge, *Late Roman Warlords*, 118, identifies the city as 'probably Paris', but admits that the text is ambiguous.

[13] *VGen* 26 (*MGH SRM* 3, 226; tr. McNamara and Halporn, 28).

[14] *VGen* 16 (*MGH SRM* 3, 221; tr. McNamara and Halporn, 24).

visible. While the link between the 'mystical tower' of Hermas and the walled city of Paris is not made clear in the *Vita Genovefae*, the equation between tower and city becomes clearer when we consider the link made between a 'tower of contemplation' and a besieged city in another source from the late fifth or early sixth century, the anonymous *Ad Gregoriam in palatio*. Genovefa's biographer may well have seen the tower of Hermas as an inspiration for, or a key to understanding the significance of, the virgin's prayers from within the walls of her city. To be sure, the ascent to the tower of contemplation should by no means be seen as a retreat from engagement with the Christian's concrete predicament; the spiritual power of the praying women had both a practical and a mystical importance.

One of the more striking elements of the text is its invocation of the message carried to Genovefa by travelling merchants from the great Syrian saint Simeon Stylites (d. 459), asking her to remember him in her prayers as he stood on his pillar outside Antioch. The point here is that the Church was perceived as developing new and alternative modes of relationship; that men and women of Christian virtue could call upon not only the powers of heaven but also on networks of religious solidarity which reached right across the span of the former empire. If Roman military prowess was no longer invincible, the Roman legacy of Christian solidarity became even more important in the ensuing political free-for-all.

We shall have occasion to meet Genovefa again, as she is one of the very few genuinely well-documented women of our period. At the same time, she raises a spectre for the historian, because in the progressive stages of her *Vita* we can trace the distortion in memory of a prosperous lay landowner of senatorial standing into a peasant nun. This transformation served not only the purposes of devotional literature, as the well-connected *materfamilias* is progressively revised into a fuzzy and romantic figure. It also met the needs of a later Church whose institutions of memory – the monastic libraries – had little reason to devote resources to the celebrating of lay householders acting as 'free agents', and every reason to furnish hagiographical literature with details aligning a saint to devotional models in which monastic readers could find edification. The afterlife of Genovefa is a cautionary tale for anyone wishing to understand the social history of the late Roman householder class in general, or its women in particular, because it offers concrete evidence of the filtering process by which monastic librarians – and copyists – successively eroded our base of evidence.

Still, the late fifth and early sixth centuries offer little-explored terrain for trying to trace the history of the aristocratic laity, in part because a number of letter collections have survived from the period. Most are linked to bishops such as Sidonius Apollinaris,[15] Avitus of Vienne,[16] Ennodius of Pavia,[17] or Fulgentius of Ruspe;[18] networking with the powerful laity was clearly a *métier* for many of them.[19] In the later chapters we will discuss the emergence of a conduct literature addressed by bishops and deacons to this class. Something about the context and expectations of these men and women can be gleaned from the language in which advice to them is couched, and from the points of reference which the writers seem to expect the readers to recognize. Perhaps most valuable among these texts for our purposes are the moral writings of Fulgentius of Ruspe, much of whose advice to political men (Theodorus, Felix), aristocratic virgins (Proba), widows (Galla), and married couples (Optatus, Venantia) still survives.[20]

To draw conclusions about lay values from the prescriptive context of moral exhortation is a treacherous task. Occasionally, an opportunity for cross-referencing arises when letters are addressed to a single layperson by more than one writer, and in these instances we can glimpse the distortions which must inevitably govern all our materials. So, for example, the Arcotamia whom we encounter in the letters of Ennodius as a pious and ascetically minded Christian kinswoman[21] appears in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus as a landowner who, having allowed her daughter to divorce and remarry, now pursues the first son-in-law in a lawsuit over a piece of choice real estate.[22] Two lay aristocrats of the early to mid sixth century stand out as candidates for such an approach: first, Senarius the patrician, who appears in the correspondence of Ennodius, as the recipient of a theological treatise by Avitus of Vienne, and a treatise on baptism by John, deacon of Rome (possibly the future Pope John II), and a number

[15] Sidonius, *Epistolae* (*MGH AA* 8), Philip Rousseau, 'In Search of Sidonius the Bishop', *Historia* 25 (1976), 356–77, and Jill Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome* (Oxford, 1994).
[16] Avitus of Vienne, *Epistulae* (*MGH AA* 6/2). An accessible introduction is offered by D. Shanzer and I. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Selected Letters and Prose* (Liverpool, 2002).
[17] Ennodius, *Epistulae*, *MGH AA* 7; See now Stéphane Gioanni, *Ennode de Pavie, Livres 1. et 2. texte établi, traduit et commenté* (Paris, 2006).
[18] Fulgentius, *Opera* (*CC* 91); tr. Robert B. Eno, *Fulgentius: Selected Works* (Washington, D.C., 1997).
[19] On letter collections in this period, see Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms: 450–751* (London and New York, 1994), 24–7.
[20] As above, n. 18.
[21] Ennodius, *Epistulae* 6.24 (*MGH AA* 7, 226) and 7.14 (*MGH AA* 7, 237–8). On Arcotamia, S. A. H. Kennell, *Magnus Felix Ennodius: A Gentleman of the Church* (Ann Arbor, 2000), 36 and 137.
[22] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 4.12 (*MGH AA* 12, 120).

of times in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus;[23] and secondly the *dux* Reginus,[24] the recipient of a theological treatise on docetism from Fulgentius, and a moral treatise on the conduct of a military leader from Ferrandus, deacon of Carthage. We will return to the handbook of Ferrandus below, since it stands as a valuable parallel to the conduct literature addressed to women, and reveals something of the peculiar flavour of Christian life during a period characterized both by cultural flowering and by military upheaval.

At the same time, a rich landscape of conduct literature survives, for which neither author nor addressee can be firmly established. These texts, which mostly circulated under spurious attributions to Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, or John Chrysostom in the surviving copies, are very difficult to make sense of, since the basic parameters of date, authorship, and context often cannot be established with any certainty. Generations of scholars have constructed hypotheses about when and why these texts were produced, but since these attributions are occasionally overturned, every effort has been made in the present study to make it clear where a revision of the received wisdom about dating would alter the validity of any argument made.

The present study has, nonetheless, drawn very heavily on this anonymous literature, on the view that late Roman history really does not need to be divided into two historiographical streams, one oriented to economic, political, and military infrastructures while the other considers religious matters and 'private life', in each case with a minimum of reference to the other end of the spectrum.[25] One of the principles of this study is that this is not how history works.

The Duke of Wellington is believed to have said that the Battle of Waterloo was decided on the playing fields at Eton. He seems to have meant that the profound induction of a generation of Britons into a culture of sportsmanship allowed them, years later, to prevail in a conflict their masters could never have imagined. As children, they had been drilled in cooperation, mutual reliance, intelligent anticipation of an opponent's strategy, and the capacity to endure seemingly pointless suffering – all to the point that these became instinctive. So too, we may imagine that the end of the

[23] John the Deacon writes to Senarius about baptismal liturgy responding to his questions: John the Deacon, *Epistula ad Senarium* (*PL* 59, 399); see J. Sundwall, *Abhandlungen zur Geschichte des ausgehenden Römertums* (Helsinki, 1919), 153; also Avitus *Ep.* 39 (36) (MGH AA 6/2, 68) – writing to him about Eastern theological quarrels. On Senarius, see now Andrew Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533* (Cambridge, 2003), 191–202.

[24] For Reginus, see *PCBE*, 958; *PLRE* 3B, 1082.

[25] Janet Nelson, 'The Problematic in the Private', *Social History* 15 (1990), 355–64.

Roman empire in the West was decided in the school-room and on the playing field, by boys who having failed to internalize old Roman values of self-sacrifice and duty to the *patria*, grew up to be generals, and repeatedly set Roman armies against one another for the sake of challenging a rival, often delaying, and even destroying, armies that were urgently needed on the frontier.[26]

It goes without saying that it had never been easy to turn children into Romans. If one looks at the late Republic or early empire, perfect enactment of the 'old values' was always an exception rather than the rule. But the fact remains that from the late fourth century, new pressures seem to have compromised the cultural machinery that had developed over the centuries to remind children and adults of what was expected of them. For every panegyric celebrating the achievements of a general or wishing fertility on a young couple, we have a shrill Christian treatise attacking a Roman magistrate for his adherence to the old religion,[27] or complaining that too many girls are marrying when they really ought to be dedicating themselves to virginity. From the point of view of gender and family history, we can say that these 'culture wars' made it harder for Roman mothers to raise their sons. To do one's duty or die trying is an ideal possessed of powerful magnetism; it is far less powerful if there is uncertainty about where duty actually lies.[28]

Edward Gibbon argued two hundred years ago that Christian asceticism played a key role in bringing down the Roman empire in the West, since 'pusillanimous youth preferred the penance of the monastic to the dangers of a military life'.[29] Of course, it is not quite so simple. We will see, if we train our eyes on the wives and daughters rather than the sons, that the mechanism by which Christian ideals undermined the single-minded will to *imperium* of Roman élites was far more complicated. The problem was not so much that potential generals joined the ascetic movement instead of the army (although the ferocity of some of the monks suggests that this could have been the case). Rather, it was in the erosion of an ancient consensus regarding duty, honour, and the pursuit of the common good. When

[26] Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), 52.

[27] For discussion of the anonymous *Carmen contra paganos*: see Lellia Cracco Ruggini, *Il paganesimo romano tra religione e politica, 384–394 d. C.: per una reinterpretazione del Carmen contra paganos* (Rome, 1979).

[28] I have developed this point more fully in Kate Cooper, 'Gender and the Fall of Rome', in Philip Rousseau, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Late Antiquity* (Oxford, forthcoming).

[29] Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3, cited in Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser, 'The Gender of Grace: Impotence, Servitude, and Manliness in the Fifth-Century West', *Gender and History* 12 (2000), 536–51, at 536.

crucial military and political decisions hung in the balance – for example, whether to set an army against the enemy or against one's rival – it made a difference if it was obvious that parties agreed on where duty lay. A general who knew that his best men would not follow him was less likely to start – or escalate – a civil war.

The end of empire was also decided household by household, by individual landowners as they faced seemingly small-scale decisions about which local strong-man to back, which taxes to evade, when to impose order on unruly subordinates and when not to bother.[30] The idea behind the present study is that to understand the role played by this undertow of self-interest in the last years of the empire in the West, the fragmentary sources documenting ethical debates among the late Roman householder class need to be better understood, and they need to be understood in light of the wider social context in which the householders in question were expected to act.

With this in mind, the present study concentrates particularly on a series of little-known texts addressed to aristocratic women from the reign of Honorius (395–425) to that of Theoderic the Great (493–526). Many of the recipients are identifiably of senatorial status and probably substantial landowners in their own right, and most are identifiably married (there are a few virgins as well, but at least one of these is herself a senatorial landowner). We cannot always identify the precise standing of the woman's family with certainty, and I have thus tried to be specific where possible about senatorial or curial values, and in other cases limited discussion to a more general 'aristocratic' or 'landowner' point of view, trying always to reflect the emphasis of the sources as I understood them. The same is true for questions of date and authorship. Where they can be deduced, I have tried to be as precise as possible; otherwise, I have tried to indicate what level of generality or uncertainty is required for fair use of the source in argument. The aim has been to construct a tapestry of threads and patches – a composite picture – of the aristocratic household and of the changing role of the *domina* within it. Where the evidence allows us to speak firmly of datable instances and developments, I have tried to do so, and where it does not, I have not.

An important premise has been that late Roman Christianity, as the laity experienced it, was far less 'theological' than centuries of monastic librarianship have made it seem to be. The late Roman laity were interested in

[30] On this point, see now Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, 30, and Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005), ch. 3, 'The Limits of Empire', 100–42.