

10. *Consors regni*: a problem of gender? The *consortium* between Amalasantha and Theodahad in 534

Cristina La Rocca

In 1964, Paolo Delogu in a seminal article clearly stated the limits and the literary tradition of a term, *consors regni*, used for Carolingian queens, which, in his view, was simply ‘un’espressione letteraria, priva di valore ufficiale’.¹ The focus of his analysis was in fact to understand the meaning and the reasons for the attribution in royal diplomas from 848 onwards of the title *consors regni* to Ermengard, wife of the emperor Lothar, and subsequent Carolingian queens. Delogu wanted to dismantle the theory of the Italian legal historian Carlo Guido Mor that from the ninth century, the Carolingian queen had a specific title, specific duties and a specific public role defined by the title itself.²

Examining the early medieval literary and diplomatic evidence from the different barbarian kingdoms, Delogu noticed that from 573, in the Visigothic kingdom, John of Biclar used the term *consors regni* in the way it had been used in the late Roman empire, that is, to express the association in rulership of a father, in this case Leovigild, and his two sons Hermenegild and Reccared; while in the Merovingian kingdom the term was used with the same meaning by Fredegar to record the association of Dagobert with his father Chlotar II in rule over Austrasia.³ As far as the Lombard kingdom was concerned, the term *consors regni* was occasionally used by Paul the

¹ P. Delogu, ‘*Consors regni*: un problema carolingio?’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo e Archivio Muratoriano*, lxxvi (1964), 47–98.

² C. G. Mor, ‘*Consors regni*: la regina nel diritto pubblico italiano dei secoli IX–X’, *Archivio Giuridico*, cxxxv (1948), 7–32.

³ John of Biclar, *Chronicon*, ed. T. Mommsen (MGH AA, xi, Berlin, 1894), pp. 207–20, at p. 213 (c. 5): ‘Leouegildus rex Sabariam ingressus Sappos uastat, et prouinciam ipsam in suam redigit ditionem, duosque filios suos ex amissa coniuge, Ermenegildum et Reccaredum, consortes regni facit’; Fredegar, *Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuation*, ed. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 39 (IV. 47): ‘Anno xxxviii Chlothariae Dagobertum filium suum, consortem regni facit eumque super Austrasias regem instituit’.

Deacon in his *Historia Langobardorum* in the late eighth century to denote the transmission of royal power in a political context where the attempts of a series of kings to create a dynasty evoked competition and tension among the Lombard aristocracy.⁴ At the same time, Delogu noticed that the term was not used either in Lombard royal diplomas or in private charters of the eighth century: in the diplomas, the *intitulatio* of Desiderius and his son Adelchis, for example, was simply ‘Flavius et Adelchis piissimi reges’ or ‘Flavius Desiderius atque Adelchis viri excellentissimi reges’.⁵ This pattern of evidence, and the contrast between the occasional appearance of *consortes regni* in early medieval narratives and their total absence from the charters, convinced Delogu that the term was used between the sixth and ninth centuries merely as an informal and unspecific vestige of various efforts by particular kings or emperors to prearrange succession to the throne. They did this, he thought, by borrowing an expression from late antique authors like Jerome and Hydatius, who had used it not to denote an official title, but just to mean the kind of succession practices that late antique emperors had tried to establish. In reaching this conclusion, Delogu neatly excluded the possibility that the Carolingian *consortium regni* represented the continuation of a barbarian tradition. He argued instead that it was something quite new, an addition made to Carolingian political vocabulary in the mid ninth century by borrowing a term encountered in classical texts to legitimize the new Frankish empire by attaching it to Roman tradition.

The passage from a male *consors regni*, deriving his legitimacy from the biological relationship between father and son in late antiquity, to a female *consors regni*, deriving her legitimacy from her marital ties with the king in the Carolingian world, was interpreted by Delogu as the result of another cultural stream, derived from biblical exegesis. Here the expression of the *consortium* was used to represent both the association between a king and his queen and the association between the Church and God. Queen Esther and the heroic widow Judith were therefore used as the most significant examples of this twofold meaning,⁶ while in these same contexts, *consors regni* was used in quite generic terms ‘referring equally to an associated

⁴ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, in *Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum* (MGH, xlvi, Hanover, 1878), pp. 199–200 (V. 35): ‘Igitur Perctarit, cum solus per annos septem regnasset, octavo iam anno Cunincpert filium suum in regno consortem adscivit, cum quo pariter per decem annos regnavit’; pp. 238–9 (VI. 55): ‘Rex autem Liutprand cum hoc cognovisset, non aequo animo accepit; tamen de infirmitate convalescens, eum [sc. Hildeprandum] regni sui consortem habuit’.

⁵ Delogu, ‘*Consors regni*’, p. 53.

⁶ F. R. Erkens, ‘“Sicut Esther regina”: die westfrankische Königin als consors regni’, *Francia*, xx (1993), 15–38.

king or queen, to a late antique emperor or to a biblical queen'.⁷ Only after Angelberga, wife of the emperor Louis II, in the second half of the ninth century, did the expression *consors regni* assume a real political value, though never any clear institutional or legal meaning.⁸

The second half of the ninth century has been identified in several works by Jinty Nelson and Pauline Stafford as a crucial moment in the reshaping of the Carolingian queen's identity: in particular both have emphasized Archbishop Hincmar of Reims's intensive investment in transforming and reshaping the female gender of the queen's identity through a series of texts and new rituals. A specific *ordo* for the queen's elevation was written by Hincmar himself, while his 'reissue' of Adalard's *De Ordine Palatii* attributed specific duties to the queen inside the public/private sphere of the royal palace. These official contexts provided for the queen's action accorded very well with the use of the *consors regni* formula for the queen, transforming her female gender into a neutral one. In Michael Wallace-Hadrill's words, every effort was made to transform the female queen into an 'honorary man'.⁹

In his fine analysis, focused mainly on literary texts and charters, Delogu neglected an important source and an important political instrument of cultural legitimacy for the Carolingian elaboration of kingship, especially in Italy. He did not mention that the first entitling of a Carolingian empress as *consors imperii* occurred in Italy in Lothar I's diploma issued in 848 for the monastery of San Salvatore in Brescia, which had been founded by the last Lombard king Desiderius and his wife Ansa, probably in 753.¹⁰ This monastery was intimately connected, from its very beginnings, to the queen and to the public patrimony of the Lombard queen that was in fact protected by this monastery.¹¹ Italy is therefore a good context in which to

⁷ Delogu, 'Consorts regni', p. 81.

⁸ Delogu, 'Consorts regni', pp. 97–8.

⁹ P. Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: the King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (2nd edn., 1998); P. Stafford, 'Powerful women in the early middle ages: queens and abbesses', in *The Medieval World*, ed. P. J. Lineham and J. L. Nelson (2003), pp. 398–415, at p. 405; J. L. Nelson, 'Early medieval rites of queen-making', in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 301–15; J. L. Nelson, 'Women at the court of Charlemagne: a case of monstrous regiment?', in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. J. C. Parsons (New York, 1993), pp. 43–61 (repr. in J. L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (1996), pp. 223–42); J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983), p. 404.

¹⁰ *Lotharii I. et Lotharii II. diplomata* (MGH, Diplomatum Karolinorum, iii, Berlin, 1966), no. 101. This female value was parallel to the continuation of the traditional meaning of the formula: Lothar describes himself as *consors regni* of his father Louis the Pious in no. 51.

¹¹ C. La Rocca, 'Les cadeaux nuptiaux de la famille royale en Italie', in *Dots et douaires dans le haut moyen âge*, ed. F. Bougard and R. Le Jan (Rome 2002), pp. 499–526, at pp. 505–11.

examine how, over two centuries before Ansa's co-founding of San Salvatore, the expression *consors regni* started its new use and meaning.

The key source is Cassiodorus's *Variae*,¹² the collection of twelve books of letters written by Cassiodorus on behalf of Theoderic and his successors – the young Athalaric, his mother Amalasantha and her cousin Theodahad, and Vitigis – as well as for his own benefit as *Praefectus Pretorio*.¹³ The relevance of the *Variae* as a medium of ancient royal tradition, political language and practical examples has been reconsidered in recent decades. In 1998 Nelson examined the political aims of Desiderius's marriage strategy, consisting of the gift of three out of his four daughters to reinforce his power both outside and within the Lombard kingdom. The marriages of Adelperga with Arichis, duke of Benevento, of Liutperga with Tassilo, duke of Bavaria, and of an unnamed daughter to Charlemagne were, in fact, at the end of the eighth century, a reminder of the politics of marriage deployed between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth by Theoderic the Great: after the emperor Zeno recognized his status of king in Italy, Theoderic arranged marriages outside his kingdom not only for his daughters, but also for his sisters and nephews.¹⁴ After 493, his daughters Ostrogotho and Theudigotho were married respectively to the Visigothic king Alaric II and to the Burgundian king Sigismund; in 500 Amalafriada, Theoderic's sister, married the Vandal king Thrasamund; and ten years later Amalafriada's daughter Amalaberga married the Thuringian king Ermanafriid.¹⁵ The sending of Amalaberga to Ermanafriid was presented

¹² Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. T. Mommsen (MGH AA, xii, Berlin, 1894) (hereafter Cassiodorus, *Variae*). Where this is followed by 'Barnish, *Variae*', with a page number, a translation of the passage is included in Cassiodorus, *Variae*, selected and trans. S. J. B. Barnish (Liverpool, 1992).

¹³ Barnish, *Variae*, pp. xiv–xxxvii.

¹⁴ J. L. Nelson, 'Making a difference in 8th-century politics: the daughters of Desiderius', in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. A. Callander Murray (Toronto, 1998), pp. 171–90, at pp. 174–5. Theoderic's marriage politics were implicitly in contrast to Charlemagne's opposite attitude towards his daughters, all of whom he kept by him: the length at which Einhard, Charlemagne's biographer, describes the absence of a marriage strategy for Charlemagne seems to me a direct sign that Theoderic was a king whose conduct, policy and material achievements were very clearly taken as a model of power. The theme of the daughters therefore needed to be explained in some detail in Charlemagne's biography.

¹⁵ *Anonymi Valesiani pars posterior*, in *Chronica Minora*, ed. T. Mommsen (MGH AA, i, Berlin, 1892), pp. 1–336, at pp. 322, 324 (XII. 63, 68, 70), with final comment: 'et sic sibi per circuitum placavit omnes gentes'; Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. T. Mommsen (MGH AA, v, pt. 1, Berlin, 1882), pp. 134–5 (LVIII). In Desiderius's time, as reported by Paul the Deacon, *Historia Romana*, ed. H. Droysen (MGH SRG, xlix, Berlin, 1879), p. 126 (XV. 20): 'Theodericus interea, ut sui regni vires constabiliret, Audeffledam Lodoin Francorum

in Cassiodorus's *Variae* as the passing on of a most precious gift, enhancing the Thuringian royal family with Amal blood.¹⁶ In the letter written by Cassiodorus recalling the marriage of Theoderic's sister Amalafreda, she is said to act as the most useful counsellor for the king.¹⁷ It seems clear that the gift of a female Amal relative was a competitive one intended to show Theoderic's superiority to other barbarian kings.¹⁸

But Desiderius was also similar to Theoderic in another respect: in both cases, if some of the women of the royal lineage were married outside, one of the daughters was kept for the father, inside his kingdom. Amalasantha, Theoderic's daughter from his second marriage to Audofleda, sister of the Merovingian king Clovis, was in fact retained in Italy, to give a successor to Theoderic in his kingdom;¹⁹ Anselperga, Desiderius's last daughter, was given to the royal-family convent of San Salvatore, Brescia, where both the public role and the private lineage of her parents were considered the most efficient way to consolidate the royal family's connection with the Lombard aristocracy.²⁰ A daughter could thus be a precious gift to an external kingdom, representing her father's authority, but could also serve, as it were, at home, as a precious instrument of local continuity. As Pauline Stafford has suggested, the king's daughter could be considered a most important part of the royal treasure.²¹

In 534 four letters, dealing with the same subject, were sent to the emperor Justinian and to the Roman Senate: they contained, as Cassiodorus put it,

regis filiam sibi in matrimonium iunxit, Amalafredam germanam suam Wandalorum regi Hunurico, eiusdem Amalafredae filiam Amalabergam Turingorum regi Hermenfredo, Theodicodo quoque et Ostrogotho ex concubina filias alteram Alarico Wisigothorum regi, alteram Sigismundo Burgundionum consociat, Amalasuintham vero tertiam filiam Eutharico ex Amalorum stirpe venienti evocato ab Hispania tradit'.

¹⁶ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 114 (IV. 1) (Barnish, *Variae*, p. 74): 'Mittimus ad vos ornatum aulicae domus, augmenta generis, solacia fidelis consilii, dulcedinem suavissimam coniugalem: quae et dominatum vobiscum iure compleat et nationem vestram meliore institutione componat. Habebit felix Thoringia quod nutrit Italia, litteris doctam, moribus eruditam, decoram non solum genere, quantum et feminea dignitate, ut non minus patria vestra istius splendeat moribus quam suis triumphis'.

¹⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 170 (V. 43): 'Quamvis a diversis regibus expetiti pro solidanda concordia aut nepes dedimus aut filias deo nobis inspirante coniunximus, nulli tamen aestimamus nos aliquid simile contulisse, quam quod germanam nostram, generis Hamali singulare praeconium, vestrum fecimus esse coniugium'.

¹⁸ D. Shanzer, 'Two clocks and a wedding: Theoderic's diplomatic relations with the Burgundians', *Romanobarbarica*, xiv (1984), 225–58.

¹⁹ Jordanes, *Getica*, p. 136 (LIX).

²⁰ Nelson, 'Making a difference', p. 175; J. L. Nelson, 'Charlemagne: pater optimus?', in *Am Vorabend der Kaiserkrönung*, ed. P. Godman and others (Berlin, 2002), pp. 269–81.

²¹ P. Stafford, 'Queens and treasure in the early middle ages', in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. E. M. Tyler (York 2000), pp. 61–82 at pp. 63–4.

bad news and good news. They announced the death of the seventeen-year-old King Athalaric, and, at the same time, the elevation of a new king, Theodahad, associated with royal power by Queen Amalasantha. In the two letters addressed to the Senate the expression *consors regni* is used to explain the status of the new king, while in the letters to Justinian, Cassiodorus as usual chose to be more descriptive and less clear, using long periphrases to explain Theodahad's new position and the way in which his accession to royal power had been brought about. In these letters, therefore, we have a unique opportunity to understand not only what the expression *consortium regni* meant in the sixth century, but also to appreciate, in political and gendered terms, the difference made to *consortium* when the associated king was male and the senior 'king' female. The letters we are dealing with belong in a time-span of only three years, from Athalaric's death (534) to Vitigis's accession to royal power (536). They contain very interesting elements which suggest how the *consortium regni* could be at once a traditional way of associating a relative with public power, and a political solution that could not be sustained.

First, the historical context of these letters needs a little more comment by way of introduction. The main figures in Cassiodorus's letters dealing with *consortium regni* were two members of the Amal dynasty, Amalasantha and Theodahad. They have long been the subject of scholarly interest and research, because they have been seen as the protagonists of the final stage of the Ostrogothic kingdom's internal decline and the beginning of its destruction during the Gothic wars against Justinian: a controversial period in itself, and the subject of controversial narratives, especially that of Procopius's *Gothic Wars*, a work precisely focused on explaining why the Gothic kingdom collapsed in Italy and purporting to offer the real reasons for Justinian's victory.²²

The sad history of Amalasantha and Theodahad is well known. Not always sufficiently emphasized, though, is the extent to which the sources for their rulership are all deeply inflected by gendered and ethnic paradigms: as Procopius put it, Amalasantha was a beauty, but naive and politically innocent, and her tragic death was the consequence of this naivety. Theodahad, Amalasantha's cousin and *consors*, but also her murderer, is depicted by the sources in a more consistently negative way, with several points repeatedly stressed: the son of Theoderic's sister Amalafriada and married to Gundeliva, he thirsted for more land and power; he spent his time reading philosophy; he lacked any military training; and he was old.²³

²² A. Cameron, *Procopius and the 6th Century* (1985). The best overview is P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997).

²³ *Procopius*, ed. and trans. H. B. Dewing (6 vols., 1914–40), iii. 14–27 (Gothic War, II. 1–29, using the form 'Theodatus' for 'Theodahad'), vi. 188 (Secret Hist., XVI. 1–5).

Amalasintha was presumably born c.494 from the marriage of Theoderic to Audofleda.²⁴ In 515 Theoderic had married her to Eutharic, a Goth from Spain, presented by Cassiodorus as an Amal,²⁵ and accepted as co-consul and adopted *per arma* (by weapons) by the emperor Justin in 519.²⁶ Theoderic had thus put his daughter in a position to transmit to her offspring a legitimate right to reign in Italy. But Eutharic died in 522 or 523 (the date is uncertain), four years before Theoderic, leaving two children, Athalaric and Matasintha. After Theoderic's death in 526, Amalasintha, already widowed, and with a very young son, Athalaric, ruled the kingdom, in Cassiodorus's words, 'solitaria cogitatione':²⁷ nevertheless all the royal letters in the *Variae* written between 526 and 534 bear only Athalaric's name as *rex*. During these eight years Amalasintha had problems coping not only with other Amal males, such as her cousin Theodahad, Amalafreda's son,²⁸ who aspired to become king, but also with non-Amal officers like Tuluin, who in 526 received the key post of *patricius praesentalis*.²⁹ This appointment was intended to give the kingdom a grown man capable of taking military command, since a young child and a woman were thought equally incapable of undertaking such a role. These disputes around military power and the right to kingship are depicted in terms of opposed ethnic values by Procopius in his famous account of conflicting Gothic and Roman attitudes to Athalaric's education.³⁰ In 534 Athalaric also died, at only seventeen or eighteen, and Amalasintha, presumably aged about forty, assumed the position of official representative of the Gothic kingdom with the title of *regina*. But in her case this title meant something different from those of other contemporary queens: she was neither the king's wife nor

²⁴ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. T. J. Dunlap (1988), p. 313.

²⁵ P. Heather, 'Cassiodorus and the rise of the Amals: genealogy and the Goths under Hun domination', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxix (1989), 103–28, and 'Gens and regnum among the Ostrogoths', in *Regna and Gentes: the Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. H.-W. Goetz and others (Leiden, 2003), pp. 85–133, at pp. 93–4, rightly pointing out that Cassiodorus claimed that Eutharic was of royal Amal blood.

²⁶ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 231 (VIII. 1) (Barnish, *Variae*, p. 101).

²⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 298 (X. 3) (Barnish, *Variae*, p. 131).

²⁸ P. Heather, 'Theoderic, king of the Goths', *EME*, iv (1995), 145–74.

²⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 237–41 (VIII. 9–10).

³⁰ *Procopius*, iii. 14–27 (Gothic War, II. 1–22, III. 10–12), saying that Amalasintha wished her son to be educated in a Roman way and instead the Goths wanted him to be trained in the barbarian fashion (that is, in weapons and drinking). The tragic end of Athalaric after this Gothic education is rightly interpreted as the result of its dangerous effects by G. Halsall, 'Funny foreigners: laughing with the barbarian in late antiquity', in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G. Halsall (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 89–113, at pp. 106–7.

the king's widow, but instead a king's daughter and a (dead) king's mother.

Some time after Athalaric's death, Amalasantha chose her paternal cousin Theodahad as her *consors regni*. For a series of reasons long explained in terms of 'the Roman party' against 'the traditional Gothic aristocracy', she was murdered, according to Procopius, by Theodahad himself at the suggestion of the empress Theodora, who was jealous of Amalasantha's beauty and feared that her own husband, Justinian, was attracted to the queen.³¹ Gregory of Tours, on the other hand, writing some forty years after the event, asserted that Theodahad was chosen as king by the Italians ('Itali'), who had been enraged by Amalasantha's killing of her own mother Audofleda and by her previous marriage with a slave, Traguilanus. Theodahad, when he learned of these misdeeds, ordered Amalasantha to be killed. In Gregory's account, Amalasantha's Frankish royal cousins threatened to invade Italy to avenge her death, but Theodahad bought them off.³² In 536 Vitigis, *spatharius* of Theodahad and though a Goth not a member of the Amal lineage, killed his former master and was elected on the battlefield as new *rex* of Italy, having first married Amalasantha's daughter, Matasantha.

The four letters written by Cassiodorus on the occasion of Theodahad's assumption of co-rule with Amalasantha have often been examined by scholars whose main focus was not on the transmission of royal power. Instead they were concerned with identifying political strategies in Theoderic's reign and, more generally, the Gothic kingdom in Italy, and trying to separate out which ideas, behaviours, actions and traditions were 'Roman' and which were instead truly 'Germanic'.³³ The ethnic problem has dominated this scenario, contextualizing, as Procopius did, the power struggles in the Gothic kingdom as a series of tensions between a very conservative 'Germanic' and Gothic party keen on war, weapons and other very barbarian and energetic pursuits, and another party, associated with 'Roman' political ideas, *otium* and philosophy.

My own view is that in evaluating these letters it is better to put assumptions about ethnic competition aside and adopt another perspective entirely, namely, that what is at stake here is the definition of the gender characteristics of an unusual couple: a woman and a man who will rule

³¹ *Procopius*, vi. 188 (Secret Hist., XVI. 1–5); A. D. Frankforter, 'Amalasantha, Procopius, and a woman's place', *JWH*, viii (1996), 41–57, offers an analysis from a feminist standpoint.

³² Gregory of Tours's narrative is later reported by Fredegar, *Chronicarum ... Libri IV*, ed. B. Krusch (MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, ii, Hanover, 1888), p. 105 (III. 43); S. Joye and M. Knaepen, 'L'image d'Amalasonthe chez Procope de Césarée et Grégoire de Tours: portraits contrastés entre Orient et Occident', *Moyen Âge*, cxi (2005), 229–57.

³³ Cameron, *Procopius*, p. 199, rightly defines Procopius's narrative on Amalasantha and her tragic death as 'a stereotyped display of "barbarian" as opposed to "Roman" manners'.

together not because they are married, with power descending from the man to the woman through their sexual intimacy, but because the woman, already in power, has chosen the man to become not her husband, but instead her political partner. The other known cases of royal power descending from a woman to a man involve widowed queens who transmitted legitimacy and throne-worthiness to their new husbands, as in the seventh-century case of Theodelinda, widow of the Lombard king Authari, who transmitted royal power to her new husband Agilulf.³⁴ What is described by Cassiodorus is, as far as I know, a unique experiment that shows both the possibilities open to a queen in the sixth century and, at the same time, their failure to materialize because of the discrepancy of gendered roles that this unusual association created: our couple is in fact presented, as we shall soon see, as an ungendered couple formed by a sister and a brother.

The four letters we will deal with are addressed in pairs: two to Justinian, two to the Roman Senate.³⁵ Each couple of letters includes one sent in the name of Amalasantha and one in the name of Theodahad. We have to recall that these four letters were composed in a political context that was difficult both internally and externally. As Peter Heather stressed some years ago, the succession to Theoderic resulted in tensions, not only because Theoderic himself had no son, but because the legitimacy of a dynastic succession in the Amal line proved difficult for the aristocracy to accept.³⁶ From the imperial perspective, it was the second time in a few years that the emperor was not consulted but only informed about the succession in what had been Theoderic's kingdom: already in 526, on Theoderic's death, little Athalaric's accession to royal power was simply communicated to the emperor Justin, recalling the family ties that connected the emperor to the new king. On that occasion, Cassiodorus (and Amalasantha) enthusiastically recalled the affection linking the young king and Justin: since Eutharic, Athalaric's father, had been adopted *per arma* by Justin himself, Athalaric now claimed for himself the status of the emperor's grandchild.³⁷

But in 534, Athalaric's death created a new situation, which made the message concerning Theodahad's accession to royal power difficult to draft. Both letters to Justinian are quite short and symmetrical. Amalasantha starts her letter by excusing herself for the delay in announcing Athalaric's death and explaining this as resulting from a desire not to sadden the emperor. She therefore postponed the letter's composition until there was good news to

³⁴ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, pp. 134–5, 140 (III. 30, 35).

³⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 297–301 (X. 1–4).

³⁶ P. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 233, 239, 250–5.

³⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 231–2 (VIII. 1) (Barnish, *Variae*, p. 101). This form of adoption is explained in Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 114–15 (IV. 2).

accompany the sad, so that the emperor could share a common joy with the Gothic queen.³⁸ Amalasantha announced that she had elevated to the sceptres ('perduximus ad scepra') a man joined to her by fraternal 'proximitas', so that he could share with her the strength of his advice ('consilium'). This man would thus shine with the same purple honour as his ancestors, the Amals, and would help the queen with his 'prudentia'. Thus Theodahad has two main qualities that appear to justify Amalasantha's choice: he was of the Amal line, a 'brother', and he could support with his 'prudentia' and 'consilium' the queen's decisions. It is worth noting that 'prudentia' and 'consilium' were exactly the two 'Amal' qualities that Theodahad was said to have inherited from his mother Amalafriada. When she had been dispatched to the Vandal king Thrasamund, in 500, Cassiodorus had pointed out that she was the most precious gift Theoderic could possibly have sent because she would help the king with her 'prudentia' and 'consilium'.³⁹ We can therefore begin to note how Theodahad would act as Amalasantha's *consors regni*: he would fulfil the same functions as his mother had done with regard to her royal Vandal husband, yet in a completely inverted gendered position.

Another reason for Amalasantha's choice of Theodahad is that, like Athalaric's death, it was the result of God's will. God transforms sad and difficult matters into favourable ones ('prospera'): the grief of the mother is changed into joy by the presence and affection of a brother, a true support for her. Note that any other *elogium* (rhetorical praise) of Theodahad's personality and character is here completely missing.

The letter written by Theodahad to Justinian, by contrast, includes no excuses for its delay nor any expression of grief.⁴⁰ A brief reference to the royal 'mos' is made only to announce the accession to power of a new king, so that he can rejoin the affection of the external princes 'de ipsa communione regnandi'. In symmetry with Amalasantha's identification of Theodahad as her brother, Theodahad calls Amalasantha his sister, but at the same time his 'praecellentissima domina', an honorary title of supremacy that expresses the queen's superior hierarchical position in relation to him. Also in Theodahad's letter the expression used by Cassiodorus to explain to Justinian how Amalasantha established Athalaric's succession is vague and very obscure: 'me curarum suarum fecit esse socium', that is, 'she made me a/the sharer of her responsibilities'. This defines Amalasantha as the ruler who shines 'sapientiae luce' ('with the light of wisdom'), keeps the

³⁸ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 297 (X. 1).

³⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 170 (V. 43): 'germanam nostram, generis Hamali singulare praeconium, vestrum fecimus esse coniugium: feminam prudentiae vestrae parem, quae non tantum reverenda regno, quantum mirabilis possit esse consilio'.

⁴⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 297–8 (X. 2).

internal peace in the kingdom ‘mirabili dispositione’ (‘with a wondrous ordering’) and preserves the external peace ‘robusta firmitate’ (‘with resilient strength’). ‘Sapientia’, ‘iustitia’ and ‘firmitas’ are the same categories that Cassiodorus had used to describe Theoderic’s royal power in Italy.⁴¹ They are therefore Amal ungendered qualities transferred from the father/king to his daughter/*regina*. Theodahad himself asks the emperor to remember the affection Roman rulers had always had towards the Amal dynasty: recalling the past he is recalling the value of tradition. Eric Hobsbawm reminded us some years ago to expect the theme of tradition to be used when aspects of novelty are so disrupting and potentially dangerous that they must be masked and presented as old, and as such, perfectly ‘normal’.⁴²

Overall, the themes that Cassiodorus chose to announce to Justinian Theodahad’s access to power are beautifully balanced: as Theodahad will assist Amalasantha with his ‘consilium’ and ‘prudentia’, so the queen’s ‘prudentia’ will allow the ‘regnum’ to entertain good relations with the emperor. In both letters the request for a peaceful relationship between the emperor and the two kings is also structured in terms directly derived from the vocabulary of warm emotion – ‘dilectio’, ‘amicitia’, for instance – characteristic of the language of kinship, neatly avoiding any expression that would imply a precise institutional character or formal subjection between the emperor and the kingdom in Italy.⁴³ The same language of affect is used to define the bond of proximity that ties Amalasantha and Theodahad: the brother-and-sister couple was chosen, although these two were not siblings in a biological sense (he was Amalasantha’s cousin), as in the earliest Christian texts, to define ‘la forme idéale du lien sociaux’. Christ himself was like ‘the firstborn among many brethren’,⁴⁴ recalling a symmetrical and egalitarian relationship with deep positive content, not least because totally removed from any sexual intimacy.⁴⁵

Although the letters addressed to the Roman Senate by Amalasantha and Theodahad to announce the *consortium* have a parallel construction, they differ from those addressed to the emperor because they are longer, and they include a long element of reciprocal *elogium* which states very clearly the different positions of the *consortium* members and their asymmetric relationship. The vocabulary Cassiodorus chooses here differs in some

⁴¹ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 327–30 (XI. 1).

⁴² E. Hobsbawm, ‘The social functions of the past: some questions’, *P&P*, lv (1972), 3–17.

⁴³ A. Giardina, *Cassiodoro politico* (Roma, 2006), p. 141.

⁴⁴ Paul, Epistle to the Romans, VIII:29.

⁴⁵ D. Lett, ‘Les frères et les sœurs, “parents pauvres” de la parenté’, *Médiévales*, liv (2008), 5–12; ‘Fratello/sorella’, ed. A. Arru and S. Boesch Gajano, *Quaderni Storici*, new ser., lxxxiii (1993), 307–566.

important details from that of the letters written on behalf of Theodahad. Amalasantha's letter opens by recalling first of all her grief as a mother who lost her son, faced with the responsibilities she must bear in order to wield royal power. God, called 'auctor castitatis' ('the author of chastity'), who has taken her offspring away from her, is now showing his 'misericordia' ('mercy'), granting to her the affection of a 'mature brother'.⁴⁶ The couple of the past, mother and son, is now changed into the new couple of brother and sister, and at the same time altering the age-asymmetry of parent and child. If in the first pair Amalasantha was the elder, in the new one she is the younger; in both pairs Amalasantha's bond with the *rex* lacks any sexual aspect. Amalasantha announces that 'deo auspice' ('if God looks favourably on us') she has chosen Theodahad as her *consors regni* so that both could act 'iunctiis consiliis' ('with concerted counsels') and will then be one 'in sentiis' ('in their decisions') while they will be two 'in tractatibus' ('in their deeds'). The *consortium* between Amalasantha and Theodahad is then explained in terms of contemporary and mutual help for common aims and results, but preceded by different spheres of action.

Which images did Cassiodorus choose to explain to the senators how the *consortium regni* was to rule the kingdom? The comparison here is with the different stars who 'mutuo auxilio' ('with mutual aid') rule the sky and light the world 'vicario labore' ('with delegated toil').⁴⁷ The *consortium* also evokes the human body, which has two hands, two ears and two eyes to accomplish with greater efficiency the duties implied in and connected to the union of two symmetrical parts. The same comparison was later used by Corippus in his encomium to the emperor Justin II, addressed to his Senate: as the emperor was the head of a body, the senators were the part that caused the body itself to function.⁴⁸ In this section, Amalasantha and Theodahad are therefore presented as absolutely similar and equal: a real 'communio regni' ('communion of the realm') will occur as a political partnership.

There then follows the list of Theodahad's qualities which had been missing in the letter to the emperor. Amalasantha divided them into two categories. The first group is linked to Theodahad as ruler: he is a member of the Amal dynasty, first of all, but he is also 'patiens in adversis', 'moderatus in prosperis' and 'rector sui' ('patient in adversities', 'equable when things go favourably', and 'ruler of himself'). Another characteristic of Theodahad's political

⁴⁶ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 298–9 (X. 3).

⁴⁷ The same comparison was used for the emperor Justin and his wife Sophia by Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, ed. and trans. A. Cameron (1976), p. 52: 'Iustinum Sophiamque pares duo lumina mundi esse ferunt./"Regnate pares in secula" dicunt, felices annos dominis felicibus orant'.

⁴⁸ Corippus, *In laudem Iustini*, p. 98.

personality is his learning: literary culture will help him to administer justice and military affairs and his deep knowledge of ecclesiastical texts will help him to act as a ruler, so that he can judge, know what is right, venerate God and think about how his judgement will affect the future. As Massimiliano Vitiello has recently shown, Theodahad has all the platonic virtues, well rooted in late Roman tradition, of *temperantia*, *prudentia*, *iustitia* and *fortitudo* (moderation, prudence, justice and courage).⁴⁹

The second group of Theodahad's virtues has to do with his qualities as a man: he is very generous, most ready in hospitality, most merciful in charity; and his attributes range from 'largissima frugalitas' ('most open-handed frugality') to 'abundantia donis' ('abundance in gifts'). The portrait of Theodahad given in this letter contrasts strikingly with those aspects of his character depicted by Cassiodorus and later by Procopius,⁵⁰ for which first Theoderic and then Amalasantha had brought Theodahad to court, accused by local landholders of grabbing their property. Theodahad was greedy. Sam Barnish thought that in this letter Cassiodorus wanted to emphasize with a bit of humour the difference between the 'real' Theodahad and the imaginary king, a rhetorical figment sketched in *Variae*, X. 3.⁵¹ The final part of the letter is addressed to the senators: they will rejoice when, as Amalasantha assures them, Theodahad will 'both execute the good deeds that spring from my justice and display what belongs to his own devotion'. His conduct as ruler will therefore be influenced by Amalasantha's justice and the virtues of his Amal ancestors, and the example of Theoderic will inspire his actions.⁵² Philosopher and intellectual, Theodahad is not represented as man of action. Does his remote and cerebral power signify that he was 'so Roman' and so different from the traditional 'Gothic' male values of fighting and drinking? Or, on the contrary, was Theodahad a member of the traditional 'Gothic party' and was it for this reason that Amalasantha was obliged to choose him as *socius*?⁵³ In Procopius's narrative, the ethnographic paradigm presents both Amalasantha and Theodahad as devoted to Roman

⁴⁹ M. Vitiello, *Il principe, il filosofo, il guerriero: lineamenti di pensiero politico nell'Italia ostrogota* (Stuttgart, 2006), pp. 119–29.

⁵⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 131–2, 149–50 (IV. 39; V. 12); Procopius, iii. 22–5 (Gothic War, III. 1–4).

⁵¹ Barnish, *Variae*, p. 132 n.

⁵² Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 299 (X. 3): 'gaudete nunc, patres conscripti, et supernae gratiae pro nobis vota persolvite, quando talem mecum constitui principem, qui et de nostra aequitate bona faciat et propria suae pietatis ostendat. hunc enim et maiorum suorum commonet virtus et avunculus efficaciter excitat Theodericus'.

⁵³ That Amalasantha was obliged to choose Theodahad is later stated by Jordanes, *Getica*, p. 136 (LIX): 'ne pro sexus sui fragilitate a Gothis sperneretur, secum deliberans, Theodahadum consobrinum suum germanitatis gratia accessitum a Tuscia, ubi privatam vitam degens in laribus propriis erat, in regno locavit'.

values, though in quite different ways. For Amalasantha, *romanitas* is connected to her respect for the emperor and for Roman culture (as in the case of Athalaric's education), whereas for Theodahad it becomes, instead, a lack of masculinity: his ignorance of military virtues, his preference for *otium*, and his greed show the 'dark side' of *romanitas* as an incapacity for ruling.

If we examine the parallel letter written by Theodahad *rex* to the Senate, we can see how the active part of the *consortium*, Amalasantha, is presented by her *socius*. In *Variae*, X. 4 Amalasantha is described in assorted terms of excellence and hierarchical superiority and the extent of her authority is variously stressed: she is called 'domina rerum toto orbe gloriosa; domna et soror nostra ... quae magnitudinem imperii sui nostra voluit participatione roborari ... sapientissima domina' ('glorious mistress of affairs of the whole world, our mistress and our sister ... whose will it has been that the greatness of her empire should be strengthened by our participation ... most wise lady'). The association in ruling is described as a gift by a queen who 'cum parvulo filio imperavit sola' but now has decided 'mecum regnare sociata' ('reigned alone with her little son [but now has decided] to rule in association with me'). The kingdom of Italy is 'beata res publica quae tantae dominae gubernatione gloriatur' ('a blessed state which glories in the guidance of so great a mistress').⁵⁴ The queen is described in the act of talking. Among her special talents is speaking different languages very well, but she also takes a keen part in discussions of policy where she speaks 'summa moderatione gravissima' ('most authoritatively while with the greatest restraint').⁵⁵ Amalasantha can therefore play a mediating role and the words she utters after careful thought are political ones. It is this quality that makes her different from other women: in gendered terms, female talk is normally presented as disordered and chaotic;⁵⁶ its tones are the murmuring voice of intimacy 'by appealing to the heart rather than to the head, by playing on feelings rather than working through reason'.⁵⁷ Amalasantha's words, that is, the communication of power, are therefore reserved to the queen.

⁵⁴ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, pp. 299–301 (X. 4).

⁵⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 300 (X. 4): 'In tractatibus acuta, sed ad loquendum summa moderatione gravissima. haec est regalis procul dubio virtus: celerius necessaria sentire et tardius in verba prorumpere. nescit enim paenitenda loqui, qui proferenda prius suo tradit examini. Hinc est quod eius doctrina mirabilis per multiplices linguas magna ubertate diffunditur, cuius ingenium ita paratum reperitur ad subitum, ut non putetur esse terrenum'.

⁵⁶ J. L. Nelson, 'Women and the word in the earlier middle ages', *Studies in Church History*, xxvii (1990), 53–78 (repr. in J. L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (1996), pp. 199–214).

⁵⁷ J. L. Nelson, 'Queens as converters of kings in the early middle ages', in *Agire da donna: modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione*, ed. C. La Rocca (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 95–107, at p. 107.

The settings for Amalasantha's speeches are the *cubilia*, the rooms of the palace, where private and public dimensions intersected. Theodahad the philosopher and Amalasantha the speaker are presented in these letters as a political brother-and-sister couple whose public space of action is completely enclosed inside the palace – 'I opened the doors of the palace to him', says Amalasantha in her letter to the Senate⁵⁸ – and whose behaviour is totally inverted, at least in gendered terms: Amalasantha's voice is heard while Theodahad offers support for the action of ruling. This opposition between gendered and ungendered voices and private and public space for a proper ruler was precisely what Theodahad's successor, Vitigis, articulated after being hailed by the Goths as their king in 536: 'I was chosen not in privy chambers, but in the wild open field. I was not sought among the subtle debates of sycophants, but as the trumpets blared'.⁵⁹ In contrasting loud sounds and murmuring voices, open fields and closed spaces, a male soldier-king pitted his own claims to power against those of the ungendered *consortium*.

In entering the palace, did Theodahad lose his male gender? And in receiving Theodahad into the palace, did Amalasantha become at once male and female? Recalling the Amal genealogy, Cassiodorus had attributed to Amalasantha male and female glorious ancestors, finally declaring that 'our fortunate mistress has achieved the glory of either sex: for she has both borne us a glorious king and has secured a spreading empire by the courage of her soul'.⁶⁰ Iconographic sources, such as the diptych of the consul Orestes, show Amalasantha wearing a cap which, to quote Patrick Amory, 'resembles not woman's dress, but men's' (see Figure 10.1),⁶¹ and which is the symbol of her regency; in the *Secret History*, Procopius says that one of the reasons why the empress Theodora hated Amalasantha was 'her magnificent bearing and exceptionally virile manner'.⁶² In a slightly later narrative, it was exactly the ungendered character of Amalasantha that was inverted and misunderstood: for Jordanes, writing at the end of the

⁵⁸ J. L. Nelson, 'Gendering courts in the early medieval west', in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West 300–900*, ed. L. Brubaker and J. H. M. Smith (Cambridge 2004), pp. 185–97.

⁵⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 318 (X. 31) (Barnish, *Variae*, pp. 142–3): 'Non enim in cubilis angustiis, sed in campis late patentibus electum me esse noveritis, nec inter blandientium delicata colloquia, sed tubis concrepantibus sum quaesitus'.

⁶⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, p. 329 (XI. 1). The Amal genealogy is also later reported by Jordanes, *Getica*, p. 77 (XIV. 80).

⁶¹ Amory, *People and Identity*, pp. 341–2. The diptych has been recently examined by A. L. McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire* (New York, 2002), pp. 79–81.

⁶² Cameron, *Procopius*, pp. 81–2; *Procopius*, vi. 188 (*Secret Hist.*, XVI. 1–5).



Figure 10.1. Consular diptych of Rufus Gennadius Probus Orestes (530), ivory. Portraits of Athalaric (top left) and Amalasintha (top right). (Victoria and Albert Museum no. 139-1866.)

Gothic War, Amalasantha made her cousin her associate in royal power ‘ne pro sexus sui fragilitate a Gothis sperneretur’ (‘lest she be spurned by the Goths because of the weakness of her sex’).⁶³

I should like to suggest that the *consortium* between Amalasantha and Theodahad can be seen as a real novelty, presented as a model for inverting male and female roles. In late antiquity the *consortium regni* mainly consisted of a mature adult’s associating a younger man with him on the throne; the asymmetric relationship here derived from the subordinate position of the son vis-à-vis his father. With the *consortium* between Amalasantha and Theodahad, asymmetry was retained but in a way that subverted conventional divisions of age as well as of gender. It was Amalasantha, a forty-year-old woman, who chose as her *consors* (she repeatedly stresses that the choice was hers) a (yet) older man: the sources depict Theodahad’s mature age not as symptomatic of experience and wisdom, but as a sign of inadequacy for his role. Theodahad, the mature brother, has no defined place in the traditional hierarchy of power and gender.

I end by returning to Paolo Delogu, with whom I began this chapter. My findings partly endorse, and partly challenge, his. While the formula *consors regni* certainly belonged in the sphere of honorific titles, it expressed, in late antiquity, a precise, male, hierarchical age-relationship that implied the subordination of the associated partner. It could thus be inferred that Amalasantha’s experiment in making Theodahad her *socius* amounted to a reaffirmation of this hierarchical meaning, in so far as it implied the inferiority of the associated partner. This was why the personal and public qualities of Theodahad listed in Cassiodorus’s *Variarum*, X. 3 were later transformed into faults that made him look ridiculously unmanly. Cassiodorus, in presenting Amalasantha – certainly with her full endorsement – as promoter of the *consortium*, made her a woman ‘of both sexes’, a hermaphrodite. The experiment must be judged a failure, then.

What I suggest here is that it was precisely this failed experiment that determined the Carolingian choice of the term *consors regni* for the king’s wife, for it was a title that epitomized, in a way that contemporaries took very seriously, her inferior, even ancillary, position. In a proper *consortium*, the woman could only play the role of an associate who was younger, weaker and subordinate.

⁶³ See above, n. 53.