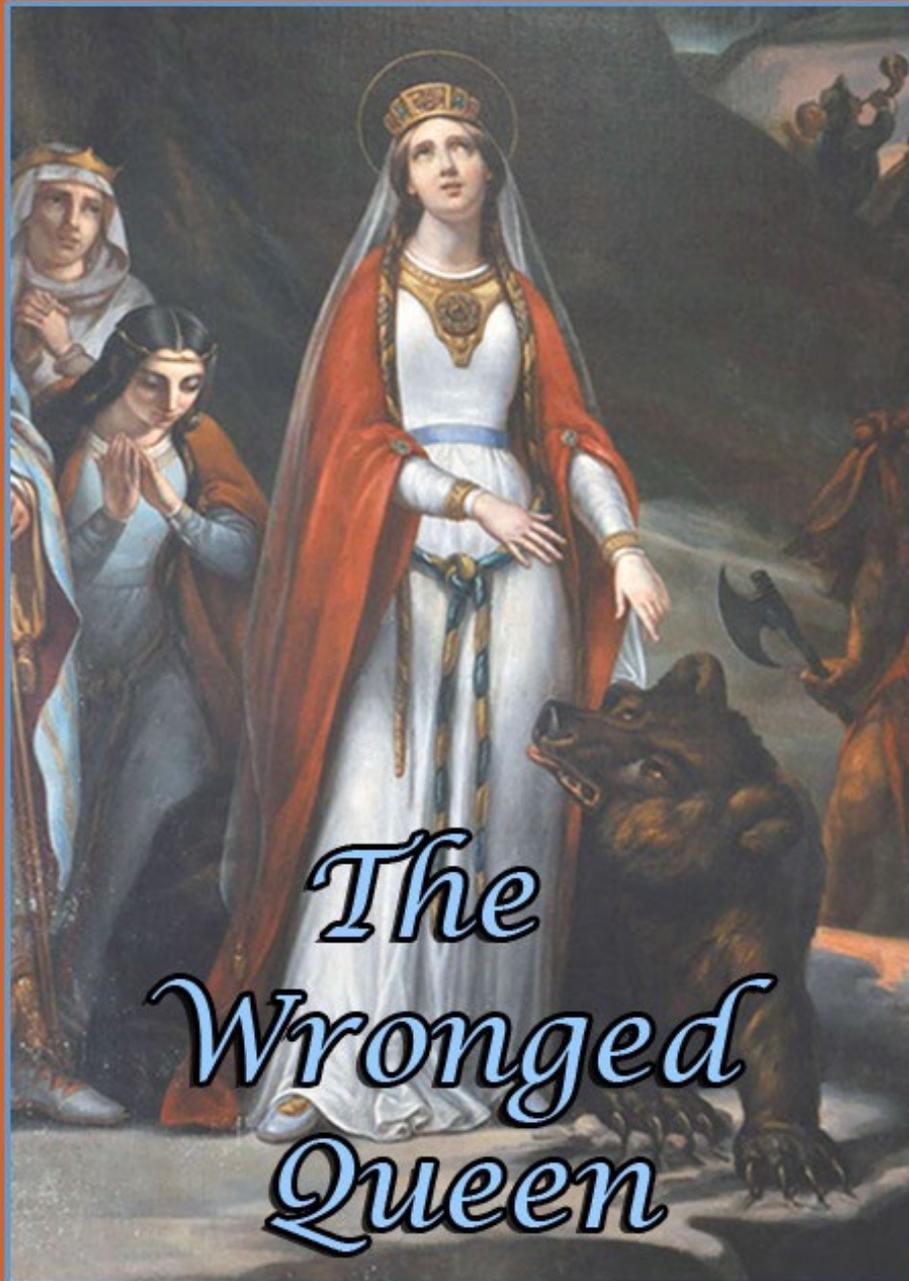


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



HELEN MARTINEAU

THE WRONGED QUEEN

A story of spiritual survival in a barbarian world

... You are a continuation of the Johannine community once in existence from the ninth and tenth century onward. Many of you were slain for the sake of your love for Christ ... There was great learning in those communities in the Alps, in those monasteries where the holy scrolls were copied, and ancient books were preserved. Because of this there was the preservation, in those days when the light was extinguished, the preservation of the truth.

—From the 1987 reading by Mario Schoenmaker to some members of The Centre community

There is a ninth century queen called Richardis or Richgard who I believe is an incarnation of Mary Magdalene. To reach her I need us to take a trip further back a bit in the history of Western Europe to set the scene. We are talking about what was known as the Dark Ages, from the end of the Roman Empire up to about 800.

Even after the Roman empire's decline in the fifth and sixth centuries, the imposition of Roman rule continued to be felt in Celtic Gaul, which covers most of modern France. But Rome had merely put a veneer over the barbarian Germanic Celts called Franks. and society remained tribal, made up mostly of farmers in small 'counties' controlled by powerful local lords. Armies were led by knights who didn't have enough land and so bonded themselves to an overlord. The education they received consisted of training as efficient fighters and killers.

Golden haired and formidable, Franks held strong and courageous warrior leaders in the highest esteem. Such men eventually became their kings who fought over land ownership because this meant wealth and power. On the death of a king or a lord his territory was divided up between his sons – and as you can imagine, this was a recipe for conflict. If there were only daughters, it became a free-for-all.

In those days Irish missionaries were venturing in their flimsy coracles across to Europe, bringing a genuine spiritual richness with them and founding communities wherever they could. Celtic Christian influence spread widely across Europe. The Roman (Catholic) church was a separate but increasingly influential body.

Columban (Columbanus) travelled to Europe in 591 with twelve companions. He is the most famous of the Irish missionaries, setting up centres at Luxeuil in Burgundy and Bobbio in the Italian Alps.

Gallus (Gallen) journeyed along the Rhine as one of Columban's party until they reached Lake Constance. Legend tells how alone in the forest Gallus lit a fire and was warming himself when a bear charged him, but the Irishman showed no fear and the bear slunk away only to return with firewood. Gallus encouraged the bear to warm itself and share his food. From that moment the bear became his constant companion. Gallus intended to live as a hermit, but many followers came to hear him teach. The centre that grew up around him would become the monastery of St Gallen.

Columban often came into conflict with local Catholic bishops. Overtly the dispute centred around the date of Easter, but it was really about Christianity as a personal path versus obedience to the legalistic structure of the church of Rome. Columban hoped for harmony and spiritual cooperation. But it was not to be.



Statues of St Columban at Luxeuil, Burgundy and St Gall with his bear at St Gallen, Switzerland

A long battle would rage in western Christendom, but this wasn't one of the endemic wars and conquests. It was a battle for souls. Eventually the Catholic Church suppressed the Celtic impulse – on the surface anyway. Yet three centuries later Queen Richardis would be a quiet keeper of the Celtic flame.

Merovingians, Carolingians and the fight for the Celtic spirit

In the sixth century the Merovingians became the ruling Frankish dynasty. According to the contemporary historian Gregory of Tours, their kingship could be summed up as 'despotism tempered by assassination'. Still, the Merovingians somehow accrued something of the aura of royal blood (they could have been the ones who first spread the story that they carried the bloodline of Mary Magdalene and Jesus). They were kings *because* they were of the royal bloodline. They wore their hair long and this was a sign of their kingship.

The mayors (or *major domos*) of the king's palace were in many ways the real rulers and more stable than the continually warring Merovingian kings and other lords. Supported by the church, eventually the mayor Pepin from the noble family of Charles Martel made himself king and began the Carolingian dynasty.

The mightiest, Charlemagne, was determined to restore the glory of the Roman empire in a Christian context. The Roman church had been trying to bring this about for centuries, so the king gained immediate approval. The pope crowned him Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800.

History records Alcuin from York as the greatest educator in Charlemagne's court at Aachen. Also important was Waldo, abbot of Reichenau on Lake Constance, a major Celtic Christian monastery founded by the monk Pirmin in 724. Waldo's name was virtually expunged by Charlemagne's biographers, for Rome had to be seen to triumph over the individualistic spirituality of the Irish.

After his death, Charlemagne's only living son Louis the Pious was able to rule alone, not having to follow the Frankish tradition of the kingdom being divided up. But Louis himself had sons and Charlemagne's unified kingdom disintegrated in a chaos of bloodshed and sibling rivalry until Charlemagne's grandson Charles the Bald emerged as sole ruler.

During his reign the Irish scholar John Scotus Eriugina was at the court in a last effort to gain Celtic Christianity's acceptance. He wrote from the understanding that all life holds a something of the Divine, of God, and that we are threefold, with body, soul and spirit. We can achieve personal knowledge of our divine part. The only hell is ignorance of this reality.

His views would increasingly be opposed by the establishment church, which tried to ban his writings. A dualistic concept of sin or redemption better facilitated its efforts to maintain power and impose unity. We have a soul that can be redeemed. But the church's earthly representatives had to be the only conduits away from damnation and towards God and heaven.

The communities founded by Irish monks would be taken over by the Catholic church, across Europe, throughout England, and into the Celtic heart of Ireland.

Queen Richardis is accused of adultery

So we come to Queen Richardis the wife of Charles the Fat, great grandson of Charlemagne and the last of the Carolingian emperors. He became Holy Roman Emperor in 881. Charles was mostly involved in pushing back the terrifying Vikings and in the usual battles between family members and their allies. Elements of this latter conflict would lead indirectly to the trials endured by Queen Richardis.

Legend says Richardis was the daughter of a Scottish lord, in part I think because of her immersion in the Celtic spirit. She was actually born around 840 in Alsace, daughter of Erchanger count of the Nordgau. She married Charles in 862.

In her capacity as queen she supported several religious institutions, including the Abbey on Reichenau Island and Sackingen Abbey on the Rhine near the Swiss border, which was founded by an Irish monk Fridolin and was gifted to her in 878. The communities were overtly Benedictine, but the Celtic Christian currents ran deep in these regions where Irish missionaries had set up their schools and centres.

It appears that Charles was a weak ruler and much power was in the hands of his archchancellor Liutward of Vercelli who was the king's chief advisor and friend. Richardis and Liutward were also close and throughout her marriage to Charles she had a warm and cooperative relationship with the archchancellor. At times they were virtual co-rulers when Charles was away fighting.

These absences were what brought about her suffering. Some of the courtiers were envious of Liutward's influence over the king. They were led by Liutbert of Mainz who had lost his favourable position to Liutward of Vercelli.

The slanders began. In documents favourable to Liutbert we read that Liutward was of low birth (and so unfit for a high position), that he saw himself as greater than the emperor and that he was a heretic (with 'Irish'

beliefs). More, he was of such an evil nature that he kidnapped the niece of Berengar of Friuli from a convent and forced her into marriage with one of his relatives.

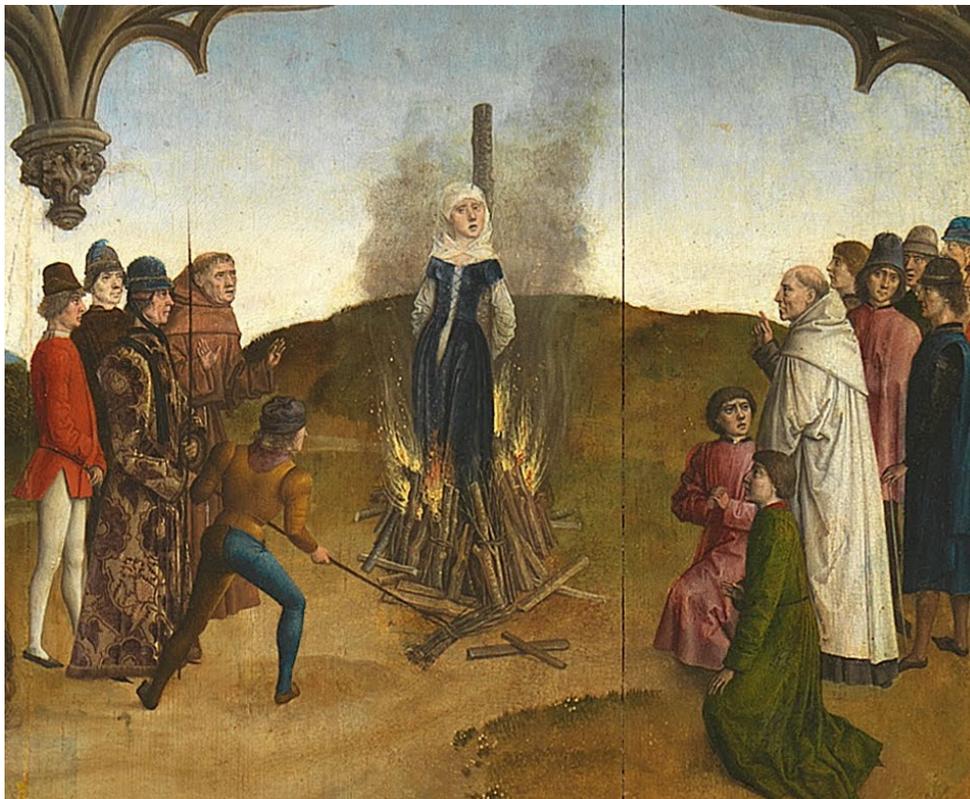
And then in 887 came the big accusation: Archchancellor Liutward and Queen Richardis were lovers.

Liutward was immediately demoted and expelled from the palace. But Richardis had to face her accusers in a judicial assembly. She was childless and Charles declared that their long marriage had never been consummated. This was a legal ground for annulment. Charles had an illegitimate son Bernard – and had tried unsuccessfully to persuade the pope to make Bernard his heir. Historian Simon McLean suggests that the king saw the accusations as an opportunity to rid himself of Richardis and find another wife to give him a legitimate son.

Annulment was agreed to and Richardis departed the imperial palace, at times staying in convents she had founded, becoming abbess of Zurzach and Sackingen and ending her life in 895 at Andlau, the religious holding she founded on her ancestral lands in Alamanni territory.

So much for the politics. We move now into legendary territory.

Trial by fire and kindness to a bear



Queen Richardis – part of 'The Trial by Fire' by Dierec Bouts the older

Charles continually harassed Richardis with accusations while she insisted that no man had ever touched her and that she gloried in her virginity. Eventually to prove her innocence she offered to undergo trial by ordeal. This was a regular means of determining innocence or guilt in the medieval period and could take many forms – all of which involved facing some painful or deathly peril. In front of the assembled lords, barefoot and wearing a shirt covered in wax, the queen walked into a burning pyre (freely, she wouldn't have been tied up as in the painting). The flames licked around her, but none could touch her. Even the wax refused to melt.

Richardis, who fire could not overwhelm, was proven innocent of adultery. She left her royal life and wandered the land. In a forest she discovered a mother bear grieving for its cub. Richardis gathered the cub into her arms and as she gently stroked its body, the cub came back to life. Both mother bear and cub were henceforth devoted to her.

Richardis founded Andlau abbey in that place and the nuns ever after protected any bears in the vicinity. In the Catholic church she represents wise rule and pure heartedness and was made a saint in 1049. Her attributes are the bear, fire, and a ploughshare which marks her work founding religious houses. In the statue she holds a model of the abbey and as always, she is accompanied by her faithful bear.



Her story has a magical faery feel to it. Today it is estimated that a mere 1% of Europe is 'wild'. In the ninth century a woman alone in a forest would be the stuff of nightmares and gruesome folk tales. We are looking at a land covered with dense forests of beech, oak, elm or pine where brigands lurked and dangerous wolves, lynx, boar and brown bear roamed. Some land had been cleared for farming and wine growing, especially by monks when they moved into the wilderness to set up their religious houses. There were some towns on trade routes. But if people travelled, they did so in well-guarded groups, and it was not uncommon for wild creatures like a 'big bad wolf' to venture right into the towns to carry off children.

The deep work of survival

Richardis' connection with fire and sacred building invokes the Celtic goddess Brigid and the fifth century Irish saint also called Brigid. It tells us that there's more to her adventure. And it begins with the bear, which connects her story with that other bear faithful to the Irish monk Gallus, and with the supposedly banished Celtic impulse.

Once, in a time of personal challenges I had a dream of a wild ride on the back of a she-bear across forests and mountains. It was exhilarating rather than frightening, and she took me to a sheltered place where she offered me honey and fruit.

On looking into its meaning, I discovered that the she-bear, a creature of great strength but also nurturing care, relates to the divine mother who is independent, powerful and deeply wise if we allow her to be that for us. The goddess Brigid embodied this divine feminine power and Celtic Christianity embraced it and saw it revealed in their own St Brigid.

The encounter between Richardis and the bears takes us deep into symbolic territory. The bear is a symbol of transformation and renewal. Like the moon which darkens and then returns to full brightness, the bear disappears into winter hibernation and reemerges with the return of the sun. There is a connection with the Celtic goddess Artio the bear, a lunar power. And there are echoes of Inanna, Persephone and other archetypal figures. For the same reason in Christian iconography the bear stands for death and resurrection.

In her gift of life to the dead bear cub, we have a clear message that through Richardis imbued with the sun rays of Christ, the light re-emerged. Renewal came through a Christian woman aligned with the nurturing spirit of Brigid. Richardis was never a mother of children, but she was mother of numerous convents. And in them the heart of Irish Celtic Christianity could safely live on. There would have been raids and even slaughter to destroy the work of the Irish missionaries and their followers. Yet

Richardis as an important abbess quietly and with integrity, held true and enabled this free-making influence to be retained in Europe beneath the growing orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic church.

Mary Magdalene and the Queen

In her afterlife Mary Magdalene was accused of having misused her sexuality. Queen Richardis was accused while she lived. They are woven together in shared injustice. Yet after enduring mistreatment and slanders both women have been vindicated – becoming Saint Mary Magdalene and Saint Richardis.

The Celtic form of Christianity was known as ‘Johannine’ because of the reverence given by the Irish missionaries to the Christ of the cosmos and to the initiatory path in John’s gospel. They understood that Lazarus, the disciple Jesus loved, was initiated by Jesus Christ. And the death-like trance in the dark tomb over four days was part of that initiation. Lazarus in other words was not ‘raised from the dead’. He re-awakened to new life. This was known to the witnesses privy to the mystery, to his spirit-sisters Mary and Martha. It was known in Ireland and to those Irish monks in their communities across Alsace and Alemannia. And the legend of Richardis tells us that she knew it too.

In the front-page image from *The Foundation of the Abbey of Andlau*, by Etienne Dubois, she points to the bear. Does she want us to know that she too had witnessed the reality of initiatory rebirth, perhaps as a memory?

Richardis brought the skull of Lazarus-John to Andlau. There are quite a few Lazarus skulls or pieces of his skull enshrined in old churches. That’s the nature of the medieval relic craze. Authenticity is not so important. Any esoteric significance is. Queen Richardis made sure this skull was held safely at Andlau where she spent the latter part of her life. I believe that when appropriate she spoke of this treasured relic as an outward sign of a profound truth to people who were part of the hidden Johannine community. Thus in her lifetime Richardis ensured that the teaching of initiation and transformation survived for a time, in those days when the light was being extinguished.

How important this was is rarely recorded because it is not known. Yet her mission, hidden within the walls of the convents, means she is linked to the emergence of the imaginative Grail visions I wrote of in *Grail Bearer* in Portal 4. Richardis kept the impulse alive as a thread leading to the twelfth century’s mystical flowering outside the church’s limits with the Cathars, the songs of the troubadours, the women of free spirit known as

Beguines, in alchemy and the Holy Grail stories with their underlying meaning that inspires seekers today.

And truly, the soul of Mary Magdalene, who lives in the mystery of Johannine Christianity was at the heart of this.