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*Amalasuintha: The
Transformation of Queenship in
the Post-Roman World*

Massimiliano Vitiello

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
Press, 2017

Review by: Anthony Smart



Amalasuintha: The Transformation of Queenship in the Post-Roman World. By Massimiliano Vitiello. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-8122-4847-7. 312 pp. £54.

Amalasuintha (d. 535), daughter of Theoderic the Great, lived through a turbulent period in the history of Ostrogothic Italy. An Amal, given a Roman education, she was fluent in Latin and Greek, and popular with the Roman senatorial elite. She corresponded with the imperial court in the East, and was an astute political thinker. She played a crucial part in her father's political plans, in particular with his attempts to unify the Gothic peoples. In the lead up to his death she assumed a much more visible and independent position of authority, ruling as regent for her young son, and then also as queen in her own right alongside her cousin, the last surviving male heir of the Amal line, Theodahad. This alliance, resting on insincere familial unity, ended with her imprisonment and murder upon the isle of Martana, on the orders of her cousin. She is then a historical person of great significance—one who assumed great authority and power, and appeared to blend, albeit unsuccessfully, Gothic queenship with Roman imperial rulership.

Amalasuintha is, however, a difficult figure to examine—certainly in book length format. She has attracted comment and discussion, but there previously was no full biographical or political study. Massimiliano Vitiello's monograph is then most welcome, filling a gap in the scholarship, and engaging thoroughly with the contemporary and near contemporary writings. There are elements here to praise, but the argument made is ultimately unsuccessful. Precisely because of her unique position, Amalasuintha's example of rulership stands apart from the Roman past and the Gothic / Byzantine present. Although this is a book focused on Amalasuintha, Vitiello does not present an intimate and personal sense of who she really was. I recognise that historical evidence does not always allow us to know a person from the past, but greater effort could have been made to bring this figure back to life. A reading of Cassiodorus, Procopius, and Gregory allows for an impression of Amalasuintha not just as a careful and astute political figure, but also a stern and fiercely independent woman, someone who did not change the nature of Gothic queenship (as Vitiello seems to believe) but who dominated the court of Ravenna through her sheer force of will. She can appear as a dutiful daughter, as well as a woman of fierce intellect and great beauty, and an overly stern and severe mother. She is a character of great complexity; but one whose personality can be seen through the evidence Vitiello draws so deftly upon.

That is not to say that this is a book without merit. There are some sections here that are nuanced and full of insight, providing new interpretations of familiar sources. The great strength to this work lies not in its examination of Amalasuintha, or indeed the exploration of queenship, but instead in how well Vitiello depicts the wider political world. A reading of this book allows for a much greater understanding of the interconnectedness of sixth-century Europe, and how important the relationship between Ravenna and Constantinople was in real political terms. This became more important after the death of Theoderic, but even when he was still ruling from a position of great power, the ties between the kingdom and the Empire were strong, and Vitiello shows very well how Ostrogothic rule rested both on the Roman past and the court of the Emperor in the East. This challenges the dominant image seen in scholarship that presents Theoderic as a mighty ruler, an emperor in all but name. In this sense, Vitiello's work is a powerful examination of Byzantine political dominance in the Ostrogothic world, and anticipates the war for Italy.

The other great strength lies in the use of evidence. Although Vitiello could have provided a clearer sense of who Amalasuintha was, he uses the writings to paint a vivid image of the political factions that arise, recognising the dominance of the conservative Goths and the Roman senators. He is particularly strong when drawing upon Cassiodorus. His examination of Procopius is also persuasive and convincing. He struggles however to appreciate the subtleties of Gregory of Tours, and takes too simplistic a line when thinking about Gregory's religious focus. The *Liber Pontificalis* is also used, but is not examined in the detail needed to support the readings made of it.

The book is divided into five chapters. The introduction sets out the piece well, and provides a useful summary of the approaches and problems. The first chapter is the strongest. Here, Vitiello provides a very useful examination of the terminology used to depict female figures of power (e.g. *domina, regina, viduvi, gens*), and the attributes expected of them in the post-Roman world. Greater effort could have been made here to place this scrutiny against a wider backdrop of gender history, but this is a thought-provoking and analytical section. Chapters two and three are weaker. Although the openings to both provide insights into the political realities of the sixth century, the subsequent sections are circumlocutory and inchoate. They present a somewhat artificial and unclear narrative, and lose sight of the subject, and draw instead to the surrounding events. The notes on Amalasuintha's education (46-54) and her relationship with both Justinian and the Roman senate (79-88) are interesting, but much more needed to be said of both. Chapter four is clearer, with stronger hints of argument, but the focus

on creating a narrative of Amalasuintha's death adds little to an examination of her queenship. The suspicion concerning Byzantine involvement (or deliberate lack thereof) is certainly entertaining, but needed to be placed more firmly against the backdrop of political thought. The final chapter presents a number of useful questions, and seeks to provide comparison between the queen and other powerful female rulers (e.g. Galla Placidia and Empress Ariadne), but the conclusions offered here are not entirely convincing. The epilogue is fluent (214-220), and importantly returns to the ideas discussed in the first chapter.

To close, this is a book that provides an interesting argument, but one that ultimately does not stand up. Amalasuintha does not transform queenship; she is a unique figure, in a unique position, at a very distinctive moment of political turmoil. As Vitiello himself accepts "[a]fter Amalasuintha, the Gothic queenship reverted to its traditional features" (214). Much more still needs to be said of the queen, and she would still benefit from a full biographical examination. However, the book is strong in examining and exploring the links between Ostrogothic Italy and Byzantium, and provides a useful insight into the political realities of the sixth century.

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