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From: Thomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner (eds), *Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe: Conversion and Consolidation in the Early Middle Ages* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016)

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From Conversion to Consolidation in Eighth-Century Hestia

One of the best-known episodes in early medieval missionary history is the felling of the ‘Oak of Jupiter’ by St Boniface at Geismar, in Hestia, what is now the northern district of Hesse in Germany. The event, which took place in 723, is dramatically described by Boniface’s biographer Willibald, who wrote his *vita* of the saint between 754 and 768. Willibald describes how Boniface

attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch.¹

At this slight cut, the tree miraculously fell and split into four equal parts, and ‘at the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord’.²

There are good reasons to question *prima facie* the validity of Willibald’s account. First, as he admits, he never met Boniface, but based his biography ‘upon personal knowledge and on the accounts of those who for a long time were his personal disciples’.³ Since he was writing more than thirty years after the event, we can legitimately wonder whether his sources included a single first-hand witness of the Geismar episode. Second, he explicitly describes his work as didactic in nature, and very deliberately modelled on hagiographical exemplars.⁴ In particular, the felling of the Oak of Jupiter bears a passing

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resemblance to the destruction of a sacred pine tree in Sulpicius Severus's *vita* of St Martin of Tours.⁵ Third, while the existence of a major pagan shrine at Geismar is not in doubt, no other contemporary source can definitely provide independent corroboration of Willibald's account.⁶

Despite these factors, Willibald's main objective in narrating the Geismar episode was to provide an arresting symbol of the triumph of Christianity over paganism. In this, he undoubtedly succeeded; the dramatic event has been picked up with gusto by many historians, particularly those of evangelical persuasion. Schwind notes that, in the German literature, it has been 'frequently portrayed with blooming fantasy and luminous colours',⁷ while in 1954, during the twelfth centenary celebrations of Boniface's martyrdom, an English historian described enthusiastically how Boniface had resolved 'to strike at the very heart of this religion of evil, and he would do so in circumstances which would either bring complete and final victory to the cause of Christ or win for him a martyr's crown'.⁸

Other commentators have been more prosaic. Theodor Schieffer, in what is still the best modern biography of Boniface in any language, expressed doubt that Boniface was in any real danger, however much pathos Willibald injected into the scene.⁹ The missionary was under the protection of the Frankish authorities when he destroyed the Geismar shrine, as proven by a contemporary letter of support from the Charles Martel, the Mayor of the Palace.¹⁰ This political reality was vividly illustrated in the 1960s and 1970s, when large-scale excavations revealed the enormous scale of the Frankish hillfort of Büraburg, which stands a mere 1.5 kms from Geismar.¹¹ Its garrison, which evidently included a substantial number of mounted troops, would have been tasked with protecting Frankish interests in a volatile border region.

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Just as interesting, however, is what followed the destruction of the pagan shrine at Geismar. After describing the miraculous felling of the oak and the conversion of the doubting pagans, Willibald continues: ‘Thereupon the holy bishop took counsel with the brethren, built an oratory from the timber of the oak and dedicated it to St Peter the Apostle.’¹² The traditional assumption is that this oratory was the precursor to Boniface’s monastic foundation at nearby Fritzlar, although this is debatable.¹³ The location of the oratory is in any case less important than the principle it illustrates, for it seems that Boniface was following an approach similar to that advised by Gregory the Great in his 601 letter to Abbot Mellitus, concerning the Roman mission in Kent:

The idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in those shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognising and worshipping the true God.¹⁴

The tactic could not be followed precisely, of course, since the shrine at Geismar was a tree rather than a building, but the principle is the same. Furthermore, although this the only direct historical reference to the destruction of a particular pagan shrine in Hessa, should need not assume that it was the only time Boniface followed such an approach, especially given its apparent success.

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My aim in this paper is to place the Geismar episode within its broader context, drawing on the evidence of archaeology, toponymics and the natural landscape. I hope to demonstrate two things. First, the Oak of Jupiter at Geismar, while obviously important, was also merely one part of an expansive pre-Christian sacred landscape whose roots lay deep in the prehistoric past. Second, Boniface's behaviour at Geismar, far from being a straightforward act of pious vandalism, was a logical, carefully calculated part of a coherent two-phase strategy for the conversion and consolidation of Hestia.

Historical Background

Since there are several accessible introductions to Boniface's life and career, here I will restrict myself to the barest outline.¹⁵ Boniface was born in Wessex around 675, and spent the first half of his life developing a successful career as a monastic priest, teacher and envoy to the royal court. In 716 he decided to join the long-standing Anglo-Saxon mission in Frisia, where he gained his first missionary experience under the Northumbrian Willibrord. Just five years later, in 721, Boniface obtained a papal mandate to lead a new mission to convert the pagans of central Germany. Heading north from Mainz towards the Frankish-Saxon border, he stopped at the important hillfort settlement of Amöneburg, whose rulers, a pair of brothers named Dettic and Deorulf, he 'converted from the sacrilegious worship of idols which was practised under the cloak of Christianity'.¹⁶ Having corrected these rulers and built a chapel in honour of St Michael, Boniface then continued north into Hestia.

[FIGURE 1 HERE] From the point of view of the Rhineland Franks in whose dominion Hestia lay, it was traditionally something of a backwater. This is indicated both by

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its lack of Rhineland-style material culture (in particular the lack of furnished inhumations and wheel-thrown pottery until the second half of the seventh century), and by its total neglect in Frankish historical sources before the mission of Boniface. Gregory of Tours in the late sixth century, for instance, found reason to mention the neighbouring region of Thuringia on several occasions, but evidently never heard anything worth reporting about Hessia.¹⁷ A hundred years after Gregory, in the last decade of the seventh century, Hessia apparently became more important to the Franks. This period saw the rapid construction and occupation of at least three massive hillforts (Kesterburg, Büraburg and Weidelsburg), along with associated settlements, several of which have been extensively excavated.¹⁸ From this point on, Rhineland burial customs, pottery forms and place-names spread across Hessia, continuing through the eighth century and beyond.

By the time Boniface arrived in 721, therefore, there had been a substantial Frankish military presence in Hessia for a generation. The most likely reason for this growth of Frankish interest is not necessarily the Hessians themselves, but the Saxons to the north. Around the same time as the Franks were building their hillforts in Hessia, the Saxons were building their own immediately to the north; the example of Gaulskopf has been excavated and confirmed on the basis of pottery evidence as a Saxon fortification, and there may have been another at Eresburg.¹⁹ Hessia effectively became a strategic bottleneck between Francia and Saxony, and the Frankish Annals support a general picture at this time of sporadic cross-border warfare, with recorded Frankish campaigns into Saxony in 719, 720, 724, 728/9, and possibly 722.²⁰ The significance of this military activity for Boniface's mission is clear. On the one hand, Charles Martel must have appreciated the value of Christianising a population

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that was still not firmly under his control.²¹ On the other, the security of Boniface and his missionaries depended on the ready support of Frankish weapons and resources.²²

The pre-Christian sacred landscape of Hestia

Even though Hestia may have been an out-of-the-way militarised borderzone from the point of view of the Rhineland Franks, the archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the region had experienced considerable stability of settlement and population since Roman times. The Hessians, in fact, seem to have been among the stay-at-homes of the Migration Period. This is most obvious in their name: the tribal name *Hessi*, first attested in the letters of Boniface, is derived directly from the name *Chatti*, first recorded by Tacitus in the late first century AD.²³ A name alone, of course, does not mean much, but the extensive work of Gerhard Mildenerger during the 1970s on Roman-period wheel-thrown pottery in Hestia provided empirical evidence for a relatively stable pattern of occupation in central Hestia between the first and fifth centuries.²⁴ This is not to say that the Hessians were insulated from the effects of the end of the western empire or the expanding confederations of the Franks and Saxons, but nor does there seem to have been any great rupture in settlement or material culture.

For an example of long-term stability, we need look no farther than Geismar itself. Excavation in the 1970s revealed that the eighth-century settlement had a history of occupation that stretched back at least twelve hundred years, deep into the pre-Roman Iron Age. A large well that would have been in use when Boniface arrived in 721 had been dug in the fourth century. Interestingly, the excavation also revealed burials of a horse and dog

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which may have been sacrificial in nature, along with a small bronze votive figurine of Roman manufacture.²⁵ We can link these finds to the name ‘Geismar’ itself, which has the rough meaning of ‘rushing pool’, and to the nearby presence of a natural mineral spring first recorded in the fourteenth century as *Heiligenborn*, the ‘holy’ or ‘health-giving spring’.²⁶ Geismar, it seems, may have been a focus of pre-Christian cult activity for hundreds of years before Boniface arrived.

[FIGURE 2 HERE] The picture can be expanded to encompass central Hesse as a whole, which the historical linguist Adolf Bach described as an ‘ancient holy district’,²⁷ and the historian Karl Demandt as a ‘cult landscape’.²⁸ The district is defined by a natural basin at the confluence of the rivers Eder and Schwalm, surrounded by high, densely forested hills. Intense pre-Christian cult activity can be traced back to the Neolithic, evidenced by a number of megaliths and monumental chamber tombs scattered across the basin and its surrounding area, some of which still remained prominent in the eighth-century landscape. A standing stone near Marburg, for instance, not only gave its name to the settlement of Langenstein, but was incorporated into the wall of the church graveyard. Another quartz megalith, colloquially known as the *Wotanstein*, stands on the edge of the village of Maden.

[FIGURE 3 HERE] The earliest likely reference to Maden is in the *Annals* of Tacitus, where he refers to the destruction of a place called Mattium, which lay just north of the river Eder, by an invading Roman force in AD 15. Tacitus describes Mattium as effectively the capital of the Chatti (*id genti caput*).²⁹ Considering Maden’s position within the modern landscape, one is also struck by the unusual arrangement of its surrounding fields. Despite the complex sub-divisions of property and the encroachment of built-up areas, there is see a fairly distinct outline of a circular precinct, roughly 2 km across, surrounding the

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village, with roads and tracks leading to the centre like the spokes of a wheel. On the edge of this perimeter lies a field called Mader Heide; until the thirteenth century, this was the seat of the oldest and highest court in Hesse, with Hesse itself referred to as the Grafschaft of Maden (a Grafschaft is roughly equivalent to an English county).³⁰ The historical and toponymical evidence suggests that Maden was a place of considerable political importance for much of the first millennium, apparently more important than Geismar itself.

[FIGURE 4 HERE] There is also evidence for considerable religious activity at Maden. One should not place much importance on the quartz megalith, which may not even have been standing in the early medieval period, and whose modern name – ‘the stone of Wodan’ – probably originated as an antiquarian fancy. On the other hand, Strabo in his *Geography* records that among the prisoners taken at the sacking of Mattium in AD 15 was a high priest called Libes, clear evidence of a religious cult.³¹ Furthermore, the focus of Maden is a natural basalt outcrop known as the Maderstein. Such volcanic outcrops are frequently associated with early modern folk-religious practices in Hesse; up until relatively recently, it was local custom to ascend the Maderstein on the Feast of the Ascension in order to gather herbs and dance.

[FIGURE 5 HERE] Just to the north of Maden is one of the largest outcrops in central Hesse, known as Gudensberg, first attested in a charter of 1119 as *Guodenesberch*. *Guoden* in this case is derived from Old High German *Woden*, through the mutation of the initial *w* into *g*, and the name of the outcrop therefore means ‘Wodan’s Mountain’.³² Without any direct historical references to cult activity as we have for Geismar, it is always hard to say anything concrete about this sort of evidence; it is apparent, though, that the Maden district was a long-standing centre of political and pre-Christian religious activity.

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The association of pre-Christian cults with natural sites during the conversion period is, of course, well-known. We have such an association from a letter of Pope Gregory III to Boniface, dated c. 738, in which the pope makes a general address to all pagans in Germania:

Therefore abstain and keep yourselves from every kind of heathen practice, and not only yourselves but all who are subject to you. Reject absolutely all divination, fortune-telling, sacrifices to the dead, prophecies in groves or by springs, amulets, incantations, sorcery (that is, wicked enchantments), and all those sacrilegious practices which used to go on in your country.³³

This list of activities represents the old clichés of pagan behaviour, derived especially from Caesarius of Arles.³⁴ But at a fundamental level it is also appropriate. At Geismar we already have Willibald's reference to the Oak of Jupiter – Jupiter being probably a *translatio Romana* from Old High German *Donar* – to show that Gregory's condemnation of sacred groves hit home, at least. The existence near Geismar of *Heiligenborn*, if it was the focus of cult activity, suggests the same of his condemnation of springs. A surviving eighth-century sermon from Boniface's mission field condemns pagan activities at 'cliffs' along with the more clichéd springs and groves.³⁵

[FIGURE 6 HERE] Groves may come and go over the course of centuries, but springs tend to move less, outcrops not at all. Central Hessa is well furnished with large basalt outcrops in particular, the remnants of a period of intense volcanic activity seven million years ago. The flat basin of the Eder-Schwalm confluence is disrupted by several of these striking outcrops, including Maderstein and Gudensberg, which we have already

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encountered. There is a further example at the peak of large hill called Heiligenberg, ‘Holy Mountain’, overlooking the village of Gensungen. North of central Hesse is the village of Martinshagen, where the church of St Martin is mere metres away from an outcrop known as Martinstein. This is a particularly good example of how such outcrops might have been suited to cult activity, with a natural ‘staircase’ of basalt columns leading up to a raised, altar-like platform. There is an even more impressive example, the Helfensteine, further to the north (situated directly between Zierenberg and Ahnatal). This cluster of enormous outcrops dominate their valley; as well as a monumental natural staircase, they also include an artificially carved altar. Nearby is a striking outcrop called the Wichtelkirche, named for its church-like spire which rises above yet another flat platform. **[FIGURE 7 HERE]** Finally, there is a second Heiligenberg 5 km north-west of Geismar, at the peak of which is a massive sandstone boulder (known as the *Riesenstein*, or ‘Giant Stone’) and cliff. The cliff has been artificially cut back at some point, with a small alcove cut into the rock, and the boulder has also had a small set of steps carved into its top.

The continued significance of some of these sites into the early medieval period is suggested by the place-name evidence – in particular the two Heiligenbergs – or their association with later churches, as at Martinshagen. Many of the sites are fairly remote outcrops, places raised above and removed from the settled landscape, but there is also some place-name evidence for sacred sites in the valleys: Wichdorf, first recorded in the 950s as *Vuihdorpf*, where the first element, *wih*, is Old High German for ‘sacred’;³⁶ and Altenstädt, first attested in 831 as *Alahstat*, where *alah* means ‘shrine’ or ‘temple’.³⁷

By necessity this is only a brief overview of a few central sites, but it suffices to demonstrate that the pre-Christian sacred landscape of Hesse extended far beyond a single

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oak at Geismar.³⁸ The country seems to be studded with natural springs and convenient outcrops, any of which might have been active at the time of Boniface's arrival, and some of which were evidently in use for many centuries before that. It may have been a strategically significant cultural backwater to the Franks, but we also need to recognise that this was an ancient, complex spiritual landscape.

In this respect, the very lack of Frankish-style material culture in Hessa before the second half of the sixth century may itself be significant. It could be that the vitality of native religious cults – the cult of Thunaer at Geismar, perhaps a cult of Wodan at the legal assembly-place of Maden – was bound up with a strong sense of Hessian identity that helped preserve a distinct culture against Frankish influences for some two hundred years. Only when the Franks established their hillforts in the 690s do we see a significant spread of Rhineland pottery types in central Hessa; and even then, the Oak of Jupiter evidently survived for another thirty years at Geismar, on the doorstep of Büraburg.

Boniface's missionary strategy

We turn now to Boniface. Why did he start his mission in Hessa in 721? Why not evangelise the Bructeri, who were next door to Frisia? The simple answer may be that their region was too hot to touch: an Anglo-Saxon mission there during the 690s had ended in disaster when the Bructeri were conquered by the Saxons, and two missionaries who ventured into Saxony proper around the same time were martyred.³⁹ Another option would have been Thuringia to the east, where Anglo-Saxon missionaries had already been active, and which was more or

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less part of the Frankish kingdom.⁴⁰ Yet although Boniface did soon expand his mission to include Thuringia, he did not choose to start there.

Lying between the Bructeri and Thuringia, Hestia was close to the Rhine and reasonably secure under Boniface's Frankish sponsors, but Christianity seems to have made a minimal impact. As mentioned above, according to Willibald even the supposedly Christian lords of Amöneburg, to the immediate south of Hestia, were still worshipping idols. The only pre-Bonifatian churches in Hestia are at the hillforts of Büraburg (where an original adult-sized, full-immersion baptismal font still survives) and Kesterburg, with a possible third at Bergheim on the road between them.⁴¹ So while Christianity must have begun to spread among some of the Hessian elite, presumably those most willing to throw in their lot with their Frankish overlords, we can hardly say that Hessian society was Christian. This is certainly the impression given by Willibald in his account of the Oak of Jupiter at Geismar. He does not mention the fact that when Boniface chopped down the oak, 'taking his courage in his hands', he had a garrison of mounted Frankish troops watching his back, but he does imply that local Hessian society was itself divided. Boniface, he tells us, took 'counsel and advice' from the pro-Christian faction before he attacked the shrine.⁴²

This reflects one important lesson: in any given historical context, the process of systematic evangelisation very often reveals, and to an extent depends upon exploiting, pre-existing tensions within the local social fabric. There is also a second lesson: once Christian missionaries have achieved a certain amount of social credibility, it is not hard to convince people to accept baptism. There is, perhaps, something appealing in the simple ritual of baptism, in its associations with moral cleansing and the promised access to a new source of divine power. The difficult part is convincing the newly baptised to take on a complete

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Christian identity, with all its obligations, prohibitions, customs and teachings that actually do have a serious impact on daily life and personal relationships.

This, at least, is what Boniface found in Hessa. He had no trouble winning converts to baptism quite soon after his arrival. According to Willibald the stumbling block was not baptism, but confirmation.

Now many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety.⁴³

This point, when a number of Hessians began to resist Christianity and revert to paganism, represents the first crisis in the mission. Boniface may have understood that if the conversion of Hessa was to be a long-term success, thirty years of Christian-pagan co-existence had to come to an end. A clear, physical break had to be made with the past; the ancient places of nature-focused worship had to be torn from the landscape.

The potential impact of this first phase of the mission strategy is hard for us to comprehend. The evidence of archaeology may allow us to suggest that Geismar had been a place of cult activity since the Roman period, but as far as the Hessians were concerned it might have been sacred since the beginning of the world. It was a deliberate and literal act of desecration, intended to traumatise and shock; in Cusack's words, it 'demonstrates the importance of the theatrical' as a part of early medieval missionary strategy.⁴⁴ And, despite the lack of further historical information, why should we assume that Boniface stopped with

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Geismar? True, an oak can be destroyed more easily than an outcrop or a natural spring, and this is perhaps why the example of Geismar is the one which was still remembered in Willibald's time. But we can also see traces of evidence for the direct supplanting of other cult sites by Christian chapels and churches.

A good example is Maden – which, as already discussed, may have equalled or exceeded Geismar in importance as a place of legal and religious assembly possibly associated with Wodan. Hence it is not surprising that, to judge from eighth-century evidence preserved in a twelfth-century cartulary from Hersfeld, property in Maden at some point came into Boniface's ownership.⁴⁵ Along with this, we can note that the parish church of Maden is dedicated to Boniface's patron St Peter, the same saint to whom he dedicated his oratory at Geismar. Its early foundation date and importance may also be indicated by the fact that, almost uniquely among the local churches, it remained an independent parish (i.e. not subordinated to the archdiaconate at nearby Fritzlar) until the Reformation.⁴⁶

One archaeologically attested eighth-century church is at Kirchberg, north of Geismar and Maden. The earliest burials beneath the church date from around 700, and are furnished inhumations of the Frankish Rhineland type. At some point during the eighth century a stone church was erected on top of the burials, perhaps replacing an earlier wooden building.⁴⁷ The name of the village itself, 'church hill', refers to Wartberg, the large conical hill at whose foot the village stands, which was a focus of settlement since the Stone Age. Given its visual prominence in the landscape, it may be that Wartberg, like Geismar and Maden, attracted some kind of pre-Christian cult activity, which would help explain the early church foundation; but there is no direct evidence for this.

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Geismar thus represents the first stage of Christianisation – the deliberate confrontation and supplantation of pagan shrines. It is telling, however, that the location of the oratory which Boniface had built from the Oak of Jupiter has now been lost. If many of these nature-cult sites were based around groves, springs and outcrops, away from the villages, then any chapels and churches built nearby may have seen only transient use. Bearing this in mind, it is worthwhile considering patterns in the toponymic evidence more broadly, and in particular natural features that bear the name of a saint.

The most obvious place to start is St Peter, who was Boniface's particular patron, and the dedicatee of the oratory at Geismar. There are four 'Peter' toponyms in Hessia: Petersholz, Petershöhe, and two Petersbergs. Such names tend to refer either to the distant owner of the land (a church or monastery dedicated to the saint), or to a church foundation on the site itself. Owing to the importance of St Peter, toponyms bearing his name are especially common.⁴⁸ Viewing these Peter- toponyms in a landscape context, the striking pattern emerges that each of them is sited either directly on, or overlooking, one of the six major medieval transit routes between Hessia and the north. Furthermore, they are all situated on the borders of Hessia as defined by eighth- and ninth-century charter evidence, at between 36 and 41 km from Fritzlar.

It is impossible to say, of course, that each of these sites was once the site of an oratory or church of St Peter. One of the two remaining communication routes into the north, however, reaches the edge of Hessia at the village of Nieder-Ense, whose existing church is dedicated to St Peter. A possible explanation for this pattern – and it can only be a suggestion, since this sort of toponymic evidence lacks temporal security – is that the church

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of St Peter in Fritzlar once had daughter foundations at these sites, oratories or churches deliberately established at each entry point into Hessian from the pagan north.⁴⁹

Whether or not the toponymic evidence is truly indicative of early foundations, the Hessians, if they were to be properly Christianised, needed regular pastoral care – they needed churches in the heart of the settled landscape, staffed by priests who lived among them. That Boniface was highly conscientious in his organisation of missionary parties and churches is clear from his surviving letters. Throughout his career he showed a strong preference for recruiting Anglo-Saxon missionaries from communities he knew and trusted. One such was Wigbert, a priest from Glastonbury, whom Boniface took the trouble to meet personally upon his arrival in Hessian. Wigbert was promptly assigned to a missionary party and sent into the turbulent Hessian-Saxon borderlands, where he endured ‘hunger and thirst and cold and attacks by the heathen’, as he wrote in a letter back home.⁵⁰ Even after thirty years of the mission, most of Boniface’s staff seem to have been Anglo-Saxon recruits. In a letter of 752 to Abbot Fulrad of St Denis, written to secure renewed material support for a mission that he feared would falter after his death, Boniface described the situation of his disciples.

They are nearly all foreigners. Some are priests living in many places in the service of the Church and of the people. Some are monks in our cloisters or are children learning to read. Others are mature men who have long been living with me and helping me in my work. [...] I make this request especially because my priests living near the border of the heathen lead a very meagre existence. They can get enough to eat but cannot

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procure clothing without help and protection from elsewhere, as I have assisted them to maintain themselves in those regions for the service of the people.⁵¹

This plea relates to those missionaries at the edge of the mission field, presumably including those at the far north of Hessa and Thuringia. By implication, the more central missionaries were better supported, and could rely on a solid network of churches better rooted in the local economies. Here the problem was not finding enough resources, but finding enough capable staff.⁵²

Again, if we turn to consider the broader landscape context, we can see how Boniface's parochial strategy worked in practice. After the oratory at Geismar, his first known foundation was a monastery at Fritzlar. This became 'mission central' for the conversion of the Hessians, as the letters and hagiography make plain. Drawing on charter evidence from the eighth century and later, German church historians, including Wilhelm Classen and Michael Gockel, have suggested that central Hessa's eleventh-century 'mother churches' can be dated back to the eighth century. These are Bergheim, Gensungen and Urff, all of which in the eleventh-century were subordinate to the archdeacon of Fritzlar, and Mardorf-Berge. In the eleventh century this last mother church was still independent of Fritzlar, having been detached from its fellows by a 782 charter of Charlemagne.⁵³

We can note the regular arrangement of the churches around Fritzlar, almost geometric in its precision, with each church located on a major routeway. This regularity suggests that it is the result of coherent planning. The dedications of the churches bear this out: both Gensungen and Mardorf-Berge were dedicated to St Peter, while the medieval dedication of Urff has been lost, but Karl Demandt suspects that it also belonged to St

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Peter.⁵⁴ The church of Bergheim is dedicated to the Frankish patron St Martin – as mentioned earlier, this may well be a pre-Bonifatian foundation. There is a conspicuous gap in the north of the network. Here we do not have an eleventh-century mother church, but we do have the excavated eighth-century stone church alluded to earlier, which was clearly of some importance. It may be that the church at Kirchberg was originally part of this network, but was later incorporated directly into Fritzlar's own territory, so did not survive into the eleventh century as a mother church.

The picture is of necessity imprecise, and my use of the term 'mother church' equally so. Its broadest elements, however – the church of Fritzlar and its ring of subordinate churches – can be traced with some confidence back to the eighth century, and probably to the time of Boniface. Indeed, it is precisely the sort of system we should expect to come from the mind of a man who approached his entire mission with an obsessive devotion to regularity and sustainability, and who was, in the words of Peter Brown, 'gripped by passionate loyalty to principles of order'.⁵⁵

Conclusion

It is apparent that Willibald's account of the felling of the Oak at Jupiter provides only one glimpse of a much larger landscape. In Hessa we are in the fortunate position of having not only rich archaeological and toponymical evidence that has already been intensely studied and published, but also an extraordinary collection of historical documents that allow us to contextualise it to an extent rarely possible in this period. Thanks to his letters, Boniface is more accessible to us than most figures from the early Middle Ages. We can, to a degree,

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reconstruct his ideology of mission, and use this to guide our interpretation of the broader evidence. He was a man who understood the importance of the theatrical, as the episode at Geismar shows, but along with this came a strict sense of regularity and order, great reserves of physical energy, and remarkable willpower.

Traces of his strategy, I have argued, can still be seen on the ground. The reconstruction of the pre-Christian sacred landscape of Hessa is fraught with difficulties, not least because Boniface's attempt to eradicate it was so successful. Nonetheless, we may be able to glimpse important sites at Maden and elsewhere. More evident is the pastoral network of Hessian 'mother churches' which goes back to the conversion period, and was most likely formulated by Boniface himself. Together this gives us a unique view of a coherent missionary strategy, enacted over three decades, which began with dramatic confrontation and conversion, but shifted seamlessly into an enduring system of consolidation at the local level.

¹ Willibald of Mainz, *The Life of St Boniface*, in C. H. Talbot (ed. and trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), pp. 25-62 (chapter 6, pp. 45-46). The standard Latin edition is Willibald of Mainz, *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo*, in Wilhelm Levison (ed.), *Vitae sancti Bonifatii archiepiscopi Moguntini*, Monument Germaniae Historica Scriptores rerum Germanicarum 57 (Hannover: Hahn, 1905), pp. 1-58.

² Willibald of Mainz, *The Life of St Boniface*, chapter 6, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, chapter 6, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ If Willibald had not read Sulpicius Severus directly, he likely knew the story of the pine tree from Aldhelm of Malmesbury's version in his prose *De Virginitate*. See James Palmer,

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‘Defining paganism in the Carolingian world’, *Early Medieval Europe*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2007), pp. 402-425 (p. 412).

⁶ The only other possible reference to the Oak of Jupiter is found in the ‘Herford Letter’, a purported letter of Pope Gregory III to Boniface which survives only in the fourteenth-century *Vita Waltgeri* by Wigand of Herford. In this letter, Gregory advises Boniface to ‘fell those trees that the natives worship, just as you brought down the so-called Tree of Jupiter that was venerated by the natives’. Elsewhere I have argued for this letter’s essential authenticity, but it remains a problematic source. For text, translation and discussion, see John-Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death: Saint Boniface and the Conversion of Hesse, 721-754*, *Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 217-225.

⁷ ‘... mit blühmender Phantasie und leuchtenden Farben dargestellt.’ Fred Schwind, ‘Fritzlar zur Zeit des Bonifatius und seiner Schüler’, in Walter Schlesinger (ed.), *Fritzlar im Mittelalter* (Fritzlar: Magistrat der Stadt Fritzlar, 1974), pp. 69-88 (p. 71).

⁸ George Patrick Greenaway, *Saint Boniface: Three Biographical Studies for the Twelfth Centenary Festival* (London: A. and C. Black, 1955), p. 27.

⁹ Theodor Schieffer, *Wifrid-Bonifatius und die christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Herder, 1954), p. 148. His view is echoed by Lutz von Padberg, the most prominent German historian currently writing on Boniface. Lutz E. von Padberg, *Die Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), p. 84.

¹⁰ Ephraim Emerton (trans.), *The Letters of Saint Boniface* (New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000), no. XIV, p. 25. The standard Latin edition of the letters of Boniface

is Michael Tangl (ed.), *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae Selectae 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1916).

¹¹ For overviews of Büraburg in English, see: Walter Schlesinger, ‘Early Medieval Fortifications in Hesse: A General Historical Report’, *World Archaeology*, vol. 7.3 (1976), pp. 243-60; David Parsons, ‘Sites and Monuments of the Anglo-Saxon Mission in Central Germany’, *The Archaeological Journal*, vol. 140 (1983), pp. 280-321.

¹² Willibald of Mainz, *The Life of St Boniface*, chapter 6, p. 46.

¹³ For discussion see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 300-303.

¹⁴ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), I.30, p. 107-109.

¹⁵ See, for example, Timothy Reuter (ed.), *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980); Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (London: Fontana, 1997), pp. 204-213; Barbara Yorke, ‘The Insular Background to Boniface’s Continental Career’, in F. J. Felten, J. Jarnut and L. E. von Padberg (eds.), *Bonifatius, Leben und Nachwirken: die Gestaltung des christlichen Europa im Frühmittelalter*, Quellen und Abhandlungen zur mittelhessischen Kirchengeschichte 121 (Mainz: Gesellschaft für mittelhessische Kirchengeschichte, 2007), pp. 23-38.

¹⁶ Willibald of Mainz, *The Life of St Boniface*, chapter 6, p. 42.

¹⁷ Until its conquest by the Franks in 531, Thuringia was one of the most powerful independent kingdoms of Germany; the Hessians have no recorded king. Gregory of Tours does, however, quote a passage from the lost fifth-century history of Sulpicius Alexander, in which a number of Chatti (the ancestors of the Hessians) briefly intimidate a Roman column

from a safe distance. Sulpicius states that the Chatti had accepted the Frankish king Marcomer as their warleader. See Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1974), II.9, p. 122.

¹⁸ See Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 157-186, for an in-depth discussion of the material.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²¹ Bernard S. Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare: Prelude to Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 23.

²² Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, p. 208.

²³ Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. and trans. by J. B. Rives (Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 30.1, p. 89.

²⁴ Gerhard Mildenerger, 'Nordhessen in der Völkerwanderungszeit', *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, vol. 16 (1966), pp. 1-8; idem, *Römerzeitliche Siedlungen in Nordhessen*, Kasseler Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 3 (Marburg: Elwert, 1972); idem, 'Terra Nigra aus Nordhessen', *Fundberichte aus Hessen*, vol. 12 (1972), pp. 104-126.

²⁵ H. Schoppa, 'Eine Bronzestatue des Harpokrates aus Fritzlar-Geismar, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis', *Fundberichte aus Hessen*, vol. 14 (1974), pp. 349-351; Andreas Thiedmann, *Die Siedlung von Geismar bei Fritzlar: Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Siedlung im Schwalm-Eder-Kreis*, Archäologische Denkmäler in Hessen 2 (Wiesbaden: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen, 2001).

²⁶ J. Udolph, 'Namenkundliches' contribution to 'Geismar', in H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 35 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973-), vol. 10, pp. 584-86.

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²⁷ Adolf Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*, 3 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1952-1956), vol. 2.1, p. 409.

²⁸ Karl Demandt, *Geschichte des Landes Hessen*, 2nd edn (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978), p. 87.

²⁹ A. Becker, 'Mattium', in H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 35 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973-), vol. 19, pp. 443-44.

³⁰ Demandt, *Geschichte des Landes Hessen*, pp. 168, 191.

³¹ Becker, 'Mattium'.

³² Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*, vol. 2.1, p. 363; Klaus Andrießen, *Siedlungsnamen in Hessen: Verbreitung und Entfaltung bis 1200* (Marburg: Elwert, 1990), p. 200; E.

Christmann, 'Der Wandel von Wodensberg zu Gudensberg', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literature*, vol. 67 (1944), pp. 362-368.

³³ Emerton (trans.), *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, no. XXXIII, p. 48.

³⁴ See Palmer, 'Defining paganism in the Carolingian world'.

³⁵ Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, p. 283.

³⁶ Andrießen, *Siedlungsnamen*, p. 46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁸ For a full discussion, see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 292-331.

³⁹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History*, V.11, pp. 485-487.

⁴⁰ Walter Schlesinger, 'Das Frühmittelalter', in H. Patze and Walter Schlesinger (eds.), *Geschichte Thüringens I: Grundlagen und frühes Mittelalter* (Cologne and Graz: Böhlau, 1968), pp. 317-80 (p. 344); Ian Wood, 'An Absence of Saints? The Evidence for the Christianisation of Saxony', in P. Godman, J. Jarnut and P. Johanek (eds.), *Am Vorabend der*

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Kaiserkrönung: Das Epos "Karolus Magnus et Leo papa" und der Papstbesuch in Paderborn 799 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 335-352 (p. 342).

⁴¹ Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 177-184.

⁴² Willibald of Mainz, *The Life of St Boniface*, chapter 6, p. 45.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 125.

⁴⁵ I discuss this complex cartulary material at length in Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 359-366.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm Classen, *Die kirchliche Organisation Althessens im Mittelalter*, Schriften des Instituts für geschichtliche Landeskunde von Hessen und Nassau 8 (Marburg: Elwert, 1929), p. 192.

⁴⁷ H. Göldner and K. Sippel, 'Spätmerowingische Gräber unter der Kirche von Niedenstein-Kirchberg, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis', *Archäologische Korrespondenzblatt*, vol. 11 (1981), pp. 65-77.

⁴⁸ Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*, p. 368.

⁴⁹ For full discussion, see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 341-349.

⁵⁰ Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, no. LXXXII, p. 152.

⁵¹ Ibid., no. LXXVI, p. 148.

⁵² See *ibid.*, no. LXXV, p. 146, concerning a priest with a sinful past whom Boniface is reluctant to remove from his parish lest, 'on account of the scarcity of priests, infants will die without the sacred water of rebirth'.

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⁵³ Michael Gockel, 'Die Franken in Althessen: interdisziplinäre Ansätze frühmittelalterlichen Geschichtsforschung', in *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, vol. 50 (2000), pp. 57-76; Classen, *Die kirchliche Organisation Althessens*.

⁵⁴ Demandt, *Geschichte des Landes Hessen*, p. 130.

⁵⁵ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity 200-1000 AD*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 418.