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Boniface in Hessia and Thuringia

Introduction

For much of Boniface's missionary career his main sphere of activity was in central Germany. From his arrival in Amöneburg in 721 to his death in 754 he was the dominant missionary in the area, working closely with both local elites and the more distant Pippinid and papal authorities. Hessia and Thuringia saw his earliest and most famous monastic foundations, and there he was able to exercise most autonomy, relatively free from interference by pre-existing or competing bishops. This makes the regions particularly valuable in understanding the aims and achievements of Boniface's activity on the Continent.

The historical sources for Boniface's mission in central Germany are sparse, fragmentary, and occasionally conflicting; using both hagiography and letters, however, it is possible to construct a fairly coherent picture of Boniface's activity in the area, and much can be gained from contextualising this evidence with the aid of archaeology. In what follows I shall first consider in more detail the nature of the two regions at the time of Boniface's arrival, considering their economic, political and religious landscapes, before I go on to examine the course of the Anglo-Saxon mission. This will be covered in four sections: first, Boniface's arrival, when he dealt with the pre-existing situation and laid the foundations for his work; second, consolidation, or the establishment of monasteries, bishoprics, and a basic parochial network; third, conversion, including the nature and challenges of Christianisation; and fourth, the final years of the mission, when it suffered serious setbacks due to political turbulence and

resistance from a hostile Frankish church.

Hessia and Thuringia before Boniface's arrival

To avoid confusion it is necessary to clarify the geographical limits of early medieval Hessia and Thuringia, as they do not exactly coincide with their modern equivalents. The 8th century term "Hessia" encompassed only the northern part of what is now the modern state of Hesse, and is more or less equivalent to the district now called *Althessen* ("Old Hesse"). Eighth-century Thuringia was also smaller than its modern namesake, being more or less restricted to the Thuringian Basin, bounded by the Thuringian Forest to the south, the Harz Mountains in the north, and the river Saale to the east. Between Hessia and Thuringia lay the broad, dense forest of Buchonia, which at the time was still largely unsettled.[1]

The two regions differ significantly in physical character and historical development. Although the Eder-Schwalm basin in central Hessia had seen continuous occupation and cultivation from prehistoric times, most of the region was still dominated by thickly forested, sparsely inhabited hills and river valleys. Hessia overall appears to have been an economically marginal region, despite its proximity to the Rhine and its function as part of a north-south

[1] Mathias Kälble, "Ethnogenese und Herzogtum Thüringen im Frankenreich (6.-9. Jahrhundert)," in *Die Frühzeit der Thüringer: Archäologie, Sprache, Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Castritius, Dieter Geuenich, and Matthias Werner, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 63 (Berlin: 2009), 344-45.

communications corridor between the Rhine-Main area and north-central Germany.[2] Archaeological evidence shows a conspicuous lack of such prestigious imported goods as are often found in furnished inhumations of the Rhineland and southern Germany. Culturally, too, Hessia was apparently removed from the Frankish heartlands. The custom of furnished burial that spread throughout Frankish, Alamannic, Bavarian, Thuringian, and Saxon territory from the late fourth century onwards appears to have been ignored by the Hessians, who continued to follow a burial rite, presumably some form of unfurnished cremation, that has left no trace in the archaeological record.[3]

In contrast, Thuringia, with its relatively extensive settled landscape, was more integrated into the economic and cultural trends of the surrounding areas. In part this was a legacy of the Thuringian kingdom, which had achieved a short-lived hegemony over much of Germany between the Danube and North Sea during the late 5th and early 6th centuries.[4] Following the conquest of this kingdom by the Franks in 531, Thuringia's loss of political importance is reflected in its archaeological record; even compared to Anglo-Saxon England, during the

[2] Hektor Amman, "Der hessische Raum in der mittelalterlichen Wirtschaft," *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 8 (1958): 42-43.

[3] John-Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death: Saint Boniface and the Conversion of Hessia, 721-54* (Turnhout: 2010), 138-39.

[4] Heike Grahn-Hoek, "Stamm und Reich der frühen Thüringer nach den Schriftquellen," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für thüringische Geschichte* 56 (2002): 49-60; Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 340-45.

seventh century it was marginal to supra-regional European exchange networks.[5] Yet it was never as marginal as Hessia. The Thuringian elite followed a typically Frankish custom of west-east furnished inhumation, and through the 7th century their material culture, as far as it survives in the archaeological evidence, is broadly similar to that of the neighbouring Rhineland.[6]

The lack of any written reference to Hessia before the 8th century means that we are unfortuntely ignorant of its political history. The abovementioned cultural distance from the Frankish mainstream need not have precluded some degree of Merovingian hegemony during the 7th century, but we cannot say how this was exercised, or by whom. We are better informed about Thuringia, which for a while from 640 enjoyed *de facto* independence under the rebellious

[5] Carl Pause, "Überregionaler Güteraustausch und Wirtschaft bei den Thüringern der Merowingerzeit," *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 29 (2001): 30.

[6] Günter Behm-Blancke, *Gesellschaft und Kunst der Germanen: Die Thüringer und ihre Welt* (Dresden: 1973), 173; Claudia Theune, "Methodik der ethnische Deutung. Überlegungen zur Interpretation der Grabfunde aus dem thüringischen Siedlungsgebiet," in *Zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Archäologie des 4. bis 7. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Sebastian Brather (Berlin: 2008), 229-30; idem, "Signs and Symbols in Archaeological Material Finds," in *The Baiuvarii and Thuringi: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Janine Fries-Knoblach, Heiko Steuer, and John Hines (Woodbridge: 2014), 284; Markus C. Blaich, "Bermerkungen zu thüringischer Funden aus frühmittelalterlichen Gräbern im Rhein-Main-Gebiet," in *Die Frühzeit der Thüringer: Archäologie, Sprache, Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Castritius, Dieter Geuenich, and Matthias Werner, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 63 (Berlin: 2009), 38.

Duke Radulf.[7] The Main river region to the south, beyond the Thuringian Forest, was ruled by another family of Frankish dukes based in Würzburg, who by the early 8th century had somehow extended their authority over Thuringia as well, whether through a marriage alliance or through violence.[8] The last of these dukes, Heden, in addition to his family inheritance near Würzburg, had acquired or established substantial personal estates in Thuringia itself.[9]

The late 7th century saw political developments in central Germany that would have a defining impact on the course of Boniface's mission a generation later, when he found it impossible to extend his authority beyond the limits of Frankish control. An impetus for these developments was the growing threat posed by a confederation of Saxon tribes to the north, who by the 690s were encroaching on the Frankish sphere of influence and threatening the borders of both Hessia and Thuringia.[10] The Franks reacted to this threat by investing considerable military resources in the borderlands. In Hessia they built large hilltop fortifications at Büraburg and Kesterburg, where extensive archaeological excavations have revealed the presence of mounted

[7] Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 352-55; Walter Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," in *Geschichte Thüringens, 1: Grundlagen und frühes Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Patze and Walter Schlesinger (Cologne: 1968), 337-38.

[8] Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 358-59; Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 340.

[9] Ibid., 338-39; Volker Schimpff and Claudia Theune, "Die Heden-Orte in Thüringen," *Concilium medium aevi* 11 (2008): 21-70.

[10] Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 151-52.

garrisons from the late 7th century onwards.[11] Excavations on a similar scale have yet to take place in Thuringia, but sufficient material has been found to prove the existence of 7th-century Frankish occupation at Hasenburg, Frauenberg, Hakenburg, and Monraburg. The forested region between the Harz and the upper Weser was further defended by strongholds at Bernshausen and Hünenburg.[12] South of the lower Helme was Pfingstberg, which was certainly occupied and possibly fortified by the early 8th century.[13] Across the river a linear earthwork known as the "Sachsgraben" runs north from near Martinsrieth several kilometres to the edge of the Harz

[11] See Walter Schlesinger, "Early medieval fortifications in Hesse: A general historical report," *World Archaeology* 7 (1976): 243-60, for an English-language summary of the Hessian evidence. The most recent comprehensive discussion of Büraburg is Thorsten Sonnemann, *Die Büraburg und das Fritzlar-Waberner Becken im frühen Mittelalter: Siedlungsarchäologische Untersuchungen zur Zentralort-Umfeld-Problematik* (Bonn: 2010).

[12] Volker Schimpff, "Sondershausen und das Wippergebiet im früheren Mittelalter -- einige zumeist namenkundliche Bermerkungen eines Archäologen," *Alt-Thüringen* 40 (2007): 297-98; idem, "Bemerkungen zum frühmittelalterlichen Hasenburgumland," *Alt-Thüringen* 41 (2008/9): 229-39; Heiko Steuer, "Die Herrschaftssitze der Thüringer," in *Die Frühzeit der Thüringer: Archäologie, Sprache, Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Castritius, Dieter Geuenich, and Matthias Werner, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 63 (Berlin: 2009), 213; Wolfgang Timpel, "Franken: Neue Herren in Thüringen," in *Ur- und frühgeschichte Thüringens*, ed. Sigrid Dusek (Stuttgart: 1999), 172.

[13] Michael Gockel, *Die deutsche Königspfalzen. Band 2: Thüringen. Vierte Lieferung: Saalfeld (Schluß) -- Tilleda (Anfang)* (Göttingen: 1998), 555-56.

mountains, and is judged by Gockel to have been a Saxon fortification contemporary with the Frankish occupation of Pfingstberg.[14] As is clear from Figure 1, the overall result was a coherent network of fortified garrisons that served to protect the northern borderlands. [INSERT ILLUSTRATION 1 HERE]

It is unclear who was directly responsible for establishing these strongholds. The ultimate authority probably came from Pippin of Herstal, who established himself as the dominant power in Frankish politics with his victory at Tertry in 687. In the wake of this success, a programme to consolidate the Austrasian borders in the 690s would have made sense. In Thuringia the authority likely devolved upon Duke Heden, who, as we shall see, owned property at the foot of Monraburg that could have helped provision its garrison. We should also consider the possibility that the newly established strongholds served functions beyond border defence, namely to watch over the Frankish colonisation of surrounding forest land, or to impose Pippinid or ducal authority on local populations who may not have welcomed it.[15]

The imposition of authority must have been of particular concern to Duke Heden. According to hagiographical tradition from later in the 8th century, his rule in Thuringia was based on the tyrannical and violent suppression of the local leadership, one result of which was

[14] Ibid., 592.

[15] Schimpff, "Bemerkungen," 236; idem, "Sondershausen," 298; Eike Gringmuth-Dallmer, "Archäologische Funde, schriftliche Überlieferung, Ortsnamen und Siedlungsformen als Quellen zur thüringischen Siedlungsgeschichte," *Alt-Thüringen* 26 (1991): 233-38.

that part of the Thuringian population voluntarily "subjected itself to the rule of the Saxons".[16] This report may relate to the region north of the Harz Mountains and the lower Unstrut, beyond the line of Frankish fortifications, where the archaeological record shows a pronounced shift from Frankish to Saxon influence in the late 7th century. In the middle of the 8th century its inhabitants were regarded as Saxons, and referred to as Northswabians; henceforth the lower Unstrut became the border between Thuringia and Saxony.[17] We should not treat the river too strictly as a cultural or religious boundary, however. Despite the line of Frankish fortifications, Thuringia south of the Unstrut and west of the Saale has revealed ample archaeological evidence more typical of Saxon and Slavic areas, pointing towards a mixed cultural zone.[18] Historical and place-name evidence also points towards the existence of ethnic sub-groups who maintained a

[16] "cetera que manebat residua populi turba Saxonum se subiecerat principatu." Willibald, VB, c. 6, 32-33. In Willibald's account Heden is condemned with a certain Theotbald, but it is unclear whether the latter was a partner or a predecessor of Heden. He is probably to be identified with a Duke Theobald commemorated in an inscription from a church near Aschaffenburg. See the comments of Levison in Willibald, *VB,* p. 32, n. 4, and for further discussion see Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 339-41.

[17] Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 374-78; Berthold Schmidt, "Stand und Aufgaben der Frühgeschichtsforschung im Mittelelbe-Saale-Gebiet," in *Jahresschrift für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte* 65 (1982): 163; Schimpff, "Sondershausen," 298-99.

[18] Wolfgang Timpel, "Ein Gräberfeld des 8. bis 11. Jahrhunderts von Rohnstedt, Kyffhäuserkreis," *Alt-Thüringen* 36 (2003): 153-4; Heinrich Rempel, "Zur Ostgrenze des fränkischen Reiches Thüringer Anteils," *Alt-Thüringen* 6 (1962/63): 508.

distinct identity within Thuringia. Of particular importance was a population of Angles who may have left their mark on Thuringian legal tradition as well as on the toponymic landscape,[19] and a group of Bructeri who perhaps migrated to Thuringia after the Saxon conquest of their homeland in the 690s.[20]

At some point between 716 and 719 Heden was forcibly driven out of Würzburg by the

[19] Behm-Blancke, *Gesellschaft*, 65-71. The Engilin district, first named in the 8th century, indicates Anglian settlement in north-eastern Thuringia, and is supported by the village names of Kirch-, Wester-, Holz, and Feldengel. Günter Neumann, "Engilin," in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd ed., vol. 7 (Berlin: 1989), 288-89. On the legal tradition, see Heike Grahn-Hoek, "Das Recht der Thüringer und die Frage ihrer ethnischen Identität. Mit einer Bemerkung zur Entstehung von Begriff und Institution 'Adel'," in *Die Frühzeit der Thüringer: Archäologie, Sprache, Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Castritius, Dieter Geuenich, and Matthias Werner, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 63 (Berlin: 2009), 446-47; idem, "The Thuringi, the Peculiarities of Their Law, and Their Legal Relations to the *gentes* of Their Time, Chiefly According to the *Lex (Angliorum et Werinorum hoc est) Thuringorum* and the Other *leges barbarorum* of the Early Middle Ages," in *The Baiuvarii and Thuringi: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Janine Fries-Knoblach, Heiko Steuer, and John Hines, (Woodbridge: 2014), 298.

[20] The name of the Bructeri is preserved in the villages of Großbrüchter and Kleinbrüchter in northern Thuringia, south of the Wipper. Schimpff, "Sondershausen," 294, n. 10.

populus orientalum Francorum, and ducal rule in Thuringia came to an end.[21] Thereafter the region was controlled by a small group of *adalingi*, independent-minded local nobles who appear to have recognized the authority of Pippin's son Charles Martel, newly victorious in the Frankish civil wars, in return for a certain degree of autonomy.[22] Chief among them were the five men named in a contemporary papal letter as Asulfus, Godolaus, Wilareus, Gundhareus, and Aluoldus, with all of whom Boniface dealt directly when he came to Thuringia in 723.[23] We should probably also identify them with the unnamed *principes* whom Boniface met on his earlier visit of 719.[24] The very silence of the Carolingian annals regarding Thuringia during these years implies that Charles Martel abstained from interfering in local affairs, his primary concern being the maintenance of the Saxon frontier. Between 719 and 729 he campaigned against the Saxons at least four times, which indicates a prolonged period of instability in the borderlands.[25]

The religious background to these political events, as far as we can understand it, was no

[21] Wilhelm Levison (ed.), *Passio Kiliani martyris Wirziburgensis*, MGH SS rer. Merov. 5 (Hanover: 1910), c. 14, 727. Heden was still in Würzburg in April of 716, when he and his wife granted Willibrord property at Hammelburg: Georg Heinrich Pertz (ed.), *Chronica aevi Suevici*, MGH SS 23 (Hanover: 1874), 60. Willibald does not mention Boniface encountering Heden on his first journey to Thuringia in 719, so he must have been removed by this time.

[22] Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 386-87; Grahn-Hoek, "The Thuringi," 298 and 305.

[23] Tangl 19, p. 33.

[24] Willibald, *VB* c. 5, p. 23.

[25] Johann Friedrich Böhmer and Engelbert Mühlbacher, *Regesta imperii, I: Die Regesten des Kaiserreichs unter den Karolingern, 751-918* (Innsbruck: 1908), 13-16.

less complex. The presence of churches in the hillforts of Büraburg and Kesterburg makes clear that the Franks representing Pippinid military interests in Hessia were Christian, and it is reasonable to suppose that Christianity had also begun to spread to some degree among the Hessian population.[26] Precisely what form this "Christianity" took is less obvious than we might think. The *Vita Bonifatii* preserves the tradition that the two local rulers of Amöneburg, immediately south of Hessia, professed Christianity while maintaining idol-worship. The author goes on to state that the Hessians as a whole were "erring in pagan rites" until Boniface freed them "from the captivity of demons".[27] These typical hagiographical clichés, written more than thirty years after the event, had some basis in reality, but the contemporary letters also show that, even for Boniface, the line between "Christian" and "pagan" was not always so easy to draw.[28]

Thuringia provides clearer evidence for a strong Christian presence prior to Boniface's arrival. We know that the Thuringian royal family of the early 6th century was thoroughly

[26] Theodor Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius und die christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: 1954), 141.

[27] Willibald, *VB,* c. 6, p. 27: "Similiter et iuxta fines Saxonum Hessorum populum paganicis adhuc ritibus oberrantem a demoniorum evangelica praedicando mandata captivitate liberavit."

[28] Alain Dierkens, "The Evidence of Archaeology," in *The Pagan Middle Ages*, ed. Ludo J. R. Milis, trans. Tanis Guest (Woodbridge: 1998), 55-56. The letters in question will be discussed below.

Christianized.[29] We can assume some continuity of the religion among the indigenous nobility, although the near-contemporary *Vita Arnulfi* claims that some of the Thuringian elite still practiced cremation "after the custom of the pagans" in the early 7th century.[30] Oral tradition preserved in the *Vita Bonifatii* recalled that the Thuringian royal line had been followed by a line of *religiosi duces* (probably including the rebellious Duke Radulf).[31] These 7th-century Frankish dukes may have been responsible for further spreading Christianity in Thuringia,[32] evidenced, for example, by the curious burial in Schlotheim of a man with a spear bearing strikingly Christian motifs.[33] If the famous carved stones of Hornshausen and Morsleben did indeed originally come from demolished 7th-century chancel screens, Christianity may have spread even beyond the

[29] Ian N. Wood, "Religion in Pre-Carolingian Thuringia and Bavaria," in *The Baiuvarii and Thuringi: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Janine Fries-Knoblach, Heiko Steuer, and John Hines (Woodbridge: 2014), 318.

[30] Bruno Krusch (ed.), *Vita Sancti Arnulfi*, MGH SS rer. Merov. 2 (Hanover: 1888), c. 12, 436: "more gentilium cadaver ignibus comburendum traderetur."

[31] Willibald, *VB*, c. 6, pp. 32-33.

[32] Kälble, "Ethnogenese," 365-71.

[33] Günther Behm-Blanke, "Das Priester- und Heiligengrab von Schlotheim: Zur Strategie und Mission der Franken in Nordthüringen," *Alt-Thüringen* 24 (1989): 199-219. The explicitly Christian character of the burial is clear, even if Behm-Blanke goes beyond the evidence in describing it as the grave of a venerated holy man.

Harz Mountains at this time.[34] Furthermore, Duke Heden, despite being remembered in Carolingian sources as a tyrant,[35] was an active supporter of the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord. In 704 he granted him property at three locations in Thuringia, including two south of Erfurt and a substantial estate near the abovementioned stronghold of Monraburg. These properties were doubtless intended to support a community of missionaries.[36]

Whether any form of organized church existed is less certain. Aside from Büraburg,

[34] Kurt Böhner, "Die Reliefplatten von Hornhausen," *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums* 23/24 (1976/77): 89-138; Babette Ludowici, "Ein frühmittelalterlicher Bildstein aus der Wüstung Morsleben bei Quedlingburg," *Germania* 81 (2003): 567-74; Heiko Steuer, "Thuringians and Bavarians -- Location in Space and Time and Social Relations," in *The Baiuvarii and Thuringi: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Janine Fries-Knoblach, Heiko Steuer, and John Hines (Woodbridge: 2014), 138; Karen Høilund Nielsen, "Lundeborg-Gispersleben: Connexions between Southern Scandinavia in the Post-Roman Period," in *Die Frühzeit der Thüringer: Archäologie, Sprache, Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Castritius, Dieter Geuenich, and Matthias Werner, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 63 (Berlin: 2009), 25-28.

[35] Ian N. Wood, "Before or After Mission: Social Relations across the Middle and Lower Rhine in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," in *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham (Leiden: 2000), 156-57; idem, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400-1050* (Harlow: 2001), 161.

[36] Pertz (ed.), *Chronica aevi Suevici*, 55-56. For discussion, see Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 342-44.

physical remains of pre-Bonifatian churches have proved elusive.[37] There is little archaeological evidence for pre-Bonifatian Thuringian church foundations by secular authority, whether Pippinid, ducal, or local, even if we assume that at least a small number of such foundations existed.[38] The only exception is the recent discovery of two probable late 7th-century funerary chapels near Sondershausen, similar in form to contemporary Bavarian examples.[39] Despite the martyrdom of Kilian at Würzburg *c*.680, there is no firm evidence of Irish missionary activity in this part of Germany,[40] and if Willibrord's missionaries in Thuringia built chapels and churches,

[37] Helge Wittmann, "Zu den Anfängen des Niederkirchenwesens in Thüringen," *Alt-Thüringen* 43 (2012/13): 26; Matthias Rupp and Sandra Bock, "St. Michael, Stadt Jena -- neue Ergebnisse zu Baugeschichte, Archäologie und Anthropologie," *Alt-Thüringen* 43 (2012/13): 225.

[38] Wittmann, "Zu den Anfängen," 23-26. See Hans K. Schulze, "Die Entwicklung der thüringischen Pfarrorganisation im Mittelalter," *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte* 103 (1967): 32-70; Rainer Müller, "Mittelalterliche Kirchenbau in Thüringen: ein Überblick," *Alt-Thüringen* 43 (2012/13): 33-44.

[39] Diethard Walther, 'Neue Ausgrabungsergebnisse zu frühmittelalterlichen Kirchen in Nordthüringen', *Alt-Thüringen* 43 (2012/13), 78-80.

[40] Schulze, "Die Entwicklung," 32; Matthias Werner, "Iren und Angelsachsen in Mitteldeutschland: Zur vorbonifatianischen Mission in Hessen und Thüringen," in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, ed. Heinz Löwe, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: 1982), 275-77 and 280-82.

no physical evidence of them survives.[41]

The Frankish church did not trouble itself with systematically evangelising the region, even though in the 9th century the Frankish churches of Châlons-en-Champagne and Reims held property in northern Thuringia, an arrangement that Flodoard of Reims claims dated from the 7th century.[42] It is also very possible that the bishops of Trier and Mainz had interests in Hessia and Thuringia; the territory of the former included the Lahn valley, which stretched from the Rhine to the border of Hessia,[43] while the latter's authority overlapped in part with that of the duke of Würzburg.[44] Heinrich Büttner has discussed some faint evidence that the Alsatian monastery of Wissembourg, closely connected to Willibrord's monastery at Echternach, had a role in founding

[41] In 718/19 Duke Heden and his wife granted Willibrord an estate at Hammelburg, south of the Thuringian Forest, explicitly for the construction of a monastery, but whether or not this programme was ever completed is unknown. See Pertz (ed.), *Chronica aevi Suevici*, 60.

[42] Werner, "Iren und Angelsachsen," 279; Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 342; Heinrich Büttner, "Frühes fränkisches Christentum am Mittelrhein," *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 3 (1951): 48.

[43] Wilhelm Classen, *Die kirchliche Organisation Althessens im Mittelalter* (Marburg: 1929), 3-5; Karl Heinemeyer, "Die Missionierung Hessens," in *Hessen im Frühmittelalter: Archäologie und Kunst*, ed. Helmut Roth and Egon Wamers (Sigmaringen: 1984), 48.

[44] This is to judge from an inscription from a church near Aschaffenburg which records the dedication of the church by Bishop Regibert of Mainz *temporibus Theobaldi ducis*, who is probably to be identified with the Theotbald named in the *Vita Bonifatii* as Heden's associate in Thuringia. See the comments of Tangl in Willibald, *VB*, p. 32, n. 4.

a monastery of St Peter in Erfurt at the start of the 8th century.[45]

Overall, however, it seems that when Boniface arrived in Hessia and Thuringia he found a Christian community that was fragmented and uncoordinated, lacking episcopal direction or strong leadership, and largely failing to reach what he considered to be the "proper" standards of Christian belief and behaviour. There may have been a number of ecclesiastical parties with properties and interests in the region, including Willibrord and the Frankish bishoprics of Mainz, Trier, and Reims. The situation was complicated by the chronically unstable political situation of the borderlands,[46] and a population that exhibited a high degree of cultural and ethnic variability. With this in mind, we can now consider the course of Boniface's mission in central Germany.

Arrival

The basic narrative of Boniface's arrival in central Germany can be reconstructed from the hagiography and surviving letters without too much difficulty.[47] His first visit to Thuringia was in the summer of 719, when he arrived from Rome with a papal letter of support. The letter contained no specific mandate beyond the preaching of salvation to "any peoples detained in the

[45] Büttner, "Frühes fränkisches Christentum," 47-48.

[46] Liudger makes a great deal of the poor state of Thuringia upon Boniface's arrival: "Nam tota illa regio, in confinio paganorum rebellium posita, illo tempore incensa erat et hostili manu vastata." Liudger, *VG,* pp. 63-79 (c. 2, 69).

[47] For concise narrative accounts, see Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius*, 113-19 and 139-56; Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 189-206; Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 344-50.

error of faithlessness" in a manner appropriate to their "untutored minds", with a further insistance that Boniface follow orthodox formulas and report any problems to Rome.[48] He also bore a letter of recommendation from his direct superior in Wessex, Bishop Daniel of Winchester, but there is no evidence that he had obtained a similar letter from Willibrord in Frisia. This is curious, given that he must have known that Willibrord had initiated a Thuringian mission some fifteen years earlier, and had visited Duke Heden at Hammelburg in 716. No mention of Willibrord's mission is made by Willibald, who speaks vaguely of Boniface meeting with Thuringian church leaders (*senatores*) and the abovementioned secular *principes*, most of whom had been "led astray by crooked teachers".[49] He found the local priests themselves to be a mixed bag, although the worst charge laid against them at this point is that some had forsaken their vows of chastity.[50]

His first visit to Thuringia could only have lasted a few weeks, since by the end of the year Boniface was back in Frisia by the side of Willibrord. They worked together for a little over two years, from late 719 to early 721, before Boniface returned to central Germany. This time he came first to Amöneburg, which stands in a fertile basin between the Lahn valley and the south-west corner of Hessia. As in Thuringia, he found the local secular leaders, a pair of brothers named Dettic and Deorulf, to be poor representatives of Christianity, and he wasted no time correcting their idol-worship and building a chapel.[51] From Amöneburg he ventured further

[48] Tangl, ep. 12, 17-18.

[49] Willibald, *VB*, c. 5, p. 23: "pravis seducti doctoribus."

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., c. 6, pp. 26-7.

north, as Willibald describes: "up to the border of the Saxons, by preaching the evangelical commands he liberated from the captivity of demons the population of the Hessians, who were up to that point erring in pagan rites".[52]

In contrast to Thuringia, Willibald makes no mention of Boniface meeting with church leaders in Hessia, even though, as discussed above, we know that there was a pre-existing Frankish church at Büraburg. The Hessians, indeed, are portrayed in the *vita* as archetypal pagans, virtually untouched by Christianity, given to sacrificing at trees and springs, to observing auspices and making divinations, to performing magic and incantations, and so on.[53] Such was the standard list of "pagan" customs that we find frequently in contemporary Christian literature, letters, and church council records.[54] It is no surprise, therefore, that Hessia is the setting for the major dramatic set-piece of the *Vita Bonifatii*, when Boniface fells the pagan "Oak of Jupiter" near Geismar.[55] He had some locals supporting him in this act, but the clear implication is that the Christians in question had been baptized and confirmed by him, not that they existed before he arrived. Willibald does not mention that barely a kilometer to the south of Geismar was the hillfort of Büraburg, which excavations have proved was occupied by a Frankish mounted

[52] Ibid., p. 27: "iuxta fines Saxonum Hessorum populum paganicis adhuc ritibus oberrantem a demoniorum evangelica praedicando mandata captivitate liberavit."

[53] Ibid., p. 31.

[54] James Palmer, "Defining paganism in the Carolingian world," *Early Medieval Europe* 15(4) (2007): 402-25; Jonathan Couser, "Inventing paganism in eighth-century Bavaria," *Early Medieval Europe* 18(1) (2010): 26-42.

[55] Willibald, *VB*, c. 6, 31-32.

garrison at this time. We do not know who was in charge of the garrison, but it is highly likely that Boniface, who carried a letter of support from Charles Martel, would have been able to count on their support.[56] The archaeological evidence thus offers a valuable corrective to the hagiographical account, and suggests that the felling of the oak at Geismar, far from being a daring act in the face of overwhelming hostility, was strategically planned and carefully executed under an umbrella of Frankish military protection.

After the success at Geismar, at some point in 723, Boniface headed through the forest of Buchonia to Thuringia. There he met with the local *seniores* and *principes*, and drove out a group of four morally corrupt priests.[57] By this time he had been ordained bishop by Gregory in Rome, and had also acquired from the pope the abovementioned letter addressed to the five *vires magnifices*, in which Gregory praised them for retaining their Christian faith when other Thuringians had renounced it under pagan pressure.[58] This is most likely an allusion to those "Thuringians" north of the Harz and lower Unstrut who had accepted Saxon overlordship. The four priests expelled by Boniface are generally interpreted in modern scholarship as a remnant of Willibrord's missionary party. This is most clearly indicated by their Anglo-Saxon names: Torchtwine, Berehthere, Eanbercht, and Hunraed.[59] That Willibald implicitly associates them with the tyrannical rule of Heden, who we know supported Willibrord's mission, also points in

[56] Lutz E. von Padberg, *Bonifatius: Missionar und Reformer* (Munich: 2003), 40-41.

[57] Ibid., pp. 32-3.

[58] Tangl, 19, p. 33.

[59] Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 344.

the same direction.[60] The accusations of fornication, adultery, and heresy levelled at them may or may not have had a basis in fact.[61] More telling is the claim that they "incited an exceedingly powerful struggle against the man of God",[62] which, together with the preservation of their names, implies that the affair was of considerable significance at the time.[63] Willibald's wording also suggests that they were able to enlist substantial support in their opposition to Boniface.

At this point it is worth considering further Willibald's conspicuous silence about Willibrord's mission in Thuringia. We might have expected Boniface, as a former associate of Willibrord, to have built directly on the previous Anglo-Saxon mission's foundations, which in practical terms would mean Willibrord giving him the estates he had received from Heden in 704. As Matthias Werner has observed, however, Willibrord declined to do this; on the contrary, in 726 he transferred ownership of his Thuringian estate at Arnstadt, and probably also his two other estates in the region, to his own foundation of Echternach, thus ensuring that they would not fall under Boniface's control.[64] The political background of Heden's recent downfall may also have been significant, for the unpopular duke had been Willibrord's sponsor, whereas Boniface from the outset of his mission had aligned himself with the very Thuringian nobles whom Heden had oppressed. Given as well that Boniface answered directly to the pope, whereas Willibrord's followers were loyal to their own master in distant Frisia, there may have been

[60] Willibald, *VB*, c. 6, p. 33.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid: "valdissimum adversus hominem Dei excitaverunt conflictum."

[63] Werner, "Iren und Angelsachsen," 286.

[64] Ibid., 288.

considerable tension between rival groups of missionaries.[65]

Boniface had the stronger hand, however, and the result was that at least four of Willibrord's former missionaries were driven out. At the same time Boniface was facing the opposition of an unnamed bishop alluded to in a papal letter of 4 December 724. This bishop had "through a certain idleness" neglected to spread the Word in Germania, and was claiming control of part of Boniface's mission field.[66] Pope Gregory promised to write to Charles Martel and ask him to intervene on Boniface's behalf. The identity of this bishop is unclear; the usual assumption is that he was Gerold of Mainz, who may have been claiming Hessia or Thuringia as part of his diocese.[67] A similar case could be made for Milo of Trier, who was certainly close to Charles Martel, although he may only recently have been ordained bishop.[68] He simultaneously

[65] Ibid., 290-91.

[66] Tangl 24, p. 42: "desidia quadam in eadem gente praedicationis verbum disseminare neglexerat et nunc sibi partem quasi in parrochiam defendit."

[67] Ibid., n. 3; Karl Hauck, *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: 1914), 471; Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius*, 149; Eugen Ewig, "Milo et eiusmodi similes," in *Sankt Bonifatius Gedenkgabe zum zwölfhundertsten Todestag*, ed. Cuno Raabe et al. (Fulda: 1954), 418-19, reprinted in Eugen Ewig, *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien: Gesämmelte Schriften (1952-1973)* (Munich: 1979), 189-219; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: 1983), 151-52.

[68] Classen, *Die kirchliche Organisation*, 4. Milo was ordained bishop of Trier between 717 and 722. See Ewig, "Milo et eiusmodi similes," 413-18, who disagrees with the identification of the unnamed bishop as Milo.

held the bishopric of Reims, which, as already mentioned, perhaps owned property in northern Thuringia at this time.[69] A third possibility, given the above discussion, is Willibrord. We know that Willibrord had an active mission in Thuringia, that he held property there that he apparently kept from Boniface, and that they were not as friendly as Willibald would have us think.[70] The pope also states that Boniface's antagonist was claiming rights over new converts *quasi in parrochiam*, "as though in [his own] diocese",[71] which may be an allusion to the clear physical separation of Thuringia from Willibrord's Frisian see. Finally, Willibrord was also close to Charles Martel,[72] who would therefore have been well placed to mediate the dispute. This suggestion is perfectly plausible provided that we do not allow ourselves to be misled by the hagiographical tradition, which harmonizes the relationship between Willibrord and Boniface.

Unfortunately the hagiography is sufficiently vague, and the letter corpus sufficiently laconic, that we cannot say for sure who was opposing Boniface at the start of his mission. The later fame and universal veneration of Boniface the Martyr should not cause us to forget that in the 720s his closest friends were in Wessex and Kent on the one hand, and Rome on the other. Charles Martel's support was nominal, apparently not extending beyond a letter of protection; there is no mention of Pippinid material support at this stage.[73] The survival of Boniface's

[69] Werner, "Iren und Angelsachsen," 279; Schlesinger, "Das Frühmittelalter," 342; Büttner, "Frühes fränkisches Christentum," 48.

[70] Willibald, *VB* c. 5, pp. 24-26; Werner, "Iren und Angelsachsen," 290-96.

[71] Tangl 24, p. 42.

[72] Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow: 2000), 127.

[73] Tangl 22, pp. 37-38.

embryonic mission therefore depended on winning the trust and material support of regional landowners. For their part, Hessian and Thuringian nobles may have seen the appeal in patronising a foreign holy man who had relatively little attachment to the Frankish court or church.

These local partnerships were successful enough that Boniface received "modest places and estates" for the building of churches, as the late eighth-century *Vita Gregorii* puts it,[74] while Otloh, writing in the eleventh century but drawing on an older written text, names the first nobles to donate land in Thuringia as Hugo and Altbolt.[75] The latter of these men is probably identical with the Aluoldus named in Pope Gregory's letter of 722.[76] But even as Boniface was laying his foundations in Hessia and Thuringia, turbulence continued on the frontier. Charles Martel campaigned against the rebelling Saxons in 724,[77] causing dangers and deprivations for the missionaries that left a powerful impression on Boniface's teenage acolyte, Gregory. Many years later Gregory recalled his experiences to his own disciple and biographer, Liudger, who as a missionary in Frisia and Saxony had also experienced the difficulties of mission.[78]

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[74] Liudger, *VG*, c. 3, p. 70: "Ibique coeperunt offerentibus propter amorem Dei et salutem animarum suarum modica loca territoriaque suscipere et in eis ecclesias construere."

[75] Otloh, *VB,* lib. 1, c. 24, p. 137.

[76] Ibid., n. 1. Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius*, 152.

[77] Bruno Krusch (ed.), *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri IV. cum Continuationibus*, MGH SS rer. Merov. 2 (Hanover: 1888), *Continuationes*, c. 11, 175.

[78] Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 105.

> [Gregory], however, having set out as one of God's chosen, was not initiated through opulence and worldly delights, nor through safety and prosperity in the mortal life, but in hunger and nakedness and many labours. Through all of this [the missionaries] were drawn together to live by the work of their hands, and sometimes, when there were nearby attacks by the pagans, they and their people fled in fear for their lives to the city. There they dwelled in hunger and poverty for many days, until the citizens, having gathered their numbers, drove [the pagans] off again with a firm hand. Hence, because this conflict between pagans and Christians occurred in innumerable places, here and there a large part of those regions returned to wilderness.[79]

The "city" in question was probably one of the hillforts that guarded the northern frontiers of Hessia and Thuringia, and that were intended to serve as places of refuge for the local population in times of crisis. Büraburg would serve such a function during a Saxon attack on Fritzlar in 774,

[79] Liudger, *VG*, c. 2, p. 69: "Hic autem tantus profectus electorum Dei non est initiatus per opulentiam et mundanas delicias neque per securitatem et prosperitatem vitae mortalis, sed in fame et nuditate et laboribus multis; in quibus omnibus et opere manuum vivere cogebantur et nonnumquam vicinam paganorum persecutionem ob metum mortis simul cum populo suo fugere ad civitatem ibique in arto pane et angustiis per dies plures habitare, donec collecta multitudine sua cives manu validiore eos iterum effugarent. Hoc ergo certamen inter paganos et christianos quoniam per innumeras vices gerebatur, idcirco hinc et inde magna pars regionum illarum redacta erat in solitudinem." English translations here and throughout the chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

as vividly described by Lupus of Ferrières.[80] Conflicts that hagiographers saw in exclusively religious terms, of course, in reality were just as much political; aggressive raiding of the borderlands was a basic political tactic of a warlike society. But whatever the causes, the result was the economic degrading of a wide swathe of territory and the traumatisation of its people.[81]

Consolidation

At the end of 724, the pope wrote to bolster Boniface's courage after a difficult year: "Let no threats frighten you," he wrote, "no terrors bring you down."[82] For the next few years the borderlands appear to have been at peace, and having secured an economic base for the mission, Boniface set about building up his community of missionaries. Otloh provides a list of the foremost figures who joined Boniface over the years: Burchard (later bishop of Würzburg); Lul (Boniface's successor as bishop of Mainz); Willibald (later bishop of Eichstätt); Wynnebald (later abbot of Heidenheim); Witta (later bishop of Büraburg); Gregory (later abbot of Utrecht); Cynehild and Berthgyth (both established as teachers in Thuringia); Walpurga (later abbess of Heidenheim); Tecla (later abbess of Kitzingen); Cynetrud (later active in Bavaria); and Leoba (later abbess of Tauberbischofsheim).[83] The close-knit nature of this group is shown particularly

[80] Lupus of Ferrières, *Vita Wigberti abbatis Frideslariensis*, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH SS 15.1 (Hanover: 1887), 36-43 (cc. 13-18, 41-42)

[81] Willibald, *VB*, c. 6, p. 33, also describes the extreme poverty of the early mission in Thuringia.

[82] Tangl 24, p. 42: "Nec minae terreant nec deiciant terrores."

[83] Otloh, *VB*, lib. 1, c. 25, p. 138.

in their family connections. Willibald, Wynnebald, and Walpurga were siblings; Cynehild was the mother of Berthgyth and the maternal aunt of Lul; and Leoba was a relative of Boniface. Gregory is conspicuous by being the sole non-Anglo-Saxon. Important figures missing from the list are Sturm, the later abbot of Fulda, a Bavarian by birth; Wigbert, sometime abbot of Fritzlar and Ohrdruf; Eoban, Boniface's messenger and companion, who died with him in Frisia; and Hygeburg, a nun of Heidenheim who wrote biographies of her relatives Willibald and Wynnebald.

The remainder of the 720s and 730s Boniface devoted to his work in Hessia and Thuringia, with a known journey to Rome via Bavaria in 737 to 738, and an attempt to evangelize parts of Saxony from 738.[84] His first monastic foundations were at Fritzlar in Hessia in 723, and Ohrdruf in Thuringia shortly thereafter.[85] In its early years the church of Fritzlar was presided over by the priest Wigbert, among whose charges was the young oblate Sturm.[86] In 732, when Boniface was made archbishop, the church at Fritzlar appears to have been rebuilt, and perhaps only at this point was it formally constituted as a monastery with Wigbert as abbot.[87] Although the evidence is uncertain, Boniface may also have established another community at

[84] See John-Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 206-25.

[85] Willibald, *VB*, c. 6, pp. 33-34. Willibald places Fritzlar's foundation after Boniface's ordination as bishop, but it was probably founded by 723. For discussion, see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 200-03.

[86] Eigil, *VS* , c. 2, p. 366.

[87] For full discussion, see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 205-06.

nearby Büraburg under a disciple named Humbert, who was followed as abbot by Witta.[88] According to Otloh, the land for the monastery at Ohrdruf in Thuringia was granted by the abovenamed nobleman Hugo, and the community may have become known especially as a place of education.[89] Wigbert, abbot of Fritzlar, was appointed over Ohrdruf for a time.[90] We also know that Wynnebald, upon joining the mission in 738, was given seven unnamed churches to administer somewhere in Thuringia.[91]

This phase of the mission must have seen the gradual accumulation of property, the training of the next generation of monks and nuns, and the establishment of a basic parochial system. We can get some idea of the property held by Boniface from an early 9th-century document known as the *Breviarium Sancti Lulli*, a summary of estates held by Boniface's successor, Lul.[92] Some of the estates had been granted to Lul by Charlemagne, and some he had acquired by donations from private individuals, but a large proportion of them must have been

[88] Ibid., 203-05.

[89] This is assuming that Cynehild and Berthgyth, when they were established as teachers in Thuringia, came to Ohrdruf. The same is true for Lul, who requested of Boniface that he be allowed to remain in Thuringia to continue his education. Tangl (ed.), *Die Briefe*, ep. 103, 226.

[90] Lupus of Ferrières, *Vita Wigberti*, c. 6, 40.

[91] Hygeburg, *Vita Wynnebaldi*, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH SS 15.1 (Hanover: 1887), 106-17, (c. 4, p. 109).

[92] Hans Weirich (ed.), *Urkundenbuch der Reichsabtei Hersfeld* (Marburg: 1936), no. 38, 68-74.

inherited directly from Boniface.[93] At Ohrdruf, for example, Lul owned eight *hubae* of land in 775,[94] while at nearby Sülzenbrücken he owned forty-two; in both places stood churches founded by Boniface. The overall distribution of properties shown on Figure 2 suggests that Boniface had strong support in central Hessia as well as in south-west and north-east Thuringia, but there is a conspicuous void in the immediate environs of Erfurt and east of the river Gera around Weimar, despite these being heavily settled districts in the 8th century. This may be symptomatic of political factions among the Thuringian nobility, as a result of which Boniface found strong support in some areas, and ambivalence or hostility in others. [INSERT ILLUSTRATION 2 HERE]

This accumulation of property allowed the construction of parish churches. Little direct evidence of these remains, although we can see traces of Bonifatian parochial structures fossilized within the later medieval church landscapes of Hessia and Thuringia.[95] By 741 Boniface felt ready to found his first bishoprics at Büraburg in Hessia, Erfurt in Thuringia, and Würzburg south of the Thuringian Forest, as he wrote in a letter to Pope Zacharias.[96] To preside

[93] For a close analysis of the document's structure, see Josef Hörle, "*Breviarium sancti Lulli*: Gestalt und Inhalt," *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 12 (1960): esp. 19-23.

[94] A *huba* was more or less equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon hide, being a unit of land farmed by a single peasant household. See Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Columbia: 1968), 29.

[95] For the Hessian evidence, see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 331-41.

[96] Tangl 50, p. 81.

over Büraburg he chose Witta, whose papal letter of confirmation survives.[97] In Würzburg, according to the *Vita Bonifatii*, Boniface installed Burchard.[98] There is no record of who was installed at Erfurt. It was possibly Wynnebald's brother Willibald, who was ordained bishop by Boniface, Witta and Burchard at Sülzenbrücken, 14 km south-west of Erfurt, in October 741.[99]

In 744 Boniface supervized the foundation of his best-known monastery, at Fulda. The site had been selected after extensive surveying by the Fritzlar-trained priest and monk Sturm, who had been living as a hermit at Hersfeld.[100] The forest of Buchonia was sparsely settled at this time, and formed a wide border zone between Hessia and Thuringia. The monastery was founded on a virgin site,[101] but its location at an important crossing point of the river Fulda

[97] Ibid., 52, pp. 92-94.

[98] Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, p. 44.

[99] Hygeburg, *VWill*, c. 5, p. 105. There has been historiographical dispute over whether Willibald was originally installed as bishop of Erfurt and later transferred to Eichstätt, or whether some other figure occupied the seat of Erfurt. For full discussion, see Alfred Wendehorst, *Die Bistümer der Kirchenprovinz Mainz: Das Bistum Eichstätt, I: Die Bischofsreihe bis 1535* (Berlin: 2006), 19-31.

[100] Eigil, *VS*, cc. 4-13, pp. 367-71.

[101] The buildings excavated at Fulda by Josef Vonderau in 1898/99, believed by him to be a Merovingian *curtis* pre-dating the monastery, have now been firmly established as tenth century in date. There is no evidence for settlement at Fulda prior to Sturm's selection of the site. See Thomas Kind, "Pfahlbauten und merowingischer *curtis* in Fulda?" in *Geschichte der Stadt*

shows that Boniface did not have a pure wilderness in mind when he sent Sturm to reconnoiter the region. The river offered relatively easy communication both south to the Main corridor and north to Saxony, while the trading road ran west to Mainz and east to Thuringia. Following navigable rivers and major routeways, Fulda was almost exactly 100 km from Fritzlar/Büraburg, Ohrdruf/Erfurt, and Würzburg, and only slightly more distant from Mainz. Early opposition to the foundation from local landowners was overcome with the help of Charles Martel's son Carloman. The building of the monastery took several years, and in 751 Boniface notified Zacharias of its existence "in the midst of the peoples to whom we preach".[102]

Conversion

By 751, in which year Wynnebald and Willibald also founded a new monastery at Heidenheim near Eichstätt, Boniface and his followers had been preaching in central Germany for almost 30 years. A handful of the surviving letters provide insight into the problems they encountered. For the most part these letters are papal responses to Boniface's queries, where the issue at stake is

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Fulda, Band 1: Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des alten Reiches, ed. Wolfgang Hamberger, Thomas Heiler, and Werner Kirchhoff (Fulda: 2009), 45-68 (62).

[102] Tangl 86, p. 193: "in medio nationum predicationis nostrae." On Fulda's founding and early years: Janneke Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744 -- c. 900* (Cambridge: 2012), 26-40; Karl Heinemeyer, "Die Gründung des Klosters Fulda im Rahmen der bonifatianischen Kirchenorganisation," *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 30 (1980), 10-29.

the orthodoxy of a particular custom without regard to its precise cultural context or geographical location. Corroborating evidence of similar customs, likewise shorn of their original context, can be found in the so-called *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*.[103] This list of non-Christian customs was probably compiled in connection with Boniface's church councils held in April 742 at an unknown location (the so-called *Concilium Germanicum*) and in March 743 at Les Estinnes.[104] Literary references to paganism in the hagiography, as already discussed, are particularly vague and clichéd. Despite the limitations of the evidence, however, we can catch furtive glimpses of the sorts of cultural practices encountered and condemned by Boniface and his followers.

Burial archaeology provides a useful starting point in understanding the background to the literary evidence, particularly when it comes to animal sacrifice associated with burials and

[103] Alfred Boretius (ed.), *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: 1883), 222-23. For discussion of the text, see Alain Dierkens, "Superstitions, christianisme et paganisme à la fin de l'époque merovingienne. A propos de l'*Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*," in *Magie, Sorcellerie, Parapsychologie*, ed. Herveé Hasquin (Brussels: 1984), 9-26.

[104] Tangl 56, pp. 98-102; also Alfred Boretius (ed.), *10: Karlmanni principis capitulare*, MGH Capit 1. (Hanover: 1883), 24-28. See Michael Glatthaar, *Bonifatius und das Sakrileg: zur politischen Dimension eines Rechtsbegriffs* (Frankfurt: 2004), 633-38. On the possibility that the *Indiculus* was originally compiled at Utrecht, see Marco Mostert, "Communicating the faith. The circle of Boniface, Germanic vernaculars, and Frisian and Saxon converts," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 70 (2013): 120-22.

house building. In the north of Thuringia burial customs involving animal slaughter continued into the early 8th century. Around the time of Willibrord's mission the community of Rohnstedt, 28 km north of Erfurt, inaugurated a new cemetery with the slaughter of a horse, cow, and two young pigs,[105] while nearby Urleben saw the construction of a mound for the cremation and burial of a high-status young woman, again with animal slaughter.[106] A similar early 8th-century mound cremation, a rite that was unusual in Thuringia but relatively common in Saxony until later in the century,[107] is also evidenced at Berlstedt in eastern Thuringia,[108] while horse burials are known from Urleben, Berlstedt, Muhlhausen, and various other sites especially in the north of Thuringia.[109] Similar mound burials are known from the fringes of Hessia, if not from Hessia itself; the second half of the 7th century saw a series of furnished mound cremations and inhumations in the Lahn valley at Gießen and Germershausen, as well as near Amöneburg and

[105] Timpel, "Ein Gräberfeld," 150-51.

[106] Idem, "Ein spätmerowingerzeitlicher Grabhügel von Urleben, Kr. Bad Langensalza," *Alt-Thüringen* 14 (1977): 275-77.

[107] Bonnie Effros, "*De partibus Saxoniae* and the Regulation of Mortuary Custom: A Carolingian Campaign of Christianization or the Suppression of Saxon Identity?" *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 75(2) (1997): 278-79.

[108] Timpel, "Ein spätmerowingerzeitlicher Grabhügel," 282.

[109] Ibid., 277; Peter Sachenbacher, Sabine Birkenbeil, Lutz Finke, Jutta Cott, and Grit Thomann, "Völkerwanderungszeitliche Gräber bei Mühlhausen/Thüringen. Zu einigen ausgewählten Problemen des Grabbrauchs und der Grabberaubung anhand neuer Gräber von Ammern, Lkr. Mühlhausen," *Alt-Thüringen* 27 (1993): 172.

Kesterburg.[110] Horse burials are unknown within Hessia, but appear on its northern border at Liebenau on the Diemel, and to the east at Eschwege-Niederhone on the Werra.[111]

There is little doubt that cremation was viewed by certain Franks as a pagan custom, being explicitly described as such in the 7th-century *Vita Arnulfi*, and outlawed in Saxony in the later 8th century.[112] That it was not discussed at the *Concilium Germanicum* in 742 suggests that it was not widely practiced in Boniface's missionary territory by that time. Mound burial, though not itself banned, also came to be associated with paganism in Saxony under Charlemagne, but there is no indication that prior to this it was viewed as a problematic burial tradition.[113] Something similar might be said of horse burial; we might assume that this was an obviously non-Christian custom, but from the 6th to the early 8th century horse burials were widespread especially in Thuringia, the upper Danube, and the middle Rhine, including from clearly Christian contexts. The vast majority were stallions between three and ten years old, associated with high-status male inhumations, and were probably regarded by contemporaries as a particularly extravagant form of grave furnishing.[114] It is possible that the slaughter of a horse at

[110] For further discussion see Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 143-51.

[111] Timpel, "Ein spätmerowingerzeitlicher Grabhügel," 286.

[112] Krusch (ed.), *Vita Sancti Arnulfi*, c. 12, 436; Alfred Boretius (ed.), *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: 1883), 68-70 (c. 7, 69).

[113] Ibid., c. 22, 69. Effros, "*De partibus Saxoniae*," 276 and 280-83.

[114] Judith Oexle, "Merowingerzeitliche Pferdebestattugen: Opfer oder Beigaben?" *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 18 (1984): 137-38; Heiko Steuer, "Pferdegräber," in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, vol. 27 (Berlin: 2004), 50-96 (56-57).

the graveside carried uncomfortable connotations of religious sacrifice,[115] and so was discouraged by Christian missionaries, but there is no condemnation of the custom in contemporary church documents. More probably it fell out of fashion in central Germany during the early Carolingian period, as did cremation and furnished burial generally.

The 8th-century church was relatively little concerned about burial ritual *per se*.[116] More problematic was the tradition of offering or consuming sacrificial foods, whether this took place as part of a burial rite or in other contexts.[117] As early as 726, for instance, Boniface raised the matter of animal sacrifice with Pope Gregory, specifically the question of whether making the sign of the cross over sacrificial food made it suitable for Christians to eat.[118] Within the first few years of the mission he also encountered priests who had sacrificed to Jupiter and eaten of the sacrificial meat, and a later letter suggests that the sacrificed animals in question had been goats and bulls.[119] Such sacrifices to pagan gods were clearly to be condemned, but other situations were less clear-cut. A common problem was the habit among new converts of making offerings

[115] Ibid., 150. The prevalence of younger stallions in Saxon horse burials lends weight to the argument that in Saxony, at least, the animals in question were dedicated to sacrifice from an early age. Torsten Capelle, *Die Sachsen des frühmittelalters* (Darmstadt: 1998), 129.

[116] Frederick Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, New York: 1990), 61-63.

[117] Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, Penn.: 2002), 185-86.

[118] Tangl 26, p. 46.

[119] See ibid., 28, p. 51, dated to *c*.732, and 80, pp. 174-75, dated to 748.

at the graves of dead relatives, a long-standing tradition that was singled out for condemnation at the *Concilium Germanicum*.[120] One solution was to allow offerings to the church in return for prayers on behalf of the deceased, but Pope Gregory ruled that this was permissible only if the dead person had been a good Christian.[121] Some converts transferred their traditional sacrificial customs directly from the old gods into the new Christian context, gathering on church grounds to sacrifice to the martyrs and confessors. No doubt they did this with the best of intentions, but they were derided as "foolish" at the *Concilium Germanicum*, and accused of angering the saints.[122]

From the fragmentary evidence it seems that the impulse to sacrifice, whether to appease ancestors, ensure the protection of a deity, or avert the malign influence of unseen forces,[123] was deeply embedded in the culture and world-view of the ordinary people, and this impulse could find expression in many ways. At one extreme was human sacrifice, which was apparently

[120] Ibid., 56, p. 100. Archaeological evidence for this custom was found in a sixth- to seventh-century cemetery in Weimar. Albert Genrich, "Archäologische Aspekte zur Christianisierung im nördlichen Niedersachsen," in *Die Eingliederung der Sachsen in das Frankenreich*, ed. Walther Lammers (Darmstadt: 1970), 481-82.

[121] Tangl 28, pp. 50-51.

[122] Ibid., 56, p. 100. The same custom appears in the *Indiculus*, c. 9, 223.

[123] Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: 1987), 118-19; Hilda Ellis Davidson, "Human Sacrifice in the Late Pagan Period in North Western Europe," in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in Northwestern Europe*, ed. Martin O. H. Carver (Woodbridge: 1992), 331.

practiced in contemporary Saxony, although there is no evidence that Boniface encountered it in Hessia or Thuringia.[124] Other forms of sacrifice were more innocuous. At the hillfort of Frauenberg in northern Thuringia, the site of a high-status Christian burial ground still in use when Boniface arrived, the enclosed cemetery and chapel were accessed via a small wooden entrance chamber, in the floor of which the builders had deliberately deposited bones from a deer, sheep, and dog, along with the limb of a horse.[125] Such ritual deposition of animal parts in building foundations, especially at thresholds, is archaeologically attested before and after the early medieval period in northern Europe; it was also practiced by the West Saxons in Boniface's time,[126] as he may have known.

Other traditions condemned by Boniface and his missionaries involved traditional

[124] On the archaeological and historical evidence for human sacrifice in the early medieval period, see Davidson, "Human Sacrifice". In 732 Boniface wrote to the pope asking him how to punish Christian merchants who were selling slaves to "pagans" for sacrifice: Tangl 28, p. 51. The same merchants were condemned by Carloman at the Council of Les Estinnes in 743: Ibid., 56, p. 102. No Frankish ruler explicitly outlawed human sacrifice itself until Charlemagne's *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, c. 10, 69.

[125] Walter, "Neue Ausgrabungensergebnisse," 82.

[126] See Martin Millett and Simon James, "Excavations at Cowdery's Down, Basingstoke, Hants, 1978-81," *Archaeological Journal* 140 (1983): 221. The construction of the defences of Carolingian Münster in the late eighth century, likely by Saxon labour, also involved the "foundation sacrifice" of a horse and a possibly live dog: Wilhelm Winkelmann, *Beiträge zur Frühgeschichte Westfalens. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Münster: 1984), 70-88.

festivals in honour of "Mercury" and "Jupiter" (the standard Latin rendering of the Germanic gods Wodan/Woden and Donar/Thunaer),[127] pig-feasts in February,[128] a large bonfire known as the *nodfyr*,[129] the communal procession of effigies around fields,[130] and so on. The effigies used in public processions were presumeably large in size, but smaller ones, perhaps resembling the poppets of later medieval witchcraft, could be made of bread or rags.[131] Some customs, such as reading auguries from birds and livestock,[132] inspecting animal brains,[133] prophesying at the hearth,[134] or uttering magical incantations,[135] may have been private or public in nature; others, like wearing protective amulets or knots,[136] or stuffing cots with magically protective straw and

[127] Boretius (ed.), *Indiculus*, c. 20, p. 223.

[128] Ibid., c. 3, p. 223.

[129] Ibid., c. 15, p. 223. This custom was also condemned at the *Concilium Germanicum*. Tangl 56, p. 100.

[130] Boretius (ed.), *Indiculus*, c. 28, p. 223.

[131] Ibid., cc. 26-27, p. 223.

[132] Ibid., c. 13, p. 223.

[133] Ibid., c. 16, p. 223.

[134] Ibid., c. 17, p. 223.

[135] Ibid, c. 12, p. 223. On the so-called Merseburg Incantations, see Patricia Giangrosso, "The Merseburg Charms," in *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep (London: 2001), 112-14.

[136] Boretius (ed.), *Indiculus*, c. 10, p. 223.

herbs,[137] were inherently personal.

How successful the missionaries were in challenging these customs is unknown. The widespread popularity of communal processions with religious icons or effigies into the later medieval period shows that, at least to some extent, the church was willing to adapt pre-existing customs to a Christian framework.[138] Yet the word-for-word reiteration of the decrees from the *Concilium Germanicum* by Charlemagne at the start of his reign indicates how little progress had been made in Boniface's lifetime.[139] Presumably it would have been easier to control the behaviour of converts in churches and adjoining cemeteries, which would have helped stop inappropriate sacrifices to the saints and the graveside lamentations referred to in the *Indiculus* as *dadsisas*,[140] but a mission that was chronically short of manpower could hardly monitor and correct the daily behaviour of an entire population.[141] There was also the problem that converts avoided the "official" churches in favour of worshipping at their traditional springs and groves, at crosses and chapels set up in the open countryside,[142] or even in their own homes with wandering holy men who did not answer to Boniface.[143]

[137] Ibid., c. 19, p. 223.

[138] Dierkens, "The Evidence of Archaeology," 55.

[139] Alfred Boretius (ed.), *Caroli Magni capitulare primum*, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: 1883), 44-46.

[140] Boretius (ed.), *Indiculus*, c. 2, 223.

[141] On the shortage of qualified priests, see Boniface's comments in Tangl 91, pp. 207-08.

[142] Ibid., 59, pp. 110-11.

[143] Ibid., 80, p. 175.

The final years

Keeping control of his central German mission field was a critical problem for Boniface during his later years. The high point of the mission was arguably the early 740s, when he founded his bishoprics in central Germany and was attempting to expand his mission into Saxony. This same activity, however, brought him into more frequent contact with members of the Austrasian church who shared neither his missionary zeal nor his monastic outlook.[144] One of his main rivals was Gerold of Mainz, who had inherited his see from his father and was closely connected to the Austrasian court. According to 11th-century tradition, Bishop Gerold accompanied Carloman when he invaded Saxony in 743 in retaliation for Saxon attacks on Thuringia. Gerold unfortunately was killed in battle,[145] although Carloman proceeded as far as the Saxon fortification on Heeseberg, which he occupied while accepting the surrender of the Saxon leader Theoderic.[146] The following year Carloman again entered Saxony, having strengthened his

[144] Ewig, "Milo et eiusmodi similes."

[145] Otloh, *VB*, c. 41, p. 155. The same story (which mistakenly calls Carloman "Charles") is told in the slightly earlier *Vita quarta Bonifatii*. Wilhelm Levison (ed.), *Vita quarta Bonifatii*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 57 (Hanover: 1905), 90-106 (c. 1, 90).

[146] Frederick Kurze (ed.), *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur annales Laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 6 (Hanover: 1895), 5.

military by exploiting church resources.[147] This time he was joined by his brother Pippin, and together they captured Theoderic a second time, taking hostages from the Saxons.[148] During this second campaign Gerold's son Gewilip, a former layman who had assumed the bishopric of Mainz, supposedly avenged his father's death by murdering his killer during a parley on the river Weser.[149] As a result Gewilip lost favour at court and was driven out of Mainz. He fled to Rome, presumeably to appeal against his expulsion, but Boniface's messenger overtook him and forewarned the pope about his arrival.[150]

These Frankish campaigns in Saxony indicate serious instability on the Hessian and Thuringian frontier in the mid-740s. This is corroborated by a report of Boniface to Pope Zacharias in 745 that part of his territory had suffered a devastating pagan invasion.[151] Gewilip's fortuitous removal at least allowed Boniface to occupy Mainz while he awaited his appointment to the city of Cologne, which he intended to make his own seat as archbishop of the new metropolitan see of Germania. He had in fact been promised Cologne by the Franks, and even

[147] This measure was announced at the Council of Les Estinnes in March 743: Tangl (ed.), *Die Briefe*, ep. 56, 102. On its significance, see Gregory I. Halfond, *The Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils, AD 511-768* (Leiden: 2010), 123-24.

[148] Kurze (ed.), *Annales regni Francorum*, 5; Krusch (ed.), *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, *Continuationes* c. 27, 180-81.

[149] Otloh, *VB*, c. 41, p. 155; Levison (ed.), *Vita quarta Bonifatii*, c. 1, p. 91.

[150] Tangl 60, p. 124.

[151] Only the pope's reply survives. Tangl 60, p. 121.

received papal confirmation in 745,[152] but the Franks ultimately failed to deliver on their promise for reasons that have not survived. Boniface instead remained in Mainz.[153] At about this time he seems to have demoted the sees of Büraburg and Erfurt, replacing the resident bishops with assistant bishops or archdeacons subordinate to himself.[154]

If the failure of Boniface's short-lived bishoprics in Hessia and Thuringia was related to the increasing instability on the Saxon frontier, the following years offered little respite. In 746 Carloman retired into the church, which must have been a blow for Boniface; as his patron, Carloman had strongly supported his church councils, whereas Pippin and Boniface were not close.[155] Matters were soon made worse when in 747 civil war broke out between Pippin and his half-brother Grifo. The latter fled to eastern Saxony with a number of disaffected young Frankish nobles, where they joined forces with the local leaders, including Carloman's former foe Theoderic.[156] Thuringia once again became the base for a Frankish invasion north of the Harz Mountains, which began with the abject surrender and baptism of the Northswabians, and led to

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid., 80, pp. 179-80.

[154] Ibid.; Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, 229-34; Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius*, 278; Wolfgang Fritze, "Bonifatius und die Einbeziehung von Hessen und Thüringen in die Mainzer Diözese," *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 4 (1954): 37-63.

[155] Rosamund McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: 2004), 150.

[156] Kurze (ed.), *Annales regni Francorum*, 6.

yet another capture of Theoderic and the devastation of a large tract of Saxony.[157] Despite this humiliation, the Saxons soon regathered their strength; by 751 Boniface had a growing sense of danger on the frontier,[158] and in 752 more than thirty of his churches were sacked and burned.[159] It was probably Hessia that bore the brunt of the attack, since Pippin's retaliatory campaign in 753 targeted the Paderborn region across the river Diemel. Once again a Frankish bishop accompanied the invading army, this time the recently appointed Hildegar of Cologne, who had already tried to interfere with Boniface's influence in Frisia.[160] Like Gerold ten years earlier, Hildegar was killed by the Saxons.[161]

A late glimpse of Boniface's mission in central Germany comes from a well-known letter he wrote to Abbot Fulrad of St Denis in about 752. The letter was a plea to Fulrad to intercede on Boniface's behalf with Pippin, who had recently assumed the title of king. By this time Boniface was an old man of over seventy years, weak-eyed,[162] white-haired, and decrepit.[163] He was conscious that he did not have long to live, and was anxious to secure royal protection for his

[157] Bernhard von Simson (ed.), *Annales Mettenses priores*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 10 (Hanover: 1910), 40-41.

[158] Tangl 86, p. 200.

[159] Ibid., 108, p. 234.

[160] Ibid., 109, p. 234-36.

[161] Kurze (ed.), *Annales regni Francorum*, 10; von Simson (ed.), *Annales Mettenses priores*, 44.

[162] Tangl 63, p. 131.

[163] As described by Liudger, who remembered seeing Boniface pass through Utrecht in 754: "candida canicie et decrepita senectute." Liudger, *VG*, c. 10, p. 75.

disciples.

> For they are almost all foreigners. Some are priests based in many places for the ministry of the church and the people; some are monks assigned to our foundations, including children learning to read; and others are old men who have laboured for a long time while living with me and assisting me. I am worried about all of them, that they should not be scattered after my death, but should have the counsel of your support and the patronage of your Highness, and not be dispersed like sheep without a shepherd, and the people near the border of the pagans will not lose the law of Christ. (...) I beg most of all that this is done because my priests near the border of the pagans lead an impoverished life. They can get food to eat, but they can find no clothes there, unless they can get advice and assistance from elsewhere so that they can support and strengthen themselves in those places for the ministry of the people, just as I have helped them.[164]

[164] Tangl 93, pp. 213-14; "Sunt enim paene omnes peregrini. Quidam presbiteri per multa loca ad ministerium ecclesiae et populorum constituti; quidam sunt monachi per cellulas nostras et infantes ad legentes litteras ordinati; sunt et aliqui seniores, qui longo tempore mecum viventes laboraverunt et me adiuvabant. De his omnibus sollicitus sum, ut post obitum meum non disperdantur, sed ut habeant mercedis vestris consilium et patrocinium celsitudinis vestrae et non sint dispersi sicut oves non habentes pastorem et populi prope marcam paganorum non perdant legem Christi. (...) Propterea hoc maxime autem fieri peto, quia presbiteri mei prope marcam paganorum pauperculam vitam habeant. Panem ad manducandum adquirere possunt, sed

With the frontier missionaries in such a vulnerable condition, the new outbreak of violence in 752 would not have helped the situation. Boniface informed the new pope Stephen that he had been busy rebuilding the burned churches, but it is possible that he was forced to abandon the more exposed part of the mission field. Archaeological evidence for this may have been found at the hillfort of Gaulskopf in northern Hessia, where a timber chapel had a brief existence in the 8th century before it was burned to the ground and not rebuilt.[165] Just 15 km to the west, overlooking the Diemel valley, stood the hillfort of Eresburg, which by the time of Charlemagne was a major Saxon stronghold.

Conclusion

Given the difficulties of his final years, it would be all too easy to view Boniface's mission in central Germany as a disappointing failure. However, this ignores what he had achieved over the previous three decades. He had built, virtually from scratch, a church in a region where Christianity had been fragmented and disorganized. The bishoprics of Büraburg and Erfurt did not last, but their basic identity survived in the form of the archdiaconates of Fritzlar and Erfurt. And while it is true that his attempts to evangelize beyond the northern borderlands failed, the

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vestimenta invenire ibi non possunt, nisi aliunde consilium et adiutorem habeant, ut sustinere et indurare in illis locis ad ministerium populi possint, eodem modo sicut ego illos adiuvavi."

[165] Werner Best and Holger Löwen, "Die Ausgrabungen in der mittelalterlichen Wallburg Gaulskopf bei Warburg-Ossendorf, Kr. Höxter," *Germania* 75 (1997): 159-92.

structures Boniface left behind in Hessia and Thuringia would prove crucial for the eventual conversion of Saxony under Charlemagne. Central to this later mission was Fulda, which, founded in the very heart of his central German mission field, proved to be not only Boniface's final resting place, but also his greatest single legacy.