

# Boniface and the Frisian Lands Revisited: Outline of a Precarious Historical Relationship

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## I. Introduction

It seems that throughout history a kind of rivalry has existed concerning the legacy of Boniface. This began with competition over his bodily remains after his martyrdom. Boniface's body was transported from the place in the Frisian Lands where he died to Utrecht, where he was buried. But quickly there came claims to the body, from Mainz and Fulda. It was in those times of the greatest importance to possess relics of such a saint. Even after burial the remains of Boniface were not left in peace. Many churches craved one of the relics and wanted to participate in his legacy: today the main relics may be found in Fulda, while the rest of Boniface's body is scattered across Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Boniface worked in several European territories and left a widespread legacy. His main title, however, has generally been Boniface 'Apostle of Germany'. The *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* is one of the very few modern works to label him 'Apostle of Frisia and Germany'.<sup>2</sup> Although the main emphasis has been on Boniface and Germany, scholars have never hidden the real background of Boniface (and his colleagues), as is testified in titles like *The Anglo-*

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<sup>1</sup> Padberg, L.E. von, *Studien zur Bonifatiusverehrung: Zur Geschichte des Codex Ragyndrudis und der Fuldaer Reliquien des Bonifatius* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1996), 45-138.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 1983 ed., s.v. 'Boniface'.

*Saxon Missionaries in Germany*<sup>3</sup> and *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, some scholars have deemed it necessary to counter German predominance in Bonifatian legacy, and thus Boniface has also been designated *The Greatest Englishman*.<sup>5</sup> Today his Anglo-Saxon background is generally recognised, as illustrated by the title of a recent German publication *Bonifatius; Vom angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen*.<sup>6</sup>

The title of the conference at which this paper was originally presented, *St. Boniface: Englishman and European* appeared therefore a fair title. Indeed, Boniface divided his long life and career between England, from his birth in c. 675 until his final departure from here in 718, and continental Europe, where he spent his life as a voluntary exile up until his death in 754. However, we need to be careful in equating our present-day connotations of Europe with the Europe of the eighth century: Europe did not then exist in any recognisable modern sense. Calling Boniface ‘European’ implies entering the field of ideology and politics. In carefully referring to ‘the Christian *foundation* of Europe’, Theodor Schieffer meant that the time of Boniface was witnessing the final throes of a four hundred-year shift from the Latin-Greek Christianity of Antiquity towards a Latin-Germanic Christianity of the Middle Ages. The Christian *foundation* for Europe was being

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<sup>3</sup> Talbot, C.H., *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Levison, W., *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

<sup>5</sup> Reuter, T., *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Imhof M., und Stasch, G. (Hg.), *Bonifatius: Vom Angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2004).

prepared.<sup>7</sup> This is quite different from calling Boniface ‘European’. In the current process of European unification, however, it seems that there is need for ‘European saints’. Boniface, with his Anglo-Saxon background and connections to France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, answers perfectly this need.<sup>8</sup> Already in 1954, at the commemoration of 1,200 years martyrdom of Boniface in Fulda, Konrad Adenauer, Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, spoke these words, “But Boniface is not just the Apostle of Germany. He is an European”.<sup>9</sup> Since 1954, the year of the publication of Schieffer’s important book and of Adenauer’s speech, Boniface has increasingly become ‘the first European’.

These topics of ‘legacy’ and ‘Europe’ lead us to the objective of this article. While Boniface has been called ‘the greatest Englishman’ and generally been claimed as ‘Apostel der Deutschen’, we want to examine the historical relationship between Boniface and the Frisian Lands. The relationship of Boniface with England, where he spent the first part of his life, and Germany, where he pursued his second and most impressive career, has generally been recognised and studied. His relationship with the Frisian Lands, however, has hardly received serious attention and

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<sup>7</sup> Schieffer, T., *Winfrid-Bonifatius und die Christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1954), 283.

<sup>8</sup> In this respect it may be of interest to note that during the Boniface conference on 12th March 2004 in Ljouwert (Fryslân), organised by the Frisian Academy and the Diocese of Groningen, a member of the European parliament (Maria Martens) was one of the main speakers. The papers of this conference are published (in Dutch) in *Benedictijns Tijdschrift* 2005/2.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Aber Bonifatius is nicht nur der Apostel der Deutschen. Er ist ein Europäer’, quoted in S. Weichlein, ‘Bonifatius als Politischer Heiliger im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’ in *Bonifatius: Vom Angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen*, eds. M. Imhof und G. Stasch (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2004), 234.

will therefore be the subject of this study. This would seem legitimate, as Boniface did not simply commence (in 716) and end his expatriate career (in 754) in the Frisian Lands, but experienced in the very same region the fundamental rupture of his life: his break with the archbishop of the Frisians, Willibrord. The Frisian Lands thus play a remarkable role in the biography of Boniface. It is therefore important to analyse carefully the three visits made by Boniface to the land of the Frisians.<sup>10</sup> Based on this, we will try to answer the question of why the legacy of Boniface has never been strongly claimed by the Frisians. In order to understand why the Frisians have never laid a claim to Boniface as ‘Apostle of the Frisian Lands’ in the same way that the Anglo-Saxons have called him ‘the greatest Englishman’ and the Germans ‘Apostle of Germany’, we will analyse the implications of missionary work on the ‘culture and religion’, ‘freedom’ and ‘unity’ of the Frisians. In this article a picture of Boniface will thus be drawn not from an Anglo-Saxon or German perspective, as has been done so often previously, but from the perspective of the Frisian Lands, the region literally between England and the European continent.

Before focusing on Boniface’s three visits to the Frisian Lands we have first to address some preliminary issues concerning the use of the names ‘Friesland’ and ‘Frisian Lands’, and concerning the available sources.

In as much as use of the name ‘Europe’ implies entering the field of ideology, this holds true too for the use of the name ‘Friesland’. This name may be used in several ways. Often ‘Friesland’ is used to designate the present-day province of ‘Fryslân’, one of the northern

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<sup>10</sup> Both Willibald in his *Vita Bonifatii* and the anonymous writer of the *Vita Altera Bonifatii* (Chapter 23) mention explicitly three visits to the Frisian Lands.

provinces in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. But Friesland could as well imply the combined and contemporary Frisian Lands of the Netherlands and Germany, i.e. Fryslân in the Netherlands, together with Ost-Friesland and North-Friesland, both in the north of Germany. For historians, however, Friesland often refers to the geographical region which in the Middle Ages was called Friesland, i.e. the whole coastal stretch from Sinkfal (bay near Bruges in Flanders, Belgium) in the south-west, to the river Weser (Germany) in the north-east.

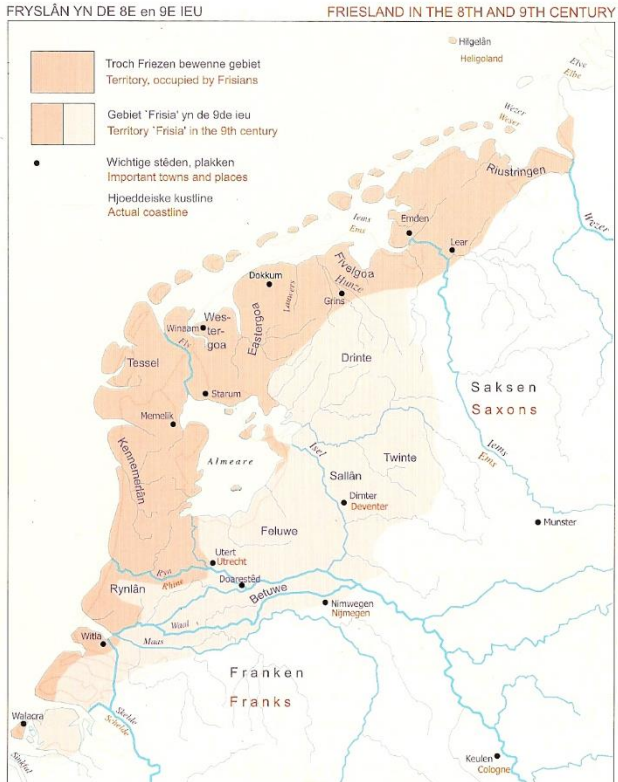
In referring to Frisia (or Fresia), mediaeval sources mean this whole coastal stretch from present-day Belgium in the south-west to Germany in the north-east. These sources are surprisingly united in their view of Frisia as the Frisian Lands. Modern historians tend to doubt whether unity existed among the Frisians, and even whether they identified themselves as Frisians.<sup>11</sup> Such scepticism may be justified, but the observation of Willibald may serve as an example of the opinion shared by mediaeval sources:

*'After bravely hazarding the perils of the river, the sea and the wide expanse of the ocean, he (Boniface) passed through dangerous places without fear of danger, and visited the pagan Frisians, whose land is divided into many territories and districts by intersecting canals. These territories, though bearing different names, are, nevertheless, the property of one nation.'*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> W. van Egmond, 'The Frisian People at the Time of Boniface: Problems of Ethnic Identity and Sources' (paper presented at the Conference 'St. Boniface: Englishman and European', organised by the Centre for Medieval Studies in York, 10-11 September 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Willibald, 'The Life of Saint Boniface' in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saint-Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 134.



(Friesland in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Century)

The *Lex Frisionum*, the law of the Frisians collated in circa 800AD under Charlemagne, divided Frisia into three main parts: that lying between Sinkfal and Fly (West-Friesland), between Fly and Lauwers (Middle-Friesland) and between Lauwers and Weser

(Eastern-Friesland).<sup>13</sup>

In this article I will use the name ‘Friesland’ in a generic sense to cover in a non-specific way the whole of Friesland, both historically and in the present. I will use the phrase ‘Frisian Lands’ when referring to the quite inarticulate political and geographical situation faced by Boniface and his colleagues in the eighth century. This term covers the Frisian Lands as meant in the *Lex Frisionum*. ‘Fryslân’ I will use only when referring to the present-day province of the Netherlands, which by and large coincides with the region called in the eighth century Middle-Friesland.<sup>14</sup>

A second preliminary issue deals with the sources. The preserved Bonifatian letters are undoubtedly the primary source for our subject. Together with Willibald’s *Life of Saint Boniface*, they form the main and most important corpus of information concerning the life of Boniface.<sup>15</sup> But there exist several other hagiographical sources on the life of Boniface. Of primary mention here are

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<sup>13</sup> For detailed expositions on the *Lex Frisionum* see Algra, N.E., *Oudfries Recht 800-1256* (Ljouwert: Fryske Akademy, 2000) and Siems, H., *Studien zur Lex Frisionum*. Münchener Universitätschriften 42 (Ebelsbach: Gremer Verlag, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> For more information on Friesland, both in history and the present, see: Interfriesischen Rat/Thomas Steensen (ed.), *Die Frieslande* (Bräist/Bredstedt: Nordfriisk Instituut, 2006) and K. Huisman, *A Pilgrimage Through Time: More than Two Thousand Years of Fryslân* (Ljouwert: Utjouwerij Frysk en Frij, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Rau, R., *Bonifatii Epistulae/Briefe des Bonifatius. Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii/Willibalds Leben des Bonifatius. Nebst einigen Zeitgenössischen Dokumenten*. Ausgewählte Quellen zur Deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters, Band IV b (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968); E. Emerton, trans., *The Letters of Saint Boniface*. With a New Introduction and Bibliography by T.F.X. Noble (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Willibald, ‘The Life of Saint Boniface’ in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints- Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

subsequent *vitae* of Boniface, especially the *Vita Altera Bonifatii*.<sup>16</sup> Some *vitae* of other saints also contain considerable information on the life of Boniface. According to Ian Wood, three centres in particular laid claim to Boniface's inheritance in the eighth and ninth century. These were Mainz, where Boniface had been archbishop, Fulda, where he was buried, and Utrecht, the base from which he attempted to evangelise the Frisian Lands and where his body was initially brought after his death.<sup>17</sup> The Mainz tradition is well covered and represented by Willibald. But the Fulda tradition is able to claim part of the legacy only by including extensive material on Boniface in the *Life of Sturm*, by Eigil.<sup>18</sup> Utrecht produced important material on Boniface in the earlier mentioned *Vita Altera Bonifatii*. Although the writer remains anonymous, the document finds its origin in the Utrecht tradition. Also of great importance within this tradition are the *Life of Gregorius* by Liudger<sup>19</sup> and the *Life of Liudger* by Altfred.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, great discrepancies exist between these *vitae* as

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<sup>16</sup> *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRG 57 (Hanover, 1905).

<sup>17</sup> Wood, I.N., *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (London: Longman, 2001), 100.

<sup>18</sup> Eigil, *Vita Sturm*, ed. G.H. Pertz, MGH, SS 2; 'The Life of Saint Sturm', trans. C.H. Talbot, in Noble, T.F.X., and Head, T., (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints- Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 165-187.

<sup>19</sup> Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH, SS 15, 1 (Hanover, 1887), trans. into Frisian by K. Bruinsma, in Altfred, *It libben fan de Hillige Liudger*. Liudger, *It libben fan Gregorius* (Boalsert: It Wite Boekhús, 1997), 47-71.

<sup>20</sup> Altfred, *Vita Liudgeri*, ed. W. Diekamp, *Die Vitae Sancti Liudgeri* (Münster, 1881), trans. into Frisian by K. Bruinsma, in Altfred, *It libben fan de Hillige Liudger*. Liudger, *It libben fan Gregorius*, (Boalsert: It Wite Boekhús, 1997), 17-44.



regards the information they offer on the life of Boniface. It is, for example, of fundamental importance for the interpretation of Boniface's work in the Frisian Lands to know whether during his second stay, as Archbishop Willibald asserts, he offered his services to the archbishop for three years<sup>21</sup> or for thirteen, as asserted and elaborated upon by Liudger in his *Life of Gregorius*.<sup>22</sup> In order to be able to use all these *vitae* as main sources much additional research needs to be done on the relationship between them and their traditions. Ian Wood has described his own groundbreaking work in chapters three and five of his book *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050*, but much more research needs to be done. I will therefore in first instance, but certainly not exclusively, use the Bonifatian letters and Willibald's *Life of Boniface* as main sources. This does not mean, however, that sensitivity to the ideological interests of the Mainz tradition will be ignored.

## **II. Boniface's Formation in the Anglo-Saxon Church before travelling abroad**

Boniface was forty years old when first he travelled abroad. Considering the average age of people in the early Middle Ages, this was already quite old. A serious monastic life and career had preceded this second stage of his life. In order to be able to understand his work as a missionary, as well as his behaviour towards the church in the Frisian Lands, we need to understand his formation within the Anglo-Saxon church during the second half of the seventh century.

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<sup>21</sup> Willibaldi *Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

<sup>22</sup> Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, Chapter 2.

The Anglo-Saxon church had its origin in two missionary movements. One came from the south through the work of Augustine (Canterbury), who was sent straight from Rome. The other was the Irish missionary movement that came mainly from the north (the island of Iona). The British churches, which were a remnant of the Roman occupation of Britain, had, according to Mayr-Harting, no profound influence on Anglo-Saxon Christianity.<sup>23</sup> These two missionary movements by and large achieved the Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon England within a relatively short period of time.<sup>24</sup> But in the seventh century a clash emerged between these two traditions. The Roman tradition was in close connection with the Papal See and promoted Roman canonical order. The Irish tradition, however, had developed along other lines. It had evolved a different mix of gospel and culture from that of Roman tradition. The Irish church had never been part of the Roman Empire and had not been severely influenced by this civilisation. Embedding of the gospel within the specific cultural context of Ireland had meant the Irish church having its own specific customs and traditions.<sup>25</sup> Although there were quite some differences between the Roman and Irish traditions, the main are usually summarised as calculation of the date of Easter, the shape of

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<sup>23</sup> Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3d ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 78.

<sup>24</sup> 'The conversion was finished after nearly 90 years.' Levison, W., *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946; Sandpiper Books, 1998), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3d ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), Chapters 5 and 6; Brown, P., Part III: 'The End of Ancient Christianity A.D. 600-750' in *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2003); H. Löwe (hg), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, Teilband 1 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982).

the tonsure, and the organisational model adopted by the church.<sup>26</sup>

The clash between the Roman and the Irish church was therefore a clash between the church of the dominant centre and a church of the periphery; between the universal church and a particular church as it had developed in Ireland, between the continental church and an island church. In a way, what was at stake was the question of uniformity and diversity. Without any doubt, it was the Roman continental church that emerged as glorious victor at the Synod of Whitby in 664. How could an insignificant, peripheral church challenge the traditions and customs of the Church universal?<sup>27</sup> King Oswy, who presided over the synod, preferred the authority of Saint Peter, the rock upon which Jesus had said he would build his church and who had received the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to the authority of Columba.<sup>28</sup> The first steps towards implementation of the results of the Synod of Whitby were made at the Synod of Hertford in 672, under the presidency of Archbishop Theodore, successor to Augustine. From the decisions of this latter synod it becomes quite clear that, besides calculation of the date upon which Easter falls it was the organisational structure of the church that was of central interest here. They were striving for a church in line with the ‘canonical statutes of the fathers’.<sup>29</sup> Theodore introduced a strict

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<sup>26</sup> ‘So when discussion arose there on the question of Easter, the tonsure and various other church matters, it was decided to hold a synod to put an end to this dispute...’ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, rev. ed. (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1990), 187.

<sup>27</sup> For reports on the Synod of Whitby see: *Ibid.*, 186-192; *Vita Wilfridi Primi Episcopi Eboracensis Autore Stephano*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRM V. (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1910), ‘Eddius Stepahnus: Life of Wilfrid’, trans. J.F. Webb in *The Age of Bede*, eds. and trans. J.F. Webb and D.H. Farmer, reprint with revisions (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), 114-116 (chapter 10).

<sup>28</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

diocesan structure that was hierarchically and geographically defined. Bishops and clergy had no rights in any other diocese and were thus bound to their own. Wandering clergy were unacceptable unless carrying letters of commendation. In the same way, monks were bound to their monastery and to their promises of obedience. This implied strict separation between diocese and monastery. Monks were strictly bound to their abbot, priests to their bishop.

Theodore thus prevented the Anglo-Saxon church from any degree of isolation or separation from the continental church. He led the Anglo-Saxon church into the realm of Roman-continental tradition.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the decisions of Whitby and Hertford (and later those of the Synod of Hatfield in 679) were directed against the position of the Irish church. Those decisions concerning the date of Easter and the tonsure have usually attracted most attention. But it was the organisational decisions of Hertford<sup>31</sup> and Hatfield<sup>32</sup> that fundamentally undermined the Irish position. For the Irish (or Celtic) church was not organised along diocesan lines. The absence of centres of dense population meant these churches were not focused on cities with bishops. They were organised through monasteries. These monasteries were the centres of the church, which implied a central position for the abbot. The bishop was in some cases also the abbot, but often a member of the monastic community filled this role.<sup>33</sup> The abbot was not in the first instance

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<sup>30</sup> Schieffer, T., *Wifrid-Bonifatius und die Christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1954), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 212-215.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233.

<sup>33</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'Van het charismatische naar het ambtelijke bisschopstype: onderscheiden visies op de combinatie episkopaat-monnikschap in de 8ste eeuw' in *Liudger 742-809: De Confrontatie tussen Heidendom en Christendom in de Lage Landen*, ed. Kl. Sierskma (Muiderberg: De Baraafsche Leeuw, 1984), 73.

an organisational pillar of the church, but a spiritual, ascetic leader. Besides the central significance of the monasteries, the general emphasis on personal holiness and an ascetic spirituality that reached its peak in the ‘peregrinatio’ or voluntary removal of every earthly tie in order to be free for God, was of great importance in the Irish church.<sup>34</sup> This could, of course, be lived out in a cell, but more often it meant literally leaving one’s country and family. The Irish monastic church was thus characterised by movement and pilgrimage.

Without going into too much detail, we may conclude that the decisions of Hertford and Hatfield, with their emphasis upon hierarchical and geographically defined structures, were pitted against the very being of the Irish-Celtic church. Both organisation centred around monasteries and the spirituality of peregrinatio were denied as basic characteristics of the church.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Angenendt, A., ‘Die irische Peregrinatio und ihre Auswirkungen auf dem Kontinent vor dem Jahre 800’ in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, Teilband 1, ed. H. Löwe (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 52-79; Richter, M., ‘Der irische Hintergrund der angelsächsischen Mission’ in *Ibid.*, 120-137; Angenendt, A., *Das Frühmittelalter: Die Abendländische Christenheit von 400 bis 900* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 203-223.

<sup>35</sup> For more information on this subject: Schieffer, T., *Wifrid-Bonifatius*, 64-80; Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, Part I: ‘Kings and Conversion, 597-664’; Löwe, H., (hg.), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, Teilband 1 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982). Aug. van Berkum, ‘Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype: Onderscheiden Visies op de Combinatie Episkopaat-Monnikschap in de 8ste Eeuw’ in *Liudger 742-809: De Confrontatie tussen Heidendom en Christendom in de Lage Landen*, ed. Kl. Sierskma (Muiderberg: De Baraafsche Leeuw, 1984), 63-86; K. Schäferdiek, ‘Die Grundlegung der Angelsächsischen Kirche im Spannungsfeld insular-keltischen und kontinental-römischen Christentums’ in *Die Kirche des früheren Mittelalters. Kirchengeschichte als Missionsgeschichte Bd. II/*, ed. K. Schäferdiek (München: Kaizer Verlag, 1978), 149-191. Angenendt, A., *Das*

Certainly the Irish-Celtic church maintained an enormous influence on both the Anglo-Saxon and continental churches, but its particular identity and organisational structure as a church ceased to exist after the victory of the Roman church (“den Sieg des römischen Kirchentums.”)<sup>36</sup>

The significance of this clash between the two traditions and implementation of the decisions of Hertford and Hatfield under Archbishop Theodore on the life and formation of Winfrid-Boniface cannot be overestimated. He was born around the year in which the Synod of Hertford (672) was held. And he underwent basic formation during the reign of Theodore (669-690). This means that his religious upbringing must have been seriously influenced by the introduction of Roman canon law into the Anglo-Saxon church, and by repudiation of the misconduct of Irish and British churches. The British churches are included here. Barbara Yorke, during an important conference on Boniface in 2004, stressed that he had grown up at the frontier between the Anglo-Saxon and the British church. Boniface was born in Exeter, which was then the frontier. The same speaker remarked how Boniface must have been influenced by the struggle on the religious frontier between the Anglo-Saxon church and the British church, the latter being banished into the farthest corners of Britain.<sup>37</sup> In this way Boniface

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*Frühmittelalter: Die Abendländische Christenheit von 400 bis 900* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 203-232; W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eight Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946; Sandpiper Books, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Schieffer, T., *Winfrid-Bonifatius*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> Yorke, B., ‘The Insular Background to Boniface’s Continental Career’ (Paper presented at the Wissenschaftliche Tagung ‘Bonifatius: Leben und Nachwirken (754-2004)’ in der Akademie des Bistums Mainz, 2nd to 5th June 2004). Also: Barlow, F., ‘The English Background’ in *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton*, ed. T. Reuter (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 14.

was well seasoned in favour of Roman canonical ways and against the unorthodox ways of the Irish and the British churches.

This perspective will enable us to understand the continental life and mission of Boniface. It provides the key to explaining, for example, why Boniface turned easily from missionary into reformer. So much focused was he upon *canonica rectitudo* (canonical rectitude) he often found a need to correct Christian misconduct rather than to bring Christianity to those adhering to traditional religious ideas. Timothy Reuter writes:

*What Boniface was concerned to do was not simply to bring Christianity to those who had never heard of it, but by example, by legislation, and by enlisting support of those who held power, to see that the Christianity practised by all was brought nearer to the canonica rectitudo, canonical rectitude.*<sup>38</sup>

This clarifies why Boniface stressed in his oath upon becoming a bishop the holy catholic doctrine, declaring that he would in no wise agree to opposition to the unity of the church universal. He stressed that he would have nothing to do with opponents to the ancient *institutions* of the holy fathers.<sup>39</sup> This explains why Boniface continually wrote letters to Rome (and other colleagues) seeking answers to questions concerning complex matters of church teaching and discipline.<sup>40</sup> This makes clear why he was very eager to convene

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<sup>38</sup> Reuter, T., 'Saint Boniface and Europe' in *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton*, ed. T. Reuter (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 80.

<sup>39</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 16. E. Emerton (trans.), *The Letters of Saint Boniface*. With a new introduction and bibliography by T.F.X. Noble (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Noble, T.F.X., 'Introduction', in *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. E.

synods for reform in order to organise the continental churches according to Roman rules. Schieffer is of the opinion that these synods were modelled upon those of the Anglo-Saxon church.<sup>41</sup> This indicates why Boniface used so many Anglo-Saxon colleagues whom he could properly trust in the midst of continental canonical disorder. This elucidates why Boniface was continually concerned about “unworthy” priests. Pope Zacharias even needed to rebuke Boniface for his overzealous administering of new baptisms. But for Boniface a baptism was not lawful unless the priest had correctly spoken the befitting words, even if he was entirely ignorant of Latin.<sup>42</sup> This illuminates how Mayr-Harting was able to write, ‘Boniface thought he smelled trouble whenever the Irish appeared over his horizon’.<sup>43</sup> And finally, the clash between two ecclesiastical traditions in his homeland clarifies the entire mood of his letters, namely the preoccupation with rules and regulations.

Reuter writes that as far as the life of Boniface is concerned all is summed up in the remark on *canonica rectitudo*. This position adopted by Boniface, the inheritance of his formation in the Anglo-Saxon church during the first half of his life, may be acknowledged as the interpretative key to all his work on the continent, and as the hermeneutic key to our understanding of his life and thought. It may certainly also help us in understanding his work in the Frisian Lands, as well as his attitude towards Willibrord. In some instances

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Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), xiv-xv.

<sup>41</sup> Schieffer, T., *Winfid-Bonifatius*, 71; 211-212.

<sup>42</sup> A priest had used the formula: ‘Baptizo te in nomine patria et filia et spiritus sancti’ (I baptise you in the name of the fatherland, the daughter and the Holy Spirit). Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 68; E. Emerton (trans.), *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 100-101.

<sup>43</sup> Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 266.



the question arises as to whether the struggle for Roman canonical order and against the unorthodox customs and traditions which flourished among the British and Irish (but perhaps even more on the continent) was the (main) incentive behind embarking upon a mission abroad. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon church, after its victory in Britain, wished to continue the battle on the continent. This way it would not leave continental 'Europe' to the Irish wanderers who had long since established connections in those regions, especially in the Frankish church.<sup>44</sup>

### III. First Visit to the Frisian Lands (716)

Winfred-Boniface was certainly not the first missionary to traverse

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<sup>44</sup> A look at the map on Irish and Anglo-Saxon Mission in the period 400-730 shows a surprisingly high number of Irish missionaries and Irish monasteries on the continent. Anglo-Saxon impact had, up until then, been shallow. 'Iroschottische und angelsächsische Mission', *Putzger Historischer Weltatlas* (Cornelsen-Velhagen & Klasing, 1981), 41; See also: A. Angenendt, *Das Frühmittelalter: Die Abendländische Christenheit von 400 bis 900* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 217.

the Frisian Lands.<sup>45</sup> Both Frankish (Amand<sup>46</sup> and Wulfram<sup>47</sup>) and Anglo-Saxon missionaries (Wilfrid,<sup>48</sup> Wictbert,<sup>49</sup> and Willibrord and his companions<sup>50</sup>) had preceded him. It would be an important help to us in understanding Boniface if we knew whether or not he was aware of this. And especially whether he was informed of the fact that all the great Anglo-Saxon missionaries before him had in one way or another been linked to the driving force of Egbert, ‘that rather shadowy Northumbrian nobleman who spent most of his life

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<sup>45</sup> Jung-Diefenbach, J., *Die Friesenbekehrung bis zum Martertode des Hl. Bonifatius* (Mödling: Missionsdruckerei St. Gabriel, 1931); Latourette, K.S., *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 2: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty 500-1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938, 1966), 80-102; Hauck, A., *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands I*, dritte und vierte (doppel-) Auflage (Leipzig: Hinrichsische Buchhandlung, 1904), 431-447; Halbertsma, H., *Frieslands Oudheid: Het Rijk van Friese Koningen, Opkomst en Ondergang* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrijs, 2000); Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie: Christendom en Cultuur in de zevende en achtste Eeuw* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> *Vita Amandi*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, SRM V (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1910) trans. J.N. Hillgarth in *Christianity and Paganism 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, ed. J.N. Hillgarth, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1969), 139-149.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Vulframni Episcopi Senonici*, ed. W. Levison. MGH, SRM. (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1905).

<sup>48</sup> *Vita Wilfridi Primi Episcopi Eboracensis Autore Stephano*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRM V. (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1910), Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, trans. J.F. Webb in *The Age of Bede*, eds. and trans. J.F. Webb and D.H. Farmer, reprint with revisions (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), 105-182.

<sup>49</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 280.

<sup>50</sup> *Vita Willibrordi Archiepiscopi Traiectensis, Auctore Alcuino*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRM VII (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1909); Alcuin, ‘The Life of Willibrord’, trans. C.H. Talbot in *Soldiers of Christ*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 189-212.

as a voluntary exile in Ireland'.<sup>51</sup> But according to Ian Wood there is no evidence for Boniface having been influenced from this direction. Wood concludes that the notion of evangelising the continent was simply current in England in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.<sup>52</sup>

Had Boniface known about Willibrord, we might have expected him to make a preliminary visit to his compatriot. But Boniface's hagiographer Willibald mentions no word of such a visit by Boniface to Willibrord during the first journey to the Frisian Lands. On the other hand, it seems implausible that Boniface had not heard of Willibrord, archbishop of the Frisians since 695! Considering the respect Boniface had for the proper order of the church (and thus against wandering priests in foreign dioceses), it is hardly imaginable that he consciously refrained from visiting Willibrord. It may simply have been impossible due to the political situation to reach Echternach, where Willibrord must have resided at that time.

Willibald does inform us, however, about a visit to the Frisian King Radbod. Radbod had, after the death of Pippin in 714 and during the crisis of 714-17, recently recaptured important areas of southern areas of the Frisian Lands.<sup>53</sup> Christian priests had been dispersed, churches laid waste and reduced to ruin. Frisian traditional shrines had been rebuilt and the worship of their gods resumed. Boniface met Radbod in Trecht (Utrecht). Unfortunately, we do not have any information regarding the proceedings of this meeting. But Willibald writes that Boniface afterwards examined

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<sup>51</sup> Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3d ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 265.

<sup>52</sup> Wood, J.N., *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow: Longman/ Pearson Education, 2001), 44.

<sup>53</sup> Wood, I.N., *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education, 1994), 267.

many parts of the Frisian Lands in order to discover what possibility there might be for preaching the gospel. Apparently he had received freedom to preach and travel in the Frisian territories. But ‘after having spent the whole summer in the country of the Frisians to no avail, he decided to depart for his native land’.<sup>54</sup>

Though the information is far from comprehensive, we may conclude concerning Boniface’s first journey to the Frisian Lands that King Radbod was not entirely hostile towards the preaching of the Christian Gospel.<sup>55</sup> Like his father King Aldgisl, who in 678 had given Wilfrid the freedom to preach and travel,<sup>56</sup> Radbod now provided Boniface with this same freedom. Moreover, we should note that Boniface, apart from not visiting Willibrord, did not turn for help or support to the Frankish powers. And, finally, we may conclude that Boniface was unwilling to stay and live among the Frisians in order to preach the gospel to them. He might have decided to stay and do ‘real’ missionary work. He might have chosen to wander, or to stay among the Frisians in the tradition of the Irish peregrinatio. But apparently Boniface did not want to conduct his missionary work on the ‘wrong side of the frontier’.

This leads us to wonder what exactly Boniface had in mind with this journey. What were his hopes and expectations? It seems that he was neither well informed nor well prepared for this first journey abroad. It consequently turned out a serious failure. Of course, Willibald knows how to make a virtue of failure:

*...a strange thing in the sanctity of the saints is that when they*

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<sup>54</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of Saint Boniface*, Chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> Wood, I.N., *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education, 1994), 319.

<sup>56</sup> *Vita Wilfridi Primi Episcopi Eboracensis Autore Stephano*; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, Chapter 26.

*perceive that their labours are frustrated for a time and bear no spiritual fruit they betake themselves to other places where the results are more palpable.*<sup>57</sup>

So Boniface forsook the pastures of the Frisian Lands “that lay parched through lack of heavenly and fruitful dew” and departed to his native land. In this respect we should not neglect to note the great difference (in mood and effect) with the mission of Wilfrid, whose preaching was ‘accepted and that year he baptised all but a few chiefs and many thousands of the common people’.<sup>58</sup>

#### **IV Second Visit to the Frisian Lands (719-722)**

##### **IV.1 Reconstruction of the period**

Having spent one summer and two winters in the seclusion of his monastery, Winfred-Boniface returned to the continent.<sup>59</sup> After his earlier failure he will certainly have considered a new strategy. And he will, without doubt, have premeditated a visit to either Willibrord or to Charles Martel, the successor of Pippin. But he decided to seek confirmation of his loyalty ‘higher up’ and ‘farther away’. He set off on his way to the tomb of the apostles, where he offered himself to the Pope and subsequently received his mission. Here we witness the fundamental commitment of Boniface to Rome. This was, however, not true only of Boniface. Anglo-Saxon clergy were fond of visiting the tomb of St. Peter. Since the mission of Augustine and that of Theodore there had been significant bonds between the

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<sup>57</sup> Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Vita Wilfridi Primi Episcopi Eboracensis Autore Stephano*; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, Chapter 26.

<sup>59</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of Saint Boniface*, Chapter 4.

Anglo-Saxon church and Rome.<sup>60</sup>

No consistency exists, however, as to the objective of the mission received by Boniface from the Pope. At least, as far as the two main sources are concerned. According to Willibald, Boniface was to make ‘a report on the savage peoples of Germany’ with the purpose of discovering ‘whether their untutored hearts and minds were ready to receive the seed of the divine Word’. But in the letter of 15th May 719 given by Pope Gregory II to Boniface upon his departure, there is no mention of Germany at all. It states that Boniface ‘may go forth to those peoples who are still in the bonds of infidelity’, according to his own desire and pious devotion. Besides preaching, his mission included ‘insisting upon using the sacramental discipline prescribed by the official ritual formulary of our Holy Apostolic See’.<sup>61</sup> At first sight, this difference in objective may seem harmless, but it will turn out to be of fundamental significance. In order to explain why Willibald framed the objective of Boniface’s mission in his own way (namely, ‘to the peoples in Germany’) and differently from the letter of the Pope (the more reliable historical source) we first need to reflect carefully upon three early letters in the Bonifatian collection. These are the aforementioned letter of Pope Gregory II, the letter of Bugga (an Anglo-Saxon nun and friend of Boniface) congratulating Boniface

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<sup>60</sup> At one point Boniface even complained about the frequent journeys back and forth to Rome, especially of matrons and veiled women, ‘A great part of them perish and few keep their virtue. There are very few towns in Lombardy or Frankland or Gaul where there is not a courtesan or harlot of English stock. It is a scandal and a disgrace to your whole church.’ in Emerton, E., *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 118 (letter 78).

<sup>61</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 12; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, with a new introduction and bibliography by T.F.X. Noble (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 11.

upon his success in Frisia (of around 720)<sup>62</sup> and Boniface's (Winfred's) letter to young Nithard (716-717).<sup>63</sup>

The letter of Gregory II does not state a destination for Boniface's mission. Gregory acknowledged his pious purpose and dedication to missionary work and the teaching of the mystery of faith among the heathen. He also mentions the 'modest forethought' of Boniface regarding his mission. Finally, he emphasises the firm foundation upon which the pious plans of Boniface had come to rest. For Gregory it was important that Boniface had shown his loyalty to the Apostolic See and accepted official sacramental discipline. In this way he would not become another uncontrollable, wandering missionary. As the letter does not state destination, we do not know what plans Boniface actually presented to the Pope 'with modest forethought'. But it must have been his plan to conduct mission in the Frisian Lands. This is the strong impression given in the letter to Boniface from Bugga, in which she rejoices in God who, as he has told her in his own letters to her, has shown him great mercy in many ways.<sup>64</sup> Bugga writes:

*First He inclined the pontiff of the Glorious See to grant the desire of your heart. Next He laid low before you Rathbod, that enemy of the Catholic Church. Then he revealed to you in a dream that it was your duty to reap the harvest of God, gathering in sheaves of holy souls into the storehouse of the heavenly kingdom.*<sup>65</sup>

Here we may note the connection between Boniface's main desire,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 18-19 (letter 15).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1-3 (letter 9).

<sup>64</sup> This letter has unfortunately not been preserved.

<sup>65</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 15; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*,

the death of Radbod, and his missionary work in the territory of the Frisian Lands. Boniface had apparently written Bugga a jubilant letter expressing his joy at finally being able to work in the Frisian mission. As third witness we recall the letter of Boniface to the young Nithard, generally considered a letter to a young friend left behind in the Frisian Lands in 716.<sup>66</sup> In this letter we learn of Boniface's plan to return to the Frisian Lands 'If it shall be God's will that I return to your country, as I purpose to do...'<sup>67</sup>

From these early three letters we get the clear impression that Boniface was concentrating upon his mission among the Frisians. There is, from the perspective of the collection of letters, no reason whatsoever to consider any other mission than the Frisian. Unfortunately, we do not have any other letters from this period. The next in the Bonifatian collection is dated 30<sup>th</sup> November 722 and contains the oath of Boniface as bishop, followed by four letters from Gregory II concerning the mission of Bishop Boniface to the peoples *in Germany* (only now!) on the eastern side of the Rhine.<sup>68</sup> In the letter collection a gap exists between the first general commission of the priest Boniface (15<sup>th</sup> May 719) and the letters concerning his consecration as bishop in Germany (1<sup>st</sup> December 722). There is no explanation as to why the Frisian mission has come to an end.

Such lack of clarity may exist in a collection of letters, but preferably not in a hagiography. Willibald in writing his *Life of*

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<sup>66</sup> Schieffer, T., *Wifrid-Bonifatius und die Christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1954), 111; Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie: Christendom en Cultuur in de zevende en achtste Eeuw* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1989), 156-157.

<sup>67</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 9; Emerton, E., *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 1-3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-23 (letters 16-20).



*Boniface* (at the request of Lull, successor to Boniface in Mainz, and Megingoz, Archbishop of Wurzburg) was at this point faced with a problem in the historical flow of his hagiography. He could not possibly ignore Boniface's (second) stay in the Frisian Lands, but at the same time he had to face the reality of the latter's consecration as bishop in 722. How could he connect these two periods of Boniface's life? In one way or another Willibald had to cover the transition from missionary in the Frisian Lands to bishop for the peoples of Germany. Either Boniface had had some sound reason for leaving the Frisian Lands or there must have been another reason for ending his missionary career here.

In order to provide Boniface with an appropriate reason, Willibald gave the following account in his *vita*. After his commission in Rome to 'make a report on the savage peoples of Germany', Boniface began his mission, travelling around among these peoples like a 'busy bee'.<sup>69</sup> When he heard of the death of Radbod, however, he travelled joyfully to the Frisian Lands to offer his services for three years to Archbishop Willibrord.<sup>70</sup> When Willibrord proposed Boniface be ordained a bishop next to him, Boniface declined. This resulted in a serious disagreement 'as if they were taking part in a kind of spiritual contest'.<sup>71</sup> Having reasoned that he was neither worthy nor of the proper age to become a bishop (both of which arguments were unacceptable to Willibrord), he cites Boniface being bound to the ties of his own promise to the Pope. He needed to return to the savage peoples of Germany to whom he had been dispatched originally by the Apostolic See. In the end Willibrord had to accept defeat, as Boniface claimed loyalty to a higher authority, namely the Pope. Boniface then returned to the peoples of

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<sup>69</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of Saint Boniface*, Chapter 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

Germany.

The objective of Boniface's mission in 719 (as stated by Willibald) not simply to conduct a mission among the heathen (as expressed in the papal letter) but to make a report on the savage peoples of Germany, offered Boniface a proper argument for declining Willibrord's proposal that he become bishop. In this way Willibald is able to create an illusion of smooth and continuous development in the career of Boniface. First there was the mission to Germany in order to "examine the field". And subsequently, with a short interruption in the Frisian Lands, he becomes bishop of the peoples in Germany. In his account Willibald makes quite plausible the idea that Boniface had to return to his original mission. The author closes the gap between the Frisian mission and the appointment as bishop for the peoples of Germany without making Boniface, although only a priest at that stage, insubordinate to Archbishop Willibrord. Willibald is, however, unable completely to disguise the serious clash between Willibrord and Boniface, a fact of which we are not informed by the Bonifatian letter collection.

Willibald's construction may seem plausible, but is unconvincing. And for two reasons: the main one is that Willibald fails to give a reason why Boniface went to the Frisian Lands in 719 at all. Was he, by working in the Frisian Lands, in a state of disobedience to the Pope for several years, and did he remember his original mission only at the moment at which Willibrord offered him a position as bishop? This seems a very improbable move in the life of the impeccable priest Boniface. Secondly, Willibald's construction leaves us with impossible dating. Unfortunately for the author of this hagiography, we possess the exact dates of Boniface's first mission in 719 and his oath taking as bishop in 722. In the period between May 719 (when Boniface left Rome) and November/December 722 (Boniface's oath taking as a bishop, again

in Rome) Willibald describes the following activities. Before going to the Frisian Lands Boniface first traversed the territories of the Bavarians and proceeded with a journey of inspection into Thuringia. Hereafter he worked for three years in the Frisian Lands. After his break with Willibrord he went to the place called Amanburch, in Hesse. Here he gathered together a sufficient number of believers to build a chapel. According to Willibald he was, after these events, summoned to Rome.

But considering these events and adding on to them the time demanded by travel in those days, it becomes clear that Willibald's dating does not possibly stand scrutiny. He has squeezed too many activities into this relatively short period of time (719-722). But in order to make the transition (from working with Willibrord in the Frisian Lands to becoming a bishop in Germany) understandable and acceptable Willibald predates the mission to Germany. He consequently also needs to add events in Bavaria, Thuringia and Hesse before and after the period spent in the Frisian Lands. Thus by using some of the later developments in Boniface's life (the mission in Germany), Willibald tries to render reasonable his leaving the Frisian Lands and returning to his original task. In this way the author may avoid the background to the real conflict between Willibrord and Boniface (see IV.3) and acknowledging a second disappointment in the Frisian Lands.

Based on this information we may reconstruct the proceedings around 719-722 thus.<sup>72</sup> Boniface received the freedom and authority from Pope Gregory II to work and travel as a missionary priest. Probably he had heard already during his journey from England to

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<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, many scholars accept too easily as historically accurate the information given by Willibald. See e.g. concerning the period under discussion Schieffer, T., *Winfrid-Bonifatius und die Christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1954), 109-119.

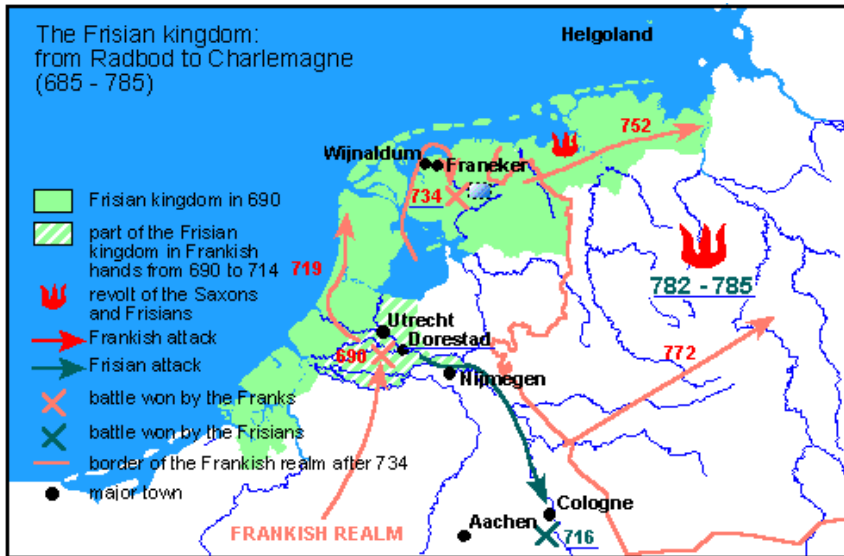
Rome, or during his stay in Rome, of the increasing power of Charles Martel in the Frisian Lands and the poor health and/or death of Radbod. After receiving the blessing of the Pope he moved on to the Frisian Lands, working under Willibrord as a missionary priest for three years. During this period he wrote his letter to Bugga. In 721-722 a serious rupture occurred between Willibrord and Boniface. Boniface the priest had to withdraw, and he returned to Rome for discussion and reorientation. Only then did he receive his new mission, directed at ‘certain peoples in Germany on the eastern side of the Rhine’.<sup>73</sup> In his own letter to Pope Zacharias (751) Boniface also makes a direct link between his ordination in 722 and his mission to the Germans.<sup>74</sup> Willibald simply changes a few details to attain the best result. He predates the German experience in order to iron out the rupture in Boniface’s (Frisian) career and to restore its flow.

## **IV.2 Missionary Strategy**

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<sup>73</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 17; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 20-21.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-137 (letter 86).



(The Frisian Kingdom. From Radbod to Charlemagne (685-785))

Boniface had decided to leave Frisia in 716 because the situation was unfavourable for his missionary praxis. But during his first stay in Rome the situation changed drastically. Radbod died in 719<sup>75</sup> after suffering illness for many years, as Alfrid tells us in his *Life of Liudger*.<sup>76</sup> Charles Martel had (re)captured part of the Frisian Lands and probably also the lands north of the great rivers and west of the River Fly.<sup>77</sup> According to Alcuin in his *Life of St. Willibrord*, Martel

<sup>75</sup> A list with sources which confirm this date can be found in: Halbertsma, H., *Frieslands Oudheid: Het Rijk van Friese Koningen, Opkomst en Ondergang* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrijs, 2000), 93; 327.

<sup>76</sup> Alfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, ed. W. Diekamp, *Die Vitae Sancti Liudgeri* (Münster, 1881); Alfrid, *It libben fan de Hillige Liudger*, chapter 3.

<sup>77</sup> Halbertsma, H., *Frieslands Oudheid: Het Rijk van Friese Koningen*,

‘brought many nations under the power of the Franks, and among these were the lands of the Frisians, whose lands were added to the dominions after the defeat of Radbod’.<sup>78</sup> Though Alcuin does not once mention the name of Boniface,<sup>79</sup> he articulately describes the situation in this period after 719, ‘Willibrord now attempted to bring into the church by baptism the people that had recently been won by the sword’.<sup>80</sup> Willibald recounts that ‘the ending of the persecution raised by the savage King Radbod permitted them to scatter abroad the seed of Christian teaching’. The result of the work was swift: ‘The divine light illumined their hearts, the authority of the glorious leader Charles over the Frisians was strengthened, the word of truth was blazened abroad, the voice of preachers filled the land, and the venerable Willibrord with his fellow missionaries propagated the Gospel’.<sup>81</sup> According to Willibald, Boniface belonged to those fellows of Willibrord who ‘filled the land’.

As we noted earlier, Boniface did not want to conduct his mission on the ‘wrong side’ of the frontier. But after the fundamental changes described above a new horizon emerged. He returned to the Frisian Lands, now offering his service to Willibrord. This new context fitted Boniface’s missionary intentions and strategy. He did not want to carry out mission in unconquered lands. He waited till the Frankish power had recaptured some areas of Frisian territory. He pursued his mission in a (re)captured territory, not as a single missionary but as member of a movement of missionaries (‘the

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*Opkomst en Ondergang* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrijs, 2000), 92-93.

<sup>78</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi; The Life of St. Willibrord*, Chapter 13.

<sup>79</sup> For Alcuin’s position regarding Boniface see: Wood, I.N., *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education, 2001), 86-88.

<sup>80</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi; The Life of St. Willibrord*, Chapter 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

voice of preachers filled the land') who followed the military conquest. Willibald writes, 'when he saw that the harvest was abundant and the labourers were few, the holy servant of God offered his services for three years to Archbishop Willibrord and laboured indefatigably'.<sup>82</sup>

As such, we may picture his mission (at this point together with Willibrord's) as one component of the conquest. The missionary conquest was part of the military conquest. Ian Wood asserts that 'after 719, the Christianisation of Frisia went hand in hand with the expansion of Frankish power over the region'.<sup>83</sup> Latourette too emphasises that 'the winning of the Saxon nation, like that of the Frisian nation, was accomplished by a combination of armed force and instruction by missionaries. The Christian name was induced by a liberal application of the sword'.<sup>84</sup> Willibald combines these two elements in one sentence, 'the authority of the glorious leader Charles over the Frisians was strengthened' and 'the voice of preachers filled the land.' Missionaries often worked at the frontier. But Boniface only returned to the Frisian Lands after the conquest in order to carry on his mission work mission behind it. Clearly Boniface sought the protection of the Frankish armies. His missionary strategy did not include becoming part of the people, living with them and preaching the gospel in order to win them, as things might have gone within the context of Irish spirituality. Boniface's mission walked hand in hand with military protection.

Boniface must have been happy with developments in the Frisian

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<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> Wood, I.N., *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education, 2001), 57.

<sup>84</sup> Latourette, K.S., *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 2: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty 500-1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938, 1966), 102; 105.

mission. He laboured indefatigably, destroying pagan temples and shrines, building churches and chapels and gaining numerous converts to the church.<sup>85</sup> It is surprising, therefore, that he declined to accept the dignity of episcopal office and become the assistant of Willibrord in governing the people of God.<sup>86</sup> He had been offered almost the highest rank in the church of the Frisians! Willibald elaborately informs us concerning Boniface's arguments in declining the offer. Initially he argued that he had not yet reached the age of fifty (supposedly) required by canon law. Willibrord did not accept this 'canon-law-talk': 'the Archbishop therefore sternly reproved him and urged him to accept the work offered him, adducing, as a final argument, the extreme need of the people over whom he ruled'.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen above in Part IV.1, Willibald was able to 'save' the situation by endowing Boniface with a higher loyalty, i.e. his promise to the Pope. Willibald tries in this way to veil behind a façade of humility (the issue of age) and obedience (to the Pope) a serious problem in the Frisian Lands. But in reality Willibald was hardly able to hide the enormous conflict between Willibrord the archbishop and Boniface the missionary priest. It was a conflict that led to the Frisian rupture in the ecclesiastical career of Boniface. In Part IV.1 an analysis has been given of how Willibald was able to hide this rupture. In the following an analysis will be given concerning the background to and the rationale concerning the rupture.

### **IV.3 The Frisian Rupture**

A very serious reason must have existed for Boniface to leave his

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<sup>85</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.



mission, ‘the desire of his hearth,’<sup>88</sup> and besides to disobey the ruling of his superior (arch)bishop. The seriousness of this event can hardly be overestimated and will turn out to have been the turning point in the life and career of Boniface. The ‘Frisian rupture’ constitutes the change from missionary in the Frisian Lands to reformer in the German territories. For the development of the argument in this article, we need to consider the reasons for this rupture with Willibrord.<sup>89</sup>

A great deal of thought (and speculation) has gone into the question of why Boniface declined the office of bishop and left behind him the Frisian Lands. The issue of age, as postulated by Willibald, can hardly have hindered Boniface, as shortly afterwards, in 722, the Pope ordained him a bishop. The very fact that he left the Frisian mission and disobeyed the request of his (arch)bishop implies that something was at stake which fundamentally contradicted the core of his thinking and the very being of his mission. In order to understand this rupture we have to return to the hypothesis formulated concerning the (theological) formation of Boniface in the Anglo-Saxon church during the second half of the seventh century, as elaborated in Section II of this article. At that point the argument was developed that the clash between the Irish and the Roman church might offer the hermeneutic key to understanding the life and career of Boniface. He grew up at the frontier with the British church. He received his formation right after and during the struggle against the Irish-Celtic church, and during implementation of the decrees of the synods of Whitby (664), Hertford (672) and Hatfield (679). Boniface himself was a representative of these developments in the Anglo-Saxon church. It

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<sup>88</sup> See note 65: ‘First He (God) inclined the pontiff of the Glorious See to grant the desire of your heart...’

<sup>89</sup> See also: Schieffer, T., *Winfriid-Bonifatius*, 113-119.

was a church inducted, under the guidance of representatives from Rome such as Augustine and Theodore, into the mainstream of the universal Roman church. Strict rules and guidelines were issued in order to achieve this goal. Boniface was the personification of these rules, of this Roman canonical order.

Several authors have noted the differences between Willibrord and Boniface. Willibrord's formation had been quite different to that of Boniface. The archbishop was born in 657-58 in the northern reaches of the Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>90</sup> He received his formation in the monastery of Ripon. This monastery had already changed from the Irish traditions to the Roman in 661, i.e. before Willibrord entered it. In the *Life of Saint Cuthbert* it is said that the monks Eata and Cuthbert, and all the rest, were thrown out of Ripon.<sup>91</sup> The monastery was in 661 given to Wilfrid, who upheld Roman practices. According to Weiler, however, there was still a strong Irish spirit at Ripon when Willibrord stayed there.<sup>92</sup> We may assert that Willibrord grew up with Roman practices but within a setting that offered a mix of traditions.<sup>93</sup> Growing older, Willibrord left for Ireland, where he remained for thirteen years (677-690). This was exactly during the period of implementation of the decisions of Hertford and Hatfield in the Anglo-Saxon church, and during the leadership of Archbishop Theodore. As he was in Ireland, Willibrord missed this fundamental stage of transition. Apparently,

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<sup>90</sup> I believe that the book by Weiler, unfortunately available only in Dutch, is one of the best monographs on Willibrord. Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie: Christendom en Cultuur in de zevende en achte eeuw. Met een Vertaling van de voornaamste literaire Bronnen door P. Bange* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1989).

<sup>91</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, trans. J.F. Webb in *The Age of Bede*, ed. D.H. Farmer, repr. with revisions (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), 53.

<sup>92</sup> Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie*, 83.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Willibrord longed for a different and stricter monastic life than was possible in Ripon.<sup>94</sup> In the monastery of Rathmelsigi (in Ireland) he became deeply influenced by Irish traditions, especially the centrality of the monasteries to church life and the spirituality of the missionary peregrinatio. The leadership of Egbert stood guarantor for this.<sup>95</sup> As Levison asserts:

*Twelve years followed, spent by Willibrord in Ireland, a time of preparation like that in Ripon, devoted to monastic life in voluntary exile, 'pilgrimage', and to the monastic learning as communicated by the Irish tradition... Willibrord was touched by this spirit.*<sup>96</sup>

Though Willibrord had from the outset entered on the Roman path, the Irish ways were at the same time deeply ingrained in him.<sup>97</sup> According to Levison it became quite common to adhere to Roman practices concerning paschal reckoning, the tonsure and other rites, while at the same time holding fast to the Irish traditions concerning ecclesiastical organisation of monastery life and the spirituality of pilgrimage. He writes, 'But, *except for the lack of an organisation conforming to the continental ecclesiastical order*, these differences disappeared in time; the Irish accepted the Roman usages.'<sup>98</sup> Van Berkum supports this view, asserting that the Irish-Celtic church

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 85-88.

<sup>95</sup> On Egbert see Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, rev. ed. (Penguin Books, 1990), Chapters III.27, V.9 and V.22; Schieffer, T., *Winfried-Bonifatius*, 97-98; Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie*, 81-111; Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, 45-69; Richter, M., 'Der irische Hintergrund der angelsächsischen Mission' in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, Teilband 1, ed. H. Löwe (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 120-137.

<sup>96</sup> Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, 55

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

kept its own organisational and spiritual identity even after acceptance of central Roman practices.<sup>99</sup> This was exactly the case with Egbert and his followers in Rathmelsigi. Willibrord's life and mission in the Frisian Lands must be understood from this perspective.

Willibrord's ministry in the Frisian Lands may be characterised by the typical traits of an Irish bishop. He travelled abroad with a group of eleven followers, a typical of Irish missionaries who wanted to found a monastic community.<sup>100</sup> He took possession of a villa in Echternach and developed it into a central monastic site where he was generally in residence. Utrecht was also a monastic-missionary centre but it is quite significant that no clarity existed as to the status of Utrecht as an episcopal seat.<sup>101</sup> By far the majority of donations were, surprisingly, given to Echternach, quite far from the Frisian Lands. A comparison of the cartulary shows that monastic advance was of far greater importance to Archbishop Willibrord than the development of the Frisian diocese or Utrecht as a see.<sup>102</sup> It seems that Willibrord conceived of himself as an abbot-

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<sup>99</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype: Onderscheiden Visies op de Combinatie Episkopaat-Monnikschap in de 8ste Eeuw' in *Liudger 742-809*, ed. Kl. Sierskma, 74-75.

<sup>100</sup> Weiler, A.G., *Willibrords Missie*, 92-93; Latourette, K.S., *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 2: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty 500-1500* (The Paternoster Press, 1971), 82; J. Jung-Diefenbach, *Die Friesenbekehrung bis zum Martertode des Hl. Bonifatius* (Mödling: Missionsdruckerei St. Gabriel, 1931), 95.

<sup>101</sup> Leupen, P.H.D., 'Sint Salvator en Sint Maarten, Willibrord en Bonifatius' in *Willibrord, zijn Wereld en zijn Werk*. *Middeleeuwse Studies*, band VI, eds. P. Bange and A.G. Weiler (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1990), 317-327.

<sup>102</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'De Constituering en Mislukking van de Friese Kerkprovincie' in *Willibrord, zijn Wereld en zijn Werk*. *Middeleeuwse Studies*, band VI, eds. P. Bange en A.G. Weiler (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1990), 169.

bishop without episcopal seat. This would explain the fuzziness of his ecclesiastical organisation and the status of his successors. It would also explain why Boniface (much later) asked Pope Stephan II for a copy of the written instructions given to Willibrord at his ordination as (arch)bishop, because he, Boniface, needed clarity concerning this.<sup>103</sup> Willibrord's work in the Frisian Lands cannot be characterised by any serious ecclesiastical strategy. No dioceses were founded and no synod organised during a period spanning almost fifty years of missionary work.<sup>104</sup> Van Berkum branded the attitude of Willibrord in this respect as 'carelessness towards the organisation of church life.'<sup>105</sup> Mayr-Harting confirms that Willibrord 'never sought to organise a Frisian province under himself.'<sup>106</sup> But on the other hand emphasis was placed on a pure life of holiness, a serious monastic life, charismatic leadership. Willibrord is in Boniface's letter to Pope Stephan II labelled as a priest of wondrous holiness and self-denial. He had indeed put his own life in danger during field trips and confrontations with opponents. He tried to be an example to the community of priests and monks, to be a charismatic and mystical leader. He was a shepherd rather than a policy maker and organiser.

Willibrord must have considered Boniface a good companion, a perfect potential supplementary strength in the Frisian mission. But Boniface must have been utterly surprised and irritated by this

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<sup>103</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 109; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 161.

<sup>104</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'De Constituering en Mislukking van de Friese Kerkprovincie', 163.

<sup>105</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype', 76.

<sup>106</sup> H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3d ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 270.

policy on the part of the archbishop. During their three years collaboration Willibrord's individualism, improvisation and lack of planning and organisation must have astonished Boniface. For in his eyes an archbishop should build a new church-province, appoint new bishops, make new dioceses and provide geographical clarity. Not the monastery but the cathedral should be given the central focus.<sup>107</sup> According to Aug. van Berkum, we are witnessing a clash between the Roman-continental and the Irish-Celtic attitude concerning the function of a bishop. In actuality, it is the confrontation of Whitby, seen here at a different place and level; involving not issues of the date of Easter or the tonsure (settled long ago) but of ecclesiastical organisation.<sup>108</sup>

It may by now be clear how fundamental this was to Boniface. This 'Irish' attitude fundamentally contradicted the core of his thinking and the very being of his mission. Boniface was a man of rules and regulations, one who wanted to introduce Roman canon law. But he could not possibly withstand and oppose an archbishop ordained by the Pope. So he had to make a choice. A high position in the Frisian church was offered him. He might have become an important figure in Frisian (church) history. He might have offered his great organisational talents to a diocese not well organised and managed by Willibrord. However, with the given context he could not give his talents to the church of the Frisians. Therefore he chose to leave Willibrord and the Frisian Lands behind him and to return (again!) to Rome for serious reflection and reorientation.

This Frisian rupture marks the transition from missionary work to

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<sup>107</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype', 76.

<sup>108</sup> Aug. van Berkum expressed this opinion in both articles quoted above. 'De Constituering en Mislukking van de Friese Kerkprovincie' and 'Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype'.

reform work. Boniface's talents turned out to be of better use in situations where the church had already settled down but needed serious improvement. In truth, Boniface was more of a reformer than a missionary. His methods fitted situations of (re)organisation and reform. Willibrord, on the other hand, continued his missionary work, organised around monastic communities in the pagan, impassable countryside of the Frisian Lands without 'civilised' and urban centres: a context comparable to Ireland. Only under his successors, Gregorius, Willehad and Liudger, did there emerge a movement away from the Irish-Columban in the direction of Roman-Benedictine attitudes.<sup>109</sup>

## V. Third visit to the Frisian Lands (754)

### V.1 Motive

After leaving the Frisian Lands Boniface made an impressive career as bishop (722), archbishop (732) and Apostolic Legate of the Roman See (738). He developed into a reformer and organiser of ecclesiastical structures, quite in line with what we would expect based on the earlier drawn portrait of him. Boniface remained a stern defender of the *canonica rectitudo*. He continually sought to refine rules and regulations (in correspondence with Rome and Anglo-Saxon church leaders). He fought against misconduct and wrong practises within the continental churches. He dismissed priests and bishops whenever he deemed it necessary and he detested representatives of the Irish and Gallic traditions. He organised and structured dioceses and he developed an enormous

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<sup>109</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'Van het Charismatische naar het Ambtelijke Bisschopstype', 76.

network of Roman-Anglo-Saxon authority.

It is quite interesting to note that Boniface never again mentions Willibrord or the Frisian Lands. In the correspondence we find only silence on this subject. Up until the very last surviving letter of Boniface.<sup>110</sup> In this he consults Pope Stephan II on the ambitions of the Bishop of Cologne to annex the see belonging to the missionary Willibrord and thus to exterminate an independent episcopal see under the Roman pontiff for the Frisian mission. From this letter we learn too that Karlmann, Prince of the Franks, entrusted the Frisian see to Boniface in order for him to appoint and consecrate a bishop which, according to this letter, he duly did.

The ambitions of the Bishop of Cologne must have been quite agonising for Boniface. Cologne was the diocese promised to him during the Frankish synods. It was approved by Pope Zacharias in a letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 745.<sup>111</sup> However, history shows that not Boniface but Agilolf (later succeeded by Hildegard) became Bishop of Cologne. Boniface had to be satisfied with Mainz, which was below his ambitions. The letter from Pope Zacharias to Boniface in which he elevates Mainz to the status of metropolitan see (4<sup>th</sup> November 751) with Tongres, Cologne, Worms, Speyer and Utrecht under its jurisdiction is false, but a clear example of wishful thinking.<sup>112</sup> These developments surrounding Cologne and Mainz reveal the decline in Boniface's influence and authority. Schieffer writes that this occurred directly following on the years of great accomplishments and reform synods (742-745). Frankish opposition to the influence of Boniface, including the host of other Anglo-

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<sup>110</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 109; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 159-161.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87 (letter 60).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 142 (letter 88); R. Rau, *Briefe des Bonifatius*, 302.



Saxon foreigners, grew.<sup>113</sup> Anglo-Saxon reform lost its power considerably after 745. Schieffer observes, ‘Für Bonifatius freilich begannen mit 746 die Jahre der Sorgen und Enttäuschungen.’<sup>114</sup>

The mission to the Frisian Lands, with Utrecht as missionary centre, had always been part of the Anglo-Saxon continental enterprise. For Boniface it must have been a very bitter pill to swallow that it was precisely the Bishop of Cologne who now claimed authority over the Frisian Mission. This development seduced Boniface, in his old age, into engaging himself for the third time to the Frisian Mission. He wrote an elaborate letter to Pope Stephan II to explain the situation and reject the claim of Cologne. He left Mainz to his successor Lull, and travelled once again to the Frisian Lands:

*He went on board a ship and sailed down the Rhine. Eventually he reached the marshy country of Frisia, crossed safely over the stretch of water, which in their tongue is called Aelmere, and made a survey of the lands round about, which up till then had borne no fruit.*<sup>115</sup>

Here, according to Schieffer, began ‘der letzte Akt seines Lebensdramas.’<sup>116</sup> In 753 Pippin had already acknowledged the position of Boniface and issued a decree granting immunity to the Frisian Diocese. The attack against Anglo-Saxon authority was, for the time being, beaten off: ‘Der Angriff war abgeschlagen, neben dem mittelrheinisch-hessisch-thüringischen Raum war Friesland als

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<sup>113</sup> Schieffer, T., *Winfried-Bonifatius*, 199-256 (V.2, Höhepunkt und Krise der bonifatianischen Reform).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>115</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, chapter 8.

<sup>116</sup> Schieffer, T., *Winfried-Bonifatius*, 269.

wirkungsfeld der Angelsachsen behauptet.’<sup>117</sup>

Boniface now apparently wanted to organise the Frisian diocese with Utrecht as diocesan centre. His pupil Gregory was already the abbot of the missionary monastery at Utrecht. According to Willibald, ‘Eoban had been consecrated bishop in the city which is called Trecht (Utrecht) in order to help Boniface in his old age.’<sup>118</sup> We can only guess at the intentions behind Boniface embarking upon such a large missionary enterprise in his old age, organising a full-blown missionary journey with a large group of missionaries and soldiers deep into the Frisian Lands. Two options are possible. It may have been one step in the struggle against the ambitions of the Bishop of Cologne. According to the letter from Boniface to the Pope, the only reason to claim the Frisian mission was to ensure the actual work of preaching to and converting the Frisian people was being done. This missionary journey, in grand style, may have been undertaken in order to claim the whole of the Frisian Lands, including those east of the Fly, for Utrecht against the aspirations of Cologne. But secondly, this may have been an attempt to claim and inspect the Frisian Lands with the object of organising the church and creating new dioceses (in Bonifatian style).

## V.2 Felix Finis

Both from the description by Willibald and from Boniface’s own letters we get the information that large parts of the Frisian Lands were still ‘without fruit’ while a great proportion of the people were still pagans.<sup>119</sup> Politically, however, Frisian Lands both west and

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>118</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.

<sup>119</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 109; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*,

east of the Fly had been subjected to Frankish rule. But the areas east of the Fly (middle and eastern Friesland) were in reality mainly politically independent and religiously free, coming under proper Frankish and Carolingian rule only in the second half of the eighth century.

Boniface and his companions penetrated deeply into Frisian territory directly east of the Fly (middle-Friesland) and it was here that he found his ‘felix finis’, his glorious end.<sup>120</sup> For our information as to the martyrdom of Boniface we have to rely on the document by Willibald, clearly a Christian and a one-sided account of the proceedings. Willibald paints the well-known picture of a pious band of missionaries led by Saint Boniface, coming with peaceful intentions to preach the good news to the Frisians. The Frisians, however, answer these good intentions with barbaric behaviour. They lust after plunder and murder, and worse, fight over the loot to the point of killing each other and after committing their murderous acts become drunk on sacramental wine.

We cannot easily grasp the facts behind the account given by Willibald because there are very few other surviving sources concerning the death of Boniface. Only the second biographical life of Boniface, the *Vita Altera Bonifatii* gives additional information comparable to Willibald’s account.<sup>121</sup> Although we must be suspicious as to historic accuracy (even more here than in relation to Willibald’s account), this information has become generally known and accepted. The anonymous writer introduced Dokkum as the place of the martyrdom of Boniface. He added the story told by the very old lady, eyewitness to Boniface’s beheading, of how he

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<sup>120</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.

<sup>121</sup> ‘*Vita Altera Bonifatii*’ in *Vitae sancti Bonifatii archiepiscopi Moguntini*, MGH, SRG Vol. 57, ed. W. Levison (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1905), Chapters 13-17.

tried to use the book of the Gospel to deflect the blows from his enemy's sword. This story struck the imagination of those who considered the introduction of the book as a (spiritual) weapon against the violence of the pagans.<sup>122</sup> The death of Boniface could thus be portrayed as a clash between the civilisation of the Book and the barbarism of the pagans.

The *vitae* of Gregorius, Liudger, Willehad and Sturm add very little, in this respect, to Willibald's *vita* and the *Vita Alterea Bonifatii*.

### V.3 Remarks on the Death of Boniface

While Christian writers used their *vitae*, unavoidably, for their own ideological ends, it is important to make some historic remarks in addition to and as commentary upon their information.

In the first place, we need to acknowledge that there is no clarity concerning the precise location of the site of Boniface's death. Willibald wrote that 'they pitched a camp on the banks of the river Bordne, which flows through the territories called Oster- and Westeraeche and divides them.'<sup>123</sup> The river Bordne actually flowed from the east and joined the central water that divided the eastern (Osteraeche) and western (Westeraeche) area of that specific Frisian Land between Fly and Lauwers. This information from Willibald, however, coincides miraculously with the message in the *Continuationes of Fredegarius' Chronicle*. Charles Martell came to incorporate Friesland between Fly and Lauwers in 734. He captured by surprise Osteraeche and Westeraeche (two islands on either bank of the River Bordne) while pitching tent on the banks of the River

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., Chapters 16 and 17.

<sup>123</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.

Bordne.<sup>124</sup> Apparently, this broad river dividing the eastern and western part was called (at least by outsiders) the Bordne, while in reality this was not the Bordne but a peninsula dividing the land. According to Halbertsma, the river Bordne (Boorne) was in its lower course a tidal river and part of a large, disordered marsh which ended in this peninsula.<sup>125</sup> Geographical orientation must have been very difficult, especially to foreigners. For further orientation we should not forget the remark of Willibald when describing the aftermath of Boniface's death. He remarked that the Christians, ready for vengeance, rushed swiftly to their neighbours' frontiers.<sup>126</sup> This might be combined with the remark of the Frisian missionary Liudger writing in his *Life of Gregory* that Gregory was in charge of Utrecht and Dorestad, together with the parts of the Frisian Lands then considered Christian. Explicitly, Liudger writes that the river Lauwers (Laubeki, the river on the eastside of Osteraeche, i.e. east of the whole of Wester- en Osteraeche) had since the government of Pippin been the border between Christian and pagan Frisians.<sup>127</sup> This would imply that a more or less fixed demarcation existed between Christian Frisian and pagan Frisian territory. Willibald situated the frontier at the River Bordne, on the border between Wester- and Osteraeche. From the other sources we might expect the border to be at the River Lauwers (Laubeki), perhaps fifty kilometres to the east. Dokkum, mentioned in later

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<sup>124</sup> *Chronicorum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici Libri IV, cum continuationibus*, MGH, SRG II, ed. B. Krusch (Hannover, 1888), 176.

<sup>125</sup> Halbertsma, H/, *Frieslands Oudheid: Het Rijk van Friese Koningen, Opkomst en Ondergang* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrij, 2000), 229-230.

<sup>126</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, chapter 8.

<sup>127</sup> Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH, SS 15, 1 (Hanover, 1887), chapter 5; Liudger, *It libben fan Gregorius*, trans. in Frisian by K. Bruinsma (Boalsert: It Wite Boekhús, 1997), 56.

traditions, does not really fit either possibility. More important a conclusion, however, is that Boniface had apparently crossed the border between Christian and pagan territory in his missionary endeavour, and that his enemy came from the pagan Frisian direction.

This leads to a second remark made from an historical point of view. Willibald, understandably, describes the Frisian enemy using many negative epithets: pagan, barbarous, violent and drunken. But we might wonder whether these people were simply robbers. This is, of course, a fair possibility. But it is also quite possible to draw a different picture of them. A picture in which Boniface comes purposefully to the Christian-pagan Frisian border in order to claim the whole of the Frisian Lands for the Christian faith. Willibald writes that they ‘destroyed pagan places of worship and turned people away from their pagan errors... The pagan temples and gods were overthrown and churches built in their stead.’<sup>128</sup> Willibald mentions the names of eleven companions: a bishop, three priests, three deacons and four monks. Together with logistics and military protection, this missionary enterprise must have been a serious undertaking. Some codices of the second life of Boniface mention 52 holy martyrs.<sup>129</sup> The whole missionary campaign at the frontier must have greatly disturbed the pagan Frisian community, who must have experienced it as a serious threat and profound provocation of their freedom. In this respect we must not forget the strict laws and rules of the Frisian people, familiar to us from the *Lex Frisionum*.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.

<sup>129</sup> Codices 2 a, b and c of the ‘Vita Altera Bonifatii’ in *Vitae sancti Bonifatii archiepiscopi Moguntini*. MGH, SRG, Vol. 57, ed. W. Levison (Hanover: Hahn Verlag, 1905).

<sup>130</sup> On the *Lex Frisionum*: K. von Richthofen, *Lex Frisionum* (Leeuwarden,

Manslaughter was a very serious offence. Strict fines were laid down for specified misdemeanours. In only few situations could people be killed without fine. One such instance applies to ‘he who demolishes a shrine.’<sup>131</sup> From the *Lex Frisionum*<sup>132</sup> as well as from other *vitae* dealing with the Frisians (e.g. that of Willibrord and Wulfram),<sup>133</sup> we know that those who violated shrines were sacrificed at the seashore to the god whose temple had been dishonoured.

All this considered, together with the fact that the attack took place in the early morning, the normal time for battle, it would not be farfetched to conclude that the attack made by the pagan Frisians was not simple robbery. Rather, that it represented a serious defence of a group of people who were afraid and seriously provoked by the missionary campaign of Boniface and his companions. They attacked the camp of Christian missionaries who had demolished their sacred shrines. It was their legal right, even their religious duty, to do so. In this perspective the death of Boniface should not be labelled murder, but execution or self-defence.<sup>134</sup>

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1866); H. Siems, *Studien zur Lex Frisionum* (Ebelsbach: Gremer Verlag, 1980); J.W. Buma and W. Ebel (eds.), *Westerlauwerssches Recht I, Jus Municipale Frisionum* (Göttingen, 1977); Algra, N.E., *Oudfries Recht 800-1256* (Ljouwert: Fryske Akademy, 2000).

<sup>131</sup> *Lex Frisionum*, V,1 (De hominibus, qui sine compositione occidi possunt).

<sup>132</sup> *Lex Frisionum*, *Additio Sapientum XI, 1* (De honore templorum).

<sup>133</sup> *Vita Willibrordi Archiepiscopi Traiectensis, Auctore Alcuino*, ed. W.

Levison, MGH, SRM VII (Hannover: Hahn Verlag, 1909); Alcuin, ‘The Life of Willibrord’, trans. C.H. Talbot in *Soldiers of Christ*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), Chapter 10-11; *Vita Vulframni episcopi Senonici*, ed. W. Levison. MGH, SRM. (Hannover: Hahn Verlag, 1905), chapter 8.

<sup>134</sup> J.A. Mol, ‘Kerstening van Friesland’ in *Benedictijns Tijdschrift*, 2005/2, 61-71.

In the third place it may be important to remark on the presence of military men and the use of violence at the death of Boniface. Willibald personifies the Frisians as barbarians: they murder, they steal and they get drunk! Special emphasis is given to their supposed violence. Willibrand introduces the enemy thus:

*A vast number of foes armed with spears and shields rushed into the camp brandishing their weapons. Then follows the sermon of Boniface to his fellow missionaries starting with the words: Sons, cease fighting. Lay down your arms, for we are told in Scripture not to render evil for good but to overcome evil by good.*

Directly after this peaceful sermon, Willibald uses the effect of contrast in order to portray the enemy as violently as possible:

*Whilst with these words he was encouraging his disciples to accept the crown of martyrdom, the frenzied mob of pagans rushed suddenly upon them with swords and every kind of warlike weapon, staining their bodies with their precious blood.*<sup>135</sup>

As many historians have acknowledged, we need to be suspicious of this pious language. Of course, Willibald wrote this *Life of St. Boniface* for his own purposes, i.e. to the higher glory of Boniface and for the instruction of the Christian reader. Though we may perhaps appreciate the content of the sermon, we need to be suspicious as to historical accuracy. For it is highly unlikely that Boniface would refuse the protection of the military forces. During his missionary life he had continually availed himself of the

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<sup>135</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.



protection of the Frankish power. During his first visit to the Frisian Lands he did not want to work behind the frontier, without the protection of the Frankish armies. But when in 719 Radbod died Boniface had joined Willibrord in his missionary work. This is thus explicitly described: ‘Being given greater scope for the preaching of the Gospel, he now attempted to bring into the church by baptism the people that had recently been won by the sword.’<sup>136</sup> Later in his career Boniface complained about his contacts with the Frankish court because he had there found persons of whom he could not approve. But he could not avoid these because of the business conducted between church and court.<sup>137</sup> Even at the end of his life he did not travel without military protection. Willibald makes no effort to conceal the presence of servants carrying weapons when the camp was under attack in 754. The servants of the army camp snatched up arms ‘In the twinkling of an eye the attendants sprang from the camp to meet them (the enemy) and snatched up arms here and there to defend the holy band of martyrs’.

From Willibald’s ensuing reportage (following on Boniface’s death) we may understand that violence belonged intrinsically to the Christian (and thus to Frankish) society:

*As the unhappy tidings of the martyr’s death spread rapidly from village to village throughout the whole province and the Christians learned of their fate, a large avenging force, composed of warriors ready to take speedy retribution, was gathered together and rushed swiftly to their neighbours’ frontier. The pagans, unable to withstand the onslaught of the Christians, immediately took flight*

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<sup>136</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*; Alcuin, *The Life of St. Willibrord*, Chapter 13. See also: *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

<sup>137</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 86; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 136.

*and were slaughtered in great numbers. In their flight they lost their lives, their household goods, and their children. So the Christians, after taking as spoil the wives and children, men and maidservants of the pagan worshipers, returned to their homes.*<sup>138</sup>

Willibald makes no effort to conceal this act of retaliation. He apparently senses no tension between the peaceful sermon of Boniface and the vengeance wreaked later by the Christians, demonstrating how very serious was their answering retaliation to the pagan resistance. Such a report actually portrays the (Frisian and Frankish) Christians as violent dominators. They did not accept this act of pagan insubordination. They must especially have been shocked and traumatised by the fact that a large section of the ecclesiastical leadership of the Frisian church had been wiped out. The seriousness of the retaliation may be understandable from this perspective. But it remains quite strange that Willibald makes no effort to hide the discrepancy between the Christian message and their behaviour. And it is equally astonishing that the pagan Frisians were personified as murderous and violent whilst they actually behaved according to their own laws. They did indeed kill an important church leader, but they were acting in full accordance with their (religious) traditions. On the other hand, the Christians responded with retaliation and violence, which was not in accordance with their own Biblical laws!

## **VI Boniface and the Frisian Lands**

This analysis of the three visits paid to the Frisian Lands by Boniface allows us to draw up a comprehensive view of the historical relationship between the two. Boniface's first visit took

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<sup>138</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 8.

place right at the beginning of his international, continental career, embarked upon in relatively old age. The journey was not very successful, despite the efforts of Willibald to conceal this. Boniface on this first trip encountered neither the leadership of the Frisian mission (Willibrord) nor the king of the Franks (Charles Martel), but instead met the King of the Frisians (Radbod) in Trecht. Although he was allowed to inspect the Frisian Lands ‘to discover what possibility there might be of preaching the Gospel in future’ he was utterly disappointed that Radbod had regained control over these areas of the Frisian Lands previously subject to Frankish control. He decided to withdraw and returned home that very same year. This discouraging experience might have meant the premature end of his international pilgrimage, a potential outcome encouraged by his being chosen to succeed Abbot Winbert in Nursling; this offered sufficient reason to stay in the safety of his familiar abbey among his brothers.<sup>139</sup>

But his missionary zeal was, apparently, strong. While uncertain as to the next step in his pilgrimage and not eager again to experience failure, he yet decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome. This discloses his real allegiance and commitment. The Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons had its origin in Rome. Throughout his life Boniface showed the highest regard for ‘Rome’. Here he in 719 received Papal blessing for a mission among the infidel heathens. Already at this stage, though only a priest, Boniface was entrusted with the task of insisting upon use of sacramental discipline prescribed by the official ritual formulary of the Holy Apostolic See.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

<sup>140</sup> Letter of Pope Gregory II to the devout priest Boniface, dated 15<sup>th</sup> May 719. Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 12; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 11.

Upon hearing that the situation in the Frisian Lands had, with the death of Radbod, changed for the better, Boniface took his second chance there. Now he worked for a considerable period of time under Willibrord, archbishop of the Frisians since 695. This must have been one of the finest periods in Boniface's life, as witnessed by the letter written to him by Bugga in which, responding to the apparent enthusiasm of an earlier message from him, she congratulates him on his success in Frisia.<sup>141</sup> But initial enthusiasm changes into serious distress. The rupture with Archbishop Willibrord due to fundamental differences in opinion concerning ecclesiastical policy and spirituality implied a rupture with the Frisian church, an occurrence surely occasioning disappointment and distress for Boniface. And when he found himself again at a loss concerning his future he returned to Rome for recuperation and reorientation.

On 1st December 722 Boniface's career took a new course when Pope Gregory II invested him with episcopal authority. At this point Boniface received his new mission, namely to preach the word of faith to the peoples in Germany.<sup>142</sup> From this point onwards Boniface pursued his impressive career as bishop, archbishop and apostolic delegate. For several years the Frisian Lands did not feature in his life. The name of Willibrord never again turns up in the correspondence, except for the very last letter in the Bonifatian collection. Church politics and ecclesiastical organisational matters led Boniface again to be confronted with the Frisian mission. While he had a grudge against the aspirations of the bishop of Cologne and as he struggled for the Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence on the continent, he felt obliged to return once more to the Frisian Lands.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 18 (letter 15).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 21-22 (letter 18) and 136-137 (letter 86).

In this way he could safeguard the Frisian mission, where he himself had twice failed but which belonged intrinsically to the Anglo-Saxon mission. And perhaps he even had hopes of improving on the ecclesiastical organisation. In this way he could still, in his old age, take revenge on Willibrord and make improvements where Willibrord had failed during his long period of office. But, alas, even this was not granted Boniface. He found his martyrdom in the north of the Frisian Lands in 754, while he had hardly had a chance to restructure ecclesiastical organisation. Even worse, an important section of the Frisian ecclesiastical leadership was exterminated along with him. In thus he left behind him a seriously orphaned Frisian mission.

Both the beginning (716) and the end (754) of Boniface's continental career are to be found in the Frisian Lands. Both visits ended disappointingly, despite Willibald speaking of a 'felix finis'. Boniface's (second) stay in the Frisian Lands between 719 and 722 were initially joyous but ended in the rupture with the Frisian mission. The mission to the Frisian Lands was clearly highly significant to the biography of Boniface. Unfortunately for him, his three visits ended in failure: respectively, rupture and death. The relationship between Boniface and the Frisian Lands must therefore be labelled utterly tragic and highly unfortunate. The Frisian mission must have been the cause for Boniface of a lot of grief and lifelong trauma. This trauma, however, could easily be concealed and denied (by Boniface himself and by others afterwards throughout the ages) by emphasising the great careers that enveloped most of this trauma: that spent in the Anglo-Saxon church and that in the continental Roman church. The *Life of Boniface* by Willibald is a fine example of this phenomenon.

## **VII Boniface's Legacy in the Frisian Lands**

In the introduction to this article we noted how Boniface's legacy had never been claimed as strongly in the Frisian Lands as it has in other parts of Europe, despite the fact that Boniface's biography was strongly intertwined with the history of the Frisian Lands. The Frisians have, of course, always been aware of Boniface's importance to their early history and of the fact that they had an 'own famous martyr'. But this feeling never developed into a lasting identification with the personality of Boniface. In order to understand this phenomenon we must try to grasp the implications of Boniface's mission (and of the Anglo-Saxon mission in general) to the Frisian people. Based on the earlier information concerning his three visits, we will now draw a picture of the implications of the Anglo-Saxon mission to this region and to the Frisian people. We do this by considering the impact of Boniface's legacy (and of the general process of Christianisation) to the 'culture and religion', the 'freedom' and the 'unity' of the Frisians.

## VII.1 Culture and Religion

Boniface carried to the continent strict Roman adherence and canonical order, in Anglo-Saxon guise. This tendency towards universalisation, with emphasis on strict canonical order, brought him into serious conflict with the sub-cultures of the continental churches. Boniface fought ferociously with opponents of Roman order. His fixation on rules led Boniface to chase up bishop, priest and ordinary Christian, even up to the point of Pope and kings being seriously rebuked for their behaviour.<sup>143</sup> If this was already the case

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<sup>143</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 50 (Boniface to Zacharias) and letter 73 (Boniface to Ethelbald); E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 60 and 102-108.

for Boniface's attitude towards deviations within the church, we can imagine his attitude towards the *traditional* cultures and religion. This was pretty narrow-minded, and its implication was that he had neither consideration nor sensitivity for the traditional religion and cultures of the Germanic peoples. He considered them simply to be heathen, barbaric and steeped in sin and evil darkness. This meant that the religion and cultures of the non-Christians were to be eliminated. In regard to the Frisian Lands, Willibald writes several times that 'he destroyed pagan temples and shrines, built churches and chapels and gained numerous converts to the church.' His missionary method was, therefore, quite straightforward and unambiguous.

Many people, including scholars, hold the opinion that this attitude simply reflects the general attitude of the Christian church and the commonly accepted missionary strategy of that time. But this is not correct. We possess explicit witnesses to other opinions being prevalent in the eighth century. It is for example hardly imaginable that Boniface would not have been aware of the advice of Pope Gregory in a letter to Abbot Mellitus during the early period of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons (601). This was an explicit message from Rome to the Bishop of Canterbury concerning the missionary method to be practised:

*We wish you to inform him (i.e. Bishop Augustine) that we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we*

*hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.*<sup>144</sup>

This letter of Gregory (the Great) emanates a spirit of accommodation and adaptation.<sup>145</sup> Though it certainly also postulates serious antagonism between Christianity and pagan traditions, it shows more consideration and respect for the traditions of the people who are to receive the Christian gospel. Beside antagonism a bridge is proffered between the old traditions and the new Christian religion.

Another witness as regards moderation in missionary strategies is notably found in a letter written by a friend and colleague to Boniface himself! Bishop Daniel of Winchester wrote this letter during Boniface's early years as a bishop in Germany.<sup>146</sup> He was trying to indicate how Boniface might 'most readily overcome the resistance of those uncivilised people.' Daniel suggests convincing the heathens by argumentation:

*These and many similar things, which it would take long to enumerate, you ought to put before them, not offensively or so as to anger them, but calmly and with great moderation. At intervals you should compare their superstitions with our Christian doctrines, touching upon them from the flank, as it were, so that the pagans, thrown into confusion rather than angered, may be ashamed of their*

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<sup>144</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 92.

<sup>145</sup> For a proper treatise on the attitude of Christian churches towards local cultures (including terminology): Shorter, A., *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>146</sup> Bonifatii Epistulae, letter 23; E. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 26-28.



*absurd ideas and may understand that their infamous ceremonies and fables are well known to us.*<sup>147</sup>

This letter too breathes an entirely different spirit than that radiated by Boniface in his own attitude. Both Gregory and Daniel express a certain level of love and respect for the people to be converted, and for their traditions. Boniface appears more of an extremist, prone to tread the road of confrontation and antithesis. We may conclude that Boniface certainly knew of other strategies but chose to act ruthlessly towards pagans outside the church and rigorously towards the “heretics” within it.

Boniface must have shown very little respect for the culture and religion of the Frisian people during his three visits. To the Frisian people the implied message must have been crystal clear. The acceptance of Christianity would imply a rejection of their traditional religion and culture. Christian identity would imply a rejection of Frisian identity, as the indigenous culture of the Frisian people was rejected as pagan, inferior and uncivilised. Therefore becoming a Christian would mean acceptance of another, foreign, tradition, both culturally and religiously. This explains why the traditional Frisians saw the coming of Boniface as a serious threat to their traditions and identity. His coming to the northern parts of the Frisian Lands indeed resulted in the confrontation always sought by Boniface. The final confrontation showed that Christian identity, at that stage, was incompatible with Frisian identity.

This intolerance of Frisian traditions illumines one of the reasons why Boniface never earned pronounced esteem in the Frisian Lands. Boniface’s Roman universalism stood diametrically opposed

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 27.

to particular Frisian identity, just as acceptance of Christianity implied the rejection of their ancestral traditions.

## VII.2 Freedom

As Wilfrid preached daily to the Frisian people with King Aldgisl's permission (in 678),<sup>148</sup> and Willibrord proclaimed the Word of God without fear,<sup>149</sup> Boniface also received permission from King Radbod to preach the gospel during his first visit. This illustrates the tolerance of the Frisian kings towards the Christian religion. The Frisians were used to travel and had been exposed both to other cultures and to the Christian religion. Plenty of evidence is available to show that they were in touch with and were aware of the military, economic and cultural changes of their era.<sup>150</sup> They were neither living in isolation nor were they purely negative in their attitude towards cultural change. The story told in the *Life of Wilfrid* illustrates their (religious) pragmatism:

*In the pagans' eyes his doctrine gained strong backing by the fact that his arrival was marked by an unusually large catch of fish. Indeed, the year was an abnormally fruitful one for every kind of produce. All this they attributed to the glory of the God whom the holy man was preaching. So his preaching was accepted and that year he baptised all but a few of the chiefs and many thousands of*

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<sup>148</sup> *Vita Wilfridi Primi Episcopi Eboracensis Autore Stephano*; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, Chapter 26; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 303.

<sup>149</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*; Alcuin, *The Life of St. Willibrord*, Chapter 9.

<sup>150</sup> Halbertsma, H., *Friesland's Oudheid: Het Rijk van Friese Koningen, Opkomst en Ondergang* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Matrijs, 2000), Part II and III passim.

*the common people ...*<sup>151</sup>

But the Frisians were at the same time deeply suspicious of Frankish aspirations to military expansion. Radbod fought against such, and throughout the period of Christianisation of the Frisian Lands we hear of skirmishes against Frankish domination; a situation that lasted right up until the times in which Liudger and Willehad worked as missionaries in the northern Frisian Lands. During the last decades of the eighth century these men were still forced to withdraw from their missionary field due to uprisings of Saxons and Frisians.<sup>152</sup>

Had Boniface stayed among the Frisians (as Wilfrid apparently did) he might have become a missionary to the Frisian people. However, he chose (like Willibrord) to do his missionary work under the protection of the Frankish armies. Only when Radbod had died and the authority of Charles Martel been strengthened did Boniface join the missionary forces in the Frisian Lands:

*The ending of the persecution raised by the savage King Radbod permitted him to scatter abroad the seed of Christian teaching to feed with wholesome doctrine those who had been famished by pagan superstition... The divine light illumined their hearts, the authority of the glorious Charles over the Frisians was*

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<sup>151</sup> Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, Chapter 26.

<sup>152</sup> Altfred, *Vita Liudgeri*, Chapters 18-19; *Vita Willehadi*, ed. A. Poncelet, *Acta sanctorum* (Brussels, 1910) Chapters 4-8. Trans. 'The Life of St. Willehad' in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints: Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 279-291. See also: Latourette, K.S., *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 2: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty 500-1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938, 1966), 80-106.

*strengthened, the word of truth was blazened abroad, the voice of preachers filled the land ...*<sup>153</sup>

In the *Life of Willibrord* too, co-operation between the military and the missionaries is quite succinctly described:

*Charles brought many nations under the power of the Franks, and among these were the Frisians, whose lands were added to his dominions after the defeat of Radbod... Being given greater scope for the preaching of the Gospel, he (Willibrord) now attempted to bring into the church by baptism the people that had recently been won by the sword.*<sup>154</sup>

During the process of Christianisation of the Frisian Lands, military domination and missionary activity grew increasingly strongly entwined, climaxing during the reign of Charlemagne when this sovereign himself ultimately appointed bishops like Liudger and Willehad here. He violently forced Saxons and Frisians into Christianity.<sup>155</sup>

For the Frisians it was, therefore, difficult to distinguish between Anglo-Saxon missionaries and representatives of the Frankish Empire. It was difficult for them to distinguish between the coming of the Gospel and the coming of the Frankish armies. Boniface and his colleagues had clearly identified themselves with Frankish power and culture. This allowed Christianity to metamorphose, from the perspective of the Frisians, into the religion of the enemy.

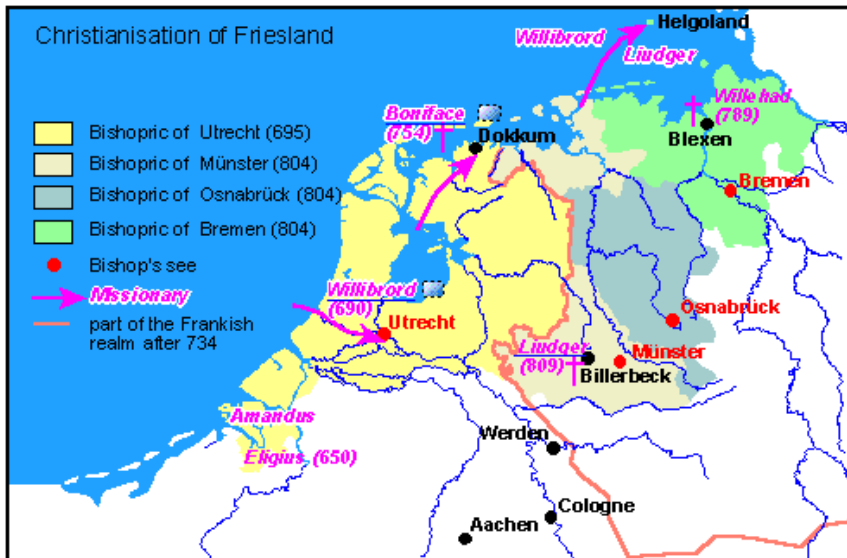
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<sup>153</sup> *Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii*; Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, Chapter 5.

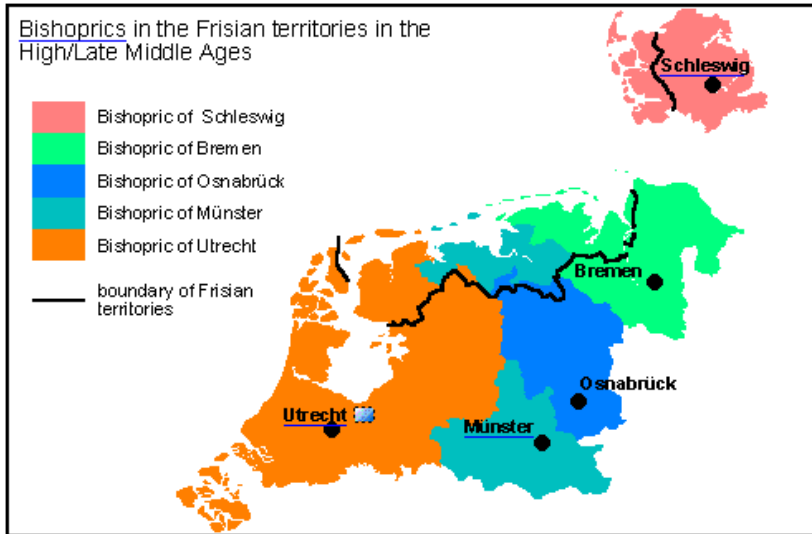
<sup>154</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*; Alcuin, *The Life of St. Willibrord*, Chapter 13.

<sup>155</sup> See the ‘Capitulare Saxonicum’ and ‘Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae,’ ed. A. Boretius, *Capitularia Regnum Francorum 1*, MGH, Leges, Section 2 (Hanover, 1883).

The coming of Christianity implied to them not just the defeat of their religion and culture but also the loss of their freedom. For them the coming of Christianity implied military conquest. Boniface brought the message of freedom in Christ. This freedom, however, was incompatible with Frisian freedom.



(Christianisation of Friesland)



(Bishoprics in the Frisian territories in the High/Late Middle Ages)

### VII.3 Unity

Indigenous peoples often acquire their tribal identity and unity during a process of struggle against some external (colonial) force. This may have happened to the Frisians in the process of Frankish annexation and Christian evangelisation. According to the *Lex Frisionum*, the Frisians were aware of their geographical territory and divided it into ‘provinces’. The *Lex Frisionum* was a united law for all Frisians but the provinces also had their own specific laws and customs. Unfortunately, the combined process (of annexation and evangelisation) led to political and ecclesiastical dissection of the Frisian Lands.

Boniface at the end of his life tried to protect the independent Frisian diocese from the aspirations of the Bishop of Cologne.

Undoubtedly he would have tried to organise the diocese according to ecclesiastical rules and regulations. He might have tried to create separate dioceses in the northern Frisian Lands. Unfortunately, his death prevented him from doing so. Instead it plunged the Frisian church even further into crisis, wiping out a large section of the ecclesiastical personnel infrastructure.

His death is followed by a period of silence in the sources. From the *Life of Liudger* we hear of no bishop in Utrecht. Altfrid writes explicitly that Abbot Gregorius remained a priest.<sup>156</sup> From this *vita* we also get the impression of a diocese at a crossroads. Gregorius sent Alubert to be ordained a bishop in York, while Liudger joined him to become a student under Alcuin. But Alberik (successor to Gregorius in 775) was later ordained bishop and Liudger a priest in Cologne. Utrecht was certainly not, as Boniface had wished it to become, an independent and separate diocese under Rome. At the beginning of the ninth century Utrecht became a sub-diocese under Cologne.<sup>157</sup> The failure of the Frisian diocese had become a fact.<sup>158</sup>

Charlemagne himself established new dioceses in the Frisian Lands. In 787 he appointed Willehad as bishop in the new diocese of Bremen, while Liudger in 805 became Bishop of Münster. Surprisingly, the diocese of Liudger was geographically more widespread than Münster. He retained within it the five Frisian Lands (Hugmerchi, Hunusga, Fivelga, Emisga and Fediritga) in

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<sup>156</sup> Altfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, Chapter 10.

<sup>157</sup> Leupen, P.H.D., 'Sint Salvator en Sint Maarten, Willibrord en Bonifatius' in *Willibrord, zijn Wereld en zijn Werk*. Middeleeuwse studies, band VI, eds. P. Bange and A.G. Weiler (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1990), 324.

<sup>158</sup> Aug. van Berkum, 'De Constituering en Mislukking van de Friese Kerkprovincie' in *Willibrord, zijn Wereld en zijn Werk*. Middeleeuwse studies, band VI, eds. P. Bange and A.G. Weiler (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1990) 159-174.

which he had earlier worked.<sup>159</sup> A small portion of the Frisian Lands even belonged to the bishopric of Osnabrück, established in 804.

The result of this ecclesiastical organisation was that the Frisian Lands became utterly divided. Friesland west of the River Lauwers remained under Utrecht. Friesland between the Lauwers and the Ems became largely part of Liudger's diocese. And Friesland between the Ems and Wezer (today Ost-Friesland in north-western Germany) became part of the diocese of Bremen. Just as the Saxon territory and people had been divided into eight dioceses, so the Frisian territory and people were divided into at least three components. Their unity as a people and the unity of their geographical territory were of no significance in the construction of Roman ecclesiastical organisation.<sup>160</sup> Unity was certainly important for the Roman church, but in a very different way. It is indeed correct that the Anglo-Saxon missionaries, and foremost Boniface, stressed the unity and uniformity of the church. This unity, however, was incompatible with Frisian tribal and territorial unity.

The pity for the Frisians of the eighth century was that Boniface chose not to stay in the Frisian Lands when working with Willibrord. Boniface might have been able properly to organise the Frisian church, which might then have led to a Frisian archdiocese with bishoprics in several of the Frisian Lands. This might have instigated a church with Frisian identity within a specified geographical territory. But in reality the coming of Christianity, including the work of Boniface, led from the outset to the partition of the Frisian people and their lands. This partition has left its deep traces and has had its fundamental influence on the course of

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<sup>159</sup> Altfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, Chapters 19-21.

<sup>160</sup> In the nineteenth century a similar thing happened (for example) with several tribes in Africa, when colonial borders cut tribal lands into two or more pieces.



history.

### **VIII Boniface and the Frisian Lands: A Precarious Relationship**

In our concluding remarks at the end of Part VI we described the relationship of Boniface with the Frisian Lands as both tragic and unfortunate, for his three journeys ended respectively in failure, rupture and death. But the relationship of the inhabitants of the Frisian Lands with Boniface has also been precarious. Consciously or unconsciously, the Frisian people have been aware of the meaning and implications of the Anglo-Saxon mission for their own traditions. They knew that the coming of Christianity was a threat to their own culture, freedom and unity: Christian identity was incompatible with Frisian identity; freedom in Christ was incompatible with Frisian freedom; and the unity of the Church was incompatible with Frisian tribal and territorial unity. This led to an ambiguous attitude towards the saint. Gratitude towards Boniface and those who preached the gospel under very difficult circumstances has never been absent. But the antagonism between his message and Frisian culture and religion, their freedom, and their unity, was hard to swallow. The Frisians have readily received the light of the Gospel, but the dark images drawn of their ancestors have never been easily accepted. The violence of the Frisian past has been acknowledged, but the brutality of the sword and the military conquest during the period of Christianisation has not been taken lightly. The need to commemorate the death of Saint Boniface has been recognised, but the lack of remembrance of those Frisians ‘who were slaughtered in great numbers’ has not been felt justified. This explains why Boniface has never become a great Frisian hero and why he has never been commonly praised as ‘the greatest

Frisian martyr' (of course, they could not say 'the greatest Frisian') or 'the apostle of the Frisians' (despite the opinion of the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*). This sort of pride, generally to be found among the English and the Germans, has been absent among the Frisians.

It seems that during development of the unification of Europe Boniface's star has been in the ascendant. Since Adenauer proclaimed him 'European' and Schieffer wrote his famous book on *Boniface and the Christian Foundation of Europe* (both 1954) Boniface has increasingly been lauded as 'the first European'. Around this time, even in Fryslân, there emerged a kind of Boniface revival. Besides the Catholic revival initiated by Father Titus Brandsma during the first half of the twentieth century, a quite remarkable opinion was voiced by Protestant journalist and poet, Fedde Schurer. Also in 1954, on the occasion of commemoration of the 1,200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of Boniface, Schurer wrote a play in the Frisian language titled 'Bonifatius'.<sup>161</sup> In this he portrays Boniface as a heroic leader who led the Frisians away from their pagan and violent isolation and into the Christian international community. At the end of the play Schurer puts into the mouths of two Frisian peasants his key message; after the murder of Boniface the first peasant says, 'I will not get over the reality that my people have done this'. The other replies, 'This is the narrative of the blackest day in Fryslân's history'.<sup>162</sup>

But at the beginning of the twenty-first century this earlier (and temporary) admiration appears to have evaporated. Despite the fact that Boniface would seem to meet a superficial need for 'European saints'. And that in 2004 the Roman Catholic Church in Dokkum

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<sup>161</sup> Schurer, F., *Bonifatius: Histoarysk Spul yn trije Bidriuwen*. Friese en Nederlandse tekst. (Drachten: Laverman, 1954).

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

and the diocese of Groningen organised several commemorative activities to celebrate the martyrdom of their patron saint,<sup>163</sup> the general mood in Fryslân now differs fundamentally from that of fifty years ago. Very few Frisians would today repeat the words uttered by the peasants in Schurer's play. They would surely regret the violent confrontation, but at the same time insist that Boniface had been asking for it.

The fact that a more critical stance towards Boniface developed in Fryslân during the period 1954-2004 may be illustrated by reinterpretation of his iconographic attributes: the sword and the book. In the iconography St. Boniface is usually portrayed with (among others) sword and book as attributes, as in the well-known engraving by Cornelis Bloemaert of 1630.<sup>164</sup>

The sword is piercing the book. This undoubtedly refers to the moment just before his death, when as described in the '*Vita Altera*'<sup>165</sup> he tried to protect himself by using the book of the gospels to fend off the violence of the sword. But more significance may be found here. The image also refers to the Biblical passage in Ephesians concerning 'the armour of God'.<sup>166</sup> In this passage the word of God is called 'the sword of the Spirit'. The word of God was for Boniface like a sword, perhaps even a double-edged sword,

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<sup>163</sup> The Bishop of Groningen wrote a pastoral letter on this occasion. Mgr. W.J. Eijk, *Monnik en Pastor: Brief over Bonifatius bij gelegenheid van het Bonifatius-jaar 2004* (Bisdom Groningen, 2003).

<sup>164</sup> Kotková, O., 'Willibrord und Bonifatius in der Darstellung von Bloemaert und Colaert' in *Bonifatius: Vom Angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen*, eds. M. Imhof und G. Stasch (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2004), 203-218.

<sup>165</sup> 'Vita Altera' in *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRG 57 (Hanover, 1905), Chapter 16.

<sup>166</sup> Ephesians 6: 10-18.

by which to judge the nations and their cultures.<sup>167</sup>



Throughout the centuries the Frisians have been accustomed to the idea that their ancestors were barbarians: a primitive and violent nation, as proven by the murder of Boniface. A nation that preferred the sword and primitive violence to the civilisation represented by

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<sup>167</sup> Psalm 149:6; Hebrews 4: 12.

the Book as shown them by Boniface. But there has been a change in this deeply ingrained self-image. New and quite different connotations have become attached to the Bonifatian attributes of sword and book. For the sword may just as well symbolise Boniface's violent rejection of traditional culture and religion. And it may be extrapolated as a symbol of the military expansionism that accompanied missionary work. Here we have a kind of reversal of perspective: the violence of the sword was used not only by those ripe for the missionary, but by the missionary himself. Not only was Boniface the (only) victim of Frisian violence but the Frisians themselves fell victim to the violence of the missionary. The symbolism of the book as attribute is similarly endowed with new connotations. The pierced Bible now symbolises the message of the Gospel being violated by the brutality of the sword. The way in which Boniface used the sword has, in this interpretation, violated the message of the Christian Gospel. Auke Jelsma may thus wonder whether Boniface's use of violence did not transfix and mutilate the biblical message.<sup>168</sup>

In this article we have tried to study and re-establish the relationship between Boniface and the Frisian Lands. It has become clear of what fundamental, if rather ill-omened, importance the Frisian Lands were to the biography of Boniface. Seen from the Frisian position, from between Britain and the European continent, Boniface was a very gifted Anglo-Saxon scholar and monk who became a missionary and made a brilliant ecclesiastical career in the continental Church, but whose relationship with the Frisian Lands was quite disastrous. His Frisian experiences must have been very

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<sup>168</sup> Jelsma, A., *Het Leven als leerschool: De Preken van Bonifatius* (Laren/Hilversum: eSplanade, 2003), 4-5.

disheartening and have left him with extremely ambiguous feelings. But, at the same time, the relationship of the Frisians to Boniface has been marked by equal ambiguity. On the one hand Boniface gave his life in order to bring the Gospel to the Frisian Lands. But on the other he represented a stream of cultural and political imperialism that has always been detested. To most Frisians, both Christian and non-Christian, it has been quite clear that the Christian church, right back to the Christianisation of the Frisian Lands, has taken a negative stand vis-à-vis Frisian traditions, be it culture, religion, freedom or unity. Boniface, as one of the missionaries at the cradle of the newly arrived Christianity, has become a symbol of the rejection of Frisian traditions and has come to represent an icon of Christian cultural intolerance.

It is therefore one of the ironies of history that due to his death in the Frisian Lands Boniface's name and these same Frisian Lands have been and will be forever connected. Despite their ambiguous and precarious historical relationship, they seem condemned to togetherness. This is indeed ironic when we consider that Boniface's name would probably have occupied not much more than a footnote in Frisian history had he not died during that regrettable confrontation in Anno Domini 754.