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*The Rhine and Barbarians Beyond*

For thousands of years, the Rhine has served as one of the most important physical boundaries in European history. As a river, it was a crossroads for trade and commerce, an ancient superhighway for fast and efficient travel in the dangerous lands of Northern Europe. As a boundary, however, it had even more significance. South and west of the Rhine was the Roman Empire, the self-proclaimed bastion of strength, authority, civilization, culture, and wine. On the other side was Germany, a land of forests, cold winters, restless barbarians, danger, and beer. Like the Danube in the Eastern Empire, the Rhine was the end of a state and a culture and the beginning of something entirely different.

Even as Europe transitioned from one age to another and the Empire's former military might slowly crumbled to ruin, the Rhine, like a ghostly representative of a dying regime, continued to serve as a cultural boundary just as potently as it had five hundred years ago. New kingdoms rose up to replace the Roman authority in Gaul, first as Roman protectorates, or *foederatii*, and eventually taking power for themselves. These kingdoms found themselves not just the new rulers of a piece of ground, but the inheritors of a rich cultural, religious, and legal tradition that would eventually absorb them into the Roman fold.

Thus is introduced a unique setting in the study of European history: the Rhine valley between the sixth and eighth centuries, for it was a region of cultural exchange in an era of transition, a crossroads of both time and place. This essay covers two significant periods of change, beginning with a general description and analysis of the first, the events of the sixth and seventh centuries that provide the setting for the second. The main actor of the second period is Saint Boniface, an English bishop who resolved to cross the Rhine into the land of the uncivilized Germans and convert them to orthodox Roman Christianity. As a political figure, he demonstrated the cooperation between the Frankish kingdom and the Catholic Church that profitted both parties and made evangelizing possible in Germany. As a missionary, his works illustrate the unique development of German Christianity as it incorporated the older pagan faith. As an

English cleric, his personal ideals and principles represented the orthodox nature of English Christianity and the tight connection it had with the Church of Rome. A study of his life, therefore, provides the perfect figure through which one can understand the nature of this complex region in a significant era.

With the disappearance of the Roman army as the enforcer of order in the northern provinces, a new political landscape was thus established in the fifth and sixth centuries that would remain for three hundred years. In Gaul, the first significant power to usurp the Romans was the kingdom of the Visigoths, who settled in Aquitaine and, with Roman assistance, were responsible for stopping the Huns in their savage plunder of Gaul at the Battle of Catalaunia Plains in 451. Soon afterwards, however, the Franks, a German tribe that lived along the shores of the north Rhine, found a leader in King Clovis and moved south against the Visigoths, killing their king, Alaric II, in 506. This new regime became firmly established as the Merovingian dynasty.

Meanwhile, Britain was in the midst of a political and ethnic transition that would forever shape its future. The Romans virtually abandoned the island as their empire fell apart in the early fifth century, leaving it in the hands of the original Celtic inhabitants. As the Venerable Bede tells the story, the island was so ravaged by marauding Picts and Irish that in 449, King Vortigern invited the Angles and Saxons to come from their homeland in Germany and save the island from the raiders, thus ushering in a new period of British history.<sup>1</sup> As other historical research has confirmed, the island was indeed beset by numerous German tribes: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Eventually these peoples conquered most of the island.

In 597, roughly a hundred and fifty years after the Germanic tribes had established themselves in Britain, Pope Gregory the Great initiated the great mission to the island, led by his trusted ally Augustine. Although the mission began with humble beginnings and met fierce internal struggle along the way, it was ultimately successful as Britons and Anglo-Saxons alike converted across the island. By the end of the eighth century, the Church of England had become a powerful institution, and English bishops and missionaries were active all over Europe.

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<sup>1</sup>Bede, The Ecclesiastical History of the English People 1.16, trans. Leo Shirley-Price (New York, 1990), p. 64.

The mission of Saint Boniface involved a deep and intricate interaction between these three cultures: the barbarians across the Rhine, the established Gallo-Romans of Francia, and the zealous English clerics from the island kingdoms. The mission took place in a time of great transition on the Continent: the great kingdom of the family of Merovech was coming to an end, and a new family was on the verge of seizing power. The story of the three peoples coming face to face in the name of the Christian Church at Rome provides a deep insight into their different identities and self-perception in a rapidly changing Europe.

When the Emperor Theodosius decreed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in 391, he left an indelible mark on the surface of Europe that has impacted its history ever since. Upon taking over the reins of control in Gaul, England, Spain, and Italy, barbarians found that they had not just inherited political, cultural, and legal traditions, but also a religious tradition that was inextricably bound to the other three. By the fifth century, bishops often had more control over wealth and property than most secular rulers, and this was something that ambitious kings like the Franks had to take into account.

Due to a twist of fortune, the Frankish kingdom became the right hand man of the Papacy in Rome. In Italy, Spain, and North Africa, the barbarian kingdoms all practiced Arian Christianity. Arius was a bishop of Alexandria who, beginning about 320, argued that the Son, as the offspring of the Father, could not be his equal, an argument that, if carried to its logical resolution, ultimately denied the divinity of Christ. This was condemned as heresy at the Council of Nicea in 325, but continued to be popular in the East and was readily picked up by barbarians who passed through those lands. As Gregory of Tours wrote, King Clovis, in a way very similar to Constantine, converted himself and his army to Christianity in 499 in hope of a military victory: “‘Jesus Christ,’ he said, ‘you who Clotild maintains to be the Son of the living God, you who deign to give help to those in travail and victory o those who trust in you, in faith I beg the glory of your help. If you will give me victory over my enemies, and if I may have evidence of that miraculous power which the people dedicated to your name say that they have experienced, then I will

believe in you and I will be baptized in your name . . . Even as he said this the Alamanni turned their backs and began to run away.”<sup>2</sup>

Clovis’ wife, Clotild, had a key influence on the future of the Frankish kingdom, for she was Catholic, and when Clovis followed suit he gave his kingdom a tie to Rome that was unique among the barbarians. Backed by the military might of Clovis, the Frankish Church became a bastion of Catholicism in Europe, thus absorbing Roman religion and administration into the Frankish military in a unique political synthesis that rivaled the claims of the Byzantines as to who was the true successor of Rome: “If the cultural legacy of Rome was claimed as a monopoly by the aristocracy, it was the military that belonged to the Franks, as it had to generations of imperial Germans before them . . . The unique achievement of Clovis and his successors was that, through his conquest and conversion, he was able to begin to reunite these two splintered halves of the Roman heritage.”<sup>3</sup> As the dominant kingdom in Europe with the might to back up its word, the kingdom of the Franks would carry on the religious legacy of Rome.

The Franks, like many other tribes, looked back to the glorious to trace their lineage. Merovech, the legendary founder of the Merovingian dynasty, “was conceived when Chlodio’s wife went swimming, and encountered a Quinotaur [prove dictionary definition], . . . The royal dynasty, thus, was thought to have had a supernatural origin.”<sup>4</sup> Looking farther back in the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, an anonymous text written in 727, the Franks owe their origins to Priam and Anetor, two Trojan princes who settled in Thrace after their city’s destruction. Centuries later, they received their their name from the Emperor Valentinian in the following story:

At this time [376] the perverse and rotten Alans revolted against the Emperor Valentinian and the Roman people. Then Valentinian moved a very large army from Rome, he went against the Alans, entered battle with them and overcame them and conquered. And the Alans having been defeated fled beyond the Danube river and entered the Maeotian swamps. In addition, the emperor said:

“Whoever is able to enter into these swamps and throw out this depraved people, I will concede to

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<sup>2</sup>Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* 2.30, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London, 1974), p. 143.

<sup>3</sup>Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: the Creation & Transformation of the Merovingian World*, (New York, 1988), p. 93.

<sup>4</sup>Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (Harlow, 1994), p. 37.

them remission of the donatory tribute for a period of ten years. Then the Trojans gathered together and prepared ambushes in the way they had been taught and knew. They entered the Maotian swamps along with other Romans, and they drove the Alans out and cut them down with the edge of the sword. Because of the harness and the daring of their hearts the Emperor Valentinian called the Trojans Franks. In the Attic tongue Frank means fierce.<sup>5</sup>

This passage, while a great piece of legend, also serves to illustrate Frankish identity. The Franks claimed the strength of pagan gods and the nobility of Roman heroes. Like Theodoric of the Ostrogoths, Clovis was aware that his people were the inheritors of a noble history; he was not just King of the Franks but Honorary Consul of the Romans, appointed by Anastasius in 511. With this respect for the Roman institutions, he maintained many of their governmental offices, laws, and customs in his administration. In addition to the noble Roman connection, the Franks also saw the divine in themselves. The Franks carried on another aspect of the Roman Empire that would become crucial in the years to follow: the border of their kingdom, like that of the Romans', ended at the shores of the Rhine. They had little success in subjugating the peoples east of the river, and thus the perception of identity continued unmarred from the days of Rome -- the German tribes continued to be a hostile, barbarous people, different in both religion and culture from their Frankish neighbors.

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the Frankish kingdom was one of the great institutions of Catholicism, active in lands both across the Channel to the north and the river to the east. The English mission might not have been successful without the influence of King Æthelbert's Frankish wife Bertha. In 601, the bishops of Vienne, Arles, Lyons, Toulon, Marseilles, Chalon-sur-Saône, Metz, Paris, Rouen, Angers, and Gap all offered their support for the mission in England.<sup>6</sup> Queen Brunhild, regent of Theuderic and Theudebert, was praised by Pope Gregory, "who announced that Brunhild had done more for the mission than anyone except God."<sup>7</sup> The Frankish bishop, Amandus, set the first precedent for "preaching to pagans outside the lands which had once been part of the Roman Empire,"<sup>8</sup> by making

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<sup>5</sup>Anonymous, *Liber Historiae Francorum* 2, trans. Burt Bachrach (Lawrence, 1973), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>Ian Wood, "The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury," *Speculum* 69 (1994): 6.

<sup>7</sup>Wood, "Augustine," p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 313.

inroads in modern-day Belgium and establishing bases in Ghent and Utrecht. Interestingly, he relied on forced conversion, a tactic different from the later English bishops, and had very limited success.

Amandus' work does display, however, the level of involvement that the early Merovingians had in missionary efforts.

Beyond the realm of the missionary, Frankish monasticism was also highly influential during this time. Many princesses of Anglo-Saxon stock were sent to Frankish nunneries to be abbesses.<sup>9</sup> When Wilfrid, the British bishop of York, built monasteries in the later seventh century, he used Frankish stonework and decorated them with Frankish sculpture.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the Frankish monasteries are now in ruins and their English counterparts are the only remnants of Frankish church architecture that stand today. This was one of the most powerful physical symbols of the ties between the English Church and the Frankish Church.

It is important to keep in mind that, despite its religious zeal, the Frankish court was no tool of the Pope. They had many things to gain politically with their involvement in England, particularly from the kingdom of Kent, which was in such close proximity to their own and bound in marriage to the Merovingian family. The level of influence that they had in the success of the English mission shows that they were one of the most effective allies of the Roman Church. Indeed, in Pope Gregory's eyes, "his ideals for England and Francia were interlinked,"<sup>11</sup> and he would have certainly wanted to create a Church in England that showed the same kind of loyalty to Rome that Francia exhibited at the time. Although Gregory would not live to see this, his investment in the island kingdom would soon pay off.

One hundred and twenty-eight years after the death of Clovis, Dagobert I died in 639 and left the Frankish kingdom in the hands of his two sons, Sigebert III and Clovis II, neither of whom were strong rulers, nor were their descendants. The next hundred years was a century of decentralization for the Franks -- many of the eastern provinces such as Frisia, Thuringia, Alemannia, and Bavaria broke off into

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<sup>9</sup>Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup>Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup>Wood, "Augustine," p. 16.

autonomous duchies. The *maior domus*, or Mayor of the Palace, grew increasingly more powerful, and soon the Merovingian kings were mere puppets of vying dukes and *maiores*.

The *maior* Pippin II, and his more successful stepson Charles Martel (Charles the Hammer), succeeded in consolidating power for themselves, thus laying the foundations for a new dynasty of powerful kings, the Carolingians. One of the most important differences between the old regime and the new was the place of the bishops. In the old Merovingian dynasty, the bishops were the representatives of Rome, the sole possessors of spiritual power, and were not at all subordinate to the kings. Charles Martel, however, created a new church, “controlled by his kinsmen and most trusted associates, without regard for religious or educational formation, local cultural traditions, and the niceties of episcopal election or consecration.”<sup>12</sup> In this new system, bishops were just another class of nobility -- spiritual guidance was left to the abbots.

As the Frankish kingdom fell into disorder, its spiritual influence and prestige collapsed. The British missionary Saint Boniface, in his letters to Pope Zacharias, continually lamented over the deplorable spiritual degredation and moral laxity of the clerics of Francia:

And certain bishops are to be found among them who, although they deny that they are fornicators or adulterers, are drunkards and shiftless men, given to hunting and to fighting in the army like soldiers and by their own hands shedding blood, whether of heathens or Christians.<sup>13</sup>

Although Ian Wood argues at length that Boniface is not the epitome of a non-partisan intellectual and stresses that his letters “are not a reliable guide to the late seventh-century Merovingian Church,” he does concede that “the opening years of the eighth century saw political developments which affected the Merovingian Church for the worse.”<sup>14</sup> Whether one believes the harsh judgment of Boniface or the moderate view of Wood, the Frankish Church was unquestionably being overshadowed by the rise of the Church in England.

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<sup>12</sup>Geary, *Before France*, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup>Ephraim Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface* 50 (New York, 1940), p. 58

<sup>14</sup>Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 252.

In 597, Pope Gregory began an intensive campaign of conversion in Britain, “the return of Britain to Europe and to her past.”<sup>15</sup> For seventy years, as the Merovingian kingdom fell into confusion and civil war, leaving the Frankish Church helpless, Britain seethed with religious activity and debate. For fifty years, the mission of Augustine and his followers percolated through the island from the south, beginning with the conversion of King Æthelbert of Kent. The Irish were busy in the north, however, establishing monasteries at Iona and Lindisfarne. The deeds of such heroes as Saint Columba of Iona and his follower Saint Cuthbert of Lindisfarne were well remembered by the people of Britain, and the peculiar strand of Christianity that they preached sparked resistance to the Roman ways of the south. Much of the drama of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History is rooted in the conflict between Roman and Irish churchmen, as can be seen in this passage: “Now the Britons did not keep Easter at the correct time, but between the fourteenth and twentieth days of the moon . . . Furthermore, certain other of their customs were at variance with the universal practice of the Church. But despite protracted discussions, neither the prayers nor the advice nor the censure of Augustine and his companions could obtain the compliance of the Britons, who stubbornly preferred their own customs to those in universal use among Christian Churches.”<sup>16</sup>

This conflict came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664. In this meeting, the two camps of British Christianity, with the Irish influence of Aidan, Columba, and Cuthbert on one side and the Roman influence of Wilfrid and Theodore of Canterbury on the other, met together and resolved to follow the Roman practices and institutions as if they were in Italy itself. After 664, Britain became a powerhouse of authentic Roman missionary work, scholarship, and monasticism, and English bishops began to return to the mainland in droves. As Wilhelm Levison puts it, “England was, in the main, in the seventh century the recipient of extraneous influences; in the next century the new member of the medieval Western world was herself to become the donor.”<sup>17</sup> As will be seen in the missionary work of Boniface, the English Christianity that had been born out of conflict with the Irish customs obtained a distinctive characteristic of being careful, or possibly obsessive, about proper church procedure.

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<sup>15</sup>Wilhelm Levison, England and the Continent in the Eighth Century, (London, 1966), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Bede, Ecclesiastical History 2.2, pp. 104-105.

<sup>17</sup>Levison, England and the Continent, p. 5

Across the Rhine, the religious life of the Germans was very complex. In the first missionary efforts of the Roman Christians, one of the obvious keys to spreading the faith was by making it as appealing as possible. There would be no intellectual discourse or theological dialectic in this effort. Instead, missionaries would try to visually outdo the pagan rites, as Jacob Grimm described, “by white robes for subjects of baptism, by curtains, peals of bells, the lighting of tapers and the burning of incense.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, many pagan rituals, such as sacrifices and idolatry, were perfectly preserved “by simply turning them, when suitable, into Christian ones, and assigning to them another and equally sacred meaning.”<sup>19</sup> For example, it was quite common at a German banquet to dedicate a portion of the meal to the gods, especially the drink. Grimm observed this same ritual, known as *minne-drinking*, in German villages in the nineteenth century: “At Otbergen, a village of Hildesheim, on Dec. 27 every year a chalice of wine is hallowed by the priest, and handed to the congregation in the church to drink.”<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Grimm also made note of a record in the laws of the Salian Franks that spoke of animal sacrifice among the Germans: “In the Salic Law, tit. 2, a higher composition is set on the *majalis sacrivus* or *votivus* than on any other. This seems a relic of the ancient sacrifices of the heathen Franks; else why the term *sacrivus*?”<sup>21</sup>

Fire worship was a common German practice that became incorporated into the early Christianity of Frisia. These were a series of customs such as “rubbing the sacred flame, running through the glowing embers, throwing flowers into the fire, baking and distributing large loaves or cakes, and the circular dance. Dances passed into plays and dramatic representations.”<sup>22</sup> These rituals became Christianized into the Easter-Fires, Mayday-fires, and Midsummer-fires that persevered in German tradition to the modern period. It is good to note that this custom was named in the list of the dubious practices of Germany that will be seen more completely later: “15. Of fire made by friction from wood, that is, the ‘nodfyr.’”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, (London, 1882), p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Grimm, *Mythology*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup>Grimm, *Mythology*, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup>Grimm, *Mythology*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup>Grimm, *Mythology*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup>Paul Edward Dutton, ed., *Carolingian Civilizations: A Reader* (Peterborough, 1993), p. 3.

Most dramatically, gods and goddesses were preserved in the early Christianity of Germany. To quote Grimm's description of the Christianization of German mythology: "The heathen gods even, though represented as feeble in comparison with the true God, were not always pictured as powerless in themselves; they were perverted into hostile malignant powers, into demons, sorcerers and giants, who had to be put down, but were nevertheless credited with a certain mischievous activity and influence."<sup>24</sup>

When the first Anglo-Saxon missionary, Wilfrid, crossed into Frisia in 678, he encountered a Germany that was nominally Christian, but in both ritual and organization was a completely different world from the Catholic Franks and English. One clergyman in these early missions compiled a list of questionable German practices in 740, and it provides an excellent illustration of the kinds of religious activity that Wilfrid would have found on the east side of the Rhine:

3. Of the swinish feasts in February.
6. Of the sacred rites of the woods which they call "nimidas."
10. Of amulets and knots.
11. Of the fountains of sacrifices.
12. Of incantations.
13. Of auguries, the dung or sneezing of birds or of horses or of cattle.
15. Of fire made by friction from wood, that is, the "nodfyr."
16. Of the brains of animals.
21. Of the eclipse of the moon -- what they call, "Triumph, Moon!"
26. Of an idol made of dough.
27. Of idols made of rags.
30. Of this: that they believe that women command the moon that they may be able to take away the hearts of men, according to the pagans.<sup>25</sup>

This selection of the list illustrates the pagan aspect of German religion. There is a strong element of nature worship (6, 21, 30), magic and divination (10, 12, 13, 15, 16), and idol worship and sacrifices (3,

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<sup>24</sup>Grimm, *Mythology*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup>Dutton, *Carolingian Civilizations*, p. 3.

11, 26, 27). Number 30 is possibly the most interesting, because it reveals two important things: first, that women, as in other cultures, had a special relationship with the moon, and in this case, could command it; second, that the author of this list distinguished between the people he wrote about and pagans. Therefore, it must be assumed that he considered his subjects to be Christians. Traces of Roman mythology appear in this list as well:

8. Of the sacred rites of Mercury and of Jupiter.

20. Of the days which they make for Jupiter and Mercury.

It is evident from this list that the gods Mercury and Jupiter were recognized deities in the German pantheon. It is also questionable as to how many of the pagan rites, such as the augury and sacrifice previously mentioned were not native to Germany, but were Roman imports. It is important to note, however, that the Germans distorted Roman mythology as much as they did Christianity. In a sermon written against pagan practices in 778, the German author described the goddess Venus as a man: “*Et alia mulier fuit Iunae-Minerva meretrix, quia non solum sufficiebat cum aliis fornicare, sed etiam cum patre suo Iove et fratres suos Martem et Venerem fornicata est.*”<sup>26</sup>

The final category of rituals are the the most fun, because they were Christian/pagan hybrids:

1. Of sacrilege at the graves of the dead.

5. Of sacrilegious acts in connection with churches.

9. Of the sacrifice which is offered to any of the saints.

18. Of undetermined places which they celebrate as holy.

19. Of the bed-straw which good folk call Holy Mary’s.

25. Of this, that they feign for themselves that dead persons of whatever sort are saints.

Here we have a brand of paganism that freely mingled with the cult of the saints. Pagan rituals were held in graveyards and churches (1, 5), relics were abundant (19), sacrifices were made to saints (9), and none of their Christian rituals, such as canonization and consecration, were performed with Church approval (18, 25). A letter written by Saint Boniface, in which he described some of the practices of the German priests,

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<sup>26</sup>Levison, *England and the Continent*, p. 311. The passage in italics reads, “but she [Minerva] also fornicated with her father Jove and her brothers Mars and Venus.”

confirms that there was no standard at all for religion in Germany -- it was a place where ‘anything goes,’ as they say: “Some abstain from foods which God made for our use; some nourish themselves only with milk and honey, rejecting all other foods; some declare -- and this is most harmful to the people -- that murderers or adulterers who persist in their crimes may nevertheless be priests of God.”<sup>27</sup> For the Anglo-Saxon missionaries and Boniface in particular, this category was the dangerous one, a threat to the survival of the fundamental beliefs and practices of Catholic Christianity.

Anglo-Saxon clerics were known for their strict adherence to Catholic ordinance. As mentioned before, their church had just witnessed the conclusion of a fierce conflict that had lasted for fifty years, and now that the Catholics had the upper hand, they were fiercely militant about proper church doctrine and procedure. As Geary tells us, when Wilfrid’s successor, Wilibrord, first came to Frisia he went immediately to the Pope to obtain his official permission to preach, something that was “unthinkable for a Frankish clergyman, but seemed only natural to Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>28</sup> Boniface possessed the same mentality and began his mission with a visit to Rome, where Pope Gregory “met with Boniface on a daily basis and discussed his plans assiduously.”<sup>29</sup> He went back to Rome two more times in his life and maintained a lengthy and detailed correspondence with Popes Gregory and Zacharias. Thanks to Boniface’s careful attention to detail, we can see exactly what issues came up in his mission to Germany, and what the Germans did that the Romans condemned, approved, or ignored.

Boniface’s success in Germany depended largely on who was in control of the lands he preached in. The first time he entered Frisia to missionize, the land was not yet subdued by Charles Martel, and the Frisian king, Radbod, was a pagan who had little sympathy for Christians. Under his reign “the greater part of the Christian churches . . . were laid waste and brought to ruin. Moreover, the pagan shrines were rebuilt and, what is worse, the worship of idols was restored.”<sup>30</sup> Under an unfriendly king like Radbod, Boniface accomplished little and had to return to England for the winter. The next year, 719, he went to Rome as discussed and then passed up through the kingdoms of Lombardy and Bavaria to Thuringia, where he

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<sup>27</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 63, p. 115.

<sup>28</sup>Geary, *Before France*, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup>Willibald, *The Life of Saint Boniface* 5, trans. C. H. Talbot in *Soldiers of Christ* (University Park, 1995), p. 121.

<sup>30</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 4, p. 118.

instructed both nobility and clergy in Roman ways, “recalling them to the true way of knowledge and the light of understanding that for the greater part they had lost through the perversity of their teachers.”<sup>31</sup>

As Charles Martel gained control of Frisia, Boniface had renewed success. True to Anglo-Saxon form, Willibald, the author of the *Life of Saint Boniface*, associated the rule of Charles with the rule of the Roman Church, and the reconquest of the area ushered in a period of miraculous prosperity: “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 that land, and the venerable Willibrord with his fellow missionaries propagated the Gospel.”<sup>32</sup> After three years, Boniface was asked by Willibrord to succeed him, but refused to do so without the Pope’s permission. As fate would have it, however, he soon received a summons from the Pope and quickly headed back to the Chapel of Saint Peter. There he was indeed made a bishop of a new arch-diocese, intended to rule over the thousands he had converted that had thus far “languished as sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>33</sup> His next move was to go to Charles Martel and obtain his permission to go to Hessa.

Hessa was an excellent example of the ambiguity of German faith. This following passage from the *Life of Saint Boniface* complements the sense of confusion and chaos that a missionary would have probably felt among these people:

Now many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the church in their entirety. Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practiced divination, legerdemain [trickery, lit. slight of hand], and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices, and other sacrificial rites; while others, of a more reasonable character, forsook all the profane practices of the Gentiles and committed none of these crimes.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 5, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 5, p. 122.

<sup>33</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 6, p. 125.

<sup>34</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 6, p. 126.

While in Hestia, Boniface's biographer notes that he followed a tried and true method of conversion -- he chopped down a sacred oak and built a church of St. Peter with the wood, thus, in a way, acknowledging the sanctity of the oak and using it for a Christian purpose. He returned to Thuringia, where Willibald makes another surprising observation, in which he points out how important political power was in maintaining Christianity: "Thus when the power of the leaders, who had protected religion, was destroyed, the devotion of the people to Christianity and religion died out also, and false brethren were brought in to pervert the minds of the people and to introduce among them under the guise of religion dangerous heretical sects."<sup>35</sup> One can speculate that the people of Thuringia adopted Christian customs as the Roman Empire consolidated its power west of the Rhine, and again as the Frankish kingdom did the same, but lost interest as the influence of these powers waned.

Boniface finished his career among the Frisians and Thuringians, founding monasteries and churches, preaching, solidifying ties with local kings, conversing with the Pope, and so on. By the end of his career he had become known as the "Archbishop of the East," a grand title suited to the work he performed, and had established a brand new church in Germany, with its own archdiocese and dioceses within. On June 5, 754, he was martyred in Friesland. The sources differ on the identity of his killers -- it may have been a band of greedy brigands or pagans determined to end his mission. He was buried in Fulda, a monastery of his founding, situated in the heartlands of the Germany he had done so much to convert.

In addition to his spiritual impact in Germany, Boniface's influence also extended to the realm of politics. His Anglo-Saxon heritage taught him to work intimately with kings, aristocracy, and religious superiors, and his superb organizational and diplomatic skills allowed him to create solid and unified institutions, whether monasteries or dioceses. Charles Martel had found an invaluable ally in Boniface, for he had taken a Germany of fragmented kingdoms and left it a well-organized and centralized religious body in Germany that could be easily managed, taxed, and governed. The Franks, more than ever before, could to utilize their alliance with the Church of Rome to take advantage of its episcopal structure.

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<sup>35</sup>Willibald, Saint Boniface 6, p. 127.

In fact, the mission of Boniface could not have been such a success without Carolingian assistance. Boniface stated this explicitly in his letters: “Without the support of the Frankish prince I can neither govern the members of the Church nor defend the priests, clerks, monks, and maids of God; nor can I, without orders from him and the fear inspired by him, prevent the pagan rites and the sacrilegious worship of idols in Germany.”<sup>36</sup> The fact that Boniface needed the support of the Franks in his endeavors shows that the German tribes were not receptive to his message. The second important aspect to remember is that many of these peoples were, at least in some form, Christians, and had been for centuries.<sup>37</sup> As the list of pagan practices demonstrated, the Gospel and the Christian God had been introduced and incorporated into their religion, and Boniface’s message would have not seemed entirely new. German resistance to Boniface was not, therefore, solely motivated by religion. It was most likely a political motive.

The orthodox Roman form of Christianity propagated by Willibrord and Boniface was a political force, in the eyes of the Frisians. Conversion meant a change of lifestyle that symbolized a subordination to outside, or specifically, Frankish customs: “The two tribes who in fact lived outside the Frankish borders, the Frisians and Saxons, clung to the gods and rituals of their ancestors no less than to political independence; Frankish domination and the Christian religion were to them inseparable notions.”<sup>38</sup> Thus it was that early attempts at missionary work met with very limited success.

Wilfrid, the first English churchman to go to Frisia, seems to have had a very small impact. The Venerable Bede maintains that Wilfrid “preached Christ among them, teaching the word of truth to many thousands,”<sup>39</sup> but the martyrdoms of Hewald the Black and Hewald the White in western Saxony<sup>40</sup> show that the missionaries in Germany were not necessarily “honourably received by the barbarous people”<sup>41</sup> unless they were working in territory controlled by Franks. Bede himself showed how Willibrord was able to establish himself in Frisia only through the political alliance of Pippin:

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<sup>36</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 63, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup>Geary, *Before France*, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup>Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eight Century* 3, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup>Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 5.19, p. 303.

<sup>40</sup>Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 4.10, p. 281.

<sup>41</sup>Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 5.19, p. 303.

Since Pippin had recently conquered western Frisia and driven out King Radbod, he dispatched them to preach there, supporting them with his imperial authority so that no one should interfere with their preaching, and granting many favours to those who wished to embrace the Faith.<sup>42</sup> Outside of Pippin's sphere of influence, however, "he met with total failure."<sup>43</sup> The fact was that the German missions were intensely charged with a political element, on both sides of the Rhine. For the Frisians and Thuringians, Christianity was not so much a new religion -- after all, they had been practicing a kind of "loose" Christianity for centuries -- as it was an outside force seeking political control, with the enthusiastic support of the Frankish kings, who were more than aware of the influence they would gain over the region should it fall under firm Church control. The English missionaries, with their firm loyalties to both monarchy and papacy, were the perfect middle men, and it was an arrangement that worked effectively for all three parties.

Boniface, as noted before, had an excellent correspondence with his contemporaries, and now is the time to examine it in the light of what has been discussed. His famous orthodoxy comes to light in many of his letters, and it is clear that he was unafraid to criticize anybody, whether they be king or pope, if he felt they were transgressing ecclesiastical law. This seems to have been a source of tension in an otherwise strong relationship, for Zacharias did not take kindly to some of Boniface's accusations. For instance, Boniface wrote to Zacharias complaining that he would perhaps have an easier time converting the Germans if the Romans set a better example: "They [the German tribes] have seen bands of singers parading the streets in pagan fashion, shouting and chanting sacrilegious songs and loading tables with food day and night . . . All these things, seen by evil-minded and ignorant people, are a cause of reproach to us and a hindrance to our preaching and teaching . . . If your Paternity would prohibit these heathen practices at Rome, it would bring rewards to you and the greatest advantage to us in our teaching."<sup>44</sup> He also accused Pope Zacharias of simony, which provoked this indignant reply:

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<sup>42</sup>Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People 4.10, p. 280.

<sup>43</sup>Geary, Before France, p. 215.

<sup>44</sup>Emerton, Letters 50, p. 82.

We find also in your aforesaid very disturbing letter certain references to us, implying that we are violators of the canons and are trying to nullify the tradition of the fathers and to this end have fallen -- which God forbid! -- into the heresy of simony, together with our clergy, by accepting gifts from those to whom we send the pallium and even compelling them to make payment in money. But, dearest brother, we pray Your Holiness never in future to write anything of the sort, for we take it as a grievous insult to be charged with an offense which we especially detest.<sup>45</sup>

The reaction of Pope Zacharias signified that Boniface was a very important person in the eyes of the Roman Church. Not many people could get away with such sharp criticism of the Papacy, and the fact that Zacharias let it go with a mere warning shows that Boniface was very important, perhaps even indispensable to him. Through his firm and uncompromising belief in good religious practice, Boniface seems to have received a great deal of respect from people of all classes and clans, including his contemporaries in Germany and England, the local German population, and the Papacy in Rome.

At times, Boniface's orthodoxy got excessive, even for Zacharias. In this letter, Boniface was reprimanded for rebaptizing converts in Bavaria: "A priest who was entirely ignorant of Latin and who, in the baptismal service, not understand the Latin idiom, made the mistake of saying: 'Baptizo te in nomine patria et filia et spiritus sancti.' And on this account you, reverend brother, thought a new baptism to be necessary."<sup>46</sup> The fact that letters are being carried across the Alps to and from Bavaria on a simple, and incidentally hilarious, mistake, illustrates Boniface's relentless eye for perfection.

Public reputation was a major concern of Boniface, for he also sent a scathing letter to King Ethelberd of Mercia, reprimanding him for his apparently infamous love conquests: "If the English people as is reported here and as is charged against us in France and Italy and even by the heathen themselves, are scorning lawful marriage and living in wanton adultery like the people of Sodom . . . at last the whole race will be come debased and finally will be neither strong in war nor steadfast in faith, neither honored among men nor pleasing in the sight of God."<sup>47</sup> For Boniface, this was worse than anything a pagan could do, for

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<sup>45</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 58, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 68, p. 122. The English translation of this is, "I baptize you in the name of the fatherland, the daughter and the holy spirit."

<sup>47</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 73, p. 128.

a Christian ought to know better than that. In fact, he even makes the statement that “This is held to be a shame and disgrace, not by Christians only but even by pagans,”<sup>48</sup> implying that he has sunk below the level of paganism. This is indicative, actually, of the attitudes that he probably had towards the missionizing process. While a stickler for detail, he probably felt very lenient towards pagans, seeing them as good but misguided people that simply needed guidance in the proper ways of the church.

To explore this further, there is a very interesting dichotomy in his methods of conversion. The first Frankish missions into Frisia, back in the 600s, used forced conversion on the local people. Boniface, in contrast, was advised by his mentor, Daniel of Winchester, on good conversion techniques: “Ask your opponents who governed the world before the gods were born, who was the ruler? How could they bring under their dominion or subject to their law a universe that had always existed before them? And whence, or from whom or when, was the first god or goddess set up or begotten? Now, do they imagine that gods and goddesses still go on begetting others?”<sup>49</sup> This was missionary work based on reason and argument, the use of logic to convince the heathen and bring them to peaceable conversion.

Boniface had no such lenience for the quasi-Christians of Hessa and Thuringia, however. As it is told in his *Life*, he felled a great oak of Jupiter in Gaesmere, in the land of Hessa, which had been worshipped by the populace for centuries: “Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly the oak’s vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall . . . At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord.”<sup>50</sup> Boniface, a practical man, used the wood to build a new oratory in the name of Saint Peter. In this case, he seems to have been one who preferred deeds to words.

The most important aspect of the German peoples was that, through the efforts of both Roman and Frankish churches in centuries past, many Germans considered themselves to be Christians. Boniface was

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<sup>48</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 73, p. 127.

<sup>49</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 23, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup>Willibald, *Saint Boniface* 6, p. 127.

not a missionary, but a teacher and reformer: “Few of his letters are concerned with the conversion of pagans . . . [instead] improving the Church, its standards, its organization and its cult.”<sup>51</sup> His letters themselves confirm this argument. In a report to Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury, he listed the following resolutions of the Frankish synods: “We have forbidden the servants of God to hunt, to go about in the woods with dogs, and to keep hawks or falcons. We have decreed that every priest annually during Lent shall render to his bishop an account of his ministry, the state of the catholic faith, baptism, and every detail of his administration. We have decreed that every bishop shall make the rounds of his diocese annually, confirming and instructing the people, seeking out and forbidding pagan rites, divination, fortune-telling, soothsaying, charms, incantations, and all Gentile vileness. We have forbidden the servants of God to wear showy or martial dress or to carry arms.”<sup>52</sup> The majority of Boniface’s work focused on the standardization and centralization of Christianity in Germany, not the conversion of pagans.

Boniface’s attention to proper church practice is made clear in his letter to his colleague, Daniel of Winchester, in which he wrote that the single greatest threat to his success are those that preach false doctrine to his flock: “We have not only, as the Apostle says, ‘fightings without and fears within,’ but we have fightings within as well as fears, caused especially by false priests and hypocrites, enemies of God, ruining themselves, misleading the people with scandals and false doctrines, and crying to them, as the prophet says, ‘Peace! Peace! when there is no peace.’”<sup>53</sup> Pagans were not a danger, for they were outside the Christian community, but false priests, from his point of view, directly countered all of his efforts by providing alternate forms of Christianity that prevented the standardization of the faith. Considering the wide variety of religious activity in Germany, his was an understandably frustrating task; he wrote once, “My labor seems like that of a barking dog that sees thieves and robbers break in and plunder his master’s house, but, because he has none to help him in his defense, can only whine and complain.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus does Boniface illustrate the world of German Christianity. It is reflective of a border culture, always outside of the Franko-Roman world, but constantly in contact with it. Boniface’s career also

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<sup>51</sup>Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 310.

<sup>52</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 78, p. 137.

<sup>53</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 63, pp.114-115.

<sup>54</sup>Emerton, *Letters* 78, pp.138-139.

marked the end of an age for Germany and the beginning of a new one. Despite his frustration at times, he was successful in creating a unified Church of Germany, and this new institution gave Germany a place, a membership, one could say, in the community of the inheritors of Roman culture. As the Merovingian dynasty was swallowed by the Carolingian family of Charles Martel, Germany also came under the political control of the Franks, and this too meant that it was no longer a land of pagan barbarians, but a Christian country with an organized political and religious administration.

Germany, of course, became one of the great countries of Europe. Even before its political unification in the nineteenth century, German food, music, and philosophy was famous throughout the Renaissance and early modern period. It is possible to argue that the alliance of the Roman Church and the Carolingian dynasty, through the work of the Englishman Boniface, began the process that gave Germany this role. While the fruits of this labor would not fully reveal themselves for hundreds of years after the death of Boniface, this was the first time that the tribes of the Rhine were directly controlled and assimilated by the inheritors of Roman culture. Boniface's mission broke the traditional role of the Rhine as the great boundary between civilization and barbarism, and may indeed have set in motion the chain of events that gave Germany its entire future as a primary actor on the European stage.

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