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Saints, pagans and the creation of a Christian community in early Carolingian Frisia

Introduction

In this paper I will be looking at three pieces of early ninth-century Frisian hagiography: Liudger’s *Vita Gregorii abbatis Traiectensis*, Altfrid’s *Vita Liudgeri* and the anonymous *Vita altera Bonifatii*. Between them, these texts commemorate three generations of missionaries who left a lasting impact on Frisia. This commemoration was vital for cementing the sense of community in the region and can be divided into three categories: the presentation of the nature of missionary work; the interaction between the saints and the Franks; and the portrayal of pagans and paganism. The first two factors were important for establishing the impact the missionaries had on Frisia itself, and the way they worked with Christian leaders from outside Frisia. The third factor was important for showing the audience how the saints had confronted Christianity’s enemies. The *Lives* of Gregory and Liudger provide some insights into the Christianisation of Frisia. More importantly for this paper, though, they show how the process was remembered by Christians in the years after Boniface’s martyrdom in 754, and the way in which the saint and his disciples could be used as focal points for a new Frisian community united by Christianity. They also show how Boniface and Christianity could be used as points of contact with the wider Frankish world. The *Vita altera* stands somewhat apart from this tradition, but it too shows the importance of the idea of Boniface as a cultural figurehead and a focal point for notions of community, although as we shall see, the author had a different kind of community in mind to that envisaged by Liudger and Altfrid.

Gregory of Utrecht and Liudger

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Liudger’s *Life of Gregory of Utrecht* – composed most likely at the beginning of the ninth century – is unusual in that it is actually a joint life of Gregory and his mentor Boniface. The *Life*, though, can be read as an effort by the author to integrate the Bonifatian tradition of Utrecht with those emerging in Mainz and Fulda, and more generally to integrate Frisia with the rest of the emerging Frankish Empire through the appeal to a common patron, Boniface.

It is with Boniface’s time in Frisia that the text begins, but this period of the saint’s career is presented differently than it had been in the first *Vita Bonifatii*, composed by Willibald in the 760s. According to Liudger, Boniface spent thirteen years in Frisia living as an evangelical hermit, first in Woerden for seven years, then Achtteinhoven and Velsen for three years each; it is only at the end of these thirteen years that the saint travels to Hesse and Thuringia. This account has generally been seen as factually erroneous, since Willibald’s claim that Boniface only spent three years in Frisia before going to Hesse seems to tally more with other evidence, but it may be that the saint was not tied as exclusively to one place as has generally been assumed. In any case, what Liudger’s account does is tie Boniface more directly to Frisia by having him perform a much more extensive mission there.

On the way to Hesse Boniface first encounters Gregory, who he takes on as a disciple, and who remains with him for the rest of his life. In Hesse and Thuringia Boniface and Gregory continue the evangelical work the former had begun in Frisia, living an apostolic life, both in terms of poverty and communal living. The saint’s work in this region had been a central part of Willibald’s *Life*, and in general terms Liudger’s account tallies with the earlier one. *Germania* is presented as inhabited by Christians living in constant fear of “rebellious pagans”, with whom constant wars are fought and who drive the Christians into the

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4 Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, ed. W. Levison, *MGH SRG* 57 (Hanover, 1905). The evidence for the dating is provided by Willibald’s opening, which addresses Bishops Lull and Megingoz – the latter died in 768.
5 Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, 2.
wilderness. It is only through the leadership and guidance of Boniface and Gregory that the people can be saved and the peace of God returned. It is worth bearing in mind here that, while this was not an inaccurate representation of the situation, it was almost certainly informed by Liudger’s own experiences as a missionary, to which we shall return shortly.

When discussing Gregory’s leadership of the Frisian Church, Liudger does not focus on missionary activity. Instead he concentrates on establishing the legitimacy of Gregory’s position by claiming that he succeeded as the “pious heir” of Archbishop Boniface, who in turn was the heir of Archbishop Willibrord. This succession is not entirely accurate, since Boniface was never bishop of Utrecht, as his own letters demonstrate, but he does seem to have appointed his disciple Eoban to the position when he returned to Frisia in 753. The other aspect of Gregory’s leadership of the Frisian community that Liudger focusses on is how he provided links with the wider Christian world. First there is a list of Boniface’s disciples, which includes Bishops Lull of Mainz, Megingoz of Würzburg and Willibald of Eichstätt, and Abbots Wynnebald of Heidenheim and Sturm of Fulda. Each of these figures is given a crucial role in continuing Boniface’s work and maintaining his legacy, and Liudger also includes the interesting aside that Wynnebald was “greatly beloved of my master Gregory”. Liudger later reflects this by discussing Gregory’s own disciples, who are not named, but are said to have been drawn from the Franks, Angles, Frisians, Saxons, Bavarians and Suevi. Crucially, many of these disciples went on to become bishops or priests.

The point of mentioning these disciples – both of Boniface and Gregory – seems to have been two-fold. First it emphasised Utrecht’s connection with the other Bonifatian

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7 Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, 2.  
8 Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, 10.  
12 Liudger, *Vita Gregorii*, 11; “Quidam enim eorum erant de nobili stirpe Francorum, quidam autem de religiosa gente Anglorum, quidam vero et de novellâ Dei plantation diebus nostris inchoate Fresonum et Saxonum, quidam autem et de Baguariis et Suevis praeeditis eadem religion... Quibus omnibus undecumque quasi ad unum ovile ovibus collectis pius pater et pastor Gregorius”. 
centres, particularly Mainz and Fulda, which at this time were developing their own interpretations of the saint’s legacy. It may also have been an attempt to emphasise the unity of these places through their association with a common patron. This would be in stark contrast to Eigil of Fulda’s approach, which emphasised the rivalry between Lull and Sturm after Boniface’s death. Second, it showed that, through Gregory, Frisia was still exerting an important influence on the rest of the Frankish world, not just because it was the place of Boniface’s martyrdom, but because Frankish bishops and priests were being trained there.

As well as calling on this shared legacy, Liudger also presented Boniface and Gregory as having a close relationship with the secular powers. This was an important part of the Bonifatian tradition as preserved in Mainz and Fulda, with both Willibald and Eigil describing a close contact between Boniface and the Frankish mayors. In Liudger’s account Boniface’s missionary activities are brought to the attention of ‘King’ Charles – that is Charles Martel – who honours the saint appropriately. Under Charles’s sons, ‘Kings’ Carloman and Pippin, Boniface is raised to the bishopric by all the Frankish people, and granted the seat of Mainz by the kings. Likewise, Gregory receives his authority over Utrecht from King Pippin. Here, then, the Frisian saints have their authority explicitly linked to the Carolingians, making the rulers a vital part of the Frisian community.

As a Frisian and a missionary, Liudger was part of the emerging community that we glimpse in the Life of Gregory. As the founder of the monastery of Werden and first bishop of Münster, he was also integral to Charlemagne’s expansion into Saxony. It is on Frisia that Liudger’s hagiographer – his nephew Altfrid – really concentrated, though. In fact, this work is much more explicitly about Frisia than the Life of Gregory had been, and Altfrid gives a

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14 Liudger, Vita Gregorii, 3-4.
15 Liudger, Vita Gregorii, 10.
great amount of detail not just about Liudger and his colleagues, but also about the world in which they lived.

Liudger’s missionary work follows a similar pattern to that found in the Life of Gregory, with a community of missionaries leading the local population in religious education and the building of churches, as Boniface and Gregory had done in Germania. Liudger, however, is not the only missionary to be named in the Life, nor is he the only one to have the spotlight. The community is first led by Abbot Gregory and then by his successor Bishop Alberic.16 Under Gregory we hear of several members of the missionary community, the most prominent of whom was the Anglo-Saxon Liafwin (or Lebuin), who, after his arrival in Utrecht, was sent by Gregory to work in the area around the Ijssel valley, where he built a church at Deventer which was twice burned down by Saxons before being rebuilt by Liudger.17 Likewise, some of Liudger’s own disciples are mentioned, for example Hildegrim and Gerbert, whom the saint took with him to Monte Cassino,18 and Bernlef, a blind man cured by Liudger, who aided him in the baptism of new-born children.19

Liudger’s missionary work is also presented in a more active way than Boniface and Gregory’s had been. Not only did he preach, he also travelled round Frisia destroying “the temples of the gods and the various places of idol worship among the people”.20 Likewise, he apparently travelled to the island of Fositesland (modern Helgoland). After destroying the temples dedicated to the god Fosite, Liudger had a church built and was able to convert and baptise the inhabitants.21 Whether this actually happened, or whether Altfrid simply borrowed the idea from Alcuin’s Vita Willibrordi is uncertain, although Altfrid himself made the

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16 Note that Altfrid specifically states that Gregory was never made bishop, whereas Liudger had been more vague about the issue; compare Altfrid Vita Liudgeri, I, 10 with Liudger, Vita Gregorii, 10.
17 Altfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 13-5; on Liafwin and Vita Lebuini Antiqua, see Wood, Missionary Life, pp. 115-7.
18 Altfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 21.
19 Altfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 25-5.
20 Altfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 16; “misit Albricus Liudgerum et cum eo alios servos Dei, ut distrauerunt fana deorum et varias culturas idolorum in gente Fresonum.”
21 Altfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 22.
connection with Willibrord. Nevertheless, whether it was Liudger who followed Willibrord or Alfrid who followed Alcuin, this episode highlights the continuation of the message of the *Vita Gregorii*: Frisia and the Frisians were a crucial part of the Frankish realm, especially in the missionary field.

There are other links between Frisia and the wider world in the text, including the crucial relationship with the Carolingians. Liudger’s secular patron was Charlemagne, who is shown as continuing his family’s interest in matters across the Rhine. First he places Liudger in charge of five *pagi* east of the River Lauwers: Mugmerth, Hunusgau, Fivilgau, Emisgau and Federitgau, along with the island of Bant. Later, Liudger is assigned to be teacher of the newly converted Saxons by Charlemagne, and establishes the bishopric of Münster. However, the link between Liudger’s family and Charlemagne’s went back to the period before the conversion of Frisia. Liudger’s paternal grandfather, Wrssing, was an opponent of Radbod, and when he was exiled he went to the court of Pippin II’s son Grimoald II, under whose tutelage and influence he accepted Christianity and baptism.

The dichotomy between Christianity and paganism was crucial to Alfrid’s representation of Frisia, and as we have now seen, in Liudger’s time it was a dichotomy that still existed. Alfrid’s depiction of paganism is complex, though. On the one hand, he portrays it in familiar terms as the military threat it had been to Boniface and Gregory in *Germania*. The Frisians who still cling to their traditional religion appear determined to plunge the region back into the darkness of error. Two of note were the East Frisian leaders Hunno and Eilrad, who began a “night of great faithlessness,” when “churches were burned and the servants of God driven out.” But it was not only the pagans of Frisia who threatened the

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22 For the relevant passage in Alcuin’s text, see Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, ed. W. Levison, *MGH SRM* 7 (Hanover, 1920), 10; see also Wood, *Missionary Life*, pp. 110-1.
23 Alfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, I, 22.
26 Alfrid, *Vita Liudgeri*, I, 22; “nox infidelitatis magnae… combustae sunt ecclesiae servique Dei repulse.”
Christian community; the actions of the neighbouring Saxons were also important. The infamous Saxon Duke Widukind, called the “root of all wickedness”, is named as an instigator of anti-Christian violence in Frisia, which not only led to the expulsion of the missionaries, but also saw many Frisians “abandon the faith of Christ and sacrifice to idols, in the manner of their former error.” Yet there is also a glimpse of what Frisian paganism was actually like, and here we return to Liudger’s ancestors. The saint’s maternal great-grandmother had been a stalwart pagan, who had tried to drown her granddaughter for want of a grandson. Alfrid makes it clear that this was completely acceptable to the pagans until a neighbour intervened and fed the baby honey, at which point the matriarch’s hired assassins refused to carry out their orders. The belief was that it was okay to murder a child who had not eaten “earthly food”.

For Alfrid, though, the world beyond the Frankish Empire remained one of Otherness, and he utilised the writing of hagiography as a voice for his own concerns – not the Saxons, who were by then integrated into the Frankish realm, but the Northmen, still pagans, and still beyond the influence of the Frankish missionaries. Towards the end of the Life Alfrid has a scene in which Liudger tells his sister of a dream, in which he saw “the sun fleeing beyond the sea from the northern regions with the foulest mists following.” The sun passes out of sight, and the mists occupy the coastal regions of Frisia, although after much time the sun returns and drives the mists away. When questioned by his sister, Liudger reveals the mists to be the Northmen, who will visit great wars of persecution and “immeasurable devastation” on the Frisians. Having lived through these attacks, Alfrid is able to report that many churches and monasteries had been destroyed, and farms left uninhabited. He makes it clear, however, that this was happening because of the sins of the

27 Alfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 21; “radix sceleris Widukind, dux Saxonum… fecit Fresones Christi fidem relinquire et immolare idolis, iuxta morem erroris pristini.”

28 Alfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 6.

29 Wood, Missionary Life, pp. 113-4.

30 Alfrid, Vita Liudgeri, I, 27.
Frisians themselves; he also says that they are still awaiting the return of the sun and the restoration of the Lord’s peace.

What we can see from the *Lives* of Gregory and Liudger, then, is that there was a thriving Christian community in Frisia in the eighth century. What Liudger and Altfrid were doing, though, was harnessing this community, giving it a sense of internal unity, through the appeal to the leadership of Boniface and those who succeeded him, and the setbacks at the hands of the pagan enemies. But there was also an appeal to a wider unity – that embodied by the growing Frankish realm and its Christianity. The Franks and their subject peoples shared not just a religion with the Frisians, but also enemies in the form of pagans, although by the time Altfrid wrote the Saxons had been integrated, as they already were being when Liudger wrote. They also shared a common spiritual patron in Boniface. What Frisia brought to this Christian community – indeed, what made the area so important in the eyes of the hagiographers – was the missionary tradition going back to Willibrord and Boniface, which in the ninth century was brought into play by people like Liudger to expand the boundaries of Francia even further. But there was an alternate and parallel approach to this idea of community; one which emphasised the importance of Boniface above all else, and which, despite appealing to a potentially broad audience, was essentially exclusive, and only meant for a select few. It is to this tradition that we shall now turn by examining the *Vita altera Bonifatii*.

**The *Vita altera Bonifatii***

Analysis of the Frisian *Life of Boniface* is complicated by the author’s anonymity. This results in its date and place of composition being difficult to determine, although there are several clues within the text. These have led to a general consensus that the text was
composed around the 830s by a priest at the church of St Martin in Utrecht, and was later revised by Bishop Radbod, perhaps in order for a copy to be sent to Fulda.\footnote{W. Levison (ed.), ‘Vitae sancti Bonifatii archiepiscopi Moguntini’, MGH SRG 57 (Hanover, 1905), pp. xlix-liv; Wood, Missionary Life, pp. 102-3; P. Kehl, Kult und Nachleben des heiligen Bonifatius im Mittelalter (754-1200) (Fulda, 1993), p. 140.} The most important point to make about the *Vita altera* for our purpose is that it is a highly metaphorical, even metaphysical text, which presents Boniface’s career not with Liudger’s focus on preaching in pagan areas, but as a constant struggle against various foes and as an attempt to cure men’s inner maladies. While the author occasionally touches on Boniface’s preaching, he has a greater tendency to portray Boniface literally taking the fight to the pagans of Frisia and *Germania*, and instead of focussing on the human pagans, the author was more concerned with literary representations of paganism as a great enemy.\footnote{On this aspect of the *Vita*, see Wood, Missionary Life, pp. 105-6.}

We first encounter paganism in the form of fauns and satyrs, along with a host of other mythological creatures which Boniface literally roots out of their sacred groves before convincing the newly converted Christians to hang them.\footnote{Vita altera, 8; “*in suis lucis ac delubris larvas lumaresque coluerant… faunos et sathyros, quos nonnulli paganorum silvestres deos appellant… driades napeasque et cetera huiusmodi magis portent quam numina*”.} Later in the narrative the saint returns to *Germania* to do battle with paganism in the form of the Philistine Cyclops, Goliath, who is also encountered before Boniface’s martyrdom in Frisia.\footnote{Vita altera, 10; “*Porro Bonifacius… Germanos suos ilico revisit fortissimumque prelium cum spurio cyclope committens… castra Israelitica a depredatione Phyllistinorum… eripuit*”; 13; “*statimque sensit fortis athlete sibi iterum peram cum lapidibus suis simendum, iterum cum Golyath Phylistheo bellum gerendum… cum dyabolo totis viribus certatum erat*”.} Likewise, the saint is said to be destined to save “many thousands of souls from the throat of Leviathan”.\footnote{Vita altera, 12; “*multa milia animarum… ab ipsis Leviathan fauces extraheret*”.

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32 On this aspect of the *Vita*, see Wood, Missionary Life, pp. 105-6.

33 *Vita altera*, 8; “*in suis lucis ac delubris larvas lumaresque coluerant… faunos et sathyros, quos nonnulli paganorum silvestres deos appellant… driades napeasque et cetera huiusmodi magis portent quam numina*”.

34 *Vita altera*, 10; “*Porro Bonifacius… Germanos suos ilico revisit fortissimumque prelium cum spurio cyclope committens… castra Israelitica a depredatione Phyllistinorum… eripuit*”; 13; “*statimque sensit fortis athlete sibi iterum peram cum lapidibus suis simendum, iterum cum Golyath Phylistheo bellum gerendum… cum dyabolo totis viribus certatum erat*”.

35 *Vita altera*, 12; “*multa milia animarum… ab ipsis Leviathan fauces extraheret*”.

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standard to criticise the clergy of his own day. Likewise, there is a marked ambivalence towards the papacy, in which the author seems to balance a respect for Rome’s patron saints and pontifical status with the feeling that the city is no more important than those associated with Saints Martin and Boniface. The author also had no qualms about addressing the failings of the Franks, in particular their “indiscriminate sexual acts”, from which Boniface had to correct them. The point is also stressed that he was made bishop to watch over the destitute and needy, but there is no mention of the role of secular powers in establishing Boniface as bishop of Mainz, nor is there any mention of secular support anywhere in the Life. As we have seen, this contrasts sharply with the image of mission and community presented by Liudger and Altfrid. The only communities to escape these denunciations, and thus the probable intended audiences of the Life, are those where, according to the author, “proof of the presence of the blessed martyr is frequently experienced”: Utrecht, the base of the Frisian mission; Boniface’s episcopal seat of Mainz; Dokkum, the place of his martyrdom; and Fulda, the place of his burial.

What should we make of this unusual presentation of Boniface? The saint’s physical and metaphorical battle with paganism seems to be the most prominent feature of the narrative. The idea of saints as pseudo-military figures and ‘soldiers of Christ’ was not unusual in the medieval period, indeed in the Bonifatian hagiography Eigil portrayed Sturm as equipped with spiritual weaponry. There is something more to the Boniface of this text, though, and this rests with the idea that the saint did battle not with the pagans, but with paganism as a concept, represented particularly as Goliath, the biblical enemy of David. The author even has the pope refer to Boniface as a “Davidic warrior”, placing him in the

36 Vita altera, 4; Liudger, Vita Gregorii, 2.
37 See Vita altera, 2, 3, 7, 10, 11.
38 Vita altera, 11; “populus Francorum innumerabilis promiscui sexus ei obviam processit, obscerans simul et contestans”.
39 Vita altera, 17.
40 Eigil, Vita Sturmi, 7.
41 1 Samuel, 17.
context of an eternal struggle between God’s people and their enemies. Add to this the author’s assertion that Boniface was the healer of men’s inner maladies, with the comparison to David as the healer of Saul, and it seems clear that the reader is meant to see Boniface as the direct successor of David.

Yet there was another eighth-century figure who was also compared to the biblical hero; Charlemagne. Even during his lifetime Charlemagne was nicknamed ‘David’ by members of his court circle, and after his death chroniclers and poets were keen to continue this comparison. The comparison between the great warrior-kings was obvious enough, especially in contexts where the Frankish Empire was being hailed as the ‘new Israel’, but the imagery of David and his son Solomon, to whom Charlemagne was also compared, contained a sacral aspect related to preaching, teaching and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. This aspect could also be applied to Charlemagne, since he had spread Christianity through his conquests and had strengthened the faith of the Franks themselves through his policy of correctio. Yet for the author of the Vita altera this imagery was just as applicable to his version of Boniface, the man who had fought paganism alone, just as David had fought Goliath. This second David had also preceded Charlemagne in his attempts to reform the faith of the Franks, although the author presents a condensed and exaggerated version of this part of the saint’s career. In addition, unlike Charlemagne, who was a king with an interest in religion, Boniface was a priest, and as a bishop may have seemed to have a better claim to leadership of the Christian people, at least to a fellow priest. Thus, for the author of the Vita

42 Vita altera, 10.
43 Vita altera, 21; note that the author attributes ‘medicinal knowledge’ to David instead of his skill with the lyre which is the cure in the Biblical account; cf. 1 Samuel, 16, 23.
altera, it was Boniface, not Charlemagne, who was the true leader of the faithful, the true
defender of Christianity, and the strongest warrior in the battle against paganism and the
Devil. In this sense, then, the author wholly rejects the Frankish community of the
Carolingians, and instead promotes a Christian community composed of those places and
people touched by Boniface, and joined not by ties of secular loyalty, but rather by the
spiritual bonds of their common patron.

Conclusion
Ultimately we can conclude that the three Lives examined here were attempts to portray
Boniface and his followers as the patrons of a new Christian community, but each author did
this in different ways. Liudger did so by appealing to the common legacy of Boniface already
being celebrated and commemorated across the Frankish world. He showed that Boniface had
had a unique relationship with Frisia and Utrecht, but he did not labour this point, instead
emphasising how both Boniface and Gregory had worked for the benefit of all Christians, and
had done so with such a wide scope through the continuing work of their disciples. In this
way the Vita Gregorii should be read as an attempt at conciliation between the divergent
Bonifatian traditions, and an attempt to remind the Franks and their subjects of their common
debt to Frisian saints. The Vita Liudgeri continued this approach, but shifted the focus onto
Boniface’s successors in Frisia and onto the region itself. Between these two texts, though,
we can see the weaving of a united Christian community in which Frisia had a central place.
The author of the Vita altera also emphasised a shared heritage centred on Boniface, but he
focussed specifically on the sites with which Boniface was associated for a particular reason;
Mainz, Utrecht, Dokkum and Fulda. This was a much more exclusive way of presenting
Boniface’s legacy, especially when we take into account the author’s apparent rejection of
secular authority. The author seems to have had no interest in integrating Frisia into the
Frankish community. Instead he saw Boniface as the patron of a specifically spiritual community based in the centres he influenced, although the possibility remains that others could enter this community if they accepted Boniface as their spiritual healer.