

The Life of Saint Boniface: Legitimizing “Political Monks” in Carolingian Europe

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ABSTRACT

Benedictine monks have played a crucial role in not only the shaping of Christianity, but also the political landscape of Carolingian Europe. One such monk, named Willibald, produced a valuable hagiographical text about Saint Boniface, who was archbishop of Mainz and a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to mainland Carolingian Europe. Examining the details within *The Life of Saint Boniface*, the thought of Willibald can be interpreted: such concerns his motives to legitimize the clergy's involvement with the Carolingian court, as well as their violent, coerced conversion of pagan communities. This paper will explore the implications of creating this hagiographical work, providing insight towards how Benedictine monks were actively aware of and sought to justify their actions in their mission to the Carolingian empire.

Keywords: Boniface, Carolingian, Benedictine, Hagiography

1. INTRODUCTION

Between the years 763-765, a monk active in the Carolingian elite circle produced a hagiographic text which provided a commentary on Saint Boniface's life, through which he addresses the cultural and religious contradictions of Boniface's actions and seeks to change the Christian doctrine. The monk in question is Willibald, an Anglo-Saxon priest who arrived at the continent and became part of the cathedral clergy of Mainz, the see of Boniface [1]. Throughout *The Life of Saint Boniface*, Willibald crafts a narrative that attempts to justify Boniface's cooperation with the Carolingian political authority, as well as his abuse of power in the form of violent, coerced conversions against pagan communities. This paper will address both aspects and examine how Willibald achieves these goals.

1.1. About *The Life of Saint Boniface*

The Life of Saint Boniface is a biographical work which details Saint Boniface's ecclesiastical life. This paper analyzes a version of the text from *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, first published in 1995, translated by C.H. Talbot [1]. The importance of *Saint's Lives* texts are that they often reveal intentions other than presenting biography. The clergy responsible for writing many of

these texts will often seek to give praise to the saints and highlight their virtue; this praise inherently links to the teaching of the Christian Doctrine[2]. *The Life of Saint Boniface* reveals the thinking of Willibald, whose ideologies reflect a greater shift of thinking surrounding the Christian Doctrine in the ecclesiastical world of the 8th century. 1) The changing perspective towards the relationship between the clergy and the court, and 2) The increase in violent, coerced conversions, warranted Willibald to address these ideological shifts through *The Life of Saint Boniface*, arguing for a change in previously conventional beliefs and providing a framework for future action [3].

1.2. About Willibald and Saint Boniface

Historically, Willibald was an obscure figure, not much known about him other than his authorship of this work, as well as his identity as a Benedictine monk [1]. Given his opportunity to write this hagiographical text, Willibald was also likely of substantial socio-economic class, similar to that of Boniface.

Boniface (born Wynfrid or Wynfrith), on the other hand, was a highly influential figure who dedicated his life to the spread of the Roman Christian Faith. After devoting himself to monastic life at a young age, Boniface travelled from England to the Continent. He would be consecrated as Bishop in 722. Throughout his

lifetime, Boniface travelled to many parts of the continent, including Thuringia, Frisia, and Bavaria, converting pagans and establishing monasteries [4]. As historian Norman F. Cantor described, Boniface had been “the chief fomentor of the alliance between the papacy and the Carolingian family,” [5] working actively with the Carolingian leaders to establish monasteries and convert pagans in and beyond the Carolingian empire.

Boniface is representative of a larger group of Benedictine monks that during this period played an active role in the Carolingian courts’ age of expansion, travelling to the continent from Ireland and England [3]. The Carolingians had hoped to establish a working hierarchy through support from the people, and so they turned to religious reform [6]. As medieval history researcher Rutger Kramer points out in *Transcending The Boundaries of Carolingian Monastic Communities*, “Monasteries played a crucial role in the development and propagation of these ideals [gaining support of the people].” [7] The Carolingians had specifically turned to the Rule of Saint Benedict, supposedly being “the best of the monastic options available at the time.” [7] Kramer also describes the existence of a paradox within Carolingian monastic life, since monasteries “persisting as isolated enclaves” still had to function in the Carolingian world in cooperation with the Carolingian court [7]. This paper examines Willibald’s account of Boniface’s *Life* under such historical landscape and analyzes how Willibald had sought to legitimize the Carolingian-monastic cooperation during the time.

2. ARGUMENT 1

The Life of Saint Boniface effectively defends Boniface’s cooperation with the Carolingian court and legitimizes the mutually beneficial, collaborating relationship between the clergy and the state. This cooperation with the state is apparent throughout Willibald’s work both directly and subtly, including formation of councils, imposition and spread of Christian doctrine, and elimination of heresy. Through these efforts, Willibald also redefines how Benedictine monks should act.

Christian monks are typically under the vows of poverty and chastity. Monks also commonly practice some degree of asceticism – a rejection to sensual pleasures – and dedicating themselves to a life focused on a search their own and others’ spiritual enlightenment [8]. Monks hadn’t been expected to play a political role in medieval Europe, making the entrance of Benedictine monks like Boniface into the continent and their activities with the Carolingian court much of an unordinary, likely criticized subject [9]. Willibald resolves the contradictions between the monastic identities of these highly influential Benedictine monks and their actions by depicting their work with the Carolingian court highly beneficial to the preservation

and spread of Roman Christianity.

In the text, Willibald would often describe the implications of the clergy’s work with the Carolingian court. Such is the case in his description of the synodal councils formed under the request of Carloman. Below is an extract showing the formation of these councils.

“During the rule of Carloman all the bishops, priests, deacons, and clerics and everyone of ecclesiastical rank gathered together at the ruler’s instance and held four synodal councils. At these Archbishop Boniface presided, with the consent and support of Carloman and of the metropolitan of the see and city of Mainz ... he urged that the numerous canons and ordinances decreed by these four important and early councils should be preserved in order to ensure the healthy development of Christian doctrine.” [1]

Willibald clearly and explicitly indicates the positive effects Boniface’s work with the Carolingian Court. In his narrative, Carloman had (under the influence of Boniface) worked with the monks to organize ecclesiastical members into councils, helping the spread of Roman Christianity. The outcome of this event hints that the Benedictine monks had contributed to a rightful cause towards their religion, all due to their active engagement with the Carolingian rulers. These implications argue against the criticism directed to these groups for what other monks of the time had considered a non-monastic lifestyle: Through their process of political engagement, the monks were given the opportunity for a greater sphere of influence, ultimately allowing them to spread their beliefs and enlighten a greater audience. Willibald further provides specific cases of effective persecution against heretics with the establishment of the councils, consolidating their value in preserving the beliefs of the Roman Christian Faith.

Willibald also emphasizes the direct power that Boniface (and the Benedictine monks) hold due to his cooperation with the Carolingian Court. Willibald shows that such power is effective at – or even necessary in – the spread of Roman Christian Faith and is thus to them for the better of society. Describing his consecration in 722, Willibald tells that “The pope placed the holy man, now strengthened by episcopal rank, under the protection and devotion of the glorious leader Charles.” [1] Regardless of the real effects of the consecration, Willibald frames the event to draw attention to the “protection” by Charles Martel (and the Carolingian court), highlighting the merits of Boniface’s engagement in political affairs.

One other instance in the text through which Willibald highlights the benefits of being supported by the Carolingian court is in his recount of the persecution of Aldebert and Clement, two individuals that were deemed heretics by Boniface. Willibald describes “the holy archbishop Boniface with the cooperation of the

leaders Carloman and Pepin forcibly ejects them (Aldebert and Clement) from the communion of the church,” [1] explicitly giving credit to the Carolingian leaders Carloman and Pepin. In doing so, Willibald again seeks to normalize the cooperative relationship between monks and the political leaders at that time.

Willibald presents Boniface’s rightful and praiseworthy way of life as an overarching idea in *The Life of Saint Boniface*. In the process of characterizing Boniface as the great, benevolent, and holy figure presented in the novel, Willibald must address Boniface’s controversial political engagement as a monk. Willibald implies that Boniface’s controversial activity had allowed him to gain power, necessary for better development of Roman Christianity and action taken against heretics. Thus, he sets Boniface as a model for future monks and missionaries to learn from and continue the preservation of the religion through political engagement, if necessary.

3. ARGUMENT 2

Now that the first prominent goal of *The Life of Saint Boniface* has been discussed, Willibald’s other intent of addressing Boniface’s initiation of coerced conversions will be examined. Boniface is infamously known for his large scale, coerced, usually violent conversions of pagan societies, as well as his ruthless persecution of heretics [10]. Willibald addresses his behavior through demonizing pagan societies and religious thought, in turn glorifying and normalizing Boniface’s actions.

In *The Life of Saint Boniface*, Willibald narrates many historical conversions that had taken place, led by Boniface. When describing these instances, Willibald, interestingly, doesn’t seek to hide Boniface’s use of violence, rather villainizing pagans and illustrating dubiously positive reactions to conversions with propitious results. Willibald begins crafting this narrative with the first characterization of pagans as a problematic and barbaric presence.

“A fierce quarrel broke out between Charles, the prince and noble leader of the Franks, and Radbod, the king of the Frisians, as a result of a hostile incursion by the pagans, caused great disturbances among the population of both sides, and through the dispersion of the priests and the persecution of Radbod the greater part of the Christian churches, which previously had been subject to Frankish control, were laid waste and brought to ruin.”[1]

In this passage detailing a conflict between the Franks and the Frisians, Willibald deliberately shifts the blame of the situation to the “hostile incursion by the pagans”. Upon the pagans’ first appearance, Willibald had depicted them as a problematic and dangerous group, characterized explicitly by their differing religions, that had been the root of multiple issues, including 1) poor

diplomatic relations between the Franks and their nearby states, 2) civil unrest due to the pagan incursions, 3) destruction of Christian churches and damages made to the spread of Christian faith. Through such means of vilification, Willibald had made “the pagans” a collective identity, which against them means of persecution or conversion is justifiable. Furthermore, by demonizing pagan communities, Willibald makes greater antipathy manifest between Christian audiences and the pagans, giving the former less reason to empathize with forcibly converted pagans. This, too, forwards Willibald’s agenda to normalize Boniface’s abuse of power.

Willibald is also deliberate in his use of language to present a narrative: that the forced conversions were well received by the pagans and an act of enlightenment rather than dominance. One instance, for example, Willibald describes Boniface’s conversions in Frisia: “He turned away also from the superstitions of paganism a great multitude of people by revealing to them the path of right understanding, and induced them to forsake their horrible and erroneous beliefs.”[1] Willibald uses words and phrases to implicitly add meaning to the account of a conversion; “superstitions” and “horrible and erroneous” present a perspective that pagans have been misguided and practicing an objectively ‘wrong’ religion, whilst Boniface had led them to “the path of right understanding”.

Similarly, in his account of Boniface’s travels in Bavaria, Willibald describes the opposing beliefs as “evil, false, and heretical doctrines” [1], as to justify his abuse of state power when he, with the duke’s permission, divided the province into four dioceses and appointed bishops to suppress the supposed heretics. This retelling of this event is prominent also for Willibald’s use of metaphors as a means of characterization. As he narrates, “(Boniface) governed the people committed to his care, diligently provided for the needs of his flock, and appointed priests to defend the faithful and deliver them from the attacks of ravening wolves.”[1] The individuals accused of heresy were made literal wolves, whilst the people of Bavaria became the “flock” that Boniface had protected. When framed in such a way, Boniface’s ruthless eradication of an opposing belief system had been glorified as a heroic effort to save the minds of the people.

Perhaps one of the more well-known events from Boniface’s life is his felling of the Donar Oak, a sacred tree of Germanic pagans. In Willibald’s descriptions, when Boniface made his first cut, the oak fell due to a “mighty blast of wind” from above, and “at the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord.”[1] Taking out consideration of the validity of the supernaturality described, Willibald implies that destroying pagan monuments of worship or sacred items is an effective means of conversion.

Therefore, Willibald suggests that later accounts of Boniface's conversion of pagans through similar means were also valid. This notion can extend further to questioning the moral codes of Benedictine monks, encouraging forced conversions and use of violence to achieve religious dominance.

4. CONCLUSION

An analysis of *The Life of Saint Boniface* provokes profound discussion towards the intent of the hagiographical work, more than Boniface himself. The author Willibald, as a representative of the high-class Benedictine monks in 8th century Europe, serves as a window to understanding how intellectuals of that time viewed and sought to address prominent shifts in the political and religious landscape. In this specific text, Willibald reasons for Boniface's cooperation with the Carolingian court and the coerced, often oppressive conversions he led; at the same time, though, his ideals expand to represent the community of Benedictine monks, justifying their attainment of state power and their practice of violence linked with such power. Therefore, Willibald's agenda returns to that of most *Saint's Lives* texts, with the intent to change the previous doctrines of Christians and monks, and to provide a framework in the clergy for future action.

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