

Boniface in Frisia

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1 Introduction

Let us start at the end. The medieval history of the northern Netherlands is punctuated by a murder. The Anglo-Saxon papal legate Wynfrith, better known as Boniface, almost eighty years old at the time, had been in Frisia for several months to preach the Word of God to the pagans. In 753 he had left his monastic retreat in Fulda, where he had retired after a long career in Germany, and arrived in the northern Netherlands accompanied by no fewer than fifty-two followers. He had passed the winter in the Utrecht mission post, which his compatriot Willibrord had founded a generation earlier in an old Roman fortress on the Rhine. Boniface had been there before: after a very short visit in 716 he had returned in 719 to learn from Willibrord in the following two years. Willibrord, who had been appointed archbishop of the Frisians, had mainly worked in the coastal area of the later county of Holland; Boniface had worked further north, on the island of Wieringen and in Westergo, in what is now Friesland. In the spring of 754, when the weather permitted travelling once more, he travelled north again. Christianity had not taken root there despite the efforts of the missionaries. Together with a number of his followers Boniface was killed by pagan Frisians on 5 June 754. It was the end of a long life, and the beginning of a legend that until today has its fixed place in Dutch historical conscience.¹

This chapter deals with the activities of Boniface in early medieval Frisia, particularly with his first two visits, in 716 and in 719–721, and with the aftermath of his fateful third visit, in 753–754. To understand Boniface's involvements with the Frisians, it will be necessary to devote some attention to the Frisians and the area they inhabited. What did the pagan Frisians believe? What kind of society had they managed to form? And what were the chances that the mission and, later, the development of ecclesiastical structures, would be successful?

¹ Marco Mostert, *754: Bonifatius bij Dokkum vermoord*, Verloren verleden 2 (Hilversum: 1999), 68–86.



MAP 14.1 Frisia in the time of Boniface

2 Frisia before Boniface

The lands of the Frisians consisted of the coastal lands on the shores of the North Sea between the Scheldt in the south and the Weser in the north. How far inland Frisian influence reached is hard to tell, as there were no clearly defined borders with their neighbours, and because the Frisians did not form a clearly demarcated political unity.² It is clear, however, that they were active from time to time in the area of the Kromme Rijn, the branch of the Rhine that starts at the site of Dorestad and meanders in a northwesterly direction to Utrecht. Utrecht was sometimes under their control, at other times under that of their southerly neighbours, the Franks.³ The delta of the Rhine and Meuse in the centre of the Netherlands was politically a border area, whereas economically it was the hinterland of the Frisian economy. The centre of the Frisian lands was formed by the modern province of Friesland, though people who called themselves Frisians were also found in what are now the provinces of North and South Holland and Zeeland, or “Frisia on this side of the sea” (*Frisia citerior*). And they could also be found to the east of modern Friesland, in Groningen and Ostfriesland (now in Germany).

Within these Frisian lands, certain areas can be distinguished. The area between Vlie and Weser was characterised by *terpen*, artificial hills providing shelter from the sea to the undyked land. It was an area of open tidal marshes which were subject to tidal inundations. The area to the west, between Vlie and Scheldt, also formed an entity made up of smaller units. These districts (*pagi*) were wedged between the North Sea and the unreclaimed peat bogs on the landside. They were connected by sand dunes, and cut through by branches of the rivers Rhine, Meuse, and Schelde. The 10th-century editor of the second *Life* of Boniface, the *Vita altera Bonifatii*, described the Frisians as living in the coastal area “almost as fish in the waters ... by which they are surrounded everywhere, so that they have only very few roads leading outside, unless they use boats for transportation.” From his perspective in Utrecht, long after the establishment of the church there, the watery isolation of the Frisians

2 For the Frisians and Frisia in general, see: Herrius Halbertsma, *Frieslands oudheid: Het rijk van de Friese koningen, opkomst en ondergang* (Utrecht: 2000); Jurjen M. Bos, *Archeologie van Friesland* (Utrecht: 1995).

3 For the inhabitants of the centre of the present-day Netherlands, including Utrecht and Dorestad, see: Willem A. van Es et al., *Romeinen, Friezen en Franken in het hart van Nederland: Van Traiectum tot Dorestad 50 v. C.–900 n. C.* (Utrecht: 1994).

in Boniface's day seemed to signal to the writer that they were a people "without reason and barbarian," alien and Other.⁴

The inhabitants of this inhospitable coastal region are named "Frisians" already in the first and second centuries A.D.⁵ Unfortunately, we do not have an early medieval history of the Frisians. Such a history might have been written: Charlemagne, a few generations after Boniface, saw the Frisians as a "people" whose law he had written down in the *Lex Frisionum*.⁶ But one important precondition, literacy, was missing. There was no monastery or other ecclesiastical institution that might have written this history, and the Latin culture of the written word had not penetrated Frisia, apart from the Utrecht mission situated in the border area between Frisians and Franks. Only in the second half of the 10th century, when the monastery of Egmond was founded, would this change, but by then the political situation in Frisia was very different.

Although we do not have early medieval texts in which Frisians report about themselves, something like a Frisian identity must certainly have existed. Recently archaeological studies have identified Westergo, the area between the Middle Sea in the east and the Almere to the west, as the Frisian central area. From here Frisian kings may have thought to control the regional elites elsewhere.⁷ Some of the names of the leaders in Frisian society have come down to us. Aldgisl and his successor Radbod were called "king" in Anglo-Saxon sources, and "duke" in Frankish sources.⁸ Boniface was to be faced with Radbod. Were Aldgisl and Radbod "kings" who merely had power in "Frisia on this side of the sea"? And did Bubo, the Frisian commander who was to be

4 *VaB*, c. 9, 68: "Ac primum Fresonibus, quibus iam antea predicaverat, navigio revector est, qui fere, quemadmodum et pisces, morantur in aquis, quibus ita undique concluduntur, ut raro ad exteras regiones accessum habeant, nisi navibus subvehantur. Hos remotos a ceteris nationibus ideoque brutos ac barbaros celestis seminiverbius adiit..."

5 All relevant mentions of "Frisians" can be found in *Excerpta Romana: De bronnen der Romeinse geschiedenis van Nederland*, ed. Alexander Willem Byvanck. Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën 73 (The Hague: 1930) and Stéphane Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons du haut Moyen Âge*, vol. 2: *Corpus des sources écrites* (Lille: 1983).

6 On all aspects of the *Lex Frisionum*, see the excellent study by Harald Siems, *Studien zur Lex Frisionum*, *Abhandlungen zur rechtswissenschaftlichen Grundlagenforschung* 42 (Ebelsbach: 1980).

7 J.C. Besteman, J.M. Bos, and H. Anthonie Heidinga, *Graven naar Friese koningen: De opgravingen in Wijnaldum*, 2nd ed. (Franeker: 1993).

8 Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons du haut moyen âge*, vol. 2 (Lille: 1983), gives references to the Frisian kings/dukes. The Frisian leader Radbod, e.g., is called *dux* in the continuations of the Frankish Fredegar: *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri iv. cum Continuationibus*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 2 (Hanover: 1888), 172, but *rex* by Bede: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and Roger Mynors (Oxford: 1969), lib. v, c. 10, 480.

defeated in 734 at the Boorne, also have merely regional authority?⁹ It would be obvious to assume Frankish influence in creating power in the west of the Frisian lands. At the mouth of the Rhine, and at the Kromme Rijn, Frisians and Franks lived side by side and maintained a delicate balance of power, until the Franks drove out the Frisians once and for all. It was at Utrecht that the Anglo-Saxon mission among the Frisians started. The missionaries were supported by the Frankish rulers. No doubt control over the rich Frisian commerce influenced Frankish considerations that led to the extension of their sphere of influence northwards.¹⁰

The Frisians were traders. More than any other group on the coasts of the North Sea they were interested in the exchange of goods.¹¹ Even as late as the 11th century, an Old English poem calls a merchant's wife a "Frisian woman."¹² From the 6th century the Frisians used coins to facilitate the exchange of goods. Dorestad flourished from about the time when Boniface, in the evening of his life, returned to Frisia,¹³ but already in the 7th century gold coins were struck at Dorestad.¹⁴ Elsewhere in Frisia coinage was struck as well. In the coastal area, especially in the region of the *terpen*, large amounts of 6th- and 7th-century coins have been found. The 7th-century hoard of Wieuwerd, which was found in an earthenware pot, contained no fewer than 39 golden jewels.¹⁵ Among them were coins from Byzantium and Merovingian Gaul that had been turned into jewels. The style of a *fibula* and some *bracteates* (little coin-shaped plates of metal struck on one side only) remind one of the Germanic cultures around the North Sea. It is clear that the Frisians faced by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries were by no means divorced from the world around them – no matter what people such as the editor of Boniface's second *vita*, who were merely concerned with the nature of their areas of settlement, may have

9 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri iv. cum Continuationibus*, ed. Krusch, 176.

10 See Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons*, vol. 1, for an excellent survey of Frisian commerce.

11 See Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons*, vol. 1.

12 Blanche Colton Williams, "The 'Frisian Sailor' passage," in *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*, ed. Blanche Colton Williams (New York: 1914), 122; Leslie Whitbread, "The 'Frisian Sailor' passage in the Old English gnomic verses," *The Review of English Studies* 22 (1946), 215.

13 See Annemarieke Willemsen, *Dorestad: Een wereldstad in de Middeleeuwen* (Zutphen: 2009).

14 Struck by the moneyer Madelinus. Image in Willemsen, *Dorestad*, 117.

15 Image in Besteman et al., *Graven naar Friese koningen*, 22–23. A gazetteer of the main early medieval finds from the Netherlands, compiled by Mette Langbroek and Josje van Leeuwen, can be found in Annemarieke Willemsen, *Gouden Middeleeuwen: Nederland in de Merovingische wereld, 400–700 na Chr.* (Zutphen: 2014), 198–211.

thought. Frisia was an economically important region despite its relatively small size and sometimes difficult natural conditions.

3 What Boniface Found in Frisia

When Boniface disembarked in the Frisian lands in 716, he would have seen small settlements on natural elevations such as river banks, consisting of a few farms only. In the north, artificial elevations, the *terpen*, were being raised to provide room for houses or, through the merging of *terpen*, hamlets. Houses were made of wood or of wickerwork smeared with loam and had thatched roofs; cattle were stabled in boxes close to the living quarters of the farmers. The dead were taken care of in various ways. They were buried, sometimes in wooden coffins made out of tree trunks, or cremated, after which the remains were deposited in a hole in the ground, sometimes in an urn. There was fishing and hunting, but also agriculture and animal husbandry. Cows were important: in 780–784 Alcuin wrote a poem in which he called the bishop of Utrecht “rich in cows.”¹⁶

Boniface would have noticed the social differences among the Frisians as manifested in their clothing, with jewellery and weapons also indicating the status of the wearers. Warriors had at least an axe and a short sword. Stirrups were reserved for higher-status warriors. There were also lances, long swords, and throwing axes (*franciscas*). Helmets were signs of proximity to the king; their wearers belonged to the summit of the warrior elite. Many of these sights will have been familiar to him, as houses and people looked roughly similar in Anglo-Saxon England.

Boniface probably would have been more or less able to understand the language spoken by the Frisians. The differences between Old Frisian and Old English were not insurmountable. Long after the Middle Ages, Dutch sailors could still understand the meaning of English place names and render them into Dutch.¹⁷ Frisia was interesting to Anglo-Saxon missionaries because of the similarities in language and culture between the inhabitants of both southern shores of the North Sea. Bede, who wrote his ecclesiastical history of the English around 732, wrote that the person who first thought of the Continental

16 Alcuin, “Cartula, perge cito ...” v. 7, in Alcuin, *Carmina*, ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH Poetae Latini 1 (Berlin: 1881), 221.

17 Marco Mostert, “Linguistics of Contact in the Northern Seas,” in *Empires of the Sea: The Power Structures of Maritime Networks*, eds. Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde, and Roy van Wijk (Leiden: 2019), 179–93.

mission, Egbert, “knew that there were many peoples in Germany, from whom the Angles and Saxons who now live in Britain descend.”¹⁸

Similarities in language made things easier for Anglo-Saxon missionaries, and so did similarities in culture.¹⁹ Although Latin literacy was extremely limited, the Frisians had their own system of writing runes. From the Dutch language area there survive some sixteen runic inscriptions, dating from the early 6th to the end of the 9th century, almost all from Frisian areas. A few of these inscriptions may be of English or Scandinavian origin, where the use of runes was continued much longer, and we have about a dozen indigenous runic inscriptions, in bone, stone, or in the wood of the yew tree, and struck in coins. It is hardly much, but many runes carved in wood must have been lost.

The Latin alphabet was used by the Franks also for letter-writing and administrative purposes. Although in pre-Christian Frisia hardly any Latin writing seems to have taken place, the Frisians were not unfamiliar with correspondence, as shown by an anecdote from the *Life* of Wilfrid where the Frisian King Aldgisil has a letter read aloud from the Frankish Duke Ebroin asking him to send or murder Wilfrid in exchange for money. Aldgisil then replies by tearing up the letter and destroying it in the fire in the presence of Ebroin’s messengers.²⁰ By far the larger part of the population, however, was illiterate, except among the merchant class. Stories and songs were transmitted orally. There were blind singers, such as the blind Bernlef, mentioned in the *Life* of Liudger, one of the first indigenous clergymen trained by the Utrecht mission. Liudger met Bernlef in Groningen. He “was kind and could recite the deeds of the ancients and the battles of the kings well.”²¹ The stories were recited before a public in a way that is called *psallendo* (melodiously), and maybe with the accompaniment of a musical instrument. In Frisia lyres and harps have been found at more than a few sites.

Which religious ideas did Boniface encounter under the pagan Frisians? And what kinds of rituals took place? Diversity in burial rites implies that

18 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and Roger Mynors (Oxford: 1969), lib. v, c. 9, 476: “Quarum in Germania plurimas nouerat esse nationes, a quibus Angli uel Saxones, qui nunc Britanniam incolunt, genus et originem duxisse noscuntur.”

19 Marco Mostert, “The Early History of Written Culture in the Northern Netherlands,” in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 20, eds. Slávica Ranković et al. (Turnhout: 2010), 459–68.

20 Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: 1902), c. 27, 220.

21 Altfred, *Vita Lgeri*, lib. 1, c. 25, 30: “oblatu est ei caecus, vocabulo Bernlef, qui a vicinis suis valde diligebatur, eo quod esset affabilis, et antiquorum actus regumque certamina bene noverat psallendo promere.”

there was no central institution or single custom that prescribed how to deal with the dead. Sacrifices were made directly to gods and the ancestors, and not mediated by clergy. Certain places of worship must have had a special significance, as is made clear from names, and since stones, trees, and sources are often mentioned in connection with non-Christian rituals, toponyms containing such elements as *holt*, *wold*, or *borne* may also refer to holy places. This is by no means certain, however.²²

We do not have a single text of non-Christian origin from early medieval Frisia. Information may be gleaned, however, from the writings of the pagans' Christian adversaries. Because of the information monopoly of the Christian sources, scholarship has been inclined to see paganism as a single unity, as if the Germans from the days of Tacitus and the inhabitants of Iceland a millennium later were connected by a single tradition. Continuity, however, has to be demonstrated. Even if we limit ourselves to more or less contemporaneous descriptions of paganism in early medieval Frisia, there are immense problems of interpretation. The authors are far from impartial. They are decidedly against pagan practices, which they characterise as dirty and ungodly: the gods of the pagans are idols, false gods, phantasms. As soon as Christianity had gained some foothold, paganism was dismissed with a term of abuse as heresy. Another problem is that the authors package their information in terminology borrowed from classical mythology. In the *Vita altera Bonifatii*, the missionary roots out all "fauns and satyrs," which, the author says, some of the pagans call gods of the woods: "Likewise he persuaded all Christians to disdain nymphs of the woods (*driades*) and of the vales (*napeas*) and other similar things that are monsters rather than divinities."²³ These names derive directly from Virgil, who was thoroughly studied in early medieval monastic schools.

Still, sometimes important information is contained in descriptions of the lives of the missionaries. Two Frisian sanctuaries are described by Alcuin in his 8th-century *Life* of Willibrord: one on Walcheren and the other on Fositesland, named after the god Fosite, "situated in the border area between Frisians and Danes."²⁴ It was here that the dangers of contact with "others" could be repelled by the power of the sacred. According to Alcuin's *Life*, Willibrord destroys a pagan sanctuary in Walcheren:

22 Rudi E. Künzel, Dirk P. Blok, and J.M. Verhoeff, *Lexicon van Nederlandse toponiemen tot 1200* (Amsterdam: 1988).

23 *VaB*, c. 8, 68: "Bonifacius, falcem manu tenens divinam, omnes faunos et sathyros, quos nonnulli paganorum silvestres deos appellant, funditus extirpavit. Similiter autem et driades napeasque et cetera huiusmodi magis portenta quam numina christianis omnibus nauci pendere persuasit."

24 Alcuin, *VW*, c. 10, 124.

When the venerable man once, as was his wont, was on a missionary journey, he came to a certain place called Walcheren, where there still was a sanctuary of the old superstition. When the man of God smashed this in his fiery zeal before the eyes of the guardian, this one, flown into a terrible rage, in a fit of his insane spirit struck the priest of Christ on the head. Because God protected his servant, he did not suffer any injury from the blow. But when his companions saw this, they came running to punish the brute violence of the godless man by death.²⁵

The Christians were in the majority and wanted to punish the solitary guard of the pagan sanctuary. What kind of sanctuary had been destroyed by Willibrord is not mentioned; the destruction of sanctuaries is a standard action of missionaries, mentioned generally at least once in their *Lives*, as, for example, when Boniface is described as felling the Donar Oak in Willibald's *Life*.²⁶ We learn more about the forms of paganism under the Frisians from the description of the second sanctuary.

On Fositesland, described also in the *Life* of Willibrord, the sanctuary of the non-Christians is deliberately desecrated by the missionary. The pagans' respect is wasted on Willibrord:

When the man of God landed on this island through a storm, he stayed for a number of days ... But because he was hardly impressed by the foolish religious customs of the place or by the cruelty of the king, who used to sentence desecrators of those holy things to the most horrible death, he baptized three men in the well, calling upon the holy Trinity. He also ordered some animals that were grazing there to be slaughtered as food for his company. When the pagans saw this, they thought that [the followers of Willibrord] would become mad or would die very soon. But when they noticed that nothing serious was happening, in deadly terror they told king Radbod what they had experienced.²⁷

25 Alcuin, *VW*, c. 14, 128: "Quodam igitur tempore, dum venerabilis vir iter euangelizandi more solito egisset, venit ad quandam villam Walichrum nomine, in qua antiqui erroris idolum remansit. Quod cum vir Dei zelo fervens confringeret praesente eiusdem idoli custode, qui nimio furore succensus, quasi dei sui iniuriam vindicaret, in impetu animi insanientis gladio caput sacerdotis Christi percussit; sed, Deo defendente servum suum, nullam ex ictu ferientis lesuram sustenuit. Socii vero illius hoc videntes, pessimam praesumptionem impii hominis morte vindicare concurrerunt."

26 Willibald, *VB*, c. 7.

27 Alcuin, *VW*, c. 10, 125: "Quo cum vir Dei tempestate iactatus est, mansit ibidem aliquot dies ... Sed parvi pendens stultam loci illius relegionem vel ferocissimum regis animum,

A well, desecrated by using it for baptism; the slaughtering of animals, apparently dedicated to the god Fosite, to show his powerlessness in this way; the deceived expectation of the pagans that their god would not let this desecration pass without retribution: these are signs of the power of the Almighty the hagiographer wants to show. But in doing so the holy pagan sanctuary is at least described.

King Radbod was angry and decided to indicate in a ritual manner that Wilibrord and his companions had to be put to death. This he did by casting lots, in order to know the will of the gods. According to Tacitus, who had described the public ritual for the first time, small slips were cut from the twigs of a nut-bearing tree, in which signs were carved. These slips were thrown on a white cloth, after which a priest or the head of a family (and in this case, King Radbod himself) drew three of them randomly. Afterwards the signs were interpreted:²⁸

Enraged, [king Radbod] thought to avenge the insults done to his gods on the priest of the living God, and during three days he threw lots, according to his custom, three at a time. And the lot of the doomed could never fall on the servant of God or on someone of his company, because God protects his own. One companion only was indicated by lot and has received the crown of martyrdom. Now the holy man was called before the king and strongly reprimanded, as he had violated his sanctuaries and insulted his god. The harbinger of Truth answered him unperturbed: "it is no god you worship, but the devil, who has deceived you by the gravest misapprehension, O king, to give up your soul to the immortal flames."²⁹

qui violatores sacrorum illius atrocissima morte damnare solebat, igitur tres homines in eo fonte cum invocatione sanctae Trinitatis baptizavit, sed et animalia in ea terra pascencia in cibaria suis mactare praecepit. Quod pagani intuentes, arbitrabantur, eos vel in furorem verti vel etiam veloci morte perire. Quos cum nihil mali cernebant pati, stupore perterriti, regi tamen Rabbodo quod videbant factum retulerunt."

28 Tacitus, *Germania*, c. 10, ed. and trans. Maurice Hutton and E.H. Warmington, in *Tacitus, Agricola. Germania. Dialogue on Oratory*, Loeb Classical Library 35, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: 1970), 144–47.

29 Alcuin, *VW*, c. 11, 125: "Qui [scil. Radbodus] nimio furore succensus, in sacerdotem Dei vivi suorum iniurias deorum ulcisci cogitabat et per tres dies semper tribus vicibus sortes suo more mittebat, et numquam damnatorum sors, Deo vero defendente suos, super servum Dei vel aliquem ex suis cadere potuit, nisi unus tantum ex sociis sorte monstratus et martyrio coronatus est. Vocabatur vero vir sanctus ad regem et multum ab eo increpatus, quare sua sacra violasset et iniuriam deo suo fecisset. Cui praeco veritatis constanti animo respondit: 'Non est Deus, quem colis, sed diabolus, qui te pessimo errore, o rex, deceptum habet, ut animam tuam aeternis tradat flammis.'"

Hereupon, Willibrord started preaching to explain the absence of power of the pagan gods and the power of God over the drawing of the lots. In this way the king was to convert. This did not happen immediately. However, Radbod let Willibrord depart for the Franks honourably and without hindrance.

This account suggests that the drawing of lots to decide over a person's life happened frequently and was not restricted to the case of Willibrord and his companions. Human sacrifice, with victims chosen from among the Frisians themselves, is in fact mentioned in another saint's life. The story comes from the *Life* of Wulfram, who had been archbishop of Sens. This Frankish aristocrat had come to Frisia to assist Willibrord in his missionary efforts:

It happened one day that a boy of the Frisian tribe itself was to be sacrificed to the gods by means of strangulation. Therefore the holy bishop prayed the infidel duke [of the Frisians] to give him the life of this boy and not to kill a human being made in the image of God in the manner of a horrible sacrifice to demons. The name of that boy was Ovo. Now the duke answered in his mother tongue that once it had been decided in the eternal law by his predecessors and the whole people of the Frisians that, whomsoever fate had chosen, was to be sacrificed immediately on the solemn days they celebrated.³⁰

Wulfram did, of course, succeed through his prayers to have Ovo's fetters broken, "and because of this a large crowd of Frisians has converted to the Lord." On another occasion two boys, Eurinus and Ingomarus, were saved by Wulfram from death by strangulation. The *Life* of Wulfram explains that human sacrifice by the Frisian king on high days was part of orally transmitted customs that were considered eternal. Apart from strangulation, the Frisians also knew human sacrifice by the sword, by hanging, and by drowning. The *Life* of Wulfram describes that it was their custom to cause some sacrificial victims

...to be submerged in the waves of the sea or the waters, driven by devilish inspiration. Under this people there was a widow who had two extremely sweet sons. They were chosen by lot to be sacrificed to the

30 Ps.-Jonas, *Vita Vulframni episcopi Senonici*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 5 (Hanover: 1902), c. 6, 665: "contigit quadam die puerum quendam, ex ipsa Fresionum natione ortum, diis immolandum duc ad laqueum. Orabat autem pontifex sanctus incredulum ducem, ut huius pueri vitam sibi donaret nec hominem ad imaginem Dei factum sacrificium execrabile daemonibus immolaret. Vocabatur autem idem puer Ovo. Respondebat autem dux patrio sermone, decretum esse lege perhenni olim a praedecessoribus suis omnique Fresionum gente, ut, quemcumque sors elegisset, in eorum sollempniis diis offerendum sine mora."

demons and to be killed in the whirlpools of the sea. They were taken to a certain place around which the sea flowed on two sides so that, when the flood of the sea would have covered that place, they would miserably be swallowed by the waves. One of them was six, the other one five years old ... But the holy bishop Wulfram asked to spare their lives... To which the unbelieving duke said: "if your Christ liberates them from the danger of this moment, I will render them for ever into his dominion."³¹

Upon Wulfram's prayer the spit immediately became as high as a hill, and of course many converted after having witnessed this miracle.

Apart from Fosite, the Frisians also worshipped the better-known Donar, Wodan, and Saxnot, according to the so-called "Utrecht baptismal promise."³² This is a text written in the Utrecht mission by an Anglo-Saxon author after an Anglo-Saxon exemplar, which survives in an 8th-century copy made in Mainz. It consists of a series of questions in the vernacular that had to be put to recently converted pagans before they could be baptized, together with the answers. The directions were put in Latin:

Do you forsake the devil? And let him answer: I forsake the devil.

And all devil's money [sacrifices]? And let him answer: and I forsake all devil's money.

And all work of the devil? And let him answer: and I forsake all the devil's work and word and Donar and Wodan and Saxnot and all evil spirits that are their companions.

And do you believe in God the almighty father? I believe in God the almighty father.

Do you believe in Christ the son of God? I believe in Christ the son of God.

Do you believe in the Holy Ghost? I believe in the Holy Ghost.³³

31 Ps.-Jonas, *Vita Vulframni*, c. 8, 667: "...alios marinorum sive aquarum fluctibus instinctu diabolico submergebat. Erat in praedicta gente mulier quaedam vidua, duos carissimos habens natos, qui ex sorte missa daemonibus fuerant immolandi et gurgite maris enecandi. Ducti namque sunt ad quendam locum bitalassi more aqua inclusum, ut, dum reuma maris eundem cooperiret locum, miserabiliter fluctibus obsorberentur. Erat vero, ut fertur, unus aetate septennis alterque quinquennis. ...Sacer vero pontifex Vulframnus eos sibi vitaeque perdonari rogabat ... Tunc dux incredulus: 'Si tuus,' inquit, 'Christus a periculo praesenti eos liberaverit, eius dominio eos perpetim concedo...'"

32 *Interrogationes et responsiones baptismales*, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: 1883), 222.

33 "Utrecht baptismal promise," in Maurits Gysseling (ed.), *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*, Series 11: *Litteraire handschriften*, 1, *Fragmenten* (The

The same manuscript also contains another text, this time almost wholly in Latin, which very likely also stems from the Utrecht mission. It is the list of superstitious practices known as the *Indiculus superstitionum*. Unfortunately, this is nothing more than a list of (sometimes cryptic) headings. The few words in the vernacular indicate that the list must have originated in what are today the counties of North and South Holland around the middle of the 8th century. The use of words in the vernacular suggests that, at least in those cases in which the vernacular is used, we may be dealing with customs that were indeed observed:

On blasphemy over the dead, i.e. *dadsisas*....

On the sanctuaries in the woods they call *nimidas*....

On the rubbing of fire from wood, i.e. *nodfyr*....

On the pagan race with torn pieces of cloth or shoes which they call *yrias*.³⁴

From this we may conclude that the mentioned *dadsisas*, “funeral chants,” could be heard in Frisia. There were indeed sanctuaries in the woods, witness the evidence of place names, and apparently a rite in which fire was made, and a “pagan race.” Whether the other practices mentioned in the list also occurred, cannot be said with certainty.

The Frisian religious practices we find described in a few saint’s lives and texts from the Utrecht mission were presented by the missionaries as if they were over and done with. The realities were different. Utrecht was just an outpost in the struggle against pagan practices; it would take a long time before

Hague: 1980), 22–26: “forsächistu diobolae? / et respondeat: ec forsacho diabolae / end allum diobolgeldae? / respondeat: end ec forsacho allum diobolgeldae / end allum dioboles wercum? / respondeat: end ec forsacho allum dioboles wercum and wordum thunaer ende woden ende saxnote ende allum them unholdum the hira genotas sint. / gelobistu in got alamehtigan fadaer? / ec gelobo in got alamehtigan fadaer / gelobistu in crist godes suno? / ec gelobo in crist godes suno / gelobistu in halogan gast? / ec gelobo in halogan gast.” Cf. Marco Mostert, “Communicating the Faith: The Circle of Boniface, Germanic Vernaculars, and Frisian and Saxon Converts,” *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 70 (2013), 87–130.

34 *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: 1883), 222–23: “De sacrilegio super defunctos id est dadsisas / ... / De sacris siluarum quae nimidas uocant / ... / De igne fricato de ligno idest nodfyr / ... / De pagano cursu quem yrias nominant scisis pannis uel calciamentis.” For the view that the *Indiculus* was prepared in preparation for one of the reform councils, see especially Michael Glatthaar’s contribution to this volume in Chapter 10, as well as the chapters by John-Henry Clay and Rob Meens.

Christianity really was to take root. Some churches were being built, but they could not prosper without an ecclesiastical infrastructure based on well-organised missions. Without such support, the wooden churches were an easy prey for dissidents. That is why Boniface set sail in 716 for Utrecht, where Willibrord was known to organise the mission as best he could, helped by the might of the Franks.

4 The Anglo-Saxon Mission in Frisia

Utrecht (Traiectum) was a small settlement of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.³⁵ We know that sometime in the 7th century, under the Frankish king Dagobert I, around 630, or under Dagobert II, roughly two generations later, a small stone church had been built.³⁶ It was the first church in the later bishopric of the Frisians. The church had been left to decay, however, after Utrecht had been reconquered by the Frisians, and it is unlikely that Utrecht, which had been a small Roman fortress at the border of the Empire, still retained any military or administrative functions. If so, those roles were mainly symbolic: both the Frankish and Frisian rulers seem to have considered themselves as successors to the Romans. The *castellum* or fort Traiectum was about one hectare in size; the cathedral of Utrecht would later be built at this site. Once up to 500 Roman soldiers had been stationed there. To the west and east of the *castellum* had been military quarters, *vici*. Geographically, Utrecht belonged to the same area as Dorestad, situated some 20 kilometres upstream on the same branch of the Rhine. In Roman times, a *castellum* called Levefanum existed close to the site of Dorestad, where it served as part of the *limes*. Neither Traiectum nor Levefanum had been part of the *civitas* centred on Nijmegen. In the 8th century Dorestad was the economic and administrative centre. The region of the Kromme Rijn had been situated at the periphery of the Roman Empire; now it had developed into an important area, because connections between the North Sea and the Continental hinterland could be monitored here. The economic role of the region could even be compared to that of the far larger regions of the Meuse or the German Rhineland. The significance of Dorestad

35 More detail can be found in Marco Mostert, "News from Early Medieval Utrecht: Archaeological Finds Challenging the Historical Narrative," in *Transforming the Early Medieval World: Studies in Honour of Ian N. Wood*, eds. N. Kivilcim Yavuz and Richard Broome (Leeds: 2020; forthcoming).

36 Tangl, no. 109, 234–36. The arguments for Dagobert II in Wolfert S. van Egmond, "Utrechts oudste kerk en Dagobert: Vraagtekens bij een brief van Bonifatius," *Millennium: Tijdschrift voor Middeleeuwse Studies* 24 (2010), 95–112.

made it into a bone of contention between Franks and Frisians. There were no cities in Frisia – or no settlements that modern geographers would be willing to call cities. Together, Utrecht and Dorestad fulfilled most of the roles required of pre-modern cities.³⁷

In the autumn of 690 Willibrord had come here with twelve companions to preach the gospel to the heathen Frisian king Radbod. The number twelve was highly symbolic, and may have been inspired by the fact that once Augustine of Canterbury had landed also with twelve companions to convert the heathen king of Kent and install the mission that was to develop into the seat of the first archbishopric in the British Isles. Hardly anything is known of these twelve companions. They are described as churchmen in the Irish tradition practising *peregrinatio*, an extreme form of asceticism.³⁸ Pilgrim monks did not merely leave their relatives to live in the artificial family of the monastery: they even left the monasteries behind to live far away, deprived of any ties with the society and culture of their early years. Frisia and the other territories north of the Rhine seemed very suitable for such a life, even if Willibrord and his companions remained together.

This is the traditional image of the life of the Utrecht mission, but it may owe more to hagiographical exigencies than to the realities of life on the Rhine. Recent archaeological research has brought to light much to alter the current image of Utrecht and its surroundings.³⁹ To the west of the former *castellum*, a number of settlements from the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries have been investigated. Along the Rhine's lateral moraines could be found small hamlets, one of which has been fully excavated. This settlement consisted of six farmsteads. Each farmstead had a large house, which also had room for cattle, and very large storage buildings for bulk goods such as cereals. One farm knew industries such as metalworking, jewellery-making, and the importation and use of expensive pottery from as far away as the German Rhineland. Clearly there were links with Dorestad. That these hamlets were part of the same international trade network as their neighbours upstream is suggested by the working of amber, and by the finds of unused metal rivets that were meant to repair ships. A nearly complete ship dating to the time of Willibrord and Boniface has also

37 Cf. Rimbart, *VA*, c. 20.

38 A.H. van Berkum, "Réflexions sur la physionomie spirituelle de Saint Willibrord et de ses compagnons," *Études epternaciennes* 2 (1982), 7–18.

39 Especially interesting is M. Nökkert, A.C. Aarts, and H.L. Wynia, *Vroegmiddeleeuwse be-woning langs de A2: Een nederzetting uit de zevende en achtste eeuw in Leidsche Rijn*, Basis-rapportage Archeologie 26 (Utrecht: 2010); and R.J.P. Kloosterman, R.D. Hoegen et al., *Domplein Revisited*, Basisrapportage Archeologie 64 (Utrecht: 2015).

been found at Utrecht.⁴⁰ At the fully excavated six-farmstead hamlet, a neighbouring site has been interpreted as belonging to a merchant. Here, coin finds witness trade across the North Sea, and a stylus suggests that some sort of writing may have been practised here before Christianity and its culture of the written word enabled lay literacy to develop.³⁹ Clearly, the farmers on the Rhine were relatively well to do. Re-excavation of the area where the settlement of the missionaries must have been, inside the former Roman *castellum*, has also rendered new information. The finds of late Merovingian fourteen pseudo-*tremisses* (in imitation of the golden coins which had been struck by the Frankish moneyer Madelinus ca. 635–650) and two silver *sceattas*, coins which had been overlooked in the excavations of 1936–1949, before the days of the metal detector, suggest that the *castellum* shared in the financial prosperity of the surroundings.⁴⁰ Clearly the “wilderness” in which the monks found themselves was not as uncomfortable as the hagiographers made it out to be. Considering the archaeological data that have been found in the areas where the Utrecht-based missionaries worked, the situation at Utrecht may not have been all that exceptional.⁴¹

The missionaries at the Utrecht of Willibrord's generation were monks in the sense that they each hoped to perfect themselves spiritually, sustained by communal life. To the Franks who had received them in 690 they seem to have been preachers rather than monks living according to a common rule.⁴² As soon as Utrecht and Dorestad were once more under Frankish control – for the time being the Frisian king Radbod still ruled here – Pippin, the mayor of the palace (640/650–714) thought of the old *castellum* of Traiectum. Willibrord and his companions could restore the ruined church there, which would be useful to the Franks. In 696, after the battle of Dorestad, and after Willibrord had been to Rome and was appointed archbishop, the mission installed itself in

40 Martijn Manders and Robert Hoegen, *Waardstelling Vleuten 1: Het onderzoek naar de resten van een opgeboeide boomstamboot uit de 8e eeuw na Christus*, Rapportage Archeologische Monumentenzorg 198 (Amersfoort: 2011), to be found at <http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/publicaties/waardstelling-vleuten-1>.

41 Willemsen, *Gouden Middeleeuwen: Nederland in de Merovingische wereld*, 198–211.

42 On the relations between the Franks and the missionaries, see Arnold Angenendt, *Kaiserherrschaft und Königstaufe: Kaiser, Könige und Päpste als geistliche Patrone in der abendländischen Missionsgeschichte. Taufe und Politik im frühen Mittelalter* (Berlin: 1984). Angenendt gives the known details about the way the missionaries dealt with (local, regional and supra-regional) power players in medieval Europe generally.

Utrecht.⁴³ The political situation remained unclear, however, because Radbod may have lost the battle, but the outcome of the war was hardly certain.⁴⁴

In contrast to the coastal area, Traiectum had never been abandoned, even if the number of inhabitants in the 5th century had declined. Two 5th-century graves of boys have been found, and from the grave goods it is clear that they were members of regional aristocratic families. From the 6th century, the Frankish aristocracy started to penetrate the region of the Kromme Rijn from the east, from the Austrasian territories of the Franks. The regional aristocracy benefited from the discord between Frisians and Franks to enhance its own influence.⁴⁵ The church in the former *castellum* built by King Dagobert I or II, dedicated to St Thomas, had been given to the bishop of Cologne with the order of starting a mission under the Frisians.⁴⁶ A few years later the pagan Frisians captured Utrecht and Dorestad, and destroyed the church at Utrecht. In 678 the first contacts between the Anglo-Saxon church and the Frisians were established. In that year the Frisian king Aldgisl received bishop Wilfrid of York in his palace at Utrecht or Dorestad.⁴⁷ From that moment on Anglo-Saxon clergy never abandoned the idea that the Frisians had to be brought to Christianity. Wilfrid was merely passing through to deal with the affairs of the archbishopric of York. According to his *Life*, written ca. 720, during his visit suddenly more fish was caught than was normal. That was credited to his God, and many were said to have converted. The author had to admit that Wilfrid had not managed to convert all, which, of course, means Utrecht-Dorestad was still pagan, as the conversion of the aristocracy was a matter of all or nothing. Wilfrid had not succeeded.⁴⁸

Around 690, new efforts were made by Willibrord and by Frankish missionaries such as Wulfram. It seemed as if the Frankish mission might achieve some success. Aldgisl had died and had been succeeded by Radbod, who let

43 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, c. 6, 172. Cf. Bede, *HE*, lib. v, c. 11, 486.

44 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, c. 6, 172 (on the battle at Dorestad); c. 7, 172–73 (on the marriage of Grimoald, the son of Pippin II, the victor of the battle, with the daughter of Radbod in 711); c. 8–9, 173–74 (the Franks of Ragenfred conclude a treaty with Radbod and invite him to attack Charles Martel with them). Unfortunately, we need to reconstruct the course of events on the basis of these few references. The author of the *Continuatio* is not always clear about which side Radbod chose.

45 H.L. de Groot, *Traces at Trajectum: An Archaeological Survey* (Utrecht: 1992), 10–13; H. Anthonie Heidinga and Gertrudis A.M. Offenbergh, *Op zoek naar de vijfde eeuw: De Franken tussen Rijn en Maas* (Amsterdam: 1992), 99–102.

46 Tangl, no. 109, 234–36, written by Boniface to Pope Stephen II in 753, concerning the quarrel with Cologne about the bishopric of Utrecht (see below).

47 Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, c. 219–20.

48 Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, c. 25–26, 219–20.

Wulfram preach, baptize, and miraculously save children from death by human sacrifice. Radbod himself was almost ready for baptism. Unfortunately, Wulfram made the mistake of giving an honest answer to a question the king asked him:

The said prince Radbod, when he was to be submerged to receive baptism, hesitated and asked the holy bishop Wulfram, whom he forced through oaths in the name of the Lord [to tell truthfully] where the greatest number of Frisian kings, princes and noblemen could be found: in the heavenly realm that he hoped to see when he was to believe and be baptised, or in the realm that he [Wulfram] had called that of dark damnation? Then the blessed Wulfram said: 'make no mistake, illustrious prince. With God is a certain number of the elect. Because your predecessors as princes of the Frisian people have died without the sacrament of baptism, it is certain that they have received the doom of damnation. But he who believes from now on and will be baptised, will rejoice with Christ for all time.' When the unbelieving duke heard this – he had already approached the font – he withdrew, so it is told, his foot, saying that he did not want to forgo the company of his predecessors, the princes of the Frisians, by sitting with a few poor in that heavenly kingdom.... Unhappily he withdrew from the sacred font.⁴⁹

The solidarity of the Frisian elites, evidently, was more important than eternal bliss in the company of those who did not belong to those elites. While the story may not reflect reality, what matters is that according to the *Life* of Wulfram there had been at least some time in which missionaries were left alone to preach.

When the Franks returned, Christianity may have been seen too much as the religion of the enemy. At the battle of Dorestad Radbod was beaten, and

49 Ps.-Jonas, *Vita Vulframni*, c. 9, 668: "Praefatus autem princeps Rathbodus, cum ad percipiendum baptismum inbueretur, percunctabatur a sancto episcopo Vulframno, iuramentis eum per nomen Domini astringens, ubi maior esset numerus regum et principum seu nobilium gentis Fresionum, in illa videlicet caelesti regione, quam, si crederet et baptizaretur, percepturum se promittebat, an in ea, quam dicebat tartaream dampnationem. Tunc beatus Vulframnus: 'Noli errare, inclite princeps, apud Deum certus est suorum numerus electorum. Nam praedecessores tui principes gentis Fresionum, qui sine baptismi sacramento recesserunt, certum est dampnationis suscepisse sententiam; qui vero abhinc crediderit et baptizatus fuerit, cum Christo gaudebit in aeternum.' Haec audiens dux incredulus – nam ad fontem processerat, – et, ut fertur, pedem a fonte retraxit, dicens, non se carere posse consortio praedecessorum suorum principum Fresionum et cum parvo pauperum numero residere in illo caelesti regno ... a sacro fonte infeliciter recessit."

Willibrord could return in 696; finally, he could settle into his mission. He built a second church at Utrecht, the St Saviour (which during the Middle Ages came to be known as the chapel of the Holy Cross). It did not take long, however, for the Frisians to rebel. In 714, when the Austrasian and Neustrian Franks were engaged in a mutual conflict, the Frisians once more chased the Franks from Utrecht.⁵⁰ Willibrord had to leave his mission and Pippin II and his wife gave him Susteren, safe behind enemy lines, to await better days. Maybe he went there; maybe he went to Echternach, the monastery that Irmina, the abbess of Oeren, had given him.⁵¹ When Boniface arrived in Frisia, he did not find Willibrord there, but had to look for him in the south, in areas controlled by the Franks.

This happened in 716. Boniface was over forty years old, and was still known as Wynfrith, the name Boniface not being given to him until 719. According to his first biography, in 716 he wanted to travel to the Continent to “leave his fatherland and relatives,” as Willibald puts it.⁵² His abbot consented, and with a purse and two or three brethren, he embarked on a Frisian vessel in London. Wynfrith arrived safely in Dorestad, to decide what to do, as the situation which he found in Frisia was all but auspicious for a starting missionary. In Willibald’s words:

A fierce conflict that arose between the glorious prince and duke of the Franks Charles [Martel] and Radbod, the king of the Frisians, occasioned by a hostile raid of the heathen, caused severe unrest among the people on both sides, and through the dispersion of the priests and the persecution by Radbod the majority of the Christian churches, which earlier had been subject to Frankish rule, were destroyed or brought to ruin. Furthermore, the pagan sanctuaries were rebuilt and, worse still, idolatry was restored.⁵³

50 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, c. 6, 172; cf. c.7, 172–73, c. 8–9, 173–74; Ps.-Jonas, *Vita Vulframni*, c. 4, 663–64.

51 J. Schroeder, “Willibrord: Erzbischof von Utrecht oder Abt von Echternach? Das Leben und Wirken des angelsächsischen Missionars aus der Sicht der frühmittelalterlichen Hagiographie,” in *Willibrord, zijn leven en zijn werk*, *Middeleeuwse studies* 6, eds. Petronella Bange and Anton Gerard Weiler (Nijmegen: 1990), 348–57; A.H. van Berkum, “De constitueren en mislukking van de Friese kerkprovincie,” in *Willibrord, zijn wereld en zijn werk*, 166, gives a list of all charters relative to Willibrord in the years 697–727, including the donations to Echternach.

52 Willibald, *VB*, c. 4, 15: “deliberaret, ut patriam parentesque desereret.”

53 Willibald, *VB*, c. 4, 16: “Sed quoniam, gravi ingruente paganorum impetu, hostilis exorta dissensio inter Carlum principem gloriosumque ducem Franchorum et Redbodum regem Fresonum populos ex utraque parte perturbabat maximaque iam pars ecclesiarum

Wynfrith went to Utrecht to talk with Radbod. The prospects for the mission were sombre, as he soon discovered. Disappointed, he travelled around and made plans for the future. In the end, when the weather worsened, he returned to England with a few companions, to stay the next years at Nursling.

In 719, Wynfrith, who had meanwhile become Boniface, received a papal mission to report on the possibilities of sending missionaries to the still pagan territories of Germany. In that year Radbod died, and Charles Martel had managed to bring the Frisian lands this side of the Almere definitively under Frankish authority.⁵⁴ Willibrord had returned to Utrecht, and started the restoration of the church of St Thomas, which he dedicated to St Martin, the patron saint of the Merovingians. He also rebuilt the mission for his companions.⁵⁵ He started a school for the formation of an indigenous clergy, and most probably also constructed other buildings necessary for the monastic communal life.⁵⁶ Willibrord, now archbishop of the Frisians, finally could start building the Frisian Church.

At that moment Boniface appeared, with his papal mission and with ideas that were not necessarily those of the older Willibrord.⁵⁷ Conflicts proved unavoidable. Willibald describes this episode in the life of Boniface as follows:

When the holy servant of God saw that, although the harvest was large, the workers few in number, he became active as the assistant of

Christi, quae Franchorum prius in Fresia subiectae erant imperio, Redbodi incumbente persecutione ac servorum Dei facta expulsionem, vastata erat ac destructa, idolorum quoque cultura exstructis dilubrorum fanis lugubriter renovata.”

54 Willibald, *VB*, c. 5, 23–24. For the other sources about this event, see F.L. Ganshof, “Het tijdperk van de Merowingen,” in *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 1, ed. D.P. Blok (Utrecht: 1949), 260.

55 The chronology of the oldest churches of Utrecht is a subject of heated debate. See, e.g., *De oudste kerken van Utrecht*, special issue of the *Bulletin van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond* 93 (1994), 133–96.

56 This is suggested by Bede, *HE*, v, c. 11, 486, who mentions Willibrord, after having settled in Utrecht, “plures per illas regiones ecclesias sed et monasteria nonnulla construxit.” Surely he would have started building *monasteria* outside Utrecht only when he had already built a monastery for the Utrecht community.

57 Apart from Willibald’s evidence, quoted in the next note, there is also the matter of Willibrord’s and Boniface’s different attitude towards books and the written word generally. Willibrord never seems to have written anything. The annotation in the Echternach calendar, MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 10837, f. 39v, in its present form shows palaeographical problems; see Marco Mostert, “Wat schreef Willibrord?,” *Madoc* 3 (1989), 1–6. The data about Boniface’s unwavering trust in the authority of written texts have been put together by Lutz E. von Padberg and Hans-Walter Stork, *Der Ragyndrudis-Codex des Hl. Bonifatius* (Paderborn and Fulda: 1994).

archbishop Willibrord, for three years with the aid of that bishop acquired with much effort a not negligible number of people for Christ the Lord, destroyed pagan sanctuaries, and built houses of God.⁵⁸

Willibrord, who felt his age, asked Boniface to become his successor. Boniface refused this because, he said, he did not as yet have the age required to become bishop. Willibrord did not accept this, and a long altercation followed. As Willibald puts it, “in a long hither and thither of words arose a battle of minds between them and an estrangement that nevertheless did not disturb harmony.”⁵⁹ That last claim must be wishful thinking. A second argument Boniface used was his papal mission, and that he should have papal permission to be consecrated bishop. In 721 Willibrord gave in and allowed Boniface to leave.

Boniface was to return to Frisia only in 753. Two years earlier Pippin had been elected as king of the Franks and anointed by the Frankish bishops. In the intervening years Boniface had been highly influential in Frankish ecclesiastical circles, but he was now some eighty years of age, and spent most of his time in his chosen retreat at Fulda. Once more the old missionary wanted to put his talents in the service of preaching the Gospel in Frisia, where he had earlier worked at Willibrord's side. When Willibrord died, in 739, control over the Frisian mission seems to have been passed on to Boniface through the influence of the Carolingian mayors of the palace. In 753, when the bishop of Cologne wanted to exercise his authority over Utrecht, the elderly Boniface left his monastic retreat at Fulda. Willibald does not mention this affair, the true motive for Boniface's journey to Utrecht. From a letter of Boniface to Pope Stephen II we learn enough to form an idea of the quarrel.⁶⁰ King Dagobert, Boniface writes, had given the church at Utrecht to the bishop of Cologne. But there was the provision that the Frisians were to be converted by Cologne. This Cologne had not done, and therefore its rights had been forfeited. That no Frisian mission had been possible as long as the Franks did not control Utrecht, he fails to mention. Willibrord was to have received Utrecht as his see. After his death an auxiliary bishop had taken care of Utrecht, and now Carloman had entrusted Boniface with the see. Probably Cologne was right, but Boniface

58 Willibald, *VB*, c. 5, 24: “Sed quia messe quidem multa operarios inesse paucos cerneret, sanctus hic Dei famulus cooperatur etiam factus est per tres instanter annos Willibrordi archiepiscopi, multumque in Christo laborans, non parvum Domino populum, destructis delubrorum fanis et exstructis ecclesiarum oratoriis, praefato pontifici opitulante, adquisivit.”

59 Willibald, *VB*, c. 5, 25: “iamque per longas tricationum moras spiritalis inter eos orta est contentio et consona pulchrae discretionis facta dissensio.”

60 Tangl, no. 109, 234–36.

tried to use his good relations with Rome in the struggle. He posited that Pope Sergius had founded a bishopric of the Frisians that directly depended on Rome, and the small mission became a cathedral complex. The pope was presented with a vision of history he could understand.⁶¹

However this may be, an aged Boniface returned to Frisia. Willibrord's mission had flourished with the help of Frankish power. In the school, Franks, Anglo-Saxons, Irishmen and, after a while, Frisians were trained.⁶² There was a small library. Willibrord had once brought relics and books from Rome, and ever since the clergy had augmented the holdings. Texts were written here, such as the baptismal promise and the *Indiculus superstitionum*. Dorestad also developed. In the old Roman *castellum*, where the representative of the king had his seat, the Upper Church could be found; in the merchants' quarter the Lower Church.⁶³ In the 9th century there were many churches in the region of the Kromme Rijn, and we may assume that some of these were already extant when Boniface arrived in 753. Ecclesiastical organisation had also developed. According to Utrecht tradition, in the places where Boniface had expelled pagan vanities, he had built "monasteries and small churches, and also altars, suitable for sacrifice to God, and there he ordered the name of the living God to be invoked where previously dead idols had been venerated by the natives."⁶⁴ Willibrord will have done something similar, as it was part of his job to build churches, using the modest pieces of land given as gifts by the recently converted population. The churches, which for the time being remained in the hands of the founders, were simple structures of wood and loam. Archaeologists can hardly distinguish them from ordinary dwellings. But much more was not necessary: a room for the liturgy, with place at least for an altar, a priest, and the community of the faithful, sufficed. The priests officiating in these churches will, as elsewhere, have had the essential vestments, a book with the prayers of the Mass and a liturgical lectionary.⁶⁵

61 Tangl, no. 109, 234–36, discussed by Marco Mostert, "Bonifatius als Geschiedvervalser," *Madoc* 9 (1995), 213–21.

62 Mostert, "The Early History," 462 ff.

63 Charter of Charlemagne, dated Nijmegen, 8 June 777, MGH DD Kar. 1, no. 117, 163–64. See also Willem A. van Es, "Friezen, Franken en Vikingen," in *Romeinen, Friezen en Franken* 96, 109–10.

64 *VaB*, c. 8, 68: "vir iste spiritu Dei plenus in locis, a quibus supradictas vanitates expulerat, ilico monasteria inclita et basilicas eximias, altaria quoque divinis sacrificiis apta construxit ibique invocari statuit nomen Dei vivi, ubi mortua ydola ab indigenis eatenus colebantur."

65 Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: 1989), 162.

The bishopric of the Frisians in 753 was quite different from that in 721. There were churches. There were believers who had given their property to Willibrord. There was a small intellectual and spiritual centre in the form of the Utrecht mission. And there was relative quiet, especially after Charles Martel had once again defeated the Frisians at the battle of the Boorne in 734.⁶⁶ Up to the Middle Sea the Frisian lands were now nominally under the control of the Franks.

After his arrival at the Utrecht mission, Boniface built a new church to replace the small church of St Saviour, which Willibrord had originally dedicated to Christ in emulation of Augustine of Canterbury's restoration of the ancient Roman church of St Saviour at Canterbury.⁶⁷ Despite his age, Boniface went to the periphery of the Frankish sphere of influence. In 754 he travelled from Utrecht, where he must have spent the winter, to the Boorne and the Middle Sea.⁶⁸ On 5 June he was killed near Dokkum.⁶⁹

As soon as the news of Boniface's death reached England, a general council decided that the day of the martyrdom was to be solemnly commemorated. This necessitated the writing of a biography, and Willibald, an Anglo-Saxon from the circle of Boniface in Mainz, proved willing to take this task upon himself. Around 760 his *Life* of Boniface was finished. Willibald had had access to trustworthy witnesses of the frightful events that had taken place near Dokkum in Frisia, but Willibald had not been asked for an accurate account, but rather for a *vita* that was meant to serve the cult of the saint that Boniface had become.

How does Willibald describe the murder and its aftermath? Even before he left Mainz, Boniface knew that he would not return. He made sure that the ecclesiastical province he had organised would be managed well. Together with his companions he embarked and sailed the Rhine downstream to Frisia. After his arrival there he destroyed, wherever this was necessary, pagan sites and idols, built churches and baptised men, women and children in large numbers. Among his followers was Eoba, to whom he entrusted the care of the

66 *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, 176.

67 Charlotte J.C. Broer and Martin W.J. de Bruijn, *De eerste kerken in Utrecht: Sint-Thomas, Sint-Salvator en Sint-Maarten* (Utrecht: 1995), 43–47. Compare Bede, *HE*, lib. 1, c. 33, 114 with Alcuin, *VW*, c. 13, 127.

68 His missionary activities are reflected in the donations by Frisians to Fulda, edited in *Oorkondenboek van Holland en Zeeland*, nos. 7–17, 12–28, dating from the end of the 8th century to 842.

69 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 48–56 provides the first story of the murder. *VaB*, c. 16, 73 mentions the book with which Boniface allegedly defended himself from the pagan Frisians. See also von Padberg and Stork, *Der Ragyndrudis-Codex des Hl. Bonifatius*.

Frisian bishopric. He also had priests, deacons, and monks with him, some of whom are named by Willibald. These clergymen pitched their tents at the river Boorne, at the border of Westergo and Oostergo. The persons who had been baptized were led before Boniface, who laid his hands on them. Thereupon the newly baptized Christians went home; they were to return on the day of their first Communion.

Willibald describes how, on the day these new Christians were to receive Communion, Boniface and his followers were met by a “mob of pagans” (*paganorum tumultus*) armed with swords, spears, and shields and intent on violence and plunder.⁷⁰ When some of his young disciples tried to defend themselves and their companions, Boniface emerged from his tent carrying relics, and urged them with fatherly words to leave off fighting and accept the martyrdom that was God’s will.⁷¹ As he was speaking these holy words, the raging host set upon Boniface and his followers, slaying them mercilessly with swords and plundering the camp.⁷² Thereupon they went to the ships, which contained the provisions of the clergymen and their armed escort. Among other things they found wine, which they drunk immediately. The division of the spoils posed some problems, with murderers hacking into one another and dying from greed. To their horror, the survivors did not find gold or silver in the chests which they had stolen, but only relics and books, which they threw away in their rage across the fields or into the swamps. Fortunately, they were later retrieved and sent to Boniface’s monastery at Fulda.

The executioners came to a sticky end. When the news of the heinous bloodbath had spread across the land, “the Christians ... brought together a formidable army, advanced, swift warriors of the coming revenge, to the border area [of Oostergo and Westergo], entered the lands of the unbelievers and ... inflicted a destructive defeat on the pagans who opposed them from several directions.”⁷³ The fugitives were pursued, their possessions taken, and the men, women, and children that had been captured were returned home.⁷⁴ The pagans that remained quickly converted to Christianity. The bodies of Boniface and his murdered companions were transported by a propitious wind over the Almere to Utrecht. They were buried there until archbishop Lull of

70 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 49.

71 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 50.

72 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 50.

73 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 52: “christiani ... maximam congregantes expeditionem exercitus, confinium terminos prumpti postmodum futurae ultionis bellatores expetunt ... ac paganos eis e diverso obbianes ingenti strage prostraverunt.”

74 Willibald, *VB*, c. 8, 52.

Mainz demanded the bodies so they could be taken to the monastery on the banks of the river Fulda. Thus Willibald.

5 Aftermath⁷⁵

The gruesome events of 754 did not fail to impress contemporaries. In Utrecht, the memory of the martyr was celebrated. Some relics of Boniface, which ought to have been given to Fulda, were kept back, as well as some relics of his companions. There was even a heathen sacrificial axe that had fallen into the hands of the missionaries and had been given to the church of St Martin.⁷⁶ Most relics were kept in the chapter of St Saviour, the successor of the original mission post. Churches were dedicated to honour Boniface, also at Dokkum, as well as a chapel in Wynjeterp close-by. The development of the cult is understandable. The story of the murder had to develop at Utrecht, where, with ups and downs, the mission grew into a bishopric that remained conscious of its early date, and at Dokkum, where the murder had taken place. Stories were taken down in writing very early on by Willibald. Developments of those stories, which may or may not have been based on fact, were handed down among the Frisian Christians, and were written down at Utrecht after several generations. As soon as the second *Life* had been written down in the early 9th century and revised around 900 by bishop Radbod, the reading of both these earliest lives would inspire further developments of the story of the murder, in accordance with the wishes of the audience.

Such stories could be told about objects which were thought to have been in contact with the saint. In Dokkum, stone loaves of bread were kept. According to some they had come about when Boniface had asked a woman for bread, just before his death. She had refused and said there were only stones in the oven. The saint answered thereupon, that in that case the loaves would remain stones forever. Needless to say, different stories about the origin of the stone loaves came to be told as well.⁷⁷

Nothing new was told about Boniface's Frisian connections in Fulda. There were contacts nevertheless: Fulda had acquired landed property in Frisia.

75 Most of the information used to write this section has been taken from Paulus Gijsbertus Johannes Post, "Dokkum," in *Bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland 1*, eds. Peter Jan Margry and Charles Caspers (Amsterdam and Hilversum: 1997), 290–304.

76 Utrecht, Museum Het Catharijneconvent, inv.nr. OKM m. 38.

77 Peter J.A. Nissen, "Het versteende brood: een volksverhaalmotief in een Oostnederlands leven van Bonifatius," *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland* 28.2 (1986), 173–91.

Around 800, Gebo, Gerwich, Geltrud, Isanbald and his wife Sigibern, Hunbert and Tetda, who all lived on Wieringen, in the region that had been Christianized by Boniface, gave their possessions to Fulda, and others followed suit. In all, more than eighty such donations are known, and the Fulda monks tried to keep records of their Frisian possessions until the 12th century.⁷⁸ But they never took note of the stories that must have been told of Boniface. Were they not interested?

To answer this question we need to consider what happened to the Frisian mission after Boniface's body left for Fulda in 754. At that moment the "bishopric" Utrecht seems to have been more or less abolished: Boniface's successor was no bishop, but abbot Gregory.⁷⁹ Utrecht must have been put under the authority of Cologne, together with the school which could form new generations of missionaries. Later, under the Carolingians, traditions about the foundation of the Utrecht bishopric developed. The mission came to be reconsidered in the light of later developments. Gaps in the list of bishops were filled, and Utrecht hagiographers constructed a genealogy which started with Willibrord, Boniface, and Gregory.⁸⁰

Circumstances at Dokkum did not help to keep any stories about Boniface alive. Those stories that may have been told were not written down. If any attempts had been made to start a new mission here as a daughter of that at Utrecht, they had failed. There was no place where hagiographical texts may have been written down, and the area suffered from apostasy under bishop Frederick of Utrecht (820–835),⁸¹ when for the last time the Frisians returned to the non-Christian religion of their forefathers. Apart from some additional details regarding the story of the murder, i.e. the supposed eye-witness account of an old woman recorded in the *Vita altera* that Boniface protected his head with a book and that he was decapitated, very little new information came to light.⁸² The third *Life* of Boniface, written at Utrecht between 917 and 1075, does not really provide new details about the saint himself.⁸³ It seems as if the

78 Anton Carl Frederik Koch (ed.), *Oorkondenboek van Holland en Zeeland tot 1299*, 1 (The Hague: 1970), nos. 7–17, 12–28.

79 Liudger, *Vita sancti Gregorii abbatis Traiectensis*, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger. MGH SS 15,1 (Stuttgart: 1887), 63–79.

80 References in Marco Mostert, "De kerstening van Holland (zevende tot twaalfde eeuw): Een bijdrage aan de middeleeuwse religieuze geschiedenis," in *Geloof in Holland*, eds. Marijke Carasso-Kok et al., Holland 25 (Hilversum: 1993), 125–55, n. 71.

81 Mostert, "De kerstening van Holland," n. 75.

82 *VaB*, c. 16, 73.

83 Wilhelm Levison (ed.), *Vita tertia Bonifatii*, in *Vitae sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, MGH SRG 15,1 (Hanover and Leipzig: 1905), 79–89.

stories that might have been told by the first Frisian Christian community, which could have cherished memories of the saint, did not survive the various periods of paganism that the region experienced after 754.

Did a truly flourishing cult of Boniface develop at Dokkum during the Middle Ages? There are a few references to the cult in 13th-century texts, and archaeologists have unearthed five subsequent churches at Dokkum, three wooden ones predating the 10th century, one in turf dating to the beginning of the 10th century, and a 13th-century church.⁸⁴ Archbishop Lull had told Willibald, the author of the first *Life*, about events following the murder in 754 involving a miraculous well. According to Lull, the Frisian people and the majority of the notables had decided to raise “an enormous hill because of the enormous difference between ebb and flood,” on which a church with accommodation for clerics was to be built.⁸⁵ When the hill was all but finished, “the inhabitants and neighbours of the place consulted about the lack of a sweet-water well, because that circumstance caused the people and their cattle in almost all of Frisia trouble.”⁸⁶ Count Abba, who had ordered the building of the hill, ascended his horse and placed himself at the head of his retinue. He rode around the hill to inspect the work’s progress:

Then the horse of someone from his retinue was in danger because it suddenly stamped its hooves. It risked to sink into the rain-drenched soil and, while it kept its front legs solidly in the soil, it thrashed about until others, who were more mobile and dexterous, quickly jumped from their horses to pull loose the horse which was caught by the earth.⁸⁷

84 For additional details about the development of the cult of Boniface at Dokkum and Utrecht, see Petra Kehl’s chapter on the “Veneration of Boniface in the Middle Ages” in this volume.

85 Willibald, *VB*, c. 9, 56–57: “quod ... cum consilio plebis atque ingentis partis populi Fresonum structura cuiusdam tumuli propter immensas ledonis ac malinae inruptiones, quae diverso inter se ordine maris aestum oceanique cursum, sed et aquarum diminutiones infusionesque commovent, ab imo in excelsum usque construeretur; super quem denique ecclesiam, sicut postea gestum est, exstruere cogitabant ac servorum Dei habitationem in loco collocare.”

86 Willibald, *VB*, c. 9, 57: “quid incolae habitatoresque loci illius de insulsae penuria limphae, – quae per omnem pene Fresiam maximam tam hominibus quam etiam animantibus difficultatem gignit, – inter se invicem disputarunt.”

87 Willibald, *VB*, c. 9, 57: “repente cuiusdam caballus pueri ex inproviso, tantum pedibus terrae inpressis, ruinae penitus casuram temptabatur, anterioribusque humo infixis cruribus, volutabatur, donec hii, qui agiliores solertioresque extiterant, discensis suis praeproperere caballis, equum terrae inherentem extraherent.”

Then the miracle happened:

A very clear, deliciously sweet-tasting well bubbled up, wholly contrary to the nature of the land, and flowed on in watercourses unknown to us, so that quickly a not inconsiderable brook came into being.⁸⁸

Amazed all went home. This old well also survived, according to the local faithful: it is indicated by a fountain in the corner of the market square.

6 Conclusion

Sketching the missionary work done by Boniface in what was then called Frisia can only be done by referring to the other sources we have for the history of the region. Although Boniface's third and last visit to the area made the most lasting impression due to his murder, his second sojourn in Frisia, between 719 and 721, must have been the most influential for Boniface himself. It is here that he came into contact with missionary practices that, with hindsight, may be termed the "Utrecht model." To succeed in spreading the Word of God four conditions needed to be fulfilled. First, a missionary needed to learn the tools of the trade from an older colleague. Continuity was necessary, and missionary work was a long-term project. Second, missionaries felt the need to be able to retire from the world in the midst of their missionary work. This isolation was also necessary to educate new generations of missionaries. In this way, islets of Christianity could come about. Christianization was rendered possible by the spread of small, new Christian communities from mission centres such as that in Utrecht. Monasteries needed to be founded in territories that were still pagan, or that had come into contact with Christianity only recently. Third, cooperation with secular power was vital for the survival of such missionary monasteries, and thus for Christianization. And fourth, it was clear that Christianization had to start at the top: first the kings needed to be baptised, next the nobles, and finally the rest of the population. It was vital to have the consent of the pagan leaders to preach the Gospel. These were some of the lessons he would have learned at Utrecht in the early 8th century. Boniface proved to be a good pupil of this Utrecht model.

88 Willibald, *VB*, c. 9, 57: "limpidissimus extra consuetudinem illius terrae fons, mirae suavitatis gustu indulcatus, prorumpebat et per incognitos penetrans meatus profluebat, ut rivus iam maximus esse videretur."