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## THE USES OF EXCOMMUNICATION IN MISSIONARY CONTEXTS (SIXTH-EIGHTH CENTURIES)

When in the closing years of the sixth century, Augustine was sent from Rome to the British Isles to bring the Christian faith, he encountered not only pagan Anglo-Saxons, but also British bishops. Apparently these bishops challenged Augustine's authority and such a context explains why Augustine required advice from the bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great, on how to deal with these bishops. British Christianity relied on a tradition going back to Late Roman times and, as our main informant Bede stresses, lived according to specific customs that were not in conformity with Augustine's ideas of what Christianity constituted. Gregory responded to Augustine's inquiry with Roman confidence and authority. He committed all the bishops of Britain to Augustine's authority and he urged the latter to teach the ignorant, to strengthen the weak and to correct the perverse<sup>1</sup>. Gregory thus associated British bishops with ignorance, weakness and perversity. That Augustine acted with Roman authority and self confidence – one might also say arrogance – is underlined by Bede's account of the meeting between Augustine and British bishops and doctors at a place called St. Augustine's Oak. There Augustine tried to convince the others to accept and follow Roman customs, but apparently in vain. One of the factors related by Bede that contributed to this failure was his remaining seated when his guests arrived. According to a hermit that the British ecclesiastical leaders had consulted before their meeting with the Roman missionary, such behaviour demonstrated that Augustine was no true follower of Christ: instead of showing himself to be humble and meek, his behaviour revealed his pride and harshness<sup>2</sup>. Augustine's successor Laurence persisted in this attitude and addressed the clergy of Britain and Ireland as his subjects, when together with his fellow bishops Mellitus and

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1 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentes Anglorum* I, 27 [*Libellus Responsionum*], ed. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford, 1992, p. 88; for a background to Augustine's actions, see R. Meens, « A Background to Augustine's mission to Anglo-Saxon England », in *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22, 1994, p. 5-17; B. Yorke, *The conversion of Britain. Religion, politics and society in Britain c. 600-800*, Harlow 2006 and C. Stancliffe, « Christianity among the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts », in P. Fouracre (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History I*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 426-461, at 446-451.

2 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II, 2, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 136-138.

*Exclure de la communauté chrétienne. Sens et pratiques sociales de l'anathème et de l'excommunication (IV<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, éd. par Geneviève BÜHRER-THIERRY et Stéphane GIOANNI, Turnhout 2015 (Haut Moyen Âge, 23), p. 143-156.

Justus he wrote a letter of exhortation to all the Irish bishops and abbots. This letter, included in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, was meant to correct their way of life, which, in the eyes of the bishop of Canterbury, deviated from the customs of the universal church. In this letter Laurence refers to a visit of the Irish bishop Dagan who apparently had visited the archbishop of Canterbury. Laurence relates how « when bishop Dagan came to us he refused to take food not only with us but even in the very house where we took our meals »<sup>3</sup>.

This brief account of the relations between the first bishops of Canterbury with Christian bishops and abbots they encountered in their missionary field, demonstrates how central acts of exclusion were in the early phase of Christianization of England. Augustine remaining seated when his guests arrived is not a formal act of exclusion, but was almost certainly regarded as a refusal of hospitality and communion by his guests. The Irish bishop Dagan, refusing to dine with Laurence and even to eat under the same roof, was surely a clear signal of refusal of communion and thus of exclusion. It has been suggested that Dagan was acting upon a verdict of excommunication, that was peculiar to Ireland in stressing the refusal to dine together<sup>4</sup>. In the process of Christianization frictions between different Christian parties became apparent and refusing communion with such parties was an accepted way of dealing with rivals.

One can argue that the Christianization of England was a special case because there at least two forms of Christianity clashed: to put it (too) simply Roman Christianity versus a British/Irish one. The missionaries from Rome were moreover confronted with an existing ecclesiastical organization in the form of the British Church which was regionally confined to the more Eastern regions of Britain that had not succumbed to Anglo-Saxon influences. It is questionable, however, whether such tensions were typical for the situation in England. Many scholars today would argue that Frankish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries who were active in Northern Gaul or East of the Rhine, were not labouring in a purely pagan area. Christianization, as we come to realize, was not only a matter of missionaries carrying the Word of Christ into the pagan wilderness. Christianity spread through all kinds of contacts such as trade, migration or enslavement<sup>5</sup>.

3 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II,4, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 146: « *Daganus episcopus ad nos ueniens non solum cibum nobiscum sed nec in eodem hospitio, quo vescebamur, sumere uoluit* ». See R. Flechner, « *Dagán, Columbanus, and the Gregorian mission* », in *Peritia*, 19, 2005, p. 6590.

4 Flechner, « *Dagán, Columbanus* ».

5 See the major studies by R. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe. From Paganism to Christianity, 371-1386 AD*, London, 1997; P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Oxford, 2003; I. Wood, *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelization of Europe, 400-1050*, Harlow, 2001; L. von Padberg, *Die Inszenierung religiöser Konfrontationen. Theorie und Praxis der Missionspredigt im frühen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, 2003 (*Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters*, 51); C. Mériaux, *Gallia irradiata: saints et sanctuaires dans le nord de la Gaule du haut Moyen Âge*, Stuttgart, 2006; J. Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690-900*, Turnhout, 2009.

As a result missionaries like St. Éloi, Willibrord or Boniface, to mention but a few, came not only into contact with pagans but also with Christians as well as « pagan Christians », if I may put it that way. This is nicely illustrated by the famous story of Boniface chopping down a sacred oak in the neighbourhood of Geismar, where he encountered Christians together with men and women who had refrained from completely embracing Christianity, as Boniface's biographer Willibald formulates it. Willibald explains that some were publicly sacrificing at trees and wells, while others did so only secretly and a few were wise enough to completely refrain from such pagan rites. The complex situation is further demonstrated by the specific character of the tree that Boniface chopped down. Willibald indicates that it was called « robor Iobis », the oak of Jupiter<sup>6</sup>. Many historians have translated this as referring to Donar and have identified Donar as a « tribal Deity ». Theodor Schieffer, for example, referred to the tree as devoted to the *Stammesgott*<sup>7</sup>. Yet, I think that it is perfectly possible that the tree was in fact devoted to the Roman God Jupiter<sup>8</sup>. Like Christianity, Roman religious ideas and perceptions had spread among the Germanic speaking peoples and perhaps Boniface encountered a Roman God here, honoured by the local population of Hessen. In such a world of « micro-christendoms » and « do-it-yourself Christianity », missionaries would have found it difficult to establish their authority and in such a context strategies of exclusion seem to have been of great importance<sup>9</sup>. The missionaries about whom we are better informed, were generally attached to centres of political power, the Merovingian court or the family of the Pippinids and were therefore in a position to enforce such politics of exclusion, to a certain extent at least<sup>10</sup>.

Many of these missionaries had some connection to monasticism. Particularly the Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries had often been educated and raised in monastic environments. Alcuin, for example, informs us that Willibrord was given to the monastery at Ripon « statim ablactatus », when he had stopped

6 Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, c. 6, ed. W. Levison, *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, Hannover / Leipzig 1905 (*MGH, SS rer. Germ. in usum scholarum*, 57), p. 31.

7 T. Schieffer, *Winfried-Bonifatius und die christliche Grundlegung Europas*, Darmstadt 1980, reprint of the revised 2nd edition, Freiburg i. Breisgau, p. 148: « dem Stammesgotte Donar heiligen Eiche ».

8 I. Wood, *Missionary Life*, p. 60; J.-H. Clay, *In the Shadow of Death. Saint Boniface and the Conversion of Hessa, 721-754*, Turnhout, 2010, uses both designations when referring to the Oak: Jupiter and Thunaer, see e.g. p. 300.

9 The concept of 'micro-christendom' was introduced by Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*; for « do-it-yourself Christianity », see B. Young, « The imagery of personal objects: hints of "do-it-yourself" Christian culture in Merovingian Gaul ? », in A. Cain (ed.), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity: Selected Papers from the Seventh Biennial Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity Conference*, Farnham, 2009, p. 339-354.

10 Think of missionaries such as Columbanus and Virgil of Salzburg connected to the Merovingian court or Willibrord and Boniface who allied with the Pippinids.

taking his mother's breast<sup>11</sup>. In monastic communities several forms of exclusion from the community were available to help dealing with monks who did not want to comply to monastic discipline. This is neatly demonstrated by the so-called *Paenitentiale Ambrosianum*, one of the earliest insular handbooks for penance<sup>12</sup>. This penitential has a characteristic way of dealing with obstinate sinners. If someone sins, he should first be admonished to make satisfaction (*arguatur*). Only if he refuses to do so, he should be forced to change his ways by several forms of excommunication. What exactly such forms of excommunication entailed is not always clear, but the rather strong language that is being employed (« dampnetur », « maledictus a deo aeclesiae pace abscondatur », « excommunicetur a pace sanctorum »), suggests that the unrepented sinner was put under severe pressure or was being expelled. Excommunication here does not seem to require a particular ecclesiastical ritual, and the text provides the impression that it could consist of different grades of exclusion from a monastic community<sup>13</sup>. In the case where this procedure led the sinner to repent and confess, the penance that was being assigned could also imply some form of exclusion from the community. Someone who in a rage cursed or scolded others and did not do penance for it, for example, should be damned. But if he did repent, he should still remain « suspensus ab oratione et sine cibo », that is removed from the common prayers and from the meals, until he would be received in the community on the next day. As a penance, however, he had to fast in seclusion for another week<sup>14</sup>. Such remarks hint at the existence of several forms of exclusion. The *Paenitentiale Ambrosianum*, however, is in this respect remarkable. In other insular penitential texts, such as the penitentials handbooks composed by the Irish abbot Cummean or the wandering monk Columbanus, the uses of forms of excommunication to bring a sinner to repentance and confession are less obvious. In these somewhat later texts periods of exclusion, in the form of a period of exile or entry into a monastery, were only assigned a part of the satisfaction that had to be fulfilled<sup>15</sup>.

The penitential work composed by the seventh-century successor of Augustine as archbishop of Canterbury, the Greek monk Theodore, assigned a period of exile or entry into a monastery as satisfaction for extremely serious sins. In that

11 Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, c.3, ed. W. Levison, *Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici*, Hannover / Leipzig, 1920 (*MGH, SS rer. Mer.* 7), p. 117-118.

12 The early date of this text has been established by L. Körntgen, *Studien zu den Quellen der frühmittelalterlichen Bußbücher*, Sigmaringen, 1993 (*Quellen und Forschungen zum Recht im Mittelalter*, 7), p. 7-86, for his conclusions see p. 86.

13 Körntgen, *Studien zu den Quellen*, p. 35-37.

14 *Paenitentiale Ambrosianum* [IV], 6, ed. Körntgen, *Studien zu den Quellen*, p. 264.

15 Meens, « Exil, Buße und sozialer Tod. Ausschließungsmechanismen in den frühmittelalterlichen Bußbüchern », in C. Garnier, J. Schnocks (eds), *Sterben über den Tod hinaus. Politische, soziale und religiöse Ausgrenzung in vormodernen Gesellschaften*, Würzburg, 2012, p. 117-131.

respect it conforms to the earlier penitential books that I just discussed<sup>16</sup>. This text is unique, however, in the way that it uses forms of exclusion for ‘heretics’, the strong term that Theodore employed to define and condemn Christians who had different opinions on the way to compute the Easter date. Those who celebrated Easter on the fourteenth day after the vernal equinox, « with the Jews », that is on the same date as the Jewish Passover, rejected the council of Nicaea and should be repelled from all churches (*exterminabitur ab omni ecclesia*), he ordered<sup>17</sup>. Anyone who prayed with such a person, should do penance for a week<sup>18</sup>. Theodore clearly is aiming at those who followed Irish ways of computing the date of Easter, still a vexed question in this period<sup>19</sup>. If anyone allowed a ‘heretic’ to say Mass, he should do penance for 40 days, if he did not know that the celebrant was a heretic. If, however, he acted thus out of reverence for the heretical cleric, a whole year of penance was required. But if someone did allow a heretic to say Mass out of condemnation of the catholic Church and Roman customs, he should be thrown out of the Church as a heretic, Theodore ordered<sup>20</sup>. Christians who like the Jews fasted on a Sunday to dishonour that day, should be abominated from all catholic churches<sup>21</sup>. Those who did not honour ecclesiastical fasts awaited the same end<sup>22</sup>. Theodore also prescribed a rigorous separation of true Christians and others after death. A church in which infidels were buried, the altar should not be consecrated unless the dead bodies were removed and the wood used for the church had been washed and cleansed. If the church had already been consecrated, it was all right if the men and women who were buried there were ‘religiosi’, probably pious people, but if they were pagans their bodies should be « thrown out » (*iactare foras*)<sup>23</sup>.

Such sentences illustrate the energetic ways with which the aged archbishop – he was 66 years old when he was sent to England in the year 668 – took up his task of reorganizing the English Church. Theodore not only had to deal with Christians who wanted to honour their relatives who had not been baptized and with those

16 For Theodore’s penitential, see R. Kottje, « *Paenitentiale Theodori* », in *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, vol. 3, Berlin, 1984, cols. 1413-1416; T. Charles-Edwards, « The penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodori* », in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore. Commemorative studies on his life and influence*, Cambridge, 1995 (*Cambridge studies in Anglo-Saxon England*, 11), p. 141-174; and R. Flechner, « The making of the Canons of Theodore », in *Peritia* 17-18, 2003-2004, p. 121-143.

17 *Paenitentiale Theodori Discipulus Umbrensiu* U I, 5, 3, ed. P. W. Finsterwalder, *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen*, Weimar, 1929 (*Untersuchungen zu den Bußbüchern des 7., 8. und 9. Jahrhunderts*, 1), p. 295.

18 *Paenitentiale Theodori* U I, 5, 4, p. 295.

19 C. Corning, *The Celtic and Roman traditions: conflict and consensus in the early medieval church*, New York, 2006, p. 132-133.

20 *Paenitentiale Theodori* U I, 5, 8-9, p. 296.

21 *Id.*, U I, 11, 3, p. 304.

22 *Id.*, U I, 11, 5, p. 304.

23 *Id.*, U II, 1, 4-5, p. 312.

who differed in the calculation of the Easter date, but also with Christians who held different opinions about fasting on a Sunday. Apart from these problems, he also had to cope with his fellow bishop Wilfrid of York. As archbishop of the English, Theodore came into a serious conflict with the bishop of York, Wilfrid. I do not want to go into the details of this affair which troubled the English Church in the 70s and 80s of the seventh century, but one of the main issues was the effort on Theodore's behalf to split the vast diocese of York<sup>24</sup>. Wilfrid, who also had problems with King Egfrith of Northumbria, was deposed and Theodore took the opportunity to divide his diocese into three. During his troublesome life Wilfrid was not only deposed, but at times also imprisoned and excommunicated. His biographer, Eddius Stephanus, devoted a small chapter to Wilfrid's excommunication, labelled: *De excommunicatione nostra*<sup>25</sup>. In this chapter Eddius describes briefly what excommunication meant to Wilfrid and his companions, among whom we must count his biographer Eddius. As the chapter title already implies, Eddius here reflects upon his own experience as a someone being excommunicated. For him excommunication was « being segregated from the fortune of the believers » (a sorte fidelium segregatos) and was expressed primarily in the refusal to dine together. When a priest or abbot of Wilfrid's party was invited for a meal and had blessed the food on the table, it had to be thrown out and cast away, as if it had been offered to idols. The vessels had to be washed so as to cleanse them from any form of pollution<sup>26</sup>. The refusal to take food together as well as the language and concepts employed, with their stress on throwing out, washing and polluting, very much reminds one of those employed in Theodore's penitential handbook. The final restoration of Wilfrid with Berhtwald, the successor of Theodore as Archbishop of Canterbury, was very publicly expressed: on that day (in the year 706): all the bishops kissed and embraced each other and they communicated in the breaking of the bread<sup>27</sup>. This must refer to the communal celebration of Mass, but the formulation that Eddius uses here, has clear associations with eating together.

In the turbulent period of the last 30 years of the seventh century, we therefore see that excommunication and other forms of exclusions are regularly employed in ecclesiastical politics. There are no signs of any liturgical forms in

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24 For Wilfrid, see D. Pelteret, « Saint Wilfrid: tribal bishop, civic bishop or Germanic lord? », in: J. Hill and M. Swann (eds), *The Community, the Family and the Saint. Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout 1998), p. 259-180 and more recently J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford, 2005, p. 92-99 and A. Thacker, « Gallic or Greek? Archbishops in England from Theodore to Egberht », in P. Fouracre and D. Ganz (eds), *Frankland. The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages*, Manchester, 2008, p. 44-69, at 55-60.

25 Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wifridi*, ed. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Eddius Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, Cambridge, 1985 (repr. of the 1927 edition), p. 100.

26 Id., c. 49, ed. Colgrave, p. 100.

27 Id., c. 60, ed. Colgrave, p. 132.

which excommunication is formally expressed, but refusal to eat together, one could perhaps coin the term ‘conspicuous non-consumption’, the ostentatious refusal to share food and drink, and the ritual washing of objects held to be made impure by contact with the excommunicated, were important ways to demonstrate separation and condemnation.

In the eighth century, the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface followed in the same tracks. In his efforts to reorganize the Frankish Church he ran into serious opposition. Among others, he came into conflict with two charismatic religious figures: the Irishman Clemens and the Frankish Adelbert. In the past these opponents have been casted as ‘eccentrics’, but we should ask whether we have not been following Boniface and his views on the matter too meekly in this respect. Most sources on the conflict derive from Boniface himself or were seriously influenced by his views. Recently, Mayke de Jong and Matthew Innes, have suggested to see Clemens and Adelbert rather as much more mainstream, as serious rivals of Boniface. They competed with him not only for a religious following, but also for political support from the family of the Carolingians<sup>28</sup>. In the Roman sources, which probably reflect views from the circles of Boniface, Aldebert and Clemens are portrayed as schismatic, false priests, heretics and excommunicates<sup>29</sup>. Boniface, moreover, in a famous letter to his mental coach Daniel of Winchester, describes that some Christian teachers who frequented the royal court (palatio Francorum), abstained from several kinds of food, which he regarded as lawful. These might have been rival Christian preachers, such as Clemens and Adelbert. With such people, so Boniface complains, he could not avoid *corporali communione*, which is often translated as « (physical) contact », but perhaps rather indicates more precisely the refusal to share a meal. Boniface, moreover, claimed that he did not celebrate Mass with such people and that he refrained from conferring and deliberating with such people<sup>30</sup>. This well-known letter of Boniface reveals that the Anglo-Saxon missionary was deeply worried about the fact that he was unable to keep his distance from these « false priests ».

Among the people at court that Boniface wanted to keep away from, were probably also well-established Frankish bishops: « Milo and that kind of people » as

28 M. Innes, « ‘Immune from heresy’: defining the boundaries of Carolingian Christianity », in Fouracre and Ganz (eds), *Frankland*, p. 101-125 and M. de Jong « Bonifatius: een angelsaksische priestermonnik en het Frankische hof », in *Millennium*, 19, 2005, p. 5-23; see now also S. Meeder, « Boniface and the Irish heresy of Clemens », in *Church History* 80, 2011, p. 251-280.

29 Council of Rome (745), ed. A. Werminghoff, *Concilia Aevi Karolini* I,2, Hannover / Leipzig 1906 (*MGH, Conc.* 2.1), p. 40; *Letter of the Roman archdeacon Theophylact to Boniface (748)*, ed. M. Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, Berlin, 1916 (*MGH, Epp. Selectae*, 1) p. 188-189.

30 Boniface, letter 63, ed. Tangl, *Briefe*, p. 128-132; see S. Airlie, « The Frankish aristocracy as supporters and opponents of Boniface », in F. J. Felten, J. Jarnut, L. von Padberg (eds), *Bonifatius. Leben und Nachwirken (754-2004)*, Mainz, 2008, p. 255-269, at 260 for Boniface’s self stylization as an outsider and his role as (re)former of the court.

pope Zachary called them<sup>31</sup>. Boniface complained about a certain bishop, probably to be identified with Gewilib of Mainz, who had killed in battle, lived a life of incontinence and had appropriated church property<sup>32</sup>. Such bishops, who in the eyes of the monk Boniface were living a life that resembled that of a nobleman, were also rivals for Boniface and his companions, and dangerous rivals at that, well-connected as they were in courtly and aristocratic circles. That Boniface was able to topple one of them, Gewilib of Mainz, reveals his power in ecclesiastical politics, but this probably was one of the few successes in this field. Bishops like Milo of Trier were too well entrenched to be removed by means of excommunication or else<sup>33</sup>.

So far we have seen how excommunication was employed in order to draw sharp boundaries between rivalling groups of Christians. Excommunication was not very formalized, but always seems expressed by a refusal of contact, clearly manifested by a denial of hospitality. What I have called « conspicuous non-consumption » was extremely important in this respect. Insular missionaries seem particularly susceptible for such discourses of food and pollution, probably because of their monastic background, but possibly also because questions of impurity of food were clearly more important in these regions than on the Continent, as for example Boniface careful inquiries into the purity of particular kinds of meat demonstrate<sup>34</sup>.

### *Discipline*

In the early eighth-century Life of the seventh-century bishop of Noyon, Saint Eligius, we encounter another form of excommunication, which is closely related to a specific locality<sup>35</sup>. The Vita informs us that St. Eligius excommunicated a

31 Letter of Pope Zachary (751), ed. Tangl, *Briefe*, p. 194-201 at p. 198: « De Milone at eiusmodi similibus »; see E. Ewig, « Milo et eiusmodi similes », in *Sankt Bonifatius: Gedenkgabe zum zwölftenderten Todestag [754 1954]*, Fulda, 1954, p. 412-440 (repr. in E. Ewig, *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien. Gesammelte Schriften* 2, ed. H. Atsma, Munich, 1979, p. 189-219) and Franz Staab, « Rudi populo rudis adhuc presul'. Zu den wehrhaften Bischöfen der Zeit Karl Martells », in J. Jarnut, U. Nonn and M. Richter (eds), *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit*, Sigmaringen, 1994, p. 249-275.

32 Letter 60, ed. Tangl, *Briefe*, p. 122 and 124; the identification is made in the *Vita quarta* of Boniface, a text composed only in the eleventh century, see Staab, « Rudi populo », p. 262-275.

33 T. Schieffer, *Winfried-Bonifatius*, p. 232-233 L. von Padberg, *Bonifatius. Missionar und Reformator*, Munich, 2003, p. 71-85; but see S. Airlie, « The Frankish aristocracy as supporters » for a somewhat more nuanced view, cit. n. 30.

34 For questions of pollution and food in mainly insular sources, see R. Meens, « Pollution in the early Middle Ages: The case of the food regulations in penitentials », in *Early Medieval Europe*, 4, 1995, p. 3-19; for Boniface's susceptibility of such matters, see R. Meens, « Aspekte der Christianisierung des Volkes », in F. J. Felten, J. Jarnut, L. von Padberg (eds), *Bonifatius. Leben und Nachwirken (754-2004)*, Mainz, 2008, p. 211-229.

35 For the date of this text, see Mériaux, *Gallia irradiata*, p. 353, dating it to the early eighth century but presupposing a seventh-century original from which this work derives.



priest, whom he forbade to say Mass in the church to which this priest was attached. The priest, however, was not impressed and as soon as the bishop had left, he started ringing the church bells. But no matter what he did, the bells would not make any sound. This reminded some of the excommunication of St. Eligius and they ran after the saint in order to implore him to reconcile the church in question (*basilicam reconciliari*). The saint, however, although of a benevolent nature, did not want to lift the ban without any proper satisfaction. After three days, the priest provided satisfaction by doing penance for his sins (*paenitentiae satisfactioe praelata*) whereupon the bishop reconciled the place (*reconciliavit loco*) 'solo verbo', with a single word<sup>36</sup>. This nice little vignette not only demonstrates that excommunication and the interdict were in fact often closely linked, but it also reveals how a bishop could employ rituals of excommunication to control and discipline the clergy in their diocese. The reaction of the priest in question, however, suggests that in practice such episcopal demonstrative acts were not always successful.

A similar disciplinary use of the instrument of excommunication is disclosed in a letter of Boniface's successor in Mainz, bishop Lullus. The bishop here complains that a priest named Wilfrid (Willefritho) had engaged another priest Enraed who had been ordained in another diocese without prior consent of his predecessor or himself. Lullus reprimanded the culprit, but as Enraed was unwilling to do penance for his acts, Lullus excommunicated him. Again, excommunication was not very effective, because the priest who had introduced Enraed, Wilfrid, welcomed and defended him. Lullus also complains about the theft of substantial ecclesiastical property by Wilfrid, which suggest that we are dealing here with a rather wealthy priest able to withstand the episcopal pressure. Lullus letter was an effort to enlist support for his case, probably from archbishop Chrodegang of Metz. Whether he was successful in this, seems rather doubtful<sup>37</sup>.

### *Obstinate laymen*

Apart from the use of excommunication to exclude religious rivals and as a disciplinary episcopal tool, there is a third application of excommunication that the sources describe. This third field of application is nicely illustrated in Alcuin's

36 *Vita Eligii*, c. 21. ed. B. Krusch, *Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici*, Hannover / Leipzig, 1902 (*MGH, SS rer. mer.*, 4), p. 713; F. Keygnaert, *Het interdict in het aartsbisdom Reims: de genese van een politiek-kerkelijk wapen (Merovingische periode – circa 1140)* (unpublished PhD dissertation from the University of Leuven, 2012); see also Keygnaert, « Misbruik en devaluatie van excommunicatie in het Merovingische rijk », in *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis*, 12, 2009, p. 7-39, at p. 8.

37 Lullus, *Letter* 110, ed. Tangl, *Briefe*, p. 237-238; see for a brief discussion J. Palmer, « The "vigorous rule" of bishop Lull: between Bonifatian mission and Carolingian Church control », in *Early Medieval Europe*, 13, 2005, p. 249-276, at p. 263-264.

Life of Willibrord. When Willibrord travelled through Frisia to preach the word of God, at some point he wanted to rest and he let his horses graze in a meadow. As soon as the rich owner of this meadow saw this, he started to chase the animals from his field. Willibrord reacted friendly and offered the angry man something to drink, which he refused, however with the words: you want me to drink in order to be at peace with you, but I do not care at all (*pro nihilo habeo*) to join you for a drink. Here we observe a layman using the means of « conspicuous non-consumption » to make his point. Willibrord, however, was not impressed and replied: « If you don't want to drink with me, then don't drink » and moved on. From that moment the owner of the meadow was unable to drink at all and nearly died of thirst, until he confessed his sins to Willibrord and was absolved. This story does not seem to describe the use of excommunication and the term is nowhere mentioned as such. Yet, the chapter received the rubric: of a rich man who was excommunicated by the man of God and then absolved<sup>38</sup>. So apparently, Alcuin, if he was the one who formulated the rubrics and there seems no reason to doubt this, saw this as a kind of excommunication, perhaps because of the importance of the refusal to eat in this story?

In the *Life of Willibrord* we see the application of excommunication as a means to convince powerful lay people of their sinful behaviour in order to confess and make up for their sins. In the *Life of Eligius* excommunication is used merely to punish a powerful lay magnate. There we see Éloi in conflict with a powerful aristocrat, a *familiaris* of the mayor of the palace Ebroin over a particular piece of woodland. At a certain point this aristocrat got so infuriated that he threatened to take the land by force. Éloi after tolerating many abuses, then threatened the aristocrat with excommunication, if he continued to behave in this way. This threat caused the worldly magnate to break out into rowdy laughter and he went on to insult the saint, who in the end saw no other means of calming him down than to strike him with the spear of excommunication (*iaculum excommunicationis*) thrown with his right hand. The powerful opponent was immediately quiet. He lost all his power and people thought he was dead. Bystanders carried him away and prepared him for a funeral. People prayed for this man that his health would be restored so that he could do penance and so make up for his sins, but as the author enigmatically concludes the story: whether he did so or not, we do not know<sup>39</sup>.

These stories illustrate the use of excommunication in conflicts between bishops and lay men over property. Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* reveals another

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38 Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi* c. 20, ed. Levison, p. 131-132; for the rubric, see p. 115. C. Veyrard-Cosme, *L'oeuvre hagiographique en prose d'Alcuin: Vitae Willibrordi, Vedasti, Richarii. Édition, traduction, études narratologiques*, Florence, 2003, p. 37 and 61-62.

39 *Vita Eligii*, II,19, ed. Krusch, p. 709-710; see Keygnaert, « Misbruik en devaluatie », p. 7-8.

sphere in which excommunication was wielded, when he provided a reason for the murder of King Sigebert of the East Saxons. Bede held the king in high esteem as the one who had brought Christianity to the East Saxons. Perhaps because of his dramatic demise by the hands of his kinsmen, Bede felt the need to provide a divine legitimation for the murder of this most religious king. From Bede's telling of the tale, it transpires that Sigebert's more forgiving Christian attitudes toward his enemies had caused severe political problems for the recently converted king<sup>40</sup>. Yet, this was not a message that Bede would or could endorse. He does his best to explain Sigebert's death as a proper divine punishment, yet maintaining his favourable portrayal of the first Christian king of the East Saxons. The king's death was not only a proper atonement of his offence, so Bede concludes, but even increased his merits<sup>41</sup>. Bede constructs the story of Sigebert's murder as the result of royal disobedience of an episcopal judgment of excommunication. One of the aristocrats of the king, a *gesith*, was unlawfully married. The bishop had not been able to prevent this from happening or to correct the situation and therefore excommunicated the man in question « and ordered that no one should enter his house or take food with him ». The bishop in question must have been Cedd, bishop of the East-Saxons, although Bede is a bit reticent in explicitly naming him. King Sigebert, however, disregarded this episcopal order and went to visit and dine with the excommunicated man. Upon leaving his house, the king came across the bishop. He immediately expressed his guilt by jumping from his horse and threw himself trembling at the bishop's feet, begging for indulgence. The angry bishop got off his horse, touched the king with a rod and foretold the king that, as a punishment for his deed, he would find his death in the house of the excommunicated *gesith*. The king's death was therefore presented by Bede as an appropriate punishment and atonement for his offence of disobeying a bishop's order of excommunication<sup>42</sup>. It seems improbable that Bede here tells the whole story, but it is significant that he chooses to present excommunication as a means to interfere in marriage politics in order to make Christians comply with ecclesiastical rules of marriage.

Compliance with ecclesiastical rules regarding marriage was also at the heart of the famous conflict related by Jonas of Bobbio between the charismatic Irish monk Columbanus and the royal family of the Merovingians, in the person of king Theuderic and his mother Brunhild<sup>43</sup>. According to Jonas the conflict

40 See N. Higham, *The Convert Kings. Power and religious affiliation in early Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester, 1997, p. 249.

41 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 22, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, Oxford, 1969, p. 284: « *talis mors uiri religiosi non solum talem culpam diluerit, sed etiam meritum eius auxerit* ».

42 *Ibid.*

43 Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani abbatis discipulorumque eius libri duo*, I, 19, ed. B. Krusch, *Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici*, Hannover / Leipzig, 1902 (*MGH, SS rer. mer.*, 4), p. 87-88; see the

centered upon the king's sexual liaisons, that the Irish monk did not approve of. When Columbanus refused to bless the children that had not been born in what in Columbanus's eyes constituted a proper marriage, relations between the saint and the royal family became severely strained. Jonas informs us that when Columbanus decided to visit the king at royal estate at Époisses, he refused the king's hospitality not only by explicitly avoiding to stay in the royal quarters, but also by conspicuously abstaining from the food and drink that was offered to him. This behaviour did have its effects, but only temporarily, Jonas implies. After finding out that the king continued to frequent his concubines, Columbanus addressed a letter to Theuderic in which he threatened the king with excommunication. Such a letter has not survived among the correspondence of Columbanus, but it would certainly fit the assertive tone that some of his surviving letters reveal<sup>44</sup>. It has been remarked that an abbot did not have the canonical authority to excommunicate a lay person<sup>45</sup>. If we consider the different grades of exclusion that we encountered in the *Paenitentiale Ambrosianum*, Columbanus's earlier refusal to share a roof and a meal with the king, and the rather loosely defined relation between abbots and bishops in the Irish and the Frankish Church at this time, we can detect a certain logic in Columbanus's behaviour<sup>46</sup>. We can see that for the author of this story, Jonas of Bobbio, avoiding contact, and particularly refusing to share a meal, were forms of exclusion that a holy man could employ in order to put pressure on powerful laymen, in this case to make them comply with ecclesiastically formulated marriage rules. Apparently, Jonas thought that some form of excommunication, although it remains unclear how this censure would look like in practice, was capable of heightening such pressure for stubborn laymen who continued their life in sin.

From this rather superficial survey of the uses of excommunication in missionary contexts in the period from the sixth to the eighth century some provisional conclusions present themselves. First of all we see that the concept of excommunication is nowhere precisely defined and is moreover somewhat loosely applied, as can, for example, be observed in the application of this instrument by Eligius, Columbanus or Willibrord. There are no clear indications of a specific ritual with which it is imposed or with which it was lifted. The texts discussed here give the impression that it could be a more or less spontaneous act on behalf of a bishop

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recent discussion of this case in A. Diem, « Monks, kings, and the transformation of sanctity: Jonas of Bobbio and the end of the holy man », in *Speculum*, 82, 2007, p. 521-559, at p. 531-538.

44 On his letters, see now T. Leso, « Columbanus in Europe: the evidence from the *Epistulae* », in *Early Medieval Europe*, 21, 2013, p. 358-389, who refers briefly to this lost letter on p. 361.

45 K. Schäferdiek, « Columbanus Wirken im Frankenreich (591-612) », in H. Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, vol 1, Stuttgart, 1982, p. 171-201, at p. 189.

46 For a discussion of the loosely defined relations in the Frankish kingdom around the year 600, see Leso, « Columbanus in Europe », p. 373-378.

or in the case of Columbanus an abbot. In almost all the instances discussed here, a refusal to dine with someone, what I have called « conspicuous non-consumption », was of central importance in the process of excommunication, regardless of the other elements that were being employed.

If we look at the ways in which excommunication was employed, certain specific circumstances in which it was used present themselves. Excommunication was used to define in- from out-groups in religious discussions particularly in the period when Christianity was a still recent phenomenon and when there was a lot of discussion about who the true Christian leaders were and what Christianity should look like, as we have seen in the contexts of the early phases of Christianization in England and in the missionary fields in Germany 'plowed' by the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface. Another field where excommunication was employed is that of ecclesiastical discipline. Bishops used the instrument of excommunication to control their clergy, as we have seen in the case of Lull or Eligius. A third field in which we have seen that excommunication was being used, was in the relations between ecclesiastical authorities and powerful laymen. This regards mostly disputes over property and marriage policies.

This survey has mainly looked at narrative sources and the conciliar decisions regarding excommunication, which are particularly rich for Merovingian Gaul, have not been used for this survey. This omission can be motivated by the fact that these conciliar sources have recently been well investigated<sup>47</sup>. The narrative sources, however, may, furthermore, provide a better understanding of the practice of the uses of excommunication in the period under discussion. As such they indicate that in practice excommunication was not always effective, even though we should keep in mind that the nature of these narrative sources – mostly hagiographical – tends to stress the effectivity of this weapon in the hands of the saints, who are after all the heroes of these works. That we, nevertheless, regularly see signs that people ignored such sentences of excommunication, is therefore even more revealing. The fact that excommunication did not always lead to the envisioned results does not necessarily mean that it had no results at all. The refusal of hospitality or declining the company of specific people when sharing a meal, certainly were acts of great symbolic significance. As such they communicated a serious disruption of social ties. Whether such strong symbolic language led to the expected results must have depended on the precise social relations, such as the authority of the one who pronounced the excommunication and on the strength of the person who was thus being excluded, and most

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47 F. Keygnaert, « Van medicijn tot wapen in de strijd om het kerkbezit. De canonieke ontwikkeling van excommunicatie in de Merovingische concilies (511-ca. 675) », in *Millennium*, 22, 2008, p. 3-23; S. Scholz, « Religiöse und soziale Ausgrenzung in den Kanones der merowingischen Synoden (511-614) », in C. Garnier and J. Schnocks (ed.), *Sterben über den Tod hinaus*, p. 147-163.

of all on the supporters the different parties were able to muster in the dispute. Excommunication, like other forms of exclusion, is a formidable weapon, but its effects depend strongly on the very specific social and political circumstances in which it is being used.

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