

ROB MEENS

WITH ONE FOOT IN THE FONT: THE FAILED BAPTISM OF THE FRISIAN KING RADBOD AND THE 8TH- CENTURY DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FATE OF UNBAPTIZED FOREFATHERS

Abstract

This contribution tries to outline a context for the well-known story of the Frisian King Radbod withdrawing from the baptismal font when hearing that his ancestors would not receive the same privilege. This story is transmitted in the *Vita Wulframni*, a text that has been regarded as a forgery. Following a summary of Stéphane Lebecq's analysis of the *Vita*, the story about Radbod's failed baptism can be shown to belong to a part of this text that was composed by the Frisian monk Ovo in the AD 740s. As such, it is a central document in the debate about the fate of pagan ancestors vibrant at precisely this time, with Boniface and the Irish bishop Clemens being the best-known protagonists. The anecdote was not written to deny Willibrord his pride of place in the Christianization of Frisia, but rather to corroborate Boniface's point of view with Willibrord's authority. There is some indication suggesting that Willibrord himself had a different opinion in this question, a crucial element in the process of Christianization.

Keywords

Radbod, Boniface, Clemens, Bede, Adomnán, St Wandrille, Theodore of Canterbury, Patrick, Columba, Trajan, Willibrord, Wulfram of Sens; Frisians; Palagianism, baptism, Christianization, paganism, ancestors, burial, churches.

Introduction

Alcuin described Radbod, 'king of the Frisians', as a major opponent of Willibrord, the Anglo-Saxon missionary of noble, possibly even royal, descent who set out from the Irish monastery of Rath Melsigi to convert

the Frisians.¹ Radbod was a man with a heart of stone, who became infuriated when he discovered that Willibrord had desecrated a holy well devoted to the god Fosite on the island of Helgoland.² We need not follow Alcuin in all details here. It can be questioned, for example, whether Radbod was actually ‘king of the Frisians’ as Alcuin says, a statement eagerly adopted by modern historians. Perhaps he was just ‘a king of Frisians’ and as such comparable to some Frankish aristocrats active in the same region.³

Radbod was clearly involved in Frankish politics. He married his daughter Theudesinda to Grimoald, son of the Frankish mayor of the palace Pippin II. In the political turmoil following the murder of this Grimoald in AD 714 and the death of Pippin later that year, Radbod allied himself with the Neustrian mayor of the palace Ragamfred.⁴ He was, therefore, an important player in high Frankish politics in the early 8th century. We may also question whether he was such a fervent opponent of Christianity, since he allowed Willibrord to travel and preach in his kingdom. It is, moreover, not implausible that his daughter Theudesinda had been baptized when marrying Grimoald.⁵ Yet, Alcuin describes him as a fervent pagan and most other sources of the period do likewise. The most famous portrayal of Radbod as an uncompromising pagan comes from the *Vita Wulframni*, the Life of Archbishop Wulfram of Sens composed in the monastery of Saint Wandrille at the end of the 8th or in the early 9th century. This source relates how Wulfram nearly succeeded in converting the Frisian king. The text runs as follows:⁶

*Praefatus autem princeps Rathbodus, cum ad percipiendum baptisma in-
bueretur, percunctabatur a sancto episcopo Vulframno, iuramentis eum
per nomen Domini astringens, ubi maior esset numerus regum et prin-
cipum 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.*

¹ Ó Cróinín (1984); Ó Cróinín (2007).

² Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi* 9, 11 (ed. by Wilhelm Levison in MGH SS rer. Merov. 7, 123, 125); on Radbod as Willibrord’s main adversary, see Berschin (1991), 127–9.

³ van Egmond (2005).

⁴ Fouracre (2000), 53, 61; Fischer (2012), 51–3.

⁵ Angenendt (1998), 81.

⁶ *Vita Wulframni* 9 (ed. by Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 661–73; 668); the translation is mine, here and throughout.

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 cavere posse consortio praedecessorum suorum principum Fresionum et cum parvo pauperum numero residere in illo caelesti regno.

‘When the named King Radbod was to be immersed in order to receive baptism from the holy Bishop Wulfram, he hesitated and asked him (Wulfram), meanwhile binding him through an oath in the name of the Lord, where the greater part of the kings, princes, and nobles of the Frisian people were: in the celestial realm that Wulfram had promised him to be shown if he believed and would be baptized, or in that region that he called the Tartarus of damnation. Whereupon the blessed Wulfram responded: ‘Don’t be mistaken, glorious prince, there is a certain amount of the elect with God. For it is certain that your predecessors as princes of the people of the Frisians, who have departed without the sacrament of baptism, have received a sentence of damnation. But he who from this moment believes and is baptized, will enjoy eternal bliss with Christ.’ When the still pagan duke—pagan, because he was still on his way to the baptismal font—heard this, he, as they tell, withdrew his foot from the font declaring that he could not go without the company of his predecessors, the princes of the Frisians, to reside with a small number of the poor in that celestial kingdom.’

Many modern scholars of this period have remarked on this famous anecdote.⁷ Interestingly, others pass over it in silence.⁸ This remarkable discrepancy is probably the result of a different assessment of the authenticity of the story. Already Wilhelm Levison, who edited Wulfram’s Life for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in 1910, expressed severe doubts about its reliability as a historical source. ‘Itaque pleraque quae narrantur aut pro fabulis aut pro dubiis habenda sunt’, was his judgement.⁹ Levison was critical because of the chronological problems presented by the text. The most striking example of this is the date of

⁷ See e.g. Fletcher (1997), 239; Brown (2003), 417; Lynch (1998), 72; Dumézil (2005), 172; Blair (2005), 58; Charles-Edwards (2000), 199 (although presenting a garbled version of the story); Smith (2005), 228; Weiler (1989), 78; Scheibelreiter (1999), 481.

⁸ Palmer (2009); Innes (2007); Wickham (2009); Noble and Smith (2008); Blok, Prevenier et al. (1981).

⁹ MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 659.

the failed baptismal rite. According to the *Vita*, this event took place not long before the death of Radbod in AD 718. Yet, the *Gesta* of the abbots of St Wandrille inform us that Wulfram had died before AD 704, as his body was translated by Abbot Bainus of Fontenelle (St Wandrille) in that year. The date given for Wulfram's death in the *Vita* (AD 720) is therefore clearly mistaken.

Historians have dealt with the question of the reliability of this story in three different ways. Some present the anecdote as historical fact without further qualification.¹⁰ Others have simply ignored it completely.¹¹ A third group of historians consider the story itself unreliable, but maintain that its theme, the insecurity about the fate of pagan forefathers, is a reflection of real issues involved in the early stages of Christianization. Characteristic for this approach is the succinct phrase by Lutz von Padberg:¹² 'Mag diese pittoreske Szene auch der Phantasie des Hagiographen entstammen, so spiegelt sie doch tatsächliche Missionserfahrungen der Übergangsepoche.' A fourth approach is to regard the story as a way in which Wulfram and Radbod were remembered at the time of composition of the *Vita*.¹³ If the story does reflect authentic experiences in the missionary field, this raises the question why no other historical or hagiographical source refers to this. The aim of this paper is to provide the background for the emergence of the story about Radbod's failed baptism by demonstrating that the theme of the fate of unbaptized forefathers was a real issue in the AD 740s in a couple of texts related to mission and conversion. This 8th-century debate forms the context for the story in the *Life of Wulfram*.

Authenticity and context

For this paper, the question of the authenticity of the story is, therefore, of secondary importance. Yet, some remarks about this vexed question are necessary in order to get a better understanding of the text and its background. Recently, Ian Wood and Stéphane Lebecq have rekindled the debate on its authenticity and I will begin by outlining their

¹⁰ See Dumézil (2005), 172; Blair (2005), 58; Smith (2005), 228; Weiler (1989), 78; Scheibelreiter (1999), 481.

¹¹ See n 8.

¹² von Padberg (2003), 123; van Eijnatten and van Lieburg (2005), 74.

¹³ Brown (2003), 417.

arguments. Ian Wood sees the *Vita Wulframni* mainly as a response by the monks of St Wandrille to the composition of the *Vita Willibrordi* by Alcuin. The text is designed not only to demonstrate the pre-eminence of Wulfram over Willibrord, but also to promote a different conception of mission. For the author of the *Vita Wulframni*, miracles are of primary importance, whereas Alcuin instead stresses the role of preaching. According to Wood, the *Vita Wulframni* was written as a reaction to the *Vita Willibrordi* because the monks of St Wandrille wanted to highlight their contribution to the Frisian mission. For this purpose, they were not hesitant in formulating 'totally fraudulent assertions', although the *Vita* may also contain 'a record of genuine events'. Wood does not explicitly address the question of the authenticity of the story of Radbod's failed baptism, but by pointing to similar concerns about the fate of forefathers raised elsewhere, he suggests that the story had at least some link with problems encountered in the missionary field. Wood considers the reference to the faith of Clovis's forefathers in the letter of Avitus of Vienne sent on the occasion of his baptism as a close parallel.¹⁴

Stéphane Lebecq, although acknowledging the indisputable problems that the text presents, has fervently defended the *Vita Wulframni* as a reliable source for the history of early medieval Frisia. The monastery of St Wandrille was in contact with this region and some of the details mentioned in the *Vita* have clear parallels with Frisian evidence. Lebecq furthermore provides an explanation for the blatant inconsistencies in the text, which have seriously prejudiced historians' judgment of the text's reliability. The author, for example, calls himself Jonas (of Bobbio), the 7th-century biographer of St Vedastus and St Columbanus, and pretends to dedicate the work to abbot Bainus, abbot of St Wandrille in the early years of the 8th-century, while in other parts of the text references to two later abbots of that monastery can be found: Wando (AD 716–719 and 742–747/754) and Austrulf (AD 747–753).¹⁵ The text as transmitted must therefore postdate AD 747, which makes a dedication to Bainus not only impossible but also suspiciously preposterous. According to Lebecq, these inconsistencies result from a somewhat clumsily amalgamation of already existing smaller dossiers. A brief biographical text was probably composed on the occasion of the elevation of Wulfram's remains in AD 704. Anecdotes mainly concerned with Frisian

¹⁴ Wood (1991), 12–4; Wood (2001), 92–4 ('may include a record of genuine events'); Wood (2005), 720 ('totally fraudulent assertions') and 726–7; see Avitus of Vienne, *Epistula* 46 (ed. by Rudolf Peiper in MGH Auct. ant. 6,2, 75–6).

¹⁵ Lebecq (2000), 432–3.

issues were reported and possibly written down by the monk Ovo, one of the Frisian boys saved by Wulfram and then brought to the monastery of St Wandrille. Two miracle stories are closely related to Abbot Wando and were probably recorded by him or under his direction.¹⁶ These then were put together in the late 8th or early 9th century. Such a genesis of the *Vita* may perhaps seem overly complicated, but it explains well the incoherence of the text as a whole; certainly, the chronological discrepancies can better be squared by this interpretation than by the assumption the *Vita* forms a coherent composition to compete with Alcuin's carefully balanced account of Willibrord's activities, unless we regard the monks of St Wandrille incapable of writing a structured narrative.

Moreover, the short anecdotes concerning Frisia show exceptional features when compared to the rest of the *Vita*. Three chapters in the *Vita*, for example, deal with the tradition of human sacrifices among the Frisians.¹⁷ According to these, young boys were chosen by lot and then offered to the gods, either by hanging or drowning. Sacrifice by drowning especially is peculiar and corresponds well with the Frisian landscape dominated by wetlands and the sea. Such descriptions do not, or only partly, rely on hagiographical *topoi*; rather, they show parallels with the sacrificial procedures related in other sources from Frisia, such as the *Vita Willibrordi* or the *Lex Frisionum*, but clearly do not derive from these.¹⁸

The *Vita* as such can therefore be dated to the end of the 8th or the early 9th century, but its components, in Lebecq's reconstruction, were composed earlier. Lebecq suspects that Wando might have been involved in the recording process of Ovo's oral testimonies, which form the basis of the Frisian *couleur locale* of the *Vita*. Both Wando and Ovo died around the middle of the 8th century. If Lebecq is correct, and I see no reason for questioning his reconstruction, then the story about the failed baptism of Radbod was probably recorded in St Wandrille in the AD 740s when Ovo would have been in his old age. Since the *Vita* refers to Ovo's talents as a scribe (*in arte scriptoria eruditus*), it is even possible that Ovo himself composed the anecdotes in question, reflecting his own experiences.¹⁹

Lebecq thus dates the anecdote about Wulfram and Radbod to the AD 740s. This date could be corroborated by further evidence for a

¹⁶ Lebecq (2000), 440–1.

¹⁷ *Vita Wulframni* 6–8 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 665–7).

¹⁸ Lebecq (2007).

¹⁹ On Ovo's talents as a scribe, see *Vita Wulframni* 7 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 666). The parts probably written by him are translated in Lebecq (2011a).

contemporary discussion of the fate of unbaptized forefathers. Some scholars have argued that the crucial question raised in the story of Radbod's failed baptism—i.e. why are we saved by the grace of baptism while our ancestors are not?—must have been of major concern in many missionary contexts. Yet, the *Vita Wulframni* seems to be the only Saint's Life in which this issue is addressed. Comparison with the other major Anglo-Saxon missionary, Boniface, however, demonstrates that the issue was of some concern to him and to other contemporaries. First, there is Pope Gregory III's reply to an earlier letter of Boniface which has not survived. In his papal letter of AD 732, the pope discusses several issues related to baptism. He asks Boniface to baptize again in the name of the Trinity those who have received baptism from 'pagans'. Furthermore, Boniface was to (re)baptize those who are uncertain whether they have received baptism. Those baptized by a priest who sacrificed to Jupiter or who participated in pagan sacrificial meals should also undergo another baptism. These papal demands raise a number of questions: Who are these pagans baptizing heathens? Does the pope here refer to Christians who had not received proper baptism themselves and should therefore technically be treated as pagans? Did this cause such a confusion that people were uncertain about their state as Christians? Were pagans possibly imitating baptismal ceremonies for specific reasons? There are no definite answers to these questions. Still, it is obvious that Boniface, at this time, encountered a number of problematical baptismal issues.²⁰

In the same letter a question is raised which is closely related to the central issue of the story of Wulfram and Radbod. Gregory here responds to Boniface's initial question whether one may bring liturgical offerings for the deceased. Gregory allows this only for the deceased who are real Christians (*vere christianis*). A priest may do so, but only for them, not for those who are impious, even when the latter were Christian, the pope specified.²¹ The term *impios* in this context is ambiguous. It seems to refer to 'unbelievers', whether (formally) Christian or pagan. Pope Gregory III here seems to respond to a desire of recent converts to make liturgical offerings for unbelievers. We may assume that some of these unbelievers are to be identified with their deceased pagan ancestors.²²

²⁰ Boniface Letters 28 (ed. by Michael Tangl in MGH Epp. sel. 1, 50–1).

²¹ Boniface Letters 28 (MGH Epp. sel. 1, 50–1).

²² As supposed by Clay (2010), 386, who also relates this letter to the story about Radbod's failed baptism.

That Boniface was confronted with precisely this issue and that other contemporaries of a certain religious authority came to different conclusions, is evident from his conflict with the Irish Bishop Clemens. This Clemens proved to be a fervent adversary of the Anglo-Saxon archbishop. He is often mentioned in the same breath as the Frankish Bishop Aldebert and they were both condemned by the same Roman Synod of AD 745.²³ Yet, we need to distinguish carefully between these two charismatic men. Clemens is accused by Boniface of following several unorthodox views and embracing uncanonical practices. Although the accusations of heresy levelled against Clemens may simply reflect heretical stereotypes, the Irishman may still have acted non-conformist.²⁴ One of the accusations involves Clemens teaching the doctrine that Christ had descended into Hell and liberated everyone there, believers and unbelievers (*credulos et incredulos*) alike, the worshippers of God and the idolaters (*laudatores Dei simul et cultores idolorum*).²⁵ This suggests that Clemens held a more favourable view on the salvation of those who had not had a chance to embrace Christianity in their lifetime. The Roman synod, when summarizing Clemens's case, chose exactly the same ambiguous term for describing the unbelievers that Pope Gregory III had used in his Letter to Boniface discussed above: *impios*. This indicates that Gregory's letter and Clemens's teaching possibly dealt with a similar problem, i.e. the salvation of pagan forefathers.

Another text that has recently been associated with Boniface addresses the same question. The text in question is a short sermon, known as *Rogamus vos*, which has traditionally been attributed to Augustine of Canterbury.²⁶ Michael Glatthaar has recently demonstrated that there is no firm basis for this attribution and has shown that the sole manuscript witness of this text is closely associated with Boniface and his mission. This manuscript, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Pal. lat. 577, contains a collection of texts that can, more or less directly, be associated with the 'apostle of the Germans'. According to Glatthaar, the connection with Boniface was so close that we may dub this collection the *Sententiae Bonifatianae Palatinae*.²⁷ It includes the

²³ On Boniface's two opponents, see de Jong (2005); Innes (2008); Meeder (2011).

²⁴ For the influence of heretical stereotypes, see Zeddies (1995); the links with Irish traditions are stressed by Meeder (2011).

²⁵ Roman Synod of AD 745 (ed. by Albert Werminghoff in MGH Conc. 2,1, 40).

²⁶ Machielsens (1961), 504–5.

²⁷ Glatthaar (2004), 455–502; the argument is accepted by Mostert (2013), 115–9.

famous list of problematic religious observances that is known as the *Indiculus superstitionum*, the so-called Old-Saxon baptismal formula, and the texts of the *Concilium Germanicum* (AD 742) and the Council of Estinnes (AD 743). The short sermon *Rogamus vos* deals with the question of why the remedies for salvation (*salutis remedia*) were preached so late. Why did Christ arrive so late in this world and let so many thousands of people perish? The fact that the sermon strongly argues against the validity of such a question indicates that it was actually directed against Clemens and his followers, who, as we have seen, also worried about the salvation of the souls of those who died before Christian doctrine was known.²⁸ That such questions must have been particularly prominent in a missionary context may be obvious, but it needs to be stressed that without someone like Clemens who actually explicitly formulated such concerns, these were generally suppressed or remained unarticulated.

An influential penitential handbook that probably was known to Boniface contains a couple of sentences that also deal in a very rigorous way with pagan ancestors. This penitential is attributed to Theodore of Canterbury, whose teachings indeed form the basis of this text. Actually, the *Iudicia Theodori* are known from five textual traditions of which the *Discipulus Umbrensius* version together with the *Canones Gregorii* were the best known.²⁹ The *Discipulus Umbrensius* version was probably composed in the late 7th or early 8th century, as it features in the canon law collection known as the *Collectio Vetus Gallica*, redacted at Corbie c.AD 725–750.³⁰ Boniface was in close contact with the monks of Corbie and particularly with Abbot Grimo, who is the most plausible candidate as redactor of the *Collectio Vetus Gallica*.³¹ Theodore's penitential contains the following two sentences:³²

²⁸ A connection between the sermon and Clemens's preaching is suggested by Glatthaar (2004), 488–9.

²⁹ For these traditions, see Kottje s.v. 'Paenitentiale Theodori' in *HRG* 3, 1413–6.

³⁰ Mordek (1975), 86.

³¹ For Boniface's contact with Grimo, see Glatthaar (2004), 215, 386–9; see also Meens (2007), 220–1.

³² *Paenitentiale Theodori, Discipulus Umbrensius*-version (U) II 1, 4–5 (ed. Finsterwalder (1929), 312; I added some punctuation); cf. *P. Theodori Canones Gregorii* 149–150 (ed. Finsterwalder (1929), 267); *P. Theodori Capitula Dacheriana* 98 (ed. Finsterwalder (1929), 247); *P. Theodori Canones Cottoniani* 56–58 (ed. Finsterwalder (1929), 274); *P. Theodori Canones Basilienses*, 71a–b, 89 (ed. Asbach (1975), Anhang, 85 and 87); see also Meens (2012), 128; Meens (2014), 90–6; and the comments in Blair (2005), 236.

In ecclesia in qua mortuorum cadavera infidelium sepeliuntur, sanctificare altare non licet sed si apta videtur ad consecrandum inde evulsa et rasis vel lotis lignis eius reaedificatur.

Si autem consecratum prius fuit, missas in eo caelebrare licet si relegiosi ibi sepulti sunt. Si vero paganus sit, mundare et iactare foras melius est.

‘One should not consecrate the altar in a church in which the bodies of unbelievers (*infidelium*) are buried, but if the altar seems well suited for consecration, the bodies should be removed and it can be re-established after the planks are scoured and washed.

But if it has already been consecrated, Mass may be celebrated in it when the people buried there are *relegiosi*. But if it concerns a pagan it is better to clean it and to throw [the remains] out.’

These enigmatic sentences can be interpreted as reflecting a desire among recent converts to have their ancestors buried in consecrated churches (or to build churches on their graves). It is obvious that Theodore took an uncompromising stand against such practices, a position that is in line with Boniface’s views, who, before going to the Continent, had close links with Theodore’s successor Berhtwald.³³ The same opinion is expressed in the story of Radbod’s failed baptism.

Clemens’s background

The story about the failed baptism of Radbod, therefore, though unique in hagiographical literature, can be set in the context of a group of texts all known and used in the northern Frankish region which concentrate on the salvation of pagan ancestors. This theme seems to have been a major issue of dispute between Boniface and the Irish Bishop Clemens. Clemens took a more lenient stance in this debate, while Boniface denied any possibility for pagan ancestors to be saved. We may wonder whether Clemens’s approach was singular, or whether he represented a wider movement. Sven Meeder recently suggested that Clemens might have been influenced by Pelagianism, which would explain the accusation of asserting ‘horrible’ ideas on predestination levelled against Clemens at the Roman Synod of AD 745.³⁴ His Irish background could, of course, have provoked such claims, as Pelagianism was strongly associated with

³³ Yorke (2007), 32.

³⁴ Roman Synod of AD 745 (MGH Conc. 2,1, 40); Meeder (2011), 277–9.

the British Isles, partly thanks to Bede's treatment of this issue in his recent *Historia ecclesiastica*.³⁵

If we look at the religious culture of Clemens's native Ireland, it becomes apparent that his positive attitude towards the pagan past had its roots there. Quite a few Irish texts speak of pagan ancestors with an exemplary life though uninfluenced by Christianity. Moreover, some texts claim that Irish men believed in the Christian God even before Patrick spread the word on the island.³⁶ Adomnán, in his *Vita Columbae* written in the late 7th century, relates how the saint miraculously foresaw the arrival of a man who had preserved natural goodness (*naturale bonum*) throughout his entire life without having been baptized, and therefore uninfluenced by Christianity, or so the story implies. When this man, Artbránán, heard the word of God from the holy man, he agreed to be baptized by Columba and died almost immediately thereafter.³⁷ Later in the same text, a similar story is narrated.³⁸ These episodes have been interpreted as evidence of persistent Pelagianism in the Irish church.³⁹ Yet, both episodes stress the importance of baptism, even for someone who had preserved natural goodness throughout his life. Rather than reading these stories as statements of Pelagianism, they should be taken as expressions of the pervading force of divine grace which makes a naturally good person receive baptism before encountering death.⁴⁰ They do show, however, 'a conciliatory attitude towards paganism'.⁴¹

The same can be observed in the late 7th-century Life of Patrick by Muirchú. When Patrick returned to Ireland, he met a certain Dichu, who became the first Irishman to convert to Christianity. According to Muirchú, before meeting Patrick he had already been 'from nature a good man, although a pagan'.⁴² Tírechán, the other late 7th-century biographer of Patrick, went even further. In his *Collectanea*, in which he as-

³⁵ Bede raised the issue particularly by his quote from the letter of Pope-elect John to the northern Irish clergy in *Historia ecclesiastica* II 19 (ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors (1992), 200–3); see Ó Cróinín (1985).

³⁶ McCone (1991), 72–5.

³⁷ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* I 33 (ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson (1991), 62–3).

³⁸ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* III 14 (Anderson and Anderson (1991), 200–3).

³⁹ Herren and Brown (2002), 95.

⁴⁰ O'Sullivan (2010).

⁴¹ Charles-Edwards (2000), 200.

⁴² Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii* I 11(10) (ed. and trans. Bieler (1979), 78–9): *cuiusdam uiri natura boni licet gentilis*.

sembled a lot of information about the saint in order to support the material claims of the church of Armagh, he relates how the saint revived a deceased pagan man and baptized him before he was returned into his grave.⁴³ We can imagine that such posthumous baptisms appealed to newly converted Christians worrying about their ancestors' salvation.

Thus, a conciliatory attitude towards paganism seems to have existed in Ireland, resulting in three stories in which a naturally good pagan is finally baptized before passing away. In one case even a pagan man is resurrected and received baptism before being returned to his grave. These stories all date from the end of the 7th century, a period when, we may surmise, Clemens, who was active on the Continent in the early AD 740s, spent his youth in Ireland. Even if Clemens was younger than this, he certainly must have been active in Ireland in the early 8th century at the latest. We must therefore conclude that Clemens appears to have grown up in an environment supportive of the idea of retrospective baptism of the deceased.

But not only in Ireland do we find traces of such discussions in hagiographical sources. In early 8th-century Northumbria, an anonymous monk or nun composed a Life of Pope Gregory the Great.⁴⁴ This text contains an intriguing chapter concerning the posthumous baptism of the Roman Emperor Trajan by Pope Gregory. When walking through the Forum of Trajan in Rome, Gregory learned the anecdote of the Roman emperor stopping on his way to do battle to oversee justice for a widow whose son had been killed. Because the killers were unwilling to pay compensation, the emperor made them do so. This Christian act done by a pagan emperor moved Gregory so greatly that he went to St Peter's church and wept 'floods of tears' for the emperor. By these tears, Trajan's soul was 'refreshed' and baptized (*refrigeratam vel baptizatam*). The author seems to expect some criticism for his choice of the term *baptizare* here, but he stressed that without baptism no one is able to see God.⁴⁵ The author of this Life, probably a monk of the monastery of Whitby, has been criticized for his lack of theological sophistication, but he seems to have been aware of the critique which the story could potentially generate.⁴⁶ He insisted on the importance of baptism and it

⁴³ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 40 (ed. and trans. Bieler (1979), 154–5).

⁴⁴ The *Vita Gregorii* and its account of the baptism of the Roman Emperor Trajan are also discussed in Colin Ireland's contribution elsewhere in this volume.

⁴⁵ The anonymous Life of Gregory 29 (ed. and trans. Colgrave (1968), 126–9).

⁴⁶ For the criticism levelled against the author, see, e.g., Marenbon (2012), 46: 'From a theological point of view, there is almost everything wrong with this story.'

appears that he wanted to make the story of the pagan Emperor Trajan being saved acceptable by introducing the act of baptism. There are no indications that the author knew the Irish Lives we just discussed, but it is hardly a coincidence that the theme of the salvation of a just pagan by baptism appears in Northumbria, a region closely linked to the Irish church. This evidence demonstrates that there was a lively debate on such issues in these regions, which made the Whitby author choose his words carefully. Such a discussion might be linked to persistent forms of Pelagianism in the British Isles, but the relevance of such a topic in a recently converted region is easy understood without any Pelagian influence.⁴⁷

Clemens Willibrordus

The debate about the fate of pagan ancestors, of which we find traces in the Irish and Northumbrian hagiographical literature of the late 7th and early 8th century, provides the general background for Clemens's opinion on this matter. In the AD 740s, this debate was one of the central themes in the dispute between Boniface and Clemens, who cherished a much more positive view of the salvation of pagans than Boniface did. The story about the failed baptism should be considered as contemporary evidence of this dispute. It agrees fully with Boniface's position: there is no salvation without baptism. A possible connection to an overarching debate on predestination is suggested by the text's insistence on the well-defined number of those eligible for salvation, thus expressed in Wulfram's words: *certus est suorum numerus electorum* ('there is a certain amount of the elect with God').⁴⁸ The author here cites Bede's commentary on the Gospel of Luke; Bede himself, it will be remembered, considered Pelagianism an imminent threat to the church of his time.⁴⁹

The story about Radbod's failed baptism therefore represents Boniface's position in the struggle with Clemens. Michael Glatthaar has recently argued in favour of a connection between the Irish opponent of Boniface and Willibrord, Northumbrian missionary and former

⁴⁷ For Pelagianism, see Herren and Brown (2002), *passim*.

⁴⁸ *Vita Wulframni* 9 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 668).

⁴⁹ Bede, *In Lucae Evangelium Expositio* II 5 (ed. by David Hurst in CCSL 120, 115); on Bede's views on Pelagianism, see Herren and Brown (2002), 97–8; Holder (2005).

companion of Boniface.⁵⁰ There exists no firm evidence for a relation between the two except for Clemens's name. Willibrord had received that very name from Pope Sergius and though not uncommon, the fact that Clemens bore the same name might suggest a connection between the two. Moreover, although the geography of Clemens's activity is difficult to establish with certainty, the fact that Carloman was deemed responsible for the capture of Clemens, we can infer that Austrasia was the territory of his mission, which was also the region where Willibrord was active.⁵¹ A connection between the two men therefore can neither be proven nor rejected.

If Glatthaar is right in his assessment of the relationship between Clemens and Willibrord, this would shed new light on the relation of the *Vita Wulframni* to Willibrord. Ian Wood argued that the *Vita Wulframni* was composed as a reply to Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi*. This may be true for its final composition, but it cannot explain the reference to Willibrord in the episode of Radbod's failed baptism, if this indeed originated in the AD 740s, decades before Alcuin started to work on the *Vita Willibrordi*. In the anecdote under discussion here, Willibrord plays a prominent role. He is summoned by Radbod as the teacher on the Frisian people (*doctor praefatae gentis*) in order to discuss the conversion of the Frisian king with Wulfram. Radbod, however, kept arguing with the bishop, apparently not interested in becoming Christian. According to the anecdote, Willibrord said the following when receiving Radbod's summon:⁵² "Why should your duke who spurns the preaching of our brother the saintly Bishop Wulfram, be inclined to follow my advice? For tonight in a dream I have seen him bound in fiery chains. Therefore, it is certain that he is already undergoing eternal damnation." When on his way to Radbod, Willibrord received the news that the Frisian leader had died without baptism, and thus his vision was substantiated.

Wood argues that Willibrord's role in the Christianization of the Frisians was so well known that the author of the *Vita Wulframni*, although presenting Wulfram and Willibrord as competitors, could not simply pass over the Anglo-Saxon missionary in silence.⁵³ Yet, the text

⁵⁰ Glatthaar (2004), 152, 523.

⁵¹ For Clemens's connection to Austrasia, see Meeder (2011), 266.

⁵² *Vita Wulframni* 9 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 668): *Quia praedicationem sancti fratris nostri Wulframni pontificis dux vester audire contempsit, meis quoque qualiter obsecundabit edictis? Nam hac nocte vidi illum in visu catena religatum ignea. Unde certum fore constat, dampnationem illum iam subisse aeternam.*

⁵³ Wood (2001), 93.

does not seem to indicate any rivalry between the two men, it rather stresses their cooperation: ‘together with the blessed Wulfram, who agreed [with him] in his religious teaching’.⁵⁴ Willibrord fully endorses Wulfram’s theological position. Perhaps this is the crucial message that the story wants to bring across: Wulfram’s position, which so neatly concurs with that of Boniface in the dispute with Clemens, was fully vindicated by Willibrord. Willibrord had died in AD 739. This chronology suggests that after his death, reference to his authority was used to substantiate a claim that featured in a dispute of the AD 740s between another Clemens, perhaps a (self-acclaimed) follower of Willibrord, and Boniface.

We know that Willibrord and Boniface had been at loggerheads, which Willibald, in his *Vita Bonifatii*, describes as a beautiful and harmonious form of discord.⁵⁵ There are indications that Willibrord considered a conciliatory approach to the Christian mission, based on compromise and assimilation, most fruitful, whereas Boniface was a more uncompromising character.⁵⁶ Archaeological evidence suggest that *de facto* posthumous Christianization of ancestors happened, as for example in the Rhineland near Alzey, where a church was built on top of a pre-Christian burial site.⁵⁷ Moreover, archaeological records from the early medieval period indicate that in missionary regions in the Low Countries and Germany, graves were frequently opened shortly after burial, presumably by relatives of the deceased.⁵⁸ In some cases gold-foil crosses seem to have been deposited in such reopened graves, which suggests a form of posthumous Christianization.⁵⁹ Formerly, such violations of graves were considered grave robberies, but more recently archaeologists interpret them as forms of ancestor worship or as an on-going relationship between the dead and the living.⁶⁰ Boniface would probably have objected to such forms of behaviour, but they seem nevertheless to have frequently occurred in many regions, also in Willibrord’s area of activ-

⁵⁴ *Vita Wulframmi* 9 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, 668): *simul cum beato Vulframno, in doctrina suae religionis concordante.*

⁵⁵ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* 5 (ed. by Wilhelm Levison in MGH SS rer. Germ. 57, 25): *spiritalis inter eos orta est contentio et consona pulchrae discretionis facta dissensio.*

⁵⁶ For Willibrord’s possibly more accommodating attitude, see Meens (2000); Meens (2014), 102–6.

⁵⁷ Geary (1994), 36–8.

⁵⁸ van Haperen (2010), 3.

⁵⁹ van Haperen (2010), 15.

⁶⁰ van Haperen (2010).

ity. In this context, the story about the failed baptism of Radbod may very well be regarded as an appropriation of Willibrord's authority in a conflict over his 'religious inheritance'. The St Wandrille author of the text sided with Boniface and added Willibrord's authority to counter the views of Clemens and his followers. Willibrord may have disagreed with Boniface on this subject given his inclination for a more compromising approach in religious matters. As a native of Northumbria, he may have known the story of Trajan's posthumous baptism. Also, he spent twelve years in Ireland, where, as we have seen, texts were written towards the end of the 7th century with a decidedly positive view of pagan ancestors. Whether Willibrord had access to these texts cannot be determined, but the *Vitae* probably reflect attitudes and discussions current in Irish and Northumbrian ecclesiastical circles at that time. It is hardly conceivable that Willibrord was not aware of such tendencies, especially since the issues in question were of primary importance for his missionary work.

Conclusion

The well-known story of the Frisian King Radbod withdrawing his foot from the font when supposed to be baptized by Bishop Wulfram of Sens is only rarely regarded as historically trustworthy. More often it is considered an imaginary episode; its relevance, in this reading, lies in its depiction of sincere hopes and fears by those involved in the process of Christianization. If we follow Lebecq's persuasive reconstruction of the genesis of the *Vita Wulframni*, we can date this specific story to the AD 740s. In those years, Boniface had serious disputes with an Irish bishop named Clemens who was active in Austrasia. One of the main issues of controversy was the question of the fate of pagans who had remained ignorant of Christian doctrine. Clemens, whose views are only known through the defamation by Boniface and the papacy, seems to have been more positive concerning the fate of pagan ancestors than the uncompromising Boniface. The theme of the naturally good pagan to be found in Irish hagiographical texts of the end of the 7th century can explain Clemens's positive approach. The story about Radbod's failed baptism should be seen as a text supporting the views of Boniface *cum suis*. It argues against a possible salvation for pagan ancestors and stresses the need for baptism. The discussion between Clemens and Boniface may also reflect an earlier dispute between Boniface and Willibrord. This

at least would explain why Willibrord, besides Wulfram, plays such a central role in the Radbod story. Willibrord's authority is claimed here in order to corroborate the Bonifatian view on the condemnation of pagan ancestors. This need not have been Willibrord's own opinion and there are some indications to the contrary. Boniface's strict attitude in such matters may have been an exception in the more general process of Christianization. If so, this would explain why we have only this single testimony to what must have been a central question. Other missionaries seem to have been less outspoken on the subject than Boniface was and thus seem to have given their new converts more comfort in dealing with their pagan ancestors in ways they considered appropriate.

Bibliography

- Anderson, A.O. and M.O. Anderson (1991) *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, Oxford.
- Angenendt, A. (1998) *Die Geschichte des Bistums Münster, Bd. 1: Mission bis Millennium, 313–1000*, Münster.
- Asbach, F.B. (1975) *Das Poenitientiale Remense und der sogen. Excarpus Cumeani: Überlieferung, Quellen und Entwicklung zweier kontinentaler Bußbücher aus der 1. Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts*, Regensburg.
- Berschlin, W. (1991) *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter, Bd. 3: Die karolingische Biographie 750–920 n. Chr.*, Stuttgart.
- Bieler, L. (1979) *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin.
- Blair, J. (2005) *The church in Anglo-Saxon society*, Oxford.
- Blok, D., W. Prevenier et al. (1981) *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden 1: Middeleeuwen*, Bussum.
- Brown, P. (2003) *The rise of western Christendom: triumph and diversity A.D. 200–1000*, 2nd edition, Malden.
- Charles-Edwards, T.M. (1995) 'The penitential of Theodore and the Iudicia Theodori,' in M. Lapidge, *Archbishop Theodore: commemorative studies on his life and influence*, Cambridge, 141–74.
- (2000) *Early Christian Ireland*, Cambridge.
- Clay, J.-H. (2010) *In the shadow of death. Saint Boniface and the conversion of Hessa, 721–54*, Turnhout.
- Colgrave, B. (1968) *The earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an anonymous monk of Whitby*, Laurence.
- Colgrave, B. and R.A.B. Mynors (1992) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, rev. ed., Oxford.
- de Jong, M. (2005) 'Bonifatius: een angelsaksische priestermonnik en het Frankische hof,' *Millennium* 19, 5–23.

- Dumézil, B. (2005) *Les racines chrétiennes de l'Europe. Conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares V^e–VIII^e siècle*, Paris.
- Finsterwalder, P.W. (1929) *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen*, Weimar.
- Fischer, A. (2012) *Karl Martell. Der Beginn karolingischer Herrschaft*, Stuttgart.
- Flechner, R. (2003–4) 'The making of the canons of Theodore,' *Peritia* 17–8, 121–43.
- Fletcher, R. (1997) *The conversion of Europe: from paganism to Christianity*, London.
- Fouracre, P. (2000) *The age of Charles Martel*, Harlow.
- Geary, P. (1994) 'The uses of archaeological sources for religious and cultural history,' in P. Geary, *Living with the dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, 30–45.
- Glatthaar, M. (2004) *Bonifatius und das Sakrileg. Zur politischen Dimension eines Rechtsbegriffs*, Frankfurt.
- Herren, M.W. and S.A. Brown (2002) *Christ in Celtic Christianity. Britain and Ireland from the fifth to the tenth century*, Woodbridge.
- Holder, A. (2005) 'The anti-pelagian character of Bede's Commentary on the Song of Songs,' in C. Leonardi and G. Orlandi, *Biblical studies in the early Middle Ages*, Florence, 91–103.
- Innes, M. (2007) *Introduction to early medieval Western Europe, 300–900: the sword, the plough and the book*, London.
- (2008) "Immune from heresy": defining the boundaries of Carolingian Christianity,' in P. Fouracre and D. Ganz, *Frankland: the Franks and the world of the early Middle Ages. Essays in honour of Dame Jinty Nelson*, Manchester, 101–25.
- Lebecq, S. (2000) 'Vulfran, Willibrord et la mission de Frise: pour une relecture de la *Vita Vulframni*,' in M. Polfer, *L'évangélisation des régions entre Meuse et Moselle et la fondation de l'abbaye d'Echternach (V^e–IX^e siècle)*, Luxembourg, 431–51, repr. in Lebecq (2011), 75–93.
- (2007) 'Paganisme et rites sacrificiels chez les Frisons des VII^e–VIII^e siècles,' in F. Felten, J. Jarnut, and L.E. von Padberg, *Bonifatius – Leben und Nachwirken. Die Gestaltung des christlichen Europas im Frühmittelalter*, Mainz, 111–20.
- (2011) *Hommes, mers et terres du Nord au début du Moyen Âge I: peuples, cultures, territoires*, Villeneuve d'Ascq.
- (2011a) 'Traduction du prologue et des chapitres 6 à 10 de le *Vie de Vulfran* du pseudo-Jonas, moine de Fontenelle,' in Lebecq (2011), 95–101.
- Lynch, J. (1998) *Christianizing kinship: ritual sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England*, Ithaca.
- Machielsen, L. (1961) 'Fragments patristiques non-identifiés du ms. Vat. Pal. 577,' *Sacris Erudiri* 12, 488–539.

- Marenbon, J. (2012) 'A problem of paganism,' in C. Steel, J. Marenbon, and W. Verbeke, *Paganism in the Middle Ages: threat and fascination*, Leuven, 39–54.
- McCone, K. (1991) *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature*, Maynooth.
- Meeder, S. (2011) 'Boniface and the Irish heresy of Clemens,' *Church History* 80, 251–80.
- Meens, R. (2000) 'Christentum und Heidentum aus der Sicht Willibrords? Überlegungen zum *Paenitentiale Oxoniense II*,' in M. Polfer, *L'évangélisation des régions entre Meuse et Moselle et la fondation de l'abbaye d'Echternach (V^e–IX^e siècle)*, Luxembourg, 417–28.
- (2007) 'Aspekte der Christianisierung des Volkes,' in F.J. Felten, J. Jarnut, and L.E. von Padberg, *Bonifatius – Leben und Nachwirken. Die Gestaltung des christlichen Europas im Frühmittelalter*, Mainz, 211–29.
- (2012) 'Exil, Buße und sozialer Tod. Ausschließungsmechanismen in den frühmittelalterlichen Bußbüchern,' in C. Garnier and J. Schnocks, *Sterben über den Tod hinaus. Politische, soziale und religiöse Ausgrenzung in vormodernen Gesellschaften*, Würzburg, 117–31.
- (2014) *Penance in medieval Europe, 600–1200*, Cambridge.
- Mordek, H. (1975) *Kirchenrecht und Reform im Frankenreich. Die Collectio Vetus Gallica, die älteste systematische Kanonensammlung des fränkischen Gallien. Studien und Edition*, Berlin.
- Mostert, M. (2013) 'Communicating the faith: the circle of Boniface, Germanic vernaculars, and Frisian and Saxon converts,' *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 70, 87–130.
- Noble, T. and J. Smith (2008) *The Cambridge history of Christianity, vol. 3: early medieval Christianities, c.600–c.1100*, Cambridge.
- Ó Cróinín, D. (1984) 'Rath Melsigi, Willibrord, and the earliest Echternach manuscripts,' *Peritia* 3, 17–49, repr. in Ó Cróinín (2003), 145–72.
- (1985) "'New heresy for old". Pelagianism in Ireland and the papal letter of 640,' *Speculum* 60, 505–16, repr. in Ó Cróinín (2003), 87–98.
- (2003) *Early Irish history and chronology*, Dublin.
- (2007) *The kings depart: the prosopography of Anglo-Saxon royal exile in the sixth and seventh centuries*, Cambridge.
- O'Sullivan, T. (2010) 'The anti-Pelagian motif of the 'naturally good' pagan in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*,' in J. Wooding et al., *Adomnán of Iona: theologian, lawmaker, peacemaker*, Dublin, 253–73.
- Palmer, J. (2009) *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish world, 690–900*, Turnhout.
- Scheibelreiter, G. (1999) *Die barbarische Gesellschaft. Mentalitätsgeschichte der europäischen Achsenzeit 5.–8. Jahrhundert*, Darmstadt.
- Smith, J. (2005) *Europe after Rome: a new cultural history 500–1000*, Oxford.
- van Egmond, W. (2005) 'Radbod van de Friezen, een aristocraat in de periferie,' *Millennium* 19, 24–43.

- van Eijnatten, J. and F. van Lieburg (2005) *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis*, Hilversum.
- van Haperen, M. (2010) 'Rest in pieces: an interpretive model of early medieval 'grave robbery', *Medieval and Modern Matters* 1, 1–36.
- von Padberg, L.E. (2003) *Die Inszenierung religiöser Konfrontationen. Theorie der Missionspredigt im frühen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart.
- Weiler, A. (1989) *Willibrords Missie. Christendom en cultuur in de zevende en achtste eeuw. Met een vertaling van de voornaamste literaire bronnen door P. Bange*, Hilversum.
- Wickham, C. (2009) *The inheritance of Rome: a history of Europe from 400 to 1000*, London.
- Wood, I. (1991) 'Saint Wandrille and its hagiography,' in I. Wood and G.A. Loud, *Church and chronicle in the Middle Ages*, London, 1–14.
- (2001) *The missionary life: saints and the evangelization of Europe, 400–1050*, Harlow.
- (2005) 'Christianisation and the dissemination of Christian teaching,' in P. Fouracre, *The new Cambridge medieval history, vol. 1: c.500–c.700*, Cambridge, 710–34.
- Yorke, B. (2007) 'The insular background to Boniface's continental career,' in F.J. Felten, J. Jarnut, L.E. von Padberg, *Bonifatius – Leben und Nachwirken. Die Gestaltung des christlichen Europas im Frühmittelalter*, Mainz, 23–37.
- Zeddies, N. (1995) 'Bonifatius und zwei nützliche Rebellen: die Häretiker Aldebert und Clemens,' in M.T. Fögen, *Ordnung und Aufruhr im Mittelalter: historische und juristische Studien zur Rebellion*, Frankfurt, 217–63.