

2013

# Res Voluntaria, Non Necessaria: The Conquest and Forced Conversion of the Saxons under Charlemagne

Alexander Scott Dessens

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*, [adesse2@lsu.edu](mailto:adesse2@lsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Dessens, Alexander Scott, "Res Voluntaria, Non Necessaria: The Conquest and Forced Conversion of the Saxons under Charlemagne" (2013). *LSU Master's Theses*. 1275.

[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses/1275](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/1275)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

*RES VOLUNTARIA, NON NECESSARIA*: THE CONQUEST AND FORCED CONVERSION  
OF THE SAXONS UNDER CHARLEMAGNE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by  
Alexander Dessens  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2010  
December 2013

© Copyright 2013  
Alexander Dessens  
All rights reserved

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION: A THING OF WILL?.....	1
THE SAXON WARS AND MISSIONARY IDEOLOGY IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP.....	9
THE OPENING PHASE OF THE SAXON WARS: CAMPAIGNS AND CONVERSIONS, 772-781.....	28
DESPERATE MEASURES: REBELLION, FRUSTRATION, AND THE ‘TERROR CAPITULARY,’ 782-785.....	42
THE END OF THE CONFLICT, 793-804.....	53
LEGACY AND CONCLUSION.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	64
VITA.....	69

## ABBREVIATIONS

MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
RAKF	<i>Annales Qui Dicuntur Einhardi</i>
AKF	<i>Annales Regni Francorum</i>
LA	<i>Annales Laureshamenses</i>
MC	<i>Chronicon Moissacense</i>
MA	<i>Annales Mosellani</i>

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Charlemagne's conquest of Saxony in the late eighth and early ninth centuries and the policies of forced conversion he espoused in his attempts to bring the peoples of these territories to the Christian religion. Often remarked upon is the Carolingian king's prescription of the death penalty for failure to be baptized, but this development was a logical consequence of contemporary ideology with regard to missionizing. I employ the letters of contemporaries, historical annals, and hagiographical sources to examine how the use of force in missionizing was viewed in this period, and I argue that with regard to Carolingian expansion and evangelization, forced conversion was not a major theological stumbling block. The letters of Alcuin of York are of special concern here because he appears at times to contradict this, yet as I demonstrate he, along with various popes and other prominent contemporary theologians, viewed Charlemagne's armies as convenient and effective vehicles by which to spread the Christian faith. The efficiency of military might outweighed any negative considerations. These arguments are made against the backdrop of the Saxon Wars, a conflict lasting decades in which Charlemagne's frustrations with the obstinacy of the Saxons further reduced the likelihood that peaceful means of evangelization would be considered.

## INTRODUCTION: A THING OF WILL?

In the year 775, it is recorded that Charlemagne made the fateful decision to “wage war on the perfidious and treaty-breaking people of the Saxons . . . until they had either been overcome and subjected to the Christian religion or totally exterminated.”<sup>1</sup> In either 782 or 785, the Carolingian ruler issued the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae*, an unprecedented series of legal directives which called for the deliberate and forcible conversion of the Saxon people to Christianity on pain of death.<sup>2</sup> The subjection and conversion of the Saxons is considered one of the king’s greatest achievements, and for the most part history has remembered him fondly for it. Charlemagne’s explicit linking of the spread of Christianity to the sword was met predominantly with praise and congratulation from his contemporaries, including the papacy and contemporary theologians with whom the king was in contact.

Alcuin of York can be considered an exception to this rule. A brilliant theologian himself, he was held in high esteem at Aachen, where he taught for fourteen years before retiring in 796 to become abbot of St. Martin’s at Tours. While Alcuin too offers a great deal of praise to his friend and patron the king, he is often cited in scholarly discussions of the Saxon Wars for his complaints about preachers imposing the tithe upon the newly converted. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill states that “a few voices only were raised in warning, Alcuin’s among them.”<sup>3</sup> Yet Alcuin’s grievances regarding tithes did not actually challenge the fact that Christianization under Charlemagne was largely predicated on conquest and the threat of force.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Annales Qui Dicuntur Einhardi,” ed. G.H. Pertz, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, I* (Hannover, 1826; reprint, 1963), 41: “. . . cum rex in villa Carisiaco hiemaret, consilium iniit, ut perfidam ac foedifragam Saxonum gentem bello adgrederetur, et eo usque perseveraret, dum aut victi christianae religioni subicerentur, aut omnino tollerentur,” and “Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks,” in P.D. King, *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Kendal, England: P.D. King, 1987), 110-111.

<sup>2</sup> “Capitulare Paderbrunnense,” ed. G.H.Pertz, *MGH, Leges, I* (Hannover, 1835; reprint 1963), 48, and “First Saxon Capitulary,” in King, *Translated Sources*, 205.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 183-84.

One can find what appear to be more serious objections in a rarely acknowledged letter from 796, addressed to Meginfrid, the royal chamberlain. In this letter Alcuin gives more expansive criticisms on tithes and predatory preachers, but also mentions the ideas of Augustine of Hippo regarding the proper manner in which to convert the uninitiated. Quoting Augustine's *De Catechizandis Rudibus (On Instructing the Uninitiated)*, Alcuin writes that "first the faith must be taught, then the sacrament of baptism undertaken, and finally the gospel precepts are to be related; if any one of these three is neglected, the listener's soul will not be able to achieve salvation."<sup>4</sup> More significantly, echoing the words of Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio (On Free Will)*, Alcuin then argues that just as Augustine said, "faith is a thing of will, not of necessity."<sup>5</sup> Alcuin continues, stating that "a man can be led into faith, not forced; he can be forced to baptism, but it will not help in faith."<sup>6</sup> This letter very clearly offers a real and fundamental challenge to missionizing with the sword, especially the mass baptisms which followed some of Charlemagne's early campaigns.

While forced conversion might strike modern readers as a questionable thing for the *rex christianissimus* to do, it would be a mistake to view these events through the lens of modern or "ideal" Christianity. The ability to justify actions and worldviews is an essential component of functioning societies, and one must acknowledge that throughout history similar events likely passed without criticism. Yet Alcuin's objections suggest that these events were potentially problematic by the standards of contemporary Frankish Christianity. Moreover, Wallace-Hadrill implies that criticism of Charlemagne's policies can be found outside of Alcuin's letters, though he does not offer notes to direct further research.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae," no. 111, ed. E. Dummler, in *MGH, Epp. II* (Hannover, 1892), 159-162: "*Primo fides docenda est; et sic baptismi percipienda sunt sacramenta; deinde evangelica praecepta tradenda sunt. At si aliquid horum trium deerit, salute animae suae auditor habere non poterit.*"

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: "*Fides quoque, sicut sanctus ait Augustinus, res est voluntaria, non necessaria.*"

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: "*Adtrahi poterit homo in fidem, non cogi. Cogi poterit ad baptismum, sed non proficit in fide . . .*"

This opens up a host of questions. To what extent were forced conversion and mass baptism issues in this period? Did others agree with Alcuin? How are missionary and military interactions with the Saxons and other non-Christians portrayed in the source material? How do Charlemagne's actions fit within the Frankish Christian culture of the Early Carolingian age? Were they radical and remarkable, or simply the next logical step in missionizing? How was the king's outlook on Christianization influenced by his goals for territorial expansion?

After much research, I have come to a number of conclusions. I would argue that Charlemagne's course of action with regard to the conquest and Christianization of the Saxon people, including the legislation of capital punishment, was neither radical nor controversial in the king's mind. Frankish Christianity was a brand adapted to the culture of the medieval warrior elite, a complex ideology which perpetuated itself through the successes of its subscribers. Warfare and piety were far from mutually exclusive, and it was understood that God, specifically the God of the Old Testament, intervened in war in a variety of ways. Local missionary tradition, continued by Charlemagne himself, offered aggressive means of coercion as examples worthy of emulation. Changes in ideas about clerical celibacy, and in practices such as infant baptism and especially oblation, indicate that freedom of choice was becoming more limited even among those already Christianized. The king's intense insistence on correct belief, proper liturgical practices, and adherence to ecclesiastical rules, such as that of Benedict of Nursia for monastic life, provides further evidence of this.

Charlemagne's initial invasion of Saxony was not undertaken for primarily religious reasons, though once the Saxons had been subjugated attempts at converting them were inevitable. Christianity was tied to the Frankish Empire in such a way that baptism was a necessary sign of political submission, while the churches and monasteries so often attacked by

Saxons were the foremost symbols of Frankish oppression and overlordship. The Saxons and other non-Christians are continuously portrayed as obstinate and perfidious peoples beneath contempt, further justifying the brutally repressive measures utilized. Their persistence in what was perceived by the Franks as rebelliousness and idolatry would have convinced the king that a firmer hand was needed.

Charlemagne believed that it was his duty as a Christian ruler to bring the Saxons and other polytheists to heel in addition to correcting the faith of his Frankish subjects. Conversion would ensure salvation for these peoples and the king himself, whose stock would rise in the eyes of God for having spread the faith. The king's manifold victories and the material wealth they brought, as well as the miracles which attended his army and destroyed his enemies, were seen as divine nods of approval. The consistent praise and encouragement the king received from those he protected and patronized, such as Popes Hadrian and Leo III, Einhard, and Alcuin, would have reinforced this worldview. Even if these men did find fault with some aspect of the king's policies, their dependence on and loyalty to Charlemagne would have made them reticent to give voice to their complaints.

I have found that Alcuin's is the only voice to question Charlemagne which survives to us, and his hesitation in doing so is evident. His complaints did not come until 796, twenty-four years after the start of the Saxon Wars and fourteen years since he had first arrived in Aachen. Prompted by the submission of the Avars along the Danube east of Bavaria (referred to in the sources as Huns), Alcuin wanted to avoid the mistakes he believed responsible for the missionary failures in Saxony. He spoke out against mass baptism and tithes, and these words seem to have been heeded to some extent. Yet even he never challenged an underlying issue, wherein the physical presence or the threat of Charlemagne's armies led Saxons to view

conversion as the means to ensure their safety and well-being. Alcuin offered advice with the understanding that potential converts would listen because they feared Charlemagne's military might, and from his perspective this was more an opportunity than an evil.

The ultimate success of Charlemagne and his dynasty in Christianizing Saxony meant that the king would be viewed in a favorable light by successive generations of Saxons raised in the new religion. From the perspective of those Saxons writing later, who had been raised as Christians, what the king had done was ensure the eternal salvation of their people. They recognized the misguided obstinacy of their ancestors and praised Charlemagne for his willingness to see the deed through. Thus, to them just as to most of Charlemagne's contemporaries, the ends justified the means.

There are many primary sources available through which I will prove these arguments. Accounts of Charlemagne's extensive reign, from his coronation in 768 to his death by natural causes in 814, are related in the many surviving historical annals of the period. These include the *Annales Regni Francorum (AKF)*, a revised and expanded edition of this same text in the *Annales Qui Dicuntur Einhardi (RAKF)*, the *Annales Laureshamenses (LA)*, the *Chronicon Moissiacense (MC)*, and the *Annales Mosellani (MA)*. The *RAKF* differ from the original noticeably in their relation of events from 741-801, but from 802-812 changes are minimal. At times these revisions can suggest intriguing motivations, and these instances will be noted as they appear.

The authors of these texts are unknown, and they are the product of many hands over many years besides. They cover slightly different periods with a large amount of overlap, yet sometimes one source mentions an event not found in another, or provides a slightly different perspective. For the most part, however, these annals describe the same events, and were written

by men of similar, likely monastic, educational backgrounds. Thus, they tend to relate these events in similar terms. While Einhard, Charlemagne's loyal courtier, is sometimes credited with the revision of the Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks, this assertion remains a matter of contention.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while they exist in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH) under the heading *Annales Qui Dicuntur Einhardi*, I will abstain from presuming that he authored these documents and cite these annals simply as *RAKF*. These revisions took place after Charlemagne's death, early in the reign of Louis the Pious, and hints of hindsight are more often present in the *RAKF* than in other annalistic sources. They also contain much information which does not appear in other annals, while also omitting occasionally descriptions found in the original *AKF* on which they were based. Thus as the single most extensive source on the historical events of Charlemagne's reign, it is primarily these Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks which I will cite from here, using the *AKF* as necessary to relate omitted events of import.

Two notable prose biographies of Charlemagne survive, one by Einhard, and another by Notker the Stammerer, a monk of St. Gall. Both were written after the king's death. There are also hagiographical sources from the later eighth and ninth centuries which survive to us, such as the *Vita Bonifatii* (*Auctore Willibaldo*), *Vita Willibrordi*, *Vita Sturmi*, *Vita Liudgeri*, and the *Vita Lebuini Antiqua*. The men described in these biographies were missionaries in the lands of the Saxons and the Frisians, and thus the texts portray meetings between Christians and pagans as well as ways of thinking about conversion. Most of these were written many decades after the death of their subjects, by men who were often relatives, and as such are arguably more useful as

---

<sup>7</sup> King, *Translated Sources*, 18.

windows into the worlds of the authors.<sup>8</sup> As such, I will use them primarily as records of missionary traditions, preserved as examples worthy of emulation.

In terms of non-narrative sources we have records of royal legal decrees known as ‘capitularies,’ so called because they were divided into sections known as *capitula*, from the Latin *caput*, meaning “head.”<sup>9</sup> Hundreds of letters also survive. Correspondence between the Papacy and the Carolingian rulers was deliberately preserved by Charlemagne’s order in the *Codex Carolinus*. 54 of the 98 complete letters within date from Charlemagne’s reign, with the remainder concerning Pippin III and Charles Martel. Another 311 letters are grouped in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* under the heading *Alcuini sive Albini Epistolae*, although many of the letters within were not penned by Alcuin. I will also cite a single letter, written by the Abbot Eanwulf, from an *MGH* collection entitled *Epistolae Variorum Carolo Magno Regnante Scriptae*. As these letters are neither ordered chronologically nor dated in the manuscripts, the editors of the aforementioned compilations, W. Gundlach and E. Dümmler, have offered their opinions on the matter with varying degrees of precision. P.D. King, drawing on the work of O. Bertolini, has amended the dates assigned by these editors when appropriate, and it is King’s estimates I will draw on here.<sup>10</sup>

Though many of these sources are unavoidably biased in favor of the Carolingians, most at least capture a contemporary spirit meriting attention.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of those in the *RAKF*, the yearly entries in the historical annals were in many cases written soon after the events described. With proper care and corroboration, a great deal can be gleaned from these documents. For these sources I have consulted both the Latin texts present in the *Monumenta*

---

<sup>8</sup> Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), 12, 91.

<sup>9</sup> King, *Translated Sources*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-20.

*Germaniae Historica* as well as English translations, such as those of P.D. King in his collection entitled *Charlemagne: Translated Sources*. Almost all of the translations used here are my own, and those I have borrowed will be cited appropriately.

## THE SAXON WARS AND MISSIONARY IDEOLOGY IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

There is an enormous wealth of modern works available on the Carolingian age and the reign of Charlemagne. Much of this is very well done, but I have found most texts to be helpful in my current task only to a certain extent, in that these works provide a great deal of useful information but no definitive answers to my queries. Below I will facilitate my survey of the treatment given by modern scholars to the Saxon Wars and forced conversion in the Early Middle Ages by dividing my discussion into two broader headings. The first of these will cover in general terms those works and authors which deal with these topics only briefly, while the second will analyze in greater detail the work of those scholars who have more to offer the present study.

Typically, discussions of the Saxon Wars are condensed to a handful of pages alongside the king's other numerous conquests, with a focus on the political implications of territorial expansion. These narratives of the events in Saxony concentrate on various key moments as demonstrative of the conflict as a whole, such as the issuance of the capitulary of 782/5 and the resurgence of rebellion in 793 after eight years of peace. Remarks concerning Alcuin's input, when present, are typically restricted to a sentence or two. As noted above, these with very few exceptions only reference his complaints regarding tithes, while the objections presented in his letter to Meginfrid are ignored.<sup>12</sup>

In those works which deal with the Carolingian dynasty and the Frankish Empire in broad terms, such as those written by Rosamond McKitterick, Pierre Riché, or F.L. Ganshof, among

---

<sup>12</sup> F.L. Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 21, and Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751-987* (London: Longman Group, 1983), 62, and Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 254, and Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 105, and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 183-84, *et al.*

others, this brevity is perhaps to be expected. A highly detailed year by year account of Charlemagne's campaigns in Saxony and the religious aspects of the ideology behind them, such as I would have desired, are hardly essential to the overall goals of these projects. Yet authors who focus only on the reign of Charlemagne tend also to follow this pattern. I believe this is reflective of a trend in Carolingian scholarship on the matter, wherein deep discussions of the religious and political motivations for the king's conquest and Christianization of Saxony are foregone in favor of a much more compact explanation.

I base this interpretation on the fact that these brief overviews are inevitably accompanied by the assertion that the conquest of the Saxons was a necessity, as was their conversion, for they could not be integrated politically and culturally into the Frankish realm until they shared the Christian religion. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill states in his work *The Frankish Church* that, in the eyes of the Franks, "no pacification of hostile peoples seemed possible until those peoples spoke the same religious language and accepted the moralities of dealings as between Christians."<sup>13</sup> Cosambeys and his co-authors likewise assert in *The Carolingian World* that the Saxons' oaths of submission would be "insecure" until they were Christianized, though it must be noted that these authors offer more than most to supplement this explanation.<sup>14</sup> F.L. Ganshof writes that Charlemagne understood both that "conquest was a necessity," and that it was "the only way to gain North Germany to the Christian religion."<sup>15</sup> In his article "Heresy and Empire," on the role of the Adoptionist heresy in Charlemagne's invasion of the Spanish March, Cullen J. Chandler argues that these views should be applied to Adoptionist Spain as well as Saxony.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 183.

<sup>14</sup> Marios Cosambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Cullen J. Chandler, "Heresy and Empire: The Role of the Adoptionist Controversy in Charlemagne's Conquest of the Spanish March," *The International History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Sep., 2002): 507.

It is also frequently stated that missionizing and conquest in the Carolingian age went “hand in hand.” McKitterick, Wallace-Hadrill, Wood, Chandler, and Richard E. Sullivan all use these exact words to describe the relationship between the two, and McKitterick gives credit to H. Büttner for demonstrating this connection.<sup>17</sup> Roger Collins writes in *Charlemagne* that the “very existence” of the Frankish church in Saxony “depended on the threat of force that lay behind it.”<sup>18</sup>

While I agree with these assessments, they do not fully answer my questions, nor do they necessarily make mass baptism and capital punishment for noncompliance the inevitable consequences of a Frankish campaign. Rather, it seems to me that the apparent simplicity of such summarizations serves more to lead readers away from further investigation of the matter. Why Charlemagne wanted to convert the Saxons is established, as is the fact that his armies facilitated this effort. Yet any discussion of the complex ideology operating behind the methods by which this conversion was to take place is mostly dispensed with in favor of these maxims. That they *are* true is less important to me than *why* they are true.

It is not to say that these authors are worthy of criticism; after all, much of the historian’s craft entails condensing information into a more easily digestible form. Though these expedient explanations may not have served my own aims with the same efficacy, decades of experience have given these authors a knowledge of source material from which I have benefited greatly. With that said, there are a few authors who have dealt more directly with issues of conversion and missionizing in this period, and they must be discussed at length by virtue of their greater impact on the present study.

---

<sup>17</sup> Chandler, “Heresy and Empire,” 507, and McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, 61, and Richard E. Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” *Speculum* 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1953): 733, and Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 183, and Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 53.

In his work *The Missionary Life*, Ian Wood gives an excellent overview of the evangelization of Europe in the early Middle Ages. He surveys missionary activity in regions such as Saxony and Frisia through the lens of hagiographical sources, using saints' lives and correspondence to trace a web of connections between churches, monastic houses, and preachers on the periphery of Christianized lands. As the author of the *Vita Willibrordi* and a commentator on contemporary missionary practice, Alcuin of York is also featured in this discourse. Because he treats the Saxon Wars and the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae* from the perspective of the missionary, Wood has much of relevance to say and will be returned to at various points.

Yitzhak Hen, in his article entitled "Charlemagne's Jihad," argues that the impetus for the 'terror capitulary' came from Theodulf of Orleans and his time spent in Muslim Spain.<sup>19</sup> He rejects the shared opinions of most modern Carolingian scholars that this capitulary was issued in 782 or 785, and instead envisions an entirely different timeline in which the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae* was issued as late as 795.<sup>20</sup> In pushing this date back, Hen is constructing a historical scenario in which the role Theodulf of Orleans played in the drafting of this capitulary can be emphasized. Theodulf was probably born in Zaragoza, and was a member of a Christian community in lands controlled by Muslims; thus, Hen argues, he was familiar with the concept of *jihad*.<sup>21</sup> Alcuin was visiting Northumbria from 790 to the summer of 793, and Hen believes that in his absence Theodulf's familiarity with forced conversion and religious militancy in the Islamic world influenced Charlemagne's policies, resulting in the 'terror capitulary.'<sup>22</sup>

In support of his theory that the capitulary was not issued in the 780's Hen cites Alcuin's failure to criticize Charlemagne in a letter from 789, claiming that at that time forced conversion

---

<sup>19</sup> Yitzhak Hen, "Charlemagne's Jihad," *Viator* 37 (2006): 47-49.

<sup>20</sup> Hen, "Charlemagne's Jihad," 39-40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

“was not something Alcuin had heard about.”<sup>23</sup> He does not take into account the fact that Alcuin was writing during a period of relative quiet in Saxony, when it appeared that the provisions of the ‘terror capitulary’ had succeeded in bringing the Saxons to Christianity. He assumes that a person such as Alcuin could not change his mind over the course of decades, and despite his claims his dates are far more tenuous than those he rejects. Conversion had long been associated with conquest in the Frankish world, and I do not believe that one must journey all the way to Muslim Spain to find such ideas.

Richard E. Sullivan is also noteworthy for discussing conversion under the Carolingians in a different light. I will cite here two articles, published in the 1950’s, in which he deals specifically with Carolingian evangelization and missionary theory. In “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” he discusses the “armory of weapons” available to missionaries in an attempt to demonstrate that military force was not the only means of converting polytheists.<sup>24</sup> This article embraces the Carolingian age as a whole, though the reign of Charlemagne is given a fair amount of attention. One of these means, the desecration and destruction of sites and temples sacred to the polytheists, will be discussed at length following my treatment of the opening years of the Saxon Wars.

Sullivan states that preaching was “not sufficient in itself” as a method, for polytheists were “only slightly impressed by argument alone.”<sup>25</sup> “No matter how great a preacher” a Carolingian missionary might have been, Sullivan continues, “he had to use additional arguments and inducements to win over the pagans.”<sup>26</sup> The most effective of these “inducements” was

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” 734.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 720.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

material wealth, made accessible by the Frankish State.<sup>27</sup> “The pagan,” he argues, “by virtue of his religious tradition, was particularly susceptible to this appeal. He was a creature who thought of religion in terms of earthly rewards; his respect for a deity seems often to have been based on how much material benefit could be derived from the worship of that god.”<sup>28</sup> This reward could come either directly in the form of a gift, or implicitly in the knowledge that a good relationship with the Frankish ruler would help one economically.

Sullivan’s downplaying of the role of force in converting polytheists does not seem to have garnered much attention from other scholars, however, as I have not seen this argument made elsewhere. I am also wary of his characterization of the ‘pagan,’ considering that we know very little about particular brands of polytheism in this period, for our Christian sources were not overly interested in the intricacies of faiths they disdained as idolatrous.<sup>29</sup> Further, Sullivan in the end is still forced to recognize that non-Christians feared that resistance to Christianity would eventually bring down upon them the military might of the Franks.<sup>30</sup> Economic opportunities for Saxons who were willing to accept the faith came at the expense of those who were not, as cooperative Saxon nobles rose to power and wealth in the ruins of the political order Charlemagne’s campaigns had destroyed.<sup>31</sup> The threat of violent reprisal and potential ruin loomed perpetually behind the preacher as the alternative to accepting the proposal of the missionary promising rewards.

In the second of these articles, entitled “Carolingian Missionary Theories,” Sullivan deals with theoretical methods of conversion as proposed in eighth and ninth-century hagiographical sources and letters. Again he is attempting to shed light on alternatives to coercion in converting

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 722.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Cosambeys, *The Carolingian World*, 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” 734.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 722.

polytheists, and, in a similar fashion, only portions of this article focus on the reign of Charlemagne. For the Carolingian age in general, he argues that “missionary work was not, at least in theory, merely a matter of brutally compelling pagans to accept the new religion.”<sup>32</sup> He gives many examples of ecclesiastics counseling approaches to evangelization outside of fear and violence, but as his article progresses, a host of disclaimers makes clear the necessity of the qualifying phrase “in theory.”

Sullivan claims that while attention was given to the question of the education of polytheists on Christian doctrine, specific ideas about what exactly should be taught only became important after what he terms the “debacle in Saxony” had prompted missionaries to truly consider how best to instruct the uninitiated.<sup>33</sup> Alcuin’s reference in his letters to Augustine’s *De Catechizandis Rudibus* is one of the first examples of this. Prior to this, Sullivan continues, those writing on missionary procedure “assumed that missionaries knew what to teach to unbaptized pagans.”<sup>34</sup>

Hagiographical sources depict saints as being “so learned in theology that there were few who could add anything to their knowledge,” and thus there was “little use in trying to instruct them on what they should teach pagans.”<sup>35</sup> Here Sullivan is arguing that the heroicization of past missionaries actually hindered the development of a realistic curriculum for evangelizing polytheists. In a similar vein, he also writes that “the concept of peaceful persuasion by argumentation on religious grounds was usually presented only in very broad terms.”<sup>36</sup> The only specific idea that Sullivan has distinguished among writings on Anglo-Saxon missionaries was

---

<sup>32</sup> Richard E. Sullivan, “Carolingian Missionary Theories,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 42, No. 3 (Oct., 1956): 295.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Sullivan, “Carolingian Missionary Theories,” 274.

the conviction that “Scripture was the basic source for the ideas that were fitted for pagan instruction.”<sup>37</sup> He concludes from this finding that a skilled missionary was simply presumed to be capable of “extract[ing] from Scripture the kind of material that was fitted for the pagan mentality prior to baptism.”<sup>38</sup>

As for Alcuin, we have seen him refer to Augustine of Hippo’s *De Catechizandis Rudibus* as a guide for instructional procedures. Yet Sullivan feels that this is potentially confusing, considering that this work was “not intended to serve as a guide for teaching catechumens through the whole period of instruction that would conclude with baptism.”<sup>39</sup> Augustine was writing for “an audience that had some education,” a description which could hardly be applied to Alcuin’s prospective pupils.<sup>40</sup> What Sullivan believes Alcuin appreciated in Augustine’s work is that it concentrated on the bare essentials of Christian doctrine. Especially relevant to my own argument, Sullivan states that Alcuin’s advice for proper teaching before baptism only came into play once the Saxons claimed they were prepared to accept the faith; how they arrived at that point was not his concern.<sup>41</sup>

Sullivan argues that the aspect of missionary practice in which the greatest effort was invested was in instilling correct rites, practices, and discipline. As he puts it, this theme was “so ever-present in missionary discussions that one is forced to conclude that the Carolingian age was far more concerned with the outward behavior of new Christians than with their appreciation of the subtleties of Christian doctrine.”<sup>42</sup> Though Sullivan for some reason does not make this connection, this information fits perfectly with Charlemagne’s program of *correctio* within the

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 280-81.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 282

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 289.

church of the empire. The king strove to ensure the proper and uniform observation of rites and liturgical procedures throughout his lands, and evidence suggests that the same ideology which informed perspectives on the recently converted in new territories such as Saxony lay behind views on the established Frankish clergy. It also explains why the decrees of *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae*, which could only force the physical act of baptism and not the spirit behind it, were considered appropriate for the situation.

As with his first article, Sullivan makes many concessions alongside his assertions. He admits at the outset that “most Carolingians, prompted by a strong conviction that the spread of Christianity was divinely ordained and by a hatred of paganism, felt that pagans could rightly be coerced into accepting Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> A potential reason why missionaries neglected to write in earnest on methods of persuading polytheists from their religion by argumentation is that in practice they were rarely forced to do so.<sup>44</sup> Missionizing in this period often took place in regions close in proximity to Christian lands, and these regions were also prime targets for raiding and programs of territorial expansion. In these cases Carolingian conquerors, Charlemagne especially, seem to have made persuasion a non-issue.

Sullivan concludes with the observation that while the notions expressed by theorists were probably “never applied fully in the conduct of missionary work,” the recurrence of many ideas about ‘good’ missionary practice means that at least some men recognized that there was more to conversion than baptism and outward conformity.<sup>45</sup> This lends some legitimacy to my initial hesitancy to accept that Alcuin was alone in advising caution by allowing for the possibility that others might have compared methods of conversion in Saxony to these recurrent

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 273-74.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 295.

ideas. It also suggests that while an ideal means to convert polytheists may have existed, circumstance somehow prevented or rendered unnecessary its application.

With regard to Carolingian missionizing, Sullivan's articles do one thing admirably: they show the difficulty inherent in separating contemporary theories on Christianization from the fear and violence associated with the Frankish regime. Sullivan does not discuss the notion of political 'necessity' with regard to the conversion of the Saxons adhered to by so many of the modern scholars writing after him. While in general I find his attempts to downplay violence in missionizing to be unconvincing, it is important nonetheless to note that other avenues of thought have been considered.

There is one final author to be acknowledged for his noteworthy observations on the connections between force and Christianity in this period. Lawrence Duggan's article, published in James Muldoon's *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, is entitled "'For Force is Not of God'? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne."<sup>46</sup> Recognizing the importance of the *Capitulario de Partibus Saxoniae*, Duggan takes his cue from the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who sought to explain the "long descent from the manifestly pacifistic teachings of Christ to the war-addicted Christian Europe of Pope Julius II."<sup>47</sup> As Erasmus wrote in his 1515 *Adage* "Dulce bellum inexpertis," so does Duggan argue; that "every bad thing either finds its way into human life by imperceptible degrees, or else insinuates itself under the pretext of the good."<sup>48</sup>

Duggan believes that force and faith gradually became more intertwined over the course of history, and thus Charlemagne does not "deserve all the credit" for linking warfare,

---

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Duggan, "'For Force is Not of God'? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne," in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. by James Muldoon (University of Florida Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Duggan, "'For Force is Not of God?'," 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

conversion, and capital punishment.<sup>49</sup> I do not fully agree with Duggan’s idea that the development he describes is chronological in nature, as this seems to imply a misleading sense of inevitability. It seems to me more likely that religious traditions are adapted to complement cultural needs and values, and specific facets of those traditions are emphasized over others depending on circumstance.

The events of the Saxon Wars make it appear, as Duggan puts it, that there is an “appalling contrast between the tolerant ways of God and the intolerant ways of His creatures.”<sup>50</sup> However, he observes that even God is not above “applying a certain amount of pressure” in order to help humans to see the light.<sup>51</sup> Monotheism is by its very nature intolerant, as those potentially fit for salvation are usually set apart by their faith in its teachings, teachings which often encourage proselytizing. The existence of hell as the inescapable punishment for nonbelievers, regardless of merit or virtue, is a testament to the prejudice of the Judeo-Christian God. These are not descriptions of direct “force,” per se, but of a lure, a threat, and an attempt to limit choice; “just as freedom is not absolute, force is not without gradation.”<sup>52</sup>

Duggan quotes Roland Bainton’s observation that “as the *one* true God, Yahweh inevitably was both bestower of peace *and* the author of war.”<sup>53</sup> In the Old Testament, God “led His people in righteous wars” in which even priests fought.<sup>54</sup> To this statement I must add that God’s role on the battlefield is frequently evidenced in Frankish sources, as will be demonstrated shortly. In addition to discussing biblical traditions, Duggan sketches a timeline of key events from the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great to Charlemagne, all in a mere ten pages. The

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

terseness demanded by this grand agenda often leaves one wanting more, but also provides numerous avenues for further research. I will take this opportunity to elaborate upon a few of the relevant persons and traditions Duggan touches on only briefly.

Duggan notes that the historical, rather than biblical, conversions of the Emperor Constantine and King Clovis of the Franks connected Christianity in a positive way with “the ultimate realm of force, the battlefield.”<sup>55</sup> The story of the sign Constantine saw before the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, and the heavenly voice which accompanied it promising victory under that sign, is well known. Clovis’s turn to Christianity almost two centuries later, in 496, takes this connection to another level, as it reportedly took place during a battle with the Alemanni which he was already losing. With his gods apparently having failed him, Clovis turns to the Christian God worshipped by his wife, who turns the tide of the battle and grants him victory over his enemies.

After the battle Clovis was baptized by the bishop Remegius, but Gregory of Tours writes in his *Historia Francorum* that Clovis expressed worry as to whether his men would be willing to do the same. Clovis said that those who followed him would not “suffer to relinquish their gods,” but that he would try to convince them.<sup>56</sup> Here Clovis is not making his men convert, but using words to sway them. It is intriguing that Gregory of Tours, writing later in the sixth century, chose to describe in this way the conversion of the first king of all the Frankish tribes. Luckily, the power of God had preceded Clovis to make the king’s followers amenable, and they joyfully agreed to “drive away” their former gods and join him in his new faith.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 53, 55.

<sup>56</sup> “Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X,” ed. B. Krusch, in *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, I* (Hannover, 1937), 76-77: “At [Clovis] ait: ‘libenter te, sanctissime pater, audiebam; sed restat unum, quod populus, qui me sequitur, non patitur relinquere deus suos; sed vado et loquor eis iuxta verbum tuum.’”

<sup>57</sup> “Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X,” 76-77: “Conveniensi autem cum suis, priusquam ille loqueretur, praecurrente potentia Dei, omnes populous partier adclamavit: ‘mortalis deus abigimus, pie rex, et Deum quem Remigius praedicat immortalem sequi parati sumus.’”

These conversions, especially that of Clovis, are relevant for a number of reasons. There are explicit connections made between these men in our sources, and with Charlemagne as well. As Clovis approached the baptismal font, Gregory refers to him as a “new Constantine.”<sup>58</sup> Writing to Charlemagne in 778, Pope Hadrian likewise states that in Charlemagne “a new Constantine, the most Christian emperor of God, has arisen for these times.”<sup>59</sup> While Pope Hadrian is writing twenty-two years before Charlemagne’s imperial coronation, Charlemagne would become in the year 800 *imperator et augustus* as well as King of the Franks, possessing the titles held by both Constantine and Clovis.

In stating that changes had taken place between the fourth and eighth centuries within Christian practices, further limiting choice, Duggan mentions as examples such practices as infant baptism, clerical celibacy, and oblation.<sup>60</sup> While the crucial sacrament of baptism was traditionally undergone late in life so as to more efficiently utilize one’s only opportunity to truly cleanse the soul, it became customary to baptize infants soon after birth. Many infants died at a young age, and this shift was likely designed to ensure their salvation in the event of their premature demise. Yet this would in effect have nullified the exercise of *catechesis*, the probationary education necessary to understand Christian doctrine and practice, which converts had thereto been required to undergo before baptism. *Catechumeni*, essentially Christians in training, had theoretically made their own choices regarding their faith and would only have undergone this education if they truly desired to; infants were obviously incapable of making such a decision.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 77: “*Procedit novos constantinus ad lavacrum . . .*”

<sup>59</sup> “Codex Carolinus,” no. 60, ed. W. Gundlach, in *MGH, Epp.*, I (Hannover, 1892), 587: “. . . *ecce novus christianissimus Dei Constantinus imperator his temporibus surrexit . . .*”

<sup>60</sup> Duggan, “‘For Force is Not of God?’,” 54.

As for clerical celibacy, a few clauses of Charlemagne's *Admonitio Generalis* of 789 make it clear that the sexual appetites of ecclesiastics were a problem the king took steps to address. All members of the clergy were "forbidden to have a woman in their house except for their mother or sister, so as to avoid suspicion."<sup>61</sup> They were also not allowed to "sin against nature with animals or males," and were to be punished harshly for this transgression.<sup>62</sup> Numerous other clauses exhort churchmen to follow the rules of their orders, which would have already contained restrictions on sexual relations.

Finally, I have done much research on the history of oblation, as I believe it to be the most significant of these three practices. Through oblation children were given to monasteries by their parents' decision, and thus without their consent, to be raised under the rule. The biblical precedent for this practice can be found in the Book of Samuel, in which Hannah donates her young son Samuel, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, to the temple for "as long as he lives."<sup>63</sup> The Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), which was unique in that it prevented oblates from leaving the cloister once donated, was promoted in the eighth and ninth centuries as a standard to replace the plurality of monastic rules which had been used in the early Middle Ages.<sup>64</sup> In 802, Charlemagne held a synod in his palace at Aachen where he ordered that all monks live in accordance with the *Regula Benedicti*.<sup>65</sup>

Patricia Quinn states that early monastic rules did not provide for the acceptance of children, and their presence was generally frowned upon as detrimental to the aims of the monastic lifestyle, though it is clear from our sources that children did at times exist in monastic

---

<sup>61</sup> "Admonitio Generalis," ed. B. Krusch, in *MGH, Leges, I*, 54: "... interdictum est presbyteris et diaconibus vel omnibus qui in clero sunt mulierem habere in domo sua propter suspicionem, nisi matrem aut sororem vel eas tantum personas quae suspiciones effugiunt."

<sup>62</sup> "Admonitio Generalis," 57: "In concilio Acyrnonense inventum est in eos qui cum quadrupedibus vel masculis contra naturam peccant: dura et districta penitentia."

<sup>63</sup> 1 Samuel 1: 24-28 (New American Bible Revised Edition).

<sup>64</sup> Riché, *The Carolingians*, 77.

<sup>65</sup> "Annales Laureshamenses," ed. G.H. Pertz, in *MGH, Scriptores, I* (Hannover, 1826), 38-39.

communities.<sup>66</sup> From the fourth century onward, however, young boys came to be accepted as potentially excellent monks, for their virtuous and studious upbringing would presumably foster great piety and erudition. Mayke De Jong and Marilyn Dunn credit Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) with the first formal provisions made for the acceptance and management of children in the cloister, guidelines which would later influence the rule of Benedict of Nursia.<sup>67</sup>

Yet Basil did not hold the donations of children to be permanent, as he argued that children could not make reasoned decisions on such momentous matters, citing the age of sixteen or seventeen as appropriate for vows of chastity for girls; “. . . it is not proper to consider children’s words entirely final in such matters,” he states.<sup>68</sup> Dunn makes it clear that she sees Basil as anxious to ensure that children be left to join the ranks of the monks on their own and “without coercion.”<sup>69</sup>

Both Quinn and Dunn stress the influence of Basil’s instructions regarding children on Benedict’s thought,<sup>70</sup> yet while Basil merely called for witnesses to be present at the child’s joining, Benedict gives precise instruction for an oblation ritual: “If a member of the nobility offers his son to God in the monastery, and the boy himself is too young, the parents draw up the document mentioned above; then, at the presentation of the gifts, they wrap the document itself and the boy’s hand in the altar cloth. That is how they offer him.”<sup>71</sup> Benedict’s ritual has strong Eucharistic overtones, as De Jong observes, “firmly situating [the offering] in the sacrificial

---

<sup>66</sup> Patricia Quinn, *Better Than the Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), 16-17.

<sup>67</sup> Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 40-41, and Mayke De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Lieden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1996.), 18-19.

<sup>68</sup> De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 19, Quinn, *Better Than the Sons of Kings*, 19-24, and Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 103.

<sup>69</sup> Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 41, 103.

<sup>70</sup> Quinn, *Better Than the Sons of Kings*, 26-27, and Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 103.

<sup>71</sup> *Regula Benedicti*, c. 59, 1-2, in *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 271-273: “*Si quis forte de nobilibus offerit filium suum Deo in monasterio, si ipse puer minor aetate est, parentes eius faciant petitionem quam supra dicimus et cum oblatione ipsam petitionem et manum pueri involvant in palla altaris, et sic eum offerant.*”

context of the mass.”<sup>72</sup> The sources present the oblates as living gifts to god, and as holocausta.<sup>73</sup> The society in question viewed gift-giving as a central strategy for cultivating relationships, both secular and supernatural, and De Jong argues that such a gift had to be considered irrevocable “precisely because it was a sacrifice.”<sup>74</sup> The child is equated with the Eucharistic offerings, likewise sanctified upon touching the altar; to rescind the donation would be akin to sacrilege.<sup>75</sup> Both De Jong and Dunn note that none of the authors of later rules, though undoubtedly influenced by Benedict, chose to include such a ritual.<sup>76</sup> They also posit that its novelty and somewhat radical nature may have lent to its initial unpopularity.<sup>77</sup>

Though Benedict is credited with making this donation permanent, I have found that he makes no definitive statement on the matter.<sup>78</sup> However, Benedict did direct that donating parents promise to deny the child his inheritance, potentially by giving it to the monastery as well, a practice which grew into a customary gift supplied upon the oblate’s acceptance.<sup>79</sup> Thus it can be argued that the intention is the same. To Dunn, this is evidence of an attempt by Benedict to close a “loophole” that allowed or encouraged runaways, as part of his broader vision that all monastic vows be permanent.<sup>80</sup>

De Jong also stresses repeatedly the influence of the Old Testament and *lex divina* on this practice and on Carolingian society, as they “permeated ninth-century law and liturgy as yeast pervades bread.”<sup>81</sup> She explains this connection as a result of a “fundamental similarity between

---

<sup>72</sup> De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 24.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 228.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 103, and De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Regula Benedicti*, c. 59, 1-7.

<sup>79</sup> Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 122-3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 8.

early medieval religiosity and its Old Testament counterpart.”<sup>82</sup> Carolingian views were not entirely derivative, and *optimates* actively interpreted certain aspects of ancient tradition which fit their conception of the Frankish Empire as a New Israel. De Jong argues that “basic features of Frankish society were mirrored in the Old Testament,” as “kings and their subjects were held responsible by a vengeful and demanding deity in both the old Israel and the new.”<sup>83</sup> Perhaps more than flattery, Charlemagne’s nickname at court was David, as is evidenced by many letters from Alcuin and others in his circle who also had biblical and classical sobriquets.

I will close this aside with the tale of Gottschalk of Orbais (d. 870), perhaps the most famous case of oblation gone awry, who was donated to the monastery of Fulda sometime just before Charlemagne’s death.<sup>84</sup> Shortly after 822 Gottschalk made his profession and was tonsured, but he would later claim that this was done against his will, and that he wished to leave the monastic life.<sup>85</sup> He demanded restoration of his liberty and property, and by 829 the matter was contentious enough to warrant the calling of a synod in Mainz.<sup>86</sup> Gottschalk argued for his freedom on the grounds that he was forcibly tonsured, and, as a member of a noble Saxon family, he also used Saxon law to his advantage. He claimed that only members of the Frankish tribe had been present at his oblation, and that without Saxon witnesses his donation was invalid.<sup>87</sup>

His complaints under secular law seem to have garnered some attention, and Gottschalk was eventually allowed to leave Fulda. Nevertheless he was forced to remain a monk, and his demand for the return of the entry gift which had comprised his inheritance was denied, after which he wandered for a time. This earned him the ignominious title of a wandering monk,

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 80.

*monachus gyrovagus*.<sup>88</sup> Gottschalk eventually continued his clerical career, but his complaints had provoked an ardent animosity in his former abbot Hrabanus Maurus, a man who would plague him for the rest of his life.<sup>89</sup> When Gottschalk espoused esoteric views on predestination, Hrabanus attacked his interpretations and prompted two councils in 848 and 849, at Mainz and Soissons respectively. Gottschalk argued his case confidently, secure in his belief that his views, derived from the writings of Augustine of Hippo, were correct. Nevertheless, his teachings were condemned, and he was flogged publicly and forced to burn his writings before spending the remaining twenty years of his life “in captivity” at the monastery of Hautvillers.<sup>90</sup>

As has been established, the act of oblation constituted the commitment of young men and women to religious life without their consent, and under Charlemagne this donation effectively became permanent. Gottschalk is a fascinating example of the potential consequences. I hope to have made clear, with Duggan’s aid, that there are various ways in which force can be perceived, as these are not necessarily examples of violent action, but of limiting choice, done with the intention of promoting Christianity. Just as forcing Saxons to the baptismal font was not viewed askance by most, neither was it considered problematic for children to be forced into religious life with little hope of ever leaving. David Knowles asserts that the permanent nature of oblation was in “perfect accord with the outlook of the time,” and in a sense the same can be said about the program of conversion which followed military conquest.<sup>91</sup>

With some understanding of Frankish religious culture as provided by those modern works I have found instructive, I will now turn to my own research on the Saxon conflict. What

---

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-88.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>91</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: a History of Its Development from the Times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 943-1216* (Cambridge University Press, 1941), 417-18.

follows is a comprehensive treatment of the events of the Saxon Wars such as I have not found elsewhere, supplemented with contemporary correspondence and a discussion of missionary traditions brought to light in the course of this endeavor.

## THE OPENING PHASE OF THE SAXON WARS: CAMPAIGNS AND CONVERSIONS, 772-781

Charlemagne's first foray into Saxony took place in 772, in the first year of his exclusive kingship of Francia, as his brother and co-ruler Carloman had died in the previous year. There had long been timid attempts to convert the Saxons through missionaries and the building of churches, but they had thus far rejected Christianity. Conversions under Charlemagne's father, Pippin III (the Short), and uncle, also named Carloman, had taken place only a few decades earlier as recorded in the *Continuations of the Chronicles of Fredegar*. In 744, Carloman responded to "trouble" in Saxony by invading, but those Saxons on the frontier "submitted without a fight and were enslaved."<sup>92</sup> Following this, many "received baptism and the sacraments began to be provided them."<sup>93</sup> Four years later, when the Saxons "behaved in their accustomed way" and again broke their oaths of obedience, Pippin advanced into Saxony with an army, pillaging and enslaving, until they "submitted to Frankish control in the ancient manner."<sup>94</sup> This time, it is recorded that most of those Saxons "asked to have the sacraments made available when it became clear that it was impossible to rebel against the Franks."<sup>95</sup>

It is questionable whether such statements accurately reflect the attitude of the Saxon converts, as the fact that they were in such a situation in the first place was due to their subjugation through armed conflict. By portraying the Saxons as asking for the sacraments, the chronicler(s) understandably chose not to directly correlate the military defeat of the Saxons and

---

<sup>92</sup> "Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus," ed. B. Krusch, in *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, II* (Hannover, 1888), 180, and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, trans. *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar and Continuations* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1960), 99.

<sup>93</sup> "Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus," 180, and Wallace-Hadrill, *Fredegar and Continuations*, 99.

<sup>94</sup> "Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus," 181, and Wallace-Hadrill, *Fredegar and Continuations*, 101.

<sup>95</sup> "Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus," 181: "Ex quibus plurima multitudo videntes se contra impetum Francorum rebellare non posse, propriis viribus destituti, petierunt sibi christianitate sacramenta conferre."

their subsequent conversion. The language used instead serves to distance the two, and to make possible the interpretation that their conversion was voluntary rather than compulsory. A similar style is detectable in most of the chronicles detailing Charlemagne's comparable exploits, as will be seen.

It should be noted that most sources do not suggest that this war was religious in nature at its outset. While the majority of the praise directed at the king does tend to focus on the spread of religion as a consequence, this preoccupation is more likely a product of the concerns of those who were writing; that is, the literate clerical class. Eigil does imply in his *Vita Sturmi*, written around 794, that Charlemagne's main concern with the Saxons was centered on matters of faith. Eigil records that after reigning for four years, the king began to consider how to bring the hostile Saxons to Christ.<sup>96</sup> He sought advice from the servants of God and gathered a great army, invoking the name of Christ and departing for Saxony with bishops, priests, and abbots in tow.<sup>97</sup> It is stated that his goal was to bring the Saxons who "from the beginning of the world had been bound by the chains of devils" to accept the faith and to "be made to submit to the soft and sweet yoke of Christ."<sup>98</sup> Considering past relations with Saxony, I am more inclined to believe the more practical reasons for war that will follow, though the fact that Saxony was populated by polytheists almost certainly made it an attractive target for raiding and territorial expansion.

On the other hand, Einhard gives material reasons for Charlemagne's initial invasion, beyond the fact that the king's forebears had traditionally had trouble in dealing with their

---

<sup>96</sup> "Eigilis Vita Sancti Sturmi," c. 22, in *MGH, Scriptores, II* (Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963), 376: "*Regnante feliciter domino rege Karolo annos quatuor, Saxonum gens saeva et infestissima cunctis fuit, et paganis ritibus nimis dedita. Rex vero Karolus . . . cogitare coepit, qualiter gentem hanc Christo acquirere quivisset.*"

<sup>97</sup> "Eigilis Vita Sancti Sturmi," c. 22, 376: "*Inito servorum Dei consilio, poposcit, ut precibus Dominum votis suis annuere obtinerent. Congregato tam grandi exercitu, invocato Christi nomine, Saxoniam profectus est, adsumtis universis sacerdotibus, abbatibus, presbyteris . . .*"

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*: ". . . *ut gentem quae ab initio mundi daemonum vinculis fuerat obligata, doctrinis sacris mite et suave Christi iugum credendo subire fecissent.*"

eastern neighbors. The Saxons had developed an affinity for raiding the eastern borderlands of the kingdom, even crossing the Rhine, and Einhard stresses the fact that the contiguous territories of the two peoples were seldom defended by impassable mountain ranges or dense forests. The easily traversable plains of the borderlands saw “murder, robbery, and arson in turn” without cease, by which the Franks were “so greatly irritated . . . that [the Saxons] were judged worthwhile to undertake open war against.”<sup>99</sup>

Henry Mayr-Harting offers more evidence that security concerns forced Charlemagne’s attentions eastward. On the west bank of the Rhine were the churches of Cologne and Mainz, while Worms lay further south. These sites were significant to Carolingian society and vulnerable to raids. On the lower Rhine was the royal palace of Nijmegen, and just south of Mainz was the palace of Ingelheim. There were economic issues at hand as well. Citing archaeological evidence, Mayr-Harting asserts that Rhine trade was increasingly important in this period, and that Charlemagne could very well have sought to control and profit from it.<sup>100</sup> Mayr-Harting argues further that the archaeological debris found at the Frisian entrepot of Dorestad, where the Rhine delta meets the North Sea, suggests “an explosive increase in activity” between the 780’s and the 820’s.<sup>101</sup>

Michael McCormick, in *Origins of the European Economy*, also suggests that this corridor was active “across the entire eighth century.”<sup>102</sup> Archaeological finds in the form of “hoards” of coins found there all date from around 800, suggesting that it was still very active

---

<sup>99</sup> “Einhardi Vita Karoli Imperatoris,” ed. G.H. Pertz, in *MGH, Scriptores, II* (Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963), 446: “. . . caedes et rapinae vel incendia vicissim fieri non cessabant; quibus adeo Franci sunt irritati, ut . . . apertum contra eos bellum suscipere dignum iudicaret.”

<sup>100</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, “Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800,” in *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 444 (Nov., 1996): 1114.

<sup>101</sup> Mayr-Harting, “Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation,” 1114.

<sup>102</sup> Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 360.

going into the ninth century as well.<sup>103</sup> Charlemagne, in 793, even spent months trying to dig a canal to connect the rivers Rednitz and Altmühl.<sup>104</sup> Because these were tributaries of the Main and the Danube, respectively, the king intended by joining these waterways to connect the Rhine to the great Danube. Though he was doomed to failure by constant rain and the swampy nature of the land, he was no doubt aware that to construct and control such a route would create profitable opportunities.

Spurred by these considerations, in 772 the king first marched into Saxony, where with his army he “laid waste to everything with fire and sword” and “brought to ruin the idol which was called Irminsul by the Saxons.”<sup>105</sup> The Irminsul was a sacred tree shrine which was said to support the heavens, and its destruction, far from the first event of its kind, is an example of one of the missionary’s ‘weapons’ described by Sullivan. It took three days to destroy the shrine, and according to the *RAKF* during this time the army became parched due to a recent lack of rainfall.<sup>106</sup> This situation reportedly prompted God to miraculously cause water to erupt from the side of a nearby mountain, filling a dry riverbed and providing enough water for the whole army.<sup>107</sup> Afterwards, the king returned to Francia with twelve hostages.

The following year, while Charlemagne was occupied in Italy defending the papacy from the aggressive designs of King Desiderius and the Lombards, the Saxons chose the opportunity to ravage the territories of the Hessians.<sup>108</sup> They then attempted to burn a church in Fritzlar, which they failed to do as a result of a divine intervention which forced them to abandon their

---

<sup>103</sup> McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 360.

<sup>104</sup> “RAKF,” ed. G.H.Pertz, in *MGH, Scriptores, I* (Hannover, 1826; reprint, 1963), 93.

<sup>105</sup> “RAKF,” 33-35: “. . . ferro et igni cuncta depopulatus . . . idolum quod Irminsul a saxonibus vocabatur evertit.”

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 35: “. . . propter continuam caeli serenitatem exsiccates omnibus illius loci rivis ac fontibus aqua ad bibendum inveniri non posset.”

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . iuxta montem, qui castris erat contiguus, tanta vis quae in concavo cuiusdam torrentis eruperit, ut cuncto exercitui sufficeret.”

<sup>108</sup> “AKF,” ed. G.H.Pertz, in *MGH, Scriptores, I*, 36-38.

efforts.<sup>109</sup> This is according to the *AKF*, which elaborates on the miracle, describing “two young men in white” who appeared and protected the church from fire.”<sup>110</sup> The church had reportedly been consecrated by the missionary Boniface, who, “through the spirit of prophecy” had foretold that it would never be consumed by fire.<sup>111</sup>

The Saxons fled, though one was found dead next to the church “with fire and light in his hands,” seemingly killed just before he could set the building alight.<sup>112</sup> The *RAFK* do not mention Saxony at all in the entry for the year 773, and instead place this event in 774. The Saxons were still driven away by “a sudden terror sent by God,” though descriptions of these miracles are omitted.<sup>113</sup> Either way, Charlemagne attacked Saxony in the campaign season of 774, after successfully concluding his siege of Pavia and taking Desiderius’s kingdom for his own. In Saxony Charlemagne “devastated everything, burning and plundering” while killing “a very great number of Saxons who attempted to resist” before returning to Francia with “immense rewards.”<sup>114</sup>

It is at this point, in the entry for the year 775, that the Revised Annals state Charlemagne “resolved to wage war on the perfidious and treaty-breaking people of the Saxons . . . until they had either been overcome and subjected to the Christian religion or totally exterminated.”<sup>115</sup> There was no immediately remarkable change in behavior, at least as reported by the annals, and

---

<sup>109</sup> “*AKF*,” 38.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 38: “*apparuerunt . . . duo iuvenes in albis, qui ipsam basilicam ab igne protegebant.*”

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . *quandam basilicam in loco, qui dicitur Fricdislar, quam sanctae memoriae Bonifacius novissimus martyr consecravit atque per spiritum prophetiae praedixit, quod nunquam incendio cremaretur.*”

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*: “*Inventus est . . . Saxonibus mortuus iuxta ipsam basilicam, genibus curvis adclinus supra pedes, habens ignam et ligna in minibus, velut ore flando eandem basilicam igni tradere voluisset.*”

<sup>113</sup> “*RAKF*,” 39: “*cumque in eo loco qui nunc frideslar ab incolis nominatur, basilicam a beato Bonifatio martire dedicatam incendere molirentur atque hoc efficere casso labore conarentur, inmisso sibi divinitus pavore subitaneo, turpi trepidatione confusi domum fugiendo revertuntur.*”

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 41: “. . . *incendiis ac direptionibus cuncta devastans, compluribus etiam Saxonum, qui resistere conati sunt, interfectis, cum ingenti praeda regressus est.*”

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . *cum rex in villa Carisiaco hiemaret, consilium iniit, ut perfidam ac foedifragam Saxonum gentem bello adgrederetur, et eo usque perseveraret, dum aut victi christianae religioni subicerentur, aut omnino tollerentur.*”

in the campaign season of 775 Charlemagne ravaged Saxony as he had in years past before securing the “customary” oaths and hostages and returning to winter in Francia.<sup>116</sup> The following year the Saxons again revolted violently while Charlemagne was dealing with other uprisings in Italy, and the king again brought his army to bear on the rebellious Saxons, swiftly crushing any effective resistance.<sup>117</sup> This time, however, it is reported that an “immense multitude of that perfidious people” were so “deeply repentant” that they sought forgiveness for their error, after which Charlemagne “pardoned them mercifully” and “had those who declared they wished to become Christians baptized.”<sup>118</sup>

The *AKF* elaborate on the Saxon attacks of 776, describing assaults on two *castella* at Eresburg and Syburg. While the *castellum* of Eresburg fell and was destroyed, that at Syburg was protected by another miracle emanating from the building which housed the church.<sup>119</sup> The “likeness of two shields” appeared above the church, “red in color and flaming.”<sup>120</sup> The mass panic which ensued among the Saxons caused many to kill each other by accident. Those fleeing impaled themselves on the spears carried by the men running before them, while others died to other forms of friendly fire, “condemned by divine vengeance.”<sup>121</sup>

After the Easter of 777, Charlemagne returned to Saxony with his army to hold a general assembly on account of the “fraudulent promises” of the Saxons, in which he “found it

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-43.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-47.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 47: “*Nam ad fontem Lippiae veniens, immensam illius perfidi populi multitudinem velut devotam ac supplicem, et quam errori sui poeniteret, veniam poscentem invenit. Cui cum et misericorditer ignovisset, et eos qui se christianos fieri velle adfirmabant, baptizari fecisset, datis et acceptis pro fide servanda fraudulentis eorundem promissionibus, obsidibus quoque quos imperaverat receptis . . .*”

<sup>119</sup> “*AKF*,” 44-46.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . *et dicunt vidisse instar duorum scutorum colore rubeo flammantes et agitantes supra ipsam ecclesiam.*”

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 46: “. . . *statim confuse sunt et magno timore perterriti coperunt fugere ad castra . . . infigebant se lanceis eorum, qui ante illos fugiebant et in humeris portabant . . . divina ultione iudicati.*”

impossible to repose trust.”<sup>122</sup> All of the Saxon magnates were in attendance, “obedient and pretending devotion,” save Widukind, a particularly troublesome man, and, as an active organizer of rebellions, a principal antagonist in this tale.<sup>123</sup> Those present “surrendered themselves . . . fully to the power of the king” and acknowledged that they would be “deprived both of their country and of their freedom should they be in further breach of his decrees.”<sup>124</sup> Finally, an “immense multitude of them, having promised, albeit falsely, that they wanted to become Christians, were baptized there.”<sup>125</sup> I believe it important to note that while there is no explicit connection yet made between the loss of freedom and the subsequent baptisms, the reader can safely presume a connection between the two. Though the consequences for disobedience did not yet specifically extend to death, the intention surely did not fall far short of that mark.

In 778, Charlemagne campaigned in Spain, hoping to gain a number of cities from the Saracens there.<sup>126</sup> On his return through the Pyrenees, the rearguard, with Roland at its head, was ambushed and slaughtered by Basques at the Battle of Roncesvalles.<sup>127</sup> The Saxons again saw their opportunity to revolt.<sup>128</sup> “With fire and sword” they laid waste, destroying “the sacred and secular . . . in equal measure,” with the intention “not to plunder but to exact vengeance.”<sup>129</sup> Though Charlemagne did not respond personally, he commanded an alliance of Frankish and

---

<sup>122</sup> “RAKF,” 49: “. . . *post celebratam ibidem paschalis festi sollemnitatem, propter fraudulentas Saxonum promissiones, quibus fidem habere non poterat, ad locum qui Padrabrun vocatur, generalem populi sui conventum in eo habiturus . . .*”

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.: “*Eo cum venisset, totum perfidae gentis senatum ac populam, quem ad se venire iusserat, morigerum ac fallaciter sibi devotum invenit. Nam cuncti ad eum venerunt praeter Widichindum, unum ex primoribus Westfalaeorum . . .*”

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.: “. . . *Ceteri qui venerant, in tantum se regis potestati permisere, ut ea condicione tunc veniam accipere mererentur, si ulterius sua statuta violarent, et patria et libertate privarentur.*”

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.: “*Baptizata est ex eis ibidem maxima multitudo, quae se, quamvis falso, christianam fieri velle promiserat.*”

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 53: “*Interea Saxones velut occasionem nacti sumptis armis ad Rhenum usque profecti sunt.*”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.: “*Mosellae vicorum willarumque fuit, ferro et igni depopulate sunt. Pari modo sacra profanaque pessumdata. Nullum aetatis aut sexus discrimen ira hostis fecerat, ut liquid appareret, eos non praedandi, sed ultionem exercendi fratia Francorum terminus introisse.*”

Alemanni troops to intercept them, and this group “inflicted such a great slaughter upon them” that few managed to escape.<sup>130</sup> The following year saw Charlemagne’s full retribution, as he again invaded Saxony, receiving oaths and hostages, before wintering at Worms.<sup>131</sup>

In the year 780 the king ordered many Saxons to meet him at Ohrum, on the river Oker, and after “settling [their] affairs,” witnessed “immense numbers” of Saxons baptized, again “practicing their customary dissemblance.”<sup>132</sup> The hindsight displayed here, and at other points where the baptism of Saxons is described, is worth discussing briefly. It is unique to the *RAKF*, which were written in the early years of Louis the Pious, and is not found in the entries of the original *AKF*. The absence of such judgments in the *AKF* can be used to reinforce the claim that these were written shortly after these events took place.

Following this mass baptism Charlemagne departed for Pavia, where he stayed for the winter before traveling to Rome the following spring to meet with Pope Hadrian.<sup>133</sup> The king ventured to Rome to have his son Pippin baptized and both Pippin and Louis anointed as kings by the hands of the Pope.<sup>134</sup> While there he also acted with Pope Hadrian in dealing with Duke Tassilo of Bavaria. Tassilo had reportedly been overzealous in his disregard for the oaths he had

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.: “[Rex] . . . francos orientales atque Alamannos ad propulsandum hostem festinare iussit. Ipse caeteris copiis dimissis, Heristallium villam in qua hiemare constituerat, venit. At Franci et Alamanni qui contra Saxones missi errant, magnis itineribus ad eos ire contendunt, si forte in finibus suis eos invenire possent. Sed illi, iam re peracta, revertebantur ad sua. Quorum vestigial sequuti qui a rege missi fuerunt, in pago Hassiorum super fluvium vado adorti, tanta strage ceciderunt, ut ex ingenti multitudine ipsorum vix pauci domum fugiendo pervenisse dicantur.”

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 53-55.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 57: “Cui cum ibi omnes orientalium partium Saxones, ut iusserat, occurissent, maxima eorum multitudo in loco, qui Orheim appellatur, solita simulatione baptizata est.”

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.: “Inde Romam veniens, honorifice ab Hadriano papa susceptus est.”

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.: “Et cum ibi sanctum pascha celebraret, baptizavit idem pontifex filium eius Pippinum, unxitque eum in regem. Unxit etiam et Hludewicum fratrem eius, quibus et coronam inposuit. Quorum maior, id est Pippinus, in Langobardia, minor vero, id est Hludewicus, in Aquitania rex constitutes est.”

sworn to be “subject and obedient” to “Pippin, his sons, and the Franks,” but Charlemagne was more lenient in this confrontation than he would be in the future.<sup>135</sup>

While it is unknown what else Charlemagne and Pope Hadrian may have discussed in 781, as neither the Frankish sources nor the *Liber Pontificalis* provide the details of their intimate conversations, it is very likely that they spoke on the difficulties in finding a lasting solution to the problems in Saxony. The interest in events in Saxony displayed by Pope Hadrian in his letters to Charlemagne support this assertion. If so, in light of the excessive violence of the following three year period, in which Charlemagne viciously quelled rebellions and legislated capital punishment for those who refused Christianity, it seems unlikely that Hadrian advised the use of more peaceful means. Charlemagne had also met the pope in Rome in 774, just before the king reportedly made his decision to either convert the Saxons or destroy them utterly.<sup>136</sup> Though this cannot be proven, perhaps Pope Hadrian’s influence played a role in guiding the exceptionally repressive attitudes displayed by Charlemagne after these visits.

Let us pause here and examine two important themes brought to light in the first phases of this war. As noted above, Charlemagne and his men destroyed the Irminsul during the invasion of Saxony in 772, and both Sullivan and Duggan recognize that this was not an isolated event. To Sullivan, such is one of the many weapons in the ‘armory’ of the missionary, and to Duggan this is an example of a “negative miracle.”<sup>137</sup> As opposed to an ‘ordinary’ miracle, such as when God provided water for Charlemagne’s army, a ‘negative’ miracle in this context is an act designed to demonstrate the impotence of other gods.

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 59: “. . . *sed cum Romae esset, convenit inter ipsum atque Hadrianum pontificem, ut simul legatos mitterent ad Tassilonem Baioariae ducem, qui eum commonerent de sacramento, quod Pippino regi et filiis eius ac Francis iuraverat, scilicet ut subiectus et oboediens eis esse deberet.*”

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>137</sup> Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” 734, and Duggan, “For Force is Not of God?,” 53.

There are many eighth-century examples of such acts. Charles Martel and his forces burned temples in Frisia while on campaign there in 734.<sup>138</sup> Willibald reports in his *Vita Bonifatii*, written around 765, that with God's aid Boniface (d. 754) cut down a massive tree at Geismar known to the polytheists of Hesse as "Jupiter's Oak."<sup>139</sup> While a "great crowd of pagans" watched, Boniface made a small cut in the tree, after which God sent a mighty gust of wind, causing the tree to shatter into four pieces of equal length.<sup>140</sup> Having seen this, it is written that the spectators gave up their formerly slanderous attitudes and began to believe in the Christian God.<sup>141</sup> This story is unique to Willibald's rendition of the *Vita Bonifatii*, as Ian Wood points out.<sup>142</sup> Wood also suggests that this event may be based on a similar story found in the *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius Severus, though he does not speak to the potential significance of this connection.<sup>143</sup> Why this event does not appear in other versions of the *Vita Bonifatii* is unclear, as Willibald's is the earliest version, and this theme is clearly a popular one.

Alcuin writes in his *Vita Willibrordi*, penned in 796, that Willibrord (d.739) went to the hallowed island of Fositesland (modern Heligoland) for the purpose of desecrating it.<sup>144</sup> The island, named after the god Fosite, was off the coast of Frisia in the North Sea, and its waters as well as the local fauna were considered sacred by the Frisians. To accomplish his task,

---

<sup>138</sup> "Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus," c. 17, ed. B. Krusch, in *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, II* (Hannover: 1888), 176.

<sup>139</sup> "Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo," c. 6, ed. W. Levison, in *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in Usus Scholarum* (Hannover and Leipzig, 1905), 31: ". . . roborem quendam mirae magnitudinis, qui prisco paganorum vocabulo appellatur robor Iobis, in loco qui dicitur Gaesmere, servis Dei secum adstantibus, succidere temptavit."

<sup>140</sup> "Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo," c. 6, 31: "Cumque, mentis constantia confortatus, arborem succidisset - magna quippe aderat copia pagaorum, qui et inimicum deorum suorum intra se diligentissime devotabant - sed ad modicum quidem arbore praeciso, confestim immensa roboris moles divino desuper flatu exagitata, palmitum confracto culmine, corruit et quasi superni nutus solatio in quattuor etiam partes disrupta est, et quattuor ingentis magnitudinis aequali longitudine trunci absque fratrum labore adstantium apparuerunt."

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*: "Quo viso, prius devotantes pagani etiam versa vice benedictionem Domino, pristina abiecta maledictione, credentes reddiderunt."

<sup>142</sup> Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 60.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Vita Willibrordi Archiepiscopi Traiectensis Auctore Alcuino*, ch. 10, ed. W. Levison, in *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, VII* (Hannover, 1920), 124: ". . . pervenit in confinio Fresonum et Daenorum ad quondam insulam, quae a quodam deo suo Fositae ab accolis terrae Fositesland appellabatur . . ."

Willibrord and his followers killed cattle for food and even baptized three men in a spring there, all while resident Frisians looked on.<sup>145</sup> While the Frisians watching thought that the Christians would “die a swift death or be turned mad,” when nothing happened they were “terrified into a stupor” and reported to their king, Radbod, what they had seen.<sup>146</sup>

It is worth noting that Willibrord had also been an child oblate. Alcuin writes that in his youth Willibrord was given to the church at Ripon so that he might grow and learn in a place where he would “see nothing unless honest, hear nothing unless holy.”<sup>147</sup> Divine grace guided his development, and Alcuin tells us that “you would think a new Samuel had been born in our times.”<sup>148</sup> Wood notes that both Alcuin and Beornrad, the archbishop to whom the work is dedicated, were relatives of Willibrord.<sup>149</sup> Thus Alcuin’s praise reflects positively on Beornrad and himself.

Finally, Altfrid tells us in chapter fourteen of *Vita Sancti Liudgeri*, written between 839 and 849, that Liudger (d. 809) was sent by one Albricus along with other missionaries to “destroy the sanctuaries of the gods and the various worships (*culturas*) of idols among the people of Frisia.”<sup>150</sup> Chapter nineteen of the same work states that Liudger also went to the island of Foseteslant [*sic*] following the advice of Charlemagne, who reportedly advised the further destruction of sanctuaries there.<sup>151</sup> There Liudger and others destroyed temples, while

---

<sup>145</sup> *Vita Willibrordi*, c. 10, 125: “. . . tres homines in eo fonte cum invocatione sanctae Trinitatis baptizavit, sed et animalia in ea terra pascentia in cibaria suis mactare praecepit.”

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*: “*Quod pagani intuentes, arbitrabantur, eos vel in furorem verti vel etiam veloci morte perire. Quos cum nihil mali cernebant pati, stupore perterriti, regi tamen Rabbodo quod videbant factum retulerunt.*”

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 3, 118: “. . . tradidit eum pater Hrypensis ecclesiae fratribus relegiosis studiis et sacris litteris erudiendum, ut fragilior aetas validioribus invalesceret disciplinis ubi nihil videret nisi honesta, nihil audieret nisi sancta.”

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . ita ut nostris temporibus novum Samuhel nasci putares . . .”

<sup>149</sup> Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 80-81.

<sup>150</sup> “Altfridi Vita Sancti Liudgeri,” c. 14, ed. G.H. Pertz, in *MGH, Scriptores, II*, 410: “*Post haec misit Albricus Liutgerum, et cum eo alios servos Dei, ut destruerent fana deorum, et varias culturas idolorum in gente Fresonum.*”

<sup>151</sup> “Altfridi Vita Sancti Liudgeri,” c. 19, 410: “*Ipse vero cura sollerti, doctrinae Domini gregi sibi tradito fluentia ministrare studuit, fana destruere, et omnes erroris pristinae abluere sordes. . . . consilio ab imperatore accepto,*

churches were built in their place, though these churches would soon be burned in turn.<sup>152</sup>

Liudger also baptized men in the revered waters of a spring there, apparently the same one used by Willibrord.<sup>153</sup>

By violating sacred space without incurring divine retribution, both warriors and missionaries sought to prove the power of their God and the powerlessness of polytheist deities. I think it worthwhile to note that a shared quality for which these missionaries were admired was their aggression. Though part of a tradition, the imagination displayed by some of these missionaries suggests that this tradition was actively built upon. Whether a literary device or historical event, the irony of baptizing a man in waters sacred to a polytheist deity was surely not lost on these men.

As our sources see it, God is also intervening directly to aid his faithful. He defends his holy places, both passively and violently. The two youths who appear to protect the church in Fritzlar do not kill their enemies, with the possible exception of the arsonist who had failed and been found dead, but they prevent the church from being harmed. God's response at Syburg, on the other hand, sows terror and destruction among the Saxons, causing their deaths as he seeks revenge. God also commands the elements, bringing succor to Christian armies via quenching rains and ruin upon idols with mighty winds. He is portrayed as everything that the polytheist deity is not. He is also unafraid to use force and violence to achieve his ends. Finally, one should note that disasters, such as the ambush at Ronesvalles in 778, the destruction of the *castellum* at Eresburg, or the failure to build the canal between the Rednitz and Altmühl are not

---

*transfretavit in confinio Fresonum atque Danorum ad quondam insulam, quae a nomine Dei sui falsi Fosete, Foseteslant est appellata.*"

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 410-411: "*Pervenientes autem ad eandem insulam, destruxerunt Omnia eiusdem Fosetis fana que illic fuere constructa, et pro eis Christi fabricaverunt ecclesias . . . et combustae sunt ecclesiae . . .*"

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 410: "*. . . baptizavit eos cum invocation sanctae Trinitatis, in fonte qui ibi ebulliebat, in quo sanctus Willibrordus prius homines tres baptizaverat . . .*"

taken as signs of divine displeasure. This worldview appears here to work only in a positive sense, and examples of its operation will continue to appear.

The fate of Desiderius also brings us to another intriguing tradition. While the historical annals only state that the former king of the Lombards returned with Charlemagne to Francia as a captive, Riché tells us that Desiderius was tonsured and sent to the abbey of Corbie to live out his days.<sup>154</sup> Men were forcibly tonsured in this period both as a punishment and as a means by which to neutralize political opponents, who were often relatives, without executing them; Desiderius was far from the first. After his *coup d'état* in 751 Pippin III had placed Childeric III, the last Merovingian king, in the monastery of St. Bertin.<sup>155</sup> Childeric's son Theuderic would also be raised in a monastery at Fontanelle.<sup>156</sup> In order to legitimize his newfound position as a king without royal blood, Pippin had himself and his sons, Charlemagne and Carloman, anointed with holy oil by Frankish clerics and later Pope Stephen II.<sup>157</sup>

Duke Tassilo of Bavaria, mentioned briefly among the events of 781, was also effectively forced into a monastery. In 788 it is suggested in the original *ARF* that Tassilo was attempting to ally with the neighboring Avars in order to resist Charlemagne and create his own kingdom independent of that of the Franks.<sup>158</sup> The relationship between Tassilo and the king had been rocky after 781, and it is possible that this treacherous alliance was a fabrication on the part of the Franks to justify the annexation of the duchy of Bavaria. Tassilo was condemned to death by an assembly, but Charlemagne, “moved by compassion to love of God and because Tassilo was his blood relative,” decided to stay his execution.<sup>159</sup> Upon being asked what he wanted to do,

---

<sup>154</sup> Riché, *The Carolingians*, 98.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>158</sup> “AKF,” 80: “*Quod et Tassilo denegare non potuit sed confessus est postea ad Avaros transmisisse . . .*”

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*: “. . . visi sunt iudicasse eundem Tassilonem ad mortem . . . Carolus piissimus rex motus misericordia ad amorem Dei, et quia consanguineous eius erat. . . ut non moriretur.”

Tassilo requested license to “have himself tonsured and to enter into a monastery” so as to “do penance for his great sins and save his soul.”<sup>160</sup> His son Theodo was likewise condemned, tonsured, and sent to a monastery.<sup>161</sup>

In the opening years of the Saxon conflict we have seen bloody campaigns and mass baptisms conducted by Charlemagne. We have also seen the destruction of idols at the hands of Charlemagne’s armies and the missionaries portrayed in the literature discussed. From the viewpoint of Christian contemporaries God condoned and aided in these undertakings. Finally, child oblates were not the only ones forced into the religious life, and the vanquished enemies of Charlemagne and his predecessors were seemingly given a choice between the habit and the gibbet; yet while donated children were not given a choice, grown men were likely thankful for theirs. These themes will continue through the period discussed in the following chapter, which covers the years between 782 and 785. I have arranged this period separately because it represents a particularly brutal stage in the Saxon Wars, and its bookends correspond to those years in which it is most likely that Charlemagne issued the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae*. It was in this legislation that the coercive methods seen thus far were crystallized.

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 80-81: “*Et interrogatus . . . quid agree voluisset; ille vero postolavit, ut licentiam haberet sibi tonsorandi et in monasterio introeundi et pro tantis peccatis paenitentiam agendi et ut suam salvaret animam.*”

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 81: “*Similiter et filius eius Theodo deiudicatus est et tonsoratus et in monasterio missus . . .*”

## DESPERATE MEASURES: REBELLION, FRUSTRATION, AND THE ‘TERROR CAPITULARY,’ 782-785

It is at either end of this three year period, between 782 and 785, that most scholars place the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, the so called “terror capitulary.” Those such as P.D. King, Roger Collins, and Ian Wood place its issuance in the summer of 782, as a provocation for the general uprising that followed.<sup>162</sup> Others such as Pierre Riché, J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, and Lawrence Duggan date it from 785, to coincide with the capture and baptism of Widukind.<sup>163</sup> In her older works Rosamond McKitterick agreed with the latter group, yet in her most recent contribution she is more hesitant, preferring not to choose.<sup>164</sup> The editor of the *MGH* also dates it from 785, giving it the potentially misleading heading “Capitulare Paderbrunnense” because Paderborn was where Charlemagne held an assembly in that year. I place this capitulary in 785, as I believe Charlemagne felt confident after the especially devastating campaigns of these years and the removal of Widukind as a focal point for rebellion. He wanted an end to the uprisings in Saxony, and as he saw it a firmer hand was the best means to achieve this goal. Judging from the peace that followed 785, it appeared for a time that he was correct.

This capitulary is most often remarked upon because it stipulated execution as the punishment for a host of crimes, many of which were clearly related to Christianity and its outward practice. This may appear to modern readers to be rather extreme, but judging by the spirit of missionizing we have seen thus far this legislation was simply the next step; a logical consequence of a pattern of behavior already in place, in which the use of lethal force against nonbelievers had been accepted and even encouraged.

---

<sup>162</sup> Collins, *Charlemagne*, 52-3, and King, *Translated Sources*, 205-208, and Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 84.

<sup>163</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 183, and Duggan, “‘For Force is Not of God’?,” 51, and Riché, *The Carolingians*, 104-105.

<sup>164</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, 62, and *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity*, 254-255.

Before progressing to specifics of crime and punishment, the capitulary begins by asserting that the churches being built in Saxony should be held in higher esteem than those shrines dedicated to idols.<sup>165</sup> Should anyone “enter a church by force,” steal from it “by violence or stealth,” or set fire to it, the penalty was death.<sup>166</sup> To “scorn the holy Lenten fast out of contempt for Christianity” by consuming meat or to cremate a body “according to the usage of the pagans” were crimes worthy of capital punishment.<sup>167</sup> Any who killed a bishop, priest, or deacon would be repaid in kind.<sup>168</sup> If anyone were to “scorn baptism . . . and remain a pagan,” or “sacrifice a man to the devil and offer the victim . . . to demons,” they would be killed.<sup>169</sup> Should anyone “appear unfaithful to the lord king” or “plot with pagans against Christians,” they would meet the same fate.<sup>170</sup>

While rejection of Christianity may have been the reason for a capital sentence, the church could also offer amnesty; if one confessed of his own accord and wished to do penance, he could be spared death on the testimony of a priest.<sup>171</sup> Also included are decrees regarding the mandatory tithe, marriage laws, burial practices, infant baptism, and Sunday activities, all in

---

<sup>165</sup> “Capitulare Paderbrunnense,” 48: “. . . ecclesiae Christi, quo modo construuntur in Saxonia, et Deo sacratae sunt, non minorem habeant honorem, but maiorem et excellentiorem, quam vana habuissent idolorum . . .” And “First Saxon Capitulary,” in King, *Translated Sources*, 205.

<sup>166</sup> “Capitulare Paderbrunnense,” 48: “Si quis ecclesiam per violentiam intraverit, et in ea per vim vel furtu aliquid abstulerit, vel ipsam ecclesiam igne cremaverit morte moriatur.”

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 48-49: “Si quis sanctum quadragensimale ieiunium pro despectu christianitatis contempserit, et carnem comederit, morte moriatur.” And “Si quis corpus defuncti hominis secundum ritum paganorum flamma consumi fecerit, et ossa eius ad cinerem redierit, capite punietur.”

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 48: “Si quis episcopum aut presbyterum sive diaconum interfecerit, similiter capite punietur.”

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 49: “Si quis deinceps in gente Saxonorum inter eos latens non baptizatus se abscondere voluerit, et ad baptismum venire contempserit, paganusque permanere voluerit, morte moriatur.” And “Si quis hominem diabulo sacrificaverit, et in hostiam more paganorum daemonibus obtulerit, morte moratur.”

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.: “Si quis domino regi infidelis apparuerit, capitali sententia punietur,” and “Si quis cum paganis consilium adversus christianos inierit, vel cum illis in adversitate christianorum perdurare voluerit, morte moratur.”

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.: “Si vero pro his mortalibus criminibus latentur commissis aliquis sponte ad sacerdotem confugerit, et confessione data ageri poenitentiam voluerit, testimonio sacerdotis de morte excusetur.”

accordance with Christian practice, though violating these only resulted in a fine, albeit a rather hefty one.<sup>172</sup>

Charlemagne held a general assembly in Saxony in 782, where he may or may not have issued the capitulary discussed above. One way or the other, following Charlemagne's departure for Francia, it is reported that Widukind chose the opportunity to incite another rebellion.<sup>173</sup>

Because the king had ordered an attack on a group of Slavs referred to as "Sorbs" in this year, his main host, led by the dignitaries Adalgis, Gailo, and Worad, was already on the march when they received word of the Saxon uprising.<sup>174</sup> The main host responded rapidly, but without informing the king, who had remained in Francia instead of leading the army against the Sorbs.

Adalgis and company rendezvoused with another hastily raised force under the count Theoderic, a relative (*propinquus*) of the king.<sup>175</sup> Yet just before battle was to be joined, the *RAKF* report that Adalgis and the others undertook a premature and reckless charge with their contingent, afraid that Theoderic alone would be credited with the "renown of the victory."<sup>176</sup> This ill-advised gambit resulted in their decimation at the hands of the Saxon rebels, as Adalgis and Gailo were killed along with at least twenty-four other nobles.<sup>177</sup> After Charlemagne regained control of the situation, and Widukind had fled to the north, in the rebel leader's stead the king received as prisoners "no fewer than 4500 . . . of those who had fallen in with [Widukind] and committed such a gross outrage."<sup>178</sup> Whereas in previous circumstances

---

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>173</sup> "RAKF," 59-61.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 63: "*Habitoque inter se conloquio veriti sunt, ne ad nomen Theoderici victoriae fama transiret, si eum in eodem proelio secum haberent.*"

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*: "*Sed maior Francis quam pro numero iactura fuit, quia legatorum duo, Adalgisus et Geilo, comitum quattuor, aliorumque clarorum atque nobelium usque ad viginti interfecti, praeter caeteros, qui hos sequuti, potius cum eis perire quam post eos vivere maluerunt.*"

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*: ". . . *cum omnes Widokindum huius sceleris auctorum proclamarent, eum tamen tradere nequirent, eo quod is re perpetrata ad Nordmannos se contulerat, caeterorum, qui persuasion eius morem gerentes tantum*

Charlemagne had been inclined to mercy when dealing with the ever-rebellious Saxons, in this case instead of a mass baptism he ordered a mass execution, and saw “all beheaded in a single day.”<sup>179</sup>

While the *RAKF* record this disaster, the original *AKF* make no mention of the defeat. The engagement is described in simple terms as yet another Frankish victory in which many Saxons were killed.<sup>180</sup> The deaths of Adalgis and Gailo are noted, but without detail, though the description of the execution of the Saxon prisoners is still included. The original chronicler, it would seem, was more reluctant to record a Frankish defeat than the massacre of 4500 polytheist prisoners. When the reviser chose to insert this information, perhaps as added justification for the executions, it is pride and an overweening thirst for glory rather than divine displeasure which he blames for the defeat.

Charlemagne returned to Saxony in 783 with a vengeance and engaged the Saxons multiple times, defeating them “with such slaughter that out of their immense host very few . . . escaped.”<sup>181</sup> “Countless hosts were slain, spoils [were] seized,” and “great numbers of captives [were] carried off” as Charlemagne moved east, “laying waste to everything in his path” before winter set in.<sup>182</sup> Unexpected flooding in the summer of 784 prevented the king from “finishing off what remained of the Saxon War” as he desired, but there were still some regions within

---

*facinus peregerunt, usque ad quattuor milia quingenti traditi, et super Alaram fluvium, in loco qui Ferdun vocatur, iussu regis omnes una die decollate sunt.*“

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> “AKF,” 60.

<sup>181</sup> “RAKF,” 65: “. . . comissoque cum eis proelio, tanta eos caede prostravit, ut de innumerabili eorum multitudine perpauci evasisse dicantur.”

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.: “Caesa est eorum infinita multitudo, spoliaque direpta, captivorum quoque magnus abductus est numerus. Inde victor ad orientem iter convertit, primoque usque ad Wisuram, deinde usque ad Albiam cuncta devastando peragravit.”

reach.<sup>183</sup> After having “devastating the districts of the Westphalians,” (a sub-region of Saxony), he “laid waste the fields of the eastern Saxons and burned their *villae*.”<sup>184</sup> Charlemagne stayed in Saxony that winter, to give them “a winter of sufficient restlessness” as he and his *duces* ranged “with killings and burnings,” inflicting “immense destruction on nearly all the regions of the Saxons.”<sup>185</sup>

In the summer of 785 the king held an assembly at Paderborn, where he would have issued the “First Saxon Capitulary,” and, at long last, Widukind was given a “promise of impunity” and baptized with Charlemagne as his godfather.<sup>186</sup> The baptisms of Widukind and others at this time McKitterick describes as “rather statements of political realignment than affirmations of religious faith.”<sup>187</sup> While she is no doubt suggesting that the Saxons being baptized were practicing the ‘dissemblance’ so often noted in the annals, I believe it important to note that Charlemagne probably saw the act as fulfilling both of those requirements. Baptism was here both a public demonstration of submission and a measureable action that one had taken a first step in embracing Christianity. By acting as godfather and making the ceremony more akin to a personal oath, I believe the king hoped to elicit more permanent results than past endeavors had produced.

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 67: “*Cum primum oportunitas temporis advenit, ad reliquias belli Saxonici conficiendas rex animo intento . . . vidit se in aquilonales Saxoniae partes, sicut statuerat, propter nimias aquarum inundationes, quae tum subito ex iugitate pluviarum acciderant, transire non posse.*”

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.: “. . . vastatis Westfalaorum pagis . . . propter nimias aquarum inundationes, quae tum subito ex iugitate pluviarum acciderant, transire non posse. . . . depopulatisque orientalium Saxonum agris ac villis incensis . . . in Franciam regressus est.”

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.: “. . . cum expedita manu ad Saxonum pagos vastandos ac villas diripiendas egressus, inquietam satis hiemem, ubique discurrendo et cuncta caedibus atque incendiis permiscendo, tam per seipsum, quam per duces quos miserat, Saxonibus reddidit. Cumque huiusmodi vastationibus per totum hiberni temporis spatium omnes fere Saxonum regions ingenti clade adfecisset . . .”

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 69-71: “. . . publicum populi sui conventum in loco qui padrabrunno vocatur . . . ibique audiens Widokindum ac Abbionem esse in Transalbiana Saxonum regione, primo eis per Saxones, ut omissa perfidia ad suam fidem venire non ambigerent, suadere coepit. Cumque ipsi, facinorum suorum sibi conscii, regis fidei se committere dubitarent, tandem accepta ab eo, quam optabant, impunitatis sponsione, atque impetrates, quos sibi dari precabantur, suae salutis obsidibus, quos eis Amalwis, unus aulicorum, a rege missus adduxerat, cum eodem ipso ad eius praesentiam in Attiniaco villa venerunt, atque ibi baptizati sunt.”

<sup>187</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, 62.

For nearly eight years thereafter, a tense peace reigned between the Franks and the Saxons while the king busied himself with events in the Italian and Iberian peninsulas. The events of the years leading up to 785 described in this chapter, characterized by open rebellion, mass executions, and merciless campaigns of death and destruction continuing even through the winter, speak of a man deeply frustrated by his inability to subjugate and convert a people who had plagued him through the majority of his reign. It has been demonstrated that neither missionaries nor warriors were averse to using aggressive means to spread their faith. The “terror capitulary,” as a deliberate and methodical appeal to deadly force in producing religious conformity, is simply another step along this path. Though it is clear to modern readers that coercive measures had clearly and repeatedly failed to make the Saxons accept Christianity, Charlemagne nevertheless believed his persecutions could succeed through still greater threats. The attitudes displayed by his contemporaries and the encouragement they provided, through the period just described especially, strongly reinforced this view.

I will demonstrate this fact by relating the words of men such as Pope Stephen III, Pope Hadrian I, Alcuin, and the abbot Eanwulf. These two popes, as well as Pope Leo III, were all closely allied with the Carolingian dynasty. It was the Papacy that had provided the spiritual justification for the palace coup of Charlemagne’s father Pepin the Short in 751, whereby Pepin installed his family as the legitimate rulers of Francia. The Papacy during the reign of Charlemagne appears in the sources to have been rather aggressive, and necessarily so. Involved in territorial disputes with Desiderius, king of the neighboring Lombards, as well as with others, the popes sought to maintain good relations with Charlemagne. Later, Pope Leo III would owe Charlemagne his see and possibly his life. Charlemagne, for his part, could not ignore the

earthly representatives of the divine authority underpinning his rule. This interdependence between the popes and the king should be kept in mind when weighing the words of these men.

Though Stephen III died in 772 just before Charlemagne's first foray into Saxony, he is worth discussing briefly to better appreciate the way he viewed his and the Papacy's relationship with king. In a letter sent to Charlemagne and his brother Carloman in the early summer of 770, following the usual platitudes which attend most of this correspondence, Pope Stephen urges the kings to remain constant in the promise to protect the domains of St. Peter.<sup>188</sup> A mutually beneficial relationship between the kings and St. Peter, via the Pope, is stressed here and indeed in most of the papal correspondence, serving as a constant reminder to Charlemagne that his own success and salvation are dependent upon his defense of the papacy's interests.<sup>189</sup> Pope Stephen warns that neglect or delay in exacting the rights of St. Peter will leave a "heavy account to be rendered . . . before the judgment seat of Christ."<sup>190</sup>

In another letter written shortly after the last, a forcefulness born of desperation is readily apparent in Pope Stephen's threatening tone. He is worried that Charlemagne is considering marrying Desiderius's daughter, a union he no doubt feared would weaken Charlemagne's will to take up arms against the Lombards and defend Papal lands.<sup>191</sup> He does not mince words, going so far as to state that should anyone act against his exhortation, eternal damnation would be their punishment.<sup>192</sup> The pope is clearly not afraid to speak brusquely when faced with issues that truly concern him. The fact that he is arguing rather than pleading I believe suggests that the

---

<sup>188</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 44, 558-560.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 45, 563.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.: "*Et si quis, quod non optamus, contra huiusmodi nostrae adiurationis atque exhortationis seriem agree praesumserit, sciat se auctoritate domini mei, beati Petri apostolorum principis, anathematis vinculo esse innodatum et a regno Dei alienum atque cum diabolo et eius atrocissimis pompis et ceteris impiis aeternis incendiis concremandum deputatum . . .*"

Pope was writing with the expectation that his advice and his office would be respected by the king.

Pope Hadrian I, Stephen's successor, is likewise concerned with defending the 'Patrimony of St. Peter,' but tends to seek Charlemagne's cooperation in a milder manner. He also has much to say about the Saxons and other pagan peoples. In a letter from the summer of 774, Pope Hadrian writes to congratulate Charlemagne on his recent conquest of the Lombards who had threatened the Papacy.<sup>193</sup> In doing so he is careful to emphasize the advantages gained through friendship with St. Peter, at whose behest God "granted [Charlemagne] victory and ordered the kingdom of the Lombards to surrender to the dominion of [his] power."<sup>194</sup> Further, he asks that the king rest assured that God, through Peter's intercessions, will "lay other barbarian races beneath your royal feet."<sup>195</sup> In another letter sent later that same year the pope professes much the same notion, again predicting future prostration of barbarian races and assuring the king that should he "continue with faithful devotion in love of the prince of the apostles" and strive to fulfill his promise, he will be "ceaselessly granted well-being and immense victories by almighty God."<sup>196</sup> Though Pope Hadrian does not name the Saxons explicitly, they are surely implied in his reference to 'barbarian peoples.' I would argue that by emphasizing the impact of St. Peter's intercessions in this way, and thus his own influence as Pope, Hadrian is at once both condoning and indirectly taking credit for Charlemagne's successes.

---

<sup>193</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 53, 575.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.: ". . . *victoriam tibi tribuit regnumque Langobardorum tuae tradere iussit potestatis ditioni . . .*"

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.: ". . . *tuis regalibus vestigiis caeteras barbaras nationes omnipotens Dominus substernet.*"

<sup>196</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 50, 569-571: ". . . *dum tu fideli studio in amore ipsius principis apostolorum secundum tuam promissionem permanseris et cuncta eidem Dei apostolo adimplere studueris, et salus tibi et immensa victoria ab omnipotenti Deo tribuetur indesinenter.*"

Two more of Pope Hadrian's letters were penned in 786, just after baptism of Widukind and possibly the issuance of the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae*. In the first of these, the pope congratulates the king on his "God-aided royal triumphs" over the Saxons whose "necks have been bent in submission to your power" through the intercession of Peter and Paul.<sup>197</sup> He continues, praising the "divinely inspired royal exertions" which had "led the whole of that people . . . to the sacred font of baptism."<sup>198</sup> Again the pope speaks of more peoples being prostrated beneath the king's feet with God's aid. But this time it is noted that this will result in Charlemagne earning "the highest reward, that of offering the most worthy gift of the salvation of their souls before Christ's tribunal," thereby winning his own salvation.<sup>199</sup> The means of securing this "gift" of the souls of converts is not commented on.

In the final letter from Pope Hadrian which I will draw on here, he is responding to an inquiry made by Charlemagne through his *missi* as to the proper penance for those Saxons who were baptized but reverted to paganism. He offers advice on potential penance based on the decrees of earlier popes, but stresses that care should be taken to determine if the convert was forced back into polytheism or if they "returned to their vomit" of their own free will.<sup>200</sup> This is significant for two reasons. First, Charlemagne has asked for Hadrian's input in dealing with the problems of the Saxon conversions, demonstrating that the king is open to advice, at least to some degree, and that the Papacy is a potential place from which to solicit it. Second, though the situation is reversed, Hadrian recognizes that there is a distinction to be made between force and willingness when discussing religious conversion.

---

<sup>197</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 76, 607-608.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.: ". . . ut . . . vestris regales subiciantur potentiis, et maximum fructum in die iudicii ante tribunal Christi de eorum animarum salute offerre mereamini dignissimum munus, et pro amore arum lucre infinita mereamini adipisci regnum."

<sup>200</sup> "Codex Carolinus," no. 77, 608-609.

What we have seen thus far is a Papacy dependent on the king, but unafraid to use its influence to win favor and emphasize its usefulness via the intercessions of St. Peter. It so happens that Charlemagne's main occupation is war, often against non-Christians, and there seems to be little reluctance to portray God as the ultimate ally in battle. If God decides the victor in battle, every triumph can also be viewed as a divine nod of approval. By highlighting his role in the king's victories, and abstaining from any question or condemnation of his conversion policies, I believe Pope Hadrian's words offered Charlemagne a great deal of encouragement.

One letter from the abbot Eanwulf is worth noting. Writing to Charlemagne in 773, he advises the king to "hasten to extend the Christian faith in the people subject to you; increase your zeal of righteousness in their conversion; persecute the worship of idols; destroy the buildings of sanctuaries; establish the morals of the subdued by great purity of life, and by exhorting terrifying, enticing, correcting, and demonstrating by example of good work; so that you might find recompense in heaven . . ." <sup>201</sup> Though Eanwulf does not acknowledge it, he is here quoting the words of Pope Gregory the Great, as the latter attempted to convince King Aethelbert of Kent to take a more decisive role in the conversion of his people. <sup>202</sup> Pope Gregory would later change this stance in his more well-known letter to Augustine of Canterbury, stating that only the idols within the temples should be destroyed, after which they could repurposed for the worship of the Christian God. <sup>203</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> "Epistolae Variorum Carolo Magno Regnante Scriptae," no. 120, ed. E. Dummler, *MGH Epp. II*, 409: "*Christianam fidem in populis tibi subditis extendere festina; zelum rectitudinis tuae in eorum conversione multiplica; idolorum cultus insequere; fanorum aedificia everte; subditorum mores et magna vitae munditia exhortando, terrendo, blandiendo, corrigendo et boni operis exemplo monstrando aedifica; ut illum retributorem invenias in caelo . . .*"

<sup>202</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford University Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>203</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 56-7.

Now let us turn briefly to two letters from Alcuin of York regarding the Saxons. Writing in late 789, Alcuin asks an unknown bishop how the Saxons are responding to his preaching.<sup>204</sup> Because every Saxon was required to be baptized in accordance with the capitulary mentioned above, and the penalty for noncompliance was death, one may judge that the majority of the Saxons Alcuin refers to were already outwardly Christianized.<sup>205</sup> This concern would seem to indicate that he cared about the spiritual well-being of the Saxons beyond the simple veneer of conformity.

Writing again early the following year, Alcuin informs Colcu, abbot of Clonmacnoise in Ireland, that the church is expanding thanks to Charlemagne's efforts.<sup>206</sup> He relates that the Saxons and the Frisians were converted under pressure from the king, "some by rewards, others by agitating threats."<sup>207</sup> There is no hint of criticism here, and Alcuin smoothly continues to a discussion of other current events and conflicts in which Christian armies are victorious over nonbelievers. The latter two letters come in the midst of the eight-year peace following the events of 785, and Alcuin likely believed at that point that the king's policies had been successful. The lack of criticism present in the second of these I believe is evidence of the fact that Alcuin had no problem with Charlemagne's methods up to this point. This is consistent with the attitudes displayed by the other men discussed here, whose words encouraged the king to continue seeking a more permanent solution to the Saxon problem by whatever means he saw fit. Before examining more of Alcuin's letters, the following chapter will discuss the events which occurred between the end of this peace and the conclusion of the Saxon Wars in 804.

---

<sup>204</sup> "Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae," no. 6, 31.

<sup>205</sup> "Capitulare Paderbrunnense," 49: "*Si quis deinceps in gente Saxonorum inter eos latens non baptizatus se abscondere voluerit, et ad baptismum venire contempserit, paganusque permanere voluerit, morte moriatur.*"

<sup>206</sup> "Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae," no. 7, 31-32.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.: ". . . nam antique Saxones et omnes Frisonum populi, instante rege Karolo, alios premiis et alios minis sollicitante, ad fidem Christi conversi sunt."

## THE END OF THE CONFLICT, 793-804

After nearly a decade of peace following the events of 785, in 793 it is recorded that Charlemagne received word of the “general defection” of the Saxons, though he possibly knew of this sooner, in late 792.<sup>208</sup> In the campaign season of 794 he invaded Saxony for the first time since 785, yet the chronicler reports that the Saxons “were converted to surrender” without a fight.<sup>209</sup> I find this use of language very intriguing, as the same word (*converto*) which has been associated with religious conversion is here being used to describe military surrender and political subjugation.

Though the Saxons appeared cowed, Charlemagne, “not forgetful of their perfidy,” again in 795 marched into Saxony at the head of an army and held a general assembly.<sup>210</sup> It is then that he heard that the Saxons had ambushed and killed his ally Witzan, the king of the Abodrites, a deed which “acted as a goad to the king’s spirit, spurring him to the swifter conquering of the Saxons, and aroused him to greater hatred of that perfidious people.”<sup>211</sup> In 796, Charlemagne invaded Saxony while his son Pippin simultaneously advanced into Pannonia and attacked the Avars. Pippin completely destroyed the famed ring-fort of the Avars, in essence the capital, and brought immense treasure back to his father.<sup>212</sup> The Avar leader, the *tudun*, came to Charlemagne at Aachen and submitted personally. Accepting Christianity was likely one of the

---

<sup>208</sup> “RAKF,” 95: “. . . erat Saxonum omnimoda defectio . . .”

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 97: “. . . ad deditonem omnes conversi sunt, victique sine proelio, regis victoris potestati se subdiderunt.”

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.: “*Quamquam Saxones aestate praeterita et obsides dedissent, et secundum quod iussi errant sacramenta iurassent, rex tamen illorum perfidiae non inmemor, conventum generalem trans Rhenum . . .*”

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.: “. . . subito ei nuntiatum est, Witzinum, regem Abodritorum, cum Albim traiceret, in dispositas a Saxonibus insidias in ipso flumine incidisse, et ab eis esse interfectum. Quod factum animo regis ad Saxones citius debellandos velut quosdam stimulus addidit, et in odium perfidiae gentis amplius excitavit.”

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 99: “. . . Pippinus autem Hunis trans Tizam fluvium fugatis eorumque regia, quae, ut dictum est, hringus . . . ex tota destructa . . .”

terms of surrender, and there the *tudun* was baptized together with those who had accompanied him.<sup>213</sup>

In 797 Charlemagne entered Saxony intent on destruction, this time ranging “to its furthest limits” where the ocean washes the shore between the Weser and the Elbe.<sup>214</sup> The “*Capitulatio Saxonibus*” was also issued in this year. It differed markedly from its predecessor in that it did not demand the death penalty for any listed infraction, even the murder of one of the king’s *missi*.<sup>215</sup> It also does not mention tithes, a fact which will be returned to shortly. The king had his armies winter in various places across Saxony, and before they could resume their campaign the following spring, Saxons seized many of the king’s legates, killing most and keeping a few for ransom. Angered, Charlemagne again razed Saxon lands through the summer of 798 while the Saxons themselves marched against and were defeated by the Abodrites, allies to the Franks.<sup>216</sup>

Charlemagne would spend much of the following three years in restoring Pope Leo III to the apostolic see, after the pope had been attacked by Roman aristocrats and only barely managed to reach the king alive. This task would end with Charlemagne being crowned *imperator et augustus* by Pope Leo on Christmas Day of the year 800.<sup>217</sup> The king sat in judgment of those who had attacked the pope, condemning them to death *en masse*.<sup>218</sup> However,

---

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 101: “*Tudun . . . ad regem venit ibique cum omnibus, qui secum venerant, baptizatus . . .*”

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.: “. . . nam usque ad ultimos fines eius, qua inter Albim et Wisuram oceano alluitur, accessit.”

<sup>215</sup> “*Capitulare Saxonicum*,” in *MGH, Leges, I*, 72: “*De missis regis statuerunt, ut si ab eis aliquis interfector evenerit, in triplum eum componere debeat qui hoc facere praesumpserit.*”

<sup>216</sup> “*RAFK*,” 102-104.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 113: “*Ipse autem cum die sacratissima natalis Domini ad missarum solemniam celebranda basilicam beati Petri apostolicam fuisset ingressus, et coram altari, ubi ad orationem se inclinaverat, adsisteret, Leo papa coronam capiti eius inposuit, cuncto Romanorum populo adclamante: ‘Karolo Augusto, a Deo coronato magno et pacifico imperatori Romanorum, vita et victoria!’ Post quas laudes ab eodem pontifice more antiquorum principum adoratus est, ac deinde, omisso Patricii nomine, Imperator et Augustus appellatus.*”

<sup>218</sup> “*AKF*,” 114: “*Post paucos autem dies iussit eos, qui pontificem anno superiore deposuerunt, exhiberi; et habita de eis questione secundum legem Romanam ut maiestatis rei capitis dampnati [sic] sunt.*”

the pope reportedly interceded on their behalf and they were banished instead.<sup>219</sup> The king did not leave Rome for Aachen until after Easter of 801. The Lorsch Annals also report that while in Rome in 799 the king had sent orders that “a multitude of Saxons with women and children” be removed from their lands and resettled across Francia. The lands seized were distributed among Charlemagne’s *fideles* and local churchmen.<sup>220</sup>

In 802 Charlemagne sent an army of loyal Saxons to bring to heel their persistently rebellious brethren while he convened a synod to deal with religious matters.<sup>221</sup> Finally, the year 804 saw the end of the Saxon conflict as Charlemagne crushed the last of the rebellious tribes and again deported many Saxons, “remov[ing] all beyond the Elbe from their homes... and dispers[ing] them within his kingdom where he wished.”<sup>222</sup> After thirty-three years, the enemy that had plagued Charlemagne for the majority of his reign was at last suppressed.

Returning to the letters of Alcuin of York, writing in 796 with war raging again in Saxony, we see an attitude different from that of his contemporaries. The Avars had submitted to Charlemagne’s power in this year, and once they had done so Alcuin was prompted to consider the imminent task of their conversion. He advises Archbishop Arno of Salzburg to be a “preacher of piety, not an exactor of tithes” as it was “tithes, men say, that have destroyed the

---

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.: “*Pro quibus tamen papa pio affectu apud imperatorem intercessit; nam et vita et membrorum integritas eis concessa est, ceterum pro facinoris magnitudine exilio deportati sunt.*”

<sup>220</sup> “LA,” in *MGH, Scriptores, I*, 38: “*Et dominus rex inde tulit [sic] multitudinem Saxanorum cum mulieribus et infantibus, et collocavit eos per diversas terras in finibus suis, et ipsam terram eorum divisit inter fideles suos, id est episcopos, presbyteros, comites, et alios vassos suos . . .*”

<sup>221</sup> “LA,” 39.

<sup>222</sup> “MC,” in *MGH, Scriptores, I*, 307: “*Et deinde misit imperator scaras suas in Wimodia et in Hostingabi et in Rosogavi, ut illam gentem foras patriam transduceret; nec non et illos Saxones qui ultra Albiam erant, transduxit foras, et divisit eos in regnum suum ubi voluit,*” and “*Einhardi Vita Karoli Imperatoris,*” in *MGH*, 447: “. . . omnibusqui resistere solebant profligatis et in suam potestatem redactis, decem milia hominum ex his qui utrasque ripas Albis fluminis incolebant, cum uxoribus et parvulis sublatos transtulit, et huc atque illuc per Galliam et Germaniam multimoda divisione distribuit.”

faith of the Saxons.”<sup>223</sup> The inexperienced soul “should be nurtured with the milk of apostolic piety” until it grows and is strong enough for solid food, he argues, as even longtime Christians can find the yoke of the tithe oppressive.<sup>224</sup> It would appear that Alcuin is advising a new strategy with the Avars because he wishes to avoid those mistakes he believes caused the Saxons to reject Christianity.

He expresses a similar sentiment in a letter written to Charlemagne himself just a few months later, but only after offering sufficient praise. He begins by congratulating the king, through whose “devotion and ministry of holy faith and righteous will” God has worked to extend the kingdom of Christianity.<sup>225</sup> He praises the great “devotion and benevolence” with which Charlemagne labored to expand Christendom and “to soften the hardness of the unhappy people of the Saxons.”<sup>226</sup> Further, it is by divine will that the Avars too were subjected to Charlemagne’s “warring scepter,” Alcuin avers, stating that Christ “bound to the yoke of sacred faith necks long extreme in their arrogance and poured the light of truth into minds blind from ancient times.”<sup>227</sup> Alcuin echoes the words of Pope Hadrian when he contemplates the rewards which will be the king’s on judgment day, as “all those converted by your good care from the worship of idols . . . follow you, standing before the tribunal of Christ, and your reward of eternal beatitude will be increased from all of them.”<sup>228</sup>

---

<sup>223</sup> “Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae,” no. 107, 154: “*Et esto praedicator pietatis, non decimarum exactor, quia novella anima apostolicae pietatis lacte nutrienda est, donec crescat, convalescat et roboretur ad acceptionem solidi cibi. Decimae, ut dicitur, Saxonum subverterunt fidem.*”

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> “Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae,” no. 110, 157-159: “. . . *per devotionem et ministerium sanctae fidei et bonae voluntatis vestrae . . .*”

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.: “*Ecce quanta devotione et benignitate pro dilatatione nominis Christi duritiam infelicis populi Saxonum . . . emollire laborasti.*”

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.: “. . . *militantibus subdidit sceptris; praevenienteque gratia colla diu superbissima sacrae fidei iugo devinxit et caecis ab antiquo tempore mentibus lumen veritatis infudit.*”

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.: “*Qualis erit tibi gloria, o beatissime rex, in die aeternae retributionis, quando hii omnes, qui per tuam bonam sollicitudinem ab idolatriae cultura ad cognoscendum verum deum conversi sunt, te ante tribunal domini nostri Iesu Christi in beata sorte stantem sequentur et ex his omnibus perpetuae beatitudinis merces augetur.*”

Following these praises, Alcuin at last gets to the point; he asks the king to send pious men to the Avars who will teach with *suavia praecepta*, that is, gentle precepts, just as the Apostles did. He respectfully requests that Charlemagne consider whether imposing tithes is the correct course of action for those newly Christianized; for as he says, “it is better to lose that than to destroy faith.”<sup>229</sup> While here Alcuin is indeed questioning the program of conversion for the Saxons, he is doing so only indirectly, indicting neither Charlemagne himself nor the primary medium through which Christianity is introduced; martial conquest. Instead, it is the greed of lackluster preachers which is blamed for the failures in Saxony.

I think it worthwhile to note that both Riché and Ganshof take Alcuin’s words at face value in this regard, stating simply before moving on that it was indeed the imposition of tithes that had driven the Saxons to reject Christianity.<sup>230</sup> While the tithe was likely perceived by the Saxons as simple extortion, and thus did not help matters in the slightest, I am more inclined to view Alcuin’s assertion as somewhat of an excuse. The problem as outlined by Alcuin is one rather simple in nature, and thus easy to correct. For one aware of the problems in Christianizing Saxony but disinclined to judge too harshly his benefactor, the king, tithes and poor preachers provide convenient scapegoats.

Another letter of Alcuin’s from 796, written to the royal chamberlain Meginfrid, raises deeper theological issues. Within Alcuin offers more expansive complaints about predatory preachers, but also expounds upon the ideas of Augustine of Hippo regarding the proper manner in which to bring the uninitiated into the fold. He states that first the faith must be taught, then the sacrament of baptism undertaken, and finally the gospel precepts are to be related; if any one

---

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.: “*Sed melius est illam amittere quam fidem perdere.*”

<sup>230</sup> Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, 21, and Riché, *The Carolingians*, 105.

of these three is neglected, the listener's soul will not be able to achieve salvation.<sup>231</sup> More importantly, he then argues that just as Augustine said, "faith is a thing of will, not of necessity."<sup>232</sup> Alcuin continues, stating that "a man can be led into faith, not forced; he can be forced to baptism, but it will not help in faith."<sup>233</sup> This provides a clear challenge to the *ad hoc* mass baptisms which characterized the early years of the Saxon Wars.

Later in 796, after penning the abovementioned letters, Alcuin also wrote to Charlemagne's son Pippin, and on this occasion he told Pippin among other things to "be terrible to pagans."<sup>234</sup> Precise instructions do not accompany this statement, but it does not appear that Alcuin is advising leniency.

It is possible that Charlemagne was influenced by the ideas Alcuin expressed in his letters to the king, Arno, and Meginfrid, though whether Meginfrid shared Alcuin's words with the king is difficult to determine. There are no more mass baptisms recorded after 796, but as there were relatively few campaigns after this point this may simply be a coincidence. The "Capitulare Saxonicum" of 797 is conspicuously free of the more draconian strictures of its predecessor, and does not mention tithes.<sup>235</sup> Yet to what extent this second capitulary actually replaced or superseded the first is unclear. It must be stressed in closing that Alcuin never questions an underlying problem of some importance, wherein the potential converts encountered by missionaries had already been cowed by the king's armies. Even when Alcuin advised missionaries to teach before baptism, or to forego tithes, he was still operating under the assumption that the people being instructed in the faith had no choice but to listen. Instances of

---

<sup>231</sup> "Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae," no. 111, 159-162: "*Primo fides docenda est; et sic baptismi percipienda sunt sacramenta; deinde evangelica praecepta tradenda sunt. At si aliquid horum trium deerit, salute animae suae auditor habere non poterit.*"

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.: "*Fides quoque, sicut sanctus ait Augustinus, res est voluntaria, non necessaria.*"

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.: "*Adtrahi poterit homo in fidem, non cogi. Cogi poterit ad baptismum, sed non proficit in fide . . .*"

<sup>234</sup> "Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae," no. 119, 174: "*Esto fortis in adversaries, fidelis in amicos, humilis christianis, terribilis paganis . . .*"

<sup>235</sup> "Capitulare Saxonicum," in *MGH, Leges, I*, 71-2.

mass deportation replaced mass baptisms, and though perhaps not specifically designed to promote religious conversion, they were yet another vehicle through which the Charlemagne could physically and forcefully influence the lives of his Saxon subjects.

## LEGACY AND CONCLUSION

O blessed compassion of God that wishes all of the human race to be saved, because he had known that the hearts of this people could not otherwise be softened, and that their native stiff-necked stubbornness would not learn to submit itself to the soft yoke of Christ, he gave to them, as an instructor for this discipline and as a teacher of faith, the great Charles. He would press by war that which could not be conquered by reason, and thus force the unwilling to be saved. This practical plan that had been inspired divinely within his heart was accompanied by mighty deeds.<sup>236</sup>

So the anonymous Saxon Poet related Charlemagne's conversion of his people in his biography of the king, written at the end of the ninth century, well after Charlemagne's death. Such a view suggests that the author, a Christian descendant of those the king had so brutally repressed, was fully willing to justify the means by the end result. Einhard in his biography of the king lauded him for turning the Saxons from their "devil worship."<sup>237</sup> Nithard, a chronicler of the reign of Louis the Pious, applauded Charlemagne in a similar manner for turning the Saxons "from the vain adoration of idols to the true Christian religion of God."<sup>238</sup> The "Paderborn Epic," also known as *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* and sometimes attributed to Einhard, also portrays favorably Charlemagne's recognizance of the utility of fear:

What the contrary mind and perverse soul refuse to do with persuasion, let them leap to accomplish when compelled by fear, what wretched rebels at first did not do of their own accord, they eagerly rush to accomplish, with fright goading them. The one who in savage fashion for a long time refused to be pious, that impious one is made pious when coerced by holy fear.<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>236</sup> "Poeta Saxonis Annalium de Gestis Caroli Magni Imperatoris Libri Quinque," in *MGH, Scriptores, I*, 231: "*O pietas benedicta Dei, quae vult genus omne humanum fieri salvum, quia noverat huius non aliter gentis molliri pectora posse, disceret ut cervix reflectere dura rigorem ingenitum, mitique iugo se subdere Christi, ob hoc doctoruem talem fideique magistrum, scilicet insignem Carolum donavit eisdem, qui bello premeret, quos non ratione domaret, sicque vel invitos salvari cogeret ipsos. Hoc inspiratum cordi divinitus eius utile consilium comitantur strenua facta.*"

<sup>237</sup> "Einhardi Vita Karoli Imperatoris," 447: ". . . *cultum daemonum dimittere . . .*"

<sup>238</sup> Nithard, "Histories," trans. Bernard Walter Scholz and Barbara Rogers, in *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 166.

<sup>239</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 133, and Peter Godson, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., Ltd., 1985), 200-201: "*Quod mens laeva vetat suadendo animusque sinister, hoc saltim cupiant implere timore coacti; quod non sponte prius miseri fecere rebelles, exercere student avidi instimulante timore. Qui pius esse fero iam dudum more repugnat, fitque timore pio pius impius ille coactus.*"

Both the Paderborn Epic and the words of the Saxon Poet emphasize that the failure of “reason” and “persuasion” give way to the use of “war” and “fear.” Here the failure of the Saxons to understand and accept Christianity is a negative reflection solely on their ‘perverse’ and ‘impious’ people, who are too stubborn to recognize the truth when it is offered, and not on missionaries or the faith itself. Thus force is cast as a perfectly legitimate, even necessary, response.

The author of the *Vita Lebuini Antiqua*, writing no earlier than the 840’s, does not hesitate to place threats in the mouth of the titular missionary Lebuin (d. 775) when the latter encounters the intractable Saxons.<sup>240</sup> Speaking to an assembly of Saxons unwilling to convert, Lebuin says that “a certain king has been prepared in the neighboring land, who will enter your land, ravage it and devastate it. [He will] fatigue you with various wars, drive you into exile, disinherit or kill you, hand down your inheritance to whomever he wishes; and then you all will be subjected to him and even his posterity.”<sup>241</sup> I find especially intriguing the way in which Charlemagne is described as having been ‘prepared’ by God, as this choice of words implies that the king was brought with purpose to a position of sufficient power to allow him to undertake the actions discussed by Lebuin. This speech was received rather poorly by the Saxons present, who tried to stone the missionary, though he managed to escape with his life.

I will conclude with a letter addressed from Charlemagne to the newly raised Pope Leo III, likely dictated in 796. Within, the king tells Pope Leo that it was his own duty “to defend the church of Christ from every side, outwardly, by arms, from the assault of the pagans and from the devastation of the infidels, and within to safeguard it with knowledge of the Catholic

---

<sup>240</sup> Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 116-17.

<sup>241</sup> “*Vita Lebuini Antiqua*,” ed. A. Hofmeister, in *MGH, Scriptores, XXXII* (Stuttgart, 1934), 794: “*Quodsi eius non vultis fieri, tunc mandat haec vobis: Praeparatus est in vicina terra rex quidam, qui vestram terram ingreditur, praedabit vastabitque, variis vos bellis fatigabit, in exilium adducet, exhereditabit vel occidet, hereditates vestras quibus voluerit tradet; eique postea subditi eritis ac posteris eius.*”

faith.”<sup>242</sup> It is the duty of the Pope to “raise his hands to God” and assist the *militiam* of the king, so that the name of Christ can be made famous through the whole world.<sup>243</sup>

The manner in which the king viewed himself and his function as a Christian king, as related here, is entirely consistent with his missionary policies and his outlook with respect to polytheism. It is also consistent with the sentiments expressed in the missionary traditions and other correspondence discussed here. Aggressive means of demonstrating the inefficacy of other deities were depicted as worthy of emulation, and the vengeful God of the Old Testament acted upon the world to raise up his faithful and to convert or bring to ruin his enemies. Approval greatly outweighs any negative judgments in surviving letters, and along with this praise came the persistent demonization of polytheist peoples. The imagery used by both Alcuin and Pope Hadrian, of the Saxons converted by Charlemagne attending him as he awaits judgment before Christ’s tribunal, is powerful indeed. Such would more likely ensure the continuance of a policy rather than inspire reassessment.

These themes are present through the majority of the Saxon conflict, and up until 796 we can be confident that Charlemagne would have had no conceivable reason to doubt the path he had chosen. This confidence would have been further bolstered by his continuous successes on the battlefield. Charlemagne did not invade Saxony specifically for the purpose of converting its polytheist populace, but once involved there not using every means at hand to secure their conversion would have been all but unthinkable for the king, especially considering his aim of incorporating conquered lands into his kingdom. As Charlemagne’s frustration with the

---

<sup>242</sup> “Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae,” no. 93, 136-138: “*Nostrum est secundum auxilium divinae pietatis sanctam undique Christi ecclesiam ab incursu paganorum et ab infidelium devastatione armis defendere foris, et intus catholicae fidei agnitione munire.*”

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.: “*Vestrum est, sanctissime pater: elevatis ad Deum cum Moyse manibus nostram adiuvere militiam . . . nomen domini nostri Iesu Christi toto clarificetur in orbe.*”

persistently intransigent Saxons grew, he surely felt that the steps he took, including the issuance of *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae*, were fully in line with what the situation demanded.

Even after 796 the extent to which the cultural climate would have allowed for a change in attitude to occur seems relatively small. For if the king did take Alcuin's advice and consciously refrain from baptizing bands of Saxons upon their defeat as he had previously, the fact still remained that these Saxons would be forced to accept Christianity; this would simply take place over a longer period of time. I hope in the course of demonstrating this to have blended the different types of source material in a manner reflective of the symbiotic relationship in this period between territorial expansion, military might, and evangelization.

While Alcuin's objections reflect real fears from a theological and theoretical standpoint, these fears were not shared, and there were levels of force he was prepared to accept. The efficiency with which fear and military force made polytheists amenable to hearing Christian teachings was too useful to ignore, and far preferable to the slow process of persuasion by argumentation which, if Sullivan is to be believed, was quite ineffective in practice. Once made to heed preachers, the Saxons in time would come to appreciate the teachings and the benevolence of the one true God and their souls could be saved. To dissuade Charlemagne from the belief that conversion by force was preferable to the persistence of idolatry would have required a great deal more effort than Alcuin or his Carolingian contemporaries were willing to offer.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

- Admonitio Generalis*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Leges I. Hannover, 1835; reprint 1963.
- Alcuini Sive Albini Epistolae*. Edited by E. Dummler. In MGH: Epp. II. Hannover, 1892.
- Altfridi Vita Sancti Liudgeri*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum, II. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Annales Laureshamenses*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum I. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Annales Mosellani*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum I. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Annales Qui Dicuntur Einhardi*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum I. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Annales Regni Francorum*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum I. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Capitulare Paderbrunnense*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Leges I. Hannover, 1835; reprint 1963.
- Capitulare Saxonicum*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Leges I. Hannover, 1835; reprint 1963.
- Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus*. Edited by B. Krusch. In MGH: Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum II. Hannover, 1888.
- Chronicon Moissiacense*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum II. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Codex Carolinus*. Edited by W. Gundlach. In MGH: Epp. I. Hannover, 1892.
- Egilis Vita Sancti Sturmi*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum II. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Einhardi Vita Karoli Imperatoris*. Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: Scriptorum II. Hannover, 1829; reprint 1963.
- Epistolae Variorum Carolo Magno Regnante Scriptae*. Edited by E. Dummler. In MGH: Epp. II. Hannover, 1892.

*Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X.* Edited by B. Krusch. In MGH: *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum I.* Hannover, 1888.

*Poeta Saxonis Annalium de Gestis Caroli Magni Imperatoris Libri Quinque.* Edited by G.H. Pertz. In MGH: *Scriptores I.* Hannover: 1826; reprint 1963.

*Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo.* Edited by W. Levison. In MGH: *Scriptores Rerum Germanicum in Usus Scholarum.* Hannover and Leipzig, 1905.

*Vita Lebuini Antiqua.* Edited by A. Hofmeister. In MGH: *Scriptores XXXII.* Stuttgart, 1934.

*Vita Willibrordi Archiepiscopi Traiectensis Auctore Alcuino.* Edited by W. Levison. In MGH: *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum VII.* Hannover, 1920.

Augustine of Hippo. *Instructing Beginners in Faith.* Translated by Raymond Canning. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006.

Bede. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* Edited by Judith McClure and Roger Collins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Davis, Raymond, trans. *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis).* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000.

Dutton, Paul Edward. *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard.* Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1998.

Einhard, and Notker the Stammerer. *Two Lives of Charlemagne.* Translated by Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Classics, 2008.

Gregory of Tours. *Historia Francorum.* Translated by O.M. Dalton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927.

King, P. D. *Charlemagne: Translated Sources.* Kendal, Cumbria, England: P.D. King, 1987.

Loyn, Henry Royston, and John Percival. *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975.

*The New American Bible, Revised Edition.* Canada: World Catholic Press, 2011.

Poeta Saxo. *Life of Charles the Great.* Translated by Mary. E. McKinney. New York: Pageant Press, 1956.

*The Rule of St. Benedict.* Translated by Timothy Fry. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981.

Scholz, Bernard Walter, and Barbara Rogers. *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1970.

Wallace-Hadrill, J.M., trans. *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar and Continuations*. Translated by J.M. Wallace-Hadrill. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Airlie, Stuart. "Narratives of Triumph and Rituals of Submission: Charlemagne's Mastering of Bavaria." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series*, Vol. 9 (1999): 93-119.

Boswell, John. "Expositio et Oblatio: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient and Medieval Family." *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (Feb. 1984): 10-33.

———. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

Brown, Peter. "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion." *Journal of Roman Studies* 54, (1964): 107-116.

Bullough, D. A. *Carolingian Renewal: Sources and Heritage*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1991.

———. "Europae Pater: Charlemagne and His Achievement in the Light of Recent Scholarship." *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 334 (Jan., 1970): 59-105.

Butt, John J. *Daily Life in the Age of Charlemagne*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Chandler, Cullen J. "The Role of the Adoptionist Controversy in Charlemagne's Conquest of the Spanish March." *The International History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Sep., 2002): 505-527.

Collins, Roger. *Charlemagne*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Cosambeys, Marios, Matthew Innes and Simon MacLean. *The Carolingian World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

De Jong, Mayke. *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West*. Lieden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1996.

Duggan, Lawrence. "For Force is Not of God"? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne." In *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, edited by James Muldoon, 49-63. University of Florida Press, 1997.

- Dunn, Marilyn. *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- Fichtenau, Heinrich. *The Carolingian Empire*. Translated by Peter Munz. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957.
- Fitzgerald, Allan D., ed. *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.
- Ganshof, F.L. *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*. Translated by Janet Sondheimer. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Godman, Peter. *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1985.
- Hen, Yitzhak. "Charlemagne's Jihad." *Viator* 37 (2006): 33-51.
- James, Edward. *The Franks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- King, Peter. *Western Monasticism: a History of the Monastic Movement in the Latin Church*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1999.
- Knowles, David. *The Monastic Order in England: a History of Its Development from the Times of St Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 943-1216*. Cambridge University Press, 1941.
- Lackner, Bede Karl and Kenneth Roy Philp, eds. *Essays on Medieval Civilization*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.
- Lawrence, C.H. *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Longman House, Inc., 1989.
- Lynch, Joseph H. *Simoniacal Entry into Religious Life from 1000 to 1260: a Social, Economic, and Legal Study*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1976.
- Mayr-Harting, Henry. "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800." *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 444 (Nov., 1996): 1113-1133.
- McCormick, Michael. *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- McKitterick, Rosamond, ed. *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- . *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

- . *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789-895*. London: Royal Historical Society, 1977.
- . *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751-987*. London: Longman Group, 1983.
- Noble, Thomas F.X. and John J. Contreni, eds. *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1987.
- Quinn, Patricia. *Better Than the Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989.
- Riché, Pierre. *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*. Translated by Michael Idomir Allen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Sidey, Thomas K. "The Government of Charlemagne as Influenced by Augustine's 'City of God.'" *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Nov., 1918): 119-127.
- Sullivan, Richard E. "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan." *Speculum* 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1953): 705-740.
- . "Carolingian Missionary Theories." *The Catholic Historical Review* 42, No. 3 (Oct., 1956): 273-295.
- Wallace-Hadrill, J.M. *The Frankish Church*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.
- Wood, Ian. *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001.

## VITA

Alexander Scott Dessens was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1989. He lived there for five years before moving to Mandeville, Louisiana. There he graduated from Fontainebleau High School in 2007 before continuing his education at Louisiana State University. He received a B.A. in History from LSU in December of 2010.