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‘Vassal’ or ‘political player’? Towards a re-assessment of Willibrord’s political activity in Merovingian Francia (AD 690–739)

Abstract: The activity of Insular clerics in the Frankish kingdom during the late seventh and early eighth centuries has long been portrayed as the first systematic cooperation between religious and political powers in early medieval Europe. Focusing on the Northumbrian missionary Willibrord (658–739), the chapter reassesses the way in which he was able to exercise political influence. The study reconsiders the two master narratives that have guided modern historians in their analysis of Willibrord’s activity on the continent: The impact of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ missions on the Frankish kingdom and the rise of the Carolingian dynasty in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Firstly, the chapter reconsiders the reliability of the the so-called *Liber aureus* compiled at Echternach between 1191 and 1231. Secondly, by analyzing the geographical range of the donations made to Willibrord and the political standing of the persons involved, the article considers Willibrord not as a straightforward supporter of the ‘Christianisation’ of Frisia led by the Carolingians, but as a more independent political actor able to establish networks which reached beyond the Pippinids’ sphere of influence.

Keywords: Willibrord, Liber aureus, Echternach, Carolingians, mission

According to Alcuin’s (d. 804) *Vita Willibrordi*, the Northumbrian cleric Willibrord baptised Pippin, the son of Charles Martel (d. 741), and foretold that the child would become greater than all the *duces* (‘leaders’) of the Franks before him.¹ Alcuin adds that the truth of Willibrord’s words was proven in his own time: the entire *populus* (‘nation’) of the Franks, now led by Charlemagne (d. 814), knew how his father Pippin (III, d. 768) had expanded the borders of the *imperium* (‘empire’), propagated Christianity in his realm and overseen the defence of the Church among the foreign *gentes* (‘nations’).² This passage mirrors an earlier chapter of the *Vita*, in which Alcuin refers to Charles

1 Alcuin, *VW*, 23 (ed. Levison, 133–134); for Pippin III’s baptism and Willibrord’s involvement see Gerberding 1994, 210–211; this chapter was originally intended as a preliminary sketch of my PhD thesis which I completed in 2021. The project was funded by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (project code: Will 17). I thank Carlo Cedro, Alexander Kelleher, Sihong Lin and Immo Warntjes for their helpful comments.

2 Alcuin, *VW*, 23 (ed. Levison, 133–134); see Moesch 2019, 101–103. Alcuin used the term *gens*, which was associated with non-Christian groups, to distinguish the pagan Frisians from the Christian *populus* of the Franks.

Martel's rise to power. After the death of his father Pippin II in 714, Charles defeated the Frisian leader Radbod and added Frisia to the paternal *imperium* ('empire'). Willibrord, who had arrived on the continent in 690 after a 12-year-stay in Ireland at the monastery of Rath Melsigi, was placed as a preacher among the Frisians and received the fort of Utrecht as his episcopal base, from where he began to "cleanse", through baptism, the *gens* "[which had been] conquered by the sword".³

In accordance with Alcuin's depiction, historians have argued that the progress of Willibrord's continental career was directly tied to the fortunes of the family which would later be known as the Carolingians and who, in 751, seized the royal title from the Merovingians. The political dimension of Willibrord's activity on the continent was reduced to his role as a "harbinger of Frankish expansion" to the Frisians.⁴ Although the problems associated with Alcuin's hagiographical reconstruction of Willibrord's life have been studied in detail, Alcuin's underlying suggestion that Willibrord played a crucial role in the rise to power of Charlemagne's ancestors persists in modern scholarship.⁵ At the same time, the question of to what extent his actions were driven by a Pippinid agenda has been raised.⁶ The persistency of the traditional perspective on Willibrord's relationship with the Pippinids is partly due to its integration into a wider historiographical narrative: Willibrord's activity apparently initiated a new era of missionary activity on the continent. In contrast to his predecessors from Ireland and Francia, he adopted a more 'effective' strategy which consisted in seeking the military support of Pippin II. Willibrord's ordination as archbishop of the Frisians by Pope Sergius I (d. 701) in 695 set the foundation for the Carolingians' later alliance with the papacy, which was developed through the efforts of the West Saxon Boniface (d. 754) and ultimately paved the way for Pippin III's coronation in 751.⁷

This approach to Willibrord's political role on the continent received its most distinct shape in Arnold Angenendt's suggestion that the relationship between Willibrord and the family of Pippin II was of "feudal nature" (*vasallitischer Natur*).⁸ This position

3 Alcuin, *VW*, 13 (ed. Levison, 127); for the translation see Veyrard-Cosme 2003, 55.

4 Angenendt 1973, 109: "Jede Grenzüberschreitung musste ihn [Willibrord] fortan als Boten nicht nur des Christentums, sondern auch der fränkischen Machtentfaltung erscheinen lassen"; see also Dierkens 1996, 463; Story 2003, 44–45, 50.

5 See Fischer 2012, 154–156, who takes up Angenendt's suggestion that Pippin II and Charles Martel tried to prevent the development of a Frisian Church independent of Frankish political influence; Nelson 2020, 41–50; on Alcuin's narration see Schäferdiek 1994, 181–187.

6 Costambeys 1994, 58–62; Palmer 2009, 6, 16.

7 Levison 1946, 50–59; Angenendt 1990, 17–18; Gerberding 1994, 209; Padberg 1998, 81–82; Weinfurter 2013, 63, 70; see also Schieffer 1972, 98–102; Honée 2000, 17–18; Goosmann 2019, 345–346, suggests that Pippin III's alliance with the papacy was not predetermined before 754.

8 Angenendt 1973, 65–66, 68–69, 76–78, diverges from the narrative set out by Levison by arguing that Willibrord neglected his role as archbishop of Utrecht because of his personal commitment to the Pippinids. Willibrord, therefore, apparently lacked the "Roman-canonical" (*römisch-kanonisch*) attitude of Boniface; Gerberding 1987, 135–136, follows Angenendt; for a critique of Angenendt's 'feudal' termi-

contrasts with more recent depictions of Willibrord as an independent political 'agent' or 'player'.⁹ With the exception of Marios Costambeys' article on the donations made to Willibrord in Toxandria, however, references to Willibrord's own agency outside of Frisia have remained on the sideline and have so far not been extended into a detailed case study.¹⁰ The lack of such a re-assessment of Willibrord's political role in Merovingian Francia accounts for the paradoxical situation that it continues to be fixed within the framework of the rise of the Carolingians, when at the same time it has also been described as "unclear".¹¹ The present chapter argues that the above-mentioned discrepancy is due to an imbalance between a fragmented corpus of contemporary sources for Willibrord's political role itself and a long-standing historiographical narrative that primarily relies on later sources.

Alcuin probably composed the *Vita Willibrordi* around 796, shortly after he had left the court of Charlemagne to become abbot of St Martin's at Tours.¹² From his point of view as a (former) member of the Carolingian court, he reduced the political development within the Frankish kingdom in Willibrord's time to the continuous triumphs of Pippin II and his descendants.¹³ Throughout the *Vita*, he refers to Pippin II and Charles Martel as *duces*, while their contemporary title under the Merovingian kings was *maior domus* ('mayor of the palace'). Alcuin shortened the transition from Pippin II to Charles Martel to a single sentence and decided to sidestep the opposition which Charles faced from various parties between 714 and 718, including his step-mother Plectrude (d. after 718), the Neustrian elite and their short-term allies from Frisia.¹⁴

Alcuin's omission of the political conflicts surrounding Charles' struggle for political domination was not simply the symptom of a *damnatio memoriae* towards the Merovingians, for the *Vita Willibrordi* was composed at a time when Alcuin reflected

nology see Fouracre 2000, 126–127, who nonetheless characterises Willibrord as a "dependant" of the Pippinids.

⁹ Wood 1994, 271; Hen 2010, 194–195, follows Levison's position but stresses Willibrord's ambition to "further his own goals"; see also Costambeys/Innes/MacLean 2011, 101–112.

¹⁰ Costambeys 1994, 39–42.

¹¹ Palmer 2009, 109: "The precise nature of Willibrord's political role here [in the period between 709–17] is unclear".

¹² Reischmann 1989, 7; Wood 2001, 89; Rambridge 2003, 377.

¹³ This has already been noted by Fritze 1971, 117. 132–139, although he contrasts Alcuin's "hagiography" with Bede's "historical" (and allegedly more reliable) account.

¹⁴ Alcuin, *VW*, 13 (ed. Levison, 127); Wood 1994, 317–318; Alcuin's diction contrasts with that of the *AMP*. Here, Pippin II and Charles Martel are referred to as *principes*, whereas their opponents are called *duces*. Both words can be translated as 'leader', but as Fouracre/Gerberding 1996, 342, have noted, *princeps* carries a more "imperial" connotation in this context; the so-called *Continuations of the Chronicle of Fredegar* (compiled between 727 and 768), on which the first part of the *AMP* is based, alternate between *dux* and *princeps*; see for example *AMP*, s.a. 725. 731 (ed. von Simson, 26–27); *Continuations*, 11. 13 (ed. Krusch, 174–175); for the political conflicts following the death of Pippin II see Fischer 2012, 50–66.

on the Carolingian approach to the spread of Christianity to the Franks' military opponents, namely the Saxons and the Avars. The hagiographical engagement with Willibrord provided him with an occasion to outline his concept of an ideal religious policy towards the territories conquered by the Franks and to highlight the necessity of baptism and religious education to ensure the successful establishment of the Christian faith. Alcuin thus retrospectively modelled Pippin II and Charles Martel's conflict with Radbod on the campaigns of Charlemagne.¹⁵ In the *Vita*, the beginning of Charles Martel's career and the submission of Frisia are chronologically condensed. Thereby, Alcuin not only omitted Charles' struggle against his political rivals *within* Francia but also the chronological gap between Radbod's death in 719 and Charles' decisive victory against the Frisians, which was only realised through a renewed military effort in 734.¹⁶ Instead, the period after 714 is portrayed as the gradual expansion of early Carolingian power over the adjacent *gentes*.

Alcuin based his *Vita* on the *Historia ecclesiastica* of the Northumbrian scholar Bede (d. 735), which contains the earliest account of Willibrord's career.¹⁷ Although Bede completed his work in 731 and thus during Willibrord's lifetime, the chronological gap between its composition and Willibrord's departure from Ireland in 690 needs to be considered.¹⁸ Like Alcuin, Bede approached the topic retrospectively and adapted his knowledge of Willibrord, which he probably received from Acca of Hexham (d. c. 742), to the larger hagiographical framework of his work.¹⁹ In the *Historia*, Willibrord's appearance is subordinated to the life of the Northumbrian exile Ecgberct of Rath Melsigi (d. 729). Book Five, which contains the two chapters on Willibrord's career, reaches its narrative climax with the conversion of the monastic community of Iona to the Dionysiac reckoning of Easter after 716 through the effort of Ecgberct. In the penultimate chapter of the *Historia*, Bede presents the 'correction' (*correcti sunt per eum*) of the monks of Iona through Ecgberct as the fulfilment of the role played by the Northumbrian *Angli* in the spread of a Rome-centred Christianity. According to Bede, Ecgberct was only able to assume his role as the Northumbrian champion of the Roman reckoning of Easter because he abandoned his earlier plan to travel to the continent and to preach to the *gentes* there.²⁰

15 Wood 2001, 84–89; Rambridge 2003, 371–373; Story 2003, 50–51.

16 Continuations, 17 (ed. Krusch, 176); *Annales Alamannici*, s.a. 719. 734; *Annales Laureshamenses*, s.a. 719. 734; *Annales Nazariani*, s.a. 719. 734 (ed. Pertz, 3–4); *Annales Petaviani*, s.a. 719. 734; *Annales Sancti Amandi*, s.a. 719. 734 (ed. Pertz, 6–8); Fouracre 2000, 80; Fischer 2012, 78–79.

17 Bede, *HE*, V 10. 11 (ed. Plummer, 298–303).

18 On the date of Willibrord's departure from Ireland see Warntjes 2011, 191–196.

19 Higham 2006, 120–122; Thacker 2010, 178–179; on Acca's role as Bede's informant see Bede, *HE*, III 13. IV 14 (ed. Plummer, 152. 233).

20 Bede, *HE*, III 4. V 22 (ed. Plummer, 133–135. 346–348); for Ecgberct and Rath Melsigi see Ó Cróinín 1984, 21–25.

It is in this context, after the first unsuccessful attempt of the community of Rath Mel-sigi to gain a foothold in Frisia, that Bede introduces Willibrord as the member of Ecgbert's group who finally accomplished the original plan. Willibrord's mission to Frisia represents a 'spin-off' of Ecgbert's vocation within the *Historia*. Bede concludes his episodic account of Willibrord's continental career after two chapters and emphasises that his work in Frisia was completed by 731.²¹ Bede's description of Willibrord matches that of Ecgbert. In both cases, Bede characterises their activity as *praedicare* ('preaching') aimed at the correction of what he considered to be erroneous religious behaviour: rather than to differentiate between the instruction of 'pagans' and communities that were already Christian, Bede suggested that both undertakings were two sides of the same coin, namely the contribution of the *Angli* to salvation history in his own age.²²

Any reconstruction of Willibrord's political activity on the Continent depends to a large extent on Alcuin and Bede's works. From the perspective of both authors, Willibrord's enterprise was primarily supported by Pippin II and Sergius I, whose political and ecclesiastical ambitions seem to have complemented one another with regard to Frisia. Taken together, the accounts of the *Vita Willibrordi* and the *Historia ecclesiastica* seemingly reflect the pathbreaking cooperation between the Northumbrian missionaries represented by Willibrord, the Pippinids and the papacy, which, according to the traditional scholarly narrative, marked a decisive turning-point in the development of early medieval Europe.²³ Willibrord's arrival in Frisia in 690 has often been perceived as a dividing line between the activities of Insular clerics on the continent and later missionaries because it closely followed Pippin II's defeat of the Merovingian King Theuderic III (d. 691) at Tertry in 687. According to the pro-Carolingian *Annales Mettenses priores*, written in the early 9th century, Pippin took over the *singularem Francorum principatum* ('the sole leadership of the Franks') a year later.²⁴ Although Pippin's descendants would not usurp the royal title from the Merovingians until 64 years later, historians have generally followed the notion of the Carolingian sources that the battle of Tertry initiated the dynasty's rise to power. From a historiographical perspective, Alcuin and Bede's depictions of Willibrord's close relationship with Pippin II can easily support the assumption that the political domination of the

²¹ Bede, HE, V 19 (ed. Plummer, 326). Here, Bede follows the phrasing of Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi*, 26 (ed. Colgrave, 52) but, contrary to the latter author, he asserts that Willibrord completed what Wilfrid of York (d. 710) had only begun.

²² Bede, HE, III 4. V 10. V 22 (ed. Plummer, 135. 298–299. 347); Higham 2006, 175–177; Wood 2015, 186–187.

²³ See McKitterick 1995, 66–70; Busch 2011, 5–6; Bühner-Thierry/Mériaux 2019, 276–278.

²⁴ LHF, 48 (ed. Krusch, 322–323); Continuations, 5 (ed. Krusch, 171); AMP, s.a. 690. 691 (ed. von Simson, 7–12); the author of the AMP dated the battle to 690; on the dating see Weidemann 1998, 194, who concludes that the battle could also have taken place earlier than 687; for the translation of *principatus* see Fouracre/Gerberding 1996, 340–342.

Pippinids (and ultimately the Carolingians) over the Frankish kingdom was already predetermined at the end of the 7th century.²⁵

Ultimately, the depiction of Willibrord as a 'vassal' of the Pippinids and as a mere predecessor of Boniface follows a line of thought that anticipates the ecclesiastical and political developments under Pippin III and Charlemagne. Such an approach leaves little room for an open assessment of his own agency which considers the complex political and religious situation in Francia between his arrival and the consolidation of Charles Martel's position after 718. A comparison between the *Vita Willibrordi* and the *Historia ecclesiastica* with other sources for the late Merovingian period shows that both Bede and Alcuin simplified the context of Willibrord's activity. Both authors omit any reference to the Merovingians or to the political turmoil that broke out after Pippin II's death in 714. The resistance which Plectrude and Charles Martel faced from their Neustrian opponents, as they were both competing for the succession to Pippin's position, shows that the family's status remained contested over 25 years after the battle of Tertry.²⁶ While Pippin extended his family's influence over the court after 687, his position as *maior domus* was still defined by its integration into the Merovingian royal administration.²⁷ In contrast to the account of the *Annales Mettenses priores*, the note on Pippin's death in the *Liber historiae Francorum*, composed around 727, foregrounds the anonymous author's perception that the Merovingians had still exercised sovereignty in 714.²⁸

The same author also records that Charles Martel was defeated in battle by the Frisians under Radbod. The author of the *Annales Mettenses*, in contrast, sidestepped this piece of information.²⁹ Radbod's involvement in the conflict raises the question of to what extent Frisia was simply a peripheral region to the Pippinids' expanding sphere of influence as suggested by Bede and Alcuin. The sources record that the Neustrian faction led by King Dagobert III (d. 715) and his mayor of the palace Raganfred entered an alliance with Radbod after Pippin had died. Although Radbod is still depicted as a non-Christian leader, his ability to side with Charles Martel's enemies suggests that the relationship between the Frankish and Frisian polities was more complex than Bede and Alcuin's accounts of a confrontation between 'Christians' and 'pagans' postulate.³⁰ Finally, Pippin's son Grimoald had married Radbod's daughter before his assassination

25 Levison 1946, 56–57; Wampach 1953, 197–198; Schieffer 1972, 28. 98–102, links Pippin II's victory to Willibrord's mission but nevertheless highlights the opposition which Charles Martel later faced; Gerberding 1987, 92–93 and Fischer 2012, 204–205, have argued against the importance of Tertry as a historical turning-point.

26 LHF, 51–53 (ed. Krusch, 325–328); Continuations, 8–11 (ed. Krusch, 173–175).

27 Scholz 2015, 256–258; see also Bühner-Thierry/Mériaux 2019, 263–266.

28 LHF, 51 (ed. Krusch, 325): Eo tempore Pippinus febre valida correptus, mortuus est obtenuitque principatum sub suprascriptos reges annis 27 et dimidio.

29 LHF, 52 (ed. Krusch, 325–326); Continuations, 9 (ed. Krusch, 173–174); compare the latter accounts with the one in the AMP, s.a. 714 (ed. von Simson, 21); see also Fouracre/Gerberding 1996, 366.

30 LHF, 51 (ed. Krusch, 325); Continuations, 8 (ed. Krusch, 173); AMP, s.a. 714 (ed. von Simson, 21).

in 714.³¹ All this implies that Radbod was, despite his religious stance, a significant player in the Merovingian political landscape, while the dominance of the Pippinids over Frisia was anything but secure before the former's death in 719. At least until Radbod's death, the relationship between the Frankish kingdom and the Frisian territories differed from Charlemagne's campaigns against the Saxons and the Avars. In contrast to the hagiographical and pro-Carolingian narrative, Pippin did not consistently lead a unified Frankish realm against its pagan periphery.³² By considering the complexity of the political situation before the consolidation of Charles Martel's power, Willibrord's position between Francia and Frisia becomes more enigmatic. If the larger context of his activity was not one of early Carolingian military expansion and Frisian religious submission, how can his role as a political actor be defined?

When Charles Martel assured his position in 718, Willibrord had already spent 28 years on the continent. One of the most prominent events of his career, namely the foundation of the monastery of Echternach (in modern-day Luxembourg) in 697/8, took place within the first decade of his Continental activity.³³ Throughout his time on the continent, Willibrord received donations of property (either addressed to himself or to churches under his authority) by different landholders situated mainly in north-eastern Austrasia.³⁴ Significantly, both Bede and Alcuin ignore this important aspect of Willibrord's career. The *Historia ecclesiastica* does not even allude to the foundation of Echternach, while Alcuin only mentions the construction of the monastery in passing.³⁵ The silence of both authors regarding Willibrord's wider network is especially problematic since the traditional depiction of Willibrord as a dependant of the Pippinids rests primarily on the surviving evidence for the foundation of Echternach and the other donations he received.³⁶ However, none of the early medieval charters survive. Besides two charters issued by Charles Martel for Willibrord's church and

31 LHF, 50 (ed. Krusch, 324); Continuations, 7 (ed. Krusch, 172–173).

32 Fouracre/Gerberding 1996, 95; Palmer 2009, 106–107; Costambeys/Innes/MacLean 2011, 42–43. 48–49; it also remains unclear if Charles Martell pursued any distinctive “missionary policy” as questioned by Fouracre 2000, 127.

33 Trauffer 1999, 48–52.

34 Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 1–42; see also van Berkum 1989; Bijsterveld/Noomen/Thissen 1999.

35 Alcuin, VW, 21. 24 (ed. Levison, 132. 134); Alcuin, VW, 15 (ed. Levison, 128–129), mentions that Willibrord visited a *cellula* named *Suestra*. This is the same place in Toxandria where Willibrord received a chapel and a monastery by Pippin II and Plectrude in 714 and where the monk Ansbold issued a charter to Willibrord in 718 (Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 24. 28).

36 See Wampach 1929–1930, I 1, 118–141; Wampach 1954, 246–257; Gerberding 1987, 129; Anton 1989, 115–121; Parsons 1999, 136–138; Werner 1980, 139–158, disagrees with the then prevailing opinion that the Toxandrian donors were direct supporters of the Pippinids' political and cultural takeover of the region, but he nonetheless assumes that Toxandria was still a “missionary field” (*Missionsgebiet*); Theuvs 2010, 49–50 (note 57), disagrees with Costambeys 1994.

monastery in Utrecht,³⁷ the only extant source is the so-called *Liber aureus Epternacensis*, compiled between 1191 and 1231 at Echternach.³⁸

The *Liber aureus* begins with two books by the monk Theoderic, the so-called *Chronicon*. Although historians have traditionally referred to the *Liber aureus* as a ‘cartulary’, Ingrid Heidrich has argued that the compilation should be considered as a historiographical work.³⁹ The first book of the *Chronicon* begins with a prologue, followed by a history of the Frankish kingdom up to the time of Willibrord’s arrival on the Continent.⁴⁰ The second book starts with a chronology of the rulers from Pippin II to Emperor Henry VI (d. 1197). Theoderic then announces that he will now turn towards the foundation of Echternach and the *testamenta* for the property collected by the monastery from the death of Willibrord until “the introduction of the canons” in the 9th century.⁴¹ However, the text breaks off on folio 43^v with the summary of a donation dated to 726/7.⁴² Theoderic’s work was finished by a second hand between 1222 and 1231. Theoderic probably abandoned the *Chronicon* because of an ensuing conflict between the community of Echternach and the archbishop of Trier, John I (d. 1212), who tried to incorporate the monastery into his jurisdiction. At the end of the 12th century, Echternach faced the loss of its *libertas ecclesiae* and thus its direct subordination to Emperor Henry VI. In 1192, Theoderic addressed the emperor in a letter⁴³ which was later copied into the *Liber aureus*. By referring to the charters recorded in the *Chronicon*, Theoderic argued for the independence of Echternach from Trier based on its close ties to the kings and emperors since the time of Pippin II.⁴⁴ Theoderic consulted the monastery’s archive, but it is unclear if he still had access to original

³⁷ Heidrich 2011, nos. 12, 13.

³⁸ Gotha, Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek, Memb. I 71; the digitised manuscript can be accessed under: https://archive.thulb.uni-jena.de/ufb/receive/ufb_cbu_00011822 (accessed 30 January 2020); note that the online numbering of the folios does not correspond to the pagination within the manuscript. The author’s references follow the latter numbering which was also used by Wampach; the part which contains the charters is only partially edited as Theoderic, *Chronicon Epternacense* (ed. Weiland, 39–64); Ferrari 1994, 76–78; Margue 1999, 241–243; Heidrich 2000, 455–458; Falmagne/Deitz 2009, 19, 27; Schneider 2010, 134–137.

³⁹ Heidrich 2000, 455–456.

⁴⁰ Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fol. 4^r–20^v (ed. Weiland, 38–47).

⁴¹ On the canons see Margue 1999, 234–235.

⁴² Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fol. 21^r–22^v (ed. Weiland, 47–48).

⁴³ Theoderic, *Libellus de libertate Epternacensi propugnata*, fols. 111^r–120^r (ed. Weiland, 66–72); Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 215.

⁴⁴ Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fol. 29^r (ed. Weiland, 53): Sed ut ad describendam propositam seriem testamentorum redeamus, quid idem Pippinus cum inclyta et legitima coniuge sua Plectruda sancto Willibrordo in Epternaco vel alibi contulerit ex ipso tenore testamentorum suorum diligenter inspiciamus. Quorum descriptionem ipsimet anno 12. Childeberti gloriosi regis Francorum, qui est annus incarnationis Domini 706, competenter ordinaverunt, et ut ipsum monasterium Epternacense in sua et heredum suorum dominatione et defensione semper esset, sicut perspicue ex ipsis verbis eorum potest videri, diligenter hoc modo confirmaverunt; Margue 1999, 241–245; see also Heidrich 2000, 456–457.

documents or if he relied on later copies or notes.⁴⁵ He gathered further information from two *Lives* written by Thiofrid, abbot of Echternach from 1081 to 1110. Before 1081, Thiofrid composed a *Vita* of Irmina, abbess of the monastery of Oeren in Trier, who allegedly donated her property in Echternach to Willibrord for the establishment of his monastery. A *Life* of Willibrord, based on Alcuin's text, was written between 1104 and 1105 in both prose and verse form.⁴⁶ Thiofrid inserted summaries of donations made to Willibrord into both *Lives* and indicated that he still had access to original charters but that he was unable to read all of them.⁴⁷ The donations recorded in the *Liber aureus* were edited and published by the Luxembourgish historian Henri-Camille Wampach (1884–1958) in two volumes between 1929 and 1930. For Willibrord's time on the Continent, Wampach lists 41 legal acts, dating the earliest donation to the year 692/3.⁴⁸ Wampach's extensive reconstruction differs greatly from the structure of the *Liber aureus* and the fragmented evidence contained within it. Of the 41 legal acts listed by Wampach, nine are only recorded in the form of short summaries in the manuscript.⁴⁹ Wampach added two⁵⁰ donations mentioned only in Thiofrid's *Vita Willibrordi* to his list and reconstructed another six⁵¹ from internal evidence contained within the *Liber aureus*, while no. 39 represents the 'testament' of Willibrord, dated to 726.⁵² Wampach's method accounts for his vague dating of some of the donations.⁵³ Nevertheless, he organised all the donations according to his own chronological order, thereby partially inverting their order in the manuscript.⁵⁴ Ulti-

45 Schneider 2010, 139–140.

46 Thiofrid, *Vita s. Willibrordi* (ed. Poncelet, 459–483); Thiofrid's *Life* of Irmina is edited as part of Theoderic, *Chronicon* (ed. Weiland, 48–50); the copy made by Theoderic is the earliest extant copy of this text; Ferrari 1994, 49–61. 63–68.

47 Thiofrid, VW, 12. 22 (ed. Poncelet, 468, 472–473); the donations mentioned by Thiofrid are Wampach, 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 4. 6. 11. 13. 14. a combination of 16 and 20. 21. 24. 31. 34. 37. 38. and a donation by Charles Martel mentioned in the introduction to no. 41; the donations mentioned in the *Vita Irminae* are nos. 4. 6; Heidrich 2000, 455–456; Schneider 2010, 132–140, assumes that more charters were lost between the early 12th century and the compilation of the *Chronicon* because Theoderic did not include all the donations mentioned by Thiofrid.

48 See note 34; for the debate about the dating of the earliest charters, conducted especially in Dutch and Belgian historiography, see Honée 1996, 103–113. I thank Jelle Visser for pointing out this aspect to me.

49 Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 1. 2. 5. 7. 12. 19. 29. 32. 40.

50 Wampach, 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 13. 22.

51 Wampach, 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 18. 23. 36. 37. 38. 41; no. 18 is based on a donation mentioned in no. 19; nos. 36. 37. 38 are based on no. 39.

52 For the 'testament' see Poncelet 1906, 163–166, who has defended the document's authenticity; Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, 85 dismisses the designation 'testament'; Heidrich 2000, 455–456, note 3, lists it as "ge- oder verfälscht".

53 See for example Wampach, 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 36. 37. 38.

54 See note 72.

mately, his edition partially conceals the *Liber aureus*' nature as a complex compilation of the late 12th century.

Wampach's approach to the edition was tied to his interpretation of the charters: the donations recorded by Thiofrid and Theoderic allegedly support the notion that Willibrord was a close ally of the Pippinids and that the foundation of Echternach, which was to become an important abbey during the time of Pippin III, was an early 'Carolingian' project.⁵⁵ Wampach tried to harmonise the content of the *Liber aureus* with the narrative established by Bede and Alcuin, as the example of the donor Irmina demonstrates. In the first part of the *Liber aureus*, Theoderic recorded four donations and a testament issued by the *abbatissa* Irmina.⁵⁶ In the latter document, dated to 1 December 697/8, she donates her inherited property at the *villa* of Echternach to the church and the monastery held by Willibrord.⁵⁷ Wampach expanded on the assumption that the Irmina in question was the abbess of Oeren and the mother of Plectrude, the wife of Pippin II. Following this line of thought, Irmina was also the mother of Adela of Pfälzel (d. after 732/3) and Bertrada (d. after 721), the foundress of the monastery of Prüm. Bertrada's granddaughter of the same name later married Pippin III. According to Wampach's influential argumentation, Irmina's role in the foundation of Echternach expressed the alliance of two of the leading Austrasian families, thereby setting the foundation for the Carolingians' rise to power.⁵⁸

A critical examination of the evidence for Irmina of Oeren's relation to Willibrord, however, shows that the *Liber aureus* cannot readily be fitted into the narrative of earlier sources. First, the Irmina mentioned in the *Chronicon* is never referred to as the abbess of *Oeren* in the text of the charters, only by Theoderic.⁵⁹ However, he never identifies her as the mother of Plectrude. The argument for a possible relation between Irmina and Plectrude rests largely on onomastic evidence.⁶⁰ Secondly, no

⁵⁵ Wampach, 1929–1930, I 1, 114–124; repeated in Wampach 1953, 258–259.

⁵⁶ Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 3. 4. 6. 9. 10.

⁵⁷ Wampach 1929–30, I 2, no. 4.

⁵⁸ Wampach 1929–1930, I 1, 129–135; Werner 1982, 11–34, summarises this narrative; Werner's conclusion, namely that there is not enough evidence to suggest a relation between Irmina of Oeren, Adela of Pfälzel and the Pippinids, was criticised by Hlawitschka 1985. Since then, the discussion has ebbed off; for the lasting impact of this narrative see Palmer 2009, 91–93; Fischer 2012, 155; Nelson 2020, 39.

⁵⁹ The titles recorded in Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 3. 4. 6. 9. 10, are in *Christo Deo sacrata abbatissa* (3), in *Christo nomine Deo sacrata acsi indigna gratia Domini abbatissa* (4), in *Christo Deo sacrata abbatissa* (9. 10) and *abbatissa* (6).

⁶⁰ The *Liber aureus* contains the summary of a donation, dated to 704, made by a certain Ymena and her daughters Crodellind and Attala to Willibrord. Scholars have equated Ymena with Irmina of Oeren, Crodellind with Betrada the elder and Attala with Adela of Pfälzel. A donation by Adela of Pfälzel, recorded as part of a compilation made between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, mentions her sister (*germana*) Regentrude alongside Plectrude. Despite the fact that only the former is clearly identified as Adela's sister, historians have combined both sources to suggest that Adela, Plectrude and Bertrada were daughters of Irmina of Oeren; Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 12; Wampach 1935, no. 19. Werner 1982, 27. 99–120, has shown that the evidence is insufficient to equate Ymena with the

contemporary source mentions Irmina of Oeren (or her involvement with Willibrord). The earliest surviving text which links the abbess of Oeren with Echternach is Thiofrid's *Vita Irminae*.⁶¹ Thiofrid wrote the text for the nuns of Oeren, who had begun to venerate an Irmina as the monastery's patron by the second half of the 10th century. Modesta, Irmina, Anastasia and Basilissa are, however, not recorded as Oeren's first abbesses until the 12th century.⁶² The lack of early medieval sources for Irmina of Oeren is aggravated by the fact that the names of Modesta and Anastasia are recorded in sources from Willibrord's lifetime.⁶³ Olaf Schneider has argued that Thiofrid's basis for his association of Irmina of Oeren with Echternach is a chapter in Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi*, in which Willibrord fends off a plague at a nunnery in Trier. Alcuin, however, does not mention the name of the nunnery's leader.⁶⁴ According to Schneider, Thiofrid was aware of the reference to an *abbatissa* Irmina among the records preserved in the monastery's archive. When he composed his *Life* of Irmina, he adapted his knowledge of Alcuin's text to the contemporary cult of Irmina of Oeren and to the history of Echternach. Thiofrid inserted the donations made to Willibrord by the *abbatissa* into his *Life*, which Theoderic then used to compile the *Chronicon*.⁶⁵

According to Wampach, the *Liber aureus* proves the interconnectedness between Willibrord, Irmina of Oeren and Pippin's II family. In contrast to this assumption, a reassessment of the evidence suggests that by the 12th century, the monks of Echternach did not possess any tradition that linked Irmina of Oeren back to Willibrord's time. Rather, they re-imagined the figure of the *abbatissa* Irmina according to their own needs. After the chronology of rulers in the second book of the *Chronicon*, Theoderic's narrative shifts to Irmina, Pippin and Willibrord.⁶⁶ He then inserts Thiofrid's *Vita Irminae*, followed by the testament and her donations.⁶⁷ The other donations are only recorded after the Irmina-section, starting with two charters by Pippin II and Plectrude.⁶⁸ Although Theoderic copied Thiofrid's *Vita Irminae*, he greatly expanded the role of Irmina in the foundation of Echternach. Whereas Thiofrid mentions Irmi-

abbatissa Irmina; Hlawitschka 1985, 19–26 defends the reconstruction of the relation; see also Anton 1989, 122.

⁶¹ See note 46 and Schneider 2010, 132–133.

⁶² Irmina was wrongly remembered by the community of Oeren as the monastery's foundress and as a daughter of the Merovingian king Dagobert I (d. 639); Werner 1982, 36–37.

⁶³ For Modesta (*abbatissa in monasterio Treverense*) see De Virtutibus Sanctae Geretrudis, 2 (ed. Krusch, 465); for Anastasia (*abbatissa puellarum in Horreo*) see Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 19; Anastasia's name is also recorded in a marginal note under 9 December in the so-called *Calendar* of Willibrord, compiled between 703 and 728 at Echternach, BnF Lat. 10837, fol. 40^r (Wilson 1918, 44): <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6001113z/f14.image> (accessed 30 January 2020).

⁶⁴ Alcuin, VW, 21 (ed. Levison, 132).

⁶⁵ Schneider 2010, 174–179.

⁶⁶ Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fols. 21^r–22^v (ed. Weiland, 47–48).

⁶⁷ Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fols. 26^r–28^v (ed. Weiland, 48–53).

⁶⁸ Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fol. 29^r (ed. Weiland, 53).

na's support for Willibrord, but (like Alcuin) asserts that Willibrord founded Echternach by himself,⁶⁹ Theoderic characterises Echternach as a joint foundation by Irmina, Pippin, Plectrude and Willibrord.⁷⁰

The structure of the *Liber aureus* reflects the new role attributed to Irmina of Oeren by Theoderic. Wampach did not ignore the political dimension of Theoderic's interest in the abbess of Oeren, but his focus on the supposed link between Irmina and the Carolingians overrode the former aspect: by listing the donations in chronological order, Wampach's edition sidestepped the problem associated with Theoderic's arrangement of his material.⁷¹ In the *Vita Willibrordi*, Thiofrid states that Willibrord withdrew Echternach from the influence of the bishopric of Trier by putting the monastery under the Pippinids' protection.⁷² Irmina's charter, dated to 1 November 697/8 and traditionally interpreted as a specification of the later testament, lists the bishops Basin and Liutwin of Trier both as witnesses and as initiators of the decision to donate her property to Willibrord.⁷³ Regardless of the question of the charter's authenticity, which cannot be discussed here in detail,⁷⁴ it seems probable that both Thiofrid and Theoderic were interested in the figure of Irmina of Oeren because of their monastery's continuous struggle against the territorial ambitions of the archbishop of Trier. By establishing Irmina's role in the foundation of Echternach, apparently in accordance with two bishops and Pippin II, Theoderic provided the monks with a historical argument for Echternach's independence from Trier and its closeness to the emperor.⁷⁵ Theoderic did not suggest a relation between Irmina of Oeren and Plectrude. Rather, his narrative anticipated Pippin and Plectrude's connection to Echternach, whereas the charters *after* the monastery's foundation.⁷⁶

69 Thiofrid, *Vita s. Irminae*, 5 (ed. Weiland, 49): Huic sanctissimo viro [Willibrord] beata virgo [Irmina] dedit medietatem fisci Epternacensis cum omnibus suis appendiciis [. . .] Qui construxit ibi aedificium et imposuit viros qui vitam exercebant monachicam.

70 Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fol. 31^v (ed. Weiland, 55): Ipse quippe anno ordinationis suae tercio monasterium Epternacense inchoavit et, cooperantibus sicut dictum est Irmina, Pippino et Plectrude aliisque quam plurimis nobilibus, feliciter consummavit; Schneider 2010, 136.

71 Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 1. 2 are recorded on fol. 31; nos. 3. 4 (Irmina's first charter and the testament) are recorded on fols. 25–26 and thus precede the other donations. Wampach also inverts the position of nos. 3 (fols. 26^r–27^r) and 4 (fols. 25^r–26^r) to comply with his chronological sequence.

72 Thiofrid, *VW*, 22 (ed. Poncelet, 473): [. . .] sed rata concessione ac firma testamenti conscriptione et astipulatione tradidit in ius et mundiburdium regum et imperatorum in ordine sibi legali iure succedentium.

73 Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 3; the testament (no. 4) only lists Basin and Liutwin among the witnesses.

74 See the analysis by Schneider 2010, 128–182.

75 Schneider 2010, 152–153. 186.

76 Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 14; Theoderic, *Chronicon*, fols. 29^v–30^v (ed. Weiland, 53–54); the transition between Irmina's charters and the first two charters by Pippin II and Plectrude contains Theoderic's statement that Echternach passed into the Pippinids' and their heirs' *dominatione et defensione* (see note 44). The second charter is followed by the statement that Echternach was a joint foundation

A promising approach could be to consider the *abbatissa* Irmina as a more independent political actor against whom the Pippinids were competing for influence in the region around Echternach. Pippin and Plectrude's first charter for Echternach indicates that, between 697/8 and 706, several parties were involved in the monastery's establishment.⁷⁷ Echternach was thus not a 'Carolingian' monastery from the start; Pippin's family needed to assert itself against other landholders first. Consequently, Irmina was marginalised in the institution's memory after 706. Thiofrid and Theoderic, therefore, did not 'rediscover' the link between Irmina and the Pippinids. They needed to create this link because none had previously existed: the analysis of the *Liber aureus*' composition suggests that the groups involved in the establishment of Echternach were competitors rather than allies investing in a common project.

In his extensive study of the evidence for Irmina of Oeren's relation to the Pippinids, Matthias Werner suggests that Pippin and Plectrude's claim to the ownership of Echternach led to a conflict with Irmina. However, Werner still identifies Irmina as the abbess of Oeren and assumes that the transition of Echternach to the Pippinids happened against the ambitions of the Trier episcopacy represented by Basin and Liutwin. According to Werner, Echternach became 'Carolingian' property in 706 as part of Pippin's *Klosterpolitik*.⁷⁸ Werner thus follows the narrative of the *Liber aureus* by assuming that, by 706, Echternach was firmly in 'Carolingian' hands and removed from the influence of Trier. In contrast, Olaf Schneider has argued that the Irmina in question was not the abbess of Oeren but an otherwise unknown nun (*deo sacrata*), whose titles and donations were modified in such a way by Thiofrid and Theoderic as to fit their narrative of Echternach's origin.⁷⁹ Even if Schneider's hypothesis is rejected and Irmina is identified as the abbess of Oeren in accordance with the established scholarly hypothesis, a reassessment of the evidence for Irmina's relation to the Pippinids shows that the identification of the *abbatissa* as the mother of Plectrude rests on Thiofrid and Theoderic's carefully constructed narratives. Consequently, by removing Irmina from the Pippinid family tree, it can be argued that Willibrord's political affiliations were neither restricted to one network of supporters nor predetermined from the beginning of his continental activities.

By carefully disentangling the different narratives, from Bede and Alcuin to the *Liber aureus* and finally to its modern reception, a more complex picture emerges. According to Wampach's edition, only seven of the 41 legal acts dated to Willibrord's

by Irmina, Pippin and Plectrude (see note 70); a drawing on folio 29^v stresses the link between Irmina and the Pippinids: it introduces the charters by Pippin II and Plectrude yet shows the *maior domus* and the abbess of Oeren holding the monastery; see also Werner 1982, 88.

⁷⁷ Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, no. 14, relates that Pippin II and Plectrude received their share of Echternach from Theodard, son of the *dux* Theotar; Werner 1982, 126–155, concludes that a relation between Irmina and Theotar is probable; see also Devroey/Schroeder 2012, 52–58.

⁷⁸ Werner 1982, 90–98; see also Trauffer 1999, 50–51.

⁷⁹ Schneider 2010, 147. 171–182.

lifetime were issued by a member of Pippin II's family.⁸⁰ In contrast, the remaining charters and summaries record the names of many other landholders, witnesses and scribes, most of whom are otherwise unknown. Their possessions and the property which they donated to Willibrord were mostly located in Austrasia, especially in the *pagus* Toxandria, which formed part of the Meuse area. This region is not mentioned by Bede or Alcuin but probably played a central role in the conflicts between Charles Martel, the Neustrian elite and Radbod.⁸¹ In the 7th century, churchmen from within the Frankish kingdom, such as Amandus of Maastricht (d. 679) and Eligius of Noyon (d. 659/660), had already been active here.⁸² Within the material of the *Liber aureus*, the significance of Toxandria (and the areas around the Lower Rhine and the Moselle), where Christian communities appear to have been firmly established before Willibrord's arrival, does not only conflict with the focus of the hagiography on Frisia; it also contrasts with Bede and Alcuin's depiction of Willibrord as solely a missionary in the wake of Pippinid expansion.

As the example of Irmina shows, earlier studies have tried to reconcile the *Liber aureus* with the framework established by the hagiography. In contrast, this brief analysis suggests that the discrepancy between the sources' political and geographical foci should be emphasised. In this context, the concept of political 'player' or 'actor' represents a helpful approach to reconcile the conflicting aspects within the surviving evidence. It acknowledges Willibrord's potential to attract the support of different groups besides the Pippinids across Merovingian Austrasia. It also highlights the agency of both Willibrord and Christian landholders in their decision to seek each other's support, thus avoiding a fixation on a 'Carolingian' framework for Willibrord's choices. Finally, such an approach raises new questions regarding the role of figures like Willibrord within Merovingian society: if he primarily interacted with Christian communities, to what extent does the concept of 'missionary' still apply to him? To what extent did conflicts *within* Christian communities shape his activities? In contrast to the perspective of the hagiographical sources, recent studies on the Christianisation of early medieval Europe have revised the importance of military expeditions and 'top-down' approaches for religious and social change.⁸³ A different approach to Willibrord's political activity, which acknowledges his far-reaching network, the possible conflicts he was involved in and the diversity of his religious role, allows for a

⁸⁰ Wampach 1929–1930, I 2, nos. 14. 15. 24. 25. 27. 29. 41; see also Heidrich 2000, 456–457.

⁸¹ For Toxandria see Werner 1980, 139–58; Costambeys 1994; Theuvs 2010.

⁸² Vita Amandi prima, 13 (ed. Krusch, 436–438); Vita Eligii Episcopi Noviomagensis, II 2 (ed. Krusch, 695–696); Esders 2016, 278–280; see also S. Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae, no. 109 (ed. Dümmler, 395–396), in which Boniface complains to Pope Stephen II about the archbishop of Cologne's claim to the see of Utrecht on the basis that King Dagobert I (d. 639) had apparently entrusted the conversion of the Frisians to his diocese.

⁸³ Nancy/Ní Mhaonaigh 2017, 2–7.

more complex picture of the process of Christianisation and the Insular missions to the continent that has emerged in the past decades.

Abbreviations

AASS	Acta sanctorum
AMP	Annales Mettenses priores
Continuations	Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus
HE	Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum
LHF	Liber Historiae Francorum
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MGH Epp.	Epistolae
MGH SRG	Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi
MGH SRM	Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
MGH SS	Scriptores
VW	Vita Willibrordi

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