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3 Studying the networks and the mobility of clerics between Ireland, Britain and Francia (c. 640–750)

The mobility of clerics between Ireland, Britain and Francia in the early Middle Ages left many traces both in the form of archaeological remains and written sources.¹ They testify to the foundation of monasteries, the emergence of saints' cults and the production of charters, letters and manuscripts which accompanied these developments. Some of these traces can appear marginal in the literal sense of the word: the manuscript carrying the shelf mark Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 10837 (see Figure 3.1) – today known as the *Calendar of St Willibrord* – contains a short note which was added in 728 to the margin of folio 39^v. The text recapitulates the career of the Northumbrian missionary Willibrord (d. 739) and records that he came to Francia in 690 “from across the sea” (*ueniebat ultra mare in Francea*). The note was probably composed by Willibrord himself, now bishop of Utrecht, at his own monastic foundation of Echternach in modern Luxembourg.² Although the note does not contain any specific reference to Northumbria or the monastery of Rath Melsigi in Ireland, from where Willibrord left for the continent, the indication that he had arrived in the Frankish kingdom³ from far away appears to have been of crucial importance to the author in the composition of his brief “biography”. Mobility, both on a local and supra-regional scale, constituted a basic precondition for the career of individuals like Willibrord – clerics of (sometimes but not exclusively) high social status who engaged in missionary activity and who could also assume the positions of abbot and/or bishop, thereby furthering the establishment or expansion of ecclesiastical infrastructure in their respective areas of influence.⁴ Female clerics, in turn, were

1 I thank Sihong Lin for his helpful comments and corrections.

2 Paris, BnF, Latin 10837, fol. 39^v, online: gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6001113z/f91.item (accessed: 07.03.2024); for the transcription of the note see *Calendar*. Ed. Wilson, 13; *Story*, Bede, Willibrord (2012), 797–799.

3 Reimitz, *Histories*, (2023), 35–44. The Merovingian realm was divided into several kingdoms in the course of the sixth century, of which Austrasia, Burgundy and Neustria were the most important entities. In the following, I use “Frankish kingdom” or “Francia” to denote the entire Merovingian realm, as it was increasingly perceived by contemporary elites as a single political entity (*regnum Francorum*) from the seventh century onwards.

4 Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons* (2009), 183–187.

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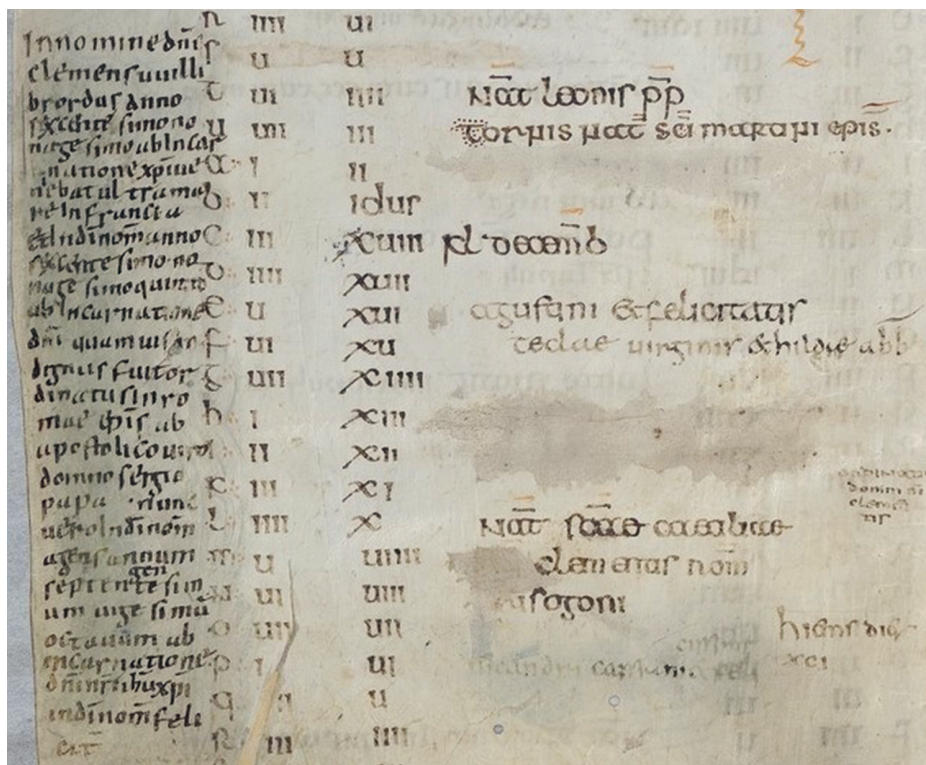


Figure 3.1: Marginal note in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 10837, fol. 39^v. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6001113z/f91.item (26.04.2024).

able to use the same channels of communication and travel routes that existed between Ireland, Francia and Rome to create their own networks as nuns, pilgrims and abbesses.⁵

In addition to the written evidence related to the mobility of clerics, archaeological sources and network analyses have increasingly been integrated into historical studies.⁶ As the methodological scope of the articles in the present volume demonstrates, the study of early medieval mobility benefits from an interdisciplinary approach which incorporates both the methods and findings of the natural sciences. Yet, as shown by the recent debate on the contribution of DNA and isotope analyses to the study of late antique and early medieval migration, archaeological remains and other data gathered from neighbouring disciplines are ultimately no more “objective” than

⁵ See, for example, Sancti Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae 3–4. Ed. *Tangl*. In a letter sent to Abbess Adela of Pfalz (d. after 732/33), Abbess Ælfflæd of Whitby (d. 714) asks her to support another Northumbrian abbess on her journey to Rome; *Nolte*, *Peregrinatio* (2007), 149–153.

⁶ *Hillner/MacCarron*, *Female networks* (2021), 31–40; *Schulze-Dörrlamm*, *Einwanderung* (2022).

the written sources on which historians rely. Their interpretation depends on the respective research questions, which are in turn influenced by the historiographical framework(s) and preconceived assumptions with which we approach our sources.⁷ Therefore, in this chapter, I want to take a step back methodologically and reflect on the study of early medieval mobility as based on the available written sources. In what follows, I will take as my example the movement of clerics between Ireland, Britain and Francia between the mid-seventh and mid-eighth century.

Given the restrictions of the present format, I limit the term “mobility” to the physical movements of persons across longer distances, homing in on the following question: to what extent is our knowledge of clerics’ mobility in the above-mentioned period shaped by, firstly, modern historiographical discourses and, secondly, by the extent and nature of the surviving written sources? The first part focuses on the alleged dichotomy between an “Irish” missionary movement on the one hand and an “Anglo-Saxon” one on the other, as it was perceived by historians in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the second part, I reconsider the supposed “divide” between these two groups by looking at common patterns which characterise the mobility of clerics in the period under consideration. Finally, using the example of Willibrord and the foundation of Echternach in 697/98, I briefly address the question of how Insular clerics integrated and adapted on the continent, while again considering the potential uses and limits of the available source material.

3.1 The mobility of Insular clerics in modern research

Mobility was already a characteristic trait of clerics in late Antiquity. However, the arrival of religious men and women from Ireland and Britain in the Frankish kingdom between the sixth and ninth centuries had a distinct impact on the social and cultural developments of the period in question. This is reflected, above all, in the rise of hagiographical texts and the foundation of monasteries from Frisia to northern Italy.⁸ The movement of people between these three regions relied on and encompassed many forms of mobility and communication, from trade networks to diplomatic missions.⁹ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians often perceived these contacts through the “lens” of Europe’s “Christianisation” following the alleged collapse of late antique culture triggered by the fall of the western Roman Empire. As Peter Brown put it, this traditional narrative saw the “age of

⁷ See Geary, *Herausforderungen* (2020), 22–29; Meier/Patzold, *Gene* (2021), 111–121.

⁸ Brown, *Rise* (3rd 2013), 219–247.

⁹ Drauschke, *Search* (2010), 27–37; Edmonds, *Practicalities* (2009), 141–147; Loveluck/O’Sullivan, *Travel* (2016), 28–34; Pestell, *Kingdom* (2018), 205–217; Picard, *De gente Scottorum* (2020), 389–395.

migrations” that characterised the fourth and fifth centuries followed by the “age of missions”, which culminated in the establishment of the Carolingian Empire in 800 and the restoration of a shared Christian culture north of the Alps.¹⁰ This development has long been connected with two names in particular: the first is that of Columbanus of Luxeuil (d. 615), who arrived in Merovingian Burgundy from Ireland around 590. The second is that of the West Saxon Boniface (d. 754), whose continental career intersected with the rise of the Carolingian dynasty in the first half of the eighth century.¹¹

In both modern historiography and popular memory, the men and women who arrived in Francia from Britain and Ireland have been primarily remembered as “missionaries”, that is, heroic individuals who advanced the spread of Christianity in the border regions of the Merovingian world.¹² The ideal of the *peregrinatio pro Christo*, which entailed leaving one’s homeland to attain a greater proximity to God, as well as the missionary incentive laid out in the gospels were often the primary motivations for clerical mobility, especially in Britain and Ireland.¹³ At the same time, many of the most prominent representatives of the so-called *irofränkische Mission* spent much of their continental careers *within* the borders of the Frankish world after their arrival – Columbanus and Boniface being no exception. Even in the north-east of the Frankish kingdom, in Austrasia and along the Rhine, missionaries were in many cases interacting with societies that had already been Christianised for at least several generations. Contrary to the notion of an “age of missions”, preaching among non-Christian communities was not the only factor that determined the mobility of Insular clerics on the continent. The foundation of monasteries, the development of an ecclesiastical infrastructure, participation in religious debates and political conflicts, the production of manuscripts and pilgrimages are just some of the many activities in which they partook, irrespective of their origin.¹⁴

In modern historiography, there has nevertheless been a tendency to divide these movements into two groups: the first one is the “Irish” mission or, as it is sometimes called in German scholarship, *irofränkische Mission* of the late sixth and seventh centuries.¹⁵ The second is traditionally summarised under the label of the “Anglo-Saxon” mission and its origins often dated back to Wilfrid of York’s (d. 710) brief (and probably involuntary) stay in Frisia in 678.¹⁶ Modern assessments of these two groups and

¹⁰ Brown, *Rise* (2013), 4–5.

¹¹ On Columbanus see O’Hara, *Introduction* (2018), 1–5; Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius* (1972), first published in 1954, remains one of the most influential depictions of Boniface’s life. For a more recent attempt to assess Boniface’s career see Aaij/Godlove (Eds.), *Companion* (2020).

¹² On the term “mission” and its application to the early Middle Ages see Wood, *Mission* (2016), 135–137.

¹³ Johnston, *Exiles* (2016), 41–47.

¹⁴ Bully/Picard, *Mensa* (2017), 136–139; Fox, Metz (2018), 212–218; Hen, *Milites* (1999), 17–20.

¹⁵ For a more recent overview see Picard, *De gente Scottorum* (2020), 395–401.

¹⁶ The most influential narrative remains that of Levison, *England* (1946), 45–93.

evaluations of their impact on religious, political and cultural developments in Francia have varied greatly across the past two centuries.¹⁷ In an article first published in 1912, the German medievalist Wilhelm Levison (1876–1947) concluded that, in comparison with the “Anglo-Saxons”, the Irish missions represented but an “episode” in the “history of the occident”, albeit an important one. According to Levison, the Irish fell short of the significance of the Anglo-Saxons because of their lack of “organisation”.¹⁸

What does this supposed lack of organisation relate to? In his seminal 1946 publication *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, Levison did not repeat his earlier statement concerning the impact of the Irish missions. Yet, in his influential assessment of the careers of Willibrord and Boniface, Levison highlighted two factors which allegedly distinguished the “English” missions from their predecessors.¹⁹ The first was the close contact both Willibrord and later Boniface kept with the papacy. Willibrord’s consecration as *archbishop* of the Frisians in 695 by Pope Sergius I (687–701) appeared especially groundbreaking to Levison. The second factor was the cooperation between Willibrord, Boniface and the ancestors of Charlemagne, most notably Pippin II (d. 714) and his son Charles Martel (d. 741), in establishing new ecclesiastical infrastructure in Frisia, Hesse, Thuringia and Bavaria. Levison and subsequent scholars perceived in the combination of these two factors the origin of the later alliance between Pippin III (d. 768) and the papacy, which laid the foundation for the creation of the Carolingian Empire. Within the historiographical framework of a Merovingian “dark age”, which was only overcome by the so-called “Carolingian Renaissance” and the religious reforms of the eighth century, the “English” missionaries, therefore, appear to have acted in a more “systematic” and ultimately successful way than the heirs of Columbanus.²⁰

3.2 Common patterns of mobility and intersections between different groups

The alleged division between these two groups also found its way into contemporary maps. In his influential 1965 publication *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, German historian Friedrich Prinz (1928–2003) argued that, from the outset, the “Anglo-Saxons”

17 See, for example, *Honée*, St. Willibrord (2000), 17–23; *Wood*, Irish I (2015), 173–180.

18 *Levison*, Iren (1912), 263: “An geschichtlicher Bedeutung steht die Wirksamkeit der Iren, an den Folgen gemessen, ohne Zweifel hinter der der Angelsachsen zurück und stellt in der allgemeinen Geschichte des Abendlandes doch nur eine Episode dar”.

19 Levison uses the terms “English” and “Anglo-Saxon” interchangeably throughout his text; on the term “Anglo-Saxon” and its application to the early Middle Ages see *Tinti*, Europe (2021), 3–5.

20 *Levison*, England (1946), 50–69; for the persistence of this narrative see, for example, *Neu*, Willibrord (2021), 7–9.

allied themselves “exclusively to the Austrasian Carolingians”.²¹ At first glance, the distribution of monasteries across Austrasia in the late seventh and early eighth centuries appears to confirm Prinz’s statement: the most important foundations were either situated in the Pippinids’ area of influence, namely the Meuse area, or established in the context of the arrival of Willibrord’s group (Echternach, Kaiserswerth, Susteren, Utrecht). Prinz concluded that the contrast between the dense network of monasteries in Neustria (especially in the Paris area) and the lower number of foundations in Austrasia reflected a border between the Merovingian and the early Carolingian areas of influence, as well as between the sphere of Luxeuil and that of the “Anglo-Saxon Benedictines” supported by Charlemagne’s ancestors.²²

The question remains whether we can draw such sharp lines, both in geographical terms and as regards personal networks, between those individuals that appear in our sources as missionaries and monastic founders. It is for this reason that I suggest that we refocus on the period between the middle of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries, as a means of loosening the fixation on the arrival of Columbanus and Boniface as the ‘cornerstones’ of two successive missionary movements. Rather than anticipating a linear development which resulted in the formation of a new ‘Carolingian’ ecclesiastical and political landscape, common patterns of mobility between different groups should be taken into account here. In what follows, I want to consider two examples of Irish clerics who arrived in Francia before 700, but did not belong to the network of Luxeuil founded by Columbanus. In each case, we are primarily dependent on hagiographical sources to reconstruct their activities. Above all, I wish to reassess the arguments put forward by Levison and Prinz and analyse to what extent the texts in question contain evidence for contacts with the Frankish political elite and the papacy before Willibrord’s arrival in 690.

The first example is that of the brothers Fursa (d. c. 649) and Fóillán (d. 655/56), who arrived in Francia from Ireland via East Anglia between 642 and 649. Fursa was first welcomed by the Neustrian mayor of the palace, Erchinoald (d. c. 660), and upon his death buried in the church he had himself founded in Péronne on the River Somme. For reasons unknown, Erchinoald expelled his brothers Fóillán and Ultán shortly afterwards and their group found refuge in Austrasia. In 655 or 656, Fóillán was assassinated after he had left the monastery of Nivelles.²³ The monastery had been established four years earlier by Itta (d. c. 652), the wife of Pippin I (d. 640), on the advice of Bishop Amandus of Maastricht (d. c. 676/79).²⁴ Through the later venera-

21 Prinz, *Mönchtum* (2nd1988), 194–195: “Während die Iren, wie wir gesehen haben, sowohl in merowingischen als auch in karolingischen Klöstern zu finden sind, verbündeten sich die Angelsachsen von Anfang an ausschließlich mit den austrasischen Karolingern.”

22 Prinz, *Mönchtum* (2nd1988), 140–151.

23 Wood, Fursey (2016), 1–5. Owing to reasons of space, I will not deal here with the potential involvement of Fóillán’s family in the exile of the Merovingian prince Dagobert (II, d. 679).

24 Vita Geretrudis 1–2. Ed. Krusch.

tion of its first abbess, Gertrude (d. c. 659), it developed into an important centre of hagiographical writing; it is from these texts, two of which were written within a generation of Fursa and Fóillán's death, that we are able to gain some knowledge of their lives.²⁵

Significantly, in all of the three texts, the issue of mission or Christianisation is barely touched upon. By contrast, the accounts focus on the activity of the clerics in Ireland, East Anglia and, later, Francia. The *Transitus beati Fursei* or *Vita prima* describes how Fursa was welcomed upon his arrival by Erchinoald and the king of Neustria, Clovis II (637–59). Already in East Anglia, Fursa had been able to access the court of the king.²⁶ The *Virtutes Fursei*, which are of a slightly later date, are especially interesting in this regard: not only do they mention that Fursa baptised Erchinoald's son, they also make reference to a quarrel that broke out over the body of one of Fursa's companions, between the mayor of the palace and neighbouring dukes.²⁷

Access to the political elite is also a feature of the (minor) *Passio* of Kilian, a more mysterious figure, who, according to the ninth-century text, reached Thuringia from Ireland in the late seventh century, where he was received by the Duke Gozbert. At the instigation of the duke's wife, Kilian and his companions were allegedly martyred around 689.²⁸ While the circumstances of his death are certainly based on hagiographical conventions, his early presence in the Würzburg area is intriguing: only a few years later, Willibrord and his monastery of Echternach received donations of property by Gozbert's son, Heden (d. after 717).²⁹ While Boniface's disciples later tried to depict Thuringia as a pagan enclave before the saint's arrival around 719, the Echternach charters suggest that Willibrord had already encountered an ecclesiastical foundation in the first decade of the eighth century, making the earlier presence of Insular churchmen in the area all the more plausible.³⁰

As far as concerns potential contact with the papacy prior to Willibrord's arrival, the *Passio Kiliani* also contains the noteworthy detail that the newcomers left Thuringia for Rome shortly after their arrival in order to secure the blessing of Pope Conon (d. 686–87) for their undertaking. Furthermore, the author of the *Passio* underlines the

25 The *Transitus beati Fursei* and the so-called *Additamentum Nivialense de Fulano* were probably written in the late 650s at the monasteries of Péronne and Nivelles, respectively. Another source, the *Virtutes Fursei*, was composed in the ninth century. Krusch's edition leaves out the central part of the *Transitus*, which describes the many visions experienced by Fursa. On the dating of the *Transitus* see Hamann, *Vita Fursei* (2004), 283; on the dating of the *Additamentum* see Fouracre/Gerberding, *Merovingian France* (1996), 307; on the dating of the *Virtutes*, see Ó Riain, *Vies* (1986), 405–13.

26 *Vita Fursei* 7–9. Ed. Krusch; see also Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.19. Ed. Colgrave/Mynors.

27 *Virtutes Fursei* 10, 14–19. Ed. Krusch.

28 *Passio Kiliani* 10. Ed. Levison; on the dating of the *Passio* see Schäferdiek, Kilian (1996), 461–463.

29 *Geschichte*, nos. 8, 17, 26. Ed. Wampach.

30 Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* 5–6. Ed. Levison; see Werner, Iren (1982), 281–293.

fact that the group had already taken the decision to travel to Rome before their departure from Ireland.³¹ It is precisely this episode which scholars have dismissed as an embellishment of the Carolingian author in his attempt to emulate Willibald's *Life* of Boniface (c. 754–68).³² While we are indeed dealing with a text that was written after the creation of the *Vita Bonifatii* and the ascension of the Carolingians, we should not forget that there is evidence of contact between Rome and the southern Irish churches in particular before the end of the seventh century, which is not least indicated by the delegation that travelled to Rome in the context of the so-called Easter dispute around 640.³³ In addition, we find the same motif, for example, in the ninth-century *Life* of Pirmin (d. c. 753/55), the founder of Reichenau Abbey. Although Pirmin was not from Ireland himself and the text originated at a similarly late date, its basic authenticity is not doubted.³⁴ The sources related to Fursa and Fóillán, on the other hand, do not contain any evidence of a journey to Rome. Nevertheless, the seventh-century *Life* of Gertrude mentions that the abbess sent envoys to Rome to collect books and relics from the city and to invite “learned men” from “across the sea” to Nivelles.³⁵ Whether the latter passage refers specifically to Ireland is open to conjecture, but it attests to the high degree of mobility of the monastic community. The *Virtutes* also record that Fursa travelled back and forth between East Anglia and Francia with some frequency.³⁶

3.3 Between integration and confrontation? Some remarks on the nature of the sources

This brief overview suggests that the mobility of the Irish clerics arriving in Francia between the death of Columbanus and the arrival of Willibrord was determined by factors similar to those that shaped the activity of Boniface and his followers. Access to and support of the political elite were important prerequisites for achieving greater freedom of movement within and beyond the borders of the Frankish realm. The clerics under consideration here also appear to have shared a common cultural and geographical horizon, in which Rome formed an important node. At the same time, evi-

31 *Passio Kiliani* 4–5. Ed. *Levison*.

32 See *Schäferdiek*, Kilian (1996), 474–476.

33 Cumman's Letter, 4–7. Ed. *Walsh/Ó Cróinín*.

34 *Vita Pirminii* 3–6. Ed. *Holder-Egger; Antoni, Leben* (2005), 10–17.

35 *Vita Geretrudis*. Ed. *Krusch*.

36 *Virtutes Fursei* 14. Ed. *Krusch*; mobility between Francia and East Anglia is also attested through the career of Bishop Felix of Burgundy (d. 647/48), who was active in the region under King Sigebert according to Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.15. Ed. *Colgrave/Mynors*. I thank Sihong Lin for pointing this out to me.

dence is for the large part restricted to works of hagiography, which sometimes date to the later Carolingian era and thereby considerably distort our perception of conditions in the seventh century. To further reflect on the problem of the available sources I want to briefly consider the example of Willibrord.

Born in Northumbria and educated in Ireland, Willibrord is one of the few individuals of the late seventh and early eighth centuries whose career connects Ireland, Britain, Francia and Rome. Regarding an alleged divide between an “Irish” and an “Anglo-Saxon” mission, Willibrord is very much an “in-between” figure and his career demonstrates that the above-mentioned labels are in many ways unsuitable to characterise his activity between Ireland and Rome.³⁷ His arrival in Francia in 690 took place in the context of political conflicts which saw the rise to power of Pippin II and, finally, Charles Martel as *de facto* rulers of the Frankish kingdom. Yet, the modern impression of Willibrord as a “harbinger of Frankish power” in Frisia or a “vassal” of the early Carolingians, as Arnold Angenendt (1934–2021) put it, is very much shaped by the nature of the surviving evidence.³⁸ On the one hand, the sources for Willibrord’s life are more abundant and diverse than those for Fursa, Fóillán and Kilian. On the other hand, this diversity of these sources presents us with new challenges. In Willibrord’s case, we must rely on a fragmented corpus of hagiographical texts originating from a later date – the most prominent being several chapters in Bede’s (d. 735) *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* of 731 and Alcuin’s (d. 804) *Vita Willibrordi* of c. 796 – and the charters from Echternach, which only survive in the *Liber aureus* compiled at the monastery between the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.³⁹

At the same time, the disparate nature of these sources offers new starting points for analyses of Willibrord’s mobility since the comparison between the hagiography and the charters reveals different layers of his itinerary. While the writings of Bede and Alcuin offer a ‘macro’ view on Willibrord’s biography, stressing his Insular background, his mission to Frisia and his journeys to Rome in order to secure the pope’s approval and collect relics, the charters reveal different networks of lay and ecclesiastical landowners in the areas of the Meuse, the Moselle and even Thuringia who donated their property either to Willibrord or one of his foundations.⁴⁰ It remains difficult to establish whether the drawing up of a charter was in each case preceded by a public gathering in which the bishop participated.⁴¹ Therefore, the distribution of donations as recorded in the *Liber aureus* should probably be regarded as an indica-

37 Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons* (2009), 183–185.

38 Angenendt, Willibrord (1973), 79, 109.

39 Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*. Ed. Levison; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.13, 5.10–11. Ed. Colgrave/Mynors; the *Liber aureus* (Gotha, Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek, Memb. I 71) is only partially edited in *Monumenta Episcopalia*. Ed. Weiland, 11–72; for the edition of the earliest charters, see *Geschichte*. Ed. Wampach.

40 *Geschichte*, nos. 1–41. Ed. Wampach; Summer, Vassal (2024), 143–152.

41 See Costambeys, *Aristocratic community* (1994), 43–47.

tion of the extent of Willibrord's network rather than as a reflection of his itinerary. Nevertheless, the charters remind us that the descriptions of Willibrord's supra-regional mobility form part of Bede and Alcuin's respective hagiographical and missionary narratives, and that regional and local movements also played a significant role in shaping the sphere of Willibrord's influence.

This observation, in turn, raises questions about how Insular clerics were able to establish themselves as political and ecclesiastical actors on a regional or local scale. The authors of hagiographical texts typically highlight their protagonists' struggles against "pagans", or the support they received from the king, the mayor of the palace or the pope for their missions. Charter evidence however, such as that from Echternach, reveals unique and often fragmentary traces of the network on which individuals such as Willibrord relied within the borders of the Frankish kingdom.⁴² It remains difficult, though, to assess how these two levels of mobility were connected in each case and precisely what preconditions allowed Insular clerics to move between different political, geographical and cultural spheres. In Willibrord's case, the above-mentioned *Calendar* from Echternach provides further insight into the process of adaptation that took place within his circle after the foundation of the monastery in 697/98. The contemporary manuscript records the names and feast days of saints and clerics from across the Insular world, Francia and the Roman tradition, thus reflecting the ability of the monastic community at Echternach to integrate themselves into their new continental environment.⁴³ In this context, it is significant that the *Virtutes* of Fursa mention that the Irish clerics brought relics of Saint Patrick alongside those of two other Irish saints, Beoán and Meallán, with them to Francia, while the body of one of Fursa's companions became a relic itself and an object of contest between the Frankish dukes. It appears that relics could be perceived as cultural "markers" but that they also quickly became part of the ecclesiastical horizon of the Frankish communities who received them; certainly, it is no coincidence that the earliest mention of Saint Patrick's feast day can be found in the *Life* of Gertrude of Nivelles. Notably, the saint's name also features prominently in Willibrord's *Calendar* in the early eighth century.⁴⁴

3.4 Conclusion

This brief overview reveals a number of overlaps between the respective careers of Fursa, Fóillán, Kilian and Willibrord. As a newcomer on the Frankish ecclesiastical stage, one of Willibrord's first actions was to travel to Rome in order to receive the

⁴² Werner, Lütticher Raum (1980), 139–158.

⁴³ On this aspect, see now Summer, Willibrord (2024), 99–180; on the *Calendar* more generally see Warntjes, Origins (2021), 134–135.

⁴⁴ *Calendar* 5. Ed. Wilson; *Vita Geretrudis* 7. Ed. Krusch; *Virtutes Fursei* 19. Ed. Krusch.

blessing of Pope Sergius I and to collect relics for the dedication of churches in his field of activity.⁴⁵ In modern scholarship, Willibrord's arrival has often been perceived as a "watershed" in the ecclesiastical history of the Frankish world, paving the way for Boniface and the ecclesiastical reforms of the eighth century. Yet, a comparison with his Irish predecessors on the continent shows similar patterns of adaptation, integration and conflict. Two particular aspects stand out here: firstly, the ability (and need) of these clerics to travel and communicate over great distances and, secondly, their rapid access to the political elite and their integration into the communities they encountered on the continent. It is, however, more difficult to assess the preconditions of their mobility. Did the most prominent individuals belong to the political elite? And does this also apply to their (often unnamed) companions as well as the members of the monastic communities they established? Determining the duration of the processes of integration is equally problematic, as the authors of hagiographical texts tend to contract or invert the chronology of events to create a coherent narrative.⁴⁶ Accordingly, we must assume more complex and longer phases of cultural adaptation and negotiation, which would have varied from case to case. Ian Wood argued that the attraction which figures such as Fursa and Fóillán exerted on the Frankish elite resulted from their status as "outsiders".⁴⁷

I believe that Wood's observation can be refined even further, and that the roles Insular clerics assumed on the continent depended on the respective contexts of their activities. In cases where they had to secure backing from the papacy in order to strengthen their position within the Frankish Church – for example, in the context of establishing new episcopal sees in the border regions of the Frankish kingdom – their status as "outsiders" probably played a greater role in their self-identification and external perception than in, for instance, situations where they dedicated churches in the Frankish countryside – acting as bishops or abbots of the nearby ecclesiastical centres. Ultimately, we should aim to distinguish between the different contexts in which Insular clerics were mobile on the continent and to determine the factors that enabled and influenced their mobility. Studying the mobility of clerics between Ireland, Britain and Francia thereby allows us to gain a better understanding of the societies they encountered and the role(s) they played in the political, ecclesiastical and cultural developments of their time. At the same time, in applying new methods and findings from neighbouring disciplines to the surviving sources, we must also remind ourselves of the historiographical frameworks with which we approach these texts. Importantly, this entails reassessing the notion of the "age of missions" – according to which linear processes of Christianisation were the only incentive or context for the mobility of clerics in early medieval northwest Europe between the sixth and ninth centuries.

45 Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.10. Ed. Colgrave/Mynors.

46 Summer, Vassal (2024), 142–145.

47 Wood, *Irish II* (2016), 214.

3.5 Bibliography

3.5.1 Sources

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