

Como resultado de la labor interdisciplinaria desarrollada en el marco de un Proyecto de Reconocimiento Institucional de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires “El *ego-trouble* en discursos de y sobre la autoridad episcopal en la Edad Media (siglos X-XIII)”, este volumen reúne contribuciones de investigadores, docentes y alumnos, que giran principalmente en torno los ejes de la autoridad, la identidad y el conflicto, recorriendo a través de diversas fuentes tardoantiguas y medievales los mecanismos de auto-representación y construcción de las realidades sociales.



AUTORIDAD, IDENTIDAD Y CONFLICTO EN LA TARDOANTIGÜEDAD Y LA EDAD MEDIA

CONSTRUCCIONES Y PROYECCIONES



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(compiladoras/directoras)

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata
Grupo de Investigación y Estudios Medievales

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2018

Autoridad, identidad y conflicto en la tardoantigüedad y la Edad Media: construcciones y proyecciones / Andrea Vanina Neyra... [*et al.*]; compilado por Andrea Vanina Neyra; Olga Soledad Bohdziewicz; dirigido por Andrea Vanina Neyra; Olga Soledad Bohdziewicz. - 1a ed. - Mar del Plata: Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2018.

Libro digital, PDF, 180 páginas

Archivo Digital: descarga y online

ISBN 978-987-544-819-3

1. Historia Medieval. I. Neyra, Andrea Vanina II. Neyra, Andrea Vanina, comp. III. Bohdziewicz, Olga Soledad, comp. IV. Neyra, Andrea Vanina, dir. V. Bohdziewicz, Olga Soledad, dir.

CDD 940.17

Diseño de Tapa

Melisa Martí

Corrección ortotipográfica y armado final:

Correcciones y maquetaciones La Alcachofa

(<https://www.facebook.com/alcachofacorrectora/>)



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**IN SEARCH OF A PASTORAL IDENTITY:
CHARLEMAGNE'S SAXON WAR AND THE AMBIGUITIES
OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITY**

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Introduction

The long and difficult conflict between Charlemagne and the Saxons in the last three decades of the eighth century not only signified the involvement of the army, engaged in territorial conquest, but also of the clergy, which was committed to the conversion of the Saxon people from paganism to Catholicism. Military action accompanied the work of the missionaries, for which the evangelisation of Saxony was not without its contradictions and second thoughts, as we will see in the pages below. In this sense, there are letters by Alcuin of York that illustrate how the Carolingian clergy found itself acting in an ambiguous context in which it was not always possible to maintain their own “identity” or autonomy in the face of the king’s urgent need to defeat and subdue the enemy, which took priority even over converting them to Christianity.

The war

As a first step, it is worth schematically reviewing the context of the war, from 772 and 804, within which the evangelisation of Saxony by the clergy took place.¹ The main sources of information available are the *Annales regni Francorum* and Einhard's *Vita Karoli*,² two accounts that allow us a step-by-step reconstruction of the heavy fighting that permitted Charlemagne to impose his authority and, with it, Catholic beliefs in a territory of deeply rooted pagan cults.

Proceeding with order, in the very first year of the war, in 772, the *Annales regni Francorum* recount a particularly significant episode. In that year, the Frankish troops stormed the Eresburg fortress, along the Diemel River, and immediately proceeded to destroy the nearby Irminsul pagan sanctuary.³ The Irminsul was associated with worshipping a large oak trunk

¹ On the Saxon War see Dieter HÄGERMANN, *Karl der Große. Herrscher des Abendlandes*, Berlin-München, Propyläen Verlag, 2000, pp. 97 ff.; Matthias SPRINGER, *Die Sachsen*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2004, pp. 166 ff.; Rosamond McKITTEK, *Charlemagne. The Formation of a European Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 251-256; Bernhard S. BACHRACH, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns (768-777). A Diplomatic and Military Analysis*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2013, pp. 177 ff. and *passim*; Matthias BECHER, "Der Prediger mit eiserner Zunge. Die Unterwerfung und Christianisierung der Sachsen durch Karl den Großen", in Hermann KAMP, Martin KROKER (eds.), *Schwertmission. Gewalt und Christianisierung im Mittelalter*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2013, pp. 23-52.

² For these sources see Rosamond McKITTEK, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 28 ff.

³ *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, ed. Friedrich KURZE, MGH, *Script. rer. germ.*

(or column) that was believed to hold up the sky and whose demolition was a hallmark of the Charlemagne's strategy against the Saxons. The «destruction of a central Saxon heathen sacred tree, the *Irminsul* [...] must surely have been more than an act of random desecration or destruction, and rather a symbolic statement of his intentions»⁴. In any event, the whole situation had clear religious connotations, since while they were intent on destroying the *fanum*, where they waited for three days, the king and his soldiers were plagued by a lack of drinking water, which ended with the miraculous appearance of a stream.⁵ God was therefore on the Franks' side in their conquest of Saxony,⁶ an endeavour that focused mainly on the military

in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicis separatim editi, VI, Hannover, 1895, a. 772.

⁴ John HINES, "The Conversion of the Old Saxons", in Dennis H. GREEN, Frank SIEGMUND (eds.), *The Continental Saxons from the Migration Period to Tenth Century. An Ethnographic Perspective*, Rochester-San Marino, Boydell Press, 2003, p. 300. About the Irminsul (see *Translatio sancti Alexandri*, ed. Georg H. PERTZ, MGH, SS, II, Hannover, 1829, c. 3, and cf. Bruno KRUSCH, "Die Übertragung des H. Alexander von Rom nach Wildeshausen durch den Enkel Widukinds 851. Das älteste niedersächsische Geschichtsdenkmal", *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Philol.-hist. Kl., II 13 [1933], pp. 423-436), see Matthias SPRINGER, Bernhard MAIER, v. *Irminsul*, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 15, 2000, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, pp. 504-506.

⁵ *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 772.

⁶ The *Annales* report that a Saxon raid against the Church of Fritzlar in 773, probably as a reaction to the destruction of the Irminsul, was foiled by the appearance of *duo iuvenes* in white robes who terrified the attackers (*Annales regni Francorum*, a. 773). A few years later, the Hohensyburg *castrum* held out thanks to the miraculous appearance of two flaming shields on a church, a vision that provoked great fear among the Saxons, who ran away hurriedly (*Annales regni Francorum*, a. 776).

aspect. Indeed, it was Charlemagne himself, while wintering in Quierzy in 775, who specified what, in his opinion, was the main purpose of war: “*consilium iniit [sc. Charlemagne], ut perfidam ac foedifragam Saxonum gentem bello adgrederetur et eo usque perseveraret, dum aut victi christianae religioni subicerentur aut omnino tollerentur*”⁷.

Bloody battles typified the Frankish excursions into Saxon territory, although there were moments when a fragile truce with the enemy was possible. Such was the case in 776, for example, when Charlemagne gathered a *multitudo* of Saxons in the fortress of Karlsburg (along the Lippe River) for baptism.⁸ The following year, during the Paderborn diet, they strengthened their vows of obedience to the *rex* with another baptism and the swearing of an oath.⁹ In celebrating this event, the poem *Carmen de conversione Saxonum* exalts Charlemagne’s endeavour in vanquishing the resistance of the infidels.¹⁰ However, Widukind, one of their most influential leaders, did not go to Paderborn and thereby refused to be baptised.¹¹

⁷ *Annales qui dicuntur Einhardi*, a. 775.

⁸ *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 776; *Annales Mosellani*, ed. Johann Martin LAPPENBERG, MGH, SS, XVI, Hannover, 1859, a. 776; *Annales Laureshamenses*, ed. Georg H. PERTZ, MGH, SS, I, Hannover, 1826, a. 776.

⁹ *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 777; *Annales Laureshamenses*, a. 777.

¹⁰ See, for the edition of the poem, Karl HAUCK, “Karolingische Taufpfalzen im Spiegel hofnaher Dichtung. Überlegungen zur Ausmalung von Pfalzkirchen, Pfalzen und Reichsklöstern”, *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, I, Philol.-hist. Kl., (1985), pp. 62 ff. For the author of the *Carmen*, probably Paulinus of Aquileia, cf. Dieter SCHALLER, “Der Dichter des *Carmen de conversione Saxonum*”, in Günter BERNT, Fidel RÄDLE, Gabriel SILAGI (eds.), *Tradition und Wertung. Festschrift für Franz Brunhölzl zum 65. Geburtstag*, Sig-

The signing of agreements and the imposition of Christianity were not sufficient to impose strict control over Saxony. On the contrary, the Franks had to toughen their stance in the region. In 782, Charlemagne convened an assembly in Lippspringe during which several measures were taken regarding the administration of Saxon lands¹² and saw the publication of the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, which we will return to later on. For now it suffices to say that despite Charlemagne’s ruthless approach, the Saxon uprisings continued. They gave way to new insurrections incited by Widukind, who was also significantly absent from the Lippspringe assembly. The Saxon offensive was effective, having inflicted a serious defeat on the Frankish troops in 782, in the vicinity of the Süntel Mountains (along

maringen, Jan Thorbecke, 1989, pp. 27-45; Mary GARRISON, “The emergence of Carolingian Latin literature and the court of Charlemagne (780-814)”, in Rosamond McKITTERICK (ed.), *Carolingian culture: emulation and innovation*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 132-133. Previously, in 744, the major of the palace Carloman, and four years later, his brother Pepin the Short, made the first attempts at introducing Catholicism to the Saxons, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS *rer. merov.*, II, Hannover, 1888, (*contin.*), 27, for Carloman, and 31, for Pippin (see *Annales Mettenses priores*, ed. Bernhard de SIMSON, MGH, *Script. rer. germ. in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicis separatim editi*, X, Hannover-Leipzig, 1905, a. 748).

¹¹ *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 777.

¹² Some Saxon nobles were entrusted with the duties of counts for the administration of the territory, cf. Eugen EWIG, “L’epoca di Carlo Magno (768-814)”, in Hubert JEDIN (ed.), *Storia della Chiesa*, IV: *Il primo Medio Evo*, trad. it., Milano, Jaca Book, 1978, p. 84; McKITTERICK, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

the Weser River)¹³. Charlemagne's response was swift and extremely fierce. 4,500 Saxons were executed in one day with the exception of Widukind, the leader of the revolt, who managed to escape the harsh repression inflicted by the Franks.¹⁴ However, Widukind resolved to accept the baptism in 785, an event that seemed to mark the end of hostilities in Saxony, according to local sources, at least.¹⁵

In truth, the conflict resumed seven years later. The *Annales Laureshamenses* examine the more profound reasons for the new rebellions by the

“Saxones [...] quod in corde eorum dudum iam antea latebat, manifestissime ostenderunt: quasi canis qui revertit ad vomitum suum, sic reversi sunt ad paganismum quem pridem respuerant, iterum relinquentes christianitatem, mentientes

¹³ A more detailed narrative of events in *Annales qui dicuntur Einhardi*, a. 782, while the *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 782, assign the victory to the Franks in contradictory manner; cf. Friedrich VON KLOCKE, “Um das Blutbad von Verden und die Schlacht am Süntel 782”, *Westfälische Zeitschrift*, 93 (1937), pp. 161 ff.; Matthias SPRINGER, “Die politische und militärische Lage der Sachsen in der 2. Hälfte des 8. Jh. und die Schlacht am Süntel 782 nach den historischen Quellen”, in Erhard COSACK (ed.), *Der altsächsische “Heidenkirchhof” bei Sarstedt, Ldk. Hildesheim, und die Schlacht am Süntel 782*, Oldenburg, Isensee, 2007, pp. 70-83.

¹⁴ *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 782: *Tunc omnes Saxones iterum convenientes subdiderunt se sub potestate supradicti domni regis et reddiderunt omnes malefactores illos, qui ipsud rebellium maxime terminaverunt, ad occidendum IIII D; Annales qui dicuntur Einhardi*, a. 782.

¹⁵ On the baptism of Widukind (and his son-in-law Abbio) at Attigny, *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 785: *Et ibi baptizati sunt supranominati Widochindus et Abbi una cum sociis eorum; et tunc tota Saxoniam subiugata est*. The event is also cited by Pope Hadrian I in a letter (*Codex Carolinus*, in *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini aevi*, ed. Wilhelm GUNDLACH, MGH, *Epist.*, III/1, Berlin, 1892, 76).

tam Deo quam domno rege, qui eis multa beneficia prestetit, coniungentes se cum paganas gentes, qui in circuitu eorum erant”¹⁶.

This source clearly highlights the superficiality of the forced conversion imposed on the Saxon people, whose ties with the pagan traditions were not severed in the slightest. In fact, they were still strong enough to make the people reject the presence of the Frank bishops and priests who sought to impose their Catholic beliefs:

“[...] conati sunt in primis rebellare contra Deum, deinde contra regem et christianos; omnes ecclesias que in finibus eorum erant, cum destructione et incendio vastabant, reiicientes episcopos et presbyteros qui super eos erant, et aliquos comprehenderunt, nec non et alios occiderunt, et plenissime se ad culturam idolorum converterunt”¹⁷.

Therefore, the conclusion is that forced baptism, even when administered to a leader such as Widukind, was not actually able to make an entire people renounce their ancient faith. Another in a series of acts of force by Charlemagne was enough to end the war when, according to Einhard,¹⁸ ten thousand Saxons were deported to *France* in 804.

¹⁶ *Annales Laureshamenses*, a. 792.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Éginard, *Vie de Charlemagne*, edd. Michel SOT, Christiane VEYRARD-COSME, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2014, 7, and *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 804. Cf. SPRINGER, “Die politische...”, *art. cit.*, pp. 209-210; Timothy REUTER, “Charlemagne and the world beyond the Rhine”, in Joanna STORY (ed.), *Charlemagne. Empire and society*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 2005, pp. 187-190; Stefan WEINFURTER, *Carlo Magno. Il barbaro santo*, trad. it., Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015, pp. 98-108.

The missionaries in Saxony, preachings and tithes

The various moments —briefly described here— during the thirty-year war that inflamed Saxony were often marked, especially in the narrations of the *Annales regni Francorum*, by the expression *auxiliante Domino*.¹⁹ The divine support for the Carolingian forces was undoubtedly considered a decisive element in the successful outcome of the campaign against the Saxons, although Einhard, who nevertheless describes them as “*natura feroces et cultui daemonum dediti nostraeque religioni contrarii*”²⁰, does not consider the religious aspect as being behind the outbreak of the conflict.

An initial, significant step in the history of the missions involving the Saxons can be placed, thanks to accounts handed down by the Venerable Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, at the end of the seventh century. The incident was the martyrdom suffered by two Anglo-Saxon monks, Hewald the Black and Hewald the Fair, arrived on the continent with St. Willibrord. They barely had the time to begin evangelising in Saxony when they were almost immediately slaughtered by villagers, wary of the religious practices —the celebration of Mass, the singing of the psalms— introduced by the monks that were in danger of converting their

¹⁹ Cf. *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 774; a. 775; a. 778; a. 779.

²⁰ Éginard, *Vie de Charlemagne*, 7.

leader and thereby also decree their own conversion.²¹ The episode is a good demonstration of the Saxon aversion to changing their religious beliefs.

Other missionaries came to Germany from Anglo-Saxon England, among which Boniface was one of the most important. He dedicated himself to an intense endeavour involving the evangelisation and ecclesiastical reorganisation of a large area, which included Hesse, Bavaria, Thuringia and Frisia, as well as expressing a desire to convert Saxony. Boniface’s interest in this land also stemmed from the common origins of his people and the *Antiqui Saxones* on the continent.²² In 738 Pope Gregory III entrusted Boniface with an appeal to the Saxons, to whom he sent

²¹ *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edd. Bertram COLGRAVE, Roger A.B. Mynors, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, V 10. The two Hewalds were martyred around 692, anyway at the beginning of the last decade of the seventh-century; see August FRANZEN, v. “Éwald”, in *Dictionnaire d’histoire et géographie ecclésiastiques*, XVI, Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1967, coll. 221-223; Knut SCHÄFERDIEK, “Der Schwarze und der Weiße Hewald: Der erste Versuch einer Sachsenmission”, *Westfälische Zeitschrift*, 146 (1996), pp. 9 ff.; Ian N. WOOD, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050*, Harlow, Longman, 2001, p. 260.

²² *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus-S. Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae*, ed. Michael TANGL, MGH, *Epist. selectae in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicae separatim editi*, I, Berlin, 1916, 46 and 47. For the *Antiqui Saxones*, see *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, V 9 (cf. Walter POHL, “Ethnic Names and Identities in the British Isles: A Comparative Perspective”, in John HINES (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century. An Ethnographic Perspective*, Woodbridge-Rochester-San Marino, Boydell Press, 1997, p. 14; Matthias BECHER, “*Non enim habent regem idem Antiqui Saxones...* Verfassung und Ethnogenese in Sachsen während des 8. Jahrhunderts”, in Hans J. HÄBLER (ed.), *Sachsen und Franken in Westfalen. Zur Komplexität der ethnischen Deutung und Abgrenzung zweier frühmittelalterlicher*

“Bonifatium fratrem ac coepiscopum meum [...] ut cognoscat, quae circa vos sunt, et consoletur corda vestra cum exortationis verbo in Christo Iesu domino nostro, ut a diabolica fraude liberati mereamini adoptionis filiis aggregari et ut ab aeterna damnatione liberati vitam habeatis aeternam”²³.

If the two Hewald monks had at least been able to set foot in Saxony, Boniface was unable to begin his work in the region due to his tragic death in an ambush while on a mission in Frisia.²⁴ Despite his untimely death, Boniface still played a major role: although «Boniface himself never managed to organise a mission to the Saxons, the following generation found his work an inspiration»²⁵. The charisma of his missionary “presence” made up for his unwanted “absence” from Saxony, which nevertheless received word of his great work in the conversion of pagans. Boniface influenced the missionary movement that later developed in that land, «even if he himself had been

Stämme, Oldenburg, Isensee, 1999, pp. 4 ff.; Andrew H. MERRILLS, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 298-299.

²³ *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus-S. Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae*, 21.

²⁴ On Boniface and his missionary activity cf. Gregor K. STASCH (ed.), *Bonifatius: vom angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen. Zum 1250. Todestag des heiligen Bonifatius*. Katalog zur Ausstellung 3. April bis 4. Juli 2004, Petersberg, Michael Imhof, 2004; Lutz E. VON PADBERG, *Bonifatius: Missionar und Reformator*, München, Beck, 2004; Franz J. FELTEN, Jörg JARNUT, Lutz E. VON PADBERG (eds.), *Bonifatius - Leben und Nachwirken. Die Gestaltung des christlichen Europa im Frühmittelalter*, Mainz, Gesellschaft für Mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte, 2007; Gerald KRUTZLER, *Kult und Tabu: Wahrnehmungen der Germania bei Bonifatius*, Wien-Berlin, LIT, 2011.

²⁵ James PALMER, “Saxon or European? Interpreting and Reinterpreting St Boniface”, *History Compass*, 4 (2006), p. 858.

unable to achieve anything in Saxony»²⁶. The missionary movement was thus inspired by the approach taken by Boniface, whose disciples inherited his important legacy, intensifying pastoral work in Saxony.²⁷ One of centres

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 860.

²⁷ On this topic, see James PALMER, “The ‘vigorous rule’ of Bishop Lull: between Bonifatian mission and Carolingian church control”, *Early Medieval Europe*, 13 (2005), pp. 268 ff., especially p. 269 for a critical overview of the historiography about the missionaries in Saxony: «It is conspicuously easy for modern historians to tell the story of Charlemagne’s attempts to convert the Saxons with little mention of Boniface’s heirs». Among other missionary figures, there was Lebuin (during the seventies in the eighth century), who spoke to the Saxons gathered at an assembly in Marklo to announce the need to accept the word of the Gospel, otherwise they would be defeated by Charlemagne (*Vita Lebuini antiqua*, ed. Adolf HOFMEISTER, MGH, SS, XXX/2, Leipzig, 1934, 6), as well as Liudger (Altfredi *Vita sancti Liudgeri episcopi Mimigardefordensis*, ed. Georg H. PERTZ, MGH, SS, II, Hannover, 1829, I 18-21) and Willehad (Anskarii *Vita sancti Willehadi episcopi Bremensis*, ed. Georg H. PERTZ, MGH, SS, II, Hannover, 1829, 5-8), who encountered many problems due to Widukind’s hostility (see Ian N. WOOD, “Beyond Sa-traps and Ostriches: Political and Social Structures of the Saxons in the Early Carolingian Period”, in *The Continental Saxons from the Migration Period to Tenth Century*, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-280); cf. also Heinrich BÜTTNER, “Mission und Kirchenorganisation des Frankenreiches bis zum Tode Karls des Grossen”, in Helmut BEUMANN (ed.), *Karl der Grosse. Lebenswerk und Nachleben*, I: *Persönlichkeit und Geschichte*, Düsseldorf, Schwann, 1965, pp. 467 ff.; Helmut BEUMANN, “Die Hagiographie «bewältigt»: Unterwerfung und Christianisierung der Sachsen durch Karl den Grossen”, in *Settimane di studio di Spoleto*, XXVIII: *Cristianizzazione ed organizzazione ecclesiastica delle campagne nell’alto medioevo: espansione e resistenza*, Spoleto, CISAM, 1982, pp. 129-163; Arnold ANGENENDT, *Kaiserherrschaft und Königstaufe: Kaiser, Könige und Päpste als geistliche Patrone in der abendländischen Missionsgeschichte*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1984, pp. 203 ff.; Ian N. WOOD, “An Absence of Saints? The Evidence for the Christianisation of Saxony”, in Peter GODMAN, Jörg JARNUT, Peter JOHANEK (eds.), *Am Vorabend der Kaiserkrönung: Das Epos “Karolus Magnus et Leo papa” und der Papstbesuch in Paderborn 799*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2002, pp. 336 ff.; Ulrich NONN, “Zwangsmision mit Feuer und Schwert? Zur

of this work was the monastery of Fulda, whose foundation was commissioned in 744 by Boniface, who entrusted it to Sturm, who in turn was directly involved by Charlemagne in the evangelisation of a *gens prava et perversa*.²⁸ That was how the Saxons were defined in the *Vita sancti Sturmi*, a source which gives an interesting account of the conduct of Charlemagne, who “... *partim bellis, partim suasionibus, partim etiam muneribus, maxima ex parte gentem illam ad fidem Christi convertit; et post non longum tempus totam provinciam illam in parochias episcopales divisit, et servis Domini ad docendum et baptizandum potestatem dedit*”²⁹.

The attitude of the *rex* appears to differ depending upon the different situations he found himself having to deal with, and between the lines it reveals a basic contradiction of the participation of the Carolingian church in the fight to eradicate pagan beliefs in Saxony. It was a struggle that was not limited to religion, but was accompanied, and sometimes even subordinated to, the military subjugation of the region. Alcuin of York, a central figure in the circle of scholars that gathered at Charlemagne’s court, bore

Sachsenmission Karls des Großen”, in Franz J. FELTEN (ed.), *Bonifatius – Apostel der Deutschen. Mission und Christianisierung vom 8. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2004, pp. 55-74; Lutz E. VON PADBERG, *Die Inszenierung religiöser Konfrontationen: Theorie und Praxis der Missionspredigt im frühen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 2003, pp. 332 ff.; James PALMER, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690-900*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2009, pp. 119 ff.

²⁸ Eigilis *Vita sancti Sturmi abbatis Fuldensis*, ed. Georg H. PERTZ, MGH, SS, II, Hannover, 1829, 23. See WOOD, *The Missionary Life...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 ff.; Janneke RAAIJMAKERS, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c.744-c.900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 26-30.

²⁹ Eigilis *Vita sancti Sturmi*, 22.

witness to this contradiction.³⁰ In his letters dedicated to the Saxon issue, certain facts emerge that allow us to better understand what had previously been unclear—in terms of the war and the work of the missionaries— regarding the participation of the clergy in the propagation of Catholicism in Saxony. The first fact highlighted is that Alcuin from «his position in the court and palace school at Aachen [...] had a prime vantage point whence to witness the sordid results of such coercive missionary practices»³¹. The expression “coercive missionary practices” suggests that while the submission of the Saxons required military force, their conversion also required decisive action against the survival of pagan superstitions.

In this sense—before proceeding with the analysis of Alcuin’s letters—it should be remembered that in 780 in Lippspringe, Charlemagne convened another assembly, which became the opportunity for a new mass baptism of Saxons, to whom he had sent *episcopos et presbyteros seu et*

³⁰ For Alcuin, see the recent work of Donald A. BULLOUGH, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation. Being Part of the Ford Lectures Delivered in Oxford in Hilary Term 1980*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2004, and the collections of papers Philippe DEPREUX, Bruno JUDIC (eds.), *Alcuin, de York à Tours. Écriture, pouvoir et réseaux dans l’Europe du haut moyen Âge*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004 (in *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’Ouest*, 111 [2004]), and Ernst TREMP, Karl SCHMUKI (eds.), *Alcuin von York und die geistige Grundlegung Europas*. Akten der Tagung vom 30. September bis zum 2. Oktober 2004 in der Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, St. Gallen, Verlag am Klosterhof, 2010; Douglas DALES, *Alcuin: His Life and Legacy*, Cambridge, James Clarke, 2012.

³¹ Steven STOFFERAHN, “Staying the Royal Sword: Alcuin and the Conversion Dilemma in Early Medieval Europe”, *The Historian*, 71 (2009), p. 464.

abbates to convert them, as testified by the *Annales Laureshamenses*.³² The same concept already expressed above in Sturm's *Vita*, that even the clergy were called upon to make an effective contribution to Charlemagne's cause, is here repeated.³³ It is not inconceivable that by so doing he wanted to attempt a less bloody path, namely the faith, through which to permeate Saxony, although two years later the king went on to order the terrible massacre of Verden. Charlemagne had also decided to strengthen the constraints on his opponents by publishing the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, a law that systematically inflicted the death penalty on those who had harmed the clergy, churches or, more in general, on those who he had violated the precepts of the new religion.³⁴ All transgressions, as recorded in the *Capitulatio*, were severely punished in an attempt to undermine the fierce Saxon resistance to abandoning their traditional beliefs. Another source, the coeval *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, provides us with a picture of

³² *Annales Laureshamenses*, a. 780, and see *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 780.

³³ *Supra*, n. 29.

³⁴ *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. Alfred BORETIUS, MGH, *LL sectio II*, I, Hannover, 1883, 26. On the law, issued between 782 and 785, see Ernst SCHUBERT, "Die *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*", in Dieter BROSIUS, Christine VON DEN HEUVEL, Ernst HINRICHS, Hajo VAN LENGEN (eds.), *Geschichte in der Region. Zum 65. Geburtstag von Heinrich Schmidt*, Hannover, Hahn, 1993, pp. 3 ff.; Lawrence G. DUGGAN, "For Force Is Not of God? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne", in James MULDOON (ed.), *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997, pp. 49-50; Rudolf SCHIEFFER, *Die Karolinger*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2006, p. 80; Matthias BECHER, "Gewaltmission: Karl der Große und die Sachsen", in Christoph STIEGEMANN, Martin KROKER, Wolfgang WALTER (eds.), *Credo: Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter*, I: *Essays*, Petersberg, Michael Imhof, 2013, pp. 325-328.

the most widespread superstitious practices of the time, which can be traced back, albeit not exclusively, to the Saxons.³⁵

The repression enacted by the Carolingians also included the imposition of tithes to be paid to the Church,³⁶ which is an issue that gives us an opportunity to examine more closely the position taken by Alcuin on the way in which the conversion of Saxony was being managed. Alcuin was very critical towards the collection of tithes from the Saxon people, because in his opinion it was the unbearable and superficial proof that the Saxons were being forced into acceptance.

In 796, he wrote on this issue to his friend Arno, the bishop of Salzburg, who was about to embark on a mission to the lands of the Avars: *Decimae, ut dicitur, Saxonum subverterunt fidem. Quid inponendum est iu-*

³⁵ *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. Alfred BORETIUS, MGH, *LL 'puposectio II*, I, Hannover, 1883, 108; cf. Alain DIERKENS, "Superstitions, christianisme et paganisme à la fin de l'époque mérovingienne. A propos de l'*Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*", in Hervé HASQUIN (ed.), *Magie, sorcellerie, parapsychologie*, Bruxelles, Centre d'action laïque et Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984, pp. 12-26; Yitzhak HEN, *Culture and religion in Merovingian Gaul, A. D. 481-751*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, Brill, 1995, pp. 178-180.

³⁶ *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, cc. 16-17. On tithes, cf. Henry MAYRHARTING, "Alcuin, Charlemagne and the problem of sanctions", in Stephen BAXTER, Catherine KARKOV, Janet L. NELSON, David PELTERET (eds.), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, Farnham-Burlington, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 214 ff.; John ELDEVIK, *Episcopal Power and Ecclesiastical Reform in the German Empire. Tithes, Lordship, and Community, 950-1150*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 51-53; Owen M. PHELAN, *The Formation of Christian Europe. The Carolingians, Baptism, and the Imperium Christianum*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 100 ff.

*gum cervicibus idiotarum, quod neque nos neque fratres nostri sufferre potuerunt?*³⁷ This is the central train of thought in the letter from Alcuin, who bluntly points out the negative effects of the taxes imposed in Saxony, a practice which seriously hindered the path of this land towards Catholicism.

“*Et esto praedicator pietatis, non decimarum exactor, quia novella anima apostolicae pietatis lacte nutrienda est, donec crescat, convalescat et roboretur ad acceptionem solidi cibi*”³⁸. Another key point is the pastoral behaviour of the Frankish clergy, who were not tax collectors, but evangelisers engaged in the patient work of conversion. Only through the faith was it possible to save the *animas credentium*, a faith that, as stated in another letter by Alcuin addressed to Charlemagne in 796, had to be introduced to non-believers as if offering milk to the mouth of a child, who would certainly not have digested something indigestible, that is to say an overly complex doctrine.³⁹ Ultimately, Alcuin exhorted the priests that they might be *praedicatores, non praedatores* in the lands of the Saxons and the Avars, and therefore should not request the payment of tithes by the pagans. To do so would make it much more difficult to bring them closer to a faith which they would consider the cause of unbearable fiscal oppression, as well as the

³⁷ See *Alcuini sive Albini epistolae*, in *Epistolae Karolini aevi II*, ed. Ernst DÜMMLER, MGH, *Epist.*, IV, Berlin, 1895, 107. For the correspondence between Alcuin and Arno, see Maximilian DIESENBERGER, Herwig WOLFRAM, “Arn und Alkuin 790 bis 804. Zwei Freunde und ihre Schriften”, in Meta NIEDERKORNBRUCK, Anton SCHARER (eds.), *Erzbischof Arn von Salzburg*, Wien-München, Oldenbourg, 2004, pp. 81-106.

³⁸ *Alcuini epist.*, 107.

³⁹ *Alcuini epist.*, 110.

religion of an enemy who had defeated them.⁴⁰ Alcuin’s considerations delve even deeper into, if we can use the term, the psychological dimension of the conversion process, highlighting how the involvement of the Saxons would be far more positive if it were possible to touch their souls, instead of simply compelling them to obey through the use of military force.⁴¹

However, in the letter to Arno considered above, Alcuin stresses that a strong *exercitus* accompanied the bishop of Salzburg to protect him during his mission in the land of the Avars.⁴² If, on the one hand, there was a use of delicate metaphors, that of the Saxon people who had just been “born” to Catholicism and need to be weaned gently, on the other hand, reference is made to an unavoidable presence of troops to guarantee the safety of the priests. In fact, there is no clear indication that Alcuin is against the use of force and, as explained by Sullivan, when «Alcuin addressed his letters to Charlemagne’s court in 796 to plead for a sensible missionary policy in connection with the Avars, he made no protest against the fact that Charlemagne’s armies would force the Avars to accept baptism. He was interested in what happened after the Avars had been made sub-

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*. See Florence CLOSE, *Uniformiser la foi pour unifier l’Empire. Contribution à l’histoire de la pensée politico-théologique de Charlemagne*, Bruxelles, Académie Royale de Belgique, 2011, p. 233: «La violence des missionnaires contribua au rejet massif du christianisme dans ces régions».

⁴¹ *Alcuini epist.*, 113: *Idcirco misera Saxonum gens toties baptismi perdidit sacramentum, quia numquam habuit in corde fidei fundamentum*.

⁴² *Alcuini epist.*, 107.

missive»⁴³. Alcuin, who did not hesitate to give Arno precise indications and admonishments regarding the conduct of the clergy engaged in missions, seems to have accepted the inevitable use of military force. Indeed, he himself asserts —echoing the words in the *Vita sancti Sturmi*— that the king, alternating gifts and threats, had converted the *antiqui Saxones* [...] *ad fidem Christi*.⁴⁴

Final considerations

Alcuin had an ambivalent view of the whole matter, intransigent on the one hand, indulgent on the other. In fact he rebutted the political and military aspects of the clergy's involvement in the conquest of Saxony, and, at the same time, he was indulgent towards the use of military force, indispensa-

ble to make the missionaries' work safer.⁴⁵ In any event, Alcuin felt the need to express a firm opinion on the missionary method that should be employed with pagan peoples. In his letters, the frequency with which he alternates advice and admonishments «... reinforces the impression that Alcuin, whether an egotist or not, had carved out a very special social position for himself and earned the regard of contemporaries far and wide [...] His distinctive social position is clearly one factor which enabled Alcuin's activity as an admonisher»⁴⁶.

We can now question whether Alcuin's incisive admonishments achieved concrete results: «Did his exhortations bear fruit?»⁴⁷. The answer would appear to be positive, because thanks to them, the fierce ruthlessness of the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* was significantly mitigated.⁴⁸ With

⁴³ Richard E. SULLIVAN, "Carolingian Missionary Theories", *The Catholic Historical Review*, 42 (1956), p. 277; cf. Mayke DE JONG, *Charlemagne's church, in Charlemagne. Empire and society, cit.*, pp. 125-126; STOFFERAHN, "Staying the Royal Sword...", *art. cit.*, pp. 466-467.

⁴⁴ Alcuin is aware of the major commitments of the Frankish bishops in the military arena, too, and in this regard he wrote to Arno in reply to his complaints about the numerous warlike commitments that distracted him from his pastoral work, reminding him of his obligation to give his *servitium* in favour of the emperor (Alcuini *Epist.*, 265); cf. Mary ALBERI, "'The Better Paths of Wisdom': Alcuin's Monastic 'True Philosophy' and the Worldly Court", *Speculum*, 76 (2001), pp. 896, 908; Mary GARRISON, "Les correspondants d'Alcuin", *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 111 (2004), p. 320; Donald A. BULLOUGH, "Charlemagne's 'men of God': Alcuin, Hildebald, Arn", in *Charlemagne. Empire and society, op. cit.*, pp. 146-148.

⁴⁵ The *Ratio de Cathecizandis Rudibus* treaty (*Ein karolingischer Missions-Katechismus. Ratio de Cathecizandis Rudibus und die Tauf-Katechesen des Maxentius von Aquileia und eines Anonymus im Kodex Emmeram. XXXIII. saec. IX.*, ed. Joseph M. HEER, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1911, pp. 77-88), written for the Carolingian missionaries, deals with the problem of how to teach the Christian doctrine to those who had agreed, evidently by means other than preaching, to renounce paganism.

⁴⁶ Mary GARRISON, "An aspect of Alcuin: 'Tuus Albinus' - peevish egotist? or parhesiast?", in Richard CORRADINI, Matthew GILLIS, Rosamond MCKITTERICK, Irene VAN REENSWOUDE (eds.), *Ego trouble. Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, Wien, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁷ Richard FLETCHER, *The Barbarian Conversion: from Paganism to Christianity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, p. 222.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*: «There are some slight indications that they did. A second Saxon capitulary issued in 797 was milder in tone than its predecessor» (with reference not only to the chapter on 797 [*Capitulare Saxonicum*, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*,

regard to Alcuin, we can also ask ourselves: «Did medieval people have to live without a self?»⁴⁹. Indeed, Alcuin seems to be troubled by a strong inner conflict about the controversial missionary approach of the Franks, which could seriously jeopardise the successful outcome of the Saxon conversion, an endeavour that could certainly not be considered closed during Charlemagne's time, but which continued under his successors.⁵⁰

[...] *partim bellis, partim suasionibus, partim etiam muneribus, maxima ex parte gentem illam ad fidem Christi convertit*. In conclusion, the words of Sturm's *Vita* are a good reflection of what we might call the identity of the Carolingian mission in Saxony. It saw the concoction of an ambiguous blend of missionary evangelical fervour and Frankish military force, which in spite of everything represented an indispensable tool for the "conversion" of the pagans, as Alcuin had sensed and as Boniface had rec-

ed. Alfred BORETIUS, MGH, *LL sectio II*, I, Hannover, 1883, 27] but also to a council, held in the previous year, in which the forced baptism of pagans was abandoned [*Conventus episcoporum ad ripas Danubii a. 796*, in *Concilia aevi Karolini*, ed. Albert WERMINGHOFF, MGH, *LL sectio III*, II/1, Hannover-Leipzig, 1906, 20]).

⁴⁹ POHL, *Introduction*, in *Ego trouble*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ In this sense, it is worth remembering how at the time of Louis the Pious (less likely in that of his son, Louis the German, Hans J. HUMMER, "The Identity of *Ludouicus piissimus augustus* in the *Praefatio in librum antiquum lingua Saxonica scriptum*", *Francia*, 31 [2004], pp. 4 ff.) the *Heliand* had been written, an epic poem in the Saxon language that consists of a re-working of the Gospel (*The Heliand: the Saxon Gospel*, ed. G. Ronald Murphy, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992). Furthermore, the revolt of the *Stellinga* shows how the lower classes of Saxon society were still strongly bound to pagan cults (Eric J. GOLDBERG, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered", *Speculum*, 70 [1995], *passim*).

ognised before him: "*Sine patrocínio principis Francorum nec populum ecclesiae regere nec presbiteros vel clericos, monachos vel ancillas Dei defendere possum nec ipsos paganorum ritus et sacrilegia idolorum in Germania sine illius mandato et timore prohibere valeo*"⁵¹.

⁵¹ *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus-S. Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae*, 63.