

just as a man who sets out to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds, but goes upward step by step and pace by pace.

There were other monks who served the missionary cause during the early Middle Ages, most notably Boniface, known as the “Apostle to Germany.” It was not until later in the medieval period, however, that large numbers of Roman Catholic clerics became involved in missions-oriented monastic orders, most notably the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Jesuits. Through these orders, Roman Catholicism spread throughout the world and established churches that would dominate the religious scene in many regions.

Although Roman Catholics dominated Christian missions during the Middle Ages, they were not the only missionaries of the period. The Celtic church, represented by St. Patrick, Columba, and others, burned with evangelistic zeal, as did the Eastern or Nestorian church that spread out across Asia. Not to be confused with the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Nestorian church, according to historian John Stewart, was “the most mission-oriented church the world has ever seen.” From their early strongholds in Asia Minor, they fled into Persia and the Arabian Peninsula to avoid persecution from Roman officials and Catholic church leaders. But there they met fierce opposition from Zoroastrians and later from Muslims, so they continued to push farther east into central Asia, India, Afghanistan, and Tibet, areas that became “centers of Christian activity.” These men and women were Christians of “great faith” and “mighty in Scripture, large portions of which they knew by heart.” Schools were established to train the young, and monasteries, resembling modern-day Bible institutes, thrust young adults into full-time evangelistic activity.⁶

From Central Asia the Nestorians moved farther East, and by the ninth century had reached China and from there Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Their influence continued to grow, and by the thirteenth century it is estimated that there were no less than twenty-seven metropolitan patriarchs and two hundred bishops under them in China and surrounding areas. But in the centuries that followed, the church rapidly declined. The peace-conscious Nestorians were no match for militant Muslims, and even worse were the armies of Genghis Khan and other barbarians who devastated large portions of Asia, including major centers of Nestorian Christianity.

An era of Christian missions was over and mostly forgotten. Because of the early doctrinal differences between the Nestorians and the Western church over the two natures of Christ, Nestorians were viewed as heretics, and their great evangelistic endeavors were discounted. Scholars have more recently recognized that the charges of heresy were overstated and that the Nestorians were a vital part of the Christian missionary heritage.

As the Nestorians were pushing eastward, the Roman Catholic Church was pushing north—and eventually across the seas. Unencumbered by families, missionaries spread out with courage and zeal to take the one true church to the ends of the earth.

Boniface (Winfried)

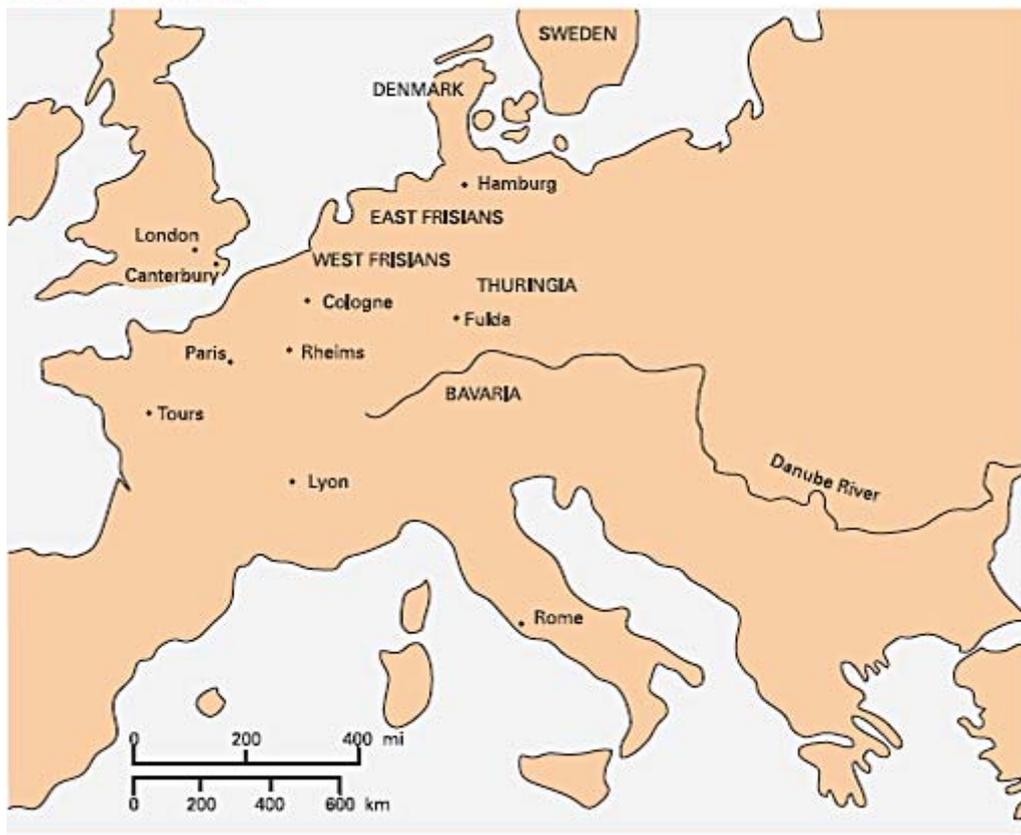
The expansion of Roman Catholic missions in central Europe during the early Middle Ages was associated with Boniface more than with any other individual. He has been variously described as “the greatest of all missionaries of the Dark Ages,” “one of the most remarkable missionaries in the entire history of the expansion of Christianity,” and “a man who had a deeper influence on the history of Europe than any Englishman who has ever lived.”⁷ But he is not universally acclaimed. His career, according to V. Raymond Edman, “reflects the lowering spiritual tone of English and Continental Christianity, which had begun to emphasize Church more than Christ, Sacrament more than Scripture.”⁸

Boniface was born in Devonshire, England, in the late seventh century. He entered monastic life as a youth, and at the age of thirty was ordained a priest. There were many opportunities for this young cleric with “unusual gifts” to excel in his homeland. He was a recognized leader and was “outstandingly suited to the work of teaching, preaching and oversight,” but his “call” was to evangelize the pagans on the Continent.⁹

His first tour of duty to Friesland, however, was unsuccessful because of political opposition and turmoil. He returned home, tempted to stay there and accept a position as head of a monastery. But his burden for foreign missions would not go away, and in 718, three years after he left on his first venture, he went back to the Continent. This time he went to Rome first. He had learned a lesson from his first experience. Papal recognition and backing were essential, and that is what he sought and received in Rome—an endorsement that colored his entire career. He was no longer an independent missionary going out simply to evangelize the pagan world. He was an emissary of Rome, commissioned to establish papal authority over the church in central Europe.

Boniface went first to what is present-day Germany and then back to Friesland for most of three years before returning to Germany, where he served the remainder of his life. In 723 he made his second journey to Rome, at which time he was consecrated a missionary bishop to Germany by Pope Gregory II. Following his return to Germany, Boniface began his missionary work in earnest and won a reputation for courage throughout the Rhineland. Here he exhibited leadership skills that would be the key to his successful ministry. Indeed, he had an uncanny ability to enlist the loyal assistance of others in his ministry. Through correspondence and personal contacts, he urged others to join him in his grand calling from God. While visiting Rome, he presented his vision not only to the pope but to anyone else who would listen. He visited the shrines not just as a pilgrim but also as a recruiter. There he knew he would find potential missionaries.¹⁰

MEDIEVAL EUROPE



Back in Germany, he focused first on the upper classes, knowing the masses would likely—out of fear or respect—follow their example. He took the beliefs of the people seriously and sought to communicate with them in a way that they understood. Many of the nominal Christians of the area had reverted to pagan practices and were involved in spirit worship and magical arts. To counteract this sacrilege, Boniface was convinced, drastic measures were needed. So he boldly struck a blow to the very heart of the local pagan worship.

He assembled a large crowd at Geismar, where the sacred oak of the Thundergod was located, and with the people looking on in horror, he began chopping down the tree. It was a defiant act, but one that clearly drew attention to the fact that there was no supernatural power in either the tree or the god whom it honored. At the same time, it heightened the prestige of Boniface, and soon fanciful tales were associated with the incident, one alleging that when “the giant monster fell, its trunk burst asunder into four parts which, as they fell to the ground, miraculously shaped themselves into the arms of a cross, each arm of equal length.”¹¹



Boniface at Geismar after chopping down the sacred oak of the Thundergod.

It was “a master stroke of missionary policy,” according to Philip Schaff, and thousands of people recognized the superiority of the Christian God and submitted to baptism.¹² Boniface was encouraged and relieved by the positive reaction and continued on in the same vein, destroying temples and shrines and smashing sacred stones into bits. Gradually, he began to question the validity of this aggressive approach. He confided his doubts to another bishop, who advised him that such forceful methods were unwise and that a more meaningful and lasting approach was to “ask them questions about their gods, to inquire about their origins, their seemingly human attributes, their relationship with the beginning of the world, and in so doing elicit such contradictions and absurdities from their answers that they would become confused and ashamed.”¹³

Whatever the impact the felling of sacred trees and smashing of shrines may have had on initial evangelistic work, it was obvious that much more was needed to build an enduring church. Like the Celtic missionaries before him, Boniface established monastic mission outposts as training centers where monks who worked with him prepared new converts for the ministry. The only truly innovative aspect of his ministry was his enthusiastic recruitment of women to serve the cause of missions. “For the first time in a number of centuries,” writes Latourette, “we find women taking an active part in missions.”¹⁴

The most noted of these women was Lioba, a cousin of Boniface who had corresponded with him and expressed interest in mission work in Germany. Through arrangements with her abbess back in Wessex, England, thirty nuns were sent abroad to join the mission work. Boniface deeded them a convent that became known as Bischofsheim, and Lioba served as the abbess. They were considered missionary nuns, but like many missionaries of this era they did not travel about conducting evangelistic outreach. They were cloistered. Their evangelism consisted of seeking to attract native women to become nuns. Lioba served faithfully for decades, long after the death of Boniface. Though confined to her convent, she had regular contact with a wide range of people—from villagers to bishops—who often came to her for counsel on church matters.¹⁵

In 737, following his third visit to Rome, Boniface was empowered to organize bishoprics throughout Bavaria, and in 744 he founded the famous monastery of Fulda that has remained a center for Roman Catholicism in Germany to this day. The phenomenal accomplishments credited to Boniface could not have been carried out without the powerful backing of Charles Martel, whose victory over the Muslims at the Battle of Tours in 732 marked a turning point in the struggle against Islam. “Without the protection of the prince of the Franks,” wrote Boniface, “I can neither rule the people or the church nor defend the priests and clerks, monks and nuns; nor can I prevent the practice of pagan rites and sacrilegious worship of idols without his mandate and the awe inspired by his name.”¹⁶

To the end, Boniface’s ministry was to bolster the Roman Catholic Church—to “turn the hearts of the heathen Saxons to the Catholic Faith” and to “gather them among the children of Mother Church.”¹⁷ From that perspective, it is not surprising that the work of Boniface clashed with the missionary endeavors of Celtic and French monks. “He reaped the fruits of their labors,” according to Schaff, “and destroyed their further usefulness, which he might have secured by a liberal Christian policy. He hated every feature of individuality.... To him true Christianity was identical with Romanism.”¹⁸

The fact that many Celtic missionaries had wives and defended clerical marriage was anathema to Boniface, but imbued with the Roman passion for uniformity, even such nonessential issues as the date for Easter, the right to eat certain meats, and the frequency of making the sign of the cross during mass caused him to denounce them as false prophets.

During the last years of his ministry, Boniface relinquished the administrative church work that had long consumed so much of his energy and went back to doing pioneer missionary work. “The spirit of the missionary prevailed,” writes Neill, “and drove him out again into the lands where Christ had not been named.”¹⁹ In 753 he returned to Friesland, which was still largely pagan. There on the banks of the river Borne, he and some fifty assistants and followers set up their tents in preparation for a confirmation service of new converts. But the service never took place. Boniface and his companions were set upon and slain by a band of armed bandits, thus ending the ministry of medieval Europe’s most energetic and outwardly successful missionary.