

**ODINIZING JESUS IN THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
AND THE CREATION OF THE CRUSADER**

by

DREW THOMAS CRAVER

(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Western Christianity in the eighth and ninth centuries to illustrate what I argue is the growth of the crusader ideology. The forced conversion of the Germanic Saxons by command of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne contributed to the growth of this ideology. This thesis will survey Western Christianity in late-Antiquity and the early Medieval periods and expose a clash of empires: one Christian and Frankish, and the other Saxon and Pagan. Looking at the methods missionaries took in order to address the repercussions of forced conversion I will highlight one specific piece of missionary literature known as *The Heliand* and how it demonstrates accommodative tactics utilized by the missionaries to assuage the new converts. Then I will present my conclusion, that centuries of Christianity's institutional transformation drastically altered the theology or Christology of Jesus which would eventually lead to the development of the crusader mentality.

INDEX WORDS: Medieval Christianity, Norse Mythology, Cult of Odin,
Charlemagne, Holy Roman Empire, The Heliand, Charles Martel, Crusade

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DEDICATION

To my loving wife who encouraged me every step of the way.

To my parents, who support all of my adventures.

And my children, who inspire me to explore!

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INTRODUCTION

Romanticizing the past is a common trait of legendary religious literature. History is always written by the triumphant who tell their story. In the Early Middle Ages, the story of the triumphant is that Europe was magically converted to the truth of Christianity. The disciples of Christ, loving missionaries who spread the word of God, were characterized as simple saints walking in the wilderness, beacons for the heathens who voluntarily accepted the gospel.

The conversion of Europe is far more complicated, and the venerable behavior of Christ's champions are often dubious. Let me be clear, the purpose of this thesis is not to insult Christianity. In fact, the purpose is twofold; one religious and one political. The religious purpose is to look honestly at a critical, but largely unexamined period of Christian expansion. My thesis will focus on the conversion of the Germanic Saxon Pagans,¹ east of the Rhine river using a threefold process. The importance of this thesis lies in identifying at least one major source of the development of the crusader mentality. For the purpose of this work I am defining the crusader mentality as the belief that fighting and dying for Jesus in a "holy war" will grant the deceased an automatic "free pass" to Heaven. While there are scholars, such as Carl Erdmann and G. Neckel, who agree with my proposed source of the crusader mentality they have merely glossed over

¹ The use of the word *pagan* is in no way intended to present a negative bias in the way the Abrahamic faiths have used the word for "devil worshipers" and other insulting remarks. Instead it simply is meant as a concise nomenclature used to represent the indigenous religion of Northern Europe which included belief in the Teutonic Pantheon.

the period referenced. My work is a call to other scholars to dig into ninth century Saxony and unpack the forced Christianization of the indigenous European pagans. The goal being to understand the development of a militarized religion and a call to clergy, scholars, and seculars alike to question whether Christianity really condones any violence whatsoever. In doing so, I believe that not only will the teachings of nonviolent resistance shine through, but that the scars caused by forced Christianization of indigenous Europeans and centuries of war against adherents of Islam may finally begin to heal. The second, political, purpose is to reiterate the historical dangers of theocracy, a government that becomes synonymous with religion. As religions in the twenty-first century battle to remain in the political sphere and certain nation-states are threatening religious freedoms by subscribing to one tradition alone and persecuting others the world runs the risk of repeating atrocities that once plagued the medieval period. This work is a call to scholars and politicians to not only promote, but demand absolute separation of church and state.

Chapter One will set the stage for understanding the landscape of late-Antiquity and the early Medieval periods. Utilizing the research of H.R. Ellis Davidson in *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, which demonstrates how the later Icelandic *Eddas* are valid when attempting to understand the indigenous myths of pagan Europe. Thanks to Dr. Davidson it is possible for me to clearly define the cult of Odin. Carolyne Larrington's research on and translation of the *Poetic Edda* have provided significant insights on the indigenous European stories validated by Davidson. Patrick Geary's *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* describe Rome, "free Germany," and Western Europe after Rome's fall. Thanks to

Geary I am able to build on my thesis highlighting the rise of the cult of Odin, which will play a prominent role in my greater thesis throughout.

Chapter Two will build on that context and begin to expose the clash of cultures: one Christian and Frankish, and the other Saxon and Pagan. Building on the research of Paul Fouracre's *The Age of Charles Martel*, I will defend my argument that there were underlying motives to convert the Saxons, motives which were not always altruistic or religious. In this chapter, I will show how these motives demanded mass conversion at a rapid pace, which rarely left room for voluntary submission and full understanding of the religion to which these peoples were converting. James C. Russell's work *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* is then necessary to understand the lasting repercussions of the mass, forced conversions of indigenous Europe. His research has demonstrated how the Germanic culture influenced Roman Christianity and I will build on his argument, focusing on one ideology in particular, the crusader mentality.

Chapter Three will look at the methods missionaries took in order to address the repercussions of forced conversion and to bridge the gap between the culture they carried and that they encountered. Particularly, it will highlight one specific piece of missionary literature known as *The Heliand* and how it demonstrates accommodative tactics utilized by the missionaries to assuage the new converts. *The Heliand* is a narrative synthesis of the four New Testament Gospels, similar to Tatian's *Diatessaron*, written specifically for the Germanic Saxons in the ninth century. Continuing the work of G. Ronald Murphy in *The Saxon Savior* I will suggest that the earliest recipients of this work could easily have heard something else, their own cultural knowledge, confusing the proposed message. I will unpack the text using the lense of literary theorists such as Hans Robert Jauss and

Hans-George Gadamer. Addressing my use of structuralist methods and comparative practices, similar to Mircea Eliade, I am well aware that Structuralism and Comparativism have fallen out of fashion in certain academic circles, but, with reservations and this acknowledgement, I will utilize these methodologies for my work.

Then I will present my conclusion, that the aforementioned confusion of and in cultures, on top of centuries of Christianity's own institutional transformation, drastically altered the theology or Christology of Jesus, which is supported in Carl Erdmann's *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* and G. Neckel's *Kriegerethik*. As my argument concludes, these changes or alterations soon led to the ideology of the crusader.

CHAPTER 1

FROM CONSTANTINE TO CHARLEMAGNE

This thesis examines Western Christianity in the eighth and ninth centuries to illustrate what I argue is the growth of the crusader ideology. For the purpose of this work I am defining the crusader mentality as the belief that fighting and dying for Jesus in a “holy war” will grant the deceased an automatic “free pass” to Heaven. The forced conversion of the Germanic Saxons by command of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne contributed to the growth of this ideology. In order to defend this thesis I must first provide a groundwork of history, political as well as religious, upon which to build my argument. In this chapter, I will explain the political, religious and economic landscape of northern Europe from the time of the Roman Empire until the rise of the Carolingian dynasty.

The Rise of the Odinic Cult in Free Germany

The earliest written history available to scholars about the geographic area referred to by the Romans as “free Germany”² and the people living there was written by the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus in the late first century. Scholars agree that Tacitus was working with information provided by Pliny the Elder earlier in the first century. Tacitus’ work is commonly referred to as *Germania* and in it he describes the landscape, natural resources, and cultural variances and attributes of tribes living there. It

² An area generally described as east of the Rhine river and north of the Danube.

is necessary before proceeding to highlight the fact that “free Germany” was by no means a single political entity, but, instead, a collection of tribes, each with a unique identity.

Naturally, these unique identities shared many common traits. One such trait described by Tacitus was the “common worship of Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth.”³ There were specific, yet not regular times, when she was celebrated. During these festivals “[n]o one goes to war, no one takes up arms, all objects of iron are locked away, then and only then do they experience peace and quiet.”⁴ Tacitus, describing the Suebi⁵ peoples, states that “[t]hey worship the Mother of the Gods and as a symbol of that cult they wear the figure of a wild boar.”⁶ From passages like these, alongside archaeological evidence, scholars such as the renowned H. R. Ellis Davidson were able to infer that the Mother Earth goddess described by Tacitus is potentially Freyja, “the most renowned of the goddesses” the “bride of the Vanir.”⁷

Early Germanic and Scandinavian mythology includes two pantheons; the Vanir and the Æsir. The Vanir were the gods of agriculture, renewal, and prosperity. The Æsir were gods of war, protection, and victory. While nearly impossible to prove, it stands to reason that the gods of the Vanir were the earlier gods worshipped by the indigenous Europeans, possibly Celts, and that the Æsir were brought with the Indo-European migration around four thousand years ago. Scholarship of and archaeology in the Indus River Valley civilization have set the precedent for such a circumstance. During its Indo-

³ Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*. A.R. Birley trans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 58.

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ The Suebi were further removed from the Roman controlled territories, which defends the belief that Germanic peoples not under continuous threat of Roman invasion still held the agrarian and fertility gods in higher status than the war gods of the Æsir.

⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 61.

⁷ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 114, 115.

European invasion, gods such as Indra, the god of thunder, who is associated with the swastika and described as the enemy of Vritra, the serpent encircling the celestial waters were brought to the Indus River Valley. Indra is no doubt a parallel to Þorr (Thor) of the Æsir. Thor is also a god of thunder, is also associated with the swastika, and is also known as the enemy of the Miðgarðsormr (world serpent) who encircles the oceans. The conquering Indo-Europeans brought their war gods with them and an interesting mythos developed which allowed the Vanir and the Æsir to coexist.

In the myth, the gods battled amongst themselves, but it was a futile endeavor. The Vanir could not overcome the tremendous strength and skill in battle possessed by the Æsir, and likewise, the Æsir could not kill the Vanir who could be continuously reborn. Instead, they exchanged hostages, made peace, and joined forces against the giants. Collectively the Æsir and Vanir were worshiped by the free Germanic peoples in the first century, but as Tacitus suggests the more peaceful Vanir were still held in highest regard. The Æsir on the other hand were called on for battle and their cults did not dominate the then agrarian societies. The Roman Empire, the giant, however would change that.

Under the constant threat of Roman aggression and invasion, as historian Patrick Geary points out “the second century radically changed the structure of Germanic tribes.”⁸ He argues that “[i]n order to survive, the tribe had to become thoroughly militarized.”⁹ During this period of continuous warfare there was a “deemphasis on the agrarian traditions of the community and, along with it, on the cult of fertility gods.”¹⁰

⁸ Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 61.

⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

These gods of plenty were superseded and “[i]n their place many Germanic tribes turned to Woden or Oden, the god of war” and “the giver of victory.”¹¹

Defining the Cult of Odin

As with almost every religion there is not a one size fits all definition for the cult of Odin. In fact, since it was nearly obliterated we know very little about its beliefs and practices. Fortunately, archaeologists have unearthed burial sites and rock carvings which combined with the eddas preserved in Iceland alongside sagas and epics scholars are able to present a valid understanding of the beliefs and practices of various indigenous Europeans including members of the cult of Odin. The most enlightening single manuscript is referred to as the Codex Regius, or *The Poetic Edda*. Carolyne Larrington in the introduction to her translation states that “[a]lthough the majority of the poems were recorded in the late thirteenth century, it is thought that most of the mythological verses and a few of the heroic poems pre-date the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity in the late tenth century.”¹² One of the most important of these poems is the *Voluspa* when attempting to understand the cosmogony of Norse mythology. The excerpt below explains the origins of humans and the importance of the World Tree, Yggdrasil:

*Unz þrir kvomo
or þvi liði
oþgir ok astgir
æsir at husi.
Fundo a landi
litt megandi
Ask ok Emblo
þrloglausa.*

¹¹ Ibid., 61. Geary’s spelling of Woden and Oden differ from the more commonly recognized Wodan and Odin.

¹² Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi.

*Önd þau ne atto
 oð þau ne hofðo,
 la ne læti
 ne lito goða.
 Önd gaf Oðinn,
 oð gaf Hænir,
 la gaf Loðurr
 ok lito goða.*

*Ask veit ek standa,
 heiter Yggdrasill,
 har baðmr, ausinn
 hvitaauri.
 Þaðan koma doggvar
 þærs i dala falla.
 Stendr æ yfir grænn
 Urðar brunni.¹³*

“Until three came
 from that family,
 dear and mighty
 Æsir to a house.
 Found on the land
 little able,
 Ask [Ash] and Embla,¹⁴
 futureless.

They did not have breath,
 they did not have spirit,
 flesh nor voice
 nor good form.
 Breath Odin gave,
 spirit Hænir gave,
 flesh and good form
 Loðurr gave

I know an ash stands,
 called Yggdrasill,
 a high tree, sprinkled with
 shining loam.
 From there come the dews
 That fall in the valleys.

¹³ Ursula Dronke, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11-12.

¹⁴ Etymology would suggest Ask and Embla were originally Ash and Elm wood that the Æsir animated.

Forever green it stands
Over Urðr's well."¹⁵

H. R. Ellis Davidson has managed to piece together a trustworthy picture of the pagan world of northern Europe in late-Antiquity and I will briefly share some of her insights at this time. According to Davidson “Wodan, worshipped on the Rhine in the first century” is the precursor to “the Scandinavian Odin” and his worship “is believed to have travelled northwards, perhaps along with the use of runic letters, with the tribe of the Heruli” to “Denmark and Sweden.”¹⁶ Working backwards it is safe to assume that references to the more well known Odin are, in fact, also true for the lesser known earlier Germanic Wodan who is actually the same deity. That being said I must point out that for uniformity and clarity I will refer to Norse mythological gods and places by their most common modern English renditions. Therefore, while Woden, Wodan, Oðinn, and Odin all refer to the same deity I will refer to him only as Odin. Likewise Donar, Þorr, and Thor I will call Thor and Valhöll will be Valhalla. Also, I wish to address my use of the word *pagan* which will be used throughout this thesis. I do not intend for it to present a negative bias in the way the Abrahamic faiths have used the word for “devil worshipers” and other insulting remarks. Instead it simply is meant as a concise nomenclature used to represent the indigenous religion of Northern Europe which included belief in the Teutonic Pantheon of which Odin is the leader.

Odin is commonly referred to as the Allfather, he is the king of the Æsir, father of Thor, husband of Frigga. He breathed life into the first man and woman, Ask and Embla. In comparative terms he is equivalent to Zeus in Greek mythology or Jupiter in Roman,

¹⁵ Translation from Old Norse by Drew Craver.

¹⁶ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 148.

although Roman authors associated him with Mercury.¹⁷ He is the Norse god of poetry, wisdom, and war. He is a traveler, known to disguise himself and walk amongst humans. He once sacrificed his own eye for one sip of the mead of wisdom. The World Tree, Yggdrasil, the pillar of the universe, which sustains and connects all life in heaven, hell, and on earth takes its name from Odin, who once sacrificed himself to himself on it.¹⁸ Using his spear, Gungnir, he staked himself to it and gained the wisdom of the Runes as told in the *Havamal*, “Sayings of the High One”:

*Veit ek, at ek hekk
vindga meiði a
nætr allar niu.
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Oðni,
sjalfr sjalfum mer.
a þeim meiði
er manngi veit
hvers hann af rotum renn.*

*við hleifi mik sældu
ne við hornigi,
nysta ek niðr,
nam ek upp runar,
æpandi nam,
fell ek aptr þaðan.*¹⁹

“I know, I hung from
from the windy tree
nine long nights.
Wounded by a spear
I gave to Odin
myself to myself,
on that tree
which no one knows
from where its roots run.

¹⁷ See Tacitus’ *Germania*.

¹⁸ *Yggr* is one of Odin’s many names and *drasill* means horse. Together *Yggdrasil* is believed to mean “Odin’s horse” or “Odin’s gallows.” See Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 375.

¹⁹ David A.H. Evans, ed., *Havamal* (Exeter: Short Run Press Limited, 2000), 68-69.

They gave me
no horn,²⁰
nor bread,
I looked down
I took up the runes,
screaming I fell back from there.”²¹

The Runes being referenced are an early alphabet used by the Germanic peoples known as the Futhark. They were not often used for literature, but, instead, were commonly used for magical inscriptions on jewelry, weaponry, armour, and artistic mythological carvings. It is well accepted that Odin was the possessor of runic knowledge and gave it as a gift to humans. He is quite often seen interacting with humans, interfering in their affairs, and always interested in current events. He is commonly associated with the raven, one of the Germanic “beasts of battle,” and is often seen with two resting on his shoulders. Those two specific ravens are known as Huginn and Muninn, “thought” and “memory.” They are said to fly over the world each night and return to Odin before his morning meal to deliver the latest news.

Odin’s interest in human affairs may be due to his continuous search for *einherjar*, warriors chosen to join him in the afterlife in Valhalla. He sends his Valkyries, angelic shield maidens, to fetch the souls of the greatest warriors and guide them over the Bifrost Bridge to his great hall. Odin is aware of future events, known as Ragnarok, when the giants will attempt to conquer heaven and earth. He and his chosen warriors will fight together in one final battle against Loki and his giants to save Earth and Asgard. Seemingly all will be destroyed, including himself, but in the cyclical nature of many indigenous religions, after all is lost, the earth and the gods will be reborn.

²⁰ The implied meaning is a drink from the mead-horn.

²¹ Translation from Old Norse by Drew Craver.

Germanic warriors in the cult of Odin sought to fight and die gloriously in battle, so they would be reborn and led by Valkyries to Valhalla, along with other great warriors such as Sigurd the Dragon slayer,²² where they will await the final battle. “Free Germany,” along the Rhine river in late-Antiquity forced into a state of continuous war saw an enormous growth in Odin’s cult. No longer was it enough to pray for food, they needed victory. Odin was their victory giver and they marked themselves as his followers.

The young warriors were known to mark or cut themselves with a spear as a certain initiation ritual. They gladly fought to the death because “a violent death was demanded as the price of entry” to Valhalla.²³ As Davidson points out “the realm of Odin was open to women as well as men.”²⁴ In fact, the goddess Freyja, received first pick of all the dead and housed half of them in her hall, Folkvang.²⁵ Entire societies developed around Odin’s warrior code and horrified their neighbors with their intensity in battle. Tacitus wrote of one such fearsome love of battle adopted by the Chatti tribe. They grow their beards “long and do not cut them until they have killed an enemy [...] When they are standing over the bloody corpse and the spoils they lay bare their faces [...] and have shown themselves worthy of their parents and their fatherland.”²⁶ Enemies the Odinic warriors did not kill in battle were often sacrificed to the god by spearing or staking them to a tree and left to die in the same way Odin sacrificed himself on the World Tree. The only difference was, Odin walked away.

²² See *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

²³ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 152.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁵ See “Grimnir’s Sayings” in; Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 50.

²⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 53.

Free Germanic peoples, unable to walk away from continuous attacks and unwilling to surrender became increasingly focused on war and the prominence of the Norse god Odin rose alongside. The Odinic cult is equally as fearsome as ancient Sparta and just as the Spartans fought to preserve Greece, so the cult of Odin remained the final free religious group in Germany.

The Rise of Roman, Constantinian Christianity

The work of historian Patrick Geary is an invaluable starting point for understanding the transition of early Europe. In his book *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* he details chronologically the political, economic, and religious changes of western Europe between the fall of Rome and the rise of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled by the Carolingian dynasty. As he himself states, the purpose of this book is “to make available the vast literature on late antiquity and the early Middle Ages” in one concise place.²⁷ Utilizing the various primary and secondary literature on Europe between the fifth and seventh centuries Geary has compiled a noteworthy source of information cited by many scholars across numerous disciplines. Following their lead I too will be working with his research to lay the groundwork of my thesis.

Before laying the foundation of any project, one must first prepare the site. In this case, I must discuss the Roman Emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 until 337. The Eastern Orthodox Church venerates Constantine as a saint, equal to the apostles, and many Christians throughout the world view him as a champion of the faith, furthering the cause of evangelization. He is said to have accepted baptism only on his deathbed and

²⁷ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, ix.

there are many who doubt that he was ever baptised a Christian. There are many legends surrounding the lives of saints, impossible to validate. Nonetheless, they exist, and they influence the world over. One such legend surrounding Constantine was written by Cynewulf, an Anglo-Saxon poet who is believed to have lived in the 9th century. In his work *Elene*, a work about Constantine's mother Helena, he describes the miraculous conversion of the young emperor:

<i>eoforcumbe beþeaht;</i>	<i>He of slæpe onbrægd</i>
<i>plitig puldres boda</i>	<i>him se ar hraðe,</i>
<i>7 be naman nemde-</i>	<i>pið þingode</i>
<i>‘Constantinus,</i>	<i>nihthelm toglad-</i>
<i>pyrda pealdend,</i>	<i>heht þe cyning engla</i>
<i>Duguða dryhten;</i>	<i>pære beodan</i>
<i>ðeah þe elpeodige</i>	<i>ne ondræd þu ðe</i>
<i>heardre hilde;</i>	<i>eges an hpopan</i>
<i>on puldres peard;</i>	<i>þu to heofenum beseoh</i>
<i>sigores tacen’.</i>	<i>þær ðu praðe findest</i>
<i>on þam frencan fære</i>	<i>‘Mid þys beacne ðu</i>
<i>geletest laðperod’²⁸</i>	<i>feond oferswiðesð,</i>

	“He started up from sleep
covered by the boar image;	quickly the messenger
the gloriously beautiful messenger	spoke with him
and called him by name -	cover of night departed
‘Constantine,	the one called the king of angels,
ruler of fate,	Lord of hosts,
offers a pledge;	dread not thou
though foreigners	threaten either terror
or severe battle;	look thou to heaven
to the guardian of glory;	there thou will find support
the symbol of victory.’ [...]	With this symbol thou
in this terrible expedition	will overcome the enemy
withstand the hateful army” ²⁹	

Here we see the emperor awoken by an angel and given a “token” of victory.

Similar to the earlier Germanic peoples described by Tacitus, and Beowulf, the namesake

²⁸ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. P. O. E. Gradon (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 29-30.

²⁹ Translation from Old English by Drew Craver.

of the famed Anglo-Saxon heroic epic, Constantine wears a helmet with the image of the boar. The boar, in Norse mythology is associated with the brother and sisters gods, Freyr and Freyja, children of Njord, the god of the sea. Freyja is a goddess of earth, plenty, and seiðr or “magic.” Freyr is “the sovereign deity of increase and prosperity.”³⁰ His association with the boar is clearly understood as it is famous for its reproductive capabilities. The average sow will have at least five pigs per litter at least 1.5 times per year. They are one of the most prolific large land mammals. While the boar is not seen as a predator, per se, its ferocity in battle is illustrious to say the least. With its razor sharp tusks it is infamous for wounding, maiming, and even killing would be attackers, but if left alone it is happy to root in the dirt searching for food. Freyr and the boar sign would be called on to bless the growth and reproduction of crops, but he could also be invoked for victory in battle when farmers found themselves attacked. His fertility cult was “strongly at variance with the battle cult of Odin [...] The ban against weapons in Freyr’s temples, his anger when blood is shed on his sacred land, the taboo against outlaws in his holy place, are all in accordance with his character as a bringer of peace.”³¹

The messenger introduced by Cynewulf describes a new “bringer of peace,” a victory-giver who uses magical symbols or “tokens” to protect his host of warriors.

<i>HEHT þa onlice</i>	<i>æðelinga hleo,</i>
<i>beorna beaggifa</i>	<i>spa he þæt beacen geseah,</i>
<i>heria hildfruma,</i>	<i>þæt him on heofonum ær</i>
<i>geieped pearð,</i>	<i>ofstum myclum</i>
<i>Constantinus</i>	<i>Cristes rode,</i>
<i>tireadig cyning,</i>	<i>tacen gepyrcean.</i>
<i>Heht þa on uhtan</i>	<i>mid ærdæge</i>
<i>pigeng preccan</i>	<i>7 pæpenpræce,</i>
<i>hebban heorucumbul</i>	<i>7 þæt halige treo</i>

³⁰ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 96.

³¹ Ibid., 102.

*him beforan ferian on feonda gemang,
 beran beacen Godes.³²*

“Then Constantine,	protector of princes
overlord of men	leader of the army
as soon as he saw that symbol,	that to him in heaven
the guardian earlier revealed,	the glorious king
ordered a likeness	of the symbol
of Christ’s cross	made with great haste.
At daybreak he commanded	with dawn
to rouse the warriors	to raise the standard
and that holy tree	and to go
to battle	bearing the symbol of God
before them.” ³³	

The symbol discussed is the Chi-Rho, X P . It is composed of the first two letters of the Greek spelling for Christ, X and P, and the image seemingly represents his crucifixion. Legend has it that under this symbol Constantine won the Battle of Milvian bridge in 312. The extreme pacifist, the peace-god Jesus had apparently embraced war and granted victory to the pagan³⁴ emperor Constantine. The god of peace went to war. The following year in 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, ending the persecutions of Christians and establishing tolerance for the worship of Jesus. Under Constantine, Jesus had graced the battlefield and entered the Roman political scene.

Arguably Constantine was one of the most influential people in all of Christianity’s history, before or after him. The various Christianities of the early centuries were at odds with each other and could not agree on a single Christology, or understanding of the human / divine nature of Jesus. The argument came to a head with Arius and Athanasius just prior to Constantine’s convening the Council of Nicaea in 325. The emperor forced bishops to end the argument and agree on one “orthodox” teaching of

³² Cynewulf, *Elene*, 30.

³³ Translation from Old English by Drew Craver.

³⁴ The use of the word *pagan* here is simply meant as a concise nomenclature to represent the indigenous religion of Rome which included belief in the Roman Pantheon.

Christianity. What was produced at the council was the Nicene Creed, which defined the “orthodox” belief of Christianity, including the nature of Jesus and the concept of the Trinity. Discussion of “orthodox” Bibles began and the characteristics desirable in a bishop were defined by the Pauline “pastoral epistle,” 1 Timothy:

“Whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way - for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.”³⁵

Constantine wielded tremendous power over the same Christian church that once lurked in the shadows of his empire. Early Christians practiced social justice; caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. After Constantine some bishops became theologians and politicians, debating word choice and instead of tending to the physical and spiritual needs of their flock. The office of bishop and church hierarchy as a whole became more and more political. By the end of the fourth century Christianity made the ultimate step into politics. Under the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, the emperor Theodosius I ordered that Christianity become the religion of the state.

Constantine’s Christianity had risen to dominate the world scene. The once persecuted minority was now, 100 years later, the persecuting majority. The oppressed had become the oppressor. Roman soldiers, in prior centuries, who converted to Christianity renounced war and retired from battle.³⁶ Now most Roman soldiers were

³⁵ 1 Timothy 3: 1-7. New Oxford Annotated Bible, (NOAB).

³⁶ See, for instance, the Centurion Cornelius referenced in Acts 10 and the vast debate surrounding his military service post-conversion.

Christian and a new definition for pacifism was required. Augustine of Hippo would redefine Christianity to accommodate the behavior of Rome.

What evolved was what is now commonly referred to as “just war” theory. Augustine, grappling with the truths of a Christian Rome, prior to its fall in the West, argued that all Christians did not have to renounce war. Instead, he claimed that one could participate in warfare as long as their motive was the defense of innocents. According to Augustine, going to war simply for personal gain was wrong, but going to war to help those who cannot help themselves is perfectly acceptable and, possibly, even expected.

Messianic expectation for Jesus, the progenitor of Christianity, was that he would lead the defenseless Israelites in a military uprising to defeat the oppressive Romans. Instead, he renounced such behavior and submissively accepted execution by crucifixion. His example of an unwillingness to fight and exhortation to his Apostles to remain passive and also accept death willingly was four centuries later, ignored, redefined, and justified. Jesus may not have fulfilled Jewish Messianic expectation, but Atonement Theory, created by Christians would argue that Jesus had, in fact, fulfilled *their* Messianic expectation. Their Atonement Theory claimed that Jesus was offered as a blood sacrifice to appease the wrath of god³⁷ and free the souls of sinners. While he was not the military and political savior expected by Israelites he was the savior of souls and the forgiver of sins that Christians expected.

³⁷ Out of respect and fairness towards the religions of Abraham, Rome, and the Norse I will refer to all of their gods with a lowercase g.

Christianity as the state sponsored religion of Rome forced one accommodation after another. By the time of Augustine, Constantinian Christianity was becoming highly developed and defended.

The Transition Towards Carolingian Christianity

The Roman Empire, in its entirety, did not survive long after making Christianity its official religion. It is true that Constantinople, in modern day Istanbul, and the Eastern Empire, which became known as Byzantium, remained for nearly a thousand years, but Rome proper, the Western Empire fell within one hundred years. While I will make reference to the Byzantine Empire at times, my discussion of Rome and its fall, from here on, refers only to the Western Empire.

Just prior to Rome's fall under the so-called Barbarian invasions, Christian Rome had begun drastically to alter the power structure of Christianity, usurping the office of the Bishop. Patrick Geary notes that thanks to "Imperial favor from Constantine and his successors [...] the position of bishop became sufficiently powerful" and was "part of the aristocracy's means of preserving and extending its power."³⁸ Using one example after another he identifies a pattern particularly in Gaul, beginning in the fifth century, where:

Bishops tended to come from the senatorial class and were selected, not from among the clergy, but usually from the ranks of those with proven records of leadership and administration. Election to episcopal office became the culmination of a career pattern or *cursus honorum* which had nothing to do with the Church. Not surprisingly, the values of these bishops reflected the values of their class and of the secular society in which they had spent their long careers. Those virtues for which bishops are most remembered in their epitaphs and funerary orations were the worldly fame and glory that had been the traditional values of pagan Roman society rather than religious virtues. Completely lacking

³⁸ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 33.

in religious or clerical backgrounds, most bishops in the West were little involved in issues of theology or spirituality.³⁹

Thanks to epitaphs and funerary orations Geary is able to paint a vivid picture of the changes in behavior and personnel of bishoprics. Clearly the confiscation of the seat of bishop was most successful in Gaul because it was not as thoroughly Christianized as were the more urban centers such as the city of Rome. In fact, the Christianity of this time was quite regional and centered on the teachings of the local bishops. Gaul was not filled with Christians who might oppose a secular senatorial bishop. Instead, the Christianity that spread through Gaul was the Christianity of the aristocracy.

The aristocracy which controlled the Western Empire just prior to and following the fall of Rome were Gallo-Roman elite “composed of those who had gained wealth and prominence through imperial service” and “managed to marry into the Roman local elite.”⁴⁰ As Geary puts it, these “Frankish commanders provided much of the leadership of the army in the West, becoming virtual rulers who could make and break emperors at will.”⁴¹ The Franks⁴² were warriors from the Rhine region of modern day Belgium. They gained wealth and power in the service of the Empire and later partnered with the senatorial class after the fall of the West. Their story is the one we will follow to trace the rise of the Holy Roman Empire.

The partnership of Franks and Roman aristocracy in Gaul, northwest Europe, created a lasting alliance that would soon merge and forever reshape Western politics and

³⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴² The word *Frank* meant “hardy” or “brave.” Later it was used to mean “free.” And during the Crusades Muslims used it as an epithet to mean “greedy, warlike, Latin-speaking Catholics.” see Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* and Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*.

Christianity as a whole. While Rome proper fell, the Gallo-Roman elite sheltered under the protection of Frankish warriors remained virtually unscathed. As Geary explains, for “senatorial landowners of the West [...] The Empire as a political reality was indeed gone”, but “since his own portion had not been adversely affected, he had not noticed its demise.”⁴³ Arguably this class of aristocrats’ power grew as they no longer owed allegiance, and more importantly taxes, to the emperor. They owned their land, they owned their slaves, they controlled local politics, the church, and they were defended by fierce Frankish fighters. While their counterparts in the city of Rome were sieged and impoverished, the Gallo-Roman ruling elite were poised to expand, without the permission of an emperor or a pope.

A prominent Frankish leader in the period of European expansion was Childeric. He managed good relations with the Visigoths and the Gallo-Romans alike. He was clearly a pagan, but was also “seen as a protector of *Romanitas*⁴⁴ and thus of the Orthodox Christian church.”⁴⁵ As Geary suggests, Childeric was paving the way for his son Clovis with “his Frankish warrior following” and “Roman power structures as well.”⁴⁶ Almost Immediately after his succession in 482 Clovis received a letter from the Gallo-Roman bishop Remigius of Reims, in northeast France near Belgium. The letter praised his behavior of good relations with bishoprics and warned, in what I read as a subtle threat: “you must always honor your bishops and must always incline yourself to their advice. As soon as you are in agreement with them your territory [provincia] will

⁴³ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 28-29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8. A term defined by Geary as “a broad concept that covers everything that refers to Rome.”

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81-82.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 82.

prosper.”⁴⁷ Keep in mind that the bishops in reference are of the political elite and often inherited their episcopacy. I suggest Remigius’ comments are a telltale sign that there were growing tensions between the aristocracy and the warriors as the restructuring of power systems in the late fifth century was underway.

Gallo-Romans, post Rome, were enjoying “familial hegemony” and were threatened by the rise of a kingship.⁴⁸ “Power over the people was held by the great landowners,”⁴⁹ the aristocracy who also monopolized the bishoprics, and quite often even fought to the death over control of the episcopacy, “because it was a prize worth fighting for,” an “hereditary right worth killing to defend.”⁵⁰ Just as the aristocrats controlled the land and the episcopacy there is no doubt that the military was the Franks’ alone. Clovis was far-sighted. He knew that the greatest success was a shared success. He allowed the aristocracy to keep their land and control of the church bishoprics and they in turn respected his militaristic prowess and legitimized his leadership. In fact, it is said that Clovis himself converted to Christianity, “at least to the extent of acknowledging Christ as the most powerful victory-giving god.”⁵¹ Together Clovis, his Frankish warriors, and the Gallo-Roman elite embarked on an expedition of “conquest and conversion” that reunited the “two splintered halves of the Roman heritage.”⁵² When the dust settled a new western empire emerged and came to be called the Merovingian Dynasty.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82. Geary cites: Eugippius, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae* 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁵¹ Ibid., 168.

⁵² Ibid., 93.

The dynasty created an “infrastructure catering almost exclusively to the elite.”⁵³ Geary bases this argument on the growth of viniculture. Wine was an essential component in the liturgy and the preference for growing grapes “at the expense of traditional subsistence-type agriculture” demonstrates “the growing dominance of agricultural decisions by the aristocracy.”⁵⁴ I must also point out that it defends the notion of a strong sovereign power able to participate in foreign commerce. While the aristocracy could easily afford to purchase food from foreign traders, the commoners increasing could not. In turn, the bishop’s role of distributing alms grew, once again, and meant the difference between life and death as laborers were no longer growing food. Geary states that “A new kind of Christian barbarian kingdom had been established north of the Alps - one which changed forever the face of the West.”⁵⁵ Geary describes this new Frankish kingdom as having a “single ruler whose wealth was matched only by his capacity for violence [...] a Christian king recognized by the emperor in Constantinople and supported by orthodox bishops, the representatives of the Gallo-Roman elite.”⁵⁶

The new kingdom in the sixth century, following Clovis, continued the propensity towards violence and saw “concerted efforts to expand the kingdom at the expense of their neighbors.”⁵⁷ In fact, their attempts towards violent expansion were so severe it has even been memorialized in the great heroic epic *Beowulf* where the narrator warns of Merovingian attacks once the Franks and the Frisians hear of Beowulf’s death.

<i>orleghwile, Froncum ond Frisum</i>	<i>Nu ys leodum wen syððan under[ne] fyll cyninges</i>
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⁵³ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115-116.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 117.

<i>wide weorðeð.</i>	[...]
<i>Merewioingas</i>	<i>Us wæs a syððan</i> <i>milts ungyfeðe.</i> ⁵⁸
a time of war	“Now is expected by the people
becomes widely revealed	after the fall of the king
the Franks and Frisians.	among
	[...]
by the Merovingians	Afterward to us
	kindness was denied.” ⁵⁹

It is clear that the Frankish Merovingians undertook violent expansion efforts, but Geary points out that they “made no attempt to absorb the regions east of the Rhine.”⁶⁰ Even under the Merovingians “free Germany” remained free. One of the last holdouts on which we will focus is Saxony.⁶¹

The areas the Merovingians did conquer were allotted “the right to live by their own law.”⁶² The Merovingians had trouble enough ruling their own regions. The most prominent regions within their kingdom were known as Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgundy. Frankish kings divided their kingdoms between their sons and internal strife led to the inevitable Merovingian decline. As an example Chilperic, Clovis’ grandson who ruled Neustria from 561 - 584, began a “three-generation feud that wrecked the Merovingian family and ended only after the deaths of ten kings and the execution of Brunehildis [Chilperic’s brother’s widow] by Chilperic’s son Clothar in 613.”⁶³ That same Clothar II and his son Dagobert I were the last Merovingians to rule with any real authority. Geary noted that such “feuding among Clovis’s descendants [...] contributed to

⁵⁸ Frederick Klaeber, ed. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, Fourth Edition. ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 99.

⁵⁹ Translation from Old English by Drew Craver.

⁶⁰ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 118.

⁶¹ The Saxons were named after the *seax* a “short sword or dagger” they were known to carry at all times.

⁶² Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 119.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 121.

the power of the aristocracy.”⁶⁴ He adds that the, “violence of the Merovingian family was mirrored in the violent interrelationships in the aristocracy.”⁶⁵ The aristocracy controlled the episcopacy and “the episcopacy held the keys to power.”⁶⁶

By the seventh century an entirely “new and vigorous form of Christianity, closely tied to royal and aristocratic interests and power bases, was spreading out from the north and gradually transforming the Romanized south.”⁶⁷ One such power base was the *fisc*⁶⁸, or “monastic network.”⁶⁹ Geary points out that the *fisc*, like the bishopric, was worth killing for and “aristocratic groups fought each other for control over the fisc.”⁷⁰ Bishops also joined the fight and the “frankish episcopacy adopted more than ever the characteristics of secular lordship.”⁷¹ One such secular bishop and his aristocratic ally were Arnulf and Pippin, respectively. With the help of Arnulf in the late seventh and early eighth centuries “Pippin solidified his control over the church in the region of Rouen.”⁷² Rising from Austrasia, a region that had grown in power throughout the internecine strife of previous centuries, Pippin’s first son, born out of wedlock, Charles Martel used the “monastic and episcopal offices” to establish his control “city by city across Neustria and Burgundy.”⁷³

During the early to mid eighth century the office of the bishop “was rapidly being transformed almost beyond recognition. And no party made greater use of this than

⁶⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁸ *Fisc* is a word of Latin origin used in general to reference the treasury of a kingdom, but it is used here specifically to represent the network of monasteries first established by the Merovingians and later expanded and used by the Holy Roman Empire as its treasury.

⁶⁹ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 181.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 181.

⁷¹ Ibid., 181.

⁷² Ibid., 197.

⁷³ Ibid., 200.

Charles Martel.”⁷⁴ As Geary admits “It would be a new church, controlled by his kinsmen [...] without regard for religious or educational formation, local cultural traditions, and the niceties of episcopal election or consecration.”⁷⁵ Geary artistically describes how “Charles and his successors,” who later became known as the Carolingians due to the many descendants named Charles, “built a new kind of episcopal and monastic edifice [...] The pillars of this edifice were Anglo-Saxon missionaries and the Roman pope.”⁷⁶

The descendants of Charles Martel soon replaced the Merovingians, beginning with Charles’s son Pippin II, who was crowned king by Pope Zachary in 751. And Pippin II’s son Charles “the Great,” Charlemagne, was crowned the first Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in the year 800. Together the Carolingian dynasty, the bishop of Rome, and their Anglo-Saxon missionaries would establish a new fisc across the Rhine. Their “Anglo-Saxon monasticism was essentially Benedictine” and their Christianizing efforts were only successful where the Carolingians “subduing them militarily went hand in hand.”⁷⁷ In fact, the missionary-military partnership was so entwined that in 742 Charles Martel’s son Carloman called a council of bishops in Austrasia “to establish a strict hierarchical order within the church, set the style for future church assemblies,” and the council was to coincide “with the annual military muster or ‘May-field.’”⁷⁸ The Carolingian Christianity created in Saxony continued the pattern of behavior unrecognizable to first century practitioners of pacifism and snowballed into a conquering faith institution poised for crusade.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 212.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 214.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 214-215.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 216-217.

While this chapter was filled with many exciting events I must reiterate and highlight the necessary takeaways before proceeding. First it is imperative to point out how the Roman Empire caused the preeminence of the Cult of Odin along the Rhine-Danube frontier. Then it is certainly necessary to understand what defines the Cult of Odin as it will be of the utmost importance in Chapter Three. Lastly, while the details are not as important, what is of importance is how the institution of Christianity in Gallo-Roman evolved over centuries into a political establishment that would have been unrecognizable to a first or second century Christian. It grew into an establishment that was poised to be used by the Carolingians in the dual process of conquest and acculturation which will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

SAXON CONVERSION FOR FRANKISH CAPITALISM: THE MOTIVES BEHIND THE FORCED SAXON CONVERSION

Every power has a weakness, every competitor a nemesis, and every empire a resistance. Achilles had his heel, Samson, his hair, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne had the Germanic Saxons. The contemporary ninth-century historian Einhard wrote that “[n]o war ever undertaken by the Frank nation was carried on with such persistence and bitterness, or cost so much labor” as the one Charlemagne fought for 33 years against the Saxons.⁷⁹ Having learned from the historical encounter the Romans had with the Germanic peoples, Charlemagne was not satisfied with just winning the war against the Saxons, he was determined to erase their entire way of life.

Earlier Romans had paid German Saxons living in a “broad area between the Baltic and North seas and the Rhine-Danube frontier,” to act “as a buffer against” outside encroachments, such as the Hun Dynasty.⁸⁰ They were a formidable fighting force with an “individualistic democracy” made up of “more territorial than political entities.”⁸¹ A similar group, the Harii⁸², were described by the Roman historian Tacitus in *Germania*, “besides their strength [...] they are fierce-spirited and enhance their inborn savagery by

⁷⁹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Sidney Painter (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 30.

⁸⁰ Thomas H. Greer, and Gavin Lewis, *A Brief History of the Western World Eighth Edition* (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2002), 150.

⁸¹ G. Ronald Murphy. *The Saxon Savior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 16.

⁸² Scholars such as Rudolf Simek, utilizing etymology, connect the Harii with the *Einherjar*, Odin’s “chosen warriors” who will join him in Valhalla.

artificial means and by their choice of time. They blacken their shields and dye their bodies black and choose pitch dark nights for their battles. Their terrible shadowy appearance, like an army of ghosts, creates panic, as no enemy can endure so strange and almost hellish a sight. Defeat in battle always begins with the eyes.”⁸³ Others he describes as excelling “in the art of horsemanship [...] This began with their ancestors and their descendants follow suit. The small children ride for sport, the young men compete with one another, even the old men keep at it. Horses are handed down, along with the household” to “the one who shows himself the fiercest and the best in battle.”⁸⁴ Their success in battle is quite visible as they have a unique custom to “let their hair and their beard grow long and do not cut them until they have killed an enemy [...] When they are standing over the bloody corpse and the spoils they lay bare their faces” having “shown themselves worthy of their parents and their fatherland.”⁸⁵

Their fatherland had no “central city” which the Romans “thought of as a weakness,” but for the Saxons it proved to be a strength.⁸⁶ “The lack of a single strong point” or “a main head to be cut off” made them virtually impossible to conquer completely, so rather than waste their resources fighting the Saxons, the Romans spent them allying themselves with local clan leaders.⁸⁷ The “more dangerous they [the German chieftains] were to the empire,” the more sought after they were.⁸⁸ In the process even more “powerful chieftains and warriors” emerged and for years defended their own

⁸³ Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 59-60.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁶ Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*. 16.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁸ Greer and Lewis, *A Brief History of the Western World Eighth Edition*, 151.

lands from Eastern invaders and in so doing protected Rome as well.⁸⁹ It was a well planned arrangement, but as these clan leaders began to profit more and more from war, their desire to fight grew, and in 376, the Visigoths “took up arms; at the battle of Adrianople” where “their horsemen won a crushing victory over the imperial foot soldiers.”⁹⁰ Rome’s one-time ally had turned on them becoming the empire’s nail in the coffin, and Charlemagne would not repeat their mistake. For him, it was not enough to ally or even conquer the Saxons, he needed to change them. The Saxons were the keystone for solidifying the Holy Roman Empire, and Charlemagne was determined to change their culture, religion, and loyalty.

The Emperor Charlemagne was willing to pour more effort and resources into exacting his control over the Saxons than any other Frankish foe. The specific question I will answer with here is: why exactly was it so important for the Carolingians to conquer and convert the Saxon pagans? And what was the resulting consequence? While you will hear input from many scholars, as this conflict is a favorite topic among Medievalists, the two I am most in conversation with for the first part of this question are the historian Paul Fouracre and the historical theologian James C. Russell. With their help, I will highlight the cultural, political, geographic, and economic incentives for and impacts of forcibly converting the Saxons to Christianity.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 158-159.

Political Incentive

Paul Fouracre has pointed out “that of all the enemies of the Franks, the Saxons were the ones most able to resist them, in cultural as well as in military terms.”⁹¹ As Fouracre explains it, Saxony “presented a strong contrast with Francia in terms of its religion and social organization, the one pagan and decentralised, the other Christian and with a single leader.”⁹² Fouracre demonstrates, by highlighting Saxon relations with Thuringians and Boructuarii and through the success of the Anglo-Saxon language in England (despite its earliest use by a substantial minority) that the Saxons wielded a powerful fighting force and a resilient culture that was willingly adopted by others they conquered. For instance, “many Thuringians allegedly opted for Saxon rule and paganism when oppressed by the Heden⁹³ family.”⁹⁴ In other words, the Saxons and their paganism cared little for aristocratic authority and had the strength to back up their disdain. During the reign of Charlemagne, the Danes, a Saxon ally to their north, had begun a massive invasion of Anglo-Saxon England and, by the end of the ninth century, would establish what has become known as Danelaw. Danelaw was Danish self-rule in England and lasted for centuries. Their influence on Anglo-Saxon culture cannot be understated; their language, Old Norse forever changed the English language, and as is mentioned in recorded sermons of the time, even the English Christians were beginning to revert to pagan worship. In fact, I agree with scholars who suggest that the adoption and Christianization of the *Beowulf* story was a monastic missionary attempt to combat a return to Norse mythology and the inevitable decline of Christian authority. The Danes

⁹¹ Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 117.

⁹² Ibid., 116.

⁹³ The Hedens were Christian nobles under the Merovingians.

⁹⁴ Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 117.

and the Saxons in the time of Charlemagne would not accept foreign, Christian rule.

Peace through paperwork was not an option. Earlier, by the “end of the seventh century the Saxons were continuing to expand, and would continue to press against Frankish territory until Charlemagne put in hand a systematic Frankish conquest of Saxony.”⁹⁵

Charlemagne has been accredited with bringing peace throughout the Western world towards the end of his reign. The peace was more of a stalemate similar to America’s recent Cold War standoff with the USSR, but it was a period of reduced fighting nonetheless. He had made peace with the Byzantines, the Persians, the Arabian Muslims, and the Lombards to name a few. One reason this was possible was due to the hierarchy of kingdoms and empires. With a single ruler who could agree to terms and who had a subordinate class of nobility to see to it that arrangements were securely carried out, Charlemagne was able to negotiate with neighboring kingdoms. The Saxons, on the other hand, had no single king.⁹⁶ They lacked the political structure desired by the Franks to negotiate with or fight against. Previously, when the Franks could not negotiate with other enemy nobility, they simply replaced them as Charlemagne’s grandfather Charles Martel had done in Burgundy and Provence.⁹⁷ The Saxons “were a confederate mass, made up of different subgroups,” similar to the various tribes of Native Americans, whose nobility were not as distinct and easy to replace, nor did they carry any sway over the other subgroups.⁹⁸ In every way possible the Saxons posed a challenge for The Carolingians.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁶ It was not uncommon for the Saxons to unite under a temporary warrior king in times of necessity, but once the need was over the king was expected to relinquish their authority.

⁹⁷ Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 165.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 117.

The descendants of Charles Martel came to be known as the Carolingians due to the sheer number of men named Charles in the line. Charlemagne, Charles the Great, fought the Saxons in all out war for 33 years, but he was merely carrying on a conflict that his grandfather had participated in beginning over eighty years earlier and continued up until his death in 741. Likewise, Charles Martel was carrying the torch of a conflict that had preceded him. The Rhine river was the boundary that even Julius Caesar was forced to recognize. The Germanic tribes controlled east of the river and Rome remained west. Even Charles Martel, the military genius who went from being an imprisoned, illegitimate⁹⁹ stepson to the absolute ruler of the Merovingian kingdom in just nine years, could not expand his authority across this boundary.¹⁰⁰ The fact that he was able to contain them to their side of the boundary was itself a success.

Geographic Incentive

The boundary of the Rhine river brings us to the first part of our question: why exactly was it so important for the Carolingians to conquer and convert the Saxon pagans? Not only were the Saxons a formidable opponent, but geographically, they were Charlemagne's closest neighbor. The Palace of Aachen, the capital of Charlemagne's empire was less than fifty miles from the river and constantly under threat. If the Holy Roman Empire was going to stand, headquartered in northern Europe, the Saxons had to fall; there was no other way. As I have explained, there could be no peace. Paul Fouracre, discussing the *Life of Lebuin* added that, in the lifetime of Charlemagne, "pacts with particular [Saxon] leaders, or even with different groups of Saxons, were not sufficient to

⁹⁹ Meant only to explain his lineage out of wedlock and not meant as a derogatory epithet.

¹⁰⁰ Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 75.

secure peace across the region as a whole.”¹⁰¹ Considering the fact that peace was not an option and that the enemy resided in such alarming proximity, it is understandable to see how and why Charlemagne chose to funnel so many resources into the utter annihilation of the Saxons.

Resources, then, are the next obvious answer to our question. Filled with fierce barbarians, what later came to be known as Saxony was a primeval forest where no invading armies ever escaped, such as the famed Roman Legions XVII, XVIII, and XIX which were totally annihilated at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE. Their embarrassment was so great that the Legion numbers XVII and XIX were never again used by the Romans. The Germanic barbarians were so fierce that they were left alone and until the time of the Carolingians were paid, first by the Romans and second by the Merovingians, to destroy any eastern invaders. As the Roman historian Tacitus describes it, in the case of the Batavians, the Romans did not dare enter their forests, but held them in “honoured status [...] Exempt from burdens and special contributions, and set apart exclusively for use in battle, they are reserved like spears and other weapons as instruments of war.”¹⁰² Charles, however, was no Roman. He himself was a German, born along the Rhine and he was willing to spend his resources in return for taking theirs. He saw, in Saxony, a vast expanse of untouched natural resources in the same eyes that colonial Europe saw Africa and the New World. The Frankish nobles joined the Carolingian Dynasty and their march east in search of new lands.

The Franks could march into Saxony all they wanted, but in order for them to subdue the Saxons and gain rights to their resources, they needed to convert them to

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁰² Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 52.

Christianity. In order to explain this final argument, I must return to the fall of Rome proper. Dr. Fouracre, in *The Age of Charles Martel*, describes the process of how nobility on the fringes of the Roman Empire maintained their wealth and authority despite Rome's collapse: "The Franks were a west German people who first appeared in the Rhineland area in the third century" and "developed their identity as troops who served the Roman authorities" acquiring "a growing degree of control over north-east Gaul."¹⁰³ "When Roman authority collapsed," he adds, "the Franks moved south and west as military rulers," and "they did little to disturb the power and privileges of the Gallo-Roman ruling elite" who "had secured their status through the control of land [...] public offices [...] and leading positions in the Catholic Church."¹⁰⁴ In this way, the Roman bureaucratic traditions survived the fall of the Roman Empire and "were adopted in other regions only when monasteries there began to build up their lands and influence in the eighth century."¹⁰⁵

A prime example of a newly founded monastery bringing Roman institutions into foreign territories is well documented at the Abbey Fulda. After its founding in 744, within the Saxon lands of modern day Hesse, the monastery itself and local nobility began to document their property ownership and transactions through the "use of charter forms which had their origins in late Roman bureaucratic tradition."¹⁰⁶ Twenty years earlier Hesse did not exist, and there stood *robor Iovis*, "the Oak of Jupiter," a tree sacred to Thor, cut down by St. Boniface and sawn into boards which he used to build St. Peter's church. The church stood as a symbol of the destruction of the Saxon culture and the

¹⁰³ Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 17.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17 & 18.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 100-101.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 101.

invasion of the Frankish theocratic regime. As Davidson explains, the cult of Thor “attracted those accustomed to make their own decisions and resentful of too much authority from above.”¹⁰⁷ A symbol of such personal autonomy was not permitted under the Benedictine Christianity spreading under the Carolingian Dynasty. History was rewritten, and the event was given a miraculous twist that said the first Christmas tree instantly grew from its base and that all the onlookers accepted sincere conversion. However, all contemporary sources make no reference to such an occurrence. From that day forward monastic growth was directly linked to the deforestation of Northern Europe. Simon Schama described this phenomenon; “when monasteries like the great Benedictine establishment at Lorsch finally set about clearing some of the woods, they created a landscape in which there was an unusually abrupt boundary between the cultivated field and the dense forest.”¹⁰⁸ The deforested areas were divided into “manses,” or lots worked by “freemen attached to the fisc or by slaves established as unfree tenant farmers.”¹⁰⁹ It has been argued that this was the beginning of feudalism. I do not agree that it is the beginning, but I must agree that it is the beginning of feudal land practices in “free Germany.”

A major piece of Saxon culture that was buried by the arrival of Christianity, its churches, and monasteries was the previous method of use and possession of land. The German philosopher and social scientist, Friedrich Engels discussed the ancient land usage of Germanic peoples in his work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. He quotes Julius Caesar describing the Suevi tribe as having “no divided or private fields whatever and reads in Tacitus that “they change (or divide afresh) the

¹⁰⁷ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 89.

¹⁰⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995), 120.

¹⁰⁹ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 163.

cultivated land every year, and there is enough common land left over.”¹¹⁰ Engels adds that their territories “were not composed of villages but of large household communities which included several generations,” and together they “cultivated an amount of land proportionate to the number of their members.”¹¹¹ In *The Communist Manifesto*, working with Karl Marx, Engels utilizes the research of August von Haxthausen and the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm German Maurer to argue that “common land ownership” was the “social foundation from which all Teutonic races started in history.”¹¹² Anthropologically speaking, it seems safe to presume that the common use of land was universal in the earliest stages of human civilization, but I also assert that Engels’ and Marx’s work on Caesar and Tacitus makes a strong claim that the Germanic peoples were unique in maintaining this way of life longer than any of their other Roman and European counterparts. Also it is possible to believe that their land was held and used in common until the spread of Roman Constantinian Christianity utilized by the Frankish Carolingian dynasty to grow their wealth and exert their control.

The success at Fulda for the Franks served as proper motivation for the continued investment in Christian expansion through the founding and funding of missionary monasteries. Through continued patronage of such monasteries, the Carolingians sponsored “a reform of the church which would make it yet more responsive to the needs of rulers.”¹¹³ It is possible to see how they were able to wield such authority over the church when noting what Fouracre points out: “the fact that the Christian Church was less

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 176.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 177.

¹¹² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), see footnote p. 79.

¹¹³ Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 25.

organized in these areas” and “‘Frankification’ did go hand in hand with the development of noble power and landholding.”¹¹⁴ He adds that “Frankification” “was most dramatic, and traumatic, in Saxony [...] where a fledgling Saxon nobility sheltered behind Frankish arms” violently subdued the local population and reorganised landholdings around the newly founded churches.¹¹⁵

The foundation of these churches and monasteries spread the use of charters and private property throughout Saxony, accompanying “the growth of the church” and strengthening “the rights which lords had over local communities.”¹¹⁶ It is no wonder that missionaries were welcomed by local nobility, and in particular, the Carolingians. As Patrick Geary has pointed out “through their support of the missionary bishop, the Carolingians had gained control of a well-disciplined, effective instrument of central control.”¹¹⁷ Carolingian support for missionary efforts was a highly successful political strategy that gained them support of the papacy, which previously backed the authority of Merovingian kings, and later replaced them, crowning the Carolingian emperors. The desire to convert their conquered lands was due to the need for solidarity between the Franks and the Saxons. Emile Durkheim explained that in order for there to be “bonds uniting them to one another, no matter what clan they belonged to” there needed to be “the conception of a supreme god, common to the tribe as a whole.”¹¹⁸ Theoretically human beings are more likely to coexist, regardless of background, when they share religious and cultural aspects such as the same supreme deity. While the theory that the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹¹⁷ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 217.

¹¹⁸ Emile Durkheim, “The Social as Sacred.” in *Introducing Religion*, ed. Daniel L. Pals (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124.

Carolingians and their aristocratic and monastic allies believed Christianity could unite the Saxons and the Franks, I suggest that it is a useful theory to consider.

Economic Incentive

Last, but certainly not least Christian conversion was a strategy of economic expansion. As previously detailed, the construction, establishment, and patronage of monasteries brought with them land ownership and cities which heightened the wealth and organization of aristocracy and the papacy alike. The contemporary historian Einhard wrote that “Charlemagne had no revenue in money. He and his court lived on the produce of the royal estates. He supported his officials and his cavalry by giving them land and the labor to farm it.”¹¹⁹ While the use of new lands was leased out to Charlemagne’s officials, its ownership remained in the hands of the monastery and in essence protected the wealth in the same way a Trust can protect money and capital in today’s world.

A Trust is a legal and financial creation dating back to Roman times where a third party holds property for the benefit of another. The property and assets held in such a Trust are usually protected from seizure, confiscation, and taxation. The third party holds the land, property, or assets on the promise that the party will allow the land usage and income from the trust to be paid to its beneficiaries. In fact, today, a trust can become a legal loophole through which some of the wealthiest families “hide” their assets in a tax-free, protected place where they still reap the benefits of its property and income even though they are no longer the outright owners of said property and assets and, therefore, cannot sell them. In this way, the papacy was delighted to gain permanent ownership of the lands surrounding their newly-formed monasteries, and the Carolingians were pleased

¹¹⁹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 8.

with the arrangement of being trustees of the land which they could use to pay their supporters, while maintaining the right to dispel dissenters, and with having no obligation to pay for the land outright. Clearly the success of these monastic property arrangements were a “win-win” for everyone, except the Saxons.

The once “clandestine religion,” as Christianity is described by Mircea Eliade, which “had no official authorization” or desire to engage in imperial politics had become entirely one in the same with the remnants of the Roman Empire.¹²⁰ “Attempts to universalize Christianity” after the third century were most fruitful under the theocratic regime of the Carolingians and their Benedictine monastic fisc.¹²¹ Their system partnered with and later strengthened the authority of the Roman bishop raising the pope to a stature never before seen. The universal Carolingian Christianity thrust upon the Saxons was later adopted as the preferred catechetical teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and would survive mostly unchanged until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s.

In order for the new European monasteries to succeed, for Roman Catholicism to grow, and for the noble class had to reap all of the potential benefits that came with them, the Saxons had to be Christianized. For if the Saxons did not respect the authority of the monastery, their continued uprisings eventually would destroy the newly-established definition of property and bankrupt the already struggling dynasty. As Fouracre elaborates “conversion marks the extension of core culture to the periphery” and “prepared the way for these regions to become fully integrated into the Frankish kingdom.”¹²² The Frankish empire was built upon a “dual process of conquest and

¹²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 366.

¹²¹ Ibid., 400.

¹²² Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 179.

acculturation.”¹²³ The Franks had mastered the conquest, but the missionaries and monasteries surpassed them in the art of acculturation. The Carolingian Franks leaned on Anglo-Saxon missionaries to begin the Christianisation and “cultural transformation” of the Germanic Saxons “beginning with the adoption of some outward signs of Christianity alongside existing ‘pagan’ customs.”¹²⁴

Christianising the Saxons proved a remarkably difficult task. James C. Russell has written extensively, explaining why converting the Germanic tribes proved such a uniquely challenging achievement for a religion that once spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire. As Russell explains the “urban social environment in which early Christianity flourished was one in which alienation and normlessness or anomie prevailed,” and its appeal to the anonymous inhabitants of the empire “was its fulfillment of the need for socialization and its promise of otherworldly salvation.”¹²⁵ In stark contrast to the world of early Christianity, the environment of eighth century Saxony was “a predominantly rural, warrior, pastoral-agricultural society with a high level of group solidarity.”¹²⁶ Their religion was “concerned with fundamental military, agricultural, and personal matters,” and any religion which did not give these adequate attention “could not hope to gain acceptance among the German peoples.”¹²⁷ The bottom line is that the Germanic peoples had each other, shared their land, and were concerned about this life, whereas many Romans who became Christians had nothing in this life and focused on the promise of the next one. Frankly, the Germanic people had no need for Christianity. One

¹²³ Ibid., 177.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 126.

¹²⁵ James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 4.

prime example is the story of the Frisian prince Radbod who, considering baptism, asked if his ancestors would be in heaven. When he was told no, he said that he would rather go to hell with his ancestors than live in heaven with a small group of beggars.¹²⁸ The missionary monks who accompanied the Carolingians into this frontier were quick to realize this and accepted that Christianity “had to be reinterpreted in a primarily heroic and magicoreligious fashion that would appeal to military and agricultural concerns.”¹²⁹ They set forth “a missionary policy that encouraged the temporary accommodation of Christianity” presuming that “an ongoing program of catechetical instruction” would “facilitate the gradual acceptance of Christian beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior.”¹³⁰

The presumption however was premature, and the “general lack of post-baptismal religious instruction, complemented by the vitality of Germanic religiosity, resulted in” what Russell calls the “Germanization of Christianity.”¹³¹ He concludes that it “was not the result of organized Germanic resistance”, but was a consequence of “the deliberate inculturation of Germanic religiocultural attitudes within Christianity by Christian missionaries.”¹³² Granted, the missionaries always expected that “more rigorous ethical and doctrinal formation would soon follow” and correct the subtle changes they had made, but a “decline of catechumenate” removed the potential for theological correction and what had been taught remained.¹³³ It remained so ingrained, he argues, that “this

¹²⁸ See Jonas of Fontanelle’s *Life of Wulfram*.

¹²⁹ Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7 & 131.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 209.

Germanic reinterpretation eventually became normative throughout western Christendom.”¹³⁴

To find evidence of the Germanic reinterpretation of Christianity, one need look no further than German literature. Particular pieces of Saxon Germanic Christian literature that demonstrate the rewriting of Christianity include, but are not limited to *The Heliand*. *The Heliand* is a retelling of the four Gospels into a Saxon heroic epic, commissioned in the year 830 by the then Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne’s son and successor, Louis the Pious. In order to be concise, I will not embark on an in-depth discussion of *The Heliand* in this chapter, but will highlight only one example of how it knowingly and blatantly changed the orthodox teachings of Christianity. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount the Beatitudes are rewritten and “Blessed are the peacemakers” became those who “do not want to start any fights.”¹³⁵ At a glance, such a reinterpretation seems harmless and possibly inviting, but I argue that its significance is in contributing “to the development of the Crusade ideology” as it was not only used to instruct Saxon converts, but their own monastic instructors as well¹³⁶--instructors such as the thirteenth-century Cistercian monk, Arnaud Amalric, who is attributed with telling a Crusader who was worried about accidentally killing Christians to “Kill them all and let God sort them out.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 209.

¹³⁵ Murphy, G. Ronald, trans. *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46.

¹³⁶ Russel, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 190.

¹³⁷ *Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius*. (Kill them all. Certainly the Lord knows which are His.) found in the *Dialogus Miraculorum*.

CHAPTER 3

SYNCRETISTIC RECEPTION IN *THE HELIAND*

According to the Christian tradition a voice crying in the wilderness of first century Judea announced a coming change. Standing on the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist recognized the carpenter's son and identified him as the Messiah, the savior of Israel, the forgiver of sins, the salvation of souls. Jesus entered the river Jordan to be baptised by his cousin John. Others followed in suit, and the initiation rite for the religion that came to be known as Christianity was born. Men and women who chose to follow Jesus and his "way" would surrender themselves to be submerged in running water believing that when they emerged their sins would be forgiven and their new life, as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, would begin.

In the late eighth century Saxony, a new voice sounded in the wilderness. It too was a harbinger for a coming kingdom--an empire, in fact, the Holy Roman Empire. Charles, king of the Franks captured the ancient castle of Eresburg and marched on Irminsul in the year 772 CE. Irminsul, the "mighty pillar," marked the sight of a sacred grove of trees where Saxons came to worship their gods. Charles' Frankish army destroyed the pillar. The sound of it crashing to the ground reverberated throughout the primeval forest. It was the sound of change. The end of the ancient ways and the beginning of a new era, a Christian era.

In 776, the Saxons had regained control of Eresburg and demolished it, igniting the vengeful fires of Charles' army. Within the year, the Franks were there to prevent the castle of Syburg from befalling the same fate. They routed the Saxons and chased them to the river Lippe, a tributary of the Rhine. Surrounded on the banks of the river, "they surrendered their land to the Franks, put up security, promised to become Christians, and submitted to the rule of the Lord King Charles and the Franks."¹³⁸ The rule of the Lord King Charles, compiled in a legal document referred to as *Leges Saxonum* was written that same year. The eighth law read as follows: *Si quis deinceps in gente Saxonorum inter eos latens non baptizatus se abscondere voluerit et ad baptismum venire contempserit paganusque permanere voluerit, morte moriatur.*¹³⁹ "If anyone afterwards in the race of the Saxons hidden among them not baptised wishes to conceal themselves and despises to come to baptism and wishes to remain a pagan, he shall be put to death."¹⁴⁰

Even after the law was rescinded, again and again, the Saxons rebelled and the Franks invaded. King Charles, like his grandfather Charles Martel, seemed locked in yearly campaigns against the Saxons, fretting the continuous ebb and flow of territorial boundary lines. As the contemporary Frankish historian Einhard wrote in the early ninth century, "No war ever undertaken by the Frank nation was carried on with such persistence and bitterness, or cost so much labor" as the one engaged against the Germanic tribe of Saxony.¹⁴¹ To Frankish relief and Saxon demise, King Charles, on Christmas Day, in the year 800, was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. On

¹³⁸ Bernhard Walter Scholz, trans., *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 55.

¹³⁹ Claudius Freiherr von Scwerin, *Leges Saxonum und Lex Thuringorum* (Lexington, KY: Leopold Classic Library, 2016), 38-39.

¹⁴⁰ Translation from Latin by Drew Craver.

¹⁴¹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 30.

that day, it became official: the Emperor Charlemagne controlled the western Christian world and with its wealth would willfully convert the Franks' most bitter rival.

Centuries earlier, baptism was an outward sign of an inner conversion, a voluntary change of lifestyle and belief. Eighth and ninth century Saxons were baptised in chains under penalty of death. They were forced to renounce their gods and to accept a foreign faith thrust upon them. Anglo-Saxon missionary monks were tasked to oversee this deed. In 815, Charlemagne's son and successor Louis "the Pious" announced the founding of the Imperial Abbey Corvey. It would replace the fortress at Eresburg and the city of Paderborn emerged in its surroundings. The Abbey stood at the front lines of the Saxon conversion, and the monastery was challenged to introduce pagan worshippers of Odin¹⁴² to their new god, Jesus Christ. To achieve this task, an anonymous monk wrote a new Gospel, a Saxon Gospel. It came to be known as *The Heliand*, meaning "The Savior" or "the Healing One" and was the longest heroic epic ever written in Old Saxon. Nearly 6,000 lines long, the epic was commissioned in 830 by "the Emperor Ludovicus Pijssimus Augustus, presumably Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son."¹⁴³ In it, Jesus is likened to a Saxon warrior, worthy of loyalty greater than Thor or Odin.

Ronald Murphy suggests that it is a beautiful intercultural narrative not "designed for use in the church as a part of official worship, but is intended to bring the gospel home to the Saxons in a poetic environment in order to help the Saxons cease their vacillation between their warrior-loyalty to the old gods and to the 'mighty Christ.'"¹⁴⁴

James C. Russell's dissertation described it as "a missionary policy that encouraged the

¹⁴² Again, be advised that Woden, Wodan, Oðinn, and Odin all refer to the same deity and I will refer to him only as Odin. Likewise Donar, Þorr, and Thor I will call Thor and Valhöll will be Valhalla.

¹⁴³ Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 13.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., xvi.

temporary accommodation of Christianity to a heroic, [...] Germanic world-view” which unintentionally “led to a substantial Germanization of Western Christianity.”¹⁴⁵

The argument I present in the following pages in no way challenges Father Murphy’s suggestion of the intended purpose of *The Heliand* and, in fact, supports Dr. Russell’s insight about the consequential Germanizing of Christianity. My intention is to add to these arguments, stating that the change was much greater than a simple temporary cultural one. I argue that the change spread into not only theology, but also the personal characteristics of Jesus himself. By highlighting particular points within *The Heliand*, I intend to illustrate how the author inadvertently re-presented Jesus to the degree that, in the process of convincing a Saxon pagan to replace their loyalty for Odin with a loyalty to Jesus, they also replaced Jesus with Odin.

The Heliand is divided into 71 songs and is immediately and obviously different from the Christian Gospels and Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, to which it has been likened. I too will divide this discussion of *The Heliand* into separate topics, such as *metod* and *wurd*, the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, the Eucharist, *comitatus*, syncretism, and reception.

In the very first sentence, the story is introduced as being “secret runes” shared by god.¹⁴⁶

*Manega uuaron, the sia iro mod gespon,
that sia bigunnun reckean that giruni,*¹⁴⁷

“Many were the hearts of those
that he told to begin to tell the secret runes”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 7 & 39.

¹⁴⁶ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Anonymous, *Heliand und Genesis* (Herausgegeben von Otto Behaghel. Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1903), 4.

¹⁴⁸ Translation from Old Saxon by Drew Craver.

The Futhark is the Runic alphabet, of unknown, but believed to be Alpine, Etruscan origin and was most often used by Saxons for carving magical inscriptions which gave them direct access to their gods and the fates with immediate results.¹⁴⁹ More powerful to the Saxons than even their gods were Fate and Time, *metod* and *wurd*. At the end of the first song, the Angel Gabriel tells Zachary, the father of John the Baptist commonly known as Zachariah, about the son he is going to have and how “the workings of fate made him, time formed him, and the power of God as well.”¹⁵⁰ Here the Christian god and His power are placed directly alongside the pagan Fates of *measure* and *time*.

Metod and Wurd

*Paðan koma meyar
margs vitandi,
þriar, or þeim sæ,
er und þolli stendr.
Urð heto eina,
aðra Verðandi
-skaro a skiði-
Skuld ena þriðio.
Þær lif kuro
alda börnom,
þrlog seggia.¹⁵¹*

“From there come maidens
with great knowledge,
three, from the lake,
which stands under the tree.
One called Urðr,
another Verdanði,
-they cut the skiðis-
and Skuld the third
They logged the law
they chose lives

¹⁴⁹ Ralph W.V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

¹⁵⁰ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 7.

¹⁵¹ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 12.

for children of men,
told the thread of life.”¹⁵²

The Fates were personified by “three maidens called the Norns, who ruled the destinies of men and were called Fate (*Urðr*), Being (*Verðandi*), and Necessity (*Skuld*).”¹⁵³ We might think of them as Past (*Urðr*), Present (*Verðandi*), and Future (*Skuld*). They lived alongside the well of wisdom at the base of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, and provided the tree’s roots with water from the “spring of fate.”¹⁵⁴ All the earth and the heavens above were dependent on the existence of the tree, and only the fates knew its and everyone else’s destinies, including those of the gods. When a child was born, the Norns took a twig from the tree, *á skíði*, and on it carved “the rune, that decides his fortune.”¹⁵⁵ While in *The Heliand* Fate loses its anthropomorphic nature, its power is in no way diminished and, as will be demonstrated later, controls even the fortune of the Christian god Jesus. Thus, it was necessary for the poet to immediately state that the Christian god is as powerful as the pagan Fates in order to gain ground with their pagan audience.

At this time, it is appropriate to reiterate the sources of Germanic mythologies, including descriptions of Odin and the Fates, which will be regularly referred to in this work. The majority of our information comes to us from the famed eddic and skaldic poetry compiled centuries later, in Iceland, mostly. Although the literature is clearly separated from eighth and ninth century Saxony by both distance and time, H.R. Ellis Davidson has written a wonderfully enlightening book, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, which concludes, through literary and archaeological evidence, that the gods of

¹⁵² Translation from Old Norse by Drew Craver.

¹⁵³ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 26.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 26.

¹⁵⁵ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 40.

the Icelanders and Scandinavians and the beliefs and practices associated with them are most assuredly traced back to continental Germanic tribes such as the Heruli. Also, Davidson, along with many others, suggests that Germanic paganism is a form of ancestor worship in which once great kings and notable peoples were deified and came to be worshiped as gods through a process of apotheosis. An outsider may say Christianity attributed the same process of apotheosis to Jesus whom they deem to be a god, but the rest of the world admits only to his being a man and / or prophet. Out of respect for each religion, I will refer to both Odin, his Teutonic pantheon, and Jesus as gods, with a lowercase “g.”

Baptism

Returning to our discussion of the Saxon Savior, we will highlight one of the most explicit mergings of the Christian god Jesus and the Germanic god Odin. *The Heliand* describes Jesus’ arrival at the Jordan to be baptised, along with many other thanes, by Zachary’s son John after having lived “thirty winters among the people in this world.”¹⁵⁶ When the Peace-Child came out of the water and stepped on land “the doors of heaven opened up” and “like a powerful bird, a magnificent dove” came down and “sat upon our Chieftains shoulder.”¹⁵⁷ A seemingly harmless exaggeration of the dove referenced in the four Gospels it is necessary to recognize here: what the author assuredly knew is that the Saxon god Odin was always represented with the birds of consciousness (Huginn) and memory (Muninn) on his shoulders. Comforting the Saxons with a familiar image of their forbidden god, the author laid the groundwork for Jesus to become the new Saxon god.

¹⁵⁶ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 34.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

After his baptism Jesus then enters *uuostunnea*, translated “wild country, wasteland, or wilderness,” because “He wanted to let powerful creatures test Him, even Satan.”¹⁵⁸ Jesus’ Temptation in the Desert is reconfigured into a Battle with Satan in the wilderness, that Jesus desired when he “hardened His heart and stiffened His mind against the blasphemer” in order “to win the heaven-kingdom for people.”¹⁵⁹ Similar to other epic poetry of the Saxon world, the hero must have accomplished feats of battle to deserve loyalty. And Jesus here accomplishes just that when “He brushed Satan away” returning him to “the valleys of Hel.”¹⁶⁰ Victorious in battle, Jesus emerges from the “deep forest” a comforting sight to a Saxon, whose place of worship was typically in sacred groves of trees.¹⁶¹ Such as the grove surrounding Idsis, the tree sacred to Thor, that St. Boniface, under the guard of Charles Martel’s soldiers, cut down and had sawn into boards which he used to build St. Peter’s church, a Christian church built with pagan boards.

The valiant Jesus then returned to “Galileeland” and “began to gather men [...] word-wise warriors.”¹⁶² The Apostles are commonly referred to as “loyal men” and “warrior-companions,” like men living in the Northern world being faced with pledging loyalty to a new emperor and divinity.¹⁶³ The author also adds many detailed descriptions, not elaborated on in the Gospels, of the fishing equipment used by the Apostles. The Saxons were a fishing culture with much seafaring knowledge and would have better related to this expanded version of Jesus calling his disciples. During this

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶² Ibid., 40.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 44.

calling, in *The Heliand*, Jesus is referred to as a “generous jewel-giver,” more so than any other chieftain had ever been.¹⁶⁴ Without a centralized hierarchy, the Saxons were composed of local clans. Locals pledged their absolute loyalty to their chieftain and their chieftain was likewise obliged to defend them against any enemy. The chieftains would honor their warriors with jewels, and this giving is a key concept in the cultural phenomenon of the Saxon mead hall life, where loyal clan members would join each other in great halls to celebrate and hear the shapers, poets or singers who would memorize and recite the epic poems of their greatest heroes. By portraying Jesus as a “generous jewel-giver,” the author welcomes the Saxons to pledge their loyalty to a new chieftain in a way more familiar to their sense of cultural identity and honor.¹⁶⁵ Neither the Church nor the Empire would oppose such a description of Jesus; after all, the Church desired loyal converts, and the Empire required “a powerful force of men from many peoples, a holy army.”¹⁶⁶ Saxons, however, were already committed to a generous chieftain who would welcome loyal warriors into his hall, Valhalla. There, they will participate daily in “an unending battle” and feast nightly “on pork and mead” until *Mudspell* brings about *Ragnarök* and they join their warrior chieftain Odin in the final battle.¹⁶⁷

Obviously aware of the Saxon understanding of loyalty and what it means to deserve loyalty the author knew that the events which transpired at Idsis must be reconciled, and he attempts to do so through Jesus’ first teaching at the Sermon on the Mount. The Guardian “spoke wisely and told God’s spell” saying, “Do not think for a

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶⁷ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 149.

moment I have come to this world to destroy the old law, to chop it down among the people.”¹⁶⁸ Faithful to Christianity, this monk alludes to the fact that Jesus would not have approved of St. Boniface’s behavior toward *robor Iovis*, “the Oak of Jupiter,” a tree believed to have been sacred to Thor. Sympathetic to the Saxons, he may be suggesting that their law is “the old law,” alluding to the fact that Mosaic law and Old Testament prophecy are not included in *The Heliand*. With a sympathetic and accommodative mindset, the author, time and time again, creates concessions, moving away from the more orthodox teachings of Christianity, in favor of Saxon understandings. Some such teachings, however, proved more difficult than others to relate.

The Beatitudes

Arguably the Beatitudes taught by Jesus at The Sermon on the Mount posed the most difficult task for the author to reconcile between the two cultures. Clearly loyal to Christianity, the monk cannot ignore some of the most important and specific teachings of Christ, but sympathetic to the Saxons, he manages to add a pagan twist that will make the teachings more desirable to them.

Creating the mental scene, the author describes Jesus as having “moved mightily up onto a high mountain - the most powerful Person ever born - and sat apart.”¹⁶⁹ He teaches them “soothsaying” and gifts them with eight good fortunes, given only to “the men whom He had picked to come to His talk.”¹⁷⁰ Throughout the Beatitudes are subtle variations designed to make them more agreeable to the Saxon culture. It has been argued that these changes were a pivotal point in the formation of the ideal chivalrous

¹⁶⁸ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 49.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 45.

knighthood that would expand through Europe in the coming centuries. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” became humility. “Blessed are the meek” became gentle. “Blessed are those who mourn” became those who cried over their evil deeds, and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” became those who want to judge fairly. “Blessed are the merciful” became those who “have kind and generous feelings within a hero’s chest,” the ideal knight.¹⁷¹ “Blessed are the clean of heart” became those “who have cleaned their hearts”; and, in the author’s most challenging teaching, “blessed are the peacemakers” became those who “do not want to start any fights.”¹⁷² The seventh Beatitude was the most drastic change, but it was a common ground, and besides the Holy Roman Empire still needed warriors willing to fight. By accepting this common ground, *The Heliand* condones fighting, war and violence, which are clearly anti-Christian sentiments in the orthodox Gospels. And, by continuing to describe Jesus as a *uuarsago*, a “soothsayer” or “wizard,” the author increases the likelihood that a Saxon listener while hearing the name Jesus thinks of the god Odin. Even Heaven, “God’s meadow,” has been Saxonized and is described in the familiar scene of a meadow recognizable as Valhalla.¹⁷³

The author also changes the “Lord’s Prayer.”

The Lord’s Prayer

<i>gerihtu us that geruni</i>	[...]
<i>Fadar usa</i>	<i>firiho barno,</i>
<i>thu bist an them hohon</i>	<i>himila rikea</i>
<i>geuuihid si thin namo</i>	<i>uuordo gehuulico.</i>
<i>Cuma thin</i>	<i>craftag riki.</i>
<i>Uuerða thin nuilleo</i>	<i>obar thesa uuerold alla,</i>
<i>so sama an erðo,</i>	<i>so thar uppa ist</i>

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁷² Ibid., 46.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 47.

<i>an them hohon</i>	<i>himilo rikea.</i>
<i>Gif us dago gehuulikes rad,</i>	<i>drohtin the godo,</i>
<i>thina helaga helpa,</i>	<i>endi alat us hebenes uuard,</i>
<i>managoro mensculdio,</i>	<i>al so uue oðrum mannum doan.</i>
<i>Ne lat us farledean</i>	<i>leða uuihti</i>
<i>so forð an iro uuilleon,</i>	<i>so uui uuirðige sind</i>
<i>ac help us uuiðar allun</i>	<i>ubilon dadium.¹⁷⁴</i>

“teach us the secret runes	[...]
Father of us	the sons of men
thou beest in the high	heaven kingdom
blessed is thy name	in each word.
Come thine	mighty kingdom.
Thine will become	over all this world,
so same on earth	so is up there
in the high	heaven kingdom.
Give us advice/support each day,	lord the good,
thine holy help	and pardon, guardian,
our many crimes,	as we do for many others.
Nor let us be led	by evil creatures
so forth in their will	as we are worthy
but help us against all	evil deeds.” ¹⁷⁵

The Victory-Chieftain is asked by his retinue, “teach us the secret runes.” Saxon pagans believed the Runes were a gift from Odin, who acquired knowledge of them and their secret powers through a ritualistic self-sacrifice, described in the *Hávamál*, where he pierced himself with his spear *Gungnir* and “hung on the windswept Tree [Yggdrasil], through nine days and nights.”¹⁷⁶ Knowledge of the Runes gave Odin magical shamanistic powers, ranging from dulling “the swords of deadly foes,” to calming the wind “and the waves also,” to raising the dead, and restraining his enemies.¹⁷⁷ In *The Heliand*, Jesus takes Odin’s place as the possessor and teacher of the Runes and the Lord’s Prayer, itself, becomes a powerful spell capable of granting believers direct access

¹⁷⁴ Anonymous. *Heliand und Genesis*, 56.

¹⁷⁵ Translation from Old Saxon by Drew Craver.

¹⁷⁶ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 143.

¹⁷⁷ Lee M. Hollander, trans., “Hávamál,” in *The Poetic Edda*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 38 & 39.

to god. While its message remains mostly Christian, it can not be overlooked that relating it to a Runic charm and Jesus as the bearer of such secret knowledge, in turn, continues the blurring of separation between the two gods, Jesus and Odin.

The Eucharist

The Eucharistic scene provides another moment of dualistic imagery, telling comparisons, and as I will argue, cause for lasting Christian theological changes. First, I will address the chosen place of meeting. Jesus sent “His warrior-companions” to “a magnificent house, a high hall, which is everywhere hung with beautiful decorations” and told them “to prepare My banquet” at which “I will definitely come with My warrior-companions.”¹⁷⁸ Clearly, the location of the Last Supper in *The Heliand* is reminiscent of Valhalla. “Easily known to Ygg’s chosen” warrior-companions, the heavenly hall is adorned with shields, spears, the wolf and the raven.¹⁷⁹ The description of the celestial Valhalla matches the descriptions of contemporary ninth century halls, such as the Danish king Ragnarr Loðbrok, described by the famed skaldic poet Bragi Boddason in *Ragnarsdrápa*, within a day’s drive (by today’s standards) of *The Heliand*’s composition.¹⁸⁰

Beyond pointing out the strengthening of similarities between Jesus and Odin in the description of the Last Supper, I must highlight an interesting and timely variation of Church doctrine that seems to have been overlooked or ignored by scholars. The Roman

¹⁷⁸ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 149.

¹⁷⁹ Hollander, “Grímnismál,” in *The Poetic Edda*, 56. One of the many names of Odin (Wodan) in Old Norse is *Ygg* ‘terrible one’ and is the source of the naming of the World Tree, *Yggdrasil*, which some translate as ‘the terrible one’s gallows’, for it is there that he hung in self-sacrifice to gain knowledge of the Runes.

¹⁸⁰ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 82.

Catholic Church taught then what it teaches now, that the bread and wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist are truly transformed into the actual physical flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. In *The Heliand*, the description of the sacrament is interestingly unique.

*uuas imu at them gomun forð
uualdand uuin endi brod
helagode hebencuning,
gaf it undar them is iungarun
sagde them olat,
uuerold endi uunnea,
'gilobiot gi thes liohto', quað he
endi min blod so same:
etan endi drinkan.
geban endi geotan
losien mid minu lichamen
an that himiles lioht.
that gi thiū fulgangan,
mariad thit for menegi:
mid thius sculun gi iuuuomu drohtine
habbiad thit min te gihugdiun*

*Sunu drohtines
endi is iungarun thar
uuihide beðiu
mid is handun brak,
endi gode thancode,
the thar al giscop,
endi sprak uuord manag:
'that thit is min lichamo
gibu ik iu her beðiu samad
Thit ik an erðu scal
endi iu te godes rikie
an lif euuig,
Gihuggeat gi simlun,
thiū ik an thesun gomun don;
thit is mahtig thing,
diuriða frum-
helag biliði¹⁸¹*

was forth with them at the feast
holy power over both
the holy king of heaven,
gave it among them serving
he said to them aloud,
the world and joy,
'Believe you this clearly', he said,
and my blood so the same:
to eat and to drink.
give and pour out
to [go] to god's kingdom
with my body and life.
that you do this,
announce it for people:
with this you should honor your lord
having it the holy likeness

"The son of the lord,
and was there serving
wine and bread,
with his hands broke
and gave thanks to god,
the one that there all created,
and spoke many words
'that this is my body
give I you here both together
This I on earth shall
and will free you
and that heaven light
Remember always,
what I at this feast do
this is a mighty thing,
with good praise-
you remember me"¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Anonymous. *Heliand und Genesis*, 156-157.

¹⁸² Translation from Old Saxon by Drew Craver.

While the beginning of the passage is quite biblical and orthodox, the later segment, when Jesus describes the bread and wine as “a mighty thing,” a “holy likeness” that honors “your lord,” there is clearly an addition to the biblical reference of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Ronald Murphy elaborates in a footnote on this *mahtig* thing as “a power-filled (magic) thing” that would be welcomed in a shamanistic tradition such as those familiar to the Saxons.¹⁸³ I suggest that while the attempt may have been meant to heighten the attraction that magical objects would have to worshippers of Odin, the monk may have unwittingly begun a debate about the authenticity of Church Theology in regards to the sacrament of the Eucharist, or at least was alluding to a debate that was unofficial, but in discussion throughout Saxony and or the Holy Roman Empire.

The first official debate on Eucharistic Theology, coincidentally or not, erupted a short time later at the nearby Abbey Corbie. The famed medieval theologians Radbertus and Ratramnus are accredited with taking up the cause. Paschasius Radbertus wrote *De corpora et sanguine Domini* (Concerning the Body and Blood of the Lord), within five years of *The Heliand*’s commissioning. It was the first treatise written exclusively about Eucharistic theology. In it, Radbertus describes two beliefs in the Eucharist, one in which it is a figurative symbol of Christ’s body and blood and the other, which he and the Church side with, in which the bread and wine are in truth Christ’s actual flesh and blood. Was this a reactionary work against the missionary teachings to the Saxons where the Eucharist was seen as a *mahtig thing*, a powerful, yet figurative thing?

In 843, Charles the Bald, son and successor of Louis the Pious, visited Corbie and asked the Benedictine monk Ratramnus to contemplate and discuss the Theology of the Eucharist. He published *De corpore et sanguine Domini* (Christ’s Body and Blood)

¹⁸³ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 153. (see footnote 235)

where he challenged his Abbot Radbertus and argued in favor of *The Heliand*'s representation of the holy sacrament, as a powerful "symbol: of Christ's body and blood. Is it possible that Ratramnus was the only contemporary theologian willing to write what the indigenous people believed, regardless of what the Church taught? And is it safe to assume that Charles the Bald's funding of such a work implies he too believed this and wanted the Church to teach this? We cannot know, but it is well known and accepted that the Carolingian Dynasty wielded tremendous authority over the Roman Catholic Church and influenced not only its long standing ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also the beliefs of its individual practitioners. The Holy Roman Empire conquered regional Christianity and established a uniform Benedictine rule and Latin rite within its realm. The policy was so successful that the bishop of Rome, the pope, later formalized this Carolingian Christianity throughout all Roman Catholic churches.¹⁸⁴ When the Dynasty's power diminished, the pope stepped in to fill the power vacuum and chose which policies and teachings should stay and which would go. Needless to say, the debate over Eucharistic theology ended, but I suggest it was not forgotten. The Carolingians, no longer funding the monasteries lost influence over Church teachings and Rome squashed the debate, declaring Ratramnus' teachings unorthodox.

Before the monastic debate on Eucharistic Theology ended, there was at least one more interesting contributor in the ninth century, Rabanus Maurus. Some scholarly research has suggested that *The Heliand* was first composed at the Abbey Fulda, based on the simple truth that Rabanus was the abbot there at the time of its composition. As

¹⁸⁴ This concept is crucial in understanding the First Crusade. One may argue that the Saxons did not participate in the First Crusade. While that may be true, what can be said is that the Christianity that was created, formalized, and institutionalized in the Saxon *fisc* became the normative Christian of medieval Roman Catholicism and justified all its adherents, regardless of locale, in the act of war.

Ronald Murphy states, “Rabanus’s broadminded tendencies with regard to non-Christian religious expression would speak well for his support of a monk attempting to write a saxonized version of the Gospel.”¹⁸⁵ More conclusive evidence is found in fragment V of *The Heliand*, which was traced to Mainz, where Rabanus was made archbishop after leaving Fulda.¹⁸⁶ Rabanus took an understanding of the Eucharist similar to Ratramnus, which I contend could further support the historical case for the origin of *The Heliand* to be placed at Fulda, since, as I have demonstrated its subtle theology of the Last Supper scene, does allude to a figurative understanding of the sacramental “presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. Rabanus, “the schoolmaster of Germany,” believed “the presence was primarily something realized by the recipient when united with the Lord in the sacrament.”¹⁸⁷ Again, all of these instances support my contention that *The Heliand* and the teachings among Saxon-Christians in the ninth century were in line with the Eucharistic Theology of Ratramnus and that they defend the opinion that Rabanus may have been in direct control of *The Heliand*’s creation.

While Father Murphy does not directly address the Eucharistic Theology in *The Heliand*, it is important to note that he does illuminate another matter of important variance from Roman Catholic orthodoxy. Before taking “His seat in the hall,” prior to the Last Supper, Jesus “told the twelve warrior-companions who were the most loyal to Him in their feelings” to feast with him.¹⁸⁸ As he suggests in discussion of the word choice *gitriuuiston*, “loyalest,” Murphy points out that “the *Heliand* insists on internal

¹⁸⁵ Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 12.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 29. (See endnote 3)

¹⁸⁷ Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: T & T Clark, 1978), 242.

¹⁸⁸ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 150.

attitudes: feelings determine who is a “good thane” of Christ.”¹⁸⁹ I might ask if it is at all surprising that the descendants of these very same Saxons led the German Protestant Reformation arguing in favor of a theology preferring feelings towards Christ as opposed to ritual actions in accordance with His teachings and a belief that the Eucharist was more likely a spiritual symbol of remembrance as opposed to the physically transformed flesh and blood of Jesus himself?

Comitatus

After celebrating the first Eucharist, in *The Heliand*, Jesus travels to a garden on “Olivet mountain,” where he is confronted by “an army of warriors.”¹⁹⁰ The Lord of the Runes merely spoke, and “the army of warriors pulled back in retreat - they could not stand up to the Word, the voice, of God.”¹⁹¹ While there is a biblical precedent to this story in the Gospel of John¹⁹² in *The Heliand* the poet adds much more emphasis and dramatic effect to the power of Jesus’ spoken word. The Saxons knew that Odin, with his Runic knowledge, possessed power “over the minds of men at war” able to drain them of “energy and will-power” causing any foe to retreat.¹⁹³ Once the spell had broken and the men “strengthened their resolve” returning to obtain their target, Peter “the noble swordsman flew into a rage” and he struck Malchus “a mortal wound.”¹⁹⁴ While clearly Biblical this passage was emphasized and dramatized by the poet to relate to the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 150. (see footnote 228)

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 156 & 159.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 159.

¹⁹² See John 18:3-8.

¹⁹³ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 66.

¹⁹⁴ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 159 & 160.

comitatus code of its Saxon audience. A passage from *Beowulf*, spoken by Wiglaf, a retainer of Beowulf, perfectly represents the severity of this code.

<i>þrong ymbe þeoden</i>	<i>Wergendra to lyt</i>
<i>Nu sceal sincþego</i>	<i>þa hyne sio þrag becwom.</i>
<i>eall eðelwyn</i>	<i>ond swyrdgifu,</i>
<i>lufen alicgean;</i>	<i>eowrum cynne,</i>
<i>þære mægburge</i>	<i>londrihtes mot</i>
<i>idel hweorfan,</i>	<i>monna æghwylc</i>
<i>feorran gefricgean</i>	<i>syððan æðelingas</i>
<i>domleasan dæd.</i>	<i>fleam eowerne,</i>
<i>eorla gehwylcum</i>	<i>Deað biðsella</i>
	<i>þonne edwitlif!</i> ¹⁹⁵
pressed around the king	“Of defenders too little
Now we shall see the receiving of treasure	when the time came for him
and giving of swords,	
all enjoyment of home	gladness with your kin
cease;	of the opportunity to land-rights
every one of your relatives	will move about
deprived,	after noblemen
from afar learn of	your flight
the inglorious deed.	Death is better
for every earl	than life of disgrace!” ¹⁹⁶

The passage above is commonly referred to as Wiglaf’s prophecy. After the death of Beowulf, Wiglaf shames the warriors who abandoned their lord to fight against the dragon alone. He makes no mention of the fact that during Beowulf’s pre-dragon fight boast, he stated clearly that he was to fight the dragon alone. Apparently, the code of loyalty between warrior and lord was even stronger than the expectation to follow orders. As Wiglaf subtly states, had they disobeyed orders, they would not have brought such shame upon themselves and their families. Their culture of loyalty and shame was so great that it even extended to their distant relatives who Wiglaf prophesies will be forced to wander unable to own land: “Death is better [...] than life of disgrace.”

¹⁹⁵ Klaeber, *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, Fourth Edition, 98.

¹⁹⁶ Translation from Old English by Drew Craver.

Peter's rage in the garden is biblical, but its emphasis and dramatization were clearly chosen by the author to appeal to the Saxon *comitatus* code and to emphasize their expected loyalty to the lord Jesus and his Holy Roman Emperor. Like Beowulf, the Chieftain assures Peter that this is his battle to fight alone and that if he wanted to, he could call down "many angels wise in warfare that no human beings could stand up to," but since "the all-mighty Father, has determined it differently" he will not do it.¹⁹⁷ Instead, Jesus orders Peter to sheath his sword and heals the wounded Malchus before allowing the soldiers to lead him away in chains. Time and time again, our author references the fact that Jesus is wearing chains, surely appealing to the sympathy of the Saxons, many of whom were forced to undergo Baptism in chains.

While Jesus is chained, Satan lurks in the crowd. In *The Heliand* Satan is a major character in a way not seen in the Gospels. He is actively engaged in attempting to change the fate of Jesus, even physically present yet "hidden by a magic helmet," the *helidhelm*.¹⁹⁸ The only other use of such a helmet is in the *Nibelungenlied* where Siegfried uses one in a scandalous bedroom scene, surely not in any copy of the Gospels. In *The Heliand* Satan "knew for sure that Christ wanted to set the whole world free" and he "immediately wanted to come to Christ's aid to help prevent the sons of men from taking Christ's life ... [h]e wanted Him to remain alive, so that human beings would not become safe and secure from their sins and the inferno."¹⁹⁹ In fact, it is Satan himself who caused Pilate's wife to have a dream which caused her to "use her words to help Christ, Chieftain of the human race, to remain alive."²⁰⁰ Before the outcome of her efforts

¹⁹⁷ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 161.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 180. (see footnote 283)

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 179.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 179.

are revealed the poet inserts that “He was then already predestined to die.”²⁰¹ As Murphy suggests, in the poet’s earlier attempt to unite the concepts of fate and god, arguing that god is at least as powerful as fate then a necessary conclusion must be drawn, “fate and the will of God are one.”²⁰² Concealed by his magic helmet, Satan fails and Jesus’ fate, or decree of god, is sealed. He watches powerless from the crowd as Jesus is led up the mountain to die.

Syncretism

With his fate sealed Jesus is executed and “died on the rope,” echoing the Saxon stories of Odin’s hanging.²⁰³ And so it is obvious to see how a ninth century Saxon, listening to *The Heliand* being sung by a *schop* or “shaper,” could easily confuse Jesus for Odin. Not only were their lives and capabilities extremely similar, but so were their sacrifices. Knowing this, missionary monks made a compensatory delineation from some of Christianity’s more orthodox teachings out of sympathy for the conquered Saxons in a presupposed temporary movement of understanding and acceptance that might welcome the new converts. They created what Chris Abram would call “syncretistic literature,”²⁰⁴ in which “references to him [Odin] often permeate the skalds’ language even when the poem has nothing to do with Odin as a mythic character.”²⁰⁵

There has been much disagreement about whether or not *The Heliand* is syncretistic literature. One serious opponent to the belief that *The Heliand* was or is syncretistic is the German scholar Dieter Kartschoke. In his essay “Geschichte der

²⁰¹ Ibid., 179.

²⁰² Ibid., 179. (see footnote 282)

²⁰³ Ibid., 187. (see footnote 297)

²⁰⁴ Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen*, 156.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 84.

deutschen Literatur im fr̄ūhen Mittelater,” Kartschoke acknowledges that *The Heliand* exudes a German flavor, but vehemently denies it as syncretistic. His comment that “Solcher Einfärbung der biblischen Lebenswelt ins Heimische und Vertraute”²⁰⁶ (“Such a coloring of the biblical life in the home and the familiar”²⁰⁷) in *The Heliand* was nothing more than a native coloring. He agrees that the author added some German flavor to a solidly biblical story, but changed nothing in regards to ideology or theology. His argument is very well presented and defended, but I suggest, it is incomplete. While he does address the *comitatus* code and festive meals among other clearly Germanic influences, he never addresses the issues I have discussed here. Kartschoke does not discuss the subtleties of wording in Eucharistic Theology or the obvious allusions to Wodan-Odin. Instead, he discusses only cultural and geographic references and uses them to discredit any theological syncretism. I, on the other hand, have addressed specific theological and mythological references and, therefore, cannot deny any form of syncretism.

I will admit that I do not believe it was ever the intention of the poet to blur the lines of Christian theology and Norse mythology. On the contrary, I believe wholeheartedly that the poet was attempting to achieve the impossible. The author was simply trying to justify and familiarize a faith that was forcibly thrust upon the Saxons. For the most part, core Christian biblical teachings remain intact, but as I have demonstrated the symbolic syncretism is undeniable, and an author’s work may well engender conversations and conflicts beyond its intent.

²⁰⁶ Dieter Kartschoke, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im fr̄ūhen Mittelater* (Nördlingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 145.

²⁰⁷ Translation from German by Drew Craver.

Reception

For a moment, let us forget about the author's intention and focus on the audience's reception. *The Heliand* was a performed work, similar to "Old Germanic poetry."²⁰⁸ In mead hall performances, "the audience had to know its way around the Old Norse mythological cosmos and its cast of characters [...] One was expected to know."²⁰⁹ It is safe to assume these first and second generation converts knew their way around and recognized the allusions to Odin. The audience assuredly knew that Odin "named himself in many other ways."²¹⁰ Utilizing reception theory, I argue that the listener, regardless of the author's intention, could easily assume that Jesus is just another name used by the All-Father, Odin. And as Russell points out, the "general lack of post-baptismal religious instruction, complemented by the vitality of Germanic religiosity, resulted in the Germanization of Christianity."²¹¹

Reception theory has been championed by scholars such as Hans Robert Jauss, building on the works of, among others, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Robert C. Holub describes reception theory as "the rehabilitation of philosophical hermeneutics, the call for criticism with more social relevance."²¹² Jauss argues that reception theory "wrest[s] works of art from the past by means of new interpretations."²¹³ Holub pointedly suggests we should "conceive of reception theory as a general redirecting of attention to the pole

²⁰⁸ Lars Lönnroth, "The Founding of Miðgarðr (Voluspá 1-8)," trans. Paul Acker in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, 1-25. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans., Jesse L. Byock. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 31.

²¹¹ Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 7.

²¹² Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), 3.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

of the reader or audience.”²¹⁴ Holub admits, and I agree, that Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* provided fertile ground for the theory of reception to grow. His work on “historical prejudices,” the fundamental sociological perspective of each literary recipient, averted the attention of theorists towards the audience. Historical context was no longer enough. Historical context plus the historical prejudice of the reader could add new meaning to old texts. Holub, using Leo Löwenthall’s sociology of literature, writes, “what it is, is determined essentially by the way it is experienced.”²¹⁵ Jauss’ “aesthetics of reception” defended such a drastic change of viewpoint for interpreting the meaning of texts and, as Holub states, “involves viewing literature from the perspective of the reader or consumer.”²¹⁶ Ultimately, after the introduction of reception theory, it is imperative for interpreters of textual meaning to look beyond the intention of the author and consider, not only the work’s historical context, but, also, its audience’s historical prejudice.

The Odinic prejudice of the Saxon audience and the historical context of the Christian author created a new story. Carolyn Jones Medine developed a concept of “de-storying and re-storying” playing on the words destroy and restore.²¹⁷ When Carolingian Christianity conquered Saxon mythology, each of the stories were destroyed and, subsequently, restored into one new story. Their “re-storying” can be elucidated from *The Heliand*, in its context as well as its reception. The Saxons sacrificed the name Odin for Jesus, and the Christians laid to rest absolute pacifism for not wanting “to start any fights.”²¹⁸ Harmless or not, melding the Saxon pagan culture with the Holy Roman

²¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 46.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

²¹⁷ Unpublished work by Carolyn Jones Medine, 2015. Used with permission of the author.

²¹⁸ Murphy, *The Heliand The Saxon Gospel*, 46.

Empire created, as I have demonstrated, lasting changes in Christian theology. Forcing the replacement of Odin with Jesus simply turned Jesus into Odin.

I am well aware that making such a bold claim is quite controversial. Jesus, one in the same with Odin, the god of war? It is easy to cast aside such a claim when reading with the historical prejudice of twenty-first century Christianity, but I ask us to look at the circumstances of ninth century Saxony. A Saxon Pagan view of Christianity looked like a cross worn by Frankish cavalry who burned their villages, destroyed their forests, killed their warriors, chained them, dunked them in rivers, forbade the Saxon gods, and executed all who resisted. To them, the god of these Frankish Christian warriors must have delighted in war, feeding the beasts of battle; the raven, the wolf, and the eagle with the slain corpses of enemies. First century and twenty first century Christians know that Jesus would never delight in such mayhem, but a ninth century Saxon would not. Their first encounter with Jesus was not a fulfillment of a call to pacifism, it was a god who fulfilled his own prophetic words, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in-law against her mother in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”²¹⁹ In ninth century Saxony Jesus already looked like Odin, *The Heliand* did not start the violent behavior of European Christians it merely documented it.

Documenting *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, Carl Erdmann wrote a complete treatise on the crusader ideology and its evolution throughout the Middle Ages. His work is a must read for anyone daring to make a claim about understanding the crusader mindset. While most of his attention is focused on the eleventh and following centuries

²¹⁹ Matthew 10: 34-36. (NOAB)

he does reference some of the early influences of the ideology. In particular he discusses the Islamic concept of *jihad*. While he agrees that *jihad* clearly plays a significant role in influencing the Christian concept of a “holy war,” it is not a concern of mine. The reason being, in *jihad* the focus is on fighting and its influence on the crusader mentality is a belief that one can perform good works by fighting on behalf of Islam. Instead, I am focused on dying in battle. Yes, the offensive nature of battle, conquer and convert, was already in Frankish Christianity by the time of the ninth century. What I present as a new idea is that dying in battle became an immediate pass to Heaven. Jesus’ Heaven became the new Valhalla, and crusaders became the new *einherjar*.

Erdmann agrees that the concept of crusade developed “over the preceding centuries” and his reviewers recognize “his book as a significant contribution to the understanding of the First Crusade.”²²⁰ Etienne Delaruelle and Erdmann agree that “participants” in the crusades saw it as “a means of attaining eternal salvation.”²²¹ They both, also, stress “the Carolingian period” and in particular “the decades following Charlemagne” which coincide exactly in time and place with the composition of *The Heliand*.²²² While comparing the Muslim *jihad* with the Christian “holy war,” Erdmann points out that “[t]here are points of agreement, such as the idea that death in a holy war leads to Paradise”²²³ and that this influence can “easily be traced to Germanic conceptions ... in the *Heliand*.”²²⁴ In short, Erdmann, alongside G. Neckel argue that Germanic concepts in *The Heliand* contributed at least as much to the concept of a

²²⁰ Carl Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, trans. Marshall W. Baldwin and Walter Goffart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xxi.

²²¹ Ibid., xxii.

²²² Ibid., xxii.

²²³ Ibid., 32.

²²⁴ Ibid., 32. (see footnote 77)

Christian holy war as did the Muslim idea of *jihad*. Erdmann, Neckel, and Delaruelle laid the groundwork in defense of my greater thesis, but did not dwell much on the specifics of these so-called “Germanic conceptions.”

My research is important because it does delve into the specific origins of these concepts. As I have previously explained, the holy war concept is a product of the “re-storying” of the Frankish Christian war machine after it collided with the Germanic Cult of Odin. The new story I argue is hidden in *The Heliand* and if we unpack the text with a new lense, reception theory, it is plain to see how Odin became Jesus, Valhalla became Heaven, and the *Einherjar* became Crusaders.

CONCLUSION

The acceptable change in behavior between Christians in the first century and the thirteenth can be summed up by the contrast between two quotations, “Turn the other cheek” and “Kill them all and let god sort them out.” On the surface, it seems impossible for these two admonitions to exist within the same religious tradition, but they did. They existed over a thousand miles and a thousand years apart, but they existed nonetheless. When we take an honest look at history, we see how the conversion of the Saxons was a key moment in the movement from point A, “Turn the other cheek” to point B, “Kill them all.”

As I argued in the first chapter, once the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, it would be forever changed. What some argue was originally an anarchistic religion became the imperial religion of Rome, with or without its permission. Roman citizens began to fill the ranks of its hierarchy, and the office of bishop became increasingly political and economic, while, coincidentally, its emphasis on orthodox spirituality and instruction waned. The Roman bishops exercised strong power on the fringes of the frontier along the Rhine-Danube, the border to “free Germany.” And, when Rome fell and the local Gallo-Roman ruling elite answered to no one other than themselves, their power grew, both over their subjects and over the form of Christianity practiced there.

Christianity was the means by which these ruling elites preserved Roman bureaucratic institutions and protected their own political and economic positions.

Frankish military men joined forces with the aristocracy and gave birth to the Merovingian dynasty. Germanic warriors, the Franks, accepted Christ as a victory-giving god and carried him into battle, as Constantine had done, to conquer their pagan neighbors. The dynasty never did extend itself into “free Germany,” but they did manage, however, to materialize a theocratic regime which was usurped by an even more ferocious entity.

The Carolingian Dynasty and the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne created a war machine that was able to cross the Rhine and establish a Benedictine monastic *fisc* which was used to subdue dissenters, fund the empire, and increase the power of both the bishop of Rome and the Frankish aristocracy. They enlisted Anglo-Saxon missionaries to join the fight and acculturated, through Christianization, their subdued pagan opponents. Their theocratic regime preserved power, expanded territory, and left a visible mark of deforestation throughout Northern Europe. They had solidified a universal form of Christianity, the Latin rite, within their realm and would pave the way for its installation throughout the Roman Catholic Church in years to come.

While some look longingly back on the ritualistic days of the Latin mass, and I must admit, it does seem appealing, most choose to ignore the Christology that, I argue, emerged from the warrior Saxon culture to shape the crusader mentality. *The Heliand* exemplifies the Medieval Westerners’ thoughts on Christ. He was *the* victory-giving god, and dying in battle for him was an entry to heaven in exactly the same way worshipers of Odin wished to die in battle and join the Allfather in Valhalla. Without post-baptismal instruction, this alignment was never addressed, and from it, the Crusades were inevitable.

One man, a Roman pagan, of noble birth, dreamed that Christ would grant him success in battle, and Christianity in the West was forever changed. I do not believe for one second that Jesus truly is the god of war. However, watching Christians in the Middle Ages praying to Jesus before seemingly endless battles, carrying armor and weapons adorned with images such as the cross or Latin prayer inscriptions, offering incense and alms in thanksgiving after victory, baptising those they the conquered in chains, and killing others who resisted, I can clearly see how an outsider would be inclined to think Jesus was a war god.

This understanding pervades Western culture, influencing just war theory, and making soldiers, even in the twenty-first century, pray to Jesus for victory in battle. Some political entities and nation-states claim that “God is on their side.” Either the political institution of Rome and the many political and religious entities following it have systematically altered acceptable behavior for Christians, or Jesus really is, for some, a god of peace and, for others, a victory-giving god of war.

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APPENDIX A

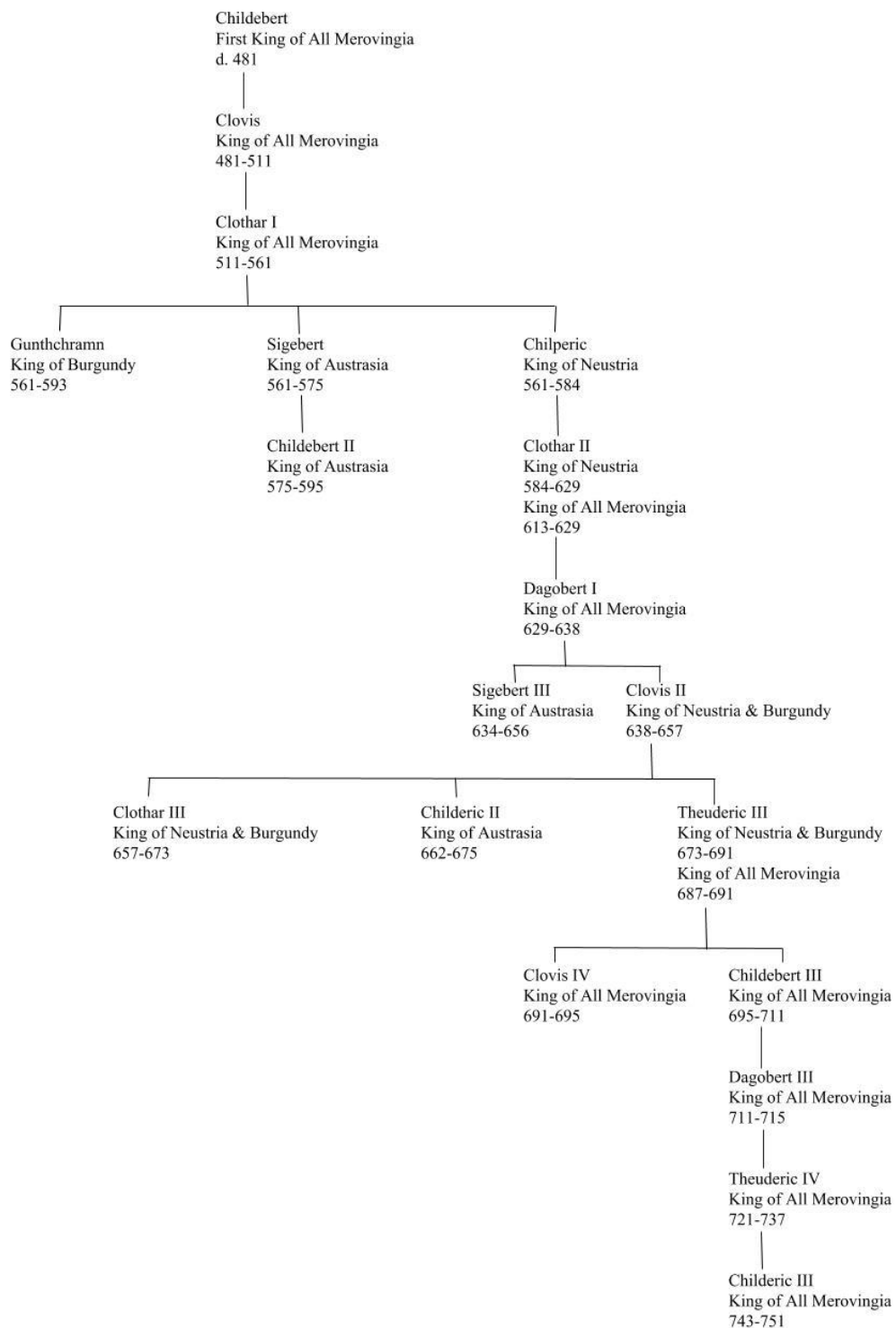
Genealogical Charts

The following genealogical charts are knowingly incomplete. Due to their many wives and children Frankish genealogies are quite complex and can be overwhelming. For the purpose of aiding this thesis I intentionally left out countless relatives in order to focus on the direct lineage of kingship as it passed from one generation to the next over centuries time.

Chart 1, (p. 83) is the Merovingian lineage from the first, Childebert through the last, Childeric Merovingian king. The chart spans from the fifth through the eighth century. This lineage is based on the research compiled by Patrick Geary in *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*.

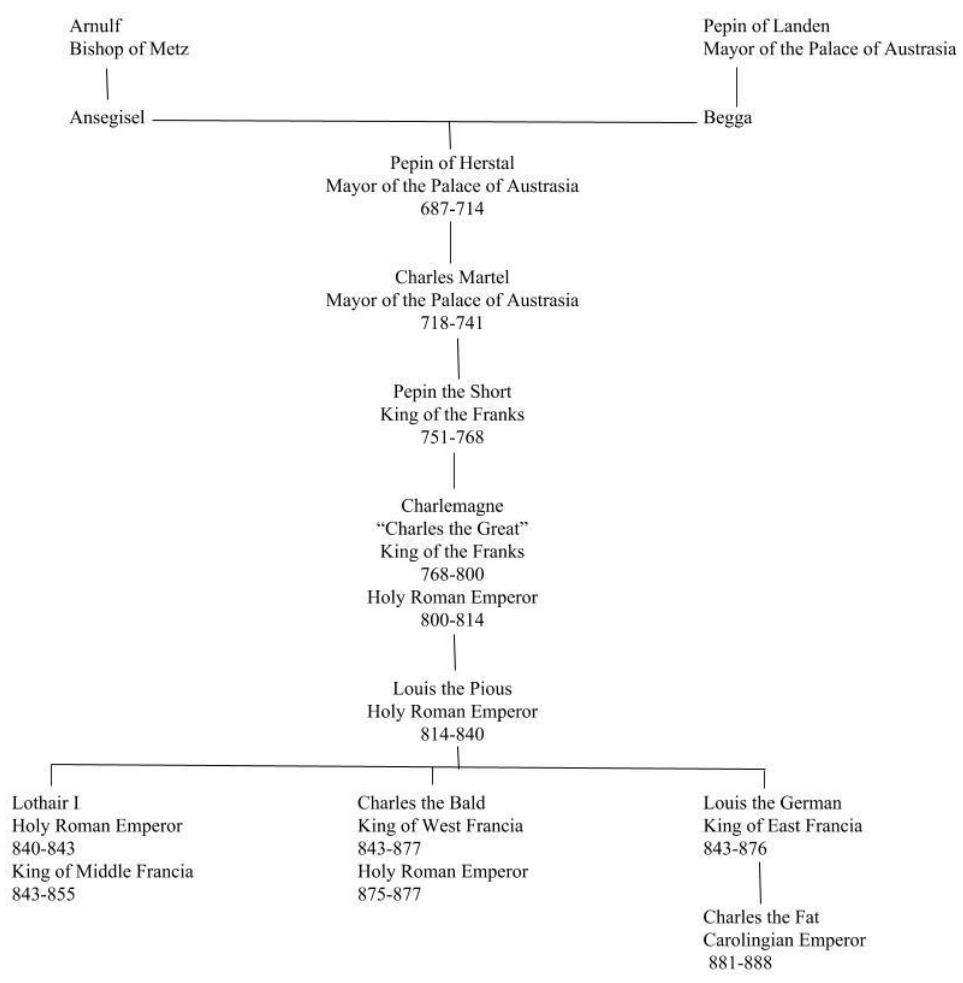
Chart 2, (p. 84) is the Carolingian lineage from Pepin of Landen through Charles the Fat. This lineage is also based on the research compiled by Patrick Geary in *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*.

Merovingian Dynasty 458-751



Carolingian Dynasty

751-888



APPENDIX B

MAPS

The next three pages include three maps illustrating the shifting political boundaries of Western Europe through the first millennia C.E. Please note that these maps are not exact and are meant only to serve as a general reference helping the reader locate, in general terms, where each kingdom and group of people referenced in the thesis reside. Keep in mind that territorial boundaries are always in flux and these lines do not entail exact unchanging markings. They are a general reference of territorial claims.

Figure 1 of Free Germany is on p. 86.

Figure 2 of Merovingia is on p. 87.

Figure 3 of Saxony is on p. 88.



Figure 1

Free Germany

Figure 1 highlights the boundaries between Free Germany and the Roman Empire. The vertical boundary is the Rhine River and the horizontal is the Danube River. This map, in essence, demonstrates the face of Europe for the first four centuries C.E.

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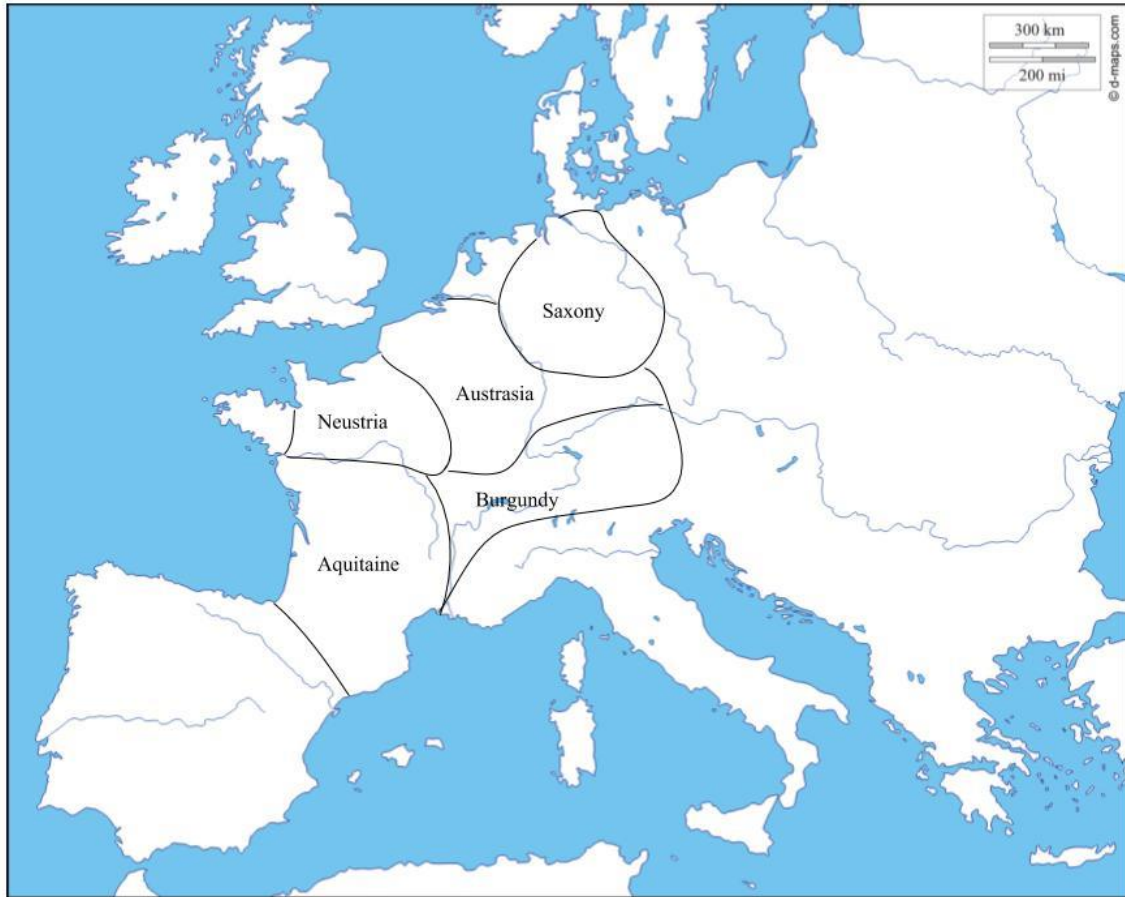


Figure 2

Merovingia

Figure 2 represents the Merovingian kingdoms which ruled Western Europe from the fifth through the eighth centuries. Boundaries and kingship shifted over the centuries, but this map serves as a general reference to aid readers in understanding where each sub-kingdom was located.

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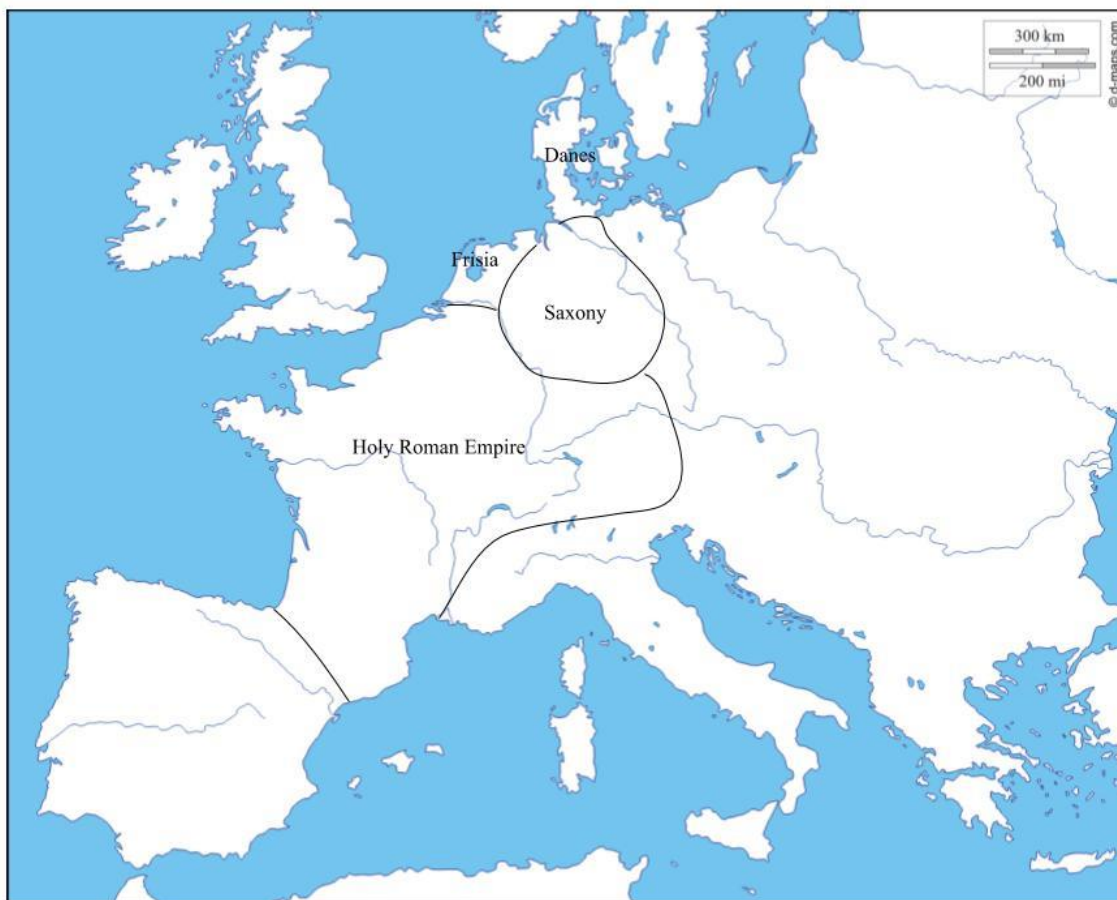


Figure 3

Saxony

Figure 3 represents the Holy Roman Empire in relation to its arch rival, Saxony at the time of the emperor Charlemagne circa 800 C.E. Having consolidated his control over the Carolingian empire, former Merovingia, Charlemagne turned his attention towards his most bitter rival and enveloped them with a conquest of destruction, Christianization, and acculturation.

<http://www.d-maps.com/m/europa/europemin/europemin05.gif>