

Boniface (c. 675-754): Archbishop, Legate and Postmaster General

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*Boniface was the prime mover in the transalpine Church during the eighth century, forming dioceses in Germany while reorganizing and reforming those in Bavaria and Frankland. To accomplish this, he made use of a *communio* of believers, including Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Germans, and Italians. Among the participants were monks, nuns, counts, kings and popes. To keep this *spiritalis communio* alive and healthy, Boniface had to devise a communication system which covered all of Roman Christendom. His postal service consisted primarily of highly-educated priests, performing the duties of mailmen, delivery men, and ambassadors-at-large. This network of envoys formed a “barbarian” answer to the Roman *cursus publicus*, while laying the groundwork for the *missi dominici* of Charlemagne’s empire.*

The pharaohs had the gift of the Nile. The Persians built the Royal Road so the imperial messengers might bring news to the Great King, the King of Kings. Ultimately, the Romans developed the *cursus publicus*, where at day's end the official traveler might have his cares tended to at the *mansio*. But the ancient world had crumbled, and the era of swift communication, at least in western Europe, had vanished by the advent of Boniface. Goths and Vandals, Moslems and Huns, Angles and Saxons — all speeded the demise of the Western Empire and its *cursus publicus*, while a new vision of empire as embodied in Charlemagne with his *missi dominici* had not yet emerged. Simultaneously, Roman Christendom had shrunk to include naught, save England, Frankland, and parts of Italy, and these but loosely bound. Into this Europe in need of rebuilding, Boniface was born.

Boniface. A few years after oblation, the young Boniface outgrew the school at his provincial monastery at Exeter and transferred to the more-advanced, educational center at Nursling, nearer to London and Canterbury. At length, he became the head of the abbey school and could member among his erstwhile students numerous, influential, monastic heads. His closest friends and mentors were Bishops Aldhelm of Sherborne and Daniel of Winchester. He once served as emissary to Canterbury for a royally-

sponsored, Church synod in Wessex. Fear of imminent, episcopal elevation then combined readily with a natural predilection to the apostolic life to lead Boniface, now nearing forty-five, to embark in 716 upon a thirty-five year missionary career.

Initial failure in Frisia soon sparked an appeal for papal approbation. Unable to elude ecclesiastical preferment, he was appointed bishop in 722 and archbishop in 732, though he remained without a see until obtaining Mainz in 748. For decades he united the roles of bishop and papal legate, ensuring the proselytism of Germany and the reform of Frankland proper. Consequently, Boniface had to maintain contact with the four cornerstones of Christendom — Italy, Frankland, Germany, and England — without the aid of the *cursus publicus* and often without even a Roman road to guide his couriers.

The Nature of Communio. It was a singular feat of organizational genius on the part of Boniface to regularize communications between his mobile command post, which traveled about Germany and Frankland, and his *communio*. A communications network was necessary for both the physical and the ecclesiastical well-being of the missionaries, while at the same time it supplied welcomed evidence of prayerful support. The correspondence fills one with an understanding of the spiritual bonds which united the disparate members of this union. The terminology itself is an adventure in Christianity. As the song says, you can tell they

were Christians by their love:

“The nature of the *communio* was that of a spiritual family—a *spiritalis societas* where *frater spiritualis* and *soror per Deum* were united in a *unitas fraternae dilectionis, communio fraterna* or *germanitas in Domino*. The letters of the communicants abound with explicit references to the *communio*. There, one finds a great feeling of love and friendship, a feeling of belonging to a *communio caritatis* or *communio dilectionis*, bound in *amore Christi* by *spiritalis adfinitas*. The nature of the Christian *communio* at hand is underscored by Boniface’s refusal to participate in the Eucharist, in *sancta communione corporis Christi*, with unregenerate clergy. *Spiritalis communio* and *sancta communio* were inseparable.”²

The Members of the Communio. Boniface’s confidants fell into five groups. First: Longtime friends, such as Daniel and Abbess Eadburga, who remained in England, yet maintained communication with him. Second: Anglo-Saxon missionaries who on their own initiative became disciples and co-workers on the Continent, such as Lullus, Burchard, and Eoban. Third: Missionaries called from the seclusion of their monasteries by the Archbishop, because he needed more workers in the field. Such were Lioba and Willibald. Fourth: There was also a group of foreign, i.e., non-Anglo-Saxon, missionaries, trained in the fine Anglo-Saxon tradition. Sturm and Gregory of Utrecht are two examples of Boniface’s introduction of a “native clergy.” Fifth: Fringe friends made up the final class, those

not involved in the mainstream of the missionary activity, but at one with the cause: Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury; Optatus, Abbot of Monte Cassino; Fulrad, Abbot of St. Denis and advisor to King Pepin; Archdeacon Gemmulus at Rome. These men all were sideline supporters of the missionary movement.³ But it was not to members of his *communio* alone that Boniface sent messengers.

Levels of Communication. Boniface’s duties as archbishop and papal legate called for one level of communication, an official correspondence with the papacy. His relationships with the secular princes called for another. It must be remembered that they were the state, per se. His dealings with his *communio* called for a third level, while there are several letters which fit no specific category. To accomplish his somewhat heroic feats during his thirty-five years of dealing with hundreds of acquaintances, Boniface developed a personal parcel and post system, which we now will investigate at some length.

The Office of Messenger. When one reads Boniface’s letters, it is evident that the messenger was an important figure in the Bonifatian organization. He was the bishop’s eyes and ears, an emissary, an alter ego. Oral messages, too important to lend to written form, were entrusted to him. Books, letters, documents, gifts, clothing, gold — all were assigned to his care. And, although Boniface was a dedicated friend of the “little man,” it must be remembered that he dealt officially —

and one would think almost daily – with the elite of Europe: counts and kings, abbots and abbesses, bishops and popes. Necessarily, his representatives would have to be mature, literate, tactful, and of sufficient rank.

The Rank of the Messenger. Of the missions for which we have documentation of the rank of the messenger, Boniface used priests on all but one occasion, at which time he used Lullus, an archdeacon.⁴ The letters show that others, such as King Pepin and Bishop Daniel, also used priests.⁵ Due to the intense training of Anglo-Saxon priests and their minimal age of thirty – the canonical age for ordination, adhered to by Boniface unless emergency required otherwise – messengers would generally have been mature, well-trained, literate, and responsible.⁶ The priestly rank was not yet held by vast numbers, as in some modern religious orders, and this lent stature to its status. Besides, what could be more logical than sending ordained ministers on Church business? With the ties Boniface was developing in Frankland between Church and state, and with such bonds already existing in England, a priest was the perfect emissary.

The Number of People on an Embassy. Due to the precarious nature of medieval travel, it would seem priest-messengers did not go off unaccompanied. Yet, Boniface did not often have a sufficient supply of priests to send several on one mission. Often letters mention multiple groupings: “bearers,” “messengers,” “companions,” “men of yours,” and

“clerics.”⁷ We may take it that monks were sent along with the priests, although in one letter Pope Zacharias does mention using several strong and trustworthy priests.⁸ But where might an entourage, such as one containing two or three friends of Boniface, spend the nights while traversing Europe?

The Provisioning of an Embassy. Though most of Boniface’s correspondence is not extant, we have sufficient information to know that he was on good terms with many of the secular and religious leaders. His coronation of Pepin in 751 and his somewhat frequent communication with the court speak positively of his rapport with the Frankish crown. In one letter, Boniface asked Count Reginbert to look after his messenger, since the Count had been so helpful in the past. Another asked King Ethelbald of Mercia for personal assistance for an envoy, while thanking the monarch for aid rendered the previous year. In a third missive, Cena begged Boniface to send any travelers to her region to her personally, that she might supply their spiritual and bodily comforts.⁹ Can one imagine a continental monastery or other ecclesiastical establishment denying hospitality to the representatives of the Archbishop-Legate? Because of his widespread network of friends and his official capacity within the Church, Boniface’s messengers hopscoched, seemingly well-provisioned, across Europe.

Frequency of Communication. If it is hard to determine exactly the frequency of Boniface’s com-

municative expeditions, the reasons are not hard to find. The extant letters are far from being a complete corpus. Dating of the letters is often tentative and in some cases simply impossible. Documentation is better after the reform synods which began in 742, probably due to Boniface's renown, considering the fight for his remains in 754. Another gap in our information is caused by the fact that Boniface relied often upon oral communication, with written correspondence being used for long distances, extraordinary circumstances or when necessary record-keeping was dictated.

Regardless of these obstacles, certain general patterns do emerge from the graphs and plottings of Boniface's postal missions. Communication with England was fairly constant during his first decade on the Continent, 716-725.¹⁰ The period of work in Hesse, Thuringia, and Bavaria, 726-736, is all but devoid of extant correspondence, except for one well-documented effort in 735. After his third and final visit to Rome in 737, Boniface's Roman contacts became almost annual. Meanwhile, his English connection regularized again after 746. Finally, certain phrases appear which lead one to think messengers made regular excursions — phrases such as; "next time," "at once," "my tardiness." However, it must be kept in mind that these generalizations are gleaned from only sixty-six letters, carried on approximately thirty-six separate journeys.

Speed of Expeditions and Number of Stopovers. Walking is walking is

walking. (Two months in a Montana winter, without an automobile, has greatly heightened my appreciation of these messengers.) If a messenger averaged fifteen to twenty miles a day he earned his keep. Roman roads facilitated travel in some sections, mountains caused average mileage to fall in others. A river might lend aid here, dense forests deter there. Rome to London was a seven-week adventure, barring mishaps!¹² But it must be noted that Boniface's friends did not endlessly travel, for layovers were often encountered. An expedition mentioned earlier (the 735 affair) entailed visitation of not less than five places in Great Britain, from the Isle of Thanet to Whithorn in Scotland. Another peregrination which left from France included visits to Mercia's royal court, the bishopric of York, and the abbey at Wearmouth-Jarrow.¹³ A messenger might be enroute for months on end delivering messages, gathering information, and visiting old friends.

Encumbrances. Before remarking on the oral and written communications which were the *raison d'être* for the arduous ambulations of these couriers, let us examine briefly some of their particular parcels. Pope Gregory III loaded one crew with gifts and the relics of various saints. Others often carried spices, clothing, books, or articles for continental altars. King Ethelbert sent Boniface a silver, gold-lined cup weighing three and one half pounds. Boniface, obviously ridding himself of confiscated or donated materials, shipped to Ethelbal of Mercia three birds of prey, two shields, and two lances. Perhaps the gift most

typical of Boniface was that of two small casks of wine sent to Archbishop Egbert of York, with a plea that he share them with the brethren.¹⁴ Yet these were extra, non-essential, items. The final sections of this paper deal with the reason for the communication system; he wanted to communicate with his *communio*, the papacy, and others.

Oral Communications. The Bonifatian corpus contains numerous accounts of non-written communications. Letters contained specific information, but the messengers often augmented this data orally. Unfortunately, though the different aspects of oral communication now to be discussed will aid our understanding of the system, the words themselves have long since vanished. Just what did those monks say?

Greetings and salutations were often expressed orally by the messengers as personal representatives of the sender, cementing old ties of friendship. Local news and current events, not worth the time, effort, or vellum necessary for written communication, were often transmitted across Europe to be dispersed orally by messengers during leisurely layovers. The messengers were also called upon to expatiate and elucidate. Items covered only briefly in letters often needed clarification, and the senders regularly briefed the couriers as to the further intricacies involved. Finally, some confidential matters were transmitted orally to prevent interception, as mentioned in a 751 letter to Boniface from Pope Zacharias.¹⁵ Oral reports clearly complemented

written communication.

Written Communication. Boniface's greatest volume of correspondence with any one place was with Rome and the papacy. Extant items include his oath upon elevation to the episcopacy, papal patent letters seeking local Frankish secular support for Boniface, and reports of papal synods concerning Frankish affairs. But for the most part, the texts concern the day-to-day problems the Archbishop was having, problems he dutifully laid at the feet of the popes. These official letters are a mine of valuable information for anyone interested in papal affairs during the early eighth century.

As already mentioned, Boniface kept in contact with the secular leaders in England and on the Continent. In one letter to Pepin, Boniface mentioned he was returning a certain mendacious cleric named Ansfrid, in order to obtain royal justice. The man had surreptitiously appealed to the monarch, lying about his relationship with Boniface. It was the King's official duty, the Archbishop noted, to protect the Frankish people from such deceivers. In another letter to Pepin, sent through the good offices of Abbot Fulrad of St. Denis, Boniface sought protection and physical support for his missionaries after his death, because they were all foreigners, Englishmen, and would be in need of royal backing to complete their mission.

To the English Kings went letters seeking temporal and spiritual aid. Yet, in

one instance, when Boniface thought that the King of Mercia, Ethelbald, had strayed too far from the path of Christian charity, the aged missionary severely admonished the King. Simultaneously, he ensured himself of local English support in the matter by enlisting the aid of Archbishop Egbert of York.¹⁶

Many letters were sent as part of Boniface's role of spiritual advisor. Abbesses in England who had attended his classes relied particularly heavily upon his advice and spared no efforts in obtaining his replies. Boniface did not placate them with pious platitudes, but was usually rather straightforward, such as the time he suggested that Abbess Bugga delay her planned pilgrimage, at least until the Moslem invasions of Italy ceased.¹⁷ Other letters show us that Boniface was interested in the everyday affairs of his monks. One letter arranged the offices to be held by the monks of Fritzlar after the death of their Abbot, Wigbert; another, written and sent from Rome, reported to the monks his reception by Pope Gregory III.¹⁸

It is also interesting to see Boniface's untiring search for useful manuscripts. As a teacher he knew the need for good written materials, while as a bishop he had to provide the many works needed for Mass and the Divine Office in his new installations. Another popular set of manuscripts was the corpus of Gregory the Great's epistles to Augustine of Canterbury, for they contained many valuable papal rulings.¹⁹ The search for manuscripts was unceasing.

Boniface asked Abbess Eadburga for the *Epistles of St. Peter*, embellished in gold to impress the pagans. From Daniel of Winchester he requested an old copy of the *Book of the Prophets*, which he had used when he was in Wessex. This particular manuscript, written in large, legible letters, was easy to read for an old man with fading eyesight.

Both Egbert of York and Huetbert, Abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow, were petitioned for works of Bede. Abbot Duddo of Nursling was asked to send a copy of the Pauline epistles, plus copies of any other interesting works in Boniface's old library. Many letters merely mentioned "books" which had been sent to the missionaries. New European libraries were being assembled: meanwhile, the scriptoria of England would have to provide the needed materials.²⁰

One important, though often overlooked, set of letters was sent during the Frankish reforms, 742-747. This was a period of intense crisis for Boniface. In need of spiritual solace and support, he sent messengers out carrying letters to friends, such as the beloved Lioba. Knowing the cost in priest-power, time and trouble, these embassies show us the emphasis Boniface put on prayer and on his *communio*, for he asked for nothing except prayers.²¹

One last letter need be noted, for it, more than any other specific piece of evidence, shows the lengths to which Boniface would go to take care of his friends. In it the priest Denehard,

himself once a Bonifatian messenger, was asked to look after and to stand up for a serf, Athalere. Athalere was about to marry and needed a character witness. Boniface supplied Denehard! The priest was informed he should pledge himself for Athalere in order that the menial serf might not fear because of his servile status.²² A concrete example of the *spiritalis societas* that Boniface created.

Summation. What might be said to bring all of the different aspects of the Bonifatian communications system into focus? An organizational genius, Boniface late in life was asked by successive popes to evangelize Germany and subsequently to reform Frankland. This necessitated the establishment of regular communications from the Scottish highlands to the retreat of Monte Cassino. Although a pragmatist and not beyond using pilgrims and other travelers such as Abbess Bugga to deliver messages, a more reliable and controllable system had to be devised. Boniface pulled from his corps of clerics a cadre of messengers who also were his eyes and ears. He kept open his lines of communication with the papacy, the secular princes and his *communio*. He even used this network of couriers as a training ground for future ecclesiastics, with messengers such as Eoban and Lullus appearing on the episcopal rolls.

When Boniface finally completed his *peregrinatio Christi* at the hands of the Frisians in 754, he was the most renowned man in Christendom. His remains were claimed, following a

strident struggle, by the monastery at Fulda. His letters were collected and edited. It is a tribute to the systematic communications he initiated that soon after Boniface's death a letter was received by his disciple and successor at Mainz, Bishop Lullus.

In it, Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke of the mutual relations established through letters and trusy messengers.²³ Because of these ties, bonds of a *communio spiritualis* held firm by regular correspondence, Cuthbert reported that Boniface had been named by the English Church to join Gregory the Great and Augustine of Canterbury as Patron of England. As bishop, missionary, and papal legate he had spread monks, messengers and manuscripts across Europe like wildfire, and soon the Continent was aflame with the Carolingian renaissance.²⁴

1. This paper was originally read at the Third Saint Louis Conference on Manuscript Studies, October, 1976, under the title, "Manuscripts on the Move." It should be also noted that Boniface had similarly gone under another name, Winfrid, only to be renamed by Pope Gregory II. However, to avoid confusion, Boniface will be used throughout the text.

2. Cowie, Frederick J. "Boniface and *Communio* in the Eighth Century," *Communio*, III, No. 1, Spring, 1976.

3. Cowie, Frederick J. *Boniface (c.675-754) and His Friends: A Communion of Saints*; unpublished doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University, 1975.

4. Throughout the essay, the numeration of the letters will be according to: *Die Briefe Des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus. Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae Selectae Tomus I*. Edited by Michael Tangl (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1916). Letters 26, 30, 32, 35, 51, 62, 63, 80, 85, 86, and 96.

5. Letters 63 and 77.

6. Jones, Charles W. *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947). See letter 25 for the papal permission to ordain at age twenty-five.

7. Letters 50, 69, 87, 93, 95, 105, and 111. Messengers of Boniface are also mentioned in the 731 embassy to Rome at the death of Pope Gregory III: Willibald *Vita Sancti Bonifacii. Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum Tomus II*. Edited by George Pertz (Hanover: Impensis

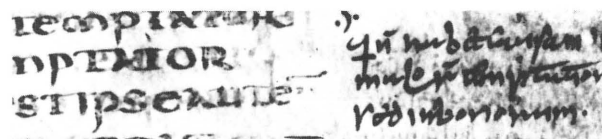


Figure 1.

Bibliopoli Hahniani, 1829).

8. Letter 77, concerning heretics Aldebert, Clemens, and Godalscius being transported by priests to Rome.

9. *Carolingian Chronicles, Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories*. Translated by B. W. Scholz and B. Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 39, for Pepin's coronation and letters 93 and 107 for communication with Pepin. Letter 95 for Reginbert, letter 69 for Ethelbald and letter 97 for Cena.

10. This seems to be due to his having only recently left his many close friends in England.

11. Letters 54, 34, and 108.

12. Haskins, C. H. "The Spread of Ideas in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, I, 1926; and Boyer, Marjorie. "A Day's Journey in Medieval France," *Speculum*, XXVI, 1951.

13. Letters for the 735 trek are 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36. For the 746-747 adventure see letters 73, 74, 75, and 76.

14. For the Gregory III notation see: *Vita Sancti Bonifacii*. For Ethelbert's conspicuous bribe, letter 105. Ethelbald's presents from Boniface appear in letter 69, while the two casks of wine are in letter 92. Almost each and every letter contained some mention of gift or remembrance.

15. Oral reports are frequently mentioned in the text. For greetings and salutations see letters 54, 78, 105, and 108. For news and current events see 26, 50, 63, and 87. Many items required further clarification, see letters 34, 87, 105, and 112. On confidentiality, see letter 86. Sometimes it is evident that letters were forsaken completely for oral

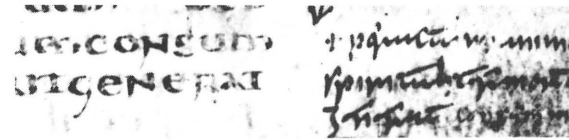


Figure 2.

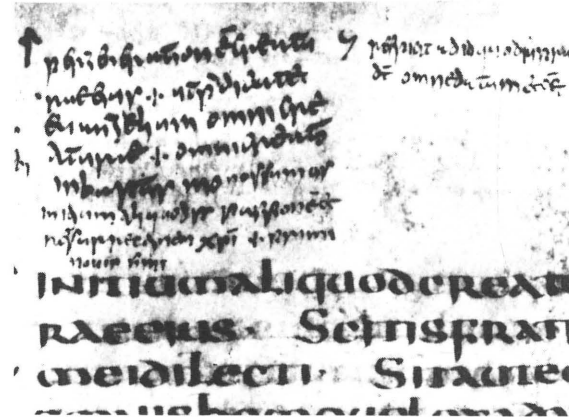


Figure 3.

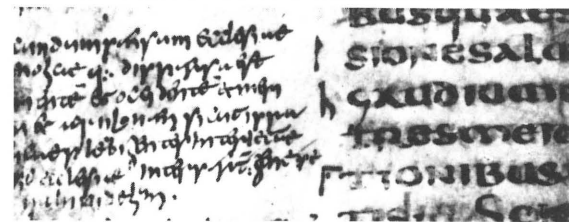


Figure 4.

communications, see letters 54 and 93.

16. Letters 107 and 93 for Pepin, while for Ethelbald see 73 through 76.

17. Letter 27, but also: 13, 14, 15, 29, 30, 35, 65, and 94.

18. Letters 40 and 41.

19. For the Gregorian epistles see letters 33, 54, and 75.

20. Letters 35, 63, 75, 76, and 34. For the connection of Duddo with Nursling, see Cowie, *Boniface and Friends*.

21. Letters 65, 66, and 67. The last two did not merit translation in: *The Letters of St. Boniface* Translated by Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940).

22. Letter 99.

23. Letter 111.

24. For the latest data as to whether we actually have anything in Boniface's own hand (and it would appear we do), see: Parkes, Malcolm B. "The Handwriting of St. Boniface: A Reassessment of the Problems," *Beitrag zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 98, 1976, pp. 161,179.

Parkes concludes in his article that we indeed have several works in Boniface's own hand. He uses the "salient features peculiar to each scribe" to isolate individual scribes writing in the six manuscripts which scholars ascribe to Boniface's circle of friends. He first uses peculiar g's and the descenders p, l, g, f, s, and r, to differentiate Glossator A (Figures 1-3) from Glossator B (Figures 4-6) in the Fulda codex. Expanding from this, he uses detailed similarities

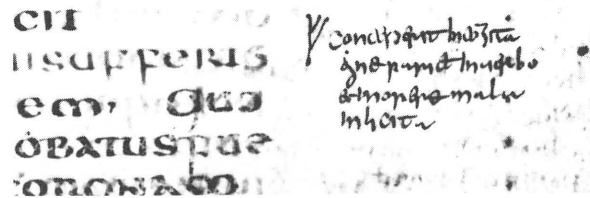


Figure 5.

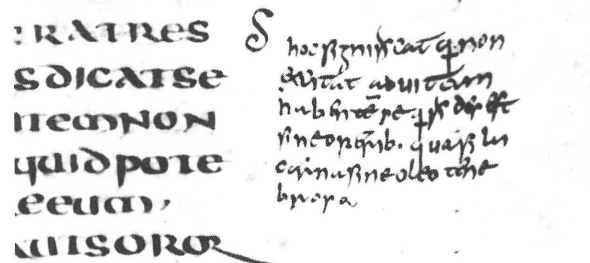


Figure 6.

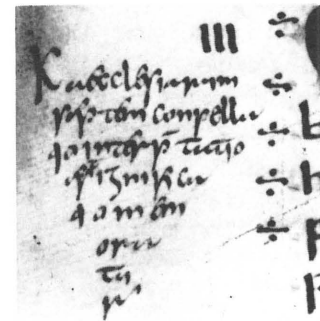


Figure 7.

and contrasts to show that the Douce Manuscript (Figure 7) and the Leningrad Manuscript were penned by a Glossator A at a different stage in his career. These three manuscripts form “Fuldensis-A group.”

Using paleographical evidence and the “contents (which include various texts of Isidore, and Aldhelm’s riddles with their solutions) and the affiliations of these texts,” Lowe and Bischoff, and now Parkes, assign the Leningrad Manuscript to southwest England. Insular cursive style and the glossators’ runes help assign the glossators of Codex Fuldensis to the south of England, while it can be shown that the Douce Manuscript was written in England at the end of the seventh century and annotated in southern England in the tenth. Thus the “Fuldensis-A group” can be assigned to a single scribe from south-west England. Parkes then proceeds to show that the Codex Fuldensis itself was copied in southern Italy before 546-7 and was “in the hands of Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent by the eighth century, and by the end of the eighth was at Fulda. “From this,” Parkes concludes, “our scribe (Glossator A) added his glosses to the Epistle of James in this manuscript on the continent.”

Finally, concentrating closely on the glosses to the Epistle of James where Glossator A is the first glossator (“presumably responsible for selecting the text”) and is “strikingly independent” of earlier commentaries on James, Parkes concludes: “The sense of personal authority which underlies his interpretations of the text, the ‘apostolic’

quality of this authority, and the way in which his literary personality accords with what we know about Boniface have convinced me that Glossator A, this Anglo-Saxon scribe who worked both in south-west England and on the continent, is to be identified with St. Boniface himself.”

Professor Malcolm B. Parkes has very kindly provided the photographs for the illustrations, which are used with kind permission of the libraries owning the MSS: Figures 1-6 are from HS Bonifatianus 1 (CLA, 1196), the Codex Fuldensis, from Fulda, Landesbibliothek; copyright the Library at Fulda, Photo-Archiv at Marburg. Figure 7 is from MS Douce 140 (CLA, 237), from Oxford, Bodleian Library; copyright the Bodleian Library.