

INTRODUCTION

There is a wooded place in the waste of a vast wilderness and in the midst of the peoples to whom we are preaching, where we have placed a group of monks, living under the Rule of Benedict, who are building a monastery. They are men of strict abstinence, who refrain from meat and wine and spirits, keep no servants and are content with the labour of their own hands. This place I have acquired by honourable effort, through the help of pious and God-fearing men, especially of Carloman, formerly prince of the Franks, and have dedicated it in honour of the Holy Saviour.¹

This is the first extant portrayal of Fulda, one of the most powerful monastic institutions of early medieval Europe. It was composed by the Anglo-Saxon monk Boniface, a church reformer and founder of several religious communities in what is today Germany. He described Fulda, his latest foundation, in a letter to the pope in the autumn of 751, in which he requested a papal privilege for the monastery. Boniface did not expect to have many more years to live. Looking back on a long and strenuous career, he was preparing his departure from this world. When he came to the Continent in the 710s, attracted by the ascetic ideal of *peregrinatio* and the desire to work as a missionary, he was already in his early forties. Having worked another thirty-five years in the service of the Church and under the authority of the Apostolic See, he asked the pope's permission to retire to Fulda. He also made provisions for his disciples and tried to safeguard what he had achieved.² For that reason, Boniface pleaded with the pope to provide Fulda with a papal exemption that would free

¹ 'Est ... locus silvaticus in heremo vasticissimę solitudinis in medio nationum predicationis nostrę, in quo monasterium construentes monachos constituimus sub regula sancti patris Benedicti viventes, viros strictę abstinentię, absque carne et vino, absque sicera et servis, proprio manuum suarum labore contentos. Hunc locum supradictum per viros religiosos et Deum timentes, maxime Carlmannum quondam principem Francorum, iusto labore adquisivi et in honore sancti Salvatoris dedicavi.' Boniface, *Epistolę*, No. 86, p. 193. Translation by Emerton, *Letters*, pp. 136–7.

² Boniface, *Epistolę*, Nos. 50, 51, 80, 93 and 107, pp. 83, 89, 180, 212–14 and 232–3.

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the monastery from the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop and protect it against the potential exploitation of the monastery's temporal holdings.

Boniface had been closely involved in the foundation of Fulda, as we will see below. He continued to play a prominent role in the lives of the monks, although as the founder and leader of several religious communities, and as bishop and papal legate with wide-ranging responsibilities that demanded his presence at several places spread over a large area, a certain distance between Boniface and the monastery was unavoidable. So he wrote in the letter to the pope, 'They are men of strict abstinence', not 'we'. Nevertheless, to Fulda he wanted to retire, although his duties to Rome and his own bishopric prevented the realisation of his wish. Additionally, he stayed in the monastery frequently and wished the abbey to be his final resting place.³ His portrayal of Fulda in the request for a papal exemption is thus based on first-hand experience. It raises several themes which, in the following one-and-a-half centuries and even beyond, continued to be relevant for the monks' self-understanding: the solitude (*eremo*) as an ideal environment for the ascetic life, the Rule of Benedict, Boniface and the relationship with the Carolingian family, represented by Carloman. Although by the time Boniface wrote his letter the Carolingians still held the office of mayor of the palace, they soon took the crown and became the new ruling dynasty. Their reign forms the background against which the monastery, a royal abbey, is studied here. Boniface's importance for the community increased substantially after his death and burial in Fulda, becoming the monastery's 'greatest relic'.⁴ Also in our times, priests yearly carry around what they believe to be Boniface's skull, with the marks of the axe that killed him in the north of Frisia, in reverent procession, exhibiting their most precious treasure to the faithful who have gathered to celebrate the saint's anniversary. The roots of this rich cult and Boniface's importance for Fulda lie in the early medieval period.

Boniface's letter is one of the many sources under scrutiny in this book, which concerns Fulda's growing self-awareness from its foundation in 744 to the end of the ninth century. In this period Fulda developed into a powerful royal abbey, closely connected to the Carolingian family. It is with the end of this dynasty and thus of the so-called Carolingian period that this book comes to a close. This period is, moreover, richly documented by a variety of texts and archaeological remains that reveal the ways in which this monastic community attempted to achieve significance

³ Boniface, *Epistolae*, No. 86, p. 193; Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, c. 8, p. 46; Eigil, *Vita Sturmii*, c. 13, pp. 144–5.

⁴ Wood, *Missionary Life*, p. 70.

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and cohesion as it went through substantial changes and conflicts. The resulting tensions produced an abundance of documentary and material information, which reflects on the ways in which the monks perceived themselves and gives meaning to these developments.

Fulda's history starts with the foundation of the monastery in 744 in the woods of Buchonia, almost 100 km north-east of Frankfurt and Mainz. The monks named their abbey after the river Fulda, which flows beside the place where they built their houses, workshops and church, enclosed by a wall and a stream, the Waidesbach, a branch of the Fulda, to its south. Originally a small religious community of prayer and manual labour at the eastern periphery of the Frankish Empire, Fulda's position changed in the following century. It became a major royal abbey and an important site within the Carolingian politico-religious orbit. Moreover, it developed into the cult-site of a real martyr, the celebrated Boniface who, within three years of the composition of the above-mentioned letter to the pope, died a violent death in the north of Frisia, an act which was perceived by his contemporaries as a martyr's death. His martyrdom and subsequent burial in Fulda brought the monastery good fortune. At its apogee, around 825, Fulda owned land from Frisia in the far north to the Bodensee in the south, and from Lotharingia in the west to the outer eastern border of the Frankish realm, and it harboured more than six hundred monks. Through its form, size and materials – Fulda's abbey church was made of stone – the monastery stood out in a landscape that was covered by forests and whose habitations were mainly huts and houses made of wood, mud and reed. It sat on a hill, though the woods might have initially hidden the abbey from view. In the course of time, trees were felled and the surrounding area was opened up for cultivation, strengthening the mark of the monastery's physical presence and structure upon the landscape.

Being a royal abbey had great implications for the monastic community, its pursuits and its position in society, and the association with the ruler and his family was an important element in the constitution of Fulda's collective identity. As we shall see, the Carolingian rulers repeatedly intervened in life in the monastery and involved the monastery in their policy of expansion and the consolidation of their rule in the Frankish Empire. Royal service deeply affected the internal life of Fulda. The monastery was being drawn into the world that its first members had ideally renounced, its integrity threatened by worldly pursuits. Prominent guests entered the cloister, the sons of the nobility received their education there without taking the monastic vows, pilgrims of both sexes visited the cult-sites of the saints in the abbey church, monks managed estates and abbots acted as secular lords.

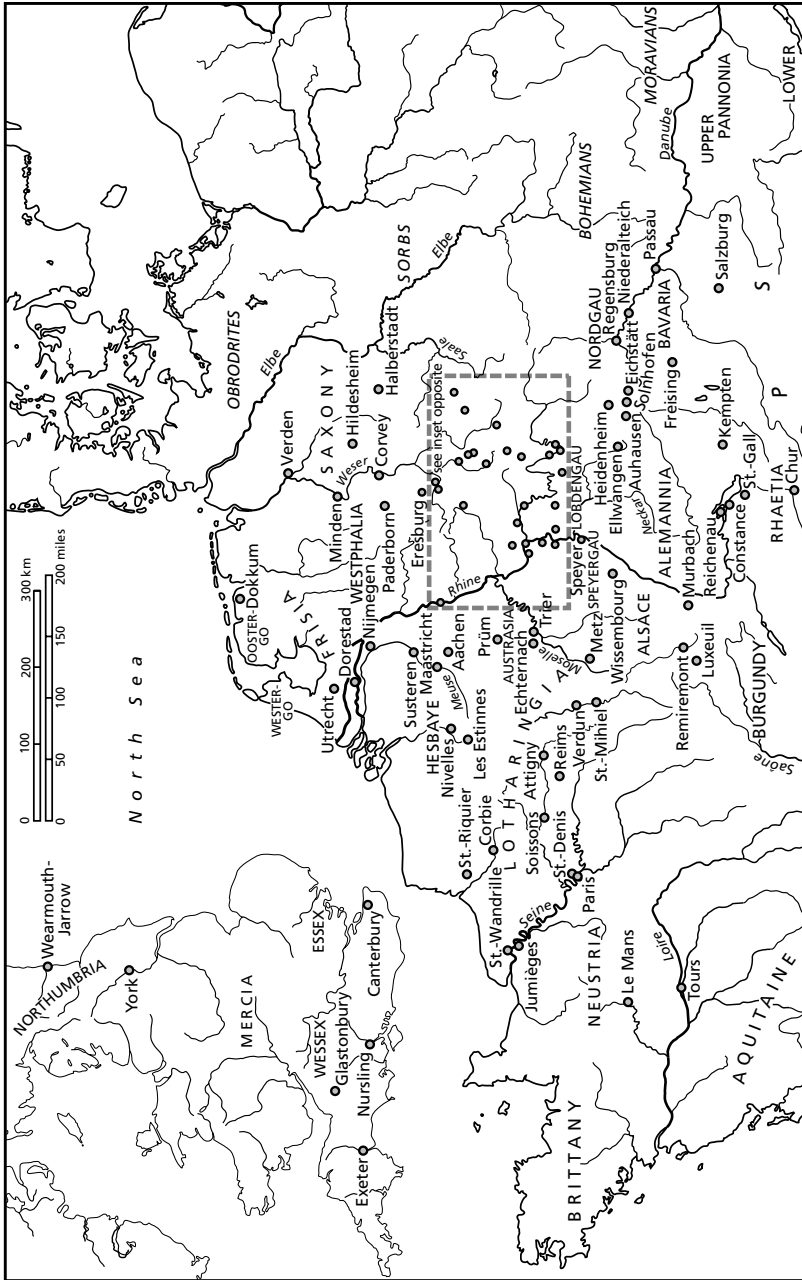
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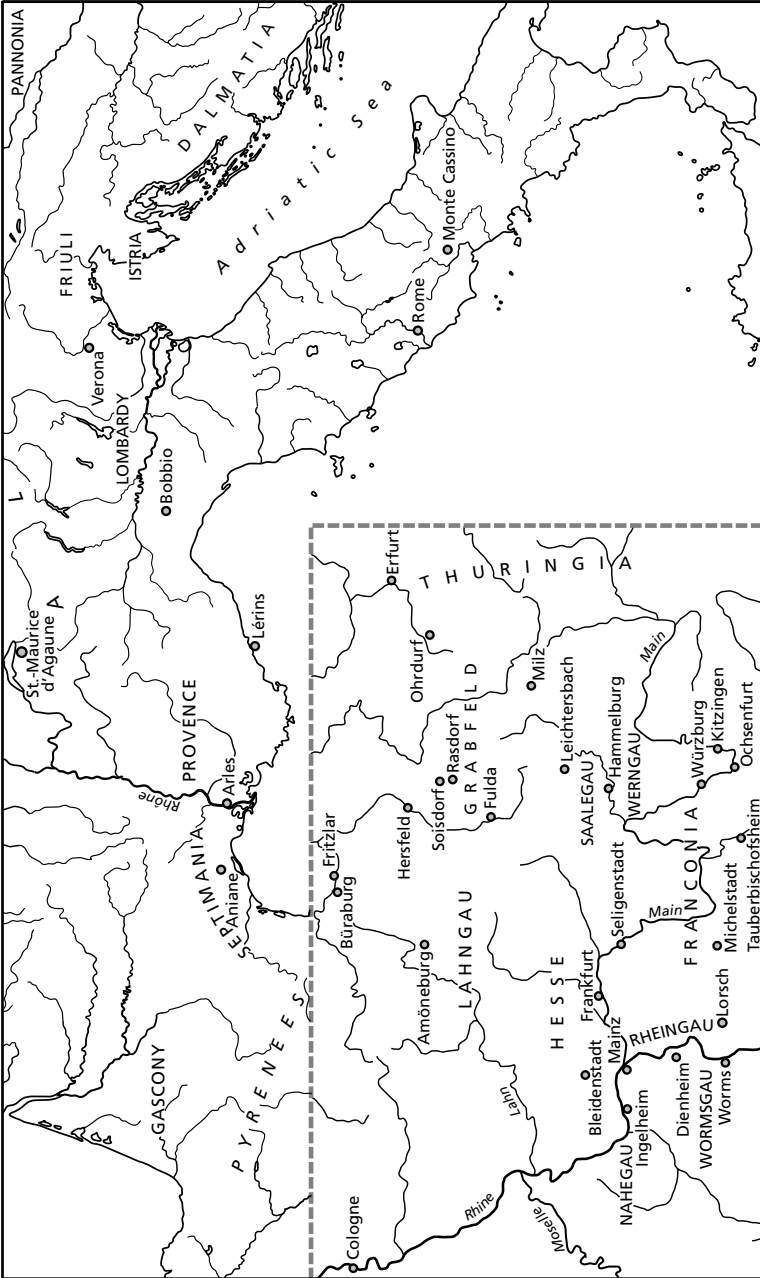


Figure 1 The Carolingian realm

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The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda

The blurring of the boundaries between the cloister and the outside world was the result not only of Fulda's participation in Charlemagne's reform programme, but also of the monastery's position as a social, economic and religious centre for the people living in the region and as a large landowner, possessing estates that lay scattered over a wide area.⁵ The monastery's material growth, the rising number of its monks and its growing commitments to the outside world presumably weighed heavily upon the minds of the brethren and their abbot. Because of the great geographical distance at which most monks in different communities lived from each other, face-to-face familiarity was no longer a matter of course. This book sets out to analyse how the monks of Fulda dealt with the heterogeneity of their community, the very rapid growth of its number of monks and property and its new responsibilities. How did the monks cope with the tensions between old ideals and new responsibilities and with the difficulties of balancing seclusion from the world and openness? What kind of repercussions did these changes have on how they perceived and represented themselves? In addition, how did they safeguard the continuity of their monastery?

As a monastic community, Fulda was a thriving enterprise that lasted for more than a thousand years. The main strategy of continuity consisted of innovation by means of invoking (and sometimes inventing) an authoritative common past. This past was never simply represented, but reshaped for present purposes. This can be clearly observed in the first century of the monastery's existence, when abbots and other influential figures successfully presented themselves as repeating old traditions, while in fact they were assimilating new aspects and transforming the past to the needs of their own time. In early medieval Fulda, tradition was a vital force used by the monks to their best advantage. Of course they did not share a modern attitude to change, but their relation with the past was one of dialogue, in which they had the last word. What mattered most was surviving inner and outer threats and safeguarding the existence of the community. This concern for permanence and coherence demanded much flexibility and the ability to adapt to new circumstances. Tradition was powerful and throwing off old traditions involved conflict and controversy. Yet this is precisely how we are able to study the dynamics of constructing a community, for this constant friction produced the most informative and self-conscious testimonies. Moreover, the tension between continuity and change, between following in the footsteps of the fathers on the one hand and innovation on the other, is

⁵ Fulda was not the only monastery struggling with these problems. See, for example, De Jong, 'Carolingian monasticism', pp. 622–53; Demyttenaere, *Claustalization*.

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not present merely in Fulda's sources. It is a more general phenomenon of early medieval culture, which makes this period such a fascinating field of study. How exactly the past was transformed, and why, I intend to investigate in this book.

THE MAKING OF A MONASTIC COMMUNITY

The main theme of the book, therefore, is the construction of group identity, which I understand to be a complex and continuous process of creating a meaningful community. Differently put, group identity is 'that which makes a group a reality for its members'.⁶ I have turned to modern discussions about identity, for they are useful in reaching an understanding of early medieval processes of identity-making, although people in the eighth and ninth century did not use the word identity themselves. Nevertheless, they had as much a sense of 'us' against 'them' as we do, and like us used the past to shape themselves in dialogue with what they perceived as 'the other'. They needed to give meaning to their lives and create coherence in order to survive the chaos of the world and come to grips with the passing of time.

Many of the modern historical discussions about identity deal with the rise of nations, nationalism, state-formation and ethnogenesis, although recently identity has also been studied in relation to gender, emotions and kinship.⁷ Contrary to the nineteenth and early twentieth century Romantic ideas about the existence of a *Volksgeist* or a unique soul, the majority of scholars of our day no longer understands identity to be a static, unified core which is by nature inherent to individuals and groups and which has objectively knowable characteristics or essences. Instead, students of identity consider it to be the product of never completed social processes and prefer to use the word identification to emphasise the active role of a group's members in the process of creating identity.⁸ One of the reasons for this greater concentration on the dynamics of identification has been the deconstruction of the concept of identity by French postmodernism, which shifted the focus from the subject to the

⁶ Pohl, 'Identität und Widerspruch', p. 24.

⁷ To give some examples: Frazer and Tyrrell (eds.), *Social Identity*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*; Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*; Hall, 'Ethnicity: identity and difference', pp. 339–99; Corradini *et al.* (eds.), *The Construction of Communities*; Pohl, 'Aux origines d'une Europe ethnique', 183–208; Pohl, 'History in fragments', 343–74; Geary, 'Ethnic identity', pp. 1–17; Geary, *Myth of Nations*; Rosenwein, 'Worrying about emotions in history', 821–45; Rosenwein, 'Identity and emotions'; Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*; Baron *et al.*, *Exploring Social Psychology*; Scheff, *Microsociology*.

⁸ Hall, 'Who needs identity?', pp. 2–4; Pohl, 'Tradition, Ethnogenese und literarische Gestaltung', pp. 9–26.

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discursive practice and challenged traditional notions of reality. In its most extreme form, postmodernism denies that reality exists outside texts and, additionally, that identity exists outside discourse.⁹ Most historians reject the denial of any reality beyond texts and depart from the idea that their sources offer at least indirect access to a reality. Nevertheless, the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, a reference to the impact of literary criticism inspired by postmodernism on the historical discipline, served as a forceful reminder of the ‘constructedness’ of their sources and the importance of studying them in their historical contexts.¹⁰

This book is particularly indebted to the work of Walter Pohl, who, in several important contributions to discussions about early medieval ethnic identities, has unfolded the complexities of the origin and development of social groups and the notion of identity.¹¹ In his introduction to the volume *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (2003), Pohl proposed to understand the creation of group identity as the construction of community, for this concept does justice to the fact that the existence and coherence of a group was not self-evident but the result of social efforts. These efforts to create meaningful communities were generated by both individuals and groups, more often through conflict than harmoniously, and in response to inner and outer tensions. In addition, these attempts comprised both knowledge and action. Constructing community was about transmitting ideas, thoughts and values and creating carriers of meaning to transfer these messages. The efforts to create meaningful communities were, moreover, not always successful.¹² I have found the concept of the construction of community most useful, for it acknowledges that identity is variable and needs constant input from its members in response to their social worlds. In addition, it lays the emphasis on the activities of people and the sources that are the products of these activities.

Fulda’s extant sources are the results of social efforts on the part of the monks to create meaning and unity. I value each of them – be they written texts, wall paintings or archaeological finds – for what they reveal about Fulda’s identity at a particular point in time. Sometimes, one is confronted with a seemingly clear-cut definition of community, such as the *Annals of the Dead* (*Annales necrologici*), which initially listed only monks of Fulda and which aimed to include *all* the monks, once they had died.

⁹ For a response to the deconstruction of the concept ‘identity’, see Hall, ‘Who needs identity?’, pp. 1–17. Also Pohl, ‘The construction of communities’, pp. 1–5.

¹⁰ Walter Pohl gives a concise summary of the developments, with further references, in ‘History in fragments’, 343–74.

¹¹ See the Bibliography for full references.

¹² Pohl, ‘The construction of communities’, pp. 1–15.

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Quite literally, this document provides a definition of the Fulda community. Nevertheless, occasionally ‘outsiders’ were included, and certainly by the second half of the ninth century, the names of abbots, bishops and later also of counts, dukes and their wives found their way into the lists. What does this tell us about the group awareness of the monks? Did they, from then on, accept these outsiders as members of their community? At other times, it is a hagiographical text, aimed at stimulating the remembrance of a saint or important person, that reflects discussions inside the community about the meaning of their existence and the role of traditions. In this source, the references to a communal identity are only a by-product. All these images of Fulda do not simply mirror the monastic community and the world of which it was a part at a certain point in time. They were also the media by which this community responded to this reality and transformed it. These sources, moreover, contributed to the community’s coherence and gave meaning to its existence. It is this process that this book sets out to analyse and reconstruct.

The focus of this book lies on sources created by the monks themselves, not definitions and designations of Fulda by outsiders. Of course, self-perception cannot be detached from the social world in which individuals and groups find their meaning. To be able to answer the question ‘who am I?’ requires a definition of what differentiates one from others. Moreover, how others perceive one, influences how one defines oneself. As Mary Garrison has argued, it was initially outsiders (various popes and Anglo-Saxon and Spanish scholars) who compared the Franks to the Israelites of the Old Testament before the belief of being God’s chosen people became part of Frankish identity.¹³ The complex interaction between early medieval self-definitions and representations by outsiders cannot always be reconstructed as clearly as in the case of the Franks becoming a New Israel. I shall discuss Fulda within its landscape of social, cultural, religious and political relationships. It is within this social world that the monastery defined itself and that the self-representations took on their meanings. Nevertheless, the main focus remains these self-representations.

The construction of community was a process in which all members were involved, but only a few were able to leave their mark on this process in such a way that we still know their names. Although there was no self-assured, solid *Traditionskern* that determined the outline of the community’s identity, those monks whose influence determined this process of identity-formation belonged to an elite, but one that in the

¹³ Garrison, ‘The Franks as the New Israel?’, pp. 114–61. For other examples, see Pohl, ‘Ethnicity, theory, and tradition’, pp. 221–39.

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course of time changed in composition and interests.¹⁴ Their superiority over those monks whose names we no longer know lay in the advantages of a good training, which they often received from an early age, and their extraordinary talents, as well as their family's name and influence, although social status did not always play a role.¹⁵ All this granted them access to high-ranking positions within the community, with potential radiation to the outside world, and the time and means to articulate their ideas in texts, art and architecture. I call their products self-representations of Fulda, but I am aware that these portrayals of Fulda could never cover the opinions and beliefs of all monks at a certain point in time. This, however, does not need to be problematic. On the contrary, such gaps and discrepancies give us insight into how groups worked in the early Middle Ages. Whenever possible, I have attempted to identify the subgroups and individuals whose contribution to the construction of Fulda had an impact on the monastery's self-understanding, or whose work was at least considered to be worthwhile enough to keep and remember, which is not necessarily the same thing. Sometimes initiatives to rewrite Fulda's past, for example for the benefit of making an abbot a saint, failed, but their products were nevertheless used by the community that considered them valuable for other reasons. Although the authors of Fulda's self-representations (not only the composers of texts but architects and artists as well) belonged to an elite and did not automatically represent the concerns of the whole community, they were nevertheless bound by the expectations of their audiences. Their creations had to appeal to their listeners and spectators. Therefore they relied on stories known and told by the community's members, the memories of the (senior) monks and literary conventions. It is often not easy to determine the impact of their products on the monastery's identity, but by following Fulda's history for a longer period, during roughly one hundred and fifty years, it is possible to a certain extent to draw out the ways in which these sources influenced the community's self-understanding and perception of the past and to see how the authors responded to each other, taking in or rejecting ideas and traditions expressed in the products of their brethren, and to developments outside the monastic confines.

Occasionally, one catches a glimpse of the different factions that no doubt divided each large religious community. Whereas monasteries presented themselves as places 'where the blessed poor from all parts

¹⁴ Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*; and Pohl's response, 'Ethnicity, theory and tradition', pp. 221–39.

¹⁵ McKitterick, *History and Memory*, pp. 6–7.