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# Gift-giving and books in the letters of St Boniface and Lul

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### A B S T R A C T

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The Anglo-Saxon missionary and archbishop St Boniface (d.754) and Lul, his protégé and successor in the see of Mainz (d.768), left behind a rich collection of letters that has become an invaluable source in our understanding of Boniface's mission. This article examines the letters in order to elucidate the customs of gift-giving that existed between those who were involved in the mission, whether directly or as external supporters. It begins with a brief overview of anthropological models of gift-giving, followed by a discussion of the portrayal of gift-giving in Anglo-Saxon literature. Two features of the letters of Boniface and Lul are then examined — the giving of gifts and the giving of books — and a crucial distinction between them revealed. Although particular customs of gift-giving between the missionaries and their supporters were well established, and indeed bore some resemblance to 'secular' gift-giving customs depicted in Anglo-Saxon poetry, books, while exchanged frequently, were consistently excluded from the ritualised structures of gift-giving. A dual explanation for this phenomenon is proposed: first, that books were of greater practical importance to the mission than other forms of gifts; second, that their status as sacred texts rendered them unsuitable for inclusion within rituals that depended upon the giver emphatically belittling the material worth of their own gift.

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We have therefore taken care to indicate to you that we have, through the religious priest Ishard, sent some trifling little gifts to your Blessedness, though they are not small in love — that is, a casket for priestly functions, fashioned out of bone for the sake of greeting as well as blessing — so that you may kindly accept those things which are ours. Likewise we hope to receive goods from you.<sup>1</sup>

When Archbishop Bregowin of Canterbury wrote the above passage to Bishop Lul of Mainz c.759–65, he was diverging from contemporary conventions of gift-giving rhetoric in two ways. First, he subtly reminded Lul that a bone casket carved in order to be given as a gift was no *munusculum parvum* at all — indeed, this is the only recorded case of a gift of this nature being exchanged by eighth-century missionaries, and we know from such objects as the eighth-century Franks Casket that bone artefacts could be highly elaborate in appearance. Second, rather less subtly, he expressed a hope that the gift be reciprocated.

It is difficult to understand why Bregowin chose to present his gift in this unusual way, which threatens to breach the conventional modesty of the gift-giver. The passage is useful, however, precisely because it highlights those conventions for what they are: performative utterances which found meaning in particular social relations between the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon church and its missionary ex-patriates in Germania. Such gifts were indeed often more than mere *munuscula parva*; gifts were indeed generally given in the expectation of a counter-gift; and in this sense Bregowin can be accused of saying only what others may have been already thinking. In such social relations, however, the form of the performance — what was said, and how it was said — was just as important as what was thought.

It is certain of these conventions which I shall explore in this article. The gift-giving conventions of Boniface (c.675–754), his successor Lul (c.710–86) and their many correspondents are a neglected topic, and the study which could do it justice would be too broad in scope to commit to paper here.<sup>2</sup> Therefore I shall concentrate on a single issue, namely the role — or lack thereof — which books played in the ritual of gift-giving.

The Anglo-Saxon mission to Germania, which can be dated roughly from Boniface's arrival in Hessa in 721 to the death of Lul in 768, could not have proceeded without books. Boniface appears to have had what Lapidge describes as a 'small, portable working library' during his missionary work, and the range of texts which Boniface owned and used has already attracted considerable attention.<sup>3</sup> We may thus expect that books were frequently exchanged as gifts between friends and colleagues involved in the mission. In this we would be right, but only half right. As we shall see, gift-giving and book-giving, though both common, were two worlds rarely brought together. They did not share the same ritual discourse, and depended upon distinct forms of social relations. This demands explanation (or at least exploration), for in a society where social bonds were in part formed and strengthened through the ritualistic exchange of precious gifts, it is curious that books, those most precious objects, should be deliberately and consistently excluded from this system.

Historians interested in gift-giving have tended to approach the topic using models derived from anthropological studies, and my first step will be a brief examination of pertinent aspects of gift-giving

<sup>1</sup> Idcirco tibi indicare curavimus nos misisse vestrae beatitudini parva quedam munuscula, non parva siquidem caritate, id est capam unam ad officium quidem sacerdotale ex ossibus fabricatam salutationis tantummodo ac benedictionis causa per Ishardum religiosum presbyterum, ut ea quae nostra sunt benigne suscipiatis. Similiter et nos a vobis bona recipere optamus. *Die Briefe des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. M. Tangl (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Ep. sel. 1, Munich, 1989) (hereafter Tangl), ep. 117, 253. Tangl's is the standard edition of the letters of Boniface and Lul, originally collected in Mainz in the late eighth century and surviving in three ninth-century manuscripts, and all citations in this article are taken from his edition. For the textual history of the 150 or so surviving letters during and after the ninth century, see Tangl, v–xxxix; H. Hahn, 'Die Briefe und Synoden des Bonifaz', *Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte*, 15 (1875), 97–115; A. Nürnberger, 'Die Bonifatiusliteratur der Magdeburger Centuriatoren', *Neues Archiv*, 7 (1882), 353–81; A. Orchard, 'Old sources, new resources: finding the right formula for Boniface', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 30 (2001), 15–38 (16–17).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Smith has given a coherent overview of gift-giving in early medieval western Europe, in which she emphasises the strong links between gifts, trade, politics and social bonds: J.M.H. Smith, *Europe after Rome. A new cultural history 500–1000* (Oxford, 2005), 183–214.

<sup>3</sup> M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon library* (Oxford, 2006), 39. For the most comprehensive discussion of the topic, see H. Schüling, 'Die Handbibliothek des Bonifatius: ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des ersten Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts', *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 4 (1963), 285–348.

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