

THE JOURNEY OF DEACON BODO FROM THE RHINE TO THE GUADALQUIVIR

**APOSTASY AND CONVERSION TO JUDAISM IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL EUROPE**

Frank Riess



The Journey of Deacon Bodo from the Rhine to the Guadalquivir

The story of Bodo begins in the ninth century around the time of the death of Charlemagne in 814. It centres on a young Aleman aristocrat and his conversion to Judaism in 838, followed by his flight to the Muslim world of al-Andalus. His apostasy constitutes an arresting footnote in the history of the Carolingian period, his change of faith viewed as a shocking episode attributed by some to an overly lax policy towards Judaism and its powerful merchants. Another factor could be ascribed to the study of Judaism and its links with Christianity, which was a feature of the time.

Bodo moved from a monastery on the Rhine, where he went as a small boy, to the imperial court, where he was now a gifted young scholar groomed for a top position. His unexpected abandonment of Christianity challenged his background and learning, and this was seen as a rebuke of the court network to which he belonged. Bodo left behind a growing conflict over succession between the emperor, Louis the Pious, and his sons that culminated in a civil war following the emperor's death. As a result, the Frankish empire was partitioned into three separate kingdoms in 843.

Meanwhile in Spain, two years after fleeing the Frankish world, Bodo debated the merits of Judaism and Christianity in Córdoba with Albarus Paulus, a beleaguered Christian in the Muslim world, not only airing criticisms of Christianity, but also some failings of the Carolingian imperial court. In 847 he is mentioned in the court annals as stirring up opposition in Islamic Spain against Christians, asserting that they should be forced to convert or be executed. This reported incident may be linked to a significant number of self-imposed deaths by Christians who, feeling increasingly persecuted, sought to provoke Islam by denouncing the Prophet and bringing about their own execution.

The experience of Bodo's apostasy was far from unique: other men and women who renounced Christianity for Judaism are also examined in conversion narratives recorded in the following two centuries. These episodes offer an illuminating study of religious changes taking place in Europe and the East where Christianity, Islam and Judaism competed in the ninth century and beyond. Bodo's experience can be viewed as part of a wider phenomenon depicting men and women who travelled as pilgrims, refugees or converts seeking to find a home and escape persecution because of their beliefs.

Frank Riess is an Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, London. His monograph *Narbonne and its Territory in Late Antiquity: From the Visigoths to the Arabs* was published in 2013.



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The Journey of Deacon Bodo from the Rhine to the Guadalquivir

Apostasy and Conversion to Judaism
in Early Medieval Europe

Frank Riess

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Abbreviations

AA	Auctores antiquissimi
AB	Annals of St-Bertin
Ant	Antiquities of the Jews
Autograph 2004	The Autograph Memoirs of Obadiah
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuato Medieavalis
CCL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSM	Corpus Scriptorum Mozarabicorum
Documentum	Documentum Martyriale
EME	Early Medieval Europe
Epp	Epistolae
LAM	Liber Apologeticus Martyrium
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LL	Legum
Med Soc	Mediterranean Society, S. Goitein
MEM	Memoriale Sanctorum
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
NCMH	New Cambridge Medieval History
Notker	The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great
PL	Patrologia Latina
PLAC	Potae latini aevi Carolini
RFA	Royal Frankish Annals
SRG	Scriptores rerum Germanicum
SRL	Scriptores rerum langobardicarum et italicarum
SRM	Scriptores rerum merovingicarum
SS	Scriptores
Thegan	The Deeds of Emperor Louis, <i>Gesta Hludowici Imperatoris</i>
TRHS	Transactions of the Royal Historical Society
T-S	Taylor-Shechter
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
VE	Vita Eulogii
VK	Vita Karoli, Einhard

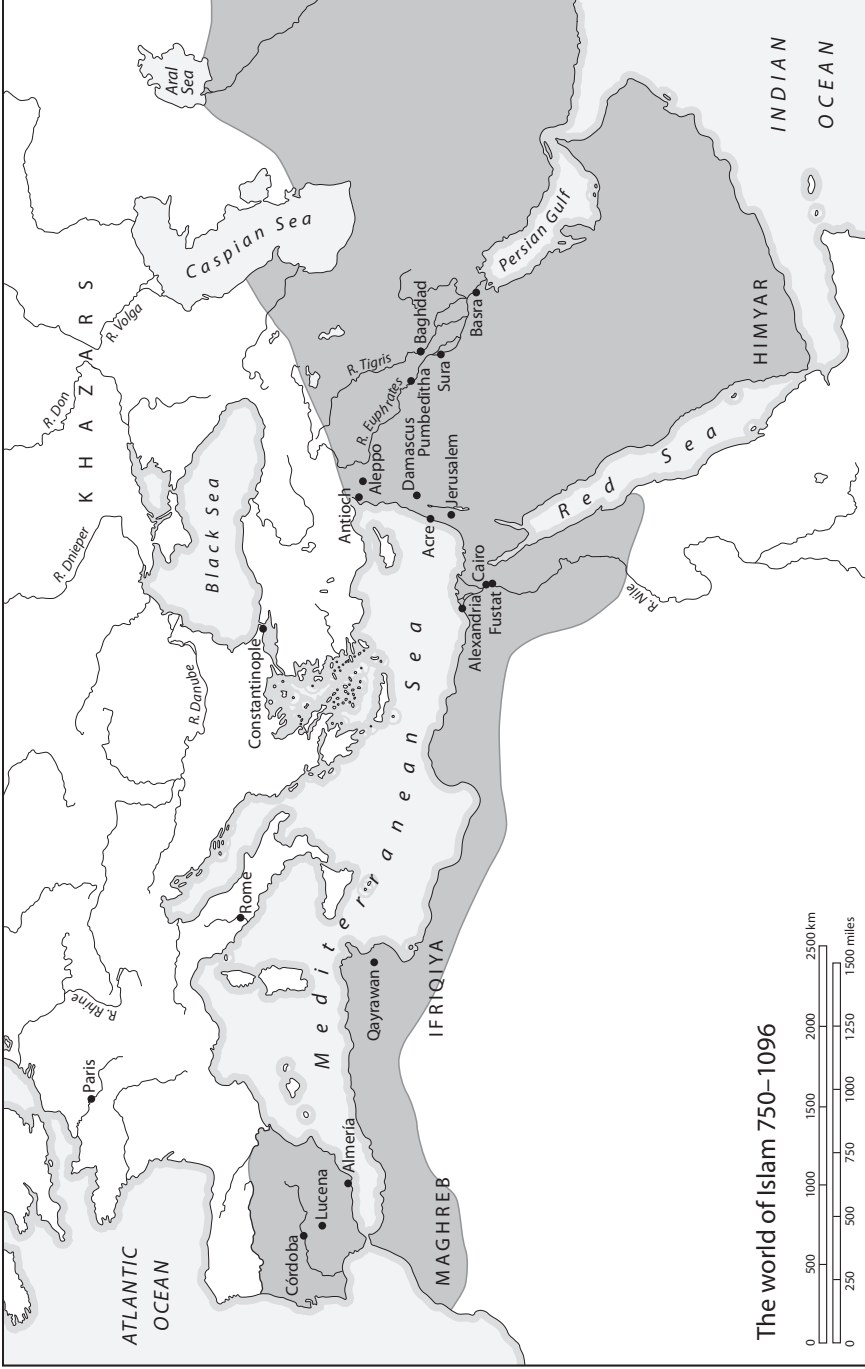
Chronology of events

- 400–600 Composition of Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud
- 740–800 Conversion of Khazars to Judaism
- 750 Abbasid dynasty takes power in the Arab world
- 756 Umayyad rule of Córdoba emirate begins
- 762 Abbasid capital moved to Baghdad from Damascus
- 808 Birth of Walahfrid Strabo
- 814 Birth of Bodo
- 814 Death of Charlemagne; Louis succeeds
- 823 Birth of Charles in Frankfurt
- 828–29 Strabo named tutor of Charles
- 829 Hilduin removed from post of archchaplain
- 830–34 Two revolts against Louis by his sons
- 838 Bodo apostatises and converts to Judaism
- 838 Strabo made Abbot of Reichenau
- 840 Bodo in Córdoba debates with Albarus
- 840 Death of Emperor Louis; Civil War follows
- 843 Treaty of Verdun; division of Frankish empire
- 846 Synod of Meaux; anti-Jewish laws put forward, rejected
- 847 Meeting at Rheims between Frankish and Arabic delegations
- 847 Viking fleet enters Guadalquivir attacking Seville
- 848 Eulogius travels to Francia
- 850–59 Martyrs of Córdoba
- 852 Death of Abd al-Rahmān II
- 853 Natronai Bar Hilai Gaon of Sura Academy writes to the elders of Lucena
- 857 Eleazar Bar Samuel of Lucena visits Sura Academy
- 859 Execution of Eulogius
- 862 Death of Albarus
- 875 Charles crowned Holy Roman Emperor
- 876 Hincmar writes to Charles mentioning Bodo
- 884 Relics of Eulogius taken to Oviedo
- 961 Calendar of Córdoba commemorates death of Albarus
- 969 Fatimid rule commences in Egypt

- 1006 Wecelin apostatises and goes to the East
- 1016 Fall of Khazar empire
- 1070–1100 Apostasy of the woman of Narbonne and her refuge in Egypt
- 1074–78 Andreas Archbishop of Bari apostatises and moves to Constantinople
- 1085 Toledo taken from Islam by Alfonso VI
- 1095 Call for First Crusade by Pope Urban; sets out in 1096
- 1102 Johannes of Oppido apostatises and travels to Antioch and Aleppo
- 1110 Johannes (now Obadiah) in Baghdad
- 1141 Judah Halevi travels to Alexandria and Fustat; dies in Palestine
- 1166 Maimonides moves to Fustat
- 1170 End of Fatimid rule in Egypt
- 1204 Death of Maimonides
- 1236 Córdoba taken by Christians
- 1572 Relics of Eulogius rediscovered
- 1574 First printing of works of Eulogius
- 1753 First printing of works of Albarus

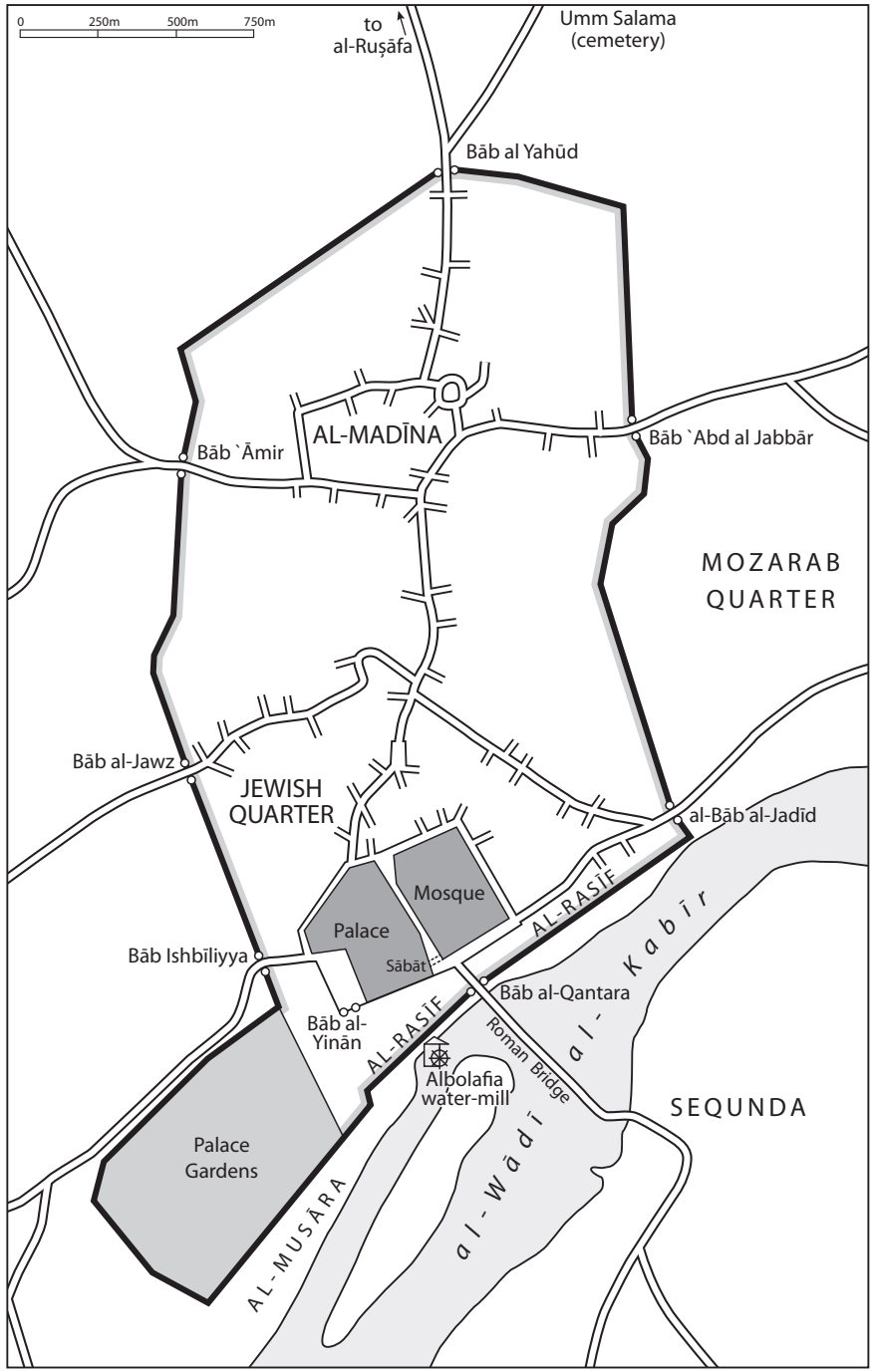


Map 1 Frankish empire and emirate of Córdoba AD 800–900



The world of Islam 750–1096

Map 2 The world of Islam 750–1096 on the eve of the First Crusade



Map 3 Córdoba in the Umayyad period

Overture

The story begins with a death and a birth. In the final months of 813 Charlemagne, the Frankish ruler, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day 800, went out hunting in the forests near his residence at Aachen. His *palatium* was a modest complex for an imperial ruler: completed *c.* 794 on a former Roman thermal spa on the edge of the Ardennes, it was furnished with an audience hall and residential buildings, with porticoes leading to a large courtyard and the entrance to an imposing round domed chapel. He spent the cold winter at this royal palace, and in the first days of the New Year a high fever confined him to his bed. He tried fasting to drive away the sickness, but he appeared to be worsening and suffering from pleurisy. He died on 28 January 814 at nine o'clock in the morning, having taken Holy Communion. He was seventy-two and had reigned for forty-seven years. These figures, from his biographer Einhard, who probably wrote this work in 817, have been revised by later modern research: Einhard had estimated his birth in 742, with the inception of his reign in 767. Scholars now fix his date of birth in April 748, with the start of his reign in 768.

The year of his death was probably also the same year Bodo, the protagonist of our story, was born in Alemannia into a world marked by the conquests of Charlemagne and its aftermath. Following his death, the emperor's body was washed and prepared for burial on the same day in the basilica of the chapel beneath the west entrance to the church. The speed of the internment and the choice of his palace at Aachen seem to be connected: the late emperor's family, principally his daughters, may have wished to control these events. There had been some grounds for believing that originally Charlemagne might have wanted to be buried in the royal chapel of St-Denis in Paris. After all, Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, and his father, Pippin, had been buried there, whereas members of the previous royal dynasty, known as the Merovingians, lay at different sites, with the exception of Dagobert who also chose St-Denis.

Charlemagne had largely resided at Aachen ever since it was built, thus partly reversing the traditional pattern of an itinerant court. Einhard, his biographer and our main source, is reticent but also revealing about the late emperor's intimacy and possessiveness towards his daughters, whom he never allowed to marry, though he gave them the freedom of the palace and partners. However, Einhard protests that there was nothing suspicious or shameful about the daughters, born of various wives and concubines.

The new emperor

The great men of the court, such as Alcuin and Theodulf, had needed to stay on the right side of these women but now, with the end of the emperor's reign, the balance started to tilt the other way. Some weeks later, upon his arrival at Aachen, Louis, the emperor's eldest son and anointed heir, had these sisters (both legitimate and natural) removed and in some cases consigned to nunneries. The expulsion was deemed necessary by Louis for the secure establishment of a new reign, which also came to be presented as a clean-up, a reformation of what was seen as the easy morality and sexual licence at his father's court. In the ensuing years the late emperor even appeared in an acrostic poem written in 824 based on a visionary dream of Wettin, a monk at the island monastery of Reichenau, on his deathbed. In the dream the late emperor, named *Carolus imperator* spelt out by the first letter of each line, is rooted to the spot whilst his genitals are torn out by a beast. This poem introduces the site of Reichenau, an island monastery on the Rhine, that plays a central part in our story's beginning; the brutal scene of the beast's attack was part of a larger poem titled *Visio Wettini*, written when he was barely eighteen by a brilliant young scholar named Walahfrid Strabo, who became an outstanding poet, a friend of Bodo and later Abbot of Reichenau. Strabo's depiction of a Dante-like journey down into the underworld, based on Wettin's dream, sees sinners being punished and admonished and serves to demonstrate that in the decade after Charlemagne's death the prevailing winds blew in a newer, sharper direction.

Strabo had been born *c.* 808 and came from the region of Alemannia, Bodo's birthplace, in what is today Swiss-German territory encompassing the Rhine and the Alps. He made his career in an altered political context under the new emperor Louis 'the Pious', as he came to be known. One of Strabo's aims was to find the protection of a new patron after the death of Wettin, his teacher at Reichenau. He turned to Grimald, dedicating the work to this powerful figure, who at that time was one of Louis's chaplains at the imperial court. Grimald would later become Abbot of St-Gall, a monastery close to Reichenau, also in Alemannia, above the Rhine. The move underlines how Strabo was looking to advance his prospects and that such criticism of private conduct was now very much the accepted topic of the day. Louis the Pious, now emperor, went on to preside over a court where selective criticism of his great father's last years was tolerated, deemed acceptable because of his taking of concubines and the permissive conduct of his daughters.

This moralising strand, already part of his father's religious policies, evolved into a continuing theological reform programme that had private and public aspects, yoking together the personal conduct of the emperor and his public governance of others. Charlemagne's earlier religious policies had already introduced an ecclesiastical and reforming edge to political practices through an endless series of capitularies – policy documents that grew into a key legislative programme – becoming increasingly sharper and more uncompromising. Now, with his successor, a chorus of voices was to be heard advocating his penance for personal sins, a convenient instrument wielded in bitter political battles between

the Church, nobility and the Crown. These theological beliefs declared that the king needed to control himself and his own behaviour before he could govern his people. How this developed alongside numerous theological debates at the time influenced Bodo's later views.

The size of the empire

At Charlemagne's death, the Carolingian empire extended for more than one million km² with population estimates varying widely: a figure recently advanced is between ten and twenty million. The geographical extent was 1,200 km from east to west and 1,500 km from north to south. Yet the distance from the borders of this empire to the main Frankish heartlands was greater than mere figures suggest because of the time taken to traverse mountains and roads in conditions that had not improved since the hey-day of the Roman empire. In actual fact Roman public road surfaces had suffered a decline through neglect after the ceasing of Roman rule, but were still heavily used in some places. At the height of Rome's power, the time taken to travel overland from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates, two extremes of Rome's dominions, was far longer than the two weeks such a journey would take today. Back in the fourth century it took three months. The gradual neglect of the roads now made communication and government even more difficult than it had been in Roman times. The distances were considerably larger than the mere measurements appearing on the map. Communications being so slow and difficult, this would be the same as running the European Union somewhere between five and ten times its actual size.*

With the Roman state and the public transport network, the *cursus publicus*, now virtually gone, the Frankish empire's challenge to maintain the system was even greater, and all descriptions of land travel, as we shall see, need to bear this in mind. It was Pippin II's illegitimate son Charles Martel who began the reunification of Gaul, and who gave his name (*Carolus*) to the dynasty, the Carolingians. They can be viewed as a powerful clan or family who ruled Europe for over two centuries. The term 'Carolingian' eventually came to be applied to this entire period, a descriptive term defining all aspects of this age, which has come to be especially associated with Charlemagne (*Carolus Magnus*) the son of Pippin III (The Short).

The centre of this vast empire was to be found in the regions bordering France, Germany and Belgium, extending from the valley of the Seine to the Rhine valley. By 814, provinces of southern Germany reaching over the Alps into northern Italy had been added to that core, and after much bloodshed the eastern territories of

* The Roman road system was not really overtaken, give or take a few improvements, until the dawn of the nineteenth century. In the UK the roads engineered by John Loudon McAdam (1756–1836) and the arrival of the railways a few decades later were accompanied by the achievements of Thomas Telford (1757–1834). Telford built bridges, roads, canals and other works on a scale not seen since Roman times. Paul Valéry remarked that Napoleon moved no faster than Julius Caesar.

4 *Overture*

Saxony had also been incorporated. Indeed, this expansion had been initiated by Charles Martel, with Pippin the Short, Charlemagne's father, concluding the subjection of Alemannia at the battle of Canstatt in 746, continuing into Italy in 754–56 and completing the reconquest of Aquitaine in 759–69. The cooperation of the local Alemannic families was central to access the Alpine passes as entry points to northern Italy to reach the cities of Pavia and Verona. Charlemagne's wife, Hildegard, was a member of one of these leading Alemannic families, together with her brother Gerold who became one of Charlemagne's most powerful political allies as Governor of Bavaria. The significance of this family lies in its importance to the Frankish Carolingians because it assisted them in securing passage to Italy through the Alps, a zone lying under their control. The major sites of power in this region at the time of Charlemagne's death were the bishopric of Constance and the monasteries of Reichenau and St-Gall, all linked or close to the River Rhine.

This is also, as noted above, the region where the family of Bodo must have originated, and these links place him and his kin somewhere at the heart of this Alemannic elite who were crucial partners with the Franks from Charles Martel onwards in the new political orientation of this area – even in the foundation of monasteries such as Reichenau in the early eighth century. These regional connections will come up more than once in the story of Bodo.¹

Anxiety and crisis

The decades following Charlemagne's death ushered in a spiritual crisis evolving into a civil war between 840–43. One of the central issues, as suggested earlier, was a perception of Louis's moral standing, engendering a bitter debate on this matter and providing a pretext for the sons of Louis and some influential members of Church elite to undermine his royal power. Some years later, when Bodo was at the imperial court, it also proved to be one of the driving forces of his criticisms of the Church and Christianity. The episode of Bodo and his apostasy, narrated in detail further on, delved especially deeply into the political and religious cracks that were exposed by the final years of Louis the Pious, and the mounting quarrels with his sons. Christianity was the main wellspring invoked for an appeal to the unity of the Carolingian empire bequeathed by Charlemagne to Louis the Pious. It was an objective declared by the emperor in all the territories he ruled. All populations – except the Jews, who benefited from special privileges – were required to embrace Christianity. The Church provided the ideology which legitimised and sanctioned the emperor's conquests, and most importantly the means to administer the realm. The last years of Charlemagne's reign had seemed to communicate a sense of anxiety: personal behaviour, correct religious practice, moral reform and political order appeared to be somehow connected.

The detailed scrutiny of religious texts was needed to arrive at an understanding of these matters. In 811, three years before his death, Charlemagne famously wondered at a council gathering 'if we are really Christian'. This anxiety was to become a driving force of these times with many paths to be followed. Such disquiet about the correct Christianity and its roots, and about attaining a properly

sanctioned way to express belief, passed to Charlemagne's son and successor creating widespread unease and a chorus of voices that questioned manners and morals at the Frankish court. The time of Bodo's presence at the imperial court is played out between these differing factions and uncertainty about the political succession. Anxiety in many forms lies at the centre of the story that follows, expressed not only in quarrels within a family, between father and sons, but also in the questioning of the nature of Christianity and its separation and inheritance from Judaism.

The bishops and abbots of the great monasteries were servants of God and emperor, but also evolved into the bureaucracy and infrastructure of the empire: they were the sinews of the state. Monasteries were also engaged in the politics of territorial management and control, and tended to be located at strategic points on major routes, like Reichenau on the Rhine – the port of entry to the Alpine passes – as it descended onto the northern Italian plain of Lombardy.

The context of Bodo's life and medieval biography

Such was also the moment that Bodo made his entry into the world: his subsequent career appears to be a singular journey and a critique of this time. But the placing of his life in the centre of a story is, to some extent, an artifice. Someone is born, lives and dies, but a biographical perspective organises history solely around this developing and foreseeable progression. The details of Bodo's life are sketchy and it could be argued that the 'individual' in the modern sense had not yet been uncovered in the early Middle Ages. In some respects, the 'Life and Times of Bodo' does not exist and the narrative that follows is often more about the times than about his actual life. Despite this, it is surprising what can be extracted and intuited from annals and other sources, especially letters that have survived giving details of personal and private lives, as we show in one example of a letter written by Lupus of Ferrières in the 830s. For all this, it is still not possible to attain the insight and depth of modern biography when we lack the enormous sources and psychological perspective of modern times, so our story is constructed around several broad strands of background, seeking to situate Bodo in a context. Even so, one has to be prepared to be side-tracked and follow paths that throw up 'hidden perspectives and retrospectives' which we attempt on occasions. By looking at a remark Bodo makes about psalms and another reference to his closeness to teachers of plainsong made years later, there is much that can be learnt when we depart from the straight and narrow and pursue a more digressive approach. Peering back at this musical past prefigured in those early years at Reichenau, hidden elements of a life start to emerge, pieced together from an archbishop's letter examined in Chapter 5. By looking back, the past becomes a story. We hope that the reader might thereby gain some closeness with the past – with, that is, the past that Bodo experienced as the present. Other such contemporaneous stories of apostasy and conversion to Judaism, beyond the time of Bodo, which serve as a later point of comparison, are also importantly described. For in the end, what happened to Bodo was part of a much wider experience of conversion to Judaism

6 *Overture*

and other beliefs embracing Europe and the Mediterranean, and these acts challenged long-standing social and religious boundaries. Bodo's story unfolded progressively on the edge of several worlds. We trace his childhood in a monastic setting and his removal to the imperial court, followed by his settlement in al-Andalus in Córdoba, perhaps beyond. This trajectory takes his life from the early ninth century up to the reception of his words in the letters of Albarus Paulus – or Álvaro of Córdoba – his Christian opponent in a debate in the 840s, and their first printing in the eighteenth century.

Even if these sources do not speak directly to us, they can, on occasions, be made to talk. Bodo is an especially interesting case as he appears to have challenged the religious assumptions of his age, and we are able to follow behind in his footsteps, even travelling with him through landscapes that seem distant and separate from other places but become connected. Religious dissent and conversion to another religion were more widespread than one might assume because of the explosive expansion of Islam at this time, producing a bewildering combination of new religious identities that ran across Christianity and Judaism all over the Mediterranean. The dialogue of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is the central story of an enormous and continuing topic, still waiting even today to be fully clarified. The story that follows was not a singular event. Bodo's life presents a minor figure walking through a vast panorama, both spiritual and geographical. Land and sea journeys, with the time taken and all their dangers and difficulties, were part of a culture of movement comprising large numbers of people in Late Antiquity and persisting into the early Middle Ages and beyond. The list of these travellers, apart from the rulers and the powerful, seems endless: political and religious refugees, officials, pilgrims, monks, soldiers, couriers, relic hunters as well as merchants. Nowhere turns out to be remote or unknown. These enormous journeys make travel one of the central acts in this story: movement not only from one place to another but also from one religion to a new one, crossing faiths and geographic lines.²

Notes

- 1 On Strabo: Duckett 1969, 121–60; Traill 1974; size and population of empire: McCormick 2007, 50, n. 24; travel times and distance: Heather 2005, 105–07; Costambeys, Innes, and Maclean 2011, for growth and expansion of empire and kingship, 1–79; Fouracre 2000, for the development from Merovingians to Carolingians; on the creation of a dynasty: McKitterick 2008, 57–136; de Jong 2009, for growing anxiety and troubled times of Louis the Pious; Nelson 1995, 110–36, for a survey of kings and kingdoms up to Charles the Bald.
- 2 Nelson 1992, 1–18, on biography and the discovery of the individual and Nelson 2006, 15–28; Nelson 2000a, 133–53 for Charlemagne's funeral; Holmes 2001, ix, 3–4, for biography, hidden perspectives and the past as a story; on the date of Einhard's biography: Ganz 2008, 3–13; Ganz 2005, 48–50 on power and greatness; on the emergence of Islam and links with Judaism and Christianity, Brown 2013, 269–94; on a summary of the special status of Jews in the Carolingian kingdoms: Riché 1978, 128–30; for travel and movement: Dietz 2005, 11–42.