‘Unclean Hands’: Purity, Penance and the Chaplain

Andrew Totten
Durham University

In 742, unit commanders in the Frankish army were granted priests to hear their soldiers’ confessions. These clerics prescribed penance according to ‘tariff books’ which had been introduced from Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. This repeatable practice supposedly maintained military morale by assuring soldiers of salvation. However, killing in battle had never been deemed a damnable sin. Soldiers, moreover, could atone without confessing to a priest. This article proposes that the primary aim was not to maintain morale but to purify the army and thereby secure divine providence in war.

The *Concilium Germanicum* was convened in 742, probably at Cologne.[1] Bishops and priests gathered to counsel Carloman (d. 754), the majordomo, or mayor of the palace, and de facto ruler of the eastern Merovingian kingdom of Austrasia. The outcome ‘represents the first ever extant legislation by a Carolingian.’[2] Its second canon ruled that clerics could serve with the army only if they were unarmed and had been chosen to carry relics such as the cloak of Martin of Tours (d. 397),[3] or to say mass, or to hear confession and set

Royal Army Chaplains’ Museum, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire, UK. E-mail: andrewjtotten@hotmail.com.
Research for this article was facilitated by the kind conferment of an honorary fellowship of the Michael Ramsey Centre for Anglican Studies at Durham University.
[1] Michael Glatthaar, ‘Boniface and the Reform Councils’, in Michel Aaij and Shannon Godlove, eds, *A Companion to Boniface* (Leiden, 2020), 219–46, at 225–7.
[2] Ibid. 225.
[3] According to a ninth-century Benedictine monk who was close to the Carolingian court, chaplains inherited their title from the *cappellani* who carried this cloak, or *cappa*, to war: see *Walahfrid Strabo’s* Libellus de Exordiis et Incrementis Quarundam in Observationibus Ecclesiasticus Rerum: *A Translation and Liturgical Commentary*, ed. and transl. Alice L. Harting-Corrêa (Leiden, 1996), 193. The earliest record of a chaplain dates to 741, when an ‘Audoenus Cappellanus’ witnessed a deed for a donation by Carloman’s father, Charles Martel (d. 741), to the monastery of Saint-Denis: see Wilhelm Lüders, *Capella. Die*

Studies in Church History 62 (2026), 26–48 © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.
doi:10.1017/stc.2026.10043

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

penance.[4] During the First World War, a German ecclesiastical historian, Albert Koeniger, identified this canon as the legal genesis of Carolingian military chaplaincy.[5] In what has become the standard account, David Bachrach dubbed it 'the legal origin of the chaplain's office in the Latin West', arguing that the priests were appointed to satisfy soldiers' hunger for confession and to allay their anxiety that killing in war meant damnation.[6] Bachrach's account, however, has been skewed by an outdated theory of the evolution of penance and a dubious assumption that Christian soldiers were morally distressed. The *Concilium Germanicum* was certainly a defining moment for chaplaincy, but this article contends that these priests were actually appointed to purify the army and thereby secure divine providence in war.

At the time of the council, the *praesbiteri* (priests) who were assigned to individual army units were not technically 'chaplains': that title belonged to the *cappellani praesbiteri* who cared for the relics and attended the bishops. Across the ranks, though, bishops, 'chaplain-priests' and unit priests probably all heard confession and set penance.[7] Koeniger drew attention to the use of books of penance in this context.[8] Originating in western Britain and Ireland, these 'penitentials' or 'tariff books' made it 'possible to work out exact scales of what penance was appropriate for what sin: tariffs of forgiveness.'[9] In

Hofkapelle der Karolinger bis zur Mitte des neunten Jahrhunderts. Capellae auf Königs und Privatgut, Archiv für Urkundenforschung 2 (Leipzig, 1909), 18.

[4] *Concilium in Austrasia Habitum Q.D. Germanicum*, c. 2, ed. Albertus Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2.1 (Hannover, 1906), 3, online at: <https://www.dmgh.de/mgh_conc_2_1/#page/3/mode/1up>, accessed 26 July 2024. See also Boniface, Letter 44 [56]; ET in: *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, transl. Ephraim Emerton (New York, 1970), 91–2.

[5] Albert Michael Koeniger, *Die Militärseelsorge der Karolingerzeit. Ihr Recht und ihre Praxis* (Munich, 1918), 15.

[6] David S. Bachrach, 'The Medieval Military Chaplain and His Duties', in Doris L. Bergen, ed., *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame, IN, 2004), 69–88, quotation at 76.

[7] Whether Carloman was requiring or permitting unit commanders to have priests is unclear from the Latin of the second canon: see David S. Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War c.300–c.1215* (Woodbridge, 2003), 45 n. 62. On balance, the intention was probably to permit the retention of one priest per unit while requiring that they focus on administering penance.

[8] Koeniger, *Militärseelsorge*, 46. See also Bernard S. Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare: Prelude to Empire* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), 152–4.

[9] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London, 2009), 333. *Indicare*, which appears in the second canon of the *Concilium Germanicum*, can denote the fixing of a price.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bachrach's account, this repeatable system, combined with doctrinal concessions on wartime killing, headed off a threat to Frankish military morale:

> Over time, the obvious and intolerable strain of forcing Christian soldiers to choose between damnation and military service gave way to compromises on the nature of penance and the sinfulness of homicide. The once-in-a-lifetime rite of sacramental penance was augmented through the development and spread of repeatable penitential exercises culminating in the tariff books. Within the context of this new penitential regime, church leaders also relaxed official teaching about the nature of homicide, bringing nuance to the formally absolute prohibition against taking human life.[10]

Bachrach was drawing here on the work of Catholic church historians such as Bernhard Poschmann, who viewed penance mainly in terms of sacramental rituals overseen by the clergy.[11] A year after Bachrach's work appeared, however, Richard Price argued that early medieval penance was 'at once richer and more flexible',[12] noting, for example, that John Cassian (d. *c.*435) – who transmitted the influence of the desert fathers to the West – considered practices such as almsgiving, forgiving the sins of others, 'acts of mercy and faith', and the shedding of tears to be penitential.[13] Lay Christians could atone in repeatable ways long before the tariff books appeared, while holy laymen and -women, as well as priests, could hear confession.[14] Poschmann – and thus Bachrach – overlooked many alternative forms of atonement.

Untenable too is Bachrach's view that killing in battle was treated as homicide until the sixth century.[15] At no stage were the two commonly equated. In the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman empire, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) acknowledged that 'homicide in war our fathers did not consider as homicide'.[16] In the Latin West, Augustine of

[10] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 30–1.
[11] Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (New York, 1964), 2.
[12] Richard Price, 'Informal Penance in Early Medieval Christendom', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds, *Retribution, Repentance and Reconciliation*, SCH 40 (Woodbridge, 2004), 29–38, at 29.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid. 31.
[15] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 29.
[16] Basil, Letter 188.13; ET in: *Saint Basil, Letters*, 3: *186–248*, transl. Roy J. Deferrari (London, 1930), 43.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hippo (d. 430) similarly observed that soldiers who killed the enemy were 'not usually called murderers'.[17] While homicide, adultery and idolatry had crystallized as a triad of 'mortal' or 'capital' sins in a treatise on purity by Tertullian (d. *c.*230),[18] even Tertullian did not equate battle with homicide. (Nor, in a loosely-organized church, was there a way for it to become 'official teaching' even if he had.[19]) On the contrary, Tertullian accepted that military violence by non-Christians was necessary to defend the empire, and he prayed for 'brave armies',[20] which seems inconceivable if he believed that they were committing mortal sin.

Bachrach's work has shed light on Carolingian chaplaincy,[21] but his reliance on traditional accounts of penance and his conflation of killing in battle with murder has resulted in the misapprehension that the first chaplains were appointed to maintain soldiers' morale.[22] Framing medieval religious experience in terms of morale raises interpretative issues of its own: 'morale', like 'religion', is culturally enmeshed, having expanded from early twentieth-century military thought into wider social, political and industrial life as a psychological property to be managed.[23] Interpretations of chaplaincy in terms of morale, moreover, have been coloured by pacifist sentiment, especially since the Vietnam War.[24] The conclusion reached by Mayke de Jong is that

[17] Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* 1.4.9; ET: *St Augustine, The Problem of Free Choice*, transl. Mark Pontifex (London, 1955), 42, online at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KYvYAAAAMAAJ>, accessed 25 October 2025.
[18] Poschmann, *Penance*, 45–7.
[19] Phillip Wynn, *Augustine on War and Military Service* (Minneapolis, MN, 2013), 38–9.
[20] See Daniel H. Weiss, 'Christians as Levites: Rethinking Early Christian Attitudes toward War and Bloodshed via Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine', *HThR* 112 (2019), 491–516, at 507–8, 511.
[21] Chaplaincy as such was instituted under the Merovingians, but evidence for its form prior to 742 is fragmentary. 'New, ecclesiastical measures designed to produce victory were devised in circumstances which escape us': Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1990), 346.
[22] David S. Bachrach, *Warfare in Tenth-Century Germany* (Woodbridge, 2012), 183–5.
[23] English translators applied the term 'morale' to the Clausewitzian distinction between the transient mood of an army and its enduring spirit regardless of adversity. A version of this theory reached British high command by the First World War, stimulating belief in the importance of moral factors in war. See Gary Sheffield, *Command and Morale: The British Army and the Western Front 1914–1918* (Barnsley, 2014), 154–5.
[24] See Anne C. Loveland, 'From Morale Builders to Moral Advocates: U.S Army Chaplains in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century', in Bergen, ed., *Sword of the Lord*, 233–49, at 239.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

acts presented as religious matters by medieval sources 'should be taken on precisely these terms': religious phenomena should not be treated as being 'actually' about something else.[25] As Michael McCormick has observed, 'as paradoxical as it appears to the modern military historian, the Carolingian warriors fasted for three days to purify themselves before battle.'[26] Carloman and subsequent Carolingian rulers, for their part, 'took to heart the lesson of the Old Testament kings, namely that the security of a king's rule and the stability of his kingdom depended on God's favour'.[27]

An Irish 'preference for the Old Testament' – of which the penitentials were one manifestation – helped shape this Frankish outlook.[28] Rome was a more fundamental reference point for the Carolingians than Jerusalem,[29] but Irish ascetical exiles (the *peregrini*) found a receptive audience among the Franks, who were already familiar with the Old Testament texts.[30] In light of the work of Holger Zellentin and Daniel Weiss, this article connects that Irish and Frankish inclination to an older Christian interest in Levitical-style purity regulations which was characteristic of the Greek East and which persisted in the Latin West despite Augustine's opposition.[31] Drawing on the work of Rob Meens,[32] the article then tracks the penitentials as they reinforced practices of purity along their routes of transmission. A sense of how and when the books reached the Frankish army has remained vague, but a connection is proposed here between a

[25] Mayke de Jong, 'Rethinking Early Medieval Christianity: A View from The Netherlands', *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998), 261–89, at 265. See also Robert A. H. Evans, *God and History in the Early Medieval West: The Theology of Carolingian Historians* (Oxford, 2025), 12.

[26] Michael McCormick, 'The Liturgy of War from Antiquity to the Crusades', in Bergen, ed., *Sword of the Lord*, 45–67, at 55.

[27] Mary Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel? Education for an Identity from Pippin to Charlemagne', in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), 114–61, at 138.

[28] Raymund Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testamentes auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters (6.-8. Jahrhundert)* (Bonn, 1964), 12–15, 108.

[29] Garrison, 'Franks as the New Israel?', 159.

[30] Mayke de Jong, 'The Sacred Palace, Public Penance, and the Carolingian Polity', in Philip L. Reynolds, ed., *Great Christian Jurists and Legal Collections in the First Millennium* (Cambridge, 2019), 155–81, at 173–4.

[31] Holger M. Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel: From the Bible to the Qur'an* (Oxford, 2022), 80.

[32] Rob Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe 600–1200* (Cambridge, 2014), offers a particularly useful overview.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

specific penitential and the *Concilium Germanicum.* Lastly, the military significance of such books is recast in terms of their role in purifying clerics and soldiers, as the Carolingian endeavour to make the Franks worthy of God's providence gained traction.

Theologies in Conflict

Two types of impurity have been identified in Leviticus: impermanent 'ritual impurity' caused by non-sinful actions such as contact with human corpses, which could be washed or burnt away ritually; and long-lasting if not permanent 'moral impurity' caused by sinful actions such as murder, which required punishment or sacrificial atonement.[33] Over time, the distinction between ritual and moral defilement became blurred and debatable.[34] Rules for Gentiles concentrated on moral impurity, 'yet often without leaving "ritual" purity discourse behind.'[35] The recognition of sources of ritual impurity by the Jerusalem Council in about the year 50 (Acts 15) contrasts sharply with the rejection of ritual purity observance by the Epistle to the Hebrews, but it nonetheless established 'a first marker of a Christian tradition of Gentile ritual purity.'[36]

In its prohibition of blood, Acts 15 'evokes the twofold prohibition against shedding and consuming blood' found in Genesis 9 and Leviticus 17.[37] Christian legal efforts to interpret Acts in relation to Genesis and Leviticus lasted at least to the late seventh century,[38] profoundly influencing ecclesiastical approaches to war and bloodshed. Thinkers such as Tertullian and Origen of Alexandria (d. *c.*254) seemingly treated the Levites' distinctive identity as a template for Christians in time of war.[39] Given their responsibilities at the tabernacle – which helped to ensure Israel's victory in battle – the Levites had had to distance themselves from corpse-impurity during military campaigns.[40] Origen and Tertullian similarly prohibited Christians from going to war. They

[33] See Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford, 2000), 41.
[34] Ibid. 42.
[35] Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*, 38.
[36] Daniel H. Weiss and Holger Zellentin, 'Purity and the West: Christianity, Secularism and the Impurity of Ritual', in Robbie Duschinsky, Simone Schnall and Daniel Weiss, eds, *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives* (London, 2016), 181–204, at 196–7.
[37] See Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*, 63.
[38] Ibid. 87.
[39] Weiss, 'Christians as Levites', 500.
[40] Ibid. 498.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nonetheless saw the empire as part of God's providential plan.[41] For Origen in the Greek East, as for Tertullian in the Latin West, Christians still had a key role to play in wartime: 'while others fight, Christians also should be fighting as priests and worshippers of God, keeping their right hands pure and by their prayers to God striving for those who fight in a righteous cause and for the emperor who reigns righteously.'[42] For Basil, Christians who did serve as soldiers might not be committing homicide, but he remained cautious: 'perhaps it is well to advise that men with unclean hands abstain from communion alone for three years.'[43]

From the fourth century, however, 'the prohibition of blood was continuously undermined by Western church fathers'.[44] Most moral cultures have retained rituals of purity,[45] but Jerome (d. *c.*420) and Augustine initiated a Western theological tendency to emphasize guilt rather than pollution:[46] 'the history of the Christian theology of warfare … can be understood as the history of a gradual decline of pollution ideas and a gradual rise of familiar ideas of moral responsibility … . The pollution-orientated ban on contact with blood became a guilt-orientated ban on intentional bad acts.'[47] Augustine saw the prohibition on the shedding of blood as a relic of the early church.[48] God commanded different things at different times, and as the authorities had now embraced Christianity (as providentially ordained), blood spilled by Christians generated neither ritual nor – in certain circumstances – moral impurity.[49] In Augustine's diocese, a Christian soldier shedding blood in the course of his just duties faced no episcopal penance, so long as he had acted without personal interest

[41] Ibid. 511–12.
[42] Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.73, transl. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 1953), 509.
[43] Basil, Letter 188.13 (*Letters*, transl. Deferrari, 43–5). That is, those who have killed in war are advised to refrain solely from receiving the eucharist. Unlike voluntary murderers, they are not subject to any other canonical penalties, such as standing outside the church doors to beg forgiveness from passers-by or being permitted to attend only the liturgy of the catechumens. The canon echoes the debate over the 'unwashed hands' of Jesus's disciples (Matt. 15; Mark 7).
[44] Weiss and Zellentin, 'Purity and the West', 196.
[45] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, 2013), 15.
[46] James Q. Whitman, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt: Theological Roots of the Criminal Trial* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 38.
[47] Ibid. 33.
[48] Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*, 84.
[49] See Weiss, 'Christians as Levites', 513–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or passion.[50] To a degree, Augustine addressed 'the challenges of Christian ritual theology by drawing on the resources of the Roman philosophy of good government.'[51]

With the breakdown of Roman government in the West, however, Christian thinkers on the old imperial frontiers began to look back to Jerusalem rather than to Rome. Whereas Eusebius had linked Rome providentially with Israel, the British ecclesiastic Gildas (d. *c.*570) twinned Israel with Britain, demonstrating from the Old Testament that 'obedience to God brought divine aid, food, and military victory and disobedience brought defeat.'[52] Peter Brown has charted the emergence of 'micro-Christendoms' in which a sense of the Roman past was replaced by that of 'the turbulent warrior kingdom of ancient Israel.'[53] Roman rule had never reached Ireland, but a similar outlook emerged there too.[54] The insular penitential texts that appeared as a new literary genre in the sixth century were pastorally preoccupied with penance as 'medicine for sin',[55] but, as Brown has observed: 'They also represent an attempt to mold society according to ideals found in the Old Testament. In the "holiness code" of the Book of Leviticus the wise men of the British Isles found an all-embracing code of behavior, based on the avoidance of various forms of "pollution".'[56] This promotion of ritualistic ways of tackling moral impurity lit a long fuse. It again reflected the compound nature of impurity, but it contradicted Augustine's theology of grace, becoming an issue 'which helped permanently to split the Western Church in the sixteenth century Reformation'.[57]

The early Irish church has left us no manuscripts of Leviticus,[58] while Finnian (d. 579),[59] the author of probably the oldest text

[50] See Augustine, Letter 220.3; ET in: *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 2/4: *Letters 211–270, 1*–29** (Epistulae), ed. Boniface Ramsey, transl. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY, 2005), 73.
[51] Whitman, *Reasonable Doubt*, 40.
[52] Stephen Joyce, 'Gildas and his Prophecy for Britain', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 9 (2013), 47–68, at 42–3.
[53] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D.200–1000* (Oxford, 2013), 141.
[54] Ibid. 359.
[55] Ibid. 242–3.
[56] Ibid. 244.
[57] MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, 333.
[58] Martin McNamara, *The Bible in the Early Irish Church (A.D. 550–850)* (Leiden, 2022), 2.
[59] Finnian is most clearly associated with Movilla Abbey, at the head of Strangford Lough in County Down. Probably British by background, Finnian was the principal teacher of Columba (d. 597). The Dál Fiatach dynasty made him the pre-eminent saint of the Ulaid or

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

containing detailed tariffs for specific sins,[60] declared simply that he wrote according to Scripture and 'the opinion of some very learned [*doctissimorum*] men'.[61] Nevertheless, the influence of Leviticus is evident in Ireland from at least the sixth century, in the making of Europe's greatest concentration of early medieval concentric curvilinear enclosures.[62] Irish clerics identified closely with the Levites and modelled the layout of their ecclesiastical sites on Jerusalem.[63] The early Irish legal system also drew on Levitical law.[64] Apart from Leviticus, a cluster of British penitential texts – including one associated with Gildas – possibly influenced Finnian, although those monastic texts paid no attention to the laity.[65] Basil's penitential advice would also appear to be a precursor, but that material – including the ruling about soldiers – is not reckoned to have reached the Latin West until the late seventh century. Basil's monastic rule, however, was known to Columba on Iona in the sixth century.[66] Finnian's penitential, moreover, has 'echoes of Cassian', indicating at least indirect contact with Eastern monasticism.[67]

The Eastern custom of personal disclosure and spiritual direction, bequeathed by Origen,[68] was also known in monasteries such as Finnian's, where the practice was extended to the laity. Everyone who was dependent on a church was required to have a 'soul friend'.[69] Frequent lay confession probably took root initially among 'para-monastic' tenants

Ulster people. See T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), 67, 291–3; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'The Real St Ninian', *The Innes Review* 52 (2001), 1–28, at 12–16.

[60] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 45.

[61] *Penitentialis Vinniani*, colophon; ET in: *The Irish Penitentials, with an Appendix by D. A. Binchy*, ed. and transl. Ludwig Bieler, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 5 (Dublin, 1975), 95. Finnian's remark rules out 'unlearned' (*indoctus*) Patrick (d. *c.*493) as a source, even though the latter's 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus' had sought to impose penance. See Patrick, *Epistola ad Milites Corotici* 1, 7, in *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, Clavis Patricii 2 (Dublin, 1993), 91, 94; ET: 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus', transl. Pádraig McCarthy (2011), online at: <https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola_english>, accessed 26 July 2024.

[62] Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland* (New Haven, CT, 2010), 59.

[63] Ibid. 38.

[64] Elizabeth Boyle, *History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland* (Abingdon, 2021), 25.

[65] Charles-Edwards, 'Penitential of Columbanus', 219.

[66] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 286–7.

[67] Ludwig Bieler, 'Introduction', in *Irish Penitentials*, ed. and transl. idem, 4.

[68] Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2001), 693.

[69] Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Pastoral Role of the Church in the Early Irish Laws', in John Blair and Richard Sharpe, eds, *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992), 63–77, at 74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of church land.[70] As kings and aristocrats began to patronize the religious foundations, conflict mediation by clerics possibly brought monastic-style penance to bear on them too.[71] Although laymen were not on a path to perfection, 'penitents seem to have shared to a large extent in the monastic life',[72] and in Ireland, 'the line between monks and those remaining in the world is more blurred than elsewhere.'[73] Tariffs typically entailed periods of fasting and praying. For Finnian, 'there is no crime which cannot be expiated through penance'.[74] This attitude, applied pragmatically to a violent society, resulted in harsh but relatively short penalties. Finnian envisaged even the worst of lay sinners being 'joined to the altar' after three years,[75] whereas Basil had assigned twenty years of penance to a wilful murderer.[76]

However, Finnian tackled violence among kindred and neighbours, not the violence of battle. 'If someone was a layman and free – still more if he was noble – he was expected to fight.'[77] Until the eighth century in Ireland, tariff books had nothing to say on the subject of warriors killing warriors.[78] An attribution of a forty-day penance for killing in 'public war' to a seventh-century Irish penitential by Cummean (d. 662), possibly the bishop of Clonfert, is mistaken:[79] it actually belongs to an eighth-century tariff book, the *Excarpsus Cummeani*.[80] Fashioned from Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Frankish penitential

[70] Colmán Etchingham, 'Conversion in Ireland', in Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, eds, *Converting the Isles*, 1: *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World*, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 19 (Turnhout, 2016), 181–207, at 200.
[71] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 217.
[72] Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick and David Dumville, eds, *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 21–46, at 41.
[73] Clare Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out', in Patrick Wormald with Donald Bullough and Roger Collins, eds, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 1983), 154–76, at 162.
[74] *Penitentialis Vinniani* 47 (*Irish Penitentials*, ed. and transl. Bieler, 93).
[75] *Penitentialis Vinniani* 35 (*Irish Penitentials*, ed. and transl. Bieler, 87).
[76] Basil, Letter 217.56 (*Letters*, transl. Deferrari, 247).
[77] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Irish Warfare Before 1100', in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, eds, *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), 26–51, at 26.
[78] Raymund Kottje, *Die Tötung im Kriege. Ein moralisches und rechtliches Problem im frühen Mittelalter*, Beiträge zur Friedensethik 11 (Barsbüttel, 1991), 2–3.
[79] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 29–30.
[80] Hermann Schmitz, ed., *Die Bussbücher und die Bussdisciplin der Kirche,* 2: *Die Bussbücher und das Kanonische Bussverfahren. Nach handschriftlichen Quellen dargestellt* (Düsseldorf, 1898), 623.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

material, this tariff book emerged in Austrasia around the time of the *Concilium Germanicum.* Its oldest source material, though, had reached continental Europe with the Irish monk Columbanus (d. 615), 'the first individual of whom we can say with some confidence that he took books out of Ireland.'[81]

Texts in Transmission

Tariff books were ephemeral. None have survived in Ireland itself. On the Continent, specimens of the first wave, which were probably unbound and penned in decreasingly legible insular script, no longer exist either.[82] The leading edge of that wave came ashore in Brittany with Columbanus in about 590.[83] His satchel seems to have contained Finnian's tariff book (directed at secular clergy and the laity), British penitential material by the likes of Gildas (directed at monks and secular clergy), and rudimentary notes that augmented British monastic rules with Finnian's clerical rules.[84]

[81] Richard Sharpe, 'Books from Ireland, Fifth to Ninth Centuries', *Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland* 21 (2010), 1–55, at 20.
[82] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 101.
[83] Columbanus probably disembarked from a trading ship near Nantes: see Jonathan M. Wooding, 'Trade as a Factor in the Transmission of Texts between Ireland and the Continent in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter, eds, *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmissions* (Dublin, 2002), 14–26, at 25. Traditionally, Columbanus and his followers are held to have embarked on their voyage from Bangor, but the distribution of 'E-ware' potsherds shows that merchants' main access point to the north-east of Ireland 'must have been the mouth of Strangford Lough': Charles Thomas, '"*Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis*" – A Sixth/Seventh Century Trade with Gaul, Reconsidered', *Medieval Archaeology* 34 (1990), 1–26, at 21. See also Ewan Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800* (York, 2007), 112–13. Moreover, a brief seventh-century account of the voyage evokes a starting point that did not open directly on to the sea: 'they embark in a boat and set out through the straits [*freta*] into the uncertain sea-lanes and the calm high seas' (Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, in *Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé, and Life of Vedast*, transl. Alexander O'Hara and Ian Wood [Liverpool, 2017], 104). The narrow strait between Strangford Lough and the Irish Sea was similarly termed a *fretum* in a seventh-century account of Patrick entering Ulster: see Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii* 1.11.10.3; ET in: *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. and transl. Ludwig Bieler, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 10 (Dublin, 2004), 78. The likelihood is that Columbanus and his monks walked from Bangor to the shore below Movilla Abbey (a two-hour journey) to board one of the Gaulish merchant ships that had been attracted to Strangford Lough by the relative wealth of the Dál Fiatach.
[84] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Penitential of Columbanus', in Michael Lapidge, ed., *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings* (Woodbridge, 1997), 217–39, at 235.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Around 590, parts of Brittany were in turmoil as the army of Guntram (d. 592), the Merovingian king of Burgundy, marched against the Bretons.[85] The campaign was dysfunctional, but for Gregory of Tours (d. 594), Guntram was a model Christian king. In terms reminiscent of Leviticus 26, Gregory attributed to him the following remarks after a failed campaign in 585, lamenting the providential implications of his soldiers' godlessness:

> How can we expect to win a victory nowadays … when we no longer keep to the conventions of our forefathers? They used to build churches, for they placed all their hope in God, doing honour to His martyrs and respecting His priesthood: the result was that, with God's help, they won victories and were frequently able to conquer hostile peoples with sword and shield. Not only do we not fear God, but we lay waste His holy places, we slaughter His ministers, and in our contempt we scatter far and wide the relics of His saints and so allow them to be destroyed. As long as such deeds are being done, we can never expect to be victorious: there is no strength in our hands, our swords lose their bite, our shields no longer defend and protect us as they used to do.[86]

Prefiguring the Carolingians, Guntram summoned royal councils in the 580s to initiate religious reforms, which were enshrined within a canon law collection, the *Collectio Vetus Gallica*, and promoted at diocesan level by the likes of the synod of Auxerre (585).[87] 'One of the main aims of this synod seems to have been to set apart the clergy from the laity, but it also tried to improve the moral life of the laity.'[88] Guntram could therefore be portrayed as being like a 'good bishop providing the remedies by which the wounds of a common sinner might be healed'.[89] Such a king would have viewed Columbanus as a godsend. Royal patronage saw monasteries established in quick succession and in close proximity at Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine, heralding a sense of Frankish royal accountability before God for the

[85] Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 10.9; ET: *The History of the Franks*, transl. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1974), 556.
[86] Ibid. 8.30 (transl. Thorpe, 460–1).
[87] Rob Meens, 'Reforming the Clergy: A Context for the Use of the Bobbio Penitential', in Yitzhak Hen and Rob Meens, eds, *The Bobbio Missal: Liturgy and Culture in Merovingian Gaul* (Cambridge, 2004), 154–67, at 161–3.
[88] Ibid. 163.
[89] Gregory, *History of the Franks* 9.21 (transl. Thorpe, 509–10).

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

salvation of the Christian people,[90] and converting the purity of monastic prayer into 'a crucial source of spiritual power to Merovingian rulers'.[91]

Columbanus was especially receptive to secular clergy and the laity.[92] His monks' purity attracted them in droves, seeking assurance that their sins were truly forgiven.[93] Later, as an exchangeable currency arose from the tariff books, monasteries 'could use their round of prayer to carry out these penances on behalf of the noblemen and warriors',[94] but Columbanus himself expected both lay and clerical penitents to model their lives on monks and to atone even for offences that were not socially disruptive.[95] Two monastic rules are associated with him. According to Albrecht Diem, 'No other monastic Rule is as explicit about performing intercessory prayer for the outside world, for kings, kingdom and *stabilitas* as Columbanus's *Regula monachorum*, and no monastic Rule is as concerned about purity and the proper execution of rituals as the *Regula coenobialis*.'[96]

The latter rule addressed how monks should live together and can be regarded as a monastic penitential.[97] Redacted by Columbanus's followers, it possibly drew on the *Paenitentiale Ambrosianum*, an insular tariff book which contains regulations regarding the ritual purity of priests,[98] and which could be as early as Finnian's work.[99] Directly or indirectly, half of the eight so-called 'simple Frankish penitentials' also made use of the *Ambrosianum*.[100] Enabling priests to reacquire ritual purity was apparently a popular innovation of

[90] De Jong, 'Sacred Palace', 164–6.
[91] Mayke de Jong, 'Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out? Political Coercion and Honour in the Frankish Kingdoms', in eadem and Frans Theuws, eds, with Carine van Rhijn, *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), 291–328, at 327.
[92] Charles-Edwards, 'Penitential of Columbanus', 237.
[93] Meens, 'Remedies for Sins', 405.
[94] MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, 356.
[95] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 56–7.
[96] Albrecht Diem, 'The Carolingians and the *Regula Benedicti*', in Rob Meens et al., eds, *Religious Franks: Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms. Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong* (Manchester, 2016), 243–61, at 261.
[97] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 54.
[98] Meens, 'Reforming the Clergy', 159.
[99] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 45.
[100] All eight are descended from a lost tariff book which blended Columbanus's penitential with conciliar legislation, including decrees from Auxerre, possibly representing a fusion of the reforms of Guntram and Columbanus: see Meens, 'Reforming the Clergy', 160–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Columbanian monasticism.[101] Cummean's penitential, which combined Finnian's penitential and the *Ambrosianum*, likewise used the latter's purity material, making it more widely known on the Continent.[102] The link between priestly purity and sacramental efficacy, which Augustine had severed in his clash with puritan Donatists, thereby gained a new lease of life.[103]

Cummean's penitential was also circulating in Anglo-Saxon England,[104] where it was known to Theodore, the archbishop of Canterbury (d. 690).[105] Theodore in turn introduced a penitential ruling that was unknown in Ireland, or indeed anywhere else in the Latin West at that time. Anyone who killed on his lord's orders, or in 'public war', should do penance for forty days.[106] Back in the fourth century, Martin of Tours had been unable to deny that soldiering had left him 'defiled'.[107] Reflecting this persistent mixture of concerns over moral and ritual purity, Pope Leo I (d. 461) had declared it contrary to the church's rules to return to military or state service after doing penance, which was echoed by a Merovingian council in 538.[108] By no later than the seventh century, however, the Augustinian reconciliation of military service with Christian life had prevailed in the West: 'the idea that state service was inherently contaminating seems to have disappeared.'[109] Anglo-Saxon kings (probably under Irish influence) did relinquish their thrones for monasteries or pilgrimages throughout the seventh century, but that seems to have been stimulated by a sense of life's transience compared to heaven, rather than a newfound revulsion at battle.[110]

[101] Ibid. 167–8.
[102] Ibid. 159.
[103] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 213–21; Mayke de Jong, 'Carolingian Monasticism: The Power of Prayer', in Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1995), 622–53, at 629 n. 27.
[104] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodori*', in Michael Lapidge, ed., *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge, 1995), 141–74, at 152–3.
[105] Ibid. 155, 170.
[106] Kottje, *Die Tötung im Kriege*, 3.
[107] Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983), 138–9.
[108] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 25–6.
[109] Wynn, *Augustine*, 307.
[110] Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out', 161, 166–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Arriving in England in 669, Theodore brought Basil's sense of the ritual impurity caused by battle to bear on the Anglo-Saxons (albeit without the metaphor of 'unclean hands').[111] Born in Tarsus, Theodore's roots were not Augustinian or even Western. Under his archiepiscopate, Greek attitudes to impurity became aligned with Irish attitudes brought to England by missionaries, and possibly with indigenous attitudes too.[112] Anticipation of resistance among Anglo-Saxon warriors would account for Theodore's shortening of Basil's tariff to forty days, but the tariff's survival in the manuscript tradition presumably reflects some degree of acceptance of it among those warriors. Across the North Sea in Frisia, another tariff book with Anglo-Saxon roots was also encouraging penitence by fighters. Tentatively attributed to Willibrord (d. 739), a Benedictine monk from Northumbria (who must have become acquainted with penitentials during a decade spent in Ireland), the *Paenitentiale Oxoniense II* reveals that warriors were seeking penance before military campaigns.[113] They were to be treated like the dying, but also had to be reminded to fulfil their penance if they returned safely.[114] Twenty-two weeks were prescribed for murder during a campaign, but if fighters killed in self-defence or in defence of their homes, penance (in the form of fasting) was left to their discretion.[115] Pastoral leniency characterizes this tariff book.[116]

It is unclear if the author of *Oxoniense II* knew any Theodorian penitential texts,[117] but around 700 a penitential based (albeit indirectly) on Theodore's teachings was written by a 'Disciple of the Northumbrians'. One of five manuscript traditions – none of them penned by Theodore himself – this *Discipulus Umbrensium* or 'U-version' transmitted the war ruling to Ireland, where it was quoted in the eighth-century 'Bigotian' and 'Old Irish' penitentials,[118] and to

[111] Basil's letters on penance perhaps first reached England with Theodore's library: see Charles-Edwards, 'Penitential of Theodore', 152 n. 37.
[112] Rob Meens, 'Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great in the Early Middle Ages', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, SCH 32 (Oxford, 1996), 31–43, at 37.
[113] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 103, 105.
[114] Ibid. 105.
[115] Rob Meens, 'Het Christendom van Willibrord en Bonifatius', *Trajecta* 15 (2006), 342–58, at 348.
[116] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 104.
[117] Ibid. 103.
[118] Charles-Edwards, 'Penitential of Theodore', 142.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parts of the Continent north of the Alps.[119] In the second quarter of the eighth century, at Corbie Abbey, a daughter house of Luxeuil,[120] the 'U-version', the *Collectio Hibernensis*,[121] and the *Regula Coenobialis* of Columbanus were used in a revision of the *Collectio Vetus Gallica.*[122] Created there in parallel was the aforementioned *Excarpsus Cummeani.*[123] Boniface (d. 754), another Benedictine monk from England, was probably involved in this penitential's composition.[124] A combination of the 'U-version', material from Cummean, and Columbanian material from a 'simple Frankish penitential', it dealt extensively with clerical purity,[125] but it also echoed Columbanus and Theodore in demanding that the laity comply with ecclesiastical regulations.[126] Crucially, it also included Theodore's forty-day tariff, perpetuating Basil's sense that soldiers were somehow polluted.

This approach to killing in war cannot be deemed the 'official' position of the Western church: penitentials were private works of nebulous authority, while the tariff in question stemmed from just one tradition with a limited geographical range in the West.[127] The composition of the *Excarpsus Cummeani* at Corbie nevertheless gave Theodore's penalty a foothold in Carloman's Austrasia. Priests serving with the Frankish army may have been using tariff books already,[128] but the new penitential (or extracts of it) feasibly became their main handbook in the wake of the *Concilium Germanicum.* Boniface convened the council (on Carloman's instructions),[129] and the abbot of Corbie probably attended it.[130] It seems that these 'Carolingian efforts to discipline

[119] Kottje, *Die Tötung im Kriege*, 3.
[120] David Ganz, *Corbie in the Carolingian Renaissance* (Sigmaringen, 1990), 12.
[121] This early eighth-century Irish collection of authoritative sayings, which came to be treated as a canon law collection, drew heavily on Old Testament prescriptions, particularly regarding purity: see Rob Meens, 'The Uses of the Old Testament in Early Medieval Canon Law: the *Collectio Vetus Gallica* and the *Collectio Hibernensis*', in Hen and Innes, eds, *Uses of the Past*, 67–77, at 75–6.
[122] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 108.
[123] Ibid. 109.
[124] Ibid. 218.
[125] Meens, 'Willibrord en Bonifatius', 353.
[126] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 109.
[127] Kottje, *Die Tötung im Kriege*, 5, 10.
[128] That the second canon of the *Concilium Germanicum* required unit priests to be 'capable' (*possint*) of assigning penances suggests both a requirement for literacy and also the novelty of tariff books in Frankish military circles.
[129] Glatthaar, 'Boniface and the Reform Councils', 220.
[130] Ibid. 221.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Frankish Christians, cleric and lay, initiated by Boniface', contributed to what Meens has judged the 'huge success' of the *Excarpsus Cummeani.*[131] 'The Church had to be purified',[132] and this particular penitential appears to have been integral to Boniface's efforts.[133]

Providence in Prospect

In addition to the *Excarpsus Cummeani*, the *Concilium Germanicum* enabled Boniface to promote the Rule of Benedict,[134] which eventually became ubiquitous in Columbanian monasteries.[135] Nothing in the original rule, however, aimed at 'ensuring the level of purity that enables monks and nuns to perform intercession'.[136] In Diem's assessment, elements such as ritual purity, intercessory prayer, royal patronage and sacred space suggest that 'the *Regula Benedicti* promoted by Carolingian reforms might be best described as a "*Regula Columbani*" in disguise.'[137] The harshness of Boniface's penitential discipline also owed more to Columbanus than Benedict. Clerical and monastic sinners could be jailed on a diet of bread and water, with priests 'flogged to bleeding'.[138] Penance was 'an important means to educate and to discipline the clergy and through them the populace at large.'[139] As with Columbanus, kings were not spared either: 'amend your life by penitence,' Boniface wrote to a Mercian king, 'purify yourself'.[140]

A few months before the *Concilium Germanicum*, Boniface informed the pope that 'certain bishops … are drunkards and shiftless men, given to hunting and to fighting in the army like soldiers and by their own hands shedding blood, whether of heathens or Christians.'[141] This kind of anxiety about clerical indiscipline, with elements of both moral and ritual impurity, had been amplified as late

[131] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 110–11.
[132] De Jong, 'Carolingian Monasticism', 629.
[133] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 111.
[134] Boniface, Letter 44 [56] (*Letters*, transl. Emerton, 93).
[135] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 384–8.
[136] Diem, 'Carolingians and the *Regula Benedicti*', 244.
[137] Ibid. 261.
[138] Boniface, Letter 44 [56] (*Letters*, transl. Emerton, 93).
[139] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 111.
[140] Boniface, Letter 57 [73] (*Letters*, transl. Emerton, 127).
[141] Boniface, Letter 40 [50] (*Letters*, transl. Emerton, 80).

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Roman aristocrats and Germanic nobles assumed ecclesiastical positions, accelerating the militarization of the Western episcopate.[142] Predating the first council of Clovis I in 511,[143] the anxiety eventually triggered Guntram's reforms. Columbanus similarly took a dim view of episcopal standards in Gaul.[144] Between 500 and 750, the church acquired over a third of the country, which 'was bound to attract attention of the wrong sort'.[145] By the time of the *Concilium Germanicum*, there was a growing sense that 'only those who lived … in a state of ritual purity, could be effective mediators between God and mankind.'[146] Under Boniface, immediate steps were taken to purify clerics serving with the army. 'We have absolutely forbidden the servants of God to carry arms or fight, to enter the army or march against an enemy,' declared Carloman, 'except only so many as are especially selected for divine service'.[147]

Parochial clergy were candidates for such service: statutes issued under Charlemagne in 800 reveal the deployment of parish priests on campaigns.[148] Twenty-five priests, by Bachrach's calculation, could have heard five thousand soldiers' confessions in ten hours, if confessions lasted for three minutes on average and priests worked without a break.[149] For the mid-eighth century, however, this seems an improbable workload. Beyond the orbit of ritually pure monastic communities and charismatic religious figures, lay confession in the Carolingian realms remained rare until the late eighth or early ninth century.[150] The role of clerics was increasingly emphasized from the seventh century, and Carolingian authorities eventually demanded confession to a priest or bishop, but as late as 813 a council acknowledged

[142] See Lawrence G. Duggan, *Armsbearing and the Clergy in the History and Canon Law of Western Christianity* (Woodbridge, 2013), 19.
[143] Gregory Halfond, *The Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils, AD 511–768* (Leiden, 2010), 208.
[144] Columbanus, Letter 1.6, in *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. G. S. M. Walker, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 2 (Dublin, 1997), 8–9.
[145] Ian Wood, 'Reform and the Merovingian Church', in Meens et al., eds, *Religious Franks*, 95–111, at 110.
[146] De Jong, 'Carolingian Monasticism', 629.
[147] Boniface, Letter 44 [56] (*Letters*, transl. Emerton, 91).
[148] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 47.
[149] Ibid. 46.
[150] Rob Meens, 'The Practice and Literature of Penance', in Reynolds, ed., *Great Christian Jurists*, 198–213, at 210–11. There is no hard evidence, but lay confession prior to receiving the eucharist at Easter, Pentecost and Christmas seems to have emerged as the pattern.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confession to God alone.[151] At the time of the *Concilium Germanicum*, confession to a priest was still a novel if not an alien practice for most laity. Soldiers' exposure to confession in the army is likely to have fostered the development of confession in the parishes, rather than the other way around as Bachrach has suggested.[152] Most Carolingian soldiers served on a part-time basis, 'and thus lived lives very similar to those of their family and neighbours'.[153]

Distinguishing top-down penitential policies from bottom-up demand for penance is not straightforward.[154] Carolingian soldiers conceivably acquired a taste for confession as Carolingian religious discipline took hold and battle rites shaped their self-understanding.[155] The *Concilium Germanicum*, however, was not seeking to satisfy a popular appetite for penance in the ranks. (Neither, apparently, was Boniface interested in the pastoral care of soldiers.[156]) Even by the end of the eighth century, troops still had to be urged 'to do what they knew they were supposed to do', with one preacher repeatedly stressing the importance of confession and pointing out to the soldiers that priests were standing by to cure their souls.[157] Twenty-first century British soldiers, without persuasion, become more religious in proximity to combat:[158] a medieval preacher applying such pressure is a sure sign that many soldiers were not resorting to what the clergy had to offer.

Bachrach has argued that what the clergy were offering served the 'ends' of morale, esprit de corps, and discipline: 'These ends were certainly helped by offering the promise of divine aid in battle, tying this aid to proper behaviour, and reminding the men through participation in common rites of their ties to each other and to the army as a whole.'[159] Carolingian morale, however, would hardly have been raised by the imposition of a penalty for killing the enemy, especially

[151] Price, 'Informal Penance', 35.
[152] David S. Bachrach, 'Confession in the *Regnum Francorum* (742–900): The Sources Revisited', *JEH* 54 (2003), 3–22, at 12, 22.
[153] Bachrach, 'Confession in the *Regnum Francorum*', 21.
[154] See Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 223.
[155] McCormick, 'Liturgy of War', 47.
[156] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 44.
[157] Ibid. 49–52.
[158] See Andrew Totten, 'Contextual Issues: War and Peace', in Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb and Andrew Todd, eds, *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places* (Farnham, 2015), 215–27, at 217–20.
[159] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 43. Actually, the late eighth-century preacher was reminding soldiers of their ties to Christ, not the army: see ibid. 50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if it entailed fasting. At a time when even bishops were keen on fighting, 'the attitude lying behind this provision directly affronted Frankish *amour propre*, stigmatising as sinful that which a militarized aristocracy regarded as its most honorable role'.[160] The eleventh-century reconfiguration of killing in war as a penitential act in itself, culminating in the launch of the First Crusade in 1095, proved much more palatable to the Franks.[161]

Bachrach's managerial interpretation misses the religious point. What the clergy were offering was a protean combination of moral and ritual purification for the sake of providence: securing divine aid in battle was the end in itself. As recognized by Bachrach himself at one point, the ends of the army's religious rites were 'to purify the fighting force, to propitiate God, and to beg for divine assistance in battle'.[162] Long after the medieval era, such an approach still made sense, both theologically and militarily. In eighteenth-century Britain, for instance, a deeply providentialist outlook and biblical warnings about Israel's victories and defeats made it 'simply inconceivable that the nation's military fortunes … should be hostage to the conduct of a godless and wrath-provoking rabble.'[163] Days of prayer, fasting and 'Humiliation before Almighty God' were proclaimed, 'For obtaining Pardon of Our Sins, and for averting those heavy Judgements which Our manifold Provocations have most justly deserved, and imploring His Blessing and Assistance on the Arms of His Majesty by Sea and Land'.[164]

Frankish soldiers as well as clerics had to be purified and made worthy of divine aid. 'If you are clean', an early ninth-century preacher told the troops (when again urging them to confess): 'as the Lord says, "*I will stay with you* and *my angel will precede you* and *he will be your*

[160] Wynn, *Augustine*, 309. Italics original.
[161] See Christopher Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford, 2004), 106–7, 114.
[162] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 38.
[163] See Michael Snape, '"Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?" Reconsidering Religion and the British Soldier', in Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null and Alec Ryrie, eds, *Contesting Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity: Essays in Honour of Diarmaid MacCulloch* (Woodbridge, 2021), 256–80, at 264.
[164] Anon., *A Form of Prayer To be used In all Churches and Chapels … For obtaining Pardon of Our Sins … and imploring His Blessing and Assistance on the Arms of His Majesty by Sea and Land …* (London, 1758), 3, online at: <https://share.google/uJKpsLL3MZ1pTbyqR>, accessed 26 July 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

protection."'[165] Driving this was the 'crucial notion that the sins of individuals tainted the whole Christian community (*ecclesia*), be it a monastery or a Christian realm'.[166] Monasteries with their traditions of penance offered Carolingian rulers a 'model for Empire'.[167] Particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the Frankish empire, where the Carolingian family had its centre of gravity, the second half of the eighth century witnessed a proliferation of penitential texts and manuscripts that 'must be related to Carolingian efforts to forge a truly Christian empire … . To retain divine favour it was important that the Franks lived a genuinely Christian life, and sins were seen as endangering that favourable relationship with the Deity.'[168]

Carloman's own religious convictions were arguably as significant as those of Boniface in priming penance for this central role in Carolingian affairs. Even if his entry into monastic life in 747 – associated with his role in a massacre – was not as voluntary as the sources maintain,[169] Carloman's piety should not be underestimated.[170] His promulgation of the decisions of the *Concilium Germanicum* in a royal capitulary was innovative.[171] Its opening remarks, moreover, presaged Charlemagne's overt invocation (in the *Admonitio Generalis* of 789) of King Josiah purging Judah after the discovery of the 'Book of the Law'.[172] In an age of belief that mixed piety with strategy, Carloman's pronouncements, as de Jong has noted, 'reflect the ambitions of a new ruler who saw himself as a guardian of the correct cult and the salvation of the Christian people'.[173] The second canon of his legislation of 742, to which chaplaincy owes its legal origin, stemmed ultimately from the Old

[165] McCormick, 'Liturgy of War', 60. Italics original.
[166] Mayke de Jong, 'Transformations of Penance', in Janet L. Nelson and Frans Theuws, eds, *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2000), 185–224, at 220.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 218.
[169] Erik Goosmann, 'Politics and Penance: Transformations in the Carolingian Perception of the Conversion of Carloman (747)', in Clemens Gantner, Rosamond McKitterick and Sven Meeder, eds, *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2015), 51–67, at 57–9.
[170] See Halfond, *Frankish Church Councils*, 215.
[171] Ibid. 151.
[172] See de Jong, 'Sacred Palace', 166.
[173] Mayke de Jong, 'Ecclesia and the Early Medieval Polity', in Stuart Airlie, Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz, eds, *Staat im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2006), 113–32, at 127.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Testament's warning that victory depended on divine favour, and that in turn required purity.

Conclusion

In the Carolingian army, according to the standard account, tariff books made it 'no longer necessary for soldiers either to wait until their final days to confess their sins or, if they chose to confess earlier, to enter a secluded or monastic life.'[174] As we have seen, this has been distorted by traditional histories of penance and the idea that 'forgiveness for sins committed after baptism is obtained first and foremost through confession to a priest and absolution by a priest'.[175] Repeatable penitential alternatives had long been available, as well as monastic possibilities that involved neither permanent confinement nor even personal participation. In addition, there were no doctrinal grounds for Frankish soldiers to fear damnation for killing in battle: it was generally not the case that 'bishops refused to distinguish between types of killing, and grouped together all forms of taking a human life, including killing in the course of war, under the rubric *homicidio*', as Bachrach claims.[176]

Devout soldiers doubtless did feel the burden of other sins as battle loomed. However, they would have sought atonement through tried-and-tested techniques rather than the relative novelty of confessing to a priest. According to one of Bachrach's own hermeneutic principles, 'it would seem highly unlikely that soldiers who faced the possibility of being called on to kill or to die in battle would turn to new or fundamentally unfamiliar rites'.[177] Penitents had flocked to Columbanus's monasteries, but they represented only a minority of the lay world. Half a century after the *Concilium Germanicum*, Carolingian soldiers still had to be strongly encouraged, if not driven, to confess. For Carloman and his successors, penitential practice was not an instrument of military morale: it was a matter of salvation or damnation. 'God's grace had to be preserved by leading a life pleasing to God and by atoning for every serious misdeed. This was no longer true only for religious men and women, but also for lay people, kings as well as

[174] Bachrach, 'Medieval Military Chaplain', 75.
[175] Price, 'Informal Penance', 29.
[176] Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War*, 24.
[177] Ibid. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

persons of lesser status.'[178] Carolingian penance, in short, was not a managerial tool in the hands of secular authorities.

Published under wartime conditions in Munich in 1918, Koeniger's ground-breaking study of military chaplaincy in the Carolingian era concluded with a veiled tribute to those engaged in a more contemporary conflict. In acknowledging the role of pastoral care and purity of heart in the Great War, Koeniger reflected both aspects of the medieval penitential literature itself.[179] In the appointment of confessors by the *Concilium Germanicum*, however, purity was the dominant consideration. Tariff books would regulate the cleansing that underpinned divine providence. The books have been dismissed as serving merely to 'codify' existing practice,[180] but codification enables transmission beyond personal reach, as well as uniformity, repetition, standardization, scalability, exchangeability, revision, and reduced supervision.[181] All these factors would have facilitated the purification of the Frankish army, in a prelude to the formation of what has been termed a 'penitential state'.[182] 'The religious and imperial ideologies of the Carolingians, which so influenced the early medieval West, owe much to the processes set in motion by the work of the Columbanians.'[183] Columbanus declared himself 'no brave soldier',[184] but the penitential process he brought to continental Europe would leave a lasting impression on medieval soldiering.

[178] Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 138.
[179] Koeniger, *Militärseelsorge*, 61–2.
[180] Price, 'Informal Penance', 31.
[181] I owe this list to Jack O'Halloran, a data engineer.
[182] Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge, 2009).
[183] Yaniv Fox, *Power and Religion in Merovingian Gaul: Columbanian Monasticism and the Frankish Elites* (Cambridge, 2014), 305.
[184] Columbanus, Letter 5.7 (*Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. Walker, 43).

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2026.10043 Published online by Cambridge University Press