

Saint Willibrord

Feastday: November 7

Patron: of convulsions; epilepsy; epileptics; Luxembourg; Netherlands; archdiocese of Utrecht, Netherlands

Birth: 658

Death: 739

Apostle of Frisia, Netherlands, a missionary archbishop. Born in Northumbria, England, circa 658, he studied at Ripon monastery under [St. Wilfrid](#) and spent twelve years studying in [Ireland](#) at the [abbey](#) of Rathmelsigi (most likely Mellifont, County Louth) under Sts. [Egbert](#) and Wigbert. After receiving ordination and extensive training in the field of the missions, he set out about 690 with a dozen companions for Frisia, or Friesland. In 693, he went to [Rome](#) to seek papal approval for his labours, Pope Sergius I (r. 687-701) gave his full [approbation](#) and, during Willibrord's second Roman visit, the pontiff consecrated him [archbishop](#) to the Frisians, in 696, with his see at Utrecht. In his work, Willibrord also received much support and encouragement from the Frankish leader; Pepin of Herstal (r. 687-714). Willibrord founded the monastery of Echternach, Luxembourg, to serve as a centre of missionary endeavours, and extended the efforts of missionaries into [Denmark](#) and Upper Friesland. He faced chronic dangers from outraged pagans, including one who nearly murdered him after he tore down a [pagan](#) idol. In 714, Duke Radbod reclaimed the extensive territories acquired by Pepin, and Willibrord watched all of the progress he had made be virtually undone. After Radbod's death, Willibrord started over with great enthusiasm, receiving invaluable assistance, from St. Boniface. Willibrord died on retreat at Echternach on November 7. For his efforts, he is called the [Apostle](#) of the Frisians.

Early life

His father, named Wilgils or Hilgis,^[2] was styled by Alcuin as a Saxon of Northumbria. Newly converted to Christianity, Wilgils entrusted his son as an oblate to the Abbey of Ripon,^[2] and withdrew from the world, constructing a small oratory, near the mouth of the Humber, dedicated to Saint Andrew. The king and nobles of the district endowed him with estates until he was at last able to build a church, over which Alcuin afterwards ruled.

Willibrord grew up under the influence of Wilfrid, Bishop of York. Later he joined the Benedictines. He spent the years between the ages of 20 and 32 in the Abbey of Rath Melsigi,^[3] in County Carlow, Ireland, which was a centre of European learning in the 7th century.

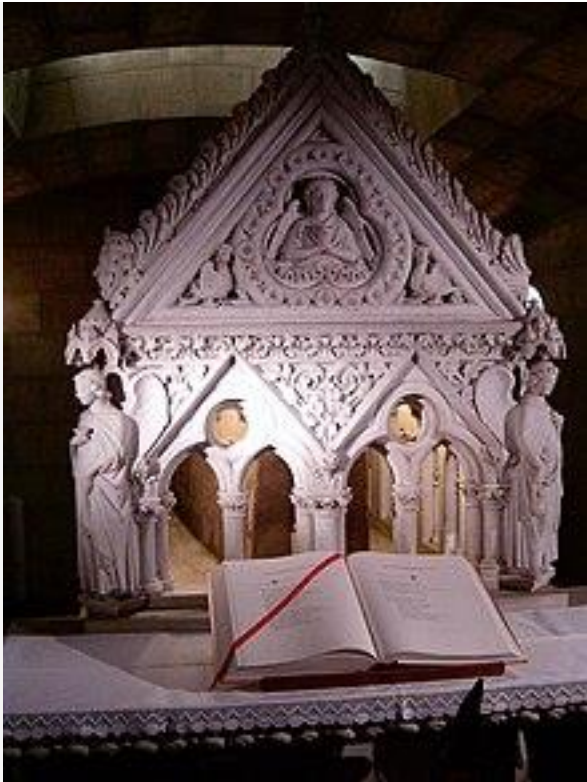
Frisia

During this time he studied under Ecgberht of Ripon, who sent him and eleven companions to Christianise the pagan Frisians of the North Sea coast at the request of Pepin of Herstal, Austrasian mayor of the palace, who had nominal suzerainty over that region. Willibrord travelled to Rome twice. Both of these trips to Rome have historical significance. As Bede tells us, Willibrord was not the only Anglo-Saxon to travel to Rome. The way in which he described the visit and its purpose is important; unlike all the others, Willibrord was not on the usual pilgrimage to the graves of the apostles Peter and Paul and the martyrs. Rather "he made haste to Rome, where Pope Sergius then presided over the apostolical see, that he might undertake the desired work of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, with his licence and blessing".^[4] As such he came to the pope not as a pilgrim but specifically as a missionary. The second time he went to Rome, on 21 November 695, in the Church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Pope Sergius I gave him a pallium and consecrated him as bishop of the Frisians.^[2] He returned to Frisia to preach and establish churches, among them a monastery at Utrecht, where he built his cathedral. Willibrord is counted the first bishop of Utrecht.

In 698 he established the Abbey of Echternach on the site of a Roman villa in Echternach, which was donated to him by Pepin's mother-in-law, Irmina of Oeren, the wife of seneschal and Count Palatine Hugobert. After Hugobert died, Irmina founded a Benedictine convent at Horren in Trier. When a plague threatened her community, she gained the help of Willibrord; and when the pestilence passed by the convent, she gave Willibrord the lands for his abbey in Echternach.^[5]

Pepin of Herstal died in 714. In 716 the pagan Radbod, king of the Frisians, retook possession of Frisia, burning churches and killing many missionaries.^[6] Willibrord and his monks were forced to flee. After the death of Radbod in 719, Willibrord returned to resume his work, under the protection of Charles Martel. Winfrid, better known as Boniface, joined Willibrord and stayed for three years, before travelling on to preach in Frankish territory.

Veneration



Tomb of Willibrord in the Abbey of Echternach

Willibrord died on 7 November 739 at the age of 81, and according to his wish, was buried in Echternach. He was quickly judged to be a saint. Willibrord wells, which skirted his missionary routes, were visited by the people, to solicit the healing of various nervous diseases, especially of children.^[5]

In the Catholic Church his feast day is celebrated on 7 November outside England, but on 29 November in England, by order of Pope Leo XIII. Willibrord is honored in the Church of England and in the Episcopal Church on 7 November.^{[7][8]}

Numerous miracles and relics have been attributed to him. On one occasion, the transport of his relics was celebrated thus "the five bishops in full pontificals assisted; engaged in the dance were 2 Swiss guards, 16 standard-bearers, 3,045 singers, 136 priests, 426 musicians, 15,085 dancers, and 2,032 players".^[9] A dancing procession continues to be held in Echternach every year on Whit Tuesday, and attracts thousands of participants and an equal number of spectators, to honour the memory of a saint who is often called the apostle of the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg).^[5]



St Willibrord's Church at Gravelines

At Gravelines in northern France, where Willibrord is said to have landed after crossing the Channel on his mission to the Frisians, the church in the old town is dedicated to him. Gravelines grew up after ca. 800 around the chapel commemorating Willibrord's mission.^{[10][11]}

There is a 13th-century chapel dedicated to Willibrord at Weissenburg Abbey, Alsace, where Willibrord's benefactress Irmina of Oeren was also venerated.^{[12][13]}