

Frontiers as zones of public overinvestment: fortresses, ditches, and walls in the northern frontier of the Carolingian Empire

by Marco Franzoni

The aim of this article is to analyse the infrastructural investments made by the Franks to pacify Saxony, and to secure the control of the Elbe River territories. I will mostly use the written sources of the Carolingian era that described, in various forms, the construction of new infrastructures and the conquest of the enemies'. I will also utilize the archaeological data, so as to be able to confirm the accounts of the written sources. Through this analysis I will highlight the central authority's constant effort to control, protect and rule the newly conquered territories of Saxony and the Elbe.

Middle Ages; 8th-9th centuries; Saxon Frontier; Carolingian Empire; Danevirke; Franks; Slavs; Danes; Saxons; fortresses; ditches; walls.

Abbreviations

MGH, AP = *Annales Petaviani*, ed. G.H. Pertz, MGH, Hannover 1826, pp. 7-18 (MGH, SS, 1).

MGH, ARF = *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses Maiores et Einhardi*, ed. F. Kurze, Hannover 1895 (MGH, SS Rer. Germ., 6).

MGH, Capit. I = *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. H.G. Pertz, Hannover 1835 (MGH, Legum, 1).

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Frontier zones are usually studied in order to highlight the differences that distinguished the centre from the periphery, so as to be able to understand how central power manifested its control over these regions. From another point of view, focusing on border areas has allowed historians to observe the centre from a new, and different, perspective. Then, if it is true that an «Empire looks different from different angles»¹, one of the most interesting ways to study a medieval state is through the lens of its peripheral regions. These are places of clashes and inclusion; zones where the political vision of the centre is usually imposed through a large variety of actions and investments. Therefore, border zones are the places where imperial rhetoric broke down, and led them to adapt to the local political and social situation². The purpose of this article is to focus on the different infrastructures that the Franks and their neighbours created during the course of the eighth-ninth centuries in Saxony and the region of the Elbe River. The building of new fortresses, as the coordination and limitation of commerce, were direct answers to the new threats and the new challenges that the Franks had to manage to consolidate their power over Saxony and the Saxons. The frontier zone was the stage where the ruler was committed to spreading his authority through investment in movable and non-movable wealth, manpower, political and religious capital. At the frontier zone of Saxony and the Elbe, the Franks built fortresses, churches, markets and centres of power to improve their control over these areas. These investments were made to bind a fragmented and disunited region in a web of political and economic interests and infrastructure of power, that were meant to erase the differences and to subject them to the central authority. In the Middle Ages, borderlands were places of “public overinvestments”, quoting Pierre Toubert’s sentence, where the efforts of the central authority became manifest through the building of infrastructures and the reorganization of the topographies of power³. As Toubert wrote, the main functions of castles have been precisely to mark borders and border areas, to give them materiality, to master them, to protect them and, in short, to insert their presence in the long-term historical landscapes. With the construction of castles and other infrastructures, the Franks manifested their power over a region or a population; they were performing an «opération de prise de possession symbolique de l’espace»⁴, a procedure reflecting the symbolic takeover of possession of space.

¹ Ludden, *The Process of Empire*, p. 135.

² Smith, *Fines Imperii*: Ead., *The Marches*, p. 176.

³ Toubert, *Frontière et frontières : un objet historique*, p. 13: «surinvestissement de puissance publique».

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

1. Saxon and Frankish fortresses

At the dawn of Carolingian history, Pippin of Herstal, Charles Martel, Carloman and Pippin III all fought against the Saxons who, since the sixth century, had colonized the valley of the Lippe and the region of southern Saxony⁵. This vast region of political and religious collision, and probably economic exchange, was vividly depicted by Charlemagne's biographer Einhard, years after the end of the Saxon wars and the death of the emperor himself. This description, written in the *Vita Karoli*, is very useful to help us imagine the reality of this frontier and its landscapes. Of course, the author's aim was apologetic towards Charlemagne and, consequently, not completely objective. Anyway, this description appears to be very close to what the Saxon border zone looked like: «There were regions too which might at any time cause a disturbance of the peace. For our boundaries and theirs touch almost everywhere on the open plain, except wherein a few places' large forests or ranges of mountains are interposed to separate the territories of the two nations by a definitive frontier, so that on both sides murder, robbery and arson were of constant occurrence»⁶. In their neighbourly relationship, the Franks were usually satisfied with the payment of a tribute, but the attitude towards the Saxon tribes was about to change with the rise of Charles, the son of King Pippin, becoming the only king of the Frankish kingdom⁷. In fact, since Charlemagne's first invasion of Saxony in 772, the Franks had pursued the conquest of the land between the Rhine and the Elbe Rivers, and the submission of all the Saxon peoples⁸. From the sixth to the eighth century, the Franco-Saxon border was a region of clashes and encounters, a permeable zone that ran across the present-day Länder of Hesse, Nord Rhine Westphalia and Lower Saxony. This frontier zone, as defined by Matthias Hardt, was «structured around a system of hillforts, which lay within thirty to forty kilometres of one another»⁹. There was no frontier line – this is, in fact, a modern concept – but instead, a large region protected and connected by a web of fortresses and sanctuaries «on both sides of the border»¹⁰. Archaeological data and the written sources show us that the Saxon frontier zone was a deep region controlled on both sides by a web of fortresses that served to protect fields, flocks, herds, wealth and the human presence in the area. From the Franks' side there were different well-known fortresses, such as the already cited Büraburg in northern Hesse, the Kesterburg and the Amöneburg. On the Saxon side, the best-known fortress was the Eresburg. There were also the castle of Sigiburg, or Syburg, not too

⁵ *Annales Laureshamenses*, pp. 24-26, *ad annos* 718, 720, 738; MGH, AP, pp. 7-9, *ad annos* 718, 720, 728, 729, 738.

⁶ Grant, *Early Lives of Charlemagne by Eginhard and the monk of St. Gall*, quote on p. 16; Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, 7, p. 9.

⁷ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 45.

⁸ Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 281.

⁹ Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*, p. 221.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

far from Eresburg, a castle on a hill called Gaulskopf, south of Warburg¹¹, and Sythen, probably a fortified place that Pippin captured in 758, and which then disappeared from the annals¹². These were all fortified centres densely settled during the eighth century, as is revealed by archaeological finds¹³.

In 772 Charlemagne marched into Saxony, conquered Eresburg, starting, *de facto*, an escalation of violence that ended only in 804 after the subjugation of all the Saxon tribes from the Rhine to the Elbe River¹⁴. It is possible that, to secure his new position on the Lippe valley and the control of Eresburg, Charles built a new *castrum* on the west bank of the Weser River. This strategic measure, only mentioned in the *Annales Mettenses priores*, can be understood since it was already used in the previous campaign in Aquitaine¹⁵. In fact, during his first campaign as king of the Franks in 769, Charlemagne dealt with the revolt of the Aquitanian noble Hunald. On his way to southern Aquitaine, the king built a fort at Fronsac, on the Dordogne River, as a military base to support a further advance, and to secure his retreat¹⁶. It is therefore credible that Charlemagne acted in the same way in the 772 military campaign. The exact place of this fortified camp, as Bachrach explains, remains a matter of debate, but a possible place is Herstelle, at the confluence of the Diemel and the Weser Rivers¹⁷. This fortification is later mentioned in different annals under the year 797 in the *Annales Petaviani*, and in the *Annales regni Francorum*¹⁸. Charlemagne's offensive continued in 775, when the Franks conquered the other strategic fortress of Sigiburg. The importance of the fortresses of Sigiburg and Eresburg is attested by the fact that Saxons tried to reconquer both of them the following year. It is interesting to note that, despite the war that erupted in the Saxon border zone, the Franks did not only build military buildings. We can see this while reading the lines that describe the Saxon siege of Sigiburg of 776 in the *Annales regni Francorum*. The chronicles reported that «cum bellum praeparasset adversus christianos, qui in ipso castro residebant, apparuit manifeste gloria Dei supra domum ecclesiae»¹⁹ («while they [the Saxons] prepared for battle against the Christians [the Franks] in the castle, God's glory was made manifest over the castle church»²⁰). It is possible to believe, therefore, that the Franks, once they captured the fortress, built a church to satisfy the religious needs of the new residents²¹. Such a *modus operandi* was perhaps adopted by the Franks in ev-

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

¹² MGH, ARF, p. 16, *ad annum* 758; Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns (768-777)*, p. 209.

¹³ Schlesinger, *Early Medieval Fortifications in Hesse*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁴ MGH, ARF, p. 32, *ad annum* 772.

¹⁵ *Annales Mettenses priores*, p. 59, *ad annum* 772.

¹⁶ MGH, ARF, pp. 28-30, *ad annum* 769.

¹⁷ Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns*, p. 235.

¹⁸ MGH, AP, p. 18, *ad annum* 797; MGH, ARF, p. 102, *ad annum* 797.

¹⁹ MGH, ARF, p. 44, *ad annum* 776.

²⁰ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 55.

²¹ Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns*, p. 435; MGH, ARF, p. 48, *ad annum* 776.

ery one of the Saxon fortresses and fortified centres that they captured during the entirety of the war. The construction of fortified camps and churches is a strong proof of the fact that King Charles intended to control Saxon lands and integrate them into his kingdom.

Anyhow, the largest construction investment of the Carolingians in Saxony was the creation of the city of Paderborn. The centre of Paderborn, earlier known as *urbs Caroli* in the *Annales Maximiniani*²², *Urbs Karoli* in the *Annales Petaviani*²³, and *Karlesburg* in the *Annales Mosellani*²⁴ and only mentioned as «*alium castrum super Lippiam*»²⁵ («another castle on the river Lippe»²⁶) in the *Annales regni Francorum*, was built in 776, not too far from Eresburg and close to the sources of the Lippe River. The identification of Karlsburg with the city of Paderborn – only mentioned for the first time with this name in the *Annales regni Francorum* under the year 777²⁷ – is agreed on by different historians²⁸. Founded in a strategic location for both military and missionary activities, Paderborn became the most important Frankish building site in the region. The importance that Charlemagne and his court gave to this newly founded city is confirmed by the fact that it became the stage of Charles' first assembly in Saxon territories in 777. The modern city of Paderborn has undergone various archaeological excavations during the twentieth century, which uncovered the different buildings erected by the Franks, helping us to understand its history²⁹. Paderborn, as the annals recall and the archaeological data confirm, was already attacked and destroyed by the Saxons in 778³⁰. This destruction was followed by a new phase of construction and rebuilding of the city, where the Franks most probably built a new wall made out of stones³¹. Years later, in 799, the Franks completed the construction of a new three-aisle basilica, that Pope Leo III himself consecrated the same year³². The case of Paderborn exemplifies the concept of over-investments that the central authority undertook in border zones. Central investments are a focal point in the process of conquest and integration of a peripheral region. These investments have a huge impact on the surrounding

²² *Annales Maximiniani*, p. 21, *ad annum* 776: «Franci civitatem fecerunt in Saxonia quae dicitur urbs Caroli et Francorum».

²³ MGH, AP, p. 16, *ad annum* 776: «aedificaverunt Franci in finibus Saxanorum civitatem quae vocatur Urbs Karoli».

²⁴ *Annales Mosellani*, p. 496, *ad annum* 776: «Et aedificavit civitatem super fluvio Lippiae, quae appellatur Karlesburg».

²⁵ MGH, ARF, p. 48, *ad annum* 776.

²⁶ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 55.

²⁷ MGH, ARF, p. 48, *ad annum* 777.

²⁸ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 165; Landon, *Economic incentives*, p. 43; Rembold, *Conquest and Christianization*, p. 49; Smith, *Europe after Rome*, p. 269.

²⁹ Gai, *Nuovi elementi sull'architettura palatina*; Gai, *Tradizione o innovazione?*; Gai, *La construction des palais royaux à l'époque de Charlemagne*; *Medieval Archaeology: an Encyclopaedia*.

³⁰ MGH, AP, p. 16, *ad annum* 772.

³¹ Gai, *Nuovi elementi sull'architettura palatina*, p. 100.

³² *Chronicon Moissiacense*, p. 304; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 166.

area and the local population; buildings and military constructions do not only manifest the presence of a new authority, but often create new economic and social development³³. The project of Paderborn, for example, probably made a great impression to the Saxons living in the neighbouring area. The creation of such a city surely attracted a large variety of craftsmen, needed to build the church and *the aula regia*, that the Franks built of stone, with all their ornaments like stained glass, gold furnishings, mosaic pieces and tapestry. In a panorama largely dominated by wood buildings, the king's stone constructions underlined Paderborn's high rank in an environment of frugal landscape³⁴. Thus, Frankish penetration into Saxony was characterized, from the very beginning, by an effort of integration and control through the classic tools that empires utilize in the frontier zones: military control, economic integration and religious penetration.

The first phase of the Saxon war, that goes roughly from 772 to 785, was focused on the conquest of the Valley of the Lippe, the occupation of Saxon fortresses, and the submission of the Saxons who lived south of the Weser and the Aller Rivers. As we have seen, during this part of the war the largest investment of the Carolingian authority was the creation of the stage-city of Paderborn, and the conquest and reconstruction of the key-Saxon forts along the Lippe River. The only fortified camp built by the Franks was Herstelle, on the Weser River, then the conquerors focused on the building of churches in the Saxon-occupied forts, and on the founding of the central city of Paderborn. The second phase of the Saxon war goes from 789 to 804, when the Emperor Charlemagne destroyed any further resistance by deporting most of the Nordalbingian Saxons into the kingdom³⁵. It is during the second phase of the war, and after the end of the war itself, that the Franks concentrated their infrastructural efforts on the newly-conquered peripheral region of northern Saxony and the Elbe River. In these regions, as is clear from the archaeological data and from the written sources, the presence of Saxon fortresses was very rare or completely absent. This situation obliged the Franks to invest time, energies, manpower and money into the construction of bridges, fortifications and control points, from 789 to 822, when the creation of the Frankish fort of Delbende, ordered by Louis the Pious³⁶, is recorded. The complete absence of Roman infrastructures, the lack of Saxon ones, and the distance from the heart of the Frankish kingdom obliged the Carolingians to protect the lands west of the Elbe with a vast building investment. In 789, Charlemagne invaded the land of the Wilzi, a Slavic tribe that lived on the other side of the Elbe. During this campaign, the Franks built two bridges on the Elbe

³³ Ludden, *The Process of Empire*, p. 139.

³⁴ Gai, *Tradizione o innovazione?*, p. 166.

³⁵ MGH, ARF, p. 118, *ad annum* 804: «Imperator Aquisgrani hiemavit. Aestate autem in Saxoniam ducto exercitu omnes, qui trans Albiam et in Wihmuodi habitabant, Saxones cum mulieribus et infantibus transtulit in Franciam et pagos Transalbianos Abodritis dedit».

³⁶ MGH, ARF, p. 158, *ad annum* 822.

River, one of which was protected by «fortifications of wood and earth at both ends»³⁷. This was the first time that a Frankish army crossed the Elbe to impose Carolingian authority on the other side of the river.

2. *The Danes and the Danevirke*

At the end of the eighth century, while Charles was occupied with the Avar Campaign, the building of the *Fossa Carolina* and various political matters, the threat of Viking piracy became more dangerous. Thanks to the letters of Alcuin, we are informed that the Franks were well aware of the Viking menace, and also of the sack of the British island of Lindisfarne³⁸. Thus, we should not be surprised to read in the *Annales regni Francorum* that Charlemagne ordered in the year 800 to build a fleet on the Gallic Sea, «that was infested with pirates», and that he ordered to «set guards in different places»³⁹. The threat posed by the raids of the Danish pirates to the northern coast of the Frankish kingdom and to the sea trades, was very concerning for the Carolingians⁴⁰. In fact, at the beginning of the ninth century, the Franks had to respond to the new threats that were triggered by the Frankish reorganization of the northern regions of the empire. Towards the end of the Saxon war, Charles decided to use the instrument of deportation to eradicate Nordalbingian resistance in the land east of the Elbe⁴¹. This measure was followed by the installation of the Abodrites Slavic allies into the «district beyond the Elbe»⁴². With this decision, Charlemagne planned to create a sort of buffer state that, in theory, should protect Frankish interest from the neighbouring Danes⁴³. Danish response to Carolingian plans did not wait and, while the emperor was settling the Abodrites into the lands north of the Elbe River, the annals report that King Godfrid of the Danes «came with his fleet and the entire cavalry of his kingdom to Schleswig on the border of his kingdom and Saxony»⁴⁴. This show of strength by the Danish king was a reminder to the Franks that now they were in a region that was traditionally part of the Danish sphere of influence.

The existing manifestation of the power of the Danish kingdom is the Danevirke. Still standing in the southern of Jutland, the Danevirke, or *Danaewirchi*, literally “Work of the Danes”⁴⁵, is a series of interrelated defensive earthworks that goes from one side to the other of the peninsula. The total length of the various ramparts of the Danevirke is about 30 km, and it

³⁷ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 68; MGH, ARF, p. 84, *ad annum* 789.

³⁸ MGH, *Alcuini sive Albini epistolae*, no. 20, p. 57, *ad annum* 793.

³⁹ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 78; Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power*, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Landon, *Economic incentives*, p. 50; Nelson, *The Frankish World 750-900*, p. xv.

⁴¹ MGH, ARF, p. 118, *ad annum* 804.

⁴² *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 83.

⁴³ Melleno, *Between Borders*, p. 361.

⁴⁴ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 83; MGH, ARF, p. 118, *ad annum* 804.

⁴⁵ *Medieval Archaeology: an Encyclopaedia*, p. 71.

consists of two defensive lines, the Danevirke itself and a smaller one, called Kovirke⁴⁶. Frankish written sources affirm that it was Godfrid himself who built this large-scale system of rampart to protect and fortify the southern border of his kingdom⁴⁷. However, archaeological excavations and studies demonstrated that the Danevirke is older than 808 and that the real date of construction of the wall is around 737⁴⁸. Nevertheless, this formidable medieval infrastructural work went through almost three or more phases of constructions, so it is very probable that Godfrid decided to reinforce it with new fortifications of a section of the long wall⁴⁹. The Danevirke was an impressive infrastructure that requested the work of thousands of manpower; thus, it is realistic to believe that in Jutland existed a centralised authority capable of imposing on its subjects the obligation to participate in public works. Therefore, the Franks were not the only political actor committed to the erection of infrastructures with the aim of controlling and protecting the territory. The Danevirke, as the others long rampart and ditches works of the Early Middle Ages, such as the Offa's Dyke, in Mercia and Wales, and the *Fossa Carolina* in Bavaria, were not only a military tool, but rather an instrument to control the movements of merchants, to control the surrounding area, concretely to manifest the power of the centre in peripheral areas and to impose the monarch's authority over his subjects. The purpose of the Danevirke was not evidently military, and this is proved by the strategy adopted by the sons of Godfrid during the Carolingian invasion of the Jutland peninsula in 815. The kings of Denmark deliberately decided to abandon the mainland and to seek refuge in a close island, as the *Annales regni Francorum* report, proving, *de facto*, the ineffectiveness of this long-moated rampart as a military fortification⁵⁰. As Paolo Squatriti suggests, the real nature of this kind of «frontiers overinvestment», quoting Toubert's phrase, such as the Danevirke, was more related to the «miniaturization» of the central authority and the imposition of royal authority over the king's subjects⁵¹.

3. Fortresses and control points on the Elbe River

As the Danish threat intensified, Frankish building investment in the region became more widespread: from the archaeological data, and from the written sources, we know that from 805 the Franks started to build a series of forts along the Elbe River, and beyond it. Since the year of the Abodrites settlement in southern Jutland and the previously mentioned comings and goings

⁴⁶ Crabtree, *Medieval Archaeology*, pp. 71-74.

⁴⁷ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 89; MGH, ARF, p. 126, *ad annum* 808.

⁴⁸ Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, p. 73; Dobat, *Danevirke Revisited*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 815; Mathisen – Sivan, *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Squatriti, *Digging Ditches in Early Medieval Europe*, p. 18.

of the Danish army with their king at the new Frankish-Danish frontier, the Franks undertook the building of a new landscape of power in Saxony and in the Elbe region. Charlemagne was deeply involved in the new organization of the Saxon lands. One of the first measures taken by the Carolingians was the creation of a series of control points on the eastern frontier, governed by royal *missi dominici*⁵². These centres, listed in the *Capitulare Theodonis*, were the only places where trade with Slavs and Avars was permitted⁵³. As we can read in the *capitulare*, three of them were in Saxony, on the western side of the Elbe River: they were Bardowick, Schezla and Magdeburg. Then there were several more in Hesse and Bavaria, such as Erfurt, Forcheim, Lorch and Regensburg. These trade centres were controlled by the king's envoys and probably garrisoned by Frankish forces. The *Capitulare Theodonis* did not only indicate who was the *missus* charged of the administration of these centres, like Hredi in Bardowick, Madalgaud at Schezla and Aito at Magdeburg, but also prohibited the trade of swords and armour between Frankish merchants and the peoples that lived on the other side of the border zones⁵⁴. Anyone caught selling dangerous weapons to neighbouring peoples, enemies or allies, would have seen all the supplies confiscated by the guards. Then the stock, as the *capitulare* explains, would have been divided half to the palace and half to the *missus* or whoever discovered it. We have to imagine, therefore, a stringent control over merchants that were obliged to sell their goods only in few well-controlled places, under the supervision of the royal envoys⁵⁵. One year after the capitulary itself, the Franks built two castles on the frontier zone: one on the bank of the Saale River and the other one on the Elbe⁵⁶. The one on the Elbe was built on the eastern bank of the river, right in front of the city of Magdeburg, as the *Chronicon Moissiacense* reports: «Et mandavit eis rex Karolus aedificare civitates duas, unam ad aquilonem partem Albiae contra Magadaburg, alteram vero in orientalem partem Sala, ad locum qui vocatur Halla»⁵⁷. The location of this city was strategically important because it faced one of the main routes going from the West into Slavs territories⁵⁸. As far as we know from reading the written sources, the fortification built to protect the control point of Magdeburg was the first fortress created by the Franks on the eastern side of the Elbe River. In 808 Charlemagne's son, Charles the Younger, was ordered to lay waste the lands of the Slavic tribes allied with the Danes. To march into enemies' lands, Charles built a bridge on the Elbe and then built two castles on the same river, «for the defense against the attack of

⁵² Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*, p. 228; Landon, *Economic incentives*, pp. 52-53.

⁵³ MGH, Capit. I, no. 44 (805), p. 123.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*: «Et ut arma et brunias non ducant ad venundandum; quod si inventi fuerint portantes, ut omnis substantia eorum auferatur ab eis, dimidia quidem pars partibus palatii, alia vero medietas inter iamdictos missos et inventorem dividatur».

⁵⁵ Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 427.

⁵⁶ MGH, ARF, p. 121, *ad annum* 806.

⁵⁷ MGH, *Chronicon Moissiacense*, p. 308, *ad annum* 805.

⁵⁸ Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*, p. 228.

the Slavs»⁵⁹. One of these castles was very probably the fort of Hohbuoki, built on an island in what is called today the Hannoversches Wendland⁶⁰. Surprisingly for the period and for Frankish architecture, the Hohbuoki fort is rectangular⁶¹. This castle was lost in 810, when the garrison of East Saxons that occupied it and the emperor's envoy Odo were captured by the Slavic tribe of the Wilzi⁶². Just a year later, the fort was reconquered and restored, but then disappeared from the annals. Another very important fortified settlement built by the Franks was the castle of Esesfeld, in today's Schleswig-Holstein, on the Stör River. The emperor himself in 809 ordered Count Egbert to find a strategic place in which to build a fort north of Hamburg, so as to be able to protect the city and defend it from Danish incursions⁶³. Once the duke found the location, as the *Annales regni Francorum* report, he occupied the site with his troops and began to fortify it⁶⁴. This strategic fortress was already besieged in 817, when an army of Danes and Abodrites rebels ravaged the bank of the Stör River and attacked Esesfeld⁶⁵. The castle was defended by Count Gluomi, commander of the Norse border, that repelled the invaders and preserved this position.

The Franks did not only defend themselves from the incursions of the neighbouring peoples, they also went on the offensive. In fact, in 815 Louis the Pious ordered the imperial emissary Baldrich to march with an army of «all Saxon counts and all troops of the Obodrites»⁶⁶ against the Danes, to help the exiled King Harald Klak to reconquer the kingdom of Denmark. The campaign was a failure, with the Danes unwilling to fight in battle the Franks on the mainland, and the Franks unable to reach the Danish army that remained on an island three miles off the shore. The Franks were only able to lay waste to the neighbouring districts and to receive hostages, while there is no mention of the Danevirke fortifications and ramparts. One of the last offensive actions taken by the Franks under the rule of Louis the Pious on the northern frontier of the empire was the capture and occupation of Delbende. In 822, Emperor Louis ordered the Saxons to build a castle at Delbende, on the other side of the Elbe River, and to expel the Slavs that lived there⁶⁷. The fortification of this site in Slavic territory illustrates how much the relations between the Franks and the Abodrites have deteriorated since the death of Charlemagne. In fact, the *Annales* explicitly report that this fortification was built to prevent Slavic incursions. From Esesfeld, north of the Elbe River, to Bardowick, Hohbuo-

⁵⁹ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 89.

⁶⁰ Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*, p. 226; Schneeweiss – Schatz, *The impact of landscape change*, p. 23.

⁶¹ Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*, p. 226.

⁶² MGH, ARF, p. 131, *ad annum* 810.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 129, *ad annum* 809.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ MGH, ARF, p. 146, *ad annum* 817.

⁶⁶ *Carolingian Chronicles*, p. 99.

⁶⁷ MGH, ARF, p. 158, *ad annum* 822.

ki, Schezla, Delbende, Magdeburg and its bridge, the Franks built a series of fortresses, bridges and fortified centres to protect their interests and their authority in northern Saxony. These forts were usually protected by a simple moated palisade, not very different from those of the Saxons or the Slavs⁶⁸. This lack of technological differences underlines the fact that the Saxony and Elbe border zones were not places defining sharp lines of exclusion, where a civilized and superior kingdom had to face barbarian and uncivilized neighbours, but rather a permeable periphery of clashes and encounters, exchanges and political interconnections⁶⁹.

4. *Overinvestment at the frontier zone*

The evidence tells us that, in southern Saxony, there was no problem of lack of fortresses: in fact the Franks fought hard to occupy those of the Saxons like Sythen, Eresburg or Sigiburg. The real lack of infrastructures was further north, on both sides of the Elbe River, and the real menace that obliged the Carolingians to build new infrastructures such as castles, fortresses, and even a fleet, were the Danes and the Slav tribes north and east of the Elbe River. These peoples were the real threat that worried the Frankish court, once all the Saxon tribes had been defeated and subjugated. As the Roman army on the famous and infamous *limes*, the Franks built several infrastructures for defence and control, for trade and administration. These buildings and control points did not have as their purpose to create an impenetrable wall, but rather to expand the authority of the centre and to project this authority as far as possible, deep into the neighbouring lands. The real problem was about control, on both sides of the river. Frankish power had to be made manifest in practice, to ensure its presence on the subjected people, on the tributaries and even onto the allied people. The northern frontier zone of the Carolingian Empire is a region of widespread central authority overinvestment. Not only did Charlemagne spent most of his life fighting against the Saxons, but he also built a large number and variety of infrastructures to ensure his authority and to pacify the newly conquered territories. Therefore, Saxony and the trans-Elbe region were a place of intense public overinvestment, where the Franks invested a large amount of manpower, time and resources. Frontiers, in fact, required investment to protect and defend them, to control and to organize the movement of people and goods. These investments were usually in form of money, military buildings, churches, administrative buildings, political capital, manpower, administrative and religious organizations. The building of a chapel, of a palace, the construction of fortresses along rivers, the creation of archbishoprics, just like the effort to control movement and commerce

⁶⁸ Henning, *Civilization versus Barbarians*, p. 29.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

through the frontier, were all concrete expression of a taking of possession. The conqueror needed to build infrastructures of power necessary to control the newly subjected peoples and to defend the interest and the properties of their allies, of the subjects, of the co-opted aristocracies, and of the Franks who decided to live on the fringes of the empire. As far as we are aware, it is interesting to note that the efforts carried out by the Franks in the northern border zones of the kingdom, in terms of manpower, political capital, military and diplomatic activities, infrastructural investments and religious proselytism, have no parallel in any one of the other border regions of the Frankish dominion.

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