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Mission

Augustine was startled from his prayers by shouts of a crewman topside. Land! “*Deo gratias,*” murmured the monk as he clambered up the swaying rope ladder to get a look for himself. Although the crossing had been mercifully calm for this time of year, he could not wait to get ashore, even with his many anxieties of what might lie ahead. The air was sharp and cold as he raced to the rail. Low gray clouds lifted in places to reveal a sandy beach flanked by low dunes and a dark line of scrubby trees. There were no signs of life. Turning to either side, Augustine could see the masts of the two other small ships. At the prow of one he made out Brother Laurence shouting joyfully and waving his arms wildly. Many of the younger monks on that vessel seemed to be joining him in the celebration. He

spotted Brother Peter at the prow of the other ship, looking far more determined and grim, his face a mixture of dread and determination.

Augustine's thoughts turned to his teacher and mentor, Pope Gregory. He wished that somehow he could let the Holy Father know that they had finally arrived. After all the false starts, ecclesiastical intrigues, and physical hardships along the way, his master's dream of a mission to the people of this distant land, the *Angli*, was about to begin. While the crew prepared to beach the ship on the shore, Augustine began to inventory the supplies his small band of monks and laborers would need upon landing.

They had been traveling light, depending upon the goodwill of bishops and monasteries in Gaul to supply their physical needs. Far more important than the casks of salted fish and the cartons of hard dark bread, or the heavy wool cloaks to wear over their black monks' habits, or even the chests containing costly healing herbs and medicines, were the treasured items they would need for the worship of God. Augustine's thoughts turned to the heavy oaken chests, stowed belowdecks, containing silver chalices and patens, rich brocade stoles and chasubles to be worn during Mass, fair white linen and brass candlesticks to adorn an altar. But most of all he thought of the books—codices of the books of the Bible written on parchment and bound in leather with iron clasps. There were dozens of well-thumbed psalters and Bibles for the monks to use for the Daily Offices, but there was also a beautiful new book of Gospels decorated with pictures of the

four evangelists and scenes from the life of Jesus—a gift from Pope Gregory himself. Such a thing had hardly been seen in Rome, let alone in this most remote corner of the world. What a powerful object this would be for him and his men, a reminder of the Holy Father’s commission to them, a symbol of the faith to impress the heathen population and a talisman as protection against their dark arts.

Augustine ran below to unpack Gregory’s Gospel book from its silk-lined box. He called to one of his deacons. There was cargo to be unloaded, but first there was Mass to be said. He gave orders for a cross to be brought and for a piece of ship’s planking to be set up as a table on the beach, between two large rocks. Clutching the Word of God to his chest, Augustine leapt from the boat into the shallow surf lapping the shore. His work as a missionary was about to begin. Who was Pope Gregory and why was he interested in sending a mission to England? Answering this question will provide us with the background we will need to understand MS 286.



There are only two popes who have had the title “the Great” added to their name. One of them is Gregory (540–604). For members of the Church of England and Anglican churches throughout the world, he is not simply great, he is the greatest, for without him, Canterbury would have remained a backwater and the history of Christianity in England would have been radically different.

Gregory became pope at a time when Europe was in disarray. The city of Rome itself was in ruins with once great imperial buildings slowly crumbling and sheep grazing in the forum from whence Roman emperors had once ruled the world. The last western Roman Emperor was Romulus Augustus, deposed by the Gothic warlord Odoacer in 476, but for decades before that the empire had begun to collapse from pressure from Germanic tribes on its northern borders, as well as internal corruption and conflict. Since the fourth century, Christianity had joined its fortunes with Imperial power, but in the East, under Byzantine control, the church had shrunk so much that by the time of Gregory, only parts of what are now France, Spain, and Italy were in communication with the bishop of Rome. The northern part of Europe was completely outside the Christian orbit, controlled by a host of barbarian and pagan tribes. One such area was the old Roman province of Britannia. Once controlled by Christian British peoples, it had been conquered by Germanic tribes from the east, except for the outlying regions of what are now Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, which managed to preserve their ancient Celtic and Christian culture.

Why then was Gregory so interested in England? Every English schoolchild has heard the story of Gregory's encounter with a group of fair-haired boys from Britain being sold as slaves in a Roman market. Impressed by their unusual light complexion, he inquired who they were and where they came from. The answer (in Latin of course) was that they were "*Angli*" (Angles). Gregory, not missing the

opportunity to make a good pun, shot back, “*Non Angli sed Angeli*” (Not Angles but Angels). “Well named,” he added, “for they have angelic faces and ought to be coheirs with the angels in heaven.” And their origin? “*De Irei*” (from Ireland) was the answer. Gregory quipped that they certainly would be rescued “*de ira*” (from the wrath of God). Learning that the king of these Irish boys was named “*Aella*,” he added, no doubt with a smile, “*Alleluia!*”¹

This story has a ring of truth to it, even though it might have been embellished through the centuries. It is recounted by the most reliable historian of the early English Church, the seventh-century monk the Venerable Bede (of whom more later). And it reflects Gregory’s passion for bringing the gospel to the frontiers of the known world.

Although this missionary zeal is the aspect of his pontificate that most concerns us here, Gregory was also one of the most competent and wise leaders of his age. Born about 540 to a noble Roman family of modest means with a tradition of civic service as well as strong family connections with the church (his great-great-grandfather was Pope Felix III), Gregory had an early exposure to the practical realities of church administration. But he was also deeply attracted to the idea of monasticism, and by the time he was about thirty he had turned his family mansion on the Caelian Hill (the “Beverly Hills” of the Rome of his day) over to a community of monks.

Interestingly, those monks commissioned a portrait of their benefactor shortly after his death, but it is now long

lost. It was described by a ninth-century monastic visitor in words that give us an idea of what Gregory might have looked like. According to this account, Gregory was “rather bald” and had a “tawny” beard. His hair was long on the sides and carefully curled. His nose was “thin and straight” and “slightly aquiline.” “His forehead was high.” He had thick, “subdivided” lips and a chin “of a comely prominence” and “beautiful hands.” This description influenced all subsequent portraits, from early icons to Carlo Saraseni’s 1610 painting, which are consistent in portraying Gregory as thin, balding, and ascetic looking.²

From this community of monks would come the leaders of Gregory’s missionary endeavors, and from his interest in the Benedictine model of community life would come his blueprint for how that work should be carried out. As much as the English Church owes its origin to the hard work and courage of Augustine of Canterbury, it owes even more to Augustine’s mentor and model, Pope Gregory, provider of the vision and the resources for his mission, both spiritual and material.

In 590 Gregory began a papacy that is universally well regarded. He was even admired by the Protestant reformer John Calvin, for whom he was “the last of the good popes.”³ His career was distinguished by achievements in administration and organization and by his contribution to Christian theology. His massive *Moralia in Job*, with its method of allegorical interpretation of Scripture, was an intellectual staple throughout the Middle Ages, and his *Pastoral Care* is

even now a valuable handbook of spiritual direction and still relevant to the duties of today's parish priest.

But Gregory's most important historical contribution was without doubt his advocacy and support of the English mission. His position as Peter's successor gave him the opportunity to fulfill the dream born of that early encounter in the slave market. So important to him was the project that he entrusted it to none other than a monk formed in the monastic community he founded in his own home—Augustine.

We know nothing about Augustine's background, nor of his mission, apart from what the historian Bede writes. And since Bede is our most important source for the English mission we are describing, it would be well to take a moment to examine his motives for writing.

Bede ("the Venerable" was added after his death in 735) is the most important source for early English history, but like all historians, his work was colored by his own agenda. His most famous work, *De historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), written about 731, betrays its bias by its very title, the author's belief that a rather loose confederation of Germanic tribal chiefdoms somehow came to constitute a national entity—the English people. Bede spent his entire life as a monk at the important abbey of Wearmouth/Jarrow in Northumbria and writes very much from a "triumphalist" bias in which Gregory's mission serves as the starting point of God's divine plan to re-Christianize the English (meaning the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants

of southern and eastern England). When it comes to failures and setbacks, or to personalities that don't fit into his design, Bede tends to gloss over them. Still, Bede has justly earned the title of the "Father of English History" for the completeness of his work, his efforts to use available past sources (his monastery had an excellent library), and above all for his willingness to seek out eyewitnesses, unusual for writers of his time. Indeed, he boasts that he "relies on the faithful testimony of innumerable witnesses"⁴ and is not afraid to name names. One such witness was Albinus, the abbot of the monastery in Canterbury, who provided much early documentation. Another was Nothhelm, later to be an archbishop of Canterbury but at the time of Bede's writing a priest in London, who had obtained copies of Gregory the Great's correspondence from Rome relating to Augustine's mission.

Gregory and Augustine were the heroes of Bede's not always unbiased account. Their motivation for the mission to England was clear to him—to spread the gospel. Some "deconstructionist" historians have speculated that Gregory might have had more Machiavellian motives for dispatching Augustine to England. The Lombards had taken over parts of Italy, and Gregory could have used an English mission as a counterweight to what he considered to be their barbarian and heretical influence. Perhaps he was looking for a toehold in England to balance the power of the bishops in Gaul (France). Or he might have seen this mission as a way of bringing the surviving British or Celtic bishops under his sway. Just as his twentieth-century successor Pope John Paul

He looked to Poland and middle Europe as fertile ground for a rebirth of the church in our time, so Gregory saw the future of the Roman Church in his own day as lying with the barbarian-occupied countries of the west—what is now England, Ireland, and the Spanish peninsula. His youthful sojourn in Greece as an *apocrisiarius* (a form of ambassador from the papal to the imperial court) left him impressed with both the vitality and spirituality of the Eastern Church and gave him a vision of what the Western Church could be.

Yet most modern historians conclude that Gregory's motives for mission were pure—to spread the gospel to the ends of the world. Indeed, Gregory's own theology saw this as a necessary step to ushering in the end-time and Christ's Second Coming. Gregory believed that the end of the world was imminent and that he, as spiritual leader of Christendom, was destined to play a major part in God's plan for the coming apocalypse. His belief was rooted in the prevalent notion that the world would go through six ages, and that he was living at the end of the last of these. This helps explain Gregory's decision to dispatch his mission to Anglo-Saxon Britain, since conversion of the heathen was an important requirement for the Second Coming (see, for example, Matt. 24:14). And so, in addition to his efforts in England, Gregory also encouraged other missionary endeavours. Arians and Jews in Italy were targeted for conversion, along with heathen populations in Sicily and Sardinia.

So great was Gregory's desire to undertake a major mission that Bede reports that even from the time he was elected pope,

Gregory planned on traveling to England himself, although the citizens of Rome refused to let him go. "It is true that he sent other preachers, but he himself helped their preaching to bear fruit through his encouragement and prayers."⁵

Early in his pontificate Gregory wrote to one of the papal estate managers in southern Gaul asking that he buy English slave boys in order that they be educated in monasteries. This might be an indication that Gregory was already planning the mission to Britain at that time and that he intended to send the slaves as missionaries. We might rightly wonder if Augustine himself was a former British slave, chosen for his knowledge of the mission territory and ability to speak the language.

Gregory probably had a fairly accurate idea of what Augustine would face when he arrived on English shores. For more than two hundred years, the southern part of England had been in the hands of descendants of Anglo-Saxon invaders who had gradually displaced the Romano-British population. So, in addition to his religious goals, Gregory would no doubt have welcomed the chance to reestablish Roman hegemony over what had originally been the farthest northern border of the Roman Empire.

Much of the Romano-British population at the time was Christian, having been converted by settlers from the rest of Christianized Europe. Very little is known about these early British Christians. There are sketchy references to some British bishops who attended the Council of Arles in 452, and one of the most famous of the early heretics, Pelagius

(354–420), was himself a British native. (Some would even argue that Pelagianism, summed up in the gross simplification, “God helps those who help themselves,” still plays a role in English theological thinking!)

The Anglo-Saxon conquering tribes were, however, pagans, and we do know a considerable amount about their customs and religion, thanks to the work of early historians and to important archeological discoveries, such as the treasure trove discovered at the Sutton Hoo royal burial site in the 1930s. When imagining early Anglo-Saxon culture, one may think “Vikings,” since they were closely related both in language and culture. They worshipped the same Norse gods who have given their names to the days in our week: *Twi* (Tuesday), *Woden* (Wednesday), *Thunor* or *Thor* (Thursday), *Frige* (Friday). And they shared a common culture and economy, as is evident in such early literary works as the great epic poem *Beowulf*.

Following the withdrawal of Roman troops around 410, these Anglo-Saxon tribes from northern Germany and Friesland began to displace the native population through invasion and assimilation. As these pagan settlements took over, the native British Church was pushed west and north into the areas of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and consequently evolved in isolation from Rome. This native church developed its own distinctive culture centered on monasteries instead of bishoprics. Other distinguishing characteristics were its calculation of the date of Easter and the style of the tonsure, or haircut, that clerics wore. This

“Celtic Christianity” was to play its own important role in English church history and would eventually interact with the Roman version brought to England by Augustine. What is important to note is that there is no evidence that these native British Christians tried to convert their Anglo-Saxon conquerors. That task would be left to Augustine and his band of Roman missionaries.

It was toward a southern tribe of these Anglo-Saxons that Gregory targeted his re-Christianization efforts. The area of Kent was ruled by Aethelbert (560–616), one of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon chieftain-kings. Bede states that his overlordship extended as far north as the river Humber, a huge chunk of territory. Much more importantly, Aethelbert was married to Bertha, the daughter of the Frankish King Cheribert I, part of the Merovingian dynasty that ruled what is now northern France.

Bertha was a Christian and had thus been allowed to bring with her into the marriage settlement a Frankish bishop by the name of Luidhard to serve as her chaplain. Together the two of them rebuilt several places of Christian worship in and around the ancient Roman settlement of *Durovernum*—in that day called *Cantwaraburh*, what would become Canterbury. One such place is the lovely little parish church of St. Martin, located within walking distance of Canterbury Cathedral, widely agreed to be the oldest place of Christian worship in England still functioning as a parish church. Although the structure has been rebuilt many times, Roman-style red bricks are still visible in its walls.