The Whitby Life of St. Gregory

Gregory the Great (c. AD 540–604)

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So long ago as 1886 attention was called in the Review to the significant fact that the oldest known life of St. Gregory the Great was from the pen of a monk of Whitby. The discovery is due to the research of Dr. Paul Ewald, who gave the results of his study of the MS., together with large extracts, in an essay published in the same year. The author gives us a cine to his identification; since, apart from his devotion to St. Paulinus, the apostle of Northumbria, he speaks of Whit by as " our monastery. Dr. Ewald finds sufficient ground for fixing the date of composition as "before the end of the first third of the eighth century. The translation of the relics of St. Edwin, of which the author writes, took place between the dates 675-704. The writer had the story of the translation from a fellow monk of Whitby, who was a relative of the principal agent in the translation. If Elfleda was alive when he wrote, then we must date the book not later than 713. Venerable Bede may or may not have seen it: but it is to be noted that he makes no mention of the two legends of the crow and the swan in his account of St. Paulinus. Though he does not speak of any translation of the relics of King Edwin to Whitby, he does, however, record the removal of the head of the King to York:

"King Edwin's head was brought to York, and afterwards into the church of St. Peter the Apostle which he (Paulinus) had begun . . . |16 It was deposited in the porch of St. Gregory, Pope, from whose disciples he had received the word of life " (Eccl. Hist. B. II. C. 20. p. 107, ed. Bohn). The indication of the respective positions of the altars of St. Peter and St. Gregory and of the burial places of the original church and not, of course, of the later the Kings of Whitby is interesting, as he is speaking foundation. The recurrence of the two names in Venerable Bede's account is also suggestive.

The relation of the Whitby life to the well known biography of St. Gregory by John the Deacon is striking. The date of the latter is given by Dr. Ewald as 874-5. It was compiled at the command of Pope John VIII. (872-882), in consequence of the deficiency of "lectio" of the Saint at Rome. John the Deacon speaks of lives of the saint in existence among the Saxons and in Lombardy. In Book II., chapters 41-44, he quotes from the English tradition. As to the much discussed incident of the emperor Trajan, it is suggestive of the feeling of the two biographers that, while John the Deacon attributes it to the English source----legitur etiam penes easdem anglorum ecclesias----the English writer is anxious to father it

on a Roman tradition ----quidem quoque de nostris dicunt narratum a Romanis, Dr. Ewald makes a detailed comparison of the two biographies, and comes to the conclusion that John the Deacon may quite probably have seen the Whitby life, and certainly must have used one very similar. As he is characteristically free in his employment of the sources which he drew from, so a more categorical conclusion is out of the question.

The chief value of the work lies in the indication given of the extent and nature of the cultus to St. Gregory in England, and, we may add, to St. Paulinus in the north. Other points of interest abound----Mr. Bishop |17 mentions one of especial liturgical significance in the former notice in the Review. Moreover there is sufficient individual characteristic in the biography to make us interested in the person of the writer; as when he discusses the nature of the material at his command ----"we have only common report; we have not learnt orally from those who saw or heard;" but of such matters we hesitate to form an estimate until we have seen, as we hope we shortly shall, the whole treatise. For the present we give here the portions of the text published by Dr. Ewald, with a translation. The latter is in parts tentative, as the text is somewhat corrupt; so corrupt, indeed, that Dr. Ewald asserts that the scribe can scarcely have known what he was writing. The original has been corrected by someone of the tenth or eleventh century; possibly, says Dr. Ewald, by Eckhard IV. But first we give a synopsis of the full contents, as our readers may wish to know what sections have been omitted.

Contents.----I. Gregory's origin and cloister life.----II. His activity as envoy to Constantinople: his ecclesiastical and unworldly mind: his grief at leaving the cloister.----III. Dearth of information; through which the author is forced to narrate miracles already known.-----IV. The miracles in general, and Gregory's view of them. ----V. Statement that few of his many miracles were learnt from the author's predecessors.----VI. That the Anglo-Saxons had special cause to honour Gregory's miracles.----VII. Gregory's humility: he strives to escape the pontificate by flight: his concealment and discovery by a pillar of fire.----VIII. His enthronisation: considerations on the reception of the priesthood.-----IX. His zeal for the conversion of the Angles before his pontificate: the English boys in the market place at Rome.----X. Undertakes the missionary journey under Pope Benedict: revolt of the Romans: the locust. ----XI. After he is pope, he sends St. Augustine and his companions to England.----XII. The baptism of Ethelbert of Kent and Edwin of Northumbria----XIII. Angles and Angels: Aelli and Alleluia.----XIV. Edwin baptised by Paulinus.----XV. Baptism of Edwin's |18 courtiers: the killing of the prophesying crow.----XVI. The conversion of Edwin: his neighbour, Ethelfrid of Bernicia, drives him from his Kingdom: at the court of Redwald, King of the East Anglians, an apparition leads him to accept the teaching of Paulinus.----XVII. Paulinus after death taken up in the figure of a swan.----XVIII. Vision of the South-Anglian priest and monk, Trinima: command to remove Edwin's relics from Heathfield to Streoneshalh, the convent of Elfleda, Edwin's grand-daughter.----XIX. Removal of the relics to Streoneshalh: Trimma's vision at Edwin's burial place.----XX.

Miracle of the unbelieving matron of Rome.----XXI. Of the relic-clothes.----XXII. Of the horse and the demon.----XXIII. Conversion of the Lombard and the healing of the milch-cow.----XXIV. Praise of Gregory's writings, especially of his homilies.----XXV. His treatise " De ordinibus angelorum." ----XXVI. The homilies on Ezechiel dictated by a white dove. ----XXVII. The Morals and Dialogues.----XXVIII. Horrible death of his hard-hearted persecutor.----XXIX. Miracle of the salvation of Trajan.----XXX. The author's regret at the meagreness and uncertainty of his narrations.----XXXI. The Regula Pastoralis. ----XXXII. Gregory's death: his title of saint: his invocation: his grave before the sacristy (ante secretarium offitii) of St. Peter.

T. Leo ALMOND. Here beginneth the book of the blessed and praiseworthy man, Gregory, pope of the city of Rome. Of his life and virtues. Inprimis: Since the holy catholic church throughout the world ceaseth not ever to celebrate the teachers in every nation, whom it rejoiceth to have given it under the mastership of Christ, for his glorification, and handeth them down in written records to posterity, that they may place their hope in God, and forget not the works of God and may fulfil his behests, it is fitting that, to the best of our power, God helping, we make mention of our master, telling of him whom we may call with all Christendom saint Gregory. Here endeth the little preface. I. There was one of the Roman nation, whose father was Gordianus and his mother Silvia, noble by title, but nobler in religion before God. Longwhile dwelling in a monastery, &c, &c. |21

IX. And in no wise should it be left untold how devoutly, and with what incomparable discernment of the eyes of the heart he furthered our conversion to God. For, as the faithful narrate, before his predestined pontificate, there came to Rome certain of our nation, fair of hair and of feature. Of whose corning when he had heard, at once he desired to see. Summoning them to his presence and dwelling with clear-minded vision upon the new and unwonted sight, especially moved inwardly thereto by God, he questioned of what race they were. (Gloss. Whom some affirm to have been comely children, others to have been curled and seemly youths). To the reply "Angels are they hight of whom we come"; quoth he: "Angels of God." Then said he: "The King of that race, how is he named?" "Aelli" was their reply. And said he: "Alleluia; for the praise of God behoveth to be in that place." Also he requireth the name of the tribe of which they were sprung; and "Deire" say they. And said he: "From the anger of God ye are fled to the faith.

X. Then therefore occasion having arisen to enkindle his desire, so yearningly he begged his forerunner in the pontificate, pope Benedict, to grant him leave, that he could not resist the urgency of his prayer, pleading that it were a miserable thing that hell should be stored with such beautiful vessels. Upon such and suchlike speech, the pontiff gave him licence to journey hither. At which licence the Roman people was exceeding sad. Whereupon it is said they did plan together to station themsolves in three parties along the way by which the said pontiff betook himself to Saint Peter's. Each party as he came along cried out thus: "Thou hast offended Peter. Thou hast destroyed Rome. Thou hast banished Gregory." He therefore, hearing thrice so fearful a saying, hastily sending messengers, caused him to

return. Of which return he was aware beforehand, the Lord admonishing him with holy intent through a locust. For when they had journeyed three days and were resting after the manner of travellers in a certain place, a locust came to him as he was reading, Forthwith he took cognisance of its name, as though it said to him: stay in the place (Sta in loco). Nevertheless he speedily bade his companions make ready to depart. About which while he and they were busied, forestalled by the messengers, he was led back to Rome. |23

XI. Not long after these things, the pope having deceased, he was as we have stated chosen to the pontificate. And speedily as he might, he sent hither the men of blessed memory Augustine, Mellitus and Laurence, with the rest, ordaining Augustine bishop, by whom Mellitus is said to have been ordained, and by Mellitus, Laurence. XII. By them therefore Ethelbert King of Kent, the first King of all the Angles converted to the faith of Christ, was made bright with his nation by the cleansing of baptism. After whom, in our own race, which is called the Humbrian, Edwin, son of the aforesaid Aelli, of whom we rightly narrated the Alleluia prediction of divine praise, was the most eminent excelling King, as well in his singular wisdom as in his royal sway, since the coining of the people of the Angles into this island. XIII. Oh how beautifully and how worthily does all that has been said harmonise together ! For the word Angles, if the letter e be transferred, becometh Angels; a name of a truth bespeaking eternal praise to Almighty God in heaven, without stint, for they weary not in praise. Of whom blessed John, &c, &c. And Aelli is formed of two syllables, which if we take the letter e from the first syllable, and change the i of the second into e, soundeth "Alle," which in our tongue signifieth all things whatsoever. And this is what our Lord saith: " Come to me all ye that labour and are burthened," and so forth. In like manner alle signifieth the King the Father, lu the Son, ia the Holy Ghost.

XIV. Verily when this prophecy was made, Edwin, the forechosen vessel of God's mercy, was peradventure in his father Aelli's loins, whose name, framed in three syllables, rightly signifieth the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Which he teacheth who calleth to himself all baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Unto this Edwin the father in baptism was the venerable bishop Paulinus; one of those whom we have said Gregory directed to us. Who is said to have given very readily on a certain Lord's day, as I deem, a sign of the wisdom of his God. |25

XV. As the foresaid King and his company were hasting with him to the church, for the catechizing of those who were in the bondage not only of heathendom but of unlawful wedlock, from the hall where they had been exhorted to the mending of both these matters; even then a crow with left-handed omen croaked its harsh note. Whereupon all the throng of courtiers who still were in the public place, hearing the bird, stood in amaze to behold it; as though the new song were not to be truly a canticle to our God in His church, but a false and bootless one. Then the venerable bishop, whilst God beholding ordered everything from his throne, called to a certain one of his attendants; "Shoot me an arrow speedily at the bird." Which straightway done, he bade both bird and arrow to be kept till, after the catechizing, he was led to the hall of those whom he taught. When they were gathered together he proved to

his new and still ignorant flock, turning the matter very surely to the action of God, that so plain a sign showed their former idolatry to be worthless in all things; saying that since that foolish bird knew not that it sang its own death, it could in no wise forebode anything of profit to such as were born again into the likeness of God; that is, to those who are baptized and who have rule over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and all living things of the earth. Which they of their native cunning, God so permitting, make boast to have knowledge of, unto the misleading of the foolish.

XVI. But because we have made mention of our most Christian King, Edwin, it is fitting also that we tell of his conversion; in what way it was said of old that it was foretold to him. Which though we tell it not so closely as we heard it told, yet as truly as we may, we tell in brief what we believe to have befallen, though we had it not from the report of those who knew more of him than others. For we hold it not right to pass over in silence what is piously handed down by the faithful; even though oftentimes the report of any happening, carried down over a wide stretch of time and of land, reaches divers ears in divers fashion. For this thing fell out long before the days of all now living. But we know of a truth that all things so fell out, because the same King was an exile under Redwald, King of the East Saxons. Whom his rival, the tyrant Edfrid, who had driven him from his country, so unceasingly harried, striving by bribes to purchase his death. At which time they say, being afeard of his life, the apparition of a beautiful vision, crowned with the cross of Christ, began to comfort him; |27 promising, if ho were willing to obey, a happy life and the future rule of his nation. Giving pledge of his willingness, if what was promised should prove true, answer was made: "Thou shalt approve it true; and whoso first appeareth to thee in this likeness and sign, him them behovest obey. Who shall teach thee to serve the one true and living God who fashioned all things; the God who shall give thee all things whatsoever I promise, and shall show thee through him all things thou must do." In which likeness, they say, Paulinus, the aforesaid bishop first appeared to him.

XVII. O loving father, Lord God Almighty, though we deserved not the bodily presence of blessed Gregory, through him nevertheless be thanks given to thee for our teacher Paulinus; whom thou didst show to be thy faithful servant at his death. For they that saw tell how, when he died, his soul sped to heaven in the figure of a great white bird, such as is a swan, and exceeding beautiful.

XVIII. But to follow on my purpose, I will tell how the lamp of Christ was bright with blossoms of wonders through this King Edwin; that his merits may more clearly shine forth. It is worthy that we give to memory how by God's revealing the relics of the bones of this kingly man were found. There was, therefore a brother of our race, Trimma by name, holding office of priest in a monastery of Mid-Anglia, in the days of Ethelfrid their King, whilst Eanfleda the daughter of the aforesaid holy King Edwin still lived in monastic life. To which priest, as he slept, a certain one appeared, saying to him: "Go thou to the place which I shall tell thee, which is in that region called Heathfield, where Edwin the king was killed; for it behoves thee take hence his bones, and carry with thee to Streones-halh (Whitby);" which

is the most famous monastery of Elfleda, daughter of the aforesaid queen, Eanfleda, who was, as we have said, wife of Edwin, exceeding holy. To whom he made answer; "I know not the place." But he: "go," he said, "to such a village in Lincoln " (whose name our brother, a relative of that priest, and who told me this history, did not recall) "and seek out in it a man named Teoful; he is able to show thee where it is." The priest, knowing the manifold deceiving of dreams, put away the thing thus revealed to him. Wherefore, being afterwards more strongly admonished by this man, he told it to another of his brethren. But he bade him dismiss it. |29

XIX. After which things, again a third time the man appeared and chastened him with much scourging. Then speedily be went to the aforesaid man and found as was shown to him. From whom he learnt where he should seek the relics of the King. Which learning, forthwith he set out for the place thus told him. At his first digging he found not what he sought, but at the second more careful search, as often happeneth. And he bore away with him the desirable treasure which he had found to this our monastery. In which those holy bones now lie with other our Kings, in the church of So. Peter, prince of the apostles, to the south of that altar which is hallowed in the name of blessed Peter, apostle, and to the east of that which is hallowed to St. Gregory in that same church. It is said that this priest, who afterwards dwelt for a time in the place of burial, affirmed that he many times saw the spirits of the slain who were baptized come in splendour to visit their bodies, and added that he would if he could, build a monastery there.

XX. Making then an end of the discourse of such matters as properly concern ourselves, let us turn to those miracles whereby. Christ himself being witness, the holiness of Gregory is held in report amoung us. For, of old &c, &c. XXXII. Of the death of this man, how and of what manner it was, we have not heard. How he died in God, which is the groat test of holiness: how more than at first he re-established our faith; as of that which he wrote in humility of the monastic life &c, &c, For so holy indeed is this Saint held throughout the whole earth, that always, by all and everywhere, he is called St. Gregory. Wherefore in the litanies, by which we implore the Lord for our excesses and innumerable sins by which we offend Him, we call St. Gregory to our aid, together with the holy apostles and martyrs, amongst whom we believe him to be joined in heaven to Christ, and to be a faithful and prudent servant over His household. He waiteth the blessed promise of the Lord, the fourth day before the ides of March, in the church of St. Peter, whose episcopal see he filled thirteen years and six months and ten days, lying buried before his sacristy, whose body sleepeth in peace. By whom he shall be awakened into glory.

[Footnotes renumbered and placed at the end] 1. Downside. Review. ----Vol. V. No. 3, July, 1880, p. 271. "Die Aelteste Biographie Gregors I. Von Paul Ewald." 2. Historische Aufsaetze dem Andenken an Georg Waitz gewidmet. Haunover Hakh, 1886. 3. Pope Benedict I. A.D. 574-578. 4. Daughter; see above.

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