

The writings of Dorothy Whitelock

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The letters of Pope Boniface V and the mission of Paulinus to Northumbria

PETER HUNTER BLAIR

Paulinus is named, together with Mellitus, Justus and Rufinianus, as one of the leading members of the mission which left Rome for England in 601. His career in England lasted until his death forty-three years later and was, with the probable exception of that of his deacon, James,¹ by far the longest of any of the Roman missionaries known to us by name. Yet nothing has been recorded about that career between 601 and 625, a period four times as long as the duration of his Northumbrian mission. Bede states that he was ordained bishop by Justus on 21 July 625 and went to Northumbria with Æthelberg, baptizing the infant princess Eanfled in 626 and Edwin in 627 at York. He continued preaching for six years until Edwin's death, spending most of his time in Deira, but also visiting Bernicia. He baptized in the Glen at Old Yeavinger and in the Swale near Catterick. He built a church in *Campodonum*, and went on a mission to the kingdom of Lindsey, building a church at Lincoln and baptizing in the Trent at Littleborough. He received a pallium from Pope Honorius, but after Edwin's death he withdrew to Kent, becoming bishop of Rochester, where he died on 10 October 644. All this information is derived from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* which was completed rather more than eighty-five years after Paulinus's death.²

Among Gregory the Great's correspondents were four men called Paulinus, but three of them were already bishops when Gregory was writing to them. The fourth is mentioned in a letter written in February 591 to Anthemius, rector of a papal estate in Campania, and is described as *presbyter monasterii sancti Herasmi, quod in latere montis Repperi situm est*.³ Since Anthemius was instructed in the letter to give this Paulinus some assistance we may infer that he was personally known to Gregory, but the whereabouts of the monastery itself is unknown save that it lay in Campania. Among the cities of Campania was Naples with whose neighbourhood the English church had connections in the seventh and eighth

¹ James survived until the 670s, see below, p. 12, but we do not know the date of his first arrival in England.

² *HE* i. 29; ii. 14, 16, 17, 19 and 20; iii. 14; and v. 24.

³ *Gregorii I Papae Registrum Epistolarum*, MGH, *Epistolae* 1, 27. For the three bishops called Paulinus, see *ibid.* ii, 502.

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centuries,¹ but Paulinus is a common name and a conjecture that the Campanian priest was the same as the later Northumbrian missionary would require better evidence than we possess. The notes about Gregory the Great found in the short collection of papal biographies known as the *Liber Pontificalis* make only brief reference to the English mission. They name Mellitus, Augustine and John, in that order, but they do not distinguish between the first group of missionaries who set out from Rome under Augustine in 596 and the second group which reached England in 601 under the leadership of Mellitus. They do not mention Paulinus by name, though he may have been included among the *alios plures... monachos* who were of the party.² No reference to the mission is to be found in the biographies of any of Gregory the Great's successors.

There is no strictly contemporary written evidence about the activities of Paulinus in England. The nearest approach consists of letters written by Pope Boniface V and these, unlike Gregory the Great's letters, have not survived independently in the papal archive, but are known to us only from Bede's *History*.³ There is no evidence for the survival either in Kent or in Northumbria of original documents relating to the earliest days of the Roman mission and it therefore seems probable that Bede's knowledge of Boniface's letters, as of those of Gregory the Great, derived from copies made in Rome in the eighth century by one of the many Englishmen who visited Rome at that time. Although, in his letter to Albinus, Bede refers specifically to Nothelm as bringing him written documents,⁴ we should not overlook Hwætberht as a likely bearer to Jarrow of written documents secured in Rome. Hwætberht, who succeeded Ceolfriht as abbot in 716 and was still alive in 735 when Bede died, was in Rome with other monks from Wearmouth and Jarrow in 701, and Bede wrote of him *non paruo ibidem temporis spatio demoratus, quaeque sibi necessaria indicabat, didicit, descripsit, retulit*.⁵ Was it through the agency of Hwætberht, called Eusebius, whose literary interests are witnessed by the Latin riddles which he composed,⁶ that the works of Gregory the Great were first brought to Northumbria?

¹ Neapolitan influence on the Lindisfarne Gospels has long been recognized. A scribal note on the Echternach Gospels, 222v, points to earlier connections with a book from the library of Eugippius (d. 535), abbot of Lucullanum near Naples; E. A. Lowe, *CLA* v, no. 578. Marginal additions in an eighth-century insular hand suggest that the *Diatessaron* written for Victor, bishop of Capua 541–54, may have been in England before it went to Fulda; Lowe, *ibid.* viii, no. 1196.

² *Liber Pontificalis, Pars Prior, MGH, Gesta Pontificum Romanorum* 1, 161.

³ William of Malmesbury gives a series of spurious letters written in support of Canterbury's claims vis-à-vis York. Among them is one supposedly written by Boniface V to Justus; *Councils* III, 73–4.

⁴ Plummer, *Bede* 1, 3.

⁵ *Historia Abbatum*, ed. Plummer, *Bede* 1, 383; also *De Temporum Ratione*, ch. XLVII, *Bedae Opera de Temporibus*, ed. C. W. Jones (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), pp. 266–7.

⁶ *Eusebius (Hwætberhtus): Aenigmata*, ed. A. Ebert, *Sächsische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* xxviii (1877), 20–56.

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The text of the *Ecclesiastical History* contains three letters written by Boniface V – one to Justus, one to Edwin and one to Æthelberg – but it is possible that Bede did not put into the *History* all the letters of Boniface that he had. Recording the appointment of Mellitus to Canterbury after the death of Lawrence, with Justus remaining at Rochester, Bede notes that Mellitus and Justus *susceperunt scripta exhortatoria a pontifice Romanae et apostolicae sedis Bonifatio qui post Deusedit ecclesiae praefuit anno incarnationis dominicae DCXVIII*.¹ Bede thus precisely identified the pope in question as Boniface V, 619–25, rather than Boniface IV, 608–15, but it is not quite clear whether we should take the date 619 as referring to the year of Boniface's succession or to the date of the letters, though the point is of little significance since we know nothing of the contents of the letters save that they were exhortatory.

After recording the death of Mellitus on 24 April 624, the succession of Justus to Canterbury and the consecration of Romanus to Rochester by Justus, Bede noted that Justus had received authority to ordain bishops from Pope Boniface – *cuius auctoritatis ista est forma* – and he then gave the text of a letter addressed *Dilectissimo fratri Iusto Bonifatius*.² Neither at the beginning nor at the end is there any dating clause and Bede himself does not say when the letter was written. In places the text is difficult to construe and Plummer,³ noting the variation between *uos* and *uester* in its earlier part and *tu* and *tuus* in its later part, suggested that careless copying might have resulted in the joining together of two originally separate letters, one to Mellitus and one to Justus, but such a conjecture hardly seems necessary. In isolation from its context the letter is primarily one of exhortation and encouragement to Justus, but within the context of the *History* we can see that Bede inserted it in order to show by what authority Justus had consecrated Romanus as bishop of Rochester.

Setting aside the exhortation, the facts which emerge from the letter are that Pope Boniface has received a letter from Justus, that letters received from a king called *Adulwald* have shown him with what depth of scriptural learning Justus had brought that king to a true conversion, that, with the bearer of his letter to Justus, Boniface has sent a *pallium* which Justus may use in *sacrosanctis celebrandis mysteriis*, but not at any other time, and finally that Boniface has given Justus permission to ordain bishops as need might arise. The Moore manuscript of the *History* reads *fili nostri adulwaldi regis*⁴ and this reading of the king's name is supported with only minor variations by the other eighth-century manuscripts known to Plummer.⁵ The Leninograd manuscript, not known to Plummer, also read originally *adulwaldi*, but a later hand erased the first *u* and inserted a *b* partly over the second *u*, to

¹ HE II, 7.² HE II, 8.³ Bede II, 92–3.⁴ *The Moore Bede*, ed. P. Hunter Blair, EEMF 9 (Copenhagen, 1959), 33r.⁵ See Plummer's critical notes to HE II, 8.

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give a reading something like *ad lbaldi*. A different and considerably later hand added *eadbaldi* in the upper margin.¹ These alterations and additions show that at a relatively early date it was assumed by some that *adulwaldi* was an error for *eadbaldi* and that the reference in the letter is to that King Eadbald who ruled in Kent after the death of his father Æthelberht. All modern commentators seem to have made the same assumption, though without knowledge of the Leningrad manuscript. Yet the manuscript authority for the form *adulwald* is excellent, the name is a common one and it is quite distinct from Eadbald, as Bede himself undoubtedly knew. Recalling how little we know of the history of south-eastern England in the first decades of the seventh century, we should be wiser to accept the evidence of the letter at its face value and to believe that Justus did in fact secure the conversion of an otherwise unrecorded king called Æthelwald. Before going to Canterbury Justus was bishop in Rochester for twenty years from 604, and it is a fair inference that it was as bishop of Rochester that he secured King Æthelwald's conversion. The existence of the two Kentish bishoprics is part of a considerable body of evidence pointing to a real division between eastern and western Kent.² We know that at certain times in the seventh century there were two kings reigning at the same time in Kent, and that there were times when two, three or even four kings ruled together among both the South Saxons and the East Saxons.³

The sending of the pallium to Justus ought not to be regarded in the light of the significance attached to this vestment in later times. The pope stated specifically that it was to be used only in the celebration of the eucharist, and it would be unwise to suppose that already at this early date it had come to be regarded as particular to the archbishop of Canterbury. Mellitus, the predecessor of Justus at Canterbury, was a man of poor physical health⁴ and it may well have seemed desirable to authorize Justus to consecrate bishops while Mellitus was still alive. We cannot assume that Boniface's letter was not written to Justus until he was already archbishop. Lacking other evidence we can say only that the letter was written in the years 619–25. It has no relevance to the date of King Eadbald's conversion nor to the date at which news of this event reached Rome.

The letters from Boniface V to Edwin and Æthelberg are given consecutively in the *History* and comprise the entire content of II. 10–11, saving only for brief introductory sentences. Each of the two is explicitly stated to be a copy (*exemplar*) of a letter written by Boniface, called in the one letter bishop of the apostolic see and in the other pope of the city of Rome. The letter to Edwin is a long exhortation to the observance of the true

¹ *The Leningrad Bede*, ed. O. Arngart, EEMF 2 (Copenhagen, 1952), 35v, col. 2.

² H. M. Chadwick, *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge, 1905), pp. 271–4.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 270 and 275.

⁴ HE II. 7.

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The letters of Pope Boniface V

faith and the abandonment of all idolatry. It contains only one passage relating to specific events in England:

We suppose that your highness, because of the proximity of place, has become thoroughly acquainted with what the mercy of the redeemer has wrought in the enlightenment of our glorious son, King Audubald, and the peoples subject to him. We therefore trust with assured hope that by heavenly long-suffering this wonderful gift is being bestowed upon you; since indeed we have learned that your illustrious consort, who is discerned to be part of your body, has been enlightened with the reward of eternity through the regeneration of holy baptism.

In later passages Boniface urges Edwin to receive the word of the preachers and the gospel of God of which they are the bearers. In his letter to Æthelberg Boniface refers to the gift of faith which has been bestowed upon her and continues: 'For we have learned from those who brought to us the news of the praiseworthy conversion of our glorious son King Audubald that your highness also, after receiving the wonderful sacrament of the Christian faith, perpetually shines forth in good works pleasing to God.' Urging Æthelberg to refrain from idolatry and the allurements of temples and sooth-saying, Boniface continues: 'and when of our fatherly love we had made enquiry of your glorious husband we learned that, hitherto serving the abomination of idolatry, he has delayed in showing his obedience by giving ear to the voice of the preachers.' Boniface was concerned because in this state the marriage could not be a complete union. *Scriptum namque est: Erunt duo in carne una.* Æthelberg must therefore be unceasing in her efforts to turn Edwin from the worship of idols and to kindle in him the warmth of divine faith.

The letters themselves contain no dating clauses and we have no means of knowing whether they were sent on separate occasions or both together. Bede did not attempt to date them more precisely than by introducing them with the indefinite *quo tempore*. Both letters were written after Boniface had heard of the conversion of King Eadbald (*Audubaldus*) and at a time when he believed that Æthelberg of Kent, though herself Christian, was married to Edwin who as yet remained unconverted. Eadbald's conversion is attributed by Bede to Lawrence whose successor, Mellitus, is said to have died on 24 April 624 after holding the archbishopric for five years.¹ On this evidence Eadbald's conversion should fall before April 619. The date of Æthelberg's conversion is unknown and Bede does not give a date in his reference to the marriage of Æthelberg and Edwin. We can say only that the two letters were written some time during Boniface's tenure of the papacy, i.e. between 619 and 25 October 625. Whether Bede knew this last date is uncertain.

¹ *HE* II, 6 and 7.

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Familiarity with Bede's account of the mission of Paulinus to Northumbria may lead us to forget that its value as historical evidence is that of a Northumbrian tradition whose oldest manuscript-witness dates from rather more than a century after the events to which it refers. The account is contained in six consecutive chapters of book II of the *History*, but is divided into two parts by the letters from Boniface V to Edwin and Æthelberg which fill two of those six chapters. The chapter preceding the two letters (II. 9) recounts Edwin's courting of Æthelberg, the consecration of Paulinus as bishop and his journey to Northumbria with Æthelberg, the attempt on Edwin's life by an assassin sent from Wessex, the birth and subsequent baptism of Æthelberg's child, Eanflæd, Edwin's punitive expedition against Wessex and his continuing reluctance to accept Christianity. Bede's chronology for this part of the tradition is precise: Paulinus was consecrated bishop *die XII Kalendarum Augustarum anno ab incarnatione Domini DCXXV*, that is 21 July 625 – the attempted assassination of Edwin occurred *anno sequente*, i.e. 626 – Eanflæd was born *nocte sacrosancta dominici paschae* and was baptized *die sancto pentecostes*, i.e. 31 March 626 for the birth and 19 May 626 for the baptism. The second half of the tradition, following the papal letters, occupies three chapters (II. 12–14) of which the first tells of Edwin's experiences in exile at Rædwald's court in East Anglia, the second of the famous debate in the Northumbrian witan and the third of Edwin's baptism at York and of the activities of Paulinus both in Bernicia and in Deira. Bede gives only one exact date in this part of the tradition – the baptism of Edwin which took place in the year *dominicae incarnationis DCXXVII. . . die sancto paschae pridie Iduum Aprilium*,¹ i.e. 12 April 627.

Bede wrote the *History ad instructionem posteritatis*² and he would surely find the story of the mission to Northumbria, in which Edwin rather than Paulinus is the hero, excellently suited to his purpose. Analysis of its different elements – exile and misfortune, the celestial comforter, escape from death, triumph in battle, ultimate conversion – is largely irrelevant. In Bede's view the duty of a historian was to give expression to the beliefs of common people – *opinionem vulgi exprimens, quae vera historiae lex est*, he wrote, in his commentary on Luke,³ slightly adapting a phrase used by Jerome in his tract *Adversus Helvidium*.⁴ Yet we must do Bede the justice of supposing him to be fully aware of the differing evidential value of the *opinio vulgi* on the one hand and the contemporary letters of popes on the other. He plainly signifies this awareness by repeating the texts of such letters verbatim and so leaving his readers to reach their own conclusions from their content. The two letters from Boniface V to Edwin and Æthel-

¹ HE II. 14.³ In *Luceam*, ed. D. Hurst, CC cxx, 67.² HE *Praefatio*.⁴ Migne, PL, xxIII, col. 197.