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The Legends of Saint Augustine of Canterbury: The Myth Illuminates the Man

Joshua B. Tuttle

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TH308: History of Christianity in Britain

Keith Beebe

Saint Augustine of Canterbury¹ is regaled as the man who re-Christianized Britain. Indeed, much of this reputation is deserved. Though there remained a strong, organized, Christian presence, especially in Ireland, the link to Rome had been all but completely severed by Augustine's time. So, at the behest of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604), Augustine embarked on a mission that would end with Britain reentering the Christian fold. And yet, we don't know all that much about Augustine. Most historical records of the day record his deeds, but say little directly about the man. We do not have an extensive picture of his character or his personality. What we do know of Augustine is primarily inferred from the little direct knowledge we have of his actions, and the legends and traditions related to him. The paragraphs that follow will examine some of these inferences and traditions, in the hope of producing a better understanding of Augustine the man, that we might properly understand his deeds in the context of a living, breathing person.

To begin with, let us examine in general terms what we understand about Augustine's manner. To be charitable, Augustine was not a people person. He is understood to have been arrogant and tactless, to the point that it frequently endangered the success of his mission. This is best illustrated by well-known example. Before the second council with the British bishops, whom Augustine was doing his best to bring under the authority of Rome, tradition holds that the British bishops consulted a learned hermit in order to decide how they should respond to Augustine's claims of authority. The hermit told them that "if Augustine was a man of God, they ought to follow him." Rightly, the British bishops asked the hermit how they should know whether Augustine was a man of God or not. The hermit replied, quoting scripture, "'Bear My yoke and learn from Me, who am humble of heart.' If Augustine, therefore, is gentle and humble, make sure he carries Christ's yoke; but if he is proud, it shows he is not from God, and we must disregard him" (qtd. in Howorth 163-4). He further intoned that they pay attention to how Augustine received them at the next council. If Augustine should rise to meet them, it would show

¹ Saint Augustine of Canterbury's exact date of birth is not known, but he was probably born in the first third of the 6th century, and he most likely died on May 26th, 604.

that he was a humble man, and that they should do as he said. If, on the other hand, he should remain seated, it would prove that Augustine was an arrogant and proud man, and therefore, he not being a man of God, they could justly ignore him. As Bede tells us, Augustine did not rise, and his meeting went poorly (ii. 2).

Such is the common understanding of what happened. But how accurate is it? Did Augustine nearly fail in his goals simply because he was arrogant? Perhaps, but that would be a gross oversimplification. It is true that Augustine was high-handed in his dealings, but he was not beating his own chest in order to throw his weight around or feel important—he had been instructed to bring the Britons under his authority by none other than the Pope. Indeed, Augustine adopted this domineering attitude after specifically requesting instructions from Gregory. Howorth relates: “Among the famous questions put by St. Augustine to the Pope, the eighth one dealt with the way he was to treat the British bishops” (143). Howorth then quotes Bede: “[A]s for all the bishops of Britain, we commit them to your care, that the unlearned may be taught, the weak strengthened by persuasion, and the perverse corrected by authority” (Bede, qtd. in Howorth 143). So, Augustine had been given full authority to insist that the British bishops bow to the Roman traditions. To modern sensibilities, the sources of disagreement between the Celtic bishops and the Roman traditions might seem petty. For instance, one of the objections Augustine is surmised (surmised because we simply do not have complete records) to have raised to British traditions was relating to baptism. One guess is that Augustine objected to the omission of chrism in baptism by the Irish (Howorth 151), or even the number of immersions used (Howorth 150). While these matters do not seem important today, in Augustine’s time ritual differences such as these were serious enough to warrant the nullification of the “invalid” baptisms (Howorth 152). As such, we have to understand that these matters were of mortal significance to Augustine, as he would have believed that it was of the utmost spiritual importance that he bring the people of Britain under Roman traditions where possible. He was reasonable in his goals, even though his skill at

diplomacy was lacking. It is also worth noting that Augustine had specifically sought guidance regarding the British, rather than acting on his own authority in demanding that the British bend. Furthermore, in his second council with the British, Augustine allowed that he would be satisfied if the British would adopt merely three of his requests: The time of the Paschal feast, baptismal traditions, and an agreement to help him spread Christianity to the Anglians (Howorth 164). This is not the behavior of petty man, though perhaps I am being too charitable. In any event, the British bishops had been acting under their own autonomous authority for centuries, and the situation called for gentleness and cooperation, the two things Augustine did not come prepared to deliver. Howorth puts it more bluntly: “[Augustine met] with very scant success due largely to his tactlessness and arrogance.” (Howorth 143-144).

If we stipulate that Augustine is as obstinate as history makes him out to be, why would Gregory have chosen him for such an important mission, in fact the first such mission of its kind? According to Deansely, it is possible that Gregory had little choice. Britain was believed to be a very dangerous place, and ordinary clergy were not eager to go to such dangerous lands. Consider, a Gallo-Roman carving, admittedly from before Gregory’s time, but still representative of the common understanding of the dangers of Britain in the same, which depicts “a human victim hanging head downwards by his feet, with his head extended and his throat bare, so that his throat might be cut and the blood flow into the bucket placed ready beneath” (5). Additionally, it was a dangerous time in Rome itself due to the city being full of refugees from the invading Lombards, which makes it all the more astonishing that Gregory persevered to send a mission to Britain at all. It’s hardly a wonder that Gregory did not have a mass of clergy vying for their turn to undertake such missionary work. Monks were a much better choice, because they would simply do as they were told, no matter the danger; they were “‘slaves of God’ (*servi Dei*). They were trained in obedience and prayer; they would go to the darkest England, not knowing a word of English, hearing by rumour that this was a very perilous mission, from which they would

certainly never return, and where death was likely to be unpleasant” (Deanesly 5). However, reluctant as they would almost certainly have been, Gregory was still the Pope, and he could have forced clergy to undertake his mission and avoided the difficulties monks presented (their ill training for worldly interaction, inability to baptize or say mass, ETC.) if he wanted to, but he did not. He sent monks, and he sent them by choice. Gregory’s monastic sympathies account for and explain the selection of someone like Augustine for missionary work. Gregory, before he became Pope, was a monk, and he desired to have his historic mission carried out by the class he considered “the real depositories of the Christian ideal” (Howorth 27). Monks were very secluded men, unversed in the ways of the world. They made for poor administrators (Howorth 114), but they were a singular class of God’s servants. Howorth puts it quite poignantly: “[T]he men who were willing to face the dangers and difficulties of the task were only to be found among those who had said a final good-bye to the world and its attractions and who were not men of the world, but, in the language of the time, were saints” (340). That a man whose life had prepared him for dealing with the personalities of other important men would have had an easier time diplomatically is without question, but who is to say if such a man existed who could have also born the necessary piety. Evidently, Gregory placed more importance on the Godliness of the message poorly rendered than a worse message better delivered. This is further evidenced by the fact that Gregory had Augustine conduct a long visitation of the monasteries in Gaul before departing for Britain to make sure they were up to Gregory’s high standards, a prudent measure as monasteries often acted with near complete autonomy and were known to become lax in the absence of supervision. Toward the end of this tour, Augustine and his companions heard some disturbing reports of the “savages” in Britain (remember the wood carvings?), and they were in fact too scared to continue. They implored Augustine to return to Rome to beg Gregory to let them come home. Gregory, ever tactful, gave Augustine a promotion and sent him back on his way. There was no more talk of returning (Howorth 29-30). To fully appreciate the scope of Augustine’s mission, and why his companions were

frightened, we must understand that the missionary work Augustine was sent to do is different from missionary work as most of us think of it today. We normally think of a mission trip as lasting a few days, perhaps weeks. When Augustine arrived in Britain, he made arrangements for where he would be *buried* (Bright 54). Remember, none of these men expected to ever return to Rome.

Beyond accounts of Augustine's official acts, there aren't many records of Augustine's everyday dealings, and those we have all come from a very few sources (mostly Bede). We are then forced to place a higher than customary amount of credence in a single source, however venerable. Official actions are often conducted through the filter of duty, and so even accurate reports of Augustine's missionary work are not always a reliable lens through which to view his personality. In the absence of personal diaries, letters, and the like, the most reliable—if not the only—means to generate a picture of someone is through the stories people tell about him when he is gone—his myths, legends, and traditions. We are fortunate, as the folklore of St. Augustine is extremely rich and varied, and it serves us well in this capacity.

Consider these two legends attesting to the temper of St. Augustine:

The first is given us by way of Caxton's Golden Legend and supported by Gocelin (according to Howorth), and it concerns Augustine's trip through Dorset. The people there did not accept his teachings, and in fact drove him out of town under a hail of fish heads. Augustine then appealed to the Lord to punish them, and He did: the descendants of all those in Dorset were born with tails, until they had repented for their mistreatment of Augustine (Caxton 90 and Howorth 168). Regrettably, there does not appear to be anything further in Caxton to go on than this, and I was unable to locate Howorth's cited reference to Gocelin, so not much more can be discovered about this particular tradition.

The second is given by Howorth, citing Gocelin a second time. I was again unable to locate the cited source, so I will proceed from Howorth's summary of Gocelin:

“The travelers [Augustine and his companions] arrived ... wearied and tired. They crossed the Loire, when a rough crowd from Se, consisting chiefly of women, drove them away with taunts and jeers. One of the women was especially offensive, where upon Augustine, afraid for his chastity, took up a stick (*batulus*) to stop her. This flew from his hand to a great distance, and as a result a spring gushed out and the crowd eased their aggressive attitude” (36).

Even simple legends like these allow us to infer much about Augustine’s personality. Both legends paint Augustine as a temperamental figure prone to outbursts against those who threaten him. He is unafraid to marshal his authority, and he does not shrink before the crowd. The second legend could also be read as a demonstration of misogyny, which is easily explained by the times generally, and specifically by Augustine’s status as a monk—he would hardly ever have been around women—hence his fear for his chastity.

The trouble with legends is that we have no guarantees that they are more than myths. Howorth admits immediately after the preceding passage that “[s]uch are the naïve stories which in days of easy belief gathered round famous people like Augustine” (37). The question of whether miracles should be taken literally is not a new question, and was in fact one considered by Augustine and Gregory’s contemporaries. Colgrave and Mynors address the question plainly:

“Bede’s very considerable use of saints’ Lives, of the sagas associated with them in tradition, together with the stories supplied by friends and contemporaries, is responsible for one of the chief difficulties which faces a modern reader of the History. How is it that one who is supposed to be our greatest medieval historian can spend so much time telling wonder tales?” (xxxiv-v).

As it turns out, the actors of the day were aware of this problem, but made such liberal use of “wonder tales” for two reasons. First, the idea was that miracles are necessary at the beginning of the history of the church in order to foster belief. Faith without miracles was difficult to accept for ordinary men, and though Bede and Gregory both understood that true faith and faith in the miraculous were not the same thing, they hoped that “the latter might be a stepping-stone to the former” (xxxv). This attitude explains the heavy presence of the supernatural—and perhaps nonsensical—in our histories of

the various Saints, Augustine included. Second, and in a similar vein, these stories are there because the people of the age expected them to be there. Bright summarizes it thusly:

“[O]f the mediæval stories of miracles the great bulk may be summarily dismissed, ... but because the interval between the alleged occurrence and the account of it is usually long enough to allow of a rank upgrowth of legend, encouraged by the fixed preconception of the age, that miracles must always attend upon, and attest, high sanctity” (64).

Essentially, in an age when everyone believed in the supernatural, these stories sprang up naturally, and formed up the common tradition. Anything less would be rejected as too mundane, so historians and theologians such as Gregory and Bede include them in their chronicles (remember—stepping stones),—but make no mistake, Bede and Gregory absolutely believed in miracles. Gregory in fact wrote a letter to Augustine about miracles he had heard he had performed, encouraging him to exalt in the glory of God at their performance and in the mysteriousness of God, but not to take pride in himself for performing them (see Bede i. 31). To paraphrase Bright’s explanation, some miracles are unlikely, and should be disbelieved, and others, perhaps those with some form of evidence, should not necessarily be discounted, and should perhaps even be believed (65).

In the rest of this essay I will examine some legends surrounding Augustine, and, where possible, show what evidence I have found that would support their plausibility, or even probability, if warranted. However, even if we cannot verify the truth of these legends—even if we suspect that they are in fact pure fancy—, they are still useful to us. For our purposes, whether a given myth is *true* or not is less important than what *attitudes* the myth encourages about its subject. For example, legend has it that when Augustine came ashore on the isle of Thanet, his feet left an impression like he had stepped onto wet concrete. Howorth relates this legend as told by Thorn, a 14th century treasurer of St. Augustine’s Abbey. According to Thorn, this stone was then brought into the chapel, where the locals gathered every year to pray for their health (Thorn, paraphrased in Howorth 60). Such a legend tells us that Augustine had left a significant footprint in history. The fact that people worshiped a cast supposed

to be of his footprints as a relic was not a behavior inconsistent with the times. In the same way that tales sprang up and became an important part of the faith, in those days, relics of holy persons were brought into churches to confer blessings and give the people tangible proof to back their faith. We no longer have this set of Augustine's supposed footprints, so it is impossible for us to evaluate this particular legend, beyond the fact that it was important enough that the local people believed it in the 14th century.

There is another legend about Augustine regarding relics whose physical evidence was more compelling, whether or not we believe the story behind it. St. Augustine's Abbey is actually a complex of buildings rather than a single building. One of the original buildings, the chapel of St. Pancras, was allegedly used by King Ethelbert as an idol house (Howorth disputes this use, but we are concerned primarily with the legend), which Augustine cleansed of evil and into which he brought holy Christian relics (Smith 25 and Howorth 72). According to legend, the devil was "[s]o incensed ... at this usurpation that he assaulted the building, leaving the print of his talons in the walls of the south porch" (Smith 25). Howorth, again relating Thorn, says that the marks were on the East wall of the chapel, placed there when the Devil "had tried to destroy the building" (72). Timbs, in his *Abbeys, Castles, and Ancient Halls of England and Wales (South Volume)*, further corroborates this legend, or at least the physical presence of marks that looked like they could have been made by claws: "he [the Devil] was so much displeased at this change that he assaulted the chapel with all his violence, but was not able to overthrow it; yet he left the print of his talons sticking in the walls of the south porch. That there are some marks there, Somner says, cannot be denied" (Timbs 333). This legend is especially interesting because of how well documented the presence of the claw marks is. It seems that the marks really *were* there, which is a distinction that most legends of this kind lack. Timbs relates the legend with particular force, elevating the myth of Augustine—and thus Augustine himself—to a level that nearly has him personally battle the Devil and come out the victor ("with all his violence, but was not able to overthrow it"). And yet, even in

defeat at the mighty holiness of Augustine, the Devil still left his mark. Such a legend is the perfect church legend, as it ascribes great power to Augustine, venerating a church authority for his righteousness, yet still gives humbling warning that the Devil can never be truly defeated, and should thus still be feared. The fact that the legend rests on reliable physical evidence makes the story still fascinating today, and as a story it is not lessened by the fact that Timbs concludes his paragraph by stating, perhaps reluctantly, “they [the marks] are probably occasioned by the ivy having eaten into the materials of that part of the building” (333).

I would like to return for a moment to the two councils Augustine had with the British bishops. I have already discussed the second one, in which Augustine offended the British by exercising his granted authority. I have not yet discussed the previous council, in which Augustine also bungled the diplomatic situation but supposedly won the grudging respect of the British by performing a minor healing miracle. Bruce tells us, (27), “the situation, from every point of view, demanded the most delicate handling. Augustine, according to Bede, opened the discussion by telling the British bishops that they reckoned the date of Easter wrongly” (27). By any measure, these are not the workings of a supreme diplomat. And yet, there was a second council. Why? According to popular legend, Augustine impressed the British bishops by restoring sight to a blind Englishman whom the British bishops had been unable to cure. How could the British refuse to accept Augustine as a true man of God after such a display? If true, this would lend credence to the hypothesis that Gregory thought it more important to send a truly holy man than it was to send a relatable one. But is it true? What evidence is there that would make this tradition plausible or implausible? As the only evidence we have is Bede’s testimony, we will examine that. There are two ways to evaluate it: by considering who authored it, and by taking a closer look at what was said. Let us begin with the former. Howorth, quoting Bright, says that the entire tale “looks like an interpolation in the narrative, and it would seem as if the delegates to the second conference, on both sides, ignored it” (Bright, qtd. in Howorth 162). He reminds us that “this version of

what happened comes from an avowed enemy of the Britons,” and that Hook treated it as a Canterbury tale, I.E. an instructive legend (Howorth 162). So, perhaps we should not trust Bede to have given us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Maybe it was adulterated a little bit. That makes sense. But if we set that aside for the moment and focus only on the language used to determine what is *possible*, I conclude that it might be, though I make the following argument without the benefit of the ability to read the original Latin: The afflicted man is usually characterized as *blind*, but what if this is an exaggeration by Bede, or a mistranslation by those who came after? Dyer notes in his chapter about the healing properties ascribed to certain wells that “the water of St. Austin’s [St. Augustine’s] Well, Leicester, was once in high repute as a remedy for *sore eyes*” (280, emphasis mine). Howorth mentions the same well: “A well close by has the reputation of curing *sore eyes*, which recalls Augustine’s miracle *in which sore eyes were cured*” (157, emphasis mine). If the man Augustine was said to have healed were only suffering from sore eyes, and not actually blind, it is fully conceivable that he could have been healed, though it remains unexplained why Augustine would be able to do something for him that the British could not. Still, it is exciting to consider a rational explanation for the legend, which would allow for the possibility that the tradition is in fact literally true, at least in a sense.

I have saved the most amazing legend for last. It is given in Rainsberry’s *Through the Lych Gate*. Rainsberry tells us that Augustine came through the parish of Long Compton at some point. At the time, the local priest was having a dispute with the local lord, as the latter was refusing to pay his tithes. When he wouldn’t repent, the local priest excommunicated the local lord. Augustine, duly concerned, questioned the man, but when he doubled down on his refusal, Augustine not only upheld the excommunication, but added to it, proclaiming, “I command that no excommunicated person be present at Masse” (Rainsberry 1). Comically, a dead man promptly climbed from his grave at the entrance to the church (for it was common in those days to be buried inside the church) and stood outside the churchyard until Augustine came to speak with him. Augustine, without the slightest

indication of distress at such an occurrence, asked him who he was and why he had left the church. The dead man replied that he was doing as Augustine had ordered; in life he had been excommunicated for refusing to pay his tithes! Patiently, and with great concern for the man's eternal soul, Augustine asked him to show him where the priest who had excommunicated him was buried. He did, and Augustine summoned the priest from his grave to cross examine him. Having determined that all was as described, Augustine asked the dead man if he would now repent, and, having his affirmation, Augustine enquired of the priest whether or not he would forgive the debt and grant the man absolution. Perhaps tempered by 150 years of rest, perhaps duly impressed by Augustine's majesty and not wanting to refuse him, or perhaps just eager to get back to his grave and return to heaven, the priest agreed, the man was absolved, and Augustine put both back in their graves. The local lord promptly handed over his past-due tithes, begged Augustine's forgiveness, and, having it, was faithful in his tithes ever after (Rainsberry 1-2).

This last story provides the most nuanced descriptions of Augustine's personality. He is portrayed all at once as wrathful, patient, uncompromising, and merciful. He takes a hard line on the transgressions, yet displays overwhelming compassion for the dead man's eternal soul, all the while using the ordeal as a moral lesson that he might also save the up-till-then unrepentant noble. In this act, Augustine is showing every bit of the wisdom that Gregory must have seen in him, and it becomes clear at last that despite his diplomatic blunders, Augustine was indeed a good choice for his mission.

I said before that when trying to derive someone's character from the folklore surrounding him, the factual basis of legends is less important than the attitudes expressed and encouraged by them. One caveat to this is that it is important to be mindful of the possibility of propaganda, which would be painting a deliberately misleading picture of the subject. Regrettably, we can never be certain that our traditions aren't tainted in this manner. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the discussion of whether and to what extent the lore and traditions that collectively make up culture perform this function. Smith

points out that it made sense to denigrate Augustine's role, and thus Augustine himself, after the Reformation, as Augustine's mission was Papal in origin, meaning that Augustine was "the first perverter of a pure faith with imported Papal error" (Smith 28). For our purposes, I acknowledge this reality, raise an eyebrow at Bede's overly-enthusiastic treatment of the miracle that saved Augustine's first council with the British bishops, and continue. The advantage of perusing folklore, rather than canonical church lore, is that folklore springs from the tales of the folks. It is much more reliable to glean the nature of a man from the stories his inferiors tell of him than those told by his official biographer.

Being in the realm of folklore, the tales of Augustine related above are generally not the sort of thing that can be proven factual, and I have already stipulated that that is no great impediment to our purpose anyway. But it's still nice to have something to go on that indicates that the tales aren't *impossible* either. Alan Smith, in his article, "St. Augustine of Canterbury in History and Tradition," examines several of the traditions I have presented, specifically the tradition of Augustine's footprint in the stone, the claw marks at the Church of St. Pancras, the first and second conferences with the British bishops, the Long Compton story, and the Dorset story. Smith plotted the supposed locations of these tales, and realized that they lined up very well with the map of Augustine's known activities. He points out that "Augustine does not crop up as a random wonderworker nor even as a traditional founder beyond the confines of his known activity. The traditions make geographical sense" (27). So, as much as is likely possible, Smith was satisfied that it would have at least been plausible for Augustine to have shown up at the times and places described. Smith also noted that the Augustines portrayed in the legends have remarkably consistent characters, giving further, if loose, credence to the stories being about the actual Augustine, and thus, taken as a whole, illustrative of the man himself (27).

So what do we make of all this? Is Augustine really just "an unsympathetic person, with little tact, and pursued by the small thoughts and small issues that act as gadflies on men who live secluded lives," as Howorth describes (xxii)? Smith certainly thinks so: "If Augustine is portrayed as something of

a harsh rigorist at the second conference, so he is at Long Compton and in Dorset. The saint, whatever his historical significance, is not lovingly remembered” (27). I’m not so sure. Yes, Augustine was a hardliner. Yes, he was tactless, and he might well have even been cranky. But these traditions say that he is so much more than that. Like his wise compassion for the lord of Long Compton, Augustine seems to be better than he is treated by history’s conclusions. When he plays the rigorist, he does so not out of pompousness but out of piety; when he strictly adheres to protocol and exercises his authority without restraint, he does so not out of bluster but out of strict adherence to doctrine he believes in. Augustine had many faults, but none can question that in spirit, dedication, and acts he remained *servus Dei* all the days of his life.

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