

REFRIGERATAM UEL BAPTIZATAM: THE CHRISTIAN LEGEND OF EMPEROR TRAJAN IN EARLY MEDIEVAL TIMES

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Abstract: *Classical tradition remembers Emperor Trajan as optimus princeps, a just ruler and equally successful in both political and military campaigns he carried out. Pious, he strove in his aim to preserve the traditional faith of the Romans by implementing strict rules for those who practiced Christianity. Emperor Trajan lived and died as a 'pagan.' However, the later medieval account praises Trajan for his unmistakable Christian virtues. This paper will explore the earliest narratives which lead to the Christian legend of Emperor Trajan, known to be narratum a Romanis and written down for the first time in the Life of Saint Gregory from the Whitby monastery. How did Christians liberate and baptize the soul of a ruler known for his persecutions? This paper will offer a summary of the main classical and Christian sources that were responsible for one of the greatest theological debates on 'virtuous pagans' in the Late Medieval Times.*

Keywords: *Trajan, baptism, virtuous pagans, Whitby, Gregory the Great*

The legendary story of Emperor Trajan's justice is old and well-known. His act of humility, in which he offered an even amount of attention to public service and dispensing justice, earned him not only the title of a 'Good Emperor', but also granted him eternal salvation. However, to be liberated from unearthly sufferings, Trajan had to be confirmed as Christian, and there proved to be no great confirmation but that committed by the head of the Church. As it was seen in his *vita*, written by an anonymous monk of Whitby, Pope Gregory the Great falls on his knees before Trajan's humility and baptizes the condemned pagan with nothing but his tears.

The journey of the *Anonymous Life of Gregory the Great* from the first recorded life of the enlightened pope to the source of a mysterious legend that would shake the inviolable dogma of baptism, and at the same time inspire great minds like Dante and Delacroix, was miraculous and lasting. It is nearly impossible to imagine the monk of the Whitby monastery, located on the very border of Northumbria, how in an attempt to portray Gregory's miracles, cov-

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ered everything else he wrote by the shadow of a profane anecdote – because how could a pagan, who was still alive during the persecution of Christians, be baptized and then liberated from hell? The monk, whose name we do not know, did not try to answer that question. The goal of his work, as he himself tells, is to glorify learned people sent to this world under the spiritual leadership of Christ so that, those who follow them, “*ponant in Deo spem suam et non obliviscantur operum Dei sui et mandata eius exquirant.*”¹² The liberation of Emperor Trajan from the torments of hell was accepted as Pope Gregory’s miracle, and the *narratum a Romanis* remained the only explanation of the legend’s origins.

This paper will interpret the so-called ‘hagiographic versions’³ of the legend, namely those written by the anonymous Whitby monk, Paul the Deacon, John the Deacon, and Pseudo John of Damascus. These four retellings of Trajan’s humility in Gregory the Great’s *vita* were written, primarily, to show the great power and primacy of Pope Gregory over the living and the dead. Through their analysis, I will try to construct Trajan’s virtuous character, along with the path the legend had taken from its earliest form in the works of Plutarch to its final Christian reading. Lastly, I will help shape a clearer narrative the Church used in the early medieval Britain to justify Trajan’s baptism and his rebirth as a good Christian emperor.

Trajan’s Justice in Four Lives of Gregory the Great

It is impossible to find two versions of the legend that are identical in their narrative and motifs. Each version hides something unique within itself. Certainly, the first version of the legend, the one that originally used Trajan’s name and came from the Whitby monastery, supplies a suitable ground for the further development of the unparalleled miracle of Gregory.

The legend of Emperor Trajan is brought to us by a monk from Whitby in this form:

“*Quidam quoque de nostris dicunt narratum a Romanis, sancti Gregorii lacrimis animam Traiani imperatoris refrigeratam uel baptizatam, quod est dictu mirabile et auditu. Quod autem eum dicimus baptizatam, neminem moueat: nemo enim sine baptismo Deum uidebit umquam: cuius tertium genus est lacrimae. Nam die quadam transiens per forum Traianum, quod ab eo opere mirifico constructum dicunt, illud considerans repperit opus tam elemosinarium eum fecisse paganum ut Christiani plus quam pagani esse posse uideret. Fertur namque contra hostes exercitum ducens propere pugnaturus, unius ad eum uoce uiduae misericorditer mollitus, substetisse totius imperator orbis. Ait enim ilia, Domne Traiane, hic sunt homines qui filium*

¹ V. Grig. p. 75.

² This paper is using the most known edition of the Whitby text published in Colgrave 1968.

³ Whatley 1984, pp. 25–63.

meum occiderunt, nolentes mihi rationem reddere. Cui, *'Cum rediero,' inquit, 'dicito mihi et faciam eos tibi rationem reddere.'* At ilia, *'Domine,' ait, 'si inde non uenies, nemo me adiuuet.'* Tunc iam concite reos in eam fecit coram se in armis suis subarratam ei pecuniam conponere quam debuerunt. Hoc igitur sanctus inueniens Gregorius, id esse agnouit quod legimus, *'Iudicate pupillo et defendite uiduam et uenite et arguite me, dicit Dominus.'* Unde per eum se habuit Christum loquentem ad refrigerium animae eius quid implendo nesciebat, ingrediens ad sanctum Petrum solita direxit lacrimarum fluentia usque dum promeruit sibi diuinitus reuelatum fuisse exauditum, atque ut numquam de altero illud presumpsisset pagano."⁴

As for the origin of the miracle, we learn a simple "*narratum a Romanis*" but there is no further explanation, and the reader can only guess how this Roman anecdote reached the most remote monastery of the English kingdoms.⁵ We assume that those reading about this miracle would not have questioned the liberation of a pagan from hell, as the first debates concerning it appear at the end of the 9th century.

The location of the miracle should be examined next. Trajan's Forum was certainly preserved in the 6th and 7th century, during which Pope Gregory lived. It is not clearly indicated what Gregory could have been so surprised by, but it can be assumed that it is related to one of the buildings erected in honor of Trajan's victory over the Dacians, vividly depicted in the forum. The general mention of Trajan's Forum, "*quod ab eo opere mirifico constructum dicunt*", without more precise instructions, whether it might be the triumphal arch or Trajan's column for example, calls into question the author's knowledge of the forum's appearance.⁶

The meeting between the woman and Trajan is briefly retold. Touched by Trajan's mercy he had shown before the woman, Gregory weeps for Trajan in the Church of St. Peter until he learns his prayers have been heard. However, he must never pray again for another pagan. Therefore, Gregory provided the condemned emperor with "*refrigerium animae*" which in the context of the legend should mean salvation.⁷

⁴ V. Grig, p. 105–106.

⁵ The original legend, without its Christian features, did indeed come from the Romans. Dio Cassius sets the same scene with the grieving woman and an emperor, although it is Hadrian who acts as the benevolent ruler (*His. Rom.* LXIX.6.3). Similarly, Plutarch compares the lives of Demetrius and Mark Antony (*Comp. Demetr. et Ant.* 42.3–4). The moment in which Demetrius leaves all his affairs in order to devote himself to the questions of a poor citizen brings the reader closer to the rare moments in which the Macedonian king would show his merciful side, the one known and similar to the common people, thus allowing himself to be approached and please those whose doubts depended on his judgment. These two anecdotes served as an example of a good monarch without any religious implications.

⁶ Colgrave 1968, p. 163.

⁷ Whatley 1984, p. 28.

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At this stage, the focus of the legend is still on Gregory and his *virtus* and *caritas*, or even Gregory's biblical-exegetical wisdom, rather than Trajan's goodness. A similar narrative can be found in Paul the Deacon's version of Gregory's *vita*, where the miracle is considered to be an interpolation, along with XXIII-XXVIII.⁸ Paul's *Life of Gregory*⁹ was written between 770 and 780, and it is the first life of Gregory written in Rome. Here, the author stresses, again, the role of Gregory who is "*perfectissimus et acceptabilis Deo sacerdos*" and does not concern oneself with the origin of the legend. What is important for Paul's interpolator is the misery of the justice-seeking woman. The mercy Trajan expresses is just that – "*insignia misericordiae ejus*." This time, the legend carries the Christian weight of a suffering widow that we can clearly imagine under the constraints of her age and the adversities that befell her. Furthermore, the key difference between Whitby and Paul the Deacon comes in the form of Trajan's salvation – Trajan's soul is "*praetorialibus catenis absolvit*" not "*refrigeratam uel baptizatam*." Only in one place in the life compiled by Paul the Deacon, i.e., the interpolator, is baptism mentioned, but only when criticizing Gregory's procedure of praying for the deceased "*sine baptisate sacro*." Mitigation and finding justification for the miracle from the Whitby *vita* begins with Paul's version of the myth and will continue with John the Deacon, aligning with Gregory's teachings about the fate of pagans and those who dare to pray for their souls.

In the end, pseudo-Paul, skillfully avoiding the mention of baptism, completes this myth with the Gospel of Luke and a justification for the incredulity of this miracle, that God's goodness and power cannot be questioned, "*quae apud homines impossibilia sunt vel videntur, facilia sunt apud Dominum, salubriter explanari, tutius tamen videtur in hoc actu divinae pietatis et potestatis iudicium venerari, et a nemine discuti*." Even though Trajan's miracle was the result of God's will, Gregory was "*promeruit castigari*."

John the Deacon's version of the legend adds multiple innovations, but most notable being those that concern the dialogue between the widow and Trajan. The first time Trajan rejects helping the widow, she prods at him by asking: "*Nonne, inquit, melius tibi est ut tu mihi iustitiam facias, et tu pro hoc mercedem tuam recipias, quam alteri hanc transmittas?*"¹⁰ It is possible that John the Deacon thought how Trajan's motive to fulfill the widow's wish was too simple and, as such, does not merit Gregory's compassion. Therefore, a quasi-Christian awareness of eternal life, but also the consequences of our actions in this world, was imposed on the pagan emperor. This interpretation was sufficient to

⁸ Dudden 1905, p. XII.

⁹ The text edition used here belongs to PL 75: 56-57.

¹⁰ PL 75:105.

exclude the biblical quotation that Whitby gave us. Based on this dialogue, it is considered that the idea of justice and future recognition were attractive to humanists in the 12th century, who then took it upon themselves to reinterpret the story of Trajan's justice and salvation.¹¹ Trying to remove those features of the legend that could diminish the reputation of St. Gregory, John the Deacon only started a process by which the figure of the Pope will eventually be overshadowed by the great glory of Trajan's justice and eternal reward.

Additionally, John the Deacon underlines that Gregory did not pray for Trajan but cried "*non advertentes quia non legitur pro Trajano Gregorium exorasse, sed tantum flevisse*", concluding that Trajan's soul was not liberated from hell, but only "*ad inferni solummodo cruciatibus liberata*."¹²

Although the idea of Trajan's salvation was mentioned, cautiously, in the previous sources, they were not the pretext for dogmatic claims that Trajan was saved. Namely, the later ideas are based on another text, directly or indirectly, which was a homily written in Greek and known in the West. By mistake, the text was attributed to John of Damascus, with its Latin title *De iis qui dormierunt in fide*.¹³ In the work of Pseudo Damascus, there are two key legends, or lives, which the author refers to when presenting his arguments. One is about St. Gregory and Trajan's miraculous salvation, while the second refers to St. Thecla, a young companion of St. Paul, and her prayers uttered for the deceased pagan Falconilla. This second example is equally incredible, but attainable. God is omnipotent and since this same power is in his hands, he can do with it as he wishes, which includes the salvation of a dead pagan.¹⁴

The decision to justify the prayers to the dead in the story of Trajan and Gregory also contributes to the lack of some of the main elements of the legend – the widow who appears before the emperor, her request for monetary compensation or revenge for the sake of her murdered son, the instructive dialogue and the postponement of the military campaign for the sake of imperial duties. Pseudo Damascus only sets us on the stage, which is indefinite; there is no description of the magnificent forum. It is possible to ask whether the description of Gregory's miracle reached Pseudo Damascus in this form, purely as an example of a saint who prays for a pagan and suffers for his act, or would the reader already know the details of the legend itself, presented in this way, without unnecessary details, so as to keep the emphasis on the already familiar idea of the homily.

¹¹ Whatley 1984, pp. 28–29.

¹² PL 75:106.

¹³ The section of Trajan and Gregory can be found in PG 95: 262–263.

¹⁴ Thrumbower 2001, pp. 74–75.

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Reading Pseudo Damascus' testimony of the legend, we cannot get the impression of Trajan as, as pseudo-Paul wrote it, a pious emperor ("*princeps piissime Trajane*"). Here the author understands the true tradition about Trajan as the Roman emperor who persecuted Christians ("*hic contra plurimos martyres dirissima morte affecerat*"), while Falconilla was exclusively an idolater and that is her only transgression, which increases Trajan's sin. Nor is the author interested in the lack of Trajan's baptism. Instead, Pseudo Damascus mentions God's condemnation for the prayers addressed to the pagan ("*Preces tuas exaudivi, ac Trajano ignosco. Tu vero posthac cave ne preces mihi pro impiis offeras.*") But we do not see the consequences of Gregory's prayers as John the Deacon tells them. One could judge this as an exception, that is, that the miracles with Trajan and Falconilla were isolated cases and that after them no one dared to do such an act, because it would not have been possible.¹⁵

An interesting detail that can be observed, which does not seem obvious at first, is that Gregory's prayers are not addressed to the posthumous salvation of a friend or a relative, unlike the prayers of St. Perpetua who prayed for her late brother, also a pagan. Trumbower¹⁶ writes that in the 8th century Christian West, when most commoners would be Christian, the posthumous salvation of an unbaptized person within the circle of close people of that person did not represent a particular problem as it would have either in the period between the 2nd and 5th century. Gregory's Whitby *vita*, where the story of Trajan's salvation as an unbaptized emperor appears for the first time, fits this thesis. In particular, the situation in Northumbria at the time of the anonymous Whitby monk should be considered; the constant change of holy and profane kings, and the reminiscence of the pagan past, could easily upset the Christian population in the northernmost kingdom of England. Even if the legend of Trajan did not originate among the Saxons, as the monk from Whitby wrote, but among the Romans, it still coincides with the instability that reigned in the west in the crisis of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The Cult of Gregory under Its Patrons

It is difficult to argue that any saint of the early Middle Ages was as revered outside the place of his resting place as was Gregory the Great. Until the life written by John the Deacon in the 9th century, there was no *vita* in Rome that described the acts of Gregory, despite the fact that the pope was born and buried in Rome, as opposed to Northumbria where his cult flourished with the *Whitby Life* written around 700 AD.¹⁷ The 8th century was also marked by Be-

¹⁵ Trumbower 2001, p. 146.

¹⁶ Trumbower 2001, p. 146.

¹⁷ Thacker 1998, p. 59.

de's *History*, in which, similar to the *Life* from Whitby, Pope Gregory is praised, "*quem recte nostrum appellare possumus et debemus apostolum*."¹⁸

Bede dedicated a great part of his *historia ecclesiastica* to Gregory the Great's mission in these distant lands. The meeting between Pope Gregory and the angel-like child, which Bede cites as a story that came "*traditione maiorum ad nos*" will be rooted in the tradition of the spread of Christianity in Britain and as such can be found in each of the lives of Pope Gregory the Great. However, as Gregory's influence in Britain was flourishing, the one in Rome was limited to only a few monasteries where Gregory served as a monk. We have reports of Gregory's relics being sent to king Oswiu,¹⁹ along with his altar being erected in the same Whitby monastery that produced the earliest life of Gregory known to us. The most notable benefactor in this nurture of the Pope's cult was Theodore of Tarsus.

Bede describes the new Archbishop of Canterbury as "*natus Tarso Ciliciae, uir et saeculari et diuina litteratura, et Grece instructus et Latine, probus moribus, et aetate uenerandus, id est annos habens aetatis LX et VI*."²⁰ Furthermore, we read about the many trips that the archbishop undertook, while teaching, during which he visited the "*insula tota, quaqua uersum Anglorum gentes morabantur*."²¹ All this was faithfully performed by Theodore with the constant accompaniment of Abbot Hadrian, since both were excellent connoisseurs of the Latin and Greek languages, as well as "*litteris sacris simul et saecularibus*"²² since they had a group of students gathered around them with whom, in addition to the Holy Scriptures, they studied metrical rules, astronomy and ecclesiastical arithmetic. Bede refers to all those learned people, his contemporaries, "*qui Latinam Grecamque linguam aequae ut propriam, in qua nati sunt, norunt*."²³

The Canterbury School, founded by Archbishop Theodore, played the key role within the conservancy of classical thought in early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The Canterbury School library's contents are well known to us. They are available to us thanks to the Leiden glossary, which is contained in a manuscript compiled around the year 800 in the Monastery of Saint Galen in present-day Switzerland. About twenty glosses refer to Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury lectures. The two lecturers precisely cite works written in Greek and Latin in several places. As for the Greek authors, we can find the following: Basil of Caesarea, Clement of Alexandria, Cosmas of Indicopleus, Ephrem

¹⁸ Bede, *HE* II. 1.

¹⁹ Bede, *HE* III.29.

²⁰ Bede, *HE* IV. 1.

²¹ Bede, *HE* IV. 2.

²² Bede, *HE* IV. 2.

²³ Bede, *HE* IV. 2.

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the Syrian, Epiphanius of Cyprus, Evagrius of Pontus, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Josephus, Sophronius and Theophilus. When it comes to authors who wrote in Latin, there are significantly fewer of them: Augustine, Isidore, Gregory and Jerome.²⁴

Archbishop Theodore played two important roles in the development of Trajan's legend. First, we know that Bishop Theodore maintained contact with Whitby through his two students, Offorus of Worcester and John of Beverley, but also through the abess of the Whitby monastery, who perhaps commissioned Gregory's life.²⁵ Second, Pope Vitalian's decision to elect Theodore as the new archbishop instead of the deceased Vighard followed the transfer of Gregory's relics to Northumbria. It is very possible that Theodore used Gregory's name to reinforce his decisions, although they often conflicted with what Gregory wrote.²⁶ There is also information about the echo of the archbishop's views in the works of his student Aldhelm (639–709), one of the first Latin poets among the Anglo-Saxons, who named Gregory as the author of the Roman Mass canon. Aldhelm addresses Gregory as "*pervigil pator et pedagogus noster*" which is again the earliest known exponent of St. Gregory as the apostle of the English people.²⁷ Moreover, Archbishop Theodore's interest in Gregory's cult was not purely altruistic in nature. He interpreted his role on the example of the eastern dioceses, primarily Alexandria, where the archbishop would confirm and consecrate all the bishops within the six Egyptian provinces over which he had control. By 679, Theodore assumed the title of "Archbishop of the Isle of Britain", which enabled him to make decisions on the territories of the entire heptarchy.²⁸ The fact that Gregory provided the English church with an apostolic patronage, not centralized in Canterbury, would have made his cult particularly attractive to Archbishop Theodore. It is easy to explain the interest of Northumbrians and Whitby in St. Gregory, especially when one considers the number of Theodore's students who went to Whitby. Theodore's influence will be seen most in the legend of Trajan since the archbishop discussed the "baptism of tears" in his *Iudicia* where he cited Gregory the Theologian as the originator of the concept.²⁹

Another link between Theodore's school the Whitby Abbey is the so-called *discipulus Umbrensium*. *Iudicia*, or *Canones Theodori*, was written to list the declarations related to penance and monastic, or ecclesiastical, discipline. These *Iudicia* were transmitted in different groups (collections), the most extensive

²⁴ Lapidge 1986, pp. 45–72.

²⁵ Gretsch 2005, p. 63.

²⁶ Thacker 1998, p. 75.

²⁷ Thacker 1998, p. 76.

²⁸ Thacker 1998, p. 76.

²⁹ O'Brian & O'Loughlin 1993, p. 69.

one labeled U, allegedly collected through the work of one Eode “Christian”, a disciple of Theodore, and then the same collection was arranged in two books by a certain *discipulus Umbrensiūm*. Both authors are unknown to us, however we can learn more about the latter through Gregory’s Whitby *vita*. When he speaks of “our people,” the Whitby author uses the name *Umbrenses* or *Hum-brenses*, referring to the people of Deira, presumably, as opposed to the *Nor-thumbrenses* or those who inhabit Berenice. From this it follows that the *discipulus Umbrensiūm* most likely acquired his knowledge somewhere in Deira, be it Whitby, Hartlepool or York. Undoubtedly, *discipulus Umbrensiūm* was closely related intellectually to Theodore’s students, and thus to the school of Canterbury.³⁰

Theodore’s patronage was undoubtedly successful. Although none of the earlier masses have been preserved, the altars and chapels in Canterbury, York, and Whitby, as well as *the Life of St. Gregory* from Whitby point to the reverence shown to Pope Gregory in those centers through the late 7th century. The course of Gregory’s cult was from a small circle of his friends in Rome through Gaul, Britain, and Ireland. Admittedly, it only took off in Gregory’s hometown and the kingdoms that owed him because of their remembrance. Its course was typical of the development of an early medieval legend: an emphasis on the veneration of bodily relics, above all the tomb of a local patron saint, with commemoration during the feast that stood for the climax of the liturgical year of that community.³¹

Finally, after this brief overview of Gregory’s life and posthumous cult, which are relevant to the development of the legend of Gregory, it can be assumed that maybe John the Deacon was right - it seems as if the legend of Emperor Trajan arose among the English population, with their eagerness to show how Gregory was worthy of his title of an apostle and “*potestas ligandi solvendi*.” Although it would be impetuous to conclude such a thing without making a reference to the figure of Emperor Trajan, whose appearance is a greater mystery than St. Gregor. As the first in a series of virtuous pagans that the ecclesiastical culture of the Middle Ages would give birth to, his name resonated even in the most remote areas of Europe. The ancient senatorial tradition knew Trajan as the emperor during whose reign Rome reached its optimal expansion, and his strict nature placed him in the group of “good emperors” along the lines of *felicior Augusto, melior Traiano*. Christians, who had the opportunity to get to know the other side of his nature, remembered him for his decisions on the continuation of merciless persecutions. What traits of Trajan do then make him virtuous?

³⁰ Lapidge 1986, p. 48.

³¹ Thacker 1998, p. 82.

Virtuous Pagans: Emperor Trajan's Christian Legacy

Previously, we were introduced to three basic Latin sources and one Greek that bear witness to Trajan's justice, and only one of them tells us about how the legend reached the north of England, with nothing but *a Romanis*. John the Deacon disputed this claim as a mere English fabrication without supplying any proof in the favor of his argument. We can assume that John the Deacon, as an official of the Holy See, could come to such a conclusion by working on material in Roman libraries that a monk from Northumbria did not have access to. Moreover, if Gregory did have such a vision, Rome would not have stayed silent about it and Gregory himself would have brought it up in his letters.³²

Today, when the origin of the legend is viewed from the perspective of John the Deacon, with all that is known about passages from Plutarch and Dio Cassius, there are no attempts to confirm what he wrote. Rather, references are made to the written and oral tradition through which the legend of Trajan, and before that of Hadrian and Demetrius, reached the Whitby monastery. Here, I will discuss the oral tradition, focusing on the pilgrimages and the artistic representation on Trajan's Column that could have encouraged Pope Gregory to transgress against himself, and at the same time testify in favor of Whitby's monk.

Often, when the legend of Trajan's is interpreted, the debate on the miraculous baptism is preferred over the other elements of Gregory's miracle. Trajan's Column, a symbol of his victory over the Dacians, shows scenes from the military campaign against the Thracian tribe, from which Trajan returned with an astonishing booty in gold and silver, intended for the construction and gilding of Rome at that time. The *Whitby Life*, and those by Paul and John the Deacon, speaks about the scene on the pillar that caught Gregory's attention. Moreover, the later sources that cite the legend but do not mention the forum do not describe how Gregory could learn of Trajan's justice.

It is not possible to determine with certainty what Gregory saw among the more than 2500 figures on Trajan's Column, but the hypothesis is all too tempting.³³ The meeting between Trajan and the widow, if it ever took place, does not appear on the column. But in the central part, high enough to allow a false interpretation for those who viewed the column from the ground, there is a scene in which Trajan is depicted on a raised platform, surrounded by soldiers and spearmen, while a kneeling figure asks for mercy. As such, the scene is a typical one for Roman imperial art, where the conquered nation would take the form of a lowly woman. Akin to Trajan's Arch of Benevento, that nation is depicted

³² Paris 1878, pp. 283–284.

³³ Vickers 1983, p. 76.

as a kneeling woman. If Gregory really had the opportunity to learn about this story from Trajan's life, one can assume how it came about by interpreting a scene like this one, that is, by misreading it.³⁴

The medieval literature about pilgrimages to the Holy Land was enriched by merchants-pilgrims who, in the records of their travels, combined an unquestionable religious sensibility with interests and attitudes derived from a life that was neither ecclesiastical nor aristocratic. However, no other pilgrimage has generated such a significant amount of literature as that to Rome did. *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, in contrast to the guides produced in northern Europe and in the late 14th and 15th centuries, whose authors undoubtedly focused on Christian antiquities in Rome and (like their parallels in the Holy Land) the forgiveness that could be obtained there, tells the history of old Roman 'pagan' buildings and ruins.³⁵ The *Mirabilia* tells of Trajan's legend, but without venturing into details such as the name of the emperor, and especially not his liberation from hell by the pope. Instead, we read: "*Sunt praeterea alii arcus qui non sunt triumphales sed memoriales, ut est arcus Pietatis ante Sanctam Mariam Rotundam, ubi cum esset imperator paratus in curru...*" As such, the legend is adapted for its audience from the secular version produced by Dio Cassius.

As for the pilgrims traveling from Britain, they will show their great interest in Rome during the reign of King Oswiu. Even he, while on his deathbed, "*qui in tantum eo tempore tenebatur amore Romanae et apostolicae institutionis, ut, si ab infirmitate saluaretur, etiam Romam uenire, ibique ad loca sancta uitam finire disposeret.*"³⁶ Following their kings, the common people also ventured in the direction of the Holy See, "*plures de gente Anglorum, nobiles, ignobiles, laici, clerici, uiri ac feminae certatim facere consuerunt.*"³⁷ Similarly, we read about monks who received their education under the auspices of the Whitby monastery, and then went to Rome where they could receive the Pope's blessing before being appointed as bishops. One of them was Oftforus, the future bishop of Worcester, who attended the monastery school in Whitby, and then the school in Canterbury. Before his enthronement, he was known to have been in Rome.³⁸ Then, the Northumbrian monk Benedict the Bishop traveled five times to Rome, where he was inspired how to develop the monastery culture in his own land. Many pilgrims followed his example and eventually a house was built for English pilgrims near the Church of St. Peter. So frequent did these

³⁴ Paris 1878, pp. 289–290.

³⁵ Webb 2002, p. 178.

³⁶ *HE* IV. 5.

³⁷ *HE* V.7.

³⁸ Young 1817, p. 200.

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journeys become by 730 that Bede was prompted to comment that in earlier times it was “*magnae uirtutis aestimabatur*.”^{39 40}

In his description of pilgrimages before the First Crusade, Webb presents data that would help understand the oral transmission of the legend from Rome to distant regions of England.⁴¹ Missionaries carried with them relics and knowledge of saints to different regions of Europe, and like St. Martin revered by queen Bertha, wife of the pagan king Ethelbert, they themselves often became saints for the church communities they founded and the people they baptized. Secondary relics, called *brandea*, such as a piece of cloth that was in contact with the relic or simply in the vicinity of a tomb, and sometimes a splinter or dust from the tomb itself, were revered as the bodily ones. Like these relics, books and stories traveled from Northern Europe to the Mediterranean, followed by architectural styles, techniques and ideas for the arrangement and decoration of cathedrals and altars.

The Roman pilgrimage was not a simple substitute for the more dangerous journey to Jerusalem in the 8th century. The presence of Christians from the newly baptized areas of Northern Europe contributed to its increased popularity. English Christians, as well as Germans who were brought into the church community by English and Irish monks, were extremely aware of the bond that tied them to Rome and the sense of duty they had towards the popes whose actions enabled the missions sent to their kingdoms. Ecclesiastical figures such as Wilfrid and Benedict the Bishop traveled to Rome for various spiritual missions, while the common people would eagerly wait to contribute to the role of establishing the Christian faith among their compatriots by moving towards Rome.⁴²

Then, why did Trajan's character seem so appealing to these crowds of worshippers since his name was connected to Christian persecutions? The comparison of 'pagan' virtues with Christian virtues was not firstly done on the example of Trajan, whose gesture towards the widow is often called the “Justice of Trajan”, although all these stories about a pagan emperor rising above his transgressions against Christians give an image of humility in the face of justice because he, as an emperor, allowed to be edified by a common woman. Through the study of the origin of the legend, one can come across a scene that Pliny tells us in his letter to Cornelius. More than anywhere else in the sources about Trajan, his justice is emphasized through Pliny's testimony about court processes where the judgment was passed by the emperor himself. The senator felt ex-

³⁹ Dyas 2020, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Bede's descriptions were indicated to me in Webb 2001, p. 11.

⁴¹ Webb 2002, p. 6.

⁴² Webb 2002, p. 11.

tremely honored to have the opportunity to attend such an event because “*quid iucundius quam principis iustitiam gravitatem comitatem in secessu quoque ubi maxime recluduntur inspicere? Fuerunt variae cognitiones et quae virtutes iudicis per plures species experirentur.*”⁴³

Comparisons of heroic and pagan values continued to occur most prominently in the Beowulf essays, which best exemplify the Anglo-Saxon view on this aspect of collaborative ancient and Christian thought. Although there is still no consensus regarding the importance of the Christian perspective to the Beowulf author, and how precisely it is integrated into the complete narrative of each Christian passage and expression, nor to what extent is the author’s concept of religion advanced in relation to the educated priests of the Anglo-Saxon period, the narrative of Beowulf is set in the pagan past of the Germanic people, and it still abounds in expressions related to Christian beliefs. They are not emphasized only through the narrator, who looks back at this earlier society from a different era, but also the pagan characters themselves. Considering the lack of accurate information about the history of Anglo-Saxon England among its people, the Beowulf author could not shape his narrative in the direction of historical probability. What he does instead is show an interest in describing a pagan past which, with its exalted deeds and sententious speeches, has its own narrative coherence and could have had ethical value among the Christian community. The expectations of historical probability are fulfilled in Beowulf so that none of the characters ever openly speaks about Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, the saints, or any other aspect of New Testament theology. The religious language of these characters is consistent with the portrait of a good pagan.⁴⁴

Thus, Trajan’s virtue was no longer a problem, but baptism, which the author from Whitby replaced with a unique view of introducing pagans to Christianity, the so-called “third type” of baptism (*tertium genus est lacrimae*).⁴⁵ We have seen that in the original sources of the legend only John the Deacon made a detailed review of the idea proposed by the Whitby monk, that Trajan was *refrigeratam uel baptizatam* with Gregory’s tears. We can assume the author also treated this type of baptism with a certain amount of doubt, since the idea itself clashed with Gregory’s views on pagan salvation. Rather than trying to clarify John’s ideas, or to justify Gregory’s action, we should refer to what the first biography, and where the idea of baptism with tears could have originated.

⁴³ *Plin. Ep.* 6.31.

⁴⁴ Klaeber 2008, pp. lxvii-lxx.

⁴⁵ For more on the topic of baptism of tears see O’loughlin & O’Brian 1993, 65–83. This paper will only look at those arguments relevant to the legend of Trajan and the Anglo-Saxon thought.

The phrase *baptismum lacrimarum* in the form in which it is used in the *Vita S. Gregorii* can be found in Theodore's *ludicia*, that is, in the review written by *discipulus Umbrensi*, in pseudo-Beda's *Collectanea*⁴⁶ and pseudo-Alcuin's *Liber de divinis officiis*⁴⁷. These comments were based on a misinterpretation of a passage from Rufinus' translations of Gregory the Theologian, that is, the sermon *De luminus*⁴⁸ as it appeared in a truncated version in the *De ecclesiasticis officiis*⁴⁹ by Isidore of Seville. Given the previously discussed connection between Whitby and Canterbury, particularly through the name *discipulus Umbrensi*, it is not difficult to imagine how this element of the Whitby legend takes from what was taught in Theodore's school. The biggest problem was the literal understanding of the term 'baptism with tears,' taken from Gregory the Theologian, and reaching Theodor's commentator through Isidore of Seville and every subsequent source based on this text. If the disciple had read and, more importantly, understood this section, he would have known that 'baptism with tears' was a technical term from Greek theology for what in the twelfth century the Western Church would interpret as the secret of confession, i.e., repentance.

A unique view on 'baptism with tears' is found in Colgrave's commentary on Gregory's Whitby *vita*, precisely on the passage concerning this subtype of baptism.⁵⁰ Colgrave claims that the author used, that is, he created 'baptism with tears' as a concept to avoid the difficulty of entering heaven for an unbaptized person. As such, the theory fits into the narrative of John the Deacon, according to which the legend of Trajan was an English creation. The remaining two types of baptism are water and blood, meant to solve the case of those who were not baptized and died as martyrs during the persecution of Christians. The story of St. Alban belongs here from Beda's *History*, according to which the soldier assigned to kill the saint refused to carry out the order and was then himself killed.⁵¹ Colgrave also considers the possibility of an ancient northern legend, told many years later in the *Prose Edda*, in which Baldr died and was then freed from hell since all wept for him.

Returning to the church fathers and works more proper to Whitby, O'loughlin and O'Briain go on to explain the potential origins of the idea of *baptismum lacrymarum* and why it might have occurred to the Whitby author.⁵² The key

⁴⁶ PL 94: 542.

⁴⁷ PL 101:1216.

⁴⁸ *De luminibus*, XVII.

⁴⁹ PL 83:820-821.

⁵⁰ Colgrave 1968, p. 123.

⁵¹ "De quo nimirum constat, quia, etsi fonte baptismatis non est ablutussui, tamen est sanguinis lauacro mundatus, ac regni caelestis dignus factus ingressu" (HE I. 7).

⁵² O'loughlin & O'Briain 1993, pp. 69-73.

is the comment written by *discipulus Umbrensiū* where he placed *baptismum lacrymarum* in the center of a series of canons on baptism:

IV. De baptisate et confirmatione... 3. Si quis gentilis elemosinam faceret et abstinentiam haberet et alia bona, quae enumerare non possumus, numquid ea in baptismo perdidit? Non, nam bonum aliquod non perdet, sed malum abluet. Hoc Innocentius papa de catecumino Cornilii gesta pro exemplo ponens adfirmavit. 4. Gregorius Nazanzenus dixit secundum baptismum esse lacrimarum.

Apart from a change in numbering, the *secundum baptismum* is the same as the *tertium genus est lacrimae* of Whitby. After the passage on the virtues of unbaptized pagans, follows an introduction to the types of baptism, confirmed by a Greek father, which to the author of the commentary could not have been anything more than an ordinary name. The virtuous pagans, if it is assumed that the Whitby biographer tried to make the legend more meaningful, torn between the exciting story of Rome and orthodox theology, were not left out, but saved. They enjoy the same effect and benefit of 'baptism by water', although out of the ordinary, but they are cleansed of their sins, only by tears that may be their own or the saint's. O'loughlin and O'Briain claim that one should not look for a meaningful explanation for this theology, because the biographer from Whitby certainly had an insight into the difficulties that arose with Gregory's miracle of saving Emperor Trajan. However unorthodox that method of justification was, the author's first source for this term was not his own understanding and misinterpretation of the rules of baptism. The monk who wrote Gregory's *vita* was at the mercy of tradition and the library of the monastery. It seems as if both have failed the author. Without access to the passage of Gregory the Theologian mentioned in the fourth canon or the exposition that Theodore could have presented in his lectures, there is no reason to doubt that *secundum baptismum*, by analogy with 'baptism by blood', is nothing more than ordinary baptism outside its usual form, a subgroup, but still baptism that allows the soul to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is hard to believe that one anecdote of assumed origin, transformed Trajan's name and title through a spiritual cult of personality in the early Middle Ages, while completely rejecting his secular role and tradition. Like any legend that could have arisen from the mass of ordinary people, even from the ranks of monks, it began with a real or imagined situation, an event which was worth retelling, so intriguing that we are forced to repeat it again and again, and only so much so that it could take on dozens or hundreds of different versions throughout time. It is in human nature to enlarge or simplify a story that has left a strong impression, and celebrate or ennoble its heroes, idealize, or humiliate, with a tendency to simplify the story into parts, and then reassemble it so that its narrative suits the idea of our mind.

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The Christian legend of Emperor Trajan was not an exception in the tradition of transmitting a myth or legend. What began as an anecdote, dependent on a potential oral tradition, from the time of Demetrius, received its variants, even after the meeting between the emperor and the subject was immortalized in the *Life of St. Gregory*. Just as myths form and shape a society and set up a model of behavior through which a person could achieve spirituality, so John the Deacon used an episode from the life of Pope Gregory to teach and give it credibility, and it thus becoming more vital and more realistic, something more than a myth.

With what has been said about the structure and elements of the Christian legend of the emperor Trajan, I believe that the opinion about the origin of the miracle of Gregory and the baptism of Trajan as translated by John the Deacon is wrong, especially when it comes to the claim that the legend is exclusively a product of English fiction or at least that part about the *baptismum lacrimarum*. It can, of course, be argued that John the Deacon spoke exclusively about the element of baptism as an English creation, while everything else, especially the meeting between the widow and the emperor, took place in Rome, following what the monk from Whitby wrote. What would be more than a simple assumption is the path that the legend of Trajan traveled from Rome to the north of Britain. While it was transformed through the centuries and through the provinces, Eastern and Western churches, it became a mythical *topos* with a natural metamorphosis and continuity of tradition. We have seen how Trajan changed his appearance and name, and the legend its stage and scenography, as the rules of oral, and often written, tradition dictate.

Each element of the legend, beginning with Pope Gregory as the English apostle and his cult of personality in Britain, the righteous Trajan and the magnificent personifications of his triumphs, the poor woman who stands as a convincing symbol of Christian grace, at the right time and at the same time present on Trajan's Column, fit perfectly and coincidentally into the foundation of the potential legendary material of Christian hagiography. Like the actors from the legend of Trajan, the legend also comes to life at an ideal moment in time in the cultural history of the early Middle Ages; conflicts within the heptarchy between pagan and Christian kings, the arrival of Archbishop Theodore in England and the establishment of a school in Canterbury, the pilgrims' interest in Rome instead of the Holy Land - all of these contribute to the definition of the legend. The legend includes elements that are historically relevant, but as such tend to the popular imagination. As its development after the interpretation of John the Deacon indicated, it is meant for everyone to interpret and repeat it in a unique way. The legend's characters, too, are subject to various adaptations, but in the Christian legend of the emperor Trajan, the only unquestionable feature is her 'pagan', profane, past.

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