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THE TRAVELS OF WILLIBALD

A.D. 721-727

Recorded from his own narration by
Nun Huneberc of Heidenheim

The monastic author of *The Travels of Willibald*, the nun Huneberc, was not only the biographer, but also a relative of the three famous missionary-saints, Willibald (701-786/7), Wunibald (702-761) and Walburga (710-777). Sometime after 761, Huneberc left England to join the monastery at Heidenheim (in Thuringia), founded by her relatives. Sometime before 787 Huneberc wrote two works: *Vita Willibaldi episcopi Eischstetensis* and *Vita Wynnebaldi abbatis Heidenheimensis*, the lives of her two kinsmen. Only the preface to the combined whole and the Vita Willibaldi have been translated into English. The latter is usually called the *Hodoeporicon* (literally, “relation of a voyage”), and is Willibald’s account of his youthful travels some fifty years earlier, as told to Huneberc and others when he visited Heidenheim in 778. All that we know of the Nun Huneberc is what she tells us in her preface: that she is young, from “the same genealogical root” as the two men of whom she will write, and that she knows that she can “place in the hands of readers something worthy of remembrance”.

A relative of St. Boniface, who both ordained Willibald and consecrated him to the episcopacy, today St. Willibald is regarded as one of the most traveled Anglo-Saxons of his time, and some even argue that he was the first known Englishman to visit the Holy Land. His shrine is at the Eichstätt Cathedral in Germany, where his relics and artifacts from his journeys are preserved.

After the ceremonies of Easter were ended, the active champion (of Christ) prepared for his voyage with his two companions, and left Rome. (In Nebule) after waiting anxiously, in constant prayer that their desires might be agreeable to heaven, they found a ship bound for Egypt, in which they took their passage, and sailed to the land of Calabria, to the town which is called Rhegia (Reggio), and there remained two days.

Opposite: Ruins of Phoenician Tyre. (Lebanon).

Then they proceeded to the island of Sicily, in which is the town of Catania, where the body of St. Agatha, the virgin, reposes. There also is Mount Etna; in case of an eruption of which, the inhabitants of Catania take the veil of St. Agatha, and hold it up towards the fire, which immediately ceases. They made a stay of three weeks at this place, and then sailed to the isle of Samos, and thence to the town of Ephesus, in Asia, which is one mile from the sea.

Pilgrimage to Ephesus and Cyprus

In Ephesus, they walked thence to the place where the Seven Sleepers repose; and onward thence to John the Evangelist, in a beautiful locality by Ephesus. They next walked two miles along the sea-side to a large village which is called Figila (Strato's Pygela), where they remained one day, and, having begged bread, they went to a fountain in the middle of the town, and, sitting on the edge, they dipped their bread in the water, and so made their meal. They next walked along the seashore to the town of Strobole (Terracina), seated on a lofty hill, and thence to the place called Patera, where they remained till the rigour of winter was past.

After this, going on shipboard, they came to the town which is called Melitena, which had been nearly destroyed by an inundation; and two hermits lived there on a rock, secured by walls, so that the water could not reach them. And there the pilgrims suffered much from hunger, from which they were only relieved by God's providential mercy. They sailed thence to the isle of Cyprus, which is between the Greeks and the Saracens, to the town of Papho (Paphos), where they passed the first week in the year. And thence they went to the town of Constantia, where St. Epiphanius¹ reposes, and there they remained till after the Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24, 722).

Willibald and Companions Taken Captive in Syria

They then put to sea again and came into the region of the Saracens to the town of Tharratas (Tartus), by the sea; and thence they walked a distance of nine to twelve miles to a castle called Archse (Arcena or Tele Arka), where there was a Greek bishop; and there they had divine service according to the Greek custom. Thence they walked twelve miles to the town which is called Emessa, where there is a large church built by St. Helena, in honour of John the Baptist, whose head was long preserved there. This is in Syria.

¹ St. Epiphanius: 4th century Church Father, Bishop of Salamis and Metropolitan of Cyprus. Strong defender of Orthodoxy, who wrote a compendium of known heresies.

Willibald's party had now increased to eight in number, and they became an object of suspicion to the Saracens, who, seeing that they were strangers, seized them and threw them into prison, because they knew not of what country they were, and supposed them to be spies. They carried them as prisoners before a certain rich old man, that he might examine them; and he inquired whence they came and the object of their mission; whereupon they related to him the true cause of their journey. The old man replied, "I have often seen men of the parts of the earth whence these come, travelling hither; they seek no harm, but desire to fulfill their law." And upon that they went to the palace, to obtain leave to proceed to Jerusalem.

While they were in prison it happened, by a manifest intervention of Divine Providence, that a merchant residing there was desirous, as an act of charity, and for the salvation of his soul, to purchase their deliverance, that they might pursue their way, but he was not allowed to carry his generous design into effect; nevertheless he sent them daily their meals, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays sent his son to them in prison, who took them out to the bath, and brought them back again. And on Sunday he took them to church through the market, that they might see the shops, and whatever they seemed to take a liking to he afterwards bought for them at his own expense. The townsmen used then to come there to look at them, because they were young and handsome, and clad in good garments.

Then, while they remained in prison, a man, who was a native of Spain, came and spoke with them, and inquired earnestly who they were and from whence they came, and they told him the object of their pilgrimage. This Spaniard had a brother in the king's palace, who was chamberlain to the king of the Saracens; and when the governor who had thrown them into prison came to the palace, the captain in whose ship they had sailed from Cyprus, and the Spaniard who had spoken to them in prison, went together before the king of the Saracens, whose title is Emir-al-Mumenin (Khalif Yezid II), and, when their cause came on, the Spaniard spoke to his brother, and begged him to intercede with the king for them. After this, when all three came before the king, and told him the case, he asked whence the prisoners came. And they said. "These men come from the west country, where the sun sets; and we know of no land beyond them, but water only." And the king replied, "Why ought we to punish them? They have not sinned against us. Give them leave, and let them go." And even the fine of four deniers, which the other prisoners had to pay, was remitted to them. The Cyprians were then situated

between the Greeks and the Saracens, and were not armed, for there was great peace and friendship between the Greeks and Saracens. It was a great and extensive region, and had twelve bishops.

From Damascus to Nazareth and Mount Tabor

As soon as they obtained leave, the travelers went direct to Damascus, a distance of one hundred miles. St. Ananias reposes there, and it is in the land of Syria. They remained there one week. And at two miles from the city was a church, on the spot where St. Paul was first converted, and the Lord said to him, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

And after praying there, they went into Galilee, to the place where Gabriel first came to St. Mary, and said, “Hail, full of grace...”. A church now stands there, and the village which contains the church is Nazareth. The Christians ... bought that church of the pagans, when the latter were about to destroy it. And having there recommended themselves to the Lord, they proceeded to the town of Cana, where our Lord turned water into wine. A large church stands there, and near the altar is still preserved one of the six vessels which our Lord commanded to fill with water to be turned into wine; and the travelers drank wine out of it. They remained there one day, and then continued their journey to Mount Tabor, the scene of our Lord’s tranfiguration, where there is now a monastery and a church consecrated to our Lord, and Moses, and Elijah. And those who dwell there call it Hagemon (the Holy Mount).

The Sea of Galilee

After praying there, they proceeded to the town of Tiberias, which stands on the shore of the sea on which our Lord walked with dry feet, and on which Peter tried to walk but sank. Here are many churches, and a synagogue of the Jews. They remained there some days, and observed where the Jordan passes through the midst of the sea. And thence they went round the sea, and by the village of Magdala to the village of Capernaum, where our Lord raised the prince’s daughter. Here was a house and a great wall, which the people of the place told them was the residence of Zebedee with his sons John and James. And thence they went to Bethsaida, the residence of Peter and Andrew, where there is now a church on the site of their house. They remained there that night, and next morning went to Chorazin, where our Lord healed the demoniacs, and sent the devil into a herd of swine. Here was a church of the Christians.

Having performed their devotions there, they went to the place where the two fountains, Jor and Dan, issue from the earth, and flowing down from the mountain are collected into one, and form the Jordan. And there they passed the night between the two fountains, and the shepherds gave them sour ewes' milk to drink. The sheep are of an extraordinary kind, with a long back, short legs, large upright horns, and all of one colour. There are deep marshes in the neighbourhood, and when the heat of the sun, in summer, is oppressive, the sheep go to the marsh, and immerse themselves in the water, all but their heads.

Monastery of St. John the Baptist; Our Pilgrims are “Baptized” in the Jordan

Thence they proceeded to Casarea, where there was a church and a multitude of Christians. They next went to the Monastery of St. John the Baptist,² where there were about twenty monks, and remained one night there, and next day went the distance of a mile to the spot in the River Jordan where our Lord was baptized. Here is now a church raised upon stone columns, and under the church it is now dry land where our Lord was baptized. They still continue to baptize in this place; and a wooden cross stands in the middle of the river, where there is small depth of water, and a rope is extended to it over the Jordan. At the feast of the Epiphany, the infirm and sick come thither, and, holding by the rope, dip in the water. And women who are barren come thither also, and thus obtain God's grace. Willibald here bathed in the Jordan, and they remained at this place one day.

Thence they went to Galgala, a journey of five miles, where is a moderate-sized wooden church, in which are the twelve stones which the children of Israel carried out of the Jordan to Galgala, and placed there as a memorial of their passage. Here also they performed their devotions, and then proceeded to Jericho, above seven miles from the Jordan, and saw there the fountain which was blessed by the prophet Elisha, and hence to the monastery of St. Eustochium, which stands in the middle of the plain between Jericho and Jerusalem.

² The Monastery of St. John the Baptist near the Jordan that Willibald visited, was the monastery of St. Zosima, to whom St. Mary of Egypt told her story in the early 5th century.



Jerusalem: The Holy City

On their arrival at Jerusalem, they first visited the spot where the Holy Cross was found, where there is now a church which is called the Place of Calvary, and which was formerly outside of Jerusalem; but when St. Helena found the cross, the place was taken into the circuit of the city. Three wooden crosses stand in this place, on the outside of the wall of the church, in memory of our Lord's cross and of those of the other persons crucified at the same time. They are without the church, but under a roof.

And near at hand is the garden in which was the sepulchre of our Saviour, which was cut in the rock. That rock is now above ground, square at the bottom, but tapering above, with a cross on the summit. And over it there is now built a wonderful edifice. And on the east side of the rock of the sepulchre there is a door, by which men enter the sepulchre to pray. And there is a bed within, on which our Lord's body lay; and on the bed stand fifteen golden cups with oil burning day and night. The bed on which our Lord's body rested stands within the rock of the sepulchre on the north side, to the right of a man entering the sepulchre to pray. And before the door of the sepulchre lies a great square stone, in the likeness of the former stone which the angel rolled from the mouth of the monument.

Willibald Falls Ill; Healed at Sion

Our bishop Willibald³ arrived here on the feast of St. Martin (Nov. 11, 722), and was suddenly seized with sickness, and lay sick until the week before the Nativity of our Lord. And then, being a little recovered, he rose and went to the church called Holy Sion, which is in the middle of Jerusalem, and, after performing his devotions, he went to the porch of Solomon, where is the pool where the infirm wait for the motion of the water, when the angel comes to move it; and then he who first enters it is healed. Here our Lord said to the paralytic, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk!"

Also, St. Mary expired in the middle of Jerusalem, in this place called St. Sion; and as the twelve apostles were carrying her body, the angels came and took her from their hands and carried her to paradise. Bishop Willibald next

³ Readers should note that Huneberc's reference to "our bishop Willibald" does not reflect his status in the Holy Land, but his rank when Huneberc knew him. St. Willibald was a layman at the time of these travels, and was only ordained and consecrated many years later by St. Boniface.

Opposite: Coastline of ancient Tyre and Sidon. Lebanon.

descended to the valley of Jehoshaphat, which is close to the city of Jerusalem, on the east side. And in that valley is the church of St. Mary, which contains her sepulchre, not because her body rests there, but in memory of it.

The Mount of Olives and the Church of the Ascension

And having prayed there, he ascended Mount Olivet, which is on the east side of the valley, and where there is now a church, where our Lord prayed before his passion, and said to his disciples, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." And thence he came to the church on the mountain itself, where our Lord ascended to heaven. In the middle of the church is a square receptacle, beautifully sculptured in brass, on the spot of the Ascension, and there is on it a small lamp in a glass case, closed on every side, that the lamp may burn always, in rain or in fair weather, for the church is open above, without a roof; and two columns stand within the church, against the north wall and the south wall, in memory of the two men who said, "Men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven ?" And the man who can creep between the wall and the columns will have remission of his sins.

The Cave of the Nativity, Bethlehem

He next came to the place where the angel appeared to the shepherds, and thence to Bethlehem, where our Lord was born, distant seven miles from Jerusalem. The place where Christ was born was once a cave under the earth, but it is now a square house cut in the rock, and the earth is dug up and thrown from it all round, and a church is now built above it, and an altar is placed over the site of the birth. There is another smaller altar, in order that when they desire to celebrate mass in the cave, they may carry in the smaller altar for the occasion. This church is a glorious building, in the form of a cross. After prayers here, Willibald came to a large town called Thecua, where the children were slain by Herod, and where there is now a church; here rests one of the prophets.

And then he came to the valley of Laura, where there is a large monastery; here the abbot resides in the monastery... with many other monks who belong to the monastery, and have their cells round the valley on the slope of the mountain. The mountain is in a circle round the valley, in which the monastery is built. Here rests St. Sabba. He next arrived at the place where Philip baptized the eunuch, where there is a small church, in an extensive valley between Bethlehem and Gaza, where the travelers prayed.

Willibald Loses His Sight

From thence they went to (the Church of) St. Matthew, where there is great glory on Sunday. And while our bishop Willibald was standing at mass in this church, he suddenly lost his sight, and was blind for two months. Thence they went to Holy Zacharias the Prophet, not the father of John, but another prophet. They next went to the castle of Aframia, where the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, repose, with their wives, and thence he returned to Jerusalem, and there, entering the church where the Holy Cross of our Lord was found, he recovered his sight.

A Visit to Lydda, Tyre and Sidon, Damascus, and Back to Jerusalem

After remaining some time at Jerusalem, Willibald set out on another journey, and came first to St. George, at Diospolis, which is ten miles from Jerusalem, and then to a town where there is a church of St. Peter the Apostle, who here restored to life the widow named Dorcas. He went thence to the coast, far away from Jerusalem, to Tyre and Sidon, which stand on the sea-shore six miles from each other; after which he passed over Mount Libanus, to Damascus, and so again to Cesarea, and a third time to Jerusalem, where he passed the following winter.

On the Syrian Border; To Damascus, Jerusalem and Sebaste

And then he went to the town of Ptolemais, on the extreme bounds of Syria, and was obliged by sickness to remain there all Lent. His companions went forward to the king of the Saracens, named Emir-al-Mumenin, with the hope of obtaining letters of safe conduct; but they could not find the king, because he had fled out of his kingdom. Upon this, they came back, and remained together at Ptolemais until the week before Easter. Then they went again to Emessa, and asked the governor there to give them letters, and he gave them a letter for each two, because they could not travel in a company, but only two and two, on account of the difficulty of obtaining food. And then they went to Damascus, and returned a fourth time to Jerusalem, where they remained a short period.

They now left Jerusalem by another route, and came to the town of Sebaste, which was formerly called Samaria, and they call the castle Sebastia.

Here repose St. John the Baptist, and the prophets Abдiah and Elisha; and near the castle is the well at which our Lord asked for water of the Samaritan woman, and over which well there is now a church. And near is the mountain on which the Samaritans worshipped; for the woman said to our Lord, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”

The Pilgrims are Pursued by a Lion

Here the travelers performed their devotions, and then they proceeded to a large town on the farthest borders of Samaria, where they reposed that night. And thence they continued their journey over an extensive plain covered with olive trees, and they were accompanied by a black with two camels and a mule, who was conducting a woman through the wood. And on their way they were met by a lion, which threatened them much with fearful roaring; but the black encouraged them, and told them to go forwards; and when they approached it, the lion, as God willed, hurried off in another direction, and they soon heard his roaring in the distance. They supposed he came there to devour people who went into the wood to gather olives. At length they arrived at a town called Thalamartha, on the sea-coast; and they proceeded onwards to the head of Mount Libanus, where it forms a promontory in the sea, and where stands the tower of Libanus. Nobody is allowed to pass this place without letters of safe conduct, for there is a guard in it; those who are without such letters, are seized and sent to Tyre. That mountain is between Tyre and Thalamartha. And so the bishop arrived again at Tyre.

Willibald Smuggles Balsam into Phoenician Tyre

Willibald had formerly, when at Jerusalem, bought balsam⁴, and filled a gourd with it; and he took a gourd that was hollow, and had flax, and filled it with rock oil⁵; and poured some in the other gourd, and cut the small stalk, so that it fitted exactly and closed up the mouth of the gourd. So, when they

4 Balsam: A sweet-smelling resinous essence of the balsam plant, used in both the eastern and western Church to make chrism, the holy oil used in baptism, ordination, and church dedications. Most balsam was produced in Arabia and in the Holy Land, particularly at Ein-Gedi, whose balsam plants, tradition said, were first given to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. The secrets of balsam production were heavily guarded by Jewish and later, Muslim producers, and judging by Willibald's efforts to smuggle it out, export was heavily taxed, if not forbidden by Muslim authorities. The 1st-century Roman naturalist and historian Pliny writes that balsam was often worth more than its weight in gold, and that when balsam-producing regions were conquered, the balsam plants were carried in victory processions.

5 Rock oil: (*Petrce oleum*) Bitumen, a sticky, tar-like form of petroleum.

came to Tyre, the citizens stopped them, and examined their burdens to see if they had any thing concealed; for if they had found any thing, they would immediately have put them to death. But they found nothing but Willibald's gourd, which they opened, and, smelling the rock oil in the stalk, they did not discover the balsam that was within. So they let them go.

Sailing to Byzantium

They remained here many days waiting for a ship, and when they had obtained one they were at sea all the winter, from the day of St. Andrew the Apostle (Nov. 30, 724) until a week before Easter, when they reached Constantinople. Here repose in one altar the three saints, Andrew, Timothy, and Luke the Evangelist; and the sepulcher of John Chrysostom is before the altar where the priest stands when he performs mass.⁶ Willibald remained there two years, and was lodged in the church, so that he might behold daily where the saints reposed.

Then he came to the town of Nicea, where the emperor Constantine held a synod, at which three hundred and eighteen bishops were present. The church here resembles the church on Mount Olivet, where our Lord ascended to heaven, and in it are the pictures of the bishops who were at the synod. Willibald went thither from Constantinople that he might see how that church was built, and then returned to Constantinople.

Willibald is Defeated in His Attempt to Visit Hell

At the end of the two years they sailed, in company with the envoys of the pope and the emperor, to the isle of Sicily, to the town of Syracuse, and thence to Catania, and so to the city of Regia (Reggio) in Calabria; and thence to the isle of Vulcano, where is Theodoric's Hell.⁷ And when they arrived there, they went on shore to see what sort of a hell it was; and Willibald especially, who was curious to see the interior, was wishful to ascend to the summit of the mountain where the opening was; but he was unable to accomplish his wish, on account of the cinders which were thrown up from the gulf, and settled in heaps round the brim, as snow settles on the ground when it falls

⁶ Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople.

⁷ Theodoric's Hell (*Iufemus Thieodorici*): In many places, craters of volcanoes were believed to be entrances to hell. A hermit, who resided on the Isle of Lipari, told a friend of Pope Gregory the Great that he had seen the soul of the Gothic king, Theodoric, thrown into the crater of the Isle of Vulcano, hence the name given to it in Willibald's narrative.

from heaven. But though Willibald was defeated in his attempt to reach the summit, he had a near view of the column of flame and smoke which was projected upwards from the pit with a noise like thunder. And he saw how the pumice-stone, which writers use,⁸ was thrown...from hell, and fell into the sea, and was thence cast on the shore, where men gathered it and carried it away. After having witnessed this spectacle, they sailed to the church of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, which stands on the sea-shore, and came to the mountains which are called Didymi. Thence they went by sea to Naples. *

⁸ Medieval scribes used pumice stone to smooth the irregularities in their vellum pages and to erase mistakes.