

HADRIAN THE AFRICAN – fact sheet

Michael Wood, 2020

There is no separate in-depth account of Hadrian and his legacy. The key study of his life is by M Lapidge and B Bischoff *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* Cambridge 1994 pp82-132. To draw up this fact sheet/time line I have used this along with older studies starting with AS Cook in 1923, and added new finds made over the last few years, the latest by Franck Cinato in 2017. It mainly concentrates on what we might be able to deduce about his life and career in Africa and Naples before he came to England. For all his importance, Hadrian was till recently a poorly studied figure – not least because of the difficulty of finding evidence; but the one certainty is that more is to be discovered. My article on him comes out in the October issue of the BBC History magazine. Any comments or suggestions gratefully received!

- 1) Hadrian was born in North Africa (in the 620s?) and died in Canterbury on January 9 709 or 710.
- 2) He was of ‘African race’ *vir natione Afir* (so Bede- Hadrian was alive till Bede was in his thirties.) NB the use of this term by the likes of Virgil, Martial and Statius: it is often specifically used by Latin poets to refer to a native of Libya. Maybe then he was a Berber/Amazigh? Probably as a fluent Greek speaker he was from the Greek-speaking part of North Africa – i.e. Cyrenaica; but where exactly we don’t know. In the lecture notes taken down by his students in Canterbury (see below) Hadrian mentions the exotic birds in a north African palace from his personal experience ‘in Libia’ – could this be the impressive colonnaded palace excavated at Apollonia – the main centre of Byzantine Christianity in the region up till 645? Is even his name a clue? (Hadrianopolis is nearby, close to Benghazi. (For a useful book – *Cyrenaica in Antiquity* ed G Barker et al Oxford 1985.) On Hadrian’s ethnicity, Professor David Ganz suggests to me that that a face in an illuminated initial in the famous Salaberga Psalter (now in Berlin but written in 8th-century Northumbria) is intended to depict a black person. Leslie Webster former head of the Early Medieval Dept at the BM, considers it a unique image. See my forthcoming article.
- 3) Why did he leave North Africa? Very likely he fled from North Africa at the time of the Arab invasions, starting late 639 in Egypt; the cities of the Libyan Pentapolis were first attacked in 642, conquered by 645. During that time perhaps Hadrian went as a refugee to Southern Italy. In the students’ notes from his classes in Canterbury (on which see below) Hadrian is quoted on the Arabs of his day as ‘a race never at peace with anyone but always at war with someone.’
- 4) Was Hadrian already a Christian priest before he left Africa? We don’t know. But sometime in the next few years he became abbot of a monastery in the region of the Bay of Naples. Bede in his HE (IV 1, written in 731) says this: ‘now there was in the monastery of Hiridanum (or Niridanum – the various manuscript copies have both spellings) not far from Naples in Campania a certain abbot Hadrian, a man of African race and well versed in the Holy Scriptures, trained in both monastic and ecclesiastical

ways, and extremely skilled equally in the Greek and Latin languages'. Allowing for slips in spelling this is clearly Nisidanum, an island in the Bay of Naples. (In the students' notes from Canterbury, incidentally, Hadrian gives local detail about the location of the nearby island of Ponza in the Bay of Naples.)

- 5) Background: The region of Naples and Campania had very early Christian communities and a very rich religious and cultural life in his time: Greek speaking as well as Latin- Naples was an old Greek foundation. The influence of the culture of S. Italy – saints, commemorations, stories etc will later be pervasive in early English Christianity: in the Lindisfarne Gospels, the calendrical lists of commemorations contain Neapolitan feasts: some Campanian cults that came into England then include St Juliana, found in England from the eighth century – subject of a Latin life and an Old English poem in the Exeter Book. All this and much else presumably came with Hadrian...
- 6) Naples was also a great entre of scholarship, with rich libraries, such as that of the scribe and scholar Eugippius (who died c535) a great collector and copyist. One famous manuscript written in England, the Echternach Gospels (from Lindisfarne c700), e.g. preserves a note saying its exemplar was copied from a book written in a Neapolitan library in 558). Copying of manuscripts of the great North African church fathers' poets and writers was especially active in the Naples region. In short Naples was a massive transmission point in the age before and after the Arab invasions, the 6th and 7th centuries, for the learning of North Africa into Italy and through Italy into Western Europe. Arriving from North Africa in the 640s this from now on was Hadrian's intellectual milieu.
- 7) So through the 650s and 60s Abbot Hadrian was an important figure in this Neapolitan cultural circle. And more. It has been suggested Hadrian acted as interpreter for the Byzantine emperor Constans who brought a Byzantine army into Southern Italy in winter 662 to protect the imperial possessions there from attacks from the northern Langobards. Constans spent early summer 663 in Naples before he travelled to Rome to meet the Pope in July. Perhaps this is how the Pope met Hadrian. Did Hadrian go with Constans? Did he even act as translator in the conversation with the Pope? This would explain how the Pope knew so much about the abbot of an otherwise obscure monastery near Naples before he invited him to go to England.
- 8) Bede also says that Hadrian had done two journeys/diplomatic missions into Gaul, so he may have been experienced as diplomat as well as a scholar-abbot: and had seen something of the world of the former Roman provinces beyond the Alps, now 'sub-Roman' kingdoms ruled by Germanic kings and war lords.
- 9) Which might explain why, in 667, when the archbishopric of Canterbury fell vacant when Archbishop Wigheard died on pilgrimage in Rome, Pope Vitalian asked Hadrian to replace him: he must have known all about him by then.
- 10) Bede suggests at this point Hadrian was still abbot of Nisidanum; though a Leiden manuscript from the late tenth century says he was abbot of the Schola Anglorum, the

'English School' in Rome, the famous church and hostel for pilgrims from England. Intriguing – but the idea has no supporting evidence. One would guess it's mistaken.

- 11) NB too: If an experienced abbot in 667, it is unlikely Hadrian was younger than 40 in 667, so he was likely born in the 620s?
- 12) But Hadrian turned down the Pope's offer. Perhaps he felt it was too big a responsibility- or just didn't want to spend the rest of his life on 'the farthest edge of the world'? Instead he suggested to Pope Vitalian Adrian, abbot of a nunnery in Naples, who also said no. Again Vitalian asked Hadrian. This time Hadrian made an extraordinary suggestion: he recommended a 65-year-old Greek and Syriac-speaking monk, now living in Rome, Theodore of Tarsus, a man educated at Antioch and Edessa in Syria, the intellectual powerhouses of the late Antique Christian world. Theodore we might assume had also fled the Arab invasions (on the refugee route from Syria to the Aegean) and had lived for a time in Constantinople, but was now in the Syrian exile community in Tre Fontane south of the Roman walls where there is still a cluster of three beautiful ancient churches. Evidently Theodore had very special qualities to even think of sending him at his time of life out to the wilds of Britain.
- 13) Theodore agreed to go (aged 65 remember!!) but the Pope instructed Hadrian to go with him 'because he had twice gone to Gaul before on various businesses'. He knew the way. And also as Bede says, he had the personnel, the retinue and resources to mount such an expedition (private money?). At what point Theodore persuaded him to stay long term we don't know – maybe only a couple of years into the project in Britain?
- 14) On 27 May 668 having been consecrated in Rome, Theodore set off for Britain (along with the Northumbrian aristocrat priest and book collector Benedict Biscop who had been in Rome on one of his five pilgrimages). It was a targeted mission – manuscripts and teaching materials in their baggage (for what they carried with them, see some suggestions below). Hadrian was detained for a while by a local ruler in Gaul – perhaps suspicious of his earlier prominent role in Papal diplomacy which had taken him into Gaul?
- 15) Theodore arrived in Britain 27 May 669. Later that year or early 670 Hadrian landed in Kent and rejoined him: from then on they would be inseparable till Theodore's death in 690 aged 88.
- 16) A year or two later, Benedict Biscop whom Theodore had made abbot of the monastery of St Peter and Paul in Canterbury (later known as St Augustine's) resigns to go back up to his native Northumbria where he will be the driving force behind the founding of the great monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Hadrian now agrees to become abbot which he will be, incredibly, for nearly 40 years. Under him the monastery will become a centre of classical and Mediterranean learning with the most influential school in British history.
- 17) The pair set out to build diocesan and parochial organisation across England; holding synods to try to regularise Christian worship in Britain. Teaching programmes are set up;

their pupils are sent out to local monasteries as abbots. They go all over England; Bede says 'they went everywhere and did everything together'. Some bullet points:

- 18) The main school was at Canterbury-the idea was to give young Englishmen the best education available in Europe. 'In addition to teaching the Holy Scriptures' Bede says, their also taught their students poetry, astronomy, the calculation of the calendar...' Theodore also taught sacred music. Bede says it was the 'happiest time since the English first came to Britain': the first generation of their students included Aldhelm, Tatwine etc: <https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/learning-and-education-in-anglo-saxon-england> His pupil Aldhelm talks about Hadrian's 'ineffably pure urbanity': <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2016/10/an-african-abbot-in-anglo-saxon-england.html>
- 19) Fluency in Latin was of course at the core of the curriculum-their surviving glossaries (the most famous is in Leiden, but there are at least thirty other copies in continental libraries) have parallel columns of Latin and Old English. Greek was also taught: some of the students Bede says 'knew Greek as well as Latin and their native language'.
- 20) A major discovery about the school was made by Bernard Bischoff in the Ambrosiana library in Milan: a later copy of student's lecture notes from the Canterbury school. Only published in 1994 after Bischoff's death (see the illustration in my article), the notes were written down originally to record Hadrian and Theodore's teachings and are printed by Bischoff and Lapidge (1994) from the Milan manuscript Ambrosiana M 79 sup, which is an eleventh century collection of biblical materials. Though the most extensive collection, it is not the only one: excerpts survive in many other manuscripts: e.g. in St Gall, Berlin, Munich, two in Leiden, and three in Würzburg. This gives an idea of how widely their teachings were disseminated in the middle ages. Other collections of glosses include ones on medicine, metrology, philosophy, Roman civil law, grammar and the art of rhetoric; the latest finds are from their grammatical teachings, a set of glosses on the late Roman (North African) grammarian Priscian in Paris lat 7505, and Reims 1094; both are now digitised. It's safe to say that here too more is to come.
- 21) As for texts they brought with them, these included Biblical commentaries, grammatical commentaries, glossaries, history, poetry (including e.g. Ephrem the Syrian who had a long afterlife in English culture – he's still got a hymn in Hymns Ancient and Modern!). Also Greek prayers and liturgica, a litany of saints from Antioch including St George; lives of saints including South Italian saints like Juliana and eastern saints like Anastasius the Persian. Most exciting perhaps is a fragment of the letters of the north African St. Cyprian, now in the British Library – incredibly a 4th century book; on this see <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/letters-of-cyprian> A 6th-century copy of the North African (Tunisian) Primasius's On the Apocalypse (now in the Bodleian Oxford) may also be his. One other possibility I talk about in the BBC History Magazine is the North African Symphosius and his Latin riddles, the beginning of the English riddle tradition.
- 22) 'They did everything together': if we are talking about statues, these two, Syrian and Libyan refugees, surely deserve one?