

Gregory I, Letter to Abbot Mellitus, c. 597¹

*Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) wrote this letter to the Abbot Mellitus, who was about to join St. Augustine of Canterbury on the mission to **England** in 597.*

Tell Augustine that he should be no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within those temples. Let him, after he has purified them with holy water, place altars and relics of the saints in them. For, if those temples are well built, they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God. Thus, seeing that their places of worship are not destroyed, the people will banish error from their hearts and come to places familiar and dear to them in acknowledgement and worship of the true God.

Further, since it has been their custom to slaughter oxen in sacrifice, they should receive some solemnity in exchange. Let them therefore, on the day of the dedication of their churches, or on the feast of the martyrs whose relics are preserved in them, build themselves huts around their one-time temples and celebrate the occasion with religious feasting. They will sacrifice and eat the animals not any more as an offering to the devil, but for the glory of God to whom, as the giver of all things, they will give thanks for having been satiated.

Thus, if they are not deprived of all exterior joys, they will more easily taste the interior ones. For surely it is impossible to efface all at once everything from their strong minds, just as, when one wishes to

reach the top of a mountain, he must climb by stages and step by step, not by leaps and bounds....

Mention this to our brother the bishop, that he may dispose of the matter as he sees fit according to the conditions of time and place.

Bede (673-735): Ecclesiastical History²

*This description of the conversion of **England** was written by Bede, a monk at Lindesfarne, nearly a century after the event.*

[Augustine, with his companions, arrived in Britain.]. The powerful Ethelbert was at that time king of Kent; he had extended his dominions as far as the great river Humber, by which the southern Saxons are divided from the northern. On the east of Kent is the large Isle of Thanet,... On this island landed the servant of our Lord, Augustine, and his companions, being, as is reported, nearly forty men. They had, by order of the blessed Pope Gregory, brought interpreters of the nation of the Franks, and sending to Ethelbert, signified that they were come from Rome, and brought a joyful message, which most undoubtedly assured to all that took advantage of it everlasting joys in heaven, and a kingdom that would never end with the living and true God.

The king, having heard this, ordered them to stay in that island where they had landed and that they should be furnished with all necessaries till he should consider what to do with them. For he had heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife, of the royal family of the Franks, called Bertha, whom he had received from her parents upon

¹ Epistola 76, PL 77: 1215-1216; From Internet medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/greg1-mellitus.txt>

² From Internet Medieval Sourcebook <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/bede1.asp>

condition that she should be permitted to practice her religion with the bishop, Luidhard, who was sent with her to preserve the faith.

Some days later the king came into the island and, sitting in the open air, ordered Augustine and his companions to be brought into his presence. For he had taken precaution that they should not come to him in any house, lest, according to an ancient superstition, if they practiced any magical arts they might impose upon him, and so get the better of him. But they came furnished with divine, not with magic, power, bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board; and singing the the litany, they offered up their prayers to the Lord for eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom they came.

When Augustine had sat down, pursuant to the king's commands, and preached to him and his attendants there present the word of life, the king answered thus: "Your words and promises are very fair, but they are new to us and of uncertain import, and I cannot approve of them so far as to forsake that which I have so long followed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from far into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true and most beneficial, we will not molest you, but give you favorable entertainment and take care to supply you with the necessary sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion."...As soon as they entered the dwelling place assigned them, they began to imitate the course of life practiced in the primitive church : applying themselves to frequent prayer, watching, and fasting; preaching the word of life to as many as they could;

despising all worldly things, as not belonging to them; receiving only their necessary food from those they taught; living in all respects conformably to what they prescribed to others, and being always disposed to suffer any adversity, and even to die for that truth which they preached. In short, several believed and were baptized, admiring the simplicity of their innocent life and the sweetness of their heavenly doctrine.

There was on the east side of the city a church dedicated to St. Martin, built whilst the Romans were still in the island, wherein the queen, who, as has been said before, was a Christian, used to pray. In this they first began to meet, to sing, to pray, to say mass, to preach and to baptize, till the king, being converted to the faith, allowed them to preach openly and to build or repair churches in all places.

When he among the rest, induced by the unspotted life of these holy men and their delightful promises, which, by many miracles, they proved to be most certain, believed and was baptized, greater numbers be-an daily to flock together to hear the word and, forsaking their heathen rites. to associate themselves, by believing, to the unity of the Church of Christ.

Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, c. 575³

Clovis (r. 482-511) was the king of the tribe of the Franks. In 486, he defeated Syragius, the last Roman military official in the West. This history of the Franks was written about a century after the time of Clovis by Gregory, bishop of Tours, who was a prominent ally of the Frankish kings. It begins with Adam, but the majority of it concerns the reign of Clovis and his successors, down to Gregory's own time period—Gregory himself is a prominent character in the book. It is a narrative history that mostly gives a blow-by-blow account of the political actions of rulers, without much attempt at explaining deeper motivations. Even though it was written later, it is the best historical source we have for the 500s in present-day France.

Book 2: At this time [A.D. 486] the army of Clovis pillaged many churches, for he was still sunk in the errors of idolatry. The soldiers had borne away from a church, with all the other ornaments of the holy ministry, a vase of marvelous size and beauty. The bishop of this church sent messengers to the king, begging that if the church might not recover any other of the holy vessels, at least this one might be restored. The king, bearing these things, replied to the messenger: "Follow thou us to Soissons, for there all things that have been acquired are to be divided. If the lot shall give me this vase, I will do what the bishop desires."

When he had reached Soissons, and all the booty had been placed in the midst of the army, the king pointed to this vase, and said: "I ask you, O most valiant warriors, not to refuse to me the vase in addition to my rightful part," Those of discerning mind among his men answered, "O

glorious king, all things which we see are thine, and we ourselves are subject to thy power; now do what seems pleasing to thee, for none is strong enough to resist thee." When they had thus spoken one of the soldiers, impetuous, envious, and vain, raised his battle-axe aloft and crushed the vase with it, crying, "Thou shalt receive nothing of this unless a just lot give it to thee." At this all were stupefied.

The king bore his injury with the calmness of patience, and when he had received the crushed vase he gave it to the bishop's messenger, but he cherished a hidden wound in his breast. When a year had passed he ordered the whole army to come fully equipped to the Campus Martius and show their arms in brilliant array - But when he had reviewed them all he came to the breaker of the vase, and said to him, "No one bears his arms so clumsily as thou ; for neither thy spear, nor thy sword, nor thy ax is ready for use." And seizing his ax, he cast it on the ground. And when the soldier had bent a little to pick it up the king raised his hands and crushed, his head with his own ax. "Thus," he said, "didst thou to the vase at Soissons."

30. [Clotilda, his queen from Burgundy was already a Catholic Christian.] The queen did not cease to urge him to recognize the true God and cease worshipping idols. But he could not be influenced in any way to this belief, until at last a war arose with the Alamanni, in which he was driven by necessity to confess what before he had of his free will denied. It came about that as the two armies were fighting fiercely, there was much slaughter, and Clovis's army began to be in danger of destruction.

³ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Ernest Brehaut (extended selections), *Records of Civilization 2*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916). From Internet Medieval Sourcebook:

<http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/gregory-clovisconv.asp>; introduction from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07018b.htm>

He saw it and raised his eyes to heaven, and with remorse in his heart he burst into tears and cried: “Jesus Christ, whom Clotilda asserts to be the son of the living God, who art said to give aid to those in distress, and to bestow victory on those who hope in thee, I beseech the glory of thy aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies, and I shall know that power which she says that people dedicated in thy name have had from thee, I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods but, as I find, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them. I now call upon thee, I desire to believe thee only let me be rescued from my adversaries.” And when he said thus, the Alamanni turned their backs, and began to disperse in flight. And when they saw that their king was killed, they submitted to the dominion of Clovis, saying: “Let not the people perish further, we pray; we are yours now.” And he stopped the fighting, and after encouraging his men, retired in peace and told the queen how he had had merit to win the victory by calling on the name of Christ. This happened in the fifteenth year of his reign.

31. Then the queen asked saint Remi, bishop of Rheims, to summon Clovis secretly, urging him to introduce the king to the word of salvation. And the bishop sent for him secretly and began to urge him to believe in the true God, maker of heaven and earth, and to cease worshipping idols, which could help neither themselves nor any one else. But the king said: “I gladly hear you, most holy father; but there remains one thing: the people who follow me cannot endure to abandon their gods; but I shall go and speak to them according to your words.” He met with his

followers, but before he could speak the power of God anticipated him, and all the people cried out together: “O pious king, we reject our mortal gods, and we are ready to follow the immortal God whom Remi preaches.” This was reported to the bishop, who was greatly rejoiced, and bade them get ready the baptismal font. The squares were shaded with tapestried canopies, the churches adorned with white curtains, the baptistery set in order, the aroma of incense spread, candles of fragrant odor burned brightly, and the whole shrine of the baptistery was filled with a divine fragrance: and the Lord gave such grace to those who stood by that they thought they were placed amid the odors of paradise. And the king was the first to ask to be baptized by the bishop. Another Constantine advanced to the baptismal font, to terminate the disease of ancient leprosy and wash away with fresh water the foul spots that had long been borne. And when he entered to be baptized, the saint of God began with ready speech: “Gently bend your neck, Sigamber; worship what you burned; burn what you worshipped.” The holy bishop Remi was a man of excellent wisdom and especially trained in rhetorical studies, and of such surpassing holiness that he equalled the miracles of Silvester. For there is extant a book of his life which tells that he raised a dead man. And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity, and was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3000 were baptized. His sister also, Albofled, was baptized, who not long after passed to the Lord. And when the king was in mourning for her, the holy Remi sent a letter of consolation which began in this way: “The reason of your mourning pains me, and pains me

greatly, that Albofled your sister, of good memory, has passed ; away. But I can give you this comfort, that her departure from the world was such that she ought to be envied rather than mourned.” Another sister also was converted, Lanthechild by name, who had fallen into the heresy of the Arians, and she confessed that the Son and the holy Spirit were equal to the Father, and was anointed.

38. Clovis received an appointment to the consulship from the emperor Anastasius, and in the church of the blessed Martin he clad himself in the purple tunic and chlamys, and placed a diadem on his head. Then he mounted his horse, and in the most generous manner he gave gold and silver as he passed along the way which is between the gate of the entrance [of the church of St. Martin] and the church of the city, scattering it among the people who were there with his own hand, and from that day he was called consul or *Augustus*. Leaving Tours he went to Paris and there he established the seat of his kingdom. There also Theodoric came to him.

42. Ragnachar was then king at Cambrai, a man so unrestrained in his wantonness that he scarcely had mercy for his own near relatives... Clovis came and made war on him, and he saw that his army was beaten and prepared to slip away in flight, but was seized by his army, and with his hands tied behind his back, he was taken with Ricchar his brother before Clovis. And Clovis said to him: “Why have you humiliated our family in permitting yourself to be bound? It would have been better for you to die.” And raising his ax he dashed it against his head, and he turned to his brother and said: “If you had aided your

brother, he would not have been bound” And in the same way he smote him with his ax and killed him...

The kings named above were kinsmen of Clovis, and their brother Rignomer by name, was slain by Clovis’ order at the city of Mans. When they were dead Clovis received all their kingdom and treasures. And having killed many other kings and his nearest relatives, of whom he was jealous lest they take the kingdom from him, he extended his rule over all the Gauls. However he gathered his people together at one time, it is said, and spoke of the kinsmen whom he had himself destroyed. “Woe to me, who have remained as a stranger among foreigners, and have none of my kinsmen to give me aid if adversity comes.” But he said this not because of grief at their death but by way of a ruse, if perchance he should be able to find some one still to kill.

The Russian Primary Chronicle⁴

*The following selections appear in the **Russian Primary Chronicle** (*Povest' vremennykh let: "The Tale of Bygone Years"*), our principal historical source for the history of Kievan Russia during the 10th to 12th centuries. Originally compiled in about 1110, the earliest surviving copy is a 1377 version (the Laurentian version).*

[In the year 980 CE] Vladimir began to reign alone in Kiev, and he set up idols on the hills outside the castle: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a moustache of gold, and others of Khors, Dazh'bog, Stribog, Simar'gl, and Mokosh'. The people sacrificed to them, calling them gods, and brought their sons and their daughters to sacrifice them to these devils. They desecrated the earth with their offerings, and the Russian land and this hill were defiled with blood.

In the year [987 CE] Vladimir summoned together his boyars [nobles] and the city elders and said to them, "Behold, the Bulgars came before me, saying, 'Accept our religion.' Then came the Germans and praised their own faith. After them came the Jews. Finally the Greeks appeared, disparaging all other faiths but praising their own, and they spoke at length, telling the history of the whole world from its beginning. Their words were wise, and it was marvelous to listen and pleasant for anyone to hear them. They preached about another world. 'Anyone,' they said, 'who adopts our religion and then dies shall arise and live forever. But anyone who embraces another faith shall in the next world be consumed by fire.' What is your opinion on this subject, and what do you answer?"

⁴ Text mixed from George Vernadsky, ed. *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 1:12-13, 25-26. in Stearns et al., *Documents in World History: Vol. 1* (4th ed., New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 236-239; and from Samuel H. Cross,

The boyars and the elders replied, "You know, Prince, that no man condemns what is his own but praises it instead. If you desire to make certain, you have servants at your disposal. Send them to inquire about the ritual of each and how he worships God." Their counsel pleased the prince and all people, so that they chose ten good and wise men.

[They visited the Bulgars and Germans, and then] they proceeded to Constantinople where they appeared before the emperor. He inquired on what mission they had come, and they reported to him all that had occurred. When the emperor heard their words, he rejoiced, and did them great honour on that very day.

On the morrow, the emperor sent a message to the patriarch to inform him that a Russian delegation had arrived to examine the Greek faith, and directed him to prepare the church and the clergy, and to array himself in his sacerdotal robes, so that the Russians might behold the glory of the God of the Greeks. When the patriarch received these commands, he bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The emperor accompanied the Russians to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of the edifice, the chanting, and the offices of the archpriest and the ministry of the deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God. The Russians were astonished, and in their wonder praised the Greek ceremonial. Then the Emperors Basil and Constantine invited the envoys to their presence, and said, "Go hence to your native country," and thus dismissed them with valuable presents and great honour.

"The Russian Primary Chronicle," in *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 12 (1930), 170-177, in Sanders et al., *Encounters in World History* (vol. 1, New York: McGraw-Hill 2006), 255.

Then they returned to their country. The prince called together his boyars and the elders, and he said: "The envoys who were sent out have returned. Let us hear what took place." He said, "Speak in the presence of my retinue." The envoys then reported, "When we journeyed among the Bulgars, we observed how they worship in their temple, called a mosque, while they stand ungirt. The Bulgarian bows, sits down, looks hither and thither like one possessed, and there is no happiness among them, but instead only sorrow and a dreadful stench. Their religion is not good. Then we went among the Germans and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples, and we saw no beauty there. Then we went to Greece, and the Greeks led us to where they worship their God, and we did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is better than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we can no longer remain here [in paganism]."

Then the boyars said in reply, "If the Greek faith were evil, it would not have been adopted by your grandmother Olga, who was wiser than anyone else." Vladimir then responded, asking, "Where shall we accept baptism?" and they replied, "Wherever you wish."

After a year had passed, in [988], Vladimir proceeded with an armed force against Kherson, a Greek city and the people of Kherson barricaded themselves therein. Vladimir halted at the farther side of the city beside the bay, a bowshot from the town, and the inhabitants resisted energetically while Vladimir besieged the town. Eventually, however, they became exhausted, and Vladimir warned them that if they did not

surrender, he would remain on the spot for three years. When they failed to heed this threat, Vladimir marshalled his troops and ordered the construction of an earthwork in the direction of the city. While this work was under construction, the inhabitants dug a tunnel under the city wall, stole the heaped-up earth, and carried it into the city, where they piled it up in the centre of the town. But the soldiers kept on building, and Vladimir persisted. Then a man of Kherson, Anastasius by name, shot into the Russian camp an arrow on which he had written: "There are springs behind you to the east, from which water flows in pipes. Dig down and cut them off." When Vladimir received this information, he raised his eyes to heaven and vowed that if this hope was realised, he would be baptised. He gave orders straightway to dig down above the pipes, and the water supply was thus cut off. The inhabitants were accordingly overcome by thirst, and surrendered. Vladimir and his retinue entered the city, and he sent messages to the [Byzantine] emperors Basil and Constantine, saying, "Behold, I have captured your glorious city. I have also heard that you have an unwedded sister. Unless you give her to me in marriage, I shall deal with your own city as I have with Kherson." When the emperors heard this message they were troubled, and they issued this statement: "It is not proper for Christians to give women in marriage to pagans. If you are baptized, you shall have her for your wife, inherit the kingdom of God, and be our co-believer. If you do not do so, however, we cannot give you our sister in marriage." When Vladimir learned of their response, he said to the emperors' envoys, "Tell the emperors I will accept baptism, since I have already given some study to your religion, and the Greek faith and ritual, as described by the emissaries I sent to examine it, has pleased me well." When the emperors heard this report they rejoiced and persuaded their

sister Anna [to consent to the match]. They then sent word to Vladimir, "Be baptized, and then we shall send you our sister."

But Vladimir said, "Let your sister herself come [with the priests] to baptize me." The emperors complied with his request and sent their sister, accompanied by some dignitaries and priests. Anna, however, departed with reluctance. "It is as if I were setting out into captivity," she lamented; "better were it for me to die here." But her brothers protested: "Through your agency God turns the Russian land to repentance, and you will relieve Greece from the danger of grievous war. Do you not see how much evil the Russians have already brought upon the Greeks? If you do not set out, they may bring on us the same misfortunes." It was thus that they overcame her hesitation only with great difficulty. The princess embarked upon a ship, and after tearfully embracing her kinfolk, she set forth across the sea and arrived at Kherson. The natives came forth to greet her, and conducted her into the city, where they settled her in the palace.

By divine agency, Vladimir was suffering at that moment from a disease of the eyes and could see nothing, being in great distress. The princess declared to him that if he desired to be relieved of this disease, he should be baptised with all speed, otherwise it could not be cured. When Vladimir heard her message, he said, "If this proves true, then of a surety is the God of the Christians great," and gave order that he should be baptised. The bishop of Kherson, together with the princess's priests...baptized Vladimir, and as the bishop laid his hand upon him he straightaway received his sight. Upon experiencing this miraculous cure, Vladimir glorified God, saying, "I have now perceived the one true God." When his followers beheld this miracle, many of them were also baptized.

As a bride price in exchange for the princess, he gave Kherson back to the Greeks and then went back to Kiev. When the prince arrived at his capital, he directed that the idols should be overturned and that some should be cut to pieces and others burned up.

Thereupon Vladimir sent heralds throughout the whole city, proclaiming, "If anyone, whether rich or poor, beggar or slave, does not come tomorrow to the river, he will be an enemy of mine." When the people heard this they went gladly, rejoicing and saying, "If this were not good, the prince and his boyars would not have accepted it." On the morrow the prince went forth to the Dnieper with the priests of the princess and those from Kherson, and a countless multitude assembled. They all went into the water; some stood up to their necks, others to their breasts, and the younger up to their breasts near the bank, some people holding children in their arms, while the adults waded farther out. The priests stood by and offered prayers. There was joy in heaven and upon earth at the sight of so many souls saved. But the Devil groaned, "Woe is me! They are driving me out of here!"

[Vladimir] ordered that wooden churches should be built and established where [pagan] idols had previously stood. He founded the Church of Saint Basil on the hill where the idol of Perun and the other images had been set, and where the prince and the people had offered their sacrifices. He began to found churches, to assign priests throughout the cities and towns, and to bring people in for baptism from all towns and villages. He began to take the children of the best families and send them for instruction from books.