



February 3

Commemoration: Ansgar, Bishop of Hamburg, missionary to Denmark and Sweden, 865

After his mother's early death Ansgar was brought up in Corbie Abbey, and made rapid progress in his education. According to the *Vita Ansgarii* ("Life of Ansgar"), when the little boy learned in a vision that his mother was in the company of Saint Mary, his careless attitude toward spiritual matters changed to seriousness. His pupil, successor, and eventual biographer Rimbart considered the visions of which this was the first to be the main motivation of the saint's life.

Ansgar was a product of the phase of Christianization of Saxony (present day Northern Germany) begun by Charlemagne and continued by his son and successor, Louis the Pious. When Saxony was no longer the focus of Christianization, what is now Denmark fell under the sweeping missionary gaze, with a group of monks including Ansgar sent back to Jutland with the baptized Jutish king Harald Klak. Ansgar returned two years later after educating young boys who had been purchased because Harald had possibly been driven out of his kingdom. In 822 he was one of a number of missionaries sent to found the abbey of Corvey in Westphalia, and there became a teacher and preacher. Then in 829 in response to a request from the Swedish king Björn at Hauge for a mission to the Swedes, Louis appointed Ansgar missionary. With an assistant, the friar Witmar, he preached and made converts for six months at Birka, on Lake Mälaren. They organized a small congregation there with the king's steward, Hergeir, as its most prominent member. In 831 he returned to Louis' court at Worms and was appointed to the Archbishopric of Hamburg.

This was a new archbishopric with a see formed from those of Bremen and Verden, plus the right to send missions into all the northern lands and to consecrate bishops for them. Ansgar was consecrated in November 831, and, the arrangements having been at once approved by Gregory IV, went to Rome to receive the pallium directly at the hands of the pope and to be named legate for the northern lands. This commission had previously been bestowed upon Ebbo, Archbishop of Reims, but the jurisdiction was divided by agreement, with Ebbo retaining Sweden for himself. For a time Ansgar devoted himself to the needs of his own diocese, which was still missionary territory with but a few churches. He founded a monastery and a school in Hamburg; the school was intended to serve the Danish mission, but accomplished little.

After Louis died in 840, his empire was divided and Ansgar lost the abbey of Turholt, which had been given as an endowment for his work. Then in 845 the Danes unexpectedly sacked Hamburg, destroying all the church's treasures and books and leaving the entire diocese unrestorable. Ansgar now had neither see nor revenue. Many of his helpers deserted him, but the new king, Louis the German, came to his aid; after failing to recover Turholt for him, in 847 he awarded him the vacant diocese of Bremen, where he took up residence in 848. However, since Hamburg had been an archbishopric, the sees of Bremen and Hamburg were combined for him. This presented canonical difficulties and also aroused the anger of the Bishop of Cologne, to whom Bremen had been suffragan, but after prolonged negotiations, Pope Nicholas I approved the union of the two dioceses in 864.

Through all this political turmoil, Ansgar continued his mission to the northern lands. The Danish civil war compelled him to establish good relations with two kings, Horik the Elder and his son, Horik II. Both assisted him until his death (Wood, 124-125). He was able to secure recognition of Christianity as a tolerated religion and permission to build a church in Sleswick. He did not forget the Swedish mission, and spent two years there in person (848-850), at the critical moment when a pagan reaction was threatened, which he succeeded in averting. In 854 Ansgar returned to Sweden. Now a king Olof ruled in Birka. According to Rimbart, he was well disposed to

Christianity. On a Viking raid to Apuole in Courland, the Swedes prayed, and with God's help they plundered the Curonians.

Ansgar died in Bremen in 865.

His life story was written by his successor as archbishop, Rimbert, in the *Vita Ansgarii*.

Ansgar, etching by Hugo Hamilton (1830)