



THE *VITA PRIMA* OF
ST WANDREGESILIUS

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ST WANDREGESILIUS

Mettingham College Series No. 2

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Historical Foreword

The Trustees of the Mettingham Orthodox Trust are pleased to present the following translation of the *Vita Prima* of St Wandregesilius written in about AD 700. Although this might seem an obscure medieval text to choose to translate, St Wandregesilius was an important saint in the South Norfolk and Waveney area in former times and pilgrimages were made to the church dedicated to him at Bixley (near Norwich) from across this region, including the village of Mettingham. To understand this link, however, between St Wandregesilius and Mettingham we need to know more about the history of the village's famous castle.

Mettingham: A Castle and a College

Whilst Mettingham Castle may be integral to the identity of the village, probably few people are aware that for a long and significant period of its history it was home to a religious chantry college. Although today a 'college' is usually conceived of as being purely an educational institution, the original colleges of medieval Europe were all primarily religious foundations, run by a dedicated staff of non-monastic clergy whose main purpose was to prayerfully remember the founders of the college in the daily round of church services. At the request of their founders, these religious colleges often had other roles which usually included the education of children and adults, as well as undertaking some pastoral responsibility for local people in surrounding parishes. Whilst the earliest colleges date to the 12th Century, their number increased dramatically in the 14th Century in the wake of Black Death, where many came to a sober and profound realisation of human mortality.

Raveningham - Norton Subcourse - Mettingham

It was at this time - in 1343 - that Sir John de Norwich, Knight of the Realm and Vice-Admiral of England, founded a Chantry College dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Raveningham, Norfolk. Here a Master and 8 secular priests lived next to the Church of St Andrew and prayed:

for the souls of the founder, and of Margaret his wife, for the honour of God and the Blessed Virgin, St Andrew the Apostle, and all the saints.

However, perhaps due both to the increased number of resident clergy, and bequests through the death of Sir John and his grandson, the college was then transferred in 1381 to the rectory of the next-door village of Norton Subcourse, and a new purpose-built church was constructed. But this was not to be the final location of the college, as the executors for Sir John's grandson then applied to move the college to the de Norwich family stronghold at Mettingham Castle. In 1393, some fifty years after its original foundation, the Master, 13 chaplains and now 14 school boys moved to a quadrangular

moated complex in the South-Eastern grounds of the Castle. Judging from the detailed financial accounts of the College, which are still preserved¹, as well as the reports of finds that were recorded in the 19th Century, the Collegiate Chapel at Mettingham was magnificently decorated in, as Alfred Suckling puts it, a ‘*complete cathedral style*’², with local craftsmen producing images, wood carvings, altar hangings, paintings and furnishings of the very highest quality. And it is a prominent image belonging to the College chapel that connects Mettingham College with St Wandregesilius and the small shrine church dedicated to him at Bixley.

Bixley: Pilgrimage to St Wandered

In his chapter on Mettingham College, Suckling mentions that -

*The fame of St. Wandered, whose image also was here, attracted an annual peregrination to his shrine.*³

But who is St Wandered? Although this seems to have eluded both Suckling and the local historian C.R. Manning, the answer is clearly found in the will of Alice Cooke of Horstead who, in 1478, ordered on her death, a series of pilgrimages to be made for the salvation of her soul which included ‘*a man to go a pilgrimage to St Wandrede of Biskeley*’⁴. As we know that the shrine church of Bixley is dedicated to St Wandregesilius, it is clear that Wandered or Wandrede was an Anglicized spelling of the Latin Wandregesilius and hence that Mettingham shared in the veneration of the saint.

Moreover, in addition to the pilgrimages being made by the order of Alice Cooke at Horstead just north of Norwich, and from Mettingham in the south, we also know that there was an image of St Wandregesilius in the Chapel of St John the Baptist at St Nicholas’ Church in Great Yarmouth to the east. The accounts of the church’s income that have been preserved indicate that the image of St Wandregesilius was a very revered one indeed⁵. Besides other images which must have been destroyed, additional wills⁶ attest that, by the late middle ages, the Church of St Wandregesilius at Bixley was at the centre of a widespread devotional cult. Exactly what the pilgrims would have seen and venerated is something of a mystery due both to the ikonoclasm of the Reformation and the fact that the church was substantially rebuilt in the 19th Century. It would seem, however, almost certain that, up to the Reformation, the Church possessed a relic of St Wandregesilius that was also widely believed to be wonder-working.

It is important to mention that the veneration of St Wandregesilius was not just an East Anglian phenomenon but embraced other parts of England as well, even before the Norman Conquest. We know that St Wandregesilius was commemorated in at least three Anglo-Saxon Calendars in the South of England,⁷ probably following St Dunstan’s exile to St Peter’s Monastery in Ghent in AD 956 – 957, where the relics of St Wandregesilius had been taken before the destruction of Fontenelle Abbey by the Vikings. Through the strong links between Canterbury and Ghent Abbey from around the 10th – 11th Centuries, it is probable that it was at this time that relics of the saint were given to key ecclesiastical

centres. Thus we know that Canterbury possessed a relic as did Abingdon Abbey near Oxford. Moreover, in terms of English dedications to St Wandregesilius, whilst Bixley is the only one to survive to this day, we know that historically it was not unique. From an index of London parishes before the Great Fire,⁸ we learn that there was also another church dedicated to St Wandregesilius in London on Old Fish Street by St Paul's Cathedral. However, by 1181, the dedication of this church had been changed to St Mary Magdalene, whose feast is also celebrated on the same day (22 July). After the Norman Conquest, the veneration of St Wandregesilius spread further throughout England as the Abbey at Fontenelle acquired numerous English parishes and lands.

St Wandregesilius: a saint for today

Thus far from being an obscure Frankish saint, as the following Life clearly shows, St Wandregesilius is an inspiring and holy saint, as relevant for us today as he was for our ancestors in earlier times. His life shines with a burning love for Christ which led him to give up the comfort of marriage and a high worldly position and embrace an austere rule of prayer, repentance and spiritual struggle after the manner of the Celtic monks, so as to be found worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whilst St Wandregesilius was never able to fulfil his wish to make a pilgrimage to the British Isles, the trustees hope that the publication of this Life and the painting of a new ikon of him will spiritually bring this Saint of God back to this area where his relics and holy memory were once so honoured.

The Trustees of Mettingham Orthodox Trust
The Feast of St Wandregesilius, 2011

Translator's Preface

In translating into English, the present writer has not attempted to abridge or condense the original text as in the earlier translation into English to which she had access. Neither has she given a literal word for word rendering of the French, but has endeavoured to give the sense rather than the letter particularly when the French translator was clearly making use of idioms. The aim was to make the life 'come alive' in a full translation into good literary English, but as the present translator has had no formal training in this task she hopes she may be forgiven if her rendering is sometimes too 'free' for the experts.

No attempt has, however, been made to compare the English text with the Latin original as this would have required someone with a far greater knowledge of mediæval Latin.

I should like to thank Dom Nault, Abbot of the Abbey of Saint Wandrille, Normandy, France, for his permission to translate the *Most Ancient Life of Saint Wandrille* (Wandregesilius) into English, and for his kindness in sending me an earlier abridged translation.

I should also like to thank Mettingham Orthodox Trust for their encouragement in inviting me to undertake the work, in addition to the other friends who, on account of their superior knowledge of French, I have sometimes consulted.

Nun Macrina
June, 2011

The *Vita Prima* of St Wandregesilius

Prologue

Here begins the life of the blessed abbot Wandregesilius.

1) The more the life of the men of God abounds with outstanding virtues, the greater the account of their deeds reflects the same, and this even when the biographer is without talent. In truth we place our trust in Him who said, *'It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you'* (Mt. 10:20): He loosed the tongues of the dumb and caused words addressed to men to come forth from the mouth of a donkey⁹. Why be surprised if He should inspire a man endowed with reason, when He is sometimes pleased to have His truth proclaimed through the jaws of an animal? It is in this hope, strengthened by power from on high, that I have aroused my feeble talent to compose the life of blessed Wandregesilius. I will do as I am able and the Lord will know how to put my words to good effect. I shall have much to say about the holiness of our blessed saint; I was, myself, an eye-witness of some of his deeds, but most of them were told to me by venerable monks who had been his disciples for many years; they recounted not only what they had learned from hearsay, but also what they had seen themselves.

In this work I shall, very briefly, give an account of their reminiscences, calling to mind only a tiny fraction of the remarkable grace which our father had received, and that in the simplest of styles in order not to weary the attention of the reader. An over-lengthy account leads to ridicule; whereas a brief exposition, even if not particularly elegant, can be a source of spiritual edification; thanks to divine mercy, this will be worth our indulgence. May the reader feel his soul kindle with ardour and desire for the good! That which he learns with his ears may he preserve, on the altar of his heart, and meditate thereupon with all eagerness; may he put into practice that which he remembers and may he fulfil the divine will with unrestrained desire.

2) Being an insignificant person, I ask those who read the life of the saint not to display malice towards the author of this account, by jealously criticizing him with tooth and tongue as Cain beat Abel with a rod of iron; may they rather keep it in their hearts and souls; for, as the prophet says, *'as for the sons of men, their teeth are a weapon and arrows, and their tongue is a sharp dagger'* (Ps. 57:4). Good examples are usually extremely useful in the conversion or the correction of men, inspiring them every day to seek after fresh virtues. Even if we had not the warnings of the divine commandments to guide us on the path to heaven, the examples of the saints would suffice. This is why the eternal King, in His Trinity of Persons, has been watching throughout the ages to make known the unending glory of His servants for the profit of their successors who will be kindled with a great love for the heavenly fatherland. For this reason, we have included here those things in the life of the Holy Father Wandregesilius which set forth the glory of God and not

those which are, in reality, of human interest alone.

The wicked will find here things that will cause them to fear; the good things that will make them rejoice; the proud will humble themselves and the licentious will be troubled by the examples of chastity; gossips will learn to be silent, the greedy to curb their appetites, the avaricious to abandon the world and its clutter, drunkards to remain sober; villains will learn gentleness, the slothful enthusiasm, the headstrong true discretion as well as holy simplicity. With admiration, we shall all behold, in this athlete of God, the works of divine grace which we should imitate, the strength of his virtue and of his repentance, and the fount of his tears. The brevity of this account compels us to leave aside many examples of misunderstanding by men, and other deeds which show us how he had renounced the world and persevered in the crucifixion of his own will on the scaffold of the Saviour. But let us now bring to a close this preface and, in order to set forth something of the virtues of his life, let us begin our account for the glory of God.

At the Royal Court

3) There was a man called Wandregesilius, surnamed Wandon, whose life was renowned - illumined by divine light. He was born into the world in the region of Verdun¹⁰ and being of noble birth he became yet more noble by his monastic life. In his youth he lived with his parents who gave him the basic education of that time and found him employment in the highest level of administration. In this secular and honoured period of his life, he accomplished faultlessly the tasks assigned to him, but his soul remained supremely attached to the commandments of Christ so that he applied to himself the word of the gospels: *'render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's'* (Mt. 22:21).¹¹

4) He was still a young man when his parents enjoined him to marry. Obedient to their desire, he betrothed himself to a maiden from a good family with illustrious ancestors. She was, in fact, from the highest rank of the aristocracy. He then found himself greatly perplexed. He wished to leave the world and serve God but feared that his fiancée, if she learned of this, would refuse the consent necessary for the separation. He decided, therefore, firstly to take her as his wife and only afterwards to speak to her of the monastic life.

Having thus wedded her, and desiring to win her for the perfect life, following the Scripture which commands to love one's neighbour as oneself (Mt. 19:19), he began to explain to her carefully the Church's doctrine, which he knew so well, concerning the great reward which awaited monastic virtues and the eternal union in the glory of the saints reserved for those who, on earth, had been two in one flesh (Mt. 19:5). But she, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, interrupted him and cried, 'O my Lord, who then prevented you from speaking to me of this before? Be assured that without hesitation I wish to offer myself to the service of God, to abandon the vain things of this world and

reign in the glory of Christ. I ask of you only one thing, my Lord, namely to put your idea into practice as soon as possible and place us both, you and myself, your handmaid, under the divine yoke.’ Hearing this he was overwhelmed with joy and praised God for the nobility of this vocation. They gave each other the necessary consent. He tonsured himself¹² and placed the veil of grace upon the head of his wife. In her case the purity of her life and heart were such that the Lord, even in her lifetime, allowed her to work numerous miracles.¹³

5) Let us now, in retrospect, return to the moment when he himself experienced the effect of divine power for the first time.

While he was still a layman, travelling with his wife and a large retinue, he stopped one evening in a place inhabited by uncultured rustics of the worst kind, who feared neither God nor master. A dispute over a meadow for horses resulted in so violent a scuffle that, had it not been for divine goodness and the virtue of the man of God, it would not have ended without many deaths. Seeking the most effective help, the saint took prayer as his sword and armed himself with divine mercy rather than his shield. The Lord, who loves to answer His servants, came to his aid and the quarrel suddenly ended. The adversaries came to an agreement and became friends. In this way, the son of peace was the instrument of God for bringing back rivals to harmony. This event increased the fervour of Wandregesilius and he would love to repeat, ‘Does not He deserve to be loved above all things, this God who appears at once, in the very place where one has called upon Him, just as He promised: “When you seek for Me with all your heart, you will find Me”?’

Montfaucon

6) The man of God, having decided to leave behind the ease of this world, sought a monastery in which he could live the angelic life. At first, but only for a short time, he lived with an old man in a place named Montfaucon.¹⁴ Our blessed one was then a young man of great elegance; he had a fine head of hair, lively eyes, a lily-white complexion and long thin hands of which he took great care. He gave away all his possessions and embarked upon the way of poverty. The devil, who loves to harm, and, with all his wiles, to fight against the good was kindled with a great jealousy towards Wandregesilius and from now on never ceased to attack him either in person or through wicked men. But he, having on his head the helmet of salvation, as the Apostle says, and protected by the shield of faith (Eph. 6:16-17), fought victoriously against the enemy’s assaults.

7) King Dagobert, who was on the throne at that time and whom Wandregesilius had faithfully served since his youth, would not accept that he had tonsured himself without his permission and ordered him to come to the palace. The man of God, trusting in the help of Christ who straightway reassured him, left unwillingly for the court. Approaching the royal residence, he saw a poor man whose cart was jammed fast in the mud just in

front of the entrance. The passers-by were not stopping to help him but, on the contrary, were jostling him and almost trampling on him. Arriving at the scene and seeing the malice of these villainous fiends, the man of God swiftly dismounted his horse and, coming to the aid of the unfortunate man, succeeded in setting the cart aright together with him. The onlookers, beholding him covered with mud, began, however, to laugh more loudly and to ridicule him. He, on the contrary, paying them no heed, humbly followed the Master who humbled Himself, *'If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household?'* (Mt.10:25) As he was thus turning this insult to the glory of God, an angel straightway appeared and cleaned his garment to perfection; so, even better clothed than he had been before, he entered the palace of the King and, like a lamb before wolves, presented himself to him and his court. The Lord, good shepherd of all the saints and his protector, guarded this lamb which had been snatched from the jaws of his enemies in their presence; they were unanimous in recognising that he was indeed a man of God and that the desire for Christ alone had caused him to abandon all the glory of the world. The king ordered, therefore, that he should not be troubled and told him that he was free to devote himself to the contemplation of divine glory.

Saint-Ursanne

8) On his return he used his own resources to build a small monastery in a different location.¹⁵ Here he imposed on himself fasts and vigils; every day he would pray with deep sighs and tears and when he could no longer stay awake, he would stretch his wasted body on the naked earth. He condemned himself to this prison sentence both from fear of Gehenna and love for Christ. The devil, beholding his unceasing progress in the spiritual life, attacked him cruelly, inflicting countless torments both by day and by night. He endeavoured to entice the saint with suggestions that he weaken his ascetic efforts; but the servant of God, understanding his cunning, overcame the temptations by the sign of the cross and abstinence.

Finding himself defeated, the devil attacked the saint even more cruelly when, out of human necessity, he was compelled to sleep, and inflicted upon him numerous assaults by means of dreams. Rousing himself, on such occasions, the man of God would put on the armour of God crying, 'Make haste, O God to deliver me; make haste to help me, O Lord,'¹⁶ and then pray to God for the strength to vanquish his cruel adversary. If, despite everything, the dream became a nocturnal illusion, he would immediately rouse himself and go to bathe in the river, weeping and groaning. There, in the depth of winter, he would recite the whole Psalter while standing in the midst of the frozen stream, prostrating himself into the water at the end of each psalm.¹⁷ What labours, what daily battles against the enemy! The Lord, who is merciful, stretched out His hand towards him for He knew that his thoughts were fixed on Jesus; so that, mystically, the blessed one watered the sacred feet with his tears, wiped them with his hair (Lk. 7:38) and, by severe

abstinence lasting for weeks at a time, triumphed over the enemy ranged against him.

Bobbio

9) Beholding his perseverance in fighting against the enemy, God sent a messenger to comfort Wandregesilius. One night when, as was his custom, he was sleeping on a mat in his small dwelling, an angel transported him in the spirit to a monastery named Bobbio, situated in the country of the Lombards which is called Italy,¹⁸ and he was able to see both where the abbey was situated and its buildings. When the angel departed, the saint wondered to what he was being called. Recalling the words of the gospel, *'Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple,'* (Lk. 14:33) and also, *'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me'* (Lk. 9:23), he fulfilled both commandments. Rising up, abandoning everything and taking with him only three young servants and a donkey, unknown to everyone, he left his country, his kindred and his father's house (Gen. 12:1), without knowing which road he should take; but the Lord, by means of an angel, showed him the path to follow.

Thus he arrived at the monastery which he had seen in his dream and, on entering, recognised without difficulty the dwelling which had been divinely allotted to him when he had the vision. He remained there for some time. The monks of the abbey, in their turn, perceived that he was a true warrior of Christ; his devout ways and his origins soon became known to them. God frequently gave him knowledge of secret events; he, however, endeavoured always to remain unrecognised, to conceal his virtues and to please God alone, for he kept in mind what the Lord said to the Pharisees, those false servants: *'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts'* (Lk. 16:15). He locked away, in the shrine of his heart, these wonderful works of God and sought only to please Him whose eyes were looking down upon him from heaven each day. Desiring to live in a more secluded place and to progress by the straight and narrow way (Mt. 7:14), he decided to move to Ireland, kindled as he was with the love of God, for the love of Christ had been set forth in his heart by the Holy Spirit which had been given to him. (Rom. 5:5)

Romainmôtier

10) On his way, seeking hospitality, he stopped in a monastery situated above the Jura called Romainmôtier.¹⁹ Following the custom of this abbey, a monk soon arrived to fulfil the commandment of the Lord by washing his feet. From this moment, the man of God recognised that here men lived that austere life which, out of love of Christ, he also desired. When the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he had been led there by the will of God to live in the monastic habit, he placed himself under obedience and remained there for a long time following the rule of the monastery.²⁰

11) Ever progressing towards the heights of holiness, he conducted himself with humility and fled from vainglory, loving gentleness and fearing lest the devil should come and, through his pride, slip in amongst the good works he was seen to do; he carefully avoided the slightest of faults such as unnecessary words, and, above all, loud laughter, knowing that it is written: *‘A fool raises his voice when he laughs’* (Si. 21:20)²¹ and always showed himself ready to fulfil the commandments of God faithfully and joyfully. These virtues had become second nature to him. In particular, one observed in him a humility which surpassed that of others - his considered speech, as I have just mentioned, his welcoming face and his kindly affection, all tempered by prudence. Not only did he never speak evil of another, neither did he even wish to hear it; he did not complain but was obedient, receiving as the commandment of God everything that came from the mouth of his superior. In reality he feared the divine commandments and kept his thoughts always fixed upon the law of the Lord; in whatever task he was performing, he would bring to mind the Word of God, and continue meditating upon it. His zeal constrained him to mortify those members through which he still remained united with the earth. Stripped of everything he bore the cross alone. Already dead to the world he lived for God. Seeing that he was so zealous in serving Him, the Lord granted him, on several occasions, the gift to discern, from a preliminary glance, the inclinations of the hearts of men and the grace to arouse many souls sunk in the sleep of indifference and spiritual sloth; he would make them rise up to work for the faith.

12) Let me not omit a great miracle which he himself recounted to me. One night, when he was in his little house absorbed in profound prayer, an angel, shining with a dazzling brightness, appeared to him; his dwelling was flooded with light and filled with a delightful fragrance. He heard a voice saying, ‘Servant of Christ, swift to fear God, His peace be with you, you have found favour in His sight! Persevere until the end in the good works which you accomplish because, for you, the Lord Jesus has prepared a crown and He will bring you into the delights of Paradise where you will rejoice for ever with Him.’ The same voice added a prophecy: ‘Your nephew Gond²² will come to you.’ Hearing this, the man of God prostrated himself weeping. His prayer became more fervent, for he did not pride himself because of the visit or the words of the angel who had praised him but, on the contrary, humbled himself judging himself unworthy, on account of his sins, to receive, in such manner, messages from the Lord. Blessed holiness, blessed man worthy to be praised by the mouth of the Most High! Blessed dying to the senses which made him like unto the Son of God! Blessed humility; despised by men yet exalted in the sight of God! It was by keeping all these things that Wandregesilius obtained his place in the Kingdom.

Fontenelle

13) We now come to the time when the Lord wished to reveal His servant to the world, to manifest that pearl of great price taken from His treasury in order, through him, to bring many others to salvation and to embellish still further his double crown.²³ He

arrived in the most holy city of Rouen, the episcopal See, at that time, of Bishop Ouen,²⁴ defender of Orthodoxy. Ouen, recognising immediately the calibre of the servant of God, who was now under his obedience, wanted to confer on him the blessed rank of subdeacon, but he only succeeded in so doing without the knowledge of the saint and almost in opposition to him. Later he made him a deacon and finally asked Bishop Omer²⁵ to ordain him priest. The new priest, being extremely capable, carried out his duties without difficulty.

14) Wandregesilius, who would return without ceasing to the well-spring of humility, and who always wished to remain detached from worldly affairs, waited, however, for God to show him the prepared place where he could live under the holy Rule. The Lord provided a situation where this good shepherd might tend a large flock on His behalf. He was able to settle near a flowing spring called La Fontenelle, in the forest of Jumieges, on land purchased with money given by royal generosity. Here he founded his monastery,²⁶ which he built with spiritual stones – that is holy souls. He erected churches dedicated to Saint Peter, Saint Paul and Saint Lawrence; further, at about a mile from the monastery, he constructed an oratory dedicated to Saint Amand de Rodez,²⁷ to whom he often prayed.²⁸

His zeal for perfection endeared him to Saint Ouen, in whose diocese the monastery was situated, for he respected the canons of the Church, was particularly humble, and never wished to plan or embark upon a journey without the blessing of the bishop,²⁹ knowing the scripture, *‘Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’* (Mt. 18:18)

15) He desired neither gifts, nor that his community should derive its sustenance from anything but the labour of its members. He kept to this rule of life for a long time. Then the Lord, knowing his zeal for increasing the talents with which he had been entrusted, sent many disciples, who, in response to his exhortations, forsook father, mother, houses, fields and all that had been theirs. The man of God, seeing the multitude of holy monks gathered to him by the Lord, renounced living without possessions; but he agreed to receive only from those who, enlightened by grace, took upon themselves the yoke of divine service. In this way, he was able to satisfy the basic needs of all, giving at least food and clothing to his disciples in accordance with the word of the Apostle *‘Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.’* (1Tim. 6:8)³⁰

As a true shepherd, Wandregesilius, in obedience to the commandment of the Lord, gave his life for his sheep (Jn. 10:15); his gentleness softened rough characters; his humility, confounding the proud, made them once again lowly; and his teachings brought many back to God. He was that wise scribe who, according to the Gospel, brought forth from his treasury jewels both antique and new. He encouraged the faint-hearted, comforted the weak, assisted the infirm and fought great battles with the devil on their behalf. He often snatched his victims from the jaws of that raging lion and, like a good shepherd, brought them back to the fold of the Lord, healing their wounds by the grace of his words. He taught his sons how to resist the assaults of the adversary and not to renounce their

vocation, saying: 'To look back, my son, is already to regret what you have undertaken and to encumber yourself with worldly desires. My dear child, the truly humble man is always striving to climb higher. One should not count with satisfaction the years that one has spent in the monastery, but rather ask oneself whether one has lived there in love and obedience to the commandments. This is why if we take a certain pride in seeing that we are not thieves like some, or murderers and villains like others let us, by our conscience, examine our deeds. Is there not someone we hate? Have we not an inherent fear of being slandered? Do we not allow ourselves to be inflated with pride or overcome by ambition? Are we not stained by impurity? Easily roused to anger? Pre-occupied with vainglory? Have we never expressed ourselves by too frequent laughter? Do we not waste time in idle chatter? Do we indeed strive, with all our might, to preserve love, peace, joy and good will? The purpose of our life is that we should be found, at any moment, ready to fulfil the commandments of the Lord; then the Lord will rejoice over us and reward us with crowns. The devil, on the other hand, will find himself vanquished, for his greatest sorrow is to see us hastening to obey the divine commands. My dear sons, keep yourselves unspotted from anything that may be of the world. Today we live, but tomorrow who knows what may befall us. Let us remember how divine mercy has transformed us from sons of darkness into children of light: let us therefore cast away every work of darkness and walk in the light of the commandments of Christ. Take great care lest the devil, with his jealous zeal, causes you to fall into his snare, but, bound together in love, serve one another in the fear of the Lord. Then the enemy will flee from you, for he cannot approach those whom he beholds in unity as a single soul: the love of Christ binds them firmly together and those who are inseparable cause him to retreat.'

The servant of God, himself, fought against the devil with all his might. His chief concern was to teach his disciples, whom he had fed with the pure milk of the Word of God, to wage war against the devil: he made them realise from whence his poisoned darts might come. Thus, throughout his life, he kept the sheep of the Lord in peace in his monastery, carefully tending each one, without ever hearing a complaint, so evident was his superiority over them all. His humility was so genuine that, for the edification of his disciples, he continued to work with his hands when already grey-haired and advanced in years.

16) This great, illustrious soldier of Christ who, through the fervour of his contemplation, would lift up his heart into the heavens, was yet kept on earth out of love for the brethren, ably adapting himself to the demands of this service so that, like the Apostle, having become all things to all men, he won them all for Christ. The diverse gifts of grace which he received from God watered the barren, pagan earth, and sweetened the waters of the dry fountain (Jl. 3:18) and those of the Dead Sea (Ez. 47:5-10).³¹ The fame of the holy man spread far and wide; even those who had never seen him were convinced that they received God's mercy through his prayers. The influence of his preaching was so immense that, in a relatively short time, the savage and ferocious inhabitants of the surrounding region were converted; even thieves were seen to forsake their possessions. It is difficult to believe that barbarians, newly converted to Christianity, would make

prostrations to the ground like monks in order to receive his pardon when he was proclaiming the divine word to his own flock and sowing it in the field entrusted to him by the Lord, while he would say *'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory'* (Ps.115:1). Every day, in his intercessions, he would ask the Lord Jesus Christ to make this new plantation, his community, grow in love and to establish it on a stable foundation. His spiritual care extended not only to his sons, but to every creature, to the righteous and to those bound in sin by the demons, to those whose skins the King of Assyria, the devil, was boiling in the furnace of sin.

17) If we refuse to ascribe to him the gift of prophecy, it is impossible to explain why, quite often, the man of God would say to a monk hiding a fault, 'My brother why are you so gloomy and with such a sad face? What are you planning in your heart? Make haste and go to confession, do not delay. Blot out that secret sin, for a little spark can kindle a great fire. Stand up my brother, do not remain lying on the ground with the devil, but stand upright with Christ.'

I can solemnly affirm that I have, myself, heard him predicting events which later, with my own eyes, I saw occurring. The brevity of this volume does not allow me to go into details; an over-lengthy account, as I said before, runs the risk of wearying its readers, but it is appropriate to touch the matter briefly with the help of divine grace. It would also be good to recount the miracles performed by our holy and venerable father, but I must confess my ignorance on many occurrences of this nature which are known to God alone. I have decided to content myself by describing what is already generally known and to go no further, as I am only writing a brief account. We have entirely certain knowledge that, through him, God healed lepers, made the lame to walk unaided, caused the dumb to speak and raised up the dead already prepared for burial and plunged into darkness of soul.³² Now released from this miserable world, today he works in heaven with Christ and His angels; Christ is his glory and he rejoices forever with the elect in the delights of Paradise.

The Death of a Saint

18) Let us now come to the moment when God wished to deliver our blessed father from the toils of this world and lead him to heavenly rest. He was already advanced in years and would often repeat, like the Psalmist, *'Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesbech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar.'* (Ps. 120, 5-6); then he would add: 'O good Jesus, deliver me, I desire so much to see Thee!' Jesus heard him and sent a short illness in order to separate his soul from his body. He remained three days and three nights without speaking to anyone; enraptured, in ecstasy he would contemplate the divine glory and, occasionally opening his eyes, would look up to heaven with a joyful face. The disciples standing around him understood that his soul had already entered into glory. Seeing that God wished to call him back to Himself they were sorrowful and said to him, 'What will become of us, father? You are leaving us too soon! We wish to continue to hear your word and to

receive your fatherly correction.’ And they prostrated themselves, praying with tears and sighs, asking God not to call him back before he had addressed them with a few words of consolation. Beholding the immense sorrow of these lambs whose shepherd was about to die without having bid them farewell, the Lord had compassion on their grief, and allowed him to give them a few final words of counsel. Having called his disciples together, he revealed to them different secret things³³ concerning both himself and other persons. Then, as was customary, the monks asked him what they should do when he was gone. He replied, ‘Be assured that if you abide by my teaching and preserve, as I have taught you, unity, love and humility, while endeavouring never to have dissensions among you, then your situation will be always good. God will be with you every day, comfort you, and assist you in your needs.’ His strength did not allow him to say more, for his Master and Defender was already there to give him eternal rest in His bosom.

19) The devil was greatly vexed on seeing the Lord call the servant of God from the darkness of this world to the life of blessedness on account of his virtues: Wandregesilius had always fought against him with the greatest of vigour, not only for his own salvation, but also in order, like a good shepherd, to snatch many sheep from his jaws that he might lead them to eternal life. In his final hours he tried to frighten him with terrible visions. The Lord, in His mercy, did not abandon His righteous servant for a moment but, dwelling within him, overcame the devil and chased him away. The disciples who were watching over Wandregesilius heard him saying, ‘God has baptised me in the Holy Spirit of regeneration and just now the devil came and stood before me, but God struck him on the forehead and put him to flight.’ The saint, seeing at his bedside a large number of the elect whom God had sent to meet him, called out to one of them whose holy life and pure ways he had known saying with a joyful voice ‘Agathon, Agathon.’ These words confirmed the feeling of the brethren that a multitude of the blessed was indeed present. One of our brothers told me that, while he was lying down in his cell, he heard a choir chanting psalms in a marvellous way. He jumped out of bed and ran to the church, thinking that the servant of God had died and the brethren were chanting the office for the departed. Entering the sanctuary he found no-one. Fearful he ran to the cell of our father and asked his cell-attendants if they had heard anything. They replied that they had not. The saint, addressing those waiting on him, then asked them, ‘Why are you not singing with the others whom we can hear in the room?’ ‘Who are they, father, we do not know, do you?’ He, however, with shining face, rejoiced in God alone and chanted the psalms with his invisible helpers.

20) In his last moments the whole monastic brotherhood³⁴ gathered around him; his holy soul departed from his body and was received by the angels who had been chanting psalms around his death bed. Jesus Christ, Whom he had served with devotion, received him into the life of blessedness. With great sadness his spiritual sons began to sing the prayers for the departed; they shed tears at his parting from them in the flesh; the angels rejoiced to see him united with them. The monks wept for the loss of their shepherd; the angels were glad for they had received the saint.

A Model for our Life

21) Let old men exalt, let young men rejoice, let children be joyful and let monks make glad, for the blessed eternal mansions have received Saint Wandregesilius. The prolonged yet cheerfully-undertaken labours for God in this life won for him a glorious crown in eternity. Brothers, if we desire, one day, to share in the joy that knows no end, let us imitate him with the same zeal. Like him, let us humble ourselves before God, that, with him, we may be found worthy to be exalted. Let us mortify our bodies that the spirit may bloom. Let us live in unity that the devil may be put to flight and, in peace, bring joy to the angels. Let the saint watch the seed of God, which he sowed in our hearts, increase; the father will rejoice in his sons and the sons in their father; on the fearful Day of Judgement he will be able to present us to the Father saying, 'Here are the sheep which Thou entrusted to me, O Lord, and not one of those who kept the commandments which Thou charged me to teach them has perished.' (Jn. 10:28; 17:12)

May the Eternal King answer us, 'Come O blessed of my Father, receive with your beloved Father Wandregesilius, My champion, that which hath been prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' (Mt. 25:34). Let us acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ who kept His confessor in this life and, after his death, united him with the glory of the saints, Him who lives and reigns with the eternal Father in the perfect Trinity for evermore. Amen.

22) Let it be known that the falling asleep of this blessed man occurred on the eleventh day before the calends of August (22 July), when, having brought his work to perfect completion, he was received by God.³⁵

End Notes

- ¹ C. R. Manning, "Extracts from the Ancient Accounts of Mettingham College, Suffolk," pp. 63 – 68. *The Archaeological Journal Vol. 6* (1899)
- ² Alfred Suckling *The History and Antiquities of the County of Suffolk: vol. 1* (1846) pp. 168 - 183
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Francis Blomefield *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: Vol. 5* (1806), p. 455
- ⁵ The Accounts list 'from the box of St Wandregesilius and the chest of King Henry, £15, 12s 9 ¼ d'. A.W. Morant "Notices of St Nicholas' Church, Great Yarmouth" p. 235, in *Norfolk Archaeology: or Miscellaneous Tracts relating to the Antiquities of the County of Norfolk Vol. 7*
- ⁶ Such as Margaret Est who, in a will dated 1484, directs that her cousin Thomas Thurkeld should make a pilgrimage to the 'holy seynt Wandrede'. Cf. *Norfolk Archaeology Vol.4* (1855) p. 338
- ⁷ T A Heslop "The Canterbury Calendars and the Norman Conquest" p. 79 in *Canterbury and the Norman Conquest: churches, saints and scholars 1066 – 1109* ed. Richard Eales and Richard Sharpe (1995)
- ⁸ *A Survey of Documentary Sources for Property Holding in London before the Great Fire: London Record Society*, 22 (1985)
- ⁹ Barlaam's ass (Num. 22:22-31)
- ¹⁰ Circa AD 600
- ¹¹ St Wandregesilius held the office of steward to the King.
- ¹² St Wandregesilius, while still a layman, had no authority to tonsure either himself or his wife in the name of the Church. The ceremony described here was his way of showing his desire to become a monk. From the rest of the account, it would appear that he was formally tonsured at Romainmôtier where 'he placed himself under obedience and remained there for a long time following the rule of the monastery'.
- ¹³ The marriage and separation would have occurred circa AD 630. The name of St Wandregesilius's wife and the monastery which she entered are unknown.
- ¹⁴ Montfaucon was the principal town of the canton of Meuse. The ruins of the hermitage of St Wandregesilius were still visible in the village of Brabant-on-Meuse until the 19th century. The monastery became a dwelling of non-monastic clergy before the 9th century.
- ¹⁵ Saint Ursanne, Jura, Switzerland. The monastery became a chapter of canons in the 12th century and remained as such until its closure in 1792. The monastery church now serves the local parish.
- ¹⁶ The quotation as cited here and in the French text is strictly Ps. 70:1 in the Hebrew Old Testament. The LXX Ps. 69:2 is in fact much shorter.
- ¹⁷ The custom of reciting the psalms whilst standing in water originated with monks in Ireland.
- ¹⁸ Bobbio is in the province of Pavie in the North of Italy. The monastery was founded in 614 by St Columban. St Wandregesilius arrived there in AD 635. The monastery was closed in 1803, but the church which was made a cathedral in 1014 remains as such.
- ¹⁹ Romainmôtier, Vaud, Switzerland. The monastery was founded in AD 450, but had adopted the rule of St Columban shortly before St Wandregesilius's arrival. The monastery was closed in 1536 and the church is now used by Protestants.
- ²⁰ The Latin life says that St Wandregesilius was here for about ten years between AD 635 and 645.

²¹ Wisdom of Sirach commonly known as Ecclesiasticus.

²² It is more probable that St Gond was the cousin of St Wandregesilius. He accompanied him to Fontenelle before moving to a hermitage at Oyes (present day St Gond) in the Marne department in France, near marshes which are also called after him.

²³ The crowns of the ascetic and the apostle (1Tim. 5:17)

²⁴ St Ouen was a contemporary of St Wandregesilius. He had also been in royal service. He founded a monastery at Rebais in AD 636, was made bishop in 640 and died in 684.

²⁵ St Omer entered the monastery at Luxeuil in AD 629 and was consecrated Bishop of Thérouanne shortly afterwards. He died in 670.

²⁶ 1 March 649.

²⁷ St Amand, 4th Century Bishop of Rodez, is commemorated on 4 November.

²⁸ St Wandregesilius built in total seven churches and oratories around the Abbey including the Oratory of St Saturninus, bishop of Toulouse, which can still be seen today. It is this oratory which he is depicted holding in the new ikon of him illustrated on the front cover.

²⁹ The 3rd Canon of the 5th Council of Arles forbade Abbots of monasteries to travel far from the monastery without the blessing of their Bishop.

³⁰ The saint uniquely accepted donations from postulants entering the monastery and bringing with them their worldly possessions.

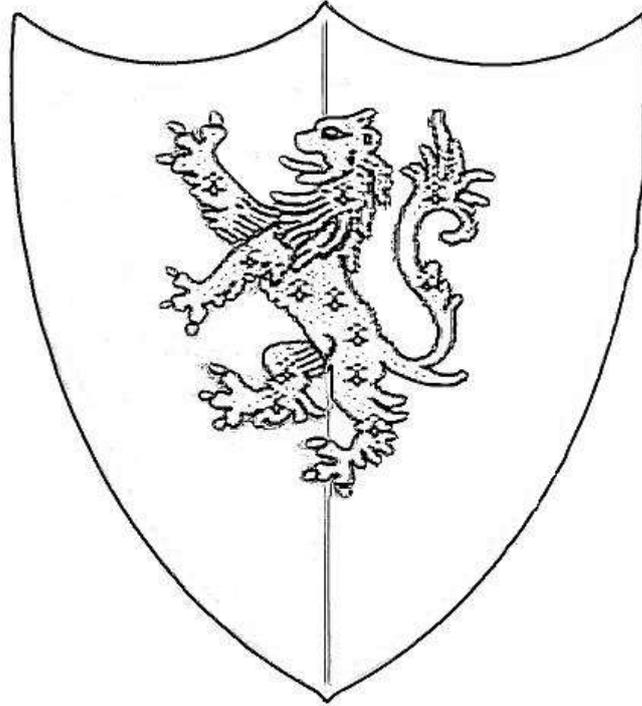
³¹ The author is using here biblical images to convey the marvels wrought by the saint in the spiritual domain.

³² It is possible that the author has in mind miracles which only occurred after the death of the saint.

³³ Undoubtedly secrets of a spiritual nature.

³⁴ There were probably over 300 monks at Fontenelle at the time and more still in other monasteries founded by the saint.

³⁵ 22 July 668.



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