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# PILGRIMAGE TO EICHSTÄTT: STS. WILLIBALD, WALBURGA AND WUNIBALD

*By Popadia Margaret Bauman*

One of the many fascinating pilgrimage sites in Germany is Eichstätt, the resting place of a brother and sister, Sts. Willibald and Walburga. They, along with their brother St. Wunibald, were Anglo-Saxon missionaries who came to Germania<sup>1</sup> in the 8th century to help their relative St. Boniface convert the pagans and re-convert the lapsed Christians.

To reach Eichstätt by train, the pilgrim first disembarks in what seems the middle of nowhere to change to a small commuter train. Before long the church spires of a lovely town appear, nestled in a valley of the Altmühl River, an area where many Germans vacation. Everything in the town is within walking distance, and you enter Eichstätt over a bridge spanning a small river, then uphill toward St. Walburga's Monastery, with the Willibald Fortress looking down from a high bank of the river. St. Walburga's monastery church now serves as a parish, but the nuns celebrate a Sunday evening vesper service which many attend. At other times of the day you can hear their pure-voiced Latin chant from the screened nuns' choir in the back of the church.

The church backs onto the courtyard containing the monastery buildings, which these days include their guesthouse and the school for local children

<sup>1</sup> The Roman name for the territory mainly east of the Rhine, which includes a large part of present-day Germany.

*Opposite: St. Walburga Statue. Eichstaett, Germany.*

which the convent has run since the beginning of the nineteenth century (a condition for re-opening after the time of secularization.) As you enter the courtyard, to the left is where St. Walburga “lives”; her relics are in a shrine built into the wall between the altar of the church and the little two-story edifice behind. Above the little chapel is a balcony close to the relics where you can quietly pray or listen to the church service inside. The walls of the upper room are covered with votive offerings commemorating the miracles and healings of those who have asked her intercession or been anointed with the “oil” (like pure water) that flows from her bones.

There is a very strong and sweet presence of St. Walburga in the monastery. I even had the odd impression as I saw several of the nuns going about their daily tasks that they looked like her—they all had a certain gentle, down-to-earth smile.

### Lives of Sts. Walburga, Wunibald, and Willibald

St. Walburga was born in England and educated in English monasteries. In the decade between 740 and 750 she sailed to the continent along with other nuns. She met her famous relative St. Boniface in Mainz, and from there probably went to Bischofsheim (either the Bischofsheim on the Tauber River or in the Rhön region) to learn about German missionary work from St. Leoba—one of the first of the missionary-abbesses to come from England to help St. Boniface in converting the “old Saxons” in what is now central Germany.

St. Walburga had been preceded, however, by her brothers. From the Life written not long after his death by the nun Huneberc, we read that the young Wunibald was inspired by his older brother Willibald to leave England and go with their father Richard on pilgrimage to Rome. Richard died on the way and was buried in Lucca, Italy, while the brothers continued to Rome. After three years Willibald travelled on to Syria, Palestine and Constantinople, while St. Wunibald remained in Rome, living either in the monastery of St. Andrew or in one of his own founding until 737-38, when St. Boniface asked him to come to the mission field in Germania.

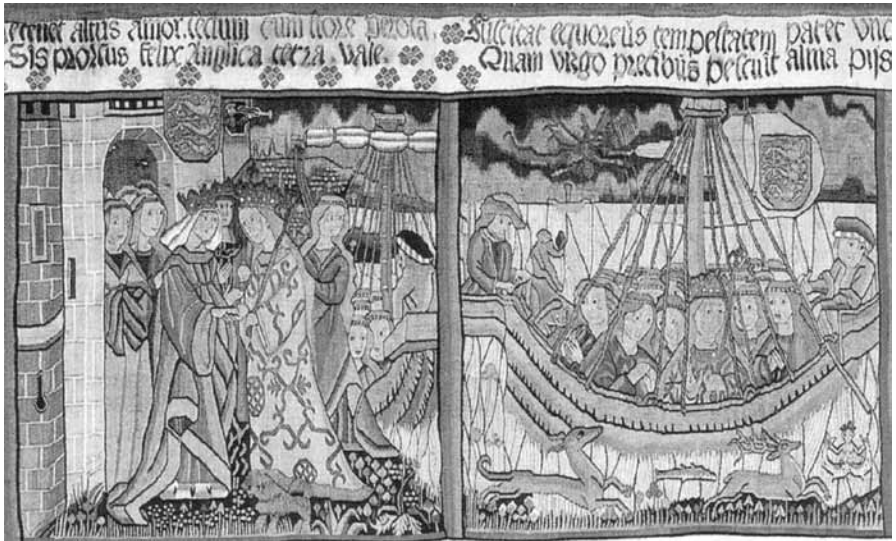
Wunibald accepted, and after being ordained to the priesthood he served with St. Boniface until 751 when, with the advice of his brother Willibald, who had arrived in Germania from the Holy Land and Italy, he purchased land in the woods to found his own monastery. He lived here for the rest of his life, leading his monks and converting the area’s pagans. Dying around



*Shrine to Sts. Wunibald, Walburga, and Willibald. Scheer.*

761, he was buried in the monastery church, and declared a saint a few years later when his relics were discovered to be incorrupt.

At St. Wunibald's death, St. Walburga inherited her brother's monastery and, as was the custom, moved to Heidenheim to take it over and also start a community for women. It is hard to imagine the conditions these men and women faced. The Life of St. Wunibald states that "paganism still had its hold in the Sualafeld area and raised its opposition to such a pitch that it could only be overcome by a high degree of prudence, patience, and courage." There were "many delusions arising from pagan depravity, many idolaters cheated by the devil's tricks," which left a trail of necromancy, adultery, apostasy of priests, and often adversaries who were "prepared to murder and burn." By the time St. Wunibald died there, many had become his friends, brothers and disciples, but St. Walburga still faced much pagan resistance, coupled with the difficulties of assuming authority over a monastery of men. Her task required patience, tact, and faith. Only hints of her life are left to us, but her sanctity was established by miracles recorded after her death.



*Tapestries showing St. Walburga's departure from England, Diocesan Museum, Eichstätt.*

After St. Walburga's repose, the women's community was dissolved and most of the events of her life forgotten. Only two stories have been passed down: the first concerns her going alone at night, past fierce watchdogs, to heal a child who was near death; and the second is about heavenly light that appeared after one of the monks refused to guide her home from church with a torch. The miraculous unearthly light streamed through the nuns' dormitory for several hours, attesting to God's benevolence for her.

St. Walburga was buried in the abbey church where her brother St. Wunibald already lay, and about a century after her death she appeared to Bishop Otgar of Eichstätt in a dream. The bishop had her remains translated to Eichstätt where a small community of canonesses settled to guard her relics, later becoming a Benedictine convent.

During one transfer of her relics, it was discovered that St. Walburga's bones gave off droplets of a dew-like liquid, and later the Eichstätt tomb was reconstructed so that the droplets could flow into a funnel-type structure to be collected below. The nuns began putting this liquid (called "Walburgis-oil"), into little bottles to distribute to the faithful for healing. To this day, her bones, especially the breast bones, give off this "oil" annually from around the beginning of October to the end of February (approximately from the date of the feast day of her translation to Eichstätt in October to the feast

day of her repose on February 25). Her intercession has brought about many healings over the centuries, and continues to the present day.

As you leave the monastery and walk toward the market square, you come to a statue of St. Walburga's older brother, St. Willibald, greets you with his hand extended in blessing. Saint Willibald arrived in the area in 740 to be its first bishop at a time when there was nothing in sight but woods and a small church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. He soon founded a monastery, training local men for missionary work. Eminently qualified for this, before coming to Germania St. Willibald had been a fervent Christian in his native England and on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Constantinople, finally living for a decade in St. Benedict's former monastery of Montecassino, Italy. (See the account of his travels on p. 65) In 739, on a visit to Rome, Pope Gregory II sent him on mission to St. Boniface in Germania. A relative of the two brothers and sister, St. Boniface both ordained St. Willibald to the priesthood and consecrated him bishop.

St. Wunibald, the holy abbot whose monastery was led by his sister after his death, proved to be much harder to search out than his two very accessible siblings as the site of his former monastery is out of the way, and his relics disappeared during the Reformation. On one pilgrimage I was able to visit the original graves of Saints Walburga and Wunibald in Heidenheim. Saddened that St. Wunibald's incorrupt relics have disappeared and there seems to be little modern veneration of him, I remember holding the hand of the reclining statue over his grave and telling him how sorry I was that he wasn't better known.

Once back in the United States, I found an internet site describing the tiny town of Scheer on the Danube River, and its Catholic Church with the relics of Sts. Wunibald, Walburga and Willibald! Although the major part of St. Wunibald's relics had disappeared, his skull had been kept by a local duke in Ansbach and given to Christoph von Waldberg of Scheer. Later, this family also acquired relics of St. Wunibald's brother and sister. It was an amazing find. On a following visit my daughter and I were able to reach this charming village and venerate the saints at a "well-used" shrine, where we met local women who were cleaning and decorating the church. Their devotion to "their" saints was very personal and warm—a piety that is easier to find in the rural areas. Perhaps the saints themselves directed their relics to where they knew they would be safe and welcome. ✦