



MONASTERY OF SAINT ANSGAR

THE LIFE AND  
TIMES OF SAINT  
ANSGAR

FATHER CALEB  
Monastery of Saint Ansgar

## Introduction

Ansgar (8 September 801 – 3 February 865), also known as Anskar, Saint Ansgar, Saint Anschar, or Oscar, was the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen in the northern part of the Kingdom of the East Franks. Ansgar earned the title "Apostle of the North" due to his extensive travels, and the See of Hamburg was given the missionary mandate to spread Christianity in Northern Europe.

## Life

Ansgar was born into a noble Frankish family near Amiens, present-day France. After his mother passed away, he was raised in the Benedictine monastery of Corbie in Picardy. According to the *Vita Ansgarii* ("Life of Ansgar"), Ansgar had a vision as a child, and he learned that his mother was in the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This experience led to a significant change in his attitude towards spiritual matters. His student, successor, and eventual biographer Rimbert believed these visions were Ansgar's life's primary driving force.

Ansgar played a role in the Christianization of Saxony (present-day Northern Germany), initiated by Charlemagne and continued by Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious. In 822, Ansgar was one of the missionaries sent to establish the abbey of Corvey (New Corbie) in Westphalia, where he served as a teacher and preacher. Subsequently, Ansgar and a group of monks traveled further north to Jutland with King Harald Klak, who had been baptized during his exile. However, after Harald's downfall in 827 and the death of Ansgar's companion, Autbert, the school for the sons of courtiers had to be closed, and Ansgar returned to Germany.

In 829, at the request of the Swedish king Björn at Hauge, King Louis sent Ansgar, accompanied by a friar named Witmar from New Corbie, as his assistant. Ansgar preached and made converts, particularly during his six-month stay at Birka on Lake Mälaren. He organized a small congregation with the wealthy widow Mor Frideborg and the king's steward, Hergeir, as its most prominent members.

In 831, Ansgar returned to Louis' court at Worms and was appointed to the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen. This new archbishopric combined the bishoprics of Bremen and Verden and had the authority to send missions into all the northern lands and consecrate bishops for them. Ansgar's mission was to spread Christianity in pagan Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The result was favorable when the King of Sweden held a lottery to decide whether to allow Christian missionaries into his kingdom.

Ansgar became a bishop in November 831 with Gregory IV's approval. Before heading north, he went to Rome to receive the pallium directly from the pope's hands and was formally named the legate for the northern lands. Ebbo, Archbishop of Reims, had a similar commission but was deposed twice before he died in 851 and never traveled north. As a result, the jurisdiction was divided, with Ebbo retaining Sweden for himself.

Ansgar initially focused on building the infrastructure of his diocese, which was still a missionary territory with few churches. He founded a monastery and a school in Hamburg, although he didn't progress much in the Danish mission.

After Louis the Pious died in 840, his empire was divided, and Ansgar lost the abbey of Turholt, which Louis had given to support his work. In 845, the Danes unexpectedly raided Hamburg, destroying all the church's possessions. Ansgar had no resources, and many of his helpers left him. Louis' third son, Louis the German, did not re-endow Turholt to Ansgar, but in 847, he appointed the missionary to the vacant diocese of Bremen. Ansgar finally moved there in 848.

Since Bremen had been under the authority of the Bishop of Cologne, combining the sees of Bremen and Hamburg posed canonical difficulties. After extended negotiations, Pope Nicholas I approved the union of the two dioceses in 864.

During the political unrest, Ansgar continued his mission in the northern region. The Danish civil war forced him to establish good relations with two kings, Horik the Elder and his son, Horik II, who supported him until his death. Ansgar obtained permission to build a church in Sleswick, north of Hamburg, and recognized Christianity as a tolerated religion. He also dedicated two years to the Swedish mission (848–850), preventing a potential pagan backlash. In 854, Ansgar returned to Sweden during the reign of King Olof in Birka, who was reportedly open to Christianity. Additionally, on a Viking raid to Apuole, a village in current Lithuania, the Swedes plundered the Curonians.

## Death and legacy

Ansgar was buried in Bremen in 865. After his death, his successor as archbishop, Rimbert, wrote the *Vita Ansgarii*. In this account, Rimbert mentioned that Ansgar wore a rough-hair shirt, sustained himself on bread and water, and showed great charity to impoverished people. Adam of Bremen attributed the *Vita et miracula* of Willehad, the first bishop of Bremen, to Ansgar in *Gesta Hammenburgensis ecclesiae*. Ansgar is also believed to be the author of a collection of short prayers called *Pigmenta* (ed. J. M. Lappenberg, Hamburg, 1844). Shortly after Ansgar's death, Pope Nicholas I declared him a saint. Ansgar is considered the first missionary in Sweden and the Nordic countries and was later named "Patron of Scandinavia."

His relics are housed in Hamburg at St. Mary's Cathedral (Domkirche St. Marien), St. Ansgar's, and St. Bernard's Church (St. Ansgar und St. Bernhard Kirche). Statues of Bishop Ansgar can be found in Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Ribe, and there is a stone cross at Birka. His feast day is celebrated on 3 February, observed in the Church of England, the Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

## Visions

The *Vita Ansgarii*, known as "The Life of Ansgar," is a historical document and primary source written by a man whose existence can be historically proven. Its purpose is to demonstrate Ansgar's sanctity. The text discusses Ansgar's visions, which, according to the author Rimbert, played a significant role in encouraging and aiding Ansgar in his remarkable missionary endeavors.

Throughout his work, Ansgar repeatedly begins new stages in his career based on visions. According to Rimbert, his early studies and commitment to the ascetic life of a monk were inspired by a vision of his mother in the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the Swedish people were without a priest, Ansgar asked King Horik for help. After receiving the king's consent, he consulted with Bishop Gautbert to find a suitable man, and together, they sought the approval of King Louis, which he granted when they agreed. Ansgar believed

heaven commanded him to undertake this mission. He was influenced by a vision he received when he was concerned about the journey, in which he met a man who reassured him of his purpose and informed him of a prophet, the abbot Adalhard, who would instruct him on what was to happen. In the vision, he found Adalhard, who said, "Islands, listen to me, pay attention, remotest peoples." Ansgar interpreted this as God's will for him to go to the Scandinavian countries, as "most of that country consisted of islands," and also because "I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" was added since the end of the world in the north was in Swedish territory.