CHAPTER 1

Thomas of Eccleston, the Chronicler of the Friars’ Arrival in England

Michael J.P. Robson

The decision to plant the ideals of St Francis of Assisi on English soil was cloaked in the unrivalled spiritual authority of the founder, who appointed Agnellus of Pisa, custos of Paris, as the head of the mission. The nine friars,¹ who sailed from Normandy to Dover, laid the foundations of the English province, a movement that was chronicled by Thomas of Eccleston, who attests that they arrived on 10 September 1224,² although an alternative date of 24 August is cited by some Franciscan witnesses and sources well acquainted with the order.³ Facts are blended with exempla materials in the Tractatus de adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam and form a unique witness to the remarkable growth of the English province, incorporating copious references to the inspirational founder, his visionary teaching and the zeal of the first friars. Anecdotes and more conventional history jostle for the author’s attention and compete for space in his recollections. The virtues of the early friars were rehearsed to challenge their confrères in succeeding generations to excel in virtue. This study analyses Eccleston’s account, the English province’s fidelity to the teaching of St Francis, recruitment to the order, its pastoral ministry and its sometimes vexed dealings with the monastic world.

¹ Grado Giovanni Merlo, Nel nome di san Francesco: Storia dei frati Minori e del francescanesimo sino agli inizi del XVI secolo (Padua, 2003), contrasts the small number of friars sent to England with those dispatched to Germany.
² Eccleston, xxii, 21–22, 52.
The Witness of Thomas of Eccleston

Echoes of St Luke’s Gospel (2.1 and 3.1) open the *Tractatus de adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*. Like the evangelist, the chronicler writes for a community pledged to the global vision of St Francis, whose life and teaching injected new energy into the Church. Echoing monastic chroniclers, Eccleston proclaims the friars’ arrival during the pontificate of Honorius III, within a year of the approbation of their *Rule* and in the eighth year of the reign of the 17-year-old monarch, Henry III, who fostered the spread of the order throughout the country and became a major benefactor. The papacy, the crown and the saint were central to the life and development of the order in England. Just as St Gregory the Great had dispatched about forty monastic missionaries from Rome, St Francis, a man who worked closely with Innocent III and Honorius III, sent his followers across the English Channel to renew the Church some 627 years later. Eccleston, who was familiar with St Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, evokes images of the arrival of St Augustine and the rebuilding of Christianity. Both the monks and the friars landed in East Kent: St Augustine and the monks came ashore at Thanet in 597 and Agnellus and his confrères at Dover in 1224. Both groups settled at Canterbury and thence spread throughout the country. St Augustine had made it a priority to establish contact with Ethelbert, king of Kent, who authorized him to preach to the people of Kent. Similarly, royal support was a vital condition for the dissemination of the Franciscan ideal in England.

The twentieth-century editor of Eccleston reflects that the chronicle’s veracity is frequently corroborated by external sources. Agnellus of Pisa’s ministry

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5 *CLR*, 1245–1251, 53–54. On 16 May 1246 the king made a donation of thirty marks for the fabric of the basilica of St Francis in Assisi.

