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Bede's Life and Times

BEDE stands an eminence on the landscape of the eighth century; there is no other writer comparable. Gregory of Tours in the sixth century and Isidore of Seville and Aldhelm in the seventh century preceded him, and Alcuin of Tours followed at the end of the eighth century, but as a scholar Bede is supreme. In all Europe no contemporary matches his talents and influence. How do we account for Bede's erudition in a remote region of the North with its limited resources?¹ How is it that he is elevated so quickly to the high status of Father of the Church, the only monk to be granted that title, on a plane with Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory?² He spent his life far from urban centers of Europe, in a geographically isolated monastery. And who is responsible for his extraordinary erudition and mastery of Latin, of prose and poetry both? Of teachers besides his abbots Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith, he mentions only one, Trumberht, "who taught me the Scriptures."³ Although Bede was in fact an autodidact, he had great mentors, namely, the biblical texts and patristic authors found in his monastic library supplied by his provident superiors. With his energy and genius devouring and absorbing those works, he became master of every discipline in the monastic curriculum and "teacher of the whole Middle Ages."

Bede gained all that knowledge within the confines of the remote but well-endowed monastery established by his solicitous abbots, as the first words of his oft-quoted summary at the end of the *Ecclesiastical History* record:

- ¹ On the cultural shift to northern Europe during the age of Bede, see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Europe*, Jarrow Lecture 1962, rpt. *Bede and his World*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Aldershot, 1992), I: 73–85 and in Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 60–75: "A looking north, indeed, may be thought to characterize the age of Bede in Europe. It has been seen as a turning-away from the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity, and as the beginning of the opening-up of a new, northern Europe, and Atlantic Europe, whether in compensation or through processes that were coincidental," p. 61.
- ² Pope Leo XIII, *Bulla Urbis et Orbis, Acta Sanctae Sedis*, 1897, pp. 338–39, declared Bede Doctor of the Universal Church, quoting Cardinal Bellarmine's words, "Beda Occidentem, Damascenus Orientem sapientia sua illustravit" ["Bede enlightened the West with his wisdom as John Damascene did for the East"], cited by Benedicta Ward, "Beda Venerabilis: *Doctor Anglorum*," in *Väter der Kirche: Ekklesiales Denken von den Anfängen bis in die Neuzeit*, ed. Johannes Arnold, Rainer Berndt, and Ralf M. W. Stammberger (Paderborn, 2004), pp. 533–42 at 533.
- ³ "... sicut mihi frater quidam de his qui me in scripturis erudiebant," *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 242. Hereafter abbreviated as *HE*.

A Companion to Bede

I, Bede, servant of God and priest of the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul which is at Wearmouth and Jarrow, have, with the help of God and to the best of my ability, put together this account of the history of the Church of Britain and of the English people in particular, gleaned either from ancient documents or from tradition or from my own knowledge. I was born in the territory of this monastery. When I was seven years of age I was, by the care of my kinsmen, put into the charge of the reverend Abbot Benedict and then Ceolfrith, to be educated. From then on I have spent all my life in this monastery, applying myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures; and, amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write. At the age of nineteen I was ordained deacon and at the age of thirty, priest, both times through the ministration of the reverend Bishop John on the direction of Abbot Ceolfrith. From the time I became a priest until the fifty-ninth year of my life I have made it my business, for my own benefit and that of my brothers, to make brief comments from the works of the venerable fathers on the holy Scriptures, and also to add my contribution to their formulations of understanding and interpretation.⁴

From that serene autobiographical note we might be led to assume that Bede would be remote and disengaged from the world and public life, but his writings, both exegetical and historical, show an acute awareness of the extramural world.⁵ He is aware of severe failures in both secular and religious realms. He addresses the problems of his church and society and expresses a sober and strong call for reform.⁶ Because of his stability and support within an austere but humane monastic environment Bede could develop his brilliant powers of assimilation and production, and address contemporary issues in both the religious and secular spheres. Even though his monastery was under the direct protection of the papacy and exempt from episcopal control, and even though Wearmouth-Jarrow was an independent landhold, Bede and his community were seriously affected by events and policies of

⁴ *HE*, V, 24, p. 567; Latin on p. 566. Colgrave's translation of the last phrase is corrected to interpret Bede's Latin more accurately, as I explain in Ch. 3, p. 33 with n. 5. On the semantic significance of Bede's use of the term "brothers" especially in the *Ecclesiastical History* see Olivier Szerwiniack, "Frères et sœurs dans l'*Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple anglais* de Bède le Vénérable: De la fratrie biologique à la fratrie spirituelle," *RB* 118.2 (2008): 239–61.

⁵ Catherine Cubitt, "Monastic Memory and Identity in Early Anglo-Saxon England," in *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrell (London, 2000), pp. 253–76 at 256: "The image created by [Janet] Coleman [in *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (1992)] of the early medieval monastery as a placid collection of individuals, striving in unison for spiritual perfection, absorbed in the study of books, fits ill with what other texts tell us about it."

⁶ A number of scholars have emphasized Bede's call and commitment to reform; see, for instance, Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130–53; on Bede's strict moral stance and call for repentance, see, for instance, Sr. M. Thomas Aquinas Carroll, *The Venerable Bede: His Spiritual Teachings* (Washington, DC, 1946), esp. chs. 4 and Conclusion.

Bede's Life and Times

both secular and sacred realms. Bede dealt with various parties ecclesiastical and secular with diplomatic care.

The monastery, its founders, and its library

Almost all the information we have about the early history of the abbey, the founder and early superiors, and indeed much of the history of Northumbria comes from Bede himself – from his *Historia ecclesiastica*, *Historia abbatum*, and occasional comments in the prefaces and texts of his biblical commentaries. What other documentation we have, such as regnal and genealogical lists, archaeological remains, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and some local histories, such as the anonymous *Life of Abbot Ceolfrith*, largely corroborates Bede's accounts.

The founder of the monastery, Benedict Biscop (d. 689), had been a member of the court of King Oswiu (ruled 655–70). Like a number of early Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles, Biscop left the precarious secular life of the warrior-class to become a religious pilgrim and then a monk: "He put behind him the things that perish so that he might gain those that last forever, despising earthly warfare with its corruptible rewards so that he might fight for the true king and win the crown in the heavenly city."⁷ Monks, abbots and inmates such as Bede, though subject to contagious diseases within their enclosed communities, lived relatively long. By comparison, kings and athelings (nobles who in the Germanic clan society were all eligible for kingship) rarely survived middle age. Rulers and princes were subject to conspiracies, assassinations, feuds, and frequent warfare, and their kingdoms lasted but briefly and precariously. In the seventh century the rich and powerful Northumbrian kings of the joint kingdom of Deira and Bernicia usually died in battle; in the eighth century the multiple claimants to the thrones died by treachery. Barbara Yorke concludes the grim history of the later Northumbrian kingship thus:

This bald summary does not do justice to the details of the many conspiracies of the period nor give the full flavour of the violence of the times. Violent attacks were not only made against the reigning kings, but also against æthelings, the sons and close relatives of kings who were potential candidates for the

⁷ Bede, *The Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, trans. D. H. Farmer in *The Age of Bede* (Harmondsworth, 1965, rpt. 1986), p. 185. The Latin original is printed as *Historia abbatum auctore Baeda* in Charles Plummer's excellent edition and commentary, *Baedae opera historica* (Oxford, 1896, rpt. 1975), I: 364–87 (hereafter abbreviated as *HAA*). Most information about Benedict comes from this biography, but see also Eric Fletcher, *Benedict Biscop*, Jarrow Lecture 1981, rpt. *Bede and his World*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Aldershot, 1994), II: 539–54; Patrick Wormald, "Bede and Benedict Biscop," in *Famulus Christi*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London, 1976), rpt. Patrick Wormald, *The Times of Bede*, ed. Stephen Baxter (Oxford, 2006), pp. 3–29; and the entry on Benedict with bibliography by Lapidge, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1999), p. 60. For an analysis of the secular and ecclesial social relationships in Anglo-Saxon society see my article, "Royal and Ecclesiastical Rivalries in Bede's *History*," *Renascence* 52.1 (1999): 19–34.

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throne. King Eadbert, for instance, besieged the church of Lindisfarne in 750 in order to extract Offa, the last surviving son of King Aldfrith, and King Æthelred murdered Ælf and Ælfwine, the sons of King Ælfwold, in 791 ... There were fourteen reigns between those of Osred and Eardwulf. The fate of two rulers, Cenred and Osric, is obscure but their reigns are suspiciously short; six rulers were deposed and forced into exile or into religious houses; four were murdered; and two apparently resigned voluntarily to enter religious houses and secure the succession of relatives.⁸

Of course, the warrior-class, disruptive as it was, was necessary for the life of the monastery: it formed the territorial state and provided political, albeit fragile, stability, furnished some protection against invaders, gave the land and endowment for the foundation and its continuance, and served as the source in large part for the major personnel of the community.

Benedict Biscop left the king's court and set off at age twenty-five on what would be the first of five trips to Rome with another young noble from court, Wilfrid, destined to become the great controversial abbot and bishop. After his second trip to Rome Biscop became a novice at the austere monastery of Lérins (off the coast of the French Riviera), which had been founded by St. Honoratus in 410; there during his two-year sojourn he exchanged his secular name of Biscop Baducing for Benedict Biscop. Returning to Rome, he was assigned by Pope Vitalian (ruled 657–72) to accompany Theodore (c. 602–90; like St. Paul, a native of Tarsus in Cilicia) to England as archbishop-elect of Canterbury (elected 667 or early 668, consecrated March 668). Benedict Biscop became the abbot of Saints Peter and Paul in Canterbury for two years, until the arrival of Theodore's colleague, the African Hadrian, in 670.⁹ The following year Benedict Biscop was again on the Continent, collecting books for a monastic foundation, which he established in his native Northumbria at present-day Monkwearmouth (at the mouth of the Wear River, as the name indicates), with land given by King Ecgfrith (ruled 670–85).¹⁰

As was the custom for early monastic founders, Benedict Biscop created his own rule, which he said was selected from the best of those used in seventeen monasteries,¹¹ but from the writings of Bede and echoes of the

⁸ Barbara Yorke, *The Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990, rpt. 1992), p. 89. Note the regnal list on p. 87 with annotations of "murdered," "deposed," "exiled," etc. See also David N. Dumville, "The Local Rulers of England to AD 927," in *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. E. B. Fryde, D. F. Greenway, S. Porter, I. Roy (London, 1986), pp. 1–25.

⁹ On the careers of Theodore and Hadrian, see Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994), chs. 2–3.

¹⁰ On this history of the territory, foundations, and institutions of Northumbria, Durham, and Wearmouth-Jarrow see William Page, ed., *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Durham*, 3 vols. (London, 1905, rpt. 1968), and the earlier great *History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham* by Robert Surtees, 4 vols. (London, 1816–40); also Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1968, reissued 2001); and Rosemary Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites*, English Heritage (Swindon, 2005).

¹¹ Bede, *Lives of the Abbots*, ch. 11, trans. Farmer, p. 196; *HAA*, I: 374; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Homily I. 13, trans. L. T. Martin and D. Hurst (Kalamazoo, 1991), I: 129. It is possible

Rule in his works, it is clear that the Rule of St. Benedict was an important part of that synthetic compilation.¹² Furthermore, Bede's description of the monastic life at Wearmouth-Jarrow in his history of his abbots seems to imply a considerate rule, similar to that of St. Benedict, rather than the austere *regulae* of the Irish foundations, such as Iona and Lindisfarne.

Although Benedict Biscop provided fine decoration for his abbey churches, the heart of his enterprise was the library he had assembled on his journeys. His dying request was that "the fine and extensive library of books which he had brought back from Rome ... should be kept preserved as a single collection and not allowed to decay through neglect or be split up piecemeal."¹³ If the Wearmouth-Jarrow library was one of the best in Europe, with ca. 250 books (excluding biblical and liturgical texts),¹⁴ it could not compare with the great libraries of classical antiquity or those of the later Middle Ages and after. Bede made remarkable use of the library which Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith established for him and his fellows, even though, rich as it was for the time, it was lacking in many works from antiquity that we would consider essential. As Calvin Kendall points out,

Bede's library did not contain any of the major philosophical, educational, or philological texts of classical Antiquity. It goes without saying that the Greek authors were missing. So also were Cicero and Quintilian and Varro. But the gaps extend to other works, which are often considered to have been instrumental in the molding of the curriculum of the early Middle Ages – the *Ad Herennium*, Martianus Capella, Fulgentius, Boethius, Macrobius.¹⁵

But Bede was grateful for what he did have for his use, and he speaks with great respect for Benedict Biscop in the *Ecclesiastical History*, the *History of the Abbots*, and the Homily on the Founder's Feast Day, in which he says:

that the "regulae" referred as much to individual customaries (local variants) as to integral rules. On the flexible nature of monasticism in Anglo-Saxon England and how it differed from the later monasticism of the tenth-century Benedictine reform, see Sarah Foot's excellent history, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–900* (New York, 2006).

¹² The notion that the monasteries of Wearmouth-Jarrow followed the Rule of St. Benedict despite Bede's testimony to the contrary was widespread, especially among Benedictine historians of the last century. Charles Forbes, comte de Montalembert, for instance, in *The Monks of the West, from St. Benedict to St. Bernard* (London, 1896), 4: 179, claims that Benedict Biscop "took care to constitute his community upon the immovable basis of the rule of St. Benedict," and on pp. 239–71 he lauds Bede as an ideal Benedictine. Even more recently Bede is sometimes still called a Benedictine: Friedrich Stegmüller, *Repertorium biblicum medii aevi* (Madrid, 1950–80), II: 186, lists "Beda O.S.B." The fact that Benedict Biscop's early companion, Wilfrid, did adopt the Rule of Benedict for his foundations and Bede echoes phrases of the Rule may have contributed to the historical confusion. See Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (Cambridge, 1970, rev. 1990), ch. 19, "The Regular Life," pp. 197–210.

¹³ Bede, *Lives of the Abbots*, trans. Farmer, ch. 11, p. 196. Latin in HAA, I. 375.

¹⁴ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), p. 60. To compare the library holdings of Wearmouth-Jarrow to other Anglo-Saxon and ninth-century Carolingian libraries, see pp. 58–60. For Bede's individual works in the libraries see the General Index, pp. 385–86.

¹⁵ Calvin B. Kendall, ed. and trans., *Libri II De arte metrica et De schematibus et tropis* (Saarbrücken, 1991), Introduction, p. 17.

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