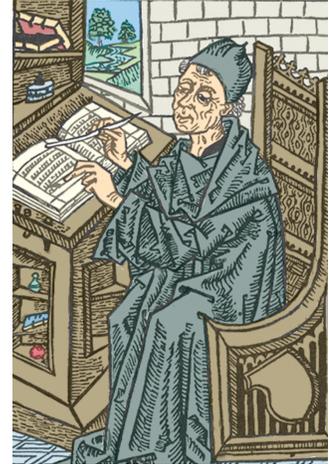


*The Venerable Bede/Baeda,
672/673-735, Scholar, and
Bishop Benedict Biscop/Baducing,
(628-689/690)*



Above: Bishop
Benet/Benedict
Biscop/Baducing, (ca.628-
690), the nobleman from
Northumbria, who chose
to serve the Church,

A Far-Seeing Bishop

The story of Bede really begins with Bishop Benet (Benedict) Biscop /Baducing, who made the world that inspired Bede and the one that he was to inhabit for his entire life. Benet made five trips to Rome beginning at age twenty-five, when he began to collect books. On the second journey he first visited Rome and then entered the monastery of St. Honorat at Lérins, where he studied for two. He made his monastic vows taking the name of "Benedict". This was followed by a third visit to Rome in 669 when he was chosen to accompany the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, to his British see. Once in Canterbury, the new monk was installed as abbot of St. Peter and Paul monastery.

In 674 Abbot Biscop obtained permission and an endowment from King Egfrith to found a monastery. He visited the continent to procure stone masons for his building plans, and on another trip to Rome in 679 he returned with more books, relic, art, vestments, manuscripts and specialty workmen, as well as certain privileges for his monastery granted by Pope Agatho.

In 681 the King provided funds to build a second monastery at Jarrow. also observing the Bendictine rule. The following year he made his last trip to Rome, returning with more wonderful things for his two monasteries. Following an illness of several years he died in 689/690.

These trips were marvelous accomplishments for the period and displayed the bishop's courage and determination as well as his vision.

Bede by Bede

What we know of Bede comes chiefly through his own pen. At the conclusion of his history of the English Church tells us that when he was seven years of age he “was delivered up” by his kinsfolk to be raised by Abbot Benedict and after his death by Abbot Coelfrid. The life agreed with him and he studied the Scripture “diligently,” observed the discipline of the monastery and attended the singing of the daily office. He summed up his life in the sentence: “I have taken delight always either to learn, or to teach, or to write.”



“The Venerable Bede (was) the first English writer in whom can be traced the strong common sense and amiable directness which characterizes the English at their best.” Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition*.

Boy oblates were not unusual in the medieval ages. Whether for reasons of piety or poverty, many parents sent their sons to be cared for and to obtain an education in the monastery. They were a special concern of St. Benedict who wrote in his Rule: “Let their weakness always be taken into account . . . (L)et a kind consideration be had for them.”

In 686 AD the community was struck by plague. All the monks died except Abbot Ceolfrith and a young boy. The boy is thought to have been Bede.

Bede spent his life at Jarrow, but he made one trip to the school at York. Not long after that visit the school would receive its most famous pupil and oblate, the child oblate Alcuin.

The Ecclesiastical History

The Ecclesiastical History was Bede’s *magnum opus*. Gilbert Highet observed that the work “was produced by genuine research: as well as incorporating the work of

early annalists, Bede used unpublished documents and verbal tradition, collecting evidence from sources as far distant as Rome.” Bede used the best sources available to him, and if some facts are incorrect or questionable, he used them in good faith, and in his preface he carefully lists his sources. Without Bede’s great History we would know nothing of Hild and the Council of Whitby, or of Caedmon, or of Gregory the Great’s first encounter with Anglo-Saxons.

Safe in his secluded world, surrounded by books, he was relatively free from the politics of religion and although he deplored the resistance of the Celtic Church to the pressures of Rome to conform, he never doubted the faith of these stalwart Christians.

“Through a long life of pious study, Bede drew into his mind and incorporated into his writings, practically the total sum of knowledge then available in western Europe.” *The Medieval Mind*, Henry Osborne Taylor.

Latin and English

Bede wrote entirely in Latin: “For him Latin was a living language, which took time and trouble to write, but which was clear and memorable and universally intelligible.” (Highet). Nevertheless he was aware of the layman’s need to understand his religion in his own tongue. Writing to his former student, Bishop Egbert, Bede encouraged the use, even if somewhat limited, of English. He urged the bishop to see to it that Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer be taught in the vernacular (Old English) to clergy and laity who do not know Latin and that included monks: “By this means it cometh that the whole band of them that worship God shall understand what most they are bound to seek of the Divine mercy.”

Bede’s other works

These included *The History of the English Church*, numerous commentaries on several books of the Bible, works on the *Tabernacle* and the *Temple of Jerusalem*, *Life of St. Cuthbert*; Lives of St. Felix and St. Anastasius, A History of the abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, and a *Martyrology*. Also a book of hymns, another of epigrams, works on orthography, *The Art of Poetry* and on *The Nature of Things and of the Times*.

A Scholar, Not A Preacher

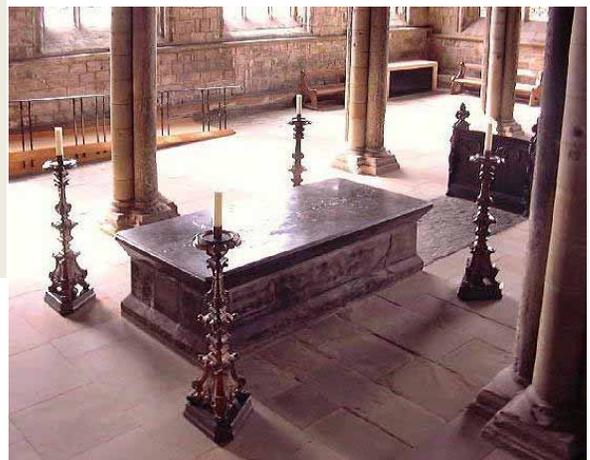


John Mason Neale, who published extracts of four of Bede’s sermons wrote “Bede’s delight it seems to have been to find some anecdote which would suit the subject and his auditors, and to dwell on hardly anything else.” J. M. Neale, *Medieval Preachers and Medieval Preaching*, 1856.

“It is remarkable that less than one hundred years after the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury, the grandson of pagans should become a Doctor of the Church and one of the classics of English literature.” Dom Jean LeClerq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.

The Missing Translation

Cuthbert, later abbot of Wearmouth, gives a moving story of Bede’s death in a letter to a fellow monk. To him alone we owe the story that Bede was translating the Gospel of John into the vernacular in his last days. The manuscript was probably lost when invaders destroyed the monastery in the middle of the 9th century.



Bede’s Tomb in Durham Cathedral: Bede was briefly buried at Jarrow, then placed in Cuthbert’s coffin until that was opened in 1204. Durham Cathedral insists his bones were saved during the purge of relics in the 16th century.