

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will

Ecclesiastical History of the English People (731)

Venerable Bede (672-735)

Ecclesiastical History of the English People 731

Bede ('the father of English history') was an English monk long residing in the monastery of Sts. Peter and Paul, in the Kingdom of Northumbria, in northern England. Although he travelled frequently to fellow monasteries around England, he remained largely monastery based, throughout his life, and did not travel abroad. He was a scholar before all, and a writer, especially a historian, at the same time. (He was also a lyric poet, a theologian, and an expert on calendar dating, a skill for which he created a computer in his fashion—a computational device for date calculation—and with which he made several conceptual innovations, including the method of historical dating in terms of the birthdate of Christ—the *Anno domini*, year of our Lord, method.)

Of Bede's origins we know little, except that from youth on he appears frequently in the company of the wealthy and influential, and that his own experience as a writer and teacher seems to have kept him in contact with worldly and intellectual circles. (We may see something of a self-portrait in the passage cited below, concerning the life of Pope Gregory.) The simplicity of his life precluded much time spent in society, and guaranteed that prayer and ritual observance dominated much of his daily existence. That he was an engaged writer, throughout his life, will support the presumption that a monastic cell and an attached monastic library were his chief lifetime ports of call. His contributions to the contemporary Carolingian Renaissance (7th and 8th centuries, court of Charlemagne) were driven largely by the pen and guaranteed him an important role in the very history he was noted for writing about—as it turned out, in many of his over sixty books.

The writings of Bede

Bede's first writings--*De Arte Metrica* and *De Schematibus et Tropis*- were intended for classroom use. *De Temporibus* (*On time*; on the calculation of time) followed. Bede's age was one in which considerable Christian thought was devoted to calculating the age of the universe, and the place of Christ in that spectrum. (His conclusion was that Christ had been born 3952 years after the creation of the world.) Bede's *De Orthografia* was intended as a learning tool for students facing difficulties in reading and learning classical Latin.

Bede was a tireless commentator on the Gospels, and other works of Biblical learning; his numerous homilies were preserved along with his historical work.

In among his many texts concerned with the calculation of time, Bede adventured often into astronomy, and into the effect of the movements and shapes of the stars and planets on the ways we choose to measure time. A lasting search for a precise date for Easter was the driver for his blend of astronomical computation—the work he created with his own computus studies.

The Mind of Bede

Like his predecessors Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, Bede had an encyclopedic mind, which extended to all aspects of natural history and universal knowledge.

Thomas Carlyle observed that Bede was the greatest historian since Herodotus. It is worth looking a little closely at certain assumptions and projects of his most renowned work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Here is the beginning of the text:

CHAP. I. Of the Situation of Britain and Ireland, and of their ancient inhabitants

Britain, an island in the Atlantic, formerly called Albion, lies to the north-west, facing, though at a considerable distance, the coasts of Germany, France, and Spain, which form the greatest part of Europe. It extends 800 miles in length towards the north, and is 200 miles in breadth, except where several promontories extend further in breadth, by which its compass is made to be 4,875 miles. To the south lies Belgic Gaul. To its nearest shore there is an easy passage from the city of Rutubi Portus, by the English now corrupted into Reptacaestir. The distance from here across the sea to Gessoriacum, the nearest shore in the territory of the Morini, is fifty miles, or as some writers say, 450 furlongs. On the other side of the island, where it opens upon the boundless ocean, it has the islands called Orcades. Britain is rich in grain and trees, and is well adapted for feeding cattle and beasts of burden. It also produces vines in some places, and has plenty of land and water fowl of divers sorts; it is remarkable also for rivers abounding in fish, and plentiful springs. It has the greatest plenty of salmon and eels; seals are also frequently taken, and dolphins, as also whales; besides many sorts of shell-fish, such as mussels, in which are often found excellent pearls of all colours, red, purple, violet and green, but chiefly white. There is also a great abundance of snails, of which the scarlet dye is made, a most beautiful red, which never fades with the heat of the sun or exposure to rain, but the older it is, the more beautiful it becomes. It has both salt and hot springs, and from them flow rivers which furnish hot baths proper for all ages and both sexes

Two features of the beginning of this text: *Extrapolation; proprioception.*

Bede begins by extrapolating from his sense of place to accounting for a whole landscape, quantifying dimensions as he proceeds. This kind of body sense transfer—note the clarity with which he defines his own position in terms of the distances from him, an unspecified but prominent location—implies a distinctive capacity to locate himself, and has to do with the additive mindset of Bede, an encyclopedic mind—like that of Cassiodorus and Isidore, two nearly contemporary colleagues in the organizational project of a new culture, the mediaeval Christian, which will itself represent a locational nomenclature, the naming of self as ‘in the middle,’ later to become our ‘Middle Ages.’ Can we call this skill, of Bede, a natural proprioception, an orientation from within the tissues of the body? Bede’s internal gyroscope is accurate.

Extravagance; richness

Geometrical extrapolation is one of Bede’s sentience-patterns, while extravagance, a sense of outflowing abundance and richness, is another. Consider the unfolding painterly abundance of the landscape of Britain, which is after all the target of Bede’s entire account. Fish, shellfish, beasts of burden, beasts of burden, pearls and their dye: God’s richness seems to pour forth from the verbal source, the same center that self-geometrized the distinctive layout of the British Isles. Extrapolation and extravagance lie ready to hand in Bede’s repertoire.

How does he handle narration, the text flow on which his spatial and uberant sensibilities batten? Take a look at his characterization of Pope Gregory, who died in 694.

He was by nation a Roman, son of Gordianus, tracing his descent from ancestors that were not only noble, but religious. Moreover Felix, once bishop of the same Apostolic see, a man of great honour in Christ and in the Church, was his forefather. Nor did he show his nobility in religion by less strength of devotion than his parents and kindred. But that nobility of this world which was seen in him, by the help of the Divine Grace, he used only to gain the glory of eternal dignity; for soon quitting his secular habit, he entered a monastery, wherein he began to live with so much grace of perfection that (as he was wont afterwards with tears to testify) his mind was above all transitory things; that he rose superior to all that is subject to change; that he used to think of nothing but what was heavenly; that, whilst detained by the

body, he broke through the bonds of the flesh by contemplation; and that he even loved death, which is a penalty to almost all men, as the entrance into life, and the reward of his labours. This he used to say of himself, not to boast of his progress in virtue, but rather to bewail the falling off which he imagined he had sustained through his pastoral charge. Indeed, once in a private conversation with his deacon, Peter, after having enumerated the former virtues of his soul, he added sorrowfully, "But now, on account of the pastoral charge, it is entangled with the affairs of laymen, and, after so fair an appearance of inward peace, is defiled with the dust of earthly action. And having wasted itself on outward things, by turning aside to the affairs of many men, even when it desires the inward things, it returns to them undoubtedly impaired. I therefore consider what I endure, I consider what I have lost, and when I behold what I have thrown away, that which I bear appears the more grievous.'

In this passage of 335 words Bede presents a rounded life portrait of a man he considered saintly. With a faultless smoothness of style he lays out the essential steps of Gregory's life: scion of noble and religious background; admiration that has plagued him since he got mired in the details of parishioners' lives; Gregory's lasting regret at what he has lost by involvement with the world.

This kind of limpid narration made Carlyle think of Herodotus, and rightly; like Bede, Herodotus holds a global conception of the object of his narration. He gives no evidence of punctuating his prose style, which flows in a single sheet.

Bede as a person

Bede the man leaves behind him the sense of staunch dignity, the mode he attributes to Pope Gregory. A man of honor, prayer, and endless activity, busy in the pulpit, in the writing of biblical commentaries, and in the congealing of his personal experience, inside a magisterial account of the history of his people.

Study guides

Bede, like Cassiodorus—and other encyclopedic thinkers of the early Middle Ages, like Isidore of Seville or Cassiodorus—were compilers, of histories, ecclesiastical traditions, or of 'information about the world.' Had they the sense, then, of being in a new world? Did they feel continuity with the spirit of classical, especially Roman, antiquity? Or did the men we track here feel part of a new kind of civilization, dating from the birth of Christ? Bede was, for his time, an expert in calculating time and dates. Do you suppose he had a mental chronology, of the time separating himself from the date of the Fall of Rome? (He was born some two hundred years after the Fall of Rome.) Do you yourself have a temporal world, in your mind, in side which you can place the life you have lived?

Where do you suppose Bede got his information sources for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*? We have to convert our minds to a period eight centuries later, when there was a printing press. To create a book—acquire good paper stock, handwrite the text, bind the whole (usually in leather)—was a far cry from the printing industry of that Gutenberg day—which has itself, by this time, been superseded by many technical changes. In Bede's own day, we can start by noting, the chief textual resource was the monastery library at Wearmouth-Jarrow—the site of Bede's own adult life. The monastery was a center of learning, and had two hundred books in its library.

The books at hand for Bede, in his monastery library, included a number of histories—by Rufinus, Gregory of Tours, Constantius, Gildas—as well as editions of the major authors of Roman literature. Bede was lucky enough to have clerical colleagues throughout the British Isles, who could fill in his knowledge of this or that region or religious institution. It will be evident, from these hints at the reading resources of Bede, that he was completely at home in Latin.

Was it feasible to carry out historical research in Bede's time? What would you say about Bede's historical text, from the limited examples given here? Has he a 'Christian' view of his own place in history? How does his religious allegiance play out into his text? What kind of conception of Europe has he?