

# The Venerable Bede as a Student of the Classics in Anglo-Saxon England

CHUCK PEEK

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In his Introduction to *The Age of Bede*, D.H. Farmer writes that more than any other figure in Anglo-Saxon England, the life and writings of Bede, “bring to life...the rich and contrasting age” that was eighth century England.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that Bede held such prominence in England’s history and culture that continues to this day. A.H. Thompson, in introducing the historical Bede states that “even during his lifetime his reputation had spread far beyond the frontiers of Britain, and St. Boniface likened his death to the extinction of a brightly burning light.”<sup>2</sup> The Venerable Bede, known as the “Father of English History” and even (by a German historian) the “Father of all the Middle Ages” died in 735, at a time when much of Europe was still trying to cope with the political and cultural vacuum left after the fall of Rome. However, the eighth century Northumbrian Saint’s legacy would be as integral a part of Medieval European society as the four Fathers of the Western Church.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it is not that the impact that Bede had on the English and on the citizens of the continent lasted for centuries following his death that is debated by most scholars. Most research on Bede instead seeks to analyze the substance of his lasting influence on England and the European continent, with most emphasis placed on the corpus from which he drew his authority and inspiration—The Classical or the Christian. It is these contrasting influences, both so prevalent in Bede’s own life that he so well illustrated in his life and works. It is accepted that Bede’s importance to Medieval society was shared between the fields of religion and culture, but it can be derived from research that while Bede was as much a child of the Classical corpus as eighth century England had seen, it was his religion that he considered to be the ultimate source of his authority. Bede’s deep-hearted convictions are inherently articulated in his life, and his ultimate loyalty to faith alone will continuously be made manifest through his works.<sup>4</sup>

Classical roots in Anglo-Saxon England, though nearly destroyed with establishment of Anglo-Saxon control of Great Britain in the mid-fifth century, ran deep, but existed despite the fact that one must search in order to find them. Probably the most healthy of these surviving Classical centers, at least in the early parts of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England, was not in England at all, but in Ireland. In light of the collapse of Roman rule in England, many fled the

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advancing pagans by moving Westward into Ireland. Here the Celtic church adopted a model of asceticism reminiscent of that of the East, and the first ascetic schools were established. Here students could study “various disciplines of the liberal arts and ‘profane studies,’” either by the training of Irish monks or continental rhetors.<sup>5</sup> By the sixth century these Irish and Welsh monasteries had become important centers of study; here Classical curriculum, though limited, comprised an essential element of monastic education with ecclesiastical computus as well as Latin grammar and rhetoric (learned by study of the antique authors) included in the corpus. According to Riche, “not having to combat the dangers of Graeco-Roman paganism, they [the Irish] could use the profane authors with less reticence than other monks.”<sup>6</sup>

It was not until the seventh century that the root of Classicism began to be nurtured again in Anglo-Saxon England. For since the fourth century, “sacred learning and some knowledge of the liberal arts were to be found in the British Church, but racial hostility, embittered by defeat, kept the Britons from intercourse with their conquerors.”<sup>7</sup> During the seventh century, however, in Southern England Roman missionaries helped re-establish the Christian faith and form their own schools in the region. One such school at Kent, Bede records, became quite apt in the area of Roman chant. However, while Christian schools took root, they did so in numbers too small, and many Anglo-Saxons still went “to seek the way of sanctity” in Gaul and to the east.<sup>8</sup>

It was in Northern England that some of the most prominent Christian schools would be established. The creation of these centers was brought about primarily by the presence of Irish missionaries in the region who brought with them many aspects of Irish study into the English schools. These Irish centers were well-organized and tended to be more receptive to literary culture and (as part of that corpus) the studies of grammar, poetry, computus, and exegesis. English monks would soon adopt the practice of decorating their manuscripts with combined Celtic and Eastern motifs, again reflecting another conflict in English culture during this time period: the growing liturgical controversy that existed between Ireland and Rome.<sup>9</sup>

The English kingdom of Northumbria would also take part in the growing revival of education taking place on the “island where learning flourished.”<sup>10</sup> However, unlike the schools and monasteries of Northern England, Northumbria had become part of the cultural sphere of the Romans, who would influence monastic and educational life there—as opposed to the Irish. A unique development that occurred during this period is that, “whenever English princes and aristocrats wanted their children to be educated, they confided them to the monasteries, *without intending them to become monks.*”<sup>11</sup> This in addition to the

increased level of education in portions of the lay population would bring about the birth of a type of education that was already very “medieval.”<sup>12</sup>

It is out of this environment that developed “the Renaissance of the seventh and eighth centuries.”<sup>13</sup> By the seventh century, monastic and Episcopal schools in England had transformed themselves into intellectual and artistic centers. With this transformation the first elements of a renaissance began to appear, the forerunner of the great Carolingian renewal. Renascences in artistic sculpture, canon law, and literary form all reflected the development of a new generation of educated, or lettered, men. In addition, this new generation had been freed from the burden of material servitude by the influx of riches into monastic communities (via the education and advancement of aristocratic posterity), which allowed them to devote more time to study. Money also facilitated a growth in travel, and soon political borders no longer hindered contacts between Christians in England and Christians in the East. This catholic connection furthered the intellectual and artistic renewal that characterized England’s seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>14</sup> The acquisition of art for the monastery at Jarrow and books for its library also resulted from the increase in travel, financed by the growing wealth of the English Church.<sup>15</sup>

The revival of Latin and Classical culture in seventh and eighth century England was distinct in each area that it affected. The birth-place of the so called Anglo-Saxon Renaissance was Kent, where the two teachers Theodore and Hadrian, “as skilled in secular literature as in ecclesiastical,” were first welcomed by the English. Theodore brought with him books that enabled him to organize instruction around the disciplines of metrics, astronomy, ecclesiastical arithmetic, medicine, exegesis, and Greek (first taught in an ecclesiastical school in Kent). Riche notes, however, that “the implementation of Hellenic culture into Kent was neither profound nor durable.”<sup>16</sup> Hadrian, who accompanied Theodore to Kent and eventually came to teach at Canterbury, taught meter, chant, calculation, astronomy, and Roman Law. One of his students, Aldhelm, would eventually prove to be the vessel by which the Anglo-Saxon Renaissance was spread to the kingdom of Wessex.

The Classical revival that occurred in Wessex was dominated by the figure of Aldhelm, whose Classical training and education was extensive and unique. He once recorded that in teaching the art of meter to the Germanic peoples of Europe that he fulfilled the role of Virgil, who was responsible for introducing Greek poetry into Rome.<sup>17</sup> Aldhelm also recorded his displeasure towards the tendency of those seeking education to look towards Ireland, “as if this green and fertile Britain were lacking Greek and Roman masters to explain the difficult problems.”<sup>18</sup> Despite Aldhelm’s strong feelings of English similari-

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ties to Rome, the Anglo-Saxon Renaissance would prove to be its weakest in Wessex. The influence of the Irish there required missionary service, and because so much time was invested in this type of commitment, there was no time for the magnitude of study required to produce someone of Bede's caliber.

It was in Northumbria that the Renaissance of the Anglo-Saxons came to be most recognized, most specifically in the works of Bede and in the abbey schools of Wearmouth and Jarrow. The new abbeys were quick to develop, and eventually superseded the Irish monasteries, for even the architecture of the two Northumbrian abbeys had been carefully chosen to represent the architecture popular in France and the rest of the continent at the time.<sup>19</sup> Bede's *The Age of Bede* records that "Benedict crossed the sea to France to look for masons to build him a stone church in the Roman style he had always loved so much. [He then] saw to it that what could not be obtained at home was shipped from abroad... the ornaments and images he could not find in France he sought out in Rome."<sup>20</sup> Another atypical attribute of the Wearmouth abbey is that it was not under *The Rule of St. Benedict*, and because of this, monks were allowed to spend significantly more hours in study.<sup>21</sup> Bede asserted that his chief pleasures at Wearmouth were in learning, teaching, and writing, and that while he observed the disciplines of the rule, he still had time to devote to these passions. His works would prove, in effect, to "bear the stamp of the Roman atmosphere into which he was born," and out of which he was educated.<sup>22</sup>

While the Anglo-Saxon "Renaissance" was essential in that it prepared the way not only for the education of Bede, but also for creating an environment in which his intellect would be appreciated, many consider its limitations too numerous to warrant the use of the word "Renaissance." The fact that a rediscovery of studies (and in particular the *artes liberales*) occurred is hard to refute; however, many scholars bring to light the inhibitions that existed in adopting antique education. Many argue that Aldhelm alone enumerated the liberal arts in their true form, but even then added the subjects of astronomy, mechanics, and medicine to the quadrivium. His study on the qualities of the number seven (coupled with a few remarks made by Bede that he borrowed from the Fathers) represent the only works and studies in mathematics that existed outside the bounds of ecclesiastical arithmetic—a limit to the knowledge of science as the ancients knew it. Musical knowledge and study was also determined to be weak, with only one work on the subject remaining, Bede's *De Musica*. In addition, the study of grammar was also limited in that rhetoric and dialectic were overshadowed by grammar alone, illustrating a lack of concern for speculative questions in favor of teaching merely practical applications.<sup>23</sup> Thomson sums up well this period in saying that "[they], with rare exceptions, did not drink inspiration from

the Classics at the fountain head, but at such streams as trickled, generally thin and muddy.”<sup>24</sup> He asserts that instead of viewing themselves in a different age than the greats of Classical Greece and Rome that the Anglo-Saxons saw themselves living in a continuation of that time period. “The prestige of Latin is boundless” he claims, “but it is not the great Latin classics that are read and imitated; the favorite Latin authors of the Middle Ages themselves belong to the Middle Ages.”<sup>25</sup>

The question still remains, however, of whether or not Bede himself was a product of Classical education, and whether or not he advocated the education by means of the antique curriculum. The arguments for and against Bede as a child of paideia and advocate of the classical curriculum involve: the subjects and contents of all of his major works, his documented statements regarding the Classics and secular learning, and other evidence presented by scholars in the field. The most practical proof for those on both sides of this argument is analysis of the works that Bede produced, and a determination of his views expressed in regards to the subject of each one.

Bede’s most well known work, is undoubtedly his *History of the English Church and People*, one of the singular most important historical works in the history of England. Perhaps as telling as anything regarding this work is the author’s own stated purpose for its creation. Bede writes:

“For if history records good things of man, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good: or if it records evil or wicked men, the good, religious listener or reader is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse, and to follow what he knows to be good and pleasing to God.”<sup>26</sup>

Bede proposes that the study of history in itself is of moral and practical value to those who study it, much like the fictional histories of Homer and other Classical poets. He later explains that he has followed, “the laws of history,” in order to create something “for the instruction of posterity.”<sup>27</sup> In addition to these statements the content of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* can also provide insight into the author’s views of pagan education. Book I, Chapter I contains both natural history and geology, and (in addition) anthropology and astronomy.<sup>28</sup> But while he includes scientific analysis and asserts the moral value of history, Thomson points out that Bede’s work did not require the consultation of classical authorities. He writes, “[Bede] draws to some extent upon them, especially Pliny, but it does not amount to much. . . nor is his style formed upon Classical models.”<sup>29</sup> So while, *A History of the English Church and People* does include classical qualities, they seem to be native to Bede (probably instilled in him during his early education) and not acquired by direct study of the Classics.<sup>30</sup>

Just as important to consider in analyzing the role of Classical education in the life and writings of Bede as his history is his textbook, *De Arte Metrica*. As

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are all of his works, *De Arte Metrica* is clear and understandable; so much so that linguist and historian Robert Palmer claims that Bede's work is more sound on certain grammatical concepts than the Classical examples he uses to illustrate many of his points.<sup>31</sup> In analyzing the same work, Ruby Davis published a list of thirty-two definitive works that she believed Bede to have cited or at least been familiar with. This list ranged from Donatus, Pompeus, and Sergius to Virgil, the Greek grammarians, Lucretius, and Arator.<sup>32</sup> In his thesis *The Knowledge of Greek in England in the Middle Ages* George Robert Stephen reveals that Bede, cited as quoting Homer in the textbook, knew Greek well; however Bede's knowledge of Greek is a heavily contested point.<sup>33</sup> Davis and Stephen seem to agree that Bede knew considerable amounts of Latin, but Riche asserts that it is only in Latin paraphrases of Greek grammarians that Bede can translate and understand the meaning during these instances.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the importance of the Greek in *De Arte Metrica*, one of the most important parts of the source is in dealing with the Latin letters comprising many of his paraphrases and quotations. Apparently, Palmer claims, Bede uses the alphabet of his time when translating, and asserts that Bede, in doing so, might have been trying to adapt the pagan Latin alphabet to the Christian alphabet.<sup>35</sup>

In general a majority of Bede's works shared the similar characteristic of being modified in interests of the Christian church's "agenda," just as did many other works published in the day. Riche writes that some simply thought that the works of the fourth and fifth century were too complicated and thus adopted their own legal works to the public.<sup>36</sup> Bede however, makes it clear that he simply does not trust pagan or secular literature because of its threat to God's truth. Bede gives several analogies representing his philosophy towards Classical or pagan literature. The most famous is probably his rose analogy, in which the secular letters are the thorns that surround the rose. Along those same lines he compared the danger of the bee's stinger to the danger of being deceived by pagan literature. Rhetoric and dialectic were both feared because they were the weapons of heretics and philosophers. Riche even records the possibility that Theodore was called philosopher only because of his great learning and knowledge of Greek.<sup>37</sup>

What of the fact that every one of Bede's works was written in Latin? Interestingly, Thomson explains that "the very fact that he wrote in Latin was rather a hindrance than a help towards clearly apprehending the differences between their ideas and his own."<sup>38</sup> In doing so, Thomson argues that Bede in particular cannot be a "Renaissance figure" during the Anglo-Saxon period because he did not see himself as being in a different age. There is, however, no doubt that he was a student of the educational heritage of Classical Rome:

"Bede's greatest delight was in the study of Scriptures, and his guiding

principle was that the glory of God is the chief end of man. His knowledge of languages and literature all helped in the mystery of interpretation; the rules of prosody and accentuation enabled the psalter to be sung correctly in the divine service. Astronomy and the computus were needed in order that the right festival days might be kept. He studied ecclesiastical controversies that his pupils might be grounded in the right faith and he wrote history that man might see the wonderous things that God had wrought.”<sup>39</sup>

While classical education had its value in the eyes of Bede, the value of paganism and antique culture was only means by which he could achieve that which was always his ultimate goal: to draw near to God. Leclercq would describe this relationship by establishing that all who work with Scripture do so under the following premise: “that grammar is a necessary introduction to it. Since Scripture is a book, one must know how to read it, and learn how to read it just as one learns how to read any other book.”<sup>40</sup>

The Greek and Roman models for education are all clearly articulated in Leach’s *The Schools of Medieval England*. The Ancient Greek model illustrates that until Macedonian Greater Greece that there were no organized schools, as of modern schools, only paid tutors in the fields of mathematics, physics, law, philosophy, and music. The foci of Roman education, conducted in the same later-Greek method and model was to “fit a boy for public life, as advocate or statesman, and generally both, and this was done by training him for public speaking.”<sup>41</sup> Careful analysis of both the Greek and Roman educational systems reveals that several common threads of Anglo-Saxon monastic education begia in the secular education of the ancient societies; however, the English schools of the eighth century used a model that was unique to the time period and location. Irish, Roman, and numerous other influences melded together to create an English phenomenon that became the education of the English monastic school.

“Long before Bede’s birth, Gregory the Great had once described the English as a people who lived in a corner of the world and who until lately had put their trust in the worship of sticks and stones. Bede himself had a deep sense of remotefulness from the centre of things.”<sup>42</sup> In a way, Bede and Gregory were both right, England’s isolation prevented it from being influenced in the ways that other European countries were by the ancient civilizations of the continent. However, in the Anglo-Saxon monastic revival of Classically based education and Latin grammar, sheer distance from the once city of Rome did not hinder the explosion of Latin literary culture. While the revival of learning was not sufficient enough to warrant the use of the word “Renaissance” in context, there is no denying that the milestones of the Anglo-Saxon revival were some of the

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many on which the watershed Italian Renaissance had its beginnings. One such element was the work and life of Bede, an author, historian, and scholar known in both his lifetime and after his death, as being a student who commanded the respect of those both Christian and pagan alike. “Primarily a teacher in his own day,” Bede helped accelerate England into the later Medieval renaissances, in which it would play a significant role.<sup>43</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Age of Bede*. Trans. J.F. Webb, with an introduction by D.H. Farmer (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 37.
- <sup>2</sup> Alexander Hamilton Thompson, *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), xv.
- <sup>3</sup> Thompson, xv.
- <sup>4</sup> Webb, 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Pierre, Riche. *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: From the Sixth through the Eighth Centuries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 310.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.
- <sup>7</sup> Thompson, 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Riche, 316.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 323. \*Emphasis added.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.
- <sup>13</sup> Riche, 362.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.
- <sup>15</sup> Bede, *The Age of Bede*, trans. J.F. Webb, Ed. D.H. Farmer, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983), 189.
- <sup>16</sup> Riche, 211.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.
- <sup>19</sup> Bede, *The Age of Bede*, 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Bede, *The Age of Bede*, 189.
- <sup>21</sup> Riche, 379.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.
- <sup>24</sup> James Alexander Kerr, *The Classical Background of English Literature* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1948), 133.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomson, 143.
- <sup>26</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, 34.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>29</sup> Thomson, 144.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>31</sup> Robert B Palmer, "Bede as Textbook Writer: A Study of His *De Arte Metrica*," *Speculum* 34, no. 4. (October 1959), 576.
- <sup>32</sup> Ruby Davis, "Bede's Early Reading," *Speculum* 8, no. 2 (April 1933), 194.
- <sup>33</sup> George Robert Stephen, *The Knowledge of Greek in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1913), 39.
- <sup>34</sup> Riche, 387.
- <sup>35</sup> Palmer, 579.
- <sup>36</sup> Riche, 386.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.
- <sup>38</sup> Thomson, 144.
- <sup>39</sup> Thompson, 36.
- <sup>40</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 72.
- <sup>41</sup> A.F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England* (New York: B. Blom, 1968), 18.
- <sup>42</sup> Bede, *The World of Bede*, 7.
- <sup>43</sup> P.H. Blair. C. - A.D. 871. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963),

2The Venerable Bede, known as the "Father of English History" and even (by a German historian) the "Father of all the ..."  
The arguments for and against Bede as a child of paideia and advocate of the classical curriculum involve: the subjects and contents of all of his major works, his documented statements regarding the Classics and secular learning, and other evidence presented by scholars in the field. The most practical proof for those on both sides of this argument is analysis of the works that Bede produced, and a determination of his views expressed in regards to the subject of each one. Bede's most well known work, is undoubtedly his History of the English Church and People, one of the singular most important The Venerable Bede (673-735) Within the walls of the imposing Norman Cathedral of Durham lies the simple tomb of a Christian monk who has earned the title as "Father of English History." Bede was born at Tyne, in County Durham, and was taken as a child of seven to the monastery of Wearmouth. Shortly afterwards he was moved to become one of the first members of the monastic community at Jarrow. Here, he was ordained a deacon when he was 19 and a priest when he was 30; and here he spent the rest of his life. Bede's writings cover a broad spectrum including natural history, poetry, Biblical translation and exposition of the scriptures. His earliest Biblical commentary was probably that on the book of the Revelation. He is credited with writing three known Latin hymns. Bede, also known as Saint Bede and as the Venerable Bede, was born in around 672 and died in 735. Bede's great work is Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, or History of the English Church and People, which he completed in 731. The book charts the establishment of Christianity in the British Isles, particularly in England. In 1899, Bede became the only English-born person to be recognised as a Doctor of the Church. 4. Bede is credited with writing a short poem on his deathbed. This poem is often known as "Bede's Death Song", though it isn't entirely clear whether Bede actually wrote it himself, or whether it was simply later attributed to him. You can read "Bede's Death Song" here. 5. It is also thanks to Bede that we have Caedmon's Hymn, one of the oldest Anglo-Saxon poems.