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by

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Master of Fine Arts, Michigan State University, 2000

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Despite his own high level of literacy and education, the Venerable Bede (672/3–735) inhabited a world in which nearly all personal, social, educational, and political discourse was conducted orally. A thorough understanding of his works will require an understanding of this discourse, but attempts to apply broad theories of “orality” derived from other cultures to early medieval England have repeatedly foundered. This dissertation establishes a set of guiding principles to produce a more nuanced and localized model of discourse in Bede’s England and observes a variety of ways oral and literate forms of rhetoric were employed by political actors in events culminating with the synod of Nidd (706). This foundation provides a detailed rhetorical context for interpreting several of Bede’s works, including his letter to Ecgberht, his prose *Life of Cuthbert*, and his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

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Abbreviations

CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
JL	Jarrow Lecture
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
	SS Scriptorum
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 217 vols. (Paris: Ateliers Catholiques, 1844–55); index, 4 vols. (Paris: Ateliers Catholiques, 1862–64)
SEHB	Studies in the Early History of Britain
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians

Chapter 1

Literacy in an Oral World

1.1. Bede's Life in Wearmouth and Jarrow

For over 1200 years, the great majority of what we have known about the seventh century in England has come from a single book, completed in 731 CE by a monk known as the Venerable Bede. During the period covered in his history, an isolated, illiterate people in the far northwestern corner of Europe was introduced to—and profoundly transformed by—Christianity and all that came with it, including literacy and the complex cultures and histories of Rome, Greece, and the Near East. The guiding assumption of this dissertation is that we will better understand and evaluate Bede's writings if we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how he might have expected them to be received and understood in his own society. The goal of this dissertation, then, is to establish a firm foundation for interpreting Bede's historical work, by examining the ways his ideas could be expected to impact not only their immediate readers but English society at large.

Bede was an extraordinary genius in many fields. His writings project an image of a humble, pious man working in quiet solitude; a superb scholar, honest, well-informed, careful, and precise. A highly reliable source. But in the past three decades, some of the pitfalls of accepting his authority without scrutiny have become clear.

Accounts of Bede's life must necessarily and primarily rely on the brief autobiographical sketch Bede incorporated near the end of his *Historia ecclesiastica*

gentis Anglorum.¹ It is an idealized portrait of the *stabilitas* to which monks aspired,² in perfect alignment with the clarity of Bede's prose and the humility of his rhetorical self-presentation.³ It relates how Bede was born (672/3)⁴ on land that was soon to become part of the estates of Wearmouth and Jarrow monasteries, and how, in his seventh year, he was given by relatives (the only mention of his birth family in all his works) into the care of Benedict Biscop, the founder and abbot of Wearmouth monastery, and later into that of Ceolfrith, Biscop's companion and successor, who founded a sister monastery some seven miles away at Jarrow. From that time, he writes,

¹ See, for example, D. H. Farmer, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1990), i; George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2010), 2; Charles Plummer, ed., *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, 2 vols. (1896; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 1:ix. In 1896, when Plummer began his edition of Bede's historical works by quoting the passage in full, he remarked, "Almost all that we know of the life of Bede is contained in the little notice of himself and his works which he has appended to the *Ecclesiastical History*," and pointed out that this situation had endured since the twelfth century, when William of Malmesbury had said much the same thing. More than a century after Plummer, little had changed: Brown also began his account of Bede by quoting the entire passage.

² See the *Rule of St Benedict*, in Terrence G. Kardong, ed., *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 5.9–10, 5.17–19.

³ Note that my use of the term "rhetoric" refers not exclusively to the classical rhetorical tradition, but to the more capacious modern sense of the word, including words and actions meant to influence the world by exerting an effect on specific audiences.

⁴ Bede indicated that he was "in the fifty-ninth year" of his life in 731, the date he gives for the completion of the *Ecclesiastical History*, and our ability to establish the dates of several important events in his biography, including his entry into the monastery and his two ordinations, depends on the calculation of his date of birth. The calculation, however, is more complicated than it may at first appear. Did Bede mean that he was fifty-nine years old? Or that he was fifty-eight, since his first year would have been the one preceding his first birthday? Was he counting the year as we do, from one birthday to the next, so that his fifty-ninth year lasted from his fifty-eighth birthday until his fifty-ninth? Or did he count the year from new year to new year (as we count the ages of horses today), so that everyone born at any time in, say, 672 would enter his or her second year simultaneously on the first day of 673? And was that first day January 1? Or was it September 1 (the start of the indictional year in Bede's Dionysian tables) or Christmas (as he apparently calculated regnal years)? These complexities are explored in some detail with regard to Bede's dates for Deiran royal succession by Molly Miller, "The Dates of Deira," *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 35–61. See also Susan Wood, "Bede's Northumbrian Dates Again," *English Historical Review* 98, no. 387 (April 1983): 280–96. The uncertainty may be irreducible, but it is not especially large. He cannot by any calculation have been born before 672 or after 674, and most commentators have settled on 672/3, although James Campbell has opted for 673/4. See also Judith McClure and Roger Collins, introduction to *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People; The Greater Chronicle; Bede's Letter to Egbert* (1994; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xii; D. P. Kirby, "Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*: Its Contemporary Setting," *JL* 1992, in *Bede and His World*, ed. Michael Lapidge, 2 vols. (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1994), 2: 906–7; James Campbell, "Bede (673/4–735)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., 2008).

tempus uitae in eiusdem monasterii habitatione peragens, omnem meditandis scripturis operam dedi, atque inter obseruantiam disciplinae regularis, et cotidianam cantandi in ecclesia curam, semper aut discere aut docere aut scribere dulce habui.⁵

Going through my life in this same monastery, I have dedicated all my efforts to the study of the scriptures, and, between the observation of the regular discipline and the daily task of singing in church, I have always held it delightful to learn or to teach or to write.

In addition to his birth and his entry into the monastic community at Wearmouth, Bede lists only two specific autobiographical events: his ordination as a deacon in his nineteenth year and his ordination as a priest in his thirtieth. This bare summary is followed by a list of Bede's numerous and diverse writings. Although the list is organized generically, rather than chronologically, scholars have been able to date some of these works with precision, and others to within a decade or so, and this has formed the second major source of information about his life.⁶ In some cases, such as the letter prefaced to his *On Samuel*, Bede provides specific biographical details, mentioning, for instance, that he interrupted his work on that commentary due to his intense distress at Abbot Ceolfrith's sudden announcement of his retirement and projected departure for Rome in 716.⁷ Other indicators enable us to produce a more general portrait of his development as

⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, OMT (1969; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 5.24, 566. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁶ See Campbell, "Bede (673/4–735)." For a timeline of Bede's works, see Brown, *Companion*, 13–15.

⁷ Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 193.

an intellectual and an author: his earliest works, for instance, seem largely intended for the education of the brethren at his own monastery, and, as his career progressed and his reputation grew, he seems to have undertaken increasingly complex and original work with wider audiences in mind. The evolution of Bede's treatment of recurrent themes (such as, for example, the dating of Easter, predictions about the timing of the Apocalypse, or—of particular relevance to this dissertation—the need to reform the Northumbrian church) throughout his career adds color and contour to his story. Bede only very rarely made explicit personal or local connections to the ideas outlined in his works, and so the portraits painted by scholars more than 1200 years after his death are necessarily varied, malleable, and contentious. And yet the more thoroughly they have been explored, the more points of consensus have emerged.

Finally, a handful of other contemporary sources depict the monastic context in which he lived or shed brief flashes of light on a few key moments. Bede's student Cuthbert wrote an elegant and moving account of his last days, rich in the kind of specific details we lack for the rest of his life, from the editing and translating projects he dictated from his deathbed to the physical symptoms of his illness to the particular line from the psalms that caused him to break down in tears. Bede himself wrote *The Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, which amounted to a history of the community in which he lived almost his entire life.⁸ A different but related text, the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith*, adds a few more details (all the more interesting for the fact that Bede chose

⁸ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grocock and Ian Wood, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 22–75.

not to mention them), including an account of a plague that devastated the community in 685 or 686, when Bede would have been about twelve years old:⁹

Porro in monasterio cui Ceolfridus praeerat omnes qui legere uel praedicare uel antifonas ac responsoria dicere possent ablati sunt, excepto ipso abbate et uno puerulo, qui ab ipso nutritus et eruditus nunc usque in eodem monasterio presbyterii gradum tenens iure actus eius laudabiles cunctis scire uolentibus et scripto commendat et fatu.¹⁰

But in the monastery over which Ceolfrith presided, all who were able to read or preach or recite the antiphons and responses were carried off except the abbot himself and one youth who, brought up and educated by him, holding the rank of priest in the same monastery up to the present time, justly commends his [Ceolfrith's] praiseworthy deeds both in writing and in speech to all who wish to learn.

The shortage of personnel and the grief of the survivors led Ceolfrith to abbreviate the liturgy for a week, but he soon found this too painful and reinstated the accustomed regimen:

⁹ See Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 92–3, note 69.

¹⁰ *Vita Ceolfridi*, 14, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 92.

cunctisque adnitentibus per se et quem praedixi puerum que statuerat non paruo cum labore complebat, donec socios operis diuini sufficientes uel nutriret ipse uel aliunde colligeret.¹¹

And, with everyone striving, with no small labor he accomplished, through himself and the aforesaid boy, what he had determined, until he could either train sufficient companions for the divine services himself or gather them from elsewhere.

Was this boy Bede? The details given about the youth all align with what we know of Bede's life, and it seems an unlikely coincidence that another boy of similar age had also entered the monastery at the same time, survived the plague, gone on to become a priest, and written and preached about Ceolfrith, but the sly refusal of the anonymous author to name the boy has led—or enabled—some historians to doubt.¹² The account, however, offers a rare glimpse of an intensely emotional and psychologically formative experience which, if it provides little practical help in interpreting the writings of Bede's maturity, certainly gives us a sense of personal connection to the man, and a reminder that—despite the soothing placidity of Bede's own presentation—even within the walls

¹¹ Ibid., 94.

¹² Walter A. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 278, n. 200; Judith McClure, "Bede and the Life of Ceolfrid," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 81–2; McClure and Collins, introduction to *The Ecclesiastical History*, xii. This question provides a fine example of how flexibly the surviving details can be applied in support of larger theories. In support of his unorthodox claim that Bede was not personally close to Ceolfrith, Goffart treats the identification of the boy as Bede with skepticism. In 1984, while arguing that Bede himself was the author of the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith*, McClure judged that it "may well be true, for the reference is manifestly to the author of the *Life of Ceolfrith* himself, as there could be no other reason for the omission of his name." However, in 1994, while questioning the traditional idea that Bede spent most of his life at Jarrow, rather than Wearmouth, McClure and Collins wrote that "the word used, *puerulus* or 'little boy', would not be applicable to the 12- or 13-year-old Bede, who, approaching his legal age of majority at 14, would not have qualified for that diminutive form of the word."

of an eighth-century monastery, mortal life is never free from adversity, grief, and suffering.

1.2. Bede's Life in Broader Contexts

It is this awareness that has led to a growing effort in recent decades to reach beyond Bede's rhetoric of serene *stabilitas* to situate his works among more immediate and urgent personal and political concerns, and to read them as "works of advocacy" deliberately constructed to evoke specific responses from specific audiences.¹³ The fantasy that Bede wrote for "posterity," that is, that he wrote for *us*, has largely been abandoned, replaced by a growing conviction that the *Ecclesiastical History* "was not a casual, motiveless, private endeavor," but rather "a studied construction, a work of art, embodying sources, to be sure, but also the beliefs and calculations of its maker."¹⁴

The tension between these two views emerged most visibly in the work of David Kirby. In his groundbreaking 1974 chapter, "Northumbria in the Time of Wilfrid," Kirby claimed that the "serenity" of the *Ecclesiastical History* is "a mirror of the peace and charity of Bede himself and the timeless quiet of his own life, the melodious unison of plainsong and the contemplative observance of the canonical hours during which, as Bede believed (and a delightful belief too), angels visited the congregations of the

¹³ Scott DeGregorio, "Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church," *Speculum* 79, no. 1 (January 2004): 1.

¹⁴ Walter A. Goffart, "Bede's History in a Harsher Climate," in *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio, *Medieval European Studies* 7 (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 216, 225. On the traditional view that Bede was detached from the issues of his day, see DeGregorio, "Bede's *In Ezram* and Reform," 1–2. See also Eric John, "The Social and Political Problems of the Early English Church," *Agricultural History Review* 18 (1970): 39–63, reprinted in *Anglo-Saxon History: Basic Readings*, ed. David A. E. Pelteret (New York: Garland, 2000), 26. John also makes the valuable observation that even if Bede and his contemporary Stephen of Ripon were "writing to some degree with posterity in mind . . . they can hardly have avoided seeing that posterity as much the same in its civility, its economic and social status grouping, as their own world."

brethren.”¹⁵ Nine years later, however, he concluded that “The *HE* was written against a background of unease, even agitation,” and that “The key to unlocking the process of writing the *HE* may still lie concealed in the tensions of the time in which Bede wrote.”¹⁶ After a further nine years, in his 1992 Jarrow Lecture, “Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*: Its Contemporary Setting,” Kirby asserted that “The *Ecclesiastical History* is a presentation of themes and topics which seemed to him to have relevance to the Christian community for which he was writing in the early eighth century,” and proceeded to reconstruct much of the complex political, historical, and ecclesiastical context in which Bede operated.¹⁷

It was Walter Goffart, however, who most convincingly and permanently shattered the long-cherished fantasy of Bede’s total scholarly isolation from worldly concerns. In a long chapter of *Narrators of Barbarian History*, Goffart read Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* against three of its source texts, Gildas’s *Ruin of Britain*, the anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great*, produced at Whitby, and most importantly, the *Life of Wilfrid*, an openly partisan account of its hero’s extraordinary and contentious career.¹⁸

Wilfrid had played a leading role in nearly all the major developments in Northumbrian Christianity during his lifetime. Within a few years of his entry, in his mid-teens, into the monastery at Lindisfarne under the leadership of Aidan, the missionary

¹⁵ D. P. Kirby, “Northumbria in the Time of Wilfrid,” in *Saint Wilfrid at Hexham*, ed. D. P. Kirby (Newcastle: Oriol Press, 1974), 4.

¹⁶ D. P. Kirby, “Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the ‘Life of Wilfrid,’” *English Historical Review* 98, no. 386 (January 1983): 114.

¹⁷ Kirby, “Contemporary Setting,” 906.

¹⁸ Goffart, *Narrators*, 235–334. Note that scholarly opinion remains divided on the question of whether the Whitby *Life of Gregory* was known to Bede. Goffart’s argument that it was rests on one assumption (that Bede would not have failed to discover a significant local written source on a topic so important to him) and a great absence of evidence. The gist of Goffart’s argument is that Bede responded to the Whitby *Life* by writing an account that differed from his source in every conceivable way.

from the Irish monastic center of Iona who had accomplished the first permanent conversion of the kingdom of Northumbria, Wilfrid journeyed to Gaul and Rome, where he made important connections and learned the method of dating Easter accepted at Rome.¹⁹ Wilfrid made his triumphant return to Northumbria at the pivotal Synod of Whitby, where he spoke for the victorious “Roman” party, in a debate that, though it seems to have focused on the technical question of how best to establish the date of Easter, amounted to a battle for control of the enormous potential power and wealth that the nascent church had begun to manifest.²⁰ The leading Irish clerics left the kingdom in the aftermath of Whitby, and within two years, Wilfrid, who had already founded the first monasteries of what would become a powerful international network, had become bishop of the whole kingdom. His episcopacy, however, was seriously contested from the start, and, in the event, he spent much of his long career in exile after falling out with successive Northumbrian kings and the formidable Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury. During his long travels, he converted the still-pagan kingdom of Sussex, established the first mission in Frisia, played kingmaker in Gaul, performed episcopal duties in Mercia and Kent, and increased the wealth and scale of his monastic network enormously.²¹ On two occasions he took his grievances directly to the pope, who found in his favor both times, although the pope’s judgments seem to have carried little practical weight in Northumbria.²²

¹⁹ Stephen of Ripon, *Vita Wifridi*, in *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (1927; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chs. 1–5.

²⁰ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 10; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.25. See Richard Abels, “The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics,” *Journal of British Studies* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 1–25.

²¹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 41, 26, 28, 14.

²² *Ibid.*, chs. 29–34, 51–4, 58. The resistance of local power structures to the imposition of a foreign hierarchy will be discussed in Chapter 2 below.

Wilfrid was undoubtedly a man of enormous charisma, and his large and powerful communities were as loyally supportive to him as his enemies were implacably opposed. Eventually, following the Synod of Austerfield (702/3), Wilfrid and all his followers were excommunicated by the combined authority of King Aldfrith and an assembly of English bishops and clergy.²³ In 705, in his early seventies, he played a significant role in the succession crisis that followed Aldfrith's death, and as a result he regained his two most important monasteries, at Ripon and Hexham, and then a portion of his previous episcopal see.²⁴ Thereafter, he appears to have avoided major conflict until his death in 710.²⁵ He was succeeded as bishop of Hexham by his close friend and follower, Acca, and as abbot of Ripon by another close confidant, Tatbert. It was these two men who commissioned the monk Stephen to write Wilfrid's life, and although Stephen knew and traveled with Wilfrid in the last years of his life, Acca and Tatbert both provided Stephen with significant oral accounts of Wilfrid's deeds, from personal experience and from what Wilfrid had told them.²⁶

In Goffart's telling, Wilfrid was a "colossus" in Northumbrian ecclesiastical politics, and the enmities he generated during his life would continue to be the defining divisions in the inter-monastic, episcopal, and even royal political landscapes for decades after his death, with the Wilfridians retaining control of Ripon and Hexham, and the anti-Wilfridian forces centered around Lindisfarne and Whitby.²⁷ The anonymous *Life of*

²³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 46–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, chs. 59–61.

²⁵ Clare Stancliffe, "Dating Wilfrid's Death and Stephen's *Life*," in *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint. Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences*, ed. N. J. Higham (Donington, UK: Shaun Tyas, 2013), 17–26.

²⁶ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, preface, chs. 56 and 65.

²⁷ Goffart, *Narrators*, 258: "He was a giant in the making of the English Church. Moreover, by dominating the horizon, generating hostility towards himself, and continuing to be an issue after his death, he incited the Northumbrian Church, alone in England, to provide itself with a written history."

Cuthbert, produced at Lindisfarne near the end of Wilfrid's life, offered—in the elevation of a competing bishop to the status of a *Reichsheiliger*—a vision of episcopal and monastic beatitude that condemned, through vivid contrast, the ostentatious Wilfrid.²⁸ The *Life of Wilfrid*, says Goffart, was a pointed rejoinder, disdaining Cuthbert and promoting Wilfrid, his model of ecclesiastical organization, and his eradication of the Irish “weeds.”²⁹ Bede, having thrown his lot in with Lindisfarne, responded first by rewriting the *Life of Cuthbert* to avoid or rebut the criticisms implied by Stephen's account and emphasize Cuthbert's alternative model, and ultimately by writing the *Ecclesiastical History*, which consistently praises Wilfrid, but just as consistently undermines his claims to primacy and preeminence in the story of Northumbrian Christianization by drawing attention to his predecessors and rivals.³⁰

Like Kirby's account in “Northumbria in the Time of Wilfrid,” Goffart's model of eighth-century Northumbria has had only partial success in convincing critics.³¹ He is quick to accept any theory that can be made to fit his paradigm, and to dismiss any that cannot, and naturally any account that tries to reduce decades of history to a single cause must drastically oversimplify. But what Goffart did demonstrate beyond any doubt was the power of his “intentionalist” approach, which he explains as the assumption that Bede and other medieval writers “meant to write what they did and were well aware of what they said and why.”³²

²⁸ Alan Thacker, “Bede's Ideal of Reform,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 147–8.

²⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 47.

³⁰ Goffart, “Harsher Climate,” 223–4; John, “Social and Political Problems,” 26.

³¹ N. J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006), 58–69. In a point-by-point consideration, Higham dismisses much of Goffart's argument on the basis of insufficient evidence.

³² Goffart, “Harsher Climate,” 207, citing Goffart, *Narrators*, ix.

Again and again, Goffart draws out vivid, provocative, and coherent interpretations of Bede's narrative and linguistic choices, situating them within an intense and dynamic struggle. But Goffart didn't just tell a more colorful story. He drew attention to the fact that there are a great many anomalous points in Bede's accounts and those of his contemporaries that *require* explanation, but that had been consistently overlooked by scholars too ready to accept Bede's rhetorical self-construction.

Goffart's strict binary of Wilfridian vs. anti-Wilfridian has given way to more nuanced readings, such as that of Clare Stancliffe, who, in 2012, made detailed comparisons of the *Life of Wilfrid* with the two prose *Lives* of Cuthbert, and concluded that, while the factional struggle initiated during Wilfrid's episcopate was real and long-lasting, it had evolved, by the third decade of the eighth century, into a struggle over the proper nature of episcopacy, a struggle that informs much of Bede's later work.³³ Faith Wallis, too, has followed up Kirby's and Goffart's basic insight with a far more subtle and personal reading of Bede's relationship to Wilfrid, his successor Acca, and the Hexham community in general, one in which the scale is reduced—she sees a great deal of Bede's middle works as having been motivated by the accusation of heresy leveled against Bede in Wilfrid's presence and Bede's desire to defend himself to his skeptical bishops—but in which the stakes are no less high for being personal. The result, again, is that seemingly sterile works on the nature of time or the appropriate level of literalness with which to read now-obscure biblical passages take on some of the vitality and

³³ Clare Stancliffe, "Disputed Episcopacy: Bede, Acca, and the Relationship between Stephen's *Life of St Wilfrid* and the Early Prose Lives of St Cuthbert," *Anglo-Saxon England* 41 (2012): 7–39.

intensity out of which they were forged, and many previously inexplicable details begin to take on new significance.³⁴

This recognition of the extent to which Bede's writings are embedded within their rhetorical contexts has been the most fruitful advance in Bede studies in generations, but attempts to understand and reconstruct those contexts have only barely begun. The inter-monastic rivalries that shaped the politics and identities of Bede and his contemporaries were themselves embedded in larger struggles over the shape and direction of Christianity and English culture. Bede's interest in these struggles as subjects of inquiry has long been obvious. The role he expected his own work to play in shaping them has yet to be thoroughly explored. Bede occupied the interface between the literate, text-based culture of Latin Christendom and the traditional oral culture of the English people, and he carefully negotiated their interactions. To understand his relationship with the world outside the monastery walls, it will be necessary to understand how that world worked.³⁵

1.3. Literate Perspectives on Oral People

Attempts to situate early English texts and their writers in the context of the largely non-literate societies within which they were produced have generally followed one of two overlapping traditions, both of which derive their essential ideas from research on twentieth- and twenty-first-century oral cultures conducted by anthropologists and

³⁴ Faith Wallis, "Why Did Bede Write a Commentary on Revelation?" in *Bede and the Future*, ed. Peter Darby and Faith Wallis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 23–45. For the accusation of heresy, see Bede, "Letter to Plegwin," in *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis, Translated Texts for Historians 29 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 405–15.

³⁵ The most thorough and up-to-date consideration of Bede in the context of his mostly oral society is Nicholas J. Higham, *Bede as an Oral Historian*, JL 2011 (Jarrow, UK: St. Paul's Church Council, 2011), discussed in Chapter 5.

ethnographers. Both traditions also incorporate serious flaws which have undermined many of their audacious early claims, and both have been profoundly revised by several generations of scholarship into more supple—if less grandiose—analytical tools.

1.3.1. Parry and Lord

The first is a tradition of literary criticism introduced in the 1920s and early 1930s by Milman Parry, who recognized that repeated verbal formulas encountered in Homeric verse fulfilled specific metrical requirements, and that these formulas were necessitated by the exigencies of improvisational oral composition.³⁶ After Parry's death, his colleague Albert Lord developed these insights into a much fuller and more widely applicable model, which was then applied, by such scholars as Francis Peabody Magoun and later John Miles Foley, to the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England.³⁷ Yet, although the Parry/Lord model, often called oral-formulaic theory, proved fantastically successful and transformative in Homeric studies,³⁸ and has been widely applied (in modified forms) to epic poetry in modern-day oral cultures, comparable success has eluded those who have attempted to apply the same ideas to medieval literature.

Magoun's initial arguments confidently assumed an absolute and universal applicability of the oral-formulaic model although the theory, in its original form, turned out to be dependent on apparently coincidental similarities between the metrical systems of Homeric Greece and twentieth-century Yugoslavia, where both Parry and Lord did

³⁶ Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

³⁷ The fully developed oral-formulaic theory is articulated in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). First edition published 1960.

³⁸ See John Miles Foley, "'Reading' Homer through Oral Tradition," *College Literature* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 1–28, for a concise summary of the theory and its application.

extensive fieldwork.³⁹ Among other shortcomings, Magoun generally failed to account for the complex interactions between literacy and oral culture. This assumption of a simplistic binary relationship, crystallized in Albert Lord's proclamation that oral and literate composition are "mutually exclusive," and that there are no "transitional" texts reflecting stages of literate development, is often referred to as "the Great Divide," and was largely abandoned, even by Lord himself, by the 1980s.⁴⁰ Western Europe had not been "purely" oral since before Roman times—even the pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons had an alphabet, a form of writing, a pre-history of Roman contact, and extensive economic and cultural relationships with their neighbors, most of whom (including the British, the Irish, and the Gauls) had some degree of literacy in their societies. Medieval England saw a kaleidoscopic evolution of relations between cultures, classes, and individuals with varying degrees of facility with and dependence upon written texts throughout a period of many centuries. As later scholars, such as John D. Niles and John Miles Foley, began to account for this complexity, their theories became more closely attuned to this messy reality, but also more tentative, so that today, for example, few scholars would deny that an oral tradition lurks behind the text of *Beowulf*, but there is no widespread consensus on what the exact relationship is between the two, or how that knowledge ought to shape our interpretations.⁴¹

³⁹Francis Peabody Magoun, "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum* 28, no. 3 (July 1953): 446–67. Magoun asserts, for example, "Whereas a lettered poet of any time or place, composing (as he does and must) with the aid of writing materials and with deliberation, creates his own language as he proceeds, the unlettered singer, ordinarily composing rapidly and extempore before a live audience, must and does call upon ready-made language, upon a vast reservoir of formulas filling just measures of verse. These formulas develop over a long period of time; they are the creation of countless generations of singers and can express all the ideas a singer will need in order to tell his story ..." (446).

⁴⁰Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 129; Albert B. Lord, "Memory, Fixity, and Genre in Oral Traditional Poetries," in *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1981), 460; Albert B. Lord, "Oral Composition and 'Oral Residue' in the Middle Ages," in *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1995), 16–17.

⁴¹John D. Niles, "Understanding *Beowulf*: Oral Poetry Acts," *Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 420 (Spring 1993): 131–55; John Miles Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic: "The Odyssey," "Beowulf," and the Serbo-Croatian Return*

One significant limitation of the original form of oral-formulaic theory is that it could only be applied to poetry, and most suitably to epic poetry, which has great intrinsic interest, but can hardly be considered representative of the range of human discourse in an oral society. As the theory has evolved, especially since the 1990s, it has moved away from its early focus on metrical analysis to encompass a range of statistical and theoretical approaches, and it has come to emphasize and illuminate, rather than resist and deny, the complex interactions between various kinds of literate and oral discourses that characterize medieval societies.⁴² In the process, oral-formulaic theory has evolved into (or been replaced by) oral-traditional theory. According to this theory, oral poetry derives enormous communicative efficiency from its invocation of and dependence upon an entire body of traditional material, known not only to the poet but to the audience as well, thus recognizing a locus of meaning in the community for and by which the poem is created.⁴³

1.3.2. Ong

Song (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For a detailed history of the application of oral-formulaic theory to *Beowulf* up to the early 1990s, see Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Diction, Variation, the Formula," in *A "Beowulf" Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 85–104.

⁴² Oral-formulaic theory has of course been applied to Old English poetry beyond *Beowulf*. An exhaustive account of this history up to the 1980s is provided in Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies 1," *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 3 (1986): 548–606, and Olsen, "Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies 2," *Oral Tradition* 3, nos. 1/2 (1988): 138–90. Since then, the work has continued to expand. See, for example, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, CSASE 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The chapter on Cædmon's "Hymn" (23–46) is most directly relevant to the study of Bede's audiences. See also Dennis Cronan, "Cædmon's Audience," *Studies in Philology* 109, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 333–63; Andy Orchard, "Looking for an Echo: The Oral Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Literature," *Oral Tradition* 18, no. 2 (2003): 225–27; Emily Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John D. Niles, "The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet," *Western Folklore* 62, nos. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 2003): 7–61; Kevin S. Kiernan, "Reading Cædmon's 'Hymn' with Someone Else's Glosses," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 103–24; and Francis Peabody Magoun, "Bede's Story of Cædmon: The Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Singer," *Speculum* 30, no. 1 (January 1955): 49–63.

⁴³ John Miles Foley, "The Implications of Oral Tradition," in Nicolaisen, *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, 31–58.

The second tradition that has attempted to recognize and compensate for the inherent biases of modern Western literate scholarship in attempting to understand the dynamics of oral-literate interactions began to take shape in the 1960s and '70s with the work of the anthropologist Jack Goody and the classicist Eric Havelock; it was articulated into a more universal theory by Walter Ong.⁴⁴

Ong argued that long and deep immersion in typographic (print) and chirographic (written) culture tends to blind us to the existence and nature of what he called “primary oral” societies: those societies that have no experience of reading or writing (which is, of course, the vast majority of all human cultures across time). He observed that “many of the features we have taken for granted in thought and expression in literature, philosophy and science, and even in oral discourse among literates, are not directly native to human existence as such but have come into being because of the resources which the technology of writing makes available to human consciousness.”⁴⁵ Based on the anthropological work available to him—particularly that of Goody and the Soviet ethnographer Alexander Luria—Ong developed a list of traits that, in his view, were generally associated with the culture, literature, and consciousness of oral peoples.⁴⁶

Because writing separates language and thought from the flow of time and active human discourse, Ong claimed that literacy was necessary (and assumed that it was sufficient) for the development of analytic thought and a suite of related mental traits,

⁴⁴ Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (April 1963): 304–45; Eric A. Havelock, “The Alphabetic Mind: A Gift of Greece to the Modern World,” *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 1 (1986): 134–50; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th Anniv. ed. (London: Routledge, 2012; first published 1982); Walter J. Ong, “Before Textuality: Orality and Interpretation,” *Oral Tradition* 3, no. 3 (1988): 259–69.

⁴⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1.

⁴⁶ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); A. R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, trans. by Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

such as objective reasoning, abstraction, individualism, interiority, and irony. Many essential elements of modern thought, he claimed, such as lists, definitions, statistics, syllogistic logic, and even facts, are not intrinsic either to the natural world or to the human mind but depend for their existence on the technology of writing.⁴⁷ Any form of reasoning that depends on these elements should therefore be absent in most oral societies.

In a primary oral culture, it is impossible to look anything up; the concept simply has no meaning. Instead, oral cultures encode their essential thoughts in stories, proverbs, formulas, and rituals which must be continuously and communally re-enacted in order to be preserved and shared. Ong listed the traits he associated with the thoughts and expression of such cultures, which he often contrasted with the different set of traits he ascribed to literate people.⁴⁸

Some of these traits can be derived from the conditions of performance and composition in a non-literate society. For example, “oral literature” tends to be “fulsome,” “redundant,” or “copious,” as compared to written literature, because a reader whose concentration wavers for a moment can always go back and reread, but a listener cannot, and hence it is necessary for an oral poet or speaker to continually restate anything important. Other traits highlight the text-dependence of many of the mental habits of modern literate people. For instance, Ong states that “oral literature” tends to be “empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced,” and “situational rather than abstract,” because analytical methods (such as the ability to compare different

⁴⁷ See Franz H. Bäuml, “Writing the Emperor’s Clothes On: Literacy and the Production of Facts,” in *Written Voices, Spoken Signs: Tradition, Performance, and the Epic Text*, ed. Egbert J. Bakker and Ahuvia Kahane (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 37.

⁴⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 37–50.

sections of the same text, or to isolate individual themes from multiple texts) and the sense that knowledge might exist outside the continuous flow of time and experience tend to emerge from long interaction with written texts. Finally, some of Ong's "oral" traits result from dependence on the living community (rather than a corpus of static texts) as the primary source of authority. For example, oral accounts tend toward "homeostasis," a term Ong adopted from Goody, meaning they tend "to maintain a state of equilibrium by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance," with the result that oral histories tend to reflect the social and political conditions at the time they are performed or recorded far more fully than the conditions of the time they purport to discuss.⁴⁹

These characterizations, based on the work of influential anthropologists and an insightful analysis of the text-dependence of modern thought, and illustrated with examples from the familiar arc of Western history, proved immediately appealing to some scholars, who set about uncritically applying them to various texts (including many medieval texts), and labeling features of those texts as evidently derived from "oral" or "literate" culture.

Yet Ong's work has been heavily criticized in recent decades for several reasons. It is, for one thing, deeply embedded in a sexist and ethnocentric worldview. This is not a mere question of insensitive expression or political incorrectness, but a profound distortion that undermines the structure of his historical model and renders many of Ong's most ambitious conclusions absurd. Ong's grand claims about the evolution of subjective human consciousness—such as the emergence of "the literate mind" in medieval Europe—appear sound only if one counts as "human" only the high-status

⁴⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 46. See discussion below.

European males whose particular form of education and acculturation Ong takes as representative.

This vast oversimplification leads to a reductive binarism and an essentially teleological vision of the history of literacy: “primary orality” and total literacy appear as the only stable states in his model; the vast diversity of ways that humans have created, used, experienced, and related to texts are subsumed by the unique tradition preserved in the twentieth-century Western educational system; and the idiosyncrasies of European history appear (despite much contrary evidence from other societies) as the inevitable consequences of the introduction of the technology of literacy.⁵⁰ More recent scholarship has highlighted these logical failings and undermined the anthropological basis on which Ong’s work was founded by producing numerous examples of non-literate societies displaying the traits Ong associates with literacy and vice versa.⁵¹

Can anything of value be salvaged from the ruins of this once-promising approach? Ong’s work remains relevant in several important respects, and it is unfortunate that in some cases, as Hartley lamented, “rejection of Ong’s more exorbitant claims seems to have led to the neglect of his best work too.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Ong was aware of his ethnocentrism (*Orality and Literacy*, 3) and the inapplicability of binary thought to the messy realities of history (*Orality and Literacy*, 92–97), but appears not to have appreciated the extent to which those biases undermined his logical position.

⁵¹ For direct criticism of Ong’s reasoning, see Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–33; Joyce Coleman, “On Beyond Ong: Taking the Paradox out of ‘Oral Literacy’ (and ‘Literate Orality’),” in *Medieval Insular Literature between the Oral and the Written, 2: Continuity of Transmission*, ed. Hildegard L. C. Tristram (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997), 155–76; John Hartley, “After Ongism: The Evolution of Networked Intelligence,” in Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 205–32. For examples of cultures in violation of Ong’s binary model, see Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), and Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). For a more recent anthropological model of oral-literate interactions, see Roy Harris, *Rethinking Writing* (London: Athlone Press, 2001), and the extended response in Naomi S. Baron, “Rethinking Written Culture,” *Language Sciences* 26 (2004): 57–96.

⁵² Hartley, “After Ongism,” 216.

The enduring value of Ong's work lies not in the generalizations he made about oral cultures, but in the biases he illuminated in text-based thinking—the ready assumptions of modern scholars—which must be carefully examined before they can be applied to people whose cultures and traditions did not rely on documents. Ong was highly alert to how severely “the relentless dominance of textuality in the scholarly mind” can warp our perceptions of non-literate cultures. He skewered the “strictly preposterous” (but still widely employed) term “oral literature” through a concrete metaphor:

Imagine writing a treatise on horses (for people who have never seen a horse) which starts with the concept not of horse but of ‘automobile’, built on the readers’ direct experience of automobiles. It proceeds to discourse on horses by always referring to them as ‘wheelless automobiles’, explaining to highly automobilized readers who have never seen a horse all the points of difference in an effort to excise all idea of ‘automobile’ out of the concept ‘wheelless automobile’ so as to invest the term with a purely equine meaning. Instead of wheels, the wheelless automobiles have enlarged toenails called hooves; instead of headlights or perhaps rear-vision mirrors, eyes; instead of a coat of lacquer, something called hair; instead of gasoline for fuel, hay, and so on. In the end, horses are only what they are not. No matter how accurate and thorough such apophatic description, automobile-driving readers who have never seen a horse and who hear only of ‘wheelless automobiles’ would be sure to come away with a strange concept of a horse. The same is true for those who deal in terms of ‘oral

literature’, that is, ‘oral writing’. You cannot without serious and disabling distortion describe a primary phenomenon by starting with a subsequent secondary phenomenon and paring away all the differences. Indeed, starting backwards in this way—putting the car before the horse—you can never become aware of the real differences at all.⁵³

Another reason that Ong’s work ought not to be entirely jettisoned is that although the “oral” traits he enumerates are not present in all oral cultures (or, for that matter, necessarily absent in text-dependent cultures), neither are they uncommon, and thus evidence of such traits is worthy of attention. Where we find such evidence, it can contribute, along with other evidence (textual, archaeological, etc.), to the construction of a working model of some parts of medieval culture that did not directly produce surviving texts, but whose influence has nonetheless left discernible traces.

From Ong’s list of traits associated with oral cultures, two are especially valuable for understanding the dynamics surrounding the introduction of literacy in the period of the English conversion: a tendency towards homeostasis between remembered history and present political reality, and a related tendency for rhetorical authority to reside in the consensus of the community. Neither trait is exclusive to oral societies. In fact, both are present in all societies, but they are more difficult to detect in literate cultures, because reliance on documents tends to slow movement toward homeostasis and expand the idea of “the community” beyond easy recognition.

⁵³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 10–12.

1.4. Homeostasis

Among the above-mentioned traits attributed to oral societies by Ong, perhaps the most critical concept for understanding how history functions in societies where written texts play little role is the tendency towards what anthropologist Jack Goody described as “homeostasis.” Goody described a process by which social forces continually shape the content of oral traditions, determining what data is recalled, transmitted, or deemed important in the present, so that “the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed.”⁵⁴ As a result, “myth and history merge into one,” he writes, serving to justify and explain present social institutions. “They can do this more consistently because they operate within an oral rather than a written tradition and thus tend to be automatically adjusted to existing social relations as they are passed by word of mouth from one member of society to another.” As Ong interpreted the concept, it suggests that “oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance,” so that “oral traditions reflect a society’s present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past.”⁵⁵

The fact that narrativizations of the past tend to reflect the structures, assumptions, and preoccupations of the present is, of course, a universal feature of human culture, not a strictly oral one, since the desire and expectation that we will find our communal identities and justifications (as nations, peoples, families, etc.) in our history has persisted without evident diminishment through millennia of oral, literate, print, and digital culture throughout the world. In document-dependent societies, however, histories

⁵⁴ Goody and Watt, “Consequences of Literacy,” 310–11.

⁵⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 46–8.

perceived to be more concerned with promulgating such identities or justifying current relations of power than with the unbiased interpretation of evidence can more easily be dismissed as mere propaganda because they can easily be compared with conflicting documentary evidence or alternative interpretations. The distinction between propaganda and genuine historical inquiry, however, would be almost impossible to make in the absence of documents or other durable sources to interpret and compare.

The *locus classicus* for the idea of a homeostatic congruence between communally constructed history and present social reality is the work of Laura Bohannan, an anthropologist who worked with the Tiv people of Nigeria between 1949 and 1952.⁵⁶

Bohannan argued that, among the Tiv, genealogies served as a “charter” for social relationships. They determined where to live and farm, whom to marry, which other subgroups to cooperate with and which to fear or fight. The distribution of land was so closely matched to family relationships that the same word—the name of a progenitor—served to indicate either the family or the territory they claimed.

Recognizing the importance of genealogical information in settling legal disputes among the Tiv, the British colonial administration had created written genealogical tables based on the information they could obtain from native informants. The oral genealogies, however, turned out to be highly fluid, and soon diverged from the written record. Bohannan explored the use, transmission, and evolution of genealogical lore and realized that their value to the people lay not in their preservation of raw historical data, but in the completeness and coherence with which they illustrated (present) social relationships.

⁵⁶ Laura Bohannan, “A Genealogical Charter,” *Africa* 22, no. 4 (1952): 301–15.

She recorded several revealing accounts of the process by which genealogies were kept in accord with social reality. In one instance, local elders adjudicated a complicated argument about two marriage wards who, one man claimed, had been wrongfully withheld by his uncle. One of the wards clearly belonged to the complainant, while the family affiliation of the other hinged on a dispute about whether two names (Adoga and Amena) in his lineage referred to the same man or two different men. “The elders were unable to agree on this point.” Bohannan observed, “However, they decided that the complainant should receive only one marriage ward (that one coming to him on the old slave deal) at the moment because there weren’t enough wards currently available to give him two without causing hardship to others. Two days later the elders told me that Adoga and Amena were *two* men *because* only the one ward had been given to the complainant. The outcome of the case, based on a practical and equitable compromise, also fixed a disputed genealogy. The existing state of affairs was taken as proof of a past state of affairs and of a genealogy.”⁵⁷

In another example, Bohannan records a dispute in which members of one lineage attempted to argue that their ancestor, Ikakwer, was the wife, rather than, as was usually recalled, the son, of Tyou, thus claiming priority over a rival group whose lineage descended from Tyou’s son Use. The elders of the second group “smilingly agreed, commenting that Use also was a wife of Tyou.” As long as they were able to maintain the equality of their claim, the descendants of Use were untroubled by the changes. “That Ikakwer appears sometimes as a woman (the wife of Tyou), sometimes as a man with two wives (Nyam and Ikaa), and sometimes as a man with two sons (Nyam and Ikaa) is, as

⁵⁷ Bohannan, “Genealogical Charter,” 307.

the Tiv themselves explain, politically irrelevant, as long as the order of dependence and superiority between the [lineal] segments is not changed.” Bohannan observed that “Such variation is generally conscious and almost metaphorical.”⁵⁸

In a third example, European colonial administrators recorded that Pwa and Yar had been brothers. Decades later, because the land associated with the descendants of Yar was smaller than that associated with the descendants of Pwa, and comparable in size to those parcels associated with each of Pwa’s children, “most people cite Mbayar [the family (or territory) of Yar’s descendants] as a child of Pwa rather than as a sibling segment. Some say that the elders who in the past told the administration that Yar was Pwa’s brother were mistaken, but that it isn’t worthwhile doing anything about it. Other elders say that Yar was born the brother of Pwa but in size has ‘become the child of Pwa’.”⁵⁹

Bohannan concluded that these variations did not generally result from lapses of memory but were “consistent with certain principles of Tiv social structure,” and that “Tiv criteria of genealogical truth lie in social consistency.”⁶⁰ In practice, “Genealogies validate present relationships; these relationships prove the genealogies; and the form of the genealogy is modelled on the form of present relationships.”⁶¹

Goody and Watt took Bohannan’s analysis of the mechanisms of Tiv genealogical transmission and evolution (combined with Goody’s own fieldwork with the Gonja people in Ghana), and extrapolated it into a universal model. The treatment of Bohannan’s work illustrates some of the problems with the theories of oral cultures that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 303.

⁶¹ Ibid., 312.

were prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s—specifically, the tendency to confidently extrapolate sound localized observations into dubious grand universal theories. Her 1952 article was selectively cited by Goody and Watt. Ong cited their summary, rather than Bohannan’s article, and many others have in turn cited Ong’s summary of Goody and Watt. In the process, Bohannan’s highly specific observations (relating only to genealogical practices within a unique culture at a particular moment) were recast as a model for every kind of historical and cultural transmission in all non-literate societies, while many of the complicating factors she observed were forgotten.

To genealogies, Goody and Watt added myths, stories, proper names, and vocabulary, and to the Tiv, they added oral societies generally.⁶² Then, applying Bohannan’s insights to history and interpreting the impact of alphabetic literacy on Ancient Greek—and hence on European—cultural development, they created a binary model, with fact-based, analytical thought characterizing literate societies on one side, set against “the homeostatic organisation of the cultural tradition in non-literate society” on the other.⁶³

Thus, the concept of homeostasis alerts us to a common social function of history that can sometimes be obscured or dismissed in literate societies. But, like many concepts indiscriminately applied to “oral societies,” this idea tends to reduce the rich complexity of human cultural diversity to a simplistic binary that lumps together nearly all human cultures into a single category, defined by a single trait (or, more precisely, by the lack of a single trait: widespread alphabetic literacy). It is necessary, therefore, to consider the mechanisms through which homeostasis functions and the limitations of its applicability

⁶² Goody and Watt, “Consequences of Literacy,” 310–11, 307.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 319–30.

before enumerating its implications for a specific culture (in this case, that of early England).

Goody and Watt claimed that “As long as the legendary and doctrinal aspects of the cultural tradition are mediated orally, they are kept in relative harmony with each other and with the present needs of society in two ways; through the unconscious operations of memory, and through the adjustment of the reciter’s terms and attitudes to those of the audience before him.”⁶⁴ A nuanced understanding of the function of historical knowledge in societies with varying levels of text-dependence requires consideration of both these processes.

1.5. Memory and History

Memory, in the individual, serves, among other purposes, as the raw material from which the conscious self is constructed. Memory operates selectively to create a sense of continuity, a belief that there is something unchanging about the perceiver, the experiencer, of the experiences remembered. Who am I? I am the person who has had all these experiences, who comes from this family, has obtained this rank in that institution, who was formed by this training and education, tested in those trials, who overcame these obstacles and succumbed to those temptations. I am the person who made those choices and experienced these consequences.

Cognitive psychologist Martin Conway and others have developed a framework, known as Self-Memory System, or SMS, for understanding the role of autobiographical memory in creating and maintaining this narrative sense of self. “The relationship

⁶⁴ Ibid., 321.

between the working self and long-term memory is a reciprocal one,” Conway observes, “in which autobiographical knowledge constrains what the self is, has been, and can be, whereas the working self modulates access to long-term knowledge.”⁶⁵ One result of this process is that “highly accessible memories and knowledge across the lifespan form a more or less coherent story of the individual and their achievements.”⁶⁶ Importantly, “autobiographical memories that are consistent with the goals and values of our working self are prioritized for remembering, whereas memories that conflict with our working self are likely to be forgotten.”⁶⁷

Although recall is the most obvious active agent in memory, the SMS framework also emphasizes the important role of selective *forgetting* in the construction of the self. Examining our “striking ability to alter our psychological access to past experiences,” Harris, Sutton, and Barnier observe that “functioning in our day-to-day lives involves, or perhaps even requires, forgetting,” and that “we forget and remember events from our past in a goal-directed strategic way.”⁶⁸ In general, “we tend to remember events that place us in a good light, support our current self-image, or promote ongoing activities. And we try to forget—with varying success—memories of experiences that undermine the current self, contradict our beliefs, plans, and goals, and increase anxiety or other negative emotions.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Martin A. Conway, “Memory and the Self,” *Journal of Memory and Language* 53 (2005): 594. For a detailed explanation of the Self-Memory System, see Martin A. Conway and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce, “The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-Memory System,” *Psychology Review* 10, no. 2 (2000): 261–88.

⁶⁶ Conway, “Memory and the Self,” 607.

⁶⁷ Celia B. Harris, John Sutton, and Amanda J. Barnier, “Autobiographical Forgetting, Social Forgetting, and Situated Forgetting: Forgetting in Context,” in *Forgetting*, ed. Sergio Della Sala (Hove, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 256.

⁶⁸ Harris, Sutton, and Barnier, “Forgetting in Context,” 253–4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 255–6.

Conway describes a tension between the psychological imperative for the selection—and sometimes distortion or even fabrication—of accessible memories to maintain a consistent narrative self (which he calls coherence) and the practical necessity that memories support decision-making by accurately reflecting reality (which he calls correspondence). Memory, as we experience it, is “a product of the tradeoff between the separate but competing demands of coherence and correspondence.”⁷⁰

The connection between individual memory and communal memory (or oral tradition) is two-fold. First, the selective process of individual remembering and forgetting determines what memories are available to be shared with the group and transmitted to posterity. Individual memory can be seen as the front line of communal memory, filtering out massive amounts of raw data while selecting and interpreting a limited set for retention and shared remembrance. Second, communal recall is shaped by many of the same dynamics that affect the course of individual recall, including the construction of identity through narrative, the importance of selective forgetting, and the competing demands of coherence and correspondence.

In fact, the line between individual and communal memory is—at least in oral contexts—somewhat arbitrary. The process of memory is, at all times, embedded in and dependent on social contexts and cues. Recent scholarship has taken the view that “rather than viewing the social milieu as contamination”—the traditional approach of cognitive research—“it could be fruitful to view it as a fundamental constituent of cognition.”⁷¹

One influential approach to cognition, the Situated Cognition Framework, understands

⁷⁰ Conway, “Memory and the Self,” 595–6, 607. See also Harris, Sutton, and Barnier, “Forgetting in Context,” 256.

⁷¹ Mary Susan Weldon and Krystal D. Bellinger, “Collective Memory: Collaborative and Individual Processes in Remembering,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 23, no. 5 (1997): 1160.

the brain “as embedded in and extended into its world, where it rarely performs cognitive operations in isolation.”⁷² With regard to memory, this means that the mind relies heavily upon distributed recall (in which each member of a social group can safely forget much as long as other members are likely to remember it as needed) and external scaffolding (in which memories not immediately accessible to the individual in isolation are activated by cues in either the social or physical environment). In this context, “the storage of information which is less self-relevant or which is computationally costly might be offloaded onto the world.”⁷³

But there is a catch. While many researchers have expected to find that such offloading improved memory, experimental results have consistently shown that collaborative group recall is considerably *worse* than the total recall of individual group members in terms of both quantity and accuracy, a phenomenon known as “collaborative inhibition.”⁷⁴ And the effects are lasting, so that individual recall following a collaborative recall session also scores lower in terms of quantity and accuracy. Several explanations have been proposed for this counter-intuitive finding. Social relations may determine who speaks (and to whom others listen) and what kinds of recollections are encouraged, thereby suppressing memories that threaten the power dynamics within the group.⁷⁵ Reliance on others may disrupt the optimal memory retrieval strategies in each

⁷² Harris, Sutton, and Barnier, “Forgetting in Context,” 271.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷⁴ Weldon and Bellinger, “Collective Memory,” 1160, 1165: “The data reveal that although collaborative groups recalled more than individuals, collaboration did not optimize individual recall. In other words, when working together in a group to recall information, individuals recalled less than when they worked alone.” See also Celia B. Harris, Helen M. Patterson, and Richard Kemp, “Collaborative Recall and Collective Memory: What Happens When We Remember Together?” *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008): 213–30.

⁷⁵ Celia B. Harris, Amanda J. Barnier, John Sutton, and Paul Keil, “How Did You Feel When ‘The Crocodile Hunter’ Died? Voicing and Silencing in Conversation Influences Memory for an Autobiographical Event,” *Memory* 18, no. 2 (2010): 185–97.

individual.⁷⁶ But these explanations raise a more basic question: if—whatever the reason—collaborative recall and socially embedded memory is worse than individual recall and memory, why do we do it?

The problem may lie in the assumption that quantity and accuracy are the most important or desirable features of group memory. As Harris, Sutton, and Barnier observe, memory may be “motivated by social goals such as promoting group cohesion, enhancing relationships, negotiating the meaning of shared experiences, and planning joint action or projects.”⁷⁷ In fact, the social dynamics affecting group recall and forgetting are selective and goal-directed, just as they are on the individual level. A small number of communal memories that promote these goals might be far more valuable to the group than a large number of accurate memories that undermine or challenge the identity and goals of the group. To put it in Conway’s terminology, group recall appears to favor coherence over correspondence.

These results—derived from controlled experiments with small groups in rich, Western, industrialized countries recalling arbitrary data—harmonize surprisingly well with the findings of anthropologists in the field, observing the messiness of oral traditions within large, complex, and diverse cultural groups.⁷⁸

One of Goody’s most vociferous and influential critics was Jan Vansina, an Oxford-trained historian-turned-anthropologist who dedicated much of his career to the

⁷⁶ Weldon and Bellinger, “Collective Memory,” 1162; Barbara H. Basden, David R. Basden, Susan Bryner, and Robert L. Thomas, “A Comparison of Group and Individual Remembering: Does Collaboration Disrupt Retrieval Strategies?” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 3, no. 5 (1997): 1176–89.

⁷⁷ Harris, Sutton, and Barnier, “Forgetting in Context,” 256. See also Weldon and Bellinger, “Collective Memory,” 1160–1.

⁷⁸ Barbara Rogoff and Jayanthi Mistry, “Memory Development in Cultural Context,” in *Cognitive Learning and Memory in Children*, ed. Michael Pressley and Charles J. Brainerd (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985), 117–42. Rogoff and Mistry emphasize the extent to which the nature of memory itself is culturally determined.

proposition that African oral traditions contain valid historical data that could be extracted if the various distorting forces that operated on them in the course of oral transmission could be accounted for.⁷⁹ Working from a far wider range of observations—both his own and those of others in the field—Vansina constructed a less elegant but more precisely calibrated explanation for the tendency towards congruence between social and narrative structures. Vansina’s model accounted for much greater diversity among oral societies and much greater complexity in the conditions of transmission.

While Goody tended to lump all oral communications into a single category, Vansina spent decades cataloguing the diversity of oral interactions and their implications for historical reconstruction. He distinguishes among a variety of modes through which oral traditions might be generated, including eyewitness accounts, hearsay, visionary experiences, reminiscences, commentaries, and verbal art forms, such as poetry and tales (in addition to the deliberate collection of oral accounts by outsiders), and considers the various strengths, limitations, and distortions likely to result from each mode. He also examines diverse processes through which such a tradition might evolve. For example, deliberately memorized speech, such as a poem, ritual incantation, or clan slogan, might (in some circumstances) prove relatively resistant to change, while historical gossip and personal traditions evolve rapidly based on immediate social dynamics. When an account becomes institutionalized, becoming the shared property of the group or culture at large, it tends to undergo a series of adaptations that makes it meaningful within the larger

⁷⁹ For Vansina’s critique of Goody’s theory, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 121–2 and 218–19, n. 53.

complex of traditions familiar to the group. “This process continues,” he observes, “to the point that most accounts are lost or fused into each other beyond recognition.”⁸⁰

Vansina’s attempt to account for every variable that might distort historical data through the various dynamic and interdependent processes that constitute oral tradition may have had the opposite of its intended effect. While he hoped that this work would enable researchers to approach pre-literate oral history with scientific rigor, he may instead have demonstrated the impossibility of such a dream. The variables are simply too numerous, and, at least in the case of early medieval England, too meagerly recorded and poorly understood to be reliably corrected through systematic adjustments. Unlike Vansina, we are not able to interrogate our informants, or to live among them and observe the social pressures that shape their accounts. We simply cannot reliably reconstruct factual history from oral accounts. And even within modern African societies, the efficacy of Vansina’s techniques for establishing a factual basis for pre-literate histories remains clouded in doubt.⁸¹

But this catalogue of transformative processes is extremely useful for the more modest task of modeling the rhetorical environments in which many early medieval documents were designed to operate. This operation is much simpler, in part because it deals only with a small number of actors across a single, short timespan—stretching perhaps from the commissioning of a document to its effective distribution—rather than the indeterminate number of actors and the long and variable timespans involved in oral transmission. It is also more practical because we can often access at least some evidence

⁸⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 21.

⁸¹ For a thorough and sympathetic account of the troubled reception found by Vansina’s work, and the flexibility with which he and his students adapted to criticisms from many quarters, see David Newbury, “Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985,” *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 213–54.

of the rhetorical environment to which medieval texts respond, either within the documents themselves, or in other documents produced under similar circumstances or recording relevant events. In addition, in eighth-century Northumbria (as has often been the case elsewhere), the introduction of documentary culture occurred concomitantly with a broad package of cultural transformations that left durable archaeological and material evidence behind. From the age of King Edwin (d. 633), we have only stories, bones, and a few suggestive postholes. From the age of King Aldfrith (685–704), we have detailed historical and biographical records, surviving letters, architecture, coins, landscape transformations, stonemasonry, sculpture, and quotidian objects of material culture, from hairpins to penknives. And we have access to similar troves of evidence from neighboring societies.

Before we can push back the boundaries of our rhetorical understanding into the period of postholes (if that should ever prove feasible), we will need to understand the moment from which our speculations begin. And to understand that moment, we must recognize that it operated according to the conventions of oral societies. And those are exactly the conventions that Vansina so assiduously catalogued.

1.6. Guiding Principles

The failure of previous theories to convincingly model oral discourse in early medieval England has led some scholars to distrust efforts to understand how culture functioned outside the very narrow band of documented interactions. Even more problematically, it has led some to assume that even the conditions under which those documents were produced must also be unknowable. There is so much we cannot know,

but the art of Medieval Studies has always been the careful and gradual construction of maximal understanding from minimal data. If the weaknesses of those previous theories (as described above) can be recognized and accounted for, it should be possible to develop more precise and flexible models that can provide useful information at least about the rhetorical world in which the surviving documents were intended to function, and hence to eliminate some of the distortions through which modern literate scholars tend to see them.

To this end, I have established the following four guiding principles for approaching Bede's oral contexts.

- 1) Acknowledge the diversity and contingency of oral cultures around the world and throughout history, and hence, avoid grand universal theories of "orality."

The central logical failure of both the Parry/Lord approach and the Ong/Goody approach was to extrapolate ironclad laws from extremely narrow observational sets, assuming, for instance, that literacy in twentieth-century Europe and the United States was representative of *all* literacy, or that oral cultures in Yugoslavia or a small number of African cultures (also in the twentieth century) could represent all oral cultures. The scholars whose work on oral culture has stood the test of time most effectively have often been those, such as Ruth Finnegan and M. T. Clanchy, who focused instead on what could be said about the specific cultures they were observing, based not on theory but on what they could observe in practice.⁸²

⁸² See, for example, Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, and Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*. Clanchy is indeed given to the occasional grandiose claim about the habits of the unlettered, but he did not base his research or conclusions on those assumptions. Instead, the value of his work has been and remains its great specificity.

- 2) Focus on only those features of oral culture for which there is unambiguous evidence from early medieval England.

Although my discussion must necessarily refer to certain features that often appear in oral societies globally, such as the use of transmission histories, reliance on communal authority, and the tendency towards homeostasis between historical narrative and political structure, I have not assumed that such traits were present or important in early medieval England unless there is clear and extensive documentary evidence of their presence and importance.

- 3) Recognize that literate culture is a variant of oral culture, distorted by the disruptive technology of writing, rather than adopt the more familiar perspective, in which oral cultures are seen as deviant from the literate norm, and defined by their lack of literacy.

Most features of oral societies are, simply, features of human societies that tend to be obscured by the effects of literacy and document culture. For example, the tendency of oral societies to locate rhetorical and epistemological authority in communal agreement—in what “everybody knows”—may appear primitive from the perspective of a scientific, print-based culture. But, although the printed word vastly expands the relevant community in terms of time, space, and number, we too depend on the consensus of recognized authorities (and consensus about which authorities to recognize) for almost all practical knowledge. Why did the dinosaurs become extinct? At what temperature is chicken sufficiently cooked to prevent foodborne illness? What were the causes of the October Revolution? In these and essentially all other areas of shared knowledge, we rely

on a complex process whereby recognized authorities collect and analyze small sets of data, formulate general statements, and debate their conclusions with other experts. What they agree on is “known,” what they cannot agree on remains “unknown.” Further recognized authorities, like journalists or textbook authors, then translate that consensus to the larger society. The expanded community, specialization, and formalized logic are all valuable advantages, derived at least in part from literacy, that improve our model of the world by increasing both its internal consistency and the degree to which it corresponds with observable physical events. But none of this gives any of us direct access to “truth.” Our dependence on what “everybody knows” has not fundamentally changed.

4) Seek out and recognize signs of agency among oral people.

The colonialist “Great Divide” model of literacy, which uncritically perceives non-literate people as the passive victims or beneficiaries of a technology received from a higher civilization, has, thankfully, been abandoned in recent decades, but it has not yet been properly replaced. An important step in this direction is the recognition that oral people make deliberate and thoughtful choices about how and when to include aspects of literate culture in their own lives.

The inhabitants of England in the seventh century were more epistemologically sophisticated than many critics have imagined. It is exceedingly difficult for people who have lived their entire lives in societies dominated by documentation to recognize the enormous extent to which this experience affects our assumptions about rhetoric and logic, and hence, we tend to take for granted the authority of the written word and to

assume that the advantages of such a system are self-evident. Bede, raised in a monastery that prized its library nearly as highly as its relics of St. Peter, sometimes took this for granted as well. But the vast majority of the people of Northumbria almost certainly did not. Ong emphasized that, when writing and documents are introduced to an oral culture, they are often met with resistance, ranging from suspicion to outright hostility,⁸³ and there is plenty of evidence that such responses were widespread in England during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Numerous examples of this suspicion can be found in Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*. King Ecgfrith of Northumbria accuses Wilfrid of forgery, and his counselors accuse Wilfrid of bribing the pope to write on his behalf. Wilfrid, in turn, goes to Rome and accuses his enemies of producing false documentation, and the cardinals in Rome accuse those enemies of falsifying documents. Wilfrid's enemies attempt to trick him by forcing him to sign a document promising to abide by their decisions before he knows what they will be. Even the permanence of the written word, generally seen as its great advantage today, could be manipulated in mendacious ways, as when Aldfrith chose to obey Archbishop Theodore's middle edicts, and ignore later ones that countermanded them.⁸⁴

Such manipulations are not possible in a more oral society in which historical material that has ceased to be relevant to the present social and political order tends to be quickly forgotten. Bede, too, provides numerous examples of both the widespread suspicion toward the technology of writing and his own ambivalence toward the supposed authority of documents. When, in the *Ecclesiastical History*, the nobleman

⁸³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 95. See also Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*, 3, 150. Although Clanchy explores the growth of literacy in a much later period, he emphasizes that the process depended even then upon a long, slow cultural shift in which people gradually moved from suspicion of written documents to acceptance of their authority.

⁸⁴ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 34, 51, 53, and 45.

Imma is captured and bound in chains, and those chains miraculously fall off again and again, his captor asks whether Imma possesses written charms, of the kind told about in fables.⁸⁵ Bede even urged Bishop Ecgberht to employ oral authority to overrule the authority of written charters, asking, “quomodo enim in peccatum reputari potest si ... mendax stilus scribarum iniquorum discreta prudentium sacerdotum sententia deleatur ac redigatur in nichilum?” (For how can it be considered a sin if ... the mendacious pen of wicked scribes should be blotted out and reduced to naught by the discerning judgment of skilled priests?)⁸⁶

And yet, for all their reservations, people in Northumbria, and early medieval England generally, quickly began to put the written word to a great variety of uses, from ritual to rhetorical to bureaucratic, copying scriptures, recording laws and land transactions, cultivating disparate networks of friends and colleagues, accessing the legacies of classical and Christian learning, and situating themselves within the great sweep of time by constructing calendars, chronologies, and histories. The following chapter will examine some of the strategies they employed to navigate this shifting landscape.

⁸⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.22.

⁸⁶ Bede, *Letter to Bishop Ecgbert*, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, ch. 11, 144.

Chapter 2

Competing Rhetorics: Literacy and *Realpolitik* at the Synod of Nidd

2.1. The Synod

In the year 706, on the east bank of a river in the north of England, a recently-orphaned nine-year-old boy, accompanied by his aunt, three bishops, an influential nobleman, and all the abbots and leading men of the kingdom, waited.

Two old men, presumably dressed in elaborate clothes and accompanied by trains of followers, arrived. They bore precious documents, marked with careful lettering in an alien tongue, adorned with the name and seal of God's representative on earth.

There would have been a great deal of formality and ceremony to be observed, followed by discussions about a land transaction and an ecclesiastical appointment in exchange for military services rendered. Perhaps the boy could be forgiven if he began to nod off, but his presence was essential.

His name was Osred, and he had quite recently been crowned king of Northumbria. The council he attended, known as the Synod of Nidd, has received only modest scholarly attention, and is remembered chiefly because it enabled the contentious bishop Wilfrid to return from exile and live out his last years in peace.¹

But Wilfrid's biographer, Stephen, provided a narrative account of the synod that reveals a great deal about the dynamics of political and ecclesiastical power at work in

¹ Discussions of Wilfrid's life, such as those by D. H. Farmer, "Saint Wilfrid," in Kirby, *Wilfrid at Hexham*, 53–5, and Alan Thacker, "Wilfrid (c. 634–709/10), Bishop of Hexham," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., 2016), have tended to follow Stephen's account of the synod closely, without providing extensive analysis. An early and insightful exception to this pattern is G. F. Browne, *Theodore and Wilfrith: Lectures Delivered in St. Paul's in December 1896* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1897), 215–24. Neither of the two edited volumes on Wilfrid dedicates a chapter to the synod, though several authors mention it incidentally in each. These are Kirby, *Wilfrid at Hexham*, and Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*. Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c. 650–c. 850*, SEHB (London: Leicester University Press, 1995) often refers to Stephen's account for the information it can provide about the conduct of synods generally but does not explore the specific political context.

eighth-century England.² It opens a rare window onto the mechanics of succession and the nature and extent of outside interference in Anglo-Saxon politics. It also records a superb piece of political theater that highlights a larger struggle, played out throughout Anglo-Saxon England, over the proper sources of authority in a society whose oral traditions were increasingly being challenged by the still-novel text-based culture of continental Christianity.

Non-literate cultures have often been understood as the passive victims (or beneficiaries) of the changes wrought by the introduction of the technology of writing, but Stephen's account reveals the agency and sophistication with which the political classes navigated the transition to literacy in eighth-century Northumbria.

I will argue that the purpose of the synod was not primarily to decide Wilfrid's fate but to project stability and unity at the top of a society that, emerging from a violent succession crisis that had reignited old internecine hatreds and left the kingdom vulnerable to extensive and apparently decisive foreign interference, found itself ostensibly ruled by a child. Beneath the surface display of reconciliation, then, the truly urgent question was: Who was in charge?

Ælflæd, young Osred's aunt, abbess of Whitby monastery, and the most prominent surviving member of the long-established royal house of Northumbria, successfully projected the continued independence and dominance of her family by framing the struggle as a contest between competing rhetorical systems: the relatively new, foreign rhetoric in which authority derived from written documents against the

² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 128–32; cf. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 528.

traditional, local rhetorical system in which authority derived from communal knowledge and established social relationships.³

2.2. Communal Consensus in Oral and Literate Societies

In early medieval England (as in most times and places), the traditional means of establishing rhetorical authority—that is to say, of establishing what was true or valid, which statements or logical procedures could be relied upon to build a convincing argument—was communal authorization. In its simplest form, this is what “everybody knows.”

In practice, of course, communal consensus is not so democratic. Some people’s memories, assessments, and opinions carry more weight than others. In eighth-century Northumbria, disparities in rhetorical authority were as extreme as other differences in political, social, and economic power. Bede, for example, regularly vouches for the veracity of a miracle account by emphasizing the high social or ecclesiastical rank of his sources.⁴ But consensus, at least among those with power, was still essential, and provided the foundation for almost all public arguments.

Communal authorization depends upon and actively projects an illusion of unanimity. “Common knowledge” and “common sense” are presumed to be universally accepted, even if, in practice, it may be impossible to determine the boundaries of either

³ While the distinction between oral and literate modes of discourse at the synod has been recognized, most explicitly by Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1992), 179–87, it has not been analyzed in depth. Both Hollis and Browne draw attention to Ælflæd’s role in guiding the outcome and the optics of the synod, which is understated in Stephen and erased in Bede.

⁴ It is noteworthy, however, that a countervailing strategy of invoking the poverty and simplicity of a source as badges of honesty and incorruptibility could also be found in his rhetorical toolkit when the occasion demanded it. See, for example, Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, in *Two Lives of Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (1940; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 3, 164.

with any consistency or precision.⁵ For this reason, rhetorical authority remains a site of continuous contention.

Some months prior to the Synod of Nidd, when messengers from Wilfrid had come to King Aldfrith (d. 704/5) to ask whether he might consider revoking Wilfrid's exile and restoring his lands and his episcopal see, the king had justified his refusal with an appeal to communal consensus:

“quod ante praedecessores mei reges et archiepiscopus cum consiliariis suis censuerunt, et quod postea nos cum archiepiscopo, ab apostolica sede emisso, cum omnibus paene Britanniae nostrae gentis praesulibus iudicavimus, hoc, inquam, quamdiu vixero, propter apostolicae sedis, ut dicitis scripta numquam volo mutare.”⁶

“That which the kings—my predecessors—and the archbishop, with their counselors, resolved before, and which we, with the archbishop sent from the Apostolic See, with almost all the bishops of our people of Britain, decided afterwards, this, I say, I will never change as long as I live on account of documents from—as you say—the Apostolic See.”

⁵ The classic anthropological appraisal of the workings of common sense is Clifford Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” *The Antioch Review* 50, nos. 1/2 (1992): 221–41 (originally published in 1975). Geertz observes that common sense “is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests: the conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity” (224). See Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 55–7, for an eloquent consideration of the implications of Geertz's analysis for historians.

⁶ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 58, 126.

The facts Aldfrith presents here are, so far as can be judged today, accurate, but the story he weaves from those facts is almost laughably misleading. Aldfrith suggests that there has been a single, unanimous and unchanging policy toward Wilfrid, shared by the whole Church and the entire political class across several generations, such that he, as merely one member of that community, whatever his rank, could not alter it at whim. This harmonious order is threatened by the intrusion of the documents Wilfrid wishes to introduce, and Aldfrith excludes them from consideration by pointing out that only Wilfrid, exiled and excommunicated, vouches for their veracity.

Verbal constructions indicating perfect communal consensus (“with all his counselors,” “and all the leading men of the kingdom,” “together with all the bishops and abbots”) are so common in the sources of the period, and their claims of unanimous agreement are so sweeping that they are easily overlooked as a kind of medieval boilerplate. But they clearly seemed indispensable to those who invoked them, and to the authors who recorded them, and they may indicate genuine public commitments even as they elide any private misgivings.

Much of what looks like public debate in Bede’s and Stephen’s accounts might be understood as exercises in consensus building, where the outcome is rarely in doubt, but the participants must find ways to publicly support it or (as in the case of the adherents to the “Irish” calculation of Easter following the Synod of Whitby, or of Wilfrid on several occasions) be expelled from the community. Participants, then, were expected to not only submit to the decision, but accept a degree of responsibility for it. In return, their own positions as indispensable arbiters were reinforced.

In oral societies, where it is impossible to look up any facts, consensus is the most important means of establishing rhetorical authority.⁷ The introduction of documents into such societies disrupts this system in significant ways.

Perhaps the most straightforward way documents and literacy altered Northumbrian society was by introducing new sources of power. Because literacy was rare and essential, those who controlled access to it emerged as a new and politically significant class. This contributed to a shift in the dynamics of wealth and power ushered in by the arrival of Christianity. Control of literacy, texts, and education, for example, were one factor in the rapid rise of monasteries to political prominence.

An example of the destabilization engendered by literacy can be found in Stephen's account of the Synod of Austerfield (702). Many years before, Wilfrid had operated an educational program in which the sons of noblemen could be educated so that, when they reached adulthood, they might choose to enter either the Church or the king's service.⁸ One of Wilfrid's former students, raised by him from infancy, had become a minister in Aldfrith's court, but he proved more loyal to his teacher than his king. Learning of the plan to dispossess Wilfrid, he snuck out of the king's tent, disappeared into the crowd, found Wilfrid, and told him what he knew. Wilfrid then refused to cooperate, and the synod ended in chaos and recrimination.⁹ Literate men were valuable enough that kings might need them around, but the same education that made them useful could, it seems, also make them dangerously unreliable.

⁷ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.

⁸ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 21, 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 47, 94–6.

These redistributions of power were immediately visible and no doubt frustrating to some, but, though they created new winners and losers, they did not seriously threaten the social order itself. That order *was* threatened, however, by the influence texts and documents could exert on the communal experience of time and space.

Spoken words are events, not objects. They exist only in the fleeting moment of pronouncement and (except in literate or technologically advanced societies) are preserved only in memory and tradition.¹⁰ For this reason, consensus within a purely oral community can evolve with all the alacrity of the human memory under social pressures—which is to say, very nimbly. This ability to adapt to changing circumstances, while maintaining the impression of stability and continuity stretching back literally to time immemorial, is a signature strength of oral cultures worldwide. Different societies develop different methods by which to adjust the speed of this process, and hence adjust the balance between agility and stability. Written texts, however, are vastly more durable and inflexible than tradition, consensus, or memory, and thus they have the potential to dramatically disrupt that balance, hindering agility and undermining stability. They harshly juxtapose the past with the present, or rather, juxtapose the recorded past with the projected, imagined past.

Goody and Watt observed that “insofar as writing provides an alternative source for the transmission of cultural orientations it favors awareness of inconsistency,”¹¹ and that awareness can call the entire basis of a society into question:

¹⁰ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32–3 and 71.

¹¹ Goody and Watt, “Consequences of Literacy,” 326.

And so, not long after the widespread diffusion of writing throughout the Greek world, and the recording of the previously oral cultural tradition, there arose an attitude to the past very different from that common in non-literate societies. Instead of the unobtrusive adaptation of past tradition to present needs, a great many individuals found in the written records, where much of their traditional cultural repertoire had been given permanent form, so many inconsistencies in the beliefs and categories of understanding handed down to them that they were impelled to a much more conscious, comparative and critical, attitude to the accepted world picture, and notably to the notions of God, the universe and the past.¹²

Goody and Watt's contention that this intrusion of durable documents into a flexible oral society—specifically, the introduction of widespread alphabetic literacy in Ancient Greece—resulted in the rationalism of Western Civilization is oversimplified and overstated, but they have highlighted the very real disruptive potential of durable texts. In eighth-century Northumbria, as we will see, the stubborn refusal of documents to adapt to changing conditions could provide powerful rhetorical leverage, but it did so by undermining the authority of tradition and consensus.

The other way literacy threatened a social order founded on communal consensus was by reconstituting the community itself. An oral community is inherently and rigorously local. Any authority who cannot be personally heard by the community members must be mediated through the mouth and memory of someone who can. The

¹² Ibid., 325.

same is true for authorities distant in time. The only way to know what a respected historical figure had to say on any subject is to know who in the present can be trusted to recall it.

Writing—in theory, at least—enables the words of authoritative people to travel through time and space and reach the community without mediation. As a practical matter, this is rarely if ever true. And it was especially far from the reality of the written word in early medieval England, where the words of those authorities would have been unintelligible to most people without a lector and interpreter. Nonetheless, the notion existed: People in Bede’s England most certainly understood themselves to be members of the greater community of Christendom and acknowledged distant and ancient authorities within it.

It is important to remember that, although literacy and the use of documents can disrupt and distort patterns of reliance on communal consensus, they do not replace them, even in the most analytical, text-dependent societies. Modern science, for example, for all its careful methodologies, ultimately depends on the consensus of the scientific community to determine which theories have been effectively supported and which have been discredited. In early medieval England, as in medieval Christendom at large, documents could dramatically expand and partially reshape the perceived community, but they could not eliminate the need for consensus.

A striking portrait of that community, bound together by the written word, emerges from the biography of Pope Agatho (r. 678–81) in the *Liber Pontificalis*,¹³ a text

¹³ Louis Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Thorin, 1886), 350–8. For English translation, see Raymond Davis, trans., *The Book of the Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715*, TTH 5 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 72–6.

known to Bede.¹⁴ Although, as Thomas F. X. Noble has observed, the *Liber Pontificalis* is, on the whole, a “parochial” work, too occupied with the local administrative doings of the church *in* Rome—upkeep of churches, purchase of altar cloths, ordinations, succession struggles—to give much notice to the grand historical narratives of the church *of* Rome,¹⁵ that narrow focus shifts and broadens as the events of the early 680s unfold, providing a (carefully constructed) glimpse of Christendom as a whole.

Though the Pope’s decisions involving Wilfrid would play a significant role in Northumbrian ecclesiastical politics for decades, these fights over primacy and property in a barbarian backwater must have seemed questions of slight importance in Rome. The great legacy of Agatho’s short pontificate was his successful navigation of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, also known as the Third Council of Constantinople (680–1), about a quarter century before Aldfrith invoked the oral consensus of the Northumbrian elites to block Wilfrid’s second return from exile, and concurrent with Wilfrid’s first appeal to papal authority.

Having withstood the Siege of Constantinople (674–8), Emperor Constantine IV (r. 668–85) found himself in a Christian world vastly reduced and utterly reshaped by the Muslim conquests of recent decades. The patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem had all been conquered in short order, leaving only Constantinople and Rome in Christian hands. Constantine IV turned his attention to healing the relationship between the two cities. Long-burning disputes over the relationship between the divine and human aspects of Christ had erupted into brutal violence perpetrated by agents of

¹⁴ See Paul Meyvaert, “Bede and Gregory the Great,” in Lapidge, *Bede and His World*, vol. 1, 110–13, and Thomas F. X. Noble, “A New Look at the *Liber Pontificalis*,” *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 23 (1985): 349.

¹⁵ Noble, “A New Look,” 351.

Constantine's father, Constans II (r. 641–68), against Pope Martin in 653–5, inciting Rome to open defiance and denial of imperial authority.¹⁶ Now that the great centers of Monotheletism (the belief that Christ had a single, divine, will) had largely been conquered by Muslim forces, and the balance of power within the remnants of Christendom had shifted inexorably toward Rome (which had emerged to replace Jerusalem as the center of resistance to Monotheletism, asserting that Christ had both a divine and a human will), Constantine was prepared to concede the theological point in exchange for reestablishing his *imperium* (at least symbolically) over Italy. Constantine reached out to Agatho's predecessor, Pope Donus, with an invitation to attend an ecumenical council to settle the matter once and for all. Donus died before the invitation arrived, but Agatho enthusiastically accepted. The council not only resolved the theological controversy (in Rome's favor), but also showcased the new order of the Christian world.

The *Liber Pontificalis* biography depicts a Christendom in two parts—Roman and Constantinopolitan—reuniting under the patronage of one emperor, with the eastern half (and the emperor himself) returning, newly chastened and purified of heresy and dissension, to the enduring orthodoxy of the western half.¹⁷ At the council, the emperor sits while all the powers of the Eastern church and state file in and take their places among the Roman envoys. The Monotheletes are shown to be liars and frauds. They are violently expelled from the church and sent into exile. The names and images of Monothelete patriarchs are removed from artworks across the city. And the Italian bishop

¹⁶ Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Alan Thacker, "Wilfrid in Rome," in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 217–19.

¹⁷ Notably, the council's anathematization of the Roman Pope Honorius I (r. 625–30) for his subscription to the Monothelete doctrine is not mentioned.

John of Porto says mass in the Hagia Sophia in Latin, with the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople joining in the responses.

The great debate is not settled, however, by the soundness of the Roman theological position, of which the *Liber Pontificalis* author gives only the barest summary. Rather, the stress is entirely on the unity and continuity of the community of the faithful. Rome is represented by a team of envoys, including, notably, the archbishop of Ravenna, recently brought to heel. The more significant representation, however, comes in the form of a letter from Pope Agatho, bearing the signatures of 125 bishops, from throughout the Western Christian world, who had convened at a preliminary synod in Rome.¹⁸ At least some of these bishops had come representing still further synods, convened at Agatho's behest. In particular, Agatho had delayed his own embassy while he awaited word from Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury (the acknowledged expert on the Monothelete question within the Western church), who had convened the leadership of the English church at Hatfield to discuss the controversy, and Agatho's own emissary to England, the Roman arch-cantor John, who had traveled to England with Benedict Biscop to investigate English orthodoxy. Although John died before he was able to bring his report and Theodore's letter to Rome,¹⁹ Bishop Wilfrid, who had come to Rome to contest the deprivation of his see, stood in, and

¹⁸ The text of the letter, among other documents related to the council, can be found at *PL* 87.1161–1258.

¹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.18, 391.

pro omni aquilonali parte Brittanniae et Hiberniae insulisque quae ab Anglorum et Brittonum necnon Scottorum et Pictorum gentibus colebantur, veram et catholicam confessus fidem et cum subscriptione sua corroboravit.²⁰

confessed and corroborated with his signature the true and Catholic faith, on behalf of all the northern part of Britain, and Ireland, and the islands which are inhabited by the races of the Angles and the Britons, and also of the Irish and the Picts.

The 125 signatures on Agatho's letter to the Sixth Ecumenical Council constituted a declaration of absolute unanimity within the Western church, on a scale made possible by the ability of documents to carry words across vast distances of space. The content of the letter, however, projected the unanimity of the universal church across *time*. The letter contains almost no strictly logical or theological argument, aside from a few scattered sentences that treat the matter simplistically, punctuated by expressions of horror and, notably, accusations of novelty and inconsistency against the Monotheletes. Instead, it contains a declaration of faith, supported by extensive citations of eastern and western patristic writers. Agatho does not argue about the natures, wills, and operations of Christ

²⁰ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 52, 112–14. Note that, in the surviving version of the complete letter, Wilfrid's subscription is terser and more formulaic, without the expansive geographic pretensions of the version Stephen cites: "Wilfridus humilis episcopus sanctae ecclesiae Eboracenaе insulae Britanniae, legatus venerabilis synodi per Britanniam constitutae, in hanc suggestionem, quam pro apostolica nostra fide unanimiter construximus, similiter subscripsi" (I, Wilfrid, humble bishop of the holy church of York of the Island of Britain, legate of the venerable synod established throughout Britain, likewise subscribed to this report, which we unanimously established on account of our apostolic faith). *PL* 87.1236D–1237A. Wilfrid, however, who had been expelled from his see in 678 and left for Rome shortly thereafter, had not been present at, and was certainly not a legate of, the Synod of Hatfield, which took place in September of 679.

so much as about the enduring consistency of Christian doctrine. Christ had two wills because the church had always taught that he had two wills.

Theodore's more local synod was equally clear in its focus on the unity of the church across space and time, emphasizing the unanimous agreement of all the bishops with the doctrine handed down from Christ to the Apostles to the church, with the five previous ecumenical councils, and with the Lateran Council of 649, which had provoked the imperial attack on Pope Martin.²¹

Agatho, then, despite the long establishment of the church of Rome as a literate, textual community, relied on communal authorization as firmly as Aldfrith would. The outcome was preordained. Neither Agatho nor Theodore convened their synods to offer everyone a chance to hash out the controversy for themselves and decide which side seemed most reasonable. The manifest purpose was for everyone to publicly align themselves with the orthodox anti-Monothelite side. Those (in the eastern church) who could not do so were expelled from the community, and the hierarchical relationships of everyone involved were reinforced. The primary difference between Agatho's rhetorical stance and Aldfrith's was that Agatho claimed the same sort of perfect unanimity within the much larger community made possible by the written word.

Aldfrith's resistance to the introduction of documents on Wilfrid's behalf does not betray a theoretical opposition to documentary evidence, but an attempt to dictate the nature of the consensus by dictating the boundaries of the community.

²¹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.17, 384–6. Bede's transcription of the letter in fact skips over the discussion of the specifics of the controversy, recording only the assertions of unanimity and orthodoxy. Michael Lapidge, "The Career of Archbishop Theodore," in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence*, ed. Michael Lapidge, CSASE 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20–4, argues that Theodore himself had played a significant role in composing the *acta* of the Lateran Synod, and may have been a signatory.

Those who had—or sought—power in early eighth-century Northumbria recognized the pitfalls and opportunities that characterized this evolving rhetorical landscape, and navigated it with impressive skill. They were willing to employ the sense of awe and intimidation that documents could evoke among the illiterate, and to utilize the durability of documents and their ability to expand the rhetorical community when such tactics could advance their own goals, but, in other circumstances, they were equally willing to evoke the widespread distrust of documents, restrict the authoritative community, and rely on the familiar and proven certainties of local, oral consensus. And they adopted these conflicting attitudes irrespective of their personal familiarity with literate culture. Stephen's triumphalist account of Wilfrid's final return from exile, and the synod by which he was readmitted to the communion with the church of which he had long claimed to be the head, offers an unusually rich opportunity to witness this process in action.

2.3. The Events of the Synod

The ostensible purpose of the Synod of Nidd, which had been demanded by Pope John VI, was to reconcile Wilfrid with his many enemies. In practical terms, this meant coming to an agreement that would be acceptable to both Wilfrid and the Northumbrian bishops. Berhtwald, the archbishop of Canterbury, began the council by reading two letters from Pope John aloud in Latin.²² The bishops and the assembly met this performance with silence. After a time, Berhtfrith, the most prominent nobleman after the

²² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 116–20.

king, who spoke on young Osred's behalf, requested that the content of the letters be explained in English, and the archbishop provided a summary.

This time the bishops objected. Wilfrid's demands had been rejected at a previous synod, overseen by Archbishop Berhtwald himself and Osred's father, King Aldfrith. And before that, Wilfrid had been expelled by the authority of the previous king, Ecgrith, and the previous archbishop, Theodore, who had been sent by a previous pope. How could all those divinely appointed authorities be wrong? By what authority could their decisions be undone?

The impasse was broken by Ælfflæd, the abbess of Whitby and aunt to the young king, who told the synod that she had been present at King Aldfrith's deathbed—he was her half-brother—and that he had there relinquished his implacable resistance to Wilfrid and commanded that his son and heir, Osred, should agree to all the pope's demands.²³

Her story was followed by an account from Berhtfrith of how, when he and Osred had been besieged in a narrow cleft of rock, surrounded by enemies, they had sworn a vow to fulfill the pope's demands concerning Wilfrid. “[E]t statim post vota,” recounted Berhtfrith, “mutatis animis inimicorum, concito cursu omnes cum iuramento in amicitiam nostram conversi sunt; apertis ianuis de angustia liberati, fugatis inimicis nostris, regnum accepimus” (and immediately after the vows, our enemies, their minds changed, were all turned by a hasty course into our sworn friends; liberated from the cleft, with the entrance laid open, with our enemies put to flight, we took possession of the kingdom).²⁴

²³ Ælfflæd gives a subtly but significantly different account of his words at Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 59, 126.

²⁴ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 132.

After a bit more private discussion, everyone agreed to a lasting peace; Wilfrid had his two best monasteries, Ripon and Hexham, restored to him; and all the parties kissed, embraced, and took communion together.

Both Ælfflæd's story of a secret deathbed change of heart and Berhtfrith's of the miraculous conversion of their enemies are, to modern ears, implausible in the extreme.²⁵ Yet in their time and place they were, apparently, more convincing than the pope's letter: they convinced the bishops to make peace with Wilfrid. But these bishops were no fools. They were playing their part in a carefully arranged public performance meant to dramatize a new political reality.

2.4. Evaluating Stephen's Account

How seriously should we take Stephen's assertions? Partly because of his unabashed partisanship, Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* has always been regarded with suspicion, especially when compared with the detachment, equanimity, and scholarly transparency about source materials projected by Bede. In recent decades, the long habit of assuming that, where the two differ, Bede's facts are to be preferred, has been increasingly challenged.²⁶ Even so, a number of scenes in Stephen's hagiography make extraordinary demands on our credulity. The account of young Wilfrid's experiences in

²⁵ Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 182, n. 16, draws an apt parallel to the more famous deathbed scene from 1066, in which Edward the Confessor, surrounded by Godwinsons, reportedly designated Harold Godwinson to succeed him as king of England. The sole written record of the scene is contained in the *Life* commissioned by Harold's sister Edith. See Frank Barlow, ed. and trans., *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster, Attributed to a Monk of St Bertin* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 76–80.

²⁶ See, for example, Stancliffe, "Dating Wilfrid's Death," 26: "[i]t may be that the last part of Stephen's *Life* . . . is more accurate than the earlier parts, both because it was nearer to the date of composition, and because Stephen was personally involved in at least some of the events that he describes there. Nonetheless Stephen has emerged as an accurate recorder, with a fine eye for detail." Stancliffe gives a detailed account of how a reflexive preference for Bede's claims, even when Stephen's were demonstrably more plausible, led to centuries of confusion about the date of Wilfrid's death. See also Alan Thacker, "Stephen of Ripon (fl. c. 670–730)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004): "Stephen's work, though deeply partisan, is in many ways easier to interpret than those of his subtler and more devious contemporary. Unlike Bede, Stephen is forthright in his commitment to his subject."

Lyons, for example (ca. 654 and ca. 660–3), makes outlandish claims—that the bishop of Lyons was so charmed by the foreign teenager that he offered to adopt him as his heir, make him ruler of a sizeable domain, and marry him to his own niece, for example—even while it is confused about the most basic facts, like the bishop’s name. In addition, the account seems to have been shaped to imitate biblical models.²⁷

But that episode describes a private conversation that had (or had not) taken place in a distant land some five or six decades earlier, with no direct or lasting impact in Northumbria. It was, therefore, susceptible to all the vicissitudes of memory, oral transmission, and imagination, and, moreover, was beyond the reach of corroboration or contradiction, at least within Northumbria. It was, in other words, fair game for mythologizing.

In describing the Synod of Nidd, however, Stephen gives a plausible, precisely detailed, and almost certainly eyewitness account of a political event that had taken place no more than six or seven years earlier,²⁸ in Northumbria, in front of a great crowd of witnesses,²⁹ including all the important men and women in the kingdom (many of whom were still alive, in power, and deeply invested in the outcome of the synod when Stephen wrote),³⁰ and probably a significant portion of Stephen’s most immediate audience, the religious communities at Ripon and Hexham. And, perhaps most importantly, at the time Stephen was writing, everyone involved was still living under the political settlement he describes. Though he was a literate man with a deep respect for documentary authority,

²⁷ Paul Fouracre, “Wilfrid on the Continent,” in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 187–91.

²⁸ Stancliffe, “Dating Wilfrid’s Death,” 21, dates the composition of Stephen’s *Vita Wilfridi* to between July 712 and March 714.

²⁹ It appears that synods drew large crowds of both religious and lay people. See Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 39–40.

³⁰ Of the major participants mentioned by Stephen, Ælflæd (d. late 715), Osred (d. 716), John (d. 721), and Berhtwald (d. 731) were all still in power when Stephen wrote. Only Bosa (d. 706) and Wilfrid himself (d. 710) are known to have died.

Stephen was no less accountable to the traditional means of verification that still dominated his society. He was free, of course, as any modern reporter is, to select and interpret the events he had witnessed, but not to grossly violate the communal consensus about them. His account had to ring true not only to the general sense of what had happened, but also to the detailed memories of all involved. Few if any claims in Bede's historical works would have had to pass through so hot a furnace of contemporary authentication.

Nonetheless, no one with experience of twenty-first-century policy meetings is likely to recognize a close historical parallel in the Synod of Nidd. No one interrupts anyone else, or drones on about irrelevant tangents or semantic niceties. No one tries to append a pet project or air a personal grievance. No one floats a proposal only to see it shot down. This is not merely a difference in manners. All the messiness of human conversation and negotiation has been carefully pruned away. The terms of the settlement—which must have involved complex land transactions and compensations for those dispossessed in Wilfrid's favor, as well as an elaborate scheme to settle the episcopal succession—are not discussed at all in the portions Stephen records.

In fact, it appears that the terms have been deliberately muddled to give the impression that Wilfrid's victory was more complete than it was. We repeatedly hear sweeping claims about Wilfrid's total restoration, quietly qualified by devastating caveats. John VI made a show of consulting the decrees of his predecessors concerning Wilfrid, and his letter asserted that Agatho's judgment of 679 in Wilfrid's favor remained binding, but carefully avoided mentioning any of the specifics, which would have been impossible to implement in 706, and instead ordered Berhtwald to come up with a new

settlement.³¹ Berhtwald claimed that Wilfrid would be restored to all the portions of the church that he once ruled over, but appointed himself to determine their boundaries. In the event, those boundaries were quite narrow: Wilfrid's exile was rescinded, his two best monasteries were returned to him, and he was allowed to resume episcopal duties in Hexham (but not York) when a see became available: a small fraction of a religious empire that had once rivalled King Ecgfrith in wealth and military might.³² Even the Archangel Michael, appearing to Wilfrid in a vision, reportedly foretold Wilfrid's ultimate success with legalistic precision, not promising that *all* Wilfrid's possessions will be returned, but only that "substantiarum tuarum *carissima* quaeque" (all the *most precious* of your possessions) will be returned.³³ In every case, Wilfrid is allowed a rhetorical triumph, but strictly limited in his practical gains.

With the clutter of actual negotiation removed, what remains is highly legible in symbolic terms: the king's party arrives first, and must wait for Berhtwald and Wilfrid to arrive; the bishops turn from one party to another, and speak with one voice; each party makes a single clear statement of its position; the discussion ends with total reconciliation, made manifest in hugs and kisses and the celebration of communion together. The necessary negotiations of the specific terms are visually indicated in the private, unrecorded conversations the Northumbrian bishops hold with one another, with

³¹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 32, 64; ch. 52, 108; ch. 54, 116. Agatho had commanded that Wilfrid be reinstated over his previous see, "salva definitione superius ordinata" (with the previously established boundary preserved), and the bishops who had been appointed in his place were to be driven out and replaced by men of Wilfrid's choosing. The height of Wilfrid's power had coincided with the climax of Ecgfrith's expansionary adventures in the 680s and early 690s. Northumbria was much smaller in 706, so there was no possibility of approaching the breadth of his original domain. And since Pope John instructed Berhtwald to reconcile the bishops John and Bosa with Wilfrid, he obviously did not intend that they be driven out.

³² See Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 24, 48. For a discussion of the extent of Wilfrid's wealth, see Michael Roper, "Wilfrid's Landholdings in Northumbria," in Kirby, *Wilfrid at Hexham*, 61–9.

³³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 56, 122. Emphasis mine.

Archbishop Berhtwald, and with Ælfflæd.³⁴ This is a tightly controlled, carefully scripted drama, a stark contrast to the chaotic and disastrous Synod of Austerfield a few years prior.³⁵

This symbolic clarity raises an important question: are we reading a tidily dramatized account of a messy negotiation, or a reasonably precise account of a carefully stage-managed public performance? Was all this narrative shaping imposed by Stephen, or by the participants? Both may be true: all the interested parties fought to control the messaging. Yet the message that emerges from the narrative shaping primarily reflects the interests of the Northumbrian elite—that is, Ælfflæd and her allies—rather than those of the Wilfridite faction. Wilfrid, uncharacteristically silent during all the proceedings, may have been central to Stephen’s concerns, but his reinstatement merely provided a convenient occasion for the public performance of the broader political reality.

2.5. The Struggle over Succession

The synod, in Stephen’s telling, takes the form of a debate, with rival factions presenting their cases to the judges—that is, the three Northumbrian bishops—in turn.³⁶ The apparent dramatic question, then, is “What will the bishops decide?”

³⁴ The reduction of the complex discussions of a synod into such streamlined narratives was not a novelty. Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 83 and 88–9, observes that “Papal – and Greek – conciliar proceedings often take the form of a dramatic report, which purports to give the actual words spoken by the parties involved, the submissions of the different parties and the reply in unison of the pope, bishop, and council . . . It is further possible that the custom of including direct speech in synodal proceedings encouraged the English custom of framing the narrative of dispute settlements in the reported speech of the parties involved,” and that “Stephanus’s account, giving each response seriatim and introduced by ‘they said’ or ‘he said’, is reminiscent of the proceedings of early church councils where different parties give their view on the submissions made before the synod.”

³⁵ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 46–7, 92–98.

³⁶ Frustratingly, Stephen tells us that three bishops from Northumbria were present, but not which three. There are four contenders. John of Beverley, bishop of Hexham, who was specifically commanded to attend by the pope, was almost certainly there. Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne, also seems likely to have been present; at least there is no obvious reason to assume otherwise. Bosa, bishop of York, was also summoned by name, but he died a few months after the synod, so some commentators have assumed that he was too sick to attend. Finally, Trumwine, the former bishop of Abercorn, had been driven out when that settlement was overrun by the Picts in 685, fleeing to Whitby, where he

But there was no real debate, because both sides were arguing for the same outcome: Wilfrid's (limited) reinstatement. The agreement that made this outcome both possible and necessary had already been made, during the desperate and chaotic months following Aldfrith's death. The synod merely ratified that agreement publicly.

Stephen does not explain the succession crisis as fully as we might wish, but he provides enough detail to enable us to reconstruct much of the internal history that led up to the synod. Aldfrith died, apparently of illness, in December of either 704 or 705.³⁷ He had a son, but succession from father to son was by no means certain, and the boy, Osred, was far too young to be able to take the kingship for himself.

The throne was claimed by a man named Eadwulf. Little is known about him, though it appears that he was not a close relative of Aldfrith, and he seems, based on Stephen's account, to have had a fierce temper. His reign lasted only a few months, during which time a conspiracy was hatched to replace him with Osred under Berhtfrith's guidance.³⁸

According to the account attributed to Berhtfrith at the synod, he and Osred were besieged and surrounded, presumably by Eadwulf's supporters, near the royal castle at Bamburgh. In these dire straits, they cut a deal. But not, evidently, with Eadwulf.

Eadwulf had made himself another enemy. Wilfrid, having been rebuffed by Aldfrith in his first attempt to enforce John's decree, approached Eadwulf soon after he was crowned. In addition to his support from the archbishop of Canterbury, the Mercian

continued to perform episcopal duties. Since he had no see, he may not have been counted among the Northumbrian bishops, even if he were physically present at the synod. Alan Thacker, "Bosa (d. 706)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.26; Alan Thacker, "Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care in Early Anglo-Saxon England," in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, ed. John Blair and Richard Sharpe, SEHB (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 149.

³⁷ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 59, 128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 59, 129.

royal family, and the pope, Wilfrid had what he apparently thought was a further advantage: he had Eadwulf's son—whether as a hostage or a supporter is unclear. Eadwulf, however, was enraged, promising to slaughter Wilfrid's followers if he did not flee the kingdom in six days.³⁹

Wilfrid then negotiated—perhaps through Ælflæd, and necessarily with her consent—an alliance. The terms of the deal are not recorded, but based on subsequent events, it seems to have looked like this: Wilfrid would support Osred's claim to the throne, and in exchange, his exile would be revoked, some of his lands would be returned, and he could resume his role as bishop when a see became available.⁴⁰ In this context, Berhtfrith's account of deliverance from the siege he endured with Osred seems somewhat less miraculous: he and Osred agreed to the deal, and Wilfrid's supporters switched sides.⁴¹

2.6. Political Theatre

Now that the boy had been crowned, it was time to pay up. One purpose of the synod, then, was to publicly ratify Wilfrid's new role. But there was another purpose, as well. In the wake of a violent succession crisis, and with the kingship in the hands of a child, the synod provided an essential opportunity to project unity, stability, and legitimacy to the assembled political class. The abbess of Whitby navigated this opportunity adroitly.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Since Bosa died within the year, it is possible that his health had already declined sufficiently that everyone expected that his see would soon be vacant.

⁴¹ Though Wilfrid had once retained a significant personal military retinue, it is difficult to imagine that, after more than a decade of exile, he could still call up a decisive force in Northumbria on his own. It is possible Wilfrid was acting as a proxy for Æthelræd of Mercia in this as in so many other affairs (see below).

Ælfflæd had spent her life at the center of royal and ecclesiastical power in Northumbria. She was the daughter of King Oswiu, granddaughter of King Edwin, sister to King Ecgrith, and half-sister to King Aldfrith. Her female relatives were perhaps even more impressive, including Abbess Hild, founder of Whitby monastery. Ælfflæd's grandmother was Queen Æthelburh, the Kentish princess who had brought Christianity to the Northumbrians, in the person of her bishop Paulinus, just as her own mother, Bertha, had brought Christianity to the English in the person of her chaplain, Liudhard, paving the way for St. Augustine's mission, and as, further back in the same line of extraordinary women, Clotilda had played a pivotal role in converting Clovis, bringing Catholicism to the Franks.⁴²

Given to the church (under St. Hild's care) in infancy by her father in return for the divine favor that had allowed him to finally defeat and kill Penda of Mercia at the battle of *Winwæd* in 655, Ælfflæd had long wielded considerable power in her own right. She succeeded Hild in 680, first as co-abbess (alongside her mother, Queen Eanfflæd), and later as abbess of the double monastery at Whitby, a center of education, cultural production, and political power, ruled by the royal family and housing the mortal remains of kings. She held this position for thirty-three years. When Archbishop Theodore had wished to heal the rift he had helped to create between Wilfrid and the Northumbrian political and religious establishment, he wrote to the kings of Mercia and Northumbria, and he also wrote to Ælfflæd.⁴³

⁴² See Jo Ann McNamara, "Living Sermons: Consecrated Women and the Conversion of Gaul," in *Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 2: *Peaceweavers*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lilian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 24–5. Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 220–4, however, makes a case that while marriages were important, women themselves played little active role in royal conversions.

⁴³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 43, 86–8.

Her influence over the bishops of Northumbria was equally extraordinary. Five Whitby alumni became bishops during her lifetime, including John and Bosa, two of the three who form the center of this drama.⁴⁴ In addition, she had another bishop, Trumwine, who had been driven from the see of Abercorn after the defeat of Ecgrith in 685, and had come to live at her monastery, where, Bede tells us, he led “uitam non sibi solummodo sed et multis utilem” (a life useful not to himself alone, but to many).⁴⁵ Alan Thacker has interpreted this to mean that Trumwine was a “tame bishop,” who performed sacramental duties at Ælfflæd’s behest, thus freeing her from any dependence on the bishops of York.⁴⁶

Finally, she had had a special friendship with St. Cuthbert, and the two had discussed matters of highest import and greatest secrecy, including the then-impending deposition of the Wilfridite bishop Tunberht of Hexham, and the elevation of Cuthbert himself as replacement. They discussed the likelihood of King Ecgrith’s death, and prophesied—or planned—the succession of Ælfflæd’s half-brother Aldfrith in his place.⁴⁷

Having spent all her life in a monastery famous for its educational accomplishments, Ælfflæd was plainly no stranger to literacy. Bede refers to her as “doctrix,” while Stephen names her “semper totius provinciae consolatrix optimaque consiliatrix” (always the consoler and best counselor of the whole nation).⁴⁸ Only one letter from Ælfflæd survives, a letter of introduction for an abbess traveling to the Continent, but by its very ordinariness it suggests that Ælfflæd viewed written

⁴⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.23, 408.

⁴⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.26, 428.

⁴⁶ Thacker, “Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care,” 149.

⁴⁷ *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 3.6, 102–4; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, ch. 24, 234–8. For an insightful analysis of the relationship between the two surviving accounts, see Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 185–90, 194–207.

⁴⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.24, 430; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 128.

correspondence as a normal part of her duties.⁴⁹ Thacker has described her Latin as “competent, if florid,” and concluded that “Ælfflæd was clearly a learned woman.”⁵⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bede was more impressed by Ælfflæd’s lifelong virginity than her political accomplishments, and he may have systematically minimized her political role in his accounts.⁵¹ At any rate, he makes no mention of her in his one-sentence summary of the Synod of Nidd.⁵² But Stephanie Hollis’s assertion that Stephen “has presented her as the mere mouth-piece of oral tradition” may underestimate Ælfflæd’s agency and influence over how she was perceived.⁵³ The pattern of events at the synod suggests that it was Ælfflæd, not Stephen, who chose, in this instance, to associate herself with local traditions of oral discourse, in contrast to the dependence on documentary authority that had been so ostentatiously embraced by the foreign powers (Rome, Canterbury, and Mercia) meddling in Northumbrian affairs.

The Northumbrian bishops could not plausibly have prevented Wilfrid’s return in opposition to the combined wills of the king, the aristocracy, the abbess of Whitby, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the pope. But they were able to decide a question that must have weighed more heavily on the minds of many in the assembly than the fate of Wilfrid. Who, among all the great powers whose influence had been so powerfully brought to bear in resolving the crisis, was really in charge? Would the new boy king be the puppet of Mercia, Canterbury, and Rome? Or were those foreign powers merely tools made use of by the traditional local rulers? In the theatrical language of the synod, then,

⁴⁹ *Die Briefen des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. Michael Tangl, in *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, vol. 6, MGH, *Epistolae Selectae* 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1916), no. 8, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁰ Alan Thacker, “Ælfflæd (654–714),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., 2004.

⁵¹ See Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 179, n. 1.

⁵² Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 528.

⁵³ Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 185.

the essential question was not really “What would the bishops decide,” but rather, “Who could command the allegiance of the bishops?”⁵⁴

Ælfflæd succeeded at dramatizing the power of her family against the outsiders by appealing to contrasting rhetorical systems. The synod presented the bishops’ decision as a choice between the familiar, local, oral system for validating evidence and establishing truth (employed by Ælfflæd and her ally Berhtfrith) and a dubious foreign system based on written evidence. Berhtwald, Wilfrid, and Æthelræd of Mercia had cast their lot in with John VI and his letter, basing their argument for Wilfrid’s reinstatement on an appeal to the authority of documents. At the synod, the bishops resisted their demands, drawing attention to the problems inherent in document-based rhetoric, as seen from the perspective of an oral society. The crisis was resolved, however, when Ælfflæd and Berhtfrith also called for Wilfrid’s return, but established their appeal on a rhetorical foundation that would have been more familiar to their audience.

Ælfflæd claimed that the deceased king had personally told her, in a private deathbed conversation, that he had changed his mind (though he had recently sworn never to do so as long as he lived). In support of this claim, she offered only her own sworn word as a respected member of the community and a recognized authority figure.⁵⁵

What must have made her claim attractive, however, was the opportunity it offered the

⁵⁴ In an interesting modern parallel described by journalist James Mann, the Reagan Administration developed an emergency succession plan in case the top U.S. leaders were to be killed in a nuclear attack. A key concern was how to establish the credibility of the new administration. “One option was to have the new ‘President’ order an American submarine up from the depths to the surface of the ocean—since the power to surface a submarine would be a clear sign that he was now in full control of U.S. military forces. This standard—control of the military—is one of the tests the U.S. government uses in deciding whether to deal with a foreign leader after a coup d’état.” In Northumbria in 706, control of the church may have been such a decisive factor. (James Mann, “The Armageddon Plan,” *The Atlantic*, March 2004, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/03/the-armageddon-plan/302902/>.)

⁵⁵ Stephen elsewhere tells us that other witnesses, including another abbess, Æthilberg, were also present at Aldfrith’s deathbed, and corroborated Ælfflæd’s story (*Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 59, 128). These witnesses are not mentioned in the account of the synod, however.

bishops and the assembled nobles to interpret support for the new status quo not as a betrayal of the previous king's dogged independence, but as the natural fulfillment of their longstanding loyalty to him. They were being asked to change their posture towards Wilfrid, but not—if they accepted Ælfflæd's story—towards the royal family. Everything about her account suggests continuity between the familiar and the new.

Similarly, while Archbishop Berhtwald had failed to convincingly establish divine authorization for the new arrangement through his exotic papal documents, the nobleman Berhtfrith sought to do the same thing by casting his account of the reconciliation between Wilfrid and the royal family into a familiar, popular genre: the miracle tale.

At this, the bishops relented. By rejecting one form of evidence and accepting another, the bishops were able to publicly perform their loyalty to the local ruling class and their willingness to resist outside influence, without having to actually disobey the pope or his archbishop. The fact that both stories were transparently implausible only served to amplify their symbolic function. The bishops were *choosing* to believe the local leadership.

2.7. Stephen's Narrative Framing

Stephen adopts this tension between literate and oral methods of establishing authority, carefully and consistently developing it over many chapters, suggesting a dynamic in which local Northumbrian oral traditions (in English) are pitted against foreign, document-based, sources of authority (in Latin). But, as I will argue, such a simplistic binary greatly underestimates the sophistication and agency of both the oral culture and the people involved.

Stephen frames Wilfrid's return as a victory for documentary culture. When, in 704 or 705, Wilfrid appealed to Pope John VI for the restoration of his lands and his see, the pope considered his case in detail, and sent him home bearing several letters.⁵⁶ In Stephen's narrative structure, this begins the triumphant return of the hero, vindicated abroad, marching inexorably to his ultimate vindication and re-acceptance at home.

Wilfrid, we are told, returned to his homeland with these documents, "signata cum bullis et sigillis" (marked with bulls and seals).⁵⁷ Berhtwald, the archbishop of Canterbury, "territus est" (was terrified) by the documents, and, "tremebundus" (trembling), he set aside his old enmities and joined Wilfrid on his march north.⁵⁸ When Wilfrid's letter was read aloud before Æthelræd, the officially retired king of the Mercians, Æthelræd, "prosternens se in terram" (prostrating himself on the ground), obediently swore that he would never oppose it as long as he lived.⁵⁹ Then, at the Synod of Nidd, Berhtwald read out the letter and explained it to the ignorant crowd. Ælfflæd and Berhtfrith confirmed the divine authority of their document with their own accounts, and everything was finally set to rights.

In this reading, the letter plays an almost miraculous role, inspiring awe and obedience in all who behold it. But Stephen is uncommonly generous in recording the historical details of his hero's adventures, even when, as is so often the case, they destabilize the narrative structures in which he tries to frame them. In this case, he has

⁵⁶ The actual number is unclear. Two versions, which Berhtwald says were very similar, were read out at the synod. Stephen reports that Wilfrid's messengers showed Berhtwald a copy, but he implies that he received a letter sent under separate cover. Presumably there were copies or alternate versions for the two kings, as well. Stephen gives us the text of only one, however, addressed to both Æthelræd and Aldfrith, read out to the Roman people by the pope, and presumably retained by the Wilfridite community. Because only one text survives, and the others appear to have been similar, I have generally referred to "the letter" below.

⁵⁷ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 57, 124.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

aligned the simplistic moral binary in which Wilfrid is the persecuted saint, innocent and ultimately triumphant over misguided enemies, with an equally simplistic binary between literate and non-literate understandings, in which the indisputable authority of a papal document shatters the corrupt and unstable networks of personal and political relationships that had previously dictated Anglo-Saxon politics.

But while Wilfrid's shortcomings as a saint may be evident enough to the modern eye, the paternalistic "great divide" perception of literacy—which envisions pre-literate people in a state of purity and ignorance and the introduction of literacy as a culturally cataclysmic paradigm shift—is alive and well, and it continues to cloud some historical thinking today.⁶⁰ It is the familiar perspective of the colonist, and occludes the agency of the supposedly less-civilized oral people. This is not a modern invention. It shaped historical perspectives in Ancient Egypt, China, and Greece, and both Stephen and the men and women whose actions he recorded found it useful in eighth-century England. In contrast to the superstitious awe suggested by Stephen's narrative, the political class in early eighth-century England approached literacy and the social changes it engendered with a high degree of strategic thinking and self-awareness, exploiting the divergence between literate and oral sources of authority to maximize their own power.

There are several reasons to be skeptical about how easily the people of early medieval England could be overawed by the apparent power of the written word, but

⁶⁰ No serious scholars actively support the "Great Divide" hypothesis today, but few have been able entirely to resist the temptation to fall back on its easy generalizations and assumptions. Even Albert Lord, whose anecdotal observation that oral poets in the Balkans who had been exposed to literacy were later unable to perform improvised oral verse did most to solidify the idea, had repudiated it by the 1990s. Walter Ong also explicitly disavowed it, but proceeded nonetheless to construct a highly influential theoretical framework based on its assumptions. See Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 129, and Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1–3, 49–56. Among those scholars who have been most alert to the nuanced and culturally specific adaptation and manipulation of the tools of writing, see especially Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality and Oral Poetry*; and Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*. Perhaps the most forceful critic of the Great Divide theory (and its persistent assumptions) has been Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, and "On Beyond Ong."

perhaps the most prominent is that, a few chapters earlier, Stephen provides a vivid counter-example. In 680, a quarter century before Wilfrid's ostensibly triumphant return, a nearly identical situation (which Stephen presents in carefully parallel language) had provoked a markedly different response. After clashing with King Ecgfrith and others, including Abbess Hild of Whitby and Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, Wilfrid had been driven from his see.⁶¹ He had appealed to the pope (at that time, Pope Agatho) and returned, "vexillum victoriae ferens" (bearing the standard of victory), a letter "cum bullis et sigillis signatis" (marked with bulls and seals), exonerating him and ordering, under pain of excommunication, his full restitution and reinstatement.⁶² The letter was shown to the king and read aloud to the leaders of the church and the kingdom. But on that occasion, the Northumbrian elite had been decidedly unimpressed.

Finding either the language or the content of Agatho's letter "difficilia sibi" (difficult for them) and his commands "suae voluntati contraria" (contrary to their wishes), the audience had "contumaciter ... respuerunt" (obstinately rejected; literally "spat out") and "defamaverunt" (slandered) the document, even claiming that Wilfrid had purchased it with money.⁶³

King Ecgfrith had flown into a rage and, with the support of his counselors and bishops, commanded that Wilfrid be stripped of all his belongings and held in solitary confinement, and that his supporters be dispersed far and wide. Ecgfrith's queen, Iurminburgh, had gone so far as to confiscate the relics Wilfrid had brought back from

⁶¹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 116.

⁶² *Ibid.*, ch. 34, 70.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Rome and wear them as jewelry.⁶⁴ Clearly, terror, reverence, and meek acquiescence were not the only possible responses to an irascible bishop waving a papal brief.

2.8. Public Piety and Personal Politics

And thus, while genuine piety and loyalty to the Apostolic See should never be fully discounted in analyzing eighth-century English politics, neither do they suffice as an explanation for the seemingly submissive deference shown by almost everyone involved in the Synod of Nidd. Public projections of piety often served private political ends, and a close analysis of the individual circumstances of the key players can reveal the practical benefits they may have hoped to obtain by choosing the public stances they took.

2.8.1. Æthelræd

For example, when Æthelræd prostrated himself before John's letter and vowed to obey the letter's dictates and dedicate himself to seeing it fulfilled, loyalty to Wilfrid and obedience to a distant (and, by this time, dead) pope were unlikely to have been his only concerns.⁶⁵ Stephen attributes Æthelræd's support to his piety and his long-standing friendship with Wilfrid. Bede, however, records that, in 676, Æthelræd led an army into Kent that laid waste to the region and "ecclesias et monasteria sine respectu pietatis uel diuini timoris fedaret" (defiled the churches and monasteries without regard for piety or fear of the divine). Amidst the general carnage, he destroyed the episcopal see of Rochester. Although the bishop, Putta, had been absent, he soon found that his church

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ó Carragáin and Thacker, "Wilfrid in Rome," 227: "John VI died on 11 January 705, possibly before Wilfrid and his companions left Rome for Northumbria ... Even if Wilfrid left Rome in late 704, it is likely that on the journey, he was overtaken by the news of John VI's death and the election of John VII."

had been pillaged and all its property carried off.⁶⁶ This would seem to suggest that Æthelræd's piety was subject to political and even financial exigencies. His command to his nephew, sub-king over the Hwicce, to drive out the exiled Wilfrid in 681 "pro adulatione Ecfriithi regis" (to flatter King Ecgfrith) might suggest the same about his friendship.⁶⁷

Indeed, Æthelræd was a canny and determined political operator who had consistently used Wilfrid to advance his own ends. Following the death of Penda in a disastrous military defeat at *Winwæd* in 655, Penda's sons and eventual successors Wulfhere (r. 658–675) and then Æthelræd (r. 675–c. 705) had worked consistently to escape Northumbrian domination and reassert their own supremacy south of the Humber.⁶⁸ In military, ecclesiastical, and political terms, their progress had been incremental but relentless. After the battle, Mercia had been directly, and then indirectly ruled by Northumbria, and a Mercian church was established, led by Northumbrian bishops from Lindisfarne. But after three years, the Mercians rebelled and reestablished their independence under Wulfhere, who soon set about expanding Mercian influence. Damian Tyler observes that Wulfhere acted as godfather to the South Saxon king, intervened in religious turmoil in Essex, appears on a charter relating to Surrey, and sold the diocese of London to Bishop Wine.⁶⁹ After Wulfhere's death, Æthelræd had succeeded in bringing both Wessex and the east midlands more fully and permanently under Mercian sway. He had reasserted military domination by raiding Kent, and, at the battle of Trent, in 679, had finally succeeded in gaining control of Lindsey, the semi-

⁶⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.12, 368.

⁶⁷ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 40, 80.

⁶⁸ Damian J. Tyler, "Bishop Wilfrid and the Mercians," in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 275–7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

autonomous kingdom south of the Humber that had for decades formed a rough and contested marchland between the expanding military powerhouses of Mercia and Northumbria.

By the beginning of the eighth century, Æthelræd had largely succeeded in extricating Mercia from Northumbrian religious domination as well. He had achieved this partly by supporting the power of the archbishops of Canterbury—and hence, the Roman hierarchy—and partly by supporting Wilfrid, who, by performing episcopal duties in Mercia and its subkingdoms at Æthelræd’s direction, had helped Æthelræd establish his personal control of the church without having to rely on men loyal to Lindisfarne or Canterbury.⁷⁰

Wilfrid had proved equally useful in needling the Northumbrian kings. As long as Wilfrid remained powerful and reasonably secure, his proximity injected serious volatility into the political life of Northumbria, where he clearly retained loyal supporters and the ability to drive successive kings into seething fury. Eric John has pointed out that, in the context of ever-present tensions between Northumbria and Mercia, Wilfrid’s monastic holdings in Mercia (and the divided loyalties they suggested) were probably a far more pressing concern to the Northumbrian elite than the division of his see: they were at the heart of the discord at Austerfield, and of Wilfrid’s subsequent plea to John VI.⁷¹ Æthelræd’s use of Wilfrid to upend Northumbrian politics would culminate in 705, with his decision to send Wilfrid into the midst of the chaotic and violent succession struggle following Aldfrith’s death, in which Wilfrid’s (or perhaps Æthelræd’s) power

⁷⁰ Morn Capper, “Prelates and Politics: Wilfrid, Oundle and the ‘Middle Angles,’” in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 263–5.

⁷¹ Eric John, “Social and Political Problems,” 33.

seems to have proved decisive.⁷² It is, therefore, necessary to understand Æthelræd's reaction to the pope's letter in light of his ongoing political ambitions.

At first blush, it might seem, as Stephen implies, that he had none. By the time Wilfrid returned from Rome, Æthelræd had given up his kingship and retired to the monastery of Bardney. But the details of Stephen's account suggest that this retirement was partial at best. Stephen writes:

Nam statim Coenred, quem regem post se constituit, invitavit et adiuravit eum in nomine Domini et in sua caritate oboedire praeceptis apostolicae sedis. Ille autem voluntarie sic facere promisit.⁷³

For he immediately summoned Coenred, whom he had appointed as king after him, and entreated him in the name of the Lord and on account of his love to obey the precepts of the Apostolic See. And he [Coenred] willingly promised to do so.

Coenred was king. But he had been appointed by his uncle Æthelræd, came when summoned, and willingly obeyed Æthelræd's instructions regarding delicate matters of foreign policy. He would also, after a reign of about five years, resign the kingship himself, making way for Æthelræd's son Ceolred to rule.⁷⁴ Æthelræd's purposes in appointing Coenred are unknown, but the abandonment of worldly power does not appear to have been chief among them. After informing Coenred of his wishes, he told Wilfrid to

⁷² Alan Thacker, "Wilfrid: His Cult and His Biographer," in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 9.

⁷³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 57, 124.

⁷⁴ S. E. Kelly, "Coenred (d. after 709)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 528.

petition Aldfrith for permission to re-enter Northumbria, kicking off a tumultuous series of political events in Mercia's great rival kingdom.⁷⁵

When Coenred himself retired, he went to be tonsured in Rome, an exile so distant and complete that he was effectively and permanently neutralized in English politics and could never be perceived as a potential rival to his successors or a threat to his neighbors.⁷⁶ Æthelræd was not so circumspect. The presence of Northumbria's old nemesis at Bardney Abbey during the succession crisis would have been perceived as anything but neutral by the Northumbrian royals. The abbey lay a mere forty miles south of the Humber, much closer to York than to the Mercian heartlands, in the long-contested buffer zone of Lindsey, which Æthelræd had finally wrested from Northumbrian control at the battle of Trent (679), where Ælfwine, brother to Aldfrith and Ælfflæd, had been killed.

He held there (much of) the remains of their uncle Oswald, the saintly warrior king who had overseen the permanent conversion of Northumbria to Christianity and established his Bernician family as rulers of their combined kingdom. Oswald had been killed and dismembered by Æthelræd's father, Penda (who had, in turn, been killed and beheaded by Oswald's brother, Oswiu, the father of Ælfflæd and Aldfrith), and control of Oswald's cult, which had by this time already spread to Ireland and the Continent, was hotly contested.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 58, 124.

⁷⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 528.

⁷⁷ In addition to Bardney's claims, several of Wilfrid's monasteries had connections to Oswald's cult through ritual or miracles (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3), and the cult was essential to the Northumbrian royal family: Oswald's head was buried in the church at Lindisfarne and his arms, including his incorrupt right hand, were held at the nearby royal palace of Bamburgh. See D. J. Craig, "Oswald (603/4–642)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), 3–4. See also Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.1–3, 3.6, 3.9–13.

Bardney was also the site of the remains of Queen Osthryth, Ælfflæd's sister and Aldfrith's half-sister, who had been Æthelræd's wife until she was murdered by Mercian nobles. Given all these connections, Æthelræd's choice to position himself at Bardney may have looked more like a provocation or a threat than a retirement.⁷⁸

Æthelræd had nothing to lose and everything to gain by making a show of obeisance to the pope's letter. Although the first item of Wilfrid's petition to Pope John had been a request that the pope command Æthelræd to secure Wilfrid's Mercian holdings, the pope had not done so. The letter is addressed to Æthelræd and Aldfrith jointly, but the contents deal only with Northumbrian affairs. There was, simply, nothing for Æthelræd to obey. His theatrical submission to the authority of the written word, however, put his Northumbrian rivals in an awkward position by helping to frame the dispute as a question of religious orthodoxy. And of course, it provided cover for his increasing meddling in Northumbrian affairs.

2.8.2. Berhtwald

The terror and trembling of Archbishop Berhtwald should also be interpreted in the context of his political ambitions, rather than accepted as an unmediated projection of his personal feelings about either papal or documentary authority. The bad blood between Wilfrid and Berhtwald ran deep. It has been plausibly argued that, following Theodore's death in 690, Berhtwald's election to the archiepiscopacy was obstructed for two years by Wilfrid's supporters, so that Berhtwald could not be consecrated by English bishops: he

⁷⁸ I have here emphasized the connections to Bardney, but the relationship between the two families was even more complex and bloody than these examples suggest. Æthelræd's brother and predecessor Wulfhere had been killed in battle with Aldfrith's brother and predecessor Ecgfrith. Aldfrith's brother Alhfrith had been married to Æthelræd's sister Cyneburh before his failed and presumably fatal attempt to overthrow his father, Oswiu. And Aldfrith's sister Alhflæd had been married to Æthelræd's brother Peda until, according to Bede, she had him murdered. See D. J. Craig, "Oswiu (611/12–670)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, online ed. Since Aldfrith had lived among the Irish until his accession, however, he may not have been personally close to his Northumbrian half-siblings.

travelled to Gaul for his consecration, and then to Rome to receive the pallium directly from the hands of the pope. He returned with letters from Pope Sergius to the kings and bishops of England commanding them to accept Berhtwald's authority.⁷⁹ During Berhtwald's absence, Wilfrid had taken upon himself the archbishop's duty of consecrating new bishops.⁸⁰ It was Berhtwald who convened and presided over the Synod of Austerfield—in Stephen's eyes, an utterly corrupt and mendacious scheme to dispossess and depose Wilfrid—at which the archbishop demanded that Wilfrid submit to his personal authority.⁸¹ Wilfrid defied Berhtwald, going over his head and taking his case directly to the pope. In response, Berhtwald, again acting on his personal authority rather than that of the synod, excommunicated the entire Wilfridite community. He also sent representatives to oppose Wilfrid before the pope, and Wilfrid's supporters incited a mob against them, declaring that "ideo digni sunt poenas luere, in ima carceris angustia usque ad finem mortis macerati" (they are therefore worthy to suffer punishment, tormented in the deepest confines of prison until death).⁸²

But Stephen's narrow focus on the tribulations of his hero tends to obscure the larger struggles against which they played out. Berhtwald did not put aside this personal

⁷⁹ Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597 to 1066*, SEHB (1984; reprint London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 76–9. See also Capper, "Prelates and Politics," 261. The key evidence in support of Wilfrid's involvement is Stephen's claim (*Vita Wilfridi* ch. 43, 86) that Theodore attempted to appoint Wilfrid as his successor. For Berhtwald's consecration in Lyons, see Alan Thacker, "Gallic or Greek? Archbishops in England from Theodore to Ecgberht," in *Frankland: The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Dame Jinty Nelson*, ed. Paul Fouracre and David Ganz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 56, and Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.8, 474. In contrast to Bede, the *Liber Pontificalis* claims that Sergius himself consecrated Berhtwald. See Davis, *Book of the Pontiffs*, 86.13, 85. The two letters from Pope Sergius survive only in a collection of later forgeries, and in my judgment, their style and structure resemble papal letters of the eleventh century more closely than those of the seventh. In Brooks's assessment, however, "the most rigorous criticism had found little to object to in the Sergius letters" (*Early History*, 77). See Heinrich Boehmer, *Die Fälschungen Erzbischof Lanfranks von Canterbury* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1902), Privileges 5 and 6, and discussion on pp. 89–95.

⁸⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.23, 411; 5.11, 485. See Capper, "Prelates and Politics," 262–3.

⁸¹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 45–8, 90–100. Bede gives no indication that the synod occurred at all, an omission that Goffart has labeled "perhaps the clearest instance of *suppressio veri* in the *H.E.*" Goffart, *Narrators*, 262.

⁸² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 53, 114.

vendetta because he trembled with fear at the words of Pope John VI. For one thing, John was dead, and the news of his demise must surely have reached Canterbury more speedily than the aged and infirm Wilfrid, who suffered what may have been a stroke en route and had to be carried at least part of the way in a litter.⁸³

Yet even if John had been alive, there is simply nothing terrifying about the letter. Berhtwald was no ignorant rube. Bede remarks that, although he could not be compared to his august predecessor Theodore, Berhtwald was “uir et ipse scientia scripturarum inbutus, sed et ecclesiasticis simul ac monasterialibus disciplinis summe instructus” (a man likewise steeped in the knowledge of the Scriptures, but also very highly instructed in ecclesiastical and monastic administration).⁸⁴ And the letter contains nothing that could be read as a threat or even a rebuke to Berhtwald. Though the pope ordered him to convene a synod to settle Wilfrid’s case, the nature of that settlement was left entirely to the archbishop’s discretion.⁸⁵ John’s unusually mild and narrow anathema formulation is not directed at Berhtwald. It does threaten removal from office and excommunication, but only against the Northumbrian bishops John, Bosa, and Wilfrid, and only in the event that they refuse either to accept Berhtwald’s settlement or to travel to Rome to present their case before the pope.⁸⁶

⁸³ See note 65 above. See also Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 56, 120.

⁸⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.8, 474.

⁸⁵ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 116–18.

⁸⁶ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 118–20: “Scire autem debet, quicumque de eis advenire distulerit vel, quod est execrandum, venire contempserit, seipsum deiectioni submittat, et hinc abiciendus nec ibidem ab ullo praesulum sive fidelium recipiendus.” (And whoever of them delays to come, or, which is execrable, scorns to come, ought to know that he is to subject himself to removal [from office], and is henceforth to be cast out from this place, and not to be received there by any of bishops or the faithful.) In closing, he adds, “Quicumque enim cuiuslibet personae audaci temeritate contempserit, non erit a Deo impunitus neque sine dampno coelitus alligatus evadet” (For whosoever, of whatsoever rank, shall with audacious rashness disregard [this], he shall not be unpunished by God, nor, divinely bound over, will he escape without injury). Compare this to the vivid language and emphatic universality of Agatho’s anathema on Wilfrid’s behalf (Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 33, 66): “ut, siquidem episcopus est, qui hanc piam dispositionem temerare temptaverit, sit ab episcopali ordine destitutus et aeterni anathematis reus; similiter, si presbiter aut diaconus fuerit vel inferioris gradus ecclesiae; si vero clericus, monachus vel laicus cuiusvelibet dicionis vel rex, extraneus efficiatur a salvatoris corpore et sanguine Domini nostri Iesu Christi nec terribilem eius adventum dignus

Berhtwald's efforts to establish himself as the legitimate archbishop over all the churches of England were part of an older and larger struggle about the nature of the ecclesiastical hierarchy on an island that, unlike most of Western Christendom, had retained little of the physical, cultural, and political geography of the Roman Empire. Bede's observation that Theodore, who held the see of Canterbury from 669 to 690,⁸⁷ "primus erat in archiepiscopis, cui omnis Anglorum ecclesia manus dare consentiret"⁸⁸ (was the first archbishop to whom the whole church of the English agreed to submit) points to a decisive transformation in the English church, and one that is all too easy to overlook because Bede so emphatically centers the Gregorian mission in his account of the conversion and evolution of the Southumbrian church.

Nicholas Brooks has pointed out that, although Kent enjoyed a brief period of political dominance at the time of Augustine's arrival, its influence waned sharply in the early seventh century, and the influence of Canterbury waned with it.⁸⁹ Canterbury played only a limited role in the conversion of East Anglia, and none at all in that of Wessex, Mercia, Sussex, or, after the failure of Paulinus's mission, of Northumbria. Bishop Deusdedit, Theodore's predecessor, did not even have a representative at the Synod of Whitby, and Canterbury was not positioned to capitalize on the outcome, which ought to have been highly favorable.⁹⁰

appareat conspicere." (So that, if there be any bishop who shall attempt to violate this pious arrangement, let him be stripped of his episcopal rank and let him be the object of an eternal curse; likewise if he should be a priest or a deacon or of lower ecclesiastical rank. Indeed, if he should be a cleric, monk, or layman of whatever rank, or even a king, let him be made a stranger to the body of the savior and the blood of our lord Jesus Christ and let him not be found worthy to witness His dreadful coming.) And Agatho, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, was renowned for his mildness.

⁸⁷ Theodore was consecrated in Rome on 26 March, 668, but he did not arrive in England until the following year. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.1, 330–2.

⁸⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.2, 332.

⁸⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.5, 148. Bede includes Æthelberht, the Kentish king who welcomed Augustine, in his list of kings who held the overlordship of all the kingdoms south of the Humber.

⁹⁰ Brooks, *Early History*, 63–8.

Indeed, not only was Theodore the first archbishop of Canterbury to receive the submission of all the English churches, he seems, as Alan Thacker has argued, to have been the first to call himself “archbishop” at all. Both Bede and Stephen apply the term anachronistically to the previous Canterbury bishops, but no contemporary documents use the title.⁹¹ Archbishoprics were extremely rare in the sixth-century church, held only by the patriarchal sees of Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria, along with a few quasi-independent power centers, such as Ravenna, which were often employed by the Byzantine emperors to counterbalance the power of Rome. The very existence of archbishops was antithetical to Gregory’s efforts to reform and centralize the church, and the title (again, despite Bede’s anachronistic application) was unknown in Gaul.⁹²

As Thacker has explained, Theodore’s claim to authority over the whole church of England did not derive from a heritage of archiepiscopal status at Canterbury, but from a confluence of traditions at a moment of unique political opportunity. Gregory had not modelled the bishoprics of Canterbury and York on the overmighty archbishops of the East, but on the highly circumscribed metropolitans of Gaul. Such superiority as those bishops could claim over their colleagues derived primarily from their positions in old Roman administrative centers. They were elected and ordained by their suffragans, and, although they could adjudicate disagreements, their power in such cases was not

⁹¹ Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 54–5, 57–8: “[I]t is almost certain that, despite repeated references to the contrary in Bede, Augustine and his first four successors never styled themselves archbishop” (55). Even Theodore did not adopt the title at the 672 Synod of Hertford (*Historia ecclesiastica* 4.5, 348), calling himself “Theodorus, quamuis indignus ab apostolica sede destinatus Doruuernensis ecclesiae episcopus” (Theodore, although unworthy, appointed bishop of the church of Canterbury by the Apostolic See). He had apparently begun using it by 679, however, as it appears in the proceedings of the Synod of Hatfield (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.17, 384), where he is called “Theodoro gratia Dei archiepiscopo Britanniae insulae et civitatis Doruuernis” (Theodore, by the grace of God archbishop of the island of Britain and of the city of Canterbury). The papacy first acknowledged the term at about the same time, in Pope Agatho’s decision on the reorganization of the English church (Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, eds., *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 130–6, at 132). See also Brooks, *Early History*, 12.

⁹² See Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 67–9.

exclusive. They could convene synods, but the real power in such councils fell to the kings. Thacker deems that “they seem to have been *primi inter pares* rather than commanding superiors,” and that “the conciliar records give an overwhelming impression of equality within the episcopate.”⁹³

Gregory had recognized, however, that metropolitan authority alone would be insufficient for establishing a missionary church among the pagan English, because metropolitans did not normally have the power to create new episcopal sees. To overcome this problem, he sent Bishop Augustine a pallium, a sacralized vestment, granted *ad hominem* rather than *ex officio*, that, in Gregory’s innovative use, marked its wearer as a personal representative of the pope himself.⁹⁴

When Theodore of Tarsus arrived some seven decades later, however, he applied a model of episcopal power much closer to that of the eastern archbishops of his own experience than the metropolitans of Gaul, appointing and deposing bishops, establishing new sees, and dividing existing sees at will, by his own authority rather than that of a synod. This assumption of new powers was made possible by the extreme disarray he found in the English church when he arrived. Due to the exigencies of politics and

⁹³ Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 51. For a history of the sources and evolution of the archiepiscopal power of Canterbury (on which this and the following paragraph are largely based), see Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 44–69. A concise summary of the differences between metropolitan and archiepiscopal rank can be found in Joanna Story, “Bede, Willibrord and the Letters of Pope Honorius I on the Genesis of the Archbishopric of York,” *English Historical Review* 127, no. 527 (2012): 784. See also Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 18–19; and R. A. Markus, “Carthage – Prima Justiniana – Ravenna: An Aspect of Justinian’s *Kirchenpolitik*,” *Byzantion* 49 (1979): 277–8. All the above-named scholars agree that the most prominent medieval statement on the relative powers and responsibilities within the episcopal hierarchy, in Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, greatly oversimplifies a complex and fluid historical reality. See Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 170–1. By Bede’s day, the roles of metropolitan and archbishop had become indistinguishable (and the terms therefore interchangeable), in part because the Canterbury model, including the newly established title of archbishop, had been replicated in the establishment of Anglo-Saxon missionary churches on the Continent, whence it would eventually be adopted by the Carolingian churches as well (Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 69).

⁹⁴ On the evolution and use of the pallium, see Thacker, “Gallic or Greek,” 48–54. See also Levison, *England and the Continent*, 19–21.

plague, only one Southumbrian see—London—had a bishop, and he was the simoniac Wine, whom Theodore soon deposed.⁹⁵ In Northumbria, meanwhile, two bishops, Wilfrid and Chad, were claiming authority over the same see. Under these circumstances, kings, bishops, and the church in general welcomed the intervention of an outside authority who could reestablish order.⁹⁶ Although his efforts to divide the existing bishoprics faced determined resistance, by the time of his death Theodore presided unchallenged over an English church with fifteen or sixteen bishops.⁹⁷

Since Theodore's authority had derived from the novel combination of metropolitan status, the papal grant of the pallium, and his own exotic conception of archiepiscopal prerogatives, it was by no means obvious at the time that all that power would automatically pass to any and all future Canterbury bishops. Even in the early eighth century, it seems that Theodore's extraordinary authority was understood to have derived in large part from the fact that he was personally sent by the pope, rather than from any supremacy inherent to Canterbury.⁹⁸

When Berhtwald took up his office, after a two-year vacancy and what appears to have been a fiercely contested election, he had to fight long and hard to establish himself in the same position. In this context, Pope John's letter offered an opportunity too

⁹⁵ Brooks, *Early History*, 71.

⁹⁶ Wilfrid, for instance, seems readily to have accepted Theodore's authority in resolving his deadlocked conflict with Chad, as did both King Oswiu and Chad himself. See Brooks, *Early History*, 72; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.2, 336; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 15, 32. Thacker, "Wilfrid: His Cult and His Biographer," 10, observes that "It is clear that the main reason why the Northumbrian kings collaborated with Theodore and Berhtwald as sole archbishop is that they needed them to deal with Wilfrid, whom they did not trust but of whom they had to take account."

⁹⁷ Brooks, *Early History*, 74–6. Brooks points out that Wilfrid was not the only bishop to resist the division of his see, nor even, it seems, the only one to bring his grievance before the pope.

⁹⁸ When, at the Synod of Nidd, the bishops objected to Berhtwald's proposed changes, they asked by what authority the decisions of "Theodorus archiepiscopus, ab apostolica sede emissus" (Archbishop Theodore, sent by the Apostolic See) could be undone (Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 130). Pope John's letter mentions Theodore twice, and both times he yokes Theodore's archiepiscopal status to the fact that he was sent by the Apostolic See (Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 116). And Stephen himself repeatedly reminds us that he derived his authority from his papal appointment (see, for example, ch. 15, 33; ch. 43, 86; and ch. 45, 92).

valuable to pass up, however strong Berhtwald's personal resentment toward Wilfrid may have been. By commanding Berhtwald to convene and preside over a synod, and commanding bishops John, Bosa, and Wilfrid to attend, the pope had plainly put the weight of his own authority behind Berhtwald's claim to have inherited Theodore's supremacy over all the churches of England.

Another advantage accruing to Berhtwald from John's decision—and from his own assertion of the authority of the document—was the opportunity to insert himself between the pope's words and the people's ears, and thereby to shape the narrative that reached the largely illiterate, English-speaking audience at the synod and beyond. After Berhtwald read two papal letters in Latin to the assembly, and the leading nobleman, Berhtfrith, asked for a translation, the archbishop summarized the implications of the letters in a way that maximized his personal leverage, saying:

Iudicia apostolicae sedis longo circuitu et ambagibus verborum, unum tamen intellectum de eadem re utriusque libri ostendentes, quorum in brevi sermone sensum tantum explicabo.⁹⁹

The judgments of the Apostolic See are expressed in extended circumlocutions and obscure language, but nevertheless both documents reveal a single idea concerning this affair, the essential meaning of which I will set forth briefly in speech.

⁹⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 130.

In the letter whose text Stephen preserved, Pope John made no specifications about the details of the settlement, requiring only that Berhtwald find some solution to which everyone could be convinced to agree.¹⁰⁰ When he summarized the letters in English, however, Berhtwald reduced that wide range of possibilities to a simple binary choice: return Wilfrid's possessions, or travel to Rome to explain your refusal to the pope and his council.¹⁰¹ And significantly, he arrogated to himself the responsibility of defining exactly what Wilfrid's rightful possessions were, implying throughout that he was merely the mouthpiece and obedient servant of the pope:

Nam his coepiscopis meis e duobus ab apostolica sede iudiciis optio datur, utrum voluerint, eligant, ut aut cum Wilfritho episcopo pacem plene perfecteque ineant et partes ecclesiarum, quas olim ipse regebat, sicut sapientes mecum iudicaverint, restituant, aut si hoc optimum noluisse, omnes simul ad apostolicam sedem pergerent ibique maiori concilio diiudicarentur.¹⁰²

For a choice between two judgments is given to these my fellow bishops by the Apostolic See. Let them choose which of the two they will, so that they may either enter into a full and perfect peace with Bishop Wilfrid, and restore the portions of the churches which he formerly ruled, as wise men and I shall

¹⁰⁰ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 54, 118: "Et siquidem, eo suffragante, apud synodum hoc regulariter determinare valuerit, gratum nobis et partibus expedit" (And if, in his opinion, he will be able to settle this regularly before the synod, it is acceptable to us and to the interested parties).

¹⁰¹ Bede (*Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 524), presumably following Stephen, also accepts Berhtwald's summary, recording only "Scriptumque a praefato papa regibus Anglorum Aedilredo et Aldfrido, ut eum in episcopatum suum, eo quod iniuste fuerit condemnatus, facerent recipi" (And the aforementioned pope wrote to the kings Æthelræd and Aldfrith, that they were to cause him to recover his bishopric, because he had been unjustly condemned).

¹⁰² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 60, 130. Note that the term "partes ecclesiarum" allows Berhtwald additional wiggle room, because it is imprecise: must they restore his church lands (the monasteries), church offices (the bishopric), or both?

determine, or, if they are averse to this best choice, they may proceed all together to the Apostolic See and be judged there by a greater assembly.

2.8.3. Aldfrith and Wilfrid

The long-running battle between Aldfrith and Wilfrid offers one of the clearest examples of the agility with which educated people took advantage of the dissonance between the two systems of authority.

Of all the figures in this drama, Aldfrith had the widest and most emphatic reputation for learning. As Colin Ireland points out in his study of Aldfrith's education, Stephen (despite Aldfrith's opposition to Wilfrid) calls him "rex sapientissimus"¹⁰³ (most learned king), Alcuin calls him "rex simul atque magister" (king and teacher at the same time) who "sacris fuerat studiis imbutus ab annis aetatis primae, valido sermone sophista, acer et ingenio" (had been imbued with sacred learning from his earliest years, a philosopher of powerful eloquence, and sharp-minded).¹⁰⁴ Irish and Hiberno-Latin sources held a similar view, granting him the title "sapiens" (or, in Irish, "ecnaidh").¹⁰⁵

Bede calls him "vir in scripturis doctissimus" (a man most learned in the Scriptures), and claims that his exile during the reign of his predecessor Ecgrith (which might otherwise be ascribed to political motives) was entered into "ob studium

¹⁰³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 44, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and transl. Peter Godman, OMT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), lines 844–6.

¹⁰⁵ Colin A. Ireland, "Where Was King Aldfrith of Northumbria Educated? An Exploration of Seventh-Century Insular Learning," *Traditio* 70, no. 1 (2015): 29–47, at 40–44; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 44, 90; Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, lines 844–6. See also Colin A. Ireland, "Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Learning of a *Sapiens*," in *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir*, ed. Kathryn A. Klar, Eve Sweetser, and Claire Thomas (Lawrence, MA: Celtic Studies Publications, 1997), 63–77.

litterarum” (for the study of letters) and “ob amorem sapientiae” (for the love of learning).¹⁰⁶

Educated among the Irish (possibly at Iona, although Colin Ireland has argued cogently in favor of peripatetic studies in Ireland itself), he maintained long-standing friendships with Adomnan, the author of the *Vita Columbana* and *De locis sanctis*, and Aldhelm, whose extremely erudite *Epistola ad Acircium* is thought to have been written to Aldfrith.¹⁰⁷ Bede records that he traded eight hides of land to Abbot Ceolfrith in exchange for a book, an extraordinary transaction for any medieval king.¹⁰⁸

Aldfrith’s preference for oral evidence can hardly be ascribed to naïveté or unfamiliarity with literacy. In fact, a few years earlier, Aldfrith had justified Wilfrid’s expulsion by specifically—and selectively—appealing to documentary authority.

Within a few years following his accession in 685, Aldfrith had welcomed Wilfrid back from the exile imposed by Ecgrith, and largely fulfilled the terms of Pope Agatho’s decision, restoring Wilfrid to the bishopric of York and driving out the bishops (including Bosa) who had been appointed in his absence.¹⁰⁹

Stephen describes their eventual falling out in unhelpfully metaphorical terms, but he does list three points of contention. First, there was a dispute about Wilfrid’s territorial possessions. Second, Hexham remained an episcopal see, which, to Stephen’s mind, violated the independence guaranteed by the community’s papal privilege. Finally:

¹⁰⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.26, 430–1; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, ch. 24, 236–8.

¹⁰⁷ Ireland, “Where Was King Aldfrith,” 37–8, 46–7.

¹⁰⁸ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, 58.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 44, 90.

Tertia deinde causa est, ut iussionibus et decretis Theodori archiepiscopi ab apostolica sede misso oportere cogebat oboedire, non illa significans canonica statuta quae in principio episcopatus sui apud nos degens aut in novissimis temporibus vitae suae constituit, quando omnes ecclesias nostras ad canonicam pacem unanimiter convocavit, sed magis ea decreta, quae mediis temporibus suis, quando discordia inter nos in Bryttania exorta fuerat, statuit.¹¹⁰

The third cause, then, is that he [i.e., Aldfrith] urged that it was necessary to obey the commands and decrees of Archbishop Theodore, who had been sent from the Apostolic See, not meaning those canonical statutes which he established in the beginning of his episcopacy dwelling among us, nor those which he established in the final period of his life, when he summoned all our churches harmoniously to canonical peace, but rather those decrees which he instated during the middle of his tenure, when discord had arisen between us in Britain.

Here it is Stephen, the putative champion of documentary authority, who cries foul. Specifically, he rails against Aldfrith's exploitation of the inconvenient durability of the written word. Wilfrid himself articulated the complaint in the defense he offered at Austerfield, asking how the assembled bishops—who had agreed to judge him according to Theodore's edicts—could disregard the decisions of three popes in preference to “decreta Theodori archiepiscopi quae in discordia, ut diximus, constituit” (the decrees of Archbishop Theodore, which, as we said, he established during their discord). These

¹¹⁰ Ibid., ch. 45, 92.

documents had endured from a time that Wilfrid and Stephen would have preferred to forget.

So Wilfrid rebuked the bishops for adhering to documents that, in his opinion, had been superseded (since he and Theodore had since reconciled), but also for preferring Theodore, an archbishop, to the various popes who had sided with Wilfrid. This highlights the tension between the official church hierarchy and local loyalties. The bishops at Austerfield had worked with Theodore and had probably been consecrated by him. When they chose his authority over that of some foreign popes they had never met, they were also able (as at the later Synod of Nidd) to signal their loyalty to the king by accepting the sources of authority that he (in this case) preferred. In an oral society, outdated judgments tend to be forgotten. But since Theodore's apparently contradictory judgments were written down, Aldfrith was able to choose the ones that best suited his present purposes.¹¹¹

At Austerfield, then, Aldfrith had appealed to the authority of documents, and Wilfrid had criticized and resisted it. But when the political dynamics shifted, so did everyone's preferred sources of authority. Berhtwald's and Æthelræd's theatrical displays of deference to Wilfrid's papal letter had implied that obedience to it was a question of religious orthodoxy, maximizing the pressure on Aldfrith to rescind Wilfrid's exile and allow the proposed synod to go forward. But when Wilfrid had returned to Northumbria, backed by the powers of Mercia, Canterbury, and Rome, to demand that Aldfrith, too, obey John's letter, Aldfrith stood firmly on the grounds of the consensus established by

¹¹¹ We do not know enough about these edicts to decide how arbitrary Aldfrith was really being. The letter Theodore wrote to Æthelræd when he tried to reconcile him to Wilfrid warmly encourages him to seek reconciliation, but it is far from a *decretum*, and it does not specify any terms. Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 43, 86–90.

the former king and archbishop, and his own previous pronouncements, and explicitly refused to acknowledge the authority of documents, even hinting at the possibility of forgery, declaring, “hoc, inquam, quamdiu vixero, propter apostolicae sedis, ut dicitis, scripta numquam volo mutare” (As long as I live, I say, I will never change this on account of documents from—as you say—the Apostolic See).¹¹²

But he did not live long. And after his death, the political situation shifted dramatically, so that Wilfrid’s ability to marshal support both at home and abroad soon made him indispensable to the surviving royal family and their allies. It fell to Ælfflæd to negotiate an end to the long dispute, and to project the stability of the kingdom and the supremacy of her family by negotiating a reconciliation between documentary and oral sources of authority at the Synod of Nidd.

The highly restricted nature of education and literacy in Northumbria at the dawning of the eighth century, and the new rhetorical possibilities they introduced, had contributed to the instability of the kingdom by disrupting the homeostasis between the sociopolitical status quo and the oral historical memory that had justified it. At the same time, however, they had created new opportunities for maximizing and consolidating power, and the ruling classes in England exploited those opportunities aggressively and flexibly. Wilfrid, Æthelræd, and Berhtwald tried to use the pope’s letter to expand the authoritative community beyond Northumbria’s border. Aldfrith responded with an appeal to a traditional, local, and oral notion of the community. Ælfflæd and Berhtfrith relied on that same notion to project the power, legitimacy, and stability of the new regime of the young King Osred.

¹¹² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 58, 126.

Chapter 3

“Who is Made to Stumble, and I Do Not Burn?” Bede’s Open Letter to Ecgberht and the Need for Pastoral Ministry

3.1. Bede and the Bishop

Bede may, when he looked back over the early history of the English church, have seen the glorious unfolding of a divine plan. When he turned his attention to its present condition, however, he was far less sanguine. Among scholars of recent decades, Bede’s dissatisfaction with the state of the Northumbrian church, and specifically with the conduct of its bishops, has emerged as the most prominent and universally accepted interpretive context for his hagiographies, histories, and even some of his exegetical works. It was first spotlighted as a major motivation for Bede’s later works by Alan Thacker and has since been extensively catalogued by Scott DeGregorio.¹ DeGregorio, however, has largely limited his investigations to discovering evidence that Bede’s other late works, such as the *Ecclesiastical History* and *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, are seriously and consistently engaged with the exact issues that Bede makes explicit in his letter to Ecgberht.² He has proved his point beyond reasonable doubt, but he has not performed a detailed exploration of the reform program itself, viewing all the pieces together, in the context of the developing church.

¹ Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal,” 130–53; Scott DeGregorio, “‘Nostrorum socordiam temporum’: The Reforming Impulse of Bede’s Later Exegesis,” *Early Medieval Europe* 11, no. 2 (2002): 107–22; DeGregorio, “Bede’s *In Ezram* and Reform,” 1–25; DeGregorio, “Monasticism and Reform in Book IV of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 4 (October 2010): 673–87.

² DeGregorio defends the traditional dating of *On Ezra and Nehemiah* to the second half of the 720s, although Paul Meyvaert has argued cogently for the much earlier range of 711–715, which would suggest that Bede’s concern with reform was a lifelong preoccupation, rather than a late development. Scott DeGregorio, introduction to *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, ed. and trans. Scott DeGregorio, TTH 47 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), xxxvii–xlii; Paul Meyvaert, “The Date of Bede’s *In Ezram* and His Image of Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus,” *Speculum* 80 (2005): 1089–97.

Most often, Bede engaged with the political, ecclesiastical, and social issues of his own day only indirectly. Notably, the *Ecclesiastical History* says almost nothing about the political and ecclesiastical turbulence of the early 730s, which might have illuminated the immediate context for the composition of that work. This apparent distance was part of what led some earlier commentators to imagine Bede living in splendid isolation, free from worldly concerns, composing his works not for his own age, but for all ages. But in November 734, when sickness and age had left him unable to make a planned journey some eighty miles south to York, Bede composed an urgent and forceful letter—the last of his writings to have survived—that directly addressed what he saw as the most pressing issues facing the church at a pivotal moment in its history, and the concerns he revealed there have shone an altogether different light on much of his earlier work, including the *Ecclesiastical History*, the prose *Life of Cuthbert*, and several of his biblical commentaries. Since no charters survive from the early Northumbrian church, and the surviving narrative sources rarely explain church structure and organization,³ this letter has been used by scholars both to provide a contemporary context for Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*,⁴ and to construct a model of how the eighth-century church was organized.⁵

The recipient of this revealing letter was Ecgberht, a personal acquaintance and possibly a former student of Bede’s,⁶ who was uniquely situated to enact Bede’s

³ James Campbell, “Bede,” in *Latin Historians*, ed. T. A. Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 176, observed that “Had we to rely on the *Ecclesiastical History* for our knowledge of the Church in the first generation of the eighth century we should know little of it, and still less of Bede’s severe judgment on it.”

⁴ DeGregorio, “Monasticism and Reform,” 673–87.

⁵ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100–21; see also Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 91–2, 128–30; and Alan Thacker, “Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care,” 148–50, 160–4.

⁶ See discussion below and Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, I.

ambitious agenda. A member of the newly ascendant branch of the Northumbrian royal family, Ecgberht had become bishop of York in 732.⁷ In 735, a few months after the letter was written, he would travel to Rome to receive the *pallium*, a vestment that would announce his status as the archbishop of York, from the hands of the pope. Ecgberht's cousin, Ceolwulf (to whom Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is dedicated), was king of Northumbria, and his brother, Eadberht, would become king in 737. Ecgberht was a patron of scholarship and a man of wide-ranging contacts. He had already traveled to Rome at least once,⁸ letters to Ecgberht from Pope Paul⁹ and St. Boniface¹⁰ have survived, and Alcuin, the most influential European scholar of the following generation, began his career as a student of Ecgberht. Alcuin later praised the period when the brothers Ecgberht and Eadberht ruled church and state together as a golden age,¹¹ showing particular nostalgia for the superb library that had been founded during Ecgberht's episcopacy at York.¹²

Bede's letter raises a number of concerns about the ways in which, to his mind, the Northumbrian church and state had been missing the mark in recent decades: Bishops

⁷ See Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:378. Plummer suspects that Ecgberht was elected bishop in 732, but not consecrated until 734, the year of Bede's letter.

⁸ Bede, *Letter to Bishop Ecgbert*, ch. 15, 154–5 and n. 80.

⁹ "Letter of Pope Paul I to Eadberht, King of Northumbria, and His Brother Egbert, Archbishop of York (757–758)," in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1: c. 500–1042, 2nd ed., ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 830–1.

¹⁰ "Letter of Boniface to Egbert, Archbishop of York, With Reference to the Letter to King Æthelbald," Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 823–4.

¹¹ Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, lines 1248–87, 98–101.

¹² *Ibid.*, lines 1536–62, 122–6. In a letter of 796 or 797 to his patron, Charlemagne, Alcuin lamented, "Sed ex parte desunt mihi, servulo vestro, exquisitiores eruditionis scolasticae libelli, quos habui in patria per bonam et devotissimam magistri mei industriam vel etiam mei ipsius qualemcumque sudorem" (But those more sought-after little books of scholarly learning, which I had in my own country, through the good and most pious efforts of my teacher, and also through some labors of my own, are, in part, lacking for me, your servant). (Alcuin, *Epistolae*, in *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, vol. 2, ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH, *Epistolae* 4 (Berlin: Weidman, 1895), no. 122, p. 177.) York certainly had a reputation for possessing important books in Ecgberht's time, receiving requests for books from St. Boniface and Lull on the Continent, for instance, but the library reached its full glory under the direction of Ecgberht's successor, Ælberht, and subsequently that of Alcuin himself. See Peter Godman, introduction to *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, lxii–lxiii, lxvi.

surrounded themselves with irreligious companions; residents of remote places paid religious dues, but received neither preaching nor the performance of holy offices (such as baptism, confirmation, and communion) in return; for short-term financial gain, kings and bishops signed charters alienating royal lands and undermining the traditional foundation of state revenue and military service; institutions called “monasteries,” but unworthy of the name, proliferated, sometimes run by married abbots and abbesses. In response to these deficiencies, Bede proposes both personal and administrative reforms: the bishop should ensure that his personal conduct is irreproachable by keeping good company, reading suitable materials, and avoiding such things as idle talk, storytelling, and companions who prize worldly pleasures; he should improve teaching throughout his diocese by training more teachers and ordaining more priests; he should see that English translations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer are made available to those who cannot read Latin; he should divide his see, and appoint more bishops; he should choose established monasteries as the seats of these new bishoprics, and allow the monastic communities to appoint their own bishops; he should work with the king to invalidate the charters of certain institutions that claim monastic status but fail to live up to monastic ideals; and he should assert his authority over all monasteries within his jurisdiction.

Many commentators have considered these concerns as being essentially equal in importance, or worse, have assumed that those about which Bede waxes most emotional were the ones that mattered to him most. But if we account for Bede’s awareness of his own rhetorical situation, and pay attention to his transitions, it becomes clear that this letter is not a grocery list of gripes and remedies. Instead, it outlines a coherent, unified program designed to address one single concern: the church in Northumbria was failing

to provide adequate pastoral care. Every suggestion is intended to address this problem, and every criticism Bede lodges, however fiery, is part of a rhetorical strategy to support this program and undermine its opponents.

Pastoral care, that is, “*praedicando Dei uerbo et consecrandis mysteriis caelestibus*” (preaching the word of God and celebrating the heavenly mysteries),¹³ had been woefully inadequate. This, he asserts, is because the dioceses were too large for a single bishop to be able to personally tend to his whole flock. The first solution is to provide more helpers by ordaining more priests and training more “*doctores*,” that is, non-ordained teachers and preachers:

Et quia latiora sunt spatia locorum quae ad gubernacula tuae diocesis pertinent, quam ut solus per omnia discurrere et in singulis uiculis atque agellis uerbum Dei praedicare, etiam anni totius emenso curriculo, sufficiat, necessarium satis est, ut plures tibi sacri operis adiutores asciscas, presbyteros uidelicet ordinando atque instituendo doctores.¹⁴

And because the distances between the places that belong to your diocese are too extensive for you alone to suffice to traverse them all and to preach the word of God to every settlement and estate, even within the span of a whole year, it is necessary that you enlist more assistants in your holy work, specifically by ordaining priests and appointing teachers.

¹³ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 130.

¹⁴ Ibid. On Bede’s ambitious conception of the role of “*doctores*,” see Thacker, “Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care,” 152–3.

This, however, would be more easily said than done. To create such a “heavenly army,”¹⁵ Ecgberht would need resources. Bede does not list the bishop’s likely expenses (which Ecgberht would surely have understood all too well), but at the least, these assistants would have required years of training, plus housing, food, clothing, horses, books, and sacramental vessels. But increasing the fees paid by the laity to the bishop was, as we will see, both politically and religiously problematic, and the king did not have sufficient land remaining to grant the bishops large estates that might sustain such a program.¹⁶ As Eric John has noted, “it is obvious that a religion which required literacy in two languages from a people who did not have an alphabet of their own could flourish only if it had stable communities where letters could be taught and a native clergy trained. In *this* world this could be done only if someone were prepared to give these communities the scarcest and most precious of all the sources of power and wealth, land.”¹⁷

Bede’s solution to this problem is to take advantage of Ecgberht’s impending elevation to archbishop to reorganize the Northumbrian church, bringing the large, powerful, and wealthy monasteries fully into the episcopal hierarchy, and directing their considerable resources to the systematic provision of pastoral care. Bede anticipates, however, that these monasteries might resist any reorganization that would diminish their independence, and so he suggests two enticements. First, new bishoprics should be created around these monasteries, which would be allowed to choose their own bishop

¹⁵ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 4, 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 9, 140.

¹⁷ John, “Social and Political Problems,” 21.

from among their brethren. This would, of course, be a great honor and a source of influence, although it would entail a good deal more formal responsibility, as Bede is at pains to establish. But the honor could not have hidden the fact that accepting episcopal status would mean submitting more fully to the new archiepiscopal authority of York, and the independence of some of these monasteries was secured by papal privileges. So Bede proposes a second inducement: the large monasteries that accepted episcopal status would be compensated with expanded landholdings, which would not come from the king's lands, but from the confiscation and absorption of smaller, less-established monasteries.

Thus, the confiscation of the monasteries and the division of the bishopric both serve to compensate the large monastic institutions in exchange for taking on the episcopal responsibility of pastoral care. This letter does not contain a list of individual complaints and proposed solutions, but a single plan to develop the administrative and fiscal capacity to undertake the ambitious task of educating an illiterate, Germanic-speaking populace in the complex, book-based Christianity of the Latin West.

Bede makes the purpose of each proposal explicit. The monasteries are to be given the right to select their own bishops for the purpose of mitigating their expected opposition to the plan: “ne forte abbas uel monachi huic decreto contraire ac resistere temptauerint” (lest perchance the abbot or monks should attempt to oppose and resist this decree).¹⁸ Similarly, the dubious monasteries are to be confiscated for the purpose of rewarding those established monasteries that accept episcopal responsibilities: “si opus esse uisum fuerit ut tali monasterio causa episcopatus suscipiendi amplius aliquid

¹⁸ Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, ch. 10, 140–2.

locorum ac possessionem augeri debeat” (if it should seem necessary that such a monastery, on account of accepting the bishopric, ought to be enlarged with more lands and property).¹⁹ Further, these established monasteries ought to be chosen as the sites of new episcopal sees because “per incuriam regum praecedentium donationesque stultissimas factum est ut non facile locus uacans ubi sedes episcopalis noua fieri debeat inueniri ualeat” (through the negligence of preceding kings and very stupid land donations, it has come about that a vacant site where a new episcopal seat ought to be established may not easily be found).²⁰ And, finally, the new episcopal sees are needed “quatinus abundante numero magistrorum perfectius ecclesia Christi in his quae ad cultum sacrae religionis pertinent instituat” (so that, by a plentiful number of bishops, the church of Christ might be administered more perfectly in those things which pertain to the cultivation of holy religion).²¹

Other recommendations made in the letter, such as increasing the number of priests and teachers, and the provision of English translations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, obviously also serve the purpose of improving pastoral care. Even Bede’s emphasis on Ecgberht’s personal conduct is explicitly and repeatedly tied to teaching. Similarly, everything Bede condemns, he condemns because it serves his rhetorical purposes to do so. The key to understanding Bede’s rhetoric, however, lies in recognizing that Ecgberht is not his primary audience.

3.2. Bede’s *Open* Letter to Ecgberht

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., ch. 9, 140. See also Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 110.

²¹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 9, 140.

Most scholars have treated Bede's letter to Ecgberht as though it were a private communication, intended to appeal directly to the bishop himself and straightforwardly revealing Bede's true feelings and concerns.²² But these assumptions cannot withstand close examination, and they fail to explain many of the most striking features of Bede's rhetoric.

The startling contrast between the serene optimism of the *Ecclesiastical History* and the intense anxiety and harsh criticism that characterize the letter has generally been attributed to Bede's famed "discretion": he was opposed in principle to public criticism of the clergy, but was presumably willing to share his concerns with a fellow churchman in private.²³ Yet Goffart has shown that this discretion was not so much a moral code as a rhetorical tool, to be employed when and how it suited Bede's larger purposes.²⁴ When discretion was not called for, Bede could be painfully and publicly forthright. For example, although it might at first seem uncharacteristic for Bede to directly criticize his own bishop, he appears to have done so, publicly and in no uncertain terms, in his homily on John 2:12–22. When Christ casts out of the temple those who sell sacrificial animals (oxen, sheep, and doves), Bede compares these moneychangers to those who, in Bede's

²² See, for example, Scott DeGregorio, "Visions of Reform: Bede's Later Writings in Context," in Darby and Wallis, *Bede and the Future*, 208–9, who writes that Bede "confides" in Ecgberht, and that "urging the bishop to implement [Bede's] plan is his real purpose." See also Farmer, introductory note to "Bede's Letter to Egbert," in *Ecclesiastical History*, 335: "The letter is an example of a private exhortation to a prelate by an author who will probably never become one." See also Brown, *Companion*, 114, who calls the letter "a private admonition to his former pupil."

²³ See James Campbell, "Bede I," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 1986), 19. Campbell cites Bede's own statements on the subject in his commentary on the Book of Samuel, and deems that "[Bede] clearly did not think it appropriate to enlarge on the deficiencies of the clergy in a work such as the *Ecclesiastical History* which was intended for a fairly wide audience. A letter to another cleric such as that to Egbert was another matter, though even there he mentions no names." In contrast to this longstanding and widespread tradition, Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 211, refers to Bede's letter as a "semi-public treatise in epistolary form," and McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxx, assert that, despite the letter's self-presentation as a private communication, "there is no doubt that this was intended as a free-standing treatise in its own right and as a very radical manifesto." These authors do not, however, explain their reasoning or discuss the implications of this position, and the question of whether Bede intended his letter to be read by others has significant bearing on our interpretation of his rhetorical choices, and so merits more detailed examination here.

²⁴ Goffart, *Narrators*, 241, 245.

own time, exchange their spiritual gifts for worldly rewards (a charge he would repeat in his letter to Ecgberht):

Vendunt columbas qui acceptam spiritus gratiam non gratis ut praeceptum est sed ad praemium dant qui manus impositionem qua spiritus accipitur etsi non ad quaestum pecuniae ad uulgi tamen fauorem tribuunt qui sacros ordines non ad uitae meritum sed ad gratiam largiuntur.²⁵

They sell doves who give the grace of the spirit they have received not freely, as is commanded, but for a price; who bestow the imposition of hands, whereby the spirit is received, even if not for the acquisition of wealth, yet for the favor of the public; who impart sacred orders not for worthiness of life, but as a favor.

Because only a bishop could perform the imposition of hands (confirmation) and confer sacred orders (ordination),²⁶ there would have been only one person who might have done these things for unscrupulous reasons, and everyone present would have known who that was. The homily goes on to discuss how those who, as social inferiors, are unable to correct such behavior (as the Wearmouth-Jarrow monks would have been with respect to their bishop) ought to respond. If he delivered this homily to the inmates of Wearmouth or Jarrow, it must have been obvious that he was referring to the present bishop of Hexham. Since the composition of Bede's homilies has generally proved

²⁵ Bede, Homily 2.1, *Homiliarum evangelii libri II*, ed. David Hurst, in *Bedae venerabilis opera, pars III: Opera homiletica; pars IV: Opera rhythmica*, CCSL 122 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1955), 187. Cf. Matthew 10:8. English translation at Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels, Book 2: Lent to the Dedication of the Church*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 4.

²⁶ Thacker, "Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care," 137–40.

impossible to date, however, modern scholars cannot determine which bishop that was. It is clear, though, that Bede was willing to call out the failings of his ecclesiastical superiors in front of a wide audience.

3.3. Cultivated Ambiguity

In his letter, Bede maintains a careful ambiguity. He avoids naming the guilty parties, and introduces his two central problems not as his own observations, but as being widely known, claiming, first, that “de quibusdam episcopis fama uulgatum est” (it is the common report concerning certain bishops)²⁷ that they surround themselves with men who give their time to jokes, storytelling, feasting, and drunkenness, and second, that, although they collect money from everyone in their diocese, they neither preach to nor perform sacramental duties for those living in remote places.²⁸ Historians have been tempted to identify exactly which bishops Bede had in mind.

Because Bede claims that some of the problems he details accelerated upon the death of King Aldfrith in 705—the event that led to Wilfrid’s final restoration—and because Bede had once been accused of heresy in Wilfrid’s presence, eliciting a furious response, including a charge of drunkenness, from Bede, it is easy to imagine that Wilfrid was foremost in Bede’s mind.²⁹ But Wilfrid had been dead for nearly a quarter century when Bede wrote to Ecgberht. The composition of Wilfrid’s court between 705 and 710 could not have been an urgent concern in 734 unless similar patterns of behavior had continued through the tenure of his successors.

²⁷ Bede, “Letter to Ecgbert,” ch. 4, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 7, 134.

²⁹ Goffart, *Narrators*, 325. Wallis, “Why Did Bede Write,” 23–45. See also Bede, “Letter to Plegwin,” 405–15.

For this reason, the most intense scrutiny has fallen on Acca, the former bishop of Hexham and Bede's long-time bishop and patron. Goffart has been by far the most damning. Only a few bare facts survive to us from the crucial moment, preserved in addenda to early manuscripts of the *Ecclesiastical History*. It is recorded that, in 731, King Ceolwulf was seized and tonsured, but then returned to his kingdom, and Bishop Acca was driven from his see at Hexham. The following year, Ecgberht was appointed bishop of York. In 734, Ecgberht appointed a new bishop of Hexham, named Frithuberht.³⁰ Acca, who, according to the *Historia Regum*, attributed to the early-twelfth-century chronicler Symeon of Durham, survived until 740, never returned to his see.³¹ Historians have been left to imagine how these events occurred, and what the relationship between them might be. On the grounds that Ceolwulf was restored and Acca was not, Goffart posits that Acca was involved in the failed attempt to overthrow Ceolwulf and paid the price for backing the losing side. In his reading, Bede had long resented Acca, the heir of Wilfrid and leader of the surviving Wilfridian faction, and enthusiastically aligned himself with Ceolwulf and Ecgberht when the political winds finally shifted against Acca. "Bede's lines to Ecgberht," he claims, "implicitly denounce ... the very magnificent Acca of Hexham" as "one of the unworthy churchmen of the recent past"³² whose expulsion offered "hope for a fundamental reform in the Northumbrian church—a return to the 'good past' lovingly described" in the *Ecclesiastical History*.³³

³⁰ "Continuatio," in Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, 572.

³¹ Symeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, extracted in Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 265.

³² Goffart, "Harsher Climate," 218–19. This version directly opposes Kirby's reading of the same events: "In view of Acca's connection with Bede and Bede's contact with the court of Ceolwulf, it seems almost certain that Acca was a loyal supporter of Ceolwulf and that he fell from power when the king did. On his restoration, Ceolwulf was probably still too insecure to reinstate his former sympathizers" (Kirby, "Time of Wilfrid," 24).

³³ Goffart, *Narrators*, 325.

Other commentators have remained lukewarm to Goffart's depiction of Acca, however, in part because it requires us to disregard the most prolific and prominent evidence of Bede's relationship to his former bishop, the dedicatory letters to Acca with which Bede prefaced six of his exegetical works. Plummer held the traditional view that Bede "evidently cherished the warmest affection" for Acca,³⁴ Colgrave and Mynors called him "a close friend of Bede,"³⁵ and Kirby concurs that "Bede had the greatest admiration for Acca."³⁶ In his letters, Bede regularly addresses Acca as "beatissimo" (most blessed) and "dilectissimo" (most cherished). Goffart dismisses such endearments as mere epistolary formulae,³⁷ although surely some, like "nimium desiderantissimo Accæ" (to Acca, missed beyond measure), convey more personal warmth than professional respect.³⁸

Acca had undoubtedly inherited Wilfrid's predilection for conspicuous displays of wealth—Stephen of Ripon expresses wonder at the "auro et argento lapidibusque pretiosis" (gold and silver and precious stones) with which he adorned St. Andrew's church at Hexham, and the "purpura et serico" (purple and silk) with which he dressed the altar.³⁹ But Bede's portrait of Acca in the *Ecclesiastical History* carries no trace of reproach. Bede knew Stephen's work well, and followed it when it suited him, but in this instance, Bede describes the church as decorated not with ostentatious gold, silver, and

³⁴ Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:329.

³⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 253, n. 3.

³⁶ Kirby, "Time of Wilfrid," 24.

³⁷ Goffart, "Harsher Climate," 219–20: Acca "was the equivalent to Bede of the granting agencies that foster our research with needed subsidies," and Bede's "phrases are well suited to the circumstances—wholly conventional, possibly outright flattery, and in any case no measure of his feelings. Bede could not be false because no truth was asked of him, any more than it is from us when we use formulas like 'Dear so-and-so,' or 'Sincerely yours.' Good manners are in question, not feelings."

³⁸ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, ed. David Hurst, in *Bedae venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 3, CCSL 120 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1960), 6.

³⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 22, 47.

precious stones but “multifario decore ac mirificis ... operibus” (with various decorations and wondrous works [of art]). The other accomplishments attributed to Acca include obtaining relics, assembling “amplissimam ... ac nobilissimam bibliothecam” (a very grand and illustrious library), providing “uasa sancta” (sacred vessels) for the church, inviting an expert in Roman chant to teach his community, and traveling to Rome to learn about “ecclesiae sanctae institutis” (the institutions of the holy church).⁴⁰ These are exactly the deeds for which Bede repeatedly praises the founder of his own monastery, Benedict Biscop, and no one could doubt the warmth of Bede’s admiration for Biscop.⁴¹ Although Bede designates 731, apparently before Acca’s deposition, as the date of completion for the *Ecclesiastical History*, this is a rhetorical fiction: he clearly continued to work on it for several years after that, and so had every opportunity to delete this passage, to insert criticism, or revise it to offer more perfunctory compliments.⁴² Had he despised Acca, or wished to ingratiate himself with Acca’s enemies, and had Ceolwulf,

⁴⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.20, 530–2.

⁴¹ See, for example, Bede, “Homily 1.13,” ch. 12, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 14–16, and *Historia abbatum*, chs. 5–6, pp. 32–6.

⁴² At the end of 5.23, Bede explicitly locates the composition of the *Historia ecclesiastica* in 731: “Hic est inpraesentiarum uniuersae status Britanniae . . . dominicae . . . incarnationis anno DCCXXXI” (This is the present state of all of Britain . . . in the year 731 of the incarnation of the Lord). But several indicators suggest that he did not finally cease work on it until a few years later. The most cited is a reference in Bede’s annalistic account of events in 729, which indicates that an invading Saracen force ravaged Gaul in that year but was defeated shortly thereafter. Most commentators have seen in this a reference to Charles Martel’s victory at the Battle of Tours in 732. See, for example, Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:338–9, and Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, 557, note 5. (But see also J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (New York: Clarendon, 1988), 199, for an alternative interpretation.) In addition, although Bede does not mention the two most momentous Northumbrian political events of 731—the temporary deposition of Ceolwulf and the permanent deposition of Acca—and emphasizes his uncertainty about the outcome of Ceolwulf’s reign, we know from the preface that Ceolwulf had read and approved a completed draft. In defense of a 731 completion, Higham proposes an implausibly tight timeline, in which Bede completes the work after the June 731 accession of archbishop Tatwine of Canterbury (the last confidently datable event in the *HE*), submits a draft to Ceolwulf, receives a reply, makes the necessary corrections, appends the preface, and prepares it for distribution either before or concurrent with the crisis that saw Ceolwulf forcibly tonsured in the same year (Higham (*Re-*)*Reading Bede*, 188–95). Goffart’s common sense explanation (Walter A. Goffart, “The *Historia Ecclesiastica*: Bede’s Agenda and Ours,” *Haskins Society Journal* 2 (1990): 40–2) that, like a modern author whose bibliography must be cut off at some point before actual publication, Bede merely “invites readers to take the work *as though* it were completed in mid-731” is more reasonable. And even Higham’s model depends on the assumption that the work was later amended to include the Saracen passage, raising the question of why a far-off military conflict warranted such attention, but local events of urgent political significance did not. See also Goffart, *Narrators*, 242, n. 36, and David Kirby, “King Ceolwulf of Northumbria and the *Historia ecclesiastica*,” *Studia Celtica* 14–15 (1979–80): 170.

who read and approved a draft of the *Ecclesiastical History*, been among those enemies, the survival of this passage is inexplicable. Most tellingly, Bede appears to defend Acca against a suggestion of administrative incompetence or even heresy—perhaps a pretext that had been used to justify his deposition—in a sentence that reaches awkwardly beyond the established “present” of his narrative.⁴³

Nam et ipse episcopus Acca cantator erat peritissimus, quomodo etiam in litteris sanctis doctissimus et in catholicae fidei confessione castissimus, in ecclesiasticae quoque institutionis regulis sollertissimus extiterat; et usque dum praemia piae deuotionis accipiat, existere non desistit.

Moreover Bishop Acca was himself a most skilled singer, and indeed most learned in holy writ, and most spotless in his confession of the Catholic faith; he was most expert in the ordering of the institution of the church, as well, and ceases not to be so, until he accepts the rewards of his pious devotion.⁴⁴

In the aftermath of Acca’s deposition, when his enemies were presumably victorious, such a statement sounds like defiant support. Yet the evidence is insufficient to make a final judgment. Specifically, there is no clear way to decide whether Acca was deposed because he *opposed* Ceolwulf (and presumably Ecgberht), or because he *supported* him, or perhaps for some unrelated reason that has not been preserved. Any

⁴³ The passage, which has so far discussed Acca’s accomplishments in the perfect or pluperfect, shifts to the present tense (*existere non desistit*) when it discusses his orthodoxy and expertise in ecclesiastical custom, which it even projects into the future.

⁴⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.20, 530–2.

specific determination amounts to speculation, and both Kirby and Goffart tend toward oversimplification in support of their respective models of eighth-century politics.⁴⁵

In any case, by the time Bede wrote to Bishop Ecgberht that certain bishops were said to spend their time with irreligious men, Acca had been out of power for some two or three years, and Bede's letter describes these episcopal failings in the present tense.

Still other scholars have assumed, despite Bede's carefully-worded near-denial, that Ecgberht himself was the intended target.⁴⁶ Though he was to prove an effective and energetic churchman,⁴⁷ Ecgberht was also a wealthy barbarian aristocrat—a leading member of the most powerful family in Northumbria—and at this early point in his career, it might not yet have been clear which culture he would most fully embrace, or how he would balance the often competing expectations of his two roles.⁴⁸

Whatever the personal and political dynamics may have been between Bede, Acca, and Ecgberht, aristocratic revelry in episcopal courts was an endemic problem

⁴⁵ For a more nuanced exploration of Bede's relationship with Acca, see Wallis, "Why Did Bede Write," 23–45.

⁴⁶ For example, McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxx–xxxii, judge that, although it is possible that Bede's criticism was directed at Bernician bishops (i.e., those of Lindisfarne, Hexham, or Whithorn), it "would seem most suited to the recipient of the work itself, bishop Egbert."

⁴⁷ Henry Mayr-Harting, "Ecgberht [Egbert] (d. 766)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Online Edition, Oxford University Press, 2004, 3, concludes, "In his building upon the work of archbishop Theodore, especially in his legal and educational efforts, he must be regarded as one of the great architects of the English church in the eighth century."

⁴⁸ Several other possible targets of Bede's criticism that would presumably have occurred to his contemporaries have not, to my knowledge, been discussed by modern scholars. Wilfrid II, the Whitby-trained bishop of York whose resignation or deposition in 732 had made way for Ecgberht's accession, would seem a possible candidate, though Alcuin praised him warmly and unreservedly, and too little is known about him to support the construction of a detailed theory. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.21; Michael Lapidge, "Wilfrid II," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), Ebook, 496–7; Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, 94–8, lines 1215–46. Even more intriguing are the two bishops who had been appointed just prior to Bede's writing in November 734. Ecgberht had consecrated Frithowald bishop of Whithorn in August, and consecrated Frithuberht bishop of Hexham—Bede's diocese—in September, filling the vacancy that had been left in the wake of Acca's departure three years prior. It certainly appears that Ecgberht and Ceolwulf were putting their team in place, perhaps in anticipation of Ecgberht's impending promotion. It is difficult to imagine that Bede did not have strong opinions about this process, though we cannot be certain what they were. (Note, however, that these dates for the consecrations of Frithowald and Frithuberht are supplied by William of Malmesbury and Symeon of Durham, respectively, while the "Continuatio" of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* assigns both consecrations to 735.) See "Continuatio" in Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, 572; see also "Chronology of Bishops" in *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, 564–6; and *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. E. B. Fryde, D. E. Greenway, S. Porter, and I Roy, 3rd ed., Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 217 and 222.

throughout the early English church. Sarah Foot has shown that the complaint was widespread and persistent: Alcuin and Boniface both wrote letters to bishops back in England condemning drunkenness, singing, excessive feasting, ostentatious clothes, and other aristocratic vices and imploring the bishops to surround themselves with men of charity, sobriety, and scholarship. Church documents, such as the Penitential of Theodore and the canons of the 747 Council of *Clofesho*, address the issue as well.⁴⁹

Yet the very fact that modern scholars have been unable to solve this riddle may be more significant than the riddle itself. The ambiguity is not an accident created by the scarcity of surviving historical sources; it is a carefully constructed and meticulously maintained feature of Bede's language. It is the fulcrum that provides the rhetorical leverage of the letter. If we understand this letter as a public document that would have been read by many people whose opinions mattered, the dilemma it would have posed for Ecgberht becomes clear. He had to decide how to respond, with the knowledge that others were watching. He could ignore the letter and try to minimize its public impact, which would, perversely, suggest that he knew that Bede's criticism was aimed at him, or he could embrace the letter and publicize it as evidence of Bede's support for his episcopacy, implying that his personal innocence was obvious. To pull this off, though, he would need to make at least a pretense of following Bede's advice.

3.4. Letters as Public Documents

But was the letter public? In the twenty-first century, when reading and writing are most often private, silent activities, a personal letter seems an especially discrete form

⁴⁹ Foot, *Monastic Life*, 237–9. See also Donald A. Bullough, "What Has Ingeld to Do with Lindisfarne?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 93–125.

of communication. At least it is more secure than email. But we do have a sub-genre, the “open letter,” which employs the format and conventions of the letter in a public *performance* of personal communication. Such letters are generally published in newspapers or on the internet, and need not even be sent directly to their professed recipient, because their true audience is the public. An open letter does not derive its power from a direct appeal to the personal interests and concerns of the addressee. Instead, it constitutes a public act that creates public pressure on the addressee to respond. This is not a modern invention. Letters addressed to a single named individual, but designed to appeal to a far wider readership, had been common and prominent since antiquity.

For both practical and cultural reasons, sending a letter in pre-modern Europe was a highly social activity. In his overview of Western European letter writing throughout the medieval period, Julian Haseldine observes that “in all its forms,” a letter “was more or less a public document, intended for a wider audience than the recipient alone. It could be almost anything except a private exchange of confidential information.”⁵⁰ Nothing like the modern expectation of privacy existed for medieval correspondence. In the preface to his commentary on Luke, Bede apologized for a delay by complaining that he was forced to play the roles of author, stenographer, and copyist.⁵¹ The implication is that this was an unusual arrangement, and that, under normal circumstances, the process of writing and distributing a text could be expected to include a minimum of three people. Certainly, the description of Bede’s last days (only a few months after he wrote to Ecgberht) provided

⁵⁰ Julian Haseldine, “Epistolography,” in *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. F. A. C. Mantello and A. G. Rigg (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 650.

⁵¹ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, 7: “Ipse mihi dictator simul notarius et librarius existerem.”

by his student Cuthbert depicts him dictating to an amanuensis, in the company of several students.⁵² For a formal letter to an important person, a fair copy would have been drawn up, possibly by another scribe, and another copy for the archives of Wearmouth and Jarrow. This community regularly preserved copies of letters they had written, such as Ceolfrith's letter to Nechtan⁵³ or Hwætberht's letter to Pope Gregory II,⁵⁴ and also letters they had received, such as Gregory II's reply to Hwætberht.⁵⁵ They felt no compunction about reproducing and distributing any of these letters, or even letters to which they had no direct connection. All of these letters have survived because they were incorporated into later texts for wider distribution. On the other end of the transmission, the process of reading was even more public. Reading was generally done aloud, often in groups (in Ecgberht's case, the "companions" whose behavior was in question could well have been among the initial audience), and Latin texts were regularly translated or explained in English for the benefit of the less-educated.⁵⁶

The public functions of an open letter emerge clearly in Andrew Fear's examination of St. Patrick's *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*.⁵⁷ In the early fifth century, the British warlord Coroticus launched a raid in Ireland that descended on one of Patrick's mass baptisms and took many captives. Patrick's initial attempt to negotiate their release through letters written directly to Coroticus was rudely rebuffed, so he turned to an alternative strategy. He wrote a letter "danda et tradenda militibus mittenda Corotici" (to

⁵² Cuthbert, "Epistola de obitu Bedae," in Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 582–4.

⁵³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.21.

⁵⁴ *Vita Ceolfridi*, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, ch. 30, 108–10; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 19, 67–9.

⁵⁵ *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 39, 118–20.

⁵⁶ On Anglo-Saxon practices of reading and translating Latin documents into English, see chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Andrew Fear, "St. Patrick and the Art of Allusion," in *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, ed. Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 326–37; Patrick, *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*, ed. and trans. David Howlett, in Morello and Morrison, *Ancient Letters*, 338–47.

be sent, delivered, and handed over to the soldiers of Coroticus) in which he declares the soldiers—but not the warlord—excommunicate.⁵⁸

Some of Patrick's rhetoric seems designed to undermine the loyalty of Coroticus's men (presumably with the further purpose of convincing Coroticus himself to change his mind), but Fear demonstrates that Patrick's appeals are more often tailored to a much wider audience: the church in Britain. Because excommunication is a social punishment, the project could not hope to succeed without the church's cooperation, and because Patrick, whose see was in Ireland, had neither the canonical authority nor the necessary access to the local church hierarchy to impose his will directly, an open letter, intended for widespread copying and distribution, offered a way to apply public pressure to both the soldiers and the leadership of the British church who tolerated them.

Patrick was explicit about the "open" nature of his letter:

Quaeso plurimum ut quicumque famulus Dei promptus fuerit ut sit gerulus litterarum harum, ut nequaquam subtrahatur uel abscondatur a nemine, sed magis potius legatur coram cunctis plebibus et praesente ipso Corotico.⁵⁹

I beseech most of all that every servant of God might be ready to be a bearer of this letter, that it should by no means be stolen or concealed by anyone, but much rather that it be read openly to all people, and with Coroticus himself present.

3.5. Historical Precedents

⁵⁸ Patrick, *Epistola*, 338.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 341.

The idea that letters might be addressed to a single individual, but intended for wider consumption, had been established, and maintained in a continuous tradition, for centuries before Bede's time.⁶⁰ In the Roman Empire, letter-writing (or dictation) was a widespread aristocratic practice, due to the necessity of organizing and maintaining large networks of friends, patrons, clients, business contacts, and employees across long distances. But Roman rhetoricians almost never included epistolary theory in their handbooks.⁶¹ Some indications of classical attitudes can, however, be gleaned from practical examples.

Although Cicero never wrote a formal treatise on epistolary rhetoric, his letters and speeches indicate that he had given some thought to the tension between public and private communication inherent in the genre. His legal defense of Lucius Valerius Flaccus includes a discussion of how, in Asia, clay seals were used "non modo in publicis sed etiam in privatis litteris" (not only on public but also on private letters), and Cicero could comfortably assume that his audience understood the distinction.⁶²

Julius Victor, author of a fourth-century treatise on rhetoric, which, although rare, was apparently known to Alcuin,⁶³ similarly distinguishes between official and personal letters: "Epistolarum species duplex est; sunt enim aut negotiales aut familiares.

⁶⁰ See Haseldine, "Epistolography," 652.

⁶¹ The earliest handbook to address letter-writing, ascribed to one Demetrius, is primarily concerned with achieving the proper tone. Demetrius's treatment of letters was not widely imitated by later writers on rhetoric. Demetrius, *On Style*, ed. and trans. Doreen C. Innes, in *Aristotle: Poetics / Longinus: On the Sublime / Demetrius: On Style*, LCL 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 309–525. Letter writing was generally learned by imitation, and collections of model letters were compiled in a more or less continuous tradition from at least the Late Antique period through the Carolingian. See James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (1974; repr., Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 194–202. The elaborate architecture of the *ars dictaminis* was not articulated until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See Murphy, *Rhetoric*, 202–3.

⁶² C. MacDonald, "Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, 37," *Classical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1979): 217–18. See also Abraham J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 12.

⁶³ Donald A. Bullough, "Alcuin [Albinus flaccus] (c. 740–804)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, updated 27 May 2010, 6–7.

Negotiales sunt argumento negotioso et gravi” (There are two kinds of letters; they are, namely, either official or personal. Official letters are concerned with official and serious matters).⁶⁴

Yet simply knowing that there was such a difference was not necessarily sufficient to enable a letter writer to ensure that private letters remained private. Cicero retained copies of his own correspondence, and sometimes shared them with his close friends, but he appears not to have had any expectation that collections of his letters—nearly 900 in total—would be widely published after his death, opening not only his eloquence and the details of his political life, but also his mundane transactions and petty vanities to the eyes of the curious for thousands of years.⁶⁵

While these sources attest to the widespread and longstanding use of letters as public documents, there is no evidence to suggest that Bede had read them.⁶⁶ He had, however, read a great many letters that *were* clearly intended for public consumption.

Of these, the most obvious models were the epistles of the New Testament, which, as Haseldine observes, “provided examples of letter writing at its most public and authoritative for the Christian world.”⁶⁷ Early in his letter to Ecgberht, Bede recommends that the bishop keep his mind and his tongue occupied with the reading of the “Pastoral

⁶⁴ Julius Victor, *Ars Rhetorica*, 27: “De Epistolis,” excerpted in Malherbe, *Epistolary Theorists*, 62. Both these references occur without helpful context. It is possible that Cicero’s *litterae publicae* should be understood as something closer to the modern concept of “official letters,” and that Victor’s *epistolae negotiales* are merely “business letters,” in which case neither example illuminates the public/private distinction.

⁶⁵ D. R. Shackleton, introduction to *Cicero: Letters to Friends*, vol. 1, LCL 205 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1–2; P. G. Walsh, introduction to *Cicero: Selected Letters* Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiv–xv.

⁶⁶ Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Libraries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205; Roger Ray, “Bede and Cicero,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 16 (1987): 12–15. Lapidge has compiled four Bedan citations from three of Cicero’s works, but any or all might be second-hand, gleaned from later manuals of rhetoric and grammar. Roger Ray has made a plausible though unverifiable case that Bede was familiar with Cicero’s *De inventione*. No one has suggested that Bede knew Cicero’s letters. Victor’s text survives only in a single twelfth-century copy in Italy, and it was never widely influential. Although it seems unlikely that Bede had not at least heard of Patrick, he makes no mention of him in the relevant sections of the *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁶⁷ Haseldine, “Epistolography,” 650.

Epistles” of St. Paul to Timothy and Titus.⁶⁸ Like Bede’s letter, these are admonitory letters to bishops, and, like his, they instruct their addressees to ordain sufficient priests, to live cleanly and maintain sobriety so that they might teach effectively,⁶⁹ and to resist the corrupting desire for wealth.⁷⁰ Like Bede’s, these letters touch briefly on personal concerns,⁷¹ but they also seem to have been written with the whole community in mind. For example, they emphasize the importance of avoiding heretics and obeying social superiors meekly, and include stern advice about the proper conduct of young men and old women.⁷² None of these admonitions would seem to have been directly applicable to the bishop himself.⁷³ More importantly, regardless of what their author intended, these letters *had* entered the public realm, in the fullest way imaginable, by their acceptance into the canon of scripture, where they stood alongside other Pauline letters that were explicitly addressed to the Christian communities, such as those in Rome, Corinth, or Ephesus (the community overseen by Timothy).

These communities generally consisted of multiple churches, and letters must have been copied and circulated among them.⁷⁴ The Letter to the Colossians, also attributed to Paul, describes such a process:

⁶⁸ All three letters identify Paul as their author. Modern scholars—except for a minority “whose theological views,” like Bede’s, “make it difficult for them to accept the possibility of pseudonymous authorship”—deny this claim. David E. Aune, “The Pastoral Letters: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 552.

⁶⁹ Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7, 4:16.

⁷⁰ Titus 1:11; 1 Timothy 6:9–10.

⁷¹ 2 Timothy 1:3–5, 4:9–15.

⁷² Titus 2:9–10, 3:1–2, 2:3–6.

⁷³ Aune, “Pastoral Letters,” 562: “In all three letters, the named author, ‘Paul,’ of course, is not the real author, nor are the named recipients (‘Timothy’ and ‘Titus’) the real addressees. ‘Paul’ functions as a respected authority figure, while ‘Timothy’ and ‘Titus’ are paradigms of ideal Christian ministers . . . who appropriately mediate ‘Paul’s’ authority. . . . 1 Timothy and Titus are also fictitious official paraenetic letters that are intended for a wider Christian audience than the two individuals to whom they are purportedly addressed.”

⁷⁴ See Jouette M. Bassler, “Paul and His Letters,” in Aune, *Blackwell Companion*, 382–3.

et cum lecta fuerit apud vos epistula facite ut et in Laodicensium ecclesia legatur et eam quae Laodicensium est vos legatis.⁷⁵

And when this letter has been read to you, see both that it be read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you read the letter of the Laodiceans.

Bede of course knew these letters intimately, and he made it plain that the interpretation of the New Testament letters should not be limited by the local circumstances of their composition or their acknowledged audience. He began his commentary on the seven Catholic Epistles with the pronouncement that all these letters are called “catholicas” (catholic) because they are “uniuersales” (universal).⁷⁶

This applies not just to those with an explicitly universal audience, such as that of James, which is addressed “duodecim tribubus quae sunt in dispersione”⁷⁷ (to the twelve tribes which are in dispersion), and Jude, addressed “his qui in Deo Patre dilectis et Iesu Christo conservatis vocatisque”⁷⁸ (to those who are beloved in God the Father and preserved and called to Jesus Christ), but also to those that name specific individual recipients, such as 2 John, which is addressed “electae dominae et natis eius quos ego diligo in ueritate”⁷⁹ (to the elect lady and her children whom I love in the truth), and 3 John, addressed “Gaio carissimo”⁸⁰ (to the most beloved Gaius). Bede explains this

⁷⁵ Colossians 4:16.

⁷⁶ Bede, *In epistolas vii catholicas*, in *Bedae Venerabilis Opera II*, vol. 4, ed. David Hurst, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1973), 181. English translation in Bede, *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. David Hurst (1985; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 3.

⁷⁷ James 1:1; Bede, *In epistolas*, 183. For Bede’s argument that references to the twelve tribes should be understood to encompass the whole church, see Bede, “Homily I.13,” ch. 3, 4–6.

⁷⁸ Jude 1:1, Bede, *In epistolas*, 335.

⁷⁹ 2 John 1:1, Bede, *In epistolas*, 329.

⁸⁰ 3 John 1:1, Bede, *In epistolas*, 332.

universality in his exegesis of 1 Peter, which is addressed “electis aduenis dispersionis Ponti, Galatae, Cappadociae, Asiae, et Bithyniae” (to the elect newcomers dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia). The “newcomers,” Bede explains, are people who were born gentiles, but converted to Judaism and accepted circumcision before learning about and converting to Christianity. “Sed et nos,” he argues, “si ueraciter cum propheta Deo dicere possumus quoniam incolae nos sumus apud te in terra et peregrini sicut omnes patres nostri, ad nos quoque epistolas beati Petri scriptas credere et ut nobis missas legere debemus”⁸¹ (But, if we too are able truly to say to God with the prophet that before you, we are inhabitants of the earth and sojourners just like all our forefathers, we ought to believe that the letters of blessed Peter were also written to us, and to read them as if they had been sent to us). This was hardly a novel interpretation. At the dawning of the third century, Tertullian had proclaimed, “ad omnes apostolus scripserit dum ad quosdam”⁸² (When the Apostle wrote to some, he wrote to all).

The use of open letters, which were addressed to bishops but intended and expected to reach the ears of the wider community, continued through the early centuries of the church, as chronicled (and often reproduced) by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (a book Bede knew intimately in the Latin translation by Rufinus, and which had been one of the models for his own *Ecclesiastical History*). As Ignatius journeyed to Rome to receive his martyrdom, Eusebius records, he gave oral homilies in various cities, emphasizing the tradition of the apostles, “quas traditiones cautelae gratia et ne quid apud

⁸¹ Bede, *In epistolas*, 225; 1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 38:13.

⁸² Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 5.17, 612. Cited in Bassler, “Paul and His Letters,” 383.

posteris remaneret incerti, etiam scriptas se adserit reliquisse” (Which traditions he asserts that he also left behind in written form for the sake of caution and lest any uncertainty should remain to posterity).⁸³

The entanglement of the personal and the public is evident in Eusebius’s list of the cities and bishops to which Ignatius wrote from Smyrna, in which the bishops and their communities appear to be inseparable:

scribit inde unam epistolam ad Efesios eorumque pastorem, in qua meminit et Onesimi, aliam Magnesia civitati, quae super Maeandrum iacet, in qua et episcopi Damaei mentionem facit. sed et ecclesiae, quae est Trallis, scribit, cuius principem tunc esse Polybium designavit.... Haec et multa alia his similia ad diversas ecclesias scribit. sed et ad Polycarpum velut ad apostolicum virum datis litteris Antiochenam ei ecclesiam praecipue commendat.⁸⁴

He wrote from there one letter to the Ephesians and their pastor, in which he also mentioned Onesimus, and another to the community of Magnesia, which lies upon the Maeander, in which he makes mention also of Bishop Damas, and he also wrote to the church which is at Tralles, of which he noted that Polybius was chief at that time.... These and many others similar to them he wrote to different churches. But also, having given letters to Polycarp as to an Apostolic man, he especially commended the Antiochene church to him.

⁸³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Latin translation by Tyrannius Rufinus, in *Eusebius Werke*, ed. Eduard Schwartz and Theodor Mommsen, vol. 2, part 1: *Die Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1903), 3.36.1, p. 275.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.36.5–11, pp. 277–9.

Such letters were copied and distributed even far beyond the local communities to which they were addressed, as Polycarp explains to the Philadelphians:

Scripsistis mihi et vos et Ignatius, ut si quis vadit ad partes Syriae, deferat litteras ad vos: quod faciam, cum tempus invenero. mittam vobis et Ignatii epistulas et alias, si quae sunt, quae ad nos transmissae sunt, ex quibus utilitatem maximam capiatis.⁸⁵

Both you and Ignatius wrote to me that, if anyone should go to the regions of Syria, he may bring letters to you, which I will do, when the time comes. I will also send to you the letters of Ignatius and others, should there be any, that have been sent to us, from which you may obtain the greatest benefit.

In the patristic era, the church fathers continued the tradition of using ostensibly personal letters to make universal, public points. In 1935, M. L. W. Laistner judged that the letters of Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory were probably not available to Bede in anything like the extensive collections available today.⁸⁶ This remains true, but the production of numerous critical editions of Bede's works in recent decades has revealed that Bede knew many more of these letters than Laistner realized. Laistner detected citations of four letters from Augustine and four from Jerome in Bede's work, but in an

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.26.14–15, p. 281.

⁸⁶ M. L. W. Laistner, "The Library of the Venerable Bede," 1935, reprinted in *The Intellectual Heritage of the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 129–32.

appendix to his 2006 *Anglo-Saxon Libraries*, Michael Lapidge lists eighteen from Augustine and nineteen from Jerome.⁸⁷ Bede also cites letters by Cyprian, Dionysius Exiguus, Leo the Great, Lucian, and Pelagius.⁸⁸

In the “singularly rancorous correspondence” conducted “with studied courtesy”⁸⁹ between Jerome and Augustine, which Laistner acknowledges “may have been in England by the eighth century,”⁹⁰ the two church fathers jockey for social dominance. In their edited volume, *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison argue that

Letter exchange advertises and negotiates social status.... Certain types of relationship and of status differential (such as father/son or teacher/pupil) are particularly common in surviving letters.... Even when there was no such paternal relationship, participants in a correspondence might choose to adopt epistolary roles which mimicked them, or to assert themselves by dwelling upon and magnifying the consequences of such role-playing.⁹¹

Jennifer Ebbeler suggests that “the discernible hostilities in the correspondence” between Augustine and Jerome “arise because Augustine deliberately refuses to play the *iuuenis* to Jerome’s *senex* and instead represents himself as Jerome’s exegetical equal.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Libraries*, 201, 217.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 206, 219, 222.

⁸⁹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 271.

⁹⁰ Laistner, “Library,” 250–1.

⁹¹ Morello and Morrison, preface to *Ancient Letters*, vii.

⁹² Jennifer Ebbeler, “Mixed Messages: The Play of Epistolary Codes in Two Late Antique Latin Correspondences,” in Morello and Morrison, *Ancient Letters*, 302.

But social dominance makes little sense outside a social context. These roles were important because both authors assumed—and were performing for—a wider audience.

Laistner concluded that Bede's library "was stocked with all Gregory's genuine works except the letters," since "although Gregory had himself taken steps to have a collected edition of his voluminous correspondence made, this seems to have disappeared early," and no large collection was made again until the Carolingian era.⁹³ Of course, Bede knew the Gregorian letters he himself transcribed into the *Ecclesiastical History*, which had been recorded in the papal archives and made available to Nothelm for transcription. But he also knew of Gregory's own collection of personal letters, which he lists among the pope's achievements in the opening chapter of Book 2 of the *Ecclesiastical History*.⁹⁴ Though he could not have read their contents, he knew that Gregory had intended them for wide readerships.

Entire chapters of the *Ecclesiastical History* are devoted to transcriptions of letters written by church leaders and addressed not to the whole Christian community but to individual men. This treatment suggests strongly that Bede applied Tertullian's dictum not only to Paul, but to Pope Gregory I,⁹⁵ St. Augustine of Canterbury,⁹⁶ Pope Boniface V,⁹⁷ Pope Honorius I,⁹⁸ Pope Vitalian I,⁹⁹ and even Ceolfrith, the abbot of Bede's own monastic community at Wearmouth and Jarrow.¹⁰⁰ The contents of all these letters were

⁹³ Laistner, "Library," 129. Boniface, at least, did not think Gregory's collected letters were available in England as of 746 or 747, when he wrote to Ecgberht, "Interea ad indicium caritatis fraternitati tuae direxi exemplaria epistularum Sancti Gregorii—quas de scrinio Romanae Ecclesiae excepi; quae non rebar ad Britanniam venisse" (Meanwhile, as a mark of affection, I have dispatched to your brotherhood copies of the letters of Saint Gregory—which I obtained from the archives of the Roman church; which I do not think have come to Britain). "Letter of Boniface to Egbert" in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 359.

⁹⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.1, 128.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.23, 1.24, 1.27, 1.28, 1.29, 1.30, 1.31, 1.32, 5.21.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.10, 2.11.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.17, 2.18, 2.19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.29.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.21.

regarded by Bede as entirely suitable for publication. So were the contents of a letter Bede had received from Bishop Acca, extracts of which he incorporated into the prefatory letter attached to his commentary on Luke.¹⁰¹

And Bede was not unusual in this attitude. Similar letters had been published by Stephen of Ripon¹⁰² and the anonymous author of the *Life of Ceolfrith*.¹⁰³ And no one felt any need to justify the practice against expectations of privacy. There were none. These were documents of public concern, full stop.

Indeed, Bede clearly considered his own letters to be documents of public interest, and he personally retained and distributed copies of them. In the list of his own works at the end of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede included the following item:

Item librum epistularum ad diversos: quarum de sex aetatibus saeculi una est, de mansionibus filiorum Israel una, una de eo quod ait Isaias ‘Et claudentur ibi in carcerem et post multos dies uisitabuntur’, de ratione bissexti una, de aequinoctio iuxta Anatolium una.¹⁰⁴

Also, a book of letters to various people: one of which is about the six ages of the world; one concerning the dwelling-places of the children of Israel; one about Isaiah saying, “And they shall be shut up in prison there, and after many days they shall be visited”; one on the reason for the leap year; one about the equinox, following Anatolius.

¹⁰¹ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, 5–6.

¹⁰² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, chs. 43 (from Theodore to Aldfrith), 54 (from Pope John to Æthelræd and Aldfrith).

¹⁰³ *Vita Ceolfridi*, chs. 30, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.24, 568.

“From this catalogue,” observes George Hardin Brown, “it is obvious that Bede did not will to posterity a collection of familiar letters; these are all scholarly disquisitions.”¹⁰⁵ Further, although Migne collected sixteen surviving Bedan letters, Brown remarks that “most of these are Bede’s prefaces to his exegetical works.”¹⁰⁶ Bede evidently did not draw a sharp distinction between the two. He expected all these letters to reach relatively wide audiences.

3.6. Bede’s Public

Neither Bede nor Ecgberht, then, could have expected that a formal letter from the greatest scholar of the age to the most powerful prelate in the kingdom, concerned with issues of intense political, ecclesiastical, and personal interest to all the churches, monasteries, and political leaders of Northumbria, could be, in any sense, private. In fact, Bede begins his letter with an apology for writing, rather than coming to discuss his concerns with Ecgberht privately:

Quod si ita, Deo uolente, posset impleri, non opus esset tibi haec per litteras scripta dirigere; cum possem liberius ore ad os loquens, quaequae uelim siue necessaria ducerem secreta tibi allocutione suggerere.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Brown, *Companion*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 94, n. 78. See *PL*, 94: 655–710.

¹⁰⁷ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 1, 124.

If, by God's will, it could happen thus, there would be no need to send these lines to you in writing, because, speaking to you more freely face to face, I could suggest whatever I wished or deemed necessary in private conversation.

The veracity of Bede's excuse, that poor health prevented him from traveling, and so forced him to write, can hardly be questioned, since he died within a few months after writing the letter. But there is also a significant public rhetorical side to this claim. Bede specifically justifies his use of the *public* format of a letter as against communication "by private conversation" (*secreta . . . allocutione*).

Of course, the word "public" carries connotations in modern usage that did not apply in the age of Bede. The nature and extent of lay literacy in early Anglo-Saxon England will be discussed in Chapter 4, but it is a debate over whether the percentage of laypeople who could read Latin was near zero or actually equal to zero. Parchment, ink, books, and the technical skills required to manufacture them were available only to specialists. Clearly, Bede could not expect a wide *readership* outside the church. Even within monasteries, there can have been few inmates who would have had both the skill and opportunity to read and understand Bede's letter for themselves. But an article published in an academic journal today—couched in technical terminology and hidden behind high paywalls—cannot expect to reach a wide audience directly, either. Yet it is still a public document, and it might have wide-ranging effects. Its findings might be summarized by journalists or popular authors, taught in undergraduate courses, and incorporated into the future work of other scholars. It might be put to all sorts of uses

never envisioned by the author, who has relinquished the right to control its dissemination almost entirely.

There were several publics whose opinions must have mattered to Ecgberht in 734, all of whom could be expected to have at least indirect access to Bede's writings. Obviously, Ecgberht needed the support of the local religious establishment, including both the priests and deacons over whom he had clear jurisdiction and the major monastic communities, where the nature and extent of his authority was more nebulous. But he also required the support of the lay nobility. Although Alcuin praises Eadberht, Ecgberht's brother and Ceolwulf's successor, as a military hero who subdued his enemies and enlarged his kingdom, Northumbria's days as an expansionist military state, dominated by kings whose power derived from battlefield success, were over. In the eighth century, the balance of power had shifted considerably from the royal family towards the larger aristocracy, and kings rose and fell in accordance with their ability to build and maintain a stable coalition of leading nobles.¹⁰⁸ Considering the rate at which kings and bishops were deposed in the decades before and after his tenure, Ecgberht must have been acutely aware of the need to cultivate this base of support.¹⁰⁹ Finally, his planned accession to the status of archbishop would be impossible without the active support of the larger church hierarchy, including especially the leadership in Canterbury and Rome. Bede had a close and longstanding relationship both with Albinus, the abbot

¹⁰⁸ N. J. Higham, *The Northern Counties to AD 1000* (New York: Longman, 1986), 291–2.

¹⁰⁹ The story of the eighth-century struggles for the Northumbrian throne, overflowing with betrayals, executions, murders, forced exiles, triumphant returns, and multi-generational power-plays between aristocratic families, is laid out by David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190–3, who notes that, although the aristocracy was clearly behind most or all of these coups, political life may have been less chaotic than it appears, because the specific wording of the annals tends to suggest that the aristocrats worked together to effectively limit the power of the kingship, perhaps even serving as a sort of elective council (196–7).

of the influential monastery of Sts. Peter and Paul outside the walls of Canterbury, and with Nothelm, who was evidently being groomed to become the next archbishop of Canterbury. Nothelm's cooperation was especially important, because his willingness to accede to a considerably reduced archdiocese on Archbishop Tatwine's death in 735 was the *sine qua non* for the establishment of a northern archbishopric.

In a world without an internet or printing press, the concept of "publication" is also obviously anachronistic, and yet it is not entirely useless. A process did exist for copying and disseminating an author's work. A related process also existed whereby an author could relinquish personal control over a text and transfer it into something like the public domain, where it might be copied, distributed, and incorporated into public discourse by others. In a 2002 article, Paul Meyvaert described this process, citing a passage that appears in Bede's *On Orthography*, copied from Isidore of Seville, who had copied it in turn from the fifth-century bishop Agroecius, that distinguishes the stages of medieval publication:

*CONSCRIBERE est multa simul scribere; EXSCRIBERE quod alibi scriptum sit transferre; TRANSCRIBERE cum ius nostrum in alium transit...*¹¹⁰

Conscribere is to write many things at the same time; *exscribere* [is] to transfer what is written to another place; *transcribere* [is] when our *ius* (right, permission, prerogative) passes to another....

¹¹⁰ Paul Meyvaert, "Medieval Notions of Publication: The 'Unpublished' *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* and the Council of Frankfort (794)," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 12 (2002): 78–9. Bede, *De Orthographia*, in *PL* 90, col. 130C. My translation.

The term most relevant to a discussion of “publication” is *transcribere*, which indicates the action of releasing the work for copying and circulation.¹¹¹ Bede highlights this distinction in the preface to his *Ecclesiastical History*, where he explains that he previously sent Ceolwulf a copy of the work, which he had recently completed,¹¹² “ad legendum ac probandum” (to be read and approved), but that the current copy is sent “ad transcribendum” (to be copied and distributed).¹¹³ Bede makes similar distinctions in his letter to Albinus, which accompanied the copy of the *Ecclesiastical History* that he sent to the abbot, who had encouraged Bede to undertake the work and had provided much material about the history of Kent. Bede explains that he sent it “mox ut consummare potui” (as soon as I was able to complete it) and specifies that the version sent is “ad transcribendum.”¹¹⁴

Bede is even more precise in the preface to his prose *Life of Cuthbert*, where he explains the process of composition, revision, approval, and publication in some detail.¹¹⁵ He assures his readers that he has not presumed to hand over his work “passim transcribenda” (to be copied and distributed far and wide) without carefully verifying his

¹¹¹ Meyvaert, “Medieval Notions,” 81.

¹¹² Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, preface, 2–3, translate “quam nuper edideram” as “I have lately published,” which obscures these distinctions. Similarly, J. A. Westgard, “New Manuscripts of Bede’s Letter to Albinus,” *Revue Bénédictine* 120, no. 2 (December 2010): 214–15, translates “illud quod . . . nuper edidi” as “that which I have recently published.” Indeed, at least in classical usage, *edere* could mean published. However, Meyvaert, “Medieval Notions,” 79, has shown that, in the early Middle Ages, a technical distinction was maintained between *edere* and *transcribere*:

The verb mostly used to indicate that a work has been produced, had been ‘given birth to,’ is *edere*: we encounter numerous examples of *librum edidi*, *libellum edidi*, etc. One might assume that the normal desire of an author who had produced a work would be to see it put into circulation. But sufficient texts survive to show that there was a distinction, at least on a mental level, between the notion of ‘producing’ and that of ‘putting into circulation.’ After completing a work an author might want to lay down conditions he wished fulfilled before he would allow it to be transcribed and go into circulation.

¹¹³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2. See also the discussion of this passage in Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:1–2.

¹¹⁴ Westgard, “New Manuscripts,” 214–15.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 5 for further discussion.

materials. He had shown Herefrith, the Lindisfarne priest sent to Wearmouth and Jarrow, a draft, “*digesto opusculo sed adhuc in schedulis retento*” (when the little work was arranged but still remained on loose pages). After suitable revisions, he undertook “*commendare menbranulis*” (to commit it to parchment), at which point he considered that the work was complete, and sent it to the Lindisfarne brethren. But it was still not “*transcribendum*,” until “*cuncta quae scripta erant communi consilio decernebantur absque ulla ambiguitate legenda, et his qui religionis studio uellent ad transcribendum esse tradenda*” (all the things which had been written were determined, by common counsel together, to be suitable to be read without any ambiguity and to be given over for the purpose of copying and distribution to those who desire this because of their religious zeal).¹¹⁶

Thus, as Meyvaert concludes, “a work went into general circulation when the author signalled, whether explicitly (as in the above examples) or tacitly, that what he had written was available *ad transcribendum*. His explicit use of that verb, or his action in handing the work over to be transcribed, indicated that he was relinquishing his exclusive right to the work (*ius nostrum*) by granting others permission to have their own copies (*in alium transit*).”¹¹⁷

In the case of a letter between two public figures, the author’s *ius* over the material must have been understood to be transferred along with the letter itself. We need look no further than the numerous letters copied verbatim into the *Ecclesiastical History*, or the hundreds of letters between prominent Anglo-Saxons in the eighth century that

¹¹⁶ Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, preface, 142–6.

¹¹⁷ Meyvaert, “Medieval Notions,” 81.

have survived to the twenty-first,¹¹⁸ to recognize that a letter like Bede's would almost certainly have been preserved, copied, collected, and distributed in various forms, and that both Bede and Ecgberht would surely have expected as much. These letters do not specify that they are meant for copying and distribution, but they *were* copied and distributed, without apology. While we cannot know for certain what factors determined whether a letter would be considered important enough to be copied and distributed, it doesn't strain credibility to suppose that a learned letter on topics of widespread public concern, written in an elevated rhetorical style on the eve of a momentous historical change, from the foremost intellectual in Europe to the most powerful prelate in the kingdom, might have been an obvious candidate. It is difficult to imagine that this possibility would not have occurred to Bede and Ecgberht.

3.7. The Fate of Bede's Letter

After excusing himself for not coming to York and for using a public forum, Bede offers a third apology:

Precorque te per Dominum, ne harum apices litterarum arrogantiae supercilium esse suspiceris, sed obsequium potius humilitatis ac pietatis ueraciter esse cognoscas.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, the dozens of letters collected in Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*. Godman, introduction to *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, xxxviii, reports that over 300 letters by Alcuin have survived.

And I beseech you, in God's name, not to suppose that the point of these words is arrogant pride, but rather, recognize it to be truly humble and pious obedience.¹¹⁹

This sounds like a humble apology, but the sentence also serves as a warning that the letter it introduces will carefully maintain an important ambiguity: it might be interpreted either as a series of suggestions between sympathetic fellow-churchmen, or as a personal attack against a social and hierarchical superior.¹²⁰ Bede invokes a common and ancient objection to the use of writing: many of the tools of expression used in personal conversation, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, answering questions, and responding to non-verbal cues from listeners, are unavailable to the writer, who must rely on words alone.¹²¹ This too is somewhat disingenuous. Had Bede wished to be clear that his criticisms did *not* refer to Ecgberht, he could easily have done so.¹²² Instead, he has carefully left open both possibilities, and thus given Ecgberht the choice: he could ignore the letter and try to minimize its public impact, or he could embrace it and publicize it as evidence of Bede's support for his episcopacy.

¹¹⁹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 1, 124.

¹²⁰ Such disavowals were widespread in letters of the period and often deployed with something approaching cynicism. For example, Alcuin assures King Ethelred of Northumbria, "vestra non horrescat humanitas benigne accipere quod mea offerre pro salute patriae studet devotio, nec culpas vobis invehere me arbitramini sed poenas amovere velle intelligere" (Let your gentleness not bristle to receive benevolently what my devotion strives to offer for the benefit of the country; understand that I wish not to introduce blame to you but to take away penalties), in preface to a letter that blames the Viking sack of Lindisfarne on the sinful behavior Ethelred has been tolerating among his people. "Letter of Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria," in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 493.

¹²¹ See, for example, Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. H. N. Fowler, in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 166:

Writing . . . is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say one and the same thing. And every word, when once it was written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.

¹²² For example, by clarifying the convoluted construction of a similar apology in ch. 4, after encouraging Ecgberht to surround himself with godly men: "Quod non ita loquor, quasi te aliter facere sciam, sed quia de quibusdam episcopis fama uulgatum est, quod . . ." (I do not say this in this manner, as if I know that you do otherwise, but because the common report about certain bishops is that . . .). Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 4, 128.

Suppressing the letter would be both difficult and dangerous. The impressive breadth of Bede's high-ranking contacts throughout Anglo-Saxon England is evident from the long list of abbots and bishops who served as sources for the *Ecclesiastical History*,¹²³ and the capabilities of the scriptorium at Wearmouth and Jarrow had been amply demonstrated by the production of three complete and nearly-perfect pandects of the Bible in the first two decades of the eighth century.¹²⁴ If Bede, and his supporters at Wearmouth and Jarrow, had wished to publicize the letter, Ecgberht could not easily have prevented it. If he attempted to limit the distribution of the letter, Ecgberht would forgo the opportunity to capitalize on the potential support of the greatest scholar in Europe, and would, moreover, suggest that he himself was the target of Bede's criticisms.

On the other hand, Ecgberht could embrace the letter, implicitly asserting that these criticisms could not apply to him, but must be directed at other bishops, perhaps including his own rivals. The more vocally he drew attention to the letter, the more clearly he would seem to indicate his innocence, provided he maintained a seemingly entourage and made an appreciable effort to expand the provision of pastoral care in his diocese. This approach would enable him to capitalize on Bede's celebrity, and emphasize the warm relationship between the two men suggested in Bede's opening sentences. From Bede's point of view, it would ensure that Ecgberht associated himself with the desired reforms.

In the event, as Bede must have intended, Ecgberht chose this second option.

Although Bede's most ambitious plan, dividing the existing bishoprics, never came to

¹²³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2–6. See also Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 14–16.

¹²⁴ *Vita Ceolfriidi*, ch. 20; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 15; R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, "The Art of the Codex Amiatinus," *JL* 1967, in Lapidge, *Bede and His World*, 1: 187–324; Richard Gameson, "The Cost of the Codex Amiatinus," *Notes and Queries* 39, no. 1 (1992): 2–9; M. B. Parkes, "The Scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow," *JL* 1982, in Lapidge, *Bede and His World*, 2: 557–86.

fruition, Ecgberht did establish himself as a reformer and a leading expert in canon law.¹²⁵ He was never accused (as several contemporary English bishops were) of maintaining a riotous court. And he seems to have promoted his relationship with Bede at every turn. He became known as a good source for obtaining copies of Bede's works.¹²⁶ He established an extraordinary library and school at York, in whose curriculum Bede's works clearly played a central role.

And, whether by Ecgberht or others, the letter most certainly *was* copied and distributed. The letter survives in three independent manuscripts.¹²⁷ "Only" three, say McClure and Collins, who judge that it "clearly had a very limited dissemination."¹²⁸ Indeed, three manuscripts may provide unsatisfactory raw material for a modern editor, and some of Bede's other works survive in dozens or even hundreds of copies, but the vast majority of those are in continental manuscripts, and while Bede's letter to Ecgberht had urgent local interest, it was probably too parochial to have concerned a European public beyond the expatriate Anglo-Saxon communities in Gaul and Saxony. Comparatively few *English* manuscripts of any of Bede's works—or any other pre-Viking Northumbrian texts—survive.¹²⁹ All of Bede's other surviving personal letters

¹²⁵ Mayr-Harting, "Ecgberht [Egbert] (d. 766)," 2–3.

¹²⁶ St. Boniface wrote to Ecgberht to request copies of Bede's works, and his successor, Lul, later wrote to York with a request for more. "Letter of Boniface to Egbert, archbishop of York, with reference to the letter of King Æthelbald (746–747)," in Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 824; "Letter of Lul to Coena (Ethelbert), archbishop of York, asking for prayers and the works of Bede (767–778)," in Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 834–5.

¹²⁷ The manuscripts are London, British Library, MS Harley 4688 (s. x), 89r–97r; The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 70 H 7 (s. x/xii–xiii), 45r–58r; and Oxford, Merton College, MS 49 (s. xv), 296v–301r. See Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, cxv–cxvi; Plummer, *Opera historica*, 1:cxli–cxlii. Grocock and Wood note that "There are lapses, misspellings, and minor omissions in all three MSS, and none can be regarded as a parent of any other; in addition, the similarities in spelling and shared omissions which very occasionally occur could easily be the result of errors in common rather than copying. As a result of this it would appear that no meaningful stemma can be envisaged; all three MSS appear to derive from a common ancestor, and there does not appear to be any contamination."

¹²⁸ McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxix.

¹²⁹ See Brown, *Companion*, 119–22; M. L. W. Laistner, *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1943), 2: "The passage of time and the Danish invasions have destroyed nearly all the copies of Bede's various works that were written in England for a century or so after his death." The principal exception is the *Ecclesiastical History*, which survives in numerous English manuscripts.

usually appear attached to more substantial works,¹³⁰ but the letter to Ecgberht did not become an inseparable appendage to the *Ecclesiastical History* until modern times.¹³¹

Of the two English manuscripts, one, Oxford, Merton College 49, was not produced until the fifteenth century, and yields few clues about its source.¹³² Its existence, and the fact that it was not made from one of the other surviving copies, does indicate that the text was in circulation, however. The second, British Library Harley 4688, which was produced in the early twelfth century, is more suggestive. A fragment of parchment from the original flyleaf (fol. 1v) bears a thirteenth-century Durham ownership inscription (“Liber Sancti Cuthberti”)¹³³ followed by the letter D (now erased),¹³⁴ and the first words of fol. 3r appears on early Durham book lists. This is in keeping with Durham’s practice of identifying a book by a letter and the first words of its second full leaf,¹³⁵ so that this codex appears in a Durham catalogue of 1391 as “D. Beda

¹³⁰ Brown, *Companion*, 94. For Bede’s letter to Albinus, which survives in two medieval copies of Austrian provenance, see Westgard, “New Manuscripts,” 208–13. The unified collection of letters Bede described in the list of his writings in the *Ecclesiastical History* does not survive, but all the individual letters it contained have survived, each bundled with a relevant longer work.

¹³¹ It was included among Bede’s historical works by Plummer in 1896 and is appended to both the revised Penguin (Sherley-Price and Farmer) and the Oxford World Classics (McClure and Collins) translations of the *Ecclesiastical History*.

¹³² Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, cxv.

¹³³ British Library, detailed record for Harley 4688, in *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*, <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=7323&CollID=8&NStart=4688>. See also R. A. B. Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 52. Plummer, *Opera historica*, 1:cxli, misdates the manuscript to the tenth century, and Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, cxiv–v, follow Plummer, although the error had previously been noted by Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 799.

¹³⁴ See N. R. Ker, ed., *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books*, 2nd edition, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 3 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1964), 73. The erasure of the D is recorded in Andrew G. Watson, ed., *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books, Supplement to the Second Edition*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 15 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1987), 30.

¹³⁵ Ker, *Medieval Libraries*, 61, describes the usual Durham practices:

“The *ex libris* inscriptions are also written at the head of the first leaf of text and usually in the form ‘Liber sancti Cuthberti (de Dunelmo)’ (s.xii/xiii and later) or ‘De communi libraria monachorum Dunelm.’ (s.xv in.). Marks consisting of a letter and, below it, an arabic number were written on the flyleaf (usually) of some manuscripts, c.1500....”

Beriah Botfield, preface to *Catalogi veteres librorum ecclesiae cathedralis Dunelm[ensis]*, ed. Thomas Rud and James Raine, Publications of the Surtees Society 7 (London: J. B. Nichols & Son, 1839), iv–v, explains the purpose of this system:

As transcripts of the same book, —as, for instance, of the Scriptures, —having the same title and initial letter, multiplied, it became necessary, in taking an account of their number, to distinguish one copy from another by some certain mark. From the inequality of the hand-writing in different individuals, the scribe of one copy

super Parabola Salomonis. ii. fo., ‘[-]piencior rediit’.”¹³⁶ That is, the D from the flyleaf, followed by the title of the first work in the codex, Bede’s Commentary on Proverbs, and the first words of fol. 3r, “[sa]piencior rediit.” Moreover, it is also almost certainly the same book entered in an early-twelfth-century catalogue as “[Beda] super Parabolas Salomonis.”¹³⁷ In fact, the British Library, following information provided by Michael Gullick, identifies one of the two scribes as the early twelfth-century monk and scholar Symeon of Durham.¹³⁸ It is possible that the Lindisfarne community carried an earlier manuscript of the letter, along with the Lindisfarne Gospels and the relics of St. Cuthbert, on the long journeys that eventually brought them to Durham in 995, or that it had been preserved elsewhere in Northumbria in a community that, like Wearmouth and Jarrow, eventually fell under the sway of Durham after it emerged as the dominant ecclesiastical center in the region.

The letter may have been widely known, but in some cases, it is difficult to determine whether later reformers with similar concerns reflect the influence of Bede’s letter, or whether others had simply come to deplore the same shortcomings and propose similar remedies. The reforms promulgated by the 747 Council of *Clofesho* mirror Bede’s stated concerns closely, instructing bishops, abbots, and abbesses to set a good example through sober dress and adherence to the monastic rule, lamenting lay control of monasteries and calling for better education of bishops, priests, and laypeople (including

would rarely, and, if ever, accidentally, begin his second leaf with the same word as his fellow-labourer; consequently, the first words of the second leaf were generally used by the Monks as the most convenient mode of distinguishing one copy of the same work from another, and of identifying the book itself.

See also Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts*, 3–4.

¹³⁶ *Catalogi Veteres Librorum*, x, 10, 20. A later hand has also written “ff Beda sup parabolas Salomonis 20 fo piencior” at the top of 2r, presumably for the convenience of librarians.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁸ British Library, *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*. See also Michael Gullick, “The Hand of Symeon of Durham: Further Observations on the Durham Martyrology Scribe,” in *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, ed. David Rollason (Stamford, UK: Shaun Tyas, 1998), 16.

the recitation of vernacular translations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer) and improved administration.¹³⁹ But they contain no clear verbal parallels to Bede's letter, whereas the direct influence of St. Boniface, the Anglo-Saxon missionary who had become archbishop of Mainz, is far more certain. In a letter to Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury (not to be confused with either the seventh-century saint or the eighth-century disciple of Bede of the same name), Boniface called on Cuthbert to convene the council and recommended many of the reforms that the council adopted. Clear linguistic borrowing and a shared manuscript tradition both argue for the direct influence of Boniface's letter on the *Clovesho* proceedings.¹⁴⁰ But was Boniface himself influenced by Bede's letter? Although he was an admirer of Bede's in later years, there are, again, no overt borrowings from the letter to Ecgbert in Boniface's letter, whereas the language and content clearly echo those of a series of councils he had convened himself in the early 740s to consolidate the emerging Frankish church.¹⁴¹ John Blair suggests that "it is easy to see how opposition to the practice [of lay-abbacy] in the circle of Boniface may have been stimulated by the circle of Bede," but this carefully qualified formulation highlights the uncertainty about Bede's direct influence.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ "Council of Clovesho, A.D. 747," in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 360–76, especially canons 4, 5, 6, 11, 19, and 28. See also Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 99–101. Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 111–12, observes that the canons of *Clovesho* "mirror so closely (in substance though not in language) the complaints and suggestions of Bede's letter that they are either based on it directly, or express a range of widely held and clearly articulated concerns of which Bede was merely one exponent." See also Thacker, "Bede's Ideal," 151–2.

¹⁴⁰ The canons survived into modern times in only one manuscript, from the eighth century (London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho A. i), which also contained Boniface's letter to Cuthbert and other related documents. Only fragments survived the 1731 Ashburnham House fire. According to Simon Keynes, "The Reconstruction of a Burnt Cottonian Manuscript: The Case of Cotton MS. Otho A. I," *British Library Journal* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 135, "Quite simply, the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. Otho A. I was the product and is thus the enduring symbol of a concerted programme of secular and ecclesiastical reform, orchestrated by Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Æthelbald, King of the Mercians, both of whom were acting in response to appeals made from the continent by Boniface, Archbishop of Mainz." See also Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 102.

¹⁴¹ Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 102–4.

¹⁴² Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 107.

The connection to Alcuin is more certain, and, because Alcuin was a proud product of the York ecclesiastical school run by Ecgberht, it provides a useful window into Ecgberht's actual handling of the potential political dilemma posed by the letter. Alcuin not only knew Bede's works deeply, and celebrated them throughout his career, but also promoted the idea that Ecgberht (and by extension, Alcuin himself) was, in some sense, the inheritor of Bede's legacy. For example, Alcuin wrote a long verse companion to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*,¹⁴³ in which he celebrates Ecgberht's episcopate as a halcyon age, fulfilling the hopes for harmonious cooperation between church and state that Bede had expressed in his letter.¹⁴⁴ Alcuin inserted his portrait of Bede among the glories of Ecgberht's tenure, although the two men's careers overlapped by only a few years.¹⁴⁵

By the 820s, this portrayal had been simplified into a direct line of transmission. The anonymous *Vita Alcuini*, composed at the behest of a student who had known Alcuin in his last years as abbot of Tours, claims that Ecgberht was Bede's *discipulus*.¹⁴⁶ The document is highly unreliable about the details of personal relationships in a distant land ninety years earlier, but highly suggestive about how Alcuin portrayed those relationships in the last years of his life.¹⁴⁷ Although it is nowhere attested in the surviving works of Bede, Alcuin, or Ecgberht, or in any Northumbrian source, the dubious assertion that

¹⁴³ Godman, introduction to *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, xxxix. According to Godman's calculation, "Two thirds of the poem draws on Bede's *HE* and prose and metrical lives of St. Cuthbert; the rest describes events of Alcuin's own lifetime."

¹⁴⁴ Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, 98–100, lines 1251–87.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100–4, lines 1288–1318.

¹⁴⁶ *Vita Alcuini*, ed. W. Arndt, MGH, SS 15.1 (Hanover: Societas aperiendis fontibus rerum Germanicarum medii aevi, 1887), 186.

¹⁴⁷ Among other factual inaccuracies, it places Bede's death in 731, and repeats a tale that Bede lived to the age of ninety (*Vita Alcuini*, 187). It is clear from Bede's own writings, however, that both claims are false. He died in 735, in his early sixties. See also Godman, introduction to *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, xxxviii: "[The author of the *Vita Alcuini*] provides corroborative, sometimes plausible, evidence for material attested elsewhere, but little that is of independent authority."

Ecgeberht was Bede's student has been accepted without much scrutiny by many of the most illustrious Bede scholars of the last two centuries,¹⁴⁸ in part because of a second careful ambiguity in Bede's letter.

Bede never addresses Ecgeberht as his student, but he does discuss their relationship in language that could be (and has been) understood to imply it. He claims that he had come to Ecgeberht's monastery the previous year because of their mutual love of reading.

The key sentence regarding Bede's relationship to Ecgeberht is:

Memini te hesterno dixisse anno cum tecum aliquot diebus legendi gratia in monasterio tuo demorarer, quod hoc etiam anno uelles, cum in eosdem deuenires locos, me quoque, ob commune legendi studium, ad tuum accipere colloquium.¹⁴⁹

I remember that last year, when I stayed with you in your minster for a few days for the sake of study, you said that you wanted me to converse with you this year also, when you came to the same place, on account of our shared zeal for study.

Grocock and Wood render "cum tecum aliquot diebus legendi gratia in monasterio tuo demorarer" as "when I stayed in your monastery in order to read with you for a few days," but this somewhat loose translation, which they defend with a footnote asserting that "what is surely meant here is *lectio divina*.... [T]he book-based nature of

¹⁴⁸ For example, Campbell, "Bede (673/4–735)," 7: "One of his former pupils was Ecgeberht, bishop and archbishop of York"; Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 125, n. 1: "Ecgeberht was Bede's pupil"; Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:379, "He was a worthy disciple of Bede."

¹⁴⁹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgeberht*, ch. 1, 124.

their endeavours is the point being stressed here,” does not convey the ambiguity of Bede’s syntax.¹⁵⁰

The phrase “tecum” (with you) modifies “demorarer”: I stayed with you. It does not modify “legendi gratia” (for the sake of study), which Grocock and Wood translate as “in order to read with you.” Bede says he *stayed* with Ecgberht, not that he read or studied with him. Grocock and Wood have accepted one possible interpretation, one that Bede left open and Ecgberht appears to have promulgated, “the very romantic idea of these clerics poring over a text together.” It fits elegantly into the narrative Alcuin would later promote but does not state it explicitly. It is possible to see in it the venerable old scholar working side by side with his former protégé, now matured into his colleague. But had things fallen out differently, other interpretations would seem just as likely. The occasion Bede mentions could have been the only time they met. Bede does not say that they studied *together*. He may have visited York to lecture or consult at the new school, or to lobby for the reforms outlined in the letter, and obtained only a brief audience with the bishop. The ambiguous portrait sketched by Bede is part of the enticement: if Ecgberht wished to magnify the public perception of his relationship with the great scholar, he could do so by promoting the letter and, with it, Bede’s reform program.

Alcuin’s promulgation of the version that emphasizes their closeness would have been impossible if Ecgberht had treated Bede as a critic to be silenced. And indeed, manuscript evidence suggests that Bede’s *Letter to Ecgbert* was a key piece of the legacy Alcuin felt himself to have inherited from Bede. The third surviving medieval copy of the letter is contained in The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 70 H 7, a miscellaneous

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 125, n. 3.

collection of letters of various dates. The section containing the *Letter to Ecgbert* is the oldest, dating probably to the tenth century,¹⁵¹ and its contents are highly suggestive. It contains, in order, a ten-line heading, addressed to Alcuin (fol. 42), Cuthbert's *Letter on the Death of Bede* (fols. 42–5), Bede's *Letter to Ecgbert* (fols. 45–58), a letter from Alcuin to King Offa of Mercia (fols. 58–9), and a sermon by John of Constantinople (fols. 59–65). In his discussion of the transmission of the Cuthbert letter to the Continent, Ker observed that “the heading of the Hague MS. makes Alcuin's part almost certain.”¹⁵² The placement of the *Letter to Ecgbert* between a copy of Cuthbert's letter addressed to Alcuin and a letter by Alcuin himself may indicate that Alcuin was responsible for the transmission and preservation of Bede's letter, as well.¹⁵³

3.8. Confiscation

If we accept that Bede had some agency over his own writing, that he chose when to reveal his flashes of anger and when to showcase the serenity of monastic life—that is, if we can let go of the assumption that we can see into his heart, and settle for the ability to analyze his rhetoric in relation to his audiences—the logic of his letter emerges.

Perhaps the most widespread misapprehension concerning Bede's letter is that it was motivated primarily by his anger towards those monasteries that were, in his estimation, unworthy of the name. The introductions to the two most widely available English translations, for instance, both claim that this issue is the central concern of

¹⁵¹ N. R. Ker, “The Hague Manuscript of the *Epistola Cuthberti de obitu Bedae* with Bede's Song,” *Medium Aevum* 8 (1939): 40. See also Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, cxv. This manuscript was not known to Plummer.

¹⁵² Ker, “Hague Manuscript,” 40.

¹⁵³ Additionally, Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:380, suggests that a letter written by Alcuin in 793 to Æthelhærd, archbishop of Canterbury, “is perhaps modelled on Bede's to Egbert,” though he notes that “Alcuin's desire to improve his neighbors required no external stimulus.”

Bede's letter. McClure and Collins call the dubious monasteries "Bede's primary targets for complaint," and Farmer declares that "the passage on the false monasteries, which were particularly detestable to Bede" is "the heart of the letter, both in material and style."¹⁵⁴ There is no reason to doubt that Bede was sincerely appalled by the lax standards of some monastic institutions, but the reform program outlined in his letter is not designed to address those concerns. Bede does not, for instance, make even the most basic proposals to reform the existing monasteries, or establish standards they should have to maintain in order to keep their privileges, either of which would have been much easier, and more likely to succeed, than outright confiscation. The purpose of the confiscation, as Bede explains, is to appease the established monasteries that he proposed to turn into the loci of bishoprics with the land and wealth of the monasteries to be suppressed. And the purpose of Bede's attacks on the dubious monasteries is to justify that confiscation. The extraordinary emotional intensity of those attacks is not a hapless and naïve revelation of Bede's inner self. It is a pointed strategy, necessitated by the radical nature of the proposal, and the intense and widespread opposition to it that Bede clearly anticipated from powerful men and institutions with entrenched interests in the current system.

Scholarly interest in Bede's condemnation of the false monasteries has been far out of proportion to their actual role in Bede's proposed reforms. No doubt this is partly

¹⁵⁴ McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxx; Farmer, introductory note to "Bede's Letter to Egbert," in *Ecclesiastical History*, 335. This misconception has not, however, been universal. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 126–7, for example, recognizes that Bede presents the confiscation of monasteries as a means of financing the division of bishoprics, and Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, li, observe that pastoral care is the "first" of a "small number of overlapping themes" in the letter. While Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 101, acknowledges the place of the confiscations in Bede's larger program, he emphasizes Bede's emotional motivations, claiming that the undesirable monasteries "preyed on [Bede's] mind," and that Bede "pours out his heart" in the letter, which "gives vent to a boiling exasperation."

because the material is (at least by Bede's standards) salacious. It suggests a whole cast of colorfully unsavory characters—lustful abbots, greedy bishops, scheming tax-avoiders, and wandering ex-monks expelled from monasteries for unnamed crimes—that is pointedly absent from the serene unfolding of the *Ecclesiastical History*. It is also—aside from his fierce response, in relative youth, to unjustified charges of heresy—the most intense and sustained outburst of anger from the usually unflappable Bede. But its value to historians far exceeds this human interest. The passage is a precious and unique trove of information about the organization and functioning of early Anglo-Saxon society. Much of what is known or guessed about the nature of land tenure, military service, monasticism, and church organization in early Anglo-Saxon England has been extracted, at least in part, from Bede's criticisms. As Grocock and Wood observe, "Bede's analysis of the crisis in landholding is the most precise insight into the social structure of eighth-century England to have survived. It is all the more important in that it provides far and away the clearest evidence on the use of charters in Northumbria, since no authentic charter survives from northern England in this period. It is not surprising that what Bede says about landholding in the Letter to Ecgbert has been analyzed at length."¹⁵⁵

In his 1990 book *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800*, Patrick Sims-Williams made a compelling argument that Bede's attacks on the "false" monasteries "should not be taken at face value" because they partake in a long rhetorical tradition, "as part of a dialectic of the larger, more regimented monasteries, with which the future of Western monasticism lay, against surviving manifestations of a smaller,

¹⁵⁵ Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, liv. In the corresponding footnote, the editors provide an impressive bibliography of works based in whole or in part on this section of the letter. See, for example, Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 108–17, and Richard Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 28–30, 43–57.

more informal monasticism, out of which it had itself grown and which it wished to stabilize or discredit.”¹⁵⁶ Sims-Williams lays out the verbal and rhetorical parallels between Bede and his predecessors, especially John Cassian (d. ca. 435) and St. Fructuosus (d. 665), with such admirable clarity and eloquence that subsequent commentators have felt the need to applaud his argument before refusing to allow it to affect their interpretations. Grocock and Wood, for example, call it “an important discussion” that illuminates “extraordinarily suggestive” parallels, and acknowledge that “it is highly likely that Bede did indeed have the earlier text [i.e., Cassian’s] in mind.”¹⁵⁷ But they recoil from the suggestion that this context should temper their reliance on Bede’s assertions about the character of the targeted monasteries:

Whether this means that the Letter to Ecgbert is, therefore, less trustworthy than is regularly assumed is a different matter.... These parallels, however, far from proving that Bede’s arguments belong to a set of early medieval topoi, are better taken as an indication that the alienation of property to the church, and particularly to monasteries, in the post-Roman period presented very serious problems.... In other words, far from indicating that Bede was writing mere polemic within an established tradition, the Continental parallels for the arguments stated in the Letter to Ecgbert suggest that he was talking about a set of issues that had echoes across early medieval Europe.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 126–33.

¹⁵⁷ Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, lii–liii.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, liii.

John Blair makes a similar move, writing, “While I accept that [Bede] was writing within a tradition of polemic, I cannot read his complaints as anything other than a straightforward statement of his own views.”¹⁵⁹ And Scott DeGregorio directs the reader to Sims-Williams’ discussion “on the style of the letter,” but declares, “I reject his suggestion that, because the letter’s rhetoric can be placed within a tradition of monastic polemic, it should not be taken at face value.”¹⁶⁰

It is difficult to escape the sense that, rather than debating the merits of Sims-Williams’ argument, these historians dismiss it in order to assert their prerogative to extract data from a precious source. The assumption seems to be that if we concede that Bede was indeed working within a rhetorical context, it naturally follows that his words are insincere or perhaps even fictional, and therefore unreliable and useless to the historian. That would indeed leave us much poorer in our sources. But the binary between “rhetorical” and “reliable” is a false choice. We need not, for example, believe that Bede was motivated purely by pious rage in order to accept that the arrangements he describes actually existed. Most of his readers would have known enough about the variations of monastic life in eighth-century Northumbria to evaluate his claims for themselves. Lies would surely have undermined his argument, and in any case Bede was dedicated to the truth as a matter of faith. But he used an emotional appeal not when he was feeling particularly emotional, but when an emotional appeal was called for. This is not lying. It is rising to an occasion. Acknowledging that Bede acted consciously to accomplish rhetorical goals does not mean he was being deceptive. It means he was being deliberate.

¹⁵⁹ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 101, n. 106.

¹⁶⁰ DeGregorio, “Visions of Reform,” 285, n. 5.

It is even quite likely that Bede did despise monasteries whose standards—in terms of piety, regularity, and education—were less strict than those of Wearmouth and Jarrow. They competed with his own institution for land, resources, political influence, and recruits, and their presence created confusion about the purpose and status of religious communities generally. But the virulence of his attack on them should not be treated as a reliable barometer of his personal spite. He employed his most intense emotional appeals in support of this particular argument because it was by far the most difficult to justify on logical, legal, and political grounds. These monasteries had to be cast as repulsively *evil*—rather than merely inefficient, unproductive, or uncanonical, say—in order to justify his extraordinary proposal to arbitrarily void their charters and confiscate their possessions as a moral necessity.

The historical value of the passage notwithstanding, there are several indications (in addition to Bede’s own explicit assertion of his purpose) that Bede’s letter was not designed to address monastic shortcomings. Among these, the most prominent is the sheer unreasonableness of its approach. Not only does Bede fail to consider common-sense reforms, but he also fails to provide clear standards by which to distinguish the good monasteries from the bad.

Bede directs his attacks toward communities to which the label *monasterium* was applied “*stilo stultissimo*” (by a very stupid pen), though they had “*nichil prorsus monasticae conuersationis*” (absolutely nothing of the monastic way of life).¹⁶¹ The struggle over the meaning of *monasterium* had a long history even in Bede’s time, and

¹⁶¹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 10, 142.

has not yet abated in the twenty-first century.¹⁶² The central difficulty was (and remains) the enormous diversity of religious communities to which, in the early Middle Ages, the term could be applied. Bede's age was one of religious, economic, and social experimentation, and we obscure the rich variety of its religious practices if we filter it through the conceptual lens of later, more conformist ages. John Blair observes that organized communal living was the norm for all ecclesiastical people, not just for monks and nuns.¹⁶³ *Monasterium* sometimes did refer to large, wealthy, highly organized, enclosed religious houses, populated by celibate, tonsured men dedicated to the contemplative life who observed a rule and sang the hours, that is, something close to the idea evoked by the modern English cognate *monastery*. But many—perhaps most—religious communities in Bede's England differed from this picture in significant respects, and all were routinely referred to as *monasteria*. Sarah Foot summarizes the variety thus:

This blanket term could conceal a variety of types of institution ranging from a small community of a handful of men, living at a distance from secular settlement on a small portion of land with perhaps a wooden oratory or a church, to a large, well-endowed congregation of men and women, living in a planned enclosure organised around one or more stone-built churches. The household of a widow living in quiet seclusion with her unmarried daughters might be thought of as a

¹⁶² For the origins of the debate, see Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 126. The most detailed consideration of terminological issues discussed here is Sarah Foot, "Anglo-Saxon Minsters: A Review of Terminology," in Blair and Sharpe, *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, 212–25.

¹⁶³ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 119.

monasterium, just as was a new community created by the royal grant of a portion of land to an aspiring abbot and a group of like-minded men.¹⁶⁴

John Blair similarly emphasizes the potential for variation in this highly-inclusive definition:

A complex ecclesiastical settlement which is headed by an abbess, abbot, or man in priest's orders; which contains nuns, monks, priests, or laity in a variety of possible combinations, and is united to a greater or lesser extent by their liturgy and devotions; which may perform or supervise pastoral care to the laity, perhaps receiving dues and exerting parochial authority; and which may sometimes act as a bishop's seat, while not depending for its existence or importance on that function.¹⁶⁵

To compound the problem, although awareness of the diversity of early Anglo-Saxon religious communities has been growing steadily in recent decades, we remain entirely ignorant about the details of daily life in all but a tiny percentage of such communities. For these reasons, Foot and Blair, two of the leading authorities on monastic life in early medieval England, have opted to use the word *minster* (derived from the Old English *mynster*, which was in turn borrowed from *monasterium*) rather

¹⁶⁴ Foot, *Monastic Life*, 5. See also Foot, "Anglo-Saxon Minsters," 213: "There is no such thing as 'a typical Anglo-Saxon monastery' ... there are no norms governing the practice of monasteries in England before the tenth-century reformers imposed the standards of the Benedictine rule on all monastic houses."

¹⁶⁵ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 3. This is Blair's definition of *minster*, his preferred English translation for *monasterium*. See below.

than *monastery* to refer to all such communities.¹⁶⁶ Yet this solution has faced objections from D. M. Hadley, on the grounds that the word has also been associated with the so-called “minster hypothesis,” a suggestion that the later English parish system derived from earlier monastic institutions,¹⁶⁷ and by Ian Wood on the grounds that using *minster* inevitably treats English institutions in artificial isolation from the larger context of European monasticism.¹⁶⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation, I have chosen to stick with the familiar word *monastery*, because even in its narrow modern sense it conjures a reasonably apt image of the regular life in Wearmouth-Jarrow, Lindisfarne, or Whitby (the *monasteria* most central to my discussions), so far as that can be reconstructed today, and because it seems more salutary to expand the conceptual range of a familiar word than to insist on an equally problematic and less-familiar coinage.¹⁶⁹

Yet, while Bede fulminated against the loose application of the word *monasterium*, he offered neither an alternative term nor a precise definition of the true monastic way of life as he understood it, and once again he used the ambiguity to his advantage. If his goal had been to induce reform, it would have made sense to clarify exactly which flaws needed correction, and how that ought to be achieved and measured. But that was not his goal. His goal was to invalidate their charters to induce the larger

¹⁶⁶ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 3–4; Foot, *Monastic Life*, 4–6. See also Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 116–17.

¹⁶⁷ D. M. Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw: Its Social Structure, c. 800–1100*, SEHB (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 217. For the debate surrounding the “minster hypothesis,” see Eric Cambridge and David Rollason, “Debate: The Pastoral Organization of the Anglo-Saxon Church. A Review of the Minster Hypothesis,” *Early Medieval Europe* 4, no. 1 (1995): 87–104; and John Blair, “Debate: Ecclesiastical Organization and Pastoral Care in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Early Medieval Europe* 4, no. 2 (1995): 193–212.

¹⁶⁸ Ian Wood, “Monasteries and the Geography of Power in the Age of Bede,” *Northern History* 45, no. 1 (2008): 13, n. 30.

¹⁶⁹ There is one notable exception to the rule that all religious communities were called *monasteria*. The term did not apply to communities that surrounded, and depended for their existence upon, bishops. Thus Lindisfarne and Hexham, each of which was a monastery whether or not it also housed a bishop at any given time, are consistently called *monasteria*, but the term is never applied to the strictly episcopal communities at York or Canterbury. See Foot, *Monastic Life*, 5. See also Foot, “Anglo-Saxon Minsters,” 219.

monasteries to accept episcopal responsibilities. It is exceedingly unlikely that all the monasteries targeted for confiscation suffered from all the shortcomings that Bede describes, yet by tarring them all with a single brush, Bede could cast his legally dubious financing scheme as a moral, spiritual, and even military necessity.

The emotional intensity of Bede's assault also helps to mask its other significant logical failing: Bede blames the targeted monasteries for a range of serious and very real social, political, and military crises, but nothing in his proposals could actually be expected to alleviate any of those problems.

The system of landholding in early Anglo-Saxon England was complex and varied, and such evidence of its nature and organization as has survived is often partial, indirect, and ambiguous.¹⁷⁰ Yet although a detailed model is beyond our reach, a few definitive features can be clearly discerned. It appears, for instance, that, traditionally, noblemen did not always automatically inherit their ancestral lands but had to be confirmed in them by the king, as a reward for military service. On the nobleman's death, then, ownership of the land would revert to the king. Before he entered the religious life, Benedict Biscop was a thane in the service of King Oswiu, and received from him "possessionem terrae suo gradui competentem" (possession of land corresponding to his rank).¹⁷¹ Monastic institutions, however, can endure for many generations, and so lands granted to them were removed from this process; monastic endowments, consequently, were implicitly (and often explicitly) granted in perpetuity. In his letter to Egberht, Bede decried the growing exploitation of this fact, as aristocratic laymen began to change the

¹⁷⁰ Eric John, *Land Tenure in Early England* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: Leicester University Press, 1960), 1–63.

¹⁷¹ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 1, 24; see Rollason, *Northumbria*, 185–7, and Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, lv.

status of their landholdings from what is often called “loan land” (which would revert to the king upon their death) to “book land” (which would remain in the hands of the landowner’s family) by endowing and receiving charters for personal or family monasteries, thus reducing both the ranks of the military and the king’s ability to reward those who fought for him.¹⁷²

In a society where land was the source of nearly all wealth and power, permanently alienating royal lands in exchange for ready cash or short-term political advantage was a recipe for long-term disaster, and surely this fact was obvious to all involved. But there were economic forces at work that made the process almost irresistible.

The establishment of Northumbrian monasteries began during a period of rapid military expansion, when both lands and soldiers would have been plentiful.¹⁷³ But that expansion came crashing to a halt at the Battle of Nechtansmere in 685, and Aldfrith and his successors had to adjust to a world in which both lands and soldiers were scarce.¹⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the economic advantages of the monastic model—large, centrally-managed estates with diverse resources, a large labor pool, and a long time-horizon—manifested themselves in the unprecedented production or purchase of luxury goods, monumental architecture, massive libraries, and an independent power structure capable of standing up to almost any king.¹⁷⁵ It should not be surprising that the leading nobles wanted in on

¹⁷² Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 11, 144–6; Rollason, *Northumbria*, 189. For a large-scale perspective on these developments, spanning several kingdoms and several centuries, see Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, especially 43–57.

¹⁷³ Rollason, *Northumbria*, 25–43, explores the dynamic and nuanced frontiers of Northumbrian power through the period culminating in the disastrous battle of Nechtansmere.

¹⁷⁴ “Successit autem Ecgfrid in regnum Aldfrid . . . destructumque regni statum, quamuis intra fines angustiores, nobiliter recuperavit” (However, Aldfrith followed Ecgfrith in the kingship . . . and nobly restored the ruined condition of the kingdom, although within narrower boundaries). Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.26, 430.

¹⁷⁵ The description in Charles Doherty, “The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland,” in *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe*, ed. H. B. Clarke and Anngret Simms, BAR International Series 255 (Oxford:

this action. And without the cushion of wealth and prestige provided by military success, the kings became increasingly dependent on the support of those nobles. A king who did not give them what they wanted was unlikely to enjoy a long reign. So first the “*praefecti*” (reeves) and then even the king’s “*ministri . . . ac famuli*” (ministers and servants), began to acquire perpetual land rights by establishing monasteries.¹⁷⁶

Inevitably, in the long term, surrendering land rights weakened the kings and depleted their estates, until, in 734, a sizeable royal land grant was evidently off the table, even for a plan of such obvious advantage to King Ceolwulf as the establishment of an archbishopric under the direction of his cousin.¹⁷⁷ It was not unreasonable for Bede to blame this situation on the new monasteries, but it was irrelevant. So far as can be seen in his letter, Bede’s plan to allow the large established monasteries to take over the smaller, less-developed institutions would not return a single hide to the king’s lands, or a single soldier to his service. Bede’s attack successfully vilifies the targeted monasteries, but it provides no logical support for his proposal.

Some sense of the nebulosity of the charges Bede levels against the targeted monasteries can be gleaned from modern attempts to label them. What is their essential feature? Are they “lay” monasteries,¹⁷⁸ “family” monasteries,¹⁷⁹ “irregular”

British Archaeological Reports, 1985), 55, of the economic advantages enjoyed by the Irish church in this period could apply equally well to the monastic establishments founded in Northumbria: “The Church in Ireland was in a unique position. . . . It had control of manpower that must have been the envy of kings. It had established centres that exercised a strong gravitational pull (by contrast, kingship was peripatetic). It was in a position to exploit fully the technical innovations such as the heavy plough and the horizontal watermill. It was thus the only organization that could produce a surplus—particularly of grain.”

¹⁷⁶ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 13, 148.

¹⁷⁷ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 9, 140: “Et quidem nouimus quia per incuriam regum praecedentium donationesque stultissimas factum est ut non facile locus uacans ubi sedes episcopalis noua fieri debeat inueniri ualeat.” (And as we know, indeed, it has come about, through the carelessness of preceding kings and extremely stupid gifts, that a vacant place where a new episcopal see ought to be established may not be easy to find.)

¹⁷⁸ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 130.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 129; Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, lviii.

monasteries,¹⁸⁰ “pseudo-” monasteries,¹⁸¹ “dubious” monasteries,¹⁸² “bogus” monasteries,¹⁸³ or simply “false” monasteries?¹⁸⁴ What specific features distinguish them from the great diversity of religious communities that Bede had celebrated so warmly in his historical and hagiographical works? As Sims-Williams has observed, Bede’s arguments “could have been levelled against regular communities just as much as against irregular ones.”¹⁸⁵ More specifically, McClure and Collins observe that “Bede’s own monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow, founded by a family of nobles withdrawing from royal service and from military activity, originated in the very way that he condemns in the letter.”¹⁸⁶

Sims-Williams casts the conflict in terms of the long-standing rivalry between larger, stricter, institutional monasteries and the more loosely regulated “family” monasteries, which owed their existence (and presumably some of their allegiance) to the aristocratic families that founded them and provided their abbots.¹⁸⁷ Bede objects to the fact that the families of the abbots of these monasteries held hereditary rights.¹⁸⁸ Yet the family of Benedict Biscop, who founded Wearmouth, had a clear interest in the continued control of that monastery.¹⁸⁹ Biscop appointed his cousin, Eostorwine, as co-abbot.¹⁹⁰ His

¹⁸⁰ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 127.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*; Brown, *Companion to Bede*, 115.

¹⁸² Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 131.

¹⁸³ Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, lii; DeGregorio, “‘Nostrorum socordiam temporum’,” 109; Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal,” 133.

¹⁸⁴ Farmer, introductory note to “Bede’s Letter to Egbert,” 335; Sarah Foot, “Church and Monastery in Bede’s Northumbria,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio, Cambridge Companions to Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press), 61.

¹⁸⁵ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 127.

¹⁸⁶ McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxxi.

¹⁸⁷ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 127–9. “These sorts of objections,” he notes (127), “have always arisen whenever stricter and less strict forms of monasticism have existed side by side, and may say as much about the intolerance of the ‘regulars’ as about the sinfulness of the ‘irregulars’.”

¹⁸⁸ Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, ch. 12, 147.

¹⁸⁹ See Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, xxxii–xxxiv, xlvi–l, lvii. See also Bede, *Historia abbatum*, chs. 11 and 13, and *Vita Ceolfredi*, ch. 16.

¹⁹⁰ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 8, 40–3. See also Grocock and Wood, xxxiii.

successor, Ceolfrith, appears to have been a relative as well.¹⁹¹ And Grocock and Wood argue that a faction within the brotherhood must have supported the claim of Biscop's brother, a layman, to control the monastery after his death (though Bede's writings opposed that claim).¹⁹² Gilling, where Ceolfrith began his career, was led by his brother Cynefrith, who was succeeded by another relative, Tunbert.¹⁹³ Chad succeeded his brother Cedd at Lastingham.¹⁹⁴ Wilfrid appointed his relative Tatberht as abbot of Ripon and his sister's son, Bernwini, to lead the foundation on the Isle of Wight.¹⁹⁵ The Northumbrian royal family founded and controlled Whitby, which passed from Abbess Hild to her kinswoman Eanflæd, and then to Eanflæd's daughter Ælflæd in turn.¹⁹⁶ Were these not "family monasteries"?

While Bede complains of the depletion of the royal landholdings on account of the establishment of monastic foundations after the death of Aldfrith in 705, both Bede and Stephen record the increasingly large land grants made by kings in Northumbria and elsewhere in the second half of the seventh century, including those on which Whitby, Ripon, Wearmouth, and Jarrow depended. In 655, King Oswiu donated 120 hides in connection with his dedication of his infant daughter, Ælflæd, to the monastic life under the direction of Hild, who founded Whitby two years later. In about 660, according to Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*, Oswiu's son and sub-king Alhfrith gave Wilfrid about ten hides at *Stanforda*, and then gave him Ripon, along with thirty hides.¹⁹⁷ In 667, Wulfhere, king

¹⁹¹ *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 14, 94–5; *Historia abbatum*, ch. 13, 52–3. Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:364, interprets these passages to imply that Ceolfrith was a blood relative, although Wormald, "Bede and Benedict Biscop," in Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 169, n. 102, disagrees.

¹⁹² Grocock and Wood, introduction to *Abbots*, xlix.

¹⁹³ *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 2, 78–81.

¹⁹⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.23, 288–9. See Roper, "Wilfrid's Landholdings," 66.

¹⁹⁵ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 63, 136–9; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.16, 382–3.

¹⁹⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.24, 292–3.

¹⁹⁷ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 8, 16–19; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 520–1.

of Mercia, gave 50 hides to Bishop Chad to found a monastery in Lindsey.¹⁹⁸ In the 680s, having been exiled by Ecgrith, Wilfrid traveled to the land of the South Saxons, whose king, Æthelwath, granted him 87 hides to found a community,¹⁹⁹ and in 686 Cadwalla, having conquered the Isle of Wight, gave Wilfrid 300 hides.²⁰⁰ In the history of Wearmouth and Jarrow, we can follow a clear pattern of expansion and consolidation on a single monastic estate. Bede tells us that Ecgrith provided the initial land grant of seventy hides from his own possessions.²⁰¹ In 681, Ecgrith added another forty hides, a few miles to the north, for the foundation of Jarrow monastery.²⁰² Later, Ceolfrith, Biscop's colleague and successor, bartered for eight hides, which he eventually exchanged as part of a deal to acquire twenty hides.²⁰³ These extensive land grants, made during the halcyon days of Northumbria's expansionary period, and capable of supporting large, wealthy communities for generations, surely depleted the royal landholdings—and the political and military power they upheld—considerably.

The distinction that appears, at first glance, to be the clearest is the clerical status of the abbots: Bede laments that many of these monasteries were run by laymen. But even this bright line fades under close inspection. “[T]his was a world,” observes Blair, “in which religious communities (however lax) were viewed by observers (however strict) as something decisively different from lay households.”²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.3, 336–7.

¹⁹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.13, 374–5; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 41, 82–3.

²⁰⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.16, 382–3.

²⁰¹ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 4, 30–3. See also *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 7, 86–7. The anonymous author of the *Vita Ceolfridi* claims that the original grant was fifty hides, but that it was soon expanded by further grants.

²⁰² Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 7, 36–9. See Ian Wood, “The Foundation of Bede’s Wearmouth-Jarrow,” in DeGregorio, *Cambridge Companion*, 84–96. Although both Bede and the author of the anonymous *Vita Ceolfridi* emphasize that the new house should be understood as having been part of the original foundation from the start, Ian Wood argues that this rhetoric obscures a more complex reality, in which “Jarrow was not originally conceived as part of Wearmouth,” but that they were gradually amalgamated into a single community over a period of thirty years or more.

²⁰³ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 9, 44–5.

²⁰⁴ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 106.

Bede acknowledges that the new abbots had been tonsured and had ceased to be laymen (though he condemns them for doing so on their own authority): “Et quidem tales repente, ut nosti, tonsuram pro suo libitu accipiunt, suo examine de laicis non monachi sed abbates efficiuntur” (And in fact, as you know, such ones hastily receive the tonsure at their own pleasure, and from laymen, are made, at their own pleasure, not monks but abbots).²⁰⁵

A related criticism, that such abbots were hamstrung by their inexperience of the monastic life, was even more important, to judge from Bede’s repeated emphasis. He laments that lands are given to men “qui monachicae uitae prorsus sunt expertes” (who are utterly inexperienced in the monastic life),²⁰⁶ and claims that they learned about their calling “non experiendo sed audiendo” (not through experience, but through hearsay).²⁰⁷

Here again, Bede not only provides no reliable method of distinguishing between the good monasteries and the bad, but he also excludes any possibility for those who are targeted to reform or justify themselves. He accuses the new abbots of inexperience, but if they should import experienced monks from established monasteries, he accuses them of poaching. If they should manage to find experienced monks who are not attached to established monasteries, Bede claims that these are not true monks and must have been expelled for disobedience. And if the abbots should create new monks by converting their lay followers to the monastic life, these are not truly monks either.²⁰⁸ This is a carefully fashioned rhetorical trap from which there is no escape.

²⁰⁵ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 13, 148–50.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 11, 144.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 13, 148.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 12, 146.

In the end, the practical distinction between the true monasteries and the false must have come down to naked power. The “true” monasteries were those that were old, large, wealthy, stable, and influential. The “false” monasteries were those that were new, small, precarious, and weak. There is no need for fine legalistic distinctions to separate the two. In the absence of legal or institutional protections, the predatory and the vulnerable could be relied upon to sort themselves out as effectively as they always have. If, by the authority of a royal synod, the protections guaranteed by church and state were removed (as Bede proposed), the strong could freely devour the weak. All they had to do, at least in the fantasy promulgated by Bede, was consent to accept episcopal responsibilities. That is, they had to allow themselves to be absorbed, in turn, by an institution much older, larger, wealthier, and stronger than themselves: the Roman hierarchy.

In the long run, the absorption of the small, independent monasteries may have been inevitable. John Blair explains that “once the novelty or prestige which secured the original patronage has faded,” institutions such as minsters can become vulnerable “to a potentially deadly alliance of reformers and cost-cutters,” and the reforming impulse “could all too easily become a cloak for asset-stripping.” Most of the benefits—both worldly and spiritual—to be gained from endowing a monastery accrued only to the original donor and his or her immediate heir. A large, successful monastery (along with its dependent houses) might retain value as a center of trade, cultural production, or priestly ministrations, and it might be sufficiently wealthy or influential to look after its own interests. But small, independent institutions could quickly become, in Bede’s

phrase, “neque Deo neque hominibus utilia” (useful to neither God nor men).²⁰⁹ Although they could, in theory, be kept within a single family, the odds that a given family would produce more than a few generations of suitable heirs who were willing and able to assume the abbacy were low, and when inheritance failed, the powerful were quick to claim the estates for their own. The nature of their vulnerability would have differed with the specific circumstances of each community, some being vulnerable because the line of heredity had been broken, or separated from the interests of the powerful family who had founded and protected them, some being vulnerable because their assets were particularly desirable to the larger institutions, some because they were too small (either in lands or membership) to sustain themselves economically, and some, presumably, because they were plainly no more than tax-avoidance schemes that could not justify themselves on religious grounds.²¹⁰

Chronicling a series of land transactions that illustrate the diminishing ability of the smaller monastic communities to determine their own destinies, Blair narrates the “downward trend” over the century following Bede’s letter, as bishops and kings laid claim to communities and increasingly treated them as personal possessions to be collected, traded, and exploited freely.²¹¹ Meanwhile, even if the overall wealth in the economy was growing, “it is evident that a smaller proportion of that wealth was thought appropriate for luxury ecclesiastical consumption, and that the lion’s share of that

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 11, 142.

²¹⁰ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 134, argues that, in any case, “the tax advantages of holding ecclesiastical land were only relative, both in theory and even more in practice,” because substantial evidence survives to indicate that kings continued to expect a range of services from monastic foundations.

²¹¹ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 129–33.

shrinking resource was increasingly monopolized by a few minsters at the expense of the many.”²¹²

Yet, though perhaps inexorable, this remained a distant fate, and formidable obstacles stood in the way of Bede’s desire to hurry it along. As has often been noted in recent years, the confiscation of the monasteries is by far the most radical proposal on Bede’s agenda.²¹³ The process Bede suggests would have been difficult and dangerous, if not outright impossible. For one thing, it meant dispossessing some very powerful men. Bede says that first the great men of the kingdom, and then every royal minister, had obtained a monastic charter.²¹⁴ This is presumably hyperbolic, but the closer it is to the truth, the more intense, widespread, and well-connected the opposition to Bede’s plan would have been. Bookland had become, it seems, a handy way to reward loyal service to the king. For this reason, it is unlikely that Ceolwulf and Ecgberht would have revoked any charters that they had themselves awarded. More likely, they would have targeted monasteries established by the supporters of Ceolwulf’s predecessors,²¹⁵ and almost certainly those established by the enemies who had driven him from the throne in 731. Nonetheless, these were obviously men to be reckoned with, and who could be expected to resist.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 133.

²¹³ McClure and Collins, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, xxxi; Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 143, note 50; Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 111.

²¹⁴ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 13, 148–9.

²¹⁵ Bede’s claim that Ceolwulf was appointed by his predecessor Osric does not inspire confidence that the succession was amicable, in part because Ceolwulf had exercised oversight over the final version of the *Ecclesiastical History*, but also because Bede himself observes that the beginnings of Ceolwulf’s reign “redundauere rerum aduersantium motibus” (“overflowed with the upheavals of troublesome events”). The A, B, and C texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* indicate that Osric was murdered. Osric himself had succeeded in 718 upon the death of Ceolwulf’s brother, Coenred, who had taken the throne two years earlier upon the murder of Osred, who may have been Osric’s brother. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.23, 558; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock, David C. Douglas, and Susie I. Tucker (1961; repr., London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965), 26–8. See Kirby, “King Ceolwulf”; see also D. J. Craig, “Osric (d. 729),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

More profoundly, Bede was arguing for a dangerous legal principle. Claiming biblical precedent, he argued that the decisions of previous kings, as recorded in documents, such as charters, were not binding on present rulers.²¹⁶ The entire monastic system was dependent on the perpetuity of chartered grants. While bookland was, in the larger historical sense, a tenurial novelty, it had been in use in Northumbria since at least the 670s.²¹⁷ In 734, that was as far back as anyone could plausibly remember. If Bede's account is at all reliable, a great many monastic institutions derived their wealth and status ultimately from charters. A king's favor could be fickle, and a king's reign could be short, but a charter endured. If Bede's proposal had truly been implemented, it would have called nearly all monastic landholdings into doubt, if not immediately, then as soon as a new royal family took power and began to eye the wealth of any monasteries with doubtful loyalties.²¹⁸ It would also have seriously weakened the present and future kings, whose decrees would have carried no enduring legal weight because they could easily be reversed.

Confiscating chartered monasteries would have similarly undermined the authority of church synods, since, as Bede records, the Synod of Hertford (673) had reaffirmed the ancient canon (which had been incorporated into the canons of the Council of Chalcedon) that “*quaeque monasteria Deo consecrata sunt, nulli episcoporum liceat ea in aliquo inquietare nec quicumque de eorum rebus uiolenter abstrahere*”²¹⁹ (whatever monasteries are consecrated to God, no bishop may interfere with them in any way nor

²¹⁶ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 11, 144; ch. 16, 156.

²¹⁷ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 17, 36, recalls how, at the consecration of the church at Ripon (sometime between 669, when he was reinstated as bishop of York, and 678, when he was exiled), Wilfrid read out a list of lands that current and previous kings had given him “*cum consensu et subscriptione episcoporum et omnium principum*” (with the agreement and signature of the bishops and all the chief men).

²¹⁸ Kirby, “Time of Wilfrid,” 26.

²¹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.5, 150.

forcibly appropriate any of their possessions). Bede's solution to this nuisance—he suggests that Ecgberht and Ceolwulf call a new council to countenance his reforms²²⁰—was a loophole at best: Hertford had been a national synod, and Chalcedon an ecumenical one. No local council could plausibly overrule them.

In the most prominent local case for which we have any record, a less elemental, but perhaps more implacable, obstacle emerged. Though the events in question occurred after Bede's death, the outcome could not have been hard to foresee. Ecgberht and his brother Eadberht, who had succeeded Ceolwulf as king of the Northumbrians, apparently did attempt to revoke some charters.²²¹ Their purposes are obscure—the abbot from whom they confiscated the estates appears at least to have been more concerned with wealth than piety (John Blair has suggested that he “looks like an absentee monastic pluralist”),²²² and the layman to whom they attempted to transfer it, Æthelwold Moll, was a rising power who would eventually displace Ecgberht's family following the murder of Eadberht's son, Oswulf, in 759—but, when Abbot Forthred took his case to Rome, the local merits of the case were immaterial. Rome's position on church property was necessarily absolute. The economic foundation of Western Christendom was at stake. Land rights granted to the church could not under any circumstances be revoked. To be sure, Bede was not suggesting that the lands of the targeted monasteries be given to laymen, as Forthred's were, but to other monasteries, yet even this appears to have been deemed unacceptable: the pope instructed that “nulli laicorum vel aliae cuiuslibet personae denuo licentia admittatur piorum pertinentia locorum invadendi” (License to seize the

²²⁰ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 10, 140.

²²¹ “Letter of Pope Paul I to Egbert, Archbishop of York, and Eadbert, King of Northumbria,” in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 394–5. See also “Letter of Pope Paul I to Eadberht and Egbert,” in Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 830–1. See also Mayr-Harting, “Ecgbert [Egbert] (d. 766).”

²²² Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 131.

belongings of devout monasteries should never again be given to anyone of the laity or of any status whatsoever).²²³

For all these reasons, Bede's confiscation scheme demanded a particularly forceful defense. And because there was no legal basis for revoking charters, and no rational basis for determining which monasteries were to be targeted, appeals to reason were of limited use. Instead, Bede appealed to emotion.

3.9. Bede on Greed

Pious outrage at the impious behavior of false monks and lustful abbots was a natural and appropriate emotion for a would-be reformer to project. But it was unlikely to provide sufficient practical leverage to overthrow a long established, deeply entrenched and highly profitable system of landholding. For that, Bede's argument invokes the baser instincts of self-interest and jealousy. And he summoned those emotions by repeatedly and forcefully accusing anyone who might oppose his plan of the one sin that touched his wider audience most directly: avarice.

Beginning in chapter 6 and progressing with increasing fervor right up to the final sentences of chapter 17, Bede constructs a moral dichotomy in which the only possible stances are support for his plan or idolatrous greed. When bishops fail to perform pastoral duties everywhere throughout their dioceses, "Cuius totius facinoris nulla magis quam auaritia causa est" (Nothing more than greed is the cause of all this wrongdoing), and the bishop must be "dictante amore pecuniae" (driven by the love of money).²²⁴ Abbots who hide behind charters do so "in defensionem concupiscentiarum suarum" (in defense of

²²³ "Letter of Pope Paul to Egbert and Eadbert," 395.

²²⁴ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 8, 138.

their desires).²²⁵ The charters themselves were written “instinctu auaritiaie uel luxuriaie” (at the instigation of greed or wantonness).²²⁶ When bishops sign such charters, “eadem ipsi filargyria dictante ad confirmandum male scripta qua emptores ad comparandum huiusmodi monasteria coacti” (They are driven to confirm wicked documents at the behest of the same love of money that drove the buyers to procure monasteries of this sort).²²⁷ If anyone resists Bede’s plan, the very fact of their disagreement suggests that they are guilty of all the greedy behaviors he condemns: “Scio namque nunnullos huic nostrae exhortationi multum contradicturos, et maxime eos qui seipsos illis facinoribus, a quibus te prohibemus, esse sentiunt irretitos” (For I know that some will say many things against this exhortation of ours, especially those who know themselves to be ensnared in these misdeeds against which we warn you).²²⁸

Bede pours sarcastic scorn on greed, suggesting, “An forte errasse ac mendacium scripsisse putamus apostulum”²²⁹ (Or perhaps we think that the Apostle erred and wrote a lie) when he warned that the greedy would not inherit God’s kingdom,²³⁰ and “An forte permodica illis culpa uidetur esses concupiscentiaie?”²³¹ (Or perhaps the sin of desire seems to them to be insignificant?)

The letter concludes with a climactic argument against greed, every bit as fierce in its way as Bede’s condemnation of the monasteries, though some of the references are arcane to modern readers and it has received scant critical attention.²³²

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 17, 158.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 17, 156.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 13, 150.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 16, 154.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 16, 156.

²³⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Ephesians 5:5.

²³¹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 17, 158.

²³² Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 159, n. 93, merely observe that “Bede concludes his argument with a suitable string of *exempla*....”

An forte permodica illis culpa uidetur esse concupiscentiae? De qua et paulo latius disputem. Haec Balaam, uirum prophetiae spiritu plenissimum, a sorte sanctorum fecit extorrem; Achan filium Charmi communionem anathematis polluit ac perdidit; Saul regni infulis nudauit; Giezi prophetiae meritis priuauit ac perpetua leprae peste cum suo semine fedauit; Iudam Scariothen de apostulatus gloria deposuit; Annaniam et Saphiram (de quibus praediximus) monachorum collegio indignos etiam corporis morte multauit; et, ut ad superiora ueniamus, haec angelos a caelo deiecit et protoplastos a paradiso perpetuae uoluptatis expulit.²³³

Or perhaps the sin of desire seems to them to be insignificant? Let me discourse upon this a little further. It made Balaam, a man most full of the spirit of prophecy, an exile from the inheritance of the saints; it defiled Achan, son of Charmi, by his partaking of the offering; it stripped Saul of the insignia of the kingship; it deprived Gehazi of the worthiness of prophecy and polluted him and his seed with the disease of leprosy forever; it deposed Judas Iscariot from the glory of the apostleship; it punished Ananias and Saphira (about whom we spoke earlier), who were indeed unworthy of the community of monks, with bodily death; and, so that we may speak of higher things, it hurled the angels down from heaven and drove the first-created from the paradise of eternal pleasure.

²³³ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 17, 158–60.

In a series of apt scriptural references, Bede escalates from the incidental to the cosmic, beginning with Old Testament examples of greedy men who came to bad ends, proceeding to Saul, who lost the kingdom of Judea, then to Judas, who betrayed Christ himself, and ultimately to the fall of Satan and his angels, and the parallel fall of Adam and Eve.

Some of these exempla plainly illustrate the dangers of abdicating spiritual responsibilities in favor of *amor pecuniae*. The gentile prophet Balaam, who could truly speak the word of God, was offered bribes to curse the Israelites and eventually organized a campaign to trick them into fornication and idolatry, and so had become a byword for greed in the New Testament.²³⁴ Achan, who stole from the spoils of Jericho that had been consecrated to God, confessed that he was driven by desire.²³⁵ Ananias and Sapphira withheld a portion of their personal wealth from the apostolic commune,²³⁶ and Judas received his thirty pieces of silver.²³⁷ But Bede's culminating examples are less obviously illustrative of greed in the narrow, pecuniary sense. The fall of Satan and the Fall of Man have been variously attributed to pride, envy, or lust, but surely neither could have been motivated by love of money.²³⁸

²³⁴ Numbers 22–5, 33:16; Jude 1:11; 2 Peter 2:15; Revelation 2:4. The early Christian and patristic debate about whether to number Balaam among the true prophets was long, complex, and indecisive. See J. R. Baskin, "Origen on Balaam: The Dilemma of the Unworthy Prophet," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983): 22–35.

²³⁵ Joshua 7:21: "vidi enim inter spolia pallium coccineum valde bonum et ducentos siclos argenti regulamque auream quinquaginta siclorum et concupiscens abstuli et abscondi" (For I saw among the spoils a very good scarlet garment and two hundred shekels of silver, and a golden staff of fifty shekels, and, desiring them, I took them away and hid them).

²³⁶ Acts 5:1–8.

²³⁷ Matthew 26:14–16, 27:3–5; Acts 1:18; Psalms 68:26.

²³⁸ In his own commentary on Genesis, Bede, quoting Augustine in both cases, attributes Adam and Eve's fall to "malum ... inobedientiae, id est superbiae, contumaciae, peruersae imitationis Dei, et noxae libertatis" (the evil of disobedience, that is, of pride, obstinacy, perverted imitation of God, and harmful license), and says that the apostate angels were "de supernis sedibus suae peruersitatis et superbiae merito deiecti" (cast down from the heavenly abodes in punishment for their own perversity and pride). Bede, *Libri quatuor in principium Genesis usque ad nativitatem Isaac et eiectionem Ismahelis adnotationum*, ed. Charles W. Jones, in *Bedaе venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 1, CCSL 118A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1967), 52 and 59.

Bede indicates, however, that he has a broad notion of “greed” in mind by employing a series of near-synonymous terms, including words generally indicative of desire (*desiderium*), words generally associated with improper financial desire (*auaritia*, *auuiditas*, *rapacitas*), and words explicitly indicative of financial desire (*amor pecuniae*, *filargyria*). But this list must also include Bede’s terms that suggest sexual desire, either loosely (*cupido*, *concupiscentia*) or explicitly (*libido*). Bede fully exploits the ambiguities of these terms. When he claims that the abbots of false monasteries hide behind charters in defense of their “concupiscentia,” are they protecting their lust (since they continue to sleep with their wives) or their greed (since classifying their lands as monastic estates shields them from tax liability)? Syntactically, in the passage quoted above, it is *concupiscentia* that caused all those biblical figures to turn away from God, but shortly afterwards, Bede attributes their failings to *auaritia*: “Haec contra uirus auaritiae breuiter sunt dicta” (These things are said briefly against the disease of avarice). The net result is a blending of all forms of material desire. Lust, financial greed, and even the gluttony and drunkenness of the earlier chapters merge into a single concept: the desire for worldly things. And it is this broad concept that the author of 1 John warns against in Bede’s final biblical quote:

Karissimi, nolite diligere mundum, neque ea quae in mundo sunt. Si quis diligit mundum, non est caritas Patris in eo. Quoniam omne quod in mundo est concupiscentia carnis est et concupiscentia oculorum et superbia uitae, quae non est ex Patre, sed ex mundo est.²³⁹

²³⁹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 17, 160; 1 John 2:15–16.

Dearly beloved, do not cherish the world, nor those things which are in the world. If anyone cherishes the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world is the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of life, which is not from the Father, but from the world.

The careful construction of this closing section often subtly suggests a specific relevance for Ecgberht. For example, Bede does not say that Saul lost his kingdom, but rather the “*infulae*” of his kingdom. The Vulgate indicates that his “*diadema*” (royal headdress) and “*armilla*” (bracelet) passed to David.²⁴⁰ As Grocock and Wood observe, “Bede’s use of the term *infula* is very specific; in church usage it refers to the two ribbons which hang from the back of a bishop’s mitre.... [T]he choice of word may indicate that the example applies not simply to secular rulers but to holders of ecclesiastical office also.”²⁴¹ In an inversion of this technique, Bede claims that greed led Judas to be deposed “*de apostolatus gloria*” (from the glory of the apostleship), but what was taken from him, according to Peter in Acts 1:18, was his “*episcopatus*” (episcopacy). And the fine scarlet garment that inspired Achan’s greed was a “*pallium*.”

But why greed? Bede could presumably have constructed an equally apt condemnation of pride, disobedience, ritual impurity, lust, or sloth, all of which appear to have been, in his judgment, rampant failings in the church of his day. Certainly, Bede hated greed. Free all his life from the burdens of landed wealth and the responsibilities of inheritances, he saw the distortions they wrought on others all too clearly. He celebrated

²⁴⁰ 2 Kings 1:10.

²⁴¹ Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 159, n. 95.

generosity and simplicity and holy poverty and detachment from worldly desires. The apostolic life of the early church—in which believers sold their belongings, distributed the proceeds according to need, and held all things in common²⁴²—is a recurrent fantasy of the *Ecclesiastical History*.²⁴³ The *Life of Cuthbert* is likewise a fantasy of an English church that acknowledges the authority of the Roman hierarchy without sacrificing the Irish tradition of asceticism. His homily on the death of Benedict Biscop is a celebration of the hundredfold, Christ’s promised reward to those who gave up everything to follow him.²⁴⁴ But why greed in this letter? Why greed in an appeal to Ecgberht? This focus makes far more sense when understood as an appeal to a wider audience: the membership of the Northumbrian church.

Among the numerous biblical references with which Bede concludes his argument, the story of Gehazi suggests an important counterexample. Gehazi was the servant of the prophet Elisha. Elisha cured a Syrian general of leprosy and refused to accept any payment. Gehazi then received payment under false pretenses, and, as punishment, received the general’s leprosy, as well.²⁴⁵ In this, the story aligns with Bede’s other examples. But the story illuminates Gehazi’s greed by contrasting him with his master. Elisha’s refusal to accept payment for spiritual services echoes one of the most forceful themes of Bede’s letter.

Having laid out, in chapter 5, the basic goal of the letter—that Ecgberht should “plures . . . adiutores asciscas” (appoint more deputies)²⁴⁶ in order to provide adequate pastoral care throughout his jurisdiction—Bede applies pressure through a detailed

²⁴² Acts 2:44–5.

²⁴³ See, for example, 1.26, 3.5, 3.28, and 4.28.

²⁴⁴ Bede, “Homily 1.13”; Matthew 19:27–9.

²⁴⁵ 4 Kings 5. Gehazi led the general to believe the payment would go to Elisha, but kept it for himself.

²⁴⁶ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 130.

scriptural argument that draws attention to the church's collection of money from the faithful. He begins by setting an impracticably high bar, backed by the authority of Christ himself: "Cum enim Dominus mittens ad euangelizandum discipulos dixisset: 'Euntes autem praedicate dicentes quia appropinquabit regnum caelorum'; paulo post adiunxit dicens: 'Gratis accepistis, gratis date; nolite possidere aurum, neque argentum.'" (For when the Lord, sending his disciples to proclaim the good news, said, "Go and preach, saying that the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he continued a little later, saying, "You have received freely; give freely, accept neither gold nor silver.")²⁴⁷

Bede then provides an Old Testament example, and, in contrast to the fleeting learned allusions that culminate the letter, he explains this argument fully. Samuel—whom Bede here calls "pontifex," a term he often applied to bishops²⁴⁸—claimed that throughout his ministry, he had never taken nor accepted anything from his people, and the people agreed. Then, in attestation of Samuel's worthiness, Bede cites Psalm 98, which asserts that God heard Samuel's prayers and spoke to him.²⁴⁹

It was, of course, impossible for a massive, complex institution such as the Northumbrian church to function without financial resources—as Bede obviously knew, since a significant portion of his letter is dedicated to the defense of a fundraising scheme—and Bede never actually suggests that Ecgberht live up to these examples. The rhetorical purpose is to make Bede's actual demands seem eminently practical and reasonable by comparison and to emphasize the vast gulf between the biblical injunction and those "qui his contraria gerunt" (who do the opposite to this), that is, those who

²⁴⁷ Ibid., ch. 6, 134.

²⁴⁸ See, for example, Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.5, 152 (where Bede applies the term to Mellitus), 3.6, 230 (Aidan), 3.7, 234 (Agilbert), and 5.19, 516 (Wilfrid).

²⁴⁹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 7, 136.

“accepta ab auditoribus suis pecunia quam Dominus prohibuit, opus uerbi quod Dominus iussit exercere contemnant” (having received money from their hearers, which the Lord prohibited, scorn to fulfill the ministry of the Word, which the Lord commanded).²⁵⁰

This is the crux of Bede’s appeal to his wider audience; he repeats it relentlessly and focusses it specifically on Ecgberht:

Sollicite atque intentione curiosa, antistes dilectissime, perpende. Audiuimus enim—et fama est—quia multae uillae ac uiculi nostrae gentis in montibus sint inaccessis ac saltibus dumosis positi, ubi numquam multis transeuntibus annis sit uisus antistes qui ibidem aliquid ministerii aut gratiae caelestis exhibuerit; quorum tamen ne unus quidem a tributis antistiti reddendis esse possit immunis.²⁵¹

Consider carefully, and with assiduous attention, most beloved bishop. For we have heard—and it is widely reported—that many of the estates and villages of our people are situated in remote highlands and bristling woodlands, where at no time in the passing of many years has a bishop been seen who could provide anything in the way of ministry or heavenly grace there; however, not one of them is able to be exempt from the payment of tribute to the bishop.

This transactional attitude towards pastoral care does not harmonize easily with the warm, idealized portraits of selfless churchmen that shine out so memorably from the

²⁵⁰ Ibid., ch. 6, 134; ch. 7, 136. Bede employs the same rhetorical technique later in the letter, when he points out that, although “Mandatum quippe est Dei: ‘Vendite quae possidetis, et date elemosinam’” (Assuredly, the command of God is “Sell what you possess, and give alms”), he does not expect bishops to live up to this command, but merely to refrain from further enriching themselves through their offices (ch. 16, 155).

²⁵¹ Ibid., ch. 7, 134–6.

Ecclesiastical History, the *Lives of Cuthbert*, the *History of the Abbots*, and the homily on Benedict Biscop.²⁵² An emphasis on payments as a direct appeal to Ecgberht's personal sense of fairness would not, in itself, be a compelling rhetorical strategy, but it is perfectly suited to inspire the zeal of those who were forced to pay him.²⁵³ Despite his fierce condemnation of greed, it is the desire of material things that Bede ultimately invokes to force Ecgberht's hand, by repeatedly reminding everyone who must pay episcopal dues that the bishop may be failing to reciprocate their material outlays with spiritual returns.

Though he expresses concern for Ecgberht's personal salvation if he fails to hold up his end of the deal, Bede also takes pains to emphasize that Ecgberht's is not the only soul at stake. Referring to the bishops' failure to perform the laying-on of hands for their parishioners, "qua Spiritus Sanctus accipitur credimus et confitemur" (by which we believe and confess that the Holy Spirit is received),²⁵⁴ Bede asks, "Cuius nimirum priuatio boni ad quos amplius quam ad ipsos respicit antistites, qui illorum se promittunt esse praesules, quibus spiritualis officium praesulatus exhibere aut negligunt aut nequeunt?" (On whom does this loss of good necessarily reflect more than on the bishops themselves, who assert themselves to be their leaders, but either cannot or will not perform the duty of a spiritual leader for them?)²⁵⁵ The implied answer is "on no one,"

²⁵² It is not, however, unique in Bede's writings. See Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 359–60; see also DeGregorio "Bede's *In Ezram*," 12–13.

²⁵³ No Northumbrian evidence survives concerning the methods of assessment or enforcement for these payments. According to the West-Saxon laws of Ine (promulgated between 688 and 694), "Church-scot is to be given by Martinmas; if anyone does not discharge it, he is to be liable to 60 shillings and to render the church-scot twelve-fold." Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 399 (Whitelock's translation).

²⁵⁴ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 8, 136.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 8, 138.

but this is true only in an obviously rhetorical sense. The immediate literal answer is that the true victims are the people who do not receive the Holy Spirit.

After invoking some of the strongest biblical condemnations of greed,²⁵⁶ Bede makes this suggestion of victimization explicit:

Cum enim antistes, dictante amore pecuniae, maiorem populi partem ulla ratione per totum anni spatium peragrarere praedicando aut circuire ualuerit in nomen sui praesulatus assumpserit, satis exitiabile et sibimet ipsi et illis quibus falso praesulis nomine praelatus est comprobatur concinnare periculum.²⁵⁷

For when a bishop, driven by the love of money, arrogates, in the name of his bishopric, a greater part of the population than he is able, by any reckoning, to traverse or travel through within the span of a whole year for the purpose of preaching, it is sufficiently established that he cultivates mortal danger both for himself and for those over whom he is a prelate with the false title of protector.

The people of Northumbria were threatened with both the loss of their money and the loss of their souls.

3.10. Ecgberht's Heavenly Army

²⁵⁶ 1 Timothy 6:10, "Radix omnium malorum est cupiditas" (Greed is the root of all evil), and 1 Corinthians 6:10, "Neque auari regnum Dei possidebunt" (Nor shall the greedy possess the kingdom of God).

²⁵⁷ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 8, 138.

Despite these pressures, Bede's careful ambiguities remain in place, and provide Ecgberht some wiggle room. He can't reasonably be expected to personally visit every village in York diocese every year. Nor, despite the scriptural examples quoted above, does Bede actually suggest that Ecgberht exempt anyone from paying dues. There is, then, only one possible way to fulfill his obligations: share the burden by training and directing more teachers. Bede's entire proposal, then, is a plan to create the necessary administrative and bureaucratic infrastructure to support a thorough and systematic program of teaching and ministry.

Bede clearly articulates his conception of the bishop's responsibilities. Ecgberht, he says, was chosen by God and consecrated to his office, "ut uerbum euangelizes uirtute multa" (so that you may preach the word with great virtue).²⁵⁸ He is to strengthen the office God has entrusted to him "sacrosancta et operatione et doctrina" (through both holy work and holy teaching).²⁵⁹

This pairing of right living and right teaching is a recurrent theme for Bede. He never tired of emphasizing the necessity of aligning the two, tracing the combination back through Gregory the Great,²⁶⁰ to the Apostles,²⁶¹ and ultimately to Christ himself.²⁶² Holy words are continually yoked to holy deeds in the portraits of his great heroes, including

²⁵⁸ Ibid., ch. 4, 130.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., ch. 4, 124.

²⁶⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.1, 124.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 1.26, 76.

²⁶² Bede, *In Lucae euangelium expositio*, 333: "Vnde notandum, quia Dominus in carne apparens, omnia quae uerbis docuit, exemplis firmauit" (Whence it is to be noted that the Lord, appearing in the flesh, affirmed by example all that he taught with words). This and many of the examples in this section were collected by Plummer, *Opera historica*, 1:xxxvi, nn. 3–5.

St. Augustine of Canterbury,²⁶³ St. Columba,²⁶⁴ St. Aidan,²⁶⁵ St. Cuthbert,²⁶⁶ St. Chad,²⁶⁷ and others.²⁶⁸

But Bede makes it clear that these good actions serve a very specific end: they are an indispensable element of effective teaching. An active teacher throughout his long career,²⁶⁹ Bede had thought long and deeply about the nature of education, and the determination that “the life must not contradict the lore,” in Plummer’s memorable rendering, was the heart of his pedagogical outlook.²⁷⁰

Again and again, the great evangelists of Bede’s narratives succeed *as teachers* because their lives serve as their most effective exempla: St. Augustine’s missionaries convinced their first English converts to believe and accept baptism because of his combination of doctrine and deeds.²⁷¹ What Bede finds most commendable about the good example Aidan bequeathed to his clergy is that “non aliter quam uiuebat cum suis ipse docebat” (he taught nothing that differed from the way he himself lived among them).²⁷² Æthelthryth attracted many followers at her monastery in Ely “et exemplis vitae caelestis . . . et monitis” (both by the example of her heavenly life and by her teaching).²⁷³ When Cuthbert became prior of Lindisfarne, he didn’t merely tell the brethren how to live. Instead, he demonstrated it himself first, which, Bede observes, is

²⁶³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.26, 76.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.4, 222.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.5, 226.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.27, 432.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.28, 316.

²⁶⁸ Other examples in *Historia ecclesiastica* of prominent churchmen Bede commends for practicing what they preached include Laurence (2.4, 144), Fursey (3.19, 268), Boisil (4.27, 432), and Bishop Eadberht of Lindisfarne (4.29, 442).

²⁶⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.24, 566.

²⁷⁰ Plummer, *Opera historica*, 1:xxxvi.

²⁷¹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.26, 76: “Crediderunt nonnulli et baptizabantur, mirantes simplicitatem innocentis uitae ac dulcedinem doctrinae eorum caelestis” (They believed and were baptized, admiring the simplicity of their innocent life and the sweetness of their heavenly doctrine).

²⁷² Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.5, 226.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.19, 392.

extremely useful for teachers: “et, quod maxime doctores iuuare solet, ea quae agenda docebat ipse prius agenda praemonstrabat” (and those things that he taught should be done, he demonstrated by first doing them himself, which is wont to help teachers exceedingly).²⁷⁴ And when the priest Ecgberht came to convince the inmates of Iona to convert to the Roman dating of Easter, in the climactic resolution of the great struggle to unite the church that Bede traced across more than a century, he found willing listeners “quoniam et doctor suauissimus et eorum quae agenda docebat erat exsecutor deuotissimus” (because he was both a most delightful teacher and a most devout performer of what he taught them to do).²⁷⁵

Similarly, in his letter to Ecgberht, Bede begins by exhorting the bishop to live correctly and surround himself with good companions, because that is what he *must* do in order to teach well: “Neutra enim haec uirtus sine altera rite potest impleri si aut qui bene uiuit docendi officium neglegit, aut recte docens antistes rectam exercere operationem contemnit” (For neither of these virtues can be properly fulfilled without the other, if either a bishop who lives well neglects the duty of teaching, or if, teaching rightly, he scorns to practice right action).²⁷⁶

Ecgberht will fulfill the duties of his high office, Bede says, “si, ubicunque perueneris, mox collectis ad te eiusdem loci incolis uerbum illis exhortationis exhibueris simul et exemplum uiuendi una cum omnibus qui tecum uenerint quasi caelestis militiae ductor ostenderis” (if, wherever you come to, you immediately gather the inhabitants of that place to you, deliver a word of exhortation to them, and at the same time show them

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.28, 439.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.22, 553. Note that this is not Ecgberht, Bishop of York, to whom the letter was written.

²⁷⁶ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 2, 124–6.

an example of how to live, together with all who come with you, like the leader of a heavenly army).²⁷⁷ Many of Bede's suggestions, including the training of teachers, the division of the bishoprics, the elevation of certain monasteries to episcopal status, and the confiscation of other monasteries to compensate them, are explicitly intended to help him build this heavenly army.

But Bede also provides some basic suggestions about what all these new teachers ought to teach (the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the importance of communion, and the difference between right and wrong behavior), and how: in English.²⁷⁸ Intriguing as Bede's evident interest in English-language teaching is, the stubborn fact that all of his surviving work is in Latin,²⁷⁹ and much of it directly accessible only to the highly educated, has tended to obscure the extent of his vision for Christian education. The teaching he proposed in this letter, however, is unambiguously intended for *all* the English people. It is not to be limited to the aristocracy, and certainly not to a monastic elite. Bede emphasized the fact that the pastoral care he demanded must be provided to all with a dramatic quote from St. Paul: "Praeter ea quae extrinsecus sunt, instantia mea cotidiana, sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum. Quis infirmatur, et ego non infirmor? Quis scandalizatur, et ego non uror?" (Aside from those things which are external, my daily concern is solicitude for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn?).²⁸⁰ The following chapters will explore the question of how Bede's erudite Latin texts could have functioned within a church dedicated to universal pastoral care in an illiterate Anglophone society.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., ch. 4, 130.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., ch. 5, 130; ch. 15, 152.

²⁷⁹ One possible exception is the short poem known as "Bede's Death Song," quoted in Cuthbert's *Letter on the Death of Bede*, in Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, 582.

²⁸⁰ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 4, 128; 2 Cor. 11: 28–9.

Chapter 4

Bede's Plan for Preaching and Teaching

4.1. Coming Down from the Rooftop

All of Bede's surviving works are in Latin. They could not be read by, or even meaningfully read aloud to, the vast majority of his people, including a considerable number of clerics and monks. But it would be a mistake to assume that Bede's sole or even primary motivation in writing was to provide for the edification of a monastic elite. In fact, I will argue quite the opposite: for Bede, the purpose of a scholarly elite was to provide a theologically sound basis for the dissemination of the word of God in a serious, meaningful way, not merely to the educated, Latinate inmates of the rapidly proliferating monastic communities, but to the far broader community of English-speaking Christians who could not read it for themselves.

In Acts 10, Peter has a vision while praying on the roof of the house of Simon the Tanner, where he is lodging. While he contemplates its meaning, messengers from Cornelius, a gentile who wishes to become a Christian, arrive at the gate, and the Holy Spirit tells Peter to come down from the roof and go with them. The story functions most obviously to sanction the inclusion of gentiles in the early church, but Bede also saw in it a dramatization of the complementarity of the contemplative and the active life, or, more concretely, of scholarship and preaching:

Descendere de tecto et ad praedicandum ire iubetur, ut ecclesia dominum non solum alta subeundo speculetur, sed eundem etiam infimis quibusque et quasi

adhuc exterius positus sed tamen ostium Simonis, id est oboedientiae, pulsantibus, ad actiuam uitam redeundo uelut e lecto resurgendo praedicet.¹

He is commanded to descend from the roof and go preach, so that the church may not only keep watch for the Lord by coming up to the heights, but also, returning to the active life as if rising from bed, preach the same to all the lowest, still placed, as it were, outside, but knocking nevertheless on the door of Simon—that is, of obedience.

Peter doesn't understand the vision when he considers it in the abstract. Its meaning, that “non est personarum acceptor Deus” (God is not a respecter of persons), only becomes clear when he obeys the call to come down and preach to those he would once have called “communem aut inmundum” (common or unclean).² Likewise, the true purpose of scholarship emerges when the Christian arises from study and goes to preach to the lowliest.³

Bede was no Cuthbert. There is no suggestion in any of his writings that he personally traipsed through the countryside elucidating the finer points of allegory and

¹ Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, ed. M. L. W. Laistner, in *Bedae uenerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 4, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 52. Cited in Lawrence T. Martin, “Bede and Preaching,” in DeGregorio, *Cambridge Companion*, 158.

² Acts 10:34, 10:28.

³ It is difficult to say exactly whom Bede had in mind as the “infimis” (lowliest). Distinctions based on class, wealth, race, language, and education overlapped considerably, but not precisely, as they do in most of the world today. However, Bede did align the division between gentile and Jew with linguistic divisions in *De Templo*, where he recalls Paul's assertion to the Romans (Rm 8:15) that “accepistis Spiritum adoptionis filiorum in quo clamamus Abba Pater” (You have received the spirit of the adoption of sons, in which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’), and he explains the dual-language exclamation (“Abba Pater”) as a symbol of the duality of the early church: “Abba uidelicet qui ex Hebraeis uenimus ad fidem, Pater qui ex gentibus uariis quidem linguis pro diuersitate nationum sed unum eundemque Deum patrem propter unius donum spiritus inuocantes” (“Abba,” that is, we who come to the faith from among the Hebrews, “Pater,” who come from among the gentiles, with different languages, indeed, according to the diversity of nations, but calling upon one and the same Father, in accordance with the gift of the one Spirit). Bede, *De Templo*, ed. David Hurst, in *Bedae uenerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 2A, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1969), 215.

computistics to every swineherd and stable boy. But he did have a clear vision of his role in a church that would truly bring the Word of God to all. He was a specialist. He had a rare combination of gifts—intellectual, spiritual, educational, and material—that could not easily be duplicated, and could certainly not be mass-produced. Nor could the kinds of writing to which he was best suited directly benefit the great mass of under-educated English Christians. Yet to help only those who were already spiritually advanced, while the bulk of the English people acknowledged Christianity and refrained from idol worship without understanding what they professed to believe, or improving their moral lives,⁴ would have been to bury his talents in the ground.

Bede reveals a complex attitude toward the uneducated in an early passage in the *Life of Cuthbert*, where a group of monks, transporting a load of wood in a raft on the River Tyne, get caught in a sudden wind and blown out toward the sea. Their troubles are witnessed by their fellow monks, on one side of the river, and a “turba uulgaris” (crowd of common people) on the other, with the saint standing among them. The common people mock the monastic way of life, saying that the monks deserved their suffering because “communia mortalium iura spernentes, noua et ignota darent statuta uiuendi” (spurning the common laws of mortals, they presented new and unknown laws of life). Cuthbert reproves them for their cruelty and prays for the monks on the rafts. The wind changes, the rafts return safely, and the people praise Cuthbert’s faith ever after.⁵

When the commoners deride the saint, Bede condemns them as “rustico et animo et ore stomachantes adversus eum” (fulminating against him with ignorant [rustico] mind

⁴ On the shallowness of the original conversion, see Rosalind Hill, “Bede and the Boors,” in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1976), 93–6.

⁵ Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, ch. 3, 160–4.

and speech), but when, a few sentences later, Bede authorizes the miracle tale by reciting the chain of transmission through which he received it, he tells us that his informant had heard it from an eyewitness, “ab uno ipsorum rusticae simplicitatis uiro, et simulandi prorsus ignaro” (from a man among those of rustic candor and utterly incapable of deception).⁶ So, are the *rustici* ignorant blasphemers or straightforward truth-tellers? This dual view of the lowly, alternating between scorn and idealization, is a recurring feature of Bede’s writing throughout his career. But in this passage—quite unusually—the *rustici* are allowed to speak for themselves. And their complaint is revealing. They are not truly pagans. But they resent the fact that that the old ways, which they have dutifully abandoned, have not been meaningfully replaced: “Nullus inquit hominum pro eis roget, nullius eorum misereatur Deus, qui et ueteres culturas hominibus tulere, et nouas qualiter observare debeant nemo nouit” (They said, “Let no man pray on their behalf. Let God have mercy on none of them, who drove out the old observances from men, yet no one knows how they ought to observe the new ones”).⁷ These *rustici* are not rejecting Christianity. They are demanding to be educated about it.

This was no small task. Christianity was a religion of the book in a profound sense. Bede had dedicated his life and considerable genius to understanding it. An ordinary person might require years of dedicated, organized teaching to develop even a basic familiarity with the scriptures, and such familiarity, on its own, would still be woefully insufficient. For one thing, the cultural and material world of ancient Judea would have seemed impenetrably alien to most English people. They understood what it was to be a fisherman, a shepherd, or a king, but what was a Pharisee? or a shekel? or

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*

even a desert? Moreover, much of what had become central to the Christian religion—such as salvation history or the mystery of one God in three persons—was not explained in the Old or New Testament in any obvious way. Also, the apparent contradictions between the two testaments were so numerous and significant that, without training in allegorical methods of exegesis, even an honest, well-disposed person would end up in confusion and doubt. Church history, traditions, and hierarchy had to be understood, as did the nature of sacraments. And all this had to be somehow applied to the day-to-day lives of people of all classes in eighth-century England.

This would have been a daunting challenge requiring generations of organized and sustained effort under the best of circumstances. But to translate the essence of literate Latin Christian thought and culture to a Germanic-speaking people with no tradition of using books or documents, where the ability to read seems to have been exceedingly rare, called for extraordinary measures.

4.2. Latinity and Literacy

Assessing rates of literacy in early medieval England with any degree of precision is nearly impossible.⁸ The evidence is too scarce, and what survives is too ambiguous. Moreover, the modern conception of literacy denotes a package of skills and knowledge—letter formation, spelling, phonics, punctuation, grammar, syntax, prose style, silent reading, cultural references, genre conventions, etc.—that are more or less inseparably bundled in the experience of most educated people in industrial societies, but

⁸ For an overview of the complications, see Leidulf Melve, “Literacy—Aurality—Orality: A Survey of Recent Research into the Orality-Literacy Complex of the Latin Middle Ages (600–1500),” *Symbolae Osloenses* 78, no. 1 (2003): 146. See also Patrick Wormald, “The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and Its Neighbors,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 27 (1977): 95–6.

were often acquired and used separately by medieval people. To take the most significant example, the ability to read and the ability to write were not coupled. As long as one can find a teacher and some texts to practice on, the technical skill of reading one's native language—insofar as this means knowing the sounds associated with each letter and decoding words—is relatively easy to acquire, even without formal education, especially if the spelling is phonetic, as it was in medieval Europe. In addition, before the age of print, reading tended to be a social activity, which meant that texts were read aloud in groups, providing access to texts even for people who did not know how to read for themselves. Learning to write is more complicated, however, and would have been unattainable for most medieval people, not least because pens, ink, and parchment were expensive and difficult to make, and the task of writing with such tools was difficult to master.⁹ For the purpose of disseminating Christian thought, however, writing would have been of secondary significance. Reading was what mattered most. But, for almost all purposes in Bede's England, that meant reading Latin.

Learning to read and write in Latin would have been exceedingly difficult for most people. Unlike Modern English, Old English shares few cognates with Latin, so Latin vocabulary was entirely unfamiliar. Textbooks and grammars were rare, and nothing comparable to a modern dictionary could be found.¹⁰ In the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede mentions only two laypeople being able to read, Aldfrith of Northumbria and Sigeberht of East Anglia. Both were kings, and both were educated in foreign lands.¹¹ Stephen tells us that Wilfrid, at least in the early years of his episcopate,

⁹ Julia M. H. Smith, "Writing in Britain and Ireland, c. 400 to c. 800," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 27–8.

¹⁰ See Vivien Law, *The Insular Latin Grammarians*, Studies in Celtic History 3 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1982).

¹¹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.18, 162–3; 4.26, 268; 5.13, 311–13. See Barbara Yorke, *Rex Doctissimus: Bede and King Aldfrith of Northumbria*, JL (Jarrow, UK: St. Paul's Church Council, 2009), 4–7. See also Ireland, "Where was

would take in the sons of noblemen to be educated: “Principes quoque seculares, viri nobiles, filios suos ad erudiendum sibi dederunt, ut aut Deo servirent, si eligerent, aut adultos, si maluissent, regi armatos commendaret” (And secular great men—noblemen—gave their sons to him to be educated, so that they might serve God if they chose, or, if they preferred, he might commend them to the king as warriors when they were grown).¹² King Sigebert also “instituit scholam, in qua pueri litteris erudirentur” (founded a school, in which boys could be taught letters).¹³ Other monasteries may have done the same.¹⁴ And yet, although formal education was therefore possible for some laypeople, these scattered (and evidently remarkable) exceptions do not undermine the basic supposition that the ability to read Latin was exceedingly rare outside monasteries and episcopal centers, and certainly not common enough to support widespread dissemination of advanced learning.

Moreover, Latin literacy seems to have been severely limited even within the great monasteries themselves. Alcuin, for example, wrote to the abbot of Bede’s own Wearmouth, urging him to see to it that the Rule of Saint Benedict be read to the brothers “et propria exponatur lingua, ut intellegi possit ab omnibus” (and explained in their own language, so that it can be understood by everyone).¹⁵

One measure of the difficulty monks seem to have had with learning Latin is the sharp distinction seen between those who entered their monasteries as children and those

King Aldfrith,” 29–40. There were surely other educated laypeople. One likely candidate is Witmer, a man “in omni tam saeculari quam scripturarum scientia eruditus” (as learned in the knowledge of all things secular as of the scriptures), who appears to have joined the Wearmouth and Jarrow community late in life, though it is not certain that he was a layman until that time. Bede, *Historia abbatum*, 60.

¹² Stephen of Ripon, *Vita Wifridi*, ch. 21, p. 44.

¹³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.18, 266–8.

¹⁴ See Foot, *Monastic Life*, 143–5.

¹⁵ Alcuin, *Epistolae*, no. 19, 54; cited in Catherine Cubitt, “Monastic Memory and Identity in Early Anglo-Saxon England,” in *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 257.

who entered as adults. The Critical Period Hypothesis, first suggested by Eric H. Lenneberg in 1967, which proposes that the ability to master a second language is greatest in children and deteriorates rapidly after puberty, has been the subject of long and fierce contention among scholars of language acquisition, and has undergone numerous critiques and refinements in recent decades.¹⁶ Some scholars remain unconvinced.¹⁷ If there is one area of consensus, however, it is that language acquisition is too complex a process to be adequately accounted for by a single factor such as age. Lenneberg's observations, for example, dealt primarily with pronunciation—specifically whether language learners could speak without a detectable accent—which ought to have been largely irrelevant for Latin learners in early medieval England, since there were no native Latin speakers to compare to.¹⁸ A more significant question is whether those who begin the process of second language acquisition in adulthood are limited in their ability to master grammar. “Relatively few studies have investigated the effect of age of first exposure on ultimate attainment in morphosyntax,” observed Robert M. DeKeyser in a 2000 study, but he concluded that the available data suggest that those who begin the process as children appear to have an advantage in terms of their ultimate attainment (though not necessarily in rate of progress) in both pronunciation and grammar.

Furthermore, while Lenneberg proposed a sharp distinction beginning at puberty, the

¹⁶ Eric H. Lenneberg, “The Biological Foundations of Language,” *Hospital Practice* 2, no. 12 (1967): 59–67.

¹⁷ See Christian Abello-Contesse, “Age and the Critical Period Hypothesis,” *ELT Journal* 63, no. 2 (2009): 170–2.

¹⁸ Lenneberg, “Biological Foundations,” 62: “Progress in language development usually ceases after the age of 12 or 13, after puberty. One sign of the change may be seen in the learning of a second language. The extent of a foreign accent is directly correlated with the age at which the second language is acquired. At the age of three or four practically every child entering a foreign community learns to speak the new language rapidly and without a trace of an accent. This facility declines with age. The proportion of children who speak the second language with an accent tends to increase, but very slowly, so that by about the age of 12, perhaps 1% or 2% pronounce words differently from native speakers. A dramatic reversal of form occurs during the early teens, however, when practically every child loses the ability to learn a new language without an accent.”

decline in aptitude now appears to be more gradual between the ages of six or seven and sixteen or seventeen.¹⁹

Despite the efforts of Bede and some of his contemporaries to produce a corpus of what might today be called textbooks, the primary method of Latin training would surely have been immersion in the aural world of the monastery, where psalms were chanted daily, edifying texts were read out during meals, and masses and other services were performed throughout the day.²⁰ The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, proposed by Robert Bley-Vroman and supported by DeKeyser's experimental results, suggests that one explanation for age-based differences in language acquisition proclivity might depend on method of instruction: children are able to learn a new language *implicitly*, using the cognitive structures that enable first-language acquisition, while adults must learn *explicitly*, by studying grammatical structures analytically.²¹ The immersive, primarily oral/aural learning environment of a medieval monastery would have supported implicit learning far more effectively than explicit.

Under these conditions, one would expect to see a marked difference in ultimate attainment of Latin between those who entered the monastic life as young children and those who entered as adults, and this is exactly what we find. In the first few generations of Christianity in England, it was possible for men like Benedict Biscop, Ceolfrith, Cuthbert, and Wilfrid—who entered the religious life in their teens or early manhood—to

¹⁹ Robert M. DeKeyser, "The Robustness of Critical Period Effects in Second Language Acquisition," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 22, no. 4 (2000): 500–1.

²⁰ Charles W. Jones, "Bede's Place in Medieval Schools," in Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 265: "Vocational training [like that practiced in medieval monasteries] is not basically systematic. A disciple works beside a master and acquires his knowledge in action—dare we say inductively?"

²¹ Robert Bley-Vroman, "The Fundamental Character of Foreign Language Learning," in *Grammar and Second Language Teaching: A Book of Readings*, edited by William Rutherford and Michael Sharwood Smith (New York: Newbury House, 1988), 23–29; DeKeyser, "Critical Period Effects," 500, 520.

rise to prominence alongside those like Abbess Ælfflæd, and the Bishops Chad, Cedd, and Eata, who had begun their training as children. In Bede's generation, however, and those that followed shortly after it, nearly all the English church luminaries whose educational backgrounds are recorded started in early childhood: Acca was raised and educated "a pueritia" (from boyhood) among Bishop Bosa's clergy, and Ceolfrith's successor Hwaetberht was trained at Wearmouth "a primis pueritiae temporibus" (from the beginning of boyhood); Bede began his education at seven; the missionary Willibald entered the religious life at four or five, and Ecgberht, Alcuin, and Willibrord may even have begun their monastic lives as toddlers.²²

As Catherine Cubitt has pointed out, this distinction seems to have been considered important at the time, and Bede was careful to keep track of it.²³ Those who could not master Latin were quite limited in their ability to participate in the intellectual life of the monastery. Abbot Eostorwine, for example, was a high-ranking nobleman and a close relative to Benedict Biscop, yet Bede describes him humbly baking bread and milking the cows. Bede emphasizes these tasks to showcase Eostorwine's Christian humility, of course, but he does not fail to mention the fact that Eostorwine had not entered the monastery until he was 24 years old, which would likely have precluded him from many activities more suited to his rank.²⁴

An even more striking example is that of Owine, chief minister and head of household to Queen Æthelthryth of the East Angles, who, abandoning worldly pursuits,

²² Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 46–55. I have avoided the term "child oblate" in this discussion, because it is often difficult to determine whether these children were formally dedicated to a religious life by their parents (as Ælfflæd was, for instance) or initially brought to the monastery only to be educated. See also Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 18, 66; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.24, 5.21, 5.24, 3.27; Plummer, *Opera historica*, 2:378.

²³ Cubitt, "Monastic Memory," 256–7.

²⁴ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 8, pp. 140–2.

showed up at Chad's monastery at Lastingham with an axe and an adze in his hands, to symbolize his willingness to engage in manual labor. Bede observes:

Quod ipsum etiam facto monstravit, nam quo minus sufficiebat meditationi scripturarum, eo amplius operi manuum studium inpendebat. Denique cum episcopo in praefata mansione pro suae reuerentia deuotionis inter fratres habitus, cum illi intus lectioni uocabant, ipse foris quae opus esse uidebantur operabatur.²⁵

This he proved by his deeds, as well, for the less suited he was to the study of the scriptures, the greater the exertion he devoted to manual labor. Finally, once he had, on account of his reverence and devotion, been admitted among the brethren with the bishop in the aforesaid house, when they were occupied indoors on study, he would work outside on whatever tasks seemed necessary.

If even people of the highest social rank could not participate in religious study, what hope was there for those who lacked such privilege and power? And how could the church hope to train enough preachers and teachers to address their religious needs?

4.3. Bede and the *Idiotae*

In his letter to Egberht, when Bede remarks that he had often provided translations of the Lord's Prayer and the Creed into English for the benefit of priests who did not know Latin, the term he uses to describe these priests is *idiotae*.²⁶ In modern

²⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.3, 338.

²⁶ Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, ch. 5, 130–2.

European languages, of course, “idiot” and its cognates convey the most vituperative scorn. This connotation, however, did not come to predominate until the late fourteenth century.²⁷ Like *rusticus*, the term *idiot* could be positive, negative, or neutral. An examination of Bede’s definitions and uses of this word can help to illuminate his attitudes.

Some modern commentators have assumed that Bede’s essential purpose in mentioning priests who were *idiotae* was to draw attention to a gross systemic failure of clerical education. Sarah Foot, for example, writes that “Bede commented in his letter to Egbert on the problems caused by uneducated priests, and by clerics and monks ignorant of the Latin tongue, presenting the problem primarily as one of inadequate education.”²⁸ David Kirby likewise judged that “The low standard of learning among some clergy (ignorant of Latin and therefore even of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer) concerned Bede greatly.”²⁹ Malcolm Godden, however, says that “Bede seems to take for granted this level of ignorance, and makes no proposals for remedying it beyond providing translations.”³⁰ Certainly, Bede devoted most of his professional life to Christian education in one form or another. But, perhaps because of this long experience, Bede took a decidedly pragmatic approach to the question of who needed to be able to read Latin.

Sometime before 709, in the letter to one “Eusebius” (identified as the monk and future abbot Hwætberht) that prefaces his commentary on the Apocalypse, probably his

²⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.

²⁸ Sarah Foot, “Parochial Ministry in Early Anglo-Saxon England: The Role of Monastic Communities,” *Studies in Church History* 26 (1989): 50.

²⁹ Kirby, “Contemporary Setting,” 914.

³⁰ Malcolm R. Godden, “Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. Richard Gameson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 581.

first exegetical work,³¹ Bede criticized the English for their limited efforts to develop literacy. But he also resigned himself to this unfortunate reality, and conscientiously recalibrated his own writing to account for it:

Nostrae siquidem, id est Anglorum gentis inertiae consulendum ratus, quae et non dudum, id est temporibus beati papae Gregorii, semen accepit fidei, et idem quantum ad lectionem tepide satis excoluit, non solum dilucidare sensus, uerum sententias quoque stringere disposui. Nam et aperta magis breuitas quam disputatio prolixa memoriae solet infigi.³²

Having deemed that provision ought to be made for our slothfulness—that is, the slothfulness of the English people, who received the seed of faith not long ago, that is, in the times of blessed pope Gregory, and cultivated it half-heartedly enough with regard to reading—I determined not only to elucidate the sense, but also to compress the sentences. For plain brevity is more wont to be imprinted onto the memory than is lengthy disputation.

The note of reproach was presumably sincere, but Bede did not dwell on it, either here or in his later work. Instead, he accepted that slothfulness as a feature of the fallen world, and compensated for it wherever he could. He did not generally write for the audience he wished he had, but for the audiences he could realistically hope to reach,

³¹ Brown, *Companion to Bede*, 69.

³² Bede, *Expositio Apocalypseos*, ed. Roger Gryson, in *Bedaе venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 5, CCSL 121A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2001), 233.

either directly or indirectly. Yet even the compressed sentences of his Apocalypse commentary were obviously meant to be read only by those who were fairly competent in Latin.³³ What was Bede's attitude towards the education of those who knew no Latin at all?

The definitive use of the word *idiotae* was the Vulgate translation of Acts 4:13, where the Jewish religious authorities, having arrested Peter and John for preaching to the crowds in Jerusalem, marvel that uneducated men could speak so well: "Videntes autem Petri constantiam et Iohannis, conperto quod homines essent sine litteris et idiotae, admirabantur" (But seeing the constancy of Peter and John, when it was discovered that they were men without letters [*sine litteris*] and uneducated [*idiotae*], they marveled).³⁴ Since Peter and John were *idiotae*, it was impossible for Bede to hold *idiotae* in contempt.

And although those who understood no Latin could obviously not be counted among the readers of Bede's Latin works, he had a precisely detailed conception of the various levels of learning obtainable throughout his society and specific plans for transmitting the Christian message to each of those levels. In the letter to Acca that prefaces his commentary on Genesis (ca. 717–18), Bede acknowledged some of the obstacles that prevented the sort of learning he himself enjoyed from becoming widespread and indicated his intention to work within those limitations. After listing the preeminent existing exegetical treatments of his material, he observed:

³³ On Bede's practice of condensing and clarifying patristic texts for the benefit of English readers who understood Latin but "were in many cases hard put to concentrate at length, think elevated thoughts, and comprehend ideas taken from books prepared for audiences distant in time and culture," see Roger Ray, "What Do We Know about Bede's Commentaries?" *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 49 (1982): 10–11.

³⁴ Acts 4:13.

Verum quia haec tam copiosa tam sunt alta ut uix nisi a locupletioribus tot uolumina adquiri, uix tam profunda nisi ab eruditioribus ualeant perscrutari, placuit uestrae sanctitati id nobis officii iniungere ut de omnibus his, uelut de amoenissimis late florentis paradisi campis, quae infirmorum uiderentur necessitati sufficere decerperemus.³⁵

Indeed, because these are so numerous and lofty that so many volumes can scarcely be acquired other than by those who are richer, and so profound that they can hardly be studied except by the more learned, it pleased your holiness to enjoin it upon us as a duty that we gather from all these—as if from the most delightful fields of widely blooming paradise—those things which might seem to meet the need of the weak.

In the next sentence, Bede displays his characteristic conscientiousness about the needs of his diverse audiences by distinguishing between the *rudis* (uneducated) and the *eruditus* (educated) reader.³⁶ This same awareness would later guide the construction of his great computistical work, *De temporum ratione*. This book expanded on an earlier

³⁵ Bede, *Libri quatuor in principium Genesis usque ad nativitatem Isaac et eiectioem Ismahelis adnotationum*, ed. Charles. W. Jones, in *Bedae uenerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 1, CCSL 118A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1967), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.* For further examples of how Bede consciously tailored his works to suit the varying abilities and educational attainments of his anticipated audiences, see Bede, *In Regum librum xxx quaestiones*, ed. D. Hurst, in *Bedae uenerabilis opera, pars 2: Opera exegetica*, vol. 2, CCSL 119 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1962), 293, and the verse preface to Bede, *Expositio Apocalypseos*, 219, verses 13–22. Likewise, see Campbell, “Bede (673/4–735)”: “Bede’s life of the third-century saint, Felix, was based on poems written by Paulinus of Nola (353–431). His avowed purpose was to take rather difficult hexameters and to transmute them into ‘common and suitable’ prose for the benefit of ‘simple readers’ (*Patrologia Latina*, 94.789b). In short it was a popularized version for people who knew Latin, but not exceedingly well: ordinary monks, it may be.”

work, *De temporibus*, which novice readers had apparently found impenetrably dense.³⁷

Faith Wallis observes:

Bede explicitly “streams” his readership according to the degree of their background preparation. For example, he provides a number of methods for finding the zodiac sign in which the moon is located, depending on whether the pupil has or has not learned the names and sequence of the signs, and does or does not know how to perform sophisticated arithmetical operations (chs. 16–19). At one point, he begs the more advanced students to explain the zodiac signs to the less well-prepared (ch. 16).³⁸

Bede’s willingness to differentiate instruction based on his audience’s level of literacy, Latinity, and exegetical sophistication harmonizes deeply with the educational philosophy championed by Gregory the Great in Book 3 of his *Pastoral Care*, the work Bede particularly recommended to Ecgberht. “Pro qualitate . . . audientium formari debet sermo doctorum, ut et ad sua singulis congruat, et tamen a communis aedificationis arte numquam recedat” (The speech of the teacher ought . . . to be shaped according to the condition of the hearers, so that it may accord with each one, and yet never withdraw from the art of communal instruction), writes Gregory, and “doctor quisque, ut in una cunctos uirtute caritatis aedificet, ex una doctrina, non una eademque exhortatione tangere corda audientium debet” (every teacher, so that he may instruct all with the one

³⁷ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Charles W. Jones, in *Bedaе venerabilis opera, pars VI: Opera didascalica*, vol. 2, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1977), 263.

³⁸ Faith Wallis, introduction to *Reckoning of Time*, xxxiii.

virtue of charity, ought to touch the hearts of the hearers according to one doctrine, but not through one and the same exhortation).³⁹ Gregory lists binary distinctions in learners that ought to shape the approach of teachers. He considers both social distinctions, such as between the rich and the poor, servants and masters, or the married and the unmarried, and differences in temperament, such as between the wise and the dull, the obstinate and the fickle, or the humble and the proud. And he gives instructions in how teachers ought to adapt their approaches to suit the needs and capabilities of each group. Perhaps surprisingly, he does not directly discuss the best ways to account for differences in literacy or educational background, although he does advise “Quod infirmis mentibus omnino non debent alta praedicari” (That lofty things ought not to be preached to weak minds at all), because “nimirum qui recte praedicat, obscuris adhuc cordibus aperta clamat, nil de occultis mysteriis indicat, ut tunc subtiliora quaeque de caelestibus audiant, cum luci ueritatis appropinquant” (undoubtedly, he who preaches rightly cries out openly to hearts still dark, [and] shows nothing of concealed mysteries, so that each one may then hear more subtle things concerning the heavens as they approach the light of truth).⁴⁰ It was no great leap for Bede to extend this framework to include the binary that created the greatest practical division among his own hearers, between the Latinate and the *idiotae*.

Bede was likewise careful to distinguish between those who did not know *letters*, those who did not know *Latin*, and those who did not know the *exegetical methods* necessary to interpret scripture. In the letter to Ecgberht, Bede carefully clarifies his

³⁹ Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, in *Règle pastorale*, vol. 2, ed. Floribert Rommel, Sources Chrétiennes 382 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992), 3, 258–60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 528.

usage, explaining that by *idiotae* he means “eos qui propriae tantum linguae notitiam habent” (those who have knowledge only of their own language).⁴¹ This definition echoed the one he had given decades earlier in his commentary on Acts: “Idiotae enim dicebantur qui propria tantum lingua naturalique scientia contenti litterarum studia nesciebant” (Indeed, those were called *idiotae* who, content with their own language and innate knowledge, were ignorant of the study of letters).⁴² This formulation appears to conflate ignorance of Latin with the inability to read, but Bede later clarified the distinction in his *Retractatio* on Acts, arguing that, in the passage about Peter and John quoted above,

*Sine litteris dicit non quod litteras nescirent, sed quod grammaticae artis peritiam non haberent; namque in Graeco apertius pro hoc uerbo ἀγράμματοι, hoc est inlitterati habetur. Idiotae autem proprie inperiti uocantur; denique in epistola ad Corinthios, ubi scriptum est, etsi inperitus sermone sed non scientia, pro inperito in Graeco ἰδιώτης habetur.*⁴³

He [Luke, the author of Acts] says “sine litteris,” not because they were ignorant of letters, but because they did not have expertise in the grammatical art. For the Greek, more clearly, has “agrámmatoi” (i.e. “inlitterati”) for this word. *Idiotae*,

⁴¹ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 130–2.

⁴² Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, 26.

⁴³ Bede, *Retractatio in Actus apostolorum*, ed. M. L. W. Laistner, in *Bedaе venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 4, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 123. To contextualize the translation “sine litteris” for “agrámmatoi,” see Martin Irvine, “Bede the Grammarian and the Scope of Grammatical Studies in Eighth-Century Northumbria,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986): 24–5. Irvine cites the “standard definition of *grammatica* which was quoted in texts known to Insular authors,” from the *Ars Victorini*: “What is *grammatica*? The science of interpreting the poets and narrative writers and the principles (*ratio*) for correct writing and speaking, *apo ton grammaton*, that is from letters, for which the Latin name ‘litteratura’ or ‘litteralitas’ is given by some” (Irvine’s translation, 25, n. 18).

however, are properly called “inperiti” [unskilled]. Then, in the letter to the Corinthians, where it is written, “although unskilled in speech, yet not in knowledge,” the Greek has “idiōtēs” for “inperitus.”

In Bede’s day, “the grammatical art” encompassed the full range of monastic approaches to sacred texts, including basic Latinity, metrical theory, and advanced scriptural exegesis.⁴⁴

So, *idiotae* are those “unskilled” in the language of educated discourse (Greek, for the Apostles; Latin for the English), and *inlitterati* are those who did not have advanced training in analytic methods of reading. Neither term necessarily means that they were unable to read their native language. In fact, in his letter to Ecgberht, Bede may be implying that he gave *written* English translations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer to priests, which would suggest that they were *idiotae*, but not illiterate.⁴⁵

Bede acknowledged and accepted the differing needs and capacities of differing audiences, and believed that those who had access—as he did—to advanced knowledge and deep understanding of the faith had a commensurate responsibility to share that knowledge not only with their peers, but also and especially with those who could not learn it on their own.

⁴⁴ Irvine, “Bede the Grammarian,” 17: “Bede inherited the patristic conception of the *disciplinae* in which *ars grammatica* occupied the central position. The patristic interpretation of *grammatica* consisted of a comprehensive ‘art of letters’ devoted to literacy, the interpretation of texts, writing, and the scribal arts for maintaining and promoting a Christian monastic *paideia* comprising the Scriptures, Christian literature, and the liturgy. The methodology and departments of study of late classical *grammatica* were retained by Christian scholars but applied to Christian writings. For Jerome, Augustine, Cassiodorus, and Isidore, the primary value of *grammatica* was not pedagogical but textual, intellectual, literary, and exegetical. The scholar’s *grammatica* was a literary and interpretive method, an intellectual discourse directed toward the understanding of texts of any kind.”

⁴⁵ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 132. See Godden, “Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England,” 581.

He believed, first of all, that the essential features of Christianity could be understood even by those who were illiterate and uneducated. Bede discusses the spiritual capacities of those who know only their own language in his Commentary on Luke. In Luke's account, Jesus, preaching to a large crowd, has exhorted his followers to be ready for the coming of the Lord like faithful servants awaiting the return of their master.⁴⁶ And he has made a distinction between the servant who knew his lord's will, but did not fulfill it, who "vapulabit multas" (will be beaten with many [stripes]), and the servant who did not know, who "plagis vapulabit paucis" (will be beaten with few stripes).⁴⁷

Bede is careful to emphasize that this passage does not justify claiming ignorance as an excuse for sin:

Et ne qui de turba sibi forte de imperitia blandirentur et se idiotas ac propheticae lectionis ignaros temporum cursum probare non posse causarentur uigilanter adiungit: "Quid autem et a uobis ipsis non iudicatis quod iustum est?" Ostendens eos utpote rationalem creaturam, etsi litteras nesciant, naturali tamen ingenio posse dinoscere uel eum qui opera in se quae nemo alius fecisset supra hominem intellegendum et ideo Deum esse credendum uel post tot saeculi huius iniustitias iustum creatoris iudicium esse uenturum.⁴⁸

And lest, perchance, any from the crowd might excuse themselves on account of their ignorance, and plead that they, being *idiotae* and ignorant of the prophetic

⁴⁶ Luke 12:35–8.

⁴⁷ Luke 12:47–8.

⁴⁸ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, 263. Note that Bede gives two interpretations—the ignorant hearers could discern either that Jesus is God or that God will judge the world—because he sees an ambiguity about whether Christ was referring to the time of his first or second coming.

teaching, are not able to discern the course of the times, he quite carefully adds: “And why do you not judge of your own selves that which is just?” Showing that, being rational creatures, they, though ignorant of letters, were nevertheless able to discern by their own innate nature that He, who had done works in them that no one else had done, is beyond human understanding and therefore to be believed to be God, or that, after so many injustices of this world, the just judgement of the Creator is going to come.

So, although the emphasis here is on the *responsibility* of the unlearned, Bede’s justification is based on the idea that, with the assistance of divine grace, *idiotae* are fully capable of comprehending the essential elements of Christian doctrine.

Bede came back to this point several times in his exegetical works, most explicitly in the opening passage of his commentary on the Song of Songs, where he refutes the Pelagian heretic Julian of Eclanum. Julian, it seems (the text is known only from Bede’s dismissive summary), had claimed that the mysteries of the scriptures could be unlocked only by “eos quos oculos et eruditio reddidisset et pietas” (those whom both learning and devotion had rendered keen-eyed). Bede counters that Julian is “oblitus gratiae Dei quae etiam inlitteratis et idiotis scripturarum archana reuelauit” (forgetful of the grace of God, which has revealed the mysteries of the Scriptures even to *inlitterati* and *idiotae*),⁴⁹ for Christ himself had said “sine me, nihil potestis facere” (without me, you can do nothing),⁵⁰ and “operuit illis sensum ut intellegerent scripturas” (he opened their [i.e., the

⁴⁹ Bede, *In Cantica canticorum libri vi*, ed. David Hurst, in *Bedae venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 2B, CCSL 119B (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 167.

⁵⁰ John 15:5.

Apostles'] perception, so that they might understand the scriptures).⁵¹ In other words, without God's grace, no amount of learning will suffice; with God's grace, the inability to read or analyze Latin texts is no obstacle. Bede ties up the argument by citing the aforementioned passage in Acts, to demonstrate that the Apostles, to whom the ability to interpret the scriptures had been given by God's grace, had indeed been *idiotae*.

And, while he obviously valued his own learning, and sought to cultivate that of his readers, Bede repeatedly warned against any arrogance founded on educational superiority. In his commentary on Proverbs 12:8–9, he declares:

Melior est idiota et simplex frater, qui bona, quae novit, operans, vitam meretur in coelis, quam qui clarus eruditione scripturarum, vel etiam doctoris functus officio, indiget pane dilectionis.⁵²

Better to be an *idiot* and a simple brother who, doing the good things that he knows, merits life in heaven, than one who, brilliant with learning of the scriptures, or even performing the office of a teacher (*doctor*), lacks the bread of love.

Bede went further. In his commentary on Acts, he argued that the Apostles were chosen to preach the gospels specifically *because* they were uneducated:

⁵¹ Luke 24:45.

⁵² Bede, *In Proverbia Salomonis*, ed. David Hurst, in *Beda's venerabilis opera, pars II: Opera exegetica*, vol. 2B, CCSL 119B (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 75–6.

Inlitterati mittuntur ad praedicandum ne fides credentium non uirtute dei sed eloquentia atque doctrina fieri putaretur, ut apostolus ait: [*non enim misit me Christus baptizare sed evangelizare*] *non in sapientia uerbi ut non euacuetur crux Christi.*⁵³

Inlitterati were sent to preach, lest the faith of believers should be thought to be caused not by the power of God, but by eloquence and erudition, just as the Apostle says: [For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to evangelize,] not in learnedness of language, so that the cross of Christ be not made void.

Idiotae could be skilled, effective, and even knowledgeable preachers. In his commentary on Acts 2:22, Bede praised Peter’s rhetorical approach and referred to him as a “doctus magister” (learned teacher).⁵⁴ In his later *Retractatio*, commenting again on Peter’s rhetorical skill, this time at Acts 3:13, Bede calls him “doctor sapiens” (wise teacher).⁵⁵

So Bede accepted the diversity of educational and linguistic capabilities among the English, asserted the obligation of the educated to teach the uneducated, recognized that those who spoke no Latin still had the ability to understand the Scriptures, and even asserted that they could be qualified for the priesthood.

⁵³ Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, 26, citing 1 Cor. 1:17.

⁵⁴ Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, 19. See Lawrence T. Martin, trans., *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 40, n. 12. Bede directs the reader to the Cornelius episode mentioned above for a further example.

⁵⁵ Bede, *Retractatio*, 106–7. Note that this does not mean that Bede discounted the differences between monks and ordinary laypeople. Monks were, for him, a class apart from—and above—other Christians, separated by their education, their lifestyle of prayer and ritual purity, their contemplative experiences, and above all by their decision to abandon all worldly things to follow Christ, making them worthy not only to receive eternal life, but to receive back all that they had given up a hundredfold on earth, and to sit in judgement beside Christ and the Apostles on the last day. See Bede, *Homily* i.13, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, chs. 1–7, pp. 2–10, and Matthew 19:16–30.

In practical terms, this meant that the actual work of preaching, teaching, and baptizing the illiterate, English-speaking people of Northumbria could and should be performed largely by *idiotae*. In *De Templo* (ca. 729–31), Bede again lamented the *inertia* (slothfulness) of his time, criticizing those who would call themselves priests but lack the firm faith to scorn worldly pomp and the hardiness to correct—or “*industriæ saltim ad intellegendos*” (even the diligence to understand)—the errors of those over whom they have been placed.⁵⁶ But note that the necessary diligence no longer concerns obtaining literacy or Latinity, but simply understanding of the faith.

An examination of one example of a man who failed to meet the minimum expectations for an illiterate priest might help to illuminate what those expectations looked like in practice. In the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede relays a reminiscence by one Herebald, abbot of a monastery on the mouth of the Tyne, about his youth in the entourage of Bishop John of Beverley. Abbot Herebald relates that he had joined in an impromptu horserace in defiance of the bishop’s orders, fallen from his horse, and suffered a severe head injury. Once it became clear that Herebald would recover, the bishop had asked him whether he was certain he had been baptized, and Herebald told him the name of the priest who had performed the ritual. John answered:

Si ab hoc . . . sacerdote baptizatus es, non es perfecte baptizatus; noui namque eum, et quia cum esset presbyter ordinatus, nullatenus propter ingenii tarditatem potuit cathecizandi uel baptizandi ministerium discere, propter quod et ipse illum

⁵⁶ Bede, *De Templo*, 207.

ab huius praesumptione ministerii, quod regulariter implere nequibat, omnimodis cessare praecepi.⁵⁷

If you were baptized by this priest, you were not fully baptized, for indeed I know him, and I know that when he was ordained a priest, he was by no means able to learn the rite for catechizing or baptizing, on account of his slowness of intellect, and for that reason I myself enjoined him to desist entirely from presuming to perform the office which he was unable to fulfil properly.

The young Herebald could not be properly healed until the ritual failure of the priest who baptized him had been corrected. But John, whom Bede celebrates primarily for his skill in healing, rather than his depth of learning,⁵⁸ diagnoses the problem not as a systemic educational failure, but as the personal deficiency of an individual student. The priest failed to learn the ministry of catechism and baptism “propter ingenii tarditatem” (on account of his slowness of intellect), not because he is an *inlitteratus* or *idiota*, although he was presumably both, for John could hardly have accused a competent Latinist of *tarditas ingenii*. It appears that the priest was expected to memorize and perform the office in Latin, not to understand it, just as a healer might perform a cure without fully understanding the principles underlying its efficacy. Reciting the formula correctly was what mattered. This, at least, seems to have been Herebald’s understanding,

⁵⁷ Bede. *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.6, 468.

⁵⁸ Though he was trained at Whitby and may also have been a student of Theodore and Hadrian, which would suggest that he was highly educated. See D. M. Palliser, “John of Beverley [St John of Beverley] (d. 721),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

and Bede does not contradict it, though his aspirations for the spiritual development of such priests were of course far more ambitious.

4.4. Texts and Images

Bede was plainly interested in direct Latin-to-English translations, and his student Cuthbert, who may have hoped to initiate a Bede cult, carefully emphasized Bede's work in English in his account of the scholar's death.⁵⁹ But the texts Bede actually translated were few, and they were carefully selected for specific contexts. For ordinary people, and even for priests, he suggested only that they learn the Creed and the Lord's Prayer in English, two short texts that could be easily memorized through oral repetition. Indeed, the 747 Council of *Colfesho* went further, promoting vernacular translations of the mass and the baptismal rite as well.⁶⁰

The English needed Christianity. Not just the *texts* of Christianity, but a whole culture and way of life. And the traditional (and, practically speaking, the only) means of communicating such things in medieval England was orally. In English.

There were unprecedented challenges. Translating the most significant Christian texts into English, then copying and distributing them, and educating a populace to be able to read them, may seem, to a modern person, like the obvious way to approach the problem of distributing Christian knowledge, because that is the traditional system *we* have for distributing ideas. But to a medieval person, it would have been simply ludicrous. It is misleading to discuss such an approach as though it was their preferred method, and they were forced to fall back on Plan B due to technical limitations. No one

⁵⁹ Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 16–20.

⁶⁰ "Council of Clovesho, A.D. 747," in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 360–76.

suggested it, any more than a person today might suggest that we distribute public health information by installing Wi-Fi receptors inside each of our skulls. Some future historian might wonder how we compensated for the lack of such receptors, but that would not accurately model the problem as we encounter it today.

Written communication in English presented its own set of problems. There were technical challenges, such as adapting the Roman alphabet to represent sounds not found in Latin (or adapting the runic alphabet for use with ink and parchment). These could be—and were—overcome in relatively short order.⁶¹ Cultural and social obstacles may have proved more stubborn than technical and economic ones, however. There was no tradition of written literature, and few contexts in which legal or business documents were advantageous. Significantly, as Wormald pointed out, there is no evidence of a traditional learned class comparable to the Irish *filid* that might have cultivated and taught vernacular literacy.⁶² In any event, no sustained effort to translate Latin texts into English appears until the ninth century, and none became widespread until much later.⁶³ Even if many people could be taught to read, and great herds of cattle slaughtered for their skins, the task of translating even the scriptures into English, and creating a significant number of copies—not to mention the greater mass of Christian thought, from poetry to patristic theology to synodal decrees—was inconceivable.

The sheer volume of information to be transmitted was staggering. But it was also necessary to adapt a traditional oral system to align more closely with a text-based

⁶¹ David Parsons, *Recasting the Runes: The Reform of the Anglo-Saxon "Futhorc"* (Uppsala: Institutionen för Nordiska Språk vid Uppsala Universitet, 1999), 11. See also Elizabeth Okasha, "Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence from Inscriptions," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 8 (1995): 69–74; and Smith, "Writing in Britain and Ireland," 28–9.

⁶² Wormald, "Uses of Literacy," 104.

⁶³ See Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*, 2.

system. The flexibility of an oral tradition, its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and retain its authority and dependability, is its greatest strength . . . as long as the illusion of permanence can be maintained. The introduction of literacy into an oral culture is disruptive in large part because it undermines that sense of permanence. It illuminates the fluidity of the oral world by contrast with the apparent durability of a text.⁶⁴

The tension between the two cultures was potentially explosive. The introduction of texts might discredit traditional systems of authority and the social order they upheld, while the introduction of oral culture might transform Christianity beyond recognition—and into heresy. In early Christian England, then, it was necessary not only that ideas be introduced and disseminated, but also that their natural tendency to mutate in transmission be restrained. This demanded redundancy. No single method of explaining Christianity could suffice on its own, just as a person could not lead a fully Christian life after having once heard a single sermon.

The transitions between Latin and English and between written parchment codices housed in monastic libraries and oral audiences scattered throughout the countryside were the obvious chokepoints in the flow of information between the two cultures, and Bede gave thought and effort to several methods of circumventing them. Bede praised a series of religious paintings that Wearmouth's founder, Benedict Biscop, had imported from Italy and hung inside the churches of his monasteries, partly for the benefit of those "litterarum ignari" (ignorant of letters).⁶⁵ In his homily for the anniversary of Biscop's death, Bede explained:

⁶⁴ See Chapter 1. See also Goody and Watt, "Consequences of Literacy," 321–6.

⁶⁵ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 6, p. 36.

pincturas sanctarum historiarum quae non ad ornamentum solummodo ecclesiae uerum et ad instructionem intuentium proponerentur aduexit uidelicet ut qui per litterarum lectionem non possent opera domini et saluatoris nostri per ipsarum contuitum discerent imaginum.⁶⁶

He brought back paintings of sacred stories to be displayed not only for the adornment of the church but also for the instruction of those looking upon them, specifically so that those who might not be able to do so through the reading of letters might learn the works of our Lord and Savior through the contemplation of the images themselves.

With those paintings seemingly in mind,⁶⁷ Bede offered a general defense of religious images in *De Templo*, arguing that, since God commanded Moses to display a bronze serpent,⁶⁸ paintings and sculptures of Christ, the Apostles, and the saints ought likewise to be allowed, “cum horum aspectus multum saepe compunctionis soleat praestare contuentibus et eis quoque qui litteras ignorant quasi uiuam dominicae historiae pandere lectionem” (since the sight of them is often wont to elicit great compunction from those who see, and also to unfold, as it were, a living reading of the story of the Lord to those who do not know letters).⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Bede, *Homily* i.13, ch. 12, p. 16.

⁶⁷ See Paul Meyvaert, “Bede and the Church Paintings at Wearmouth-Jarrow,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 69.

⁶⁸ Numbers 21:4–9.

⁶⁹ Bede, *De Templo*, 212–13.

Since Biscop brought the paintings to Wearmouth and Jarrow in the late 670s and early 680s, Bede, who joined the community as a boy around 680, most likely would have known firsthand what it was to contemplate those paintings in the church without understanding the Latin of the scriptures they illustrated, and may have been deeply affected by them. But he is also following Gregory's famous dictum on the subject: "Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus" (For what writing reveals to those reading it, a painting reveals to the *idiotae* viewing it).⁷⁰

Certainly, Bede was not the only person in early medieval England to grapple with the limitations imposed by differences in language and literacy. Augustine, Aidan, Theodore, and Wilfrid all wrestled with them in various ways. Nor was Bede alone in recognizing the need for an expansive, multi-pronged approach. Attempts to translate aspects of Christianity into English idioms would be the signature feature of English cultural efforts for centuries.

Carved stone crosses are one example from the age of Bede. They transformed the landscape, most likely at sites that had already long been held sacred. Because oral societies frequently externalize cultural memory by attaching stories to landscape features, such changes presumably transformed—and Christianized—the mental landscapes of the people as well.⁷¹ Their relief sculptures illustrated scenes from the Bible or church history, or presented ideas in iconographic form, such as Christ in Majesty. In at least one famous case, the Ruthwell Cross, they also contained text, in

⁷⁰ Gregory the Great, Letter to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, *Registrum epistularum XI, 10*, ed. Dag Norberg, in *S. Gregorii Magni opera: Registrum epistularum, libri VIII–XIV, Appendix*, CCSL 140A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 874. Cited by Lawrence G. Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" *Word and Image* 5, no. 3 (1989): 227–8.

⁷¹ See Chapter 1.

English, in the runic alphabet.⁷² That text, moreover, was part of the poem “The Dream of the Rood,” which (in the form recorded in the tenth century) has become a classic example of the syncretic early English approach to Christianity, describing Christ’s crucifixion not only in the English language and alliterative verse, but also strikingly reimagined within the generic conventions of the epic hero.⁷³

It has been common, therefore, to assume that the purpose of the Ruthwell Cross, and hence, presumably, of other decorated crosses in stone or wood, was to teach Christianity to *idiotae*. Fritz Saxl began his 1943 analysis of the cross from the assumption that “its decoration had to convey to the faithful the essential ideas of Christianity.”⁷⁴

But how seriously should we take this argument? Could the illiterate, illiterate English people really be expected to learn the essentials of Christianity by looking at pictures?

Lawrence Duggan has argued compellingly that “in certain fundamental ways illiterates cannot read pictures just as literates can read books,” and that the idea that images served the illiterate in place of books was little more than a conveniently pious excuse, “an idea which survived because it was useful” (as a defense against iconoclasm), sanctified by Gregory’s authority, but almost never seriously examined or practically attempted.⁷⁵ In the twenty-first century, certainly, even a literate, educated Christian

⁷² Rosemary Cramp, *Early Northumbrian Sculpture*, JL 1965, in Lapidge, *Bede and His World*, 1:148–51, makes a case for a connection between the Ruthwell Cross and the community at Wearmouth and Jarrow.

⁷³ Robert T. Farrell and Catherine Karkov, “The Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of the Ruthwell Cross: Some Caveats,” in *The Ruthwell Cross: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 8 December 1989*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 46–7, take a dim view of attempts to interpret the “short series of *sententiae*” inscribed on the eighth-century cross in light of the tenth-century poem that contains similar lines.

⁷⁴ Fritz Saxl, “The Ruthwell Cross,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): 1.

⁷⁵ Duggan, “Book of the Illiterate,” 228, 231.

requires extensive support to correctly interpret medieval religious art. Images may evoke intense emotional and even spiritual responses, but they cannot convey doctrine by themselves.

Duggan's critique of Gregory's assertion that images could take the place of books is certainly valid if we assume that the role of books was to convey information about the new religion. But it is well to keep in mind that books played very different roles in the Middle Ages than they do today. Books were quite often objects of reverence in themselves—specifically exempted from restrictions on images and idols.⁷⁶ And when books were used in religious education, it was almost never the case that an individual would learn the essence of Christianity—in any country or language—primarily from private reading.⁷⁷ Books were most often read aloud socially, explained, and discussed. They provided raw material for oral interactions. A passage of scripture, for example, served as the foundation for a homily. A text, then, could play a central, but not an independent role in the spread of religious ideas. It is in this sense that images could serve in place of books: neither was meant to do the work of instruction on their own, but to assist in the work of oral instruction, in teaching and preaching.

Perhaps the most confounding aspect of Bede's declaration that he had often given translations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer to illiterate priests is the casual suggestion that there were a considerable number of priests active in Northumbria who

⁷⁶ Michelle P. Brown, "*In the Beginning Was the Word*": *Books and Faith in the Age of Bede*, JL 2003 (Jarrow, UK: St. Paul's Church Council, 2003), 2–3.

⁷⁷ See Paul Saenger, "Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society," *Viator* 13 (1982): 367–414. There were of course exceptions at the highest intellectual levels. Many ideas came to Bede directly from books, and seem to have spread among his friends and colleagues through letters, books, and other texts, but this would not become the norm for ordinary Christians until the age of print. Brown, "Books and Faith," 13, notes that "Cassiodorus felt that [books] could also act as teachers. In his *Institutiones* he observed that the *antiqui* could found schools with oral instruction, whilst for the *moderni* books must suffice instead of teachers."

could not explain either text in any language. At first blush, it is difficult to imagine in what sense these priests or their flocks might be called Christian. Several variations of the Creed existed throughout England at the time,⁷⁸ and Bede's English translation has not survived, but he did summarize what he took to be the Creed's key points. In Acts 10: 37–43, Peter explains the recent foundational events of Christianity to Cornelius. Bede observes:

Breviter omnia quae in symbolo dicuntur complexus est, quod Iesus sit Christus, quod omnium dominus, quod mundum deo reconciliari missus, quod Iohannis voce praeconatus, quod spiritu sancto perunctus, quod deo inhabitante per miracula declaratus, quod crucifixus et a mortuis suscitatus suisque manifestatus, quod iudex omnium in fine venturus quodque etiam ecclesiam suam per fidem totum sit dilataturus in orbem.⁷⁹

Briefly he encompassed all the things which are said in the Creed: That Jesus is Christ, that he is lord of all, that he was sent so that the world might be reconciled to God, that he was heralded by the voice of John, that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit, that, with God dwelling in him, he was proclaimed by miracles, that he was crucified and raised from the dead and revealed to his own people, that in the end he will come as the judge of all, and also that through faith he will expand his church throughout the whole world.

⁷⁸ See Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 131, n. 18.

⁷⁹ Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, 50.

If neither the priests nor the people knew of these things or held these beliefs, could they really be considered Christians? And yet neither Bede nor any of his contemporaries ever denies that the uneducated English are Christians. The conversion is taken as an established historical fact, and while Bede is endlessly vigilant against the threat of heresy, he evinces far less concern about the potential threat of a renewed pagan revival, or even about continuing pagan practices among the ignorant.

The simplest explanation, of course, is that these priests *did* teach some, most, or all of the ideas collected in the Creed, and that the laity knew and understood them to varying degrees, but that they had been taught in a more ad hoc arrangement, rather than in the tightly focused and organized trinitarian formulation of the Creed.⁸⁰ Thus, in translating that text for memorization, Bede was not introducing new ideas, but providing a precise and systematic method by which to organize and recall and verify ideas that were already being taught. The text served as a tool to support and regulate the oral transmission of ideas. It did not transmit them independently. The same must be said of all the painted and sculpted images of the period.

In 403, long before Gregory, Paulinus of Nola had justified the elaborate figural decorations he had installed at the shrine of St. Felix in terms of their role in edifying the

⁸⁰ This, at any rate, appears to have been Wilfrid's method of proselytizing. Stephen tells us that when he arrived unexpectedly in Friesland, "Tunc statim sanctus pontifex noster cum licentia regis verbum Dei gentibus cotidie praedicavit, enuntians eis verum Deum patrem omnipotentem et Iesum Christum, filium eius unicum, et Spiritum sanctum sibi coaeternum, et baptismum unum in remissionem peccatorum et vitam aeternam post mortem in resurrectione manifeste docuit" (Then straightaway, with the king's permission, our holy bishop preached the Word of God to the people every day. He taught plainly, proclaiming to them the true God, the Father almighty, and Jesus Christ his only Son, and the Holy Spirit, coeternal with them, and one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life after death in the resurrection). He began the conversion of Sussex in much the same way, and then, over many months, he added a detailed explanation of salvation history (Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 26, 52; ch. 41, 82).

“rusticitas non cassa fide neque docta legendi” (peasantry, not devoid of faith and yet not taught to read),⁸¹ but he gave a far more precise account of the process than did Gregory:

Propterea uisum nobis opus utile totis
 Felicis domibus pictura ludere sancta,
 Si forte attonitas haec per spectacula mentes
 Agrestum caperet fucata coloribus umbra,
 Quae super exprimitur titulis, ut littera monstret
 Quod manus explicuit, dumque omnes picta uicissim
 Ostendunt releguntque, sibi uel tardius escae
 Sint memores dum grata oculis ieiunia pascunt.⁸²

For this reason is seemed to us a useful labor to enliven all the houses of Felix with holy painting, if, perchance, by these spectacles a shadowed place, painted with colors, might captivate the astounded minds of the peasants; it is explained by inscriptions above, so that the letter may reveal what the hand has set forth, and while they all point to and read over the pictures, one after another, they may surely, for their own part, be more slowly mindful of food, while pleasing fasts nourish their eyes.

⁸¹ Paulinus of Nola, “Natalicium IX,” in *Carmina*, ed. Franz Dolveck, CCSL 21 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 403, line 540.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 405, lines 580–7.

Note that, for Paulinus, the paintings are meant to have a dramatic emotional impact, but their interpretation is a complex process involving the images, the explanatory texts, and the interpretation of both in a public, social context.⁸³

Only in a similarly rich communicative environment could the Northumbrian stone crosses have been realistically expected to serve an educative function. Elizabeth Okasha has pointed out that, as a practical matter, the texts on the Ruthwell cross would have been anything but accessible to an ordinary person.⁸⁴ But both texts and images could serve as useful tools in the hands of a trained oral teacher. Éamonn Ó Carragáin outlines a complex and subtle reading of the Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses that would have been impossible without a profound and detailed understanding of some abstruse theological concepts, but he also argues that even a “primitive and uneducated understanding” of the iconography “could have provided a useful foundation on which an educated nun, monk or cleric might bring [their uneducated audiences] gradually to an awareness of Christ’s heroic humility..”⁸⁵

Bede, too, understood that images could better serve as a support to oral teaching than as teachers in themselves. Although he proposed, in his homily for the anniversary of Benedict Biscop’s death, that the illiterate might learn of Christ’s works through the

⁸³ Duggan, “Book of the Illiterate,” 229.

⁸⁴ Okasha, “Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England,” 72: “Firstly, there is the physical problem of reading letters some five centimetres in height located up to four metres above one’s head. Secondly, it would be necessary to be literate in both Old English and Latin. Thirdly, one would have to be able to read both the roman and runic script. Fourthly, the texts are not well organized for easy reading. The Latin texts are set partly horizontally and partly sideways to the reader; the Old English texts in runes read horizontally but are cut in such narrow bands that each line of text contains a maximum of four letters, and one word can therefore be spread over up to three lines. Now it may have been that in rural Northumbria in the eighth century there were people capable of reading the Ruthwell Cross texts in spite of all these difficulties; perhaps there were some scholars there who appreciated cryptography and other difficult reading. However, such people cannot have been very numerous and the cross is unlikely to have been commissioned with only such people in mind.”

⁸⁵ Éamonn Ó Carragáin, “At Once Elitist and Popular: The Audiences of the Bewcastle and Ruthwell Crosses,” *Studies in Church History* 42 (2006): 39.

paintings brought back by the abbot,⁸⁶ Bede was more specific about the process in his *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, explaining that Biscop installed the paintings

quatinus intrantes ecclesiam omnes etiam litterarum ignari, quaquauersum intenderent, uel semper amabilem Christi sanctorumque eius, quamuis in imagine, contemplarentur aspectum; uel dominicae incarnationis gratiam uigilantiore mente recolerent, uel extremi discrimen examinis, quasi coram oculis habentes, districtius se ipsi examinare meminissent.⁸⁷

so that always, wheresoever they might turn, everyone entering the church—even those ignorant of letters—might either behold the lovely sight of Christ and his saints, although in a picture; or they might reflect with a more careful mind on the grace of the Lord’s incarnation; or, having the decisive moment of the Last Judgment as it were before their eyes, they might remember to examine themselves more strictly.

In this telling, the purpose of the paintings is not to convey doctrine or narrative to the illiterate, but to activate the knowledge they already have, and support the cultivation of a suitably religious state of mind. In other words, they should provide additional support to Christians who, though unable to read, already understand the concepts of the

⁸⁶ Bede, *Homily* i.13, ch. 12, 16.

⁸⁷ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 6, 36.

Incarnation and the Last Judgment, which they must, of course, have learned about orally, and in English.

This understanding of the role of images is in fact quite close to Bede's vision of the role of texts in the religious life of the unlettered. When Bede explains his reasons for promoting the daily recitation of the Creed, he draws attention to three benefits: it would promote the unity of the congregation of the faithful, praying the same prayer and reciting the same doctrine, as emphasized in phrases like "coetus omnis fidelium" (all the company of the faithful) and "chorus omnis Deo supplicantium" (the whole chorus of supplicants to God); it would teach Christians "qua fidelis esse" (how to be faithful) and how to pray; and, finally, the recitation of the Creed would serve like "antidoto spirituali contra diaboli uenena quae illis interdiu uel noctu astu maligno obicere possit" (a spiritual antidote against the poisons of the devil, which he can hurl against them by day or night with wicked cunning).⁸⁸

This last might be understood to imply that chanting the Creed could serve a talismanic or apotropaic function: magic words to ward off evil spirits. This would, presumably, be a familiar and easily understood way to sell the practice to lay people who had only the most rudimentary grasp of Christianity. And, if they chanted it in *English*, rather than Latin, they would, in the process, soon come to know the tenets of

⁸⁸ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 132: "Sic enim fit ut coetus omnis fidelium quomodo fidelis esse, qua se firmitate credendi contra immundorum spirituum certamina munire atque armare debeat discat; fit ut chorus omnis Deo supplicantium quid maxime a diuina clementia quaeri oporteat agnoscat.... Nam sanctus antistes Ambrosius hoc de fide loquens ammonet, ut uerba symboli matutinis semper horis fideles quique decantent, et hoc se quasi antidoto spirituali contra diaboli uenena quae illis interdiu uel noctu astu maligno obicere possit praemuniant." (For in this way it will come about that all the company of the faithful may learn how to be faithful, how it ought to fortify and arm itself with firmness of belief against the assaults of unclean spirits; it will come about that the whole chorus of supplicants to God may recognize what especially ought to be sought from the divine mercy.... For, when speaking about faith, the holy bishop Ambrose advises this: that each of the faithful should always chant the words of the Creed in the morning, and they may fortify themselves with this, as if with a spiritual antidote, against the poisons of the devil, which he can hurl against them by day or night with wicked cunning.)

their new faith as well. But Bede attributes the practice to the advice of Ambrose, who clearly had a psychological, rather than talismanic, benefit in mind. Ambrose compares the Christian chanting the Creed to a soldier reciting his oath in his tent.⁸⁹ A soldier does not recite an oath because it provides magical protection, but in order to fortify his courage and resist fear by focusing his mind on his obligations.

Bede makes clear that he intends something similar. Chanting the Creed will teach the faithful to fortify themselves against the attacks of the devil not through magic, but by reminding them of what they are to believe. In this case, the poisons of the devil are doubts or heresies, and the power of the recitation is psychological. The purpose of the recitation, then, like that of the paintings, is to activate the memory and cultivate the proper state of mind.

4.5. Oral Transmission

How, then, were essential ideas transmitted in the first place? One method of spreading Christian culture, and particularly ideas about marriage practices and ritual purity, was through the promulgation of rules, and the imposition of penances on those who did not conform. These could be extraordinarily harsh, and were sometimes enforced by secular authorities. Full sacramental participation in Christian life demanded such extraordinary dedication to chastity and abstinence that few people outside the monasteries (aside from the very old and the very young) were likely to qualify.⁹⁰ For example, Alan Thacker points out that Theodore's *Penitential* required three nights of abstinence before married people could receive communion, and total abstinence during

⁸⁹ Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, Book 3, ch. 4, s. 20, *PL* 16, col. 225C.

⁹⁰ Thacker, "Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care," 155–60.

Lent.⁹¹ It was for this very reason that Bede urged Bishop Ecgberht to provide teachers to the laity, so that they might learn how a Christian ought to behave, pray, and maintain purity, and recognize the value of participation in communion, noting that

Quod uidelicet genus religionis ac Deo deuotae sanctificationis tam longe a cunctis paene nostrae prouinciae laicis per incuriam docentium quasi prope peregrinum abest ut hi qui inter illos religiosiores esse uidentur non nisi in natali Domini et epiphania et pascha sacrosanctis mysteriis communicare praesumant.⁹²

That kind of religious scruple and devotion to God is, through the negligence of teachers, so far absent from, and as it were foreign to, all the lay people of our kingdom that those who seem to be the most observant among them do not presume to partake in the holy sacrament except at the birth of the Lord, the Epiphany, and Easter.

But there were other, less austere means by which the laity might learn about and participate in the new religion. Bede records an apparently oral tradition—“Ferunt” (They say)—that when the first missionary from Iona to the English returned in frustration, Aidan suggested that he had been too harsh toward his “indoctis auditoribus” (uneducated hearers). Instead, Aidan recommended that he first extend “lac doctrinae mollioris” (the milk of gentler teaching)⁹³ until “paulatim enutriti uerbo Dei, ad capienda perfectiora et

⁹¹ Ibid., 156. Thacker notes that the strictures enjoined in the *Penitential* of Theodore (and, to a lesser extent, by Bede), which seem to reflect actual practice, are far more rigorous than the pragmatic compromises suggested in the letters of Gregory to Augustine that Bede quoted in his *Historia ecclesiastica* (1.27).

⁹² Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 15, 154.

⁹³ See 1 Corinthians 3:2.

ad facienda sublimiora Dei praecepta sufficerent” (nourished little by little upon the Word of God, they might suffice to grasp the more advanced, and to carry out the more exalted, commandments of God).⁹⁴ This view seems to have been widely shared.

One way to make religious ideas more appetizing was to cast them in popular poetic forms. Caedmon, of course, is the most famous example. Bede tells us that “quicquid ex diuinis litteris per interpretes disceret, hoc ipse post pusillum uerbis poeticis maxima suauitate et compunctione conpositis in sua, id est Anglorum, lingua proferret” (whatever he might learn, through interpreters, of divine writings, he produced, after a little while, in his own tongue—that is, English—in verses composed with the greatest sweetness and compunction).⁹⁵ This technique was clearly effective, as far as it went, for “Cuius carminibus multorum saepe animi ad contemptum saeculi et appetitum sunt uitae caelestis accensi” (The minds of many were often kindled by his songs to the contempt of worldly things and the desire of the heavenly life).⁹⁶

According to one tradition, Bishop Aldhelm followed Aidan’s advice to an extraordinary degree. William of Malmesbury relates that Aldhelm used English poetry or songs to cajole his reluctant flock. The people at that time were “semibarbarum” (semi-barbaric), had little interest in religious talk, and preferred to go straight home after mass. So Aldhelm would stand on the bridge “qui rura et urbem continuat” (which connects the town and the country), and block their way, performing popular songs. Eventually, people came to hear him in droves, and

⁹⁴ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3:5, 228.

⁹⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.24, 414.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Hoc commento sensim inter ludicra uerbis scripturarum insertis, ciues ad sanitatem reduxisse; qui si seure et cum excommunicatione agendum putasset, profecto profecisset nichil.⁹⁷

Gradually, by this contrivance, with words of Scripture introduced between the entertainments, he recalled the inhabitants to soundness. If he had thought to do this sternly and with excommunication, he would surely have accomplished nothing.

Bede himself may have written, and certainly recited, Christian poetry in English.⁹⁸ Poetry, like the visual arts, could inspire religious feelings. It could also tell memorable stories. But it was less well suited for explaining complex and subtle ideas or relating them to the daily lives of Christians. That task required preaching, and, more broadly, pastoral care, the overarching goal of all the reforms Bede proposed in his letter to Ecgberht.

4.6. The Organization of Pastoral Care

The term “pastoral care” may need some clarification. It derives from the title, *Liber Pastoralis Curae*, by which Gregory the Great’s treatise on the awesome

⁹⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom, vol. 1, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 5.190.3–4, p. 506. Note that Malmesbury wrote in the twelfth century, some 400 years after the events he described, though he cited a now-lost book attributed to King Alfred as the source of this account. See also Paul D. Remley, “Aldhelm as Old English Poet: *Exodus*, Asser, and the *Dicta Ælfredi*,” in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe and Andy Orchard, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 90–2.

⁹⁸ Cuthbert, “Epistola de obitu Bedae,” 580–2.

responsibilities of the episcopate has been commonly known since the Middle Ages.⁹⁹ It did not, however, come into use as a general term for those responsibilities until the modern era. Gregory's work was concerned almost entirely with preaching and teaching, but Bede, in his *Letter to Ecgbert*, usually sees these in connection with a sacramental dimension, including baptism, confirmation, and sometimes communion. Modern historians often include the judicial functions of the bishop—the assignment of acts of penance—as part of pastoral care as well. Although Bede did not generally emphasize this aspect,¹⁰⁰ many of his near contemporaries did, including Theodore and the bishops who convened at *Clovesho* in 747.¹⁰¹

My argument focuses primarily on Bede's concern for preaching and teaching, but it is well to bear in mind that, for Bede, the sacramental duties of the episcopate were inextricably entwined with the educative. That did not mean, however, that they must therefore be performed by the same person. Bede stakes out a clear position in favor of the widespread use of un-ordained preachers in his letter. He wanted Ecgbert not only to ordain more priests to assist him in his duties, but also to institute more *doctores*, a term by which he referred to a highly educated religious elite who might or might not have a formal role within the church hierarchy. Bede, like Gregory, was careful to leave space for unordained preachers and teachers as well as priests.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Gregory himself called the book *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*. The opening words of the treatise provided the alternate title. See James Barmby, preface to *The Book of Pastoral Rule and Selected Epistles of Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome*, trans. James Barmby (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895).

¹⁰⁰ The so-called "Penitential of Bede" is pseudonymous. See Mayr-Harting, "Ecgbert [Egbert] (d. 766)."

¹⁰¹ Catherine Cubitt, "Pastoral Care and Conciliar Canons: The Provisions of the 747 Council of *Clovesho*," in Blair and Sharpe, *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, 193. See "Council of Clovesho, A.D. 747," in Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. 3, 360–76.

¹⁰² See Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," 130: "Throughout his active life as a teacher, but especially in his later writings, Bede was much preoccupied with the role of those whom he variously called *spirituales magistri*, the *sancti praedicatores*, the *rectores* or *doctores ecclesiae*. In particular, he favoured the expressions *doctor* and *praedicator*. For him preaching had a pre-eminent, even a sacramental significance; it was not envisaged as confined to a narrowly liturgical context, but as embracing a whole range of doings concerned with converting the heathen or promoting the moral well-being or theological understanding of the faithful. Bede's teachers and preachers were the spiritual leaders

No surviving text clearly explains the system by which pastoral care was provided in Bede's day, and modern debate about it has largely centered on the question of whether it was (in theory and in practice) primarily the responsibility of the bishop, or whether monastic institutions were expected to play a significant role as well. In 1990, John Blair and Richard Sharpe edited *Pastoral Care before the Parish*,¹⁰³ which included chapters by both editors as well as Sarah Foot, Catherine Cubitt, and Alan Thacker, among others, and brought a new level of attention and focus to some key questions about the provision of pastoral care in early Anglo-Saxon England, many of which are essential to our understanding of Bede's intended reforms: What services was pastoral care understood to include? Who performed it? How were they trained? How was it financed? What kinds of administrative arrangements facilitated it? Who bore responsibility and authority for its oversight? The authors sought ways to resolve the tensions among a diversity of approaches and sources (including historical, hagiographical, and documentary texts, local church histories, topography, archaeology, and comparative analysis) that, taken independently, sometimes suggested different and seemingly irreconcilable answers. Definitive and universal answers remained out of reach, but a rough consensus seemed to emerge around the general model put forth in Thacker's chapter,¹⁰⁴ which postulates that preaching, teaching, and baptism were, in practice, almost always financed and provided through the *monasteria*, in the most capacious sense of that term, including most or all of the royal foundations such as Lindisfarne, Wearmouth and Jarrow, and Whitby, along with their networks of dependent

and guides of the people of God, the successors of the prophets and apostles, to whose *ordo* they belonged and whose role they fulfilled in the contemporary Church."

¹⁰³ John Blair and Richard Sharpe, eds., *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, SEHB (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁴ Note, however, that Thacker drew heavily on ideas first articulated by Sarah Foot, "Parochial Ministry," 43–54.

“daughter-houses,” and also, crucially, the private foundations excoriated by Bede in his letter to Ecgberht. Teaching and preaching would have been performed by a mix of ordained priests and active monks. This combination, Thacker proposed, created an ad-hoc network “sufficiently dense to make possible effective pastoral ministrations.”¹⁰⁵

Other scholars, including Simon Coates, responded by emphasizing the role of the episcopal hierarchy over that of the monasteries. Coates claimed that “the role and importance of bishops” in providing pastoral care—which, he says, has traditionally been overlooked due, in some measure, to the monastic perspective of those medieval historians and hagiographers, from Bede through William of Malmesbury, who have done most to shape our ideas about the period—“should be returned to the centre of the early Anglo-Saxon church.”¹⁰⁶ And he argued that, despite the narrative attention they give to the monastic life, Bede, Stephen, and the anonymous author of the *Life of Cuthbert* “were united by the shared concern that bishops stood at the apex of the pyramid of ecclesiastical responsibility, possessing the chief personal responsibility for teaching, preaching and the active Christianization and depaganization of early Anglo-Saxon society.”¹⁰⁷

Eric Cambridge and David Rollason likewise asserted that “pastoral care was and is primarily the concern of the episcopate,”¹⁰⁸ and they critiqued the entire project behind *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, arguing that it was based on “the assumption that pastoral care was from the beginning of central importance in the Anglo-Saxon Church,

¹⁰⁵ Thacker, “Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care,” 145.

¹⁰⁶ Simon Coates, “The Role of Bishops in the Early Anglo-Saxon Church: A Reassessment,” *History* 81, no. 262 (April 1996): 177.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰⁸ Cambridge and Rollason, “Pastoral Organization,” 92.

when in fact it has yet to be shown that it was universally accessible or even, at some periods, widely available.”¹⁰⁹

Both Thacker and Coates built on and responded to the work of Sarah Foot, who drew attention to the evidence of conciliar and legislative documents, such as the canons of the 747 Council of *Clofesho*, which have much to say about the bishops’ pastoral responsibility, but next to nothing about a monastic role. This silence might be understood in a variety of ways, but Foot cautions against taking it at face value, as an indication that the monasteries had no significant role at all:

[T]he directives in canon law relating to parochial ministry refer mostly to the work of priests and to the organization of their ministry by diocesan bishops, apparently ignoring the potential of both other religious and the minsters. This might imply that abbots, or the heads of the minsters, were not involved in the organization of parochial ministry, and that all pastoral workers came automatically under the jurisdiction of their diocesan bishop. Alternatively, the apparent domination of bishops in this sphere might simply reflect the fact that the drafting of canon law was undertaken predominantly by bishops. Although the possible contribution of teachers and preachers was ignored by church councils, it seems inherently unlikely that there was no recognized role outside the minsters for religious who were not ordained. It is also difficult to postulate for the seventh

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 95. See John Blair’s rebuttal in “Ecclesiastical Organization,” 193–212.

or eighth century an adequate supply of trained priests to perform all the necessary pastoral work.¹¹⁰

Catherine Cubitt, who has analyzed the conciliar documents extensively, observed that the *Clofesho* canons “are the single most important and most detailed source on pastoral care in England before the tenth and eleventh centuries,” but, like Foot, she emphasized that they were in some measure aspirational, and that they might tell us more about the ideals of their (episcopal) authors than the actual functioning of the church.¹¹¹ Thacker had recognized this apparent discrepancy as well, acknowledging that “the nature and scope” of the pastoral responsibilities ascribed to the monasteries “remain in some ways ambiguous” and that “it is hard to know how practice measured up to the expectations recorded in the charters of founders and the canons of councils.”¹¹²

In fact, as every scholar involved in this debate has recognized, the situation on the ground was almost certainly a disorganized heap of conflicting practices and overlapping jurisdictions, varying according to local conditions and traditions, and any attempt to systematize them—whether by Bede, by the bishops at *Clofesho*, or by modern scholars—will tend to obscure this variety and inconsistency.¹¹³ The debate, then, is ultimately about relative degrees of emphasis, and cannot provide a decisive answer to the question of whether pastoral care was understood to be a monastic responsibility or purely an episcopal one. The cacophony of modern voices echoes that of the medieval

¹¹⁰ Foot, “Parochial Ministry,” 50. To Thacker, this looks “like a deliberate attempt to ignore the link between priest and abbot so evident in the narrative sources” (“Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care,” 151).

¹¹¹ Cubitt, “Pastoral Care and Conciliar Canons,” 193–4.

¹¹² Thacker, “Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care,” 146–7.

¹¹³ See, for example, Coates, “Role of Bishops,” 177; Thacker, “Monks, Preaching, and Pastoral Care,” 146–7; Cambridge and Rollason, “Pastoral Organization,” 94; Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 113; Blair, “Ecclesiastical Organization,” 199.

voices. Monasteries played an essential role in pastoral care in many or perhaps most times and places, sometimes independently, sometimes under the clear direction of the bishop, and no doubt sometimes in the midst of unresolved struggles over exactly who was in charge of what.¹¹⁴

It is in the context of this inconsistency and uncertainty about the provision of pastoral care that we should interpret Bede's plan to reform it. Bede acknowledges the divergence between ideal and reality, urging Ecgberht to exercise oversight of the monasteries, because "sicut uulgo fertur, dicere estis soliti" (as it is said among the people, you [bishops] are accustomed to say) that the internal affairs of the monasteries fall under episcopal jurisdiction.¹¹⁵ The careful distancing in Bede's formulation ("people say that you say that . . .") suggests that the practical reach of this authority could be very limited indeed.

At its root, this discrepancy reflected the comparatively precarious political, social, and economic situation of Anglo-Saxon bishops. Bishops in Gaul and Italy, whose position the eighth-century English bishops largely sought to emulate, could often draw political and economic might from their establishment in comparatively dense urban centers; no such centers existed in England.¹¹⁶ The largest, most densely populated, and most economically dynamic communities were monasteries. In addition, continental bishops were often drawn from the highest ranks of the aristocracy. In England, members of the various royal families who entered the church were far more likely to become abbots or abbesses than bishops, which, in turn, meant that royal interests and monastic

¹¹⁴ Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 113.

¹¹⁵ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 14, 152.

¹¹⁶ Thacker, "Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care," 139.

interests tended to align closely.¹¹⁷ The larger monastic communities would have been relatively self-sufficient both economically and spiritually. They would often have educated, trained, housed, and fed the clergy, whose loyalty to their local abbot and community might therefore be far stronger than their loyalty to a possibly distant and unfamiliar prelate. Bishops were forced to invoke the abstract and alien Roman hierarchy or leverage their monopoly over the ecclesiastical powers of ordination and consecration to assert their authority, and, if a monastic community resisted, there might be little the bishop could do to force the issue.¹¹⁸

Some bishops may have been able to dominate through force of personality. Bede presents a neat dramatization of the tension between religious might and worldly weakness that defined the early Anglo-Saxon episcopacy in the story of Bishop Cedd and King Sigbert of the East Saxons. One of Sigbert's kinsmen married in violation of church law. Cedd "prohibere et corrigere non posset" (was not able to prevent or correct) the marriage and, what is worse, was powerless to enforce the resulting sentence of excommunication: King Sigbert accepted the hospitality of the offending kinsman, in defiance of Cedd's explicit command. The East Saxon royal family had, it seems, called Cedd's bluff. But Cedd, in Bede's telling at least, was saved from this embarrassment by two less-tangible sources of power. First, because of Sigbert's (possibly genuine) religious terror on meeting Cedd, the king "mox tremefactus desiluit equo ceciditque ante pedes eius, ueniam reatus postulans" (leapt, trembling, from his horse and fell before his

¹¹⁷ As a bishop who was a brother to one king and cousin to another, Ecgberht was unusual. Both Bede and Alcuin took pains to celebrate this alignment of royal and episcopal interests.

¹¹⁸ The prime example of such apparently unassailable independence is Whitby, a royal establishment, led by abbesses drawn from the royal family, with extensive estates, and with Trumwine, a bishop without a see, living and apparently performing religious duties in their community for many years after his seat at Abercorn was lost to the Picts in 685. Abbess Ælfflæd maintained close personal ties with Cuthbert, and an impressive percentage of Northumbrian dioceses were headed by Whitby-trained bishops.

feet, asking pardon for his offense), and then, the bishop exercised his “pontificali auctoritate” (episcopal authority) to both predict the future (that Sigbert would die at the house of the offending kinsman) and interpret it authoritatively (as punishment for violating the excommunication).¹¹⁹

Neither Wilfrid’s towering personality nor his episcopal status had done him much good in his conflicts with successive Northumbrian kings and their monastic allies. His practical power, and his ability to resist royal rage, had derived instead from his extensive, transnational network of monastic communities, the authority of Rome, and his ability to make himself useful to foreign kings to promote his own interests. Such elusive forms of power were no foundation on which to sustain an organization as complex as a church.

A comparable situation obtained in Ireland, where episcopal power left so little mark on the documentary record of the sixth through eighth centuries that scholars long thought it to have been entirely eclipsed by monastic networks.¹²⁰ In more recent scholarship, the importance of the bishop has been reasserted, and the apparent significance of the monastic networks has been greatly reduced.¹²¹ Sharpe suggests a model close to that of Lindisfarne, where a bishop might live in a monastery and order his daily life under the direction of the abbot, but remain independent in his ordering of the pastoral work of the church.¹²² A key difference, however, was that the church in England was clearly conceived as a hierarchical organization from the start, even if that

¹¹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3:22, 284.

¹²⁰ See Richard Sharpe, “Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 230–5.

¹²¹ Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 44–110; Sharpe, “Some Problems,” 243–7.

¹²² Sharpe, “Some Problems,” 263.

hierarchy had not immediately supplanted more traditional and local power structures. This was true not only in the “Roman” south, where Augustine and then Theodore worked prominently to establish an orderly episcopate, but even in the north, where Aidan’s concern with pastoral care extended beyond the personal proselytizing romanticized by Bede to include a dedication to the educative and administrative development of an episcopal hierarchy. The reorganization Bede promoted was meant to provide bishops with the necessary land and leverage to sustain their position within that hierarchy, so that they could effectively fulfill their pastoral responsibilities.

Both images and texts had a role to play in educating the laity, but neither could accomplish the task on their own. The most important method was oral teaching in English, and the central goal of Bede’s letter to Ecgberht was to encourage the bishop to dedicate the necessary financial resources and to reimagine the organization of the church in order to support the ambitious teaching ministry Bede envisioned.

The educational system he envisioned, then, consisted of a top level of advanced scholars who ensured doctrinal accuracy and taught a wider group of educated, Latinate readers. This group, in turn, would teach others, whose scholarly and linguistic abilities were probably more limited, within their respective religious communities. Overlapping with these groups would be an even larger group of teachers—some ordained as priests, some not; some bound by monastic vows, some not—who could read little or no Latin, but were to be trained, orally and in English, for the ministry. It was these men and women, under the direction of the bishops, who would ultimately take on the task of carrying the Word out into the countryside.

Chapter 5

“Fidelium uirorum uiua uoce”: Bede’s Prose *Life of Cuthbert* in an Oral World

5.1. “Auditor siue lector”¹

In the preface to his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede describes the most significant witnesses and authorities he consulted to obtain his knowledge of English Christian history. When he comes to his sources for events in his native Northumbria, he specifically explains how he obtained his information about St. Cuthbert, for both his *Ecclesiastical History* and his prose *Life of Cuthbert*, concerning which he takes an unusually defensive stance:

Lectoremque suppliciter obsecro ut, siqua in his quae scripsimus aliter quam se ueritas habet posita reppererit, non hoc nobis inputet, qui, quod uera lex historiae est, simpliciter ea quae fama uulgante collegimus ad instructionem posteritatis litteris mandare studuimus.²

And I humbly beseech the reader, if he should discover anything other than the truth set down in what we have written, that he not impute this to us, who, for the instruction of posterity, have taken care to straightforwardly commit to writing those things which we could collect from common report, which is a genuine principle of history.

¹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2.

² *Ibid.*, preface, 7.

The passage, and particularly the phrase *vera lex historiae*, has been the source of considerable debate, in part because it appears to promise an articulation of Bede's guiding principle of historiography: the True Law of History.³ But in a 1980 *Speculum* article, Roger Ray argued that, although Bede had taken the phrase *vera lex historiae* from Jerome, neither author had intended to claim that he was articulating *the* true law of history. In fact, they are not even appealing to the same "law." Jerome had claimed that it was rhetorically sound to knowingly make a factually false statement that accords with common opinion within the narrative context. Specifically, Jerome argued that in Luke 2:33, where the evangelist refers to Joseph as Jesus's father, he is conforming to the narrative context, since at the time of the story, Jesus's divine parentage would not have been widely known. Jerome's "true law of history," then, is "an exception to the main rule of history" that "authorizes a brief strategic departure from the normal goal of factual truth."⁴ Ray argues that Bede, responding to Isidore of Seville's assertion that "among the ancients no one wrote history except he who took part in and saw what he recorded,"⁵ offered a different "true law of history," which allows that "the historian, having no choice, is permitted to treat parts of his story from a low grade of source material, common report."⁶

Ray's analysis is sensitive, erudite, and largely convincing, but it rests upon a limited assumption about the rhetorical environment in which Bede operated, and as a result, it characterizes Bede's view of "common report" more negatively than the textual evidence can support. In addition to characterizing "fama vulgans" as "a low grade of

³ See Walter Goffart, "Bede's *vera lex historiae* Explained," *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005): 112, n. 4 for a selection of authors who have attempted to work out what Bede meant by this phrase.

⁴ Roger Ray, "Bede's *vera lex historiae*," *Speculum* 55, no. 1 (1980): 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

source material,” Ray emphasizes the limitations of oral traditions, “whose factual worth Bede could not himself fully judge,” calling them “trustworthy so far as responsible ecclesiastical men could say,” “acceptable to give the English people some first lessons,” and “unprovable,” only to be used, “better sources failing, so long as he made no personal commitment to their factual truth.”⁷ Bede, however, makes no such emphasis. In the rest of his prefatory discussion of his sources, Bede places his oral and written sources side by side, without demonstrable preference for either. Abbot Albinus “diligenter ... cognouerat” (had assiduously investigated) the story of Augustine’s mission to Kent “uel monumentis litterarum uel seniorum traditione” (either from written records or from the tradition of the elders).⁸ Bede learned about the history of the East Anglian church “partim ex scriptis uel traditione priorum” (partly from the writings or the traditions of men of the past).⁹ He learned about the history of Lindsey “uel litteris reuerentissimi antistitis Cynerecti uel aliorum fidelium uirorum uiua uoce” (either through the letters of the most reverend bishop Cyneberht or through the living voice of other faithful men).¹⁰ When he comes to events of Cuthbert’s life, the faithfulness of the *written* source must be accepted “simpliciter” (simply), while the oral testimony is “certissima” (most trustworthy):

notandum quod ea, quae de sanctissimo patre et antistite Cudbercto uel in hoc uolumine uel in libello gestorum ipsius conscripsi, partim ex eis quae de illo prius a fratribus ecclesiae Lindisfarnensis scripta repperi adsumsi, simpliciter fidem

⁷ Ibid., 2, 14.

⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2–4.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

historiae quam legebam accommodans, partim uero ea quae certissima fidelium uirorum adtestatione per me ipse cognoscere potui, sollerter adicere curauit.¹¹

It is to be noted that those things which I have written concerning the most blessed father and bishop Cuthbert, either in this volume or in the little book of his deeds, I took partly from what I had previously found written about him by the brothers of the church of Lindisfarne, simply accepting the credibility of the story that I read, while partly I took care to deftly add those things which I was able to learn myself through the most trustworthy testimony of faithful men.

This pattern of dual authorization reflects the dual rhetorical contexts in which Bede would have expected his writings to be received. It reveals not only the kinds of sources available to him, but also the kinds of sources likely to be accepted as authoritative by his audiences, broadly defined.

Bede and his personal network of literate informers and readers were part of larger networks of communication and discourse. On one hand, they were all part of the educated, literate network centered on the church, extending through time back to the pagan ancients and the authors of scripture, and extending through space to encompass all of Western Europe, then on to Constantinople and beyond. It is, in fact, through this same network that we encounter Bede today, and it is by the standards of this community that we are most apt to evaluate Bede's sources. But on the other hand, these men and women were also part of various *oral* networks, including monks and clergy and extending to the

¹¹ Ibid.

vast bulk of English Christendom who had no direct access to literacy or literate culture, because they could not read or write or even understand Latin read aloud. These oral networks were more spatially localized, although they too stretched back, in their own ways, through distant time, encoding the traditions, laws, mores, and cultural signifiers that made social and political life possible. Bede and his correspondents occupied space at the intersection of these two discourse communities, each of which operated by its own set of rules, and it was necessary, therefore, that his writing function in both rhetorical environments.

Clearly, some of Bede's works were composed with only the most educated audiences in mind, but Bede would have anticipated that others, such as the *Ecclesiastical History* (which addresses both readers and hearers), would, in parts, make the transition back into oral form, so that facts and stories recorded there would be read (usually aloud), heard, retold, and discussed, re-entering the oral tradition from which he had, in part, obtained them. The Bedan work most evidently designed to reach an oral, vernacular audience, I will argue, is the prose *Life of Cuthbert*.

Clare Stancliffe suggests that the audience for the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* (composed ca. 699–705), which provided most of the material that Bede later reworked into his own versions, “would have been, first, the monks of Lindisfarne and visitors to Cuthbert's shrine; beyond that the church—and king—of Northumbria, and probably Christian circles further afield in England, at Iona, and on the continent.”¹² Bede would have written for a similar diversity of readers and hearers. His prose *Life of Cuthbert*,

¹² Clare Stancliffe, “Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary,” in *St Cuthbert, His Cult, and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (London: Boydell and Brewer, 1989), 21–42.

completed by 721, is addressed to Bishop Eadfrith and “omni congregationi fratrum qui in Lindisfarnensi insula Christo deseruiunt” (to all the congregation of brothers who serve Christ on the island of Lindisfarne),¹³ an immediate audience who seem, on the whole, likely to have been considerably less scholarly than monks at the more “Roman” monasteries.

A number of textual hints suggest that Lindisfarne was not known as a place of learning. Stancliffe points out that, as he “plagiarized” a long passage from the Anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* into his *Life of Wilfrid*, Stephen of Ripon made a small but significant change, implying a contrast between the educated Wilfridites and the ignorant rustics of the monasteries in the Irish tradition. Where Cuthbert’s biographer had written, “His memory served him instead of books” (*memoriam enim pro libris haberet*), Stephen, in applying the passage to Wilfrid, altered the phrase to “He had a wonderful memory *for* books” (*memoriam autem miram in libris habuit*). “By this subtle change of one word,” observes Stancliffe, “the sense is transformed: Wilfrid is portrayed as learned, in a way that Cuthbert was not.”¹⁴ Also, while the Lindisfarne Gospels and other manuscripts testify to the extraordinary scribal activity at Lindisfarne in this period, there is no evidence that the Lindisfarne monks ever travelled the Continent to build a library comparable to those at other Northumbrian religious houses. Bede frequently celebrates the Wearmouth and Jarrow library assembled by Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith, and tells us that Acca created “*amplissimam ... ac nobilissimam bibliothecam*” (a very large and most noble library) at Hexham,¹⁵ and Alcuin describes a massive library at York,¹⁶ but

¹³ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, prologue, 142.

¹⁴ Stancliffe, “Disputed Episcopacy,” 16; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 11, 24; *Vita Sancti Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 4:1, 112. Translation and emphasis used here are Stancliffe’s.

¹⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5:20, 531.

¹⁶ Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, lines 1536–62, 122–6. See Rollason, *Northumbria*, 140–41.

neither author mentions a library at Lindisfarne. In his account of Boisil's last days at Melrose (another monastery in the Irish tradition, founded, like Lindisfarne, by Aidan), Bede records that Boisil and Cuthbert read a commentary on John's Gospel in seven days, and that they were able to finish so quickly "*quia solam in ea fide quae per dilectionem operatur simplicitatem, non autem questionum profunda tractabant*" (because they engaged only with simple things, *by the faith that works through love*, and not with the profundities of disputed matters).¹⁷ This emphasis on simple—rather than scholarly—faith is characteristic of Bede's treatment of the Irish monastic tradition in general, and may have been intended in part to provide some excuse for the Irish failure to recognize the Roman dating for Easter,¹⁸ but it must have been at least a plausible characterization, and acceptable even to the community at Lindisfarne.

But whatever they may have lacked in erudition, the monks at Lindisfarne made up for in two ways: eremitical zeal and pastoral care. Examples of the former are too numerous and too prominent in the sources to require discussion here,¹⁹ but the active participation of monks in pastoral care also appears to have been one of the most significant practical distinctions between the Roman and Irish monastic traditions, and although it is unlikely that Bede himself travelled the countryside preaching, he clearly felt that it should be one of the highest priorities of the Northumbrian church. In his letter to Egberht, Bede argued forcefully for the ordination of new priests and the establishment of new bishoprics to ensure that Christians living in remote places could receive the sacraments and the word of God:

¹⁷ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 8, 182.

¹⁸ As, for example, in *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.17, 266.

¹⁹ For an analysis of the intertwining patterns of solitary life and pastoral involvement as "the *leitmotif* of Cuthbert's life," see Stancliffe, "Pastor and Solitary"; see also Simon J. Coates, "The Bishop as Pastor and Solitary: Bede and the Spiritual Authority of the Monk-Bishop," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, no. 4 (October 1996): 601–19.

Et quia latiora sunt spatia locorum quae ad gubernacula tuae diocesis pertinent, quam ut solus per omnia discurrere et in singulis viculis atque agellis uerbum Dei praedicare, etiam anni totius emenso curriculo, sufficiat, necessarium satis est, ut plures tibi sacri operis adiutores asciscas, presbyteros uidelicet ordinando atque instituendo doctores qui in singulis viculis praedicando Dei uerbo et consecrandis mysteriis caelestibus, ac maxime peragendis sacri baptismatis officii, ubi opportunitas ingruerit, insistant.²⁰

And because the distances between the places that belong to the jurisdiction of your diocese are too extensive for you alone to suffice to traverse them all and to preach the word of God to every settlement and estate, even in the span of a whole year, it is necessary that you enlist more assistants in your holy work, specifically by ordaining priests and appointing teachers who may, in every settlement, devote themselves to preaching the word of God and celebrating the heavenly mysteries, and especially performing the holy rite of baptism where the opportunity arises.

Wearmouth and Jarrow had no bishopric, and hence, it seems, had little or no direct responsibility for pastoral care. The biographies in Bede's *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* focus on the success of those abbots in building and guiding the

²⁰ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 5, 30. See Chapters 3 and 4 for a detailed discussion of the letter and its implications for pastoral care.

monastic community, paying little attention to the affairs beyond their walls.²¹

Nevertheless, it is clear from both the admiring depictions (in the *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Life of Cuthbert*) of Aidan, Boisil, and Cuthbert humbly traveling the countryside, and from his letter to Ecgberht, that Bede took a personal interest in supporting those who did carry the teachings and sacraments of the church to the remote farms and villages of Northumbria.

Lindisfarne, however, *did* have a bishop, and had clearly inherited a tradition of providing pastoral care that Bede found particularly admirable. Little evidence survives to tell us what preaching to the Anglophone laity would have entailed, but Bede does offer Ecgberht an overview of his own priorities. For the laity, Ecgberht should provide teachers who, in addition to teaching the words of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, would also teach the people what works will please God, what sins should be avoided, how sincerely they should believe, how devotedly they should pray, how they should protect themselves with the sign of the cross, and how beneficial it is to take daily communion.²² It is worth noticing what does *not* appear on this list: there is no mention of Scripture or computistics or anything approaching the profound arguments upon which Bede lavished so much scholarly attention elsewhere. This is a simple, practical list, and one for which the deeds of Cuthbert would provide a near-perfect model.

Of course, reading the text of the *Life of Cuthbert* aloud, in Latin, to the unlettered populace would have been worse than useless, but reading it aloud (possibly with English interpretation) at the monastery would have provided a rich store of highly memorable,

²¹ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, 22–75.

²² Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, ch. 15, p. 152.

theologically straightforward exempla for the simple monk-preachers of the Lindisfarne community to pass on to their flocks.

Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert* is a formal companion—an *opus geminatum*, or “twinned work”—to his earlier metrical *Life* (completed ca. 705).²³ It is clear that one purpose of these twinned works was to provide an ornate, stylized verse version for private contemplation by the highly educated and a straightforward, accessible prose version for wider audiences.²⁴ Bede's metrical *Life* is dedicated to a specific individual, the (otherwise unidentifiable) priest John, for him to read on his journey to Rome, while the prose *Life* was “passim transcribenda” (to be copied far and wide).²⁵

Excerpts from the prose *Life* would presumably have been read aloud to the monks at Lindisfarne on Cuthbert's feast day, and perhaps on other occasions as well. If, as Simon Coates argues, “Bede wanted the heights of perfection witnessed in the exemplary lives of bishops to be the goal of the Anglo-Saxon people,”²⁶ the *Life of Cuthbert* would have been a perfect tool for conveying his vision both to the less-scholarly monks of Lindisfarne and, indirectly, to the English-speaking Christians to whom they ministered. At the same time, this process would have provided valuable advertising for the growing cult and shrine of St. Cuthbert.²⁷ Bede's presentation of the

²³ For dating and analysis of the metrical *Life* (and its later revision), see Michael Lapidge, “Bede's Metrical *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*,” in Bonner, Rollason, and Stancliffe, *St Cuthbert*, 77–93; for a discussion of how Bede's prose *Life* replaced the earlier anonymous *Life* as the twin to his metrical version, see Walter Berschin, “*Opus deliberatum ac perfectum*: Why Did the Venerable Bede Write a Second Prose Life of St Cuthbert?” in Bonner, Rollason, and Stancliffe, *St Cuthbert*, 95–102. For a general history of the *opus geminatum* tradition, see Peter Godman, “The Anglo-Latin *opus geminatum*: From Aldhelm to Alcuin,” *Medium Ævum* 50 (1981): 215–29.

²⁴ See Brown, *Companion*, 77–8.

²⁵ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti metrica*, in *Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti*, ed. Werner Jaeger (Leipzig: Mayer and Müller, 1935), 56; Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, prologue, 142. On the dedication to John, see Lapidge, “Bede's Metrical *Vita*,” 77–8 and 85. On the significance of *transcribere*, see Meyvaert, “Medieval Notions,” 78–81. Meyvaert specifically discusses Bede's “passim transcribenda” on p. 81.

²⁶ Coates, “Bishop as Pastor and Solitary,” 603.

²⁷ See D. P. Kirby, “The Genesis of a Cult: Cuthbert of Farne and Ecclesiastical Politics in Northumbria in the Late Seventh and Early Eighth Centuries,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46, no. 3 (July 1995): 383–97.

posthumous miracles described in chapters 41–6 seems particularly suited to this purpose: a boy is cured of an evil spirit by the soil where the water that washed Cuthbert’s corpse had been dumped, and “ostenditur usque hodie fossa illa cui memorabile infusum est lauacrum” (that trench into which the memorable bath was poured is still displayed today), bordered by a wooden frame and filled with small stones;²⁸ a sick man is cured by praying at Cuthbert’s tomb;²⁹ and a paralyzed boy is cured by wearing his shoes.³⁰ “Nunc usque” (even now), Bede proclaims, “miraculorum signa fieri non desinunt” (the signs of miracles have not ceased to come about), and the clothes once worn by the saint still retained their healing power.³¹ All these miracles clearly testify to the value of the shrine and its relics as a site of pilgrimage.

For these reasons, it was logical and necessary that Bede should consider how to establish the authority of his material for an audience steeped in oral traditions, who might be distrustful of written sources, but had their own, highly developed means of evaluating ideas and stories. James Montgomery observes that “Writing (or more precisely the fixation of writing in published form) tends, in an age of large-scale publication, to the hegemonic as a practice. Intolerant of other, related practices such as the codification of knowledge in orally transmitted formats, it verges on the exclusive and can entail the obsolescence of oral practices.”³² The modern hegemony of literate culture is so totalizing that it is all too easy for us to discredit oral testimony out of hand, as mere gossip or hearsay. As Benedicta Ward notes, however, Bede’s oral sources are carefully

²⁸ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 41, 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 44, 296–8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 45, 298–300.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 44, 296.

³² James E. Montgomery, editor’s introduction to *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, by Gregor Schoeler (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

and specifically authorized, even if the means of authorization are unfamiliar to us: “This oral tradition of good men, *ex traditione maiorum*, is a source no longer available for historians; it belongs to the close-knit society of another age, where what is agreed to have happened is held to be a stronger guide than the observations of individuals. The fact that this source is not available now does not invalidate Bede in his use of it.”³³

Neither were these traditions immediately invalidated by the introduction of literacy and literate culture to England. Brian Stock, studying the functions of literacy in England centuries after Bede, observes:

During the medieval period the implanting of a society that acknowledged literate criteria in a wide variety of circumstances required more than a simple increase in the use of scribal techniques. A different style of reflection also had to question long-established habits of thought, which, if not actually produced by oral tradition, were nonetheless maintained in the system of human interchange by means of the spoken word.³⁴

Ward Parks, in his study of Old English poetic narrators’ use of oral formulas, argues that even among poets who composed in writing, “oral discourse still provided the most natural frame of reference.”³⁵ Bede wrote his *Life of Cuthbert* for a narrow and explicit audience: their education and Latinity may have been doubtful, but they were

³³ Benedicta Ward, “Miracles and History: A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories Used by Bede,” in Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 70–76.

³⁴ Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5.

³⁵ Ward Parks, “The Traditional Narrator and the ‘I Heard’ Formulas in Old English Poetry,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 16 (1987): 61.

committed to pastoral care and to promoting their patron saint and his shrine. They would encounter the stories Bede had recorded orally, and they would be expected to preach orally, in English, as well. It is, therefore, against this oral frame of reference that Bede's narrative choices can be most readily understood.

5.2. *Raison d'être*

A single question has dominated the scholarly discussion about Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert* for more than half a century: Why did he write it? More specifically, why was he commissioned to write it by the Lindisfarne community, when they already had what seems to us like a perfectly good *Life of Cuthbert*, written by one of their own brethren?

One strand of criticism has focused on the differing theological implications of the two narratives. The anonymous author repeatedly emphasizes that Cuthbert was "predestined" for his saintly role, and although his narrative is ordered chronologically, there is little of what a modern reader would call character development: Cuthbert is as saintly in early childhood as he is in old age. His early miracles are the signs whereby "Dei electione predestinatum, Dominus magnificavit eum" (The Lord glorified him, predestined by God's choice).³⁶

The author makes a condensed case for predestination based on biblical exemplars. Jacob surpassed his older brother Esau not because he behaved virtuously, but because God—seemingly arbitrarily—loved one and hated the other.³⁷ "Samuhel quoque et Daud, utrique in infantia electi inueniuntur. Hieremias uero propheta, et Iohannes

³⁶ *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 1.4, 66. See also 1.3, 64.

³⁷ Sally Shockro, "Bede and the Rewriting of Sanctity," *Haskins Society Journal* 21 (2010): 6.

baptista, in officium Domini a uulua matris sanctificati leguntur. Sicut doctor gentium adfirmavit dicens, *Quos autem predestinavit, hos et uocavit, et reliqua.*” (Samuel and David, also, are each found to be elect in infancy. Indeed the prophet Jeremiah and John the Baptist are read to have been sanctified for the service of the Lord from the mother’s womb. Just as the teacher of the gentiles affirmed, saying, *but those whom he predestined, he has called, and the rest*).³⁸

Bede, however, frames Cuthbert’s sanctity and power as a more precarious progression, in which Cuthbert is found worthy of each new bestowal of God’s grace because of how fully he has embraced the last: “Itaque uir domini de ostensa miraculi uirtute conpunctus, maiorem ex eo uirtutum operibus curam impendebat. Crescentibus autem uirtutibus, crevit et gratia coelestis” (And so, the man of God, pricked by the revealed virtue of the miracle, devoted greater care from that time to works of virtue. As his virtues grew, however, so also grew the grace of heaven).³⁹

In his choice of exemplars, Bede seems to be answering those of his predecessor. Where the anonymous author, in discussing Cuthbert’s childhood miracles, cites Samuel and Jeremiah as evidence that God’s grace is predetermined, Bede, at the same point, cites the same sources but with a subtler interpretation. As a boy, Cuthbert was reprimanded by a young child for participating in “ioci uarietatem, et scurilitatem” (a variety of games and coarse behavior) unbecoming the high rank he would later attain.⁴⁰ The anonymous author interprets the child’s prophecy as evidence that Cuthbert’s future was foreordained. Bede, however, uses the same occasion to frame Cuthbert’s holy life as

³⁸ *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 1.3, 66. See Malachi 1:2–3, Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1:13–15, and Romans 8:28–30.

³⁹ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 7, 178. Carole E. Newlands, “Bede and Images of Saint Cuthbert,” *Traditio* 52 (1997): 82–4, traces the transformation from static to progressive visions of sanctity from the anonymous *Vita*, through Bede’s metrical *Vita*, and finally to his prose *Vita*.

⁴⁰ *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 1.3, 64–6; Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch.1, 154–8.

a dynamic process, rather than an enduring but static fact of God's eternal will. Replacing Samuel's name with Cuthbert's, he writes, "*Porro Cuthbertus necdum sciebat Dominum, neque reuelatus fuerat ei sermo Domini*" (*Now, Cuthbert did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him*).⁴¹ Like the young Samuel, the young Cuthbert had not yet attained the full holiness of his later years.

Bede establishes this point of view from his first sentence, invoking the authority of Jeremiah: "Principium nobis scribendi de uita et miraculis beati patris Cuthberti Ieremias propheta consecrat" (The prophet Jeremiah consecrates for us the beginning of the writing about the life and miracles of the blessed father Cuthbert). But he cites an obscure textual variant in the Lamentations of Jeremiah that, unlike the more common version, emphasizes human agency: "Bonum est uiro cum portauerit iugum ab adolescentia sua, sedebit solitarius et tacebit, quia leuabit se super se" (It is good for a man who bears the yoke from his childhood; he will sit alone and be silent, because he will raise himself above himself).⁴² From a modern perspective, Bede's Cuthbert is an

⁴¹ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 1, 154, citing 1 Samuel 3:7.

⁴² Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 1, 154, citing Lamentations 3:27–8. The final clause of Bede's text differs from the most common Vulgate text in two ways. The Vulgate reads "quia levavit super se" (because he has lifted [the yoke] upon himself). See *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969, repr. 1983), 1252. The shift to the future tense, from "levavit" to "levabit," appears in three sources: the Codex Amiatinus, produced at Bede's Wearmouth and Jarrow before 716 (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1), and two later Spanish Bibles, the León Bible of 960 (León, Archivo Capitular, Real Colegiata de San Isidoro, MS 2), and the tenth-century Seville Bible (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MS Vitr. 13–1). The variant may therefore be the result of v/b confusion (a frequent occurrence in medieval Spanish manuscripts) in an earlier common source. Note that *leuauit* does appear in three closely-related manuscripts of Bede's prose *Life* (C1, V, and H) of the subgroup Colgrave designates as Am, as well as in M, which he took as representative of the late-twelfth-century subgroup Bz. Although his A group contains nearly all the earliest manuscripts, Colgrave judges this "unfortunate, because it seems that the text of this group is less faithful to the original than that of the B group, judging by its frequent and serious omissions . . . and its treatment of unfamiliar words . . . or its numerous mistakes in syntax which are correct in the other groups" (introduction to *Two Lives*, 47). For this reason, he based his text on the early-twelfth-century manuscripts of the Bx group, which, he surmised, "were probably written in Durham and have the Durham tradition behind them" (*ibid.*, 48). Thus, *leuabit* appears in all but nine of the thirty-six extant manuscripts, and is found in all manuscripts in the groups Colgrave deemed most reliable. It therefore seems most likely that Bede wrote *leuabit*, and that later scribes attempted to correct it to the more familiar *leuauit*. The more problematic difference between Bede's text and the Vulgate, however, is the insertion of the reflexive *se*. This changes the meaning of the passage significantly (from "he will lift [the yoke] upon himself" to "he will raise himself above himself"), introducing the idea of individual agency that animates Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* throughout, and it does not appear in the Codex Amiatinus or in any other Vulgate source used in Weber's edition. Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives*, 56–7, classes

active protagonist, who makes choices that have consequences, and who develops over the course of the narrative. He not only bears the yoke of service from childhood, but also uses that service to elevate himself.

Bede's portrait of the workings of grace reaches its climax with another counter-intuitive interpretation of a passage that seems more naturally to support the idea of predestination, from the Parable of the Talents:

Verum quia *omni habenti dabitur et abundabit*, id est habenti propositum amoremque uirtutum harum copia superno munere donabitur. Quoniam puer Domini Cuthbertus, quae hominem accepit hortamenta sedulo corde retinebat, etiam angelico uisu et affatu confortari promeruit.⁴³

It is true that *to everyone who has shall be given, and he shall abound*, that is, to him who has purpose and love, an abundance of these virtues will be given by divine gift. Because Cuthbert, the child of the Lord, kept with a zealous heart those exhortations which he received, he also merited to be comforted by the sight and speech of an angel.

Matthew Delvaux points out that although "this quotation might more easily have buttressed the Anonymous's providential theology," Bede has, somewhat awkwardly,

this citation among those that do not correspond with either the Vulgate or the *Versio Antiqua*, concluding that "the source is doubtful but apparently not the Vulgate." See Pierre Sabatier, ed., *Bibliorum Sacrorum Latinae Versiones Antiquae*, vol. 2 (Paris: Reginald Florentain, 1743), p. 728. Sabatier cites many slight variations on "quia tulit jugum grave" (because he has borne a heavy yoke), but nothing remotely resembling Bede's version. It is difficult to avoid the suggestion that Bede inserted the reflexive *se* himself.

⁴³ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 2, p. 158, citing Matthew 25:29.

stretched it to suggest that the bestowal of grace is an active, reciprocal process, in which those who make good use of what is given to them are rewarded with greater gifts.⁴⁴

These contrasting concepts of sanctity were first emphasized in the 1950s by Marie Schütt. Schütt saw Bede's rewriting in the context of a longstanding contention between the model of sanctity crystalized in the *Life of Anthony*, with its emphasis on the personal spiritual development of its central character, and an Augustinian (or perhaps more accurately an anti-Pelagian) approach that views sanctity as an eternally foreknown and ultimately inscrutable gift of God.⁴⁵

Bede, of course, would have been horrified to be thought a Pelagian heretic, and he carefully navigates the theological difficulties.⁴⁶ He does not claim that Cuthbert achieved sanctity without the aid of divine grace, but rather that the process is reciprocal. God grants a measure of his grace, Cuthbert responds by embracing a more virtuous path, and so God grants further grace, and the process continues. Bede emphasizes that the process necessarily begins with God: "ut haec in maiori aetate posset, superna illum gratia ad uiam ueritatis paulatim a primis iam puericiae incitauerat annis" (so that he might be capable of these things in greater age, heavenly grace had already stimulated him gradually to the path of truth from the first years of his boyhood).⁴⁷

More recently, Sally Shockro has argued, like Schütt, that Bede's concerns in rewriting the anonymous *Vita* were largely theological.⁴⁸ The scriptural references in the

⁴⁴ Matthew C. Delvaux, "From Virtue to Virtue: Diverging Visions of Sanctity and Monasticism in Two Lives of Cuthbert," *Early Medieval Europe* 27, no. 2 (2019): 240.

⁴⁵ Marie Schütt, "Vom heiligen Antonius zum heiligen Guthlac: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Biographie," *Antike und Abendland* 5 (1956): 85–8. See also Marie Schütt, "Ein Beda-Problem," *Anglia* 72 (1954): 12–14. Stancliffe, "Pastor and Solitary," 25, argues that the anonymous *Vita*'s concern with predestination has more to do with its reliance on Irish narrative traditions than a commitment to Augustinian theology or worry about Pelagianism.

⁴⁶ See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.10, 38; 1.17–21, 54–66; and 2.19, 200 for Bede's condemnation of Pelagius's doctrine.

⁴⁷ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 3, 154.

⁴⁸ Shockro, "Rewriting of Sanctity," 1–19.

anonymous *Vita* were systematically replaced in Bede's version. Building on an observation made by Benedicta Ward, Shockro points out that many of the original citations bear only the shallowest connections to the miracles they accompany, and they do not, in combination, add up to any coherent thematic commentary beyond the "continual reaffirmation that elements present in Cuthbert's life and miracles also happened in the Bible, and, therefore, that Cuthbert existed in a paradigm of holiness."⁴⁹ For example, after hearing the child's prophecy that he will one day hold high ecclesiastical office, the boy Cuthbert remembers the prediction, though he does not understand it, and the anonymous author compares him to Mary, who remembered without understanding the prophetic words she heard about her son. Shockro observes:

Already the Anonymous's comparison (Cuthbert/Mary) is unusual, to say the least. Instead of focusing on those about whom the prophecies were made (Cuthbert/Jesus), he has instead looked to those who remember half-understood prophecies that predict future spiritual greatness. Although there is nothing objectionable in this comparison, it does little to further the reader's understanding of Cuthbert as a saint or as imitating the figure of Christ.⁵⁰

Bede, however, uses his allusions far more effectively and coherently, creating "a web of scriptural connections" that "engendered multiple layers of meaning."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3–4. See Benedicta Ward, *The Venerable Bede* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 98. Although, by Shockro's count, Bede removed "all but one of the thirty-eight references to the Bible" in the anonymous *Vita* and inserted forty-eight of his own, "referencing an entirely new set of biblical verses" ("Rewriting of Sanctity," 4), these numbers can be misleading. As can be seen above, Bede's scriptural references often seem to answer those of the anonymous rather than disregard them.

⁵⁰ Shockro, "Rewriting of Sanctity," 5–6.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

Specifically, Shockro observes, “Bede was saying that the saints of England, although doubtless in the spiritual line of Christ, were also, simultaneously, figures in another tradition—that of the prophets, holy men, and warriors of God in the Old Testament.”⁵²

But explanations of why Bede rewrote the anonymous *Vita* have ranged far beyond theology. Some commentators have referred to aesthetic considerations. Though there is a tradition, originally and most forcefully articulated by Plummer, that “it cannot . . . be said that Bede has bettered the original” stylistically,⁵³ other scholars have noted ways in which Bede seems to have created a more coherent literary organization. Walter Berschin argued that Bede rewrote the prose *Life* to create a more fitting *opus geminatum* to his metrical version, specifically one that shared the numerologically significant division into 46 chapters.⁵⁴ And Lenore Abraham, observing some of the same patterns illuminated by Schütt and Shockro, interpreted them in artistic rather than strictly theological terms. Abraham noted that although the structure of the anonymous *Vita* is roughly chronological, the individual episodes are strung together only with crude connective phrases, grouping them by time, place, or source, rather than according to any spiritual significance. Bede, on the other hand, provides progressive interpretations in which Cuthbert becomes spiritually stronger and his miracles reach further and further from his body in time and space as he approaches his own death.⁵⁵ At the same time, Bede’s scriptural references progress roughly chronologically through biblical history, and this progression, in turn, is echoed in an allusive recapitulation of the Ages of the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Plummer, introduction to *Opera historica*, vol. 1, xlvi. See also Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives*, 14–16. For an overview of this tradition, see Lenore Abraham, “Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*: A Reassessment,” *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference* 1 (1976): 23–4.

⁵⁴ Berschin, “*Opus deliberatum ac perfectum*,” 95–102.

⁵⁵ Abraham, “A Reassessment,” 26–7.

World. “Bede’s work,” Abraham argues, “was not intended simply to be another biography of Cuthbert, rhetorically embellished, but forms a paradigm of the whole meaning of the Church on earth.”⁵⁶

Another common explanation for Bede’s rewriting has been an assumed desire to reach a wider audience. Colgrave, for instance, felt that Bede universalized his account of Cuthbert by eliminating local references that would have alienated readers from beyond the Lindisfarne community:

Bede also suppresses many interesting proper names of persons and places, perhaps, as has been suggested, in order to make the account more easy to read in the services of the church or the refectory. In fact, even in the *Anonymous Life*, certain MSS (notably B and H) have omitted many of the proper names for the same reason. But probably Bede’s account was written in the first instance for a wider circle of readers than the *Anonymous Life* and was therefore intended to be somewhat less personal.⁵⁷

Francesca Tinti agrees that “[Bede’s] intent was to make Cuthbert’s *Vita* less parochial and more suitable for a wider audience,”⁵⁸ and Alan Thacker noted Bede’s emphasis on celebrating Cuthbert as a *national* saint: “Cuthbert, in short, is presented as the selfconscious patron of the whole of Northumbria, a role which complemented his

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁷ Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives*, 15.

⁵⁸ Francesca Tinti, “Personal Names in the Composition and Transmission of Bede’s Prose *Vita S. Cuthberti*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 40 (2011): 17.

function as model monk and pastor: exemplified by the *Reichsheiliger*, Bede's pastoral ideas were certain to reach a wide and influential audience."⁵⁹

Thacker interpreted this push for a larger audience within two wider contexts, however, that have come to dominate scholarly approaches to the *Cuthbert Lives* in recent decades: Bede's desire to reform the Northumbrian church, which has been discussed in chapters 3 and 4,⁶⁰ and the longstanding rivalry between Lindisfarne and the Wilfridite communities.⁶¹

The complex and often ferocious rivalry between the Lindisfarne community and the community of Wilfrid and his followers shaped the lives of everyone involved for decades. Even as late as 731, the competition between, and eventual synthesis of, the Irish and Roman factions served as the central axis of Bede's account of the history of his church. The vicissitudes of Northumbrian ecclesiastical politics in this period can be dizzyingly complex, and many of the details of these struggles have been left out of the sources, but a summary of the most egregious affronts on both sides should suffice to give a sense of the intensity and urgency of their competition.

In the early 660s,⁶² Cuthbert was living in the newly-established community of Ripon, which followed the Irish traditions it had inherited from Melrose and, ultimately, from Lindisfarne. But they were forced off their land to make way for a new community founded by Wilfrid, who had begun his religious career at Lindisfarne, but had returned

⁵⁹ Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal," 130–53, at 147–9.

⁶⁰ See also Thacker, "Bede's Ideal," 103–22; Scott DeGregorio, "'Nostrorum socordiam temporum,'" 107–22; and DeGregorio, "Monasticism and Reform," 673–87.

⁶¹ Alan Thacker, "Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St Cuthbert," in Bonner, Rollason, and Stancliffe, *St Cuthbert*, 117–22.

⁶² The dates in this section follow Catherine Cubitt, "Appendix 2: The Chronology of Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*," in Higham, *Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, 334–41.

from an extensive journey abroad with new ideas and foreign backers, and had gained the ear of Alhfrith, Oswiu's son and sub-king of Deira.

In 664, the Lindisfarne bishop Colman was defeated by Wilfrid at the synod of Whitby and forced into exile with all those of his followers who refused to conform to the Roman Easter and tonsure. According to his biographer, Wilfrid later bragged, "Necnon et ego primus ... Scotticae virulenta plantationis germina eradicarem?" (And was I not the first to uproot the poisonous shoots planted by the Irish?).⁶³ In the confused aftermath of the synod, the seat of the bishopric was moved from Lindisfarne to York, and two bishops, Wilfrid and Chad, who had been trained at Lindisfarne, were appointed to the same see. The dispute was eventually decided in Wilfrid's favor.

In 678, Wilfrid was exiled and his see divided, with a portion going to Eata, abbot of Lindisfarne, who had been the leader of the community that Wilfrid had driven from Ripon. Two years later, when Wilfrid returned with exonerating letters from Pope Agatho, the Northumbrian bishops (presumably including Eata) supported King Ecgfrith's decision to imprison Wilfrid.

In 684–5, the Wilfridite bishop Tunbert was deposed. Eata replaced him at Hexham and Cuthbert took Eata's place as bishop of Lindisfarne. But when Cuthbert died some two years later, Wilfrid, recently restored at York, took control of Lindisfarne for a year. Decades later, the community still recalled that year with horror:

Siquidem sepulto viro Dei tanta aecclesiam illam temptationis aura concussit, ut plures e fratribus loco magis cedere, quam talibus uellent interesse periculis.

⁶³ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 47, 98.

Attamen post annum ordinato in episcopatum Eadberto magnarum virtutum viro, et in scripturis nobiliter erudito, maximeque elemosinarum operibus dedito, fugatis perturbationum procellis, ut scripturae uerbis loquar, *aedificauit Ierusalem* id est uisionem pacis *Dominus, et dispersiones Israel congregauit*.⁶⁴

Indeed, with the man of God buried, so great a blast of trial struck that church that many of the brethren chose to depart the place rather than be among such dangers. However, after a year, with the ordination to the episcopacy of Eadbert, a man of great virtue, and remarkably learned in the scriptures, and especially given to works of charity, with the tempests of disturbances driven off, if I may speak with the words of scripture, *the Lord built up Jerusalem*, that is, the vision of peace, and *gathered together the dispersed of Israel*.

Around 700, with Wilfrid in exile again, Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne, commissioned the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert*. Goffart, Thacker, and Stancliffe have all agreed that, by falsely claiming that Cuthbert had worn the Roman tonsure from the first and dubiously implying that he had instituted the Rule of St. Benedict at Lindisfarne, and more generally, by promoting an alternative model of both sainthood and episcopacy to that embodied by Wilfrid, the anonymous *Life* aggressively challenged Wilfrid's position as the preeminent figure of the Northumbrian church.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 40, 286. Psalm 146:2–3.

⁶⁵ Goffart, *Narrators*, 235–328; Goffart, “Harsher Climate,” 203–26; Thacker, “Origins of the Cult,” 119–22; Stancliffe, “Pastor and Solitary,” 21–5.

In about 702, according to Stephen, Wilfrid, who had been living in Mercia, was summoned to the synod of Austerfield by an alliance consisting of the Northumbrian king, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the bishops of nearly all Britain, including “illis pontificibus ecclesiarum ... qui pacem ecclesiarum Dei, avaritia instigante, nullatenus habere concupierunt” (those bishops of the churches who, driven by greed, by no means desired the peace of the churches of God),⁶⁶ which would seem to be a reference to those bishops (including Eadfrith) who controlled parts of Wilfrid’s former see, and so stood to gain from his permanent exclusion. At the synod, his enemies attempted to violate his safe conduct and trick him into consenting to his own deposition and condemnation, and to the confiscation of all his possessions. The synod collapsed into boasting, name-calling, and threats of violence. Wilfrid was allowed to return to exile in Mercia, but shortly afterwards, “inimici vero, qui haereditatem sancti pontificis nostri sibi usurpabant” (the enemies, indeed, who had usurped the endowment of our holy bishop for themselves) excommunicated all Wilfrid’s followers, decreeing that any food they had blessed must be thrown away and vessels from which they had eaten and drunk must be washed “quasi sorde polluta” (as if polluted with filth) before they could be used again.⁶⁷

Following the settlement set forth at the synod of Nidd,⁶⁸ the relationship between these powerful factions of the Northumbrian church entered a new phase. There were no further banishments, imprisonments, or excommunications, but several odd occurrences, such as Wilfrid’s decision to set aside a full quarter of his patrimony to enable the

⁶⁶ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 46, 94.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 49, 100.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 2.

community to purchase the favor of kings, or John of Beverley's uncanonical appointment of his successor,⁶⁹ have long been seen as indications that each side continued to feel threatened by the other, tensions which may have culminated in the ouster of Acca in the political upheaval of 731.⁷⁰ It is mostly in the context of this cold-war period that Goffart, Thacker, and others discern the outlines of a hagiographical "pamphlet war" in which Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* served as a riposte to Lindisfarne's earlier attempt to undermine Wilfrid by elevating Cuthbert to the level of a national saint, while Bede's construction of a new prose *Life of Cuthbert* parried Stephen's subtle but piercing attacks on Lindisfarne's behalf.⁷¹

Many other possible motivations for the collaboration between Bede and Lindisfarne have been suggested as well. My ambition in this chapter is not so much to add to the profusion of speculative explanations as to propose a framework in which that profusion might be understood.⁷² Generally speaking, these theories are not mutually exclusive: Bede may indeed have had unfulfilled aesthetic (or numerological) ambitions for the prose twin to his most extensive poetic work, *and* the Lindisfarne community may have felt that Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* had exposed weaknesses in the original *Life* that left them politically vulnerable; the anonymous author's rustic Latin (or his strict Augustinian outlook) may have come to seem old-fashioned and simpleminded as Northumbria reached the heights of its golden age, *and* the dynamic roles played by women, such as Ælflæd, in the anonymous *Life* may have become a source of embarrassment as male domination of church and society became more fully entrenched

⁶⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 63, 136; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.6, 468, and see p. 144, n. 2.

⁷⁰ Thacker, "Origins of the Cult," 119–22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 122. See also Stancliffe, "Disputed Episcopacy," 7–39.

⁷² Perhaps the most successful synthesis of the disparate approaches is Delvaux, "From Virtue to Virtue," 226–50.

and the accepted range of female behavior narrowed.⁷³ At the same time, changes to episcopal boundaries may have made the geographical references less suited to the present realities and ambitions of the community.⁷⁴ In short, the world had changed, and the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* was outdated. But while scholars have traditionally sought to understand Bede's text in relationship to the text of the anonymous *Life*, I contend that a fuller explanation can be found in the relationship between the static text of the anonymous *Life* and the evolving oral traditions of the Lindisfarne community.

As we have seen repeatedly, a written text can rapidly become outdated in an oral society. This is particularly true where such texts are not ordinarily consulted by most people. As the disparities (potentially including any of those listed above) grew between the anonymous *Life* and the stories told by respected community members, the continued existence of the text would have grown increasingly embarrassing, and an updated text, reflecting the truth as presently understood, would be required.

And the anonymous *Life* need not have been widely read to provoke this tension. In the model I am proposing, the text does not exist to edify readers so much as to serve as a reference for oral storytellers, just as a modern screenplay is not meant to be read for its own sake, but only by the very specialized audience of filmmakers who will use it to create a different work for a much larger audience.

5.3. The Problem of Subtlety

⁷³ Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 179–87.

⁷⁴ A. Joseph McMullen, "Rewriting the Ecclesiastical Landscape of Early Medieval Northumbria in the Lives of Cuthbert," *Anglo-Saxon England* 43 (2014): 57–98.

From the standpoint of rhetoric, one problem continually recurs in assessing many of these explanations: the problem of subtlety. What was the purpose of expending such considerable resources of time, material wealth, and mental energy on the composition and copying of texts that almost no one could be expected to read or understand? What was the point of writing arguments based on subtle hints that could only be detected by a vanishingly small number of potential readers? Appeals to “prestige” or intra-monastic rivalries merely beg the question. Prestige in the eyes of whom, exactly? Books, it seems, require readers. Or, to state the general principle: rhetoric requires an audience.

The problem becomes more acute when a text cannot be properly understood without detailed knowledge of another text. In the case of Goffart’s theory, Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert* is a political document, but its political force emerges only when it is read side by side with both the anonymous Lindisfarne *Life*, which it was putatively intended to replace, and Stephen’s *Life of Wilfrid*, a polemical work produced by a rival monastery. Would the ordinary monks of Ripon even have had access to a Lindisfarne polemic, or vice versa? And if even the relevant local communities were unlikely to be familiar with all the books involved in these intertextual exchanges, surely the local nobility and distant ecclesiastical powers would be entirely deaf to them. The audience of readers who could potentially detect intertextual references must have been tiny, and it likely would have consisted entirely of people who had already formed opinions on the relevant issues.

And yet intertextual references are undeniably present. No one has been more alert to such exchanges, or analyzed them more precisely, than Clare Stancliffe. In her article “Disputed Episcopacy: Bede, Acca, and the Relationship between Stephen’s *Life of St Wilfrid* and the Early Prose Lives of St Cuthbert,” Stancliffe agrees with much of

what Goffart, Kirby, and Thacker have said about the rivalry between Lindisfarne and the Wilfridians, concluding that “Stephen’s *Life of St Wilfrid* does indeed contain implicit criticism of the presentation of Cuthbert’s sanctity given by the anonymous Lindisfarne author; and Bede can be seen to be responding to those implicit criticisms in his rewriting of the Cuthbert *Life*.”⁷⁵ She acknowledges, however, that it is “difficult to prove that Bede’s prose *Life of Cuthbert* was commissioned specifically to replace the Lindisfarne *Life* as a result of Stephen’s snide use of the latter ... because Bede’s mode of operating was so subtle.”⁷⁶

The tension between ambitious rhetorical aims and muted rhetorical techniques is evident throughout Stancliffe’s article. She writes that the anonymous Lindisfarne author, and other writers in the Irish tradition who had converted to the Roman Easter, “appear to have flagged up their allegiance by deliberately citing the works of approved catholic and Roman authors.” Some of these citations, such as the extended quotations from Sulpicius Severus’s *Life of St. Martin* or Athanasius’s *Life of St. Anthony* that make up the bulk of the first preface of the anonymous *Life*, may have been widely recognizable. Others seem less obvious:

When Cuthbert was watching in prayer one night while still a layman, he had a vision of the heavens opening, and saw angels ‘carrying a holy soul to heaven in a globe of fire’. This wording comes from a passage in Book IV of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, where St Benedict sees the soul of Germanus, bishop of Capua, borne aloft to heaven. This testifies both to the sanctity of Cuthbert, here

⁷⁵ Stancliffe, “Disputed Episcopacy,” 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20. Stancliffe uses variations of the word *subtle* five times in her article, and variations of *imply* seven times.

implicitly compared to St Benedict, and also to that of Aidan the bishop, whose soul turns out to be that which is borne aloft by angels; and it does so by invoking the authority of Pope Gregory I.⁷⁷

If the echo of Gregory, which consists of only six words in the Latin, seems too faint to impact anyone's interpretation—Stancliffe observes that it “has hitherto gone unremarked” by scholars—it is clear that at least one medieval English reader caught it: Bede. In the rewritten version, he changes the “globe of fire” to a stream of light, but, remarkably, “Bede's rewording of the text also borrows from Gregory's account of the same vision, but this time taken from that given in Book II of his *Dialogues*.”⁷⁸ Bede detected the reference and thought it worth keeping even as he eschewed the wording of the anonymous author. But how many ordinary monks would have noticed it? Could such a reference have “flagged up” the connection to Gregory visibly enough to affect public opinion about the orthodoxy of Lindisfarne?

In another example, Stancliffe points out that the anonymous *Life* falsely represented Cuthbert as having received the Petrine (i.e., Roman) tonsure at the commencement of his monastic career, and Stephen, who is careful to mention that Wilfrid was tonsured not at Lindisfarne, but at Lyons, describes the tonsure with the exact same phrase. By doing so, Stancliffe writes, “Stephen drew attention—for those with the necessary knowledge—to the fact that Cuthbert had not originally had the Roman tonsure, in contrast to Wilfrid's unimpeachable Roman record.” But who had the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

necessary knowledge to recognize a single phrase from the anonymous *Life*? What audience did Stephen hope to convince with such an indirect attack?

Stancliffe sees further intertextual discourse behind much of Bede's prose *Life*. Is there oblique criticism in Stephen's brief account of Caelin, Wilfrid's prior, who wished to pursue the life of a hermit, but waited for his abbot's permission, unlike Cuthbert, who according to the anonymous *Life*, left his post as prior of Melrose for the same purpose, "secularem gloriam fugiens clam et occulte abscedens" (secretly fleeing worldly glory and covertly departing), and had to be "inuitatus" (invited) and "coacte" (compelled) to go to Lindisfarne?⁷⁹ When Stephen "begins by announcing Wilfrid's predestination to sanctity right from birth, using precisely the same biblical passages as the Lindisfarne author," but emphasizes Wilfrid's childhood modesty and *stabilitas*, Stancliffe remarks that "it becomes difficult not to see this as a pointed contrast to the supposed sanctity of the young Cuthbert," who was criticized for engaging in frivolous (and naked) sports with other boys.⁸⁰ Bede's references to the Book of Samuel are "a skilful way of countering Stephen's own use of Samuel typology for the young Wilfrid to the detriment of Lindisfarne."⁸¹

What is most remarkable about all these subtle attacks is that Bede clearly saw them too, and took them seriously enough that he carefully defanged them. He eliminated the reference to the Petrine tonsure, claimed that Cuthbert entered the eremitical life after a deliberate transfer to Lindisfarne, with the support of his abbot and fellow monks, and

⁷⁹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 64, 138; *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 3.1, 94.

⁸⁰ Stancliffe, "Disputed Episcopacy," 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

eliminated the references to nakedness and predestination in the account of his childhood miracles.⁸²

But Bede, in addition to his deep learning and capacious memory, had a professional interest in these texts: he had been commissioned to rewrite one, seemingly in response to the other. He had good reason to literally place the two texts side-by-side. What remains to be explained is what Stephen could have hoped to gain by a series of attacks so indirect that no casual reader could detect them, and why Lindisfarne should have felt compelled to respond to them.

Stancliffe sheds some (fittingly indirect) light on this question when she considers a related issue: If Bede's commission was truly inspired by Stephen's attacks, why did it not appear until almost a decade later? Her answers indicate that the discourse that mattered had been taking place far beyond the page. She concludes, in fact, that "Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* and Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert* are but the tip of the iceberg," and that Bede's defensiveness about Cuthbert's early miracles, about the charge of Quartodecimanism, and about Lindisfarne's unusual constitution (as the home of both a bishop and an abbot) "was not called forth by anything in Stephen's *Life of St Wilfrid*." However, she notes, "it is clearly apologetic in tone, and therefore likely to be a riposte to fresh criticism."⁸³ She even goes so far as to imagine "conversations" between Acca and Bede, through which Acca was convinced to turn the cultic focus of his communities away from the divisive Wilfrid and toward the more unifying figure of St. Oswald.⁸⁴

⁸² See Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, chs. 7, 16, and 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 28–9, 38.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

In the theories of “orality” that held sway in the 1970s and ’80s, analytical reading, in which specific passages, temporally decontextualized from their original narratives, can be extracted and compared across multiple texts, is the preeminent example of supposedly “literate” reading, the necessary and sufficient condition that gave rise to “the literate mind.”⁸⁵ But what we see in the interactions surrounding the *Lives* of Cuthbert and Wilfrid is something altogether different: the work of analysis has been crowdsourced. The texts have a role to play, but the analysis of those texts takes place in the communal discourse, rather than within the mind of a solitary reader.

In this model, then, the texts do not answer one another. Each text serves as a reference, a carefully constructed reservoir of stories and facts intended to inform the oral discourse. The *Life of Wilfrid*’s careful structuring of the tonsure episode, for example, did not need to be read side by side with the Lindisfarne account to have its effect. It needed to provide sufficient ammunition to those who would make the case orally. These texts achieved their aims when they structured the ongoing oral debates in advantageous ways, not when they convinced individual readers. It is likely that Bede would have expected his *Life of Cuthbert* to play a similar role—as a reference source informing diffuse oral interactions—in the pastoral efforts of the Lindisfarne community. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the nature and role of storytelling within the Northumbrian church.

5.4. Written Texts in the Evolving Contexts of Oral Storytelling

⁸⁵ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38–9, 77, 92. See also Goody and Watt, “Consequences of Literacy,” 320–5.

In his 2008 Jarrow Lecture on “Bede as Oral Historian,” Nicholas Higham makes a compelling case that certain leading members of the ecclesiastical community will have built reputations as tellers of specific tales and adapted those narratives to their own needs. “From the way in which many were introduced” in the *Ecclesiastical History*, he remarks, ‘it is clear that informants frequently repeated stories. The *Ecclesiastical History*, in other words, offers us an insight into the world of clerical story-telling and interpretation.’⁸⁶ It is a world in which stories could serve as a sort of social currency. “Successful performance,” Higham observes, “established ownership of a story, enhanced the status of the individual as storyteller and facilitated recall of both the story and its pastoral message.”⁸⁷

Higham gives the example of Abbot Deda, of Partney Abbey in Lindsey, who told Bede a story he had himself heard from an old man who recalled having been baptized by Paulinus and described the saint’s physical appearance. Following the synod of Whitby, Higham writes, baptism by Paulinus would have “gained value among a people now reunited with the Roman tradition, hence an old man’s eagerness to voice his own connection with a member of the Gregorian mission.” So much value, in fact, that the story was appropriated by a higher-status teller:

Abbot Deda in Lindsey clearly valued the recollection, re-telling it for his own purposes.... It reads as an anecdote that Deda told many times; his ownership is acknowledged by Bede and reinforced by loss of the old man’s name. This had,

⁸⁶ Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

therefore, become Deda's tale, validated by his exemplary character and recalled as his performance.⁸⁸

Similar examples abound. King Ealdwulf's recollection of having seen King Rædwald's syncretic temple "reads as though this was a recollection that the king was wont to repeat, so one which local churchmen are likely to have heard frequently and themselves then adopted."⁸⁹ Drythelm's dramatic account of his visionary experience, while "recounted at length as if it had reached Bede first-hand," actually came through the *relatio* (account)⁹⁰ of a monk and hermit named Hæmgisl. Drythelm had been wont to recount it to King Aldfrith, but after his death, Hæmgisl had presumably found his second-hand recollections valuable, and shaped them carefully.⁹¹ Even when Bede himself knew the people involved first-hand, as in the case of a dissolute monk who refused to repent despite a deathbed vision of the torments awaiting him, he sometimes presented the narrative as one he had received from oral circulation: "Bede acknowledges that 'the story spread far and wide', so despite his having himself known the individual he took this story from unacknowledged oral informants rather than his own experience."⁹²

In such an environment, where oral storytelling was prized, stories were treated as possessions of established tellers, and written texts were not widely available even within the church, a written version of an established narrative would play a role very different from, say, a published account of a historical event today. In Anglo-Saxon England,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8–9. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.16, 192.

⁸⁹ Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 9. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.15, 188–90.

⁹⁰ Higham elsewhere interprets *relatio* to indicate a written letter.

⁹¹ Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 10. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.12, 488–99.

⁹² Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 11. See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.14, 502–4.

observes Ward Parks, “Written texts were potential utterances more than discourse frozen into visual space.”⁹³ Written texts, in other words, served as repositories for storytellers, rather than as independent narrative vehicles. This accords with observations about how information is transmitted across generations in oral societies in modern times. On the question of how a novice storyteller learns the craft, Jan Vansina writes:

Information is acquired normally by assistance at performances, but this channel is not the only one. Bits of history are also transmitted during casual conversations so that history as gossip is perhaps as important a source as performances are. This means that information that stems from non-oral sources, from writings or from foreign oral sources is also an input which will no longer be differentiated from other knowledge about the past. In the pool all information about a given topic will be fused.⁹⁴

Even when they were read aloud in large group settings, written texts, like Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert* or its anonymous predecessor, would have been translated, explained, and interpreted by those who had the authority to do so. Perhaps most often, they were simply told in English by their established tellers.

The key distinction here is that, as long as the stories remained in oral circulation, they continually changed. New tellers could pick them up, perhaps when the old tellers died, perhaps sooner. They would tell them in their own style, making their own points, following their own preoccupations, adapted to the needs of their own audiences. And

⁹³ Parks, “Traditional Narrator,” 61.

⁹⁴ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 148.

with each telling, the tale would evolve and adapt, to suit differing needs of the moment: the size of the audience, the time of day, the liturgical or casual context, the presence of social and ecclesiastical superiors, the location and its acoustics, the politics and fashion of the moment, the expectations established by previous tellings. Stories could change in length, tone, moral, level of detail, or scriptural relevance. And, eventually, those tellers would recede, and new tellers would emerge. Such a story is in many ways more like a living organism than a static text. A static text, then, could be a dangerous thing. It might undermine the authority of the teller by offering a competing version, complete with the inherent authority of consistency over time. It seems to claim the story as its own.

When the anonymous *Life* was composed, scarcely a decade after the saint's death, many eyewitnesses would have been available. And while their testimony was obviously essential to the author's research, their continued presence could easily undermine the authority of his text. Two decades later, the leadership of the community would have evolved considerably. Herefrith, who is not mentioned in the anonymous *Life*, but played a major role in the research, approval, and even composition of Bede's version, is only the most obvious example. The political situation would also have evolved. Lindisfarne had, for one thing, become closely aligned with Bede's own community, as both his involvement in the project and his frequent invocation within the prose *Life* of witnesses who had come to live at Wearmouth and Jarrow suggest. The debate over tonsures had been long settled. The synod of Nidd had produced a stable settlement, and Wilfrid himself had died around a decade before, after living out his final years without controversy. Perhaps most important, as Bede repeatedly points out, most of the surviving witnesses would not survive much longer. That meant that whatever new

tellers arose would not easily be able to counter the authority of Bede and his unimpeachable (and sometimes eyewitness) sources.

The predictable political effect of committing the stories, as they circulated circa 720, to parchment, under the combined *imprimatur* of Bede, his aged and holy witnesses, and the current Lindisfarne leadership, was to slow the process of narrative evolution and extend the influence of those in power at the moment. In his preface, Bede acknowledges an alternative world of Cuthbert stories, whose tellers fought for inclusion in his book, but were excluded from the early stages of planning, research, and review, and whose stories were politely but firmly rejected:

Sed et alia multa nec minora his quae scripsimus praesentibus nobis ad inuicem conferentes, de uita et uirtutibus beati uiri superintulistis, quae prorsus memoria digna uidebantur, si non deliberato ac perfecto operi noua interserere uel supradicere minus congruum atque indecorum esse constaret.⁹⁵

But, deliberating together in our presence, you introduced many other things (and not less important than those which we have written) about the life and virtues of the blessed man, which seemed quite deserving of mention, if it were not agreed to be unfitting and unseemly to interpose or overwrite new things into a considered and completed work.

⁹⁵ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 144. The anonymous author also frequently acknowledges that additional stories were in circulation, though he gives fewer hints about the process by which they were excluded. See *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 1.7, 72; 4.2, 112; and 4.18, 138. For an alternative reading of this passage, see Berschin, “*Opus deliberatum ac perfectum*,” 96 and 99.

A striking indication of the continuing life of these stories beyond the page appears in Francesca Tinti's analysis of source names inserted in the margins of a small group of much later manuscripts (dated between the tenth and fourteenth centuries) of Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert*. These names had been omitted by Bede (presumably because he had not personally interviewed the individuals in question) but had been recorded, either in the anonymous *Life* or in other sources, and passed down successively through the communities at Lindisfarne, Chester le Street, and Durham for centuries. The scribes, it seems, had been unwilling to alter Bede's text, but had also recognized and wished to preserve something of the narrative diversity from which his account had been extracted. "These manuscripts," she writes, "show how in a hagiographical context the process of memory preservation can proceed beyond the author's intentions through the collective remembrance of the people who had witnessed the saint's holy life and death."⁹⁶

Higham notes the pattern of escalating appropriation of narrative authority, culminating in Bede's commitment of the story to the page:

Bede's gift to us is a succession of voices, each louder and clearer than the one before: Bede's in the foreground, behind him the intermediaries from whom he had himself received these stories, behind them the originators and last in line the actors within the original tale, who are least likely to be named.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Tinti, "Personal Names," 39. Note that Tinti does not propose that these names were remembered orally for three hundred years, but rather that they had been in circulation close to Bede's day, and had been recorded and copied by a series of writers who thought them worth preserving.

⁹⁷ Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 19.

To take on such a role while remaining on good terms with his sources, Bede had to navigate carefully, prominently acknowledging the established authorities. And although Higham confined his observations to the *Ecclesiastical History*, such negotiations are especially visible in the *Life of Cuthbert*.

5.5. Written Text; Communal Process

In the preface to his prose *Life of Cuthbert*, Bede provides a rare and detailed account of the process by which the work was commissioned, researched, vetted, and approved for copying and distribution.⁹⁸ He explains that the community of monks at Lindisfarne, along with their bishop, Eadfrith, had requested the work, and

quia nec sine certissima exquisitione rerum gestarum aliquid de tanto uiro scribere, nec tandem ea quae scripseram sine subtili examinatione testium indubiorum passim transcribenda quibusdam dare praesumpsi, quin potius primo diligenter exordium, progressum, et terminum gloriosissimae conuersationis ac uitae illius ab his qui nouerant inuestigans.⁹⁹

that I did not presume to write anything about so great a man without the most determined investigation of his deeds, nor ultimately to hand over to others that which I had written to be distributed far and wide without the minute examination of reliable witnesses, but rather, first searching diligently, from those who had

⁹⁸ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, preface, 142–6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

known him, into the commencement, progression, and termination of his most glorious life and conduct.

Further, he explains that he has “aliquotiens” (sometimes) included the names of his sources “ob certum cognitae ueritatis inditium” (as a sure indication of known truthfulness). While the work was “adhuc in scedulis retento” (still kept on loose pages), he had often shared it with members of the community who had known Cuthbert and revised it according to their judgment. Only then did he commit the work to parchment, which was then read out “senioribus et doctoribus uestrae congregationis” (to the elders and teachers of your congregation), who, after careful examination, “communi consilio” (by common counsel), pronounced it suitable to be read and copied for distribution. The conception, execution, and approval of Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert* is presented as a decidedly communal endeavor, with Bede as essentially a hired hand tasked with executing the will of the community.

It would, of course, be naïve to assume that Bede has openly and accurately recorded his writing process for us. Yet though this account is plainly idealized, it has much to tell us about the kind of process Bede and the Lindisfarne community wished to advertise. It has much to tell us about the kind of authority that Bede expected his audiences to trust.

The process and authority Bede showcases are assertively oral and communal. Bede makes no mention of any written or documentary sources, either here or elsewhere in the book. Every source he mentions appears as a face-to-face conversation. This contrasts markedly with Bede’s discussion of his research methods in the preface to the

Historia ecclesiastica, which draws attention to his far-flung network of epistolary contacts and, at least to the eyes of modern readers, it grossly misrepresents Bede's actual process.

The anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* was more than just one source among many. A writer today who followed a source (and especially an unacknowledged source!) so closely would be guilty of the most blatant plagiarism. Bede studiously avoided verbal parallels even when the change produced no improvement (substituting *vocatur* for *dicitur*, for example), he replaced most of the scriptural references, he added some new material, and he replaced the four-book structure with a single book of forty-six chapters, but, overall, he told the same stories, often down to the smallest details, in approximately the same order. Yet, among all his extensive citations, both in the preface and the main body of the work, Bede never once mentioned that the anonymous *Life* existed. Had Bede been embarrassed by his reliance on oral sources, as Ray suggests, this approach would make no sense. Walter Berschin captures the jarring omission aptly:

If it was not for some continental manuscripts in which the first life of St Cuthbert is handed down to us, we would have no idea that such a work ever existed. In the preface to his *Historia ecclesiastica* the Venerable Bede, it is true, refers to some material about St Cuthbert. However, he does it in such a way that nobody would think of it being a monumental *Vita S. Cuthberti*, written before Bede, which it is. If we consider the fact that Bede usually mentioned the names of his witnesses

and not seldom quoted them verbatim, we get the impression that Bede deliberately failed to mention the first *Life of St Cuthbert*.¹⁰⁰

But, although Bede might have fooled us, he surely could not have hoped to fool the Lindisfarne community, who knew the origins of his work far better than we. It might be more instructive, then, to take his failure to mention the anonymous *Life* seriously. Perhaps neither he nor his audience considered it important. He was not participating in an intertextual discourse with other authors; he was providing the raw material that would shape a dynamic and evolving oral discourse.

5.6. Structure and Rhetoric for Oral Discourse

Two features of Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* are especially well-adapted for such a role. First, the book is divided into discrete, "portable" units. This means that each chapter or unit can stand as an independent narrative that would make sense to an audience who knew nothing of the preceding or following chapters, that each unit is of a length suitable for easy recall and public performance, and that each narrative unit is packaged with the requisite scriptural references and interpretations to convert a story into a homily. Second, the book employs rhetorical techniques from oral discourse, and generally eschews references to documents. Specifically, Bede emphasizes transmission histories and communal authorization, and in so doing he not only affirms the truth and orthodoxy of his stories, but also recognizes and reinforces the authority of the men from whom he learned them.

¹⁰⁰ Berschin, "*Opus deliberatum ac perfectum*," 96.

5.6.1. Portability

In a study on reading and writing practices in the early modern period, William Nelson has drawn attention to the widespread pattern of private composition intended for public—or at least social—reading aloud, and the concomitant need for scholars to develop critical criteria based on the expectation of performance, and to jettison criteria based on the expectation of private, close analytical study.¹⁰¹ Nelson highlighted a common feature of narratives intended to be read aloud in a social context: episodic structure. He examined an account by Torquato Tasso of his father Bernardo's composition, performance, and subsequent revision of his epic poem, the *Amadigi*. Inspired by Aristotle's *Poetics*, the elder Tasso had initially attempted a continuous climactic plot structure, somewhat akin to that of a modern novel. After unsuccessful performances at court, however, Tasso reconsidered.¹⁰² Nelson continues the story, drawing on Ludovico Dolce's 1560 preface to the revised *Amadigi*:

Its failure led Bernardo [Tasso] to recall the similar failure of Alamanni's *Giron Cortese* and the great acclaim accorded the *Orlando* [*Furioso*, by Ludovico Ariosto]. He therefore rewrote his poem in cantos, suitable for oral presentation,

¹⁰¹ William Nelson, "From 'Listen Lordings' to 'Dear Reader,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 46.2 (Winter 1976/7): 110–24. Nelson observes that "For works designed to be read aloud certain kinds of critical approach are ... inappropriate. The attempt to discover unity and cohesion of plot in such compositions may lead only to the imposition of irrelevant structures and to distorted interpretation. A close reader with the book before him can find or imagine meaningful connections between a metaphor in canto ii and a simile in canto xi, but, unless the passages are especially memorable or the author explicitly connects them, a listening audience cannot. Nor can such an audience keep careful count of the number of lines in each canto, the number of characters in each episode, in order to discover the author's intention by way of numerological design. A writer might indeed have secreted such patterns in his work for his own pleasure or for the delighted discovery of inquisitive scholars, perhaps centuries later. But he could not have expected them to be recognized by those who heard his work read" (120–1).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 110–11.

and incorporated a great many additional actions, approaching, Dolce says, that delightful variety of Ariosto praised by the universal judgment of mankind.¹⁰³

The problem, Nelson surmised, lay in the fact that the makeup of the audience could be different for each performance. Because these works were too long to be read in their entirety in a single sitting, they had to be broken into chunks of manageable length that could be read on separate occasions. But there was no guarantee (or even likelihood) that the same listeners would be present from one reading to the next. Those who listened to the first section, but were absent for the next, would never reach a satisfying resolution. Meanwhile, those who were absent on the first occasion, but showed up to the second, had missed out on essential information and did not know who the characters were or what they were trying to accomplish. “The author of a short narrative which can be read in an hour or two may indeed, like a playwright, conceive his tale as a complex but unified whole, with beginning, middle, and end,” Nelson writes, “but for long works which require many reading sessions, perhaps with shifting audiences, such unitary plotting can have little meaning. The listener cannot remind himself of the antecedents of the action, nor, for that matter, can he skip ahead to see how it ends.”¹⁰⁴ Nelson traces the revision of several long early-modern poems that began as unified, tightly plotted single narratives, but, having passed through the crucible of public performance, were rewritten with diverse, episodic structures.

A comparable pattern arose in the evolution of television: before the ubiquity of streaming services, audiences could not be relied upon to watch a series straight through

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

from beginning to end (and in any event the order of episodes would often be scrambled in reruns). Perhaps the most natural genre under such conditions was the sitcom, a defining feature of which is that every episode ends essentially where it began, so they can be watched in any order. Shows that experimented with long narrative arcs, like *Twin Peaks*, could not long sustain an audience. As DVDs and on-demand streaming enabled viewers to watch a series in order and on their own schedules, sitcoms receded, and unified plots expanded across multiple episodes and multiple seasons.¹⁰⁵

In contrast to the anonymous *Life*, there is clear narrative progression in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, as discussed above. Bede himself must certainly have read privately and wrote with the expectation that at least some of his readers would do the same. But the longer progression breaks up into chunks—either single chapters or small groups of connected chapters—short enough to manage easily in one sitting, which relate a self-contained narrative that neither depends on knowledge of earlier episodes nor delays its resolution until a later one.

This was hardly an innovation on Bede's part; it had been standard practice since at least Roman times.¹⁰⁶ Episodic narrative structure is a form naturally suited to reading aloud in a group setting, which, as we have seen, was the expected mode of reception for most kinds of writing. But the stories of Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* are also portable in other ways that would have facilitated their use in English as part of the pastoral efforts of the Lindisfarne monks. Most of these miracle accounts are packaged with an interpretation of

¹⁰⁵ Mike Raab, "How Streaming Doomed Comedy," Medium.com, October 12, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-raabithole/how-binge-watching-doomed-comedy-541c2dd68225>.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," *PMLA* 90.1 (January 1975): 17, notes that, "although the drama had been tightly plotted from classical antiquity ... until the late eighteenth century there is in the whole Western world ... no sizable prose narrative, so far as I know, with a tidy structure comparable to that known for two millennia in the drama, moving through closely controlled tensions to a climax, with reversal and denouement."

the spiritual significance of the miracle, and a relevant verse or two of Scripture. Many also come with references to similar miracles performed by other saints.

For example, in Chapter 20, Cuthbert compels a pair of ravens, who had been pilfering the thatch of the guesthouse at his hermitage on Farne Island, to leave the island. One returns penitently, and, using signs, asks the saint's forgiveness. Having received it, the bird flies off and returns with its mate, and the two of them bring Cuthbert a gift: a section of pig fat.

The plot is essentially unchanged from the anonymous *Life*, but Bede provides a great deal more guidance in how that plot should be interpreted. He gives us the moral before he even tells the story: "auium oboedientia et humilitate palam contumatia et superbia condempnatur humana" (by the obedience and humility of birds, human obstinacy and pride are plainly condemned). At the end, Cuthbert himself explains that the penitence of such proud birds should inspire like humility in men, and we are told that the birds remained on the island for many years "ad dandum hominibus exemplum correctionis" (to furnish an example of reformation to humans). Bede concludes with a citation from the Book of Proverbs to justify learning from birds: "Vade ad formicam o piger, et considera uias eius et disce sapientiam" (Go to the ant, oh sluggard, and consider her ways and learn wisdom).¹⁰⁷

The anonymous author had included a scriptural reference, but it has no relevance to the main story,¹⁰⁸ and, if he had a specific moral lesson in mind, he did not explain it.

This pattern repeats again and again through the two works. It could be the case, as

¹⁰⁷ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 20, 222–4, citing Proverbs 6:6; cf. *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 3.5, 100–2.

¹⁰⁸ 2 Thessalonians 3:10: "Qui non laborat, nec manducet" (He who does not labor, neither let him eat). Cuthbert is digging his garden at the start of the story.

Shockro implies, that Bede is simply a more skilled and conscientious exegete.¹⁰⁹ But if Lindisfarne sought to train a new generation of teachers, it would make sense to provide them with more structured lesson plans.

The first generation of Cuthbertine storytellers, many of them eyewitnesses who had spent years living in community with the saint, having crafted the stories from their own experiences and for their own purposes, might not have felt the need for exegetical support. They already knew what their stories meant. But as they retired or died, a new audience of younger brethren arose and inherited the stories. If they had only the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* to draw upon, they would have had to interpret the stories themselves. Some may not have had sufficient biblical or theological knowledge to be trusted to do so correctly. This would explain why Bede included such careful guidance. We should be cautious, however, about assuming that the interpretations necessarily originated with him.

In several places, the anonymous author drops little more than a confused hint about an interpretation that Bede would later explain in detail. The simplest explanation for these hints is that the interpretive material was already attached to the story when the anonymous heard it, but either he didn't understand it, or he didn't think it his business to record it. If we take Bede's assertions about his own oral research seriously, rather than assuming that he was simply and surreptitiously cribbing from the Lindisfarne *Life*, the living oral tradition from which he drew, and which his *Life* was meant to support, comes into sharper focus.

¹⁰⁹ Shockro, "Rewriting of Sanctity," 19.

For example, the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* contains two miracle accounts in which the saint battles fires.¹¹⁰ In the first, he is teaching and baptizing in a mountain village, and foresees that the devil will try to disrupt his holy work with an illusion. He warns everyone not to be distracted, but when they hear that there is a fire outside, most of them rush out to fight it, demolishing one of their houses, while only Cuthbert and a few companions remain calm. When the men realize that there is no smoke, they understand that there was no fire. This was the illusion Cuthbert had foretold, and their faith is strengthened. In the second story, Cuthbert is visiting his foster mother, and a real fire catches on a nearby house. Because of the strong winds—and the early English preference for wooden houses with straw roofs—the fire threatens to consume the whole village. Cuthbert lies down in front of the fire and prays, the wind changes, and the village is saved. The anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* places these two stories side by side, but it draws no explicit connection between them and presents no moral.

When Bede retells the two stories, he makes both the connections and the lessons to be drawn from them explicit, contrasting the *ignis fantasticus* (illusory fire) with the *ignis verus* (real fire), comparing Cuthbert's miracles to those performed by earlier saints, and then making his moral point: it should come as no surprise that power over flames was granted to these holy men, “qui cotidiana uirtutum industria et incentiua suae carnis edomare, et *omnia tela nequissimi ignea norunt extinguere*” (who, by daily effort of virtue, learned both to subdue the incitements of their flesh and *to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most evil one*).¹¹¹ The lesson here is not merely that Cuthbert could perform miracles. It is that the fires are to be understood symbolically: the real fire is the threat of

¹¹⁰ *Vita Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, 2.6–7, 86–90.

¹¹¹ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 24, 202, citing Ephesians 6:16.

bodily lust, the phantom fire is the threat of spiritual assaults against a Christian's faith. Bede even concludes with a warning not to try this at home, saying that he himself (and by extension his readers and their hearers), not being as holy as Cuthbert, should not expect to be able to command fire. But even here, there is a lesson, because he points out that they must be equally uncertain about their ability to escape the fires of Hell, relying instead on the grace and protection of Christ. Two isolated stories have been transformed into a single carefully packaged homily.

But why did the anonymous author place the two stories side by side, if not to point to such a connection? It seems likely that the two stories had been linked before he received them, but that he recorded only the bare facts of the narratives, rather than the teller's interpretations. Bede, who often had access to authoritative oral storytellers, and who had a greater need to preserve not only the facts but also the spiritual meanings of Cuthbert's miracles, makes the connections between the pair of stories explicit.

5.6.2. Oral Rhetoric

In addition to material that might have guided those whose task it was to bring Christian teachings to the Northumbrian hinterlands, Bede also relied almost exclusively on rhetorical techniques that would have been familiar and convincing to audiences who had little or no experience with the written word. Perhaps the most visible of these is the transmission history.

Again and again, Bede records witnesses and their oral intermediaries. Their qualifications, usually in terms of age, holiness, or ecclesiastical or social rank, are stressed, as is the large community of people who have heard the story. Concerning the

story of how the young Cuthbert's prayers changed the winds, saving brothers who were in danger of being swept out to sea, we find that Bede heard the story from "frater quidam nostri monasterii probatissimus" (a certain very trustworthy brother of our monastery), who had in turn heard it told "coram multis sepe assidentibus" (often, in the presence of many people), by an eyewitness.¹¹² The story of Cuthbert's horse finding food in the roof of a shepherd's hut is attributed to a Wearmouth monk and priest named Ingwald, now blind with old age, who heard it "ab ipso Cuthberto" (from Cuthbert himself).¹¹³ The story of the miraculous cures worked by Cuthbert's cincture on Ælfflæd and one of her nuns originated from the "uenerabilis ancilla Christi" (venerable handmaid of Christ), Ælfflæd herself, "sicut ipsa postea reuerentissimo Lindisfarnensis aeccliesiae presbitero Herefrido et ille mihi referebat" (just as she herself afterwards related to the most reverend Herefrith, priest of the church of Lindisfarne, and he related to me).¹¹⁴ Even when no specific source is named, a story may still cite an oral source and its communal nature, as in the story of how Cuthbert calmed the seas for a group of stranded monks, and one of them, who later became a priest, "uirtutem miraculi . . . multorum noticiae patefecit" (brought the power of the miracle to the notice of many people).¹¹⁵

Bede's failure to mention the existence of the anonymous *Life* in his preface (despite his care to mention so many oral sources) has generally seemed, to modern readers, to be a form of deception. But, considering the deep and widespread suspicion of writing in early medieval England, it may have been an appropriate choice, sensitive to the needs of his audience. As he recorded and revised the miracle stories about Cuthbert,

¹¹² Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 4, 164.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, 170.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 23, 230.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 11, 192.

Bede may well have expected his own written contribution to be likewise elided in the transmission histories that authorized future oral tellings, so that a story found in Bede and attributed to Ingwald might be introduced simply as a story once told by Ingwald.

Even in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede rarely gives the names of his written sources, even when the debt is considerable, as in the case of Constantius's *Life of Germanus* or Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*.¹¹⁶ And when he does acknowledge a textual source, he is careful to authorize it in multiple ways.

For example, in his account of the Irish saint, Fursey, Bede acknowledges that he is presenting the stories "sicut libellus de uita eius conscriptus sufficienter edocet" (just as the little book written about his life teaches fully), and even recommends the book to the curious: "De quibus omnibus siqui plenius scire uult ... legat ipsum de quo dixi libellum uitae eius, et multum ex illo, ut reor, profectus spiritalis accipiet" (If anyone wishes to know more about all these things ... he may read the little book of his life of which I spoke, and from that, I believe, he will receive much spiritual benefit).¹¹⁷ But, in a rhetorical move that echoes the careful presentation of sources in his preface, Bede also provides a parallel authorization: an oral transmission history.

Superest adhuc frater quidam senior monasterii nostri, qui narrare solet dixisse sibi quendam multum ueracem ac religiosum hominem, quod ipsum Furseum uiderit in prouincia Orientalium Anglorum, illasque uisiones ex ipsius ore audierit.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.17–21 and 5.19.

¹¹⁷ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.19, 270.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

One elderly brother of our monastery is still living, who is wont to relate that a certain very truthful and pious man told him that he saw this same Fursey in the province of the East Angles, and heard these visions from his own mouth.

Likewise, in the final book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede introduces his extracts from Adamnan's *On the Holy Places* by stressing its oral origins: it was dictated to Adamnan by Arculf, who had first-hand experience of the places in question. Bede justifies dependence on the book by pointing out that, for most people, it would be impossible to learn this material through direct experience or oral transmission. The book, he says, is "multis utile et maxime illis, qui longius ab eis locis, in quibus patriarchae uel apostoli erant, secreti ea tantum de his, quae lectione didicerint, norunt" (useful to many, and especially to those who, very far separated from those places in which the Patriarchs and the Apostles lived, know about them only what they have acquired by reading).¹¹⁹ Thus, contrary to Ray's assumptions,¹²⁰ for at least some of Bede's audiences, it is not the oral, but the written sources which are only to be used when no better alternative is available.

The other rhetorical stance that specifically positions Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert* to resonate with oral audiences is his care to situate it within the local community. Bede takes considerable pains to emphasize the role of the Lindisfarne community, as a single active entity, in every stage of the work. The preface is addressed to Bishop Eadfrith and "omni congregationi fratrum qui in Lindisfarnensi insula Christo

¹¹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.15, 508.

¹²⁰ Ray, "Bede's *vera lex historiae*," 2.

deseruiunt” (to all the congregation of brothers who serve Christ on the island of Lindisfarne). But the purpose of the preface was not to inform them of his methodology or provide empirical support for his claims. Whatever factual information it contains would already have been known to them. He explains that he wrote the preface “quia iussistis dilectissimi ut ... praefationem aliquam in fronte iuxta morem praefigerem” (because, most beloved ones, you have bidden that ... according to custom, I might affix some preface in the front). The book itself was one that “uestro rogatu composui” (I composed at your request). And the reason they had asked for the preface was so that “et uestrae uoluntatis desiderium, et oboeditionis nostrae pariter assensio fraterna claresceret” (both the desire of your will and likewise the brotherly assent of our obedience might become clear) to all readers. Bede is unusually emphatic: this is *their* book; he just wrote it.

The establishment of rhetorical authority is a two-way street. It is true that the stories of Cuthbert’s miracles would be both more believable and more readily accepted as orthodox because of the impressive ecclesiastical and social credentials of Bede’s sources and the carefully constructed performance of communal assent. But it is equally true that the entire process establishes their authority precisely by appealing to it. As Higham observes of the similar pattern evident in the *Ecclesiastical History*, “His naming of informants added their authority as churchmen to his own and by reinforcing their reputations Bede delivered potency to his message, stressing their credentials as witnesses.” Bede’s transmission histories and celebration of consensus create a portrait of “a network of elite adult males within the religious and priestly community, a community

of Christian *doctores* if you will.”¹²¹ Perhaps the ultimate purpose behind the commissioning of Bede’s prose *Life of Cuthbert* was the desire of the Lindisfarne leadership to establish and promote their own legitimacy as the authoritative source for both the historical facts and the spiritual interpretation of all Cuthbert’s miracles.

Roger Ray may have imagined that Bede denigrated oral sources, but he also recognized that Bede’s idea of *officium historici* (the business of the historian) derived not from classical historiography but from *mos sacrae scripturae* (the mores of holy Scripture), the practices, above all, of the evangelists. “Bede,” Ray observed, “thought of the customs of scriptural narrative as the habits of perfect history.”¹²² And it is in his own analysis of *mos sacrae scripturae* that Bede most clearly and assertively makes the case for the authority of the oral Christian community:

Et quippe tempore scripserunt Marcus et Lucas quo non solum ab ecclesia Christi, verum etiam ab ipsis adhuc in carne manentibus apostolis, probari potuerunt. Nam domini nutu gerebatur, ut non solum apostoli qui viderant sed et discipuli qui auditu didicerant facta Christi dictaque conscriberent, quatenus sequentibus ecclesiae doctoribus ea quae non viderant praedicandi scribendique fiducia pariter et auctoritas praeberetur.¹²³

Indeed, Mark and Luke wrote at that time when they were able to be approved not only by the church of Christ, but even by the apostles themselves still remaining

¹²¹ Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, 13.

¹²² Roger Ray, “Bede, the Exegete, as Historian,” in Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 127–9 and 132.

¹²³ Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, 4.

in the flesh. For it came about, with the Lord's assent, that not only the apostles who had seen, but also the disciples who had learned by hearing, recorded the deeds and sayings of Christ, so that trust and also authority for preaching and writing things which they had not seen might be extended to subsequent church teachers.

This is precisely the model Bede emulated when he recorded the deeds and sayings of Cuthbert, as he had learned them from both eyewitnesses and oral tradition, and with the approval of both, so that their authority to teach might be extended to subsequent teachers in the Lindisfarne community.

Conclusion

6.1. Oral Rhetoric, Oral Sources, Oral Contexts

Historical studies of literacy have traditionally been mired in Eurocentric and colonialist assumptions, which were disguised but not displaced by the polite shift in terminology that replaced the imagined dichotomy between civilized and savage with an imagined dichotomy between literate and oral cultures. Yet medieval Europe has long been the historical field where such oral theories go to die, its scholarly literature littered with naïve and failed attempts to apply simplistic universal theories of “orality” to stubbornly specific surviving texts. Throughout the Middle Ages, people from all walks of life accessed, interpreted, manipulated, critiqued, or resisted written words in a bewildering variety of social contexts, whether they personally had mastered the skills and languages of reading and writing or not. The central program of this dissertation has been an attempt to understand literacy in eighth-century England not as an advanced cultural and mental state, but as a tool deliberately and skillfully adopted and deployed (or, alternatively, resisted and refused) by individual actors pursuing individual goals.

The first chapter explored how medieval writers understood and interacted with this complex and dynamic rhetorical environment, and how acknowledging these relationships can help to counterbalance some of the biases and historically contingent perspectives that have limited our understanding of the era. Beginning with a survey and critique of the relevant work in historiography, anthropology, theories of oral literature, and cognitive science, I proposed a set of guiding principles for approaching oral and written cultural practices in early medieval England, with the goal of producing more nuanced and localized models of medieval discourse that account for the multifarious

ways texts could be expected to function within their societies. These principles include acknowledging the diversity and contingency of rhetorical systems, avoiding grand universal theories of “orality” by relying only on those features of oral discourse for which we have specific, unambiguous evidence in early medieval England, and acknowledging the agency and intelligence of all social actors.

The second chapter explored public performances of attitudes towards literacy as political tools in the hands of the Northumbrian elite immediately before and during the succession crisis that followed the death of Aldfrith in 705, modeling interactions between texts and society by analyzing how leading political figures leveraged either oral or literate forms of rhetoric to maximize their own power and social standing or achieve political goals. Specifically, it examined the variety of ways kings, abbesses, bishops, and archbishops portrayed the papal letters St. Wilfrid brought back to England following two of his trips to Rome. Even among the highly literate, the written word could be alternately fetishized for its unchanging truthfulness or demonized for its susceptibility to forgery, just as oral traditions could be celebrated for their antiquity and universality or dismissed as base and ignorant rumors. These skillful shifts had very real political consequences. While Wilfrid, Stephen, Berhtwald and Æthelræd each embraced textual authority in ways calculated to benefit themselves, Abbess Ælfflæd of Whitby invoked traditional, local, oral rhetoric to outflank numerous powerful challengers and re-establish her family’s royal authority. By acknowledging the rhetorical possibilities inherent in adopting or refusing textual authority, this chapter helped to create a more consistent and detailed portrait of historical events, but at the same time, the analysis of those events

helped clarify the relationship between literacy and rhetorical authority that can be applied in the analysis of Bede's work.

When we approach Bede's works with an awareness of this extended rhetorical field, his strategies and goals often come into clearer focus, and Chapter 3 demonstrated this by examining his most explicitly political work of advocacy. Bede's letter to Bishop Egberht is often, oddly, treated by modern scholars as a "private admonition," and Bede's emotional appeals, therefore, are treated as convenient windows into the author's heart, rather than as rhetorical strategies deployed in the pursuit of larger goals. Naturally, both Bede and Egberht understood that the letter would be copied, distributed to influential people and institutions, read aloud in Latin, and explained in English. Many of Bede's appeals, which would have fallen flat in a private letter, make much more sense when understood as attempts to maximize public pressure on the bishop to institute Bede's proposed reforms. Viewed through this lens, Bede's critique of his church, which modern readers often treat as a laundry list of unrelated gripes, emerged as the articulation of a coherent plan meant to increase the financial and bureaucratic capacity of the church to provide a more widespread, coherent, and consistent level of pastoral care—in English—to the scattered and unlatined population.

This was an enormous challenge, and had engaged Bede's mind over many years. Chapter 4 explored Bede's attitudes toward this task and the strategies he employed to facilitate it. How did Bede, whose intellect and education created a vast gulf between him and all but a handful of advanced scholars, expect his works to reach and influence such an audience? Despite his own extraordinary level of educational advancement, Bede was convinced that those who could read no Latin were still capable of understanding the

message of the scriptures, and even, in some ways, ideally suited to teaching it. He envisioned a system in which illiterate teachers and preachers, under the guidance of their bishops and supported by religious art, oral poetry, and indirect access to a selection of key texts, could reliably spread the word of God to every isolated hamlet in Northumbria.

Not all Bede's works would have been relevant to illiterate or illiterate audiences, but those that were show structural features adapted to the supporting role they would have played in oral discourses. For example, the narratives in Bede's histories tend to take the form of brief tales that could easily be read or retold in a single sitting and understood by new arrivals who had not heard the earlier tales. Moreover, Bede often includes exegesis, relevant scriptural citations, and transmission histories, creating individual, portable packages that could be easily and dependably reproduced from memory even by those with comparatively modest learning.

Although modern scholars, such as Roger Ray,¹ have tended to assume that, like them, Bede preferred documentary evidence when he could get it, a less patronizing view of Bede would acknowledge that his inclusion of oral sources, and oral methods of establishing truthfulness, validity, and authority, is also a deliberate and consistent strategy, one that both honored oral traditions and fit the needs of the ultimately oral audiences Bede hoped to reach. Chapter 5 considered what kinds of roles Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* might have been expected to play within and beyond the Lindisfarne community that commissioned it, arguing that, while scholars have traditionally viewed Bede's *Life* primarily as a revision of the anonymous Lindisfarne *Life of Cuthbert* that preceded it, a broader model, which sees both texts in relationship to a more widespread

¹ Ray, "Bede's *vera lex historiae*," 14. See discussion in 5.1 above.

and authoritative oral discourse, can better explain Bede's choices. Bede carefully ensured that the stories of Cuthbert were packaged into portable units that could not only be told in isolation, in a single telling, but also provide the scriptural, historical, and theological material necessary to inform an oral retelling. The complex textual interplay between the original *Life of Cuthbert*, Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*, and Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, which makes little sense given the small and narrow audiences who might be expected to read all three texts, is more easily understood as a reflection of competing attempts to influence the ongoing evolution of the stories within the oral storytelling networks of the Northumbrian ecclesiastical world.

6.2. Continuing Research and Analysis

Of course, Bede meant his works to reach literate audiences as well, and he created large-scale literary structures and inserted extensive documentary evidence for their benefit. One of the central goals of this dissertation has been to establish a solid foundation upon which further study, examining the complex relationships between these two modes in Bede's most ambitious historical work, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, might be constructed. I would like to take a moment to outline some of the most promising lines of inquiry suggested by this work.

One reason for focusing on the *Life of Cuthbert* in Chapter 5 is that the work is explicitly directed to a specific, known, and narrow audience: the monastic community at Lindisfarne. It therefore enables us to isolate and examine Bede's work in the oral historical mode. The rhetorical situation embodied in the *Ecclesiastical History*, however, is not so simple. For one thing, Bede anticipated, and wrote for, a far larger and more diverse audience. While the work is dedicated to the then-reigning Northumbrian king,

Ceolwulf, it clearly anticipates readers, hearers, and re-tellers throughout England and beyond, repeatedly explaining the meanings of English words, for instance, or basic geographical facts. The nature of Bede's historical material is equally diverse. While much of his material (after Book 1) does indeed derive from oral accounts, and much of that from traditional material, rather than the second- and third-hand eyewitness accounts Bede so often spotlights, this version of history is counterbalanced by a great mass of material dependent on literacy, record-keeping, and access to calendars and related computational materials. It includes transcriptions of numerous letters, some obtained from the papal archives in Rome. It deftly synthesizes the relevant material from a wide range of written sources, from earlier Christian writers like Orosius, Constantius, and Gildas to more recent works like the *Life of Fursey* and Adamnan's *On the Holy Places*. It occasionally illustrates the functioning of text-based authority, as when a miraculous vision is confirmed by comparing it to the records kept in a calendar at Selsey monastery.² It is also a literate work in its conception: Bede's sense of linear time, along with the elaborate chronological computation that undergirds it, is an artifact of literacy, and the grand sweep of the narrative that so impresses itself upon readers today would have been inaccessible to audiences who heard only occasional, isolated chapters.

The *Ecclesiastical History* embraces both oral and written sources, as it embraces both aural and reading audiences, and it continually shifts between the modes best suited to each. As such, it frequently employs the techniques seen in the *Life of Cuthbert*, including the use of portable episodes and oral rhetoric, such as transmission histories and communal authorization. Bede does not embrace oral material merely to fill in the

² Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4.14, 377–80.

gaps between his written sources, but instead often uses it to provide meaningful structure to the scattered data derived from the written record. For example, the story of Gregory and the Angles, which Bede carefully marks as legendary, governs our understanding of Gregory's role both in the preceding biographical account and throughout the book. Recognizing this alternation can help us make sense of the shifting perspectives and epistemological systems encountered through the *Ecclesiastical History*. It can also further illuminate the interactions between literate and oral culture and rhetoric that defined the work's context.

6.2.1. Story Exchange as a Social and Political Tool

The sharing of stories did more than generate a shared conception of history. Participation in story exchanges, particularly when it involved a public commitment to the veracity of one or another story, could help manage relationships and construct group identities. For example, in the late seventh century, Osthryth, the Northumbrian princess who had become, through marriage, the Mercian queen, sought to establish influence in Lindsey, a long-contested border region, recently conquered by her husband, between the two expansionist kingdoms, by translating some of the remains of her uncle, King Oswald, to Bardney monastery.³ Oswald, who had been defeated and butchered by the Mercian King Penda, had become the center of a rapidly expanding cult which several powerful groups, in Northumbria and beyond, would seek to claim as their own. But

³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.11, 244–50. Alan Thacker, “*Membra disjecta*: The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult,” in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford, UK: Paul Watkins, 1995), 104 and 106, establishes that the translation occurred somewhere between 679 and 697, but argues that “in many ways a date at the beginning rather than the end of the range is most plausible.”

Oswald was remembered as an enemy in Mercia and a conqueror in Lindsey, and Alan Thacker has suggested that the translation looks like part of a concerted effort between Osthryth and her sister Ælfflæd, who similarly created a shrine for Oswald's predecessor, Edwin, at her monastery at Whitby during the same period, to promote "the claims of a chosen family to be the sanctified rulers of a united Northumbria, probably envisaged as including the disputed province of Lindsey as well as Bernicia and Deira." The translation may, therefore, have been perceived as "an appeal to Northumbrian sympathies within the province."⁴ It was, in any event, a politically fraught move, and the monks of Bardney, caught in a tangled web of competing allegiances, initially displayed their loyalty to Mercia by refusing to accept the remains of Mercia's enemy. But in doing so, they had directly opposed their queen, a plainly unsustainable position. Osthryth clearly had enemies among the Mercian elite, as they murdered her in 697, but it does not seem that Æthelræd, who was eventually buried with her at Bardney, was among them. A miracle story about miraculous lights emanating from the relics provided cover for the necessary change of policy.

Afterwards, it seems that acceptance and promotion of that miracle story could serve as a means of indicating political allegiances. When, sometime later, Æthelhild, the abbess of a nearby monastery, came to visit Queen Osthryth at Bardney, she recited the story, and claimed to have seen the beam of light with her own eyes. The queen responded with another miracle story, about the healing power of the soil over which Oswald's bones had been washed. The abbess begged to receive some of the soil, and Osthryth complied. Later, the story of a miraculous healing worked by that soil at

⁴ Thacker, "*Membra disjecta*," 106.

Æthelhild's monastery reached Bede. The exchange provides a rare illustration of how women at the highest levels in early medieval England could exert power, and how belief in miracle stories could be as much a reflection of political alignments and group identities as of religious faith.

Æthelhild was not only an abbess, but also the sister of Æthelwine, bishop of Lindsey, and Ealdwine, abbot of Partney.⁵ Given her powerful position in the region, the precariousness of Osthryth's position, and the previous refusal of the Bardney monks to accept Oswald's relics, this exchange of stories appears to have served as something of a negotiation, in which Æthelhild, by personally vouching for the Oswald cult, signified the allegiance (or at least submission) of her family, and thus of the Lindsey church establishment, to Osthryth. With three monasteries and the bishop all agreeing that God wanted the Oswald cult in Lindsey, Osthryth's position must have seemed considerably more secure. In Bede's attention to—and, ultimately, participation in—these exchanges, we can begin to understand some of the mechanisms that drove and shaped the story economy.

6.2.2. Diverse Voices and Perspectives within the *Ecclesiastical History*

The care Bede took in organizing his material, and the consistent cadences of his Latin, can sometimes mask the diversity of voices that populate the book. When he records his sources, he is not only vouching for the veracity of his material, giving credit

⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.11, 246. It is worth noting that the monastery at Partney would eventually become a cell of Bardney, and that, although Bede claims that these stories were widely known, he personally knew the abbot of Partney, Deda, from whom he had learned other historical material. All of which suggests that Partney continued both its submission to Bardney and its promotion of the Oswald cult. See 2.16, 192 and 3.11, 247, n. 4.

where due, and reinforcing the authority of established storytellers, but also providing hints about under what circumstances and towards what purposes each story might have been molded before it reached him. He rarely preserves the language of his oral sources, perhaps even when he claims to, but he often preserves their points of view.

An example of how Bede could work together a variety of stories representing multiple perspectives appears in 2.2, where Bede discusses St. Augustine's interactions with the British. The chapter contains three stories, all of which appear to be far removed from the actual historical events they purport to describe. It is likely that all three came to Bede through Albinus and Nothelm, as he describes in the preface.⁶ But while the first and last reveal exactly the perspective one might expect from Canterbury traditions, the middle story views events from the British point of view.

In the first story, Augustine appears eminently reasonable and mild-mannered, while the Britons are nameless, merely referred to as "episcopos siue doctores proximae Brettonum prouinciae" (bishops or teachers of the neighboring province of the British), and the story evinces no sympathy for their position. Augustine attempts to convince the British "fraterna admonitione" (through brotherly admonition) that "pace catholica secum habita communem euangelizandi gentibus pro Domino laborem susciperent" (keeping catholic communion with him, they might take up the shared labor of evangelizing the people for the Lord's sake), but the British refuse because "suas potius traditiones uniuersis quae per orbem sibi in Christo concordant ecclesiis praeferrent" (they preferred their own traditions rather than the traditions in which all the churches throughout the world are united in Christ).⁷ When they fail to cure a blind man, and Augustine succeeds,

⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2–4.

⁷ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2, 134–6.

the bishops and teachers are personally convinced, but they lack the authority to bring their church into conformity on their own. This story contains only information that would have been known in Augustine's circle, and presents an entirely partisan view of events.

The second story describes a similar meeting, but the perspective is flipped. Here, we are given specific information about the British attendees, most of whom were associated with the monastery of Bangor. Their concerns are taken seriously and given center stage, and even their internal discussions, down to the specific scriptural passage that informed their strategy, are laid out. Augustine now appears as an inscrutable outsider, high-handed, insensitive, and bullying, and the British refusal to obey him seems eminently reasonable. When the conference is proposed, the bishops and teachers “uenerunt primo ad quendam uirum sanctum et prudentem, qui apud eos anachoreticam ducere uitam solebat, consulentes an ad praedicationem Augustini suas deserere traditiones deberent” (went first to a certain holy and wise man, who was wont to lead an eremitical life near them, consulting whether they ought to abandon their traditions at the word of Augustine).⁸ The hermit says they should, if Augustine is a man of God. To determine this, he proposes a test. The Britons will arrange to arrive after Augustine's party; if he rises humbly to greet them, he must be “mitis ... et humilis corde” (meek and humble in heart), as befits a man of God, and hence they ought to follow him. If he refuses, he must be “inmitis ac superbus” (harsh and proud),⁹ and they should disregard him. Augustine does not rise, and so they refuse to accept his authority, “conferentes adinuicem quia ‘si modo nobis adsurgere noluit, quanto magis, si ei subdi coeperimus,

⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2, 138.

⁹ Ibid. See Matthew 11:29.

iam nos pro nihilo contemnet” (saying among themselves that, “if he is unwilling to rise for us now, by how much more will he scorn us as insignificant, if we begin to be made subject to him?”).¹⁰

If this story appears to have derived from a British source, it also appears to have been absorbed by English storytellers, because the British refusal is further framed by a third story that uses their supposed intransigence to justify a horrific crime, and the stories are bound together in complex ways. Augustine warns the British that “si pacem cum fratribus accipere nollent, bellum ab hostibus forent accepturi” (if they did not want to accept peace with their brothers, they would get war with their enemies).¹¹ After Augustine’s death, King Æthelfrith of Bernicia slaughtered some 1,200 unarmed British priests, mostly from Bangor, who had come to the battlefield at *Carlegion* to pray for the British forces resisting his invasion. This third story justifies the killing as the fulfillment of Augustine’s prophecy and the just vengeance of God against “perfidi” (heretics).¹² These shifting narrative perspectives suggest that it is possible to uncover some of the diversity of the oral traditions from which, and within which, Bede was operating.

6.2.3. A New Approach to a Familiar Story: The Synod of Whitby in an Oral World

A similar example of the multivocal nature of the *Ecclesiastical History*, though more dramatic and, for Bede, closer to home, occurs in 3.25, Bede’s account of the Synod of Whitby. While this is surely among the most well-known and thoroughly examined

¹⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2, 138–40.

¹¹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2, 140.

¹² Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2, 140.

sequences in all of Bede's work, its position within and relationship to the larger storytelling economy has not yet been seriously examined.

The central narrative of Book 3 is the Irish mission in Northumbria, with Oswald and Aidan at its core. The other large narratives of Book 3 further explore the same basic theme. We read about the visionary experiences of the Irish monk Fursey, who had lived and taught in East Anglia, the missionary activities of Cedd, an English bishop trained in the Irish tradition by Aidan, and an early miracle in the life of the English monk Ecgberht, trained in Ireland, who would ultimately convert Iona to the correct system of dating Easter, which Bede presented as a divine reward for the missionary zeal the Ionan community had manifested for so long.¹³ In each case, Bede celebrates the Irish traditions of Christianity and the English adoption and imitation of them. But when he comes to discuss the Synod of Whitby, there is a sudden shift in perspective, followed by an equally sudden return to form. Wilfrid, whose extensive and significant contributions to the establishment of Northumbrian Christianity Bede largely confined to a single, late chapter, emphasizing instead his missionary activities abroad, and whose interminable conflicts with the rest of the church and the royal family Bede largely ignored, suddenly appears as the dynamic hero: a man of eloquence, orthodoxy, and learning, whose triumph saves the whole Northumbrian church.

But, although Wilfrid was very much at the center of a series of highly consequential events immediately after the synod—including the (re-)establishment of the bishopric at York and the mysterious and ill-fated revolt by Wilfrid's patron, Alhfrith, against his father, Oswiu—Bede gives us only the most shadowy hints about Wilfrid's

¹³ See Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.22, 554.

activities, shifting attention instead back to the remnants of the Lindisfarne community, and to Colman's work in Ireland.

More jarring, though, than this shift in narrative perspective is a concomitant shift in moral perspective on the outcome of the synod itself. Chapter 25 ends on a note of triumph, stressing the unanimity and free will of the converts:

Haec dicente rege, fauerunt adsidentes quique siue adstantes maiores una cum mediocribus, et abdicata minus perfecta institutione, ad ea quae meliora cognouerant sese transferre festinabant. ¹⁴

When the king had said these things, everyone attending—both the greater and the middling—agreed and, having renounced their less-perfect custom, they hastened to convert themselves to those which they had learned to be better.

The story, then, taken out of context, recounts not only the victory of Wilfrid, but the successful unification and purification of a divided church. And yet, a mere two sentences later, Bede utterly rejects this very vision, showing us instead the continuing disagreement, dispossession, exile, and confusion that the synod actually unleashed:

Colman uidens spretam suam doctrinam sectamque esse dispectam, adsumtis his qui se sequi uoluerunt, id est qui pascha catholicum et tonsuram coronae (nam et

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.25, 306–8. Note that Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 10, stresses the power of the king's decree and the submission of the Irish to his will.

de hoc quaestio non minima erat) recipere nolebant, Scottiam regressus est, tractaturus cum suis quid de his facere deberet.¹⁵

Colman, seeing that his teaching was rejected and his faction despised, returned to Ireland [i.e. to Iona], taking with him those who wished to follow him—that is, who were unwilling to accept the catholic Easter and the tonsure of the crown (for there was no small dispute about this, also)—in order to discuss with his own people what he ought to do about these things.

Everyone agreed! And all those who didn't agree were forced into exile.

This sharp turnaround is magnified in the following chapter (3.27), when Bede goes to some trouble to suggest a connection between the synod and two dire events—an eclipse and a catastrophic wave of plague—that appeared in the same year. What are we to make of these sudden shifts? More to the point, what could Bede have expected his audiences to make of them?

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that Bede cared a lot about the dating of Easter, and on this question, the Ionans were wrong and Wilfrid was right, while in almost all other things, the Ionans were exemplary Christians and Wilfrid considerably less so. This is undoubtedly true, but it does not explain the sudden attention to Wilfrid. Had Bede had an entirely free hand, and had he wished to keep the focus on the heroes of the Irish tradition, he could have assigned Wilfrid a smaller role, as the mouthpiece or even the translator for bishop Agilbert, for instance. He also could have focused attention

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.26, 308.

on the conversion of Oswiu, Cedd, Hild, or Cuthbert, emphasizing their humility and obedience. But Bede did not have a free hand. We are so used to Bede being the only source for English events of the seventh century that we can easily forget how different the situation was in his own time and place. Other accounts of this dramatic and seminal event were in circulation. There was of course, Stephen's version of the story, the structure of which Bede largely retained. But there were clearly other versions as well. Bede has specific historical information, not given by Stephen, about who attended and what their roles and positions were, which he presumably obtained from the traditions of their various communities. Bede's handling of his material can be understood as his contribution to these evolving traditions.

Once again, Bede's rhetorical choices are easier to understand if we consider the range of his potential audiences. On one hand, Bede clearly anticipated at least some highly literate readers, both in England and beyond, who might be expected to progress through the whole book in order, either privately or in small groups of educated readers and hearers. This group would make sense of the synod account within its larger context of Ionan missionary efforts and the long-term project of establishing the Roman Easter throughout the insular world. In this narrative, Wilfrid's triumph is partial and local, overshadowed by the larger projects of the conversion of the English to Christianity and the reciprocal conversion of the Irish to the correct Easter date.

But on the other hand, Bede also recognized that a much larger audience would encounter the story in a more fully oral context, several steps removed from his text. They would be likely to encounter the Whitby story in isolation, in a telling influenced not only by Bede's text, but also by all the previous variants the teller had heard, as well

as by the specific social and political dynamics of the interaction. The versions that established and maintained currency would not necessarily derive directly from either Bede or Stephen, but would be shaped in part by the influence exerted by each. A different audience, receiving the story in a different context, called for an entirely different set of priorities.

Modern readers often fixate on the question of how Bede felt about Wilfrid, but this is another example of the assumption that we can and should see into the author's heart, rather than analyze his choices. It assumes a degree of rhetorical naïveté on Bede's part that we would be unlikely to ascribe to a modern writer. Although Bede certainly distinguishes between the good and the wicked,¹⁶ and he does indeed give us sparkling portraits of a number of Christian heroes, such as Aidan, Theodore, Cuthbert, and John of Beverley, passing judgments on individuals is never the main impetus behind the *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede's moral perspective on his characters often shifts, so that we see King Oswiu, for example, as the good and Christian king who triumphed over the pagan Penda and oversaw the conversion to Easter orthodoxy, but also as a duplicitous fratricide; we see his son Ecgfrith as a generous patron and a tyrannical invader of peaceful nations; even Penda emerges as an ambiguous figure, a terrifying pagan and an inveterate enemy, but also a tolerant king who holds his Christian subjects to a higher standard than they do themselves.¹⁷ Bede was, simply, less concerned than many modern readers with whether his Wilfrid was likeable.

¹⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, preface, 2: "Siue enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigatur; seu mala commemoret de prauis, nihilominus religiosus ac pius auditor siue lector deuotando quod noxium est ac peruersum ... accenditur" (For, if history should report good things of good men, the engaged listener is incited to imitate the good; or if it should recall evils concerning the wicked, the conscientious and devout listener or reader is no less inflamed to shun what is harmful or corrupt).

¹⁷ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.14, 256; 4.18, 388; 4.26, 426; 3.16, 262; 3.21, 280.

One thing Bede most definitely was concerned about was the correct method of establishing the date of Easter. Universal agreement on this point was essential, but the calculations are difficult: not everyone could be expected to master the finer points. Throughout his career, he addressed this question (and the field of computistics generally) in diverse ways to reach diverse audiences. These all encompass both oral and textual elements, but they can be ordered according to the level of education (and hence of Latin literacy) required to comprehend them. When he received complaints that *De temporibus* was too dense for many students, Bede wrote an expanded treatment of time in *De temporum ratione*, a book he very clearly envisioned being used as a support for teachers who would present the material orally to students of varying (but still relatively advanced) educational attainments.¹⁸ In the *Ecclesiastical History*, for which Bede envisioned broader and more diverse audiences, he explains the justification for the Roman system of dating Easter twice. Chapter 21 of Book 5 contains a letter to Nechtan, king of the Picts, which Bede attributes to Ceolfrith. In it, he justifies the Roman system with a detailed argument that synthesizes scripture, church authority, and knowledge of astronomical cycles. It provides the distilled essence of the reasoning behind the orthodox calculation. The material is not easy, but it has been presented in a simplified form. The letter format suggests all the oral elements I discussed in Chapter 3, including especially a public, oral delivery and interpretation (in this case, apparently, into Pictish). Bede give us not only the content of the letter, but the context of its reception, at which the king rises from his seat and kneels down in delight and gratitude.¹⁹ But a letter is also a written

¹⁸ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, 263. See 4.3 above. For examples of Bede's appeals to oral intermediaries, see Wallis, introduction to *Reckoning of Time*, xxxii, n. 40.

¹⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.21, 553.

text, and this one, certainly, repays the kinds of close scrutiny that only a written text can make possible.

Among Bede's numerous attempts to explain the paschal controversy, the story of Wilfrid's victory at the synod of Whitby is by far the most suited to an oral retelling. It is, for one thing, the purported record of an oral discourse. It is also short, populated by vivid characters, and made more dramatic by its colorful language, high stakes, and climactic ending. It is, in short, a good story. But Bede uses that narrative power to achieve a didactic goal: explaining the Easter debate in a way that would be both accessible and memorable for the widest possible audience.

Bede's account of the synod followed the same basic structure as Stephen's: everyone gathers, Colman defends the Irish custom by citing his holy predecessors and a purported connection to the apostle John. Wilfrid responds by citing the traditions of the Roman (and universal) church, and the king is ultimately convinced by an appeal to Matthew 16: 18–19:

Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam et portae inferi non praevalent adversus eam. Et tibi dabo claves regni coelorum et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum et in coelis. Et quodcumque solveris super terram erit solutum in coelis.

You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of

heaven, and whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. And whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This climactic and seemingly irrefutable invocation of the divine authority granted to Peter, and through him, to the Roman church (voiced by Wilfrid in Bede's account, and by the entire assembly in unison according to Stephen) provides a satisfying narrative conclusion.²⁰ But it probably bears little resemblance to the actual debate at Whitby. Wilfrid's dramatic victory is possible only because Colman conveniently provides the setup. In both versions, he begins the debate by arguing for the Irish calculation based on the authority of St. Columba, founder of the Ionan monastery, and of the apostle John. This would have been an extremely foolish rhetorical mistake, since partisans of Rome had been invoking Matthew 16:17–19 in support of Roman authority since the third century.²¹ The debate over Easter had been raging in Northumbria for years prior to the resolution at Whitby, so Colman could hardly have been unfamiliar with this most basic stratagem.²² He would surely have known that he could not win a contest of apostolic authority against the Apostolic See.

Stephen's chapter on the synod may well have cemented Wilfrid's place at the center of the story, but as tool for teaching about the paschal controversy, it was sorely lacking. The details of establishing the date of Easter seem to have been almost entirely lost on Stephen and his early transcribers. The whole chapter is marred by serious errors,

²⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.25, 306; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 10, 22.

²¹ Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew," in Aune, *Blackwell Companion*, 296–318. See also Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), 175, 294, 322.

²² Bede tells us that the controversy arose during the episcopacy of Colman's predecessor, Finan (651–61), though the fact that the debate was suppressed during Aidan's life (d. 651) suggests that tensions had simmered beneath the surface for much longer. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.25, 294–6.

including confusion about the location and status of Colman's episcopacy, the total elimination of Tuda (who briefly succeeded Colman) from the episcopal succession, and, in a mistake that must surely have infuriated Bede, mangling the numbers of days after the first full moon during which each side claimed Easter could be celebrated.²³ Moreover, Stephen's account of Wilfrid's speech teaches essentially nothing about the paschal controversy because, in it, Wilfrid bases his argument exclusively on the necessity of conformity to the larger church and its synodal decrees. Not only does he fail to address the scriptural or computistical bases for the dating system, but he also fails to address a number of potentially unsettling questions the debate raises about the nature of religious authority.

By expanding the arguments on both sides (following the ancient historical tradition of recording what *ought to* have been said), Bede is able to provide a much fuller understanding of the issues in a familiar question-and-answer format. Colman introduces arguments; Wilfrid refutes them. For example, in both versions, Colman invokes the authority of the apostle John. Certainly, Peter had been given explicit authority, but was it possible that the disciple Jesus especially loved, who had lain his head in the savior's lap, who had (putatively) written both a gospel and the Book of Revelation, had been wrong? Stephen succeeded in dodging the issue, because his Wilfrid ignores the John reference and compares Peter's authority only to that of Columba. But even this could prove troubling. Columba was a bona fide holy man, credited with numerous miracles, as were others in the Ionan tradition. Finally, the Irish

²³ See Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 10, 20, especially n. 9, and Colgrave's notes, 156–7. Stephen also seems to conflate the two core issues: which lunar cycle should determine the date of the first full moon of the year, and whether, if the fourteenth day of that moon should fall on a Sunday, Easter should be held on that day or the following Sunday.

claimed to be following the system of another recognized holy man, Anatolius. If all these sources (and hence the miracles and traditions that vouched for them) were deceptive, it would amount to a crisis of Christian authority.

Stephen may have been happy to ignore these awkward questions and dismiss the entire Ionan tradition as heretical, but Bede obviously was not. His version of Wilfrid carefully answers each objection, explaining that John was right *at the time*, because the early church was still following Jewish law, and in any case the Irish system of dating Easter was different from his; that Anatolius had in fact been correct about the proper dates for Easter, but had been using a different system of counting, so the Irish were not following him, either; and that it had been no great sin for earlier generations of Ionans to have miscalculated Easter, but it would be for those in the present, because they had been shown the better way and refused it.

Bede has thus turned the dramatic story of Wilfrid's victory into a genuine lesson about Easter orthodoxy, and perhaps orthodoxy in general. And the narrative structure makes allowance for those who could not follow even this simplified format. The triumphant citation of Matthew 16:17-19 remains, and King Oswiu reduces even that to the simplest possible terms, appealing to the personal interest of the audience, rather than to the inherent rightness or lawfulness of either system: obey Peter because he'll be standing at the gates of heaven when you die.

Bede's narrative about the synod of Whitby was well-adapted to the requirements of an oral-traditional storytelling environment. The tale of Wilfrid's victory, based on the invocation of Matthew 16: 18–19, was already current. It was a compelling story, actively

promoted by a significant faction.²⁴ Even had he ignored it, it would have remained to rival and perhaps undermine whatever alternative framing Bede might have chosen to replace it. Instead, he coopted it, retaining its structure but carefully shaping it to support his own purposes.

For example, Bede was careful to include, *within the portable unit of the chapter itself*, a precisely calibrated defense of the Irish, despite their having been technically incorrect on this one important issue. To a modern reader, who encounters the *Ecclesiastical History* as a whole, such statements become almost comically repetitive. But Bede could not expect that everyone who heard some version of the Whitby story would necessarily also have heard the similarly nuanced assessments Bede offers in 3.3 and 3.4, for example. Just as he had done with his *Life of Cuthbert*, Bede was careful to include within the chapter everything a teacher might need to know.

The apparently anomalous shift in perspective in 3.25, therefore, fits the larger patterns that animated Bede's work: his concern to reach diverse audiences, including those who would encounter the stories he recorded in oral retellings, and his willingness to let his sources speak—even if he sometimes cleaned up their Latin. Each source had its own perspective and had valuable lessons to teach. Even when they pulled in different directions, Bede often attempted to harmonize them without silencing them. I hope to explore this process in detail in my upcoming work. Bede's celebration of his oral sources and his concern for the impact of his work within ongoing oral traditions have long been overlooked. In recent decades, Bede scholars have come to appreciate the

²⁴ In addition to Stephen's (and Bede's) narrative of the synod, this theme appears in Wilfrid's defense at Austerfield and in Wilfrid's epitaph. Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 10, 20–2; ch. 47, 98; and Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.19, 528.

importance of Bede's political context for our understanding of his historical work. It is time to recognize his place within his rhetorical contexts as well.

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