

THE TIMES OF
Bede

STUDIES IN EARLY ENGLISH CHRISTIAN SOCIETY
AND ITS HISTORIAN

PATRICK WORMALD

Edited by Stephen Baxter

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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For Brian Wormald

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Foreword

Bede was indisputably the greatest historian of the English Middle Ages, and arguably the greatest English historian of all time. But perceptions of him as scholar and historian have changed markedly over the last generation. Modern scholars no longer contemplate the ways in which he measures up to the standards of accuracy and impartiality which they like to think they can find in themselves. Rather, they stress those values which sharply distinguish Bede's approach from that of most contemporary academics: not merely faith in miracles, but a passionate sense that history is about the working out of God's ways to Man, and that a historian's function was to expound those ways in furtherance of Man's salvation. It has come to be seen that while Bede *is* the most factually reliable source for the first century of English Christianity, he is in many ways *not* its most sympathetic, or therefore (from a modern angle) most perceptive observer. The history of the conversion of the English now takes account of factors and developments to which Bede gave little or no attention.

The four essays making up Part I of this collection were all originally written and published as variants on this theme. Each is concerned with a significant area of post-conversion experience: broadly speaking, the monastic, social, political and propertied aspects of early Christian culture in England. Each, while exploiting Bede's evidence to the full, seeks to set him in a wider context than his own work permits, and to explain why historians who have been content to take their perspective from Bede have thereby missed important questions and answers. The underlying thesis is that the history of early England cannot be understood without due regard to the priorities of its aristocracy, and that the circumstances of Bede's own life set him largely in opposition to them. A further theme is that English developments need to be seen in their fullest continental context, whereas Bede's own approach has inevitably encouraged the insularity which is second nature to many English historians. The four essays in Part II are reproduced here because in many ways they represent sequels to the first four, and because they show how,

despite (or because of) his detachment, Bede came to exercise a decisive influence on the self-perceptions of the English Church and people. The Appendix was rather more a *pièce d'occasion*, given at the centenary celebrations of St Hilda's College, Oxford in 1993, which here serves as a reminder that women played a more important part in the earliest phase of English Christianity than ever since.

In assembling this collection over the last thirty years, I have often had in mind a classic study of the way in which a historian was moulded by experience of his own times whilst permanently changing its image in the eyes of posterity. I have learned much of what I think about history and historians from the author of *Clarendon: Politics, History and Religion*, since it was published when I was four years old. This book is dedicated to Brian Wormald by a grateful son and pupil, as a proud and loving tribute to an important historian and remarkable teacher.

Patrick Wormald,
Oxford, 2004

Editorial Note

One of the tragedies of this book is that neither the author nor the dedicatee lived to see it published, another is that Patrick never wrote the introduction to the volume which he had planned. However, he did check and revise the original footnotes and wrote additional notes to several of the essays. The footnotes to the Brixworth lecture, which was published posthumously, were supplied by Dr Jo Story based on a set of abbreviated references supplied by the author. The publisher arranged for an external professional to proofread the essays against the original publications and to compile the index. Jinty Nelson also helped by reading a set of proofs. We have between us read the proofs, checked the index and identified some of the cross-references.

Tom, Luke and Jenny would like to add their very warm personal thanks – and indeed, Patrick’s – to Stephen Baxter, and also to Angela Cohen for all her efforts in seeing this book through to publication. Although it was coming near to completion when Patrick died, there was still a great deal to be done, and it is because of Stephen’s painstaking search through the papers Patrick left and the immense amount of work he has put in to getting the manuscript ready for publication that a book so close to Patrick’s heart is now in the state that he would have wished. We are very grateful.

Jenny Wormald and Stephen Baxter
April 2006

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Abbreviations

<i>ASC</i>	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Text: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel</i> , ed. J Earle and C. Plummer (2 vols, Oxford, 1892–9); translation, <i>EHD</i> I, II.
<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i> (Cambridge, 1972–).
<i>ASSAH</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History</i> (Oxford, 1979–).
<i>Alc. Ep.</i>	<i>Alcuini Epistolae</i> , ed. E. Dümmler (MGH, Ep. KA II, Berlin, 1895).
<i>BCS</i>	<i>Cartularium Saxonicum</i> , ed. W. de Gray Birch (3+ vols, London, 1885–99).
<i>Bede</i> , ed. Thompson	<i>Bede, his Life, Times and Writings</i> , ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford, 1935).
<i>Beowulf</i>	<i>Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg</i> , ed. F. Klaeber. 3rd edn (Lexington, 1950).
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i> .
<i>Br. Bon.</i>	<i>Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus</i> , ed. M. Tangl (MGH, Ep. Sel. I, Berlin, 1916).
Brown, <i>Religion and Society</i>	P. R. L. Brown, <i>Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine</i> (London, 1972).
Brown, <i>Society and the Holy</i>	P. R. L. Brown, <i>Society and the Holy in late Antiquity</i> (London, 1982).
Campbell, <i>Anglo Saxons</i>	<i>The Anglo-Saxons</i> , ed. J. Campbell (Oxford, 1982).
Campbell, <i>Essays</i>	J. Campbell, <i>Essays in Anglo-Saxon History</i> (London, 1986).
<i>Cap.</i>	<i>Capitularia regum Francorum</i> , ed. A. Boretius and V. Krause (MGH, Leg. Sect. II, 1883–97).
CCM	<i>Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale</i> .
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout).

Bede (or Saint Bede, or the Venerable Bede, or Beda) was a monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Peter at Wearmouth and of its companion monastery, Saint Paul's, in modern Jarrow, Great Britain. Works[edit]. *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Ecclesiastical History of the English People. *Vita sanctorum abbatum monasterii in Wiremutha et Gyruum*. Lives of the holy abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow. *De locis sanctis*. Bede became known as "Venerable Bede" (Lat.: *Beda Venerabilis*) soon after his death, but this was not linked to consideration for sainthood by the Roman Catholic Church. Almost everything that is known of Bede's life is contained in a notice added by himself when he was 59 to his "Historia" (Book V, Chapter 24), which states that he was placed in the monastery at Wearmouth at the age of seven, that he became deacon in his nineteenth year, and priest in his thirtieth. Saint Bede the Venerable, Anglo-Saxon theologian, historian, and chronologist. He is best known for his historical writings that document the conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxon tribes. Get unlimited ad-free access to all Britannica's trusted content. [Subscribe Today](#). In 731/732 Bede completed his *Historia ecclesiastica*. Divided into five books, it recorded events in Britain from the raids by Julius Caesar (55–54 bce) to the arrival in Kent (597 ce) of St. Augustine of Canterbury.