

Actu, mente, fide veterum vestigia Patrum
Semper dum vixit, directo est calle secutus.

*In deed, in mind, in faith he ever walked
Upon the ancient Fathers' hallowed path.*

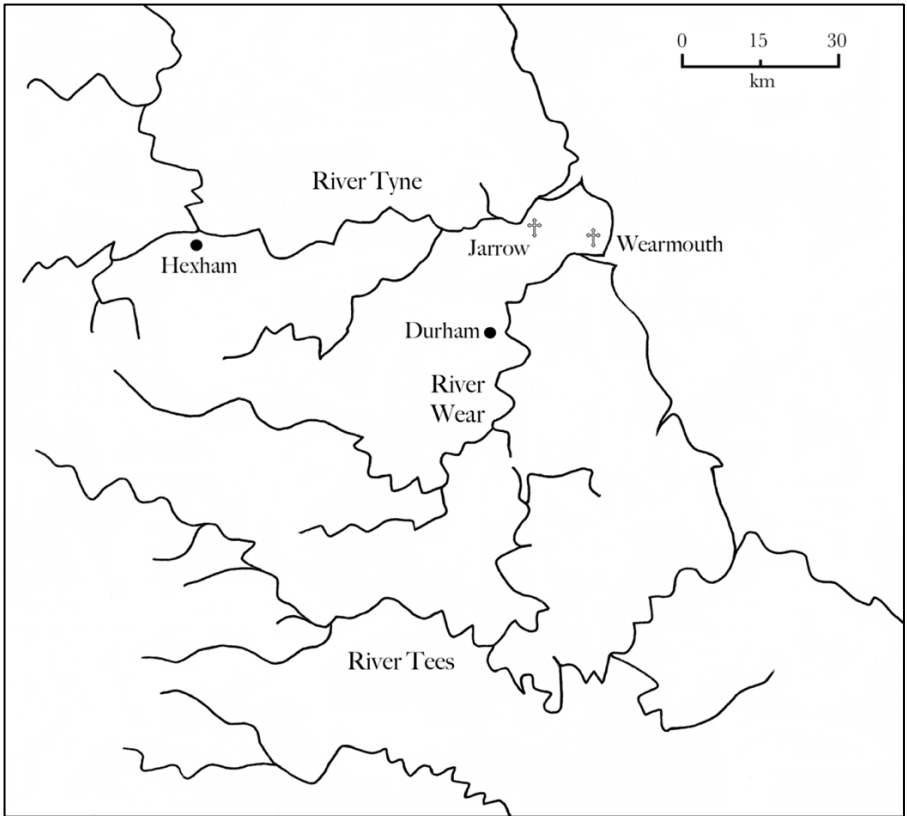
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Northern Britain at the Time of Saint Bede



The Vicinity of Bede's Monastery

Introduction

By George F. Browne (1897)

The Venerable Bede is one of the most striking figures in the history of the English Church. It would be difficult to find a parallel to him in the history of any church. A voluminous and learned Christian writer on many subjects, theological, historical, grammatical, and physical, he sprang from an immediate ancestry of unlettered pagans. The first preacher of Christianity who visited his fathers arrived in the country only fifty years before Bede's birth. Forty years before his birth, the kings of the land were heathens; one, indeed, was worse than a heathen, for he had been called a Christian and had abjured the faith of Christ. The progress made in those forty years was marvellous. We find kings and people vying with one another in paying honour to Christian bishops and priests; churches rising in one town and village after another; large grants of land for the foundation of monasteries.

At the time when Bede was born, we find a Northumbrian noble building the monastery which afterwards received him, employing workmen and manufacturers of glass from Italy, where he studied all the details of the monastic life, in order that his church and all his arrangements might be worthy of his holy purpose. Here, in a monastery built by one who must have passed his boyhood while the land was still pagan, Bede lived and wrote and died but one generation later. In these present times of active missionary enterprise it is difficult to imagine anything more encouraging, and more full of hopeful prophecy, than the final conversion of Northumbria, with its speedy outcome in the person of the Venerable Bede.

1- The Conversion of England

The kingdom of Northumbria, the birthplace and home of the Venerable Bede, consisted of two parts. Each was an independent kingdom, though the two were usually under the rule of one king. Sometimes this king was sole ruler over both countries; at other times he reigned in his own portion of the land, and allowed a less powerful king to reign as his inferior in the other portion. At the time when Christianity was first brought to the Angles or English of Northumbria, Edwin was sole king of the country. The Province of Deira, that is, roughly speaking, Yorkshire and Durham, was his by descent. The other province, Bernicia, which occupied the remainder of the North-East of England on that side of the Humber, and part of Scotland as far as the Forth, he held by conquest, having expelled the rightful king.

The first impulse towards the establishment of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons was given by the sight of some young natives of the province of Deira exposed for sale in the slave market at Rome. The story is well known: Gregory, once the Prefect of Rome and afterwards its Bishop, was struck by the handsome faces and fine forms of the Yorkshire lads. He asked of what race they were. He was told that they were Angles. In a play on words, he replied that they were fit to be made Angels. From what province did they come? From Deira. Then they must be freed *de ira*—from the wrath—of God. Who was their king? Aella. Then they must be taught to sing Alleluia.

Gregory set to work with characteristic energy. He bought some young English slaves, and began to train them in the doctrines and practice of Christianity, intending to send them in the course of time to preach to their fellow-countrymen. But as this

seemed to his enthusiasm a slow process, he attempted to visit England himself; and when that intention was frustrated, he sent Augustine and his party, in the year 595. Although the natives of Deira were the objects of Gregory's first interest, the Italian mission went to Kent, and christianized that kingdom; and it was not till many years after that any attempt was made to preach the Gospel in Deira.

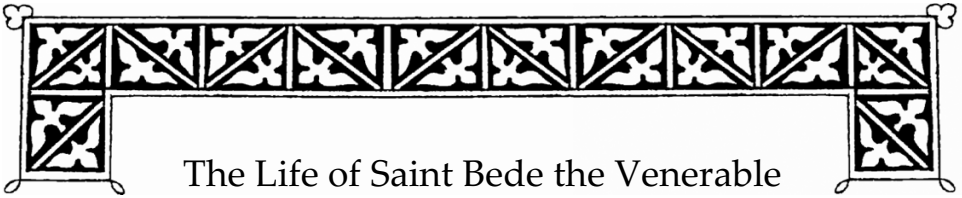
It is necessary to say a little of the British Christians. School chronologies used to give A.D. 596 as the date of the "introduction of Christianity into this island by Augustine," but Christianity had been known and practised here very long before Augustine's time. There were British Christians, and in large numbers too, four hundred years before Augustine came to Christianize the Saxons.

No one can say, with any approach to certainty, by whom Christianity was first brought to Britain. Clement of Rome, a contemporary of St. Paul, says that the Apostle went to the extreme limits of the West. The great historian of the early church, Eusebius, writing about the year 320, says decidedly that some of the Apostles crossed the sea to the British Isles. It is certain that Tertullian (about A.D. 200) described the spread of Christianity in the island as so wide that parts which the Roman armies could not reach had been subdued to Christ, and that British bishops were present at the Council of Arles, held in the year 314. The Emperor Constantine the Great, and also Athanasius, testified to the orthodoxy of the British Church between A.D. 325 and A.D. 350.

The departure of the Romans, who carried off the flower of the population in their armies, and the arrival of the Saxons, effected the ruin of the Britons, and all but obliterated the

British Church. According to Bede's account—and we have no other account which contradicts it—the Britons eventually deserved their fate. They had found courage to drive off the northern enemies who had invaded them as soon as the Romans retired. But when the invaders had been after a time sent out of the land again, the Britons became too prosperous. There was a remarkable plenty of the fruits of the earth, such as had never been known before, and the people waxed idle and wanton in consequence. Vice spread rapidly among them. Bede's traditions informed him that cruelty, the hatred of truth, and the love of lying, were rampant; so much so that anyone who was a little more inclined to the truth than his neighbours was hated and destroyed as a "subverter of Britain." And this was not confined to the laity. The clergy indulged themselves in drunkenness, quarrelsomeness, and so on. At length a pestilence came upon them and slew the greater part of them, and then their northern enemies attacked them again, and they invited the Saxons to come to their aid. We know what that led to.

Bede gives none of the details which we learn from other sources, and only tells in general terms of the cruelty of the Saxons. The priests were slain at the altar; prelates and people were destroyed with fire and the sword; many who had fled to the mountains were seized, and murdered in heaps; others were more successful, and contrived to find refuge in the mountainous parts on the west of the island, Cornwall, Wales, and Cumberland. There they kept up the succession of bishops—indeed, the sees of St. David's, Lampeter, and St. Asaph's, were founded during this period of distress—and when Augustine came to christianize the Saxons, one of the most important questions he had to refer to Pope Gregory was, what was he to do with the British bishops?



The Life of Saint Bede the Venerable

Preface

Among the Catholic interpreters of Holy Scripture who have shone forth as luminaries in the world second to the Apostles, Bede the priest of sacred learning and the monk of admirable conduct occupies a title and place of distinguished honour. Not without merit did the Holy Church admit him to the ranks of her doctors; for by imitating the latter's dedication, diligence, and exercise in the Holy Scriptures by following them in his own studies and writing, that true Israelite made a great offering of the sacred office in defence and adornment of the house of God. Many are the volumes which he wrote that expound the sacred oracles and are filled with apostolic grace. And since they are firmly established on the inviolable rock of faith, no assault from the gates of hell will be able to cast them down.²

While he yet lived, the man's name was in obscurity as he dwelled beyond the edge of the world in an isle of the ocean. But following his death, by the will of God Who brings up clouds from the ends of the earth (as Scripture says),³ he lives through his books in the memory of the faithful wherever the voice of the Apostles has reached. Like a lamp upon the lampstand of the Church⁴ he shines upon all in the house of

² Matthew 16:18

³ Psalm 134:7 (Vulgate numbering)

⁴ Matthew 5:15

God, illuminating through the grace of God the mother Church that once illumined him, regenerating him in Christ Jesus.

Yet however much his wisdom merits him a sublime seat among the princes of the churches, and although he occupies a throne of glory among them, and with them calls out to the nations everywhere, loudly trumpeting the word of the Gospel, a certain cloud of dismissal seems to obscure the brightness of such an illustrious man. For if one wishes to learn of his origin, or who he was, or what kind of life he led, or what his end was, the ears of the Church pass this over in silence, as if it were a profitless or unworthy thing of which one were better to remain ignorant. Far be the contagion of such suspicion from this vessel of grace and instrument of the Holy Spirit! For just as faith is strengthened by learning, so does one's love for another burn all the more strongly when the example of his life is made known.

And indeed, from his very youth Bede was planted in the house of God and was led by grace to grow as a palm tree bringing forth blossoms of justice.⁵ He continually announced the mercy and truth of God with the ten-stringed psaltery that united the song of his words⁶ with the harp of his good deeds. For living among saints and being raised by saints under monastic discipline, and receiving an extensive education in letters, he led a life of holiness with the holy and innocence with the innocent,⁷ zealously devoting himself over the course of his life to preserving himself completely untouched by the present age.

⁵ Psalm 1:3

⁶ Psalm 91:4

⁷ Psalm 17:26

Of these matters reliable information can be gleaned as much from his own writings about himself as from the writings of others. After collecting these from diverse places, we assembled the various particulars into one structure to make a portrait describing the perfect man in Christ. However, since the sequence of these writings, containing but scattered and interrupted accounts across the various volumes, prevented the reader from drawing a complete picture of the memorable man, it seemed to us that the matter called for an unbroken ordering of events as the effectiveness of a continuous narration is more instructive. Certainly, this task, which would have been equal to the skillful industry of an educated man, proved beyond our own abilities, as we lack either eloquence or knowledge. But since all things are possible to one who believes, we who believe in the Word, that is to say, in Christ Who is the virtue and wisdom of God, shall not abandon this work. And placing Him at the beginning of our work and discourse, may we merit to have Him at the end also. By His mercy, we are ready to say or do anything. May He find fit to both precede and follow us with His favour and assistance.

Book I

While Christ Jesus, the Author of man's salvation,⁸ Who sends forth ministers of the holy word amidst the harvest of the believing multitude,⁹ shone upon all Creation with evangelical grace, the land of the Northumbrians, isolated almost at the ends of the earth, came to share in the knowledge of God and grew warm with the holy fire of the Saviour in the frigid regions of the North. For the Lord came to send the fire of the Holy Spirit on earth.¹⁰ And as there is none who may hide from His heat, He has penetrated into the furthest of nations and operates the flames of His love in the hearts of men that they might abandon their old life and be made new creatures in Christ.¹¹ After receiving the faith, the faithful who are the sides of that pagan North (as Scripture says)¹² founded a city there for the great King. Praising her Founder, she rejoices in exultation and proclaims to the whole world: *Great is the Lord, and exceedingly to be praised in the city of our God.*¹³

But let us start at the beginning: the kings of this land were at first ignorant of the Creator; but the more they exercised themselves in faithfully serving Christ, the King of the ages, the more truly they themselves reigned. Having become citizens of the future heavenly Jerusalem, they endured the burdens of public office, offering only the required tribute to Babylon. The pious devotion to religion of king Edwin is witness to this.

⁸ Hebrews 2:10

⁹ Luke 10:2

¹⁰ Luke 12:49

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹² Psalm 47:3: "With the joy of the whole earth is mount Sion founded, on the sides of the north, the city of the great king."

¹³ Psalm 47:1