

The *Vita Bedae* and the Craft of Hagiography¹

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The present-day visitor to Durham Cathedral is privileged to find the resting place of not one, but two great English saints: Cuthbert lies at the east end, Bede at the west. The cult of St Cuthbert has been much discussed; that of Bede rather less so. But then, notwithstanding early indications of a developing cult,² it was Bede's writings, formidable both in quantity and quality, that spread his fame throughout Christendom and represented his spiritual legacy.³ This,

¹The following abbreviations are used throughout. BHL = [Bollandists (ed.)], *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis*, 2 vols. (Bruxelles, 1898-99) with *Supplementum* (Bruxelles, 1911) and *Novum Supplementum* (Bruxelles, 1986). DCL = Durham Cathedral Library. *Epistola* = Cuthbert of Jarrow, *Epistola de obitu Bedae*, printed: E. van K. Dobbie, *The Manuscripts of Caedmon's Hymn and Bede's Death-Song* (New York, 1937), pp. 118-27; and Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (ed.), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 579-87, their translation cited. *HA* = Bede, *Historia abbatum: Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. Christopher Grocock and I. N. Wood (Oxford, 2003), pp. 21-75. *HE* = Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, printed: Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), their translation cited. *Libellus* = Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius hoc est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie*, ed. David Rollason (Oxford, 2000), his translation cited. *PL* = *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844-64), cited by volume and column.

²David Rollason, 'The Cult of Bede', in Scott deGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), 193-200, esp. 194 and 196.

³Quite apart from the abundant circulation of his oeuvre in its own right, the liberal inclusion of excerpts from it within the *Glossa ordinaria* (Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: the Making of a*

moreover, accorded with the Northumbrian scholar's own view of the value of his life and work. In the autobiographical coda to his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede gave a few basic facts about his upbringing and career, then declared that he had applied himself 'entirely to the study of the scriptures and, amid the observance of the discipline of the rule and the daily task of singing in the church, it [had] always been [his] delight to learn or to teach or to write'. There follows a dauntingly long list of the titles that he had written – a list which, tellingly, occupies considerably more space than the sparse details of his life.⁴ Who could possibly disagree with this assessment of his significance? The answer is: an anonymous hagiographer, active (we would suggest) in the north east of England in the eleventh century.

We shall first consider what is known, and may reasonably be deduced, about the *Vita Bedae* in question, its composition and its sources, and shall outline its structure and content.⁵ We shall then examine the main strategies that its author uses to present his subject, thereby exploring in some detail the craft of one hagiographer. We shall conclude with observations on

Medieval Bible Commentary (Leiden-Boston, 2009), pp. 41, 44-55 and 80-83) and the presence in Books of Hours of a prayer on the last words of Christ that was attributed to him ('Domine iesu christe qui septem verba in ultimo vite tue in cruce pendens dixisti ...?'; printed: *Horae Eboracenses: the prymer or hours of the blessed Virgin Mary according to the Use of the Illustrious church of York ...*, ed. John Wordsworth, Surtees Society 132 (1920), pp. 140-2) ensured that Bede's name and achievement remained familiar to a broad cross-section of both ecclesiastics and layfolk throughout the middle ages.

⁴ *HE*, V.24 (pp. 566-76). R. Ray, 'Who did Bede think he was?' in Scott DeGregorio (ed.), *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede* (Morgantown WV, 2006), pp. 11-35.

⁵ BHL, no. 1069. T. D. Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue of Materials Relating to the History of Great Britain and Ireland to the End of the Reign of Henry VII*, 3 vols. (London, 1862-71), I, no. 985 (pp. 450-1).

the place of the work within the tradition of hagiographical writing in early England more generally.

The Text

The *Vita Bedae* survives in eight manuscripts, the oldest copy being that in Durham Cathedral Library, B.II.35.⁶ The core of this volume is a late eleventh-century transcript of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* that was presented to Durham Cathedral priory by William of Saint-Calais and must therefore predate that bishop's death on 2 January 1096.⁷ The *Vita Bedae* was appended to the book at an early date, being started on the four pages that had been left blank at the end of the last original quire and concluding on a small supplementary quire that was added for that purpose.⁸ The text was mainly written by one scribe, with a small contribution from a second; that it was indeed transcribed in Durham is confirmed by the fact that this second hand

⁶ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, 21245E (olim Mostyn 181) (North-East England, Hexham; xiii²). Cambridge, Pembroke College, 82 (Tynemouth; xii²). Durham Cathedral Library, B.II.35 (Durham; xi^{ex}). London, British Library, Burney 310 (Finchale/Durham; 1381). British Library, Harley 322 (England; medieval provenance unknown; xiii^{2/3}; Books I-II only – i.e. without the Preface); British Library, Harley 526, fols. 28-37 (England or northern France; medieval provenance unknown; xii¹). British Library, Harley 4124 (Worksop; xii²); Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fairfax 6 (SC 3886) (Durham; xiv^{med-2}).

⁷ R. A. B. Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts to the end of the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1939), no. 47; Richard Gameson, *Manuscript Treasures of Durham Cathedral* (London, 2010), no. 12.

⁸ Fols. 119r-123v. The last original quire (fols. 113-120) is a quaternion, the appended one (fols. 121-4) a binion.

reappears in another Durham-made book.⁹ The nature of the script and the position of the text within the stratification of the manuscript – to which further items were soon added – point to a date for the transcription of the *Vita* around 1100 or at the very beginning of the twelfth century.

This is thus the *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the work. There is, unfortunately, no comparably secure *terminus post quem* – beyond Bede’s death itself in 735 and the account of it that was written shortly afterwards by the Cuthbert who subsequently became abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow. The only other available evidence for evaluating the date of the *Vita Bedae* is that provided by its nature and content. Fortunately, these do offer some pointers. It seems improbable that this *Vita* was written at Wearmouth-Jarrow in the eighth century when tentative steps appear to have been taken to promulgate Bede’s sanctity, given the absence of any notice of the healing miracle that his relics were believed to have performed,¹⁰ not to mention our author’s extremely limited first-hand knowledge of his subject’s writings. Nor, in view of the

⁹ Scribe 1 wrote 119r/col. 1/line 26 to 121v/col. 1/ line 31 (‘actum apostolorum’); then 121v/col. 1/ line 37 (‘que’) to 123v/col. 1/line 22. Scribe 2 wrote fol. 121v/col. 1/ line 31 (‘in euuangelium’) to line 37 (‘preteriit’). This latter hand subsequently added a copy of Bede’s *Historia abbatum* to B.II.35 (fols. 123v/col. 2 to 129r/col. 1), and also contributed to BL, Harley 4688 (Bede, *In Proverbia Salomonis; Epistola ad Egbertum*). That Harley 4688 was indeed written at Durham is confirmed by the fact that its first scribe was Symeon, monk, scribe, historian and (by 1126) cantor of the cathedral priory: Michael Gullick, ‘The Hand of Symeon of Durham: further observations on the Durham Martyrology Scribe’, in David Rollason (ed.), *Symeon of Durham, historian of Durham and the North* (Stamford, 1998), 14-31, esp. 16, 17 and 27.

¹⁰ As celebrated by Alcuin, ‘Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis euboricensis ecclesiae’, ll. 1,315-18: Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ed. Peter Godman (Oxford, 1982), pp. 102-4.

forthright celebration of Northumbria and her Christian history, does it seem likely to have been composed on the Continent. Our author does not favour the arcane vocabulary characteristic of the so-called hermeneutic style of Latin that flourished in England during the tenth and early eleventh centuries;¹¹ and, though clearly a competent latinist who had benefitted from sound schooling, he appears, when he was composing the text, to have been in a situation with limited library resources – another factor pointing away from the major monastic foundations of southern England during the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Now, the very same features that tend to eliminate the aforementioned contexts would make perfect sense in the setting of the monastic revival that occurred in the north east of England in the late eleventh century, a setting that would also explain idiosyncratic aspects of the content of the text. These are the stress placed on the excellence of the Jarrow community as a whole, articulation of the special holiness of Northumbria as a historic region, and emphasis on Bede's sanctity in contradistinction to his scholarship. All are discussed in more detail below.

In 1073 a couple of monks from Evesham under the leadership of Aldwin, prior of Winchcombe, refounded a community at Jarrow.¹² Aldwin had been so moved by reading Bede's account of the Northumbrian church in the seventh century that he had determined to revive a tradition of monasticism in the north. Established in the ruins of St Paul's, Jarrow, by the bishop of Durham, his little community attracted recruits from Northumbria and elsewhere, enabling the mission to expand to Wearmouth and Whitby. A decade later (1083) these new monks of Jarrow and Wearmouth were brought in to staff Durham itself, when it was converted into a

¹¹ Michael Lapidge, 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975), 67-111; repr. with addenda in his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900-1066* (London and Rio Grande, 1993), 105-149 and 474-9.

¹² *Libellus*, III.21-22 (pp. 200-210).

benedictine priory under William of Saint-Calais.¹³ Though proof positive is lacking, this is manifestly a context in which writing a Life of Jarrow's greatest son would be a logical and attractive proposition. The circumstance that the Life of Kenelm, the patron saint of Aldwin's alma mater, Winchcombe, had been composed immediately before the northern initiative, enhances the likelihood that the leader of the movement would have favoured an equivalent endeavour to fortify the spiritual credentials of his new model northern community,¹⁴ while the fact that Bede's presumed cell at Jarrow is recorded at the beginning of the twelfth century as a site of pilgrimage shows that his former monastery was indeed a locus of devotion to him then.¹⁵ The absence of any allusion to Bede's relics (which were believed to have been appropriated from Jarrow for Durham by the mid-eleventh century¹⁶) would seem to favour the early years of

¹³ *Libellus*, IV.3 (pp. 228-34). David Rollason, 'Symeon of Durham and the community of Durham in the eleventh century', in C. Hicks (ed.), *England in the Eleventh Century* (Stamford, 1992), 183-98; William Aird, *St Cuthbert and the Normans: the church of Durham 1071-1153* (Woodbridge, 1998), 110-141; David Rollason, 'The Anglo-Norman Priory and its Predecessors, 995-1189', in David Brown (ed.), *Durham Cathedral. History, Fabric and Culture* (New Haven and London, 2015), 27-37 and 518-19, esp. 29-32.

¹⁴ Printed: *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives*, ed. Rosalind Love (Oxford, 1996), pp. lxxxix-cxxxix and 49-89, its date (1066x75) discussed on xc-xci. The Life of Evesham's saint, Egwine, had been composed in the early eleventh century: *Byrhtferth of Ramsey, The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbine*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Oxford, 2009), pp. lxxxii-iii.

¹⁵ *Libellus*, I.14 (p. 68).

¹⁶ *Libellus*, III.7 (pp. 164-6). Ælfred Westou, the individual responsible, though he lived into Æthelwine's episcopacy (1056-71), appears to have been at his prime in the time of Bishop Edmund (c. 1020-40).

the revival at Jarrow rather than the subsequent phase at Durham; by contrast, the repeated praising of monastic values and, above all, the vituperative condemnation of secular life in contradistinction to the glories of a harmonious communal one that the dying Bede is made to utter are most obviously relevant to the situation at Durham from 1083, with the enforced replacement of secular clergy by benedictine monks. Whatever the truth of this particular point, the interlinked history of the two foundations from 1073 provides an economical explanation for how the earliest copy of the *Vita* (and clearly one not far removed from the archetype) came to be added to a Durham book, c. 1100.

The *Vita Bedae* is arranged in three sections – a substantial Preface, followed by two books, the first a little longer than the second.¹⁷ None of the early copies features any further subdivisions.¹⁸ The Preface celebrates Bede as a doctor of the church; it justifies the *Vita* on the grounds that acquaintance with Bede’s life – supposedly little known on account of the remoteness of his geographical location¹⁹ – would inflame faith; and it claims to rest on the

¹⁷ Printed: John Smith, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Cambridge, 1722), 515-22; J. A. Giles, *The Miscellaneous Works of Venerable Bede in the Original Latin ... I: Life, Poems, Letters, etc.* (London, 1843), cxlii-clx; and PL 90.41-54. As the first is difficult to obtain while the second and third are less than reliable, we worked from the text in DCL B.II.35 itself (available in digital facsimile via the ‘Durham Priory Library Recreated’ website) and supply in full the Latin for all passages that we treat. All translations from the Life are our own.

¹⁸ By contrast, the s. xiii^{2/3} copy in BL, Harley 322 dispenses with the Preface and presents the main body of the text as fourteen unnumbered chapters, each with its own rubric; its ch.10 corresponds to the start of Book II.

¹⁹ Bede (*HE*, I.1 (pp. 14-15)) had described Britain as ‘at a considerable distance from [multo intervallo adversa] the greater part of Europe’. The dedicatory inscription in Codex Amiatinus,

authority of a range of authors in addition to Bede himself. Book I treats Bede's career in its context: the 'golden age' of the Northumbrian church is evoked (albeit via little more than a recitation of the names of key kings and churchmen) and the foundation of Wearmouth-Jarrow by Benedict Biscop is reported, as is his gathering of books and other resources from Rome and Francia (again, all without much specific detail). Into this is woven notice of the infant Bede being entrusted to the monastery, his studious nature, his progression from deacon to priest, and some generalities about his writings; stress is laid on the fact that he was one part of a model spiritual community. Book II is devoted to Bede's death: his physical sufferings are spelled out at length, alongside notice of how he nevertheless persevered in teaching and scholarship to the very end. The work is thus simply structured and has a clear narrative arc, culminating in the triumphal reception of its subject into heaven.

Notwithstanding the author's claims in the Preface concerning the range of writers he has used, the sources he draws upon for such factual content as is present are strictly limited. Book I uses Bede's *Historia abbatum* and *Historia ecclesiastica* (above all its autobiographical coda), while Book II depends upon the account of Bede's death by Cuthbert of Jarrow (d. after 764).²⁰ Apart from a couple of citations from the Preface to Bede's commentary on Luke,²¹ an

the great pandect made at Wearmouth-Jarrow before 716, styled Ceolfrith as 'Anglorum extremis de finibus abbas' ('abbot from the far-off lands of the Angles'): Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Amiatino 1, fol. 1v. Cf. note 25.

²⁰ Namely *HA*, *HE*, and *Epistola*.

²¹ 'Saepe quidem tuae sanctae fraternitati ... quam facere maluisti'; 'beatum Lucam luculento sermone expone ... corde contempleris': *Baedae Venerabilis Opera II: Opera Exegetica 3. In Lucae Evangelium Expositio; In Marci Evangelium Expositio*, ed. D. Hurst (Turnhout, 1960), pp. 5 and 6, ll. 2-6 and 54-68 (embodying quotations from Colossians 2.3 and Isaiah 3.17).

apothegm from Jerome,²² a saying attributed to Ambrose that is lifted from Cuthbert of Jarrow,²³ and a tag that is ultimately from Ovid,²⁴ all other texts that are quoted or paraphrased are scriptural. The great majority of the biblical citations are from the Psalms and the Epistles, the former predominating in Book I, the latter in Book II. That Bede is thus increasingly presented in terms of the words of St Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, provides implicit support for one of the author's strategies for promoting his subject, namely the contention that Bede was a successor to the apostles.

The author writes fluently, with a profusion of loosely-linked clauses. Although he does not typically use arcane or obscure vocabulary, he is plainly alive to the rhythm, form and poetry of his language, taking advantage of the inflected nature of Latin to adorn his sentences with similar-sounding words and alliteration, and playing with cognates. The phrases he strings together are generally balanced, be it verbally, conceptually, or both; and while contingent ideas are often set out in sequence, occasionally by contrast they are sometimes nested one within another.²⁵ Biblical phraseology and well-trying extended metaphors abound – the far-gathering

²² *Quamvis enim elegans sit exercitatumque ingenium et longo usu trita currat oratio, tamen nisi auctoris manu curata fuerit et polita: Jerome, Commentariorum in Zachariam prophetam, Book III, Preface: PL 25.1497. A Norman-made copy of the work was at Durham before 1096: DCL B.II.9 (Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts*, no. 37).*

²³ *Illud quoque beati ambrosii dictum non sic inquit uixi ut me pudeat inter vos vixisse sed nec mori timeo: Epistola, p. 582; cf. Paulinus of Milan, Vita Ambrosii, §45: PL 14.27-46 at 43A.*

²⁴ *Boreas penna deficiente venit: Ovid, Epistolae ex Ponto I.5, line 72. For the citation, see the next note.*

²⁵ *E.g.: Quis enim non obstupescat, uel etiam supra fidem esse arguat, tanta in extremo mundi angulo donorum spiritualium exuberare carismata, ut ibi sacre scripture non modo legerentur*

bee, the ruminating beast, the flowing river of knowledge. In sum, form is as important as content in engaging and inspiring the audience.

Craft

The *Vita Bedae* has nothing of substance to add to the slender contemporary record of Bede's life. How then does its author fashion the work and present his subject? He has four main strategies. They overlap and intertwine; however, for the sake of clarity, we shall consider them separately in turn.

His first tack is to laud his subject's intellect and scholarship, developing the theme that Bede, via his scholarly work, was a doctor of the church, following in the footsteps of the Fathers. The lofty heights of his subject's intellectual achievements are trumpeted at the outset. The preface starts by hailing him thus: 'Amongst the catholic expositors of holy scripture who shone in second place after the apostles as sources of light for the world, the priest of holy learning and monk of exemplary life whose name is Bede also holds a place of outstanding honour. It is not undeserved that holy church admits him to the number of the doctors, as he

uerum etiam earum misteria per mundi latitudinem inde diffundenda explanarentur, ubi et si nomen christi auditum non fuisset, profecto mirandum non esset, quo ut poetice loquar boreas penna deficiente uenit. ('For who would not be astounded or might even contend that it was beyond belief that such great grace of spiritual gifts abound in the furthest corner of the world, so that not only are the Holy Scriptures read there, but truly also are their mysteries explained to be diffused thence throughout the [length and] breadth of the world; and if the name of Christ had not been heard there (where – if I may speak poetically – Boreas comes with weakening wing), it would not indeed be wondered at.') See also sentences quoted in notes 29 and 49.

emulates their study in sacred scripture, their diligence and their exertion of mind, while by pondering and writing he accomplished the defence and decoration of the house of God and, a true Israelite, offered a great portion of his holy gift'.²⁶ Beyond Bede's personal erudition and labour for God, the further point flagged here is that his contribution enriched the church at large. The message is spelled out in Book I in a passage which also broadcasts his universal renown: 'Therefore since the grace of God was sublimely conspicuous in him, fame carried around everywhere the name of the celebrated man – it poured into the ears of the church his excellence in the scriptures'.²⁷

Bede's scholarship is depicted as the result of a felicitous combination of his own gifts and the remarkable environment at Jarrow. His intellectual ability was God-given and manifested itself early: 'even at that age [i.e. in childhood] a great intelligence sparkled from force of natural ability, God being its instigator'.²⁸ It was nurtured by the extraordinary bibliographical resources of his monastery: 'the knowledge of scripture in our theologian Bede should not seem incredible, for the establishment of which [i.e. his knowledge] the providence of a heavenly tutor had

²⁶ Inter catholicos sacre scripture expositores qui secundo post apostolos loco refulserunt mundi luminaria, sacre eruditionis presbiter ac imitabilis uite monachus BEDA nomen honoris excellentis tenet et locum. Nec immerito eum intra numerum doctorum sancta admittit ecclesia, quorum in sacris scripturis studium, diligentiam, intentionem imitans dum meditando ac scribendo prosequitur in munimen et decorem domus dei, magnam muneris sacri portionem uerus isrelita obtulit.

²⁷ Cum igitur tam sublimiter dei in eo gratia emineret, nomen uiri celebre circumquaque fama ferebat, que illius in scripturis excellentiam ecclesie auribus infundebat. Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XII, line 197.

²⁸ ... etiam in illam etatem ex ui naturalis ingenii magna deo auctore scintillauit intelligentia.

gathered together both a sufficiency of sacred books and the hard work of outstanding masters in every branch of knowledge'.²⁹ And it was honed via this combination of innate God-given brilliance and the resources at Jarrow: 'he, a teachable youth suffused with love of knowledge, was zealously trained, sweating at these same studies'.³⁰

Vitae sanctorum typically assimilate their subjects to the template of an earlier holy man or woman, implicitly and explicitly promoting the sanctity of their individual by analogy with revered models. The archetypes to whom Bede is likened (albeit in the most general of terms) are the Fathers of the Church. A troop of intellectual saints who were venerated not only highly but also universally, this was exalted company indeed; moreover, the comparison was – in contrast to some hagiographical flights of fancy – entirely apt.³¹ Proof of his status in this regard – and hence of his membership of this elite saintly cohort – is then provided via the testimonial of a bishop who was himself recognised as a saint, and whose relics, like Bede's, had been appropriated for Durham by the mid-eleventh century. Bede's commentary on Luke (his only work of exegesis of which our author displays any knowledge) was an episcopal commission and the *Vita* quotes two excerpts from the letter by Bishop Acca of Hexham (d. 740) that served as

²⁹ ne ... in nostro theologo Beda incredibilis uideatur scripturarum scientia, cui instituendo celestis magisterii prouidentia et librorum sacrorum contraxerat sufficientiam, et insignium in omni scientia magistrorum industriam.

³⁰ docibilis adolescens in amorem transfusus scientiarum, acriter eisdem studiis insudans exercebatur.

³¹ Bede is chronologically the last major figure to be included in the standard modern guide to patristic authors and their works, Eligius Dekkers, *Clavis patrum latinorum*, 3rd ed. (Turnhout, 1995), pp. 444-57.

its Preface.³² These present Bede as an intellectual divine who, thoroughly versed in patristic writings, continues and complements that venerable tradition. Substance is thereby provided for our author's claims, as crystallised in his own Preface, where Bede is described as sitting 'so sublimely with the leaders of the churches by virtue of his doctrine and occupy[ing] in their midst a throne of glory, crying out everywhere in the world with them, and raising the voice of the gospel like a trumpet'.³³

Our author's second tack is to highlight Bede's status as an excellent christian and a model monk in an optimum monastery. He is hailed at the outset as 'monk of exemplary life';³⁴ and our author subsequently stresses that his intellectual endeavours went hand in hand with spiritual growth and carnal purity: 'For the one who was passionate in these studies of holy philosophy, with the passage of years the grace of spiritual gifts also grew, so that along with the spirit of wisdom, his intellect might also receive the spirit of the fear of the Lord,³⁵ by which, chastening his body and keeping it in subjection, he knew (following the apostle³⁶) that he possessed a vessel in a state of sanctification and honour'.³⁷ Here our author neatly formulates a pointed contrast between Bede's scholarly passion and his bodily asceticism.

³² See note 21.

³³ Cum ergo tam sullimiter merito doctrine cum principibus ecclesiarum sedeat, et inter eos solium glorie teneat, ubique gentium cum eis clamans, et quasi tuba uocem euangelii exaltans ...

³⁴ See note 26.

³⁵ Isaiah 11.2-3.

³⁶ I Thessalonians 4.4.

³⁷ In hæc sacrosanctę philosophię studia flagranti, cum incremento annorum creuit et gratia spiritualium donorum, ut cum spiritu sapientię et intellectus acciperet etiam spiritum timoris

Moreover, not only was Bede himself an admirable monk, he was a member of a model monastic community. The founder of the monastery, Benedict Biscop, is lauded in his own right, with predictable verbal play upon his name in religion ('the man of venerable life, about whom it is said above that he was blessed [*benedictus*] in grace and in name ...').³⁸ He is praised more particularly for establishing Wearmouth and Jarrow, 'in both of which a numerous and noble throng of monks quickly came together and learned by experience the pleasant sweetness of that blessed fellowship which the psalm proclaims,³⁹ namely how good and how pleasant it may be for brothers to live as one'.⁴⁰ In fact, declarations about the excellence of the community are interwoven with the sanctity of Bede from the outset of the work. The Preface claims (with repetitious parallels for emphasis), 'To be sure [Bede] was nurtured among holy men and by holy men under monastic discipline and was liberally instructed in letters; persisting on life's path a holy man in the company of holy men, an innocent among innocents, he strove to keep himself unstained by the world in the whole endeavour'.⁴¹ The point is then developed in Book I: 'Living

domini, quo castigans corpus suum et in seruitutem redigens, sciret secundum apostolum uas suum possidere in sanctificatione et honore.

³⁸ Uir uite uenerabilis de quo supra dictum est gratia benedictus et nomine ...

³⁹ Psalm 132.1.

⁴⁰ Ita frequens et nobile monachorum examen breui utrobique coaluit, ubi iocundam illius beate societatis dulcedinem quam psalmus pronuntiat, experimento didicit, scilicet quam bonum sit et quam iocundum habitare fratres in unum.

⁴¹ Quippe inter sanctos et a sanctis sub monasterialibus disciplinis enutritus et litteris liberaliter institutus; sanctus cum sanctis, et innocens cum innocentibus peragens cursum etatis insistebat conamine toto, immaculatum se custodire ab hoc seculo.

among 600 fellow-fighters in a holy monastic army – for *that*, one reads, was the number of brothers in the aforementioned monastery of the apostles Peter and Paul – [Bede] was wont to emulate the better spiritual gifts in each; so that what spiritual knowledge each of them received, he drank in whole by learning from each one of them; wherefore he became drunk from the abundance of the house of God, and the Lord gave him to drink from the torrent of his pleasure.⁴² And thus the very wisest bee of the church, greedy for the sweetness pleasing to God, collects hither and thither the little flowers from the full field that the Lord has blessed, from which by the ingenuity of wisdom, as if making honey, he might compose eloquence that is sweet beyond the honey and the honey-comb'.⁴³ The metaphor of the bee was much used (and abused) by medieval authors and, when applied to writers, normally evoked their activity in reading, and excerpting from, anterior texts. The 'little flowers from the full field which the Lord has blessed' that Bede collects here, by contrast, are the 'spiritual gifts' of his fellow monks at Jarrow.

These and similar passages go beyond what is necessary for the claim that Bede's environment was one of optimal spirituality: the holiness of the monastic community at Jarrow

⁴² Psalm 35.9.

⁴³ quippe qui inter sescentos sanctę monachilis militię commilitones degens, hunc enim numerum fratrum legitur habuisse supradictum apostolorum Petri et PAULI monasterium, in singulis emulabatur carismata meliora, ut quod quisque illorum spiritualis scientię accepisset, ille totum ex singulis perdiscendo combiberet; quatinus inebriaretur ab ubertate domus dei, et torrente uoluptatis suę poteret eum dominus. Sicque prudentissima ecclesię apes gratę deo dulcedinis auida, agri pleni quem benedixit dominus hinc et inde flosculos collegit, quibus artificio sapientię quasi mellificans, eloquia super mel et fauum dulcia componeret. (Re the final clause, cf. Psalm 18.11; also Ecclesiasticus 24.27.)

as a whole is a preoccupation in itself. Not only did it foster Bede's sanctity, it was an intimate part of it. As noted above, this striking feature is most readily explicable if the *Vita* were, perchance, written in the context either of the re-establishment of that very community, or of the transfer of its members to replace secular clerics at Durham.

The author's third strategem is rhetoric. The various quotations given above exemplify the lengthy sentences, overflowing with content, expressed in high-flown language, replete with scriptural quotations and comparisons, that he habitually uses. At one level, this was the approach (if not the precise style) of many a hagiographer – using language that was felt to be suitably elevated to honour and promote an exalted subject. Simultaneously in this case, however, it was almost certainly a response to a fundamental problem, namely a shortage of actual subject matter. A *vita* presupposed life-events to narrate and apotheosise. However, in relation to Bede, while his literary output was prodigious, his recorded life was one of minimal incident, offering precious little with which an author could work. Bede himself had given a prominent place to the literary endeavours of Gregory the Great in his summary biography of that pope within the *Historia ecclesiastica*, and had included selected details of the collecting, production and preserving of books as part of his record of the lives of the abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow.⁴⁴ Yet in these cases matters bibliographical were but one element of a much broader narrative; in relation to Bede himself, by contrast, they were the essence of the story. This was a difficult brief. Unsurprisingly, our author's response to the challenge was to flesh out a slender skeleton of documented events with generalities about an idealised monastic formation, dressed up in extravagant verbiage.

Bede's own account of his early life as an oblate is short and simple: 'when I was seven years of age I was, by the care of my kinsmen, put into the charge of the reverend abbot

⁴⁴ *HE*, II.1 (pp. 126-8). *HLA*, cc. 4, 6, 9, 15, 18 (pp. 30, 34, 44, 56, 58, 66).

Benedict and then of Ceolfrith, to be educated'.⁴⁵ In the hands of our author this becomes: 'Of these [oblates] one indeed, unmatched by the rest for his good innate quality, the little child Bede, now seven years old, was handed over by his parents to [Benedict], famous for his sanctity, to be formed more uniquely to the service of the Divinity in the monastery'.⁴⁶ 'His childish years were passed under the reins of [religious] discipline. And as a boy he dwelled in the temple of God, made fit for the Lord in the historic example of blessed Samuel, so that he might make plain to the people the secrets of the speeches of God whenever they were revealed to the ears of his heart. Truly, so that he might profit from this stage of life – so that the efficacy of the liberal study to which he had been assigned be not little or nothing in the boy – even at that age, a great intelligence sparkled from force of natural ability, God being its instigator. Afterwards indeed he honed his ability for grasping higher things by acquired knowledge in the liberal arts and by the use of practice; and he strove to plumb the penetrable depths of holy scripture; and he devoted whatever strength he had to the understanding of these things. By desire and hard work, adding his prayers to the prayers of the Psalmist,⁴⁷ he said "open my eyes and I shall consider the wonders concerning your law". And since without hesitating he asked in faith, he was given by the Father of illumination the finest gift and perfect present of wisdom – not, moreover, the wisdom of this world which perishes, but that wisdom of God which (the apostle preaches)⁴⁸ was hidden in mysteries'.⁴⁹ A slender basis of fact has thus been transmuted into an

⁴⁵ *HE*, V.24 (pp. 566-7).

⁴⁶ *Horum unus immo pre aliis solus bonę indolis infantulus BEDA iam septennis memorato sanctitatis uiro ut ministerio solius diuinitatis adaptetur, a parentibus in monasterium traditur.*

⁴⁷ Psalm 118.18.

⁴⁸ Cf. I Corinthians 2.7 and Colossians 2.2-3

elaborate structure of hagiographical commonplaces and rhetorical flourishes, buttressed with scriptural allusions.

Indeed, not only here but throughout the text, Bede's life and work are compared to biblical precedent – a practice that came naturally to any and every ecclesiastical writer and was a commonplace of hagiography. As a boy, Bede was like Samuel. As a deacon, he is credited with the words of Psalm 141.5: 'The Lord is the share of my inheritance, my hope and my portion in the land of the living'. As a scholar, he had the wisdom of Solomon – to hear which many flocked from the ends of the earth with the eagerness of the Queen of Sheba.⁵⁰ When investigating the mysteries of the sacraments, he was like Moses approaching the dark cloud wherein was God;⁵¹ while in death it was the words of Paul that were on his lips.⁵² By stressing

⁴⁹ *ętas infantilis sub disciplinę frenis educatur, atque exemplo beati quondam Samuelis accommodatus domino in templo dei puer conuersatur, ut in aure cordis sibi reuelata quandoque populis sermonum dei manifestet archana. Verum ut hoc ętatis processu posset, ne studii liberalis cui deditus erat, parua uel nulla in puero esset efficacita, etiam in illam ętatem ex ui naturalis ingenii magna deo auctore scintillauit intelligentia. Postquam uero adepta liberalium artium scientia, usu exercitii altioribus capiendis ingenium expolierat, etiam profunda sanctarum scripturarum penetranda ingredi contendit, hisque intelligendis quicquid uirium habuerat insumit, desiderio ac labore preces adiungens psalmistę precibus, reuela inquit oculos meos, et considerabo mirabilia de lege tua. Et quoniam postulauit in fide nichil hesitans, datur ei a patre luminum datum optimum et donum perfectum sapientię non autem sapientię huius seculi que destruitur, sed quam apostolus predicat dei sapientiam in misteriis absconditam.*

⁵⁰ I Kings 10.1-13.

⁵¹ Exodus 20.18-21.

⁵² Cf. II Timothy 4.7.

Bede's likeness to scriptural figures, our author can present him with a well-polished veneer of biblical spirituality.

Concurrently, Bede's status is projected by the epithets that are applied to him. These are fairly evenly divided between terms that promote his sanctity and those that underline his erudition. Thus *magister* ('master / teacher') and *doctor* are used four times each, and *theologus* ('theologian' / 'interpreter of the divine') and *ecclesiae columna* ('pillar of the church') once each; while he is styled *venerabilis* thrice, and *presbiterus et monachus*, *beatus* and *israelita*⁵³ twice each (this last term indicating that he was one of God's chosen people). In addition, on five occasions it is Bede's fame that is underlined: thrice he is *memorabilis* ('memorable' / 'worthy of note'), once *celebris* ('famous'), and once *illustris* ('illustrious').

Concerning the intellectual and literary achievement of the adult Bede, even though a wealth of specific information was, in principle, available in the form of his works themselves, our author takes much the same approach as he did to his subject's poorly-documented childhood and youth. While, as we have seen, he is lavish in lauding Bede's status as a spiritual commentator in general terms, he makes no attempt to enumerate, let alone to detail or to expound, his subject's specific achievements in this respect, not even hinting at the extraordinary range and quantity of the oeuvre (something he must have known, since a near-complete listing of it dominates the coda to the *Historia ecclesiastica*, from which he drew such biographical information as he had). Nor does our author take advantage of the opportunities provided by his own prose to insert mention of a relevant work (*à propos* his likening of Bede to Samuel, for instance, he could neatly have noted that this youth was the (supposed) author of a biblical book

⁵³ Once as 'verus israelita', once as 'spiritualis israelita'.

that his subject would go on to expound in due course).⁵⁴ On the contrary, Bede's intellectual achievements are apotheosized in grandiloquent generalities without reference to a single specific title:⁵⁵ 'Assuredly from the time when he took up the office of a priest, he extended the probings of his genius in the explanation of the sacred scriptures, composing many books of catholic erudition. Whatsoever by learning, reading, and meditation he chewed over like a clean beast, he spat out the whole for divine purposes in his writing and teaching. He grew daily, advancing in mystic insights – to the extent that those whom he had had as leaders on the pathways of the scriptures, and many others, he himself, when more experienced, led with the guidance of grace into the depths of higher understanding.' Again:⁵⁶ 'his preaching and teaching was according to the apostle:⁵⁷ not arranging spiritual matters in learned words of human wisdom but in spiritual

⁵⁴ *In primam partem Samuhelis libri IIII*, ed. David Hurst, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 119 (Turnhout, 1962).

⁵⁵ A quo uidelicet suscepti [*sic* – doubtless for 'suscepit'] presbiteratus tempore in scripturarum sacrarum explanationem ingenii sui laxat acumina, pluresque catholicę libros eruditionis conficiens, quicquid eatenus discendo, legendo, et meditando mundum scilicet animal ruminauerat, totum in diuinos usus scribendo ac docendo eructuat. Crescit cotidie in mysticos intellectus proficiens, in tantum ut et ipsos quos in scripturarum semitas habuerat duces, plerosque in intelligentię altioris abissum gratia magistrante duceret ipse peritior.

⁵⁶ sermo eius et doctrina secundum apostolum erat non in doctis humanę sapientię uerbis, sed in uerbis fidei spiritualibus spiritualia comparans, ut abissus ueteris testamenti abissum inuocet euangelicam in uoce cataractarum, id est in uoce prophetarum et apostolorum.

⁵⁷ Cf. I Corinthians 2.4.

words of faith, so that the deeps of the Old Testament might call unto the deeps of the Gospel in the voice of the waterfalls,⁵⁸ that is in the voice of the prophets and the apostles’.

Whether such an approach reflected a lack of familiarity with the works themselves, ignorance of appropriate literary models for how to treat a substantial catalogue of texts within a *vita*,⁵⁹ a lack of interest in attempting to do so, a conviction that such detail was irrelevant to the higher purpose of his work, the wish to highlight other aspects of his subject, or some combination of all of these is debatable. However, preferring rhetoric to detail and generalisation to fact is wholly in accord with the author’s approach at large. Certainly, the aspect of Bede that our author chose to stress above all was not his scholarship, nor indeed any other aspect of his life, but rather his death.

Bede’s death is at the heart of our author’s presentation of his sanctity, and this is his fourth strategem. Book II of the *Vita* is entirely devoted to the Northumbrian scholar’s illness

⁵⁸ Cf. Psalm 41.8.

⁵⁹ The *locus classicus* for recording and hence celebrating literary work as part of a christian’s achievement was Jerome’s *De viris illustribus*: Dekkers (ed.), *Clavis*, no. 616; PL 23.603-720; *Hieronymus Liber de viris inlustribus. Gennadius, Liber de viris inlustribus*, ed. E. C. Richardson (Leipzig, 1896), pp. 1-56. Possidius appended a classified listing of the writings of Augustine to his biography of that towering scholarly saint: Dekkers (ed.), *Clavis*, nos. 358-8; BHL 785-6; PL 32.33-66 (*Vita*) and 46.5-22 (*Indiculus librorum*). Venantius Fortunatus (d. 601) named seven christian poet predecessors and characterised their work in his verse *Life of St Martin: Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus, Opera Poetica*, MGH Auctores Antiquissimi 4.1 (Berlin, 1881), 293-370 at pp. 295-6. Alcuin, ‘Versus de patribus’, ll. 1536-60: *Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ll. 1536-60, ed. Godman, pp. 122-6, lists forty-one authors who were represented in the book collection of Ælberht and Alcuin at York as part of his celebration of York’s Christian culture.

and death; moreover here, in contrast to Book I (where comments on Bede were set amidst accounts of his community and of Northumbrian christian history more generally), the focus remains squarely upon Bede himself. The letter of Cuthbert of Jarrow had offered an eye-witness report of Bede's last days and death, and our author draws extensively upon it, as one would expect. His version, however, is markedly different in tone and emphasis.

Whereas the contemporary account, written by a friend and former pupil of the dying man, charted a relatively painless decline, showing Bede to have been cheerful, thankful to God, and anxious only to finish the works of scholarship upon which he was still engaged,⁶⁰ our author stresses his subject's suffering throughout this period and his unceasing fortitude in the face of it. Cuthbert's one specific detail about Bede's infirmity – that on the Tuesday before Ascension Day his 'breathing became very much worse and a slight swelling had appeared in his feet' – is exaggerated by our author to: 'Meanwhile the memorable doctor was struck with more violent gasps and, now on the point of being blessedly victorious after death, he was bitterly oppressed by a constricted breath into the clutches [lit. 'debt'] of death, a certain lethal swelling taking possession of his lower body'.⁶¹ He elaborates that Bede 'was suddenly seized by a severe discomfort of his tightened chest so that his voice, thinned by the difficult respiration of his wind-pipe, was utterly strangled by his panting breath. Under this trial of almost uninterrupted

⁶⁰ Physical suffering is only alluded to twice: once in general terms ('et Deo gratias referebat quia sic meruisset infirmari'), followed by quotations from Hebrews 12.6 and Ambrose (see note 22); and once with specific detail ('... coepit uehementius aegrotari in anhelitu, et modicus tumor in suis pedibus apparuerat'). Both: *HE*, p. 582.

⁶¹ Inter hæc doctor memorabilis uehementioribus suspiriis concutitur iamque beate post mortem uicturus, in debitum mortis spiritu coartante acriter urgetur, letali quodam tumore inferiora corporis iam occupante.

breathlessness he laboured for some time, that is nearly fifty-three days; but so that virtue should be perfected in bodily weakness, gladly he gloried with the apostle in his infirmities'.⁶² Here become explicit the hagiographical topoi of steadfastness in the face of suffering, and the divine scourging of Christians to fit them for heaven. Needless to say our author labours this second point, quoting in full Proverbs 3.11 with Hebrews 12.5-6,⁶³ the standard christian apologies for bodily suffering, and further specifying: 'so that no spot or wrinkle of sin should remain in [Bede, the kindly Deity] wished him to be cleansed by the discipline of pious chastisement; so that purer than purest gold, by the furnace of lengthy illness, he might glitter golden with ornament as the Jerusalem which is built as a city in the heavens'.⁶⁴

Cuthbert of Jarrow's delicately articulated impression that 'it seemed to us that [Bede] knew very well when his end should be' is duly repeated in slightly more concrete form by our author, whose Bede, 'know[s] in advance, so it seemed, the hour of his passing'.⁶⁵ Conversely,

⁶² Denique repente corripitur angusti pectoris graui incommodo, ut difficili arteriarum meatu uox ei admodum tenuis spiritu coartaretur anhelo. Qua pene intercepti anhelitus molestia multis id est quinquaginta ferme tribus diebus laborauit, sed ut uirtus in infirmitate perficeretur, libenter cum apostolo in infirmitatibus gloriabatur. Cf. II Corinthians 12.9. Our author's 'fifty-three days' was calculated from Cuthbert's report that Bede's illness lasted from almost a fortnight before Easter to the eve of Ascension Day.

⁶³ Fili mi noli neglegere disciplinam Domini ... Quis enim filius quem non corripit pater.

⁶⁴ ... ne macula in illo uel ruga resideret peccati, disciplinis pie castigationis uoluit expurgari, ut camino diutine infirmitatis auro purior purissimo, in celestis ierusalem que edificatur ut ciuitas, rutilus coruscaret ornamento. Cf. Psalm 121.3.

⁶⁵ Vnde ille ut uidebatur prescius hore sui exitus ...

whereas Cuthbert specifically recorded that Bede's final literary endeavours were completing a vernacular version of part of John's Gospel and compiling excerpts from Isidore's *De natura rerum*, our author states more vaguely but verbosely: 'Already much earlier they had corrected his tracts with great labour and now also, as he grew progressively weaker, namely with tiredness and exhausted breathlessness, he assuredly returned to emend those certain lesser tracts which, through his occupation with greater ones, had not infrequently been neglected, so that when henceforth, resting from his labours, his place would be in peace, and his habitation in Zion,⁶⁶ not only would his sentence not offend the ecclesiastical reader, but nor would his speech, stuttering in its vowels or harsh in its consonants, upset a competent schoolmaster'.⁶⁷ With typical prolixity he then adds: 'For although, as a certain man said, ability may be sophisticated and well trained and speech may run smooth through long practice, yet unless it is taken care of and polished by the hand of the author, it gives off the dusty odour of neglect'.⁶⁸ Wholly inappropriate for characterising the heroic last efforts of a dying scholar determined to accomplish all that his failing strength would permit in order to leave the most useful possible literary legacy to his community and to posterity, this reveals our author at his weakest: having

⁶⁶ Psalm 75.3.

⁶⁷ *Iam multo ante sua opuscula grandi studio emendauerunt, nunc quoque lasso licet anhelitu indeficienter deficeret, quedam quidem minima que maiorum fuerant occupatione neglecta sepius emendando eadem repetebat, ut cum amodo requiescens a laboribus suis in pace factus fuerit locus eius, et in syon habitatio illius, eius non solum non sententia ecclesiasticum lectorem offendat, sed nec oratio aut hiulca uocalibus, aut aspera consonantibus docibilem grammaticum moueat.*

⁶⁸ *Quamuis enim ut ait quidam elegans sit exercitatumque ingenium, et longo usu trita currat oratio, tamen nisi auctoris manu curata fuerit et expolita, redolet sordes negligentie.*

buried with platitudes an event that offered a truly telling insight into Bede's saintly nature, he then further undermines it with a trite and inappropriate analogy lifted (be it directly or indirectly) from Jerome.⁶⁹ But then, as was noted above, the realities and details of Bede the saintly scholar were not of particular concern to him.

Indeed, our author's dying Bede, unlike Cuthbert's, is not regretful to be leaving his brothers without their wise and learned mentor; rather he ponders mournfully, 'the happiness of sinners who pass their days in prosperity and at a stroke descend to Hell, who have no share in the trials of men and with men are not scourged, so that they are punished in eternity with devils'.⁷⁰ That this is the message our author wants to convey is underlined by its obvious tension with what Cuthbert reported that Bede had actually declaimed: 'He used to repeat that sentence from St Paul, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"' and many other verses of scripture, urging us thereby to wake from the slumber of the soul by thinking in good time of our last hour'.⁷¹ Correspondingly, Bede's so-called Death Song, which Cuthbert cited immediately thereafter, was a humble musing to the effect that no-one, however wise he may be, should fail to reflect upon the inevitability of divine judgement and on the reward or punishment that he would receive according to the state of his soul.⁷² Thus in place of general monitions to

⁶⁹ See note 22 above.

⁷⁰ *At contra nichil reputabat infelicius felicitate peccantium qui ducunt in bonis dies suos, et in puncto ad inferna descendunt, qui in labore hominum non sunt, et cum hominibus non flagellantur, ut in æternum cum demonibus puniantur.*

⁷¹ *Epistola*, pp. 580-1. Hebrews 10.31.

⁷² *HE*, p. 582; *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York and London, 1942), pp. c-cvii and 107-8 with 199.

consider one's mortality and spiritual fate, our author substitutes a diatribe against worldliness. In the same way, to the last words of Cuthbert's Bede, our author adds the specific injunctions that his brothers should remember the case of Joseph ensnared by Potiphar's wife,⁷³ and should flee 'the cloak of worldly concupiscence, that is the snares of earthly things are to be left behind; so that, when they should be victorious in fleeing its obscene embraces, the flesh of the sinner having been reduced to servitude, they may put in subjection to themselves the kingdom of Egypt, that is of the vices. He taught them that they could in no other wise give proof of Christ dwelling in them than through the spirit of holy and undivided charity. So that those who with the sharing of heavenly bread become one body of Christ should not be separated from the unity of that same body by the spirit of dissension'.⁷⁴

Spurning the seductive blandishments of the secular world for the pure simplicity of a harmonious communal life was the *raison d'être* of monasticism and central to its perceived worth; so having this articulated, and hence endorsed, by a venerable authority was of enduring relevance. Putting such sentiments into the mouth of Bede in particular would plainly have had additional value in the circumstances of a new attempt to re-implant a monastic community at Jarrow and, above all, when its members were transferred to Durham to replace the secular clerics there. (And even if this was not the context in which the work was composed, the witness of DCL B.II.35 demonstrates that it was one in which it was copied and read.)

⁷³ Genesis 39.6-20.

⁷⁴ ... mundiali concupiscentię pallium id est retinacula rerum secularivm relinquenda, ut cum eius obscenos amplexus fugiendo uincant, redacta in seruitutem carne peccati, regnum egypti hoc est uitiorum sibi subiacciant. Docet eos non posse aliter dare experimentum christi in se habitantis, nisi per spiritum sanctę ac indiuidę caritatis. Vt qui communionē cęlestis panis unum christi corpus efficiuntur; ab unitate ipsius corporis spiritu dissensionis non separantur.

The accounts of the actual moment of Bede's death, singing the doxology, surrounded by his dearest brethren, are very similar in the two versions. With modest exaggeration, where Cuthbert had him sitting propped up, our author describes him as lying down.⁷⁵ More significantly, whereas Cuthbert noted, 'And well may we believe without hesitation that, inasmuch as he had laboured here always in the praise of God, so his soul was carried by angels to the joys of Heaven which he longed for', our author predictably crystallises this into: 'with the naming of the Holy Spirit his spirit was freed from his body and forthwith was carried into the beatific company of holy spirits in heaven, where mingling in the hymn-singing choirs of the heavenly Jerusalem, the blessed man continually praises with the rest the King of Ages, Lord of Hosts, one in substance three in person'.⁷⁶ A delicately articulated belief has become a triumphal ascension, embellished with verbal *repetitio*.

Cuthbert's dignified and profoundly moving picture of Bede as scholar and teacher bringing to completion his last literary projects, ensuring that his pupils are not left with unfinished business, and humbly distributing his few precious possessions among his beloved brethren has been replaced by a long-drawn-out saga of suffering and endurance, combined with a homily on the virtues and rewards of monasticism and abstinence in contrast to the superficial attractions of, but ultimate perdition resulting from, worldliness. While undoubtedly carefully crafted, Cuthbert's account was replete with poignant specific details, which our author sacrifices to hagiographic and homiletic conventions. To the modern mind the result is infinitely less

⁷⁵ 'sedere': 'supinatur'.

⁷⁶ Cum nominatione sancti spiritus eius spiritus carne soluitur, moxque beatifico spirituum sanctorum comitatu celis inuehitur, ubi ierusalem celesti ymnidicos admiscens concentus; regem seculorum deum sabaoth unum substantialiter trinum personaliter perpetuo collaudat beatus.

credible and less moving; for an eleventh-century mind, however, a reduction of anecdotal incident in order to enhance eternal truths would doubtless have seemed appropriate and august.

Conclusion

Although of minimal value for the life of the historical Bede, the *Vita Bedae* is nevertheless of great interest to the historian. Because we can compare the text with its own sources, it provides an instructive opportunity to watch a hagiographer at work. It lets us see in sharp focus how one author moulded and padded out a slender store of information to suit the expectations of the genre, lauding his subject's exceptional childhood, celebrating his scholarly achievement with rhetoric rather than example, stressing how his spirituality was interconnected with that of his model community, and re-presenting his death as a saga of christian steadfastness in the face of a martyrdom of extended suffering, climaxing with a triumphal arrival into heaven. Points are supported by scriptural allusions and verbal display rather than fact. The circumstance that none of the author's strategies is novel or distinctive – on the contrary, all were well tried and tested – adds to, rather than detracts from, the value of the case as an exemplum of the hagiographer's craft. Whether from limitations of source material, the author's personal inclination, or both, the work is largely free of specious miracles. The presence of the Divine is nevertheless regularly invoked via its specified interventions in forming Bede's community, in fostering Bede's intellect and in engineering his bodily purification, and it is continuously evoked via literary artifice.

Each subject of a *vita* presented its own problems and potential. There might be a shortage of information about a long-dead individual (an extreme case is Ecgwine of Evesham, about whom almost nothing was known when his Life came to be written three centuries after

his death⁷⁷) and a relative plenitude for one who had died within living memory (such as Æthelwold of Winchester (d. 984) or Wulfstan of Worcester (d. 1095)). Yet a personage of the former sort could be easier for an author to manipulate than one of the latter. Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (d. after 1107) in his presentation of Augustine of Canterbury (for whom little record appears to have been preserved at Canterbury beyond what appeared in Bede) could embellish with relative freedom the basic outline of his deeds as recounted in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Thus the hagiographer punctuated his narrative and demonstrated the saint's authority by the introduction of colourful miracles, such as the divine retribution wrought first on a disrespectful woman at Angers, then on obdurate English in the West Country, and the appearance of supernatural springs at places where churches were to be constructed.⁷⁸ By contrast, William of Malmesbury (d. 1143) in his enhanced translation of the (now lost) vernacular *Vita Wulfstani* by Coleman of Worcester (d. 1113) recounted numerous comparatively mundane events in the life of a diligent monk and bishop who was principally distinguished for his humility, abstinence and longevity, and did his best to emphasise their spiritual dimension, playing up anything with a hint of the miraculous.⁷⁹ Bede, long dead by the time the *Vita* that is our concern here was probably composed, might in principle have offered the potential of the former type. In reality, however, as his life was impeccably but tersely documented by his own hand as brimming with scholarship

⁷⁷ *Byrhtferth, Lives of Oswald and Ecgwine*, ed. Lapidge, pp. lxxxii-lxxxv.

⁷⁸ *Historia maior*: BHL, no. 777; PL 80.43-94. Fiona Gameson, 'Goscelin's *Life* of Augustine of Canterbury', in Richard Gameson (ed.), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud, 1999), 391-409.

⁷⁹ *William of Malmesbury Saints' Lives*, ed. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson (Oxford, 2002), 7-155.

but devoid of dramatic incident, it presented a real conundrum. Predictably, our author strove to recast it in terms of hagiographical conventions to which it was poorly suited.

Should our suggested dating of the *Vita Bedae* be correct, its broad context is the revival in hagiographical writing in England from the mid-tenth century onwards and, more particularly, the efflorescence of the genre in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. If it were indeed produced in the context of the late eleventh-century northern monastic revival as we have hypothesised, it would be a vital witness to the literary dimension of that phenomenon. Much attention has been paid to Symeon of Durham's endeavours at the beginning of the twelfth century to craft the history of the church of Durham so as to demonstrate a (specious) continuity between the monastic community established on Lindisfarne in 635 and the benedictine monks who were installed in Durham in 1083.⁸⁰ The *Vita Bedae* would be an antecedent endeavour – demonstrating the model nature of the early community of Jarrow, via the example of its most famous brother, to provide spiritual underpinning for the venture to re-found that monastery in the 1070s, from which, in turn, Durham was then worthily staffed.

Be that as it may, it is informative to compare the account of Bede that is offered by our author with that of Symeon.⁸¹ Though depending upon exactly the same sources, they seemingly present a stark contrast. Symeon is altogether more overt about the fact that what he is offering is a compilation. Not only does he quote *in extenso* from *Historia ecclesiastica* V.24 and Cuthbert of Jarrow, he makes a virtue of this practice, stating that he has done so in order to show that

⁸⁰ *Libellus*. A. J. Piper, 'The First Generation of Durham Monks and the Cult of St Cuthbert', in Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe (ed.), *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), 437-46.

⁸¹ *Libellus* I.8, 11, 13, and (above all) 14-15.

nothing he has said is without the authority of Bede himself.⁸² Thus whereas our author conceals and embellishes his sources, Symeon presents those same sources directly to the reader with limited comment. Correspondingly, where our author merely generalises about Bede's literary oeuvre, Symeon supplies in full Bede's own list of his titles. Furthermore, whereas our author recasts and extends the events of Bede's death, Symeon simply repeats verbatim what was said by Cuthbert of Jarrow.

Nonetheless, Symeon does evoke Bede's passing from life to death with powerful metaphors – 'that lamp of the catholic church went to the light which had illuminated it, that vein of water, leaping toward eternal life reached the living spring which is God' – and he articulates the Northumbrian scholar's enduring spiritual significance with elegant antithesis: 'Now Bede lived hidden away in the extreme corner of the world, but after his death he lived on in his books and became known to everyone all over the world'.⁸³ Furthermore, where our author links Bede's spirituality with that of Wearmouth-Jarrow, Symeon interweaves it with that of Cuthbert, the premier saint of the Durham community that he is celebrating. Correspondingly, the youth of Symeon's Bede is dated in relation to the death of St Cuthbert, the fact that Bede wrote about Cuthbert is highlighted, as is the circumstance that the scholar's bones were placed alongside those of that saint (points that our author passes over in silence, presumably because they cast his subject in the role of a supporting character rather than a leading one). Equally, Symeon dates the death of Bede with relation to the activities of SS.

⁸² *Libellus*, I.14 (p. 64).

⁸³ Symeon, *Libellus*, I.14 (pp. 64-5). Cf. the letter of St Boniface (d. 754) to Hwætberht of Wearmouth-Jarrow: *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi* I, ed. E. Dümmler, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolarum Tomus III* (Berlin, 1892), no. 76 (p. 348).

Oswald and Aidan, to the death of Cuthbert, and to the foundation of Lindisfarne as well as to that of Wearmouth.

There can be no doubt that Symeon, who used and annotated the copy of the *Historia ecclesiastica* in DCL B.II.35, knew our author's work. If the differences between their accounts of Bede highlight what is complementary about the crafts of the historian and the hagiographer, their similarities demonstrate the extent to which the conventions and requirements of these two genres coincide. This point is underlined by the manuscript witnesses of our text.

The respectable number of surviving copies of the *Vita Bedae* – greater than that for many other eleventh- and twelfth-century English saints' lives⁸⁴ – suggests that, at the very least, the text was felt to meet a need. Transmission of the work seems, unsurprisingly, to have focused on Durham; and the manuscript contexts in which it has been preserved imply that it was commonly perceived as a complement to the *Historia ecclesiastica* and *Historia abbatum*. This does not mean that the text did not circulate, and was not also used, independently – indeed, the second oldest copy was originally a self-contained *libellus*.⁸⁵ However, it does suggest that,

⁸⁴ Wulfstan of Winchester's Life of Æthelwold survives in five MSS, B's Life of Dunstan in three; William of Malmesbury's Life of Wulfstan and Life of Dunstan, as also the *vitae* of Egwine and of Christina of Markyate in but a single manuscript, in this last case a highly lacunose one: *Byrhtferth, Lives of Oswald and Ecgvine*, ed. Lapidge, pp. xciii-xcic; *Vie de Christina de Markyate*, ed. Paulette L'Hermitte-Leclercq and Anne-Marie Legras, 2 vols. (Paris, 2007), I, pp. 28-53.

⁸⁵ BL, Harley 526, fols. 28-37 comprises a single quire (a quinion), now bound into a composite volume with four other hagiographical works of disparate dates. The fact that the text begins at the very top of 28r and ends half-way down 36v, with 37r-v left blank, suggests that it was produced as a free-standing item, the additional wear sustained by 28r and 37v further indicating its former independent existence.

notwithstanding our author's valiant attempt to redefine Bede's sanctity, his efforts were inevitably subject to the gravitational pull of the latter's historical works. DCL B.II.35 itself accumulated further historical texts during the course of the twelfth century;⁸⁶ and the three latest copies of the *Vita Bedae* all appear as part of more expansive collections of Northumbrian historical and hagiographical material.⁸⁷ The two youngest of these volumes certainly belonged to Durham Cathedral Priory, and duly feature in the 1395 catalogue of books that were then in its cloister and represented its 'working' collection. From this we discover that, while one of them was kept among the 'legendae seu vitae sanctorum' ('legendaries or lives of saints'), the other was

⁸⁶ 'Nennius', *Historia Brittonum*; regnal and episcopal lists; notes on the Ages of the World; Caradoc of Llancarvan, *Vita Gildae*; Gilbert of Limerick, *De hierarchia ecclesiae*.

⁸⁷ NLW 21245E: Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*; *Vita Bedae*; Bede, *Historia abbatum*; Richard of Hexham, *Historia Haugustaldensis ecclesiae*; Bernard, *Sermones*. BL, Burney 310: Eusebius (Rufinus), *Historiae ecclesiasticae*; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*; 'Nennius', *Historia Brittonum*; Caradoc of Llancarvan, *Vita Gildae*; *Vita Bedae*; Bede, *Vita abbatum*. Bodleian Library, Fairfax 6: *Libellus de ortu S. Cuthberti*; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti* (verse), *Vita Cuthberti* (prose) and *Historia ecclesiastica*; *De miraculis*; Reginald of Durham, *De virtutibus S. Cuthberti*, *Vita S. Oswaldi*; *De S. Aidano*; *Vita Eatae*; Reginald of Durham, *Vita S. Ebbe*; Bede, *Historia abbatum*; *Vita Bedae*; Reginald of Durham, *Vita S. Godrici*; Geoffrey of Coldingham, *Vita S. Bartholomei*; *De iniusta uexacione Willelmi episcopi primi*; Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*; Geoffrey of Coldingham, *De statu ecclesie Dunelmensis*; Robert Greystanes, *Historia de statu ecclesiae Dunelmensis*; Lives of Richard de Bury; William Chambre, *Historia*.

shelved with the 'libri historiarum' ('books of histories'); as DCL B.II.35 was also stored with this latter group, two of Durham's copies of the *Vita Bedae* had come to be classified as 'history'.⁸⁸

Much of the present study has been devoted to exploring, implicitly and explicitly, the distinctions between history and hagiography, considering what was involved in turning the former into the latter, and assessing the techniques and preoccupations of one individual who did so. Now recent commentators have rightly stressed how far Anglo-Norman history-writing was indebted to, and intertwined with, the practices of hagiography.⁸⁹ The compendious manuscripts which preserve the later copies of our author's work enlarge the point, underlining from a complementary perspective how porous in medieval monastic contexts were the borders between what the modern mind likes to distinguish as separate genres, and how far the ways in which they were used might overlap. They were, indeed, two sides of the same coin: ecclesiastical histories and hagiographies both proclaim the presence and the workings of the divine within earthly affairs; it is just that the latter do so more overtly than the former.

⁸⁸ DCL B.IV.46, fol. 21v entry P, fol. 22r entry N (an early addition), and fol. 21v entry G respectively (printed: *Catalogi veteres librorum ecclesiae cathedralis Dunelm.*, ed. B[eriah] B[otfield], Surtees Society 7 (1838), pp. 55-6).

⁸⁹ Véronique Gazeau, 'Orderic Vitalis and the Cult of the Saints' in Charles Rozier, Daniel Roach, Giles Gasper and Elisabeth van Houts (ed.), *Orderic Vitalis: Life, Works and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, 2016), 172-88; Anne Bailey, 'Gesta pontificum Anglorum: history or hagiography' in R. M. Thomson, Emily Dolmans and Emily Winkler (ed.), *Discovering William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, 2017), 13-26; Charles Rozier, 'Between History and Hagiography: Eadmer of Canterbury's Vision of the *Historia novorum in Anglia*', *Journal of Medieval History* 45/1 (2019), 1-19.

