

St. Bede (c.673-735)

Benedictine monk, teacher, historian and Biblical exegete, Bede (or Beada) is the most important scholar produced by Anglo-Saxon England. Born in Northumbria, probably into the aristocracy, he was placed by his family in the monastery of Wearmouth as a child, shortly after moving to Jarrow where he lived for the rest of his life.

Bede was the author of around 40 works, including Biblical commentaries, reflective of patristic learning; treatises on linguistic subjects; translations into the vernacular; and scientific and computational works. Many of these works were highly influential throughout medieval Europe, and from at least the ninth century he was referred to as Venerabilis.

However, his greatest gift to posterity lies in his historical and hagiographical works, especially his lives of St. Cuthbert, and his *Historia Ecclesiastica* or Church History of the English People (731). His importance as a historian is reflected in his view of chronology, such as his pioneering use of BC and AD in dating; his thoroughly researched biographies and martyrology; and especially the model of historical writing provided by his ecclesiastical history of England, which laid the foundation for all subsequent historical study of this period.

This work is particularly notable for the care and discretion which the author exercised in seeking out source materials obtained from contemporary institutions and individuals; in its careful use of citation and quotation; and in the judicious weighing of evidence from diverse sources. All of this the author integrated into a coherent and readable narrative, justly obtaining him the epithet of the 'Father of English History'.

His work is a synthesis of influences: the Roman and continental current derived from his patron St. Benedict Biscop; scholarship emanating from the other great centre of learning at Canterbury; and the indigenous Irish monastic tradition which he also celebrated, whilst remaining loyal to the modern Roman and Benedictine disciplines of his own calling.

Whilst most Anglo-Saxon libraries were extremely small, it has been estimated that in Northumbria Bede could draw upon a library of approximately 150 works, in addition to his contacts with other centres in England and on the continent, reflecting the richness of Northumbrian religious culture of the time.

Bede's work remains a model for historical studies, as reflected in his concern to identify and interrogate the widest possible range of archival and other sources, an avoidance of dogmatism and prejudice, and a deep moral sense informed by religious faith. The Holy See pronounced Bede a Doctor of the Church in 1899 and sanctus in 1935.