

Bede's account of the abbess Hild and the poet Cædmon
from the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (c. 731), IV.23-4

Bede 'the Venerable', the most learned writer of the Anglo-Saxon period, was born in Northumbria around 673. At the age of seven he entered the twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow and remained there, except for a few short excursions, until his death. Under the abbot Ceolfrith Bede received a thorough education in grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, music, natural science and the study of scripture; he was ordained a deacon at 19 and a priest at 30. In a brief autobiographical note appended to his *Ecclesiastical History* he describes himself in this manner: "amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule [of St Benedict] and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write." Over the course of his life Bede produced a remarkable body of writing still impressive for its clarity, intelligence, range and devotion. His works, which survive in hundreds of manuscripts, were deeply influential and widely copied throughout the Middle Ages. Apart from a brief and enigmatic Old English poem and a lost translation of the Gospel of John he is said to have composed on his deathbed, all Bede's works were written in Latin, the international language of scholarship and the Church.

The founder of Jarrow monastery, Benedict Biscop, had traveled extensively and assembled an impressive library; during Bede's lifetime this remote outpost on the northeastern coast of England—founded about the year Bede was born, and scarcely 50 years after the rulers of Northumbria had converted to Christianity—was perhaps the most learned monastic center in all of Europe. Bede's writings include numerous works of scriptural commentary, many homilies, works on meter and orthography, lives of several saints, books of poetry and hymns, and several treatises on cosmology and timekeeping. He was deeply interested in time and its measurement, a matter of some urgency in his lifetime because the Irish and Roman churches had different methods for calculating the date of Easter. In some years the two churches celebrated the feast on different days, which to Bede was a shocking sign of disunity. In his works promoting the Roman method of Easter reckoning he also helped establish the foundations of medieval astronomy and chronology; Bede is primarily responsible for popularizing the western 'BC' and 'AD' system of reckoning dates (using the *anno domini* or 'year of our Lord').

It is Bede's historical works, however, that are best known today. His *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), completed in 731, is an extensive history of England which takes as its theme the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon invaders who had displaced the native Christian British population. The *Ecclesiastical History* imagines an 'English' people united not so much by culture or language or geography as by faith, the Roman Christianity brought to the island by Augustine of Canterbury and other missionaries, sent by Pope Gregory the Great in 597. This work still provides the foundation for much of our knowledge of England in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Bede's talent as a historian was his ability to take multiple sources—documents, other histories, local oral traditions and legends—and weave them together into a coherent narrative. Though Bede was not fully a historian in the modern sense, his approach is far less foreign to the modern historical sensibility than those taken by most medieval chroniclers—unlike many writers of the time, for example, he makes frequent reference to the sources for the material he is recounting. In Bede's narrative, written very much from the Northumbrian point of view, the English are gradually and inevitably brought into the happy embrace of the Roman church, triumphing against the bitterness and treachery of the native British, the well-meaning but deluded zeal of the Irish missionaries, and the temporizing and backsliding of one pagan king after another. It is a tribute to Bede's great literary talent that in many ways the story he constructs from whatever meager evidence was available to him is still regarded as an fundamentally accurate account.

The following selection gives Bede's account of two remarkable figures from the seventh-century monastery of Whitby. Of the two, Cædmon's story is far more widely read today. According to Bede, Cædmon receives a miraculous talent for poetic composition and becomes a great composer of religious verse; Cædmon's *Hymn* (which Bede records in Latin, not English) is sometimes treated as the first English Christian poetic work. Bede's account of the life and miracles of the abbess Hild, however, plays a role of equal importance in his larger history; it is included here to suggest that the paired lives of a learned aristocratic woman and an illiterate peasant can tell us a great deal about the boundaries of Bede's narrative and the kinds of material it excludes, about the relationship between history and hagiography, and about the ways in which the cultural roles prescribed by one's gender and class affect the shape of one's spiritual journey.

The standard edition of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, with a modern English translation, is Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969). The present translation relies heavily on that work, as well as the earlier work of L.C. Jane (London: J.M. Dent; New York E.P. Dutton, 1910) and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill's *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV. 23-24

In the year of our Lord 680 Hild, the most devout servant of Christ, abbess of the monastery that is called Whitby,¹ departed on the 17th of November after having performed many heavenly works on earth, to receive the rewards of the heavenly life, at the age of sixty-six. She spent her first thirty-three years living most nobly in the secular habit, and more nobly dedicated the remaining half to our Lord in the monastic life. She was of noble birth, being the daughter of Here-ric, nephew to King Edwin; in Edwin's company she received the faith and mysteries of Christ at the preaching of Paulinus of blessed memory, the first bishop of the Northumbrians, and she preserved her faith undefiled until she was rewarded with the sight of Him in heaven.

Resolving to give up the secular habit and serve Him alone, she withdrew to the kingdom of the East Angles, for she was related to the king there; she intended to pass over from there into Gaul, leaving her native land and all that she had to live as a stranger for our Lord's sake in the monastery of Chelles, so that she might more easily reach her eternal home in heaven. Her sister Herewith, mother of Ealdwulf, king of the East Angles, was at that time living in the same monastery under the discipline of the monastic Rule, waiting for her heavenly crown. Inspired by her example, Hild continued a whole year in the kingdom of the East Angles with the intention of going abroad; Bishop Aidan called her home, however, and gave her enough land to support herself on the north side of the river Wear, where she lived in the monastic life for a year, with a small group of companions.

After this she was made abbess in the monastery called *Heruteu*,² which had been founded not long before by Heiu, a devoted handmaid of Christ, who is said to have been the first woman in the kingdom of Northumbria to take the habit and vows of a nun, having been ordained by Bishop Aidan. But soon after she had founded that monastery, Heiu went away to the town of *Calcaria*, which the English call *Kælcacæstir*,³ and there made her dwelling. Hild, the handmaid of Christ, was appointed to rule over that monastery, and immediately began to establish a rule of life there in all things, as she had been taught by many learned men; for Bishop Aidan and other devout men who knew her visited her frequently, instructed her diligently, and loved her dearly for her innate wisdom and devotion to the service of God.

¹ Bede uses the Old English name *Streaneshalch*.

² Hartlepool.

³ Uncertain; possibly Tadcaster.

When she had ruled over this monastery for some years, wholly intent upon establishing a rule of life there, it happened that she also undertook either to found or to reform a monastery in the place called *Streaneshalch*, which she carried out with great industry. She established the same rule in this monastery as in the other, and she taught there the strict observance of justice, piety, chastity, and other virtues, above all peace and charity. After the example of the primitive church, no one there was rich, and no one was poor, for all things were common to all, and none had any private property.⁴ Her wisdom was so great that not only ordinary people, but even kings and princes sometimes asked for and received her advice; she obliged those who were under her direction to devote so much time to the study of the Holy Scriptures, and to exercise themselves so much in works of justice, that there might be no difficulty in finding many there who were fit for ecclesiastical duties, that is for the service of the altar.

In fact we have seen five men from that monastery become bishops, all of them men of singular merit and sanctity: Bosa, Ætla, Oftfor, John, and Wilfrid. The first of them, as we related elsewhere, was consecrated bishop of York; of the second, it may be observed that he was appointed bishop of Dorchester. Of the two last we shall later relate that John was consecrated bishop of Hexham and Wilfrid, bishop of York; of Oftfor we will here note that after he applied himself to the reading and observance of the Scriptures in both of Hild's monasteries, being anxious to attain to greater perfection, he went to Kent to join Archbishop Theodore, of blessed memory. After he had spent more time in sacred studies there, he resolved to go to Rome, which in those days was considered to be an act of great merit. After his return to Britain, he went to the province of the Hwicce, where King Osric then ruled, and remained there a long time, preaching the word of faith and setting an example of holy life to all who saw and heard him. At that time Bosel, the bishop of that kingdom, suffered such weakness of body that he could not carry out his episcopal duties; so Oftfor was appointed bishop in his place by universal consent, and was consecrated at King Æthelred's command by Bishop Wilfrid, of blessed memory, who was at that time bishop of the Middle Angles because Archbishop Theodore was dead, and no other bishop had been ordained in his place. Before Bosel, a most learned and industrious man of excellent ability named Tatfrid had been chosen bishop there, also from Hild's monastery, but he had been snatched away by an untimely death before his consecration.

All who knew Abbess Hild, the handmaid of Christ, called her Mother because of her outstanding piety and grace. She was not only an example of holy life to those who lived in her monastery, but provided an opportunity for repentance and salvation to many who lived far away who heard the happy news of her diligence and virtue. This was bound to happen so that the dream which her mother Breguswith had during Hild's infancy should be fulfilled. When her husband Hereric lived in exile under the British king Cerdic, where he was later poisoned, Breguswith dreamed that she was looking for him most carefully, and could find no sign of him anywhere; but suddenly, after having tried with all her might to find him, she found a most precious necklace under her garment, and as she was gazing at it very attentively, it cast such a blaze of light that it spread throughout all Britain. This dream came true in her daughter Hild, whose life was a bright example, not only to herself, but to many who desired to live well.

After she had governed this monastery many years, it pleased Him who has made such merciful provision for our salvation to subject her holy soul to the trial of a long sickness so that, like the apostle, her strength might be made perfect in weakness.⁵ She was struck by a fever and fell into a violent heat, and for six years was afflicted continually; during all which time she never failed to give thanks to her Maker or to instruct the flock entrusted to her care both in public and in private. From her own experience she admonished every one to serve the Lord dutifully in

⁴ Acts 2: 44-5.

⁵ 2 Cor. 12:9.

health and always to return thanks to Him in adversity or bodily illness. In the seventh year of her illness, she began to suffer internally and approached her last day. Around cock-crow, having received the viaticum of Holy Communion, she called together the handmaids of Christ who were in the monastery, and admonished them to preserve the gospel peace among themselves and towards all others; and as she was exhorting them she joyfully saw death approaching or, to use the words of our Lord, she passed from death into life.⁶

That same night it pleased Almighty God by a vision to reveal her death in another monastery at some distance from hers called Hackness, which she had built that same year. In that monastery was a nun called Begu, who for thirty years or more had dedicated her virginity to God and served Him in the monastic life. While she was in the dormitory of the sisters, she suddenly heard in the air the well-known sound of the bell which used to awaken the sisters and call them to prayers when any one of them had been taken out of this world. Opening her eyes, she seemed to see the top of the house open, and a strong light pour in from above; looking intently at that light, she saw the soul of the handmaid of the Lord borne into heaven in the midst of that light, attended by angels. Then awaking and seeing the other sisters lying around her, she realized that what she had seen was either a dream or a vision; greatly frightened, she rose immediately and ran to a maiden named Frigyth, who was then presiding over the monastery in place of the abbess. With many tears and sighs, Begu told her that the Abbess Hild, mother of them all, had departed this life, and that she had seen her ascend with a great light, and with angels conducting her, into eternal bliss and the company of the inhabitants of heaven. When Frigyth heard this, she awoke all the sisters, and called them to the church; she ordered them to pray and sing psalms for Hild's soul, which they did for the rest of the night. At break of day, the brothers came from the place she had died with news of her death. They answered that they already knew it, and when they told how and when they had heard it, it was found that her death had been revealed to them in a vision in the very same hour that the brothers said she had died. Thus it was happily ordained by Heaven that when some watched her departure out of this world, others watched her entrance into the eternal life of the spirit. These monasteries are about thirteen miles distant from each other.

It is also reported that her death was made known in a vision the same night to one of the holy maidens who loved her most passionately, in the same monastery where this servant of God died. She saw Hild's soul ascend to heaven in the company of angels; and she declared this, the very same hour it happened, to those servants of Christ who were with her, and awakened them to pray for her soul, even before the rest of the congregation had heard of her death, for it was only made known to the whole monastery the next morning. This same nun was at that time with some other servants of Christ in the remotest part of the monastery, where the women who had recently entered the monastery used to spend their time of probation until they were instructed in the Rule and admitted to the society of the community.

In Hild's monastery was a certain brother specially marked by the grace of God, who used to make pious and religious verses, so that whatever he learned from the holy Scriptures through interpreters, he soon afterwards turned into poetry of great sweetness and humility, in English, which was his native language. By his verses the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life. After him other Englishmen tried to compose religious poems, but none could ever compare with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men or through a man,⁷ but received the gift of song freely by divine grace. For this reason he never could compose any trivial or foolish poem, but only those which were concerned with devotion and were fitting for his pious tongue to utter.

⁶ John 5:24.

⁷ Gal. 1:1.

He had lived in the secular life until he was well advanced in years, and had never learned any verses; therefore sometimes at feasts, when it was agreed for the sake of entertainment that all present should take a turn singing, when he saw the harp coming towards him, he would rise up from the table in the middle of the feast, go out, and return home. On one occasion when he did this, he left the house of feasting and went to the stable, where it was his turn to take care of the animals that night. In due time he stretched out to rest; a person appeared to him in his sleep, saluted him by name, and said, "Caedmon, sing me something." Caedmon answered, "I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here, because I could not sing." The man who was talking to him replied, "Nevertheless, you must sing to me."⁸ "What shall I sing?" he asked. "Sing about the beginning of created things," he replied. At that, Caedmon immediately began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God, whose general sense is this: "We ought now to praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how He, since He is the eternal God, was the author of all marvels and first, as almighty Guardian of the human race, created heaven as a roof for the sons of men, and then the earth."⁹ This is the sense but not the actual order of the words he sang in his sleep, for poetry, no matter how well composed, cannot be literally translated from one language into another without losing much of its beauty and dignity. Awaking from his sleep, Caedmon remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising God in a worthy style.

In the morning he went to the steward, his master, and told him of the gift he had received; the steward led him to the abbess, who ordered him, in the presence of many learned men, to recount his dream and repeat his poem, so that they might all decide what it was and where it had come from. It was clear to all of them he had received a gift of heavenly grace from our Lord. Then they explained to him a passage of sacred history or doctrine, and ordered him, if he could, to turn it into verse. he undertook this task and went away; when he returned the next morning he repeated it to them, composed in excellent verse. At this the abbess, recognizing the grace of God in this man, instructed him to renounce the secular habit and take up the monastic life; when this was done she joined him to the rest of the brethren in her monastery and ordered that he should be taught the whole course of sacred history. He learned all that he could by listening, and turned it over in his mind like a clean beast chewing the cud,¹⁰ turned it into the most harmonious verse, and recited it so sweetly that his teachers became in turn his audience. He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and all the history of Genesis: and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt, and their entry into the Promised Land, and many other stories from the holy Scriptures; of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of our Lord, and of His ascension into heaven, of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles, also of the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the joys of the kingdom of heaven, and many more songs about the Divine mercies and judgments, by which he tried to turn all men away from the love of vice and to inspire in them the love and practice of good works. He was a very devout man, humbly submissive to the discipline of the monastic rule, but full of zeal against those who behaved otherwise; for this reason his life had a lovely ending.

When the hour of his departure drew near, for fourteen days he was afflicted with a bodily

⁸ Lat. *mihi cantare habes* – the subtle difference in meaning between 'you *are able to* sing to me' and 'you *are obligated to* sing to me' seems critical to our understanding of this scene, but we cannot entirely recover it.

⁹ See below for Caedmon's *Hymn* in Old English. Bede gives only this paraphrase; in two manuscripts of Bede's Latin *Historia* a poem in the Northumbrian dialect of Old English is added in the margins. When Bede's work was translated into Old English at the end of the ninth century, the translators substituted a version of this poem for Bede's paraphrase, and omitted the disclaimer that follows it.

¹⁰ Lev. 11:3, Deut. 14:6. Rhetorically speaking, Caedmon has made the leap from cowherd to cow.

weakness which seemed to prepare the way, yet mild enough that he could talk and walk the whole time. Nearby was the house to which the sick and dying were carried; As evening fell on the night he was going to depart this life, he asked his attendant¹¹ to prepare a place for him there so he could take his rest. The attendant wondered why he should desire that, because there seemed to be no sign of his dying soon, but did what he had asked. They went there and were talking pleasantly and joyfully with the people who were already in the house; when it was past midnight he asked them whether they had the Eucharist there. They answered, "What need do you have of the Eucharist? you are not likely to die, since you talk so merrily with us, just as though you were in perfect health." "Nevertheless," he said, "bring me the Eucharist." When he had taken it into his hand he asked whether they were all in charity with him, without any complaint or quarrel. They answered that they were all in perfect charity, and free from anger; and likewise asked him whether he felt the same towards them. He answered at once, "My sons, I am in charity with all the servants of God." Then strengthening himself with the heavenly viaticum, he prepared for his entrance into the next life; he asked how near it was to the time when the brothers had to awaken to sing their nightly praise of our Lord. They answered, "It is not far off." He said, "Good; let us wait until then," and signing himself with the sign of the holy cross, he laid his head on the pillow and fell into a slumber, and so ended his life quietly. Thus it came to pass that, just as he had served God with a simple and pure mind and quiet devotion, so now he departed into His presence and left the world by a quiet death, and his tongue, which had composed so many holy words in praise of the Creator, uttered its last words while he was in the act of signing himself with the cross, and commending his spirit into God's hands; and from what has been said, it seems he had foreknowledge of his death.

Cædmon's Hymn in Old and Modern English

Nu sculon herian heofonrices weard,
 Methodes meahta ond his modgeþanc,
 weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
 ece Drihten, or astealde.

5 He ærest scop ielda bearnum
 heofon to hrofe, halig Scieppend;
 þa middangeard manncynnes weard,
 ece Drihten, æfter teode,
 firum foldan Frea ælmihtig.

Now (we) ought to praise Heaven-kingdom's guardian,
 the Maker's might and his mind's thoughts,
 the work of the glory-father, as he of each of wonders,
 eternal Lord, established a beginning.¹²
 He first shaped for men's sons
 Heaven as a roof, the holy Creator;
 then middle-earth mankind's guardian,
 eternal Lord, afterwards prepared,
 for men the earth, the Lord almighty.

¹¹ Older monks were attended by young novices who took care of them.

¹² i.e., "He established the beginning of every wonder."