

The Age of Bede Study Guide

The Age of Bede by Bede

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Plot Summary

The Age of Bede is a compilation of a number of documents that concern events and personalities in the sixth and seventh centuries in Ireland and Northern England. It contains a number of important documents from this period, including The Venerable Bede's Life of Cuthbert and Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, Eddius's Life of Wilfrid, The Voyage of St. Brendan and The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith, along with an illuminating introduction by the translators J. F. Webb and D. H. Farmer. All of the personalities discussed and probably all of the authors are monks of English or Irish descent. Thus, the book almost exclusively concerns the lives and activities of various important monks, abbots and bishops.

The Voyage of St. Brendan is a "travelogue" that portrays an account, though largely fictional, of the voyage of St. Brendan and represents a relatively isolated Celtic conception of the monastic life. It was a widely read document in the Middle Ages. The Venerable Bede covers the transformation of this conception of the monastic life in the historical biography of Cuthbert, Abbot of Lindisfarne. Eddius discusses the life of Bishop Wilfred and his tumultuous relationship with local church hierarchy and royal authority for his attempts to impose Episcopal Orthodoxy on England. Bede's Lives of the Abbots discusses the lives and monastery-rule of Benedict, Ceolfrith, Eosterwine, Sigfrith and Hwaetberht most if not all of whom Bede seems to have known personally. Much of the information in Lives of the Abbots is confirmed by the anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith.

The "Navigatio" is the most recently written document and has the least information but it does display important information on the personality of the St. Brendan of history who died in 575. The Life of Cuthbert describes the life of Bishop Cuthbert, a Northumbrian born in 634 who was trained as an Irish monk and preferred a life of solitude to running a monastery. In fact he lived as a hermit until 685 and was a bishop for only two years until his death.

Wilfred was a Northumbrian as well. He was both a monk and a bishop and was trained by older Irish monks. However, he was later trained in Rome, the center of Christianity during his day. The ideals and practices of the Merovingian bishops deeply influenced him and he returned to England as an enforcer of ecclesiastical authority who greatly upset local authorities usually leading to his expulsion from his office. He would often have to travel to Rome to request that the Pope intercede on his behalf.

Bede's Lives of the Abbots concerns five abbots and is a work of local history, containing much information about the time. Bede also knew the characters personally and wrote the book within ten years of Ceolfrith's death. The account has the most authentic presentations of the time.

One of The Age of Bede's important themes is the conflict between English and Irish monasticism and Roman ecclesiastical authority which comes out clearly in nearly all of the documents. It also presents a relatively uniform picture of the English and Irish

monastic tradition's understanding of Christian piety and practice, along with their conception of virtue.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

The Age of Bede presents five texts that historians regard as providing valuable information about England and Ireland's early Christian Church. The saints covered in the texts lived within the sixth or the seventh century and were innovators within monasticism and spirituality generally. They are also written about as if they were heroes who fought against the devil and his demons with prayer, fasting and solitude. However, these men also contributed to the construction of Christian towns and other monasteries. They were all venerated by their successors.

The earliest monk is an Irishman named Brendan. However, the *Navigatio*, the piece written about him, was written latest and includes the fewest reliable details about him. Cuthbert was Northumbrian and was born in 634, and Wilfrid was Northumbrian also. Both men were trained as Irish monks and became bishops. Cuthbert spent much of his time in Rome, Christianity's center at the time. When he returned to England he took part on the "Roman" side of a conflict between "Roman" and "Irish" conceptions of Christianity. The piece written about him, "Life" was composed by Eddius Stephanus, and was written in 720. It is the first historical biography an Anglo-Saxon wrote.

Bede's, "Lives of the Abbots," is written about several figures and also covers local historical facts. It was also written within ten years of the events it describes; Bede was actually involved in these men's lives.

The "Voyage of St. Brendan," was widely read during the Middle Ages and was translated into many languages. It is considered authentic, though *Navigatio* is much less reliable. The author then discusses some of the details of manuscripts that survived. Generally, the *Navigatio* seems to be full of symbolism and lore from mythological traditions that seem to indicate it was not intended or not merely intended to be a biography.

The Irish monasticism described in the *Navigatio* is significant. While it depends on Irish society, it also had Eastern characteristics, as they were mostly Benedictine. St. Patrick had encouraged monastic life and monasteries were constructed in a land which had never been part of the Roman Empire. Irish society was based on extended families and when these families converted monasteries sometimes grew out of them. There were many monasteries and many people called "monks." The monasteries were led by Abbots who in practice reduced the authority of bishops.

In 597, Augustine (not St. Augustine) made a mission to England and brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. The King of Kent, Ethelbert, converted and then established diocese at Canterbury, London and other city. Christianity spread mostly uninterrupted throughout the country side through Irish, Frankish and Italian missionaries.



Another important element in these texts is the Irish-Roman Christianity conflict. Centers of various origins were constructed that were united and organized into a nationwide church and often contacted the papacy, which had great power in England in the seventh century. The Irish tended to resist external control and preferred local traditions and practices, whereas the Romans were cosmopolitan, European and universalist.

Many of the monks who authored these texts knew of one another and admired each other. Their works often bear important resemblances to one another. They often exaggerated one another's character in part to make them seem greater than Irish pagan gods for conversion purposes. Arranged chronologically one can see in the works a greater integration of the Irish and the Pagan over time. The works also often reflect political tensions between the two groups. But there were tensions within the other areas discussed as well, particularly within Northumbria.

The most important document of the book is Bede's "Lives of the Abbots." It records information about Benedict Biscop, founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow and Ceolfrith, his successor. They were of equal importance and shared ideals and policies. Details about the monks' day-to-day activities are listed there, as are buildings, libraries and works of art. For several centuries no documents of similar complexity and authenticity created about English life.

Bede was the great historian of the early Middle Ages, and his work is a great authority. It was written almost certainly after 716. Bede's writing is balanced and attempts to trace the origin and development of England's most important monastery in the late seventh century. The author then discusses a bit of history about Bede's subjects, Ceolfrith and Biscop. Biscop contributed greatly to the history of art and education. He was also something of an adventurer, accumulating wealth and using it to build monasteries, traveling the countryside and to Rome, and so on. Ceolfrith was firm and kind, of noble Northumbrian birth. Ceolfrith would run a separate monasteries but Biscop intended them to be united. Bede was a young man at this time and often writes about the deaths of important monks.

St. Benedict's Rule was extremely powerful at the time and set the scale of values in the monastery, though this also depended on the character of the abbot. Most of the time the mandates of the Rule and the abbot's wishes did not contradict but the customs of the abbots build on the rule.

Ceolfrith continued to set up monasteries and chapels to complete Biscop's work after his death; Ceolfrith also led his abbacy to produce three large complete Bibles, one of which survived largely intact. One of them might have been a gift for the Pope. Ceolfrith also resigned the abbacy to live out his life in Rome; he also felt that he was too old to run the monastery properly. The community he ran clearly had great regard for him. This is also reflected in the anonymous Life of Ceolfrith. The adoration of Ceolfrith led to a saintly "cult" to form around him. A shrine was built around his grave and many believed miraculous events came to be associated with it.

In the author's opinion, the characters of the texts were all great men who should have appeal to later generations. Many scholars are rediscovering their rich age, and their ideals and values are more and more coming to be admired.



Chapter 1, Bede, Life of Cuthbert

Chapter 1, Bede, Life of Cuthbert Summary and Analysis

The Life of Cuthbert contains 46 short chapters. Bede begins with the customary preface, which in this case is written to Bishop Eadfrid and the monks at Lindisfarne. Bede notes that the Life has been revised by Priest Herefrith; Bede has tried to avoid ambiguity. The book was finished with God's help and his fellow monks approved.

Chapters 1 - 7. Bede's history begins with the life and miracles of Cuthbert in his youth. Cuthbert suffered in his youth, embracing the hermit's life and spending time in solitude later in life. As a youth, however, he loved games and pranks. One day while playing games, a three year-old child came and chastised him from indulging in games when God had a plan for his life. Cuthbert then gave up games. Also as a child, Cuthbert was made lame by a disease but was instantly cured by an angel in the form of a horseman who advised him with a cure.

Cuthbert's prayers could change the wind and the rafts which would have otherwise been carried away. As a result, Cuthbert was once able to save rafts taken away at sea back to land. He was also fortunate enough to watch the soul of monk Aidan (later St. Aidan) taken to heaven by angels. Once on a journey, God provided him with food. As Cuthbert was growing up, Priest Boisil prophesied that Cuthbert would achieve a high degree of holiness. This was at Melrose, where Cuthbert arrived and remained. Cuthbert is also said to have entertained an angel. He tried to offer the angel early food but the angel left before he could return and left behind heavenly bread to remind him that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

Chapters 8 - 15. Cuthbert next acquired another disease and was cured. As Boisil died, he again prophesied over Cuthbert, hinting that he would become a bishop. Cuthbert was a deeply zealous follower of the Gospel and preached far and wide, calling many to repentance, even causing some to openly repent. Cuthbert once spent an entire night in prayer while at sea. Animals then came to care for him until he left the water. When another monk became sick at seeing this, Cuthbert healed him with his prayers.

Cuthbert once promised calm seas to sailors that were blocked by a storm; his pray for food was once answered as well. While traveling, Cuthbert prophesied that food would be left for his traveling party by an eagle. Once while ministering to the people, he saw that a demon would cause a fire and Cuthbert was able to extinguish it. He then saw the flames of a house that was on fire and was able to stop it as well. He even once removed a demon from a sheriff's wife prior to reaching her.

Chapters 16 - 24. Cuthbert eventually came to live at the monastery at Lindisfarne; he taught there under Aidan, the first bishop. He removed the demons from the Farne Island and built a house there. Cuthbert's prayer once caused water to come out of the



land, which was dry. He also spent time living as a hermit. Simply by speaking, Cuthbert was able to drive away birds, preventing them from spoiling crops he had planned. The ravens repented, saying prayers, and brought Cuthbert a gift to compensate for the damage they did.

Even the sea would occasionally serve Cuthbert. He encouraged many who he interacted with to come to salvation and exposed weaknesses in the demons' traps for humanity. Cuthbert's cincture once cured Abbess Aelfflaed and one of her nuns. He also prophesied over King Ecgrith in response to Aelfflaed and predicted his consecration.

Chapters 25 - 33. Cuthbert then became bishop elect and cured one a sick servant for one King Ecgrith's bodyguards. He did so with holy water. Cuthbert filled his practices as bishops with good works. He had a vision of King Ecgrith's destruction while King Ecgrith was actually coming to his end in a battle with the Picts. While with Hereberht the hermit, he foretold of his own death. At a future time, Cuthbert sent a priest with holy water to one of the king's bodyguard's wives. Cuthbert cured the headaches of a girl with anointing oil and healed an ill man with bread that he blessed. Cuthbert prevented a youth from dying when he was almost certain to die. And, finally, when a plague was spreading, Cuthbert healed a dying boy and returned him to his mother.

Chapters 34 - 39. Cuthbert had a vision of a man's soul taken to heaven that was killed when he fell out of a tree. He could make water taste like wine just by tasting it alone. Some of his brothers who disobeyed him got caught in a storm at sea. Cuthbert suffered great temptation when he was sick and he instructed his brethren on how to take care of his burial prior to his death. While he was sick, he healed one of his servant's diarrhea and he then gave his last instructions to the brethren and after taking the viaticum, he died while in prayer.

Chapters 40 - 46. Before Cuthbert died, he foretold from a psalm that the Lindisfarne monks would be assaulted yet kept safe. When he died, this happened. A lotion that was created from the dirt on which the water was poured that washed his body cured a boy of a demon. Cuthbert's body, eleven years after his death, was found not rotten. Eadberht was buried in Cuthbert's tomb underneath Cuthbert's sarcophagus with his remains underneath. A sick man was once cured while praying at his tomb, his shoes healed a paralyzed man, and Felgild, a hermit, was healed of face swelling by cloth covering Cuthbert's cell wall.



Chapter 2, Eddius Stephanus: Life of Wilfred

Chapter 2, Eddius Stephanus: Life of Wilfred Summary and Analysis

As with Life of Cuthbert, Eddius Stephanus begins Life of Wilfred with his dedication, which is to his Bishop, Acca, and his Abbot, Tatberht. He finds the work of producing a biography difficult but with God's help he knows he can persevere. He profits from the work mentally as well.

Chapters 1 - 9. Wilfred was born in 634 and Eddius claims that he was predestined for holiness and God's glory. He was also sanctified in the womb when a group of men saw a house catch on fire. Frantic, the men ran trying to put the fire out but the women attending Wilfred's mother giving birth came and calmed them, telling them of a light that was to shine, i.e. the child. Wilfred also chooses God when he was a boy. He always obeyed his parents and avoided silly fads. He also endured with holiness his stepmother's mistreatment of him. Wilfred develops a desire to visit St. Peter's threshold due to the Holy Ghost inspiring him. Queen Eanfled sent him to her cousin, the king of Kent and once fellow-travelers were found, he was able to travel with his parents' blessing.

Before he arrived, Wilfred was happily received by Archbishop Dalfinus and Dalfinus offered to adopt him as his son and find him a wife and land. But Wilfred declined, saying that he had made his vows to the Lord and will keep them. Then Wilfred safely reached the See of St. Peter and met Boniface, the archdeacon. They taught him the ruler about Easter and Wilfred was presented to the pope and the pope blessed him. On his return, he received the Roman form of tonsure from Dalfinus and the bishop was martyred in 658.

When Wilfred returned, Alhfrith, ruling along with his father Oswiu, learned of his arrival and greeted him peacefully. The King begged Wilfred to stay with them and Wilfred and the King grew close. Alhfrith then gave him the monastery at Ripon in 660. Three years later, Bishop Agilberht ordained him a priest.

Chapters 10 - 22. Wilfred next came into conflict with Bishop Colman over the Easter Question. Colman was bishop of York and metropolitan archbishop. They disagreed about how to celebrate Easter, specifically on which day. Wilfred had learned the true day in Rome. Wilfred won the day. In 664 Wilfred was elected to the episcopacy and was consecrated in Gaul the same year. In 666, Eddius claims that God protected Wilfred and his fellow travelers from both the pagans and the stormy seas. Chad was made bishop in Wilfred's see in the same year. However, in 669, Wilfred got his see back.



Over the next two years, Wilfred led the restoration of the church at York. It had been founded by St. Paulinus but was half in ruins. The church was built between 671 and 678, and dedicated at Ripon when it was finished. While bishop, Wilfred healed a young child and from 671 to 673, King Ecgrith, who was obedient to Wilfred, fought the fierce Picts and beat them. They were then enslaved. From 673 to 675, Ecgrith fought the king of Mercia and won as well. Next Eddius tells the reader of the great virtue of Wilfred. When Ecgrith won, Wilfred's jurisdiction expanded. He was bishop of the Saxons, British, Scots and Picts. Everyone loved him and he did not abuse his power. Wilfred also led the building of a church at Hexam between 672 and 678.

Chapters 23 - 40. Wilfred next healed a half-dead boy. In 678, those who envied Wilfred made trouble for Wilfred and chased him out of his see. Wilfred was also robbed, but God helped him to survive. Wilfred's travels after being robbed and expelled, took him to Friesland, where he preached the whole of Christian truth. The king of the Franks refused to put a price on Wilfred's head despite the fact that he had been expelled. Wilfred was then received by King Dagobert and Perctarit in 679. All the while he made converts. Dagobert was king of the Franks and Perctarit king of Campania.

In 679, Wilfred's letters were received by Pope Agatho and the Holy Synod. The synod declared that he had been unjustly removed from power. Wilfred was guilty of no crime and the Pope restored him to power. Wilfred was then received at Rome to present his petition. He had been removed by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury unjustly, in his mind. If restored to his diocese, he promises to do the best he can. Pope Agatho, along with the synod, restored him to authority.

Wilfred returned to York in 680 and he returned to his see with the Archbishop's acquiescence. However, the king then rejected the Holy See's decision. Wilfred was then sent to prison for nine months because the king's authority was threatened by the Pope. Wilfred then addressed his comrades to keep the faith and not to despair. When he was taken to prison, a guardian who had heard him singing psalms saw his cell light up. While in prison, Wilfred healed a woman and his chains fell off of him. The queen then fell ill and was healed in 681. She then convinced the King to let Wilfred out of jail. This was how the queen was healed. When Wilfred set out for kingdoms south of York, he was greeted by sheriff Berhtwald, nephew to Aethilred, king of Mercia.

Chapters 41 - 55. When Wilfred was restored, he had great success converting the pagans of Selsey between 681 and 686. In 686, Ceadwalla became king as well. Over the next year, Wilfred made peace with Archbishop Theodore. That same year, King Aldfrith received Wilfred, though between 691 and 692 Wilfred's opponents stirred up enmity between him and the king. Aldfrith then banished Wilfred from Northumbria after Wilfred criticized him for appropriating church land. From 702 to 703 a synod was held at Austerfield and was led by Archbishop Berhtwald. Wilfred was invited and promised peace but conflict erupted when he arrived. Wilfred accused them of disobeying the Pope. At the same conference, Wilfred discovered a trap they were setting for him to appropriate his church properties. They attempted to force him to sign away his own land but he accused them of injustice. Eventually the synod bishops relented.



In 703, Wilfred returned to King Aethilred and they reconciled but next Wilfred's enemies got him excommunicated and Wilfred had to return to Rome. Then Pope John received him warmly and the synod again decreed that he was to be restored. Pope John also ordered that his predecessors' writings be studied at the same synod in order to make sure that Wilfred's claims were just. In 704, Wilfred's appeal is heard and in response Pope John wrote a letter to the local kings ordering them to comply with Wilfred's restoration. Wilfred then came home and took holy relics with him.

Chapters 56 - 68. During his return, Wilfred fell ill and St. Michael appeared to him. This occurred in 705. He and his companions then crossed over to the British Isles in 705. King Aldfrith hated him but concealed his hatred initially. In that same year, because of his hatred and his banishment of Wilfred and his companions, he died. Osred, Aldfrith's son, became the next king and the bishop adopted him as his son.

In 706, the Synod of Nidd occurred and peace between Wilfred and his enemies was achieved. In 708, Wilfred became sick once again, and he then gave his last instructions to his followers in 709. Then Wilfred assembled his community and instructed them on the future of his monasteries. The men then knelt to cry and promised to follow him. When they raised their heads, he was gone. They never saw him again. Wilfred went south and received the love of the whole Northumbrian people and he told some of the abbots the details of his will, along with tying up other loose ends. Then he died. Wilfred was buried.

It became clear later that God intended Wilfred to be made a saint. An armed band set fire to a monastery to Oundle but an angel from God sent them away and God brought troops to have them killed. There was also a sign of the rainbow arc.



Chapter 3, Bede, Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow

Chapter 3, Bede, Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 is Bede's account of the lives of five holy abbots: Benedict, Ceolfrith, Easterwine, Sigfrith and Hwaetberht.

Chapters 1 - 7. Benedict Bishop was inspired by God to create a monastery to honor St. Peter. This monastery was on the north bank of the Wear and King Egfrid aided in the monastery's construction. Due to illness, construction took 16 years. Benedict was a holy man, who put aside riches, country, home and family to serve God. So Benedict traveled to Rome and saw the tombs of the apostles. Afterwards, he dedicated himself to practice Christianity as they did in Rome. He was also trained in the monastic life at a monastery in Lerins.

At the same time, Egbert, the King of Kent, sent Wighard as bishop-elect to be consecrated in Rome. When he arrived, however, he and his companions died of the plague. So the Pope appointed an archbishop, Theodore, to return to Britain in Wighard's stead. The Pope also appointed Abbot Hadrian. They were favorably received when they arrived. After two years at the monastery, Benedict left again for Rome and returned with many books of knowledge. He told Egbert, King of Northumbria, that he wanted to build up monastic life in the area and teach the people what he had learned. The monastery was built in 674 as a result. However, only one year after work began, Benedict went to France to look for masons in the Roman style. He also brought back glaziers, which were new to England and taught the people who to make glass.

Once the monastery was provided for, Benedict returned to Rome once more. He then returned with another great mass of books, spiritual relics, introduced the order of chanting and singing the psalms and conducting the liturgy in accord with the Roman practice. He also brought back a cantor named John. King Egfrid was impressed by Benedict's virtue and expanded the monastery's resources as a result. Benedict then chose seventeen monks from his community and made Ceolfrith his abbot. They then formed a new foundation at Jarrow. Benedict also chose Easterwine to be abbot of Wearmouth.

Chapters 8 - 14. Easterwine ran the monastery from its ninth year until he died four years later. He was a nobleman by birth but did not let this high rank become arrogant. He was also Benedict's cousin and both ignored worldly honor. Easterwine wanted to keep the monastic rule as much as he could and lived a very pious life as a result. He died the night of March 7th, having lived at the monastery for twelve years until he was thirty-six.



After Benedict made Eosterwine and Ceolfrith abbots, he went to Rome once again and returned with many valuable gifts. On his return he found that King Egrith had been killed. Eosterwine and his monks all had died of the plague, though he found from the monastery deacon Sigfrid, who was Eosterwine's equal in humility. However, he was weak with physical infirmity. Soon after Benedict became sick and the sickness started to weaken him. Sigfrith became the new abbot but died soon thereafter and after three years of paralysis, Benedict died as well. He encouraged the monks not to appoint abbots according to their social class but only from among themselves. Just before they died, Benedict and Sigfrith were brought to see one another. They then consulted with Ceolfrith and made him abbot of both monasteries. All monks favored the decision. After a few short months, both men died and went on to heavenly bliss.

Chapters 15 - 23. Ceolfrith was energetic, mature and zealous. He first founded St. Paul's monastery and ruled it for seven years. For the next twenty-eight years, he ruled both monasteries. He saw that Benedict's works were completed and improved upon them. Ceolfrith also carried out observance of the Rule of St. Benedict which had been handed down from St. Benedict himself. He also promoted a ceaseless round of daily prayer. When the second monastery needed a new abbot, Ceolfrith permitted the monks to choose for themselves. He then left for Rome to let them choose, though the monks initially resisted.

As he left, the brethren returned to thinking of the Lord. After recited psalms, they came together to review what to do. They decided to select a new abbot through prayer, fasting and singing. Ceolfrith made clear that a new abbot must be chosen for both monasteries, and so the men unanimously selected Hwaetberht as abbot. He was a solid and pious man. They then sent word to Ceolfrith about their decision and Ceolfrith was pleased. Hwaetberht then sent a letter of recommendation concerning Ceolfrith to Pope Gregory and the lines of the letter are included in the text. Hwaetberht notes that Ceolfrith intends to die in Rome as a servant of the church.

Hwaetberht was made abbot by Bishop Acca. He then, with diligence, made sure that a number of rights were given to the monastery, such as to remove the bones of Eosterwine and Sigfrid to be placed next to Benedict. Ceolfrith continued on to Rome but died before he arrived. His party, in great sadness, continued their journey onward. Ceolfrith died at seventy-four and was an abbot for forty-three years. Every day that he was an abbot he made sure the psalter was recited twice all the way through. He still offered the Mass when he was ill. Ceolfrith died at nine on Friday, September 25th, 716 on Saturday outside Langres.



Chapter 4, The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith

Chapter 4, The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith Summary and Analysis

The Anonymous history begins with a reference to the manuscript written by Bede. Saint Ceolfrith received the habit of holy religion and the palm of eternal happiness. The reference was probably added after Bede's death.

Paragraphs 1 - 10. The author claims that Christians do well to remember their leaders, including abbot Ceolfrith. He was born of noble and religious parents and practiced virtue from an early age. At 18, he became a monk at a monastery in Gilling (Yorkshire). Ceolfrith was devoutly received by his brother who ran the monastery, Cynefrith who would soon thereafter die of the plague. Ceolfrith then left to see Bishop Wilfred at his Ripon monastery. The bishop then chose him for the priesthood at twenty-seven.

Ceolfrith came to East Anglia to meet Abbot Botulf who was thought to be a great teacher. Benedict next asked for Ceolfrith to come under him through Bishop Wilfred as his helper. In this way, he achieved much learning, though he already knew much. In his studies he learned the Rule and made it a deep part of his heart. The monastery that Ceolfrith was to head started to be built in 674. While Benedict was off procuring masons in Gaul, Ceolfrith found his office as prior irksome. He preferred monastic peace to looking after others. When Benedict returned he was happy to resume his duties.

When the church was finished, Benedict decided to go to Rome to procure texts and relics. Ceolfrith went with him hoping to learn more in Rome. Eosterwine was left behind to tend to the monastery. The trip taught Ceolfrith much.

Paragraphs 11 - 20. Eight years after the monastery began to be built, King Egrith donated more resources for the building of a church and monastery. The two monasteries would be united. In the third year from the foundation of the monastery, the church of St. Paul started to be built. The church was, surprisingly, built within two years. A sudden outbreak of the plague in that time struck Britain and killed many monks, including Abbot Eosterwine. Only Abbot Sigfrith, who was abbot in Ceolfrith's stead, survived the plague, along with a small boy who is now a priest. New companions had to be trained.

When Benedict returned, he was distraught at the disaster, but he was happy that Sigfrith replaced Eosterwine. Through both Benedict and Sigfrith were confined to their beds due to illness. Benedict then called up Ceolfrith, making him abbot of both monasteries. Benedict maintained that abbots be chosen from within the order. Ceolfrith



was made abbot in the third year of King Aldfrith, on May 12th. Sigfrith died the same year, and Benedict early the next year.

When Benedict died, Ceolfrith took charge of both monasteries and took care of them for twenty-seven years. Ceolfrith ruled intelligently, and with energy and justice. He was severe in correcting sin but soft when helping the repentant. He was constant in enforcing the Rule and kind in giving to the poor. Ceolfrith also enriched the monasteries he ruled, externally in wealth and internally with spiritual resources. He also obtained a letter of privilege from Pope Sergius. Several copies of the Bible were produced at that time.

Paragraphs 21 - 33. Ceolfrith eventually decided that he was too old to be a good example to his followers and decided to leave the authority over the monasteries to young men and then decided to go on pilgrimage to Rome. Once he arrived, he would simply wait for his death and focus on prayer. So Ceolfrith prepared a ship and brought monks with him and obtained gifts for St. Peter. He hid his decision to go until it was too late for the other monks to stop him. When everything was ready, he announced his departure to the brethren and they all wept; but they did not resist him and he left with their approval.

Ceolfrith left the same day and told the monks to choose an abbot for themselves and ran a departure service with all the monks. When his sermon was finished, the men sang and Ceolfrith left. As he sailed away he grieved for the pain of his brethren and said a prayer for them. The brothers returned to the church and decided to select Hwaetberht as their new abbot. Hwaetberht then wrote a letter of recommendation for Ceolfrith to the Pope who would receive Ceolfrith when he arrived. The letter is then reprinted in the text, where Ceolfrith's virtues are cited.

Ceolfrith left his monastery on June 4th and on July 4th he boarded a ship and went to Gaul, arriving August 12th. King Hilperic of Neustria (under Charles Martel, King of Gaul) welcomed him. The Lombards also warmly received him. He eventually came to Langres in Burgundy on September 25th. He died there at age seventy-four.

The monasteries were left with six hundred Christian monks with land worth a great many hides. Until Ceolfrith died, he said the entire Psalter of David three times a day. He always offered the sacrifice of the Eucharist to himself and his friends, save when he was extremely ill and near death.

Paragraphs 34 - 39. Ceolfrith had eighty men accompanying him. When Ceolfrith would leave an area, the poor were sad for him to go because he was a great benefactor for them. Gangulf, Lord of Langres, received Ceolfrith warmly and asked him to stay until he was well. At the tenth hour of September 25th, Ceolfrith died and he was buried in the church of the holy martyred brothers Speusippus, Eleusippus and Meleusippus. When Ceolfrith was buried, some of the brothers who accompanied him returned to tell of his death, though the rest completed the journey to Rome and gave away his presents, including a Bible they had copies. Others decided to stay in Langres for the love of Ceolfrith but they eventually went to Rome. When they returned, they carried

with them a letter from the Apostolic Pope reporting how highly he regarded Ceolfrith and his gifts.

The night after Ceolfrith was buried the custodians of the church smelled a wonderful fragrance in the church. A light then came for a short time and rose to the church roof and then into the sky, lighting it up as if it were day. As a result of this—the apparent departure of Ceolfrith's soul to heaven—a custom arose where after praying the psalms, the men would kneel at his tomb. Other signs and cures took place by his grave as well.



Chapter 5, The Voyage of Saint Brendan

Chapter 5, The Voyage of Saint Brendan Summary and Analysis

Chapters 1 - 11. Saint Brendan was born in Munster and led the life of an ascetic. He was widely known for working miracles and supervised nearly three thousand monks. The biography begins with a speech Brendan gave to Barinthus, a monk he initially brought bad news. Barinthus asked him to preach about God. Brendan was a traveler and told the brethren that there were places of hope in the world. At the community of Clonfert in Galway, Brendan selected fourteen monks and asked them to join him in spiritual warfare. They agreed. After a series of three day fasts over a forty day period, the community left and set out to find a Enda, a holy monk, the abbot of Ardemere to stay for three days.

After those three days, Brendan received Enda's blessing and they left for a distant part of the region. When they reached their destination, Brendan set out to go past the island into the sea and after three monks begged to accompany him, he allowed them to come with him. They then set sail under good weather. After forty days, they were out of food and came upon an island to gather some. Brendan prophesied that in three days Jesus would show us a harbor and a place to rest. After three days, a harbor appeared big enough for one ship. A dog led them to a group of buildings. When they arrived, they found jugs of water left out for them. Then a local monk served them food. After the other monks fell asleep, however, Brendan witnessed the works of the devil, with a monk being tempted by illicit riches. On further days God miraculously fed them in the evening.

Again the men set sail. Some brother was hoarding the necklace that the devil gave to him. The monk then confessed and repented. The men then all begged God to save the brother's soul. A little Ethiopian boy appeared out of the culprit's breast and complained that Brendan was denying him his inheritance. Brendan then banished the demon from harassing anyone else and then gave the Sacrament to the culprit monk for he was soon to die. After receiving communion he perished and Brendan buried him.

The remaining party reached the shore of the island, but before they could leave, a man brought them a basket of bread and some water. Every two days the men refreshed themselves. They then found another island and came upon sheep to eat. When preparations were made, the men ate. God informed Brendan that this was the place where they were to celebrate the Easter-time Holy Days. The men then celebrated Easter on their way. But when the men cooked the food the island they were on began to heave like a wave. God told Brendan that they had landed on a creature known as Jasconius, a large fish.

After another three days, the men climbed a summit and found another place to rest. God then led them to the place where they would celebrate Easter Sunday. On the way,



a demon in the form of a bird spoke to them. However, God was merciful and imprisoned them in a place where they would not suffer. The bird told them that they would journey for six more years and would celebrate the next Easter there. At the end of their journey they will discover the Land of Promise of the Saints. The men stayed in the area until the octave of Pentecost. Then Brendan loaded their ship with food and water.

Chapters 12 - 29. For three months the men traveled and on the way asked for God's aid. They were helped by a dignified old man, who took them to a monastery where they stayed for a time and worshiped. The monastery had a rule of silence that Brendan asked about. He was also refused permission to stay at the monastery, for God wanted them to return to their own monastery. Of the two remaining monks, one will go to the Isle of Anchorites and the other will go to hell forever. The men then stayed in the monastery until Christmas and then the Epiphany.

After Epiphany, Brendan and his monks' departure, but their supplies quickly ran out and they had to stop to stock up. They left and sailed for three weeks, eating every three days. The men then returned to the island where they celebrated Maundy Thursday the previous year. Then they celebrated Easter in the same place as before, again meeting the birds. One bird told him that God wanted them to visit four places for each season of the year where they would stay each year until their pilgrimage ends. Easter is passed on the back of the whale, Easter till the octave with the birds, Christmas at the Community of St. Ailbe. They will then find the Land of Promise of the Saints, where they will remain for forty days.

During the next year, Brendan and his monks encountered many challenges continuing their pattern of sailing and pausing at communities and clearings to stock up on resources and to pray. And they followed the order of the seasons as the bird told them. The events acquire a cyclical quality, with challenges concerning food, monsters, and messages from God. Along the way they encountered Judas Iscariot and saw a great number of demons around him. They also encountered a hermit covered in hair who was named Paul. He told them that his old abbot, St. Patrick, had appeared to him long ago, telling him to find his way to the place where he would spend the rest of his life.

Next Paul described his journey to find his final resting place where he was fed by an otter for thirty years. He lived ninety years on the island, living to one hundred and forty years of age. The day after he died, he appears to Brendan and his monks. After receiving Paul's blessing they continued their cyclical pattern of travel, this time to the top of the whale. Following this season, they took up their cyclical travels again. Eventually the whale took them to the island that Brendan had been seeking. A man told them that Christ had been merciful and granted them to find the island early. They then filled their ship full of precious stones and came home. The man told them that they would die soon. After many years, the island would be revealed to Brendan's successors. Also, the island never went dark.

When Brendan returned, his community rejoiced and glorified God. Brendan reciprocated. He then told them of the prophecy and he quickly died after putting his affairs in order.



Characters

The Venerable Bede

The pioneer English historian and author of the Lives of the Abbots and Life of Cuthbert, lived from 672/3 to 735. He lived out his life at a Northumbrian monastery, the Monastery of St. Peter, along with Saint Paul's monastery, its companion also located in Northumbria. Bede is best known for his Ecclesiastical History of the English People and was made a Doctor of the Catholic Church by Pope Leo XIII in 1899.

Little is known about Bede's life as he describes few details about his life. He claimed to have been born at Monkton, two miles from the Jarrow monastery. He was connected to noble blood and his first Abbot was Benedict Biscop, who he writes about in Lives of the Abbots. At age 7 he entered the Wearmouth monastery for education, and may have been adopted as a son of the monastery abbot. He then came under the rule of Ceolfrith in 682, transferring to the other monastery. In 686, the plague came to Jarrow and notes that only two monks survived, one of which was Ceolfrith and the other of which was probably the young Bede.

Bede began writing his own work in 701, the first of which were textbooks for classroom use. Bede was also a teacher and sang well. When accused of heresy, he was protected by Bishop Wilfrid, who is discussed in Eddius's Life of Wilfrid. In 733, Bede went to York to see The Bishop of York, Ecgbert. He often corresponded with others across the British Isles and probably traveled widely.

Bede left behind his history of the English people, works on the Old Testament, varied theological works, and work on dating Easter, along with varied textbooks and vernacular poetry.

Abbot Ceolfrith

Ceolfrith lived from 642 to 716 and was an Anglo-Saxon saint. He cared for Bede from the time Bede was seven until he died and ruled the Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey. Bede's writing on Ceolfrith and the Anonymous History confirms that he died traveling to Rome to deliver a copy of the Bible to Pope Gregory I having stopped in Burgundy.

Historians know little about Ceolfrith's life, save that he had an early goal of becoming a monk because of his brother's piety. He probably entered the monastery at age 18, in 660. Many of his family members were monks. He was also known for being devoted to the reading of Scripture, to hard work and discipline. He left the Gilling monastery to find a stricter monastery and fell in with Saint Wilfrid, forming the Benedictine Monastery of Ripon. At twenty-seven, Ceolfrith became a bishop and studied monastic principles. He also helped Benedict Biscop build a monastery at Wearmouth, along with a second monastery at Jarrow. Ceolfrith was Biscop's "zealous assistant." When St. Paul's



Church was completed, Ceolfrith became its abbot. The two men also journeyed together to Rome.

Bede knew Ceolfrith because he came under his care at age seven until Ceolfrith died. They were also the only two monks in their monastery to survive an outbreak of the Plague. Further, he commissioned the creation of the Codex Amiatinus, the oldest text of the Vulgate. Ceolfrith chose his successor before he died, choosing Hwaetberht. He then left for Rome to deliver the Codex to Gregory I, but died at Langres.

Bishop Wilfred

Wilfred (633 - 709) founded a monastery in Ripon after studying in Canterbury and Gaul. He spoke for the Roman side of the debate over ecclesiastical hierarchy in England, and thereby upset the local kings and bishops. He also stridently defended Rome's method of dating Easter. Wilfred became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 668.

St. Brendan

A monk who lived from 484 to 577 often known as "the Navigator." He was an early Irish monk and saint and is the main character in a legend about his voyage to the "Isle of the Blessed," as contained in The Voyage of St. Brendan. The Voyage or "Navigatio" was widely read in the Middle Ages.

Abbot Benedict Biscop

Living between 628 and 690, Biscop founded the twin monasteries at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. He was a Northumbrian and mentor to Ceolfrith. He made many pilgrimages to Rome and brought a number of relics and books back with him. King Egfrith granted him the land for the monasteries. He also brought stonemasons and glaziers from Gaul to help build the monasteries. Bede claims that he thereby introduced glass-working to the English.

Abbot Eosterwine

In 682, Biscop chose Eosterwine (Easterwine) to assist him at St. Peter's in Wearmouth. He lived from 650 to 686 and became the second abbot of the Wearmouth monastery. He was from a noble family in Northumbria. He died of the plague while Benedict was in Rome and Sigfrith was chosen by the monks to succeed him.



Abbot Sigrith

Sigrith was the Abbot of the Monkwearmouth Priory and was chosen by Ceolfrid. Bede claims that he knew Scripture well but was plagued with physical illness. He and Benedict Biscop fell ill and died at nearly the same time.

Abbot Hwaetberht

An abbot of the Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Priors who succeeded Ceolfrith.

Bishop Cuthbert

Living from 634 to 687, Cuthbert was an Anglo-Saxon monk and a Northumbrian bishop. He founded the monastery at Ripon where he became Bishop of York. Bede wrote Life of Cuthbert about him.

God

The central figure of the Judeo-Christian religion, the authors represented in The Age of Bede along with the characters therein claim that God was constantly involved in their lives, answered prayers, produced miracles and filled them with grace and joy, along with saving their souls.

Jesus

Jesus Christ is worshipped by Christians as God and the Son of God. Like God, the authors in The Age of Bede believed that Jesus was involved constantly in their lives for the good.

Monks

All of the major characters of The Age of Bede are English and Irish monks, as are all of the main characters, though some are elevated to Abbot, Bishop and Archbishop.



Objects/Places

Ancient England and Ireland

7th and 8th century England and Ireland are the major settings of all the works in The Age of Bede.

The Wearmouth and Jarrow Monasteries

The twin monasteries founded by Benedict Biscop and run by the abbots mentioned in The Age of Bede.

Northumbria

The kingdom of Angles in northeast England and the south of Scotland, established in 653 and conquered in 954. During that time, Northumbrian families produced many of the monks in The Age of Bede, including Benedict Biscop, Bede, Eosterwine, Ceolfrith, and Cuthbert.

Prayer

The Age of Bede is filled with prayers of various sorts.

The Psalter

The list of the Davidic Psalms which were regularly prayed by the monks of the twin monasteries.

The Codex Amiantus

The earliest manuscript of the entire Bible that survives written in the Latin Vulgate. It was created with medieval calligraphy. Ceolfrith commissioned it in 692 and died taking it to Rome.

Relics

Physical pieces of putative holy origins, such as pieces of the "true cross" of Jesus Christ. Benedict brought many relics back from Rome to England.

Pilgrimages

Many of the monks take pilgrimages to Rome for various reasons, pious and political. Wilfred would travel to Rome to have the Pope reinstate him as Bishop, whereas Ceolfrith died taking the Codex Amiantus to the Pope and to live out his days there.

Miracles

All of the documents in The Age of Bede contain claims that miracles occurred because of and around the monks featured prominently in the documents.

The Mass

The Eucharistic celebration of the Catholic Church celebrated with Latin liturgy. It is also used by The Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans. The Mass is celebrated many times in The Age of Bede.

Singing

The Age of Bede is full of monks singing in worship of God. Some monks sang the antiphon, a response to a psalm or part of a religious service, that is typically sung as a Gregorian Chant.

The Plague

Not the Bubonic Plague, a disease that killed all of the monks in the Wearmouth-Jarrow monasteries save Ceolfrith and a young boy who was probably Bede himself.

Themes

English/Irish/Celtic Christianity vs. Roman Christianity

The Navigatio is the document in The Age of Bede that was written the latest but whose subject matter is the earliest. It represents Irish monasticism which had a character distinct from the Eastern Benedictine monasticism of its day. After the death of St. Patrick in 461, monasteries started to become the most important element of social life in Ireland. Ireland had no civil government to speak of and had never been part of the Roman Empire. As a result, life was still tribal and monasteries were built up out of extended family units. Thus, monks included most people in families. Many forms of life were represented as well. The Abbot became very important and his power often challenged that of the Bishop.

When Augustine went to England in 597, he brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons and set up hierarchical diocese in Canterbury, Rochester and London. With the help of missionaries, Christianity spread throughout the island which spread a traditional diocesan system. This Roman hierarchy was in tension with decentralized Irish monasticism and the tensions are often reflected in the major texts of the book.

For instance, for pushing the Roman hierarchy, Bishop Wilfred was often expelled from his office. At the Synod of Whitby, Wilfrid spoke for the Romans and Colman for the Irish. When Wilfred won, local centers with different origins were united as an organized church. A cultural synthesis was then produced but not without the conflict widely seen in the Lives in the age of Bede. One of the most important conflicts is over the dating of Easter, which the Irish calculated in one way and the Romans in another.

Monkish Brotherhood

Unlike the extended family monasteries of early Irish monasticism, the monasteries discussed in The Age of Bede are more traditional. They are led by abbots but they are filled with young to elderly men who practice celibacy, poverty and obedience to their abbot. The monasteries are often built by kings but commissioned by bishops, such as the twin monasteries at Wearmouth and Jarrow. The abbots were often chosen from among the brotherhood itself. Abbots would often recommend a future successor.

The daily activities of the monks in The Age of Bede including daily prayer, singing the psalms, work around the monastery, such as growing food, writing or, for instance, creating the Codex Amiantus, and preaching the Gospel to those local non-members in the area. Often abbots and bishops would travel on pilgrimages to Rome together in order to visit the tombs of the Apostles, seek favor with the Pope or procure books and relics to bring back to the British Isles. In other cases, they would travel to seek political help in retaining their offices against their detractors or gaining recognition for their choice of successor.



These common activities and social structure bred profound brotherhood among the monkish brethren. This is seen no more clearly than in the Wearmouth-Jarrow monasteries of St. Peter and St. Paul. The abbots of these monasteries - Benedict, Ceolfrith, Sigfrith, Eosterwine, and Hwaetberht followed their lines of succession through close ties to one another. The men grieved mightily at the deaths of others. When Ceolfrith and Bede were the only two monks to survive an outbreak of the plague in Benedict Biscop's absence, he is distraught upon his return. Also The Age of Bede is littered with effusive praise for the abbots, citing their great piety and virtues and almost never mentioning any of their vices.

Admirable Piety, Merit and Miracles

Bede, Eddius and the anonymous authors of the other texts have a particular conception of the most important personal virtues. In different ages, different virtues are ranked in importance. In the Roman Empire, the virtues of the hero were highly prized, in early modern European cultures, commercial virtue was often praised, while in the medieval period extreme forms of supernatural piety—faith, hope and love—were ranked as the highest virtues. The authors of the documents in The Age of Bede lean strongly towards the latter conception of virtue with monastic trimmings.

All the core characters of The Age of Bede, that is, the abbots and the bishops, are profusely praised for their great faith, hope and love. Each major figure was a man of great devotion to Jesus, who was given to particularly powerful abilities to practice the Rule of St. Benedict, again indicating his great piety. They were often generous in their almsgiving to the poor and heroically pursued their piety in pilgrimages to Rome, preaching the Gospel in the countryside and convincing Kings to build new monasteries for them.

The abbots were also deeply favored by God and were able to form impressive feats as a result, such as healing the sick. In other cases, the great merit of these abbots and bishops apparently is reflected in the favor God showers on the abbots in the form of these miracles and in terms of the often miraculous events that occur at the burial sites after their deaths.

Style

Perspective

The Age of Bede contains two sets of perspectives, those of the editors and translators, J. F. Webb and D. H. Farmer, and those of the authors of the major texts within The Age of Bede, particularly the Venerable Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the anonymous authors of the latter two pieces. The first set of perspectives is of great interest. The editors treat the monks of the period with great respect. Like the monkish authors, they rarely criticize the major figures represented in the book. They also refrain from claiming that because the texts all cite miracles that none of them are historically accurate.

In fact, the only text they claim is largely fictional is The Voyage of Saint Brendan which is stocked with an enormous number of miracles and literally magical events, including demons talking in the form of birds and an Ethiopian boy that lives in a monk's chest, along with the monks living on the back of a whale. The authors simply say that much of the piece is fictional, whereas one might think that other historians would dismiss it entirely. They also claim that Bede's works contain a great deal of authentic material and decline to question his intentions. The editors seem to greatly admire the monks, their culture and their character to a degree unusual for academic historians.

The perspectives of the authors other than the Voyage of St. Brendan, are those of Bede, Eddius Stephanus and an anonymous author. They seem to have similar perspectives. Both are deeply respectful of the men about whom they write and almost if ever cite errors in the decisions of their main characters. For instance, in Eddius's Life of Wilfred, he never blames Wilfred for the enormous number of political conflicts that his demand for obedience to Rome caused in England.

Bede's perspective has a more historical aim, as he records a great deal more historical material, however. Nonetheless, his attitude is as reverential as any. The authors also reflect the deep social, political and religious ideas of 7th century English and Irish monks with an extraordinary admiration for the ascetic life, rare attention to peasants and more focus on religious and secular nobility, along with an intense belief in constant miracles and the validity of relics.

Tone

The tone of The Age of Bede is multifaceted and changes depending on the author, though many of them share more features of their tone than they have differences. The editors and translators express an admiration for the authors and main characters in the pieces they have translated and compiled, but the tone of their writing is neutral, historical and largely dry. Their aim is to convey the consensus of academic historians concerning their subject matter. They often report on controversies but generally they report the consensus. They also often give their own views and often side with the



characters of the books in the conflicts they endure. This adds an element of upbeat respect to the dry, historical tone of the introduction.

Bede's two pieces, *Life of Cuthbert* and *Lives of the Abbots*, is reverential and meticulous. Bede attempts to collect as much historical information he can into one place, which was probably quite difficult in his day and time. His aim seems in part to write a history of the abbots and bishops whose piety he admired. His admiration comes through his writing powerfully, particularly when he speaks of Abbot Ceolfrith who may well have been his adopted father. The *Lives of the Abbots* has the most personal tone, which makes sense as Bede witnessed many of the events he is relaying. The tones of the *Life of Wilfred* and the *Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith* are similar to that of Bede's writings.

The oddball tone is in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*. The author clearly does not intend to write an accurate history but instead seeks to illustrate the personality traits of an early Irish saint in what appears to be a completely fictional story. The tale is full of heroism, struggle and magic much like a modern fantasy novel.

Structure

The *Age of Bede* has six major parts, along with recommendations for further reading, maps and an index. The first part of the book is the lengthy introduction where the authors explain in detail the information academic historians have about the texts they have included in the books, the authors of the texts and the characters discussed in the text. They also discuss what historians know of the time and place of the composition of the pieces and of the settings in which their stories are placed. The editors focus on the social and political conflicts of the day as well, in particular emphasizing the tension between Irish and Roman Christianity.

The first chapter or piece is Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* which discusses the life of Bishop Cuthbert. The general element of the *Life of Cuthbert* is Cuthbert's extraordinary piety and all the value he contributed to the lives of the people at Lindisfarne where he served as bishop. It is printed and divided into a series of short chapters, 46 in all. The *Life of Wilfred* concerns the life of Bishop Wilfred and attempts to vindicate his positions in the political conflicts in which he participated along with celebrating his piety. It is also divided into short chapters, this time there are 68.

Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* is next and concerns five characters, the abbots Benedict, Ceolfrith, Sigfrith, Eosterwine and Hwaetberht, so it is unique in this regard. Bede attempts to give all the first and second hand information he has about these abbots lives and their local situations, along with venerating their piety. The piece is shorter, containing only 23 short chapters. The *Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith* seems to have a goal similar to Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* although it focuses on Ceolfrith. It is divided into 39 short paragraphs rather than chapters. And the *Voyage of Saint Brendan* concerns the mythological journey of Saint Brendan to a magical isle and is separated into 29 paragraphs.



Quotes

"The five texts presented in this volume are important sources for the early history of the Christian Church in England and Ireland." (Introduction, 9)

"The characters described in these works were all great men, with considerable appeal to generations other than their own." (Introduction, 39)

"The rich and contrasting age in which they lived ... is being rediscovered at the present time by an increasing number of students. The ideals and the scale of values of its great men still appeal across the centuries." (Introduction, 39)

"It is good for a man to have borne the yoke in his youth; he shall sit in solitude and be silent, because he will raise himself above himself." (Life of Cuthbert, 45)

"Why, most holy priest and bishop Cuthbert, do you persist in doing what is so contrary both to your nature and your rank?" (Life of Cuthbert, 46)

"Thus fortified with the Lord's Body and Blood in preparation for the death he knew was now at hand, he raised his eyes heavenwards, stretched out his arms aloft, and with his mind rapt in the praise of the Lord sent forth his spirit to the bliss of paradise." (Life of Cuthbert, 95)

"I have made my vows to the Lord and I shall keep them I yearn to receive the reward God promised to those that love Him." (Life of Wilfred, 111)

"We decree and lay down that Bishop Wilfred, God's beloved, is to take possession of the see which until recent times was his, according to the terms previously defined." (Life of Wilfred, 141)

"Why are you trying to bring me to so sad a plight as to have me make my own signature an instrument of self-destruction?" (Life of Wilfred, 158)

"For the signs of death are crowding thick about me." (Life of Wilfred, 178)

"Take the greatest care, brothers, never to appoint a man as father over you because of his birth; and always appoint from among yourselves, never from outside the monastery." (Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, 198)

"And so that holy soul, which had been tested and perfected by the burning pain of long but profitable suffering, left this earthly furnace of the flesh and, free at last, took wing to the glory of eternal bliss." (Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, 201)

"O Christ, have pity on this band. Lord Almighty, protect this community. For I know very well that I have found none better than them or more inclined to obedience. O Christ, O God, defend them." (The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith, 223)



"In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I forbid you to harm any man from now till the Day of Judgment." (The Voyage of St. Brendan, 239)

"Now, at last, you have found the land you have been seeking all these years." (The Voyage of St. Brendan, 267)



Topics for Discussion

Who was the Venerable Bede? What are his great accomplishments?

What was praiseworthy about Bishop Wilfred? Why did he get into so many conflicts with English Kings, the Archbishop, and so on?

What is the contrast and conflict between English and Roman Christianity in the 7th century?

What is distinctive about English Christian piety in the 7th century as opposed to Christian practices today?

What personal qualities are most prized by 7th century English monks?

What do you make of the many claims of miracles in the writings? Is there any reason to think that, Bede, for instance, seriously thought these miracles occurred? Was he lying? Why would he lie?

Describe 7th century monkish worship practices and explain how these practices connected to their conception of God.

Why do you think these biographies were written?

What do the conflicts in the first five pieces indicate about church-state conflicts in the 7th century?