

Benedict Biscop: Benedictine, Builder, Bibliophile

by Lorraine H. Olley

Abstract

The essay offers an overview of the life, career, and accomplishments of Saint Benedict Biscop, a seventh-century Benedictine monk in Northumbria, England. A brief overview of his life traces his conversion and later service to the church, his role in founding found a monastery at Wearmouth-Jarrow, and his particular interest in building a library, a task that required numerous journeys to Rome.

The conclusion of the essay identifies hallmarks of Biscop's career that remain instructive for contemporary theological librarians.

Introduction

On January 12, 690, in St. Peter's Monastery in Monkwearmouth in Northumbria, Abbot Benedict Biscop lay dying. His final admonitions to his community were recorded by the great chronicler and member of the Wearmouth-Jarrow community, Bede:

Benedict sought to strengthen the monks...in their observance of the Rule which he had given them. "You must not think," he said, "that the ordinances I laid down for you were the result of my own untutored invention. No, all I found best in the life of the seventeen monasteries I visited during my long and frequent pilgrimages, I stored up in my mind and have handed on to you, to be steadfastly adhered to, for your own good." He gave orders that the fine and extensive library of books which he had brought back from Rome and which were so necessary for improving the standard of education in this church should be carefully preserved as a single collection and not allow to decay through neglect or be split up piecemeal. Over and over again he insisted that in electing an abbot upright life and soundness of doctrine were to be the prime considerations, not rank or family influence. "I tell you in all sincerity," he said, "that as a choice of evils I would far rather have this whole place where I have built the monastery revert forever, should God so decide, to the wilderness it once was, rather than have my brother in the flesh, who has not entered upon the way of truth, succeed me as abbot."¹

These final words encompass the three most important legacies of Benedict Biscop: the monastic rule of St. Benedict and its preservation; the preservation of Biscop's foundation, the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastic complex, from outside influence from family and secular power; and the preservation of his library. Although he is little known today, it can be argued that Biscop, in establishing the Benedictine monastic way of life in a Northumbrian monastery he founded and furnished with artistic and intellectual treasure, made possible the intellectual achievements of Venerable Bede. To better appreciate his place in history and his role as inspiration for theological librarians, it is helpful to understand his life and its context.

¹ Bede, "Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow," in *The Age of Bede*, trans. David Hugh Farmer (London: Penguin, 1998), 198.

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Biography

Biscop was born c.628 into a Northumbrian noble family; his given name was Biscop Baducing. He came of age during the reign of King Oswald (reigned 633-642) and his son Oswiu (reigned 642-670). As a son of nobility, Biscop served as a thane, ready to support the king in military campaigns.

In 653, at the age of 25, Biscop renounced his warrior role and departed on a pilgrimage to Rome to visit the tombs of the apostles. It is not known what prompted this departure from a life of relative privilege, but Biscop was not unique in his choice.

Like a number of early Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles, Biscop left the precarious secular life of the warrior-class to become a religious pilgrim and then a monk...Monks, abbots and inmates such as Bede, though subject to contagious diseases within their enclosed communities, lived relatively long. By comparison, kings and athelings...rarely survived middle age.²

On his journey to Rome, Biscop stopped in Canterbury, where he met the nineteen-year-old Wilfrid, who was to become a figure of great accomplishment and controversy in the story of the conversion of Britain. Wilfrid, also a Northumbrian nobleman, was waiting for a companion to accompany him to Rome.³ The two traveled together through Gaul, stopping at monasteries along the way. Wilfrid decided to remain at Lyon, leaving Biscop to complete the journey south. When he arrived in Rome in 654, Biscop “may have been the first Englishman, certainly the first Northumbrian, to visit Rome since the end of the Pax Romana.”⁴

Very little is known about Biscop’s movements during the next eleven years, including the date of his return to Britain. However, scholars assume that it was during this period that he visited many of the seventeen Benedictine monasteries whose rules of life served as the inspiration for his own rule at Wearmouth-Jarrow. These probably included monasteries at Vienne, Lyons, Arles, Marseilles, Paris, and St. Denis.⁵

Biscop had returned to Northumbria by 654, because it is known that he embarked from there for a second trip to Rome, this time accompanying King Oswiu’s son Alcfirth. In 665, Biscop left Rome to enter the novitiate at the Benedictine monastery at Lerins, on an island off the coast of southern France. It is there that he became a monk, taking the name Benedict.⁶

Biscop returned from France to Rome in 667. In 668, Pope Vitilian requested that he accompany Theodore, the newly appointed bishop of Canterbury, along with the monk Hadrian, to England; the entourage arrived in Canterbury in 669. Biscop agreed to serve as temporary abbot of the monastery of SS. Peter and Paul in Canterbury until Hadrian was prepared to take the post permanently. After two years, Biscop returned to Rome “with no ostensible purpose other than the academic interest of collecting books on sacred literature and visiting friends in Vienne to collect more books. At that time, Benedict Biscop had no prospect of founding monasteries in the north, or of being permanently attached to Canterbury.”⁷

The various trajectories and experiences of Biscop’s life converged in 674, when he received a grant of land from the Northumbrian King Ecgfrith, a son of King Oswiu, whom Biscop had served as thane. On this land, located at the mouth of the Wear River, Biscop established St. Peter’s monastery (Wearmouth). In founding his monastery, Biscop undoubtedly drew on his experience as temporary abbot in Canterbury. He most likely had learned a great deal during his journey with Theodore and Hadrian about collecting educational resources for a school or monastery. He drew on his novitiate at Lerins, and his knowledge of best practices from spending time in sixteen other Benedictine monasteries,

² George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2009), 3.

³ Eric Fletcher, *Benedict Biscop*, Jarrow Lecture (Jarrow, Durham: St. Paul’s Church, 1981), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 119.

⁷ Fletcher, 6-7.

to create a Benedictine rule of life for his foundation. His royal patronage combined with his experience and knowledge of the Benedictine monastic way were resources Biscop put to good use in his foundation, which became a center for learning and culture in medieval Britain.

In 679, Biscop journeyed again to Rome with Coelfrith, one of his monks. This time he returned with not just books and artwork, but also with John, the archcantor of St. Peter's in Rome, to teach the monks proper chanting.⁸ At the command of King Ecgrith, in 682 Biscop founded a second monastery, dedicated to St. Paul, at Jarrow, about 28 miles from Wearmouth. Although he remained in charge of the entire foundation, Biscop appointed co-abbots: Coelfrith at Jarrow, and his cousin Eosterwine at Wearmouth.⁹

In 687 he made what would be his final journey to Rome, returning in 689. During his absence Eosterwine died; the monks, with Coelfrith's approval, selected the deacon Sigfrid to replace him. After his return in 689, Biscop appointed Coelfrith as abbot over both monasteries because "Benedict thought it best from every point of view that both houses should be under the guidance of one father and rector so in that way they would be kept together in harmony, unity and peace."¹⁰ Sigfrid died in the fall of 689, and Biscop, suffering from paralysis, followed four months later, in January, 690.

Bede movingly summarized Biscop's life and commitment to his abbey and his community:

...he put behind him the things that perish so that he might gain those that last forever, despising earthly warfare with its corruptible rewards so that he might fight for the true king and win this crown in the heavenly city. He left country, home and family for the sake of Christ and the gospel so that he might receive a hundredfold in return and gain eternal life. He rejected the bond of earthly marriage so that in the kingdom of Heaven he might follow the Lamb of spotless virginity. He refused to bring forth children in the flesh, being predestined by Christ to raise up for Him sons nurtured in spiritual doctrine who would live forever in the world to come.¹¹

Biscop the Benedictine

It is anachronistic to call Biscop a Benedictine, but it is accepted that he was deeply influenced by the Rule of St. Benedict, and that the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastic foundation lived by a rule modeled on Benedict's. Northumbria was Christianized by Irish missionaries, and both Biscop and Wilfrid grew up as Irish Christians. However, after becoming acquainted with the Roman Church and Roman monastic traditions, both of these seminal figures in the British church became champions of Roman Christianity. The monastery at Lerins where Biscop received the monastic tonsure and took the name Benedict was a well-established Benedictine institution.¹²

The major difference between the Benedictine and Irish monastic models was manifested in the manner in which the monks lived in community. In the Irish tradition, based on the desert fathers, monks lived in isolation, in dwellings clustered close enough for weekly communal prayer. Although there is no extant copy of Biscop's rule, it can be assumed to have been a mixed rule, a compilation of best practices which he gleaned from seventeen Benedictine monasteries in Italy and central and southern France. In keeping with the Benedictine tradition, the monks at Wearmouth-Jarrow lived austerely in community, sharing living space and participating in a daily rhythm of life that revolved around *opus Dei*, common prayer; *lectio*, consisting of private prayer, meditation, memorization of scripture; and *opus manuum*, labor, including the production of books.

Biscop provided for the stability of his foundation by naming men to serve as abbots while he traveled — Eosterwine, Sigfrid, and later Coelfrith. It is interesting that he did not remain abbot until his death; Coelfrith served in that capacity for the last few years of Biscop's life. Biscop also obtained a papal charter to protect the monastery from any outside

⁸ Bede, "Lives of the Abbots," 196.

⁹ Ibid., 193-194.

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

¹¹ Ibid, 187.

¹² Fry, 56.

influence or interference in its governance. It protected the monastery from political and family interference which had the potential to create instability, and bound the monastery more closely to Rome.¹³

In his deathbed declaration that he would rather see his life's work destroyed than to see his brother appointed to head the monastery, Biscop emphatically rejected the common practice of the Irish and Germanic church, in which the monastery was seen as a family asset. "It is noteworthy that the presuppositions and procedures of the Rule of St. Benedict were in this instance preferred to those of Anglo-Saxon law. This is an example of [Biscop's] preference of spiritual fatherhood and monastic inheritance to their natural and earthly equivalents."¹⁴

Biscop as a Builder

The twin monasteries of SS. Peter and Paul at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow were the embodiment of Benedictine life. At their peak they are estimated to have supported 600 monks, in an era when the average village had a population of 300.¹⁵ Bede noted several remarkable aspects of the construction of Wearmouth and Jarrow.

Only a year after work had begun on the monastery, Benedict [Biscop] crossed the sea to France to look for masons to build him a stone church in the Roman style he had always loved so much....When the building was nearing completion he sent his agents across to France to bring over glaziers — craftsmen as yet unknown in Britain — to glaze the windows in the body of the church and in the chapels and clerestory....they helped the English to understand and to learn for themselves the art of glass-making....¹⁶

Remnants of the innovative construction of Wearmouth-Jarrow can still be seen at the site. Excavations "reveal buildings made by Continental techniques of construction, but with a layout adapted to existing insular custom."¹⁷ Jarrow was built with stone quarried from existing Roman buildings.

Once the buildings were completed, Biscop installed paintings and sculpture he brought back from Rome. Bede recorded very detailed descriptions of which pictures were hung in each of the churches; this attests to the uniqueness and significance of this artistic contribution to Northumbrian culture.¹⁸ It is likely that the paintings were the inspiration for the illuminations that were incorporated into manuscripts. At the zenith of its history

...we can visualize Monkwearmouth-Jarrow as substantial well-built stone monasteries equipped with comfortable and perhaps sumptuous quarters, plastered inside and out, including a library and scriptorium and available for a large number of inmates with facilities for writing and study, as well as for devotional purposes.¹⁹

Besides books, artwork, relics, and glaziers, Biscop brought back from St. Peter's in Rome John the archcantor, to instruct the monks in chanting properly. Not only did the Wearmouth-Jarrow community benefit, but monks from other foundations came for training as well. "The presence of Abbot John and his school of singing must have added to the renown and pre-eminence of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow."²⁰ One may imagine that while at SS. Peter and Paul, visiting monks would have been deeply impressed by the art in the churches, the size of the library, and the orderliness of the monastic life.

¹³ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People; The Greater Chronicle; Bede's Letter to Egbert*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), III. 18.

¹⁴ David H. Farmer, "Introduction," in *The Age of Bede* (London: Penguin, 1998), 33.

¹⁵ Alberic Stacpole, "St. Bede the Venerable, Monk of Jarrow," in *Benedict's Disciples*, ed. David H. Farmer (Leominster: Fowler Wright Books, 1980), 97.

¹⁶ Bede, "Lives of the Abbots," 191.

¹⁷ Stacpole, 97.

¹⁸ Bede, "Lives of the Abbots," 192, 196.

¹⁹ Fletcher, 13–14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

So from its inception in 674 Monkwearmouth became a touchstone of Roman orthodoxy, to which all Northumbria looked for guidance. As Rome had emerged among the Mediterranean churches as a center of consultation, so in its lesser way Abbot Benedict's monastery became the repository of Roman Church usage in the northern limits of civilization.²¹

Biscop the Bibliophile

It is obvious from his biography and legacy that Biscop loved books and learning. "Although Benedict Biscop provided fine decoration for his abbey churches, the heart of his enterprise was the library he had assembled on his journeys."²² His second trip to Rome, a book-buying trip, was made before he became an abbot or founded Wearmouth-Jarrow. He traveled to Rome six times to purchase or receive donations of books;²³ these trips total over 15,000 miles. With his dying breath he expressed concern for the integrity of the monastery's library.

There is no extant listing or catalog of titles in the library, but analysis of the works cited in Bede's writings yields some clues as to its content. The collection was broader in scope than the typical library of a monastery or diocesan see, which was primarily made up of service books. The estimated 250 titles contained in Biscop's library included scripture, classical, and secular works. "As far as evidence permits us to say, the library used by Bede at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow was the largest library ever assembled in Anglo-Saxon England."²⁴ Immersed in this rich repository from the age of seven, Bede never had to leave home to gather material for his voluminous writings.

The story of Biscop's bibliophilia comes full circle, albeit posthumously, with the *Codex Amiatinus*. One of the ancient volumes acquired by Biscop on his fifth trip to Rome was the pandect (Bible in a single volume) *Codex Grandior*, from the library of Cassiodorus (d. 585) located at the monastery at Vivarium. In the late seventh or early eighth century, Abbot Ceolfrith ordered the production of three copies of that pandect. In 716, he presented one copy of the British-produced volume, known as *Codex Amiatinus*, to Pope Gregory II in Rome. This, the only surviving copy, found a home in a monastery in Florence, where it was historically assumed to have been an Italian production.²⁵ However, it is now known to have originated at Wearmouth-Jarrow.

The Codex Amiatinus

is an enormous volume:..It consists of 1,030 folios (2,060 pages): each double page or opening, measures twenty-seven and a half by twenty and a half inches. It weighs more than seventy-five pounds. It has been credibly estimated that 1,550 calves were needed to provide for the parchment....Only a large and wealthy monastery could have been commissioned a volume of his size. Yet Ceolfrith commissioned three.²⁶

That the tome

was identical with a 'pandect of the old translation' acquired by Ceolfrith and Benedict Biscop at Rome is clear from evidence of many kinds, not least that the layout and contents of the prefatory quire of the great *Codex Amiatinus*, written at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in the years before 716, were modelled closely on those of the 'codex grandior' as described by Cassiodorus."²⁷

Biscop as a Model for Theological Librarians

Biscop's life work was the creation of a place where order, beauty, learning, and worship would be able to flourish over time. Bede entered St. Peter's at Wearmouth at the age of seven, moved to Jarrow, and spent his life immersed

²¹ Stacpole, 95.

²² Brown, 5.

²³ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁵ Patrick Wormald, "Bede and Benedict Biscop," in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London: S.P.C.K, 1976), 151–153.

²⁶ Farmer, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

in this world of rich intellectual, liturgical, artistic, and cultural resources. In keeping with the norms of Benedictine monasteries, Bede would have had a daily routine of fourteen hours of communal praying of the Divine Office and other worship, and, depending on the season, two to four hours of labor and three to four hours for reading or private meditation.²⁸ Apart from a plague epidemic that decimated the monastery, presumably while Bede was still a boy,²⁹ there appear to have been no other disruptions to monastic life at Jarrow.

The stability, prosperity, and stimulating environment in which Bede flourished were the result of the personality, labors, and lifelong devotion of Benedict Biscop. In contrast to his fellow Northumbrian Wilfrid, Biscop was a quiet but equally influential person. Whereas Wilfrid

became an ambitious ecclesiastical statesman, a staunch upholder of episcopal right, a proud if quarrelsome prelate and a litigant ever anxious to assert the supremacy of Papal jurisdiction....Biscop had a gentler, more obedient and modest disposition....He was not ambitious....He observed the Benedictine rule of humility.³⁰

Unlike other important figures such as Adomnan, Biscop did not leave any writings. In contrast with the chroniclers of other contemporary saints' lives, Biscop's biographers attribute no miracles to him. The abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow spent his life gathering together the best of the learning of the past and of his time, along with the best sacred art and music, and creating the garden in which an intellect like Bede's could take root and blossom.

Biscop exemplifies several essential aspects of the vocation of theological librarianship. First, Biscop's legacy shows the importance of the effort to build and preserve collections with the intent of capturing the best of the past and present, while anticipating future trends. Although he was head of the entire monastic foundation of Wearmouth-Jarrow, and responsible for the well-being of its community, Biscop evidently placed the library uppermost in his life. Leaving the monasteries in others' hands, he personally made arduous trips to acquire books and art, and to recruit talented artists and craftspeople. In his dying declaration as reported by Bede, Biscop insisted that the library remain intact at Wearmouth-Jarrow. These efforts are evidence of the importance to Biscop of the intellectual life he aimed to establish in Northumbria. Twenty-first century librarians do not need to work so arduously at collection development (although many may mourn the demise of buying trips). The contemporary challenge is to evaluate the vast number and array of resources and formats available, and to select, acquire, preserve, and provide access to those that record the best and most beautiful of the church's traditions and heritage.

Second, it is important to administer the library with the goal of maximizing the available support to organize and provide access to research materials, while managing a stable yet growth-oriented organization. The materials required nowadays differ vastly from those used by the Wearmouth-Jarrow library. In the eighth century, arguably the most important resource was cattle to provide parchment for book production; consider that nearly 1,200 calves were used in the massive *Codex Amiatinus*. Although there is virtually no documentation on how Biscop allocated for the daily operations or planned for the future of Wearmouth-Jarrow, it is obvious that the foundation he established generated sufficient wealth to produce the *Codex Amiatinus* twenty-five years after his death. Likewise, the contemporary theological librarian allocates the annual budget to meet current needs, while building the framework for future growth and expansion. The librarian who makes decisions that maximize the benefit of the currently available talent and treasure — through negotiated discounts, consortial arrangements, appropriate acquisition of print and electronic formats, provision of reader services through a range of media, cooperative cataloging, shared storage facilities, and the like — leaves her library in a stronger position each year. Anticipating developments in library operations — such as the shift from integrated to open-source library systems — and positioning the library to benefit from them is another essential talent for theological librarians. If this seems daunting, one need only consider the effort that went into producing 1,200 sheets of parchment!

Third, it is desirable to create an orderly and ascetically pleasing physical space for study and contemplation. The ruins of Wearmouth-Jarrow reflect its scope and hint at its beautiful simplicity.³¹ Historians of the period point out that the

²⁸ James G. Clark, *The Benedictines in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2011), 93, 105–106.

²⁹ Brown, 7.

³⁰ Fletcher, 8–9.

³¹ Wearmouth-Jarrow, “Welcome one and all...” <http://www.wearmouth-jarrow.org.uk/> (accessed March 25, 2013).

monastery was the center for liturgical art and culture in Britain in the eighth century. It seems certain that for Bede to have accomplished his remarkable and prolific scholarly output, he would have required a stable community, with an orderly routine of daily and seasonal life, and a well-stocked and organized library. The theological library serves its community well by providing, along with the necessary technological tools of scholarship, comfortable, and attractive areas for quiet study and contemplation, surrounded by ascetically pleasing natural and man-made environments.

Finally, Biscop had faith that the fruits of his work in building and preserving the library would nourish others intellectually and spiritually, long after his own passing. Biscop died in 690, when Bede was around 17. The old abbot could have had no inkling of the lasting influence his own life's work would have on Western Christianity over the centuries, through his young monk Bede. But it can be argued that without Biscop's successful efforts to preserve the library and monastery from outside governance and family inheritance traditions, Bede may not have had the resources available to flourish as a historian and scripture scholar. So, even as many theological librarians despair the perceived underutilization of library resources, they are buoyed by their belief in the mission of preserving and providing access to the church's intellectual, spiritual, and artistic heritage for future students and scholars.

Saint Benedict Biscop — Benedictine, builder, and bibliophile — deserves elevation from the relative obscurity of Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* to consideration as the patron saint of theological librarians. His dedication to the library's collection and preservation, regardless of personal cost or evidence of success, is an inspiration to all librarians who are called to minister to the church's ministers.

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