

## Book Review

*Julia Barrow*

**BOOK REVIEWED:** CHRISTOPHER GROCOCK AND I. N. WOOD (ED. AND TRANS.), *ABBOTS OF WEARMOUTH AND JARROW: BEDE'S HOMILY I. 13 ON BENEDICT BISCOP; BEDE'S HISTORY OF THE ABBOTS OF WEARMOUTH AND JARROW; THE ANONYMOUS LIFE OF CEOLFRITH; BEDE'S LETTER TO ECGBERT, BISHOP OF YORK*, OXFORD MEDIEVAL TEXTS (OXFORD: CLARENDON PRESS, 2013), CXX + 214 PP. ISBN: 9780198207610.

In this volume Christopher Grocock and Ian Wood bring together Bede's works dealing with Wearmouth and Jarrow, his *Homily* for the anniversary of Benedict Biscop and the *Historia Abbatum*, together with his letter to Bishop Ecgbert, which is closely linked in content because of its commentary on the state of Northumbrian monasticism, and the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith*, abbot of the community when Bede was a young adult, which is close in content to the *Historia Abbatum*. The works have all been available in various editions for many years and more recently also in a range of translations. Among the editions, Plummer's collection of Bede's historical writings (which includes all the works edited here save the *Homily*), now over a century old, is especially valuable: nonetheless, Grocock and Wood's edition supersedes all its predecessors and should become the standard one. In addition, it provides a full and authoritative account of Wearmouth and Jarrow in the first half-century of their existence, setting them in their full political, social and cultural context. This is supplied both through the detailed annotation and through the introduction, which occupies a third of the volume and which contains discussion of authorial motivation, historical context and literary style. Detailed analysis of the *cursus* and other literary features proves conclusively that the *Life of Ceolfrith* was by an author other than Bede, and this case is strengthened by analysis of the

contrasting ways in which its author and Bede deal with family relationships and aristocratic life. Even more importantly, a strong case is made by the editors for dating Bede's *Historia Abbatum* early, to 716 soon after news of Ceolfrith's death reached Wearmouth, but before those of Ceolfrith's companions who had gone on to Rome after his death at Langres returned to Wearmouth in the spring of 717. The *Life of Ceolfrith*, which does mention their return, must therefore be later than the *Historia Abbatum* and perhaps in some sense a response to it. Clearly, Bede was already developing a strong ability to select his historical materials to create his chosen story lines over a decade before he wrote the *Ecclesiastical History*, and the editors underline Bede's selections and omissions in their annotations to the *Homily* and to the *Historia Abbatum*. Comparison of these texts with the *Life of Ceolfrith* shows that while Bede argued that all the original seventy-hide endowment of Wearmouth was provided by kings from their own property, according to the anonymous author only fifty hides were by royal grant and the rest came from other people. It also seems likely (to judge from the *Ecclesiastical History*) that Benedict Biscop displaced Hild at Wearmouth, a point that Bede and the Anonymous were not keen to point out to readers in works highlighting Biscop's achievements. Bede's anxiety in his *Homily* to stress that the lands for Wearmouth were granted by kings from their own property ties in (as the editors also underline) with his anxiety in the *Letter to Ecgbert* about whether too much land was being alienated for monastic foundations. The origins of Jarrow are also explored: it emerges as different in type from Wearmouth in its early years, being a royal foundation lying close to another royal monastery (*Donemutha*) and to a royal settlement in the old Roman fort of *Arbeia* at South Shields.

The editors also comment on differences between Bede and the anonymous author of the *Life of Ceolfrith* in their attitudes to aristocracy: the Anonymous was much more accepting of aristocratic ethos, as is made clear by his commendation of Ceolfrith's parents for their hospitality (an aristocratic virtue), and he stresses, far more than Bede does, the family relationships between Benedict Biscop, Eosterwine and Ceolfrith. Bede was much less inclined to give place to persons. However, it is possible that the editors go too far in arguing from this that Bede's own origins were non-aristocratic: the chances that he too was a kinsman of Benedict Biscop are high, and his hostility to the power of family relationships within the cloister may have been the critique of an insider, not an outsider. The relationships among Biscop, Ceolfrith and the Northumbrian kings are highlighted, with especially useful comment on the circumstances of Ceolfrith's departure for Rome, which may have been a form of exile. Among many other useful points drawn to the reader's attention by the editors, it is worth noting the detailed attention paid to the Frankish kingdoms and Rome, and to the practicalities of travel in this period: Anglo-Saxon England is fully integrated into its surrounding world. Overall, therefore, this volume is a major contribution to our understanding of Bede and his times.