

OF WHEN IT WAS NECESSARY TO REMIND A BISHOP OF HIS DUTIES: LOOKING INTO BEDE'S LETTER TO EGBERT OF YORK

QUANDO ERA NECESSÁRIO RELEMBRAR UM BISPO DOS SEUS DEVERES: INVESTIGANDO A CARTA DE BEDA PARA EGBERT DE YORK

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Resumo: Bede's letter to Bishop Egbert could very well be seen as an urgent call for immediate changes at the Northumbrian Church. In his letter, the monk from Wearmouth-Jarrow denounces a series of abuses which were being committed by ecclesiastical members of his time. Not only does Bede's writing denounce the clergy's lack of moral values and negligence towards the preaching of the Word, but it also proposes specific actions to bring these issues to an end. This paper brings out some key elements from the referred historical source and tries to get some glimpses of a couple of Bede's views on what the real Church should be like. Scholars such as Blair (1990), Brown (2010), DeGregorio (2010), Mayr-Harting (1991) and Yorke (2014) among other ones have helped us to exploit the subjects which are brought here.

Palavras-chave: Anglo-Saxon England – Church – Bede.

Abstract: A carta de Beda ao bispo Egberto de York pode ser compreendida como um chamado urgente para mudanças na Igreja da Northumbria. Em sua carta, o monge de Wearmouth-Jarrow denuncia uma série de abusos que vinham sendo cometidos por membros eclesiásticos de seu tempo. Não apenas o texto de Beda denuncia a falta de valores morais por parte do clero e a negligência em pregar a Palavra, mas também propõe ações específicas para pôr um fim a esses problemas. Este artigo traz alguns elementos centrais contidos na referida fonte histórica e tenta vislumbrar algumas visões de Beda sobre como a verdadeira Igreja deveria ser. Pesquisadores tais como Blair (1990), Brown (2010), DeGregorio (2010), Mayr-Harting (1991) e Yorke (2014) entre outros nos auxiliaram a explorar as propostas aqui trazidas.

Keywords: Inglaterra Anglo-Saxã – Igreja – Beda.

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Opening Remarks:

On the fifth day of the eleventh month in the year of 734, the monk Bede (c. 673-735) from the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastery, located in northern England², wrote a letter to Bishop Egbert of York. In his letter, Bede exposes his deep concerns regarding the lack of morality among many ecclesiastical figures of the Northumbrian Church³.

The present paper brings as its source the aforementioned document. Comprehending in which ways, through Bede's perspective, the Church at the kingdom of Northumbria should organise itself and how its many ecclesiastical members were expected to behave is the ultimate goal of this piece of writing. My work is permeated by a central research question: identifying the authority figures which have been taken by Bede so that he could have a solid basis to justify his critical commentaries on the precarious state of the Church in Northumbria and support his reformist beliefs, which he wished to see implemented within the Anglo-Saxon Church. But, before going any further into this matter, it is more than necessary to make some brief descriptive considerations regarding the document which is about to be studied.

It is necessary to clarify that the access I had to the historical source was through a critically commented modern English version by McClure and Roger Collins (2008)⁴ of Bede's original Latin text from 734. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (2008)⁵ is part of a series of publications, entitled *Oxford World Classics*, by *Oxford University Press*. The translated material, which is the basis for my study, has had the English historian Charles Plummer's (P) edition from the London BL

² At this paper, *England* is used just for geographical reference. There are no connections whatsoever to nowadays country or nation.

³ We understand *Church* through the meaning conveyed by the term *ecclesiae*, which brings together individuals from various social groups towards a common factor: the Christian faith. As we are analysing what is commonly known as Anglo-Saxon England in the eighth century, we should see the lexical term *Church* as *(C)hurch*: a social body which is not entirely centralised, but who see the Pope as a figure of authority, the leader who brings close to each other the different *ecclesias* that were scattered throughout the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon English kingdoms.

⁴ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. In: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357.

⁵ This publication is a composition of the following Bede's texts, which have been translated into English: *Chronica maiore* (725), *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (731) and *Venerabilis Baedae epistola ad Ecgerctum antistitem* (734).

MS Harley 4688, a twelfth-century manuscript, as its reference text⁶ What is important to be mentioned is that the manuscript which Plummer had access to writing his edition is not the oldest one which brings Bede's text (734). In the seventeenth century, more precisely in 1664, Sir James Ware had already edited Bede's letter, in Dublin, from a manuscript dated from the tenth century.⁷

It would not be any inappropriate to think of Bede as someone whose life was entirely dedicated to serving the eighth-century Northumbrian ecclesiastical microcosm at the twin-monasteries in Wearmouth-Jarrow. It is believed that Bede was born around 673 and joined the Wearmouth monastery, having Benedict Biscop as his first mentor, at the age of seven, in 680.⁸ By having these years and this geographical location in mind, we see that the religious environment in which Bede inhabited was very closely related to continental Roman traditions. The quarrels between the Irish-Celtic and the Roman parties were past. The Synod of Whitby held in 664, presided by King Oswiu of Northumbria, brought the Easter dating and the tonsure arguments to an end: the Church in England chose to follow the Roman fashion of worship.⁹ The conception itself of the monastery at which Bede was a member of demonstrates how connected was eighth-century English Christianity to Roman Christian tradition. Wearmouth-Jarrow founder figure, Benedict Biscop (c. 628-690), a man of Northumbrian noble stock, went on a number of journeys to the

⁶ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Introduction. *In*: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. ix-xxxii, p. xxx.

⁷ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Introduction. *In*: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. ix-xxxii, p. xix.

⁸ DEGREGORIO, Scott. Chronological table of important dates. *In*: _____. (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. xviii-xx, p. xix.

⁹ STENTON, Frank. The conversion of the English people. *In*: _____. **Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 96-176, p. 123. For more information about the Synod of Whitby (664) see the following reference works:

CAHILL, Thomas. The end of the world: is there any hope?. *In*: _____. **How the Irish Saved Civilization**. New York: Anchor Books, 1996, pp. 197-218. DAILEY, E. T. To choose one Easter from three: Oswiu's decision and the Northumbrian synod of AD 664. **Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland**, Turnhout, n. 26, pp. 47-64, 2015.

GETHING, Paul; ALBERT, Edoardo. Religion. *In*: _____. **Northumbria: the lost kingdom**. Brimscombe Port: The History Press, 2012, pp. 51-70.

MAYR-HARTING, Henry. The Synod of Whitby. *In*: _____. **The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp. 103-113.

YORKE, Barbara. The issues of a 'Celtic' church and the dating of Easter. *In*: **The Conversion of Britain: 600-800**. London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 115-118.

continent in order to acquire different sorts of Church reading material and relics to his monastery.¹⁰ Of the building-up of Wearmouth, Ryan (2013, p. 168) says that:

Benedict returned to the Continent to recruit stonemasons and glaziers who could build a church for him in the Roman style, and he ensured through this and subsequent trips to Rome and elsewhere that Wearmouth and later Jarrow (founded in 682), were well-stocked with relics, paintings and books.¹¹

As it will be discussed in due time, through the quotation of fragments of the documentation to be analysed, Bede had a strong sense of asceticism. The Venerable Bede's ascetic mentality might have been a result of the monastic Rule that was present at Wearmouth-Jarrow and the many different books and reading material he has come across through the years. By having Eddius Stephanus' *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi*¹² from the eighth century as a source, it is well known that the Benedictine Rule was present in England since the second half of the seventh century, right after the Synod of Whitby. However, it is not possible to know for certain whether or not the Wearmouth-Jarrow communities followed the Benedictine Rule because, at that time, there were many rules throughout the whole Christendom.¹³

This was an age when there were many different rules, an age when individual founders, such men as Columbanus at Lexeuil, Leander and his brother, Isidore, at Seville, and of course Benedict Biscop himself, composed their own rules for their own foundations.¹⁴

Foot (2009, pp. 56-57)¹⁵ says that the Rule of St. Benedict seems to have been known to some extent in England since the seventh century and might have guided some religious communities in southern England. If one takes Professor Foot's remarks into account, they will see that as a community searched for a Rule to guide

¹⁰ RYAN, Martin J. From tribal chieftains to Christian kings. *In*: HIGHAM, Nicholas J.; RYAN, Martin J. **The Anglo-Saxon World**. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 166-172, p. 168.

¹¹ For full reference see footnote number 9.

¹² COLGRAVE, Bertram. **The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus**. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 99.

¹³ BLAIR, Peter H. Gaulish and Italian influences. *In*: _____. **The World of Bede**. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 117-129, p. 125.

¹⁴ For full reference see footnote number 13.

¹⁵ FOOT, Sarah. The ideal minster. *In*: _____. **Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c. 600-900**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 34-72, pp.56-7.

them, a mix of different rules may have sprung – perhaps this was what we had within Wearmouth-Jarrow's walls:

In the process of creating a mixed rule for their own use, many communities may have turned for guidance to separate rules – the Rule of St Benedict, the writings of Columbanus, one or other of the rules of Casarius of Arles, perhaps also the rules of St Augustine or of St Basil, both of which were well-known in the Latin West.¹⁶

When we look at the works Bede had access to, it is possible to see that the Latin tradition was heavily present at the Northumbrian twin-monasteries' library. Written works associated to what is known as Latin tradition such as Augustine's, Ambrose's and Jerome's would share the Wearmouth-Jarrow shelves with the contributions from later generation thinkers like Isidore and Pope Gregory I, for example. Translations into Latin from Greek documents like Eusebius's, Basil's and John Chrysostom's could have been easily found at Wearmouth-Jarrow as well and were certainly accessible to Bede.¹⁷ As Love (2010, p. 43) says the nature of the content of all that material written by those Church men would vary:

The literature which they produced was dominated by commentaries on the Bible and other aids to its study such as rudimentary onomastic dictionaries, theological treatises, sermons and letters, rules of monastic communities, but also accounts of the Church's early history, stories of the saints, Latin hymns for use in worship and other kinds of poetry too, even versifications of the Scriptures. Many of these works were among the volumes which came to Wearmouth-Jarrow [...].¹⁸

By having a combination of a monastic rule, which we do not know for sure which one it was, and the various works which Wearmouth-Jarrow's library had, it is possible to see how present asceticism and orthodoxy guided the life of those at the monasteries located on the banks of the rivers Wear and Tyne. Thus, it would be more than natural and, to some extent, expected to see these two Christian features

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

¹⁷ LOVE, Rosalind. The world of Latin learning. //: DEGREEGORGIO, Scott (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 40-54, p. 43.

¹⁸ For full reference see footnote number 17.

reflected in Bede's writing, as it is indeed seen in his letter to the Bishop of York from 734.

Of Bede's Impressions on the Church of Northumbria:

To the most dear and most reverend bishop Egbert, greetings from Bede the servant of Christ.¹⁹ This is the opening used by Bede when writing to his addressee. Although this initial address is associated to the text genre of letters, it is possible to see this document of Bede as a proper manifesto asking Egbert of York for the implementation of a series of clerical reforms at the Northumbrian Church.²⁰

It is known that Bede was close to the bishop of York. Egbert had been Bede's pupil at Wearmouth-Jarrow before being consecrated bishop.²¹ At different moments in his writing, not only does the ecclesiastical figure from Wearmouth-Jarrow urge Egbert to fulfil his role of bishop in a responsible manner, but also denounces a series of episcopal abuses which were being committed by members of the high clergy of his days.²² One must keep in mind how related these two individuals were in order not to misunderstand Bede's commentaries. The way I see it, there is no contempt in Bede's words. Bede's letter should not be seen as a written statement from a smaller clerical figure who openly challenges the authority of his bishop. Instead of it, this letter reveals the moment when a master reprimands his former-pupil. Let us see what Bede has to say to his former-pupil:

I urge your Holiness, my most beloved Father in Christ, to remember to uphold by both holy living and teaching the most sacred office which the Author of all dignities and the bestower of all spiritual gifts has conferred upon you. Neither of these virtues is complete without the other; for the bishop who lives a holy life should not neglect the duty of teaching, and he would be condemned if he gave good instruction but failed to follow it in practice. But he who truly does both is the slave who joyfully awaits the coming of the Lord, hoping soon to hear the words 'Rejoice you good and faithful slave; because

¹⁹ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. *In*: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, p. 343.

²⁰ For full reference see footnote number 6.

²¹ BLAIR, Peter H. Change in the west. *In*: _____. **The World of Bede**. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 3-10, p. 3.

²² BROWN, Michelle P. Bede's life in context. *In*: DEGRORIO, Scott (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 3-24, p. 9.

you have been trustworthy over these small matters, I shall place you in charge of greater ones; join in your Master's happiness.' But if anyone—may it never happen!—receives the office of bishop and does not take care to keep himself free from evil by living well, and does not ensure that the people under his authority are corrected by instruction and punishment, what will happen to him at the hour of the coming of the Lord, the time of which is unknown to him, is made clear in the Gospel; where He says to the useless slave: 'Throw him in the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.²³

George Brown (2010, p. 91)²⁴ says at the same time Bede was subject to episcopal authority, he also had a Christian orthodox moral doctrinal instructor role to play. Furthermore, according to the same academic, Bede would support his right to reproach other clerical individuals based on his belief that throughout the grace and inspiration of divine power, monks who knew and were close to the Word had the duty of instructing other clergy members, and, if the occasion called for it, bishops would be included in this group to be educated.

Bede's critical attitude towards the Northumbrian episcopate has to be related to the coming and flourishing of monasteries in the Late Antiquity religious scenario: a movement that at first was apart from the Church, but in a hierarchical way was still part of it.²⁵ Something which should be emphasised is the fact that since its origins in the late sixth century, the Church in England was attached to monastic culture.

Monasticism in its early history had evolved independently of episcopal control and was sometimes outright hostile to it, but since the late third century had been incorporated into the institutional Church, so much so that from the time of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), himself a monk, monasticism furnished the Church with the men who became bishops and, as Gregory's *Book of Pastoral Care* demonstrates, established monastic asceticism as the ideal for the clergy. From the time of the mission to England by St Augustine, first archbishop of Canterbury (ruled 597– c. 609), and his monastic companions nearly all the bishops of England were monks. Bede was a monk in a monastery whose founder Benedict Biscop (d. 689) was

²³ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. //: ____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, pp. 348-349.

²⁴ BROWN, George H. Bede both subject and superior to the episcopacy. //: DANIELSON, Sigrid and GATTI, Evan A (Eds.). **Envisioning the Bishop: image and the episcopacy in the Middle Ages**. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010, pp. 91-102, p. 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

devoted to the pope and had obtained papal exemption from local episcopal control. Bede, who frequently assured his readers that in all his works he was following the footsteps of the Fathers of the Church, honoured the pope's apostolic succession and acknowledged papal authority in the Catholic Church [...].²⁶

Strong links bounded Wearmouth to Rome: the papal bill granted by Pope Agatho would set Biscop's monastery free from any sort of local control and interference, it would also directly bind it to the Roman episcopate: Wearmouth had to obey the commands from the Bishop of Rome in every single matter. Agatho's bill can be seen as an enabler: through the exempt of local authority, Wearmouth has gained some high status, thus, making it possible for its founder to be granted more lands in 682 to build another monastery in Jarrow.²⁷ By looking back at the previous quoted extract from Bede's letter, it is possible to see that the Church in Anglo-Saxon England was a monastic-like body.

One of the central points highlighted by Bede in his text to Egbert is the poor state of morality at which certain Northumbrian monasteries found themselves in the first half of the eighth century:

[...] there are many places, as we all know, that only in the most foolish way deserve the name of monastery, having absolutely nothing of real monastic life about them. Some of these I should wish to be turned by the authority of a council from luxury to chastity, from vanity to verity, from indulgence of the stomach and gullet to continence and heartfelt piety [...].²⁸

Such brief passage enables us to have a glimpse of Bede's conception of monastic life: a place where chastity, the search for God's truth and charity should always be found. As far as the Wearmouth-Jarrow monk was concerned, what he referred to as 'fake monasteries' were useless both to ecclesiastical and temporal powers.

²⁶ For full reference see footnote number 25.

²⁷ RAMIREZ, Janina. Wilfrid: God's nobleman. *In*: _____. **Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England: the private lives of the saints**. London: WH Allen, 2015, pp. 199-226, p. 219-220.

²⁸ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. *In*: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, pp. 349-350.

Such places which are in the common phrase 'useless to God and man', because they neither serve God by following a regular monastic life nor provide soldiers and helpers for the secular powers who might defend our people from the barbarians, are both numerous and large [...].²⁹

Thus, we may see Bede as an individual whose concerns go beyond religion. Bede was close to certain noble and royal secular men like King Ceolwulf of Northumbria, who was the patron of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (731).³⁰ Bede was fully aware of how helpful secular figures would be when putting into practice the changes he wished to see in the very heart of the Church of Northumbria. As a matter of fact, royal support would be vital to this end. By mentioning ancient Old Testament Judah kings like David, Solomon and Zedekiah, just like specific passages from the Book of Isaiah such as Isa. 58.6, which is found in the Vulgate, Bede proposes that Egbert, with the assistance of the bishop's cousin, King Ceolwulf, to nullify previous documentation which had been issued by former monarchs that validated the granting of lands to the establishment of certain monasteries:

Following this example, you holiness should, together with the most pious king, tear up the irreligious and wicked deeds and documents of earlier rulers of our people, and should provide in our land those things which are useful either to God or to lay society [...]. It is shocking to say how many places that go by the name of monasteries have been taken under the control of men who have no knowledge of true monastic life [...]. There are others, laymen who have no love for the monastic life nor for military service, who commit a graver crime by giving money to the kings and obtaining land under the pretext of building monasteries, in which they can give freer rein of their libidinous taste; these lands they have assigned to them in hereditary right through written royal edicts, and these charters, as if to make them really worthy in the sight of God, they arrange to be witnessed in writing by bishops, abbots, and the most powerful laymen. Thus they have gained unjust right over fields and villages, free from both

²⁹ For full reference see footnote number 28.

³⁰ RYAN, Martin J. From Tribal Chieftains to Christian Kings. In: HIGHAM, Nicholas J.; RYAN, Martin J. **The Anglo-Saxon World**. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 166-172, p. 171.

divine and human legal obligations; as laymen ruling over monks they serve only their own wishes.³¹

As it is said by McClure and Collins (2008, p. xxxi)³² in their introductory study, if Bede's reformist ideas had been implemented, the principle of land holding through official royal written assent would have been completely undermined. By still relying on McClure and Collins (2008, p. xxxi)³³ considerations, we are told this type of system which guaranteed the possession of land through written books or charters derived from Roman legal practices and was introduced in England at the beginning of the seventh century.

When it comes to the matter of the laity who was ahead of religious institutions, this issue must be exploited within more detail. Through the contribution of Mayr-Harting (1991, pp. 252-253)³⁴, we know that the lawful right to possess land through written proof was developed in England by men who were close to the Church and were acquainted with Late Roman canonical and secular laws. What there had been before it in Anglo-Saxon England was a system in which a *gesith* or *thegn*³⁵ was allowed to hold land throughout his lifetime, but at the moment of his death or betrayal or exile the land would return to the monarch's possession who would give it to a new member of his warrior aristocracy. Through the seventh century onwards, the Roman Vulgar Law started to be adopted throughout the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms:

Out of this law, developed Anglo-Saxon book-land and book-right. The most important features of book (or charter)-right for our present purposes, were freedom of the land from secular (and especially military) service, the perpetual tenure and right of free disposal – in other words the *ius perpetuum* of the Roman Vulgar Law.³⁶

³¹ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. *In*: ____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, pp. 350-351.

³² MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Introduction. *In*: ____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. ix-xxxii, p. xxxi.

³³ For full reference see footnote number 32.

³⁴ MAYR-HARTING, Henry. Church and laity. *In*: _____. **The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp. 240-261, pp. 252-253.

³⁵ Both terms *gesith* and *thegn* refer to an individual who was a member of the warrior aristocracy and was bound to a specific lord by public oaths.

³⁶ MAYR-HARTING, Henry. Church and laity. *In*: _____. **The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp. 240-261, p. 252.

Until the end of the seventh century and beginning of the following one, the right of owning land in a perpetual fashion was exclusively limited to those properties granted for ecclesiastical purposes. Through this legal device, the laity found a way to make sure that the land which they have been granted would remain permanently within their family possession: turning such bits of land into monasteries. This way the position of abbot would be transferred to the family who had been given the land. The family members would be turned into monks and nuns and would have the right of holding revenue to the keeping of their religious houses.³⁷ But, hereditary inheritance would not necessarily take place. Ecclesiastical right, also known as monastic right of holding land in a permanent manner, could be passed on to any successor who had been chosen by the former holder. Those who had the right of having land could also alienate it if it was their will, this way *ius perpetuum* and *liberas potestas* would be entangled in this new Anglo-Saxon configuration of land holding.³⁸

Something we should not fail to notice is the fact that in his letter Bede does not present any assessment criteria to evaluate the monasteries in Northumbria. How would one know in a systematic and practical way if a particular monastery would be qualified to be seen as a true place where God is served, and not a mere moral decadent building under the title of a monastery?³⁹ To this question, Bede's letter does not provide us any answer. Another interesting fact is that the Venerable Bede seems to turn a blind eye to the origins of his own monastery: Benedict Biscop belonged to a noble Northumbrian family who were bound to the royal house of Northumbria. Biscop himself had been a *thegn* of King Oswiu.⁴⁰ Ironically enough, Wearmouth-Jarrow is a product of a noble family who had withdrawn from royal and

³⁷ WOOD, Susan. Some non-Frankish patterns of family interest in monasteries. //r. _____. **The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 140-175, p. 153.

³⁸ For full reference see footnote number 37.

³⁹ For full reference see footnote number 32.

⁴⁰ . RAMIREZ, Janina. Wilfrid: God's nobleman. //r. _____. **Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England: the private lives of the saints**. London: WH Allen, 2015, pp. 199-226, p. 219.

military services. This means that the genesis of the twin-monasteries is to be found in the very fashion condemned by Bede in his letter to Egbert of York.⁴¹

Of Bede's Impressions on the Tax for the Bishops:

You must appreciate what a serious crime is committed by those who most sedulously demand earthly recompense from those who listen to them, but at the same time devote no attention to their eternal salvation by way of preaching, moral exhortation, or rebukes. Be moved by this and weigh it carefully, dear bishop. For we have heard, and it is indeed well known, that there are many of the villages and hamlets of our people located in inaccessible mountains or in dense forests, where a bishop has never been seen of the course of many years performing his ministry and revealing the divine grace. But not one of these places is immune from paying the taxes that are due to the bishop. Not only does the bishop never appear in such places, to confirm the baptized by the laying-on of his hand, neither do they have any teacher to instruct in the truth of the faith or to enable them to distinguish between good and evil deeds. Thus it may come about that not only do the bishops not evangelize freely and confirm the faithful, but also they do something much worse, which is having received money from their congregations, something the Lord forbade, they neglect the ministry of the word which the Lord ordered [...].⁴²

Thus Bede denounces episcopal greed for money in Anglo-Saxon England of his days. To contrast the wicked behaviour of such bishops to what the Vulgate presents, Bede makes use of a Samuel passage: Sam. 12: 2-4, which says the priest Samuel's attitude was just the opposite when compared to the one shown by the erroneous Anglo-Saxon bishops. This way, Bede could be easily compared to the Old Testament prophets who openly rebuke corrupt religious leaders who are full of pride, and do not have any zeal for those to whom they are expected to teach God's laws.⁴³

The extract that has been quoted above enables us to have some partial understanding of the taxation that lay society had to pay to the eighth-century

⁴¹ For full reference see footnote number 39.

⁴² MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. *In*: _____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, p. 347.

⁴³ BROWN, George H. Bede both subject and superior to the episcopacy. *In*: DANIELSON, Sigrid and GATTI, Evan A (Eds.). **Envisioning the Bishop: image and the episcopacy in the Middle Ages**. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010, pp. 91-102, p. 97.

Church in England. The oldest historical source in Anglo-Saxon England which mentions that taxes⁴⁴ had to be paid to the Church is known as the Laws of King Ine⁴⁵, a Wessex monarch who ruled from 688 to 725, being these laws dated at some point between the years of 688 and 694:⁴⁶

4. Church dues shall be rendered at Martinmas. If anyone fails to do so, he shall forfeit 60 shillings and render 12 times the church dues [in addition].⁴⁷

61. Church dues shall be paid from the estate and the house where a man is residing at midwinter.⁴⁸

It is not known for certain if Ine's taxation system was applied in eighth-century Northumbria. Bede's letter does not offer us many details about the nature of the taxes to be paid for the bishops. In Bede's original Latin text the word used to refer to this type of tax is *tributis*, a very vague lexical item to state that the members from Northumbrian congregations had to pay their dues in cash and/or agricultural products, for instance. What is worth mentioning is that no matter whether it was southern, as we know from Ine's Laws, or northern England, having Bede's letter as a source, Church taxes were compulsory in Early Medieval England. Moreover, depending on the area, taxation could have been reinforced through legal systems, as we can see from the Laws of Ine. According to the laws issued by this king of Wessex, Church taxes had to be paid at the Martinmas, a festive occasion in honour of Saint Martin of Tours: a celebration which would happen after the last harvest right before winter when the slaughter of cattle, pigs, geese and wild animals like deer would happen.⁴⁹ Thus, it does not seem too inappropriate to believe that the taxation mentioned by Bede would involve agrarian products.

⁴⁴ We chose not to use the word tithe(s) because neither in Bede's letter nor in the Laws of King Ine we have the mentioning of what was known as *decima*.

⁴⁵ MCCLURE, Judith. and COLLINS, Roger. Explanatory notes. //: _____. (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp.358-429, p. 427.

⁴⁶ ATTENBOROUGH, F. L. The laws of Ine and of Alfred. //: _____. **The Laws of the Earliest English Kings**. London: Cambridge University Press, 1922, pp. 34-93, p. 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴⁹ WALSH, Martin W. Medieval English "Martinmesse": The Archaeology of a Forgotten Festival. //: **Folklore**, London. v. 111. n. 2. pp.231-254, 2000, pp. 231-235.

As Bede tells us congregations should see their bishop's face at least once a year. This matter was a challenge to Northumbrian bishops because Northumbria was one of the largest kingdoms in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England. The Wearmouth-Jarrow monk proposes an alternative to solve the problematic situation of those villages which hardly ever received the visit of their bishops: dividing these gigantic bishoprics into smaller units and nominating more clergymen from Northumbrian origin:

For who cannot see how much better it would be for the enormous weight of ecclesiastical government to be divided up amongst many, who could easily take their share, than for one to be oppressed by a load which he cannot carry? For the holy pope Gregory, in a letter that he sent to the blessed archbishop Augustine about the future and the preservation in Christ of the faith of our people, ordered that twelve bishops should be ordained after all had been converted. Over these the bishop of York, receiving the pallium from the apostolic see, would be the metropolitan.⁵⁰

Even though Bede's presents a Church structure which have been envisioned by Gregory, the Great, a man of undisputed authority, apparently, Bede's appeal for having large dioceses split has not been given much attention. Two reasons may explain why Bede's proposals were refused: a) Anglo-Saxon bishop prestige was closely related to the fact that a bishop would be associated to a whole tribe or kingdom – this matter was discussed at the Synod of Hertford (672),⁵¹ presided by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury: the Anglo-Saxon bishops debated among themselves if there was the need of creating new dioceses through the division of the present ones⁵² and b) the dimensions of a particular bishopric could influence directly on its revenue: the larger the bishopric would be the more revenue it would get.⁵³

⁵⁰ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. *In*: ____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, p. 349.

⁵¹ STENTON, Frank. The conversion of the English people. *In*: _____. **Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 96-176, p. 134. For more information about the Synod of Hertford (672) see the following reference work: MAYR-HARTING, Henry. Wilfrid. *In*: _____. **The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp. 130-147.

⁵² MAYR-HARTING, Henry. Wilfrid. *In*: _____. **The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England**. 3. ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp. 130-147, pp.130-132.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Mayr-Harting (1991, p. 135) states that at that time, Anglo-Saxon churches would count on different ways to get their revenue. “[...] there were offerings of money at the altar during mass and fees paid for burials, as well as tithes which were at this time voluntary”.⁵⁴ Taking what has been said so far into consideration, money collection was important to the Church in England in the seventh and eighth centuries: the Church would offer ecclesiastical services provided the laity paid the clergy for such performed services.

I hold the belief that the tributes paid to the Church in Anglo-Saxon England would have a social role as well. Taxation could be seen as an attempt by the bishops to establish their episcopal authority. The problem was that, in Anglo-Saxon times, since the coming of Christian missions, it was quite common for kings to play a very active part in the business of the Church within their domains.⁵⁵ Royal interference would be so frequent that bishops could easily be exempted from their duties, imprisoned or exiled if they contradicted the wills of a king⁵⁶, as it is told in the work of Eddius Satephanus: *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi*. To illustrate this dependence which the clergy had on the monarchic figures, we just need to remember Bede’s letter extract which demonstrates the auxiliary function that King Ceolwulf would play alongside Egbert in nullifying the land donations which had been granted to the so-called fake monasteries in the kingdom of Northumbria.

Of Bede and His Ecclesiastical Reform:

Even though, in his letter to Egbert of York, Bede has not used the word *reform* or any equivalent term at any moment to refer to the changes which he wanted to see implemented at the Church of Northumbria, respectable scholars whose research focuses on the study of the British Islands in the Middle Ages, like Michelle Brown

⁵⁴ For full reference see footnote number 53.

⁵⁵ YORKE, Barbara. The conversion of Britain to Christianity. *In*: _____. **The Conversion of Britain: 600-800**. London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 98-133, p. 127.

⁵⁶ For full reference see footnote number 53.

(2010)⁵⁷ make use this noun and its variations when critically thinking about the content of Bede's letter:

His letter suggests reforms (pp. 345, 349), laments the hypocrisy of those who founded pseudo-monasteries on their land for temporal benefit (pp. 351–2) and fears for the military strength of the kingdom should too many youths enter those bogus institutions (p. 350).⁵⁸

Bede targets at two very specific social groups: the corrupt and greedy clergy members and those individuals from lay society whose private interests had led them to join monastic life as monks and nuns – a practice which only aggravated the deterioration process of the Early Middle Ages English Church even more. The Wearmouth-Jarrow monk offers a single answer to these two problems: asceticism. According to Bede's views, through a centralised force it would be possible to reintroduce or reinforce the ascetic and orthodox Christian way of life within those monasteries of ill repute. As Bede's writing reveals, local bishops would be the core centre of this centralised force:

[...] All the more so, since it is commonly known that you bishops normally say that what happens in individual monasteries is subject to your episcopal investigation and jurisdiction and not that of the king or any other secular lord, unless it turns out that someone in the monastery has offended against those rulers. It is your duty, I say, to ensure that in the places that are consecrated to God the devil does not set up his kingdom, in case conflict replaces peace, discord piety, drunkenness sobriety, and fornication and murder take the throne of charity and chastity; lest there be some found amongst you of whom it needed to be said: 'I saw the evil-doers buried, who, when they were alive, stood in the holy place and were praised in the city as men of good deeds'⁵⁹

By looking into this passage, we see that it was up to local ecclesiastical leaders to supervise what was going on within the walls of their dioceses' monasteries. Kings could appoint or confiscate the lands of a bishop⁶⁰, as it has

⁵⁷ BROWN, Michelle. Bede's life in context. //: DEGREGORIO, Scott (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 3-24, p. 10.

⁵⁸ For full reference see footnote number 57.

⁵⁹ MCCLURE, Judith; COLLINS, Roger. Bede's letter to Egbert. //: _____ (Eds.). **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 343-357, p. 353.

⁶⁰ For full reference see foot note number 55.

happened to Wilfrid, or a bishop could be sent into exile by the monarch figure, losing all his possessions and being dismissed from his pastoral duties within a certain kingdom. However, as it is revealed by Bede's letter, the only one who should manage monastic affairs was the bishop. Thus, the bishop figure would play a vital part in a local ecclesiastical centralisation process: secular leaders could interfere in the politics between the kingdom and its Church, but the secular leader had no right whatsoever to have any say when it came to daily Church issues. Making sure peace, sobriety, charity and chastity were put into practice by the brethren and the sistren was one of the bishop's exclusive responsibilities.

It has been previously said that the letter addressed to Egbert manifests Bede's discontent towards the corruption and the abuses inside the ecclesiastical microcosm of the northern English Church. One of the issues denounced by the Wearmouth-Jarrow monk was simony, whose roots are to be found in the greedy attitudes of some members of the high clergy. It goes beyond any dispute that Bede considered himself a monk, a servant of Christ, but he was also fully aware of the other social roles he had to perform: a historian and an instructor of the Christian orthodox doctrines. Bede has also deeply studied a wide range of biblical texts: the Old Testaments Books of Nehemiah and Ezra are among such texts. If one compares Bede's remarks on the two mentioned biblical books and his piece of writing to Egbert, they will find similarities between the call for reform in eighth-century Northumbria and the corrupt Jewish past from the Old Testament.⁶¹

[...] Striking an equally contemporary note, he [Bede] relates the unfair taxation that some Jews imposed on their less well-off brethren (see Nehemiah 5:1 – 4) to those clerics in his own day 'who exact an immense tax and weight of worldly goods from those whom they claim to be in charge of while in return giving nothing for their eternal salvation either by teaching them or by providing them with examples of good living (*On Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 184) – thus anticipating another burning issue of his letter, episcopal greed and simony (cf. *Letter to Bishop Egbert*, p. 347).⁶²

⁶¹ DEGREGORIO, Scott. Bede and the Old Testament. *In*: _____ (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 127-141, pp. 138-139.

⁶² For full reference see footnote number 61.

The biblical figure of Ezra is also used by Bede so that he could introduce his propositions of reformist ascetic and orthodox nature:

Thus Bede emphasizes that Ezra's task as scribe was not only the preservation and transmission of Holy Writ but also its learned dissemination through preaching and teaching (*On Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 108-9). Hence Bede's Ezra is something like a Bedan exegetical *doctor* who reforms others through the interpretation of sacred texts!⁶³

These two extracts allow us to visualise how Bede makes use of very specific Old Testament narratives to shape his letter so that he would present to the ecclesiastical authorities of his time the urgent need of moral re-edification at the Northumbrian Church.⁶⁴

The problem was that Bede was a single yelling voice trying to fix what he thought was wrong in the whole English Church. Generally speaking, his proposals had a negative reception among the ecclesiastical authorities of his days: neither previous concessions which had been given to immoral monasteries have been nullified nor massive bishoprics like Northumbria's have been split into smaller dioceses. Some evidence which proves the unpopularity of this letter's reformist content is the single fact that whereas many writings of Bede like his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (731) had hundreds of copies scattered throughout England and the continent⁶⁵, the letter to Egbert is to be found in only three manuscripts. This makes me strongly believe there has been very little interest, in the Middle Ages, to spread Bede's reformist ideas through the various British and continental Christian spaces.

Closing Remarks:

⁶³ DEGREGORIO, Scott. Bede and the Old Testament. *In*: _____ (Ed.). **The Cambridge Companion to Bede**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 127-141, p. 139.

⁶⁴ For full reference see footnote number 63.

⁶⁵ BROWN, George H. Bede both subject and superior to the episcopacy. *In*: DANIELSON, Sigrid and GATTI, Evan A (Eds.). **Envisioning the Bishop: image and the episcopacy in the Middle Ages**. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010, pp. 91-102, pp. 97-8.

By denouncing the dilapidated moral state of the Anglo-Saxon Church, Bede openly manifests his deep dissatisfaction with the lack of basic Christian principles within the eighth-century English ecclesiastical spaces. According to the Wearmouth-Jarrow monk, asceticism, to be achieved through the following of a Rule and the implementation of innovative actions like the annulment of donation charters and the division of bishoprics, would bring the problem of those greedy clergymen and laymen who were acting as if they were religious leaders ahead of monastic houses to an end.

Although Bede's piece of writing to Egbert of York brings reformists propositions, perhaps, it would not be right to have the conception of a term like 'Bedan Reformation'. Neither the word *reform* nor any of its equivalents were used by Bede in his 734 text. I hold the believe that through the contribution of fragments of texts from Old Testament authority figures and more recent texts like Gregory I's, Bede did not intend to propose an entirely new configuration to the Christian English communities of his time. Rather than doing it, he wanted to remind the Anglo-Saxon clergy of their primary role: the pastoral zeal for the spreading and preaching of the Christian faith.

It has already been stated that Bede did not envision some whole new ecclesiastical structural configuration in Northumbria, but his suggested means for putting the monasteries and the clergy of his island in a better condition are undoubtedly quite peculiar: dividing bishoprics into smaller administrative units, which would consequently lead to the undermining of episcopal power, and revoking past secular leaders' decrees.

The historical document which has been scrutinised in this brief study reveals an eighth-century figure who was very closely attached to ecclesiastical continental Roman traditions and whose plans for the Church in England were of a reformist nature. Even though the Venerable Bede has focused on dealing with very local and specific Anglo-Saxon insular religious issues, one should not disregard or underrate

by any means the reformist conceptions that he had in mind for the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Church.