THE GREGORIAN MISSION TO KENT IN BEDE'S *ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY*

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Richard Shaw

ROUTLEDGE

The Gregorian Mission to Kent in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

Historians have long relied on Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* for their narrative of early Christian Anglo-Saxon England, but what material lay behind Bede's own narrative? What were his sources, and how reliable were they? How much was based on contemporary material? How much on later evidence? What was rhetoric? What represents his own agendas, deductions or even inventions?

This book represents the first systematic attempt to answers these questions for Bede's *History*, taking as a test case the coherent narrative of the Gregorian mission and the early Church in Kent. Through this critique, it becomes possible, for the first time, to catalogue Bede's sources and assess their origins, provenance and value – even reconstructing the original shape of many that are now lost. The striking paucity of his primary sources for the period emerges clearly. This study explains the reason why this was the case. At the same time, Bede is shown to have had access to a greater variety of texts, especially documentary, than has previously been realised.

This volume thus reveals Bede the historian at work, with implications for understanding his monastery, library and intellectual milieu together with the world in which he lived and worked. It also showcases what can be achieved using a similar methodology for the rest of the *Ecclesiastical History* and for other contemporary works.

Most importantly, thanks to this study, it is now feasible – indeed, necessary – for subsequent historians to base their reconstructions of the events of c.600 not on Bede but on his sources. As a result, this book lays the foundations for future work on the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England and offers the prospect of replacing and not merely refining Bede's narrative of the history of early Christian Kent.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested.

ISBN: 978-1-138-06081-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-16285-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by codeMantra

This book is dedicated,
in grateful memory,
to Lily Shaw and Gladys Weare:
thank you

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Acknowledgements

It is a great pleasure to be able to thank the many people who have helped me in the composition of this book. First and foremost is Alexander Callander Murray, who was my supervisor for the doctorate out of which this work developed. The wise guidance I have received from Sandy is only matched by his generosity: he has truly been a mentor.

Other scholars have been scarcely less helpful: my colleagues and friends at Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College; Alexander Andrée, Michael D. Elliot, Nick Everett, Eduardo Fabbro and Andy Orchard, among others, at the University of Toronto; Peter Darby, Paul Hilliard, Maírín MacCarron, Conor O'Brien, Sharon Rowley, Alan Thacker, Barbara Yorke and others associated with Bedenet at Kalamazoo and Leeds; and, finally, Henrietta Leyser and other teachers and guides from my time at Oxford – many now sadly departed, including James Campbell, Rees Davis, Maurice Keen and, especially, Patrick Wormald.

I would also like to thank everyone at Routledge involved with the production of this book, particularly Michael Greenwood, a true gentleman. Gratitude is also due to the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the fellowships they provided, which financially supported the research behind this study.

My greatest thanks must go to my family. This book is the fruit of many sacrifices on their behalf. My debt to my parents, grandmother, and great-aunt for the support they have provided can never be repaid – and it is to the latter two that this book is dedicated.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to my wife, Christine, and to my children, who have been a constant source of encouragement and inspiration throughout my work.

Abbreviations

AnonVC	Anonymous *Life of Cuthbert*
AnonVCeo	Anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith*
CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*
Colgrave and Mynors	Bede. *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors, Oxford, 1991
DTR	Bede. *De temporum ratione*
Elmham, *History*	Thomas of Elmham. *Historia Monasteria S. Augustini Cantuariensis*
Gregory, *Histories*	Gregory of Tours. *Historiarum libri X*
Gregory, *Letters*	Gregory the Great. *Registrum Epistolarum*. References are given to the *MGH* edition: translations are taken from Martyn, 2004
HA	Bede. *Historia abbatum*
HE	Bede. *Historia ecclesiastica*
LP	*Liber Pontificalis*
M	Gregory the Great, *Letters*: trans. Martyn, 2004, with references by book and letter number
MC	Bede. *Major Chronicle*, from *De temporum ratione*, 66
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
MinC	Bede. *Minor Chronicle*, from *De Temporibus*
Orosius, *History*	Orosius. *History Against the Pagans*
PL	*Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina*, ed., J.-P. Migne
Plummer	Plummer, C. ed. *Bede: Opera Historica*, Oxford, 1896, with references by volume and page number.
R	Gregory the Great, *Letters*: *MGH* edition, with references by book and letter number

S	Sawyer and Kelly, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* from the updated electronic version at esawyer.org.uk
VCM	Bede. *Life of Cuthbert*, Verse
VCP	Bede. *Life of Cuthbert*, Prose
VG	Anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great*. Colgrave, 1968
VW	Stephen. *Life of Wilfrid*

1 Introduction

An early medieval historian at work

Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* [*HE*] is one of the best known and most extensively studied early medieval texts. The work's status as the main source for Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh and early eighth centuries means it has attracted near constant historiographical attention. Surprisingly, however, the materials Bede used and the way he used them have never been systematically considered. The present book aims to begin to fill these gaps and to provide answers to the questions of what Bede's sources were in writing the *HE* and how he employed them to construct his *History*. In other words, how did Bede work as a historian and with what did he work? Although this is an exercise that could – and should, I will argue – be carried out for the entire *Historia*, in the first instance, it will be more practical to confine this study to a specific area: Bede's account of the Gregorian mission. Through analysis of this narrative, both the process and the sources for Bede's creation of the *HE*'s account of the Gregorian mission to Kent can be reconstructed.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the classification of Bede's materials. A better appreciation for the way in which Bede compiled the *HE* will cast light on Bede the scholar and his milieu, on his connections and informants, and on the stages in which he composed the work. It will be possible to gain a more nuanced view of the nature and purpose of the library at his disposal with potential lessons for its role as an archive and in education. Furthermore, reconstructions of Bede's sources and assessment of their provenance and reliability will provide a firmer foundation for future investigations of early Christian Kent. Such a basis will mean that Bede's narrative can potentially be replaced and not simply refined.

1.1 Recent work on Bede and the *Historia ecclesiastica*

Given how important a source the *HE* is, it may seem rather remarkable that its own sources have not already been subjected to systematic analysis. There are many reasons for this: probably the principal one has been the strength of Bede's enduring reputation. This has been so revered that the *HE* was often treated as a primary source for the events it described. Modern historiography has long recognised that this is not the case. Nonetheless, the chief focus of Bedan studies over the last half-century has not been an attempt to understand Bede's sources in the *History*, but to uncover his agendas in writing the work in the first place. Recent work on Bede has sought to provide a more complicated account of the man and his scholarship, especially by offering a greater appreciation for the *HE* in the context of his complete catalogue of writings, dominated as it was by works of biblical exegesis (for instance, DeGregorio, 2006a; DeGregorio, 2010a; Darby and Wallis, 2014).

With a deeper awareness of Bede's intellectual background, the *HE* appears less the independent and objective work it was once considered. Bede was not primarily a historian (Campbell, 1986a, 1986b). He came to write the *History* only after a career mainly spent producing biblical commentaries (DeGregorio, 2006b). This background underlay his writing of history and affected his presentation of the past. Moreover, he was not just writing within the context of his exegesis but also within the tradition of ecclesiastical history (Ward, 1998).

As Bede's biblical commentaries, and his corpus as a whole, are better understood, his creativity in both the exegetical and 'scientific' fields becomes all the more evident. Bede did, as he often claimed, walk in the 'footsteps of the Fathers', but he went even further down the path they had laid. These findings have indirect and important impacts on our understanding and interpretation of the *HE*: first, Bede's background and his assumptions are clearer, helping us to see what he took for granted in the *HE*, arguably affecting his portrayal of events – consciously or not; second, the evidence of his originality demonstrates that Bede was no mere compiler and suggests that the *HE* itself may be imbued with a higher degree of intentionality than was long believed.

This conclusion supports the connected work, specifically on the *HE*, which has gone beyond offering mere descriptions of the conscious and unconscious attitudes that must be taken into account in interpreting the evidence of the *HE* and has instead sought to unravel Bede's possible motivations for writing. These studies have provided nuanced perspectives on the work, especially illuminating the plausible ideologies and agendas that Bede intentionally brought into his writing of the history of the conversion of the English. Through these proposed rationales, which tend to be grounded in contemporary ecclesio-politics, whether the 'Ghost of Bishop Wilfrid' (Goffart, 1988; 2002; 2005), ecclesiastical reform (Thacker, 1983; DeGregorio, 2010a; Darby, 2018a), monastic competition (Gunn, 2009), or moral regeneration (Kirby, 1974: 2; Mayr-Harting, 1991: 43–45; Hilliard, 2010), we should, it is argued, read the entire *Historia*. Not all of these – or other competing explanations (Rollason, 2001; Higham, 2006) – can be correct; but, taken together, they have enriched our appreciation of the complexity of Bede and the *HE* itself.

Because Bede is still the main, and often the only, source for the history of early Christian Anglo-Saxon England, a better sense of the prism(s) through which he viewed the world is a crucial building block for reconstructing the events of the period. But in discerning the reality behind the *HE*'s descriptions, identifying Bede's agendas is only part of the task, and arguably not the most important one. The *HE* is mainly a secondary source. This inevitably affected Bede's account, even if he had had no agendas. The world looked very different from Kent in 600 and Wearmouth-Jarrow in 731. We must therefore ask not only why he wrote but also how he wrote and what he wrote with.

1.2 Bede's methods and materials: the need for a systematic analysis

It has long been acknowledged in theory that the *HE* is at best a secondary source for most of its account. This realisation, however, has only infrequently affected the historiography. Given that the *HE* is not a direct witness to most of the events it records, we need to ask what lay behind it. Bede writes so well that it is not always immediately obvious what is 'him' and what is his 'source'. Bede's very qualities as historian have complicated the task. His ability to weave together his sources and connect them into a convincing story is one of his most impressive characteristics and has long been praised by scholars (Markus, 1975: 7; Mayr-Harting, 1991: 45; Brooks, 1999: 3). Thus, the *HE* reads like a primary source, while the latent trust for Bede's authority even now means the work is often implicitly treated as one. How did Bede construct his *History*? What was Bede's basis for his statements? Is the *HE*'s narrative built on reliable sources? Are they from the time they describe or merely retrospective recreations? Which parts of his text effectively repeat his sources? Which are deductions?[1] Which are mere rhetorical flourishes or even inventions?

These questions are especially critical in light of recent research into Bede's agendas, motivations and assumptions in writing the *HE*. Without a complete analysis of the sources lying behind Bede's narrative, even though in a general way it is possible to recognise his bias and the limitations in the evidence available to him, the reliability of his account in specific instances cannot properly be assessed. Such a systematic examination of how Bede worked, based in an analysis of his sources – what they are and how well informed they were – has yet to be carried out for the *HE*. As a result, although we now have plenty of reasons to tread cautiously in using the *History* as a source, it does still remain our source, and indeed our chief one. While we know much more about the possible reasons for which the *HE* was written, or at least about the ideologies under the influence of which it was drafted, we still know very little about how it was written, giving the work a deceptively monolithic appearance.[2]

These questions have been asked, and to a large extent answered, for Bede's other works. Researches into Bede's sources for his exegetical and educational works reveal an impressive library (Laistner, 1966b; Ganz, 2004: 91–108; Lapidge, 2006: 37 and 191; Love, 2012: 631). In contrast, in the case of the *HE*, comparable investigations have only covered literary texts and, even then, little has been done since Charles Plummer's liminal edition of Bede's historical works (Plummer, 1.l–lii, n. 3). Furthermore, Plummer's treatment, while characteristically scholarly, was not comprehensive. Most of the sources he identified were concentrated within the first section of the book, from *HE* 1.1–22. Bede was frank in the *HE*'s preface about the extent to which the narrative in these chapters represented a collection of borrowings from the writings of earlier authors (*ex priorum maxime scriptis*).

In later sections of his commentary, Plummer pointed out Bede's reliance on other works, such as his prose *Life of Cuthbert* [*VCP*], or his adaptation of Adomnan's *On the Holy Places*. In the century since Plummer's groundbreaking volumes, scholars have added few sources to those he identified, although there have been individual treatments of certain types of material or of Bede's use of individual authors. Discussion continues about the nature of the relationship between the *HE* and the *Life of Gregory* [*VG*],[3] and with Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* [*VW*].[4] Bede's borrowings from Gildas have been analysed (Miller, 1975), as has his use of Orosius (Scully, 2002), and his handling of certain papal letters in the *History* (Markus, 1963; Hunter Blair, 1971; Story, 2012). Other studies have assessed Bede's sources for dates in wider examinations of chronology (Jones, 1947; Harrison, 1976a); and, evidently, focused analyses of episodes in the *HE* have sometimes included limited treatments of Bede's sources and attempts to explain them.[5]

Literary texts, however, can hardly be called the basis for the *HE*.[6] These are not, in the main, what is meant when talking of the sources of the *HE*, or, besides Gildas, of any of Bede's stories within it. Bede had and used many sources beyond the 'classics' in composing his *History*: some were documentary or administrative, some were oral and many are lost. In fact, probably the majority of Bede's sources no longer survive.[7] Identifying the raw material behind the *HE* cannot be achieved simply by searching electronic databases. Instead, a more complex assessment of the viable and plausible sources is required, with the conclusions inevitably less certain.

This justifiable caution should not devolve into a dismissal of the enterprise as impossible. That might be tempting. Much of the *HE* tends to be implicitly, or explicitly, explained away as reliant not on 'written sources' but on what might be termed, in a general sense, 'tradition'.[8] For David Kirby, the *HE*, in the main, was a 'mosaic of personal memories' (Kirby, 2000b: 56).[9] Such comments are grounded in a reality: many stories in the *HE* do come from 'oral tradition', which would not be found in a library.[10] Bede is often frank that his source is a named individual who has told him the tale. At other times, though more ambiguously, generic expressions point in the same direction.[11] To say that Bede uses 'traditions', however, is not to say that the majority of the work was written without identifiable 'sources'. Nor does it preclude analyses of both the basis upon which he made his claims and of how he utilised his materials – oral and written – to compile his narrative.[12] Establishing provenance allows us to begin to judge reliability. There are often quite stark differences in genre between the sources used across the *HE*. The beginning of the account of the Gregorian mission, for instance, marks a watershed as much in evidence as in narrative.

Thus, though difficult, the task is not impossible, and, as we have seen, carrying it out is not only vital, but necessary. Indeed, it has been too long delayed. What is required for the *HE* is an exercise whose nature and value were set out in plain terms by Rosalind Love for the entire Bedan corpus: 'a very great deal still remains to be discovered about his reading, by a painstaking process of interrogating every single paragraph he wrote, a lifetime's task' (Love, 2012: 619).

This book represents the beginning of such a broader undertaking. In the long run, of course, the work needs to be carried out across the whole *HE*. Such a comprehensive examination of the text is a major desideratum for scrutiny of the *History*. Nonetheless, given the scale of the question, the focus here is on a single significant and coherent narrative within the *HE*: the account of the Gregorian mission and ecclesiastical life in Kent until the advent of Theodore. I will analyse the sources for Bede's account of the mission and how he used them in the *HE*, consistently seeking answers to the question of the basis for Bede's individual statements. The emphasis is on the early Church in Kent as the most fruitful grounds for such an investigation. This was a period that Bede himself, in the Preface, marked as an essentially discrete element in the composition and sourcing of the *HE*. As a finite and connected narrative within the work, the sources and informants, while rarely simple, are often clearer and more easily identifiable.[13] Consideration will be given to those non-Kentish chapters dealing with papal letters, as the wider question of Bede's use of papal letters is valuable for understanding his information on Kent.

Therefore, while earlier works have sought to give an impression of Bede's library, in this book, I shall show him at work in it. It will be possible to see Bede at his desk, in the scriptorium, surrounded by his notes and books, and to gain a much better sense of how he obtained his materials and how he used them. In short, I hope to provide an insight into how an early medieval historian – albeit an exceptional one – worked. The methods and conclusions should point the way for others to attempt something similar for the other sections of the *HE* and for other works.

1.3 The implications of this study

Reconstructing the list of sources used by Bede in composing the *HE* offers a better sense of his intellectual milieu and context as a scholar. This provides a more detailed framework for situating him as an author. As a result, it is possible to learn not only about Bede but also about the world in which he lived. One obvious example is that a more systematic catalogue of the material Bede used in his *History* will expand our knowledge of his library, with intriguing implications for understanding the culture of Anglo-Saxon monasteries and their relation to the politics and society of the time.

A better understanding of Bede's sources and their provenance will improve our sense of the process of composition of the *HE* and of how Bede gathered his materials and when he possessed what, especially illuminating his relationship with Canterbury and Albinus. This provides a much stronger basis for work on the chronology and context of the *HE*'s composition and in identifying stages in drafting. The full consequences will need to be considered separately and in more detail through a thorough re-examination of the question, but initial lessons will be able to be drawn below.

The final implication of the findings presented here is perhaps the most significant for historians. In the *HE*, Bede created a narrative using primary sources, secondary sources, oral information, and rhetorical *topoi*, as well as his own deductions and, arguably, inventions. This book identifies, catalogues, assesses and as far as possible reconstructs all of the sources upon which Bede based his account of the Gregorian mission church in Kent. As a result, it becomes possible to replace that narrative.

Using the various prisms modern historians have been able to identify – and through which we are encouraged to read the *History* – views of the *HE*, and consequently of the period, have grown more nuanced. But these remain reinterpretations of Bede and the *HE*. We are still left reading the history through the *Historia*. Thus, it has long seemed that, even with modern reservations about Bede as an objective historian, and even with an increased ability to correct certain errors of fact, it is not possible to dispense with what James Campbell called a 'necessary dependence on Bede' (Campbell, 1986c: 49). Consequently, even scholars who separately provided sensitive and perceptive treatments of Bede's weaknesses as a source have effectively been prisoners of Bede's narrative.[14] Despite all the reasons to be on our guard when reading the *History* that modern historiography has emphasised, it is striking how little Bede's overall story of seventh-century England, or even simply the Gregorian mission, has altered in its presentation by modern historians.

The treatment of how Bede worked presented here will make it possible to rectify this situation – at least for the account of the Gregorian mission. Bede's version of events was based on limited and often untrustworthy materials. If it is possible to identify his sources and discern between them, then Bede will not be our 'source', his sources will. This means that scholars need not be constrained by Bede's narrative. Future reconstructions of what happened in early Christian Kent will be able to use only well-informed sources and so will be built on much firmer foundations. It will no longer be credible to allow unconvincing statements to go unchallenged or to rely on every passing remark of Bede's as if each might potentially represent the vestiges of an original source to which he had access, or even merely to repeat Bede's narrative with the caveat, 'Bede says', in an attempt to disassociate the author from the story, while relying on its content to propel the narrative.[15] This means that much of the Bedan account upon which historians have traditionally depended needs to be dispensed with.

But the more reliable elements need not stand alone. Placed alongside other sources available to us, though not to Bede, they can become the basis for reconstructions of the conversion period, especially in Kent, which, while they can never be comprehensive, can be better informed than the *HE*'s own version of events. In other words, by combining Bede's sources – properly assessed – with other sources that exist for the period – especially archaeology and coinage, but also Merovingian and other continental texts – future work will be able to produce more accurate versions of events and of the world of c.600. This picture is likely to suggest a Kent more closely connected to contemporary Gaul than Bede realised, and, indeed, more similar to it than he probably could ever have imagined.[16]

Properly sifted, Bede's sources for the Gregorian mission can lay the basis for a better understanding of, and not merely a new perspective on, early Christian Kent. In short, this book indirectly attempts to carry out the groundwork necessary for rewriting, and not merely reinterpreting, seventh-century England. The full implications of this will require further and separate development; nonetheless, a beginning can be made and a basis laid through the analysis that follows.

Thus, an investigation of Bede's sources and how he used them to compile his *History* tells us not only about him, his time, his connections, his library and his world, but also about the processes of an early medieval scholar and historian at work, as well as laying the foundations for more accurate reconstructions of early Christian Kent.

1.4 The structure of this study

In attempting to achieve these goals, this book falls naturally into two parts. The first, comprising Chapters 2–4, represents the source analysis of the *HE*'s account of the Gregorian mission and the Church in Kent before the arrival of Theodore. Chapter 2 covers *HE*, Book 1, Chapters 23–33. Chapter 3 covers *HE*, Book 2, Chapters 1–11 and 15–20. Chapter 4 covers *HE*, Book 3, Chapters 8, 14, 20 and 29, as well as *HE*, Book 4, Chapter 1. Following the methodology set out in the next section, this analysis will systematically assess the basis for each statement Bede makes. Through this, it will be possible to see what he possessed and to appreciate how he used it, combining his materials with his own deductions and rhetoric to construct a coherent narrative. By necessity, this is the longest part of the book.

Part II is a detailed consideration of the sources themselves. Chapter 5 collects, organises and analyses the sources identified in Part I, attempting to reconstruct them as far as possible. The materials will be considered by genre. All the sources will be assessed, addressing the questions surrounding their reliability, date and origins, and how Bede obtained them.

Chapter 6 will examine those sections of the *HE* that could not be sourced in Part I. By considering the segments together, I shall argue that they represent information from a group of sources whose content Bede has skilfully integrated into the work. This set represents a linked collection of hagiographic tales from Canterbury concerning the mission fathers, written significantly after their time. The nature and possible contexts of these 'Canterbury tales' will be discussed, showing how they, and the materials in Chapter 5, cast light on Bede's discussion of his sources and authorial process in the *HE*'s preface.

Finally, the Conclusion will summarise the findings of this study and point to the directions in which the work could profitably be taken forward along the lines indicated above.

1.5 Methodology

Achieving these aims is no simple matter: it requires a specific methodology, which has already been described in general terms. In short, what is needed is the enterprise called for by Love for the entire Bedan canon: 'a painstaking process of interrogating every single paragraph he wrote' (Love, 2012: 619). The occasional repetition inherent in undertaking such a process needs no apology. This exercise in the identification and reconstruction of the lost sources available to Bede is closely akin to that which Michael Lapidge termed 'palaeobibliothecography' – the reassembly of ancient libraries and the works within them – though it is operating on a narrower canvas than is usually the case (Lapidge, 2006: 3). Such an analysis, be it of a biblical commentary or of the *HE*, cannot be done properly if it is not done systematically, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence.

Organising such an examination is not an easy matter within the confines of a book. Anything less than a rigorous, step-by-step treatment, would not be convincing. It is not sufficient to make broad assertions supported with a few examples, as Max Laistner did, or simply to take Bede's own statement of sources as evidence, following Plummer. Nor is it feasible merely to state conclusions as agreed and begin work on reconstructing the history of early seventh-century Kent. No one would believe the work had been done unless they saw the working itself. In that case, this book would appear to have provided options rather than answers. The basis provided by such an approach would apparently be no stronger than those that have come before.

Only through a process of determined and careful investigation is it possible to see what Bede had and how he used it; only then will it be feasible to go beyond Bede. The approach in this book thus represents a necessarily different one to the traditional thematic treatment of the *HE*. A thematic treatment, or one dedicated to making specific narrative points, might appear to provide the materials for innovative answers to interesting questions, but without the thoroughness of a more comprehensive examination of Bede's sources, too many gaps would be left to allow the findings to advance beyond the merely speculative. We still could not be sure that Bede did not have alternative sources underpinning elements of his narrative. In short, any attempt to reconstruct early seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England using the *HE* without thoroughly analysing its sources is doomed to failure.

There is, in addition, an academic short-sightedness to such a narrow approach. It would advance knowledge only so far as it served the author's current argument. In contrast, a more thorough method presents conclusions that should serve as a basis for all scholars working on Bede and the *HE*. This strategic perspective characterised Lapidge's volume with its appendices on the Anglo-Saxon Library (Lapidge, 2006). Instead of simply analysing one single point, or even making a series in a specific argument, Lapidge provided a concrete foundation for scholarly work for the next generation. The nature of the subject means that studies such as Lapidge's will never be the last word. Refinement will continue to come – I will offer some myself – but the enduring value of such work far exceeds that of more restricted treatments. That is the model that, for a more limited field, this book seeks to emulate.

In order to achieve this, a thorough analysis of the relevant sections of the *HE* is required to test every statement made by Bede in these chapters, to isolate and identify the basis on which he is saying it, and, where appropriate, to specify the source: be it oral or written, primary or secondary. When something Bede says can be explained by a surviving text that could reasonably have been available to him, then that is the simplest and best explanation for his information. There is no reason to pretend that Bede had an alternative basis for his knowledge that does not survive but which, by some coincidence, happened to contain identical material.

Each chapter of the *HE* relating to the Gregorian mission will therefore be examined section by section. To facilitate the reader's navigation within the *HE* chapters being considered, each part will begin with a summary of the entire Bedan chapter, usually in the form of the original chapter headings with additional content where required. The investigation of each section within the *HE* chapter will begin with the Latin and English of the pertinent segment for the reader's easy reference.[17] The Latin will be in italics, and the translation will be in square brackets. Occasionally, sections included within such quotations need to be marked out for separate treatment. These parts are distinguished in both the Latin and English through the use of angle brackets. At times, the sections being considered are too long for it to be helpful to reproduce them in full: in such cases, lacunas are marked with ellipsis, with the omitted content sometimes summarised in English within curly brackets – {} – for the sake of comprehension. The analysis follows the quotations from the text.

1.6 Bede the historian

One final point must be underlined before proceeding. Bede 'the historian' has come under strong and sustained criticism over the last forty or so years.

The purpose of this analysis and this book is not to heap further coals on his head. This study is not intended as a commentary on the *HE*. The present task is to discover Bede's sources, or more precisely, his reasons for saying the things he did, not to pronounce on his accuracy. Examining Bede's materials and methods will improve our understanding of how he built up his story. It will be easier to comprehend the practical impact in individual instances of Bede's rhetoric, conception of genre, and assumptions and agendas. These shape his interpretation of his sources and the framing of his narrative. As part of the process of assessing Bede's sources, it will at times be necessary to underline those areas where others have already identified erroneous statements: errors based on Bede's misunderstandings of, or faulty deductions from, his sources or due to the ideological baggage he brought to his presentation of the ecclesiastical history of the English. In fact, with a better sense of his sources, identifying such mistakes becomes easier and more convincing. As a result, Bede's narrative, sources, and occasionally his process will necessarily be criticised in the following pages. But this is not being done for its own sake.

It was not beyond Bede to invent content, especially in terms of baldly stating generic comment as fact. Even so, as a general rule, he does not fabricate specific events or facts. He is more honest than he often receives credit for, though his narrative is less reliable than it continues to be treated. He was severely hampered by the meagreness of his sources. As will be categorically demonstrated in this book, Bede had precious few contemporary sources, beyond the papal letters, for the Gregorian mission.[18] There was good reason for this, as will be shown in Chapter 5: the hiatus in ecclesiastical organisation in the 660s as a consequence, directly and indirectly, of 'plague' amounted almost to a total structural breakdown and resulted in devastating administrative discontinuity. There were extended vacancies in the episcopacies of both Canterbury and Rochester, as well as in the main abbey, Ss Peter and Paul's, at a time when one king had died and his successor was a minor, probably with a maternal regency. This congruence of natural and systemic calamity effectively meant that, as I shall argue, Canterbury maintained no original sources from the early mission period to pass on to Bede. Thus, almost the only dependable information Bede possessed derived from the papal letters, and potentially some epigraphic evidence, together with some of the information from episcopal and regnal lists and genealogies.

Of course, if Canterbury could only provide Bede with very limited, and often unreliable, information, the fault for this should not be laid at Bede's door. He included data from his informants in good faith and built his own deductions on that material. That it was inaccurate does not by any means imply that he was attempting to mislead his readers. Instead, we will see how much his narrative and assertions depended on his sources: they are the basis of most of what he says in the account of the Gregorian mission in the *HE*.

The reality is that Bede did incredibly well with a tiny number of well-informed sources. Through an examination of how he constructed the *HE*, the analysis below will provide insights into his own view of history. The *HE* was hardly an exercise in the conscious deception of the centuries of historians who followed him. The reason we should trust his account less than we did is not because he was lying, but, principally, because his sources were so few and so rarely produced by people in a position to know the reality of events. In addition, Bede needed to make deductions from the limited materials he did have in order to create a credible narrative from them. Those deductions were based on his own ideology and contemporary world view. Other elements of his presentation, such as the placing of speeches of his own composition into the mouths of his protagonists, were informed by the classical and late antique historiographical tradition (Thacker, 2010: 171–72).

For the Gregorian mission, Bede was writing what we might call 'distant history'. This was not the case for the whole *HE*, or for most other early medieval histories. Bede did not have access to either direct or second-hand oral information for this period: that is, he had information neither from the participants and observers nor directly from those who had spoken to them. Yet the events and history of this time were more intimately connected to those of his own than, say, that of the Anglo-Saxon *aduentus*. How Bede reconciled these challenges is revealing. He was not a 'modern historian' but he was a historian. Indeed, in some ways, it is in the account of the Gregorian mission that Bede behaves most like one, at least as modern historians of the Middle Ages understand the term and their own endeavours. Even while breaking down the basis for his narrative, this analysis will confirm that. The problem for Bede was that his task was to write a history of a period about which he had a basic ignorance and almost no primary sources to enlighten him. How, in such circumstances, he managed to produce the enduring masterpiece that is the *HE* will be examined below.

1.7 Bede's introduction to his own sources in the *HE* preface

We are not operating in a void, however. The process of discerning Bede's sources is greatly helped by his own broad summary in the *HE*'s Preface of the main routes by which he gained his material. The Preface, which takes the form of a letter to the Northumbrian king Ceolwulf (r. 729–737), begins with what is effectively a dedication to that monarch. Bede states that Ceolwulf had looked at an earlier version. He praises the king for the latter's interest in history, which Bede says can be an effective guide to behaviour. Bede then devotes the rest of the Preface to explaining whence he had obtained his material.

The first source mentioned is Albinus, the abbot of Ss Peter and Paul's, Canterbury, whom Bede calls the *auctor* and *adiutor* before all others of the work.[19] Albinus had been a pupil of Theodore, the eastern archbishop of Canterbury (668–690), and Hadrian, a monk from North Africa who was Albinus's predecessor as abbot. Bede says that Albinus collected information about what the Gregorian mission fathers had done in Kent or in neighbouring kingdoms, either from written records (*monimenta litterarum*) or from tradition (*seniorum traditio)*. He sent these to Bede via Nothelm, a priest of London, who would go on to become archbishop of Canterbury (735–739).

Later, Nothelm went to Rome, and while there, he searched through the papal archives and brought back copies of letters written by Gregory the Great and other popes. On Albinus's advice, Nothelm made a further visit to Bede to deliver these epistles. As will be seen, these letters include those Bede inserted in his text, for instance in 1.24 or 3.29, as well as those he drew on for information in his narrative.[20] For our purposes, it is noteworthy that Bede mentions that the letters were not simply those of Gregory the Great but also those of other popes. There is no neat dividing line of authorship and provenance (as implicitly suggested by Wallace-Hadrill, 1988: 68). Bede obtained the papal letters he quoted, or simply drew from, thanks to Nothelm's research.[21]

This two-stage process represented by the visits of Nothelm to Wearmouth-Jarrow[22] is crucial to understanding Bede's construction of the narrative of the Gregorian Mission and the composition of the *HE* as a whole. These two visits and the material Albinus and Nothelm provided lie at the heart of what Bede writes about the early church in Canterbury and beyond.

Bede goes on to offer more details worth mentioning. He notes that the first section of the book, up to the Gregorian Mission – in other words *HE* 1.1–1.22 – came mainly from the works of a variety of unnamed other writers. He then states that his information from that point on came from several different sources. He restates his debt to Albinus and Nothelm, describing the information received from them in slightly different terms and apparently giving extra detail about the content of the material. Bede explains that Albinus – via Nothelm – was the source not only for information about the Gregorian mission to Kent but even for some of his knowledge about Essex and Wessex, as well as East Anglia and Northumbria. He specifies that this information related especially to the names of the bishops and kings under whose administrations the kingdoms had received the faith, and reiterates that it was thanks to Albinus's encouragement, and, implicitly, the resources he provided, that he was emboldened to carry out the work.

Bede then moves on to other sources, effectively dividing his information by kingdom. This information is explicitly set out as additional to that coming from Canterbury, which he has just described. Daniel, bishop of the West Saxons, wrote to Bede with some details about the history of Wessex, Sussex and the Isle of Wight. The monks of Lastingham, a Northumbrian monastery founded by Cedd and Chad, told Bede about the lives of these two brothers and explained how they brought Christianity to Mercia and restored it to Essex following that kingdom's plague-inspired apostasy.

Bede says his information about East Anglia came both from old writings or traditions (*ex scriptis uel traditione priorum*) and from Abbot Esi. Bishop Cyneberht had written to Bede concerning Lindsey, about which, in addition, Bede had learned stories 'orally from other trustworthy people' (*aliorum fidelium uirorum uiua uoce*). Together, these sources had provided some knowledge of the Church in that small kingdom and of 'episcopal succession' (*successio sacerdotalis*) there.

Predictably, Northumbria was a special case. Bede knew some things from personal experience but also 'on the basis of innumerable witnesses' (*fideli innumerorum testium*).[23] He adds a slightly perplexing note relating to his material about St Cuthbert, explaining that he had drawn on the anonymous Lindisfarne *Life of Cuthbert* [*AnonVC*], as well as on his own researches, not only for the *History*, but even for his *uita* of the saint.

That rather surprising tone is continued in Bede's conclusion to this extended treatment of his own sources. He ends with a statement begging his readers not to blame him if they find untrue things in the *History*. He has merely recorded 'those things which we collected from common report for the instruction of posterity' (*ea, quae fama uulgante collegimus ad instructionem posteritatis*), according to the 'true law of history' (*uera lex historiae*). This phrase, and Bede's meaning in this section, has been much debated, perhaps unnecessarily (Ray, 1980; Goffart, 2005). In short, Bede seems to be offering something of a warning and something of an apology, as if to say that he has felt, and arguably had been, compelled to include things in the *HE* that may not, in fact, have been true, and that he may not, in fact, have believed to be true, but which were commonly believed; so, he does not want to be held responsible for them. Following this apparent caveat, the Preface ends with a customarily pious rhetorical envoi requesting that the reader, whatever kingdom they are in, pray for his soul.

Taken as a whole, it can be seen that the Preface is a solid basis for beginning an investigation of Bede's sources and methods. Even if we should probably not assume that the informants and information set out here represent anything like a comprehensive tour, the Preface is a vital point of reference. The details about Canterbury, Albinus and Nothelm – especially the two visits – are of particular importance and will be returned to throughout the following Chapters analysing Bede's account of the early Church in Kent in an attempt to identify his sources and understand his methodology.

Notes

1 As Campbell noted, Bede 'did not write in an age in which it was thought necessary to distinguish between known facts and deductions or assumptions.' Campbell, 1986a: 9.

2 There have been some stimulating discussions of Bede's rhetoric – a rather different aspect of his process to that being considered in this book. See especially Ray, 1980; 1987; 1997; 2006.

3 The question of the origins of this early Anglo-Latin work remains unsettled.

4 Recent treatments of Wilfrid's life and the *Life of Wilfrid* can be found in Higham, 2013; see especially Thacker, 2013; Stancliffe, 2013; Cubitt, 2013.
5 Obviously, the various commentaries that exist on the *HE* have not entirely avoided these questions either. Plummer carried out some source analysis in his commentary, but apart from noting Bede's literary sources, he was not thorough because his working assumption was that Bede knew what he was talking about. Wallace-Hadrill was even less intensive in his commentary (Wallace-Hadrill, 1988), perhaps partly because death interrupted his completion of the work. Jones, 1947, did look directly at sources; his approach was not comprehensive, however, because he was only interested in material relating to Bede's statements on chronology and was affected by a dogmatic assumption, inconsistently applied, that every phrase of Bede's relating to time had been copied verbatim from his source. The salient contributions of Kirby to the subject should not be ignored, even if their treatment of the material is not systematic: Kirby, 1974 and 2000b.
6 In her study of Bede's library, Love provided a helpful catalogue of Bede's 'historical collection', but as she noted *contra* Laistner (Laistner, 1966a: 100), these works represent texts primarily used, and presumably collected, for 'explication of the Scriptures', rather than in preparation for writing the *HE*: Love, 2012: 627–28.
7 Although parallel, or later, versions often do, as with episcopal lists or genealogies.
8 As a result, for the basis of Bede's account of the Gregorian mission, historians frequently refer to 'Canterbury tradition'. This is particularly prevalent in the otherwise extremely useful Brooks, 1984.
9 Higham even argued that Bede was an oral historian: Higham, 2011. On this topic, see now Shaw, 2015.
10 Though Ray goes too far in claiming that the *HE* 'was built with self-conscious rhetorical art largely from folk traditions': Ray, 1982: 5.
11 See Shaw, 2015, for a detailed treatment of Bede's more nuanced intentions in using such language.
12 Higham, 2011, made broad claims about what Bede used but these were based on little more than a cursory examination of the *HE*'s materials.
13 Growing up and living in Northumbria, the likelihood is higher that Bede had readier access to a more significant body of tradition about his *patria*. The possible permutations for his sources, especially oral traditions, of whatever trustworthiness, regarding Northumbria are thus too great for it to be feasible to discern between them here. One further point about Northumbria: 'Northumbria', as a term, and to an extent as a unified political entity, seems to have been invented during Bede's adulthood; indeed, it was an invention which the *HE* appears to have played a role in initiating and disseminating. Even so, I shall usually refer to Northumbria without qualification for simplicity's sake, following academic convention.
14 The account in Mayr-Harting, 1991, for instance, follows Bede's narrative carefully throughout. So too does Hunter Blair, 1970b, once the mission party arrives in Kent.
15 Such rhetorical tactics are popular with historians because they appear to establish credible distance from the story, while maintaining narrative continuity: see, for instance, Brooks, 2004b. Ironically, in so doing, historians are following the *uera lex historiae* that Bede hid behind in the *HE* Preface. Repeating Bede's unverified statements with a caveat but without analysis of the source from which he was working is no better historiographical practice than Bede's justifying his retelling of the story of Gregory and the *Angli* boys on the basis of what had

reached him from the *traditio maiorum*. If the story is patently not true – such as Mellitus's miraculous turning back of a Canterbury fire which is nothing other than a repetition of a tale from Gregory's *Dialogues* – there is no reason to dignify it with repetition in a modern narrative of events, even with a caveat. It did not happen.

16 Archaeology has long suggested Anglo-Frankish commercial, and probably political, interactions, and each new discovery confirms and extends the links between the two. Every year, more pertinent material pointing in the same direction comes to light: the online publication of the *Treasure Annual Reports* – available at www.finds.org.uk – has made early assessment and comparison of new material much simpler.

17 The Latin text is that of Plummer's excellent edition, whose age makes it freely available to all: significant differences in Mynors's version are marked in the notes. The English translation is my own. Unless otherwise noted, other translations are taken from those itemised in the Bibliography.

18 A conclusion already suspected by Mayr-Harting, 1991: 63; Hunter Blair, 1970a: 215.

19 Bede uses the word *auctor* later in the Preface in a context that must mean source/informant.

20 The inclusion of the papal letters provides a sufficient response to Gunn's criticism of the Preface's account as merely 'to offer some semblance of an authenticity': Gunn, 2009: 146. The Preface should not be considered a complete guide but the papal letters evidence its basic reliability.

21 The exceptions are: first, the papal letters relating to paschal computation, which he derived, with the rest of his *computus* material, from ultimately Irish sources; and second, the *Libellus Responsionum*, which Bede inserts in *HE* 1.27, and which reached him with other canon law materials.

22 That is not to say that the visits described in the Preface were Nothelm's first and second visits ever to Bede's monastery – almost certainly, they were not. For present purposes and for simplicity's sake, however, references to Nothelm's first or second visits are to those visits he made in the context of the compilation of the *HE* as set out in the Preface. In other words, Nothelm's first visit means the one in which he brought the initial information collected by Albinus, while his second refers to the visit in which he delivered the papal letters he had copied in Rome.

23 Such phrasing is not dissimilar to the protestations of hagiographic works: for instance, Bede's own reference to his *examinatio testium indubiorum* in the Preface to his Prose *VCP*.