

The Eccentric Hermit-Bishop: Bede, Cuthbert, and Farne Island

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Cuthbert, the renowned saint of early Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, enjoyed a multifaceted career. After submitting to monastic discipline as a young man, he became successively a prior, a hermit, and a bishop. Modern historians have struggled to explain how, in one lifetime, this seventh-century saint managed to be an energetic evangelist in the Northumbrian countryside, an effective administrator both inside and outside the monastery, and a religious solitary on a small, rocky island in the North Sea. How, to use Clare Stancliffe's phrase, did he negotiate the "polarity between pastor and solitary"? ¹ A related question involves the depiction of these separate roles by the saint's famous biographer, the Venerable Bede. Recent studies of Bede's prose *Vita Cuthberti*, written c. 721, uniformly suggest that he crafted his text in such a way as to highlight the pastoral elements of the saint's career at the expense of the eremitic elements. One commentator, for example, flatly asserts that Bede's Cuthbert "subordinated the solitary life to the demands of the church."² The present article challenges such readings by arguing that although Bede clearly emphasizes Cuthbert's missionary and pastoral activities in his prose *Vita Cuthberti*, he does not diminish the eremitic aspect of the saint's life in order to do so. Instead, Bede's portrait of Cuthbert suggests that the saint, while connected to the ecclesiastical organization of pre-Viking Northumbria, ultimately resides outside the church leadership's machinery. Put in slightly different terms, in his prose *Vita Cuthberti* Bede ultimately insists on the saint's liminality.³

This argument might seem at odds with what we know about Bede's ecclesiastical ideals. In an influential article, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," Alan Thacker argues that Bede was not a naive idealist, isolated from the social and political realities around him.⁴ He recognized problems in the contemporary

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Northumbrian church and had concrete solutions, or reforms, in mind. Indeed, this much is clear from his scathing letter to Bishop Egbert of York, written in 734, only a year before his death, in which he warns of the dangers of episcopal greed and calls for the revocation of charters for bogus monasteries, the creation of smaller dioceses, and more active pastoral work, particularly in remote regions of the kingdom.⁵ At the heart of Bede's notion of reform, says Thacker, is the cultivation of an elite group of teachers and preachers--*doctores* and *praedicatores*--who would spearhead the pastoral work. Cuthbert, he goes on to argue, is "the most perfect exponent" of Bede's "pastoral ideal."⁶ Although Thacker himself points to Bede's care in presenting fully each aspect of Cuthbert's career--as prior, hermit, and bishop--subsequent commentators have seized on the notion of Cuthbert as an embodiment, fundamentally, of Bede's pastoral ideal. Consequently, the general claim has been made that, in writing his *Vita Cuthberti*, Bede de-emphasizes the eremitic elements found in his primary source, a prose *Vita* of the saint composed by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne approximately twenty years earlier. Presumably, this aspect of the saint's career would clash with a pastoral ideal.⁷ While such claims fit neatly with what Thacker identifies as Bede's ideal of reform, they are not supported by details from Bede's text. A close examination of the *Vita Cuthberti* reveals that Bede in fact expands on the descriptions of Cuthbert's solitary existence found in the anonymous *Vita*. Instead of fashioning an embodiment of his own pastoral ideal, Bede presents a more complex, liminal holy man who, while acting as an exemplary missionary, prior, and bishop, is destined to live apart from his fellow human beings as a hermit or *anachorita*.

A clear indication that Bede viewed Cuthbert's years on lonely Farne Island as the telos toward which his earthly career progressed can be found in the first chapter of the *Vita*. Both Bede and the earlier anonymous biographer begin their narratives with the same incident from the saint's early youth. Bede tells how Cuthbert, while wrestling with other boys in a field, is approached by a three-year-old child who sobs uncontrollably and cries, prophetically: "Why, O Cuthbert, most holy bishop and priest, do you do these things so contrary to your nature and rank? It is not fitting for

you to play among children when the Lord has consecrated you to be a teacher of virtue even to your elders."⁸ The placement of this particular prophecy at the head of the narrative suggests that Cuthbert's primary calling is for the bishopric. Bede, however, inserts the following passage at the beginning of his first chapter, before relating the child's prophecy and, indeed, before commencing his narrative:

The prophet Jeremiah consecrates for us the beginning of our account of the life and miracles of the blessed father Cuthbert when, praising the hermit's [*anachoreticae*] state of perfection, he says: "It is good for a man to have borne the yoke in his youth; he shall sit in solitude and be silent because he will raise himself above himself [Lam. 3:27-28]." (154-

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This passage, placed prominently at the head of the narrative and unparalleled in the anonymous text, posits the eremitic life at the apex of the saint's achievements. There is no mention here of Cuthbert's bishopric before Bede starts into the main narrative.

Moreover, the image of the yoke (*iugum*) in this passage's quotation from Lamentations is consistent with Bede's own ideas about the necessary preparation for becoming a hermit. In a homily on John the Evangelist, Bede describes the solitary life as one which is properly pursued by the individual who, "instructed with the long effort of good action, prepared by the sweetness of lengthy prayer, and trained by the frequent compunction of tears to be free of all matters of the world, learns to direct the mind's eye in solitary love." "This life of divine exploration," he goes on to say, "chiefly admits only those who, after a long beginning in monastic discipline, live remote from men in order to have a freer spirit, cut off from the commotion of the world, for meditating on heavenly things."⁹

In his prose *Vita Cuthberti*, Bede is careful to show the saint preparing himself through each of these elements of a proper preparation for the eremitic life--that is, "good action," "lengthy prayer," "frequent compunction of tears," and monastic discipline. Cuthbert's practice of "lengthy prayer" is most dramatically demonstrated by a famous scene that takes place at the monastery of Coldingham. There, a brother of the monastery spies on the visiting saint when he leaves the monastery during the night; after wading neck-deep into the cold waters of the nearby sea, Cuthbert "spent the dark hours of the night watching and singing praises to the sound of the waves" (188-89).¹⁰ Bede demonstrates Cuthbert's "frequent compunction of tears" when he relates that Cuthbert "was so full of penitence, so aflame with heavenly yearnings, that when celebrating Mass he could never finish the service without shedding tears." In addition, "sometimes when wrongdoers were confessing their sins to him, in his pity for their weakness he would be the first to burst into tears and thus, though himself righteous, by his own example would show the sinner what he ought to do" (212-13). And the saint's "good actions" are precisely those actions which have attracted the attention of recent commentators--namely, his travels to remote regions, preaching to the laity, baptizing, and healing (184-87). Although modern readers have tended to see these actions as reflections of Bede's church ideals, in Bede's view they also represent the necessary steps toward a proper pursuit of the eremitic life.

Bede makes it clear that when Cuthbert finally departs from the monastery of Lindisfarne for Farne Island, seven miles distant by water, he intends to embrace the eremitic life fully and permanently. In this respect he differs from contemporary figures associated with Lindisfarne and Irish Christianity. Aidan, who came from Iona to become the first bishop of Lindisfarne, periodically retired to Farne Island, as Bede says in the *Ecclesiastical History*, "to pray

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in solitude and silence."¹¹ Similarly, Eadberht, Bishop of Lindisfarne from 688 to 698, retreated to the small islet close by the monastery, now known as St. Cuthbert's Island, "to spend the season of Lent as well as the forty days before the Lord's birthday, in deep devotion ..."¹² Unlike these fellow Northumbrian churchmen, Cuthbert did not alternate between the eremitic life and that of the community. He clearly aimed to follow the example of the Egyptian desert father, Antony, and make Farne Island a northern version of Antony's retreat on the Inner Mountain.¹³

It is Bede, rather than the anonymous biographer, who most vividly evokes the topography and physical realities of Cuthbert's eremitic existence. He includes the detail, absent in the anonymous *Vita*, that Cuthbert's first retreat was in fact on what is now called St. Cuthbert's Isle, located only one hundred yards from Lindisfarne; after a short stay there, Cuthbert "sought a place of combat (*locum certaminis petiit*) farther and more remote from mankind, aiming at greater things" (214-15). In this series of moves Cuthbert emulates Antony, who withdrew from a deserted fortress on the Outer Mountain to the more remote Inner Mountain.¹⁴ Bede then describes the isolation of the island of Farne, "shut in on the landward side by very deep water and on the seaward side by the boundless ocean," as well as the buildings of Cuthbert's hermitage, encircled by a wall high enough "so that the pious inhabitant could see nothing except the sky from his dwelling, thus restraining both the lust of the eyes and of the thoughts and lifting the whole bent of his mind to higher things" (214-17). Bede's *Vita*, in fact, presents a picture of Farne Island as a place that is much more vivid than that found in the anonymous *Vita*, which is surprising given the fact that the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne was closer to Cuthbert's cell in both time and space. Bede also adds details about Cuthbert's person during his eremitic life, including the fact that he "had so far withdrawn his mind from the care of his body and fixed it on the care of his soul alone" that he removed his boots only once a year, when visiting monks washed his feet on Maundy Thursday (218-19).

In Bede's text, Farne Island emerges as a paradoxical space, both an isolated, contemplative retreat and yet a busy place of interaction between the saint and his visitors. At one point Bede indicates that Cuthbert gradually progressed toward an anchoritic way of life, enclosed within his personal dwelling:

When his zeal for perfection grew, he shut himself up in his hermitage and, remote from the gaze of men, he learned to live a solitary life of fasting, prayers, and vigils, rarely having conversation from within his cell with visitors and that only through the window. (218-21)

But Bede also describes how, when he built his hermitage, Cuthbert included a *maior* guest-house ("larger," that is, than his own dwelling-place) near the landing-place "in which the brethren who visited him could be received and rest" (216-17). Bede thus indicates that the saint did not intend for his eremitic life to require absolute isolation; on the contrary, the building of the guest-house is clearly meant as a sign that visitors are encouraged. Interestingly, only five chapters after his reference to Cuthbert's progressive withdrawal, Bede described Farne Island as a bustling spot, attracting many people even "from the remoter parts of Britain," visitors who "revealed the common troubles of humankind" to the holy man and received his consolation and counsel (228-31). **start of page 21**

At this point in the text it becomes clear that, for Bede, the life of the *anachorita*, although focused on the *vita contemplativa*, is not synonymous with it. Even as Cuthbert is able to "sit alone and be silent" on Farne in a manner reminiscent of the introductory passage from Lamentations, he also transforms the island into a setting for profound spiritual instruction. In describing this latter aspect of Cuthbert's eremitic life, Bede follows the *Vita Antonii*, the central chapters of which are devoted to a long discourse from the saint to a crowd of monks gathered on the Outer Mountain.¹⁵ Bede adopts this image of the hermit-preacher in the twenty-second chapter of his *Vita*, where he depicts Cuthbert addressing his visitors on Farne, and in doing so he again departs from his anonymous source, which does

not include an analogous chapter. Using direct discourse, Bede provides a sample of the saint's preaching:

How many times ... have they [the demons] cast me down headlong from a rock; how many times have they hurled stones at me as if to kill me! But though they sought to frighten me away by one phantasmal temptation or another, and attempted to drive me from this place of combat, nevertheless they were unable in any way to mar my body by any injury, or my mind by fear! (228-29)

Cuthbert's description of his own struggle, like Antony's before him, is not boastful (despite the fact that it sounds almost like a Beowulfian *beot*) but didactic. The religious solitary is, by virtue of experience, an expert on the Devil and his stratagems, as part of the chapter's title indicates: *Quomodo ... fragiles exposuerit antiqui hostis insidias* (How ... he [Cuthbert] exposed the weakness of the snares of the ancient foe) (228-29). Thus, if the hermit is able to withstand the vicious assaults of demons, so should his auditors be able to stand against lesser attacks. And so, in Bede's text, the solitary struggles of the hermit are shown to have relevance for the larger Christian community. Bede's Cuthbert, who ultimately resides outside the regular church structure, unites the roles of *anachorita*, *doctor*, and *praedicator*.

Farne Island, then, is the site not only of Cuthbert's *anachoresis* but also of his spiritual teaching. In Bede's text, the island exists as a profoundly separate place, distinct from and yet connected with the monastery of Lindisfarne, which acted as the center of the Northumbrian church. As Bede depicts it,

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Farne Island becomes an example of what Michel Foucault calls a *heterotopia*. Whereas utopias are "sites with no real place," as Foucault explains, heterotopias are "real places," each one "a kind of effectively enacted utopia ..." ¹⁶ But, as Kevin Hetherington has recently maintained, in a refinement of Foucault's idea, these spaces are not carnivalesque margins, providing space for free play; rather, they are "spaces of alternate ordering," connected with a center. Indeed, Hetherington asserts that "the important point to remember when considering heterotopia[s] is not the spaces themselves but what they perform in relation to other sites." ¹⁷ From the alternate space of Farne Island, outside but connected with the episcopal structure of Northumbria, Cuthbert is positioned not only to provide unique spiritual guidance but also to address a topic that deeply concerned Bede: the danger of episcopal greed. Bede relates how Cuthbert is aware throughout his life that he will some day be appointed bishop, as was prophesied twice in his life (156-59 and 182-85). According to Bede, Cuthbert lived in constant dread of this event. At one point in Bede's *Vita*, reflecting on this prophecy, he exclaims "with much sorrow" to a group of monks visiting Farne:

Even if I could possibly hide myself in a tiny dwelling on a rock, where the waves of the swelling ocean surrounded me on all sides, and shut me in equally from the sight and knowledge of men, not even thus should I consider myself to be free from the snares of a deceptive world: but even there I should fear lest the love of wealth should tempt me and somehow or other snatch me away. (184-85)

The Cuthbert of the anonymous *Vita* does not exhibit such anxiety over the episcopal office. Indeed, the notion of the holy recluse Cuthbert--too intent in his contemplation of celestial things to be aware of even the sorry condition of his own feet--becoming ensnared by avarice is so incongruous as to be almost laughable. Nevertheless, Bede's Cuthbert, speaking from his liminal position, is able to express Bede's own concern, which he outlines in his Letter to Egbert, over the danger of episcopal greed.

Bede indicates at several points that Cuthbert, even while acting as bishop, ultimately belongs outside the regular

ecclesiastical structure. Before he finally accepts episcopal office (like Saint Martin before him, under duress), Bede's Cuthbert makes it clear that his proper earthly home is on Farne Island. Speaking to Abbess Aelfflaed, he states that his only comfort in the face of the bishopric is his knowledge that God "will set me free, and perhaps, after not more than two years, He will send me back to my accustomed rest and solitude" (236-37). Although he interacts with his fellow monks as well as with Aelfflaed, the saint's closest personal association is with Hereberht, a fellow *anachorita* of the district of Carlisle. Hereberht, who lived on an island in the river Derwent, was, says Bede, "long bound to Cuthbert the man of God by the bonds of spiritual friendship." When the two meet during a visit by Cuthbert

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to the region on episcopal business, they "refreshed one another with draughts of heavenly wisdom" (248-49). Indeed, these two figures appear to exhibit what the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner describes as the "intense comradeship" that develops between liminal entities.¹⁸ The "bonds of spiritual friendship" between the two solitaries are ultimately manifested in the event of their simultaneous deaths, as "they departed from the body at the same moment of time and their spirits were straightway united in the presence of the blessed vision ..." (250-51).

Nowhere is Cuthbert's liminal status as apparent as in the *Vita*'s lengthy account of his final days (unparalleled in the anonymous text), which Bede says he received from Herefrith, Abbot of Lindisfarne. As he himself had predicted, Cuthbert leaves episcopal office after only two years in order to return to Farne to die. After some time there, he commands all the monks to leave the island, to return only "when God will and when He himself shall direct you." A tempest ensues, preventing any travel between Lindisfarne and the island for five days. When Herefrith finally returns, he finds Cuthbert "exhausted" (*defessus*). After showing Herefrith the slightly-gnawed onion that provided his only sustenance during this period, the hermit tells him, "My adversaries have never persecuted me so frequently, during all the time that I have been living on this island, as during these five days." Herefrith gives what is perhaps the only possible response: "I did not dare to ask him what were the temptations of which he spoke. I only asked him to allow some of us to wait on him" (270-81). Cuthbert's final struggle, like much of his life, is beyond the ken of those around him.

In writing his prose *Vita Cuthberti*, Bede neither de-emphasizes the eremitic aspects of the saint's career nor transforms him into an "organization man." Instead, he suggests that Cuthbert belongs to a special class capable of earning the privilege, through years of obedience and good works, of embracing the solitary life fully. Significantly, he also demonstrates that the pursuit of this life does not entirely isolate the saint from the larger Christian community, but instead enhances his own powers as a teacher and a preacher, even as it enables his own spiritual development. Within Bede's text, the saint's missionary activities in the countryside and remarkable sensitivity to the danger of episcopal greed are in accordance with what we know about Bede's own ecclesiastical ideals. Indeed, Cuthbert is sometimes more a voice for Bede than for himself. Bede even goes so far as to place into Cuthbert's mouth a dying speech in which he vehemently condemns those who observe Easter according to the Celtic reckoning (284-85), a speech that reflects Bede's strong support of the Roman reckoning of Easter, but ill suits Cuthbert, who was himself trained in the Irish tradition.¹⁹ Despite all of this, however, Cuthbert is finally more than simply an embodiment of Bede's pastoral ideals. Bede's purpose in writing the prose *Vita* was not to create just a tract advancing his own agenda nor a manual for young, Anglo-Saxon monks, but rather to celebrate one of God's chosen individuals from the recent past who was called to a life beyond the boundaries of the community.

In the final chapter of his *Vita Cuthberti*, Bede recounts a modest miracle involving the healing of Felgild, third heir of Cuthbert's hermitage, by a relic imbued with the power of Cuthbert and his immediate successor on Farne, Aethilwald (300-7). Bede ends, then, not with an image of the community at Lindisfarne--that is, with an image of the center--but with a vivid picture of Farne Island, still charged with the sacred power of Cuthbert. Bede clearly admired Cuthbert's pastoral vigor as it was manifested in his visits to the remote mountain villages of Northumbria; perhaps what he admired most, however, was the saint's *eccentricity*--in the literal sense of the word, his destined place outside

the center. As Bede grew older and became troubled with what he saw as the inadequacies of the Northumbrian church, Farne Island must have seemed an increasingly more desirable place.

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Notes

1. Clare Stancliffe, "Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary," *St. Cuthbert: His Cult and Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 21-44.
2. Mary Clayton, "Hermits and the Contemplative Life in Anglo-Saxon England," *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives in their Contexts*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, 1996), pp. 155-56. Another recent study refers to Cuthbert's "schizophrenic calling" (Joel T. Rosenthal, "Bede's Life of Cuthbert: Preparatory to the *Ecclesiastical History*," *Catholic Historical Review* 68 [1982], 610).
3. Cuthbert was clearly the favorite native saint of Bede, who celebrated his life in three separate texts: a short metrical *Vita* (c. 700), a longer prose *Vita* (c. 721), and a substantial block of chapters (IV.27-32) in his *Ecclesiastical History* (731). Of these, the prose *Vita*, the subject of this study, presents the most complete portrait of the saint.
4. Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald (Oxford, 1982), pp. 130-53.
5. *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford, 1896), pp. 405-23.
6. Thacker, "Bede's Ideal," p. 145.
7. One scholar asserts that Bede transforms the Cuthbert found in the anonymous *Life* "from an eccentrically holy wonder worker into an model pastor" (Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* [Princeton, 1988], p. 293). Another states that Bede took "the saint from his traditional setting, i.e., one of splendid isolation, and turn[ed] him into a church-builder, an organization man" (Rosenthal, "Bede's Life," p. 602). See also the quotation from Mary Clayton above, that Bede's Cuthbert "subordinated the solitary life to the demands of the church" ("Hermits and the Contemplative Life," pp. 155-56).
8. *Vita sancti Cuthberti Auctore Beda, Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 156-59. Subsequent quotations are from this edition, with page numbers given parenthetically in the main text. Colgrave's edition also includes the anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti* (c. 720), Bede's primary source.
9. *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 122 (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 64-65.
10. Another example of Cuthbert's practice of "lengthy prayer," during his stay at Lindisfarne, occurs in Bede's *Life*, pp. 210-11.
11. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 262-63.
12. *Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 442-45.
13. The famous fourth-century *Vita Antonii*, written in Greek by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, was known in early Anglo-Saxon England through the Latin translation of Evagrius.
14. *Vita Beati Antonii Abbatis*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1979), col. 162.
15. *Vita Antonii*, cols. 134-46.
16. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986), 24.
17. Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London, 1997), pp. 13 and 49.
18. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1969), p. 95. Turner's arguments are grounded in his observations of tribal rituals involving a temporary, liminal state between one social status and another. Working from these observations, he goes on to describe Christian monasticism as the "institutionalization of liminality" (p. 107). His ideas are later extended to eremiticism by Christopher Holdsworth, who characterizes the eremitic life as "the most complete working out of permanent liminality in the Christian tradition" (Christopher Holdsworth, "Hermits and the Powers of the Frontier," *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 [1990], p. 68). A similar dynamic can be seen at work in the bonds between Turner's ritual "neophytes" and those between the two religious solitaries in Bede's text.
19. "A biographer was allowed considerable license with the speeches placed in his protagonists' mouths" (Stancliffe, "Cuthbert and the Polarity," p. 28, n. 45).

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