

XXII.—*An Inquiry into the Origin of the Name "Sunderland"; and as to the Birthplace of the Venerable Bede.* By ROBT. BROWN, Esq.

IN the passage of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in which that venerable author is generally understood to have recorded that he was born *upon the estates* of the united monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, the words used are, "Qui natus in territorio ejusdem monasterii;" and in King Alfred's Saxon translation, the Saxon words substituted for "in territorio" are "of Sundorlande." (See Wheloc's edition of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 492.) The statement made by Bede, therefore, as explained by Alfred, is that he was born in "Sunderland of the monastery." What does this imply? Is the word "Sundorland" used by Alfred as a proper name, or as a translation of "territorium"? And if the latter, what is the strict meaning of "territorium"?

We are not about to contend that the word "Sundorland" *was* used by King Alfred as a proper name: yet such a thing is possible; for his translation is in many instances paraphrastic, and if a place called Sundorland or Sunderland were known to him as the place of Bede's birth, it would only be in keeping with his usual practice to substitute the name of the place for Bede's more general description of it. Assuming it to have been so used, the addition of the words "of the monastery" determine it to have been a "Sundorland" adjacent to, or under the control of, or in some way connected with the monastery; and as the town of Sunderland is the only place in the neighbourhood ever known to have borne that name, the identity of names is *primâ facie* evidence of the identity of place.

Wearmouth is well known to have been the ancient name of the district which comprises both banks and so much of the vale of the Wear as lies

near its mouth. It must be conceded, therefore, that before Sunderland received a distinctive name, it was part of Wearmouth. What, then, was the origin of the change? *Our theory is, that Sunderland was built simultaneously with the monastery, and that its name originated in the relation in which it stood to its monastic patron.*

In Bishop Morton's charter, A.D. 1634, Sunderland-near-the-Sea is described as having been "time out of mind an ancient borough known by "the name of the New Borough of Wearmouth." The phrase "New "Borough of Wearmouth" or "Warnemuth" is borrowed from a charter of Henry III. But though the "New Borough of Wearmouth" may have been the earliest incorporated name of the borough, Bishop Morton's charter clearly implies throughout that Wearmouth and Sunderland-near-the-Sea were then, and had been theretofore from time immemorial, the distinctive names of its two component parts. Accordingly, we find both names occurring in documents of a much earlier date. The charter of Bishop Pudsey, towards the close of the twelfth century, mentions, it is true, only the incorporated name "Wearmouth": but the name "Sunderland-juxta-Mare" occurs in a series of leases of the ferry and fisheries and other rights exercised by the Bishop over the river and haven, extending back to A.D. 1464; and in the earlier lease of Bishop Hatfield, A.D. 1358, in the survey of the same bishop, and in the Great Rolls of the Exchequer, A.D. 1197, Sunderland is named in a way which necessitates the belief that Sunderland-juxta-Mare is intended. Hutchinson (vol. ii. p. 515) refers also to a charter of still earlier date, A.D. 1154, "*De burgo de Weremue, alias Weremouth, modo Sunderland juxta Mare.*" It is however a significant circumstance that when, A.D. 930, King Athelstan granted to the church all the lands on the south side of the river Wear, for many miles around, enumerating them as "the delightful vill of South Wearmouth, "Weston, Offerton, and Silksworth, together with the two Ryhopes, Burdon, "Seaham, Seaton, Dalton, Dalden, and Heselden," no mention is made of Sunderland. And it is not less significant, that although all the lands enumerated in that grant, except such as have been recently enfranchised, are to the present day copyholds or leaseholds, owing fealty to the church, Sunderland alone owes no such fealty, but is, altogether, ancient freehold. Minute accuracy might indeed require the exception of a small plot of

copyhold adjoining the river, a small plot purchased by the Priory of Finchale and now held as Dean and Chapter, and the Bishop's undefinable interest in the Town Moor; but each of these cases would on examination be found to confirm the antiquity of the general tenure. That Wearmouth was copyhold in the twelfth century is demonstrable from the character of its rents and services as enumerated in the *Boldon Buke*: and that Sunderland was at the same period freehold is equally obvious from the form and terms of the instruments used in conveying its lands, as set forth in "The Charters of Endowments, &c., of the Priory of Finchale" pp. 128-131. Without pretending to any closer argument than reasonable presumption—the only kind the subject admits of—is it not a fair inference from the preceding facts, that when, A.D. 930, the grant was made to the church of all the land about Sunderland, Sunderland itself was excluded, because its lands were *at that time* freehold, in the actual occupation of free-men, holding them as their own absolute indefeasible estates of inheritance? But this probable occupation may be carried back to a yet earlier period; for in Athelstan's grant it is stated that the lands thereby restored had been "wrested from the church in former times through the malignity of evil men." The evil men and former times thus alluded to are probably the incursions of the Danes. Adverting, then, to a period anterior to the Danish invasion, the following extract from Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* (Wilcock's translation, p. 23) may refer to one of the grants to the church, of which the benefit had been subsequently wrested from it:—"Among a great variety of other valuable acquisitions, Benedict, on his return from off his last journey to Rome, imported two cloaks woven entirely of silk, and most admirably wrought. In exchange for these, he obtained of King Alfrid and his council (for Egfrid during his absence had been slain) three hides of land, near the mouth and on the *south* bank of the river Wear." Now it is a notorious fact that although the monastic estates on the north side of the river have devolved in due course upon, and are now held by, the Dean and Chapter of Durham, that body hold no lands, similarly acquired, on the south side. Hence we infer either that the ground on which Sunderland stands was, because already occupied, not included in the original grant to Benedict, but that the subject of that grant is to be sought among the church's Wearmouth copyholds; or, if

included, that it was obtained in order to be, and was, parcelled out among the inhabitants, and became absorbed in Sunderland's free tenures.

The Monkwearmouth monastery was completed A.D. 674; and probably, like that of Jarrow, was two years in building. We date, therefore, the rise of the town of Sunderland A.D. 672; and our conjecture as to its origin is, that when Benedict introduced masons, glassmakers, and other artizans from abroad, for the purpose of building and beautifying the monastery, he settled them, not upon the monastic lands on the north bank of the river but, upon lands appropriated to them on the south bank. What, in fact, more probable, than that Bede's father was himself one of these foreign artizans? Bede's having been born about the time of the erection of the Wearmouth monastery, and having been received into it at the early age of seven years, are circumstances not unfavourable to such an hypothesis. But whether this were so or not, fostered by a church which was then the patron of freedom, and stimulated by the impulse then being given to the industrial arts, Sunderland was, in all probability, a well populated town in the beginning of the eighth century, when Bede flourished, and towards the close of the ninth century, when Alfred wrote.

It may be observed in passing that the compound Anglo-Saxon word "Sundorland," or "Sunderland," is said by Anglo-Saxon lexicographers to have, among other meanings, that of "privileged territory, freehold land": *i. e.*, land sundered from the adjoining land, for exclusive, permanent, and privileged occupation. We have said that Sunderland-near-the-Sea is all ancient freehold, while Monk-Wearmouth and Bishop-Wearmouth consist wholly of ecclesiastical lands; and had there been other authorities than the passage under discussion for attributing to the word the above meaning, the coincidence might have justified the inference that the name of the town was derived from its having been occupied as freehold at the time when all the waste lands around were granted to the church. We have, however, reason to believe that the passage under discussion is the only authority relied upon for this signification; and, against it, we submit that the phrases "in territorio," and "of Sundorlande," do not, either of them, express the idea of exclusive personal occupation; but rather that of lands lying outside and sundered, yet under control. The Latin word "territorium" is explained, by the best lexicographers, to mean,

“land round a town, the town common.” Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, lib. v. cap. iv., thus defines it:—“Colonis locus communis, qui prope oppidum relinquitur, Territorium.” The entire passage runs thus:—“Terra dicta ab eo, ut Ælius scribit, quod teritur; itaque terra in Augurum libris scripta cum R uno. Ab eo colonis locus communis, qui prope oppidum relinquitur, Territorium, quod maxime teritur.” Cicero, in his *Orationes Phillipicæ*, 2, 40, 102, uses the word in the same sense:—“Quo quidem vomere portam Capuæ pæne perstrinxisti, ut florentis coloniæ territorium minueretur.” The English word “territory,” which is in fact the Latin word Anglicized, is defined by Webster and others thus:—“A tract of land belonging to and under the dominion of a prince or state lying at a distance from the parent country or from the seat of government; as, the territories of British India, the territories of the United States, the territory of Michigan, the north-west territory.” With reference to the latter examples, Webster adds:—“These districts of country, when received into the Union and acknowledged to be States, lose the appellation of territory.” In Tomlin’s *Law Dictionary*, the “territory of a judge” is defined to be “the district within which he has right of jurisdiction and of deciding the causes proper to him.” As to “territorial jurisdiction,” and “territorial boundaries,” they are phrases still in ordinary use to indicate the extent of a diocese or a cure.

More appropriate terms than those used in explaining “territorium” and “territory,” we could not select to express what we conceive to be the meaning of the Saxon word “Sundorland” *i. e.*, land sundered and outlying—not necessarily part of the estates of the monastery, but within its jurisdiction.

With regard to the jurisdiction of the early monasteries, Dr. Lingard remarks (*Antiquities of Anglo-Saxon Church*, 2nd ed., p. 81.):—“The superior,” in addition to his spiritual jurisdiction, “was frequently invested, by the partiality of his benefactor, with the civil and criminal jurisdiction; and, throughout the domain annexed to the church, he exercised the right of raising tolls on the transport of merchandize, of levying fines for breaches of the peace, of deciding civil suits, and of trying offenders within his courts. And as,” adds the historian, “the authority of the clerical was exercised with more moderation than that of the

“secular thanes, men quickly learned to prefer the equity of their judgments to the hasty decisions of warlike and ignorant nobles; and the prospect of tranquillity and justice encouraged artificers and merchants to settle under their protection.” Such we conceive to have been the precise relation in which the town of Sunderland stood to the monastery of Wearmouth. It was a settlement of artificers and merchants:—not upon the monastic estates (for on them resided 600 monks, who, with unwearied industry, tilled the soil by their own exclusive personal labour) but upon land sundered from the estates of the monastery, yet within its spiritual, civil, and criminal jurisdiction, and under its protection:—hence called the Sunderland *of the Monastery*.

In this diocese we have two other Sunderlands; and each suggests by its situation and history, the like severance from a neighbouring monastic estate combined with the like submission to monastic control. The one is North Sunderland, divided by an arm of the sea from Farne Island, where St. Cuthbert long lived in not inglorious seclusion, and from Holy Island, the seat of the Monastery of Lindisfarne. The other is Sunderland Bridge, which, as Surtees says (vol iv. pp. 72 and 122), is the extreme southern and outlying portion of the lands of St. Oswald, being sundered from the bulk of those lands by the Brun on the one side and by the Wear on the other. There is a Sunderland in Allerdale, and there was a Sunderlandwick in Craven (See *Domesday*); both localities favourable to similar combinations, though not now easily detected. But in another case the coincidence is remarkable. Sunderlandwick, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, is within a short distance of Watton, where, A.D. 686, there existed a priory called by Bede “Wetadun” or Wettown (Bohn’s edition of Giles’ *Bede*, p. 239 and note), because a considerable portion of the neighbourhood was “a complete morass” (See Lewis’ *Topographical Dict. of Eng. in loco*). This Sunderlandwick, once a considerable village, was, A.D. 1086, when *Domesday Book* was compiled, in the hands of the king; and had no doubt been a dependency of Wetadun severed from it by the morass.

We have then before us the following facts, viz. :—

1. A monastery erected on the north side of the river Wear, upon and surrounded by lands the property of the ecclesiastical body, and reserved for the exclusive use of its austere members.

2. On the south side, skilled foreign workmen and others, a not inconsiderable population, chiefly brought together through the building of the monastery, and settled as freemen upon their own lands, which being bocland in the first instance, were or became freehold of inheritance, and have so continued to the present day—a remnant of Saxon liberty.

3. This *land*, no part of the estates of the monastery but, *sundered* from them by the river Wear—the monastic estates and the *sundered* lands lying on its opposite banks.

4. Using the word “territory” in the sense before cited, Sunderland, though not within the estates of the monastery, was under its jurisdiction, within its territory.

5. Bede does not record of himself, that he was born within the walls nor upon the lands personally occupied by the monks:—he says that he was born within their territory; and King Alfred expressly declares that Bede was born in “Sundorland of the Monastery.”

From these premises, we are to determine whether the place of Bede’s birth was not the “territorium,” the “*colonis locus communis*,” as distinguished from the monastic establishment; and, if Sunderland be not used by King Alfred as a proper name, whether the circumstance of its being subject to but *sundered* from the monastery, has not *originated* the name of a town whose present prosperity is attributable to the continuance of the skill, enterprize, and industry, that characterized its earliest occupants, and which, if the foregoing reasoning prove correct, may add to its other claims on public attention, that of being the birthplace of one of the brightest ornaments of the eighth century, and one of the most eminent Fathers of the English Church.

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