

VIII.—REVIEW OF TWO LIVES OF SAINT  
CUTHBERT.

*A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life.* Texts, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave, Cambridge University Press, 1940. pp. xiii and 375. Price 21s.

Seventeen years ago Bertram Colgrave edited the life of Wilfrid attributed to Eddius Stephanus. He has since completed the much more arduous task of editing two of the lives of Cuthbert, the one written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne and the other Bede's *Prose Life*, and in so doing he has performed another valuable service to the study of Northumbrian history. Bede's reputation as a historian, not only in this country, but also in many parts of the continent, is perhaps one reason why the work of other Northumbrian historians has been neglected. It is, none the less, a reflection of the lack of interest in early English history that there should have been no attempt to provide an accurate text of the anonymous life of Cuthbert since the work was first published by the Bollandists in 1668. Both Stevenson and Giles edited the life in the middle of the nineteenth century, but in both cases they did little more than reprint the text of the Bollandist edition. There are at least three good reasons why the anonymous life deserves the careful attention which it has at long last been given. It is the earliest piece of English historical literature now extant, it is a work of considerable merit both as literature and history, and it is the main source of Bede's prose life of Cuthbert.

Colgrave has, he writes in his preface, committed him-

self to certain principles in editing these two lives. The first was evidently that the texts should be based on the fullest possible examination of the surviving manuscripts. This has involved him in immense, and often tedious, labour, especially in the case of Bede's version, but he must feel amply rewarded by the completeness of the text which his labour has enabled him to supply, as well as by the many interesting discoveries which he has made about the manuscripts themselves. It is remarkable that, of the seven manuscripts of the anonymous life which are now known to exist, not one seems to have been written in this country. Again the explanation is to be found partly in Bede's reputation which resulted in a greater demand for what was doubtless considered to be the more authoritative version—witness the thirty-eight surviving manuscripts of Bede's prose life. This, however, is not the whole explanation. A manuscript of Bede's version which was written at Durham in the fourteenth century contains a series of apparently contemporary notes which are almost all taken from the anonymous life. It therefore seems not unlikely that the Durham library contained a copy of the anonymous life at that time. Doubtless there were once other copies at York, Whitby, Jarrow and elsewhere in Northumbria, including, of course, Lindisfarne itself. Of the thirty-eight manuscripts which contain the whole or part of Bede's prose life, two only are assigned by Colgrave to the tenth century, while the great majority are of twelfth century date or later. Neither of the two earliest manuscripts is, according to Colgrave, of north country origin. Evidently the early Northumbrian manuscripts both of the anonymous life and of Bede's version have shared the fate of so many other early documents from this part of the country.

Colgrave has done much more than supply full texts. His wide knowledge of hagiographical literature has enabled him to reveal the construction of these lives in considerable detail. By showing how much is conventional in this kind of literature, he has revealed all the more clearly

how much is real. It is interesting to find that, when the anonymous author states in his preface that he has not "written anything except what has been received on good authority and tested," he is quoting from the late fourth century life of St. Martin by Sulpicius Severus, a work which, Colgrave points out, was one of three which were long used as models for saints' lives in western Europe. The impressive list of phrases which the anonymous writer has borrowed from Isidore of Seville for a description of Cuthbert's virtues and which Eddius also borrowed to describe Wilfrid, is of value just because it reveals so clearly the contrast between the conventional and the real. There is, indeed, hardly a chapter which does not illustrate some detail of Cuthbert's ways of life and thought. Particularly vivid is the account of his life on Farne—the lack of water, the shortage of wood, the difficulty of growing food and the exasperation of seeing the birds eat it when it did grow. These incidents are as real as the account of his journeys through his diocese preaching, dedicating churches, ordaining priests and attending to all the other duties of a bishop.

The lack of churches was probably a less serious obstacle to the spread of Christianity in Northumbria than the lack of trained priests to teach the new religion. This point emerges from one of the most interesting additions made by Bede to the anonymous life—the story of the rafts which were driven out to sea. The onlookers who jeered at the monks as they prayed on the opposite bank of the river for the safety of their companions on the rafts, replied to Cuthbert's rebuke: "Let no man pray for them, . . . for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows." It seems clear that Christianity had not established itself in this part of Northumbria in earlier times, though we cannot do more than speculate on what the *ueteres culturas* were. The evidence suggests that the scene of this incident was the Tyne which separates Northumberland from Durham, rather than the Haddingtonshire Tyne, as some writers

have supposed. The possibility that some cults popular in the late Roman period may have survived in this area, where there is very little evidence of early anglo-saxon settlement, is not to be entirely discounted. This problem, however, seems to offer less hope of solution than another raised by the same story—the exact site of the monastery to which Bede was referring. "Changed like all else by time," he writes, rather regretfully, it had become a nunnery in his day. He mentions it as the scene of one of Cuthbert's miracles in a later passage and he records that Verca was then its abbess.

The interest of these lives is by no means confined to ecclesiastical history and, if one may venture a criticism, it may be that Colgrave has devoted a little less than due attention to social and constitutional matters. For example, he translates the latin term *comes* by the old english *gesith* and, for the meaning of the latter, is content to refer his readers to a work which may not be readily accessible to many of them. In book IV, chapter VII of the anonymous life he translates both the latin terms *seruus* and *minister* by the same english word, namely "servant." This is unfortunate because it obscures the different meanings of the two words. Whereas *seruus* here seems to mean "servant" in the sense most commonly used in modern english, *minister* seems to mean "servant" only in the sense that a government minister may describe himself as a servant of the crown. Again, what is the implication of the word *regio* which is applied by the anonymous writer to *Kintis* and *Ahse*, two of the several unidentified place-names in this work? It is interesting to note that Eddius uses the same word to describe the land on which Wilfrid built his church at Hexham. The anonymous life contains one particularly interesting passage in which the juxtaposition of the words *comes* and *regio* seems to be more than accidental. These are points which deserve a little more attention in the notes than Colgrave has given them. The anonymous writer refers also to the *Niuduera regio*. It seems generally to

have been supposed that the region of the Niduari was in the land of the Picts, but it is questionable whether the account given in the anonymous life justifies this assumption. Cuthbert and his two companions are said to have set sail for the land of the Picts. They reached the region of the Niduari where they were stormbound and ran short of food. After four days they resumed their journey and reached harbour safely. There is more than one obscure point here. Was the region of the Niduari Cuthbert's ultimate destination or were he and his companions only forced to take refuge here on their way? As the coast on which they landed was evidently deserted, the latter seems the more likely. When the author refers to Cuthbert resuming his journey on the fourth day, does he mean that Cuthbert went on to the land of the Picts or that he came back home? Unfortunately the writer was not interested in the journey itself or its purpose, of which he says nothing, but only in the miraculous provision of food. Bede's account is different in important details. He states without any ambiguity that Cuthbert and his companions went by sea to the land of the Picts who are called Niduari. They were forced to stay there longer than they had intended because of the bad weather. In view of their expected early return they had taken no food with them. After the storm had subsided, they returned home to their own country. Bede has removed the obscurities of the account given by the anonymous writer. Had he any more evidence than we have for answering the questions raised by that account or was it merely that he was anxious to give a less ambiguous version? It is worth noting that the account given by the anonymous writer as far as the resumption of the voyage after the storm fills thirty-one lines of Colgrave's text. Bede takes forty-six lines to tell the same story, and one suspects that this is one of the passages in which he may be not unfairly accused of "padding."

The picture of Cuthbert's Northumbria which is drawn in these two lives is clear in its broad outlines, though less

so in detail. The people live in small and widely scattered villages. Sheep seem to be their main concern. Of the plough we learn nothing directly, nor is there anything said of industry or trade. Towns play no part in their lives, with the exception of Carlisle, and even this seems to have been something of a curiosity, of whose origin, it should be noted, some at least of its inhabitants were well aware. It is mainly the upper classes who have embraced Christianity. The ruling class is an aristocracy, with king and bishop as the head of state and church. Cuthbert's seemingly genuine reluctance to accept the office of bishop is some evidence of the prominent part which that official was expected to play in daily life. The heads of monasteries and nunneries are people of high birth, as indeed Cuthbert himself may have been. The local administrative officers are appointed by the king.

No other part of the country provides such abundant evidence for the study of the early christian period of english history as Northumbria, nor is there any part where the material is so varied in kind. Much work has yet to be done on the literary sources. Colgrave himself draws attention to the need of a critical edition of the works of Bede. It will doubtless be many years before this can be achieved, but meanwhile, in this edition of the lives of Cuthbert and in his earlier edition of the life of Wilfrid, Colgrave has filled a part of the gap. If other editors reach the high standard which he has set, Northumbrian history will be well served. It is much to be hoped that one result of Colgrave's labours may be to stimulate interest in what the spade may yet recover of the places in which Cuthbert and his contemporaries lived and worked. Much of the evidence has been lost, but not all of it. In conclusion, a word of gratitude for Colgrave's translations. Those who wish to make a detailed study of these works must, of course, do so in the language in which they were written, but it is well to remember that modern english is nearer akin to the old english in which these authors thought than it is to the latin

in which they wrote. Sometimes anglo-saxon literature may seem a little dull, especially in contrast with Norse, but the story of the penitent ravens, Cuthbert's vision at Carlisle and the account which Bede gives of Cuthbert's death will stand comparison with the best in any period of English history.

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