

A Note on the Knowledge of Greek in Early Anglo-Saxon England

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The starting point for an enquiry concerning the knowledge of Greek in early Anglo-Saxon England is the Venerable Bede's (673-735) description of the school of Theodore of Tarsus (602-690) and the Abbot Hadrian (d 709) in Canterbury and his testimony to their linguistic skills. In his *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, Bede writes,

This was Theodore, a man well versed in both worldly and clerical wisdom, and this in both languages, that is, in Greek and Latin. He gave him, Hadrian the abbot, a most energetic and careful man, to be his companion and counsellor.¹

Bede stresses Theodore's knowledge of both Greek and Latin and his ability to teach both languages to his students. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede writes, "They gave their hearers instruction not only in the books of holy Scripture but also in the art of metre, astronomy, and ecclesiastical computation. As evidence of this, some of their students still survive who know Latin and Greek just as well as their native tongue."² Bede identifies two of these students. One was

¹ Bede, *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, 3, in Christopher Grocock & I N Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford Clarendon Press 2013), pp28-29: *Theodorum videlicet saeculari simul et ecclesiastica philosophia praeditum virum, et hoc in utraque lingua, Graeca scilicet et Latina, dato ei college et consiliatore viro aequae strenuissimo ac prudentissimo Adriano abate.*

² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* Bertram Colgrave & R A B Mynors, eds, (Oxford Clarendon Press 1972), IV 2 pp333& 335: *Ita ut etiam metricae artis, astronomiae et arithmeticae ecclesiasticae disciplinam inter sacrorum apicum volumina suis auditoribus contraderent. Indicio est quod usque hodie supersunt de eorum discipulis, qui Latinam Graecamque linguam aequae ut propriam in qua nati sunt norunt.* J M Wallace-Hadrill comments: "neither nationality nor age plays any part in the qualifications for a new archbishop in Britain; what matters is scriptural learning, experience of ecclesiastical and monastic discipline, and unimpeachable character. Theodore, however, is so old that Bede makes a virtue of it." (J M Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

Tobias, Bishop of Rochester, who “was a man of great learning and was familiar with the Latin, Greek, and English languages.”³ Later Bede repeats his praise of Bishop Tobias’ scholarship:

In the following year Tobias, bishop of the church at Rochester, died, a most learned man, as has already been said. He had been a disciple of two masters of blessed memory, Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian. Besides having a knowledge of both ecclesiastical and general literature, he is also said to have learned Latin and Greek so thoroughly that they were as well known and as familiar to him as his native tongue.⁴

A second was Albinus who succeeded Hadrian as abbot and “was so well trained in scriptural studies that he had no small knowledge of the Greek language and that he knew Latin as well as English, his native tongue.”⁵ There may have been others who learned Greek in the school in Canterbury whom Bede has not identified. Bede does refer to two other students who eventually became bishops, Oftfor, bishop of the Hwicce, and John of Beverley, Bishop of Hexham. It seems that for Bede and his generation, while the ability to read and write and speak Latin might be normal, the ability to read and write and speak Greek was unusual and worth noting.

Aldhelm of Malmesbury (640-709) was a student of Theodore and Hadrian in Canterbury. In his letter to Heahfrith, he uses the image of bees collecting nectar and pollen to describe English scholars returning from Ireland laden with scholarship. He writes of “ravenous scholars and an avid throng of sagacious students” who have gathered “the residue from the rich fields of Holy Writ,” “the grammatical and geometrical arts,” “the thrice-fold scaffolds of the art of physics” and “the fourfold honeyed oracles of allegorical or rather

(Oxford Clarendon Press 2002) p 136). Wallace-Hadrill does not mention Theodore’s knowledge of Greek.

³ Bede, *HE* V 8, Colgrave & Mynors, p 475: *Virum Latina Greca et Saxonica lingua atque eruditione multipliciter instructam.*

⁴ Bede, *HE* V 23, Colgrave & Mynors, p 557: *Anno post quem proximo Tobias Hrofensis ecclesiae praesul defunctus est, vir, ut supra meminimus, doctissimus; erat enim discipulus beatae memoriae magistrorum Theodori archiepiscopi et abbatis Hadriani, unde, ut dictum est, cum ruditione litterarum vel ecclesiasticarum vel generalium ita Grecam quoque cum Latina didicit linguam, ut tam notas ac familiars sibi eas quam nativitatibus suae loquellam haberet.*

⁵ Bede, *HE* V 20, Colgrave & Mynors, p 531: *In tantum studiis scripturarum institutes est, ut Gecam quidem linguam non parva ex parte, Latinam vero non minus quam Anglorum, quae sibi naturalis, noverit.*

tropological disputation of opaque problems in aetherial mysteries.”⁶ This gives us an idea of the curriculum of the Irish schools and therefore an idea of the scholarship that the English were seeking. Aldhelm, however, argues that in his time there was no need for Englishmen to go to Ireland when England possessed Theodore of Tarsus and Abbot Hadrian whom he describes as “citizens of Greece and Rome...who are able to unlock and unravel the murky mysteries of the heavenly library to the scholars who are eager to study them.”⁷ Aldhelm then speaks of Theodore being surrounded by enthusiastic Irish students. In his letter to Leuthere, Aldhelm again speaks of the curriculum of schools of his time. He speaks of ‘Roman laws,’ ‘the hundred types of metres,’ ‘this metrical art,’ ‘calculation,’ ‘computation,’ and ‘the zodiac.’⁸ It is noted that Aldhelm does not mention Greek as a subject of instruction in either Ireland or Canterbury. This becomes ‘an argument from silence’ since we know from Bede that Greek was taught at Canterbury. Next we must discuss Aldhelm’s knowledge of Greek and then trace the history of the school at Canterbury during and after the times of Theodore and Hadrian. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren analyse Aldhelm’s knowledge of Greek in their edition of his prose works. They say

Bede further notes that certain students acquired a sound knowledge of Greek as well as of Latin (*HE IV 2*). Again it is not easy to judge whether Aldhelm was one of the ‘certain students’ who acquired a knowledge of Greek. Despite his fondness for Greek and Greek-derived words, we possess no unambiguous evidence that he was able to construe a sentence in that language. He is addressed by an unknown student (letter VI) as “distinguished in native ability and for (his) Roman eloquence, and for various flowers of letters, even those in the Greek fashion.” But the phrase *Graecorum more* might indicate no more than that Aldhelm adorned his vocabulary with Greek words.⁹

Eventually Lapidge and Herren conclude that “the question of Aldhelm’s knowledge of Greek must remain in suspense until further research has been

⁶ Aldhelm, “Letter to Heahfrith,” in Aldhelm, *The Prose Works* translated by Michael Lapidge & Michael Herren (Ipswich D S Brewer 1979), pp 160-164 at pp 161 t-162.

⁷ Aldhem, “Letter to Heahfrith,” p 164.

⁸ Aldhelm, “Letter to Leuthere,” in Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, pp152-153.

⁹ Michael Lapidge & Michael Herren, “Aldhelm’s Life,” in Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, p 8

undertaken.”¹⁰ On the basis of the information which Lapidge and Herren have provided we may see Aldhelm as a scholar fascinated with words, exotic words from Greek and Latin, and interested in using them as often as possible in his works. His knowledge of Greek is likely derived from glossaries of Greek and Latin words and perhaps from interlinear glosses of texts of Holy Writ. This is the same approach which led to Anglo-Saxon riddles. Still it is significant that Aldhelm should be interested in Greek words. This is evidence that Greek was known and studied in the England of his time if only in a specialized way.

We now need to consider the school in Canterbury. In recent years a number of scholars have studied Theodore of Tarsus and his educational work at Canterbury. We may note James Siemens, *The Christology of Theodore of Tarsus: The Laterculus Malalianus and the Person and Work of Christ*.¹¹ In addition there is the work of Jane Stevenson on the *Laterculus Malalianus* and the collection of essays in the volume *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*.¹² Michael Lapidge’s essay “The Study of Greek at the School of Canterbury in the Seventh Century,” and the relevant passages in his book, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* are important contributions to this field of study.¹³ Lapidge has identified the Greek and Latin works which were parts of Theodore’s Library at Canterbury. In his essay, Lapidge uses the Canterbury Biblical Commentaries as a means of demonstrating the presence of Greek Commentaries, the Greek Gospels and parts of the Septuagint in Theodore’s and Hadrian’s school.¹⁴ In *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Michael

¹⁰ Ibid., p 9

¹¹ James Siemens, *The Christology of Theodore of Tarsus: The Laterculus Malalianus and the Person and Work of Christ*, (Turnhout, Belgium Brepols 2010).

¹² Jane Stevenson, *The ‘Laterculus Malalianus’ and the School of Archbishop Theodore Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 14* (Cambridge University Press 1995), & Michael Lapidge, ed. *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 11* (Cambridge University Press 1995). Of these works, the following are particularly useful: Guglielmo Cavallo, “Theodore of Tarsus and the Greek Culture of his time,” David Dumville, “The importation of Mediterranean manuscripts into Theodore’s England,” and Patrick McGurk, “Theodore’s Bible: The Gospels.”

¹³ Michael Lapidge, “The Study of Greek at the School of Canterbury in the Seventh Century,” in Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Literature 600-899* (London The Hambledon Press 1996), pp123-139 & Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford University Press 2008), pp 31-33.

¹⁴ Lapidge, “The Study of Greek,” pp 125 & 130, see also Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (London Leicester University Press 1996), pp 95 – 96.

Lapidge has identified at least thirteen Greek authors as known to Theodore and Hadrian.¹⁵ He adds an important reservation,

However, since both Theodore and Hadrian were trained (in Greek) in Mediterranean schools, one must reckon with the possibility that quotations in the biblical commentaries were made from memory, and hence do not imply the existence of a particular book at Canterbury. On the other hand, some quotations are so extensive and agree so closely with the transmitted text, that the hypothesis of quotation from memory becomes untenable.¹⁶

These biblical commentaries where they existed would have been valuable teaching tools and a means whereby the knowledge of the Greek language was handed on to the students in the Canterbury school. Lapidge concludes sadly: “Not a single one of these volumes can safely be identified among surviving manuscripts. The Canterbury library has vanished completely.”¹⁷ This, unfortunately, limits our ability to assess the teaching of Greek.

There is one manuscript which may have a claim to be a surviving volume of the school in Canterbury. This is Cambridge, Corpus Christi 286, the Gospels of St Augustine. Christopher de Hamel describes the book thus: “the manuscript comprises the four Gospels from the New Testament, in the Latin translation of Saint Jerome, taken from the original Greek of its four authors and rendered by him into the spoken language of Western Europe.”¹⁸ He presents the arguments that this sixth century Italian Gospel book “was probably in England by the late seventh century,” and in Anglo-Saxon times was in the possession of St Augustine’s Abbey.¹⁹ He reminds us that Theodore’s colleague, Hadrian, was abbot of St Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury.²⁰ He describes the belief of the Monks of St Augustine that this book was one of the books which Gregory the Great sent to England with Augustine of Canterbury, and his own conclusion based on a study of its version of the Vulgate by Hans Hermann Gunz that the book “can only have emanated from the household of

¹⁵ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, p 32-3.

¹⁶ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, p 33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (Penguin Books 2018), p 19.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 27.

²⁰ Ibid, 46.

Saint Gregory in Rome.”²¹ Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge are more cautious in their description of this book thus: ‘s. vi or vi/vii, Italy (Rome?), prov. S. England (Minister-in-Thanel?), s. vii/viii, perh. Canterbury s. viii/ix, prov. Canterbury St A s. x (or ix?)’²² As we see, they assign its origin to Italy in the sixth century, possibly Rome, and place it in England in the seventh century and Canterbury in the eighth century. This gives the book the right origin in Italy, and its date of writing, to support a theory that it came to England with St Theodore if not with St Augustine. Both theories are hence likely. An illustrated Gospel book may not have been used in the classroom, but it would have been available for consultation. It likely was kept either on the altar of the Church or in the sacristy. It is a happy speculation that here we have a book which was handled by Theodore and Hadrian. The book unfortunately has no Greek in it.

The history of the school at Canterbury after the times of Theodore and Hadrian deserves further study. For our purposes, it is likely that the study of Greek there ended with the deaths of its teachers. This is certainly Nicholas Brooks’ opinion. He writes that “the knowledge of Greek at Canterbury had passed away with the last of Theodore’s pupils,” and that Theodore “was the *magister*, the teacher, and with his death the ‘school of Canterbury’ lost its pre-eminence.”²³ Lapidge’s comment on the quality of the teaching of the Greek language in the Canterbury Biblical Commentaries supports this conclusion: “at the same time, although this learning was for the most part in Greek, the commentaries provide no evidence that the Canterbury students were given elementary instruction in the fundamentals of Greek grammar, and it is not clear that they could have read and understood a Greek manuscript unaided.”²⁴ In the light of this comment, the achievements of Tobias and Albinus are as remarkable as Bede insists, and the disappearance of Greek after the deaths of Theodore and Hadrian seems inevitable.

²¹ Ibid, pp 30, 32, 33 & 36.

²² Helmut Gneuss & Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographic Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments written or owned in England up to 1100*, (Toronto University of Toronto Press 2015), p97.

²³ Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury*, p 97. In the following pages, Brooks argues his case with references to Pope Gregory’s *libellus Responsium* and Theodore’s Penitential.

²⁴ Lapidge, “The Study of Greek,” p 139.

There are several links between Canterbury and the Venerable Bede. One of them is the commanding figure of his beloved abbot, Ceolfrith. “The Anonymous Life of Ceolfrith” reads: “Soon after his ordination he (Ceolfrith) went to Kent, because he was extremely eager to learn the practices of the monastic life and of the rank which he had assumed.”²⁵ The unknown author does not say that Ceolfrith went to Canterbury for his monastic formation; it is only a supposition which Nicholas Brooks accepts. If, however, Ceolfrith did go to Canterbury in the times of Theodore and Hadrian, he might have benefited from their interest in teaching the Greek language and in turn encouraged Bede’s interest in Greek. This is speculative. There is, unfortunately, no evidence that Ceolfrith knew Greek. There is, however, good evidence that Bede was devoted to his teacher and abbot. His distress at the departure of Ceolfrith for Rome is ample evidence of this.²⁶ As we shall see presently, Bede was self-taught in Greek. Another link is Benedict Biscop, the first abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow. He had accompanied Theodore and Hadrian from Rome to Canterbury and had ruled the abbey of St Peter until Hadrian arrived.²⁷ He may have experienced Theodore’s lessons in the Greek language. In addition, Benedict Biscop had lived both in Lerins and in Rome and may have met Greek speakers in both places. Charles Plummer comments, “he [Bede] was, in fact indirectly through Benedict Biscop, largely indebted to this Canterbury school.”²⁸ Could this debt have included an interest in the Greek language? Both Ceolfrith and Benedict Biscop encouraged Bede’s scholarship by the books which they collected for their monastery’s libraries and by their teaching in the monastery. Again it is speculation but it presents a pleasing picture. Two men who so greatly influenced Bede encouraged him to teach himself Greek.

²⁵ “The Anonymous Life of Ceolfrith,” c 3 in Christopher Grocock and I N Wood, ed & trans, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, p 80-81: *Qui mox ordinatus ob studium discendi maxime vitae monasterialis et gradus, quem subierat, Cantiam petiit. Cantia* is the Latin term for Kent; the Latin term for Canterbury is *Civitas Doruernensis*. Nicholas Brooks thinks that Ceolfrith did live in the monastery at Canterbury, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury*, p 94.

²⁶ Bede, *In Primam Partem Samvhelis Libri IIII CCSL CXIX* (Turnhout Brepols 1962), Book IV pp212.

²⁷ Bede, *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* 3 in Christopher Grocock & I N Wood, eds & trans, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp 27-31.

²⁸ Charles Plummer, ed. *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1966), Notes pp 205-206.

Now we must turn our attention to the Venerable Bede, and the school of Wearmouth and Jarrow, and his knowledge of Greek. This question has received its share of the attention of scholars. We may note the following: Mary Catherine Bodden,²⁹ Anne Carlotta Dionisotti,³⁰ Kevin M Leach,³¹ and M. L. W. Laistner.³² The consensus appears to be that Bede was largely self-taught and that his grasp of Greek increased with his experience of the language. This is based on his handling of Greek in his two commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles.³³ His grasp is surer and more self-confident in the second of the two commentaries. Dionisotti tells us that “his *Retractatio* on Acts clearly shows that, by then, he had a knowledge of Greek quite remarkable for his time; but just how he learned and used it, whether it was as for the most of us, with a grammar and a dictionary, remains unexplored.”³⁴ She argues that Bede gained his command of Greek “by intensive study of the Bible in Greek and Latin, word by word, and by gleaning all he could from Latin sources, mainly patristic ones.”³⁵ This seems to be a very laborious approach to learning Greek but made necessary by the absence of any teachers. Laistner discusses this thoroughly in his essay, “The Latin Versions of Acts Known to the Venerable Bede.” Bodden associates Bede’s knowledge of Greek with Aldhelm’s grasp of the language writing: “Yet the testimony of both Bede (thought himself to have used the seventh century Greek manuscript, Oxford Bodleian Library Laud Gr 35, for his work on the Acts of the Apostles) and Aldhelm suggest that, even if only briefly, knowledge of Greek seems to have flourished in England...”³⁶ Gneuss and Lapidge describe this valuable bilingual manuscript of the *Acts of*

²⁹ Mary Catherine Bodden, “Evidence for knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988), 217-246.

³⁰ Anne Carlotta Dionisotti, “On Bede, Grammar and Greek,” *Revue Bénédictine* 92 (1988) 111-141.

³¹ Kevin M Leach, “The Venerable Bede’s Knowledge of Greek,” *Traditio* 39 (1983) 432-479.

³² M L W Laistner, “The Latin Versions of Acts known to the Venerable Bede,” *Harvard Theological Review* 30 (1937), pp37-50.

³³ Bede, *On the Acts of the Apostles: Two Books: Expositio Actuum Apostolorum CCSL 121*, M L W Laistner, ed (Turnhout Brepols 1983), pp1-99; Bede, *Retractio in Actus Apostolorum CCSL 121* (Turnhout Brepols 1983), pp 101-163; Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles Cistercian Series 117* L T Martin, trans, Kalamazoo, Mi Cistercian Publications 1989).

³⁴ Dionisotti, “On Bede, Grammar and Greek,” p111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p 128.

³⁶ Bodden, “Evidence for the Knowledge of Greek,” p 228. For Bede’s knowledge of this manuscript, see M. L. W. Laistner, “The Latin Versions of Acts known to the Venerable Bede,” p 43.

the Apostles thus: “Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud gr.35 (S.C. 1119) s. vi or vii, Italy (prob. Sardinia), prov. Northumbria s. viii, prov. S Germany (Abbey of Hornbach) s. viii ex. Contents: Actus Apostolorum (in Latin and Greek); cipher alphabet (s. ix?); creed, pagan oracle, Invocations to the Virgin, Edict of Flavius Pancratius of Sardinia (all in Greek).”³⁷ Another example of Bede’s confidence in his knowledge of the Greek language is his handling of “a book on the life and passion of St Anastasius which was badly translated from the Greek by some ignorant person, which I have corrected as best I could, to clarify the meaning.”³⁸

After Bede, there is some evidence of the existence of the school, and scriptorium at Jarrow and Wearmouth. Bede left his pupils behind him. Cuthbert’s letter describing Bede’s death identifies himself, and several others as Bede’s pupils.³⁹ Cuthbert names only one, a boy named Wilberht.⁴⁰ The names of the others have not been recorded. A careful examination of the surviving manuscripts from Jarrow and Wearmouth may turn up the names of the scribes. We can assume that the scribes were either the pupils of the Venerable Bede or the pupils of Bede’s pupils. We must now ask about the books in the Library at Jarrow and Wearmouth. Michael Lapidge concludes sadly: “But this great library has vanished more or less completely.”⁴¹ A quick search through Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, turned up nine items and there may be a few more.⁴² There is no hint of any Greek in these volumes. We know from various sources the Jarrow and Wearmouth had a flourishing trade in publishing the works of Bede. For example, St Boniface wrote from Germany to Abbot Huetbert of Wearmouth and asked for “some of the treatises of that keenest investigator of the Scriptures, the monk Bede, who, as we have learned, shone forth among you of

³⁷ Helmut Gneuss & Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, pp 501-502.

³⁸ Bede, *HE* V 24, Colgrave & Mynors, pp 568-571: librum vitae et passionis sancti Anastasii male de Greco translatum et peius a quodam imperito emendatum, prout potui, ad sensum correxi.

³⁹ “Cuthbert’s Letter on the Death of Bede,” in Bertram Colgrave & R A B Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp 579-587.

⁴⁰ Ibid p585, *praefatus puer, nomine Uilberht.*

⁴¹ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford University Press 2008) p 37.

⁴² Helmut Gneuss & Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, items 25 (the Moore Bede), 221, 293, 327, 367, 501.2, 501.3, 825 & 846 (Leningrad Bede).

late as a lantern of the Church, by his scriptural scholarship.”⁴³ This is further evidence that the scriptorium and school at Jarrow and Wearmouth survived Bede. We must, however, conclude sadly that Bede’s interest in Greek did not survive him.

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⁴³ St Boniface, *The Letters of St Boniface*, translated by Ephraim Emerton with a new introduction & bibliography by Thomas F X Noble (New York Columbia University Press 2000), pp 111-112.