

Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People

Edited with a facing-page translation of the Latin text by
Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors
Clarendon Press, 1969

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XXXXI.

XXIIII [XXII]

IN huius monasterio abbatissae fuit frater quidam¹ diuina gratia specialiter insignis, quia carmina religioni et pietati apta facere solebat, ita ut, quicquid ex diuinis litteris per interpretes disceret, hoc ipse post pusillum uerbis poeticis maxima suauitate et /
p. 259 compunctione conpositis in sua, id est Anglorum, lingua proferret. Cuius carminibus multorum saepe animi ad contemptum saeculi et appetitum sunt uitae caelestis accensi. Et quidem et alii post illum in gente Anglorum religiosa poemata facere temtabant, sed nullus eum aequiperare potuit. Namque ipse non ab hominibus neque per hominem² institutus canendi artem didicit, sed diuinitus adiutus gratis canendi donum accepit. Vnde nil umquam friuoli et superuacui poematis facere potuit, sed ea tantummodo, quae ad religionem pertinent, religiosam eius linguam decebant. Siquidem in habitu saeculari usque ad tempora prouectionis aetatis constitutus, nil carminum aliquando didicerat. Vnde nonnumquam in conuiuio, cum esset laetitiae causa decretum ut omnes per ordinem

¹ Cædmon's name is British, so he was possibly of British descent.

² Gal. 1: 1.

CHAPTER XXIV (XXII)

IN the monastery of this abbess there was a certain brother¹ who was specially marked out by the grace of God, so that he used to compose godly and religious songs; thus, whatever he learned from the holy Scriptures by means of interpreters, he quickly turned into extremely delightful and moving poetry, in English, which was his own tongue. By his songs the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life. It is true that after him other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him. For he did not learn the art of poetry from men nor through a man² but he received the gift of song freely by the grace of God. Hence he could never compose any foolish or trivial poem but only those which were concerned with devotion and so were fitting for his devout tongue to utter. He had lived in the secular habit until he was well advanced in years and had never learned any songs. Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing

cantare deberent, ille, ubi adpropinquare sibi citharam¹ cernebat, surgebat a media caena et egressus ad suam domum repedabat.

Quod dum tempore quodam faceret, et relicta domu conuiuui egressus esset ad stabula iumentorum, quorum ei custodia nocte illa erat delegata, ibique hora competenti membra dedisset sopori, adstitit ei quidam per somnium, eumque salutans ac suo appellans nomine 'Caedmon', inquit, 'canta mihi aliquid.' At ille respondens 'Nescio' inquit 'cantare; nam et ideo de conuiuio egressus huc secessi, quia cantare non poteram.' Rursum ille qui cum eo loquebatur 'At tamen' ait 'mihi^a cantare habes.' 'Quid' inquit 'debeo cantare?' Et ille 'Canta' inquit 'principium creaturarum.' Quo accepto responso, statim ipse coepit cantare in laudem Dei Conditoris uersus quos numquam audierat, quorum iste est
p. 260 sensus: 'Nunc laudare / debemus auctorem regni caelestis, potentiam Creatoris et consilium illius, facta Patris gloriae: quomodo ille, cum sit aeternus Deus, omnium miraculorum auctor extitit, qui primo filiis hominum caelum pro culmine tecti, dehinc terram Custos humani generis omnipotens creauit.'² Hic est sensus, non autem ordo^b ipse uerborum, quae dormiens ille canebat; neque enim possunt carmina, quamuis optime composita, ex alia in aliam linguam ad uerbum sine detrimento sui decoris ac dignitatis transferri. Exurgens autem a somno, cuncta quae dormiens cantauerat memoriter retenuit, et eis mox plura in eundem modum uerba Deo digni carminis adiunxit.

Veniensque mane ad uilicum, qui sibi praeerat, quid doni percepisset indicauit, atque ad abbatissam perductus iussus est, multis doctioribus uiris praesentibus, indicare somnium et dicere carmen, ut uniuersorum iudicio quid uel unde esset quod referebat probaretur. Visumque est omnibus caelestem ei a Domino

^a mihi *om. c*

^b et ordo *c*

¹ The type of harp which was passed round would probably be like the one reconstructed from the fragments found in the hanging bowl at Sutton Hoo, which is now in the British Museum. It is about 6 in. high and could easily be passed from hand to hand. Unfortunately Bede tells us neither the nature nor the substance of the songs sung. The context implies that they may have been 'foolish or trivial', which might mean simple folk-songs or ballads and possibly some heroic fragments. Again Bede does not tell us whether they were made up for the occasion, either on the spot or beforehand, but again the context suggests that they were traditional songs which Caedmon for some reason had never learned.

entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he saw the harp¹ approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home.

On one such occasion when he did so, he left the place of feasting and went to the cattle byre, as it was his turn to take charge of them that night. In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep, whereupon he dreamt that someone stood by him, saluted him, and called him by name: 'Caedmon,' he said, 'sing me something.' Caedmon answered, 'I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here because I could not sing.' Once again the speaker said, 'Nevertheless you must sing to me.' 'What must I sing?' said Caedmon. 'Sing', he said, 'about the beginning of created things.' Thereupon Caedmon began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the Creator, of which this is the general sense: 'Now we must praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how He, since he is the eternal God, was the Author of all marvels and first created the heavens as a roof for the children of men and then, the almighty Guardian of the human race, created the earth.'² This is the sense but not the order of the words which he sang as he slept. For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed, literally from one language to another without some loss of beauty and dignity. When he awoke, he remembered all that he had sung while asleep and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising God in fitting style.

In the morning he went to the reeve who was his master, telling him of the gift he had received, and the reeve took him to the abbess. He was then bidden to describe his dream in the presence of a number of the more learned men and also to recite his song so that they might all examine him and decide upon the nature and origin of the gift of which he spoke; and it seemed clear to all of them that the Lord had granted him heavenly grace. They then

² The Old English lines of which Bede gives a Latin translation are preserved in an Old Northumbrian version in L and N and in two other much later manuscripts. The poem in a late West-Saxon form is preserved in seven manuscripts of Bede's Latin text as well as in five manuscripts of the Old English translation of Bede which was made in the time of King Alfred. The poem is written in the traditional alliterative metre of all Old English poetry and the lines quoted illustrate well the poetic variation, a favourite device in which the same idea is repeated in different words; this was one of the main stylistic features of all Old English verse.

concessam esse gratiam, exponebantque illi quendam sacrae historiae siue doctrinae sermonem, praecipientes eum, si posset, hunc in modulationem carminis transferre. At ille suscepto negotio abiit, et mane rediens optimo carmine quod iubebatur compositum reddidit. Vnde mox abbatisa amplexata^a gratiam Dei in uiro, saecularem illum habitum relinquere et monasticum suscipere propositum docuit; susceptumque in monasterium cum omnibus suis fratrum cohorti adsociavit, iussitque illum seriem sacrae historiae doceri. At ipse cuncta, quae audiendo discere poterat, rememorando secum et quasi mundum animal ruminando,¹ in carmen dulcissimum conuertebat, suaviusque resonando doctores suos uicissim auditores sui faciebat. Canebat autem de creatione mundi et origine humani generis / et tota Genesis historia, de egressu Israel ex Aegypto et ingressu in terram repromissionis, de aliis plurimis sacrae scripturae historiis, de incarnatione dominica, passione, resurrectione et ascensione in caelum, de Spiritus Sancti aduentu et apostolorum doctrina; item de terrore futuri iudicii et horrore poenae gehennalis ac dulcedine regni caelestis multa carmina faciebat. Sed et alia perplura de beneficiis et iudiciis diuinis, in quibus cunctis homines ab amore scelerum abstrahere, ad dilectionem uero et sollertiam bonae actionis excitare curabat.² Erat enim uir multum religiosus et regularibus disciplinis humiliter subditus; aduersum uero illos, qui aliter facere uolebant, zelo magni feruoris accensus, unde et pulchro uitam suam fine conclusit.

Nam propinquante hora sui decessus, XIII diebus praeueniente corporea infirmitate pressus est, adeo tamen moderate, ut et loqui toto eo tempore posset et ingredi. Erat autem in proximo casa, in qua infirmiores et qui prope morituri esse uidebantur induci solebant. Rogauit ergo ministrum suum³ uespere incumbente, nocte qua de saeculo erat exiturus, ut in ea sibi locum quiescendi

^a amplexa c2

¹ According to the Mosaic law only such animals as chewed the cud and had cloven hoofs were 'clean' and might be eaten. Cf. Levit. 11: 3 and Deut. 14: 6.

² A number of Old English poems on religious subjects, such as are described here, have survived, particularly in a late tenth- or early eleventh-century

read to him a passage of sacred history or doctrine, bidding him make a song out of it, if he could, in metrical form. He undertook the task and went away; on returning next morning he repeated the passage he had been given, which he had put into excellent verse. The abbess, who recognized the grace of God which the man had received, instructed him to renounce his secular habit and to take monastic vows. She and all her people received him into the community of the brothers and ordered that he should be instructed in the whole course of sacred history. He learned all he could by listening to them and then, memorizing it and ruminating over it, like some clean animal chewing the cud,¹ he turned it into the most melodious verse: and it sounded so sweet as he recited it that his teachers became in turn his audience. He sang about the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole history of Genesis, of the departure of Israel from Egypt and the entry into the promised land and of many other of the stories taken from the sacred Scriptures: of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of the Lord, of His ascension into heaven, of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles. He also made songs about the terrors of future judgement, the horrors of the pains of hell, and the joys of the heavenly kingdom. In addition he composed many other songs about the divine mercies and judgements, in all of which he sought to turn his hearers away from delight in sin and arouse in them the love and practice of good works.² He was a most religious man, humbly submitting himself to the discipline of the Rule; and he opposed all those who wished to act otherwise with a flaming and fervent zeal. It was for this reason that his life had a beautiful ending.

When the hour of his departure drew near he was afflicted, fourteen days before, by bodily weakness, yet so slight that he was able to walk about and talk the whole time. There was close by a building to which they used to take those who were infirm or who seemed to be at the point of death. On the night on which he was to die, as evening fell, he asked his attendant³ to prepare a place in this building where he could rest. The attendant did as Cædmon

manuscript at Oxford (Junius xi). There is no evidence that any of them derive from Cædmon's work except the nine lines translated by Bede. In fact it is clear that they are the work of more than one man.

³ It was the custom for an older monk to have a young novice to look after him. Thus Cudda on Lindisfarne was looked after by young Wilfrid (Eddius, chapter 2).

praepararet; qui miratus cur hoc rogaret, qui nequaquam adhuc moriturus esse uidebatur, fecit tamen quod dixerat. Cumque ibidem positi uicissim aliqua gaudente animo una cum eis, qui ibidem antea inerant, loquerentur ac iocarentur, et iam mediae noctis tempus esset transcensum, interrogauit si eucharistiam intus haberent. Respondebant: 'Quid opus est eucharistia? neque enim mori adhuc habes, qui tam hilariter nobiscum uelut sospes loqueris.' Rursus ille 'Et tamen' ait 'afferte mihi eucharistiam.' Qua accepta in manu interrogauit, si omnes placidum erga se animum^a et sine querela controuersiae ac rancoris haberent. p. 262 Respondebant / omnes placidissimam se mentem ad illum et ab omni ira remotam^b habere, eumque uicissim rogabant placidam^c erga ipsos mentem habere. Qui confestim respondit: 'Placidam ego mentem, filioli, erga omnes Dei famulos gero.' Sicque se caelesti muniens uiatico, uitae alterius ingressui parauit. Et interrogauit, quam prope esset hora, qua fratres ad dicendas Domino laudes nocturnas excitari deberent. Respondebant: 'Non longe est.' At ille: 'Bene; ergo expectemus horam illam.' Et signans se signo sanctae crucis reclinauit caput ad ceruical, modicumque obdormiens ita cum silentio uitam finiuit. Sicque factum est ut, quomodo simplici ac pura mente tranquillaque deuotione Domino seruietat, ita etiam tranquilla morte mundum relinquens ad eius uisionem ueniret, illaque lingua, quae tot salutaria uerba in laudem Conditoris composuerat, ultima quoque uerba in laudem ipsius, signando^d sese et spiritum suum in manus eius commendando, clauderet; qui etiam praescius sui obitus extitisse ex his quae narrauimus uidetur.¹

XXV [XXIII]

HIS temporibus monasterium uirginum, quod Coludi Vrbem cognominant,² cuius et supra meminimus, per culpam incuriae flammis absumtum est. Quod tamen a malitia inhabitantium in eo,³ et praecipue illorum qui maiores esse uidebantur, contigisse omnes qui nouere facillime potuerunt aduertere. Sed non defuit

^a animum erga se *c* ^b semotam *c* ^c placitam *c* ^d signando *om. c 2*

¹ For Cædmon's foreknowledge of his death compare the story of Chad. See p. 343, n. 2.

² Coldingham is in Berwickshire, Scotland. Traces of the monastery are still visible on St. Abb's Head which is named after the abbess. This was the only one of the double monasteries concerning which any suspicion of loose conduct seems to have arisen during this period. See p. 392, n. 2.

³ Ps. 106 (107): 34.

said though he wondered why he asked, for he did not seem to be by any means at the point of death. They had settled down in the house and were talking and joking cheerfully with each of those who were already there and it was past midnight, when he asked whether they had the Eucharist in the house. They answered, 'What need have you of the Eucharist? You are not likely to die, since you are talking as cheerfully with us as if you were in perfect health.' 'Nevertheless,' he repeated, 'bring me the Eucharist.' When he had taken it in his hand he asked if they were all charitably disposed towards him and had no complaint nor any quarrel nor grudge against him. They answered that they were all in charity with him and without the slightest feeling of anger; then they asked him in turn whether he was charitably disposed towards them. He answered at once, 'My sons, I am in charity with all the servants of God.' So, fortifying himself with the heavenly viaticum, he prepared for his entrance into the next life. Thereupon he asked them how near it was to the time when the brothers had to awake to sing their nightly praises to God. They answered, 'It will not be long.' And he answered, 'Good, let us wait until then.' And so, signing himself with the sign of the holy cross, he laid his head on the pillow, fell asleep for a little while, and so ended his life quietly. Thus it came about that, as he had served the Lord with a simple and pure mind and with quiet devotion, so he departed into His presence and left the world by a quiet death; and his tongue which had uttered so many good words in praise of the Creator also uttered its last words in His praise, as he signed himself with the sign of the cross and commended his spirit into God's hands; and from what has been said, it would seem that he had foreknowledge of his death.¹

CHAPTER XXV (XXIII)

ABOUT this time, the monastery of virgins at Coldingham,² which has previously been mentioned, was burned down through carelessness. However, all who knew the truth were easily able to judge that it happened because of the wickedness of those who dwelt there³ and especially of those who were supposed to be its leaders. But God in His mercy did not fail to give warning of approaching punishment so that they might have been led to