

**ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN  
(410-1066): BEDE'S  
ECCLESIASTICAL  
HISTORY OF ENGLAND**



# ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN (410-1066): BEDE'S ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from Bede's "Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum" ("Ecclesiastical History of the English People"), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how and why Bede wrote his most famous work (including his motives for writing it), and why Bede's History has been so important to the study of Latin Christendom and Medieval England for the last 1100 years.

## Subjects

English Literature  
World History  
European History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- British Library
- Dunham Cathedral, Dunham
- Bede's World, Jarrow

## Essential Questions

- Who was Bede?
- Why did he write The Ecclesiastical History of the English People? Did he have a bias? If so, did that bias cloud his writing?
- Why is the book considered so important in studying Anglo-Saxon England?

## Academic Summary

To the most glorious King Ceolwulph, Bede, the servant of Christ and Priest FORMERLY, at your request, most readily transmitted to you the Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, which I had newly published, for you to read, and give it your approbation; and I now send it again to be transcribed and more fully considered at your leisure. And I cannot but recommend the sincerity and zeal, with which you not only diligently give ear to hear the words of the Holy Scripture, but also industriously take care to become acquainted with the actions and sayings of former men of renown, especially of our own nation ...

### OF THE SITUATION OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND, AND OF THEIR ANCIENT INHABITANTS

... This island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine law was written, contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth. The Latin tongue is, by the study of the Scriptures, become common to all the rest. At first this island had no other inhabitants but the Britons, from whom it derived its name, and who, coming over into Britain, as is reported, from Armorica, possessed themselves of the southern parts thereof. When they, beginning at the south, had made themselves masters of the greatest part of the island, it happened, that the nation of the Picts, from Scythia, as is reported, putting to sea, in a few long ships, were driven by the winds beyond the shores of Britain, and arrived on the northern coast of Ireland, where, finding the nation of the Scots, they begged to be allowed to settle among them, but could not succeed in obtaining their request. Ireland is the greatest island next to Britain, and lies to the west of it; but as it is shorter than Britain to the north, so, on the other hand, it runs out far beyond it to the south, opposite to the northern parts of Spain, though a spacious sea lies between them. The Picts, as has been said, arriving in this island by sea, desired to have a place granted them in which they might settle. The Scots answered that the island could not contain them both; but "We can give you good advice," said they, "what to do; we know there is another island, not far from ours, to the eastward, which we often see at a distance, when the days are clear. if you will go thither, you will obtain settlements; or, if they should oppose you, you shall have our assistance." The Picts, accordingly, sailing over into Britain, began to inhabit the northern parts thereof, for the Britons were possessed of the southern. Now the Picts had no wives, and asked them of the Scots; who would not consent to grant them upon any other terms, than that when any difficulty should arise, they should choose a king from the female royal race rather than from the male: which custom, as is well known, has been observed among the Picts to this day. In process of time, Britain, besides the Britons and the Picts, received a third nation the Scots, who, migrating from Ireland under their leader, Reuda, either by fair means, or by force of arms, secured to themselves those settlements among the Picts which they still possess. From the name of their commander, they are to this day called Dalreudins; for, in their language, Dal signifies a part.

CLAUDIUS, THE SECOND OF THE ROMANS WHO CAME INTO BRITAIN, BROUGHT THE ISLANDS ORCADES INTO SUBJECTION TO THE ROMAN EMPIRE; AND VESPASIAN, SENT BY HIM REDUCED THE ISLE OF WIGHT UNDER THEIR DOMINION

IN the year of Rome 798, Claudius, fourth emperor from Augustus, being

desirous to approve himself a beneficial prince to the republic, and eagerly bent upon war and conquest, undertook an expedition into Britain, which seemed to be stirred up to rebellion by the refusal of the Romans to give up certain deserters. He was the only one, either before or after Julius Caesar, who had dared to land upon the island; yet, within a very few days, without any fight or bloodshed, the greatest part of the island was surrendered into his hands. He also added to the Roman Empire the Orcades, which lie in the ocean beyond Britain, and then, returning to Rome the sixth month after his departure, he gave his son the title of Britannicus. This war he concluded in the fourth year of his empire, which is the forty-sixth from the incarnation of our Lord. In which year there happened a most grievous famine in Syria, which, in the Acts of the Apostles is recorded to have been foretold by the prophet Agabus. Vespasian, who was emperor after Nero, being sent into Britain by the same Claudius, brought also under the Roman dominion the Isle of Wight, which is next to Britain on the south, and is about thirty miles in length from east to west, and twelve from north to south; being six miles distant from the Southern coast of Britain at the east end, and three only at the west. Nero, succeeding Claudius in the empire, attempted nothing in martial affairs; and, therefore, among other innumerable detriments brought upon the Roman state, he almost lost Britain; for under him two most noble towns were there taken and destroyed.

LUCIUS, KING OF BRITAIN, WRITING TO POPE ELEUTHERUS, DESIRES TO BE MADE A CHRISTIAN

IN the year of our Lord's incarnation 156, Marcus Antoninus Verus, the fourteenth from Augustus, was made emperor, together with his brother, Aurelius Commodus. In their time, whilst Eleutherus, a holy man, presided over the Roman church, Lucius, king of the Britons, Sent a letter to him, entreating that by his command he might be made a Christian. He soon obtained his pious request, and the Britons preserved the faith, which they had received, uncorrupted and entire, in peace and tranquility until the time of the Emperor Diocletian.

*Bede, excerpts from Book 1 of Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People), approx. 731 CE*

On 26 May 735 CE, in a monastery in northeastern England, an old monk passed away quietly in his monastic cell after a long illness. He was somewhere between 60 and 65 years old. A prolific writer and church scholar, in the end the old man could only dictate to a scribe. According to one of the young monks present, the old man passed quietly in his rest after bequeathing his entire stock of worldly possessions to the monks under his charge: some pepper, napkins and some incense. Originally buried at the monastery itself, the old monk's remains were eventually interred (hundreds of years later) in Durham Cathedral a short distance away, where they remain to this day.

Elements of the story above would have been repeated across the Medieval Christian world. During the "Dark Ages", a time period when much of Europe's population could not read or write, monks across Christendom kept learning alive. Many were scribes, some spending their entire lives locked away in monastic cells copying and illustrating books by hand. The monk discussed above, a man simply known as Bede, however, was different.

Bede didn't just copy old Latin texts. He wrote volumes of new ones, devoting much of his study to a theological study of the Bible and its stories of miracles. According to tradition, he even translated the fourth Gospel (John) from Latin into the Anglo-Saxon language (now called Old English), completing the work on his deathbed. Unfortunately, no part of the translation survived to the modern age. At a time when learning in Europe

had collapsed across the remnants of the old empire, in some ways Bede was like many other scholarly monks across Europe. Unlike many other medieval scribes, however, Bede also wrote extensively on subjects outside of the traditional biblical stories. His most important work, for which he is most famous today, is a five-volume tome called *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (An Ecclesiastical History of the English People). Completed around 731 CE, a few years before his death, Bede's History is the foundation for historical study in Britain. In it, Bede tells the history of Britain from Caesar's invasion in 55 BCE to Bede's own time in the 8th century. The primary goal of the work was to tell the story of how the Christian church in Britain unified the island (an idea not all that surprising considering he was a monk). Using various literary and oral sources at his disposal, Bede was able to put together a detailed timeline on the religious spread under the Roman occupation. He was critical of British Christians, however. Apparently after the Romans left in 410, British Christians did not try to unify their island by spreading Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. According to Bede, it was only through outside forces, such as those coming from Ireland and Italy, that Christianity was finally able to unify Britain, although curiously his work fails to mention the most famous Irish evangelist, St. Patrick.

Since his death, Bede's History has been copied (and later printed) countless times. Handwritten medieval copies, many from the 11th and 12th centuries, can be found across Europe today (one of the most famous is in St. Petersburg, Russia). Bede's writings have been studied extensively for over 1000 years, and continue to be the subject of research and scholarship today, both for their historical value and religious meaning. During the Medieval period, Europeans across the continent began to venerate Bede, seeing him as having favor with God. Dante in his *Divine Comedy* (early 14th century) even has Bede as a character in the 4th level of Paradise (the only English character in Heaven) along with other Christian scholars such as Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII made Bede a "Doctor of the Church" for his contributions to scholastic Christian thought and teaching, making him the only native-born English subject to have been given this designation by the Roman Catholic Church. In the secular world of public schools today, the study of Bede's History is seen as an important element of study as a window into both Latin Christendom and English history. Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how and why Bede wrote his most famous work (including his motives for writing it), and why Bede's History has been so important to the study of Latin Christendom and Medieval England for the last 1100 years.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why Bede wrote *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People).
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why Bede's History has been so important to the study of Latin Christendom and Medieval England for the last 1000 years.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What role did monasteries play in keeping learning alive after the fall of Rome in the 5th century? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Bede and the History. (20 min)
- Video – Bede (2 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Bede's History, taking notes as appropriate. (25 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Why did Bede write *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*)? How did he come by his information? Why has Bede's History been so important to the study of Latin Christendom and Medieval England for the last 1100 years? (25 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how and why Bede wrote *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), and why Bede's History has been so important to the study of Latin Christendom and Medieval England for the last 1100 years.

## Extension

### On tour: Bede's World in Jarrow, England

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit Bede's World in Jarrow (about 25 minutes north of Durham), where they can learn about Bede and his place in Anglo-Saxon England. The site has replica buildings from the time period, a museum dedicated to Bede, a science gallery, a working farm (where the students can see the types of food Anglo-Saxons may have eaten), and an herb garden based on 9th century monastery gardens. Bede's World hosts school-age children from across the UK and the world, and can accommodate large groups as well. Special lectures on Saturday highlight various aspects of Bede's Anglo-Saxon world. Admission is very reasonable. Prices can be found on the Bede's World website (listed below in the Links section), and there are special rates for groups of 15 or more.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book1.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book1.asp)  
Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Book 1 (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book2.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book2.asp)  
Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Book 1I (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book4.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/bede-book4.asp)  
Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Book 1V (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/bede-apoc.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/bede-apoc.asp)  
Bede: Explanation of the Apocalypse (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/history/bede](http://www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/history/bede)  
Durham World Heritage Site (website)
- [www.bedesworld.co.uk/](http://www.bedesworld.co.uk/)  
Bede's World (website)
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/bede\\_st.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/bede_st.shtml)  
The Venerable Bede 673 AD – 735 AD (website) – from the BBC
- [www.history.org.uk/resources/primary\\_resource\\_3865\\_132.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_3865_132.html)  
Anglo-Saxons: A brief history (website) – from the Historical Association (UK). Good overview of Anglo-Saxon history.
- [www.wmich.edu/medieval/resources/IOE/genintro.html](http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/resources/IOE/genintro.html)  
The Anglo-Saxons and their Language (website) – from Western Michigan University. Explores the works of Bede with the development of English.
- <http://whoarethehistorians.wikispaces.com/file/view/Bede.ppt>  
Bede (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CDoqL843z8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CDoqL843z8)  
The Venerable Bede (video) – 7-minute video is appropriate for all classes

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede)  
Bede – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons)  
Anglo-Saxons – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia\\_ecclesiastica\\_gentis\\_Anglorum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia_ecclesiastica_gentis_Anglorum)  
Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People) – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons)  
Anglo Saxon Britain (410-1066) – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-beowulf](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-beowulf)  
Anglo Saxon Britain (410-1066) – Beowulf

## **Key Terms**

- Anglo-Saxon
- Bede
- Ecclesiastical
- History
- Latin Christendom
- Monk



