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Author(s): Joel T. Rosenthal

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# Bede's Ecclesiastical History and the Material Conditions of Anglo-Saxon Life

JOEL T. ROSENTHAL

The author of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was the greatest historian writing in the West between the later Roman Empire and the twelfth century, when we come to William of Malmesbury, Otto of Freising, and William of Tyre.<sup>1</sup> Bede's qualities as a historian are well known and widely appreciated, and they need no further exposition here.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we propose to be perverse and to attempt to read Bede's text as though he had been a sociologist or an economic anthropologist: What can we learn from him about the "material conditions" of life in post-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon England, especially about life in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>3</sup> This is surely a strange purpose for which to use the *Ecclesiastical History*. We do so both to show that Bede is so rich and so multifaceted that he is immensely valuable for many purposes besides those of greatest obvious interest to him, and because the sources for social and economic life in those years are so poor that everything available is legitimate grist for the mills of our analysis.

Actually there are two reasons why Bede *might* have furnished us with the kind of information we are seeking. One is that among classical and early medieval historians there was a considerable tradition of describing the barbarian world, of paying particular attention to the institutions, mores, and customs of the Germanic people or whoever might be the subject of the tale. Passages in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*,<sup>4</sup> most of Tacitus' *Germania*,<sup>5</sup> and goodly sections of the works of Ammianus Marcellinus,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was read at the Mid-Atlantic States Conference on Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies at Villanova University, September 1976. I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Paul Szarmach and William McDermott and of the members of Donald Fry's Old English seminar at Stony Brook.

<sup>2</sup>The edition of Bede used in this paper is *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and Roger A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), (hereafter, *EH*). For Bede as historian, Wilhelm Levinson, "Bede as Historian," in *Bede, His Life, Times, and Writings*, ed. A.H. Thompson (Oxford, 1935), (hereafter, *BLT*), pp. 111-51; J.N. Stephens, "Bede's Ecclesiastical History," *History LXII* (1977), 1-14; C.W. Jones, "Bede as an Early Medieval Historian," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, IV (1946), 26-36; *Venerabilis Baedae, Opera Historica*, Charles Plummer (ed.), (Oxford, 1896), I, ix-1xxix.

<sup>3</sup>Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800* (trans., M. Kochan) (London, 1973), especially the discussion of "material life" and "material civilization," pp. ix-xv.

<sup>4</sup>Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars* (trans., M. Hadas) (New York, 1957), V, 12-14 on the Britons, VI, 11-20 on the Gauls, and VI, 21-28 on the Germans.

<sup>5</sup>Tacitus, *Germania* (trans., M. Hutton, rev., E.H. Warmington) (London, 1970), and *Agricola* (trans., M. Hutton, rev., R.M. Ogilvie), #10-13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ammianus Marcellinus* (trans., R.C. Rolfe) (London, rev. 1956), Vol. I, xv, 9-11, 12, 1-4; xvii, 12, #2, and Volume III, xxxi, 2, #1-12.

Jordanes,<sup>7</sup> Priscus,<sup>8</sup> and others were devoted to the explicit treatments of culture and institutions that we would look for today in traditional ethnographic writing. Caesar had seen this as a legitimate part of his job, and he simply paused in the midst of his political account to add his anthropological material: "...This seems a suitable point in the narrative to describe the mores of Gauls and Germans and the points of difference between them."<sup>9</sup> If few other historians are as bald as this, many of them did display much the same curiosity. They also assumed an interest on the part of their readers. Though the chances are that Bede did not have direct access to any of the secular histories that contain such passages,<sup>10</sup> their inclusion had become part of the accepted canons of the historical profession and Bede must have been aware of the possibility of dealing with such material without violating the rules of his craft.

So the model may have been there, though Bede chose not to follow it. He was writing sacred, not secular, history. Explicit attention to the ways of this world may have seemed to him a detour, at the very least, and perhaps an absolute dead end. But we need not explain the omission simply in terms of his teleological and theological perspective. Bede did give himself time and space for whatever interested him, and given the length of his work and of the rambling models offered for sacred history by Eusebius and Orosius,<sup>11</sup> neither brevity nor unswerving devotion to his main theme need be considered a compelling explanation for the omissions noted here. The more likely reason for Bede's failure to talk about the institutions of Anglo-Saxon England is that he, unlike the secular authors mentioned above, was an "insider," that is, he too was one of the people about whom the story was being told. The other historians we have mentioned were outsiders: whatever their degree of objectivity, their moral and literary purpose in writing, and their empathy with their subjects, they were all dealing in their narratives with *another* people. Whether their purpose was to whet the reader's curiosity and to exalt the author, as with Caesar, or to point a moral, as with Tacitus, or to explain the terror inspired by the barbarians, as with Priscus and Ammianus when they talk about the Huns, we are always seeing the barbarians through the eyes of the distant observer. Bede in this respect is closer to the position of the Goth Jordanes. When Jordanes wrote about his own people, he confined himself to that blend of myth, political history, and gossip that was considered narrative

<sup>7</sup>Jordanes, *The Gothic History*, trans., C.C. Mierow (Princeton, reprinted 1960).

<sup>8</sup>The relevant passages in Priscus are conveniently collected in C.D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila* (Ann Arbor, 1960), especially pages 57-58, 81-82, 88-89, 110-11.

<sup>9</sup>Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, VI, 11.

<sup>10</sup>M.L.W. Laistner, "Bede as a Classical and a Patristic Scholar," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, xvi (1933), 69-94, and "The Library of the Venerable Bede," *BLT*, 237-66.

<sup>11</sup>Laistner, *BLT*, 263-66. Bede had access in his library to Eusebius via Jerome and Rufinus and to Isidore's *Chronicon*. L.W. Barnard, "Bede and Eusebius as Church Historians," in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi, Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 106-24. For Bede's debt to Eusebius and Gildas, J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 72-97.

history, and he only became expansive about social mores when he turned his attention to the Silures of North Britain or to the Huns, where he acknowledges the derivative and remote nature of his information: "As Priscus the Historian relates . . ." <sup>12</sup> Unlike the conventions of modern journalism, the daily routine of life on the home front did not strike historians of the dark ages as being particularly newsworthy. <sup>13</sup>

The other reason we *might* hope for some information from Bede about the material conditions of Anglo-Saxon life is because he saw the world so systematically. To him the separate components of human society were all parts of a grand design, a larger unified construct. Though both the parts and the whole were subordinate to the higher architecture of the City of God, they did operate within the framework of natural as well as of divine law. Human institutions had a purpose, and they followed a course of historical development that was usually explicable in rational terms. Worldly matters were guided by time's arrow and were in no sense inchoate or unrelated to each other. As surely as the great modern social scientists, Bede saw the parts of the secular world as being interrelated and capable of causal explanation. To say this is but to say that he believed, though at a more explicit and articulate level, in common with all other Christian thinkers of his day. But he alone, with no company except Gregory of Tours, wrote a long and comprehensive history of a secular society within the intellectual and methodological context of this world view. Though the *Ecclesiastical History* was written for spiritual ends, it still offered Bede a unique opportunity to demonstrate how the organic nature of human society had both a structural coherence and a functional utility. We are accustomed to seeing barbarian social structure, kingship, land tenure, priesthood, literature, trade networks, court ceremonial, and so on as all being bound together. Did Bede not also see them in this fashion? Surely he did: whether God or socioeconomic conflict wound up the great clock, the interaction of earthly institutions was worked out in much the same fashion.

In the *Ecclesiastical History*, the kind of data we are concerned with is apt to be scattered among the many other items for which we conventionally read the work. In extricating the information on society and its institutions, there is no need simply to run through all possible categories and tally what Bede has to offer. There is something in his work on the social structure of Anglo-Saxon England, the tribal organization, kingship and royal dynasties, the legal system, and many other items of a political as well as a social nature. But by concentrating on the material basis of life and culture, on the physical and economic state of the union, there is a precise focus. This topic is really a compound of such social and economic

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<sup>12</sup>Jordanes, *The Gothic History*, p. 85. For the Silures, pp. 54-55, and for the Huns, pp. 85-87.

<sup>13</sup>Stephens, *History*, p. 2. "Bede's History has more in common with the histories of Gregory of Tours, Fredegar, and Paul the Deacon, for all of them concern the story of the barbarian *gentes*." Similar views are to be found in J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 96-97.

issues and factors as population, public health, agricultural prosperity, rural and urban settlement, communication, the use of wealth for display and investment, access to markets, trade, and other such phenomena. Our task now is to organize this material so as to derive an overview of Bede's external world in the century or two before he wrote (in the 720s and 730s), and to show how the inclusion of this material tells something of importance about Bede's purposes in writing, as well as about his society. It will also give a possible glimpse of Bede's view of change within England between the end of Roman rule and the relative harmony that was ushered in by the Synod of Whitby.

The general picture of material conditions in Britain/England between 200 and 700 A.D. is a fairly sorry one.<sup>14</sup> The regression had begun in the third century and it was to continue for centuries, though there are some indications of improvement in the quality of life towards the end of the period. The lugubrious tale antedated the withdrawal of the legions from and the coming of the Germanic invaders to Britain: a shrinking population, deserted villas, towns diminishing in size and importance, the decline of international economic and commercial life, and a deteriorating standard of domestic craftsmanship were all characteristics of the third century and of the succeeding years. The story continued, with local and temporary variations, well into the sixth century. By the seventh century, things were perhaps beginning to improve, though the rate of amelioration was slow and hardly uniform.

We know that Bede's England was a relatively empty land. The population of Roman Britain in its prime is a topic that has elicited some scholarly debate, and modern estimates vary by about 100 percent, from a half million to something well in excess of one million.<sup>15</sup> But we have already mentioned the long decline, and when we remember the encroachments of woods, waste, and sea upon what had previously been inhabited and cultivated land, we can be sure that by the fifth and sixth centuries we are dealing with a shrinking human universe, probably down to, if not below, the minimal figure estimated for the Roman province. Atop the woes of declining Roman provincial life came the blows of the invaders, Celtic from the north and Germanic from the east and northeast. The countryside grew barren and the towns suffered even more. Few scholars would argue with the verdict that "the Saxon conquest caused a real break in the continuity of urban life," and the only doubt is whether the continuity had even lasted that long.<sup>16</sup> Anglo-Saxon poetry has its share of lines on the "snows of yesteryear" theme, with *The Ruin* containing the most

<sup>14</sup>R.G. Collingwood and J.N.L. Myers, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (hereafter, *Roman Britain*) (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1937), pp. 201-07.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 180-81; J.C. Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, "Transactions of the American Philosophical Society," new series 48, part 3, 1958, p. 85; E.W. Gilbert, "The Human Geography of Roman Britain," in H.C. Darby (ed.), *An Historical Geography of England to A.D. 1800* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 76-80, with bibliographical references to the various contributions to the controversy.

<sup>16</sup>Collingwood and Myers, *Roman Britain*, p. 444.

poignant statement about urban decline, probably with reference to Bath:<sup>17</sup>

Fate has smashed these wonderful walls,  
 This broken city, has crumbled the work  
 Of giants. The roofs are gutted, the towers  
 Fallen, the gates ripped off, frost  
 In the mortar, everything moulded, gaping,  
 Collapsed . . .

Gildas also spoke in this vein, telling how "In the midst of the streets lay the tops of lofty towers, tumbled to the ground, stones of high walls, holy altars. . . ."<sup>18</sup> We know from saints' lives as well as from the *Ecclesiastical History* that the tale of Anglo-Saxon settlement, like that of the early missionary activity, is so often the tale of a few men in a large and deserted, or at best sparsely occupied, landscape.<sup>19</sup> The signs of a former level of prosperity, far beyond present resources, were common if not ubiquitous.<sup>20</sup>

Bede knew this from his historical and written sources, from conversations with visitors, and from an occasional walk in the neighborhood. Though his reason for the composition of the *Ecclesiastical History* was to show that the conventional world view—that we are now in an age of iron after the fall from an age of gold—was erroneous, he was still heir to a tradition of explanation in terms of worldly decline. For him, his age had a newer, more precious metal—the true faith—and to Bede it had been the Romans who had actually lived in the false paradise of fool's gold. But the spiritual, though better than the material, is still different from it. Spiritual consolations did not deny the empty towns, the crumbling masonry, the rusted and useless hot and cold plumbing systems, the leaky hypocausts, the weed-choked villas.

The *Ecclesiastical History* contains its full share of references to the physical and material decline in the quality of life. The gloomy side could be very gloomy indeed. Plague, famine, and depopulation were often joint rulers of much of the land. Bede was not given to mournful generali-

<sup>17</sup>The Ruin, lines 1-6, from the translation by Burton Raffel, *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2nd ed., 1964), p. 27. The same theme figures in *The Wanderer*, lines 85-87: "Thus the Maker of men lays waste/ This earth, crushing our callow mirth./ And the work of old giants stands withered and still," p. 61. D. Whitelock, "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, xxxi (1949), p. 93.

<sup>18</sup>Gildas, published in J.A. Giles (ed.), *Six Old English Chronicles* (London, 1848), p. 311; and on p. 313, "And yet neither to this day are the cities of our country inhabited as before, but being forsaken and overthrown, still lie desolate."

<sup>19</sup>B. Colgrave (ed.), *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940); Bede's *Life*, xxvii. P.H. Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1959 ed.), p. 279.

<sup>20</sup>The important Roman towns of Verulam, Silchester, Wroxeter and Caistor-next-Norwich completely disappeared: Collingwood and Myers, *Roman Britain*, p. 318.

zations, but he reported that the plague of 664 “first depopulated the southern parts of Britain and afterwards attacked the kingdom of Northumbria, raging far and wide with cruel devastation and laying low a vast number of people.”<sup>21</sup> The details regarding the death of Chad are obscure: “A plague sent from heaven came upon them which, through the death of the body, translated the living stones of the church from their earthly sites to the heavenly building.”<sup>22</sup> This is very poetic—but does it report a real epidemic or outbreak of the plague, or was it just another instance of winter gripe within a closed community? Happily, the “virulent plague” that attacked “many of the kingdoms of Britain” in 681 was halted at the posthumous intercession of Oswald.<sup>23</sup> Famine too was a familiar if an unwelcome acquaintance. Whether we are looking at the general woes of the fifth century, when famine “left to posterity a lasting memory of its horrors” and “compelled many . . . to surrender to the plundering foe,” or at the more concrete problems of 681, when a three-year drought produced “a most terrible famine [that] assailed the populace and pitilessly destroyed them,” the human misery was much the same.<sup>24</sup>

Gildas had bemoaned the plague that had struck Britain in the 540s, the local manifestation of the pandemic that ravaged Europe from the Byzantine Empire westwards.<sup>25</sup> This disease, with its related subdiseases and side effects, was a menace to health and life throughout the seventh century, as Bede’s references indicate.<sup>26</sup> In fact, plague, epidemic, and famine were almost the only natural phenomena with a social and demographic consequence that merited serious attention in Gregory of Tours’ *History*, and he noted their appearance a number of times. Gregory could give a clear and straightforward account of the medical aspects of the plague and of how it reached and infected the population of Marseilles.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, he fits into a tradition in western historiography that includes Thucydides and Daniel Defoe. But unlike Bede, Gregory was prone to introduce the subject in order to point a moral: when he tells of how Ecdicius saved 4,000 people from famine, it is to praise that man, a Gallo-Roman senator and a close relative of Sidonius.<sup>28</sup> When Gregory tells of the plague that hit Limoges in 581, it is to discuss the nature of the divine wrath: “A number of people were consumed by fire from heaven for having profaned the Lord’s day by transacting public business. This day is

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<sup>21</sup>*EH*, iii, 27.

<sup>22</sup>*EH*, ix, 3.

<sup>23</sup>*EH*, iv, 14.

<sup>24</sup>*EH*, iv, 13.

<sup>25</sup>J.C. Russell, “The Earlier Medieval Plague in the British Isles,” *Viator*, VII (1976), 65–66.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65–68 for a discussion of the evidence on the incidence and mortality of the plague. Bede’s evidence is discussed on pp. 73–74.

<sup>27</sup>Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* (hereafter, *Franks*), (trans., L. Thorpe) (Harmondsworth, 1974), ix, 22: The inhabitants fled for two months and then returned, “thinking themselves safe. Then the disease started again and all who had come back died.” Gregory describes the plague, v, 34, and famine, vii, 45.

<sup>28</sup>Gregory, *Franks*, ii, 24.

holy. . . ."<sup>29</sup> Gregory was less willing than Bede to explain secular matters in terms of secular cause and effect, and he lacked Bede's wonderful ability to drive home the point of a larger issue by the apt use of one or two pertinent examples.<sup>30</sup>

The stark ruins of the once-populous landscape were all about. In most places there had been but little recovery from the time when the withdrawal of the legions had left the countryside "stripped of its armed men, its military supplies, and the whole flower of its active youth . . . [and] wholly exposed to plunderers."<sup>31</sup> The people of the former Roman provinces had now "deserted their cities, fled from the wall, and were scattered," and life in the north still reflected these wounds.<sup>32</sup> Long afterwards, when Bishop Cedd sought a wild and unpopulated site for the monastery he was about to build, thanks to a grant from Ethelwald, king of Deira, he had no trouble finding a suitable place "amid some steep and remote hills which seemed better fitted for the haunts of robbers and the dens of wild beasts than for human habitation."<sup>33</sup> That he was following the injunction of Isaiah and seeking "the habitation where once dragons lay [and where now] shall be grass with reeds and rushes" was both spiritually correct and physically all too easy to do.<sup>34</sup> The landscape described by the *Beowulf* poet began just beyond the garden fence.<sup>35</sup> The deserted Roman sites were put into dramatic focus because the Anglo-Saxons tended to settle near, rather than directly upon, them. This meant that the discontinuity in urban and village life was apt to catch the naked eye, whereas continuity in rural habitation and field patterns, though possibly considerable, would be less striking and accordingly less likely to be noted in either contemporary literature or in administrative practices.<sup>36</sup>

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All this negative material in Bede is perceptive if slightly rhetorical. It is much what might be expected, given that the author displays an interest

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, x, 30. Spiritual weapons, for example, alms and abstinence, were resorted to and "in this way the wrath of God was turned aside and things became better." In ix, 13 a "serious epidemic of dysentery" is mentioned, primarily to launch a series of anecdotes about the lechery of Duke Beppolin's son, who eventually married the widow of the man whose death from dysentery was the opening point of the story.

<sup>30</sup>P. Hunter-Blair, "Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* and Its Importance Today," (Jarrow Lecture, 1959), p. 7: ". . . Bede's skill in heightening the interest of his narrative by the addition of relevant detail . . ."

<sup>31</sup>*EH*, i, 12.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*EH*, iii, 23.

<sup>34</sup>Bede is quoting from Isaiah, xxxv, 7, and he adds: "that is, the fruit of good work shall spring up where once beasts dwelt or where men lived after the manner of beasts," *EH*, iii, 23.

<sup>35</sup>Felix's *Life of St. Guthlac*, in C. Albertson, *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Heroes* (hereafter, *Saints and Heroes*) (New York, 1967), chapter xxiv-xxviii, xxxvii-xl. D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 72-77.

<sup>36</sup>The case for continuity between Roman (and post-Roman) Britain and Anglo-Saxon England is put forth in H.P.R. Finbert, *Lucerna, Studies in Some Problems in the Early History of England* (London, 1964), especially pp. 14-16, 51-57.

at all in such subjects. Things were not what they might have been nor what they had once been. Furthermore, Bede had a certain hortatory purpose in showing how few and paltry were the material pleasures available to his readers, their parents, and grandparents. So given these factors—that life was undeniably harsh for most of the people and that Bede had no desire to gloss over aspects of material decline—it is important to note the amount of testimony he actually included relating to prosperity, population, trade, urban life, settled agriculture, and social stability. There clearly *was* another side to the story: By the late seventh century, not all was dark. These were the years in which the pendulum began to swing the other way, and Bede's tale contains a good deal of information that reflects this upward curve. Robert-Henri Bautier's survey of medieval economic life has a section called "Sixth and Seventh-Century Renaissance," and though he mainly deals with Merovingian Gaul, we know that changes there were not isolated from trends elsewhere in the west.<sup>37</sup> These were the beginning years of the long period in which England, in M.M. Postan's words, "grew manifold in area, population, and agricultural output."<sup>38</sup> Human ingenuity began to triumph over hostile nature and human depredations. Man began to take the offensive: there is a poetic reference to the ploughman as "the old enemy of the forest."<sup>39</sup> The years between the definitive conversion of the English and Bede's death gave indication of material improvement. The worst of internecine strife seemed to be over, the plague had played out its fiercest attacks, the seas were friendly.

We can organize data in the *Ecclesiastical History* to show the author's awareness of these aspects of improved or improving material conditions. Population is always a basic factor in such developments. Bede helps us a bit: he often refers to large groups and aggregations of the folk, and the specific numbers roll quite easily off his pen. We all know what medieval statistics of this sort are worth. It is not, however, his metaphysical or statistical accuracy, but the relative order or magnitude of his numbers that is of interest. Bede had no trouble producing large crowds when it suited his narrative purpose, and pictures of an inhabited countryside, able to send forth goodly numbers of monks, soldiers, and people awaiting conversion or a saint's visit abound in his pages.

The healthy ratio of people-to-land indicated that the island was not seen as barren and sterile, but rather that it was potentially a fertile kingdom into which the seeds of the new truth could be successfully sown. When Augustine landed on the Isle of Thanet in 597 he was coming to a

<sup>37</sup>R.H. Bautier, *The Economic Development of Medieval Europe* (hereafter, *Economic Development*) (trans., H. Karolyi) (New York, 1971), pp. 18-29.

<sup>38</sup>M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 16. Also Postan in *The Cambridge Economic History* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1966), I, 549: There were "at least six centuries of internal colonization before Domesday." H.R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (New York, 1962), pp. 17, 44-48.

<sup>39</sup>D. Whitelock, "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th Series xxxi (1949), p. 93.

place that “in the English reckoning [was] 600 hides in extent.”<sup>40</sup> Did this phrase refer to land capable of holding 600 families? And if so—since the answer is probably yes—were they simple, nuclear families, or were they more extended and complicated ones? Or was Bede just indicating that in the eyes of the missionaries, at least, the people of Kent had quaint customs? When King Edwin of Northumbria was allowed, as a sign of divine favor for his conversion, to conquer Anglesey and Man, his new territories added a total of 1,260 hides to his realm, again “according to the English way of reckoning.”<sup>41</sup> When King Oswiu turned over “twelve small estates” for a monastery, each was still large enough to contain, and therefore presumably to support and to realize an agricultural surplus from, ten hides of land.<sup>42</sup> Peada’s south Mercian kingdom contained 5,000 hides, his northern one 7,000.<sup>43</sup> When Bishop Wilfrid carried the gospel to the South Saxons, he was bringing 7,000 hides into the area of the true faith.<sup>44</sup> When King Ethelwalch gave land to Wilfrid to support a monastery, he gave him “eighty-seven hides of land to maintain his exiled followers.”<sup>45</sup> The Isle of Wight contained 1,200 hides, “according to the English way of reckoning,” and the church received one-quarter of it, or 300 hides.<sup>46</sup> The Isle of Ely was “a district of about 600 hides” when the monastery was founded there by Queen Aethelthryth around 660.<sup>47</sup>

The hide probably represents the amount of arable land that sufficed to support a household, and Bede’s phrase, “the reckoning of the English,” must have come from his attempt to translate a working and elastic measure of English rural life into a comprehensible Latin phrase.<sup>48</sup> Information about tax yields and the tribal hidage would have helped him make his estimates, and the text of the *Ecclesiastical History* indicates a desire for whatever degree of precision was possible. The numbers, while hardly immense, are of considerable interest. That they are given in terms of the unit of household subsistence, rather than per capita, means that the actual number of inhabitants was greater than the number of hides by a factor of between three and four at the lower end of the spectrum to perhaps ten and twelve at the upper. Household size is hard to determine, though its value as a unit is widely recognized.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the inclusion of so many numbers indicates Bede’s sensitivity to what we might term the need for “a critical mass” of people, a necessary concentration of human resources and of labor power. Without such an aggregation, there could be no way out of the vicious circle of mere subsistence, near-starvation, and

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<sup>40</sup>*EH*, i, 25.

<sup>41</sup>*EH*, ii, 9.

<sup>42</sup>*EH*, iii, 24.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>*EH*, iv, 13.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*EH*, iv, 16.

<sup>47</sup>*EH*, iv, 19.

<sup>48</sup>Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, p. 97-98; Blair, *Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 267-68; Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, p. 251

<sup>49</sup>P. Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972).

physical and emotional exhaustion: no resources for the division of labor, no surplus for trade and as a hedge against temporary adversity, no tribute for the support of kings, artists, craftsmen, and priests.<sup>50</sup> The Malthusian equation of people, land, and produce would only give positive answers when an adequate number of people lived within a certain proximity. Bede is giving positive if implicit answers to the relevant questions when he reports on the healthy collections of families in various parts of the land. His statistics, whatever their inadequacies, were not just the best for such an early date; they were virtually the only ones. Sir Frank Stenton based his discussion of Anglo-Saxon population almost wholly on the very numbers we have quoted—a tribute to Bede's omnivorous curiosity *and* to his recognition of the interdependence of social forces. He not only included the quantitative material later incorporated into the tribal hidage, but he integrated it so that it spoke to the issues of the economic geography of the island.<sup>51</sup>

The clerical or monastic population is also alluded to a number of times, though not in an aggregated fashion. This material is of interest for what it tells us about the quick appeal of the new faith. But as quantitative data such materials also fit in here because we can generally assume that for every cloistered monk the labor and land of other people was usually needed and exacted. True, there could have been exceptions, for example, a community following the self-sufficient model of the Benedictine code, but for the most part spiritual houses lived—and in larger and larger part as the years passed—on the labor and services of those bound to the lands with which they were endowed. The regular house that sent thirty of its men off to live near the place of Cedd's burial must have been one of good size, dependent upon a substantial financial base to support the spiritual apex.<sup>52</sup> The "monastery of forty hides" that Alhfrith gave Colman must have represented a princely donation,<sup>53</sup> and Colman's ability to call "about thirty men of the English race" to follow him when he settled Lindisfarne in 667 again indicates the heavy demographic and economic substratum of the more visible spiritual edifice.<sup>54</sup> We need not make too much of these numbers, but when we remember the modest monastic population sup-

<sup>50</sup>B.H. Slichter van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850* (trans., O. Ordish) (London, 1963), pp. 7-18, especially the charts on pp. 9, 10, 11; pp. 29-39, on the "natural economy."

<sup>51</sup>F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1947), pp. 40-53. For the nature of the tribal hidage and the problems involved in using its figures, J. Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage," *English Historical Review*, xxvii (1912), pp. 625-48, and xl (1925), 499-503; Reginald Lennard, "The Origin of the Fiscal Carucate," *Economic History Review*, xiv (1944-45), 51-63, with particular attention to Bede's use of the hide, the "family-land unit," p. 58-59; Cyril Hart, "The Tribal Hidage," *TRHS*, 5th series, xxi (1971), 133-57. A glimpse at the document indicates how much ingenuity was needed to transform its data into digestible material; Walter de Gray Birch, "An Unpublished Manuscript List of some Early Territorial Names in England," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, xl (1884), 28-46.

<sup>52</sup>*EH*, iii, 23.

<sup>53</sup>*EH*, iii, 25.

<sup>54</sup>*EH*, iv, 4, and chapter xxxiii of *The Anonymous Life of Ceolfrith the Abbot*, in Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, p. 267.

ported by the vast agricultural holdings of the great Benedictine houses in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we can get an idea of how much secular organization can go unmentioned in a picture of monastic development that usually focuses on spiritual zeal and the strength of the conversion experience.<sup>55</sup>

Whatever their accuracy, Bede's numbers had to be credible in some flexible sense to his audience. If 200 people actually came to hear Cuthbert preach and Bede says there were 2,000 or "a vast multitude," nobody objected to his poetic liberty, if they even noticed it. But if the West Riding of Yorkshire lay virtually deserted, he could not conveniently people it. He could exaggerate, as we see it, but he could not conjure up souls. The thirty legions that "it is said" the Mercians brought into battle against Oswiu in 655 indicate a good-sized and organized army marching to a field of battle, in contrast to local skirmishers.<sup>56</sup> We cannot go beyond this, nor need we worry about our inability to do so. The 250 slaves who were converted and released "from the yoke of human slavery" by Bishop Wilfrid had to be in some consonance with "real" numbers.<sup>57</sup> For all our qualifications about detail and precision, Bede does give ample indication of human beings living in some fair measure of concentration. The overall impression from his *History* certainly is not that there were more people in Anglo-Saxon England than historical demographers attest to. It is rather that emptiness, decay, and desertion were not nearly the dominant economic or psychological forces one might imagine. The loneliness and the isolation from good fellowship that made Grendel such an implacable enemy of Hrothgar's men were part of his special curse as a descendent of Cain. They were not accompaniments of the normal human condition. Even in the dark landscape there were people, settlements, perhaps small crowds for special occasions. The folk of the land were ready and willing to accept the faith, to fell the virgin tracts of land and forest, to organize themselves into something approaching a semblance of order, if not of prosperity.<sup>58</sup>

The people of seventh-century England not only hung onto life, but they went about their daily business with as much routine as they could command. Many of them lived in villages, towns, and even in very small cities. The urban proportion of the population—even if we accept that "urban" life might begin in towns with a population in the neighborhood of 500—probably came to no more than 10 percent of the total. But the effect of nucleated centers of habitation upon society is always disproportionate-

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<sup>55</sup>K. Knowles and R.N. Hadcock, *The Medieval Religious Houses in England and Wales* (London, 1971), pp. 488-95. The monastic population averaged about 15-25 per house. J.C. Russell, "The Clerical Population of Medieval England," *Traditio*, ii (1944), 177-212.

<sup>56</sup>*EH*, iii, 24. Hodgkin's willingness to follow Chadwick and to accept a Mercian army of 15,000 seems naive, at the very least; R.H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford, 3rd ed., 1952), I, 211.

<sup>57</sup>*EH*, iv, 14.

<sup>58</sup>Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (trans., A.L. Manyon) (Chicago, 1961), pp. 60-65, for a discussion of the psychological aspects of population density. Finberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-30, for another treatment of the continued habitation of the countryside.

ly great, whether we are concerned with economic exchange, political organization, or intellectual activity. Bede tells us of solid buildings, of durable domestic architecture, of fortified towns, and of walled cities. The great assembly hall through which the sparrow flew in the famous simile about Christianity was clearly a structure of some magnificence, much like the great hall in which Hrothgar feasted in *Beowulf*, or that into which Odin came to make trouble in the *Volsungasaga*.<sup>59</sup> It may, however, have been a long house in the woods. But other structures were more centrally situated. Paulinus had built a stone church at Lincoln. Granted, it was not particularly durable, for while the walls remained in Bede's day, the roof had fallen, "either through long neglect or by the hand of the enemy."<sup>60</sup> The presence of a walled and fortified town testifies, on the one hand, to the lack of larger units able to provide order and to the need for localized self-help. On the other hand, it can indicate some level of building skill, of the accumulation of hard-to-get materials, and of enough wealth to help redress the primal impression of quasi-anarchy. That King Anna and his nobles could embellish Cnobheresburg with "still finer buildings and gifts," shows that not all liquid treasure went into burial mounds nor all the exploitation of labor services into their construction.<sup>61</sup> Caedwalla's epitaph contained a reminder of what he had forsaken among worldly treasures in order to follow Christ: "... his high estate, wealth, kin, a mighty crown, his strongholds, chieftains, spoils..."<sup>62</sup>

London, of course, has always been *sui generis*. Bede's reference to it as "an emporium for many nations who come to it by land and sea" is as famous as it is evocative and mysterious.<sup>63</sup> His phrase is quite similar to a reference in a charter of the 670s: "... the port of London, where ships come to land."<sup>64</sup> But in some ways his reference to a community of the "people of London" who refused to accept Mellitus as their bishop in the years of the early missionary efforts is a stronger and less rhetorical indication of the existence of well organized communal life along the Thames.<sup>65</sup> Gregory the

<sup>59</sup>*EH*, ii, 13. In *Beowulf*, Heorot is described (lines 725 and 994-96). William Morris, trans., *The Volsungasaga* (New York, 1962), pp. 93-94.

<sup>60</sup>*EH*, ii, 16. D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (London, 1968), I, 695, for the passage in Eddius Stephanus' *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* where the great stone church at Hexham is described: "My feeble tongue will not permit me to enlarge here upon the depth of the foundations in the earth, and its crypts of wonderfully dressed stone, and the manifold building above ground..." Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, p. 114 for a description of the stone church at Ripon.

<sup>61</sup>*EH*, iii, 19.

<sup>62</sup>*EH*, v, 7.

<sup>63</sup>*EH*, ii, 3. C.N.L. Brooke, *London, 800-1216* (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 16-17.

<sup>64</sup>D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 400. The charter is a grant of the 750s, from Frithuwold, subking of Surrey, to Chertsey Abbey. A.J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1956), p. 3: A Mercian charter of the 750s carries the grant, "Very gladly then I have granted them remission of all the dues on two ships which are exacted by the tax-gatherers in the harbour of London." Walter de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* (London, 1885), I, #424, "... in loco praeclaro antiquorum Romanorum arte constructa vulgoque per tulluris spatio vocitato civitas Lundonia magna."

<sup>65</sup>*EH*, ii, 5.

Great's original vision of an English church, organized along urban lines, was doomed in large part to fail because the land simply lacked the dominant cities for such a structure. But there were also historical accidents, and we need not totally downgrade the chances of a reviving city life because of the way political boundaries, established by agricultural conquerors and geography, came to govern subsequent political organization.

As we have said, aggregations of people are needed to support a division of labor in society—a stratified social and economic system. The aggregation fostered economic exchange. Here too Bede comes to our aid. Travel, as we know from the itineraries and peregrinations of kings, bishops, and monks, was no rarity, at least not for the upper classes. Though it is not easy to argue about the overall volume of travel throughout the ranks of society or about its impact, both literary sources and archaeology counter the old picture of a static world.<sup>66</sup> King Edwin fostered internal travel as a concomitant of the general pacification he was able to impose upon his realm.<sup>67</sup>

The king cared so much for the good of the people that, in various places where he had noticed clear springs near the highway, he caused stakes to be set up and bronze drinking cups to be hung on them for the refreshment of travellers. No one dared to lay hands on them except for their proper purpose because they feared the king greatly nor did they wish to, because they loved him dearly.

The flight of Paulinus by sea after the rise of Penda of Mercia indicates a prior knowledge of the regular maritime routes.<sup>68</sup> The wanderings of Aidan and Cuthbert reveal a network of roads, old and in disrepair, as they often were. The longer journeys—to and from Rome, to the court of Clovis, to Ireland and Scotland, across the Channel, and so forth—all serve to suggest that Bede's own experience—"born in the territory of this monastery" and then spending "all my life in this monastery"—may have been the peculiar pattern for a renowned eighth-century figure.<sup>69</sup> After all, Bede could speak with great enthusiasm of the book-collecting journeys of others, and he well knew how English literary culture, technical virtuos-

<sup>66</sup>Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 64, and Bautier, *Economic Development*, p. 22: "Contacts became so frequent between Rome and the British Isles that St. Aumaire . . . built a hospice in the heart of Puiseye . . . which was wild country at that time, especially to lodge the English on their way to Rome."

<sup>67</sup>*EH*, ii, 16. There is also the standard comment about the ability of the "new born child" to walk from sea to sea without harm. Among the extant charms there is a special one to be said to ensure a safe journey: "I pray . . . for a good journey, a mild and gentle wind from these shores," R.K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1926), pp. 91-92. O. Cockayne (ed.), *Leechdom, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England* (London, 1864-66) (Rolls Series, 35), I, 177: "He who will travel an over long way, let him have with him on the journey, the wort which one nameth heraklia . . . then he dreadeth not any robber, but the wort puts them [all] to flight."

<sup>68</sup>*EH*, ii, 20.

<sup>69</sup>C.E. Whiting, "The Life of the Venerable Bede," *BLT* 32-33. C. Jenkins, "Christian Pilgrims," in *Travels and Travellers in the Middle Ages*, ed. A.P. Newton (New York, 1950 ed.), pp. 38-39.

ity, and spiritual reinvigoration were dependent upon regular continental contacts.<sup>70</sup> He endorsed the journeys of others, even if he made no effort to emulate them.

It follows that Bede was not ignorant of or indifferent to the existence of trade and trade routes, though the volume of traffic he discloses seems closer to the world of the isolated Syrian and Jewish merchants described by Pirenne in *Mohammed and Charlemagne* than it does to the great commercial complexes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>71</sup> As leftovers of the Roman world, there were still a few decent roads and there was some interest in what remained of that network. One piece of it was incidentally mentioned by Bede when he recounted how Herebald and his companions were going across the countryside when "we came upon a level and dry road, suitable for galloping our horses."<sup>72</sup> Along such arteries went the travelers, the monks with their books and relics, and the odd merchant and peddler with secular objects of utility and ornament.<sup>73</sup> Sea lanes were also familiar. They served to link the north and south of the realm, as we saw when we mentioned Paulinus' hasty departure from the apostacizing Mercians, and the island with the continent. Though they were followed by slave traders, among others, Bede made no mention of this use. He seems to have been ignorant of the biography of St. Patrick. But in general we do not come away from Bede's few references to travel with an impression that men who had the means and the will to journey were so isolated, so bereft of companions and encouragement that they had to remain apart.<sup>74</sup>

We have been dealing with the more glamorous side of material existence. Beneath the relative glitter of urban and even cosmopolitan life lay the settled routines of agricultural life, without which the more articulated institutions of society could be but memories. Bede lived in and wrote against a background of rural life, as did almost all others of the day. The rhythms of the agricultural world, as well as its metaphors, were an integral part of the human outlook. When Bede tells how Pope Gregory elaborated his views on the parallel authority of the churches of England

<sup>70</sup>Bede's *Lives of the Abbots*, in Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, pp. 227-32.

<sup>71</sup>Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York, 1939). Bryce Lyon, *The Origin of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1972), pp. 70-76, for a survey of the literature on the "Pirenne Thesis" and the question of economic continuity between late classical and early medieval times. R.S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 18-22. Philip Grierson, "The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest," in *Essays in Medieval History*, R.W. Southern (ed.), (London, 1968), pp. 61-92.

<sup>72</sup>*EH*, v, 6. *Beowulf*, line 320: "The path he'd shown them was paved, cobbled like a Roman road." Trans., B. Raffel (New York, 1963); also, lines 853-67. P. Hunter-Blair, *Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 255-57.

<sup>73</sup>John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London, 1973), p. 442, on the law's ambivalence towards traders. Examples of encouragement of and distrust of merchants, travellers, and traders are reflected in the law codes; F.L. Attenborough (ed.), *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (New York, reprinted 1963); chapter 15 of Hlothhere's Laws, p. 21, and chapter 25 of Ine's, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup>Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 10-14. Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 283: "Goods and men crossed the Channel and the North Sea in both directions in quantities which seem surprising to the modern eye."

and of Gaul, he has the Pope fall back on the "standing corn" imagery of the Old Testament.<sup>75</sup> One of Bede's proofs of the superiority of Anglo-Roman monks over those of the Celtic church was contained in his account of how the latter wandered off each summer and then came back in the winter to eat what the former had harvested. The more disciplined (and civilized) men understood that it was part of the divine plan for those in a sacred community to sow as well as to reap.<sup>76</sup> When Cuthbert had to rely on a miracle to give him enough corn to get through the winter, it was only after he had first followed good agronomic practice: starting with wheat and then quickly switching to barley when the former failed, in case the fault lie in "the nature of the soil," rather than in "the will of the heavenly giver."<sup>77</sup> Cuthbert's first grain had been correctly sown at "the proper time of sowing," though the second grain had to be put in too late for normal maturation and it needed direct and speedy divine intervention. Even the most spiritual had material needs, and they first tried to conform to the law of the natural universe. Cuthbert's request to his disciples for agricultural implements, as well as for seed, shows that the saints of the wilderness may be better compared to Thoreau, seeking self-subsistence at Walden Pond, than to the legendary John the Baptist of the desert. Whatever their ultimate spiritual purposes, the lonely saints were also pioneers and first settlers of the English landscape.<sup>78</sup>

It is unnecessary here to continue to pile reference upon reference. We can conclude by saying that instead of a world of pathless desolation, with despair and depression as its inevitable psychological hallmarks, we find more than an occasional hint of peace, of settled order, of prosperity, and of not infrequent victory in the struggle against chaos. Along with the new blessings of faith there were the rudiments of a decent human existence, almost a novelty after the centuries of uncontested and unchecked decline.

Bede's great shortcoming as a social scientist is that he offers little of this in a systematic or analytic fashion. It is all randomly woven into the fabric he was really concerned with. His value for our purposes lies not just in the specific bits of information, the hard kernels of data, but rather in the way he used them to create a frame against which the spiritual tale was stretched. There is less of decay, more of hope and growth than we might have expected. The new era of faith was not going to be just a brief flicker in the dusk, saving men's souls as their bodies went under. It was more likely to be a joint step forward, a new and more spiritual world in which God's kingdom on earth would achieve a level of human order and prosperity that had been beyond the aspirations of the preceding genera-

<sup>75</sup>*EH*, i, 27

<sup>76</sup>*EH*, iv, 4.

<sup>77</sup>*EH*, iv, 28.

<sup>78</sup>Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, pp. 431-34, for a sanguine view of the spread of agriculture and the improvement of agricultural technique. Morris also points out how often various types of agricultural miracles comprise part of a saint's catalog of wonders.

tions. Bede's patriotic vision hardly encompassed a starving multitude with only a new faith to keep them warm. Whatever might be said of Bede the exegete and theologian, we do not get the impression that for him as a historian "it already was evening. The end might come at any moment: there was no time to be lost."<sup>79</sup> For the people of England, there was time indeed.

Numismatics and archaeology, with the latter relying on increasingly scientific methods of investigation and of analysis, offer considerable testimony to the prosperous and materially sophisticated life of the seventh century.<sup>80</sup> The finds of Sutton Hoo and their confirmation of the treasure tales of *Beowulf* are but the most splendid pieces of material evidence, and they have a huge company of lesser companions. But material remains are dumb. Furthermore, they largely reflect ruling class and court life. Though they mutely argue for the existence of some kind of prosperous substratum, their story of English daily life can be hopelessly tangled by the presence of the spoils of war, of foreign and purely ceremonial treasures, and of gifts between kings. So Bede's literary evidence is welcome, to say the least. It offers a further argument in favor of the solid edifice of seventh-century material life. It bespeaks a level of population, village prosperity, and agricultural order that we suspect but generally find very hard to pin down.

The other reason this survey of Bede is of interest is for what it tells us of the author of the *Ecclesiastical History*. This focus upon his data regarding material life reveals an optimistic, as well as a patriotic, Bede. The new people of his island were hardy and energetic, susceptible to good husbandry in their worldly affairs, as in their spiritual. If the world were not about to end imminently, the healthy status of the former constituted the ideal foundation for the latter. In place of the Athenian goal of a sound mind in a healthy body, Bede's aim was to show the development of a true church in a flourishing realm, especially in the territory of the great Northumbrian kings.<sup>81</sup>

No contemporary or comparable source can match the quantity of Bede's evidence on material life, nor can any of the other sources approach his thematic purpose. We have indicated that Gregory of Tours' references to the plague are less relevant to the tale of secular life and its laws, even though his medical descriptions are far superior to Bede's. Other sources refer to conditions and factors bearing on material life, and saints' lives

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<sup>79</sup>H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to England* (New York, 1972), p. 217.

<sup>80</sup>R. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* (London, 1975), I, for an assessment of the contributions of new scientific techniques. The advances are singled out for commendation by a reviewer, R.T. Farrell, in *Speculum*, LII (1977), 932-35.

<sup>81</sup>Little in the standard Bede bibliography, W.F. Bolton, "A Bede Bibliography, 1935-60," *Traditio*, xviii (1962), 436-45, has much to do with any consideration of material life. There are some references in P. Hunter-Blair, *Northumbria in the Days of Bede* (London, 1976) to such matters.

have innumerable passages that add snippets of information.<sup>82</sup> But these works rarely incorporate their material for any larger purpose of secular exposition or causation. In Bede, the wilderness is usually seen as an obstacle to be overcome by some combination of faith and hard labor. In contrast, the wilderness portrayed in Felix's *Life of St. Guthlac* is looked on rather as a friend and protector to be embraced. That saint welcomed the "most dismal fen of enormous extent . . . [with its] swamps and bogs and an occasional black pool, exuding dank miasmatic mists," for it was there that he would begin "that long journey which was to end in eternal bliss."<sup>83</sup> Bede's vision was somewhere between this withdrawn picture, reminiscent of the lives of the desert fathers of the fourth century,<sup>84</sup> and that of an English countryside that would be populated by men and women who kept their hands upon the plough while they turned their thoughts to the glories of St. Cuthbert.

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<sup>82</sup>Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, pp. 254-56, for chapters xiii-xv of the *Anonymous Life of Ceolfrith*. Russel, "The Earlier Medieval Plague," has other relevant citations.

<sup>83</sup>Albertson, *Saints and Heroes*, p. 181.

<sup>84</sup>St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, trans., R. Meyer (Westminster, Md., 1950), and Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor, 1957).