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introduction

I was born on the lands of this monastery, and on reaching seven years of age, I was entrusted first to the most reverend Abbot Benedict and later to Abbot Ceolfrid for my education. I have spent all of my life in this monastery ... From the time of my receiving the priesthood until my fifty-ninth year, I have worked, both for my own benefit and that of my brethren ... (HE, Autobiographical Note)

These words were written *c.* AD 731 by the scholar Bede as a postscript to his most widely known work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. They provide a poignant appendix to the great book and an unusually personal testimony to the monastery's role in shaping his life from birth almost to death.

The monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow were among the leading religious and cultural centres in the kingdom of Northumbria, which flourished during a 'Golden Age' in the seventh and eighth centuries AD (Fig. 1.1). The surviving evidence for these first Christian centuries in Northumbria is exceptional in Britain and Europe for several reasons. First, a significant number of the kingdom's earliest monasteries have been extensively excavated by archaeologists. Important examples include Ripon (Hall and Whyman 1996), Whitby (Rahtz 1976; Cramp 1993), Hartlepool (Daniels 2007), Whithorn (Hill 1997) and Hoddum (Lowe 2006). Second, there is an impressive legacy of early medieval art that comprises both stone sculpture and portable objects, particularly books (e.g. Cramp 1984; Battiscombe 1956; M. Brown 2003). Third, many standing churches preserve parts of their Anglo-Saxon structures, including the largely complete building at Escomb (Cramp 2005; McClendon 2005) and a remarkable string of churches along the Tyne valley, including Jarrow. Finally, there is a considerable surviving corpus of pre-Viking written sources, including the famous works of Bede (Rollason 2003). These archaeological, art historical and documentary sources, which are extremely rich by seventh- or eighth-century standards, provide a window onto a vigorous Christian culture with links across Britain, Ireland and Europe.

The surviving testimony of Bede and the author of Abbot Ceolfrid's anonymous *Life* explain how the monastery at Wearmouth was founded *c.*673 and how Jarrow was established around eight years later, *c.*681. According to these histories, both sites were set up as a result of royal patronage with substantial grants of land from King Ecgrith to

Benedict Biscop. Benedict was a nobleman who, as Biscop Baducing, had enjoyed a career in the retinue of King Oswy of Northumbria before travelling several times to Rome. In the mid-660s he became a monk at the island monastery of Lérins, before going again to Rome and then back to England with Theodore of Tarsus, the new archbishop of Canterbury. In Kent Benedict spent two years as abbot of the monastery of SS Peter and Paul before making a third journey to Rome in order to collect books and relics. On his return to England he discovered the death of his patron, King Cenwalh of Wessex, so he continued his journey to his native Northumbria. According to Bede he impressed King Egfrith so much that the king ‘immediately gave him from his personal property an area of land’ to found the monastery of St Peter (*Hist. Abb.* Ch. 4). In due course, impressed with Benedict’s ‘virtue, industry and devotion’, the king made him another grant of land that he used to establish Jarrow. Thus the two monasteries were established as a twin foundation, and ‘as the body cannot be separated from the head . . . neither should anyone try to disturb the brotherly love that would unite the two houses just as it had bound together the two chief apostles, Peter and Paul’ (*Hist. Abb.* Ch. 7).

All Bede’s works were composed at Wearmouth or Jarrow and, as might be expected, he takes a special interest in these houses, particularly in his *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*. The corpus of Bede’s surviving writings alone makes Wearmouth and Jarrow outstandingly important, but we are extremely fortunate that we also have a unique body of associated artistic works and archaeological finds. In the early Middle Ages the monasteries were famous across Europe as centres for the production of books; letters sent by European saints and archbishops record requests for copies of volumes including Bede’s works (WJP 2011b, 317–18). Surviving masterpieces from the monastery’s scriptorium include the *Codex Amiatinus*, which itself neatly encapsulates a range of relationships that signal how the monastery operated at local and international levels. Not only is the book the world’s earliest surviving near-complete manuscript of the Vulgate Bible, but it was originally prepared by Abbot Ceolfrid and his community as a gift for St Peter’s church in Rome and its leader, the pope (Chazelle 2003) (Fig. 1.2). Books such as the *Codex* were used to create political links between churches and kingdoms and influenced religious practice and scholarship across Europe through men such as Alcuin of York (M. Brown 2003, 63). As a physical object the *Codex Amiatinus* also eloquently expresses a range of relationships. To make it the monks of Wearmouth and Jarrow required books from across Europe to use as exemplars, and Bede testifies that Benedict brought such volumes from Rome. Some of the pigments required for inks could also have come from Europe, though studies of Northumbrian codices have suggested that most were probably produced from plants and minerals available locally (Brown *et al.* 2003;

Figure 1.2 Not shown

Gameson 2011, 811–13). Perhaps most notably of all, the book needed the skins of over 500 calves to create the pages themselves (Mitford 1967, 2; McKitterick 1989, 139–40). Since wealth in middle Saxon England was intimately related to the possession of livestock, this figure testifies to the wealth of the monastery – particularly as Ceolfrid ordered the creation of not one but three such Bibles. Although sheep were probably more widely available (Gameson 2011, 798), calf gave the best-quality vellum and allowed the creation of larger pages (Mitford 1967, 2). The production of volumes such as the *Codex Amiatinus* suggests that Wearmouth and Jarrow had at their disposal both the land to graze these herds and people to manage them.

Even more significant than the well-documented origins of the monasteries are the substantial surviving structures. The recent publication of the long archaeological campaign led by Professor Rosemary Cramp from 1959 to 1988 provides an exceptional insight into the establishment and development of two major monasteries in this period (Cramp 2005; 2006). Indeed, few important seventh- or eighth-century monastic sites in the whole of Europe have witnessed such extensive excavation as Wearmouth and Jarrow.