

Máirín MacCarron, *Bede and Time. Computus, Theology and History in the Early Medieval World*, London, New York (Routledge) 2019, XII–210 p. (Studies in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland), ISBN 978-1-4724-7663-0, GBP 115,00.

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This important new monograph tackles the subject of the Venerable Bede's writings on time, history and chronology. MacCarron is an able guide to what has the potential to be a somewhat bewildering field, writing with precision and bringing clarity to specialised terminology and complicated calculations. The first three chapters of *Bede and Time* are mostly concerned with an early work of Bede's, »De temporibus«, and it is good to see this hitherto rather neglected text receives such a level of scholarly attention. Particular consideration is paid to the chronicle that makes up the final chapters of that work; this chronicle has generally been referred to by scholars as the »Chronica minora«, a term that implies a secondary relationship to Bede's later chronicle, the so-called »Chronica maiora« (itself part of a longer work, »De temporum ratione«). MacCarron puts forward a convincing argument for approaching the earlier chronicle on its own terms, not simply as a less developed precursor to the later work. She furthermore suggests renaming the two works the »Chronicle of 703« and the »Chronicle of 725«, in order to sidestep this implication of inferiority.

In the second half of the book, MacCarron turns to Bede's other writings on time, namely the aforementioned »Chronicle of 725« and the »Historia ecclesiastica«. In Chapter 4, she compares the presentation of history found in the two chronicles, written more than two decades apart, and shows that Bede gained access to a number of important sources of historical information in the intervening years, including the »Liber pontificalis«, which allowed him to firm up dating and include details not found in the earlier work. Chapter 5 offers an examination of the importance of the Incarnation in Bede's theology, while Chapter 6 discusses the movement towards dating events from the Incarnation and Bede's own contributions to this new dating system.

MacCarron's approach throughout draws on and reflects a number of recent trends in Bedan scholarship. Where he was once celebrated chiefly as a historian and scientist, Bede's writings in other genres have been the subject of renewed study in recent years. As MacCarron notes in her »Introduction«, recent developments in the field have led to some re-framing of Bede's intellectual contribution: we have come to see Bede's history and exegesis as possessing greater originality than had been thought previously, while his computistical writing is now seen as less



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ground-breaking than once it was (p. 10). More than that, scholars now find themselves attempting to avoid the more grandiose claims of originality once heaped upon him and to draw attention instead to what MacCarron calls Bede's »capacity to innovate within tradition« (p. 11). So, in »Bede and Time« we learn that earlier suggestions by scholars that Bede invented AD dating are wrong (p. 136), yet MacCarron argues that Bede did nevertheless make a »distinctive contribution« by applying AD dating to history (p. 144), a departure which she sees as an »extraordinary innovation« and one »far more revolutionary« than the pre-existing use of AD dating to record contemporary events (p. 145).

Bedan scholars have also sought in recent years to bring his works in different genres in dialogue with one another and particularly to read his historical writings in conjunction with his exegesis. That such an approach can pay rich dividends is demonstrated in »Bede and Time«. In examining Bede's chronography, MacCarron does not shy away from discussing his theological understanding: time is, apart from anything else, a deeply spiritual concern for Bede and his entire approach to history is derived from a deeply held Augustinian appreciation of the relationship between the eternal and the transitory. For this reason, his Christology also deeply influenced his sense of history: The Incarnation represented the moment when eternity was made manifest in the temporal world. For Bede, the Incarnation was therefore the crux of history – indeed, it is »striking how little attention« he gave the Passion in his chronicles (p. 119) – and over the course of his career he elaborated this into a developed theology of history of which AD dating was simply one manifestation.

Finally, it is worth noting that an important influence on this method of counting time from the Incarnation was Dionysius Exiguus, whose 95-year Easter table was central to the turbulent debate over the date of Easter. A number of factors have distorted our view of the Insular Easter controversy, not least Bede's own influential presentation of events in his »Historia ecclesiastica«, which encased in amber a particular view of the controversy that still exerts a powerful gravitational pull. Amongst other things, it gives the reader the impression that there was one »Roman« method of calculating Easter when in fact there were two, the Dionysian and the Victorian. Bede himself was a staunch opponent of the latter and an ardent proponent of the former.

It is no surprise then, on one level, to find that Dionysius exerted such an influence, but, for a variety of reasons, the study of *computus* has often found itself segregated off from the rest of Insular studies. The importance of this part of the early medieval intellectual world should not be downplayed, however. In fact, as MacCarron ably demonstrates in this book, early Insular chronicle writing, and historiography was entwined with contemporary computistical debates. Drawing on recent ground-breaking work in the field of Insular computistics, she places Bede against an intellectual backdrop which has too often been left out of studies of his historical and chronological thought.



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