

The first critical edition of the Venerable Bede's monumental history.

Saint Bede the Venerable. *Historiae ecclesiasticae gentis Anglorum libri quinque*. Cambridge: Typis academicis, 1722. 15 3/4 inches x 9 inches (400 mm x 228 mm), 860 pp. Engraved frontispiece by van der Gucht and double-page folding map.

The Venerable Bede (673–735), a monk of Northumbria, was the greatest English historian of the Middle Ages. (He was “Venerable” for sanctity rather than age). Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the British People*, an account of the Anglo-Saxon tribes, was completed shortly before his death. The text was soon brought to Germany by evangelizing Saxon scholars. It was apparently from one of these manuscripts that the Strasbourg printer Heinrich Eggestejn produced the first printed edition in 1475. It was two and a half centuries before the appearance of the first critical edition (reproduced here).

The editor was John Smith (ca. 1659–1715), a prebendary at Durham Cathedral and Rector of Wearmouth, site of Bede’s monastery. These duties did not prevent him, in that easy-going age of sinecure, pluralism, and nonresidential clergy, from spending most of his time in Cambridge on scholarly pursuits. Smith was able to consult the Moore Manuscript of Bede, named after John Moore, Bishop of Ely, whose books were presented to Cambridge University Library by George I. It is one of only four surviving eighth-century Latin manuscripts of the text, and formed the basis of Smith’s edition, buttressed (or tempered) by judicious annotation. A prospectus for the work was issued in 1710, but Smith died before publication. His learned son, George Smith (1693–1756) saw the work through the press. The edition immediately became the standard point of reference, not superseded until Charles Plummer’s edition of 1896. David Douglas, in his authoritative study *English Scholars* (London, 1939 and 1951), describes it as “a magisterial performance, ... both original and definitive” and “perhaps the most perfect single book of the greatest age of Anglo-Saxon historical learning.” With Smith’s death, the epicenter of Saxon scholarship shifted from Cambridge to Oxford.

King Alfred's Saxon version (or paraphrase) of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is also included at **Spreads 247–337**. This text was first published at Cambridge in 1643 by Abraham Wheelock, introducing a new Anglo-Saxon type. Smith's edition, too, employed a new type, specially cut for the book. (The first Anglo-Saxon types had appeared in an edition of Ælfric's sermon on Easter, published in 1566). There is also a map of Saxon Britain. The appendix includes a series of Anglo-Saxon charters from Mercia, the manuscripts of which are no longer extant.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is the sole authority for all that is known of Cædmon, the earliest English vernacular poet for whom a name survives. Bede claimed that Cædmon, who flourished around the time of his birth, was the first poet to compose sacred verse in English. *Cædmon's hymn*, a mere 42 words of alliterative verse, is the poet's first (and only genuine surviving) composition. Smith's edition is notable for its presentation of so ancient and significant a poem (**Spread 311**) in long lines, like the ancient prose, as in the manuscript tradition—such contemporaries as George Hickes or Humphrey Wanley preferred a modernized lineation. (The West Saxon version appears in Smith's text, in lines 20–24, with the Northumbrian in a footnote).

The earliest recorded owner of this copy was Alexander James Beresford-Hope (1820–1887), the rich youngest son of the neoclassical connoisseur Thomas Hope. His diminutive bookplate appears on the front pastedown. Beresford-Hope was an ineffectual conservative politician, a high and staunch defender of the established church and a champion of Gothic Revival architecture. The frontispiece by van der Gucht at would have appealed to Beresford-Hope on aesthetic, doctrinal, and historical grounds. After his death, the volume passed into the appropriately ecclesiological keeping of St. Hugh's, Parkminster, whose ink-stamp may be seen on the title-page opposite.

This volume is now in the Cecil H. Green Library, which comprises roughly a third of the Stanford University Libraries' 8.5 million volumes. The Green Library houses special collections amounting to a quarter million rare volumes; among the rarities are an extensive collection of Aldine editions and numerous incunables.