

# The Codex Amiatinus



Illustration of Ezra, the Old Testament scribe

## The History of the Codex Amiatinus

The Codex Amiatinus was one of three great single-volume Bibles made at Wearmouth-Jarrow, written in the 8th century. It is the earliest one-volume Latin Bible to survive in the world.

Wearmouth-Jarrow had been established in the late 7th century by the nobleman Benedict Biscop. After visiting Rome, Biscop, inspired by the architecture, art, treasures, music and books of the Roman church, endeavoured to bring the best of the continent back to his native Northumbria. In AD 674 and AD 681, land was granted to Biscop by King Ecgfrith of Northumbria to establish a double monastery. Wearmouth-Jarrow quickly gained a reputation as a centre of great culture and learning, small in scale but of immense influence.

The great library established by Biscop at the twin monastery, was one of the finest of its day, allowing scholars, most notably the Venerable Bede, to flourish.

Bede's 'Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow' provides an account of the commissioning of the three Bibles. This was done under the direction of

Abbot Ceolfrith, who succeeded Benedict Biscop as Abbot of the twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow. The Bibles were made in the monastic scriptorium during his abbacy, 690-716 AD. It was a remarkable thing to undertake at the time; usually copies of books of the Bible were produced as single volumes (eg. the Book of Psalms) or volumes containing a small number of books (eg. the four Gospels). Ceolfrith intended to carry the Codex Amiatinus to Rome in AD 716 as a gift to Pope Gregory II. He left Wearmouth with an entourage of 80 followers, intending to spend his last days in Rome, but died in Langres monastery in France en route. Some of his followers took the Codex Amiatinus on to Rome and presented it to the Pope to fulfil Ceolfrith's wishes. The later history of the book is unknown until it reappeared at the monastery of San Salvatore at Monte Amiata in Italy, where it was highly prized and thought to be a 6th century Italian work. When the monastery was closed in the 18th century it was



Illustration of Christ in Majesty

taken to the Laurentian Library in Florence, where it still resides today and was given the name Amiatinus after the monastery it had come from. Its Northumbrian origin was not rediscovered until the 19th century.

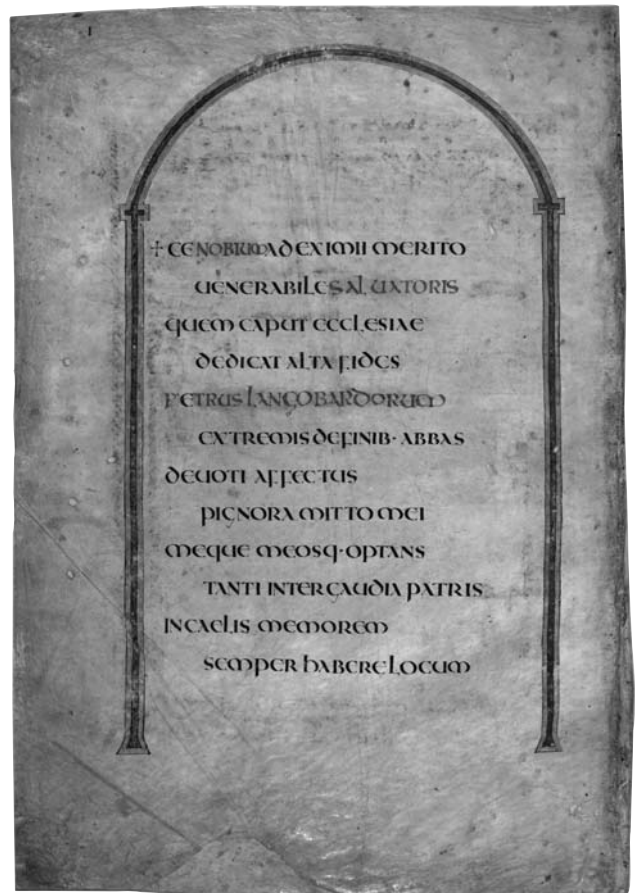
## Facts about the Codex Amiatinus

The scale of the manuscript is huge – unlike anything else made at the time. Its pages are approximately half a metre in height, two thirds of a metre across when the book is open, approximately quarter of a metre thick when shut and was once described as weighing approximately the same as a female Great Dane. The facsimile in the City Library & Arts Centre is reduced in size from the original.

The pages are made from vellum – (prepared hides of sheep, cows or goats). They are so large that each double page would have required one whole animal hide. The whole book has over 2,000 individual pages. As the vellum is of very good quality, some animal hides would probably have been rejected. The fact that Wearmouth-Jarrow was able to obtain this quantity of animal hides, for just one project, shows how well resourced the monastery was.

Analysis of the manuscript has revealed that it was the work of about six scribes. It shows that the monastic scriptorium was highly organised and very skilled. At a large scriptoria at this time, it would be common practice for a number of different scribes to work on one book simultaneously. As the writing work was undertaken before the book was bound it was possible for scribes to work on different sections of text. Other jobs in the scriptorium would include ruling the vellum on which the text was to be written, mixing the inks and undertaking the illustrations.

It was not until its text was closely studied in the 19th century that it was recognised that its dedication poem had been changed. A little-known text by an anonymous monk, writing at Wearmouth-Jarrow in the 8th century, was discovered, called: The Life of Abbot Ceolfrith. The text was virtually identical to that in the Codex Amiatinus except that the names had been changed. Originally, the inscription dedicated the Codex from Ceolfrith of England, to St Peter's in Rome. The other parts of the poem were unique, and hence this proves that the manuscript was made at Wearmouth-Jarrow.



The dedication page at the opening of the Codex Amiatinus

## Find out more about the Codex Amiatinus

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library & Arts Centre, which has books on the Codex Amiatinus, such as:

- 'The Codex Amiatinus: the Byzantine Element in the Northumbrian Renaissance', Jarrow Lecture 1977 by Nordhagen, P. J.
- 'Art of the Codex Amiatinus' by Bruce-Mitford, R

More information and images can be found on the following websites:

- [www.sunderland.gov.uk/codex](http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/codex)
- [www.wearmouthjarrow.org.uk](http://www.wearmouthjarrow.org.uk)
- [www.bedesworld.co.uk](http://www.bedesworld.co.uk)