ERASMUS AND NOËL BEDA AT PARIS IN 1499

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What little we know about Noël Beda’s origins derives mostly from several comments which Erasmus of Rotterdam made about him in later life, after the two theologians began their gladiatorial battles in 1526.

The year of Beda’s birth, for example, is generally placed in c. 1470 on the basis of two of Erasmus’ statements. The first gives only a vague indication of their relative ages. In Prologus in supputationem calumniarum Natalis Bedae (Basel: Froben, August 1526) Erasmus asserts that his adversary, though complaining of ill health and old age, is in fact non ita multo me iunior (“not that much younger than I”)\(^1\). With due allowance for the rhetorical coloring of this statement, we may interpret it to mean that Erasmus considered himself several years older than Beda. Since Erasmus, as is now becoming clear, was born in 1466, Beda’s birth may be placed in about 1468-71\(^2\). The second statement by Erasmus about the Frenchman’s age permits a somewhat more precise estimate. It occurs in Notatiunculae quaedam extemporales ad naenias Bedaicas (Basel: Froben, March 1529). Beda, Erasmus says, is now practically a sexagenarian: nunc pene sexagenarius (LB IX 707A). We should remind the reader, however, that this estimate too is colored by the context. Erasmus is accusing the Paris theologian of having wasted virtually his whole life on Scotist trifles (totam ferme aetatem detrivit in quaestiunculis Scoticis). Only now, he adds, when Beda is almost sixty years old, is he finally beginning to venture out into the strange new world of St. Augustine. Allowing for some exaggeration, then, the age-reference points to about 1470-71 as the year of Beda’s birth. This date is corroborated by a third statement which has been ignored up to now, probably because of the widely held belief among historians that Erasmus was born in 1469. In Ep. 2275:22 (dated

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\(^1\) See Desiderii Erasmi Opera omnia ed. J. Clericus 10 vols. (Leiden 1708-06) IX 448E. The Leiden-edition will hereafter be cited as LB.

\(^2\) For the year of Erasmus’ birth see Harry Vredeveld “The Ages of Erasmus and the Year of his Birth”, forthcoming in Renaissance Quarterly.
February 1530) Erasmus states that Beda was then perhaps five or four years younger than he: *Beda fortasse quinque aut quattuor annis me minor est*. The statement occurs in an open letter to the Franciscans in which Erasmus begins by saying that he is no more decrepit than say Budé (who is two years younger than he), Beda (four or five years younger), and Latomus (three years younger). Though Erasmus’ estimate of Latomus’ age is probably erroneous (Latomus seems to have been born in about 1475), his reference to Budé’s age is not far off the mark (he was born on 26 January 1468). And since the reference to Beda’s age tallies with his earlier two estimates of the French theologian’s age, we may regard this age-indication as reasonably accurate. The context supports this view, since Erasmus is evidently intent on establishing his own vigor of mind and body and would hence have been more likely to make himself appear younger rather than older. The third reference to Beda’s age thus confirms that Beda was born in 1470-71, four to five years after Erasmus’ birth on 28 October 1466.

Erasmus not only knew how old Beda was, but could also put him down as a provincial. In *Supputationes errorum in censuris Natalis Bedae* (LB IX 531A) he mocks Beda for speaking the much derided Picard dialect. Erasmus was indeed able to describe some of the peculiarities of this dialect; see *Adagia* 1753 (ASD II-4 182:728-29); *De recta pronuntiatione* (ASD I-4 53:303-05 and 76:74). That Beda came from Picardy in north-western France — and not from Mont-Saint-Michel on the Channel coast, as is sometimes assumed — is supported, as we shall see, by a much earlier reference to Beda in Erasmus’ correspondence from Paris in 1499.

Besides Beda’s age and origins, Erasmus also knew exactly when his adversary had started studying theology. Walter F. Bense, in his admirable dissertation on “Noel Beda and the Humanist Reformation at Paris, 1504-1534,” has inferred from the available evidence that Beda might have come to the Collège de Montaigu in Paris “as a beginning student in theology and teacher in arts at the formal founding of the Community of the Poor in 1494, and possibly somewhat earlier”.

This inference can now be confirmed by a precise statement which

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4 The abbreviation ASD stands for *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam 1969-).