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Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons*

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GILDAS, our sole contemporary Latin¹ witness for the sixth century in Britain, is an enigmatic figure. All trustworthy information about him comes from his own words. He implies that he is a deacon in the British church and hints at his sympathies with a particular group within that church, perhaps meaning the monks.² He says that he wrote his work, now called *De Excidio Britanniae*, 'The Ruin of Britain', after ten or more years' deliberation, and at one point he gives his own age as forty-four, presumably at the time of completion.³ The first writer to refer to him, Columbanus in about the year 600, calls him 'Giltas auctor', perhaps using *auctor* in the sense 'authority on church discipline'; more than a century later Bede calls him the Britons' own historian (*historicus*) who had described their 'unspeakable crimes'; Alcuin calls him 'the wisest of the Britons';

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and to later Celtic writers he is 'St Gildas'.⁴ As far as the *De Excidio* is concerned, we can best follow Wulfstan and describe Gildas not as a historian but as a prophet, a prophet not in the sense of a foreteller of the future, but in the Old Testament sense: a fearless critic of the evils of the present age who refers to past events and past prophecies only insofar as they reveal the pattern of history, the origins of the present order, and the inevitable consequences of disregarding the moral laws of God.⁵ It is in this prophetic role that Gildas prefaces his denunciation of contemporary kings and clergy with an outline of the geography and history of Roman Britain. He introduces it as follows:

I shall try, God willing, to say a little about the situation of Britain; about her obstinacy, subjection, and rebellion, her second subjection and harsh servitude; about religion, persecution, the holy martyrs, diverse heresies, tyrants, two plundering races; about defence and a further devastation, about a second vengeance and a third devastation; about hunger, about the letter to Aëtius, about victory, crimes, enemies suddenly announced, a memorable plague, a council, an enemy much more savage than the first, the destruction of cities; about those who survived, and about the final victory of our country that has been granted to our times by the will of God.⁶

As Alcuin and Wulfstan probably realised, Gildas's impact as a prophet does not depend on the reader knowing any more of the geography, history, and current affairs of Britain than Gildas chose to include. But if we are to follow Bede in using Gildas as a historian, we want to know when he lived and what his horizons were. Unfortunately no reliable authority answers these questions. Gildas himself says that he was born in the year of the siege of *Badonicus mons*, but we are not sure when that was;⁷ Columbanus says that Gildas corresponded with 'Vennianus auctor',⁸ but we are not sure when *he*

⁴For these and other testimonies, see the editions of Gildas by T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, III, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi, 13 (Berlin, 1898), pp. 21–24, and Hugh Williams, *Gildas*, Cymmrodorion Record Series, 3–4, 2 vols continuously paginated (London, 1899–1901), pp. 415–20. See also Neil Wright, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas', *Arthurian Literature*, 2 (1982), 1–40. On Bede's attempt to use Gildas for (in our sense) historical purposes see my 'Settlement of England'. ⁵This is also the nature of the historical writings of the fifth-century Continental writers, such as Orosius, Augustine, and Salvian, discussed by Pierre Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germaniques*, third edition (Paris, 1964); but one hesitates to place Gildas in the same 'literary tradition' as them, since he shows no knowledge of their work. The similarities may be due to similar circumstances and biblical outlook, plus a strong gust of *Zeitgeist*; there are also important differences. ⁶DEB 2. ⁷DEB 26.1; cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', and below, p. 4. ⁸*Epistulae*, 1.7, in *Sancti Columbani Opera*, edited and translated by G. S. M. Walker, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 2 (Dublin, 1957), pp. 8–9; cf. R. Sharpe in *Gildas: New Approaches* (see n. 1 above).

lived—nor where. Gildas attacks by name contemporary rulers of the south-west and Wales,⁹ but there is no early source for their dates and we cannot assume that Gildas wrote in or near their kingdoms; in fact many modern scholars, regarding Gildas as a fearful rather than a fearless prophet, have supposed that he wrote at a safe distance from these kings and kept a discreet silence about the ones near to hand.¹⁰ This is a novel way of localizing prophets, but I doubt if it is justified.—In passing I would suggest the possibility that he wrote secretly. That could explain his mysterious allusions to his supporters and also his odd name, which is not recognizably British or any other language.¹¹

It is often assumed that Gildas wrote towards the middle of the sixth century. However, this dating depends ultimately on the very doubtful authority of the *Annales Cambriae*.¹² The earliest manuscript of these Annals is c. 1100, although their compilation must have begun in the late eighth century.¹³ There are three relevant annals. One is Gildas's death in 570. It is one of a series of entries, many of them obits or birth dates of Irish and Welsh saints, which were taken over from an early-tenth-century version of the so-called 'Chronicle of Ireland'.¹⁴ The birth dates, of course, were added retrospectively, not when the saints were born; and similarly many or all of the obits may have been added to the 'Chronicle of Ireland' long after the saints' deaths by persons distressed at the absence of notable saints, but not necessarily well informed about their dates. Since the 570 Gildas obit may have been inserted as late as the early tenth century, one must conclude that it can carry very little weight.¹⁵

⁹See Kenneth Jackson, 'Varia: II. Gildas and the Names of the British Princes', *CMCS*, 3 (Summer 1982), 30–40; D. N. Dumville in *Gildas: New Approaches*. ¹⁰See, for example, Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 225. One might, however, cite the case of Lucifer (d. c. 370), author of *De Regibus Apostaticis* and other tracts written to the Emperor Constantius 'with the evident, but unsuccessful, intent of courting martyrdom' (F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition (London, 1974), p. 841; cf. n. 50 below), or, nearer home, St Patrick (see his Letter to the soldiers of Coroticus, especially Chapters 3 and 21, edited and translated by Hood, pp. 35, 38, 55, and 59), St Columbanus, and others (see James Campbell, 'The First Century of Christianity in England', *Ampleforth Journal*, 76 (1971), 23). ¹¹Sims-Williams, 'Gildas and Vernacular Poetry', n. 2. ¹²As is shown by O'Sullivan, pp. 77–86, and, more cogently, by Dr Dumville in *Gildas: New Approaches* (see n. 1 above). See also my 'Settlement of England'. ¹³Kathleen Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, SCH, 2 (Woodbridge, 1980), pp. 68–69. See 'The *Annales Cambriae* and Old-Welsh Genealogies from *Harleian MS. 3859*', edited by Egerton Phillimore, *Y Cymmrodor*, 9 (1888), 141–83. ¹⁴See Hughes, *Celtic Britain*, pp. 69–70 and 88–91. I owe the date to Dr Dumville, who tells me that it will be supported in Kathryn Grabowski and David Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, SCH (Woodbridge, forthcoming). ¹⁵The 565 annal in MS B of *Annales Cambriae*, 'Navigatio Gildæ in Hybernia' (*Annales Cambriae*, edited by John Williams ab Ithel, Rolls Series (London, 1860), p. 5), probably reflects the later hagiography of Gildas.

If 570 were right, it would not date the *De Excidio* exactly, because we do not know how old Gildas was when he died. A second entry in *Annales Cambriae* would give a precise date if we could trust it: in 516 'The battle of Badon in which Arthur carried the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were victorious'. But the 516 date may be as late an invention as the anachronistically detailed entry itself.¹⁶ If 516 were right for the battle and hence for Gildas's birth, we could add 44 and date his work to 560. However, this conflicts with the third date in *Annales Cambriae*, the death of Maelgwn in a 'great mortality' in 547, for Gildas attacks Maelgwn of Gwynedd as a living person.¹⁷ The 'great mortality' is also taken from the 'Chronicle of Ireland', but at some stage a Welsh copyist has added or substituted the name of Maelgwn where the Irish 'Chronicle' has a series of Leinster names.¹⁸ We cannot tell if he had any authority for this act. He may have known the hagiographical tradition that Maelgwn perished in a plague—a fitting punishment for the sins described by Gildas.¹⁹ This tradition may be quite a late one. Yet it is on Maelgwn's 547 obit that the conventional date of c. 540 for the *De Excidio* rests!

There is no obvious way out of this chronological impasse. All we can say is that by the early tenth century an Irish annalist thought that Gildas flourished in the mid-sixth century and that his opinion was acceptable to a Welsh annalist. The Welsh genealogies cannot be used with any assurance as an independent check on the period of Maelgwn and his contemporaries, calculating back with generation averages, because the pedigrees all have unverifiable weak links in them, and because they have come down to us from the same milieu, indeed in the same earliest manuscript, as the *Annales Cambriae*.²⁰ Neither (in my opinion) can one establish Gildas's date from the chronology of his account of British history, because he does not provide us with a reliable base line from which to estimate forwards

¹⁶'Bellum badonis in quo arthur portavit crucem domini nostri Iesu Christi tribus diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos et brittones uictores fuerunt.' A vernacular source is likely, since there is probably confusion between *ysgwyd* 'shield' and *ysgwydd* 'shoulder' (cf. Thomas Jones, 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 8 (1964), 5). That Arthur should have had the Cross on his shield is not anachronistic (cf. the Emperor Constantine's *Chi-Rho*); the anachronism is the discursiveness of the annal. ¹⁷Miller's explanation of the *bellum badonis* date and attempt to date Maelgwn's father ('Publication Dates', p. 174) is unconvincing; cf. O'Sullivan, p. 123. ¹⁸See A. P. Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals: Their First Contemporary Entries, and the Earliest Centres of Recording', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 72, Section C (1972), 14–16; Hughes, *Celtic Britain*, p. 91; and n. 84 below. ¹⁹See O'Sullivan, pp. 81–85, especially p. 84 n. 32; he makes heavy weather of the various types of plague. ²⁰London, British Library, MS Harley 3859 (unknown origin, c. 1100). The genealogies will be discussed by D. N. Dumville in *Gildas: New Approaches*.

in time down to the date of writing.²¹ For the rest of this paper I shall be content to regard the *De Excidio* simply as a sixth-century work, written earlier than Columbanus' reference to it c. 600, and later than the fifth century, because of Gildas's vagueness about the known history of the early part of that century.

As well as the date of the *De Excidio*, we would like to know the geographical horizons of its author. I use this cumbersome phrase, rather than 'place of writing', because, for all we know, Gildas may have moved about the country, or even gone abroad, during the previous forty-four years; the most we might hope to gather from his own words are the areas he was well informed about, and the areas about which he was apparently ignorant, and we might then hope to find the evidence converging to give us an idea of his point of view or points of view. There are certain pitfalls in this approach, however. First, what Gildas says may reflect the point of view of his written or oral sources, rather than his own standpoint. For example, we can be sure that his opening description of Britain derives from a written source in part, because it includes an error in the dimensions of the island found in the manuscripts of Orosius but not in Pliny, the ultimate source,²² and it seems that Orosius' words came to Gildas indirectly, probably via some geographical compilation, because he is otherwise ignorant of Orosius.²³ Thus Gildas's references to the Thames and Severn, and even his allusions to the northern Walls and the southern Shore Forts, could also have been influenced by that same compilation.²⁴ A second pitfall is that certain places may have been regarded as of such importance in Gildas's time that it would be surprising for him not to mention them whatever his regional point of view. For example, it is hardly significant that he lays such stress on St Alban of Verulamium, for Alban may have been regarded as the most distinguished British martyr throughout Britain; certainly he is the only one praised by fifth- and sixth-

²¹I have discussed this in detail in 'The Settlement of England', where I argue that Gildas's reference in *DEB* 20.1 to Aëtius (*ter consul* in 446; d. 454) does not provide such a base line since Gildas may not have known Aëtius' dates and probably misplaced the Britons' letter to him. ²²*DEB* 3.1; *Pauli Orosii Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*, edited by C. Zangemeister (Leipzig, 1889), p. 12 (1.2.77). Cf. C. E. Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', *English Historical Review*, 56 (1941), 354; Stephen Reckert, *The Matter of Britain and the Praise of Spain* (Cardiff, 1967), p. 8, n. 5. The passages of Pliny (*Natural History*, iv.102) and Orosius are translated by A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), pp. 77 and 80. ²³cf. Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 206 and 209–11. Of course, it could be that Gildas never got a chance to read past the beginning of Orosius. ²⁴*DEB* 3.1, 15.3 and 18.2–3. The statement that Britain has (or had) twenty-eight *civitates* and many *castella* (*DEB* 3.2) may reflect a written source; see C. E. Stevens, 'Gildas and the Civitates of Britain', *EHR*, 52 (1937), 193–203; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, 284–602, 3 vols (Oxford, 1964), II, 715. See also n. 78 below.

century Continental writers.²⁵ One might argue that the two northern Walls were of comparable importance, and the same may be true of the martyrs Julius and Aaron of *Urbs Legionum*, that is, Caerleon or possibly Chester.²⁶ The third pitfall is that the usable geographical indications in Gildas may be just too few to be significant. It seems to me that E. A. Thompson's recent argument that Gildas both lived and wrote somewhere in the north-west, say Cheshire or Lancashire, does not avoid these pitfalls.²⁷

Professor Thompson makes the assumption I have already questioned: 'The five kings whom Gildas names ruled in the south-west and the west of Britain, and so we may be sure that Gildas himself was not living in that area'. Thus even Gildas's detailed reporting of events in Dumnonia in the very year he was writing can only be regarded as an indication of a vaguely western orientation, and Gildas's allusions to the five kings are only pointers to where he did not live.²⁸ Unfortunately, if we discard these, the only contemporary geographical allusions left in the text are those to the places of martyrdom and/or burial of Alban, Julius, and Aaron which are of doubtful significance.²⁹ Thompson's case therefore has to rest on the alleged northern bias of the traditions about the past reported by Gildas; in fact it is Gildas's knowledge of contemporary south-western and western conditions coupled with his knowledge of northern traditions that inclines Thompson to place Gildas in the north-west. This brings us back to the question of sources. If we assume that

²⁵DEB 10-11; Hugh Williams, *Christianity in Early Britain* (Oxford, 1912), p. 102; Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), p. 49. Wilhelm Levison argued that Gildas's account of Alban derived ultimately from the *Passio Prima*, composed not earlier than 506, explaining the disparities—that Gildas had to conjecture the date of the martyrdom and sited the miracle at the Thames, not the Ver—by the theory that the date is an interpolation in the extant *Passio Prima* and that Gildas quoted from memory ('St. Alban and St. Albans', *Antiquity*, 15 (1941), 337-59; cf. Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', p. 373; and Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 210). However, Gildas may have known a *Passio* written earlier than the *Passio Prima*, possibly before the martyrdom was localized at Verulamium. Note how he distinguishes *corporum sepulturae* and *passionum loca*. Cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 45. ²⁶DEB 10.2. Cf. p. 27 below; Rivet and Smith, pp. 337 and 378-79; Colin Smith, 'Romano-British Place-Names in Bede', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 1 (1979), 6-7. By the ninth century there was certainly a *martyrium* of Julius and Aaron at Caerleon: *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâv*, edited by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Oxford, 1893), p. 225; Levison, 'St. Alban', pp. 340-41; Wendy Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth, 1979), p. 121. ²⁷See his valuable paper, cited in n. 2 above. Cf. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 247-52, who also discusses the (to my mind) impossible interpretation of M. Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', *EHR*, 90 (1975), 241-61. ²⁸Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 225. In view of the order in which he names the tyrants in DEB 28-33 it seems certain that his Dumnonia/Damnonia is the south-western one; cf. Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, second edition (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 122; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 251 and 269; Jackson, 'Varia: II', p. 30 and n. 1. ²⁹Especially if Gildas names them as being inaccessible; but see below, p. 27.

what Gildas says about the fifth century was drawn from locally preserved documents and locally preserved oral tradition, then Thompson has a *prima facie* case. But that assumption gets no support from Gildas. He begins by saying that he will tell the story of Britain 'to the best of my ability, not so much by the aid of native writings or records of authors, inasmuch as these (if they ever existed) have been burnt by the fires of enemies, or carried far away in the ships which exiled our countrymen, and so are not to hand; but I shall follow overseas tradition (*transmarina relatio*) which, because broken by many gaps, is far from clear'.³⁰ What does he mean by *transmarina relatio*? Possibly merely foreign written sources like Rufinus' *Church History*, which gave him very little help, but equally likely, as Thompson suggests, oral reports from Britons who had emigrated to the Continent or Ireland.³¹ This is a valuable suggestion, and not at all a bizarre idea; today a historian of the nineteenth-century Highland clearances or Irish famine might well obtain more vivid oral traditions from Australia or America than in Scotland or Ireland. An emigrant's image of the motherland is less blurred by recent events there than that of those who stay behind, and her history up to the time he or his ancestors left may be especially important to him because it is part of the story of his family's emigration. But if we admit that what Gildas says about northern events may depend not on traditions preserved *in situ* but on the testimony of people whose forebears had moved elsewhere in Britain, or abroad, in the face of Anglo-Saxon, Pictish, or Irish pressure, we cannot rely on it as evidence that he himself dwelt in the north.

I shall try to show that a northern emphasis is detectable in only part of Gildas's narrative, and that we have no right to assume that in other sections Gildas is only talking about the north. Certainly, whatever his practical limitations, his aspiration is always to generalize about *Britannia* as a whole.³² I believe that he succeeds so well that we cannot tell where he wrote.

We may now examine Gildas's text with not only this question in mind, but also the further question of Gildas's reliability as a historian. For reasons which will become apparent I shall first work backwards from Gildas's own time for a few generations, then work forward from the time of Magnus Maximus (d. 388).

Gildas's Britain is surrounded by the ocean, except for the southern straits, where one sails to 'Belgic Gaul'—*navigatur*; is the present

³⁰DEB 4.4. Translation based on Williams, *Gildas*, p. 19. Cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 56. ³¹Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 209 and 223; he favours Ireland. ³²*Patria*, *insula*, and *Britannia* seem to be used synonymously. See N. Wright in *Gildas: New Approaches*.

tense significant? Her most important rivers are the Thames and Severn, along which 'transmarine delicacies' used to be brought in ships—*vehebantur*; note the imperfect tense. (Gildas does not mention the Humber nor the Firths of Forth and Clyde, which seemed so important to Bede in Northumbria.)³³ Britain has (or had) twenty-eight *civitates* and many *castella*, now fallen from their former glory, but he does not name any of them except St Albans and *Urbs Legionum*, also, by implication, a native stronghold at Dinarth in north Wales.³⁴ His view of current affairs stretches at least from Devon to north Wales and, as we have seen, he may be in touch with some *transmarini*. He says that many of his simoniac contemporaries are given to sailing abroad to obtain ordination, and that surrounding nations deplore the corruption of British life.³⁵ The year of his birth, forty-four years before, was the year of a victory over the Saxons at *Badonicus mons*. We do not know where this was,³⁶ and it may be doubted whether we ever shall, any more than we shall establish whether a man called Arthur fought there. If it were ever located, we would not be much further towards localizing Gildas himself, because the battle may have been one of national importance—though it should be noted that he does not actually say it was.

Before the siege of *Badonicus mons* and his own lifetime, Gildas reports a period of alternating victory and defeat stretching back to the time of Ambrosius Aurelianus, who had led the demoralized Britons to challenge the victorious Saxons, after the Saxon plunderers for some (unexplained) reason had gone home (*domum*)—presumably to the east of the island. The range of these operations is quite vague; there is no indication where Ambrosius was based, except that it was not in the Saxon *domus*. The fact that his degenerate grandchildren were still alive when Gildas wrote gives us some idea of the chronology.³⁷ Beyond Ambrosius' time we are getting back to the period of Gildas's great-grandparents, the realm of tradition rather than living memory. This is his graphic picture of that time, in Chapter 25:

A number of the wretched survivors were caught in the mountains and butchered wholesale. Others, their spirit broken by hunger, went to sur-

³³DEB 3.1. Cf. Kenneth Jackson, 'Varia: I. Bede's *Urbs Giudi*: Stirling or Cramond?', *CMCS*, 2 (Winter 1981), 1–7, and n. 71 below. ³⁴DEB 32.1; Jackson, 'Varia: II', pp. 33–34. ³⁵DEB 26.4 and 67.5. ³⁶cf. the discussion towards the end of my 'Settlement'. See also below, p. 25. ³⁷DEB 25. There may be a deliberate parallel with the Irish who return *domos* in 21.2. (The singular in 25.2 is noteworthy, suggesting a single area of Saxon settlement.) Any connection between Ambrosius Aurelianus and Aurelius Caninus (30.1) is guesswork. The latter *may* have been named after the former, but the name was common; see A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1971–), I, 127–38, and II, 199–202.

render to the enemy; they were fated to be slaves for ever, if indeed they were not killed straight away, the highest boon.³⁸ Others made for lands beyond the sea; beneath the swelling sails they loudly wailed, singing a psalm that took the place of a shanty: 'You have given us like sheep for eating and scattered us among the heathen'. Others held out, though not without fear, in their own land, trusting their lives with constant foreboding to the high hills, steep, menacing and fortified, to the densest forests, and to the cliffs of the sea coast.

We cannot date the emigrations usefully; they are not even necessarily to Brittany.³⁹ Nor can we identify Gildas's description with a particular region—how high is a *mons* or a *montanus collis*?⁴⁰—and we may not be meant to; in the previous chapter, Chapter 24, Gildas has been speaking of Britain as a whole: a metaphorical fire lit by the 'impious easterners' had spread from sea to sea, ravaging *civitates* and fields, and 'did not die down until it had burned almost the whole surface of the island and was licking the western ocean with its fierce red tongue'. I do not know how literally we can take Gildas here; we are beyond the reach of living memory and into the amorphous traditions of Britons, perhaps ones whose families had emigrated or moved elsewhere in Britain. No literal significance can be attached to the fire metaphor, because Gildas also uses it for the spread of the Roman empire *across the sea* to Britain.⁴¹ But we can say that at this point Gildas is generalizing about the ruin of Britain as a whole.

Let us look a little more closely at what Gildas says 'about the destruction of cities' in this Chapter 24:

All the major towns (*coloniae*)⁴² were laid low by the repeated battering ³⁸cf. DEB 7, on the treatment meted out by the Romans. Orosius similarly compares the Roman conquest of Spain with that by the Goths, v.1.6 and vii.41.2 (for edition, see n. 22; there is a translation by Roy J. Deferrari, *Paulus Orosius: The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, Fathers of the Church, 50 (Washington, 1964)). Orosius is anxious to minimize the savagery of the onslaught of the Christian barbarians against Christian Spain by contrast with the pagan Roman conquest, emphasizing the willingness of the barbarians to serve the Roman Spaniards as mercenaries and comrades. Gildas makes no such contrast, emphasizing that both onslaughts were disasters the Britons brought upon themselves. The original Roman conquest was peaceful (DEB 5). ³⁹Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 222, suggests Ireland as a possibility. They may have been in various directions, including Brittany. Any *terminus a quo* for the emigrations to Brittany is inevitably based on an argument from the silence of the sources and is therefore unreliable. ⁴⁰cf. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 249–50! ⁴¹DEB 5 (cf. the fire of God's judgment in 43.4 and 60). Similar imagery is used by Orosius, iii.22.15–23.4, and by Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, vii.12.50 and 52 (edited by F. Pauly, *Salviani Presbyteri Massiliensis Opera Omnia*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum [Latinorum], 8 (Vienna, 1883), p. 171). ⁴²I quote Winterbottom's translation. Thomas, in connection with Thompson's northern hypothesis, notes that York and Lincoln were the northern *coloniae* (*Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 63 and 250); but Gildas is surely not using *colonia* in its technical sense—the chapter is 'de urbium subversione' (DEB 2).

of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants (*coloni*)—church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press. There was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds—saving the reverence due to their holy spirits, if indeed many were found at that time to be carried by holy angels to the heights of heaven.⁴³

This description cannot be rejected out of hand. There are similar descriptions of civil violence and barbarian devastation in fifth-century authors. Here is the Pelagian author of *De Vita Christiana*, who may or may not have been a Briton, writing in the early fifth century about government officials reaping the reward of their wickedness:

Of these some, who had frequently shed the blood of others, felt the wrath of God to such effect that they were compelled at last to shed their own. . . . Others who had committed similar deeds were so completely overthrown by the wrath of God that their bodies lay unburied and became food for the beasts and birds of the air. Yet others who had unjustly destroyed a countless multitude of men have been torn to pieces limb from limb, piece by piece . . .⁴⁴

Some years later the poet Orientius describes the barbarian onslaught in Gaul:

Neither the harsh terrain of dense forest and high mountain (*celsi montis*), nor strong rivers with their rapid currents, nor castles (*castella*) with their stones, nor cities protected by walls, nor the barrier of the sea, nor the troubles of the wilderness, nor caves, nor even caverns beneath black rocks, were sufficient to escape the hands of the barbarians. To many false trust was the cause of death, to many perjury, to many civic treachery. Ambushes did much, and so did open force. What was not overcome by force was overcome by famine. The unlucky mother fell with her child and husband, the master underwent servitude with his slaves. Some lay

⁴³DEB 24.3–4. The last sentence is reminiscent of Augustine, *De Cura pro Mortuis Gerenda*, II.4 (edited by J. Zycha, CSEL, 41 (Vienna, 1900), p. 626), and *De Civitate Dei*, I.12 (edited by B. Dombart and A. Kalb, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 147–48, 2 vols (Turnhout, 1955), II, 13–14; translated by Henry Bettenson, *Augustine: City of God* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 21–22); but perhaps the sequence of thought, inspired by Psalm 78 (AV 79). 2–3 (cf. n. 50 below) and Luke 16. 22, was a commonplace one? Cf. Patrick, *Confessio*, Chapter 59. ⁴⁴Chapter 3, in *The Works of Fastidius*, edited and translated by R. S. T. Haslehurst (London, 1927), pp. 301–302. I quote the translation of W. Liebeschuetz, 'Pelagian Evidence on the Last Period of Roman Britain', *Latomus*, 26 (1967), 440; on its authorship see also R. P. C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 40–44.

food for dogs, and flaming roofs deprived many of life, giving them a funeral pyre. Throughout towns and villas, throughout fields and cross-roads and all regions, on every road this way and that, there was death, sorrow, ruin (*excidium*), burning, grief. All Gaul smoked in a single funeral pyre.⁴⁵

My third example is Salvian's description of the sack of Trier, written in about the 440s, some ten or twenty years after the event:

Those whom the enemy had not killed when they pillaged the city were overwhelmed by disaster after the sack; those who had escaped death in the capture did not survive the ruin that followed. Some died lingering deaths from deep wounds, others were burned by the enemy's fires and suffered tortures even after the flames were extinguished. Some perished of hunger, others of nakedness, some wasting away, others paralyzed with cold, and so all alike by diverse deaths hastened to the common goal. Worse than all this, other cities suffered from the destruction of this single town. There lay all about the torn and naked bodies of both sexes, a sight that I myself endured. These were a pollution to the eyes of the city, as they lay there lacerated by birds and dogs. The stench of the dead brought pestilence on the living: death breathed out death. Thus even those who had escaped the destruction of the city suffered the evils that sprang from the fate of the rest. What followed these calamities? Who can assay such utter folly? The few men of rank who had survived destruction demanded of the emperors circuses as the sovereign remedy for a ruined city!⁴⁶

My final example is a letter from Sidonius, Bishop of Clermont Ferrand, in the winter of 473–74, to Constantius (the biographer of St Germanus), referring to a Visigothic assault in the Auvergne.⁴⁷

What a joy it was for the afflicted when you set your sacred foot within our half-ruined ramparts! . . . What tears you shed, as if you were the father of all, over buildings destroyed by fire and half-burnt homes! How greatly you grieved over fields that were buried under unburied bones! How splendid then was your encouragement, how spirited your arguments for reconstruction! To this it may be added that, when you found the city evacuated because of civic dissension as much as barbarian attack, you, by urging peace, restored charity to the people and the people to their fatherland. Thanks to your advice the people have returned to a single

⁴⁵*Commonitorium*, II.167–84, edited by R. Ellis, in *Poetae Christiani Minores*, I, CSEL, 16 (Vienna, 1888), p. 234; cf. Courcelle (n. 5 above), pp. 99 and 356. With the closing 'uno fumavit Gallia tota rogo' compare Orosius on Carthage: 'unus rogo tota ciuitas fuit' (v.1.5). ⁴⁶*De Gubernatione Dei*, VI.15.83–85, edited by Pauly (see n. 41 above), pp. 148–49; translated by Eva M. Sanford, *On the Government of God* (New York, 1930), p. 183. Cf. Courcelle, p. 151. ⁴⁷*Epistulae*, Book III, Letter 2, edited and translated by André Loyen, *Sidonius Apollinaire: Poèmes [et] lettres*, 3 vols (Paris, 1960–70), II, 84–85. On problems of interpretation see C. E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and his Age* (Oxford, 1933), pp. 146–47.

mind as well as to a single city; to you the walls owe the return of their people, the returned people their unity.

Gildas's description in Chapter 24 is not too dramatic, then, by fifth-century standards. But if we have difficulty interpreting eye-witnesses like Salvian and Sidonius—were the latter's fields really buried under unburied bones?—how much harder is our task with Gildas! Is he the inheritor of fifth-century facts or only of fifth-century rhetoric? How much is his account of barbarian devastation, like many Continental accounts,⁴⁸ influenced by the Fall of Troy in *Aeneid*, Book II, the book of Vergil he quotes most often, probably because he saw a parallel between the Fall of Troy and the Ruin of Britain?⁴⁹ And how much is it shaped by the prophecy he quotes in Chapter 40 from the Book of Kings—

His descendants who die in the city (*civitas*) shall be eaten by dogs, and the birds of the air shall eat his dead body on the plain

—and by the Psalms on the desecration of the Temple from which he quotes in Chapter 24 itself?⁵⁰ We cannot really say.

E. A. Thompson, though noting that 'in Roman times it was relatively rare for the northern barbarians to be able to take a walled city by storm (unless they could surprise it)',⁵¹ is inclined to believe Gildas's account. It must be emphasized, however, that it stands alone. It has yet to be confirmed archaeologically. As Thompson admits, 'there is no conclusive archaeological evidence for the military destruction of any British city'. But he adds that 'that can hardly be taken to contradict the explicit statement of Gildas. Archaeology cannot prove a negative of this kind'.⁵² It is of course true that excavators are hardly likely to find the skeletons of Gildas's unfor-

tunates lying about;⁵³ they would doubtless have been given decent burial eventually, just as one imagines Sidonius and Constantius arranged at Clermont. On the other hand excavation has yet to reveal burnt debris, easily recognizable though this is.⁵⁴ Gildas's cataclysmic picture of the Saxon devastations must, then, be exaggerated, to say the least. It could be almost entirely imaginary, inspired by his belief that Romano-British *luxuria* had lasted right up to the time of the Saxon take-over⁵⁵ coupled with the comparatively decayed state of the Roman cities in his own day, which must have demanded explanation. Significantly, Gildas describes them immediately after his account of the Anglo-British wars, in Chapter 26:

But not even at the present day are the cities of our country inhabited as formerly; deserted and dismantled, they lie neglected until now, because, although wars with foreigners have ceased, domestic wars continue.⁵⁶

If the *De Excidio* is to be cited at all in the current debate about the survival of towns and town life in the fourth to sixth centuries,⁵⁷ it has to be stressed that Gildas, in ascribing their ruin to the Saxons in Chapter 24, is talking about a period some generations before his own.

In Chapter 26, on the other hand, Gildas speaks with the authority of both a contemporary (except insofar as his 'as formerly' is a historical judgment) and, presumably, an eyewitness. Nevertheless his words present insuperable problems of interpretation. Like an Old Testament prophet, he holds up the cities as an example.⁵⁸ There is no need for him to tell his contemporaries exactly how deserted they are, nor exactly how they have declined, so long as it is clear that they stand as a reproach to the irresponsible Britons. That the

⁴⁸The current opinion is that the few alleged examples, for instance at Wroxeter, Cirencester, and Caerwent, are ordinary interments, not unburied military casualties or plague victims: Malcolm Todd, 'Famosa Pestis and Britain in the Fifth Century', *Britannia*, 8 (1977), 323–24; Graham Webster, *The Cornovii* (London, 1975), p. 121. ⁴⁹A point made forcefully by Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, pp. 185–86 and 355. The famous 'burnt house' at Caistor-by-Norwich may have caught fire accidentally, like those described by Constantius in his *Life of St Germanus*, Chapter 16 (translated by F. R. Hoare, *The Western Fathers* (London, 1954), p. 299); for a still more minimizing interpretation see J. N. L. Myres and Barbara Green, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall, Norfolk* (London, 1973), pp. 33–34. Cf. Todd, *Roman Britain*, p. 243 (on Wroxeter cf. Webster, p. 121). ⁵⁰See below, p. 18. ⁵¹Sed ne nunc quidem, ut antea, civitates patriae inhabitantur; sed desertae dirutaeque hactenus squalent, cessantibus licet externis bellis, sed non civilibus. I quote the translation of Williams, p. 63; cf. p. 25 below. ⁵²For contrasting views see Richard Reece, 'Town and Country: The End of Roman Britain', *World Archaeology*, 12 (1980), 77–92; Todd, *Roman Britain*, pp. 241–45. ⁵³cf. Zephaniah 3. 6. Orosius says that people looked at ruined cities for consolation in present troubles (vii.22.8); Gildas is less complacent!

⁴⁸Courcelle has shown that a quotation of *Aeneid*, II.368–69, is a commonplace of fifth- and sixth-century Continental writings: *Histoire littéraire*, pp. 25, 201, n. 1, and 257, n. 7 (add Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, vi.15.89, edited by Pauly, p. 150, lines 9–10). It is symptomatic of Gildas's distance from these writers (n. 5 above) that he does not quote this passage; what he shared with them was probably an early grounding in Vergil. ⁴⁹Winterbottom, *Gildas*, p. 10, n. 8; Saunders Lewis, 'The Tradition of Taliesin', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1968, pp. 296–97. Cf. the discussions by Neil Wright and myself in *Gildas: New Approaches* (n. 1 above). ⁵⁰III (AV I) Kings 16. 4; Psalms 73 and 78 (AV 74 and 79) (cf. n. 43 above). Here Gildas quotes III Kings in an Old Latin version. F. C. Burkitt, 'The Bible of Gildas', *Revue bénédictine*, 46 (1934), 207, makes the unlikely suggestion that Gildas took his quotation from Lucifer (see n. 10 above), even though the extant works of the latter do not incorporate the verses in question, only the similar III Kings 14. 11 (in *De Regibus Apostaticis*, Chapter 5, edited by G. F. Diercks, *Luciferi Calarutani Opera*, CCSL, 8 (Turnhout, 1978), p. 144). ⁵¹Gildas, p. 220. Cf. John Wachter, *The Towns of Roman Britain*, first edition (London, 1975), pp. 414 and 444, n. 8 (citing earlier studies by Thompson); Malcolm Todd, *Roman Britain, 55 BC–AD 400*, Fontana History of England ([London], 1981), p. 242. ⁵²Gildas, p. 220.

present state of the cities is directly or indirectly due to warfare is only implied,⁵⁹ and Gildas certainly does not say clearly that it is *solely* due to warfare, nor that they have been continuously depopulated since the Saxon onslaught.⁶⁰ A host of post-Imperial economic and social forces may be beyond Gildas's notice, and perhaps his comprehension, because he is a preacher, not a disinterested analyst. His words may usefully be set beside a homily of Gregory the Great, which no one, surely, would care to use as direct evidence for an end to city life in late-sixth-century Italy:

What is there to please us in this life? On every side we see grief, on every side we hear groans.⁶¹ Cities are destroyed, forts overthrown, fields depopulated, the land reduced to a wilderness. No inhabitant remains in the fields, and scarcely any dweller in the cities; and yet these tiny remnants of the human race are still afflicted every day without respite. And the lashes of heavenly justice do not end because their faults are not corrected even under the lash. Some we see carried into captivity, others mutilated, others killed. What then is there to please us in this life, my brothers? If we still delight in such a world, it must be wounds we love, not joys. We see what will be left of Rome herself, who for a while seemed mistress of the world: bruised again and again by many great sorrows, by desertion by her citizens, by oppression by her enemies, and by repeated destructions, so that we may see fulfilled in her what the prophet says against the city of Samaria [Ezekiel 24] . . . Where now is the senate? Where now the people? . . . And we few who have remained are still daily oppressed by the sword and innumerable tribulations. . . . For because the senate is missing and the people lost, and because even among those who remain sorrows and groans daily increase, Rome, now deserted, burns.⁶²

Summing up this enquiry so far, it may be concluded, first, that Gildas was all too successful in presenting a highly generalized account of the history of Britain from the Saxon devastations of Chapter 24 down to his own time, an account so generalized in fact that no regional bias is now detectable—unless we rely on the attacks on the named kings; and, secondly, that by the time we get back from Gildas's time to Chapter 24 we have probably passed beyond the limits of living memory, which probably reached back no further than the recovery under Ambrosius Aurelianus (in Chapter 25). What Gildas told his readers about the Saxon destruction of their cities may have been based entirely on traditions now unverifiable

⁵⁹Note the ablative absolute clause (n. 56 above). Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 220–21, overstates Gildas's clarity. ⁶⁰The opposite is suggested by the comment in *DEB* 26.2 about *publici, privati*, etc. holding fast. ⁶¹*Aeneid*, II.368–69; cf. n. 48 above. ⁶²*Homilies on Ezekiel*, II.6.22, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 76, cols 1009–1010. Cf. Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 62–69 and especially p. 339, nn. 62 and 64f. John Morris makes a similar point with a passage from Jerome: *The Age of Arthur* (London, 1973), p. 137.

and on inferences from modern conditions. It may have been an intensely personal vision, highly coloured by his reading of the Bible and the *Aeneid*; or it may have been widely shared. Unfortunately we have no contemporary British account with which to compare it, but Continental parallels encourage caution.

There is no trace of any regional bias in Gildas's narrative up to and including the usurpation of Magnus Maximus (in 383). If Gildas knew from northern tradition about Maximus' victory over the invading Picts and Irish, which is not mentioned by his known written sources for Maximus,⁶³ he feels no need to include it. Certainly he gives the impression that it was only after Britain's governors departed in the wake of Maximus that Britain became open to the attacks of these 'two savage overseas peoples', the Irish from the north-west and the Picts from the north.⁶⁴ (He does not say where the Picts sailed from!)⁶⁵

The Irish and Pictish attacks led to three British appeals for Roman aid, the first two of which were answered by Roman expeditions against the foes and the building of two walls to keep them out. The first was built by the foolish Britons out of turf and was useless; the second was built by the Romans in stone and would have been effective, had the British defenders not been lazy cowards. As Thompson argues, these expeditions are merely an aetiological legend to explain the existence of the much earlier Antonine and Hadrianic Walls.⁶⁶ All the legend tells us is that in Gildas's time people knew about the Walls and about the perennial threat from the north which their existence visibly implies. It is amazing that so many historians have taken it seriously as evidence of actual northern wars, as if Gildas were a reliable witness for so many generations before. Thompson rightly sees that we cannot tell whether Gildas invented this legend himself or took it over from someone else. In any case it, and the northern wars which are part and parcel of it, are not signs of his northern viewpoint; to use Thompson's words, 'no self-respecting historian of Roman Britain could possibly have left the two most striking monuments of the Roman occupation unaccounted for'.⁶⁷ In fact Gildas also seems to refer the building of

⁶³Rufinus, and possibly Sulpicius Severus; cf. Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', p. 356, and Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 204–205. The victory is recorded in the Gallic 'Chronicle of 452', edited by T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, I, MGH, AA, 9 (Berlin, 1892), p. 646; on this source, cf. the references in my 'Settlement', n. 47. ⁶⁴The force of *primum* in *DEB* 14 is uncertain; cf. Williams, *Gildas*, p. 32, n. 1; Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 206 and n. 20; Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 35. ⁶⁵See below, n. 71. ⁶⁶*DEB* 15–19; Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 206–207. ⁶⁷*ibid.*, p. 207. For a suggestion that *DEB* 18.2 reflects knowledge of inscriptions on Hadrian's Wall see Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', p. 359, n. 6; Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', p. 245, n. 1.

the southern Saxon Shore Forts to the same period.⁶⁸ After the Romans had built the stone Wall, he says that they

gave the frightened people stirring advice and left them patterns for making weapons (?). They also placed towers overlooking the sea at intervals on the south coast, where they kept their ships: for they were afraid of the wild barbarian beasts attacking on that front too. Then they said goodbye, meaning never to return.⁶⁹

It looks, then, as if Gildas attributed all the most striking visible remnants of the defences of Roman Britain to the period between the departure of her soldiery with Maximus and the coming of the Saxons! Except for the fact that he mentions the Walls first, there is no significant northern bias. It is not really significant that the *De Excidio* reports only Pictish and Irish attacks in the north before and immediately after the final departure of the Romans, while ignoring the doubtless more southerly Germanic attacks of 408 or 409 noted in Continental sources,⁷⁰ because the northern wars may be there only as part of the aetiological legend. Gildas's real ignorance of far northern geography and of the northern situation in Roman Britain is shown by his belief that it was not until after the departure of the Romans that the Picts first settled in the north of Britain (instead of merely making overseas raids from the far north).⁷¹ Indeed, he may have been entirely ignorant of the events of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

Historians have been reluctant to admit this because of one passage in Gildas. Before the Romans build the stone Wall and the southern Shore Forts, they tell the Britons that they will have to stand alone

⁶⁸The epigraphic evidence cited in support of Gildas by Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', pp. 359–60, has turned out to be a fake: Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), p. 420, n. 5. Interestingly, Gildas does not mention the east coast Forts. ⁶⁹DEB 18.2–3. Winterbottom translates *exemplaria instituendorum armorum* by 'manuals on weapon training'; cf. E. A. Thompson's review, *Britannia*, 11 (1980), 452. ⁷⁰Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, edited by L. Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1887), pp. 286–87 (vi.5.2–3); Gallic 'Chronicle of 452', edited by Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, I, 654. Both are quoted and discussed by E. A. Thompson, 'Britain, A.D. 406–410', *Britannia*, 8 (1977), 303–18, and 'Zosimus 6.10.2 and the Letters of Honorius', *Classical Quarterly*, 32 (1982), 453–54; and (unconvincingly) by Philip Bartholomew, 'Fifth-Century Facts', *Britannia*, 13 (1982), 263–64 and 268–70. See also Sims-Williams, 'Settlement'. Jerome refers to the activities of Saxons at this time in Letter cxxiii.15.2, edited by I. Hilberg, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, III, CSEL, 56 (Vienna, 1918), p. 92, and translated by Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire*, p. 84. ⁷¹DEB 21.1; cf. A. W. Wade-Evans, 'The "Picti" and "Scotti" in the *Excidium Britanniae*', *Celtic Review*, 9 (1913–14), 314–23. This embarrassed Bede who was probably the first to suggest that Gildas regarded the *Picti* and *Scotti* as 'transmarine' in the sense of coming from beyond the Firths of Forth and Clyde; cf. Charles Plummer's note, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1896), II, 23–24; Kenneth Jackson, 'Rhai Sylwadau ar "Kulhwch ac Olwen"', *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, 12 (1982), 15–17, and 'Varia: I' (n. 33 above); and Neil Wright, in *Gildas: New Approaches*.

in future; they cannot be bothered helping people who will not help themselves. Thompson concludes that 'Gildas has heard in some way of Honorius's famous letter of 410 to the British *civitates* bidding them defend themselves. . . . The contents of Honorius's letter are a matter which Gildas could not possibly have invented, and he could not possibly have got the incident right by coincidence. A genuine tradition has reached him here'.⁷² I venture to disagree. Gildas does not seem to know the real reason why Rome had to abandon Britain, but his passage makes good sense in the context of his story of the Walls and his moralizing treatment of the relations between Romans and Britons. It implies no more knowledge about the end of Roman Britain than the fact that it did end and that the Britons were left to fend for themselves. Gildas may have had no conception of the events of 410 and have attached no special importance to that year; he does not even mention the sack of Rome. Like some modern historians, he portrays the end of Roman Britain as a process, not an event; for him Britain was already Roman in name alone by the time of Maximus.⁷³ Moreover, although Honorius' letter is 'famous' to modern scholars, it was not to early ones. Only the Greek historian Zosimus mentions it, in the context of events in northern Italy, and there is an ominous possibility that *Brettania* in the sole extant manuscript is an error for *Brettia*, that is, Bruttium in southern Italy.⁷⁴ It cannot be emphasized too strongly that there is no other evidence for an 'Honorian Rescript'. If Honorius did write such a letter, it was a bit late in the day,⁷⁵ for Zosimus has already told us that the Britons had already taken up arms and freed their cities from the onslaught of barbarians from across the Rhine.⁷⁶

This onslaught of 408 or 409 was, surely, the real beginning of the 'Coming of the Saxons', if any beginning can be defined for that process. It is Gildas's next few chapters, however, that have been the foundation of all later accounts of the 'Coming of the Saxons'.⁷⁷

⁷²'Gildas', p. 207 (and p. 208; also 'Letters of Honorius', p. 449). See DEB 18.1. On the other hand J. N. L. Myres would associate Honorius' letter with the failure of the third appeal (to Aëtius according to Gildas, cf. n. 21 above) in DEB 20.1: 'The Adventus Saxonum', in *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond: Essays presented to O. G. S. Crawford*, edited by W. F. Grimes (London, 1951), pp. 226–27. This is equally possible and equally uncertain, given the vagueness of Gildas's chronology (discussed in Sims-Williams, 'Settlement'). ⁷³DEB 13.1 ⁷⁴Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, vi.10.2 (edited by Mendelssohn, p. 291); the passage is translated by Rivet and Smith, *Place-Names of Roman Britain*, p. 102, and by Thompson, 'Letters of Honorius', p. 445. *Βρετανία* is defended by Thompson (see also his 'Britain, A.D. 406–410', pp. 315–16), *Βρεττία* by Bartholomew, 'Fifth-Century Facts', pp. 261–62 (cf. Salway, pp. 442–43). ⁷⁵Todd, *Roman Britain*, pp. 240–41, suggests that it was window-dressing, not a reply to a communication or appeal from Britain. For a similar edict see Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 1062, and III, 343, n. 54. ⁷⁶*Historia Nova*, vi.5.2–3; see n. 70 above. This passage is also translated by Rivet and Smith, p. 102. ⁷⁷cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement'.

As the Romans leave for the last time, the coracles of the Irish and Picts appear. They seize the north of the country right down to the stone Wall, capture the Wall and the cities,⁷⁸ butcher the inhabitants or reduce them to starvation because of the lack of food in the whole region (*regio*). Gildas does not tell us the limits of this *regio*—maybe he did not know them—but he is obviously referring to an area near Hadrian's Wall of quite uncertain size.⁷⁹ A third appeal for Roman help, which Gildas associated with a letter to Aëtius,⁸⁰ fails. Some starving Britons give in to the plunderers, but others fight back from the mountains and forests, drive the Irish back to Ireland and the Picts to the far north of the island, where they settle for the first time. A period of peace begins, leading to luxury, vice, civil war, and tyranny, and to ostentation and bickering among the clergy. The parallel to events between the time of Ambrosius Aurelianus and Gildas's own day is striking and intentional: disaster, recovery, decadence.⁸¹ In the course of driving this parallel home Gildas slips from talking about the *regio* to talking about the island as a whole: 'in the respite from devastation, the *island* was so flooded with abundance of goods that no previous age had known the like of it'. There may be some sleight of hand here. Gildas wants his readers to compare the present decadence which has followed the partial defeat of the Saxons with this earlier period of decadence which followed the partial defeat of the Irish and Picts; but his parallel is not exact because he cannot claim that the latter peoples had played exactly the same role as the Saxons, for they had *not* ravaged 'nearly the whole island'. In the earlier case the devastation and recovery of a *regio* were followed by the luxuriousness of all the Britons, whereas in the modern case nearly all the Britons have been affected by both the devastation and the luxuriousness. Gildas must have been aware of the disparity, but unable to get round it, because he could not represent the Irish and Picts as devastating more than the northern *regio*. Now is this an argument for a northern point of view? If anything, quite the contrary. The Irish and Pictish devastation might loom large in the imagination of people brought up in the *regio*, and they might well imagine that it affected far more of the island than it really did. In southern Britain the idea of widespread devastation

⁷⁸*civitates*, DEB 19.3; possibly equivalent to the *urbes* along the Wall in 18.2, which conceivably suggest a geographical source (cf. Rivet and Smith, pp. 191 and 210, and my review in CMCS, 4 (Winter 1982), 91). ⁷⁹cf. Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 215–16. *Regio* was not a technical term in the West, despite I. A. Richmond, 'The *Sarmatae*, *Bremetannacum Veteranorum* and the *Regio Bremetannacensis*', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 35 (1945), 15–29. I cannot accept that *muro tenus* in 19.1 means northwards as far as the Wall (Thompson, p. 214). ⁸⁰cf. above, nn. 21 and 72. ⁸¹DEB 20–21 and 25–27. Salvian similarly speaks of the corrupting effect of peace and prosperity, but he denies that people are corrected by adversity (cf. DEB 22): *De Gubernatione Dei*, vi.11.63–12.66.

by Irish and Picts would be harder to credit. Gildas's geographical point of view can be argued in two ways, then.

It is unclear what Gildas really knew about his apparently fifth-century period of luxury. His picture of dynastic struggles and ecclesiastical in-fighting is consonant with what may be learnt from Procopius,⁸² St Patrick, and Constantius about the rise of independent rulers and about the fifth-century Church. On the other hand, the unprecedented material prosperity does not fit in with what archaeology tells us about the decline of town and villa life, the money economy, and the Roman pottery industry. At best, Gildas may be giving a composite picture based on hazy memories of fourth- to fifth-century Britain. The conscious parallelism with his own time is also a warning against taking him at face value. The one real difference between the two periods, as Gildas portrays them, lies in the more limited nature of the earlier, Irish-Pictish threat. At first sight it might appear that one could therefore insist on these wars as the kernel of credible tradition in the section. But even this seems doubtful when one realises that the role of the Irish and Picts may be dictated by the legend about the origin of the Walls and the Britons' inability to defend them, and by the story of the coming of the Saxons, to which I now turn.—It must be noted that Gildas says nothing about the historic Irish settlements in Wales and Cornwall about which we know from Ogam stones.

Gildas says that in order to bring the decadent Britons to their senses, God allowed a rumour to spread that the old enemies (that is, the Irish and Picts) were about to attack again and settle the *regio* (presumably the northern one) from end to end. The rumour had no effect. It was followed by a deadly plague (not identifiable, unfortunately)⁸³ but this did not teach the Britons their lesson either, so the time of their final destruction drew nigh. One would like to know if Gildas's parallels with his own times are continuing here; were rumours of an English advance and an outbreak of plague rife when he wrote? If so, he would not need to spell the point out, so it is doubtful if we can assume, as has been suggested, that he wrote the *De Excidio* before the great plague of 542 onwards reached Britain.⁸⁴ After the plague, the Britons—presumably the ones of the *regio*, but Gildas is vague—call a council to decide how to counter the repeated invasions by the Irish and Picts. All its members, together with a

⁸²On Procopius' famous remark about British tyrants see Thompson, 'Letters of Honorius', p. 460. The term is unfortunately vague; cf. Salvian's *ubi quot curiales fuerint tot tyranni sunt* (v.4.18). ⁸³See Todd, 'Famosa Pestis' (n. 53 above); Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 78. ⁸⁴Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', p. 259. On this plague see Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, I, 287–88; II, 1043; it is probably the *mortalitas* of the Irish Annals s.a. 549 and the *Annales Cambriae* s.a. 547 (cf. p. 4 above). Another *mortalitas* is mentioned in the A-text of the latter s.a. 537.

certain 'proud tyrant' (that is, Vortigern), decide to let the Saxons into 'the island' to guard 'our *patria*' and beat back the peoples of the north.⁸⁵ Here again, Gildas seems to be speaking both of the *regio* and, perhaps by anticipation, of the island as a whole. First of all three shipfuls of Saxons came and were settled in the 'east' of the island on the tyrant's orders, to fight for the *patria*. They were soon joined by many more shiploads. Now the barbarians, representing themselves as soldiers, demanded more and more pay, threatening that otherwise they would sever their treaty (*foedus*) and unpeople the whole of the island. They did so 'without delay' and the 'fire heaped up and nurtured by the hand of the impious easterners spread from sea to sea' . . . bringing us to Chapter 24, just before the recovery under Ambrosius Aurelianus, where we left Gildas earlier.

The original point of this story, as Thompson says, must have been that the Saxon federates⁸⁶ were settled not in Kent or East Anglia, but in north-east England, on the east of the *regio*, to fight against both northern enemies (or, at least, the Picts). We cannot tell exactly when people began to regard the 'proud tyrant' and the 'council' as foolish enough and powerful enough to settle the Saxons down in the south-east.⁸⁷ And as we do not know how big Gildas's *regio* is, we do not know how far south he himself would allow 'east' to stretch. (It is important to remember that he refers to the east of the island, not of 'England'.) Clearly the story gives the coming of the Saxons a northern emphasis. But, as has already been said, that does not make Gildas himself a northerner.⁸⁸ The story may have come to him from somebody with a northern background. Even that is putting it too strongly because, for all we know, the idea that the Saxon conquest, or an important stage in it, had begun with a federate rebellion in the north-east may have been generally current in Britain when he wrote. There could even be some truth in this idea although it is probably incapable of archaeological or other verification. (It is not quite the same as saying that the *first* Saxon mercenaries or settlers were in the north-east.) Here we leave the last vestige of Thompson's northern Gildas, and may turn our attention solely to the second object of this investigation, Gildas's reliability.

Gildas's story looks like a tale that had been told and retold until its moral message stood out in pure black and white. Whether the 'proud tyrant' and the council were as culpable as he makes out

⁸⁵DEB 23.1; cf. n. 32 above. For the identification with Vortigern see Jackson, 'Varia: II', pp. 35–40. ⁸⁶Since they had a *foedus* it seems legitimate to call them federates, without implying that they were *foederati* in any technical sense (cf. Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 611–12). ⁸⁷Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 217; Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 87. (See also n. 37 above). ⁸⁸See p. 7 above; cf. Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 219.

cannot now be established, nor even whether they had invited the Saxons with whom they treated; they may have been made scapegoats for the subsequent catastrophe. One might compare the way in which Continental writers blamed the early-fifth-century barbarian attacks on Stilicho's federate policy ('arming our enemies against us with our resources') and alleged 'secret treaty' (*occultum foedus*) with the Goths.⁸⁹ In his case historians have the testimony of various contemporaries to examine—the denunciations by Jerome and Orosius can be compared with the panegyrics by Claudian—but, even so, firm conclusions are hard to reach.⁹⁰ In the case of Britain's 'proud tyrant' there is only the late testimony of Gildas,⁹¹ so no conclusion is possible.

There is no documentary evidence about the organization of external and civil defence in fifth-century Britain by which Gildas's tale of the Saxon mercenaries can be tested. His story in any case refers only to one part of eastern Britain and cannot form the basis for sound generalizations. A regrettable tendency to generalize from it, to see the 'Coming of the Saxons' as a 'complex process, one element in which may be a set of variations on a single theme, a tale of federate settlement re-enacted who knows how many times in various parts of eastern Britain',⁹² has, nevertheless, been shared, and indeed pioneered, by many archaeologists, and has obviously coloured their 'federate' interpretation of the fifth-century archaeological evidence—for example, the so-called 'Romano-Saxon pottery' and 'Germanic military metalwork'.⁹³ The historian can only appeal to them to continue to rethink what the archaeological evidence, taken on its own, actually proves.⁹⁴

A tale about the dangers of alliances with the Saxons may have had polemical value in Gildas's day. Later on he appears to quote a fellow-Briton who had denounced the formation of treaties with heathens (or heretics?) rather than with other British or foreign

⁸⁹Jerome, Letter cxxiii.16.2 (edited by Hilberg, III, 93); Orosius, VII.38.2. ⁹⁰See Courcelle, pp. 42–45, 102, and 253; Alan Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 156–88. ⁹¹Accounts based on the speculations of later writers (for example John H. Ward, 'Vortigern and the End of Roman Britain', *Britannia*, 3 (1972), 277–89) are valueless; cf. David N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend', *History*, new series, 62 (1977), 173–92; Sims-Williams, 'Settlement'. ⁹²Myres, 'The Adventus Saxonum' (n. 72 above), p. 241. ⁹³See, for example, J. N. L. Myres, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (Oxford, 1969). ⁹⁴Aspects of the problem are grappled with by: Sonia Hawkes, 'Some Recent Finds of Late Roman Buckles', *Britannia*, 5 (1974), 386–93; Catherine Hills, 'The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England in the Pagan Period: A Review', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 297–329; John Gillam, 'Romano-Saxon Pottery: An Alternative Interpretation', in *The End of Roman Britain*, edited by P. J. Casey, British Archaeological Reports, British series, 71 (Oxford, 1979), pp. 103–18; Todd, *Roman Britain*, pp. 245–48. I should like to thank Mrs Hawkes for advice about the buckles, without associating her with the opinion expressed above.

Christians: 'One of us is right to say: "We greatly desire that the enemies of the church be our enemies also, with no kind of alliance (*foedus*), and that her friends and protectors be not only our allies (*foederati*) but our fathers and masters too"'.⁹⁵ It is unfortunately impossible to tell whether this Briton was referring to federate arrangements or to alliances in a more general sense, nor whether he lived in Gildas's time or earlier. He may even have been referring to British dealings with non-Saxon pagans, like those which Coroticus and his soldiers had with 'Irishmen, Picts, and apostates'.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that Gildas quotes this anonymous Briton at all may show that the question of treaties with the Anglo-Saxons was in the air. Gildas's apparently good command of the vocabulary of federate arrangements⁹⁷ in telling the story of the 'proud tyrant' suggests that they may have been common in his day, despite the alleged lessons of the past. This cannot, however, be verified.

A second reason why we cannot trust the details of the 'proud tyrant' story is that part of it has affinities with the genre of origin legends, which are notoriously unreliable:

A pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, coming in three 'keels' (*cyulas*), as they call warships in their language. The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prows were directed, and that for half the time, a hundred and fifty years, they would repeatedly lay it waste.⁹⁸

The small number of ships in which the first representatives of a nation sail is a standard theme. One thinks of Bede's story about the Picts sailing from Scythia out into the ocean in 'a few ships' and the

⁹⁵DEB 92.3. Attention was drawn to this by Morris, *Age of Arthur*, p. 286. On 'one of us' see Hanson, *Saint Patrick*, pp. 44–45; Liebeschuetz (n. 44 above), p. 446. Conceivably Gildas is quoting himself here, as Salvian does, *De Gubernatione Dei*, rv.1.1: 'sicut ait quidam in scriptis suis'. ⁹⁶Patrick, *Epistula*, Chapter 2 (edited and translated by Hood, pp. 35 and 55). Here the word is *socii*; cf. E. A. Thompson, 'St Patrick and Coroticus', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series, 31 (1980), 15. ⁹⁷DEB 23.5. Cf. John Richard Green, *Historical Studies* (London, 1903), p. 10; Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', pp. 368–69; Morris, *Age of Arthur*, pp. 132–33 and 220–21; Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 217–18. But the technicality of Gildas's language has perhaps been exaggerated. *Hospites* may refer to billeting rather than *hospitalitas* in the technical sense (cf. F. Lot, 'Du régime de l'hospitalité', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 7 (1928), 975–1011; Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans A.D. 418–584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, 1980); Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, I, 249–50); there were many kinds of *annonae* besides *annonae foederaticiae* (ibid., III, 411, s.v.); and *epimēnia* is admittedly unattested as a technical term and may be mere *variatio sermonis* (P. Grosjean, 'Quelques citations dans le *De Excidio*', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 75 (1957), 190, n. 1; cf. Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 221, on Gildas's military terms). On *foedus* see n. 86 above. ⁹⁸DEB 23.3.

Irish *Lebor Gabála* legends, or, nearer Gildas in time, the story reported by Jordanes: 'the Goths went forth from the bosom of the island of Scandza with Berig, their king, sailing in only three ships toward the hither shore of Ocean, namely to Gothiscandza'.⁹⁹ The motif of the portents may be compared with the twelve vultures seen by Romulus, which were supposed to presage twelve centuries of Roman rule.¹⁰⁰ It would be interesting to know if the details came from the Saxons themselves, including the expectation that their settlement would last three hundred years. (If that meant *only* three hundred years one wonders what may have gone through the mind of Abbot Sléibíne of Iona when he discovered, on a visit to Ripon in 753, that three hundred years had passed since the Saxons came to Britain!)¹⁰¹ Unfortunately for us, Gildas was no Cassiodorus or Jordanes to demean himself by relating barbarian origin legends at length; he only tells as much as he does for the sake of ironic contrast with the Britons' vain expectations. Yet, had he told us more, it might have been of little historical value, for while origin legends can be true—the Pilgrim Fathers and the Mayflower, for instance—they can never be trusted without corroboration.

Gildas's story of the coming of the Saxons, like much of his account of fourth- and fifth-century Britain, is marked by the characteristics of oral tradition, and like much oral tradition, it is shaped by recent events and present circumstances—this is especially true of Gildas, because his prophetic vision leads him to see and emphasize the interrelation of the present and the past. Like most oral tradition, Gildas is concerned not so much with absolute chronology as with relative chronology because he is interested in cause and effect, in responsibility, in crime and punishment. Some of the questions he answers may well have been asked and answered in similar terms before. Why were the Britons conquered by the Romans? Because they were cowards. Why did Britain fall open to foreign enemies? Because the usurper Maximus took away her soldiery. Why did the

⁹⁹Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited and translated by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 16–19 (I.1); Myles Dillon, 'Lebor Gabála Éirenn', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 86 (1956), 62–72; Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Mediaeval Welsh Literature', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock and others (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 246–47; Jordanes, *Getica*, xvii.94 (edited by T. Mommsen, MGH, AA, 5, Part 1 (Berlin, 1882), p. 82; translated by Charles C. Mierow, *The Gothic History of Jordanes* (Princeton, 1915), p. 78). Cf. J. M. Lappenbergh, *A History of England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings*, translated by Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols (London, 1845), I, 71, n. 5; John Mitchell Kemble, *The Saxons in England*, 2 vols (London, 1849), I, 16 and n. 1; Jan de Vries, 'Die Ursprungssage der Sachsen', *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, 31 (1959), 33; Norbert Wagner, *Getica* (Berlin, 1967), pp. 216–20. ¹⁰⁰See Courcelle, p. 33 and n. 1. ¹⁰¹cf. Kenneth Harrison, *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History to A.D. 900* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 99–100.

Romans abandon the Britons? Because they got fed up with wasting their time on people who would not help themselves. Why were the Walls and the Saxon Shore Forts built? As a last, unsuccessful attempt to help the Britons. Why did the Saxons take over? Because of the Britons' foolish invitation. Some of this relative chronology is falsifiable. Still less can we derive any absolute chronology from Gildas, who never mentions a date and never gives an exact length of years, except in relation to his own lifetime.¹⁰² For example, the story of the Saxon federates and their revolt is followed by the British recovery under Ambrosius, three generations before Gildas. But we cannot date the revolt, say, four generations before Gildas. In reading Gildas we simply emerge from the world of tradition into the world of living memory about here. Any chronology beyond Ambrosius is likely to be a mirage.

Many people think that if you have only got tradition to go on you had better make the most of it. Gildas may have thought so, but modern anthropologists and African historians would not agree.¹⁰³ And although some writers like to suppose that Celtic oral tradition is peculiarly reliable, this is not an opinion shared by experienced Celtic historians.¹⁰⁴

Other writers like to start from the premise that our earliest written sources depend on still earlier lost ones. But this premise cannot be justified in the case of Gildas. After the dim light of Rufinus' *Church History* and other such sources goes out in the time of Maximus he is in the dark. No written remains were available in Britain, only *transmarina relatio*—and that may merely mean Rufinus and other early authorities.¹⁰⁵ This is why, as many historians still do, Gildas falls back as a last resort on the archaeological record, perhaps reported at second hand, and makes inferences from the surviving remains of paganism,¹⁰⁶ the Roman defensive system, and the Roman cities. If he had copies of an 'Honorian Rescript' or the *acta* of 'Vortigern's Council' on his desk, or anything like them, he was quite incompetent. But in fact, he appears to know only one relevant fifth-century document, the letter to Aëtius, which he was unable to place in its true context.¹⁰⁷ I prefer to believe that Gildas is rightly described as *sapiens* and that he did the best that he could with the available oral information, insofar as this was relevant to his prophetic task.

¹⁰²cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement'. ¹⁰³Ruth Finnegan, 'A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence', *History and Theory*, 9 (1970), 195–201. ¹⁰⁴F. J. Byrne, 'Senchas: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition', *Historical Studies*, 9 (1974), 137–59; Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain' (n. 91 above); Kathleen Hughes, *The Early Celtic Idea of History and the Modern Historian: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1977). ¹⁰⁵cf. nn. 30 and 63 above. ¹⁰⁶DEB 4.2. ¹⁰⁷See nn. 21 and 72 above. That he quotes the letter shows that he had no stylistic objection to the quoting of documents; cf. A. H. M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World* (London, 1966), p. 3.

The *De Excidio Britanniae* cannot be used as if it were a primary source for events before the time of Ambrosius Aurelianus, whose grandchildren were alive when Gildas was writing. As Gildas himself says, the generation that was chastened by the sight of the ruin (*excidium*) of the island and its unexpected recovery had passed away, and had been succeeded by an age ignorant of that time but familiar with the present peace. This is the age for whose manners and customs and ideas about the past Gildas's *De Excidio* is a primary source—one which is still far from exhausted. By way of example, I shall end by examining three passages relevant to relations between the Britons and Anglo-Saxons during Gildas's lifetime.

In Chapter 26 Gildas says that the alternating victories and defeats in the struggle initiated under Ambrosius Aurelianus

lasted right up till the year of the siege of *Badonicus mons*, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed.¹⁰⁸ But the cities of our land are not populated even now as they once were; right to the present they are deserted, in ruins and unkempt.¹⁰⁹ External wars may have stopped, but not civil ones. For the remembrance of so desperate a blow to the island and of such unlooked for recovery stuck in the minds of those who witnessed both wonders. That was why kings, public and private persons, priests and churchmen, kept to their own stations. But they died; and an age succeeded them that is ignorant of that storm and has experience only of the calm of the present. All the controls of truth and justice have been shaken and overthrown, leaving no trace, not even a memory, among the orders I have mentioned: with the exception of a few, a very few.

It is not specifically stated here that there were forty-four years of external peace up to the time of writing, whenever that was, nor forty-four years of civil war. By describing *mons Badonicus* as *almost* the most recent defeat (*ferme novissima*), Gildas implies that there were later, if less important ones. The generation which witnessed the Anglo-Saxon onslaught and British recovery may have survived some way into the forty-four years without witnessing the 'calm of the present'; the 'calm', with its civil wars, may have begun less than forty-four years before the date of writing. Nevertheless it would not be unreasonable to deduce that there were at least forty-four years of *comparative* Anglo-British peace, at some period between the fifth-century (perhaps just *early-fifth-century*) warfare described retrospectively and unreliably by Gildas and the late-sixth-century and early-seventh-century conflicts described in Bede's *Ecclesiastical*

¹⁰⁸For interpretations of this passage see O'Sullivan (n. 2 above), pp. 134–57, and my 'Settlement'. ¹⁰⁹cf. p. 13 above.

History and the early Welsh poetry. Can this period be defined more closely? Probably not. One common suggestion is that it fell between the times of Ælle of Sussex and Ceawlin of Wessex, whom Bede names as the first two kings to rule over the kingdoms south of the Humber.¹¹⁰ It is not clear, however, that there is any necessary correlation between the maintenance of an *imperium* over the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and warfare against the Britons.¹¹¹ In any case, Bede assigns no dates to Ælle and Ceawlin, and it would be illogical to accept the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* late-fifth- and late-sixth-century dates for them while disregarding its West Saxon anti-British campaigns which separate Ælle and Ceawlin and perhaps dictate their chronological position.¹¹² Another suggestion is that the forty-four year 'peace' must have fallen before the rise of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Bernicia in 547.¹¹³ Bede, however, the best authority we have for this year, says nothing about the establishment of a kingdom, by violence or treaty, nor about the building of Bamburgh.¹¹⁴ Even if there was fighting in Northumbria in 547 and Gildas wrote after it, he would not necessarily mention it (though his readers' knowledge of it might add piquancy to his tale of the original Saxon settlement in the 'east' of the island); nor would it necessarily require him to modify his picture of *comparative* external peace.

It once seemed possible that a forty-four year peace after *Badon-icus mons* could be recognized archaeologically as a period in which the area of Anglo-Saxon settlement ceased to expand, or even contracted, but the evidence put forward, such as the absence from the upper Thames Valley of heavily stamped embossed urns such as we have in sixth-century Cambridge cemeteries, has been reinterpreted as a matter of regional styles—Oxonian good taste declining to imitate the more outrageous products of the Other Place!¹¹⁵ Indeed there seems to be no half century in which Anglo-Saxon settlement ceased to expand somewhere. This is not an argument for supposing Gildas ignorant of the situation of much of Britain in his own lifetime;¹¹⁶ in fact, he says nothing about a halt to Anglo-Saxon settlement. His words do not exclude the possibility that the settlement

¹¹⁰*Ecclesiastical History*, II.5. See H. Munro Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation*, second edition (Cambridge, 1924), pp. 13–14 and 26; O'Sullivan, pp. 160–61. ¹¹¹Bede does not use the word *Bretwalda*, which is in any case of obscure significance; cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 105. ¹¹²cf. *ibid.* on the *Chronicle's* unreliability and composition. ¹¹³Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', p. 259. ¹¹⁴*Ecclesiastical History*, v.24 ('Ida began to reign, from whom the Northumbrian royal family trace their origin'); cf. Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 104; Leslie Alcock, 'Quantity or Quality: The Anglian Graves of Bernicia', in *Angles, Saxons and Jutes: Essays presented to J. N. L. Myres*, edited by Vera I. Evison (Oxford, 1981), p. 179. ¹¹⁵References in Sims-Williams, 'Settlement', n. 139; cf. Myres, *Pottery and the Settlement*, pp. 47, 105–106, and 115. ¹¹⁶cf. Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 225.

advanced fairly peacefully throughout his lifetime, perhaps backed up by threats, or skirmishes, or forced agreements, or alliances, or 'federate' arrangements during the British civil wars.

Gildas's other overt reference to contemporary Anglo-British relations is almost accidental. Referring to the early British martyrs, he says:

Their graves and the places where they suffered would now have the greatest effect in instilling the blaze of divine charity in the minds of beholders, were it not that our citizens, thanks to our sins, are being deprived of many of them by the unhappy partition with the barbarians. I refer to St Alban of Verulamium, Aaron and Julius, citizens of *Urbs Legionum*, and others of both sexes who, in different places, displayed the highest spirit in the battle-line of Christ.¹¹⁷

This passage shows that there were areas of Britain where Britons could not go, at least on pilgrimage, not that the graves or places of martyrdom of Alban, Aaron, and Julius were in those areas;¹¹⁸ they may be mentioned simply as notable martyrs, not as inaccessible ones. The unhappy 'partition' is not necessarily to be interpreted as a fixed line across the map, with perhaps a few British enclaves behind it; *divortium* need imply no more than a fluid and piecemeal division of land between Briton and barbarian.¹¹⁹

I wish we knew which of the Britons and Anglo-Saxons were in favour of this *divortium*; unfortunately we only have Gildas's opinion. Gildas, who was no friend of the barbarians, calls it *lugubre*, 'mournful'; but he never urges the Britons to fight the Saxons instead of each other, nor implies that any wished to do so.¹²⁰ This is in keeping with his non-revolutionary 'render unto Caesar' attitude to the secular order.¹²¹ His viewpoint is clarified, perhaps, by a neglected passage in his Preface in which he explains how reading the Bible led him to write:

I read how the breaking of the treaty (*foedus*) with the Gibeonites (though

¹¹⁷DEB 10.2. The present force of *adimerentur* is urged on me by Mr N. Wright. Strictly speaking, Gildas does not say that the named martyrs suffered or were buried (cf. n. 25 above) at their places of origin; but cf. Levison, 'St. Alban', p. 339. ¹¹⁸Thompson, 'Procopius' (n. 1 above), p. 500. ¹¹⁹But not quite as piecemeal as the Continental *hospitalitas* (cf. n. 97 above). The fourth canon of the *Synod of the Grove of Victory*, with heavy penances for guiding barbarians to the Christians, would suit the context of the *divortium*, but its British origin and date are uncertain; cf. *The Irish Penitentials*, edited and translated by Ludwig Bieler, SLH, 5 (Dublin, 1963), pp. 3 and 68–69; Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966), pp. 43–44. Compare Canon 4 of the Council of Angers in 453: *Concilia Galliae A. 314–A. 506*, edited by C. Munier, CCSL, 148 (Turnhout, 1963), p. 138; Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire*, p. 159. ¹²⁰Thompson, 'Gildas', p. 224 and n. 113, who refers however to DEB 21.2 (*sic leg.*). ¹²¹DEB 4.1; 6–7; and 21.6.

it had been wrung from them [the Israelites] by a trick) brought destruction on not a few.¹²²

The Israelites were tricked by the Gibeonites into making a *foedus* with them without consulting God, and into allowing them to settle in Israel and swearing not to kill them. Saul, with misplaced zeal, later tried to exterminate them, so that not one should remain in the borders of Israel, and God punished the Israelites with famine for breaking their word. Gildas seems, then, to imply that the Britons, his latter-day Israelites,¹²³ were wrong to allow themselves to be tricked into treating with the heathen Saxons, who were 'hated by man and God',¹²⁴ but ought now to keep faith with them. Unlike Cadwallon in the early seventh century (as reported by Bede), Gildas does not plan the genocide of the entire English race,¹²⁵ though the story of the prophesied three hundred years of settlement perhaps suggests that he may have anticipated its eventual removal.

As Gildas does not return to the matter, it may be that his view of the *foedus* was widely shared; this would help to explain the forty-four years of relative peace. On the other hand, since he claims to have left out much for the sake of brevity, and professes to deal with those who have 'cast care aside', rather than 'brave soldiers in the stress of war',¹²⁶ there may have been more militaristic, 'heroic' attitudes to the Anglo-Saxons that he ignores. One only has to cross to the Continent to see how varied the response to barbarians might be: down-trodden peasants and people of better birth who were said to welcome or acquiesce in barbarian rule,¹²⁷ harassed landowners who greeted the barbarians as mercenaries and defenders,¹²⁸ a traitor (or realist) who sought to divide Gaul with the Burgundians and Goths 'according to the law of nations', the old Gallo-Roman patriots of the Auvergne, proud of their 'Trojan' blood, who fought to save their province for an Emperor who sold them out to the Goths to save his own skin. . . .¹²⁹ A historical novelist would find models enough for sub-Roman Britain in the Auvergne alone c. 470: Vortigern might be modelled on Seronatus, who hectored the Council

¹²²DEB 1.4. See Joshua 9 and II Kings (AV II Samuel) 21. Gildas had the Vulgate text for both: Williams, *Gildas*, p. 94. ¹²³DEB 26.1. ¹²⁴DEB 23.1. Despite the text in 21.2, Gildas nowhere attempts the Tacitean theme of the virtuous barbarian, unlike Salvian—perhaps he and his readers knew them too well—nor looks forward, with Orosius, to their conversion; cf. Courcelle, pp. 109–13, 147–54, and 193–94. ¹²⁵Ecclesiastical History, II.20; cf. IV.16 on an English king. ¹²⁶DEB 1.2 and 1.12–13. ¹²⁷Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, v.5.21–23 and 8.36–37. Cf. Courcelle, pp. 149–50 and 159–60; Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 1061; Frank M. Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes: A Translation and Historical Commentary*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, new series, 61, Part 1 (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 46–47. ¹²⁸Orosius, VII.41.4–8. Cf. Courcelle, pp. 110, 204–205, and 207. ¹²⁹Sidonius, *Epistulae*, I.7 and VII.7 (for edition see n. 47 above). Cf. Courcelle, pp. 174–81, 235, and 255–56.

of the Seven Provinces, favoured Visigothic law, and billeted federates on Roman villa-owners,¹³⁰ while Ambrosius Aurelianus, 'whose ancestors had surely worn the purple',¹³¹ could be patterned on Ecdicius, son of an emperor and despiser of Gaulish and Germanic speech alike, who broke through the siege of Clermont Ferrand with eighteen mounted comrades and raised a private army to resist the Goths. . . .¹³² For the strict historian, however, the richness of the Continental sources is a melancholy reminder of the inevitable inadequacy of the solitary *De Excidio*.

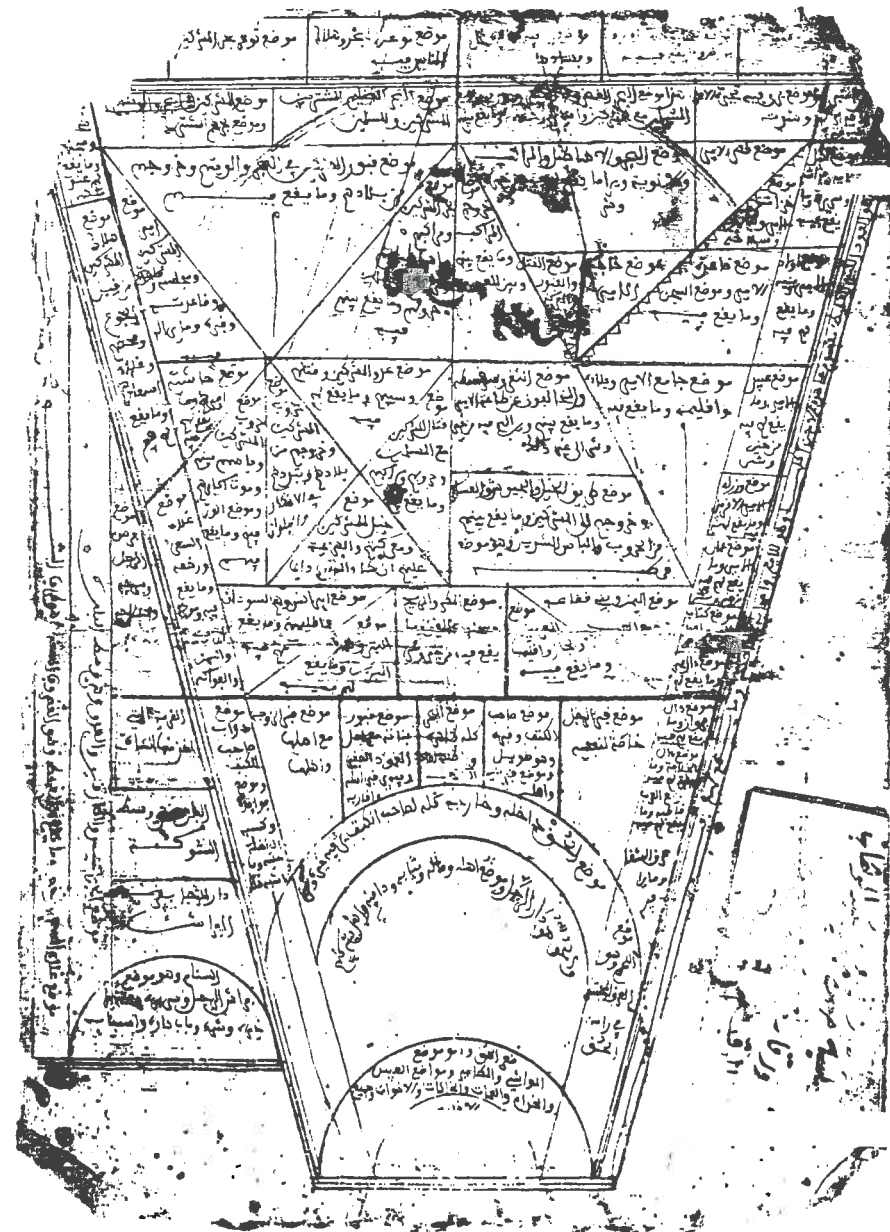
Despite its limitations the *De Excidio Britanniae* captures for us a psychological moment of immense importance. Under the Roman Empire, it is said, provincial history was almost inconceivable; the provinces were simply divisions of the Empire with no discrete history.¹³³ By Gildas's time, however, attitudes had changed on the Continent. The barbarian invasions and collapse of central Roman control had brought new, provincial perspectives, from which the Roman rule of Gaul or Spain could be portrayed as transient, and not necessarily beneficial, phases in these provinces' history.¹³⁴ Gildas is the first known Briton to write from such a post-imperial perspective. Although deeply attached to the values of *Romanitas*, he reminds his readers that there was a time before *Britannia* became *Romania*, shows them she was a province 'fertile in tyrants' that became 'Roman only in name', and portrays her final abandonment by Rome as inevitable and irreversible. The lost province, through her own fault, is once again alone in the world. Even the sense of the unity of the universal Church of the 'holy Romans', so clear in St Patrick's Letter to the soldiers of Coroticus, is muted in the *De Excidio*. The Britons are answerable directly to God. They are his latter-day Israel. Britain's isolation has encouraged Gildas to stand back and contemplate her particular history and destiny.

At a mundane political and racial level Gildas's Britain is far from a unity. She is divided among recent pagan settlers and native kings of dubious legitimacy. Her political future is scarcely considered: Gildas seems not to envisage Britain, or part of Britain, becoming a 'kingdom of the Saxons' (as Gaul became the 'kingdom of the Franks'); on the other hand, he does not urge action against the barbarians. He is affected neither by the transcendent nationalism

¹³⁰Sidonius, *Epistulae*, II.1; *Prosopography* (n. 37 above), II, 995–96. ¹³¹DEB 25.3; cf. Thompson's review of Winterbottom's edition, *Britannia*, 11 (1980), 452.

¹³²*Prosopography*, II, 383–84. ¹³³Thompson, 'Gildas', pp. 208–209. Cf. idem, 'Procopius' (n. 1 above), pp. 457–58; J. F. Matthews, 'Gallic Supporters of Theodosius', *Latomus*, 30 (1971), 1097–98; E. M. Wightman, 'Prisca Galliae Memoriae: Some Comments on Sources for the Early History of Gaul', in *The Ancient Historian and his Materials: Essays in honour of C. E. Stevens on his Seventieth Birthday*, edited by Barbara Levick (Farnborough, 1975), pp. 93–107. ¹³⁴cf. *ibid.*, pp. 102–103. See especially Orosius, v.1, VI.12, and VII.41.2 (cf. n. 38 above).

conjured up for us by the name **Kom-brogī* ('co-countrymen', 'Cymry', 'Cumbrians'), nor even by the crusading internationalism evoked in early Welsh poetry by the word *bedydd* ('baptism', 'the baptized world'). On the contrary, his transcendent, prophetic vision is exclusively moral. At its centre stands the personified Island of Britain, 'ever since she was first inhabited. . . ungratefully rebelling, stiff-necked and haughty, now against God, now against her own countrymen, sometimes even against kings from abroad and their subjects'.¹³⁵ This *Britannia* is not the cardboard personification of classical writers but, next to God, the most important moral agent in the *De Excidio*. In consequence the *De Excidio*, whatever the geographical limitations of its author's effective knowledge, conveyed to posterity a strong sense of Britain's essential unity; Gildas has a fair claim to be regarded as the father of the concept of *Ynys Prydein* ('the Island of Britain'), which was to be so central to subsequent Welsh ideology.¹³⁶ In the *De Excidio*, however, it is not yet a political concept. The formulation of the corollary of a 'monarchy of Britain' (*unbeinyaeth Prydein*),¹³⁷ with its momentous consequences for Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and, indeed, modern history, lay in the unforeseen future.



¹³⁵DEB 4.1. Cf. n. 32 above. ¹³⁶cf. Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), pp. lxxviii and 525. ¹³⁷cf. Brynley F. Roberts, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 20 (1976), 31–33; Nicolas Jacobs, 'Anglo-Danish Relations, Poetic Archaism and the Date of *Beowulf*', *Poetica* [Tokyo], 8 (Autumn 1978), 34, n. 52; R. Geraint Gruffydd, 'Canu Cadwallon ap Cadfan', in *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd / Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*, cyflwynedig in Syr Idris Foster, edited by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones (Cardiff, 1978), p. 28; Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, edited by Patrick Wormald and others (Oxford, 1983), pp. 101–102.

