

GILDAS, a monk of the 6th cent

Name: Gildas
Parent: Kau
Parent: Caunus
Gender: Male
Occupation: monk
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Ifor Williams

to whom is attributed a Latin work known as *De Excidio Britanniae* together with works such as 'Ormesta Britanniae,' the word 'ormesta' being a Latin form of the Welsh word *armes* or *gormes* or a mixture of both words. Gildas was not a historian and his *De Excidio Britanniae* is certainly not history, important though it be to historians, but a letter or epistle to convince the civil and ecclesiastical heads among the Welsh people of sin. His pattern was the prophecies of the great prophets of the Hebrew peoples, particularly those of Jeremiah. He cannot restrain himself as he regards the wickedness of his age; there are tears in his eyes, there is anger in his heart, he has a whip in his hand and the function which he was called upon to exercise is that of using the whip unsparingly. Owing to the depth of his feelings he cannot be fair or moderate in his judgement, whether on state or church. His prejudices were those of a monk, and also those of a Welshman or a Romano-Briton. It was difficult for him to see any value in the work of a secular priest, and every revolt against the Roman empire was an ungrateful sin. He admits that there exist some good people - but they are very few; he does not name a single one. The Britons are cowardly people, unskilled in warfare, and yet somehow they did win some great victories; only one successful general is named - and he came of a Roman family - **Ambrosius Aurelianus**, and Gildas must perforce add that his descendants had greatly deteriorated. Five kings of Britain are named by him and he exposes the corrupt and wicked life of each one of them, at the same time pouring threats of eternal punishment upon each.

The most important of these five is **Maelgwn Gwynedd**. According to the *Annales Cambriae* **Maelgwn** died of the great plague in A.D. 547. The writing of the *De Excidio* can therefore be assigned to a period before that year.

Gildas quotes from a letter sent by the Britons to the Roman Agitius to ask for help against the barbarians. Agitius is addressed as 'consul for the third time' - it is known that a man named Aetius held that post in 446. Nowhere does he give the year of any happening except one and he succeeded in doing that through the medium of an expression which is so obscure that scholars have for centuries been arguing as to its meaning. The Saxons had come here as the result of the stupidity of a foolish ruler **Gwrtheyrn** who had invited them to become his hired soldiers to fight against the Picts and the Scots. They turned against him who had hired them and despoiled the island. They were defeated at last by **Emrys (Ambrosius)** in a battle. Thenceforward the Britons were sometimes the victors, but sometimes the mercenaries were victorious, for a period the termination of which is marked in these words - 'usque ad annum obsessionis Badonici montis, novissimaeque ferme de fufuriferis non minimae stragis, quique quadragesimus quartus ut novi orditur annus, mense iam uno emenso, qui et meae nativitatis est.' The first clause is clear - 'until the year of the siege of Mount Badon, almost the last great slaughter of the wretches.' Then comes the obscure part. One is forced to explain it in this way, in order to make sense of it: 'and (this) year begins the four and fortieth year (afterwards) - one month has passed already.' But in the middle of the awkward sentence have been placed the two words 'ut novi' ('as I know') and it is to these two words that one should join the very last clause, understanding the 'qui' in it with the indicative verb as a personal pronoun giving the reason ('is enim'; see Gildersleeve-Lodge, *Latin Grammar*, 626, on the 'explanatory relative'; 'qui' with the indicative (gives) a fact; and in many passages the casual sense seems to be inevitable'). This is the second month and forty-fourth year since the victory of Mount Badon 'as I know full well, because that year was the year of my birth.' Gildas was proceeding to relate that his country had enjoyed marvellous peace since the great victory (won by **Arthur**, according to credible testimony) with the exception of some small battles against the Saxons and some civil strife amongst the Britons themselves. Badon was almost the last big slaughter of the strangers. This shows that some fighting with them continued, but over forty years of peace had been secured. The number of those who could remember the victories of **Emrys** and **Arthur** was becoming smaller from year to year. A new generation had arisen which knew naught of the old tempests but which had become accustomed to the present state of peace, had enriched itself, and had become corrupt, forgetting truth and justice. That is the trend of the section in *De Excidio*, and it is in the light of it that the awkwardly-phrased opening sentence must be explained.

The view of Ussher, Zimmer, Mommsen, and **J. E. Lloyd** was that Gildas reckoned his four and fortieth year from the time of the battle of Badon, the year in which he was born. Mommsen thought, however, that the words 'ut novi' made no sense and he offered in place of them the reading - 'est ab eo qui.' But it would seem that the words 'ut novi' are essential for understanding the concluding clause.

There is another explanation which calls for attention. This is the one based on Bede, *Hist. Eccl.*, I, xvi, where the words of Gildas have been changed so that the forty-four years refer to the period between the coming of the Saxons to Britain and the battle of Badon ('quadragesimo circiter et quarto anno adventus eorum in Britannicam'). Bede wrote in 731 and made extensive use of the *De Excidio*: De la Borderie (*Rev. Celt.*, vi, 12) suggests that Bede saw an earlier text of Gildas than the one which we have and that the reading was contained in that. He says that the reputation of Bede was such that no one could accuse him of inventing the reading! To fail to understand the Latin of Gildas is not a moral fault. The view of Mommsen is fairer - that the sentence in Bede's copy was exactly as it appears in ours, that he failed to understand it, and freely changed it to a mode of computing time which he himself used. It would appear that to date an event from the time of the coming of the Saxons ('adventus Anglorum') is exactly what one might expect Bede to do and the very last thing that Gildas would do. It is known that Bede computed in that manner (e.g. I, xxiii, II, xiv, V, xxiii). To a Briton like Gildas, (pre- 547) and for many years afterwards, the Saxons were but a temporary affliction somewhere in the extremities of his country, an oppression that had been checked, and an oppression that was to come to an end. To an Englishman in the year 731, the English were the possessors of the whole of England and likely to remain there.

It is difficult to accept the compromise offered by Plummer (*Baedae Opera*, ii, 30) - that Bede might be right in adding forty-four years to 449 and dating the battle of Badon in 493 and that Gildas also was writing in 537, i.e. forty-four years after 493. A fair attempt to make the best of both worlds. But Gildas does not say forty-four years, but forty-three years and a month over. Such exactness suggests that he was thinking of his own age. Indeed, Zimmer thinks that Gildas was born on the day of the battle of Badon (*Nennius Vindictatus*, 100), and not merely in the same year.

When, then, did the siege of Mount Badon take place? The *Annales Cambriae* give 516. Add forty-three to that and we get 559-60 as the time of the writing of *De Excidio*. That will not do, because **Maelgwn** is addressed by the author as a living and lively ruler - and **Maelgwn** died in 547 according to the *Annales*. Assuming that Gildas wrote his attack on **Maelgwn** in the year the latter died, that gives 504 as the last year possible for the battle of Badon and the birth of Gildas - and they may be a little earlier. The *Annales* gives 570 as the date of his death (see **Lloyd, A History of Wales**, 142 n, for corroborative details from Irish chronicles) and that permits us to suggest c. 500 as the time of his birth. It is possible, therefore, that he knew people who had witnessed the first laying waste of Britain by the Saxons in the time of **Vortigern**, the deliverance through **Emrys**, and the subsequent chequered period which ended in the bliss of the victory of Mount Badon and the long peace that was enjoyed when Gildas was in his youth.

There are extant some observations by Gildas on Penance together with some other disconnected pieces that are attributed to him. Two 'Vitae' of him were written, one by a monk from Ruys, in Brittany, and the other (so it is said) by **Caradoc** of Llancarfan. According to the former he was born in the district of Arecluta, i.e. on the banks of the river Clyde in Scotland. He was the son of a man of gentle birth named Caunus. According to the other 'Vita' his father was Nau, king of Scotland. 'Nau' is an error for 'Kau' ('Caw'), an attempt to make the saint a son of Caw of Scotland (see 'Gilda son of Caw' in 'Kulhwch ac Olwen' *R.B.M.*, 107), together with eighteen brothers. If Caunus had been the name in the British language then the Welsh form would have been 'Cun,' not 'Caw.' It is a tiring matter to get at the truth by sifting the lives of these saints, but it can be believed that Gildas was a disciple of **Saint Illutus**; see the 'Vita' of **Saint Paul**, written in 884, which states that **Paul, David, Samson**, and Gildas, author of the 'Ormesta Britanniae,' were fellow-pupils (*Rev. Celt.*, v, 421), and that he crossed to Brittany and established there the monastery of Ruys in Vannes. The fame of Gildas amongst the saints of Ireland is attested by the reference to him by abbot Columban (Columbanus) in a letter to pope Gregory, c. 600. For his contribution to the second wave of Irish saints see **Hugh Williams, Gildas**, 416; see also **Sir John Lloyd's** considered opinion of him generally (*A History of Wales*, 134-43).

Author

Sir Ifor Williams, (1881 - 1965)

Sources

The authority for the Latin texts is Theodore Mommsen; there is an excellent English translation of them, with notes, by Hugh Williams and a Welsh translation by J. Owen Jones. Gildas has been discussed by everyone who has studied the 6th cent, in Britain so that it is unnecessary to start listing the authorities

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Gildas](#)

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Williams, I., (1959). GILDAS, a monk of the 6th cent. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-GILD-AS0-0495>

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