Gildas: the Red Monk of the First Peasants' Revolt

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to interpret the work of Gildas in the context of three other classes of evidence for 'the End of Roman Britain' — the historical sources for events between A.D. 367 and 449; the archaeological evidence for the decline of Romano-British civilisation in the same period; and wider theoretical understandings of peasant struggles in history. The Ruin of Britain *is interpreted as a polemical text in the Judaeo-Christian Apocalyptic tradition which both conveys a specific politico-religious message and implies a specific historical context. The conclusion is that Gildas should be regarded as a fading early sixth-century echo of peasant revolt and land seizure in the decades following the collapse of Roman imperial authority.*

INTRODUCTION

We cannot reconstruct economic, social and political events in Britain between A.D. 367 and 449 from direct evidence. No such evidence is known to us, and in all likelihood none will ever be found. Historiographically at least, we are in the Dark Ages.

The two dates forming my chosen chronological bracket are testimony enough to the obscurity of the period. The first is supplied by Ammianus Marcellinus. Though Ammianus generally provides a reliably dated and reasonably accurate narrative, the character, intensity, and significance of 'the barbarian conspiracy' of A.D. 367 remain uncertain (*Hist*. 27.8). Yet more problematic is my end date, A.D. 449, the traditional beginning of the Anglo-Saxon *adventus* — that is, the year that Bede and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* give as the occasion when the British warlord Vortigern granted land to Hengest and Horsa in return for military service. Bede's account (*c*. A.D. 731) post-dates the events it purports to describe by almost 300 years, *The Chronicle* (*c*. A.D. 892) by more than 400 years (Campbell 1991, 23–7).

The same sort of problems apply to the period as a whole: we are dealing with occasional scraps of text that are chance survivals, no longer in context, quite likely to have been distorted in transmission, and usually only arriving at the form in which we have them long after the event in question. Consequently, even in aggregate, the text we have with a bearing on the End of Roman Britain cannot tell us much; certainly not when read in isolation from other classes of evidence and from ways of thinking about the past based on wider historical experience.

It is for this reason that I propose an argument in the form of a wigwam supported on four poles. Our scraps of text provide one pole. The other three comprise: the archaeology of Romano-British decline; the genre character and political content of Gildas' *Ruin of Britain*; and what wider historical experience of peasant struggle in the context of systems collapse suggests as a likely hypothesis for Britain between A.D. 367 and 449. I will deal with the former two in summary form, since both arguments have been published elsewhere; but I will deal with the latter two at greater length, emphasising in particular my proposed reading of Gildas, and concluding with the suggestion that the four 'poles' of evidence taken together constitute a strong overall hypothesis.

THOMPSON'S *BAGAUDAE*

In 1977 Edward Thompson published a paper in *Britannia* in which he argued that the famous account of the End of Roman Britain in Zosimus' history implies that Roman rule collapsed in

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Britain in the early fifth century A.D. because of widespread peasant revolt. The argument was as follows.

Zosimus appears not to be describing a military usurpation of the kind so common in the Late Roman world. The Britons did not — as we might have expected them to — create a new emperor to lead them in the face of barbarian attack after the departure of Constantine III to Gaul in A.D. 407 with the bulk of the local field-army. On the contrary, events proceeded in a distinctly *un*-Roman way. The Britons not only 'took up arms in their own defence'; they also 'expelled their Roman governors and set up their own administrations as best they could'. In reporting this, moreover, Zosimus explicitly states that 'Armorica [Brittany] and the other provinces of Gaul followed the British example and freed themselves in the same way' (Zosimus 6.5.2–3).

We happen to know, from other sources, that north-western Gaul was a major centre of peasant revolt from the late third to the mid-fifth century A.D. — and, in particular, that the period A.D. 407–417 was one when large areas were under the control of peasant rebels known as *bagaudae*. One Late Roman source (the anonymous author of the comedy *Querolus*) reports that, under bagaudic authority, farmers made speeches, court cases were heard under oak trees, records were inscribed on bones, people lived according to 'woodland laws', and in general 'anything went'. Another (the senator Rutilius Namatianus) reports that the subsequent suppression of such authority meant that 'Armoricans' were no longer 'slaves of their own slaves' and that 'laws and liberty' had been restored. The writer here means by 'Armoricans' men of his own class, that is, Romano-Gallic landlords, and by 'laws and liberty' those of the Roman state; the common people have clearly been put back in their place (de Ste Croix 1981, 478; Thompson 1977, 310–13).

This all sounds very like some sort of peasant communism, the result of a successful peasant revolt to destroy the landlord class and the state infrastructure that underpinned it. And since Zosimus specifically states that events in Gaul around this time were an imitation of earlier events across the Channel, we appear to have indirect reference to some sort of peasant war in Britain from A.D. 409 onwards.

REECE'S DECLINE

In 1980 Richard Reece published a paper in *World Archaeology* in which he argued that the accumulating archaeological evidence from the Romano-British towns implied that they had suffered such precipitous decline from some time in the third century A.D. that 'the towns of Roman Britain had gone by 350'.

Reece's intervention was extremely unpopular at the time. He was blackballed by the publishers of the conference at which the paper was first delivered in 1978. It is now regarded as seminal (and from this, it is to be hoped, we all learn something about the peer review and academic publication process). For all the evidence implies that Reece was right — there were no towns in Britain after about A.D. 350, merely what he called 'administrative villages'.

My own contribution to this discussion was relatively modest: doing the number-crunching to prove the hypothesis (Faulkner 1994; 1996; 1998; 2000; 2002). During the mid-1990s, I collected and quantified the evidence provided by 1,500 Roman urban buildings from 17 large towns (as opposed to 'small towns') and established that construction work and occupation levels produced distinct bell-shaped graphs when plotted by date from A.D. 60 to 425. The middle years of the third century emerged as a time of crisis, with a collapse in civil construction work, and a massive diversion of resources into building town walls. There was some recovery in the early fourth century, but it proved to be little more than a blip, with no return to the boom conditions of the second century, and with steady decline thereafter, such that by *c*. A.D. 400 virtually all building work had ceased on Roman urban sites. Occupation levels told a similar story: the building evidence implied rapid development in the second century, fairly stable conditions through the third, then dramatic decline, with occupation down more than a quarter by A.D. 350, more than half by A.D. 375, and reduced to a mere eighth of peak levels by the end of the century.

Reece had hypothesised a shift from urban-based to country-based élite activity — in archaeological terms, from towns to villas. This turns out to have been correct, though the

'golden age' of the villas proves to have been relatively short-lived, lasting only a generation or two. Analysis of a sample of 78 excavated Romano-British villas revealed a peak in both construction work and occupation at the beginning of the fourth century, but also that a few had been abandoned as early as *c*. A.D. 350, more than a third by *c*. A.D. 375, and virtually all by *c*. A.D. 400 (Faulkner 2002a, 68–72).

This, of course, is merely confirmation of what we all know: the archaeological signature of Romano-British civilisation is fading through the fourth century, has become very weak by its end, and has, to all intents and purposes, completely disappeared by the second quarter of the fifth century at the latest. Forts, towns, and villas; Roman-style pots, coins, and knick-knacks; mosaics, frescos, classical sculpture: the whole material repertoire of *Romanitas* has gone. This is a collapse of élite culture as definitive as any in the British archaeological record.

This surely is what 'the end of civilisation' looks like in archaeological terms. We have: the disappearance of all 'high-status' Romanised sites; the cessation of all monumental stone architecture; and an end to industrial-scale mass production and long-distance trade. The implication has to be that the Roman imperial 'military-supply' economy no longer functioned at any level, and that Romanised élite lifestyles had become wholly unsustainable. The further implication is that the Romano-British ruling class of estate-owners and imperial officials had ceased to exist.

GILDAS' *ZEITGEIST*

'The book is a sermon, not a history': thus comments early-medievalist John Morris with reference to Gildas' *Ruin of Britain* in his authoritative assessment of the written sources for early Dark Age Britain (1977, 36). It may not be a criticism — Gildas 'set down as much of the past as he thought fit for his purpose, and left out what he held to be irrelevant thereto' — but it is certainly a lament: if only Gildas *had* set out to write history …

The traditional approach has been to mine Gildas for occasional nuggets of hard narrative history (and perhaps to work some alchemy that will turn them into something they are not). Though the book is in fact 'a sermon', most scholars have determinedly ignored the sermonising and focused instead on incidental references to historical events and personalities. A useful collection of twelve seminar papers on Gildas published in 1984, for example, contained discussions of the writer's chronology, his Latin culture, the Church to which he belonged, and much else, but nothing that attempted to interpret him as a propagandist with a message in the context of contemporary social struggles; nothing, that is, that took him entirely at face-value — as a sermoniser in a specific social context (Lapidge and Dumville 1984).

We need to listen to the sermon. For Gildas speaks with a strikingly distinctive voice. This becomes clear as soon as one compares him with somewhat comparable figures before and after. Consider, for example, the stark contrast between Gildas and two such representative figures as Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and Bede (A.D. ?673–735).

All three men were clerical intellectuals. Beyond that, they seem to have had little in common. Both Augustine and Bede speak for sections of their respective ruling classes, the former for Romano-African landlords, state officials, and church dignitaries, the latter for Christianising Anglo-Saxon kings and their warrior retinues. Augustine is the propagandist of the conservative 'law and order' party against, in particular, the lower-class radicals and 'heretics' of the Donatist Church. According to Augustine, for example, the war-cry 'Praise be to God' of the militant *Circumcelliones* was more to be feared than the roar of a lion (quoted in de Ste Croix 1981, 482). Bede is the chronicler of the rise of the Anglo-Saxon Church — in large measure at the expense of the more 'primitive' Celtic Church (that is, Gildas' Church). The Britons, he tells us, have 'a national hatred for the English', 'uphold their own bad customs', and are 'opposed by the power of God and man alike'; fortunately, he continues, they were 'powerless to obtain what they want', and have been 'brought to some extent under subjection to the English' (5.23).

Gildas seems to inhabit a different social world. Augustine and Bede were both servants of a powerful state-backed official Church, and, as such, were embedded in rigid class hierarchies whose ruling assumptions and prejudices they shared. Gildas was not. He appears to have had

no patron — no ecclesiastical or secular potentate whose servant he was. Like Augustine and Bede, he inhabited what he perceived to be a sharply dichotomous world; but whereas Augustine and Bede viewed the world from above — detecting enemies beyond the frontiers, within a fractured élite, and among the lower classes — Gildas seems to have viewed the world from below. For him, the *whole* élite appears to have been 'corrupt' and 'wicked'. While he deems 'good rulers' possible, the category is for him a purely hypothetical one, since all *actually existing* rulers turn out to be 'tyrants'.

Of what sins do the élite stand accused? They extort wealth through violence, corrupt justice by taking bribes, and use their ill-gotten gains to enrich their retinues and wage unjust wars. 'Their military companions', moreover, are 'bloody, proud, and murderous men' (*Ruin of Britain* 27). The 'wicked tyrants', to boot, are attended by clerical toadies who function as their spin-doctors; these corrupt priests are 'liars', 'sycophants', 'profiteers', 'sinners', and 'debauchees'; they are 'wolves all ready to slaughter souls' (*Ruin of Britain* 66.1). The masses — 'the just poor' — are an oppressed multitude; among whom are to be found 'the very few good shepherds'.

The sociology implicit in this account I will discuss fully in the next section. Here I wish to place this distinctive world-view — Gildas' *zeitgeist* — in the context of Judaeo-Christian Apocalyptic literature. This genre of politico-religious discourse can be traced from at least the sixth century B.C. to the seventeenth century A.D. It is represented in the language of the Prophets (e.g. *Daniel* 7), of the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g. *The War Scroll*, I, in Vermes 1998, 163–5), of Jesus Christ (e.g. *Matthew* 24), of medieval Millenarian radicals (Cohn 1970, *passim*), of sixteenth-century Dutch Anabaptists (Cohn 1970, 252–80), and of seventeenth-century Fifth Monarchy Men (e.g. in Raymond 1993, 162–3). That this is Gildas' tradition is made clear by the extended quotations he selects from both the Prophets and the New Testament, and by his own choice of language.

Consider this direct quote he gives from *Isaiah*:

> Woe to the wicked for evil, for he shall be punished for his deeds. His extortioners have plundered my people … The Lord shall come to judgement with the elders of his people and its princes. You have eaten up my vineyard, and your house contains the spoil of the poor. Why do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor? says the Lord of Hosts …
>
> Woe to those who found unfair laws and when they write have written wickedness, that they should oppress the poor in court and do violence to the causes of the humble among my people, that widows should be their prey and orphans the victims of their plunder. What will you do in the day of punishment and calamity that comes from afar? (*Ruin of Britain* 78, 1–2)

Then contrast it with how Gildas describes the backsliding priesthood of his own age:

> Britain has priests, but they are fools; very many ministers, but they are shameless; clerics, but they are treacherous grabbers. They are called shepherds, but they are wolves all ready to slaughter souls. They do not look to the good of the people, but to the filling of their own bellies. They have church buildings, but go to them for the sake of base profit … They mock the precepts of Christ, and all their prayers are directed to the fulfilment of their lustful desires … They hate the truth as an enemy, and love lies like favourite brothers. They look askance at the just poor as though they were dreadful snakes; and … they respect the wicked rich as though they were angels from heaven. (*Ruin of Britain* 66.1–2)

This is not mainstream Christianity. It is a class-war discourse of a kind which finds its most complete expression in Judaeo-Christian Apocalyptic literature. In the dominant tradition, the Apocalypse is transformed into a spiritual experience of resurrection and redemption at a distant end of time. In its original meaning — the one it retained in the Apocalyptic-Millenarian tradition under discussion here — it was imminent, earth-bound, and associated with social transformation. The Apocalypse was expected to restore an imagined golden age, a divinely ordained egalitarian order that had been corrupted by sin and wickedness over the ages. In this respect, it merged with another radical Judaeo-Christian idea, the Jubilee, which — again as originally conceived — involved the freeing of slaves, the cancellation of debts, and the restoration of the land to the people (Faulkner 2002b, 123–6, 158–62).

I am not arguing that Gildas was a Millenarian; he makes no direct reference to an imminent

Apocalypse that will entail a settling of accounts with the oppressive rulers, corrupt priests, and 'wicked rich' against whom he rails. What I am saying is that his is a popular Christianity that is much closer to this tradition than the great majority of commentators seem to have realised. And, so far as we can judge, he seems not to have been alone. The Celtic Church appears to have been a 'primitive' Church — a Church of bagaudic fellow-travellers, perhaps — in that it had a relatively flat hierarchy, modest social pretensions, a left-of-centre theology, and a strong focus on its core mission of work among the peasantry.

Let us recall two other figures associated with the Church in Britain about whom we happen to know a little. Pelagius was a British-born monk who argued that people had free will, could choose to act righteously, and in this way accumulate enough heavenly credit to ensure salvation. In contrast to Augustine, who believed that 'sin' was inevitable and that God's 'grace' could be earned by 'faith' and 'obedience' alone, Pelagius maintained that people were responsible for their own actions and it was therefore deeds not words that counted; a much harder road for the rich to tread, since it required them not merely to profess to be Christian, but to act in a positively Christian way towards others (Chadwick 1967, 227–31). Then there is Patrick, whose writings testify to a real tension between the orthodox grandees of the Church and the rural priests of popular Christianity. He describes himself as uneducated, expresses scorn for 'priestly intellectuals', and tells us, with evident bitterness, that some elements in the hierarchy attempted to frustrate his Irish mission (*Conf.* 1, 26–7, and *passim*).

It seems possible, on the evidence of Pelagius and Patrick, that the later 'conservatism' of the Celtic Church — with regard, for example, to the date of Easter — was rooted in a tradition of popular asceticism and radicalism going back to the years when Roman rule collapsed in Britain. If this is correct, what gave rise to this tradition? What, in other words, is the ultimate source of Gildas' *zeitgeist*?

PEASANT REVOLUTION

Regardless of whether or not they own them, peasants are in control of the land, the animals, and the tools that constitute their 'means of production'. It is they, not the landlords, who work the fields, pasture the sheep, and guide the plough. The rural settlements in which they live, whether homestead, hamlet, or village, are largely self-sufficient; they produce most of what the peasants need, such that the community can usually manage with only occasional contact with the wider world.

Because of this, surplus appropriation in the ancient and medieval worlds was inherently coercive. When the landlord, the priest, the soldier, and the debt-collector came to claim their share — as rent, tithe, tax, or interest — they had to be able to take it by force. Similarly, when they appropriated peasant labour to work the lord's fields, extend the local church, or re-lay the king's road, they had to be able to compel compliance. Regardless of whether or not on any particular occasion they arrived with armed men at their backs, their victims had to believe that such force was potentially available to them.

Today, surplus appropriation is disguised in the employment contract, the mortgage agreement, and the consumer purchase. In the fifth century A.D., it depended upon a threat of violence. No peasant ever volunteers to pay rent, tithe, or tax. None volunteers for labour service. And because it is the peasant who actually works the land, and because the village community can supply most of what he needs, his default position is to ignore the outside world and to keep the fruits of his labour for himself and his family.

I have argued elsewhere that British society is likely to have passed through three distinct but overlapping stages of development between *c*. A.D. 375 and 550 (Faulkner 2004). They are as follows:

1. *Imperial collapse and peasant revolt, c. A.D. 375–425*

The rule of the imperial grandees — soldiers, officials, and big landowners — ends with the gradual run-down of the Roman army in Britain and the effective severing of ties between the central state and the diocese. The disintegration of the state apparatus means that peasants refuse

to pay rents and taxes and perform forced labour-services. Élite consumption therefore collapses, and the Romano-British landowning class and any residual Romano-British administrative infrastructure dissolves.

2. *Peasant subsistence economy, c. A.D. 400–525*

Most peasant communities operate a local subsistence-farming regime in virtual isolation from the wider economic, social, political, and cultural worlds. This leaves a political vacuum in which a 'primitive accumulation' of retinues by rival warlords can begin. But the process of élite formation is slow because surpluses are small, peasant resistance strong, and rival war-bands a barrier to the acquisition of territory, labour and resources.

3. *An age of warlords, c. A.D. 425–550*

A patchwork of peasant communes, barbarian enclaves, and warlord fiefdoms slowly gives way to a better defined political geography of regional polities. Smaller war-bands are defeated and destroyed, or co-opted and assimilated, by larger groups, and through a slow-motion process of 'politico-military accumulation' proto-states emerge in which rulers command large enough retinues to be able to defend their borders and ratchet up the exploitation of the peasant. A new class society is forged.

If something like this did not happen, those who would argue differently need to address some central questions: by what coercive mechanism was surplus being appropriated from the British peasantry in the early fifth century A.D.; by whom and in what form; where was it being stored; how distributed and consumed; and what is it about all of these processes that means there is no trace of any of them in the archaeological record?

   It seems to me self-evident that *The Ruin of Britain* is describing that process of politico-military accumulation referred to in (3) above. The sociology implicit in Gildas is surely that of embryonic class formation by a warrior élite using military force (a) to extract surplus from peasants inside its own territory, and (b) to defend that territory against rival retinues. I stress 'embryonic': Gildas owes his radical passion — in contrast, say, to the dull conservatism of Augustine and Bede, both of whom lived in far more exploitative polities — to the fact that his benchmark is provided by the relative freedom of the British peasantry in the fifth century and the rooting of the Celtic Church in the lives of the common people.

   I would therefore suggest the following hypothesis regarding Gildas. He was a radical who looked back to a lost golden age of relative abundance and freedom for the common people of Britain in the early to mid-fifth century A.D.; that he measured the emerging ruling class of his own age against this yardstick; that he was taking a stand against a rising tide of what might be termed 'counter-revolution'; that he echoed the Judaeo-Christian Apocalyptic tradition in decrying the social iniquities of the age; that he was a champion of the British Celtic Church as a people's church rooted in the villages; and that he was, therefore, in some sense, the red monk of the first peasants' revolt.

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