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## THE PREFACE

*Gildas's purpose*

The first place to look for some hint of Gildas's doctrinal stance is of course at the beginning of the text, a section which for the purposes of this study will be referred to as 'the Preface'. While the opening of the work might be expected to include some straightforward statement of Gildas's purpose in writing, it has been noted that these early chapters contain some of the most obscure writing to be found in the work.<sup>1</sup> The opening paragraph or chapter amply illustrates this feature of Gildas's writing:

*In hac epistola quicquid deflendo potius quam declamando, vili licet stilo, tamen benigno, fuero prosecutus, ne quis me, affectu cunctos spernentis omnibusve melioris, quippe qui commune bonorum dispendium malorumque cumulum lacrimosis querelis defleam, sed condolentis patriae incommoditatibus miserisque eius ac remediis condelectantis edicturum putet.*

*Quia non tam fortissimorum militum enuntiare trucidis belli pericula mihi statutum est quam desidiosorum, silui, fateor, cum inmenso cordis dolore, ut mihi renum scrutator testis est dominus, spatio bilustri vel eo amplius praetereuntis imperitia sic ut et nunc, una cum vilibus me meritis inhihentibus, ne qualemcumque admonitiunculam scriberem.<sup>2</sup>*

Let no-one think that whatever I shall have presented in this letter, in a poor yet kindly style, with weeping rather than with declaiming, I am going to speak from the point of view of a person who despises everybody and is superior to everybody, in so far as I am expressing sorrow with tearful complaints about the general loss of good and the piling up of sins, but [let him think] that I am speaking from the point of view of a person who joins with others in grieving for the misfortunes of his country and for its unhappy circumstances and who shares with others pleasure in their resolution.

Because I had decided to bring out into the open the risks of grim war not so much pertaining to our most energetic fighters as pertaining to our indolent ones, I was silent (I acknowledge the fact) in great unhappiness of heart, as the Lord who sees into my feelings is my witness, for ten years or even longer, because of inexperience, even now combined with the poor abilities which were disinclining me from writing any kind of small handbook of advice at all.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Winterbottom, 'The Preface', p. 287, n. 6. Winterbottom believes that the difficult early chapters were not intended for a wide audience, but concedes that the chapters largely based on Biblical extracts may have been easier going.

<sup>2</sup> *DEB* 1:2. Mommsen followed the Avranches MS at this point and did not insert a paragraph break between *putet* and *quia*: see *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, ed. by T. Mommsen, p. 25, n. 5. Mommsen evidently believed that the *quia* clause should not begin a new sentence. Winterbottom's edition of the Latin text, however, places *quia* at the beginning of the second paragraph or sentence of the work. The layout of the text here follows Winterbottom's edition.

<sup>3</sup> My own translation.

This section immediately raises a number of questions. What is the exact nature of the 'good' that has been lost, and the 'sins' that are increasing?<sup>4</sup> What is the nature of the 'grim war' and where is it being fought? Why are Gildas (and others) grieving for their country and how do they hope to resolve the problem? Who are the 'energetic fighters' and who are the 'indolent' fighters, and why are they so designated? It appears that Gildas's decision to write about 'indolent' fighters was the primary reason for the ten-year delay in writing; why should this have been the case? His other reasons for the delay, namely his 'inexperience' and his 'poor abilities', have not prevented him finally putting pen to paper, although 'even now', as he tells us, he still has 'poor abilities'. There appears to be a clear distinction here between Gildas's 'inexperience' and his lack of writing skills. The latter claim is of course largely rhetorical. Gildas's Late Latin style is undoubtedly obscure and difficult, but Kerlouégan's detailed and wide-ranging study of the language of the *DEB* has convincingly demonstrated that it is also grammatically and syntactically correct.<sup>5</sup> It has also been noted that Gildas was evidently well acquainted with the contemporary convention of authorial modesty, in accordance with which fifth- and sixth-century writers habitually expressed their doubts about their ability to write while being compelled to do so, either by their consciences or by the creative impulse.<sup>6</sup>

The opening sentence of the work is formal and rhetorical. Gildas appears to be employing a well-known ornament of classical prose, the pairing of words with the same endings. Hence we have *deflendo ... declamando, stilo ... benigno, miseriis ... remediis* and so on. As Latin is a highly inflected language, this may not always be deliberate, but the extraordinary syntax of the opening section suggests Gildas may have been striving for this effect. He may have taken Cicero as his model in this respect; it is certainly possible that Gildas's use of a forensic style throughout much of the *DEB* was derived from a study of Cicero's speeches during his education.<sup>7</sup>

Gildas describes his work as a 'letter', or *epistola*. A public letter, which followed the form of a speech, was a well-known form of Late Antique rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> A close reading of the text at this point reveals that Gildas is not, as is frequently thought, a lone voice crying in the wilderness. He states that he is writing 'from the point of view of a person who joins with others in grieving for the misfortunes of his country ... and who shares with others pleasure in their resolution'. The significance of the use of the participles *condolentis* and *condelectantis* in this context has not been fully appreciated. Gildas is not alone in his views; others share them, and they form a significant proportion, if not all, of his audience.

It is clear that Gildas is giving three separate, if closely related, reasons for not writing (or publishing) his work for ten years or even longer. His first reason

<sup>4</sup> In translating *bonorum* as 'good', and *malorum* as 'sins', I have attempted to maintain the ambiguity of Gildas's Latin at this point. Gildas appears to be thinking in abstract terms here although he undoubtedly has particular individuals in mind.

<sup>5</sup> Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio Britanniae*, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Winterbottom, 'The Preface', p. 284. Winterbottom comments in a footnote that an 'infinitely more impressive instance of internal dialogue' is to be found in Augustine, *Confessiones*, 8.25–26, but adds that any resemblance between this passage and Gildas's words is 'coincidence'.

<sup>7</sup> Lapidge, 'Gildas's Education', pp. 43–46. N. Wright, 'Gildas's Prose Style and its Origins', in *GNA*, pp. 107–28 (p. 111).

<sup>8</sup> Lapidge, *ibid.*, p. 43.

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for delay was the difficult decision he took to speak of the dangers faced by 'indolent' men, his second reason was his 'inexperience', and his third reason, his 'poor abilities'. It is evident that these 'indolent' men, whoever they are, are at the forefront of Gildas's mind as he is writing. It is also clear that Gildas wishes all his readers, including the 'energetic fighters' whose conduct is presumably irreproachable, to understand that he speaks as one of them, not as someone taking a superior position, in his decision to address the issue of 'indolent' soldiers. The important thing to note is that Gildas evidently felt that his subject matter was problematic in itself, even controversial, and this contributed towards his delay in writing. Curiously, Gildas even seems to have felt that his theme may have appeared controversial to those whose support he hopes for, those who 'by their holy prayers ... support my weakness from total collapse ... and no-one should suppose that I am carping at their worthy lives ... if I speak freely, even sorrowfully, of those who are slaves of the belly, slaves, too, not of Christ ... but of the devil'.<sup>9</sup> He is referring here to the 'few, the very few', 'true sons' of the 'holy mother Church'.<sup>10</sup> These men are leading the 'worthy lives which all men admire and God loves', and yet, good as they are, it seems that some of them may suppose that Gildas's criticisms are intended for them. Most curious of all is his reference to the fact that the 'mother Church' cannot see 'her true sons, although they lie in her lap'.<sup>11</sup> Whether he means the British Church or the western Church in general, his statement that the Church is blind to her 'true sons' is one of the clearest indications in the *DEB* that Gildas is writing in a context of ecclesiastical debate.

At the end of the Preface, Gildas gives his reasons for finally speaking out as follows: 'in zeal for the sacred law of the house of the Lord, spurred on by my own thoughts and the devout prayers of my brethren, I now pay the debt so long ago incurred'. The last two reasons for beginning to write appear to be a response to the second and third reasons given for *not* writing (Gildas's own thoughts have overcome his doubts concerning his 'inexperience', and the prayers of his brethren have overcome his 'poor abilities'). The *first* reason for his beginning to write, his 'zeal for the sacred law of the house of the Lord', corresponds to the *first* reason for not writing (or delaying writing until now); his decision to speak of the dangers faced by 'indolent' men.

It would be a great help in untangling Gildas's purpose from his occasionally baffling prose if we knew who these 'indolent' men were. The 'energetic fighters' have sometimes been thought to be men who are fighting with the Saxons, or with some other unnamed enemy, and the 'indolent' men to be those who are not involved in fighting. It is, however, a mistake to attach any military significance to Gildas's words at this point. The context makes it clear that he is speaking of spiritual warfare, not recent battles with the Saxons.<sup>12</sup> The 'energetic fighters' are

<sup>9</sup> *DEB* 26:4.

<sup>10</sup> *DEB* 26:3.

<sup>11</sup> *DEB* 26:3.

<sup>12</sup> As noted by Winterbottom, 'The Preface', p. 283, n. 23. Winterbottom notes that this passage 'explains Gildas's hesitation by pointing to the necessity of making embarrassing disclosures about the weaknesses of the British, who soldier for Christ not bravely but sluggishly'. For the view that Gildas is addressing real soldiers here, see N. J. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester, 1994), p. 210.

men and women who are battling for Christ in a spiritual sense. The whole tone of the Preface is set by its concern with spiritual, not temporal matters.

If the 'energetic fighters' are the good Christians, then who are the 'indolent' fighters? Are they simply the bishops and priests who do not come up to Gildas's high standards? 'Indolence' appears again in the catalogue of other faults Gildas attributes to these individuals later in the work; the list includes greed, vice, lying, lack of charity, sexual immorality, and seeking to buy priesthoods instead of earning them by merit.<sup>13</sup> There is also a baffling reference to 'lazy martyrs', and another reference to the 'pride and laziness of stubborn priests', both later in the work; all of these would seem to suggest that the sin of spiritual 'indolence' appears to have some particular significance for Gildas.<sup>14</sup>

We can be sure at least of the spiritual nature of the troubles of Gildas's *patria*; it is the state of the Church Gildas is primarily concerned with, and with her decline from her 'former glory', which he illustrates with passages from the Book of Lamentations describing the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Gildas is not talking about a decline in trade or worldly prosperity, or even the decline in towns, which may have reached their nadir long before his day.<sup>15</sup> He is not talking about the theft of wealth from the churches here either, although in the unsettled times of the recent past this could certainly have happened. Gildas undoubtedly accuses some kings and their followers of plundering churches for wealth later in the work, but that is not what he means here. He is describing a transition from a state of spiritual wealth to one of spiritual poverty. In the opening sentence to the work, Gildas describes his country's troubles, somewhat unhelpfully, at least from the point of view of the modern historian, as *commune bonorum dispendium*, a 'general loss of good'. It is true that this description could be referring to either spiritual or secular matters; it is a very obscure phrase. But, again, the context is all. Gildas hopes to correct and find a cure for the country's spiritual malaise; he is not offering a plan for military recovery or a way of reclaiming the former prosperity of the provinces.

The tone of Gildas's Preface is one of overwhelming urgency and the need to address a general malaise, something that seems to be endangering the moral welfare of all of the Britons, not just the kings and the clergy. This is made particularly clear when Gildas confronts his doubts about his own fitness to take on this task.

*Quid?(mihimet aio) tibine, miser, veluti conspicuo ac summo doctori talis cura committitur ut obstes ictibus tam violenti torrentis, et contra hunc inolitorum scelerum funem per tot annorum spatia ininterrupte lateque protractum? Serves depositum tibi creditum et taceas. Alioquin hoc est dixisse pedi: speculari et manui: fare. Habet Britannia rectores, habet speculatores. Quid tu nugando mutire disponis?Habet, inquam, habet si non ultra, non citra numerum. Sed quia inclinati tanto pondere sunt pressi, idcirco spatium respirandi non habent.*

What? I say to myself, is such care being entrusted to you, o unhappy one, as to a distinguished and outstandingly learned man, in order that you may stand in the way of the blows of so violent a flood and against this rope of inborn crimes which has been extended widely and without cease for the length of so many years? Look

<sup>13</sup> DEB 66–68.

<sup>14</sup> DEB 74:4, 92:1.

<sup>15</sup> P. Sims-Williams, 'Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 6 (1983), 1–30 (pp. 9–13).

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after the thing entrusted <and> deposited with you and be silent. Otherwise this is to have said to the foot 'keep watch' and to the hand 'speak'. Britain has governors; she has watchmen. What are you intending to mumble about by talking your nonsense? She has them, I say, she has them, if not beyond the number <necessary> nor less than the number, but they are bent down, burdened with so great a load: on that account, they have no space to breathe.<sup>16</sup>

First, this seems to be describing a general situation in the whole *insula*. It is at least clear that Gildas sees the situation in this way; 'Britain has governors; she has her watchmen.' The word used for governor is *rector*, a word that also had the contemporary meaning of 'bishop', as did *speculator*.<sup>17</sup> The context of Gildas's concerns is a spiritual one, and both *speculator* and *rector* should therefore be understood to refer to ecclesiastical rather than secular leaders. It is possible that these individuals are independent of the tyrants and their courts.

It would be interesting to know if both groups, that is, the good and the bad clerics, were similarly located, i.e. in the households of petty kings or rulers, or whether some remained in the towns. Some churchmen were evidently present in kings' courts at this time, for Gildas asks this question of one of the kings, Cuneglasus: 'Why do you provoke with continual injuries [i.e. his sins] the groans and sighs of the holy men who are present in the flesh at your side?'

### *Gildas and the continuity of the British Church*

Archaeological evidence for the existence of Romano-British churches has been found in a large number of towns.<sup>18</sup> Some of these may have continued in use into the fifth century. If they did, they would presumably have retained their urban bishops and other members of the seven orders of the clergy. It is, however, difficult to be sure of the condition and function of towns in Gildas's day from his descriptions. At the very beginning of the work, Gildas tells us that Britain was 'ornamented with twenty-eight cities and a number of castles, and well-equipped with fortifications, walls, castellated towers, gates and houses, whose sturdily built roofs reared menacingly skywards'.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that in referring to 'fortifications', Gildas could be referring to strongholds of the kings, although he could equally well be referring to old Roman fortifications, abandoned or otherwise, such as those found along the Saxon Shore.<sup>20</sup> He certainly seems to be saying that a high standard of building work went into their construction, which may be significant. Later in the work, Gildas describes the towns of his

<sup>16</sup> *DEB* 1.14. My translation.

<sup>17</sup> A. Souter, *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.* (Oxford, 1949). Souter's earliest recorded usage of this meaning is found in a letter of Augustine.

<sup>18</sup> D. Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London and New York, 1991), p. 144. Watts gives a list of sites of 'almost certain and probable Christian churches in Roman Britain, including Lincoln, Icklingham, Colchester, Verulamium, Uley, Nettleton, Lullingstone, Richborough, Canterbury, Silchester, Hinton St Mary and Frampton'. Richard Sharpe, in 'Martyrs and Local Saints', pp. 85–105, provides a wide-ranging and comprehensive survey of the arguments for and against the continuity of the post-Roman Church in Britain from the time of the visit of Germanus.

<sup>19</sup> *DEB* 3.

<sup>20</sup> B. W. Cunliffe, 'Excavations at Portchester Castle. I: Roman', *Society of Antiquaries Research Report*, 32 (London, 1975).

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