Introduction

Gildas the Wise (c. AD 500–570)

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Introduction

Cymmrodorion Record Series, No. 3.

GILDAS.
PART I. LONDON: PUBLISHED FOR THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION, BY DAVID NUTT, 270, 271, STRAND. ------ 1899. To be completed in Three Parts, Price 21s. THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION. President:---- The Most Honorable Marquess of Bute, K.T. THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION, originally founded under Royal patronage in 1751, was revived in 1873, with the object of bringing into closer contact Welshmen, particularly those resident out of Wales, who are anxious to advance the welfare of their country; and of enabling them to unite their efforts for that purpose. Its especial aims are the improvement of Education, and the promotion of intellectual culture by the encouragement of Literature, Science, and Art, as connected with Wales. Meetings of the Society are held in London during the Spring and Summer months, for the Reading of Papers on Literary, Scientific, and Artistic subjects, and for the discussion of practical questions within the scope of the Society's aims. A Series of Meetings is annually held in Wales in connection with the National Eisteddfod, under the name of "THE CYMMRODORION SECTION," to promote the consideration of Educational, Literary, and Social Questions affecting the Principality. It was from these meetings that the "NATIONAL EISTEDDFOD ASSOCIATION," the "SOCIETY OF WELSH MUSICIANS," and the "SOCIETY FOR UTILISING THE WELSH LANGUAGE" sprang: the latter being the outcome of the inquiries instituted by this Society of Cymmrodorion in 1884 and 1885.

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Y Cymmrodor, Vols. ii, iv, v, vi, vii, viii, ix, x, xi, xii, 10s. 6d per volume. [Vols. i and iii are out of print.] The History of the Cymmrodorion. Out of Print. A Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe, by Wyllyam Salesbury (1547). Facsimile, black letter. 4 parts, 2s. 6d. each.

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To be obtained on application to the Secretary, at the Cymmrodorion Library, 64, Chancery Lane, London, W.C. GILDAE DE EXCIDIO BRITANNIAE, FRAGMENTA, LIBER DE PAENITENTIA, ACCEDIT ET LORICA GILDAE. GILDAS: THE RUIN OF BRITAIN, FRAGMENTS FROM LOST LETTERS, THE PENITENTIAL, TOGETHER WITH THE LORICA OF GILDAS. Edited for the Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion. BY HUGH WILLIAMS, M. A., PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY AT THE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE, BALA. LONDON: PUBLISHED FOR THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION, BY DAVID NUTT. ------ 1899. LONDON : PRINTED AT THE BEDFORD PRESS, 20 AND 21, BEDFORDBURY, W.C.

PRELIMINARY NOTE.

IN the present edition, it is intended to publish in a collected form the works ascribed to Gildas for which, roughly speaking, a date is assigned during the twenty years that elapsed between A.D. 540 and 560. The earliest references to Gildas that have come down to us are the two made by Columbanus in his letter to St. Gregory the Great, which must have been written between thirty and forty years after the death of the British writer (i.e., A.D. 595-600). In the first passage, he is mentioned as Gildas auctor who has written against simony in bishops; in the second, as having been engaged in correspondence, respecting the monks who were leaving their convents to become hermits, with Vennianus, probably Finian, the abbot of Clonard in Meath, to whom Gildas sent "an exceedingly noble answer" (et eligantissime illi rescripsit). Gildas is thus widely known, not very long after his death,

as a writer on ecclesiastical abuses, and as a correspondent whose opinion on new and doubtful movements was highly valued in Ireland.

In a general INTRODUCTION I hope to deal with the questions appertaining to the time and life of Gildas, the condition of Britain, its people and its Church, at that time, and the authorship of the several works named below. A map is also in preparation based on that in Spruner's Histor. Atlas, and Maps 15 (Roman Britain) and 16 (England and Wales before the Roman Conquest), in Parts I and XVI of The Histor. Atlas of Modern Europe. Oxford, 1896, 1898. The works brought together in the volume, of which the present is Part I, are the following:---- I. The DE EXCIDIO BRITANNIAE. This work has been mistakenly read as history; it is, really, in no way a history, nor written with any object a historian may have. It may be regarded as a kind of "Tract for the Times" of the sixth century. Ebert (Gesch. der Literatur des Mittelaltcrs) correctly terms the "De Excidio" a Tendenzschrift; it is a message or a sermon addressed to rulers and ecclesiastics by a fervent monk, containing historical portions which are of undoubted value, because we possess no other for a part of the period to which they refer, but which in the whole setting of their narration are coloured by the author's main purport as a Christian moralist. We may regard it as extremely probable that this is the very work to which Columbanus refers, when writing shortly after A.D. 595.

2. A series of FRAGMENTS. These Fragments appear in a collection of rules or canons for church order, belonging to the early Irish Church. The whole consists of LXVII books, divided into chapters which give extracts from many ecclesiastical writers; e.g. Origenes, Hieronimus, Augustinus, Gregorius, Isidorus, also Sinodus Hibernensis, &c. Among these appear extracts made probably from letters, now lost, of Gildas, such as that mentioned by Columbanus as written to Finian. These will be printed from the text of Wasserschleben's Irische Kanonensammlung, 2nd edition (Leipzig, 1885). 3. An early Penitential, or DE PAENITENTIA. This will be printed from the text of Wasserschleben's Bussordnungen (Halle, 1851), and Haddan and Stubbs, Councils, vol. i, p. 113 (1869). Penitentials, especially as found in the Celtic remains, show the gradual extension of disciplinary rules over the life, chiefly of monks, but also of those living outside the cloisters, in that age. 4. The LORICA GILDAE. After much deliberation, it has been thought better to include this poem as a probably genuine production of Gildas. The text will be that printed in THE IRISH LIBER HYMNORUM, published by the Henry Bradshaw Society, 1897 (vol. i, p. 206), compared with that of Zimmer in Nennius Vindicatus: " Die Lorica des Gildas," s. 337.

The necessary documentary research by examination of the few codices remaining, and of probable evidence as to lost ones, in the first editions professedly based upon them, has been already accomplished for us by the edition of Gildas which has appeared in the MONUMENTA GERMANIAE HlSTORICA, forming vol. iii of the "Chronica Minora Saec. iv, v, vi, vii, edidit Theodorus Mommsen" (1894-1898). It may well be presumed that no fresh research could have provided us with a text of Gildas accompanied with the same guarantee of thoroughness as this edition by Dr. Mommsen. To profit by it is, however, rendered

difficult for many readers by the fact that all introductory matter and critical notes are in Latin, while all questions appertaining to the contents of the work, as the learned editor several times intimates, are remitted to others. His task is mainly the production of the best possible text of Gildas' De Excidio. With deep respect and gratitude, Dr. Mommsen's text has been adopted for the present edition, excepting some changes of punctuation and words and phrases in particular portions of the work. The particular portions referred to are those places in which Gildas quotes from certain books of the Old Testament. As explained in the notes, the Latin text of these quotations is found to be a rude and excessively literal rendering of the Greek of the Septuagint; so far is this the case that the Greek version itself, for the quotations made from Job, Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets, and some other books, becomes a no unimportant part of the documentary evidence for the determination of readings. It has been so employed in this edition.

The FRAGMENTS seem to throw a distinct and pleasing light upon the man's character, and the PENITENTIAL will illustrate the beginnings of a peculiar mode of church discipline. Every one of the pieces named, after the De Excidio, has been made the subject of searching critical examination, as regards the text, by Dr. Wasserschleben or the late Mr. Henry Bradshaw, by Dr. Heinrich Zimmer and the editors of The Irish Liber Hymnorum. The Introductions and Notes in this edition will endeavour to deal with the subject-matter of each. An unprejudiced student of Gildas comes back to his writings with the feeling that something of value may, and ought to, be got out of them; my own frequent reading of these has led me to a higher appreciation of the man and his work. To my mind, it is a grave mistake to call Gildas a "historian": neither Columbanus, writing about forty years after his death, nor Alcuin, in the last quarter of the eighth century, regard him in this light. The fashion began with the Venerable Beda; for him, in the early parts of his Historia Ecclesiastica, and, for the writers of the Saxon Chronicle also apparently, Gildas was the sole "historian" (historicus eorum). Mediaeval writers, who invariably term him historiographss, helped to make the idea a fixed one. But Gildas would never have regarded himself as a "historian": he is a preacher, a revivalist, who will "attempt to state a few facts" (pauca dicere conamur), by way of illustrating his message, that divine anger must visit with punishment a sinning people and priesthood.

I could not but feel interested, in reading "The Letters of Cassiodorus," by Mr. Hodgkin, to notice what he says of "the inflated and tawdry style" of that strenuous and successful administrator, and exceptionally far-sighted Roman statesman. In the volume mentioned, which contains a resumé of letters in the Variorum Libri XII, Mr. Hodgkin gives an amusing specimen of how Cassiodorus, as prime minister, could write in the name of Theodoric to Faustus, the Praetorian prefect, who was dawdling over an order to ship corn from Calabria and Apuleia to Rome. Reprimanding the lazy official, Theodoric, by his minister, is made to say: "Why is there such delay in sending your swift ships to traverse the tranquil sea? Though the south wind blows and the rowers are bending to their oars, has the sucking-fish fixed its teeth into the hulls through the liquid waves, or have the shells of the Indian sea, whose quiet touch is said to hold so firmly that the angry billows cannot loosen it, with like

power fixed their lips into your keels?" Now Cassiodorus, who died A.D. 570, was a contemporary of Gildas, and we ought, in the case of Gildas as well as in his, to be able to conquer the aversion roused within us by an inflated style, because it is partly the fault of the age. Perhaps, in the case of Gildas, something should also be attributed to the emotional intensity that was, and is, characteristic of the Celtic race. Notwithstanding all such blemishes, a substantial net profit remains for the student of history and literature.

HUGH WILLIAMS. Bala, September 29th, 1899.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.