

## **A short biography of St Gildas, known as The Wise**

by Master Hrolf Herjolfssen

Who was St Gildas? He was probably born about 517 AD, but we do not even know for sure where he was born. Various ecclesiastic authorities give the North of England or Wales. The North of England is the more likely. This is one of the things connecting him with the "real" Arthur, who was probably also based in this area. He was also sometimes known as Badonicus - as he was born in the year of Arthur's victory in a battle of that name against the Saxons. Gildas thus spent his childhood during the time when the Saxons were kept quiet by this defeat. We know his father's name was Cau (or Nau) and that he came from noble lineage. He probably had several brothers. It is likely that one of these, Cuil (or Hueil), was killed by Arthur (who died in 537 AD). It also appears that he may have forgiven Arthur for this.

He lived in a time when the glory of Rome was faded from Britain. The permanent legions had been withdrawn by Maximus, who used them to sack Rome itself and make himself Emperor. Despite several expeditions to the island to drive off Saxons, Picts and Scots (most notably under the great general Stilicho), the Britons had generally been left to their own devices and were made responsible for their own defence. Most of the landed Romans (as all Britons had Roman citizenship) left for the more defensible lands of Brittany.

Of his character, he seems to have been a very sombre and severe figure. He was noted for his piety in a time when this meant a denial of the flesh. In a time when this was usual for holy men, he was regarded as notable. He was well-educated and was not afraid of publicly rebuking contemporary monarchs, at a time when libel was answered by a sword, rather than a Court order. He was a figure more familiar with the Old Testament than with the New and he may have regarded his sermons on vice as being comparable to the Prophets in denouncing the sins of Kings.

Gildas lived for many years as a very ascetic hermit on Flatholm Island in the Bristol Channel. Here he established his reputation for that peculiar Celtic sort of holiness that consists of extreme self-denial and isolation. At around this time, according to the Welsh, he also preached to Nemata, the mother of St David, while she was pregnant with the Saint.

In about 547 he wrote a book *De Excidio Britanniae* (The Destruction of Britain). In this he writes a brief tale of the island from pre-Roman times and criticises the rulers of the island for their lax morals and blames their sins (and those that follow them) for the destruction of civilisation in Britain. The book was avowedly written as a moral tale and it probably should not be regarded as history. It contains only one date (and gets it wrong).

He is tireless in his criticism of the Britons. Indeed his description of pre-conquest Britain is more harsh on his countrymen than Roman commentators whom he was familiar with (such as Tacitus). He never neglects a chance to comment on their faults and never uses a single example of British victory or moral uprightness. This is probably one of the reasons that he says nothing about Arthur, although Nennius and the Welsh Annals (slightly later histories), both mention him.

He also wrote a longer work, the Epistle. This is a series of sermons on the moral laxity of rulers and of the clergy. In these Gildas shows that he has a wide reading of the Bible and of some other classical works. We also have some fragments of some of his letters. I rather like: "Miriam was condemned to leprosy because she and Aaron agreed in blaming Moses because of his Ethiopian wife. We should be afraid of this fate when we disparage good princes for trifling faults."

He was also a very influential preacher, visiting Ireland and doing much missionary work. He was responsible for the conversion of much of the island and may be the one who introduced anchorite customs to the monks of that land.

By legend he brought a bell of very pure tone back from Ireland. This bell was associated with Llancarfan, where he taught. While based here, it appears likely that he went on a voyage of pilgrimage to Rome - a very rare thing in those days. Gildas took the bell with him as a present for the Pope. Despite being intact, it refused to ring. This was taken by everyone to mean that the bell was to be returned to Wales and Gildas returned with it. He retired from Llancarfan to Rhuys, in Brittany, where he founded a monastery.

Of his work on the running of a monastery (one of the earliest known in the Christian Church), only the so-called Penitential, a guide for Abbots in setting punishment, survives. It is interesting as it shows, not only the severity of the penances, but also the sorts of crimes that were common enough for Gildas to write about. Sodomy, natural fornication, bestiality, masturbation, dropping the Host, arriving late for Mass, drunkenness and the eating of carrion are all covered.

He died around 571 AD, at Rhuys. The monastery that he had founded became the centre of his cult.

Gildas had two biographies (or Lives) written about him within the Middle Ages. They were written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, although it appears that they had (different) earlier works to draw upon. The earliest is written by a monk of Rhuys, and so he may have had monastic records to draw upon. The other was written in Wales, probably by Caradoc of Llancarfan. They differ markedly. This probably represents different local writings and traditions.

Gildas is the patron of no particular group, nor has he any usually associated iconography or items. Both of these are to be expected as he is a clear historical figure, based in the West, with no major allegorical legends attached to him. If depicting him however, a bell would be the most likely associated item.

He is regarded as being one of the most influential figures of the early English Church. The influence of his writing was felt until well into the Middle Ages, particularly in the Celtic Church. He is also important to us today as the first British writer whose works have survived fairly intact. His feast day is 29 January (which, coincidentally, is when I am writing this). Happy Feast Day St. Gildas!

Note: The Welsh Annals, famous for their brief coverage of history (not all years have an entry - most are one line) has the following entries that are about Gildas:

565 Navigatio Gildæ in Hybernia (The sailing of Gildas into Ireland)

570 Gildas Britonum sapientis-simus obiit (Gildas the snub-nosed, wisest of Britons, he died)

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