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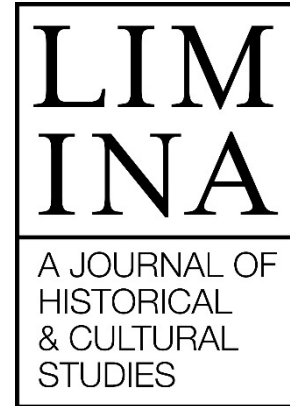
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Submitting to Limina

Details about the journal and how to submit can be found at www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au.

Joyce, Stephen J., *The Legacy of Gildas: Constructions of Authority in the Early Medieval West*; Woodbridge and Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2022; hardback, 204 pages, 6 b/w illustrations; RRP £70.00 / \$105.00 USD; ISBN: 9781783276721.

The British Latin writer Gildas is one of the pillars of early medieval literature, though less well-known than many of his continental contemporaries. As one of the only authors to both originate from and discuss post-Roman Britain (ca. 410–550 CE) in detail, Gildas holds a unique position as a chronicler of both British Christianity and British political identity in this period. However, because of the unusual genre of his most well-known work, *De Excidio Britanniae* ('On the Destruction of Britain'), Gildas is often viewed as idiosyncratic at best and illegitimate at worst, with other writings associated with him ignored in favour of *De Excidio*. Stephen Joyce's monograph, *The Legacy of Gildas: Constructions of Authority in the Early Medieval West*, offers a new perspective on Gildas, approaching him through the lens of his continental and insular Latinate successors and their acceptance of Gildas's authority as one of the earliest medieval religious and political theorists. Drawing from the fragmentary letters associated with Gildas (*fragmenta Gildae*) as well as from *De Excidio*, Joyce argues that Gildas should be examined as a foundational figure for models of religious and kingly authority in early medieval Europe.

Chapter one seeks to put Gildas in context with other accounts of early medieval Britain, introducing a timeline of the three main sources – St. Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola*, Constantius of Lyons' *Vita Germani Episcopi Autissiodorensis*, and Gildas himself. None of these texts reference each other and Joyce argues that none of them support corroborating narratives of the insular church. Instead, the reception of Gildas was influenced by changing perceptions of the British Isles, and more specifically, Insular Christianity, in the medieval period.

Chapter two has the initially misleading title of 'Images of Gildas', which suggests art and other visual material but instead refers to historiographical (both medieval and modern) views of Gildas, which Joyce divides up into Gildas *sapiens*, Gildas *auctor*, Gildas *historicus*, Gildas *sanctus*, Gildas *confessor*, and Gildas *historiographus*. This chapter explores the various ways in which medieval authors identified Gildas as both an authority figure in his own right and as a figure capable of defining secular and ecclesiastical authority across time.

In chapter three, Joyce moves away from receptions of Gildas's authority and returns to Gildas's own authority as a monastic figure, exploring the ways in which *De Excidio* engages with the monastic antecedents of Jerome, Cassian, and Augustine. Joyce identifies Gildas's intervention as his engagement with anointed Christian kings, rather than with Roman emperors like his predecessors.

In chapter four, Joyce argues that in his letters to Gregory the Great, Columbanus invokes the authority of Gildas in his criticism of corrupt churchmen, particularly in the heresy of simony. While Joyce admits that it is unclear whether or not Gregory actually

read Gildas, he argues that Columbanus wrote with the expectation that Gregory was familiar with Gildas, using *De Excidio* as a precedent for clerical authority on the subject of simony.

Similarly, chapter five on the collection of Irish canon law known as the *Hibernensis*, invokes Gildas's clerical authority on the subject of the insular tonsure (not addressed in *De Excidio*) and echoes his use of scripture in *De Excidio* and the *fragmenta*, linking Gildas's own authority with his use of biblical authority. This chapter is the weakest of the six, as at times Joyce seems to be reaching for connections: for example, one connection is not between the *Hibernensis's* use of Gildas, but instead in its use of the same biblical quotes that also appear in *De Excidio*, and on several occasions Joyce remarks on the absence of direct references to *De Excidio* (117, 120).

Joyce saves Gildas's most significant, as well as most well-known, reception for the final chapter. While Gildas was one of Bede's main sources in the *Historia Ecclesiastica's* for the advent of the Saxons in Britain, Joyce highlights his usage of *De Excidio* as a model of providential history amidst political and ecclesiastical anxiety. At the same time, Bede also updated Gildas's presentation of the island of Britannia to account for both his present-day realities in the eighth century and his mission as an eschatological writer. He argues that Bede repurposes Gildas's prophetic authority as a framework through which he is able to create his own providential history of the English church. He returns to Bede in the conclusion, using Bede as 'our most reliable lens' to the early Middle Ages and the reception of Gildas (154). While Joyce does use Bede as a bridge briefly connecting Gildas and the other medieval authors covered in the book, his emphasis in the conclusion is on 'Bede's dark age' and how new readings of Gildas illuminate it (157).

Joyce's approach to Gildas is firmly rooted in the Middle Ages, rather than in Late Antiquity, leaving certain gaps that do not take into account recent scholarship on Roman and post-Roman Britain, such as Robin Fleming's works *Britain After Rome* (Allen Lane, 2010) and *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300–525 CE* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), or James Gerrard's *The Ruin of Roman Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). While Gildas's respect for *romanitas* is remarked on in several places (28, 56-58, 77), Joyce does not further interrogate it or define his own conception of *romanitas*, referring to it as 'a *romanitas* that situates Britain as a *natio* amongst *nationes* and not directly dependent on Roman imperial authority' (35). As his primary focus is on Gildas's medieval reception rather than Gildas's own historical and cultural context, these gaps do not negatively impact the book, but can be frustrating for scholars approaching Gildas as a product of Late Antiquity rather than of the early Middle Ages. If Gildas's encounters with *romanitas* are not relevant to his early medieval reception, then why bring them up at all? Similarly, Joyce's focus on receptions of Gildas often comes at the cost of political and ecclesiastical complexity in the British Isles and the continent, though he addresses this lack early on in the book (9).

Throughout the book, Joyce's focus is on Gildas's titular legacy, particularly as an early medieval political theorist and its intersections with Christianity. By drawing on a wide survey of continental and insular narrators, Joyce presents numerous facets of

Gildas's reception in the early middle ages, ranging from his position as a prophetic writer to his advocacy for clerical criticism of secular authority. In moving away from the usual discussions of *De Excidio* as a historical text, Joyce offers a new interpretation of Gildas that recontextualizes both his authority and his works in the early medieval period. While the book may be unsatisfying for scholars of Late Antiquity or Gildas specialists due to its focus on Gildas's medieval reception rather than on Gildas himself, for medievalists it provides a fresh look at a controversial author and his often-fraught legacy. Textual scholars otherwise unfamiliar with Gildas will find this book a fascinating look at the interconnections between geographically far-flung early medieval writers. Hopefully, it will spur further scholarship that explores these connections and the reception of now-obscure authors who, like Gildas, are lesser known or often studied within only one context. I recommend this book to medievalists interested in insular-continental connections or in religious literary history, but scholars of post-Roman Britain may find themselves frustrated.

Katrina Knight
University of South Dakota