



De Excidio Patriae: civic discourse in Gildas' Britain

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This article explores the use of civic discourse in Gildas' De Excidio Britonum. It argues that such language and imagery functioned within a larger dialectical argument that exhorted readers to choose virtue over vice. Gildas assigned the Britons collective moral agency by styling them citizens (cives) of a shared homeland (patria) defined by cities (civitates). Due to the citizens' moral failings, however, this urban landscape had been compromised: enemies had destroyed the patria's cities, rendering it a place of desolation. Only a return to virtue could save the Britons from ruin and grant them access to heavenly Jerusalem.

Civic discourse remained a potent instrument for identity formation in the post-Roman west. Early medieval authors readily harnessed the persuasive power of the Latin terminology of the citizen and the city, as testified by such diverse sources as law codes, narrative histories, sermons, chant and epigraphy.¹ Even in the more de-urbanized regions on the periphery of the

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¹ For civic discourse in many such sources: C. Brélaz and E. Rose (eds), *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, forthcoming); M. Welton, 'The City Speaks: Cities, Citizens, and Civic Discourse in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages', *Traditio* 75 (2020), pp. 1–37; J.M. Jiménez, 'Urban Identity and Citizenship in the West between the Fifth and Seventh Centuries', *Al-Masāq* 32.1 (2020), pp. 87–108; C. Rapp and H.A. Drake (eds), *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World: Changing Contexts of Power and Identity* (Cambridge, 2014); and, with particular reference to high medieval chant, C. Saucier, *A Paradise of Priests: Singing the Civic and Episcopal Hagiography of Medieval Liège* (Rochester, 2014).

former Roman empire, civic discourse continued to structure the way people thought about their community, their duties and their moral obligations to each other and to God. This article explores the use of civic language and imagery in Gildas' *De Excidio Britonum*, one of the few narrative texts to have survived from early medieval Britain.²

Written in a singular style that had its roots in the rhetorical schools of the late Roman empire, *De Excidio* functions simultaneously as a historical narrative, a moral invective and a biblical florilegium.³ Its author was a deacon or minor ecclesiastic working in the British Isles somewhere between 480 and 550.⁴ Gildas introduces his work as an *epistola* in which he directly addresses British kings and clergymen, suggesting he anticipated his work would find an audience among the secular and religious elites of post-Roman Britain. The manuscript evidence shows that the text eventually came to circulate on the Continent as well as through the Isles.⁵ All the same, it cannot be ruled out that Gildas wrote *De Excidio* as an intellectual exercise, intended first and foremost for a small community of fellow literati.

Even as the date, location, and readership of Gildas' text remain disputed, scholars have subjected it to a steady stream of readings and interpretations. Gildas has been read as a social critic in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and late antique moralists like Orosius and Salvian.⁶ His work has been approached as an idiosyncratic origin story

² Unless otherwise indicated, we use the edition and translation by Michael Winterbottom: Gildas, *De excidio Britonum* (henceforth *DEB*), ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, Arthurian Period Sources 7 (Chichester, 1978).

³ The key study of Gildas' style is F. Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas, les destinées de la culture latine dans l'île de Bretagne au VI^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, 1987), pp. 580–93. See also, N. Wright, 'Gildas's Prose Style and Its Origins', in *idem* (ed.), *History and Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 107–28 and M. Lapidge, 'Gildas's Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain', in M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (eds), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 27–50.

⁴ In the absence of reliable external evidence, the work has to be dated on the basis of internal clues. The *locus classicus* is *DEB*, c. 26, in which Gildas links the so-called Battle of Badon to his own date of birth, neither of which he dates absolutely. See for a discussion of this passage with references to previous scholarship, G. Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 53–7. See also D. Woods, 'Gildas and the Mystery Cloud of 536–7', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 61 (2010), pp. 226–34, which takes *DEB*, c. 93: 'dense cloud and black night of their sin' (*densissima quaedam eorum nebula atraque peccaminum*) for a reference to the fog that is said have obscured the European skies in 536–7. The debate surrounding his geographical location is summarized by L. Larpi, *Prolegomena to a New Edition of Gildas Sapiens De excidio Britanniae* (Florence, 2012), pp. 11–13.

⁵ Larpi, *Prolegomena*, pp. 20–30.

⁶ S. Joyce, 'Gildas and his Prophecy for Britain', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 9 (2013), pp. 39–60; T. O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures: Observing the World through a Biblical Lens* (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 90–2, 111–24; R. Gardner, 'Gildas's New Testament Models', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 30 (1995), pp. 1–12; N. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 7–34. See also K. George, 'Gildas's *De excidio Britonum*' and the Early British Church (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 79–109 who argues that Gildas was specifically concerned with advancing a point about doctrine.

that served to position the Britons in the increasingly ethnicized political landscape of the post-Roman world.⁷ Lastly, Gildas has been read as the earliest insular narrator of the continental migrations to Britain that gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.⁸ On the whole, this article has most affinity with the first of these three approaches: it seeks to understand Gildas not as a historian but as a rhetor arguing a moral case. In brief, Gildas argued that Britain's past and present tribulations were the result of its sinfulness and that the only way to avoid further suffering was to effect a change in behaviour, especially on the part of those in charge.

This article explores how Gildas invoked the language of cities and citizenship in support of this case.⁹ It will advance three points. First, for Gildas, as for his Roman and biblical models, the fate of cities and citizens was closely connected. Gildas situates citizens (*cives*) within a homeland (*patria*), where they live, or are supposed to live, in cities (*civitates, urbes, coloniae*). Gildas applies this civic framework to decry the past and present state of the Britons as well as to envision their eventual salvation in the heavenly Jerusalem. Second, this civic framework was inextricably bound to virtue. The purpose of using such language was not to suggest that the inhabitants of Britain should identify as Romans or Roman citizens, but that they should see themselves as members of a providential community whose past, present and future condition was and would be decided on the basis of its moral conduct. The final point is that the above civic language derived much of its power and salience from being opposed to what might be called un-civic terms and imagery: invasions by outside peoples (*barbari, hostes*), scenes of burning cities, ongoing civil wars (*bella civilia*), and even a veritable menagerie of animal metaphors used to describe Britain's external and internal enemies.

Rather than treating each of these components in isolation, this article analyses how Gildas manipulated the constituent components

⁷ S. Schustereder, *Strategies of Identity Construction: The Writings of Gildas, Aneirin and Bede* (Göttingen, 2015), pp. 65–108; D. Dumville, 'Post-Colonial Gildas: A First Essay', *Quaestio insularis* 7 (2007), pp. 1–21; A. Plassmann, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin, 2006), pp. 36–51.

⁸ E. Pace, 'Walls and Withdrawals: Gildas' Version of the End of Roman Britain', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 11 (2015), pp. 17–40; E.A. Thompson, 'Gildas and the History of Britain', *Britannia* 10 (1979), pp. 203–26. See also Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*, pp. 188–94, who reinterprets Gildas' narrative as part of a larger argument for a revised chronology of the *adventus Saxonum*.

⁹ For previous scholarship that has noted the civic character of Gildas' work, R. Williams, *Jerusalem, Rome and Llantwit Major. Cultural Identities in Post-Roman Britain*, Classical Association Presidential Address (Watford, 2018), pp. 4–6; J. Harland, 'Rethinking Ethnicity and 'Otherness' in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Worlds* 5 (2017), pp. 113–42, at p. 122; Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*, p. 167; P. Turner, 'Identity in Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 58 (2009), pp. 29–48, at p. 32; Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio*, pp. 560–1.

of civic discourse throughout his *De Excidio* into each successive stage of his moral narrative. As will become evident, Gildas did not confine his use of civic language and imagery to any particular section of his work: it is present throughout, from the opening prologue to his concluding prayer. After a concise exploration of the classical and biblical roots of civic discourse, we will roughly follow the rhetorical order of Gildas' work, as he progresses from the fallen cities of post-Roman Britain to her present leaders preying on the citizens entrusted to their care. Our discussion of Gildas will conclude with his call for Britain's *cives* to make the collective choice either to suffer the destructive consequences of their current path or to head his admonition to follow the precepts of civic virtue and become citizens of heavenly Jerusalem.

I. Civic discourse

In using such terms as *civis* and *patria*, Gildas tapped into a rich and complex language founded upon both Roman and Biblical traditions. As a citizen of Rome, the *civis Romanus* had a legal status that conferred rights, privileges and protection, including access to Roman private law and the right (and duty) to participate in Rome's political institutions.¹⁰ This citizenship was formally tied to a city, Rome. However, as Roman rule expanded, citizenship status was gradually extended to other urban communities, first to her Latin allies, then to the cities of Italy, and eventually, in AD 212, to all free inhabitants of the empire.¹¹ This meant that from early on, the vast majority of Roman citizens were neither living in Rome nor participating in its civic bodies and offices. While dual citizenship was technically not allowed before the Principate, Roman citizenship was never expected to blot out local ties and duties.¹² The Roman citizen had two *patria*e, in the words of Cicero, one of birth

¹⁰ See most recently A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Civitas Romana: The Fluidity of an Ideal', *Al-Masāq* 32.1 (2020), pp. 18–33. Key publications include C. Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome* (London, 1980) and A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1973).

¹¹ M. Lavan, 'The Foundation of Empire? The Spread of Roman Citizenship from the Fourth Century BCE to the Third Century CE', in K. Berthelot and J. Price (eds), *In the Crucible of Empire: The Impact of Roman Citizenship upon Greeks, Jews and Christians* (Leuven, 2019), pp. 21–54; C. Ando, 'Introduction: Sovereignty, Territoriality and Universalism in the Aftermath of Caracalla', in *idem* (ed.), *Citizenship and Empire in Europe 200–1900* (Stuttgart, 2016), pp. 7–27; R. Mathisen, 'Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani: Concepts of Citizenship and the Legal Identity of Barbarians in the Later Roman Empire', *The American Historical Review* 111.4 (2006), pp. 1011–40; P. Garnsey, 'Roman Citizenship and Roman Law in the Late Empire', in S. Swain and M. Edwards (eds), *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 133–55.

¹² S.E. Porter, *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 321–3.

and one of law.¹³ Some centuries later, the poet Ausonius would in fact claim citizenship of two *patriae*, that of Rome and that of his native Bordeaux.¹⁴ He refused to place one before the other.

Another tradition laid claim to civic language: Christianity. The Old Testament was characterized by cities and, to a lesser extent, citizens, and so too was the New Testament.¹⁵ The Apostle Paul admonished the Ephesians that with the coming of Christ, they were 'no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints', subverting the traditional Roman opposition between the citizen and the non-citizen or stranger.¹⁶ Patristic authors developed this line further. Writing to the pagan aristocrat Nectarius in 408 or 409, Augustine commended his compatriot on his devotion to his native town and *patria*, but also expressed the hope that Nectarius would become a 'citizen of a certain country beyond' (*supernae cuiusdam patriae . . . civem*).¹⁷ Some years later, Augustine would famously distinguish two cities and citizenships: that of the world (*civitas terrena*) and that of God (*civitas Dei*).¹⁸ The Christian should dwell as a stranger in the former, while aspiring towards citizenship of the latter.

¹³ Cicero, *De legibus* II.5: 'Ego mehercule et illi et omnibus municipibus duas esse censeo patrias, unam naturae, alteram civitatis: ut ille Cato, cum esset Tusculi natus, in populi Romani civitatem susceptus est, itaque cum ortu Tusculanus esset, civitate Romanus, habuit alteram loci patriam, alteram iuris.' See also Wallace-Hadrill, 'Civitas Romana', pp. 28–9. On the concept of *patria*, see E. Rose, 'Reconfiguring Civic Identity and Civic Participation in a Christianizing World: The Case of Sixth-Century Arles', in Brélaz and Rose (eds), *Civic Identity* (Turnhout, forthcoming); A.G. Peck, 'Haec Patria Est. The Conceptualisation, Function and Nature of Patria in the Roman World', Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick (2016).

¹⁴ Ausonius, *Ordo urbium nobilium*, ed. C. Schenkl, *MGH AA* 5.2 (Berlin, 1883), XVIII, ll. 166–8, p. 103: where the poet famously claims to be a consul in both cities, suggesting citizenship.

¹⁵ See e.g. the lemma 'city' in A. Dale *et al.* (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* 5 (Berlin, 2012), pp. 361–79. Cities appear throughout the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament of the Vulgate contains 889 references to *civitas* and 363 to *urbs*, while the New Testament has only 156 references to *civitas* and 2 to *urbs*. The term *civis* appears less frequently in both: 25 occurrences in the OT, with a particular concentration in Leviticus and II Maccabees, and 5 occurrences in the NT. For the Greek terminology of the city (*pólis*), the citizen (*polites*), and citizenship (*políteuma*) in the Bible and its continued impact in late antiquity, see C. Rapp, 'Monastic Jargon and Citizenship Language in Late Antiquity', *Al-Masāq* 32.1 (2020), pp. 54–63; C. Brélaz, *Philippe, colonie romaine d'Orient. Recherches d'histoire institutionnelle et sociale* (Athens, 2018), pp. 242–4; and Rose, 'Reconfiguring Civic Identity'.

¹⁶ Ephesians II.19: 'ergo iam non estis hospites et advenae sed estis cives sanctorum et domestici Dei'. See also B. Dunning, 'Strangers and Aliens No Longer: Negotiating Identity and Difference in Ephesians 2', *The Harvard Theological Review* 99.1 (2006), pp. 1–16 and *idem*, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2009), pp. 1–45.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Epistula*, no. 91. Augustine's correspondence with Nectarius is conveniently collected and translated in E. Atkins and R. Dodaro (eds), *Augustine: Political Writings* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 1–22.

¹⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XV.1. For Augustine's complex and at times ambiguous use of the term *civitas*, see C. Conybeare, 'The City of Augustine: On the Interpretation of *civitas*', in C. Harrison, C. Humfriss and B. Sandwell (eds), *Being Christian in Late Antiquity. A Festschrift for Gillian Clark* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 139–55.

Christianity, however, did not just subvert Roman ideas of citizenship, but also appropriated and transformed them. This occurred in part within the framework of the Roman state itself. Starting with Constantine, the Christian emperors experimented with making orthodoxy a precondition for Roman citizenship: increasingly, only a Catholic could be considered a full citizen under Roman law.¹⁹ Heretics, pagans and to a lesser extent Jews found themselves marginalized: they were deprived of civic rights and even physically banished from urban communities.²⁰

In the sixth-century world of Gildas, then, civic terminology could invoke a range of meanings and associations. In his contribution to the landmark volume *Gildas: New Approaches*, Neil Wright rightly emphasized that Gildas was not concerned with a particular region of Britain but with the island as a whole, which he treated as a single entity.²¹ His terminology certainly reflected this sense of unity. Yet contrary to the commonly accepted title of the work – *De Excidio Britonum* – Gildas' treatise is remarkably low on ethnic identifiers. The Britons are referred to by their ethnonym only twice in the entire work; their foremost adversary, the Saxons, only once.²² Instead, Gildas labelled the Britons as citizens (*cives*) of a single *patria* and that *patria* was Britain. Christopher Snyder further explored Gildas' 'socio-political language' within the wider context of late Roman and post-Roman British textual sources.²³ Calling attention to the frequent use of the term *civis* and, to a lesser extent, *patria* in such sources, Snyder documented two views of citizenship circulating in Britain at this time. There were authors like Patrick and Gildas who used *cives* to refer to the Britons collectively, thereby expressing a desire for a politically and above all religiously unified Britain, at times referred to as their

¹⁹ C. Lo Nero, 'Christiana Dignitas: New Christian Criteria for Citizenship in the Later Roman Empire', *Medieval Encounters* 7 (2001), pp. 146–64; M. Salzman, 'The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the Theodosian Code', *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 42 (1993), pp. 362–78.

²⁰ R. Flierman and E. Rose, 'Banished from the Company of the Good. Christians and Aliens in Fifth-Century Rome', *Al-Masāq* 32.1 (2020), pp. 64–86; M. Escibano Paño, 'The Social Exclusion of Heretics in Codex Theodosianus XVI', in J.-J. Aubert and P. Blanchard (eds), *Droit, religion et société dans le Code Théodosien* (Geneva, 2009), pp. 39–66; C. Humfress, 'Citizens and Heretics. Late Roman Lawyers on Christian Heresy', in E. Iricinschi and H. Zellentin (eds), *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2008), pp. 128–42.

²¹ N. Wright, 'Gildas's Geographical Perspective: Some Problems', in Lapidge and Dumville (eds), *Gildas: New Approaches*, pp. 85–105, at p. 102.

²² *DEB*, c. 6: 'quod Britannii nec in bello fortes sint nec in pace fideles'; c. 20: 'gemitus Britannorum'; c. 23: 'illi nefandi nominis Saxones'.

²³ C. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400–600* (Stroud, 1998), p. xvii, with pp. 58–65 on *patria* and pp. 73–80 on *cives*.

patria.²⁴ In inscriptions from this period, however, we also encounter more local notions of citizenship: a late fifth-century inscription found on a pillar stone in Penmachno, Wales, famously mentions one Cantiorix, a 'citizen of Gwynedd' (*Venedotis cives*).²⁵ More recently, Peter Turner stressed the distinct character of Gildas' approach: he was claiming a unified British identity at a time of political fragmentation, when such a view would have been 'far from universally shared'.²⁶ For Turner, Gildas' use of the term *cives* was thus first and foremost about assigning to the Britons a sense of 'collective destiny and responsibility'.²⁷ Beyond their collective agency, the Britons' most distinguishing feature, in Turner's interpretation, was that they were not Romans. In order to uphold his view of British unity, Gildas consistently distinguished the Britons from the Romans in his narrative and consciously refrained from anchoring British identity – civic or otherwise – in Britain's former status as a Roman province and diocese.

As outlined in the introduction, this article will uncover three further dimensions of Gildas' civic terminology that have so far remained underexplored. First, that for Gildas, the citizen (*civis*) was not just linked to Britain, their *patria*, but also to the city (*civitas*, *urbs*, *colonia*). From a Roman perspective, this connection was self-evident: citizenship in the Roman world – whether local or Roman – had always been rooted in membership of a city. When Cicero and Ausonius spoke of two *patriae*, they referred to two cities. Christian conceptions of the citizen were no different, though here the most important of the two *patriae* was the heavenly Jerusalem, visualized in Revelation as a walled city with twelve gates, forming a perfect – and typically Roman – square.²⁸

Here a second crucial aspect presents itself: for Gildas, being a *civis* was closely tied up with virtue. The link between citizenship and virtue was ubiquitous in the work of Rome's republican and imperial historians, who made exemplars of virtuous conduct part of the very fabric of the Roman past: ideal citizens showcased wisdom (*prudentia*), courage (*fortitudo*), loyalty (*fides*), steadfastness (*constantia*), self-control

²⁴ Snyder mainly emphasizes the geographical unity expressed by the term *patria* when used by Gildas and Patrick: the *patria* as the island of Britain. See Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants*, pp. 62–4, 79; see also Patrick, *Epistula ad Corotici milites*, ed. L. Bieler, *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Dublin, 1993), c. 1, p. 91 ('tradidi patriam et parentes'); c. 2, p. 92 ('non dico civibus meis neque civibus sanctorum Romanorum sed civibus daemioniorum').

²⁵ Ffestiniog 1, in N. Edwards (ed.), *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales 3* (Cardiff, 2013), pp. 385–9.

²⁶ Turner, 'Identity in Gildas', p. 36.

²⁷ Turner, 'Identity in Gildas', p. 32.

²⁸ Revelation XXI.10–21. Thus F. Havervield, *Ancient Town Planning* (Oxford, 1913), p. 55.

(*temperantia*) and piety (*pietas*).²⁹ Virtue was also enshrined in Roman law: convicted criminals and those engaged in morally dubious occupations like gladiators, prostitutes and undertakers were considered second-rate citizens and did not enjoy full civic rights.³⁰ Christianity redefined rather than replaced Roman civic virtues: piety and loyalty were now due above all to God.³¹ However, in the post-Roman Christian world the performance of virtuous behaviour continued to have concrete consequences on earth. Gildas reserved many of his most vitriolic condemnations for the tyranny of kings, the idiocy of priests, and the cowardliness of soldiers.³²

Third, Gildas' use of civic language often derived its salience through opposition. In contrast to urbanized citizens, bestial enemies attacked and burned Britain's cities, turning their *patria* into an untamed wilderness. Opposite the joys of the celestial Jerusalem loomed the utter desolation of *tartarus*.³³ While particular to his immediate context, Gildas' ideas of the wilderness and vice in opposition to cities and virtue reflected a broader dialectic in late antique civic discourse. Writing to a local urban administrator in the 520s, Cassiodorus made a point of equating cities with civilization: 'wild beasts look for fields and forests, yet humans cherish their paternal hearths above all things'.³⁴ It was in cities, also, that the virtuous man could show his merit:

Let the learned man strive for [that place] where he can live a life of renown; let the prudent man not eschew the company of his fellow men in which he knows he can find praise. Otherwise, his virtues are denied fame if their merits remain unknown to others.³⁵

In many ways, Cassiodorus and Gildas inhabited opposite worlds. The former lived at the urban heart of the most Romanized of the successor kingdoms, whereas the latter wrote at the remote edge of the former

²⁹ Being first and foremost a reflection of Rome's political culture, Roman ideals of virtue changed somewhat under the Principate, see J.W. Atkins, *Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 63–90. For a study of the virtues in the Middle Ages, see I. Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (Leiden, 2011).

³⁰ J. Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen* (London, 1993).

³¹ As argued in the context of late Roman invective by R. Flowers, *Emperors and Bishops in Late Roman Invective* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 101–6.

³² *DEB*, c. 27: 'reges habet Britannia, sed tyrannos'; c. 66: 'sacerdotes habet Britannia, sed insipientes'; c. 19: 'acies, segis ad pugnam, inhabilis ad fugam'.

³³ For *tartarus*, see *DEB*, cc. 26, 29, 34, 36, 66, 68, 109.

³⁴ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA 12* (Berlin, 1894), VIII.31, p. 259: 'feris datum est agros silvasque quaerere, hominibus autem focos patrios supra cuncta diligere'.

³⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, VIII.31, p. 260: 'quaerat eruditus, ubi possit existere gloriosus: prudens frequentiam non respuat hominum, in qua se novit esse laudandum. alioquin virtutibus fama tollitur, si earum merita in hominibus nesciantur'.

Roman empire. Yet for both men alike, the situational context of *virtus* and the communal nature of its performance and reception were vital. For Cassiodorus, *virtus* and public urban life were co-dependent; one could not fully exist without the other. Gildas strengthened this connection by illuminating its dialectical counterpart, namely the consequences of vice, which would destroy the city and lead the civic community into the wilderness.

II. Splendid cities and sinful citizens

Civic language and imagery dominate the historical section of *De Excidio*, starting with the opening chapter, which offers a physical description of 'the island of Britain'.³⁶ This description is decidedly positive, a catalogue of features that make the island a potential paradise. Gildas speaks of bountiful fields, mountainsides fit for grazing animals, many-hued flowers, clear springs, and gently murmuring streams. Such natural splendour is preceded by an equally laudatory description of the island's urban features:

[Britain] is ornamented with twenty eight cities (*civitates*) and a number of castles, and well equipped with fortifications – walls, castellated towers, gates and houses, whose sturdily built roofs reared menacingly skyward.³⁷

Understandably, this passage has generated a good amount of speculation: to which cities did Gildas refer and how did he arrive at the number of twenty-eight?³⁸ While some sections of Gildas' description of Britain can be traced back to Orosius, this specific passage has no clear textual precedent.³⁹ It has been suggested that Gildas took his information from a late Roman administrative document, something akin to the *Notitia Galliarum*, which listed and numbered the *civitates* of early fifth-century Gaul.⁴⁰ If so, this would

³⁶ *DEB*, c. 3.

³⁷ *DEB*, c. 3 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 16): 'bis denis bisque quaternis civitatibus ac nonnullis castellis, murorum turrium serratarum portarum domorum, quarum culmina minaci proceritate porrecta in edito forti compage pangebantur, munitionibus non improbabiliter instructis decorata'.

³⁸ Most recently, A. Breeze, "'Historia Brittonum' and Britain's Twenty-Eight Cities', *Journal of Literary Onomastics* 5.1 (2016), pp. 1–16.

³⁹ Only the phrase 'domorum, quarum culmina minaci proceritate' seems to have been adopted from Orosius, *Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem* II.6.10; with I.2.77 mirroring Gildas' description of the topographical characteristics of Britain. See also N. Wright, 'Gildas's Reading: A Survey', *Sacris erudiri* 32 (1991), pp. 121–62, at p. 126; and Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio*, pp. 81–2.

⁴⁰ As already suggested by C.E. Stevens, 'Gildas and the Civitates of Britain', *The English Historical Review* 52 (1937), pp. 193–203, at pp. 194–5.

mean that he was not just referring to any British settlements, but those cities which under the late Roman empire had been recognized as administrative centres or *civitas*-capitals.⁴¹

One can ask, at the same time, whether the number and historical origin of cities in Britain were really the principal issues at stake for Gildas. Despite the undeniable specificity of the number, Gildas never sets out to identify the cities he mentions in Chapter 3. Throughout the historical section, he remains far more interested in Britain's urban landscape as a whole than in any specific city. He talks almost exclusively about Britain's cities in the plural or collectively.⁴² It should be noted, furthermore, that the cities as introduced in Chapter 3 have an idyllic quality to them. They are ahistorical: Gildas does not explain when they were built or by whom, nor indeed does he in any way associate them with the Romans, who are soon to make their appearance on the scene. They are an intrinsic part of the landscape. This, in fact, may well be Gildas' principal point: in its ideal, pristine state, Britain was to be understood as a land of cities, and splendid cities at that.

Having sketched Britain's physical features, Gildas then introduces its inhabitants. 'Ever since it was first inhabited', he declaims, 'Britain has been ungratefully rebelling, stiff-necked and haughty, now against God, now against its own citizens (*civibus*), sometimes even against kings from abroad and their subjects.'⁴³ What follows is not a list of natural splendours but a catalogue of vices:

What daring of man can, now or in the future, be more foul and wicked than to deny fear to God, charity to good citizens (*bonis civibus*), honour to those placed in higher authority [. . .] to break faith with man and God: to cast away fear of heaven and earth, and to be ruled each man by his own contrivances and lusts?⁴⁴

⁴¹ Whether there ever were twenty-eight such *civitates* in late Roman Britain can neither be confirmed nor denied. The number seems somewhat high compared to the better-documented early empire, see e.g. A. Rogers, 'The Development of Towns', in M. Millett, L. Revell and A. Moore (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 741–66.

⁴² The exception is *DEB*, c. 10, which mentions Verulanum and Caerleon in relation to its martyrs.

⁴³ *DEB*, c. 4 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 17): 'Haec erecta cervice et mente, ex quo inhabitata est, nunc deo, interdum civibus, nonnumquam etiam transmarinis regibus et subiectis ingrata consurgit.'

⁴⁴ *DEB*, c. 4 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 17): 'quid enim deformius quidque iniquius potest humanis ausibus vel esse vel intromitti negotium quam deo timorem, bonis civibus caritatem, in altiore dignitate positus absque fidei detrimento debitum denegare honorem et frangere divino sensui humanoque fidem, et abiecto caeli terraeque metu propriis adinventionibus alique[m] et libidinibus regi?'

The contrast with the previous chapter is striking and unsettling. Within a short space, we have moved from a Britain characterized by lofty cities to a Britain populated with sinful citizens. As adumbrated in the previous section, citizens and cities for Gildas were inextricably intertwined. The sin of Britain's citizens could not but mar the face of her cities. Indeed, the urban consequences of vice were felt in Gildas' present, as becomes evident when he sets out his methodological parameters. He will not deal, he claims, with the 'ancient errors' committed in pagan times, though the physical remnants of this period can still be seen today 'in and outside the deserted city walls' (*intra vel extra deserta moenia*).⁴⁵ Furthermore, he will have to rely on outside reports for his historical account, because 'the writings of our country, such as there were, have been burned by the fire of the enemies or carried away by the citizens as they went into exile overseas'.⁴⁶ Clearly, for Gildas, the unspoilt splendour of Britain had been compromised.

Gildas starts his history of Britannia with the arrival of the Romans. Their conquest of the island allows Gildas to move from his overall rhetorical argument about British vice to specific historical manifestations of their cowardice and infidelity. Intriguingly, Gildas neither labels the Romans as *cives* nor associates them with the creation of Britain's cities. Civic discourse, and urban structures, only resurface in *De Excidio* with the arrival of Christianity. Christ's light radiates from the highest citadel of heaven, his martyrs are citizens of Romano-British cities, and their mutilated bodies adorn the gates of heavenly Jerusalem.⁴⁷ Here, Gildas introduces an important link between terrestrial and spiritual citizens that he will augment later on in his invectives against Britain's kings and clergy.⁴⁸ As the historical narrative progresses, Gildas maintains his focus on civic discourse by confronting his readers with a series of moral crises that manifest themselves through the destruction of civic structures such as walls and the violent ravages of the unruly wilderness.

Walls, for Gildas, often reflect the virtuous probity of the British citizens, while at the same time, their destruction comes as a consequence of these same citizens' descent into vice.⁴⁹ In his

⁴⁵ *DEB*, c. 4.

⁴⁶ *DEB*, c. 4 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 17): 'non tam ex scriptis patriae scriptorumve monumentis, quippe quae, vel si qua fuerint, aut ignibus hostium exusta aut civium exilii classe longius deportata'.

⁴⁷ *DEB*, cc. 8–11.

⁴⁸ See section III below.

⁴⁹ Gildas mentions two walls: a turf wall and a stone wall, which can be identified with the Antonine Wall and Hadrian's Wall respectively, though Gildas confuses their chronology. N. Higham, 'Gildas, Roman Walls, and British Dykes', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22 (1991), pp. 1–14.

description of the constant threat of the Picts and the Scots, Gildas details how the Romans sent a legion to free the Britons from these northern incursions.⁵⁰ In particular, the Britons were instructed to construct a wall across Britannia, which would link the two seas and, ‘properly manned, would scare away the enemy (*hostibus*) and act as protection for the citizens (*civibus*)’.⁵¹ However, as the Britons did not act as citizens, but instead as a ‘leaderless and irrational mob’, the wall was constructed of turf and not stone, and therefore neither deterred the *hostes* nor protected the *cives*.⁵²

In a subsequent episode concerning walls, Gildas spells out the consequences of moral failure still more clearly. After the Britons sent a second delegation to Rome, so Gildas claims, the Romans refused to come to Britannia, announcing that they would no longer send their soldiers. They declared to the *patria* that she must stand alone, for her ‘enemies (*gentibus*) were no stronger than herself, unless she chose to relax in laziness and torpor’.⁵³ Before abandoning the Britons, the Romans did leave them with two means of defence: manuals (*exemplaria*) for martial training and a new stone wall. This wall was, according to Gildas, ‘quite different from the first’.⁵⁴ It ran across the island ‘from sea to sea, linking towns (*urbes*) that happened to have been sited there out of fear of the enemy (*hostes*)’.⁵⁵ Unlike the previous wall, then, the Britons possessed all that was required to keep their *patria* safe: a stone wall, martial precepts, and above all an exhortation to virtue. The question was whether the Britons would enact these virtuous precepts. Their moment of truth soon arrived. Emboldened by the news that the Romans would not defend Britannia, the Picts and Scots returned ‘like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm’, and seized all the land north of the wall.⁵⁶ Gildas’ verdict is merciless: the wall would have held back these bestial hordes, if not for the laziness of Britain’s defenders. Those soldiers stationed along the wall ‘were too lazy to fight, and too

⁵⁰ *DEB*, c. 15.

⁵¹ *DEB*, c. 15 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 21): ‘ut esset arcendis hostibus turba instructus terrori civibusque tutamini’.

⁵² *DEB*, c. 15 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 21): ‘vulgo irrationabili absque rectore’.

⁵³ *DEB*, c. 18 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 22): ‘et gentibus nequaquam sibi fortioribus, nisi segnitia et torpore dissolveretur’.

⁵⁴ *DEB*, c. 18.

⁵⁵ *DEB*, c. 18 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 22): ‘a mari usque ad mare inter urbes, quae ibidem forte ob metum hostium collocatae fuerant’.

⁵⁶ *DEB*, c. 19 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 23): ‘quasi in alto Titane incalescenteque caumate de artissimis foraminum caverniculis fusci vermiculorum cunei’.

unwieldy to flee; they were foolish and frightened, and sat about day and night, rotting away in their folly'.⁵⁷

Due to the soldiers' folly, according to Gildas, the citizens of Britannia suffered immensely. There was no respite 'from the barbed spears flung by their naked opponents, which tore the wretched citizens from the walls (*miserrimi cives de muris*) and dashed them to the ground'.⁵⁸ Gildas augments the destruction suffered by the citizens at the hands of their feral enemies by detailing the abandonment of their wall and their cities:

The citizens abandoned the towns and the high wall. Once again they had to flee; once again they were scattered, more irretrievably than usual; once again there were enemy assaults and massacres more cruel. The pitiable citizens were torn apart by their foe like lambs by the butcher; their life became like that of beasts of the field.⁵⁹

Gildas characterizes the *cives* of Britain not only as abandoning their civic structures, but also as abandoning themselves. They became like the wild *hostes*, reduced to looting each other and living off the land in order to survive. Furthermore, even when the massacres ceased, the Britons did not learn their lesson, for as Gildas argued, 'the enemies' audacity ceased – but not our people's wickedness. The enemy retreated from the citizens, but the citizens did not retreat from their own sins'.⁶⁰

The period of peace combined with an influx of luxurious goods led in Gildas' eyes to a 'new and more virulent famine' that spread across Britannia: *luxuria*.⁶¹ As the *hostes* had spread over the island like wild packs of animals or worms warming themselves in the sun, so now luxury 'grew with a vigorous growth'.⁶² Such flourishing of vice tempted Gildas to peer briefly into his own time. In the wake of *luxuria*, he declaims, other vices rushed in, 'especially those that are the downfall of every good condition nowadays too, the hatred of truth

⁵⁷ *DEB*, c. 19 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 23): 'segnis ad pugnam, inhabilis ad fugam, trementibus praecordiis inepta, quae diebus ac noctibus stupido sedili marcebat'.

⁵⁸ *DEB*, c. 19 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 23): 'non cessant uncinata nudorum tela, quibus miserrimi cives de muris tracti solo allidebantur'.

⁵⁹ *DEB*, c. 19 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 23): 'relictis civitatibus muroque celso iterum civibus fugae, iterum dispersiones solito desperabiliores, iterum ab hoste insectationes, iterum strages accelerantur crudeliores; et sicut agni a lanionibus, ita deflendi cives ab inimicis discerpuntur ut commoratio eorum ferarum assimilaretur agrestium'.

⁶⁰ *DEB*, c. 20 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 24): 'Quievit parumper inimicorum audacia nec tamen nostrorum malitia; recesserunt hostes a civibus nec cives a suis sceleribus.'

⁶¹ *DEB*, c. 21.

⁶² *DEB*, c. 21 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 24): 'crevit etenim germine praepollenti'.

and its champions and the love of falsehood and its contrivers, the taking up of evil instead of good, the adoration of wickedness instead of kindness, the desire for darkness instead of sun, the welcoming of Satan as an angel of light'.⁶³

Gildas intensifies his association between vice and the destruction of the *patria* and its *cives* in his subsequent narrative on the coming of the Saxons. Gildas lampoons the council that had been assembled to decide how to stem the attacks from outside *gentes*.⁶⁴ Together with their proud tyrant, the council members 'were struck blind' and instead of devising a plan to protect their island, these leaders instead opened the doors to Saxon mercenaries.⁶⁵ Gildas' phrasing at this point is crucial: this was the *excidium patriae*.⁶⁶ The people who were invited in to protect the country turned out to be its ruin. The Saxons, variously characterized as wild lions, dogs, enemies and barbarians, first 'falsely represent[ed] themselves as soldiers ready to undergo extreme dangers for their excellent hosts', but soon turned on the Britons themselves.⁶⁷ According to Gildas, the Saxon threat – 'the sprig of iniquity, the root of bitterness, the virulent plant, worthy of our own deeds' – sprung directly from the soil of Britannia's own crimes, and wrecked righteous chaos throughout the island.⁶⁸ In his description of this devastation, Gildas highlighted the utter destruction of Britannia's cities and her citizens by the Saxons:

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants – church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames cracked. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with the purple crust of congealed blood,

⁶³ *DEB*, c. 21 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 24): 'et praecipue, quod et nunc quoque in ea totius boni evertit statum, odium veritatis cum assertoribus amorque mendacii cum suis fabricatoribus, susceptio mali pro bono, veneratio nequitiae pro benignitate, cupido tenebrarum pro sole, exceptio Satanae pro angelo lucis'.

⁶⁴ *DEB*, c. 22.

⁶⁵ *DEB*, c. 23.

⁶⁶ *DEB*, c. 23.

⁶⁷ *DEB*, c. 23 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 26): 'veluti militibus et magna, ut mentiebantur, discrimina pro bonis hospitibus subituris'.

⁶⁸ *DEB*, c. 23 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 26): 'germen iniquitatis, radix amaritudinis, virulenta plantatio nostris condigna meritis'.

looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.⁶⁹

The very fabric of the cities, according to Gildas, was comprised of the citizens and the buildings alike; through the Britons' moral failings, both crumbled together. Whereas previous attacks merely had driven citizens from their cities, the Saxon attacks witnessed the complete annihilation of the civic landscape. All the cities' fundamental components – their defences, their streets and squares, their sacred spaces, their citizens – were irreparably violated.

Gildas implores his readers to learn from these scenes of destruction and the errors that caused them. After describing the brutal annihilation of civic space, Gildas acknowledges that the Britons eventually had some measure of success against the Saxons, as 'victory went now to the citizens (*cives*), now to the enemies (*hostes*)'.⁷⁰ However, even as the Saxon threat was managed, 'the cities of our land are not populated even now as they once were; right to the present they are deserted, in ruins and unkempt, for external wars have ceased, yet civil wars have not'.⁷¹ Once again, Gildas compounds a scene of urban destruction with a reference to Britain's present state, forcing his readers to examine their own surroundings and see therein a confirmation of their moral turpitude.⁷² Critically, Gildas starts to pivot at this point from the external threats presented by historical *hostes* to the domestic upheavals fuelled by those leading the *patria*: the court and the clergy. The remainder of *De Excidio* in fact consisted of two extended harangues against Britain's secular and religious leadership. It is to these harangues and their civic idiom that we now turn.

⁶⁹ *DEB*, c. 24 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 27): 'ita ut cunctae coloniae crebris arietibus omnesque coloni cum praepositis ecclesiae, cum sacerdotibus ac populo, mucronibus undique micantibus ac flammis crepitantibus, simul solo strenerentur, et miserabili visu in medio platearum ima turrium edito cardine evulsarum murorumque celsorum saxa, sacra altaria, cadaverum frusta, crustis ac si gelantibus purpurei cruoris tecta, velut in quodam horrendo torculari mixta viderentur'. Note that in a Roman context, *colonia* was a technical term that referred to a colony of Roman citizens (and by extension, a strongly 'Romanized' settlement). There were at least three documented *coloniae* in Britain by the end of the first century AD: Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln. York also appears to have obtained the status by the third century. See Rogers, 'The Development of Towns', pp. 742–3.

⁷⁰ *DEB*, c. 26: 'ex eo tempore nunc cives, nunc hostes, vincebant'.

⁷¹ *DEB*, c. 26 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 28): 'civitates patriae inhabitantur; sed desertae dirutaeque hactenus squalent, cessantibus licet externis bellis, sed non civilibus'.

⁷² See also the argument put forward with regard to early medieval Gaul by B. Effros, 'Monuments and Memory: Repossessing Ancient Remains in Early Medieval Gaul', in M. de Jong and F. Theuvs (eds), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 93–118, at pp. 100–1: 'The few ruins identified in hagiographical and historical compositions of the sixth and seventh centuries in Gaul pointed to consciousness of their potential for manipulation in clerical discourse.'

III. Tyrants and gluttons

Gildas manipulates the dialectic character embedded within the language of virtue and vice in his opening descriptions of Britain's kings and clergy.⁷³ While he attacks them one after the other, Gildas connects these complaints through stylistic parallelism based on the rhetorical device of antithesis, which serves to suggest that the conduct of kings and the conduct of clergy are interdependent on each other.⁷⁴ 'Britain has kings', Gildas acknowledges, 'but they are tyrants.'⁷⁵ For each and every virtue that kings should internalize, exhibit, and encourage in their people, Gildas finds Britain's kings consciously choosing the opposite, with far-reaching consequences: regnal mismanagement, murder, and civil war. Gildas' attack on the ecclesiastical elite has a similar tenor: 'Britain has clergymen', he avers, 'but they are fools.'⁷⁶ As in his diatribe against Britain's kings, Gildas accuses these men of inverting each of their religious responsibilities, for 'they do not look to the good of their people, but to the filling of their own bellies. They have church buildings, but go to them for the sake of base profit. They teach the people – but by giving them the worst of examples, vice and bad character.'⁷⁷

The connection between these two sections goes beyond stylistic parallelism: royal and clerical vice are shown to be codependent and reinforce each other. The failure of priests to instruct Britain's citizens 'by word and example' corresponds directly with the failure of kings to discern good counsel and good men with whom they should surround themselves.⁷⁸ In his diatribe against Maglocunus, Gildas chastises the king for tuning out the melodious strains of the church, and instead only listening to the 'empty praises of yourself from the mouths of criminals who grate on the hearing like raving hucksters – mouths stuffed with lies and liable to bedew bystanders with their foaming phlegm'.⁷⁹ For Gildas, these raving hucksters include Britain's clergymen. They perpetrate the very vice of falsehood and flattery that

⁷³ *DEB*, c. 27 and c. 66.

⁷⁴ T. Charles-Edward, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford, 2013), p. 205.

⁷⁵ *DEB*, c. 27 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): 'Reges habet Britannia, sed tyrannos.'

⁷⁶ *DEB*, c. 66 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 52): 'Sacerdotes habet Britannia, sed insipientes.'

⁷⁷ *DEB*, c. 66 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 52): 'Quippe non commoda plebi providentes, sed proprii plenitudinem ventris quaerentes; ecclesiae domus habentes, sed turpis lucri gratia eas adeuntes; populos docentes, sed praebendo pessima exempla, vitia malosque mores.'

⁷⁸ *DEB*, c. 76 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 60): 'tam exempla quam verba docentes'.

⁷⁹ *DEB*, c. 34 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 34): 'Arrecto aurium auscultantur captu non dei laudes canora Christi tironum voce suaviter modulante neumaque ecclesiasticae melodiae, sed propriae, quae nihil sunt, furciferorum referto mendaciis simulque spumanti flemate proximos quosque roscidaturo, praekonum ore ritu bacchantium concrepante.'

the kings encourage at their courts. In his long list of biblical and saintly exempla, Gildas rhetorically enquires amongst his clerical audience, 'which of you, who slouch rather than sit lawfully in the priestly seat, was cast out of the council of the wicked like the holy apostles and beaten with diverse rods . . . ?'⁸⁰ None of the priests, Gildas implies, could claim that they had spoken truth to power, none could claim that they had proffered good counsel and suffered the consequences.⁸¹ Gildas even goes on to equate Britain's priests with the devil. 'You, like that Lucifer who was cast out of heaven', he declaims, 'you thrive on verbiage, not on power'.⁸² Just as the tyrant eschews good counsel for spittle-laden flattery, so too does the corrupt priest shirk his responsibility to correct his people and king.

Civic discourse figures prominently in the complaints laid before the British kings and clergymen. For instance, Gildas asks Aurelius Caninus, 'Do you not hate peace in our country (*pacem patriae*) as though it were some noxious snake? In your unjust thirst for civil war and constant plunder, are you not shutting the gates of heavenly peace and consolation (*portas pacis ac refrigerii*) to your own soul?'⁸³ These two rhetorical questions explicitly link the peace of the *patria* to the city of heaven, guarded by the *portas* of peace. The second statement, in particular, also links civil war to plunder. This reiterates a connection first introduced at the close of the historical section, where Gildas acknowledged that while Britain's cities had been destroyed by outside enemies, its present state of ruin was due to civil war.⁸⁴ By instigating such war, Aurelius Caninus thus failed as a virtuous ruler and guardian of his kingdom, while also jeopardizing his soul's entrance into the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

On earth, the kings are not only acting as tyrants; they are acting as non-citizens. Their actions directly correspond to the actions of the *gentes* and *hostes* detailed by Gildas in his previous chapters. One striking parallel occurs in Gildas' diatribe against the tyrant Constantine. As with the other kings, and indeed the outside peoples,

⁸⁰ *DEB*, c. 73 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 58): 'Quis vestrum, qui torpetis potius quam sedetis legitime in sacerdotali sede, eiectus de consilio impiorum, post diversarum plagas virgarum ut sancti apostoli . . .'

⁸¹ On the importance of speaking truth to power, particularly in relation to civic language, M. de Jong, *Epitaph for an Era: Politics and Rhetoric in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 184 ff.; I. van Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 180–205; Flowers, *Emperors and Bishops*, pp. 55 ff.

⁸² *DEB*, c. 74 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 59): 'Et vos, ac si Lucifer ille de caelo proiectus, verbis non potestate erigimini.'

⁸³ *DEB*, c. 30 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 30): 'nonne pacem patriae mortiferum ceu serpentem odiens civiliaque bella et crebras iniuste praedas sitiens animae tuae caelestis portas pacis ac refrigerii praecludis?'

⁸⁴ *DEB*, c. 26.

Gildas dehumanizes Constantine by addressing him as the ‘tyrant whelp of the filthy lioness of Dumnonia’.⁸⁵ He drives home the tyrant’s uncivic status when he accuses him of the violation of a sacred oath to protect his *cives* and the sacrilegious murder of two young rivals in front of a church altar. Gildas first outlines how Constantine bound himself ‘by a dreadful oath not to work his wiles on his citizens (*civibus*)’.⁸⁶ In an important aside, Gildas underlines that the *cives* held up their side of the bargain, as those ‘who trusted first of all in God and the oath, then in their companions of the choirs of holy men and the mother’.⁸⁷ Yet while the *cives* placed their faith in God and their ruler, Constantine instead violated his oath, killing his own subjects and instigating dynastic strife. True to his animalistic nature, Constantine did not merely order the murders, but ‘cruelly tore at the tender sides and vitals of two royal youths and their two guardians [. . .] using as teeth his wicked sword and spear’.⁸⁸ The two youths, by contrast, reached for the altar rather than their weapons. Their constant trust and devotion to God in their final moments finds resonance with Gildas’ ideal of the British martyrs, who themselves had sacrificed their bodies during Diocletian’s persecutions. Their destination was the same. Just as the limbs of the late antique martyrs were fixed on the gates of heaven after their murder by Roman officials, the limbs of the royal boys, so Gildas avers, ‘shall, in the day of judgement, hang at the gates of Christ’s *civitas*, the honourable standards of their suffering and their faith’.⁸⁹

Gildas’ charges against the priests, too, invoke civic imagery, albeit in slightly different ways. Like the kings, Britain’s priests are characterized by base, bestial behaviour. Having obtained their priestly seats through simony, they ‘wallow there inappropriately in the manner of pigs’, sitting in the ‘slime of their own sin’.⁹⁰ In a similar vein, Gildas cautions the Britons to ‘flee these rapacious wolves of Arabia’, underlining that Britain’s priests are not just a danger unto themselves, but also unto their flock.⁹¹ As Gildas elucidates further on, these ‘intolerable burdens of crime that false priests heap on themselves’

⁸⁵ *DEB*, c. 28 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): ‘leaenae Damnoniae tyrannicus catulus’.

⁸⁶ *DEB*, c.28 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): ‘horribile iuramenti sacramentum, quo se devinxit nequaquam dolos civibus’.

⁸⁷ *DEB*, c. 28 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): ‘deo primum iureque iurando, sanctorum demum choris et genetrice comitantibus fretis’.

⁸⁸ *DEB*, c. 28 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): ‘latera regionum tenerrima puerorum vel praecordia crudeliter duum totidemque nutritorum [. . .] ense hastaque pro dentibus laceravit’.

⁸⁹ *DEB*, c. 28 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 29): ‘in die iudicii ad tuae civitatis portas, Christe, veneranda patientiae ac fidei suae vexilla suspendent’. Compare *DEB*, c. 11.

⁹⁰ *DEB*, c. 66 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 53): ‘intolerabilium piaculorum caeno [. . .] utpote indigne porcorum more volutantes’.

⁹¹ *DEB*, c. 68 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 54): ‘si non istos rapacissimos ut Arabiae lupos [. . .] praepropere fugeritis’.

contradict Christ's mandate for the faithful to shine as a beacon for the world, like the city placed on a mountain.⁹² Gildas built upon this civic image in a rhetorical address to Britain's clergy, enquiring 'Who is there who is looked upon as a safe and obvious common refuge for all the sons of the church, as is a strong city (*firmissima civitas*), placed on the peak of a high mountain, for its citizens (*civibus*)?'⁹³ As with his address to Britain's kings, Gildas spelled out the providential outcome of the priestly endeavour. Yet here his emphases were different. Gildas' admonition of Constantine and other tyrants revolved around the heavenly citizenship they stood to lose: they would find the gates of heaven barred to them. His threat against Britain's priests, conversely, stressed the infernal consequences of sin: their pursuit of vice could only lead them to 'the gates of hell (*Tartari portis*)'.⁹⁴ More importantly, their descent had collective implications. If the people of Britannia could not avoid these sinful pastors, if they did not flee like Lot had fled from the 'fiery rain of Sodom', they would all fall together into hell.⁹⁵

Gildas held kings and clergy equally culpable for the ruined state of the *patria*: both lacked the requisite virtues of leadership and chose to dwell in vice instead. In rebuking their failings, he purposely harnessed a language that previously had been used to describe Britain's outside enemies: Britain's kings and clergy behaved like animals, bent on plunder; they failed to protect the citizens entrusted to their care or dragged them into civil war. More explicitly than in the historical section, Gildas drove home the providential repercussions of royal and priestly sinfulness: beyond the ruin of Britain's temporal cities, it was their entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem that was at stake. In fact, by continuing to behave in opposition to virtue, Britain's kings and priests were denying entrance not only to themselves, but also to their citizens, whom they had been ordained to save and protect.

IV. Scriptural cities

Jerusalem functions as a malleable frame throughout *De Excidio*. She is there at the beginning of the work and at the end, representing at once a sinful city in ruins and the celestial city to which all British citizens should aspire. Gildas' civic ideals were thus not limited to past and

⁹² *DEB*, c. 93 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 70): 'quantis semetipsos intolerabilibus scelerum fascibus falsi hi sacerdotes opprimant'. On the city on a mountain, Matthew V.14.

⁹³ *DEB*, c. 93 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 70): 'quis ita universis ecclesiae filiis tutum publicum conspicuumque refugium, ut est civibus firmissima forte in editi montis civitas vertice constituta, habetur?'

⁹⁴ *DEB*, c. 68 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 54): 'proclive vitiis, id est Tartari portis, ducant?'

⁹⁵ *DEB*, c. 68 (trans. Winterbottom, p. 54): 'igneum Sodomorum imbrem'.

present, but extended into the future. The city was for him a site of divine providence: a testimony to God's punishment of the wicked on earth as well as the physical embodiment of future salvation. It is well known that Gildas relied heavily on the Bible to illustrate the workings of providence.⁹⁶ Indeed, of the many texts that echo throughout *De Excidio*, the Bible is by far the loudest. What remains yet to be explored is how the Bible inspired Gildas' use of civic imagery, and more particularly, allowed him to integrate his civic ideals for Britain into the broader story of Christian salvation.

Scriptural passages litter Gildas' prologue.⁹⁷ They function, as he himself puts it, 'as a mirror reflecting our own life'.⁹⁸ He proclaims that he sees Britannia's current situation reflected in the trials and tribulations of the Israelites in the Old Testament, both for their leaders and the people as a whole. Already at this early stage, Gildas concentrates on civic destruction and its effects on the city's populace, as he draws attention to the doomed fate of certain biblical cities. He isolates the imagery found in the book of Lamentations, a series of poetic elegies for the destruction of Jerusalem. Like many patristic commentators, Gildas associated Lamentations with the prophet Jeremiah, who, he claims, 'bewailed the ruin of his city' (*ruinam civitatis*) – that is, Jerusalem – 'because of the sins of men'.⁹⁹ Over the next several lines, he explicates select passages from the book of Lamentations, layering the present state of Britain and the *ecclesia* over the image of the earthly Jerusalem, bereft and diminished after its capture by Nebuchadnezzar:

I could see that in our time, just as Jeremiah had lamented, 'the city sat solitary, bereaved; formerly she had been full of peoples, mistress of races, ruler of provinces: now she had become tributary'. This represents the Church.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures*, pp. 93–110; N. Perkins, 'Biblical Allusion and Prophetic Authority in Gildas's *De excidio Britannie*', *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 20 (2010), pp. 78–112; Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio*, pp. 51–9.

⁹⁷ See O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures*, pp. 125–39.

⁹⁸ *DEB*, prologue (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 13): 'veluti speculum quoddam vitae nostrae'.

⁹⁹ *DEB*, prologue (trans. Winterbottom, p. 13): 'ob peccata hominum'.

¹⁰⁰ *DEB*, prologue (trans. Winterbottom, p. 13): 'Videbamque etiam nostro tempore, ut ille defleverat, "solam sedisse urbem viduam, antea populis plenam, gentium dominam, principem provinciarum, sub tributo fuisse factam", id est ecclesiam.' Compare Lamentations I.1. For Gildas' treatment of Lamentations, and his interactions with Jeremiah, see George, *Gildas's 'De excidio Britonum'*, pp. 29–41; Higham, *The English Conquest*, pp. 67–89. See more generally on Gildas' use of allegory, Perkins, 'Biblical Allusions', pp. 103–5.

This image – a city once prosperous, bustling, and well fortified, now depleted and destroyed through the sins of its people – reverberates throughout *De Excidio*. Indeed, it could be argued that Gildas' history of Britain was an extended variation on the theme: the *patria's* urban landscape gradually brought to ruin due to the vice of her citizens. Beyond the immediate exegetical connection between Jerusalem and the church, the above passage thus makes a wider point. Right from the start, Gildas was primed to link what he read in the Bible to his own times, and what the Bible offered him in plenty was scenes of cities destroyed through sin.

It should be underlined that Gildas did not conceive of civic and biblical language as mutually exclusive forms of identification. Yet the precise relationship of these two idioms in *De Excidio* requires elaboration. On one level, Gildas appears to have used them as complementary narrative instruments that worked towards the same moral argument. This is clearly evinced in the historical section of *De Excidio*. Decrying the British lawlessness that had provoked the arrival of the Saxons, Gildas impressed on his readers that there was a familiar pattern of crime and punishment afoot: 'the old saying of the prophet denouncing his people could have been aptly applied to our country (*patria*): "sons", the prophet said, "you have abandoned God and provoked to anger the holy one of Israel"'.¹⁰¹ Sometime thereafter, Gildas characterized the ongoing struggle between Britain's citizens and its Saxon enemies as a divine test, 'so that God could make trial of this latter-day Israel, as is his wont, to see whether it loves Him or not'.¹⁰² Evidently, Gildas had no qualms about simultaneously identifying Britain's inhabitants as *cives*, as part of a *patria*, and as a *praesens Israel*. These terms expressed a similar moral responsibility.

On another level, *De Excidio* makes it resoundingly clear that the providential language of the Bible *was* to some extent civic. Two potent civic images recur throughout: the ruined cities of Old Israel and the promise of the heavenly Jerusalem. The former inevitably influenced how Gildas conceived of the urban destruction wrought on Britain. Working up to the final downfall of Britain's cities at the hands of the Saxons, Gildas started by drawing a parallel with the Assyrian assault on Judaea. He then combined scenes of sacrilege and ruin lifted from two psalms: God's sanctuary put to fire, the tabernacle being defiled,

¹⁰¹ *DEB*, c. 21: 'ita ut merito patriae illud propheticum, quod ueterno illi populo denuntiatum est, potuerit aptari. Filii, iniquis, sine lege dereliquistis deum, et ad iracundiam prouocastis sanctum Israel'. See Isaiah 1.4–6.

¹⁰² *DEB*, c. 26: 'Ex eo tempore nunc ciues, nunc hostes, uincebant, ut in ista gente experiretur dominus solito more praesentem Israellem, utrum diligit eum an non.'

and outside peoples desecrating the holy temple.¹⁰³ His subsequent portrayal of the Saxon destruction of Britain's *coloniae* is a frenzied tapestry of graphic images, some original, others distinctly biblical. The lack of proper burial and the devouring of corpses by birds and beasts was adapted from one of the previously cited psalms (LXXVIII.2–3).¹⁰⁴ The destruction of urban buildings, in particular that of the *plateae*, the public squares or boulevards, seems inspired above all by Isaiah XXIV on the downfall of the City of Folly at the End of Times, a detailed blueprint of what divine punishment looked like.¹⁰⁵ That Gildas had this passage in mind is confirmed by the fact that he closes his account of the Saxon attack with a citation from Isaiah XXIV.13 on the lack of remaining agricultural produce. The passage's importance for Gildas is underscored later on in his biblical dossier against the British tyrants. Treating the reader to an extended string of excerpts from the 'chief of Prophets', he includes an almost verse-by-verse account of the urban destruction foretold in Isaiah XXIV.¹⁰⁶

If the road of vice led to urban desolation, then the path of virtue ascended to the ideal city of heavenly Jerusalem. Though not as ubiquitous as the ruined city, Gildas reaches for the biblical image of the celestial city at crucial moments. As outlined in the previous two sections, Gildas draws a powerful parallel between the historical martyrs killed during the reign of Diocletian and the virtuous princes killed by the present-day tyrant Constantine: both had their limbs hung at the city gates of the heavenly kingdom. Another tyrant was similarly taken to task for repudiating his wife in favour of her sister: adulterers, Gildas admonishes, would not be citizens of the heavenly kingdom.¹⁰⁷ This city reappears, more elaborately, at the end of his admonition of Britain's priests, which also served as the conclusion for his entire letter. This conclusion takes the form of a prayer for those select members of the clergy Gildas deemed worthy:

¹⁰³ *DEB*, c. 24; Psalm LXXIII.7; LXXVIII.1.

¹⁰⁴ Compare: *DEB*, c. 24: 'et nulla esset omnimodis praeter domorum ruinas, bestiarum volucrumque ventres in medio sepultura, salva sanctorum animarum reverentia, si tamen multae inventae sint'; and Psalm LXXVIII.2–3: 'dederunt cadavera servorum tuorum escam volatilibus caeli carnes sanctorum tuorum bestiis terrae. effuderunt sanguinem eorum quasi aquam in circuitu Hierusalem et non erat qui sepeliret'.

¹⁰⁵ Compare *DEB*, c. 24: 'simul solo sternerentur et miserabili usu in medio platearum ima turrium edito cardine euulsarum murorumque celsorum saxa, sacra altaria, cadauerum frusta, crustis ac si gelantibus purpurei cruoris tecta, uelut in quodam horrendo torculari mixta uiderentur'; and Isaiah XXIV.10–12: 'adtrita est civitas vanitatis clausa est omnis domus nullo introeunte. clamor erit super vino in plateis deserta est omnis laetitia translatum est gaudium terrae. relicta est in urbe solitudo et calamitas opprimet portas'. On the importance of Isaiah's destructive imagery for Gildas in general and *DEB*, c. 24 in particular, see also Perkins, 'Biblical Allusion', pp. 91–6.

¹⁰⁶ *DEB*, c. 45.

¹⁰⁷ *DEB*, c. 32.

May the almighty God of all consolation and pity preserve the very few good shepherds from all harm, and, conquering the common enemy, make them citizens of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, that is, of the congregation of all the saints: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen.¹⁰⁸

Gildas' entreaty for God to preserve these *bonos pastores* from all evil (*omni malo*) echoes the prologue's opening lamentation declaiming his *patria's* loss of the good and accumulation of the bad.¹⁰⁹ The confrontation between Satan and the saints also recalls a dialectic used throughout *De Excidio*, namely that of the *hostes* against the *cives*. In this final prayer, however, it is not the past that is at stake, but the future. For the virtuous few, at least, this future lay in the *civitas caelestis* in the company of God's ideal citizens.

V. Conclusion

Rife with violent imagery and composed in baroque Latin, *De Excidio* is not an easy read by any measure. Yet Gildas' complicated rhetoric served a purpose. It allowed him to construct a powerful moral case for Britain as a providential community, which needed a reminder of its troubled past so that it would amend its present actions. This article has argued that as Gildas lamented his *patria's* past and present, and laid bare his hopes for its collective future, he relied heavily on the language of cities and citizens. Historical and biblical exempla of fallen cities bolstered Gildas' call for the British *cives* to embrace virtue, lest God once again allow external *hostes* to enter their *patria*, destroy their cities, and render their once splendid homeland a wilderness. His carefully mirrored complaints against Britain's kings and clergymen showed these leaders to be just as detrimental to the civic body: framed as *hostes* who harmed their own *cives*, these vicious leaders not only reduced the *patria* to civil war and destruction, but also barred the gates of the celestial city. Ultimately, Britain's salvation was at stake.

Civic language, then, was evocative and instrumental. It was a rhetorical resource accessible even in heavily de-urbanized regions such as sixth-century Britain. It need not reflect a legal reality, nor the institutional trappings of a Roman or Roman-like state. Authors like

¹⁰⁸ *DEB*, c. 110 (trans. adapted from Winterbottom, p. 79): 'Ipse omnipotens deus totius consolationis et misericordiae paucissimos bonos pastores conservet ab omni malo et municipes faciat subacto communi hoste civitatis Hierusalem caelestis, hoc est, sanctorum omnium congregationis, pater et filius et spiritus sanctus, cui sit honor et gloria in saecula saeculorum. Amen.'

¹⁰⁹ See furthermore O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures*, p. 352.

Gildas harnessed its equally valid rhetorical potential for social cohesion and moral exhortation. Used in this manner, civic discourse not only delineated the parameters of the civic body, but above all stipulated how those within this body should act. Grounded in classical and biblical traditions, the virtuous citizen offered a coherent moral blueprint that could be mapped upon the newly emerging polities of the post-Roman west.

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