

## The Past or Present? Gildas and the Forgetting of Hadrian's Wall

Gildas, a British cleric writing in the mid-sixth century CE, laments the Romans' desertion of Britain and the island's subsequent invasion by Saxon barbarians in his polemic text *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*. Within the text Gildas describes how the Romans constructed a massive stone fortification along the Romano-British frontier before their departure from the island in the early fifth century CE. This defensive structure, without a doubt, is Hadrian's Wall. Why, however, did Gildas misidentify such a famous structure and distinct marker on the British landscape? N. J. Higham believes that Gildas' incorrect description of the wall's construction was fabricated for rhetorical purposes and is "largely unhistorical" (Higham 1994, pg. 22). In this paper, however, I will argue that Gildas' description of the wall was namely due to an absence of memory from the Romano-British past and an unintentional conflation of historical accounts that are presented in the literary record. Gildas' incorrect description of Hadrian's Wall, then, is the result of a fragmentation of memory and an attempt to string together more contemporary events from Britain's Roman past.

I will begin the paper by reviewing in brief Gildas' account of the wall's construction. Gildas states in his introduction to the *De Excidio* that he will attempt to tell the story of Britain not so much from literary remains, because they no longer exist:

non tam ex scriptis patriae scriptorumve monimentis, quippe quae, vel si qua fuerint, aut ignibus hostium exusta aut civium exilii classe longius deportata non compareant (Gildas, *DEB* 4.4, Winterbottom 1978).

It is clear, then, that we must look elsewhere in order to piece together some sort of record for the construction of a stone fortification on the Romano-British frontier in the fifth century. After reviewing Gildas' own account of the wall's construction, I will then turn to other, more

classical, sources that describe restorative efforts undertaken along the frontier by Theodosius after 367 CE and the Romans' departure from the island. I will give particular attention to Ammianus Marcellinus, but will also discuss the accounts presented in Zosimus' *Historia Nova* and Orosius' *Adversum Paganos*. I will utilize these sources to discuss how Gildas appears to be commingling fragmented memories from the Roman past to give an account of the wall's construction. Gildas, through his description of Hadrian's Wall, is able to construct a "sub-Roman" identity for the inhabitants of Britain.

Gildas creates a semi-mythical *illo tempore* for the Britons and offers an explanation for the current state of the island by placing the construction of Hadrian's Wall and the Romans' departure from Britain somewhere in the past. The construction of Roman fortifications along the frontier and the Roman departure from Britain serve as a distinct marker for when the Romano-British simply became "Britons" or "sub-Roman." Bradford Vivian writes that societies are dependant on memory for a collective sense of meaning and purpose. Likewise, the process of public forgetting, deliberate or not, is also crucial to the formation of a community (Vivian 2010, pg. 10-11). Gildas' "false" account of the construction of Hadrian's Wall works as a marker for the formation of a new community, one distinct from the Romans. Although Gildas himself had no access to the accounts of writers such as Ammianus and Orosius, it appears that memories from the events described in these texts have been transformed into a collective "folk-memory" through the passing of time. Hadrian's Wall, at least for Gildas, represents the liminal space between the Romano-British past and the Anglo-Saxon future.

## Bibliography

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