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"Of the Ruin and Conquest of Britain": The Anglo-Saxon Transformation of the British Isles

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Abstract

The history of Britain after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire has traditionally been perceived as one of invasion and domination at the hands of Germanic peoples most commonly known as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Though this is the narrative presented by medieval authors, current archaeology suggests that the settlement of Germanic peoples in Britain was peaceful and characterized by cohabitation and acculturation. Further examination and contextualization of the most nearly-contemporary sources reveal discrepancies of chronology and causation which indicate that medieval authors constructed their accounts based not upon an understanding of any Anglo-Saxon invasion but rather upon a narrative constructed from their contemporary cultural landscape.

"Of the Ruin and Conquest of Britain":
The Anglo-Saxon Transformation of the British Isles

By: Bryan Caswell

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire during the fifth century has traditionally been portrayed as a sharp break in history, ending the 'civilized' rule of the Roman state and heralding the rise of 'barbarian' successor states across much of the old Empire's dominions in Europe. Recent scholarship has challenged this narrative of abrupt collapse, demonstrating that many of these successor states possessed varying degrees of continuity with the Empire of Late Antiquity. The notion of a European Dark Age resulting from Rome's fall has also largely been dispelled, as an ever-increasing body of sources illuminates this previously dim period of history. Only in the British Isles do the traditional themes of collapse and darkness retain much of their value. Rome's abandonment of Britain in the fifth century set in motion a chain of events that would alter the very identity of those who called the island home, characterized most famously by the arrival of Anglo-Saxon peoples from the European continent. The study of this Anglo-Saxon transformation of Britain has conventionally been the study of those few native British and later English writers who attempted to record the tumultuous events of the centuries following Rome's withdrawal. These sources, ranging from the mid-sixth century to the twelfth century, portray the advent of Germanic peoples to Britain as a great and terrible invasion of pagan hordes, one which devastated Britain's cities and reduced its people to ruin. Current archaeology and scholarship raise grave reservations concerning the nature of this invasion narrative, however. In examining such emerging sources more closely, it becomes apparent that the Anglo-Saxon transformation of Britain occurred not as a massive invasion but as a piecemeal migration of small Germanic family units who cohabited peacefully with the native Britons. It is only in later centuries that a tradition of Anglo-Saxon violence and British resistance come to serve as an explanation for the demise of Roman influence in Britain.

Any study of fifth-century Britain must begin with the writings of Gildas Sapiens, a monk of the sixth century who recorded much of the history of Britain under and after Roman rule in his *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, or *Of the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*. Later canonized as a saint, Gildas was most likely born in the late fifth century in the burgeoning state of Dumnonia in the far southwest of Britain, in the region which is today known as Cornwall. Though the exact date of the *De excidio* is hotly debated, many scholars agree that it was most

likely written by Gildas in the early to mid-sixth century, either between AD 515 and 530 or 546 and 547.[97] The use of Gildas's work herein as a source for the Anglo-Saxon transformation of the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries is not itself dependent upon any exact chronology, however, and so requires a definite date for neither Gildas nor his writings. It is enough that he has been conclusively determined to be contemporary with or only slightly removed from the events he describes with such righteous passion.

Gildas's *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* follows the outline of many medieval texts, recording historical events not as any effort to chronicle the past but rather as an exercise in religious polemic.[98] As is denoted by the title, Gildas is particularly concerned with the 'ruin and conquest of Britain' conducted by Germanic peoples. In the first half of the *De excidio*, sometimes referred to as 'The History,' Gildas explains that Britain had been laid low by these Germanic tribes due to its own people's sin and Godlessness. According to Gildas, Germanic warriors were first invited to Britain by a native British leader to help combat the perennial invasions of the Scots and Picts, two un-Romanized peoples of the northwest and far north, respectively. By seeking help from heathens, however, the Britons "sealed [their country's] doom by inviting among them (like wolves into the sheep-fold) the impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men … Nothing was ever so pernicious to our country, nothing was ever so unlucky."[99] Now aware of the inability of the Britons to defend themselves, the Germanic tribes began to migrate to the British Isles in ever-greater numbers, inundating the native populace with foreigners. Finally, unsatisfied by the Britons' initial promises of compensation, the Anglo-Saxons turned on their hosts, ravaging the land and destroying what ruling structure had been left by the Romans; "the fire of vengeance … spread from sea to sea … destroying the neighboring towns and lands."[100] Most Britons who were not killed or enslaved retreated into the hills, but a small group rallied under the command of one Ambrosius Aurelianus, "who of all the Roman nation was then alone in the confusion of this troubled

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[97] Thomas D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: Its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 77, 178.

[98] Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 61.

[99] Gildas Sapiens, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, c. 23, J.A. Giles, trans., *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 310.

[100] Gildas, *De Excidio*, cs. 23-24, p. 311.

period," and managed to inflict a stunning defeat upon the invaders.[101] Gildas indicates that an extended period of conflict followed between Romano-Britons and Anglo-Saxons, the greatest battle of which occurred at Mons Badonicus and resulted in an overwhelming native victory, though it was not enough to drive the invaders completely from the shores of Britain.[102]

This diatribe against the Britons and their Anglo-Saxon assailants serves as a prefatory example to Gildas's ulterior purpose: Christian kingly instruction and the history of salvation. Indeed, the historical narrative of the *De excidio* is only comprised of the first twenty-six chapters, while the instructive 'epistle' occupies the remaining eighty-four. Using the tale of woe so artfully crafted in his first twenty-six chapters as a springboard, Gildas proceeds in those last eighty-four chapters to instruct his contemporary rulers in the proper manners and methods of good Christian kingship and, more often than not, to rail against the un-Christian behavior of his contemporary rulers. The key to this and, by extension, the entirety of Gildas's writings is the word 'Christian.' As a monk of the early medieval period, Gildas's view of his world was dominated by Judeo-Christian scripture and iconography. Gildas cites only one outside source for the duration of the *De excidio*: the Christian Bible.[103] It is through his scriptural knowledge that Gildas conveys his interpretation of historical events and their meaning, and it is through ubiquitous scriptural examples that Gildas attempts to instruct kings on proper conduct.[104]

The writings of Gildas make clear that though the physical manifestations of Roman dominion in Britain may have crumbled, Roman influence remained strong in at least part of the island even into the sixth century. Gildas himself was thoroughly Romanized. Indeed, Dumnonia and Wales seem to have been the only regions of Britain in which Romano-British Christianity survived the Anglo-Saxon transformation.[105] The *De excidio* is unfailing in its praise of Roman civilization while simultaneously denigrating the native inhabitants of the British Isles. Britons are alternately called "indolent and slothful," "stiff-necked and stubborn-minded," "ungratefully rebels," and "unwarlike but faithless."[106] Rome, in contrast, is portrayed as a beacon of wisdom and civilization: "the fierce flame which they kindled could not be

[101] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 25, p. 312.
[102] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 26, p. 313.
[103] J. A. Giles, *Six English Chronicles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), vii.
[104] Hanning, *The Vision of History*, 50; Gildas, *De Excidio*, cs. 24, 31, 47; 311, 317, 331.
[105] John Blair, "The Anglo-Saxon Period (c. 440-1066)," *The Oxford History of Britain*, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67; Hanning, *The Vision of History*, 63.
[106] Gildas, *De Excidio*, cs. 1, 4, 5, pp. 299-301.

extinguished or checked by the Western Ocean, but passing beyond the sea, imposed submission upon our island without resistance, and entirely reduced [it] to obedience."[107] It is only with the assistance of Rome that Britain was saved from the depredations of the first three Scot-Pict invasions, and it is only through the refusal of further Roman aid that the hiring of Germanic mercenaries is made necessary to combat the fourth. Even after the Western Roman Empire had collapsed, leaving Britain bereft of aid, Gildas attributes a man of Roman descent, Ambrosius Aurelianus, with organizing the only effective British resistance to the Anglo-Saxons.[108]

The second, and arguably most famous, author to chronicle the events surrounding the 'Fall of Britain' lived a century and a half after Gildas. Bede, oft-times known by the epithet 'the Venerable', was a Northumbrian monk born in the second half of the seventh century. Bede was the author of forty-four works, yet his fame is largely derived from only one: the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in approximately 731.[109] As is evident from the title of his work, the Germanic settlers of the fifth and sixth centuries had taken firm root in their new homes, so much so that by the eighth century the Celtic identity of 'Britain' had been replaced with the Anglo-Saxon identity of 'England.' Two centuries removed from Gildas at the time he was writing the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede was forced to rely on existing sources for much of his history, including Gildas's *De excidio*.[110] Indeed, nearly the entirety of Bede's treatment of the arrival of Germanic peoples in Britain and their conflict with the island's native inhabitants is taken verbatim from the writings of Gildas.[111] Nevertheless, Bede offered his own contribution to the evolving narrative of the Anglo-Saxon transformation, identifying the main ethnicities of the invaders as those known as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes of mainland Europe.[112] Himself a monk like Gildas, Bede's monastic use of history mirrors that found in the *De excidio*, functioning not to chronicle the events of the past but rather to tell the story of

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[107] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 5, p. 301.

[108] Gildas, *De Excidio*, cs. 13-20, 24, pp. 304-308, 312.

[109] Bertram Colgrave, "Historical Introduction," *Bede's Ecclesiatical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), xix; George Hardin Brown, *Bede the Venerable* (Boston: Twayne Pubishers, 1987), 1.

[110] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 5.

[111] M. Miller, "Bede's Use of Gildas," *The English Historical Review* 90, No. 355 (1975), 244; Alan Thacker, "Bede and History," *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174; Hanning, *The Vision of History*, 76.

[112] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.xv, p. 51.

God's plan for the conversion of the English people.[113] It is for this reason that, according to Bede, the great sin of the Britons was their failure even to attempt to convert their new Germanic neighbors.[114]

The third source for the Anglo-Saxon transformation derives from a different tradition than the Roman-Christian monks Gildas and Bede. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a compilation of manuscripts with their origins in the late ninth century. Commonly thought to have begun under the reign of King Alfred the Great as part of his efforts to encourage literacy and revive culture in England after the Viking incursions of the ninth century, the *Chronicle* records the happenings of each year from the birth of Christ to the death of Harold Godwinson in 1066 and the fall of Anglo-Saxon England to the Normans.[115] As a result, Christian providence does not enter into the events therein recorded to the degree it is seen in the *De excidio* and *Ecclesiastical History*, and the Germanic peoples are given more agency in their settlement of Britain. For the first time, names are given to the leaders of the Saxon mercenaries called to fight on behalf of the Britons: Hengest and Horsa. These two war-leaders are not the only Germanic tribesmen mentioned by name, either, as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts the many battles and deeds of a host of other men and their followers.[116] This same formula is copied in a related manuscript of the ninth century, another chronicle attributed to an author known as Ethelward.[117] These battles do not appear to be large affairs, however, and most are more akin to small-scale raids than the depredations of an invading horde. Nowhere do such accounts appear in Gildas or Bede, and it is unclear where the ninth-century chroniclers garnered this information. Most likely it stemmed from oral histories and traditions of family genealogy passed down by generation.

The final two medieval sources for the fall of Britain are also the most fantastical. The first, the *Historiae Britonnum*, is a compilation of writings from numerous authors. The date of the *Historiae* is highly uncertain, with estimates ranging up to two centuries apart. It is most

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[113] Colgrave, "Historical Introduction," xxx; Brown, *Bede the Venerable*, 85-86.
[114] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.xxii, p. 69.
[115] Michael Swanton, "Introduction," *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1998), xviii.
[116] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, cs. 448-508, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12-14.
[117] Fabius Ethelward, *Chronicon*, 1.449-509, J.A. Giles, trans., *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. J. A. Giles, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 6-9.

likely, though, that an author by the name of Nennius compiled the *Historiae* in the end of the tenth century, approximately 994.[118] A strange hybrid of Anglo-Saxon and Romano-British traditions of the fall, the *Historiae* attempts to establish the validity of British resistance after the departure of Rome.[119] Ambrosius Aurelianus is again mentioned, but, instead of a Roman paragon of resistance, here he is portrayed as a prescient boy who advises a Romano-British king named Vortigern on his mistakes in dealing with the Germanic invaders. A list of battles appears in the *Historiae Britonnum* just as in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, yet these battles are not Anglo-Saxon victories but Romano-British.[120] The final battle listed is that of Mons Badonicus, further connecting with Gildas and Bede, yet the leader to whom these victories are attributed is an entirely new entity: Arthur.

Indeed, the genesis of the Arthurian cycle of legends has its origins in memories of native resistance to the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the fifth century. Though the *Historiae Britonnum*'s treatment of Arthur is not yet infused with fantasy, the twelfth century would see the completion of the mythologizing of these events with the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Author of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey penned an account of the events of the fifth and sixth centuries that is nothing short of wondrous.[121] Here the Arthurian tradition has taken root in its fully fictionalized form, with prophesying wizards and magical antics. Ambrosius Aurelianus is here the uncle of Arthur, and Arthur himself is said to have killed four hundred and ninety-four Saxons in a single battle.[122] By possibly the tenth century and most definitely the twelfth, then, the introduction of such flights of storytelling drastically reduce the utility of sources for the Germanic migration to Britain.

Save for the myth-making of Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth, modern historical scholarship has conventionally accepted the accounts of most of these medieval authors as largely accurate. Of the four reliable sources discussed above, Gildas's veracity is questioned the most by historians of both Late Antique and Early Medieval periods despite his greater

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[118] J. A. Giles, *Six English Chronicles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), viii; Hanning, *The Vision of History*, 91.

[119] Hanning, *The Vision of History*, 101.

[120] Nennius, *Historiae Britonnum*, cs. 42, 50, J.A. Giles, trans, *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. J. A. Giles (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 402-403, 408-409.

[121] Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles*, viii-ix.

[122] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, VI.viii, VI.xviii, IX.iv, J.A. Giles, trans., *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. J. A. Giles (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 182, 192, 233.

proximity to events. Gildas makes numerous errors in his characterization of Roman Britain before the fifth century, the most egregious of which is attributing the building of Hadrian's Wall and the more northern Antonine Wall to the fourth century instead of the (correct) second.[123] When coupled with Gildas's focus on Christian virtue and the history of religious salvation, these small inaccuracies have led historians such as Leslie Alcock to discard Gildas entirely as a reliable source while paradoxically continuing to accept Bede.[124] Even the compilation of Nennius and the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth have spawned a sect of medieval and literary historians bent on isolating the kernels of historical fact that might lead them to the 'true' King Arthur.

Regardless of the degrees to which the medieval authors are accepted as accurate, their common themes have been accepted nearly universally. After the withdrawal of Rome from Britain, local leaders attempted to hire foreign mercenaries for protection against tribesmen from the north. These mercenaries revolted against the Romano-British and, despite valiant but isolated attempts at resistance, a massive influx of Germanic peoples drove the native Britons out of their land through violence. This framework provided the context for J. A. Giles' *Six Old English Chronicles*, published in 1901, and scarcely changed throughout the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, the vast bulk of scholarship concerning the Anglo-Saxon transformation of Britain has focused on either establishing an exact chronology for the invasions, estimating the size of the reinforcements that joined the initial force of Saxons, or determining the extent of Anglo-Saxon settlement throughout Britain.

This first chronological avenue of inquiry has received by far the most attention, as few of the medieval sources discussed include explicit dates. Timothy O'Sullivan devotes an entire book to discussing the chronology of Gildas, concluding that the Battle of Mons Badonicus took place in 493, while Ambrosius Aurelianus's victory most likely occurred between 447 and 457.[125] Michael Jones and John Casey have used two fifth-century Continental documents known as the Gallic Chronicle to date the Anglo-Saxon arrival in Britain, placing the initial incursion in 410 and the establishment of Anglo-Saxon dominion over the island in 441.[126] The

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[123] Gildas, *De Excidio*, cs. 15, 18, pp. 305-306.
[124] Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology, AD 367-634*, 3rd edition (New York: Penguin, 2001), 21.
[125] O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas*, 139, 178.
[126] Michael E. Jones and John Casey, "The Gallic Chronicle Restored: A Chronology for the

points of contention regarding Anglo-Saxon reinforcements and dispersal have also received substantial attention, though through less orthodox methodology. Linking the open-field method of agriculture to Germanic immigrants, George Homans has attempted to map out the extent of Anglo-Saxon settlement in central and eastern England by examining the prevalence of open-field agriculture in later centuries.[127] Mark Thomas, Michael Stumpf, and Heinrich Harke have attempted to address both of these debates through genetic research of the peoples of southern Britain, specifically on buried remains from cemeteries of the sixth and seventh centuries. Substantial genetic contribution from the European Continent was indeed found, yet results were not conclusive enough to establish an estimation of the size of the original Anglo-Saxon population.[128]

Though scattered attempts had been made to supplement early medieval textual analysis with archaeological evidence, the first scholar to examine the physical record unencumbered by assumptions based on the traditional sources has been Robin Fleming. In her landmark book *Britain after Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400-1070*, Fleming analyzes the archaeology of Britain for the entire Anglo-Saxon period from Rome's withdrawal to the Norman Conquest. Of particular note are the first two chapters in which she relates the corpus of archaeological evidence for Britain and the lives of its inhabitants under Rome in Late Antiquity and then after Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries. Included within this discussion is of course the advent of Germanic peoples to the British Isles. Fleming contends that the physical record thus examined bears no support for the statements of Gildas, Bede, and the later chroniclers. There is evidence of neither violent conflict nor a highly-militarized culture intruding in native Romano-British society.[129] Indeed, much of the chronology established by modern scholars is also called into question, for Fleming notes that very little evidence for the presence of Germanic peoples exists in the physical record before the middle of the fifth century.[130] Migration sites, as Fleming calls those settlements in which Germanic presence can be established, flourished in the half-century

Anglo-Saxon Invasions and the End of Roman Britain," *Britannia* 19 (1988), 367, 379.

[127] George C. Homans, "The Anglo-Saxon Invasions Reconsidered," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 71 (1953-1957), 44.

[128] Mark G. Thomas, Michael P. H.Stumpf, and Heinrich Harke. "Evidence for an Apartheid-Like Social Structure in Early Anglo-Saxon England," *Proceedings: Biological Sciences* 273, No. 1601 (October 2006), 2651.

[129] Robin Fleming, *Britain after Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400-1070* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 29.

[130] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 41-42.

between 470 and 520, thirty years later than Anglo-Saxon dominion was supposed to have been imposed over all of Britain according to the Gallic Chronicle. These sites are also unfailingly small and would appear to house only a low number of settlers, most likely a close family unit of some kind.[131] Fleming argues that open-field agriculture was adopted later than proposed by Homans as well, this time by centuries.[132]

Fleming ascertains the archaeological presence of Germanic peoples using a variety of methods, among them the existence of German-style dwellings also seen on the continent and the discovery of ceramics commonly found in continental Germanic contexts. The most significant source of information for Fleming, however, is the study of burials in fifth-century Britain. The exhibition of certain funereal practices denotes the presence of Germanic peoples, in particular that of cremation, which had gone out of fashion in the Roman world in the third century.[133] Burials that employed inhumation also offer signs of Germanic settlement, as interments of this period yield a wealth of grave-goods. Items buried alongside or adorning remains, these grave goods offer invaluable insight into the material culture and identity of those people with whom they were entombed. The inclusion of weapons in some burials indicate foreigners, as not even military burials of the Roman period include weapons or other martial paraphernalia.[134] The brooches included in a large number of female burials are even more informative. Different styles of metalwork and design used in these brooches have been established as characteristic of Roman, British, or Germanic artistic inspiration, and so the specific brooches adorning a buried woman can in theory indicate that woman's cultural identity. A significant number of Continental Germanic brooches have been excavated in burials across England, confirming the presence of Germanic peoples. A surprisingly large number of brooches in those same Germanic contexts are not of Continental ancestry, however, but are either native British, Roman, or a fusion of Romano-British and Germanic design.[135] These findings lead Fleming to conclude that not only did Germanic immigrants to Britain cohabitate

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[131] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 45.
[132] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 43.
[133] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 45.
[134] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 46-47.
[135] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 48.

peacefully with their native Romano-British neighbors, but that a gradual system of intermixing and acculturation took place involving both parties.[136]

Considering this overwhelming archaeological evidence to the contrary, how could Gildas and his sources of the sixth century have viewed the fifth century as one filled with violent upheaval and military strife? The first key to the puzzle lies in the state of British towns and cities after the disappearance of Roman dominion over the island. The second half of the fourth century was a period of unparalleled prosperity for Britain. It was in this period that the Romanization of Britain reached its zenith, with the construction of lavish villas prevalent throughout the island and mass-produced commodities from the continent reaching as far north as the forts along Hadrian's Wall. British cities supported themselves with the surpluses produced and traded through the intricate trade networks established throughout the Western Roman Empire. Raids launched by barbarian peoples of the north, namely the Scotts and Picts, began to disrupt this delicate system in the end of the fourth century.[137] The opening of the fifth century saw the Western Roman Empire in crisis and, unable to defend both the continent and Britain, the decision was made to abandon the British Isles. Cut off from the infrastructure that had sustained it, the urban society of Roman Britain quickly withered. The inhabitants of cities flocked to more easily defensible areas such as Roman fortifications in the north or ancient pre-Roman hill-forts of the Iron Age, the better to secure their own livelihoods from bandits and rival settlements.[138] Gildas himself recognizes this movement, but attributes the ruin of cities and flight into the hills to the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons.[139] The temporal distance of Gildas from the events he recorded seems to have obscured their origins, and, when these events were viewed through the radical contraction of Christian influence in Britain, were seen by Gildas and later chroniclers as the aftermath of a titanic military struggle for the fate of Britain. In reality these phenomena were the result of economic and institutional collapse, not warfare.

Though Gildas may have misinterpreted the skeletal remains of Roman influence in Britain during the sixth century, his tradition of Germanic mercenaries in British employ may not have been entirely inaccurate. The few archaeological traces of Germanic individuals in

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[136] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 52.
[137] Nicholas Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 41.
[138] Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 28-29; Higham and Martin, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, 46, 54.
[139] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 25, p. 312.

fourth-century Britain are found in military context, and a number of military buckles in particular indicate that men of Germanic heritage were in the employ of the Roman military as auxiliaries.[140] The language Gildas uses to describe the Saxon mercenaries hired by native Britons is interesting in this regard. Gildas calls these Saxons 'federates,' the term used to denote barbarian mercenaries employed by both halves of the Roman Empire throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.[141] The use of this terminology in the *De excidio* was no accident, for Gildas also uses the official terms describing the supplies granted those federates when he describes the promised compensation bestowed upon the Saxons by the Britons.[142] As many scholars have noted, Gildas also does not specifically name the native ruler who invited these Saxons to Britain; the name Vortigern was only supplied by later authors starting with Bede.[143] This has led Guy Halsall to suggest that Saxon mercenaries were used in Britain not in the fifth century but in the fourth as a supplement to the defense of Roman Britain as the island's official garrison was called to campaign on the European continent.[144] A discrepancy in chronology is not outside the realm of possibility for Gildas, who has previously been demonstrated to have a tenuous grip on the progression of historical events at best. Here then is the most probable origin of the tradition of Anglo-Saxon mercenaries in Britain: stories of Germanic federates in service to a British authority reached Gildas, who associated that service with the peaceful and unrelated settlement of Germanic peoples later in the fifth century.

Only one conundrum therefore remains: whence came the tales of Romano-British resistance to a supposed invasion of Anglo-Saxons? What was the inspiration for such characters as Ambrosius Aurelianus and Arthur, for such events as the battle of Mons Badonicus and the forceful exile of Britain's native inhabitants? The answers to this question lie in a synthesis of the theories presented so far. As a fully Romanized Christian, Gildas considered these German tribes to be "fierce," "impious," "a race hateful both to God and men."[145] Whether of a violent nature or not, the inexorable march of these Angles, Saxons, and Jutes was

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[140] Higham and Martin, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, 78.

[141] E. A. Thompson, "Gildas and the History of Britain," *Britannia* 10 (1979): 217; Charles-Edwards, Thomas, "Nations and Kingdoms: A View from Above," *After Rome*, ed. Thomas Charles-Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24.

[142] Thompson, "Gildas and the History of Britain," 217.

[143] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 23, p. 310; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.xiv, p. 49.

[144] Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 215.

[145] Gildas, *De Excidio*, c. 23, p. 310.

accompanied by the spread of pagan religious practices and the subsequent decline of Roman and Christian traditions throughout most of Britain, save for two final enclaves of Romano-British peoples to the southwest and west, the former from which Gildas most likely hailed. This cultural shift can only have seemed catastrophic to the overtly Roman, Christian Gildas, and when observed alongside the remains of cities abandoned in the course of the collapse of Western Europe could very well have left the impression of titanic struggle and savage ruin. For Gildas, the survival of some Romano-British elements in England in this context could only have stemmed from successful military resistance to the Germanic hordes extinguishing the light of Christianity throughout the isles, and so was born the tradition of Romano-British resistance to the Anglo-Saxons. This tradition could have been given further weight in and after the ninth century, in which Alfred the Great repelled the incursions of the Vikings and united England under one ruler. This experience of successful Christian resistance to the depredations of pagan warriors may well have been projected backwards into the history such authors as Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth were attempting to record.

The archaeological evidence unearthed within the first decade of the twenty-first century has thus called into question the conventional history of Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries, raising serious objections concerning the veracity of key historical writings. The invasion narrative of the Anglo-Saxon transformation of Britain must be discarded; in its place a model of small-scale, peaceful migration and acculturation of Germanic peoples must be substituted. The tales of King Arthur and general British resistance to a violent Anglo-Saxon invasion should in this model be relegated to the studies of historical memory and conceptions of British identity, but cannot be taken as accurate representations of historical events.

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