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# GILDAS

## The Ruin of Britain and other works

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**PHILLIMORE**

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when the ark of the testament stood for a while on gravel in the midstream of Jordan. Accompanied by a thousand men, he crossed dry-shod, while the river eddies stayed themselves on either side like precipitous mountains. In this way he changed from wolf to lamb his first executioner, when he saw such a wonder, and made him too thirst strongly for the triumphal palm of martyrdom and bravely receive it.

2 As for the others, they were so racked with different torments, so torn with unheard of rending of limbs, that there was no delay in their fixing the trophies of their glorious martyrdom on the splendid gates of Jerusalem. The survivors hid in woods, desert places and secret caves, looking to God, the just ruler of all, for severe judgements, one day, on their tormentors, and for protection for their own lives.

12 Before ten years of this whirlwind had wholly passed, the wicked edicts were beginning to wither away as their authors were killed. Glad-eyed, all the champions of Christ welcomed, as though after a long winter's night, the calm and the serene light

2 of the breeze of heaven. They rebuilt churches that had been razed to the ground; they founded, built and completed chapels to the holy martyrs, displaying them everywhere like victorious banners. They celebrated feast days. With pure heart and mouth they carried out the holy ceremonies. And all her sons exulted, as though warmed in the bosom of the mother church.

3 This pleasant agreement between the head and limbs of Christ endured until the Arian treason, like a savage snake, vomited its foreign poison upon us, and caused the fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one. And as though there were a set route across the ocean there came every kind of wild beast, brandishing in their horrid mouths the death-dealing venom of every heresy, and planting lethal bites in a country that always longed to hear some novelty - and never took firm hold of anything.

13 At length the tyrant thickets increased and were all but bursting into a savage forest. The island was still Roman in name, but not by law and custom. Rather, it cast forth a sprig of its own bitter planting, and sent Maximus to Gaul with a great retinue of hangers-on and even the imperial insignia, which he was never fit to bear: he had no legal claim to the title, but was raised to it like a tyrant by rebellious soldiery. Applying cunning rather than virtue, Maximus turned the neighbouring lands and provinces against Rome, and attached them to his kingdom of wickedness with the nets of his perjury and lying. One of his wings he stretched

to Spain, one to Italy; the throne of his wicked empire he placed at Trier, where he raged so madly against his masters that of the two legitimate emperors he drove one from Rome, the other from his life - which was a very holy one. Soon, though entrenched in these appalling acts of daring, he had his evil head cut off at Aquileia - he who had, in a sense, cast down the crowned heads that ruled the whole world.

### Independent Britain

14 After that Britain was despoiled of her whole army, her military resources, her governors, brutal as they were, and her sturdy youth, who had followed in the tyrant's footsteps, never to return home. Quite ignorant of the ways of war, she groaned aghast for many years, trodden under foot first by two exceedingly savage overseas nations, the Scots from the north-west and the Picts from the north.

15 As a result of their dreadful and devastating onslaughts, Britain sent envoys with a letter to Rome, plaintively requesting a military force to protect them and vowing whole-hearted and uninterrupted loyalty to the Roman empire so long as their enemies were kept at a distance. A legion was soon despatched that had forgotten the troubles of the past. Soundly equipped, it crossed to our country by ship, came to grips with the dreadful enemy, laid low a great number of them, drove them all from the country, and freed from imminent slavery a people that had been subjected to such grievous mangling. The British were told to construct across the island a wall linking the two seas; properly manned, this would scare away the enemy and act as protection for the people. But it was the work of a leaderless and irrational mob, and made of turf rather than stone: so it did no good.

16 The legion returned home triumphant and joyful. Meanwhile the old enemies re-appeared, like greedy wolves, rabid with extreme hunger, wild, dry-mouthed, leap over into the sheepfold when the shepherd is away. They came relying on their oars as wings, on the arms of their oarsmen, and on the winds swelling their sails. They broke through the frontiers, spreading destruction everywhere. They went trampling over everything that stood in their path, cutting it down like ripe corn.

17 And so a second time envoys set out with their complaints,

- their clothes (it is said) torn, their heads covered in dust, to beg help from the Romans. Like frightened chicks huddling under the wings of their faithful parents, they prayed that their wretched country should not be utterly wiped out, that the name of Rome, which echoed in their ears as a mere word, should not be cheapened by the gnawing of foreign insult. The Romans were as upset as is humanly possible by the narration of such a tragedy. They hurried the flight of their horsemen like eagles on the land and the course of their sailors on the sea, and planted in their enemies' necks the claws of their sword-points - claws at first unexpected, finally terrifying; and they caused among them a slaughter like the fall of leaves at the due time of the year. They were like a mountain torrent increased by tributaries tempest-swollen, that, thundering as it goes, wells out beyond its channel, back furrowed, forehead fierce, waves - as they say - cloud-high (because of them the pupils of the eyes are darkened, despite their constant refreshment from the flickering of the eyelids, when they encounter the lines of the whirling clefts); it foams wonderfully, and with a single surge it overcomes the obstacles in its path. This was the way our worthy allies instantly put to flight across the sea the columns of their rivals - such as could get away: year after year they had greedily taken heaps of plunder overseas with none to resist them.
- 18 The Romans therefore informed our country that they could not go on being bothered with such troublesome expeditions; the Roman standards, that great and splendid army, could not be worn out by land and sea for the sake of wandering thieves who had no taste for war. Rather, the British should stand alone, get used to arms, fight bravely, and defend with all their powers their land, property, wives, children, and, more important, their life and liberty. Their enemies were no stronger than they, unless Britain chose to relax in laziness and torpor; they should not hold out to them for the chaining hands that held no arms, but hands equipped with shields, swords and lances, ready for the kill.
- 2 This was the Romans' advice; and, in the belief that this would be a further boon to the people whom they proposed to abandon, they built a wall quite different from the first. This one ran straight from sea to sea, linking towns that happened to have been sited there out of fear of the enemy. They employed the normal method of construction, drew on private and public funds, and made the wretched inhabitants help them in the work. They gave the frightened people stirring advice, and left them manuals on weapon training.

- 3 They also placed towers overlooking the sea at intervals on the south coast, where they kept their ships: for they were afraid of the wild barbarian beasts attacking on that front too. Then they said goodbye, meaning never to return.
- 19 As the Romans went back home, there eagerly emerged from the coracles that had carried them across the sea-valleys the foul hordes of Scots and Picts, like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm. They were to some extent different in their customs, but they were in perfect accord in their greed for bloodshed: and they were readier to cover their villainous faces with hair than their private parts and neighbouring regions with clothes. They were more confident than usual now that they had learnt of the departure of our fellow-debtors and the denial of any prospect of their return. So they seized the whole of the extreme north of the island from its inhabitants, right up to the wall. A force was stationed on the high towers to oppose them, but it was too lazy to fight, and too unwieldy to flee: the men were foolish and frightened, and they sat about day and night, rotting away in their folly. Meanwhile there was no respite from the barbed spears flung by their naked opponents, which tore our wretched countrymen from the walls and dashed them to the ground. Premature death was in fact an advantage to those who were thus snatched away; for their quick end saved them from the miserable fate that awaited their brothers and children.
- 3 I need say no more. Our 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. For they resorted to looting each other, there being only a tiny amount of food to give brief sustenance to the wretched people; and the disasters from abroad were increased by internal disorders, for as a result of constant devastations of this kind the whole region came to lack the staff of any food, apart from such comfort as the art of the huntsman could procure them.
- 20 So the miserable remnants sent off a letter again, this time to the Roman commander Aëtius, in the following terms: 'To Aëtius, thrice consul: the groans of the British'. Further on came this complaint: 'The barbarians push us back to the sea,

the sea pushes us back to the barbarians; between these two kinds of death, we are either drowned or slaughtered'. But they got no help in return.

Meanwhile, as the British feebly wandered, a dreadful and notorious famine gripped them, forcing many of them to give in without delay to their bloody plunderers, merely to get a scrap of food to revive them. Not so others: they kept fighting back, basing themselves on the mountains, caves, heaths and thorny thickets. Their enemies had been plundering their land for many years; now for the first time they inflicted a massacre on them, trusting not in man but in God - for, as Philo says, 'when human help finishes, we need the help of God'. For a little while their enemies' audacity ceased - but not our people's wickedness. The enemy retreated from the people, but the people did not retreat from their own sins.

It was always true of this people (as it is now) that it was weak in beating off the weapons of the enemy but strong in putting up with civil war and the burden of sin: weak, I repeat, in following the banners of peace and truth but strong for crime and falsehood. So the impudent Irish pirates returned home (though they were shortly to return); and for the first time the Picts in the far end of the island kept quiet from now on, though they occasionally carried out devastating raids of plunder. So in this period of truce the desolate people found their cruel scars healing over. But a new and more virulent famine was quietly sprouting. In the respite from devastation, the island was so flooded with abundance of goods that no previous age had known the like of it. Alongside there grew luxury. It grew with a vigorous growth, so that to that time were fitly applied the words: 'There are actually reports of such fornication as is not known even among the Gentiles'.

And it was not only this vice that flourished, but all those that generally befall human nature - and especially the one that is the downfall of every good condition nowadays too, the hatred of truth 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. Kings were anointed not in God's name, but as being crueller than the rest; before long, they would be killed, with no enquiry into the truth, by those who had anointed them, and others still crueller chosen to replace them. Any king who seemed gentler

and rather more inclined to the truth was regarded as the downfall of Britain: everyone directed their hatred and their weapons at him, with no respect.

- 5 Things pleasing and displeasing to God weighed the same in the balance - unless indeed things displeasing were regarded with more favour. In fact, the old saying of the prophet denouncing his people could have been aptly applied to our country: 'Lawless sons, you have abandoned God, and provoked to anger the holy one of Israel. Why go on being beaten for adding to your wickedness? Every head is sick, every heart is sorrowful; from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there is no health
- 6 in it'. Everything they did went against their salvation, just as though the true doctor of us all granted the world no medicine. And this was true not merely of worldly men; the flock of the Lord and his shepherds, who should have been an example to the whole people, lay about, most of them, in drunken stupor, as though sodden in wine. They were a prey to swelling hatreds, contentious quarrels, the greedy talons of envy, judgement that made no distinction between good and evil: it looked very much as though, then as now, contempt was being poured on the princes, so that they were seduced by their follies and wandered in the trackless desert.

### The Coming of the Saxons

- 22 God, meanwhile, wished to purge his family, and to cleanse it from such an infection of evil by the mere news of trouble. The feathered flight of a not unfamiliar rumour penetrated the pricked ears of the whole people - the imminent approach of the old enemy, bent on total destruction and (as was their wont) on settlement from one end of the country to the other. But they took no profit from the news. Like foolish beasts of burden, they held fast to the bit of reason with (as people say) clenched teeth. They left the path that is narrow yet leads to salvation, and went racing down the wide way that takes one steeply down through various vices to death.
- 2 'The stubborn servant', says Solomon, 'is not corrected with words'. The fool is flogged, but feels nothing. For a deadly plague swooped brutally on the stupid people, and in a short period laid low so many people, with no sword, that the living could not bury all the dead. But not even this taught them their lesson, so that the word of the prophet Isaiah was fulfilled

here also: 'And God has called to wailing and baldness and girding with sackcloth: look at the killing of calves and the slaughter of rams, the eating and drinking, and people saying:

- 3 Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we must die'. The time was indeed drawing near when their wickedness, like that of the Amorites of old, would be complete. And they convened a council to decide the best and soundest way to counter the brutal and repeated invasions and plunderings by the peoples I have mentioned.
- 23 Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant, were struck blind; the guard - or rather the method of destruction - they devised for our land was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God, should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat
- 2 back the peoples of the north. Nothing more destructive, nothing more bitter has ever befallen the land. How utter the blindness of their minds! How desperate and crass the stupidity! Of their own free will they invited under the same roof a people whom they feared worse than death even in their absence - 'the silly princes of Zoan', as has been said, 'giving foolish advice to Pharaoh'.
- 3 Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, coming in three *keels*, as they call warships in their language. The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prows were directed, and that for half the time, a hundred and fifty years, they would repeatedly lay it waste.
- 4 On the orders of the ill-fated tyrant, they first of all fixed their dreadful claws on the east side of the island, ostensibly to fight for our country, in fact to fight against it. The mother lioness learnt that her first contingent had prospered, and she sent a second and larger troop of satellite dogs. It arrived by ship, and joined up with the false units. Hence the sprig of iniquity, the root of bitterness, the virulent plant that our merits so well deserved, sprouted in our soil with savage shoots and tendrils.
- 5 The barbarians who had been admitted to the island asked to be given supplies, falsely representing themselves as soldiers ready to undergo extreme dangers for their excellent hosts. The supplies were granted, and for a long time 'shut the dog's mouth'. Then they again complained that their monthly allowance was insufficient, purposely giving a false colour to individual incidents, and swore

that they would break their agreement and plunder the whole island unless more lavish payment were heaped on them. There was no delay: they put their threats into immediate effect.

- 24 In just punishment for the crimes that had gone before, a fire heaped up and nurtured by the hand of the impious easterners spread from sea to sea. It devastated town and country round about, and, once it was alight, it did not die down until it had burned almost the whole surface of the island and was
- 2 licking the western ocean with its fierce red tongue. So it was that in this assault, comparable with that of the Assyrians of old on Judaea, there was fulfilled according to history for us also what the prophet said in his lament: 'They have burned with fire your sanctuary on the ground, they have polluted the dwelling-place of your name'. And again: 'God, the heathen have come into your inheritance; they have desecrated your holy temple'; and the rest.
- 3 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 crackled. 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 a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.
- 4 There was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds - saving the reverence due to their holy spirits, if indeed many were found at that time to be carried by holy angels to the heights of heaven. For by then the vineyard that had once been good had degenerated into sourness, so that (as the prophet puts it) there was rarely to be seen grape-cluster or corn-ear behind the backs of the vintagers and the reapers.

#### The Victory at Badon Hill

- 25 So a number of the wretched survivors were caught in the mountains and butchered wholesale. Others, their spirit broken by hunger, went to surrender to the enemy; they were fated to be slaves for ever, if indeed they were not killed straight away, the highest boon. Others made for lands beyond the sea; beneath the swelling sails they loudly wailed, singing a psalm that took the

place of a shanty: 'You have given us like sheep for eating and scattered us among the heathen'. Others held out, though not without fear, in their own land, trusting their lives with constant foreboding to the high hills, steep, menacing and fortified, to the densest forests, and to the cliffs of the sea coast.

2 After a time, when the cruel plunderers had gone home, God gave strength to the survivors. Wretched people fled to them from all directions, as eagerly as bees to the beehive when a storm threatens, and begged whole-heartedly, 'burdening heaven with unnumbered prayers', that they should not be altogether  
3 destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence. Under him our people regained their strength, and challenged the victors to battle. The Lord assented, and the battle went their way.

26 From then on victory went now to our countrymen, now to their enemies: so that in this people the Lord could make trial (as he tends to) of his latter-day Israel to see whether it loves him or not. This lasted right up till the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed.

2 But 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. External wars may have stopped, but not civil ones. For the remembrance of so desperate a blow to the island and of such unlooked for recovery stuck in the minds of those who witnessed both wonders. That was why kings, public and private persons, priests  
3 and churchmen, kept to their own stations. But they died; and an age succeeded them that is ignorant of that storm and has experience only of the calm of the present. All the controls of truth and justice have been shaken and overthrown, leaving no trace, not even a memory, among the orders I have mentioned: with the exception of a few, a very few. A great multitude has been lost, as people daily rush headlong to hell; and the rest are counted so small a number that,  
4 as they lie in her lap, the holy mother church in a sense does not see them, though they are the only true sons she has left. By their holy prayers they support my weakness from total collapse, like posts and columns of salvation; and no one should suppose that I am carping at their worthy lives, which all men admire and which God loves, if I speak freely, even sorrowfully, of those who are slaves of

the belly, slaves, too, not of Christ, who is God, blessed for ever, but of the devil: if, forced to it by an accumulation of evil, I employ lament rather than analysis. Indeed, why should their own countrymen conceal what surrounding nations are aware of and reprove?

### THE COMPLAINT: KINGS

27 Britain has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked. They often plunder and terrorize - the innocent; they defend and protect - the guilty and thieving; they have many wives - whores and adulteresses; they constantly swear - false oaths; they make vows - but almost at once tell lies; they wage wars - civil and unjust; they chase thieves energetically all over the country - but love and even reward the thieves who sit with them at table; they distribute alms profusely - but pile up an immense mountain of crime for all to see; they take their seats as judges - but rarely seek out the rules of right judgement; they despise the harmless and humble, but exalt to the stars, so far as they can, their military companions, bloody, proud and murderous men, adulterers and enemies of God - if chance, as they say, so allows: men who should have been rooted out vigorously, name and all; they keep many prisoners in their jails, who are more often loaded with chafing chains because of intrigue than because they deserve punishment. They hang around the altars swearing oaths - then shortly afterwards scorn them as though they were dirty stones.

### The Five Tyrants

28 This unspeakable sin is not unknown to Constantine, tyrant whelp of the filthy lioness of Dumnonia. This very year he bound himself by a dreadful oath not to work his wiles on our countrymen (who trusted first of all in God and the oath, then in their companions the choirs of holy men and the mother); then, in the bosom of two mothers he should have respected - the church, and their mother in the flesh - and in the habit of a holy abbot, he most cruelly tore at the tender sides and vitals of two royal youths and their two  
2 guardians. Their arms were stretched out not to weapons - though almost no man handled them more bravely than they at this time - but to God and the altar; and those same arms shall, in the day of judgement, hang at the gates of Christ's city, the honourable standards of their suffering and their faith. He tore them, I say, at the holy altar, using as teeth his wicked sword and spear, so that the place of divine sacrifice was touched by the purple cloaks (as