

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** LUCA LARPI, *PROLOGOMENA TO A NEW EDITION OF GILDAS SAPIENS «DE EXCIDIO BRITANNIAE»* [OPUSCULI SECONDA SERIE 8] (FIRENZE: EDIZIONE DEL GALLUZZO PER LA FONDAZIONE EZIO FRANCESCHINI, 2012): PP. 165 + X; ISBN 978-88-8450-458-6; 32 EUROS.

This fine book, an updated version of the author's Manchester doctoral thesis of 2008, makes a convincing case for a new edition of Gildas' *De excidio Britanniae* (hereafter *DEB*). *DEB* is one of the key, if undoubtedly problematic, written sources for understanding the transition from Roman to post-Roman Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. The book is divided into six chapters. In what follows, I provide an overview of contents of each chapter before making some general comments about the book as a whole.

Chapter 1, 'In search of Gildas Sapiens' (pp. 3-19), is perhaps the most useful section of the book for a general audience and could be deployed usefully in introductory classes on post-Roman Britain, for example. Larpi provides an overview of various scholarly opinions on the limited primary source evidence for: the identity and name of Gildas; the chronological and geographical location of his life and work; Gildas' relationship to monasticism and education; the historical value of the *DEB*; and 'Gildas and the Romans'. Although the exact geography and chronology of his life and work remain uncertain, Gildas is shown to have received a fairly standard late antique education despite the fact that he wrote in a somewhat obscure style and probably from a post-Roman perspective.

Chapter 2 (pp. 20-30) provides a comprehensive overview of the manuscript tradition, including detailed descriptions, lists of contents and extensive bibliographies on each of the main manuscript witnesses. The third chapter (pp. 31-88), analyses the various indirect witnesses to the

text of the *DEB*. After conducting an exhaustive comparison of the various texts and variants, Larpi convincingly demonstrates the importance of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Chronica Maiora* as early witnesses to the *DEB*. An important and original contribution of this study is the effort that is made to explore the light which various Gildasian glosses can throw on the text and transmission of the *DEB* (pp. 52-70; an appendix to the chapter at p. 89 outlines the 'Gildasian glosses in the 'Leiden' glossary'). Other indirect witnesses are then examined, including the *Historia Brittonum*, the *Vita Gildae* and the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Chapter four (pp. 90-115) surveys the previous editions of the *DEB*, stressing the vital role the Mommsen's 1898 edition for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* played in the reconstruction of the text and in subsequent scholarship.

In chapters 5 ('The relationship of the witnesses', pp. 116-124), 6 ('The case for a new edition', pp. 125-138) and the brief general conclusions (pp. 139-140), Larpi makes his case for a new edition of the *DEB* which takes account of the full range of witnesses to the text. He concludes sensibly that, although we can be broadly confident in Mommsen's edition, work needs to be done to collate the full range of manuscripts and other evidence for the *DEB* if we are to understand fully the text and its transmission history.

The book is accompanied by a comprehensive bibliography (pp. 141-155), and an index of names (pp. 159-160), Latin words (p. 160), manuscripts (p. 161) and passages from the *DEB* (pp. 163-165). Overall, then, this is a thorough, well-written and clearly-structured piece of scholarship that makes a strong argument for reediting the *DEB*. This might enable us to gain a better understanding not only of the obscure history of post-Roman Britain, but also of the reception and reuse of the Gildasian tradition in subsequent centuries.