

A. Friedlander

St. Gildas and the anointing of kings

An axiom, lexicographers inform us, is a statement universally accepted as true. Medievalists have cultivated various axioms. Thus one such statement reads: the anointing of King Pepin in 751 was a cardinal event; it had one precedent in European (non-biblical) history, namely, the anointing of certain Visigothic kings a century earlier.

A fact, philosophers inform us, meaning a declarative proposition, is either true or false. That conclusion is apodictic, for the past as for the present. (Whether logical determinists may apply it to facts of the future remains debatable.) Historians will hardly dissent from that reasoning, except to add one word: maybe. Certainly the facts we proclaim are either true or false. But we add the caveat because our sources arrive incomplete, fragmented, the product of unlimited human deceit. One may be tempted to agree with «post-modern» historiographers. History is opinion; leave it at that. Still, some opinions are better than others. Some opinions may even approach the truth. On a concrete level, therefore, historians insist, a fact must be acceptable; that is, it should be demonstrably or verifiably true or verifiably false. If the former condition prevails it rises to an axiom. If the latter prevails it falls to earth. Many historical facts, alas, reside in the grey regions. They float between axiom and earth, incompletely verifiable, demonstrably likely perhaps, or unlikely. The stages in a given fact's rise proceed through five levels, from dubiety to possibility to plausibility to probability to acceptance; thence an axiom. The axiom proposed here has passed along this continuum to the final stage. Does it deserve its exalted station?¹

¹ Learned dissertations, to be sure, have challenged consensus. They have failed to pierce its adamant armor. The verdict is enshrined where it counts most: in the world of educational textbooks. There the axiom reigns. A few examples, consistent for more than half a century: Joseph Strayer, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages: A Short History* (New York, 1955), at p. 47;

The opening clause cannot be disputed. Pepin's anointing was a seminal event. The clause to the semi-colon's right — the primacy, that is, of the Visigothic precedent — is not so certain. Other plantings may have preceded the sowing of that seed. Nearly a century ago, nevertheless, Marc Bloch pronounced the verdict: «L'institution nouvelle prit forme d'abord dans le royaume visigothique d'Espagne... Puis ce fut dans l'Etat franc»². That verdict remains. Doubters have questioned it. It has shrugged them off. The shrug, however, is a mute gesture. It consists of silence. We hear of no regal anointing, verifiably, before the Visigoths' «institution nouvelle» and then its Carolingian recapitulation. If someone had practiced the practice previously someone would have recorded it. In fact it is recorded, or at least suggested. Some have put in a claim for an Irish origin in the 6th century, relying on a phrase in Adamnan's Life of St. Columba³. The axiom has shrugged them off. Others have noted a positive crack, a voice that breaks the wall of silence. The axiom, under its Teflon coat, has repelled that too. But, it may be, that voice deserves a hearing. One may prefer to dismiss it. One must show the reason why. Our voice is a lonely one. Its message, though not unsubstantial, is unsubstantiated. Unverifiable, it has fallen far on the axiomatic scale. Why has it fallen? It is not impossible. It is not implausible. It is not perhaps improbable. It is not farfetched. It is dismissed.

The voice belongs to Gildas. His statement, in the *De Excidio Britanniae*, cap. 21, is brief but formal. After the dissolution of Roman authority, Britons early in the 5th century chose new leaders. They consecrated them by anointing: *Ungebantur reges non per deum sed qui ceteris crudeliores exstarent, et paulo post ab unctoribus non pro veri examinatione trucidabantur, aliis electis trucioribus*⁴. Britons, saith Gildas, elevated fifth-century kings with anointment. His words have not been ignored. Detractors have dismissed them, axiomatically. Admirers have accepted them⁵. Most

Norman Cantor, *Medieval History: The Life and Death of a Civilization* (New York, 1964), pp. 217–218, and also the «Completely Revised and Expanded Edition», 1994, at pp. 175–176; R.H.C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis* (London, 1988), p. 125; Rosamond McKitterick, *The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400–1000* (Oxford, 2001), at p. 55; Jean-François Lemarignier, *La France médiévale, institutions et société* (Paris, 1970), p. 62; Giovanni Vitolo, *Medioevo. I caratteri originali di un'età di transizione* (Milan, 2000), p. 128; Peter Hilsch, *Das Mittelalter — die Epoche* (Konstanz, 2006), at p. 37.

² Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges. Etude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris, 1983), p. 68.

³ Michael J. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin and New York, 1985); Raymond Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters* (6.–8. Jahrhundert) (Bonn, 1964): 98–105.

⁴ Cap. 21:4: «Kings were anointed not in God's name, but as being crueler than the rest; before long they would be killed, with no enquiry into the truth, by those who had anointed them, and others still crueler chosen to replace them». Text and translation in Michael Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (Chichester, 1978), whose edition we use throughout.

⁵ Among the detractors: Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*: 467–469; Michel Zimmermann, «Les sacres des rois wisigoths», in Michel Rouche, ed., *Clovis: histoire et mémoire, 2, le baptême de Clovis, son écho à travers l'histoire* (Paris, 1997): 10; Gerald Ellard, *Ordination Anointings*

admirers, however, as well as detractors, with some exceptions⁶, suggest no more than an intuitive preference. Intuition left other observers dissatisfied. Some chose to confront the problem by overlooking it, rather than grope dishearteningly in the void⁷. Some decided not to decide⁸. The erudite Ernst Kantorowicz left the question open⁹. More than one authority, reflecting upon the impenetrability of the matter, ended the discussion with an interrogative. Thus the conclusion of Christopher Snyder: «Did the British church formally anoint native kings in the absence of legitimate Roman rulers?»¹⁰ He does not answer. Nor can we, in the end, erase his question mark. Let the interrogative remain. We can examine it. We can consider its probabilities. We can think it over.

Why, to begin with, should we disbelieve Gildas' straightforward statement? The anointing of kings was hardly a wild idea. It had not currently been practiced. But its biblical precedents readily came to mind. It was floating about in the thought of theologians. It was picked up by Visigoths in the 7th century. Why should it not have occurred to Britons of the 5th? Why assume that Gildas was wrong in citing

in the Western Church before 1000 A. D. (Cambridge, Mass., 1933): 9–13; Eva Müller, «Die Anfänge der Königssalbung im Mittelalter und ihre historisch-politischen Auswirkungen», *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 58 (1938): 322–327; Jan Prelog, «Sind die Weihe-salbungen insularen Ursprungs?» *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 13 (1979): 325–334; Abilio Barbero de Aguilera, «El pensamiento político visigodo y las primeras unciones en la España medieval», *España. Revista española de historia*, 30 (1970): 304–309. Among admirers: William Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae: The Occasional Offices of the Church of England according to the Old Use of Salisbury the Prymer in English and other Prayers and Forms, with Dissertations and Notes*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1882): x–xi; C. E. Stevens, «Gildas Sapiens», *English Historical Review*, 56 (1941): 361; E. A. Thompson, «Gildas and the History of Britain», *Britannia*, 10 (1979): 216, 225; David Petts, «Christianity and the End of Roman Britain», in Patricia Baker et al., eds., *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference. Proceedings of the 8th Annual TRAC, University of Leicester, April, 1998* (Oxford, 1999): 91.

⁶ Prelog, following Müller's arguments, offers the most thoughtful case among the detractors.

⁷ Arnold Angenendt, «Rex et Sacerdos. Zur Genese der Königssalbung», in N. Kamp and J. Wol-lash, eds., *Tradition als historische Kraft* (Berlin, 1982): 100–118; Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, «La 'ordinatio principis' en la España goda y postvisigoda», *Cuadernos de la Historia de España*, (1962): 12–13.

⁸ E.g. Reinhard Elze, «Le consacrazioni regie», *Segni e riti nella chiesa altomedievale occidentale, 11–17 aprile 1985. Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo*, 33 (1987): 49: «A chi e da dove era venuto l'idea di questo atto? Qual'era il modello? L'Antico Testamento? L'unzione di alcuni re visigoti in Spagna o di altri re celti nelle isole britanniche?»

⁹ Ernst Kantorowicz, *Laudes Regiae. A Study in Liturgical Acclamations and Medieval Ruler Worship* (Berkeley, 1958): 54n.

¹⁰ Christopher A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, AD 400–600* (University Park, 1998): 299. Likewise Ellard, *Ordination Anointings*, 13: «Shall one read a physical anointing of the king into Gildas' lines?» Also Cornelius Adrianus Bouman, *Sacring and Crowning. The Development of the Latin Ritual for the Anointing of Kings and the Coronation of an Emperor before the Eleventh Century* (Gröningen, 1957): xi.

this detail? The answer opens upon another question: why assume the historicity of anything Gildas reports? The enigmatic author, whose chronicle, or rather diatribe, brings us such shadowy figures as the proto-Arthur Ambrosius Aurelianus, has sown deep mistrust among scientific historians; he sheds darkness on a dark period. We accept his stories only with caution. The perspicacious Ferdinand Lot formally declared Gildas' oeuvre void, a meaningless mishmash, «bavardage ou imaginations insipides»¹¹. Scholars nevertheless recognize some reliable nuggets of fact in the gossip. Why not this nugget? Skeptics point to two areas of doubt: a fault of knowledge; or a case of creative vocabulary.

As to the latter, vocabulary, it is possible Gildas used his words imprecisely. He intended not to indicate an actual anointment but simply and generally an investiture of power¹². The Bible, some have proposed, is to blame. Gildas understood the meaning of his word but did not mean it meaningfully, as it amounts to no more than the casual reflection of a biblical turn-of-phrase that crossed his mind: «Une réminiscence purement verbale d'une tournure biblique»¹³. Still, nagging objections arise. His word, used not once but twice in one sentence, is a peculiarly precise word to use imprecisely, twice, in two different constructions — *ungebantur*; *unctoribus* — in two different turns-of-phrase. The second phrase, one must note, conveys no biblical reminiscence; nowhere will we find the Bible to remark that anointers slaughtered their anointed (*ab unctoribus trucidabantur*). Biblical imagery turns un-biblically sour. But, we are told, there is an explanation. Metaphor comes to the rescue. Metaphor preserves the biblical allusion, though it perverts the meaning of the words.

The term, *ungebantur*, in this assumption, is not a nonchalant reminiscence. It is metaphor: «Eine metaphorische Auffassung dieses Ausdrucks akzeptiert»¹⁴. With metaphor as refuge, one avoids the inconvenience of accepting a literally inconvenient phrase. Anointing can mean anything but anointing¹⁵. One may conceive it in any way that suits the fancy. Once again, however, do we presume to ask: why? Gildas certainly was not averse to the use of metaphor when it had a point. This particular verbal obliquity, however, so confoundedly obscure, misleading at the very least, becomes the height of pointlessness. Gildas, moreover, authorities agree, was a peculiarly precise writer. He composed in proper Latin, of which his education had made him master. His prose, as François Kerlouégan and Michael Lapidge attest, is formal: «Well-constructed Latin which bears comparison with that of the finest

¹¹ Ferdinand Lot, «De la valeur historique du De Excidio de Gildas», in *Medieval Studies in Memory of Gertrude S. Loomis* (Paris — New York, 1927): 263.

¹² Müller, «Die Anfänge der Königssalbung», 324.

¹³ Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*: 468.

¹⁴ Prelog, «Sind die Weihesalbungen insularen Ursprungs?» 333; also Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments*, 98: «Es ist umstritten ob eine wirkliche, d. H. physische Salbung gemeint ist, oder ob die Worte von der Salbung bildlich zu deuten sind».

¹⁵ Barbero de Aguilera, «El pensamiento visigodo», 309: «Que Gildas hablaba en sentido metafórico y que no se puede dar a sus palabras un valor literal».

authors preceding him»¹⁶. His word choice marks a clear knowledge of terms. His writing demonstrates the training of a school, the instruction of a *grammaticus* and possibly a *rhetor*¹⁷. We congratulate him on his «highly polished and sophisticated» style¹⁸, his «impeccable grammar and syntax»¹⁹, his felicity of expression. Then we dismiss his expression when it does not suit our assumption.

Dismissed it is, nevertheless, axiomatically. Gildas' process is «allusive», so we are told. He trolls the Bible for metaphor with which to decorate current events, thereby distorting those events. Unwary readers tread a landscape honeycombed allusively with illusion. In fact, say the metaphorists, we need not confine ourselves to metaphor. «Irony» or «downright sarcasm», it has been suggested, are appropriate, if one chooses to discover them in the text²⁰. Here the historian walks with the wariest of footfalls. Irony is a fine literary device, when used aright. Is there the slightest call for irony in Gildas' words? Cruel kings arose, were slaughtered, crueler kings followed, an age of chaos, a war of all against all. Just the place for a touch of irony (the last words to be read in an ironical tone of voice). Once we commence to find irony in our sources, to read their meaning backwards, our sources become playthings of creative imagination.

Sarcasm? Possibly. But it becomes a hazardous proceeding when historians insert stage directions into lines of text at their own will and discretion. If we apply inflection to one word we can apply it to any. If we read *unctores* sarcastically we may, with quite as much justification, read *reges* likewise. «Kings' (sarcasm) arose in fifth-century Britain» — meaning there were no kings in fifth-century Britain, only contemptuous derision. We enter a wonderland of interpretative freedom. Possibilities lie endless before us.

Metaphor, plain and simple, has a stronger case to make. It has been strongly advanced. Gildas' method, as noted, «trolls the Bible». He seeks out biblical texts and exempla for historical application. These he relates didactically to upbraid, to chastise the waywardness of the Britons. The proper biblical example for this didactic parallel, corresponding to kings raised up then rejected, leads one to Samuel, Saul and the royal David. Samuel established monarchs by anointing. Hence the metaphorical use of that term in Gildas' vocabulary. Seeing the word, anoint, the reader's mind refers

¹⁶ François Kerlouégan, «Le latin du De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas», in M.W. Barley and R. P.C. Hanson, eds., *Christianity in Britain, 300–700. Papers Presented to the Conference on Christianity in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain held at the University of Nottingham, 17–20 April, 1967* (Leicester, 1968): 152; also, *Le «De Excidio Britanniae» de Gildas: les destinées de la culture latine dans l'île de Bretagne au VI^e siècle* (Paris, 1987): 581.

¹⁷ Michael Lapidge, «Gildas' Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain», in Michael Lapidge and David Dumville, eds., *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984): 33–47; Kerlouégan, «Le latin de Gildas», 159–160, 172–173.

¹⁸ Lapidge, *ibid*, 50.

¹⁹ Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants*: 46.

²⁰ This suggestion we have not found in print. It is suggested, however, by anonymous readers who have commented on the proposed publication of this paper.

necessarily to Samuel, of course, and the rest follows. Gildas' phrase thus «becomes much more biting», it is suggested. «Fifth-century equivalents of Samuel rejected their kings not because they have disobeyed God, but because there are to hand men who are even more cruel than those originally anointed». They were *not*, however, anointed. The word serves only to introduce the metaphor. The metaphor serves only to deliver a sly, subtle reproach to Britain's kings, or rather its kingmakers²¹.

Such is the most thoughtful case for metaphor (and a touch of sarcasm) we have encountered. The so-called «anointers», who did not anoint, are perversions of the holy Samuel, who did. The cruel kings are reversions of the worthless Saul. The crueller kings are inversions of the god-fearing David. The word «anointed» is purely a matter of convenience. It has to be there to allude to all the rest. In fact, it is the only thing in the allusion that alludes to the allusion. Without it we would never know that Gildas intends us to conjure up in imagination the struggles of King Saul, Samuel, and King David. The subtlety is surpassing. Not a *tam* nor a *quam*; Gildas does us no courtesy to light our way. But it is possible²².

If this is correct, one must say, it is not only an exceedingly subtle construction but also clumsy. *Ungebantur* does not mean anointed but «chosen» in some manner or another. Once we have digested that and understand it to imply — despite our conjuration of Samuel — nothing of a spiritual nature, we are faced with *non per Deum*, implying a spiritual nature. This too consequently means not what it means. It is simply a round-about way of saying «badly chosen». Then, finally, we may appreciate the «biting» spiritual sarcasm of the phrase. All this obscurity and misdirection just to say one simple thing: the Britons chose bad kings.

Who then were the non-anointers who chose so badly? Either they were churchmen who abused their function, or they were non-churchmen who had no spiritual function. If the *unctores* were churchmen, we have as much as admitted that they did anoint, or consecrate, albeit unworthily. If they were not churchmen they could not possibly have acted *per Deum*, so why bother to point that out?

Let us construct another analogy. In modern times dictators have arisen — perhaps we may imagine ourselves in a small Latin American country — strongmen empowered by force. Let them stand in for Gildas' cruel and crueller kings. Our strongmen assume the presidency. Would one say (affecting, be it understood, a sarcastic, metaphorical or ironical tone) of such as these, hoisted up by the army, that they arose *non per populum*? We might say so on one condition; that is, if the tyrant claimed to hold his power *per populum* (as indeed many do, having arranged an «election» to

²¹ For this analysis once again we thank an anonymous reviewer, whose words we quote perforce anonymously.

²² Gildas did not shrink from the adverbial construction elsewhere, as for instance when describing Britons who rallied to the Arthur-esque warrior Ambrosius: *confugiunt... miserrimi cives tam avidè quam apes alveari procella imminente* (cap. 25). The passage provides a nice, literary touch. Or is it more? An invocation of metaphor? Bees appear in the Bible. Perhaps these bees connect Ambrosius to Samson (Judges, 14:8), or to the Messiah (Isaiah, 7:18). Or do they pre-empt ultimate military disaster (Deuteronomy, 1:44).

suit the purpose). In Gildas' age rulers of all types, emperors, pretenders, usurpers, Germanic chieftains, were hoisted up, by a late imperial army or by a tribal host. None of them claimed ruler-ship *per Deum*. Such is the verdict of historical science. The idea — so says the axiom — occurred to no one, no one before the Visigoths' innovation two centuries later. Why then, even granted an underlying obsession with biblical analogy, should Gildas hurl this insult here? Did he expect potential readers to nod in savage agreement at his condemnation of kings empowered *non per Deum* in an age when no king claimed empowerment *per Deum*?

Metaphor takes us on a tour of dizzying circularity. The verb, *ungebantur*, exists to sustain an allusion to Samuel and Saul. Samuel and Saul are not actually alluded to, except by the allusive verb. We know therefore that the verb is allusive; it alludes to Samuel and Saul. How do we know it alludes to Samuel and Saul? We know because we know it is allusive. The word does not emerge to fit a metaphor; a metaphor emerges serendipitously to explain the word as metaphor. The «anointers' may have been churchmen, but they didn't anoint. More likely they were not churchmen but armed thugs who could not conceivably have anointed. To complete the sarcasm, or irony, or mockery, Gildas specifies that the non-anointing was done in a non-godly manner, even though no ruler as yet claimed to rule by godly fiat. In fact — the only way out of the box — none of these words mean anything they seem to mean. Thus speaks metaphor. Will it not be simpler to take Gildas' words as they stand?²³

Gildas' entire thought describes a religious event. It describes a consecration. It was impiously done, he protests, truly not through God's power: *non per Deum*. It pretended nevertheless to that power, an act whose presumption required a disclaimer on behalf of the deity. It was not merely a sordid investiture of authority, *per hominem*. Let us put Gildas' passage in context. He precedes these phrases very precisely with a diatribe upon certain sins rampant in fifth-century Britain. A period of plague, he says, had passed. An age of wantonness commenced, an age of sin. Each sin was not just a perversion but an inversion of Christian conduct. Whatever should be done was done deformed, a flagitious facsimile of the faith.

«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" <...> the hatred of truth and its champions

²³ Metaphorical subtlety, in fact, has not pleased all historians. Rather than adopt the simple solution, however, they have proposed even wilder convolutions. One suggests that Gildas' *reges* — no allusion here to Saul or David — were pagan kings (Kottje, *Studien*, p. 98: «Dass es sich um heidnische Könige handelte»). Still more needlessly convoluted is the suggestion that Gildas' phrase, *non per deum*, is to be read simply as *non*, a negation of the word, *ungebantur*, immediately preceding it (Prelog, «Sind die Weihesalbungen», p. 333: «Die von Gott vollzogene Salbung ist eine Folge der Würdigkeit des Königs. So lag es für Gildas nahe, die Unwürdigkeit der Könige damit zu auszudrücken, dass er sie als nicht von Gott gesalbt bezeichnete»). Gildas will have employed his word precisely in order to sabotage it, thereby to arrive at a meaning opposite to his word. Anointed-not-by-God means not anointed. Caesar, one might say, was shot-not-with-an-arrow (meaning to say he was stabbed).

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 (*susceptio mali pro bono, veneratio nequitiae pro benignitate, cupido tenebrarum pro sole, exceptio Satanae pro angelo lucis. Ungebantur reges non per deum*)».

No amount of imprecision or arbitrary retreat into the land of metaphor can erase the fact that Gildas conceived his kings to have been established by some sort of spiritual sanction, however spurious it may have been. This act, to be sure, does not prove a case for anointing. It does reduce decisively the scope of interpretation we may permit ourselves to put upon Gildas' choice of words. It may even, for insisters upon biblical analogy, justify a case. Gildas may indeed welcome an allusion to Samuel. Samuel anointed kings *per Deum*. Fifth-century Samuels performed a perverted, looking-glass version of that act, *non per Deum*. Now, if one still insists upon it, sarcasm makes some sense. It assumes truly a biting, bitter, and also a meaningful tone.

Perhaps, however, one may take refuge in the skeptics' second argument, an *argumentum ex ignorantia*. Gildas was not metaphorical but misinformed. That we cannot tell, since Gildas alone informs us. He relied on sources of which we have no knowledge. We cannot impeach his sources, since we do not know them²⁴. Therefore we choose to impeach him. Among historians deep distrust of Gildas' work predominates, and not without reason. Much that he says is untrustworthy. Gildas, it is asserted, knew essentially nothing about the 5th century, albeit it was the century of his birth. Indeed he knew less than we know, sixteen centuries later. We know he knew nothing. Ferdinand Lot was right. His work is a gallimaufry of gossip. Close its covers. Transfer the book to the library's literature section and forbid historians to refer, other than mockingly, to its contents.

Skepticism is wise, especially for historians. It is wise to be wary when confronted with seemingly fantastic or fantastical facts. Is there anything fantastical about the idea that fifth-century Britons conceived of anointing to legitimize upstart rulers? Gildas reports numbers of improbable, legendary or folkloric items concerning a dark period of history. Does that mean he picked up no accurate items from that time, a time not very remote from his writing?²⁵ When we presume that a historical source's fact is fancy we must have some reason so to presume. Is there in this case a countervailing source of information? None appears.

Logic dictates that historians who choose to challenge the clear statement of an historical source bear the burden of proof. They must show the cause of their challenge. For this cause we look in vain. No source confirms Gildas' assertion. There

²⁴ See Thompson, «Gildas and the History of Britain», 208–211; Stevens, «Gildas Sapiens», 354–357.

²⁵ How ignorant was Gildas? Intensely, according to some: «Gildas wrote of a period of which he had very little knowledge» (Wendy Davis, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982): 122). Others suggest the opposite. His «historical memory» may certainly have extended to the century of his birth (Ken R. Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud, 2000): 229).

is only silence. Silence, so the argument goes, suffices. «Nothing proves it», one expert has concluded. «Despite two ambiguous passages in Gildas and in the Life of St. Columba, nothing proves that Celtic Christianity knew of royal unction»²⁶. That is hardly enough. Nothing proves it. Nothing disproves it. Nor is Gildas' passage in any way ambiguous (unless one translates his thought metaphorically). Another authority breezily dismisses historians who have presumed to take Gildas' words «uncritically» — without offering to supply the requisite criticism²⁷. Let us be critical. Why should we not consider literally a literal statement when no contrary evidence exists? *Non confirmatum* does not equal *non potest*.

Id potest, however, also requires a basis for belief. «This will strike any reflecting mind forcibly», Mark Twain declared when shown by tour-guides in Jerusalem the authentic spot where God took the earth to make Adam. «That Adam was formed of dirt procured in this very spot is amply proven by the fact that in six thousand years no man has ever been able to prove that the dirt was *not* procured here whereof he was made». We cannot procure dirt positively to prove Gildas' anointings. (Nor can one prove the contrary.) We can, however, consider their plausibility.

Reges habet Britannia, sed tyrannos. With those famous words, marking presumably the situation in the first decades of the 6th century, Gildas describes the politics of Britain in those parts of Britain yet unoccupied by Saxon encroachment. He proceeds to give a detailed critique of five currently unpleasant kings, whose demerits he freely ventilates: Maglocunus of Gwynedd, Constantine of Dumnonia, Aurelius Caninus, Cuneglasus, Vortipor. Here Gildas' observations arouse less mistrust. His «five tyrants» were living models. Those rulers, «squalid and bellicose kinglets», were the descendants in status if not in bloodline of their unnamed predecessors whose anointing Gildas had described²⁸. Conditions that applied to them may have applied to their forerunners. What can we say about the nature of their authority? They bore the title of king, as did their predecessors. They assumed the right to exercise power from tribal connection, birth and wealth, as their predecessors must variously have done. They derived their mandate, for so Gildas insists, from a Christian foundation — as had their predecessors. Did they, or their predecessors, fortify that foundation by an act of anointing? In reference to his own day Gildas gives no hint that the practice persisted. He gives no hint, conversely, that it did not persist. From that, of course, one may build another *argumentum ex silentio*. We can only take this for what it is worth: a significant silence, or a casual omission? Conditions a century earlier suggest a more likely scenario. Two factors point to the possibility.

²⁶ Zimmermann, «Les sacres des rois wisigoths», 10: «Quant aux chrétientés celtiques, rien ne prouve, malgré deux passages ambigus de Gildas et de la vie de saint Columba, qu'elles connaissent le rituel de l'onction royale».

²⁷ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*: 8n.

²⁸ Thompson, «Gildas and the History of Britain», 224–225.

Two factors, that is, distinguished Britannia at that time from all other parts of the ex-Roman world: the unique circumstances of its political transformation; and the presence of a unique religious force, the influence, or interference, of Pelagian ideas. Each or either of these factors can have encouraged a resort to anointing uniquely among the Britons.

Upon the disintegration of Roman authority in the empire's western provinces in the 5th century new governments arose. Those governments had to establish their claims to authority. In the continental districts claims were not hard to establish. Germanic peoples came equipped with prior organization. War-leaders became kings and inserted themselves into power, after disposing of Roman officialdom. On the island of Britain uniquely, after the events of 409–410, a vacuum enveloped the structure of government and obscured the right to govern. Invaders had not yet permanently invaded. But authority had devolved. «Fissiparous internal forces», to borrow one writer's felicitous phrase, fractured the political structure²⁹. Officialdom disappeared. Its replacement remained unformed. Emperor Honorius, if we accept Zosimus' account, could address his valedictory message to no one in authority, but only to impersonal entities, the *civitates* of the island. In the vacuum new men arose. They assumed archaic titles, *reges*. But they sought the sanction of a new force. To a significant extent, perhaps to a decisive extent, that force defined the nascent political order. It was the Faith. Having abandoned Romanitas, power leaned on Christianitas: «Britain looked to Christianity», one authority has affirmed, «and the Bible as alternative models for kingship and power»³⁰.

Novelty, it is assumed, motivated the first Carolingian to seek spiritual sanction for his coup d'état. A new line of rulers presumed to replace the old. It could not rest its claim on ancestral authority. It sought the authority of God. Instability, it is suggested, motivated seventh-century Visigothic monarchs. Uncertain lines of succession and an elective tradition that clashed with their interest in establishing hereditary rule stimulated the search for a higher sanction. The *detestabilis consuetudo*, as Gregory of Tours described it, (HF, 3:30) of Visigothic nobles, their penchant for replacing their rulers after a brief tenure and then replacing the replacements, incited Visigothic kings to find a firmer foundation. The same stimuli will have motivated the earliest kings among the Britons. Novelty was even more compelling, instability in the political landscape more malignant. These men, whose names are forgotten, were in an unprecedented position. They arose without predecessors. They were not emperors or imperial pretenders competing for power already established. They were not pre-existing tribal dynasts. They were kings *ex nihilo*³¹. They rose from

²⁹ David Dumville, «The Idea of Government in Sub-Roman Britain», in Giorgio Ausenda, ed., *After Empire: Towards and Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians* (Woodbridge, 1995): 181.

³⁰ Petts, «Christianity and the End of Roman Britain», 91.

³¹ Royal title in Britain, though reduced to honorific, was not wholly effaced by imperial rule. See Ken R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity, 300–800* (Leicester, 1993): 178–181. Royal power, nonetheless, submerged by imperial rule, required a restart, even among the Britons.

private station and arrogated to themselves royal rank. They were the first persons ever to inaugurate — not to be born or to succeed to — a title of kingship under the stamp of the Christian faith. In no other province of the Roman world did such individuals arise as were spawned on the island of Britain³². If any individuals needed the support of an innovating ceremony to validate innovative positions, such were the individuals.

Many factors, to be sure, contributed to give these men their claim to rule, to presume upon the loyalty of the people. Tribal identity remained alive. Roman occupation had not extinguished deference to the aristocracy of ancient clans³³. A still-lively respect for vanished imperial officialdom continued to operate. St. Germanus, we are told, when in Britain received the visit of a person who asserted his status with the eminently official-sounding title of *vir tribuniciae potestatis*. Ambrosius Aurelianus, whoever he may have been, Gildas says, came of a family still clinging to imperial nostalgia: *Romanae gentis <...> parentibus purpura nimirum indutis*. Such individuals, clothed in tribal reverence or benefiting from a faded Roman dignity, or simply possessed of landholding dominion and a hill-fort³⁴, could easily have presumed a right to govern once legitimate government fell away. There is no reason to believe they did not so presume. «A landed elite», Christopher Snyder characterizes them, «they seized control of their districts. They stepped out of the shadows to take the reins of government»³⁵.

Presumption, however, rested on tenuous ground. Roman Britain found itself outside the constitutive firmament of Roman authority, an authority even usurping pretenders hitherto had assumed. The penultimate member of that crew, according to Zosimus, the ephemeral usurper Gratian of 406, still presumed he could wear the panoply of empire. The fleeting *reguli* who followed him could rely no longer even on that consolation. They were in the position of the Carolingian mayors three centuries later. They possessed personal strengths, qualities no doubt that gave them kingly potential. Landed gentry, power brokers in their regions, they were, one might say, *königsfähigen*, capable of being king. They lacked a capable constitutive authority to confirm their claim. They needed a superior power to spark royal potential into life. That power source, Gildas asserts, was the Church. They sought in some manner the imprimatur of spiritual authority, *per Deum*. It legitimized their presumption. Those who abused it lost their imprimatur.

³² One might cite as an exception Aegidius, *magister militum* stranded at Soissons, and his son Syagrius whom Gregory of Tours addresses as *rex*. It is doubtful Syagrius would have acknowledged any such title (on this see the remarks of Ian Wood in Ausenda, *After Empire*: 206). The chronicler Hydatius, who was his contemporary, recalls Aegidius simply as an agent of the empire: *regiones Romano nomini tuebatur* (Hydatius, *Chronicon*, cap. 228).

³³ See Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*: 94–96; also Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud, 2000): 70.

³⁴ Susan M. Pearce, *The Kingdom of Dumnonia* (Padstow, 1978): 59.

³⁵ Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants*: 16, also 226–232; Snyder, *The Britons* (Oxford, 2000): 71.

St. Gildas, to be sure, seems to have been a thoroughly fashionable, querulous and moralizing churchman. He, as did his fellow commentator Salvian, viewed the ruin of the people writ large in the sins of their rulers³⁶. What more commonplace, indeed unimaginative notion than to declare those rulers forfeit of their right to rule by virtue of God's displeasure? Perhaps, we may say, he imposed upon them an imprimatur they had not sought, the better to question their legitimacy for reasons they would not have imagined. And yet Gildas' point is surely more concrete. We know nothing of his fifth-century kings. But he clearly expected sixth-century rulers to understand. God punishes kings because He himself creates them.

On this point Gildas dwells with a persistency that never occurred to a celebrated continental contemporary. Gregory of Tours had much to say about kings, especially bad kings. Gregory, it is true, permits God to upbraid his rulers. God, Gregory prays, has given young King Childebert to the Franks for their preservation (8:4). But it is to the Franks, their men and women assembled, that he has King Guntram pray for Childebert's preservation (7:8). God, he warns King Chilperic, will revoke his reign should he persist in evildoing (5:18). But the legitimacy of that reign resides in the bloodline, the *stirps regia* of Merovech³⁷. God, when He wills, unmakes Gregory's kings. Men make them: «For Gregory we do not find precisely the idea that the king is instituted by God»³⁸. For Gildas precisely God institutes kings. «The King of All Kings has made you king», so he prefaces his remarks to Maglocunus (c. 33). God, he advises Constantine of Dumnonia, will give you «a royal ring» (c. 29)³⁹. «I [God] exalted you and made you prince», he reminds them one and all (c. 40).

Gildas' point is clear: the insular Church in post-Roman Britain presumed the right to sanction the lawful basis of kingship. «Why do you provoke the groans and sighs of the holy men who are present, in the flesh (*corporaliter*), at your side?» Gildas warns King Cuneglasus. «They are the teeth of an appalling lioness that will one day break your bones» (c. 32)⁴⁰. Gildas may have exaggerated the masticatory power of his sixth-century Church. He may have overstated its king-making ability. But he affirmed its king-making pretensions. One almost sympathizes with the petty, priest-ridden tyrants

³⁶ Thomas D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas. Its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden, 1978): 29–30, 60–61.

³⁷ See Marc Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville* (Rome, 1981): 353–355.

³⁸ Ibid, 391: «Pour Grégoire, les rois sont dans la main de Dieu qui les défait quand bon lui semble. Mais de cette attitude négative, nous n'avons pas chez lui la contrepartie positive, l'idée explicite que le roi est institué par Dieu».

³⁹ Again, an anonymous reviewer has suggested, Gildas' words do not mean what they say — yet another of the infinitely-metaphorical author's metaphors, the allusion now being to the Prodigal Son (who received a ring upon his homecoming). To this we can only respond that the operative word for our purposes is not «ring» but «royal».

⁴⁰ See Dumville, «The Idea of Government in Sub-Roman Britain», 194–195: «A Christian ideal of kingship <...> [it was] in the requirements of royal office that the Church had the most effect on the king's official behavior».

he torments in his diatribes. Nettlesome were churchmen to kinglets of the 6th century. Did they presume to validate those of the 5th? All the preconditions were met. Every factor that can have attracted adventurous *reguli* to seek out the imprimatur of the faith appears in the 5th century, more compelling than at any other time.

Britain's first aspiring royals did not spring upon the public, as Athena, fully armed and majestic. They stood on shaky legs. Their leases of power were short and terminated disagreeably. «The hatreds of all men and their spears», Gildas says, «were hurled together without respect» (c. 21:4)⁴¹. Thomas Hobbes lived in another age of political unrest. He understood the importance of legitimacy. Kings of ill-defined pedigree, he wrote, need to contrive an honorable support, «to save the people from the shame of receiving them. To have a known right to sovereign power is so popular a quality, as he that has it needs no more»⁴². Fifth-century pretenders, mired in a Hobbesian world, would have appreciated Hobbes' wisdom. Some, perhaps, as Napoleon, seized their crowns and fit them onto their heads with defiant hands. Others, as Pepin, thought it best to receive a handshake. They sought the sanction of the faith. Through what visible sign will Faith have extended its hand? The sign, Gildas reports, was unction. And thus we come to the core of uncertainty.

Gildas himself does nothing to resolve our doubts. We may, however, call to aid another source. Its author does not mention the making or unmaking of kings. There may yet have been no kings in Britain. He does describe the situation at the moment that kings, or proto-kings, of Britain took their first tottering steps toward kingship. Constantius of Lyon, the hagiographer of St. Germanus, wrote his account before the end of the 5th century. He may have had his information, his narratives of the saint's missions to Britain, from an eyewitness, perhaps Germanus' companion Lupus of Troyes. Historians have not universally expressed admiration of Constantius' product: «A farrago of folklore, legend and allegory», to cite one authority⁴³. His farrago nonetheless cannot be ignored, considering that precious little else exists to take its place⁴⁴. Constantius' stock, moreover, has risen. Michael Jones' analysis of his seemingly most folkloric story, the «Alleluia! Victory», has gone far to redeem the hagiographer's credibility⁴⁵. That most fabulous of tales deserves credence. We will be presumptuous to dismiss Constantius' more ordinary accounts⁴⁶.

However one may evaluate the details, three essential points emerge from Constantius' narrative. First, the insular Church, after a period of decline, entered a phase of renewed importance. Second, its influence appealed to persons who aspired to

⁴¹ *Omnium odia telaque sine respectu contorquebantur.*

⁴² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part 2, chapter 30.

⁴³ B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge, 1988): 114.

⁴⁴ David Dumville, introduction to E. A. Thompson, *St. Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1984): vii: «A fifth-century text about a fifth-century subject <...> is not to be lightly set aside.»

⁴⁵ Michael E. Jones, «The Historicity of the Alleluia Victory», *Albion*, 18 (1986): 363–373.

⁴⁶ We rely on the text edited by Wilhelm Levison in MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, VII.

authority. Finally, that Church faced competition. Pertinacious disciples of Pelagius exerted a force that required consideration. Constantius certainly will have had reason to emphasize, not to say overemphasize, these points. Caveats being granted, his impressions have weight.

Constantius relates two journeys of his hero to the island. The first of these, though by far the more exciting, need not detain our inquiry. Germanus arrived in Britain in 429 (c. 12–18). He found the island beset by Pelagians (*Pelagiana perversitas*). Perversity spread its venom widely (*late populos occupasse*). Germanus consequently progressed through town and village to a rendezvous arranged for a public disputation with the opposition spokesmen. These latter arrived arrayed in their finest attire (*conspicui divitiis, veste fulgentes*). Here we do not wish to overstate the case. How significant was the «Pelagianist» presence? Historians have had some doubt⁴⁷. Constantius may have allowed a forgivable exaggeration to color his account; if St. George, as the playwright quipped, had killed a dragonfly, would anyone have cared? Would leaders of the Church, on the other hand, have summoned a holy man to swat a gnat? Friends of unorthodoxy provoked serious enough concern to require a reaction, and also to influence the acts of their establishment rivals.

Therefore, Constantius continues, people flocked to witness the disputation. Among them appeared a leader, the *vir tribuniciae potestatis*. For his benefit the saint performed a miracle, which his opponents proved unwilling to reproduce. The scene, to be sure, bears all the marks of a set-piece of religious theater, inspired no doubt by Elijah's confounding of the prophets of Baal. Be the miracle as it may, the significance rests on the presence of the miracle's beneficiary, the tribunician man. Not only the people, we are told, but their leader sought to touch the power of the men of faith, to have that power reflect upon them. This notion Constantius pointedly reinforced in his account of the saint's second mission. On this first occasion one task remained for Germanus: consummation of the «Alleluia! Victory». Under his inspirational command, Britons repelled a force of Picts and Saxon marauders. That narrative too confirms an essential point: the rising influence of spiritual authority. Matters once left to government concern, the rallying of armies, became a concern of the faith. What the sanction of spiritual power could do to assist in the dispatch of military affairs it could do to assist in the creation and legitimization of government.

We come now to Germanus' second appearance (c. 25–27). The historicity of this visit has excited some skepticism. It is perhaps merely a doublet of the first, minus the alleluias and military adventure⁴⁸. Yet Constantius of Lyon recounts Germanus' second intervention in a way curiously unlike his relation of the first. The sequence of

⁴⁷ Georges de Plinval, *Pélage, ses écrits, sa vie et sa réforme. Etude d'histoire littéraire et religieuse* (Lausanne, 1943): 382; see J.N.L. Myres, «Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain», *Journal of Roman Studies*, 50 (1960): 21–36; John Morris, «Pelagian Literature», *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 16 (1965): 56–59. For a discussion of the evidence, see Rees, *Pelagius, a Reluctant Heretic*: 110–123; Ian Wood, «The End of Roman Britain: Continental Evidence and Parallels», in *Gildas: New Approaches*: 6–10.

⁴⁸ Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*: 52–53.

events is similar. Yet it is distinct. That distinction cannot be ignored. In Constantius' first narrative the saint, once invited to the island, assumed the initiative. He provoked events. He led them as he desired. Here a Briton, the Britons' leading man, takes the initiative. He precipitates the action. He shapes the scene. He reaps the reward.

The occasion once more is the persistence of Pelagian agitation, *praevaricatio*. This time, says Constantius, the heretics' following is reduced (*paucis auctoribus*), logically a result of Germanus' success in his first endeavor. We hear of no disputation. The assembly is impromptu. The chastisement of the *praevaricatores* is summary. Everything seems to have been arranged for a different purpose. Certain parties act as if to find an excuse for a meeting with the holy man. Germanus and his companions are caught unprepared. They react with surprise when they face the forum of the people. They barely recognize a need to be there. No heretics appear. At last a few dissenters, skulking in the crowd, are dredged up: *intellegerunt culpam esse paucorum*. They are hardly resplendent, as their earlier confrères had appeared⁴⁹. They are quickly disposed of: *inquirunt auctores inventosque condemnant*. All this seems rather a sideshow than the main act. That act, Constantius indicates, was conceived beforehand. Indeed it has been stage-managed. One man manipulates events, the only Briton to receive a name in Constantius' history: Elafus.

Constantius prefaces his narrative with otherworldly words. But he recounts a mundane event. During this time (*interea*), he recalls, speaking of the moment of Germanus' arrival, spiteful spirits (*sinistri spiritus*) drifted over the island. They revealed that Germanus had returned. Rumors, that is, circulated. A very important man had come back. Locals detected the news. They hastened to appear in the great man's presence. Some local persons particularly wanted to see, and be seen, at his side. They rushed to receive his blessing. Most eager among those notable persons was Elafus. Constantius accords him no title. We do not know the location of his bailiwick. He represents power nonetheless. He is the «first man» (*regionis illius primus*)⁵⁰. Elafus guides the events that follow. Germanus does not convoke him. He convokes himself. Having heard the whispered news of Germanus' arrival he puts himself in his way. He intercepts him deliberately, indeed obnoxiously. He appears without warning: *in occursum sanctorum, sine ulla manifesti nuntii relatione, properaverit*. Nor does he arrive alone. A concourse of people surrounds Elafus. They arrive en masse — not he following them, but they following him: *provincia tota subsequitur*. They follow though ignorant of the reason they have followed (*occurrit inscia multitudo*), obedient to the call of the primus of the province.

⁴⁹ One wonders just how *fulgentes* the earlier Pelagians truly were, given their official doctrine of disdain for worldly display. Thus the Pelagian author of the treatise *De Divitiis* advised: *confundimur in humilitate, in pauperie, in abiectioe vestium* (*De Divitiis*, 14:1. Text in Andreas Kessler *Reichtumskritik und Pelagianismus: Die pelagianische Diatribe «de divitiis»: Situierung, Lesetext, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Freiburg, 1999). Either Pelagius' British disciples, to make a better public appearance, disregarded the master's guidelines or Constantius, to make a better story, misrepresented his hero's opponents' appearance.

⁵⁰ See Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants*: 114.

The holy men, Germanus and his traveling companions, confronted with this unexpected assemblage, halt their progress. They cannot do otherwise. A brief inquiry unmasks the Pelagian diehards, who are exiled unceremoniously. Ceremony centers rather on Elafus. He takes that center stage abruptly, launching himself at Germanus' feet: *subito Elafus pedibus advolvitur*. Germanus, willy-nilly, must acknowledge him, or trip over him. Raised up no doubt from his submissive posture, Elafus, *primus regionis*, receives the priestly endorsement. He receives an affirmation of his primacy: the merit of a miracle personal to him, and pointedly favoring the fortune of his house (the restoration by laying-on of hands of a paralytic son). Germanus returns to the continent. Elafus, after his *coup de théâtre*, returns to his base enhanced, elevated in the eyes of all the people, *provincia tota*, whom he had brought along to witness.

Dressed as a spiritual episode, Constantius describes for us a political event. Elafus has succeeded, as did few other fifth-century Britons, in making his name remembered. He has headlined himself, favored by God's representatives on earth. Indeed he appears as the perfect prototype of Gildas' *reges*, one of the ur-kings of the sub-Roman Britons⁵¹. Did Elafus take the final step? Did he confirm his power with a coronation? We do not know. Could he have taken that final step? Assuredly. He commanded the attention of a region. At his call the people came. He possessed attributes — *primus regionis*, perhaps the largest landholder of the area — that made him *königsfähig*⁵². He took the first step toward the realization of a crown. He sought the imprimatur of the Faith. His primacy was publicly anointed. Did he request a formal anointing? This much we can say. He points precisely to the path we should expect to see if Gildas' tale of the first kings is correct: powerful men grasping for the hand of the Church to uplift their power.

The deeds of St. Germanus take us no further. Another factor may carry us on. Germanus' adversaries also had a role to play in shaping the perceptions, actions and practices of Britons in this unsettled time. Orthodox churchmen placed sanctifying hands upon would-be kings. There is every cause to believe that their Pelagian counterparts will have done the same.

Pelagius' theology, his disputes with Augustine and Jerome, centered on matters of grace, free will, the genetic inheritability of Adam's sin. These controversies, dramatic as they were, need not concern us essentially. Beyond them, Pelagius preached practical advice. The conduct of life was his concern. He addressed his advice to ascetics, or aspiring ascetics, to virgins, or aspiring virgins. He did not address himself to kings, or aspiring kings. Aspiring kings, nonetheless, fit neatly into the scheme of Pelagius' advice. Any aspiring kings who approached his disciples in Britain will have found an act of unction suggested to their minds.

⁵¹ Thompson, *ibid*: 12; Stevens, «Gildas Sapiens», 365–366.

⁵² Was Elafus the «man of tribunician power», or his doppelgänger? On the person of Elafus and the construction of his name, see Andrew Breeze, «Elafus the Briton, St. Germanus, and Bede», *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 53 (2002): 554–557, who concludes he was in any case a Romanized gentleman and landowner.

Without wishing to review complex considerations of grace and free will, suffice it to say that few authorities dispute the centrality of one act to Pelagian thought and to its model of salvation. That act was baptism⁵³. Pelagius' thought, to be sure, drifted into inconsistencies on the subject of baptism, *in remissione peccatorum*, as he squirmed to avoid a tightening circle of ecclesiastical censure. Debate over infant and adult baptism occupied reams of theological controversy. Let that controversy remain to the side. For our purposes it is Pelagius' perception of baptism as such, that holds the key. Nothing indeed can be clearer in Pelagius' view. That willful act, a matter of intelligent choice, marked the central pivot of redemption. By a conscious decision each person must receive baptism. By a conscious decision he must bind himself to a virtuous life⁵⁴. «Baptism was a dramatic “fresh start”, the beginning of a heroic life of action»⁵⁵. That action could be done: «God commands nothing that is impossible»⁵⁶.

The idea permeates Pelagius' writings: first intelligent belief, the choice of virtue; next baptism, the renewal of innocence; then the absolute commitment to a sinless life⁵⁷. «They [the faithful] are called to believe through the preaching, and are justified through baptism when they believe», he noted in his commentary on Romans⁵⁸. *Filii dei sitis*, he urged in his exegesis of Galatians. *Omnia per baptismum peccata sunt remissa*⁵⁹. The faithful believe; baptism sanctifies their belief⁶⁰. *Unxit nos deus, spiritu sancto vel chrismate*⁶¹. Each person takes salvation into his own hands: *Nolite de praeteritis timere peccatis, tantum ne post baptismum delinquatis*⁶². Thus wrote the Pelagian author of the *Liber de Vita Christiana*⁶³.

⁵³ Peter Brown, «Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment», *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 19 (1968): 103–105; see Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius, Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York, 1968): 113–121; Rees, *Pelagius, A Reluctant Heretic*: 76–80; Kessler, *Reichtumskritik*: 170–172.

⁵⁴ «L'homme, créature intelligente et libre, auquel Dieu par un privilège unique a donné la conscience de ses actes, l'honneur exceptionnel d'être dans l'univers l'exécuteur libre de sa volonté ... la possibilité de mériter par lui-même le salut», de Plinval, *Pélage*: 386.

⁵⁵ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, 1969): 368.

⁵⁶ de Plinval, *Pélage*: 209.

⁵⁷ «Natürlich ist die Taufe gleichzeitig ein Eintritt in die engere Gemeinschaft der Kirche der christiani». Kessler, *Reichtumskritik*: 178.

⁵⁸ *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Theodore de Bruyn (Oxford, 1993): Romans 6:22 and 8:30, pp. 100, 113.

⁵⁹ 'Expositio in Galatas' 3:27; text, J. A. Robinson, ed., *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul* (Nedeln–Liechtenstein, 1967).

⁶⁰ 'Expositio in Ephesios' 1:1.

⁶¹ 'Expositio in II Corinthios' 1:22.

⁶² 'Expositio in I Corinthios' 6:11.

⁶³ On the authorship, perhaps by Pelagius himself, see B. R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* (Woodbridge, 1991): 105–106; de Plinval, *Pélage*: 41. A contrary view: Morris, «Pelagian Literature», 28–35.

«The faith of all holds that sins are washed away by baptism; but if there is to be sinning thereafter, what does it profit us to have washed it away? Listen to what the Lord says to a man once he had been made well: See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you»⁶⁴.

The baptismal moment formed the hinge on which a Christian life turned. That moment was essential: a willful act of faith. But, as the *Vita Christiana* warned, another action of the will must follow: blamelessness. «This one word suffices», Pelagius wrote to the virgin Demetrias. «How deliberate is a life, how holy is a life which incurs no blame!»⁶⁵ «Blamelessness (*innocentia*) is what commends us to God; guilelessness (*simplicitas*) is what causes us to reign with Christ, as it is written in the psalms: «The blameless and upright have clung to me»⁶⁶. Through that innocence one becomes a Christian. *Christianus est <...> ut breviter multa concludam, qui post baptismi ablutionem alienus est a peccato*⁶⁷. Those who are cleansed must choose to walk blamelessly: *sumus in Christo renati, ut in bonis operibus ambulemus*⁶⁸. What was essential for a man, Pelagius perceived, was indispensable for a king.

Kings, it is true, being scarce before the fall of the Empire, do not occupy much of Pelagius' attention. He does, nevertheless, allude to them. And he refers to the sacrament of their authority: the act of anointing. Kings, prophets and priests, three categories of men uniquely, they rise to their exalted station through anointment: «Holy men and men sufficiently worthy of God have always been anointed», insisted the *Vita Christiana*. «Nor have they been other than prophets or priests or kings. And so great was the mystery of this anointing itself that not all but only a very few were deemed worthy to receive it». All Christians now are kings. «Not only some, as had previously been the case under the law, but all, are anointed among the prophets and priests and kings», so the *Vita Christiana* continued. Orthodox clergy would not have disagreed. *Omnes in Christo regeneratos*, wrote Leo the Great, *efficit reges*⁶⁹. Christians become as kings. Kings become Christian. From the ritual anointing that followed the baptismal ceremony there evolved, eventually, the anointing ritual of Christian kings⁷⁰.

⁶⁴ Rees, *ibid*: 122; PL, 50, col. 398.

⁶⁵ «To Demetrias». Rees, *ibid*: 54; PL, 30, col. 32: *sitis irreprehensibiles et simplices ad omnem morum perfectionum*.

⁶⁶ «On the Christian Life», Rees, *ibid*: 118; PL, 50, col. 394.

⁶⁷ Letter «Honorificentiae Tuae», in Carl Paul Caspari, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus dem zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirklichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelalters* (Brussels, 1964): 5.

⁶⁸ «Expositio in Ephesios», 11:10.

⁶⁹ Janet Nelson, «National Synods, Kingship as Office and Royal Anointing: An Early Medieval Syndrome», *Studies in Church History*, 7 (1971): 52; see also Bernhard Welte, *Die postbaptismale Salbung, ihr symbolischer Gehalt und ihre sakramentale Zugehörigkeit nach den Zeugnissen der alten Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1939): 11–13, 80.

⁷⁰ Elze, «Le consacrazioni regie», 50–51; Angenendt, «Rex et Sacerdos», 114, 117: «Stellte der postbaptismale Teil der Tauf liturgie einen Ritus dar, den man seiner Struktur nach auch zur

Pelagius, however, went further. One could not wear the regal crown lightly. Peculiarly serious consequences resulted: obligations of blamelessness. The *Vita Christiana* concluded its thought: «By the example of that anointing we are advised as to what sort of men we ought to be, so that in the case of those whose anointing is so holy their behavior may be no less holy»⁷¹. Kinglike Christians received anointment. They must live without blame. What then of authentic kings, anointed *ex officio*?

Pelagius, as noted, wrote no advice to an aspiring king. At the peak of his influence he did address himself to an aspiring individual. He composed his letter to Demetrias. She, daughter of the noblest family, had dedicated herself to virginity. An elaborate ceremony marked her consecration in 413. Jerome, also an epistolary advisor, described the occasion⁷². A royal spirit inhabited the proceedings. All Italy and Africa, said Jerome, rejoiced. The virgin became a regal person. A queenly presence arose: *Astitit regina a dextris Eius, in vestitu deaurata*. The initiate chanted from Solomon's Song: *Introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum*. A choir responded, singing the 44th Psalm, the one text above all associated with the anointing of kings. Demetrias ascended into a purer state of being: *secundus post baptismum gradus*. Such were Jerome's words. In Pelagius' words she rose higher. She assumed «a diadem of royal unguent».

«God has made his universal Church to be without spot or wrinkle, has purified her by washing her with the water of salvation and desires her to become more beautiful day by day, so that, once cleansed of vices and sins, she may be forever adorned with the splendor of virtues. If this is what he requires of his whole Church which contains both widows and brides, how much more, do you think, will he expect of a virgin who seems to have been picked out from all his Church's most brilliant array of decorations like a flower, as it were, of even greater honor. So you must put on all the adornment which will enable you to please Christ <...> and as a decoration for your head keep only what you acquired by the sacrament of unction, when a diadem of royal unguent was placed upon you as a token of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven (*quod acquisivisti Chrismatis sacramento, cum tibi in coelestis regni mysterium diadema quoddam regalis unctionis impositum est*)»⁷³.

Did Demetrias, in this fair facsimile of a royal consecration, renew an act of unction? Jerome does not record it. Pelagius does not state it explicitly⁷⁴. In any case

Salbung und Krönung von Königen verwenden konnte... Für die Königssalbung stellen wir fest, dass die postbaptismalen Salbungen in bester Weise geeignet waren, ein Modell zu liefern».

⁷¹ «On the Christian Life», Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*: 108; PL, 50, col. 384–385.

⁷² Jerome, «Ad Demetriadem», PL, 22, col. 1107–1124.

⁷³ Pelagius, «To Demetrias», Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*: 62–63; PL, 30, col. 40.

⁷⁴ His phrase is ambiguous. But it is possible Demetrias did «acquire» an unction specific to the occasion. The public ceremony consecrating virgins was a relatively new phenomenon, its forms still evolving. (See Nathalie Henry, «A New Insight into the Growth of Ascetic Society in the Fourth Century, AD: The Public Consecration of Virgins as a Means of Integration and Promotion of the Female Ascetic Movement», *Studia Patristica*, vol. 35 *Papers Presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999* (London, 2001):

Pelagius' perception is clear. Those who enter the highest estate are as kings: diademed, anointed. So Pelagius wrote to a quasi-queen, a virgin in queenly model. So he will have written to a factual king, one who wore of necessity the royal adornment, itself the vital, the central pivot of the Pelagian paradigm, the *diadema regalis unctionis*.

Britain, in all the world, provided the only ground where kings can have risen under the influence of a Pelagian paradigm, the pivotal requirement of unction and particularly its harsh imposition of blamelessness. Harsh events, Gildas reports, befell Britain's first, blameworthy kings. Higher commitment, Pelagius insisted, imposes higher obligations: «How much more will He expect!» With that comes a closer and swifter threshold of failure. A threshold, Gildas says, closed swiftly upon Britain's earliest royalty.

Perhaps the most curious, certainly the most disconcerting element of Gildas' account of the first kings lies in his insistence that those rulers were made, that is anointed, and then they were unmade, in fact destroyed, by the same persons who had anointed them: *ab unctoribus*. Two almost offhand words; they relate an astonishing idea. The kings were cruel, Gildas says. Therefore they were removed. Violence attended their downfall. Civil warfare raged afterwards. But they succumbed first to the repudiation of their creators. They were, Gildas says, stripped of their power by their spiritual support, invalidated and destroyed. One is hard pressed in the annals of kingship to find a like case. A similar event, one could say, occurred three centuries later: the repudiation of the Merovingian Childeric III and the elevation of Pepin. Even this does not meet Gildas' example. There the initiative rested with the secular power — Childeric upended by his mayor, a palace coup — the Church merely applying affirmation⁷⁵. Here, Gildas says, the initiative lies with the Church. Anointers anointed kings. The anointers found them unsatisfactory, and removed them for cause. Closer in spirit is Ambrose's chastisement of Emperor Theodosius for bloodletting upon his citizens. But even the Bishop of Milan stopped at excommunication. Gildas himself excoriated sixth-century tyrants and threatened them with God's wrath. He left the deed to God. Only one possibly parallel case comes to mind: the Visigothic King Swinthila, deposed for secular crimes, robbing of the poor, oppression of the nobles. His overthrow was pronounced in 633 by the Fourth Council of Toledo, which council, under the leadership of Isidore of Seville, saluted his replacement, the usurper Sisenand. Yet King Sisenand too had already made good his usurpation, a coup d'état aided by foreign intervention. Isidore and the council

102–107.) One significant text, dating from the early sixth century, does observe an act of unction incorporated into the ritual: *ibi probabitur iudici a pudicitia vera et <...> pudicitia custodita, uncta vertice, introducatur [virgo] ad nuptias Christi*. René Metz, *La consécration des vierges dans l'Eglise romaine* (Paris, 1954): 109–110.

⁷⁵ Some collusion, it is possible, occurred, as the papacy assisted the prior withdrawal of Pepin's brother Karloman. No one will say, in any case, that the initiative came from the Church, a papal compulsion to destroy an ancient line of kings and inaugurate a new one.

gave their approval after the fact and under evident compulsion, «with a knife to their throats», as one authority has commented⁷⁶.

Gildas' kings are unique. They have committed no apparent sin against the Church. Yet they fall to the Church. Their crimes are like those alleged upon King Swinthila, cruelty and misrule. In Swinthila's case nevertheless the Church quite casually managed to overlook secular misdeeds, until his secular rivals acted. Isidore fawned over Swinthila's benevolence, while he was in power. He commemorated him, prince of the people and the father of the poor⁷⁷, until he needed an excuse to applaud his successor's coup. Gildas' anointers overlooked nothing. They waited for no excuse. Kings proved unsatisfactory: *crudeliores*; *truciores*. They liquidated them.

So forcefully has this idea struck some historians, a proceeding so improbable, incompatible with the act of spiritual men, that it has provoked disbelief: yet another manifestation of Gildas' inanity. Murderers cannot anoint. Anointers cannot murder⁷⁸. Gildas' words do not amount even to metaphor. They are simply nonsense. «Anointers» signifies bloodstained laymen. They «anointed» only in a sanguineous sense and then «unanointed» operating with a knife⁷⁹. Or shall we invoke a hobgoblin legion of creeping, regicidal, axe-wielding priests?⁸⁰ One historian has tried to square the circle. He invokes a hybrid: true anointing; false anointers. The anointing, he suggests, was real, not metaphorical. The anointers, however, were «not priests» but murderous laymen. Their anointing nevertheless produced «not tyrants» but kings. Lay anointers somehow created legitimate kings illegitimately through an anointing which they could not do⁸¹. And then they killed their kings. Nothing in Gildas' thought requires such desperate conjectures. Priestly *unctores* anointed. They delegated, subsequently, violent deeds (as, a millennium later the Church's Inquisitors did) to the suitably sanguinary hands of others. They, however, gave the green light. Pelagius would have nodded and understood.

In a Pelagian world those anointed had betrayed more than their people or their political enemies. They *did* commit crimes against the Church; against a Church, that is, conceived in the Pelagian model, a small pure body defined by its sinlessness

⁷⁶ «Le couteau sur la gorge, un couteau brandi par le roi usurpateur Sisenand». Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine*: 550.

⁷⁷ Barbero de Aguilera, «El pensamiento político visigodo», 268–269; Thompson, *The Goths in Spain*: 168–174; Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine*: 546–551.

⁷⁸ Müller, «Die Anfänge der Königssalbung», 323: «Danach kann es sich m. E. unmöglich um eine religiöse Weihe, eine von liturgischen Amtspersonen — die zu Mördern wurden — vollzogene rituelle Salbung handeln».

⁷⁹ «Deutet man aber 'unctores' als pauschale Bezeichnung für die politisch massgebliche Schicht, die auch — wohl sogar in erster Linie — aus Laien bestand». Prelog, «Sind die Weihesalbungen insularen Ursprungs?» 333.

⁸⁰ «Seria necessario acceptar que los reyes eran precisamente asesinados por los sacerdotes». Barbero de Aguilera, «El pensamiento político visigodo», 309.

⁸¹ Bernard Bachrach, «Gildas, Vortigen, and Constitutionality in Sub-Roman Britain», *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 32 (1988): 134.

and righteous life, «an institution made up of perfect men»⁸². They transgressed the condition of their anointment. They failed in blamelessness. For that failure, quintessentially Pelagian⁸³, the power that made them broke them. Peter Brown has pointedly noted the unyielding character of Pelagian discipline, its «austere perfectionism» and iron ethic of accountability. «The Pelagians were Late Roman men, to a depressing extent», he concluded. «Reform meant only one thing: reform from the top; yet more laws, sanctioned by yet more horrific punishments. The Pelagians would have reformed the Catholic Church exactly as Vegetius proposed to reform the Roman army — by re-imposing the old discipline: «Corruption and its antidote, Terrorism»⁸⁴. Crooked kings were disciplined, Gildas says. They were terrorized. The antidote: *ab unctoribus trucidabantur*⁸⁵.

What discipline did Pelagius expect of kings? He addressed no letter to a budding king. There were in his vicinity none to address. A few remarks, nonetheless, in his commentaries provide an idea of his thought. Royalty, he indicates, God has instituted to suppress the unrighteous. «The ruler is established by God to judge in righteousness. Thus sinners have reason to fear, should they sin»⁸⁶. Kings sustain the environment, permitting people to pursue blamelessness. «Let kings have subject peoples», he counsels in his commentary on Paul's first letter to Timothy (*ut subiectas habeant gentes*), «for in the kings' peace resides our rest and tranquility; and if they be Christian kings, all care of persecution and distress will fall away from us»⁸⁷. Christian rulers must perform this vital task, without which Christianity itself will fail. If they do not perform it, they are neither Christians nor kings: «For what does it profit you to be called what you are not and to appropriate to yourself a name which belongs to others?»⁸⁸ Failure in this matter, as by being thuggish — *crudelis, truculentus* — makes forfeit the name of kingship. «Who is so vain», wrote the *Vita Christiana*, «and so wretched as to dare to declare himself to be an advocate, when he is illiterate <...> to declare himself to be a soldier, when he does not know how

⁸² Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*: 348.

⁸³ See Robert Evans, *Pelagius, Inquiries and Reappraisals*: 119; Myers, «Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain», 27–28.

⁸⁴ Peter Brown, «Pelagius and his Supporters», 111.

⁸⁵ Pelagius derived much favored wisdom from the popular aphorisms of the «Sentences of Sextus». Among other items of interest in that compilation of dicta, his disciples will have noticed some instructive recommendations concerning tyrants: *corporis quidem habet potestatem et leo similiter et tyrannus*; concerning oppressive tyrants: *grandis impietas in deum hominem affligere*; on the propriety of punishing oppressive tyrants or other unsatisfactory rulers: *iniustum si iniubeas agere iniuste, hoc est secundum deum punire*. Henry Chadwick, ed., *The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Early Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, 1959): nos. 63, 96, 363b. On Pelagius' fondness for these maxims, see Evans, *Pelagius, Inquiries and Reappraisals*: 48–65.

⁸⁶ Text: de Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 13:1, p. 137.

⁸⁷ «Expositio in I Timotheum» 2:2. Text: Robinson, *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Letters of St. Paul*, p. 479.

⁸⁸ «On the Christian Life» Rees, *Letters of Pelagius and his Followers*: 108.

to wield arms? No one is assigned to any name whatever without due cause; to be a cobbler it is necessary to produce shoes... There is no name without an act but every name comes from an act»⁸⁹. So much for false cobblers. What then of a false king, who proves himself by act unfit for the name? Logically, he ceases to be king, as a Christian unfit ceases to be Christian⁹⁰.

«Do you consider him a Christian in whom there is no Christian act, in whom there is not righteous conduct, but evil, ungodliness and crime? Do you consider him a Christian who oppresses the wretched, who burdens the poor <...> who feeds on others' tears?»⁹¹

Pelagius, assuredly, did not invent the idea that a king deserving of the name ought to act appropriately. The notion appears in Augustine, in Gregory the Great, and through him in Isidore of Seville: *Recte igitur faciendo regis nomen tenetur, peccando amittitur. Unde et apud veteres tale erat proverbium: Rex eris si recte facias, si non facias non eris*⁹². The sentiment is commonplace. It reads well. Isidore no doubt was pleased with its expression. Seldom, if ever, did churchmen non-Pelagian translate the proverbial dictum into act. Isidore himself recoiled from the removal of faulty kings. Cruel kings, he said, should rather be endured: «Kings, when they are good, it is of God's gift; when they are bad, it is of the people's sin»⁹³. In fifth-century Britain, if we accept Gildas' words, there was no exculpatory hesitation. Anointed kings were removed with unsettling rapidity, by their very anointers, because they had failed to justify their name by their act. Isidore's churchmen at Toledo invalidated King Swinthila «with a knife to their throats». Gildas' anointers handed a knife to eagerly-awaiting cut-throats. A peculiarly Pelagian fate engulfed Britain's earliest kings.

«Pelagianism» in fifth-century Britain remains a shadowy force. We wish in no way to exaggerate it. But it existed. It was a force. It was sufficient to be remarked upon at the time, and to send Germanus on at least one voyage across the water. Perhaps it was not sufficient to command the obeisance of would-be kings, or to set them kneeling in receipt of anointment. It sufficed to discommode the establishment. It caused orthodox churchmen anxiety. It may have made them anxious to purloin, if possible, to incorporate promising or popular Pelagian ideas. This particular idea, moreover, a spot of unction, will not have seemed unthinkable to the orthodox mind, if would-be kings approached in search of a blessing.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 112. Similarly «Honorificentiae Tuae»: *vehementer enim errat, quisque putat se rem aliquam iam obtinuisse si eius obtineat nomen, cum nomen rei, non res nomini, debeatur*. Caspari, *Briefe*: 5.

⁹⁰ See Kessler, *Reichtumskritik*: 172–173.

⁹¹ «On the Christian Life» Rees, *Letters of Pelagius and his Followers*: 119.

⁹² *Etymologiae*, 9:3.

⁹³ *Reges quando boni sunt muneris est Dei, quando mali sceleris est populi*. See Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine*: 577–579; Barbero de Aguilera, «El pensamiento político visigodo», 265–266.

Only a few decades after Gildas' report, Clovis submitted himself to the hands of the Church. Clovis, needless to say, was king before his baptism. Nor did the application of oil to Clovis' person, the customary post-baptismal unction, announce a royal consecration⁹⁴. The ceremony did announce spiritual validation of royal pretension. God's warrant rested upon the king. Avitus of Vienne pointed out the fact in his congratulatory letter addressed to Clovis, now «the most prosperous of kings» (*regum florentissimus*): «As you yourself believe, most prosperous of kings, the softness of that [baptismal] clothing will cause, it will cause, I say, from now on the hardness of your armor to be all the more effective; whatever good luck has offered you in the past, holiness will now provide»⁹⁵. Clovis, at the end of the 5th century, anticipated tangible benefits («as you yourself believe») from an ecclesiastical endorsement⁹⁶. What king earlier in that same unsettled time — perhaps only a generation before Clovis' act — a newly-minted royal, without pedigree, struggling in an upended political world, would not happily have supplemented his luck with an additional layer of armored plating?

Unique conditions confronted the first kings in Britain: a political vacuum; the need to shore up confused authority; religious controversy. One other factor contributed to the situation. Christianity also needed a helping hand. The Church, that is, required a handclasp, security and stability. Thus some authorities have interpreted the evidence. The late 4th century initiated a staggering period of decline: «Without the support of the Roman administration and the Roman army, Christianity withered and all but died on the vine»⁹⁷. Cities depopulated. Rustics remained rooted to traditional beliefs⁹⁸. Christianity's clientele in Britain found its institutional framework slipping away⁹⁹. We will be wary of adopting this picture unquestioningly. Other observers have perceived a situation less dire¹⁰⁰, or even improving¹⁰¹. Even upbeat assessments, nonetheless, leave Christianity in a delicate

⁹⁴ Victor Saxer, «Les rites du baptême de Clovis dans le cadre de la pratique paléochrétienne», in Michel Rouche, ed., *Clovis. Histoire et mémoire, I, Le baptême de Clovis, l'événement* (Paris, 1997): 229.

⁹⁵ Avitus of Vienne, MGH, AA, vol. VI: 75–76. *Faciet, sicut creditis, regum florentissime, faciet inquam indumentorum ista mollities, ut vobis deinceps plus valeat rigor armorum, et quicquid felicitas usque hic praestiterat addet hic sanctitas*. See Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose* (Liverpool, 2002): 372. We have diverged somewhat from their translation.

⁹⁶ See Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine*: 98–99.

⁹⁷ Dorothy Watts, *Religion in Late Roman Britain. Forces of Change* (New York and London, 1998): 64; see also by the same author, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London and New York, 1991): 209–227.

⁹⁸ Thompson, *St. Germanus and the End of Roman Britain*: 19; W.H.C. Frend, «Ecclesia Britannica: Prelude or Dead End?» *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 30 (1979): 131–141.

⁹⁹ Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca, 1996): 176–185, finds a Church weakly implanted, unpopular and sapped by heresy.

¹⁰⁰ E. g., Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (Berkeley, 1981).

¹⁰¹ R.P.C. Hanson, «Summary and Prospect», in R. P. C. Hanson and M. W. Barley, eds., *Christianity in Britain 300–700. Papers Presented to the Conference on Christianity in Roman and*

condition¹⁰². One recalls the lament of Hydatius writing «from the world's edge» in Galicia in 469: «The shameful state of the ecclesiastical order, beset by disordered ordinations, the ruin of honorable freedom and practically the downfall of all religion and the discipline of the faith brought on by the fury of maddened peoples»¹⁰³. In such circumstances, leaders of a floundering faith will have felt keenly the desire to advance at the side of any promising political pretender who pledged safety and support. There emerged yet one more stimulus, one more motive to forge a symbiotic compact, a bonding of neophyte kings and a nurturing Church.

Ungebantur reges, says Gildas. A combination of circumstances in fifth-century Britain supports the accuracy of his saying. There was an unprecedented upwelling of an unprecedented crop of kings, kings ill-supplied with the credentials of kingship. They discovered a common interest with a Church hierarchy still clawing its way out of a wrenching period of depression. Pelagian influence, instinct with the idea of willful self-reformation directly dependent on an act of unction, the «diadem of royal unguent», percolated through the island. Orthodox opinion meditated upon the utility of royal anointing. The pieces were in place. Why should a practical demonstration not have occurred? A practical demonstration occurred to Visigoths two centuries later, without reported fanfare.

King Wamba offers the first undisputed record of a royal anointing, preserved for us in Julian of Toledo's panegyric *Historia Wambae Regis*, in 672. Wamba, Julian's protagonist, fits the model: a contested ruler with a wobbly title, lifted from among his peers, facing the certainty of rebellion. He emerges an indefatigable warrior sustained by the spirit of God: «A transformation of the man, brought about by the sacred power of unction»¹⁰⁴. From that moment Wamba's authority rests under a «banner of unction»: *sacrae unctionis vexilla*. He insists on a proper anointing, «so that it would not be thought that, moved by a frenzied desire to reign, he had usurped or stolen rather than obtained from God the sign of such great glory». As Bishop Quiricus of Toledo applied the unction onlookers observed smoke encircling the royal head and a bee ascending, «which was certainly an omen of some future prosperity»¹⁰⁵. Wamba consummated his victory over the rebels. The army

Sub-Roman Britain held at the University of Nottingham, 17–20 April, 1967 (Leicester, 1968): 209; Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*: 18–20, 117–125.

¹⁰² Snyder, *Age of Tyrants*: 237. See also Philip Rahtz and Lorne Watts, «The End of Roman Temples in the West of Britain», in P.J. Casey, ed., *The End of Roman Britain. Papers Arising from a Conference, Durham, 1978* (Oxford, 1979): 183–184.

¹⁰³ Hydatius, *Chronicon*, Praefatio, 7: *Deformem ecclesiastici ordinis statum, creationibus indiscretis, honestae libertatis interitum et universae propemodum in divina disciplina religionis occasum*.

¹⁰⁴ Joaquin Martinez Pizarro, *The Story of Wamba. Julian of Toledo's Historia Wambae Regis* (Washington, 2005): 123.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 182–184.

hailed him «God-chosen king». Wamba's rival, the usurper Paul, gathering his forces at Narbonne, deployed the same standard: *Flavius Paulus unctus rex orientis*. In the turbulent late Visigothic kingdom kings took shelter under the *vexilla unctionis*. Will it have been otherwise for Elafus or his anonymous brethren?

An axiom, logic insists, can survive only a minimum of uncertainty. Uncertainty reigns over events in fifth-century Britain. Over uncertain events, nevertheless, we may establish a certain measure of plausibility. John Morris, who understood the sources, their limitations and their potential, wrote: «We can distinguish the probable from the possible and the unlikely, isolate the extremes of the virtually certain and virtually impossible, and weigh the degrees of probability in between»¹⁰⁶. It appears not simply possible but plausible that the first experiments in royal anointing occurred in that transitional time. What time was it? No two chronologies of sub-Roman Britain agree on a sequence of events. One credible, though by no means sure, timetable has been drawn up by David Dumville¹⁰⁷. By its measure the day of anointing will have dawned in the years soon after 450. A final appeal for outside intervention, the «letter to Aëtius», produced no response. Barbarian incursions subsided. Islanders turned inward, and to their own leadership. Those leaders, invested with an authority of bastard pedigree, arranged for themselves a sign of legitimacy, as did the pretender Paul at Narbonne: *unctus rex*. Is that conclusion sure? Surely not. Does it deserve a nod in the direction of verisimilitude? Silence alone offers an objection.

History, Cervantes joked, is Truth; Truth is God: *La historia es como cosa sagrada; porque ha de ser verdadera, y donde está la verdad está Dios*¹⁰⁸. Gildas was not God. Nor was he the Devil. Metaphor, it may be, was his weakness. «Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body, of Thought», Thomas Carlyle wrote. «Imagination wove this Flesh-Garment: and does not she? Metaphors are her stuff»¹⁰⁹. How can we know when Gildas' flesh-garment has drifted into metaphor, drifting so softly we cannot even be sure we have entered metaphor's enchanted realm?

Our metaphor, presumably, rests on allusion to Samuel and Saul, notwithstanding Samuel and Saul are not mentioned in the metaphor. Samuel at least does appear in Gildas' thought. He introduces an undoubted allusion in cap. 38. «Behold!» he declaims, with absolutely no resort to subtlety. «Behold! There comes to our mind Samuel»: *En primus occurrit nobis Samuel*. He belabors the matter with a long, obsessive description of Samuel (*iussu dei legitimi regni stabilitor, deo antequam nasceretur dedicatus, a Dan usque Bersabee omni populo Israhel veridicus propheta, signis indubitanter admirandis notus, ex cuius ore spiritus sanctus cunctis mundi potestatibus*

¹⁰⁶ John R. Morris, «The Literary Evidence», in Hanson and Barley, *Christianity in Britain 300–700*: 55.

¹⁰⁷ David Dumville, «The Chronology of the *De Excidio Britanniae*, Book I», in Lapidge and Dumville, *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984): 83.

¹⁰⁸ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*: Part 2, Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Book First, Chapter XI.

intonuit) as if he were afraid readers might not recognize the reference. He slings the subject back to modern times (*Quid ergo simile huius temporis sceleribus?*) so there can be no misunderstanding. All this occurs well after he has already, without forewarning — so proponents of metaphor assure us — slipped in the same reference, ever so subtly, to the same idea. In one passage Gildas speaks with all the refinement of a sledgehammer. In the other he insinuates his allusion with diabolical delicacy, an imprint so guarded as to elude inattentive or literal-minded readers, and guaranteed to mislead the rest.

If not metaphor, perhaps ignorance was Gildas' weakness, ignorance coupled with a vivid imagination. He knew nothing about what he wrote but he enjoyed writing it anyway. Thomas Carlyle knew a thing or two about history, the futility of trying to uncover certainty in history, «the long burial-aisle of the Past, where only winds, and their low harsh moan, give inarticulate answer». Is Gildas' remark inarticulate, humbug in the wind? Because he fabricated some facts we assume he fabricated others, those, that is, we choose not to believe. Evidence for belief, say the skeptics, is lacking. Evidence, pardon us, needs to come from the skeptics. One cannot without proof prove a negative. Yet that is the verdict, *res judicata*:

«Over the past century scholars have rejected the historicity of Gildas' statement. It occurs amidst a florid rhetoric, and seems to be no more than a metaphorical image of Old Testament dictum. The evidentiary basis for a revision of that interpretation is not advanced»¹¹⁰.

«Most scholars» reject Gildas' words. Why? They do. His words «seem to be» a use of metaphor. Why? They seem so. «Evidentiary basis» for a new interpretation is not advanced. The old interpretation evidently needs no evidentiary basis. We do not, in any case, advance a new interpretation. We ask why the words require interpretation. Most scholars think they do. Most scholars may well be right. We make no claim of certainty. Most scholars owe at least a reason for theirs. Suppose, let us say, Julian of Toledo's work survived only in tatters. No shred preserved the story of King Wamba's anointing, bees buzzing, smoke rising, etc. But in one fortuitous fragment we read that an obscure usurper called himself *unctus rex*. Consensus would no doubt dismiss it: un-confirmable, sarcasm most likely, a casually-biblical reminiscence. Assumption based on no evidence dismisses the only evidence for lack of corroborating evidence.

References / Список литературы

Angenendt A. Rex et Sacerdos. Zur Genese der Königssalbung // N. Kamp, J. Wollash, eds. Tradition als historische Kraft. Berlin, 1982.

Bachrach B. Gildas, Vortigen, and Constitutionality in Sub-Roman Britain // Nottingham Medieval Studies. 1988. 32.

Bloch M. Les rois thaumaturges. Etude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre. Paris, 1983.

Bouman C. A. Sacring and Crowning. The Development of the Latin Ritual for the Anointing of Kings and the Coronation of an Emperor before the Eleventh Century. Gröningen, 1957.

¹¹⁰ These words we cite again from the comments of an anonymous reviewer.

- Breeze A. Elafus the Briton, St. Germanus, and Bede // *Journal of Theological Studies*. n.s. 2002. 53.
- Brown P. Augustine of Hippo: A Biography. Berkeley, 1969.
- Brown P. Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment // *Journal of Theological Studies*. n.s. 1968. 19.
- Cantor N. *Medieval History: The Life and Death of a Civilization*. New York, 1964.
- Caspari C. P. Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus dem zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirklichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelalters. Brussels, 1964.
- Chadwick H. (ed.) *The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Early Christian Ethics*. Cambridge, 1959.
- Dark K. R. *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity, 300–800*. Leicester, 1993.
- Davis R. H. C. *A History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis*. London, 1988.
- Davis W. *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*. Leicester, 1982.
- de Aguilera A. B. El pensamiento político visigodo y las primeras unciones en la España medieval // *España. Revista española de historia*. 1970. 30. P. 304–309.
- Dumville D. The Idea of Government in Sub-Roman Britain // G. Ausenda, ed. *After Empire: Towards and Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians*. Woodbridge, 1995.
- Ellard G. *Ordination Anointings in the Western Church before 1000 A. D.* Cambridge, Mass., 1933.
- Enright M. J. Iona, Tara and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual. Berlin; New York, 1985.
- Evans R. F. *Pelagius, Inquiries and Reappraisals*. New York, 1968.
- Hilisch P. *Das Mittelalter — die Epoche*. Konstanz, 2006.
- Jones M. E. The Historicity of the Alleluja Victory // *Albion*. 1986. 18.
- Kantorowicz E. *Laudes Regiae. A Study in Liturgical Acclamations and Medieval Ruler Worship*. Berkeley, 1958.
- Kerlouégan F. Le latin du De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas // M. W. Barley, R. P. C. Hanson, eds. *Christianity in Britain, 300–700. Papers Presented to the Conference on Christianity in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain held at the University of Nottingham, 17–20 April, 1967*. Leicester, 1968.
- Kessler A. *Reichtumskritik und Pelagianismus: Die pelagianische Diatribe «de divitiis»: Situierung, Lese-text, Übersetzung, Kommentar*. Freiburg, 1999.
- Kottje R. *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters (6.–8. Jahrhundert)*. Bonn, 1964.
- Lapidge M. Gildas' Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain // M. Lapidge, D. Dumville, eds. *Gildas: New Approaches*. Woodbridge, 1984.
- Lemarignier J.-F. *La France médiévale, institutions et société*. Paris, 1970.
- Lot F. *De la valeur historique du De Excidio de Gildas* // *Medieval Studies in Memory of Gertrude S. Loomis*. Paris — New York, 1927.
- Maskell W. *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae: The Occasional Offices of the Church of England according to the Old Use of Salisbury the Prymer in English and other Prayers and Forms, with Dissertations and Notes*. Vol. 2. Oxford, 1882.
- McKittrick R. *The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400–1000*. Oxford, 2001.
- Metz R. *La consécration des vierges dans l'Eglise romaine*. Paris, 1954.
- Morris J. Pelagian Literature // *Journal of Theological Studies*. n.s. 1965. 16.
- Müller E. Die Anfänge der Königssalbung im Mittelalter und ihre historisch-politischen Auswirkungen // *Historisches Jahrbuch*. 1938. 58. S. 322–327.
- Myres J. N. L. Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain // *Journal of Roman Studies*. 1960. 50.
- Petts D. Christianity and the End of Roman Britain // P. Baker et al., eds. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference. Proceedings of the 8th Annual TRAC, University of Leicester, April, 1998*. Oxford, 1999.
- Pizarro J. M. *The Story of Wamba. Julian of Toledo's Historia Wambae Regis*. Washington, 2005.
- Plinval G. de. *Pélagie, ses écrits, sa vie et sa réforme. Etude d'histoire littéraire et religieuse*. Lausanne, 1943.
- Prelog J. Sind die Weihesalbungen insularen Ursprungs? // *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*. 1979. 13. S. 325–334.
- Rahtz Ph., Watts L. The End of Roman Temples in the West of Britain // P. J. Casey, ed. *The End of Roman Britain. Papers Arising from a Conference, Durham, 1978*. Oxford, 1979.
- Reydellet M. *La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville*. Rome, 1981.
- Sánchez-Albornoz C. La «ordinatio principis» en la España goda y postvisigoda // *Cuadernos de la Historia de España*. 1962.
- Saxer V. Les rites du baptême de Clovis dans le cadre de la pratique paléochrétienne // Michel Rouche, ed. *Clovis. Histoire et mémoire, I, Le baptême de Clovis, l'événement*. Paris, 1997.

- Snyder C.A.* An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, AD 400–600. University Park, 1998.
- Stevens C.E.* Gildas Sapiens // *English Historical Review*. 1941. 56.
- Strayer J.* Western Europe in the Middle Ages: A Short History. New York, 1955.
- Thompson E.A.* Gildas and the History of Britain // *Britannia*. 1979. 10.
- Vitolo G.* Medioevo. I caratteri originali di un'età di transizione. Milan, 2000
- Watts D.* Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain. London; New York, 1991.
- Watts D.* Religion in Late Roman Britain. Forces of Change. New York; London, 1998.
- Welte B.* Die postbaptismale Salbung, ihr symbolischer Gehalt und ihre sakramentale Zugehörigkeit nach den Zeugnissen der alten Kirche. Freiburg im Breisgau, 1939.
- Winterbottom M.* Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works. Chichester, 1978.
- Zimmermann M.* Les sacres des rois wisigoths // M. Rouche, ed. Clovis: histoire et mémoire, 2, le baptême de Clovis, son écho à travers l'histoire. Paris, 1997.