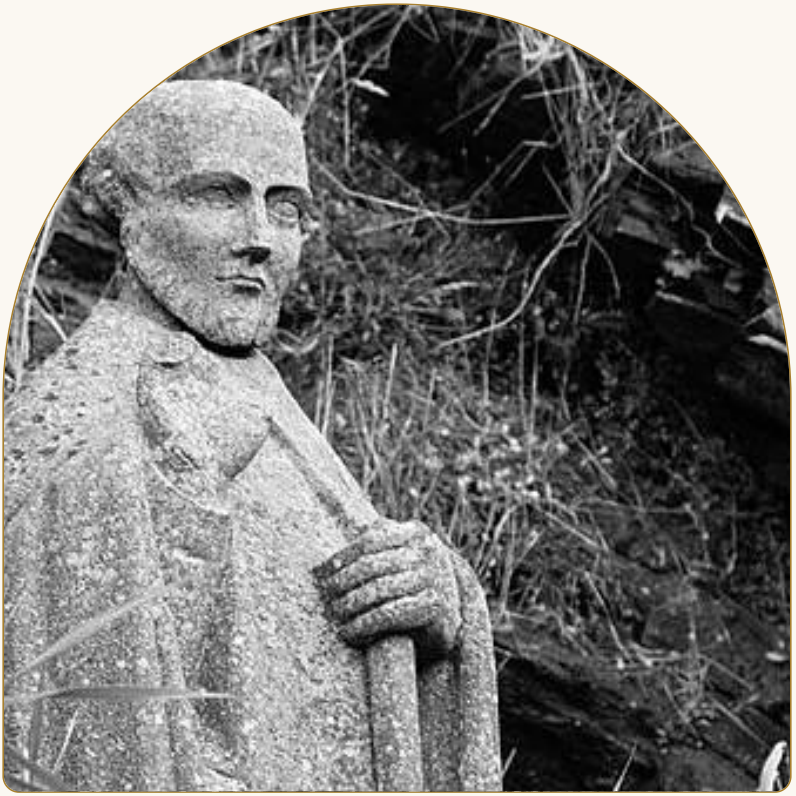


BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Gildas the Wise

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 29

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IN BRIEF

Saint Gildas the Wise

British monk of the 6th century, author of De Excidio Britanniae, honored at Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys in Brittany.

Feast day	January 29
Born	c. 500, Britain, probably Strathclyde
Died	c. 570, Island of Houat, Brittany (according to tradition)
Era	6th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Gildas for the Courage of Truth

Novena to Saint Gildas the Wise

Abbey Church of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Gildas the Wise

Saint Gildas, called "the Wise" and known as Gweltaz in Breton, was a monk born in Britain around the year 500 who died around 570, and who is said to have ended his life in Brittany, in northwestern France. He is the author of *De Excidio Britanniae* ("On the Ruin of Britain"), a stern sermon against the kings and clergy of his time, which remains one of the very few sources for the history of the island in that period. According to tradition he founded the monastery of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, in the Morbihan, and he is celebrated on January 29.

Who was Saint Gildas?

Gildas belongs to the generation of British monks who shaped Christianity on both sides of the English Channel in the sixth century. In his own work, he says that he was born in the year of the Battle of Mount Badon, a victory of the Britons over the Saxons usually dated around 500, and that he was writing forty-four years later. The Welsh annals mention a journey of Gildas to Ireland in 565 and his death in 570; the tradition of Brittany places it on January 29.

The oldest mention of his name is found in a letter of Saint Columbanus to Pope Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century, which cites "Giltas" as an authority on monastic life. Other sources present him as wary of excessive austerity and credit him with a rule more moderate than that of his contemporary Saint David of Wales.

Key dates

- **c. 500**: Born in Britain, probably in the kingdom of Strathclyde, near present-day Glasgow.

- **Early 6th century**: According to his biographers, trained under Saint Illtud in Wales.
- **Before 547**: Writes *De Excidio Britanniae*.
- **Mid-6th century**: Settles in Armorica (Brittany), according to Breton tradition, first on the island of Houat, then at Rhuys.
- **565**: Journey to Ireland, mentioned by the Welsh annals.
- **c. 570**: Dies, according to tradition on the island of Houat, on a January 29.

De Excidio Britanniae, "On the Ruin of Britain"

The title sets the tone of the work. Gildas first summarizes the history of the island since the Roman conquest. He then attacks by name five British kings, whom he accuses of cruelty and debauchery, before denouncing, without naming anyone, the mediocrity of part of the clergy.

It is not a chronicle but a call to conversion: for Gildas, the misfortunes of the British people facing the invaders are the consequence of their sins. He writes as the prophets of the Old Testament wrote to Israel, quoting them at length.

This sermon had a considerable influence. Saint Bede the Venerable drew heavily on it to tell the story of the Saxon invasions, and Alcuin was inspired by it after the sack of Lindisfarne in 793. Modern historians read it with caution, because Gildas chooses the facts that serve his purpose, but it remains one of the very few texts written in Britain at that time. Readers looking for King Arthur are often surprised: Gildas mentions the victory of Badon, but he does not name Arthur.

Gildas is also credited with a short penitential rule for monks and a prayer of protection, the *Lorica*.

Gildas in Brittany: history and tradition

What we know of the second part of his life comes mainly from a *Life of Saint Gildas* written around 1060 by a monk of Rhuys. This text mixes credible elements with legendary stories. It tells that Gildas came to Armorica, settled first on the island of Houat, then founded a monastery on the Rhuys peninsula, and sometimes withdrew to a hermitage dug under a rock on the bank of the Blavet river, at Bieuzy. The legend also gives him a role in the story of Saint Tréphine, wife of the cruel Count Conomor, whom he is said to have brought back to life.

According to the same account, Gildas died on Houat. His disciples from Cornouaille wanted to carry off his body, but their boat was wrecked, and the body was found intact on the beach of Le Crouesty, then buried in the church of Rhuys.

Another *Life*, written in Wales in the twelfth century, knows nothing of a stay in Armorica and connects him to the legends of King Arthur. Historians see this rather as a confusion with another Gildas. The well-attested author must therefore be distinguished from the saint of Breton tradition.



The abbey church of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, in the Morbihan.

Why is Saint Gildas honored in Brittany and Wales?

Gildas has no great universal patronage, but he is one of the saints who bind together the Celtic Christian world. Wales remembers him as a disciple of Illtud and a contemporary of Saint David; Brittany honors him as the founder of Rhuys and as the saint of many chapels and place names.

He is prayed to for the courage to speak the truth, for political and religious leaders, and for Brittany, where his cult remains alive. He can also be prayed to for sailors and coastal people, as a saint who lived on the islands and whose body, according to legend, was carried by the sea.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gildas in art

- **Abbot's dress**: he is usually shown as an abbot, in a monk's habit, with a crosier.

- **The book**: a book in his hand recalls the author of *De Excidio Britanniae* and the teacher of monks.
- **Breton statues**: many old painted wooden statues of him can be found in the chapels of Brittany.

What can we learn from him?

Saint Gildas is a demanding witness: he did not hesitate to tell hard truths to the powerful and to the clergy, in the name of the Gospel. Yet this stern prophet was also known as a balanced master of monastic life, who distrusted spectacular austerities. He teaches us that truth and moderation can go together.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Gildas and the novena to Saint Gildas.



The sarcophagus attributed by tradition to Saint Gildas, chapel of Saint-Gildas at Carnoët.

Where to pray to Saint Gildas

- **Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys** (Morbihan, France): the former abbey church, where tradition places his tomb, with its treasury of reliquaries.
- **Island of Houat** (Morbihan): the island where he is said to have lived as a hermit and to have died.
- **Bieuzy** (Morbihan): the hermitage of Saint Gildas, under a rock on the bank of the Blavet.
- **Carnoët** (Côtes-d'Armor): the chapel of Saint-Gildas and its sarcophagus.
- **Ushant (Ouessant)** (Finistère): the hamlet of Locqueltas, "the hermitage of Gildas."

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gildas for the Courage of Truth

Saint Gildas left writings, but no prayer in his name has come into common use. Here is the oldest testimony to his authority, followed by an original prayer inspired by his work and by his cult in Brittany and Wales.

Gildas, a master of monastic life

Toward the end of the sixth century, Saint Columbanus wrote to Pope Gregory the Great that a certain Vennianus, probably Saint Finnian of Clonard, had consulted "Giltas auctor," that is, Gildas, on the life of monks, regarding him as an authority. This is the oldest known mention of his name. Source: letter of Saint Columbanus to Pope Gregory the Great, between 595 and 600.

Prayer to Saint Gildas for the courage of truth

Saint Gildas, you dared to tell the kings and clergy of your time their faults. Give me the courage of truth, and the charity that keeps it from becoming harshness.

You left your homeland to seek God in the solitude of the islands. Teach me to keep silence so that I may listen to him, amid the noise of my life.

You wanted a monastic life without excess. Keep me from proud zeal and lead me on the path of a humble and lasting conversion.

I entrust to you those who govern nations and those who guide the Church, sailors and the people of the coasts, Brittany and Wales where you are invoked, and my own intention: (name it in silence).

May I, like you, read the trials of my time in the light of the Gospel, and answer them with prayer and faithfulness. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

- **On his feast day**, January 29, the day of his death according to Breton tradition.
- **Before a difficult conversation**, when you must say something true that will not be easy to hear.
- **For political and Church leaders**, that they may govern with justice and integrity.
- **For a time of retreat**, when you seek silence to listen to God.
- **For Brittany, Wales and the Celtic lands**, and for all who live from the sea.

A short invocation

> *Saint Gildas the Wise, pray for us, and give us the courage of truth.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Gildas or pray the novena to Saint Gildas.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gildas the Wise

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life, the writings and the tradition of Saint Gildas the Wise. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, January 29, begin on January 21. You can also pray it at any time of year: when you need the courage to speak the truth, for leaders, or in a time of searching and retreat.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow Gildas from Britain to the islands of Brittany: the student, the writer, the monk and the hermit.

Day 1: Born in a troubled time

Gildas was born around 500, in the year of the Battle of Mount Badon, when Britain was torn by war and invasion. He did not choose his era, but he chose how to live in it: as a Christian who looked at events in the light of God.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you lived in a troubled time. Help me not to lose heart in the trials of my own era, and to look at them with faith. Amen.

Today: Pray for a country at war, naming it before God.

Day 2: A disciple who learned

According to his biographers, Gildas was trained by Saint Illtud in Wales. Before becoming a master, he was a disciple. Every Christian life needs teachers, and the humility to learn from them.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you learned from your masters before teaching others. Give me a teachable heart and thank God with me for those who have formed me in the faith. Amen.

Today: Thank, by a message or a prayer, someone who taught you the faith.

Day 3: The courage of truth

In *On the Ruin of Britain*, Gildas named the faults of five kings. It took courage to speak like that to the powerful. Truth sometimes costs us, but silence before evil can cost more.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you dared to speak the truth to the powerful. Give me the courage to speak up when it is necessary, with clarity and charity. Amen.

Today: Say a true word you have been avoiding, gently and respectfully.

Day 4: Truth begins at home

Gildas did not only criticize kings: he also denounced the failings of the clergy, his own people. Reform begins from within, and the first heart to convert is our own.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you called the Church of your time to conversion. Help me to see my own faults before those of others, and to begin my reform with myself. Amen.

Today: Make a careful examination of conscience, and plan your next Confession.

Day 5: Reading the times with the prophets

Gildas read the misfortunes of his people in the light of the prophets of Israel, quoting them at length. The Word of God helps us to understand our own history and to find a way forward.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you nourished yourself on the Scriptures. Give me a love for the Word of God, so that it may enlighten my life and my times. Amen.

Today: Read a chapter of one of the prophets, for example Isaiah 55.

Day 6: A balanced master

Saint Columbanus called Gildas an authority on monastic life, and other sources describe him as wary of excessive austerity. Holiness is not a competition of mortifications, but a steady path of love.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, master of a balanced life, keep me from proud zeal and from laziness alike, and lead me on a humble and lasting path. Amen.

Today: Choose one small, realistic resolution, and keep it.

Day 7: Leaving for the islands

According to Breton tradition, Gildas crossed the sea and settled first on the island of Houat, then at Rhuys. He left his homeland to seek God in solitude and to serve him in a new land.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, you left your homeland to follow God. Pray for migrants and for all who must begin again far from home. Amen.

Today: Welcome or help someone who has recently arrived in your community.

Day 8: Silence and the hermitage

Tradition says that Gildas sometimes withdrew to a hermitage under a rock, on the bank of the Blavet. Even the busiest founder needs times of silence with God.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, lover of solitude, teach me to make silence in my life so that I may hear the voice of God. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silence, without a screen, before God.

Day 9: Carried by the sea

According to the legend, after his death the boat carrying his body was wrecked, and the sea gave his body back intact on the beach of Le Crouesty. His disciples laid him to rest at Rhuys, where pilgrims still come to pray.

Prayer: Saint Gildas, pray for sailors and for all who live from the sea, and for those I love who have died. May we all reach the harbor of God's peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for those who have been lost at sea and for their families.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Gildas the wisdom to read the trials of his time in the light of your Word, the courage to speak the truth and the love of silence and prayer. Through his intercession, give us upright hearts, the courage of truth joined to charity, and leaders who seek justice. Bless Brittany, Wales and all the lands where he is honored, and hear the intention I have carried during these nine days, if it is according to your will. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Saint Gildas, pray for us.

PILGRIMAGE

Abbey Church of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys

The former abbey church of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, at the tip of the Rhuys peninsula in the Morbihan, is the chief place of devotion to Saint Gildas. According to tradition, the saint founded a monastery here in the 6th century and was buried here. The church, partly Romanesque, keeps the memory of his tomb and a treasury of reliquaries that still draws pilgrims and visitors.

An abbey born of Gildas's tradition

The *Life of Saint Gildas*, written at Rhuys in the 11th century, tells that the saint, who came from Great Britain, founded a monastery on this peninsula and that his body, found on the beach at Le Crouesty after the wreck of the boat carrying him, was buried in the church. In the 10th century, fleeing Viking raids, the monks left Rhuys carrying his relics and took refuge in the Berry, at Déols, where another abbey of Saint-Gildas arose. Around 1025, Abbot Felix restored the monastery of Rhuys, whose present church preserves Romanesque parts from that time.

In the 12th century, the philosopher Peter Abelard was its abbot for a few years; he left a very dark account of the stay, in which he failed to reform monks who were hostile to him.



The abbey church of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys.

The tomb and the treasury

Inside, the Romanesque choir and its ambulatory contrast with the nave, rebuilt in the modern period. Tradition shows the tomb of Saint Gildas behind the high altar. The church also keeps a treasury of religious metalwork, with ancient reliquaries associated with the saint. Medieval gravestones recall the abbey's former importance.



The tomb of Saint Gildas in the abbey church of Rhuys.

Visiting the abbey church

The church, now a parish church, is in the center of the village of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, a few minutes from the ocean beaches. Visits to the treasury may be subject to special conditions. The feast of Saint Gildas, on January 29, and the pardons (traditional pilgrimage festivals) held in the region are especially good times to come and pray.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Gildas. Near his tomb, you can entrust to him those who bear responsibilities, ask for the courage to speak the truth with charity, and pray for Brittany. The prayer to Saint Gildas can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places associated with Saint Gildas

- **Île d'Houat** (Morbihan): the island where he is said to have lived as a hermit and where tradition places his death.
- **Bieuzy** (Morbihan): Saint Gildas's hermitage, sheltered under a rock beside the Blavet.
- **Carnoët** (Côtes-d'Armor): the Chapel of Saint-Gildas, with a sarcophagus that tradition attributes to him.
- **Ouessant** (Finistère): the hamlet of Locqueltas and the "stone of Saint Gweltas."
- **Déols** (Indre): the remains of the Abbey of Saint-Gildas founded by the monks who fled Rhuys.

Practical information

Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys can be reached by road from Vannes, across the Rhuys peninsula. The Île d'Houat is reached by boat from Quiberon or, in season, from other ports of the gulf. Check the opening hours of the church and treasury, and the dates of Masses and pardons, with the parish or the peninsula's tourist office before your visit.

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