

HPHI 7016: Past Peoples, Present Societies

Fall 2021

Sarah Wolek

Contextualizing Research Task: Monastic Wales Activity

Selected Location: Monmouth Priory (aka St. Mary)

(I selected this monastery since my undergraduate school in the United States was Monmouth College in western Illinois. The school has a Scottish Presbyterian foundation versus a Monastic Welsh connection but the name caught my eye!)

Assignment Questions:

1. To what order did your chosen monastery belong, and what do you understand by 'order'?

Benedictine. The website explains that Benedictines were named for their adherence to St. Benedict, who created rules for monks to follow at his monastery. I understand the term "order" to mean a collective group of individuals following a specific set of rules and guidelines, in this case "Benedictine" refers to the rules created by St. Benedict for how monks should live.

On the Monastic Wales website, Professor Janet Burton explains that Benedict created his blueprint for monastic life at the end of the 5th century and gained momentum but was not widely enforced until the beginning of the 9th century when Charlemagne's son Luis the Pious began to apply it more generally for monastic houses.

2. Who founded it?

Monmouth Priory was founded in 1080 by Wihenoc, the Breton who held Monmouth Castle on behalf of William the Conqueror, who granted the endowment for the Priory before his death.

3. Are there any indications of why it was founded?

The Monastic Wales website does not include any speculation I can find, but the fact that the founder, Wihenoc, was a Briton and loyal to the Norman King William I suggests it was founded as a means to further cement William's hold in the region and make sure power was held by those loyal to the King.

4. What is the significance of its location?

The Monmouth Priory website does explain that the site was very active in the 6th-7th centuries with activity in the area from St. Cadoc, who likely had an earlier church on or near the same site. So it is likely that the combination of an already-established religious reputation coupled with the Norman leadership were the reason Monmouth Priority was founded when and where it was located. In addition, it is located near the border of England and Wales, which would also support the rationale that control and oversight in the region was a significant reason the Priory was founded where it was.

5. What recorded events in are listed its history, and what is their significance?

Several historical events are noted on the Monastic Wales website, including compensation received in 1234 as a result of damage sustained in the battle between Henry III and Richard Marshall. In 1403 there is again a reference to damage caused the rebellion of Owain Glyndwr.

There are several references to financial issues, include the designation of a new Prior to turn around the site (1264) and the selling of indulgences to anyone who visited (1279); it doesn't seem as though they were successful, as there is a notation in 1315 that the Priory is in financial turmoil and in 1398 the Pope grants an indulgence again to pilgrims who visit on certain holy days.

When looking at the significance of these events, I would suggest they are related. The Priory is located near the border of England and Wales, which would account for the damage it sustained in the 1234 & 1403 battles with the Welsh. One might ask why a Priory that is documented as having frequent financial issues was founded and continued to operate through the ages and I would think the reason is because of its strategic location on the border and the need for the English crown to keep an eye on the Welsh and maintain a position of strength via the church.