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Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales¹

The 'Age of the Saints' has frequently been depicted as a period of intense religious activity when 'Celtic' missionaries travelled back and forth across the western seaways establishing early religious communities in Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Ireland, Brittany and the Isle of Man.² In Wales these religious enclosures were known as 'llannau', and many place-names reflect the names of both male and female saints: for example, Llanddewibrefi, Llan-non, Llanddwyn, Llangain, Llandudno, Llandegla and Llanilltud Fawr. Whilst some scholars, such as E. G. Bowen, once argued that place-names and church dedications possibly reflected a saint's missionary activities, most now suggest that they indicate the spread of a saint's cult.

Although south-east Wales was Christianized during Roman times, the fifth to the eighth centuries have traditionally been considered as the formative period in the founding of a 'Celtic Church' with its own specific infrastructure of monastic communities following a strict, ascetic regime. The notion of a unified Celtic Church has been

justifiably challenged by Kathleen Hughes and largely demolished by Wendy Davies.³ Ian Bradley, who was previously one of the chief supporters of the concept of 'Celtic Christianity', has more recently altered his views quite considerably. His book *The Celtic Way* referred to Celtic Christianity as 'a gentle, mystical, affirmative and holistic faith, firmly biblical and strongly influenced by Desert Fathers, while assimilating many pagan beliefs and practices',⁴ whereas his subsequent volume *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* provided a valuable critique of the concept of Celtic Christianity, noting that: 'it is tempting to suggest that Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographical terms than an artificial construct created out of wishful thinking, romantic nostalgia and the projection of all kind of dreams about what should and might have been.'⁵

Nevertheless, for many years archaic views of a male-dominated Celtic Church has led to the dismissal of the disparate and sometimes partial sources which deal with the female saints of Wales and this, coupled with the fact that very few official prose Lives survive for the native women saints, has meant that the important role they played in medieval belief and religious practice has not always been fully acknowledged.⁶ J. W. Willis Bund, more than a century ago, claimed that women rarely became saints in Wales and Ireland 'for a woman would not be the head of a monastery, the chief of a tribe or a Saint, and so could never become a Saint or entitled to be so called . . . a woman could never fill the office which certainly among the Welsh entitled a person to become a saint'.⁷ Sainthood was, in his view, gender specific and incompatible with the traditional roles played by women. G. H. Doble, author of numerous articles on the Cornish and Welsh saints, also found it difficult to accept that women could have travelled great distances in order to establish religious foundations. There are dedications to St Cain (or Keyne) in South Wales, Anglesey, Somerset, Herefordshire and Cornwall, and Doble, whilst perfectly willing to accept that Cain could have visited these locations had the saint been male, was somewhat reluctant to concede that this would be the case if Cain was female:

It seems difficult to believe that a woman could, in those wild ages, travel so far, and found so many settlements, and St. Keyne may quite well have been a man, in spite of the later universally accepted tradition of *Cain Wry* [Cain the Virgin].⁸

Doble also suggests that Non (St David's mother) and Efrddyl (St Dyfrig's mother) were originally male saints, despite the fact that *Vita Davidis* and *Vita Dubricius* record that both saints were undoubtedly believed to be female and, as saintly mothers, they played an important role in the biographical patterning of the saint, a point which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.⁹ Doble's suggestions are indicative of a school of thought that assumed that male saints were much more likely to have been historical figures than were the female saints: needless to say, maleness alone is not admissible as evidence of historicity.

Similar gender-biased assumptions can be found in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. David Farmer assumes that the fourteenth-century Welsh Life of Beuno 'may contain genuine elements', but dismisses the twelfth-century Latin Life of Beuno's niece, Gwenfrewy (Winifred) as 'a tissue of improbabilities'.¹⁰ No explanation is given. Both legends deal with the same episode and it is unclear why one medieval narrative, relating how a Dark-Age, Welsh saint resurrected seven people from the dead (*Hystoria o Uched Beuno*), is more likely to record historical events than another medieval narrative which relates how the same saint resurrected Gwenfrewy (*Vitae sanctae Wenefrede/Buched Gwenfrewy*). The aim here is not to claim that the female saints were historical characters, nor to assess the historical accuracy of the Lives, but simply to challenge the frequent assumption that the *vitae* of almost all male saints contain a core element of historical 'truth'. Nor is it appropriate to dismiss the legendary material associated with the female saints as 'worthless'.¹¹ The vast majority of relevant sources belong to the medieval period and thus they will be considered as an accurate, albeit incomplete, record of medieval beliefs and traditions concerning the Welsh saints. As J. Wyn Evans concisely points out:

The Lives of the saints appear then to tell us more of the cult of a saint at a particular place in the medieval period rather than

about the saint himself or herself. They are based on criteria which were valid for the cyfarwydd or the ecclesiastic in writing of their own past as they perceived it, rather than those which the twentieth century normally uses in writing history.¹²

The daughters of Brychan Brycheiniog

According to *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, a Middle Welsh compendium of triads thought to have been assembled in the twelfth century, Brychan Brycheiniog's family was one of the Three Saintly Lineages of the Island of Britain (un o 'dri Santeidd Linyys Ynys Prydein').¹³ His genealogy in *De situ Brecheniauc* records that he married three times and had eleven sons and twenty-five daughters all of whom were saints.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that E. G. Bowen maps the dedications to Brychan's sons in *Settlements of the Celtic Saints in Wales*, but neglects to provide a similar study of dedications to Brychan's daughters, despite the fact that they were more numerous.¹⁵ Brychan's genealogy varies from one manuscript to the next. For example, the Vespasian A xiv version of *Cognacio Brychan* lists eleven sons and twenty-four daughters, while the Domitian i version lists thirteen sons and twenty-five daughters.¹⁶ Although numerous medieval traditions survive concerning some of the daughters of Brychan (for example St Dwynwen, who will be discussed in a separate section below), the genealogies are an important source because they also preserve the names of saints of whom very little is now known.

St Mabyn (Mabena), for example, is referred to in the twelfth-century Hartland list of Brychan's children recorded in Cornwall and she is depicted in stained glass c.1528 at St Neot, Cornwall, although no Welsh traditions regarding Mabyn appear to have survived (Plate 11). In the wives' window at St Neot parish church Mabyn is depicted wearing a blue mantle, crowned one of Christ's virgins, holding a book in one hand and a palm in the other suggesting that she was probably martyred. The portrait is a rare example of surviving late medieval stained glass depicting one of Brychan's daughters. The church and holy well at St Mabyn are

dedicated to her and a fragment of her shrine survives. The shrines of two of her sisters, St Endellion and St Issey, are well preserved and Joanna Mattingly has argued convincingly that the shrine at St Issey, Cornwall, depicts sculpted figures of Brychan Brycheiniog's children.¹⁷

St Eluned (Eliwedd or Elvetha) who is mentioned in the Welsh genealogies was martyred, according to *Cognacio Brychan*, for her love of chastity.¹⁸ Gerald of Wales who also attributes twenty-four daughters to Brychan provides a more detailed account of Eluned's martyrdom in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* c.1188:

The Welsh annals bear witness to the fact that he had twenty-four daughters. From their youth upwards they were all dedicated to the religious life, and they ended their days blissfully in this state of sanctity. There are still many churches in Wales which have the honour of being named after them. One is on the top of a hill in Brecknockshire, not far from the main castle of Brecon. It is called the church of Saint Eluned, after the name of the saintly virgin who on that spot refused the hand of an earthly ruler and married instead the King Eternal, thus triumphing in an ecstasy of self-denial. Each year on the first day of August her feast-day is celebrated with great solemnity in this same place.¹⁹

Were it not for his summary of the Life of Eluned, the specific traditions associated with this saint may well have been lost, since neither *vita* nor *buchedd* are extant and Eluned is not mentioned in native Welsh poetry. Surprisingly her feast-day is not entered under 1 August in any of the Welsh calendars.²⁰ However, there is a reference to Eluned in the work of William Worcestre (c.1415–85). He refers to the saint's remains as being housed in the priory church at Usk, home to a community of Benedictine nuns founded sometime before 1135 by Richard de Clare.²¹ Worcestre also relates the tale of Eluned's martyrdom on a hill near Brecon, adding that a spring of water welled forth at the time of her decapitation and that whoever drinks from the water or recites the Lord's Prayer shall find one of Eluned's hairs on a stone near the site of her martyrdom.²²

St Gwenfrewy

Eluned's mythos is somewhat reminiscent of the traditions associated with one of the most renowned Welsh saints – Gwenfrewy – a virgin martyr who was, according to the various versions of her medieval legend, decapitated at Sychnant (from then on known as Holywell) in Flintshire, because she refused to have sexual intercourse with a local prince called Caradog. As mentioned earlier, she is resurrected by St Beuno who places the virgin's head back on her shoulders, and a holy well, with curative powers, springs forth from the pool of saintly blood spilled on the ground. Tudur Aled, in an early sixteenth-century *cywydd*, draws attention to the unusual stones stained with blood at the bottom of the well.²³ The medieval *vitae* also emphasize the importance of the blood-stained stones and refer to fragrant moss found at the well, which was, according to Baring-Gould and Fisher, known as St Winefride's Hair.²⁴

Gwenfrewy's legend is well attested in medieval sources and she is one of the few native female saints for whom official prose Lives survive. Two twelfth-century Latin Lives and a fifteenth-century Welsh *buchedd* are extant and a summary of Gwenfrewy's martyrdom and decollation is also given in the Welsh Life of Beuno, *Hystoria o Uched Beuno* (c.1346). The Welsh version of the Life of Gwenfrewy preserved in Llanstephan 34 most closely resembles the Latin *vita* attributed to Prior Robert of Shrewsbury and concludes with an account of the translation of Gwenfrewy's relics from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury.²⁵ The Welsh version preserved in Peniarth 27, however, omits the account of the translation to Shrewsbury and focuses instead on the importance of the burial site at Gwytherin, emphasizing that countless other saints were also buried there, including local saints such as Cybi, Sanan and Theon. While this version emphasizes the importance of the Welsh sites at Holywell and Gwytherin, Prior Robert's Life adds Shrewsbury to the list and the anonymous twelfth-century Latin Life, which is brief to the point of being curt and abrupt, contains a lengthy appendix devoted to posthumous miracles performed at the well and church at Holywell. The anonymous *vita* is quite different

from the other versions and it is only in this text that it is claimed that Gwenfrewy went on pilgrimage to Rome and also attended an important synod in Britain.²⁶

Gwenfrewy's legend was translated into Middle English and included in a number of extremely popular hagiographical collections such as certain versions of the *South English Legendary* (which was in wide circulation between c.1270–85 and the fifteenth century), the *Gilte Legende* (1438) and William Caxton's printed edition of the *Golden Legend* (1483).²⁷ Medieval Welsh poetry relating Gwenfrewy's legend and recording miraculous healings at her holy well are to be found in the work of Ieuan Brydydd Hir (fl.1450–85), Tudur Aled (c.1465–c.1525), Siôn ap Hywel ap Llywelyn Fychan (fl. c.1490–1532), as well as in two medieval *cywyddau* of uncertain authorship.²⁸

Having spent seven years presiding over a community of nuns at Holywell, Gwenfrewy, according to her medieval Lives, moved to Gwytherin where she succeeded St Theon as Abbess. In 1138 her relics were translated to the Benedictine priory of SS. Peter and Paul at Shrewsbury. Gwytherin appears to have attracted pilgrims even after the removal of her relics since Edward Lhuyd, on a visit to Gwytherin c.1690, sketched a drawing of her empty reliquary, a piece of which was found by Tristan Gray Hulse in 1991 and is thought to date from the eighth or ninth century. It appears that pilgrims visiting Gwytherin cut off small fragments of the wooden box, until it gradually disintegrated.²⁹

The vigorous spring at Holywell, now claimed to be one of the seven wonders of Wales, attracts pilgrims to this day and, at the height of the pilgrimage season, as well as on special occasions such as the saint's feast-days, the reliquary of St Gwenfrewy is displayed (Plate 12). A fragment of finger bone, presumed to be Gwenfrewy's, is encased in a silver monstrance: the relic which had been sent to Rome was returned to Holywell in 1855. From 1240 to the Dissolution the holy well was a source of considerable income for the Cistercian monks of Basingwerk to whom it was appropriated and, throughout the Middle Ages, it attracted eminent visitors such as Henry V, Edward IV and Richard III. A statue of Gwenfrewy appears in Henry VII's chapel at Westminster

Abbey and the building of the well chapel at Holywell has frequently been attributed to the generosity and religious convictions of Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort (1441–1509), although one should also emphasize the importance of Thomas Pennant's sponsorship of the rebuilding work at Holywell, during his time as Abbot of Basingwerk (1481–1522). Medieval Welsh poetry certainly gives the impression that the building of the current Perpendicular well chapel was overseen and financed by Pennant. Tudur Aled, for example, wishes that Pennant may soon finish enclosing the well and be rewarded for his endeavours by being made either Bishop of York or Bishop of St Davids³⁰ and Siôn ap Hywel in his *awdl* to Gwenfrewy states that:

O law Tomas urddaswin
Yr aeth y gost ar waith Gwen:
Diwan adeilad, da iawn y dylud,
Da y darparwyd, iti darperir.³¹

(From the hand of Thomas [provider of] noble wine
came the cost of Gwen's work:
A sturdy building, full well do you deserve it,
well was it prepared, prepared for you.)

Gwenfrewy was certainly of sufficient political importance to warrant the production of medieval *vitae* and a Welsh *buchedd*. Her high-ranking status within the diocese of St Asaph is also confirmed by a fifteenth-century ecclesiastical seal, the second seal of the Chapter of St Asaph, which appears to depict Gwenfrewy, veiled as a bride of Christ, holding her abbess's crosier and a reliquary (Plate 13). To her left, stands another saint, probably St Asaph, and a third figure kneels under a canopy. Gwenfrewy is also depicted on a fifteenth-century seal from the Church of the Holy Cross at the priory of SS. Peter and Paul, Shrewsbury. This seal focuses on Gwenfrewy's decapitation and depicts an angry Caradog brandishing his sword above the virgin's neck. It bears the initials of Thomas Mynde, Prior of Shrewsbury 1459–99.³² Gwenfrewy is depicted clutching a sword in late medieval stained glass at the church of St Tyrnog, Llandyrnog, Denbighshire. She appears in the tracery lights of the east window

alongside St Marchell (Tyrynog's sister), St Frideswide of Oxford and St Katherine of Alexandria. It is possible that the virgin martyr depicted in medieval glass at Llanasa church may originally have been intended to be Gwenfrewy, and that the label 'Sca Katharina', along with the sword and the wheel were added when the glass was reconstructed in the nineteenth century. Neither the label nor Katherine's attributes appear in a sketch of the window in 1825. The saint (whoever she may be) has a visible scar around her neck and this is consistent with Gwenfrewy's iconography and the emphasis placed on her scar in medieval Welsh poetry.³³

Scholars have frequently noted the political importance of saints' Lives and the way in which these narratives were used to empower the medieval dioceses, assert rights and privileges, define ecclesiastical boundaries and establish rights of sanctuary, as well as to promote the cult of a particular patron saint and establish a locus of pilgrimage with a view to both financial and spiritual gain.³⁴ The dioceses of St Davids and Llandaf were not only competing against each other in the struggle for archiepiscopal primacy, but were also attempting to fend off Norman influence. It is interesting to note that the anonymous Latin Life of Gwenfrewy remarks that, as an expression of celebration, Gwenfrewy's well flowed with a milky liquid for three days following the expulsion of the French from Gwynedd.³⁵

As we saw in the previous chapter, it has generally been assumed that in post-conquest Wales numerous churches were rededicated to the Virgin Mary or to universally popular saints (particularly in areas of strong Norman influence) and that some of the original dedications to local Welsh saints have been lost or altered.³⁶ However, further, more detailed work on Welsh dedications is urgently needed if we are to test these theories and analyse to what extent this was in fact due to Norman influence. Certainly by the fourteenth century internationally popular saints, such as the Virgin Mary, Katherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalene were as fashionable in Wales as they were elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless hagiographical texts strongly associated native saints with a particular foundation and, in general, sanctity seems to have been locally conferred. The vast majority of the native

saints' cults (and in particular the female saints) were confined to a particular locality, often having only one or two church dedications. With the exception of Gwenfrewy, few of the native female saints of Wales appear to have been considered of major political importance and this perhaps explains why so few Lives are extant. Naturally some may have been lost, but one cannot altogether discount the possibility that many of these hagiographical 'stories' were never committed to writing and may only have been current in oral tradition. Since medieval literature was generally intended for oral delivery and public performance rather than private reading, one could reasonably speculate that the local saints' Lives were frequently recounted on special days such as feast days, or on pilgrimages to the saint's holy well or shrine, and that the local population were familiar with these traditions, despite never having read an official *vita* or *buchedd*. This hypothesis is further supported by the nature of the evidence for the female saints. Remnants of their medieval traditions are found in native Welsh poetry, prayers and genealogies yet few Lives survive.

St Melangell

A noteworthy example of a female saint whose legend appears to have been current in oral tradition, possibly before being recorded in writing, is Melangell (or Monacella) – the patron saint of hares. In her church at Pennant Melangell stands a twelfth-century, Romanesque shrine, which was reconstructed in 1958, and again in 1991, from fragments found in the church walls and lych gate.³⁷ The shrine may once have contained the saint's relics or, alternatively, it may have been positioned over a cist grave found in the eastern apse of the church. Certainly by the twelfth century the church at Pennant Melangell was believed to honour the relics of the holy virgin Melangell.³⁸

By the eighteenth century the relics appear to have found their way to France. Father Louis de Sabran, rector of the Jesuit College of St Omer, believed that the college possessed 'St Monacella's body' and referred to the saint in a series of

letters between 31 October 1713 and 2 July 1715.³⁹ His letter book suggests that the relics remained intact and that the entire skeleton of Melangell was venerated at the college and dressed in clothes suitable for a saintly princess. In February 1714 he commissioned 'a flower crowne for St. Monacella' from Lady Knatchbull, Abbess of the English Benedictine nuns at Ghent, and she replied that she would send him a crown of gold and silver silk flowers.⁴⁰ Attempts were made to obtain an indulgence to venerate the body on Melangell's feast and Louis de Sabran was keen to learn more about Melangell and obtain a copy of her Life. During the period that the letters were written the Jesuits appear to have known very little about Melangell, assuming incorrectly that she was a martyr.⁴¹ A play was performed in her honour at the college, but unfortunately it would appear that neither the play nor the relics have survived.⁴²

Melangell is referred to by the fifteenth-century poet Lewys Glyn Cothi and mentioned three times in the poetry of Guto'r Glyn (c.1435–93).⁴³ Three complete copies and two incomplete copies of her Latin Life, *Historia divae Monacellae*, are extant in manuscripts dating from the late sixteenth century and there is also a printed copy of a seventeenth-century manuscript which was destroyed in a fire in 1858.⁴⁴ Radford and Hemp suggest that the Life was composed in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century, possibly when the church was enlarged and modernized, but Pryce proposes that it was composed sometime between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century and that it draws on oral sources as well as earlier written material.⁴⁵ The earliest record of Melangell's legend is pictorial rather than textual, since a carved, late fifteenth-century rood-screen in her church at Pennant Melangell depicts a large hare running towards the abbess, in order to seek protection from the pursuing hounds (Plate 14). On the left of the screen, Brochfael Ysgithrog is depicted on horseback clutching a sword and one of his men sounds the hunting horn.⁴⁶

According to the *Historia divae Monacellae*, Melangell fled from Ireland to Wales in order to avoid an arranged marriage. She settled in a remote hamlet at Pennant Melangell and enjoyed a quiet and peaceful, contemplative existence for

fifteen years during which time she never 'looked at the face of a man'.⁴⁷ Then one day she came face to face with Brochfael Ysgithrog hunting a hare. His hounds cowered and refused to approach the hare which peered out from under the hem of Melangell's skirt. Brochfael, made aware of Melangell's sanctity, decided to grant her a considerable portion of land on which to establish a nunnery and protective sanctuary for anyone seeking asylum. It was not until after Melangell's death that the peace at Pennant Melangell was broken when:

a certain person by the name of Elise, came to Pennant Melangell, who, desiring to ravish, seize and defile the same virgins, came to an end most wretchedly and perished suddenly. Whoever has violated the aforementioned liberty and protected holy place of the said virgin has rarely been said to avoid divine vengeance in this region, as one can perceive every day.⁴⁸

The message put forward in the *Historia* is crystal clear. Anyone who attempts to violate one of Christ's virgins risks divine retribution. Those who threaten or harm the female saints are frequently cursed, swallowed up by the earth, melted, frozen or suffer excruciating sudden death. In the *Vita sancte Wenefrede*, for instance, Beuno curses Gwenfrewy's murderer who immediately melts and disintegrates.⁴⁹ Melangell is fortunate in that she has already departed her earthly existence, before the would-be rapist visits Pennant Melangell with evil intent, but other female saints (such as Gwenfrewy and Eluned) are not as fortunate.

Martyrs: violence and torture

A number of Welsh female saints are reputed to have been martyred including Dunod, Tudful, Tybie, Gwen, Enfail and Maches. Dunod, who is only mentioned in the Lives of St David, is brutally murdered by her stepmother Satrapa:

Sef a oruc y vorwyn da, diweir, war, gymenn, rodi y phenn yn arffet y llysuam. Sef a oruc y llysuam, tynnv kylllell a llad penn y vorwyn santes. Ac yn y gyfeir y dygwydawl y gwaet y'r llawr,

yd ymdangosses ffynnyawn. A llawer o dynyon a gauas yechyt a gwaret yno. A hyt hediw y gelwir y ffynnawn honno Ffynnawn Dunawt, kanys Dunawt oed enw y vorwyn.⁵⁰

(The good, chaste, civilized, eloquent maiden placed her head in her stepmother's lap. The stepmother took out a knife and cut off the saintly virgin's head. And in the very place where the blood fell to the ground, a holy well appeared. And many people were healed there and granted salvation. And today this well is still named Dunod's Well, for Dunod was the virgin's name.)

Four of Brychan Brycheiniog's daughters were murdered by pagan Saxons, according to Iolo Morganwg (1747–1826), namely Tybie of Llandybïe, Tudful of Merthyr Tudful, Gwen of Talgarth and Enfail of Merthyr Enfail. Although the first three women appear consistently in Brychan's medieval genealogies, Iolo Morganwg's manuscripts are the only source which mentions their martyrdom, and in most cases Iolo simply adds the following formula to the genealogies: 'lle ai llas gan y Paganiaid Saeson' (where she was killed by pagan Saxons).⁵¹ However, in the case of Tudful he elaborates upon the tale, claiming that Tudful was slain whilst visiting her ageing father Brychan. Her brothers, having witnessed her martyrdom, became involved in the conflict and hurried after the pagans to avenge her death, but Rhun, one of Brychan's sons, was killed in the onslaught. The pagans were eventually driven away by Tudful's young nephew, Nefydd ap Rhun, who was outraged by his father's death. Here Iolo makes Tudful of Glamorgan the mother of Brochfael Ysgithrog, a hero who is usually associated with Powys and who, as we have seen, grants lands for St Melangell's sanctuary.⁵² Although Iolo Morganwg was an avid collector of Welsh manuscripts and a keen copyist, one must exercise caution when using his notes on the Welsh saints, since he is renowned for skilfully faking 'medieval' material and embellishing certain traditions, particularly those associated with Glamorgan.

One example of the manner in which Iolo Morganwg's narratives differ from medieval traditions is demonstrated in the account of the martyrdom of Maches. According to Iolo

Morganwg, Maches, who was fond of offering alms to the poor, was stabbed in the chest by a pagan Saxon who had disguised himself as a beggar. Iolo claims that Maches was St Cadog's sister and St Gwynllyw's daughter, yet neither the *Vita sancti Cadoci* nor the *Vita sancti Gundleii* mentions Maches.⁵³ However, an account of the martyrdom of the virgin Maches (Machuta) is given in the twelfth-century Latin *Life of St Tathan* (Tatheus) where it is related that Maches was beheaded by thieves who were eager to steal a ram from her flock. The murderers confess all to St Tathan who visits the spot where the virgin was martyred:

In that same place he founded a church built in honour of the virgin Machuta. He refused to allow there the virgin's body, but only in the place where alone it ought to lie. Therefore it was carried to Caer-went, and buried in the floor of the church, and may her soul rest in eternal rest.⁵⁴

Her role as shepherdess may have led to her misidentification with St Margaret of Antioch, a more popular and well-known saint who is depicted caring for her foster mother's flock of sheep at the beginning of her medieval Life. In an intriguing fifteenth-century *cywydd* to St Margaret the poet Thomas Derllysg (*fl.* 1460–90) suggests that the saint from Antioch lies buried at Llanfaches, near Caer-went, and that the local Welsh parishioners will benefit spiritually from their association with Margaret since this is where she suffered:

Sôn am eurgrair Sain Margred,
Uwch Caer Went i iachau cred.
Un ferch wen o Vorach oedd
I Dewdus, a da ydoedd.
Llyma ferch lle mae i fedd
Llan faches, lleian fuchedd.
Dywedaf i'm diwydion,
Fuchedd hoff, o achoedd hon
Un Dewdus un da ydoedd . . .
. . . Margred sydd yn arwydd nef.
Am iddi yma oddef,
Mae nef yn gartref i gyd
I'w phlwygion o'i phlegyd.⁵⁵

(Talking of the golden relic [of] St Margaret,
to heal faith, above Caer-went,
she was the only holy daughter of Theodosius
from Vorach [Antioch?] and she was good.
Here's a girl whose grave is at
Llanfaches, holy Life of a nun.
I will tell the faithful, favourite Life,
one Theodosius of her lineage, and good was she . . .
. . . Margaret who is a sign from heaven.
For since she suffered here,
heaven is home to her parishioners,
because of her.)⁵⁶

The remainder of the poem is reasonably straightforward and recounts the standard narrative associated with St Margaret of Antioch, her imprisonment and persecution by Olibrius, her encounter with the devil disguised as a dragon and her heroic martyrdom.

The Lives of the universally popular saints Margaret of Antioch, Katherine of Alexandria, Mary of Egypt, Mary Magdalene and Martha were translated into Welsh sometime before the mid-fourteenth century. Chapters 4 and 5 in the present volume will provide a detailed study of the vernacular versions of these Lives, focusing in particular on the Welsh evidence for the cults of St Katherine, Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha. As in the traditions associated with the Welsh female saints, many of these universal saints' Lives are brutal and violent and most centre around the perpetual struggle to preserve the female saints' virginity. Both Gwenfrewy and Margaret refer to Christ as their protector, the man responsible for guarding their virginity and ensuring that they remain physically undefiled. With the exception of the repentant prostitutes, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, all of these holy women are virgins and their sanctity and spiritual strength are inextricably linked with their physical purity. Margaret of Antioch (Margred) and Katherine of Alexandria (Catrin) suffer an appalling array of tortures, but stoically refuse to bow to their tormentors' will. In *Buched Margred*, for example, Margaret is thrown in prison, beaten with large

sticks until her flesh is ripped apart, stripped, set alight and tortured in boiling water:

'Noethwch hi a chroguch ynn yr awyr, ac ennynnwch y hystlyssev a ffaglev gwressauc' . . . Ac yna yd erchis y pennya-dur dvynn llestreit o dvfyr brvt, a rvy mav y phenn a'e thraet a'e dienydyav a'e phoeni yn hvnnv.⁵⁷

('Undress her and suspend her in the air and set the sides of her body alight with red-hot firebrands' . . . And then her tormentor requested that vessels of boiling water be brought and that her hands and feet be bound and that she be tortured and put to death in them.)

Her tormentors are referred to as 'kiccydyon' (butcherers) and at one point during the series of vicious attacks perpetrated against her, even her torturer, Olibrius, has to look away because the scene is so horrific:

Y kiccydyonn, hagen, voe voe a oed yn dinev y gvaet ac ynn dienydyav y chorff hi. Hynny a oruc y creulaun treissvr cudyav y llygeit a'e mantell cany allei edrych arnei rac meint yd yttoedit ynn gordinev o'e guaet hi.⁵⁸

(The butcherers, however, were increasingly causing her blood to flow and torturing her body. The cruel perpetrator of violence hid his eyes in his cloak since he could not bear to look at her, since the amount of blood flowing from her body was so immense.)

Margaret is eventually swallowed by the devil disguised as a dragon, but emerges from his body unharmed when the crucifix around her neck miraculously grows and splits the dragon in two. It is presumably for this reason, as well as the fact that she promises before she is beheaded that no lame or blind child will ever be born into any household which possesses a copy of her Life, that she became known as the patron saint of childbirth.

Of the numerous methods of torture described in saints' Lives, one of the most horrific is amputation of the saint's breasts. As we shall see in Chapter 5, in the Life of St Katherine it is the perpetrator's wife rather than St Katherine who has her breasts removed. In the continental versions of

the Lives of Barbara and Agatha the saints have their breasts ripped off because, like Katherine, they refuse to sacrifice to pagan gods and refuse to marry their tormentors. Both are imprisoned and eventually decapitated.⁵⁹ Agatha's breasts heal miraculously during her incarceration. Neither the Lives of Barbara or Agatha appear to have been translated into Middle Welsh, although both saints were known in Wales. Agatha is invoked by the poet Dafydd Nanmor (*fl.* 1450–90) in a long list of 'saint yr ynys hon' (saints of this island, i.e. Britain) whom he hopes will offer protection to Henry Tudor.⁶⁰ Barbara is one of the female saints invoked in a poem by Lewys Morgannwg (*fl.* 1520–65) which was composed on behalf of Margred Siôn of Coety who appears to have been suffering from breast cancer:

Bo ar weddi, bêr addef,
beri bron iach, Barbra nef;
San Ffred, Sant Margred a Mair,
Sant Ann a'r holl saint unair.
Galw o nefoedd, glaîn afiach,
Gwenfrewy nerth, gwna vronn iach.⁶¹

Heavenly Barbara, Ffraid, Margaret and Mary,
St Ann and all the saints united,
may this sweet prayer
cause the breast to be healed.
Call strong Gwenfrewy from holy heaven
[in order to] heal the sick breast.)

St Apollonia, another 'foreign' saint who suffered physical torture when her teeth were brutally extracted one by one by her pagan tormentor, certainly seems to have been popular in Wales. The patron of toothache sufferers is depicted holding one of her teeth in a pair of pliers in two late fifteenth-century stained-glass windows at Gresford parish church.⁶² She is also mentioned in a charm in one of the Middle Welsh medical texts which advises that the patient write a short prayer to Jesus, Mary and Apollonia and tie it around the neck in order to relieve toothache.⁶³

St Ursula

Another saint of international repute who has a particular connection with Wales is St Ursula. According to Welsh tradition, Ursula and her 11,000 virgins set sail from Llangwryfon (the church of the virgins) near Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, on their final pilgrimage to Rome and were martyred at Cologne. Her legend was translated from Latin into Welsh c.1514 by Huw Pennant and is preserved in a single manuscript, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 182. According to *Hystoria Gweryddon yr Almaen*, Ursula refused to marry a pagan prince, but was forced to compromise for the sake of her father 'un o brenhinoedd Ynys y Kedyrn' (one of the kings of the Island of the Mighty, that is to say Britain).⁶⁴ She agreed that she would marry on returning from her pilgrimage. Ursula set sail with her 11,000 maidens and having visited Cologne, they arrived in Rome where they received a rapturous welcome from the British Pope Curig. However, on their return to Cologne they discovered that the city was under siege and it was not long before all of Ursula's virginal companions were brutally murdered. The pagan prince responsible for the murders apologized to Ursula when he noticed her great beauty and requested her hand in marriage, but since she adamantly refused his offer, he took out his bow and arrow and shot her. Ursula is depicted shielding her companions under her cloak and holding the arrow with which she was martyred in modern stained glass at her church in Llangwryfon.⁶⁵ The present church was erected in 1883, and built opposite the site of the medieval church which formerly stood in the circular cemetery at Llangwryfon.

Gwerful Mechain (fl.1462–1500), the only Welsh female poet for whom a corpus of medieval poetry survives, refers to the 11,000 virgins in a poem she wrote to defend Anni Goch (and women in general) from a vitriolic attack by another poet called Ieuan Dyfi. Her 'Cywydd i Ateb Ieuan Dyfi am ei Gywydd i Anni Goch' (poem responding to Ieuan Dyfi for his poem to Anni Goch) lists particularly virtuous women, and was written in direct response to Ieuan Dyfi's *cywydd* which criticized, not only his lover Anni Goch, but the whole of

womankind, listing numerous examples of female sinners and wrongdoers.⁶⁶ Other Welsh poets refer to the 11,000 virgin martyrs, but do not specifically praise St Ursula. For example, Tudur Aled compares Gwenfrewy to the 11,000 virgins rather than Ursula,⁶⁷ and, with the exception of Gwerful Mechain, most poets who name Cologne (Cwlen in Welsh) refer to the relics of the three wise men in Cologne cathedral, rather than the relics of Ursula and her virginal companions.⁶⁸ It is possible that the Life of Ursula (which follows the traditional *vita*) was not translated into Welsh until the sixteenth century and that the version which was perhaps more widely disseminated in Wales was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) and its Welsh translations.⁶⁹ In this version Ursula is not specifically named: she is the daughter of Dunod (Dionotus), King of Cornwall, and is martyred along with 11,000 noble virgins by the Picts and the Huns. The virgins and 60,000 women of lower status set sail for Brittany, whither they have been summoned by Cynan Meiriadog (Conanus Meridiadocus), who is eager for his men to marry Britons. The unnamed Princess and her companions are blown off course and a number are drowned before the remainder eventually land in Germany only to be martyred by Winwas (Wanius) and Melwas (Melga), the leaders of the Picts and the Huns. *Gŵyl y Gweryddon* (the feast of the Virgins) on 21 October is entered in almost all of the Welsh calendars.

Virginity and feminine sanctity

Virginity may almost be considered a prerequisite for feminine sanctity, and one begins to see a pattern emerging in the traditions of the female saints that is quite different from the male saints' Lives. Henken notes that the unusual birth and conception of the male saint is similar to that of the secular hero; that the childhood of the saint usually demonstrates his greatness; he often performs a miracle illustrating his 'coming out into the world'; he is learned, usually precocious and receives a good education; performs many miracles; heals the sick; punishes unbelievers; lives to a ripe old age and usually

dies of natural causes.⁷⁰ Most of the Welsh male saints' Lives follow this pattern (the holy abbot/bishop model) rather than the alternative model of male martyr saints found in numerous Lives from England and the Continent. There is no Welsh equivalent, for example, of St George whose Life, in many ways, resembles that of a female saint (in particular St Katherine). George, like Katherine, is summoned to sacrifice to Roman gods and when he refuses he is detained by a heathen ruler, tortured in a variety of ways including being strapped to a wheel with knife-like blades and eventually he is decapitated. Although George appears to have been a relatively popular figure in medieval Welsh art, his Life was not translated into Middle Welsh. Medieval images of both SS. George and Katherine are extant from Llangystennin church, although the painted glass is no longer *in situ*.⁷¹

Of the Welsh female saints Henken says:

Tradition pays no, or virtually no, attention to their lives until they are confronted with male sexuality . . . The encounter with male sexuality is the only major element in the biographical pattern which appears with any consistency for the Welsh women saints.⁷²

One may add a number of details to the biographical pattern of the female saints: their Lives usually begin at puberty, when they decide to dedicate their virginity to Christ and refuse to marry; they are frequently of noble birth and often have to flee their native land in order to avoid an arranged marriage; sometimes this involves a journey across the Irish sea; they seek a simple ascetic lifestyle, worshipping Christ (their eternal husband), and either live alone or establish a community of religious females; however, they unwittingly become the objects of male desire and are frequently abducted, threatened with rape or forced marriage, tortured and decapitated.⁷³

Only in death does the female saint attain perpetual virginity and eternal salvation, for whilst on earth there is a constant risk that she may be seen, admired and polluted. As Bloch notes 'a certain inescapable logic of virginity, most evident in medieval hagiography, leads syllogistically to the conclusion that the only good virgin – that is, the only true

virgin – is a dead virgin'.⁷⁴ The confrontation with male sexuality is usually introduced to the narrative account via a description of the pagan suitor gazing or staring at the saint's beauty, as in the following example from the Life of Gwenfrewy:

So Caradog gazing at the countenance of the girl made up of white and red and admiring the whole of her, fair in form and face, his heart in desire of her began to burn exceedingly.⁷⁵

Another of Bloch's definitions of the medieval concept of a virgin is a woman who not only has never slept with a man, nor desired to do so, but 'a woman who has never been seen by a man'.⁷⁶ Interestingly, Melangell manages to lead a peaceful existence at Pennant Melangell since she has been hidden from the male gaze for fifteen years. The female saint welcomes physical punishment or torture because it is the prelude to her elevation from the corporeal world of the senses to the plane of spiritual fulfilment.

San Ffraid

San (St) Ffraid, a composite saint in Welsh tradition (that is a fusion of the Irish St Brigid of Kildare and St Birgitta of Sweden), is temporarily deprived of one of her senses in order to preserve her virginity. When her father tried to force her to marry she prayed to God for assistance. Miraculously, one of her eyes popped out of her head, presumably rendering her so physically repulsive that no one would wish to marry her and, when the threat of marriage subsided, her face healed. This episode (which stems from the Life of Brigid of Kildare) is related in a Welsh *cywydd* by Iorwerth Fynglwyd (*fl.* 1485–1527):

dydd, y ceisiodd dy dad
wra yt, a'i roi atad,
un o'th lygaid a neidiawdd
o'th ben, hyn a'th boenai'n hawdd;
a thrannoeth aeth yr wyneb
oll yn iach, ni bu well neb.⁷⁷

(The day your father attempted
to find you a husband, and give him to you,
one of your eyes jumped
out of your head, and this inevitably hurt you;
but the next day, all your face healed,
no one had ever felt better.)

There are numerous examples of saints and nuns who plucked out their eyes or cut off their noses in order to avoid marriage or rape. Schulenburg describes how nuns frequently mutilated their faces during Viking invasions in order to avoid sexual violation.⁷⁸ In Britain at least forty nunneries were destroyed during Viking raids, and by the time of the Norman Conquest only nine houses for women remained.⁷⁹ Sainly self-mutilation appears to have continued well into the High Middle Ages, for St Ffraid's method of avoiding an arranged marriage recurs in the thirteenth century. St Margaret of Hungary (who died in 1270) refused to marry the Duke of Poland, the King of Sicily and the King of Bohemia, and when she heard that the Pope intended to arrange a marriage for her she threatened to pluck out her eyes and cut off her nose.⁸⁰

St Dwynwen

Numerous other female saints escape unwanted marriages, but one Welsh saint in particular has become associated with marital alliances and unrequited love. Dwynwen, the patron saint of lovers, whose cult has recently enjoyed a revival as the Welsh St Valentine, is perhaps the best known of Brychan Brycheiniog's unmarried daughters. Her feast day is still celebrated in Wales on 25 January and it is listed in most medieval calendars on this date, although one sixteenth-century manuscript refers to her feast on 13 July.⁸¹ Hywel Rheinallt in a *cywydd* to the saint praises Dwynwen's noble lineage and emphasises her pre-eminence amongst the other saintly daughters of Brychan Brycheiniog:

Pab mewn côr o'th [ch]wiorydd,
Bob cares yn santes sydd.
Un wyd er dy fod yn iau
Sy'n tywyso santesau.⁸²

(A pope in a choir of your sisters
Every loved one is a female saint.
Although you are younger, you are the one
who leads female saints.)

According to the legend recounted in the Iolo Morganwg manuscripts, Dwynwen fell in love with Maelon Dafodrill, but was heartbroken when he broke off their engagement on the grounds that she refused to have sexual intercourse before marriage. God punished Maelon by turning him into a block of ice and gave Dwynwen three wishes. She requested that Maelon be defrosted; that she would always be able to hear the anguished prayers of anyone suffering from unrequited love; and that she herself would never again suffer the pangs of love, but rather that she would live a solitary existence as a nun on Llanddwyn island.⁸³ In the sixteenth century three Latin prayers invoking Dwynwen were added to the Bangor missal (1494). These record very different traditions associated with Dwynwen, for they claim that Dwynwen miraculously walked across the Irish Sea for fear of Maelgwn Gwynedd.⁸⁴ Maelgwn, a common secular adversary in the Lives of the saints, may well have come into conflict with the saintly virgin, possibly requesting her hand in marriage and causing Dwynwen to flee. In the Latin Life of Cadog Maelgwn abducts the daughter of one of Cadog's prefects and is temporarily blinded as a punishment for insulting behaviour towards the saint.⁸⁵

Throughout the Middle Ages Llanddwyn island was a popular place of pilgrimage. Hywel Rheinallt refers to her church there as 'seren y sir' (the star of the county) and describes how crowds of people from Gwynedd Is-conwy and Gwynedd Uwch-conwy visited the church and holy well in August leaving offerings of gold and wax. Dafydd Trefor (c.1460–c.1528) in his *cywydd* to Dwynwen gives the impression that the image of the saint was draped in gold and valuable offerings and provides a vivid description of miraculous healings that took place at the holy well:

Minteioedd ym min tywyn:
Merched o amrafael wledydd,
Meibion fil fyrddion a fydd,
Cleifion rhwng ei ffynhonnau,

Crupliaid a gweniaid yn gwau,
Bronnydd fel lluoedd brenin,
Pobl o'r wlad, pawb ar ei lin,
Taprau cwyr, pabwyr er pwyll,
Pibau gwin, pawb â'i gannwyll,
Crysau'n llawn brychau gerbron,
Miragl wrth godi meirwon!⁸⁶

(Crowds on the edge of the seashore:
Girls from various regions,
An innumerable myriad of men are to be found [there]
Sick people, cripples and the weak
bustling between the holy wells,
Hill slopes [covered with people] like a king's army,
People from the countryside, everyone on his knees,
Wax tapers, candle wicks for health of mind,
Pipes of wine, everyone with his candle,
Shirts covered in stains nearby,
A miracle as the dead are resurrected!)

The remains of Dwywnwen's chapel on the island probably date from the sixteenth century. However, there was certainly an earlier chapel on the island and the fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym refers to a golden statue of the saint in her church. He invokes Dwywnwen, requesting that she act as a *llatai* (love messenger) and persuade his lover Morfudd to arrange a tryst with him:

Dwywnwen, pes parud unwaith
Dan wŷdd Mai a hirddydd maith,
Dawn ei bardd, da, wen y bych;
Dwywnwen, nid oeddud anwych.
Dangos o'th radau dawngoeth
Nad wyd fursen, Ddwywnwen ddoeth.⁸⁷

(Dwywnwen, if you would allow it once
Under May woods on a long, lingering day
Her poet's gift, [O] fair one, you'd be blessed.
Dwywnwen, you were [never] wretched!
With your rich-gifted graces show,
Wise Dwywnwen, you're not prudish.)⁸⁸

The mischievous tone of the poem is characteristic of Dafydd ap Gwilym's love poetry. He is more than willing to take advantage of Dwywnwen's reputation as a chaste holy virgin in order to arrange an unchaste, adulterous meeting with his married lover. In a satirical poem by Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn (c.1395–1486) Dwywnwen is described as an extremely chaste saint who will, nevertheless, not prevent others from committing adultery.⁸⁹

Although various references in medieval poetry refer to Dwywnwen assisting in matters of the heart as well as the soul, it is not clear exactly when Dwywnwen became specifically associated with lovers. By the eighteenth century people were not only visiting the well at Llanddwyn to obtain cures for physical ailments, but also in order to obtain information about relationships. An old woman from Newborough would sit near the well and having placed a suitor's handkerchief on the surface would predict from the movements of eels that lived in the bottom of the well, whether or not the relationship would be successful.⁹⁰

Abduction

Whilst the majority of female saints are virgins who manage to avoid marrying, others are abducted against their will by their would-be suitors and some eventually become mothers to important male saints. St Tegfedd, according to Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn's *cywydd* to her brother St Tydecho, was abducted by Cynan, but later returned, maidenhead intact, and restored to her brother who was also given lands at Arthbeibio in the form of apology.⁹¹ St Gwladys, one of Brychan Brycheiniog's daughters, was abducted by King Gwynllyw eager to make her his wife. En route to Gwynllyw's court she was spotted by King Arthur and his men and, for a brief moment, was actually in danger of being abducted from her abductors, since King Arthur:

immediately very inflamed with lust in desire for the maiden,
and filled with evil thoughts, said to his companions, 'Know
that I am vehemently inflamed with concupiscence for this girl,

whom that soldier is carrying away on horseback.' But they forbidding him said, 'Far be it that so great a crime should be perpetrated by thee, for we are wont to aid the needy and distressed. Wherefore let us run together with all speed and assist this struggling contest that it may cease.'⁹²

Gwladys is never restored to her father, since King Arthur's interpretation of 'aiding the needy' involves assisting Gwynllyw in his abduction. However, after the birth of their son, St Cadog, Gwladys and Gwynllyw separate and she leads a holy life akin to that of a nun. The female saint's virginity, it appears, can be compromised when the conception of a male saint is at stake, a point which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Gwladys's ordeal is recounted in the Latin Life of her son Cadog and a different version of events is given in her husband Gwynllyw's Life.⁹³

The notion of holy kinship is prevalent in the genealogies of Welsh saints, and many of the saints' families are interrelated. The lineages of the two eponymous kings, Ceredig and Brychan, who gave their names to Brycheiniog (Breconshire) and Ceredigion, include numerous Welsh saints: Ceredig who is purported to have been St David's grandfather is related to SS. Ina, Dogfael, Tyssul, Pedr and Afan Buellt and, one of his saintly daughters, Gwawr, is claimed to be the mother of St Gwynllyw. As we have already seen, Brychan Brycheiniog was credited with twenty-five holy daughters, some of whom mothered male saints. The genealogies *De situ Brecheniauc* and *Progenies Keredic* even link these two extended holy Welsh families claiming that Ceredig married St Meleri, one of Brychan's daughters, and thus St David's grandmother united the two most prominent holy families of Wales via a marital alliance.⁹⁴

Conclusions

Thus we have seen that the biographical patterning of the female saint is somewhat different from that of the male saint and that feminine sanctity (with the exception of the maternal saints) is closely linked with the saint's virginity.⁹⁵ Whilst

chastity is an important component in the male saint's make-up (and the Celtic saints are frequently described as sitting in icy cold water to extinguish lustful urges), their legends do not revolve around the struggle to maintain their virginity. The female saint is usually depicted as sexless. She is not troubled by the physical yearnings of the flesh, yet she is always described as being very beautiful and is also depicted as very feminine. Femininity and virginity are central to the female saint's iconography and she is usually depicted veiled and crowned Christ's bride. The nature of the female saint is, on the whole, paradoxical: she is, on the one hand, an innocent, fragile victim, but on the other, an independent and powerful victor who triumphs 'in an ecstasy of self denial' and is ultimately united with her heavenly groom.

Contrary to Willis Bund's claim that women rarely became saints in Wales, we have seen that there were in fact a significant number of Welsh women saints.⁹⁶ These Dark-Age virgins and maternal saints were revered in medieval Wales for a host of different reasons and offered valuable services and practical assistance to the faithful including healing, guidance in marital affairs and protection to animals. Above all, the intercessory powers of these *mulieres sanctae*, many of whom had themselves suffered torment and persecution, ensured their popularity with the local populace. Explanatory medieval legends accrued to these holy women who, in the main, led exemplary virginal lifestyles and were either nuns or abbesses. The extent to which their medieval traditions survive varies considerably. Whilst some are well attested in medieval sources, others have all but vanished from the written record. Their names may only be recorded in place-names (Llanllŷr, Llanerfyl, Eglwys Wrw, for example), or mentioned briefly in the Welsh calendars or genealogies (Rhyddlad, Callwen, Gwenfyl and Gwenfaen, for example).⁹⁷ Some of the lesser-known saints are occasionally invoked in the poetry of the *Cywyddwyr* or in medieval law texts (Tegfedd and Gwenog, for example), whilst others are mentioned only in the Lives of male saints (Gwladys, Dunod, Maches, for example).⁹⁸ Certain characters such as Helen (the mother of Constantine the Great) and Thecla of Iconium appear to have been amalgamated into Welsh tradition

because of the similarity between their names and the names of Welsh characters (Elen and Tegla). St Helen became conflated with Elen Luyddog, a mythological character who marries the Roman Emperor Macsen Wledig (Magnus Maximus) in the Middle Welsh tale *Breudwyt Maxen*. The Invention of the True Cross was also translated into Middle Welsh – *Val a Cauas Elen y Grog*.⁹⁹ In an early thirteenth-century manuscript, Lambeth Palace MS 94, a number of miracles associated with St Tegla of Llandegley, Powys, form an appendix to *Passio S. Theclae*, the passion of St Thecla of Iconium.¹⁰⁰

The immense popularity of the Welsh women saints might lead one to assume that medieval Wales was a favourable environment for the female religious, but this, surprisingly, was not the case. As we shall see in Chapter 6, there were only three long-standing nunneries in medieval Wales and they were small, poor and probably had very few inmates.¹⁰¹ Despite the fact that the Welsh princes and nobility appear to have been particularly fond of sponsoring male Cistercian houses, there does not seem to have been quite the same impetus to provide long-term investment in houses for religious women. No doubt Eluned's relics had a special significance for the Benedictine nuns of Usk, but it appears that only to a very limited extent were the female saints of Wales viewed as appropriate role models for medieval Welsh women. All of these female saints were purported to have been alive in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries and the tradition of according sanctity did not continue in Wales into the Middle Ages.¹⁰² Elsewhere holy women such as Margaret of Scotland (c.1045–93), Christina of Markyate (c.1097–c.1161), Malfada of Portugal (1184–1257) and Margaret of Cortona (1247–97) continued to be regarded as saints. However, in Wales, few noblewomen appear to have been encouraged to follow in the footsteps of the saints and retire to a contemplative existence. One could argue that for medieval Welsh society, the best kind of *holy* virgin was indeed a *dead* virgin.