

Commentary 1 – A Summary of the Historiographical Materials Relating to St. David

Introduction

Saint David (Dewi Sant), the patron saint of Wales, was a 6th century monk who died circa 589 AD after founding the strict monastic community at Menevia (St Davids). Today, he remains a powerful symbol of Welsh national identity: his feast day of 1st March is widely celebrated throughout Wales.¹ There are no historical records which contain a contemporary record of his life. Instead, our modern view of St David is one that has developed over centuries, shaped by various external factors including theological ambition and national politics.²

Early Evidence

Until the formal creation of his hagiography in the late 11th century, the oldest record of St David relies on scattered early medieval texts and epigraphic evidence. One of the oldest surviving pieces of material evidence is a 6th century monument with the inscription *RINACI*, which was found near St Davids.³ Similarly, there are contemporary penitential canons (records of ecclesiastical rules) including *Excerpts from a Book of David*, that document St David's extreme ascetic life.⁴ The *Idnert Stone* (7th – 8th century) found at Llanddewi Brefi, is the earliest material evidence for the church of St David.⁵ An early written account from the 9th century, Wmonoc's *Life of Saint Paul Aurelian*, describe his restricted diet of bread and water, leading to him being known as 'the Waterman'.⁶ Bishop Asser's *Life of King Alfred* (c. 885 AD) is the first surviving evidence of the increase in the saint's prominence beyond his monastic world, specifically mentions attacks on St David's monastery (*monasterium*) and his diocesan jurisdiction (*parochia Sancti Degui*).⁷ In the 10th century the prophetic Welsh poem, *Armes Prydein Fawr* (c. 930). from the *Book of Taliesin* portrays St David as protector, both spiritually

¹ Matthew, Kelly, *Calendar of Irish Saints: The Martyrology of Tallagh, with Notices of the Patron Saints of Ireland; and Select Poems and Hymns* (J. Mullany, 1857), p.80.

² Jennifer Bell, *The development of the saints' cults and the ecclesiastical landscape of early medieval south Wales, c. 600-1200*, (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Bangor University, 2022), <<https://research.bangor.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-development-of-the-saints-cults-and-the-ecclesiastical-landsc/>> [24 May 2026]

³ David N. Dumville, *Saint David of Wales* (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2001), p. 15.

⁴ Dumville, *Saint David of Wales*, p. 15.

⁵ Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', *Traditio*, 62 (2007), 135–205 (p. 168).

⁶ Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, 'The Edition' (2025), <https://saints.wales/theedition/> [accessed 24 May 2026], p. 2.

⁷ Day, Jenny, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, p.2.

and militarily, and under him the English will be driven out of Wales.⁸ Also from the same period is the *Annales Cambriae* (c. 950 AD), this is a collection Latin annales compiled from sources from St David's monastery, Mynyw, that record the death of St. David (589 or 601 AD) and also a fire which destroyed the monastery in 645 AD.⁹

Rhygyfarch's *Vita Sancti Davidis*

Undoubtably, Rhygyfarch's *Vita Sancti Davidis* is the most significant piece of historiographical evidence existing today. Believed to have been created in the late 11th century by the scholar Rhygyfarch ap Sulien of Llandadarn Fawr, the *Vita* was the earliest historiography of St David's life.¹⁰ Written in the chaotic, post-Norman invasion era, the work was a skilfully crafted piece of propaganda, intended to defend the independence of the Welsh church against Norman control and the Archbishop of Canterbury's jurisdictional claims.¹¹ Rhygyfarch created a narrative that elevated David from a humble abbot to a sovereign metropolitan archbishop, claiming he was consecrated directly by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, to bypass any dependence on the English crown or Canterbury.¹²

Manuscript Variations

In contemporary hagiographical studies, there is an ongoing debate regarding the multiple surviving versions of the *Vita*.¹³ Because Rhygyfarch's original 11th century manuscript has been lost, distinguishing between the later version is essential for

⁸ Lisa Margaret Garland, 'Aspects of Welsh Saints' Cults and Pilgrimage c. 1066-1530' (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2005), p. 221.

⁹ David Lees, 'Identities in Twelfth Century Cornwall' (unpublished student thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2023), p. 108.,

Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, 'The Edition' (2025), <https://saints.wales/theedition/> [accessed 24 May 2026], p. 1.,

David N. Dumville, *Saint David of Wales* (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2001), p. 32.

¹⁰ Jenny Day, 'The later Lives of St David in NLW MSS Peniarth 27ii, Llanstephan 34 and Peniarth 225', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses: Studies in the Saints of Wales*, ed. by David N. Parsons and Paul Russell (Aberystwyth: Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru, 2022), pp. 119–153 p. Introduction.

¹¹ J. Wyn Evans, 'St David and St Davids: Some Observations on the Cult, Site and Buildings', in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. by Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 10–25 (p. 13).

¹² Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, 'Introduction' (2025), <https://saints.wales/theedition/> [accessed 24 May 2026], pp. 3-5.

¹³ John Reuben Davies, 'Some observations on the "Nero", "Digby", and "Vespasian" recensions of Vita S. David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 156–160 (pp. 156–159).

separating the saint's original hagiography from later political manipulations.¹⁴ Despite these variations, Rhygyfarch's core work successfully promoted the cult of St David, resulting in his papal canonization in 1120 AD, although there is academic discussion surrounding the evidence for this canonization.¹⁵ The *Vita* provided a foundational legacy which later writers used and manipulated according to their own agendas. The Anglo-Welsh cleric Gerald of Wales relied heavily on it when he wrote *Vita Sancti David Episcopi in Wallia* in 1190, using Rhygyfarch's work to support his lengthy campaign against the papal curia to have St David's recognized as an independent archbishopric.¹⁶

Later, in the 14th century, the Latin text was translated into the Welsh language *Buchedd Dewi*.¹⁷ In this version, the main focus was the diocese of St David's with a shift away from the more formal Latin to a softer, conversational tone better suited to a Welsh audience.¹⁸ It emphasized the saint's personal virtues, such as piety, goodness and modesty, and at the same time excluding the majority of the political agenda of the early Latin version.¹⁹

The *Vita* also had an audience outside of Wales, as evidence by two surviving Irish manuscripts (Rawlinson B 485 and B 505), that are adaptations of St David's biography.²⁰ These Ireland-centric texts, elaborate on specific parts of his story, reframing St David, not as a foreign outsider, but as a revered equal to the Irish holy men and women.²¹

The historiographical legacy of St David shows a constant evolution from its early fragmented medieval records to Rhygyfarch's keystone *Vita Sancti Davidis*. A work which was later adapted by others, such as Gerald of Wales, for their own political purposes, and translated into Welsh to reach a broader audience. The Irish versions of his life, with their specific adaptations, further demonstrate the saint's appeal to a larger, international audience and his high standing within Ireland. Despite centuries of changes

¹⁴ Richard Sharpe, 'Which text is Rhygyfarch's Life of St David?', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 90–106 (pp. 90–93).

¹⁵ David N. Dumville, *Saint David of Wales* (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2001), p. 30, n. 130.

¹⁶ Lisa Garland, 'Aspects of Welsh saint's culture and pilgrimage c.1066-1530' (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2025), p. 95.

Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making: The Medieval Cathedral and Bishopric of St David's (Wales)', *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, 14 (2020), 185–197 (pp. 192–193)

¹⁷ Jenny Day, 'The later Lives of St David', p. 1.

¹⁸ Alan Robert Phillips, 'A Comparison of the Life of Saint David with the Life of Saint Gwenfrewy (Winefride)' (2016), p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰ Sarah Waidler, 'A Welsh Hagiographical Export: The "Irish Recension" of the Life of St David and the Cult of St David in Ireland', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), p. 162.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

and manipulations to his *Vita*, St David has remained a revered figure in Wales since the 6th century and making St Davids an internationally recognised pilgrim destination.

Commentary 2 – A Commentary on a Textual Source Relating to a Miracle Resulting From St. David’s Intercession

Rhygyfarch’s *Vita Sancti Davidis*: The Miracle of the Mound

Rhygyfarch’s *Vita* (1090 AD) is a work of ecclesiastical propaganda created to help defend the bishopric of St Davids against the post-invasion Normans and the ambition Archbishop of Canterbury which explains why Rhygyfarch, in accordance with the tradition of the time, created a series of spectacular events designed to assert St David’s supreme spiritual and ecclesiastical authority over the Welsh church. One specifically stands out as being the most well-known, this is the ‘miracle of the mound’ at the Synod of Llandewibrefi (often written as the Synod of Brefi).²²

The Synod at Llanddewibrefi (Brefi) and the Miracle

According to Rhygyfarch’s *Vita*, a synod was convened at Brefi to tackle the resurgence of the Pelagian heresy and St David was summoned to attend, which he had previously refused three times.²³ On the way to the synod, he demonstrates his spiritual power by resurrecting a dead boy named Magnus, who then attends the synod with St David.²⁴ Rhygyfarch describes the synod as a massive gathering of people where speakers were unable to make themselves heard by everyone in the crowd and have exhausted their voices trying.²⁵ In the Latin version of the *Vita*, section 52 describes St David as ‘ascend a heap of clothes rather than a hill,’ even though section 49 had already established that the synod was taking place on high ground.²⁶ In one version of the event, St David refused to climb the mound of clothes, instead he instructed the resurrected boy to spread a simple handkerchief on the ground under his feet. As the saint started to preach to the crowd, a white dove descended from heaven, landing on his shoulder. At just this moment, the miracle happened and the earth under his feet rose up, creating a

²²Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', p. 191.

²³ Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, 'Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 143–145.

²⁴ Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, 'Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 107–55 (p. 145).

²⁵ Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, p. 4.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62.

substantial mound from which he was able to preach to the gathered crowd.²⁷ This physical lifting up of St David had consequence beyond his ability to address the people who had gathered, whilst metaphorically raising St Davids above all other rival sees. It resulted in the defeat of the Pelagian heresy and the assembly appointing the saint as archbishop to the entire British nation, this raising his monastery at Menevia to that of a metropolitan church.²⁸ Rhygyfarch reports that to mark this miracle, a church was built on the mound that had formed.²⁹ Gerald of Wales later relied on this powerful narrative during his campaign to secure independent metropolitan status for St Davids.³⁰

The Welsh Translation and Changes to the Text

As the cult of St David grew in the latter part of the Middle Ages, the original Latin text written by Rhygyfarch was translated and adapted into a more vernacular version of the *Vita*, *Buchedd Dewi*, during the creation of this new iteration of St David's life issues arose with the how the 'miracle of the mound' was recorded, it being open to scribal corruption and deliberate omission.³¹ Jenny Day's textual analysis highlights how the linguistic signifiers of the Breifi miracle become very confused over time. In the manuscript Peniarth 15, the scribe mistakenly transcribed the correct Welsh word *bryn* ('hill') with a nonsense, causing later scribes to struggle to understand the source text or were confused by Rhygyfarch's vivid description of events.³² One example of this is in the late medieval manuscript, Peniarth 27ii, which is a version of the *Buchedd Dewi*, but with significant changes. Here the miracle of the hill is completely absent, something Jenny Day suggests might be due to a corrupted exemplar leading to the scribe omitting the passage rather than trying to understand the true meaning, resulting in a change to the actual hagiography.

33

A Paradigm Shift

Putting aside scribal errors as the cause of the omission in Peniarth 27ii, there may have been a conscious editorial decision. There is evidence in this manuscript of non-

²⁷ Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, 'Rhygyfarch's Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 145–146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–147.

²⁹ Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, p. 58.

³⁰ Amelia Sargent, *Visions and Revisions: Gerald of Wales, Authorship, and the Construction of Political, Religious, and Legal Geographies in Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Britain* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011), pp. 175, 183.

³¹ Jenny Day, 'The later Lives of St David in NLW MSS Peniarth 27ii, Llanstephan 34 and Peniarth 225', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses: Studies in the Saints of Wales*, ed. by D. Parsons and P. Russell (Aberystwyth: Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2022), pp. 119–53 (pp. 120–21).

³² Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, p. 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.62.

accidental changes being applied. For example, replacing old, arcane language with more contemporary and improving the readability.³⁴ Larger, more significant changes may reflect changing times and the need to portray St David as a more accessible, pastoral model of godliness.³⁵ What once would have been important, for example triumph over Pelagianism, could have been replaced with a need to emphasize the saint's virtues without the need for overtly fabulous marvels.³⁶

The historiography of the 'miracle of the mound' illustrates the changing nature of medieval hagiography and how they have evolved. Rhygyfarch's original Latin *Vita Sancti Davidis*, was created as a piece of ecclesiastical propaganda designed to assert the authority of the Welsh church. Its translation into Welsh, as the *Buchedd Dewi* came from the need for it to be accessible to a wider Welsh-speaking audience. Over time changes appeared, demonstrating the need for the manuscripts to retain currency with their audience. What is demonstrated very clearly is that St David's legend was able to retain its influence without the need to rely on the original, sensational event and that works like the *Buchedd Dewi* operated as living documents, continually being reimagined and updated to meet the spiritual, pastoral and cultural needs of their contemporary audience.

Commentary 3 – A Commentary on a Material or Visual Source Relating to the Cult of St. David

The Corporeal Relics of Saint David

The veneration of St David's corporeal relics represents a complex historical narrative that is characterized by political agendas, calculated 'discoveries' and a fateful and catastrophic destruction.³⁷ In early Medieval Wales, religious devotion normally centred around material objects, for example, Gospel books, handbells and pastoral staffs, not the bodily remains of the saints.³⁸ Religious establishments first started to 'collect' saintly remains in the late 11th century, which may have been influenced by post-Norman conquest.³⁹ The physical remains of Saint David, or more correctly the lack of his remains, became central to those seeking to advance their own agenda, which encompassed bishops, monarchs and 16th century zealots.

³⁴ Ibid., p.35.

³⁵ Alan Robert Phillips, "A Comparison of the Life of Saint David with the Life of Saint Gwenfrewy (Winefride)" (2016), p. 8.

³⁶ Jenny Day, ed., *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, p. 35.

³⁷ Lisa Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saint's culture and pilgrimage c.1066-1530* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Kings College London, 2025), p. 89.

³⁸ Nancy Edwards, "Ritual and Belief," in *Life in Early Medieval Wales* (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 356, 358.

³⁹ Jennifer, Bell, *The development of the saints' cults and the ecclesiastical landscape of early medieval south Wales, c. 600-1200*, p. 228.

Bishop Bernarnd and the Missing Bones

The transformation of St Davids into a significant international pilgrimage destination was primarily due to the efforts of its first Anglo-Norman bishop, Bernard (1115 – 1148), whose vision was to establish St Davids as an independent metropolitan archbishopric.⁴⁰ This was a bold plan which required forceful promotion of the cult of St David and the commissioning of a new cathedral that was consecrated in 1131.⁴¹ However, Bernard encountered a problem, the because the relics which were intended to be housed in the new building were absent and despite extensive searches, the bishop was unable to find the saint's relics, a fact that the English chronicler William of Malmesbury noted in his work.⁴² This certainly was a point of weakness in Bernard's plan especially as there has been earlier records that suggested a violent raid on the church around 1087 – 1089 had removed St David's shrine.⁴³ A situation made worse by the competing Welsh bishops, such as Urban of Llandaf, having acquired the relics of their own foundational saint.⁴⁴

The finding of St David's Bones

The embarrassing absence of St David's bones was resolved in the late 13th century, a time of intense political instability in Wales. During the episcopate of Richard de Carw, a new shrine had already been initiated in 1275, why make have been in 'expectation of finding the relics'.⁴⁵ In 1284 a 'miraculous' discovery was made close to the south gate of the church; this discovery is linked to a monk from Peterborough called John de Gamages who saw the location in a vision.⁴⁶ The discovery of the missing relics gave the church authorities the power they needed to establish Menevia's status in a wider context.⁴⁷

Edward I and the New Relics

News of the discovery and subsequent enshrinement of the relics attracted the attention of King Edward I, who, very soon after his military conquest of Wales visited St David's on pilgrimage in 1284.⁴⁸

The King portrayed himself to be very pious and gave a generous sum of money to the then Bishop Bek for various works in the cathedral including the completion of the

⁴⁰ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making, p. 190.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁴² Lisa Margaret, Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, p. 91.

⁴³ Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.139.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

shrine.⁴⁹ However, this charitable act was soon negated by the removal of the saint's head and arm by Edward who then return to London with the relics.

The Destruction by Reformation

The 'theft' of the head and arm by Edward I did nothing to dampen the attraction of St Davids for pilgrims who continued to visit despite the huge ideological turmoil of the 16th century. With the Protestant Reformation came a dramatic change in attitudes to the veneration of bodily relics and in 1536, William Barlow, upon his new appointment as Bishop of St Davids, waged war on what he saw as 'popish pilgrimages' and 'abominable idolatry'.⁵⁰ In a drastic move to suppress the power of the cult, he proposed moving the diocesan seat to Carmarthen, thus breaking all links to the medieval past.⁵¹ He has a total disdain for the relics and was keen to brag in 1538 how he had taken the contents of the shrine to stop the people before ensuring that the shrine was finally destroyed, ending centuries of pilgrimage.⁵²

'Recent' Discoveries and Modern Science

The last significant event related to St David's corporeal relics happened in 1886 during restoration work on the cathedral when a 'discovery' was made.⁵³

A box containing bones was found in a niche in Holy Trinity chapel and for decades a silent hope lived on that these might be the true bones of the saint which had been hidden for safety, out of reach of Barlow's reign of destruction.⁵⁴

Radiocarbon dating carried out by Oxford University in 1996 was able to identify that the bones were from several humans but as the oldest of the bones only dated to the late 12th century, they were not those of St David.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The history of St David's corporeal relics reflects more on political and ecclesiastical ambition than it does on spiritual devotion. From Bishop Bernard's 12th century attempts to obtain a metropolitan see through Edward I's seizure of the saint's head as a symbol of a conquered Wales, concluding with Bishop Barlow's destructive zeal during the Reformation, St David's bones were continually being reinvented. Despite modern

⁴⁹ Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage*, p. 135

⁵⁰ Williams, Glanmor, 'The Crisis of the Sixteenth Century', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Boydell Press, 2007), p. 336.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁵² Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage*, p. 275.

⁵³ J. Wyn Evans, 'St David and St Davids: some observations on the cult, site and buildings', p. 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ David, Dumville, *Saint David of Wales* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2001), p. 30

methods of carbon dating proving that the remaining relics can't belong to the saint, it reinforces the historical importance of having 'a' relic, rather than 'the' relic and the importance they were given by those seeking to control the Welsh spiritual and cultural identity.

Commentary 4 – An Analysis of the Significance of Your Chosen Saint in Relation to One of the Themes of The Module

Pilgrimage and the cult of St David

As the foremost figure of Welsh national and religious identity, Saint David (Dewi Sant) and his shrine at Menevia (St Davids) served for centuries as the primary pilgrimage site in Wales.⁵⁶ The veneration of this sixth-century holy man developed from its modest monastic beginnings into a sophisticated religious and cultural movement deeply intertwined with church politics, foreign relations, support from royalty, and the dedication of common people.⁵⁷ Understanding Saint David's importance within the context of medieval pilgrimage requires looking at how a remote, exposed coastal area became a holy land that could compete with major sites like Rome and Jerusalem.⁵⁸ This essay will look at the role St David played in transforming a quiet corner of rural Wales into an important sacred landscape and pilgrimage site, on par with Jerusalem and Rome. Robert Barlett observes that medieval pilgrims endured difficult journeys to 'serve God and honour the saints', even if that meant leaving their homes and families.⁵⁹ Pilgrims came from different backgrounds, from commoners to kings, seeking anything from physical healing to political validation.⁶⁰ Medieval pilgrimage to St Davids changed the religious landscape of the British Isles through the promotion of the 'Callistine privilege'; the considered and deliberate creation of the sacred landscape of 'Dewisland'; along with strategic royal visits by English monarchs and the powerful, miraculous experiences reported by the lay pilgrims.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Elissa Henken, 'Welsh Hagiography and the Nationalist Impulse', in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. by Jane Cartwright (University of Aberystwyth Press, 2003), p. 32.

John Sharkey, *Pilgrim Ways: The Grand Pilgrimage to St. Davids* (Ancient Landscapes, 1994), p. 1.

⁵⁷ Dumville, *Saint David of Wales*, p. 1.,

Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', p. 185.

⁵⁸ Kathryn Hurlock, 'Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c.1100-1500' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2018), Introduction.

⁵⁹ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 410.

⁶⁰ Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh Saints' Cults and Pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, pp. 25, 111.

⁶¹ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making: The Medieval Cathedral and Bishopric of St David's (Wales)', *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, 14 (2020), p. 191.

The Ecclesiastical vision

The transformation of St Davids into a globally recognized pilgrimage hub was far from accidental; it was the product of a calculated political and ideological push by clerics following the Norman Conquest.⁶² Throughout the early 1100s, the Welsh church was dogged by fierce competition, notably between St Davids and the Llandaff diocese. Llandaff used fabricated documents like the *Liber Landavensis* to champion the cults of Saints Teilo and Dubricius, aiming to secure its own spiritual and territorial dominance.⁶³ In response to this, Bernard, the first Norman bishop of St Davids (1115-1148), looked to claim metropolitan status for his diocese, promoting the cathedral into a major pilgrimage destination.⁶⁴

Bernard's most significant achievement in advancing Saint David's cult was allegedly obtaining a prized papal concession from Pope Calixtus II around 1123.⁶⁵ This decree stated that two visits to St Davids carried the same spiritual weight as a single trip to Rome, a concept captured in the famous Latin verse *Roma semel quantum, bis dat Menevia tantum*.⁶⁶ This 'Callistine privilege' established St Davids within the global system of indulgences, offering an alternative option for pilgrims from England and Wales who wanted absolution without the perils, time, and heavy expense of continental travel.⁶⁷ Lisa Garland notes that, William of Malmesbury, claimed Calixtus II 'explicitly urged English travellers to choose St Davids over Rome', showing the Pope's belief in the site's spiritual power—even though Bishop Bernard had famously failed to locate David's actual remains in Menevia.⁶⁸

After the success of Bishop Bernard, Archdeacon Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) further leveraged the privileged status of St Davids as a pilgrimage site. His aim, in the later part of the 12th century, was to obtain metropolitan (archiepiscopal) independence for St Davids, for which he engaged in a legal battle with the papal curia of Pope Innocent

Ross T. McIntire, *In the Footsteps of the Holy: Sacred Landscapes and the Cult of Saints in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066-1220* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019), p. 118.

Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh Saints' Cults and Pilgrimage c. 1066-1530* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2005), pp. 111, 136.

Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', *Traditio*, 62.1 (2007), pp. 147, 195.

⁶² Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh Saints' Cults and Pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, p. 71.

⁶³ Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, C. 1100–1500* (Springer, 2018), p.55.

⁶⁴ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', p. 190.

Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, C. 1100–1500* (Springer, 2018), p.55.

Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh Saints' Cults and Pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, pp. 39, 60.

⁶⁵ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', p. 191.

⁶⁶ J. Wyn Evans, 'St David and St Davids: Some Observations on the Cult, Site and Buildings', p. 12.

⁶⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 43.

⁶⁸ Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, pp. 91 – 92, 94.

III.⁶⁹ He based his argument on Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian histories and recently revised hagiographies to show that St David had legitimately transferred the archiepiscopal pallium from Caerleon to Menevia after he succeeded Saint Dyfrig (Dubricius) as archbishop of Caerlon-on-Usk, which was considered to be one of the ancient archbishoprics of Britain.⁷⁰ If Gerald of Wales had been able to establish Menevia as an ancient, legitimate archbishopric, he would have been able to justify its independence from the Archbishop of Canterbury's jurisdiction.⁷¹ Ultimately, the campaign failed to obtain metropolitan status from the Pope, but it did further St David's reputation both as a historical pilgrimage site and place of spiritual importance. This ambition survived Gerald; in the early 1400s, Owain Glyn Dŵr resurrected the mythos during his uprising against England. He petitioned Pope Benedict XIII in Avignon to restore the see's archiepiscopal rank, using the legendary reach of David's authority to help build a self-governing Welsh church.⁷²

Pilgrim routes and a sacred landscape

Pilgrimage to St Davids was a complex, multi-layered spiritual and physical experience. This was not limited to the physical cathedral of St Davids but something that was much larger, incorporating the topography of the Pembrokeshire peninsula into a carefully engineered, holistic sacred landscape, known as 'Dewisland'.⁷³ To make the pilgrimage to St Davids was much more than to just visit a holy building, it was a journey that followed in the saint's footsteps through the wider area, visiting secondary cult sites, holy wells and chapels.⁷⁴ In this way, the canons provided the pilgrims with a way they could connect, both spiritually and physically, with the saint's history through specific geographical locations, scholars term this 'natural authenticity'.⁷⁵

There were multiple routes pilgrims could follow to St Davids, along regional paths that passed sites dedicated to the saint, such as "Capel Dewi" (David's Chapel) and "Ffynnon Dewi" (David's Well).⁷⁶ One significant point on the journey was Porth Mawr (Whitesands Bay), which was the

Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2005), pp. 91 – 92, 94.

⁷⁰ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', p. 186.

⁷¹ Karen Stöber, 'An Ecclesiastical Identity in the Making', pp. 186, 192-192.

⁷² Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', p. 150.

⁷³ Ross T. McIntire, *In the Footsteps of the Holy: Sacred Landscapes and the Cult of Saints in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066-1220* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019), pp. 118, 150.

⁷⁴ Nancy Edwards, *'Ritual and Belief', in Life in Early Medieval Wales* (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 362–363.

Ross T. McIntire, *In the Footsteps of the Holy: Sacred Landscapes and the Cult of Saints in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066-1220* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019), pp. 16, 150.

⁷⁵ Ross T. McIntire, *In the Footsteps of the Holy: Sacred Landscapes and the Cult of Saints in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066-1220* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019), p. 150.

Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, C.1100–1500* (Springer, 2018), p.121.

⁷⁶ John Sharkey, *Pilgrim Ways: The Grand Pilgrimage to St. Davids* (Ancient Landscapes, 1994), p. 28.

primary arrival point for pilgrims from Ireland.⁷⁷ This was the location for St Patrick's Chapel, build where Patrick had seen an angelic vision in which he was to leave the area for the unborn David, signifying David's divine right to both the land.⁷⁸

St Non's Chapel with its holy well was further along the coast and here, at the supposed site of David's birth, medieval pilgrims were shown a rock within the alter on which Non miraculously made an imprint during the birth of St David.⁷⁹ Further stage management by Gerald of Wales was evident at a nearby harbour where hagiographical texts told of the saint's baptism at Porth Clais, the same location at which St Mobi had his sight restored with holy water from a miraculous spring.⁸⁰ The ecclesiastical authorities were able further strengthen the supreme authority of St David by incorporating the wider landscape into the multi-sensory pilgrim experience.⁸¹

Royal Pilgrims

Becoming a prestigious pilgrimage site also meant that Mineva came to the attention of the English monarchy, resulting in royal pilgrimages to Wales that combined religious devotion with political theatre.⁸² In 1081, almost twenty years after his successful invasion of England, William the Conqueror visited St Davids, a highly publicised event that was described by the native Welsh chroniclers as being devotional and pious in nature.⁸³ At the same time, it was also a public demonstration of Norman might to a recently conquered Welsh territory, which William successfully managed to combine with the holy act of pilgrimage.⁸⁴

Another monarch who also combined pilgrimage with military intent was King Henry II, who visited Meneva in 1171 and 1172.⁸⁵ He arrival, barefoot and humbly dressed to ask for the blessing of the Welsh clergy, coincided with his military expeditions to Ireland.⁸⁶ Henry is believed to have been seeking divine favour at a time of great political difficulty, following the excommunication and assassination of Thomas Becket.⁸⁷ Much like William before him, Henry's pilgrimage was not just

⁷⁷ Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', p. 192.

⁷⁸ Elissa Henken, 'Welsh Hagiography and the Nationalist Impulse', in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. by Jane Cartwright (University of Aberystwyth Press, 2003), p. 32.

⁷⁹ Nancy Edwards, 'Ritual and Belief', in *Life in Early Medieval Wales* (Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 362.

⁸⁰ Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, 'Rhygyfarch's 'Life' of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Boydell Press, 2007), p. 117.

⁸¹ Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c. 1100-1500* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2018), p. 240.

⁸² Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, pp. 257-258.

⁸³ Dumville, *Saint David of Wales*, p. 35.

⁸⁴ Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, p. 111.

⁸⁵ Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, C. 1100-1500* (Springer, 2018), p. 261.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸⁷ Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, p. 112.

for devotional purposes, he would also have hoped that, as sign of penitence, it might have helped to restore his sullied royal image.⁸⁸

Whilst the previous royal visits may have not been solely devotional, they were not at the detriment of Mineva. The same is not true of the pilgrimage of Edward I and Queen Elenor just a year after the English conquest of Wales (1282-1283). They arrived in St Davids in 1284, the final destination in a tour of Welsh shrines.⁸⁹ Edward's generous grant of money, to be used to build a new shrine for St David's relics, could be described as an act of piety; his sacking of the relics and subsequent removal of the saint's head and an arm bone to London was a political act in which Edward symbolically stripped the Welsh of their spiritual independence.⁹⁰

Miracles and Popular Belief

The shrine at St Davids continued grow as a centre of popular miracles, promising divine aid to those afflicted by sickness or misfortune, even after Edward I had removed the head.⁹¹ In the 13th and 14th centuries the tomb was seen as a powerful source of protection for pilgrims; as evidenced in the extant copy of a late medieval miracle collection copied in the 15th century by the antiquary William Worcester.⁹² Of the eleven miracles copied by Worcester, seven happened remotely to the shrine but would have resulted in a pilgrimage of thanks being made to St Davids.⁹³ Robert Bartlett records a practice where a silver coin would be bend over a sick or dying person at the same time St David was called upon to intervene, when the person recovered, the same bent coin would be taken on the pilgrimage and offered at the shrine.⁹⁴ On arrival at the St Davids, ordinary pilgrims would be with greeted with a carefully managed environment, one of sacred bells, gleaming silver and the smell of incense, designed to enhance their pilgrimage experience.⁹⁵ For those who sought the saint's intervention but were physically unable to make the difficult journey, there was the option of a 'virtual pilgrimage' based on the specially created bardic poetry that contained graphic descriptions of pilgrimage customs and practices.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 106–107.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 173.

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 147, 173.

⁹¹ Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', p. 142

⁹² Richard Sharpe, 'Which text is Rhygyfarch's Life of St David?', p. 102.

⁹³ Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', pp. 136, 142, 177.

⁹⁴ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things, Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 355.

⁹⁵ J. Wyn Evans, 'St David and St Davids: some observations on the cult, site and buildings', pp. 10–11.

⁹⁶ Lisa Margaret Garland, *Aspects of Welsh saints' cults and pilgrimage c. 1066-1530*, p. 45.

St David's Relationship with Ireland

Saint David's importance as a focus for pilgrimage stretched far beyond the borders of Wales, especially in Ireland. His hagiography regularly highlighted his close relationships with the Irish saints especially St Aidan (Máedóc of Ferns) and St Finbarr, with the St David's *Vita* being modified so that it would better suit an Irish audience.⁹⁷ Anecdotal evidence for the close Irish relationship also comes from William Worcester, who recorded a story about Irish pilgrims, who visited St David on the way home from Rome, trying and failing to steal a wooden statue of the saint.⁹⁸

The impact of the Reformation

The period of the 16th century Protestant Reformation saw great changes imposed on St Davids. When William Barlow, a fervent Protestant, became Bishop of St Davids in 1536 he brought with him a strong opposition to medieval Catholicism, condemning the veneration of St David as 'ungodly image service, abominable idolatry, and licentious liberty,' and sought to relocate the church to the town of Carmarthen to rid it of 'popish pilgrimages'.⁹⁹ The cathedral chapter put up a strong fight to stop the move and to protect their historical rights, that of course also included the significant income that came from the pilgrimages.¹⁰⁰ They failed to save the shrine, which in 1538 was stripped of its silver and jewels, with the much-venerated relics of the saint being dismissed as, 'two heads of silver plate, enclosing rotten skulls stuffed with putrified clouts; two arm bones and a worm-eaten book', abruptly ending centuries of medieval material worship.¹⁰¹ As John Sharkey notes, the pilgrimage routes were repropounded for secular use, but Barlow's actions remained in the Welsh collective memory, this is strongly demonstrated by the 'repaired empty tomb of David', which still exists today.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The historiography of Saint David and his cult of pilgrims' highlights how religion, the geography of the Pembrokeshire peninsular and politics have interacted under the auspices of pilgrimage. Despite the loss of the saint's relics from theft, from the removal to London by Edwards I and the act of destruction by the Protestant reformers, pilgrimage to St Davids retained its ideological power. This may have been due to its ability to accommodate a wide-ranging set of needs; from monarchs with motives other than purely devotional; to an ambitious archdeacon looking for independence from the

⁹⁷ Michael J. Curley, 'The Miracles of Saint David: A New Text and Its Context', p. 177.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 203–205.

⁹⁹ Glanmor Williams, 'The Crisis of the Sixteenth Century', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 333–336.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁰¹ J. Wyn Evans, 'St David and St Davids: some observations on the cult, site and buildings', pp. 16–17.

¹⁰² John Sharkey, *Pilgrim Ways: The Grand Pilgrimage to St. Davids* (Ancient Landscapes, 1994), p. 24.

English church; and the humble laypeople sustained by their faith. As a saint, David was found in the sacred landscape of Dewisland as much as he was found in the cathedral, he transcended the loss of his corporeal relics and in doing so created a legacy which makes him the keystone of Welsh national and spiritual identity.

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