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The place stained with her blood cracked and a turbulent fountain gushed out and watered it. Its rocks still seem as bloody today, as they did on that first day. The moss smells like incense, and it cures various illnesses.¹

The above account, taken from the twelfth-century anonymous Latin Life of Saint Winefride, describes the dramatic moment that Winefride (Gwenfrewy)—the beautiful, chaste daughter of a powerful local knight (residing in Treffynnon, or modern day Holywell in Flintshire)—was beheaded for refusing the sexual demands of a passing Prince. The Lives of the Celtic saints are full of dramatic descriptions of the landscapes they are embedded in, whether it be the ground rising up to amplify and give divine assent to Saint David's voice at the Synod of Llanddewi Brefi, stones rising to protect the modesty of his mother Non in childbirth, bubbling holy wells with a multitude of miraculous healing properties springing forth at the site of a saint's death, or the ground rending apart at the saint's command in order to swallow their adversaries.

In her book *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* Elissa Henken argues that there is a common pattern to the Lives and traditions associated with the Celtic saints, which consists of many overlapping motifs, and has the overall effect of constructing them as "Christianized folk hero[es]."² A great many of these motifs concern the saints' relationships with the landscape—be it in a local sense, in terms of the places they were born and buried, or in a wider sense as they journey through the land and influence the landscape around them—with landscape often being central to the miracles that the saints perform. Indeed, Patrick Sims-Williams has noted that "[p]lace-lore is in fact central to heroic literature", and points to how landscape plays a significant role across medieval works of literature, citing the *Mabinogion* and the *Stanzas of the Graves*, as well as the hagiographical texts concerning the saints.³ The

¹ Anonymous, 'The Anonymous Life of St. Winefride', in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 95- 113 (p. 101). Further references to the anonymous *vita* are taken from this edition, and are given after quotations in the text in the form of (A. p.x).

² Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p. 1.

³ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Clas Beuno and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion* «- Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen, ed. by Bernard Maier and Stefan Zimmer (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 2001), pp.111-127, (p. 111).

emphasis on landscape in such texts often concerns issues of identity, belonging, and claims to land and property rights which work at personal, spiritual and political levels.

In this study I will examine how the traditions associated with Saint Winefride—whose famous healing well in Holywell is known as "the Lourdes of Wales"—relate to landscape in particular. In doing so, I will look at the aspects of Winefride's Lives which concern landscape, and will relate them to other saints' Lives in the light of Henken's argument concerning common patterns and motifs. I will then look at explanations as to why landscape is important in the Lives of the Celtic saints and will argue that, in the traditions associated with Winefride's landscape is important geographically, politically and spiritually and that Winefride herself can be read as the embodiment of her local landscape.

Saint Winefride's story comes down in two twelfth-century Latin Lives, the *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae* written by Prior Robert of Shrewsbury, the anonymous *Vita S. Wenefrede*, and the Middle Welsh Life *Buchedd Gwenfrewy* which survives in four extant manuscripts and is thought to be derived from a Welsh translation of Prior Robert's Latin *vita*.⁴ Whilst there are differences in the style and content of these Lives, the story they tell is broadly similar. Prior Robert's *vita* is written in a detailed, elaborate style, whereas the anonymous tradition is written more economically, and contains an addendum which emphasises the miracles that occurred posthumously at Winefride's holy well—a section which (Baring-Gould and Fisher have suggested) may have been added at a later date.⁵ The Latin Lives are generally considered to be similar enough for scholars to argue that their relationship to each other is self evident, however, it is unproven as to how, with Winward and Feiss arguing that they were likely written independently, but derived from a Welsh translation of the lost Latin life of Winefride's canonical uncle, Saint Beuno, who resurrected and mentored his niece in the ways of a holy life, and whose life is closely linked with hers.⁶

⁴Jane Cartwright, 'The Welsh Versions of the Life of Gwenfrewy', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses*, ed. by David N. Parsons and Paul Russell (Aberystwyth: Prifysgol Cymru, 2022), pp. 237-267 (p. 241).

⁵Sabine Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, v. 3 (London: The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1911), p. 185.

⁶Winward, Fiona, 'The Lives of Saint Winefride', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 117 (1999), pp. 89-132 (p.121); Hugh Feiss, 'Introduction', in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp.6-22 (p.18).

Saint Winefride's Lives all tell a similar story. They describe Winefride as the beautiful, chaste daughter of a powerful local chieftain (or knight) Teuyth, who on staying home from church one Sunday, is propositioned by a travelling Prince (Caradoc) who attempts to rape her. Winefride outwits, and temporarily escapes Caradoc, however he pursues, and decapitates her. As Winefride's head falls to the ground, a vigorous well with healing waters gushes up from the place where it lands, and her blood permanently stains the rocks around it, along with the moss which blooms red on the anniversary of her decapitation (22nd June). Upon discovering his niece's fate, Saint Beuno is distraught and curses Caradoc, who melts, and is swallowed down into the earth. Beuno puts Winefride's head back on her body, covers her with his cloak and prays. Winefride is resurrected—healed with nothing but a thin scar (white or red depending on the text) remaining on her neck, after which she devotes her life and chastity to God, and studies under Beuno's mentorship until he leaves. Upon Beuno's departure, the link between him and Winefride remains, and every year at his request Winefride places a cloak that she has made on the rock *Maen Beuno* which is borne out to sea to him via the waters of her stream. This cloak miraculously remains dry—untouched by river, sea or rain. Winefride is eventually called to leave Holywell, and travels to Gwytherin where she cares for, and instructs, a group of virgins. Here she dies (2nd November), and her relics are taken to Shrewsbury Abbey at a later date making her, as Cartwright notes “one of the few native saints whose cults extended beyond the Welsh border.”⁷ Winefride's healing wells at both Holywell and Gwytherin are reported to have been the sites of several miraculous healings which take place after her death. The anonymous *vita* also catalogues several miracles of a vengeful nature which have taken place at these sites, and Prior Robert's *vita* details how attempts to move an oak tree in her graveyard, and *Maen Beuno*, result in disastrous consequences. Winefride is referred to as the “Patron Saint of Withholding”, emphasising her own chastity and the protection she gives to others who follow similar doctrine. The anonymous *vita* places Winefride in seventh century Holywell (Tegeingl) during the reign of Cadfan. However it is unlikely that she and Beuno existed as historical figures, and Winward has argued that their hagiographical stories and framing within their

⁷ Cartwright, 'The Welsh Versions of the Life of Gwenfrewy', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses*, ed. by Parsons and Russell, pp. 237-267. (p. 238).

landscapes were more likely to have been a politically motivated “monkish post-Conquest fabrication.”⁸

Winefride’s Lives are very much embedded in the physical geography of the local landscape in which they are set. Prior Robert’s *vita* opens with a description of its geographical context;

In the western region of Great Britain, there is a certain province called Wales, adjoined on one side by the borders of the kingdom of England, on the other by the Ocean sea.⁹

This locates Winefride’s story as being at the very edges of a kingdom, a setting which resonates with the positioning of the Celtic nations generally. Sheldrake emphasises the importance of the liminality of ‘edges’ or boundaries to Celtic religion, suggesting that “these edges connect the solid and material with the intangible, the seen with the unseen, this world with another world (of God, saints, angels and the dead).”¹⁰ This establishes the wider geographical context for the traditions associated with Winefride, and many of the topographical features local to and including both Holywell and Gwytherin, play an important role in the traditions associated with her.

Central to Winefride’s story and to her ongoing cult is her Holy Well, which springs up miraculously where her severed head falls to the ground, forming a spectacular aspect of the landscape, worthy of its modern day claim to be one of the seven wonders of Wales;

As soon as the head of the maiden fell to the ground, a most clear spring burst forth in that very spot and spread itself copiously, offering health to many sick people through the merits of the holy maiden which even today has not ceased to flow. (R. 35)

In the light of its fame, and supposed efficacy, Winefride’s well still remains an active site for pilgrimages, making the Holywell pilgrimage “the oldest event with a continuous history in modern Wales.”¹¹ It has been recorded as being under continuous Christian usage for thirteen

⁸ Winward, pp. 89-132, (p.92)

⁹ Robert Pennant, (Prior of Shrewsbury), ‘The Life of Saint Winefride’, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 23-94 (p. 27.). Further references to Prior Robert’s *vita* are taken from this edition, and are given after quotations in the text in the form of (R. p.x).

¹⁰ Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), (p. 81).

¹¹ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Saint Winefride and her Well: The Historical Background* (Holywell: W. Williams and Sons, 1962), p. 23.

hundred years, and it attracts approximately thirty thousand annual visitors.¹² The force of the water at the well is meant to have been profuse, and Winefride's Lives report it variously flowing with water, wine, or milk.¹³ The water was said to bubble so ferociously that it never froze. This is in keeping with some of the various features attributed to Holy Wells generally, which Phil Cope argues tend to be diverse;

Most never freeze or run dry, while some are said to ebb and flow, make strange noises, or seem to be bottomless. Most are believed to predict the future, grant wishes, and offer cures and sometimes curses. Some have the ability to turn objects into stone; others to erupt with milk or blood.¹⁴

Scholars such as Miranda Green and Anne Ross point to an early Celtic veneration of water, and point to lake deposit sites such as Lake Neuchâtel, artefacts such as the Gundestrup cauldron, and well sites such as the hot spring at Bath which contain inscriptions to early gods, as evidence for this. In addition, Hamaker comments on the derivation of river names from the names of pre-Christian deities, and the number of references in medieval Celtic literature to wells or rivers, which seem to act as liminal spaces “between the material and spirit world.”¹⁵ Water may have been viewed as sacred for numerous reasons. Cope points out the essential nature of water to our existence, and notes that well water in particular has been used for medicinal or healing purposes, often because it contains beneficial minerals.¹⁶ Cope (and others such as Francis Jones) argue that the use of wells as sacred sites long predates the coming of Christianity, which essentially incorporated such sites;

Churches were built over wells and Christian saints replaced pagan deities as the spiritual benefactor, often at the places where a severed martyred head fell, mirroring the much earlier head cult of the Celts. In addition, new Christian well sites were also developed, often associated with a saint's visit, a miracle or martyrdom. The red stain of iron found in chalybeate wells provided evidence for believers of the saint's violent and bloody death

¹² Phil Cope, *Holy Wells: Wales a Photographic Journey* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 213.

¹³ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 148.

¹⁴ Cope, *Holy Wells*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Catherine Hamaker, ‘Winefride's Well-Cult’, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp.117-126 (p. 118).

¹⁶ Cope, *Holy Wells*, pp.10-11.

- and a deeper reference all the way back to Christ's suffering - at the same time as reminding them of the well's original Celtic occupant.¹⁷

This description certainly resonates with the traditions associated with Winefride who suffers a violent death, and is reborn to her religious, saintly life at the site of her Holy Well, bringing to mind Christian ideas concerning resurrection, and also of spiritual birth through baptism. St Julius' story also contains a similar motif, where a well springs up at the site of his own martyrdom by decapitation. Ross argues that this may result from a common association of a severed head with a spring, which, she argues, is due to a "linking of the objects of two pagan cults" leading to a "confusion of traditions."¹⁸ Hamaker advises caution on the application of terms such as "Celtic Paganism" in relation to pre-Christian religious practices, but given the above evidence she concludes that

it is not hard [...] to make the leap in suggesting that the mediæval fondness for dedicating wells to holy figures [such as the Saints] is traceable to a longstanding tradition of water veneration.¹⁹

Ronald Hutton however, presents a more sceptical view, arguing that the firm evidence we have for "Celtic holy wells" being pre-Christian pagan sites is sparse, and that "there is much less sign of a cult of either springs or wells in pre-Roman Britain than elsewhere in the ancient world, including Greece and Rome" with the only notable exception being at Bath (which was later claimed by Saint David), for which there is good evidence that the Roman deity Sulis Minerva was worshipped there.²⁰ Whether either of the wells associated with the traditions concerning Winefride were used in pre-Christian times, remains unconfirmed.

An association with plants is one of the motifs identified by Henken as occurring across a number of saints' Lives, and which often, as with Holy Wells, acts as a "medium for miracles and wonders."²¹ At the site of Winefride's well, where her blood reportedly fell, the moss (likely *byssus jolithus*) reportedly smells of incense and blooms blood red on the anniversary of her

¹⁷ Cope, *Holy Wells*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 49-50.

¹⁹ Hamaker, 'Winefride's Well-Cult', in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Pepin and Feiss, pp.117-126 (p. 119).

²⁰ Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 217.

²¹ Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p. 115.

beheading.²² There is also a further species of moss (*jungermannia asplenioides*) close by which pilgrims collect, known as Winefride's hair.²³ These features of the landscape once again act as reminders of the suffering Winefride endured, and the miracles performed in her name, and their enduring existence is used as proof of the validity of the stories associated with her.

In addition to such plants, many of the saints' Lives incorporate trees, from Cadog's miraculous use of a tree as a bridge over a river, to the Yew associated with Saint Adomnan in Scotland.²⁴ Winefride and Beuno both have associations with oak trees, which are related to vengeance miracles. Prior Robert's *vita* details an oak tree "of wondrous height, untouched from ancient times on account of reverence for the saints" which stands in the Saints' graveyard at Gwytherin, where Winefride died and was initially buried. (R. 87) Robert describes how a man lost the use of his arm when, on his attempts to cut the tree, his axe sticks, and "by a certain divine force the handle [...] held the man's hand and rendered his whole arm as if dead." (R. 87) As with other aspects of the landscape related to the traditions associated with Winefride, Robert suggests the enduring presence of the tree proves his narrative; "[t]he oak still stands there as if it were struck recently, teaching that what has been told remains true." (RS 88)

Beuno too, is associated with an oak tree who takes vengeance of a decidedly political nature on any Saxon who walks beneath it, but who gives freedom of passage to Welshmen. Henken notes how trees seem to have a particularly strong association with Beuno, and notes that "No one dared cut [the trees in Beuno's land] for fear the saint would kill them or do some other harm." Henken notes the similarity here between the protections on Beuno's trees with the fairy trees, and hypothesises that "it was in the beliefs concerning fairy trees that Beuno's tradition started."²⁵ The vengeful nature of both Beuno and Winefride's oaks suggests they may be from a similar root.

With lore reminiscent of the fairies then, could the trees in saints' Lives then, indicate a site's link to a pre-Christian past in the same way that wells might? In his study on *The Ancient Yews of Wales* Andrew Morton argues that they do. Morton notes that there is a long tradition of sacred trees across a number of ancient religions, and suggests that an examination of medieval Irish sources in respect of sacred trees yields some interesting insights, especially in view of the

²² Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 147.

²³ Cope, *Holy Wells*, p. 15.

²⁴ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 92.

²⁵ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 84.

fact that Ireland had a particular influence on Christianity in Wales and Britain and vice versa.²⁶

Morton notes how

Some of the earliest ecclesiastical foundations (e.g. at Clonmacnois) were deliberately sited at pagan places where there existed sacred groves and trees. The Church then introduced Christian ritual at these sites [and therefore] ‘the church came to the tree, not the tree to the church.’ The bond between tree and church grew, culminating in trees coming to the churches and associated saints, with deliberate planting taking place within the holy enclosure.²⁷

If this is accepted, then it is possible that other species of trees that had been viewed as spiritually important in the pre-Christian period also became encompassed by Christian culture. Winefride and Beuno’s associations with the oak in particular bring to mind the special associations Pliny claimed the Druids had with the oak tree, as well as classical references to the Druids’ tree filled groves given by Tacitus, Pomponius Mela, or Lucan.²⁸ These sources however have their flaws, as Hutton and others have discussed, in that they are not contemporary with the Druids’ themselves, they likely come from an oral tradition which is vulnerable to perpetuating inaccuracies, and they are open to the biased—often sensationalised—Roman views of the time. If they are tied to the traditions concerning Winefride and Beuno it may be because of the interpretations of earlier sources by the Lives’ twelfth century authors rather than any authentic continuity from the time of the Druids themselves.²⁹

Sacred trees are deeply rooted in the ground on which they grow with some standing for thousands of years. However the ground itself provides an equally important motif in the Saints’ Lives, giving unforgettable scenes such as the earth rising in divine assent to the words of Saint David, or, Saint Cadog causing the earth to swallow his adversaries, leaving only Illtyd unconsumed.³⁰ In Winefride’s case, the shape of the local landscape plays a role in the scenes concerning the dramatic descent of her severed head down the mountain and into the church in

²⁶ Andrew Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2009), p. 21.

²⁷ Morton, p. 24.

²⁸ Koch, John. T., and Carey, John, eds., *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1995), pp. 25-28.

²⁹ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 16.

³⁰ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 93.

Prior Robert's *vita*. The earth itself is also part of the revenge Beuno takes on Winefride's murderer, who is melted and "swallowed up by the gaping earth", his soul sinking "into the abyss." (R. 37) In such accounts, the saints appear to manifest God's will through the landscape. Interestingly this is not done in a healing way alone; the saints use their landscape to punish wrongdoers, as well as to reward the good. That nature is used to this effect in the *Lives* demonstrates, as Sheldrake puts it, that "Celtic Christians were as aware of its dangerous power and unpredictable quality as they were of its softer hues."³¹

Individual stones too, seem to hold importance in the saints *Lives*. Two stones arise from the earth to protect Saint Non's modesty when she is birthing Saint David, and there are crystal pebbles on the beach at Porth Stinam, near St. David's, which are known as "St. David's Diamonds."³² There are several traditions associated with Winefride involving stones; the bloodstained stones of her well endure as a reminder and mark of her martyrdom and chastity. 'Saint Beuno's stone' or *Maen Beuno* is also said to be stained with Winefride's blood and it is upon this stone that Winefride annually placed the cloak she makes for Beuno, whereupon it travels down the stream and out to sea, arriving at its destination on the shore perfectly dry, earning him the title "dry cloak." (A. 101) There seem to be gendered differences in terms of aspects of the landscape at play here. Winefride is represented by the water of her well, and of the command of this element, and Beuno by contrast, with the rocks, and command of the earth. In Winefride's case, her control of things signals that they stay dry—protected from outside influences—in a possible reference to her own chastity, which, as Henken and Cartwright have both noted, is a common biographical pattern (and almost a prerequisite) for feminine sanctity in particular.³³

As already touched upon, aspects of the landscape may have played such an important role in the *Lives* of the Celtic Saints as the result of the Church's incorporation of spiritually significant pre-Christian sites. Dorian Llewelyn notes how "[t]he Celtic gods of territory were often of topographical origin: woods, rivers, mountains, springs", and explains how "[t]he Christianisation of such individual places was facilitated by the Christian cult of the saints." A process which, Hamaker argues, was "aided by a populace pre-disposed to think of certain places

³¹ Sheldrake, p. 8.

³² Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, pp. 72-73.

³³ Jane Cartwright *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 92.

and types of geographic features as spiritually significant.”³⁴ Green shares this view, and argues that the pagan, pre Christian deities of the Celts were essentially mapped on to the figures of the Saints during the transition of Celtic religious practices to Christianity;

The transference from polytheism to monotheism was made easy because the multiplicity of pagan deities could slip without difficulty into the characters of Christian saints. [...] The pagan Celtic Otherworld corresponds very closely to the Christian Promised Land [...] Thus the religion of the pagan Celtic world not only survived, in adapted form, the Roman occupation, but was not even totally obliterated by Christianity.³⁵

It certainly appears then, that the Church—the religion of the conquering Romans, who recognised the highly religious nature of those they were conquering—had ample motive to incorporate such sites and claim them as its own. By establishing the Celtic saints as native heroes, and embedding their traditions in the local landscape itself, the Catholic Church establishes that the lands the saints mark, move across freely, and influence, are Christian lands.

In the traditions involving Winefride’s life it is implied that Christianity’s coming to these lands (in the form of Beuno) has a healing effect; the fragmented landscape and its kingdoms are brought together under one religion. This ties in with Winefride’s own healing; her head is reattached and her body reborn;

Henceforth, where her head had first been severed along the neck, and afterward by divine power it had been attached and reunited, a certain very slender whiteness, like a thread, surrounded her neck and covered the place of the cutting. (R. 38)

Winefride’s scar exists as a reminder of her head’s violent separation from her body, and its healing by God. As such, it is possible that her scar acts on a symbolic level, representing the violent divisions that would have happened in relation to the landscape and its political borders during this period. As Charles-Edwards puts it, these hagiographical texts were written in “an age of violent transition” following the collapse of the Roman empire, and he notes how “in Wales the crisis was met and mastered by the Welsh Saints” and Celtic Monasticism, “which fused the British tribes and the remnants of Roman culture into a spiritual unity, so that, from being merely a geographical term in Roman times, by the eighth century **Britanni** had become

³⁴ Hamaker, ‘Winefride’s Well-Cult’, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Pepin and Feiss, pp.117-126 (p. 119).

³⁵ Miranda Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 22.

the name of a nation.”³⁶ The miracle performed by Beuno on Winefride’s body—an act which lies at the heart of the traditions involving her—can be read as mirroring this; the land, its nation and its people bear the scars of a divisive age, but (according to the Church), they are unified, and healed by Christianity.

Much of the division experienced by the area during this period was caused by the influence of the Normans. Medieval hagiography is widely regarded as a politicised genre and an example of the possible politicisation of the miracles associated with the traditions surrounding Winefride’s Holy Well is given by Feiss, who points out that, in the anonymous *vita*, the miracles themselves “seem to be divided, or at least assigned to, political eras in the region” which correspond with the withdrawal of the French from the region.³⁷ Feiss lists these as:

[T]he era when the Danes were subject to the Britons (10), the time of the French (12), a period of anarchic struggle between the French and the Welsh (13), the time of the French (16), and the time after the expulsion of the French (26). The miracles are also divided into miracles of retribution (10-15), and addendum (28), and miracles of healing (16-27).³⁸

That the withdrawal of the French is associated with healing in the anonymous *vita* seems to be supported by the fact that, in this Life, Winefride’s well

appeared to flow with a milky liquid for three days. At dawn on the first of those days it had the colour and taste of milk [...] The liquid, received by the priest and transmitted everywhere to the sick to be drunk, healed them and so conferred on them the assistance which the virgin was accustomed to offer. (A. 111)

Francis Jones discusses how milk was regarded as “a sacred elixir” with healing properties, and it is implied that the land started to heal itself and its inhabitants when the French left, which resonates both with themes regarding a sense of divine healing that run throughout Winefride’s Lives, and with the anti-Norman sentiments demonstrated throughout the texts.³⁹

³⁶ Charles-Edwards, p. 10.

³⁷ Feiss, ‘Introduction’, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Pepin and Feiss, pp.6-22 (p.15).

³⁸ Feiss, ‘Introduction’, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Pepin and Feiss, pp.6-22 (p.15).

³⁹ Francis Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 37.

Sims-Williams illustrates an additional way in which the relationship between the stories presented in the *Lives* and the landscapes in which they are set can be read politically, in his article on *Buchedd Beuno*, arguing that "the close correspondence" between the dedications of churches and holy wells to Beuno and Beuno's Life can,

"in accordance with the well-known conventions of Celtic hagiography [...] be taken to reflect the wider territorial interests and spiritual ties of the community of Clynnog in the early twelfth century - and probably earlier, in view of the outdated dynastic preoccupations of the Powysian sections of *Buchedd Beuno* and the anonymous *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*. In the case of St Gwenfrewy, we know that her subservient relationship to Beuno in the *Lives* was mirrored in the dependence of Treffynnon (Holywell, Flints.) on Clynnog as late as the sixteenth century, when rents were paid to Clynnog from Gwesbyr and Holywell, 'where the said Beno is called chief Lord.'"⁴⁰

This mirroring is also evident throughout Winefride's *Lives*. Winefride is subservient to Beuno, who is essentially her instructor, mentor and resurrector. Winefride's dependence on Beuno is emphasised by her fearful reaction to his departure, which leaves her feeling "exposed to all the attacks of enemies, and forsaken by the presence and attentiveness of her pastor." (R. 45)

Winefride's dependence on Beuno mirrors the relationship that areas such as Holywell had with their larger neighbours, in this case Clynnog. Winefride's loyalty to, and dependence on Beuno is further emphasised by the fact that she essentially pays an annual tribute to him in the form of the cloak she makes each year;

"every year on the first of May she sent a gift to her master, while he was alive, in the manner in which we indicated above; and although a great space separated them from each other[...] in the space of one night, carried over the winding currents of the sea to the door of the monastery, the gift was found in the morning on the sand of the shore." (RS 50)

It is known Holywell paid rent to Clynnog during this time, but the seasonal nature of Winefride's gift, along with Beuno's protection of her, reads like a tribute, which in her essay 'Land, people and power in early medieval Wales' Rhiannon Comeau argues "were structured

⁴⁰ Sims-Williams, 'Clas Beuno and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion* «- Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen, ed. by Maier and Zimmer, pp.111-127 (p. 124).

by a longstanding seasonal patterning that is preserved in twelfth and thirteenth-century Welsh law.”⁴¹ Such a reading illustrates how the physical landscapes in Beuno and Winefride’s Lives may well have represented the political landscapes of the time, with one part of the landscape being dependent on the other.

The landscapes associated with Winefride’s traditions then, are not only embedded in local geography, they also act as a mirror of the political landscape of the time. Furthermore, the character of Winefride herself can be read as the embodiment of her landscapes. As discussed, Winefride’s decapitation may be read as a symbolic representation of the divisions that occurred within the landscape and its political territories during this period, and her scar a reminder of that which the Church has healed. She is often linked with water, through which she performs the majority of her miracles, and there has been some speculation as to whether “Gwenfrewi” Winefride’s name in Welsh, is derived from the Welsh word “Gwenffrwd” meaning “a fair or clear Brook”, but this remains unproven.⁴² In addition, the language in Prior Robert’s *vita* in particular is full of metaphors linking Winefride’s body to the landscape, particularly when it comes to aspects concerning her chastity, her union with God and her relationship with Beuno. Winefride is described “drinking in” Beuno’s “mellifluous” words with a “thirsty heart” (RS 30) and when she devotes herself to God she says to Beuno:

I want it to be clear to you how much the seeds of the divine word poured out for me from your mouth have increased their yield in me. I have chosen to reject all the excess of the world, and I have determined to preserve my virginity intact and undefiled in honour of the heavenly bridegroom [...] [T]he saint, moved by her piety and rejoicing that now the divine seed was sprouting in her, said that he would eagerly address her parents and bring about as best he could that which she asked. (R. 31)

Winefride’s devotion to God is here expressed as her being a vessel in which God’s teachings can grow. This is dependent on her earthly chastity—she is devoted to God alone, and his teachings flow like water from Beuno’s mouth into her, as if she is land to be fertilised. It seems surprising that a metaphor with such seemingly overtly sexual connotations involving “seed” pouring into Winefride to “increase her “yield” in “honour of the heavenly bridegroom” is used in

⁴¹ Rhiannon Comeau, ‘Land, people and power in early medieval Wales: the cantref of Cemais in comparative perspective.’ (unpublished Doctoral thesis, University College London, 2019) <<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10076045/>>[accessed 26 April 2023].

⁴² Baring-Gould and Fisher, v.3, p. 190.

relation to her chastity and demonstrates that God creates through her, just as he does the landscape. In this sense, she is reminiscent of a sovereignty goddess, but one whose lands are devoted to God. Winefride's spiritual birth at the hands of Beuno happens through water, and there are other prominent women in medieval literature who are linked to the land and nature, such as Blodeuwedd in Branch four of *The Mabinogi*, who is again "birthed" by men in the form of magicians Gwydion and Math. Through both traditions women are associated with nature and wild landscapes, and there is a strong suggestion that men are trying to harness (or as Valente would say, "usurp") their creative powers, with varying degrees of success.⁴³ Blodeuwedd's needs as the embodiment of nature in her story, are unmet, leading to her betrayal of the husband she was created for. Winefride remains chaste throughout her life, her fate and fortunes controlled by the men around her. Her chastity however, is her own choice, and she exerts her power through intermediaries in the landscape—her holy wells, trees, plants, rivers and stones—through nature. And nature, as medieval authors seem to be keenly aware, brings healing and vengeance in equal measure. In Winefride's case that vengeance is particularly directed at men seeking to take things, or to cross boundaries that they should not.

To conclude, the landscape is an important feature in the Lives of the Celtic saints, and contributes towards many of the patterns which construct these figures as Christianized folk-heroes. This works on a number of levels. Features in the physical landscapes often act as vital conduits through which the saints perform miracles, or as long-lived memorials whose shaping or features act as enduring reminders to the trials the saints encountered. Ideas of aspects of the landscape such as wells, trees, plants, and stones, being used as primal sacred spaces and the base on which religions such as Christianity built their churches, also permeate through, and with evidence of water veneration and folk traditions such as the fairy faith, it is no wonder that people assume their link to earlier, native religious practices. Care must be taken however, in assuming that this applies across the board, and evidence should be looked for on an individual basis pertaining to each site. It is unproven, for example, as to whether Winefride's wells were used as places of worship in pre-Christian times.

⁴³ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 35 (1988), 1-9 (p. 5).

Whilst virginity and chastity are undoubtedly key to the traditions surrounding Winefride's own sanctity, her miracles are expressed through the landscape, and her own religious instruction is often portrayed through the metaphor of fertile land and water. Her relationship with Beuno works on several levels, they are each tied to the landscape in different ways and their relationship mirrors the relationship between Hollywell and Clynnog. Beuno's healing of Winefride's decapitated body also resonates with the healing the Church wanted to portray Christianity as having done to the territories it assimilated during this period.

Winefride's enduring traditions bridge both Wales and England, and her spectacular Holy Well, which has been in continuous use for thirteen hundred years, make her more than a mere footnote in the life of a male saint. The marks on the landscape attributed to her—her wells, her crimson moss and stained stones, continue to attest to this, and contribute to her characterisation as a female “super saint.”⁴⁴ Bodily autonomy and consent are as important as physical boundaries within the landscape. Winefride's renown for choosing, and upholding such values, and the support that she gives to others who also wished to uphold them, gives her traditions and their place in the landscape enduring relevance to this day.

⁴⁴Cartwright, 'The Welsh Versions of the Life of Gwenfrewy', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses*, ed. by Parsons and Russell, pp. 237-267 (p. 238).

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