

HPCS7005

Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality and Hagiography

Student: N. Baker

Number: 2107142

Tutor: Professor Jane Cartwright

Assignment 2:

Analyse the role and function of saintly relics in the cult of several Welsh or Celtic saints. In your answer you can refer to corporeal as well as secondary relics.

Word count: 4,910

The term relic, derived from the Latin *reliquiae*, denotes ‘remains’.¹ It is a word generally applied to what is ‘left behind’ by a holy individual upon their death, i.e. their body.² These holy individuals were commonly labelled as ‘saints’, though there is no precise definition of one.³ From late antiquity, the graves of the dead were visited and honoured, and shortly came to be regarded as places where heaven and earth met.⁴ Over time, the bones, or other parts of the body, known as corporeal relics, were placed in shrines near the original places of burial, or were transported across Europe.⁵ It meant that contact with the divine was no longer restricted to a single location. As Brown writes, “if relics could travel, then the distance between the believer and the place where the holy could be found ceased to be a fixed, physical distance.”⁶ Soon items, other than bodily remains, were viewed as points where contact could be made with the holy. Secondary relics were items that had been made by, or had come into contact with, a saint, alive or dead; these were comprehended in a similar light as corporeal relics. They include bells, crosiers and books, amongst other items. Relics of all kinds had a central role to play in the cults of Celtic saints, those individuals who lived in places like Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Brittany, where the Celtic languages were known.⁷ Relics served many functions: they offered healing, victory in battle, a means to raise income, a way of increasing the importance of a religious centre, and as foci for devotions. Their function is known from hagiographical literature, often written with an agenda in mind, and some of the relics still survive, physically, to this day. A study of relics provides a useful

¹ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 239.

² Derek Krueger, ‘The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium,’ in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli et al. (London: British Museum Press, 2011), pp. 4 – 17 (p. 5).

³ David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 3.

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 1 – 3.

⁵ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 239.

⁶ Brown, *Cult of Saints*, p. 89.

⁷ Oliver Davies, ‘An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality,’ in *Celtic Spirituality*, ed. Oliver Davies, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 3 – 25 (p. 4).

insight into popular religion of the Middle Ages, alongside a greater understanding of the ecclesiastical politics of the period.

It is a little ironic that Jesus Christ, who inspired others to follow in his footsteps, including Celtic saints, left no bodily remains: his significance rests on the fact that he rose from the dead, body intact, for the salvation of humanity.⁸ It is true that objects associated with Jesus, such as his milk teeth, sweat and even his burial shroud,⁹ circulated throughout Medieval Europe, but his body did not, unsurprisingly! It is curious, therefore, that relics of saints, be they corporeal or secondary, became so significant. And yet, when Holy Scripture is considered, evidence can be found for an early reverence of relics. Matthew notes that the graves of the 'righteous' were decorated by the Jews, though no mention is made of the bodies having extra special significance.¹⁰ However, Luke records in the Book of Acts that God worked such extraordinary miracles through Paul, that when handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, they were healed, and evil spirits were even driven out of the afflicted.¹¹ This is essentially an account of the functions of secondary relics, to heal those affected in body and in spirit.

The significance of relics increased during the early years of the Christian church, helped along by various individuals in positions of authority. The reverence of relics moved away from a simple honouring of the dead at their place of burial. In the late fourth century, Pope Damasus publicised the bodies of the saints in the catacombs,¹² and added their names to the liturgies. At about the same time, Ambrose built new basilicas in Milan to house the bodies of martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, and at a time when portable reliquaries were

⁸ Arnold Angenendt, 'Relics and Their Veneration,' in *Treasures of Heaven*, ed. Martina Bagnoli *et al.*, pp. 18 – 28 (p. 14).

⁹ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 240.

¹⁰ Matthew 23: 29-31. Cited in David Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 4.

¹¹ Acts 19: 11-12. Cited in Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 245.

¹² Jane Cartwright, ed., *Hystoria Gweryddon Yr Almaen: The Middle Welsh Life of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2020), p. 2.

constructed to contain other saintly remains.¹³ Initially, these relics were of those who had been killed for their faith, but when persecutions and martyrdoms subsided, anyone who exhibited ‘saintly’ qualities were included. Some, however, felt uneasy about the veneration of the dead, and this led to a gathering of bishops in c.340 AD at Gangra (Turkey), when it was agreed that anyone who disapproved of relics should be excommunicated.¹⁴

Interest in relics, both corporeal and secondary, had grown over a few centuries before they became a central part of the Christian faith in the Celtic world. They had a vital role to play in the Church, as signs of God’s power and authority, through the various functions that were performed by these venerated objects. Not only did they offer the presence of the holy, the *praesentia*, in the midst of the faithful,¹⁵ but they were also the source of miracles, which demonstrated God’s power at work in the world.¹⁶ A peculiarity of the Celtic world, though, is the fact that corporeal relics were not revered above all others, and were certainly not necessary for the development of a cult:¹⁷ secondary relics were highly respected. Indeed, Gerald of Wales in 1191 AD writes that handbells, pastoral staffs and other such relics were revered by the Irish, Scots and Welsh.¹⁸

Historians are aware of the various functions fulfilled by relics through the writings of the period, chiefly hagiographical texts, which provide information about the lives of different saints; these were certainly not ‘biographical’ in a historically accurate sense but were intended to highlight the special qualities of the holy person. These texts may also explain how a certain saint was connected to a specific ecclesiastical centre, and list the

¹³ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 266; Angenendt, ‘Relics,’ p. 21.

¹⁴ Thomas Head, ‘The Cult of Saints and Their Relics,’ <www.hagiographysociety.org/wp_content/uploads/2013/03/Head_Cult_of_Saints.pdf> [Accessed 11 April 2023].

¹⁵ Brown, *Cult of Saints*, p. 88.

¹⁶ Cartwright, *Hystoria*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Fiona Winward, ‘The Lives of St Wenefred (BHL 8847-8851),’ *Analecta Bollandiana* 117 (1999): 89 – 132 (p. 116).

¹⁸ Julia M.H. Smith, ‘Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c.850-1250,’ *Speculum* 65.2 (April 1990): 309 – 343 (p. 338).

various miracles associated with the holy relics. The lack of specific historical evidence for some of these saints, especially those from the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, permitted writers to exaggerate their stories and develop their propaganda.¹⁹

Regardless of this motivation, it clear that the relics were seen as fulfilling certain functions. They were particularly well-known for their miraculous ability to heal: the relic's connection with a person who lived a holy life meant that God was able to work through that object. Saints' *vitae* record many different types of healing miracle, many of them posthumous. The poem *De Abbatibus*, believed to have been written at a daughter house of Lindisfarne in c.803 AD, describes the enshrinement of the bones of an Irish monk, Ultan, and how a sick man was cured when the dead saint's hand was placed on his forehead.²⁰ Sometimes, these miracles took place beyond the confines of the church where they were housed. The relics of Trián of Kildalkey were carried on a circuit in 743 AD to protect the people against smallpox, and those of Eric of Slane and Finnian of Clonnard in 776 AD during what has been interpreted as a typhoid epidemic.²¹ One would imagine that such journeys of relics would have had some missional element to them, especially if healings accompanied their presence in various communities.

As noted, secondary relics were extremely important in the Celtic world, even significant enough to become the focus of a cult without bodily remains. Healing miracles were associated with such relics. For example, Teilo was given a bell in Jerusalem that was said to have had the power to heal.²² The ninth-century *vita* of Paul Aurelian, a sixth-century Welshman who established a religious foundation in Brittany, notes that the saint had a bell

¹⁹ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 2.

²⁰ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 31.

²¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Ireland c.800: Aspects of Society,' in *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *A New History of Ireland 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 549 – 608 (p. 583).

²² Elissa W. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p. 55.

that even brought the dead back to life.²³ Sometimes, other things associated with a saint would be able to cure. Moss that grew at Holywell, where Winefride was decapitated and a spring appeared, was known as ‘Winefride’s hair’. It could be made into a poultice and applied to the area that required relief.²⁴ Conall Cael, Abbot of Inishkeel, County Donegal, in the seventh and eighth centuries, possessed a bell that would be used to celebrate his feast day years after his death; people would gather at his well and be healed.²⁵ Even dust from a tomb could heal: the son of a Scottish noble was cured when a pilgrim brought him this substance scraped from the tomb of Margaret of Scotland, that was mixed in water and drunk.²⁶ The connections between the saint and healing could be a little tenuous. A millstone at the monastery of Brigid’s house at Kildare, which was unaffected by a fire, was placed at the entrance of the enclosure, healing all those who touched it.²⁷

The ability of saintly relics to bring about a cure was part of the reason why some religious houses wanted to possess relics. There could be much to gain, both in terms of status and, perhaps more importantly, in terms of wealth. This is suggested by a comment made by Gerald of Wales who said that Curig’s staff was used to heal, only on payment of a penny.²⁸ There are rare exceptions, however, when a cult could attract attention and money, even if no relics were present. St David’s Cathedral found itself caught up in military conflict on more than one occasion in the eleventh century, partly due to a long-standing dynastic struggle involving the Norse, Irish and Welsh.²⁹ Depending on how it is dated, the *Annales*

²³ Smith, ‘Oral and Written,’ p. 323-324.

²⁴ T.W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission, c.650-1930* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2009), p. 62.

²⁵ Angenendt, ‘Relics,’ p. 119.

²⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 249.

²⁷ Cogitosus, *Life of St Brigid the Virgin*, in *Saint Patrick’s World: The Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age*, trans. Liam de Paor (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 207 – 224 (p. 222).

²⁸ Henken, *Welsh Saints*, p. 55.

²⁹ Fred G. Cowley, ‘The Relics of St David: the Historical Evidence,’ in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and J.M. Wooding, *Studies in Celtic History* 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 274 – 281 (p. 274).

Cambriae record that David's reliquary was stolen from the Cathedral, and its covering of precious metals removed.³⁰ Despite the lack of relics, Bernard, who became bishop of St David's in 1115 AD, managed to obtain from Pope Calixtus II an indulgence which gave those pilgrims who travelled twice to St David's the same blessings they would receive if they had travelled to Rome, the home to the bodies of Saints Peter and Paul.³¹ Clearly, the *vita* of David composed by Rhygyfarch, and other works declaimed by Welsh bards in honour of this saint, did much to promote David and the Cathedral, despite the lack of relics.³² (David's bones were discovered in the following century by John de Gamages in miraculous circumstances, and this is discussed further below.)³³

Ideally, though, the presence of physical relics would be better than a cult without anything to view or to touch. Moreover, the existence of these relics, and the fuss made of them by those in authority, was vital for churches in the Celtic world, given that in the early centuries they did not have the remains of Christ's apostles, unlike somewhere like Rome that could boast Peter and Paul.³⁴ (It should be added that the bones of Andrew did arrive in Scotland, though the date is uncertain, possibly in the eighth or ninth centuries.)³⁵ This is why there was a focus on the founders of ecclesiastical centres, like Patrick and Brigid, and *vitae* were often composed in order to promote the relics cared for by these respective communities. However, relics were sometimes obtained by religious houses from elsewhere, and new *vitae* written. One good case study concerns Winefride (or *Gwenfrewy*). She is one of very few female saints with two official Latin *vitae*, both of from the twelfth century.³⁶ The author of one of them is unknown, but the writer of the other is given. This is Robert,

³⁰ Cowley, 'Relics of St David', p. 274.

³¹ Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' pp. 274 and 276.

³² Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' p. 276.

³³ Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' pp. 277 – 279.

³⁴ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 7.

³⁵ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 171.

³⁶ Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales,' *Medium ævum* 70.2 (2001): 1 – 28 (p. 4).

prior of the Benedictine Abbey of Saints Peter and Paul in Shrewsbury, who died in 1168; his *vita* has been dated to 1140 AD because the dedicatee, Gwarin, prior of Worcester Cathedral, died in 1142 AD.³⁷ Robert justified the translation of Winefride's remains by means of this *vita*, from Gwytherin in Wales, where she rested, to his abbey in Shrewsbury.³⁸ In his *vita*, Robert explains that the brothers complained that their community had no relics, but God would protect them further through his patronage if they had some, and so they turned their eyes to Wales, which was well-known for having the bodies of many holy people.³⁹ Following the appearance of the saint to a brother, who earnestly prayed for the healing of a companion, and following a Mass held at Holywell which brought about the cure, the brothers sought out the bones of Winefride and successfully translated them to Shrewsbury. This would have brought many benefits to the community. Winward writes that the monks planned successfully for this translation, “. . . since holy relics were the most effective way of bringing both gravitas and financial benefits to a religious house.”⁴⁰ Sometimes, though, relics would be used to make a point. In 1177 AD, a disgruntled canon of a community in Cornwall, stole the relics of Petroc from his community, and transported them to the monastery of Saint-Méen in Brittany.⁴¹ Relics served a purpose, even if a negative one.

Regardless of this example, the acquisition of relics, along with newly composed hagiographical texts, brought status to those housing these relics. These places became centres of pilgrimage, attracting financial offerings from pilgrims, and added authority in the locality. The *vitae* also helped these religious houses to assert rights and privileges, to defend ecclesiastical boundaries, and in some cases to establish the rights of sanctuary.⁴² Relics,

³⁷ Winward, 'Lives of St Wenefred,' p. 89.

³⁸ Hugh Feiss, 'Introduction,' in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride, with an Essay on Winefride's Well-Cult*, trans. Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), pp. 7 – 22 (p. 14).

³⁹ Robert of Shrewsbury, 'The Life and Translation of St Winefride,' trans. Ronald Pepin, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, pp. 23 – 93 (pp. 77 - 78).

⁴⁰ Winward, 'Lives of St Wenefred,' p. 89.

⁴¹ Smith, 'Oral and Written,' pp. 315 – 316.

⁴² Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins,' p. 5.

therefore, had a significant role in the development in the fortunes of a religious house, through their function as the means for miracles and as points where heaven and earth met. And this made the production of *vitae* so important: they justified the ownership of what was in effect stolen relics,⁴³ despite various descriptions of miraculous directions for their acquisition. Furthermore, the acquisition of relics was not only executed by the religious, but it was also carried out by the secular and for political reasons. In the ninth century, as Kenneth McAlpin extended his authority, he moved several holy relics to Dunkeld, Perthshire, which lay at the heart of his new kingdom, following the unification of Picts and Scots in 849 AD.⁴⁴ One of the relics was the crosier of Columba.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the relics of holy men and women were not the only objects that were collected with political purposes in mind. In 1284 AD, King Edward I of England travelled around Wales following its recent conquest.⁴⁶ Edward gathered the regalia of the princes of Gwynedd in North Wales, but also obtained parts of the skeleton of David, when he came to St David's on pilgrimage; one of the relics later being placed on the high altar of the church of Great St Helen at Bishopsgate. This demonstrated, physically, that Edward had complete control over Wales, including possession of its most renowned saint.

Relics could even serve an army on the battlefield. The crosier of Columba, kept at Dunkeld, Perthshire, was carried to war to protect the Scottish army when they confronted the Vikings at Corbridge in 918 AD.⁴⁷ Similarly, the *Brecbennach*, or 'blessed shrine', associated with the eighth-century Monymusk Reliquary, again containing Columba's relics, was paraded before Scottish armies; as was a psalter, thought to have been copied by this saint, kept in an eleventh-century silver casket called the *Cathach* or 'battler'.⁴⁸ This is indeed

⁴³ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 292.

⁴⁴ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ And for what follows, Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' p. 278.

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 24.

ironic, bearing in mind that the Columba lived a life of peace, whose very name reflects his reputation as ‘dove of the church.’⁴⁹ However, it was believed that Columba could also provide protection, and not just victory in battle. When Columba lived on Hinba, the church was persecuted by the sons of Conall macDomnaill, who attacked with spears. Brother Findlugen stepped in to halt the attack, and Columba’s cowl protected him.⁵⁰ This sounds a little more in keeping with the saint’s way of life. Darerca, Abbess of Killeevy, who died in 517 AD and was the sister of Patrick, left sheepskin garments, and a hoe, as talismans. Yet, she warned the people that they were only to be used for defence.⁵¹

The possession of relics, therefore, served a religious house, or indeed a secular leader, by giving them special control over various matters. As noted, a house that held relics, regulated access to them. Relics also allowed the possessor an advantage on the battlefield. Moreover, they also served legal functions; again, the regulation of access to the relics would have granted the owner special authority. The Medieval Irish word for ‘oath’ was *mionn*, which was derived from the term *mind*, meaning ‘relic.’⁵² This was apt given that oaths of loyalty and fidelity, the oaths of an office, the oaths of allegiance to an ally, the oaths confirming that the truth would be declared in a dispute, were made on relics.⁵³ On occasions, swearing on the remains of a holy person could be a very serious business. The Breton *Buez* about Non, David’s mother, notes that at her shrine at Dirion, if an individual swears falsely on the bones, the perjurer will fall dead!⁵⁴ Moreover, there was an earlier precedent for swearing on holy items, if not a holy name. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of

⁴⁹ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 24; Hilary Richardson, ‘Visual Arts and Society,’ in *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, A New History of Ireland 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 680 – 713 (p. 692).

⁵⁰ Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 173.

⁵¹ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 248.

⁵² Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 312.

⁵³ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 313.

⁵⁴ Jane Cartwright, ‘The Cult of St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and British Hagiography,’ in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and J.M. Wooding, Studies in Celtic History 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 182 – 206 (p. 192).

Deuteronomy references the practice of swearing on the name of God, and later still, the Rule of St Benedict advocated swearing on relics.⁵⁵

Thus, relics served numerous functions when owned by religious houses: they offered patronage of the saint, status and control over many aspects of life, such as legal matters. More importantly, relics served as income generators for the owners of the relics, which is one of the reasons why religious houses desired relics of a holy individual. One stream of income came from the pilgrims who travelled to visit the shrine of a saint, leaving offerings in return for an answer to prayer, especially a miraculous cure, which has been discussed above. Although not a relic as such, though connected with a saint, Holywell, which itself was a source of miraculous healings, brought income to the Cistercians monks of Basingwerke who had control of the site.⁵⁶

Sometimes, money would come from tours of the saint's remains; the reliquary containing the dead need not remain static to attract the faithful. Tours of relics took place around the countryside. Although not connected with a Celtic saint, the monks of Laon took relics of the Virgin Mary on a tour in 1112 AD into the Celtic world, Cornwall, to raise money for a building project.⁵⁷ Sadly, the monks generated ill-feeling in that place because they doubted the locals' belief that King Arthur was still alive.⁵⁸ Another example of relics going 'on tour' can be found in records from the fifteenth-century Wales. They record that in the thirteenth century, John de Gamages, a monk at the priory of St Michael's, Ewenni in the diocese of Llandaff, discovered the body of David, which was the result of a divine revelation.⁵⁹ The body was later dismembered and dispersed, some bones ending up as nothing more than fragments, but St David's took their relics around the diocese to raise

⁵⁵ Deuteronomy 6:13; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, p. 312.

⁵⁶ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins,' p. 5.

⁵⁷ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 301.

⁵⁸ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 301.

⁵⁹ And for what follows, Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' pp. 277 – 279.

money, details of which are recorded in the *Liber Communis*. Furthermore, the discovery of the remains of David by John de Gamages, who was affiliated to Gloucester abbey, may also have assisted in convincing St David's to return the ownership of two religious houses back to Gloucester, and at a time when the latter was in financial difficulty.⁶⁰ Even Patrick's bones were carried on a circuit to raise money, the so-called 'Patrick's Pence.'⁶¹ In some instances, though, the relics did not benefit monasteries materially, and in fact had quite the opposite effect. Ironically, it was because relics were highly revered that remains were placed in rich shrines, and were often decorated with precious metals and stones. As a result, the Vikings who raided religious houses along the British coastline in the ninth century did so because they desired these treasures.⁶² Relics, then, contributed to the destruction of religious houses indirectly.

Beyond the roles that relics had in increasing the prestige of a religious centre, or by playing their part in raising money or by asserting authority and legal power, it must be remembered that relics had roles beyond those functional ones. Apart from healing miracles, which attracted pilgrims to religious houses in their thousands, relics, both corporeal and secondary, had the ability to bring other wonders into being. As noted, relics were carried in front of armies, or paraded around battlefields, to bring about a successful military outcome for a particular army. Relics could bring about other things into being. For instance, in the event of a drought, the monks of Iona took the tunic worn by Columba, and a book copied in his hand, and walked around newly ploughed fields to bring about much needed rainfall.⁶³

Sometimes, miracles could happen on spots which were regarded as holy, though not technically relics in their own right, like the Holywell associated with Winefride. Muirchú, author of Patrick's *vita*, tells of a story when the saint returned to Ireland and came to Mag

⁶⁰ Cowley, 'Relics of St David,' pp. 277 – 278.

⁶¹ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p. 16.

⁶² Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 290.

⁶³ Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, pp. 245 – 246.

Inis (Lecale, County Down), where he stayed with Dichu.⁶⁴ Muirchú then reflects on an earlier part of Patrick's life, speaking of an angel that told the saint many things in conversation; the angel placed his foot on Scirit (Skerry near Slemish, County Antrim) at Sliab Mis and rose into heaven. We are told that those who pray by the footprint left by the angel, received happy results. And this is a reminder that descriptions of the role of relics are often very grand, included in hagiographical texts used by religious house to promote themselves and to control access to the holy. However, the interaction between the ordinary faithful and the holy is sometimes lost in this larger narrative. Take for example the reliquary of Winefride. Even after her relics had been removed from Gwytherin by the monks of Shrewsbury, the original container of those bones, the reliquary, still attracted individuals. Edward Lhuyd, who visited Gwytherin in c.1690 AD, not only sketched the empty container, but he also remarked that he witnessed several pilgrims cut small fragments off it. This illustrates something of the desire to possess an item that would bring a personal connection with a holy person, and thereby the divine. The powers of 'touch' and 'association' were incredibly powerful and contributed to the faith of many.

Relics, both corporeal and secondary, were highly important in the Middle Ages. Ever since late antiquity, when the holy dead were venerated at their graves, relics served numerous functions. First and foremost, they offered contact with the divine, a place where a person could interact with a holy Christian, assisting them with their prayers. Furthermore, God worked through relics to cure the sick, but also to bring about other miracles, like rainfall during a drought. Secondly, the power wrought through relics made them attractive to religious houses. Possession of relics increased the status of an ecclesiastical centre, it brought in income, not to mention control over various aspects of society, such as legal matters. Hagiographical texts were penned to justify the movement of relics from one place

⁶⁴ And for what follows, Muirchú, *Life of St Patrick*, in *Saint Patrick's World*, pp. 175 – 197 (p. 182).

to another, as well as to promote a place for pilgrimage. Moreover, relics also served a political purpose: they were employed on the battlefield to bring about military victories, but relics were also accumulated by kings to strengthen their standing, and to demonstrate authority over conquered peoples. When analysing the cult of relics in the Celtic world, a few points are worth highlighting. Unlike a place like Rome, or maybe even Paris, the Celtic regions did not have the relics of Christ's apostles, and so the relics of local saints took on greater importance. For the Celtic world, bones were important, but so were objects associated with the holy, like bells, crosiers and such, which could also work miracles, too. In some cases where no *vitae* existed, a saint is known only through its relics. To modern historians, then, a study of relics offers a window in Medieval life, through an investigation of relics' numerous functions. Indeed, stories about them have even inspired literary works, such as Ellis Peters' *A Morbid Taste for Bones*,⁶⁵ which uses the translation of Winefride's relics in a murder plot. Relics served many roles and functions in the Middle Ages, and continue to do so to this day.

⁶⁵ Ellis Peters, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (London: MacMillan, 1977).

Bibliography

i. Primary Sources

Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1995)

Cartwright, Jane, ed., *Hystoria Gweryddon Yr Almaen: The Middle Welsh Life of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Council, 2020)

Cogitosus, *Life of St Brigid the Virgin*, in *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*, trans. Liam de Paor (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 207 - 224

Muirchú, *Life of St Patrick*, in *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*, trans. Liam de Paor (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 175 – 197

Rhygyfarch, *Life of St David*, ed. and trans. R. Sharpe and J. Reuben Davies, in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, *Studies in Celtic History* 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017), pp. 107 – 155

Robert of Shrewsbury, 'The Life of St Winefride,' trans. Ronald Pepin, in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride, with an Essay on Winefride's Cult*, trans. Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), pp. 27 - 94

ii. Secondary Sources

Angenendt, Albert, 'Relics and Their Veneration,' in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli et al. (London: British Museum Press, 2011), pp. 18 - 28

Bagnoli, Martina, *et al.*, eds., *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (London: British Museum Press, 2011)

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

Bradley, Ian, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

Brown, Peter, *The Cult of Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)

Cartwright, Jane, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales,' *Medium ævum* 70.2 (2001): 1 – 28

Cartwright, Jane, 'The Middle Welsh Life of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins,' in *The Cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 163 – 186

Cartwright, Jane, ed., *The Cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016)

Cartwright, Jane, 'The Cult of St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and British Hagiography,' in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, *Studies in Celtic History* 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 182 – 206

Cowley, Fred G., 'The Relics of St David: the Historical Evidence,' in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, *Studies in Celtic History* 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 274 – 281

Davies, Oliver, *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales: The Origins of the Welsh Spiritual Tradition* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1996)

Davies, Oliver, 'An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality,' in *Celtic Spirituality*, ed. Oliver Davies, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 3 – 25

Evans, Andrew, 'The Levitating Altar of St Illtud,' *Folklore* 122. 1 (April 2011): 55-75

Evans, J. Wyn, Wooding, Jonathan M., eds., *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, *Studies in Celtic History* 24 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017)

Feiss, Hugh, 'Introduction,' in *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride, with an Essay on Winefride's Cult*, trans. Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), pp. 7 - 26

Head, Thomas, 'The Cult of Saints and Their Relics,'

<www.hagiographysociety.org/wp_content/uploads/2013/03/Head_Cult_of_Saints.pdf>

[Accessed 11 April 2023]

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

Johnson, Elva, 'The 'Pagan' and 'Christian' Identities of the Irish Female Saints,' in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 60 - 78

Krueger, Derek, 'The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium,' in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli *et al.* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), pp. 4 - 17

Ó Corráin, Donnchadh, 'Ireland c. 800: Aspects of Society,' in *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *A New History of Ireland 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 549 – 608

Ó Cróinín, Dáibhí, ed., *Prehistoric and Early Ireland, A New History of Ireland 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Peters, Ellis, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (London: MacMillan, 1977)

Poar, Liam de, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*
(Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996)

Pritchard, T.W., *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission, c. 650-1930* (Wrexham:
Bridge Books, 2009)

Richardson, Hilary, 'Visual Arts and Society,' *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó
Cróinín, *A New History of Ireland 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 680 - 713

Rollason, David, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989)

Smith, Julia M.H., 'Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c.850-1250,'
Speculum 65. 2 (April 1990): 309 – 343

Winward, Fiona, 'The Lives of St Wenefred (BHL 8847-8851),' *Analecta Bollandiana* 117
(1999): 89 - 132