

Analyse the traditions associated with St Non: to what extent is she a typical female saint and to what extent is she an unusual figure in the context of medieval hagiography?

Variously referred to as Non, Nonna, Nonnita and by some as Melaria, it is as the mother of St David, the patron saint of Wales that St Non is best known.¹ She is reputed to be the daughter of Cynyr of Caer Gawch, a ruler in the land of Dyfed who is also thought to be the father of Gwen, the mother of St Cybi.² Non's cult is of particular interest in that it spread to several locations across the Celtic regions. Dedications to Non are found in South Wales, Cornwall, Devon, Brittany and Ireland. In many of these locations Non's dedication is adjacent to that of her son David; most notably at St Davids in Pembrokeshire, Altarnun in Cornwall and Dirinun in Brittany, all of which have their own traditions associated with Non alongside many which are shared.³ Throughout Wales Non's feast day was and still is marked on 3rd March, two days after that of St David. In Brittany her principal pardon takes place on the Sunday after the octave of Corpus Christi, and Bernard Tanguy suggests that at Altarnun in Cornwall she was celebrated on 15th June.⁴ Considering the spread of her popularity, relatively little is known about St Non outside of what we can learn in the various Lives of St David, although some insight can also be gleaned from local folklore, holy wells, medieval poetry and the few illustrative references to her and her life that can be seen in ecclesiastical

¹ Nicholas Orme, *Nicolas Roscarrock's 'Lives of the Saints': Cornwall and Devon*, (London, Boydell and Brewer, Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1992), p. 97 - Roscarrock claimed that Non's real name was Melaria, however this is most likely due to some confusion around family names as generally 'Meleri' is one of the daughters of Brychan Brycheiniog and was married to Keredic, so was therefore St David's grandmother; Bernard Tanguy, 'The Cults of SS. Nonne and Divi in Britany', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. By J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, (London, Boydell and Brewer, 2007) for further explanation of the confusion and a connection with the Life of St Keyne

² Orme, *Nicolas Roscarrock's 'Lives of the Saints'*, p. 97

³ Jane Cartwright, 'St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008) - There are other dedications to Non in South Wales, namely in Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire but for the purpose of this essay we will focus mainly on the locations listed above

⁴ Tanguy, 'The Cults of SS. Nonne', p.207; although note also - Orme, *Nicolas Roscarrock's 'Lives of the Saints'*, p. 162, where Orme suggests that Non should be regarded as 'the ancient patron', as the parish records her feast day as 3 March, as in Wales

art found at the locations of her dedications. In many ways she performs mainly as a vessel to bring a more famous saint into the world and after she has served this purpose she seems to disappear into the depths of history and legend. It is not necessarily unusual for a female saint to also be a mother, indeed Mary, considered to be the holiest of all saints is famously a mother herself. Non's somewhat violent path to motherhood, however, is quite unusual although not unique when viewed within the wider corpus of Celtic hagiography.

Although St David lived during the late 5th century, the earliest extant version of his life is found in MS Cotton Vespasian A. xiv held in the British Library. This Latin version of the Life was written down around 1090 by the Welsh cleric and scholar Rhygyfarch, son of Sulien the Bishop of St Davids.⁵ It is here we learn that the coming of David was foretold 30 years before his birth when an angel appears in a dream to his father Sant, telling him that he must gather 3 gifts for his future son.⁶ The prophecy is also received by St Patrick who is told he must leave Wales for Ireland to make way for a child who is not yet born. Here the legend of David draws an obvious comparison to the story of the annunciation where Mary is visited in Nazareth by the Angel Gabriel who informs her she is to conceive a child immaculately and that the child she carries will be Jesus, the son of God.⁷

In Brittany, Non's tradition is recorded in the middle Breton mystery play, the *Buez Santes Nonn*. The play was discovered in the presbytery at Dirinon in Finistère in the nineteenth century and although it draws heavily on sections from the Rhygyfarch Life, it remains unique in many other ways, most notably in its dedication to 'Nonn' – note that although the

⁵ Richard Sharpe and John Rueben Davies, ed. and trans, 'Rygyfarch's life of Saint David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. By J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2007), pp. 107 - 155

⁶ Ibid. p. 109

⁷ Luke 1: 26-38

title uses Nonn, the remainder of the play uses *Nonita* - rather than to David.⁸ In the *Buez*, although the framework of the legend remains largely the same as that of its Cambrian counterparts, the majority of the action is relocated to Brittany, and there appears to be some confusion regarding character names and their familial relationships which will be discussed in more detail below. The dedication of the Breton Life to Non seems to suggest that in Brittany she was revered as the more important saint. Tanguy considers that at Dirinon, the cult of St Non predates that of David; David, as at other locations, has an adjacent dedication in the nearby town of St. Divy.⁹

Perhaps unfortunately for Non, despite the parallels already noted to the annunciation, she receives no warning of her impending pregnancy. Presumably at the point of the prophesy being made to both Sant and St Patrick she is yet to be born, but nevertheless, some 30 years later, a beautiful, young 'nun named Nonnita', runs into *Sanctus* (Sant), who Rhygyfarch gives the title 'king of the territory of Ceredig'.¹⁰ The rape is described almost as an aside; 'Lusting after her, he raped her, and she conceived his son, the holy David'.¹¹ Rhygyfarch precedes this description by noting *Nonnita* (Non) is a virgin and immediately follows it by extolling her virtue in telling his reader how she had never lain with a man either before or after this point, and that she goes on to live a truly devout and ascetic life, consuming only bread and water from the moment her child is conceived.¹² It would have been of great importance to Rhygyfarch along with the other medieval biographers of St David to emphasize that Non, his mother was a virgin before she is raped. Virginity and sanctity went

⁸ Tanguy, *The Cult of SS. Nonne*, p. 208; Victor I. Scherb, 'Situating the Holy: Celtic Community in Breton and Cornish Saint Plays', *Comparative Drama*, Vol.35, No. 3-4, (Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, 2001) p. 320

⁹ Tanguy, *The Cult of SS. Nonne*, p. 208 – Tanguy considers the name of the town, Dirinon, to have attracted the patronage to Non rather than vice-versa, as a means to throw-off its previous pagan association of *diri* meaning 'oaks'

¹⁰ Sharpe and Rueben, ed. *Rhygyfarch's Life*, p. 113

¹¹ Ibid

¹² ibid

very much hand in hand where the female saints were concerned and there is an obvious attempt to suggest parallels between David, his conception, birth and life with that of Jesus. It would have been considered near heresy to claim that the conception of any saint was immaculate. Mary alone could remain the eternal virgin whilst also fulfilling her role as Holy Mother. In David's story the rape of Non acts as a vehicle which allows her to remain as chaste as possible whilst also conceiving and carrying a child who would become the patron saint of his country. Therefore, we see 'no moral condemnation of the incident' in the Latin or Welsh Lives as Jane Cartwright discusses in her comprehensive study of St Non and her cult.¹³ She suggests that the rape is simply viewed as a way in which Sant can fulfil the prophecy made to him 30 years earlier and that by ensuring the reader knows Non remains chaste from then on, the saint is almost afforded 'honorary virgin[ity]'.¹⁴ In the Breton *Buez* alone is the rape of Non described in any detail; the hagiographer does not simply excuse the act as a means to an end, but instead notes that the young nun wishes for her maidenhood to remain intact and acknowledges her despair at having been attacked by *Kereticus*.¹⁵ Contrary to the almost positive spin put on the rape in the Latin and Welsh lives, the *Buez* recognizes it as a sin and Keretic finds himself chastised and ultimately repentant of his contemptuous behaviour.¹⁶ It is interesting that the Breton biographer felt comfortable in highlighting Non's distress when those writing in Wales did not. This could perhaps be explained by turning again to the dedications of the respective lives; the Life of St David has the sole aim of promoting his popularity and transmitting the male saint's story throughout the land for

¹³ Jane Cartwright, 'St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 114-116

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 116

¹⁵ Tanguy, *The Cult of SS. Nonne*, p.210 for how *Keretic/Kereticus* is substituted for Sant in the Breton Life; Nicolas Jacobs, *Non, Nonna, Nonnita: Confusions of Gender in Brythonic Hagionymy*, *The Transactions*, Vol 23, (The Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion, 2017) < <https://www.cymmrodorion.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2-NON-NONNA-NONNITA-CONFUSIONS-OF-GENDER-IN-BRYTHONIC-HAGIONYMY.pdf> > [accessed 14th March 2026] for a detailed summary of the confusion regarding the names of St David's parents

¹⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, pp.114 – 116 for a more detailed description on the account of Non's rape found in the *Buez* and for its significance when viewed in the context of medieval female spirituality

which he is spiritual patron; the Breton Life is alternately dedicated to Non and has no need to protect so closely the sanctity of her son. Could Non in Breton tradition be seen as an important saint in her own right, whereas in Wales her primary significance is as the mother of David? This seems plausible when considered alongside Tanguy's proposal - discussed above - that Non's cult predated that of David's in Brittany.

Within Celtic hagiography the rape of a female saint is 'unusual, although not unprecedented'.¹⁷ It is more common however in the lives of the female saints, to encounter unsolicited advances, threats of forced marriage, torture, abuse and even execution. One of Wales's better known saints, Gwenfrewy faces a number of these tribulations; she declines the advances of Caradog and attempts to escape him sending him into a violent rage during which he beheads her. Fortunately for Gwenfrewy her uncle St Beuno is able to reinstate her head thus making her both living saint and martyr simultaneously and enabling her to live out her life as a member of the holy order before dying at Gwytherin in North Wales.¹⁸

St Kentigern is conceived in a similar fashion to St David when his mother Thaney is raped by Owain ab Urien. In an incomplete *Life of St Kentigern* from the 12th century, Thaney who has expressed a wish to birth a child whilst remaining a virgin is tricked by Owain who disguises himself as a woman and rapes her.¹⁹ Although he succeeds in convincing the girl that she is still a virgin, her father is enraged to discover her pregnancy and orders her to be thrown from a cliff. Thaney survives the fall only to be cast out to sea in a coracle. Surviving

¹⁷ Karen Jankulak, 'Adjacent Saints' Dedications and Early Celtic History', in *Saints' Cults in the Celtic World*, ed. By Steve Boardman, John Reuben Davies and Eila Williamson (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2009), p. 101; Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 118

¹⁸ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Claudius A.v version)*, ed. By David Callander, *The Cult of Saints in Wales* (2023), <https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Wenefreda-Claud.pdf> [accessed 14th March 2026], sections 9 - 12, also see page 1 of the introduction by Callander; see also Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine sanctity in Medieval Wales', in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 72 - 76

¹⁹ Alexander Penrose Forbes, *Lives of S. Ninnian and S. Kentigern*, *Historians of Scotland*, vol. V. (Edinburgh, Edmonston and Douglas, 1874) < http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/kentigern_frag.html > [accessed 14th March 2026]

once more, she is rescued and lives on to birth her son who grew up to become patron of Glasgow cathedral.²⁰ Cartwright has written about how the rape element of Kentigern's and Thaney's story has been deliberately omitted from Jocelyn of Furness's complete version of the Life, which she considers is down to his disgust at the suggestion that so significant a saint should be the product of so vile a conception.²¹

St Cadog, whose mother is St Gwladus, although not the result of rape is also conceived under violent circumstances. In the early 12th century Welsh Life of St Cadog, Gwynllyw, his father, is desirous of Gwladus, one of the young daughters of Brychan Brycheiniog. On being refused the girl by her father, Gwynllyw decides to take her 'by force'. Sometime later Cadog is born.²² It is interesting to note that at this point in the kidnap of Gwladus, King Arthur appears, and before he steps in to the fray – he does not rescue Gwladus, and her feelings about the episode are bypassed, much as Non's are in the majority of accounts of her rape – he too considers taking the girl for himself.²³

In the earliest surviving version of the Welsh Life of St David, written in 1346 and found in *The Book of the Anchorite of Llanddewibrefi*, we are told that Non's ability to survive on bread and water alone is the first miracle performed by the newly conceived David, thus removing this act of devotion from Non and reassigning it to her son.²⁴ The *Hystoria O Uchedd Dewi*, thought to derive from an earlier Welsh version that had been translated from one of the Latin Lives, is a shorter, more colloquial biography and omits a number of details found in the *Vita*. The episode of the jealous tyrant - an example of a detail omitted from the

²⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p.118

²¹ Ibid. pp. 118 – 119; Jocelyn, a monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo), trans. By Cynthia Whiddon Green, (University of Houston, 1998) < <https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp> > [accessed 14th March 2026]

²² Jon B. Coe and Simon Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend*, (Felinfach, Llanarch Publishers, 1995), pp. 27 - 31

²³ Ibid. p. 29

²⁴ Jenny Day, ed. *Buchedd Dewi (Peniarth 27ii)*, (saints.wales, 2025) < https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/BDewiPen27ii_Eng.pdf > [accessed 14th March 2026], intro. p. 9; D. Simon Evans, ed. *The Welsh Life of St David*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2016), intro. xliii and p. 2 for the original Welsh

Welsh Life - is found in all extant versions of the Latin Lives, and describes how a local unnamed tyrant who, through divination learns a child of great power is to be born and vows to kill anyone who rests at the spot the birth is prophesied to take place. As Cartwright points out, there is another obvious biblical parallel here, this time with King Herod.²⁵

Non seems to be represented in a very much more human way than her son David in the extant literature; any miracle which occurs while she is with child is attributed to him, an example being the striking dumb of Gildas when he is attempting to preach in the presence of the pregnant nun.²⁶ In section 6 of the Life where the birth of David is depicted, Non is described as experiencing pain during labour; in her agony she digs her fingers into a nearby rock leaving indentations where she presses. Although once again parallels can be drawn to the birth of Jesus, it appears the intent of the hagiographer was to keep the similarities a little obscure; although both women birth alone without emotional or medical support, Mary labours free from pain, whereas Non does not. Aside from birthing whilst being bathed 'with such serene light that it shone as if God were present' in the midst of an almighty storm, Non's experience is more akin to that of any other human women giving birth.²⁷

During the rape in section 4 of the Latin Life at the moment 'she [Non] conceived, there appeared two large stones' ; the rocks rise up from the earth to protect Non's modesty, one at her head and one at her feet.²⁸ This could be viewed as both a foreshadowing of David's future and a cementing of his connection to the land of Wales for which he is so significant. Later, as mentioned above, we are told of the rock which becomes malleable like wax at the touch of the labouring Non and then splits in two, one half jumping above her head and the

²⁵ Matthew 2:1-19; Cartwright, *Feminine sanctity*, p.103

²⁶ Sharpe and Rueben, ed. *Rhygyfarch's Life*, pp. 113 -115

²⁷ Cartwright, 'Feminine Sanctity', p.119

²⁸ Sharpe and Rueben, ed. *Rhygyfarch's Life*, p. 113

other to below her feet.²⁹ Perhaps the recurrent rock motif is also suggestive of how the hagiographer - and surely the *cyfarwydd* who would almost certainly have been circulating these miracle tales orally - intended for their audience to view St David; from the moment of his conception he is connected with the natural landscape. His very existence appears to hold some command over the land for which he is destined to become the national saint. Here we can also consider the episode above where the rocks rise up as Non is raped, alongside the miracle later in St David's life when the land rises beneath him as he preaches at the synod.³⁰

None of the Latin Lives state the exact place where David was born, but tradition in Wales now generally places the event in Pembrokeshire, just outside St Davids in a field on the cliffside above Non's Bay.³¹ The ruins of an ancient building thought to be a chapel remain in close proximity to a holy well which is dedicated to Non. Rhygyfarch states that 'a church has been built', at the place where Non gave birth and that the stone which miraculously split at her touch became part of its foundations.³² Although this stone has long been searched for, its current whereabouts remain unknown.³³ There is however an early incised cross on a large stone which stands inside the ruins of the chapel. The positioning of Non's Church and the tradition that places David's birth here is also of note when considering the earlier suggestion of the male saint being deliberately connected to the land and rock of Wales, as the chapel is reputedly built within the boundary of a large circle of stones, thought to have been erected in the Bronze Age.³⁴ Oral tradition also holds, that a spring burst forth at the moment of David's birth at the place where Non's Well is located today. None of the extant lives describe a

²⁹ Sharpe and Rueben, ed. *Rhygyfarch's Life*, p. 117

³⁰ Ibid. pp.145 - 147

³¹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 103 – 108 for a detailed summary of the traditions surrounding Non, found and associated with locations in Pembrokeshire

³² Sharpe and Rueben, ed. *Rhygyfarch's Life*, p. 117

³³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 104

³⁴ St David's Cathedral website, *Who Is St Non?* < <https://www.stdavidscathedral.org.uk/discover/history/St-Non> > [accessed 15th March 2026]; Heneb, 292 *St Nons – Llandrudion* < <https://heneb.org.uk/hcla/st-davids-and-ramsey-island/292-st-nons-llandrudion/> > [accessed 15th March 2026] for a detailed roundup of local archeology in the area surrounding the chapel

spring appearing at the time of the birth but instead place the appearance of the spring a short time later when the baby is baptised. The location of the baptism by Ailbe, the bishop of Munster, is not known although the now absent chapel at Porthclais was reputedly connected with the event.³⁵ Non's Well is traditionally thought to have healing properties, in particular for complaints regarding the eyes, as is often the case with holy waters associated with St David. In the modern chapel, also dedicated to St Non close to the well and ruins, there is a stained-glass window depicting the mother saint. Cartwright notes that at the base of the window Non is shown arriving in Brittany by boat with her young son and points out how this depiction suggests an attempt to link the Welsh tradition with the Breton, which relocates David's birth to Brittany.³⁶ In the *Buez*, Non arrives in Brittany whilst still pregnant and gives birth to her son there.³⁷

It is known that St Non's Well and Chapel were places of pilgrimage in medieval times, if perhaps seen mainly as a worthy detour on the way to or from St Davids. In the fifteenth century Lewys Glyn Cothi wrote a *cywydd* to Edudful Ferch Gadwgon who visited both locations whilst on pilgrimage with her sons:

She visits Non's Church,

Puts her head in the well

Raises her hands merrily,

Worships the holy image,

³⁵ Ibid. p. 105; Phil Cope, *The Living Wells of Wales: new photographs and old tales of our scared springs, holy wells and spas*, (Bridgend, Seren Books, 2019), pp300 – 303 for recent images of the well alongside other holy wells for comparison including the remains of the well at Porthclais, pp.303 – 305; see also *Rhygarfarch's Life*, ed. Sharpe and Davies, p.117 note 33 for possible explanation of St Ailbe being named in the Rhygyfarch version and associated tradition

³⁶ Ibid. p.108

³⁷ Scherb, *Comparative Drama*, p.320

Lights the large, yellow candles,

And puts all of them on the alter³⁸

The poem not only offers a small insight into pilgrimage in the area in the medieval period but is also the only extant early description of the chapel and well.³⁹

Motherhood is somewhat unusual within the wider context of medieval hagiography but appears to have been more acceptable in Wales.⁴⁰ Often this seems to be, as in the case of Non, due to the need to emphasize the sanctity of an important male saint; making him the son of a saintly mother with a series of miraculous events connected to her maternity and his birth elevates his spiritual status. Ben Guy suggests in his notes on the *Vita Sancti Dubricii*, that Dyfrig's mother, St Efyddyl was an important saint in her own right and would have had several dedications in Herefordshire and Monmouthshire, geographically close to those of St Dyfrig. Guy considers that the story of Efyddyl being Dyfrig's mother was created in order to connect the two highly regarded saints whilst 'emphasizing the general pre-eminence' of the male saint.⁴¹

There is no explanation in the Life of Dyfrig as to how Efyddyl became pregnant, and her story bears more resemblance to that of Thaney, as discussed above than it does to Non's; when Peibio, the father of Efyddyl discovers his daughter is with child he is so angry he has her cast into a river trapped inside a leather bag. As she is repeatedly carried back to the shore by the current and does not drown, he decides instead to have her burned on a pyre. The

³⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p.106 – see also for the original Welsh; this translation is Cartwright's own

³⁹ Ibid. p. 106; *British Library, From the Sacred to the Profane: Medieval Pilgrimage with Diane Watt, Sara Wheeler and Marion Turner*, (Youtube, 19 May 2025) < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIBXC9eRc5s> > [accessed 14th March 2026] see also this excellent discussion as part of the BL exhibition Medieval Women in Their Own Words for a greater insight into women's pilgrimage at the time Eudful would have been making her own

⁴⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 120

⁴¹ *Vita Sancti Dubricii (Liber Landavensis/ Vespasian A. xiv)*, ed. Ben Guy, (saints.wales, 2020) < https://welshsaints.ac.uk/theedition/VDub_LL-V/edited-text.eng.html > [accessed 14th March 2026], note. 92

following morning Edryffyl is found still very much alive with her new son clasped at her breast, having given birth in the night.⁴² In Dyfrig's story too, like in St David's the hagiographer places a rock at the location of the birth; 'This rock is positioned in that very place as evidence of the boy's miraculous birth'.⁴³ Although the rock itself performs no miracle, by including it in the story the birth is connected to something literally and perhaps symbolically permanent in the natural landscape of Wales.

A further parallel to be drawn between Non and Eddryffl is the suggestion by some, most notably G. H. Doble, that both were originally known as male rather than female saints.⁴⁴ In the case of Non, Cartwright has argued that Doble was uncomfortable with the rape element in the story and so sought an alternative narrative; reframing Non as a male character means the rape element in David's story never need happen. Cartwright also notes that Doble's theory is incompatible with the fact that the rape of Non is consistent in all extant versions of David's life as well as in the Breton *Buez*.⁴⁵

Saint Keyne, another daughter of Brychan Brycheiniog whose cult flourished in the late 5th century was a virgin, hermitess and traveller, with dedications across Wales and down into Cornwall.⁴⁶ Doble also considered Keyne to have originally been a male saint, based on the theory that women in the 5th and 6th centuries could not have travelled as far as Keyne would have needed to in order for her cult to have established in such wide spread locations.⁴⁷

Cartwright suggests part of Doble's assertions that particular female saints were originally male are based on the assumption that a male saint was more likely to have been a historical

⁴² Ibid. §.14

⁴³ Ibid. §.14

⁴⁴ G. H. Doble, *Saint Nonna*, Cornish Saints Series 16 (Liskeard, Philip and Sons, 1928); Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 69

⁴⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 100

⁴⁶ Orme, , *Nicolas Roscarrock's 'Lives of the Saints'*, pp. 84 – 85 and notes, pp. 146 - 147

⁴⁷ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, pp. 68 - 69

figure.⁴⁸ Karen Jankulak says that where St David has a fairly established historicity, St Non's historicity is 'relatively insecure'.⁴⁹ This historical insecurity, and indeed, Doble's assertion that Non is male may in part have arisen from the debate that surrounds her name and its meaning; Nonna is the Latin for 'nun'.⁵⁰ Nicolas Jacobs has shown that Non could have been used as a male or female name in the period contemporary with the lives of the Celtic saints but nevertheless, as Cartwright so astutely puts it, 'maleness alone is not admissible evidence of historicity'.⁵¹

Both Non and Edryffyl, along with other mother saints like Thaney and mothers of saints including Ethni, the mother of St Collen, and Beren, the mother of St Beuno largely disappear from their sons' *Vitae* once they have fulfilled their primary role of giving birth. Although there is a local oral tradition that David spent his childhood with Non in Ceredigion, there does not seem to be a great deal of evidence to suggest that the mother saints played much part in raising their own children; the opportunity to enact a typical motherly role seems to be removed by the need for the young saints to receive an impressive religious education; on the whole the mother has no further story of her own.⁵² Non however, is unusual because in the Breton Life, which is dedicated to her rather than her son, we do at least learn that during the years David is back in Wales being educated and performing miracles, she 'goes on pilgrimage, ending up near Dirinon, her tomb itself becoming the site of many further miracles'.⁵³ Whereas David's position as spiritual leader in his native Wales overshadows his mother, in Brittany she is able to become a 'true and great Breton saint', in her own right.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 69

⁴⁹ Jankulak, *Adjacent Saints*, p. 101

⁵⁰ Jacobs, *Non, Nonna, Nonnita*, pp. 19 – 33 for a highly detailed study of the name and all its possible derivations/interpretations. It is also of note that David's father, Sant could be taken to mean 'saint', in which case the parents of St David begin to sound entirely fabricated

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 21; Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 69

⁵² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 99

⁵³ Scherb, *Comparative Drama*, p. 320

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 329 - 330

Non is first a daughter and a nun, she is a virgin, a victim of rape, a mother and eventually a quiet saint. Her primary purpose is fulfilled in her early years and afterwards her story recedes into the background, apparently hidden in the shadow of her highly venerated son. Perhaps there once existed further tales of Non, local folklore, an oral history but if this was ever the case those stories are now lost. The vast majority of female saints when faced with the theft of their virginity, whether through forced marriage or rape, choose flight or martyrdom; Non is not given the choice. A typical saintly mother was necessary in the story of Wales's patron saint; she needed to be a nun, have a noble genealogy, be young and beautiful, devout and virginal; but in making her the mother of St David she becomes a somewhat unusual figure when considered alongside her fellow saints. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker has stated that, there are 'almost no mother saints, that is, saints whose sanctity is based on motherhood', and of the few that are known, even fewer are made mothers through an act of rape.⁵⁵ As Jane Cartwright concludes in her comprehensive study of Non, the saints 'maternity appears not only to form the origin of her sanctity, but also to be the root of her relevance and appeal'.⁵⁶ A modern poem by Guinevere Clarke, written when on pilgrimage with her young son to Non's Chapel suggest in its closing stanza that this appeal is still relevant today:

My son tugs to go – tiny church ghost
in the stone's dust, lips dry for water, breath
steaming on a line of candles. We step back
in the aisle, mosaic lit, necks crooked, and

⁵⁵ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, (New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1995), p. 4

⁵⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 121

in a last halo of sun, *Non, Mary, woman!*

Springing from your arch, flesh

From glass, you dance, veil tossed to stars.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Guinevere Clarke, 'St Non', Poetry Wales, (2023) <https://poetrywales.co.uk/guinevere-clark-how-i-wrote-st-non/> [accessed 15th March 2026]

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