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Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality, and Hagiography

*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.*

The relics of the saints, both corporeal and secondary, abound in the consciousness of medieval Wales. Thus the Life of St Cadog tells how his corporeal relics melted an offending pillager into the ground, frightening his companions and protecting the other monasteries in the region; *Cyfraith Hywel Dda* specifies that a man claiming that he is not liable to pay *galanas* in the case of a homicide must swear to the fact on the relics of saints; and the poet Ieuan Brydydd Hir sings the praises of St Gwenfrewy and her holy well with its powers of healing, saying that it gives ‘life, like the baptismal font’. The relics are the bodies of saints or specific items that once belonged to them that have been endued with their power, and they are also remarkable features in the landscape where the saints touched the earth and changed it by their power. In medieval Welsh society they served a number of purposes, providing healing, both spiritual and physical, as well as protection to those who sought their aid and giving justification to the claims of religious houses to lands and power as well as support to the practice of law in Wales. Believed to channel the power of the saints, they formed a significant element in the religious and social life of medieval Wales.

Initially, the cult of the saints and their relics in Wales appears to have developed very similarly to the rest of Christendom. It arose from the celebration of martyrs when their fellow Christians would gather at their graves on the days of their martyrdom to remember their lives and deaths. Soon these particularly holy Christians were noted as saints above the others, and their bodies came to be believed to possess healing and protective powers and the ability to intercede with God on behalf of other Christians. With the legalisation of Christianity, the bodies of the martyrs were moved from the cemeteries to newly built churches and shrines erected in their honour, and new Christians, particularly those who sought hard, celibate lives as hermits or monks, were added to their number. As Christianity spread, certain holy individuals who lived in the new regions at the time of their conversion became noted locally as saints.<sup>1</sup> In Wales this is the Age of the Saints.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 3, 7–8, 17, 27.

While new saints continued to be added slowly to the list of saints throughout the Middle Ages, essentially Wales saw no new saints after this time. However, Welsh reverence for these saintly individuals appears to match that of other regions in Europe. Just like in the rest of Europe, many of their relics came to be housed at abbeys and monasteries where their Lives were written, proving the rights of these religious houses to the property they claimed as coming from the saints they housed. There appears to have been only two significant differences between the Welsh reverence for saints and their relics and that of the rest of Europe. Throughout Europe, while items associated with the saints, such as dust or oil that touched their bodies, were believed to contain the power of the saints, focus remained on corporeal relics.<sup>2</sup> However, Gerald of Wales notes that Wales, Ireland, and Scotland were all united in placing greater emphasis on the secondary items of the saints than on their bodies. Additionally, the Welsh saints along with their relics appear to have exacted vengeance much more often than the saints of other regions.<sup>3</sup> Thus the Life of St Martin of Tours contains nearly all healing miracles while the first third of the miracles recorded in the anonymous Life of St Gwenfrewy are miracles of punishment and vengeance, despite her being portrayed as a gentle saint in life.<sup>4</sup>

At first saints were accorded sainthood locally, but the papacy slowly began to take control over the process until Pope Innocent IV claimed in the thirteenth-century that only the pope could canonise an individual. Robert Bartlett notes that despite the monopoly on canonisation claimed by the papacy, many individuals continued to be regarded locally as saints whether they received official canonisation or not.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Wales, with the possible exception of St David, not a single saint was canonised, and they maintained their sanctity from local recognition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 12–13, 48, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 87, 189.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 37 and Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, trans., *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), pp. 103–07a.

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 57–59.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 212 n. 13.

By the time of the Middle Ages, the cult of the saints held a significant position in the religious and social life of the people of Wales. They attended churches where they saw the relics and heard the stories of the saints, they lived among the marks left by the saints such as holy wells or rocks with their imprints marked in the stone, they went on pilgrimages to the shrines holding the saints' relics, and they prayed and gave to the saints, trusting that they would save them from spiritual and physical suffering and from attacks. And it was through the relics that they believed that the saints worked on their behalf.<sup>7</sup>

There were a range of items that could serve as a relic of a saint, but certain items were more common than others. Even with the Welsh preference for secondary relics rather than corporeal, the bodies of saints were treated with respect and regarded as holy. The chronicler of *Brut y Tywysogyon* thought the loss of David's body worthy of mention in his chronicle.<sup>8</sup> And according to the Life of Gildas, Gildas instructed his followers to place his body in a boat and to release it in the water so that it could find its own place of rest and not be fought over for the benefits it would bring.<sup>9</sup> Such a fight did occur with the body of Teilo, which was solved only by Christ miraculously tripling his body so that all three churches associated with him might have one.<sup>10</sup>

The secondary relics that appear most often are the bell and crosier. These, Elissa Henken notes, were the symbols of the saints' office as abbot or bishop, which would explain their frequent appearance and their significance.<sup>11</sup> David's bell even had a name, Bangu, and when stolen, Gerald of Wales tells that the town where it was kept was burned down by God except the wall on which it was hanging.<sup>12</sup> Teilo's bell, according to his Life, came from Jerusalem, and it could reveal those who had just perjured themselves as well as heal people.

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<sup>7</sup> Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jones, trans., *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicles of the Princes: Peniarth MS. 20 Version* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Elissa R. Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 79.

Oudoceus's bell has an even more impressive beginning, being shaped from butter by the saint and turning into gold. It was housed at Llandaff and was said to heal all who touched it.<sup>13</sup>

Henken calls crosiers the 'hagiographical equivalent of a magic wand' since they are staffs that perform so many great miracles.<sup>14</sup> Samson's crosier was used by monks after his death to put out a fire while Padarn's was noted for putting out the fires of war. It was given the name Cirguen or Cyrwen, and enemies swore their agreements on it.<sup>15</sup> Curig's crosier would heal tumours but only if given a penny. According to Gerald of Wales, if only half a penny was given, only half the tumour would disappear.<sup>16</sup>

Gospel books and other books appear to be the other notable relic associated with saints. In both Gildas's and Cadog's Lives, Gildas is said to have written a Gospel book for Cadog used for the swearing of oaths, and according to Gildas's Life, no one dared open it.<sup>17</sup> Teilo, Cadfan, and Beuno are all said to have had a special book while according to Cadog's Life, one book in particular came to be called Cob Cadduc or Cadog's memory. It is said to have been left open outside by Cadog's followers, Finian and Macmoil, when they rushed to work and to have been preserved without damage.<sup>18</sup> The importance of these books lies not so much in the words they contained, for there were many Gospel books and other religious texts with no such significance, but in their contact with the saints so that they became yet another object to carry their power.

Other items associated with individual saints took on their powers. Cynog was said to possess a golden torque that performed miracles. According to a *cywydd*, it was made in heaven, but according to *De Situ Brecheiniauc*, it was given to Cynog by his father after his baptism. Its power was so great that it kept the saint alive after he was beheaded as long as he held it.<sup>19</sup> Gildas made a wheat mill that would heal people, and the coals carried by Cadog in his shirt as a

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<sup>13</sup> Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, pp. 129, 283.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, pp. 78–79.

<sup>17</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, p. 97 and Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 53–55.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 86 and Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, pp. 181, 183.

youth were said in the Lives of Cadog and Tatheus to continue to possess healing powers even after he had left.<sup>20</sup>

Holy wells, though marks in the landscape rather than items like a staff or bell, were the most common of all. Gwenfrewy, Tigiwc, and Dunod all had wells spring up where they were beheaded, and the wells of Gwenfrewy and Dunod provided healing to those who came to them.<sup>21</sup> Male saints created wells in less violent fashion. Gwynllyw received a well in response to his prayers while the tears of Samson created another. And Illtud created a fountain by thrusting his crosier into the ground.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, unique marks in the landscape were viewed also like relics. The hill at Llanddewibrefi is said to have once been level ground until it rose under David's feet to allow him to preach to all gathered there while Maen Beuno was a stone in Gwenfrewy's well and was surrounded by rocks in the well permanently marked with drops of her blood and possessing special powers.<sup>23</sup> In the fifteenth century, the poet Ieuan Brydydd Hir sang about the drops of Gwenfrewy's blood that were still visible on them.<sup>24</sup> Another such stone is the one which broke in half as Non gave birth to David, half of it leaping from her head to her feet, and which showed the prints of her hands.<sup>25</sup>

Henken compares the patterns of saints' Lives with that of the stories of heroes. In the latter, the hero, after training and setting out on his own, comes upon magical items that will help him in his future career, and in the saints' Lives, the crosier and bell perform the same role for the saint. They become instruments through which the saints channel their power and perform their miracles, a role that they continue even after death.

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<sup>20</sup> Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 55 and Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 37–41, 281.

<sup>21</sup> Pepin, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, pp. 39, 101; Patrick Sims-Williams, ed., *Buchedd Beuno* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2018), pp. 150–151; and Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', ed. and trans. by Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 181, 211–15.

<sup>23</sup> Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', p. 145 and Pepin, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Clancy, Joseph P., *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 334.

<sup>25</sup> Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', p. 117.

Gerald of Wales notes that for the Welsh, secondary relics possessed greater value than corporeal relics, stating that they ‘have such a reverence for portable bells, staffs crooked at the top and encased in gold, silver or bronze, and other similar relics of the saints’ that they swear on such items rather than on the Gospels like the rest of Europe. While in this passage Gerald is contrasting secondary relics with the Gospels rather than with corporeal relics, it is significant that the latter are not even mentioned, indicating the relatively little value placed on them in comparison with the others. This is somewhat surprising considering that scholars have made frequent mention of the Celtic regard for the human head, seeing a hint of this in the story of Bendigeidfran’s talking head that has talismanic powers. Gerald does say that these items were believed to have ‘occult power’ from God and the favour of the saints with whom they were associated, but one would expect the body to have the same.

Whatever the reason for the Welsh preference for secondary relics, the sources do seem to bear out Gerald’s claim. It is an Englishman, William of Malmesbury who tries to take a finger of Caradog’s body. While Welsh bishops certainly kept David’s body at St David’s until it was plundered, it was a Norman bishop, Bernard, who made great efforts to search for it, and it was another Norman, John de Gamages, who later claimed to have found it after seeing its location in a vision. Also, parts of the bodies of Welsh saints were taken from Wales to English religious houses in Glastonbury and Tewkesbury.<sup>26</sup> And even more notable is the permission given by the prince of Gwynedd and the bishop of Bangor for the departure of the body of Gwenfrewy to Shrewsbury.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the English focus on corporeal relics, Llywelyn Fardd’s *Canu Cadfan* and the *Cywydd i Deilo* each mention a list of relics associated with each saint, and neither list includes corporeal relics.<sup>28</sup> Neither do Iolo Goch’s song to David and Ieuan Brydydd Hir’s song to Gwenfrewy. The anonymous Life of Gwenfrewy tells only of miracles that occurred at her holy well with complete disregard for her body at Gwytherin or Shrewsbury. And it could be asked how it was that both the prince of Gwynedd and the bishop of Bangor agreed to the

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<sup>26</sup> F. G. Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales, 1066–1349* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1977), pp. 160–61.

<sup>27</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>28</sup> Nerys Ann Jones and Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Twelfth-Century Welsh Hagiography: The *Gogynfeirdd* Poems to Saints’ in Jane Cartwright, ed., *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 58 and Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 114.

translation of her body out of Wales. Robert of Shrewsbury claimed that the prince said that the Welsh must not have been reverencing the saint as they ought, and thus it was right to move her where she wanted to go, but this can be discounted as propaganda on his part. No prince would say such a thing. Possibly instead both the prince and the bishop saw it as a good political move and did not view her body as possessing enough importance when they still had her holy well and Gwytherin to neglect such an opportunity.

One of the primary workings of the power of the saint through relics was the way in which they could improve the condition of those who approached them for help. They healed the bodies of worshippers, cured diseases affecting their livestock, drove away demons, and provided pardon to sinners and respite from time in purgatory. According to the *Life of Cadog*, the saint prayed specifically that his body would have such powers, asking for the ability of any who possessed a part of his body to perform miracles, drive away demons, and keep back disease, and he was granted his wish. The author of the *Life* goes on to relate how his body performed more miracles than when he was alive, curing even lepers and driving away demons.<sup>29</sup>

Holy wells appear to have been particularly noted for healing. Both Gwenfrewy's well and Dunod's are said to provide healing in the *Lives of Beuno, Gwenfrewy, and David*.<sup>30</sup> The poet Ieuan Brydydd Hir calls the healing provided by Gwenfrewy's well life-giving and compares it to the regeneration accomplished through baptism and the well itself to the Jordan River where John the Baptist baptised Christ. The well is a feast, and he will find healing from 'sips of her wonders'.<sup>31</sup>

Relics possessed the ability to heal the soul as well as the body. Iolo Goch sang of St Davids that three pilgrimages to that shrine granted the same indulgence as one pilgrimage to Rome, and he repeated the assertion of Rhygyfarch that all buried in the cemetery of St Davids would achieve salvation.<sup>32</sup> In this case the sanctified ground associated with the saint and his relics guarantee not just the reduction in one's punishment but the ultimate attainment of

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<sup>29</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 109–11.

<sup>30</sup> Sims-Williams, *Buchedd Beuno*, p. 147, Pepin and Feiss, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, p. 43, 101, Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, p. 335.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240, 242–43 and Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', p. 121.

salvation. Similarly, Einion ap Gwalchmai claimed that ‘The good of God’s relics will win me pardon’, indicating that relics have the power like Christ’s death to win forgiveness.<sup>33</sup>

Another significant way that the power of the saints was manifested through relics was their ability to protect themselves and those living on their lands or those who sought their aid. According to Thomas Charles-Edwards, saints were believed to watch what went on in their churches and lands and to be interested in their protection and well-being.<sup>34</sup> The relics were sacred objects endued with the power of the saints and serving as a physical connection to the people and lands. Anyone who sought to damage or disrespect them sought to insult the saint with which they were connected as well as God who particularly favoured the saints. The saints’ Lives are full of stories of those who attempted to violate the relics and sanctuaries of the saints, and in each case, they do not ultimately succeed but instead suffer dreadful torments and are fortunate if they can repent and beg for mercy and receive a pardon from the offended saint. Thus, Gerald of Wales tells of the story of a man who tried to break the torque of St Cynog for its gold and suffered blindness for the rest of his life. He also describes the judgment suffered by a man who put a horn of St Patrick’s to his lips and blew instead of carrying it reverently and kissing it as had been the custom. His lips were paralysed, and he lost his sharp mental faculties. After visiting Patrick in Ireland he improved, but never completely.<sup>35</sup> Cadog’s relics caused a plunderer to melt into the ground, frightening his companions so that they no longer wanted to plunder any land under his care.<sup>36</sup>

However, despite this repeated storyline, reality hardly seems to support such claims of the saints’ protective power. The chronicler of the *Brut y Tywysogyon* mentions three attacks on churches. One was the plunder of David’s shrine and another the confiscation of cattle from the church sanctuary by the men who accompanied Gruffydd ap Rhys, who took them for their dinner.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the judgment exacted on the companions of Illtud when they demanded cattle from Cadog and were swallowed up by the earth, nothing is reported to have happened to

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<sup>33</sup> Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, p. 165.

<sup>34</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350–1064* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 614–15.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 86–87.

<sup>36</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, *Brut y Tywysogyon*, pp. 18, 42.

these men.<sup>38</sup> Nor do the Vikings who plundered David's shrine appear to have faced any hardships from the saints or God for their act. However, in the third case, the offending party did meet with misfortune immediately after their sacrilegious act. The chronicler reports that the English army plundered the churches of Anglesey, 'but the saints did not let them get away scot-free, for God took vengeance for it upon them'.<sup>39</sup> It would seem then that the chronicler, despite reporting incidents of sacrilege with no consequences, did still believe in the power of the saints so that he could think that that must be the reason for the English army's misfortune. However, it would seem that fear of the saints' power of revenge may not have been as widespread as one would expect given this understanding of their power. The repeated stories of saintly retribution recounted in the saints' Lives and in Gerald of Wales's *Journey through Wales*, in which the offenders are Welsh Christians as late as the high medieval period and not merely pagans, would seem to indicate that this was a recurring concern. Perhaps some of these stories are fabricated motifs because they make a good story, but there can be no doubt that some individuals must have noticed the lack of retribution on the part of the saints and acted accordingly.

The way that the saints' protection was supposed to work in society was tied to the concept of sanctuary. In Welsh this is called *nawdd*, and the right of a church to grant this is called *braint*. Nerys Ann Jones and Morfydd E. Owen note that originally, individuals could grant protection to others for a specific amount of time and within a specific region. However, in the high medieval period, this right came to be the prerogative of the king and churches and relics. At this point the place where this sanctuary could be granted was called a *noddfa*.<sup>40</sup> *Cyfraith Hywel Dda* specifies how the *nawdd* provided by relics was recognised legally. While carrying a relic provided protection even for a wrongdoer, it did not allow a person to commit a crime with impunity. Any relic being carried at the time a person committed a crime offered them no protection. They would have to find a new relic and a new place of sanctuary to be safe from the law for that crime. Further, a person could not seek protection from weapons and relics at the same time, for if a person were carrying a weapon, the relics they were also carrying would

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<sup>38</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, p. 197–99.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, *Brut y Tywysogyon*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>40</sup> Jones and Owen, 'Twelfth-Century Welsh Hagiography', p. 56.

offer them no protection.<sup>41</sup> It is as if the saints' protection cannot be viewed merely as another asset, but the person must throw themselves wholly on the protection provided by the saints and not trust in themselves. When used in this way, the relics could be carried, and Huw Pryce notes that they acted as a protective escort for the person carrying them.<sup>42</sup> An example of this can be seen in an agreement between Llywelyn ap Gruffydd and Maredudd ap Rhys in which Llywelyn says that if Maredudd is accused of anything to the prince, he is to come '*sine conductu vel reliquiis*, without escort or relics' to prove his innocence, equating the relics with an escort and indicating the power of protection they possessed.<sup>43</sup> However, in this legal aspect, it seems to be a recognition of the sanctity of relics and the role they should play rather than a fear that they may harm the enforcers of the law that is dictating their use in such a fashion. It is as if the law has reduced the spontaneous and awesome power of the saints to a calculated formula.

The fact that relics were such powerful objects of healing and protection meant that they could serve to prove the sanctity of the saints with which they were associated and thus the importance of any church which housed their relics. Both Cadog and Illtud are proven to be preeminent holy men through bells that choose them. In each saints' Life, Gildas has made a bell and is on his way to bring it to either the pope or St David. On the way he encounters one of these saints who rings the bell and desires it. When Gildas meets the pope or David, the bell refuses to ring for them, and they ask who has touched it before because it belongs to him. The physical bell then becomes a reminder of how it chose the saint because of his holiness. And just as the miracles that the saints performed during their life proved their sanctity, miracles accomplished through their relics after their death reinforced that message. Thus the relics of Cadog bent a tree over water to allow a monk to ask peace of Cynan, king of Reinmuc. Relics also served to support claims of importance for saints, sometimes at the expense of other saints. Thus the bells proved that Cadog and Illtud were at least as important if not more so than the pope and St David since the bells would only ring for them. Cadog's Life also claims that it was a tradition that if any of Cadog's house should be carrying a particular Gospel book and meet a descendant of Cynaethwy in the act of dressing, the descendant of Cynaethwy would be required

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<sup>41</sup> Dafydd Jenkins, ed., *The Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales Translated and Edited* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1986), pp. 8, 82–83.

<sup>42</sup> Huw Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> Huw Pryce, ed., *The Acts of Welsh Rulers, 1120–1283* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2005), p. 250.

to follow them without finishing dressing. The same was required of a descendant of Lyuthyly if met by a member of Cadog's house with a parti-coloured bell.<sup>44</sup> It could be doubted that any descendant of Cynaethwy or Lyuthyly, if they still existed at the time that Cadog's Life was written, would have agreed to this tradition, but it is told to prove the importance of Cadog since anyone connected with him and carrying one of his relics had such power over others. Finally, it seems reasonable to think that stories in the Lives of the saints were told and written to explain any unusual features in the relics as a means of showing the power of the saints. Thus the damaged appearance of Cynog's torque is explained as a man trying to strike the torque for money and being blinded for life while a horse was said to carry back Illtud's bell that had been plundered but dropped it so that it bore a mark.<sup>45</sup>

The greater importance and power that a saint and their relics possessed, the greater power and recognition a church or religious house holding their relics could claim to possess. The three religious houses associated with Teilo fought over his body because the church with his relics would have preeminence among them. These squabbles were put to rest when they trusted Christ to resolve the issue and woke up the following morning to find that the saint's body had tripled. The church at Llandaff, however, claimed that they saw the most miracles, and therefore they had the true relics of the saint.<sup>46</sup> This dispute must have been fierce and the solution exceptionally marvellous because it formed the entire content of one of the triads.<sup>47</sup> Gerald of Wales tells also how Caradog's body chose where it would remain, giving power and prestige to that place for being chosen by the saint.<sup>48</sup> While Welsh churchmen were certainly involved in aggrandising their particular churches—Rhygyfarch's Life of St David being one such example—it would seem that this struggle over prestige was the concern more of foreign churchmen than of the Welsh. It was foreign churchmen who began to gather the corporeal relics of the saints, and it was they who dug up the bodies of Welsh saints and placed them in

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<sup>44</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 85–87, 97, 115, 223.

<sup>45</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 86 and Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 229–231.

<sup>46</sup> Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 132.

<sup>47</sup> Rachel Bromwich, ed., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, pp. 144–145.

decorated reliquaries for greater prestige for their churches.<sup>49</sup> And it is interesting to note that while Gerald claims that the Welsh were concerned mostly with secondary relics, the saints' Lives and the religious houses that wrote them show a greater concern with the bodies of the saints. It is possible that Gerald is describing the thoughts of the Welsh people while the Lives are pieces of propaganda for churches, and these by this time were run mostly by foreigners.

One last role that relics played in medieval Wales is that of providing support for the workings of the law. Henken notes that the saints were regarded as the 'defenders of the law'.<sup>50</sup> This they did when people swore oaths on their relics, and they revealed the truth or falsity of their oaths. Both Cadog and Teilo were believed to possess bells that would reveal if someone was lying.<sup>51</sup> *Cyfraith Hywel Dda* lists a number of instances when oaths taken on relics were necessary to prove a person's claim. In the case of surety they were required as well as in determining the time of day or in claiming something that had been stolen or in the case of damages to farm animals or crops. They were further required when a woman claimed that she had been raped or that her son had been fathered by a specific man, and he was required to swear on the relics if he wished to deny her claim. Further, they were required for a man to say that he was not related closely enough to a man guilty of homicide to be required to pay *galanas* to the family of the victim.<sup>52</sup>

Swearing on relics had once been common across Europe in the early medieval period, but it became increasingly uncommon as other practices, such as swearing on a Gospel book or swearing with words alone, came to replace it. Wales, however, continued to practice swearing on relics, and Pryce states that by the time the extant copies of *Cyfraith Hywel Dda* were written, it was already 'old-fashioned'.<sup>53</sup> While some aspects of the law code may represent archaic material that was no longer in practice, it is clear from Gerald of Wales's statement about the fondness of the Welsh for swearing on relics that in this the law code represented actual practice. There are records of specific instances when relics were used for the taking of oaths. Margam

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<sup>49</sup> Jones and Owen, 'Twelfth-Century Welsh Hagiography', p. 66 and David Petts, *The Early Medieval Church in Wales* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), p. 194.

<sup>50</sup> Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, pp. 51, 64, 88, 132–133, 142, 145, 177, 199, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales*, p. 41.

abbey used such a practice to contribute to its protection from attacks while a certain Morgan swore on relics that he was giving land to Margam Abbey in a charter: '*super sacrosancta ecclesie iuravi*, I have sworn on the relics of the church'.<sup>54</sup> In keeping with Gerald's statement that the Welsh preferred secondary relics to corporeal, when they are specified in *Cyfraith Hywel Dda*, the relics are objects. In disputes over boundaries between two churches or between a church and a king, those swearing were to take a crosier and Gospel book to the place of dispute and swear on them.<sup>55</sup> These, according to Pryce, would not have been just any crosier and book but would have been the relics of the founding saint of the church, and such a practice was recorded in the articles of St Asaph written in the 1270s.<sup>56</sup> Gerald writes of this practice as if he thought it strange, indicating that by the late twelfth century it was one practice of the Welsh in reverencing their saints that was unique in Europe.

The reason why swearing on relics was considered to be so powerful was the common belief that the saints would exact vengeance for a false oath on their relics. This can be seen in a story in the Life of Cadog. In this story, there was a peasant who had stolen an ox and refused to admit to the deed. Cadog's sexton happened to be there at the time and for a joke took his knife, claiming it to be the knife of St Cadog and threatening that it would strike the peasant if he was swearing falsely. Fearing the vengeance of the saint, the peasant confessed immediately to the deed. Later in the saint's Life, the author tells of a place in Scotland where kings and nobles would swear on the bodies of three of Cadog's followers that they would maintain peace, knowing that they would die before the end of the year if they failed to keep that oath.<sup>57</sup> Gerald of Wales tells the story of judgment suffered by Rhys ap Gruffydd who swore on relics that he would leave his son-in-law in peace but then attacked and took Llanhyver Castle from him. For violating the oath he had sworn, he suffered imprisonment at the hands of his sons.<sup>58</sup> While these last two are the violation of a previously taken oath instead of perjuring oneself on the relics, the resultant violation and disregard of the power of the relics is the same, and the

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<sup>54</sup> Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales*, p. 197 and Pryce, *Acts of Welsh Rulers*, p. 269–70.

<sup>55</sup> Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, p. 127.

<sup>56</sup> Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>57</sup> Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, pp. 97, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, pp. 170–71.

punishment is the same. Pryce questions how much the power of saints to exact punishment for false oaths on their relics was really feared by the Welsh, and it must be assumed that just as there were Welshmen who violated the sanctuary of churches with impunity, there were those who perjured themselves and thought nothing of it and saw no consequences. However, he notes that it is significant that those who wrote and compiled *Cyfraith Hywel Dda* 'seem to have assumed that it amounted to as effective a sanction as any'.<sup>59</sup>

The relics of the saints played a significant role in medieval Wales. Whether it was the granting of healing and spiritual favours or the judgment of those who violated their sanctuary and protection or the justification of claims by the saints' followers to power and prestige or the aid of the law with the threat of their power, the Welsh saints and their relics touched many aspects of medieval Welsh life. The power of the saints as evidenced in their relics affected all from the highest princes and nobles who swore peace on the relics to the lowest peasant who sought healing at a nearby holy well. To all their power was believed to provide health and life or destruction and death.

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<sup>59</sup> Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales*, pp. 43–44.

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