

MA in MDS

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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.

In medieval Wales and Celtic regions, Christianity involved the reverence for saints and their relics as an integral form of community identity and territorial affiliation. Saintly relics are physical objects that serve as a way to venerate and deeply connect to those saints or holy persons that people believe continue to intercede for them on earth. Some of the functions that relics had include healing the sick, bringing favorable changes to the weather and/or harvest, acting as a sacred object upon which to take an oath, and to ensure victory in battle. Even though the cult of relics seems to be part of many religious traditions (see A.T. Lucas, 1986) there is a common thread in the categorization of relics. Relics can be categorized as being First class relics, Second class relics, and Third-class relics. The first being part of the saint's body, the second, clothing worn and objects used by the saint, and the third, items attached to a first- or second-class relic and thus having had some power transferred to them. Similarly, saintly relics can also be described as either Corporeal or Secondary. Although controversial and often contended, corporeal relics such as hair, blood, teeth, and bones, to name a few, seemed to have been "obtained or were believed to have been obtained by exhuming the body of the saint after it had lain for some years in the grave." (A. T. Lucas, 1986). The secondary relics which may include clothing, tools and personal belongings from the saint appear to be the most abundant throughout the Celtic world, including a very prestigious Irish relic believed to have been the *Bachall* or Staff of Jesus, which then was received directly from Heaven by St Patrick. Hagiographical literature also mentions bells, books, and rosaries as other key secondary relics. Regardless of the class of relic, it is clear that they served as reminders of the lives of saints and of their divinity on earth. The urge to touch, kiss, or possess the saint's bones or their objects remained an important cornerstone of the Christian faith in early medieval Ireland (see Niamh Wycherley, 2020) Furthermore, in Welsh and Celtic societies, saintly relics transcended their

religious significance to function as tools for political legitimacy, cornerstones of regional identity, and engines of economic prosperity. In this paper I will provide examples of this and focus primarily on the relics of St Winefride, St David, St Columba, and St Partick, with some brief mention to St Cuthbert and St Manchan.

It is important to start by briefly mentioning some key studies and essential literature surrounding the veneration of saints. Mainly as it provides historical context, cultural significance, and religious expression in relation to relics. Peter Brown, in his book *The cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (1981) gives the reader the sense that cults of saints themselves acted as a link between the celestial realm and the earthly world, suggesting a harmonious relationship between the two. He also proposes that there were religious and social challenges at the time that contributed to the rise of the cult of saints such as fear of death, awareness of going against moral or ethical standards and the need for saintly intercession. Robert Wiśniewski in his paper for *the Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2015) about Brown's 2014 updated edition also indicates that Brown later reevaluated his printed work to include additional thoughts and findings, such as the importance of the role of the cults beyond the aristocratic groups of worshippers to also reference ordinary people. Moreover, the relationship between the veneration of saints and the veneration of relics is a topic of interest for both authors. Wiśniewski, for instance, mentions that while it is accurate to say that few cults emerged without associated relics, most of them eventually created holy objects. However, there appears to have been a noticeable transition from the inception of saintly worship to the introduction of relics because for some time, many saints were honored without the need for relics. Additionally, there is research that highlights how saints and their cults shaped religious practices and influenced social dynamics during Medieval times. For instance, Bernard W. Scholz (1981) in his work on Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* states:

"The relationship between saint and cultist replicated the bonds of patronage and friendship existing in late antique society. The saint became the patron, protector, friend, and intimate, with whom the worshipper could communicate, even identify." (Scholz, B.W. 1981)

It is fair to state that relics became active agents in the medieval religious experience of the people; and whether they were corporeal or secondary relics, they seemed to have had multi-dimensional functions, serving in religious, political, economic, and social ways. To illustrate this let's consider how relics played a vital role in establishing a community's bond with particular saints; namely the ownership of relics within their territory, and the sacred location surrounding relics as pilgrimage hubs which could include wells, trees, and stones associated with the saints. One such example is St Winefride's Well at Holywell.

The Lives of St Winefride (Gwenfrewy) from the twelfth century tells of Winefride, the daughter of a Welsh nobleman, who rejected the advances of Prince Caradog in the seventh century only to have her head cut off. A spring (well) is said to have sprung on the spot where this tragedy happened, which people can still visit today and also enjoy an exhibition, shop, and small chapel in the same area. St Winefride is arguably one of Britain's leading female saints and her Well shrine dates from 1512 where according to legend it was where Beuno told Winifred that "anyone coming to the well and asking for something in her name would, at least at the third time, receive an answer to their request" (Stumpe, 2009, pg. 69). Pilgrims can still do some of the practices enjoyed by their medieval counterparts: visit the site to pray to her, make offerings to her altar, bathe in the waters of the adjacent pools, and even drink the water of the site. According to St Winefride's Well Museum Committee (2008) the moss that grew in the Well also used to be thought of as miraculous, which is why pilgrims would take it as a relic too.

Locations where saints were venerated became the places where work force and wealth resided, in part thanks to the cults of the saints but more so for the support of the most powerful men in the area such as wealthy Norman magnates, bishops, and the king. As T.W. Pritchard states in *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*: "The possession by the monastery of a church, tithes and monetary offerings associated with a sacred place became a valuable part off their economy and where jealously safeguarded throughout their existence..." (The Development of the Cult, 2009,pg. 46) The Well relic remains a sacred pilgrimage site, thus a source of tourism in the area, for those seeking her intercession and to honor her.

Another of her relics is the Arch Gwenfrew, “an eight-century wooden reliquary which may be taken as good evidence for her having been recognized as a saint very soon after her death. This probably contained a secondary relic, such as an item of clothing.” (Stumpe, 2009) As such, it became a place for spiritual comfort. Most relics also benefited from their reputation when it came to curative powers and favors from their associated saint. Her relics were no exception thanks to the stories in the Lives of Winefride, the pilgrimages to the Well and records of them (see poems such as *Cywydd Gwenfrewi a' i Ffynon- Maredudd ap Huw pg. 154-159*), and her overall reputation for being kind, fair, pious, and having healing abilities.

St Winefride's relics not only include her Well and Arch but also corporeal ones such as a piece of bone said to have been recovered after the Reformation in Rome. This corporeal relic was transferred from Rome to Shrewsbury where it was divided, and one part sent to Holywell. It is believed though that when she died the saint was buried at the convent in the remote villa of Gwytherin, east of Llanrwst. In the eleventh century her body was exhumed, and her bones were taken to the cathedral in the area. A chapel was built over her grave, and currently there is a crypt that can be visited by pilgrims. Many pilgrims visited the Saint's relics in hopes of obtaining indulgences for them and their families, and help reduce their time in Purgatory. In turn, the area where the relic was exhibited would therefore benefit financially. T.W. Pritchard provides a clear example of the ecclesiastical power and the material gains sometimes granted to the locations associated with saints when he states that:

“Indulgences could be obtained to aid the repairs of damaged churches and shrines if visited by the pilgrim. In 1427, the abbot of Basingwerk was licensed to dispense Pope Martin V's indulgence for a period of ten years. It specified a period of remission of a year and forty days penance to penitent who visited the well on the principal feast of the year and dedication...” (Pritchard, 2009, pg. 58)

Another popular Celtic saint whose relics are still venerated is St David. Much is known about this Welsh saint thanks to the son of Bishop Sulien, Rhygyfarch, who wrote the *Life of St David* in 1093 at a time where Wales was dealing with the aftermath of several Norman invasions. In his *Life of St David* he emphasized the saint's influence and sanctity, although there was no mention of a shrine to the saint or of miracles at his tomb. Rhygyfarch was able however

to discuss secondary relics: an altar, a bell, and a staff. In the twelfth century there was an increase in popularity of the cult of St David in part thanks to Rhygyfarch but also Bishop Bernard, the first Norman Bishop of St Davids Cathedral. His cult also grew after a new life was published in 1192 by Gerald of Wales who wrote the *Life of St David* much in form after Rhygyfarch's version. Gerald did mention one more relic, the Imperfect Gospel. F.G. Cowley in his book *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation* (2007) shares that the legend goes as follows:

“David was engaged in copying the gospel of St John. On the ringing of the bell he jumped up and hastened to the church without either closing the book or completing the page. When he returned to the scriptorium, he found the column which he had begun, already completed in gold letter by the work of an angel.” (pg. 276)

Years later in the thirteen century, and thanks to the abbot of Gloucester John de Gamages, there is mention of St Davids body being found “outside the southern door, at the fixed measure of paces shown to [John] in his vision” (F.G. Cowley, 2007, pg. 277). The remains and burial items of St. David were initially housed in a movable casket placed on the stone foundation of the shrine located at St. David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire. In the years following the discovery, the body was fragmented, and its parts were taken by various individuals and churches. One of the earliest beneficiaries was King Edward I, who celebrated his victory in Wales with a progress after its conquest. At St Davids Cathedral he obtained the head and parts of the skeleton of the saint and later led a procession to Westminster carrying the saint's head. Relics being potent political items, and St Davids relics being meaningful representations that connect Welsh people to their shared history and traditions, afforded the English king a visual (and spiritual) connection between the English and the Welsh. As a relic collector, the king also acquired other significant items during his journeys, including the relic of Croes Nawdd (true cross) and King Arthur's crown. Certainly, all played a part in exalting his political and religious power in the eyes of his people.

In 1275, Bishop Richard de Carew constructed a new Shrine of St. David following the destruction of the original shrine during a Viking raid in 1089. This new shrine featured painted depictions of St. David, St. Patrick, and another saint, which provided even more reasons for pilgrims to visit this site. Even though the validity of St David's bones has been contested (see Higham, Ramsey, and Nokes. 2007), it is fair to say that the physical remains provided a direct connection to the saint which was highly sought after as potentially being that direct link to heaven. Therefore, the tangible connection between the saint and the pilgrim was sacred for many, effectively also offering protection at times of uncertainty, famine, and despair. The strength of the relic was just one aspect of the cult, its capacity to safeguard the community also guaranteed a strong value for the relics within the medieval Church and society. This notion added to the already powerful invocation of saints before and during battles. One can see this, for instance, in the poem *Armes Prydain Fawr* translated by G. R. Isaac (St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation. 2007. Ch 8) where we read that:

51 (They commend themselves to God and David,
 52 That He may pay the foreigners back, that he may reject their treachery.
 53 They commit shameful deeds for their lack of living space.
 54 The Welsh and the English will meet,
 55 They will charge and attach each other on the river bank,
 56 With enormous armies, they measure themselves up against each other.)

The author here suggests that St. David will serve as a powerful divine intermediary in the battle, positioned just below God himself in terms of providing supernatural aid and protection to the combatants. Additionally, and as previously stated, one key aspect of having relics in situ, was that given the power, that location could be seen as particularly holy by pilgrims. For instance, in the case of St David "The Cathedral was granted a privilege from the Pope stating that two pilgrimages to St Davids was equal to one to Rome, and that three were as significant as a pilgrimage to Jerusalem" (St Davids Cathedral. 2018, para 8)

Let's consider next a very prolific Celtic saint, St Columba. St Columba, an Irish born saint from the sixth century, is credited with raising up over 300 churches and monasteries in his lifetime. After the Battle of Cul Dreimhne in 563 AD he was exiled to Scotland. He arrived at the

island of Iona where he built a community and a monastery, eventually called the Iona Abbey. Iona became the center of teaching and learning for those who wanted to serve God through missionary work. His legacy in the area appears to have been extensive as was his relentless promotion of Christianity in Scotland. The communities of monks he established, particularly Iona Abbey, emerged as vital hubs for the dissemination of Christianity across Scotland and beyond into Britain. Columba might have been a mysterious and relatively obscure figure if not for Adomnán, the ninth Abbot of Iona. His work, the *Vita Colum Cille* (Life of Columba), played a crucial role in elevating the saint's status in relation to other Scottish saints and in promoting the fame of Iona throughout Europe.

It is reported that St Columba authored 300 books by hand, of which two—"The Book of Durrow" and the psalter known as "The Cathach"—still exist today. This psalter, housed in a shrine, was historically taken into battle by the O'Donnells clan as a symbol of their hope for victory. Columba's remains were ultimately taken away in 849 AD and split between Scotland (Alba) and Ireland. Following St. Columba's passing, his spiritual legacy continued to flourish. The abbey he established on Iona developed into an important destination for religious travelers, while his relics became objects of devotion and reverence, continuing to provide economic support and religious value to the area. Furthermore, the Monymusk Reliquary, dating back to approximately 750 AD, likely housed a relic of St. Columba. This reliquary became an important emblem of national identity and was carried in front of the Scottish army as they advanced into battle as a symbol of protection. It is believed that this reliquary is the Brechbennoch, which was used by the Scots during the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Additionally, in his *Life of Columba* Adomnan discusses the protection granted to those who celebrated St Columba: "certain men, wicked and bloodstained from a life as brigands, were protected by songs that they sang in Irish in praise of St Columba, in commemoration of his name. From the site on the night where they sang these songs they were delivered from the hands of their enemies who surrounded the house of the singers, and they escaped unhurt from flames and swords and spears. But a few of them made little of the holy man's commemoration and would not sing those songs and miraculously these alone perished in the enemies' attack." (Thomas Charles- Edwards, 2007-2008, pg. 9)

Likewise, we see some similarities in relics and shrines for two other Celtic saints: St Manchan and St Cuthbert. St Manchan (Mancháin, Manach) was an Irish saint associated to Lemanaghan (Leamonaghan), who created a monastery in 645 AD. He was sent to that location by St Ciaran who wished the area to be converted to Christianity. Like St Winefride he has a well venerated in his cult ; it is believed that once when he was thirsty and had no water to drink, he struck a rock, and a spring appeared. St Manahan's well is visited today by people seeking his intervention and healing powers, as it is said to have them in abundance. Moreover, Karen Overbey in her book *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines and Territory in Medieval Ireland*, examines the St. Manchan's shrine, as the main reliquary honoring this saint in his role of founder of the Lemanaghan monastic settlement in County Offaly. The author analyzes the shrine's imagery, construction, and historical modifications within its political context, and argues that Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair commissioned the reliquary during his campaign to become High King of Ireland, while his descendant Ruadhri Ua Conchobair later modified it in the 13th century. The shrine thus served a dual purpose: housing the saint's relics while symbolizing the political ambitions of successive Ua Conchobair rulers. Additionally, this portable artifact was likely carried in ceremonial processions to help define both religious and secular territorial boundaries. (see Chapter two, Holy Ground: St. Mancháin's Shrine, 2012)

St. Cuthbert's life is well-documented thanks to the Venerable Bede's eighth-century biography, available in modern translation by Webb (1965). Despite serving as Bishop of Lindisfarne for only one year (685-686 AD), Cuthbert gained widespread recognition for his piety and ascetic lifestyle, becoming the center of an early religious following and community. Between 793 and 875, Viking invasions devastated the Lindisfarne monastery, eventually forcing the monks to flee with Cuthbert's remains. It is believed that after much transfer of his body, it was finally laid to rest in 1537-1542 in Durham Cathedral. When his body was examined by Dr Shelby Plummer in 1827, it was found that most parts of the body where in a very good state of preservation, perhaps due to some mumification process, and effectively provided support in the belief that this were the authentic remains of the saint and more importantly, of the miracle of his body being uncorrupted after some many years had passed. (see Nova Et Vetera. The Bones of St Cuthbert. 1901) Like other Celtic saints, his corporeal relics were also venerated and

cared for as a symbol of divine power. Scholars like Bernard W Scholz (1981) argue that the bones of saints rather than being a source of horror or disgust (like perhaps other remains would be) became focal points of divinity and those who believed in this, sought proximity to them.

Finally, let's explore St Patrick, one of Ireland's foremost patron saints, who was born in Britain but is credited with bringing Christianity to Ireland during the fifth century. Relics and artifacts linked to Saint Patrick are not just physical links to history; as with those of other saints, they also act as important historical resources. These items reveal insights into Saint Patrick's life and era, illuminating his religious activities, cultural importance, and the lasting respect he garners. His relics are many and include corporeal and secondary ones. The earliest reference to his relics comes from the "Book of Cuanu" (Annals of Ulster) where an entry states that the saints' relics were enshrined sixty years after his death. However, like scholar Maire de Paor says: " The shrine and relics described [here] are associated in tradition with St Patrick, but their actual connection with the Saint is in most cases impossible to establish". (M. De Paor 1961-9162, pg. 87). One potential source for St David's relics comes from William Barlow appointed to St Davids in 1536 who, being a Protestant, denounced relic veneration amongst other things. In a letter to Thomas Crownwell in 1538 he says that he found and confiscated two hides of silver plate that had two skulls, two arm bones, and a book covered in silver plate. (see TF. G. Cowley, *The Relics of St David: The historical evidence.* pg. 279)

One popular relic associated with this saint is the St Patrick Bell , thought to have belong to him dates of around the eighth century, and is also mentioned in the Annals of Ulster. This object, as many other bells, is said to have been part of the daily rituals in monastic life, and is currently house in the National Museum of Ireland. Encased in a bell shrine in the eleventh century and made out of bronze, gold, and silver, it contains an inscription in Irish which helps date the artifact as well as authenticate it. Another notable secondary relic of this saint is the Staff of Saint Patrick, and it carries profound historical and spiritual importance. It's commonly portrayed with a snake wrapped around it, representing Saint Patrick's triumph over pagan beliefs and the establishment of Christianity in Ireland. As such it is a powerful relic for this faith. According to

tradition, this relic represented his episcopal authority and was instrumental in his miraculous works too. Crafted from wood with detailed carvings, this pastoral staff was thought to hold curative properties and ward off malevolent forces, exemplifying once again the importance of the relic's "power". An idea echoed by author Patrick Geary who states that "In order for an object to be venerated as a relic, a new symbolic function had to be assigned—a function that had its origin in the fabric of the society in which it was to be venerated. Thus the symbolic value of a new or rediscovered relic was only a reflection of the values assigned by the society that honored it." (Geary 1990. pg. 23)

As far as corporeal relics, the St. Patrick's Arm reliquary is a treasured religious artifact said to house remains of the revered saint. This gold shrine, embellished with precious stones and elaborate designs, contains what is believed to be Saint Patrick's preserved arm. It has served as a destination for faithful pilgrims seeking miraculous intervention and healing for many years. This reliquary represents both a tangible link to Saint Patrick and a testament to his enduring spiritual influence. It stands as the only Gothic-style arm reliquary in Ireland and is currently on extended loan to the Ulster Museum from the Diocese of Down and Connor. Another corporeal relic also hosted at the National Museum of Ireland is St Patrick's tooth, believed to have belonged to the saint and recovered from one of his visits to a church in Connacht. While its authenticity continues to be debated, its importance in religious devotion is undeniable.

Two additional points of interest are worth mentioning here when discussing the relics of saints during Medieval times. Firstly, the relevance and influence of the relics were especially significant during those times for reasons already mentioned in this paper, but they needed to be believed as key spiritual and powerful items; as indeed holding healing and miraculous powers. Thus, the relic itself needed authentication not just within the religious world but also because its power rested on the stories and examples of its divinity. Just as author Patrick Geary states: "In order to affect this transmission, something essentially extraneous to the relic itself must be provided: a reliquary with an inscription or iconographic representation of the saint, a document attesting to its authenticity, or a tradition, oral or written, which identified this particular object with a specific individual or at least with a specific type of individual (a saint)" (Geary 1990, pg. 22). This is echoed by Cynthia Hahn's work *What do Reliquaries do for Relics* (

2010) where she states that the desirability of a relic is deeply connected to the power it may have (miracles) or by the acknowledgement of its power, a third element too being an audience to lends its attention to it. She concludes that reliquaries were essential too as a way to transport and authenticate sacred relic. Certainly all the relics mentioned in this paper are potent examples of how their power, their stories, and the saints they were associated with, made them highly sought after objects of veneration and political influence.

Secondly, the acquisition of saintly relics is as significant and interesting as the stories and miracles attached to them. Although the traditional way of acquiring relics was through the act of gifting or exhumation, theft was unfortunately another avenue. In fact, Patrick Geary discusses this very topic in his work *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (1990). The stealing of relics, primarily from monasteries, created additional challenges where the cultural significance of the relics and their identity were often lost or uncertain. Furthermore, the invasions after the eighth century not only caused significant damage to personal property, but more critically, they eliminated records of monastic rights and interrupted the ongoing local practices essential for sustaining the oral traditions at the time. Monasteries, which often lacked military protection, looked to find safety from saints and relics, in turn also created the development of cults around new local patrons. Additionally, for monasteries to have some extra income, the practice of carrying relics around the area provided the clerics with much needed funds while also promoting the saints' miracles and inspiring the local inhabitants. Moreover, the location of relics to a particular area exalted that area's popularity while in a way legitimizing the ecclesiastical authority of it. It is argued by some that one of the goals of Robert of Shrewsbury's *Vita* about St Winefride was to advance the priory of Shrewsbury as the prime location of her relics (see Pritchard, 2009)

In summary, the Christian tradition that emerged among Celtic peoples between the 4th and 12th centuries represents a distinctive fusion of traditional Christian teachings with native Celtic cultural elements. Notably, this spiritual synthesis manifested itself in communal religious organizations, reverence for saints' physical remains, and a significant focus on healing rituals and practices. During these times relics and their locations were for devotees, a focus for prayer

and devotion as well as sources of miracles and healing, and for religious communities that hosted them, they were welcomed vehicles of income. Many scholars echo these ideas, including Jane Cartwright when she says that “Scholars have frequently noted the political importance of saints' Lives and the way in which these narratives were used to empower the medieval dioceses, assert rights and privileges, define ecclesiastical boundaries, and establish rights of sanctuary, as well as promote the cult of a particular patron saint and establish a locus of pilgrimage with a view to both financial and spiritual gain.” (*Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales*, 2002, pg.5)

Likewise, it is worth briefly considering in my conclusion some of the scholarly challenges associated with the study of relics because they too exemplified the significance and importance of such objects when we try to understand their relevance and how they shaped practices in the past. The study of medieval saint relics presents numerous methodological challenges for historians and religious scholars, as well as mere students like me. The fragmentary nature of surviving evidence often leaves researchers with incomplete narratives and documentation, asking them to piece together histories from references in chronicles, pilgrimage accounts, and church inventories. This difficulty is compounded by the widespread destruction of relics and shrines during the Post-Reformation period, when this practice systematically erased centuries of material across Europe. For me these challenges become particularly noticeable when examining Celtic saints whose relics frequently became political pawns in ecclesiastical power struggles, with competing religious centers claiming ownership of the same holy remains at different times. Additionally, the fact that many Celtic saints' relics often moved between monasteries and cathedrals as political fortunes shifted create complex origin stories and archeological realities, including some scarcity when it comes to pilgrimage accounts. And, as previously stated too, there is the added challenge of the authenticity of relics. In spite of this, and as an outsider looking into this wonderful Celtic world, the research of saints' relics although it proved difficult for me was also absolutely fascinating.

In essence, it is reasonable to conclude that numerous of the relics mentioned in this paper (and countless not mentioned here) became vital sources of cultural memory for the Celtic world.

Not merely due to relics containing imagery, artwork, patterns, insignias, and stories of folklore and rituals that would otherwise have been lost, but because they embody the deep beliefs and views of people at a time of such political unrest and societal uncertainty when religion could be of great comfort. Furthermore, relics such as chairs, wells, stones, and ecclesiastical objects frequently provided concrete objects for people to venerate and more importantly, to form an integral part of their regional identity. One can also deduce their significance for the people who venerated them by the way they were handled and cared for, with numerous objects being consistently placed in more intricate containers, highlighting their continued relevance to medieval communities even long after they were made or found. The lasting power of these items is both indisputable and historically rich, even today.

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