

What made a saint a saint in the Middle Ages and what 'services'  
did the saints offer the faithful that ensured their popularity in Wales?

The Middle Ages were a period of significant development in the structures of the Christian church. During this time, the definition of a saint moved beyond the earlier Biblical understanding, which had been a general descriptor for all Christians, and instead became an exclusive status reserved for individuals who mirrored Christ through *imitatio Christi*. Consequently, canonisation became a bureaucratic papal process that was time-consuming and expensive, leading to low success rates and significant delays. These complications necessitated continued reliance on oral tradition to preserve a saint's cult. However, a saint had to provide tangible services to warrant a cult following. This essay explores services such as restorative miracles performed by a living saint or at the shrine of a deceased saint, punitive miracles as expressions of divine justice, and the political legitimacy conferred on local churches. In the specific context of 11th-century Wales, the political upheaval of the Norman Conquest made saints essential tools for maintaining cultural identity and legitimacy in a changing landscape.

To understand how and why an individual is made a saint, it is essential to first understand what a saint is. In the Pauline epistles, some of the oldest extant Christian documents, St Paul designates saints as those newly converted to Christianity, who also formed the first Christian communities. In converting to Christianity, an individual is cleansed of their past sins and ultimately sanctified.<sup>1</sup> If, in this context, every Christian is considered a saint, then sainthood can be understood as the standard requirement for being a Christian.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, by the later Middle Ages, sainthood was understood as the reward for a holy life rather than as a prerequisite. Saints would be required to demonstrate the ability to perform miracles and evidence their life of moral excellence

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Douillet, *What is a saint?*, ed. and trans. by Donald Attwater (Hawthorn Books, 1958), pp.9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.24-25.

to be granted sainthood.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, this essay explores sainthood in light of its medieval definition.

In the period preceding the Middle Ages, Christian sainthood emerged as a lived expression of *imitatio Christi*. The concept of *imitatio Christi* positions Jesus Christ as the ultimate exemplar of moral and spiritual perfection. The faithful sought to emulate Christ's charitable nature and compassion, his presumed celibacy, and his willingness to endure suffering and sacrifice his life.<sup>4</sup> Christians actively participated in *imitatio Christi*, believing this would guarantee eternal salvation and that living as Christ did would ensure true inner peace. Particularly in the first three centuries, when the Christian community faced persecution, the faithful might have been martyred for their faith.<sup>5</sup> Martyrdom was a public spectacle, in which an individual might experience "the most horrific suffering,"<sup>6</sup> such as being crushed between stones or burned alive. Those martyred were exalted within their community for their righteousness and unconditional loyalty to their faith. In fact, martyrs were believed to be the foundations of the Church. In this context, a martyr's death was not merely a personal expression of *imitatio Christi*, in which perhaps only the martyr would benefit, but a communal act of sacrifice that would support and preserve the Church. To correct the moral imbalance caused by the unjust murder of a martyr, they would be venerated by their community, made saints, and, in some communities, might receive "great powers."<sup>7</sup> Here, martyrdom can be understood as an act of *imitatio Christi*, in which the martyr's death and the consequent bestowal of power mirror the Crucifixion and Second Coming of Christ. The martyred saint would further practice *imitatio Christi* by using their power to perform miracles, as the miracles expected of a saint were greatly inspired by those performed by Christ

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How The Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes A Saint, Who Doesn't, And Why* (Touchstone, 1996), pp.67-68.

<sup>4</sup> Linda G. Jones, 'Holiness, saints, and sanctity in Christianity', in *Saints and Sanctity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Striving for Remembrance*, ed. by Alexandre Coello de la Rosa and Linda G. Jones (Routledge, 2020), pp.42-64 (p.42).

<sup>5</sup> Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, 'Holiness, saints, and sanctity in Christianity', in *Saints and Sanctity*, ed. by Coello de la Rosa and Jones, p.42.

<sup>7</sup> Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, pp.22.

himself.<sup>8</sup> However, this reveals a fundamental paradox within early Christian identity. Here, martyrdom, the very event which threatened to extinguish the Christian population, was viewed as the essential foundation of the church. While the spectacle of the martyr's death might otherwise have been intended to end their influence and even deter further support for the Christian faith, the Christian community instead interpreted such a death as an inversion of roles in which the victim becomes the victor. Much like in the case of Christ, the martyr, who has cheated death, is now granted powers to manipulate the physical world, such as to perform miracles, for the benefit of the community.

However, laying down one's life for the faith was not always grounds for sainthood. During the Crusades, if a lay or monastic soldier was killed in the name of Christ and Christendom, he was no longer considered a sinner. In fact, his sins were expiated because he had taken part in a "penitential pilgrimage"<sup>9</sup> to fight in a 'holy war.' Further, he was granted the right to bypass judgment and was permitted direct entrance into heaven. However, the soldier would not be granted sainthood. Unlike the martyrs who gave their lives in imitation of the Passion of Christ, the soldier died in active combat. Here, the soldier is forgiven for his sins but is not elevated to saintly status. Martyrial sanctity remained reserved for those validated by God through the power to perform miracles.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the soldier's ascension to heaven is considered a pardon of sins, but it is not regarded as on the same level as the martyr, whose entrance to heaven is a triumph for the martyr themselves and for Christianity. While the soldier's death is a personal sacrifice, ending with his death, a martyr's death transforms them into a tool the Church uses to inspire the faithful. Furthermore, their death creates a relic, or a site of pilgrimage, while the death of the soldier does not significantly impact the Church.

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, 'Holiness, saints, and sanctity in Christianity', in *Saints and Sanctity*, ed. by Coello de la Rosa and Jones, p.42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Critically, a physical martyrdom was not necessarily essential to sainthood. Kenneth L. Woodward notes that this became particularly clear as Roman persecution ended. An alternative way to attain reverence was a public display of readiness to be martyred. This was particularly evident in the case of imprisoned Christians who were “cheated of martyrdom”<sup>11</sup> yet still venerated due to their public display of faith. It was also possible to gain sainthood through an ascetic life. In the case of St Antony, his *vita* claims that he was a “martyr to his conscience.”<sup>12</sup> Essentially, this meant that sainthood was attained not only by dying in imitation of Christ but also by living in imitation of Christ. In the late Middle Ages, asceticism was regarded as a means to achieve “religious and philosophical perfection.”<sup>13</sup> The ascetic would control their body through severe physical restrictions, including fasting and hardship, such as extreme isolation or discomfort. When fasting, the ascetic would eat solely for sustenance. Here, asceticism was considered a way of affirming the soul’s governance over the physical body. Furthermore, sainthood granted through a life of asceticism challenged the role of the witness. While martyrdom required the witness to be present for a single moment, the ascetic was required to perform for their community, and ultimately for their audience, throughout their whole lives. The only relief from this performance was to be granted death, and ultimately the final validation of their lifelong trial. In this context, the community likely relied on the ascetics’ physical state to substantiate the claims of abstinence. For medieval women, this lifestyle allowed them to counterbalance their social positioning in a society that otherwise viewed the female body as biologically inferior. Here, this journey toward becoming a saint afforded her a life free from the typical social expectations of marriage and childbearing.

The ways in which a saint’s cult would materialise varied significantly throughout the Middle Ages. Until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian community determined an individual’s

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<sup>11</sup> Woodward, *Making Saints*, p.54.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.61.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah E. Hanson, ‘Connections Between Body and Soul: The Asceticism of Medieval Saints’, *UCI Undergraduate Research Journal*, 12 (2009), pp.23-34 (p.24), < [https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wp.ovptl.uci.edu/dist/e/3/files/2023/09/2009\\_03\\_hanson.pdf](https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wp.ovptl.uci.edu/dist/e/3/files/2023/09/2009_03_hanson.pdf) > [accessed 29 April 2026]

sanctity. Upon a saint's death, a cult would emerge “spontaneously.”<sup>14</sup> The absence of a cult upon death determined that the individual was not, in fact, a saint. In this context, a cult was necessary to legitimise a saint. Robert Bartlett observes that the cult comprises three components that serve as primary indicators of a saint's status: a recognised feast day, preserved physical relics, and documented hagiography.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of one or more of these components, the community proved proactive in addressing the deficiency. The discovery of a saint's burial place was termed an *inventio*, the Latin for ‘finding’. It was regarded as a legitimate means of providing a cult with its necessary physical relics. However, the physical relics alone, such as the bodily remains of a saint, were insufficient to sustain a cult. Without hagiographical writings, the saint and their cult lacked the narrative framework necessary to command public reverence.<sup>16</sup>

While the clergy did not regularly engage in matters of saint veneration, in some cases, communities sought the services of local bishops to bless their saints. In these cases, the local bishops were not interested in confirming the saint's legitimacy and did not conduct formal investigations, as was the case in the later papal canonisation process.<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that papal canonisation did not occur before the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the earliest recorded papal canonisation was that of Ulric of Augsburg in 993.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that papal interest in the veneration of saints, particularly in overseeing it, attained new heights. For instance, Pope Alexander III forbade the veneration of any saint not canonised by the papacy in a letter addressed to the King of Sweden: “Even if miracles were performed by him, you are not allowed to venerate him as a saint without the permission of the Church of Rome.”<sup>19</sup> However, the papacy was not ignorant of the difficulty of enforcing this and recognised that it was unreasonable to expect smaller communities to seek papal approval for their saints.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton University Press, 2015), p.57.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.95.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp.102-103.

<sup>17</sup> Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, p.23.

<sup>18</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p.57.

<sup>19</sup> Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, p.26.

In these smaller communities, papal canonisation might have been impractical for various reasons. Papal canonisation was an expensive and time-consuming process. In its maturity, the process began with a postulation. Popes did not initiate canonisations. Instead, they responded to requests. To justify an investigation into canonisation, there had to be a high demand for canonisation and a broad, strong consensus that the deceased was truly a saint. The laity could make their requests known by sending letters to local bishops, who then forwarded them to the papacy. Alternatively, a representative from the papal court could be appointed to oversee the process. If the pope agreed to investigate the candidate saint, commissioners would be sent to the region where the candidate had been active to hold hearings. The commissioners would likely consist of three highly respected churchmen known to the pope and knowledgeable in legal and administrative matters. Along with the commissioners, a proctor was appointed to the case. The proctor represented the petitioners and was responsible for identifying relevant witnesses. Further, it was the proctor who oversaw the drafting of the questionnaire, which would be significant in the inquest. Robert Barlett discusses, in particular, the 1307 case in the canonisation process of Thomas de Cantilupe, highlighting the exhaustive nature of the questionnaire: "Witnesses had to state 'if they were literate or illiterate, noble or commoner, rich or poor and if they were of Thomas's kindred or household, and what their age was.'"<sup>20</sup>

The questionnaire was exceptionally thorough, divided into three sections covering the candidate saint's virtues during their life, their reputation, and their miracles. The section on the saint's life asked for biographical details, including birthplace, parentage, and place of baptism. Questions about their reputation sought to clarify where the claims of sanctity originated and how they were spread. This section of the questionnaire also asked the laity to explain what they understood by the phrase 'public knowledge.' This could suggest that the Church did not initially accept a claim to sainthood until any potential bias was removed. Here, the Church challenges the local cult's distinction

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<sup>20</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p.62.

between rumours and truth. While a local cult might believe the truth lies in witnessing a miracle, the Church required far more rigorous scrutiny and questioning. Consequently, this suggests a hierarchy in which the Church is above the cult, and only when the Church is convinced of sainthood are the cult's claims proven true. Perhaps contradictory to the common understanding of sainthood as a reward for a virtuous life or death, the Church regarded sainthood as a legal status to be authorised. Perhaps the most elaborate section of the questionnaire was the one on miracles, which comprised 15 subsections. In fact, the nature of these proceedings was of great similarity to those of the inquisitions against heretics, which were occurring at the same time. Witnesses were required to swear oaths, could be cross-examined by commissioners, and had their evidence recorded by notaries. These inquests were sometimes called a 'process' (*processus*). While this had no technical meaning, it is important to note that it was a word commonly used in legal proceedings.<sup>21</sup>

These inquiries were not without difficulty, as evidenced by the language barriers that often arose. The notaries would likely write in Latin, and it was not an unfounded possibility that the commissioners might speak a different language from the witnesses. In these instances, the inquiry would require interpreters. As Bartlett noted, in the case of Thomas de Cantilupe, 'monoglot' Welsh speakers required the services of bilingual friars from Hereford friary, and the case saw the use of four languages: Latin, English, French, and Welsh. Once the hearings were complete, the documents would be sent to the papal court, organised by chaplains, before being evaluated by a panel of three cardinals. The number of documents could be substantial, as reflected in the time between the initial inquest and the official canonisation. For example, the canonisation process of Louis XI spanned 14 years from the initial inquest to his canonisation. Successful candidates would be recognised by the Pope in a liturgical ceremony and in a canonisation bull.<sup>22</sup> However, the success rate for the papal canonisation of candidate saints was as low as 50 per cent. Consequently, papal canonisations were rare. It is estimated that approximately 78 saints were canonised by the papacy throughout the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp.62-63.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp.63-64.

Middle Ages. This number is remarkably low, particularly when compared with the 482 saints canonised by John Paul II alone between 1978 and 2005.<sup>23</sup>

We can observe the complications of the papal canonisation process in the case of Osmund, the Bishop of Salisbury, who died in 1099. Following his death, the clergy of Salisbury repeatedly sought his canonisation in 1228, 1387, 1406, 1416, 1442, and 1452. Only the final attempt was successful, leading to his canonisation in 1457, over three centuries after his death. The cost of this was substantial for the time. At just over £713, it was the equivalent of the average annual income of a medieval English baron.<sup>24</sup> This exorbitant fee ensured that only the elite, those with wealth and influence, could pursue the canonisation of saints.

The centuries-long gap between Osmund's death and his formal recognition as a saint indicates that his memory was preserved through a communal oral tradition. On the oral preservation of a saint and their miracles, Simon Yarrow argues that the faithful negotiated through conversation to make sense of what they had witnessed. This conversation is what essentially realises the miracle. Yarrow argues that it matters little whether the miracle is factually correct, as its meaning is created in the recitation of the miracle rather than in the miracle itself.<sup>25</sup> In Osmund's case, it was the clergy of Salisbury and those who venerated him that maintained his presence and perhaps disseminated his renown. This oral tradition, which endured for over three centuries, would ultimately shape his official *vita*. Here, the people of Salisbury collectively authored Osmund's sainthood. This suggests that, despite rigorous attempts to secure papal canonisation, oral tradition was not regarded as a temporary substitute. In fact, it allowed local people to shape their saint to the needs and demands of their time and surroundings. Thomas Heffernan observes that, although a *vita* may be authored by an individual, it is in fact the community that functions as the experts on the subject and provides the essential

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp.59-60.

<sup>24</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p.60.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Yarrow, *Saints and Their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-Century England*, (Clarendon Press, 2006) pp.20-21.

information that informs the content of the vitae.<sup>26</sup> Regarding the process of papal canonisation in Osmund's case, particularly the postulation stage, his sainthood must have been widely acknowledged before he could be considered a saint. While papal canonisation may have enhanced Osmund's wider popularity, his initial reputation as a saint was established primarily through oral tradition.

The papacy used canonisation as a means of exercising control over the Christian community. Thomas Heffernan argues that the papacy established a "machinery of canonisation"<sup>27</sup> that effectively reconfigured pre-existing saints and their cults to conform to its canonisation policies. The reformed saint and their cult could then be further promoted to a wider audience. However, the papacy was careful in its adaptations, so as not to isolate the pre-existing cult. Particularly when considering Wales in the Middle Ages, the cults of native saints sought canonisation, perhaps as a means of justifying their saints to invading Norman audiences, who brought with them their own saints.<sup>28</sup> These cults might have turned to pragmatic means to guarantee their survival. In the case of St Cadog, his *vita* served as "political propaganda"<sup>29</sup> to secure the physical protection of his church's territory. Further, evidence suggests that the church sought and maintained relationships with local rulers to secure the protection and grants necessary for the cult's survival.<sup>30</sup> These powerful relationships might have established this particular cult as worthy of the respect of Norman invaders. At the very least, this might have established the cult well enough for the papacy to be hesitant to adapt its saint.

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<sup>26</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, p.20.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p.22.

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Bell, 'The development of the saints' cults and the ecclesiastical landscape of early medieval south Wales, c. 600-1200' (unpublished PhD thesis, Bangor University, 2022) <<https://research.bangor.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-development-of-the-saints-cults-and-the-ecclesiastical-landsc/>> [accessed 25 April 2026] p.182.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.51.

Evidently, medieval Welsh saints were neither devoid of nor immune to political influence. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century Norman Conquest and subsequent domination of Wales secured its future as a “land of plural cultures,”<sup>31</sup> with settlers arriving from England, northern France, and Flanders. Consequently, the structures of the Church changed, including the introduction of new religious orders, such as the Benedictines. This ecclesiastical reform, prompted by the conquest, generated interest among both Welsh and Norman clergy in the histories of Welsh churches and their saints. This led to a surge in writing about the early Welsh Church, notably the saints’ Lives, in the late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. This trend can be observed in the Life of St David, as written by Rhygyfarch in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. Over a span of eleven years, St David’s Cathedral had endured great misfortune. In 1080, it was raided by Hiberno-Scandinavians. In 1090, its shrine was stolen and looted of its silver and gold. Finally, in 1091, the cathedral was destroyed in a further attack. It is possible that Rhygyfarch wrote the Life of St David following these misfortunes. The original manuscripts used by Rhygyfarch to compile the Life, according to his account, were ancient and had eroded over time.<sup>32</sup> Since the original manuscripts used by Rhygyfarch are now lost, what we understand of St David and his Life is filtered through the lens of the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, a period of Norman conquest and the domination of Wales. As Heffernan suggests, this process of restructuring a saint and its cult allowed the cathedral to meet its needs, such as promoting the cult and elevating the saint’s prestige.

Before the Church received state support from Constantine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christian saints were buried unceremoniously in catacombs beneath Rome. Outside of larger cities, most saints were buried in ordinary cemeteries. As the Roman populace converted to Christianity, they moved in droves to visit the grave sites, effectively abandoning the ancient pagan temples.<sup>33</sup> Here, these Christians would engage in tactile piety, believing that “divine power works through things that have been consecrated by

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<sup>31</sup> Huw Pryce, *Writing Welsh History: From the Early Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century*, (Oxford University Press, 2022), p.35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, pp.35-41.

<sup>33</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, pp.8-11.

use and contact with the hands”<sup>34</sup> of saints. Such items became contact relics, considered as holy as corporeal relics and possessing the same power. It was possible for any Christian to obtain a contact relic from a saint's burial site, such as dust from the tomb or oil from the lamps lit there. Bartlett notes that, in some cases, the public was exceedingly keen to obtain a contact relic for themselves, for example, by plucking hair from the head and beard of St Nikon’s corpse. Regardless of their method of acquisition, contact relics rendered the saint’s power portable. Consequently, they could be retained by the faithful in their daily lives, enabling them to harness their divine power.<sup>35</sup>

Of the many miracles performed by medieval saints, those of sudden healing were perhaps the most prevalent. These miracles included restoring sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, as was often observed at the tomb of St Teilo.<sup>36</sup> Seeking healing at a saint's burial site was a practice frequently referenced in medieval poetry. For example, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh poet Dafydd Epynt, on seeking healing from St Cathen, pleaded to the saint to “Succour me at your graveside.”<sup>37</sup> An individual might seek a particular saint depending on the ailment they have, such as St Margaret of Antioch, who is invoked for protection during childbirth. These miracles would be recorded by the clergy, who would use technical medical terminology to present the saint’s intervention as a legitimate medical alternative. In medieval Wales, professional physicians might have been scarce and costly, thereby increasing demand for healthcare. Here, local and papally canonised saints benefited from being regarded as reliable and accessible practitioners. The faithful might seek miracles from saints by sleeping overnight at their shrines, a practice known as ‘incubation’. This was particularly helpful for poor pilgrims, who might have nowhere else to stay. Pilgrims also benefited from incubation, as it was considered a righteous act to distribute bread among the poor at the saint’s tomb. However, it was crucial to seek permission to stay overnight at a saint’s shrine. Bartlett discusses a case in which a woman brought her nephew to the church of St Maximinus

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.244.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp.239-250.

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c.1100–1500* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.34, doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43099-1

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.39.

for healing. They slept at the church for eight days with no results before being prompted to ask for permission to stay. Upon doing so, the boy was promptly healed overnight.<sup>38</sup>

Those in need might also seek healing from the holy well of a saint, or even from natural topographical features linked to miraculous incidents.<sup>39</sup> For example, Ynys Llanddwyn, where St Dwynwen lived, and both a church and a monastery were established, serves as a contact relic. Dwynwen died as a hermit on the island around the year 460, after which the island began to attract pilgrims. Johnathan M. Wooding argues that the island's topography, being described as "severed from the mainland,"<sup>40</sup> functions as a metaphor for the intense "regulation of monastic life."<sup>41</sup> The island on which Dwynwen lived could be considered a liminal space between the physical world and a spiritual exile. The monasteries and islands of Wales, the eremitical lives of their saints, and their cults attracted pilgrims. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Church had begun to appropriate the saintly relics of these islands to ensure continued visitor interest. If the islands were not accessible to pilgrims, the relics were moved to a more suitable location. The relocation of these relics suggests that the Church sought to increase the number of pilgrims to whom the relics were accessible, which would, in turn, result in more offerings made and fees paid to the Church. While a saint might be popular locally, they were not financially beneficial to the Church if the saint or their relics were inaccessible to its cult. However, this provided the Church with the opportunity to appropriate grassroots saints. This can be observed in the case of St Gwenfrewy, whose relics were relocated from North Wales to Shrewsbury. While this move might have enhanced her legend, Patrick Geary believes

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<sup>38</sup> Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, pp.359-360.

<sup>39</sup> Bell, 'The development of the saints', p.9.

<sup>40</sup> George Nash, 'Archaeological Evaluation For St Dwynwen's Church, Ynys Mon', *Archaeology in Wales*, 59 (2019), pp.83-90 (p.84), [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/George-Nash-2/publication/350772345\\_ARCHAEOLOGICAL\\_EVALUATION\\_FOR\\_ST\\_DWYNWEN'S\\_CHURCH\\_YNYS\\_MON/links/6070d9b7a6fdcc5f7794ba1a/ARCHAEOLOGICAL-EVALUATION-FOR-ST-DWYNWENS-CHURCH-YNYS-MON.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/George-Nash-2/publication/350772345_ARCHAEOLOGICAL_EVALUATION_FOR_ST_DWYNWEN'S_CHURCH_YNYS_MON/links/6070d9b7a6fdcc5f7794ba1a/ARCHAEOLOGICAL-EVALUATION-FOR-ST-DWYNWENS-CHURCH-YNYS-MON.pdf) [accessed 1 May 2026].

<sup>41</sup> Johnathan M. Wooding, 'Island monasticism in Wales: towards an historical archaeology', *Studia Celtica*, 54, (2020), pp.1-28 (p.7), doi: 10.16922/SC.54.2

that a relic loses its value when it is removed from its original locality, as it is the community that confers value on it.<sup>42</sup>

While we may traditionally associate saints with these righteous healing miracles, it is perhaps less well known that saints' miracles may also involve punishment. José Antonio López Sabatel notes that although the modern audience might perceive such punishments as cruel, they were considered just by medieval audiences and hagiographers.<sup>43</sup> López Sabatel explains that several contextual factors may have influenced this medieval attitude toward punitive miracles. Notably, these acts were designed to mirror Biblical precedents. In doing so, the saints provided a clear and predictable moral framework. This was beneficial to a medieval Welsh audience, particularly during the turmoil of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a time when shifting populations meant laws and customs were constantly adapting. Further, these punitive miracles performed by saints in the high and late Middle Ages were essentially stripped of their brutality, as their alignment with scripture rendered them beyond human reproach or secular questioning. By extension, these miracles should be understood as expressions of the medieval period's distinctive conception of justice.

Perhaps a less obvious example of the services provided by saints is through their feast days, which sustained their popularity as these days were the engine of medieval social life. To understand this, we can explore the feast day of St Eluned. Eluned was a virgin saint and was martyred in Brecon by a rejected suitor. Evidently, she had lived a life of sanctity through preserving her virginity for her bridegroom, Christ. While her feast day may be understood as falling on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, this information is absent from extant

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<sup>42</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Furta sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1990) p.128. <<https://www-fulcrum-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/epubs/9c67wq25b?locale=en#page=144>> [accessed 2 May 2026]

<sup>43</sup> José Antonio López Sabatel, 'The Role of Divine Retribution in the Twelfth-Century Lives of Saint Winefride', *Itinerantes. Revista de Historia y Religión*, 2022, pp.223-240 (p.232), doi:10.53439/revitin.2022.1.11.

medieval Welsh calendars.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of the confusion about the date of her feast day, it is believed to have drawn considerable crowds from great distances to seek curative miracles. These participants, often of mixed ages and genders, celebrated the feast day by dancing. This dance, which occurred in the church and its cemetery, was accompanied by songs. Laura Hellsten describes this dance as a “situation of worship where people are affected by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>45</sup> St Eluned’s feast day provided the opportunity for her cult to gather. Furthermore, it enabled the saint to perform miracles of physical healing, thereby exemplifying her saintly powers. Recitations of these events might have allowed the cult to grow further, increase in numbers, and consequently laminate Eluned’s status as a saint.

In summary, becoming a saint in the Middle Ages was a multifaceted process. This process revealed a significant difference between the status of sainthood as regulated by the Church and that recognised by the laity. In the eyes of the papacy, a saint was considered legitimate only after thorough examination. Such an examination was costly, time-consuming, and, consequently, an elite pursuit far removed from the needs of the faithful. However, the laity regarded a saint as legitimate because of a saint’s relics, the miracles associated with a saint’s topography, such as wells, and the recitation of the saint’s stories. In 11<sup>th</sup>-century Medieval Wales, saints were indicative of a cultural struggle amid shifting power dynamics. Saints often had to undergo restructuring to ensure their survival under Norman influence. This not only guaranteed their status as saints but also allowed them to retain their land. Furthermore, a saint had to serve their cult to sustain it. This was achieved through miracles performed by the saint, either in life or in death. For example, healing miracles, such as those performed at the tomb of St Teilo, helped ensure a saint’s popularity by providing tangible results, especially in the face of ailments that humans could not cure. Perhaps paradoxically, it was through the performance of punitive miracles that a community might be provided with a moral order

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<sup>44</sup> Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (University of Wales Press, 2022), p.71, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=7386140&c=UERG&ppg=90#>> [accessed 4 May 2026].

<sup>45</sup> Laura Hellsten, ‘The Liminal Space of Medieval Dance Practices: The Case of St. Eluned’s Feast Day’, *Arts*, 11 (2022), 79 (p.11), doi:10.3390/arts11040079

otherwise denied to them by secular law. Ultimately, sainthood in Wales in the Middle Ages was negotiated by the faithful based on functional utility. By providing services, such as miracles, to their cults, saints ensured their enduring popularity. Sainthood in the Middle Ages was, then, a symbiotic relationship between the cult and its saint.

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