

The Cult of the Solider Saint

Illtud

An Essay Prepared For

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Introducing Saint Illtud, the Solider-Saint

Illtud ap Bicanus ap Emyr Llydaw is a revered Welsh Saint, born in Brittany in the late Fifth or early Sixth century, around whom a cult developed, emanating from the Vale of Glamorgan in South Wales and spreading to the North of Wales and Brittany. A prototype of *The Renaissance Man*, Illtud was a theologian, a solider, a scholar, an agricultural expert, and a man endowed with prophetic and spiritual and or magical powers. He was also a complex and flawed man who seemed to consistently deal with past, unnamed sins and did not have regard for women. Using the three primary or early sources, which include a hagiographical biography or *Life* written in the early twelfth century by an unknown scribe and two additional medieval works, an abbreviated *Life* written by John of Tynemouth in the first half of the thirteenth century, and *Moliant I Illtud*, a long poem by Lewis Morgannwg written in the mid-fifteenth hundreds, a summary biography of the famous Holy Man can be synthesized.

The translation used for the three primary source manuscripts, unless noted otherwise within the body of this work, is from Mary Jones's online *Celtic Literature Collective*.

Illtud's father was a Breton prince called Bicanus, a high-born warrior of renowned bloodline. His mother a princess of the Britons called Rieingulid, daughter of Amlawdd, who was fashioned King of all Britannia.¹ Rieingulid, was perfect and chaste in all her ways and her virtue did she pass to their son, Illtud, whose name means 'safe from every fault'.² A perfect child, Illtud was instructed in the seven arts, the five keys of wisdom and as the Vita writes, 'None was more eloquent throughout Gaul than Illtud, the soldier, in discoursing philosophic eloquence'.³ Although being reared in philosophy and devout religion, Illtud followed his father into the military life.

In the process of time, Illtud traveled to what is now Wales to visit the court of the famous King Arthur, whose men received him gladly. While in Wales, Illtud visited another court, that of King Poulentus, king of the Glamorgan folk.⁴ The latter regent was so impressed with Illtud that he bade he and his wife, Trynihid, remain at court and denominated Illtud master of his soldiers.

One day a hunting accident in the territories of Saint Cadog (also in Glamorgan) changed the course of Illtud's life (and by extension that of Wales) forever. Illtud was guiding the royal household and the hunting party sent message to an abbot, rudely demanding that the preacher feed his party. The abbot deemed the demand rude and improper but acquiesced and offered the meal. Before the hunting party could eat, the earth opened her mouth and swallowed the whole of them, sparing only Illtud, who did not consent to the crudeness of the demands. However, the incident brought Illtud under great conviction. Seeing the miracle, he

¹ Mary Jones, *Celtic Literature Collective* (2010)
<<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/illtud.html>>
[accessed 21 July 2025]

² Mary Jones, *Celtic Literature Collective* (2010)
<<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/illtud.html>>
[accessed 21 July 2025]

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

asked of Cadog what he might do to atone for his own faults and Cadog advised him to leave secular life altogether and give himself wholly to learning, and to the Lord.⁵

A second major event further pivoted Illtud's life from married solider to unwed hermit. An angel, claiming to be sent from the Creator, bade Illtud forsake his wife and live a monastic lifestyle. The angel inquired and commanded, 'What, pray, is carnal love but a horror and the source of sins? One who loves much burns as the burning of fire, a hurtful thing, an odious thing which leads to punishment. Let it not burn thee, neither let lust incite thee, a beast of poison. Thy wife is comely, but better is chastity. Who would choose for such to forgo things eternal?' ⁶ Illtud discards his wife in a manner swift and cruel crying, 'The woman now of little worth'. ⁷Following multiple rejection attempts, Illtud is at last free of his spouse and finds the famous Dyfrig, the very bishop who crowned King Arthur, from whom he is fully ordained.

Illtud takes on students and mentors them in Scripture and the monastic way but his fame, at this time, is in arena of agriculture, where his skills are generations ahead of his time and his ability to sow and reap, to water and direct hydration are miraculous. At this time, he develops a rival with another figure of Arthurian fame. Enter Meirchion the Mad (the same who features heavily as the father of Mark in the Tristan and Iseult cycles). Following an incident involving a magical stag that could draw a carriage and do Illtud's bidding, Illtud, refusing Meirchion's covetousness over the charmed animal, sit for a meal. Illtud performed an enchantment that caused Meirchion to taste the finest meads and fullest wine, even though he was only consuming water. The 'water' made Meirchion drunk, and in his drunkenness an angel visited him, rebuking the king of his intrusions and rude encroaches upon Illtud.

The Mad King goes on to have a complex relationship with the Saint but there is no ambiguity about the aims of Meirchion's steward, Cyflym, whose evil deeds prompted Illtud to 'melt him like wax before a fire.'⁸ This provokes the mad king's wrath, who seeks to kill Illtud, who through prayer and penance, divines an escape route leading to a secret cave along the Ewenny River. For the space of one year and three days did Illtud do penance in the cave, sleeping every night upon a cold stone, but God fed him, as it were manna from heaven.⁹

As the years progressed, Meirchion sent other stewards, who suffered like miraculous due comeuppance and ultimately Illtud caused the king himself to be swallowed by the earth (although never killing him. After this, Illtud received ecclesiastical orders and the chapter of Illtud's life most commonly known ensues. He becomes the great headmaster of what is now Llantwit Major, teaching countless Britons, and students from abroad in astronomy, history, agriculture, philosophy and Scripture. Along the way he makes room for several additional miracles, including healing his former spouse's blindness (for daring to look upon him) and spends his later years in a cave (the legends seem to make two different caves, not one); experiencing one final miracle whereby, when praying in the cave a boat bearing the body of a special person was conducted to Illtud, an alter levitating above the dead man's head. Illtud buried the body in the cave and worked many miracles with the alter.

The Life of Illtud ends with a chapter that brings the reader fast-forwarded into the time of the unknown writer. The Normans attempt to sack and desecrate Saint Illtud's and just a few

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

defenders are endowed with power from heaven to vanquish above three thousand Normans and English, the writer personally giving Illtud credit for the victory.¹⁰

Tracing the Cult of Saint Illtud – Foundational Topics

The Age of Saints and the Importance of Hero Worship

The composite biography of Illtud is unusual, fascinating and deeply complex but also similar to the legends and lives of other saints from the 5th -7th century. An era disputably called *The Dark Ages* in Europe, a morose time bereft of learning, longevity and prosperity. A time of despair, ignorance and tyranny. Not so for Wales, Cornwall, Ireland and Brittany. South Wales based historian and author Terry Breverton calls this time '*The Age of Saints*' in his encyclopedic tome, *The Welsh Book of Saints*. Where elsewhere darkness is perceived, Breverton's preamble declares:

It was a time when Romanized Wales held the torch of Christianity alight, when it had been extinguished in all of Europe except for a few report Irish Islands. To the early Welsh and Irish saints of this period, the Christian church owes an unacknowledged debt – without them the history of Christianity in Europe would have been very different.¹¹

The historian then goes on to catalog over nine hundred fascinating men and women endowed with supernatural powers to heal, to curse, to administer justice, to teach and guide mankind, often having power over nature, or matter itself. This was the indeed the Age of Saints, and the rise of early Medieval Christian cults that celebrated, venerated and profited from them.

Hero worship or veneration is not limited to ecclesiastical circles, and a modern analogy may provide insight into the mind of a sixth century Welsh parishioner. Consider the beaming, joy experienced by a parent when their child is accepted into a university that was attended by a favorite family hero, religious icon, great philosopher or celebrity. Such life trajectory changing moments might be exclaimed as "*Our son was accepted to Morehouse College! He will*

¹⁰ Mary Jones, *Celtic Literature Collective* (2010)
<<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/illtud.html>>
[accessed 21 July 2025]

¹¹ Terry D Breverton, *The Welsh Book of Saints* (Porth Glyndwr: Glyndwyr Publishing, 2000). Pg. 7

study where Dr. King studied, he will make his diploma walk where Dr. King walked!”. Many American adolescents, hoping to be the next great football quarterback, go to Michigan University for no other reason save that Tom Brady attended and played there. Heroes inspire, society celebrates heroes, and institutions market and benefit financially, or by association and acclaim, from the heroes to whom they attach. This dynamic is timeless and the root origin of ‘cult worship,’ and was no different one thousand years ago, or fifteen hundred years ago.

In the place of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr or Tom Brady, a 12th century Welsh villager, would have been inspired to study or worship where the great Saints, Kings or villains of old once trod. They may have been privy to the relics of Holy Men and Women who wielded supernatural powers, raised the dead, levitated, slayed dragons, caused the deaf to hear, or the blind to recover their sight. And the ecclesia that owned the church would profit mightily from the offerings made by devotees.

And, if inclined to a life of study, a young person might covet, above all else, to attend Llantwit Major in the Vale of Glamorgan. Literature and legend proclaim the illustrious college as the Harvard University of its time, boasting an unparalleled cast of famous alumni from the *Celtic Age of Saints*. Saint Patrick, Gildas, Samson, Dewi Sant, and Maelgwn Gwynedd were reputed to learn under its headmaster, Illtud.

This essay examines the origins and development of the namesake of the monastic college. The historicity of Saint Illtud (and other characters from his era) will be considered but not wrested from the aim of this work, which is to present the primary and secondary literary sources, placenames, and traditional and circumstantial evidence to help trace Illtud’s cult.

What is a Celtic Christian Cult?

Prior to tracing the cult of Saint Illtud, there are two important foundational items germane to the study. First, an operating definition of a Christian *cult*, especially in the context of what is loosely and carefully described as Medieval Celtic Christianity and secondly, some attention or explanation to the uncomfortable five-to-six-hundred-year gap between the era where most famous saints are claimed to have lived and the earliest writings about them is needed.

The contemporary connotation of the word ‘cult’, in a Christian context, is overwhelmingly negative and is not connected to how it is used to describe early medieval Christian communities in Wales, Ireland, and Brittany. The modern notion connects to groups or sects who deny the Divinity of Jesus, elevate outside writings to be equal to or greater than the authority of Scripture, have strict hierarchies, exclusive membership for salvation and tight doctrinal controls over followers.

There isn't a standard academic definition of a medieval Celtic Christian cult but, by sharp contrast, in Wales in the 6th century there were communities of believers with little or no structure, standardization or hierarchy, loosely organized around an Abbot or Saint, living a simple life of study and reflection via early forms of monasticism. After the passing of the Saint, he or she would be venerated and their parish, holy well, grave site or other key locations would become centers for spiritual pilgrimages with a focus on sacred relics (bones, bells, vestments and other physical items) that connected the earthly with the heavenly for purpose of blessing, healing or good fortune. It is this latter sense of 'cult' that is used throughout this essay.

The Gap – Did Twelfth Century Monks Invent Illtud and Other Famous Saints?

Breverton catalogues over nine hundred saints.¹² However, researchers have a sense of skepticism about the historicity, even of first tier, famous saints such as David, because the earliest documented mention of their lives appears in religious hagiographies, poems and fragments of other prose written in the 11th and 12th centuries. This gap creates a fair academic discomfort. In *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, edited by Professor Jane Cartwright, contributing scholars Nerys Ann Jones and Morfydd E. Owen summarize:

The earliest recorded Lives of the Welsh saints, with one exception, that of the early Vita Samson is (written in and mainly concerning Brittany), were composed in Latin in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.¹³

The authors describe the corpus of available manuscript evidence as scarce and fragmentary¹⁴ and provide a summary level snapshot of the scant available early sources:

Vita Davidis (Dewi) was written by the cleric Rhigyfarch sometime after 1081 and Lifris' Vita Cadoei (Cadog) belongs to the same period.

The Lives of Dubricius (Dyfrig), Oudoceus (Euddogwy) and Teliavus (Teilo) were incorporated into the Liber Landavensis in the twelfth century, and the important collection of Lives included in British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian A xiv, which was based on an earlier collection, was copied c.1200. All hagiographical

¹² Terry D Breverton, *The Welsh Book of Saints* (Porth Glyndwr: Glyndwyr Publishing, 2000), pg. i

¹³ J. Wyn Evans and Others, *Celtic Hagiography And Saints' Cults*, edited by Jane Cartwright, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pg. 45

¹⁴ J. Wyn Evans and Others, *Celtic Hagiography And Saints' Cults*, edited by Jane Cartwright, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pg. 45

material in the vernacular dates from a later period.¹⁵

Hagiographical prose, too few poems and too large a gap presents a challenge, but one that can be explained and overcome. There are clear factors that allow for a triangulation and arrival at the reasonable conclusion that most the saints were *real*, and the Age of Saints not a mere work of propaganda.

First, because there are few documents from the 6th to 12th century available to us now, doesn't mean they weren't available to the monks and scribes at the time. Internal evidence reveals references to earlier sources that show up separately in works written by clerics separated by scores of years and great distances. In *Llanilltud, The Story of a Celtic Christian Community*, late author Philip Morris, who was the Archdeacon of Margam and endeavored to provide the first scholarly book wholly dedicated to Llantwit Major, uses the subject of Illtud to capture an example of this:

Towards the end of the ninth century, Wrmonoc, a native of Léon in Brittany, wrote the Vita Pauli Aureliani (Life of St Paul Aurelian) about the founder of Saint-Pol-de-Léon. Wrmonoc had not visited Llanilltud and confuses Illtud's school with Samson's monastery at Caldey.

However, Wrmonoc describes Illtud as "a man of noble birth and great learning" and as having many disciples, including Paul Aurelian.

Some of the miracles in the Vita Pauli Aureliani appear in the later Vita Illtuti, though the Vita Pauli Aureliani was not known in Wales at the time.

Does this mean that there was an earlier Life of St Illtud in existence, adapted by Wrmonoc and the writer of the Vita Illtuti to suit their purposes?¹⁶

Although Morris is questing for accuracy and exposing motifs, errors and omissions, the fruit of this and other efforts reveals internal evidence that the later writers were independently working from earlier sources.

Secondly, and with perhaps more weight, is the subject of Placenames. Parishes, villages, hills, caves and sacred wells celebrate the story of the Age of Saints in the very taxonomy of the Wales and Brittany. Twelfth Century writers were recording the placenames connected to the histories and legends they heard, not rewriting maps and creating new placenames based upon local legends. Poet R.S Thomas, in 'The Moon to Lley'n' declares 'the Parish has a saint's name that time cannot unfrock.'¹⁷ Llanilltud, or "Illtud's Parish" (with high variation of spelling) appears as early as the 7th century in the Vita Samson (a critical manuscript

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 397

¹⁷ Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 57

that will be revisited later in this work) and could not have been a fabrication six to seven centuries later.

The gap is shortened by internal evidence, and all but removed as a concern by the abundance of placenames that embed the history and legends within the very naming convention of the land, and lastly, two more points of emphasis close the gap. Early to Middle Welsh was in transformational development and stabilization of the time, leaving little evidence of the former and more evidence of the latter and finally, an eruption of writing in the 11th and 12th century is directly explainable by the Norman Conquest. Morris writes:

The Vita Illtuti (The Life of Illtud) was written at a critical time in Welsh Church history, when the pre-Norman clasau or communities were being brought within the jurisdiction of the bishop of each of the newly created territorial dioceses. Lives of the early founders of the communities were sometimes written to show the claim of the diocese over the clas and its lands by exaggerating an ancient connection; sometimes they were written to show the importance of one clas over another. It was a case of reconstructing the past to justify the present or prepare for the future.¹⁸

The dynamic lends evidence to embellishment and romanticization but in so doing provides rock solid evidence that these holy men and women *were*, and that their cults can be traced and studied. The monks and clerics were not inventing characters from nothing or constructing strawmen into saints. This would have been dangerous, foolish, and of great threat to their occupation and persons. Rather they were trying to claim saints for their territory, proclaim or exaggerate genealogical ties, and bolster their prominence and position, which was a gravely serious matter at the time.

With this foundation built, that the cults can be traced, and their historicity for the better part trusted (while at the same time knowing that documentation is scarce and that romantic embellishments occur,) the celebrity Saint Illtud can be properly introduced.

Tracing the Cult of Saint Illtud – Foundational Topics

The Primary and Early Literary Sources

¹⁸ Ibid, Location 357

There is a story or biography of a man. There is an era or timeframe in which the man dwelt. But these two variables do not a cult make. To forensically trace the development of a community of believers or pilgrims bringing offerings and devotions to Illtud (or his successors, relics or places of habitation), a study of the literary materials is needed.

There is no *direct* evidence for a cult of Saint Illtud prior to the 11th century. Morris explains:

No pre-Norman Life of St Illtud remains; the earliest is the *Vita Illtuti*,³⁵ which appears to have been written early in the twelfth century by one of the clerics Sancti Illtuti, the 'clergy of St Illtud'. He writes in the past tense about William Rufus, the son of William the Conqueror, and Robert Fitzhamon, the Norman ruler of Glamorgan; Robert died in 1107, so the *Vita Illtuti* must have been written sometime after that date.¹⁹

When translated into English, the manuscript consists of twenty-six chapters and is believed to have been written near Monmouth in the twelfth century. This Life is included with other Saints in British Library Cotton manuscript Vespasian A.XIV. Setting aside the legendary and supernatural elements, there are important markers with *Vita Illtuti* that provide clues that a cult was already established, potentially at risk, and vying for prominence or continued viability.

In this telling of Illtud's life, the reader is told that he visits Dyfrig to receive his tonsure and clerical habit. Later Dyfrig visits the valley (Hoddnant) where Illtud dwells and marks out the boundaries of the area, including a place for a cemetery and an oratory. A contemporary book, *Liber Landavensis* or Book of Llandaff describes how Dyfrig appointed Illtud to be abbot of a monastery 'called after him'²⁰ as part of the organization of the diocese. There is no evidence that sixth century Celtic Churches had this form of governance whatsoever, so the anonymous compiler (of both books) is using the *Lives* to justify the fact that the community in Llanilltud at the time were under the oversight of the Bishop of Llandaff. Writing current events or conditions backwards into history to make a claim demonstrates that there was a community there, connected to Illtud, and worth clamoring or posturing over.

Illtud is one of a handful of Saints whose frequent mentions allow a triangulation of several circumstantial pieces of evidence to validate that he *was and* was very well known. The *Vita Illtuti* of the 12th century, and its abridged counterpart written a century or less later, are the earliest *Lives*, but not the earliest mentions of Illtud. This is a rarity and allows the hints of an earlier cult to be heavily considered.

¹⁹ Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 355

²⁰ Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 355

Moving backwards in time, Illtud appears in the *Vita Cadoci*, written this time by a known author, Archdeacon of Glamorgan, in the eleventh century. This time it is Saint Cadoc, and not Dyfrig, who gives Illtud his habit and tonsure. Morris asserts, Any attempt at historical accuracy is overtaken by the desire to show the primacy of the monastery of Llancarfan over its nearby rival, Llanilltud.²¹ Again, rivals and Church intrigue are markers of existence, and development. Two hundred years later, Illtud appears in another early source, *Vita Pauli Aureliani*. The author, a Breton, had never visited Southeast Wales and makes many key errors of geography and even locates Llanilltud incorrectly. However, it's an early source that shortens the gap between the actual historical figure and those writing about him by another two hundred years.

Then further back yet is the most important manuscript evidence for Saint Illtud, and that found in the seventh century *Vita Samsonis* (Life of Saint Samson). Some scholars suggest that this Life was written as early as 610 C.E from Dol in Brittany, citing the geographic names.²²

Vita Samsonis establishes several imperatives when studying the development of the cult of Illtud. First, it allows for a reasonable calibration for the time of Illtud's activity:

From this, Taylor believes the probable year of Samson's consecration is 521; assuming Samson was then 35, the canonical age for a bishop, he would have been born in 486.²³ The *Vita Samsonis* says that when Samson was about five years old, his parents brought him to "the school of the famous master of the Britons, Eltut by name". This suggests that Illtud's monastic school was well established by 490.²⁴

If Samson's Life was written around 610, and its author had this to say of Illtud, 'in truth, Eltut was of all the Britons the most accomplished in all the Scriptures, namely of the Old and New Testaments, and in those of philosophy of every kind, of geometry namely, and of rhetoric, grammar and arithmetic, and of all the theories of philosophy. And by birth he was a most wise magician, having knowledge of the future,'²⁴ then there is direct evidence, within ninety years of the Soldier Saint's life, that he was celebrated and given very early cult-like or celebrity status.

Lastly, the details about Illtud in Samson's Life remove some of what could be significant later additions. The miracles are fewer, the description of Illtud much closer to that of a benign hermit, and the unusual and untoward discarding of Trynihid (perhaps the strangest feature of the Illtud legends given the social and moral implications both then and now) are conspicuously

²¹ Ibid, Location 355

²² Ibid, Location 401

²³ Ibid, Location 407

²⁴ Ibid, Location 441

absent. *Vita Samsonis* rather establishes that Illtud founded his famous monastic college, was real, and was deeply revered.

The Antiquarian Sources

Outside of the early *Lives*, Illtud is also mentioned or alluded to by well-known medieval writers to include Gildas and Nennius, and his school is alluded to by Monmouth firmly establishing his person and cult as very popular from as early as the 7th century and likely flourishing by the twelfth.

Additionally, there is an unbroken chain and link of literature about Illtud that moves from the medieval period right into the Celtic Renaissance and Antiquarian period (s). Morris notes:

The tradition of Illtud Farchog – Illtud the knight – is very strong in Welsh literature and is found in the writings of bards such as Tudur Penllyn of north Wales (c.1420–c.1485–90) and Llywelyn ap Rhisiart of south Wales (1520–1565). Iolo Morganwg (1747–1826) described Illtud as “the studious golden-chained knight”.²⁵

Rice Rees, a cleric and historian writing in the 19th century takes the Antiquarian versions of Illtud as fact, to include his connections to Arthwys ap Tewdrig, his mention in the Triads as a guardian of the Holy Grail and similar stories. Whether wholly made-up, partial histories or forgeries, Rees, like Iolo Morganwg and Llywelyn ap Rhisiart before him include a rich amount of information that reflects the development of the cult. For example, Rees suggests that it was Illtud himself who invented the modern notion of a choir, giving the Soldier Saint an immeasurable impact on Wales, who are known the world over for their elite singing gifts and famous choirs. Rees claims:

According to the Triads, the three societies (of formal choirs) of the first class, of which Bangor Illtyd was one, contained no less than two thousand four hundred members; one hundred being employed every hour, in order that the praise and service of God might be continued day and night without intermission.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid, Location 507

²⁶ Rice Rees, *An Essay On the Welsh Saints: Or Primitive Christians, Usually Considered To Have Been The Founders Of Churches In Wales*, (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, Rees, Llandoverly and Bird, 1836), pg. 81

Reverend Barry Morgan, who wrote the forward to Morris's *Llanilltud, The Story of a Celtic Christian Community*, like the book's author, has a negative view towards the antiquarian writers and endeavors to rescue the Saint and the College from them. The root cause of legend being mixed with fact comes from, in his opinion.²⁷ Like the writings about many saints, this is hagiographical in character: a fact overlooked by later writers about Illtud in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who also adopted a romantic and uncritical view both of the early Saints and of Celtic Christianity in general.²⁷ There may be merit to this assertion as the Arthurian and supernatural elements of Illtud's life continue to be debated and reprocessed but these legends only enhanced and further promoted the cult.

From Paper to Stone and Wood – The Placenames

The cult of Saint Illtud originated, naturally, with the famous college that bears his name, Morris writes:

Llanilltud Fawr makes claims that it is "Britain's oldest centre of learning", the "University of the Celtic Saints", "the cradle of Celtic Christianity", and that Illtud "played a significant part in bringing Christianity to Britain". Other claims make Llanilltud "the Christian axis of the Celtic-speaking peoples" and the "University of the Atlantic"²⁸

But the evidentiary expansion of his cult, is found in the numerous churches, wells, landscape features and placenames that are named for or dedicated to the Solider-Saint. The Sentiau webpage catalogues, and maps over forty with a concentration in Glamorgan moving west as far as Fishguard. The placenames are dramatically disproportionate in Southeast Wales but a total absence of placenames or dedications in Gwent is visually noticeable, with nearby Monmouth having just one site, the Church of St Illtud, Mamhilad, being the nearest exception (and that, according to The Sentiau researchers being a late dedication rather than an Medieval one)²⁹.

There are at least five sacred wells named after Illtud (each called Ffynnon Illtud with no distinctive naming convention amongst them). Three of the five are clustered around Neath, which is northwest of Llantwit Major and conjures imagery of pilgrims moving up the coast

²⁷ Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 46

²⁸ Ibid, Location 816

²⁹ Sentiau, Cwlt Y Sentiau Yng Nghymru, *Illtud* (2025) <<https://seintiadur.saints.wales/en/chwilio.php?saintid=3#texts> > [accessed 21 July 2025]

visiting sacred wells along the way. An additional Holy Well is located directly north of Llantwit Major near Craig Buarthchapel, which is very close to Llanwonno.

Twenty-three churches are catalogued as being dedicated to or named after Illtud, and twenty of those within Glamorgan. The chapel at Llanharry has a foundation that suggests it is Pre-Norman and could be contemporary with the Saint. Moving through the centuries, the Church of Saint Illtud in Illston has strong evidence of a twelfth century dedication while some are later, such as Church of St Rhidian and St Illtyd in Llanrhidian, which is thought to be associated with Illtud only as far back as 1578.³⁰

As for placenames, a prehistoric round cairn called Bedd Gwyl Illtyd ('grave of Illtud's Eve') is found in Powys (the Midlands) but once again, the placename distribution is heavier in Glamorgan with examples such as Ilston and Llantwit Fardre. At an initial pass, an assumption might be made that Illtud should be classified as a local Saint. However, when expanding the map, the Soldier-Saint is celebrated in Dolgellau in the North and, according to Richard Morgan (a scholar and expert on Welsh placenames), Illtud has no fewer than twenty-four additional placenames in Brittany.³¹ In fact, the veneration of Illtud amongst the Bretons could fill a separate work as Brittany claims many legends (and even Illtud's final resting place) for themselves. A few examples of placenames in Brittany include Lociltud in Dol-de-Bretagne and Llandebaeron, where the village claims to possess relics from the Saint.

Conclusion – The Lasting Popularity of the Cult of Saint Illtud

A Christian Community was formed by and around Saint Illtud in the 6th century that resulted in what the Guinness Book of World Records calls 'Britain's earliest centre' of learning.³² The fascination with the man, the school and his pupils coalesced into a medieval (and after, celebrity styled) cult that has been celebrated in an unbroken chain throughout the centuries, including the present time. Arthurian enthusiasts spend money to make long journeys to Llantwit Major to see stones, walk where Illtud walked and delve into his connections to King Arthur, Gildas, King Maelgwyn Gwynedd, Meirchion and other figures from the Arthurian saga. This brings revenue, prestige and acclaim to the area, which is the function of a medieval Christian Cult, spiritual benefits notwithstanding.

Illtud still inspires literature up to the present time, showing that the ripple effect of his cult is strong and possesses staying power. Contemporary writers Laurence Main and Alec Kinch portray Illtud as a villain on account of his secret sins and mistreatment of his wife, with

³⁰ Sentiau, Cwlt Y Sentiau Yng Nghymru, *Illtud* (2025) <<https://seintiadur.saints.wales/en/chwilio.php?saintid=3#texts> > [accessed 21 July 2025]

³¹ Richard Morgan, *'Place-Names Of Glamorgan'*, (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2018), pg. 129

³² Phillip Morris, *Llanilltud, The Story Of A Celtic Christian Community*, Kindle Edition, (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2020), Location 291

Main going so far as to mock the Saint with the pejorative *Ill-tide*³³. Lastly, high schools such as St Illtyd's Catholic High School in Cardiff and St Illtyd Primary School in Swansea were named after the Saint within the last one hundred years, demonstrating that the Soldier-Saint presses on, appearing in ongoing literature and physical placenames to this very day.

³³ Laurence Main, *King Arthur's Camlan* (Dinas Mawddwy: Meirion Publications, 1989), p.6

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