

Write a critical appreciation of any saint's Life associated with one of the Celtic regions. In your answer you should consider issues such as the text's authorship, its purpose, transmission, key themes, literary and historical context.

Medieval Welsh literature is rich in hagiographical lore with a number of surviving vitae and bucheddau which recorded the medieval traditions associated with saints. Although some of the male saints such as St. Beuno have recently attracted attention from hagiologists, female saints have largely been ignored. This may have been due to the fact that few of their lives are extant but also because archaic views of a male dominated Celtic Church have occasionally led to their dismissal.¹ The 'Age of the Saints' has been represented as a time when 'Celtic' missionaries travelled back and forth across the western seaways to establish religious communities in Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, and the Isle of Man. During the fifth to the eighth centuries, it has been considered a period in which there was a founding of a 'Celtic Church' with its own specific infrastructure of monastic communities which followed their own strict, ascetic regime. In Wales, sanctity was locally conferred and none of the medieval Welsh saints appear to have been locally conferred.²

Gwenfrewy or Winefride was presented as a nun and martyr who lived in the north-east of Wales during the seventh century. She was decapitated by Caradog after refusing his sexual advances and a healing well sprung forth where her head landed. She was then brought back to life by her uncle, St. Beuno. Gwenfrewy went into holy orders and became a nun at Gwytherin where she died.³ It was not until some five hundred years after Gwenfrewy's death where her reputation grew from a local saint to becoming nationally and then internationally recognised. This occurred after monks from Shrewsbury Abbey dug up her bones and translated them from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury Abbey. Gwenfrewy is one of only two female saints with official extant prose Lives, the other being Melangell.⁴ Her Life survives in the earliest form in two Latin texts of the twelfth century, one of which was anonymous; *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*, and the other composed by Prior Robert who was abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of SS Peter and Paul at Shrewsbury.⁵

Robert's Life can be dated and localized with a greater degree of certainty than most other Lives of Welsh saints. Robert was prior of Shrewsbury, later becoming abbot from c. 1148 until his death in 1168. It was there that he wrote the Life and Translation and presented himself as a major figure in the latter.⁶ Prior Robert's vita follows Gwenfrewy's life through the stages of maiden, martyr, abbess, and saint at Holywell, Gwytherin and Shrewsbury. He places great emphasis on the process of her becoming an abbess with miracles occurring at Gwytherin as they had during her time at Holywell, doubtless so he could portray her as a saint. The vita also provides an account the translation of her relics from Gwytherin to

¹ Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales' in *Medium Ævum*, 2001, p1

² Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins,' p2

³ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Claudius A. v version)*, edited by David Callander, p1, <<https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Wenefreda-Claud.pdf>> [date accessed 21/3/23]

⁴ Sally Ann Hallmark, 'Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin, From maiden and martyr to abbess and saint The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin,' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, 2015), p16

⁵ James Ryan Gregory, 'A Welsh Saint in England: Translation, Orality and National Identity in the Cult of Gwenfrewy', (Unpublished PHD thesis, Georgia University, 2012), p2

⁶ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury, Laud Misc. 114 version)*, edited by David Callander, p2 <<https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Wenefreda-Laud.pdf>> [date accessed 21/3/23]

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Shrewsbury.⁷ It is likely that Prior Robert used this image of her as a saint to allow for an increase in pilgrims to Shrewsbury Abbey, as it was likely many would have travelled to Shrewsbury on a pilgrimage to visit Gwenfrewy's remains. Prior Robert's version of Gwenfrewy's Life may have been politically motivated in this respect as he would have wanted to have ensured the portrayal of her as a saint due to miracles in both Holywell and Gwytherin to ensure the popularity of Gwenfrewy's cult continued after her translation to Shrewsbury. Robert's inclusion of Gwenfrewy's journey from Holywell subtly authorises the translation of her remains to Shrewsbury. As Gwenfrewy had once deigned to move from one location to another for the spiritual amelioration of others dwelling there, in death she could do so again. The visions included in the *translatio* account seem to underscore the maiden's desire to be moved to Shrewsbury.⁸ Robert's version of Gwenfrewy's Life certainly seems to be more politically motivated than other versions of her Life in that it attempts to ensure Gwenfrewy is portrayed as a saint to legitimatise the translation of her relics to Shrewsbury to increase visiting pilgrims.

The anonymous Life contrasts with Robert's version in that it is unable to be dated accurately. As well as this, the focus of the contents differ slightly. The anonymous Life centres on posthumous miracles at Holywell with few references to Gwytherin other than her being chosen as an abbess at the synod she attends and her taking up this position at Gwytherin where she presided over eleven virgins.⁹ Despite these differences it is likely both versions share a common Welsh source written in Latin. It has been thought that this source was the '*Hystoria o Uched Beuno*' which may be a Welsh version of a lost Life of St Beuno. Both the anonymous Life and the vita share features which are not present within the *Hystoria* such as the royal status of Caradog and the request for Gwenfrewy to change her clothes before she flees. This suggests that while potentially being based upon a lost Latin original of the *Hystoria*, the story of Gwenfrewy was enhanced by additional details from the oral versions of her legend, creating a mixture of folklore and Christianity.¹⁰

In Welsh hagiography, native cultural values often overshadowed the church traditions of the time. Henken found that the Lives of male saints closely followed the outlines of hero stories from secular myth and legend, albeit modified to meld with the religious nature of the saint, whilst the female saints of Wales appear in a more domestic context which reflects the role accepted for women in medieval Welsh society.¹¹ In Welsh hagiography, the righteousness of the male saints is regularly foretold and acknowledged before their births whilst female saints are generally not identified as holy until they are confronted in some way by male sexuality, a force from which they must flee or in some way overcome or avoid.¹² Gwenfrewy is one such example of this. Before her encounter with Caradog, she is regarded typically as one of the female religious. It is not until her subsequent martyrdom and resurrection in which she is considered in some way to be holy, and it is not until her final death that she is venerated as a saint.

⁷ Hallmark, '*Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin*', p16

⁸ Gregory, '*A Welsh Saint in England*', pp208-209

⁹ Hallmark, '*Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin*', p17

¹⁰ Hallmark, '*Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin*', p18

¹¹ Gregory, '*A Welsh saint in England*', p134

¹² *ibid*

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The legend of Gwenfrewy sits within the medieval tradition of female sanctity being closely related to their virginity.¹³ Virginity was almost considered a prerequisite for feminine sanctity and a pattern with the Lives of the female saints emerges which could be considered quite different from that of the male saints. Most of the Lives of the male saints follow the pattern of the holy abbot/ bishop rather than that of the male martyr.¹⁴ In contrast to this, female saints in their Lives seek a simple lifestyle worshipping Christ and living either alone or within a female religious community before becoming the object of male desire and being abducted, threatened with rape or forced marriage, tortured and decapitated. Only after her death does the female saint attain perpetual virginity and eternal salvation after there is no longer the constant risk to her virginity.¹⁵ Despite the threat of rape in many of the legends associated with female saints, they are rarely actually raped. Instead, they face violence and torture before eventually being killed but at no point are they actually raped.¹⁶ The Life of Gwenfrewy follows this pattern and within her Life, Caradog gives her the ultimatum to either lie with him willingly or he would cut off her head.¹⁷ This is similar to the work of William of Worcestre, where he relates the tale of the martyrdom of St Eluned. Eluned was also decapitated, and a spring of water also welled forth after her decapitation.¹⁸ The common theme among the female saints demonstrates the importance of retaining their virginity in order to become elevated to saint status even if this occurs only after their death. It is possible this focus on retaining their virginity in order to attain saint status represents the conflicting view on the preferred state for the women within their community. During this period, the Church prized chastity above marriage and virginity was considered the ultimate state of perfection, which clashed with the secular need for heirs.¹⁹

Within the Latin Life of St Melangell, the *Historia divae Monacellae*, it puts forward a message that anyone who tries to violate one of Christ's virgins risks divine retribution. Those who threaten or harm the female saints are frequently cursed, swallowed up by the earth, melted, frozen or suffer excruciating sudden death.²⁰ The Life of Gwenfrewy is one such example of this occurring. In both the anonymous Life and Prior Robert's version Caradog is melted after being addressed by Beuno as a result of his murder of Gwenfrewy. In Prior Robert's version Caradog drops dead after being addressed by Beuno who emphasizes Caradog's defilement of the Church due to his actions against Gwenfrewy and he melts into the ground with his spirit sinking into a pit of darkness.²¹ The anonymous Life bears some differences in that Beuno is not described as addressing Caradog before cursing him and simply does so upon seeing it was him who carried out the act.²² Although both versions tell of his death and Gwenfrewy's subsequent revival, Prior Robert's version tells of how Beuno calls to God to punish Caradog and addressed Jesus Christ during his prayers for her

¹³ Hallmark, 'Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin', p18

¹⁴ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', pp12-13

¹⁵ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p13

¹⁶ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p16

¹⁷ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury, Laud Misc. 114 version)*, edited by David Callander, p63

¹⁸ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p4

¹⁹ Gwenyth Richards, *From footnotes to narrative: Welsh noblewomen in the thirteenth century*, (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005), p202

²⁰ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p7

²¹ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury, Laud Misc. 114 version)*, edited by David Callander, p65

²² *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Claudius A. v version)*, edited by David Callander, p28

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revival.²³ This may have been done to add credence to Gwenfrewy's portrayal as a saint and thus increasing pilgrim's to Shrewsbury where her remains were translated. In both versions of Gwenfrewy's Life, it is said that the stones retained the blood spatters from where she was martyred perhaps as a way to demonstrate to readers the danger of attempting to harm one of Christ's virgins.

Elissa Henken notes that the '*rites de passage*' of birth and death are frequently not reported of female saints and they almost seem to not exist before contact with men which seems inevitable considering most female saints are minor players in the *vitae* of male saints. It is interesting to note that Gwenfrewy's birth goes unreported even though she is the main saint of the *vita*.²⁴ At the beginning of both the anonymous and Prior Robert's Life, multiple sections focus on Beuno's founding of his church and Gwenfrewy plays little to no part in the story, and when mentioned she plays a passive role excepting for her decision to devote her life to religion.²⁵ She does not behave independently nor does she speak until the encounter with Caradog.²⁶ This may demonstrate how even for female saints, their lives were consistently intertwined with that of the males they encounter.

The historical and political background of the development of Gwenfrewy's cult in Holywell is one of unrest and jostling for power between the Welsh princes and the English kings and earls of Chester. During the reigns of Henry I, Stephen and Henry II, control of St Gwenfrewy's well at Holywell passed between Welsh and English control.²⁷ The *Vitae* were used as political tools against the Normans and in the struggle for archiepiscopal primacy. A church would try to establish its rights through the rights of its patron saint.²⁸ This may account for the importance of Holywell in the cult of Gwenfrewy as for a place which experienced much political unrest and a changing in control between two nations, the importance of a Welsh saint would place a greater claim towards the land in favour of the Welsh. It also accounts for Robert's account attempt to legitimise the translation of Gwenfrewy's relics to Shrewsbury after he claims that they were being looked after poorly.

The official recording of Gwenfrewy's Life in a Middle Welsh buchedd as well as the twelfth century Latin Lives, as well as the fact she is one of two Welsh female saints with official extant Lives, indicate her considerable political importance. This is further confirmed by her representation on an ecclesiastical seal of the Dean and Chapter of St Asaph Cathedral.²⁹ This seal was used from the fifteenth century and appears to depict Gwenfrewy, veiled as a bride of Christ and holding an abbess's crosier and reliquary. To her left stands another saint, probably St Asaph, and a third figure kneels under a canopy. She is also depicted on a fifteenth century seal from the Church of the Holy Cross at the Priory of SS Peter and Paul in Shrewsbury.³⁰ Scholars have frequently noted the political importance of saints' Lives and

²³ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury, Laud Misc. 114 version)*, edited by David Callander, pp65-66

²⁴ Fiona Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred', *Annalecta Bollandiana*, Vol. 117 (1999), p106

²⁵ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury, Laud Misc. 114 version)*, edited by David Callander, pp57-62 and *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Claudius A. v version)*, edited by David Callander, pp23-26

²⁶ Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred', p106

²⁷ Hallmark, '*Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin*', p21

²⁸ Elissa R. Henken, 'The Saint as Secular Ruler: Aspects of Welsh Hagiography', in *Folklore*, 1987, Vol. 98 (1987), p230

²⁹ Hallmark, '*Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin*', pp18-19

³⁰ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p5

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the way in which they were used to empower the medieval dioceses, define ecclesiastical boundaries and establish rights of sanctuary as well promote the cult of a particular saint in order to establish a particular locus of pilgrimage.³¹ Thus the use of the image of Gwenfrewy within these political seals may be an attempt to form some link with her and thus try to encourage pilgrimages to their church.

It appears that only to a limited extent were the female saints of Wales viewed as appropriate role models for Welsh women. All of the female saints venerated in Wales were supposed to have been alive in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries and the tradition of according sanctity did not continue into the Middle Ages.³² Many of the Lives were written some hundred years after their subjects death and although it is likely they were circulating in oral form before being committed to writing, it is difficult to know how important the female saints would have been. Certainly, in Wales, few noblewomen appear to have been encouraged to follow in the footsteps of female saints and retire to a contemplative existence. Especially as elsewhere, holy women, such as Margaret of Scotland (c. 1043-1093) continued to be regarded as saints.³³ This may have been due to the attitude towards the female religious in Wales where it was likely that private devotion was preferred to claustration, as although chastity was preferred, there was still a secular need for heirs.³⁴

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³¹ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p5

³² Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', pp19-20

³³ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p20

³⁴ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2008), p194

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