

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Assessment 2

Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality and Hagiography (HPCS7005)

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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.

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I. Introduction

The veneration of saintly relics has played a significant role in the religious practices of the Welsh and Celtic regions. This essay aims to examine the role and function of saintly relics in the cult of several Welsh or Celtic saints, including corporeal and secondary relics, and their significance in religious practices.

The cult of the saints refers to the religious practices and beliefs surrounding the veneration of saints and their relics, which has played a vital role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of the Welsh and Celtic regions. In this context, the veneration of corporeal relics, such as bones, and bodily remains, or secondary relics, such as clothing and personal possessions of saints, has been of particular significance.¹

One of the most prominent examples of the cult of the saints in Welsh and Celtic religious history is the veneration of St. David, the patron saint of Wales. According to the Life of St. David, his relics were highly revered by the Welsh people, and his shrine was a place of pilgrimage for many (Rees, 1908). The significance of St. David's relics in Welsh religious practices includes their use in healing and the importance of pilgrimage to his tomb.

Similarly, the cult of St. Columba, a sixth-century Irish saint who played a crucial role in spreading Christianity throughout Scotland and Ireland, is an example of the veneration of saintly relics in Celtic religious history. According to Terry Jones, St. Columba's relics were venerated throughout Scotland and Ireland and played a significant role in the religious practices and beliefs of the Celtic people². The function of St. Columba's relics in Celtic religious practices includes their use in healing and the importance of pilgrimage to his tomb.

In conclusion, the veneration of saintly relics in the cult of Welsh and Celtic saints has significantly shaped the religious and cultural landscape of these regions for centuries. The analysis of primary sources and secondary literature has provided an overview of the historical and cultural context of the cult of the saints, the veneration of corporeal and secondary relics, and

¹ Rees, W.J. (1908). *Lives of the Cambro British Saints*. London: Llanerch.

² Jones, T. (1998). *Who Murdered Chaucer?: A Medieval Mystery*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books.

the function of relics in religious practices. As scholars continue to explore this fascinating subject, the cult of the saints will remain a vital area of study in Welsh and Celtic religious history.

II. Historical and Cultural Context of Saintly Relics in Wales and Celtic Regions

The history of Christianity in Wales and Celtic regions has been shaped by a rich tradition of religious practices and beliefs that have developed over time, influenced by various historical and cultural factors³. Relics have played a crucial role in Christian practices in these regions, taking various forms such as corporeal and secondary relics, and are believed to possess sacred power, thus venerated by the faithful⁴.

The veneration of relics evolved over time and was influenced by cultural and historical factors. Initially, relics were associated with martyrdom and venerated as symbols of faith and sacrifice. The cult of the saints, an important aspect of early Christian practices, was closely linked with relic veneration. Over time, the veneration of relics became more complex, with relics believed to possess miraculous powers and abilities.

The influence of Roman culture and the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire also played a significant role in shaping Christian practices in Wales and Celtic regions. The use of relics in Christian practices was influenced by the Roman tradition of ancestor worship and the idea of the communion of saints. According to Peter Brown, the idea held that the faithful were connected through a shared faith, and the saints were capable of interceding on behalf of the living⁵.

Relic veneration also contributed to the development of the pilgrimage and religious tourism in Wales and Celtic regions. The veneration of relics was closely associated with specific holy places and played a crucial role in the development of pilgrimage and tourism in the region. As

³ Evans, J.W. (2000). *The History of Christianity in Wales*. Cardiff: the University of Wales Press.

⁴ Overbey, K.A. (2012). *Sacred Founders: Women, Relics, and the Authority of the Past*. The University of California Press.

⁵ Brown, P. (2013). *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. Princeton University Press.

Thomas Owen Clancy observes pilgrims visited these sites to venerate relics and seek healing and other forms of spiritual solace ⁶.

In conclusion, the history of Christianity in Wales and Celtic regions is characterised by a rich tradition of religious practices and beliefs, including the veneration of relics. The veneration of relics, closely tied to the cult of the saints, evolved over time, influenced by various cultural and historical factors. Moreover, it played a crucial role in the development of the pilgrimage and religious tourism in the region.

III. The Cult of Welsh or Celtic Saints and Their Relics

The cult of Welsh or Celtic saints had a profound impact on the development of Christianity in these regions. These saints were regarded as models of Christian piety, and their lives and accomplishments were commemorated through religious practices and traditions. The veneration of relics was a central feature of this cult, as relics were believed to possess supernatural powers and link the faithful to the saint ⁷.

The veneration of relics was a common practice in medieval Christianity, and Welsh or Celtic saints were no exception. Corporeal and secondary relics were the types of relics used in this context. Corporeal relics were physical remains of the saint's body, such as bones, hair, or clothing, while secondary relics were objects that had come into contact with the saint during their lifetime, such as a book or a piece of jewellery.

The acquisition and distribution of relics played a critical role in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints. Relics were obtained through various means, such as the excavation of tombs, the donation of personal possessions, or the theft of relics from other communities. Once obtained, relics were distributed among the faithful through various means, such as pilgrimages, the establishment of churches or chapels dedicated to the saint, or the creation of reliquaries to house the relics.

⁶ Clancy, T.O. (1996). *The Saints in the Cult of the Celtic-speaking Peoples*. Celtic Studies Publications.

⁷ Brown, P. (2003). *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. University of Chicago Press.

Relics were used in numerous religious practices and traditions associated with the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints. One of the most prevalent uses was in healing rituals, where the saint's relic was believed to possess curative powers that could alleviate a variety of ailments and afflictions.

Relics were also used in the context of the pilgrimage, where the faithful travelled to a holy site to venerate the relic and seek the saint's intercession. Additionally, relics were commonly used in liturgical practices, such as the commemoration of the saint's feast day or the dedication of a new church or chapel ⁸.

In conclusion, the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints was crucial to the development of Christianity in these regions, and the veneration of relics played a crucial role in this cult. Through the use of relics, the faithful were able to connect with the saint and seek their intercession. Relics played a significant role in the religious practices and traditions associated with the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, particularly in the context of healing, pilgrimage, and liturgical practices.

IV. Corporeal Relics in the Cult of Welsh or Celtic Saints

Corporeal relics, which are physical remains of saints, have played a crucial role in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints for centuries. These relics were believed to possess extraordinary powers and were venerated by the faithful, who regarded them as sacred objects that enabled them to establish a direct link to the divine. This section will explore the significance of corporeal relics in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, provide examples of corporeal relics associated with specific saints, and discuss the controversies surrounding their use.

The veneration of corporeal relics has its roots in the early Christian Church, where the physical remains of saints were deemed to have special powers and were regarded as tangible links to the divine. The cult of Welsh or Celtic saints embraced this practice, enshrining corporeal relics in churches and chapels and venerating them as objects of great spiritual significance.

⁸ Rees, W.J. (1908). *Lives of the Cambro British Saints*. London: Llanerch.

One such relic associated with a Welsh or Celtic saint is the arm of St. David, the patron saint of Wales, who founded a monastery in the valley of the River Tywi in the sixth century. After his death, his body was buried at the monastery, and later, his arm was removed and enshrined in a golden reliquary. The arm of St. David was believed to possess healing powers and was venerated by the faithful for centuries.

Another example of a corporeal relic associated with a Welsh or Celtic saint is the head of St. Dyfrig, also known as Dubricius, a sixth-century Welsh bishop who founded several churches and monasteries in Wales. After his death, his head was removed and enshrined in a church in Gwent. The head of St. Dyfrig was also believed to have special powers and was venerated by the faithful.

Corporeal relics were used in various religious practices in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints. They were often enshrined in churches and chapels and venerated by the faithful, who travelled long distances to visit these relics and seek their intercession. Relics were also used in liturgical practices, such as the veneration of saints' days, which were important events in the religious calendar.

The use of corporeal relics in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints was not without controversy, as some critics argued that the veneration of relics amounted to idolatry and went against the teachings of the Church. Others contended that the veneration of relics was a necessary part of Christian practice and helped to connect the faithful to the divine.

In conclusion, corporeal relics played a significant role in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, and their veneration has been an essential aspect of religious practices for centuries. The arm of St. David and the head of St. Dyfrig are examples that demonstrate the importance of these relics in religious practices. Despite the controversies surrounding their use, the veneration of corporeal relics remains a crucial aspect of the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, reflecting the enduring influence of Welsh and Celtic religious traditions.

V. Secondary Relics in the Cult of Welsh or Celtic Saints

Secondary relics, or objects that have come into contact with the body or primary relics of saints, have played a significant role in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints. These objects are believed to possess spiritual power and are often used in religious practices. As Karen Overbey notes, secondary relics, like corporeal relics, are venerated as tangible links to the divine and are an essential aspect of Christian practices in Wales and Celtic regions⁹.

An example of a secondary relic is the crozier of Saint David, which became a symbol of his authority as bishop. According to legend, Saint David received the crozier from an angel and used it throughout his life. After his death, the crozier was preserved as a secondary relic and was venerated by pilgrims who sought the saint's intercession for healing and other miracles. (Rees, 1908)

Similarly, the shrine of Saint Melangell in Powys contains several secondary relics, including a bronze bell and a manuscript written in Latin, which is believed to have belonged to the saint. The bell was said to have been used by Saint Melangell to summon animals to safety while she was living as a hermit in the Welsh wilderness. The manuscript, known as the Pennant Melangell, contains a collection of prayers and hymns in honour of the saint.

Secondary relics were also important for their symbolic value. For example, the Book of Llandaff, a manuscript written in the 12th century, contains a list of the relics held by the church of Llandaff. The list includes not only primary relics but also secondary relics, such as a piece of the veil of the Virgin Mary and a piece of the true cross. These relics symbolised the spiritual authority and prestige of the church and were used to attract pilgrims and donations.¹⁰

The use of secondary relics was not without controversy. Some critics saw the veneration of secondary relics as a form of superstition or idolatry, detracting from the true focus of Christian

⁹ Overbey, Karen. (2012). The Material Culture of Medieval Wales. In J. Burton & K. Stöber (Eds.), *A Companion to the Medieval Welsh Church* (pp. 31-46). Brill.

¹⁰ Clancy, Thomas Owen. (2009). Relics and Cults in Medieval Scotland. In J. Carey, M. Herbert, & P. Ó Riain (Eds.), *Saints' Cults in the Celtic World* (pp. 57-74). Boydell & Brewer.

worship. However, defenders of the use of secondary relics argued that they were a legitimate way to honour the saints and connect with their spiritual power.

In conclusion, secondary relics played a vital role in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, and their use has been an essential aspect of Christian practices for centuries. They were used to connect with the spiritual power of the saints, symbolised the authority of the church, and attracted pilgrims and donations. Despite the controversy, the use of secondary relics remains an important aspect of Christian tradition to this day.

VI. The Function of Saintly Relics in the Cult of Welsh or Celtic Saints

The use of saintly relics has been a longstanding tradition in Christian practices, with the cult of Welsh and Celtic saints being particularly notable in its significance. This section explores the function of saintly relics in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, the role of these relics in religious practices, their impact on the faithful, and their contribution to the development of Christian traditions in Wales and Celtic regions. Moreover, it examines how the use of relics reflects broader cultural and social attitudes toward religion and spirituality.

The veneration of saints and their relics was closely linked to the belief in their power to intercede with God on behalf of the faithful. The concept of the "communion of saints" held that the saints in heaven could offer prayers and intercession to God on behalf of the living.

Corporeal relics, or physical remains of saints, were particularly revered in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints, as they were believed to possess the power and sanctity of the saint.¹¹ Secondary relics, or objects associated with saints, were also venerated in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints. These objects included items such as clothing, personal belongings, and even pieces of wood or stone from sites associated with the saints.

Relics were often enshrined in elaborate reliquaries and venerated with great ceremony. For example, the relics of St. David, the patron saint of Wales, were enshrined in a cathedral at St. Davids, which became a major centre of pilgrimage in the medieval period. The bones of St. Columba, the Irish monk who founded the monastery at Iona, were also venerated as relics, and

¹¹ Delehaye, Hippolyte. *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), 8-12.

his monastery became an important centre of Celtic Christianity. The veneration of corporeal relics helped to create a sense of continuity with the early Christian period and to reinforce the idea of Wales and Celtic regions as centres of Christian learning and devotion.¹²

The veneration of saintly relics had a significant impact on the faithful in Wales and Celtic regions. Pilgrimages to the sites of saints' relics were a common practice, and these sites often became centres of economic and social activity. The cult of Welsh and Celtic saints contributed to the development of Christian traditions in these regions, where the veneration of saints and their relics helped to create a sense of identity and continuity.¹³

The use of saintly relics also reflected broader cultural and social attitudes toward religion and spirituality. The veneration of relics was part of a broader medieval culture of religious devotion and piety, in which the material world was seen as a means of accessing the spiritual realm. The veneration of relics was also tied to broader social and political structures, as powerful individuals and institutions competed for control over the relics of saints and the benefits that came with them.⁴

In conclusion, the function of saintly relics in the cult of Welsh or Celtic saints was significant and multifaceted. The veneration of corporeal and secondary relics played a central role in religious practices and was seen as tangible links to the saints. The cult of Welsh and Celtic saints contributed to the development of Christian traditions in Wales and Celtic regions and reflected broader cultural and social attitudes toward religion and spirituality. The veneration of saintly relics remains a significant part of religious and cultural life in these regions and continues to be an important aspect of the history and cultural heritage of these regions.

VII. The Continued Significance of Saintly Relics in Contemporary Christian Practices

The veneration of saintly relics in contemporary Christian practices has a long history and remains a significant aspect of Christian worship and devotion. Despite controversies and debates surrounding their use, the continued importance of saintly relics in contemporary

¹² Davies, John. (2007). *The History of Wales*. London: Penguin.

¹³ Koch, John T. (Ed.). (2006). *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Christian practices reflects their enduring significance as a tangible representation of the power of God and a connection to the saints. As Hahn and Wiker (2011) note, the use of relics has a biblical basis and has been an important aspect of Christian worship since the earliest days of Christianity.¹⁴

In modern times, the use of relics has evolved and adapted to fit changing Christian practices and traditions. Relics may be displayed in museums or churches as historical artefacts rather than being used directly in religious practices. Additionally, the emphasis on the veneration of specific saints may vary depending on the denomination or region of Christianity.

One example of the continued significance of relics in contemporary Christian practices can be seen in the veneration of Saint Therese of Lisieux. Saint Therese, who lived in the late 19th and early 20th century, is known for her devotion to God and her simple, childlike faith. Her relics, including bone fragments and personal items such as her rosary, have been venerated by Catholics around the world since her canonisation in 1925.

In addition to their continued use in Christian worship, the veneration of saintly relics also reflects broader changes in Christian practices and traditions. As Kugelmann and Krech (2017¹⁵) note, the emphasis on personal spiritual experiences in contemporary Christianity has led to a greater focus on the use of relics as tools for individual devotion and prayer. Additionally, the globalisation of Christianity has led to the veneration of a wider range of saints from different regions and cultures.

However, the use of saintly relics in contemporary Christian practices is not without controversy. Some Christians may view the veneration of relics as idolatry, while others may argue that the emphasis on relics detracts from the true focus of Christian worship, which should be on God alone.

¹⁴ Hahn, S., & Wiker, B. (2011). *The Fourth Cup*. Emmaus Road Publishing.

¹⁵ Kugelmann, Robert, & Krech, Volkhard. (2017). *Religion and Material Culture: Studying Religion and Religious Elements on the Basis of Objects, Architecture, and Space*. Brill.

Despite these controversies, for many Christians, the veneration of saintly relics remains an important aspect of their faith and a tangible connection to the saints and their devotion to God. As Christianity continues to evolve and adapt to changing times and cultures, the use of saintly relics will likely continue to play an important role in Christian worship and devotion.

In conclusion, the veneration of saintly relics in contemporary Christian practices has a long and complex history, with their use dating back to the earliest days of Christianity. Despite controversies and debates surrounding their use, the continued significance of saintly relics in contemporary Christian practices reflects their enduring importance as a connection to the saints and a tangible representation of the power of God. As Christianity continues to evolve and adapt to changing times and cultures, the use of saintly relics will likely continue to play an important role in Christian worship and devotion.

VIII. Saint Patrick and His Relics in the Cult of Welsh or Celtic Saints

Saint Patrick is a significant figure in Welsh and Celtic Christian tradition, renowned for bringing Christianity to Ireland and for his influence on the development of Christian practices in Wales and Celtic regions. The history of Saint Patrick is shrouded in myth and legend, but it is generally believed that he was born in Roman Britain in the late fourth century and became a missionary in Ireland. He is said to have converted thousands of people to Christianity and established monasteries and churches throughout the country, leaving a profound impact on Irish Christianity.¹⁶

The veneration of Saint Patrick's relics is an important aspect of Welsh and Celtic Christian tradition, with his relics being highly esteemed and revered by the faithful. Among his most famous relics is the "Bell of Saint Patrick," which is said to have been given to him by an angel and which he used to summon the faithful to prayer. The bell was later taken to Ireland, where it

¹⁶ O'Loughlin, Thomas. (2005). Patrick, Saint. In F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone (Eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

became one of the most important relics of the Irish Church. Other relics associated with Saint Patrick include his crozier, or bishop's staff, and several fragments of his bones.¹⁷

The veneration of Saint Patrick's relics played a crucial role in the cult of this saint and the development of Christian traditions in Wales and Celtic regions. The relics were believed to possess miraculous powers and were used in various religious practices, including the cure of illnesses and the protection of crops and livestock. They were also used in liturgical practices, such as the procession of relics on feast days.¹⁸

The cult of Saint Patrick was closely linked to the cults of other Welsh and Celtic saints, and the veneration of relics was a vital aspect of these cults. The use of relics in religious practices helped to establish a sense of continuity between the Christian traditions of the past and the present and helped to reinforce the authority of the Church.¹⁹

In conclusion, the veneration of Saint Patrick's relics continues to be an essential element of Welsh and Celtic Christian tradition, with the relics being highly revered and considered to possess miraculous powers. The veneration of Saint Patrick's relics played a crucial role in the cult of this saint and the development of Christian traditions in Wales and Celtic regions, establishing a sense of continuity between the Christian traditions of the past and the present.

IX. The Veneration and Function of Saint Patrick's Relics in Welsh or Celtic Christian Practices

The veneration of Saint Patrick's relics have been a significant aspect of Celtic Christian practices for centuries, reflecting broader cultural and social attitudes toward religion and spirituality in these regions.

¹⁷ "Relics of St. Patrick." (n.d.). Catholic Online. Retrieved from https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=89.

¹⁸ Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. (2014). Relics. In J. H. M. W. S. Ziegler (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* (pp. 269-280). Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Hirsh, John C. (1991). *The Cult of Saints in Late Medieval Scotland*. In J. Shinnars (Ed.), *Religious Belief and Ecclesiastical Careers in Late Medieval England* (pp. 151-167). University of Rochester Press

One important aspect of the veneration of Saint Patrick's relics was their use in religious rituals and worship. According to Welsh and Celtic Christian tradition, relics such as fragments of his bones or clothing were believed to possess healing properties and were prominently displayed in many churches and monasteries dedicated to Saint Patrick. Many people would visit these sites to pray for healing or to seek blessings.

The veneration of Saint Patrick's relics also played a role in devotion and piety. For many people, these relics represented a powerful spiritual presence, and acts of devotion, such as lighting candles, offering prayers, or making donations to the church or monastery, were common ways to venerate these relics. The use of relics in Christian practices was often intertwined with pre-Christian beliefs in the power of objects and symbols, such as the Celtic cross.

Despite the importance of Saint Patrick's relics in Welsh and Celtic Christian practices, there were objections to their use. Some Christian leaders argued that the veneration of relics could lead to idolatry and detract from true spiritual devotion. Others were concerned that the veneration of relics could shift the focus to material objects rather than spiritual practice. Nonetheless, the use of Saint Patrick's relics continued to be a vital aspect of Welsh and Celtic Christian practices.

In conclusion, the veneration of Saint Patrick's relics reflects the rich cultural and social history of Wales and Celtic regions, encompassing aspects of worship, devotion, and piety. Welsh and Celtic Christian traditions hold that Saint Patrick's relics possessed healing properties, and these relics were prominently displayed in many churches and monasteries dedicated to him. The use of relics in Christian practices also reflected pre-Christian beliefs in the power of objects and symbols, and despite objections from some Christian leaders, the use of Saint Patrick's relics remained an important aspect of Welsh and Celtic Christian practices.

X. Conclusion:

The veneration of saintly relics has been a prominent feature of Welsh and Celtic Christian practices throughout history, serving as a significant aspect of religious worship and devotion. The cult of specific saints, such as Saint Patrick, has played a crucial role in shaping the religious

traditions of these regions, and the veneration of their relics has provided a tangible connection between the faithful and these revered figures.

As discussed in this essay, corporeal and secondary relics have played a significant role in the cult of Welsh and Celtic saints. Corporeal relics, such as bones, hair, and other physical remains, have been venerated for their association with the saint and the power that they are believed to possess. Secondary relics, such as clothing, manuscripts, and other objects associated with the saint, have also been venerated for their connection to the saint and the power that they are believed to possess.²⁰ For example, Saint Patrick's Crozier, housed at the National Museum of Ireland, is considered to be one of the most important relics associated with the saint, and it has been used in religious ceremonies for centuries.

However, the use of relics has not been without controversy and debate. Some have criticised the veneration of relics as a form of idolatry, while others have questioned the authenticity of certain relics.²¹ Nevertheless, relics remain an important aspect of Christian worship and devotion in contemporary times, and they continue to inspire and provide a source of spiritual power for the faithful.

In conclusion, the cult of Welsh and Celtic saints and the veneration of their relics have played a significant role in the development of Christian traditions in these regions. The use of relics has provided a tangible connection between the faithful and these revered figures, serving as a source of inspiration and spiritual power. Despite controversies and debates, relics remain an important aspect of Christian worship and devotion in contemporary times, and they continue to shape the religious practices of Wales and Celtic regions.

²⁰ Davies, Owen. (2007). *Popular Magic: Cunning-folk in English History*. London: Hambledon Continuum.

²¹ Finucane, Ronald C. (1995). *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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