

UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVID: BA CELTIC STUDIES

Module: Celtic Sanctity and Spirituality: Hagiography and Saints' Cults
(HPCS5015, HPCS6015)

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Module Assessment / Assignment:-

5,000 word essay (level 5 and level 6 students) by midnight on 19 April 2023.

Option3: 'Trace the origins and development of the cult of any saint from the Celtic regions paying particular attention to the literary texts and the key sites associated with them.'

Assignment Introduction: British Museum Cotton MS Vespasian A xiv. Latin Life of St Brynach (Lat. *Bernachius*). . . fact, mythology or synthesis ?

In attempting to come to terms with this question, within the relatively limited time involved, it was decided to cover as much data as possible including transcripts of the Latin 'Life' of Brynach, but also fundamental personal research at sites associated with Brynach in south Wales, for example what are regarded as principal sites in the North Pembrokeshire locality of the old Barony of Cemaes and in particular the religious foundation site, the 'llan' enclosure, at the hamlet of Nevern, a few miles upstream from Newport (Trefdraeth) Pembrokeshire. This seemed particularly apposite, as it seems to have been the focus of Brynach's later career. It was a principal objective to attempt an evidential link between the Cotton MS details and these sites as much as could be uncovered.

The 'Vita' apparently had its origins in west Wales. Brynach's life appears on f.77v and extends to f.80v in an excellent well-defined script, easily translatable as for instance in the version by Wade-Evans.¹ The assignment will comment on various

¹ Wade-Evans, A. W. ed. *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944)

aspects of this in relation to some recent research efforts at corroboration in the field by this author. This follows the general attitude expressed for example by Sabine Baring-Gould in the Preface of his *Lives of the British Saints* when discussing the problems of considering the veracity of biographical details committed to writing some centuries following on from the actual life of the saint, and 'to establish such points as are genuinely historical, as far as they can be determined'.²

Brynach's provenance and career establishment

Cotton MS Vespasian A xiv within the first two opening sections as defined by Wade-Evans gives us a brief summary of Brynach's aristocratic upbringing but does not really indicate with accuracy his home country. But by the third section it is clear that he has voyaged across to Italy or made his way overland, and after an extended stay in Rome, retraced his steps to Brittany. Here he remains for several years on a mission to heal the sick and inspire the healthy to an even better existence with adoption of the Christian ethic.

This initial section of the life seems to form the basis for what happens in what could be regarded as the more recognisable visual perspective of the assignment in that the account lays out an itinerary from Brittany to what we now know as the estuary at Milford Haven and the river Cleddau, which flows out to it. From here, as far as can be seen, Brynach moves on to north Pembrokeshire and finds temporary solace at 'Pons Lapideus'. In the Wade-Evans translation this is interpreted as 'Pontfaen' for good reason: there still exists a church not far from the River Gwaun bearing Saint Brynach as a dedicatee.³ This is illustrated as Fig 5 below. The impression of something small-scale is immediate and suggests an

² Baring-Gould, S. & Fisher, J. *Lives of the British Saints* Vol. 1. (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 2000) p. vii

³ Wade-Evans, A. W. ed. *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944) Cap. 5

authentic, primitive religious structure in contrast to the next building under discussion, also indicated in the Life.

Brynach's lack of establishing a permanent foothold at Pontfaen is then described as 'divine providence' when he ventures further north and by this time with 'companions' finally finds the site which appears to be the ideal place to build the church.⁴ However, here again the author intercedes with one of the miracles included and describes how an angel intervenes and instructs Brynach to move to a more fitting place. Brynach's establishment at the location now principally associated with him is cemented when the local chieftain enters the narrative:

'There was at that time a certain lord of that territory, Clechre by name, a man just and fearing God, who was advanced in days, wherefore he was also named Senex, Old. This man, rising in the morning and seeing the smoke from the fire, which the man of God had lit in the deep valley, rising to be spread abroad, and to cover the adjoining parts of the earth, being urged by the Spirit of God, calls together the twenty sons, whom he had, and said to them, 'My sons, give ear, because that man is arrived, whom we have long known to have been promised to us, the report of whose goodness will be spread abroad on the face of the earth Let us, therefore, go, and fall down before his face, and let us submit ourselves to him, because we ought by no means to contradict the divine will, or to resist it.'⁵

This is a major event in Brynach's career. 'Clethre' is seen in Latin form as a person of some considerable importance on two local memorial monuments: the earlier at Llandissilio parish church on the border between Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire now forming part of the building's side wall⁶; and a later Ogham script monument celebrating the status of one of his sons (assuming the Vita is accurate) where it has been strangely incorporated into a transept window ledge of

⁴ Wade-Evans, A. W. ed. *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944) Cap. 6

⁵ Wade-Evans, A.. *Life of Brynach*, Cap 8: in actual fact 'quida clethre nomine' in the British Museum Cotton MS Vespasian A xiv. fol. 79r, 10

⁶ Monument is so badly weathered that no photographic plate is currently available but see line drawing in the publication by Westwood, J O *Lapidarium Walliae* The Early Inscribed And Sculptured Stones of Wales, etc. (Oxford: University Press, 1876), illustrations page 53

Saint Brynach's Church in the Nevern hamlet (see figs. 1 and 2 below). In the case of the first he is described as 'Clutorigi' and at Nevern as 'Clutor-'. The evidential link here with the 'Vita' might follow the following logic: the son named in the window is 'Maglacunas maqi Clutar' in the Irish script, and 'Maglocuni fili Clutor' in the adjacent Latin; the 'Vita' names the British king Maglocunas (cognate with Welsh 'Maelgwyn') as contemporary with Clutor, visiting the area on some kind of itinerary and eventually parting company with Brynach's blessing in return for a gift of land; this act by the king indicates authority which obviously includes the west coast of Wales in an overlordship of hierarchical power, reinforcing subservience or client relationship. In other words, Clutor is apparently answerable to Maelgwyn's supreme authority, acting as a local chief or perhaps petty-king. The action of naming a son after Maelgwyn is again suggestive of this deference and 'politic' decision as an act of public admiration, whether sincere or not, and acknowledgement of subservience.⁷

Brynach 'Wyddel' . . . was there a significant Irish connection, hegemony, or even patrilineal origin?

Local tradition has it that Brynach was of Irish descent, hence the epithet above. Tracing the origin of this tradition does not seem possible via the Vespasian MS, but we can look at other sources. In the Saint Brynach Church 'Guide' the anonymous author states without source reference that Brynach came to west Wales along with a Breconshire chieftain⁸. On further research this may have originated as far as actual printed text is concerned to the 1914 publication by Baring-Gould⁹

In her publication *The Welsh Saints* (Study in Patterned Lives) Elissa Henken speaks of 'strands' of local lore coming together to comprise a legendary account:

⁷ MS Vespasian A xiv. fol. F.79v. . . 'rex ca[m]brie mailgonus '

⁸ Anon: *The Church of St Brynach NEVERN PEMBROKESHIRE* 3rd edition (Cardigan: E L Jones Printers, 2016 p.13

⁹ Baring-Gould, S. & Fisher, J. *Lives of the British Saints*, Facsimile of 1907 -1913 4 Vols. in 8 parts (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 2000) Part 2, , p.209

‘Certain themes emerge not in one narrative, but rather across many [of the saints’ lives]. . . The different strands which make up the hagiographical material are not of interest only so that they may be pulled apart to reveal the true, untainted folklore of the saints. Hagiographical folklore does not and cannot exist in a pure and isolated state’ ¹⁰

Whether one agrees with the phrase ‘true, untainted folklore’ is debatable. Realistically, folklore cannot be really fully true in relation to known or as close as possible corroborative facts as best as we can determine them from a temporal gap of some one and a half millennia unless some additional concrete evidence is forthcoming. However, some of this material certainly found its way into the church guide which first appeared in its present form in 1950. Nevertheless, some of what has ended up in print does now seem credible or have some sound basis in origin. We will examine some of this evidence in detail in the following review of extant memorial sites within the north Pembrokeshire areas, all quite in close proximity to the west Wales Irish Sea-facing coastline.

Referring back to the meeting of Brynach with Clethre, the possibility of association at least with Irish society does in fact become very credible when reviewing the local archaeological evidence at Brynach’s monastic site at Nevern and elsewhere. This takes on tangible forms of not just memorials with Latin inscriptions but in some cases those devoid of Latin and with the Irish Ogham script commemoration as the sole means of identification (see examples in Fig’s 2 and 3 below). Clethre’s, or Clutor’s, high status heritage as indicated at nearby Llandissilio village, in a stone slab (confirmed as ‘the son of Paulini’), would most probably have been Brittonic or Romano-British, as there is no evident Irish script; however, the son’s memorial is more complex in that it respects a well-established tradition emanating from the south of Ireland, where the majority of such memorials are found. This practice is subsequently found to extend across to the west coast of Pembrokeshire by migration on a large scale and eventually we see the extent in the use at the other

¹⁰ Henken, Elissa R. *The Welsh Saints A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 1991) p.12

side of Wales near the town of Brecon [Brecknock], again at the heart of an Irish connection by virtue of its assumed founding king, Brychan Brycheniog.¹¹

At this stage we are possibly entering a confusing situation where two similar-sounding personal names of some importance become linked when Brychan becomes associated with Brynach as part of the local Pembrokeshire narrative. Brynach is commemorated not far from the county town, Brecon, at the opposite side of the country from Nevern, in a former Roman settlement now known as Llanfrynach. A respected local Pembrokeshire historian dealing with the traditional Welsh language areas of Pembrokeshire, Ewart Thomas Lewis, in his *Llanfrynach Parish Lore* (Pembrokeshire), states that Brynach was in fact the son of Brychan Brycheniog and married to Cymorth and having at least two sons, Cerwyn and Clydwen. There are at least two localities reflecting this as place names: 'Foel Cwm Cerwyn' and 'Llanglydwen'. Thomas also lists three daughters: Mwynwen, Gwennon and Gwenlliw, but does not cite any source reference, neither manuscript or printed source for either claim. But of course the possibility of this kind of information being a conflation of different source material is really emphasised in, the final analysis, by the term 'lore'.¹² On further investigation, no mention of Brynach as a recorded son of Brychan was found within the data of the Cotton MS Vespasian A xiv. manuscript dealing precisely with this genealogy, that is, the 'Cognacio' section. However, and this may well indicate a definite association, alongside the 'Cognacio' we find *De Situ Brecheniauc*, allowing an historical perspective of the county. In this, as translated by Wade-Evans we are told . . . 'Marchell brought forth a son and called him Brachan.'

Anlach therefore returned with Queen Marchell and the boy Brachan, and the following chiefs: Kerniol ; and secondly, Fernach, from whom Enifernach is named'¹³

¹¹ See reference under 13 following

¹² Lewis, E. T. *Llanfrynach Parish Lore* p.11

¹³ *De Situ Brecheniauc*. [British Museum. Cottonian Collection. Vespasian A, xiv, 10è-llè.]Trans. 'The Situation of Brecheniatjc' p.32, *The Brychan Documents* in 'Y CYmmrodor', THE MAGAZINE OF THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION, VOL. XIX. (LONDON :ISSUED BY THE SOCIETY, 1906)

And so one possibility of this essentially fifth century hegemonistic settlement in Brecon might well result in a later descendent of the 'Fernach' listed as a supporter of King Anlach becoming prominent in the sixth century as a candidate, for example, to an unsuccessful claim on an existent foundation or benefice.¹⁴ Or else, of course, Brynach, as the son of the aristocracy, followed in the footsteps of others such as Columba, as a consequence of an established course of action expected of those in power.

In the early twentieth century local Pembrokeshire tradition of Brynach's establishment, is related by the Reverend D. C. Jones, pen-name 'Gwynrug', as a consequence of working holidays gathering local information from the village communities in the coastal area, later compiled by Pembrokeshire Historical Society:

'A cave ran from Pig-y-baw on the north side of the meadow [at Cwm-yr-eglwys] and the graveyard towards the Bont, in which a Goidel saint presided for centuries, but the Christian missionaries to the place turned him out, and replaced him with the Christian saint Byrnach, and the cave was known as Ogof Byrnach, Byrnach's cave. The old cave now is an open beach, but it is still called the "Ogof" and "Ogof Fyrnach"' ¹⁵

Here again, there may have been some later conflation of an Irish immigrant with Brynach in the locality resulting in an Irish-born progeny narrative.

The Miracles

In her publication, *The Welsh Saints*, Elissa Henken elaborates on the thesis that the lives of the saints took the course of a predetermined pattern. Her volume has a sub-text *A Study in Patterned Lives*, suggesting a kind of pre-considered, formulaic progression in the relating of the life. Among these 'strands', a combination of possible fact and those more fictional and fantastic, the

¹⁴ see discussion by Baring-Gould's on 'saintly pedigrees' in the introduction to Baring-Gould, S. & Fisher, J. *Lives of the British Saints*, Facsimile of 1907-1913 4 Vols. in 8 parts (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 2000) Part 1, p.1

¹⁵ Comeau, Rhiannon, 'MEMORIES PRESERVED: ANTIQUITIES AND ORAL TRADITIONS OF DINAS IN THE WRITINGS OF GWYNRUG, 1908-9' in Pembrokeshire Historical Society: Journal and Notes (undated)

prominence is often given over to the miraculous events of the life.¹⁶ A study of the Brynach miracles might form an assignment study in themselves, and so what follows is a group which seems to have some basis in fact or relevance elsewhere beyond the recounting of the act..

Sir Richard Fenton in his *A historical tour through Pembrokeshire* briefly relates Brynach having 'reputed to have lived an eremitical life' and 'often visited by angels' who 'spiritually ministered to him'. This is supposed to have happened within the locality of the hillsides overlooking the present Saint Brynach church location.¹⁷ On reflection, this feature of Brynach's existence might have had some vital importance in terms of potential stature among the local population and nobility. That is to say, here was a man who could ascend to the summit of the local hilltop (geologically part of an extinct volcanic eruption) and there purportedly commune with heavenly beings who could, as with Moses in the mists on Mount Sinai and Jesus on Mount Tabor, undergo similar experiences. Brynach ascending into the mists of the Carn Ingli is therefore very much a credible act within the Life. And upon his descent, some form of decisive outcome or solution to a local problem may have been the eventuality, although of course there is no real evidence for this. But could anyone question, in any case, the authority of a leader ascending as did Moses on Sinai, establishing contact with the Heavenly Host ?

Sabine Baring-Gould attempts to explain the origins and need for the inclusion of the miraculous within the literature of the lives of saints as a means of adding interest to otherwise mundanity or even paucity in available details available to the biographer, thus adding within the narrative a sense of supernatural power and authority to the saint's abilities. Indeed this feature of the life could emphasize the distinction of whether the person was merely holy or worthy of the status of sainthood. Secondly, the theme of the miracle can reflect similar

¹⁶ Henken, Elissa R. *The Welsh Saints A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 1991) p.12

¹⁷ Fenton, R., *A Historical Tour through Pembrokeshire*. pp 541-542 op cit

miraculous details found within the Scriptures: for example, Christ has the capacity to walk on water: but Brynach can match this by sailing into Milford Haven by means of a floating rock, which also serves as an apparent metaphor for the foundation of Brynach's Christian faith.¹⁸ Such biblical parallels are numerous within the Vespasian texts. Indeed, this could be considered a constructional component of Henken's pattern within the saints' biographies.

Conflict and resolution: a moralistic ending to the 'Vita'?

The life of a saint was not an easy one on numerous levels. As suggested above, the mirroring of the life of Christ could be riven with problems. As with Christ, these could well be related to secular authority. The perennial dilemma was therefore one of secular power on one side versus the saint on the other, who was attempting to establish himself as, it seems, a higher authority as representative of God, to put it in simplistic terms. This type of disagreement between the secular and sainthood echoes down the years to later conflicts as for example with Henry and Saint Thomas a Becket. In the case of Brynach, it is Maelgwyn of Gwynedd ('Rex Cambria') who confronts him whilst on itinerary, demanding sustenance and subservience (tribute), but is denied this. Brynach's favourite cow is seized but, miraculously, refuses to be cooked, and indeed the author of the biography then extends this confrontation into yet another complex parallel involving the Old and New Testaments, where Brynach relents, finds the west Wales manna in the form of oak bread, turns stones in the stream to fish, and from

¹⁸ Wade-Evans, A. W. ed. *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944), Cap. 3

the same stream draws wine, all of which is presented as a feast for Maelgwyn, who in turn grants Brynach freedom from 'all royal exaction', and, 'In the name of God and our Lord Jesus Christ'. As a kind of *quid pro quo* exchange, Brynach then offers a blessing on Maelgwyn and his retinue. All ends well and the parting is extremely amicable.¹⁹

This episode, which takes up around a third of the paragraphs in Wade-Evans' translation, and which essentially draws the *Life* to a close, while seemingly appearing to be on the surface naively fantastic and perhaps unduly emphasized, on a deeper level might be viewed again as symbolic of the power and potential beneficence of the sacred over the secular. Possibly we might also regard it as a naive fantasy for the hope that the current contemporaneous state authorities of that era (when the *Vita* was drawn up) might realise the moral of the narrative. Brynach is beneficent, he is not a petty-minded tyrant, in the final analysis. And indeed his potential power over the world around him is supreme and exceeds that of any king. Overall, the biographer's message was a moral of possibly 'do good and good will be returned'. But most of all, the status of the saint is at least equal to that of the ruling elite. It is as if the biographer is establishing a political stance, if politics equates to power. Kings might rule, but all are ruled over by the Almighty, and the representative of that supreme power on earth should be respected. And so, at least in the view of Brynach's biographer, it was inevitable then that Maelgwyn should respect the authority of God's representative on earth.

¹⁹ Wade-Evans, A. W. ed. *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944), Cap's 11 -15

Brynach's legacy?

And so we come to an inevitable question, based on the assumed fame and status of Brynach, was there a cult? As the space in time between the assumed life of Brynach and the 'Vita' compilation runs into centuries, establishing exact details is a challenge to put the matter modestly. But more realistically, what may be considered in the light of gazetteer indications and a survey of two versions of Brynach's Christian name with slight variation in the spelling as suggested by the 'Vita' as well as the mutation from 'B' to 'F' resulted in two further sites additional to the Nevern establishment: 'Llanfyrnach' in north Pembrokeshire, and 'Llanfrynach' in the countryside near Brecon, Powys. However, this initial review did not include any consideration for sites outside the Welsh topography and the 'Llan' prefix, and so when we look to the immediate areas across the Severn Estuary we do see evidence of the spread of interest into the West Country notably under the anglicised 'Brannock'. This, on further inquiry, was not the complete picture however, as there exist a greater number of Saint Brynach church sites located in settlements with no indication of the Saint in the village name. Some of these, such as that at Pontfaen, (Abergwaun, Fishguard) and nearby Cwm yr Eglwys (three miles from Nevern) give the impression of early constructional dimensions as would have been the case for an early medieval period type, well before the second millennium building initiatives of the incoming Norman regimes. In the case of the Brynach site at Cwm yr Eglwys, the attraction of maintaining a local sainthood as opposed to establishing some other foundation (e.g. Saint Mary) when the new church was built on much higher ground ('Brynhenllan') in 1861 is testament to the importance of Brynach in this

west coastal area and associated landholdings further inland within the Preseli Hills and vales topography. It may well be the case that the continued support of a local 'Welsh' saint, or at least purported to be, would have been attractive to the local community as an alternative to the Saint Mary foundation in the centre of the Cemaes Baronial district at Newport, adjacent to the twelfth century Norman castle there.

Regrettably, what remains of Brynach's legacy and corroborative material is incomplete. A recent survey of sites concludes the reference to Brynach's principal abode

It is referred to by Fenton as 'Above that range of rocks called Carnedd Meibion Owen, on the side of the mountain by the highway, and is compassed round with a curtilage of stone wall called Buarth Brynach, Brynach's fold, the wall being of 6 feet thick.'

In 1914 no traces of the stone wall existed. It was later noted that the spring had been diverted, with only a wet hollow indicating the site. When visited by Dyfed Archaeological Trust in 2002 it was not visible. ' ²⁰

A revealing comment by Sir Richard Fenton states that 'most churches' are dedicated to Saint Brynach, an eremitic, and 'contemporary of Saint David'. However, he may have been considering local dedications as opposed to the totality of dedication throughout Wales,²¹ although it should be added that the Brynach 'cult' did apparently spread east to the south Glamorgan area by virtue of the fact of what appears to be an early site located at Llanfrynach, near Cowbridge in the vale of Glamorgan. This is additional to the Breconshire Llanfrynach mentioned earlier. But certainly the principal site in North Pembrokeshire continues as a memorial to the legend, set to continue of some

²⁰ <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/32464/> [Buarth Byrnach]

²¹ Fenton, R., *A Historical Tour through Pembrokeshire* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Co., 1811) pp 541-542

considerable importance at least for the foreseeable future by virtue of the fact that two early medieval monuments continue as research and tourist attractions in the curtilage of the 'llan', while two survive as window lintels in the interior structure on the south elevation, one of which as described earlier can be linked back to Brynach's lifetime or relatively short period before or after.

Assignment summary

Undoubtedly, establishing *bona fide* biographical details of personalities such as Brynach is at first glance a major challenge. In his case the 'Vita' is relatively short when compared with David's. But it is hoped that the foregoing would have opened up some avenues for further scrutiny enhancing what is recorded in the Vespasian MS. The major source is still the 'Vita', but on the other hand the earlier archaeology seems contemporary with the man.

Illustrations

Fig. 1 *Maglocuni* memorial inserted into south transept window



Below Left, fig.2 Original upright positioning of the Maglocunas memorial. The monument would have been erected or measured prior to incising (cutting) the Irish script from the visible base as was customary. The Latin equivalent would then have been inscribed from the top or opposite end for conveying the details of the inscription to those outside the Gaelic speaking fraternity if considered necessary.

Right fig.3 and 4 below, similar strictly Irish script dedications found near Llanfyrnach and Bridell, Pembrokeshire. The dedicatees in this case were:

Fig 3 Efessangus.

Fig 4 Nettasagri (maqi mucoi Briaci)



Fig's. 2,3 Photographs

courtesy of Dyfed Archaeological Trust and <https://www.megalithic.co.uk>



INSCRIBED STONE AT BRIDELL, PEMBROKESHIRE.

From a cast in the Cardiff Museum.

(Photographed by Alfred Perke.)

Fig 4

Source of Bridell monument image: <https://gazetteer.org.uk/>

E. T. Lewis indicates the possible complexity of interpretation of some of the monuments currently located at church sites. For example, the 'Efessangus' example is a terminal site in its history as he states that it had been removed from 'letwen' 'Mynydd Stamber' to 'Trellywel', there used as a gatepost, thence to the churchyard at Glandwr, possibly by virtue of the ringcross etched into the face of the structure [the Ogam script invariably occupying the corner edges] He also maintains that the original site was located near a site of cremation as an urn was discovered nearby along with pottery op cit p13 On further reflection, this may have also been the case with the almost identical monument at Bridell, Saint Davids church 'llan', seen in fig. 4 above.

Fig. 5 St Brynach's, Pontfaen, North Pembrokeshire

Typical earlier Pembrokeshire style lacking tower and pronounced chancel (compare with the Cathedral of Saint Davids, for example, a Norman development around 15 miles south west).



Fig. 6, below, Saint Brynach's site with the remaining elevation on Cwm yr Eglwys beach, Pembrokeshire, a surviving structure after 19th century destruction following a major maritime storm. A later dedication to Brynach was founded in the hills behind the shore at Brynhenllan ('the hill of the old church')



source :<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/304400>

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