

Skills for Medievalists: Week 3 Activity – Llanllŷr Abbey

1. To what order did your chosen monastery belong, and what do you understand by 'order'?

The abbey at Llanllŷr originally belonged to the Cistercian order, who were sometimes referred to as the 'White monks' due to the colour of their habits. The order itself began at Cîteaux in Eastern France, and quickly spread its influence throughout Europe following the arrival of Bernard of Clairvaux around c. 1112.¹ I understand the term 'order' to be in reference to a monastic group who follow a certain rule and interpretation of the Catholic Church, and are usually based at a monastery or other religious house, sometimes one specifically built for the purpose of the order.

2. Who founded it?

The abbey itself was founded by Rhys ap Gruffudd, who was the Lord of Deheubarth from 1155 until his death in 1197, which is how we know the abbey was founded prior to this date.² The Lord Rhys, as he is more commonly known, dedicated the abbey to the Virgin Mary, which could explain why the abbey was initially inhabited by sixteen nuns.³

3. Are there any indicators of why it was founded?

There does not seem to be any direct reason for the founding, however, the fact that Rhys was a major patron of the abbey at Strata Florida, and that Llanllŷr was a daughter-house of said abbey, the founding could have had something to do with strengthening the influence and wealth of the former by founding the latter.⁴

4. What is the significance of its location?

The significance of Llanllŷr Abbey's location is not extremely clear, however, there does seem to be a lack of monastic houses in the surrounding area, with only four in Ceredigion itself, compared to

¹ Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, and others, *Monastic Wales: Cistercians* (2020) <<https://www.monasticwales.org/order/1>> [Accessed: 23-10-20].

² Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, and others, *Monastic Wales: Rhys ap Gruffudd, Prince of Deheubarth (the Lord Rhys; Yr Arglwydd Rhys)* (2020) <<https://www.monasticwales.org/person/23>> [Accessed: 23-10-20].

³ Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, and others, *Monastic Wales: Llanllŷr (Abbey)* (2020) <<https://www.monasticwales.org/site/38>> [Accessed: 23-10-20].

⁴ Burton, Stöber, and others, *Llanllŷr*, [Accessed: 23-10-20].

eight in Carmarthenshire and six in Pembrokeshire.⁵ As such, it could have been founded at this location to add to the number of houses in Northern Deheubarth, as well as to strengthen the authority of the medieval diocese of St David's.⁶

5. What recorded events are listed in its history, and what is there significance?

There are several recorded events listed in the history of Llanllŷr Abbey, from its founding before 1197, up until its dissolution on 26th February 1537. For instance, a number of records state that the abbey was given 40 marks as compensation for damages caused by Edward's conquest of Wales in 1284, and in about c. 1291, it is believed that the abbey's value and assets were estimated at 60 sheep and 1,200 acres.⁷ Both of these events are significant as they provide indicators as to the political and financial situation at the abbey, as well as wider events on a national and international scale. Furthermore, in 1299, there are accounts that the abbess of Llanllŷr was acquitted of a fine for illegally felling an oak tree by Queen Margaret of England, which is again significant due to the legal information it provides, as well as the connections that the abbey had to the English monarchy.⁸

It is not until around c. 1535 that another record regarding Llanllŷr Abbey is recorded, again in reference to the value of the building and its net income, which was seen to be £57, 5 shillings and 4 pence. Like before, this is significant as it demonstrates the abbey's finances near to the time of the dissolution. The final two recorded events occur in 1536 and 1537 respectively and do feed into one another. The former date was when a survey of the abbey occurred in preparation for the dissolution, which finally occurred in 1537. Both of these events are significant as they provide information regarding the abbey's decline, as well as demonstrates the prep and thought that went into the dissolution process as a whole.⁹

⁵ Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, and others, *Monastic Wales: Monastic sites in the Database* (2020) <<https://www.monasticwales.org/listsites.php>> [Accessed: 23-10-20].

⁶ Burton, Stöber, and others, *Llanllŷr*, [Accessed: 23-10-20].

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

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