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Gwenfrewy, also known as Winifride, is the most famous female saint of Wales who died circa 650.¹ A virgin who became a martyr after refusing the advances of a medieval Welsh prince, Gwenfrewy was decapitated by Caradog and resurrected by her uncle and mentor, St. Beuno, living her second life as an abbess. With multiple *vitae* bringing her story and many miracles to life, she is also ‘one of the few native female saints for whom official prose Lives survive’.² Of these many Lives, the *vita* selected for this critical appreciation is the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* (Laud Mis. 114 version) written by Robert Pennant of Shrewsbury, sometime between 1138-1140.³

According to Robert, Gwenfrewy was the daughter of a Welsh nobleman. A pious virgin, she sought to take the veil, guided along this religious path by Beuno. Unfortunately, on a day when she was home alone, Prince Caradog happened upon her. Infatuated by her beauty, he propositioned her. Gwenfrewy feigned the need to change her clothes before escaping through a door and fleeing for the church. Maddened and consumed by desire, Caradog hunted her down and sliced off her head with his sword. A spring burst forth the moment her head hit the ground. Beuno and the other worshippers saw the aftermath of this attack, where Beuno cursed Caradog and he immediately melted into the ground and died. Beuno resurrected Gwenfrewy, and she bore a delicate white scar around her neck for the rest of her earthly life. Following her resurrection, Gwenfrewy stayed in Holywell for seven years before she was led to Gwytherin after receiving divine message; all predicted by Beuno. When the

¹ James Ryan Gregory, ‘*A Welsh Saint in England: Translation, Orality, and National Identity in the Cult of St. Gwenfrewy, 1138-1512*’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Georgia, 2012), abstract

² Jane Cartwright (2002), ‘*Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales*’, *Medium Ævum*, vol. 71, no. 1, p.4

³ David Callander (2023), ‘*Vita Sancte Wenefrede* (Robert of Shrewsbury; Laud³)’, *Seintiau* (2023) < <https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Wenefreda-Laud.pdf> > [accessed 8th March 2024].

seven years were up, Gwenfrewy journeyed to Gwytherin where she remained as abbess until her death. Five centuries later, Prior Robert and other monks made their way to Gwytherin to retrieve her bones and return them to Shrewsbury Abbey circa 1138.⁴ After their safe retrieval and instalment at Shrewsbury Abbey, he wrote his *vita* circa 1140. According to Gregory, Robert's Life 'exerted the greatest influence on later retellings of her story, including the numerous English and Welsh renditions that survive from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.'⁵ This claim is supported by the enormous increase in visitors to both her well at Holywell and the shrine. Richard I made pilgrimage to Holywell in 1189 to seek Gwenfrewy's favour regarding his upcoming crusade, the first known monarch to make such a pilgrimage and certainly not the last.⁶ Baring-Gould declare that the translation of her *vita* by Robert 'may be regarded as having been mainly responsible for her eminence as a saint'.⁷

Robert's purpose in writing the *vita* was, firstly, religious. The *vita* is fashioned into a saintly drama with three separate acts: Gwenfrewy as the 'menaced virgin' prior to her decapitation;⁸ Gwenfrewy resurrected, serving God as abbess at Gwytherin; and Gwenfrewy 500 years later, detailing the journey of her saintly relics from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury Abbey. It is action-packed with

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 Masters thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2015), p.14-15

⁵ Gregory, p.4

⁶ Martin D. Locker, '*Landscapes of Pilgrimage in Medieval Britain*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University college London, 2012) p.199

⁷ S. Baring-Gould and John Fisher, '*The Lives of the British Saints*', (Pennsylvania: Alpha Editions, 2019) 3.2, p.196

⁸ Jane Cartwright (2007), 'The Cult of St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and Breton Hagiography', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans, Jonathan M. Wooding (Martlesham: Boydell Press, 2007), pp 182-206 (p. 182)

grandiloquent descriptions throughout. However, Robert's *vita* was critically important for the continuation of Gwenfrewy's legend and her acceptance and celebration in England and continental Europe. It was also fairly common for lives of saints to be dramatic, with excessive verbiage and grandiose religious references. *Vitas* were incredibly popular as their own genre of literature, hence why so many have survived as both individual *vitas* and collections.⁹ Robert's *vita* is perfectly representative of what was considered enjoyable reading at the time, but it also served another purpose: to lead the reader to divine inspiration, a sudden urge to mirror the saint's actions, such as when Gwenfrewy's parents decide to donate their riches and possessions, including those items they had intended to keep for their daughter's marriage to an 'earthly man'.¹⁰ It could be argued that for those readers with no child to inherit their estate, or with children who followed in Gwenfrewy's footsteps, such charitable behaviour from her parents might have inspired them to donate the bulk of their wealth to the church; perhaps even Shrewsbury Abbey.

Robert also sought prestige and notoriety; not for himself, but for Shrewsbury Abbey. The possession of Gwenfrewy's relics put the newly constructed Abbey on the map. Now worshippers would stop at Shrewsbury Abbey as they made pilgrimage to both Gwytherin and Holywell. By anglicising her name, which appears as Wenefrede in his *vita*, he could make her legend more appealing to continental European and English Catholics. Now this formerly local saint had been introduced to pilgrims far and wide, as well as those people who enjoyed reading *vitas* for pleasure. Lowry adds 'the motive for Prior Robert's expedition and for the introduction of St Winifred to English religious life was almost certainly religious. Norman foundations like those at Chester and Shrewsbury needed to graft themselves on to the Celtic traditions that had preceded them, and Robert's own account of the events follows a well-established pattern of stories recording the 'translation' of holy relics'.¹¹

⁹ Gregory, p.4-5

¹⁰ Callander, p.60-61

¹¹ M.J.C Lowry, 'Caxton, *St Winifred and the Lady Margaret Beaufort*', *The Library*, vol. 6, no.2 (1983) p.110

Shrewsbury Abbey was now quite as critical as Gwytherin and Holywell, and would therefore benefit from additional footfall from pilgrims and their generous donations; ‘Shrewsbury... became the second main centre of her cult’.¹² Furthermore, Robert details numerous miracles and visions; in his opinion, such divine messages and actions proved that Gwenfrewy herself wished to be moved to Shrewsbury Abbey, happy to be under the stewardship of the monks there, her bones resonating with ‘holy power’.¹³ Robert mentions Gwenfrewy’s gifts, most specifically her second gift: that a pilgrim seeking her blessing will receive it on either the first, second or third time, and if he receives no blessing then he will die not long after; by saying the second or even the third time, it could be argued that Robert hoped to inspire pilgrims to make multiple pilgrimages, multiple visits to Shrewsbury abbey, and therefore multiple donations. Alternatively, Robert was simply hoping to inspire devotion in the reader, or possibly fear if no blessing is received at all.¹⁴ It should also be noted that Robert wrote the *vita* to appease the Normans; by adjusting her legend, it not only gave authority to Shrewsbury Abbey as the steward of her relics but also suited a ‘new Norman audience’.¹⁵ So, Robert’s motives were not only religious but also political. Cartwright explains that Gwenfrewy is ‘a rare example of a Welsh female saint whose cult appears to have acquired political clout’: her cult spread far wider than Wales, thanks to the movement of her relics, and her legend was retold in various other Middle English lives.¹⁶ Robert goes into great detail about Gwenfrewy’s wish to be moved to Shrewsbury Abbey, telling a story of one of the brothers building a monastery in

¹² Lowry, p.103

¹³ James Ryan Gregory, ‘*The Life of St. Winifred: The Vita S. Wenefrede from BL Lansdowne MS 436*’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, vol. 4 (2016), p.11

¹⁴ Callander, p.70

¹⁵ Gregory, *The Life of St. Winifred*, p.10

¹⁶ Jane Cartwright, ‘*The Welsh versions of the life of Gwenfrewy*’, in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses: astudiaethau ar Seintiau Cymru*, ed. by David N. Parsons and Paul Russell (Aberystwyth: Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru, 2022) pp. 237-268 (p. 238)

Shrewsbury who was struck by a terrible mental illness. After another brother, Ralph, was visited by a vision of Gwenfrewy in his sleep, she instructed him to visit her well at Holywell, as well as the church at Gwytherin, and the poor afflicted brother would be free from his 'madness'. Following the miraculous healing of this monk, Prior Robert and the other brothers made it their holy mission to acquire Gwenfrewy's relics and return them to Shrewsbury.¹⁷ He navigated the politics carefully and spun the story well, making it clear that the locals supported him in this mission as well as the church, doing his utmost to prove that it was Gwenfrewy herself who desired to be at the Abbey rather than the Abbey requiring saintly relics to increase its prestige.

Robert openly declared his own reasons for writing the *vita* within the life itself. First, he was afraid of God's mighty retribution if he failed to acknowledge and openly proclaim Gwenfrewy's power. Second, because of his love for Gwenfrewy and his belief that she be revered as widely as possible, and the 'devotion his monastic brothers have for him'.¹⁸ However, Robert also concedes that he has deliberately excluded various stories and details about Gwenfrewy's life. For example, that he chose not to write about Gwenfrewy's journey to Rome, and not to include certain stories 'because I did not find these in books nor were those who proclaimed them by their own assertions worthy in the estimation of men whose words I would trust'¹⁹. Robert also admits that he did not want to be seen as 'guilty of some superfluity';²⁰ an interesting admission, since Robert's work is certainly wordy and frivolous in language.

Robert, in writing his *vita*, utilised written and oral accounts to learn about Gwenfrewy. Oral accounts were normal in early medieval Wales; tradition, which would have been essential to Robert when

¹⁷ Callander, p.92

¹⁸ Callander, p.57

¹⁹ Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 2000), pp. 95-113 (p.26)

²⁰ Pepin and Feiss, p.26

gathering sources. He refers to information from locals around Holywell, as well as local cultural practices: ‘many people affirmed that it had been swallowed up by the gaping earth and had sunk with his soul into the abyss’.²¹ Gregory mentions Ong when discussing these oral accounts, stating that the structure of the *vita* is indicative of an ‘oral epic’, but also that Robert’s *vita* is linear and ordered, ‘a carefully constructed edifice’. Alongside his reliance on frothy language, Robert clearly used both written and oral accounts in order to create the *vita*.²²

Robert incorporates traditional female hagiographical themes. Firstly, Gwenfrewy’s depiction is quite typical of a medieval female saint: domestic, reflective of a Welsh woman’s role in medieval society. It follows Welsh hagiographical tradition in that Gwenfrewy does not become a saint until faced with the prospect of uncontrollable sexual urges from a man; according to Wogan-Brown, lives written about women during the twelfth century were nearly always about virgin martyrs, a ‘favoured presentation of the female saint’.²³ Gwenfrewy’s journey to taking the veil is portrayed as follows: she is placed under Beuno’s tutelage by her father, she subsequently finds her calling, declares her wish to become a nun before her fatal interaction with Caradog, but does not actually succeed until her resurrection. As Cartwright states, ‘the menaced virgin is a common topos in hagiography... virginity is almost a prerequisite for feminine sanctity, and the image of the female saint as the bride of Christ, a veiled consecrated nun, is inextricably linked with her physical purity’.²⁴ Next, decapitation was a common hagiographical theme for female saints and one that Robert made good

²¹ Callander, p.37

²² Walter J. Ong, ‘Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word’ in James Ryan Gregory, ‘*A Welsh Saint in England: Translation, Orality, and National Identity in the Cult of St. Gwenfrewy, 1138-1512*’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Georgia, 2012), p.139

²³ Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, ‘*Saints’ Lives and the Female Reader*’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, p.314

²⁴ Cartwright, *St. Non*, p.182

use of. Furthermore, it seemed almost inevitable for a healing spring to burst forth with miraculous powers from the place that the unlucky woman's head landed.²⁵

Finally, Robert included Celtic beliefs and practices. According to Henken, Welsh hagiography represented 'native, cultural values' which 'greatly overshadowed church traditions', something which Robert had to acknowledge and demonstrate in his *vita* in order to stay true to Gwenfrewy's legend.²⁶ As a saint, Gwenfrewy is depicted as vengeful: something unique to Welsh saints and in complete contradiction with her English or European counterparts.²⁷ For example, Gwenfrewy afflicts a thief with what appears to be gangrene, and other numerous miracles in the *vita* that depict her wrath.²⁸ Robert, despite his *vita* being quite excessive in words and descriptions of various miracles and visions, was clearly respectful of Welsh traditions and cultural beliefs, therefore appealing local worshippers who still held on to their Celtic practices.

In conclusion, the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* is a lengthy, emotional life intended to delight and entertain the reader, but with clear political and religious intentions behind its publication. Robert was determined to place Shrewsbury Abbey on the pilgrim's path to Gwytherin and Holywell, placate new Norman readers and simultaneously increase his Abbey's authority and status. He wrote the *vita* in line with medieval style and themes: the beautiful young virgin confronted with violent male lust, her martyrdom following her inevitable beheading and subsequent resurrection, before leading a pious life as an abbess and ascending into sainthood after her second death. He also stayed faithful to the more uniquely Welsh traditions regarding Gwenfrewy's sainthood, utilising oral accounts of her miracles passed down over five centuries, as well as her vengeance as a saint to any man who dared desecrate

²⁵ Cartwright, p.182

²⁶ Elissa R. Henken, '*The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives*' (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p.12-13

²⁷ Gregory, p.9

²⁸ Callander, p.93

her sacred churchyard. His *vita* ensured that Gwenfrewy's legend was transmitted far wider than Wales, introducing her to English and European audiences whilst also tailoring her story to suit the new Norman style. It is thanks to this *vita* that Gwenfrewy has reached the level of reverence and respect that she still enjoys today, though perhaps not quite so piously; however, Catholics still make pilgrimage to Shrewsbury Abbey, Gwytherin and Holywell today and it is questionable if Gwenfrewy would have been quite so celebrated if it were not for Robert's detailed and emotionally charged Life.

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