

A Critical Appreciation of the Lives of St Gwenfrewy

The Welsh virgin martyr Gwenfrewy, or the anglicised Winefride, is the most documented and widely venerated woman saint of Wales. Her *floruit* is recorded as occurring in the 7th century. However, her literary existence emerges in the 12th century. In this period, Gwenfrewy is the subject of two extant *vitae* (lives): the anonymous *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* (hereafter VSW), as edited and translated by A.W. Wade-Evans,¹ and Prior Robert of Shrewsbury's *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae*, as translated by H. Feiss and R.E. Pepin.² By critically analysing these two accounts, this essay will demonstrate how the authors used Gwenfrewy to negotiate political and financial gain, specifically by manipulating her agency and materialising her cult through the physical landscape, namely her well, and her relics.

Gwenfrewy was the only child of Teuyth, son of Eylud, and Gwenlo, daughter of Bugi, who was also the father of Saint Beuno.³ Notably, the two 12th-century *vitae* offer no information on her birth. It is not uncommon for such details of female saints to go unreported in the *vita* of male saints, as they usually play supporting, minor roles. However, it is unusual for such details to remain absent in the instance that Gwenfrewy becomes the primary subject of the *vita*.⁴ Fiona Winward theorises that this omission may be due to the possibility that Gwenfrewy originated as an “extracted character”⁵ from a lost Latin *vita* of her uncle, Saint Beuno. It is possible that Gwenfrewy's *vita* was inspired by her feature in Saint Beuno's *vita*.⁶ This implies that Gwenfrewy's character exists only as an extension of a male saint, and that her purpose is solely to fulfil a spiritual or

¹ Anonymous, 'The Life of St. Wenefred', in *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, ed. and trans. by A.W. Wade-Evans (University of Wales Press Board, 1944) pp. 288-309.

² Prior Robert of Shrewsbury, 'The Life and Translation of Saint Winefride', in *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by Hugh Feiss and Ronald E. Pepin (Peregrina Pub. Co., 2000) pp. 27-76.

³ Baring-Gould, S., and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, (The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1911), p.188.

⁴ Fiona, Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred (BHL 8847-8851)', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 117 (1999), p.106.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.123.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.122.

narrative role as a virgin and a martyr. This is thus reinforced when we consider Gwenfrewy as following the narrative construct of the medieval hagiographical virgin “genre”.⁷ In this context, Gwenfrewy herself is secondary to her function as a narrative construct.

Despite the omission of her birth and earlier life, both *vitae* in question detail her early decision to dedicate herself and her virginity to Christ, the bridegroom. By doing so, she renounced all mortal men. Upon learning of this commitment, her father and mother were conflicted, wishing for offspring to continue the family line. However, they were ultimately pleased that their daughter “yielded herself to the rule of God.”⁸ Here, “yielded herself” implies a contradictory act that, although suggesting obedience, is essentially a conscious and deliberate choice made by Gwenfrewy.

Winward’s studies highlight that Gwenfrewy’s decisions are consistently submissive to a higher authority or command: even though her choice to commit herself to Christ is of her own will, she is still committing herself to the will of another, or even that it is her father who further guides her toward a religious vocation by relegating her to Beuno’s care for “religious instruction.”⁹ However, scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum emphasise a pattern in which medieval women saints exercised agency by making early, independent decisions about chastity, often before the age of eight. Their decision to remain chaste, or even to join a convent, and commit themselves to Christ allowed them to circumvent “the dangers of childbirth and the brutality of many marriages.”¹⁰ This aligns with Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe’s view that, for medieval women saints, agency lies in a voluntary, conscious decision to submit to a higher power.¹¹ Gwenfrewy’s submission to

⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300 : Virginity and its Authorizations*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3-5, <<https://archive.org/details/saintsliveswomen0000woga/page/n7/mode/1up>> [accessed 15 March 2026].

⁸ Anonymous, ‘The Life of St. Wenefred’, in *Vitae Sanctorum*, ed. and trans. by Wade-Evans, p.289.

⁹ Winward, ‘The Lives of St Wenefred’, p.106.

¹⁰ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (University of California Press, 1987) p.20.

¹¹ Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England*, (University of Toronto Press, 2012), p.81,

Christ can be understood as both an act of obedience and a strategic use of the limited agency allowed to her as a medieval woman. This submission grants Gwenfrewy physical freedom, enabling her to refuse to submit to the secular framework of marriage. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne notes that, by embracing a spiritual life, women are afforded a life in which they can focus on activities otherwise unattainable to medieval women, exchanging a life of labour for one of “reading and contemplation”.¹²

One Sunday, while her father and mother attended Mass, Gwenfrewy remained at home. For this, both *vitae* in question offer distinct potential motives. The anonymous *VSW* describes Gwenfrewy as collecting items needed for Mass from her father’s house: “fire and water with salt.”¹³ By providing these liturgical elements, Gwenfrewy transforms a domestic task into a sacred duty. Scholars such as Jane Tibbets Schulenburg describe this as “practical piety.”¹⁴ For women saints, the domestic and sacred spheres often blurred. Gwenfrewy exemplifies this by performing practical, public acts, like preparing liturgical items, in her father’s domestic space.¹⁵ The text suggests that Gwenfrewy is an essential participant in her ecclesiastical community, as evidenced by the decision to place the vital elements of Mass in her care. This is what ultimately leaves her vulnerable to the secular intrusion of Caradog, effectively linking her ritual service to her physical sacrifice and martyrdom.

In contrast, Robert’s account describes Gwenfrewy as needing to stay at her father’s house, perhaps due to illness.¹⁶ In this *vita*, Gwenfrewy assumes a passive role, consequently reducing the extent of her agency. This aligns with Schulenburg’s view that, within 11th-century Europe, the “Church attempted to popularize and promote passive

<<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=FbkAveuvSnYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>> [accessed 13 March 2026].

¹² Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture*, p.5.

¹³ Anonymous, ‘The Life of St. Wenefred’, in *Vitae Sanctorum*, ed. and trans. by Wade-Evans, p.291.

¹⁴ Schulenburg, Jane Tibbetts, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca.500-1100*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1998) p.21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 60-62.

¹⁶ Robert of Shrewsbury, ‘The Life and Translation of Saint Winefride’, in *Two Mediaeval Lives*, trans. by Feiss and Pepin, p.33.

virtues for women.”¹⁷ Schulenburg argues that women were expected to exemplify obedience and subservience in domestic spheres, following a “rigid separation of public and domestic spheres.”¹⁸ While the anonymous VSW presents Gwenfrewy as actively engaged in sacred duties, Robert’s *vita* effectively strips Gwenfrewy of public importance, reducing her to a domesticated, obedient woman.

The arrival and ultimate proposal of Caradog ap Alog are described similarly in both *vitae* in question. They detail Caradog’s arrival as a consequence of his thirst following fatigue from hunting. Upon discovering Gwenfrewy alone, his intentions become lustful, and he propositions her. Though Gwenfrewy initially rejects Caradog, as she is betrothed to Christ, his outraged response prompts her to reconsider her approach to appease him. Here, the *vitae* differ slightly. While they agree that Gwenfrewy initially flees to her bedroom, their justifications differ. In Robert’s *vita*, Gwenfrewy tells Caradog that she will return to her bedroom as they wait for her father to return from Mass.

In contrast, in the anonymous VSW, she returns to the bedroom with the apparent intention of changing into more appropriate attire but flees to the monastery instead. Winward notes that such cunning deception against men or secular authorities is common in vernacular literature about Welsh women saints; she cites Rhiannon, who similarly deceives unwanted suitors, and is seen as admirable.¹⁹ Compared with Robert’s *vita*, the VSW affords Gwenfrewy more agency. Rather than waiting for her father to return and intervene, Gwenfrewy independently plans and executes her escape, actively manipulating Caradog. This suggests a conscious effort by Robert of Shrewsbury to shape Gwenfrewy’s character by casting her limited agency as passive and dependent on an authoritative male figure. This could be considered a deliberate attempt to make her more palatable to a monastic audience, who expected women to behave obediently.²⁰

¹⁷ Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p.7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Winward, ‘The Lives of St Wenefred’, p.107.

²⁰ Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p.7.

Once Caradog comprehends that he has been deceived, he quickly pursues Gwenfrewy. The VSW describes this incident briefly, stating that Caradog, seeing Gwenfrewy as she arrives at the door of the monastery, immediately draws his sword and decapitates her. Her martyrdom here is instantaneous, the *vita* focusing rather on the transformation of the landscape following her decapitation. In contrast, Robert's account offers a more detailed and gruesome retelling of the event, in which Caradog and Gwenfrewy engage in a short conversation before her imminent decapitation. Here, Gwenfrewy defends her betrothal to Christ, ultimately telling Caradog that nothing he can do will convince her to marry him. Caradog is enraged by her defiance and decapitates her. Robert's *vita* describes her head as "rolling"²¹ into the church, landing at the feet of those attending Mass, and her "mutilated"²² body lying outside the church doors. Such detail could elicit a visceral reaction from Robert's audience, especially when compared to the more concise VSW. This violence is a common factor in the lives of medieval women saints, occurring in a consistent pattern.²³

Essentially, Robert's *vita* transforms Gwenfrewy's body into a public spectacle, further reinforcing Winward's suggestion that she functions as an extension of Beuno, the male saint.²⁴ This suggests that Gwenfrewy, although the primary subject of the *vita*, remains secondary to both the authoritative male figure and to the subsequent miracle performed upon her remains. In this context, she is physically punished by Caradog for the little agency afforded her in Robert's *vita* and remains a passive victim as a miracle is performed on her body, reducing her to a spectator of her own martyrdom. However, Jane Cartwright argues that Gwenfrewy's refusal to submit to Caradog and his sexual advances, and subsequent decapitation, are both displays of her agency. Cartwright cites Giraldus Cambrensis' writings on St Eluned, another female saint who was

²¹ Robert of Shrewsbury, 'The Life and Translation of Saint Winefride', in *Two Mediaeval Lives*, trans. by Feiss and Pepin, p.35.

²² Ibid.

²³ Jane, Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity In Medieval Wales', *Medium Ævum*, 71 (2002), p.9, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43630386>> [accessed 17 February 2026].

²⁴ Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred', p.106.

beheaded by an unwanted pursuer. Here, Eluned's refusal of a secular suitor is referred to as "triumphing in an ecstasy of self-denial."²⁵ In this context, both Eluned and Gwenfrewy are active participants in their own martyrdom and, consequently, their elevation to sanctity.

The immediate aftermath of Gwenfrewy's martyrdom differs between the *vitae* in question. The VSW is consistently brief. It describes Beuno cursing Caradog, which causes him to melt, "as wax before fire."²⁶ Beuno returns Gwenfrewy's head to her body, and following a prayer to God, her head becomes one with her body, leaving behind only a faint white scar. Robert's *vita*, of course, offers far more detail. Beuno finds Caradog wiping Gwenfrewy's blood from his sword, seemingly indifferent to the act he had moments before committed. The saint confronts Caradog with Gwenfrewy's head in his hands, and Caradog instantly dies, melts, and is "swallowed up by the gaping earth and had sunk his soul into the abyss."²⁷ According to Robert, Beuno places Gwenfrewy's head with her body and covers it with his cloak. The Mass continues, and only when it is finished does Beuno implore the congregation to pray to God for her resurrection, to which Gwenfrewy rises from her death as though she had been asleep, a thin scar around her neck where her head had been decapitated. Both *vitae* evidently agree that violating a virgin will invoke divine punishment.

Karen Winstead argues that the body of the virgin, mutilated and made whole, is reminiscent of the Eucharist, as the bread resembling Christ's body is fragmented but remains resembling his whole body.²⁸ In this context, Gwenfrewy, who is fragmented by decapitation and then made whole through resurrection, resembles the Eucharist. Winstead recognises the paradoxical nature of these virgins' becoming saints, in which

²⁵ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p.3.

²⁶ Anonymous, 'The Life of St. Wenefred', in *Vitae Sanctorum*, ed. and trans. by Wade-Evans, p.293.

²⁷ Robert of Shrewsbury, 'The Life and Translation of Saint Winefride', in *Two Mediaeval Lives*, trans. by Feiss and Pepin, p.37.

²⁸ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, (Cornell University Press, 2018), p.12,

<https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Virgin_Martyrs/t7lcDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1> [accessed 16 March 2026].

the instruments of their torture become indicative of their identity.²⁹ In the case of Gwenfrewy, the sword used by Caradog to decapitate her is a phallic image. Her body has been denied to him sexually, and thus, he turns to violence. Caradog's decision to behead her is particularly interesting, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly notes that during the age of antiquity, the neck, or rather the throat, was deemed to "be homologous to the neck of the uterus."³⁰ Gwenfrewy's martyrdom is also an attempt to silence her, as the throat is "the site of the voice."³¹ However, her resurrection suggests Caradog's failure to domesticate her spiritual agency. Instead, Caradog provides Gwenfrewy with a permanent "emblem"³²: the scar on her neck where he struck her with his sword becomes an iconographic mark of her transition from a mortal woman to a saint.

It is agreed in both *vitae* that a well had sprung from where Gwenfrewy's severed head fell. Following the emerging popularity of Gwenfrewy's cult in the 12th century, no doubt thanks to the *vitae* in question, the well gained a reputation for being a "curative shrine."³³ Gwenfrewy's Well provides physical restoration to the community and visiting pilgrims. Elissa Henken notes that these saintly wells would be used as "intermediary agents."³⁴ In this context, the well would allow continued access to Gwenfrewy's "supernatural powers"³⁵ in the absence of Gwenfrewy herself or her relics. The stones of the well are described in both *vitae* as being marked with Gwenfrewy's blood from her decapitation, and the moss, likened to her hair,³⁶ as smelling of incense. Here, the blood and the moss serve as iconography for pilgrims to witness and acknowledge Gwenfrewy's presence. The 12th century, in which Gwenfrewy's *vitae* were produced, saw the development of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, (Routledge, 2000), p.57.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p.12.

³³ T.W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission, c.650-1930*, (Bridge Books, 2009), p.55.

³⁴ E.R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives*, (DS Brewer, 1991), p.54.

³⁵ Ibid, p.49.

³⁶ Sean R. Edwards, *Mosses in English Literature*, (British Bryological Society, 1992), p.1, <https://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/1992-BBS-Special-Vol.-4-Mosses-in-English-Literature-S.-Edwards_1992_OCR.pdf> [accessed 16 March 2026].

affective piety.³⁷ This meant that devotional traditions shifted to focus on Christ's humanity, urging Christians to connect emotionally with the sacred. Michelle Sauer argues that, in the case of medieval manuscripts, many of their users believed that depictions and likenesses of Christian iconographic figures were essentially alive. In her example, Sauer claims that a medieval user might touch an illustration of Christ in a manuscript, believing it to be "akin to touching a proxy of his body."³⁸ In this context, Gwenfrewy's Well might be considered the closest physical manifestation to Gwenfrewy herself and, consequently, the physical manifestation of her saintly ability to heal. This is furthered by the understanding of tactile piety, which placed much emphasis on a pilgrim's physical display of veneration. Dee Dyas describes this devotional tradition as revealing "an extraordinary degree of physicality at the heart of much Christian spirituality."³⁹

It is crucial to understand the significance of the authorship of both *vitae* in question. Prior Robert of Shrewsbury's *vita* dates to 1138. Madeleine Gray notes that, while the acquisition of Gwenfrewy's relics, such as the exhumation of her body from its original burial in Gwytherin, was contested by locals, Robert claimed to have sought and received permission from the bishop of Bangor and the local prince, presumably Owain Gwynedd. Gray suggests this was a rebuttal against "accusations of relic theft."⁴⁰ The theft of saintly relics was otherwise known as *furta sacra*. It was common to justify such theft in

³⁷ Raphaëlle Sarah Golder, 'The Changing Uses and Developments of Affectivity in the Practice of Confession (12th -13th centuries)', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2022) <<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/b2ca8c89-fd0e-47e8-8bfa-662c3b3778fc>> [accessed 16 March 2026].

³⁸ Michelle Sauer, 'Queer Time and Lesbian Temporality in Medieval Women's Encounters with the Side Wound', in *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies*, ed. by Will Rogers and Christopher Michael Roman (Medieval Institute Publications, 2020) pp.199-220 (p.210).

³⁹ Dee Dyas, 'To Be a Pilgrim: Tactile Piety, Virtual Pilgrimage and the Experience of Place in Christian Pilgrimage', in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, ed. by James Robinson, Lloyd de Beer, and Anna Hardnen (The British Museum, 2014), pp.1-7 (p.1) <<https://britishmuseum.iro.bl.uk/concern/books/5c9614ae-1cb1-4a84-b663-c6db86ac107e>> [accessed 17 March 2026].

⁴⁰ Madeleine Gray, 'Contested Relics: Winefride and the Saints of the Atlantic Churches', in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, ed. by James Robinson, Lloyd de Beer, and Anna Hardnen (The British Museum, 2014), pp.164-169 (p.164) <<https://britishmuseum.iro.bl.uk/concern/books/5c9614ae-1cb1-4a84-b663-c6db86ac107e>> [accessed 17 March 2026].

hagiographical texts, such as Robert's *vita*, and to utilise tropes that implied that the acquisition of the relics would "increase the relative value of the cult,"⁴¹ ultimately benefiting the new community in which the relics reside. Considering that Shrewsbury Abbey had begun construction in 1083, these relics would provide it with "bravitas and financial benefits."⁴² Patrick Geary argues, however, that the value of a relic is socially constructed by its community, and therefore it loses value when it is separated from its original locality.⁴³ Robert of Shrewsbury might have written the *vita* to reassert the relic's value and ensure it would bring prestige and wealth to Shrewsbury Abbey.

In comparison, the identity author of the anonymous *VSW* is highly contested among scholars. While some believe the author was Welsh, there are arguments that the author was a monk at Basingwerk Abbey, which would make the author likely Savignac-Norman, or that the *vita* was written for a monk, but not necessarily by one.⁴⁴ Regardless of the author's identity, there was a distinct difference between their writing and that of Robert of Shrewsbury. Robert's account offers additional implications in the narrative that reflect the Church's attempts to reassert 12th-century expectations for women, while the anonymous *VSW* perhaps offers a less sanitised account of Gwenfrewy.

Ultimately, Gwenfrewy is a figure whose martyrdom and subsequent sanctification are political tools. Robert of Shrewsbury illustrates Gwenfrewy as a passive victim to commodify her virginity as an achievable aspiration for medieval women, reflecting the social and religious expectations of women in the 12th century. This passivity allows Gwenfrewy's image to be mediated by the monastery. Robert's *vita* aims to justify the relocation of her relics to ensure the prestige of Shrewsbury Abbey. While the *VSW*'s

⁴¹ Elizabeth A. Wiedenheft, 'Circulating Saints: A Study of the Movement of Corporeal Relics in Three Regions of Western Europe, c. 800-1200', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 2017) <<https://repository.nottingham.ac.uk/server/api/core/bitstreams/07445203-1f59-43c9-a555-6647bfc6ef62/content>> [accessed 17 March 2026] p. 85.

⁴² Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred', p.89.

⁴³ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1990) p.128. <<https://www-fulcrum-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/epubs/9c67wq25b?locale=en#page=144>> [accessed 17 March 2026]

⁴⁴ Winward, 'The Lives of St Wenefred', p.90.

author is unknown, and much debate surrounds their identity, it is possible to suggest that if they were a monk, writing or commissioning this *vita* could be an attempt to anchor Gwenfrewy to her homeland. Regardless, it is clear that Gwenfrewy's remains became a contested resource, caught between the Welsh locality and the English monastery, both of which sought to benefit financially and politically. These *vitae* offer a tangible presence in comparison to oral tradition.

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