

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.

Christians thought saints were regularly capable of performing miracles with divine assistance. They were able to cure the sick, counter famines, quell fires or defeat enemies. Their residence of the divine court meant that their posthumous powers were considered more impressive and useful as they could present petitions on behalf of the living to God in order to win their favour in the divine court. The posthumous power of the saints was thought to come from God and the honour shown to the saints was considered a means of worshipping God.¹ Relics were not just a medieval phenomenon in Christianity. There are several references to the veneration of relics in both the Old and New Testaments which show the existence of some degree of informal cults fairly early on, such as Moses taking the bones of Joseph out of Egypt in Exodus 13:19.²

The public honour accorded to saints took many forms. One of which was liturgical. The memory of those admitted to the canon of saints was celebrated on a feast which commemorated the day of that saint's death. The other most important form was that of the cult of relics. Relics were the material objects associated with saints which served to incorporate the sacred power of these holy people, most particularly their bodies.³ The cult of the saints began with the tombs of the martyrs in the cemeteries outside the walls of the Greco-Roman cities, where Christians visited, especially on the anniversary of their death. Over time these began to be marked by what eventually became the martyr churches.⁴ These tomb shrines were significant. Ancient legislation forbade the disturbance of human remains, the martyr churches of the late antique period were raised above the tombs of the saints, leaving them in their original position. Although early Christian martyr graves were built above graves, in the sixth and seventh centuries, underground churches were excavated around the tombs of Roman martyrs in the catacombs, a tradition which continued.⁵ Throughout the Middle Ages, the cult of the saints was widespread and could be considered to have revolved around relics. Churches and monasteries, monks, nuns, bishops, and prelates as well as kings and queens, merchants and soldiers all sought to touch or see the bones of dead saints and if possible obtain them. They were essential to the consecration of a church and were placed under or over the altar, made into artefacts and exchanged in political deals, etc. The veneration of the bones of the holy dead was not a late medieval development in Christian history.⁶

Saints' relics made it possible for the devout to connect with saints as they were objects could be seen and before which the devout could kneel and pray, as well as present gifts. Relics were seen to be the vectors through which miracles were granted by God by the transmission through the body of the saint to the body of an individual or to a community. A strand of hair

¹ Thomas Head, 'The Cult of Saints and their Relics', < http://www.hagiographysociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Head_Cult-of-Saints.pdf >

² Lynne Heidi Stumpe, 'Display and Veneration of Holy Relics at St Winefrides' Wells and Stonyhurst', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, December 2009, No. 22, Museum Ethnography at Home (December 2009), p65

³ Thomas Head, 'The Cult of Saints and their Relics',

⁴ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton University Press, 2013), p250

⁵ Bartlett, *Why can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p251

⁶ Benedicta Ward, 'Relics and the Medieval Mind', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Vol. 10, No. 4, November 2010, pp274-275

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which belonged to the saint became its embodiment. Touching, feeling, and seeing the hair itself became necessary to experience the saints' power.⁷

The cult of the saints began with the veneration of the dead bodies of the martyrs. Throughout the medieval period, there were shrines which consisted of the dead bodies of the martyrs. These corporeal remains might have become fragmented and body parts then may have went into circulation.⁸ Contact relics could be obtained from the tombs of the saints as well as from living holy men, dust or oil from the lamps which burned in the tombs. The most intimate things which were possible to take from a saint- whether dead or alive- were hair or clothes. Hair is technically a corporeal relic, but, as it contains no blood and was easily separable from the body, it shares some of the features of inanimate contact relics such as clothing.⁹ Relics can be classed into four different types. A first-class relic is either the body of a saint or a portion of it such as a piece of bone or fragment of flesh. A second-class relic is an item which was used by the saint such as a piece of clothing. A third-class relic is an item which was deliberately touched to a first-class relic. A fourth-class relic is anything that was deliberately touched to a second-class relic with the intent of creating a fourth-class relic.¹⁰ The practice of repositioning the saint's bones, the fragmentation of relics and the development of secondary or contact relics, meant that the physical location and housing of saintly relics could be of varied types, from a massive and elaborate shrine placed in the nave or choir of the church to a phylactery hung around the neck.¹¹ In the Celtic lands of Wales and Brittany, because saints' relics were not translated into above ground shrines, contact relics such as bells, croziers, staff and garments were often at the centre of cultic veneration and the primary focus of lay devotion. They were thought to be imbued with the saints powers and acted as an adjunct to the corporeal relics or as a substitute for them.¹² The veneration of relics as part of the cult of saints had different degrees of importance at different times but was widespread by the later Middle Ages. Relics also developed as important prestige items and were circulated through Europe by gift exchange. These highly valued items were used to seal dynastic alliances as well as changing hands through sale and theft.¹³

One focus on the cult of the saints was on healing and the use of relics was an important part of this. The focus on healing meant that visits to the burial place of saintly relics was assured. There was a sense of need for personal and individual contacts with the saint in more tangible ways than through prayer. A physical relic could be carried away for use in need and for affectionate meditation. As a result of this both churches and individuals were eager to own these relics.¹⁴ The belief in the ability of the saint and as such the ability of any relics of these saints to aid in healing was prevalent in the lives of many of the Celtic saints. The original

⁷ Robert A. Scott, *Miracle Cures: Saints, Pilgrimages, and the Healing Powers of Belief*, (University of California Press), pp38-39

⁸ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton University Press, 2013), p239

⁹ Bartlett, *Why can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p245

¹⁰ Joe Nickell, *Relics of the Christ*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p19

¹¹ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p263

¹² Rebecca Browett, 'Touching the Holy: The Rise of Contact Relics in Medieval England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 68, No.3, July 2017, p501

¹³ Stumpe, 'Display and Veneration of Holy Relics', p65

¹⁴ Ward, 'Relics and the Medieval Mind', p278

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purpose of collecting and employing relics was for the healing of the sick. In the absences of a saint whose magnetic personality would have been effective in producing a cure, the use of relics by the simple monk was a matter of routine and the faith of the patient in the power of the relic might produce the hoped for cure.¹⁵ The ability of healing water after contact with one of the saints is common among the saints lives. One such occurrence is within the story of David where during his baptism, his baptismal water gave sight and features to the blind wynepclawr- a term often used to describe lepers- who held him.¹⁶ Another occurrence of healing water following contact with a saint occurs later in David's Life after he is able to resurrect a young boy with his tears and prayed upon the body.¹⁷ The presence of healing wells is also present within the lives of the saints, with perhaps one of the most well-known being that of Gwenfrewy in Holywell. The well appears following the resurrection of Gwenfrewy by her uncle Beuno and is visited by pilgrims who considered it to have healing powers even to this day. There was a belief that saints were capable of performing miracles with divine assistance and these instances were perhaps considered as proof of the saints abilities to heal through the assistance of God and would explain the importance of the physical remnants of these miracles. Another example of one of the miracles performed by saints through contact with the saint is found in the Life of Saint David, where after his teacher, Paulinus, lost his sight. Paulinus calls for all of his disciples to bless his eyes, but none were able to cure him until David, who restores his sight after touching his face.¹⁸ These miracles could be considered a demonstration of the Saints power to work miracles through the power of God and explains the preoccupation with the ownership of relics to aid with healing. This is demonstrated by the Life of St. Teilo, where a maid was told to take the skull of Teilo where it would be a blessing for future generations. A tradition then developed where drinking from the skull would heal the sick.¹⁹

The bell and the staff are the most numerous of the associative type of relics and in both the literature and iconography, the bell and staff are depicted as the insignia of the ecclesiastic. The saints staff- or bachall- was perhaps more important than his bell because it was thought to be the principal vehicle of the saints power.²⁰ Bells are common among the relics of both Welsh and Irish saints. Saint Patrick was said to have been associated with a the 'Bell of the Testament' or Clog an Edachta, which was supposedly found in his tomb when it was opened in 533 and is mentioned at intervals in the annals of the succeeding centuries.²¹ Another saint who is described as owning a bell as one of his relics was the Welsh saint, St. Cadog. He is described as owning a bell which originally belonged to St. Gildas, and it is described as being blessed by the pope who says that all oaths should be made on the bell. The bell was

¹⁵ Wilfrid Bonser, 'The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages', *Folklore*, Winter 1962, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Winter 1962), p235

¹⁶ E.R Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives*, (D.S Brewer), p54

¹⁷ 'Rhygyferch's Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, edited by J. Wyn Evans, Jonathon M. Wooding, (Boydell and Brewer, Boydell Press, 2007), p145

¹⁸ 'Rhygyferch's Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, edited by J. Wyn Evans, Jonathon M. Wooding, (Boydell and Brewer, Boydell Press, 2007), p119

¹⁹ Jennifer Bell, *'The development of the saints' cults and the ecclesiastical landscape of early medieval south Wales, c.600-1200'*, (PHD thesis, Bangor University, 2022), p141

²⁰ A.T. Lucas, 'The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 1986, Vol. 116 (1986), pp8-9

²¹ Lucas, 'The Social Role of Relics', p8

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intended to be a symbol of sacred sanctuary for all of Wales.²² The mention of the bell as being used to swear oaths associates it placing within Llancarfan with a key role within secular rule as well as that of an ecclesiastical symbol.²³ St. Teilo is also recorded as having a bell as one of his relics, which was given to him by the patriarch of Jerusalem during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was unusual within the context of Welsh hagiography as Welsh saints were normally gifted the bell by another Welsh saint such as the case of St. Gildas gifting a bell to St. Cadog.²⁴ St. Teilo's bell was also thought to have the ability to heal.²⁵ Teilo was gifted a bell which was able to 'condemn the perjurers, it cures the sick' and was able to sound without anyone touching it.²⁶ On the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral, Jerusalem was considered to be the centre of the world and one of the most important places to visit alongside Rome.²⁷ This perhaps demonstrates the importance of the cult of St. Teilo as it obtained relics from outside of Wales and from a place which was considered important and prestigious to Christian rulers even as far as Wales.

Although it is clear that the presence of relics within religious communities were a way for people to demonstrate their closeness with God and their belief in Gods abilities to work miracles through those considered to be saints, the acquisition of relics could have been given some political connotations. There appears to be no overt statements within the ancient literatures of relics and reliquaries being regarded as badges of office by abbots and other church dignitaries but the accumulation of a number of contexts of evidence suggests they were also used for this purpose. Abbots were repeatedly accompanied by major relics from their foundations when away from their monasteries. The most obvious explanation for this is that the relics travelled with the churchmen as an insignia of their rank.²⁸ Relics were essential for the consecration of a church and the acquisition of these relics could have been used as a justification for the building of a church or shrine dedicated to the saints associated with the relics. Gender and misogyny influenced the veneration of relics in Medieval Christianity in many ways. Women always constituted a minority of people celebrated as saints by Christian communities and an even smaller minority of those whose relics gained widespread veneration.²⁹ Access to shrines was sometimes restricted especially if they were housed in monasteries, where lay people, especially lay women, were not welcome.³⁰ This dilemma was recognised early and one saintly monk of the fifth century, claimed 'although undeserving' possessed healing powers and requested to be buried in a place where crowds could come for miraculous cures rather than in a monastery where women would be unable to enter.³¹

²² Jennifer Bell, 'The development of the saints' cults and the ecclesiastical landscape of early medieval south Wales, c.600-1200', (PHD thesis, Bangor University, 2022), p74

²³ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p76

²⁴ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p139

²⁵ Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p55

²⁶ *Vita Sancti Teliui (Liber Landavensis)* edited by Ben Guy, <<https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TeliuiLL.pdf>> p40

²⁷ T.W. Pritchard, *St. Winefride, her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, (Bridge Books), p54

²⁸ Lucas, 'The Social Role of Relics', p13

²⁹ Thomas Head, 'The Cult of the Saints and their Relics'

³⁰ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p261

³¹ *ibid*

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Many of the cults of the saints faced revivals around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a time in which there was great political upheaval due to the Norman invasions. One such area was that of Tegeingl, Gwenfrewy's territory, which was subject to political unrest for around six to seven hundred years, until the Edwardian settlement in 1284.³² The possession of the relics of Gwenfrewy in a contested area could then be used to demonstrate the legitimacy of those in control of the territory, especially that of the Welsh Lords. There was a belief that no self-respecting saint would allow their relics to be moved without their approval and so a successful theft of relics was taken as a sign that the saint had been unhappy with their previous earthly home and preferred the new location. The community which owned an important relic was considered to be under the special protection of the saint. Anyone tempted to harm the community which housed the relics risked incurring the saint's wrath. The extraordinary means the saint had chosen to reach their final resting place was thought to validate the community's rights to ownership and protection.³³ This would validate a foundation's claim to the land in which the relics had been enshrined. It could give legitimacy to a people's control of the land, which would be especially important in an area contested between nations.

Large shrines were erected over the tombs of saints or in those places to which the saintly bodies had been moved. Shrines attracted pilgrims from near and far. More fragmentary corporeal relics were placed into altars as part of the process of consecration or set into elaborate reliquaries. Canon law also required that fragmentary relics were placed into altars during the process of consecration.³⁴ As a result of this shrines and altars are one of the most important and numerous relics of the saints but are often overlooked. This is perhaps due to the fact that bells and gospels were more prominent and lack of survival of altars. The earliest mention of a relic in Wales is an altar mentioned within the *Historia Brittonum*, where a floating altar was given to St Illtud.³⁵ Altars play a role in the Lives of St Cadog and St David. In both cases, the saints are told to have brought the altars back from Jerusalem. In the life of St David, he is gifted his altar by the patriarch of Jerusalem whilst in the life of St Cadog, three altars are miraculously transported from Jerusalem to Wales for the saint. In both these cases, the altars are considered to be prestigious relics.³⁶

Relics also came to be important financially to the religious places associated with their cults. In practice saints could be venerated anywhere but they were thought to be the most responsive to prayers offered near the place where their relics lay or where their apparitions had been seen. Although resident in heaven, saints were also believed to have been present at their tomb on earth. The optimal time to visit the saint's tomb or hallowed space was thought to be on their feast day.³⁷ Pilgrimages were popular throughout medieval Wales, and one type of pilgrimage was the visitation to a holy place containing the relics of a saint. To experience the full strength and benefits of the holy force saints' relics were thought to contain, pilgrims believed that they should get as close to the relic as physically possible. As a result, the most

³² T.W. Pritchard, *St. Winefride, her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p46

³³ Scott, *Miracle Cures*, pp42-43

³⁴ Head, 'The Cult of Saints and their Relics'

³⁵ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p208

³⁶ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p208

³⁷ Robert A. Scott, *Miracle Cures: Saints, Pilgrimages, and the Healing Powers of Belief*, (University of California Press), pp36-37

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desirable way to venerate a saint was to go the tomb or site of the saint's relics and get as close as possible.³⁸ This meant that it became financially viable to obtain some form of relic. One such example of this is the translation of the relics of Gwenfrewy by Prior Robert to Shrewsbury. During his account of her Life, Prior Robert places great emphasis on the events leading to Gwenfrewy becoming an abbess, by recording miracles which occurred both at Gwytherin and Holywell. It is likely this was done to portray her as a saint chosen by God as a way of ensuring her relics would be considered to be blessed in similar ways to other saints.³⁹ The importance placed on the miracles of her life would ensure that the cult of Gwenfrewy would gain popularity and then ensure an increase in visitors to Shrewsbury where her relics were enshrined.

Books feature prominently in hagiography. Books can be seen as examples of the great patronage received by a foundation and a way of reflecting the status of foundations which owned them. These books were both symbols of the ecclesiastical power of a foundation and evidence of the secular role they may have played in the areas they were located.⁴⁰ The Life of St Cadog describes a gospel book which is thought to have been associated with him as one of Cadog's relics although the book is described as the Gospels of Gildas. The Life of St Cadog describes how the book was used to swear upon in legal disputes. The practice of swearing upon holy books was common throughout the medieval period and could demonstrate how the Gospel of Gildas was considered to be a holy relic.⁴¹ The ownership of such an important and holy relic could increase the prestigiousness of the institution. Following a decree by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, no church was supposed to be dedicated without the placing of relics. This may have led to the fabrication of a relic if the church was unable to obtain a genuine article. For a poor monastery, it was a great temptation to secure some relic, whether genuine or not, as it would be a source of wealth from the resulting pilgrimages made to the shrine thus created.⁴² A possible example of this may be remains of St Teilo. After his death there was disagreement among the three communities of his church on who should have his body and after a night of praying in order for Christ to decide who should be entrusted with his body, Teilo's body had apparently multiplied.⁴³ It is possible this event had been fabricated by these churches and thus recorded into Teilo's Life as a way of legitimising each churches claim to Teilo's remains.

As well as through pilgrimages, relics could be used as a way of collecting ecclesiastical dues and tributes. An example of this is found in the Life of St Caillin, an Irish saint. In his Life, he is said to have a bell called Clog na Righ which had to be obeyed when it came into a territory with Caillin's people such as when it was taken on a rent collecting visitation by the clergy of Fenagh, country Leitrim. Those that were visited were threatened with dire consequences if they failed to obey the clergy who were symbolized by the bell.⁴⁴ Relics

³⁸ Scott, *Miracle Cures*, p39

³⁹ Sally Ann Hallmark, *'Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin, From maiden and martyr to abbess and saint The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin'*, (unpublished MA these, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, 2015), p16

⁴⁰ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p207

⁴¹ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p73

⁴² Bonser, 'The Cult of Relics', p236

⁴³ *Vita Sancti Teliaui (Vespasian A. xiv)* edited by Ben Guy, <<https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TeliauiVesp.pdf>> p29

⁴⁴ Lucas, 'The Social Role of Relics', p14

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were symbols of power and prestige which drew pilgrims and patronage to the principle foundation of the saint. They were also tools of secular power as well as symbols of a foundations ecclesiastical power. The presence of relics at a foundation was thought to represent the success of the cult, whilst the removal of its relics could be considered a sign of its decline in most cases.⁴⁵ Gwenfrewy could be considered an exception to this as both Holywell and Gwytherin- significant places in her life- remained popular places to visit on pilgrimage even after the translation of her relics to Shrewsbury.

The impulse to keep a relic may have simply begun as an act of respect for a beloved saint⁴⁶ but the development of the saints cults meant the acquisition of relics was undertaken for many different reasons. The veneration of the particular saint associated with the relic and the hope of communicating with God through the saints was one function of saintly relics. Healing through saintly relics was important to the people of medieval Wales and the idea of a relics bearing the ability to heal was prominent in many of the saints Lives. As well as this, relics bared some political connotations as well as a financial role. The presence of relics within a foundation ensured pilgrims would visit and could be a great source of financial gain and so it would be considered important for a foundation to obtain a relic to display for veneration. The role of saintly relics in the cult of saints differed greatly depending on the time period and the location of the foundation they were placed in.

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⁴⁵ Bell, *The development of the saints' cults*, p206

⁴⁶ Joe Nickell, *Relics of the Christ*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p15

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