

Divine Retribution in the Lives of Welsh Saints



**Source Prof. Jane Cartwright,
'J. E. Caerwyn Williams Memorial
Lecture NLW' (forthcoming publication)**

Sources?

Vitae Latin Lives of Welsh Saints (25 native saints)

- David (Rhygyfarch, Gerald of Wales)
- Clydog, Dyfrig, Aelfgar, Euddogwy, Samson, Teilo (Liber Landavensis)
- Brynach, Cadog, Carannog, Clydog, Dewi, Dyfrig x2, Gwynllyw, Illtud, Cybi x2, Padarn, Tathan, Teilo (Llsgr Cotton Vespasian Axiv)
- Brynach, Cadog, Carannog, Clydog, Dewi, Dyfrig, Gildas, Gwynllyw, Illtud, Justinian, Cybi, Cain, Cennydd, Euddogwy, Padarn, Samson, Teilo, Gwenfrewy (Llsgr Cotton Tiberius Ei, John o Tynemouth G14)
- Cyngar (Wells, Wynkyn de Worde), Decuman (Wynkyn de Worde)
- Gwenfrewy (Claudius Av, Laud. Misc. 114, TC 0.4.42, Bib. Royale 8072)
- Asaph (RBA)
- Daniel (P225)
- Melangell (Caerdydd 3.11; BL Harley 2059, LlGC 1506C; 1641B)

Welsh-medium *Bucheddau*

25% native Welsh saints:

David, Beuno, Gwenfrewy/Winefride, Collen, Curig, Ieuan Gwas Padrig, Llawddog, Wrsula

75% international saints:

Catrin (Katherine), Margred (Margaret of Alexandria), Mair Fadlen (Mary Magdalene), Martha, Mair o'r Aifft (Mary of Egypt), Matthew, Mark, Luke, Ieuan (John), Iago, Tomas o'r India (Thomas of India), Marthin, Nicolas, Pawl Ebostol (Paul), Pedr (Peter), Erasmws, Einion neu Fartholomews (Bartholomew), Silfestr (Silvester), Simon a Jwd (Simon and Jude), Lawrens (Laurence), Andras (Andrew), Edmwnd, Mihangel (Michael), Mair (Mary)

Poetry: 3 poems David, Cadfan, Tysilio (Poets of the Princes)

83 poems (Poets of the Nobility)

Sanctity

- Hagiography – criticised for being ‘derivative’ and not historically accurate, seen almost as defective historical texts
- Thomas Head ‘some of the most valuable records for the reconstruction and study of the practice of premodern Christianity’
- Common patterns found in hagiography < biblical motifs; the saint as Christian hero imitating Christ / the Virgin Mary
- What makes a saint a saint? Early Christian martyrs and after conversion of Constantine in early C4th a different kind of martyrdom (white martyrdom – chastity); sacrificing one’s sexuality, wealth, emotional and family relationships.
- Saint not just a holy person (must perform miracles) – agent through whom God performs miracles

Miracle (Dictionary of Biblical Theology)

Although English speakers regularly use "miracle" to refer to a broad range of wondrous events, the biblical concept is limited to those not explainable solely by natural processes but which require the direct causal agency of a supernatural being, usually God. These occur throughout all major eras of history but do appear with greater frequency at key periods of God's self-revelation.

Miracles – not meant to be ‘difficult’! Meant to be incredible / impossible

Recording miracles an essential part of any saint’s Life – making a case for them to be a saint

Canonization – costly, complicated and time consuming: no Welsh saints were canonized

Usually associate saints with healing miracles – holy wells, physical ailments, emotional problems, cures

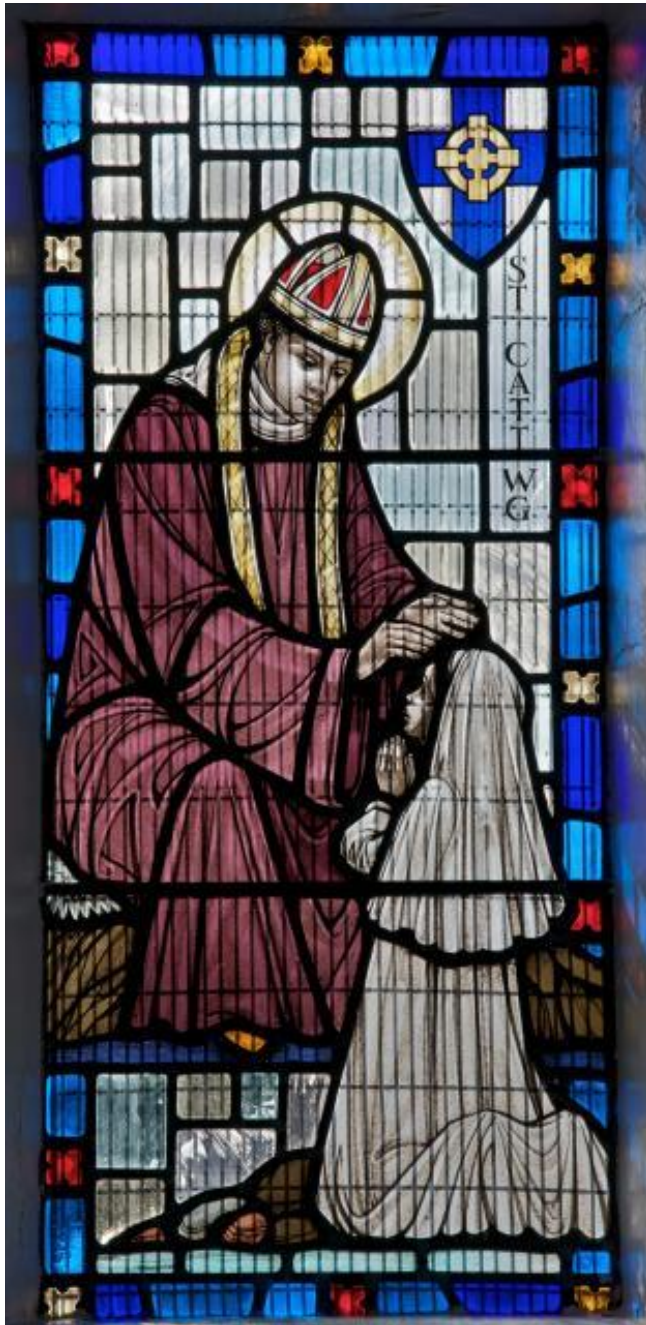
- Yet many miracles involve punishments: causing physical pain, limbs wither, bones break, sinners are afflicted with blindness,
- cursing, melting, drowning or burning of sinners
- More miracles in Welsh saints' Lives involve punishments than cures?



Vita Sancti Cadoci

(BL Vespasian Axiv a BL Cotton Titus Dxxii)

Burning with anger he uttered a reproof of this sort against them, ‘Go ye, never to return.’ Then the disciples, making no delay, quickly entered the vessel according to their preceptor’s bidding, and made for the aforesaid island by rowing. Also, the aforesaid volume being recovered, they soon returning on their watery course even to the midst of the sea, the man of God sitting on the top of a hill in Barren, and from a distance watching them in mid-ocean, the boat being unexpectedly overturned, they were drowned. The body of Barruc was found cast by the sea, on the Barrenian shore, and buried in the same island, which is from his name called Barren to this day. The body of the other, to wit, Gualees, was carried by the sea to the island of Echni, and buried there[...]



Vita Sancti Cadoci

When they had disembowelled it [the salmon], they found the aforesaid book in its entrails, unhurt by injury of waters and white. The man of the Lord, giving God thanks, receiving it with alacrity, declared openly to all that nothing was impossible to God.

W. Wade-Evans (ed. and trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1944; repr. Welsh Academic Press, 2013)

Motif of Religious Book Not Ruined by Water < Life of Finnian?

Llun Cadog Sant, Llanilltud Faerdref: Martin Crampin *Gwydr Lliw yng Nghymru*

- What is the reaction of a modern audience to this? Too harsh?
- Lifris's message? By not prioritizing the religious book, they are insulting God. Cadog's final words – God's action not the saint's.
- 'Go ye, never to return' – often the punishment is preceded by an announcement or a curse that acts almost like a prediction.
- Charles Plummer 'the mutual jealousy and spitefulness, the maledictions and vindictiveness of Celtic saints, to a great extent, find their explanation in an ecclesiastical absorption, however inadvertent, of pre-Christian mythology' – is he correct? Why see this as pre-Christian? Cf Old Testament – hagiographer would be familiar with OT teachings and well-versed in Scriptures.

The concept of vengeance in the Bible is complex and multi-faceted. Although the English term, “vengeance” has generally been perceived as having a negative or pejorative connotation, the concept designated by the root *nqm* in the Hebrew Bible is generally presented in a positive light as a type of action appropriate (with certain limitations) to humans and particularly to God [...] Divine vengeance, however, is always presented as appropriate and is often requested by a petitioner when the latter is afraid that justice may not be done on a human level.

David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 6, p. 786

Prior Robert's Latin Life of St Winefride

And, fixing his gaze on the youth's face, he began to address him with these words. 'Oh wicked man,' he said, 'who has blemished the nature of handsome youth and offspring of royal dignity with a homicidal crime, why does it not cause you regret to have admitted such a wicked deed? You have disturbed the peace, and defiled the church with your sacrilege, and you, offending moral law, have provoked God. Do you not feel sorrow? But now, since you did not spare the church, nor show reverence for Sunday, I pray to my God, that those things which you unworthily perpetrated, you may receive in return by due recompense.' These things being said, the youth, falling to the ground there and then, breathed his last. And, amazing to say, in the sight of everyone standing nearby, the body of the dead man vanished, having melted, with many affirming that it had been engulfed by the gaping ground and sunk with his spirit in the pit of darkness. But everyone seeing this is struck by unspeakable fear on account of the novel happening of the unusual wonder.



Vita Sancte Wenefreda (trans.) D. Callander (forthcoming)

- Numbers 35:31 suggests murderer should be put to death – no compensation paid.
Exodus 31: 14-15 anyone disobeying Sabbath should be put to death.
- How do you imagine the audience of the Life reacted when Caradog was punished?
- Numbers 16 – Dathan and Abiram swallowed by earth for insulting Moses (Beuno second Moses?) Cf Life of Cadog thieves swallowed by earth and author draws direct comparison with Dathan and Abiram.

Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Claudius Av anonymous Latin Life section of post-mortem miracles at Holywell)

For a certain married woman, led by the jealousy of envy against a maid, tormented her with cruel lashes, and furiously she attacked her with flogging as she fled to the virgin's church for protection.³⁷ But, when the wretched girl came to the church and tried to get in, she found the door to be firmly locked, and, having previously hoped for protection inside the basilica, she did not then know what she would do. She stayed by the door all the same, but the woman by no means held back from lacerating her. The martyr of the lord undoubtedly seeing the force inflicted upon her, and sympathising with her shame and feeling compassion pitifully, at once obtained retribution from the lord. And so the captive, lacerated for a long time and prostrate under the woman's feet, at last rose up as God wanted, and struck her head against the jaw of her mistress pushing on her. By that blow her jaw-bone was dislocated from the joint, and her throat twisted towards one ear. Thus up until her death she remained deformed. Without doubt it was just that there should be no stopping from rebuking her until the separation of body and soul, she who did not want to desist from lashes before the killing of the spirit. So it is for those who do not fear God and the tabernacles of the saints: their faces are filled with shame.

trans. of the anonymous Life David Calendar (forthcoming)

... So it is for those who do not fear God and the
tabernacles of the saints: their faces are filled with
shame. (VSW anon.)



So pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with
your hurricane. Fill their faces with shame, so that they
may seek your name. (Psalms 83: 15-17)

Name	Crime	Punishment (later forgiven)
Rhun ap Maelgwn	sets fire to Cadog's barns	Struck blind
Baia	Plots to kill David	Cattle killed
Arthur	Admires Padarn's tunic	Is swallowed by the earth up to the neck
Maelgwn	Steals St Brynach's cow	Cannot cook the meat

Cf Deuteronomium (punished with blindness)

Metaphor for spiritual blindness?

‘...preventing thereby the need for more drastic or deadly consequence. The impairments suffered by wrongdoers both demonstrate the identity of the saint as sanctified and mark the afflicted as separated – literally, figuratively or both – from the community of the faithful.’

Máire Johnson, ‘ “Vengeance is Mine”: Saintly Retribution in Medieval Ireland’, in *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud*, ed. A. A. Throop and P. R. Hyams (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 4-50 (p. 26)



Vita Sancti Illtuti (Vespasian A xiv)

[Illtud was] unwilling to curse him, but rather he was wont to bless him in return for his frequent persecutions and injuries, praying that he might be reformed and converted from iniquity, lest he might end his life, being most vile, in the way of malice. (ed. and trans.) Wade-Evans *VSBG*, p. 225

Llun: Martin Crampin *Illtud, Goetre Fawr, Sir Fynwy* (1956)



But God, the supreme avenger, caused him to melt like wax softened and melted by heat of fire[...] [Illtud] poured forth diligent prayers that God might grant pardon to the malevolent man. For he strove to fulfil the gospel precept which thus enjoins, ‘Pray for those who persecute and speak evil of you,’ and again, ‘Blessed are they who suffer persecution for righteousness’ sake.’ (ed. and trans.) Wade-Evans, *VSBG*, p. 219.

Love your enemies and and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5: 44)

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5: 10)

Photo: Martin Crampin Illtud, Goetre Fawr, Sir Fynwy (1956)

- A means of causing fear and also acting as a warning – a deterrent?
- Redemption possible
- Used for the purpose of edification? How were Lives read and delivered in what circumstances? Monastic? Instructive?
- Entertainment but also valuable moral lessons?
- Respect and protect church property, sanctuary, cemeteries, holy wells and lands associated with the church
- The Life of St Clydog found in *Liber Landavensis*, commissioned by Bishop Urban 1120-1140 to promote new bishopric of Llandaf.

Vita Sancti Clitauci (Latin Life of St Clydog)

Liber Landavensis

Ithel son of Æthelberht, a certain powerful man in Ewias, coming accompanied by his wife to St Clydog to hear the divine service on Sunday, was persuaded at the suggestion of the Devil and the goading of wantonness to lie with²³ his wife in a certain meadow on the bank of the River Monnow.²⁴ And the result was that, during that same sexual act, when he desired to be separated, having perpetrated the sin, he could in no way be separated from her, but rather he remained joined to his wife inseparably. And he exclaimed in a loud voice, and said to his companions, 'Go to the tomb of the martyr Clydog and on my behalf above Clydog's holy altar bestow upon him this meadow, which I had unjustly seized by force, laying your hands in a pledge just as when a gift is given, [...]so that by the martyr's intercession and by their prayer I may be delivered promptly from this intolerable sin as well as from this horrible bond'

Clodock church (Her.)



And straightaway, as soon as the alms had been made and rendered along with a promise to emend his life henceforth by fasting and praying and alms, he was separated from the offensive union in front of all the people, giving praises and thanks to God on account of such an agreeable liberation. And what he had done beforehand through his messengers, that same thing he, now healthy, did for himself, confirming it, with his own hands placed over the altar of the martyr and with the sacred gospels

Vita Sancti Clitauri (ed. and trans. Ben Guy)

Saints in Wales website



Buchedd Beuno

Ac ar vric y prenn hwnnw ef a wrthtyfawd keing hyt y llawr, ac o'r [llawr] dracheven yn ogyvuch a bric y prenn, a thrigaw elin y'r geing ar y llawr. Ac velle y mae yn [wastat]. Ac od a Seis y rwng yr elin honno a bon y prenn, yn diannot y byd marw. Ac os Kymro a a yno, nu henvyd gwaeth.

(gol.) Patrick Sims-Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies), p. 144.

And on the top of that tree there countergrew a branch to the ground, and from the ground again as high as the top of the tree, and a bend of the branch rested on the ground. And so it is always. And if there goes an Englishman between the bend and the stock of the tree, he forthwith dies. And if a Welshman goes there, he will be no worse.

(trans.) Wade-Evans, *VSBG*, p. 338.



Gerald of Wales, *Journey Through Wales*

He was a hagiographer too (Life of David and Life of Caradog)

Not only in hagiographical texts

The mistress of a priest at Howden sits on the grave of a female saint - St Osana – and her backside sticks to tomb; cannot come unstuck – much blood and pain, eventually God frees her.

- Typical of Gerald's misogyny; also criticism of unchaste priest.

The textual and pictorial representations of punitive interventions were the fantasies the monks visualized for themselves as what ought to be, while they pragmatically pursued their objectives with every realistic means of legal or economic recourse available to them.

B. Abou-El-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.27.

Lives could be written with different audiences in mind, and rewritten with changing political needs, historical sensibilities, cultural tastes and intellectual fashions. Indeed while a Life might be composed or assembled by an individual writer, often the hagiographer is perhaps more accurately understood less as an author, and more as the locus for an interaction between the set of community interests that promoted the composition of the Life and the audience for which it was composed.

Jesse Harrington, 'Vengeance and Saintly Cursing in the Saints' Lives of England and Ireland, c. 1060-1215' (unpublished D. Phil thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017), p. 20.