

Assessment #1
Julianne McQuarrie
Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality, and Hagiography
03/12/24

A Critical Appreciation of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*: The Life of St. Melangell

Saint Melangell is a female Welsh saint primarily known as the patron saint of the hares. The longevity of her influence has been explored by many scholars through archaeological and written records. The earliest of these written records is a Latin text titled, the *Historia Divae Monacellae*. This paper explores the text's authorship, context, purposes, and key themes associated with the saint. The key themes of Melangell's hagiography include connecting with nature, seeking refuge, and preserving purity. The *Historia* reveals how Melangell's life captures the typical factors of a female saint, and how her deep connection with nature sets her apart.

The Text

The original *Historia*'s exact date and author are unknown. The surviving copies—both complete and fragmented—help today's scholars estimate the date it was written, but the author may never be determined. This Latin text is considered the primary written record on Saint Melangell and survives in five main copies.¹

The first two copies are incomplete manuscripts from the late 16th or early 17th centuries. Thomas Sebastian Price copied the first complete manuscript in the late 17th century. The next manuscript derives from Price's copy and also dates to the late 17th century. Another copy comes from a clerical scholar who lived close to Pennant Melangell during the first half of the 19th century. The final copy from William Maruice in 1640—who claimed it was a manuscript from a Powel of Ruabon—was destroyed in a fire in 1858.

These copies all contain the same story with little to no variation as follows: In Powys, a prince named Brochwel Ysgithrog is hunting with his dogs. Chasing a hare to thorny underbrush, the prince happens upon a virgin maiden devoutly praying. The hare hides in the hem of her skirt and despite coaxing from the prince, the dogs refuse to approach and catch the hare. The prince inquires where the young maiden is from and Melangell reveals she is fleeing an arranged marriage from her parents. She has been living alone for many years and has not seen the face of a man in all that time. Impressed by her sanctity and power the prince donates the lands to her for a sanctuary for any who seek refuge. Melangell lives many years after and becomes known as the patron saint of hares. While the events are placed around 604 AD in the story, scholars

¹ Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 24

including Radford and Hemp believe that date is untrue, and that the author is drawing on other sources that mention this date as a way to endorse the claimed sanctuary of Pennant Melangell.²

Huw Pryce narrows the date of the record in his “A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacella*,” proposing the *Historia* was written prior to 1548. The term “*divus*” referring to the saint replaced “*sanctus*” sometime after the late 15th century, and the College of St. Chad mentioned as a “current” geographical reference, was dissolved in 1548.³ Redford and Hemp also conclude that the *Historia* was written in the 14th-15th century, stating it was written “probably when the cult was enlarged and modernized.”⁴ This implies a shift in the cult of Melangell as it moved from a small localized following to a growing regional movement.

A will dating to the 16th century provides clues of Melangell’s influence. This text mentions Pennant Melangell as one of the six Welsh shrines and includes a note for a respectable votive.⁵ It is clear that by this time her cult was well established and well known. What is harder to determine is whether the *Historia* text acted as an agent to spread her story, or was created as a reaction to her increasing influence. When considering the transmission of the text, it is crucial to understand the possible intent of the author and the societal climate they were from.

Taking a close look at the text, it seems clear the author is drawing on other sources. Key clues are found in Pryce’s article like the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which also includes 604 as the key date in one of its own chapters. The author also showcases a good understanding of Latin and there is little doubt they had access to local history and sources. The author likely could have drawn information from oral tradition and stories passed down.⁶ Other sources could have included relics associated with Melangell, the 12th century Romanesque shrine, or the wooden screen located inside the church of Pennant Melangell in northern Wales.⁷

Literary and Historical Context

While Melagnell’s primary source in the written record is the *Historia Divae Monacellae*, there are multiple references to her in other forms. First, Melangell is referenced by two 15th-century Welsh poets, Guto’r Glyn and Lewys Glyn Cothi—the former referencing her three times.⁸

² Radford, R. A. and Hemp, W. J. “Pennant Melangell: The Church and The Shrine.” *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1959) Vol 108, 82

³ Pryce, Huw. “A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*.” *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 28

⁴ Radford, R. A. and Hemp, W. J. “Pennant Melangell: The Church and The Shrine.” *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1959) Vol 108, 82-83

⁵ Keulemans, Michael, and Burton, Lewis. “Sacred place and pilgrimage: Modern visitors to the shrine of St Melangell.” *Rural Theology* 4.2 (2006), 100-101

⁶ Pryce, Huw. “A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*.” *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 28-29

⁷ Cartwright, Jane. “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru” *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76-77

⁸ Cartwright, Jane. “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru” *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76-77

Second, Melangell is mentioned in the *Bonned y Saint*, a genealogical record of early saints. Rather than telling her story, this text simply states who she was related to and how.⁹ Based on the genealogy, it can be surmised that Melangell lived during the 8th century. This provides an alternative to the 604 AD date mentioned by the *Historia*. Whether or not the alternative date is credible is currently subject to scholarly debate.

Other references provide unique insight into Melangell and her cult as well. In her book, “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales,” Prof. Jane Cartwright explains the earliest record of Melangell’s story takes the form of a wooden screen inside the church at Pennant Melangell. These wooden carvings show the hare running to the saint for protection. Cartwright also describes a Romanesque shrine located inside the church dating back to the 12th century.¹⁰ These two artifacts indicate how the cult of Melangell could have survived without written tradition—relics and physical objects would be strong reminders of her story to those local to the area. Both Cartwright and Pryce suggest oral tradition was a likely pairing with the archaeological evidence prior to the *Historia*’s creation.¹¹

Considering the context, Melangell and her realm of influence seem to exist in two time frames: the cult before the *Historia Divae Monacellae* was written and after. Even without a written record, there is no doubt her cult was established prior to the Latin text. Pennant Melangell was built on top of a centuries-old shrine and perhaps an even older gravesite. Even today the site is nestled in the hills and a traveler would not happen upon the site by accident. In her article, “The Power of Place,” Tania Siôn explains how even modern day visitors are usually those who intentionally seek it out.¹² The rural location of the church could mean two things. One, the isolation might have acted as a preserver of the cult and church—without high traffic there was little outside force affecting the local tradition. Two, the remote cult might have lacked a need for a written hagiography of the saint. Perhaps the *Historia* did not come along until the cult became more widely known and there was a need for a written account.

What makes Melangell unique is her *Historia* makes her one of only two female Welsh saints with recorded *vitae*—the other being Saint Winifred.¹³ While there are many Latin lives of saints recorded, Jane Cartwright suggests why there are so few of female Welsh saints. Potential reasons include the saints lacking political importance, the documents being lost over time, and

⁹ “Genealogy of the Saints (Continued).” *The Cambro-Briton*, vol. 3, no. 28 (1822), 337

¹⁰ Cartwright, Jane. “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru” *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76-77

¹¹ Cartwright, Jane. “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru” *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76 and Pryce, Huw. “A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*.” *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 34

¹² Siôn, Tania ap. “The Power of Place: Listening to visitors’ prayers left in a shrine in rural Wales.” *Rural Theology* 18.2 (2020), 89

¹³ Gray, Madeleine. “Saints on the edge: reconfiguring sanctity in the Welsh March.” *Rewriting Holiness: Reconfiguring Vitae, Re-signifying Cults* (2017), 94.

local oral tradition superseding the need for written accounts.¹⁴ However, something about Melangell's story appealed to the author as well as pilgrims over time. Whatever the purpose of the *Historia*, it's clear that the text was not made from scratch, but was working with rich, existing material and sources.

Purpose and Transmission

With an established cult and pilgrimage site, Melangell's followers didn't use the *Historia* as a way to introduce a new saint. As evidenced earlier, the Latin text was working with pre-existing material. The true purpose of the text could have taken a number of forms: introducing Melangell to a more widespread audience, securing her legend to a specific location, or attempting to maintain official jurisdiction over the lands. This last possibility aligns with a key theme expressed twice in Melangell's story. First, the Welsh prince initially dedicated the surrounding region to the female saint. Second, his listed descendants also confirmed her right to the lands as a sanctuary for those seeking refuge. Whether the prince and his descendants are fictional or not, this text makes an effort to show royal sanction across several generations. Huw Pryce further suggests that the *Historia* reflects the desire of Pennant Melangell's abbots to maintain their jurisdiction over the land.¹⁵ This text would act as a record of their claim to anyone who would oppose it. It is clear that land and location play a key role in Melangell's story.

Beyond securing jurisdiction over the land, the *Historia*'s purpose might have been to tie Melangell and her story to the geographic region. The *Historia* helps the reader spatially place Melangell in relation to her surroundings. As an Irish princess and therefore a foreigner, her realm of influence is delineated throughout the Latin text. In an ancient way, this places her "on the map." Pryce also points out the other texts referencing Melangell like the *Bonned y Saint*, and Welsh poets Guto'r Glyn and Lewys Glyn Cothi are further evidence of her popularity expanding geographically.¹⁶ Whether the *Historia* was a reflection of her growing influence, or an effort to create awareness, the Latin origin of the text supports the idea of Melangell's shift from an isolated cult to a wider influence—making her story more universal in Wales and beyond.

Key Themes

The *Historia Divae Monacella* offers several themes worth exploring that are both unique to Melangell and common to other female saints. Her intimate relationship with hares and nature connotes a unique natural element not found in most other female saints. Her power and strength in refuge and sanctuary is also a core element to her character. Lastly, her virginity and chastity

¹⁴ Cartwright, Jane. "Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru" *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76

¹⁵ Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 32

¹⁶ Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 34

as a core identifier is a trait shared with all female celtic saints. These three themes provided by the *Historia* create the Melangell we know today.

Theme of Nature

The relationship Melangell has with the natural world is both intimate and protective. The chief example of this dynamic is the centrality of the hare in her story. Depicted in the wooden rood screen at Pennant Melangell, the hare is shown running to the saint for protection from the chasing dogs. The animal miraculously and instinctively is drawn to her. Once safely inside her dress the hare is described as “calm and bold.” Even after this singular event, the *Historia* describes hares as being a friend to Melangell “all her life”.¹⁷

The isolated fifteen years she spends in the wilderness also reinforce the relationship between Melangell and nature. Melangell’s connection to the natural world is cemented when the prince and his descendants confer the land to her, providing a space for anyone seeking asylum. This provides her the refuge she was initially seeking and creates a reciprocal theme of the environment protecting Melangell and Melangell protecting the environment. This idea of protection is further explored in the next theme—refuge.

Theme of Refuge

As an Irish princess running away from home, Melangell begins her journey as a figure seeking asylum. Like the hare, she is running from a situation and yearns for refuge—both physical and spiritual. The tale draws a parallel between the fleeing hare and the fleeing saint, creating a relationship between seeking and giving refuge. The inspired prince declares “that there shall be a perpetual asylum, refuge and protection in honor of your name.”¹⁸ Melangell’s refuge for one creature leads to the opportunity for refuge for many others.

Her connection to a land of asylum shows the power that comes with refuge. Searching for a “promised” or “safe” land is an archetypal journey seen in scripture as well. Moses and the ancient Israelites are a prime example of leaving one area to a better place where their spiritual views can be freely observed and expressed. Just as there is a parallel running between the hare and Melangell, a parallel between physical and spiritual refuge is also evident in the saint’s life.

Theme of Virginity

Lastly, we come to the theme shared with all other celtic female saints. The sanctity of virginity. As Jane Cartwright explains it, virginity is integral to the sanctity of a female saint and could be

¹⁷ Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 39-40

¹⁸ Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 39-40

considered an unspoken requirement.¹⁹ E.R. Henken shares similar views in her work stating, “The encounter with male sexuality is the only major element in the biographical pattern which appears with any consistency for the Welsh women saints.”²⁰ Melangell’s encounter with the male in the story diverts from the expected when the prince makes no threat to her virtue.

However, some scholars suggest the hare could be viewed as a sexual symbol. Ian Richards briefly touches on this theme by acknowledging that the hare hiding in her dress could be representative of Melangell’s body, turning the hunt for the hare into a pursuit for lust. While this idea fits the theme found in other female saint lives there is no evidence to support this interpretation.²¹ While Melangell does not have a direct sexual encounter in her hagiography, her virginity is referenced in several cases. First, since her journey begins when she flees an arranged marriage, one could count this as the challenge to her virginity so often found in other female saints' lives. Second, she spends years in the wilderness without seeing the face of a man. And finally, when the virginity of her followers is challenged after her death, the lustful man meets a divine and miserable end. Her sanctity through chastity is another theme found in the *Historia Divae Monacellae*.

Conclusion

The life of Saint Melangell expressed in the *Historia Divae Monacellae* is a rich account of a divine figure. Archaeological evidence predating the examined account proves this particular saint's long-standing influence in the local area. This implies the author drew upon pre-dating sources and oral history. While the authorship remains a mystery, potential purposes of the text range from maintaining land jurisdiction, to introducing Melangell to wider audiences, or simply reflecting her already growing fame.

Themes in the *Historia Divae Monacella* include her relationship with the natural world, the power of physical and spiritual refuge, and her sanctity through virginity. Melangell shares themes with other female saints like virginity while also setting herself apart with her focus on the natural world and her role as the patron saint of hares. Like the hares that sought her out, pilgrims and saints over time sought her church and protective care. The life of St. Melangell is an enduring example of the innate human desire to seek and give refuge to others in need.

¹⁹ Cartwright, Jane. “Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru” *University of Wales Press* (2022) 85

²⁰ Henken, Elissa R. “Traditions of the Welsh Saints” Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987. Pg 13-14

²¹ Richards, Ian. “The Welsh Female Saint: Patterns within a Social Framework.” *Y Myfyriwr Ymchwil* (2010): 74.

Works Cited

Cartwright, Jane. "Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru" *University of Wales Press* (2022), 76-77. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=7386140>.

"Genealogy of the Saints (Continued)." *The Cambro-Briton*, vol. 3, no. 28, (1822), 337. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30069154>

Gray, Madeleine. "Saints on the edge: reconfiguring sanctity in the Welsh March." *Rewriting Holiness: Reconfiguring Vitae, Re-signifying Cults* (2017), 89-107. <https://pure-test.southwales.ac.uk/ws/files/1245581/2BGray.pdf>

Henken, Elissa R. "Traditions of the Welsh Saints" Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, (1987), 13-14

Keulemans, Michael, and Burton, Lewis "Sacred place and pilgrimage: Modern visitors to the shrine of St Melangell." *Rural Theology* 4.2 (2006), 100-101.
https://doi.org/10.1179/rut_2006_4_2_003

Pryce, Huw. "A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae." *Montgomeryshire Collections* 82 (1994), 23-40.
<https://journals.library.wales/view/1264487/1271085/44#?xywh=-2019%2C-245%2C7055%2C4527>

Radford, R. A. and Hemp, W. J. "Pennant Melangell: The Church and The Shrine."
Archaeologia Cambrensis (1959) Vol 108, 82-83

Richards, Ian. "The Welsh Female Saint: Patterns within a Social Framework." *Y Myfyriwr Ymchwil* (2010), 69.
[https://www.academia.edu/download/31930840/The_Student_Researcher_Vol_2_No_1_complete\(1\).pdf#page=82](https://www.academia.edu/download/31930840/The_Student_Researcher_Vol_2_No_1_complete(1).pdf#page=82)

Siôn, Tania ap. "The Power of Place: Listening to visitors' prayers left in a shrine in rural Wales." *Rural Theology* 18.2 (2020): 87-100.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14704994.2020.1771904>