

Assignment Essay 5000 words – Celtic Sanctity and Spirituality: Hagiography and Saints' Cults (HPCS5015) – Heidi Wyldewood (2110492)

According to J. W. Willis-Bund: 'a woman could never become a saint...a woman could never fill the office which certainly among the Welsh entitled a person to become a saint'. Is this a fair assessment of feminine sanctity in Wales? Analyse a range of extant sources that document the traditions associated with some of the female saints of Wales.

The history of Christianity, from its beginnings in the New Testament through to the Renaissance, is populated by male voices; opinions; and lives. Unquestionably, women lived spiritual lives and sought religious experiences throughout that same history, but as in many other walks of life their stories remain with limited documentation in comparison to their male counterparts. Sainthood is a very particular veneration afforded those deemed worthy by the Church, and certainly women are among those who are remembered this way, although J. W. Willis-Bund did not think it possible for a Welsh woman:

... a woman... could never become a Saint... a woman could never fill the office which certainly among the Welsh entitled a person to become a Saint.¹

In response to those words from over a century ago, this paper examines the context within the article itself and Willis-Bund's own cultural lens; the charge made versus the criteria of female sainthood in the Middle Ages; and the women who do emerge from Welsh history as saints. Ascertaining proof of life or the veracity of deeds is not the primary concern of this paper, rather the value of the documented traditions of those women in relation to the required conventions and the perception of the Welsh towards feminine sanctity is argued via extant sources. Whilst it must be acknowledged that some 'lives' may be fictitious or added to, in line with popular Christian tropes or local folkloric motifs, when Willis-Bund opined an absolute, that women living in Wales could not and did not become saints, one must ask whether he ignored evidence to the contrary, especially when the likes of saint Dwynwen remain in popular culture and the holy well of saint Winefride is still a busy pilgrimage destination.²

As an Englishman born in 1843, Willis-Bund lived most of his formative years during the Victorian era. Educated at Eton and Cambridge he made his mark as a law man and an historian with a focus on the Welsh Church.³ Although a regular writer for the Cymmrodorion Society and author of his own book, 'The Celtic Church of Wales', not all felt his research

¹ J. W. Willis-Bund, 'Some Characteristics Of Welsh And Irish Saints', *Archeologica Cambrensis*, 11.44 (1894), 276-291 (pp. 279-280) <<https://journals.library.wales/view/2919943/3010090/31#?xywh=-2559%2C-73%2C7297%2C3655>> [accessed 10th April 2023].

² Sion Morgan, 'The Reasons Why St Dwynwen Is Wrongly Known As The Welsh St Valentine', *Wales Online* (2019) <<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/reasons-st-dwynwen-wrongly-known-15731257>> [accessed 11th April 2023]. For St Winefride see Rebecca Astill, 'The Shocking Legend Of St Winefride's Well Treasured For its 'Healing Powers'', *Wales Online* (2022) <<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/travel/shocking-legend-st-winefrides-well-21212498>> [accessed 11th April 2023].

³ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymry: The National Library of Wales, 'Willis-Bund, John William', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig: Dictionary Of Welsh Biography* <<https://biography.wales/article/s-WILL-WIL-1843>> [accessed 23rd March 2023].

impeccable or his views unbiased.⁴ However, his stance on Welsh women and sainthood was echoed only a few decades later by Canon Doble, who could not believe that many of the female Welsh and Cornish saints had not originally been men, somehow morphed by time and wishful thinking.⁵ The inability to conceive of women in the Middle Ages as travelling long distances or as founders of small communities was no doubt partially influenced by their perceived limited agency or capability of Victorian or Edwardian Welsh women, whose herstory remained mostly hidden until the spotlight was turned upon them in the late twentieth century.⁶ Willis-Bund also argued that the supposed female Welsh saints were not really of pure Welsh blood.⁷ He would have also known that historically the female body had been deemed weaker and quicker to age, and that the 'imperfect nature of women', apparently evidenced by their inverted sexual organs and unholy menstruations, was a widely held belief in the Middle Ages.⁸

How then as instruments of sin; physically deformed; mentally inferior; or lacking in moral fibre could early medieval women become saints? The answer lies in 'the antithesis of Eve', the Virgin Mary, the 'one who epitomised obedience to God's will'.⁹ Because women were considered inferior to men, the level of devotional deeds which afforded their male counterparts a promotion to sainthood was not enough. The route to feminine sanctity required something else.

Consider first that during the Age of Saints 'sanctity was locally conferred', and it is not until AD 993 that the record of papal canonisation begins.¹⁰ Whilst the later process for canonisation had formalised steps, requirements and official records, it is understood that the cults of many Welsh saints might have been 'quite unknown beyond the region' in which they were sanctified.¹¹ Recognised locally then was the man or woman who devoted their lives to God in a way that differed from the community, garnering special interest or renown, perhaps even a following:

A saint was not a person of a particular type but a person who was treated in a particular way. That "way" can be summed up by the word "cult", and its three key

⁴ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymry: The National Library of Wales, 'Willis-Bund, John William', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig: Dictionary Of Welsh Biography* <<https://biography.wales/article/s-WILL-WIL-1843>> [accessed 23rd March 2023].

⁵ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity And Spirituality In Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 68-69.

⁶ Deirdre Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Women's History', *Llafur: The Journal For The Society Of Welsh Labour History*, 3.2 (1981) <<https://journals.library.wales/view/1326508/1327246/33#?xywh=-2154%2C-76%2C7159%2C3586&rid=https%3A%2F%2Fdamsssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F1327246%2Frange%2FAWJB-R010001>> [accessed 23rd March 2023].

⁷ J. W. Willis-Bund, *The Celtic Church Of Wales*, (London: D. Nutt, 1897), pp. 427-428.

⁸ Jennifer Ward, *Women In Medieval Europe 1200 – 1500*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), p. 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3

¹⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 5. For AD 993 see Robert Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints And Worshippers From The Martyrs To The Reformation*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 57. For 'Age of the Saints' see Alan Thacker, 'Loca Sanctorum: The Significance Of Place In The Study Of The Saints', *Local Saints And Local Churches In The Early Medieval West*, ed. by A. Thacker and R. Sharpe, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 1-43 (p. 31).

¹¹ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 453.

elements were public recognition of the name and the day of the saint; special treatment of the saint's bodily remains; and celebration of the saint in writing.¹²

Given that more than half of the dedications in Wales are to local saints, a large number of varying 'traditions of sainthood' are indicated.¹³ Throughout medieval times both 'native and universal saints' were remembered on their respective feast days, filling up the calendar year, which 'would vary from one region to another'.¹⁴ In Wales a saint was still prayed to and remembered in local lore, but their bells, books and staffs were preferred over bone relics.¹⁵ Although 'tombs were not the main focus of cult', there may have been a centring around 'graves that had not been disturbed by translation' and many towns and villages have their names attached to saints.¹⁶ It is not hard to find placenames beginning with *Llan*-, denoting a church or enclosure of a saint, or *merthyr*, from the Latin *martyres*, specifying 'a place with relics', but not always of a martyred saint.¹⁷ It follows that to stand out during their lifetime enough to warrant these forms of recognition or special treatment after death, a saint's unique dedication and special relationship with God must have been evidenced. Another aspect of Welsh sainthood was the tracing of ancestry back to either Brychan, Cunedda or Caw, the fathers of the three holy families of Britain, and of utmost importance were the books of genealogy 'dedicated to describing the family descent of saints'.¹⁸

However, that something extra that female saints were expected to bring to the table was their chastity. Whilst the Virgin Mary 'inspired deep devotion' and was a female Christian role model 'she did not alter the way in which women were viewed by the Church in the later Middle Ages'.¹⁹ The virgin saint is widely represented in hagiography throughout the centuries and in many countries, and Wales is not without its own virgin tales. The widely repeated motif, the female body reserved as a Bride of Christ, gave the illusion of unity within the growing Church and acted as a manifestation of its own holy status.²⁰ To this end the Church 'reserved to itself the right to recognize, sanction, and reward virginity'.²¹ To ensure that chastity remained visible within female hagiography there existed a formula: the 'circumvented rape or near-rape' story containing the account of purity in peril followed by a miracle which prevents disaster and defilement.²² Some of these miraculous preventions included blessings of 'blindness, leprosy or tumours', and acts of self-harm, where the virgin resorted to turning 'violence in upon herself', cutting her nose, ruining her face or plucking

¹² Ibid., p. 95.

¹³ Ibid., p. 453.

¹⁴ Jane Cartwright, *Hystoria Gwerryddon Yr Almaen: The Middle Welsh Life Of St Ursula And The 11,000 Virgins*, (Cambridge: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2020), p. 10.

¹⁵ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid. For undisturbed graves see Thacker, 'Loca Sanctorum', p. 34.

¹⁷ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 458.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 524-525. For Brychan, Cunedda and Caw see *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, 4th edn., ed. and trans. by Rachel Bromwich, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 96 and p. 211.

¹⁹ Ward, *Women In Medieval Europe*, p. 3.

²⁰ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity And Testing Chastity In The Middle Ages*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) pp. 41-42.

²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

²² Ibid., p. 42.

out her eyes to deter attentions, attack or marriage.²³ So prevalent is the trope that it appears a female saint 'may lose her limbs or her life, but never her virginity'.²⁴ If martyred, she gains immortality, as does her virginity, her persona preserved somewhere between 'victimization and empowerment'.²⁵

St Gwenfrewy's seventh century tale is one of such martyrdom. She is one of only two 'native Welsh female saints for whom detailed prose narratives survive'. The earliest surviving texts for a Gwenfrewy are from the twelfth century: the *Vita S. Wenefrede* and the *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae*.²⁶ Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century her life was also written into several more Latin and English texts; she appears in the fourteenth century Welsh Life of St. Bueno, the *Hystoria o Uched Beuno*; and from the fifteenth century, a '*buchedd*', which is the only official Welsh 'life' of a female saint.²⁷

The two main miracles in her story are the healing spring which began to flow forth as her blood spilled on the ground after her decapitation and her return to life after her head was retrieved whence it had rolled, and lovingly laid on the ground as though still attached to her neck, by her uncle, St Bueno. Her decapitation occurred of course during her flight from unwanted advances to the church. Her cult developed around three centres, 'Holywell in Flintshire, Gwytherin in Conwy, and Shrewsbury in Shropshire', each variously focussing on her maiden, martyr or abbess status.²⁸ Gwytherin remained active till the relics there disappeared towards the end of the sixteenth century, and Shrewsbury was active from the twelfth to sixteen centuries.²⁹ The Holywell, today called St Winefride's as mentioned earlier, remains a popular religious and historic tourist destination, receiving thousands of visitors from Wales and beyond each year.³⁰

The other woman for whom there is extant hagiography is the eighth century St. Melangell. Her Latin Life, *Historia divae Monacellae*, is found in five manuscripts from the late sixteenth century.³¹ However, the place and church associated with her, Pennant Melangell, appears in documentation as Pennant during the mid-twelfth century and Penant Mellagel at the end of the thirteenth.³² The name change, which predates the hagiography, points to an earlier oral

²³ Ibid., p. 52. For self-harm see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Saints' Lives And The Female Reader', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 27.4 (1991), 314–332 (pp.326) <doi.org/10.1093/fmls/XXVII.4.314>.

²⁴ Kelly, *Performing Virginity And Testing Chastity*, p. 42.

²⁵ Robert Mills, 'Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?', *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih and Ruth Evans (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 187 – 213 (pp. 187-188).

²⁶ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. *Laud Misc.* 114, f. 140r-163v.

²⁷ James Ryan Gregory, *A Welsh Saint In England: Translation, Orality, And National Identity In The Cult Of St. Gwenfrewy, 1138-1512*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Georgia 2012). For *Buchedd Gwenfrewy* see National Library of Wales, *Peniarth MS 27*.

²⁸ Sally Hallmark, *Gwenfrewy The Guiding Star Of Gwytherin: From Maiden And Martyr To Abbess And Saint. The Cult Of Gwenfrewy At Gwytherin*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2015), p. 12.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁰ Nick Bourne, 'Religious Tourism On The Rise, Says Church In Wales', *BBC News* (2012) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-18058646>> [accessed 11th April 2023].

³¹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 77.

³² Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, *Historic Settlement Survey – Montgomeryshire: Pennant Melangell*, (2012) <<https://cpat.org.uk/ycom/mont/pennantmelangell.pdf>> [accessed 7th April 2023].

tradition, as does a twelfth century shrine reported to once contain her bones, and a rood-screen from the late fifteenth century.³³ The carving on the rood-screen depicts her legend: a hare seeking protection from her, running from its hunter and dogs. Again, there are 'possible hares peeping out from skirts of dress' on a late fourteenth century female effigy found at the site.³⁴ This miraculous protection of the hare occurred when Melangell, having escaped an unwanted suitor in Ireland, had been living in a secluded spot in Wales for fifteen years. The hunter, Brochfael Ysgithrog, moved by the actions of his dogs, who halted mid chase so gentled were they by her presence, gave Melangell land on which to found her nunnery. Whilst not a 'near rape' story, the two escapes, that of herself and the hare, highlight Melangell's chosen chastity.

St Dwynwen or Dwyn also avoided the loss of her virginity, although she was once in love.³⁵ Her tale turned to heartbreak, and she never married. She was granted three wishes by 'The Almighty', which enabled her to recover from her own sadness and intercede on behalf of 'all true-hearted lovers' from that time on.³⁶ Her story was told by Iolo Morganwg, in the nineteenth century which is a late source and one that cannot always be taken at face value.³⁷ Fortunately, earlier evidence for her tradition lies in feast day calendars, place and poetry.³⁸ Llanddwyn island and the chapel there have long been associated with her and served as a pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages.³⁹ Fourteenth and fifteenth century poets referred to her powers of intercession; her lineage; and the presence of her statue draped in gold, gems and coins, in her chapel.⁴⁰ In a fifteenth century Bangor missal, liturgical additions were made in the sixteenth century to include 'two saints associated with the diocese of Bangor, Deiniol and Dwynwen'.⁴¹ Huws notes that the specific nature of the additions could suggest a 'lost *vita*'.⁴² By the end of the fifteenth century a 'window for St Dwynwen' was put in to Bangor Cathedral.⁴³

³³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 77.

³⁴ Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, 'Pennant Melangell Church (St Melangell), Effigy II: Ref 50684', *Archwilio: Historic Environment Records Of Wales*, <<https://archwilio.org.uk/her/chi3/arch.php>> [accessed 7th April 2023].

³⁵ S. Baring-Gould, M.A., and John Fisher, B.D., *The Lives of The British Saints: The Saints Of Wales And Cornwall And Such Irish Saints As Have Dedications In Britain*, Vol. 2 (London: The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1908), p. 387.

³⁶ Taliesin Williams, *Iolo Manuscripts: A Selection Of Ancient Welsh Manuscripts, In Prose And Verse, From The Collection Made By The Late Edward Williams, Iolo Morganwg, For The Purpose Of Forming A Continuation Of The Myfyrian Archaology; And Subsequently Proposed As Materials For A New History Of Wales / With English Translations And Notes, By His Son, The Late Taliesin Williams*, (Abergavenny: Welsh Manuscripts Society, 1888), p. 474.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84 and pp. 473-474.

³⁸ Daniel Huws, 'The Earliest Bangor Missal', *National Library Of Wales Journal*, 27 (1991) 113-28, (p. 119) <<https://journals.library.wales/view/1277425/1289033/2#?xywh=-2959%2C-223%2C8851%2C4434>> [accessed 10th April 2023].

³⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-91. For the votive offerings of gold, gems and coins see Huws, 'The Earliest Bangor Missal', p. 122.

⁴¹ Huws, 'The Earliest Bangor Missal', p. 113.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Dwynwen's lineage is also relevant to the discussion of Welsh female saints because she is named as one of the daughters of Brychan Brycheiniog.⁴⁴ St Brychan was a fifth century Welsh king, from Ireland, had three wives, and was father of one of 'The Three Saintly Tribes of Britain'.⁴⁵ The earliest genealogies for his family are from the eleventh or twelfth century, where the daughters number twenty four, which stays fairly consistent throughout subsequent centuries, pointing to a 'genuine early tradition that Brychan had many daughters'.⁴⁶ Several are recorded as saints in Cornwall and Ireland, as well as Wales, places which are not unusual migrations for the period. Information about them is very scant and at times confused due to inconsistent name spellings, duplications and the addition of grandchildren or great-grandchildren in later lists.⁴⁷ Those that appear in a twelfth century version of *Cognatio de Brychan* and other early lists as saints are: St Aranwen, (Arianwen); St Belyau (Tydieu), who possibly had a previous dedication at the church of Llanvillo (Llanfilo, Lanbilio, Lanbiliou); St Cain (Cain Wry, Ceinwen, Keyne), who was a virgin associated with several churches in Wales, Cornwall and England, but not to be confused with St Cain daughter of Caw; St Ceingair (Kehingayr, Keyngair, Rhiengar); St Clydai (Clydei), whose church was said to be in Emlyn; St Cynheiddon, whose Capel Llangynheiddon is thought to have stood till the eighteenth century around which time the bell was removed to St Cain's in LLangain; St Eluned (Eiliwedd, Elvetha), who was martyred for her chastity in a tale similar to St Gwenfrewy; St Goleu (Goleuddydd), who was associated with Gwent; St Gwawr; St Gwen, (Wenna, Weneu, Wentu), who founded the church of Talgarth, Breconshire; St Gwladys who was remembered via several church dedications and a spring in and around the Newport area; St Gwrygon Goddeu; St Hunydd (Nefydd); St Ilud (Iludd, Ilid), who was possibly of Llanilid, Glamorgan, although the church there underwent an early rededication to St Julitta of Tarsus, no doubt due to Ilid being the Welsh form of Julitta; St Mabenna (Mabyn), who is remembered as an abbess, virgin and martyr in Cornwall, where her church, holy well and part of her shrine survives, as does a fifteenth century stained glass window depicting her at St Neot parish church; St Marchell, (Marchel, Mechell, Mechyll); St Meleri (Eleri), who was possibly the grandmother of St David; St Nyfain (Nefin, Nyuein, Nyuen); St Tutglid (Tudglid, Tuglit), who was the original patron of the Church of Llanwrtyd, Breconshire; St Tudhistil (Tanglwst, Tangwystl) of Llan Dydstyl, formerly Merthyr Tudhistil, where the chapel remains were still visible in the late nineteenth century; St Tybie (Tybieu), who still has local legend of her martyrdom, sit spot and holy well, and an active church at Llandybie, Carmarthenshire; and St Tudful (Tydfil, Tudeuel, Enfael, Enfail), who is remembered via Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol. 2, p, 387.

⁴⁵ *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 294. For 'The Three Saintly Tribes' and wives see S.Baring-Gould, M.A., and John Fisher, B.D., *The Lives of The British Saints: The Saints Of Wales And Cornwall And Such Irish Saints As Have Dedications In Britain*, Vol 1, (London: The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1907), pp. 315.

⁴⁶ T. Thornley Jones, 'The Daughters Of Brychan: Their Importance In The History Of Breconshire', *Brycheiniog*, 17 (1967-1977), 17-58 (p. 20) <<https://journals.library.wales/view/1380216/1383503/27#?xywh=-2400%2C-4%2C7767%2C3890>> [accessed 10th April 2023].

⁴⁷ Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol 1. p. 317.

⁴⁸ S. Baring-Gould, M.A and J. Fisher, B.D, 'St. Brychan, King, Confessor', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 6th Series, Vol. 3 (1903), 345-370 (p. 345) <<https://journals.library.wales/view/4718179/4719477/426#?xywh=-2904%2C-203%2C8071%2C4042>> [accessed 10th April 2023]. For saints A to B see Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of*

The number of chapels and places associated with this long list of female saints, from just one family group, hints at the love of local representation and a lost lore. It has been proposed that many of the daughters of Brychan may have been inheritors of lands within Breconshire, which potentially awarded them the moderate wealth and status needed to build small chapels for worship or to fund travels.⁴⁹ Some are indicated to be martyrs by current or older place names, with the additional detail, 'killed by pagans', appearing in the late Iolo Manuscripts.⁵⁰ Iolo Morganwg also altered the original twelfth century tale of the martyrdom of St Maches, of Llanvaches (previously Merthyr Maches).⁵¹ Interestingly, several of the 'Brychan' women are not listed as unmarried virgins or martyrs, but as mothers, and certainly 'motherhood and not virginity was what most women expected' in the Middle Ages.⁵² The holy form of motherhood presented by the Virgin Mary provided women with another pathway to sanctity, that of mother of a saint or as a devotee in later life:

Penance and asceticism become modes in which widows and mothers can claim the powers of the virgin-martyr ideal for lives within and outside the enclosures of convents and households.⁵³

Brychan's own mother, Marchell, became a saint.⁵⁴ St Gwladys is recorded as the mother of St Cadoc, and St Ceingair as the mother of St Cynidr.⁵⁵ St Non features in the hagiographies of her son St David, and her unique rape victim to mother to holy woman story is remembered extensively from Wales and Ireland to Cornwall and Brittany via churches, windows, carvings, and feast days.⁵⁶ One of her miracles occurs during the birthing of St David when she either grips a rock in agony and it moulds to her hand like wax or it splits 'in sympathy' with her.⁵⁷ This labour is unlike that of the Virgin Mary's, who is 'spared the pains of childbirth' or the need to lie in.⁵⁸ These maternal saints held more relevance to the majority of medieval Welsh

The British Saints, Vol 1. For saints C to E see Vol. 2 (1908); for saints F to M see Vol. 3 (1911); and for saints N to U see Vol. 4 (1913). For St Eluned and St Mabenna see Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, pp. 70-71. For the bell of Capel Llangynheiddon see Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru / Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 'Capel Llangynheiddon, Chapel Site, Bancyapel', *Coflein* (2012) <<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/12664/>> [accessed 14th April 2023]. For Llan Dydstyl see Dyfed Archaeological Trust, *Medieval And Early Post-Medieval Churches And Chapels: A Threat-Related Assessment 2010-11*, (2011) <<https://www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/churchesandchapels.pdf>> [accessed 15th April 2023].

⁴⁹ Thornley Jones, 'The Daughters Of Brychan', pp. 21-26.

⁵⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 79.

⁵¹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, B.D., *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol 3, p. 392. For Merthyr Maches see Vol. 4, p. 267.

⁵² Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History Of Women in England 450 – 1500*, (United Kingdom: Phoenix Press, 2002) p. 123.

⁵³ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives And Women's Literary Culture, c.1150-1300: Virginity And Its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 124.

⁵⁴ Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol 1, pp. 436-437.

⁵⁵ Baring-Gould and Fisher, B.D., *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol 3, p. 202-204. For St Ceingair see Vol. 2, p. 101.

⁵⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, pp. 95-121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

⁵⁸ Leyser, *Medieval Women*, pp. 123-130.

women. This is borne out by the number of poems that praised married noble women by likening them to St Non.⁵⁹

When analysing extant sources of female sainthood, it cannot be ignored that the wider hagiographies indicate sanctity for a variety of women: young, old, rich, poor, rural, urban, 'virgins, wives, mothers, widows, transvestites, and even reformed prostitutes', making them intercessory saints for the human condition.⁶⁰ The virgin saint, 'especially the virgin martyr', is a format favoured 'in the vernaculars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries'.⁶¹ Therefore it could be considered that local Welsh female saints of little renown did not acquire this upgrade to their stories and were suppressed or lost for that very reason. This 'narrowing' of the range for female saints, to virgins only, expanded once more to include 'married women and women leading active lives of charity work' in the late thirteenth century.⁶² This adds weight to the idea that, although the Virgin Mary had no effect on the Church's view of women 'in the later Middle Ages', the views might have been different in the early years of the Church, or indeed the early Welsh church. Charitable Christian women, married or unmarried, might have impacted communities in a notable way and stood out as saintly, especially if not all the community had converted to Christianity at that time.

It is important to note too that although the hagiography of Welsh saints emerged centuries after the Age of the Saints, they were a 'continuation of a tradition', not the beginning.⁶³ Extant evidence, and indeed the '*vitae* are sufficiently distinctive', to point to the prior existence of vibrant oral stories.⁶⁴ Although it can also be acknowledged that in 'the absence of hard facts' hagiographers probably padded those stories out or wove in their own agendas.⁶⁵ However, the reality is that there are only two extant 'lives' for female Welsh saints, but there are a number of factors to consider when asking why are there not more. The obvious answer is not necessarily that there were never more to begin with, but that they may have been lost or destroyed.

Inevitably, many Welsh saints' Lives will have been lost over time and the texts that survive may well represent 'the tip of the iceberg' in relation to Welsh hagiographical output. It is generally assumed that the Latin Lives of Welsh saints preceded their later Middle Welsh equivalents and that poetic narratives, or snippets of hagiographical traditions preserved in poetry, may have drawn on lost Welsh Lives or oral versions of saints' Lives that were never committed to writing.⁶⁶

Beyond misplacement, accidental damage, and wear and tear, Welsh records and 'liturgical texts' undoubtedly suffered from a sixteenth century 'royal injunction' that ordered the

⁵⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Kelly, *Performing Virginity And Testing Chastity*, p. 51.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶³ Fiona Winward, 'The Lives Of St Wenefred (BHL 8847-8851)', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 117 (1999), 89-132, (p. 93) <doi.org/10.1484/J.ABOL.4.01776>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶⁵ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths And Chasing Dreams*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁶⁶ Cartwright, *Hystoria Gwerryddon Yr Almaen*, p. 9.

destruction of 'all medieval service books'.⁶⁷ Certainly there are other Welsh female saints not discussed here, like St Rhyddlad and St Gwenfaen, for whom very little evidence exists, such as a single church dedication, poem, feast day or genealogical record.⁶⁸ Hence, it is reasonable to consider that the female saints, glimpsed through those stained glass windows or placenames, might have once had their own mentions in the pages of manuscript, even as part of the lives of male saints, like St Dunod and St Non in the 'Lives of St David'.⁶⁹ It is also possible that there were once a higher number of native dedications and traditions, given that some churches are known to have been re-dedicated and that some traditions may have been suppressed or surpassed by later folklore or other saints. Willis-Bund himself notes that Welsh saints numbered in the hundreds up until the end of the eighth century, but that the Latin church probably 'closed the list of Welsh saints' deeming the Welsh church to be more primitive.⁷⁰

Therefore, a conclusion is drawn that homegrown feminine sanctity was not only a perceived possibility in Wales, but an actuality. If the same assumptions regarding the legends of male saints are applied to those of female saints, then women did serve communities or as role models within the early Welsh Church. Willis-Bund was limited in his view of the agency and means of some women in the early Middle Ages and precluded some due to the foreignness of the fathers. Whilst it is true that many of the Welsh saints trace their lineages to either Brychan, Caw or Cunedda, who moved into Wales, this does not alter the place of birth for those discussed or the heritage of their mothers. He also regarded the rise of the Latin church as ending the naming of Welsh saints for political gain, and that only a few Welsh saints originally attained the Latin list, but saints were named and venerated by the Welsh for the Welsh, and cults appear to have formed around sanctified women born in Wales or those who lived most of their lives there. Whilst not all Welsh female saints have been discussed here, it has been demonstrated that it is not an impossible idea, albeit rare perhaps, that women travelled; formed religious communities; or lived solitary lives. The veracity of those 'lives' has often been queried differently to those of male saints, but if the core of their traditions and evidence of cults, however small or localised, are accepted in a similar way as done for males, then female Welsh saints exist, as women devoted to God, emulating their beloved Mary and inspiring others. Perhaps their collective miracle is that anything is known of them at all, given the level of erasure suffered at the hands of a male-oriented historical record; the general loss of manuscripts due to age or misplacement; and religious or political interference.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 93. For the holy well and church formerly called Llanwenfaen in Anglesey see Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of The British Saints*, Vol 3, pp. 184-185.

⁶⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 78.

⁷⁰ Willis-Bund, *The Celtic Church Of Wales*, pp. 421-422.

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