

Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality and Hagiography (HPCS7005)

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Brief

TASK 1 Either (i) Write a critical appreciation of Caesar's De Bello Gallico critically analysing his interpretation of the Celtic religious practices and comparing this with what is known from other early sources. (2,500 words)

OR

(ii) Write a critical appreciation of any saint's Life associated with one of the Celtic regions. In your answer you should consider issues such as the text's authorship, its purpose, transmission, key themes, literary and historical context. (2,500 words)

Title: A Critical Appraisal of the Life of St. David

Introduction

The life of St. David, the patron saint of Wales, is surrounded by myth, legend, and historical accounts that intertwine to create a complex narrative of religious fervour, political manoeuvring, and cultural identity. This critical appraisal seeks to delve into the various aspects of St. David's life, examining historical sources, interpretations, and the enduring legacy of this revered figure in Welsh history and culture.

Historical Context

To understand the life of St. David, it is essential to place him within the historical context of early medieval Wales with his death close to 600 AD (Wooding 2007, 1), with the 6th century traditionally considered the time of St. David's birth and activity. This time was characterized by significant social, political, and religious changes in Britain. The Roman Empire had collapsed, leading to the withdrawal of Roman authority from Britain and the rise of independent kingdoms. In this tumultuous period, Christianity began to take root in Wales, primarily through the efforts of missionaries like St. David. The spread of Christianity intersected with the decline of paganism and the emergence of Welsh identity, creating fertile ground for the development of a distinct religious and cultural landscape.

Sources and Interpretations

The primary source for St. David's life is Rhygyfarch's "Life of St. David", composed in the 11th century, Rhygyfarch ap Sulien living from 1056/7 to 1099 (Sharpe 2007, 90). Rhygyfarch, the son of Bishop Sulien of St. David's, wrote his hagiography to elevate the status of St. David and the diocese of St. David's within the ecclesiastical landscape. As such, Rhygyfarch's account is not without bias, as he sought to promote the cult of St. David and enhance the prestige of his family's lineage.

The text comes to us from multiple sources with which, due to its primacy as a source text, I shall treat it here as fully as possible. The main sources come from multiple manuscripts which can be grouped as follows. I will hereon use terminology to refer to the sources as aligned with Sharpe (2007) and James (1967). The Vespasian text (Sharpe 2007, 90–91) is one manuscript from Brecon priory and there are a few dozen additional shorter texts that are grouped together because they are interpreted as daughter texts of an earlier text, referred to by Sharpe (2007, 93) as the Nero-Digby text.

There has been controversy over the importance and priority of the Vespasian and Nero-Digby texts. These are treated at length by numerous authors from various scholarly approaches (Howlett 2007; Davies 2007; Huws 2007; Sharpe 2007; James 1967).

With their modern approaches, the authors convincingly highlight some of the major differences between the texts and include the oversights and flaws of previous investigations, particularly of James (1967). It is worth elaborating on a couple of the major points here that ascertain the primacy of the texts (Wooding 2007, 3; Howlett 2007):

1. The Vespasian text is longer, Wooding therefore reviews previous assumptions that longer texts are later elaborations of shorter earlier texts. He clarifies that this assumption is a principle of analysis not a rule. And rather than the Vespasian text being a later elaboration, the shorter Nero-Digby texts are likely redacted copies for ease of comprehension and circulation.
2. If the Nero-Digby text is seen from the historical circumstances of its production, and the evidently wide circulation it achieved, then it is convincingly affirmed by Wooding that the peculiarities to any redactions can be understood. Local names, particularly place names, absent in the Nero-Digby text, and irrelevant to a wider non-local audience, would logically be omitted, which they have been. There is also a difference in language in the Nero-Digby version, whereby the more formal and obscure Greek expressions and vocabulary are presumably removed for a wider audience. There is interestingly no mention of other saints, derogatory or other,

which would logically follow Bishop Bernard's campaign to propagate the cult of St David.

3. Howlett provides a brilliant analysis of the technical syntax orchestrated by Rhygyfarch's prose writing. Considering Rhygyfarch's own testament that his intention is to end his lines with Ciceronian metrical clausulae. It is then convincing when this rhythm and other syntax remains largely intact in the Vespasian text, it can be seen as closer to the original.

Therefore, the Vespasian text will be taken as the closest replication of Rhygyfarch's original production following the explicit recommendation of (Sharpe 2007, 105). Specifically, I will be using 'Rhygyfarch's Life of St David' (Sharpe et al. 2007) as the main reference for this essay. The Nero-Digby text and its associated texts can be seen as redacted pamphlet type propaganda disseminated for wider audiences (Sharpe 2007, 104).

Having discussed the merits of the sources first, there is still the question of the original text written by Rhygyfarch and how it represents the life of St David. It was written a little over 500 years after St David's death, in and following a time of national change. The Norman conquest was still in living memory with summers filled with ever-present Norse raids and the Church Bishop's were establishing their internal dominions (Cowley 2007, 274–275). Rhygyfarch's father's successor, Bishop Abraham of St David's, was murdered by a raiding party only in 1080, where his father was restored as Bishop (Lloyd 1959). The writing of the Life of St David can therefore be seen as a public relations exercise by Rhygyfarch in validating and securing the region in unstable times via the cult of St David (Davies 2007, 159). It was written in 1091–1093 using dates settled on by Davies (2007, 160). It was only in 1115 that the Archbishop of Canterbury suspended the last Welsh bishop of St David's, Wilfred and was thus succeeded by the first Norman Bishop Bernard, suffragan to Canterbury (Cowley 2007, 275). It is interesting to note that bones thought to be St David's at St David's were analysed and found to be from the 12th century (Nokes et al. 2000). It appears therefore, that there was enough motivation to legitimize St David during this time that a potential mistruth was born, if of course the confusion was not due to another reason.

In such turbulent times I interpret that Rhygyfarch's motives for self-establishment would've been significant in introducing the prime bias of this text. Needless to say the same motives are what produced the text. Therefore, Rhygyfarch would surely have been using the most powerful legitimising traditions available to him, one being St David, a legacy still evidently present 500 years after his death.

Its accuracy in terms of how it exists today vs how it reflected Rhygyfarch's original text, I agree with Sharpe and consider it good. There are multiple daughter texts from the lost

originals which allow scholarly analysis, they show significant overlap and agreement, notwithstanding the controversy highlighted above. Therefore, their representation of the original text is likely good and considering Rhygyfarch's own skill and diligence in production, we can be confident he produced a concise and coherent original work inclusive of his biases.

Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David* (Sharpe et al. 2007) portrays him as a saintly figure endowed with miraculous powers from an early age. St. David is depicted as a pious and virtuous individual who performs extraordinary deeds, including healing the sick, raising the dead, and confronting pagan adversaries. However, scholars clearly recognize the hagiographic nature of Rhygyfarch's account and approach it with a critical lens, acknowledging the embellishments and theological agendas inherent in medieval hagiography. For example, by describing the prophecy of St David's coming to St Patrick (Sharpe et al. 2007, 111), Rhygyfarch is either repeating a commonly held notion or introducing himself this idea to infer a wholistic continuity in God's plan to bring Christianity to Wales and Ireland, thereby legitimizing David. The prophecy does not appear in St Patrick's *Confessio* (McCarthy 2008), in fact he explicitly cites other visions and reasonings that compelled him to return to Ireland.

In addition to Rhygyfarch's work, other medieval sources and later hagiographies contribute to the multifaceted portrayal of St. David. These sources include the writings of Gerald of Wales (Sharpe 2007, 93), who offers valuable insights into the cult of St. David and also the veneration of relics associated with the saint about a century after Rhygyfarch (Cowley 2007, 275–276). While these sources provide glimpses into the medieval perception of St. David, they must be scrutinized for their biases, theological motivations, and literary conventions. Suffice to say here that they certainly indicate the widespread cult of St David throughout much of Wales, particularly in the southern half and western regions. Gerald wrote a century after Rhygyfarch and Bishop Bernard, and it would be naive to think the cult of St David was not also magnified during the 12th century by their own writings and publicity campaigns that were disseminated via the *Nero-Digby* text pamphlets.

Discussion

According to Bowen in James (2007, 41), there is a historically reliable core to Rhygyfarch's Life of St David. This has David being born in Ceredigion and educated in a monastic life at Henfynyw (Vetus Rubus) under Guistilianus and then somewhere in Carmarthenshire under Paulinus. In James' (2007) work she then elaborates on this to further illustrate the movements of David and his followers in establishing churches along two main routes throughout the countryside following river courses and old roman roads. Further analysis here is outside the scope of this text, however this geographic analysis is fascinating and highlights the tangible reliability of Rhygyfarch's local place names and furthers knowledge of David's actual lifetime operational locations.

Several key themes emerge from the life of St. David, reflecting broader religious, cultural, and political dynamics in medieval Wales:

Monasticism and Spiritual Leadership

St. David's establishment of monastic communities, most notably the monastery at Glyn Rhosyn (Vallis Rosina) (Sharpe et al. 2007, 111), reflects his commitment to asceticism, prayer, and communal living. Monasticism would've played a crucial role in the spread of Christianity and the consolidation of ecclesiastical authority in medieval Wales. The clash of hierarchal and structured monotheistic disciplines with that of pagan traditions and beliefs would've been a landscape that would've required a very adaptable and flexible leader.

Miracles and Divine Intervention

The hagiographies of St. David abound with accounts of miracles attributed to his divine intercession. Save believing the miracles themselves, Rhygyfarch was likely solidifying in his text existing tales that developed since the time of St David, as the telling of miracles served to authenticate St. David's sanctity and reinforce the power of the Christian faith in the face of pagan resistance and ecclesiastical competition.

Ecclesiastical Reform and Influence

St. David's advocacy for ecclesiastical reforms and his confrontations with non-Christian practices underscored his role as a religious leader and reformer. He is credited with setting

up twelve monasteries (Sharpe et al. 2007, 119) and his efforts to purify the church and uphold doctrinal orthodoxy would have contributed to the consolidation of Christianity in Wales. His zeal for the monastic vow is nicely summarised in a decree accredited to St David, "For he who does not work, let him not eat." (Sharpe et al. 2007, 127). It should however be noted that to uphold doctrinal orthodoxy would have been an attractive trait to gather papal favour. Although unsupported, it could be well imagined that some relaxation of some orthodoxy would've been astutely practiced by David to successfully appeal to local populations at the forefront of church influence.

Cultural Identity and Nationalism

The cult of St. David has today become intertwined with Welsh identity and nationalism, symbolizing the resilience of Welsh culture in the face of external threats and cultural assimilation. It is interesting to consider these modern-day associations with St David and their comparative similarity to Rhygyfarch's motivations, that of ecclesiastical independence from an encroaching Church structure centred in England. St. David's Day, celebrated on March 1st, remains a prominent cultural and religious observance in Wales, reaffirming the enduring national legacy of the patron saint himself or at least the cult created around him.

While St. David's life is celebrated and venerated within Welsh tradition, it is essential to critically evaluate the historical veracity of the accounts surrounding his life. The hagiographies of St. David, while valuable as sources of religious devotion and cultural identity, must be approached with a critical eye, acknowledging the literary conventions, theological agendas, and historical context that shaped these narratives.

Scholars have raised questions regarding the historicity of certain events and miracles attributed to St. David, highlighting the challenges of separating myth from reality in medieval hagiography. The absence of contemporary sources and the reliance on later hagiographies such as those of Rhygyfarch and the subsequent Gerald, pose challenges for historians seeking to reconstruct an accurate portrait of St. David's life and deeds.

Furthermore, the cult of St. David and the veneration of his relics raise broader questions about the intersection of religion, power, and identity in medieval Wales. The promotion of St. David as a national symbol and patron saint reflects the political aspirations and cultural aspirations of the Welsh people and those with influence, underscoring the dynamic interplay between religious devotion and communal identity.

Legacy

Despite the uncertainties surrounding his life, St. David's legacy as cult endures as a symbol of Welsh spirituality, cultural resilience, and national pride. The celebration of St. David's Day, the proliferation of churches and monuments dedicated to the saint, and the enduring popularity of his hagiographies attest to his enduring influence in Welsh society.

Moreover, St. David's emphasis on humility, compassion, and service detailed by Rhygyfarch resonates with contemporary values and aspirations, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. As Wales continues to navigate the complexities of modernity and globalization, the legacy of St. David serves as a source of inspiration and solidarity, reminding the Welsh people of their rich cultural heritage and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

The life of St. David occupies a central place in Welsh history, religion, and culture, embodying the aspirations, struggles, and triumphs of the Welsh people. While the historical veracity of his deeds may remain elusive, the enduring legacy and cult of St. David as a spiritual leader, cultural icon, and national symbol underscores his profound significance in the collective imagination of Wales.

Missionaries of this time were spreading quite foreign beliefs among native Celtic traditions and cultures. They would not of course have been untouched by foreign Roman ideas, but monotheism spread by missionaries and the founding of churches and formal monastic orders would've been quite novel. The encroachment of a textually based faith with an organised structure, which remembers its founders and significant members so fondly, is a ripe environment for developing a reverence for its predecessors. The few hundred years after St Davids life was witness to the development of a successful legacy cult that survived the change from native Welsh traditions to the Anglo-Saxon and later Norman world (James 2007, 83).

Through critical appraisal and scholarly inquiry, we gain deeper insights into the complex interplay of religion, cult identity, and power that shaped the life and legacy of St. David. As we continue to explore and interpret his life, we affirm the enduring relevance of his message of faith, compassion, and solidarity in an ever-changing world.

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