

HPHI7008

Fact or Fiction? Literature and History

Assignment 1

A critical analysis of an extract from The Life and Translation of St  
Winefride by Prior Robert Pennant

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This essay will critically analyse an extract from *The Life and Translation of St Winefride* written by Prior Robert Pennant, translated from Latin to English by Ronald Pepin.<sup>1</sup> It will examine the genre and style of the text, the authorial intention and how the extract fits within the corpus of work concerned with the life of St Winefride. It will then draw conclusions about the significance of Prior Robert's account and whether this text can be relied on as a historical source for the seventh and twelfth centuries in England and Wales.

The extract concerns the translation of the bones of the Welsh saint from Gwytherin in northeast Wales to the Benedictine Abbey of SS. Peter and Paul at Shrewsbury in 1137. Multiple spellings of the saint's name appear in various texts, and she is widely known by her Welsh name Gwenfrewy.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, she will be referred to as St. Winefride as this how her name appears in the version of the text used for the analysis. The full text of *The Life and Translation of St. Winefride* will be referred to by the generic Latin term for this type of work, *vita*. Similarly, the section on the translation of the relics will be referred to as the *translatio*<sup>3</sup>.

The *Vita* can be classified as a hagiography. Rothstein argues that the hagiography is how, since early Christian times, religious figures have achieved their special status 'by means of dramatized and imaginative narratives'.<sup>4</sup> In the medieval period, written hagiographies were produced within the institutions of the Christian church. Pritchard claims that *The Book of the Acts of the Apostles* was the first hagiography and provided a model for these later versions with 'its mixture of events, witness, conversion, martyrdom, sacramental fellowship, miracles, missionary activity, church discipline, etc'.<sup>5</sup> Medieval hagiographies drew on the biblical tradition, but also on the oral tradition which had passed the stories of the lives of saints down the generations in local areas combining facts with folklore.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Pepin and Hugh Feiss, trans, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride*, (Toronto : Peregrina, 2000), pp. 77-93.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> 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), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Rothstein, Mikael, 'Hagiography: A Note on the Narrative Exaltation of Sect Leaders and Heads of New Religions', in *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*, ed. by James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tollefsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 392-400, p. 393.

<sup>5</sup> T.W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission, c.650-1930*, (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 13.

Authors of medieval hagiographies had both spiritual and secular motivation for their work. From a religious perspective, the description of the life of a saint forms an example of the highest standard of Christian behaviour, the descriptions of curative miracles provide hope, and retributive miracles serve as a warning against transgression.<sup>7</sup> However, the secular motive of hagiographers could be equally strong in deriving financial gain from pilgrimage and gaining recognition as a major cultic centre.<sup>8</sup> Medieval hagiography should not be regarded, however, as standing apart from mainstream literature of the period, much of which had religious themes.<sup>9</sup>

The section of the text which is the subject of this essay is part of a subgenre of hagiography known as a *translatio*. Gregory draws on Geary's work in arguing that *translatio* has a very specific purpose in asserting the legitimacy and power of the saint in the new location often through miracles.<sup>10</sup> He further notes that these types of text can be more closely related with historical events and typically contain descriptions of:

.... a public ceremony during which the tomb or grave was opened and the relics removed, the failure of initial efforts to bear the body away and the resolution of the problem with fasting or prayer, and the occurrence of miracles on the journey to the saint's new home.<sup>11</sup>

The *Life and Translation of St. Winefride* follows these conventions. Robert Pennant was the Prior of Shrewsbury Abbey. He dedicated the text to Guarin, Bishop of Worcester, and this enables the work to be dated between 1137 when the events took place and 1142 when Guarin retired.<sup>12</sup> In the Prologue to the *Vita*, Robert states his reason for writing the text is that is his duty to share the knowledge that he has received from God but also that Guarin

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<sup>7</sup> José Antonio López Sabatel, 'The Role of Divine Retribution in the Twelfth-Century Lives of Saint Winefride', *Itinerantes. Revista de Historia y Religión* 16 (2022), 223-240, p. 232.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (La Vergne: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru / University of Wales Press, 2022), p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholson-Jenkins p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Cartwright, 'The Welsh Versions of the Life of Gwenfrewy', in *Seintiau Cymru, Sancti Cambrenses: Studies in the Saints of Wales*. ed. by David N. Parsons and Paul Russell, (Aberystwyth: Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru, 2022), pp. 237-268, p. 239.

requested it and 'our friends [asked] that I make known to you the grace poured forth upon us'.<sup>13</sup>

Robert states that his sources were both written and oral and included documents held in churches 'of the country in which she is known to have lived'. He also relied on 'the reports of certain priests whom venerable antiquity commended and whose words their habit of religious life compelled us to trust'.<sup>14</sup> Robert points out that he omits some information which can be found in other sources because 'I did not find these in books nor were those who proclaimed them by their own assertions worthy in the estimation of men whose words I trust'.<sup>15</sup> From this, it appears important to him that his work is accepted as authoritative and reliable.

It should be noted that there is another extant twelfth century Latin *Life of St. Winefride* of which the author is unknown.<sup>16</sup> There is scholarly debate about which of these two *vitae* predates the other and if either relied on the other as a source.<sup>17</sup> There are many similarities between the two texts which may indicate that they are based on a common source which Pritchard suggests may have been a Latin life of St. Beuno which has now been lost.<sup>18</sup>

However, Prior Robert's version is longer and omits St. Winefride's visit to Rome which is included in the anonymous *vita*. Both texts describe miracles that occur in Holywell and Gwytherin, but these miracles differ in the two texts. However, the major point of difference is that the anonymous text does not include any reference to the translation of the relics to Shrewsbury. This could be explained by the distinct authorial intentions of the writers.

Gregory suggests that the anonymous life may have been written to establish control of the cultic site at Holywell and that perhaps the author was a Norman monk from the Cistercian Abbey at Basingwerk whereas Prior Robert was writing to demonstrate the power of St. Winefride and to support his abbey's claim to her bones.<sup>19</sup>

Several later texts concerning the cult of St. Winefride have used the *Vita* as a source text. Cartwright's analysis of the Welsh lives (or *buchedd*) argues that it can be demonstrated that

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<sup>13</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-113.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 11.

they are based on lost versions of Prior Robert's text rather than on the anonymous twelfth century one.<sup>20</sup> In the fifteenth century, Caxton published a Middle English *Lyf* of the saint which helped to publicise the cult in England and this closely follows the contents of Prior Robert's text, although it adds in names for some of the monks who accompanied him on the expedition which are not in the currently extant versions so it may be based on a version which is now lost.<sup>21</sup> The influence of the *Vita* continued up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Edith Pargeter, writing as Ellis Peters, based the first novel in her series of historical detective stories on it. Pargeter's novel closely follows Prior Robert's account until it introduces the murder mystery to the plot at which point the two texts diverge.<sup>22</sup>

St. Winefride is thought to have been born at the place now known as Holywell at the beginning of the seventh Century.<sup>23</sup> Writers of hagiographies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dismissed Winefride as an invention of medieval monasteries but later scholars accept that the cult existed before the medieval *vitae* and that it is likely to have descended through the generations as part of the oral tradition of the early Christian church.<sup>24</sup> Prior Robert's identification of his sources would appear to support this contention.

The *translatio* must be seen in the context of the cult of St. Winefride to understand why the monks of Shrewsbury decided to remove her remains from Gwytherin. Based on Prior Robert's version<sup>25</sup>, Winefride's story can be summarised as follows. She was born into a noble family and received religious instruction from her uncle, St. Beuno, who established a church on her father's land. Winefride was very pious and dedicated her life to God. One day while her parents were at church the king's son, Caradoc, arrived at the family home. Winefride offered him hospitality, but Caradoc made sexual advances to her. Winefride rebuffed him, explaining that she had chosen a life of chastity, but Caradoc persisted. Winefride then made an excuse about changing her clothes and escaped through her bedroom. She ran to the church, but Caradoc caught her before she could reach safety and beheaded her. A spring gushed forth from the spot where her head touched the ground. The head rolled into the

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<sup>20</sup> Cartwright, 'Gwenfrewy', p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Peters, Ellis, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, (London: Sphere, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, pp. 27-76.

church, where Beuno picked it up and reunited it with her body. Beuno cursed Caradoc who died and his body melted into the ground. Beuno breathed into Winefride's nostrils, covered her with his cloak and said mass. The congregation prayed for Winefride and she recovered, unharmed apart from a white scar around her neck.

Prior Robert records how Winefride became a nun and spent seven years at Holywell after Beuno had departed before she travelled to Gwytherin. There she led a religious community of virgins before she died of natural causes and was buried at Gwytherin in a cemetery which already contained the remains of venerated saints, including Chebius and Senanus. Robert describes miracles which took place at both Holywell and Gwytherin, including both cures and punishment. These miracles provide an important justification for the subsequent *translatio*. Pritchard argues that miracles are the 'stock in trade' of hagiography and were used as 'propaganda and publicity campaign to promote both the saint and the cultic centre'.<sup>26</sup>

The second part of Robert's text concerns the translation of St. Winefride's bones from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury. As previously noted, this type of narrative was an established subgenre of hagiography, and it will be seen that Robert's account includes all the main features that would be expected in this type of text. However, Robert's *translatio* is unusual in that it is written by the protagonist of the story<sup>27</sup>, although he refers to himself in the third person throughout. This analysis will focus on elements of the *translatio* which demonstrate authorial intent, conformance with the standard structure of the genre or are historically significant. Not all details of the text will be discussed.

The *translatio* begins with a brief history of the abbey at Shrewsbury but within a few lines the author introduces the theme that the abbey is incomplete without the relics of a saint, noting that the monks at Shrewsbury 'often ... complained to one another that they very much lacked the relics of saints, and they turned their attention with the greatest effort to inquiring into this'.<sup>28</sup> They focus their search for an appropriate saint on Wales as that country was known to contain many relics and, therefore, 'they strove in every way to

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<sup>26</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Cartwright, 'Gwenfrewy', p.239.

<sup>28</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, p. 77.

investigate how they may be able to have one of them'.<sup>29</sup> In this early part of the text, Robert is demonstrating a sense of certainty and entitlement about the abbey's right to acquire relics in this way illustrating his intention to use the *translatio* to justify these actions.

The text outlines the involvement of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburg in Chester in the selection of an appropriate saint. The monks of this institution were likely to have detailed knowledge of the cult of St. Winefride as they had been involved in a struggle with the Cistercian Abbey of Bassingwerk for control of the site at Holywell.<sup>30</sup> In fact, when a monk from Shrewsbury fell ill, one of the order at Chester had a vision of St. Winefride who said a mass should be held at the site of the spring, following which he would be cured. This happened and the monk then travelled to Holywell to bathe in the waters and give thanks. According to Robert's account, the memory of this miracle remained in the minds of the Benedictines who then 'reckoned they would be happy if they could acquire even a small part of her most holy body'.<sup>31</sup> Robert is, in the tradition of a *translatio*, using a miracle to justify the selection of specific relics and to establish a connection between St. Winefride and the abbey at Shrewsbury. He acknowledges the difficulties inherent in the task but writes that 'at [God's] command any impossible or difficult things could come to pass for them' thus establishing the logic that if they succeed then it must be God's will.<sup>32</sup>

Robert gives some historical context, suggesting that the exact location of the relics had been found but that the translation was delayed by the civil war and disruption which resulted from the accession of Stephen to the English throne following the death of Henry I. He dates the resumption of the quest to 1137, the second year of Stephen's reign.<sup>33</sup> The Prior relates that he himself was sent by the Abbot to retrieve the bones and that he sought permission from the bishop of Bangor who then sent him to a prince, who is unnamed in the text. The prince gives Robert permission to take the bones, thus conferring political support, in addition to the religious justification which had already been established. Robert attributes a long speech to the prince, which expresses certainty that both God and St.

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<sup>29</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.79.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

Winefride have approved the mission. The prince provides further justification for the removal of the relics, claiming that they are not venerated in their current location:

For, perhaps, seeing that the respect owed her is not rendered by her own people, she desires to be taken elsewhere so that she might receive from strangers which either her own people disdain to give her or neglect to give.<sup>34</sup>

Gregory argues that it does not matter if these secular authorities gave their consent in this way, but the presentation of approval of this kind is very important in the hagiographic tradition.<sup>35</sup>

In the next section of the *translatio* Robert reports that the party of seven, which consisted of monks from Shrewsbury and Chester as well as three unidentified others, set off to Gwytherin and en route a messenger informed them that they will meet local resistance to the removal of the relics. They again prayed for God's assistance and later that night Robert reports that a vision of a woman appeared to his attendant, who she told to inform Robert not to worry and that his mission would be successful. Robert himself had a vision of Godfrey, a monk from Shrewsbury Abbey who had died recently, who assured him that with God's help he could overcome these obstacles.<sup>36</sup> On arrival at Gwytherin, the local priest tells the party that during a night of prayer he too had a vision, this time of a young man, who accompanied him to Winefride's grave and told him not to oppose anyone who comes to take the bones otherwise he will die after a long and painful illness.<sup>37</sup> Robert is using this part of the text to legitimise the translation and to provide more evidence of links between Shrewsbury and St. Winefride, and using the threat of a punitive miracle to suppress any dissent.

The priest interprets for Prior Robert as he explains his intentions to the local people, sharing with them the visions and miracles that have led to him arriving here. All but one are persuaded by the arguments. However, one man speaks up, claiming that it is not right to remove the bones from the place they have always been. This man is later offered money to change his mind and when he does so this further convinces the rest of the population who

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<sup>34</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

see it as a further example of divine intervention.<sup>38</sup> While clearly being used by Robert to justify the removal of the bones, this part of the text highlights the difference between the Anglo-Norman and Welsh traditions for the veneration of sacred relics. Gregory argues that in the early Welsh Christian church relics tended to be left in the original burial site whereas there was an established Norman tradition of moving the bones of saints to religious centres that would then become destinations for pilgrimage.<sup>39</sup>

Robert describes the cemetery at Gwytherin where St. Winefride is buried. This again give him opportunity to illustrate the power of the Saint in curing the sick, but also in meting out retribution by striking down any animals who graze there and punishing anyone who tries to desecrate the site, such as a man who was punished for using an axe to remove bark from a tree to make shoelaces. His axe was welded to the tree and his arm paralysed until local people prayed to St. Winefred, who then displayed mercy by freeing him and restoring him to health.<sup>40</sup>

The rest of the text of the *translatio* concerns the identification of St. Winefride's grave, the removal of the bones and the journey back to Shrewsbury. Further miracles occur, including Prior Robert finding the grave although he has never been there before, curing a sick man at a roadside inn by giving him dust from the Saint's skull, restoring the health of a young man in Shrewsbury who had been brought to witness the arrival of the relics and maintaining dry weather in the centre of the town as the procession arrived at the Abbey.<sup>41</sup> This appears to be designed to demonstrate that St. Winefride retained her power following the translation of her body. It is interesting that only approximately forty percent of the text is concerned with the exhumation and translation of the relics, illustrating the emphasis Prior Robert places on detailing the justification for moving the bones to Shrewsbury.

Because of the inclusion of miracles and the religious and secular motivations of the writers, hagiographies can be dismissed as not being useful historical sources. However, they can tell us much more about the times in which they were written than the period in the lives of the saints that they are relating. Cartwright argues that Medieval hagiographies should 'be

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory, A Welsh Saint in England, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> Pepin and Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives*, p. 88.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-93.

considered as an accurate, albeit incomplete, record of medieval beliefs and traditions concerning the Welsh saints'.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, they can provide information about the organisation and economy of the Christian church in the twelfth Century.<sup>43</sup> The inclusion of curative and vengeful miracles also gives historical insight into Medieval belief systems because, although these may seem ridiculous to the modern reader, their message would have been clearly understood by congregations in the twelfth century and corresponded with wider beliefs about supernatural forces.<sup>44</sup>

It has been demonstrated that *The Life and Translation of St Winefride* sits within the *translatio* subgenre of hagiography. It adheres to the template for this type of work and it has been acknowledged as an important source for other works in the corpus of documents concerning the cult of St. Winefride. The eyewitness narrative gives the text a unique perspective and provides a detailed description of the layout of the cultic site at Gwytherin. Therefore, while acknowledging the author's secular and religious motivations and the inclusion of miracles and supernatural events, *The Life and Translation of St Winefride* is an important historical source and provides useful information about the political, cultural and religious spheres in twelfth century England and Wales.

Wordcount: 3163

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<sup>42</sup> Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p.69.

<sup>43</sup> Pritchard, *St Winefride*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Evelyn Nicholson-Jenkins, 'From the Foothills of Snowdonia to Shrewsbury and Beyond: The Transition of St. Winefride from Child to Great Saint', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 37 (2022), 1–13, p. 1.

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