

Assignment 1:

(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)

This essay will examine the Life associated with Saint Melangell (also known by her Latin name of *Monacellae*) and will conclude that her Life exhibits many themes and motifs found in Lives of other Welsh saints. However, there are also some elements which rest upon her womanhood – elements which are common to many female saints, but which are in stark contrast with male saints' Lives. There are also a few elements which are unique to her Life itself.

One of these differences relates to the actual recording of her Life, because the *Historia Divae Monacella* is a rare example of a written account of a Welsh medieval female saint. Indeed, St Winefride or *Gwenfrewi* is the “only other Welsh saint attested in pre-Reformation sources for whom Latin lives survive”¹. However, in common with numerous other Welsh saints, there is more than one version of text setting out St Melangell's Life and more than one academic opinion on the age and validity of each version.

It is widely accepted that the original manuscript is lost, but three complete and two fragmentary manuscript copies survive of which ‘the earliest date from the later sixteenth century’². Nevertheless, the differences between many of the texts are not substantive, so this essay follows Pryce by using the late seventeenth century manuscript (MS 3108B) copied out by an antiquary, Thomas Sebastian Price, which is the earliest manuscript containing a complete text of the *Historia*³. This is not to suggest that the original text is of that period, since other manuscript copies date to

¹ Huw Pryce. ‘A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*’. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994.) Vol.82, p.23.

² Pryce. ‘A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*’ Page 24.

³ National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. MS3108B.

the sixteenth century and the Latin style and content within MS3108B suggests that it was probably initially composed sometime around 1500, if not before⁴.

Given that there is ample evidence (as discussed below) to show that the cult of Melangell was established centuries before the Life was recorded, it raises the question as to why Thomas Price elected to record the Life at that particular point in his lifetime. Interestingly, Thomas Price lived close to Pennant Melangell, in a village called Llanfyllin and his circle of friends included other antiquaries of Welsh history such as William Maurice and Robert Davies, both of whom lived nearby⁵. The 'Wars of the Three Kingdoms' (1640 onwards) meant that Wales was suffering the same instability as England⁶, with battle lines drawn over complex divisions in politics and religion, so the group lived through turbulent times. Price was a Catholic, and a noted popish recusant who is credited with collecting 'a large number of manuscripts which he sent to the Vatican'⁷. So - as someone with a clear interest in protecting Welsh religious heritage at a time when it appeared under threat, it is of no surprise that he should wish to place on record his '*Catalogue of British Saints*'⁸, with his proximity to Pennant Melangell probably explaining why he included the complete '*Historia Divae Monacella*' at the end of the manuscript.

It is also of note that Price was an associate of the notable Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709)⁹ who produced one of the other two extant complete copies of the *Historia* during his journeys through Wales at the end of the seventeenth century. Within the manuscript¹⁰, Lloyd credited the form of the text to Thomas Price, perhaps lending more credibility to Price's version.

⁴ Pryce. Page 28.

⁵ Evan David Jones, 'Thomas Sebastian Price' in '*Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig*' (Dictionary of Welsh Biography) online. (1959)

⁶ English Heritage online. '*The English Civil Wars; Origins, events, legacy.*'

⁷ Evan David Jones, 'Thomas Sebastian Price'. (1959).

⁸ The 'Catalogue of Saints is the first section of manuscript 3108B

⁹ Professor Thomas Jones, 'LHUYD, Edward', (in '*Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig*' [Dictionary of Welsh Biography] online. (1959).

¹⁰ National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. MS1506C, part iii, pp38-41. (c1700).

The *Divae Historia Monacellae* is a relatively short text, consisting of just over three pages of handwriting within a small manuscript book¹¹ and the outline of the hagiography is as follows:-

Melangell was the virgin daughter of a sixth century Irish king who fled to Wales to avoid being betrothed. She hid in the remote valley of Pennant Melangell for 15 years until, one day, a local prince, Brochfael Ysgithrog, came across her, praying, whilst he was out hunting in the woods. His dogs had chased a hare into brambles where it sought protection under Melangell's garment and Brochfael was so taken aback by her account that he granted her his lands for the service of God and as an asylum in perpetuity. He also granted anyone under her care protection from being molested or removed. Melangell went on to establish herself as abbess and to receive virgins into her religious sanctuary for 37 years¹². After her death, a man by the name of Elise came to Pennant Melangell and sought to defile the virgins in refuge there, but the *Historia* documents 'that he came to an end most wretchedly and perished suddenly'¹³.

One of the key themes within this story is the idea of sanctuary and protection from harm – not just within the immediate area of where there is now a twelfth century church, but, it would appear, within the wider area of the remote valley ("*has terras meas do et dono tibi animo quam libentissimo ad serviendum Deo*"¹⁴ ["I give these lands of mine and I give them to you with the most willing heart to serve God"]). Perhaps this notion of the valley being a recognised sanctuary in perpetuity may have given added encouragement to Thomas Price to write the Life, given that he may have felt vulnerable in the political climate of his time.

However, Huw Pryce concludes it may also have been one of the reasons for the creation of the original manuscript stating that 'an emphasis on sanctuary runs through the *Historia*, connecting its various episodes'¹⁵ and he notes that many

¹¹ Author's observations, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. 2023.

¹² Oliver Davies, 'The Life of St. Melangell' in '*Celtic Spirituality*'. (Paulist Press, New York. 1999). Pp 221-223.

¹³ Pryce. '*A new edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae*' Page 40.

¹⁴ National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. MS3108B. Folio 77.

¹⁵ Pryce. Page 31.

Welsh churches had needed to proclaim their sanctuary privileges prior to the Edwardian conquest of the thirteenth century¹⁶. Other authors share the assessment that the Lives were often compiled, not just to establish rights and lands, but as evidence that the granting by a legitimate king or ruler made the rights inviolable and permanent¹⁷.

The Life of St. Melangell clearly fits this framework, with Brochfael not only purported to be from a ruling family in Powys, but also given the title of Earl of Chester (*Consul Legecestriae*) in the third line of the *Historia*¹⁸. A further frequent addition to many of the Welsh Lives is the inclusion of a genealogy towards the end of the text to reinforce valid political authority. As Oliver Davies points out, this reflects “the force of kinship patterns in medieval Wales”¹⁹ and may also have its roots in the local nature of pre-Christian Celtic gods. In the case of St. David, for example, the genealogy goes back through 20 generations to ‘Ieuan the son of the sister of Mary’²⁰ and the Life of Beuno traces 19 generations back to ‘Mary the Virgin, the mother of Christ’²¹. The Life of St Melangell does, indeed, identify her as being of royal descent, in fact it states she is the daughter of an Irish King called Iowchel²². However, the text does not trace her lineage back any further, rather the validity of Melangell’s claim to the land is traced through five generations of (male) descendants of Brochwel (see discussion regarding misogynistic attitude to female saints below, page 7).

One clear parallel between the *Historia Divae Monacellae*²³ and many other medieval saints’ Lives is the ‘Hermit and the Hunter’ motif which forms a central

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 32. See also, ‘Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David’ in J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan Wooding. *‘St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation’*. E Book (2007). Page 147, Paragraph 57, for a very similar statement of sanctuary to St. Melangell.

¹⁷ See, for example, Elissa R Henken. ‘Welsh hagiography and the nationalist impulse’ in Jane Cartwright (Ed) *‘Celtic hagiography and Saints’ cults’* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff. 2003). Page 30. Also, Oliver Davies, ‘The Lives of Saints’ in *‘Celtic Spirituality’*. (Paulist Press, New York. 1999). Page 12.

¹⁸ Author’s observations of manuscript MS 3108B, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. 2023.

¹⁹ Oliver Davies. *‘Celtic Christianity in early medieval Wales’*. (University of Wales Press, Cardiff. 1999). Page 27.

²⁰ J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan Wooding. *‘St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation’*. Pages 154 to 155

²¹ Oliver Davies, *‘Celtic Christianity in early medieval Wales’*. Page 27.

²² Pryce, Page 40.

plank of the St. Melangell hagiography²⁴ and which relates both to the notion of 'sanctuary' and the early medieval tensions between ecclesiastical and secular powers over liminal space discussed above. The commonest version of the motif involves a large animal such as a boar or stag. For example, the Life of Illtud, another Welsh saint, tells how King Meirchion 'The Wild' pursued a stag to Illtud's cell, where it lay down at his feet and the hounds ceased baying²⁵. However, there are also a few examples involving a hare, the earliest probably being in Gaul where Saint Martin of Tours commanded hunting hounds to desist and allow a hare to escape – a story that reappears centuries later when Saint Anselm of Canterbury done something similar²⁶.

It is the symbolism of the hare combined with the woodland context in which St. Melangell was discovered which marks out her Life from many others and which also appears to connect her directly to pre-Christian beliefs. Firstly, there is much evidence to suggest that ancient Celts viewed woodland clearings as sacred, for example, Pliny suggesting that druids 'worshipped in groves of oak'²⁷ and in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* Pwyll encounters Hafgan in a woodland clearing²⁸.

Similarly, hares held a special status in early Celtic history, with Julius Caesar, writing in the first century BC, suggesting that it was a religious taboo to eat hares in Britain (*Leporem et gallinam et anserem gustare fas non putant*)²⁹. Dio Cassius also mentions that Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, released a hare whilst invoking *Andraste*, goddess of victory, before her campaign against the Romans and there is some archaeological evidence that hares were part of rituals, with remains found in Iron Age ritual pits³⁰.

²⁴ See Luke John Murphy and Carly Ameen. 'The Shifting baselines of the British Hare Goddess' in 'Open Archaeology' De Gruyter publishing, Berlin. (2020) Vol. 6(1).Page 226.

²⁵ John Blair and Brian Golding (Eds). 'The Hermit and the Hunter' in 'The Cloister and the World: Essays in Honour of Barbara Harvey'. (Oxford University Press, Oxford.1996). Page 111.

²⁶ Dominic Alexander. 'Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages'. (Boydell and Brewer, 2008.) Page 118.

²⁷ Ronald Hutton. 'Blood and Mistletoe' (Yale University Press, London (2009). Page 14.

²⁸ See Jane Cartwright (Ed) . 'Celtic hagiography and Saints' cults' (University of Wales Press, Cardiff. 2003). Page 100, n58.

²⁹ Julius Caesar, 'The Gallic War'. Translated by H..J. Edwards Loeb Classical Library 72 (Cambridge MA, Harvard Press 1917) Book V.12.6/ page 250/251.

³⁰ Miranda J. Green. 'Dictionary of Celtic myth and legend'. (Thames and Hudson, London, 1992).Page 112.

Thus, whatever the date of the original (now lost) Life of St. Melangell, the cult appears to have origins much earlier than the extant manuscripts and to have been transmitted orally. The existence of a fifteenth century rood screen in the nave of the twelfth century church at Pennant Melangell evidences this fact; Carved from a single piece of oak, it illustrates the legend of Melangell³¹. There is also a recumbent stone effigy, positioned in the chancel, of a woman with two hares peeping round her waist, dated to the fourteenth century³².

There exists, therefore, ample physical evidence of a continuous cult based upon Pennant Melangell and the notion of Saint Melangell represented as an intercessor between humanity, animals and the divine.

This saintly connection with God is given greater force in many Lives with saints possessing the power to savagely punish those who may offend against them or their followers. For example, when the local landowner called Baia planned to kill St David, an enemy cut his head off and fire fell from heaven, burning down his castle.³³ A similar motif appears in St. Melangell's Life when a man called Elise, who came to Pennant Melangell 'desiring to ravish, seize and defile the same virgins', came to an 'end most wretchedly'³⁴. In this way, the inviolable nature of the declared sanctuary is reinforced.

There is a further important phenomenon prominent within the *Historia* – one which is specific to female saints, and that is the emphasis on Melangell's virginal state and her desire for continued chastity. Jane Cartwright identifies that the pattern of traditions of female saints follows a different sequence to male saints³⁵.

Male saints are often subject to an unusual birth and early recognition of greatness by demonstrating their wisdom, their education and by performance of miracles. He

³¹ John Hainsworth. 'Saint Melangell's church: A history and guide'. (St Melangell Centre, Llangynog, Oswestry). Page 10.

³² Maurice H. Ridgway. 'Furnishings and fittings in Pennant Melangell Church'. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994). Vol.82, p.130

³³ J. Wyn Evans and J. Wooding. 'St David of Wales: Cult Church and Nation' (Boydell and Brewer, 2007) page 125.

³⁴ Pryce. 'A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*'. Page 40.

³⁵ Jane Cartwright, 'Feminine sanctity and spirituality in Medieval Wales'. (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2008).Pages 85/86.

'heals the sick; punishes unbelievers; lives to a ripe old age and usually dies of natural causes'³⁶.

Female saints, on the other hand, were less likely to be recognised as saints³⁷, but if they were their Lives usually follow a different path; only beginning at puberty – when they are challenged by male sexuality. They go on to dedicate their virginity to Christ and refuse to marry, often living alone or establishing a community of religious females³⁸.

Doubtless, this misogynistic perspective is 'heavily indebted to the example of the Virgin Mary'³⁹ and the Life of St. Melangell neatly fits the characterisation ; she escaped to Pennant Melangell to avoid an unwanted marriage, spending fifteen years in the valley 'without ever setting eyes on a man until she encountered Brochwel'⁴⁰. She declares her ambition to remain chaste and 'serve God and the spotless Virgin'⁴¹, going on to establish a sanctuary for other virgins, whom divine intervention saved from being raped by Elise.

In conclusion, the act of committing of the Life of St Melangell to manuscript, using widely used hagiographic motifs and literary style to create a particular image, crystallised the Saint's sanctity and consolidated a cult which probably existed in oral form for hundreds of years before. As a result, the *Historia* has supported the continued development of Pennant Melangell as a sacred space, with many hundreds of people visiting the liminal landscape of the remote valley in North Wales for sanctuary, self-reflection, and healing, thereby expanding the Saint's reach beyond the region and making Pennant Melangell one of the four most popular pilgrimage sites in Wales today⁴².

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Thomas Head, 'Women and hagiography in Medieval Christianity'. (The Orb on-line reference book for medieval studies, 1999). Page 1.

³⁸ Jane Cartwright. 'Feminine sanctity and spirituality in Medieval Wales'. Page 86.

³⁹ Pryce 'A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*'. Page 23. See also Thomas Head, 'Women and hagiography in Medieval Christianity'.

⁴⁰ Pryce. Page 23.

⁴¹ Ibid. Page 40

⁴² Michael Keulemans and Lewis Burton. 'Sacred place and pilgrimage: modern visitors to the shrine of St Melangell'. (In *Rural Theology* 2006) 4(2), page 99.

WORD COUNT = 2664.

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