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Women in the Middle Ages: Sources from the Celtic Regions

What light do the extant sources shed on medieval Welsh nunneries?

As might be expected of a nation in medieval Christendom, there were women in Wales who took the veil to devote their lives to God. However, none of the nuns who lived in Welsh nunneries left any records, and there remain very few sources written outside the nunneries to detail the lives of these women. There are a few references to Welsh nuns in literature and records that detail the nunneries' foundation and income, and finally there are poems by the Welsh bards written as if addressed to the nuns themselves. The picture that these sources create is that of very few and small nunneries who were poor and held in low esteem by the remainder of the Welsh populace.

Medieval Wales had a tradition of holy women. The *vitae* of saints, purporting to describe holy figures from what has been called the age of the saints, contain a number of female saints and saintly figures, many specifically noted to be nuns. The most famous is St David's mother St Non who is said to be a nun at the time of David's conception. Rhygyfarch in his *vita* of St David notes further that 'neither before nor after did she know a man' while in poetry she is called '*Ileian wiw*, a beautiful nun'.¹ Elissa Henken notes that Non's sanctity and chastity make her son's conception and birth all the more notable.² St Gwenfrewy suffered martyrdom rather than give up her goal of becoming a nun, and she went on to be an abbess over many other nuns.³ St Melangell fled marriage and lived in seclusion for fifteen years before her discovery, and then she became the abbess of a community of religious women.⁴ Mothers and wives of saints appear in their *vitae* where they become nuns after giving birth to their saintly children or after their husbands embark on a saintly career. Guean is said to sleep with her husband only once in order to conceive St Padarn, and then she becomes a nun while Gwladus, after the birth of St Cadog, is

¹ Rhygyfarch, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', ed. and trans. by Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), p. 113 and Henken, Elissa R., *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), p. 159.

² Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, pp. 159–60.

³ Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, trans., *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000) p. 35, 46, 61.

⁴ Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 221–23.

said to lead other nuns. Trinihid, the abandoned wife of St Illtud, illustrates the idea of strict chastity as the highest ideal. She is described in her husband's *vita* as living an exemplary life as a nun, being described as blameless and living as the leader of a group of nuns. Yet when she desired to look again on her husband, even without ill intent, she was severely punished and even after repentance never completely recovered from that punishment.⁵ Saints for whom there is no extant *vita* reveal the same ideals. The poet Iorwerth Fynglwyd praised St Brigid or Sant Ffraid, saying, '*Y lleian, hardd yw llun hon*, the nun, lovely is her appearance'.⁶ St Dwynwen and St Eluned were among the twenty-four daughters of the legendary king Brychan, all of whom Gerald of Wales reported 'from their youth upwards they were all dedicated to the religious life, and they ended their days blissfully in this state of sanctity'.⁷ Dwynwen, despite being entreated by lovers is described by the poet Dafydd ap Gwilym as a nun, and Eluned herself lost her life rather than lose her virginity.⁸

It was not just individual saints who were considered to be particularly holy, but virgins also formed one of the categories of saintly persons along with apostles and martyrs. In the *Book of Taliesin*, the poet lists virgins along with apostles and martyrs while in multiple religious poems, Mary is presented as the leader of virgins who all have power to help those who turn to them. One such poem is the 'Song of Elaeth' which speaks of 'the protection of Mary and all the virgins' while Gruffydd ab Yr Ynad Coch wrote of 'the protection of...Mary and her maidens...And the virgins' true acknowledgement!'.⁹ Finally, the *vita* of St Cybi ends with his death when his soul goes to join all the other saints in heaven: 'in the unity of the apostles and evangelists...in the unity of virgins and all the righteous saints, in the unity of the heavenly church'.¹⁰

⁵ A. W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944), pp. 181, 217–19, 253.

⁶ Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, pp. 161–62.

⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 91–92.

⁸ Henken, *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 227 and Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, 92.

⁹ Gwyneth Lewis and Rowan Williams, trans., *The Book of Taliesin: Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020), p. 169; Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 274; and Catherine A. McKenna, *The Medieval Welsh Religious Lyric: Poems of the Gogynfeirdd, 1137–1282* (Belmont: Ford & Bailie, Publishers, 1991), p. 213.

With such appearances in both religious and secular literature, it would be expected that religious houses for women would have been commonplace in medieval Wales and that such women would be revered for their devotion to God. Indeed, how else could a woman imitate the famous saints who were venerated and no doubt held up as an example for women to emulate? However, the extant information presents a different picture. Instead, Welsh religious houses for women were few in number—Jane Cartwright estimates that there were thirty-five nuns in all of Wales—and the religious houses appear to have been poor.¹¹

There were three religious houses whose existence has been clearly documented. They are the abbeys of Llanllugan, Llanllŷr, and Usk. Llanllugan was a Cistercian abbey located in Cydwain in the kingdom of Powys and was the daughter house of Strata Marcella in the diocese of St Asaph. It was founded by Maredudd ap Rhobert in the final decades of the twelfth century. The exact date is unknown, and a charter written by Maredudd giving the nuns of the abbey the township of Llanllugan has been dated to sometime in the first half of the thirteenth century. Janet Burton and Karen Stöber theorise that it was built on the site of a previous religious house dedicated to St Gwyddelan of Ireland. It was dissolved in 1536 under Henry VIII. In a period of approximately three and a half centuries, very little remains to give a record of the abbey.¹² The website Monastic Wales lists ten events in the life of the abbey, nearly all dealing with finances. In 1377 a source records that there were as few as five religious women in the abbey. The only mention of the quality of holiness to be achieved at the abbey comes just six years before its dissolution when a nun from another location requested and was granted permission to relocate to Llanllugan to lead a stricter, holier life.¹³

The abbey of Llanllŷr appears just as sparsely in the extant record. It was the daughter house of the Cistercian priory Strata Florida and was located in Cardigan within the kingdom of Ceredigion. It was founded near the end of the twelfth century by the Lord Rhys, the great prince of the kingdom of Deheubarth. Llanllŷr appears in Gerald of Wales's *Opera* where he

¹⁰ Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, p. 249.

¹¹ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 176–85.

¹² Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 121.

¹³ Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, 'Llanllugan (Abbey)', in *Monastic Wales* <<https://monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsite&siteID=37>> [accessed 28 February 2023]

claims that the abbey was poor and mistreated by Strata Florida.¹⁴ It was damaged during Edward I's conquest of Wales and received forty marks in financial compensation.¹⁵ One abbess was found guilty of felling an oak tree and then pardoned in 1299 while another abbess appears in a poem called a *cywydd gofyn* as commissioning Huw Cae Llwyd to write the poem to request an ape.¹⁶ It, too, was dissolved under Henry VIII.¹⁷

The abbey of Usk was different from the other two. It was Benedictine rather than Cistercian and was founded by a marcher lord, Richard de Clare, earl of Pembroke, by 1135. Richard Strongbow gave a charter to the abbey which was later confirmed by Elizabeth de Burgh, also of the Clare family. In between these two events in 1322 Edward II awarded patronage of the abbey to Hugh Despenser the Younger. Other events of note are the visit of Archbishop John Peckham in 1284 and the petition of Adam of Usk to the pope on behalf of the nuns of the abbey.¹⁸ After his visit, Peckham noted the poor condition of the abbey and ordered it to appoint two nuns to serve as treasurers while a priest would also oversee the care of the abbey, and he made strict rules for nuns leaving the enclosure.¹⁹ Then during the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr, Adam of Usk wrote in 1404 that the nuns were in danger of leaving the abbey again. According to Adam, the abbey had received damage during the revolt, and the nuns might be forced to leave the enclosure and beg. To protect them from this fate he requested the pope to grant indulgences to those who would visit the chapel of St Radegund at Usk as a means of providing an income for the nuns. He noted that only women of noble birth, including several from his family, were allowed to be members. Later in his will he bequeathed twenty pence to each nun in the abbey.²⁰ There is also a record that two women fought for the position of abbess

¹⁴ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales*, p. 123.

¹⁵ F. G. Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales, 1066–1349* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1977), p. 214.

¹⁶ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 184, 186–88.

¹⁷ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales*, p. 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁹ Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964), p. 223–24, 232.

²⁰ Adam of Usk, *The Chronicle of Adam Usk, 1377–1421* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 193, 273.

of the nunnery in 1516.²¹ It was a small abbey with only five nuns at the beginning and six at its end when it was dissolved in 1536.²² Cartwright theorises that most likely the women to be found within the abbey were Norman rather than Welsh since the Benedictine order was popular in England and not in Wales. Since the abbey was located in Norman-held territory, it would be likely that many of the women, at least, were Norman.²³

In addition to the women of these three abbeys, there are a few references to nuns and their religious houses in legal writings and in literature. F. G. Cowley notes that due to a lack of religious houses, women seeking the life of a nun might become a recluse, several of whom are mentioned by Gerald of Wales in his *Opera*.²⁴ In legal writings there are two references to reclusive holy women. *Cyfraith y Gwragedd* states that a woman in a cell should pay a death tax.²⁵ J. E. Lloyd notes that this was because these women or their fathers did not pay the *amobr*, which was paid to the lord at the loss of the woman's virginity.²⁶ That there were such women up until at least the end of the high medieval period can be seen in a letter written by Llywelyn ap Gruffydd to Archbishop Peckham in October of 1282. In the letter, Llywelyn mentions Welsh male and female recluses (*inclusorum et inclusarum*) as part of a list of those who had suffered attacks by the English.²⁷

Gerald of Wales makes mention of two groups of nuns as well. The first is the questionable abbey of Llansanffraid-yn-Elfael. This abbey appears nowhere in the extant record except in the writings of Gerald of Wales where it features in a story. In his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Gerald tells how the abbot of Strata Marcella, Enoch, ran off with a nun from Llansanffraid-yn-Elfael, all of which was known to a man who communicated with spirits.²⁸ In

²¹ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales*, p. 211.

²² Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, 'Usk (Priory), in *Monastic Wales* <<https://monasticwales.org/site/40>> [accessed 28 February 2023]

²³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 206.

²⁴ Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales*, 52.

²⁵ Dafydd Jenkins, ed., *The Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales Translated and Edited* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1986), p. 57.

²⁶ J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales: From the Norman Conquest to the Edwardian Conquest* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), II, p. 218.

²⁷ Huw Pryce, ed., *The Acts of Welsh Rulers, 1120–1283* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 618–20.

his *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, Gerald further states that Enoch impregnated many of the nuns of the abbey before running off with one of them. Cartwright notes contradictions in Gerald's story and the fact that it served as a sensational story for his travel account. This and the fact that this abbey can be found nowhere else have led her to question the abbey's existence.²⁹

Also in his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Gerald describes an ancient church in Caerleon that was 'graced by a choir of nuns dedicated to the service of God'.³⁰ It should be noted that there is no other reference to a religious house for women in Caerleon, and the nuns are said to be singing at a church dedicated to one of the earliest British martyrs, Julius, and this church is said to be one of three which were from 'former times'. The implication is that the church where the nuns sang is no longer in existence. Thus, these nuns could be seen as existing like the virgin saints from an earlier time, possibly even the age of the saints, but if they had ever existed, their religious house had long since disappeared.

Finally, there is the intriguing reference to the mother of Myrddin, a nun, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, at the church of St Peter. The origin for Geoffrey's story, the *Historia Brittonum*, does not present her as a nun but merely that she claimed to have produced her son without intercourse with a man.³¹ It is Geoffrey who turned her into a nun, but Welsh translations of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* retain this aspect of her identity. In Peniarth MS 23C and in MS Cotton Cleopatra B, she is described as a *lleian*, a nun, and in the latter, Myrddin is given an original name of An because his mother was a nun.³²

Most of the depictions of religious women appear to be almost affectionate, yet lacking in respect. In the story of Enoch and the nun (or nuns), Gerald presents this particular religious house as morally weak. Just as Cartwright noted that the story could just be an instance of Gerald using an exotic story for entertainment, it should be noted that Gerald does this on a number of occasions in his writings, and he has no difficulty using such stories to present others as exotic, strange, and also immoral. It would seem likely that the story of Abbot Enoch and the

²⁸ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 118.

²⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, pp. 178–81.

³⁰ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 115.

³¹ J. A. Giles, trans., *History of the Britons* (Createspace, 2018), p. 18.

³² Aberystwyth, Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 23C, fol. 60r and John Jay Parry, trans., *Brut y Brenhinedd* (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1937), pp. 121–24.

nuns of Llansanffraid-yn-Elfael fall into this category, and if this story was invented by Gerald himself, then it does not reflect on the views of regular Welsh society. In contrast to the clear weakness and immorality of the nuns in Gerald's story, the writers of Peniarth MS 23C and Cotton Cleopatra B have turned Myrddin's mother into a victim. Instead of willingly sleeping with the demon that visits her as she does in Geoffrey's story, she now sees him only in her sleep and wakes up pregnant.

In the Bardic Grammars, poets are told that they are supposed to praise nuns for their holiness and chastity. However, the works of the poetry of the gentry are notorious for representing nuns as possible partners in a liaison. In fact, nuns appear in love poetry rather than praise poetry as one would expect. In one poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym, the poet speaks as if he is trying to draw the abbess or one of the nuns of Llanllugan to a tryst. Another poem connected to Dafydd tells the nun addressed in it to give up many of the aspects of being a nun and tells her that 'the Virgin's guarantee...would confer greater honour' than being a nun. While in some of the poems the poets describe their attempts to draw nuns from their vocation, in others they describe nuns who have violated their oaths or at least hint that they have done so.³³ Helen Fulton sees such poetry as having been written about specific women who became nuns for the pleasure and edification of their families and that they were intended to praise the nuns in the same way as their fellow noblewomen.³⁴ Perhaps this could be true for some, but the lack of names or identifying characteristics makes this unlikely for a number of such poems. While Welsh writers may have been uncomfortable with the idea of a nun willingly sleeping with a demon, it would seem that the idea of enjoying a tryst in violation of a nun's vows was a perfectly fun and acceptable idea to contemplate.

It should be noted that these less than respectful representations of religious women all appear in literature and poetry. In the actual records, there is little to indicate whether they deserved such a reputation, though outside of literature, the nuns make a few less than positive appearances, such as during Archbishop Peckham's visit or the facing of legal matters for cutting down an oak, the commissioning of a poem for an exotic pet or the fight between two women for a position of authority. However, all of these have possible explanations. Was it immorality or

³³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, pp. 188–90.

³⁴ Helen Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), 87–112 (p. 98–99).

necessity that led the nuns of Usk outside the abbey? The date is significant since it follows closely on the conquest of Wales. While Usk may not have suffered damage from the fighting as it did later during the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr, it could have been affected financially all the same just as Adam of Usk claimed for the later nuns of the abbey. It should also be noted that extant injunctions from Peckham's travels through Wales show that the abbey at Usk was in no way unique. Peckham made similar orders to the male religious houses for how they conducted their finances, and their conduct, too, was looked upon as suspect.³⁵ The primary difference here is that, as Cartwright has pointed out, Peckham's specific concerns for the nuns of Usk show a male concern about women's mobility rather than necessarily reflecting on their strictness of life. She has further pointed out that the cutting down of an oak tree illegally could have stemmed from a financial crisis, and the fuel or lumber was needed despite the illegality of obtaining it.³⁶ It is not certain that Abbess Anne actually commissioned the *cywydd gofyn* requesting an ape, and if she did, it does not mean that she did not faithfully fulfil her vows. There is nothing outside the poem to explain her relationship with Sir William Herbert to whom the poem was addressed or what exactly was intended by it. Finally, the fact that two women fought for the position of abbess of the same abbey is nothing unique to a female religious house. The history of religious houses for men is full of such happenings. Against these possibly negative appearances is the single positive appearance in the petition of a nun from an English nunnery to move to a Welsh one for greater holiness. It is interesting that here the individual who thinks well of a Welsh nunnery is not a Welshwoman but English. Taken all together, therefore, there is little evidence of the holiness or lack thereof of the women in Welsh nunneries.

The contrast between Welsh societal depictions of nuns and long-dead virgin saints reflects the divide in their representation with that of unmarried maidens and chaste matrons. According to the Bardic Grammars, young, unmarried virgins were praised for their virginity and portrayed as desirable but unattainable. This is reflected in the song by Gwalchmai ap Meilyr, who wrote about a virgin who motivated him in battle: 'I love a comely maiden, noble her ways,/Hateful to me those who will not praise her./...Blessed the one on whom God bestows/A maid's favour, fair virgin's comfort.' He hopes that his deeds in battle will win him recognition

³⁵ Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales*, pp. 101–02.

³⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, pp. 101–04, 184.

and so her hand in marriage: ‘He was tall Owain, much pledged of Christendom./And it’s he who’ll grant me a maid finely wrought/...And if the God of heaven is good to me/Bliss is mine, with the fair one to sleep beside me.’³⁷ This expectation of Welsh society is further reflected in the words of Gwydion in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi to his sister Aranrhod after it was discovered that she was not the virgin she presented herself to be. She is angry at her son, he says, because he is proof that she is not a virgin: ‘Never again will you be called a virgin’.³⁸

The married woman was praised for her piety and chastity and often compared to female saints.³⁹ To be a chaste wife was the ideal, and this is evident also in the triads. In all the triads, all the women are married women, and one triad even contains the three chaste wives of the island of Britain. The only individuals who are said to be ‘virgin of body’ are two of the knights who found the Holy Grail.⁴⁰ Similarly, in *Cyfraith Hywel* while there numerous references to priests and monks, there is only one to a religious woman. She is not even described as a nun but as a ‘woman in a cell’.

In some ways the number and condition of Welsh nunneries is not unusual. Roberta Gilchrist notes that in England there were six times as many religious houses for men as there were for women, and they were generally wealthier and founded first with women’s religious houses founded almost as an afterthought.⁴¹ These facts are hardly surprising in a male-dominated society. However, the situation in Wales was far more extreme, and the sparse number of Welsh nunneries (three to England’s hundred and fifty, Ireland’s sixty-four, and Scotland’s fifteen in the late medieval period) and their less than positive depictions in Welsh literature have led scholars to try to understand what it was that made Wales such a hostile environment for women devoting their lives to God despite the veneration of so many virgin saints.⁴²

³⁷ Joseph M. Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 124.

³⁸ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 55.

³⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 194, 196.

⁴⁰ Rachel Bromwich, ed., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 183, 225.

⁴¹ Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 188.

⁴² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales.*, p. 177.

Many reasons are tied to Welsh law. Gwyneth Richards points out that illegitimacy was not an issue in medieval Wales, and thus there would have been no need to dispose of illegitimate daughters in a nunnery rather than marrying them off for alliances.⁴³ Also, in England, landowning noblewomen were often the patrons of religious houses for women.⁴⁴ Under Welsh law, however, women could not inherit land. Thus, even if they were wealthy enough to found such an establishment, they did not have the property on which to situate it and were dependent on their male relatives to do it for them. There were exceptions to the prohibition of women inheriting land, but even then the women do not appear concerned with founding a religious house for women. Gwerful Goch was one woman for whom there is a record that she owned land and that she donated it to found a religious house. Yet, she did not choose to found a house for women as might be expected, but Betws Gwerful Goch was a house for men.⁴⁵

If women in general did not have the means to found a religious house for women, then it was the men who must do it. However, here there was little incentive to do so other than piety or perhaps giving in to the special pleading of a female family member. Lords had the right to exact *amobr*, a tax when a woman lost her virginity. If women chose to remain perpetual virgins, the lord lost his *amobr*, and thus the lords wealthy enough to found religious houses for women would have had less incentive to do so.⁴⁶ It could be added that while male religious houses could be self-sufficient, it was harder for female houses to be so, and thus not only would the lord have lost *amobr* from every nun in a religious house, but he might also have to fund the nunnery. Further, there is the issue of what a nunnery had to offer. The Cistercian houses for men became the repositories of Welsh culture. They kept and copied Welsh cultural works, and they supported the Welsh princes against the English. A Welsh prince had every reason to found a house that would be self-sufficient and support him. Even if the women could read and write, however, it is doubtful that they ever could have contributed anything like their male

⁴³ Gwyneth Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century: An Historical Study of Medieval Welsh law and Gender Roles* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), p. 183.

⁴⁴ Jennifer C. Ward, 'English Noblewomen and the Local Community in the Later Middle Ages', in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. by Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 192.

⁴⁵ David Petts, *The Early Medieval Church in Wales* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), p. 190–91.

⁴⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 202–03.

counterparts. It is hardly likely that they would ever have been educated to the extent that they could have contributed culturally, and they would never have the same political standing. All they had to offer were their prayers.

Here, too, they could not contribute as much as might be expected. In Wales as opposed to the continent, saints existed only in the first few centuries following its people's conversion to Christianity. Even male religious figures essentially ceased to be viewed as saints after a certain period, and thus that early time has been called the age of the saints. The benefits that these female saints could give to their devotees was great, but there was no more need of women devoting their lives to God in such a fashion because they could not hope to attain the position of sainthood from which they could dispense grace and healing to their devotees.

Finally, the dominant and most popular religious order in Wales, the Cistercians, did not look favorably on religious houses for women and would have influenced the Welsh to maintain their expectations that women would marry.⁴⁷ It is possible that all these reasons gained more weight the more distant one found oneself from English influence which would have urged to the contrary, and it is possibly significant that the one convent that belonged to the Benedictine order rather than to the Cistercians, the abbey at Usk, was located in English-controlled territory while the two Cistercian convents were located in Welsh territory, albeit in the middle of Wales. In Gwynedd, the most independent of the Welsh kingdoms, there existed no religious houses for women.

From the extant sources, then, it can be seen that it is difficult to learn much about the Welsh nunneries themselves other than the facts that they were few in number, poor, and viewed with little respect. Who the women were and how they actually lived their lives—how piously or unpiously they fulfilled their vows—is hardly evident. What can be seen from the record, however, is that the life of a chaste matron was the ideal that all Welsh women should strive for and that by living such a life, they could imitate according to the norms of the high and late medieval period the virgin saints at the beginning of the medieval period. When Gwenllïan ferch Llywelyn was placed in the Gilbertine convent in Sempringham as an infant, the writer of the Welsh chronicles says that 'she was made a nun against her will'.⁴⁸ It is impossible to know

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 205.

⁴⁸ Thomas Jones, trans., *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicles of the Princes: Peniarth MS. 20 Version* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 117.

what Gwenllian herself thought of such a life, and the words could be revealing just the reaction of an individual to the tragic circumstances of Gwenllian taking the veil, but the words appear to reflect the general hostility of medieval Welsh culture to such a life.

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