

Assignment 2:

- (1) *To what extent is landscape important in the Lives of the Celtic saints? Illustrate your answer with reference to the traditions associated with one particular saint from the Celtic regions.*

*"And ever since this hidden vale
Has been her church and home
And pilgrims have long ages come
For healing prayer and song".*

Norman Schwenk¹.

This essay considers the importance of landscape in the cult of Saint Melangell, which is centred upon a twelfth century church in the remote valley of Pennant Melangell in Montgomeryshire. Initial discussion focuses upon how the recorded Life of St Melangell relates to many naturally occurring features in the area, also highlighting how topographical features helped to embed the medieval cult at Pennant Melangell. The essay then addresses the emergence of the tradition of 'localised cults' which developed in the medieval period, and the subsequent popularity of pilgrimage in Wales, an activity which is intimately linked to landscape. Finally, it will be found that the specific combination of the cult and locality of Pennant Melangell has ensured that it has remained important up to modern times. And, from this, it will be concluded that there is an inextricable link between all aspects of Saint Melangell's image, the sacred 'place' of Pennant Melangell and the landscape of North Wales.

The most straightforward phenomenon which links many saints to localities is through toponymy. Early Welsh religious communities were known as *Llanau*², - indeed modern Welsh/ English dictionaries continue to translate *Llan* as 'church'³,

¹ Norman Schwenk. 'Rime of St Melangell' in Anne Cluysenaar and Norman Schwenk (Eds). *The Hare that Hides Within. Poems about St Melangell.* (Parthian Books, Cardigan. 2004).

² Jane Cartwright. 'Dead Virgins: *Feminine sanctity in Medieval Wales*'. (Medium Aevum 71, 2002). Page 2.

³ See, for example, '*Llan*' in Heini Gruffedd, 'The Welsh learner's Dictionary'. (Y Lolfa Cyf, Talybont. 2007).

and this connection frequently manifests itself in place names, often as a combination of 'Llan' and the name of the relevant saint: for example, Llandeilo (Saint Teilo), Llansteffan (St Steffan), Llanaled (St Aled), etc. This suggests the place name often flowed from the cult of the saint concerned and, whilst 'Pennant Melangell' does not follow the traditional formula above, its meaning (head of the stream of Melangell) clearly indicates the locality as being connected to Saint Melangell in the same way as Tydewi (House of David) overtly proclaims a connection with St David, whilst also not following convention (although Llandewi Brefi, a settlement in Ceredigion, does!).

One obvious direct physical connection to the cult of Saint Melangell within the village is the twelfth century⁴ church of that name which is positioned at the head of the Tanat valley in the Berwyn mountains, nearly three miles up a single-track lane from the village of Llangynog, with the Tanat waterfall and spring just beyond. The church stands within a cemetery, itself surrounded by an ancient semi-circular stone wall and the presence of numerous Middle Bronze Age (c3000 BCE) cremated human remains⁵ both under and near to the church walls strongly suggest the locality to have been of religious significance in antiquity. The Yew trees in the church yard are certified as being over 2000 years old and so, taking these two things together, Britnell concluded after his excavations, that the cemetery had been used as a burial area long before the building of the twelfth century stone church⁶. Indeed, the trees would have been around 1000 years old at the time the church was built, reinforcing the longevity of the 'place' as a focus of worship, thereby rooting the cult into the natural landscape.

This is relevant, given that the legend of St. Melangell has its roots in a time much earlier than the age of the church. Whilst there is no conclusive evidence of when Melangell was alive, the most complete account of her life, the *Historia Divae Monacellae*⁷, does claim that she lived in the late sixth/early seventh century. The

⁴ W. J. Britnell. 'Excavation and Recording at Pennant Melangell Church' (Welshpool: The Club. The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994) Vol. 82. Page 65.

⁵ Ibid. Page 54.

⁶ Ibid. Page 50

⁷ Huw Pryce. 'A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*'. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994.) Vol.82.

Life, probably committed to manuscript in the late sixteenth century, suggests that the local Prince, Brochwel Ysgithrog, was out hunting 'on a certain day in 1604'⁸, when he came across Melangell who was sheltering a hare which was fleeing the prince's hounds. She explained that she had left Ireland to avoid an unwanted marriage and lived in solitude in the valley for the previous fifteen years, devoting herself to God. Brochwel immediately granted the lands in the vicinity as perpetual sanctuary for her and anyone else seeking similar refuge there, thus creating a direct link between the cult and local terrain. Melangell remained in the valley as Abbess until her death 37 years later and the *Life* asserts that the sanctuary rights were confirmed by Brochwel's successors. It concludes by citing how a certain Elise came to the site after Melangell's death, seeking to violate the virgins living there and how he 'came to an end most wretchedly'⁹.

Clearly, the *Historia Divae Monacellae* is not a historical record, and some commentators reject the date of 604, in favour of the genealogical tract, *Bonedd y Saint*, which posits the notion Melangell was born circa 790¹⁰. However, both accounts were written centuries later, and neither can be relied upon; not only is there no reliable narrative of her birth or life, but there is also no conclusive evidence that Melangell lived at all. Indeed, Pryce highlights that many Welsh Saints' Lives have different 'versions'¹¹ and it is not implausible that Melangell's legend reflects an amalgam of various written sources and oral folklores – folklores which constitute an important element of the continuing relationship between many individual saints and a particular 'place', and which are discussed below.

Regardless of the source, the *Historia* does constitute a record of Saint Melangell's cult and, whilst the text deploys some common hagiographic motifs ('Hermit and Hunter', savage punishment for transgressors, virginity equals sanctity, etc), it is tailored to 'fit' the locality: i.e., the remote valley of Pennant Melangell. Alan Thacker identifies the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries as crucial in the development of the cult of the saints in Western Britain, citing the 'process of

⁸ Ibid. Page 40.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For discussion of this point, see Huw Pryce, page 33.

¹¹ Pryce, Page 30.

localisation'¹² which saw a significant increase in the number of cults, with many of these becoming embedded in local churches and in a restricted area. Saint Melangell matches this description precisely and whilst the medieval village was larger than the few houses which exist there today, the remote nature of the church's location and the steep bowl of the valley create a landscape in lockstep with the *Vitae* (and vice versa). It is easy to imagine someone living a hidden, solitary life in such a place and even easier to understand how it could become a secluded religious sanctuary. Even today, the visitor must make some effort to get there and both journey and location give a sense of a place 'set apart'¹³. Conversely, the specific characteristics of the valley encouraged a unilocal cult, but the emergence of the notion of sacred places was a parallel fundamental development in Christian thought, which enabled these local cults to thrive.

R. A. Markus suggests that, up until the fourth century, 'place had been important to Jews and pagans; a spiritual religion such as Christianity had no room for physical holy places'¹⁴, but the veneration of buried martyrs shifted the dial, thereby promoting the cult of holy tombs and relics and creating a new 'personalised sacred topography'¹⁵ for the Christian world which could legitimately supplant the impersonal holiness associated with pagan nature worship.

In addition to the localised nature of Saint Melangell's cult, mentioned above, this cardinal change in Western religious thought is epitomised by the cult of Saint Melangell in other ways. Firstly, several topographical features in the immediate area of the church which correspond to the medieval Latin *Life*, the most impressive of which is '*Craig Melangell*' or Melangell's rock, around 500 metres south of the church. On the north facing wooded slope of this hill is a large rocky outcrop which forms a series of moss and fern covered ledges and was reputed to be the place

¹² Alan Thacker. 'Loca Sanctorum' in Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Eds). '*Local Saints and Local Churches in the early Medieval West*'. (Oxford University Press, New York. 2002). Page 2.

¹³ Tania ap Sion. 'The power of place: Listening to visitors' prayers left in a shrine in rural Wales', in '*Rural Theology*'. (Routledge). Volume 18. Issue 2. 2020. P. 89.

¹⁴ R.A. Markus. 'How on earth could places become holy? Origins of the Christian idea of holy places.' *Journal of Early Christian studies*. (1994) Volume 2 (3). Page 259.

¹⁵ Alan Thacker. 'Loca Sanctorum'. Page 2.

where Melangell slept, hence the name *Gwely Melangell* (Melangell's bed)¹⁶, and the field immediately below it is called *Cae Gwely* (Bed field). This outcrop formed part of the cult as G. G. Evans' paper, '*Place-names and Field names of Pennant Melangell*' contains two nineteenth century line drawings of *Gwely Melangell*, one of which even labels the 'bed' and 'steps'¹⁷. Evans goes further, stating that the words 'St Monacella's bed' had been cut into the rock, again 'sometime during the nineteenth century'¹⁸. It is reasonable to take these drawings and engraving as evidence that the story of Saint Melangell and its attachment to the valley was still both of interest and relevant at that time.

Although not attested in the *Vitae*, the current Priest Guardian, Reverend Browne, believes a circle of round boulders, between *Gwely Melangell* and the nearby *Nant Y Saer*, (Carpenter stream) are also part of the local folklore associated with Melangell. The assertion is that Abbess Melangell used the boulders as 'seats' and a meeting place to discuss issues of the day with her sister colleagues, and there is even a local view that the ancient stone wall which defines an oblong patch of land near to the burial ground marks out the original 'sanctuary' granted by Prince Brochwel. Neither of these topographical features are named on any maps but these local stories may be evidence of further, modern development of folklore surrounding the Saint.

Another central aspect of Saint Melangell's cult which reflects the fourth century shift in Christian practice is the importance of shrines and relics and the associated encouragement of pilgrimage. By its very nature, a pilgrimage in medieval times involved intimacy with the landscape through which one passed, and the naturally wild landscape of Montgomeryshire would be a 'powerful metaphor for religious meaning'¹⁹, with the association between the natural and sacred adding to, and being part of, the religious experience. This would mean that the distance itself was

¹⁶ G.G. Evans. '*Place-names and Field-names of Pennant Melangell*'. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections. (1994). Volume 82. Page 14

¹⁷ Drawing by Worthington T. Smith (1994) in G.G. Evans. '*Place-names and Field-names of Pennant Melangell*'. Page 17.

¹⁸ G.G. Evans. '*Place-names and Field-names of Pennant Melangell*', page 15.

¹⁹ Kathryn Hurlock. '*Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c1100-1500*.' (Palgrave MacMillan, United States, 2018). P. 95.

not as important as the emotional adventure and the sensory experience could be heightened by the specific setting of the ultimate destination. For example, the church at Llandewi Brefi, sits on the raised ground which purportedly rose under Saint David's feet as he preached, whilst the remote, mountainous setting of Saint Melangell's church increased the spiritual reward for visitors emerging from the seclusion of the woods where the Saint had hidden. The prominence of the ancient Yews, clearly visible to any arriving pilgrims, would have added what Kathryn Hughes labelled as "authenticity"²⁰ to their journey.

In his paper, Markus relates how the emerging notion of *locus sanctus* inadvertently led to many previously pagan sites being taken over and re-purposed by Christian pilgrimage²¹ and this may have been the case at Pennant Melangell. As discussed above, excavations by W. J. Britnell at the end of the twentieth century identified that the cemetery area had been used as a burial ground for thousands of years and many graves pre-dated the church.

One grave of particular interest for the present discussion, and which Britnell believed pre-dated the church, was found within the apse beyond the eastern end of the church. It was marked by a 'large, irregular stone slab, 1.80 metres long and 0.7 metres wide'²², laying east to west and had been propped by settings of edge-set stone. Whilst no human remains were found during the excavations, there is a popular hypothesis that it was the grave of Saint Melangell²³, and recent excavations have suggested that the apse (known as *Cell-y-Bedd* or Cell of the Grave) was specifically built to house the grave²⁴. The apse was even closed off from the main body of the church by a wall with an offset doorway to respect the position of the grave. Additional corroborative evidence comes from similar excavations carried out by Britnell in the 1980's at Capel Maelog in Powys. Here he discovered a near

²⁰ Kathryn Hurlock. '*Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c1100-1500.*' (Palgrave MacMillan, United States 2018). P. 96.

²¹ R.A. Markus. Page 260.

²² W. J. Britnell. '*Excavation and Recording at Pennant Melangell Church*'. Page 54.

²³ Nancy Edwards. 'Celtic Saints and early Medieval Archaeology' in Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Eds). '*Local Saints and Local Churches in the early Medieval West*'. (Oxford University Press, New York. 2002). Page 233. See also R.B. Heaton and W.J. Britnell. '*A structural history of Pennant Melangell Church*'. (Welshpool: The Club. The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994). Vol. 82. Page 110.

²⁴ Nancy Edwards. Page 233.

identical 'special' grave, also defined by edge-set stones, but on this occasion, there was a wooden coffin beneath which appeared to also pre-date the church²⁵.

Nancy Edwards goes on to identify a number of Welsh ecclesiastical sites with a *Capel y Bedd* which probably housed corporeal relics²⁶ and when taken together, the assumption would be that the apse was built to house the grave, and the bones of Saint Melangell were translated, being placed into the newly built shrine sometime in the twelfth century, in rhythm with the fashion for shrines initiated by Rome, as mentioned above. The fact that the grave remained prominent, with the stone slab re-set into the floor of the re-built seventeenth century apse enabled the grave site to continue to be visible and venerated, continuing the connection between the Saint and the 'place'²⁷.

The shrine itself was a reinforcement of this connection and would have permitted churchgoers to feel they could get close physical access to the saintly remains, encouraging even more pilgrims to the specific location for the purpose.

Unfortunately, the Reformation period (mid sixteenth to mid seventeenth centuries) witnessed the destruction of the shrine with an order to clergy issued by the St Asaph diocesan council in 1561;

"That every one of them forthwith....remove and put away....all and every fayned relyques...withyn ther several churches and abolshe ther auters yn the same, within eight days"²⁸.

Pennant Melangell was a popular pilgrimage destination by then with a recorded income in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of two pounds sixteen shillings and eight pence in 1535²⁹, and so would not have been immune from these suppressive actions. The shrine stone was clearly re-purposed for repairs and Thomas Pennant noted some of

²⁵ W.J. Britnell; N.W Jones; P. Courtney et al. *Capel Maelog, Llandrindod Wells, Powys: Excavations 1984-87 in Medieval Archaeology* (Routledge, London 1990) Vol. 34.(1). Page 36.

²⁶ Nancy Edwards. 'Celtic Saints and early Medieval Archaeology'. Pages 234/5.

²⁷ Ibid. Page 234.

²⁸ R.B. Heaton and W.J. Britnell. '*A structural history of Pennant Melangell Church*'. (Welshpool: The Club. The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994). Vol. 82. Page 113.

²⁹ W.J. Britnell and K. Watson. '*Saint Melangell's Shrine, Pennant Melangell*'. (Welshpool: The Club. The Montgomeryshire Collections. 1994) Vol.82. Page 147.

the fragments in the church walls in when he visited in the 1770's³⁰. Other pieces were found in the seventeenth century lychgate and in 1991 the shrine was reconstructed as a 1.1 metre high, free-standing reliquary³¹, putatively a recreation in the original design. The sandstone used to create the shrine is identical to that used for the early font and south door of the church, indicating it to be contemporary with the twelfth century church and expert opinion identifies the Romanesque capitals, arches and gables as produced by local twelfth century craftsmen³². Given that the earliest extant British shrines are from the thirteenth century, it makes the Pennant Melangell shrine one of the oldest in Northern Europe, as well as being a clear statement of association between saint, church, and locality.

This dismantling of the shrine meant that any corporeal remains were also removed, and Jane Cartwright cites correspondence from a rector of a Jesuit college in St Omer who referred to 'St Monacella's body', stating that the intact skeleton was venerated at the French college and was dressed in clothes befitting a princess³³. Unfortunately, the relics are no longer traceable, but the episode tends to support the notion that there was an original burial and relics of Saint Melangell, albeit it remains a mystery exactly how the body came to be in France.

Despite the lack of corporeal remains, the shrine and church retained, and continue to retain, an attraction for pilgrimage and at this point, the doctrine of 'secondary' or 'contact' relics should be considered. The early Medieval process of 'localisation' led to the creation of shrines across Christendom, but the corollary of this was to create a significant demand for relics - particularly of major saints. whose physical remains were often at inaccessible distance from worshippers. The Papal solution was to satisfy demand for relics by *sanctuaría*, items formed by contact with the relevant tomb/shrine or things which had belonged to or touched the saint's body³⁴. In the case of Rome, this enabled popes to dispense relics made from St Peter's chains or

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. Page 148.

³² Ibid. Page 161.

³³ J. Cartwright. '*Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*'. (University of Wales Press, Cardiff. 2008). Page 76.

³⁴ Alan Thacker. '*Loca Sanctorum*'. Page 16.

St Lawrence's gridirons³⁵, for example. The indirect consequence of this for the cult of Saint Melangell was to ensure that pilgrimage to Pennant Melangell was worthwhile, even if the corporeal remains had disappeared, because the shrine, the slab of stone marking the empty grave and even the rock outcrop *Gwely Melangell* could be seen as 'contact' relics, deepening the relationship between Saint Melangell and that part of North Wales. This may also explain the enthusiasm someone felt to engrave the saint's name into the rock in the nineteenth century (see above).

At this point it is relevant to refocus upon the nature of Saint Melangell's cult, which rests, primarily, upon the notion of sanctuary, based upon her protection of the vulnerable hare from hunting hounds. This legend is evident both in the fourteenth century stone effigy of Saint Melangell with a hare³⁶, found in the cemetery but more recently placed in the chancel, and the fifteenth century rood screen which portrays Brochwel, Melangell with her Abbess' staff, hares, and hounds³⁷ and which dominates the nave. This represents Melangell as an intercessor between humans, animals, and God, but emphasises the offer of sanctuary and protection within a prescribed area - the cult site at Pennant. In this, the hare is the ideal symbol since it reinforces her links to the local wilderness and hunted prey. Indeed, an eighteenth-century account of local folklore by Thomas Pennant noted that hares were locally called *Mwyn-Melangell* (Melangell's lambs) and that no one would kill a hare because of superstition. It was firmly believed that, when a hare was being chased by dogs, if one cried 'God and St Monacella be with thee' it was sure to escape³⁸.

However, there is an additional topographical feature of interest to pilgrims; the small stream called *Nant Ewyn* (Stream of the foam) which descends past the church to join the Tanat has a small, curative spring at its head, *Ffynnon Cwm Ewyn*. The spring sits at 300 metres in height, about one kilometre north of the church and the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Huw. Pryce. *'A new edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae'*. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994.) Vol.82, p.29.

³⁷ John Hainsworth. *'Saint Melangell's church: A history and guide'*. (St Melangell Centre, Llangynog, Oswestry). Page 10.

³⁸ Luke John Murphy and Carly Ameen. 'The shifting baselines of the British Hare Goddess' in *'Open Archaeology'*. October 2020.

well has a small surrounding wall with rough steps leading into it³⁹. The original connection between Melangell and the belief in its curing properties for rheumatism, scrofula, and skin diseases⁴⁰ is unclear, although it may have been part of the adoption of pre-Christian sacred waters, but there is no doubt that it became part of Melangell's cult and is also deeply connected to the local landscape.

Whether pilgrims came to venerate the reliquary itself, spend time in reflection in a space of refuge or to be healed, there is clear evidence that the rapid rise in the popularity of Melangell's localised cult was attracting many visitors to the valley soon after the church was completed. In 1254, the *Valuation of Norwich* valued the *ecclesia de Pennant* at below the average in the diocese of St Asaph as a whole⁴¹. By around 1291, less than forty years later, the value of the church fell within the top quarter of the diocese and a consideration of why Pennant Melangell became so successful in attracting visitors is fruitful in the context of this essay.

Mention has already been made of the significant growth in the number of local saints' cults during the medieval period, based upon church sites and the veneration of relics, contact relics, miracles, and religious images. Grave sites were an important location for veneration⁴² and, in the case of Saint Melangell, probably influenced the siting of the church, but the successful development of a saintly cult required sites to 'compete'. The development of early major pilgrimage sites in Wales, such as St David's was characterised by rivalry for primacy and the acquisition of corporeal remains and the production of Latin *vitae* formed part of the contest for their place in the hierarchy⁴³. Obviously, the *Divae Historia Monacella* setting out the Life of St Melangell was not produced for this specific purpose, since the cult was well established before any of the extant versions of her *Lives* were written down⁴⁴, so it may be that the creation of the twelfth century shrine at Pennant

³⁹ G.G. Evans. 'Place-names and Field-names of Pennant Melangell', page 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ R.B. Heaton and W.J. Britnell. 'A structural history of Pennant Melangell Church'. Page 103.

⁴² Kathryn Hurlock. Page 9.

⁴³ See Elissa Henken, 'Welsh hagiography and the nationalist impulse' in Jane Cartwright (Ed). 'Celtic hagiography and Saints' cults'. (University of Wales Press. 2003). Page 30.

⁴⁴ Huw Pryce. 'A new edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*'. Page 24.

Melangell was either to encourage pilgrims and create an income, to compete with neighbouring destinations, or simply as an act of prestige⁴⁵.

As Hurlock suggests, few translations took place into purpose-built shrines in Wales, so the shrine at Pennant Melangell is extremely rare. One explanation is that Rhirad Flaidd, a twelfth century local nobleman commemorated as *Priodawr pennant pennaf*, who may have built the church, also commissioned the shrine⁴⁶. Given that the *Life* of Saint Melangell does not even mention the shrine or relics and is widely accepted as being written to support the case for sanctuary rights⁴⁷, it may also be that the shrine itself was created to highlight that central theme of Saint Melangell's *Life* and to establish the land around as a sacred refuge under the protection of the Saint.

Once again, the mutuality between landscape and cult is writ large, but whatever the primary motive for promoting Saint Melangell, the steep increase in revenues indicates that many pilgrims came to the site, and it may well be that the rare shrine was just one of the features which set the location of Pennant Melangell apart. One of the key beliefs at the time was that the Saint concerned was simultaneously in his/her grave and resident in heaven, so proximity to the Saint put the supplicant closer to heaven and increased the chance of securing a miracle⁴⁸. The design of the shrine, with its carved stone arcade enabled pilgrims to crawl between the pillars and achieve bodily contact with the shrine, so intensifying the experience. When combined with the curative stream and well, the grave site within the apse, the fourteenth century stone effigy, the femininity of Saint Melangell and the emphasis upon sanctuary, this presented a special blend of reasons to visit Pennant Melangell rather than another site.

Both Alan Thacker⁴⁹ and Kathryn Hurlock⁵⁰ highlight the popularity of local pilgrimage in Wales during this period and the strong affinity people had with local

⁴⁵ Kathryn Hurlock. Page 16.

⁴⁶ R.B. Heaton and W.J. Britnell. '*A structural history of Pennant Melangell Church*'. Page 103.

⁴⁷ See Kathryn Hurlock. Page 16 and Huw Pryce. Page 32.

⁴⁸ Kathryn Hurlock. Page 21.

⁴⁹ Alan Thacker. '*Loca Sanctorum*'. Page 2.

⁵⁰ Kathryn Hurlock. Pages 51/52.

sites, so it may be that many travelled in the hope of a cure rather than for penitential value. That is not to say that journeys to major religious sites such as Rome, St David's and Santiago did not happen, but there is a body of medieval Welsh poetry supporting the notion of comparatively short pilgrimages⁵¹. This may have been for many reasons, such as lack of time and money to fund long pilgrimages, or the dangerous nature of travel at the time, but one theory supported by medieval poems and saints' *Lives* is that local people felt themselves, their church, land, and community under the protection from injury by local saints and a strong affinity existed between the two. This would have benefited Pennant Melangell and could explain why the church became so popular within the region and so well financed.

It is also supported by the reputation of the healing powers of the shrine being publicised in a poem by the famed bard, Guto'r Glyn (c.1435-1493)⁵². In a poem, written for a patron from Moeliwrch (Denbighshire) who sought relief from an injured knee, Guto offered several saintly intercessors, including four sites extremely close to Moeliwrch (Saint Silin's at LLansilin, Saint Martin's at Chirk, St Oswald's at Oswestry and St Leonard at Gresford)⁵³. Entitled '*I iacháu glin Hywel ab Ieuan Fychan o Foeliwrch*' ('To heal Hwyl ab Ieuan Fychan of Moelwiwrch's knee') Saint Melangell, further afield but, by now prominent within North Wales, is also offered as a possible curative option. At lines 61 and 62 the poem states:

Cyrch at Felangell bellach, (Seek Saint Melangell now)
Cyfod, Nudd, cai fod yn iach. (Arise, Nudd, you may be well)⁵⁴.

This can only mean that the shrine at Pennant Melangell had a particular meaning and that the 'place' represented something different to the other suggested shrines. This conclusion is reinforced in another of his poems which mentions a pilgrim from Llechwedd Ystrad (36 miles distant) being buried at Pennant Melangell⁵⁵ and the Church is also referenced by the fifteenth century poet, Glyn Cothi⁵⁶, highlighting how the oral tradition was critical to the perpetuation of the cult.

⁵¹ Ibid. Page 56.

⁵² Huw Pryce. Page 34

⁵³ Guto'r Glyn.net '*I iacháu glin Hywel ab Ieuan Fychan o Foeliwrch*' (Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. 2013). Guto'r Glyn.net

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ W.J. Britnell. Page 48.

⁵⁶ Jane Cartwright. *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*. Page 77.

Further evidence that individuals had a conception of a localised pilgrimage landscape is found in the will of Morgan Herbert, dated 1526, directing his servant to wear his black gown and undertake a pilgrimage to five sites in Montgomeryshire and one in neighbouring Merionethshire – the route including Pennant Melangell⁵⁷. At each site he was to make an offering of 4 pennies. Interestingly, Herbert lived in Worcestershire at the time of writing the will, so it is presumed that the route (and thus the sites) had some meaning for him, perhaps because they were local to an area where he had once lived. Whilst it is not known if his servant carried out the instruction, the will provides additional evidence of how supplicants took a local ‘smorgasbord’ approach to pilgrimage and reinforces the idea that each site offered a unique experience within a small area.

The saint’s festival day (27 May)⁵⁸ was also important in maintaining the legacy of the saint within the area and the celebrations - held near the church, allegedly lasted two weeks, “with rustic games ...and interludes”, the last recorded occasion of this last being in the eighteenth century⁵⁹.

In summary, pilgrimage to Pennant Melangell was popular up to the Reformation and the cult was widely known and embedded within the region, primarily based upon the sanctity of the church shrine and the landscape itself. This is testified by vernacular poetry, the *Historia* and the inclusion of the Saint’s pedigree in the genealogical tract, *Bonedd y Saint*⁶⁰. There is even a fourteenth century tomb slab with a large carving of a hound chasing a hare in the nave of the diocese cathedral at St Asaph⁶¹.

Information is less plentiful for the immediate post-Reformation period, although eighteenth century folklore (‘Melangell’s lambs’) and the nineteenth century drawings of ‘Melangell’s bed’, cited above, provide some element of continuity in, and the

⁵⁷ Murray Chapman. ‘*Transcript of will of Herbert Morgan, Kt. Dated 19 July 1526*’. (Welshpool: The Club; The Montgomeryshire Collections, 1994.) Vol.82. Page 126.

⁵⁸ David Farmer (Ed). *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. ‘Melangell’ (Oxford University Press. 2011). Page 58.

⁵⁹ W. J. Britnell. Page 51.

⁶⁰ Huw Pryce. Page 34.

⁶¹ Website: *North Wales Churches: St. Asaph’s cathedral*.

importance of, the landscape to the cult, even though the church itself had fallen into a state of disrepair by the mid-nineteenth century.

More recent – and dated to just after the church's restoration, is the installation of a stained-glass window⁶² in St Tydecho's in Cemmaes, Powys (35 miles south-west of Pennant Melangell) in 1905 which depicts a standing figure of the saint as abbess, over a scene below showing her encounter with Brochwel. Of similar vintage is a panel of the Reredos⁶³, showing Saint Melangell, in St Oswald's in Oswestry (22 miles east of Pennant Melangell). The regional spread of these sites resonates with the pilgrimage route planned in Morgan Herbert's sixteenth century will and, interestingly, there is an official pilgrim route from Oswestry to Pennant Melangell⁶⁴ today, 500 years later. The verse from the poem by Norman Schwenk at the beginning of this essay, taken from a contemporary book of poems about Melangell, echoes the same sentiments of Guto'r Glyn from that medieval time and also re-affirms the continuing link between Saint Melangell and the terrain of the region.

To conclude, Jonathan Wooding⁶⁵ identifies that pilgrimage is, once again, a rapidly growing activity, and one of the prime motives is the opportunity to reflect on society and life, from a liminal space. This may go some way to explaining the popularity of St. Melangell's church as a destination for visitors, evidenced by a study of 939 intercessory prayer requests⁶⁶ left at the church and shrine. Several 'shaping-place' themes were identified in visitors' prayers, such as sacred place, sanctuary/haven, refuge, pilgrimage, nature, etc, highlighting that the Saint's aura and association with the specific location continue to render an ordinary place extraordinary.

⁶² Gwydr Lliw yng Nghymru/ Stained glass in Wales. 'Church of St. Tydecho'. (2011-2023).

⁶³ 'The Parish Church of St Oswald, King and Martyr – Oswestry'. 'The Reredos'. (Undated website).

⁶⁴ 'St Melangell Way (23 miles, 2 days) Oswestry to Pennant Melangell.' British Pilgrim Trust. 2023

⁶⁵ Jonathan M. Wooding. 'Changing roles of pilgrimage: Retreating, Remembering, Re-enacting'. In Catherine Clark (Ed). 'The St Thomas Way and the Medieval March of Wales: Exploring Place, Heritage, Pilgrimage.' (Arc Humanities Press, 2020). Page 24.

⁶⁶ Tania ap Sion. 'The power of place: Listening to visitors' prayers left in a shrine in rural Wales', in 'Rural Theology'. (Routledge). Volume 18. Issue 2. 2020. Pp. 87-100.

Even today the location involves a conscious decision to travel up the valley to the church and a questionnaire survey in 2004⁶⁷ found that 70% had planned their visit (rather than being casual visitors) and 72% of people had travelled over 30 miles to get there - including a few from overseas. Nearly half were on their second to fifth visit, which confirms a tendency for repeat visits and the availability of a shepherds' hut for pilgrims to stay in, a small visitor centre and a guardian priest⁶⁸ evidence that the church shrine's primary function is as a place of individual contemplation and pilgrimage connected to the cult of Saint Melangell, rather than religious service. Given that Pennant Melangell is the fourth most popular pilgrimage centre in Wales⁶⁹, it is also clear there is a symbiotic relationship between the Saint's cult and landscape, and that physical surroundings are still paramount in the recognition of a sacred place.

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⁶⁷ Michael Keulemans and Lewis Burton. 'Sacred place and pilgrimage: Modern visitors to the shrine of St Melangell'. *Rural theology*. (Routledge). Volume 4. Issue 2. 2006. Pages 99-110.

⁶⁸ Website. '*St Melangell, Powys*'. National Churches Trust. 2023.

⁶⁹ Michael Keulemans and Lewis Burton. Page 99.

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