

Medicine and Miracles: Health, Illness and Cures

Prof. Jane Cartwright

Détail d'une enluminure du *Canon medicinae* d'[Avicenne](#) (Besançon - BM - ms. 0457 - f. 051).

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What will be studying in this section of the module?

Medieval medical concepts:

What were the origins of medieval medical ideas?

the four humours, importance of a balanced diet, bloodletting, uroscopy, the zodiac, surgery, herbal medicine, common misconceptions

The plague:

How did people respond to an epidemic in the Middle Ages?

Secular v religious responses; medieval poetry requesting cures

Saints and relics:

The saints as guardians of the people, saints associated with particular illnesses.

How can 'miracle' be defined? Holy bones, sacred objects and pilgrimage sites.

Holy wells:

Pre-Christian and pagan? How were wells believed to have been formed? What stories and folklore are associated with wells?

Medieval poetry and saints' Lives associated with holy wells

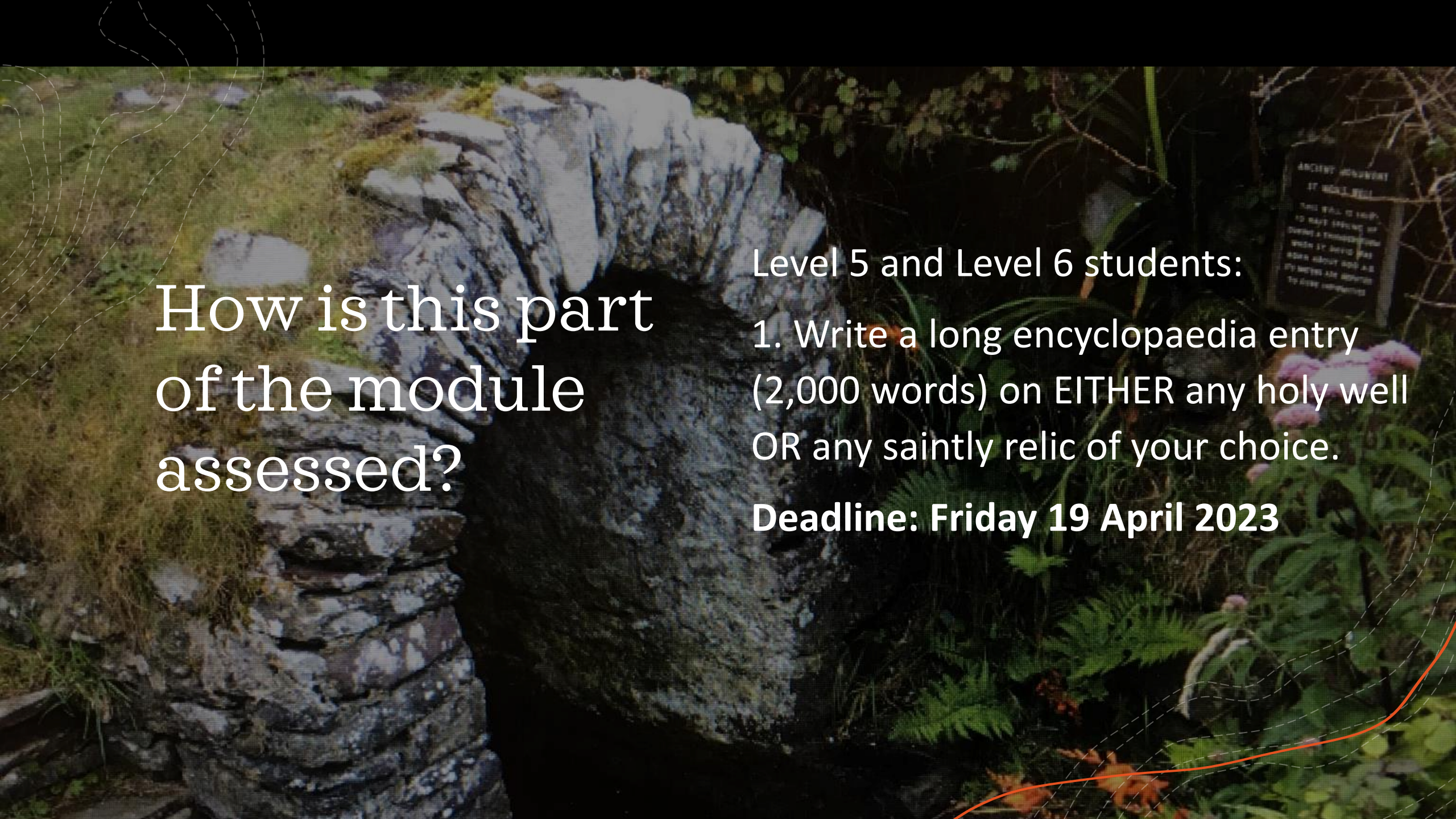
Later folk traditions, pilgrimage to holy wells, case studies, healing but also cursing wells.

The Physicians of Myddfai:

Who were the Physicians of Myddfai? Did they actually exist?

The Legend of the Lady of the Lake

Herbal medical recipes from Wales

The background image shows a stone well in a wooded area. The well is constructed from rough-hewn stones and has a dark opening. To the right of the well, there is a wooden sign with text. The sign is partially obscured by foliage. The overall scene is dimly lit, suggesting a forest setting. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

How is this part
of the module
assessed?

Level 5 and Level 6 students:

1. Write a long encyclopaedia entry
(2,000 words) on EITHER any holy well
OR any saintly relic of your choice.

Deadline: Friday 19 April 2023

Tips for Assignment 1:

- + Choose *either* a holy well *or* a relic and make it clear at the start which you have chosen (both might be associated with a saint and could be interlinked, but specify which you have chosen);
- + Choose a site that has enough information available to make it viable for an assignment;
- + Place the well or relic in its wider context: introduce holy wells or the cult of relics; with which saint is it associated?; is it referenced in Lives, poetry, historical documentation? Do any literary texts shed light on how the well was used and who frequented the well? Does it have an interesting history? Was it a popular pilgrimage site? How has its usage changed over the years? Can any comparisons be drawn between this relic and other similar relics? Is it mentioned in hagiography or the work of antiquarians?

Tip for Assignment 1:

- + How does practise at the well or the traditions associated with the relic compare to other similar sites or relics and is there any theological significance to these practises?
- + Are there other relics or wells associated with this saint?
- + Study long encyclopaedia entries – writing concisely, clearly, check your sentences flow correctly and that punctuation and spelling do not contain mistakes;
- + Have you drawn on appropriate academic primary and secondary sources (not just web sources)?
- + Provide a good bibliography (checking referencing is correct and consistent – see UWTSD MHRA Guide to Referencing and Bibliography).

Saints and Healing Relics



Prof. Jane Cartwright

Hagiography (Lives of the saints – *vita* in Latin *buchedd* in Welsh)

- Hagiography – Greek ἅγιος, ‘holy’, and γράφια, i.e. sacred writings
- one of the richest and most significant literary genres of the medieval world.
- Thomas Head: ‘Hagiography provides some of the most valuable records for the reconstruction and study of the practice of premodern Christianity...Works of hagiography can thus tell us at least as much about the author and about those who used the text – their ideals and practices, their concerns and aspirations – as it does about the saints who are their subjects.’

- First Christian saints were martyrs who died for their faith, including biblical figures such as St Peter and St Paul;
- historical characters one of the earliest accounts = martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna who was burned alive c. 150-180; his hagiographer claimed his flesh smelt of 'burning bread'.

Image: engraving by Michael Burghers 1685; Alekajs at en.wikipedia, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



- Another historical martyr, St Perpetua of Carthage, was thrown into prison c. 203 when she refused to sacrifice to pagan gods, and much of the account of her terrifying experiences is thought to have been composed by her during the period in which she was incarcerated with her young child. Perpetua was eventually thrown to wild animals, along with other Christians including Felicity and Saturninus, at the military games organized in celebration of Emperor Septimius Severus's birthday.

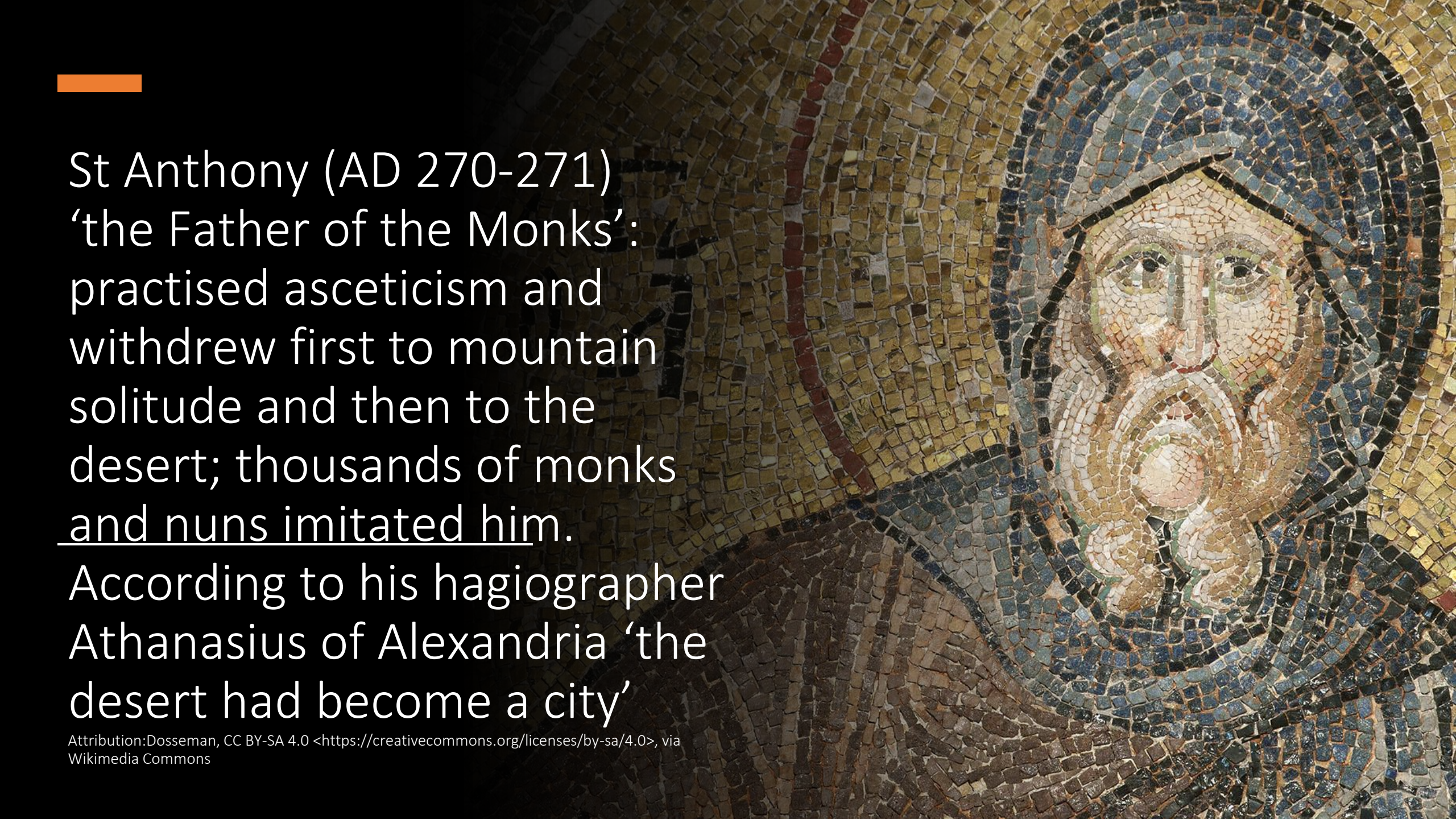
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- Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire began with Nero in 64 CE and ended after the Christian conversion of Constantine (306–337) when Christianity was finally legitimized by the Edict of Milan in 313.
- When it was no longer necessary to die for one's Christian beliefs, a new form of 'martyrdom' became prevalent among the early saints: this involved sacrificing personal wealth and property, one's sexuality, emotional ties, and familial bonds.

Image: [Constantine Slaying the Lion \(tapestry\) - 1637.jpg \(887×1500\) \(wikimedia.org\)](#)



A detailed mosaic of St. Anthony, showing him with a long, curly beard and hair, wearing a blue and gold robe. He is depicted with a halo, and the background consists of concentric circles of gold and blue mosaic tiles. An orange rectangular bar is located in the top left corner of the image.

St Anthony (AD 270-271)
'the Father of the Monks':
practised asceticism and
withdrew first to mountain
solitude and then to the
desert; thousands of monks
and nuns imitated him.

According to his hagiographer
Athanasius of Alexandria 'the
desert had become a city'

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Wikimedia Commons

- In the fourth century veneration of the saints' relics began to be formalized, since, as noted by Peter Brown, the dead bodies of saints were perceived to bridge the gap between heaven and earth.
- One of the principal roles of the saint was to act as an intercessor, mediating between ordinary Christians and God.
- Although strictly speaking all Christians could be regarded as saints once they had entered the kingdom of heaven, the honorific title came to be reserved for a selection of particularly worthy holy men and women who gained direct access to heaven because of their personal sacrifice and great virtues.

- Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397) discovered the remains of the twins St Gervasius and St Protasius, translated them to his own newly-built basilica in Milan (where he was later buried between them), and actively promoted their cults and the healing powers associated with their relics.
- Fragments of their relics were distributed throughout Italy and Gaul and many other churches were dedicated to the martyred twins: effectively Ambrose set a precedent demonstrating how saints' cults could spread, proliferate and become international.

Introduction to hagiography, see Jane Cartwright, *Hystoria Gweryddon yr Almaen: The Middle Welsh Life of St Ursula* (Cambridge: MHRA, 2020) and Thomas Head (ed.), *Medieval Hagiography* (Routledge: London, 2000).

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- Christian ascetics Lives of St Antony and St Martin hugely influential; many historical martyrs and ones presumed legendary; noteworthy examples of Merovingian, Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh saints' Lives.
 - Virginity became almost a pre-requisite for feminine sanctity and the body of the virgin is often a metaphor for the body of the Church; pollute the virgin's body = pollute her faith.

Sanctity what makes a saint a saint?

- Hagiography – criticised for being ‘derivative’ and not historically accurate, seen almost as defective historical texts
- Thomas Head ‘some of the most valuable records for the reconstruction and study of the practice of premodern Christianity’
- Common patterns found in hagiography < biblical motifs; the saint as Christian hero imitating Christ / the Virgin Mary
- What makes a saint a saint? Early Christian martyrs and after conversion of Constantine in early C4th a different kind of martyrdom (white martyrdom – chastity); sacrificing one’s sexuality, wealth, emotional and family relationships.
- Saint not just a holy person (must perform miracles) – agent through whom God performs miracles

Miracle (Dictionary of Biblical Theology)

Although English speakers regularly use "miracle" to refer to a broad range of wondrous events, the biblical concept is limited to those not explainable solely by natural processes but which require the direct causal agency of a supernatural being, usually God. These occur throughout all major eras of history but do appear with greater frequency at key periods of God's self-revelation.

Miracles – not meant to be ‘difficult’! Meant to be incredible / impossible

Recording miracles an essential part of any saint’s Life – making a case for them to be a saint

Canonization – costly, complicated and time consuming: no Welsh saints were canonized (not even St David); Welsh saint C5-7 Age of Saints; sources C11-16.

Sources?

Vitae Latin Lives of Welsh Saints (25 native saints)

- David (Rhygyfarch, Gerald of Wales)
- Clydog, Dyfrig, Aelfgar, Euddogwy, Samson, Teilo (Liber Landavensis)
- Brynach, Cadog, Carannog, Clydog, Dewi, Dyfrig x2, Gwynllyw, Illtud, Cybi x2, Padarn, Tathan, Teilo (Llsgr Cotton Vespasian Axiv)
- Brynach, Cadog, Carannog, Clydog, Dewi, Dyfrig, Gildas, Gwynllyw, Illtud, Justinian, Cybi, Cain, Cennydd, Euddogwy, Padarn, Samson, Teilo, Gwenfrewy (Llsgr Cotton Tiberius Ei, John o Tynemouth G14)
- Cyngar (Wells, Wynkyn de Worde), Decuman (Wynkyn de Worde)
- Gwenfrewy (Claudius Av, Laud. Misc. 114, TC 0.4.42, Bib. Royale 8072)
- Asaph (RBA)
- Daniel (P225)
- Melangell (Caerdydd 3.11; BL Harley 2059, LlGC 1506C; 1641B)

Welsh-medium *Bucheddau*

25% native Welsh saints:

David, Beuno, Gwenfrewy/Winefride, Collen, Curig, Ieuan Gwas Padrig, Llawddog, Wrsula

75% international saints:

Catrin (Katherine), Margred (Margaret of Alexandria), Mair Fadlen (Mary Magdalene), Martha, Mair o'r Aifft (Mary of Egypt), Matthew, Mark, Luke, Ieuan (John), Iago, Tomas o'r India (Thomas of India), Marthin, Nicolas, Pawl Ebostol (Paul), Pedr (Peter), Erasmws, Einion neu Fartholomews (Bartholomew), Silfestr (Silvester), Simon a Jwd (Simon and Jude), Lawrens (Laurence), Andras (Andrew), Edmwnd, Mihangel (Michael), Mair (Mary)

Poetry: 3 poems David, Cadfan, Tysilio (Poets of the Princes)

83 poems (Poets of the Nobility)

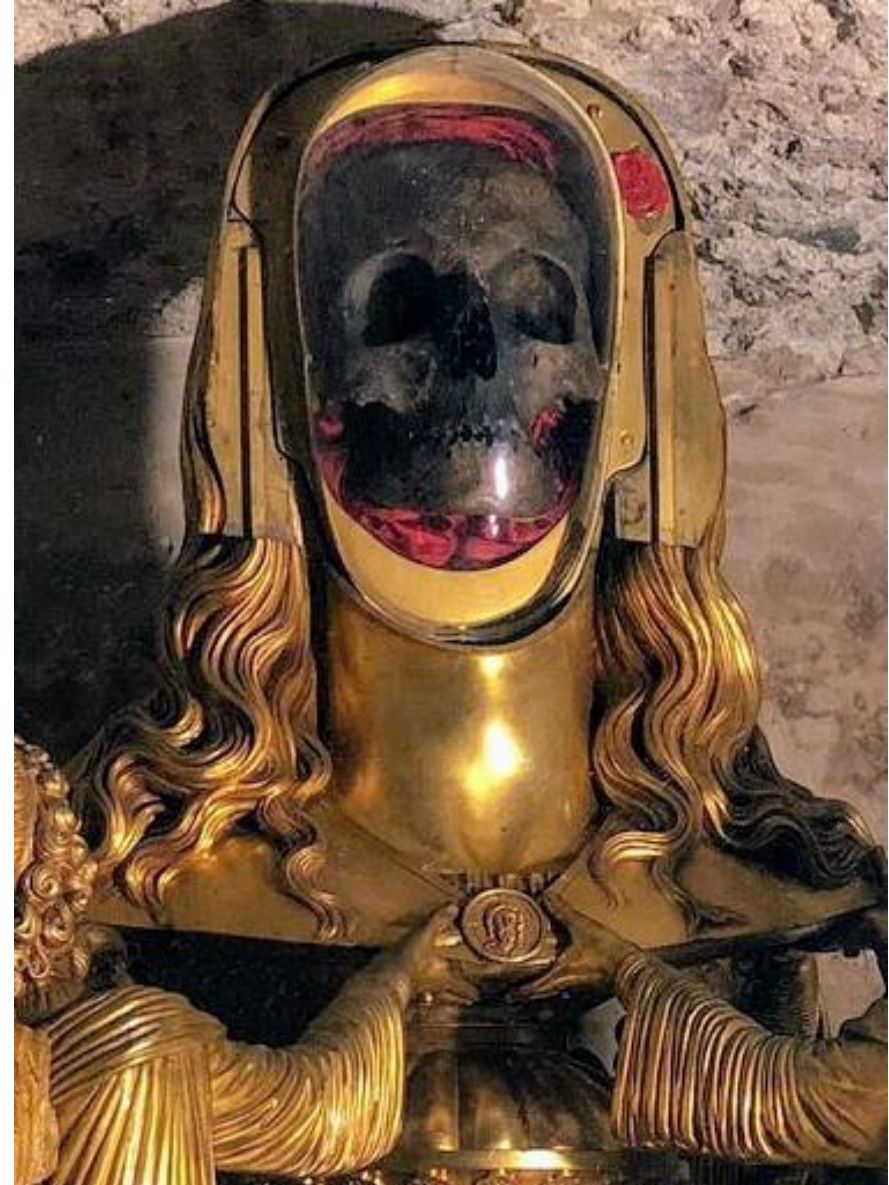
Cult of Relics

- Cult of saints began with veneration of dead bodies of the martyrs – saint's feast day = the day on which the saint died.
- In the 6th century Aemilianus, bishop of central Asia Minor, possessed the head, one finger and one tooth of St George.
- Relics = physical remains, usually bones, but also objects that had been in contact with the saint during his/her lifetime – books, bells, crosiers.
- Jesus left no corporeal relics (clothing, crown of thorns, pieces of the true cross, earth on which he had stood, blood etc.)
- Most famous beheading – John the Baptist, precursor of Christ; several heads were said to exist. Robert Bartlett 'The existence of multiple supposed heads of this saint in the medieval period was one of the more notorious scandals concerning relics, cited by both medieval critics and Protestant reformers.' (Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, p. 241)

Skull of Mary Magdalene

- There were various heads and arm bones of Mary Magdalene.
- Churches would often compete or try to outwit each in claiming that they had the genuine relics of a saint.
- The medieval Life of Mary Magdalene claims that she landed in a rudderless boat from the holy land and Christianized Provence.
- In the C11th the Abbey Church of Ste Marie-Madeleine at Vézelay had become the most important pilgrimage centre in France. It was claimed that her body had been transported there from Provence.

• Image: Enciclopedia1993, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons



- In 1146 Bernard of Clairvaux preached there in order to rally support for the Crusades

The crowd was so vast that a platform erected on the hill collapsed because of the weight of the people and everyone gave thanks to Mary Magdalene that no-one was hurt.

In 1279 an alternative set of relics were discovered in St Maximin in Provence in the tomb of St Cedonius who was believed to have travelled to France with Mary.

It was claimed that the 'real' relics of Mary Magdalene had been put in Cedonius's tomb in the C8th in order to fool the infidel and that, as a result, Vézelay had the body of a fake. A document in the tomb at St Maximin 'proved' the authenticity of the relics there.



- The discovery at St Maximin was largely due to Charles II's determination to find the relics in Provence.
- He spent the last 30 years of his life erecting physical signs of his devotion to the saint.
- Sometimes people would go to extraordinary lengths to acquire relics or fragments of relics: Bishop Hugh of Lincoln on a trip to France to revere the arm bone of Mary Magdalene attempted to bite off a piece of the relic with his teeth – first with his incisors and, then when this didn't work he attached it with his molars.

See K. L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

Jane Cartwright, *Mary Magdalene and her Sister Martha* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2013)





St Cuthbert – contact relics

- St Cuthbert is accredited with evangelizing Northumbria and leaving Melrose in 661 to travel around the countryside curing plague victims.
- He was buried on Lindisfarne but his body moved to protect it from Viking raids and eventually reburied in Durham cathedral.
- After St Cuthbert's death, the water his body had been washed in was poured away outside the church.
- Earth and stones that were taken from the site effected 'many works of healing' and the site was marked out and protected by a wooden fence.
- This demonstrates how a chain of contact could be established to transmit miraculous power from the saint's body to the water to the earth – without diluting any of the effects.
- Listen to In Our Time on Cuthbert's miracles and relics
- [In Our Time - Saint Cuthbert - BBC Sounds](#)

• Image: Storye book, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons



Buchedd Beuno /The Life of Beuno c. 1346

- Beuno resurrects 7 people from the dead including St Winefride

Maen Beuno – Beuno's Stone in the bottom of St Winefride's well acted as a relic – people would kneel on this to pray.

Cf. bullauns (basin stones) in Ireland rounded stones with hollows, medicinal herbs may have been ground in them, usually found near monasteries.



Beuno's stone in the C12th Life of St Winefride

And when the blessed virgin, greatly saddened by the departure and absence of her instructor, was crying, the blessed Beuno, having laid hold of her right hand, led her to the spring, which we have indicated above had flowed out from the place where her severed head had fallen. And standing her upon a stone, which was then found there by chance and which remains in the stream of the spring to this day and is called St Beuno's stone by the inhabitants, he addressed her anew with these words. 'Do you still see', he said, 'the vestiges of your suffering here? Look at these stones besprinkled with your blood, which show that you suffered martyrdom for God, and for your own perpetual honour, as an instruction to many others, they maintain the sprinkling, by which they were made wet from your blood, as if it were recent.'

An account of how Prior Robert journeyed to Wales and dug up the relics of St Winefride is found in the C12th Life of St Winefride
Sections from Prior Robert's Life:

And, having complained quite often to one another that they greatly needed saints' relics, with the utmost effort they drove their minds towards that which was to be sorted out. And seeing that they had heard the bodies of many saints were held in Wales, which was nearby, because that territory was previously inhabited by many saints, whose merits were made known in various places, they devoted themselves to considering carefully in every way how they might obtain one of them.



Then, the lay people having been removed, and while both monks and clerics who were in that place were singing psalms, two of the brothers, namely the prior of Chester and the brother whom we specified above had come from the monastery with the prior, started to dig the earth with spades and hoes. A short space of time had passed when now, great toil having been exacted, almost exhausted by labours, they reached the desired treasure. Having found this, they gave thanks to God with devout spirits, and, having pulled the bones out of the dust, as it had then struck a convenient time, they placed them in cloths tied up in a seemly manner.

Dust from St Winefride's skull (from Life of St Winefride trans. D. Callander forthcoming)

But as they were taking their places at the table, a sick man in the more private part of the house started to give out the terrible and wretched sounds of a lament. But after the prior asked what had been the cause of his sorrow, it was responded to him that the sick man was held back there by excessive weakness of the body, and that he would have a great reward from God, if he would grant him anything by which he might be brought to health. Then the prior blessed the water which had been brought. And then, putting a little of the dust found in the head of the blessed virgin in it, instructed that it be given to the sick man. He, without delay requesting that a place be prepared for him to rest, at once fell asleep. But rising after a short time, he found himself healthy and unharmed, giving thanks to God and the holy virgin. And, their faith having been confirmed by this miracle, the messengers were made more joyful, and more devout in veneration of the virgin. With many other signs as well, God made known to them on the way that the gift they were carrying was divine.





The relics of St David

- St David – died 1 March c. 600
- His Life (*Vita Davidis*) was composed c. 1096 by a monk from Llanbadarn Fawr called Rhygyfarch who was the son of Sulian (who was twice bishop of St Davids).
- He is associated with many holy wells (some of which are believed to be particularly efficacious at healing blindness) and his Life also claims he turned the poisonous waters of Bath into healing springs.
- For many years the relics in this casket were believed to be the relics of St David.
- Around 1090 the entry in *Brut y Tywysogion* (The Chronicle of the Princes) notes that: 'the shrine of David was taken by stealth from the church, and close to the city it was completely destroyed.'



- In 1866 during the Victorian repair of the cathedral bones embedded in mortar were found in the east wall of the cathedral built by Bishop de Leia (1176-98).
- They were buried under the floor for forty-five years and in ~~1920 Dean William Williams had them dug up and put on display in a new casket.~~
- Pilgrimage to the cathedral began again as people came to visit the relics.
- In 1996 Dean J. Wyn Evans raised the question again of the authenticity of the relics and they were examined scientifically and radio-carbon dated.
- They were found to belong to more than one person (including possibly a woman) and dated to various periods between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, so definitely not those of David!
- The shrine today contains a replica of David's bell and reliquary. See chapters 14 and 15 in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, eds. Evans and Wooding



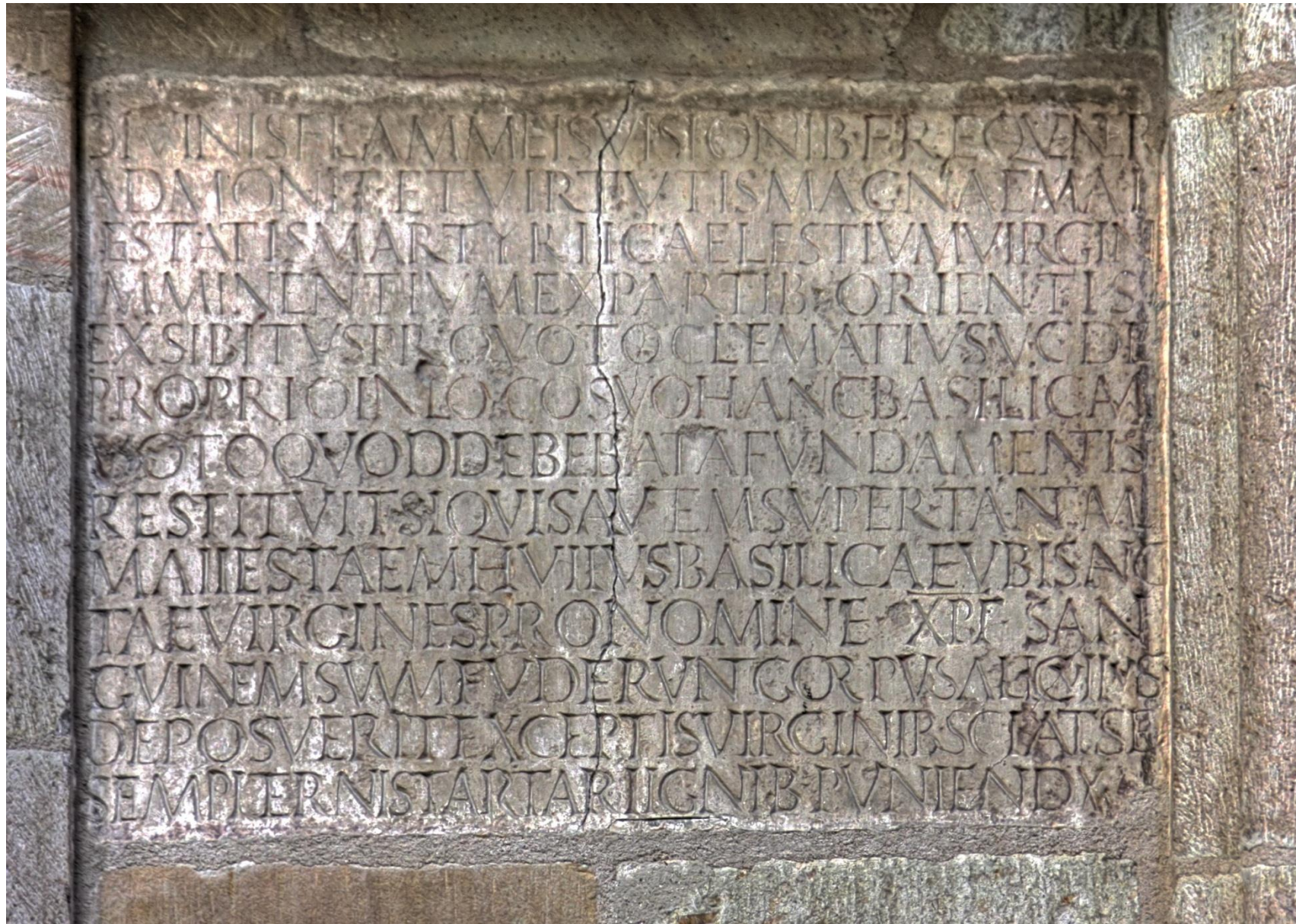


THE CULT OF ST URSULA AND THE 11,000 VIRGINS



Edited by Jane Cartwright

Clematius Inscription, south wall of choir, Church of the 11,000 Virgins,
Cologne ©Raimond Spekking/CC-BY-SA-3.0 (via Wikimedia Commons)



Golden Chamber, Church of the 11,000 Virgins, Cologne

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AGoldene_Kammer_St_Ursula_K%C3%B6ln_29122014_12.jpg

Vassil, Goldene Kammer (the Golden Chamber), made in 1643 in Saint-Ursula church in Cologne.



299

Peniarth MS 182, p. 299

Morwyn hefyd hon a elwid Cristina a'r gwaed heddyw ynghylch i mwnwgl val pe bai y newydd dorri.

(Also a maiden called Cristina and the blood around her neck today as though it had just been cut.)

Morwyn hefyd hon a elwid Clemencia hon a ddrylliesid i phen, eithyr bod y gwaed gwedy ysgrowlingo y gwallt yn kynnal yr esgryn ynghyd.

(Also a maiden called Clemencia whose head had been severed, although the blood had matted in her hair and held the bones together.)

Merch arall Katrin y gelwid a'r saeth yn i phen a gwallt mawr ar i phen

(Another girl called Catrin with an arrow in her head and lots of hair.)

Skulls, Golden Chamber, Cologne (Kevin Lakhani)





‘Beth a ddywedwn am Vrsula Santes a Chymbraes, a hitheu yn ferch i Frenhin y Cymbry a ddioddefodd farwolaeth er cadw ei morwyndod ag vnmil ar ddeg o forynion yn santesol yn dioddef gyda hi? A’r cwbl a ddoethant o wlad y Cymbry.’ Anon. c. 1583
Y Drych Kristnogawl, ed. Geraint Bowen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 2

[What shall we say about Ursula – saint and Welsh woman – the daughter of a king of the Welsh people who suffered martyrdom in order to preserve her virginity and the 11,000 saintly virgins who suffered with her? And they all came from the land of the Welsh.] trans. Jane Cartwright





George Eyre Evans, *Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth: The Welsh Gazette, 1903)

First let me tell you in the few brief and pithy words in which it was told some seventy years ago, by an aged Shepherd on Mynydd bach. “You see it was like this, Melga was king of the Picts, and Guanius was king of the Huns, and they got hold of a ship load of these here Welsh girls, who were wrecked near their lands, and they two men killed them all!”

But can we not locate the massacre here in our loved Ceredigion, and on the banks of the brooks Baedog and Wyre? Why let Germany have all the credit of being the scene of our noble Welsh girls’ triumphant last stand? May not the vessels which ‘tis said sailed from river Thames, instead of being wrecked on the Armorican Coast, have been driven ashore at Llansanffraed? Who shall say it no?

Treasures of Heaven, exhibition of relics that was held at the British Musuem

[Treasures of Heaven at the British Museum BBC Documentary 2017 - Bing video](#)

St Teilo

Teilo's principal site is at Llandeilo Fawr in Carmarthenshire, but he became one of the chief saint associated with the diocese of Llandaf

His C12th Life is included in *Liber Landavensis* (The Book of Llandaf) and claims that when he died his body triplicated so that each of his churches (Llandeilo Fawr, Pennalun and Llandaf) could bury his body and have his relics.

- healing miracles took place at his tomb at Llandaf where his skull is now kept.
- It was not always kept there though and for many years was kept at his well at Llandeilo Llwydiarth near Maenclochog in Pembrokeshire.
- The water would be scooped from the well in his skull which acted as a kind of drinking cup.

St Teilo's skull at the well at Llandeilo Llwydiarth (Maenclochog, Pemb)

[Image: Mrs Melchior with the skull](#)

[St Teilo's Skull - The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kaganate — LiveJournal](#)

The Melchior family who
owned the land and well
would scoop the water from
the well and hand it to the
sick person.

It was believed to be particularly
effective for whooping cough
and chest complaints.



*Llandeilo Pembrokeshire
Mrs Melchior with St Teilo's Skull*

- St Teilo reputedly told his favourite maid to take his skull to the other Llandeilo in Pembrokeshire after his body was buried at Llandeilo Fawr.
- Oral reports collected by the Welsh Folk Museum at Sain Ffagans record people travelling to the well by train from Neath and one boy from Swansea who drank the well water but not from the skull. He was not cured until he returned again and drank from the skull.
- The skull was reputedly used until 1947 and then vanished (some reports suggest the Melchior family sold the skull).
- It was found in Australia in 1994 and is now preserved in Llandaf cathedral.



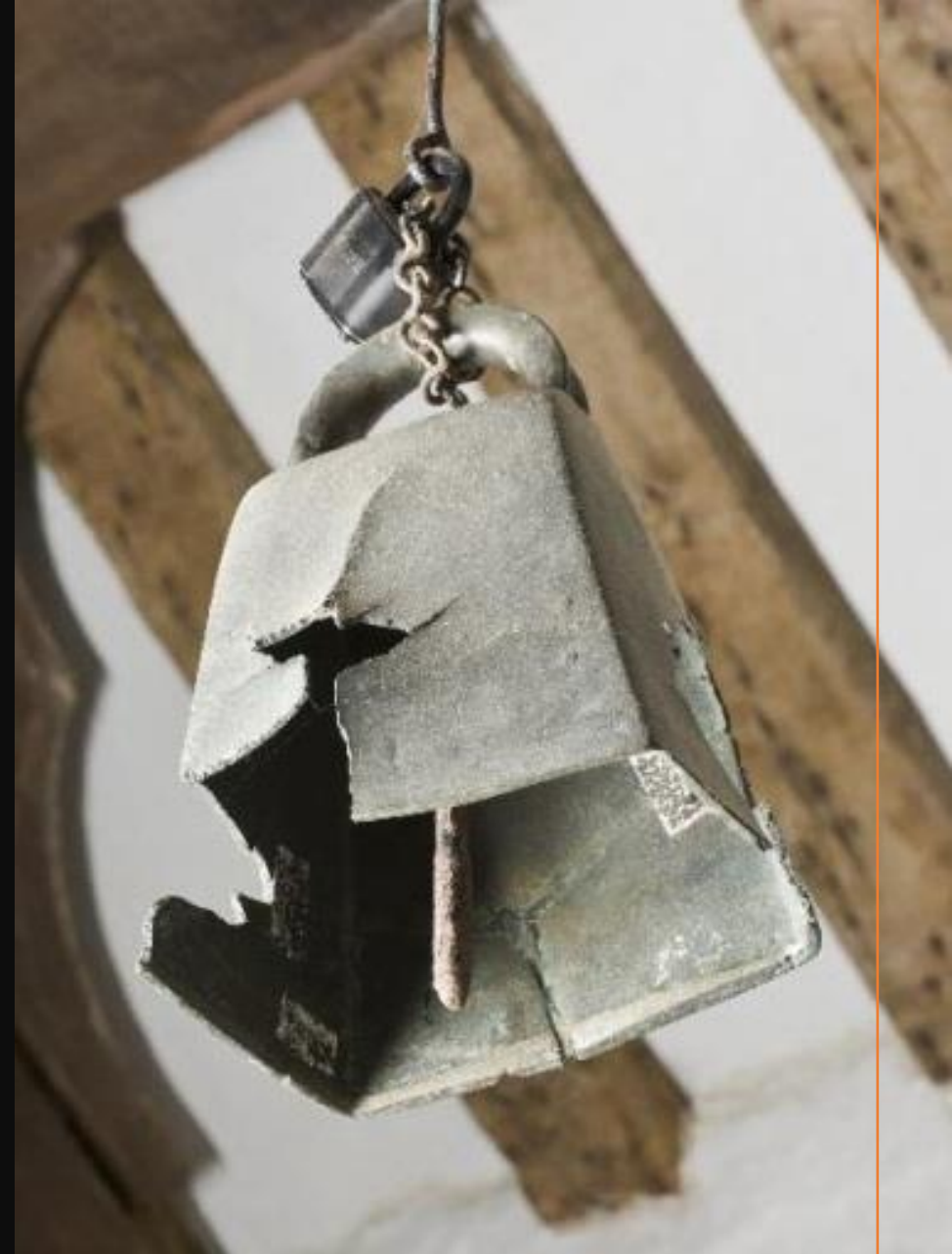
Secondary relics:

- St Padarn's staff Cyrwen:
- Then all magnify the Lord in his servant, Padarn, and all blessing him, said, 'May there always be to thee a token of peace, whereby thy name may shine on the earth, while thou livest, also after thy death.' Which is fulfilled in the gift, Cirguen, Cyrwen. For so great is the service of that bachall, that, if any two are at discord, they are made to agree by swearing together on it. (from the Life of St Padarn)
- Image: Martin Crampin, [St Padarn from St David and St Padarn - image from Stained Glass in Wales \(llgc.org.uk\)](http://llgc.org.uk)



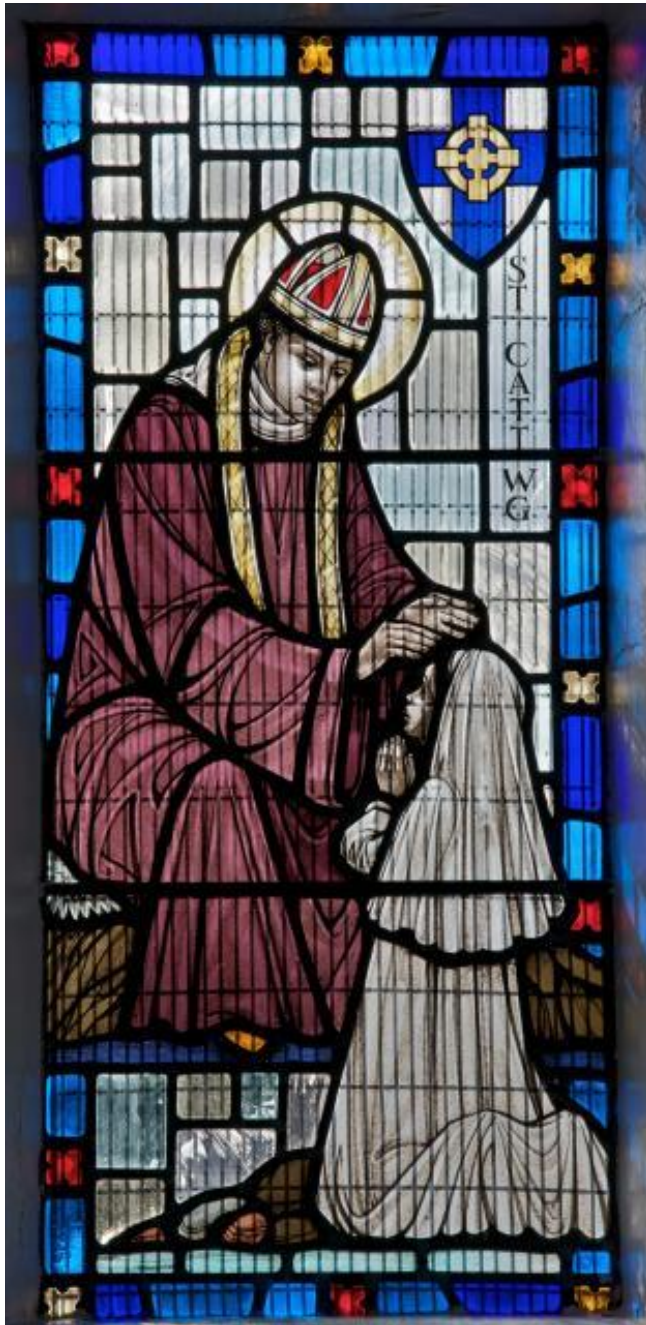
Saints' bells

- Cloch Gwyddelan (St Gwyddelan's bell), Dolwyddelan
- Dug up in the church yard in 1850 on the site where St Gwyddelan reputedly preached.
- St Illtud and St David's bell – would make no sound for David so was sent back to St Illtud.



Saints cause physical affliction...

- Usually associate saints with healing miracles – holy wells, physical ailments, emotional problems, cures.
- Yet many miracles involve punishing wrongdoers too (often people who disrespected the saint or steal church property): causing physical pain, limbs wither, bones break, sinners are afflicted with blindness; cursing, melting, drowning or burning of sinners.



Vita Sancti Cadoci / Life of St Cadog

A 'rustic' is punished for gazing on the tombs of Cadog's disciples

'The rash fellow, therefore, ran to the opening, and covered one eye with his hand placed thereon, for with the other open he looked through the window, and sooner than said the open eye cracked, and by the optic nerve hung down his face. So thereupon the rustic, emitting a great and mornful lamentation, hurried in mad course towards the crowds of people. When he was seen, the whole multitude with uplifted voices poured forth praises to God and saint Cadog...'

W. Wade-Evans (ed. and trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1944; repr. Welsh Academic Press, 2013), p. 101

Image: St Cadog Sant, Llanilltud Faerdref: Martin Crampin, *Stained Glass in Wales*