

Welsh Saints' Lives as Legendary Propaganda

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An academic is carrying out fieldwork in cultural anthropology. This scene is easy for us to imagine, because we have seen numerous photographs and read countless accounts of researchers collecting information in this manner in the field. A note is made of everything “the natives” say, usually through an interpreter, and their answers to questions about all kinds of matters are taken down and sorted out for further study. Since the early twentieth century, interviews have been recorded not only in writing, but also on wax cylinders and later on magnetic tape, audiotape, and now digital audio and video. But before such means of securing permanent records came into being, the information assembled had to be either transcribed in real time or committed to memory and written down later. There have certainly been a large number of instances when a researcher conducted fieldwork for the express purpose of making the data more widely available to the general public. At such a stage, the fieldworker may not have known whether the material gathered was of any value to the “outside world.” After accumulating observations from others researching similar topics, however, certain overarching trends might have begun to emerge, and the information most useful to the fieldworker working on that research project might thus become more apparent.

Turning our attention now from the more modern realities of anthropological fieldwork, let us imagine a different situation. A medieval cleric sits at a table placed outside a cathedral door. He is writing down details of miracles that were supposed to have been brought about through the intervention of the saint whose shrine visitors to the cathedral had come to see. The bishop might have decided that the local patron saint’s reputation needed bolstering, so he launched a public-relations campaign by arranging for a man on his staff to collect information about how people had received assistance after praying to the saint. In the resulting account, gossip, travelers’ tales, and anecdotes that “everyone” knew about the saint’s powers gained a certain permanence simply because someone made a note of them, thus providing a written source for the medieval legend of the saint.

But these written sources were of course not the only way that legends came into existence. I would like to illustrate another route by referring to the example of the legend of the Welsh patron saint, St. David, whose background is well documented.¹ I shall first provide a background for the composition of the legend, and will give details of incidents described in the

¹ See Bowen 1982:5-29; Evans 1988:xi-xix; and Evans and Wooding 2007:1-17.

legend as examples of what the transcriber felt needed to be recorded. I am concerned here with issues regarding memory and how people perceive an influential person's role(s) in their cultural history. I discuss how details from folklore and oral tradition are selected in order to manipulate the perception of these roles for political reasons. The resulting legend was composed—or written down—and thus “fixed,” by a person familiar with traditional narrative themes and the formulaic language of a cleric. Legends such as these are therefore interesting examples of a literary genre whose primary intention was to influence a non-literate audience.

Historians do not seem to doubt that a man known as David, Dafydd, Degui, or Dewi, living in the sixth century, led a monastic community at the place where the city of Tyddewi, Menevia, or St. David's later grew up. It is not improbable that a reputation for sanctity earned during his lifetime was enough to insure that people wished to continue to revere him after his death. The promotion of saints was common in Western Europe, and right up to the Reformation new saints were continually being created through processes of local approval, and, interestingly, often without the recognition of the Vatican. Some royal saints were also deliberately cultivated to legitimize the claims to the throne made by their families.² But apart from such politically based reasons for securing power, there were also locally based, more practical reasons for doing so. All churches were dedicated to one or more saints; thus a church whose patron saint became popular benefited economically when people visited the church and left a coin in the collection box. This was all tied in with the Church's teachings on the matter of sin.

Penance and Pilgrimage

Through the sacrament of penance, the Church had a means of teaching about sin, while also educating people about the relative seriousness of different sins. The sacrament had existed since the early days of the Church, but from the thirteenth century all Christians were required to go to confession at least once a year.³ Before giving absolution, a priest hearing confession could require a person to perform penance in proportion to the seriousness of the sin committed and in consideration of the person's circumstances. This could include prayer, fasting, almsgiving, or exposing oneself to the hazards of going on a pilgrimage.⁴ Almsgiving included donating money and land to the Church as well as giving money, food, and clothing to the poor. It was considered to be a valuable act of piety. It also provided the economic basis that was fundamental to the spread of monasticism.⁵

² Royal families supported the canonization of Edward the Confessor (canonized in 1161), Charlemagne (1165), and the Danish King Knud Lavard (1169) (Lundkvist 1997:165).

³ Fourth Lateran Council, 1215. Canon 21.

⁴ This is a topic about which many have written, including Hall 1965, Sumption 1975, Brooke and Brooke 1984, Krötzel 1994, and Turner and Turner 1978.

⁵ For the scriptural basis, see Matt. 6. 3-4; and Tobit 4, 9-10.

Penance for grave sins might require long periods of fasting or exile. Taking advantage of papal indulgences connected with penitential exercise was a possibility that was often contemplated. Jerusalem had always been the prime goal for Christian pilgrims, but in the eleventh century a new kind of pilgrim appeared, as many young warriors visited the Holy Land during the crusades and attempted to reach the city. Pilgrimage to Rome had already been one of the forms of penance for dire offences since the ninth century, and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries pilgrimages to the grave of St. James the Apostle at Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain became the third important goal after Jerusalem and Rome (Hohler 1957:54).⁶ By the early thirteenth century the idea of pilgrimage had become generalized and other sanctuaries had been established. Particular places in every country became centers to which pilgrims traveled (the cathedral at St. David's in Pembrokeshire, South Wales, being one).⁷ According to the *Chronicon Angliæ Petriburgense*, Pope Calixtus II (d. 1124) conceded that two pilgrimages to remote St. David's counted for one to Rome (Baring-Gould and Fisher 1908:315).

By no means were all pilgrims doing penance for sins committed, and the motivation for embarking upon pilgrimages could be due to numerous factors. One would seem to have been the belief that illness or disability, endured by the pilgrim or a person represented by the pilgrim, could be cured after praying at a chapel containing the relics of a particular saint. People trying to practice a religion in which they are required to believe in a deity whom they cannot see may experience a very basic and understandable desire to implore the deity to give them a visible sign to affirm their faith. If the patient's condition improved, it might be supposed that a sign had been given, and that a miracle had indeed happened. If the patient's condition did not improve, no one probably heard of the request. Reports of miracles became embedded in travelers' tales that were told and retold, and thus contributed to promoting the reputation of the saint in question. Devotion to a particular saint was very common and was viewed as a form of insurance in the Middle Ages. With disability and death more obviously close at hand than they are today, people considered the protective influence of someone to whom they could pray—who would act on their behalf with the Almighty—as essential. Building a close relationship with a saint through prayer, giving thanks, and the possibility of pilgrimage, was therefore wise.

If I am correct in suggesting that respect for a person's memory may have been impetus enough to start a cult, we may assume that it will have helped the process if knowledge of the success of supplicating to the saint was passed on by word of mouth. Even so, a political strategy was necessary if a cult was to gain the support of many people and to lead to financial rewards. Impressive solemnities could be held annually to commemorate the date of the saint's death or, as it was always put, the saint's birth in heaven, or *natalicio*. These services might attract visitors to church, even though most of them could not understand what was sung because they were in Latin. It was consequently important to get the legend established, to provide material for

⁶ "By the twelfth century priests in the major Roman basilicas were specifically charged with absolving penitent pilgrims. These priests also became known as 'penitentiaries'" (Clarke 2005:1014).

⁷ The extraordinary popularity in England of Canterbury cathedral, with its shrine of St. Thomas, was immortalized in Geoffrey Chaucer's well-known *Canterbury Tales*.

particular reminiscences that people could then learn in their own language. When they had been repeated often enough and embedded in their culture, they were often believed even if they were not entirely true.

Norman Settlers in South Wales

Hope of economic gain is a motive frequently recognized on the part of both the Church and the laity in the Middle Ages. A study of this period of Welsh history finds avarice to be the incentive for many undertakings. The legend about St. David was pure propaganda. It was concocted by an author well known for his learning,⁸ and is evidently not a case of folklore that chanced to be recorded when the idea occurred to somebody to commit it to writing. Rivalry with the neighboring diocese of Llandaff, inflamed as a result of startling changes that took place there in the closing years of the eleventh century, was the reason for his constructing the legend. The influx of numerous wealthy families inspired people in both the dioceses of Llandaff and St. David's to compete for the benefit of their flocks. South Wales was regarded as more or less up for grabs by land-hungry Normans who had come over to Britain and fought in the Conquest of 1066. The new feudal lords who settled there had much blood on their hands. Notorious for their ferocity and skill in battle, they were nevertheless Christians, and the degree to which they desired to have peace for their souls, especially in the life-ever-after, may be seen in the extent of the piecemeal transfer of recently acquired lands to the Church. Almsgiving was the solution. As French immigrants invaded South Wales, their castles and fortified manor houses were soon followed by monasteries, and the face of the countryside began to take on a new appearance. The newcomers did not know who the most highly regarded local saints were. They needed to be informed and persuaded. The bishops of the two dioceses in South Wales came to this conclusion at about the same time they saw the way things were going in the late eleventh century.

Then Lifris, son of Bishop Herwald of Llandaff, and Rhigyfarch, son of Bishop Sulien of St. David's, each wrote a legend. These are not dated, but it has been argued that the life of St. Cadoc of Llancarfan by Lifris appeared first, and Rhigyfarch's life of St. David shortly afterward.⁹ Both hoped to impress the Normans with the venerability, piety, and benevolent influence of their respective saints. Besides wishing to leave the settlers in no doubt as to the pre-

⁸ When he died in 1099, *The Chronicle of the Princes* mentioned that "in that year died Rhigyfarch the Wise, son of bishop Sulien, the most learned of the learned men of the Britons, in the forty-third year of his life, the man whose equal had not arisen in the ages before him and whose peer it is not easy to believe or to imagine will arise after him" (Jones 1955:39).

⁹ For more about the Life of St. Cadoc, see Baring-Gould and Fisher 1908:14-42 and Henken 1987:88-98. Versions of the legend of St. David are available in the standard lives of the saints (see, for instance, Farmer 1978), all of which are derived from Rhigyfarch's *Vita beati Davidis*. Texts are available in James 1967, Evans 1988, and Sharpe and Davies 2007. On the matter of dating Rhigyfarch's composition of the legend, see James (1967:x-xi) and Evans (1988:xxxiii). Wade-Evans (1923:x, xviii) dates its composition at c. 1090, while the date 1081 is proposed by N. K. Chadwick (1958:175-76). Davies 2007:156-60 concludes that it was penned in the period 1091-93.

eminence of St. David among the Welsh saints, Rhigyfarch's additional purpose was to emphasize the leading position of St. David's in Wales and to assert the traditional independence of the Welsh Church against mounting pressure to submit to the ecclesiastical reforms that Lanfranc, the new archbishop of Canterbury, was introducing. In order to call attention to the antiquity and independence of the Welsh Church, Rhigyfarch asserted in the Latin *vita*, for example, that St. David had been consecrated archbishop by the patriarch of Jerusalem. In a mid-fourteenth-century version of the *Life of St. David* this event is said to have taken place in Rome (Evans 1988:9). In other words, anywhere but Canterbury! Probably the most prominent Welshman of the twelfth century, Giraldus de Barri (alias Giraldus Cambrensis), an archdeacon and canon of St. David's, wrote an elegant paraphrase of Rhigyfarch's legend in about 1172-76,¹⁰ almost a century after it had been composed. Giraldus sought election as bishop of St. David's, but the king and the archbishop of Canterbury disapproved of his overt political commitment to the cause of an independent Welsh Church and denied his appointment on two occasions when he had been nominated by his fellow canons.¹¹

Rhigyfarch's Legend of St. David

Living where he did, Rhigyfarch would have been familiar with the communal memory of the local patron saint, the celebration of whose annual feast would have recalled the details freshly to mind every year. He also may well have selected incidents from lives of the saints in very old written sources, as he claimed to have done, "out of the very many that are scattered in the oldest manuscripts of our country, and chiefly of [St. David's] own monastery. These, though eaten away along the edges and backs by the continuous gnawing of worms and the ravages of passing years, and written in the manner of the elders, have survived until now, and are gathered together and collected by me to the glory of the great father and for the benefit of others, that they shall not perish . . ." (James 1967:xi). This might, on the other hand, have simply been an assertion intended to impress his audience of the significance of the subject of his narrative, in so far as ordinary people did not usually have things written about them. The way he relates his story repeatedly gives the impression of trying to persuade his audience that St. David was a notable figure—a saint worth cultivating.

Rhigyfarch's legend is conventional in that it has clear indications of having been constructed for a purpose, using familiar storytelling techniques. It gives David a royal lineage with an impressive pedigree. Predictions are made about when he was to be born and to die, and details are given of how these were fulfilled. Descriptions are included of how he devoted years to preaching and doing good works, including performing miracles. Distinctive elements that might be identified, without my repeating the whole story, were his long period of study and extremely ascetic way of life, his missionary efforts through the founding of monasteries, and his

¹⁰ This is the opinion expressed in Evans 1988:xl, while the year 1200 is proposed in Harris 1940:16.

¹¹ The twelfth-century sources contain some 6,300 words, while the version by Giraldus, who must have been a greater talker, was 1,600 words longer (James 1967:xxv).

suppression of the so-called Pelagian heresy. The narrative has a chronological sequence that falls into four parts: the prophesy, birth, and his upbringing; the missionary work and miracles; his journey to Jerusalem and his consecration as archbishop of Wales; and the two general synods of the Welsh Church, concluding with general remarks on his sanctity and death.

With regard to the manner in which Rhigyfarch presents his story, we see that he uses techniques well known in passing on oral traditions in order to stress that St. David was a person of consequence. In his narrative, he first lets David's birth be foretold to his father and then to St. Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, by an angel 30 years before it took place. The fulfilment of the prophecy then confirms the truth of the account. There is a satisfying balance between the prediction and its implementation. He then reveals that he had the best credentials by naming 18 forefathers going back to Eugene, son of the Virgin Mary's sister.¹² This was not just anybody, but somebody with whom to be reckoned. And lastly, he accompanies the birth with dramatic supernatural incidents. The repetition of groups of threes in the legend has Trinitarian connotations, while the prophecies have noticeably Messianic associations. Rhigyfarch interweaves indisputable "facts" into his tale to lend it reliability. Thus he lets his readers know—most of whom would have been inhabitants of the diocese of St. David's—that David was a local boy. His grandfather, Ceredig, was king of Ceredigion, the district named after him in the north of the diocese. Name-dropping of this sort occurs frequently. The names of the places where the twelve monasteries that David is said to have founded, for example, may well have been known to the people of South Wales then: Glastonbury, where King Arthur was supposed to have been buried; Bath, of Roman fame and an important center of trade; and the border market town of Leominster, Crowland, Repton, and Raglan, and other places in southwest Wales, the ring of whose familiar names will presumably have been proof enough of the legend's reliability. When Rhigyfarch mentions Ireland and Jerusalem, of whose existence they had no reason to doubt, his audience cannot but have been convinced.

Rhigyfarch gives a clue at the beginning as to how the symbolism in his text should be interpreted. David's father, King Sant of Ceredigion, is told by an angel in a dream that he would go hunting the following day. He would kill a stag near a river and would find there three gifts: the stag itself, a fish, and a hive of bees. The honeycomb, fish, and venison were to be sent to a certain monastery, where they would be preserved for the son who was to be born to him in 30 years' time. At this point Rhigyfarch breaks off the narrative in order to make the symbolic meaning of the gifts clear. The example shows how he expected the legend to be read (Sharpe and Davies 2007:109-11):

The honeycomb proclaims his wisdom; for just as the honey is in the wax, so he has understood the spiritual meaning in a literal statement. The fish signifies his watery life, for as the fish lives by water, so does he; rejecting wine and liquor and everything that can inebriate, he has led a blessed life for God on just bread and water; because of this he is surnamed David "of the watery life." The stag signifies dominion over the ancient serpent, for just as the stag desires a spring of water when it had grazed on despoiled snakes, and having gained strength is renewed as if with youth, so he is established on the heights, as

¹² Sources vary on this point, showing that David was also a relative, uncle, or great-nephew of King Arthur of Round Table fame who, while still being nearly related to Jesus, was quite something (Henken 1987:32).

though with stags' feet, despoiling the human race's ancient serpent of his power to harm him. Choosing the fount of life by the constant flow of tears, renewed from day to day, he made progress, so that in the name of the Holy Trinity he would begin to have the knowledge of salvation [and] by the frugality of purer food the power of holding dominion against demons.

Orally transmitted stories can be both very detailed and infused with symbolism. Although this story will have been passed on from person to person, from teller to audience, and probably been modified in repetition, it should be borne in mind that at the time it was written down it was a deliberately constructed literary composition. We are reminded of this fact by its name, "legend," from the Latin *legere*, "to read." This was a story to be read to listeners who would learn and understand it in the sense that medieval students studied not by reading themselves but by listening to their teachers reading to them (as pointed out in Clancy 1979:270).¹³ Though not part of the liturgy, the incidents described in the legend are referred to in choral pieces sung in the different services and provided material for the "readings" chanted at matins.

After David's birth, missionary endeavors, and his establishment of the twelve monasteries, Rhigyfarch settled in what is now the city of St. David's. The normally peaceful David becomes more assertive when he is exposed to force and guile from a local chieftain called Baia. This man's efforts to get him to go away included instructing his servant girls to play in the nude, imitating sexual intercourse where they could be seen by the monks. For this blow below the belt, divine retribution dramatically annihilated Baia and family. An unsuccessful attempt upon David's life by three of his own men becomes an opportunity to show that he has divine protection. A former disciple living in Ireland has a premonition and sends a monk to warn him, crossing the Irish Sea on a sea monster's back. David then blesses bread that he knows contains poison and eats it without harm, while a raven and a dog with which he shares it die. Teilo and Padarn travel with David to the Holy Land, where David is consecrated archbishop of Wales by the patriarch in Jerusalem. This preferment later gets affirmed at the Synod of Llanddewi Brefi, where 118 bishops and a large number of priests constitute him archbishop of the British people. Miracles are seen to happen and his reputation increases. He also attends a second synod of the Welsh Church, where he finally stamps out the Pelagian heresy and establishes decrees of the Roman church. St. David predicts the date of his death, which takes place on a Tuesday, March 1st, after he has lived to the age of 147. This was likely in the year 589, but historians are not in agreement about this date (Evans 1988:xii).

The Female Audience

Certain details in the legend may have been intended to appeal particularly to the experience of women listening to the story. These are concerned with the conception, pregnancy, and birth of the future saint. David's mother, Non, is said to have been exceptionally beautiful,

¹³ We still hear this expression used today, for example: "So, you are at university . . . what are you reading?"—meaning studying or learning about a subject by listening to lectures as well reading books.

which was possibly the reason why the king in the region where she lived noticed her and consequently forced himself on her. Rhigyfarch makes no judgment about this but instead reports it in a matter-of-fact way. When the time for her confinement was close, she went to church; unexpectedly, the priest who was leading a service at the time she entered suddenly became dumb. He was unable to say a word, according to the narrator, in the presence of someone of higher ecclesiastical rank, though as yet unborn. When she left the church, the priest's speech returned. David's birth took place in an open field during a violent storm of thunder, lightning, and floods of rain and hail. It was an exceptional moment, so it was appropriate that the weather was also exceptional. The bad weather prevented a magician who had planned to kill the baby from carrying out his intention. Rhigyfarch writes that while giving birth she clasped her hands round a big stone, on which her hands left an impression. In sympathy with her agony, the stone broke in two. Giraldus embellishes this information, saying that one half of the stone jumped over her head and landed upright at her feet. This image of standing stones may remind us, as well as those who listened to the legend in the Middle Ages, of prehistoric monuments of the menhir kind found in Wales.

Another episode might have been deliberately constructed with geographical features that people would have recognized in the village of Llanddewi Brefi. The legend relates that attempts to eradicate the heresy of the "free will" monk, Pelagius, had failed despite efforts by St. Germanus to wipe it out. In concern, a very large number of people had gathered at Llanddewi Brefi for a synod of the Welsh Church. When some attempted to preach, their voices could not be heard, so they stood on a pile of clothes on the ground, to no avail. The suggestion was made that St. David be called; he declined three times before eventually consenting. Then, after restoring a young man to life in a Jesus-and-Lazarus fashion, he went to the synod and began to preach in a loud voice. The ground where he stood miraculously rose up to form a natural pulpit (this hill is still there today) and his voice rang out "like a trumpet." Having expelled the heresy, he was constituted archbishop of the Britons by unanimous consent.

29 Latin and 14 Welsh texts of Rhigyfarch's Life of St. David, dating from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, are said to exist (James 1967:xiv-xxxviii). This unusually high number may have been found because the legend was about the patron of the largest Welsh diocese. The degree to which Rhigyfarch's propaganda was successful may only be guessed at, but a certain accomplishment may be measured by the fact that there are 42 churches dedicated to this saint in the diocese of St. David's and 22 outside it.¹⁴ Commemorative services for St. David's Day, containing texts based on material from the legend, were repeated annually for about 250 years, probably from the 1280s up to 1543, when King Henry VIII prohibited the worship of non-scriptural saints in England and Wales.¹⁵ When the feast was included in the Sarum church calendar in 1398 it would have been observed throughout most of England, Wales, Scotland, and

¹⁴ According to Baring-Gould and Fisher (1908:317-22), this number made him the third most popular saint in Wales, preceded only by the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel. It must be admitted that some of these dedications may have been earlier than Rhigyfarch's political campaign was launched. The dating of church dedications is clouded with uncertainty.

¹⁵ Details of the services and grounds for these dates are given in Edwards 1990.

Ireland. A decree reasserting that St. David's Day on March 1st was to be celebrated throughout the province of Canterbury was issued in 1415, when Henry Chichele, who had been bishop of St. David's from 1408-14, was "promoted" to the leading prelate of England, the archbishop of Canterbury.

It is my hope that these reflections have given an impression of the nature of the legend of St. David, and have shown that legends were not merely stories that somebody chanced to write down. Rhigyfarch has the good storyteller's knack of providing us a combination of well-known elements that give us confidence to follow his narrative, and unexpected ones that we are encouraged to suppose are credible.¹⁶ Realism of a kind that reassures us of the integrity of the legend is securely balanced against the miraculous. Our response today to the information given is obviously going to be different from that of people in medieval times. Most significantly, a common inability now to accept miracles as true is bound to affect our reaction to the achievements asserted. We have to be aware of the need to distinguish between reading, listening, and believing then and reading now; how differently the legend was understood in the Middle Ages; and how meaningful it was to those who believed in it.¹⁷

An event known to many people will be remembered differently by each person. The collective recollection might be comprehensive for a while, but details get forgotten, even from one generation to the next, and evidence that the event ever took place might eventually disappear completely. Experience confirms that memory is elusive. It is particularly noticeable with regard to changes occurring during the twentieth century. This reflection has nothing to do with the absentmindedness of elderly people: conventions and practices that are common knowledge at one time may not be fully understood or may even pass into oblivion only 50 years later. Unless someone consciously makes an effort to remember, record, and explain the information, it risks getting lost or misunderstood. In the case of legends, there is a common misapprehension even about the form of transmission. An unguarded listener might not be aware of being manipulated while paying attention to someone reading the legend of St. David. It is an engaging story: indeed, much of it is nearly plausible.

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¹⁶ In view of the cultural tradition of the Irish Church, it is not surprising that Henken (1987:41), citing Wade-Evans and Evans, identifies Irish influences on Rhigyfarch's *vita*.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Professor Jakob Lothe, Oslo, for this observation.

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