

Why were there so few nuns in Medieval Wales?

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Introduction

The history of high medieval Wales is peculiar by the standards of western Europe in numerous ways, including its gendered history. One peculiarity is in the lack of provision of nunneries, considering the rich contemporary feminine hagiographical (saint's lives) tradition. Jane Cartwright has estimated that there were around thirty-five nuns in Wales at any point during the late middle ages, and

comparing Cistercian houses, even though Wales had a similar number of male houses to Yorkshire it had only a sixth of the number of women's houses.¹ Whilst explanations have been found in the dominance of Cistercians, and an indirect legal deterrent from the law codes, a fuller explanation can be reached by integrating the hagiographies which make the absence of female monasticism so surprising.

A different model of monasticism?

The contradiction of the large feminine hagiographical tradition without many nunneries can be solved by addressing what the model for women which is presented in the hagiographies. We'll take two examples: Gwladus in the Life of Saint Gwynllyw, and Trinihid in the life of St Illtud.

Gwladus

The mother of Cadog and wife of Gwynllyw, Gwladus appears in both their lives, but most fully in Gwynllyw's vita. Upon angelic instruction, Gwynllyw founds his church, 'building a dwelling-place; and subsequently he marked out a cemetery, and in the middle of it he built a church of planks and boughs, which he diligently visited with his frequent orisons.' Gwladus then has to react. 'Although equally devoted to the catholic religion [as her husband], [she] was nevertheless unwilling to remain near the dwelling-place of saint Gwynllyw.' The implication here is that though she desires the ascetic life, she must support her husband by withdrawing to prevent temptation. She chooses a compromise, 'dwelling not far away, only one furlong distant'. Both then seem to embark on some sort of rule, described as 'an eremitical life', partaking of a limited diet and rising early to bathe and pray. Cadog then decides

that one furlong was too 'close neighbourhood' lest the carnal temptations of the 'unseen foe should pervert their minds from ... chastity'. Gwladus, 'being admonished' then leaves 'to a mountain solitude, distant a space of about seven furlongs'. Though she is described earlier as leading a hermit's life, she leaves 'seven nuns, including virgins and chaste women, to serve God'. Clearly what Gwladus founded beside the Ebbw was meant to be a nunnery of some description. She once again sets herself up choosing 'a place for habitation, and, having marked out a cemetery, built a church in honour of St Mary'. She resumes her asceticism, now without opposition, with 'none except her own attendants and wild animals' for company. Her monastic existence corrected, Gwladus sets an example of the female religious, removed from the secular world, not by enclosure like her male counterparts, but in her 'mountain solitude'.⁶

Trinihid

Trinihid is Illtud's wife, whom he leaves to found his monastery at Hodnant. At the start of Illtud's life, she is his 'comely' companion in the bedchamber, yet when she returns to visit him she has been transformed, living a pious religious life in 'mountain solitude'. 'There she built a dwelling, [and] she founded an oratory' for her prayers, comforting the nuns and widows which gath-

Cistercian Hostility

The monastic order which was most associated with the Welsh nobility were the Cistercians. Of the three nunneries which we are certain existed within modern Welsh boundaries, two were Cistercian. The other, at Usk, was founded by English Marcher patrons. The Cistercians were particularly hostile to the involvement of women in their order, and the early thirteenth century saw a series of attempts to exclude women from the order. In 1222 Cistercian abbots

petitioned the pope so as to not to send Monks to nunneries due to the concern with the risk of corruption. This was definitely a concern relevant to Wales, with Gerald of Wales making repeated references to a failed nunnery at Llansanffraid and the Abbot Enoch eloping with a nun. By 1228 the foundation of new nunneries under Cistercian rule was prohibited. As the 'go-to' rule for monastic patronage, the Cistercian's hostility to nuns certainly played a role in the lack of nunneries in Wales.⁵

Laws and Lordship

The native medieval Welsh law, the *Cyfraith Hywel Dda*, presented two major challenges to the foundation of nunneries:

- the *amobr*, a fine paid to the lord when a woman's maidenhood ended 'by gift and handing over though she be not slept with; ... [or] open cohabitation though there be no gift; ... [or] by pregnancy' put a financial incentive to marry off the daughters of vassals.²
- Few women held land in their own right, limiting her ability to make independent endowments.
 - * Welsh wives received their marriage portion in movables, rather than land.³

* Familial inheritance was (in principal) strictly patrilineal.⁴ *Cyfraith Hywel* dissuaded male lords from becoming patrons of nunneries, and reduced the likelihood of women being able to act as large independent patrons.



Figure 1: A Kissing couple from the Peniarth 28 manuscript of *Cyfraith Hywel*.



Figure 2: Fifteenth Century stained glass at Llanllugan depicting a nun.

ered around her. Her visit ends badly, tempting herself looking at Illtud she is blinded by God and is only restored to sight by Illtud's prayers. She returns to her mountain solitude, removed from the temporal world's carnal temptations, and her fellow nuns.⁷

What is this model?

The example that Gwladus and Trinihid produce gives us a model of the female religious life which is very different to their male counterparts. These are not abbesses or prioresses; they do not rule over their communities. They are landless and are only able to build their buildings because they are well resourced noblewomen. We find women living religious lives in similar contexts in other regions, but where we do, they enter the record it is when they are being cloistered at the initiation of a monastic order: unlikely in Wales. This is a tenuous form of existence would not have left material or textual remains, and neither would it attract many women. But it does explain why there is such an absence of religious women in our record.

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 - 3 RR Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage in Late-Medieval Wales', in *WLW*, p. 114; Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff 2008), p. 203.
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 - 5 Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff 2008), pp. 205-6.
 - 6 'The Life of Gwynllyw', Wade-Evans (ed. & trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, (2nd edn, Cardiff, 2013), 56-8, pp. 177-181; 'The Life of Saint Cadog', Wade-Evans (ed. & trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, (2nd edn, Cardiff, 2013), 55-4, pp. 123-125.
 - 7 'The Life of St. Illtud', Wade-Evans (ed. & trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, (2nd edn, Cardiff, 2013), 54-6, p. 199-203; 516, p. 217.
- Figure 1: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laws_of_Hywel_Dda_\(f.5r\)_Kissing_couple_cropped.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laws_of_Hywel_Dda_(f.5r)_Kissing_couple_cropped.jpg). Image in the public domain.
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