

# AN ECCLESIASTICAL IDENTITY IN THE MAKING: THE MEDIEVAL CATHEDRAL AND BISHOPRIC OF ST DAVID'S (WALES)

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the repeated attempts made by churchmen in medieval Wales to elevate the bishopric of St David's to metropolitan status. Drawing on often dubious "historical" evidence and an alleged precedent, several churchmen set about creating a tradition of St David's distant past as archbishopric. The focus is on the cleric Giraldus Cambrensis, keen if ultimately unsuccessful aspirant to the bishopric, thanks to whose writings we know of the mechanisms used in the creation of an identity for St David's, which plays in particular on the links of the site with Wales's patron saint David. We moreover see the ways in which the various attempts at promoting St David's over the centuries can be linked directly to the political situation in Wales in each case.

## KEYWORDS

Wales, dioceses, Giraldus Cambrensis, St David's, identity, invented traditions.

## CAPITALIA VERBA

Wallia, dioceses, Giraldus Cambrensis, Sanctus David, Identitas, Traditiones fabulatae.

“St David’s is still the capital of Wales, but once it was also the metropolitan city of an archbishop”.<sup>1</sup> With these words Giraldus Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales (d.1223), archdeacon of Brecon, in his *Journey through Wales*, introduces the Welsh bishopric that was closest to his heart and in relation to which he would end up investing considerable time, ink and effort in an ultimately futile attempt at becoming its bishop. By the time he was writing these words, during the final decades of the twelfth century, Giraldus, in his concern for St David’s, was able to draw on an existing tradition of some standing, according to which the see of St David’s could lay legitimate claim to being recognised as an archbishopric. This tradition places at the heart of its arguments the saint himself, David (d.c.589), patron of Wales, and the site of his abbey and later his burial: a place known then as Menevia (now St David’s), on the south-west coast of Wales.

According to the tradition, which appears in different places from Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155?) to Giraldus himself, Saint David was the successor of Dyfrig (d.c.550), archbishop of Caerleon-on-Usk, which was one of the ancient archbishoprics of Britain. Dyfrig himself retired from his post of archbishop to live the life of a hermit, and Saint David, who replaced him in the see, moved the seat of the archbishopric from Caerleon to Menevia, his favourite monastery. It was at Menevia that Saint David spent his final days, and there he died and was buried. A later successor to the archbishopric of Menevia, a man named Samson, forced to flee Wales, removed the precious *pallium* from St David’s, thereby depriving the episcopal see of its metropolitan status. Thus goes the story. Even though this tradition is riddled with chronological impossibilities and built on shaky historical foundations, it was one that enjoyed great popularity among medieval Welsh writers and bishops (or aspirants to the bishopric) alike, throughout the Middle Ages, and it was used repeatedly by them to argue for St David’s elevation (or, as they saw it, reinstatement) to archbishopric.

The invention of a tradition is by no means an unusual phenomenon in a medieval ecclesiastical context.<sup>2</sup> In the highly competitive world of the medieval Christian church, its representatives frequently found themselves obliged (or merely encouraged or inspired) to legitimise their status, or to “upgrade” it, and/or to provide historical justification for their present situation. This caused churchmen (and -women) not uncommonly to seek such legitimisation in a past beyond living memory, often hazy, distant and legendary, and equally often explained in documents of uncertain or dubious provenance, helped along by an often distinctly imaginative memory. The thirteenth-century canons of St Gregory’s Priory in Canterbury (Kent), for instance, drew heavily on their Anglo-Saxon origins and

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1. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales / The Description of Wales*. Harmondsworth – New York: Penguin, 1978: 159.

2. Note Remensnyder, Amy G. *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995. See also: Wickham, Chris. “Medieval Memories”, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*, James Fentress, Chris Wickham, eds. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992: 144-172.



saints, and made reference to their own saintly past in order to reaffirm their cathedral's current place and standing.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of Amy Remensnyder, “the past constructed by imaginative memory, the golden age of heroes, does not merely reflect, but also informs the present”.<sup>4</sup> In the construction and defence of an identity, the present community of a twelfth- or thirteenth- or fifteenth-century institution has little difficulty in drawing on, even bringing very much to life, an imagined, invented tradition of a distant past in which categories such as chronology and genealogy become blurred and lose their formality. Do they, however, become “un-true”? The issue of “historical truth”, now and then, is one that appears never to lose its fascination. Chris Given-Wilson, in his book on writing history in the Middle Ages, dedicates his first chapter to *Telling the Truth*.<sup>5</sup> He draws attention to the frequent reference to “truth” and “truthfully” in the works of later medieval European chroniclers, a reference that brings us back to Giraldus Cambrensis, our campaigner for the metropolitan status of the see of St David's: he, too, concerned himself with ideas about the role of truth in the writing of history. In his second preface to his *Descriptio Cambriae*, explaining to his audience the task of the historian as he sees it, he remarks that “even when one has discovered the truth in all its detail, there still remains the task of ordering one's facts, and this is difficult”.<sup>6</sup> And he proceeds to cite Cicero (though he mistakenly thinks he is citing Seneca), who describes History as “the recording of past events, the testimony of the ages, the light of truth, a living memory, a guide for conduct and a reminder of what happened long ago”.<sup>7</sup> In the course of this process, “the past may become legitimating, glorifying—even sanctifying—for the present”.<sup>8</sup>

Representatives of religious communities, churches, religious orders and individual monasteries throughout medieval Christendom made frequent reference to the past, an often distant past that revealed and underscored the present importance of a site. This was a common strategy in the process, for instance, of launching a new claim or reactivating an existing one, such as for the elevation of a house's status, or its primacy. Where better, and closer, to look than those moments of a (real or invented) glorious and successful past that would legitimise a present claim and give “historical foundation” to an argument. “Truth” as we understand it has little room in this process. “The social meaning of memory”, according to James Fentress

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3. Sweetinburgh, Sheila. “Anglo-Saxon Saints and a Norman Archbishop: ‘Imaginative Memory’ and Institutional Identity at St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury”, *The Regular Canons in the Medieval British Isles*, Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011: 19-40.

4. Remensnyder, Amy G. *Remembering Kings Past...: 2*.

5. Given-Wilson, Chris. *Chronicles. The Writing of History in Medieval England*, London: Hambledon and London, 2004: 1-20.

6. Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales...: 216*.

7. Cicero. *De oratore* II. 9 (Cicero. *De oratore*. New Haven: B. et Gul. Noyes, 1839: 72), cited in: Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...: 217*.

8. Remensnyder, Amy G. *Remembering Kings Past...: 3*.



and Chris Wickham, “like its internal structure and its mode of transmission, is little affected by its truth”.<sup>9</sup>

From the point of view of the historian, the creation and formation of ecclesiastical identities in the medieval period is particularly revealing of the attitudes and priorities of the people involved. Talking about the imperial abbey of Farfa in central Italy, Susan Boynton considers “the most essential components of its identity” to be “its property, its independence, and ultimately its patronage”.<sup>10</sup> To this we should add “its patron saint”. The use of a (often local) saint in the making and shaping of an ecclesiastical identity was, as we have seen, not uncommon in medieval Europe. Strengthening the claim of a church to reassert itself in the face of ecclesiastical competition, or in the attempt at promoting a site by increasing its status, was a common enough concern for churchmen throughout the period. Where a claim of supremacy was made, it was crucial to prove a church’s credentials to boost such a claim, and drawing on the antiquity and holiness of a site added credibility to such efforts. The cathedral and bishopric of St David’s represent an interesting case in point.

During the Middle Ages Wales did not have a native archbishopric and its dioceses were instead subject to the authority of the metropolitan at Canterbury. Over the centuries, repeated attempts were made by churchmen in Wales to rectify what they perceived to be an unsatisfactory situation.

By the twelfth century a well-developed tradition had emerged, which attributed to St David’s the status of an archbishopric of great antiquity. This tradition told the story, retold briefly above, of Saint David, abbot of Menevia, moving the archbishopric of Wales from Caerleon-on-Usk to Menevia, where he himself was based, in the sixth century. Twelfth-century writers, foremost among them Giraldus Cambrensis, were eager promoters of this version of events, which saw fact and fiction melt into one in utter disregard of chronology and probability. Both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Giraldus, the latter a particularly keen champion of elevating the see of St David’s, and a passionate aspirant to its *pallium*, tell the story of how Saint David had inherited the archbishopric of Caerleon from his predecessor, Saint Dyfrig (or Dubricius<sup>11</sup>). According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, David was the uncle of the legendary King Arthur, and he is insinuating that David was appointed to his new benefice by King Arthur himself.<sup>12</sup> David later moved the archbishopric to Menevia,

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9. Fentress, James; Wickham, Chris, eds. *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992: xi.

10. Boynton, Susan. *Shaping a Monastic Identity: Liturgy and History at the Imperial Abbey of Farfa, 1000-1125*. Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2006: 5.

11. In the words of Geoffrey of Monmouth: “Then the saintly Dubricius, who for a long time had wanted to live as a hermit, resigned from his position as Archbishop. David, the King [Arthur]’s uncle, whose way of life had afforded an example of unblemished virtue to those whom he had instructed in the faith, was consecrated in his place.” Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966: 230.

12. “While Arthur was distributing these benefices among his clergy...”. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain...*: 230.



a move that had allegedly been predicted by Merlin,<sup>13</sup> when he himself returned to this place, which was the site of his favourite monastery, and the place where he wished to end his days. Geoffrey tells us that “David, the most holy Archbishop of the City of the Legions [Caerleon-on-Usk], died in the town of Menevia [St David’s], inside his own abbey, which he loved more than all the other monasteries of his diocese”.<sup>14</sup>

But Menevia’s glorious days as archbishopric were not to last. According to a legend which defies the laws of chronology, the last archbishop of Menevia, Samson, was the same man as Samson of Dol, first metropolitan of the Breton archbishopric of Dol, *Sancti Samsonis Dolensis Archipraesulis*.<sup>15</sup> This Samson, so it was said, fled from Wales during an outbreak of the “yellow plague” epidemic, and went from Dyfed to France, where he settled as bishop at Dol. The important point in this story is that Samson was said to have taken the archiepiscopal *pallium* with him, thus removing it from Menevia and implanting it in Brittany.<sup>16</sup> The story not only provided a wonderfully convenient explication for the otherwise inexplicable absence of any official documentation confirming to Menevia the status of archbishopric. In doing what he did, moreover, Samson echoes the alleged move of the same *pallium* from Caerleon-on-Usk to Menevia by Saint David some generations earlier.

The tradition as told by Giraldus and repeated by those who followed him, weaves history and fiction into one nicely-fitting fabric, which is given extra strength by the addition of enhancing details such as revised genealogies and fantastic chronologies, which lend authority to the idea of Saint David being King Arthur’s uncle, for instance, or to Samson, who seems in real life to have been Saint David’s contemporary, becoming the latter’s successor removed in time. Invented genealogies, not at all uncommon in the medieval Welsh documents and normally tracing an individual’s line back to an alleged Biblical ancestor, Adam, for instance, or the Virgin Mary, seek to lend additional weight to an individual’s place in history and hence his importance.<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, though, was not among the medieval champions of the battle for metropolitan status for St David’s. In fact, in

13. “Here [in Caerleon] Archbishop Dyfrig handed over his supreme function to David of Menevia, for the metropolitan see was moved from Caerleon in accordance with the prophecy of Merlin Ambrosius: ‘Menevia shall be dressed in the pall of the City of the Legions,’ and so on”. Giraldus Cambrensis quoting Geoffrey of Monmouth: *Gerald of Wales. The Journey through Wales...*: 115.

14. Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain...*: 262.

15. Lloyd, John E. *A History of Wales from the earliest times to the Edwardian conquest*, London: Longmans-Green, 1912: II, 486.

16. Gerald of Wales, tells us that “the pallium was taken away in Samson’s time. The circumstances of its removal were as follows. During his period as Archbishop [of Menevia], an epidemic spread throughout Wales and killed a great number of people. They called it the yellow plague [...]. As a man of religion, Archbishop Samson had no fear of death, but he was persuaded to go on board a boat. The wind blew from the north-west, and it carried him and those with him safely to Brittany. By chance the see of Dol was vacant at the time, and Samson was immediately elected as bishop. He had taken the *pallium* with him...”. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 162.

17. One striking example can be found in the twelfth-century *Life* of Gruffudd ap Cynan, which traces his lineage on his father’s side via a lengthy list of named ancestors to “...Japhet, son of old Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methusalah, son of Enoch, son of Jaret, son of Mahaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son



his *Historia* he barely concerns himself with the topic at all, except in two places; first, where he explains how King Arthur's uncle, [Saint] David, came to succeed Dyfrig, the archbishop of Caerleon-on-Usk, upon the latter's withdrawal from the world, as we have seen.<sup>18</sup> Second, in his "prophesies of Merlin", where Geoffrey puts into Merlin's mouth a reference to moving the archbishopric from the City of the Legions (Caerleon) to Menevia (St David's): "Menevia shall be dressed in the pall of the City of the Legions".<sup>19</sup>

There is no shortage of sources that emphasise the importance of David the saint and St David's cathedral. Both feature in the native poetry of medieval Wales. The poet Gwynfardd Brycheiniog (fl. c. 1170-1180) composed a lengthy poem in praise of David, while some centuries later, Iolo Goch (d. c. 1400) and Ieuan ap Rhydderch (fl. c. 1430-1470) both made reference in their poetry to St David's as a great pilgrimage destination; the latter compares the site to Santiago de Compostela, calling it *ail Sain Siâm*, "a second Santiago",<sup>20</sup> while the former, aging and increasingly infirm, expressed the desire to go on pilgrimage to St David's rather than Jerusalem or Rome, both of which were too far and beyond his physical capacities at that time, and St David's had long been an accepted alternative, complete with papal approval: *Roma semel quantum, bis dat Menevia tantum*, i.e. going to Roma once equals going to St David's twice.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not Iolo Goch ever actually made that journey, this little episode shows that St David's was by the late fourteenth century a pilgrimage destination of some repute and tradition, and indeed one which had spread beyond the confines of the cathedral and town to the surrounding landscape. It was famed for the miracles attributed to the saint, of which William Worcestre (d. c., 1482) compiled a list of eleven examples; and it was believed that burial in the cemetery of St David's would "guarantee a safe journey to heaven" to the souls of those laid to rest there.<sup>22</sup>

As far as can be ascertained, the first serious attempt at promoting St David's to archbishopric was made by Bernard (d. 1148), the first Anglo-Norman bishop of Menevia (1115-1147).<sup>23</sup> It appears that the various claims to raise the status of St David's to archbishopric during the Middle Ages can be related to the current political circumstances, as well as to the individual ambitions of those who were behind the attempt in each case. A resurgence of that claim, playing heavily on the symbolic value of St David's, thus took place on several occasions during the twelfth century, in the first case during the episcopate of Bernard, who, "impressed by the

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of Seth, son of Adam, son of God". Evans, Daniel Simon, ed. *Historia Gruffud vab Kenann*, Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1977: 1-2.

18. Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain...*: 230.

19. Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain...*: 172.

20. Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's", *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, Jane Cartwright, ed. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003: 10.

21. See: Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's",....: 10.

22. Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's",....: 11-12.

23. See: Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's",....: 10-25. Note also: Lloyd, John E. *A History of Wales...* II, 486.



historic claims made by his Welsh clergy to the whilom status of St David's as an independent archbishopric", was among the first to bring forward this ambition in a formal manner.<sup>24</sup> In this enterprise Bernard had the support of some of the great and good of the Welsh political scene of the day, foremost among them Owain Gwynedd (d. 1170), followed by his brother, who understood the potential benefits the creation of a Welsh archbishopric would bring to the country, and ultimately to themselves.<sup>25</sup> For Bernard, a Norman cleric, it was perhaps an attempt at the double goal of assimilation, seeking to adapt and fit into his new role, combined with a sizeable portion of personal ambition in the elevation of his own, personal power. By playing the Welsh card, Bernard, in what may be seen as a politically astute strategy, may have sought to gain the confidence of his clergy and parishioners alike. If there had been fears about a Norman intrusion into this most emblematic of Welsh bishoprics, these proved to be unfounded: Rather than turning the see into an administrative post for Norman control over Wales, Bernard embraced the symbolic value of the place and tried to turn its importance in the affection of Welsh clerics and Welsh people to his own advantage. Not only did he display great fervor for the person and cult of Saint David, but he moreover began a series of improvements, culminating in the construction of a new church on the site and the granting of privileges from Pope Calixtus II in 1123.<sup>26</sup> Calixtus II helped raise St David's status considerably. He was allegedly responsible for the canonisation of Saint David in 1120,<sup>27</sup> and it was he who decreed that two pilgrimages to St David's equalled one pilgrimage to Rome, a privilege that was eagerly accepted in Wales.<sup>28</sup> The new cathedral of St David's was consecrated by Bishop Bernard in 1131. As he does about most other things, Giraldus Cambrensis has things to say about Bernard, too. He tells us about the bishop's efforts on behalf of his diocese, noting that "of all the bishops thus deprived of their rank as metropolitans, only one, Bernard, the first Anglo-Norman Bishop of St David's, made any public move to claim back the rights of his own church".<sup>29</sup> Not unlike Giraldus himself, Bernard seems to have been confident in the feeling that his battle was a just one and that what had befallen his diocese was undeserved and hence ought to be corrected. In a heavily symbolic gesture, "when he travelled through Wales", Giraldus comments, "he occasionally had an archbishop's cross carried before him".<sup>30</sup>

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24. Williams, Glanmor. *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976: 5.

25. Williams, Glanmor. *The Welsh Church...*: 5.

26. Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's",...: 13.

27. But note Toynbee, Margate. *Saint Louis of Toulouse and the Process of Canonisation in the Fourteenth Century*, Manchester: Publications of the University of Manchester, 1929: 240, who points out that no canonisation bull survives for David, and who casts doubt on the claim that David was canonised by Calixtus II at all.

28. Evans, John Wyn. "St David and St David's",...: 13.

29. Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales...*: 165.

30. Ironically, Giraldus here moreover accuses the bishop of "insufferable pomposity and ambition": Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 165.



All Bernard's attempts, his several "carefully prepared and extremely expensive appeals to the Roman curia", were ultimately futile.<sup>31</sup> The bishopric of St David's was not raised to metropolitan status and he did not become its archbishop.<sup>32</sup> He did, however, set a firm precedent that was to be revisited by others after his death—including Giraldus Cambrensis. And there is more: he left behind a canonised Saint David and a new cathedral in which to honour him; a diocese, so it would appear, reaffirmed in its Welshness and keenly aware of its complex, if invented, identity.

Later in the same century another cleric dug out St David's claim to metropolitan status. Giraldus Cambrensis, as we have seen, was most keenly aware of what he perceived to be St David's historical entitlement to the status of archbishopric.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he had personal motives: he favoured the elevation of his preferred bishopric, the "venerable and unchallenged mother-church" of Wales—and the one to which he passionately hoped to succeed—for its ancient status and venerability.<sup>34</sup> It is for these motives that he turns to the sources that best reflect his line of argument, among them Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a work for which he otherwise expresses nothing but scorn.<sup>35</sup> In his search for "historical" evidence to support his efforts, Giraldus appears to have no qualms in justifying to himself and his readers this exceptional reliance on Geoffrey of Monmouth, ultimately an immense contradiction, nor does he have any scruples to overlook the chronological impossibilities of his story. In his own *Life of Saint David*, Giraldus makes a direct reference to the saint's association with a Welsh archbishopric.<sup>36</sup> There seems to be no doubt in his mind as to the rightfulness of his claim that St David's had once enjoyed metropolitan status. In his work *De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae*, Giraldus records a conversation between himself and Pope Innocent III (d. 1216) on that topic, during the course of which he explains to the pope, and defends vehemently, the existence of a Welsh archbishopric from the earliest times of Christianity in the British Isles: "When Fagan and Duvianus had converted Britain to Christianity", he tells the pope, "the country was divided into five Metropolitan Provinces, Caerleon, Dorobernia (Canterbury), London, York, and St Andrew's in Scotland, each with a number of suffragans."<sup>37</sup> Giraldus then relates the story of the ancient archbishops

31. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 165.

32. In fact, Bernard's efforts had clearly alarmed the authorities, for his successor, David Fitzgerald (bishop of St David's 1148-76) was made to promise, under oath, not to pursue his predecessor's ambitions for a Welsh archbishopric. See: Williams, Glanmor. *The Welsh Church...*: 5.

33. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 159.

34. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 159.

35. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 117-118 for some scathing musings by Giraldus on Geoffrey of Monmouth's work.

36. *Pater autem Davidcommuni omnium tam cleri scilicet quam populi, electione pariter et acclamatione, cui et honorem antea destinatione Dubricius cesserat, in Kambriae totius archiepiscopum est sublimatus.* Giraldus Cambrensis. "De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae", *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. John Sherren Brewer. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1863: III, 401.

37. Butler, Harold E., ed. *The Autobiography of Gerald of Wales*, Suffolk-Rochester-Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005: 186. See also: Giraldus Cambrensis. "De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae...": III, 169-170 (book 2).





of Wales to Innocent III: “in Wales Dubricius, Archbishop of Caerleon, gave place to David, who transferred the Metropolitan see to Mynwy [Menevia], as was foretold by our prophet Merlin long before”.<sup>38</sup> Giraldus has his historical evidence to hand and is keen to present it to the authorities. He also offers his explanation for the loss of the archbishopric, describing “how [Menevia’s] Metropolitan rank had disappeared when Sampson, the last Archbishop of Mynwy (Menevia), fled overseas to Brittany to escape the plague of jaundice”.<sup>39</sup> Samson, Giraldus explains to the pope, took the *pallium* with him from Menevia to Dol and “down to the time of Bishop Bernard, [the *pallium*] was neither claimed nor recovered”.<sup>40</sup> The story, such as it is told by Giraldus, would make perfect sense, were it not for the fact that the chronology does not fit. It seems certain that the Archbishop Samson who, in the story, flees from Menevia to Brittany, was in real life a contemporary of Saint David, as we have seen. He is therefore unlikely to have been alive still, and for several decades, after Saint David’s death. The chronological impossibilities of the story of the *pallium* do not, however, appear to have much perturbed the medieval audience. The story became popular and was used over the centuries as the accepted explanation for the missing *pallium* of St David’s.

And there is more. It could be argued that beyond Giraldus’s personal ambitions there lay another, perhaps equally personal, force, this time relating to his own troubled identity as a Welshman. In his *Journey through Wales*, Giraldus laments the loss of what he claims to have been the “ancient archbishopric” of St David’s, blaming the Anglo-Saxon invasions for the fate of the Welsh church: “That was how it came about, through indolence or poverty, or more probably as a result of the coming of the English to our island and the never-ending wars with the Saxons, that we Welshmen lost for all time the honour which we had once enjoyed”.<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to note Giraldus’s insistence on his Welshness here, which contrasts starkly with his references to “the Welsh”, always in the third person, throughout his *Description of Wales*.<sup>42</sup> The idea of the elevation of St David’s to metropolitan status, the creation (or, as Giraldus sees it, the *re-creation*) of a Welsh archbishopric, tickles his Welsh pride, but just like Bernard, and despite travelling as far as the Roman Curia, Giraldus ultimately failed to achieve his aim.

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38. Butler, Harold E., ed. *The Autobiography of Gerald of Wales...*: 186-187. See also: Giraldus Cambrensis. “De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae”...: III, 171.

39. Butler, Harold E., ed. *The Autobiography of Gerald of Wales...*: 184. See also: Giraldus Cambrensis. “De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae”...: III, 166.

40. Butler, Harold E., ed. *The Autobiography of Gerald of Wales...*: 185. See also: Giraldus Cambrensis. “De iure et statu meneuensis Ecclesiae”...: III, 167.

41. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 162.

42. In: Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 233. Giraldus Cambrensis introduces his compatriots thus: “The Welsh people are light and agile...”. He proceeds to talk about “the Welsh people” in the third person and with considerable detachment, until Chapter 10 of Book 2 of the *Description*, in which identifies himself as belonging, at least in part, to those people. Having elaborated on how the Welsh might be conquered by the English crown, Giraldus says: “I have set out the case for the English with considerable care and in some detail. I myself am descended from both peoples, and it seems only fair that I should now put the opposite point of view”. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 273.



That the metropolitan question was a political as much as a religious concern can be seen particularly clearly in the case of the third man to raise the campaign during the medieval period. Although the idea of the archbishopric of St David's may never have gone away entirely, it flared up again during the opening years of the fifteenth century, when a third attempt was made at turning St David's into the seat of the archbishop of Wales. The author of this project was Owain Glyn Dŵr (d. 1415?), and the context was his conflict with the English crown at his attempts to be recognised as Prince of Wales.<sup>43</sup> Glyn Dŵr's vision of a Wales that was independent from English authority involved the restructuring of both internal and external affairs. In a now-famous, if disputed, document known as the Tripartite Indenture, Glyn Dŵr, together with Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland (d. 1408), and Edmund Mortimer (d. 1409), and with French support, the three men envisaged the three-way division of England and Wales between themselves. This document, in fact, assigned to Glyn Dŵr a considerable portion of land, extending beyond the current limits of Wales.<sup>44</sup> Along with the repartition of Welsh and English lands among the three men, Glyn Dŵr sketched a vision of a new Wales, independent from England not only in government, but also, crucially, in terms of its church and education. Wales in the fifteenth century had no university of its own; Welsh students attended universities in England (predominantly Oxford) and Europe, leaving political players such as Glyn Dŵr increasingly conscious of the disadvantage that this meant for the country at a time when universities were "increasingly regarded as integral parts of political, territorial units, designed to serve the needs of national institutions and to be of benefit to those living in the realm".<sup>45</sup> The Wales of Glyn Dŵr envisaged the foundation of not one, but two universities, one in the north and one in the south of Wales.<sup>46</sup> In the event his educational vision did not become reality until almost five centuries later.

Glyn Dŵr's design for a restructured Welsh church was more ambitious still and included turning Wales into an independent ecclesiastical province. He proposed to "restore to its original status of archbishopric" the ancient see of St David's. By granting metropolitan status to St David's, Glyn Dŵr sought both ecclesiastical independence from England and a consequent enhancement of a Welsh ecclesiastical identity.<sup>47</sup> The new-old Welsh archbishopric with its seat in St David's would have incorporated not only the existing Welsh bishoprics of Llandaf, St Asaph, and Bangor,

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43. See: Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

44. See: Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain...: 167*, citing from the Tripartite Indenture. According to this document, which some claim to be fake, Glyn Dŵr's portion was to include "the whole of Cambria or Wales divided from Leogria now commonly called England by the following borders, limits and bounds: from the Severn estuary as the River Severn flows from the sea as far as the northern gate of the city of Worcester; from that gate directly to the ash trees known in the Cambrian or Welsh language as Onennau Meigion which grow on the high road leading from Bridgnorth to Kinver; then directly along the highway, popularly known as the old or ancient road, to the head or source of the River Trent; thence to the head or source of the river commonly known as the Mersey and so along that river to the sea."

45. Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain...: 171*.

46. Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain...: 171*.

47. Davies, John. *A History of Wales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993: 202.



as well as St David's itself, but it would moreover have assumed authority over the English bishoprics of Bath, Exeter, Hereford, Worcester and Coventry and Lichfield. As Rees Davies explains, this apparently "fantastic" programme had its origins in the current 'ecclesiastical mythology', which alleged that the five English bishoprics had in fact once been part of the ancient Welsh archbishopric of St David's, from as early as the days of Saint David himself, to those of Samson of Dol, his twenty-fifth successor.<sup>48</sup> There was also some emphasis on the use of the Welsh tongue, on those who could 'speak our language' among clerics.<sup>49</sup>

Over the centuries, on the various occasions that Welsh churchmen and politicians campaigned for metropolitan status of St David's, each of the campaigners drew on the 'evidence' compiled by those who had made the claim before him. Giraldus Cambrensis, it would appear, must have had access to the documents, or at least been intimately familiar with the information compiled a few decades earlier by Bishop Bernard of St David's, to which he added his own pieces of information. Among the items cited by the three men (Bernard, Giraldus and Glyn Dŵr) is a list of archbishops of St David's. Giraldus reproduces this list in his *Journey through Wales*, where he tells us that "from the time of David onwards, twenty-five archbishops occupied the see of St David's down the years". He then proceeds to name them:

First came David himself, then Eliud also called Theliau, Keneu, Morwal, Haernueu, Elwaid, Gurnueu, Leudiwit, Gorwiust, Gogaun, Cleauc, Aman, Eludged, Elduven, Elave, Mailswid, Sadurnueu, Catalus, Sulhathuai, Novis, another Sadurnueu, Doithwal, Asser, Archuail and Samson.<sup>50</sup>

John E. Lloyd comments that the Samson who appears in the list of archbishops of St David's, "though separated from Dewi [David] by some twenty names, was the Samson of saintly renown, who was, in fact, Dewi's contemporary and never ruled at Mynwy [Menevia] at all".<sup>51</sup> Giraldus tells us that, upon succeeding Dyfrig, archbishop of Wales at Caerleon-on-Usk, to this honour, David took the decision not to stay in Caerleon, despite this being, in his words "much more suited to be[ing] a metropolitan city", but to move the archbishopric to Menevia instead.<sup>52</sup> At Menevia stood David's monastery, and it is the place that has come to be associated with the saint above all others. But it was not always thus. In fact, and while we are in the land of legends, the territory that is now so firmly David's had originally been associated with another holy man, or even two, namely Saint Patrick, better known for his missionary work among the Irish people, and Saint Justinian. Both men have dedications in the area, including two chapels known as "St Patrick's Chapel" and "St Justinian's Chapel" respectively, just west of the cathedral of St David's, and

48. Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain...*: 172.

49. Rees Davies, Robert. *The Revolt of Owain...*: 171-172; Davies, John. *A History...*: 202.

50. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 161-162.

51. Lloyd, John. *A History...*: II, 486.

52. "It was David who had the archbishopric moved to St David's". Gerald of Wales. *The Journey through Wales...*: 160.



according to J. Wyn Evans, “the original saint culted at Menevia could well have been either Patrick or Justinian”.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to being firmly associated, at least by the time of Bishop Bernard, with Menevia, David was said, by his biographer Rhigyfarch, to be responsible for the foundation of a whole series of important churches in England and Wales, and as his cult grew, so did the importance of this allegation. According to Rhigyfarch, David founded churches at Glastonbury, Bath, Crowland, as well as Raglan, Repton and Leominster, making him a more important figure still.<sup>54</sup>

The story may have been current in medieval Wales, and it clearly had its defenders, whether or not they actually believed it. More important, I would argue, is that people used the story and repeated it as they saw fit. But not everyone would agree with this view. Indeed, the historian of Wales John Edward Lloyd seems to have taken issue with the fabrication of the metropolitan legend and its use (or abuse) by ambitious twelfth-century churchmen seeking to rewrite history in order to make it fit their own story. Having cast aside the diverse elements of the “historical evidence” presented in the documents used by the likes of Bernard and Giraldus, Lloyd exclaims that “no evidence exists, apart from the worthless testimony of the letter to Eugenius in Giraldus Cambrensis [...] that the bishops of St David’s ever exercised any authority over the other bishops of Wales”.<sup>55</sup>

One thing is clear: St David’s became a greatly popular pilgrimage location and was, by Bishop Bernard’s time in the early twelfth century, so well established that he not only achieved the saint’s canonisation, but moreover got to build a new, grander cathedral in which to celebrate David’s cult. Pilgrims, among them royal ones, were visiting the shrine, miracles were being recorded.<sup>56</sup> Pope Calixtus II had just declared the matter of the two journeys to St David’s equalling one journey to Rome. Business was going well. And this takes us the issue of St David’s relics. Because, despite the grand new building built to accommodate the saint’s cult, his relics, it emerges, were conspicuously absent. Despite his efforts, Bishop Bernard did not find Saint David’s physical relics. From William of Malmesbury we know about Bernard’s search for David’s bones, and we also know that he failed to locate them.<sup>57</sup> According to Saint David’s hagiographer, Rhigyfarch, David was “laid to

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53. Evans, John Wyn. “St David and St David’s”,...: 15. Note also the map reproduced in the same book as Figure 1.2. According to tradition, Saint Patrick wanted to settle in the place known as *Vallis Rosina*, but was made to understand that this same site was reserved by God for another saint, David, not yet born: Evans, John Wyn. “Transition and Survival”, *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, John Wyn Evans, Jonathan M. Wooding, eds. Woodbridge – Boydell & Brewer: Suffolk-Rochester, 2007: 29.

54. Rhigyfarch. *Buched Dewi*, ed. Daniel Simon Evans. Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1959: 6. “And then David came to Glastonbury, and there he built a church” (*Odyna y doeth Dewi hyd yng Glastynbri, ac yno yd adeilyawd efe glwys*).

55. Lloyd, John. *A History...*: II, 486.

56. Henry II is known to have made the pilgrimage to St David’s in 1171; William I had done so earlier. Vincent, Nicolas. “Pilgrimages of the Angevin Kings of England”, *Pilgrimage: the English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, Colin Morris, Peter Roberts, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 24.

57. Evans, John Wyn. “St David and St David’s”,...: 13.



rest within his monastery”, but his bones were not to be found there, it seems.<sup>58</sup> Similarly problematic was the issue of Saint David’s secondary relics, of which the poet Gwynfardd Brycheiniog tells us in a lengthy poem in the saint’s honour: his bell *bangu*, the altar covered in skins, a gift to David from the patriarch of Jerusalem, and the golden pastoral staff; but at least their whereabouts were known. *Bangu*, David’s bell, was kept at Glasgwm in Elfael, the altar was at Llangyfelach, and the golden pastoral staff seems to have been kept at Llanddewibrefi.<sup>59</sup>

In this example of a creation of ecclesiastical identity, the bishopric of St David’s becomes a historically legitimate archbishopric that could trace its origins to the earliest days of Christianity in the British Isles and had the documents to “prove” it, and that had at its heart a much-venerated local saint and a miracle-working shrine that brought in the pilgrims. There remains the issue of the relics, which must have given those keen to promote St David’s as a pilgrimage destination considerable headaches; but the pilgrims kept coming and miracles were reported.<sup>60</sup>

To what extent the successive authors of St David’s claim to metropolitan status were aware of the shaky ground on which they constructed their ‘historical’ evidence seems to matter less than the fervour which with they pursued their ambition.

In the end, St David’s, archbishopric or not, held a special place in the Welsh imagination throughout the Middle Ages, and even during the closing years of the sixteenth century George Owen, with patriotic pride, spoke of our “ancient and famous cathedral and sometime metropolitan church” of St David’s.<sup>61</sup> Whether it was foremost national pride, personal ambition, or desperation that drove different generations of clerics and politicians to return time and again to the ‘evidence’ for St David’s superior status, the special place the see and its cathedral held in the affection of the Welsh people remained undiminished, and among the later medieval Welsh poets St David’s reputation was untainted, relics or no.

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58. See: Sharpe, Richard; Davies, John Reuben. “Rhigyfarch’s ‘Life’ of St David”, *St David of Wales*, eds. John Wyn Evans, Jonathan Wooding. Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2007: 151 (paragraph 66): “And so his [David’s] body, borne in the arms of the holy brethren, accompanied by a great retinue, and committed to the earth with honour, was laid to rest in his monastery”.

59. See: Owen, Morfydd E. “Prolegomena to a study of the historical context of Gwynfardd Brycheiniog’s poem to Dewi”. *Studia Celtica*, 26-27 (1991-1992): 51-79; also Owen, Morfydd E. “Canu i Ddewi”, *Gwaith Llywelyn Fardd I ac Eraill o Feirdd y Ddeuddegfed Ganrif*, Kathleen Anne Bramley, Llywelyn Fardd, Morfydd E. Owen, eds. Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1994.

60. During his lifetime, David had been associated, among others, with a miracle about which John Davies in his *History of Wales* remarked that “one can scarcely conceive of any miracle more superfluous in that part of Wales”, namely the miraculous lifting of the ground beneath David’s feet during a sermon, creating a hill. Davies, John. *History of Wales*...: 74.

61. Owen of Henllys, George. “Dialogue of the Government of Wales”, *Description of Pembrokeshire*. London: Bedford, 1906: III, 38, cited in Williams, Glanmor. *The Welsh Church*...: 6.

