

De Situ Brecheniauc and *Englynion Y Beddau*: Writing about Burial in Early Medieval Wales

David Petts

Early medieval archaeology has always had an uneasy relationship with textual evidence, bouncing between over optimistic uses of written sources to interpret both events and processes recognised in the archaeological record to the cynical rejection of the value of historical evidence and approaches to the study of material culture.¹ The use of written evidence to illuminate early medieval attitudes and practices surrounding death, burial and commemoration have a particularly long history of use and abuse. All too often, certain prominent texts, such as the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, have been employed as illustrations of early medieval burial practices.² This approach focuses on extracting nuggets of *realia* from the texts to confirm archaeological interpretations, as if texts record first-hand observations or objective recollections of mortuary practices. Texts are often adduced to supplement archaeological evidence, and in doing so, material culture serves merely as an addendum or illustration to the written sources of the period. A range of early medieval Welsh texts, such as the *Englynion y Beddau*, *Marwnad Cynddylan* and the *Historia Brittonum* have been used in this manner to explicate early Welsh burial practices.³

It is important to acknowledge the complexity of such exercises. Whilst documentary evidence may certainly shed light on contemporary and past burial practice in some instances, the relationship between text and practice is a complex one. It is important to understand the social and political context in which the text was produced, the choices and selections made in how mortuary rites are portrayed and the possible literary elaborations to which texts can be subject. Rather than the wholesale adoption or rejection of the written evidence for inform our understanding of early medieval mortuary practices, this paper suggests that a fruitful way forward lies in regarding both as meaningful 'discourses' involving both ideas and practices. In this light, early medieval literature and archaeological evidence were not two separate strands running along in parallel, yet separate, tracks. Instead, as this paper will show, the wider threads of

discourse about death and burial that ran through early medieval Welsh society was expressed in a dialogue between the textual record and mortuary practice in a recursive relationship with each other. By exploring the ways in which two texts, the *Englynion y Beddau* and *De Situ Brecheniauc*, wrote about burials and mortuary monuments, I want to try and explore the discursive relationship between text and material culture in early medieval Wales. While this is not the place to review the rich corpus of archaeological evidence for burials, cemeteries as well as inscribed and sculpted monuments of early medieval Wales, the paper hopes to illustrate that both texts, graves and monuments formed part of an emerging ideology and practice about the role of burial and commemoration in society from the ninth to the eleventh centuries AD.

Englynion y Beddau

The text most frequently adduced in discussions of burial in early medieval Wales is the collection of three-line *englynion* (stanzas) known collectively as the *Englynion y Beddau* (Stanzas of the Grave) or *Beddau Milwyr ynys Prydein* (The Graves of the warriors of the Island of Britain).⁴ This consists of 73 stanzas describing the mythical burial places of famous, and not so famous, Welsh warriors. The stanzas have been recorded from several sources, but the most extensive collection comes from the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, the earliest version dating from the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Although no known manuscript examples predate AD 1000, consensus, based on the metrical patterns and textual history, points to a ninth/tenth century date.⁵

The verses seem to be full of evidence for burial in barrows and cairns in a variety of topographical locations: on the seashore, on mountains, by rivers, in churches and at fortified sites. It is noticeable, however, that out of all the graves mentioned only six are located in ecclesiastical contexts. Dylan is buried at Llanfeuno which can probably be identified as Clynnog Fawr in

Caernarvonshire⁶ and the grave of Ceri Long-sword is placed 'in the churchyard of Corbre' at Heneglwys in Anglesey,⁷ Cynon is buried at Llanbadarn,⁸ Owain ab Urien at Llanforfael⁹ and Llemenig is buried at Llanelwy, probably St Asaph.¹⁰ It is this rarity of church burial that should warn against using the *Englynion y Beddau* for understanding contemporary (ninth/tenth century) burial practice, let alone earlier rites. Whilst it is hard to be certain about the date that churchyard burial became dominant in early medieval Wales, archaeological and written evidence would suggest that it was likely to have been commonplace by the time the *Englynion y Beddau* were composed. The kings of Gwynedd were burying at Llangadwaladr by the end of the seventh century¹¹ and the crosses from Llantwit Major¹² suggest that it was a royal burial site in the tenth century. Other documentary evidence, such as *De Situ Brecheniauc* and *Cognacio Brychan* suggest that in the tenth century churches were seen as the appropriate place for royal burial. Equally unlike Type 1 stones, the seventh- to tenth-century Type 2 cross-marked stones are found almost exclusively on ecclesiastical sites and excavations at ecclesiastical centres such as Llandough show a long-sequence of burials from the seventh century onwards.

It is clear that the *Englynion y Beddau* do not record contemporary burial practices, but neither is there reason to believe that the mortuary practices of earlier generations were being accurately portrayed. This is because while cairns, mounds and graves with structures are known dated to sixth to ninth centuries AD from Wales, they do not correspond in any direct way with the descriptions recorded in the *Englynion y Beddau*. Nonetheless, the source does seem to be deliberately conjure up a vision of monuments that serves to connect the contemporary landscape to a perceived, mythical past. Indeed, it has even been suggested that the use of the old-fashioned three-line englynion form rather than the more usual four-line englynion form was a deliberate 'archaicizing' literary device.¹³ If so, then the subject matter and literary style unify to strengthen the message.

There is also other evidence to suggest that this group of poems is not describing a simple historical past, but a more subjective mythic past. Whilst not all of the warriors mentioned in the *Englynion y Beddau* are identifiable, there are at least three groups of recognisable individuals. The first group, and in some ways the most 'historic' are a group of heroes usually identified with the 'Old North', the *gwr y gogledd*: Rhydderch the Generous, Owain ab Urien and Cynon ap Clydno Eidyn.¹⁴ Their historical context is in the northern kingdoms of Strathclyde, Rheged and Gododdin. In the poems, however, they are localised in a Welsh geographical context; Owain ab Urien is buried in Llangorfael and Rhydderch at Aberech.¹⁵

A second overlapping group includes those associated with the emerging Arthurian cycle, such as Bedwyr, Gwalchmai, Cynon, March and Gwythur,¹⁶ though it is

recorded that the grave of Arthur himself was 'the wonder of the world', as its location was unknown. Again, although perhaps originally from a Northern British context, they too were localised in Wales.

The final group includes individuals who were probably euphemised pre-Christian gods that may have survived in Christian culture as heroes, such as Dylan and Lleu Lawgyffes.¹⁷ Most of the other names mentioned are otherwise unknown, but Jones has suggested that many of the names were eponyms derived from the names of landscape features. For example, he equates Epynt with the Epynt mountain, near Llangamarch.¹⁸ In other cases individuals are related to well known landscape features:

- 20 Three graves of three steadfast ones are on a
conspicuous hill
in Pant Gwyn Gwynionog
Mor and Meilu and Madog.

Looking at these groups of identifiable individuals it is clear that many of the stanzas in the *Englynion y Beddau* are not historicizing the Welsh landscape, but mythologizing it. It is one of the few examples of topographical and onomastic lore known from the early Welsh poetic tradition. Two verses describing the route of rivers are found in *Canu Heledd* but there is nothing comparable to the Irish metrical *dindsenchas*. However, there are Irish parallels in a group of tenth century poems from Leinster, such as 'On the Graves of the Leinster Men', written in 972 by Broccán the Pious of the monastery at Clonmore.

A few earlier examples of topographical lore can be found within Wales. The best-known examples are the 'Wonders of Britain' from the *Historia Brittonum*.¹⁹ These *mirabilia* first appear in the Harleian text derived from a redaction of AD 829/30. In this short collection, however, the emphasis is on miraculous properties of certain sites, such as unmeasurable tombs or apples growing on an ash tree, rather than linking the wonders to particular historical or mythical stories.²⁰ Even when one of the sites is connected with a named individual, such as Amr, son of Arthur,²¹ it is the miraculous nature of the site rather than its historical context that justifies its mention. However, these examples are operating in a different genre to the *englynion y beddau* in which the locations are made significant by the presence of the individual warriors, and there is a notable lack of any significant supernatural elements.

This mythologization of the Welsh landscape is best seen in the context of the time in which it was written down. The ninth and tenth centuries were a period of great tension in the Welsh kingdoms, caught between the expanding Saxon kingdoms to the east and the Danes, known as the 'Black Gentiles', threatening from Ireland and Scotland to the west and north. It is noticeable that at least two of the groups of the identifiable individuals in the *Englynion y Beddau*, the Arthurian group and the

gwyr y gogledd, were known for their struggles against Anglo-Saxon expansion. Arthur was associated with the battles of Badon and Camlan. There is also an explicit reference to the Battle of Camlan in the text:

- 12 The grave of Osfran's Son is at Camlan,
after many a slaughter;
the grave of Bedwyr is on Tryfan Hill.

It is possible that these graves were believed to have been in Merioneth, where the village of Camlan (SH 85 12), is 12 km south of Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake), which is associated with Morfran, son of Tegid, who was believed to have escaped the Battle of Camlan. Also 18km from Camlan is Twyn where a fourteenth century praise-poem to St Cadfan alluded to Osfran in a positive light.²²

It is in this context that the stanzas can be best appreciated: they literally write a history of resistance to invaders of the landscape of Wales. Indeed, there is even an overt reference to warfare against the Saxons.

- 16 Whose is the grave of good repute
who would lead a compact host against Lloegr
[England]?
The grave of Gwên, son of Llywarch is this

The warriors with names are eponymous with landscape features were therefore connected to the Welsh countryside onomastically, and there is evidence to suggest that some of the sites mentioned were actually prehistoric monuments: prominent ancient sites whose original construction was lost in time. The description of the graves at Gwanas may suggest that a megalithic chambered tomb was being referred to, possibly one that had been robbed out and explored without notable discoveries:

- 29 The long graves on Gwanas, –
they who despoiled them did not discover
what they were, what their mission was.
- 30 The war-band of Oeth and Anoeth came thither
to their man, to their servant;
let him who would seek them dig Gwanas

The possible references to treasure being found in the graves, may suggest the discovery of prehistoric grave-goods, considering the lack of a tradition of grave-goods in early medieval Welsh graves:

- 60 The grave of Taflogau, son of Lludd is in his
homestead yonder,
as he is in his durance,
whoso would dig it would find treasure.

Equally the references to four-sided stone graves may well be better understood as the remains of prehistoric monuments, rather than looking for parallels with Pictish cairns or the early medieval squarebarrows at Tandderwen:

- 63 Whose is the four-sided grave
with its four stones at its head?
The grave of Madawg, fierce horseman.

Jones has also identified the grave of Dylan, with the standing stone, known as Maen Dylan close to Clynnog Fawr, on the beach between Aberdesach and Pontlyfni. He has also suggested that the three graves of Cynon, Cynfael and Cynfeli, recorded as being on Cefn Celfi²³ may be identified as the three standing stones, on the farm of Cefn Celfi, near Neath.²⁴

The poem transforms the landscape of Wales with its landmarks, both natural and prehistoric, into a landscape of resistance to Saxon and Danish incursions. The emphasis on landmarks and legendary heroes with a tradition of defending Wales serves to place the *Englynion y Beddau* as part of the arsenal of literary weapons built by the Welsh in the tenth century against the English and the Vikings. This means that any attempt to use the stanzas as a way to directly understand fifth- to seventh-century burial practice must be carried out with extreme caution. Whilst there may certainly be echoes of earlier burial practices, they are to be understood through a ninth- or tenth-century lens. Whether burial sites of a fifth- to seventh-century date were being accurately remembered or not, it does appear that the composers of the *Englynion y beddau* were interpreting and portraying mortuary monuments in a mythological rather than an 'historical' or 'archaeological' manner.

But how can it help us better understand strategies of mortuary behaviour in ninth- and tenth-century Wales? It seems that this appreciation of the literature as a means by which death and landscape were mythologized, sheds new light on at least one unusual burial site from the period, namely the unique memorial known as the Pillar of Eliseg.²⁵ This is a curious structure, drawing from a range of traditions in an unusual act of cultural *bricolage* that created a unique memorial. The column may have originally been surmounted by a cross head and is clearly inspired by eighth- and ninth-century Mercian cross-shafts. Like the Mercian monuments, the sculpture may have evoked links with Rome and the Roman past through its form and also the commemorative context of royal power and ecclesiastical patronage. However, the extensive inscription records that it was set up by the King of Powys, Cyngen, who died in 856. It carries a genealogy of the kings of Powys linking them back to the mythical fifth-century British king Vortigern and the Roman imperial usurper Magnus Maximus. It connects this mythical past to the prestige of Cyngen's recent ancestors, recording the success of Cyngen's grandfather, Eliseg, in warfare against the English. In the 840s or early 850s, when it was probably erected, the kingdom of Powys was again suffering from increased pressure from both Anglo-Saxons. Aethelwulf was probably raiding into Powys in 853, and there may have been attacks from the increasingly powerful

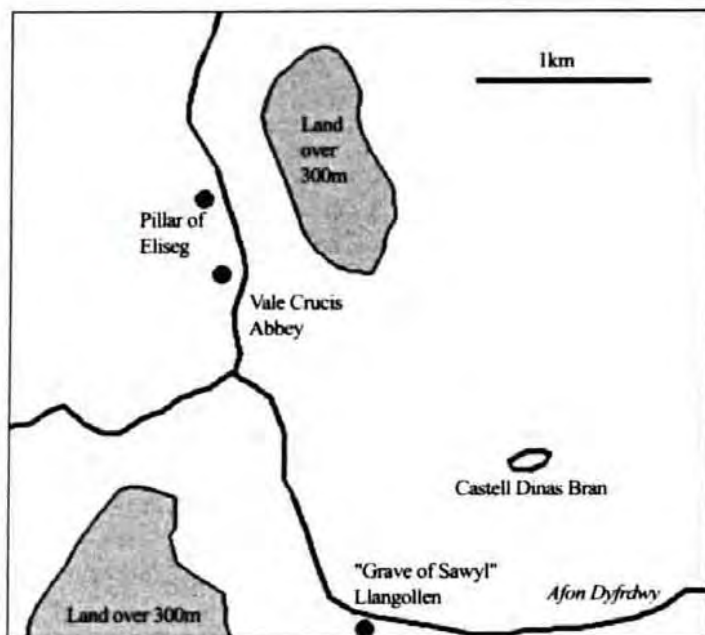


Figure 1. The environs of the Pillar of Eliseg, Denbighshire

kingdom of Gwynedd under the leadership of Merfyn Frych and Rhodri Mawr.²⁶

The cross with its surviving commemorative column was only one element of the monument. The stone itself lies on an earth mound – a unique position for a mid-ninth century memorial stone. Antiquarian investigation in the eighteenth century revealed a stone cist and a silver coin. It has been suggested that these were the remains of a prehistoric burial and that it was a case of the early medieval re-use of an earlier medieval barrow.²⁷ However, there is extensive evidence for early medieval re-use of burials and there is no reason to assume that this burial was not early medieval in date.²⁸ Consequently, the memorial could have been raised on a site that Cyngen knew (or believed or even invented) as the burial mound of one of his ancestors.

I would argue that as well as using Anglo-Saxon sculptural traditions and Welsh genealogical traditions, this monument also has a dialogue with either the *Englynion y Beddau* or related contemporary traditions which placed the graves of heroes, notably those who had resisted foreign invasion (in this context foreign referring to the English and the kingdom of Gwynedd), at prominent burial mounds. Ultimately, this ideological weapon was not a success; Cyngen was forced into exile where he died. He was the last recorded king of Powys until the last quarter of the eleventh century. Be that as it may, the monument can be interpreted as a statement of resistance to Mercian hegemony, made more effective through its adoption of Mercian commemorative iconography to achieve this.

Intriguingly, one of the *Englynion y Beddau*, interpolated into the body of the Llywarch Hen poems includes references to sites in the vicinity of the Pillar of Eliseg:

Bed Gwell yn y Riw Velen

The grave of Gwell in
Y Rhiw Felen

Bed Sawyll yn Llan Gollen

The grave of Sawyll in
Llangollen

Gwercheidw llam yr
bwch Lloryen

Llorien guards
'roebuck's leap'

This seems to place at least two legendary burial sites in the same general area as the Pillar of Eliseg (Fig. 1). The grave of Sawyll, one of the sons of Lywarch Hen is in Llangollen. Patrick Sims-Williams has pointed out that there was a site named Rhiwfelen only about 5 miles from Llangollen.²⁹

Within its more immediate vicinity, the Pillar did not stand alone. Although the adjacent Valle Crucis Abbey was not built until 1201, an earlier settlement stood at the site. Its name, Llanegwestl, is a clear indication that a church also stood in the immediate environs, suggesting that Eliseg's Pillar was only one element of an dispersed elite landscape possibly incorporating both secular residences and a monastic complex.³⁰ It can be seen that the Pillar of Eliseg was not only drawing on a generalised tradition associating the burials of heroes with mounds and prehistoric monuments, but more importantly, a tradition which was already expressed locally in written and perhaps also in oral traditions. We see here interplay between text and material culture. It is not possible to say which influenced which, rather, together they created a story about the tombs of heroes as guardians of the landscape against foreign incursions to produce a new mythology about the Welsh landscape. This tradition reached into earlier burial traditions and linked them with historical traditions, both oral and textual. It must have influenced the construction and subsequent interpretation of sites such as the Pillar of Eliseg and the other ninth- and tenth-century re-used barrows. For example, the cross-incised stone from Ty'n y Cae, Nefyn (Caernarvonshire) was reputed to have been erected on a mound in which bones had been found.³¹ Intriguingly, this stone stood on a boundary between Pistyll and Nefyn parishes. Another example is the ring-cross associated with a probable prehistoric standing stone at Llechgynfarwy.³²

Without knowing about the *Englynion y Beddau* we cannot fully understand the significance of the inscription and form of the Pillar of Eliseg nor its siting on an earth mound. The textual evidence allows us to move from an abstract concept about the use of a mound as a marker of territoriality,³³ such as is common in interpreting the early medieval use of mounds for burial sites,³⁴ to a contextually-specific understanding of monument reuse, linking into clearly defined discourses about the relationship between burial, landscape and defence against aggression.

It is important to be aware of the diversity of content within the *Englynion y Beddau*. They should be seen as a collection of poems, rather than a single body of work. As such, despite the theme of burial places that they share,

the actual way the theme is explored varies considerably. As has been noted 'the stanzas combine the lore of place-names with lists of heroes... in some the commemoration of the hero being the more important and the location of the grave remaining vague'.³⁵ These stanzas were clearly exploring a range of issues beyond simply burial, whilst they partly functioned to graft the stories of the past heroes to the present landscape, the situation was not this clear cut. The references to the long graves on Gwanas note that it was not known who was buried there,³⁶ and many heroes are given no precise burial place. However, whilst some stanzas appear to be 'elegiac poetry for its own sake',³⁷ there is a still a clear thread running through the verses linking quasi-historical events to real places.

Whilst the *Englynion y Beddau* were ultimately committed to paper it is probable that they were primarily intended to be heard rather than read. Whether recorded on manuscript or committed to memory, the main purpose of the stanzas was to be performed. References in stanza 42–3 mention bardic training, indicating that it is most likely that the poem would have indeed been recited by a bard. In royal household this is most likely to have been either the *pencerdd* (chief poet) or *bardd teulu* (poet of the warband).³⁸ The role of the *bardd teulu* is significant in this context. The Welsh Law of Hywel Dda record that the bard was to declaim whilst plunder was being divided and or when the bodyguard was setting off on a raid.³⁹ This declamation was intended to inspire the warrior; the poem to be recited in the Iorweth redaction of the laws was meant to be *Unbeiniaeth Prydain* (The Sovereignty of Britain). It has been suggested that this was an alternate name of the *Armes Prydain*.⁴⁰ It is probable that this is precisely the kind of context in which the *Englynion y Beddau* would have been recited. The recorded text suggests that there was an element of interplay between the orator and the audience:

Stanza 46 Whose is this grave and this?
Question me for I know it....

As well as providing entertainment, it is likely that such

interplay provided a mechanism that prevented the reciter from changing or altering the content of the poem excessively. This control over content is profoundly important if the political and ideological content of the stanzas is acknowledged. In the same way that the audience acted as a control on shifts of content and interpretation in the oral and textual tradition, the same process may well have taken place between the poems and the actual burial record. The burials and the poems both acted as mechanisms that informed the interpretation of the other, but also acted to constrain the way in which they were understood. This recursive ideological buttressing would have acted to check any attempts to contest the political narratives embedded within their structure.

De Situ Brecheniauc and Cognacio Brychan

This emphasis on the burial of mythological figures at significant points in the natural landscape and rarely at church sites contrasts with the short sections on burial found in the two early medieval Welsh texts known as *De Situ Brecheniauc* and *Cognacio Brychan* (CB), probably written in or near Brecon. *De Situ Brecheniauc* (DSB) (On the circumstances of Brychan) is first known from a larger manuscript collection that may have been put together around 1200, perhaps at Monmouth Priory (BL Cotton Vespasian A xiv). The *Cognacio Brychan* (CB) (The Kin of Brychan) is only known from a transcript made at Brecon by Sir John Prise (1502–55), but probably originally derived from an earlier lost manuscript, possibly of thirteenth century in date.⁴¹ Although in their current form they are probably date no earlier than the late eleventh century, they deal so specifically with the royal dynasty of Brycheiniog that they were almost certainly compiled at an ecclesiastical centre with close links to the ruling family. Brycheiniog ceased to exist as a polity in the late tenth century, giving a rough *terminus ante quem* for the creation.⁴²

Both follow a similar pattern—outlining the circumstances of birth, career and death of the early king Brychan (dated to approximately the sixth century), the

Table 1. Comparison of sections of the 'Brychan documents' dealing with the burial sites of Brychan and his kin. Latin taken from Wade-Evans (1944) and the English translation from Thomas (1994, 137–40)

De Situ Brecheniauc

Sepulchrum Brachan est in insula, que vocatur Enys Brachan, que est iuxta Manniam.

Sepulchrum Rein filii Brachan in Landeuailac

Sepulchrum in Kannauc Merther in Brecheniauc

Sepulchrum Anlauch, ante hostium ecclesie de Lanespetit'

The grave of Brachan is in the island called Enys Brachan, which is next to Mannia. The grave of Rein, son of Brachan, in Landeuailac. The grave of Kannauc, Merthir in Brecheniauc. The grave of Anlauch, before the door of the church of Llanespit .

Cognacio Brychan

Brichan iacet in Mynav

In valle, qui dicitur Vall[is] Br[I]cha

Anllach iacet ante hostium ecclesie Llanyspidit

Reyn, filius Brichan, iacet apud Llanvaubo

Sepulchrum Kynauc in Merthy Kynauc in Brecheniauc;

Brichan lies in Mynau in the valley which is called Vallis Bichan. Anllach lies before the door of the church at Llanyspydyt. Reyn, son of Brychan, lies at Llanvayloc. The grave of Kynauc, in Merthyr Kynauc in Brecheiniawc.

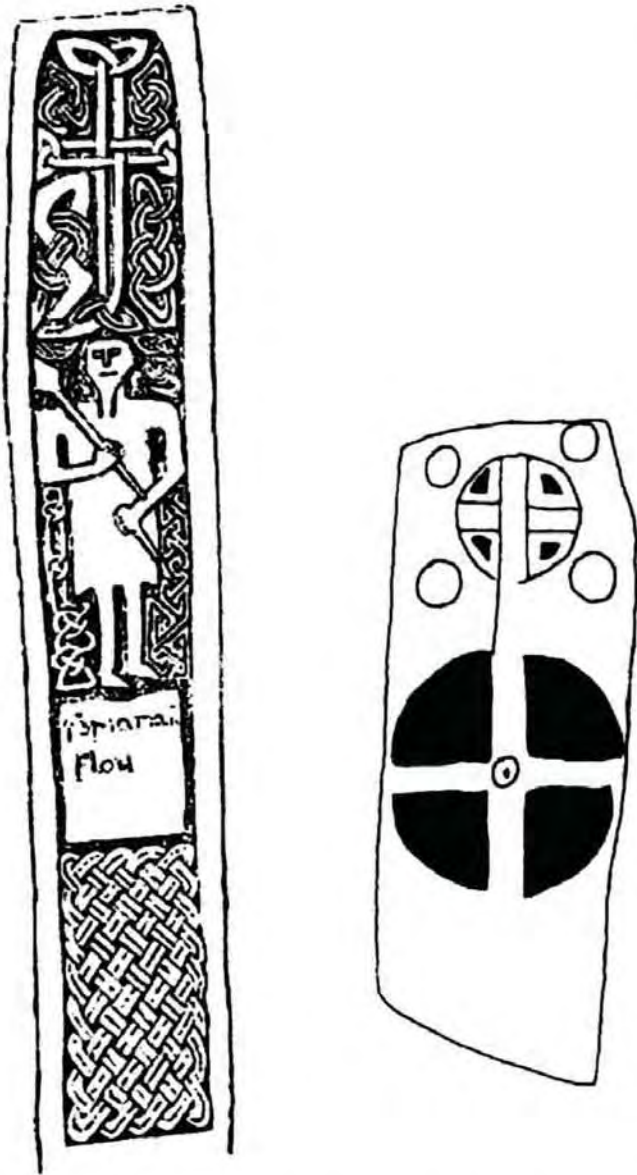


Figure 2. Images of inscribed stones (a) Llandyfaelog Fach (Brecks); (b) Llansbyddydd (Brecks)

founder of the eponymous kingdom of Brycheiniog. Both also contain genealogical material relating to Brychan's descendents. Finally, and importantly for this paper, they also contain similar sections noting the burial places of Brychan and his immediate family.)

Both are very similar, and clearly identify the burial places of the king and his sons. The three sons of Brychan are all buried in churches. The burial place of Rein has been identified with Llandyfaelog Fach (Brecks) which lies about two miles to the north of Brecon. By the tenth century this was clearly a burial site of some importance because two inscribed stones have been recorded coming from the site. One, now lost, is too poorly known to make any guesses about its date, but the second is an unusual Type 3 stone with a rare depiction of a warrior (Fig. 2a).⁴³ The grave of Kennauc is found at Merthyr Cynog and Annlauch at Llansbyddydd,

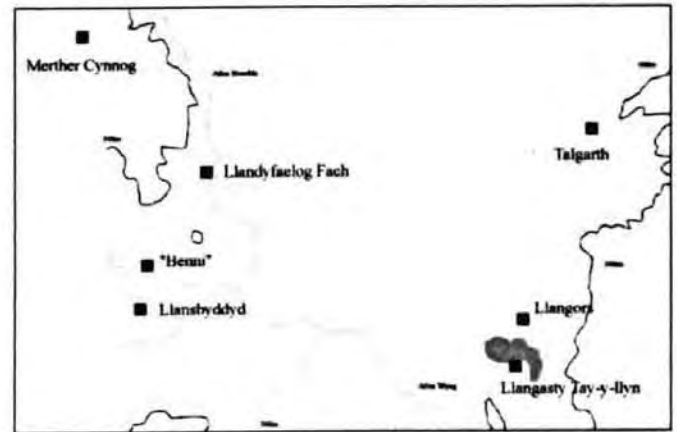


Figure 3. Location of sites mentioned in Brychan documents

another church that has produced a carved cross stone (Fig. 2b). Both versions record that he was buried *ante hostium* – before the doors. Interestingly, the twelfth-century Life of St Cadog contains a foundation legend for this church, suggesting it was founded by the saint, Brychan's grandson, who was given the land by his grandfather after he was miraculously fed by a mouse that had a cache of wheat concealed within a tumulus nearby.⁴⁴

Several attempts have been made to identify the burial site of Brychan himself (Mannia/Mynau). Charles Thomas suggested that he was buried on Lundy Island before being translated to Hartland.⁴⁵ In a review of Thomas's book Philip Bartholomew suggested that the crannog at Llangorse might be a better candidate.⁴⁶ This is an equally unlikely location, particularly considering that excavation has shown that the crannog dates to the late ninth or tenth century AD, several hundred years after Brychan's death.⁴⁷

Apart from the site of Brychan's burial, the others are all securely located in the heartland of the kingdom of Brycheiniog, close to other significant ecclesiastical and royal sites (Fig. 3). For example, other sites mentioned in the Brychan documents include 'Garth Matrun' (probably Talgarth), Llansefin, Meidrim, 'Benni' (probably the hillfort near the mouth of the Ysgir). Important ecclesiastical sites mentioned include those noted as burials sites and Llangasty Tal-y-llyn close to Llangorse lake and its crannog. Another reference to the burial site of a king of Brycheiniog is also known, a charter granting *Lann Cors* to Llandaffin which King Awst of Brycheiniog (fl. first half of the eighth century) makes reference to Llangorse as the proposed burial place of himself and his sons.⁴⁸

The most intriguing aspect of these two Brychan texts is the lack of similar, biographical histories of secular figures from this date. Instead, they appear to have many of the hallmarks of contemporary hagiographical writing. Most of our early Welsh hagiographic material belongs to the eleventh to twelfth centuries, such as the *vitae*

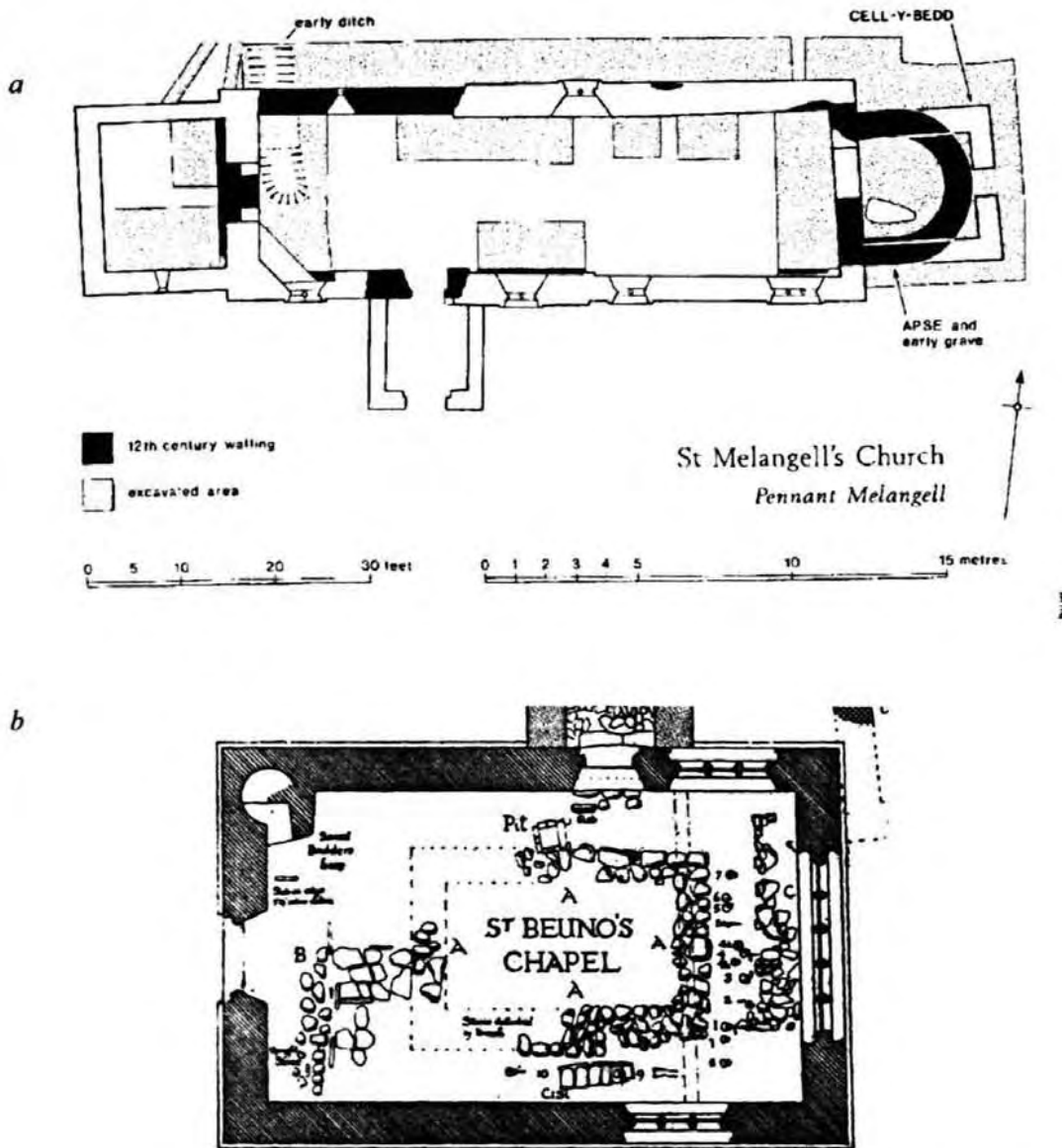


Figure 4. Archaeological evidence for shrines and holy graves (a) Pennant Melangell (Powys); (b) Clynog Fawr (Caernarvonshire)

incorporated into the Book of Llandaff, Rhigyfarch's Life of St David and Lifris' Life of St Cadog. However, there was certainly an earlier tradition of writing stories about Saints lives; the life of Saint Samson dates to between the seventh and ninth centuries (broadly contemporary with the Brychan documents). Although written in Brittany, probably at Landevennec, the connections between the Breton and Welsh church were extensive. Indeed the author of the Vita claimed to have borrowed from the Acta of Saint Samson, which had been brought overseas by Henoc, the Saint's cousin. It is equally likely that the eleventh to twelfth century Welsh saints lives were drawing on earlier hagiographical material, though clearly rewritten for a contemporary audience.

The broad parallels between the Brychan documents and the saint's life take a number of forms including the emphasis on lineage and ancestry, the recording of

miraculous events and the emphasis placed on recording the death and burial place of the subject.⁴⁹ More specifically, the recording of the burial of Brychan's sons in or near a church, clearly reflects the recording of the burial sites of saints within or close to church structures. For example, St Brynach was recorded as being beneath the eastern wall of his church⁵⁰ while Gwynllw was described as being placed either by the wall on the south side of his own monastery⁵¹ or in the floor of the church.⁵² Tatheus was also recorded as being buried under the floor of the church.⁵³ David and Padarn were both buried in the grounds of their monasteries.⁵⁴

Whilst the burials recorded in the Brychan documents appear to reflect burial practices associated with saints in hagiography, what they do not seem to reflect is the burial practice of the sixth century, when Brychan and his immediate family are likely to have had their flouit. Indeed, there is little to suggest that these church sites,

Merther Cynog, Llandyfaelog Fach and Llanysbyddid, were exceptionally early foundations (*i.e.* pre-eighth century). The only tentative evidence for an early establishment of these sites is a lost stone from Llandyfaelog Fach, which is recorded as having the name *CATVC* inscribed upon it.⁵⁵

From what relatively little we know about the graves of holy individuals in the ninth to eleventh century, the documentary evidence appears to be born out in the archaeology (Fig. 4). The tombs of Welsh saints appear to have remained beneath ground, though they may often have been surrounded by a small building or chapel, known as a *capel y bedd* or *cell y bedd*. For example, the excavated shrine of St Melangell at Pennant Melangell shows that the original central burial was placed in an apse at the east end of the church, beneath a large stone slab (and 'ante hostium': before a door). It was not until the twelfth century that the Romanesque shrine that can now be seen was built.⁵⁶ The *capel y bedd* of Saint Beuno at Clynnog Fawr in Gwynedd also contained a central focal stone-lined grave, rather than a built shrine.⁵⁷

The presence of a saint's body or relics became an increasingly important way of asserting a sphere of influence over an ecclesiastical property in the ninth to tenth century, as well as becoming increasingly important commodities in their own right. Most of the Saint's lives written in the eleventh and early twelfth century are clearly intended to help validate claims to property and associated rights in the face of increasing pressure from Normans, as well as in internecine tensions over ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For example, the Life of St Cadog ends with a series of charters recording the gifting of land to the saint and his monasteries.⁵⁸

It is in this context that we should see this record of royal burials. The kingdom of Brycheiniog was increasingly under pressure from neighbouring kingdoms from the ninth century onwards. The Welsh annals record battles against Gwent (s.a. 848 *ASC*) and Asser's *Life of Alfred* (ch.80, c. 885) records the submission of members of the royal family to Alfred, seemingly an attempt to court protection from the powerful monarch in the face of pressure from the sons of Rhodri Mawr.⁵⁹ The area also came under threat in the early tenth century, when the crannog of Llangorse was destroyed by the armies of Lady Aethelflaed of the Mercians.⁶⁰

As well as pressure from rival Welsh kingdoms and Anglo-Saxon armies, there was also the possibility of ecclesiastical rivalry – indeed it is in this context that we should perhaps understand the reference to Llanysbyddid in the Life of St Cadog.⁶¹ Disputes about territory were common between early medieval Welsh monasteries and dioceses.

The descriptions of the burials in the *De Situ Brycheniog and Cognacio Brychan* should not be taken as historically accurate descriptions of the burials of sixth century British nobility. Instead we need to see the

text in context; they are attempts to use a burial – actual or believed – as an indicator of the primacy of a claim to control the central heartland of Brycheiniog.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed two broadly contemporary texts, both dealing with the burial of important, secular members of early medieval Welsh society, yet they both seem to be talking about death and burial in contrasting ways. The *Englynion y Beddau* situates elite burial sites away from churches at important points in the landscape, often seemingly associated with prehistoric monuments or significant natural features. The second text, the Brychan documents, firmly locates the burials of Brychan's family in churches, indeed churches that seem to be important ecclesiastical centres on the basis of other early medieval evidence. It records these burials in a document that seems to be drawing on existing hagiographic traditions, and aims to link the secular dynasty of Brycheiniog into traditions of sainthood and saintliness.

How do we reconcile these seemingly contrasting strategies for recording burial sites in early medieval Wales? The simple answer is, we do not have too. It is important to avoid the mind-set that says we can only have one contemporary discourse about burial rites. We have discovered here two complimentary dialogues about death and burial; dialogues that include the practice of burial as well as literary writing about it. It appears that elites in early medieval Wales were creative in seeking sources of ideological legitimation, turning to both martial and ecclesiastical prototypes for defining modes of power. This may well express the tensions between the Welsh nobility and the increasingly powerful Church. By appealing to antiquarian traditions and historical precedents, burial practice and textual descriptions of burial appealed to the past as a source of legitimation for the present.

The production of biographies of individuals and families in the medieval period is closely linked to strategies for ideological and political legitimation.⁶² For example, in early medieval Wales, Saint's lives sometimes incorporated grants of land to saints connected to the ecclesiastical institutions that were responsible for the production of the *vita*. In his discussion of the biography of Gruffud ap Cynan, Rhys Jones has noted 'lay biographies also incorporated discourses of power that helped to legitimise certain socio-spatial formations'.⁶³ The transformation of oral historical and genealogical narratives to textual ones in the ninth to tenth century reflected a wider process of transition from oral to textual in the medieval period.⁶⁴ It has often been suggested that the move to written record prevents the manipulation of the information contained within the narrative structure. However, this is not necessarily so; the opposition between 'fluid' oral narrative and 'fixed'

textual narrative is not so clear-cut. There are good examples from early medieval Welsh contexts of written versions of the same broad genealogies providing alternate genealogical data.⁶⁵ As suggested above the relationship between the bard and his audience may have acted as a constraint on the manipulation of content; equally textual records can be vulnerable to alteration, manipulation and rewriting. In the context of the Brychan documents and the related burial evidence it is likely that the parallel material and textual records both facilitated and constrained political interpretations. The presence of the documentary record has limited attempts to re-interpret the meaning embedded in the ecclesiastical sites (which may have been contested); equally the traditions associated with the sites and their material remains would have acted as a constraint on attempts to rewrite textual histories.

These textual representations of burial combine with varying burial practices to form wider discourses about death and burial in the ninth century Wales. These discourses are intimately related to the ebb and flow of dynastic politics and wider debates about the sources of social power in the region. The tension between the church and the secular elite is partly reflected in the diverging ways in which burial is presented in these two texts. Crucially, these discourses may have served to influence wider attitudes to the production of symbolic places in the early medieval landscape, swinging from the bounded, nodal points formed by early ecclesiastical sites with their tightly defined boundaries to the more diffuse landscapes of mythology and legend, which is

being actively created outside the church. Increasingly, from the tenth to twelfth century the church itself appears to become involved in the struggle to make places outside the bounds of the church itself symbolically important; this is reflected in the increasing emphasis on imbuing meaning on natural sites found in saint's lives of this period. A good example of this can be found in Rhigyfarch's Life of Saint David, when the scene of Nonita's conception is marked by the miraculous appearance of a pair of large stones 'in order to ...declare before hand the significance of her offspring'.⁶⁶

The eighth to tenth century was a fluid and difficult time of the Welsh nobility, faced with increased internal friction combined with renewed external threats from both the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. Whilst the church provided important ideological support, it was also posing a threat of its own, with its increased demands for fiscal powers and exemptions from service obligations. By bringing together the evidence from historical texts and archaeological evidence it can be seen that the consequence of this was a period of originality and creativity by the elites when seeking ways to project images in death that implied power and consequence in life.

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Notes

1. Moreland 2001.
2. Hills 1998.
3. E.g. Davies 1996, 185–6.
4. Jones 1967.
5. Jones 1967, 100.
6. *EB* 4.
7. *EB* 5.
8. *EB* 8.
9. *EB* 13.
10. *EB* 50; Jones 1967, 100–1.
11. Nash-Williams 1950, no.13.
12. Nash-Williams 1950, nos 222, 223.
13. Rowlands 1990, 143.
14. *EB* 9–11, 13–14.
15. *EB* 13–14.
16. *EB* 8, 12, 44.
17. *EB* 4, 35.
18. *EB* 26; Jones 1967, 109–10.
19. *HB* 67–75.
20. Roberts 1991, 88–93.
21. *HB* 73.
22. Sims-Williams 1993, 57.
23. *EB* 65.
24. Jones 1967, 113.
25. Nash-Williams 1950, no.182.
26. Maund 2000, 41 Davies 1982, 106–7, *ASC* s.a 853.
27. E.g. Edwards 2001.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Sims-Williams 1993, 47.
30. Silvester 2001, 87; Robinson 1998, 194.
31. Nash-Williams 1950, 90, 99.
32. Edwards 2001, 30.
33. E.g. Van der Noort 1993; Shepherd 1979.
34. *ibid.*
35. Stephens 1986, 179.
36. *EB* 29–30.
37. Rowlands 1988, 183.
38. Jenkins 2000.
39. *Ibid.*, 149–50.
40. Jenkins 2000, 150.
41. Sims-Williams 1993, 56.
42. Sims-Williams 1992, 56–7; Dumville 1983, 148, n.4.
43. Nash-Williams 1950, 49.
44. *VC* 11; Corner 1988.
45. Thomas 1994, 131–180.
46. Bartholomew 1996.
47. Campbell and Lane 1989.
48. *LL* 146.
49. Henken 1991.
50. *VB* 16.
51. *VC* 28.

52. *VG* 10.
 53. *VT* 17.
 54. *VD* 65; *VP* 29.
 55. Nash-Williams 1950, 74, 50.
 56. Britnell 1994a, 1994b.
 57. RCAHMW 1960, 36–42.
 58. *VC* 55–69.
 59. Dumville 1982.

60. s.a. 916 *ASC*.
 61. *VC* 12.
 62. Jones 2004.
 63. *Ibid.*, 461.
 64. Clanchy 1993.
 65. Thornton 1998.
 66. *VS David* 4.

Abbreviations

<i>AC</i>	<i>Annales Cambriae</i> (Morris 1980)
<i>ASC</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> (Whitelock and Tucker 1961)
<i>EB</i>	<i>Englynion y Beddau</i> (Jones 1967)
<i>HB</i>	<i>Historia Brittonum</i> (Morris 1980)
<i>LL</i>	<i>Book of Llandaff</i> (Evans 1893)
<i>VB</i>	<i>Vita Bernachius</i> (Wade-Evans 1944, 2–16)
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vita Cadocus</i> (Wade-Evans 1944, 24–142)
<i>VS David</i>	<i>Vita Sancti David</i> (James 1967)
<i>VG</i>	<i>Vita Gundleius</i> (Wade-Evans 1944, 172–94)
<i>VP</i>	<i>Vita Paternus</i> (Wade-Evans 1944, 252–69)
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vita Tatheus</i> (Wade-Evans 1944, 270–87)

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