HOW THE WELSH CAUGHT THE YELLOW PLAGUE

ABSTRACT

The ‘Yellow Plague’ (*pestis flava*, *buidhechair*, *ball felen*, etc.) is a term used by Irish and Welsh authors working in the tenth century and later to describe several epidemics of the sixth and seventh centuries. This paper examines one particular set of stories about this illness found in Welsh sources written between 1100 and 1223, in which the Yellow Plague is responsible for a mass migration from Wales to Brittany. This legend, I argue, was likely created at Llancarfan in the late eleventh century from various older sources, including annals and saints’ Lives from Ireland and Brittany; I also provide an account of how this legend may have been transmitted to other Welsh centers, and suggest connections to other contemporary works of pseudo-history, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *De gestis Britonum*.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, several major epidemics swept across Ireland and Britain.1 Surviving contemporary, or near-contemporary, sources from Ireland and England make clear that these ‘mortalities’ (as they were called) were often catastrophic, at least in the short term.2 Recent research has made clear that some, at least, of these mortalities were outbreaks of *Yersinia pestis*, the pathogen responsible for bubonic plague, a common scourge across Europe and the Near East at the time.3

Memory of these outbreaks faded swiftly in England; they are hardly mentioned in writings after the eighth century, except for translations or adaptations

1My gratitude is due to Ben Guy, Rachel Singer, Barry Lewis, and the anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful comments on advanced versions of this article, and to Michael McCormick, whose seminar on the Plague of Justinian in 2019 inspired me to pursue this topic.


of earlier sources. In Ireland and Wales, however, these early medieval epidemics were transformed, over the centuries, into a pestilence whose various names can usually be translated roughly as the ‘Yellow Plague’, and which came to play a major role in the later medieval historiography of both regions. In Ireland, this plague was seen as a typical feature of the ‘Age of Saints’, and appears in numerous saints’ Lives and their associated literature; in Wales, it was believed to be the cause of the death of Maelgwn, the fearsome sixth-century king of Gwynedd, and of a mass migration from Britain to Brittany and Ireland.

The origins and creation of this last legend – the story of a terrible epidemic that forced saints and many other Britons to flee the island for safety – is the focus of the present article. The ‘migration legend’, as I will refer to it, flourished for little more than a century; it first appears in the so-called ‘Vespasian Life’ of St Teilo, a text likely written for the community of Llandaf shortly after 1100, and essentially disappears from the textual record after the death of Gerald of Wales in 1223.

This legend has not attracted much comment over the past century. Recent histories of early medieval Wales and the British migration to Brittany have (rightly) ignored it; literary studies of the texts that contain it are few, and it has rarely been examined in the context of other plague narratives from Britain and Ireland, let alone further afield. For this reason, the peculiarity of this legend has passed unnoticed. We have many surviving contemporary, or near-contemporary, reports on outbreaks of bubonic plague from across Europe, Africa, and the Near East, often couched in apocalyptic tones. None of these,
to my knowledge, envision any sort of widescale, long-term population movement of the sort the Britons supposedly undertook.\(^{10}\) What was the inspiration for this legend, and how did it take shape?

I. THE SOURCES

Presented below is every text from Wales written before 1223 that mentions the Yellow Plague; all dates given are for the composition of the text.

1. The Life of St. Teilo in BL MS Vespasian A.xiv, fols 52r–55v (c. 1107 × 1119)\(^{11}\)

2. Three texts in the Book of Llandaf (NLW MS 17110E: manuscript itself shortly before 1134; relevant portions likely 1120 × 29)\(^{12}\)
   (a) The revised Life of Teilo (pp. 97–117)
   (b) The Life of Euddogwy (pp. 130–9)
   (c) Charter 144 (pp. 144–5)

3. Three works by Gerald of Wales:\(^{13}\)
   (a) *Itinerarium Cambriae* (first recension c. 1191)\(^{14}\)
   (b) *Invectiones*\(^{15}\) (1200 × 16), in which, besides Gerald’s own writings on the Yellow Plague, he presents the text of two earlier letters from the clergy of St Davids to the Pope in which the Yellow Plague is mentioned:
      i. A letter to Honorius II (pp. 143–6)
      ii. A letter to Eugenius III (pp. 139–41)
   (c) *De Iure et Statu Menevensis Ecclesiae* (c. 1218)\(^{16}\)

\(^{10}\)See n. 148 below.


\(^{15}\)W. S. Davies (ed.), ‘De invectionibus’, *Y Cymro* 30 (1920).

\(^{16}\)J. S. Brewer (ed.), *De iure et statu Menevensis ecclesiae*, Giraldi Cambrensis Opera, vol. 3 (London, 1863), 98–373.
(1) and (2) above are closely related, and form what I call below the ‘Llandaf-Llancarfan’ group; the texts in (3) will be called the ‘St Davids’ group.

The B-text of the Welsh Latin annals, otherwise known as the Breviate Chronicle (BC), should, perhaps, be included above as well. In this text, the Yellow Plague is mentioned in association with the death of Maelgwn Gwynedd, alongside a saying about the ‘long sleep’ of Maelgwn.\(^{17}\) While the surviving copy of the Breviate Chronicle dates to the end of the thirteenth century, its textual history is complicated, and the relevant notice of the Yellow Plague may well have been entered before 1223.\(^{18}\) I have chosen not to discuss it here, however, as any thorough treatment of the entry in the Breviate Chronicle should include the copious late medieval stories about Maelgwn’s death (only some of which allude to the Yellow Plague): this, I believe, is best suited for a separate article.\(^{19}\)

i. The Llandaf-Llancarfan Group

The earliest of the four texts in the Llandaf-Llancarfan group is the Vespasian Life of Teilo; the remaining three survive in the Book of Llandaf, a compilation of saints’ Lives, charters, papal bulls, and other material that serves as a sort of case file for the partially successful attempt by the bishop of Llandaf, Urban (1107–34), to extend and solidify the bounds and holdings of his diocese.\(^{20}\) Some of the texts in the Book appear to have been created for the sole purpose of pressing this case, such as the Life of Euddogwy; others have been only lightly edited from earlier versions, such as the Life of Teilo; still others are substantial rewritings of older material, such as the Life of Dyfrig and many of the charters.\(^{21}\) The contents of this book came together in the years leading up to Urban’s death at Rome in 1134. Much of the Book of Llandaf, Wendy Davies suggests, was written 1120–1129, including the texts discussed below; J. R. Davies has also argued that these were the work of a single compiler-reviser.


\(^{18}\)Huw Pryce, ‘Chronicling and its contexts in medieval Wales’, in Ben Guy, Georgia Henley, Owain Wyn Jones, and Rebecca Thomas (eds), The Chronicles of Medieval Wales and the March (Turnhout, 2020), 1–32, at 7–8, with further references there.

\(^{19}\)Certain copies of Brut y Brenhinedd also refer to the Yellow Plague. This appears to have happened relatively late in that text’s transmission, however; it is first found in the Cotton Cleopatra version: John Jay Parry (ed. and trans.), Brut y Brenhinedd: Cotton Cleopatra Version (Cambridge, MA, 1937), 95. See further n. 161 below.


possibly to be identified as Caradog of Llancarfan, who was, perhaps, one of Urban’s brothers.\textsuperscript{22} 

\textit{The Vespasian Life of Teilo} 

Caradog may have been responsible for the Llandaf Life of Teilo, but the Vespasian Life was written by another brother of Bishop Urban, Stephen (or, perhaps, Geoffrey).\textsuperscript{23} This work takes the form of a sermon addressed to a religious community, probably, but not certainly, that of Llandaf.\textsuperscript{24} This Life is named after the sole manuscript that contains it, the late twelfth-century BL MS Cotton Vespasian A.xiv.\textsuperscript{25} It is likely, as Ben Guy has argued, that the Vespasian Life was written after 1107, when Urban became bishop, and before 1119, when Urban began to promulgate the newly fabricated version of the history of his see.\textsuperscript{26} 

The Yellow Plague appears towards the end of the Life, after Teilo has returned from a voyage to Jerusalem with his fellow Welsh saints, David and Padarn. When the plague strikes, in the form of ‘a column of mist’, it nearly wipes out the entire population; the remainder are forced to flee:

Sancti Dei […] reuersi sunt in regionem suam. In qua non diu commorari potuerunt propter pestilentiam que fere totam gentem deleuerat. Pestis autem illa ‘flaua’ uocabatur, eo quod flauos et exangues efficiebat uniuersos quos persequebatur. Que in columpa nubis apparebat hominibus, unum caput urrens per terram, aliud sursum trahens per aerem, et discurrens per totam regionem ad modum imbris discurrentis per ima conuallium. Quecumque autem animantia suo pestifero afflatu attingerat aut ilico moriebantur aut egrotabant in mortem. Siquis uero medelam conaretur adhibere egrotanti, non tantum medicamina non habebant suum effectum, sed etiam medicantem cum egroto atra lues trahebat ad interitum. Interea, dum ista pestis seuiet non tantum in hominibus sed etiam in feris et in reptilibus, sanctus Eliud, in ieiunio et planctu, clamabat ad Dominum, dicens, 


\textsuperscript{23}BL MS Vespasian A.xiv, fol. 52r: ‘\textit{Incipit vita sancti Teiavi episcopi \textit{V}espa\textit{s}i\textit{a}n \textit{A}l\textit{ii}us.} \textit{v}ita \textit{ Sancti Teilavi episcopi \textit{V}espa\textit{s}i\textit{a}n \textit{A}l\textit{ii}us heb./ a magistro Ga\textit{l}frido \textit{i}. stephani/ fratre urbani Landavensis ecclesie episcopi dictata’ (‘The Life of St Teilo, bishop, begins [Feb. 9], composed by Master Geoffrey [that is, Stephen], the brother of Urban, bishop of Llandaf’). This attribution is very likely genuine (J. R. Davies, \textit{Book of Llandaf}, 119); scholars have differed, however, on whether to call the author Geoffrey or Stephen. Cf. G. H. Doble, in D. Simon Evans (ed.), \textit{Lives of the Welsh Saints} (Cardiff, 1971), 161; Brooke, \textit{Church and Border}, 31 n. 65; Guy, ‘\textit{Vespasian Life}’, 8. Here the author is referred to as ‘Stephen’. 

\textsuperscript{24}It seems very likely that the text was destined for reading aloud at Llandaf (where Teilo was the patron saint), but this is nowhere made explicit (Guy, ‘\textit{Vespasian Life}’, 5–9, 16). 

\textsuperscript{25}Once dated to c. 1200, this manuscript has been redated to the last third of the twelfth century by Teresa Webber (cited in Guy, ‘\textit{Life of St Dyfrig}’, 6 n. 17). See also Kathleen Hughes, ‘British Museum MS. Cotton Vespasian A. xiv (“\textit{Vitae Sanctorum Wallensium}”): its purpose and provenance’, in Nora Chadwick et al., \textit{Studies in the Early British Church} (Cambridge, 1958), 183–200; and Joshua Byron Smith, \textit{Walter Map and the Matter of Britain} (Philadelphia, 2017), at 107–39. 

\textsuperscript{26}I follow here Guy, ‘\textit{Vespasian Life}’, 8–9.
‘Parce, Domine, parce populo tuo, qui non uis mortem peccatoris, sed uitam, et ne des hereditatem tuam in perditionem.’ Deinde, ira Dei ad tempus pacata oratione eius aliorumque sanctorum, celitus admonitus, cum his qui residui fuerant de gente recessit in longinquas regiones, donec Deus eis innueret reditum in patriam. Et factum est ita.

‘The saints of God [Teilo, David, and Padarn] […] returned to their own region. They were not able to dwell there for long on account of the pestilence which had almost destroyed the whole people. But this plague was called “yellow”, because it turned all those whom it struck down yellow and bloodless. It would appear to people as a column of mist, sweeping one end over the earth, and dragging the other above through the air, and it roamed throughout the whole region like a shower of rain roaming through the bottoms of the valleys. And whatever living things it touched with its pestilential breath would either die on the spot or become mortally sick. Moreover, if anyone tried to apply a cure to the sick person, not only would the medicine have no effect, but the black infection would even drag down the healer along with the sick person to death. Meanwhile, as that plague raged not only among people but even among wild beasts and reptiles, holy Eliud, through fasting and lamentation, cried out to the Lord, saying, “Spare, O Lord, spare your people, you who wish not the death of a sinner, but rather life, and give not your inheritance to destruction.” And for that reason, God’s wrath having been appeased for a time through his prayer and the prayers of other saints, he, warned from heaven, departed for faraway regions with those who remained from among the people, until God should indicate to them that they should return to their country.’

Most of this Life of Teilo is based on the Life of David by Rhgyfarch; the above passage, however, has resisted all previous attempts to uncover its sources. Where parallels can be found, the links are merely suggestive of Stephen’s education, rather than proving reliance on a particular text. For instance, Stephen appears to have had a fairly robust grounding in medical knowledge; when

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27 Guy, ‘Vita Sancti Teliaui (V)’, §§8–10. I have emended his translation slightly.
28 Most scholars have focused on the Llandaf version, which is considerably more tractable. G. H. Doble, for instance (Lives of Welsh Saints, 179–88) only quotes the original, and pivots instantly to the additional material offered in the Book of Llandaf. J. R. Davies’s focus, understandably, is on the Life as it exists in the Book of Llandaf; I must admit to being mystified, however, by the claim that ‘The story of the flight of St Teilo from the plague is taken directly from Vita I S. Samsonis, and the author refers the reader to that work’ (Book of Llandaf, 129). This is supported neither in the rest of Davies’s argument nor by the Life in the Book of Llandaf, where the mention of Samson’s Life is in the context of his becoming archbishop, as Davies himself notes (ibid., 116). Ben Guy remarks that the passage is one of two ‘that do not appear to have originated in the Life of St David’ (‘Vespasian Life’, 17).
claiming the Yellow Plague makes people ‘yellow and bloodless’, he follows the humoral theory’s view on the causes of jaundice.\textsuperscript{29}

There are other hints that Stephen had read widely, though it is hard to prove connections to any given text. The description of the apparent tornado, for instance, bears close resemblance to the ‘disease-bearing cloud’ (\textit{morbifera nube}) of Adomnán’s \textit{Vita Columbae}, itself also ‘rainy’ (\textit{pluialem}),\textsuperscript{30} or the comments of Bede (and others) that plague could arise in the aftermath of too much rain.\textsuperscript{31} This tornado may also invoke the column of cloud and fire of the Book of Exodus, which ‘slew the host’ of the Egyptians in Exodus 14:24.\textsuperscript{32}

This list of suggestive parallels can be multiplied, but perhaps the best indication of the author’s skill in remaking his sources is Telo’s prayer: \textit{Parce domine parce populo tuo, qui non uis mortem peccatoris sed uitam, et ne des hereditatem tuam in perditionem} (‘Spare, O Lord, spare your people, you who wish not the death of a sinner, but rather life, and give not your inheritance to destruction’). This prayer appears to be a free creation, combining and adapting versions of Joel 2:17 (\textit{Parce, Domine, parce populo tuo; et ne des haereditatem tuam in opprobrium}) and Ezekiel 33:11 (\textit{Nolo mortem impii, sed ut convertatur impius a via sua, et vivat}). It is clear, moreover, that the author was working not with the Bible, but with versions of these passages drawn from liturgical materials.\textsuperscript{33} In Joel 2:17, for instance, the Vulgate has \textit{in opprobrium}, against the Life’s

\textsuperscript{29}The notion that jaundice can be caused by the replacement of blood by yellow bile appears already in Galen: Carl Wolfram Brunshön (ed.), \textit{De locis affectis V–VI: Über das Erkennen erkrankter Körperteile V–VI} (Berlin, 2021), 348 (Book V, §8.1). The oldest Latin version of this doctrine I have found is Constantinus Africanus’ \textit{Viaticum}: ‘De presenti causa [ictericie] quando corpus patitur externus: sicut reptilium terre venenosorum morsus: venenosa potio: consuetudo cibi γ potus calidissimi sanguinem incende νtis οποτος [[choler = yellow bile]]: Constantinus Africanus, ‘Viaticum’, \textit{Omnia opera} Ysaac (Lyons, 1515), fols 144r–171v, at 161v (Book V, §12). Constantinus was active in the later eleventh century; it is just possible, therefore, this work would have been available in southeastern Wales in the early twelfth, though that would involve an improbably swift transmission (see Brian Long, ‘Arabic-Latin translations: transmission and transformation’, in Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Barbara Zipser [eds], \textit{Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Galen} [Leiden, 2019], 343–58).


\textsuperscript{31}‘Pestilentia nascitur aere vel siccitatis vel pluviarum intertemperantia pro meritis hominum corporum, qui spirando vel edendo perceptus luem mortemque generat’ (‘Pestilence is born from air corrupted by a lack of moderation, whether of rains, or of drought; which, taken up by breathing or by eating, gives rise to plague and death’): C. W. Jones (ed.), \textit{Opera didascalia}, vol. 1, Corpus Christianorum series Latina 123A (Turnhout, 1975), 173–234, at 223 (§87). This derives from Isidore (as noted in the edition [223]), but the reference to an excess or lack of rain is not present there. Note also the connection made between rains and plague in an account of the outbreak of bubonic plague at Rome in 590: McCormick, ‘Gregory of Tours’, 86–8.

\textsuperscript{32}My thanks to Barry Lewis on this point.

\textsuperscript{33}The difference is noted in Louis Gray, ‘Biblical citations in Latin Lives of Welsh and Breton saints differing from the Vulgate’, \textit{Traditio} 8 (1952), 389–97, at 393.
in perditionem; the latter reading, however, is found in the common responsory In ieiunio et fletu orabant, frequently used on the first Sunday of Lent. Moreover, the phrase modeled on Ezekiel 33:11 is, as it stands, far closer to various penitential prayers, or requests for relief from sickness, than the Vulgate text; both types of prayer, of course, suit the context of a devastating plague very well.

The Llandaf Life of Teilo

Some time after the Vespasian Life was written, it was revised to suit Bishop Urban’s new vision of the history of Llandaf. Most of the Life received only minimal changes; this is not the case, however, for the section on the Yellow Plague, to which four separate passages were added. The first serves the overarching apologetic purpose of the Book of Llandaf, naming Llandaf as Teilo’s see (this information being omitted in the Vespasian copy), and reaffirming Teilo’s status as the successor of Archbishop Dyfrig. The last and longest of these additions provides an account of how Teilo takes over Dol for Samson for a time (inspired, it seems, by the Life of Turiau, a Breton saint), and rescues King Budic of Brittany and his people from a monster ravaging the countryside. The intervening second and third passages are what interest us here (in bold below):

[…] [M]edicantem cum egroto atra lues trahebat ad interitum. Traxit enim Mailconvm, regem Guenedotis, deleuit et patriam suam, et in tantum incanduit prædicta clades et per totem illam gentem quod patriam pene reddidit desertam. […] [C]um his qui residui fuerant de gente recessit [Teilo] in longinquas regiones. Quorum quidam perrexerunt in Hiberniam, plures uero, ducente eo, in Franciam[.]

[…] ‘The black infection would even drag down the healer along with the sick person to death. For it dragged down Maelgwn,


35 The Sacramentary of Angoulême, for instance, uses a version of this statement in an ordo for the ‘reconciliation of a penitent to death’, reconciliatio penitentis ad mortem: ‘Maiestatem tuam Domine quaesumus […] Deus, qui non mortem sed peccatorum uitam sempem inquiris, respice flentem famulum tuum […]’ (‘Lord, we beseech your majesty […] God, you who always seek not death for sinners but life, look upon your weeping servant […]’); Patrick Saint-Roch (ed.), Liber sacramentorum Consolismensis: Manuscript B.N. Lat. 816, le sacra- mentaire Gélasien d'Angoulême, Corpus Christianorum 159C (Turnhout, 1987), at 85 (§620). This sacramentary was written in the late eighth century (ibid., ix–x). Compare, too, the prayer found in the Stowe Missal: George Warner (ed.), The Stowe Missal: MS. D. II. 3 in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, vol. 2, Henry Bradshaw Society 32 (London, 1915), at 34 and the Book of Dimma (TCD MS 59 [A.4.23], p. 100, accessible at <https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/concern/works/9306370s?locale=en>, accessed 16 May 2022) for the recovery of a sick brother: ‘Deus, qui non uis mortem peccatoris, sed ut convirtatur et uiuat […]’ (‘God, you who want not death for a sinner, but that he should be turned and live […]’).

36 Guy, ‘Vita santi Teliaui (LL)’, §8; Evans and Rhys, Llan Dèw, 107.

king of Gwynedd, and destroyed his country, and to such an extent did the aforesaid destruction rage through all the people that it almost rendered the country a desert. […] [Teilo] departed for faraway regions with those who remained from among the people. Some of them travelled to Ireland, while others, led by him, travelled to Francia.’

These additions provide context to the vague description in the Vespasian Life: the mention of Maelgwn, the famous sixth-century king, anchors this plague firmly in the heroic Welsh past; and we also learn where the fleeing Britons go (another detail omitted in the Vespasian Life). This new material derives from two sources: 1) a version of the Welsh Latin annals, and 2) Wrdisten’s Life of Winwaloe. The former supplied the notice of the death of Maelgwn; the latter, the details about the extent of the devastation, as well as the destination of Teilo and his followers.

That the reviser was reliant on the Welsh Latin annals has been clear since G. H. Doble’s study of the Life of Teilo. J. R. Davies further suggested that the version of the annals used was similar to the A-text of the Welsh Latin annals, otherwise known as the Harleian Chronicle (HC). This text was completed at St Davids not long after 954, and records the death of Maelgwn Gwynedd from an unnamed ‘great mortality’ (mortalitas magna).

The additional details about the course of the illness and its effects derive from Wrdisten’s Life of Winwaloe, written at the monastery of Landévennec in western Brittany in the later ninth century. In the opening paragraphs of that Life, Wrdisten describes how the Britons were forced by a terrible plague to flee their native land; the passages in bold correspond to the additions made by the Llandaf reviser:

Interea miserorum, qui paterna incolebant rura, peste foeda repente exorta, catervatim et absque numero et absque sepultura

41 Doble, Lives of Welsh Saints, 180.
44 The text can be dated to 860 × 884 (‘peut-être aux environs de 874’): Joseph-Claude Poulin, L’hagiographie bretonne du haut moyen âge: Répertoire raisonné, Belhete de Francia 69 (Ostfildern, 2009), at 413–28.
miseranda sternuntur corpora. **Ex hac lue magna ex parte antiqua desolatur patria;** tandemque pauci et multo pauci, qui vix ancipitem effugissent gladium, **aut Scoticam quamvis inimicam, aut Belgicam,** natalem autem patriam linquentes, coacti acriter alienam petivere terram.45

‘In the meantime, a foul pestilence suddenly arose, and the wretched bodies of the wretches who remained tilling the ancestral fields were strewn in multitudes, unburied and uncountable. **From this plague the old fatherland was largely made a desert;** and at length a few – and a very few indeed – who had barely evaded the double-edged sword were driven, bitterly, to seek a strange land: **whether Ireland (however hostile), or Belgica,** leaving the country of their birth behind.’

The debt of the Llandaf reviser to the Life of Winwaloe is clear. The passages outlined above correspond precisely to the additions in the Book of Llandaf, albeit with most words switched out for a synonym. Both texts, for instance, report the ‘near-total’ ‘desolation’ of the ‘fatherland’ (**patriam pene reddidit desertam** in the Book of Llandaf, and **magna ex parte antiqua desolatur patria** above), while the reviser’s ‘Francia’ stands in for Wrdisten’s ‘Belgica terra’, as does ‘Hibernia’ for ‘Scotica terra’. It is likely, moreover, that the Life of Winwaloe was the ultimate, if perhaps indirect, source for Stephen’s account of the Yellow Plague; evidence for this will be discussed below.

**Life of Euddogwy**

The historical Euddogwy appears to have been a bishop active in southeastern Wales in the early eighth century.46 In his Life, however, which follows closely on the Life of Teilo in the Book of Llandaf, he is portrayed as Teilo’s nephew and eventual successor.47 Euddogwy, in this telling, is living in Brittany when the Yellow Plague strikes, forcing Teilo to flee Britain with his followers. The bulk of this passage is taken verbatim from the Vespasian Life of Teilo, or a very close relative, as particular readings found in the Vespasian text (such as *sursum* for *rursum*) are also preserved in the Life of Euddogwy.48 Only the beginning and end are much modified (the passage shared in common is underlined below):

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45 Charles de Smedt (ed.), ‘Vita s. Winwaloei primi abbatis Landevenecensis auctore Wurdéstino nunc primum integre edita’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 7 (1888), 167–264, at 175. My translation, with assistance from Ben Guy on several difficult passages; see further Guy, ‘Explaining the origins of Brittany in the twelfth century: St Cadog’s solution’ in Caroline Brett, Fiona Edmonds, and Paul Russell (eds), *Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Medieval Brittany. 450–1200: Connections and Disconnections* (Turnhout, forthcoming). With *belgicam... terram*, Wrdisten is presumably referring to the region of northern France surrounding Calais (the coastline of the old Roman *Gallia Belgica*).


Et post immensum tempus, uenit flaua pestis per maiorem brittaniam. ‘Flaua’ quidem uocabatur eo quod flauos et exsangues efficiebat uniuersos quos persequebatur. Que in columnna aquose nubis apparebat hominibus, unum caput uerrens per terram, aliud sursum trahens per aerem, et discurserunt per totem regionem ad modum ymbris discurrentis per ima conuallium. Quæ in columna, quæ in columnna aquos et nubis apparebat hominibus, unum caput uerrens per terram, aliud sursum trahens per aerem, et discurserunt per totem regionem ad modum ymbris discurrentis per ima conuallium. Quecunque autem animantia suo pestifero afflatu attingerat aut ilico moriebantur. aut egrotabantur in mortem. Siquis ero medelam conaretur adhibere egrotanti, non tantum medicamina non habebant suum effectum, sed etiam medicantem cum egroto atra lues trahebat ad interitum. Et post immensum tempus, sedata est oratione sancti Teilo et sanctorum Brittannicorum. Et antequam omnino extirpatur, uenit diuina uox ad sanctum Teilo ut cum suis clericis et populo iret Cornugalliam (quæ postea uocata Cerniu Budic). Et ibi inuenit nepotem suum Oudoceum.

‘And after a very long time, the Yellow Plague came through greater Britain. Indeed, it was called “yellow” because it turned all those whom it struck down yellow and bloodless. It would appear to people as a column of watery mist, sweeping one end over the earth, and dragging the other above through the air, and it roamed throughout the whole region like a shower of rain roaming through the bottoms of the valleys. And whatever living things it touched with its pestilential breath would either die on the spot or become mortally sick. Moreover, if anyone tried to apply a cure to the sick person, not only would the medicine have no effect, but the dire infection would even drag down the healer along with the sick person to death. And after a very long time it was quelled by the prayers of holy Teilo and the saints of Britain. But before it was eradicated entirely, a divine voice came to holy Teilo to tell him to go with his clerics and people to Cornouaille (which was afterwards called Cernyw Budig [“the Cornwall of Budic”]). And there he found his nephew Euddogwy.’

There is no Breton source that relays this precise story, but it is clear that the author of the Life of Euddogwy had access to Breton legends, if perhaps at second hand. Lifris, the abbot of Llancarfan (closely tied to Llandaf, as discussed above), had access to texts or written reports from Brittany in the late eleventh century – in particular, the monastery of Sainte-Croix in Quimperlé. Several different Budics are named as rulers of Cornouaille (the region of southwestern Brittany including Quimperlé) in the cartulary of Landévennec, a work composed in the later eleventh century and which, much like the Book of Llandaf, tells the history of its diocese through charters and saints’ Lives

50Bernard Tanguy, ‘De la Vie de saint Cadoc à celle de saint Gurtiern’, EC 26 (1989), 159–185, at 164–5; Guy, Medieval Welsh Genealogy, 89–90 (expanded upon in Guy, ‘Explaining the origins’).
(including the Life of its purported founder, Winwaloe), and may even have inspired Llandaf’s own compilation.\textsuperscript{51} There are other scattered references to legends about a certain King Budic preserved in medieval Breton sources.\textsuperscript{52} The church of Landeleau, ‘Teilo’s Enclosure’, located some thirty miles upstream from Landévennec, provides, moreover, a potential reason for connecting Teilo with Budic and Cornouaille; the legend of Teilo’s travels to that region would nicely explain the existence of the foundation there in his name.\textsuperscript{53}

This line of reasoning does not function, however, for either version of the Life of Teilo: in the Vespasian Life, Teilo leaves ‘his region’ (\textit{regionem suam}) for ‘faraway regions’ (\textit{longinquas regiones}), and in the revised Llandaf Life, he travels to Dol, in northeastern Brittany, where Budic rules as ‘king of the land’ (\textit{rex terræ}).\textsuperscript{54} I suspect, therefore, that these three different versions of Teilo’s travels indicate different levels of access to Breton texts on the part of the various authors and revisers. There is no evidence for any direct impact of Breton material on the Vespasian Life of Teilo; this Life never mentions Brittany or any Breton saint.\textsuperscript{55} To fill out the vague account of Teilo’s subsequent travels, then, the author of the Life of Euddogwy drew on Breton source material for the figure of King Budic of Cornouaille; in so doing, he connected Teilo with that region and thus, by implication, to his foundation at Landeleau. Finally, when the reviser of the Life of Teilo encountered hagiographical texts from Dol, including a Life of Turiau which named Turiau as successor to St Samson, he leapt at the chance to associate Teilo with a much more important church, adapting parts of the \textit{Vita s. Turiaui} into his revised \textit{Vita s. Teliaui}.

It is odd that the Breton materials in the Life of Euddogwy and in the Llandaf Life of Teilo have not been harmonised, especially given that Euddogwy’s Life follows so closely on Teilo’s in the Book of Llandaf. Euddogwy, despite his purported status as Teilo’s nephew and successor, is not even mentioned in the Llandaf Life (or the Vespasian). Perhaps the author of the Life of Euddogwy and the reviser of the Life of Teilo were different people, each working with slightly different sources, or according to their separate tastes. I suspect, however, that they are, in fact, the same person (as J. R. Davies

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[51]{Arthur de la Borderie (ed.), \textit{Cartulaire de l’abbaye de Landevenec} (Rennes, 1888), at 172–3; J. R. Davies, \textit{Book of Llandaf}, 119–20; Brett, \textit{Brittany}, 301, where a forthcoming publication is cited.}
\footnotetext[52]{Doble, \textit{Lives of Welsh Saints}, 209–11.}
\footnotetext[54]{Evans and Rhys, \textit{Llan Dàv}, 110.}
\footnotetext[55]{Guy, ‘Vespasian Life’, 16.}
\end{footnotes}
has suggested), one who incorporated new material into his work as he discovered it, and who was simply indifferent to how well his various writings hung together.57

Charter 144
The final text in the Book of Llandaf to mention the Yellow Plague is Charter 144, which purports to tell of a transaction in which Euddogwy, by that point bishop of Llandaf, recovers a property, Lann Cingualan (Llangynwalan), in the Gower peninsula.58 The narration to this charter presents this decision as the resolution of a dispute between Llandaf and Illtud’s church (Llantwit Major), which is represented in the charter by its abbot, Bywon. The narration runs as follows:

Sciendum est sane quod Oudoceus episcopus suum proprium adquisuit agrum, id est podum Cyngualan: agrum quidem sancti Dubricii in patria Guhyr, quem sanctus Oudoceus a tempore mortalitatis (id est y dylyt melen) perdiderat usque ad tempus Athrhis filii Mourici, post uero contentionem magnam inter Oudoceum episcopum et abbatem Ilduti Biuon, qui dicebat suum esse agrum. In fine uero iudicio iudicatus est ager predictus Oudoceo episcopo et altari Landauię in perpetua hereditate[.]

‘It should be known truly that Bishop Euddogwy acquired his own land, that is the church of Cynwalan: namely, St Dyfrig’s land in the country of Gower, which holy Euddogwy had lost from the time of the plague (that is, \( y \text{dylyt melen} \) [the yellow death]) until the time of Athrwys son of Meurig, following, indeed, a great dispute between Bishop Euddogwy and Bywan, abbot of Llanilltud, who said that the land was his. However, in the end the aforesaid land was adjudged to belong to Bishop Euddogwy and the altar of Llandaff in perpetual inheritance[.]

The charter continues from there, telling of the particular properties reclaimed by Euddogwy (accepted \( de \text{ manu Athruis gurcanti magni nepotis} \), ‘from the

57 J. R. Davies, *Book of Llandaf*, 132–42. It may be worth noting that the prose style of the Life of Euddogwy is very stilted: even in the excerpt above, note the double use of post immensum tempus, and the constant repetition of et... et... et.... Perhaps, then, the Life of Euddogwy represents an early attempt at crafting a saint’s Life, and the Llandaf Life of Teilo a later attempt by the same author, now with longer practice at writing in Latin, and in possession of new ‘sources’ for Teilo’s biography.


59 GPC Online s.v. *dilaith, dylon* considers *dylon* here to be a form of that noun, meaning ‘destruction, death, dissolution’; Ben Guy suggests it may be in error for *dilyw* (‘flood’) (Guy, ‘Vita Sancti Oudocei’, n. 111). Semantically, *dilaith* seems the better fit, though it remains to be explained how -y- could stand in for modern -ai-. The gender of *dilaith* is uncertain, moreover; it may be masculine, and hence the adjective ought, in modern Welsh, to be *melyn* instead of *melen*: Ben Guy, personal communication (June 2022). See further below.

hand of Athrwys, grandson of Gwrgan Fawr’), along with a list of witnesses, followed by a short note on the boundaries of Llangynwalan.61

This charter has clearly been reworked to suit Llandaf’s contemporary needs; Patrick Sims-Williams cites it as an archetypical example of a charter which may ‘contain forgeries designed to appropriate monastic lands’, though he grants that it may have ‘some authentic basis’.62 The basic reason for Sims-Williams’ doubt is geography: the historical Euddogwy, as noted above, was most likely a bishop active near the River Wye in the early eighth century, where the sole foundation that now bears his name, Llandogo, lies – many miles away from Gower.63 Conversely, as Sims-Williams notes, the losers in the judgment above – Bywon and the community of Llantwit – were long-established in the Gower peninsula.64

Despite these well-grounded concerns, it is possible, if perhaps unlikely, that Euddogwy was, in fact, in a position to receive those properties. The narration claims that this dispute happened in ‘the time of’ Athrwys, son of Meurig (fl. late 7th c.?).65 On the evidence of the sole other example of this phrase in the charters of the Book of Llandaf, ‘the time of [x]’ would suggest that x was in charge.66 The witness list, however, claims that the king, Meurig, stood as a witness to this charter ‘over his son’ (super filium suum). This is the only use of such a formula in a charter-list in the Book of Llandaf; it is unclear what it means, precisely, in this context. It appears as though Meurig and his descendants held effective control over much of both Gwent and Glywysing (including, it seems, Euddogwy’s home region of Ergyng): are we meant, then, to imagine Athrwys in charge in one region of the kingdom, under the watch of his father?67 In any case, if the kingdoms of Gwent and Glywysing were in fact united within that family in the later seventh century, Meurig and Athrwys’s authority could perhaps have stretched from Gower to Ergyng.68 The long distance between Euddogwy’s church at Llandogo and his purported properties in Gower may not, therefore, be an outright disqualification for the (partial) authenticity of the charter.

61 Evans and Rhys, Llan Dâv, 144–5.
62 Sims-Williams, The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source, 66, 112.
64 Sims-Williams, The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source, 66; see also Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘“Dark” and “clear” y in medieval Welsh orthography: Caligula versus Teilo’, Transactions of the Philological Society 119.1 (2021), 9–47, at 11.
66 [U]sque ad tempus hergualdi episcopi: Evans and Rhys, Llan Dâv, 278.
67 See the comments of Sims-Williams, The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source, 167.
68 Admittedly, the extent of these kingdoms – as envisioned in J. E. Lloyd, A History of Wales: From the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest (London, 1911), vol. 1, at 273–4 – is itself heavily reliant on the charters preserved in the Book of Llandaf, so there is a real risk of circularity here. Sims-Williams is more cautious, claiming that the ‘credible grants are concentrated … east of the Tywi—or more precisely east of the Neath valley’; Gower lies west of Neath (The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source, 165).
I do not wish to push that case too far, however. More relevant here is that the *mortalitas*, ‘mortality’, glossed by *idest y dylyt melen* (‘that is, the dylyt melen’), may well reflect a real record of a seventh-century mortality. As discussed above, *mortalitas* was the standard contemporary term for the major epidemics of early medieval Ireland and Britain, copiously attested in English and Irish sources.69 In all the texts of the Book of Llandaf, moreover, the word *mortalitas* only appears here. If this charter were a simple forgery, the lack of references to this ‘mortality’ in the other charters and saints’ Lives would be surprising. Finally, the scenario envisioned is at least plausible; comparative evidence from Ireland suggests that opportunistic shifts in land ownership did, in fact, happen in the wake of the *mortalitates* of the seventh century, as Tírechán – writing, most likely, shortly before 700 – complains:

[N]on quaerebant aliquid a familia Dumiche nissi amicitiam tantummodo, sed quaerit familia Clono, qui per uim tenent locos Patricii multos post mortalitates nouissimas.

‘They [Patrick’s successors] used not to demand anything of the community of Dumech save friendship alone, but the community of Clonmacnoise, which holds many of Patrick’s places by force since the most recent epidemics, does.’ 70

In short, though the reviser of the charters in the Book of Llandaf no doubt reworked this charter to some extent, he possibly relied on a charter first written centuries earlier.71 When the explanatory note naming the illness as the *dylyt melen*, was added is unclear. This Welsh term for the epidemic later known as the ‘Yellow Plague’ appears only here: by the thirteenth century, the preferred term was, rather, *ball felen*, and the synonymous *bad felen* first appears in the fourteenth century.72 *Dylyt melen* nevertheless continued to be understood; a late-medieval glossator of the Book of Llandaf (probably David Llywelyn, the treasurer of Llandaf in the late fifteenth century) wrote ‘y vall velen’ next to both *pestis flava* and *y dylyt melen*. 73

*Dylyt melen* may, in origin, have been a gloss present on an earlier copy of the charter, and incorporated into the main body of the text by a later copier, perhaps the compiler of the Book of Llandaf. This hypothesis would explain the odd spelling of the word *dylyt*: a possible Old Welsh spelling of *dilaith*.

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72 *BC* s.a. 575.1; Parry, *Cotton Cleopatra*, 195.

(or *dylaith) *melyn would be *dilet melen, which the reviser of the Book of Llandaf, fitfully updating older forms with a new, y-heavy orthography, could have fashioned into dylyt melen.\textsuperscript{74} The use of -e-, however, to represent Modern Welsh -ai-, Middle Welsh -ei-, appears to have largely fallen out of use by the early twelfth century, and would suggest that knowledge of the Yellow Plague was circulating in southern Wales before the date of compilation of the Book of Llandaf.\textsuperscript{75}

It is worth pausing here for a moment and asking why, exactly, this plague came to play such a major role at Llancarfan-Llandaf: after all, as I mentioned in the introduction above, attributing major historical consequences to early medieval epidemics was not particularly common at the time.

This question is considerably easier to answer for the three works in the Book of Llandaf. There, the reviser was working with a given narrative, set out by the earlier Vespasian Life of Teilo, and was able to connect the ‘Yellow Plague’ of that text with ‘mortalities’ recorded in other available sources (the annals, a charter), helping to create a timeline for the collection as a whole: the plague that broke out at the start of Teilo’s episcopate marked the end of Maelgwn’s rule over Gwynedd, which also coincided with his nephew Euddogwy’s youth.\textsuperscript{76}

As for the version preserved in the Vespasian Life of Teilo, I can only speculate. It is hard to justify Teilo’s flight from his diocese, though the text attempts to do so by claiming that angels commanded him to flee. I suspect, for this reason, that Stephen was working with a pre-existing story circulating at Llandaf-Llancarfan that he adapted for use in his sermon, which, in turn, was itself possibly based on Wrdisten’s Life of Winwaloe; this evidence will be discussed after the following section.

\textsuperscript{74}Sims-Williams, ‘“Dark” and “clear” y’, 10, 12; Peter Schrijver, ‘Old British’, in Elmar Ternes (ed.), Brythonic Celtic – Britannisches Keltisch: From Medieval British to Modern Breton (Bremen, 2011), 1–84, at 37.

\textsuperscript{75}Sims-Williams, ‘“Dark” and “clear” y’, 14; Schrijver, ‘Old British’. 27. Patrick Sims-Williams points out to me that examples of <e> for <ei> persist until the early thirteenth century (personal communication, Feb. 2023). These late usages appear, however, to happen only in monosyllables, or stressed syllables of polysyllabic words (e.g. Brecheniauc, in BC s.a. 1121.1 = 1099 AD, or per (GPC s.v. pair 2), found in the poem ‘Brenin gwrthfin gwyth uchaw y sydd’ from the copy in the Black Book of Carmarthen: Marged Haycock (ed.), Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Crefyddol Cynnar (Swansea, 1994), at 121–35, l. 3. Use of <e> for <ei> in an unstressed final syllable (as in the hypothesized *dilet) is considerably less common; I have encountered only a handful of examples, all potentially dating to the Old Welsh period, e.g. ‘hewed’ (Hfyaidd), BC s.a. 961.1 (= c. 938 AD), and ‘priten’ (Prydain), found in the Harleian genealogies (before 954; likely mid-9th c.): text in Ben Guy (ed.), ‘The St Davids recension’, in Guy, Medieval Welsh Genealogy, 333–38, at 336 ($19); date in Guy, Medieval Welsh Genealogy, 79.

\textsuperscript{76}Charter 144 fits less well into this timeline, given that Euddogwy is an established bishop at the time of its supposed creation. Since the charter refers to the ‘mortality’/dylyt melen as something that happened in the past, however, it does not necessarily clash with the statement that Euddogwy was still living with his family in Brittany when the Yellow Plague broke out (and, in any case, internal consistency was not the overriding goal of the Book of Llandaf’s reviser, as discussed above).
ii. The St Davids Group

The Yellow Plague appears four times in records from Llandaf-Llancarfan; it appears twice as often in materials deriving from St Davids: all of these, however, are preserved in the writings of Gerald of Wales (d. 1223), archdeacon of Brecon, and sometime aspirant to the (arch-)bishopric of St Davids. Most of these records were written in his own words; however, in his *Invectiones* he relates the text of two letters, purportedly sent from members of the community at St Davids to the papacy in the first half of the twelfth century. Regardless of the particular source, however, the basic story hardly varies: when the Yellow Plague threatened Wales, Samson, the archbishop of St Davids, took the pallium with him to Dol in Brittany; from that moment on, Dol enjoyed an honour that rightly belonged to St Davids and the Welsh.

This repetition means there is no need to discuss each work in detail. Instead, in what follows I will focus, first, on establishing the probable authenticity of earliest source, the letter to Pope Honorius II (r. 1124–30), which has not always been accepted as genuine; secondly, I will lay out the context of this story, and its potential relationship to the Llandaf version of the legend of the Yellow Plague, as discussed above.

Gerald of Wales’ *Invectiones* was composed over a period of time in the early thirteenth century; it is primarily a defense of the doomed attempt to win the archepiscopal pallium for St Davids, as well as a defense of Gerald’s own actions in pressing that case. The second book lays out Gerald’s own account of the history of Christianity in Wales, followed by a collection of letters largely relating to the first attempt to win St Davids’ independence from Canterbury, prosecuted by Bernard, the bishop of St Davids from 1115–48.

Samson’s flight from the Yellow Plague is reported three separate times in the second book: first, in Gerald’s own words; and then once each in letters to Popes Honorius II (r. 1124–30) and Eugenius III (r. 1145–53); this story is nowhere reflected in Samson’s surviving Lives. In each case, Samson’s flight from the Yellow Plague is the culmination of a tendentious history, meant to outline how St Davids won, and then (wrongly) lost, its archepiscopal status. The letter to Honorius, if authentic, would be contemporary (or nearly so) with the production of the texts in the Book of Llandaf – and thus an important early witness for the Yellow Plague. This letter has largely been accepted as genuine on a variety of grounds, most of which are slight or impressionistic.

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77 Georgia Henley and A. Joseph McMullen, ‘Gerald of Wales: interpretation and innovation in medieval Britain’, in Henley and McMullen (eds), *Gerald of Wales: New Persepctives on a Medieval Writer and Critic* (Cardiff, 2018), at 2–3, with further references there.
79 Davies, *De invectionibus*, 143–6 and 139–41, respectively. See also the discussion in Michael Richter, *Giraldus Cambrensis: The Growth of the Welsh Nation* (Aberystwyth, 1976), at 40–2.
80 E.g. Brooke, *Church and Border*, 21–3, especially n. 26: the letter ‘seem[s] to be genuine’; also J. Wyn Evans, ‘Transition and survival: St David and St Davids cathedral’, in J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan Wooding (eds), *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation* (Woodbridge, 2007), at 35–6; there is independent evidence that letters from Honorius were in St Davids’ archives; J. R. Davies, *Book of Llandaf*, 110 n. 15: dismisses possible interference from Gerald, suggesting
Recently, Barry Lewis has suggested the letter to Honorius is actually the work of Gerald of Wales. Lewis argues that the letter appears to have been heavily influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *De gestis Britonum*, a work not completed and made public until the late 1130s – years after the letter would have been written.\(^81\) The similarities are unmistakable: both Geoffrey and the author of the letter to Honorius claim that Britain was evangelised by two missionaries sent to Lucius, the ruler of Britain at the time. Both accounts contradict, therefore, the earlier version of the foundation of St Davids as set out in Rhiggyfarch’s Life of St David; moreover, the names of the missionaries, Faganus and Duvianus, reflect the names of parishes near Llandaf (St Fagan’s and Merthyr Dyfan). Lewis considers three possible explanations for this change. One is that both the letter-writer and Geoffrey worked from a lost third source compiled at Llandaf; the similarities between the letter and *De gestis Britonum* are so close, however, that, in Lewis’s opinion, ‘it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the author is citing Geoffrey’s book’.\(^82\) A second possibility is that the St Davids letter-writer worked from a version of Geoffrey’s text circulating in draft form in the 1120s before its eventual wider dissemination a decade or so later. Lewis grants this could have happened, but prefers to consider this letter the work of an author working after the publication of *De gestis Britonum*, familiar with both Geoffrey of Monmouth and St Davids’ own version of its history; and there is no better candidate, as Lewis points out, than Gerald himself.\(^83\)

Stylistic evidence makes it clear, however, that Gerald cannot be the author of the letter. Gerald is a notorious self-plagiariser, repurposing fragments of his earlier works almost verbatim,\(^84\) and the five versions of the story he presents as his own work are, in fact, very similar to one another. I have provided below the texts of both purported letters to the papacy; these are followed by three of Gerald’s own making: his own history from the *Invectiones*, a similar account in his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, and, finally, the paraphrase of a conversation with Innocent III, as preserved in *De iure et statu Menevensis ecclesiae*.\(^85\)


\(^{82}\) Lewis, ‘Religion and the church’, 409.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.


\(^{85}\) For the background to Gerald’s conversation, see J. Conway Davies, *Episcopal Acts*, vol. 1, 214–16. The other two versions of Gerald’s Yellow Plague story in *De iure et statu* are verbatim repetitions of passages set out below: Brewer, ‘*De iure et statu*’, 151, 171.
1. **To Pope Honorius**

[S]anctus Sanson nostre Demetice regionis partibus oriundus et in eadem ecclesia sicut in eius uita legitur archiepiscopus consecratus, imminente flaue pestis letali incommodo ad Dolense Armorice gentis cum pallii honore transmeauit monasterium.\(^86\)

‘As the lethal illness of the Yellow Plague threatened, St Samson, a man born in the districts of our own region of Dyfed, and consecrated archbishop in the very same church [viz. St Davids] (as is read in his life), went over to the monastery of Dol, of the Armorican people, and with him the honor of the pallium.’

2. **To Pope Eugenius**

[P]allio decorata est ecclesia nostra a tempore beati Dauid usque ad tempus beati Sansonis, qui nostre sedis aliquamdiu pontifex, tandem flaum pestem fugiens, et pallium cum ceteris pontificalibus ornamentis secum deferens, ad Armoricos applicuit, et in Dolensi monasterio honorifice susceptus permansit.\(^87\)

‘Our church was adorned with the pallium from the time of blessed David to the time of blessed Samson, who, after serving as the pontiff of our see for some time, set out in flight from the Yellow Plague and landed among the Armoricans, bringing with him the pallium along with the other pontifical ornaments; and he remained in the monastery of Dol, where he had been honorably received.’

**Gerald**

1. **Invectiones**

Habuimus autem apud Meneuiam archiepiscopos successiue xxv, quorum primus fuit Sanctus Dauid, ultimus uero Sanctus Sanson, qui ingruenta per Walliam ictericia clade in Armoricam Gallie Britanniam nauigio se transtulit, ibique in ecclesia Dolensi, tune forte uacante, cum pallio nostro quod secum portauerat, in archiepiscopum assumptus est.\(^88\)

‘Moreover, we at St Davids have had twenty-five archbishops in succession, of whom the first was St David, the last, then, St Samson, who brought himself over by a sea voyage to Gaul’s Armoric Brittany, as the icteric calamity cut its way through Wales, and there in the church of Dol, by chance vacant at that time, he was made an archbishop with our pallium, which he had brought with him.’

2. **Itinerarium Cambriae**

Ingruenta per Kambriam, isto [Sansone] praesidente, peste

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\(^{86}\) Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 145. Translation here and in the following passages my own.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 131–2; see also 165 for a nearly identical version.
quadam, qua cateruatim plebs occubuit, quam flauam pestem uocabant, quam et physici ictericiam dicunt passionem, praesul, quamquam sanctus et ad mortem intrepidus, tamen ad suorum instantiam nauem scandens, flante Circio, cum suis indemnem in Armorica Britannia se suscepit, ubi et uacante tunc forte sede Dolensi, statim ibidem in episcopum est assumptus. 89

‘When he [Samson] was in charge, a certain pestilence, called the “Yellow Plague”, and which physicians call the “icteric passion”, cut its way through Wales; the people lay dead in heaps from it, and the prelate – though a saint, and fearless in the face of death – nonetheless boarded a boat at the request of his followers, and took himself, unharmed, with his followers in Armoric Brittany as a west-northwesterly wind blew; then and there he was made a bishop (as the see of Dol was, by chance, vacant at that time).’

3. De iure et statu Menevensis ecclesiae

Item quaerente iterum papa qualiter et ob quam causam dignitate pristina Meneuensis fuerat ecclesia priuata, respondit Giraldus, exponens ei quomodo per ultimum archiepiscopum Meneuensem Sampsonem nomine, fugientem cladem ictericiam et ob hoc in Armoricam Britanniam transfretantem, metropolitica dignitas euauit[.]. 90

‘When the pope asked, again, how and why the church of St Davids was deprived of its original dignity, Gerald responded, explaining to him how the metropolitan dignity disappeared through the last archbishop of St Davids, Samson by name, who fled the icteric calamity and for that reason crossed over into Armoric Brittany.’

Gerald’s stylistic tics are clear; he glosses the earlier accounts even as he recounts them. Every time the *flava pestis* is mentioned, he displays his grasp of medical knowledge and calls it jaundice, using the Greek-derived term *ictericus*. He tries to explain certain omissions in the original narratives, suggesting that Samson was able to set himself up as (arch-)bishop in Dol because the see was ‘by chance vacant at the time’ (*tunc forte vacante*), and also provides a number of learned flourishes (such as the Latin name, *circius*, for the west-northwesterly wind). 91 Moreover, he conceives of Brittany as a territory, always labeling it ‘Armoric Brittany’, where the letters talk of ‘the Armoric people’ or ‘the Armoricans’. 92 Such explanation and literary polishing of his sources is characteristic of Gerald’s style. 93

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90 Brewer, ‘De iure et statu’, 166.
91 Gerald’s earliest reference to this story – the *Itinerarium Cambriae*, written years before Gerald took up his crusade for St Davids’ independence – says that Samson was taken up in *episcopatum*; in his later works, Dol is invariably an archbishopric.
93 Henley, ‘Quotation, revision, and narrative structure’, 50.
The two letters, on the other hand, differ from each other as much as they do from Gerald’s versions, and are both clearly their own works. The older letter to Honorius favors roundabout elocations, such as *flaue pestis letali incommodo*, ‘the lethal illness of the Yellow Plague’, and wields a complicated syntax, with the subject and main verb separated by nearly the entire passage. The author of this letter tends to defend St Davids’ claims on textual grounds, moreover, often referring to ‘histories’; the purported reliance on Samson’s Life (which, in fact, never mentions any such ordination at St Davids) fits this trend well. The later letter to Eugenius, for its part, is much more direct in its prose: it calls the Yellow Plague simply *flava pestis*, and the ideas unfurl successively in a series of relative clauses.

In short, on a stylistic basis, neither letter can be the work of Gerald (at least not in the passages examined above). Bernard and Gerald were the two most vocal and determined supporters of the case for an archbishopric of St Davids; there would, therefore, have been little reason to write (or even forge) such a letter once Bernard had died, and before Gerald himself took up the cause of St Davids’ archbishopric. Since Gerald is not the author, both of the letters Gerald reproduces most likely date, therefore, to Bernard’s episcopacy.

The contemporary political situation provides another reason to suspect that the letter to Honorius was, in fact, written during Honorius’ papacy. Pope Gregory VII had granted Dol the pallium in 1075; despite reversals in succeeding decades, Archbishop Baudri (r. 1107–30) successfully laid claim to the pallium and the archepiscopal title throughout his prelacy (though he rarely wielded much actual power). The letter to Honorius trades on Dol’s success: perhaps familiar with a Breton source that claimed that Samson was ordained in Britain, the clergy at St Davids seized on the Yellow Plague as a convenient

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94 E.g. Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 143: [*In textu historiarum reperitur* (‘it is found in the text of the histories’); ibid., 145: *Tradunt namque nostre prouincie aliarumque nationum historie* (‘For the histories of our own province, and those of other nations report […]’); ibid., *historiarum contestante serie* (‘as the series of histories testifies […]’); ibid., *quorumscripta adhuc retinet nomina* (‘whose written names [St Davids] possesses to this day’), and so on. For a list of Samson’s early Lives (i.e. pre-1000), see Poulin, *L’hiographe bretonne*, 311–12. Pryce (‘Gerald of Wales’, 30) suggests that Geoffrey of Monmouth and the clergy at St Davids may have derived their notion of Samson being archbishop of Dol from the revised Life of Samson in the Book of Llandaf (Evans and Rhyd, *Llan Dâv*, 22, 24); however, the near-contemporary Life written by Baudri, archbishop of Dol 1107–30, likewise names Samson and his successors as archbishops: Baudri, *Vita sancti Sansonis*, in Armelle le Huërou (ed. and trans.), *Baudri de Bourgueil: Œuvres en prose* (*textes hagiographiques*), vol. 3 (Paris, 2013), 243–435, at 431 (§II.24).


98 Brett, *Brittany*, 298 notes the existence of Breton texts that assert that Samson was ordained archbishop in Britain, including the work *De dignitate Dolensis ecclesiae*, written ‘probably before 1143’ (ibid.), which reads ‘prius in sua regione [Samson] archiepiscopi dignitatem sortitus fuerat’
way to show that Samson had not left Britain at the urging of angels, and with the full approval of Archbishop Dyfrig (as his Lives report),

99 but instead had fled it in its need – and thus St Davids should regain the archbishopric Samson had wrongly taken away with him to Dol.

100 Baudri’s archepiscopacy provides a highly plausible context for the letter to Honorius, as well as the view of history underlying it. It is best, therefore, to view these two letters as authentic.

This conclusion, however, raises difficult questions of its own. So far in this discussion, I have sidestepped the role that Bernard himself played in the dispute over the history of the see of St Davids. Yet among the surviving documents recorded in Gerald’s Inversiones, there is a startling divergence between letters sent anonymously from St Davids (nos. 5, 6, and 10), which invariably blame Samson for the missing pallium, and the letter from Bernard himself to the pope (no. 7), which makes the case for the archbishopric not on historical grounds, but on the more practical bases of sheer geographic distance, as well as linguistic and cultural differences.

Furthermore, Bernard sought to promote the view of St Davids’ history as set out by Rhygyfarch’s Life of the saint, composed in the 1080s or 1090s.

This Life depicts the founding of the archbishopric of Wales as a two-step process. First, David is raised to the rank of archbishop by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Then, when he returns to Wales, he preaches against the Pelagian heresy at the Synod of Llanddewibrefi, and is proclaimed by all assembled to be the archbishop of the British people, an honour, the text claims, that all his successors will hold as well.

(‘[Samson] had previously in his own region obtained the dignity of an archbishop’): François Duine (ed.), ‘De dignitate Dolensis ecclesie’, in Duine, La métropole de Bretagne (Paris, 1916), 38–54, at 41. Gerald, moreover, relays a sequence that he claims was found in ‘Dol’s histories’ (historie Dolenses), to the effect that Samson was archbishop in St Davids before Dol (Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 132; also cited in Brett, Brittany, 298). It is hard to shake the suspicion, however, that Gerald either concocted this sequence, or reported a sequence that some previous partisan of St Davids’ had concocted before him.

99 As in Evans and Rhys, Llan Dâv, 18–19.

100 This logic is laid out explicitly in a different letter from St Davids’ to the pope (which does not mention the Yellow Plague): Unde cum omnia redire debeant ad sua inicia, sicut ecclesia Dolensis ad suum initium iam redit, scilicet simplicem episcopatum, sic etiam Meneuensis ecclesia ad suum inicium, id est, sedem metropolitanam, Deo dante, diebus uestris redire debet (‘Whence, as all things should return to their beginnings, just as the church of Dol has already returned to its beginning – to wit, a simple bishopric – so indeed should the church of St Davids, by the gift of God, return in your days to its beginning – that is, a metropolitan see’: Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 139; my translation). This letter, likely to be dated to around the same time as the letter to Eugenius, is clearly attempting to turn Lucius’ dismissal of Dol’s metropolitan claims in 1144 in its favor (see Martène and Durand, Thesaurus novum, cols 887–90; J. Conway Davies, Episcopal Acts, vol. 1, 262–3).

101 Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 142.

102 In particular, that found in the lightly revised Nero-Digby recension of the Life. See Richard Sharpe, ‘Which text is Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David?’ in Evans and Wooding (eds), St David of Wales, 90–105, at 104–5. For the date of the original text, see Guy, ‘Vespasian Life’, 16–17, especially n. 48.

As noted above, this story runs directly counter to that outlined by the letter to Honorius, which depicts David as just one in a series of archbishops of western Britain. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, the author of the letter portrays the founding of the archbishopric of St Davids as happening under the reign of Lucius, in the time of pope Eleutherius. The letter refers to an unnamed synod at which David’s predecessor, Dyfrig, consecrated him as archbishop. This synod appears to be a disguised version of the synod of Llanddewibrefi; no mention is made, however, of the Pelagian threat that Rhigyfarch stresses. For its part, the letter to Eugenius strains, it seems, to reconcile the two accounts: gone are the references to Eletherius, Lucius, Dyfrig, Faganus, and Duvianus; and the Synod of Llanddewibrefi once again plays the crucial role, followed now with the story of Samson fleeing the Yellow Plague.

It appears as though new written texts – the ‘histories’ the author of the letter to Honorius refers to time and again – provoked a thorough rewriting of St Davids’ history in the late 1120s to provide, in concert with the contemporary political situation at Dol, a plausible basis, rooted in the supposed ‘histories’, for an ancient archepiscopate of St Davids – as well as an excuse for its eventual disappearance. Decades later, however, the author of the letter to Eugenius, while still incorporating details of the earlier letter (including the ‘Yellow Plague’), reinstated much of the earlier version of the history of St Davids, as found in the Life by Rhigyfarch.

The difficulty comes in interpreting the role of Bernard at this time. Did the left hand not know what the right hand was doing? Or did Bernard focus on the practical case for a separate archbishopric, delegating the task of devising a suitable historical basis for a renewed see of St Davids? Regardless of the precise answers to such questions, I believe the evidence offered above suffices to show that the passage in the letter to Honorius II about the Yellow Plague very probably was, in fact, composed between 1124 and 1130, and drew on materials derived ultimately, it seems, from Llandaf, and with an eye to the contemporary status of the supposed archbishopric of Dol.

II. The Origins of the Yellow Plague

Above, I have run through the earliest surviving Welsh sources about the Yellow Plague, and discussed their likely contexts of composition, and, where evident, their immediate source material. It is possible, however, to follow the migration legend further back, to stories developed in the ninth and tenth centuries in Ireland and Brittany, and later brought over to Wales. Irish scholarship, I argue, was the point of origin for the name of the disease itself, and its approximate timeframe, while the Breton Life of Winwaloe supplied the basic narrative of a people forced to flee overseas.

104Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 143. My thanks to Barry Lewis for useful suggestions on this point.
105Davies, ‘De invectionibus’, 143.
106Ibid., 139–40.
Ireland and the Yellow Plague

Medieval terms for the ‘Yellow Plague’ are preserved in three languages: Welsh, Latin, and Irish. Most often, these terms denote the mortalities attested in the Annals of Ulster (AU) under the years 545, 549, and 664–8 (Welsh sources for the Yellow Plague allude only to the second of the three);\(^\text{107}\) in texts whose authors were less concerned with chronological accuracy, the ‘Yellow Plague’ is often simply a name for a particularly terrible disease that happened sometime during the ‘Age of Saints’;\(^\text{108}\) Welsh and Latin terms (the latter found essentially only in Wales)\(^\text{109}\) are, generally, straightforward: *flava pestis, ictericia clades, bad felen, ball felen,* and likely *dylyt melen.* Each of those terms can be understood as a ‘yellow plague’ – or, in the case of *ictericia clades,* as a learned extrapolation from that term. Such a translation is, however, at best only a very rough approximation for the three principal Irish names for the illness, each apparently wholly interchangeable with the others: *buidechair,* *buide chonnail,* and *crom chonnaill;* *galar buide,* ‘yellow disease’, appears once as well, in a

\(^{107}\) AU s.a. 545, 549, 664, 665, 668. All the various collections have various dates for these outbreaks (though 664 is well-attested). Moreover, AU explicitly mentions the Yellow Plague only at 556, 665, and 668. These are all *secunda manus,* however, and the first is likely a kalends error, as the day of January 1 was the same in 550 as in 556; the Annals of Tigernach (AT), a version of the Clonmacnois-group recension of the Irish annals (whence much of the second-hand material derived) has the notice of the Yellow Plague at 550; Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘The Annals of Tigernach,’ *RC* 17 (1896), 6–33. 116–263, 337–420, at 140, with date as reconstructed in Daniel McCarthy, ‘Irish chronicles and their chronology’, 2005, <https://publications.scs.tcd.ie/kronos/chronology/synchronisms/> (accessed 29 November 2023). For a discussion of the Clonmacnois-group recension, see Nicholas Evans, *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Woodbridge, 2010).


\(^{109}\) The two exceptions are the Life of Déclán (*pestis […] que flavos primitus faciebat homines,* and *postea occidebat:* ‘a plague […] that first made men yellow, and then killed them’: Plummer, *Vita sancti Declani’, 48), and the Life of Gerald of Mayo, which, after giving the Irish term *Budi Conayll,* translates it as *ictericia:* Charles Plummer, ‘Vita sancti Geraldii abbatis de Magh Eo’, in Plummer (ed.), *Vita sanctorum Hiberniae,* vol. 2, 107–15, at 113.
poem about Éimín Báin’s bell.\footnote{Erich Poppe, ‘A Middle Irish poem on Éimín’s bell’, \textit{Celtica} 17 (1985), 59–72, at 65. The original form of the Irish words has been the subject of some debate. It has been suggested, for instance, that \textit{crom chonnaill} should properly be \textit{crón chonnaill}, as ‘crón’ appears to indicate a dark yellow/brown/ruddy color (\textit{eDIL} s.v. \textit{crón}); Grace, ‘From \textit{blefed} to \textit{scamach}’, \textit{pace} 2–3. This is attested only once, however, in a \textit{secunda manus} entry to the \textit{Annals of Ulster} (\textit{AU} s.a. 556). It is invariably \textit{crom} elsewhere, both in other annals collections (\textit{AI} s.a. 551: \textit{AP} p. 140 [= 550 \textit{A}]; \textit{CS} s.a. 551), and in the only other attestation, the Life of Mac Creiche: Charles Plummer (ed. and trans.), ‘Bitha Meic Creiche’, \textit{Miscellanea hagiographica Hibernica. Vitae adhuc ineditae […]} (Brussels, 1925), 13–91, at 19: \textit{na cruime connaill}.} For all three, the literal or etymological meanings – ‘yellow rot’, ‘straw-yellow’, and ‘straw-crooked’, respectively – are fairly opaque.\footnote{\textit{EIR}, \textit{Frühmittelalterliche Studien} 52 (2018), 119–55. For the \textit{Liber hymnorum}, see J. H. Bernard and Richard Atkinson (eds and trans), \textit{The Liber Hymnorum}, 2 vols (London, 1898); and for its date and place of composition, see Maître Herbert, ‘Crossing historical and literary boundaries: Irish written culture around the year 1000’, \textit{CMCS} 53–4 (2007), 87–101, at 89–91.} It is unlikely, for instance, that an Irish scholar of the eleventh century would understand that the \textit{-chair} of \textit{buide chair} is related to Latin \textit{caries}, ‘decay’, especially when a productive suffix \textit{-chair} ‘loving, -philous’ was to hand.\footnote{For the creation of the Clonmacnoise-group texts, see Evans, \textit{Present and Past}, 189–224; an alternative view is registered in Daniel Mc Carthy, ‘The genesis and evolution of the Irish Annals to AD 1000’, \textit{Frühmittelalterliche Studien} 52 (2018), 119–55. For the \textit{Liber hymnorum}, see J. H. Bernard and Richard Atkinson (eds and trans), \textit{The Irish Liber Hymnorum}, 2 vols (London, 1898); and for its date and place of composition, see Maître Herbert, ‘Crossing historical and literary boundaries: Irish written culture around the year 1000’, \textit{CMCS} 53–4 (2007), 87–101, at 89–91.} This evidence alone suggests derivation from Ireland to Wales is more likely than the converse route, as I doubt that \textit{pestis flava} or \textit{ball felen} could be rendered into Irish as \textit{buide chonnaill}, let alone as \textit{crom chonnaill} (‘straw-crooked’); the terms found in Wales, however, could well be approximations of two of the Irish terms (\textit{buide chonnaill} and \textit{buide chair}).\footnote{Examples of \textit{mortalitas} were listed above, n. 69. The Irish terms can be found in early medieval legal texts such as \textit{Críth Gablach} – Daniel Binchy (ed.), \textit{Críth Gablach} (Dublin, 1941), 20; snd.} These terms are, moreover, highly unlikely to be the original names for the sixth- and seventh-century mortalities. In both Ireland and Wales, these terms first appear well after the events themselves. The two earliest sources to use any term for the Yellow Plague are the Clonmacnoise-group recension of the Irish annals, which came together in stages between c. 911 and c. 1060, and the \textit{Liber hymnorum}, likely compiled at Armagh c. 1000.\footnote{\textit{The Irish Book of Hymns: a palaeographical study}, 2 vols (Lon- don, 1985), 17 (1985), 59–72, at 65. The original form of the Irish words has been the subject of some debate. It has been suggested, for instance, that \textit{crom chonnaill} should properly be \textit{crón chonnaill}, as ‘crón’ appears to indicate a dark yellow/brown/ruddy color (\textit{eDIL} s.v. \textit{crón}); Grace, ‘From \textit{blefed} to \textit{scamach}’, \textit{pace} 2–3. This is attested only once, however, in a \textit{secunda manus} entry to the \textit{Annals of Ulster} (\textit{AU} s.a. 556). It is invariably \textit{crom} elsewhere, both in other annals collections (\textit{AI} s.a. 551: \textit{AP} p. 140 [= 550 \textit{A}]; \textit{CS} s.a. 551), and in the only other attestation, the Life of Mac Creiche: Charles Plummer (ed. and trans.), ‘Bitha Meic Creiche’, \textit{Miscellanea hagiographica Hibernica. Vitae adhuc ineditae […]} (Brussels, 1925), 13–91, at 19: \textit{na cruime connaill}.} Prior to that date, all references to those early-medieval epidemics use nondescript Latin terms like \textit{mortalitas} or \textit{pestilentia}, or the Irish equivalents \textit{mortlaid} and \textit{duineba}.\footnote{\textit{Examples of mortalitas} were listed above, n. 69. The Irish terms can be found in early medieval legal texts such as \textit{Críth Gablach} – Daniel Binchy (ed.), \textit{Críth Gablach} (Dublin, 1941), 20; snd.}
(There is one exception, ‘blefed’ or ‘belefeth’; it is found only in the annals, and is likely the original Irish word for the bubonic plague.) In Wales, neither of the references to early medieval epidemics older than 1100 – namely, the Welsh annals and the Historia Britonum – names the disease; if the term dylyt melen truly does derive from a misinterpreted *dilet melen, as tentatively suggested above, the existence of a term for the ‘Yellow Plague’ in Welsh could, perhaps, be pushed back some time earlier than the late eleventh century.

Over time, these once nondescript ‘mortalities’ came, then, to be identified as the ‘Yellow Plague’, sometimes in the face of earlier evidence. For instance, two versions of the Life of Ruadán refer to a nameless epidemic; in one, this pestilence is identified by a later glossator as the ‘budi chonnaill’. The Latin Life of Laisrén of Devenish (Molaise) likewise refers to an ingen pestis where the later Irish translation has buide chonnaill. This process can be traced in Welsh texts, too, as when the mortalitas of the Harleian Chronicle (after 954) becomes the ball felen of the Breviate (c. 1300).

Nor were vernacular texts immune to this process. The ninth-century Cáin Éimíne Báin, for instance, names the affliction only as a duineba; the poetic version of this story and the commentary to the Martyrology of Óengus – both centuries younger – call it the ‘Yellow Plague’. The pattern is consistent enough that it can provide a check on attempts to date certain hagiographic


116 AU s.a. 545; CS s.a. 541. The word is likely a compound of an unidentified element *bel- and *swēd-, which gave rise to Welsh chwydd, ‘swelling, pride’ (GPC Online s.v. chwydd) and Irish siad, ‘tumor’ (eDIL s.v. siad) – possibly a reference to the characteristic buboes of the bubonic plague. For more on *bel-, see IEW, vol. 1, 118–24 and Peter Schrijver, ‘On henbane and early European narcotics’, ZCP 51 (1999), 17–45. I am grateful here for the assistance of Joe Eska. Cf. Shrewsbury, ‘The Yellow Plague’, 24; Dooley, ‘Plague and its consequences’, 218–19.


120 HC s.a. 103.1; BC s.a. 575.1.

texts. For instance, the first half of *Betha Meic Creiche*, it has been claimed, ‘may well have been written towards the end of that century [viz. the seventh] or in the eighth’ – despite the manifestly later date of the language. Whatever the origins of the author’s source material, the appearance of the terrible *crom chonnaill* suits the context of the otherwise late Middle Irish language of that section of the text very well, and there is no reason to project the composition of the Life further back than the eleventh century.

Records of the death of Mobhí Claráineach, Colmcille’s teacher, provide the clearest illustration of how the concept of the Yellow Plague spread. In the Irish annals, he died of *blefed*/*belefeth*: as stated earlier, this is likely the original word for bubonic plague. The commentary to the hymn *Noli pater* in the *Liber hymnorum* (composed c. 1000), which claims that hymn was composed on the occasion of Mobhí’s death, does not specify how the saint died. However, glosses in one manuscript, Dublin, Trinity College MS 1441 (E.4.2), written in the ‘second half of the eleventh century’, speculates that Colmcille may have sought protection against the Yellow Plague (*buidechuir*), using that word (along with *erloscud*, ‘burning’) to gloss the Latin ablative *uridine*, ‘burning, burning itch’. Finally, in Colmcille’s Irish Life, composed in Derry in the early twelfth century, Mobhí is explicitly stated to have been killed by the Yellow Plague (*in buide chonnaill*). In these several stages, we can see a progression away from the historical reality of ‘blefed’ to learned speculation over what looming threat Columba faced as he left his master’s school, and ultimately to acceptance of Mobhí’s Yellow Plague-inflicted death as a historical fact.

In short, whatever the original meaning(s) of the various terms for the Yellow Plague, their use as names for particular early medieval epidemics is first attested around 1000 AD (though these sources were doubtless reliant on earlier materials); in many cases, this is demonstrably the result of an ongoing scholarly rewriting of the past. While this process is easier to trace in Ireland, with its many surviving early medieval texts, it is clear that a similar process was also at work in Wales.

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123 For instance, independent object pronouns are used frequently: e.g. *Ro shaer Dia & urnaighthe an cleirigh naoimh e* (‘God and the prayers of the holy cleric freed him’) and *Tucc leis é don tigh, & ro gher & ro chosgair é* (‘He brought it with him to the house, and cut it up, and prepared it’): Plummer, ‘Betha Meic Creiche’, 14, 16. This would suggest a date in the eleventh century or later: Liam Breatnach, ‘An Mheán-Ghaeilge’, in *SnaG*, 221–333, at 271.


125 *AU* s.a. 545, *CS* s.a. 541. See n. 116.


129 Bernard and Atkinson, *Liber hymnorum*, 88 n. to *uridine*, line 2: *o erloscud no o buidechuir* (I have corrected their reading, a *buidechuir*, against the MS).

The ‘Yellow Plague’, therefore, is largely the creation of Irish and Welsh historiography. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that Welsh and Irish scholars independently stumbled across similar terminology for the same early medieval epidemic; there must have been transmission of this name from one region to the other. Given the linguistic and textual evidence cited above, the direction should be from Ireland to Wales: *ball felen* is a respectable translation of *buidechair*, but *crom chonnaill* bears no resemblance to *pestis flava*; the breadth and variety of Irish stories about the Yellow Plague, moreover, far outstrips the handful of narratives, all attested after 1100, found in Wales.

When did this transmission happen? Intellectual exchange from one region to the next was fairly consistent throughout the earlier Middle Ages, so there is no pressing need to postulate a single moment of transmission as the source of all knowledge about the Yellow Plague in Wales.\(^\text{131}\) There is circumstantial evidence, however, that points to the monastery of Clonard, in east-central Ireland, and Llancarfan as leading candidates for the main points of contact.

In Ireland, scholars at Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Inisfallen, and Armagh were familiar with the Yellow Plague by 1100, on the evidence of the Clonmacnoise-group annals and the *Liber hymnorum*, and there were no doubt other centers as well where one could learn of it.\(^\text{132}\) Yet of all of these, Clonard shows the most sustained engagement with the illness. It is Finnian, after all – the supposed founder of the monastery – who was the leading Irish saint said to have died of the ‘great mortality’ of 549 (or 550, or 551) in all the principal Irish collections of annals.\(^\text{133}\) This was, at some point – it is unclear when – a well-known fact at Clonard. Finnian’s cause of death is not mentioned in the Latin Life, but in the Irish Life, his demise from the *buide chonnaill* is presented as a noble self-sacrifice, akin to Paul’s death in Rome.\(^\text{134}\)


\(^{132}\)Given the prominent placement of the Yellow Plague in Columba’s Irish Life, itself composed ‘around the middle of the [twelfth] century’, Kells and/or Derry may be implicated as well: Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 199; Yellow Plague at 229.

\(^{133}\)This is the entry, discussed above (n. 43), that served as the source for the entry on Maelgwn’s death in the Welsh Latin annals.

\(^{134}\)W. W. Heist (ed.), ‘Vita s. Finniani abbatis de Cluain Iraird’, in Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae. Ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels, 1965), at 96–107. Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘Betha Fhindein Clúana hEraird’, in Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, 74–83, at 82, ll. 2761–4. Unfortunately, it is difficult to say when this Life took shape; Kathleen Hughes’ rough estimate of the ninth or tenth century seems far too early, even if some aspects of the narrative may truly date from that period (Hughes, ‘Historical value’, 372); Pádraig Ó Ríain’s brusque assertion, however, that it must postdate the Norman invasion cannot be sustained (Ó Ríain, *Dictionary of Irish Saints*, 319–20). The claim that Finnian’s familiarity with David, Cadog and Gildas was ‘bound to impress the invading adventurers, most of whom had family links in that part of Britain’ (ibid., 319) is hard to understand; by this logic, the association of David with Máedóg of Ferns and Patrick in Rhigyfarch’s Life of David would suppose an Irish invasion of southwest Wales in the later eleventh
Llancarfan, as discussed above, is where textual evidence of the Yellow Plague first appears in Wales. Moreover, the abbot of Llancarfan in the later eleventh century, Lifris, wrote a Life of Cadog indebted to a Life of Finnian of Clonard; this Life testifies to what appears, at some point, to have been a close ongoing relationship between the two foundations. It was not only Llancarfan that showed interest in Clonard; the transfer of information, it seems, was mutual, as Finnian’s Lives – Irish and Latin – have their saint train at Llancarfan. Such interaction between two centers that displayed early and sustained interest in the Yellow Plague is suggestive, to say the least.

Kathleen Hughes, in her study of the Lives of Finnian, suggested that the connection between Clonard and Llancarfan was no longer active by the late eleventh century, as the garbled passage in the Life of Cadog linking the two foundations ‘seems to indicate that Lifris was reporting a tradition which he found recorded in documents at Llancarfan, but which he himself did not understand and which had passed out of current monastic practice before his day’. It is unclear when, precisely, this may have been; an early connection would, however, provide a plausible context for the reconstructed spelling of *dilet melen discussed above.

Brittany and the Migration Legend

While Irish scholars may have provided the name of the Yellow Plague to their Welsh colleagues, there is no trace of any story similar to the Welsh migration to Brittany preserved in Irish sources. A plausible parallel is found, however, in the Life of Winwaloe by Wrdisten. While there is no trace of direct influence from Wrdisten’s work on the earlier Vespasian Life of Teilo, as noted above, there is nonetheless reason to believe that the Life of Winwaloe was the ultimate source for that text, as it appears that Wrdisten was the first author to yoke together an early medieval plague and migration from Britain to Brittany.

Wrdisten asserted that he made use of an earlier Life of Winwaloe; this, if it existed, is now lost. He did, however, use many works that we can still trace, including Gildas’ blistering jeremiad De excidio et conquestu Britanniae.

135 Hughes’ estimate of the language of the Life as being originally approximately twelfth-century in date (Hughes, ‘Historical value’, 357 n. 10) seems accurate enough – there are only two independent object pronouns (Stokes, ‘Betha Fhindein’, 76, l. 2545: Dorat-sidhe iat; and 81, l. 2722: aconnaic […] he).
137 Hughes, ‘Historical value’, 367. The passage is in Wade-Evans, Vitae sanctorum Britanniae, 114.
138 De Smedt, ‘Vita s. Winwaloei’, 172, l. 1.
139 Poulin, L’hagiographie bretonne, 414–22 (in particular, 418).
In this work, written in the first half of the sixth century, Gildas describes the various disasters that afflicted the Britons on account of their sins and general waywardness, including a terrible plague; a while later, he claims that the Saxon onslaught forced many Britons to flee overseas.\textsuperscript{140} Wrdisten uses this narrative to structure his opening passage, in which he lays out a brief description of Britain and a sketch of its history, before turning to his subject, and narrating how Winwaloe’s parents come to settle in Brittany.\textsuperscript{141} In so doing, he streamlines Gildas’ text considerably, and makes the plague and migration appear to be contemporaneous. Here is the passage in full, including the portion cited earlier:

Haec autem quondam patria Cyclopum, nunc vero nutrix, ut fertur, tyrannorum, a divinis non inulta raro umquam diu quievit propter sua peccata flagellis. Aut enim crebris hostium irruptionibus, aut civium inter se invicem concussionibus, aut fame, peste, gladio morbisque insectata est acerrimis. Sed longe ab hujus quoque moribus parvam distasse sobolem suam non opinor, quae quondam ratibus ad istam devecta est citra mare Britannicum terram. Tempore non alio, quo gens barbara, dudum aspera in armis, moribus indiscreta, Saxonum maternum possedit cespite, huic se cara soboles in istum conclusit sinum, quo se tuta loco magnis laboribus fessam, ad oram concessit sine bello quietam. Interea miserorum, qui paterna incolebant rura, peste foeda repente exorta, catervatim et absque numero et absque sepultura miseranda sternuntur corpora. Ex hac lue magna ex parte antiqua desolatur patria; tandemque pauci et multo pauci, qui vix ancipitem effugissent gladium, aut Scoticam quamvis inimicam, aut Belgicam, natalem aut patriam linquentes, coacti acriter alienam petivere terram.\textsuperscript{142}

‘Moreover, this fatherland, once home to Cyclopes, now rather the nourisher (as is said) of tyrants, has rarely ever received any respite for long from the divine lash on account of its sins, which did not go unavenged, for it was beset by frequent hostile invasions, or by strife between its citizens, or by hunger, pestilence, the sword, and the cruelest of illnesses – but I do not suppose that its little offshoot, borne a while ago on boats to this land on this side of the British Sea, to be far removed from its habits. At the same time as the barbaric Saxon race (until recently savage in arms, crude in habits) took possession of the maternal turf, the beloved offshoot confined itself here in this refuge, in which, secure, it withdrew itself (exhausted with great labors) to a peaceful shore without

\textsuperscript{141}Brett, Brittany, 110.
\textsuperscript{142}De Smedt, ‘Vita s. Winwaloei’, 175, with thanks to Ben Guy and Barry Lewis for helpful suggestions on the translation.
In the meantime, a foul pestilence suddenly arose, and the wretched bodies of the wretches who remained tilling the ancestral fields were strewn in multitudes, unburied and uncountable. From this plague the old fatherland was largely made a desert; and at length a few – and a very few indeed – who had barely evaded the double-edged sword were driven, bitterly, to seek a strange land: either that of the Irish (however hostile), or of the Belgians, leaving the country of their birth behind.

It is, admittedly, difficult to follow Wrdisten’s prose, which revels in hyperbaton and figurative language; still, it is tolerably clear that both plague and Saxon pressure are forcing the Britons to flee.

Learned speculation on the origins of Brittany was fairly common in what little survives from the period: Wrdisten’s account appears to be unique. This is not, however, a case of ‘absence of evidence’; while textual survival from early medieval Brittany is, in general, poor, there are two other early Lives that explicitly mention early medieval plagues; one, the Life of Broic, describes a terrible epidemic in Ceredigion in Wales. Neither plague has anything to do with a migration from Britain to Brittany. In short, this connection between plague and migration was not present in Wrdisten’s surviving sources, and it cannot be traced in contemporary Breton texts that touch on the same topics: it seems likely, therefore, that it was Wrdisten’s own invention.

This invention, moreover, does not seem to have been a popular one. No other Breton author picked it up, then or in the centuries following, save for the anonymous figure responsible for an abridgment known as the Vita brevior (datable only to the tenth to twelfth centuries); it is even lost from the truncated versions that Wrdisten himself composed. So far as I can tell, until Stephen

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143 For other accounts of Breton origins, see the discussion in Brett, *Brittany*, 105–13, 306–7, 312–13; especially 110–11; also Guy, ‘Explaining the origins’.


NICHOLAS THYR

wrote his Life of Teilo, there was no other account of large-scale migration caused by plague not only in Breton literature, but in literature from Ireland or Britain – or in any literature from the Latin West.\textsuperscript{148} We are not, in other words, dealing with a common motif floating around in the intellectual ether, and so I find it hard to credit that the same basic story was invented twice over – especially given that Wrdisten’s Life was demonstrably available at Llancarfan not long after Stephen wrote his Life of Teilo.\textsuperscript{149}

The main obstacle to this conclusion remains, of course, that there is no good evidence that Stephen had consulted Wrdisten’s Life – indeed, the general lack of any Breton material in the Vespasian Life of Teilo rather suggests that he did not.\textsuperscript{150} Still, this does not rule out the possibility that Stephen had learned of this legend, or something like it, at second hand. Lifris’s Life of Cadog shows some reliance on traditions from southwestern Brittany, as do a number of genealogies perhaps stemming from Llancarfan.\textsuperscript{151} On that basis Ben Guy has recently shown that a member of the community of Llancarfan, Iuthael \textit{filius} Aidan, a contemporary of Lifris’s, had traveled to western Brittany in the later eleventh century (including, it seems, the abbey of Sainte-Croix at Quimperlé), and served as a conduit for texts and information between Brittany and Llancarfan.\textsuperscript{152} Perhaps among this material was a copy of the Cartulary of Landévennec – which would contain much of the basic material on King Budic needed for the Life of Euddogwy, as well as a copy of the Life of Winwaloe.\textsuperscript{153} Exposure to this source (and, perhaps, familiarity with nearby Landeleau) may have inspired the story of Teilo’s flight and return; someone at Llancarfan with access to Irish materials derived, perhaps, from Clonard could then have connected the dots, and equated the plague that drove Teilo from Britain with the ‘Yellow Plague’ that slew Finnian, thereby creating the story which would later be adapted by Stephen for his sermon on the Life of Teilo.

This account, I freely admit, is speculative. But once the possibility is granted, other elements begin to fall into place. Llancarfan appears to have had, at some point, a close association with Clonard – whose patron saint was known to have died of the Yellow Plague. Given this connection, and assuming that Iuthael (or another member of the community of Llancarfan) had brought back a Life of Winwaloe from Brittany, then both of the principal ingredients of

\textsuperscript{148} Small-scale or short-term movement of people in the aftermath the plague is narrated e.g. in Gregory of Tours: Bruno Krusch (ed.), \textit{‘Liber de virtutibus s. Iuliani’}, MGH SS. rer. Merov. 1.2 (Hannover, 1969), 112–24, at 131–2, with discussion by McCormick, \textit{‘Gregory of Tours’}, 77 – or, nearer to Wales, in Bede (Lapidge, \textit{Storia degli Inglesi}, 142), or in the story of Colmán’s founding of the monastery of Inishbofin: \textit{Thes ii}, 298.

\textsuperscript{149} See above.

\textsuperscript{150} Guy, \textit{‘Vespasian Life’}, 16.

\textsuperscript{151} Wade-Evans, \textit{Vitae sanctorum Britannie}, 96–8; discussion in Tanguy, \textit{‘De la Vie’}, 160–7; for a discussion of the genealogies, see Guy, \textit{Medieval Welsh Genealogy}, 81–5; Brett, \textit{Brittany}, 304–5.

\textsuperscript{152} This argument is laid out briefly in Guy, \textit{Medieval Welsh Genealogy}, 86–90, and more thoroughly in Guy, \textit{‘Explaining the origins’}.

\textsuperscript{153} De la Borderie, \textit{Cartulaire de Landevenec}. See above, n. 51; also Brett, \textit{‘L’hagiographie de Saint Guénolé’}, 264, who uses several telling connections between Landévennec and Wessex to conclude \textit{‘[l]a date la plus probable de la première arrivée de textes sur saint Guénolé en Angleterre est peut-être la règne d’Édouard de Wessex (899–924) ou de son fils Athelstan (924–939)’}.
the Welsh legend of the Yellow Plague could have been present in Llancarfan by the late eleventh century, shortly before the earliest surviving Welsh text to mention the Yellow Plague, Stephen’s Life of Teilo, was composed.

The case for Llancarfan is strengthened by the lack of any compelling evidence for the migration legend elsewhere in southern Wales. St Davids is an unlikely candidate; Rhggyfarch’s Life of David shows no interest in Brittany, and the letter to Honorius is the first sign of engagement with the legend. Llanbadarn is a possibility – the Life of Padarn shows reliance on Breton sources, and, in the person of Sulien (d. 1091), twice bishop of St Davids, and head of an important school at Llanbadarn, it had connections to St Davids and Ireland, too – but there is no sign of the Yellow Plague in any surviving work from that community. Llancarfan (along with Llandaf) became a fertile site for historical speculation: many important historical texts – including an influential collection of genealogies, and a considerable amount of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s De gestis Britonum – had their roots in new histories developed at Llandaf-Llancarfan.

If my tentative interpretation of the evidence presented above is accepted, Llancarfan had access to the relevant information at the right time; furthermore, it had a demonstrated ability to create history from very limited source material. It is not surprising, therefore, that the earliest source to mention the Yellow Plague was produced by someone closely affiliated with that community. Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests the conclusion that the Welsh legend of the Yellow Plague, in which many Britons flee a terrible pestilence, was created at Llancarfan not long before Stephen wrote his Life of Teilo in the early twelfth century.

By the late 1120s, this legend had, it seems, become known at St Davids, where it was apparently given enough credence to serve as a central plank in a letter to the Pope arguing for the (re-)creation of an independent archbishopric of St Davids. What form that legend had when it arrived at St Davids remains unclear. Above, I laid out the three possibilities that Barry Lewis outlined for the source of the letter to Honorius: 1) a now-lost source shared with Geoffrey of Monmouth; 2) an early, pre-publication version of Geoffrey’s De gestis Britonum; and 3) the published version of De gestis Britonum (assuming the letter to be a later forgery). As discussed above, I believe the weight of textual evidence, and considerations of historical context, rule out the third option. The second option is implausible; Geoffrey never directly refers to the Yellow

154 As noted in Brett, Brittany, 297; for the text closest to Rhggyfarch’s original, see Richard Sharpe and J. R. Davies (eds and trans), ‘Rhggyfarch’s Life of St David’, in Evans and Wooding (eds), St David of Wales, 107–55.
156 J. R. Davies, Book of Llandaf, 142; Brooke, Church and Border, 43–4; Guy, Medieval Welsh Genealogy, 91–2.
Plague (even though he very likely knew of it). I suspect, therefore, that the first option is correct, and the author of the letter to Honorius adapted a Llandaf source on the founding of the British church for the purposes of St Davids: and furthermore, that this same source also served as the basis for Geoffrey’s account.

That St Davids knew something of the burgeoning collection of pseudo-history at Llandaf is plausible. In the late 1120s, Llandaf and St Davids were embroiled in a struggle over their diocesan boundaries, each presenting their respective cases before Pope Honorius. They would likely, therefore, have had the opportunity to learn their opponents’ competing accounts of British history well, and to prepare counter-arguments against them. Conclusive evidence is not forthcoming; still, I believe the most satisfactory explanation of the evidence is that the legend of the Yellow Plague, as found at St Davids, was derived from a Llandaf-Llancarfan source also used by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

III. Conclusion

To summarise the above account: the legend of the Yellow Plague, in which some form of ‘yellow’ disease, often identified in medieval sources as jaundice, makes many Britons flee from Britain, is the product of the combination of two separate elements. First, there is the story itself, of the terrible plague that drives the Britons overseas. Before 1100, this story is only attested in a single work, the Life of Winwaloe by Wrdisten, and it is likely his own invention, brought about by his attempts to abbreviate the De excidio of Gildas and use it to explain Brittany’s origins. This work was certainly available at Llandaf by the 1120s, and, as I argue above, it is possible it was present there earlier, and that it was the ultimate inspiration for all Welsh accounts of the migration.

The second element is the name of the disease, which almost certainly reflects Irish terminology. The Welsh names for the disease (and their Latin analogues) could be approximate translations of the Irish terms, but the converse could not be true; the Irish terms are attested, moreover, in a wider variety of genres and contexts. Finally, evidence of close cooperation between Clonard and Llancarfan – two early centers for the composition of materials that mention the Yellow Plague – provides a plausible route of transmission from Ireland to Wales.

These two elements first appear together in a work by one Stephen, the brother of Bishop Urban of Llandaf, whose family had close connections to

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157 It is likely that Geoffrey was inspired by Llandaf’s stories about the Yellow Plague to end his De gestis Britonum with the flight of Cadwaladr from a plague: Reeve and Wright, History of the Kings of Britain, 277 (§203); Geoffrey identified this with the mortalitas found c. 682 in the Welsh annals: Guy, Medieval Welsh Genealogy, 52. It is possible, too, that Caesar’s sword in Geoffrey’s work, named the ‘Yellow Death’ (crocea mors) – Reeve and Wright, The History of the Kings of Britain, 73 (§57) – is a play on pestis flava/ball felen, as Edmond Faral suggested: Edmond Faral, La légende arthurienne: Études et documents. Première partie: Les plus anciens textes (Paris, 1929), vol. 2, at 152.

158 See also Pryce, ‘Gerald of Wales’, 30; Brooke, Church and Border, 22 n. 26.

Llancarfan. Stephen’s work was then developed further in the Book of Llandaf (perhaps by Caradog of Llancarfan), and the community of St Davids appears to have used materials derived from Llandaf to claim, in a letter to Pope Honorius, that the Yellow Plague caused St Davids to lose its archeepiscopal pallium. This story lingered on at St Davids for some time; it was reused in a subsequent letter to Pope Eugenius, and Gerald of Wales adapted it near the turn of the twelfth century to buttress his own campaign for the archbishopric of St Davids. After Gerald’s lifetime, however, this story all but disappears, appearing only in a late-medieval liturgical text from St Davids. The Yellow Plague itself persisted, eventually merging with what appears to be a folktale from northern Wales about the death of Maelgwn Gwynedd; over the centuries, the Yellow Plague became more and more a monster, or some other sort of humanoid apparition, than a disease.

How that happened is a story for another paper. What I would like to focus on here, by way of a conclusion, is what the foregoing account might tell us about the creation of knowledge in medieval Wales. This legend possesses relatively copious, well-dated sources, as well as clear analogues from neighbouring regions. While there are aspects of its creation and transmission that remain unclear, or at least uncertain, the outline can at least be sketched.

What close analysis uncovers is, for once, a demonstrable example of literary borrowing from other Celtic literary traditions. Such borrowing has been the subject of much speculation over the years, but good detailed evidence on when and where it may have occurred remains frustratingly scarce. As Patrick Sims-Williams has written (in the context of the influence of Irish literature in the vernacular on Welsh texts):

160 The single example, to my knowledge, is a list of St Davids’ suffragans inserted into a 15th-century list of recent miracles wrought by St David: Michael Curley (ed.), ‘The Miracles of Saint David: a new text and its context’, Traditio 62 (2007), 135–205, at 190. Curley points out that this list bears strong resemblances to the revived claims for an independent Welsh archbishopric made by Owain Glyn Dŵr in the course of his rebellion, and argues that it was included in the collection because of its politically topical nature. However, as Curley claims, the list was most likely composed by Gerald of Wales himself (ibid., 155–62).


162 Compare, for instance, attempts at discerning the origins of the legend of Taliesin: Haycock, Legendary Poems, 12–21; Patrick Ford (ed.), Y storia Taliesin (Cardiff, 1992), at 1–55; Ior Williams, Chweddl Taliesin (Cardiff, 1957).
It is impossible to decide what proportion of the story motifs and themes shared between Ireland and Wales is inherited from the period when the languages were merely dialects (or even earlier) and what is due to recent intercourse across the Irish Sea or independent contact with third parties such as mercenaries, traders, and itinerant scholars, not to mention Viking and other settlers.\textsuperscript{163}

In the case of the legend of the Yellow Plague, however, we can demonstrate that it was the product of a particular educational and scholarly milieu that obtained in Ireland, Wales, and Brittany in the tenth through twelfth centuries, as each region, in contact with its neighbors, rediscovered – or recreated, rather – its early medieval past. This is clear even if we leave aside the more speculative connections that I made above: Wrdisten, working in the later ninth century, took the sixth-century text of Gildas and worked it into his vision of the settlement of Brittany, and this text then served as the basis for Landévennec’s cartulary in the eleventh century; an anonymous tenth-century scholar at St Davids used a copy of the Irish annals – already centuries old, and having undergone several major revisions – to shape early Welsh history; Irish churchmen rewrote their records and the Lives of their patrons to include reference to \textit{crom chonnaill}, \textit{buide chonnaill} and \textit{buidechair}. The creation of the Yellow Plague in Wales, probably at Llancarfan, was one of the fruits of this slow accumulation of historical knowledge.

Every supposed fact, and every story, from medieval Wales may well have a similar pedigree, the result of centuries of development, spurred on by individual and communal ingenuity. Most of the time, however, we simply do not have the sources to prove this was the case; and by the time we get to the twelfth century, it is usually too late: pseudo-historical texts spill out in their characteristic mixture of pedantry, literary aspiration, opportunism, and the occasional striking insight, as their authors take up many of the fragments and pieces of earlier legends, and seek to make them cohere into a fuller history, one national in its sweep – such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s \textit{De gestis Britonum} and its descendants, or, in Ireland, the various recensions of the \textit{Lebor Gabála Érenn}.\textsuperscript{164} These summations tended to obliterate earlier versions of the past;\textsuperscript{165} and so what the analysis above provides, I hope, is a picture, however dim, of the intellectual ferment of the period leading up to the increasing codification, and even calcification, of these histories, when new connections between old sources created a moment in which the past – and thus the future – was there for the taking.

\textsuperscript{163} Patrick Sims-Williams, \textit{Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature} (Oxford, 2010), at 15.


ABBREVIATIONS


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