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Asaf [St Asaf, Asaph, Asa]

(*supp. fl.* 6th cent.)

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Asaf [St Asaf, Asaph, Asa] (*supp. fl.* 6th cent.), bishop, is the patron of St Asaph and the nearby Llanasa in north-east Wales. According to late medieval and early modern Welsh saints' genealogies, he was the son of Sawyl Benuchel ap Pabo Post Prydain, and thus descended from the so-called Men of the North (the Britons of northern Britain), and his mother was Gwenasedd ferch Rhain Rhieinwg. Most information about Asaf comes from chapters 24–5 and 31 of the *Vita sancti Kentigerni* by the monk Jocelin of Furness (*fl.* 1199–1214) and from some later local Welsh traditions. More might once have been available, however: Jocelin (chap. 25) alludes to a 'little book' (*libellus*) of the life of St Asaf which he may have used; and the (now lost) thirteenth- or fourteenth-century manuscript called the Red Book of St Asaph (*Llyfr Coch Asaph*) is known to have contained a *Vita sancti Assaph*.

The *Vita* by Jocelin describes how the church at Llanelwy (St Asaph) was originally founded by Kentigern of Glasgow, and not by Asaf. While in exile in Wales and having paid a visit to St David, Kentigern is said to have looked for a suitable site for a monastery and was eventually led to one on the banks of the River Elgu (Elwy) by a white boar; hence the name Llanelwy, the 'church on the Elwy'. Among his disciples was the youth Asaf, described as being 'distinguished by birth and by looks'. Asaf is said to have performed a miracle by carrying red-hot coals against his chest in order to warm up his frozen master, and the two saints subsequently argued, both seeking to attribute the miracle to the other's virtue. Kentigern thus held Asaf in high regard and designated him as his successor. Eventually, Kentigern returned to Glasgow, leaving Llanelwy through the northern door, from which developed a tradition that the door should only be opened on the feast day of Asaf. Modern historians have rejected most of Jocelin's account of Asaf as a twelfth-century fiction, but a text (dated 1256), appended to the red book but seemingly independent of Jocelin's *Vita*, describes the founding of St Asaph by Kentigern with the involvement of the sixth-century Welsh king Maelgwn Gwynedd, though in circumstances different from those related by Jocelin.

There have been various attempts to explain why the twelfth-century monks of St Asaph attributed the founding of their church to the Glaswegian saint and not to their own patron. For example, the

tradition may have been devised c.1125 when there were plans (ultimately unsuccessful) to render St Asaph (then not yet a diocese) and other churches subject to York, which was also seeking to establish its authority over the Scottish churches (also unsuccessfully). Alternatively, it has been suggested that the link with Kentigern goes back to the supposed migration to north Wales in the late ninth century of political exiles from Strathclyde, who could have brought the saint's cult with them and which may have inspired the idea of Kentigern's own Welsh sojourn. A late account of the founding of the church by Asaf himself occurs in the chronicle of Elis Gruffudd (c.1548), in which the Welsh saint recovers a lost ring of Maelgwn's wife, who was Asaf's sister. This story, though based on a common motif, is probably an adaptation of a similar miracle in Jocelin's *Vita* where it is attributed to Kentigern and set in Strathclyde.

It is perhaps significant that the Welsh name for St Asaph, Llanelwy, contains no reference to the saint, who is commemorated instead in Llanasa ('church of Asa'), which is about 5 miles north-east of the more famous church. It is likely that Llanasa was Asaf's original foundation, and indeed there is no need to associate Asaf with Llanelwy until the twelfth century. The claim in a late version of the Welsh laws that a bishop of St Asaph named Chebur accompanied the tenth-century Welsh king Hywel Dda on his visit to Rome is probably best rejected. In 1125 the church is not named explicitly but is simply referred to as the diocese between those of Chester and Bangor. The Anglo-Norman diocesan church of Llanelwy was established in 1143 under Bishop Gilbert. Use of the name St Asaph first occurs in 1152 when Geoffrey of Monmouth succeeded Gilbert as bishop, and the appropriation of Asaf's cult by the new church may not have occurred until this point. Doubtless these developments gave impetus to new traditions about the church and its founder. He does not appear in any extant medieval Welsh saints' calendars—celebration of his feast on 1 May appears later—and his cult in Wales is limited to a few local Flintshire places, including Pantasa, Onnen Asa, the River Asa, and also Ffynnon Asa, a holy well. His appearance in some late medieval Scottish calendars probably derives from the *Vita sancti Kentigerni*.

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