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Seiriol [St Seiriol]

(*fl.* 6th cent.)

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Seiriol [St Seiriol] (*fl.* 6th cent.), holy man, is the patron of the churches at Penmon (on Anglesey) and Priestholm (an island off the east of Anglesey). His feast is celebrated on 1 February. According to the Welsh saints' genealogies, he was the son of Owain Danwyn, and thereby of local royal stock, and was numbered among the Seven Cousins (notable saints, said to be related). His cult is restricted to Anglesey; and since there is no surviving life (*vita*) or vernacular *buchedd* for Seiriol, information about him is limited to a series of much later traditions of even less reliability than medieval hagiography. These include the tradition, doubtless fictional, that Seiriol held daily meetings with St Cybi of Holyhead at Clorach, which is roughly midway between their respective churches. Accordingly, Seiriol is said to have faced westwards in the morning and eastwards in the afternoon in order to retain his fair complexion, while Cybi would face in the opposite directions to darken his complexion. Hence they became known as 'Seiriol Wyn a Chybi Felyn' ('White Seiriol and Yellow Cybi'). Of equally dubious historical value is the claim, preserved in material from the early seventeenth century, that Seiriol had a causeway built between his hermitage on Priestholm to Penmaen-mawr on the opposite shore on the mainland, and that he cut a passage through the rock at Dwygyfylchi to Llanfairfechan which became known as the King's Highway. It is also difficult to reconstruct a picture of Seiriol by referring to his two main church sites. Indeed, if the tradition that the church at Penmon was founded by the sixth-century king Maelgwn Gwynedd is rejected, then there is no historical record of the site until 971, when it was sacked by vikings. The surviving archaeological record also begins in the tenth century, with three decorated crosses (one now lost) probably constructed c.950–1000, and a font from the late tenth or early eleventh century (though this is not definitely associated with Penmon). The holy well at Penmon is probably of a later date and the earliest remaining church-buildings are in twelfth-century Romanesque style. The evidence for Priestholm is even slighter, the earliest reference being that by Gerald of Wales (*d.* 1220×23), stating that it was 'a small island inhabited by hermits' (Gerald of Wales, 190). The main church here is again Romanesque, but there is evidence of an earlier chancel (incorporating a long-cist burial) and a monastic enclosure with two phases of huts or cells.

Sources

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