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Tysilio [St Tysilio, Suliau]

(fl. c. 600)

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Tysilio [St Tysilio, Suliau] (fl. c. 600), holy man, was patron of the monastic church at Meifod in Montgomeryshire. His feast day is celebrated on 8 November. Although he is the chief saint of Powys in north-east Wales, very little relating to him survives from Wales, except for some passing notices in the vernacular *Buchedd Beuno*, an ode to him by the twelfth-century bard Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, and material in the Welsh saints' genealogies. However, traditions about his early life and career seem to have been preserved in the Latin life of the saint Suliac (Sulinus), patron of St Suliac in east Brittany, whose feast day is 1 October. The author of this work attempted, probably incorrectly, to identify his subject with Tysilio, since the Welsh saint's name is really an extended or hypocoristic form Ty-Suliau of the name Suliau (Silio), not dissimilar to Suliac. According to these sources, Tysilio was son of Brochfael Ysgithrog ap Cyngen, king of Powys, and of Arddun Benasgell ferch Pabo of alleged northern British descent. The genealogical connection with Brochfael, if accurate, would suggest the saint flourished in the late sixth or early seventh century. This claim that he was a member of the ruling dynasty of Powys may explain the later significance of Tysilio and his church of Meifod, burial church of the kings of Powys, although it should be recalled that royal ancestry was a very common attribute of saints in medieval Celtic hagiography.

Even in his early years Tysilio is said to have aspired to a religious life, in spite of Brochfael's disapproval, and consequently fled to the monastery at Meifod, then under Abbot Gwyddfarch. Subsequently, he moved westwards and founded the church of Llandysilio, on the Anglesey side of the Menai Strait. He remained there for seven years before returning to Meifod and succeeding Gwyddfarch as abbot. The *Buchedd Beuno* records that St Beuno visited Tysilio at Meifod. However, according to the Breton life Tysilio's dynastic connections continued to plague him, and he was forced to migrate to Brittany following the persecutions by Haiarme, the childless widow of his brother, the deceased King Iago. There is no other record elsewhere of this Iago as a son of Brochfael (who in fact was probably succeeded in the kingship by his son Cynan Garwyn) and this whole episode may have been invented to account for the saint's migration to Brittany, and therefore to support the identification with St Suliac. He is said to have landed at the mouth of the River Rance and, following an appropriate meeting with St Malo, founded the church

of St Suliac further upstream. Subsequent attempts by members of the Meifod community to persuade Tysilio to return to Wales failed, and he is said to have died soon after. However, according to Cynddelw, Tysilio was present at the battle of Maserfelth (Maes Cogwy), possibly Oswestry, in 642 between Penda of Mercia and Oswald of Northumbria but at which Welsh tradition would also include Powysian participation in the person of Cynddylan ap Cyndrwyn. If the later chapters of the Breton life are dismissed, then it is not entirely impossible that Tysilio was still alive and active in Wales in 642; but, if he was indeed a son of Brochfael Ysgithrog, this must stretch the chronology.

Later Welsh tradition regarded Tysilio as author of some poetry preserved in the Red Book of Hergest, but this attribution is evidently incorrect. Furthermore, Archbishop James Ussher's claim that the saint wrote an 'ecclesiastical history of Britain' is equally erroneous but probably underlies his connection with the so-called *Brut Tysilio*, which was once thought to have been the source for Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, but is now recognized as a fifteenth-century Welsh translation of Geoffrey's work. Not surprisingly, the Welsh cult of Tysilio is centred on Meifod, and comprises a cluster of dedications in south Denbighshire (including Llandysilio-yn-Iâl and nearby Abersili) and north Montgomeryshire (including a Llandysilio and possibly Llandysul). In addition to Llandysilio on Anglesey (as recorded in the Breton life of Suliac), churches elsewhere in Wales thought to be dedicated to Tysilio include Llandysilio on the Pembrokeshire-Carmarthenshire border, and Llandysiliogogo and possibly Llandysul in Cardiganshire. However, the Welsh saints' genealogies list a Tysul ap Corun and a Tysilio ab Enoc as two separate saints of wholly Cardiganshire ancestry; and, while these figures could account for at least some of the south-western dedications, on the other hand they may simply represent localized doublets for Tysilio of Powys.

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