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SAINT DAVID AQUATICUS

Toby D. Griffen, Ph.D.
Professor of Foreign Languages & Literature
Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

Names in the Age of Saints

The names we recall from the Age of Saints (also known as the Dark Ages) were most often not the names given at birth. Rather, they were cognomens or nicknames acquired in recognition of certain traits or accomplishments.

For example, as I have pointed out in *Names from the Dawn of British Legend*, Arthur had never been a given name before the early sixth century when evidently there was a great military leader with that name attributed to him. That the man who bore the name was a military leader and lived in the early sixth century is clear from the fact that four prominent soldiers in the very next generation went by that hitherto unused name (and given the paucity of records from the period, four was surely just the tip of the iceberg).

The Latin form of the name was Arturus. For those Latin scholars among us, this surely means nothing, for Cicero never would have used such a word. This name was, however, not in Classical Latin, but rather in the Late Latin of sixth-century Britain. In that language, Arturus was the name of one of the brightest, most prominent, and easily found stars that marched across the northern sky during military campaigning season. The name (which we know more "properly" in Classical Latin as Arcturus) meant 'the guardian of the bear', and the star was so named because it was seen to lead and care for the Great Bear ― a symbol for the North.

Now it happens that the earliest written form of the name in Brythonic (the British ancestor of Welsh, Breton, and Cornish) was Arthur, as it first appeared in the *Song of Aneirin* written down shortly after A.D. 600. The *th* though, had recently developed from *t*; so the name in the Brythonic of the early sixth century would have been Artur. Not only was this identical to the Late Latin stem, but its meaning of 'the bear-man' was essentially identical to the meaning of Arturus in Latin.

Thus, the name was clearly acquired by a military leader with the attributes of the "man of the bear" ― again, a symbol for the North. The fact that it was essentially identical in Brythonic and Latin was very important for the effectiveness of this leader, as some Britons spoke Brythonic and others still spoke the language of their recent Roman rulers. Whoever was to lead all of the Britons had to have a name that could be easily understood in both languages simultaneously.

The name Arthur was frankly a stroke of genius, but it is certainly exemplary of

the use of names in this period. It functioned to identify the attributes of the individual and the context in which he lived and worked. From it and in the context of the earliest writings, we know that Arthur was a cavalry brigadier, a rallying point for British and Romano-British resistance to the encroaching Anglo-Saxons, a leader fashioned in the mold of the old Roman *imperator*. From that last point, we can also see how he came to be viewed in later legend as an emperor or king, which in the early sixth century he most assuredly was not.

David Aquaticus

Within this framework, let us examine the name of Saint David. Unfortunately, we see immediately that what we have here is not an acquired name at all, but a biblical name given either by his parents or by his order with no discernable consideration for who he was or what he did. But David was not his only name. He was known as Saint David Aquaticus. If a name is to give us any insight into the life of Saint David and into the British Church of his times (which the saint would certainly point out as being far more important, anyway), it will be the name Aquaticus.

The first thing we notice about Aquaticus is that it is Latin. While this may have been a scribal change in a later manuscript, other names (as we shall see) were not translated directly or completely into Latin. And while this may have simply been a reflection of the use of Latin in the British Church, there were others in the church (as again we shall see) who did have British names.

It is thus likely that Saint David had a Romano-British background. It is a curious characteristic of the Celts that they tend to distrust each other so much that they at times prefer foreign leaders and they seem ever-so-willing (in spite of their vehement protests) to take on the language of the foreign ruler. Thus, Latin was widely embraced in areas under Roman rule, and those who spoke Latin were if anything eager to embrace English and to help form the new Anglo-British culture. Looking beyond the shores of Britain, we see the same thing on the Continent, where Iberians adopted Latin wholesale and Gauls accepted every word they could understand from their Roman rulers, producing a "Latin" with strange characteristics such as counting by twenty, preposing pronoun objects, and other syntactical oddities that a speaker of Welsh would hardly find odd at all.

So the Latin form of the name certainly does give us insights into the age and the people of Saint David. Going beyond the form to the meaning, we gain a far deeper view into the world of Britain during the Age of Saints. When we examine the various meanings for the name, we find that it could have come from one or more of several traditions. Indeed, it could conceivably have come from all of them, a product of the Celtic philosophical penchant for finding connections in order to form a greater, more meaningful whole.

Asceticism

As mentioned already, the name Aquaticus was Latin ─ the root *aqua* meaning 'water', the adjectivizing suffix *-tic-* meaning 'one connected with', and the masculine ending *-us* identifying the one as a male. Thus, to those using it, the name would have meant quite transparently 'the man connected with water'.

One of the more popular interpretations of how this man might have been connected with water has to do with asceticism ─ the practice of self-denial or even self-torture in order to reach a higher spiritual state. As was reported in an interesting article last year for Saint David's Day in *Y Drych*, Aquaticus could indeed have referred to one who drank only water ─ one who abstained from alcohol.

The popularity of the teetotaling interpretation of Aquaticus, however, may be more in keeping with our own modern sensibilities. Nonetheless, it may well be that Saint David, among other things, did abstain from alcohol. Whether that in itself would have been enough to gain him the cognomen Aquaticus, however, is highly doubtful. Of course, in proper Celtic fashion, it could certainly have formed one loop of the knot.

Another ascetic interpretation that would have been more dramatic and that would certainly have been in keeping with the practices of the early church involved the exercise of immersion in cold water. In order to achieve a higher spiritual state (a state of deeper connection with God), there were those in the British Church who would regularly immerse themselves for dangerously long periods of time in cold water.

Today, we probably find these ascetic interpretations somewhat disquieting. If we were limited to only one interpretation or the other, then immersion would clearly win out over abstinence. But again, it could have been both. Most probably, however, the name went far beyond asceticism to more prominent aspects of the life of Saint David and to more important practices in the British Church.

Saint Dubricius

Saint David was consecrated by a man who was in all probability the most important and powerful cleric in Britain during the Age of Saints ─ Saint Dubricius. This man appeared in the Life of Saint Samson, the earliest (and thereby the most reliable) of the saints' lives to make its way down to us. Although the life was about Saint Samson, Saint Dubricius was prominently mentioned as the bishop who consecrated the three famous bishops Saints David, Samson, and Hildutus (or Illtud). Moreover, he was not referred to simply as Bishop Dubricius, but as Papa Dubricius

(and this was long after the title Papa had been elevated for use well beyond priests and bishops).

From the earliest traditions, it is evident that Saint Dubricius at least functioned as an archbishop ― perhaps *the* Archbishop of the loosely confederated (highly Celtic) British Church. Anyone consecrated by him, must by association have been very important indeed (hence his prominent treatment in the Life of Saint Samson).

As noted above, Saint David was one of the three famous bishops consecrated by a man with the acquired name Dubricius. The Brythonic root *dubr* happened to mean 'water', and it was the parent form of Modern Welsh *dŵr* (with its combining forms *dyfr-* and *dwfr-* which retain the old *b* > *f*, whence the Modern Welsh form of the name as Dyfrig). This Brythonic name was semitranslated into the Latin of the British Church through the simple addition of the Latin adjectivizing suffix *-ic-* meaning once again 'one connected with' and the masculine ending *-us*. His name was thus intended to mean 'the man connected with water'.

So the name Dubricius would have had the very same meaning as the name Aquaticus. It could well be that one reason for Saint David's acquiring the cognomen Aquaticus was to honor his patron. Of course, such honor would naturally have fallen back upon the Welsh saint, identifying him as one consecrated bishop by none other than Papa Dubricius himself.

Baptism and Holy Wells

But this is not all. There are two more very salient reasons for any British saint at the time to have acquired the name Aquaticus. One reason had to do with two practices severely frowned upon by Rome.

The Rite of Baptism was gradually being transformed in Roman theology and practice. Rather than being applied by immersion to individuals as they joined, it was increasingly being limited to the eves of major feasts and performed more formally *en masse*. The loosely confederated British Church, however, was neither philosophically nor practically inclined to feel any obligation whatsoever to agree with Rome.

For one thing, these Celts valued the individual far more greatly in all aspects of life, from religion to warfare (a trait which in the latter case often led to "glorious defeats" rich in displays of personal prowess and bravery, but poor in the organization needed to sustain a more mundane victory). Treating the individual at such an important event as Baptism as merely one of a crowd upon whom might fall a drop of water was thus philosophically anathema. To the Briton, Baptism was a rite to be celebrated with enthusiasm and by full immersion as often as an individual joined the church.

On the more practical side, the British Church and the even-more-loosely confederated Celtic Church as a whole was embattled. Indeed, the entire Western

world was under siege by the Germanic migrations. Across Europe, monasteries were scattered, buildings and libraries were destroyed, and the very institution of the church was threatened. The British Isles were a refuge and a fortification cut off from Rome not only physically, but emotionally as well. These people were in no mood to debate the fine points of Roman theological authority, even if (at least prior to the Counsel of Whitby) they considered themselves in a Roman Church to begin with.

And so Baptism was practiced far more extensively and enthusiastically in Britain than the Roman establishment would have liked. There could well have been other deviations from the Roman canon in this regard as well, but we do not have reliable documentary evidence. In any case, since the British clergy were closely identified with the Rite of Baptism and with the manner of Baptism, it is entirely within reason to conjecture that Aquaticus was a man particularly connected with the water of Baptism.

Of course, if Saint David chose the name Aquaticus to emphasis Baptism, it would not have been as a result of the British disagreement with Rome. Such names had to appeal to the Britons themselves ─ those for whom the bishop wanted to perform the rite. By the same token, Arthur chose a name that was readily understood by Britons and Romano-Britons, and not some name that would have been obscure to his prospective followers (as many a philologist has enjoyed reconstructing through tortuous paths of vowels and consonants). Saint David, then, could well have chosen the name to identify himself as the Baptizer, regardless of the particular manner in which the rite was practiced.

But the manner of Baptism was only one bone of contention. The other had to do with the place of Baptism, and this more serious point of dissention could also have contributed to his choice of names.

Much to the dismay of the clergy in Rome, the British clergy often practiced the Rite of Baptism in old pagan springs that we have come to call “Holy Wells." Certainly, many of these Holy Wells were later said to have sprung up where such-and-such a saint performed a miracle, and they were thus incorporated into the local Christian tradition. Such a practice of imbuing pagan sites and celebrations with new Christian meanings has always been quite effective in converting a population. And of course, the Romans had already made full use of this tactic, even producing Christmas out of Saturnalia. What the Romans could accept within their own tradition, however, they could not accept from the Celtic, and these Holy Wells were among the least acceptable of all such “syncretisms."

If Saint David had stood by the practice of using the Holy Wells for Baptism, which is entirely likely especially given the British insistence on immersion, then this would have been one more excellent reason to associate him with water as David Aquaticus. To be sure, such a bishop would rather frequently have been seen waist-deep in water ─ aquatic indeed.

The Waterman

There remains, however, one more very widely spread practice that definitely contributed to the association between the clergy and water in the British Church and in the Insular Celtic Church in general. This practice gives us an insight that should greatly increase our admiration for these people who truly were saints in their own time.

To get from one Celtic land to another, missionaries, bishops, and others engaged in holding the church together in these dark years had to travel frequently by sea. Using their established seaways, the Celtic people of God maintained communication, shipped food in time of famine and medicine in time of plague, administered far-flung dioceses, and spread the Word.

But this was not only the Age of Saints ─ it was the Dark Ages. There was no authority that could secure these seaways, infested as they were with pirates and raiders who would think nothing of robbing and massacring a boatload of Christians, especially clergy who could not engage in combat. To make matters worse, the North Sea was tempestuous, and the coasts were littered with rocks and boulders that could easily tear the small boats apart. Indeed, it was the courage and faithfulness of these travelers that made the Dark Ages into the Age of Saints.

As bishop of a diocese along the southwest coast of Wales, Saint David Aquaticus himself most certainly must have used these dangerous seaways to care for his people and to bring aid to others. He, like so many of his age, was a "Waterman."

Indeed, the name Waterman either in its full Latin form Aquaticus or in its Romano-British form of Dubricius was not at all uncommon. One rather famous instance of a purely British name for Waterman was acquired by a soldier who fled in insanity to an island sanctuary after the disastrous Battle of Arfderydd in A.D. 572. He evidently joined a monastery and learned enough to compose the eulogy for his fallen comrades. His name combined *mori* 'seas' (later realized as *myŷr*) with **donios* 'man' (later *din/dyn*, the latter still the form in Modern Welsh) to give us Myrdin. This was the religious but troubled Myrddin who, in a series of literary developments too convoluted to go into here, passed into legend as a mad poet fused with a sorcerer.

David the Waterman

So here we have several different interpretations for Aquaticus, the Waterman. Did he drink only water? Did he immerse himself in cold water? Did he associate himself closely with Papa Dubricius? Did he Baptize with enthusiasm? Did he Baptize in Holy Wells? Did he dare the treacherous seaways?

There is no reason to assume that he did not do all of these things. Precisely which provided him with the name Aquaticus is frankly no longer terribly interesting.

What is interesting is the broad view the name provides us today into the life of Saint David and into the lives of all those who dedicated themselves to the worship of God, to the establishment of his Kingdom, and to the care of his people in the Age of Saints.

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