

Not all those who wander are lost (2).

Yn Nifant [into oblivion]:
A Preliminary Study of the Post-Mortem Treatment of Bodies in Medieval Welsh Literature

Tri chyffro dial ynt: vn ohonunt diaspedain y caressev, eil yw gweled gelor eu car yn myned y'r llan, trydyt yw gweled bed ev car heb ymdiwyn [these are the three incitements of revenge: one of them is the wailing of female relatives, the second is seeing the bier of their relative go to the church, the third is seeing the grave of their relative without reparation].¹ Despite its brevity, this Medieval Welsh legal triad sheds insight into post-mortem practice. Though the triad's focus is revenge, this act is instigated by encountering a dead body on its post-mortem journey. Inhumation had become standard practice in Britain and Ireland by the fourth century.² Despite the medieval Christian doctrine believing the soul and body to separate upon death,³ the belief in physical resurrection on the Day of Judgement meant to a Christian society the fate of the body was an understandable concern.⁴ A corporeal narrative can therefore be read in the body's journey from the moment of death to its interment and subsequent memorialisation, which this study seeks to elucidate. In her reading of dead bodies in *Táin Bó Cúailnge II*, Sarah Künzler observed that corpses are ignored in scholarship.⁵ An examination of depictions and discussions of deceased bodies is found to be equally lacking in the Welsh context. I have brought together instances of dead bodies in this preliminary study on post-mortem bodies in Medieval Welsh literature, seeking to explore the treatment of these bodies by their living counterparts and contemporary attitudes to mortality. To quote John Barrett, 'the corpse, and the way it was treated, presents a powerful symbolic medium by which the transition from life to death can be represented'.⁶ Alongside this overview of mortuary ritual in literature, I also explore the narrative treatment of dead bodies, which proves enlightening in its efforts to avoid the very body itself. In the aforementioned triad, the body is absent, its existence implied by the bier it is inferably on. This brief example reflects a trend across genres, wherein the body, once deceased, all but disappears from view.

For reasons of space, I confine my source material to literatures of varying genre and form where death is expected or foregrounded,⁷ especially texts featuring warriors, so often producing or becoming dead bodies given the violent nature of their vocation. This study looks at Aneirin's *Y Gododdin*; the *Mabinogion*; *Englynion y Beddau*; and the *Saga Englynion*. *Y Gododdin* is a collection of *awdlau* [stanzas] commemorating the bravery and sacrifice of individual Gododdin warriors who fell fighting at Catraeth around the year 600. It survives in the *Llyfr Aneirin*, a manuscript John Koch described as 'heavily corrupted, interpolated, and modernised' and a product of the later thirteenth century rather than an artifact of the sixth or seventh.⁸ Attaching any concrete date to the *awdlau* is precarious,⁹ and

¹ Sara Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 56-57, (X34).

² Susan Fry, *Burial in Medieval Ireland 900-1500*, (Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 40.

³ Helen Fulton, 'Body and Soul: From Doctrine to Debate in Medieval Welsh and Irish Literature', in *Sanctity As Literature in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. by Eva von Contzen and Anke Bernau, (Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 96-115, (p. 97).

⁴ Fry, *Burial in Medieval Ireland*, p. 96.

⁵ Sarah Künzler, 'A Spectacle of Death? Reading Dead Bodies in *Tain Bo Cuailnge II*', *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 12, (2015), pp. 35-48, (p. 36).

⁶ John Barrett, 'The Living, the Dead, and the Ancestors: Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices', in: *The Archaeology of Context in the Neolithic and Bronze Age: Recent Trends*, ed. by John Barrett and I. Kinnes, (Collis, 1988), pp. 30-41, (p. 31).

⁷ In confining my texts I acknowledge the limitations of my research.

⁸ John Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from the Dark-Age North Britain*, (University of Wales Press, 1997), p. iv.

⁹ For scholarship on dating *Y Gododdin*, see: Ifor Williams, 'The Gododdin Poems', in *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, ed. by Rachel Bromwich, 2nd edn, (Cardiff University Press, 1980), pp. 50-69; Kenneth Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1969), pp. 56-67; For an overview of the

taking the poem to portray a heroic,¹⁰ historical past even more so. Its structure means, as Joseph Clancy states, ‘*Y Gododdin* cannot be read as a narrative poem, but neither can it be read as a collection of elegies, as fragmented and disparate *awdlau*’.¹¹ As the extant *awdlau* were copied as a single text, for the purposes of this literary study I address *Y Gododdin* as a single work of literature, whilst recognising it may not reflect actual sixth-century post-mortem practices. The *Mabinogion* is a collective name for the eleven stories found in both the White Book of Rhydderch (c. 1350) and the Red Book of Hergest (between 1382 and c. 1410).¹² Particularly productive for this study are the three romances (though given no such title nor grouping in the manuscripts): *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*, or *Owein*; *Ystoria Gereint uab Erbin*; and *Peredur ab Efracw*, named as such for their French parallels,¹³ corresponding to the metrical romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Through the divergences in the texts regarding mortuary ritual, Medieval Welsh attitudes to post-mortem practices may be uncovered. Saga *Englynion* is the name given to the body of pseudo-historical *englyn* poetry spoken by historical figures of the sixth or seventh centuries, though written around the late ninth to early tenth centuries.¹⁴ The *englynion* poetry displays the impact dead bodies had on their living counterparts; the *englynion* spoken by Urien, Llywarch, and Heledd grieve dead bodies and lament their own resulting wretched fates. Finally, I draw on *Englynion y Beddau*,¹⁵ a list of burial places of early medieval heroes. Though archaeologically unreliable, the stanzas provide enlightening insight into the interrelation of body and landscape, memory and memorial.

There are moments where link can be drawn between literature and life, between practices in the texts and those in the legal or archaeological record.¹⁶ But as David Petts warns, ‘[t]he use of written evidence to illuminate early medieval attitudes and practices surrounding death, burial and commemoration have a particularly long history of use and abuse.’¹⁷ I therefore write with full appreciation that the literature is not a historical record, emphasising that this study concerns the literary treatment of dead bodies and the journey they undertake. I look first at ‘Dead and Dying Bodies’, at the initial moments following death; then to ‘Burying Bodies’, exploring mortuary ritual and depictions of

scholarship see Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Dating the Poems of Aneirin and Taliesin’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 63, (2016), pp. 163-234, in particular pp. 177-93.

¹⁰ On the term ‘heroic’ see Helen Fulton, ‘Cultural Heroism in the Old North of Britain: The Evidence of Aneirin’s *Gododdin*’, in *The Epic in History*, ed. by Lola Davidson, S. Mukherjee, and Z. Zlatar, (Sydney Studies, 1994), pp. 18-39.

¹¹ Joseph Clancy, *The Earliest Welsh Poetry*, (Macmillan, 1970), pp. 5-6; The nature of the poem means its textual history is complex, as new stanzas may easily be interpolated. Two scribal hands penned the surviving *awdlau*, producing an A text of eighty-eight *awdlau* and a more archaic B text of forty-two *awdlau*, preserving earlier orthography (see Michelle Bratchie, ‘The Colourful Worlds of Aneirin’s *Gododdin*’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 90, (2025), pp. 1-18); Both A and B likely went through periods of oral and written transmission resulting in the divergences observed (see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350-1064*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 365-73).

¹² *The Mabinogion*, ed. by Sioned Davies, (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. iv.

¹³ On the relationship between the Welsh and French narratives, see: Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, ‘Migrating narratives: Peredur, Owain, and Gereint’, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 128-41.

¹⁴ Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poems (EWSP)*, (Brewer, 1990), p. 2, p. 388.

¹⁵ Dating the poem’s composition is difficult, again due to likely interpolation. Patrick Sims-Williams offers anywhere from the eleventh to early-thirteenth centuries (see *The Medieval Welsh Englynion Y Beddau*, (Brewer, 2023), pp. 26-48, (p. 48)). For reasons of space I refer only to Series 1, pp. 120-272.

¹⁶ Unlike Ireland, there have been fewer graves found in Wales meaning our understanding of post-mortem practice is limited; see: David Longley, ‘Early Medieval Burial in Wales’, *The Archaeology of the Early Medieval Celtic Churches*, 29, (2009), pp. 105-34; Marion Shiner, ‘Burial in Early Medieval Wales: Identifying Multifunctional Cemeteries’, *Archaeology*, 40.3, (2021), pp. 268-85; and Karen Pollock, *The Evolution and Role of Burial Practice in Roman Wales*, (Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ David Petts, ‘De Situ Brecheniauc and Englynion Y Beddau: Writing about Burial in Early Medieval Wales’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 14, (2007), pp. 163-72, (p. 163).

funerals; then to ‘Grieving Bodies’, that is the impact dead bodies exert on living ones; and finally at ‘Remembering Bodies’, exploring memory and memorial.

Dead and Dying Bodies: To Bier or not to Bier

Y Gododdin provides enlightening insight into the body’s immediate fate following death,¹⁸ either left where it fell or taken to be buried elsewhere. Grimly, the crows circling the skies were often quicker to the battlefield – and subsequently the bodies – than the biers. Notions of death in *Y Gododdin* manifest metaphorically; dead bodies are seldom referred to explicitly. There are only two direct references to corpses, the first praising Gwrhafal: [*o*]edd llew y lladdewch chwi ddydin [easily did you strike down corpses] (676), and the second – uniquely gruesome in detail – eulogising Bleiddig: [*c*]alanedd cochwedd a edewi [he left bloodstained corpses behind him] (886), where *dynin* and *celain* both mean ‘corpses, carcasses’. The latter translation augments the kenning-like structure used throughout the poem wherein bodies are no longer human, but food for carrion birds. Six variations occur; most frequent is the conceptualisation of enemy bodies as carrion fodder. In praise of Cydywal the poem relates: [*b*]wyd i eryr erysmygai [he made food for eagles] (180). Similarly, of Merin and Cynon we are told: [*n*]eus dug trwy fâr | [*g*]wledd i adar [through his fury he brought / a feast for the birds] (571-2) and [*y*]n annwyd gworeu bwyd i sglyfon [in his fury he fed birds of prey] (631) respectively. This abstract construction robs the dead bodies of their individuality and humanity; the boundary between bodies, the delineation of human form, is broken down into indistinct flesh. This homogenisation augments the individuality of each Gododdin warrior, their bodies separated by virtue of each elegiac stanza. However, it also speaks to the literary refusal to describe deceased bodies in significant detail. Of note also is the lack of any verb denoting killing in these two constructions. Instead, *dug* [he brought] and *gworeu bwyd* [he made food] are the verbs at play. The poetic voice speaks in euphemism, perhaps afraid of mentioning death outright and confronting the bitter, bloodied reality of the battlefield immediately following the slaughter. *Y Gododdin* focuses on commemorating the warriors’ bravery, not on narrating outright the gore and bloodshed of the battlefield; however, allusion to it nevertheless seeps through the cracks.

The poet was certainly aware of the grim reality of the battlefield,¹⁹ as flesh-feasting birds are a motif in wider Welsh literature. In *Canu Heledd*,²⁰ Heledd berates the eagle of Eli for feasting upon the *creu callon* [heart blood] (34) of Cynddylan, her slain brother, and wallowing in *gwaet gwyr* [the blood of warriors] (35, 38), just as the crows feast upon dead bodies in *Y Gododdin*. Bitter critique of both the eagle and battle itself comes to the forefront in 39, *ae llawch llwydit y draha* [the violence of he who indulges him succeeds]. Rowland notes ‘[w]arriors are frequently said to ‘feed’ ravens by their battlefield carnage, but the use of *llochi* ‘spoil’ gives this symbolic activity a personal face, and one which suggests a cruelly inhuman activity’.²¹ Heledd then turns her castigation to the eagle of Pengwern, who is *eidic am gic a garaf* [greedy for the flesh I love] (42). As with *llochi*, *eidic* [greedy] layers human morality onto the eagle’s animalistic instincts; with Heledd alone following the destruction of her home and family, only the eagle remains to curse her misfortune, other than herself. Heledd’s *englynion* are

¹⁸ Quotations are taken from: Aneirin, *Y Gododdin: Britain’s oldest heroic poem*, ed. by Alfred Jarman, (Gomer, 1988). Jarman uses modern orthography and does not separate the A and B text; this present study does not seek to explore differences in language between the two, though discrepancies could prove enlightening. Line numbers as they are given in Jarman’s edition will be supplied in brackets.

¹⁹ The carrion-crow imagery of *Y Gododdin* is so pervasive that the black wings of one such bird adorn the cover of Gwyn Thomas’s *Gododdin: The Earliest British Literature*, (Gomer Press, 2012), accompanied with the words: ‘slaughtered heroes: food for crows’. The grisly fate of the majority of the warriors’ bodies may not be the elegies’ primary purpose, but the uneasy realisation of such fate nevertheless underpins the *awdlau*.

²⁰ Quotations from Rowland, *EWSP*, pp. 429-47; pp. 483-96; *Englyn* number supplied in brackets.

²¹ Rowland, *EWSP*, p. 158.

tinged with an acute and pervading grief, the potency of which is absent in the *awdlau* of *Y Gododdin*, and which accounts for her fierce vendetta.

In *Y Gododdin*, most instances of excarnation are in reference to enemy bodies. However, of Buddfan it is said: [*b*] *ju bwyd i frain, bu budd i frân* [he was food for ravens, benefit to crow] (272), the only instance of this metaphorical structure invoked in reference to a Gododdin warrior. However, Buddfan does eventually receive a burial and is borne away from the battlefield, an act corroborated by earlier mentions of the recovery of deceased bodies: *dyfforthynt lynwysawr gelorawr hir* [long biers bore away blood-stained men] (145), and [*g*] *wnaethont yn geugant gelorwydd* [they made biers inevitable] (109). However, the sinister implication of *bwyd i frain* insinuates Buddfan's body was not reached quickly enough to prevent his corpse from desecration.

Either the body is left where it fell, slowly eaten by carrion crow, or taken for burial (although this latter option does not prevent the crows' assault). This dichotomy is evident in *Gereint*. After killing seven adversaries, the titular knight strips the armour from their dead bodies, tying it to their horses and taking both metal and mount with him, leaving the plundered corpses behind. Geraint's actions, though not as grisly, strike a parallel with the crows' feasting: both strip the corpse in some way for their own benefit. Furthermore, the narrative makes no mention of burial; Geraint leaves their bodies to rot by the wayside. However, the Earl of Limwris, who later happens upon a lady standing over her dead husband (killed by three giants which Geraint has ventured to defeat), *a beris cladu y marchawc a edewssit yn uarw* [saw to it that the knight who had been left for dead was buried].²² Similarly, in *Peredur*, Peredur encounters a woman holding her dead husband, who without her support falls limp to the ground, and reassures her: *mi a gladaf y gelein. A gwedy hynny mi a af hyt lle mae y marchawc, y edrych a allwyf y dial arnaw* [I will bury the corpse. And after that I will go with you to where the knight is, and I will look to bring vengeance upon him].²³ Burials in the literature have an undercurrent of moral evaluation and are afforded only to those with someone to care for them. Should the dead body not be worthy of honouring, they are afforded little to no post-mortem care and left to the mercy of the crows.

In the Irish material, the Otherworldly woman Cailb curses the doomed King Conaire in the Middle Irish tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* with *noco n-érnába ceinn ná cárna dit asind áit hi tudchad acht 'na mbérat éoin ina crobaib* [neither fell nor flesh of thine shall escape from the place into which thou hast come, save what birds will bear away in their claws].²⁴ Though Cailb speaks of the defilement of bodies, here bearing away chunks of flesh, sometimes this separation of body parts was done by those seeking to bury the body. The despoiling of corpses in the legal triads is one of the three shames of a corpse;²⁵ however, in some instances carrying the whole body was impossible and only parts of the deceased body were granted burial. When Bendigeidfran's giant body in the second branch of the *Mabinogion* is mortally wounded by a poisoned spear, carrying his body back to Wales would be unfeasible. Knowing his death is imminent, he orders: [*a*] *chymewch chwi y penn [...] a dygwch hyt y Gwynfryn yn Llundain, a chledwch a'y wyneb ar Freinc ef* [and take the head ... and carry it to the Gwynfryn in London, and bury it with its face towards France].²⁶ He prophesies that his head, though decapitated and separate from his body (which is left to an undetermined fate in Ireland), *a uyd kystal gennwch y gedymdeithas ac y bu oreu gennwch, ban uu arnaf i eiryoet* [will be as good company with

²² *Ystoria Gereint Uab Erbin*, ed. by Robert Thomson, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS), 1997), p. 47.

²³ *Peredur ab Efracw*, ed. by Kuno Meyer, (Hirzel, 1887), p. 10.

²⁴ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes, (Bouillon, 1902), p. 50.

²⁵ See triad X70 in Roberts, *Legal Triads*, pp. 78-79; *teir sarhaed kelein yw: y llath, a'e hyspeilyaw, a gwan gwith troed yndaw* [the three shames of a corpse are: striking it, and despoiling it, and giving it a shove with a foot].

²⁶ *Branwen uerch Lyr*, ed. by Derick Thomson, (DIAS, 2003), p. 15.

you all as it ever was when it was on me],²⁷ never decaying so long as the surviving men do not open the door towards Aber Henfelen. Bendigeidfran's apotropaic head is imbued with supernatural power to protect Britain, so long as it remains buried.²⁸

Even in not-so-supernatural instances, the head would be taken for burial when carrying the whole body proved impossible.²⁹ Patrick Sims-Williams discusses the early-twelfth-century *Cartulary of Quimperlé*, wherein the Breton Saint Gurthien encounters a lamenting mother carrying her son's head to its tomb, unable to bear the full weight of his body from the battlefield.³⁰ A similar tableau is painted in the 'Penn Urien' *englynion* of *Canu Urien*.³¹ Grief and guilt are palpable, with the speaker – Urien's cousin – opening each *englyn* with *penn a borthaf* [I carry a head], namely, Urien's. Curiously, he laments *gwae vy llaw llad vyg keuynderw* [woe, my hand, the striking of my cousin] (21). Though the poem is unspecific as to the decapitating blow happening before or after death, is not without foundation to suggest the speaker could only bear Urien's head away to bury.³² Like the Gododdin warriors, Urien's body falls victim to *[b]rein* [ravens] on his *[b]ronn wenn* [white breast] (9). Despite this gory fate, his body remains *gwenn* [white]. For such morbid circumstances as *penn a borthaf* suggests, in keeping with this apparent trend in Medieval Welsh literature, there is a sustained sanitary approach to the body, or rather body parts, refusing to offer the corpse any significant or gruesome description.

Though Bendigeidfran was exceptionally tall, meaning logistically his body could not be carried from Ireland to Wales, his decapitation reflects a practice done even to average-sized bodies should they be too cumbersome for the bearer. Three options exist as to the fate of dead bodies immediately post-mortem. The first was the full recovery of the body. There is mention across the literature of biers transporting bodies, including *Canu Urien: neus goruc o dir bryneich \ gwedy gawr gelorawr veich* [he (Urien) made of the Bernicians | after battle a burden for biers] (15), indicating transportation for burial of the entire body. The second was the partial recovery of a body (usually prioritising the head). The final option was the abandonment of the body, left to feed the crows and to rot away where it fell. This latter option seems, from the literature, to be the most undesirable, more often the fate of enemy bodies.

Burying Bodies: 'The Theatre of the Dead'

Should a body, or body-part, be taken for burial, the next stage in its post-mortem journey is the burial itself. Depictions of mortuary ritual are scarce in Medieval Welsh literature, particularly that of the funeral. Here we must consider form; much of the early Welsh material does not feature what David

²⁷ Thomson, *Branwen*, p. 15.

²⁸ Talismanic dead bodies (or body parts) extend into the Irish material. Eogan Béal, King of Connacht, commands his body to be buried on the side of a *ráith* [earthen rampart] with his face to the north. In doing so, the Ulstermen would never prevail in battle against Connacht, which holds true until his body is exhumed, brought to the north, and buried face downwards. See: Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi*, (University of Wales Press, 1958), pp. 96-97.

²⁹ Elizabeth O'Brian discusses the Christian belief in Ireland wherein the head determined the place of resurrection, as spoken by Origen in the early eighth-century Canon, Hib. XLIX, *De martyribus* [concerning martyrs]. Should Origen have been known in the Welsh context, it could have motivated the prioritisation of the head's recovery. See *Mapping Death*, (Four Courts Press, 2021), p. 140.

³⁰ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Death of Urien', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 32, (1996), pp. 25-56, (p. 47).

³¹ Quotations from Rowland, *EWSP*, pp. 419-28; pp. 477-82; *Englyn* number supplied in brackets.

³² I postulate that the speaker decapitates Urien's head, rather than leaving the body whole and returning later, in case his head should fall victim to enemy mistreatment; however, headhunting is more a practice of the early Irish material (see for example Conaire's decapitation at the end of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, wherein an enemy marauder runs off with the head, or the post-mortem decapitations recorded in the Irish annals) and so this theory is only speculation.

Callender calls a ‘progressive narrative current’.³³ The *awdlau* of *Y Gododdin* commemorate each warrior in turn without linear description of the events in question: any such information is elusive and fragmented. However, the focus of the poet is not to recount the destruction, but to memorialise the warriors through eulogy and elegy. Detailed account of any funeral afforded to their deceased bodies is not in the interest of poet or genre. However, the prose romances of the *Mabinogion* offer the space and linear narrative to linger on post-mortem practices. *Owein* portrays the funeral procession of the Black Knight, having met his end after being wounded in a skirmish by the tale’s protagonist, Sir Owain. I give the passage here in full providing Sioned Davies’ translation:

Ac am rynnawd o'r dyd y clywynt diaspedein a gweidi anueitrawl eu meint, a gofyn a oruc Owein y'r uorwyn, 'Pa ystyr yssyd y'r gweidi hwnn?', 'Mynet a chorff y gwrda bieu y gaer y'r llan.' [...] Ac ny welei nac ymyl nac eithaf y'r lluoed yn llewni yr heolyd, a hynny yn llawn-aruawc, a gwaged llawer y gyt ac wynt ar ueirch ac ar traet, a chrefydwyr y dinas oll yn kanu. Ac ef a tebygei Owein bot yr awyr yn edrinaw rac meint y gweidi, a'r utkrynn, a'r crefydwyr yn kanu. Ac ym perued y llu hwnnw ef [a welei] yr elor, a llen o vliant gwynn arnei, a physt kwyr yn llosgi yn amyl yn y chylch. Ac nyt oed vndyn dan yr elor lai no barwn kyuoethawc. A diheu oed gan Owein na welsei eiryoet niuer kyhardet a hwnnw o bali a seric a syndal. Ac ar ol y llu hwnnw y gwelei ef gwreic velen a'e gwyllt dros y dwy ysgwyd, ac a gwaet briw amyl yn y brigeu, a gwisic o bali melyn ymdanei gwedy y rwygaw, a dwy wintas o gordwal brith am y thraet. A ryued oed na beu yssic penneu y byssed rac dyckynet y maedei y dwylaw y gyt.³⁴

[And shortly after dawn they could hear tremendous crying and wailing, and Owain asked the maiden, ‘What is the meaning of this wailing?’ ‘They are taking the body of the nobleman who owns the castle to the church’. [...]. He could see neither end nor limit to the crowds filling the streets, and they were fully on horseback, and on foot, and all the clerics of the town chanting. And Owain felt that the sky was ringing because of all the wailing, and the trumpets, and the clerics chanting. And in the middle of crowd he could see a bier covered in a sheet of fine white linen, and many wax tapers burning around it. And not one of the men carrying the bier was of lower rank than a powerful baron. Owain was certain that he had never seen a gathering as fine as that, in brocaded silk and damasks and sendal. And following the crowd he could see a lady, her yellow hair let down over her shoulders and covered with the blood of many wounds, and she was wearing a dress of yellow brocaded silk, which was torn, and boots of speckled leather on her feet. And it was surprising that the tips of her fingers were not worn away, so violently did she wring her hands together].³⁵

Detailed outlook on post-mortem practice is offered. The Black Knight flees to the castle having received a *dyrnawt agheuawl* [mortal blow].³⁶ The woman (the *iarlles* [countess] and knight’s wife) is covered in the *gwaet briw amyl* [blood of many wounds], implying that in the knight’s final moments she cared for his dying body, tending to his fatal wound.³⁷ In contrast to the blood-stained *iarlles*, Owain sees the knight’s body draped in *llen o vliant gwynn* [a sheet of fine white linen], indicating the corpse

³³ See David Callender, *Dissonant Neighbours: Narrative Progress in Early Welsh & English Poetry*, (University of Wales Press, 2019), p. 48.

³⁴ *Owein or Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynnawn*, ed. by Robert Thomson, (DIAS, 1968), pp. 13-14.

³⁵ Davies, *Mabinogion*, p. 124.

³⁶ Thomson, *Owein*, p. 11.

³⁷ There are myriad instances in the *Mabinogion* of women caring for dead or dying bodies, note the widowed countess healing Owain later in the narrative, and the wives reviving the dead bodies of their husbands in *Peredur*. It stands to reason that the *iarlles* followed suit.

is draped in a funerary shroud. The veiled purity of the corpse contrasts with both its former state as a dying body marked by mortal wound, and the bloodied but living body of his wife. Furthermore, the corpse is hidden from view, the shroud obscuring the physicality of the body beneath. No detail of the corpse is offered; instead, focus is on the surrounding pomp, detracting from its existence. In comparison, in Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century *Le Chevalier au lion* (*Yvain*) the body in all its marred and abused form is laid bare before us. During the funeral procession, *li sans touz chaus et vermaus* | [*r*]issi au mort par mi la plaie [fresh blood began | to run from the corpse's cold wounds],³⁸ which the narrative voice directly equates with the injuries Yvain inflicted. Attention is given to these wounds, the blood *degoutés* [trickling down],³⁹ the unavoidable presentness of the language ensuring the audience's attention is fixed on the gruesome scene, rendering the corpse unavoidable. In the Welsh depiction of the same scene, the body, let alone the gore, is absent. In her reading of the *Táin*, Künzler noted the text did not 'exploit the potential 'aesthetics' of poetic visual descriptions of blood and gore', indeed they are 'rarely visualised' in terms of their appearance.⁴⁰ This observation appears true in the Welsh context. Aside from the maiden's overview of the scene, no mention of the knight's body is made. As with the legal triad quoted in the introduction, the corpse's presence is suggested through metonymic and euphemistic reference to the *gelor* [bier], mirroring the bodies in *Y Gododdin* hinted at also through metaphor. The bodies of the dead in Welsh literature are very often hidden from view.

In terms of mortuary ritual, the Welsh does not deviate much from Chrétien's *Yvain*. It is now agreed that whilst Chrétien's work served as an important source, the Welsh is not a translation, but an adaptation of a 'common original' story.⁴¹ More emphasis is placed on the knight's wife's grief through virtue of direct speech in the Old French, whilst the Welsh offers more detailed description of the procession itself. John Darrach writes of burial in Arthurian romance that '[t]he most prestigious victims were buried with great ceremony'.⁴² Opulence is afforded to the scene in *Owein* by the entourage surrounding the body. The knight is held aloft by noble men, the immediate crowd around him draped in *bali a seric a syndal* [brocaded silk and damask and sendal]. Owain can see no end to the throngs of people gathered to accompany the bier. In Melissa Herman's study on mortuary ritual in early Medieval England, she writes that both funeral and grave alike are 'intensely visible and communal processes involving members of society as both participants and audience'.⁴³ By the description in *Owein*, it would seem this observation extends to Medieval Wales. In fact, the community and their practices are afforded far greater attention than the very body they gather to mourn: almost the entire kingdom participates in the spectacle of the Black Knight's funeral procession. The scene painted by the narrative and observed by Owain is incredibly vivid and multisensory: visually through the ornateness of textiles described and flickering lights of many candles, but aurally also through the mention of trumpets, cries, and chants. This funerary depiction complements Herman's commentary on mortuary ritual; though the crowds Owain observes are there to honour the knight's body, in doing so they partake in the funeral, both audience and actor in what Herman dubs the 'theatre of the dead'.⁴⁴ However, as the narrative is unwilling to offer any intimate descriptions of the dead body, alluding only to linen and bier, the central character of these theatrics is virtually absent, suggesting mortuary ritual is more for the living bodies than the dead.

³⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au lion, ou, Le roman d'Yvain*, ed. by David Hult, (Le Livre de Poche, 1994), p. 122, (lines 1180-81); Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain: The Knight of the Lion*, trans. by Burton Raffel, (Yale University Press, 1987), p. 37, (lines 1180-81).

³⁹ Hult, *Le Roman d'Yvain*, p. 124, (line 1191); Raffel, *Yvain*, p. 38, (line 1191).

⁴⁰ Künzler, 'A Spectacle of Death?', pp. 37-39.

⁴¹ Lloyd-Morgan, 'Migrating narratives', p. 131.

⁴² John Darrach, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance*, (Boydell Press, 1994), p. 135.

⁴³ Melissa Herman, 'Monumental Memory: The Performance and Enduring Spectacle of Burial in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Dealing with the Dead*, ed. by Thea Tomaini, (Brill, 2018), pp. 68-96, (p. 68).

⁴⁴ Herman, 'Monumental Memory', p. 73.

Extended description of burying bodies is not given much attention in the Welsh material, though brief mentions are observable. Returning to *Canu Urien*, the burial of his body (whether whole or headless is unclear) is addressed in the eight *englynion* that comprise *Celain Urien*. Though this title is editorial, it nevertheless makes clear that Urien's corpse actually takes centre stage, unlike the Black Knight's. Each *englyn* opens with *[y]gelain veinwen a oloir hediw* [the slender white corpse is being buried today] (20-27), providing a rare description of a corpse that is not obscured by shroud or metaphor. The language is not detailed beyond *veinwen* [slender and white], a sanitary description a far cry from the gushing, bloodied wounds in Chrétien's *Yvain*. Detail concerning the burial can be gleaned from the *englyn*: his body is placed within *derw* [oakwood] (21), indicating a coffin of sorts, *ymplith prid* [within the soil] (21) and beneath *mein* [stones] (20, 22, 27) and *dynat* [nettles] (26). It is unclear whether the stones form part of the burial together with the *derw* or are simply part of the earth's natural cover. However, stone-lined graves have been found dating back to the fifth century, some with wooden lids which *derw* could indicate.⁴⁵ Though these literary texts cannot serve as documentation of historical burial tradition, they nevertheless draw on and align with archaeological evidence.

The Black Knight's bier is led from *caer* [castle, fort] to *llann* [church], suggesting a Christian burial in a churchyard, though such interment is not shown. Nevertheless, the ecclesiastical location is significant as a divergence from earlier literature. In the second branch of the *Mabinogion*, Branwen dies of heartbreak returning to Britain at the deaths resulting from her rescue. The survivors construct *bed petruol idi, a'e chladu yno y glan Alaw* [a four sided grave for her and bury her there on the banks of the Alaw].⁴⁶ The absence of churchyard here is obvious given the Four Branches' pre-Christian setting; however, the Gododdin poet's attention to the warrior's interment also appears, ostensibly, to be similarly secular. The poet laments Eideff's *glasfedd* [green or grass grave] (832), whilst Edar is buried *dan dydwed daear* [beneath the cover/soil of the earth] (965), and the grave of Gwrwelling lying beneath a *clawr glas* [green cover] (186). Precise geographical mention of warriors' graves is also offered. Buddfan is buried *o dan Eleirch Fre* [beneath Elerch Fre] (279),⁴⁷ whilst Gorthyn Hir's grave is on the *orthir Rhufoniog* [uplands of Rhufoniog] (856).⁴⁸ The warriors' varied graves indicate their bodies were carried from the battlefield to be buried, though not within a churchyard. Their resting places mirror those described in *Englynion y Beddau*, which are often beneath scrub or grass, on hills or mountains, besides estuaries or rivers, or on the seashore.⁴⁹ However, the absence of churches or chapels does not entail an absence of Christianity. The archaeological record indicates 60% of early Medieval burials had no direct association with churches; with such link only established from the seventh century onwards.⁵⁰ Though no churches manifest in *Y Gododdin*, the warriors' burials were not necessarily secular, a point supported by the poet's own desires that: *[y]s deupo i'w henaid wedi trined | [c]ynnwys yng ngwlad nef, addef afneued* [may there be for their souls after battle a welcome in the land of heaven, the home of plenty] (772-3).⁵¹ Ceridwen-Lloyd Morgan gives the early thirteenth century as an approximate date for *Owein's* composition.⁵² Therefore, the phenomenon of cemetery burial is perceivable in the literature: that the Black Knight's burial in the later *Owein* is explicitly within

⁴⁵ Longley, 'Early Medieval Burial in Wales', pp. 106-11.

⁴⁶ Thomson, *Branwen*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ On the place names in *Y Gododdin*, see: Alexander Falileyev, 'Three Notes on the Gododdin', *Studia Celtica*, 54, (2020), pp. 81-98; and Philip Dunshea, 'The Meaning of Catraeth: A Revised Early Context for Y Gododdin', in *Beyond the Gododdin: Dark Age Scotland in Medieval Wales*, ed. by Alex Woolf, (University of St Andrews, 2013), pp. 81-114.

⁴⁸ Multiple warriors' burials in Wales, especially Gwynedd, suggest these stanzas were later additions composed in North Wales, though Jackson in his historical reading suggests this Northern-Welsh contingent could have simply been men who answered Mynyddog Prince of the Gododdin's call (see Jackson, *Y Gododdin*, p. 26).

⁴⁹ Sims-Williams, *The Medieval Welsh Englynion Y Beddau*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Longley, 'Early Medieval Burial in Wales', p. 106, p. 124.

⁵¹ Though this line could be later interpolation.

⁵² Lloyd-Morgan, 'Migrating narratives', p. 139.

church grounds reflects David Longley's suggestion that the final, inextricable association of burial and church graveyard was not established until the twelfth century.⁵³ Before then, Christian burials were not always in explicitly Christian locations, as *Y Gododdin* might indicate.⁵⁴

Grieving Bodies: The Living Dead

Grief is an inevitable companion to dead bodies. The poetic voice of *Y Gododdin* relates of the warriors [o] *gyfrysedd gwraedd gwyddw a wnaethant | [l]lawer mam a'i deigr ar ei hamrant* [by fighting they made women widows, many a mother with her tear on her eyelid] (537-8). Though burial seems to be the ideal fate of dead bodies, it pales in comparison to the true ideal: life. *Englynion* 18-33 of *Canu Heledd* see Heledd stood before the desolate hall of Cynddylan, lamenting her loss before the abandoned structure. Like Cynddylan's body, the hall is a carcass, the life that once thrived within now gone. Each stanza opens with Heledd grieving the hall's emptiness, for example, it is: *tywyll heno* [dark tonight] (18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 32), *peithiawc* [desolate] (28), and *oergrei* [dismal] (29). Nine of the sixteen *englynion* include an explicit reference to Heledd's grievous mental state, declaring that *dygystud deurud dagreu* [tears wear away cheeks] (25), lamenting *o wi a anghau byrr ym gat* [o death, why does it leave me behind] (23). Beyond this section, Heledd states *rwy vyg galar* [too great is my grief] (51) at the death of her kinsmen. Her exclamatory *gwae vi duw vy mot yn vyw* [woe is me that I am alive] (71), *o annffawt vyn tauawt yt lesseint* [because of the misfortune of my tongue they have been slain] (57) is evocative of Branwen's own [o] *y a uab Duw [...] gwae ui o'm ganedigaeth. Da a dwy ynys a diffeithwyt o'm achaws i* [oh son of God... woe that I was ever born. Two good islands have been laid waste because of me].⁵⁵ She also remarks that were it not for the death of her brothers, *ny bydaf leuawr inneu* [I would not be a wailer] (101). Returning once more to the introductory legal triad, it is specific in *diaspedain y caressav* [wailing of a kinswoman]. It appears to be a particularly female prerogative to mourn the dead through piercingly-loud, wordless cries, like the *iarlles* in *Owein*, of whom it is said *uch oed y diaspat noc a oed o dyn a chorn yn y llu* [her cries were louder than those of all the men and trumpets in the crowd],⁵⁶ whilst men take a more literary approach. Heledd straddles these two manifestations of grief, she is a mournful woman expressing her grief through animalistic, wordless cries, yet she says of Cynon that he *dylvei [...] y gwynaw* [ought to be lamented] (103), and takes on this role usually reserved for male voices, likely because there are no surviving male relatives to fulfil the role. Saga *Englynion* are a heroic genre with little notice of women,⁵⁷ and Heledd is unique as a female voice in Welsh elegiac praise poetry.

That *Canu Heledd* gives voice to the grief dead bodies invoke is undeniable, but there is also an underlying commentary on heroic ideals. What use is valour and honour in battle when living bodies return as deceased ones? The hall stands empty, Heledd is destitute. The bravery of her brothers is worthless now. A similar critique is explored in *Canu Llywarch Hen* through Llywarch's regret at goading his sons to combat (which Heledd seems to have done to her brothers), an action which led to their death on the battlefield. He bitterly laments: [p] *edwarmeib ar hugeint a ueithyeint vyg knawt | drwy vyn tauawt lle<de>sseint* [twenty-four sons of the nurture of my flesh | through my tongue have

⁵³ Longley, 'Early Medieval Burial in Wales', p. 126.

⁵⁴ Simon Evans argues that religious references in *Y Gododdin* are later additions; however, Jarman states there's no grounds for Aneirin and the warriors of Gododdin to not be Christian, a view also held by Fulton. See Simon Evans, 'Aneirin – Bardd Cristnogol?', in *Ysgrifau Beirniadol X*, ed. by J. Caerwyn Williams, (Dinbych, 1977), 35-44; Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, p. lviii; and Fulton, 'Cultural Heroism', p. 30.

⁵⁵ Thomson, *Branwen*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Thomson, *Owein*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Rowland, *EWSP*, p. 141.

they been killed].⁵⁸ As a result of his eagerness for their own renown on the battlefield he is now alone. As Eleanor Smith observes of one of his sons, ‘Gwên’s uncompromising heroism, once desired, is now a tragedy which his father wishes undone’.⁵⁹ In this way, both Heledd’s and Llywarch’s laments are inversions of the traditional *Marwnadau* [laments for the dead] wherein poetic grief augments the dead man’s qualities. Instead, Gwên’s bravery, and consequently his dead body, has caused Llywarch’s suffering. Furthermore, the now elderly Llywarch denounces himself *wyf annwar abar* [I am a cantankerous carcass] (20); neither *hun* [sleep] nor *hoen* [happiness] come to him. There is a bitter irony interwoven within this penultimate *englyn*. Llywarch compares himself to a dead body, mirroring the corpses of his twenty-four sons buried beneath the ground. His grief has all but transformed him into a dead body, though death itself *nam dygret* [does not come to me] (19). Grief is a purgatorial sentence: it wreaks damage upon living bodies that mourn dead bodies.

The poet of *Y Gododdin*, in his commemoration, experiences grief. He laments, *[t]ruan yw gennyf, gwedi lludded, | [g]oddef gloes angau trwy anghyffred, | [a]c ail trwm truan gennyf gweled | [d]ygwyddo ein gwŷr ben o draed, | [a]c uchenaid hir ac eilywed* [grievous for me, after toil | is the suffering of death’s agony in affliction, | and again it is the heavy grief for me to see | the headlong fall of our men | and long sighing and lamentation] (764-768). Yet his words are not tinged with the guilt that plagues Heledd and Llywarch. This difference is one of genre; to quote Eleanor Smith, ‘*Y Gododdin* is genuinely about the young men it memorialises: the undercurrent of unbearable tragedy that lurks beneath its surface comes largely from their deaths, not from the consequences for those who survive them’.⁶⁰ *Y Gododdin* focuses on the warriors’ unfortunately *deceased* bodies; the mournful *englynion* of Heledd and Llywarch centre their living bodies in reaction to dead bodies. The shift in perspective means the mournful moments in the *awdlau* of *Y Gododdin* are a masterclass in brevity. Smith continues, arguing *Y Gododdin* follows the warriors ‘to the point of death and no further’, being ‘more interested in warriors and their doomed courage than any of the *englyn* poetry is. It freezes them in the moment before their deaths, knowing what is coming but not dwelling on it.’⁶¹ Whilst I agree to an extent, certainly regarding the focus on the warriors, not the speaker, I would afford *Y Gododdin* greater credit in its post-mortem detail. Many of the warriors are allowed to die within the text, indeed, great care is taken by the poet to reference known burial sites, reassuring the audience that their bodies are safely interred and not abandoned. This attention stands in contrast to the treatment of enemy bodies: *dychiawr* | *[u]gain cant yn nifant yn un awr* [ten score fell into oblivion in one hour] (61). These thousands of men are simply said to fall into *difant*, oblivion, the abyss, with an underlying connotation of disappearance.⁶² This disregard and homogenisation of enemy bodies further highlights the individuality of each *Gododdin* warrior; the poet is not concerned with detailing enemy bodies, only with the *Gododdin* warriors he purports to know within the conceit of the poem. He makes purposeful note that these men are spared from the jaws of oblivion through a determinate resting place. Burial is the fate of the body post-mortem that is desired; oblivion is feared.

Remembering Bodies: Monument and Memory

The body’s post-mortem journey comes to an end with its memorialisation; whether through physical monument or literary composition the dead are immortalised. The memory of the body continues long after the physical body has decayed beneath the soil. Herman comments that funerary acts render the

⁵⁸ Quotations from Rowland, *EWSP*, pp. 404-418; pp. 468-76; *Englyn* number in brackets.

⁵⁹ Eleanor Smith, ‘Penn a borthaf am porthes’: The Subversion of Mourning in Early Welsh *Englyn* Poetry’, *Quaestio insularis*, 20, (2019), pp. 21-44, (p. 28).

⁶⁰ Smith, ‘Pen a borthaf am porthes’, p. 43.

⁶¹ Smith, ‘Pen a borthaf am porthes’, p. 44.

⁶² GPC, ‘difant’, 1961.

dead invisible, ‘yet in memorialising them, marking the grave and especially the mound, the invisible dead are once again made visible, as enduring spectacles on the landscape’.⁶³ As Herman names them, these ‘enduring spectacles’ rewrite the topography, the memory of the dead reshaping conceptions of the world around the bodies. This marriage of monument and literature is exemplified no better than by *Englynion y Beddau*. Sims-Williams describes the stanzas as a ‘testimony to the impact megaliths, tumuli, and monuments had on the cultural imagination’.⁶⁴ Petts stresses that the burial practices the *englynion* record are not contemporary with its composition, nor can it be said they accurately depict those of earlier generations; instead, the stanzas seek to connect the landscape, littered with ancient monuments, to a ‘perceived, mythical past’.⁶⁵ Rather than attempting to glean archaeological data concerning Medieval Welsh burial practice, the text is far more insightful when read as a testimony to the interplay between burial and memory. The figures commemorated within are kept alive in the cultural memory by virtue of their graves marking the landscape. Petts also highlights that two of the groups of identifiable individuals – the Arthurian and the *gwyr y gogledd* [men of the north] – fought against the Anglo-Saxon assault, meaning *Englynion y Beddau* transforms the landscape, via the graves preserving the bodies of fallen heroes, into a history of resistance against invaders threatening Wales.⁶⁶ The *englynion* become ‘a message of defiance, rooted in the locatable specifics of the Welsh landscape’.⁶⁷

Several instances in the *Mabinogion* speak to this topographical memorialisation. In the fourth branch, Gronw is killed when Lleu’s spear punctures the stone he uses as a shield. The narrative observes: *ac yno y mae y llech ar lan Auon Gynuael yn Ardudwy, a’r twll drwydi. Ac o achaws hynny ettwa y gelwir Llech Gronw* [and the stone is still there on the banks of the river Cynfael in Ardudwy, with the hole through it. And becomes of that it is still called Gronw’s stone].⁶⁸ Gronw’s death is now marked by the stone, which acts as a rudimentary grave. Sioned Davies adds further detail in the notes to her translation, stating such a stone was found in the bed of the river Cynfal in 1934, whilst another was found in 1990 in a place known locally as *Bedd Gronw* [Gronw’s grave].⁶⁹ Gronw’s literary death has exerted tangible influence on the real world. This intersection of literature and landscape echoes the Irish tradition of *dindshenchas* [lore of prominent places], especially *Dindschenchas Érenn*, a collection of onomastic prose and verse expounding the names of topographical features.⁷⁰ *Dindshenchas* suggests the impact the Irish presence had on the land,⁷¹ but these instances in the Welsh material are particularly concerned with the impact dead bodies exert. Not dissimilar to Gronw is Branwen’s burial. Whilst her body was buried within a four sided grave, her name is now buried in the name *Ynys Bronwen* [the Island of Bronwen], the site of a cromlech in which, purportedly, an urn containing calcified bones of a female were found in 1813.⁷² According to Robert Williams, ‘the very spot has always been called Ynys Bronwen’,⁷³ suggesting strong topographical ties between the tale and the landscape even before the

⁶³ Herman, ‘Monumental Memory’, p. 108.

⁶⁴ Sims-Williams, *Englynion Y Beddau*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Petts, ‘De Situ Brecheniauc and Englynion Y Beddau’, p. 164.

⁶⁶ Petts, ‘De Situ Brecheniauc and Englynion Y Beddau’, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Sims-Williams, *Englynion y Beddau*, p. 97.

⁶⁸ *Math Uab Mathonwy*, ed. by Ian Hughes, (DIAS, 2013), p. 21.

⁶⁹ Davies, *Mabinogion*, p. 244.

⁷⁰ James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 141.

⁷¹ Sarah Künzler, ‘Sites of Memory in the Irish Landscape? Approaching Ogham Stones through Memory Studies’, *Memory Studies*, 13.6, (2019), pp. 1284-304, (p. 1291).

⁷² Thomson, *Branwen*, p. 15; A cromlech could reasonably fit the description of *bed petruol*; I do not claim to establish irrefutable proof, but to highlight the relationship between text and landscape: the ancient cromlech could easily have inspired the detail of Branwen’s burial.

⁷³ Robert Williams, *Enwogion Cymru: A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Welshmen*, (Llandovery, 1852), p. 47.

bones' discovery. Unlike *Llech Gronw*, *Ynys Bronwen* is not mentioned by the narrative, but nevertheless demonstrates the influence literary bodies and their burials exert on the landscape.

The memory of the body is the body's final iteration on its post-mortem journey. As explored, the poetic voice of *Y Gododdin* takes care to relay the warriors' eventual interment. The only visible remainders of deceased bodies are these graves, which, along with the *awdlau* themselves, become the loci of grief, representations of the dead body that act as a receptacle for mourning. To quote Herman, '[t]he marking of the space of the dead is about situating and preserving the memory of the deceased, which has been carefully constructed by the funeral, within the societal memory'.⁷⁴ The *awdlau* of *Y Gododdin* resurrect the deceased bodies of the Gododdin orally in the cultural memory. Underpinning the elegies is a desperation to be remembered, to avoid oblivion, each stanza serving as a literary grave even if no physical grave is known. There is throughout *Y Gododdin* a constant mood of anxiety interwoven with the praise of the Gododdin's heroism as to their fate, their final destination. By gifting each member of the war-band their own stanza, the poet effectively executes a literary burial, offering them immortality through remembrance to combat the oblivion their enemies met.

Conclusion

Having gathered together instances concerning or pertaining to dead bodies across Welsh literature in this preliminary study, trends emerge. Firstly, the ideal fate of the deceased body is that of inhumation, preferably whole, though if not possible the head is the cardinal body-part. Bodies are not cremated; where post-mortem practice is demonstrated, it is burial. This literary view complements the historical record: inhumation gradually replaced cremation throughout the Roman empire, becoming the standard post-mortem practice in Britain by the fourth century.⁷⁵ Despite the texts' often murky dates, they were written in a world where burial was the preferred disposal rite of both their contemporary culture and often the historical one they sought to portray.

The second finding this study has shown is the determination to avoid confronting the deceased body itself, suggesting that post-mortem ritual is more important for living bodies than for dead ones. Visual description of dead bodies is limited, and brief when it occurs. Furthermore, the corpse is often absent, replaced by metaphor. Biers, not their burden, are centred instead; or more morbidly, corpses are depicted as carrion, their humanity stripped from their form as their flesh is by crows. It is tempting to suggest this dehumanisation of dead bodies reflects the Christian soul and body doctrine. Once the soul has departed, the body is no longer understood or valued as a living body is, becoming practically invisible.⁷⁶ This dearth of description agrees with Künzler's own observations of the Táin: '[d]ead bodies are rarely visualised in terms of their looks', suggesting 'corpses are subject to a different kind of reading: they are perceived more in a monumental way and are read as static signs situated in the landscape.'⁷⁷ Künzler highlights the relationship between dead bodies and the landscape, shaping it topographically with monument and memorial, but culturally too through onomastics. The graves become the body, enduring long after the corpse decays, immune to the transience of flesh.

But equally effective as monument is the use of verse as a literary memorial. Immortality may be achieved through the body's preservation in the cultural memory. Texts like *Y Gododdin* and the Saga *Englynion* confront the tension arising from the desire for such immortality – achieved through bravery and heroic sacrifice – at the expense of corporeal life. Künzler concludes that dead bodies exist firmly within heroic discourse; they are 'important not as biological entities but as part of the social and

⁷⁴ Herman, 'Monumental Memory', p. 74.

⁷⁵ Christopher Arnold and Jeffrey Davies, *Roman and Early Medieval Wales*, (Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 137.

⁷⁶ It would be productive therefore to examine Medieval Welsh soul and body dialogues in the context of post-mortem bodies.

⁷⁷ Künzler, 'A Spectacle of Death?', p. 37.

cultural discourses of the narrated world. In addition, the bodies of the just-deceased warriors mark the transitional point from life to death, from acquiring fame (through martial action) to the transmission of their fame.⁷⁸ *Canu Heledd* and *Canu Llywarch* particularly expose this fallacy, for those grieving the deceased, the heroism of the dead is little comfort. However, in memorialising the dead their memory is kept alive, sparing them from the oblivion of being forgotten. One final legal triad elucidates this point: *Teir gwarthrud kelein yw: gofuy'n 'pwy a ladawd hwnn?', a 'phiev yr elor?', a gofuy'n 'piev y beth newyd hwnn?* [The three shames of a corpse are: asking 'who killed this one?', and 'whose is this bier?', and asking 'whose is this fresh grave?].⁷⁹ A fear of being unknown pervades these words, and the literature as a whole. Though the literary corpse is largely absent from the pages, through the post-mortem practices of mourning, burying, and memorialising, the body is spared oblivion.

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