

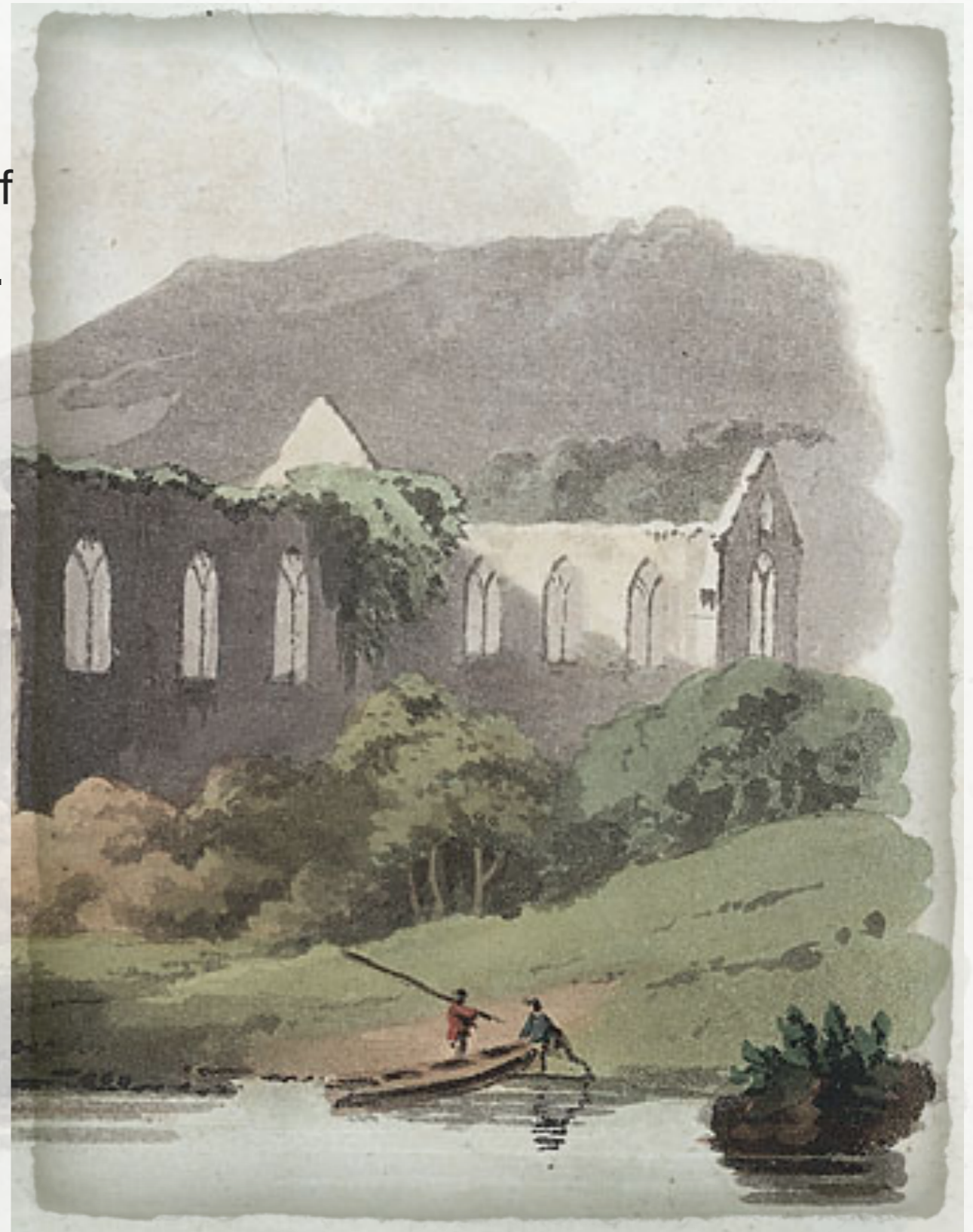
The Expansion of the Monasteries

The Monasteries were much more than religious houses. During the Middle Ages the church played a central role in the economy, politics and culture of Wales. Like lords and bishops, abbots were extremely powerful, and because of their influence obtaining their support was important to the lords and princes.



*E*stablishing the Monasteries

Many monasteries were established between the 11th and 13th centuries during a period of conflict between the Welsh and the Normans. Every monastery belonged to a group or community known as an order, and monasteries were established in Wales by Benedictines, Augustinians, Dominicans and Franciscans. The most powerful and popular religious order in Wales however was the Cistercians, and it was they who founded houses such as Tintern, Whitland, Strata Florida, Strata Marcella, Abbeycwmhir, Margam, Valle Crucis, and many other monasteries and nunneries.

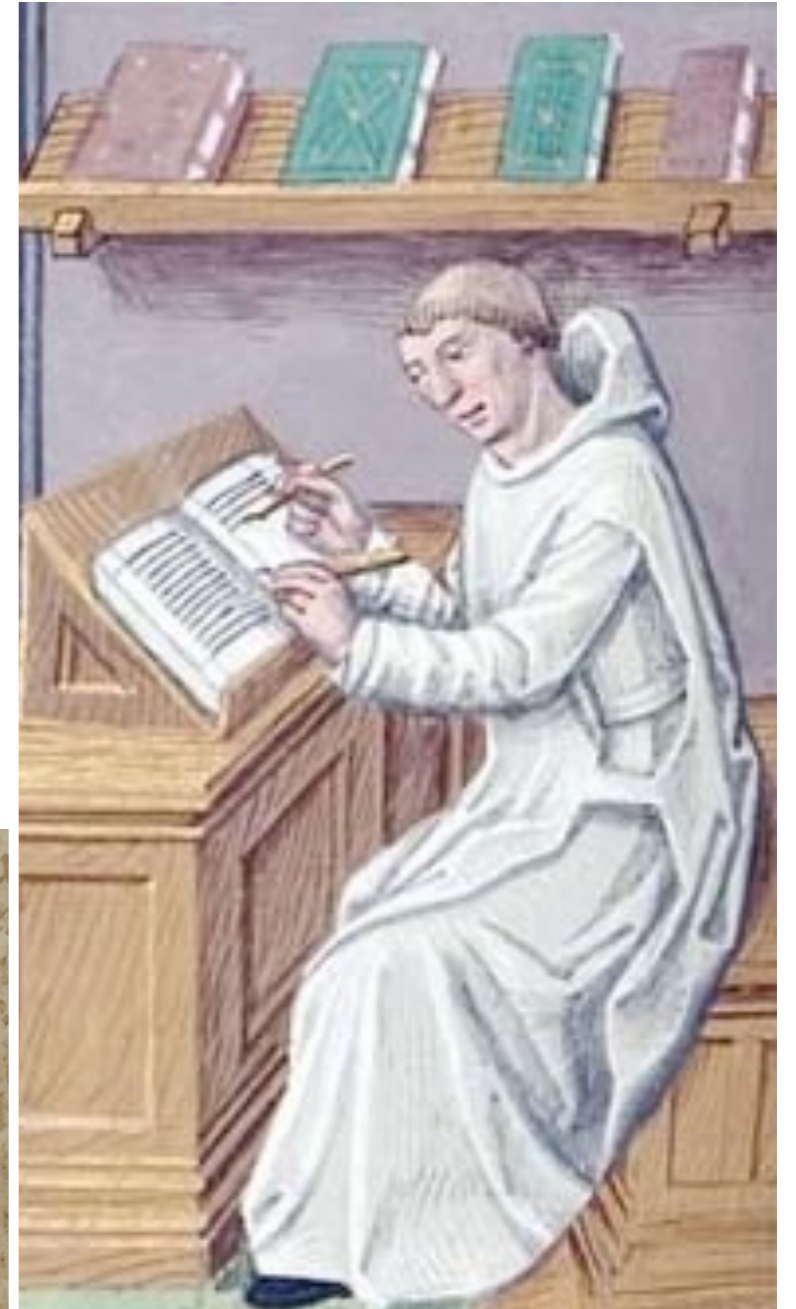
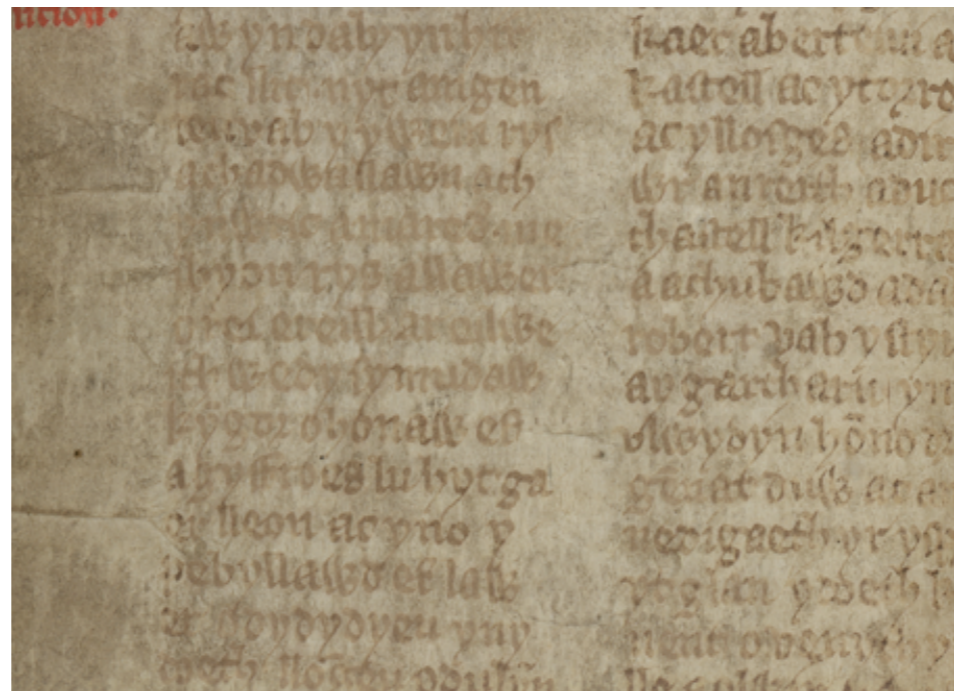


Recording history

Very little written testimony regarding the monks survives today from the Middle Ages.

The printing press had not been invented and every book had to be written by hand, and many of the manuscripts created during this period have disappeared over time.

The manuscripts that have been saved to this day are very precious items for historians because they are a record of life in the Middle Ages.



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Brut y Tywysogion

A very important manuscript held at the National Library of Wales called Brut y Tywysogion (The Chronicle of the Princes) records the history of Wales from 682 until 1332. The Chronicle includes information about the establishment of Strata Florida Abbey, and its close ties with Rhys ap Gruffudd (Lord Rhys). The Chronicle of the Princes is the most important source for Welsh history during the Middle Ages.

The Chronicle of the Princes, circa 1330. The detail contains a reference to Strata Florida Abbey. This manuscript is a Welsh translation of a lost Latin work.



Receiving patronage

One of the main reasons for the expansion of the Monasteries in Wales from the 11th to the 13th century is the patronage they received from powerful people. During the Middle Ages various parts of Wales were controlled by different lords, some Welsh and others Norman. The monasteries received patronage in land, and money for new buildings from these lords and princes.



Lord Rhys paid for new buildings for Strata Florida Abbey and gave it considerable land, as well as establishing a nunnery i Llanllŷr in the Aeron Valley, and giving further lands to Whitland Abbey.

Support from the Lords



Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (Llywelyn The Great)

Many Welsh lords and princes followed the example given by Lord Rhys. Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (Llywelyn the Great) established an abbey in Aberconwy, while Owain Cyfeiliog established Strata Marcella Abbey. Maredudd ap Maelgwyn founded and gave patronage to Abbeycwmhir, and Maredudd ap Cynan established Cymer Abbey. In much the same way the Normans established and supported monasteries in the lands that they ruled.

The lords and princes had many reasons for granting land to the monasteries, some religious and others political. They believed that by granting land the monks would pray for them and their families and save their souls. Patronage was also a means of ensuring that they would be buried on monastery land following their death.

The people's support

It wasn't just the lords who supported the monasteries, the common people did so as well. Why was this the case? There was no political advantage for these folk, but they certainly believed there was a religious advantage. During the Middle Ages most people believed that religion explained everything. Scientific theories were not prominent at the time. The common folk believed that obeying the monasteries and living a good life would grant them a place in heaven. It made the monasteries and churches powerful and prominent in the lives of lords and common folk.



Managing the land



The monastery reared sheep on the mountainous land it

owned

It produced wool to sell.

The monastery grew wheat and oats on land in the Aeron and Severn valleys



It owned mills to grind grain

Strata
Florida is a good example of a powerful and wealthy monastery that owned vast lands and played a key role in the economy, culture and politics of the surrounding area.

It rented land to tenants, and leased land

It owned marshes for harvesting peat



It owned gardens and orchards for growing fruit and vegetables

It owned lakes and land near the sea for fishing

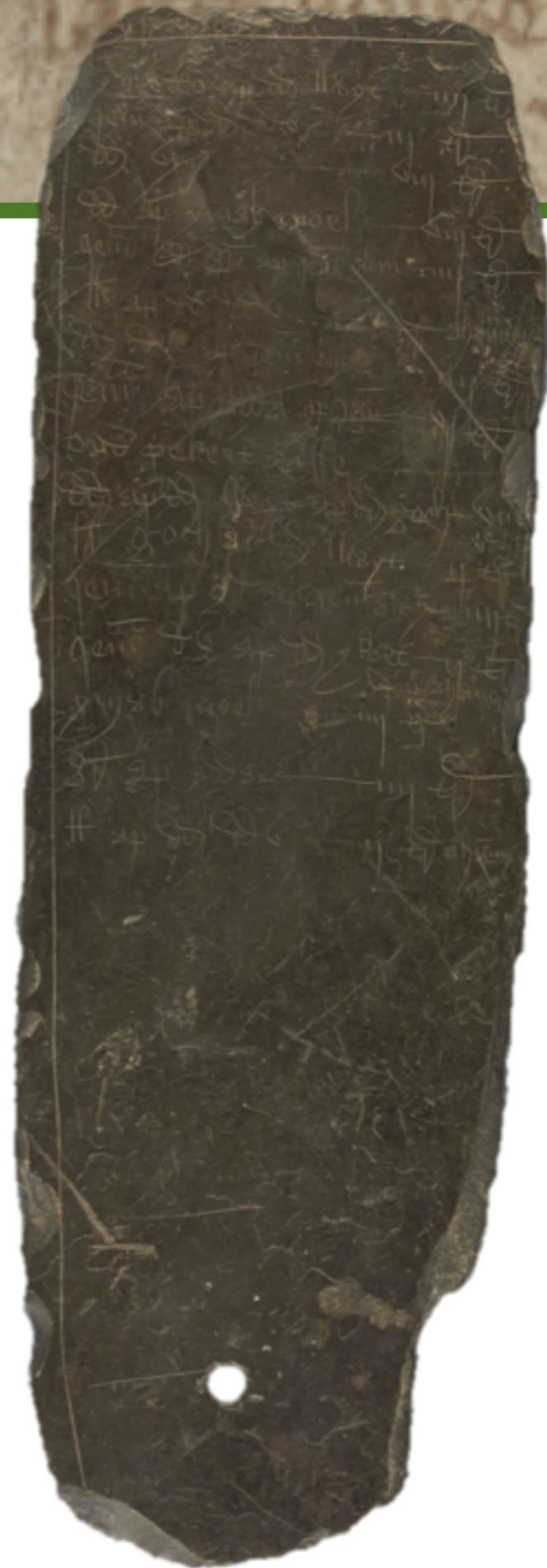


Wealth and Power

These tenants would have to pay rent to the monastery from the produce of the land, such as:

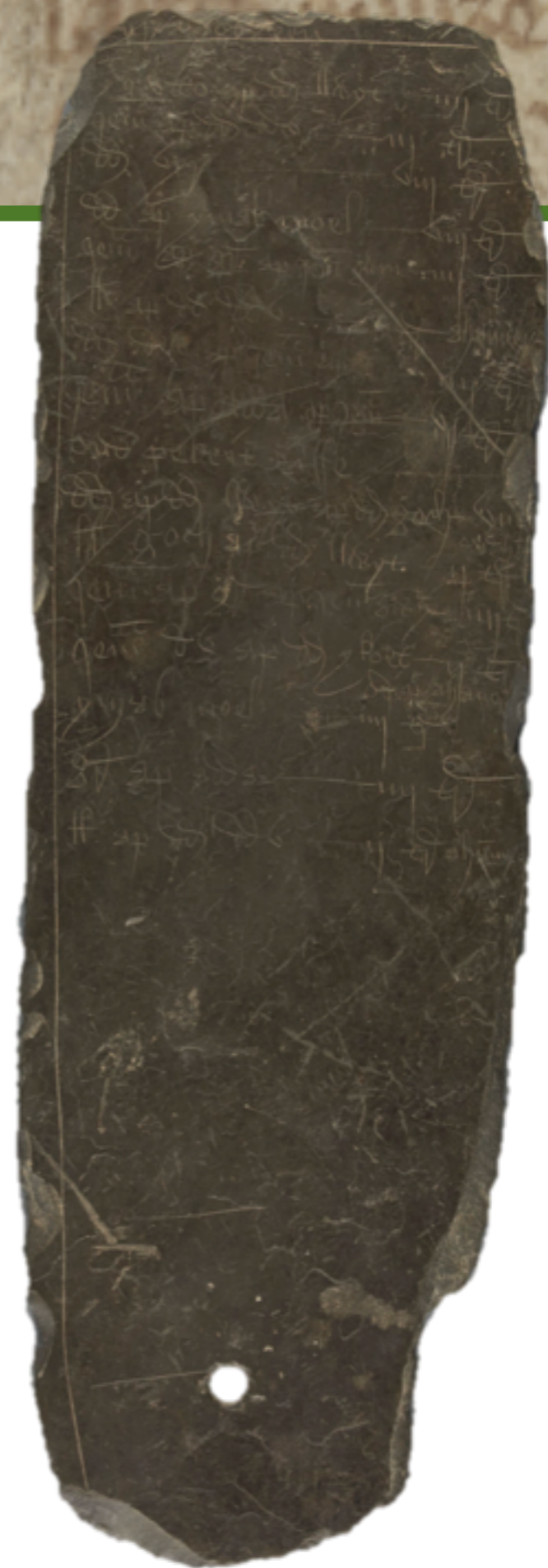
- wool
- sheep
- hens
- pigs
- eggs
- corn

As with most monasteries the tenants of Strata Florida were expected to spend part of their time working on monastery lands, transporting goods like salt and iron or repairing the monastery building.



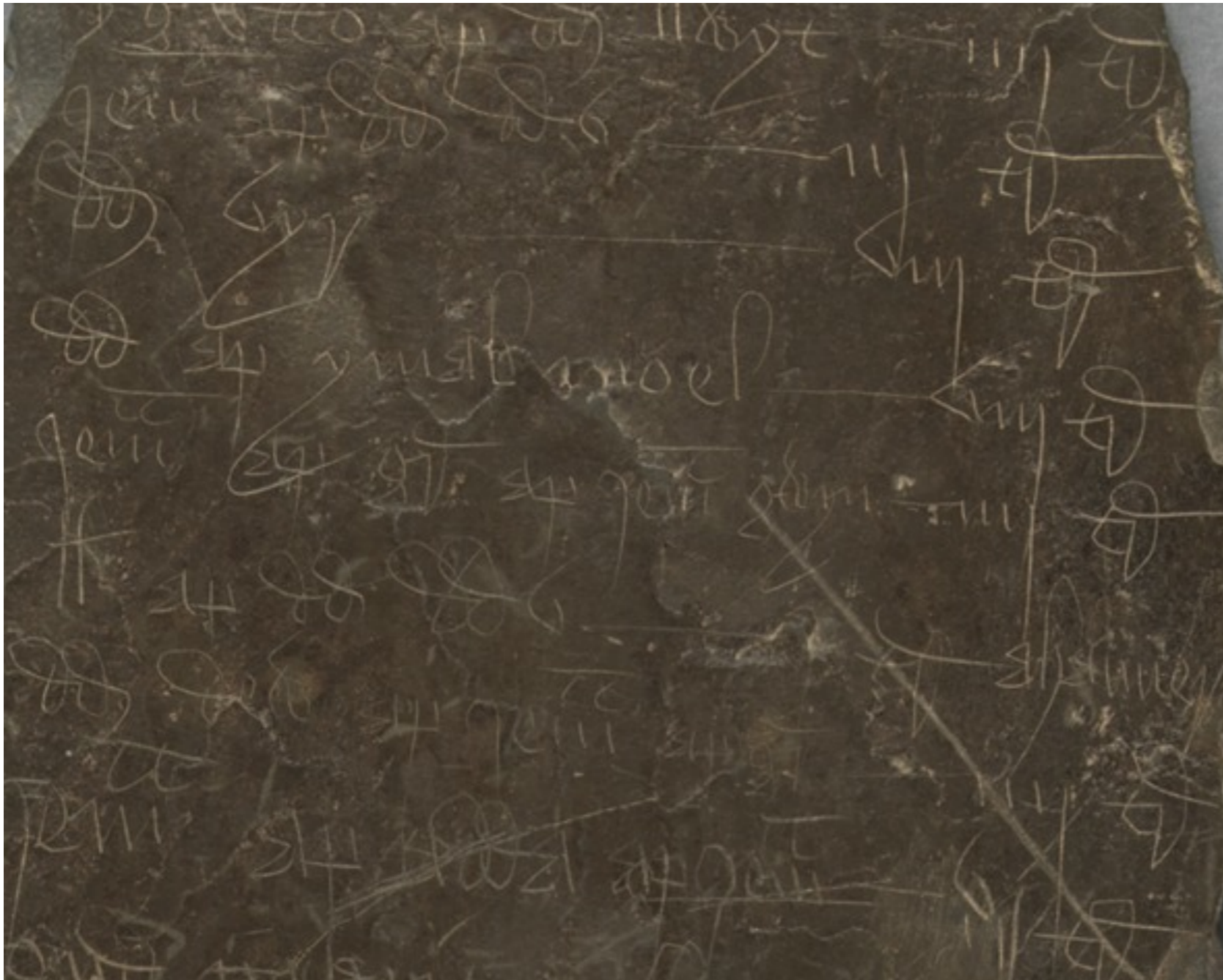
Collecting rent

The National Library of Wales holds a slate from the 15th century that was discovered in Strata Florida in 1946. Inscribed on it are a list of payments from tenants of the Hafodwen Grange that included land in four parishes between the Aeron and Teifi rivers. The slate was used to make a record of rent, and it lists how many truggs of oats each tenant had to pay for his land. The person collecting the rent would use the slate while he was on the grange, and copy the inscription to parchment when he returned to the monastery.



Strata Florida Slate

As this slate mentions the names of tenants we can safely assume that it dates from around the year 1470, as other documents provide us with further information about the son of the first person mentioned, Guto ap Dafydd Lloyd. Later records from Strata Florida also show that people paid for their land with money,



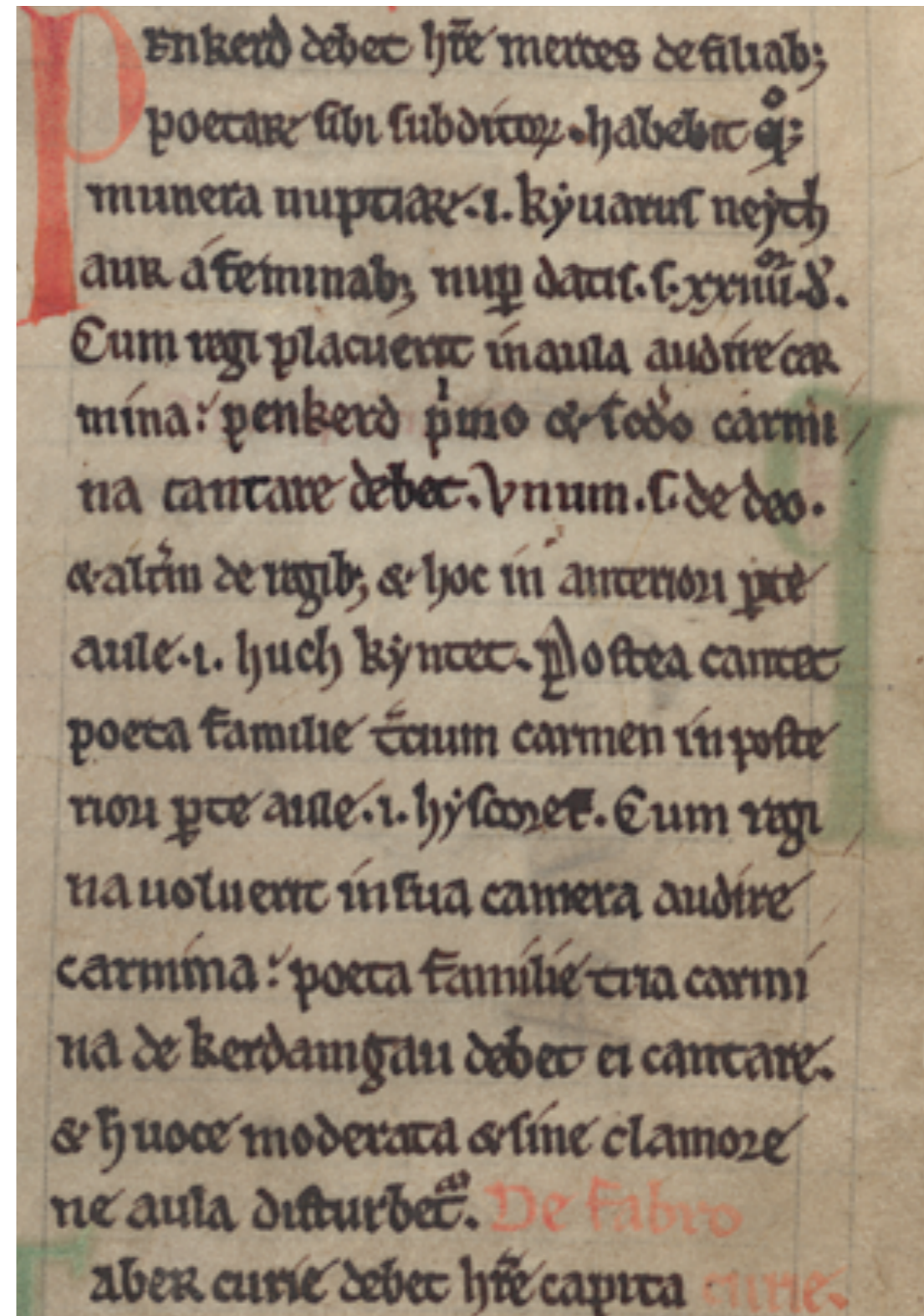
so we can assume that this slate comes from an earlier period when the older system existed, and tenants still paid with goods.

These are some of the names mentioned on the slate:

Guto ap Dafydd Lloyd	4 tr
leuan ap Dafydd Ddu	3 tr
Dafydd ap y Mab Moel	8 tr
leuan ap Gruffydd ap leuan Gwyn	4 tr
Llywelyn ap Dafydd Ddu	1/2 tr
Dafydd Dew ap leuan ap Gruffydd	4 tr
leuan ap Adam ap leuan	6 tr

The Monasteries and Culture

As well as being powerful economic centres the monasteries were also important centres for culture in Wales. Most people in Wales could not read or write in the Middle Ages, so the work of producing manuscripts was carried out mostly by monks. Books were useful for monks in their everyday lives. They would copy parts of the Scripture, books of prayer and important religious works, and use these daily. They would also copy legal books as these could be useful in managing their lands.

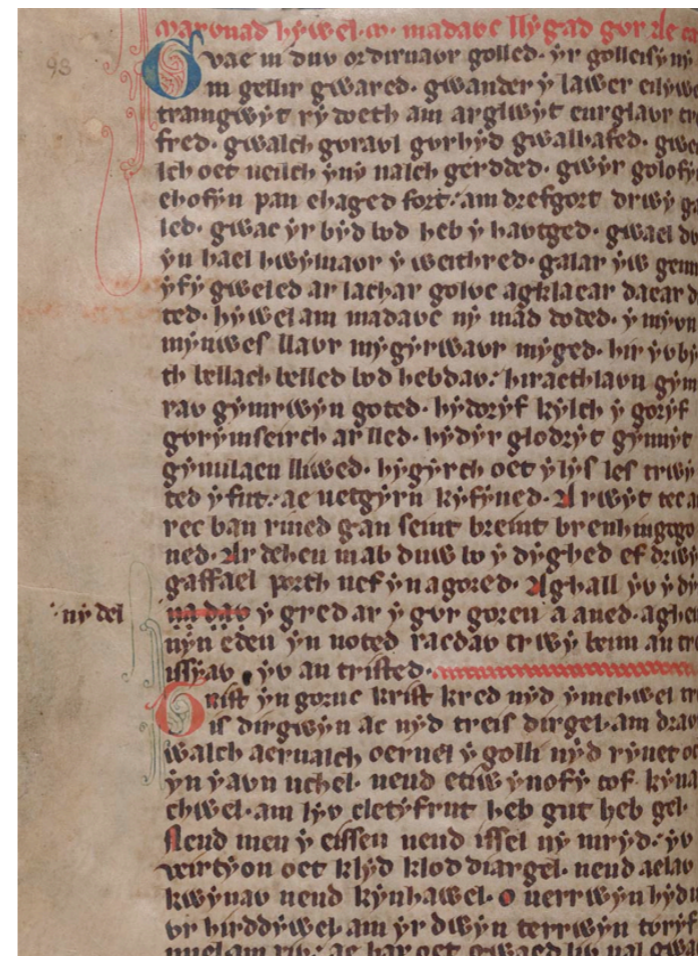


Record keeping

Some of the monasteries supported the cause of the Welsh Princes, especially the Cistercian monasteries in mid and west Wales. They therefore tended to focus on creating a record of Welsh history and copying Welsh literature.

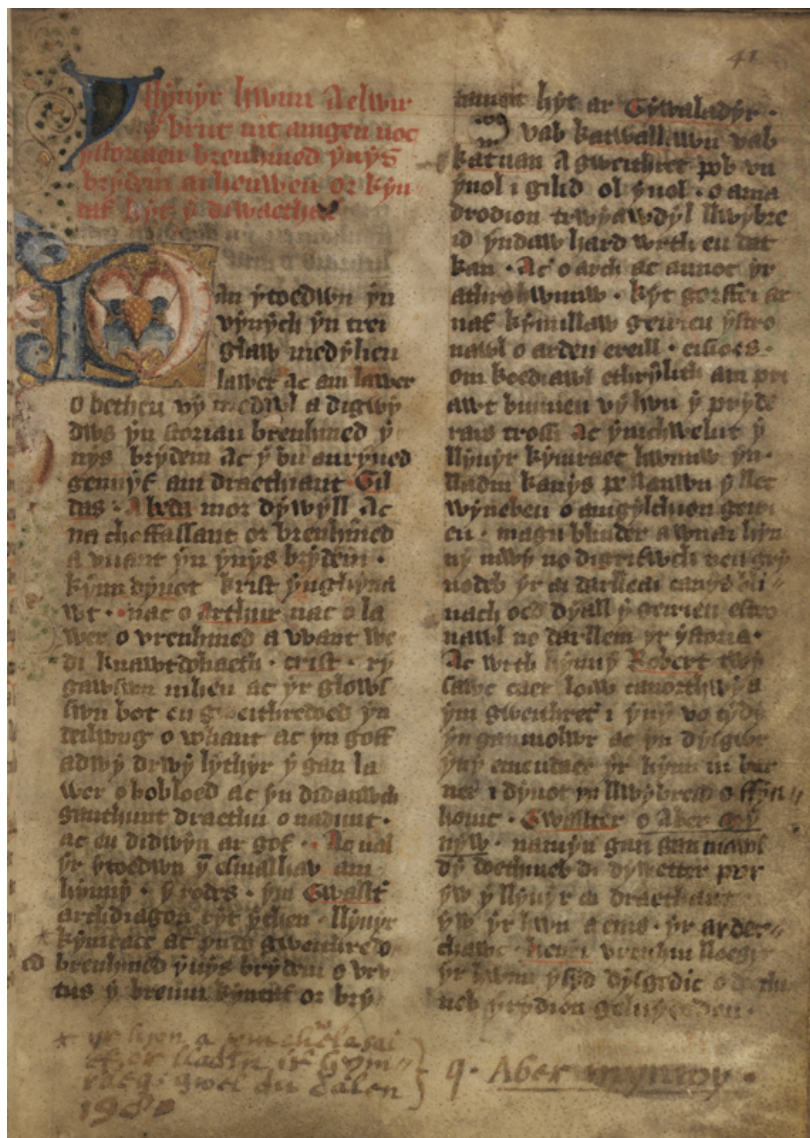
The monks are very important to us as they produced the only written and lasting record of a significant part of what we know today about Welsh history and literature. Without these records most of the early poetry, legends, literature and history of Wales would not have survived.

Many of the most important manuscripts from the Middle Ages are today kept at The National Library of Wales. A large proportion of these were copied in monasteries, priories and abbeys throughout Wales.

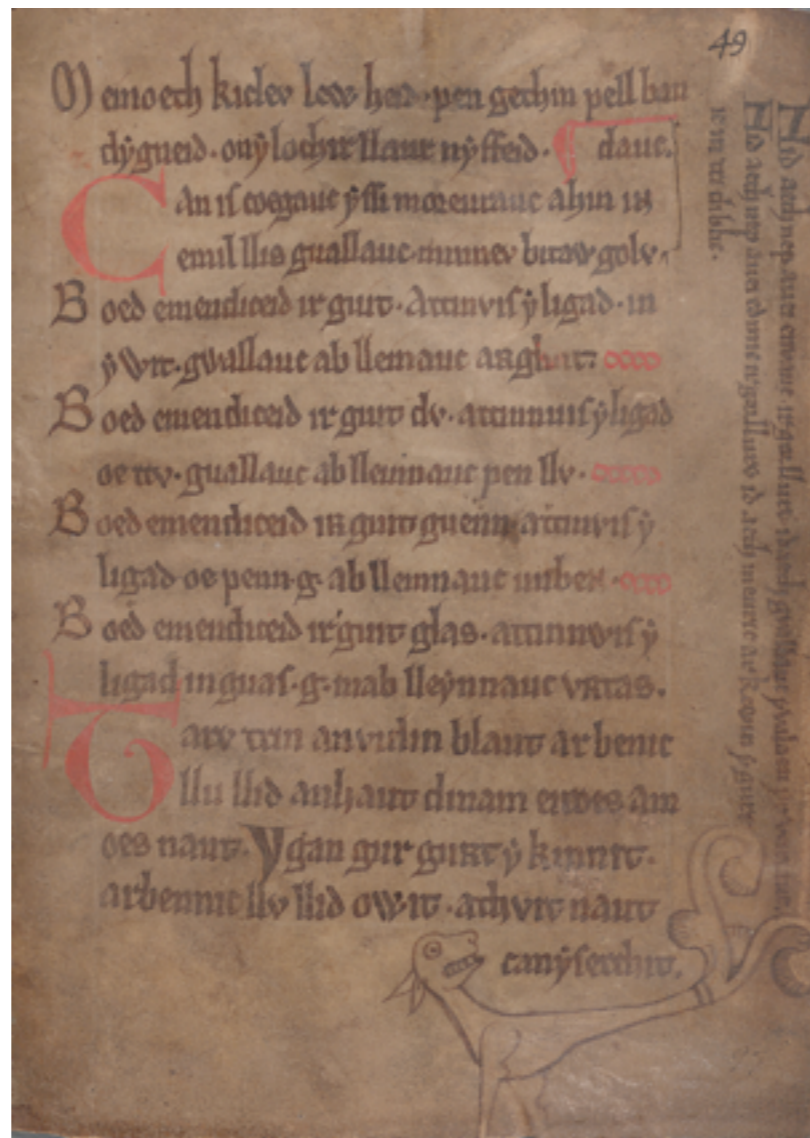


The Hendregadredd Manuscript. This Welsh language manuscript was written in Strata Florida in the 13th-14th century. It contains the poetry of the Gogynfeirdd, and the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym.

Manuscript gallery



The Black Book of Basingwerk. This 15th century manuscript contains many important historical texts. It is written in Welsh, mostly by Gutun Owain, and has strong links with Basingwerk and Valle Crucis abbeys.



The Black Book of Carmarthen. The oldest surviving collection of Welsh poetry. This 13th century manuscript was copied by a monk in a priory in Carmarthen.



The Laws of Hywel Dda. One of the earliest copies of native Welsh law. The manuscript was copied during the 13th century by a church person in south west Wales, probably in Whitland. The manuscript is written in Latin.

Manuscript gallery



Gutun Owain Manuscript. This manuscript contains an assortment of texts about astrology, history, medicine and many other subjects. It has strong links with Valle Crucis and was written between 1488 and 1489. Most of the text is in Welsh, although the manuscript contains some Latin.

The White Book of Rhydderch. The earliest written copy of the Mabinogi stories. This Welsh language manuscript was written during the 14th century in Strata Florida for Rhydderch ab Ieuan Llwyd of Parcrhydderch.

