

Saint Teilo's bell

William Linnard

Teilo was a Celtic saint of the sixth century, who was revered in south Wales. He and his contemporary Dewi (Saint David) belonged to a missionary movement which was characterised by zeal and asceticism. Reliable information on the life of Saint Teilo is scant, but the churches, chapels and holy wells which bear his name are to be found mainly in south-west Wales and in Gwent, and also in Brittany.¹

The cathedral and diocese of Llandaf in Glamorgan had, by the beginning of the twelfth century, gathered together the traditions, privileges and churches of three saints – Dyfrig (Dubricius), Teilo (Teliaus) and Euddogwy (Oudoceus).² *Liber Landavensis (The Book of Llandaf)* is a collection of manuscripts in Latin and Welsh, parts composed and parts copied and put together at Llandaf in the first half of the twelfth century.³ This book contains the lives of these three saints, also the bishops of Llandaf, and miscellaneous grants, charters, land boundaries and tithes. The book was compiled primarily to magnify the importance of Llandaf and to bolster the claims of Urban, bishop of Llandaf, who was in a prolonged dispute with the bishops of St David's and of Hereford over property and the boundaries of their respective dioceses. Urban, the first bishop of Llandaf to be appointed by the Normans, was consecrated in 1107 and died in 1134.

Accordingly, the life of Teilo, as presented in the *Book of Llandaf*, was compiled in the twelfth century, some six hundred years after the saint's death, and contains much that is quite unsubstantiated or clearly fictional. One short passage, however, will be of interest to antiquarian horologists.



An image believed to be Saint Teilo. Bronze figure in high relief on end cover of the *Book of Llandaf*, National Library of Wales NLW MS 17110i-iiiE.

© National Library of Wales.

On their pilgrimage to Jerusalem three holy men from Wales, Teilo, Padarn and David, preached there eloquently and persuasively, were consecrated and then were given appropriate gifts: Padarn a staff and choral cope, David a wonderful altar, and Teilo a cimbalum, a special bell which is described as follows:

*pontifici Teliauo . non extremum tamen
donorum accessit cimbalum . magis
famosum quam sit magnum . magis
pretiosum quam pulchrum . quia dulci
sono uidetur excellere omne organum.
Periueros dampnat . infirmos curat . &
quod magis uidetur mirabile . singulis
horis nullo mouente sonabat . donec
peccato hominum prepediente quin illud
pollutis manibus temere tractabant . a
tam dulci obsequio cessauit.*⁴

1. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940* (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1959), p. 931, s.v. Teilo. See also *Oxford DNB*, s.v. Teilo.

2. M. Stephens, *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (OUP, 1986), s.v. Llandaf, and Teilo.

3. *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâw*, reproduced from the Gwysaney Manuscript by J. Gwenogfryn Evans (Oxford, 1893). Facsimile edition published by National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. 1979. Hereafter cited as *BL*.

4. *BL*, p. 106.

In his scholarly preface to the *Book of Llandaf*, J. Gwenogfryn Evans translates this Latin passage as follows:

To Blessed Teilo, the Pontifex, was given not the least of the gifts, a Bell more famous than great, more precious than beautiful, for in sweetness of sound it seemed to excel every organ; it condemned the perjured, it healed the sick, and what is far more wonderful, it kept sounding every hour without being moved until, by the rash and constant handling of sinful men, it ceased from its sweet services.⁵

This wondrous bell has been mentioned previously in horological literature.^{6,7} It is worth noting that the scribe, compiling the life of Teilo in the scriptorium at Llandaf in the first half of the twelfth century, used the word *cimbalum* (*cymbalum*, i.e. cymbal, struck with an external object) for the bell, not the more usual word *campanum* or *tintinnabulum* (with internal clapper). He seems to be describing some form of wondrous time-keeping bell, which struck the hours without any human involvement. In other words it is a form of striking clock, which the scribe links to the sixth-century Welsh saint. It is also noteworthy that this small hour-striking bell of Saint Teilo is said to have ceased to function because of repeated mishandling by unskilled lay persons, a sad fate that has beset clocks of all kinds throughout the centuries up to the present day.

There are two possible interpretations of this passage describing the wondrous bell. First, that the story is true, Teilo did indeed go

to Jerusalem and was given the hour-striking bell, which would have been a water-clock from the ancient hydraulic horological tradition of Antiquity and the Eastern Mediterranean; it would have been a rather impractical gift for a pilgrim so far from home. The second interpretation, which I believe to be much more likely, is that the whole story was invented by the scribe who was merely describing an hour-striking device with which he was already quite familiar, and which he simply associated with Teilo and a visit to Jerusalem; in other words he was describing a medieval water-clock like the monastic alarms in use in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Western Europe.⁸ Accordingly, the hour-striking bell, if it ever existed, would have been a form of water-clock, either of the sixth or more probably the twelfth century.

Llandaf cathedral houses the tomb of Saint Teilo, and also a relic, the reputed skull of the saint. Modern figurines in the cathedral, and booklets and leaflets now for sale there depict Saint Teilo holding a simple hand-bell. However, on the slight and shadowy evidence of Teilo's life as recorded in the Book of Llandaf, it would be profitless to speculate further about Teilo's miraculous bell. What is certain, however, is that in the first half of the twelfth century a Welsh scribe at the cathedral conceived of such an hour-striking bell and briefly described it.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Anthony Turner for his important publications on water-clocks^{7,9} and for discussing with me the two possible interpretations of the Teilo bell.

5. *BL*, Preface, p. xxvi.

6. E. J. Wood, *Curiosities of Clocks and Watches* (1866; facsimile reprint EP Publishing, 1973), pp. 14–15.

7. A. J. Turner, *Time Museum: Catalogue. Vol.1: Time measuring instruments. Part 3: Water-clocks, sand-glasses, fire-clocks* (1984), p. 18 (footnote).

8. F. Maddison *et al.*, 'An early medieval water-clock', *Antiquarian Horology* June 1962, 348–353.

9. A. J. Turner, 'From sun and water to weights: public time devices from late Antiquity to the mid-seventeenth century', *Antiquarian Horology* March 2014, 649–662, and the literature cited therein.