

Holy Body, Wholly Other:  
*Sanctity and Society in the Lives of Irish Saints*

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ABSTRACT

“Holy Body, Wholly Other: Sanctity and Society in the *Lives* of Irish Saints” focuses on the ways in which Ireland’s hagiographers portrayed holy otherness in the *Lives* of their subjects, using the Latin *vitae*, the vernacular *bethada* and the *Lives* containing both languages that survive from the 600s through the end of the fourteenth century. This study considers three broad themes, namely the transition of a sanctified essence into a holy body and the resulting alteration of an otherwise mortal form into a wholly other, the saintly prosecution of vengeance against those who wrong the body Christian and the enactment of hagiographical healing to bring the community of the faithful back to full integrity. These themes are analyzed within the social and cultural context of medieval Ireland, and are particularly compared with the biblical, apocryphal, heroic and legal writings of the Irish Middle Ages. Depictions of male and female saints are also compared and contrasted, as are the shifts in such depictions that occur between Latin and Irish narratives.

Throughout the *Lives* the language of the laws of church and society inform the saint’s portrait, firmly situating these holy men and women within the sphere of medieval Ireland. Elements of Irish sanctity are drawn from vernacular heroic saga, but the

predominant influence upon the *Lives* of Ireland's sanctified is a powerful combination of apocryphal and canonical scriptures, demonstrating that Irish holiness can only have emanated from heaven. This combination, moreover, differs between male and female saints and between Latin and Irish *Lives*; holy men are modeled very strongly upon both Old and New Testament figures, while lady saints are painted more in the hues of *imitatio Christi*. Further, Latin *vitae* follow patterns capable of speaking to both Irish and non-Irish audiences alike, while vernacular *Lives* observe models that needed to appeal only to the Irish themselves.

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## Abbreviations

<i>ActsAnd</i> (Greg)	<i>Acts of Andrew</i> (Gregory of Tours epitome) (ed. Elliott)
<i>ActsAndMath</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew and Matthias</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>ActsAndPaul</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew and Paul</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>ActsPet</i>	<i>Acts of Peter</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>ActsPetPaul</i> (Ir)	<i>Acts of Peter and Paul</i> (Irish variant) (ed. and trans. Herbert and McNamara)
<i>ActsThom</i>	<i>Acts of Thomas</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>ApocAb</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i> (ed. Sparks, et al.)
<i>AssVir</i> (Ps.-Mell)	<i>Assumption of the Virgin</i> (Ps.-Mellitus) (ed. Elliott)
B. A. R.	British Archaeological Record
<i>BNÉ</i>	<i>Bethada naem nÉrenn</i> (ed. and trans. Plummer, 2 vols)
<i>CCCM</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis</i>
<i>CCSA</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum</i>
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>
<i>CMCS</i>	<i>Cambrian</i> (formerly <i>Cambridge</i> ) <i>Medieval Celtic Studies</i>
<i>CSANA</i>	Celtic Studies Association of North America
<i>DIAS</i>	Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
<i>DIL</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Irish language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials: compact edition</i> (Dublin: RIA, 1998)
Dublin	Marsh Library, Dublin, MS V.3.4 and Trinity College, Dublin, MS E.3.11 (ed. Plummer, <i>VSH</i> )
<i>ÉC</i>	<i>Études celtiques</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>JMLat</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval Latin</i>
<i>IER</i>	<i>The Irish Ecclesiastical Record</i>
<i>InfGosp</i> (Ar)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Arabic variant) (ed. Elliott)
<i>InfGosp</i> (GrkA)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Greek A variant) (ed. Elliott)
<i>InfGosp</i> (GrkB)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Greek B variant) (ed. Elliott)
<i>InfGosp</i> (Ir)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Old Irish variant) (ed. and trans. McNamara; also ed. and trans. Carney)



<i>InfGosp</i> (LB)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Leabhar Breac variant) (ed. and trans. McNamara et al.)
<i>InfGosp</i> (LFF)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Liber Flavus Fergusiorum) (ed. and trans. McNamara et al.)
<i>InfGosp</i> (Syr)	<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> (Syriac variant) (excerpts, ed. Elliott)
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i> (new series)
ITS	Irish Texts Society
<i>JRSAI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LB	<i>Leabhar Breac</i> (Dublin, RIA MS 23.P.16)
<i>LibInfSal</i>	<i>Liber de infantia Salvatoris</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>Life</i>	<i>Life of Adam and Eve</i> (ed. Sparks et al.)
<i>Life of John</i>	<i>Life of John, the beloved disciple</i> (ed. and trans. Herbert and McNamara)
Lismore	<i>Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore</i> (ed. and trans. Stokes)
LFF	<i>Liber Flavus Fergusiorum</i> (Dublin, RIA MS 23.O.48a–b, 1437 and 1440 CE)
<i>Miscellanea</i>	<i>Miscellanea hagiographica hibernica</i> (ed. and trans. Plummer)
Oxford	Bodleian MSS Rawlinson B.485 and 505 (ed. Plummer, <i>VSH</i> )
<i>ParJer</i>	<i>Paraleipomena of Jeremiah</i> (ed. Sparks, et al.)
<i>PHCC</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium</i>
PIMS	Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies (Toronto)
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> (ed. Migne)
<i>PRIA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
<i>ProtJac</i>	<i>Protevangelium of James</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>PsMatt</i>	<i>Gospel of Ps.-Matthew</i> (ed. Elliott)
<i>RC</i>	<i>Revue celtique</i>
RIA	Royal Irish Academy
Salamanca	The Salamanca Codex, Bibliothèque royale, Bruxelles, MS 7672-4, (ed. Heist)
<i>SC</i>	<i>Studia Celtica</i>

<i>TrMar</i>	<i>Transitus Mariae</i> (ed. and trans. Herbert and McNamara)
USMLS	Ulster Society for Medieval Latin Studies
Vespasian	<i>Vita S Aedui sive Maedoc</i> , BL Cotton Vespasian A.xiv
<i>VSH</i>	<i>Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae</i> (ed. Plummer, 2 vols.)
<i>ZCP</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie</i>

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

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One is never a saint except *for other people*.<sup>1</sup>

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#### **In the beginning**

Ireland is blessed with an abundant array of written evidence from and concerning the Middle Ages, including works about Ireland's saints. This latter body of literature, known as hagiography, extends from the late 500s through the end of the medieval era and survives in both Latin and the vernacular. Though the genre undoubtedly has found itself the repository of such worldly elements as tribute claims or territorial rights, the ultimate focus is always the saints.

The core of hagiography, whatever else may accrete around it, is therefore the depiction of what defines a saint as a saint in the eyes of the hagiographer and his intended audience. Ireland's hagiography must then encompass the Irish author's understanding of an Irish saint. Implicit in these portrayals is the delicate, shimmering thing that is holiness, the intrinsic divine gift God bestows upon an elite few men—and fewer women—among the early Christian Irish.

This gift falls upon the saint of Ireland before conception and continues to manifest its potency long after death. It marks the chosen as reserved for God's purposes; it transforms a human being of unusual virtue into something new. As a sanctified mortal, a saint is compelled to live within the everyday mundane world, yet he or she

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Delooz, "Towards a sociological study of canonized sainthood in the Catholic Church" (trans. Jane Hodgkin), in *Saints and their cults: studies in religious sociology, folklore and history*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 194. Emphasis original to quote.

simultaneously partakes of the rarefied purity of the divine; a saint is human, yet not as others. Sanctity elevates those it touches, but it also separates them. Permanently altered, they are both a part of and apart from humanity. The holy are the ‘other.’

This study focuses on the ways in which Ireland’s hagiographers attempted to portray their understanding of holy otherness in the *Lives* of Irish saints. It accesses the extant evidence of the genre written in Ireland during the Middle Ages by—as far as is presently known—Irish authors, whether that evidence is in Latin, Irish or some combination of both. The components of select themes are analyzed within the social and cultural contexts of Ireland from the late sixth through the end of the fourteenth century. Depictions of male and female saints are compared and contrasted, as are the ways in which those depictions shift according to the language of their narrative, and from these diverse elements appear facets of medieval Irish sanctity.

### **The question of Christian sanctity and sainthood**

Any discussion of the ways in which sanctity may be represented in the *Lives* of its embodiment, the saints, requires that the nature of sanctity itself be considered. What is it? How is the shape of holy otherness to be understood? Can it be encompassed by finite mortal minds or words?

### *Holiness in Christian theology*

The question of the theology of Christian holiness has exercised scholars of the faith from its earliest era, a question that gained additional import with the emergence of

the cult of saints in the Latin west from at least the third century of the Common Era.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of public Christian devotion to individuals seen as possessing an unusual degree of sanctity naturally demanded that religious authorities attempt to explain whether or how an otherwise thoroughly mortal—and therefore inherently sinful—human being could be sanctified.

Among the many men of Late Antiquity to turn their attention to these matters was Augustine of Hippo, whose writings on the nature of Christian holiness were produced in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, whatever its expression, Augustine emphasizes that sanctity can emanate only from God and God's goodness, which is "so perfect and self-sufficient that it can neither be increased nor diminished."<sup>4</sup> Human beings, to Augustine, are born separated from God by the sin of Adam and Eve. When an individual submits to the annihilation of sin within him- or herself by joining Christ's congregation through baptism, and augments that sacrament with complete obedience to God, continual acts of charity, and daily subjugation of bodily desire, Augustine sees then the possibility of reconciliation with God and a recovery of God's favor. Augustine calls this favor internal grace, without which holiness

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<sup>2</sup> The earliest stages of the veneration of the holy man in the eastern Mediterranean are explored by Peter Brown in his 1971 essay, "The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61: 80–101. He reviews the critiques of other scholars and refines his own arguments in "The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 vol. 3 (1998): 353–76. See also the further discussion of Brown's work by other scholars in *The cult of the saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: essays on the contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The veneration of holy men in the east arose somewhat later than the cult of martyrs and saints in the west, however; see Peter Brown's insightful exploration of public adherence to the holy dead in *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). Brown continues and furthers this work in *Authority and the sacred: aspects of the christianisation of the Roman world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). In some sections, *Authority* also presages the commentary of the later article, "Rise" (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Augustine's considerations of holiness have been discussed by, among others, Edward J. Carney, *The doctrine of St. Augustine on sanctity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Carney, *St. Augustine*, 8, 46–8 (quote on 48).

may not be attained.<sup>5</sup> The infusion of God's grace sanctifies and, because this infusion occurs through baptism and participation in Christ's community, for Augustine anyone who is Christian may be rightly termed a saint.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's doctrine that grace and the sanctification it brings must emanate only from God is contradicted by his contemporary, Pelagius, who envisions three types of grace. The first is the nature with which each person is created. This nature includes the free will to choose whether or not to follow the correct course of action as revealed by God in the second grace of Scripture, comprising both the Old and the New Testaments. The third grace is literally embodied in the example of Christ's virtue, adherence to which allows remission of sin. But while faith in Christ brings a grace that destroys past sin, for Pelagius only the proper exercise of free will in obedience to God prevents future sin. Humanity, not God, is thus made the source of grace, and holiness becomes personal, expressed in the observance of God's commands and Christ's example rather than in a unity with God gained through divine favor.<sup>7</sup> This denial of both Original Sin and of God as the source for sanctifying grace played a significant role in the Church's condemnation of Pelagian free will in the early fifth century.

Some of the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages also wrote on the question of sanctity and sanctification. In his late-sixth-century *Dialogues*, Pope Gregory I, or Gregory the Great, expresses the view that sanctity is not found in or proven by the appearance or performance of miracles, as these could also be present in maleficent individuals with diabolical powers. Instead, for Gregory the true essence of holiness is

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<sup>5</sup> Carney, *St. Augustine*, 8–9, 38–43, 51, 57–8.

<sup>6</sup> Carney, *St. Augustine*, 1, 77, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Carney, *St. Augustine*, 32–5. Also see Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the fifth to the tenth century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 71–5.

found in virtuous living, in which humility and charity dominate a life modeled on the observance and imitation of Christ's virtues—but not necessarily of his miracles.<sup>8</sup>

Gregory's concept of *imitatio Christi* would prove to be of considerable influence on the medieval west.<sup>9</sup>

In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville apparently distinguished between the terminology of *sacrum*, *religiosum* and *sanctum*. It has been observed that, in Isidore's writings, a thing is *sacrum*, or sacred, because it concerns God; it is *religiosum*, "religious", if it "concerns righteous human beings." *Sanctum*, however, refers to that which is holy because it is sanctioned, or set apart, by and for God, and the transgression of this sanction incurs punitive consequence.<sup>10</sup>

The vocabulary of sanctity remains little changed, it has been shown, through much of the Middle Ages. In his thirteenth-century *magnum opus*, *Summa Theologiae*, however, Thomas Aquinas uses *sanctitas*, or sanctity, to refer to both an essential purity and to a stability established, protected and augmented by law and by sanction. While sanctity itself may apply equally to human beings, to places and to ritual objects involved in and relevant to the performance of the faith, the element of purity is required for any human spirit to experience the union with God that elevates an otherwise mortal being to

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory's opinions have been thoroughly examined by William D. McCready, *Signs of sanctity: miracles in the thought of Gregory the Great* (Toronto: PIMS, 1989). See p. 2 for dating the *Dialogues* to 593 or 594; see pp. 65–71 for the discussion of sanctity itself.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Elizabeth Kuzdale, "The *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great in the literary and religious culture of seventh- and eighth-century Europe" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1995), is a broad and useful survey of the text and influence of the *Dialogues* in the early Middle Ages.

<sup>10</sup> *Etymologiae*, X 24, ed. W. M. Lindsay, and *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi differentiarum sive de proprietate sermonum libri duo*, I: *de differentiis verborum*, PL 83, cols 59–60, as fully cited in Jacqueline Hamesse, "The image of sanctity in medieval preaching as a means of sanctification," in *Models of holiness in medieval sermons*, ed. Beverly M. Kienzle et al. (Louvain-la-Neuve: Collège Cardinal Mercier, 1996), 132–3, notes 13–15.

the status of sainthood. Further, for Aquinas, purity is only to be gained by pursuing a contemplative life that rejects worldly matters and turns its focus toward God.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand St. Bonaventure, in a sermon roughly contemporary to the work of Thomas Aquinas, collapses *sanctificatio*, sanctification, into *purificatio*, or purification. St. Bonaventure preaches not only that “whatever is pure is holy” but also that holiness is not necessarily restricted to the contemplative, monastic life. As observed of Bonaventure’s works by Jacqueline Hamesse:

Whereas the ideal of sanctity was represented until the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the monastic model, emphasizing the contemplative life and spiritual qualities, ...from the 13<sup>th</sup> century...the intellectual and active life can also provide virtues that will lead to sanctity.<sup>12</sup>

There is also additional evidence that by this time, *sanctus*, holy or sainted, was distinct from *beatus*, or blessed. Though a person labeled *beatus* or *beata* was recognized as possessing “peculiar merits” that might earn him or her posthumous veneration as a saint, he or she was only beatified; *sanctus* and *sancta* were now reserved solely for those individuals who had not only been accorded a high level of virtue and grace by God, but had also obtained official papal canonization.<sup>13</sup>

### *Modern scholars and sanctity*

Much of this same ground has been generally covered in an extended essay by Hippolyte Delehaye entitled *Sanctus: essai sur le culte des saints dans l’Antiquité*. A work that is readily the most comprehensive modern exploration of sanctity, it traces the terminology of holy otherness from the usages of pagan religions through those in the Old and New

<sup>11</sup> *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae, qu. 81, art. 8, as cited in Hamesse, “Image of sanctity,” 134–5 note 17.

<sup>12</sup> *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, T.IX: *Sermones* cols 484a, 523 and 641, as cited in “Image of sanctity,” 135–6 and notes 19, 22 and 24, and *De divinis nominibus* col. 2, cited p. 135, note 20.

<sup>13</sup> Hamesse, “Image of sanctity,” 136–9.



Testaments.<sup>14</sup> To Delehaye, the evidence supports the assertion that while sanctity itself is the work of divine grace, the concept of sanctity arises spontaneously in the minds of the faithful. As such, it is instinctive, and thus required no specific definition or explanation until the papacy began to codify juridical canonization procedures in the twelfth century, which then necessitated proof of a candidate's holiness.<sup>15</sup> When all evidence is sifted, though, Delehaye considers the ideal of sanctity to be “un ensemble harmonieux des vertus chrétiennes pratiquées à un degré qu'une rare élite est en mesure d'atteindre” (a harmonious combination of Christian virtues practiced to a degree that only a rare elite can attain).<sup>16</sup>

Delehaye does not stop there. As an ideal sprung from the human mind, sanctity is expressed in a blending of the uniform and the diverse. There are, it is true, formulaic expressions of holiness that create an image of apparent immutability across wide geographical and chronological boundaries. Beneath this seemingly static surface, however, the representation of sanctity “s'adapte à toutes les contingences de la vie humaine” (adapts to every contingency of human life).<sup>17</sup> Not only does the meaning of holy otherness differ depending upon the identity of those debating its definition (e.g.,

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<sup>14</sup> Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1927.

<sup>15</sup> Delooz, “Towards a sociological study,” observes that papal canonizations occurred as early as the late tenth century; twelfth-century reforms augmented the papal role in the determination of an individual's holiness, but it was not until 1234 that canonization was legally reserved for the Holy See. See pp. 192–3, 199–200.

<sup>16</sup> Delehaye, *Sanctus*, 233–40, quote on p. 240. All translations from French in the present study are my own, unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes. A recent study by Karolyn Ann Kinane follows up on this elite nature of sanctity. Kinane observes that early English hagiographers, anxious to deter their flocks from literal imitation of the saints, portrayed holiness as an essence unattainable for all but the very few. By placing the extraordinary contact with God experienced by saints to the unreachable periphery of ordinary life, Kinane suggests, God is glorified, not the saint, and the audience is encouraged to emulate saintly virtue rather than a saint's extremes of asceticism or miracle-working. Kinane labels this narrative technique “deferred sanctity.” See “Sanctity deferred: the problem of imitation in early English saints' Lives” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> *Sanctus*, 233, 240 (quote).

theologians versus ecclesiastical judges), but it also displays an individuality that draws upon the characteristics of culture, region and time.<sup>18</sup>

Though Christian sainthood in Augustine's time may have applied to the entirety of the community of Christ, it is clear from the above that this inclusive approach did not last. Initially, the population of the truly sanctified was collapsed to include only Christ and the apostles. This elite gathering was then permanently altered by a new group of non-clerical, non-biblical individuals. These men and women, who refused to abandon Christ even in the throes of unbelievable torture, were the martyrs of the early church. Their deaths in the name of Christianity earned them veneration as 'holy' or 'sainted.'<sup>19</sup>

By the late fourth and fifth centuries, the avenues to sanctification were also being walked by persons of exceptional virtue who professed the faith, who suffered on its behalf, often as ascetics, but did not die as martyrs. Increasingly, depictions of all sainted persons included considerable spiritual power; holy men and women were portrayed not only as model Christians but as workers of impressive miracles both before and after death.<sup>20</sup> As the fame and veneration of holy men and women grew, so also evolved the writings intended to record their exemplary lives, their virtues, acts and miracles and, for some, their martyrdom. In these texts lies the dawning of the hagiographical genre.

In addition to being honored as perfected Christians whose virtuous lives follow the pattern established by Jesus Christ, saints have a trait not shared with their resurrected exemplar. Unlike Jesus, saints are not messiahs begotten with God as Father, however close to that model their portrayals may approach. Holy men and women are completely

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<sup>18</sup> *Sanctus*, 233, 240, 247.

<sup>19</sup> Delehay, *Sanctus*, 38–59; also see Stephen Wilson's introduction to the essays of *Saints and their cults*, 3, and Brown, *Authority*, 60–67.

<sup>20</sup> Delehay, *Sanctus*, 38–59, 80–89. Wilson, "Introduction," 3, and Brown, *Authority*, 60–67.

mortal beings with mortal bodies who, while they may ascend to the heavenly communion of saints after death, are not the Risen Christ. They are utterly human, but are elevated above the general faithful by the unusual gift of sanctity. As such they exist—whether alive or dead—in an intermediary state between the human and the divine. They are the holy others.

Peter Brown has asserted that it is precisely because martyrs died as human beings that they became objects of veneration; as the wholly mortal, their faith and their martyrdom present a real-life image with which believers may identify, while their sanctification accords them the status of “friends of God”, able to intercede with God on behalf of their devotees.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Brown argues that the holy men of the Mediterranean east also occupied a mediatory role between God and humanity through which a distant God was brought into greater immediacy.<sup>22</sup> Because saints were seen as having a special relationship with God, they were assumed to “have access to knowledge of the holy in all its manifestations”; holy men and women, therefore, could use that knowledge to present an intelligible image of Creation. This ability to make the order of the universe understandable while also putting a relatable human face on the faith, Brown suggests, facilitated the christianization of the late Roman world.<sup>23</sup>

Edmund Leach explores this idea of an opposition between the human everyday realm and the perfected abode of God in a classic essay regarding the nature of Christian myth. Because such an opposition necessarily must separate God’s world from our own, Leach asserts that the central intent of religion is to resolve that distance, “to re-establish

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<sup>21</sup> *Cult*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> “Rise” (1971), 97.

<sup>23</sup> *Authority*, 68–76; quote on p. 69.

some kind of bridge between Man and God.”<sup>24</sup> The connection between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, is mediated, writes Leach, by a sort of “middle ground”, the extraordinary elements of which mark it as possessed of unusual holiness.<sup>25</sup> Saints, as fully human persons upon whom God has bestowed an anointing grace that elevates them above the common faithful, act as embodiments of this “middle ground”; the sacredness of the space they occupy imbues their very essence with a sanctity they can impart—whether beneficially or punitively—to other people or to objects, even long after death. In other words, not only is the “neutral zone”, as Arnold van Gennep has termed it, the localization of holiness, but so are those who reside within it.<sup>26</sup>

Mary Douglas, too, has examined the nature of holiness, positing its essence to be an expression of the opposition between purity and pollution. Purity and holiness are seen, she writes, in not just the avoidance of defilement on a daily basis, but in the inherent possession of wholeness, of physical and spiritual integrity. “To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind.”<sup>27</sup> This pure, unblemished nature marks holiness, and those it affects, as set apart,

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<sup>24</sup> *Genesis as myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 10. It has, in fact, been pointed out to me by Michael Herren that the concept of an individual standing as a bridge between heaven and humanity is inherent in the etymology of *pontifex*, a term that originally designated a high priest but which in a Christian context came to be used exclusively to refer to the bishop of Rome (i.e., the pope). Apparently a union between *pons*, bridge, and *facere*, to make or to establish, *pontifex* seems to literally mean “created as a bridge.” Isidore of Seville alludes to this interpretation in his early seventh-century *Etymologiae* VII.13, a text well-known in Ireland, in which he writes that the word *pontifex* implies a man whose role is to make a way for his followers (*Pontifex princeps sacerdotum est, quasi via sequentium*, “The *pontifex* is the chief of priests, as if ‘the way’ of (his) followers.” W. M. Lindsay, eds., *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX* (1911; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), available online at LacusCurtius [<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/texts/Isidore/home.html>]. For commentary and translation, see Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, trans., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171.

<sup>25</sup> *Genesis*, 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> *The rites of passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (1960; reprint, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 18–20.

<sup>27</sup> *Purity and danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 49–55; quote on p. 54

touched by the divine.<sup>28</sup> Sanctity thus can also be viewed as a pure ideal that is the antithesis of an impure and sinful reality; by attaining that ideal the sanctified few have transcended their flawed humanity, stretching for union with God.<sup>29</sup>

The saint, then, by virtue of imbuing divine grace, existed in a supernatural state of holy otherness, “en état surnaturel de sainteté”, a part of yet apart from the general Christian congregation.<sup>30</sup> Whether male or female, saints “were those who were recognized as having experienced so much reverence and achieved such a degree of purity that they had transcended the sinfulness of ordinary existence.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, having attained this elevated position, saints attracted venerators on behalf of whom they might intercede both before and after their own or their followers’ departure from life.<sup>32</sup> Whether living or dead, holy men and women put human faces on an awesome and incomprehensible God, bringing the divine closer to the mortal; saints were the literal embodiments of the threshold of heaven.<sup>33</sup> They knew and often displayed formidable spiritual powers, and the use of their heavenly gifts furthered the message of Christ and the commandments of God.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Purity and danger*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Fallen bodies: pollution, sexuality and demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2, sees the space between “pure ideal” and “impure reality” as the abode of the demonic forces acting against humans—sainted or otherwise—on a daily basis, and therefore the “symbolic terrain” where sin must be defeated if purity, or holiness, is to be attained.

<sup>30</sup> René Aigrain, *L’hagiographie: ses sources – ses méthodes – son histoire* (1953; reprint, Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 2000), 7–8.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and society: the two worlds of western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and society*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Brown, “Rise” (1971), 97; also *Cult*, 6, and Wilson, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Authority*, 67.

### The hagiographical saint

Perhaps nowhere else is the supernatural element of sanctity more visible than in the depictions of saints surviving in the vast corpus of medieval hagiography. Delehayé warns that the true nature of sanctity cannot be sensed using ordinary human perception. It is, he writes, “un qualité de l’âme; elle réside dans un sanctuaire où le regard de l’homme ne pénètre point” (a quality of the soul; it resides in a sanctuary where the human glance shall not penetrate).<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the only way sanctity can be seen and recognized is through its attention-grabbing manifestations, and “nous en jugeons par les oeuvres extérieures dont elle est le principe” (we judge it by the external works of which it is the principle).<sup>36</sup> Hagiography attempts to capture the evidence of these “oeuvres extérieures”, to report the events that demonstrate the presence of sanctifying grace in the life of an otherwise ordinary, if unusually devout, Christian. Not surprisingly, then, even the most factual accounts of saints must often include elements of the miraculous; in some of the more florid paeans, marvels even supplant the mundane.<sup>37</sup>

Hagiographical works, therefore, are literary texts produced in honor of their saintly subjects. As Delehayé puts it, the understanding of holiness by the faithful tends toward the simple and general, and the hagiographer’s task is to decipher sanctity in

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<sup>35</sup> *Sanctus*, 242.

<sup>36</sup> *Sanctus*, 242.

<sup>37</sup> The gold standard for the study of hagiographical texts is that of Hippolyte Delehayé, *Les légendes hagiographiques*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1962). A more recent and updated survey is that of Aigrain, *L’hagiographie*. While Delehayé classifies texts regarding the saints according to their relative historicity and the saint’s official ecclesiastical status (i.e., whether or not papal canonization played a role), Aigrain looks at the overall evolution of hagiography. Both men follow an expanded conceptualization of the genre, including not only the *Acta*, *Passiones* and *Lives* of saints and martyrs, Latin or vernacular, but also such works as martyrologies, inscriptions, homilies and memoirs. Even more recently, there is also the useful work of Allison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to paradise: reading the Lives of the early saints* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987).

terms any Christian may apprehend. In the process, saints often lose the stronger traits of their original individuality and are made to conform to an outline, such as that of martyr, confessor, priest or abbe. The person becomes a picture, the individual, an ideal.<sup>38</sup> Yet still, within this leveling framework, literary saints retain a diversity particularly dependent upon the culture and region of the saint and the saint's biographer, as well as upon the social, political and religious environment within which the biographer worked. Thus it is safe to discuss the hagiographical saint as "an ideal cultural type."<sup>39</sup>

Within the literary universe of the hagiographical genre, sanctified servants of God are made over into Christian heroes, and are often portrayed in ways that closely parallel depictions of other "beloved figures of story and legend."<sup>40</sup> Yet despite sharing a considerable number of traits with their more secular counterparts, "hagiographical heroes" are not identical to them; while traditional heroic figures celebrate battle prowess, the saintly individual's hagiography commemorates "self-sacrifice, humility, charity and spiritual integrity."<sup>41</sup> The secular character pursues personal glory, but the saint walks in the steps of Christ. One pre-eminent model of this *imitatio Christi* is the portrayal by Sulpicius Severus of Martin of Tours in texts of the late fourth and early

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<sup>38</sup> *Les légendes*, 4–5, 19–20. One such outline, for non-martyr saints, is offered by Delehaye, 72–3. Another may be found in Régis Boyer, "An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography," in *Hagiography and medieval literature: a symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielson, Peter Foote, Jørgen Jørgensen and Tore Nyberg (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 28, 31–3. There are other examples as well, some of which will be mentioned below, and several of which relate to Irish saints.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Goodich, *Vita perfecta: the ideal of sainthood in the thirteenth century* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982), 3. Also see Delehaye, *Sanctus*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> A. G. Elliott, *Roads to paradise*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Boyer, "Typology," 31, uses the terminology of "hagiographical hero"; for the second quote see John Edward Damon, *Soldier saints and holy warriors: warfare and sanctity in the literature of early England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 2.

fifth century. The Sulpician model would prove to have an enduring influence in the medieval west, including being echoed in the works of Gregory the Great.<sup>42</sup>

But is the goal of the hagiographical genre truly the presentation of the saint as a Christian hero? Perhaps in part, as to do so would use imagery with which the author's audience would relate. John Edward Damon has suggested, however, that the prime goal of saintly biography was *not* to portray saints as heroes, but to create in the saint a literal embodiment of church doctrine, a literary monument to the ecclesiastical teachings the saint's life and acts are meant to uphold and to impart.<sup>43</sup> In the saint the full panoply of Christian virtues is undoubtedly given form, and the most critical and obvious expression of this form is the adherence to the example of Jesus, which itself is often portrayed as essentially an heroic virtue, particularly in some regional hagiographical traditions, such as that of the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, it is not only Christ whose paradigm is invoked by hagiographers, but other figures as well, from both the canonical and, especially in some traditions, the apocryphal scriptures. These "other types of Christ" can include Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, David, Peter, John and Andrew, among others.<sup>45</sup> As John Kitchen has observed, these parallels model the saints as the successors not only of Christ but of the patriarchs,

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<sup>42</sup> An excellent study of St. Martin and Sulpicius Severus is that of Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his hagiographer: history and miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For one consideration of the long shadow cast by Sulpicius Severus, see Damon, *Soldier saints*, a fascinating exploration of the Martinian model's influence on Anglo-Saxon hagiography. See p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Soldier saints*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> For one study of *imitatio Christi* as an heroic virtue, see Edward Christie, "Self-mastery and submission: holiness and masculinity in the Lives of Anglo-Saxon martyr-kings," in *Holiness and masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 150–151. Michael Herren also discusses the model of Christ as hero, "the harrower of hell," in *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 137–9, 151–60, a model for which, he notes, the Irish have a particular predilection. More will be seen of saints' heroic virtues in Ireland's hagiography also, below, pp. 22–31.

<sup>45</sup> William Trent Foley, *Images of sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an early English saint's Life* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), 40–42, is among the many scholars who refer to these other biblical models as "types of Christ."



prophets and apostles, placing the hagiographical texts about these holy heirs “in the same relation to the Bible that the New Testament has to the Old” and making clear that “the history of salvation...does not end but continues in the narratives on the lives of the saints.”<sup>46</sup>

The observations of Pierre Delooz underline a critical component to the general understanding of sanctity and sainthood. To some extent echoing similar observations by Delehay, Delooz states that because both of these concepts are ultimately values defined by society, their representation must be expressed according to a collective comprehension of sanctified behavior and its relationship to the community. Public opinion is therefore required for the determination of whether an individual has attained genuine holiness; a saint cannot be a saint without the recognition of his or her sanctity by others. Though not in and of itself sufficient to constitute a person as sainted, if community acknowledgement is absent a saint’s identity is meaningless. Indeed, agreement that a man or woman is holy must be strong enough to attract a public cult, as it is through their adherents that saints perform their most important work as examples, as embodied scriptural lessons and as witnesses to the glory of God and the message of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

In his doctoral dissertation, John Coakley contemplates many of these same questions. He observes that there are three top queries to be addressed, namely, how sanctity should be defined, in what manner sanctity may be seen to have a history, and

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<sup>46</sup> *Saints’ Lives and the rhetoric of gender: male and female in Merovingian hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 32–4, quotes on pp. 32, 34. Kitchen calls these comparisons “actualizing the Bible.”

<sup>47</sup> “Towards a sociological study,” 193–5, 199.

how the hagiographical genre can be a source for that history.<sup>48</sup> Coakley judges that sanctity, rather than “an ensemble of virtues practiced to perfection”, is best understood as “*the meaning a saint holds for those who venerate him*”; the history of sanctity, instead of being the changes that occur in those virtues over time and in different places, is rather “the history of the experience of [a saint’s] venerated.”<sup>49</sup> Hagiography may be evidence for this history, then, not as a primary witness to the collection of virtues made according to the dictates of location and era, but because “analysis of its integral form and content may reveal the meaning which the saint held” for his or her hagiographer.<sup>50</sup> Sanctity and sainthood may be founded in an infusion of God’s grace into the souls of the unusually virtuous but, as Delooz and Coakley both assert, the most significant element in *understanding* holiness is not divine, but human.

### **Sanctity and sainthood in Ireland**

Thus far consideration of holy otherness has focused its attention outside of Ireland. The actual portrayals of medieval Irish holiness are the primary focus of the following chapters, and do not need to be examined here. Instead, attention now turns to the ways in which scholars have assessed the expression of sanctity within Ireland’s medieval hagiography.

There has been a strong tendency, particularly among the works of a generation or more prior to the present, to view Irish saints through a sort of soft focus, portraying them as nature-loving, retiring monks and nuns of impressive asceticism who spouted poetry

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<sup>48</sup> “The representation of sanctity in late medieval hagiography: evidence from *Lives* of saints of the Dominican order” (Harvard University, 1980), 1–2.

<sup>49</sup> “Sanctity in late medieval hagiography,” 17–18. Emphasis original to quote.

<sup>50</sup> “Sanctity in late medieval hagiography,” 17–18.

and remained distant from the taint of everyday life.<sup>51</sup> Irish holy men and women have also been described as shamans, often by authors in the service of disseminating or explaining the modern Celtic Christianity movement.<sup>52</sup> Even where more profuse praise is absent, emphasis on extraordinary asceticism, particularly as the only avenue Irish saints traveled toward sanctification, often remains.<sup>53</sup> If attention is not being paid to these elements, depictions of holy men and women in Ireland have been called unedifying, non-Christian images reported in amoral texts that fly in the face of Christian ethics.<sup>54</sup>

Ireland's hagiographical sanctity has often been viewed as reflecting varying amounts of pagan influence or survival. At one end of the spectrum, Irish holy men and women have been deemed to be representations of pagan divinities clothed in very skimpy Christian costume, assertions that have often called into question the historicity of their saintly subjects.<sup>55</sup> More commonly, the saints of Ireland are figured as heirs to local pagan cults, particularly when saints' names coincide with those of known or suspected pre-Christian deities. Signs of the god Lug have been sought amongst the hagiographical evidence, for example, and female saints have been painted as the inheritors of the status and powers of the goddess of sovereignty, who is usually agreed

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<sup>51</sup> One prime proponent of this view is Nora K. Chadwick, *The age of the saints in the early Celtic church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Edward C. Sellner, "Songs of praise: early Celtic hagiographies and their spirituality," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31 no. 2 (1996): 153–80; see especially p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> For example, see Kathleen Hughes, "Sanctity and secularity in the early Irish church," *Studies in Church History* 10 (1973): 21–37. It should be observed that the general focus on asceticism as the route to holiness is in no small part the result of a notable scarcity of death by martyrdom—the other major path to sainthood—among the early saints of Ireland. But see further chapter two below, pp. 100–103, for discussion of the actual rarity of saintly feats of extreme self-denial.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: the enduring tradition* (1983; reprint, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 81–2. See also Oliver Davies and Thomas O'Loughlin, "The sources: introduction to the translated texts – hagiography," in *Celtic spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 26–37, particularly p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Plummer, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* vol. 1 (1910; reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), ix–clxxxviii; Liam de Paor, "Saint Mac Creiche of Liscannor," *Ériu* 30 (1979): 93–121.

to have been embodied in more secular literary figures like the great Queen of Connacht, Medb.<sup>56</sup>

St. Brigit of Kildare has arguably received the most speculation as a presumed pagan descendant whose sanctity is due in some degree to the eminence of her eponymous pre-Christian predecessor. Brigit's hagiography, particularly her vernacular *Life* of the ninth century, has been, for example, described as preserving the outline and character of the goddess Brigit through an elaborate reformulation of the deity within a Christian ethos.<sup>57</sup> Dorothy Ann Bray has written several articles observing the apparent prevalence of native pagan elements in Brigidine *Lives*, though she is always certain to assert—as are other scholars who have followed similar approaches to the image of holiness in these texts—that these elements do not overshadow Brigit's clear Christianity.<sup>58</sup>

Most recent Brigidine studies, in fact, observe that the stories of the saint, while they may possess some elements absorbed from lore regarding the goddess, are based on

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<sup>56</sup> Pádraig Ó Riain, "Traces of Lug in early Irish hagiographical tradition," *ZCP* 36 (1978): 138–56. See, however, Ó Riain's re-examination, in which he asserts that the continued appearance of deity names in Christian Ireland was likely a means of retaining property by claiming ancestral ties to pagan gods and goddesses. "Pagan example and Christian practice: a reconsideration," in *Cultural identity and cultural integration: Ireland and Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. Doris Edel (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 144–56. Curiously, he does not seem to have considered the possibility that the names of one-time deities may have continued to be adopted among the thoroughly Christian Irish out of a non-religious desire to associate with the attributes oral tradition linked to pre-Christian figures, much the way today someone might name their child after an Irish saint and yet be neither Irish nor even Christian. Regarding saints as heirs to the sovereignty goddess, the earlier studies of Dorothy Ann Bray often make such suggestions. See for example "Motival derivations in the *Life of Samthann*," *SC* 20/21 (1985/86): 78–86, where she claims that "the image given of the saint in her *Life* may be said to derive...from the foremost female figure in Irish mythology, the great goddess" (p. 84).

<sup>57</sup> Edward C. Sellner, "Brigit of Kildare, golden sparkling flame: a study in the liminality of women's spiritual power," *Vox Benedictina* 8 vol. 2 (1991): 265–96. Kathryn A. Laity, "Local heroes: the sociocultural context for the development of vernacular saints' Lives in Old Irish, Old Norse, and Old English" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 2003), 2–3, 6–7, 21–39.

<sup>58</sup> "The image of St. Brigit in the early Irish church," *ÉC* 24 (1987): 209–15; "Motival derivations," "Saint Brigit and the fire from heaven," *ÉC* 29 (1992): 105–13. In this last article, Bray states that the saint's image "undoubtedly" owes something to the traditions surrounding the goddess, but she is also careful to caution that next to nothing is actually known about the pre-Christian Brigit.

a factual individual rather than a euhemerized deity. Many then go on to present possible biblical origins for motifs often presumed to have arisen only from pagan prehistory.<sup>59</sup> Even though traits applied to the saint may have both scriptural and pagan antecedents, most scholars now would caution that St. Brigit must be approached as herself, a holy woman with a clearly defined place in early Irish Christianity, and not as heir to mythical pre-Christian characteristics.<sup>60</sup> It is a rule that holds not just for Brigit, but for all Irish saints.

Indeed, there are studies that threaten to unseat arguments that would date a conscious affiliation between goddess and saint to the earliest Brigidine hagiography. Pádraig Ó Riain, for instance, asserts that there is solid historical evidence indicating that the pre-eminent status enjoyed by Brigit of Kildare is due more to political realities among Kildare's patrons in the Middle Ages than to any affiliation with the similarly high-status goddess.<sup>61</sup> Most recently, the work of Catherine McKenna has offered strong support for the apparent lack of any equation between saint and goddess until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In that era, she shows, turbulent events in Irish history combined with an increase in access to accurate translations of medieval sources to raise Brigit up as both a national symbol in a time of civil strife, and as a Catholic cornerstone in a period when Protestantism was viewed as threatening traditional definitions of Irishness. Further, McKenna sets forth the evidence that Brigit was an historical saint, not just a literary refiguring of the goddess; in point of fact it seems

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<sup>59</sup> Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (1990; reprint, An Sagart: Maynooth, 1991), 161–75; Clare Stancliffe, “The miracle stories in seventh-century Irish saints’ Lives,” in *Le septième siècle: changements et continuités*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (London: The Warburg Institute, 1992), 93–4. Also see Bray, “Brigit and the fire from heaven,” 108–9.

<sup>60</sup> For example Bray, “Brigit and the fire from heaven,” 109, 112.

<sup>61</sup> “Pagan example,” 151–5.

modern conceptions of the pagan deity are built upon the saint rather than the saint's holiness being predicated on the goddess.<sup>62</sup> McKenna readily demonstrates, moreover, that the use of pagan literary figures in early Brigidine hagiography is very likely a conscious echo not of pagan tradition but of the Christian New Testament.<sup>63</sup> This pattern is borne out in the overwhelming portrayals of Brigit, more so than any other saint whether male or female, as walking in the steps of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, it seems fatuous to deny that the holy otherness of Irish saints as represented in their hagiography has inherited some elements with possible, even probable pagan roots. On the one hand, it has been noted that the deliberate choice to use a pre-Christian motif implies some form of precedence accorded to that 'older' tradition rather than to a 'newer', more clearly Christian corollary consciously omitted, and that this choice may reflect attempts to convey a greater degree of textual authority in an Irish context than might otherwise pertain.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, there are the comments of James Tschen-Emmons in his recent dissertation:

In all likelihood pre-Christian residue did survive in the Irish tradition, and more than that it no doubt continued to be valuable to the literati. [But to focus on that residue is at best an unbalanced approach.] No one raises an eyebrow when Gregory of Tours quotes Virgil, or when Gregory [of Nyssa] embeds elements of Homer in the *vita* devoted to his saintly sister.<sup>66</sup>

The difficulty with any study that seeks pagan remnants drawn from prior tradition, oral or written, into the presumably more recent products of the church is the

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<sup>62</sup> "Apotheosis and evanescence: the fortunes of Saint Brigit in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," in *The individual in Celtic literatures: CSANA yearbook 1*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 74–108.

<sup>63</sup> "Between two worlds: Saint Brigit and pre-Christian religion in the *Vita Prima*," in *Identifying the 'Celtic': CSANA yearbook 2*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 66–74.

<sup>64</sup> See chapter three, pp. 149, 157–8; chapter four, pp. 190, 193–4, 199, 204, 206, 212–13.

<sup>65</sup> Ó Riain, "Pagan example," 144.

<sup>66</sup> "The limits of Late Antiquity: the life of Áed mac Bricc and the Irish literati in Late Antiquity" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2002), 42. A similar observation was made by McCone, *Pagan past*, 34; additionally see below, note 68.

inherent assumption that the secular and ecclesiastical genres of Ireland are clearly distinct. This approach was the general track followed by a significant number of scholars for quite a long time.<sup>67</sup> More recently, though, it has been recognized that these genres cannot be sharply distinguished, as both were produced “either in monasteries or by people who had received an essentially monastic education.”<sup>68</sup>

In fact, the literary works of medieval Ireland span far more than just hagiography and saga. The extant corpus is broad, includes texts in both Latin and the vernacular, and ranges from ecclesiastical and secular law to scriptural exegesis, from grammar to toponymy, from annalistic records to genealogies, and beyond. Throughout the length and breadth of this written evidence, even when the main focus is apparently secular, the penetration of religious elements has been shown to be readily visible. Latin and Irish, as well as verse and prose, mingle in all genres, in many texts, and even within individual works.<sup>69</sup> It is thus little surprise that Ireland’s more ecclesiastical narratives should show

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<sup>67</sup> This approach may be exemplified by the following: James F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland (ecclesiastical): an introduction and guide* (1929, 1966; reprint Dublin: Pádraic Ó Táilliúir, 1979); Felim Ó Briain, “Miracles in the Lives of the Irish saints,” *IER* 5<sup>th</sup> series 66 (1945): 333–42; also Ó Briain, “Saga themes in Irish hagiography,” in *Essays and studies presented to Professor Tadhg Ua Donnchadha (Torna)*, ed. Seamus Pender (Cork: Cork University Press, 1947), 33–42; William W. Heist, “Myth and folklore in the Lives of Irish saints,” *The Centennial Review* 12 (Spring 1968): 181–93. Also Heist, “Irish saints’ Lives, romance, and cultural history,” *Medievalia et humanistica* n.s. 6 (1975): 25–40; in this latter case, however, note that Heist, while still distinguishing the secular and the religious genres of literature, also states repeatedly that both were products of the same privileged elite, and that the result was a certain degree of similarity in function and form between them. Ludwig Bieler, “Hagiography and romance in medieval Ireland,” *Medievalia et humanistica* n.s. 6 (1975): 13–24, observes much the same things, even noting that Christian texts were not necessarily the borrowers. Neither scholar, though, seems to take the final step of recognizing that the genres are too interwoven to truly untangle them.

<sup>68</sup> McCone, *Pagan past*, ix, 1. Also note the comments of Patrick K. Ford, “Pagan past and Christian present: some aspects of the problem,” *ÉC* 29 (1992): 457–8, where Ford challenges the apparently stark line McCone draws between pre-Christian and christianized Ireland; indeed there is considerable evidence of the ongoing presence of pagan-based cultural elements for centuries past the start of conversion in the fourth and fifth centuries. See for instance the two studies of Liam Mac Mathúna on early Irish cosmology: “The christianization of the early Irish cosmos?: *muir mas, nem nglas, talam cé* (Blathm. 258),” *ZCP* 49–50 (1997): 532–47; also “Irish perceptions of the cosmos,” *Celtica* 23 (1999): 174–87, which repeats and expands upon the 1997 essay.

<sup>69</sup> This point is the particular emphasis of McCone, *Pagan past*; it has also been mentioned by numerous other scholars, such as Elva Johnston, “Transforming women in Irish hagiography,” *Peritia* 9 (1995): 197–

the traces not only of continental and patristic predecessors, as well as of the Bible, but also of native ‘secular’ writings—that, for instance, hagiography should demonstrate an interdependence with the Irish heroic saga alongside which it evolved, rather than any less ecclesiastically-inclined elements in writings about saints necessarily having automatically descended from an older, pre-Christian tradition.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Irish hagiographical hero**

In keeping with assertions made by, among others, Edmund Leach and Régis Boyer that the holy person occupies an intermediate status, a liminal zone between earth and heaven that aligns him or her with society as a type of cultural ideal, the study of Ireland’s hagiography has often observed a strong correspondence between the biographical outlines of the vernacular saga hero and the saint.<sup>71</sup> In the Irish evidence this correlation results from the parallel evolution of the hagiographic and heroic traditions just discussed, as a consequence of which interdependence many scholars have seen the saga figure as a primary exemplar for the Irish saint, diminishing the role played by Christ as a

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220, especially p. 199. Additional corroboration of the religious penetration of supposedly secular texts is apparent in the modeling of Irish vernacular law on Old Testament Levitical strictures, as demonstrated in the work of Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “Irish law and canon law,” in *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, hrsg. Próinséas Ní Chatháin und Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 157–66, and “Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament,” in *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission*, hrsg. Ní Chatháin und Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 284–307. The most in-depth examination, though, must be that of Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Aidan Breen, “The laws of the Irish,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 382–438.

<sup>70</sup> The work of McCone, *Pagan past*, is pre-eminent on this subject. McCone particularly emphasizes the scriptural antecedents for apparently pagan motifs in Ireland’s literature, hagiographical and otherwise, while also observing that though hagiographical literature in Ireland began in the late sixth century the majority of saga material is not yet datable to anytime prior to the eighth century. In addition there are a number of excellent studies of continental influences on the island’s hagiography. See for example Jean-Michel Picard, “The marvellous in Irish and continental saints’ Lives of the Merovingian period,” in *Columbanus and Merovingian monasticism*, ed. H. B. Clarke and Mary Brennan (Oxford: B. A. R. S-113, 1981), 91–103; also Picard, “Structural patterns in early Hiberno-Latin hagiography,” *Peritia* 4 (1985): 67–82. More recently there are Stancliffe, “Miracle stories,” and Tschen-Emmons, “Limits of Late Antiquity”; in the latter see especially pp. 53–71.

<sup>71</sup> See pp. 9–10 and notes 38 and 41 above.



model for the resulting image of holiness. For the proponents of this view, it is less the heroic savior whom the saint is seen to follow, but more often a narrative figure of very secular bent, a view aided by an unusually vibrant body of medieval Irish heroic material unlike that found outside Ireland either in early date or in extent. With so strong a saga tradition, it is inevitable that Irish hagiologists should tend to compare the influences of each genre upon the other.

James Kenney, for example, argued in 1929 that sanctifying grace was figured in Irish hagiography as the counterpart to the often maleficent magic of the druids, making of the saints the “heroes of the new order.”<sup>72</sup> Not long after Kenney, it was demonstrated by Alwyn Rees that this hero-saint correlation is also true for the narratives of Wales and Cornwall. Though both Kenney’s and Rees’s assumptions that the Christian saints must be heirs to druidic attributes possess elements that are now rather outdated, Rees’s outline of the shared life structures for the heroes and holy persons of Ireland, Wales and Cornwall has formed the basis of a number of subsequent investigations.<sup>73</sup>

Kathleen Hughes, for instance, draws parallels between the heroic traits of a “quick wit” and a “ready tongue” and the evolution of Ireland’s hagiographical saints as “devastating cursers”, a parallel more fully elucidated by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh’s pithy study of the closely-aligned structures of saintly malediction and poetic satire.<sup>74</sup> Hughes

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<sup>72</sup> *Sources*, 301–3. Note that the implied chronology of this statement, however, makes saints the ‘new’ to the heroes as the ‘old.’

<sup>73</sup> “The divine hero in Celtic hagiology,” *Folk-Lore* 47 (1936): 30–41; see pp. 31–5 for the biographical outline. Analogous statements are also found in Mary Alice Steinberg, “The origins and role of the miracle-story in Irish and English history and hagiography, 400–800 AD” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1978), 1–2, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Hughes, *The church in early Irish society* (London: Methuen and Company, 1966), 8; Ó Cathasaigh, “Curse and satire,” *Éigse* 21 (1986): 10–15. Similar observations have also been made by Lester K. Little, “Anger in monastic curses,” in *Anger’s past: the social uses of an emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9–35, who also subscribes to the view that Irish saints inherited the druidic power with words, pp. 28–9. Further see Wendy Davies, “Anger and the Celtic saint,”

also suggests that the seventh-century *vitae* of Irish saints emphasize traits more valuable to an heroic society than might be expressed in narratives comprising only the saints' teachings. The consequence of this emphasis, Hughes writes, is an increased focus on *miracula*, producing works she calls "defects" in Irish Christianity, accusing them of being "puerile and repetitive" in the places where they are not merely "charming."<sup>75</sup>

A focus upon the biographical patterning of hero and saint much closer not only than that of Hughes but seemingly also that of the hagiology undertaken outside Ireland, however, followed closely upon the 1977 publication of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's detailed study of the outline of the hero, *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt*.<sup>76</sup> Elissa Henken has produced two examinations of the correspondences between this heroic structuring and the paradigm of the Welsh saint. Importantly, Henken also shows that while male and female saints have different narrative outlines, each gender shares a high degree of correlation with the depictions of the same gender in saga material.<sup>77</sup> Dorothy Ann Bray, basing a series of investigations on the efforts of both Ó Cathasaigh and Henken, not only refines Henken's Welsh patterns specifically for Ireland's hagiographical heroes, but also presents a list of the miracle motifs found in Ireland's hagiography, arguing that the outline and the *miracula* together demonstrate a specific set

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in *Anger's past*, 191–202; Lisa M. Bitel, "Saints and angry neighbors: the politics of cursing in Irish hagiography," in *Monks & nuns, saints & outcasts: religion in medieval society*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 123–50; and Dorothy Ann Bray, "Malediction and benediction in the Lives of the early Irish saints," *SC* 36 (2002): 47–58. These studies are considered again in Chapter Three's investigation of saintly vengeance in Ireland's hagiography, pp. 110–84 below.

<sup>75</sup> *Church in early Irish society*, 146–7.

<sup>76</sup> Dublin: DIAS.

<sup>77</sup> "The saint as folk hero: biographical patterning in Welsh hagiography," in *Celtic folklore and Christianity: studies in memory of William W. Heist*, ed. Patrick K. Ford (Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin, 1983), 58–74. See p. 59 for the outline of the male Welsh saint, and p. 74 for its refinements in the representation of female saints. For a more expanded version of the study, see *The Welsh saints: a study in patterned lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991). Note, however, the considerable augmentations made to the narrative paradigm of the female Welsh saint by Jane Cartwright, "Dead virgins: feminine sanctity in medieval Wales," *Medium Ævum* 71 vol. 1 (2002): 1–28.

of compositional and narrative standards to which all Irish saints' *Lives* were expected to conform.<sup>78</sup>

Ó Cathasaigh's consideration of the heroic biography flowed into two studies, one an expansion of the other, which both bear import in the world of Ireland's hagiographical saint and supplied additional material for Henken's work. These essays, further echoing the words of predecessors such as Edmund Leach and Arnold van Gennep, construct the place of the saga hero in the narrative world of Ireland as a mediator between the divine world and the realm of humanity, a precarious position that may bring significant renown but also presents an equal degree of danger.<sup>79</sup> Henken's continuation in a Welsh context of Ó Cathasaigh's Irish outline posits that the parallels between the heroic and the hagiographical place the Welsh saint, as the ecclesiastical hero, in the same literary role as his or her saga counterparts. Not only does the holy person of Wales fulfill many of the same functions as the Welsh hero—bringing order to chaos, forming political alliances, providing for followers—but he or she also stands as a liminal being “literally on the border between the sacred and the divine.”<sup>80</sup>

In the realm of Ireland's evidence, much the same commentary has been made by Joseph Falaky Nagy, who has spent a good deal of ink on the liminal elements apparent

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<sup>78</sup> “Heroic tradition in the Lives of the early Irish saints: a study in hagio-biographical patterning,” in *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. Gordon MacLennan (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1988), 261–71; *A list of motifs in the lives of the early Irish saints* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992); “Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints,” in *Celtic hagiography and saints' cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 136–47.

<sup>79</sup> “Between god and man: the hero of Irish tradition,” *The Crane Bag* 2 vols. 1 and 2 (1978): 72–9; “The concept of the hero in Irish mythology,” in *The Irish mind: exploring intellectual traditions*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), 79–90. See pp. 9–10 above for Leach and van Gennep.

<sup>80</sup> “Saint as folk hero,” 58, 63 (quote).

in Irish heroic literature.<sup>81</sup> Nagy emphasizes that the founding of the saint's tale on the heroic paradigm, far from sidelining the saint as a mere fill-in for the prior position of either poet or druid, sets forth the holy person of Ireland as the eminent representative of the Christian faith. Within the narrative world of medieval Ireland, the literary saint acts not only as mediator between heaven and earth, as argued by Leach and van Gennepe, among others, but also between Christian and pagan, and between the literary and the oral, conducting the Irish through the transition from "heroes of oral tradition" to the holy individuals of the new written medium.<sup>82</sup>

Lisa Bitel, in a study that attempts to elucidate the patterns of monastic settlement in early Ireland using, in part, hagiographical evidence, seems to echo both Delehaye and Karolyn Ann Kinane when she asserts that Ireland's hagiographical saints were not intended to exemplify attainable behavior. Irish saints, she holds, are "born, not made; sanctity, like nobility, was evident from birth."<sup>83</sup> These heroes, Bitel observes, were those who expanded the frontier of early Christian Ireland, who interceded with God on behalf of allies and adherents, and who functioned as "deputies to God."<sup>84</sup>

The finer details of the agreement between the mediatory roles of saintly and saga heroes again come to the fore in Victoria Lord's examination of a subset of miracle tales shared by the *Lives* of Coemgen and Cainnech. Considering the Irish concept of *fír*

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<sup>81</sup> For example, "Liminality and knowledge in Irish tradition," *SC* 16/17 (1981–2): 135–43; "The wisdom of the *geilt*," *Éigse* 19 vol. 1 (1982): 44–60; "Close encounters of the traditional kind in medieval Irish literature," in *Celtic folklore*, ed. Ford, 129–49; also, though differently, *Conversing with angels and ancients: literary myths of medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> "Close encounters," (quote from 148–9) and *Conversing with angels and ancients*; also "Liminality and knowledge" and "Wisdom of the *geilt*." This transition, for Nagy, occurs within the literary world, not in the actual history of the evolution of saga and saintly biography, and therefore does not conflict with the confluence of Ireland's textual genres as noted above. See pp. 9–10 above for Leach and van Gennepe.

<sup>83</sup> *Isle of the saints: monastic settlement and Christian community in early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 10. Also see Delehaye, *Sanctus*, 233–40, and Kinane, "Sanctity deferred," as outlined above on pp. 6–9 (Delehaye) and note 16 (Kinane).

<sup>84</sup> *Isle of the saints*, 11–12.

*flathemon*, or “princes’ truth,” Lord contends that the link between a ruler’s fitness and the fertility of his kingdom inherent to *fír flathemon* is likewise apparent in the miracle tales she studies. Specifically, Lord suggests that these *miracula* reveal nature in cooperation with the hagiographical saint, a cooperation that equates fertility and sanctity and draws the “clerical hero” even closer to the “secular hero.”<sup>85</sup>

A recent study by Karen Overbey takes the liminal status of the Irish saint in an intriguing direction by focusing on the place of relics and reliquaries in early Ireland. Overbey’s insightful exploration of space and distance, of life and death, and of the mediatory role of reliquaries illustrates brilliantly that the liminality of sainthood and sanctity extends beyond death. As Overbey puts it, “[t]he efficacy of the cult of relics rests on paradoxes: saints are both like humans and not like them; after death saints reside both in heaven and on earth.”<sup>86</sup> This intermediate status applies, therefore not just to the living saint but to the saint’s holy remains, corporeal or otherwise. Although the saint’s person acts as mediator while he or she is still breathing, his or her relics seem to have need of an additional mediation that is fulfilled by the reliquary containing, preserving and distancing them from the ordinary mortal world. For Overbey, this evidence suggests that “the medieval Irish conception of holiness” was “grounded in the body and in its actions and effects: these too could forge the connection between earthly and divine spaces.”<sup>87</sup>

The description of holy relics as links between earth and heaven is also espoused by Nathalie Stalmans, though curiously she does not seem to explicitly extend the same

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<sup>85</sup> “Nature, fertility, and animal miracles in the Lives of Saints Coemgen and Cainnech,” *PHCC* 15 (1995): 129–38; for quotes see pp. 134–5.

<sup>86</sup> Karen Eileen Overbey, “The space of the holy body: relics and reliquaries in medieval Ireland” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2003), 56. Emphasis—as underlining—original to quote.

<sup>87</sup> “Space of the holy body,” 61. Emphasis original to quote.

status to living saints. Instead, Stalmans attempts to outline Irish conceptions of sanctity by enumerating other expressions of a saint's role as found in his or her *vita*, calling these expressions "les aspects de la sainteté" (aspects of sanctity).<sup>88</sup> Stalmans assesses elements of clear sanctity such as inborn holiness or the extension of that holiness beyond death in a saint's relics, but at times it seems these are confused with criteria that are rather more like characteristics of general Irish piety than traits that define an individual as holy.<sup>89</sup> Despite these issues, however, Stalmans succeeds in demonstrating that depictions both of the saint's societal actions and of the virtues she associates with sanctity are far from static in the *vitae*, whether comparing saints individually, within time periods, or as groups across hagiographical eras.

There seems little question that Ireland's hagiographical heroes shared strong correspondences with their saga brethren, but it is equally agreed that the paradigm for the holy man or woman—whatever the parallels in narrative pattern with other models—is that of Christ himself. As Mary Alice Steinberg has noted, Christ is the hero whose parentage exemplifies the bridge between heaven and earth. "While subsequent Christian saints never claimed divine parentage in a biological sense, their biographers saw them as beings who were especially selected for holiness from the time of conception."<sup>90</sup> In fact, as will be seen, it is arguable that they were selected even before then.<sup>91</sup>

Yet saints in Ireland's texts, much as is true for saints outside of Ireland, are not just imitators of Christ's virtuous life and miracles, but the heirs of Christ's mission,

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<sup>88</sup> *Saints d'Irlande: analyse critique des sources hagiographiques (septième-neufième siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003), 128.

<sup>89</sup> *Saints d'Irlande*, 96–7, 128, 160–183, 187–90, 223–4, 226, 228–60, 260–261, 285–7, 289–92. Some of the elements of less clear association with holiness include whether bodily relics are more in evidence than secondary relics, or whether relics are enshrined.

<sup>90</sup> "Origins and role of the miracle-story," 9–10.

<sup>91</sup> See chapter two, pp. 49–68 below.

placing them in the same lineage as the apostles.<sup>92</sup> The Irish saint is, in parallel with the observations of Foley and Kitchen outside the Irish tradition, “a reproduction of Christ, of other Biblical paradigms, and of other saints”, while his or her *Life* still retains its own definitive traits for its particular holy subject.<sup>93</sup> He or she is sanctified in much the same fashion as were Old Testament prophets, for example, making the Irish saint the continuator of the work of redemption prefigured by the prophets and truly begun by Christ himself. Irish saints, like saints elsewhere, maintain and keep alive Christ’s message.<sup>94</sup>

But it is not only the canonical versions of such paradigmatic figures as Moses, Elijah and Christ who are taken as models for the Irish hagiographical hero. Preserved in Ireland’s extant literary corpus are both traces and texts of apocryphal origin. Whether in the vernacular or in Latin, Ireland boasts what is probably the “richest crop of apocrypha” from both the Old and the New Testament to survive past the Middle Ages.<sup>95</sup> Hagiographical narratives are among those that reveal the influence of apocryphal material, including the earliest *vita* of Ireland’s premier saint, Patrick.<sup>96</sup> The *Lives* of Irish

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<sup>92</sup> Bray, *List of motifs*, 10–11.

<sup>93</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, “The reproductions of Irish saints,” in *Studies in Irish hagiography: saints and scholars*, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 281. For Foley and Kitchen, see above pp. 14–15, notes 45–6.

<sup>94</sup> Jennifer O’Reilly, “Reading the scriptures in the Life of Columba,” in *Studies in the cult of Saint Columba*, ed. Cormac Bourke (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 80–106. Also Thomas O’Loughlin, “Reading Muirchú’s Tara-event within its background as a biblical ‘trial of divinities’,” in *Celtic hagiography*, ed. Cartwright, 123–35.

<sup>95</sup> Martin McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish church* (Dublin: DIAS, 1975), 1–2.

<sup>96</sup> Aileen O’Leary, “An Irish apocryphal apostle: Muirchú’s portrayal of Saint Patrick,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (July 1996): 287–301. Additional work on the abundance of apocryphal survivals in Ireland has been produced by a number of scholars; see for example St. John D. Seymour, “Notes on apocrypha in Ireland,” *PRIA* 37C (1926): 107–17; also David N. Dumville, “Biblical apocrypha and the early Irish: a preliminary investigation,” *PRIA* 73C (1973): 299–338.

saints may even show some elements indicative of Pelagian remnants still clinging to Irish Christianity at the time of the genre's birth.<sup>97</sup>

Ultimately, the evidence forces an admission that, whoever the historical saints may have been, the holy men and women known now through their hagiography are literary constructs; the questions that remain to be asked consider the nature of the collective expectations with which the narrative saint was to conform.<sup>98</sup> As Delooz has said, "One is never a saint except *for other people*."<sup>99</sup> The study of representations of holy otherness in Ireland's hagiographical genre must then, as in any other region's saintly tradition, grapple with the ways in which the medieval Irish understood the signification of sanctity. Judith Bishop has eloquently expressed the crux of the issue when she writes, in a deliberate echo of Delooz:

How does a culture describe and inscribe holiness?...By what signs is a saint—a person perceived by a community to have a distinct relationship to the divine, and a resultant authority in the community—to be recognized?

Each age gives its own shape to the concept of holiness, has its own ways of understanding and interpreting activities which read as sanctity—often as opposed to reading as insanity. Each society codes activities and characteristics which, interpreted through the lens of culture, produce saints.<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, these are some of the questions the ensuing study attempts to address. What are the cultural elements that act as some of the building blocks of medieval Irish conceptions of sanctity? What makes the hagiographical saint of Ireland recognizable to the native Irish as one of their own? For whom were the *vitae* and *bethada* of medieval

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<sup>97</sup> Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 9, 15–16, 120, 165–74, 280.

<sup>98</sup> Herbert, "Hagiography," 87, asks the same question in her thorough review of the scholarship, pitfalls and opportunities in the study of Ireland's hagiographical works.

<sup>99</sup> "Towards a sociological study," 194. Emphasis original to quote.

<sup>100</sup> "Sanctity as mirror of society: culture, gender and religion in the three oldest *vitae* of Brigit of Ireland" (Ph.D. diss., Berkeley, 2004), v–vi.



Ireland composed? Are the traits that comprise holy otherness generally applicable, or do they vary depending upon whether an individual recognized as holy was a man or a woman? Are the representations of Latin texts different from those of works written in the vernacular? Finally, what might the design of the hagiographical hero's pattern reveal concerning the relationship of saint, church and society in the Ireland of the Middle Ages?

### **The nature of the primary sources**

Hagiography is, in general terms, a literary genre comprising writings about men and women recognized as possessing an extraordinary degree of virtue, such that they have been sanctified by the infusion of divine grace. Throughout medieval Europe, hagiographical writings provide what has been termed "the single largest body of evidence for medieval life and thought," and Ireland is no exception.<sup>101</sup> Though records of the *Acta* and *Passiones* of martyrs and of the *Lives* of desert ascetics such as Antony began to appear in the Mediterranean from the third century, Irish saintly biography does not seem to have arisen until the late sixth century.<sup>102</sup> The earliest extant texts concerning Ireland's saints to be produced in Ireland, however, are neither miracle lists nor *Lives*, nor anything in prose, but are instead Latin eulogies honoring the saints in verse.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Charles Doherty, "The Irish hagiographer: resources, aims, results," in *The writer as witness: literature as historical evidence*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), 10.

<sup>102</sup> Doherty, "The Irish hagiographer," 11. Also see Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 119–20, where it is argued that saints' *Lives* were not written in Ireland until this era due to the influence of Pelagian views, which disapproved of miraculous expressions of spiritual power and the divine grace they imply.

<sup>103</sup> Michael W. Herren, "The role of the miraculous in the earliest Irish saints' eulogies," in *Scripturus vitam: lateinische Biographie von der Antike bis in die Gegenwart*, hrsg. Dorothea Walz (Heidelberg: Mattes Verlag, 2002), 35.

From the seventh century, though, the genre truly begins to evolve, and there are surviving more than one hundred Latin *Lives*, or *vitae*, of around sixty saints, and approximately fifty or so *Lives* in either Old or Middle Irish, known as *bethada* (sg. *betha*, *bethu*), relating to perhaps forty individuals, many whom also are commemorated in *vitae*.<sup>104</sup> To the *vitae* and *bethada* may also be added a corpus that includes brief works concerning saints, anecdotes, martyrologies and their commentaries, tales written in some of the more voluble entries in Ireland's many annals, glosses, marginalia, genealogies and lists of saints.<sup>105</sup> These hagiographical texts span nearly the entire medieval era, from the seventh through the fourteenth century, and often possess redaction layers that are still more recent, particularly among the *bethada*, as will be shown presently.<sup>106</sup>

While there are works entirely in Latin or in Irish, many are mixtures of both, with one or the other language predominating. It has been observed that extant *vitae* appear to be entirely lacking for about two centuries after the years around the middle of the ninth century. Though it is possible that this *lacuna* may reflect a failed preservation of Latin works, the survival of liturgical treatises in Latin has been taken by many scholars as evidence that Latin hagiography simply was not written, since according to that view some trace of any *vitae* written would still be apparent in what is extant. Often the presumed change to the vernacular is viewed as an indication that the expected

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<sup>104</sup> Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 5–6. From this point forward, this study observes the following format regarding the *Lives* of Ireland's saints: Latin works are referred to exclusively as *vitae*, vernacular texts as *bethada* and both in combination as *Lives*.

<sup>105</sup> Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> See pp. 37–44 below.

audience shifted from a strictly monastic population to something broader, the exact nature of which is still somewhat contested.<sup>107</sup>

*The Latin evidence: vitae in Ireland*

The earliest extant saintly biographies in Ireland are all *vitae*, and present with two characteristics that are nearly entirely absent thereafter. All four not only have identifiable authors, but their original composition is also of reasonably solid dating. These *vitae* all pertain to the three primary saints of Ireland, Brigit of Kildare, Patrick of Armagh, and Columba of Iona. Importantly, only those seventh-century works relating to Patrick survive in a manuscript produced and preserved in Ireland; the early *vitae* of Brigit and Columba are found only on the Continent.<sup>108</sup>

The *Vita S. Brigitae* of Cogitosus was written between 650 and 675, according to its most recent editor, but has also been dated as early as the 630s and as late as the

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<sup>107</sup> Kenney, *Sources*, 303, proposes that vernacular texts in the two centuries lacking Latin evidence represent either a lapse away from orthodox Christianity—a suggestion predicated upon the greater prevalence of saga material in the *bethada*—or a more complete fusion of Christianity with native Irish society than existed previously. Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources* (London: Camelot Press, 1972), 210, holds that the “changeover” is the result of a shift in audience from monastic to “a wider public”, an opinion with which Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints’ Lives*, 22–3, agrees, but Sharpe specifies that the *bethada* were probably intended for those with less education, by which he seems to mean the lay population. Sharpe is also one of the key proponents of the view that the lack of Latin hagiographical texts means they were simply not composed, but his logic seems circular: there are no *vitae*; because there are other non-hagiographical Latin texts known to date to between the end of the eighth and the conclusion of the eleventh century (e.g., exegesis), *vitae* should have survived but did not; therefore *vitae* cannot have been written between the 850s and the end of the 1000s, which means that no *vitae* extant can be dated to that period....which means that there were no *vitae* written in that era. See *Medieval Irish saints’ Lives*, pp. 24–5. This issue of audience is revisited, chapter five, pp. 268–71.

<sup>108</sup> The Patrician manuscript is known as the *Book of Armagh* (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 52), produced in the early ninth century; see Kenney, *Sources*, 326–7, 337–9, and Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: DIAS, 1979), 1–55. The earliest continental manuscripts of the *Vita S. Brigitae* of Cogitosus (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 2999) and of Adomnán’s *Vita S. Columbae* (Stadtbibliothek Schaffhausen, MS Generalia 1, probably written in Iona by Abbot Dorbbéne) are of the eighth century. See Kenney, 359, 429–32; also Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints’ Lives*, 10–11, 13, 18.

680s.<sup>109</sup> Two texts regarding Saint Patrick are extant, the *Collectanea Patriciana* of Tírechán and the *Vita S. Patricii* of Muirchú. Tírechán's work is a collection of anecdotes concerning Patrick's circuits of Ireland, his *acta* and his *miracula* that can be placed to the last quarter of the seventh century by internal and intertextual evidence.<sup>110</sup> Muirchú, by contrast, provides a much more narrative text rightfully termed a *vita*; also dated to the end of the 600s, the composition of this *vita* is usually thought to fall slightly later than Tírechán.<sup>111</sup> The final member of this foundational quartet is the *Vita S. Columbae* by Adomnán of Iona, which sits at the cusp of the eighth century, probably having been completed between c.696 and 704.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>109</sup> The most recent edition in Latin has not been published, but its editors have printed a translation based upon their editorial work: Seán Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard, "Cogitosus' Life of St. Brigit: content and value," *JRSAI* 117 (1987): 5–27; see p. 5 for dating. Connolly repeats his chronology in "Vita prima sanctae Brigitae: background and historical value," *JRSAI* 119 (1989): 6. See however Kim McCone, "Brigit in the seventh century: a saint with three lives?" *Peritia* 1 (1982): 107–45, who dates Cogitosus to 650 x 675 (p. 115); and Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 13, who says Cogitosus wrote c.680. Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 438–9, places Cogitosus between 675 and 686, but in "Early Irish saints' cults and their constituencies," *Ériu* 54 (2004): 90, Charles-Edwards broadens this range to 630s x 680s. For the Latin text of the *vita*, it is still necessary to rely upon *Acta Sanctorum*, Februius I, cols. 0135B–0141E.

<sup>110</sup> Tírechán has been edited and translated by Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 35–42; it is Bieler, pp. 38–9, not Tírechán himself, who applies the label *Collectanea* to the compilation. For dating, see Charles Doherty, "The cult of St. Patrick and the politics of Armagh in the seventh century," in *Ireland and northern France AD 600–850*, ed. Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1991), 56, who places the work to 684 x 700; Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 13, merely says it precedes Muirchú's *vita* of Patrick. Also refer to Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 439–40, who offers the range of 688 x 693.

<sup>111</sup> Muirchú is also edited and translated by Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 60–123. David Howlett, *Muirchú moccu Macthéni's 'Vita Sancti Patricii': Life of Saint Patrick* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), has produced his own edition and translation of the text; all page references in this study are to those of Bieler's edition. For dating see Doherty, "The cult of St. Patrick," 75–82, who considers the *vita* to have been composed sometime between 688 and 700; Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 12, says Muirchú is the contemporary of Adomnán. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 439–40, seems to agree, giving a range of c.695 x 700.

<sup>112</sup> Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson provide the most recent edition and translation, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (1961; reprint, Edinburgh: Clarendon Press, 1991), but see the critique and corrections of Francis J. Byrne, review of *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, *Scriptorium* 16 (1962): 397–400. An earlier edition is also in print: William Reeves, *The Life of Saint Columba, founder of Hy* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), available online at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt>. All references here are to the edition published by the Andersons. For the date, see Jean-Michel Picard, "The purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 160–177.

There is a fifth *vita* that can also be safely deemed a component of the earliest hagiography of Ireland, but while its date range—if the exact details yet remain contested—is reasonably certain, its authorship, like that of nearly all the remaining *Lives* in medieval Ireland, is anonymous. This is the *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, or the *Vita I*, so-called because of its placement in the *Acta Sanctorum* rather than any chronological or textual primacy.<sup>113</sup> The chronology of the *Vita I* still remains the focus of considerable debate, but it is acknowledged to belong either to the seventh or the eighth century.<sup>114</sup>

A complete discussion of the arguments related to the date of the *Vita I* is found in the appendix, but for now it suffices to say that the present study adopts the position that *Vita I* cannot predate Cogitosus. Though the two *vitae* do appear to draw from a common source of the late sixth or early seventh century and by that evidence alone could be roughly contemporary, the *Vita I* also appears to access other texts from the early to mid-600s, and may well use works from the last quarter of that century. It must, however, predate its earliest extant manuscript of c.850, a codex originating in Germany

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<sup>113</sup> The *Vita I* has been edited by Seán Connolly, but as with Cogitosus' *vita* of the same saint, Connolly has published thus far only the translation drawn from his edition, "*Vita prima*." Connolly's edition was the basis of his dissertation, "A critical edition of Vita I Sanctae Brigidae with linguistic commentary" (National University of Ireland, 1969–70). For the published Latin text, it is necessary to repair to *Acta Sanctorum*, Februius I, cols. 0119E–0135B.

<sup>114</sup> Arguments concerning the date of the *Vita I* center on whether it precedes or follows the work of Cogitosus, with which it shares many of its episodes. Those who view *Vita I* as a source for Cogitosus include Mario Esposito, "On the early Latin Lives of St. Brigid of Kildare," *Hermathena* 24 (1935): 120–165; Richard Sharpe, "*Vitae S. Brigidae*: the oldest texts," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 91–106; David Howlett, "*Vita I Sanctae Brigidae*," *Peritia* 12 (1998): 1–23; Daniel McCarthy, "The chronology of St. Brigit of Kildare," *Peritia* 14 (2000): 255–81; also McCarthy, "Topographical characteristics of the *Vita prima* and *Vita Cogitosa S. Brigidae*," *SC* 35 (2001): 245–70; and Lori Ann Knight-Whitehouse, "Articulations of holiness: three case studies from the early Irish church" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 2005). On the opposing side is the assertion that Cogitosus must be a source for rather than drawing from the *Vita I*. Proponents here include Felim Ó Briain, "Brigitana," *ZCP* 36 (1978): 112–37; Donncha Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte* (Dublin: DIAS, 1978), ix–xxv; McCone, "Brigit in the seventh century" (continued in "An introduction to early Irish saints' Lives," *The Maynooth Review* 11 (December 1984): 34); Connolly, "*Vita prima*" (altering his view of "The authorship and manuscript tradition of *Vita I Sanctae Brigidae*," *Manuscripta* 15 vol. 2 (1972): 67–82, that the two *vitae* draw independently from a common lost source, an assertion with which Sharpe, "*Vitae*," and McCone, "Brigit in the seventh century," partially agree); Laurance J. Maney, "When Brigit met Patrick," *PHCC* 14 (1994): 175–94; McKenna, "Between two worlds," 73; and Bishop, "Sanctity as mirror," 161–73.

but now preserved in England (London, British Museum MS Additional 34,124).<sup>115</sup> For the current purposes, therefore, the *Vita I* is treated as an early to mid-eighth-century compilation.

After these five Latin works, however, the evidence falls into a great cauldron of anonymity. While a few *vitae* of Irish saints with known authorship survive, it is rare that they are the work of Irish compilers.<sup>116</sup> The majority of these *vitae* are preserved in three great manuscript compilations, the *Codex Kilkenniensis* or Dublin, the *Codex Insulensis* or Oxford, and the *Codex Salmanticensis* or Salamanca.<sup>117</sup> Though there has been a healthy debate surrounding the chronology of these collections, particularly that of Salamanca, the most recent studies place the Salamanca to the late 1200s or very early 1300s, the Dublin to around the middle of the 1300s, and the Oxford to the later years of that same century.<sup>118</sup> While these dates provide terminal reference points for the final

<sup>115</sup> See Connolly, “*Vita I*,” 6; also Connolly, “Authorship and manuscript tradition of *Vita I*.”

<sup>116</sup> One exception is that of the *Vita S. Monennae* of Conchubranus, from the second quarter of the eleventh century. For edition, see Mario Esposito, “*Conchubrani Vita S. Monennae*,” *PRIA* 28C (1910): 202–51; a more recent edition and translation has also been published by the Ulster Society for Medieval Studies, “The Life of St. Monenna by Conchubranus,” *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 9 (1978–9): 250–273, 10 (1980–1982): 117–41, 426–54. See, however, the important correction of chapter 1.3 of the *vita* by Maura Lafferty, “Educating a virgin: a proposed emendation of Conchubranus, *Vita S. Monennae* 1.3,” *JMLat* 15 (2005): 237–45. For dating see Esposito, “The sources of Conchubranus’ Life of St. Monenna,” *EHR* 35 (1920): 71–8; the chronology of the *vita* is determined based on a combination of internal evidence and intertextual relationships.

<sup>117</sup> The Salamanca Codex is Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 7672-4. The manuscripts of the Dublin collection are Dublin, Marsh Library, MS V.3.4 and Dublin, Trinity College, MS E.3.11. The Oxford texts, for their part, are preserved in Bodleian Rawlinson B.485 and 505. For an enumeration of the shared and unique works of the three collections, as well as for the English names adopted here for convenience, see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints’ Lives*, 228–39, 246–52, 347–63. The Salamanca *vitae* are edited by William W. Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels: Society of Bollandists, 1965). The Dublin texts and those *vitae* unique to the Oxford collection have been edited by Charles Plummer in the two volumes of *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*. The remaining Oxford *vitae* have not, as yet, been published as a collection, but some may be found in *Acta Sanctorum*.

<sup>118</sup> These most recent studies are Pádraig Ó Riain, *Beatha Bharra: St. Finbarr of Cork, the complete Life* (London: ITS, 1994), 94–8 and 109–12; also Ó Riain, “*Codex Salmanticensis*: a provenance *inter Anglos* or *inter Hibernos*?” in *A miracle of learning: studies in manuscripts and Irish learning*, ed. Toby Barnard, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and Katharine Simms (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 91–100; William O’Sullivan, “A Waterford origin for the *Codex Salmanticensis*,” *Decies: Journal of the Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society* 54 (1998): 17–24; and Caoimhín Breatnach, “The significance of the orthography of Irish proper names in the *Codex Salmanticensis*,” *Ériu* 55 (2005): 85–101.

redactions of the *vitae* in each collection, the determination of the probable time of composition for individual *vitae* is not so simply managed. The case of the O'Donohue group may illustrate the complexity of the matter.

Richard Sharpe has undertaken what may arguably be the most thorough exposition of the manuscript compilations of *vitae*, in which he argues that viable analysis of the *vitae* cannot be accomplished without some understanding of the work of their collectors.<sup>119</sup> Among Sharpe's many observations is the important enumeration of several subsets of *vitae* held in common by either two or all three of the great collections, *vitae* so close in content that they often even share errors. These subgroups are clear indicators that the compilers of Salamanca, Dublin and Oxford used some of the same sources.<sup>120</sup> One such source becomes a prime focus for Sharpe, namely the O'Donohue group, comprising nine (perhaps ten) *vitae* preserved in all three compilations and named for the individual whom colophons thank for providing them to the Salamanca compiler.

For Sharpe, the O'Donohue group displays three key characteristics that identify it as a unit: these nine (or ten) particular *vitae* possess in common errors, narrative style, Old Irish orthography and early Hiberno-Latin traits. Because the Salamanca versions of these texts are the longest and most detailed, Sharpe concludes that this manuscript best preserves the original works. Further, since Sharpe both dates Salamanca as the most recent of the three collections and considers Salamanca's O'Donohue *vitae* the source for the versions found in Dublin and Oxford, he assumes the trio all drew upon a shared archetype he labels  $\Phi$ .<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*; for assertion of argument, see pp. 85–9.

<sup>120</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 244–5, 266, 274–6, 297–339.

<sup>121</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 297–311.

Sharpe attempts to determine the date of  $\Phi$  based primarily upon Old Irish personal and place name forms found in Salamanca's O'Donohue group, from which evidence he determines that the compilation of  $\Phi$  should be firmly situated at c.800 CE, drawing upon earlier exempla.<sup>122</sup> Sharpe's certainty that Salamanca's version of the O'Donohue *vitae* preserves primitive traits largely unchanged since the ninth century has led him to claim that they represent an "uncontaminated survival" of the original  $\Phi$ .<sup>123</sup>

Sharpe's conclusions, however, have been strongly challenged. Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin's study of the church and polity of Glendalough, for example, demonstrates an eleventh-century stratum in the *Vita S. Coemgeni* of Salamanca, a member text of the O'Donohue group, showing that Sharpe's "uncontaminated survival" thesis cannot be universally sustained.<sup>124</sup> More damning still is the recent work of Caoimhín Breatnach, whose careful examination of the name orthography of Salamanca's O'Donohue group dismantles Sharpe's assertions that the name forms indicate the preservation of Old Irish in this compilation, which was performed, at the very latest, in the early 1300s. Breatnach convincingly shows that the supposedly primitive orthographical features so critical to Sharpe's argument are actually fully consonant with other thirteenth-century manuscripts, and therefore are evidence not of the ancient origins of Salamanca's O'Donohue group but of the provenance and date of Salamanca itself.<sup>125</sup>

Ultimately, outside the seventh- and eighth-century *vitae* and apart from the rare gift of verifiable authorship or colophon evidence, Latin hagiography is perniciously difficult to date. Lacking any other clues, the chronological placement of *vitae* can only

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<sup>122</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 319–34.

<sup>123</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 244 (quote), 334, 342.

<sup>124</sup> *Church and polity in pre-Norman Ireland: the case of Glendalough* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1996), 149.

<sup>125</sup> "Irish proper names in the *Codex Salmanticensis*." Breatnach does not, however, address or unseat the apparently early Hiberno-Latin elements Sharpe highlights as a characteristic of  $\Phi$ .



be accomplished on the basis of internal evidence, such as references to persons, places or events supported by other sources, that may establish dates before or after which the texts cannot place.<sup>126</sup> The matter does not rest there, however, as such a set of parameters may not apply to the entirety of the work. The *Lives* of the saints, whether in Latin or the vernacular, are notoriously stratified, elements being added to, subtracted from or modified in the core narrative over time. As a consequence, even the most demonstrably solid dating may only be relevant for a particular layer, or stratum, of a text.<sup>127</sup> For this reason, though studies such as Máire Herbert's examination of the Salamanca *Vita S. Cainnechi* and *Vita S. Aedi* may show that the former has elements from the mid-700s and the latter from somewhat earlier, apparently supporting Sharpe's thesis, there is still little that precludes the simultaneous likelihood of much later—or earlier—strata, such as those Mac Shamhráin uncovers in the *Vita S. Coemgeni*.<sup>128</sup>

Numerous additional studies demonstrate this high level of stratification in Ireland's *vitae*. Thus, for instance, Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel shows that the continental influences apparent in the Salamanca *vitae* of Flannán and Mochuille are more likely to result from being reworked in Regensburg rather than having a continentally-educated author who wrote while in Ireland, as asserted by Donnchadh Ó Corráin.<sup>129</sup> Nathalie Stalmans has also presented convincing evidence that six *vitae* with connections to the

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<sup>126</sup> McCone, "Introduction," 40.

<sup>127</sup> Doherty, "Irish hagiographer," 13; McCone, "Introduction," 40.

<sup>128</sup> Herbert, "The *Vita Columbae* and Irish hagiography: a study of *Vita Cainnechi*," in *Studies*, ed. Carey, Herbert and Ó Riain, 31–40; Mac Shamhráin, *Church and polity*, 149.

<sup>129</sup> Ó Corráin, "Foreign connections and domestic politics: Killaloe and the Uí Briain in twelfth-century hagiography," in *Ireland in early mediaeval Europe: studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick and David Dumville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 213–31; Ó Riain-Raedel, "The travels of Irish manuscripts: from the Continent to Ireland," in 'A miracle of learning', ed. Barnard, Ó Cróinín and Simms, 52–67; also "German influence on Munster church and kings in the twelfth century," in *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 323–30.

Leinster region of Slieve Bloom possess passages which, by virtue of descriptions of Slieve Bloom as savage and uncultivated, betray strata that must originate in the first half of the seventh century—prior to the domestication of the area—though the works themselves apparently date from at least one hundred years later.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Raymond Patterson’s work not only suggests dates for the earliest *vitae* of Íta and Samthann based on internal evidence, it also illustrates the influence of reform attitudes on some of the later redaction layers.<sup>131</sup>

*Lives of the saints in Irish: the bethada*

As challenging as dating Ireland’s Latin works may be, the situation is little different with respect to texts composed partly or entirely in the vernacular. There may occasionally be the possibility of determining or augmenting chronological evidence through the use of linguistic analysis, in which the grammar, phonology and morphology of a text’s Irish composition is closely examined for elements known to have been prevalent in the Old Irish era (c.600 to c.900) but which declined in the Middle Irish period (c.900 to c.1200).<sup>132</sup> Linguistic criteria on their own, however, are seldom sufficient; as Kim McCone observes, “linguistic dating is, whatever scholars of Old and Middle Irish may sometimes say and get others to believe, at best a very approximate affair.”<sup>133</sup> It is still advisable, therefore, to seek internal evidence to corroborate the traits

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<sup>130</sup> “La description de la région de Slieve Bloom (Irlande) dans l’hagiographie de quelques fondateurs. Une clef de datation des sources?” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 76 (1998): 895–906.

<sup>131</sup> “Irish hagiography and reform movements: a comparison of the portrait of the saint in the Lives of Sts. Ita, Samthann, Declán, and Malachy” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2002).

<sup>132</sup> Kim McCone, “Prehistoric, Old and Middle Irish,” in *Progress*, ed. McCone and Simms, 7–53.

<sup>133</sup> McCone, “Introduction,” 40.

of the language, though even then the resulting chronological parameters cannot preclude the possibility of textual stratification.<sup>134</sup>

In essence, even with the potential aid gained by close analysis of the Irish text, dating vernacular works remains a very sticky problem the issues of which, it has been suggested, “may well prove insoluble.”<sup>135</sup> That said, there are a few gems of reasonably solid chronology that can provide invaluable points of reference, even under the threat of stratification. The earliest of these is the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte*, the compilation of which has been placed firmly in the ninth century.<sup>136</sup> The *betha* of Adomnán possesses sufficient linguistic and contextual data to provide the surprisingly close chronological parameters of between 956 and 964 for the core of the text.<sup>137</sup> There is also an early twelfth-century *betha* of Colmán mac Lúacháin known from its colophon to have been originally composed shortly after the discovery, elevation and enshrinement of the saint’s relics in 1122.<sup>138</sup> Most works, however, fall into the realm of the repeatedly redacted and rewoven.

Saint Patrick has been commemorated in a vernacular *Life*, a homily in three parts known either as the *Vita Tripartita* (Tripartite Life) or *Betha Phátraic*.<sup>139</sup> This text is a

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<sup>134</sup> McCone, “Introduction,” 40.

<sup>135</sup> McCone, “Prehistoric, Old and Middle Irish,” 36.

<sup>136</sup> This *bethu* of Brigit of Kildare has been edited and translated by Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte*; see pp. ix–xxv for date. Also see McCone, “Introduction,” 43 and Sharpe, “*Vitae S Brigidae*,” 82, 93 for additional assessments which, while they disagree on whether the *Vita I* precedes or follows Cogitosus, agree on the chronological placement of the *Bethu Brigte*.

<sup>137</sup> The text is edited and translated by Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnáin: the Irish Life of Adamnán* (London: ITS, 1988); see pp. 1–44 for lengthy discussion of dating criteria. Also see discussion in Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 151–68, 203.

<sup>138</sup> The text is edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis and Company, 1911); see pp. vi–vii for dating.

<sup>139</sup> The *Life* was edited by Kathleen Mulchrone, *Betha Phátraic: the Tripartite Life of Patrick Volume I: texts and sources* (Dublin: Hodges and Figgis, 1939); Mulchrone attempts to reconstruct the ‘original’ core text as it was first composed, which has excited some strong criticism (see the following note for the criticism as summarized by Kenneth Jackson). Mulchrone’s planned second volume with a translation was

true paradigm of the multi-layered *Life*; it has been shown to encompass a core element datable on internal evidence to c.900, but the body of the homily also has traits from the tenth and early eleventh centuries, and the introductions and perorations of the text appear to be of at least the eleventh century as well. Thus the *Betha Phátraic*, as it is extant, most probably is a redaction of around 1000 that still retains the signs of its earlier incarnations.<sup>140</sup> This text is also one of a group of Middle Irish homilies regarding the saints that was apparently collected into an homiliarum in the late eleventh century.<sup>141</sup>

The *bethada* of the Book of Lismore, a compilation of texts gathered in the later 1400s from earlier sources, also possess many chronological strands.<sup>142</sup> The works within Lismore, however, are linguistically mixed, possessing elements from Old, Middle and Early Modern Irish.<sup>143</sup> Heavily predominant amongst those strata appears to be “a fairly late type of Middle Irish suggestive of a roughly eleventh- or twelfth-century date of

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unfortunately never completed, so for a much older edition with translation it is necessary to turn to Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick: with other documents relating to that saint*, 2 vols. (1887; reprint, Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1965).

<sup>140</sup> Probably the most thorough analysis of the *Betha Phátraic* is that of Kenneth H. Jackson, “The date of the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick,” *ZCP* 41 (1986): 5–45; see p. 7 for Jackson’s critique of Mulchrone. Other scholars who have commented on the date of the *Betha* are also summarized by Jackson, including Whitley Stokes (pp. 6–7), John Strachan (p. 7), Rudolf Thurneysen (p. 8), T. F. O’Rahilly (p. 8) and Frederic Mac Donncha (pp. 8–9). See also Kenney, *Sources*, 343; Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 134; and Frederic Mac Donncha, “Medieval Irish homilies,” in *Biblical studies: the medieval Irish contribution*, ed. Martin McNamara (Dublin: Dominican Publication, 1976), 66.

<sup>141</sup> The majority of these homilies are edited and translated either by Whitley Stokes, *Three Middle Irish homilies on the lives of saints Patrick, Brigit, and Columba* (Calcutta: n.p., 1877), or by Robert Aitkinson, *The passions and homilies from Leabhar Breac* (Dublin: RIA, 1887). For some of the commentary of other scholars see Mac Donncha, “Medieval Irish homilies,” and Gearóid Mac Eoin, “Observations on some Middle-Irish homilies,” in *Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Bildung und Literatur*, hrsg. Próinséas Ní Chatháin und Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1996), 195–211.

<sup>142</sup> Kenney, *Sources*, 308–9, 381; also James Carney, “Literature in Irish, 1169–1534,” in *A new history of Ireland II: medieval Ireland 1169–1534*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 692. The *bethada* of Lismore have been edited and translated by Whitley Stokes, *Lives of the saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890). The Book of Lismore survives in three manuscripts: Chatsworth, Book of Lismore, folios 41ra1–84ra9 (facsimile pagination), Dublin, RIA MS 57,477 (formerly 23.K.5) and Dublin, RIA MS 478,474 (formerly 23.H.6).

<sup>143</sup> Stokes, *Book of Lismore*, v, xlv.

composition.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, a number of these works have narrative cores shown to place to that era, including the *bethada* of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise (mid-eleventh to mid-twelfth century), Finnhúa (late eleventh or early twelfth century), Senán (twelfth century), and Finnian of Clonard (twelfth century).<sup>145</sup> Some of these texts also have still earlier layers demonstrably located in the ninth or tenth centuries.<sup>146</sup>

Charles Plummer has also gathered together a number of texts into two collections he has edited and translated as the *Bethada naem nÉrenn* and the *Miscellanea hagiographica hibernica*.<sup>147</sup> These texts also show evidence of stratification, but in the main all appear to be written in a late Middle Irish akin to that of Lismore, the composition of a major portion of their contents thus similarly placed in the eleventh or twelfth century.<sup>148</sup> The second *betha* of Máedóc extant in *Bethada naem nÉrenn*, for example, is held to have been written in the 1100s, but possesses elements such as verses added in the early 1300s and is, as a whole, extant in a redaction of the late 1400s.<sup>149</sup> In like fashion the *Betha Meic Creiche* of the *Miscellanea*, though drawn from a manuscript dated by its colophon to 1528, is clearly descended from an exemplar of probably the

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<sup>144</sup> McCone, “Introduction,” 38.

<sup>145</sup> Máire Herbert, “An infancy narrative of Saint Ciarán,” *PHCC* 14 (1994): 1–8 (Ciarán of Clonmacnoise); Kenney, *Sources*, 458; Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 243–4; and Overbey, “Space of the holy body,” 199–201 (Finnhúa); Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 242–3 (Senán); and Hughes, “The historical value of the Lives of St. Finnian of Clonard,” *EHR* 69 (1954): 355–7, 371–2.

<sup>146</sup> Finnian of Clonard’s Lismore *betha* descends from a core of ninth- or tenth-century date; see Hughes, “Lives of St. Finnian,” 372. The *Betha Shenáin* likewise possesses a stratum from the tenth century; see Hughes, *Church in early Irish society*, 225 and note 3.

<sup>147</sup> *Bethada naem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish saints*, 2 vols. (1922; reprint, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997); *Miscellanea hagiographica hibernica: vitae adhuc ineditae sanctorum Mac Creiche, Naile, Cranat, ad fidem codicum manu scriptorum recognovit prolegomenis notis indicibus instruxit Carolus Plummer* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1925).

<sup>148</sup> McCone, “Introduction,” 38.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Doherty, “Some aspects of hagiography as a source for Irish economic history,” *Peritia* 1 (1982): 322; also Doherty, “The transmission of the cult of St. Máedhóg,” in *Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung*, hrsg. Próinséas Ní Chatháin und Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 273–83.

twelfth century, and has been shown to preserve some elements that may be as early as the 800s.<sup>150</sup>

It is clear that even apparently certain dates cannot necessarily be taken as the *only* relevant time periods for their texts. In fact, whether in Latin or the vernacular, most *Lives* show signs of repeated redaction. Early elements are found mingled with accretions and alterations from throughout the medieval period, mirroring, in a sense, the development of the hagiographical genre. This vexing matter of chronology, complicated as it is both by the length of the tradition and by its survival in two languages, makes a straightforward historical model of Ireland's hagiography much more than challenging.<sup>151</sup>

### **The holy other in Ireland's hagiography**

Discussion of the ways in which sanctity is represented in narratives concerning holy men and women may use several approaches. Individual saints may be examined, following the contents of their hagiographical dossiers in order from the earliest to the most recent texts.<sup>152</sup> Where a saint's dossier is replete with datable evidence, this method allows an intriguing view of the evolution of that specific individual's image over time. Despite a hagiographical corpus of respectable size, however, Ireland's saints seldom possess extensive dossiers and, as already noted, datable material is at a premium; a true

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<sup>150</sup> Seán Ó Coileáin, "The saint and the king," in *Folia Gadelica*, ed. Pádraig de Brún, Seán Ó Coileáin and Pádraig Ó Riain (Cork: Cork University Press, 1983), 36–46, asserts that a list of kings in the *betha* must date to well before the age of the *betha* itself, and must be closer to the dates of those the list names. Ó Coileáin says that date may "possibly" be as early as the ninth century.

<sup>151</sup> All translations from Latin in this study are my own, while translations from Old or Middle Irish rely heavily upon the work of prior scholars. Any orthographical irregularities in cited Latin or Irish are original to the quoted text. Further, all discussions of the deeds of saints refer not to the acts of historical individuals, but solely to the *acta* of the literary figures portrayed in the *Lives*.

<sup>152</sup> Generally dossier studies have, to this point, not engaged in examination of sanctity itself, but in the evolution of a saint's cult and the religious, ecclesiastical and cultural history that is apparent in the incidental data of the dossiers considered. Examples include those of Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* and Mac Shamhráin, *Church and polity*.

historical development can only be explored for perhaps four or five Irish saints, only one of whom is female.

Another potential approach is the consideration of specific motifs across the *Lives* of numerous saints, an avenue seen, for example, in the essays of Jean-Michel Picard, Dorothy Ann Bray and Clare Stancliffe on the “folk-lore” type of miracle.<sup>153</sup> This focus permits a full exposition of closely defined elements, and can particularly clarify the numerous cultural and textual inspirations for the motifs in question. Additionally, motival explorations also can—where the evidence is datable—provide a sense of the use and adaptation of these small facets of narrative sanctity over time. With respect to Ireland’s saints, though, the close-up lens of a motival study is too limited to offer a three-dimensional image of literary holiness. Though motival elements play a role in the following chapters, they are not the primary avenue of examination.

A third avenue toward the understanding of holy otherness, and that adopted by the analysis of Ireland’s medieval hagiography pursued in this study, is the discussion of selected broad themes across the *Lives* of numerous saints.<sup>154</sup> This approach allows the inclusion of a wide swath of the available evidence without necessitating an exact resolution of the thorny chronology question or requiring a saint to possess a complete dossier. Though the construction of an evolutionary model is not really feasible when a thematic examination lacks sufficient datable evidence, the chosen themes do offer a set of defined limits within which the plethora of Ireland’s saintly portrayals may be

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<sup>153</sup> See above, notes 59 (Stancliffe), 70 (Picard) and 78 (Bray). My own study, “Preserving the body Christian: the motif of ‘recapitation’ in Ireland’s medieval hagiography,” *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 10 (2007), <http://www.heroicage.org>, is also a member of this category.

<sup>154</sup> This approach is in part that of Stalmans, *Saints d’Irlande*, in which the themes discussed include the depiction of royalty and of the figure of the *magus*, the saint’s socio-ecclesiastical roles, and the function of relics for each *vita* considered.

managed. These limits create a sort of skeleton of sanctity, yet retain the flexibility both to analyze the multiple components and motifs subsumed into a theme and to access sufficient material for the illumination of a multi-dimensional understanding of medieval Ireland's representations of holy otherness.

Chapter One, "Introduction," has offered a broad review of the conceptions of sanctity in Christian theology and in the works of modern scholars of hagiography, or hagiologists, with respect to the hagiographical traditions both within and outside the shores of Ireland. It has shown that while a significant degree of correlation between depictions of continental and Irish saints cannot be denied, there is room to consider some of the elements of sanctity in texts concerning Ireland's holy individuals as unique, either because they are common traits altered in some manner by the influences of the cultural and religious milieu of medieval Ireland or because they are not seen outside the Irish tradition. It is now time to turn to the work of subsequent chapters, each of which encompasses a theme or subset of themes that may reveal facets of the gem of holiness.

Chapter Two, "From Essence to Identity," considers the incarnation of holiness in the person of the holy and the consequences to human physiology that appear to result. Who are the parents chosen to birth and raise Irish saints? How, when and where are sanctified children conceived and born? How are they described? How is the holy body depicted? Are Ireland's holy others all beautiful paradigms of perfection in mind and body? What happens to the mortal form when it is inhabited by the sanctified essence of God's favor? Does this indwelling essence confer particular abilities or manifest in specific signs that demonstrate its presence? How does a saint transition from a human to a heavenly life?



Chapter Three, “Punishment and Penance,” addresses the portrayals of saintly vengeance in the *Lives* of Irish saints. The holy men and women of Ireland have often been accused of vindictive behavior. In the twelfth century, Gerald of Wales wrote that the Irish saints, like their secular compatriots, “appear to be more vengeful than the saints of other regions” (*pre aliarum regionum sanctis animi uindicis esse uidentur*).<sup>155</sup> A similar opinion still prevails among some modern scholars.<sup>156</sup> It is certainly true that the *Lives* depict their sanctified subjects in association with often flashy displays of punitive consequence. There are, in fact, so many representations of saintly retribution that they require a slightly different framework of categorization from that pursued in Chapter Two or Chapter Four. But are these episodes merely a matter of holy temper tantrums, or do they represent something more significant? What does a saint’s vengeful act express concerning the hagiographical image of sanctity?

Chapter Four, “From Exile to Enlightenment,” assesses the handling of healing episodes in Ireland’s hagiography. It has been observed that healing stories are rare in the seventh-century *vitae*.<sup>157</sup> Is this true for all saints of these texts? If so, does it remain true in the wider scope of the evidence? Saints, cures and resuscitations are not, in and of themselves, surprising associations to see in texts painting images of individuals whose lives were meant to embody perfected Christian virtue. Do the miraculous restorations of health and life in the *Lives* of Ireland’s saints follow a standard pattern, or are there

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<sup>155</sup> *Topographia Hiberniae* 2.83, ed. John J. O’Meara, “Giraldus Cambrensis in *Topographia Hiberniae*: text of the first recension,” *PRIA* 52C (1949): 156; for dating to the late twelfth century see *The history and topography of Ireland*, trans. O’Meara (1951; reprint, Portlaoise: Dolmen, 1982), 14–15. See also James Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages* (1972; reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 54–66 for the circumstances of the circuit of Ireland that led to Gerald’s composition of the *Topographia*, as well as for Gerald’s commentary on John’s successes and failures.

<sup>156</sup> See for example Little, “Anger in monastic curses,” 28–9, where Ireland’s saints are declared the “matchless champions of the spontaneous, hostile, and efficacious curse” delivered through the vehicle of divinely sanctioned rage.

<sup>157</sup> Picard, “Marvellous,” 92–3; Stancliffe, “Miracle stories,” 89.

unusual traits? What is really said about the Irish conception of literary holiness when saints perform healing acts?

In Chapter Five, “Saint and Society in Ireland,” the arguments of this study are summarized, and potential avenues for future research are suggested. The questions of separate models of sanctity for male and female saints and for Latin and vernacular *Lives* are addressed, leading to a discussion of the likely audiences for the *vitae* and *bethada*. The many strands of the themes examined are woven together in a concluding commentary. The result is a tapestry of the image of holy otherness in medieval Ireland’s hagiography that allows understanding of the placement of this image not only within Ireland but in the traditions of saints’ *Lives* abroad.

Finally, Chapter Five is followed by an appendix, in which the controversy surrounding the date of the anonymous *Vita I S Brigitae* is assessed in detail. Of particular focus is the apparent use by the *Vita I* of a homiletic text, the *De duodecim abusiuis saeculi*. According to the evidence of parallels between the narratives, the appendix then offers the possibility of narrowing the chronological range within which the *Vita I* could have been compiled. But before reaching that final point, attention now must turn to the embodiment of sanctity in the person of the saint.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *From essence to identity*

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“The saint is a privileged character  
from the very beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

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#### **Saintly origins**

How does an Irish saint become a saint? Is it a matter of good deeds performed throughout a life virtuously spent in the Lord’s service? Or are Ireland’s sanctified made holy by enduring the agonies of martyrdom in the name of their faith? According to the evidence of the medieval *Lives*, Irish men and women were not recognized as saints by their biographers because of what they did, how they lived or under what circumstances they died. Instead, sanctity participates in the production of the hagiographical saint from before conception, making of such elements as good works, virtue-filled living and martyrdom not the reasons an otherwise ordinary mortal is elevated by God’s favor, but the signifiers of an already extant election.

In the *vitae* and *bethada* of Ireland, sainthood is neither attained nor conferred, but is innate, an essence literally embodied through the conception and birth of the holy other. This essence alters the human body in which it resides, and thus continues to express itself throughout the saint’s reported life in a variety of ways. This chapter examines the motion of holiness from incarnation through death as witnessed in the *Lives* of Ireland’s saints, and discusses the biblical, apocryphal and heroic parallels that serve to illuminate the messages conveyed by the depictions of this motion.

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<sup>1</sup> Elissa Henken, *Welsh saints*, 23. Although Henken specifically refers to the male saints of Wales, it will be seen that much the same observation is true of Ireland’s holy men and women, as has also been noted by, among others, Bray, *List of motifs*, 10–11.

## Genesis: a saint conceived

Embodiment must start somewhere, and saints are no exception. At the roots of every saint's *Life* lies the story of how sanctity and mortality intertwine to produce the person of the holy other. It is to those roots that attention must therefore turn.

### *Conception foretold*

The narrative of sanctity in medieval Ireland begins long before the arrival of a holy child in the story. Nearly all Irish saints are prophesied, sometimes only a short while before conception and sometimes generations in advance. Quite often the foretelling is delivered by another saint, whose role as prophet places him—or her—in the same position as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, while the child whose eventual birth is the fulfillment of that prophecy becomes both another prophet known by God before formed and sanctified before birth, as Jeremiah pronounces, and another Christ.<sup>2</sup> According to Adomnán, the nativity of Columba of Iona was predicted many years beforehand by Saint Mochta of Louth, a disciple of Patrick.<sup>3</sup> In the *vitae*, Patrick anticipates the birth of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise by fifty years, and is also credited with forecasting Abbán of Moyarney, Colmán of Dromore, Mac Nisse, Berach and Molaisse

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<sup>2</sup> Isa. 7:14, 11:1–11, Jer. 23:5–6, Ezek. 34:23–31. Jeremiah's report of his election by God is made at Jer. 1:4–7: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you exited the womb I sanctified you as a prophet and gave you to the nations" (*priusquam te formarem in utero novi te et antequam exires de vulva sanctificavi te prophetam gentibus dedi te*). John 1:1–4: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was made nothing that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (*In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum. Hoc erat in principio apud Deum. Omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est. In ipso vita erat et vita erat lux hominum*).

<sup>3</sup> *Vita S Columbae* Preface 2, p. 4.

of Devenish.<sup>4</sup> Columba of Iona also makes his own share of prognostications, such as that regarding Féchín of Fore's eventual advent.<sup>5</sup> Patrick himself, the foundation of Irish male holiness, is said in his anonymous *Vita IV* to have been "predestined by Omnipotent God, before worldly time, to be the apostle of the Irish" (*ante tempora secularia ab omnipotenti Deo apostolus Hibernensium praedestinatus*).<sup>6</sup> Only Patrick, chief of the saints of Ireland, could be said to be foreknown by God alone without the active participation of spoken human prophecy; thereafter, Latin forecasts of saintly conceptions and births all pass through God's agents among the Irish.

In Irish texts, prophecies of the future arrival of saints by other saints are surprisingly uncommon, though this may admittedly be due to the survival of fewer *bethada* than *vitae* from the Middle Ages. Ciarán of Clonmacnoise is one of those whose *betha* does include such prognostications, by not one but four holy Irish, namely Patrick, Brigit, Becc mac Dé and Columba of Iona.<sup>7</sup> Columba, too, receives multiple anticipatory foretellings, from Mochta, Patrick and Brigit.<sup>8</sup> In the conception prophecies of the vernacular *Lives*, it simply does not generally suffice to have only one saint predict a holy man's birth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 78. *Vita S Abbani de Mag Arnaide et Cell Abbain* (Salamanca) 1, p. 256; *Vita S Abbani abbatis de Mag Arnaide* (Dublin) 2, VSH 1, 3–4. *Vita S Colmani episcopi Dromorensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 357. *Vita S Mac Nissei episcopi Connerensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 404. *Vita S Berachi abbatis de Cluain Coirpthe* (Oxford) 3, VSH 1, 75–6; *Betha Beraigh* 2, 3.9, BNÉ 1, 24–5; BNÉ 2, 23. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatis de Dam Inis* (Oxford) 2, VSH 2, 131.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita S Fechini abbatis de Fauoria* (Oxford) 2, VSH 2, 76; see also ch. 3 of his later *betha*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, "Life of St. Féchín of Fore," *RC* 12 (1891): 320–323.

<sup>6</sup> Ch. 76, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *Four Latin Lives of Patrick: Vita secunda, quarta, tertia and quinta* (Dublin: DIAS, 1971), 105–6; also ed. and trans. Francis J. Byrne and Pádraig Francis, "Two Lives of Saint Patrick: *Vita secunda* and *Vita quarta*," *JRSAI* 124 (1996): 57. My translation differs very slightly from that of Byrne and Francis, who phrase it as "predestined before time began by Almighty God to be the apostle of the Irish."

<sup>7</sup> *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) II 3968–74, pp. 118, 262–3.

<sup>8</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* 13–14, Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 223–4, 251–2.

<sup>9</sup> Occasionally only one saint does suffice, and this is usually Patrick; see for example *Betha Shenain meic Geirrginn* (Lismore) II 1797–1863, pp. 54–5, 201–3.

It is noteworthy that, as far as the extant evidence appears to allow, no female saint's conception is prophesied by another saint, whether in the *vitae* or the *bethada*. Admittedly there is a regrettable dearth of *Lives* pertaining to holy women, a lack which may play some part in so curious a distinction, yet this simple explanation is hardly satisfactory. Just as Patrick is the fundament of Irish male sanctity, so Brigit is the first sanctified Irish female. Yet while Patrick's predestined status as God's apostle to the Irish creates in his person a *locus* of sanctity that then flows into other male saints through his forecasts of their conception, Brigit's holiness does not extend to prophesying the genesis of other holy women. Brigit anticipates the arrivals of male saints, but not female; Patrick, for his part, only predicts Irish holy men, and never women. While there may be some complex societal gender distinction at play that is not readily explainable within the realm of the present evidence, an equally likely possibility is that the lack of prophesied conceptions for females in scriptural texts has provided a negative model upon which Ireland's hagiographers drew. While biblical prophets regularly foretell other male prophets, especially foreseeing the advent of the Messiah, there are no holy women whose genesis and nativity receive the same distinction.<sup>10</sup>

One particular type of prophesied conception deserves its own discussion. In the Dublin *vita* of Mochutu of Lismore, it is not another saint who foretells the saint's nativity but an angel. In a break from the expected *imitatio Christi* pattern that would see the recipient of angelic messages as Mochutu's mother, however, it is instead two eminent holy men of Ireland, Comgall of Bangor and Brendán of Clonfert.<sup>11</sup> A similar

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<sup>10</sup> The virgin who would give birth to the Messiah is foretold only as the mother of the Christ; her own nativity is not mentioned, a distinction that hagiographers seem to have closely observed in their own texts. See Isa. 7:14.

<sup>11</sup> *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu episcopi de Less Mor* 2–3, *VSH* 1, 170–171.

prophecy is given to Brendán regarding the future conception and nativity of Moling.<sup>12</sup> Were the angel only another sanctified mortal, these messages would fit well into the Irish paradigm of conception foretold. It seems Mochutu's and Moling's hagiographers felt it necessary to claim an additional degree of heavenly authority for their subject's destined embodiment and holiness, beyond even that conferred by Patrick—whose angel, Victor, is specifically identified as the messenger who brings the news of Moling.<sup>13</sup> Also tempting is the possibility of a conceptual parallel with the angelic visitation to the shepherds the night of Jesus' birth.<sup>14</sup> Though the gospel choir does not make its appearance until after the birth of the holy child, the casting of Brendán and Comgall as shepherds of men, a common designation for both saints and for Jesus himself, has a certain appeal.<sup>15</sup>

### *The importance of lineage*

Just who did hagiographers consider worthy to produce a saint? Whatever the historical facts may or may not have been, writers of Ireland's saintly biographies claim exalted kinship for all of their subjects, often linking them through at least one parent with some of the leading families of Ireland, a fact noted by Dorothy Ann Bray, among others.<sup>16</sup> Columba of Iona, Áed mac Bricc and Fintán of Taghmon, for example, are among those who are linked with the powerful kindred of the Uí Néill, who held the

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<sup>12</sup> *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 7.24, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *The birth and life of St. Moling* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1907), 20–21.

<sup>13</sup> See for example *Vita II S Patricii* 14.XII, *Vita IV S Patricii* 16, Bieler, 64; Byrne and Francis, 29 for examples of Victor's visitations with Patrick.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 2:8–14.

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 25:32, John 10:11, 14, 16, and 1 Pet. 2:25 all refer to Jesus as a shepherd of the flock of faithful.

<sup>16</sup> *List of motifs*, 11–14; "Heroic tradition," 267.

Ulster throne at Tara for centuries.<sup>17</sup> Coemgen of Glendalough and Columba of Terryglass are members of a group of saints with descent from noble Leinster dynasties.<sup>18</sup> Fínán of Kinnitty is said to be related to a chief kindred of West Munster, the Corcu Duibne.<sup>19</sup> Brigit claims a paternal bloodline from the Fothairt.<sup>20</sup> Monenna is a daughter of the Cenél Conaill, a sept of the Uí Néill, while Íta, for her part, is a scion of the powerful Déisi of Munster.<sup>21</sup> In the *bethada*, saints' pedigrees even tend to link their subjects with heroes of legendary history, as occurs in Columba of Iona's *betha*, where his paternal heritage is traced back three generations to the legendary eponymous ancestor of the royal Uí Néill, Niall Noígiallach.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* Preface 2, p. 6. *Vita S Aidi episcopi Killariensis* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 167–8; *Vita S Aedi episcopi filii Bricc* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 34. *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu abbatis de Tech Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, p. 198; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu abbatis de Tech Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 247–8; *Vita S Munnu siue Fintani abbatis de Tech Munnu* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 226. The Uí Néill ruled Tara from roughly the fifth to the early eleventh century. See Francis J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (1973; reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 70–105, 254–67. The throne of Tara became the primary seat of the kingship of Ulster around the time that the Uí Néill came to power, the exact dates of which are unknown; they were, however, fully established in their sovereignty by the time that records become reliable in the sixth and seventh centuries. The throne of Tara occupied a status much like that of other strong provincial thrones until it gained the mystique of being the seat of the “High King of Ireland” in the writings of annalists compiling entries after the fall of the Uí Néill in the first decades of the eleventh century.

<sup>18</sup> *Vita S Caemgeni abbatis Glenndalochensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 361; *Vita S Coemgeni abbatis de Glenn Da Loch* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 234. *Vita S Columbae abbatis de Tír Dá Glas* (Salamanca) 1, p. 225.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita S Finani abbatis de Cenn Etigh* (Salamanca) 1, p. 153; (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1151–3, pp. 35, 183.

<sup>21</sup> *Vita S Darerca seu Moninnae abbatissae* (Salamanca) 1, p. 83; Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 1.2, Esposito, 208 and USMLS, 254–5. *Vita S Ite virginis* (Dublin), VSH 2, 116. The Déisi are also the kindred who claim Declán of Ardmore; the introductory chapters of the Dublin *vitae* of Íta and Declán, in fact, offer accounts of the history of this people from their position ruling Tara, through their expulsion and wandering, to their eventual settling in Munster that are so alike I am hard pressed to not see the same authorial hand at work in the source utilized by the Dublin redactor. See also *Vita S Declani episcopi de Ard Mor* 1, VSH 2, 32–3.

<sup>22</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* 15–16, 20, pp. 224, 225–6, 252–3. Generally, the pedigrees of saints in the *bethada* are at least twice the length of those in the *vitae*, and some extend to two dozen or more generations. See, for example, the following Lismore *bethada*: *Betha Fhindein Clúana hEaird* II 2504–8, pp. 75, 222; *Betha Finnchua Bri Gobunn* II 2788–2802, pp. 84, 231; *Betha Shenain* II 1792–7, pp. 54, 201; *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* II 3975–4000, pp. 118–19, 264. *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 3, 5, pp. 4–7. *Betha Bhrighdi* II 1151–3, pp. 35, 183. Although there may have been an extended genealogy provided by the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte* as well, the loss of the text's beginning make it impossible to know for certain.



In much the same sense that saints are elevated from the rest of humanity by God's election, it seems nobility is represented in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints as a distinguishing factor that raises the relationship of the upper social echelons with God above that of the general masses. By virtue of these uncommon bloodlines, aristocrats are apparently one step closer to the divine and therefore are seen by the writers of Ireland's saintly biographers as more fit to channel sanctity into the next generation. Such a perception of the fitness of noble families is corroborated by statements similar to that regarding the parents of the eminent saint Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, "from whom", it is written of them, "many saints were born" (*ex quibus multi sancti nati sunt*).<sup>23</sup>

The emphasis on the nobility of at least one parent in both the shorter lineal notices of the *vitae* and the extensive pedigrees of the *bethada* may be inspired by scriptural texts. Of particular relevance may be the lengthy lineage found at the beginning of the *Gospel of Matthew*, which assigns Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, to the royal line of David, a heritage that is a precondition for Jesus' recognition as the Messiah.<sup>24</sup> In starting every *Life* with a pedigree that ranks an Irish saint among the nobility, Ireland's hagiographers follow a pattern thus set by the New Testament itself, making aristocratic blood a requirement for the embodiment of sanctity and creating, in essence, a gospel for each saint.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 78; *Vita S Ciarani abbatis de Cluain mic Nois* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 200–201.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 1:1–17; see the prophecy of Isaiah, Isa. 9:2–7, which claims that the Messiah will sit on David's throne to establish and rule the kingdom of heaven on earth. Also see Luke 1:32, in which the angel tells Mary her son will be given David's throne and will rule in the house of Jacob forever.

<sup>25</sup> In no way do I claim that nobility is a facet of holiness unique to Ireland's hagiography. The likely gospel foundation, however, probably at least partially explains the prevalence of nobility as an important component in the *Lives* of both the Irish and of other traditions as well. Additional corroboration for the concept of the saint's *vita* in Ireland as a form of gospel for its holy subject is found in the repeated use of chapter *incipit* phrases that echo those of the New Testament's "on a certain day" (*una dierum*, Luke 5:17, 8:22) or "in those days" (*in diebus illis*, Matt. 3:1, Mark 8:1, Luke 1:24, 2:1) such as "on a certain day"

Joseph Falaky Nagy, applying concepts of the transitional or liminal state as developed by Arnold van Gennep to the specifics of early Irish narrative, has proposed that the role of the Irish saint is as a mediator not only between God and man—a path walked by Bray and Ó Cathasaigh as well, as observed in Chapter One—but also between pagan and Christian, oral and literary traditions.<sup>26</sup> The liminal zone, writes Nagy, both possesses and exerts a “sacred force” that can confer “extraordinary powers” and knowledge on the people and objects associated with it.<sup>27</sup> In the realm of a saint’s lineage, the ultimate model of liminal birth is most likely that of Jesus, the wholly human yet still wholly divine Christ who retains paternal nobility through the royal line of David despite having no earthly biological father.<sup>28</sup> Following this model, the highborn parents of the Irish holy frequently define a liminal space through their union, from which liminality is then generated the holy child. Kim McCone has observed, for instance, that the bringing together of Áed mac Bricc’s Munster mother, a member of the Muscraige Tír, and his Uí Néill father straddles “the most important political division in early Christian Ireland,” namely that between the northern and southern halves of the island.<sup>29</sup>

Nor is Áed mac Bricc the only saint for whom such a liminal heritage holds true. Lugaid of Clonfertmulloe is the product of a Corcaige father and Osraige mother, and

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(*quadam die*), “and on another day” (*alio quoque die*) or “at another time” (*alio tempore*). On the noted preference for the *Gospel of Matthew* over the other Gospels, see Joseph Kelly, “Hiberno-Latin theology,” in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, hrsg. Heinz Löwe (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 558–9; also “*Das Bibelwerk: organization and Quellenanalyse of the New Testament section*,” in *Bibelstudien und Mission*, ed. Ní Chatháin and Richter, 115–22.

<sup>26</sup> van Gennep, *The rites of passage*; Nagy, “Close encounters,” 139, 148–9. This argument became the core of his later insightful work, *Conversing with angels and ancients*. For Bray and Ó Cathasaigh, see pp. 24–5 above.

<sup>27</sup> “Liminality and knowledge in Irish tradition,” 135, 142.

<sup>28</sup> See Jesus’ genealogy at Matt. 1:1–17; the story of the conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is told in Luke 1:30–38.

<sup>29</sup> *Pagan past*, 190.

therefore joins a western and an eastern kingdom across the province of Munster.<sup>30</sup>

Fintán of Taghmon's father is of an eastern Uí Néill sept, the Cenél Conaill, while his mother is of a western branch, the Uí Maine, unifying parts of Ulster and Connacht.<sup>31</sup>

Mochoemóg descends from a Connachtman-in-exile and a Munster woman.<sup>32</sup> Lasair is the daughter of an Eóganacht father and a mother from Leinster, merging eastern and western regions in the southern half of Ireland.<sup>33</sup> Social status, too, may form a threshold crossed by the union of saints' parents, as in the coming together of a noble father and slave mother in the *Lives* of Ailbe and Brigit.<sup>34</sup> So also religion creates a boundary that may be erased by the birth of a Christian saint to pagan parents, as occurs with, for instance, Ciarán of Saigir.<sup>35</sup>

Not only do such parental ties fuse two political or socioeconomic entities both in the act of procreation and in its living consequence, but they also produce an individual who, by the very nature of his or her origins, cannot be claimed by any one people, kingdom or province. Instead, the holy persons whose mothers and fathers hail from politically or socially disparate roots belong to, are part of and, to no small extent, may declare a sort of ecclesiastical suzerainty over the peoples of not only their maternal but also their paternal forebears. These societally liminal saints, therefore, represent a

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<sup>30</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae abbatis de Cluain Ferta Molua* (Salamanca) 1, p. 131; *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae abbatis de Cluain Ferta Molua* (Salamanca) 1, p. 382 (in which Lugaid's father is only said to be a Munsterman); *Vita S Moluae abbatis de Cluain Ferta Moluae* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 206.

<sup>31</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, p. 198; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 247–8; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 226.

<sup>32</sup> *Vita S Mochoemog abbatis de Liath Mochoemog* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 164.

<sup>33</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* II 2–16, ed. and trans. Lucius Gwynn, "The Life of St. Lasair," *Ériu* 5 (1911): 74–5.

<sup>34</sup> *Vita S Albei episcopi in Imlech* (Salamanca) 1, p. 118; *Vita S Albei archiepiscopi de Imlech* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 46–7. *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.1, col. 0118F; ch. 1, Connolly, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 215 specifies that at the time of Ciarán of Saigir's birth, all Ireland was pagan. It should also be noted that some saints are likely to have been born to parents one of whom was pagan and the other Christian, but I am unaware of any instances where this difference is explicitly identified. It may, for example, be true of Brigit, whose father is said to be a (presumably pagan) druid in some of her *Lives*, but as her mother's religious affiliation is not defined such a label would only be speculation. See *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1151–5, pp. 35, 183.

Christian image of an idealized Ireland that extends its boundaries beyond those of a single class, kindred or domain, unified under one faith as led by its holy men and women the circumstances of whose lineage paint them in the image of the Messiah himself.

### *Legitimacy versus bastardy*

Unlike the emphasis on noble lineage throughout the *Lives* of Ireland's saints, there is a notable lack of attention paid to the status of the relationship between the progenitors of holy men and women. It is only in a small a number of *Lives* that the writers of saintly biography take care to indicate the marital status of their holy subjects' progenitors. The *vitae* of Finnian of Clonard, Maedóc of Ferns, Crónán of Roscrea, Declán of Ardmore, Mochoemóg and Molaisse of Devenish all specify that their saints are born to married parents, using terms like “wife” (*uxor*) and “husband” (*maritus*) for the relevant partners.<sup>36</sup> The *betha* of Colmán mac Lúachán also announces that the saint's mother and father were married, their betrothal arranged by a bishop.<sup>37</sup>

In an even tinier handful of saints, the unions of their parents are clearly said to be illicit. For Ailbe and Brigit, as noted above, descent is reckoned through fathers of higher status and slave mothers (*ancillae*). Ailbe's father secretly sleeps with the slavewoman of King Crónán, then flees for his life knowing Crónán desires her for himself.<sup>38</sup> Brigit, for her part, is born of the adulterous union between a married druid, Dubthach, and his

<sup>36</sup> *Vita S Finniani abbatis de Cluain Iraird* (Salamanca) 1, p. 96. *Vita S Aidi siue Maedoc episcopi ex Codice Cottoniano* (Vespasian) 1, VSH 2, 295; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc episcopi Fernensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 234; *Vita S Maedoc episcopi de Ferna* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 141. *Vita S Cronani abbatis de Ros Cree* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 274–5; *Vita S Cronani abbatis de Ros Cree* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 22. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 3, VSH 2, 35–6. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 164. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatis de Dam Inis* (Oxford) 3, VSH 2, 131.

<sup>37</sup> *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 7, pp. 6–7.

<sup>38</sup> *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 1, p. 118; (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 46–7.

slave, Broicsech, angering Dubthach's legitimate spouse.<sup>39</sup> In what Kim McCone has called "an interesting inversion of the more usual pattern" in which the saint's mother is of a status inferior to that of the father, Tigernach's conception results from the clandestine affair of a soldier in the employ of a king and that king's daughter.<sup>40</sup> Moling, on the other hand, in his late vernacular *Life*, can claim genesis from the scandalous, secretive intercourse of a married man and that man's sister-in-law.<sup>41</sup> Such illicit affairs result in children born out of wedlock, in a liminal realm of bastardy, as McCone has also noted.<sup>42</sup>

In those *Lives* where saints are born as a consequence of adultery or clandestine sexual congress, particularly between a married man and a slave woman, there are strong parallels with the biblical story of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah and the conception of Ishmael. Hagar, Sarah's slave, conceives Ishmael when Sarah gives her to Abraham as a concubine in order for Abraham to have an heir when Sarah herself is barren.<sup>43</sup> In both the Bible and the *Lives*, the child's father is married to someone other than his or her mother, the mother is a slave in the father's household, and the resulting child receives the favor of God. For Moling, whose pregnant mother Emnait flees her sister's wrath by night, there is also the shared moment of Hagar's flight from Sarah's mistreatment. In the case of the *Vita I* of Brigit, the parallel is bolstered by the angered words of Dubthach's wife upon discovering that her husband has fathered a child on the slave Broicsech, which words constitute a verbatim quote of the declaration of Sarah to Abraham

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<sup>39</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.1, col 0118F; ch. 1, Connolly, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Vita S Tigernachi episcopi in Cluain Eois* (Salamanca) 1, p. 107; *Vita S Tigernaci episcopi de Cluain Eois* (Oxford) 2, VSH 2, 262. See *Pagan past*, 189 for quote.

<sup>41</sup> *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 2.5, pp. 8–9.

<sup>42</sup> *Pagan past*, 182–3.

<sup>43</sup> Gen. 16.

regarding the expulsion of Hagar: “Cast out that bondmaid” (*Eiice ancillam istam*).<sup>44</sup>

Could the birth tale of Ishmael, a cast-out who is still promised numberless descendants and great eminence before God, be the legitimation of Ailbe, Tigernach, Moling and Brigit?

There is some exegetical support for such an interpretation. The Irish compilers of the mid-eighth-century compendium of exegesis, the *Reference Bible*, for instance, comment that the woman named Cethura whom Abraham marries after the death of Sarah is, in fact, Hagar, whose name is secretly changed to indicate her elevation from concubine to wife just as Sarai became Sarah to indicate God’s favor upon her.<sup>45</sup> In early Irish society, such an elevation would specifically make of Hagar a *cétmuintir*, or “chief wife”, the most privileged and apparently only fully legitimate spouse in vernacular Irish law.<sup>46</sup> That the *Reference Bible* commentators interpret the identity of Cethura as the covertly-legitimized Hagar suggests that Hagar’s status as concubine was considered inconsistent with the promise delivered to Abraham concerning the eminence of their son Ishmael’s descendants. Such a status would also seem to be inappropriate for the mother of a saint, unless—as Irish exegetes seem to have thought—there was reason to view these unions as more legitimate than that of married man and unmarried slave. In essence, it seems possible that parallels between the Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael story and

<sup>44</sup> Ch. 1.1, col. 0118F; ch. 1.2, Connolly, 14. Gen 21:10.

<sup>45</sup> Gen. 17:15. *Reference Bible* §§295, 320, ed. Gerard MacGinty, *The Reference Bible/Das Bibelwerk: inter pauca problemsmata de enigmatibus ex tomis canonicis* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 132, 143. See p. x for dating of c.750 CE.

<sup>46</sup> D. A. Binchy, ed. *Críth Gablach* (1941; reprint, Dublin: DIAS, 1970), 80–81, “*cétmuintir*”. Donnchadh Ó Corráin has observed regarding the status of the *cétmuintir* that she “is so privileged that one may feel that for the lawyers she is the real wife” while “the secondary wife” in other legal tracts increasingly gains the identification of *adaltrach*, or adulteress. “Women and the law in early Ireland,” in *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society*, ed. Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, 1995), 45–57; citation on p. 56. Also see Ó Corráin, “Women in early Irish society,” in *Women in Irish society: the historical dimension*, ed. Margaret MacCurtain and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 1–13, esp. p. 4, and Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin: DIAS, 1988), 50–87.

the problematic origin narratives in the *Lives* of Irish saints hint at an assumption that the lesser-ranked hagiographical parents had hidden legitimacy.

There are also numerous instances of bastardy in the heroic narratives of early Ireland. The divine figure of Óengus mac Óc, for example, is the offspring of the god Dagda and Eithne, the wife of another man.<sup>47</sup> As has been thoroughly examined by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, the great Ulster hero Cú Chulainn, too, is a child born as a consequence of adultery.<sup>48</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, in company with scholars such as Dorothy Ann Bray and Kim McCone, has suggested that in heroic saga these sorts of anomalous unions often produce children marked for eminence, their less-than-orthodox beginnings setting them apart as liminal, as not quite of the rest of society, nor yet completely separate.<sup>49</sup> The mediatory nature of the parental pairing that brings heroic children into the world destines the children for fame and prowess precisely because it is liminal. Does this apply to saints?

Kim McCone argues rather forcefully that it is as a consequence of this importance placed on liminality as a source for supernatural power that the rather scandalous parentage of saints like Brigit and Tigernach survive in the *Lives*. McCone views the *Vita I* of Brigit as the early literary model of the motif of adulterous origins, hinting that the saga genre may have taken its cues from hagiography. Liminal associations with the lineage and conception of saints, he asserts, are part and parcel of

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<sup>47</sup> *Tochmarc Étaíne* 1, ed. and trans. Benjamin Hazard, Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, *Tochmarc Étaíne (the wooing of Étaíne)* (1938; reprint, Cork: University College Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2005). This narrative is available at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt> in separate Irish and English-translation documents. The text originates in the ninth century but possesses a redaction layer falling between 1050 and 1100; see preamble to Irish-text document.

<sup>48</sup> “Between god and man,” 74–5; “Concept of the hero,” 81–3.

<sup>49</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic biography*, 26–40. Bray, “Heroic tradition” and *List of motifs*. McCone, *Pagan past*, 182–95.

accounts of adultery, clandestine sex or the like even in the *Lives* of saints, and these liminalities add to the saint's overall prestige.<sup>50</sup>

While McCone's assessment of the saint as a mediator between God and humanity certainly has strong basis in the evidence—some of the manifestations of which have been and will continue to be addressed throughout this study—the concept of illegitimacy as a source of sanctity seems problematic. If hagiographers perceived such an obvious advantage to being born from illicit sexual congress, why are there not more saints of such background? It seems more likely that these unions were not generally viewed favorably even where the resulting progeny are recognized as sanctified, whatever admitted liminality pertains to illegitimacy. The claims of the commentary of the *Reference Bible* that Abraham's second wife must be a quietly renamed Hagar certainly corroborates this preference for fully legitimate marital unions, as does the observation of Donnchadh Ó Corráin that wives other than the chief wife—including concubines, a pairing considered a type of lesser marriage by early Irish legal tracts—increasingly received the label of 'adulteress' over the course of the medieval period.<sup>51</sup>

The dossier of Brigit of Kildare can also be taken in support of this possibility. While the *Vita I* of the mid-700s does include the tradition that Brigit's father was married to someone other than Brigit's mother, this same tradition is not found in either the preceding *vita* written by Cogitosus or the subsequent Lismore *betha*. In the former, Brigit's parents are merely noble, with no further distinction, and in the Lismore text, Broicsech is characterized as Dubthach's second wife in the tradition of the Cethura-as-

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<sup>50</sup> *Pagan past*, 182–95.

<sup>51</sup> See page 60, note 46 above.



renamed-Hagar found in the *Reference Bible*.<sup>52</sup> Both of these *Lives* erase any whiff of bastardy or infamy from the genesis of one of Ireland's premiere saints, suggesting that McCone's argument may be an oversimplification of the reasons for the inclusion in the *Vita I* of Dubthach's and Broicsech's affair, particularly when considered in the light of the explicit scriptural parallel to the story of Ishmael.

For writers of the *Lives* of Ireland's saints, holiness was inborn, and it was consequently necessary to justify how someone of unholy heritage could nevertheless remain God's chosen. The elements shared between the hagiographical and heroic paradigms are undeniable, and it is likely liminality plays some part in the use of such unorthodox origin narratives, but at least in this instance the scriptural legitimization of these saints appears to have a stronger relevance. Illegitimate saints are still predestined for eminence before they are even conceived. The biblical example of Ishmael demonstrates that this election remains true despite the marital status of their parents rather than because of it, while the exegesis suggests that for some saints their illegitimacy may have been seen as true only in appearance rather than actuality.

### *Conception from sterile parents*

For another tiny selection of Irish saints, the very nature of their conception brings them into a close relationship not only with the Old Testament but with the New. Maedóc of Ferns, Molaisse of Leighlin and Mochoemóg are all explicitly portrayed as the children of mothers who had been barren prior to the genesis of their saintly offspring. Maedóc's mother conceives after a long period of prayer during which she and

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<sup>52</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 1.3, col. 0135E; ch. 1.1, Connolly and Picard, 13. *Betha Bhrighdi* ll 1154–5, pp. 35, 183. The relevant portion of the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte* has been lost.

her husband give many alms, pleading with the divine for an heir.<sup>53</sup> Molaisse's mother is described as being sterile until Molaisse's conception blesses her womb.<sup>54</sup> Ness, the mother of Mochoemóg and sister of Saint Íta, is barren until Íta herself promises Ness and her husband that they will have a son and heir.<sup>55</sup>

These conception narratives bear interesting similarities to several biblical accounts of divinely-facilitated children. One of these narratives is that of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, a birth which occurs through the Lord's promise to Abraham, despite Sarah's advanced years and lifelong sterility. This tale suggests in some measure both the benedictory genesis of Molaisse and the conception of Mochoemóg as a consequence of Íta's pledge.<sup>56</sup> The years Rachel spends in prayer begging God for a son while her husband Jacob's other wife (her sister Leah) and two concubines all bear him many male offspring appears to parallel the lengthy period of entreaty and oblation endured by Maedóc's parents, just as the divine favor shown to her son Jacob mirrors the sanctification of the child saint.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, God's audition of the prayers of Zachariah, resulting in his barren wife Elizabeth's conception of the baby who would be John the Baptist, also shares traits with these hagiographical origin stories.<sup>58</sup> Of particular relevance is the similarity of role between John, the herald of Jesus as the Christ whose conception Irish exegetes label the embodiment of the grace of Mosaic Law, and the Irish saint whose preaching also tells of the coming Messiah.<sup>59</sup> Through

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<sup>53</sup> *Vita S Aidi siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 1, *VSH* 2, 295; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 1, p. 234; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 141.

<sup>54</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaisse abbatis de Lethglenn* (Salamanca) 2, p. 340.

<sup>55</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 121–2; also *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 2–3, *VSH* 2, 164–5.

<sup>56</sup> Gen. 17:16–21, 18:10–15, 21:1–7.

<sup>57</sup> Gen. 30:1–24.

<sup>58</sup> Luke 1:1–45.

<sup>59</sup> This early eighth-century exegetical tract is from continental Irish circles. In addition to its commentary concerning John it also equates Elizabeth's womb with the synagogue; Zachariah, for his part, is called

these parallels, Maedóc, Molaisse and Mochoemóg become new reflections of Isaac, Joseph and John the Baptist, crossing from the Old into the New Testament and inheriting thereby the dispensation of great figures from both.

*Immaculate conception?*

Most saints are conceived in the usual way, an event so ordinary as to occasion only a laconic observation of its occurrence. In at least three cases, however, conception appears to lack any involvement by a human male. It will be recalled that the parents of Maedóc of Ferns spend years beseeching the Lord for a son and heir. When at last their prayers are answered, the holy man's father has a vision in which a star descends and enters his wife's mouth; she, for her part, also has a dream, but instead of a star she sees a bright moon. That night Maedóc is conceived.<sup>60</sup> Though the text is not categorical that these manifestations describe Maedóc's actual genesis in his mother's womb, it does seem to suggest a divinely-facilitated quickening. It is also a burning star seen to fall into the mouth of Saint Buite's mother the night Buite is conceived, a night during which the child's parents are in hiding from raiders.<sup>61</sup> Though Buite's parents may engage in the usual activities that produce children despite being occupied with fear for their lives, the narrative is spare enough to leave doubt.

For one saint, though, the *vita* is quite explicit. Becnait, the mother of Fínán of Kinnitty, has an extraordinary experience the narrative is careful to describe as the means

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*fons novi testamenti*, "the font of the New Testament." *Commentarium in Lucam e codice Vindobense latino* 997 1:5, 24, ed. Joseph F. Kelly, in *Scriptores Hiberniae minores pars II* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974), 4, 6. See pp. vii–ix, xii–xv for dating discussion.

<sup>60</sup> *Vita S Aidui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 1, *VSH* 2, 295; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 1, p. 234; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 141.

<sup>61</sup> *Vita S Boecii episcopi de Mainistir Buite* (Oxford) 1, *VSH* 1, 87. These raiders may be either Saxons or Norse; they are called "pirates" (*pirati*), implying sea raiding and reducing the possibility that the offenders are Irish brigands. Normally, Irish malefactors are not *pirati* but *latrones* or *latrunculi*, "brigands."

through which her saintly son is conceived, beginning the tale with “Thus, moreover, was his conception accomplished” (*Conceptio autem illius ita facta est*). The text continues as follows:

For his mother saw a fish of reddish gold flying from the rising of the sun, and because it entered into her belly through her mouth, from that she conceived (*Vidit enim mater eius piscem de auro rubicundo volantem ab ortu solis, et quod intravit per os eius in ventrem, et de illo concepit*).<sup>62</sup>

Little room for query remains here. Fínán, a child produced from the sign of Jesus himself, clearly results from what can only be described as a rather Hibernian envisioning of fatherless conception, staying just a degree or two shy of heretically declaring Becnait a virgin mother.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, it is the desire to avoid the potential stain of lust that underlies such unusual origin narratives. Jane Cartwright has suggested an alignment between miraculous forms of conception in the *Lives* of Welsh saints and cases where holy children result from rape or angelic command, an alignment in which both are hagiographical representations of the saints’ mothers as untouched by carnal desire or sexual pleasure.<sup>64</sup> Such an assessment seems very likely to bear weight in these few Irish *vitae* as well. By portraying the moment of a saint’s incarnation as completely free from sin, as facilitated by the bestowal of a spark of divine grace or inspiration, the saintly infant itself is also shown to be immaculate. The sinless mother—though not declared a virgin—still becomes a new Mary, a medium through whom sanctity transforms from

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<sup>62</sup> *Vita S Finani abbatis de Cenn Etigh* (Salamanca) 1, p. 153; (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 87.

<sup>63</sup> See Matt. 4:18–25 and John 21: 1–8, where Jesus is associated with fish and fishing and where the act of preaching and gaining converts is deemed fishing among men. Jesus is also associated with fish himself because the Greek initials for his identity, ΙΧΘΥΣ, spell “fish”. The initials stand for *Iesous Christos Theou Uios, Soter*, or “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

<sup>64</sup> “Dead virgins.”

spirit to saintly child, and the infant born of so pure a vessel is again envisioned as a new type of Christ.

Yet the peculiar nature of these uncorrupted conceptions does not find its closest parallels in scripture, whether canonical or apocryphal, but in the saga narratives of early Ireland. In the *Scél Tuáin meic Cairill* of the second half of the ninth century, for example, Tuán ends a long series of transformations by changing from a hawk to a salmon which, when consumed by a mortal queen, is conceived in her womb as a human who matures to become a prophet. In his very old age, this prophet is said to be baptized by Patrick, a metaphor for the end of Tuán's pagan era and the conquest of Ireland by Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Étaín, the heroine of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, also undergoes a series of metamorphoses that culminate in her assuming the form of a fly. The insect falls into the drink of a human queen and is swallowed, impregnating the queen with an infant girl, the reborn Étaín herself.<sup>66</sup> In one version of his origins, Conchobar mac Nessa, one of the legendary kings of the Ulster Cycle, is said to be conceived when his mother drinks water containing two worms.<sup>67</sup>

In the saga genre, it seems clear that these unusual origin stories demonstrate the otherworldly origin of the heroes and heroines who are their subjects. The lack of a human father, or of any father, creates men and women who stand between the mortal

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<sup>65</sup> Ed. and trans. John Carey, *Ériu* 35 (1984): 93–111; see 93–7 for dating.

<sup>66</sup> Chs. 16–18, 21.

<sup>67</sup> “Conchobar mac Nessa,” comp. Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The lore of Ireland: an encyclopedia of myth, legend and romance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 110. According to Stith Thompson's index of folk literature motifs, there are not only Irish but Indonesian and Indian narratives of conception by the consumption of fish; only in Ireland, however, does he report the motif of impregnation by swallowing either the symbolic worm in water or a star. *Motif-index of folk-literature: electronic edition* vol. 5, T511.5.1–2, T525.1 (1932–6; reprint, Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1989–2009), <http://www.nlx.com>. Further, as nearly as I was able to determine, all Irish instances of conception by stellar body appear to be hagiographical and not heroic. See Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-index of early Irish literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1953), T525.1. I hope to pursue this query further in future work.

and immortal realms, adding to their prestige the supernatural forces of the threshold that are critical to their conception.<sup>68</sup> In hagiography, the same liminality and otherworldly interpretations apply, save that the ‘otherworld’ from which holy men like Buite and Fínán receive their genesis is the Christian heaven, the authority of the liminal conferred by maternal parallels to Mary. The divine visitations to the mothers of these few Irish saints bring into their bodies and their wombs the touch of God, a spark of grace that stirs the conception of a sanctified child. Born of a mother untouched by the sin of lust, the child is thus manifestly created in the image of Christ.

### *Gestation dreams*

Whatever their visionary skills prior to conceiving holy children, a number of saints’ mothers experience profound visions and dreams during their pregnancies. Although some of these visitations echo elements of the conception *miranda* of other *vitae*, the emphasis here is less on how the saintly fetus came into being and more on the recognition of his or her holy eminence even in the womb. Mochutu’s mother Medb, for instance, sees a fiery globe descend toward her. All those with her witness it sinking into her head and know thereby that this manifestation of heavenly grace crowns not Medb but her unborn baby.<sup>69</sup> The unusually public nature of this event serves to announce not only that the child in Medb’s womb is sanctified but that his sanctification is known by all before he is even born.

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<sup>68</sup> Much the same observation has been made by, among others, Ó Cathasaigh, Bray, Joseph Falaky Nagy, and McCone. See pp. 18, 24–6, chapter one, and pp. 82–4 below.

<sup>69</sup> *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochuda episcopi Lismorensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 334; *Vita S Carthachi siue Mochutu episcopi de Less Mor* (Dublin) 4, VSH 1, 171.

The eventual prominence and power of the unborn holy comprises the content of other maternal gestation dreams. The mothers of Finnian of Clonard, Molaisse of Devenish and Naile all have dreams that foretell the expansive influence and inspiration their sons will exercise on Irish Christianity.<sup>70</sup> In other instances rather greater focus is placed on the mothers themselves and on the purity and sacrifice they pass to their children, strengthening the image of the Irish saint's mother as a new Mary and the child as an Irish face of Christ. Cara, Brendán's mother, sees her lap fill with gold, a representation of the holy child growing in her uterus, while her breasts glow with a great light that suggests the purity of Cara herself, a purity that would be shared with her infant through her milk.<sup>71</sup> In the *betha* of Columba of Iona, Columba's mother Eithne sees her own entrails carried throughout Ireland in a graphic image of her son's eventual eminence.<sup>72</sup> The strong sense of sacrifice implicit in this literally gut-wrenching representation of the parturition and loss of her child to a calling far beyond her, and even beyond Ireland, evokes a poignant echo of Mary's terrible pain at the loss of her son.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 1, p. 96; *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) ll 2509–20, pp. 75, 222. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatis de Dam Inis* (Oxford) 3, VSH 2, 131. *Betha Naile* 1.1, *Miscellanea*, 100, 126.

<sup>71</sup> *Vita altera et navigatio S Brendani abbatis Clonfertensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 324; *Vita I S Brendani abbatis de Cluain Ferta* (Oxford) 1, VSH 1, 98; *Betha Brenainn meic Fhinnlogha* (Lismore) ll 3331–4, pp. 99–100, 247–8. The likeness of this narrative to the classical tale of the impregnation of Danaë by Zeus, who comes to her in the form of a shower of gold and whose union with Danaë produces the great hero Perseus, is difficult to escape. Michael Grant and John Hazel, comps, *Who's who in classical mythology* (1973; reprint, New York: Routledge, 2002), 101 ("Danaë").

<sup>72</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* 18–19, pp. 225, 252–3.

<sup>73</sup> John 19:25–30 portrays Mary and the beloved disciple standing at the foot of Jesus' cross. Though the biblical text is vague on the nature of Mary's emotions, exegetical commentary provides a wealth of imagery concerning Mary's steadfast compassionate faithfulness in remaining to witness and endure her son's suffering. See for example Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 49–50, *PL* 16, cols 0319A–B, or Bede, *In S. Joannis evangelium expositio* 19, *PL* 92, 0913C–0914C. In Catholic tradition, of course, Mary's experience of seeing her son crucified is deemed the fifth of her seven sorrows, a tradition at least as old as the early thirteenth century. *Catholic encyclopedia: digital version* (1907–1912; reprint, np: Catholic Online, 1997–2009), "Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Feast of the Seven," <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/>.

For another saint's mother, however, the connections between her experience and that of Mary are much more explicit. While pregnant with the baby who would become Coemgen of Glendalough, Caemgella is visited by an angel of the Lord. The message he brings not only follows the textual pattern of the announcements the angel Gabriel delivers to Joseph regarding his pregnant betrothed and to Zachariah concerning his wife Elizabeth's expected birthing of their son, John the Baptist, but also parallels the prophecy of Jesus' birth as given to Mary herself.<sup>74</sup> To Caemgella, the angel says: "O blessed woman, you will bear a son, and his name will be called Coemgen" (*Benedicta mulier, paries filium, et uocabitur nomen eius Caymginus*), and continues with the prophecy that Coemgen will be the father of many monks.<sup>75</sup> To Mary, the message is: "Blessed are you among women ... you will bear a son and you will call his name Jesus" (*Benedicta tu in mulieribus ... paries filium et vocabis nomen Iesum*), and he will rule from the throne of David.<sup>76</sup>

Not only does the hagiographer deliberately evoke the textual authority of the Gospel in support of Coemgen's origins, but the purity of Mary the mother of Christ is drawn into the mother of an Irish saint whose child is then, by extension, made over in the image of Jesus. For Coemgen, and in a sense for any saint whose blessed mother receives visions from God while incubating holiness in her womb, the equation of Gospel and hagiographical roles of mother and son, of maternal sacrifice made for sanctified

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<sup>74</sup> Matt. 1:21 (the angel tells Joseph that Mary "will bear a son and you will call his name Jesus" (*pariet autem filium et vocabis nomen eius Iesum*), Matt. 1:23 (the Matthean version of the prophecy of the Messiah: "Behold ... she will bear a son and they will call his name Emmanuel" (*Ecce ... pariet filium et vocabunt nomen eius Emmanuel*), Luke 1:13 (the angel tells Zachariah that Elizabeth "will bear you a son and you will call his name John" (*pariet tibi filium et vocabis nomen eius Iohannem*).

<sup>75</sup> *Vita S Caemgeni* (Salamanca) 1, p. 361; *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 234.

<sup>76</sup> Luke 1:28, 31–2.



sons bound before birth to do the work of God, the primary paradigm of their gestation is that of *imitatio Christi*.

### *Gestational asceticism*

For the mothers of at least three saints, the presence of holy fetuses growing in their wombs leads to ascetic behaviors not previously a part of their lives. As a consequence of Talech's vision, her husband Fintán decides that they must remain separated until she gives birth to Finnian of Clonard; for the duration of her pregnancy, moreover, Talech satisfies herself with a parsimonious diet of only bread, water and oil.<sup>77</sup> Findnait, mother of Fintán of Clonenagh, also alters her lifestyle following a vision late in her pregnancy during which an angel tells her to retreat to a secret place until her labor is accomplished. When she wakes, she immediately goes to a "deserted spot" (*desertum locum*) and sits under a tree to await the fulfillment of the remainder of her term. While isolated, Findnait eats only what is sent to her from heaven each day until Fintán is born, a period of seven days.<sup>78</sup> In a shift from the pattern—if two cases can be called a pattern—Minchlú, mother of Columba of Terryglass, experiences no heavenly visitations. Instead she is simply unable to eat meat or drink any intoxicating liquid from the moment of conception through the birth of her son, "because a spiritual inebriation from the grace of the holy child separated bodily drunkenness from the mother" (*quia spiritalis ebrietas de gratia sancti filii corporalem ebrietatem exclusit a matre*).<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 1, p. 96; also *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) II 2509–20, pp. 75, 222.

<sup>78</sup> *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Cluain Edhnech* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 145–6; *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Cluain Ednech* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 96.

<sup>79</sup> *Vita S Columbae abbatis de Tír Dá Glas* (Salamanca) 1, p. 225.

These curious expressions of ascetic piety have clear scriptural correspondences, not only to canonical but also to apocryphal texts. The mother of Samson is told to abstain from intoxicating drink and unclean foods because she will conceive the man destined to liberate Israel from the Philistines, a diet strongly reminiscent of that followed by Talech, Findnait and Minchlú.<sup>80</sup> If such a parallel holds true, the resulting saints would then be cast in the mold of Samson, standing as heroes whose work freed Ireland from the forces of paganism and sin. In the *Gospel of Luke*, Elizabeth goes into seclusion in response to the hand of God in her pregnancy, and the only person other than her husband to see her during her term is Mary. It even seems that Elizabeth's kin and neighbors do not discover her condition until John is born.<sup>81</sup>

In the apocryphal *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* (*PsMatt*), on the other hand, Mary herself is represented as spending nearly all of her pregnancy in the company of other virgins, eating only what the Lord delivers to her.<sup>82</sup> Though Mary is, in *PsMatt*, said to be of an ascetic bent prior to the conception of Jesus, the similarity between her habits while pregnant and the angelic provisioning of both Findnait and Minchlú is intriguing; the text may also have provided some inspiration for the minimalist regime followed by Talech. The further agreement between the isolation sought by Elizabeth to honor the great gift of God's blessing and, to varying degrees, the seclusion undertaken by all three hagiographical mothers is also worth consideration. It seems that, again, through the deliberate avoidance or rejection of any pollution whether worldly, carnal or dietary,

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<sup>80</sup> Jgs 13:4–5.

<sup>81</sup> Luke 1:24–5, 56–8. At least one exegetical text observes that the five months of Elizabeth's isolation are not only an indication of the modesty of old age but also a sign that “the work of grace through the five books of Moses” (*opus gratiae per quinque libros Moysi*) have not yet been made manifest. This manifestation is then embodied in the birth of John himself. *Commentarium in Lucam* 1:24, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> *PsMatt* 10, ed. J. K. Elliott, *The apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 89–90.

these three Irish women are each altered in their own way by the outflow of holiness from their wombs. Elevated alongside their scriptural counterparts, they become versions of both Elizabeth and Mary, while their infants are represented as echoes of John the Baptist, herald of the Messiah and fulfillment of the Pentateuch, and of the Messiah himself, the embodiment of the New Revelation.<sup>83</sup>

*The future eminence of the fetal saint foretold*

In the later *bethada* of Ireland's saints, pregnant women whose unborn infants are destined to attain great eminence are often told of the sanctity of their children in a simple straightforward fashion that generally echoes similar pronouncements in scriptural texts. These forecasts may be offered by druids, as with Senán's mother, or by ecclesiastical figures, such as the confessor who tells Finnhúa's mother that her child will have great fame or the bishop who informs Brendán's mother of Brendán's future influence.<sup>84</sup> Not surprisingly, most such reported foretellings—which do not appear in any of the earlier *Lives* upon which some *bethada* draw—bear the closest parallels to the

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<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, in the cases of Talech and Findnait, this elevation occurs in no small part because the women make a conscious choice to follow a higher path, albeit at the direction of another. Minchlú, on the other hand, is simply under the influence of the overwhelming sanctity emanating from her holy fetus. Her lack of agency emphasizes that the holiness and purity are not really hers but her child's, while both Talech and Findnait retain some free will and therefore appear to possess a certain degree of grace in and of themselves. Minchlú is, instead, merely the vessel, the channel, the rented real estate of sanctity, and though it's implicit that she must be an exemplary vessel to merit so glorious a divine child, it is not an excellence that the hagiographer of Columba's *vita* translated into Minchlú's own conscious action. By deliberately engaging with the sacred nature of their children, however, Talech and Findnait even more closely approach the examples of Elizabeth and of Mary, embodying thus the model of the obedient handmaiden of the Lord. For the exegetical analogy of John the Baptist and the fulfillment of the Pentateuch, see page 72, note 81 above.

<sup>84</sup> *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 1875–83, pp. 57, 204; *Betha Finnhua* (Lismore) ll 2803–11, pp. 84, 231; *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) ll 3336–40, pp. 100, 248.

announcements of the angel Gabriel to Zachariah, Joseph and Elizabeth that proclaim the conceptions and expected deeds of John and Jesus.<sup>85</sup>

A rather more idiosyncratic form of prophetic message prevails in the earlier texts, however, a form which more clearly expresses the influence of the unborn infant's holiness on his or her surroundings. Here, the eventual eminence of the fetal saint is prognosticated according to the sound made by the chariot in which the saint's gravid mother rides, and whether the expected child is male or female the statement made is that "the chariot sounds under a king" (*currus sub rege sonat / fogur carpait fo rig*).<sup>86</sup> This odd divinatory announcement appears in the *Life* of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, as well as in the *vitae* of Maedóc of Ferns, Comgall of Bangor and Mochoemóg.<sup>87</sup> Even earlier than the texts of these holy men, however, is the appearance of this same prophetic motif in the *Vita I* of Brigit of Kildare, where the message is delivered to Brigit's mother and father by a *magus*.<sup>88</sup> A *magus* is also the messenger for Ciarán's and Maedóc's parents, while Comgall's mother and father receive the prophecy from Saint Mac Nisse and Mochoemóg's parents from Saint Íta.

For saints to deliver any divinatory proclamation is not especially unexpected. As noted above, however, *magi* also commonly act as channels for heavenly messages foretelling the coming brilliant influence of Christian agents. How are we to grapple with the terminology of the *magus* which, in Irish versions of the same passages, is translated

<sup>85</sup> See particularly Matt. 1:20–21, and Luke 1:13, 31–2.

<sup>86</sup> It should be noted here that although the motif does appear in some later *bethada*, in all cases of which I am aware the vernacular *betha* is a direct descendant of the earlier *vita* discussed here.

<sup>87</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 78; *Vita S Ciarani abbatis de Cluain mic Nois* (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 200–201; *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) II 4006–17, pp. 119–20, 265. *Vita S Aidui siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 2, VSH 2, 295; *Vita S Aedani* (Salamanca) 2, p. 234; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 2, VSH 2, 141. *Vita S Comgalli abbatis Bennchorensis* (Salamanca) 1, p. 332; *Vita S Comgalli abbatis de Bennchor* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 3. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 5, VSH 2, 166.

<sup>88</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.2, cols 0118F–0119A; ch. 2, Connolly, 14; also *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1161–73, pp. 35, 183.

as *druí*, or druid, a figure of assumed pagan affiliation?<sup>89</sup> Is this a case of the pagan past acknowledging its fading twilight in the face of the advancing sun of Christianity? Or is the *magus* who prophesies an unborn saint's eventual eminence stripped of any prior pagan association and left merely as the holder of a title applied to a particular noble advisor of chieftains and kings?

The seeming hagiographical friendliness toward *magi* in these instances might suggest that writers of saints' *Lives* generally considered them to be mere wise men divorced from any problematic taint of paganism, but the evidence of the *Lives* themselves would belie such assumptions. *Magi* in other narrative moments are consistently viewed as unclean (*immundus*) precisely because of their pagan stigma, even in the Brigidine texts that are often viewed as being rather warmer in the treatment of *magi* than are other *Lives*.<sup>90</sup> Instead, it seems that druidic characters who prophesy the nativities and eminence of saints are intended to represent a sort of Hibernian version of Old Testament prophets, non-Christian forebears of Christian holy men and women who share many of the same abilities, and who foretell their own eclipse by the leaders of the post-revelation faith.<sup>91</sup> They may also echo the 'wise men' of the Gospels, also called *magi*, who journey to see and make offerings to the newborn Christ, recognizing his

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<sup>89</sup> *Dictionary of the Irish language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials: compact edition (DIL)* (Dublin: RIA, 1998), "*druí*."

<sup>90</sup> See for instance Brigit's inability to stomach a druid's food, discussed below, pp. 94–5. Most scholastic attention to the attitudes of hagiographers toward *magi* has focused on the seventh-century *vitae* of Brigit, Columba of Iona and Patrick, highlighting the disparity between Patrick's and, to a lesser extent, Columba's harsh treatment of these pagan powerhouses and the kinder, gentler approach of the Brigidine material. See particularly Stalmans, *Saints d'Irlande*, 286 and Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 197–8. But see also Catherine McKenna's analysis of the role of the *magi* in the *Vita I S Brigitae* in "Between two worlds," where she argues that the *magi* conform more to the Matthean view (Matt. 2:1–2) than to an image of resistant paganism.

<sup>91</sup> As to the druids as representatives of the Old Testament prophet, McCone, *Pagan past*, 182–95, 197 has suggested much the same interpretation.

sanctity, royalty and eventual eminence.<sup>92</sup> In essence, the prophetic druid whose message tells of a sanctified child destined to change the face of Irish religion acts both as an Irish Isaiah and as a gospel *magus*, promising the advent of saints whose holiness is thus declared. The saints then become textual versions of the Messiah.

As for the odd form of the prognostication delivered by both *magus* and saint, there are two possible textual parallels. The first is biblical and admittedly rather a stretch. In 4 Kgs 7:6, the din of chariots is said to so terrify the Syrian host arrayed against Israel that they flee, convinced that the chariots bear upon them the kings of the Egyptians and the Hethites, employed and sent by Israel to destroy the Syrian encampment. The noise is described as “the sound of chariots and of horses and of an army” (*sonitum . . . currum et equorum et exercitus*), and this *sonitum* is immediately then linked to kings, *reges*. Could the association between sound and royal passenger here have exercised some influence on the Irish *currus* that *sonat sub rege*?

The other candidate has much stronger textual correlations with the hagiographical divinations, not the least because it is a prominent Irish work rather than a somewhat abstruse biblical moment. In the late narrative known as the *Cath Maige Tuired*, a special stone, an otherworldly token brought to Ireland by the divine Tuatha Dé Danann, is said to cry out whenever the rightful king of Ireland is upon it.<sup>93</sup> The chariots bearing the women whose wombs shelter sanctity do not “cry out”, but the resonating sound of their wheels may be interpreted similarly. The ruler indicated by this auditory

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<sup>92</sup> Matt. 2:9–11.

<sup>93</sup> Lines 6–7, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired: the Second Battle of Mag Tuired* (Kildare: ITS, 1982), 24, 57. The text does not explain further, leaving it unclear whether the king is meant to sit or stand on the stone. The idea of the shouting stone may draw some inspiration from the apocryphal *Paraleipomena of Jeremiah* (*ParJer*) 9:19–32, ed. and trans. H. F. D. Sparks et al., *The apocryphal Old Testament* (1984; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 828–9, in which a pillar that has taken on Jeremiah’s appearance announces aloud that it is not the prophet. See also chapter four, pp. 233–5 below for further discussion of this apocryphon. I will more fully explore this parallel in a future study.

omen, however, is not a secular but a spiritual leader, a saint whose authority is conferred by the other sovereign the noise of the chariot may be said to herald, namely the king of heaven himself.

### **The birth of the holy other**

The seminal moment of birth is, perhaps surprisingly, an event most saint's *Lives* in Ireland pass over with minimal comment, much like biblical nativity announcements.<sup>94</sup> In only a small number of accounts is parturition granted a degree of attention more in keeping with the importance of a saint's entry into life. Of these, the time, place and manner in which Irish saints transition from the hidden realm of the womb into the light of the human world are the most frequent subjects.

#### *Time and place of nativity*

Where details concerning an Irish saint's birth are given, the greatest attention is reserved for the time and place of nativity. Several holy infants, for instance, are reportedly born on stones, though it's not clear in these sparely-worded instances whether the stones are outdoors or form the floor of a house or shelter.<sup>95</sup> Naturally these rocky surfaces retain miraculous properties as a result of their contact with one of the two most

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<sup>94</sup> See for example the laconic observation of the important arrival of Isaac: "She conceived and bore a son" (*concepit ... et peperit filium*), Gen. 21:1. John the Baptist enters the world with a similarly-phrased verse in Luke 1:57, and Jesus' nativity and swaddling has only moderately more detail, Luke 2:7. There are attendant miracles in many hagiographical birth announcements, such as displays of heavenly lights, but these *miranda* are not directly involved in the physical event of a holy infant's birth and are therefore not relevant to the present discussion of sanctity's incarnation.

<sup>95</sup> *Vita II S Patricii* 2, *Vita IV S Patricii* 2, Bieler, 52; Byrne and Francis, 21. Also *Bethu Phátraic* ll 85–8, Mulchrone, 5; Stokes, 8–9. *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, p. 198; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 247–8; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 226. *Betha Beraigh* 5, *BNÉ* 1, 25–6; *BNÉ* 2, 24–5.

intimate moments of a saint's life, namely that of full incarnation as a human being.<sup>96</sup> As noted in the prior section, the mother of Fintán of Clonenagh retreats into seclusion, giving birth to her son under a tree.<sup>97</sup> For the parents of Colmán Élo it is not in seclusion but in exile that their son is born, they and their kindred having fled their homes to elude hostile invaders in a plot reminiscent of the escape into Egypt of Mary, Joseph and the newborn Christ.<sup>98</sup> The flight of the holy family may have also partly inspired the story of Tigernach's birth, in which the saint's father, fearing for his life should his son's maternal grandfather learn of the child's clandestine birth and the affair behind it, takes the barely-arrived Tigernach and flees back to his home province.<sup>99</sup>

For two other saints, bastardy has very different consequences. Ailbe of Emly is not born in hiding but openly, his mother a slave left behind to bear the child alone. The king who holds her declares that Ailbe can neither remain with nor be raised among his sons, and commands his servants to remove the infant. Ailbe is left under a stone where a she-wolf raises him as one of her own pups.<sup>100</sup> Ailbe's story is very similar to an infancy tale of the great Irish hero, Cormac mac Airt, who is stolen from the meadow where his mother tends him when she drifts off into sleep. The thief is a she-wolf who nurses the

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<sup>96</sup> The other most intimate moment is that of the departure of the saint's sanctified soul at death.

<sup>97</sup> *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Cluain Edhnech* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 145–6; (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 96.

<sup>98</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 1, p. 209; (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 1, 258. The story of the holy family's Egyptian exile is found in Matt. 2:13–15.

<sup>99</sup> *Vita S Tigernachi* (Salamanca) 1, p. 107; *Vita S Tigernaci* (Oxford) 2, *VSH* 2, 262.

<sup>100</sup> *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 1, p. 118; (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 1, 46–7. Though Salamanca only reports the order to remove the infant, Dublin puts the command of a death sentence on Ailbe, hearkening back to both the killing of the Hebrew sons by Pharaoh (Exod. 1:22) and the slaughter of the innocents by Herod (Matt. 2:16). These parallels evoke both Moses and Jesus, firstborn sons who were also saved from murderous culling.



child until, as with Ailbe, a hunter stumbles across the wolf's den and finds Cormac, taking him home and caring for him for a year.<sup>101</sup>

So near a correspondence begs an interpretation of Ailbe's nativity as a hagiographical sibling of the Cormac mac Airt who is represented in a text dated linguistically to roughly the same era as that in which the core *vita* of Ailbe was likely written.<sup>102</sup> Ailbe is aligned in this fashion with a heroic king famed for his justice and wisdom, upon whom has been fathered the didactic *Tecosca Cormaic*, a sort of 'mirror for princes' intended to convey the tenets of true and righteous kingship.<sup>103</sup> Though Ailbe is no secular ruler, he is the leader of a prominent Munster episcopacy; through the resemblance between the illustrious Cormac and the holy man the status of both is augmented. Ailbe is thus portrayed as an ecclesiastical hero endowed with the same wisdom and righteousness as his secular counterpart.<sup>104</sup>

In contrast to prior paradigms of illicit unions that produce holy infants, in the late *betha* of Moling it is not Moling's father who runs in fear for his life but his mother.

Fleeing the wrath of her sister under cover of darkness and hiding by day, frightened and

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<sup>101</sup> *Scéla Éogain ocus Cormaic* ll 59–64, ed. and trans. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic biography*, 121, 125. There are curious similarities here with the story of Romulus and Remus in Roman mythology. In both Irish and Roman narratives the children are not only raised by a she-wolf but found by a man who then takes them home and raises them. Saint Ailbe and the Roman twins, moreover, are all meant to be slain, but are saved by kind-hearted retainers; Ailbe's infancy under a rock further parallels the Roman twins' fostering under a fig tree. For the saint, such a parallel might intimate an equation of the founders of Rome with the founder of Emly, an illustrious Munster community and, perhaps, a conceptual link between the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Emly. Grant and Hazel, *Classical mythology*, 294 ("Romulus").

<sup>102</sup> *Scéla Éogain ocus Cormaic* dates to the eighth century with a redaction layer of the Middle Irish period, according to Ó Cathasaigh; see p. 116. Ailbe's Salamanca *vita* is among those O'Donohue works Sharpe considers a  $\Phi$  text and therefore is held to possess a core from the 700s though, as noted in Chapter One, the  $\Phi$  *vitae* have all passed through subsequent redactions and revisions. See pp. 36–8 above.

<sup>103</sup> Ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *The instructions of King Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1909).

<sup>104</sup> This equation is bolstered by the parallels drawn in the legal texts of early Ireland between the status and authority of kings and those of bishops, according to each the same honor price. See for example *Bretha Nemed Toísech* 13–14, ed. and trans. Liam Breatnach, "The first third of the *Bretha Nemed Toísech*," *Ériu* 40 (1989): 14–15. Also consult "Canon law and secular law in early Ireland: the significance of *Bretha Nemed*," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 439–59, in which Breatnach argues that this legal text is from the second quarter of the eighth century.

ashamed because her child's sire is her sister's husband, she ultimately succumbs to terror and exposure and delivers her infant in the midst of a terrible nighttime snowstorm. Though she leaves the newborn saint exposed, he is kept warm by his holiness and by a coterie of angels. When she tries to throttle him to remove the shame of her betrayal and adultery, a dove blocks her hands; she is further prevented from stoning him by the fortuitous arrival of Brendán, who recognizes Moling's sanctity and takes the desperate mother and child into his care at Clonfert.<sup>105</sup>

That Moling's mother is thwarted in three attempts at infanticide declares not only that her child is favored by the triune God, but that by virtue of his election Moling is pure despite the sordid nature of his origins. Once taken into Brendán's protection, Moling's mother is implicitly absolved, a forgiveness later made overt when she begs for and obtains pardon from God through her thirty-year-old son's prayers and benediction.<sup>106</sup> Whatever the impurity of the act that results in a saint's birth, the incarnation of sanctity in a particular womb makes manifest the mother's worth, further proving that the immaculate nature of holiness renders it impervious to stain.<sup>107</sup> Moling was destined to be himself long before his conception, and the circumstances of that conception cannot in any way demote him.<sup>108</sup>

The time and place of a saint's nativity also has a curious paradigm for Áed mac Bricc, Molaisse of Devenish and Brigit of Kildare, for whom arrival into the world fulfills a prophecy that anyone born on a particular day, at a particular time, will achieve

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<sup>105</sup> *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 2.6–2.9, pp. 8–13.

<sup>106</sup> *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 7.26–7.28, pp. 20–23.

<sup>107</sup> This attitude toward the fitness of a saint's mother is not always so unambiguous. See for example the instant separation of mother and newly-born infant saint in *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 4, *VSH* 1, 76 and *Betha Finnchua* (Lismore) ll 3004–14, pp. 90, 237, in which the holy babies are then nursed on the miraculous milk of their foster-father saints.

<sup>108</sup> This version of Moling's birth is only present in the *Genemain*, and not in the earlier *vitae*.

a stature outshining that of all others. In Brigit's tale a *magus* prophesies the fortuitous nature of the following dawn for anyone born then, but there is no notice given as to whether Brigit's heavily pregnant mother hears the foretelling. Instead, the expectant Uí Néill queen who does hear the *magus* delivers her son early that night and misses the blessing of the next morning. Brigit's mother, the slave named Broicsech, altogether without intending it gives birth to her saintly daughter at sun-up on the acclaimed day, with one foot on the inside and one foot on the outside of the house so that Brigit's head touches the threshold stone. In a sign of the child's purity Broicsech then washes her newborn in freshly-drawn milk still warm from the cow.<sup>109</sup>

Áed's birth, while very similar to that of Brigit, is also a study in some telling contrasts. Áed's mother, a woman never named, is told to her face by a prophet that a child born the next morning would receive the favor of God and all Ireland. In a determined fashion, she declares that "unless [Áed] comes through (my) side, he will not come out of my womb until tomorrow" (*Nisi per latera venit, usque cras non egredietur de utero meo*). She then positions herself on a stone outdoors to block her son's egress all night, and the force of her contractions causes his head to leave a dent in the rock's surface. Naturally, water drunk from that dent cures every ailment.<sup>110</sup> Where Broicsech inadvertently births her daughter at the fortunate time and in a most liminal locale, Áed's mother intentionally prevents her son's entry into the world, and as a result not only

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<sup>109</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.4, col. 0119B1; ch. 6.2–6.4, Connolly, 15. The story is retained in the Lismore text, *Betha Bhrichti* II 1192–1201, pp. 36, 184. Given the close correlation between the *Vita I* and the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte*, it probably was originally reported there as well, but the loss of the *Bethu*'s initial chapters make it impossible to be certain. Regarding the bathing of the holy child in milk, see for example *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 2, p. 96, where a white liquid is explicitly equated with purity.

<sup>110</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 167–8; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 1, 34. The Salamanca *vita* is included by Sharpe among the  $\Phi$  texts of the O'Donohue group and thus likely possesses core elements dating to approximately the same period during which Brigit's *Vita I* was composed. See pp. 34–8, chapter one and the appendix.

delivers the child in the correct hour but leaves behind a sign of the event for future generations.<sup>111</sup>

Molaisse of Devenish also has a deliberately delayed birth. Again the saint's mother, Mugnea, personally receives the prophecy from a *magus* that the next day is propitious for the child born on it. Mugnea goes to the shore of a nearby lake and sits on a stone all night; God is said to close her vagina (*uulua*) to prevent the delivery of her son until the next morning.<sup>112</sup> While Mugnea shares with Áed's mother the agency of her own decision to heed the foretelling she is given, her action also adds the additional liminal element of selecting a stone on a lakeshore, rather like the threshold stone of Brigit's matin-time appearance, and allows for God's aid in her retention of Molaisse until sunrise. It appears that the Oxford *vita* may have drawn from and modified the earlier examples of the motif from the *vitae* of both Brigit and Áed.

The concepts of a fortuitous moment of birth and its intentional deferment have a close parallel in the nativity tale of the Irish hero Fíachu Muillethan. Fíachu's pregnant mother is informed by a druid that if her son is born the following day, he will surpass all

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<sup>111</sup> The strange sense of competition between Áed's hagiographer and that of Brigit is clearly political. Áed mac Bricc, a scion of the powerful Ulster Uí Néill royalty, is made by the writer of his *vita* to best Brigit, who is a descendant of Eochaid Find Fuathnairt and under the patronage of Uí Néill foes, the Leinster Uí Dúnlainge. She, in her *Vita I*, similarly if rather less obviously also outdoes Áed. The tug of war is also noticeable when Brigit's severe headache is, in her own *vita* (*Vita I S Brigidae* 4.25, col. 0121D; ch. 29, Connolly, 20), said to be cured only by God, while in the Salamanca *vita* of Áed her relief is accomplished by her invocation of Áed's name (*Vita S Aidi* 17, p. 173). Notably, in *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 13, VSH 1, 38–9, the “holy virgin” (*sancta virgo*) cured is never identified, strengthening the specific tensions between the *Vita I S Brigidae* and Áed's Salamanca *vita*. With respect to their nativity narratives, the agency given Áed's mother is a mirror image of Broicsech's accidental threshold delivery, which occurs as her pangs overtake her. Additionally, Áed mac Bricc's kinswoman—possibly even his mother, though as she is not named there can be no certainty—appears in the *Vita I* as the Uí Néill queen whose son is born early, missing the fortunate hour. Kim McCone, “Introduction to early Irish saints' *Lives*,” 36–7, has also proposed an overall similarity between the heroic pattern of the legend of the Uí Néill rise to power in *Echtra Mac nEchach* and the structure of the biography of Brigit in the *Vita I*. If McCone's theory holds true, it further augments the superiority over Áed and his kin that the *Vita I* accords to Brigit. I intend to pursue the details of the Áed vs. Brigit contest in future investigations of the two relevant *vitae*.

<sup>112</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatissae de Dam Inis* (Oxford) 4, VSH 2, 131–2.

others and that his lineage will be kings forever. She straddles a stone to hold him in her womb until the appointed time, and the contact of the crown of his head with the rock flattens his skull and earns him the epithet “Muillethan” (said by the tale’s writer to be from *munlethan*, “broad crown”).<sup>113</sup> It is notable that where Fíachu is himself changed by the stone on which he makes his entry into life, in the *Lives* of saints it is the stones that are permanently altered, the curve of the holy infants’ skulls creating indentations with curative capabilities that become a form of relic. Fíachu’s lineage may gain worldly eminence from his fortunate birthing time, but hagiographical holy men and women obtain a stature beyond any human measure. The endowment of a saint born on a lucky day is a holiness that leaves enduring traces on the same landscape that the secular hero can influence only temporarily.

These delayed deliveries are rare, yet they are retained from early to late text in the dossiers of Brigit and Áed, while Molaisse’s Oxford *vita*, as it survives, appears to be of the fourteenth century, giving the motif a somewhat intermittent chronology that extends from the 700s to the 1300s. There is clearly a reason hagiographers included the *topos*, and it appears that, in addition to the messages concerning the eternal impact of God’s grace through the sanctity of his saints, some meaning is also obtained from the liminal elements of the narratives.<sup>114</sup> McCone has asserted that since birth is a “supremely liminal event”, it therefore attracts multiple liminal associations, the most elaborate example of which accretion is that of Brigit’s *Vita I*.<sup>115</sup> It seems that a

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<sup>113</sup> *Scéla Éogain ocus Cormaic* ll 6–16, pp. 119, 124. The writer appears to be drawing this etymology from *muin*, the nape of the neck, and *lethan*, broad or wide. See the *DIL* entries for these two words.

<sup>114</sup> A number of scholars have commented on or assessed liminality in various portions of these nativity tales, including Judith Bishop, “Sanctity as mirror of society,” 116–17; Dorothy Ann Bray, *List of motifs*, 11–14 and “Heroic tradition,” 267; and Kim McCone, *Pagan past*, 186–90, 193, 198.

<sup>115</sup> *Pagan past*, 182–3, 189. See pp. 80–81 above.

continued privileging of the thresholds may encourage the appearance of these three delayed delivery tales over the many centuries of Ireland's hagiography. Their rarity, however, suggests that these particular liminal traits may have been viewed by some writers of Ireland's saintly biographies as potentially problematic, perhaps precisely because of their similarities to paradigms in heroic texts that tend to offer a view of society contrary to that sought by the church.

*Pangs or no pangs?*

As has been true of other aspects relating to the birth of Irish saints, the experiences of the women delivering these holy infants are nearly always passed over in silence. Occasionally, particularly in earlier texts, a moment is given to a miracle directly related to the pangs of parturition. Such an instance is found in the *vita* of Colmán Élo, the core elements of which are likely to date to the eighth century, in which tale the branch of dry wood Colmán's straining mother grasps to brace herself becomes green, puts down roots and grows into a large tree.<sup>116</sup> Most often, there is little other mention made of the course of the mother's travails delivering her sanctified child.

There are, however, a small number of episodes containing birthing details that appear in works dating to the 1100s and later. In the *Life* of Abbán, the earliest extant form of which appears to place to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, Abbán's mother Mella suffers such severe pains that she begs aid from her brother, the sainted

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<sup>116</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 1, p. 209; (Dublin) 1, VSH 1, 258. The Salamanca *vita* is among those Sharpe designates as the Φ texts of the O'Donohue group and therefore is likely to have a composition date sometime in the 700s, prior to the group's compilation around 800. See pp. 36–8 above, chapter one.

bishop Ibar.<sup>117</sup> Instead of the infant saint conferring aid to his struggling mother, it is Ibar's prayers that grant comfort to Mella so that she successfully delivers Abbán with no further pain.<sup>118</sup> Senán's mother also holds a stake, a rowan that puts forth flowers and leaves and grows; when her labor is eased, however, it is by an angel instead of a human, emphasizing the infant's grace over that of the one soothing his mother's labor.<sup>119</sup>

Clustered chronologically around these accounts are the *Lives* of three other saints whose mothers are said to give birth to their holy infants completely without pain. Colmán mac Lúacháin's mother not only delivers Colmán painlessly but has an entire pregnancy without the weariness, sickness or discomfort associated with that condition.<sup>120</sup> Declán's arrival occurs without difficulty for his mother "due to the sanctity of the infant lying in (her) womb" (*pro sanctitate infantis in utero latentis*).<sup>121</sup> In his *vita*, Moling, in a truly extraordinary nativity, not only puts in his appearance on Pentecost, paralleling the arrival of this holy child with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, but does so by seeming to witnesses to coalesce between his mother's hands after an angel signs her with the cross; this birth stands in stark contrast to the saint's arrival in his fourteenth-century *Genemain ocus betha*, as discussed above.<sup>122</sup>

The greening of the dry wood under the hands of laboring mothers very likely finds its origins—along with other examples in the *Lives* of wood sprouting on contact

<sup>117</sup> See Pádraig Ó Riain, "St. Abbán: the genesis of an Irish saint's Life," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. D. Ellis Evans, John G. Griffith and E. M. Jope (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1986), 159–70, for analysis and dating of the *Life* of Abbán, including the *vita*.

<sup>118</sup> *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 2, pp. 256–7; (Dublin) 3, *VSH* 1, 4–5; *Betha Abbáin* 1.1–1.2, *BNÉ* 1, 3; *BNÉ* 2, 3. In the Dublin version Mella comes near to death due to the extreme nature of her pangs.

<sup>119</sup> *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 1884–9, pp. 57, 204.

<sup>120</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 10, pp. 10–11. The text is dated to around 1122; see chapter one, p. 41.

<sup>121</sup> *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 3, *VSH* 2, 35–6. In its present form the *vita* most likely dates to the twelfth or thirteenth century; the Dublin compilation, as noted above on page 36 of chapter one, places it to the 1300s.

<sup>122</sup> *Vita S Dairchelli seu Moling episcopi in Tech Moling* (Salamanca) 1, pp. 353–4; *Vita S Moling episcopi de Tech Moling* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 190. In the Dublin version, the detail of Moling's birthday falling on Pentecost is omitted, losing some of the force of the scriptural parallel. See page 79–80 above for the discussion of the *Genemain* birth story. See Acts 2:3–4 for the biblical text of Pentecost.

with a saint—both in the Old Testament story of Aaron’s rod taking root and budding as an almond tree and in the New Testament equation of Jesus with life and resurrection.<sup>123</sup> Painless labor or, indeed, laborless birth, on the other hand, seems likely to draw some inspiration from the words of Isaiah’s prophecy that a woman shall give birth without labor pangs and deliver before her travail has truly begun.<sup>124</sup>

There are also vivid correspondences to the different variants and constituent texts of the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (*InfGosp*). In the version of the *InfGosp* that survives in the *Leabhar Breac* (LB), compiled in the early 1400s, Mary is reported to have experienced no pain in birthing Jesus, whose arrival is then said to be like light pouring through glass, an image that emphasizes Mary’s absolute physical and sexual purity. Jesus, as the light of God’s grace, passes into and through Mary without requiring the loss of her virginity, just as light passes through glass without breaking it.<sup>125</sup> Both the Isaian prophecy and the similarity of the *InfGosp* interpretation to those of the *Lives* of Colmán mac Lúacháin and Declán make plain that these saints are mothered by women whose purity equals that of Mary, the mother of God, while the saints themselves are again modeled on the *exemplum* of Christ.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>123</sup> See Num. 17:8 for the tale of Aaron’s staff; for equations of Jesus and life see, for example, John 1:4, 11:25, 14:6. Other examples of greening are found in the *vitae* of Columba of Terryglass (*Vita S Columbae abbatis de Tír Dá Glas* (Salamanca) 12, p. 228) and of Brigit (Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 1.5, cols 0135F–0136A; ch. 2, Connolly and Picard, 14. Also found in the *Bethu Brigitte*, though here the beam is changed from ash to acacia rather than made to grow; see ch. 18, pp. 6, 24).

<sup>124</sup> Isa. 66:7.

<sup>125</sup> The comparison between the birth of Christ and the shining of light through glass originates in a fifth-century North African sermon erroneously attributed to Augustine of Hippo; while the sermon itself was not widely known, the image it used was adopted into two subsequent sermons of the late sixth and early seventh centuries one of which became very popular in Ireland. See Andrew Breeze, “The blessed virgin and the sunbeam through glass,” *Celtica* 23 (1999): 19–29.

<sup>126</sup> *InfGosp* (LB) 75.4, ed. and trans. Martin McNamara et al., *Apocrypha Hiberniae I: evangeliae infantiae* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 320. The *Leabhar Breac* is Dublin, RIA MS 23.P.16; see McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 11 and McNamara, “Apocryphal infancy narratives: European and Irish transmission,” in *Texte und Überlieferung*, hrsg. Ni Chatháin und Richter, 124, 126, 132 for discussion of the *InfGosp* (LB).



The birth of Jesus is also effortless in the *Protevangelium of James* (*ProtJac*) and in the *InfGosp* of which a variant can be found in the fifteenth-century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (LFF). Here, Jesus' arrival is not as an infant but as a brilliant light that gradually assumes the shape of a baby boy and begins to nurse, a scene very like that in Moling's *vita*.<sup>127</sup> The message of these unusual birth scenes is as clear as that conveyed by the suddenly viridescent dry wood: Irish saints are born from women of such unsullied nature that they can be compared only with the virgin Mary, while the holy children themselves are imbued with a divinely-bestowed holiness the only comprehensible parallel to which is that of Jesus himself.

### **The sanctified form**

Once sanctity transforms from spiritual essence to corporeal entity through the conception and birth of its human shape, how does that sanctity affect the mortal body? It is now evident that this embodied essence can and does alter the mind and body of the woman who carries it in its infancy. But how does it impact the saint's physical shape after birth, as it grows and ages? Are there detectable signs that the holy body is wholly other?

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<sup>127</sup> *ProtJac* 19:2, Elliott, 64; also *Liber de infantia Salvatoris* (*LibInfSal*) (which McNamara calls the J compilation of *InfGosp*) 74, Elliott, 110. On the J compilation, see McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 132. See further *InfGosp* (LFF) 74.1–2, McNamara et al., 244–5; dating is given on p. 137. LFF is Dublin, RIA MS 23.O.48a–b, 1437 and 1440 CE. An excerpted translation of *InfGosp* (LFF) is also available in Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara, eds, *Irish biblical apocrypha: selected texts in translation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989); see §§15–16, pp. 31–2. Though Martin McNamara, “Apocryphal infancy narratives,” 132, has dated the arrival of the I compilation of infancy narratives, which he sees as the foundation of the LB and LFF *InfGosp* texts and the sole mode of transmission for *ProtJac* and its painless nativity, to approximately 700, and the arrival of the J compilation, in which the light-formed infant savior is found, to somewhat later, it seems these depictions of a sanctified birth did not find a hagiographical audience for several centuries.

*The beauty of the holy body*

Where the saint's physical appearance is mentioned, the most frequent depiction is one of a supernal beauty that occasionally creates problems for Ireland's holy elite.<sup>128</sup> Male saints like Patrick, Rúadán, Fintán of Taghmon, Coemgen, Brendán of Clonfert, Cuanna, Mochutu, Declán, Fintán of Clonenagh, Mochoemóg, Berach, Columba of Iona, Finnhúa, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise and Moling are described as "handsome" (*speciosus*), "beautiful" (*pulcer*, *admas*), or "most/very beautiful" (*pulcerrimus*, *archaín*, *airmass*).<sup>129</sup> Female saints, too, receive similar attention. The infant Brigit is described as lovely, with rosy cheeks.<sup>130</sup> Íta's face is alight like that of an angel.<sup>131</sup> Monenna, for her part, is "most

<sup>128</sup> Saints Brendán and Coemgen both suffer the unwanted attentions of females due to their looks. As a boy, Brendán whips a young girl who tries to play with him; for harming the innocent maiden he performs one day's penance praying in a cave (*Vita altera S Brendani* (Salamanca) 4, pp. 325–6; *Vita I S Brendani* (Oxford) 5, *VSH* 1, pp. 100–101; *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) II 3403–25, pp. 102, 249–50). Coemgen, frustrated that a girl will not leave him alone, quells any quirk of temptation in himself by stripping and rolling in stinging nettles "like another Antony" (*tamquam alter Antoninus*), then dresses, seizes handfuls of nettles, and flagellates the female in question in the hopes that the exterior pain will deter her from her "evil proposition" (*malo propositio*). Not surprisingly, the girl's ardor is utterly extinguished (*Vita S Caemgeni* (Salamanca) 3, pp. 361–2; *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 4, *VSH* 1, 235–6). In a variant on this theme, Saint Cuanna becomes distressed by the temptation his own good looks create and digs out and casts away his own eyes. This act is an echo not only of scriptural commands to avoid contact with defiling things and of Christ's injunction to remove the offending eye rather than risk hell for the entire body, but also of a similar act of defiance displayed by Brigit in response to her family's attempts to force her to marry (*Vita S Cuannathei seu Cuannae abbatis Lismorensis* (Salamanca) 7, p. 408, and *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.15, col. 0120D; ch. 19, Connolly, 18; *Bethu Brigitte* 15, pp. 5, 23; and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1332–40, pp. 40, 188). See Lev. 11–23 for the proscriptions against contamination, and Matt. 5:29 for Christ's words. Brigit's self-mutilation has also been proposed by Stancliffe, "Miracle stories," 92 to likely draw from the apocryphal *Acta Petri*; if the parallel holds true, it would likely also inform the similar act of St. Cuanna.

<sup>129</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.23:4, p. 102. *Vita S Ruadani abbatis de Lothra* (Salamanca) 25, p. 167; *Vita S Ruadani abbatis de Lothra* (Dublin) 30, *VSH* 2, 252. *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 7, p. 200; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 2, p. 248; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 2, 7, *VSH* 2, 226, 228–9. *Vita S Caemgeni* (Salamanca) 3, p. 361; *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 4, *VSH* 1, 235–6. *Vita altera S Brendani* (Salamanca) 4, pp. 325–6; (Oxford) 5, *VSH* 1, 100–101; *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) II 3406–9, pp. 102, 250. *Vita S Cuannathei seu Cuannae* (Salamanca) 7, p. 408. *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochudu* (Salamanca) 3, p. 335; *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 11, *VSH* 1, 173. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 9, *VSH* 2, 38–9. *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Cluain Edhnech* (Dublin) 21, *VSH* 2, 105–6. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 6, *VSH* 2, 166. *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 4, *VSH* 1, 76. *Betha Coluim Chille* 3.5, pp. 188–9. *Betha Finnhua* (Lismore) line 2840, pp. 85, 232. *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) II 4169–71, pp. 124, 269. *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 6.21, 8.29, pp. 18–19, 22–3. Orthographical variations in the quoted Latin texts reflect the appearance of the cited terms in the originating *vitae*.

<sup>130</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.5, col. 0119C; ch. 7.2, Connolly, 15.

<sup>131</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 2, *VSH* 2, 116–17.

beautiful in body and chaste in soul” (*pulcherrima corpore et anima casta*).<sup>132</sup> A small number of saints are also said to emit a heavenly fragrance while living, including Ailbe and Colmán mac Lúacháin; Ailbe’s scented breath actually brings on inebriation and three days of sleep for the Osraige king who tries to wake the resting saint.<sup>133</sup>

Depictions of holy beauty are drawn from scriptural references to angels and other sanctified persons as luminous like the sun and very beautiful, but with only a couple of notable exceptions, the references are apocryphal, not canonical.<sup>134</sup> Of particular relevance are the depictions of Mary and Jesus found in the Infancy Gospels. In *ProtJac* 5:2 and *PsMat* 6 Mary is radiantly lovely, for instance.<sup>135</sup> Her holy son, when newly born, is painted in similar hues; the infant Savior is additionally said to emit a satisfying aroma of sweetness and spice unlike anything of earthly origin.<sup>136</sup> Such hagiographical characterizations of the beauty and odor of holiness as are found in the *Lives* of Irish saints, then, place their subjects again on the paths of *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae*.

Yet not all saints in the *Lives* are so lovely or perfect in form. Mochúa, for example, is described in his *betha* as a small man with a limp, such that he suffers mockery from boys who call him a “lame cleric” (*clérech lascc*).<sup>137</sup> Fintán of Taghmon is a leper apparently because, displeased that his usual angelic visitation is delayed due to a

<sup>132</sup> Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 1.2–1.3, Esposito, 208–9; USMLS, 254–7.

<sup>133</sup> *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 46, p. 129; (Dublin) 38, VSH 1, 60. *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 12, pp. 14–15.

<sup>134</sup> The two clearest examples from the Bible are the glory that accompanies the heralds of Christ’s birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:9), an admittedly weaker parallel, and a much stronger description of an angel as having a face like a sun (Apoc. 10:1).

<sup>135</sup> Elliott, 88; also see *InfGosp* (LFF) 19 and 30, McNamara et al., 164–5, 178–9.

<sup>136</sup> *LibInfSal* 73, Elliott, 110; also *InfGosp* (LFF) 73.3, 74, McNamara et al., 244–5 and *InfGosp* (LB) 73.3, McNamara et al., 242–5, 318–21.

<sup>137</sup> *Betha Mochua Balla* (Lismore) ll 4641, 4663–7, pp. 138–9, 282–7. It should be noted that Mochúa does not let the insult pass without response; the offensive young louts are consumed by the earth, a punishment that leads to Mochúa’s expulsion from Ulster. See chapter three pp. 163–7 for more on the wages of verbally assaulting a saint.

heavenly celebration welcoming the soul of Saint Lugaïd, Fintán challenges the tardy angel to explain why Lugaïd should receive such favor while he, Fintán, is left unattended. For his arrogance, Fintán is struck with leprosy.<sup>138</sup> This narrative appears not only in the *vitae* of Fintán himself, but in the *vitae* of two other saints, Lugaïd and Mochúa, the accounts varying only in Fintán's response to the punishment and in its duration.<sup>139</sup> Its consistency and repetition strongly suggest that there was a genuine need to account for the reasons this saint retained his holiness while suffering from some form of visibly painful skin condition.

What of the personality of the Irish saint? It is likely no surprise that the vast majority of holy persons are described in terms that echo the commands of scripture to be humble, merciful, patient, kind, prudent, wise and—especially in the *bethada*—a host of other virtuous character traits.<sup>140</sup> The repetitive nature of such descriptions gives the Irish saint a remote quality, distancing the holy person from humanity with a cloud of vague adjectives rather than revealing any individual personality. Still, there are rare flashes of a more mortal selfhood, such as the foul temper of Fintán of Taghmon, who refuses to

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<sup>138</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 28, pp. 206–7; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 24, pp. 253–4; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 25, VSH 2, 235–6.

<sup>139</sup> Fintán's own *vitae* say he suffered with leprosy for twenty-four years; in Salamanca he simply endures, while in Dublin he offers to depart Ireland on pilgrimage to relax his monks' discipline, the harshness of which, in contrast to the clement *conversatio* of Lugaïd, is given as the reason God favors Lugaïd with a heavenly parade and Fintán loses his weekly angelic visit; the angel tells him essentially that pilgrimage would be too easy. In *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 69, p. 145 and *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 40, p. 388, Fintán endures the leprosy for the rest of his life (though the *Vita altera* does not explicitly name the saint's ailment), while in *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 53, VSH 2, 224–5 Fintán is struck for only two decades. Finally, the *Vita S Mochua* (Oxford) 5–6, VSH 185–6 represents Fintán in the most kindly fashion, saying that while arrogance brings on his affliction, he actually chooses to suffer the leprosy as penance, and after seven years is guided to Mochúa to be healed.

<sup>140</sup> See Matt. 11:29, 18:4, 23:12; Luke 14:11, 18:14; Rom. 12:16, Phil. 2:8, James 4:6, 10, and 1 Pet. 3:8, 5:5–6. In the *Lives*, for example see: *Vita S Ailbe* (Salamanca) 55, p. 131. *Vita S Abbani* (Dublin) 53, VSH 1, 33. *Bethu Phátraic* II 640–53, 3062–75, Mulchrone, 37, 152–3; Stokes, 62–3, 256–7. *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) II 2450–64, pp. 73–4, 220–221. *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) II 2740–64, pp. 82, 229. *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) II 3315–30, pp. 99, 247. *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) II 4484–4503, pp. 133–4, 279–80. *Betha Beraigh* 30.88, BNÉ 1, 42; BNÉ 2, 42. *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1690–1702, pp. 50–51, 197–8.

heal a sick woman and about whom Columba of Iona reportedly said “that man’s nature is harsh” (*natura enim illius viri aspera est*).<sup>141</sup> A moment of human emotion is also seen when Lasair becomes jealous that her sister has been given lands while she herself has not; the surge of envy Lasair expresses is said to be her only sin.<sup>142</sup> Though there are cases in which saints express wrath—nearly always in response to violations of the rights, status or authority due to them, as shown in the next chapter—on the whole the saints of Ireland are to be viewed as following scriptural edicts even to their temperament.

#### *Sanctity and schooling the saint*

It might be anticipated that sanctity would confer upon the holy child all the wisdom and understanding assumed to be inherent to sanctification, much as Jesus himself is said to have displayed perspicacity beyond his mere twelve years.<sup>143</sup> Quite the opposite tends to be the case, however, according to the *Lives*. The great majority of holy youngsters undertake much the same training as their peers, with one notable change: where other children might be fostered out to learn a trade in the secular world, saints are generally represented being fostered by other ecclesiastical figures, including anchorites, scholars and eminent saints.<sup>144</sup> For the rare later cases of females taken under the wing of an elder,

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<sup>141</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 7, 27, pp. 200, 206; notably the same unfavorable description is not found in Fintán’s other *vitae*. I am left wondering whether the author of the Salamanca *Vita prior* did not much like Fintán.

<sup>142</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* ll 9–29, pp. 78–9.

<sup>143</sup> Luke 2:46–7.

<sup>144</sup> Youngsters in medieval Ireland generally seem to have had an expected course of pursuits in which they would have been trained, usually by a foster-parent, beginning around age seven and determined by rank and gender. A noble boy would focus, for instance, on outdoor sports and warcraft, while his female counterpart learned sewing, cloth-cutting and embroidery. Lower-status boys tended to be set to farmwork and husbandry, including tasks such as chopping wood and tending the animals; girls of the same rank would have to winnow and grind grain, make bread and perform other similar chores. Only particular

holiness does provide the ability to learn with greater rapidity than their peers, a skill not seen in the *Lives* of male saints. Monenna is said by Conchubranus to receive spiritual training from Patrick, her memory, intellect and skill with the Psalms superior to those with whom she studies.<sup>145</sup> Lasair's education is the responsibility of Molaisse of Devenish; her learning after three months exceeds those who have studied for two years, and after her first twelve months she outstrips the knowledge of those who have been hard at their books for seven years.<sup>146</sup>

Not only does this speedy assimilation suggest the precocity of the young Jesus, but its pattern of acceleration also has parallels in Irish saga. The great Ulster hero, Cú Chulainn, rescues his king, fights and defeats otherworldly forces and slays nine men when a mere five years of age; at seven, he slays the huge hound of the smith Culann, receives his adult name (Hound of Culann), and takes on the protection of the entire region of Muirthemne.<sup>147</sup> In the later narrative of the *Cath Maige Tuired*, Eochaid Brés attains a fortnight's growth within one week of birth, and the maturation of a fourteen-year-old by the age of seven.<sup>148</sup> That hagiographers use this paradigm not to display a warrior's physical growth but a female saint's advancement in knowledge is an intriguing

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youths—nearly always male—would be trained in poetry, medicine or ecclesiastical life. See Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 87–91 for discussion of the *Cáin Íarraith*, a vernacular legal text the contents of which include the expected learning paths of children by rank and gender. In the *Lives*, Fínán of Kinnitty is fostered by Brendán of Clonfert, for example, while Ciarán of Clonmacnoise and Columba of Terryglass are among those who go to Finnian of Clonard (*Vita S Finani abbatis de Cenn Etigh* (Salamanca) 5, p. 154; (Dublin) 4, VSH 2, 87. *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 12, p. 80; *Vita S Ciarani abbatis de Cluain mic Nois* (Dublin) 15, VSH 1, 205; *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) ll 4103–18, pp. 122–3, 267–8. *Vita S Columbae abbatis de Tír Dá Glas* (Salamanca) 7, p. 226). Fintán of Taghmon reads and studies with a hermit living near his father's house, his father's cattle ably and safely tended by wolves whilst his nose is in his books (*Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 3, pp. 198–9; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 3, p. 248 (where the cattle are pigs, *peccora*); *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 3, VSH 2, 226–7).

<sup>145</sup> *Vita S Monennae* 1.2–1.3, Esposito, 208–9; USMLS, 254–7.

<sup>146</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* ll 26–37, pp. 74–5.

<sup>147</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ll 481–607, ed. and trans. Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: recension I* (Dublin: DIAS, 2003), 15–19, 138–42.

<sup>148</sup> Lines 74–7, pp. 28, 63.

inversion. Instead of becoming individuals of precocious killing power these holy women become women apart, possessed of a wisdom and insight superior to both the men and women around them.<sup>149</sup>

It also seems most often to be female saints who simply know the essentials of religious life in the service of their Lord, following very closely the example set by the young Christ. Brigit is set to the usual household tasks of a girl of her social status, including butter churning, cooking and sheep-tending, yet she lives the Gospels as one born steeped in their teachings, giving to all who ask, receiving the least with the noblest, and feeding and clothing the needy not just in response to their seeking but specifically because she sees in them the reflection of Christ.<sup>150</sup> Saint Íta is never described as studying or being instructed either, yet she instinctively lives a “most chaste” (*castissima*) life dedicated to Jesus Christ.<sup>151</sup> Samthann, too, despite appearing to lack education, has so insightful a grasp of scriptural and monastic tenets that she explains such things as the proper position for prayer and the reasons pilgrimage is unnecessary

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<sup>149</sup> As far as could be discovered, no male saints are shown learning in this divinely-hastened fashion. Instead, in very rare cases, holy men with heavenly knowledge obtain it not by their own efforts but with the aid of an angelic educator, as occurs with Saints Patrick, Buite and Moling, or by being taught from birth by the Holy Spirit, as seen with Abbán. See *Vita IV S Patricii* preface, 18 and *Vita II S Patricii* 14.XII, Bieler, 47, 64; Byrne and Francis, 17, 29. *Vita S Boecii* (Oxford) 3, VSH 1, 88. *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 4.12, pp. 12–13. *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 2, 3, p. 257; (Dublin) 4, 5, VSH 1, 5–6. For these saints, the pattern is clearly that of *imitatio Christi*. Abbán in particular is even said to go to the church as soon as he can walk and to preach there “most learnedly” (*peritissime*), with a skill and knowledge well beyond his toddler years, a scene very reminiscent of the adolescent Jesus speaking at the temple; see *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 2, p. 257; (Dublin) 4, VSH 1, 5, and Luke 2:46–7. With the exception of the Patrician texts, these are all late *Lives*, rough contemporaries of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The two Patrician works are likely of the early ninth century; see pp. 8–12 of the translation by Byrne and Francis for the most recent review of the dating initially offered by Bieler, *Four Latin Lives of Patrick*, 7–12. It seems probable that the later *Lives* have drawn inspiration from the Patrician example.

<sup>150</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 1.4, 2.6, 2.10, 2.13, cols 0135F, 0136B–F; chs 1.3–1.7, 3, 7, 10, Connolly and Picard, 13–16. *Vita I S Brigitae* 2.11, 2.13–2.14, cols 0119F–0120A, 0120C; chs 14, 16, 18, Connolly, 16–18. In the *Vita I*, Brigit states that “every guest is Christ” (*Omnis hospes Christus est*) and that an alms-seeker to whom she gave her father’s sword is also Christ. See also *Bethu Brigitte* 12, pp. 3–4, 22 and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1266–74, 1306–9, pp. 38–9, 186–7. The relevant scriptural texts are Matt. 25:35, Luke 6:30, 9:47–8.

<sup>151</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 1, VSH 2, 116.

for spiritual health.<sup>152</sup> For these women, then, holiness has so permeated their beings that they are steeped with the clarity and insight of the spiritual tenets as taught by Jesus, creating in them the model of the obedient handmaiden whose inborn knowledge also elevates them in *imitatio Christi*.

### *The rejection or transformation of the unclean*

The holiness inhabiting the mortal body of an Irish saint reveals itself in ways beyond the impact it exercises on the learning of the holy female. Among the most dramatic effects are those which demonstrate the inability of sanctity's purity to tolerate the presence of anything unclean. The rare saints who accidentally consume contaminated foods while young, for instance, immediately vomit up the offensive substance. Cainnech, when still a boy, is tricked into eating a stolen apple; he promptly regurgitates the illicit fruit.<sup>153</sup>

Some inspiration for this motif may have been drawn from Brigit's *Life*, as the infant saint is said to be unable to retain the milk her druid foster-father provides, until he sets aside a single cow specifically for the holy baby and has that cow milked by a Christian

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<sup>152</sup> *Vita S Samthanne virginis* (Oxford) 20, 24, *VSH* 2, 259–60. It is difficult to determine from the extant evidence whether the absence of episodes depicting women receiving a religious education either formally or informally is due to an assumption that it was unneeded in a society thoroughly steeped in Christianity or, as seems rather more likely, that girls were not generally sent away for training as were boys, particularly in the early Middle Ages. In support of this latter possibility are the *Lives* in which female saints are said to live at home before they depart to establish their own monastic communities, suggesting that any teaching received was presumed by Irish hagiographers to have occurred there; Íta and Samthann, for example, both live at home prior to taking the veil (*Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 2, 116; *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 1, *VSH* 2, 253). It is additionally important that the two *Lives* that do depict their female subjects being sent away for their education are later works; the *vita* of Monenna by Conchubranus dates to the eleventh century, while the *Beatha Lasrach* is in a Middle Irish that appears to date to around the same period. See p. 36, note 116 in chapter one for the chronology of the *Vita S Monennae*; for the *Beatha Lasrach* see the comments of Lucius Gwynn, its editor and translator, in his introduction, p. 73. Monenna's earliest *vita*, for instance, mentions nothing of her learning and instead emphasizes—in company with other female saints whose *Lives* date before the eleventh century—a consistently upheld vow of virginity. See *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 1, p. 83. Mario Esposito's analysis of the dossier of Monenna has shown that there is likely a core layer of the Salamanca text that may be as early as the seventh century; see "The sources of Conchubranus' *Life of St. Monenna*."

<sup>153</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 3, p. 182; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 2, *VSH* 1, 152. The Irish saint, for all he or she may know, is apparently not omniscient.



maid.<sup>154</sup> Aside from the fulfillment in such scenes of the Levitical prohibitions against contact with the defiled, including receiving anything that would otherwise be pure from unclean hands, the violent ejection of tainted food from the sanctified body demonstrates the inability of holiness to tolerate such intimate internal contact with contamination.<sup>155</sup>

The embodied essence within the saint does not always cast away the impure, however. In some *Lives* substances that would ordinarily be considered defiling are altered by contact with the holy. Food items such as pork or meat are transformed into bread, fish or honeycombs at the touch and benediction of a number of Irish saints, including Ciarán of Saigir, Áed mac Bricc, Brigit and Monenna, reflecting the observance of Levitical dietary proscriptions.<sup>156</sup> Saint Cainnech's vomit becomes gold, providing exactly the amount of precious metal needed for Brendán of Clonfert to have an altar chalice made.<sup>157</sup> Comgall of Bangor, too, turns bodily moisture into metal. When he prays on behalf of an alms-seeking pauper, his speech causes him to spit upon the

<sup>154</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 1.8, cols 0119D–E; ch. 11.6–11.7, Connolly, 16. *Bethu Brigitte* 5, pp. 2, 21. *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1225–30, pp. 37, 185.

<sup>155</sup> Lev. 11 lists many of the forbidden foods; Lev. 22, by contrast, contains the edicts indicating those who are prohibited from consuming consecrated foods, presenting the mirror image of the sanctified eating unclean items. Lev. 22 further asserts that the unclean defile whatever touches them or contacts the things that they touch. Also related are likely to be the moments in which a saint will not receive foods connected with pagan rites or in any way associated with a heathen, as when Muirchú's Patrick refuses to eat food originally provided to him and his pagan traveling companions through his own prayers to God because his companions offered the viands to their deities first (*Vita S Patricii* 1.2:2, p. 68; *Bethu Phátraic* subnotes, Mulchrone, 15 and Stokes, 23), in accordance with the command of Acts 15:29 to not receive what has been used in heathen ritual. Also see *Vita I S Brigitae* 5.37–5.38, col. 0123A and ch. 40, Connolly, 40; *Bethu Brigitte* 41, pp. 15, 31–2; and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1460–1466, pp. 44, 191, in which the adult Brigit and her nuns are unable to dine with a devoted follower, despite his belief, until he is purified of his heathenism through baptism.

<sup>156</sup> *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 17, p. 352; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 30, *VSH* 1, 229–30. *Vita S Aedi* (Salamanca) 45, p. 180; *Vita S Aidi* (Dublin) 31, *VSH* 1, 43. *Bethu Brigitte* 20, pp. 6, 24. *Vita S Monennae* 1.9, Esposito, 211–12; USMLS, 262–3. See Lev. 11–13 for the Levitical dietary rules; pork in specific is addressed in Lev. 11:7.

<sup>157</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi abbatis de Achad Bó Chainnich* (Salamanca) 53, p. 196. Here, Cainnech acts out of charity for Brendán by deliberately eating too much bread and causing himself to vomit the needed precious metal. In *Vita S Cainnici abbatis de Achad Bó Cainnich* (Dublin) 44, *VSH* 1, 168, Cainnech only blesses the bread he is sharing with Brendán and places it on the table, whereupon it is immediately transformed into gold, removing from the narrative any question of contact with bodily fluids. See Lev. 7:26–7 where blood is declared unclean, Lev. 15:8 for the definition of saliva as contaminating and the words of Lev. 17:12 against the consumption of blood.

man; the saliva turns into a gold ring that Comgall promptly bestows upon the alms-seeker.<sup>158</sup> What would be a base fluid in an unsanctified body becomes a desired and demanded material, through the sanctity of a saint, in order to fulfill the requirements of charity.<sup>159</sup> In addition to revealing the alteration of the human body into the holy other, these episodes may also draw inspiration from the Gospel account of Jesus turning water to wine to serve the wedding guests at Cana.<sup>160</sup> Holiness in these saints not only moves in accordance with Mosaic Law, then, it also follows the finest hagiographical tradition of *imitatio Christi*.

In a number of male saints, sanctity so alters their physical form that even sexual desire is eliminated, an erasure that is made manifest through an imperviousness to flames that likely draws from biblical equations of lust and fire.<sup>161</sup> In a number of *vitae*, Irish holy men carry live embers in their cloaks, in their bare hands, or even reach into crackling hearths to retrieve fallen items altogether without harm to their hands, hair or clothing. Lugaid retrieves a glowing ball of iron, for instance, but though it burns through the table onto which it accidentally falls, Lugaid himself is unharmed.<sup>162</sup> Fínán of Kinnitty also reaches into the fire, to pick up a dropped piece of bread, and neither his hand nor the bread are even singed.<sup>163</sup> Colmán Élo picks up with his bare hand a lit coal that falls from the bread oven, tossing it back into the flames and leaving his skin

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<sup>158</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Salamanca) 38, p. 15.

<sup>159</sup> See chapter four, pp. 186–9, 195–6, 197–8, 221–2 below for instances of the healing powers of saints' bodily effluvia, including blood and saliva.

<sup>160</sup> John 2:6–9.

<sup>161</sup> See for example Sir. 9:9.

<sup>162</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 17, p. 134; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 17, *VSH* 2, 211.

<sup>163</sup> *Vita S Finani abbatis de Cenn Etigh* (Salamanca) 6, p. 154; (Dublin) 5, *VSH* 2, 88.

unscathed.<sup>164</sup> The message of the fire-carrying saint is clear: for those whom the flames of carnal lust do not touch, no physical fire can hold any danger.<sup>165</sup>

### *Sanctity and severe asceticism*

For a prominent number of saints in the *Lives*, the immanent spark of sanctity confers the ability to withstand considerable deprivation in the service of intercessory suffering. Patrick, Maedóc of Ferns, Cainnech of Aghaboe, Molaisse of Devenish and Mac Creiche, for instance, all fast for forty days and nights, following the example of Moses and Christ.<sup>166</sup> The Irish hagiographical holy are also frequently depicted surviving on significantly abstemious diets, such as bread and water with a few herbs, or the amount of grain that fills the palm of a hand, as seen with Finnian of Clonard, Molaisse

<sup>164</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 37, p. 221.

<sup>165</sup> This display of the complete subjugation of carnal desire is drastically opposed to that of other male saints who must instead avoid temptation, as when Lugaid—in direct contradiction to the fire-carrying episode just mentioned—flees from the gaze and even the sound of women, “as if evading a fire” (*quasi ignem vitaret*), declaring that wherever women are, there also will be sin, the devil and hell, or when Fintán of Taghmon refuses to bless water that would heal a woman suffering hemorrhage because he fears the compounded threat of both femaleness and the defiling influence of blood. (Lugaid’s fire is probably a reference to both lust and to hell. *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 27, 28, 32, pp. 136–7. *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 25, *VSH* 2, 214. *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 27, p. 206; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 24, *VSH* 2, 235. See Lev. 7:26–7 and 17:12 for the defiling influence of blood. In addition, menstruating women are unclean in Mosaic Law, and this status is augmented when the flow does not stop in its usual time. See Lev. 15:19–27). Cases like those of Lugaid and Fintán appear in part to be reflections of the scriptural injunctions to avoid looking upon maidens as in, for example, Sir. 9:5. The influence of another passage concerning the properly modest behavior of godly women in 1 Tim. 2:9–10, 3:11 is also seen in the completely different portrayal of female saints who avoid the opposite sex. Rather than women evading the sight and sound of men to keep from being tempted, they are instead portrayed in a couple of *Lives* preventing their own bodies from becoming temptations to others. Monenna, for instance, is said to look upon no man once she settles in her Muirthemne church at Killeevy; when duty demands that she travel to heal the sick or free captives, she only moves at night and keeps her face veiled. *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 14, p. 87; Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 2.16, Esposito, 226–7 and USMLS, 136–7. See also the discussion of Monenna’s salvific makeover of Orbile, chapter four, p. 222.

<sup>166</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea* 38.1, 3–4, p. 152. *Vita IV S Patricii* 59–60, Bieler, pp. 101–2; Byrne and Francis, 54. *Vita S Aidi siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 33, *VSH* 2, 304; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 28, p. 241; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 2, 153–4. *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 48, p. 195; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 42, *VSH* 1, 167–8. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi* (Oxford) 9, *VSH* 2, 132–3. *Betha Meic Creiche* 2.3, *Miscellanea*, 113–14, 53–4. See Exod. 24:18, 34:28, Deut. 9:9, 18, 25, and Matt. 4:2, (Mark 1:13, Luke 4:2).

of Devenish or Mac Creiche.<sup>167</sup> These fairly formulaic *topoi* of asceticism paint the saints associated with them in tones reminiscent particularly of the teachings of the New Testament. The example provided by John the Baptist, a man whose life is largely spent wandering in the desert wearing camel's hair garments and eating locusts and wild honey, yet who not only prophesies but properly recognizes and baptizes the Messiah, is foremost.<sup>168</sup> Of prominence also are the commands of Jesus himself to take no care for their own lives, their food or their clothing because God will provide them, or to abandon worldly concerns, including home, spouse, kin, children, wealth and property, to gain great rewards in heaven.<sup>169</sup> These *exempla* not only equate Ireland's holy other with the eminence and life story of John the Baptist, the ascetic herald and baptizer of Christ, but also make plain the prominent role played in the saint's biography by the fulfillment of the teachings of Jesus through the revelation of sanctity's unusual level of endurance.

For a very small number of hagiographical Irish holy, the sanctity moving under their skin allows the pursuit of extraordinary self-mortification. Despite the reputation of widespread severe austerities imputed to Ireland's holy men and women, only a very few are described either engaging in a harsh discipline or imposing one upon their communities.<sup>170</sup> Of these few, most engage in habitual nighttime prayer outdoors immersed in icy water. The male saints in this select group follow the steps of Muirchú's Patrick into a cold river so frigid Patrick's pupil, Benignus, cannot withstand it upstream of the saint, yet downstream the water is so heated by Patrick's fervent faith and prayer

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<sup>167</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 34, p. 106; *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) ll 2730–2739, pp. 81–2, 228–9. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi* (Oxford) 9, *VSH* 2, 132–3. *Betha Meic Creiche* 1.2, 2.3, *Miscellanea*, 13–14, 53–4.

<sup>168</sup> Matt. 3:1, 4, 13–14 (Mark 1:4, 6, 9), Luke 3:16, 7:33, John 1:15, 26, 29.

<sup>169</sup> Matt. 6:25–34, 19:21, 29, (Mark 10:21, 29–30, Luke 18:22, 29–30).

<sup>170</sup> For two scholars whose work tends to emphasize the asceticism of Irish hagiography and view it as a widespread practice, see Chadwick, *Age of the saints* and Hughes, "Sanctity and secularity in the early Irish church."

that it is too hot to endure.<sup>171</sup> This motif suggests the battle furor of the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn, the intensity of which bursts one barrel of water, boils away all the water in a second barrel, and is still sufficiently heated to rapidly warm the water in a third.<sup>172</sup> The Patrician plot, with different players, is also observed in the *vita*e of Comgall and Molaisse and the *Lives* of Féchín and Ciarán of Saigir.<sup>173</sup> Coemgen's nocturnal petitions in a frigid pool are joined not by another human being but by a horrible beast that swims around and around him, pestering but not harming him until God mercifully sends an angel to both warm the pool and repel the creature.<sup>174</sup>

On the female side of the tradition the model is Brigit, whose prayers are undertaken even when the pool is surrounded by snow and ice. God, however, thinks her rigors are too severe, and causes the pool to be dry at night but full during the day.<sup>175</sup> Monenna, who throughout her *Life* is depicted as following the trails blazed by Brigit, also engages in this chilling nightly ritual. According to Conchubranus, Monenna chants the entire Psalter sitting in a cold fountain with water up to her breasts.<sup>176</sup>

This odd form of mortificatory piety appears to have apocryphal roots in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, a text certainly known in Ireland by the 900s, when its narrative was

<sup>171</sup> *Vita S Patricii* 1.28:4–5, p. 102.

<sup>172</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ll 814–18, pp. 25, 148.

<sup>173</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 46, *VSH* 2, 17. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi* (Oxford) 12, *VSH* 2, 133. *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 17, *VSH* 2, 82; *Betha Féchín* 22, pp. 332–3. *Betha Sein Chiaráin Saighre I* 24.41–2, *BNÉ* 1, 109–10; *BNÉ* 2, 105–6.

<sup>174</sup> *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 1, 243. In the *Vita S Columbae* written by Adomnán may be found what is generally viewed as the earliest known reference to a monster living in Loch Ness (ch. 2.27, pp. 132–5). Glendalough certainly has its share of deep lakes between high ridges, a topography much like that of the area of Ness in Scotland if on a rather smaller scale. It seems more than a little likely that Coemgen's tolerated creature is a Leinster reflection of the monster Columba drives away from Loch Ness.

<sup>175</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 15.93, col. 0132A; ch. 94, Connolly, 42.

<sup>176</sup> *Vita S Monennae* 1.12, Esposito, 214–15; *USMLS*, 268–9. See for instance ch. 2.8, in which Monenna and Brigit go to Rome on pilgrimage together.

translated and versified into the vernacular *Saltair na Rann*.<sup>177</sup> In the apocryphon Adam and Eve, in penance for disobeying God in the Garden of Eden and in hopes that they may regain entry into paradise, engage in a lengthy fast standing in water. Adam takes up a position in the river Jordan, and commands Eve to follow suit in the Tigris, each of them submerged up to their necks. Eve, when she emerges from the Tigris, is said to be blue and shivering with cold.<sup>178</sup> The saints whose *Lives* link them with the account of the *Life of Adam and Eve* do not perform penance for themselves but for others. They do undertake, though, in an adaptation of the act undertaken by Adam and Eve, an intercessory vigil that would be impossible without the warming protection of an indwelling spark of holiness and heroism. Whether saint or protoplast, the goal is the same; penance is undertaken so that those who have sinned may attain paradise.

In still fewer *Lives*, sanctification confers the ability to endure austerities so severe that lesser monks and nuns do not survive. At Colmán Élo's first monastery, the deprivation is so extreme that all of Colmán's monks die.<sup>179</sup> Cainnech's three-day retreat and fast, observed along with him by the entire community at Aghaboe during his absence, causes the starvation of a little boy living among the brethren. Cainnech

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<sup>177</sup> McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 15, notes that the *Saltair* is generally dated to around 988, but may be as early as the latter half of the 800s. The apocryphal roots of the *Saltair*, he asserts, are stronger than its use of the canonical scriptures, and prime among the apocrypha used is the *Life of Adam and Eve* (*Life*). Much the same observations have been made by Brian Murdoch, the commentator on the most recent edition of the apocryphon as it appears in the *Saltair*. See *The Irish Adam and Eve story from Saltair na Rann volume II: commentary* (Dublin: DIAS, 1976).

<sup>178</sup> *Life* 6, 10, Sparks, 148–9. For the version in the *Saltair* itself, see David Greene and Fergus Kelly, eds and trans., *The Irish Adam and Eve story from Saltair na Rann volume I: text and translation* (Dublin: DIAS, 1976); the story of the penance of Adam and Eve is found at ll 1589–92, pp. 64–5. It is also excerpted in “The penance of Adam,” Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical apocrypha*, 8–11.

<sup>179</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 3, pp. 210–211; (Dublin) 6, *VSH* 1, 260–261. Interestingly, while the Salamanca text says that the deprivation the monks suffer is due to penury, the Dublin version lacks Colmán's command to remain at the monastery and alters the cause of scarcity to a deliberate choice by the brethren and Colmán to eat so little that life cannot be sustained. The Dublin *vita*, in other words, turns what seems a tragic demonstration of the rule to obey one's monastic superior even at the cost of life when circumstances shift unfavorably into a consciously-adopted and extremely rigorous ascetic discipline, and therefore into a form of martyrdom.

naturally resurrects the lad with prayer and a verbal summons.<sup>180</sup> Comgall relents and relaxes his harsh rule when, stirred to mercy by the starvation and freezing of seven monks in his community, the rest of Ireland's holy men ask him to loosen the rigor of his *conversatio* ever so slightly.<sup>181</sup> Féchín also practices mercy; though he crucifies his own body beyond normal human endurance, his followers live according to a much more clement discipline. Féchín's own fasting is so extreme that, in a haze of hunger and confusion, he attempts to milk a bull, and his miraculous success is touted as paralleling the extraction of honey or of oil from a stone.<sup>182</sup>

Monenna of Killeevy is also portrayed engaging in a certain degree of ascetic discipline, but when her nuns begin to suffer deprivation greatly, it is not as a consequence of too strict a rule but of Monenna falling into an ecstatic contemplative state so complete that she is unaware her nuns are near death from laboring while in a fast. Embarrassed at being called to task by the observation of a holy man, Monenna's prayers then facilitate the feeding of her whole community.<sup>183</sup> Monenna's meditative trance owes a good deal to a similar spiritual transportation that affects Brigit, though in the latter woman's case no one else is involved or harmed. Brigit's prayers simply so absorb her that she is oblivious to everything around her in Ireland and yet can hear the new order of worship in the Masses at Rome.<sup>184</sup> It is interesting that the effects of Monenna's ascetic piety are more passive, occurring as a result of the saint's accidental

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<sup>180</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 37, pp. 191–2; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 29, *VSH* 1, 163.

<sup>181</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 2, 6–7.

<sup>182</sup> *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 9–10, *VSH* 2, 79. It seems to me the miracle is really that he survived.

<sup>183</sup> *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 21, pp. 89–90; Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 3.2, Esposito, 229 and USMLS, 430–431.

<sup>184</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 15.89, col. 0131D; ch. 90, Connolly, 41.

neglect rather than following the deliberate choice to impose a harsh regime upon her followers as seen in the *Lives* of the male saints.

In the rarest expressions of extraordinary mortification, involving fewer than a half a dozen Irish saints, holiness permits the subjects of the *Lives* to so subjugate the physical form that their bodies become terribly emaciated; their bones protrude and their flesh is even said to rot. Finnian of Clonard, for instance, “worn by excessive thinness” (*nimia macie confectum*), falls into this very elite group, his suffering explicitly said to be penance for others, and particularly for a rather corpulent monk among his brethren. Finnian further wears an iron band so tightly around his body that it macerates the flesh beneath it and fosters the proliferation of maggots that fall from his sides to the earth.<sup>185</sup> Finnhúa’s body is perforated by beetles and other creatures, and daily he performs what his *betha* enigmatically calls a penance on iron sickles; explanation for this comment is found in the late twelfth-century commentary on the ninth-century Irish martyrology, *Félire Óengusso*. In that text, Finnhúa reportedly suspends himself between floor and ceiling by two iron sickles, the curves of which support him by the armpits.<sup>186</sup> The

<sup>185</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 32, pp. 105–6; *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) II 2719–29, pp. 81, 228–9.

<sup>186</sup> November 25, notes, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *Félire Óengusso Céili Dé: the martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (1905; reprint, London: The Henry Bradshaw Society, 1984), 246–7. For the dating of the martyrology and its very valuable and extensive marginalia, see Pádraig Ó Riain, “The Tallaght martyrologies, redated,” *CMCS* 20 (Winter 1990): 21–38 and *Four Irish martyrologies: Drummond, Turin, Cashel, York* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 2002), 11–12. It is significant that the earliest appearances of this type of extreme self-inflicted suffering are apparently those found in the commentary to *Félire Óengusso*. It is there also that Íta is said to endure the suckling of an enormous stag-beetle attached to her flank, a story that does not appear in her *vita* (January 15, notes, pp. 42–5). Assuming the pain of others into the saint’s own body has a longer pedigree in Ireland than suggested by the short chronology of extraordinary mortification, as seen in the *vita* of Áed mac Bricc when Áed absorbs the headache of another man who, despite Áed’s promise that bearing the ailment will gain heavenly reward, declares its pain to be “beyond his strength” (*supra vires*). Áed transfers the man’s sickness into himself, and “patiently endures” (*patienter sustinuit*) not only to relieve another out of mercy but “so that he would suffer the cross of martyrdom for Christ” (*ut pro Christo martirii crucem toleraret*) (*Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 17, p. 173; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 13, *VSH* 1, 38–9). The oldest *vita* of Áed mac Bricc is among the Φ texts of the O’Donohue group and therefore likely has a layer dating to the 700s, giving the earliest horizon for the concept of penitential sacrifice for others as seen in the *Lives* (see pp. 36–8, chapter one). Yet the truly gory forms of martyrdom, which appear to indicate the identification of the saint with the agonies of Christ’s



intense suffering endured by these few Irish saints on behalf of others paints them as new types of Christ, their holy bodies essentially crucified for the sake of others, in imitation of the Savior himself.

### **At day's end: the saint's death**

Most saints' deaths occasion little comment. It seems odd, perhaps, that passage from this world to the next would not be granted much attention, yet in the majority of *Lives* little is said of the holy person's general health, age or manner of decease. Saints in Ireland are not tortured to death on the rack, or martyred for Christ by unbelievers.

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Passion, also borne to save others from perdition, are only known in late works that postdate the Anglo-Norman and Cambro-Norman incursions of 1170 and thereafter. It would seem the motif of severe self-torture arrived in Ireland's hagiography along with the other religious influences imported with the island's new inhabitants. That the more moderate forms of asceticism appear to be represented throughout the history of the genre in Ireland supports the argument of Westley Follett, *Céli Dé in Ireland: monastic writing and identity in the early Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006) that the appearance in the eighth and ninth centuries of a particular group of monks known as the Céli Dé, "clients of God," did not signify a reform movement intended to correct failing or lax *conversatio* standards; instead the term was a specific designation for a monastic elite characterized by a focus on penance and pastoral care that did not demonstrably show more severe ascetic practices than those already extant. Although the Céli Dé have often been seen as having espoused particularly harsh self-mortification, Follett's analysis of the evidence shows that while the Céli Dé appear to have been a monastic class differentiated by a greater degree of asceticism than pursued by fellow community members, these monks nevertheless deemed moderation to be essential, the actual degree of austerity lived by each monk and each community showing considerable variation according to individual ability. Indeed, Follett's conclusions are corroborated not only by the genre-long appearance of standard ascetic claims such as fasting, vigil, poverty and chastity, but also by the fact that the most grotesque self-denial is both rare and late. For a thorough discussion of the events begun with the engagement of aid from Britain by deposed Leinster king Diarmait Mac Murchada in 1168–9 and continued with the increasing settlement of those allies and their reinforcements, see the first several chapters of *A new history II*, ed. Cosgrove, especially 43–155. I intend to further pursue the nature of the external influences upon such extreme austerities in future work. It should also be observed that the devouring of flesh by worms is linked with the punishment of arrogance several times in scriptural texts. See for instance Isa. 14:11, in which the covering of the fallen bodies of the proud is foretold to be worms; 2 Macc. 9:9, in which Antiochus is brought low from his hubris in thinking to destroy the Jews by worms that swarm from his body and cause him to emit an unbearable stench; and Acts 12:33, in which Herod's pride in not giving the Lord his due honor results in his death from worms that consume his insides. Could the horrible odor of Antiochus' body be countered in the *Lives* of Ireland's holy by the sweet odor of sanctity? If the scriptural texts did provide inspiration, it would seem Ireland's hagiographers sought to take a punitive consequence of arrogance and use it to demonstrate absolute humility in the saints who so suffer.

Instead, they are most often represented as simply having ‘rested’ (*quieuit*), ‘gone to sleep’ (*dormiuit*), or ‘migrated’ to heaven (*migrauit*).<sup>187</sup>

Some hagiographers do take care to observe their subjects’ advanced years, lovingly listing the infirmities accompanying great age. Comgall of Bangor, for instance, is deaf, unable to urinate and suffers “other bitter ailments” (*aliosque acres dolores*). The *vita* here shows its compilatory origins, reporting that some sources say God gave these challenges to Comgall as a kind of penance for the harshness of the rule which he required of his monks, while others hold that Comgall’s own austerities simply wore out his body.<sup>188</sup> Crónán of Roscrea becomes blind due to his years, his *vita* referring to him as “a decrepit old man” (*senex decrepitus*) who, on the day of his death, is weak in body yet still retains all his mental faculties (*infirmus corpore sed mente validus*).<sup>189</sup> Tigernach also loses his sight, ending his life as an anchorite, his mind firmly fixed on heaven.<sup>190</sup> For other saints, infirmity may or may not be a consequence of agedness. Fínán of Kinnitty dies of illness, and near his death is said to suffer throughout his whole body.<sup>191</sup> Much the same is written with respect to Cainnech and Colmán of Dromore.<sup>192</sup>

These depictions of bodily suffering at the close of life, much like those of intercessory mortification, are best understood in the light of *imitatio Christi*. By

<sup>187</sup> See for example the eminently peaceful passing of Columba of Iona, surrounded by monks, in Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 3.23, pp. 220–226. Also *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 60, p. 198; *Vita S Caimnici* (Dublin) 46, *VSH* 1, 169 (*migrauit*). *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 53, 55, p. 247 (*obdormiuit, quiescens*); *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 57, 59, *VSH* 2, 162 (*migrauit*). *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 36, *VSH* 2, 130 (*migrauit*).

<sup>188</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 56, *VSH* 2, 20. The description of Comgall’s urinary issue seems to suggest advanced prostate cancer: “His belly was closed without the flow of urine” (*venter eius conclusus est sine effusione urine*). Such specificity offers the tempting possibility that this tidbit reflects an actual fact regarding the historical, and not just the hagiographical, saint.

<sup>189</sup> *Vita S Cronani abbatis de Ros Cree* (Dublin) 27, 29, *VSH* 2, 30–31.

<sup>190</sup> *Vita S Tigernaci episcopi de Cluain Eois* (Oxford) 18, *VSH* 2, 268.

<sup>191</sup> *Vita S Finani abbatis de Cenn Etigh* (Salamanca) 37, p. 160; (Dublin) 29, *VSH* 2, 95.

<sup>192</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 60, p. 198; *Vita S Caimnici* (Dublin) 46, *VSH* 1, 169. *Vita S Colmani Dromorensis* (Salamanca) 20, p. 360.

portraying the sanctified Irish with the imagery of illness and advanced age, the holy other is brought down from the elevated realm of the heavenly elect and firmly placed on earth as a mortal being. That saints can, in Ireland, become blind, get sick or grow old makes them, whatever the intensity of the grace that inhabits them, completely human, as was Jesus. Their pain and disability, moreover, grant to them a final form of martyrdom, a set of trials through which they endure patiently—their minds still sharp due to the protective blessing of sanctification—and through which they may more fully identify with the terrible throes in which Jesus himself died on the cross. While in their *Lives* Irish saints do not become senile, they end their existence among the living with an eminently human transition from life to life hereafter.

This identification with Christ is made more explicit in a tiny number of *Lives* in which the saint, knowing he is about to die, allows another person to pass away alongside him, his holiness somehow synchronizing exactly the departure of both their souls.<sup>193</sup> Áed mac Bricc, for example, allows a brigand to wash himself and lie down in bed alongside Áed to accompany him to heaven, “according to (the example of) Christ” (*post Christum*).<sup>194</sup> Columba of Terryglass does something similar, when “a certain uneducated warrior, not yet baptized” (*quidam laicus rusticus, adhuc non baptizatus*) professes belief in Christ, receives a tonsure, bathes himself and joins Columba in bed, whereupon both pass away. This act of compassion is again explicitly compared to the crucifixion of the believing robber alongside Christ.<sup>195</sup> The parallel is made still clearer by the idiosyncratic

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<sup>193</sup> There are no examples of which I am aware that involve female saints dying, at the same time, in the same bed, with a layperson.

<sup>194</sup> *Vita S Aedi* (Salamanca) 52, p. 181; *Vita S Aidi* (Dublin) 36, VSH 1, 45. Note that in Dublin the man is only “uneducated” (*rusticus*), and not also a brigand (*latro*) as in Salamanca.

<sup>195</sup> *Vita S Columbae abbatis de Tír Dá Glas* (Salamanca) 27, pp. 231–2. Columba’s deed in taking the warrior to heaven with him is described as “in the likeness of Christ with his robber” (*in similitudine Christi cum suo latrone*). The biblical text of the crucifixion including the two robbers is Luke 23:39–43. I

use of *laicus* in Hiberno-Latin, a term that often means not only layman and warrior—a translation of the Irish *láech*—but also specifically a brigand.<sup>196</sup>

Some saints' deaths are heralded by great miraculous occurrences in the cosmos. Patrick's passing is one such case, his decease followed in his province of Ulster by nearly a fortnight of unceasing daylight; from then until the end of a year the nights remain not quite as dark as usual. This wonder is explicitly equated both with to the reversing of the sun's course to allow Hezekiah time to recuperate from illness and to the sun standing still against Gabaon and the moon against the valley of Achilon for Joshua.<sup>197</sup> Similar events occur after Lugaid of Clonfertmulloe dies, when for seven days all punishments in hell cease, there are no shadows or night on earth and all sick people become well.<sup>198</sup> In addition to any explicitly cited scriptural models, these accounts stand in *imitatio Christi*, echoing and inverting the upheaval of the world upon the death of Christ.<sup>199</sup> Where Jesus' passing is marked with the mournful, angry rending of the temple curtain, the quaking of the ground, the rising of the dead and the darkening of the sun (depending upon the Gospel account), however, the reaction of the cosmos to the passing of Irish saints is one of joy and celebration. Far from the heavens mourning, the atmosphere is one in which the saint's soul is welcomed home.

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am struck also by the fact that not only do the robbers in each *vita* have to wash prior to dying, but so do the saints. It is as though the soil of the earth must be removed before migration to heaven is possible, as if it were a sort of second (or in some cases first) baptism.

<sup>196</sup> See the article by Richard Sharpe, "Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech*, and the Devil's men," *Ériu* 30 (1979): 75–92 for a full discussion of the terminology for robbers in Hiberno-Latin and Irish; additionally see chapter three, pp. 123–4, 136, 173–5 for the punishments that befall brigands, and chapter four, pp. 232, 235–6, 242–6 for the place held by the *laici* and *latrones* in the healing miracles of the Irish saints.

<sup>197</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 2.8, p. 118; *Bethu Phátraic* II 2995–3003, Mulchrone, 149–50; Stokes, 254–5. The relevant biblical citations, found in both texts, are 4 Kgs 20:11 and Josh. 10:12–13.

<sup>198</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 69, p. 145; *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 40, p. 388; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 53, *VSH* 2, 224–5. These celebrations are, of course, the reason Fintán of Taghmon does not receive his usual weekly angelic visitor, leading to his peevish behavior and affliction with leprosy as discussed above, pp. 89–90.

<sup>199</sup> Matt. 27:51–3 (Mark 15:38, Luke 23:44–5).

What of the saint's body? In a few *Lives*, the remains of the holy other retain a degree of the appearance of life, and may also emit a pleasing odor. Columba of Iona's face remains flushed and appears only to sleep, a sweet scent surrounding him.<sup>200</sup> Patrick's body, too, is enveloped by a perfume that brings both sleep and joy to those who attend it at night.<sup>201</sup> This odor of incorruptibility appears to have apocryphal roots, as in the *Assumption of the Virgin*—a version of which is known in Ireland as the *Transitus Mariae* in Latin and in Irish as the *Timna Muire*—Mary's body emits a sweet fragrance unlike any other before it is Assumed to prevent its corruption in the tomb.<sup>202</sup> There may also be influence drawn from the apocryphal tales concerning John the Baptist, whose head still retains a lifelike appearance and complexion even years after its severing, and whose truncated corpse is without putrefaction, as if it were only asleep.<sup>203</sup> When the perfection of the sanctified body is retained beyond death, then, the holiness of Irish saints connects them, through the herald of the Messiah and the Messiah's mother, directly to Christ himself.

<sup>200</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 3.23, pp. 224–6.

<sup>201</sup> *Betha Phátraic* II 3005–3311, Mulchrone, 150; Stokes, 254–5.

<sup>202</sup> *AssVir* (PsMell) 10, 17:1, Elliott, pp. 711, 714. In *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 122–3, Martin McNamara observes that this apocryphon was certainly known in Ireland by the eleventh century, when it was used to produce the *Fís Adomnáin*. McNamara notes, however, that it may have been in Ireland as early as the 600s. If some version of the *AssVir* (PsMell) was an inspiration for Adomnán, that would seal the arrival of the text to the Irish—or at least to Iona—by no later than the 690s. Though the present chapter and verse are taken from the Latin Ps.-Mellitus version, it is not known from the evidence whether this specific variant was that known in Ireland, though it is possible; the version of *Acta Iohannis* transmitted to Ireland was that of Ps.-Mellitus. See McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 10.

<sup>203</sup> McNamara dates the knowledge of the *Acta Iohannis* to the seventh or eighth century based on its appearance in the prayers of the devotional text, the *Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, University Library MS LI.1.10), which has been placed variously between 600 and 900 and was widely used in Ireland. See *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 10. The relevant passages are separately presented by Herbert and McNamara as “The death of John the Baptist” 8 and “Fragment of an apocalypse, and the death of John” 19, *Irish biblical apocrypha*, 58, 98.

### **Conclusion: the essence of embodiment**

The weaving together of the many threads in this chapter reveals a tapestry of the Irish saint as an individual known to and chosen by God from before his or her conception. Irish holy men and women are human—they are born, they grow and mature, they age and they die—yet they are brought into being by God’s election. The *Lives* paint the image of a holiness that becomes embodied through mortal, physical processes, lives through a mortal existence that includes both suffering and rejoicing, then returns to heaven after death to be welcomed home by the angels. Even saints whose origins are unorthodox, whose tempers are irascible, whose bodies are imperfect or who are stricken with infirmity retain their sanctification. The holiness of an Irish saint exists before conception and is therefore innate, an indwelling essence that fills the saint’s body and alters it, making it the signpost for a divine destiny and even allowing it, in some rare instances, to persist beyond death. The *Lives* of Ireland’s saints, drawn from biblical and apocryphal inspiration and sharing strong parallels with elements of the early Irish heroic genre, make clear that it is not so much what the sanctified do or what their personalities may be that grants them their elevation, it is the inborn grace of God.

Yet it must be emphasized that while there is a prominent thread of heroic material present in the hagiographical tapestry of sanctity’s incarnation, a thread which augments the divine favor inherent in the identity of the holy other particularly with the touch of the liminal, it is scripture that forms the warp, weft and loom. The transition of holiness from spirit to self is modeled on both the Old and the New Testament, but at birth, at death and throughout the saint’s *Life*, the most prevalent paradigm is that of *imitatio Christi*, a paradigm here drawn from both canonical and apocryphal texts. The

embodiment of sanctity, whatever elements may cling to it from the tradition of such figures as Cú Chulainn or such narratives as the *Cath Maige Tuired*, relies most heavily not on the examples of the saga hero but on those of the Savior.

Once that spark of God is kindled into a mortal being, the holiness gathered within the identity of the Irish saint must then reach toward humanity. The holy men and women in the *Lives* demonstrate their sanctification not only through their conception, birth, life and death but also through the impact they have on others. A saint can only be a saint through the acknowledgment of those upon whom the inborn essence of election has had an influence. This chapter has shown how that incorporeal essence takes on the shape of a human whose maturation, habits of piety and manner of passing can all declare the presence of the divine spark. The next chapter turns to the exploration of how the sanctity enthroned in the holy body moves through its hagiographical world, beginning with acts of vengeance. As Chapter Three demonstrates, the punishment and penance of saintly retribution carves out an idealized image of Ireland as a body of the Christian faithful led by God's agent on earth; altering the spiritual and political landscape, the punitive holy person leaves behind permanent reminders of sanctity's passage.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Punishment and Penance*<sup>1</sup>

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“In one and the same *Life* you can meet a saint  
humble and charitable or arrogantly cursing.”<sup>2</sup>

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#### **The question of vengeful holiness**

Once sanctity has made the transition from soul to self, it is possible to examine the ways in which it extends into and affects the society depicted in the *Lives*, a society which then reflects back recognition of the saint’s identity. One critical component of this action is the prosecution by the Irish holy of hagiographical vengeance. The *Lives* positively bristle with nearly four hundred episodes of judgment that seem to portray their sanctified subjects as capable of almost any retaliatory act; *Lives* lacking even a single instance of vengeance are more remarkable than those possessing several. The image of Irish holy otherness not only seems to allow, but to demand—even to expect—punitive saintly acts. Yet what are the messages of hagiographical retribution? What do depictions of these icons of Irish Christianity as either directly or indirectly bringing down all manner of punishments upon those who challenge their authority say about the medieval Irish understanding of sanctity?

Scholars have frequently commented on this apparent predilection for vengeance, often with an unfavorable slant. In his expansive introduction to the *vitae* of Irish saints,

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this chapter was previously compiled for another project, now forthcoming as chapter one in a volume of essays by other scholars. While some elements of that work have been reproduced here, the material has been significantly revised and expanded throughout. See “‘Vengeance is mine’: saintly retribution in medieval Ireland,” in *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: emotion, religion, and the discourse of violent conflict*, ed. Paul Hyams and Susanna Throop (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing), 13–63.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 246.



Charles Plummer states that “It seems to be regarded as extraordinary self-restraint if a saint does not exercise his maledictory powers on the slightest provocation.”<sup>3</sup> Oliver Davies has labeled Celtic saints in general as “notoriously amoral in that the power of the saint can often be manifest in destructive ways that sit uneasily with the ethical values of the Christian gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Lester Little, for his part, considers Ireland’s holy to be “matchless champions of the art of the spontaneous, hostile and efficacious curse.”<sup>5</sup>

Almost inevitably, academic scrutiny has focused upon malediction, which—as this chapter demonstrates—comprises only one form of the vengeful judgment found in the *Lives*.<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Ann Bray, for instance, considers the balance established and maintained by both malediction and its opposite, benediction. In agreement with the general field of scholarship, Bray asserts that both curses and blessings uphold not only ecclesiastical but secular social order; she also, however, distinguishes between historical occurrences of malediction and benediction and those instances depicted in hagiography. The latter, Bray argues, are often individual, private and critical to the proper definition of ties between church, society and God, while the former tend to be corporate, public and related only to the church’s concerns as an institution. Whether the saint wields a curse or its opposite, Bray concludes, the consequences convey clear messages to both ecclesiastical and secular audiences.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *VSH* 1, clxxiii.

<sup>4</sup> Davies and O’Loughlin, “Sources,” 27.

<sup>5</sup> “Anger in monastic curses,” in *Anger’s past*, ed. Rosenwein, 28–9.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of such studies include: Ó Cathasaigh, “Curse and satire;” Little, “Anger in monastic curses” and “Spiritual sanctions in Wales,” in *Images of sainthood in medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 67–80; Wendy Davies, “Anger and the Celtic saint;” Bitel, “Saints and angry neighbors;” Dan Wiley, “The maledictory psalms,” *Peritia* 15 (2001): 261–79; Bray, “Malediction and benediction.”

<sup>7</sup> “Malediction and benediction.”

A number of studies focus on the possible connections between anger and the performance of cursing by Ireland's saints. Lester Little, for example, has considered the expression of anger in the liturgical practice of *clamor*, a corporate form of malediction practiced by continental monks. Little asserts that while a legitimate formal *clamor* demanded both tight self-control and the observance of carefully delineated liturgical stages, Irish holy men and women are ruled by emotional reactions that impel them to deliver powerful maledictions without any guiding formulae. Anger may be used as a honed tool in corporate *clamor*, argues Little, but where uncontrolled wrath would cause the *clamor* to fail it apparently guaranteed the efficacy of the Irish saintly curse.<sup>8</sup>

Wendy Davies, too, has labelled malediction a general characteristic in not only Irish and Welsh hagiography, but also the lesser corpus of early medieval material in Scotland and Brittany. In direct opposition to Little, Davies argues that Celtic saints do not curse out of anger, but as a justifiable response either to dishonor or to the violation of a saint's protection. Anger, she concludes, is reserved for derogatory depictions of the out-of-control laymen who oppose the saints in hagiography.<sup>9</sup> Lisa Bitel agrees; if saints express anger in the *vitae*, Bitel writes, it is on God's behalf only.<sup>10</sup>

While the extant work concerning malediction illuminates elements of that particular form of hagiographical retribution, it neglects other manifestations of vengeance. To date, no examination has quantified the incidence of vengeful episodes, nor has any distinction been drawn between their representation in the *vitae* and in the *bethada*, or between the depictions of male and female saints. Aside from occasional

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<sup>8</sup> "Anger in monastic curses;" also *Benedictine maledictions: liturgical cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 173–85.

<sup>9</sup> "Anger and the Celtic saint."

<sup>10</sup> "Saints and angry neighbors."

suggestions of the possible influence of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* on instances of cursing, only two studies have spent more than passing commentary on the likely role of apocryphal texts in the broader field of saints' vengeance.<sup>11</sup> Finally, no exploration of maledictory saints has assessed in-depth the importance of early Irish legal structures to the understanding of retaliation among Ireland's holy. In pursuing the motion of holiness through the medieval Ireland of the saints' *Lives*, this chapter aims to rectify some of these gaps in knowledge.

Judith Bishop has observed the necessity of grappling with the concept of holiness within, rather than apart from, the cultural, societal and historical milieux that have shaped it.<sup>12</sup> Certainly there are significant events in Irish history—whether local, regional or island-wide—that could well have influenced hagiographers' imaginings of Irish saints, from endemic intertribal raiding and associated collateral damage among noncombatants to occurrences such as the so-called 'Mellifont conspiracy' of 1216–1231.<sup>13</sup> Yet aside from the earliest horizon of hagiographical vengeance in the *vitae* of

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<sup>11</sup> Passing commentary includes, for example, Dumville, "Biblical apocrypha and the early Irish," 305; Seymour, "Notes on apocrypha in Ireland," and McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish church*. O'Leary, "An Irish apocryphal apostle," on the other hand, pulls apart the apocryphal sources behind Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*. In the second instance is the rather more considered analysis of the form of *imitatio Christi* expressed by the vengeful saint in the earliest *vitae* by Herren in Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 165–9, 173–7. Herren specifically posits the importance of the image of Christ as "just judge" (*iustus iudex*) as an exemplar for the acts of hagiographical retribution, while also noting the roles played by apocrypha such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *acta* of the apostles.

<sup>12</sup> "Sanctity as mirror", v. Bishop, it will be recalled, is following the words of Delooz; see chapter one, pp. 15–30 above.

<sup>13</sup> The events of the Mellifont and Jerpoint resistance to the Visitors of their Cistercian mother house, Cîteaux, may have stimulated the unusually harsh line taken by the writer or redactor of the Oxford *vita* of Saint Buite of Monasterboice. The lack of tolerance the *vita* displays for even the slightest signs of disobedience (a cow who seeks reunion with her segregated calf against Buite's wishes is swallowed by the earth, for example) may indicate disdain—whether from the viewpoint of a Cistercian house aloof from the fray, of a member of another order, or of an Englishman among the Irish—for the violent turn taken by the disobedience of those Irish Cistercians who did take part in the opposition of especially 1216–17. See *Vita S Boecii* (Oxford) 21, *VSH* 1, 93, 95–6 for relevant episodes. For the history of the so-called conspiracy, consult: Barry O'Dwyer, *The conspiracy of Mellifont, 1216–1231* (Dublin: The Dublin Historical Association, 1970); John Watt, *The church and two nations in medieval Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 83–107; also Watt, *The church in medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan,

the seventh century, the majority of retribution episodes are difficult to date, leaving most attempts to identify their historical influences a matter largely of conjecture. Instead, it is to the cultural components of sanctity that analysis must turn.

Lisa Bitel suggests that Irish holy men and women acted according to “their own mysterious criteria”, judging the souls of wrongdoers and meting out consequences for their sins in agreement with these enigmatic standards.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this argument, John Carey asserts that the *miracula* of saints restore to harmony a natural order disrupted by the deeds of wrongdoers.<sup>15</sup> Understanding the meaning of *miracula* must then require the definition of the order they are meant to uphold.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as this chapter asserts, the vengeance narratives of Irish hagiography are neither mysterious nor enigmatic, but instead strive to establish and defend an order headed by Ireland’s churches. Using elements of biblical, apocryphal and heroic correspondence, episodes of saintly retaliation create an image of sanctity that is shot through with the language of early Irish law. It is the work of this chapter to examine both the holiness inherent to the textual parallels of retribution in the *Lives* and the impact of that holiness as expressed in the hagiographical use of both canon and vernacular Irish law.

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1972), 50–59; F. X. Martin, “John, Lord of Ireland, 1185–1216,” in *A new history*, ed. Cosgrove, 154–5; and Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (London: Longman Group, Ltd., 1970), 3. I expect to pursue this line of inquiry further in future work.

<sup>14</sup> *Isle of the saints*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> *A single ray of the sun: religious speculation in early Ireland – three essays* (Andover: Celtic Studies Publications, Inc., 1999), 43–5.

<sup>16</sup> A number of other scholars have explored various aspects of saints’ wonder-working as specifically upholding a proper social order, including Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients*, 73, 78–9, 81–2, 85, 94–5, 98, 108–9, 111–12, 115, 182, 196, 230, 240–244, 247–50, 253, and “Wisdom of the *geilt*,” Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* and “Observations on the Life of Molaga,” in *Cín chille cúile: texts, saints and places*, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert and Kevin Murray (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2004), 127–40; Steinberg, “Origins and role of the miracle-story,” especially 37–45; Bitel, “Saints and angry neighbors,” Little, *Benedictine maledictions*, 173–85; Bray, “Malediction and benediction.”

### **The representation of saintly vengeance**

Although there are linguistic clues that indicate the presence of hagiographical retribution in an episode of a saint's *Life*, including the use of such terms as the Latin *vindicta* or *ultio* (vengeance, revenge) or, in Irish, of *maldacht* (a curse), these clues are not universal. In general, vengeance episodes are those in which wrongdoing incurs a miraculous punitive consequence. Moreover, saintly retaliation may be divided into four broad categories, each defined according to the action undertaken by the saint. These categories are prayer, outright malediction, negative or maledictory prophecy, and passive retaliatory judgment.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Prayer vengeance*

In approximately a dozen distinct narratives, it is through prayer alone that saints invoke a divine verdict upon those who oppose, blaspheme or dishonor them. Quite often the supplications offered are very detailed requests, resulting in equally exact consequences. Prayer vengeance makes clear the saint's role as conscious mediator of God's punitive intervention; the saint acts rather like a prosecutor bringing a case before the divine judge, and it is God's final act that demonstrates the saint's identity as sanctified. In prayer-summoned retribution, the matter is brought to God's attention and left to God to adjudicate, while the saint remains only an agent of God's will.

Prayer vengeance is much more common in the *vitae* of men than of women.

Though it has a small presence in the vernacular texts of holy men, prayer-summoned

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<sup>17</sup> Both Lisa Bitel and Dorothy Ann Bray have also used the term "negative prophecy." Neither, however, have utilized the alternate term, "maledictory prophecy." The distinction between curses of immediate effect and prophesied doom was also noticed by Mary Alice Steinberg, among others, without employing any additional terminology. Bitel, "Saints and angry neighbors," 129; Bray, "Malediction and benediction," 52, 56; Steinberg, "Origins and role of the miracle-story," 50.

retribution is not found at all in the *bethada* of female saints. Conversely, penance is entirely absent from all male cases, but appears in half of the anecdotes of Ireland's holy women.

One of the earliest examples of prayer vengeance is the heart-stopping display of Patrick's sanctity as reported by both Tírechán and Muirchú in the seventh century. In this episode, a druid dares to mock both God and Patrick "with tumultuous words" (*tumulentis uerbis*). In response to Patrick's petition that he "be lifted outside now and die swiftly" (*eleuetur nunc foras et cito moriatur*), the druid is lofted into the sky and dropped to his death.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Prayer with fasting and vigil*

Within the category of prayer-invoked punishment, there is a subset of retribution cases in which prayer is combined with fasting, or *troscud*, and may also include the chanting of psalms or the ringing of bells. As the holy man or woman prays and fasts, he or she holds vigil and neither sleeps nor eats in an attempt to compel a malefactor to accede to the saint's, and to God's, will. Fasting and vigil occupy an intriguing place in early Irish society, and hagiographical use of this ritual as a form of vengeance presents a significant example of the saint's role as enforcer of the structures of early Irish law.

On its own, fasting in Ireland has a complex lineage that begins with a long legal history as a means of compelling someone of equal or superior status to comply with demands of due restitution. Contemporary vernacular legal texts explain that seizure of property, or distraint, a final stage in the process of gaining recompense, was often to be

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<sup>18</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea* 3.8.5–6, pp. 130, 132; Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.17.3–6, pp. 88, 90. See also below, pp. 139–42, for more detailed discussion of this episode.

preceded by notice of the plaintiff's case. If no recompense was forthcoming and the defendant was of sufficiently exalted status—a king, noble, cleric or poet—*troscud* could follow.<sup>19</sup> A defendant who failed to give the appropriate pledges or to counter-fast against the plaintiff before the conclusion of the plaintiff's vigil could legally lose property, status or both.<sup>20</sup> This type of legal fasting did influence Ireland's hagiography apart from episodes of vengeance. Saints Patrick, Maedóc and Énda, for example, all fast against God to obtain boons for them and their followers.<sup>21</sup> Patrick's boons are even referred to as a *les*, a legal term for redress gained through official proceedings, underlining the assumption that the fast itself is seen as a lawsuit brought against God as the defendant.<sup>22</sup>

Fasting also has an illustrious scriptural heritage, although the context in the Bible is somewhat different. Usually an expression of despair or mourning, fasting in the Old and New Testaments is often associated not only with spiritual cleanliness but with proving sufficient contrition and spiritual commitment to gain mercy, forgiveness,

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<sup>19</sup> Neither notice nor fasting was necessary when a defendant's status was inferior to that of a plaintiff, as the superior grades could simply appropriate the defendant's property. Still, both notice and fasting are seen in some hagiographical instances of prayer vengeance, most notably those of Brigit. See §§8–9 of a legal fragment edited and translated by D. A. Binchy, "A text on the forms of distraint," *Celtica* 10 (1973): 72–86. The largest tract on *troscud* is a subsection of the *Cetharslicht Athgabála* (*the four classes of distraint*) 365.5–367.7, ed. Binchy, *Corpus iuris hibernici* (Dublin: DIAS, 1978). English translation (not always accurate) in *Ancient laws of Ireland* 112.14–118.7, ed. and trans. Hancock et al. (Dublin: A. Thom, 1865). A German translation plus discussion of the practice of *troscud* is available in Rudolf Thurneysen, "Das Fasten beim Pfändungsverfahren," *ZCP* 15 (1925): 260–275. Also worth consulting are Binchy, "Distraint in Irish law," *Celtica* 10 (1973): 22–71, esp. 34–5, and Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 9, 182–3.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 182–3. Binchy, "Distraint in Irish law," 34, 66 observes that in *Cetharslicht Athgabála* fasting replaced the tendering of notice by the plaintiff, while other legal tracts still required the announcement of the suit prior to engaging in *troscud*.

<sup>21</sup> *Bethu Phátraic* II 1289–1374, Mulchrone, 71–5; Stokes, 112–19. *Vita S Aidi sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 33, *VSH* 2, 304; also *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 28, p. 241 and *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 2, 153–4. *Vita S Endei abbatis de Aran* (Oxford) 31, *VSH* 2, 73–4.

<sup>22</sup> *DIL*, "les."

inspiration or aid from God.<sup>23</sup> The early Irish certainly had observed these cases; the *Collectio canonum hibernensis* (*Collection of Irish canons*) offers a lengthy list of biblical fasts and their consequent benefits from the viewpoint of early eighth-century ecclesiastical law.<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, elements of this scriptural fasting also appear in Ireland's hagiography. In Tírechán's seventh-century image of Patrick, the saint not only fasts for God's aid but, in a separate episode, undertakes a forty-day and forty-night bout of self-denial according to the examples of Moses, Elijah and Christ.<sup>25</sup> When this same epic vigil appears in the later *Bethu Phátraic*, it has become a legal fast in which Patrick's protracted deprivation moves a wearied angel to accede to the saint's demands.<sup>26</sup> Hagiographical *troscud*, then, possesses both scriptural and legal roots and occupies a unique place in the prosecution of saintly vengeance.

As a mode of invoking punitive judgment in the *Lives*, prayer with *troscud* occurs in the *vita* of only one female saint—Brigit—but never in the *bethada* of her female colleagues. In the *Lives* of men, however, it is found three times more often in the *vitae* than in the *bethada*. Further, while penance is certainly part of the Brigidine episode and appears in more than half of the cases in *vitae* of men, it is not at all a part of male examples in the vernacular.

The earliest narrative of a saint submitting to fasting and vigil with the intent of obtaining divine judgment, an option only pursued once all attempts at secular resolution

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<sup>23</sup> For just a few examples see Exod. 24:18, 1 Kgs 7:6, 2 Kgs 1:12, 12:16–23, 3 Kgs 21:27, Neh. 1:4, Est. 4:16, Ps. 34:12–14, Matt. 6:16–18, Mark 2:18–20, Luke 2:37, 18:12 or Acts 12:2, 14:23.

<sup>24</sup> *Collectio* 12.2, ed. Hermann Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (1885; reprint, Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1966), 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Collectanea* 3.19:4, 3.38, pp. 138, 152.

<sup>26</sup> Lines 1289–1374, Mulchrone, 71–5; Stokes, 112–19.



fail, occurs in the early eighth-century anonymous *Vita I S Brigitae*. Here, Brigit fasts against a layman who refuses to depart an island claimed by an anchorite under the holy woman's guidance.<sup>27</sup> Brigit observes all the legal niceties. She gives notice of her suit and asks the layman to leave. He refuses, and she fasts against him for the legal minimum of one night.<sup>28</sup> Having gained little response by the end of her fast, Brigit pursues distraint, as an eagle swoops up the layman's infant son and carries him to the mainland shore. The obdurate individual remains unmoved, however, until he is pointedly removed from the island by a great gust of wind. At last the frazzled fellow does penance to Brigit and cedes to her the disputed land.<sup>29</sup> Property, produce, independence, physical and spiritual health, and even life itself are often targets of saintly seizure, as will be seen. In Brigit's case, it is only a small island, claimed by the holy plaintiff through persuasive force once other methods have failed.

The prosecution of a legal fast inherently provides a defendant multiple opportunities to reform, offering considerable room for displays of saintly mercy. Though many other instances of hagiographical vengeance depict no waiting period between sin and judgment, and may even invoke an immediate consequence with no recourse for appeal, *troscud* aims for the correction and reconciliation to the community of its targeted malefactors. The presence of penance in Brigit's case of fasting and vigil,

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<sup>27</sup> The term translated here as "layman" is *laicus*, which Sharpe, "Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech*, and the Devil's men," has shown to be a loaded term that often refers to a warrior or a brigand. Here, however, the *laicus* is moving onto the island with his wife and many children and seems therefore unlikely to be a brigand in the usual sense; as seen especially in instances of healing by recapitulation, chapter four, pp. 242–9, these robber *laici* travel in groups without women or children. While Brigit's *laicus* may indeed be a warrior, or *láech*, it is simplest here to call him a "layman." See also other instances of brigandage in the *Lives* as explored below, pp. 123, 136, 173–5 and chapter four, pp. 232, 236.

<sup>28</sup> Binchy, "Distraint in Irish law," 34. Biblical precedent for one-night fasts can be found in 2 Kgs 12:16–17 or Dan. 6:18, for example. Other than vigils of one night, the most common duration in hagiography is three days and nights; one instance of scriptural fasting for this period is Est. 4:16.

<sup>29</sup> Ch. 12.72, col. 0129C; ch. 72, Connolly, 35–6.

therefore, in addition to being Ireland's earliest extant example of the practice as a response to saint-summoned punishment, is an organic outgrowth of the essential function of *troscud*.

### *Outright malediction*

Many saints summon retaliatory consequence through the use of outright malediction. Indicated by both language and, in some cases, by gestures, curses have an instantaneous fulfillment that cannot fail to impress the *Life*'s audience. Importantly, God's involvement in outright malediction is not always explicitly acknowledged. Instead it is tacitly understood that the successful infliction of the curse is only permitted by the saint's identity as a vessel of God's grace.

Among male saints, pronouncements of outright malediction form the third most common type of vengeance in the *vitae* and second most frequent in the *bethada*. In contrast, cases of cursing are rare in the Latin texts of women, but constitute more than half of all instances of retribution in their *bethada*. For both male and female saints, moreover, penance is more frequent in Latin than in vernacular maledictory episodes.

The founding hagiography of Ireland portrays Saint Patrick as the master of outright cursing. In Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*, for example, the saint stops during a journey to rest his oxen and allow them to graze. The greedy farmer on whose land the oxen are released, however, decides to protect his crops by beating and driving away the exhausted beasts right in front of the saint. In response to this outrage, Patrick's curse

strips from the farmer that which he treasures most; the man's fields are swamped by the sea that night and made permanently sterile.<sup>30</sup>

### *Negative or maledictory prophecy*

Closely related to outright malediction is the saintly use of negative or maledictory prophecy. In delivery, intent, language and often in duration of judgment, negative prophecy is identical to outright cursing. Episodes of negative prophecy, however, also include language such as *prophetavit* (he or she prophesied), *praedicere* (to foretell) or *fáistinid* (he prophesies). The difference, a distinction not made by the Irish themselves, lies in the time of onset. Straightforward malediction always produces instantaneous result. By contrast, negative prophecy has a delayed onset, its full manifestation not appearing for periods varying anywhere from one day to many years, even many generations, later.

To clarify the distinction between these two forms of vengeance it is useful to turn to Book 61 of the early eighth-century Irish canon law compendium, the *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, which specifically addresses cursing.<sup>31</sup> In the book's first two chapters, malediction is considered to be a last resort utilized only against a malefactor who "does not fear the face of God" (*non timet faciem Dei*), is to correct rather than to permanently condemn, and is to be pronounced "not in the spirit of one desiring, but of one prophesying" (*non optantis animo, sed prophetantis*).<sup>32</sup> In other words, curses should never arise from any personal agenda. At the same time, Book 61 concludes with a list of

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<sup>30</sup> Ch. 1.26, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> "De maledictionibus," 227–8.

<sup>32</sup> *Collectio* 61:1–2, p. 227.

potent maledictory sanction clauses, making plain that certain infractions do demand instant, irredeemable judgment.<sup>33</sup>

*Collectio* 61 draws significant inspiration from a scriptural precedent that both exemplifies and condemns curses. Malediction is not uncommon in the Old Testament; in the New Testament, on the other hand, the overall emphasis is on the rejection of cursing.<sup>34</sup> The tenets of *Collectio* 61 thus balance the *exempla* and injunctions of both the Old and the New Testament, standing carefully between the outright malediction so frequent in the former and the general tendency to prohibit in the latter. That fulcrum is the pronouncement of maledictory prophecy.

Among holy Irish men, negative foretelling is the second most common type of vengeance in the *vitae* but the most numerous in the *bethada*. About two thirds of the Latin and none of the Irish instances pronounced by male saints involve penance. Female saints, by contrast, seldom pronounce maledictory prophecy, do so only in Latin, and always leave room for penance.

Tírechán's Patrick delivers several forecasts of doom that comprise the earliest surviving examples of this type of saintly retribution, all of which predict the subjection of one lineage to another. In one case, Coirpre mac Néill is told his descendants will always serve those of his brothers because of Coirpre's involvement both in a plot to kill Patrick and in the beating of Patrick's servants.<sup>35</sup> In another, the lineage of Derclaid is

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<sup>33</sup> *Collectio* 61:6, p. 228. Other scholars to observe the canon law prescriptions urging that malediction be both a last resort and that it be pronounced as prophecy include Little, *Benedictine maledictions*, 88–91; Dan Wiley, “The maledictory psalms,” 271–3; Bitel, “Saints and angry neighbors,” 129; and Bray, “Malediction and benediction,” 52.

<sup>34</sup> See Matt. 21:18–21, Mark 11:12–14, Acts 5, and Acts 13:11–12 for the rare instances of outright malediction in the New Testament; examples in the Old Testament are rife and many are reported below.

<sup>35</sup> *Collectanea* 3.8:9, p. 132. This episode has apparently been combined with the narratives of cursed rivers in 3.46:4–5, pp. 158, 160 by the compilers of *Vita IV*'s descendant version. See ch. 51, Bieler, 98–9; Byrne and Francis, 52 and the tale's continuation at *Betha Phátraic* ll 736–41, Mulchrone, 45; Stokes 68–71.

prophesied to die out for attempting to slay Patrick, while Derclaid's brother—who rescues the saint—is blessed with descendants prominent in the church.<sup>36</sup>

### *Passive retaliatory judgment*

In this study, passive retaliatory judgment describes instances of vengeance in which the saints commit no act, either of speech or of gesture, to invoke the punitive miracles that occur. These portrayals most clearly demonstrate the saint's identity as a recipient of God's favor. Here, he or she is a conduit not for his or her own power but for a "divine strength," a *divina virtus* that moves independently of the saint when necessary. Indeed, passive retaliatory judgment can befall those who wrong a saint when that holy individual is asleep, physically absent from the relevant region, even dead.<sup>37</sup>

Episodes of passive retaliatory judgment constitute the most commonly depicted mode of retribution in the *vitae* of both men and women, but one of the least frequently seen in the *bethada*. Among male saints, penance appears in more than half of the Latin but only a very few of the Irish examples. For sanctified Irish women, by contrast, nearly two thirds of the vernacular examples include penance, but less than half do so in Latin.

The earliest case of passive retaliatory judgment in Ireland's hagiography can be found in the mid-seventh-century *vita* of Saint Brigit by Cogitosus, in which thieves (*fures*) raid Brigit's community and make off with her cattle. When they try to cross the

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<sup>36</sup> *Collectanea* 3.36, p. 150. The pronouncement is given as *maledictum erit*, "it will be cursed." The episode is retained in *Bethu Phátraic* ll 1257–63, Mulchrone, 69–70; Stokes, 110–111, where Derclaid's name is given as Derglám.

<sup>37</sup> The potency of the *divina virtus* and its link to the saint recalls Peter Brown's discussion of *praesentia*, the "physical presence of the holy" through which a saint's *potentia*, or miraculous display of power, can occur even after the saint's mortal passing. Brown observes that quite often *praesentia* is viable in secondary objects that touched the saint—living or dead—and absorbed his or her sanctity through that contact. See *Cult*, 88, 106–7. It is reasonable to see the movement of passive retaliatory judgment as demonstrating a strong *praesentia* in the locale where judgment occurs.

river around Brigit's territory, however, the waters they had forded safely previously flood so fiercely that, "like a wall" (*instar muri*), they bear down upon the thieves and sweep them away. The cattle, freed, make their way back to Brigit, their leather lead thongs hanging from their horns.<sup>38</sup>

### **Textual models of vengeful sanctity**

The judgments that befall those who oppose Ireland's saints are fulfilled in more than fifty ways in nearly four hundred episodes. What is the image of holiness intended when a saint's prayer causes a foe to drop dead, suffer paralysis or transform into stone? In this section, the forms of saintly retribution are considered in the light of the textual models of sanctity they suggest. From this evidence may be reconstructed a portion of the image of holiness as imagined and understood in the episodes of vengeance created by Ireland's medieval hagiographers.<sup>39</sup>

#### *The Irish saint as Moses*

Almost half of the manifestations of hagiographical vengeance associated with Ireland's saints can be linked in some fashion to Moses, God's chosen mouthpiece, leader of the Israelites, bringer of the Law and agent through whom God's power is repeatedly demonstrated to both faithful and foe. The iconic story of the Red Sea

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<sup>38</sup> *Vita S Brigitae* 19, col. 0137D; ch. 16, Connolly and Picard, 18. The story is retained and expanded in the *Vita I S Brigitae* 6.43, cols 0124B–C; ch. 45, Connolly, 25, where punishment is softened to a healthy dose of public shame. In order to cross the flooded river, the thieves strip and bind their clothing onto the horns of their stolen herd, but are left stranded when the cows turn back midstream. The sodden, naked men are compelled to pursue the animals all the way back to Brigit's settlement, where they are recognized by everyone and perform immediate penance—still nude—to Brigit. See the upcoming pages for the likely parallel to Moses made by the depiction of the river as *instar muri*.

<sup>39</sup> Out of necessity, only a representative selection of saints' punishments can be mentioned. For additional discussion of saintly vengeance in Ireland's hagiography, see Johnson, "'Vengeance is mine'."

crossing, of the flight of Moses and the Israelites over miraculously dry land and the swamping of Pharaoh and his armies as they attempt to pursue, appears to provide some inspiration to Ireland's hagiography.<sup>40</sup> Thieves who rustle cows from Brigit, or from Ciarán of Saigir, for example, are submerged through passive retaliatory judgment when they try to cross nearby rivers, a fate strongly reminiscent of that suffered by Pharaoh. Of particular significance here is the representation of the water in Brigit's *vita* as rising "like a wall" (*instar muri*) against the felons, directly echoing the biblical description of the Red Sea as standing "like a wall" (*quasi murus*) on either side of the fleeing Israelites.<sup>41</sup>

The death of all the firstborn children and animals of Egypt during the passing over of the Lord's angel seemingly provides inspiration for episodes of hagiographical punishment in which wronging Ireland's saints causes the children or horses of the saints' opponents, or of the opponents' allies, to die suddenly, often during the night.<sup>42</sup> In one such tale, Saint Ailbe's confrontation with a certain Connacht king who wishes to slay a captive proceeds in a manner that resembles the meetings between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh.<sup>43</sup> Ailbe sends one of his followers to the ruler with his staff of office, or *bachall*, seeking the captive's release, but the request is denied. Ailbe's *bachall* is then carried around the chained man, preventing him from being crucified (*crucifigi*); upon the circuit's completion the king's son immediately dies, but is resurrected when the

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<sup>40</sup> Exod. 14:20–9.

<sup>41</sup> Exod. 14:22. Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 19, col. 0137D; ch. 16, Connolly and Picard, 18. *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 351; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 20, VSH 1, 226.

<sup>42</sup> Exod. 12:28–9.

<sup>43</sup> Moses and Aaron attempt to free the Israelites repeatedly in Exod. 7–12; it is the final plague, the death of the firstborn children in Exod. 12:28–9, that finally convinces Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart.

captive is released and a field is granted to Ailbe by the king.<sup>44</sup> The similarity not only between the punitive death of the prince and the firstborn of Egypt but also between Moses' staff and Ailbe's *bachall* are suggestive.<sup>45</sup>

A form of saintly retaliation with particularly clear links to Moses is that in which malefactors or their mounts are swallowed by the hungry earth, usually through passive retaliatory judgment, a fate that echoes the chthonic consumption of Dathan and Abiram for rebelling against Moses and blaspheming the Lord.<sup>46</sup> Offenders who blaspheme Colmán of Dromore are swallowed by the soil, "like another Dathan and Abiron" (*tamquam alterum Dathan et Abiron*).<sup>47</sup> Stealing the alms that saints have set aside for the poor triggers the earth to swallow those thieving from Molaisse of Leighlin and Declán of Ardmore; the judgment that condemns those who wrong Molaisse is called "that sentence by which Dathan and Abiron were overthrown" (*ea sententia percelluntur qua Dathan et Abiron*).<sup>48</sup> Thanks to the prayers of Berach, a Leinster queen and all her allies are consumed for trying to mutilate the queen's stepson with demonic aid, a punitive consequence explicitly said to echo the fate of the two biblical rebels.<sup>49</sup>

Prophecies of subjugation to enemy nations promised to those who defy Mosaic Law play a part in the negative forecast of foreign domination—a consequence included

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<sup>44</sup> *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 42, p. 128; (Dublin) 35, *VSH* 1, 59. In the Dublin text, the ruler must request his son's resurrection, and the consequence of the boy's return to life is the conversion and baptism of many onlookers.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of Moses' use of his staff see Exod. 9:23 and 10:13, both of which instances fall within the narrative of Moses' and Aaron's endeavors to free the Israelites from Pharaoh.

<sup>46</sup> Num. 16. Interestingly, in no hagiographical case of this punishment of which I am aware is Korah mentioned, though he is explicitly included in the group taken alive to hell in both the Hebrew version and in modern translations of the text, suggesting that he probably is present in the relevant verses of Num. 16 in the *Vetus Latina*. The Vulgate does not name Korah as among those swallowed by the earth, however, indicating that the form of the Bible being used by Irish writers of such episodes is most likely the text as produced through the efforts of Jerome.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita S Colmani episcopi Dromorensis* (Salamanca) 15, pp. 359–60.

<sup>48</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaisse abbatis de Lethglenn* (Salamanca) 11, p. 343. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 32, *VSH* 2, 54.

<sup>49</sup> *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 16, 23, *VSH* 1, 78–9, 85.



in a complicated foretelling that also involves disenfranchisement, decapitation and debasement of the sinner's body—such as that pronounced by MacCarthinn upon a leader who refuses to pasture the saint's bull. The malefactor is here said to have “a hardened heart” (*obduratum cor*), echoing the biblical assessment of Pharaoh.<sup>50</sup> In another episode, a thundering, fiery hailstorm ravages the harvests and fields of a gang of taunting nobles impeding Fintán of Dún Blésci, calling to mind the hail and lightning Moses summons to destroy the crops of the Egyptians.<sup>51</sup>

Those who defy Mosaic Law are also foretold to suffer the loss of their food stores to animals and insects.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Comgall prophesies the loss of a tyrant's abundant grain stores to an army of marauding mice as a punishment for the ruler's refusal to share those stores with Comgall's famine-stricken monastery.<sup>53</sup> Even the abduction of a troublesome parishioner's infant by an eagle as a consequence of the *troscud* of Brigit may correspond to the Levitical prophecy that wild beasts will tear children from their parents should the adults defy the Laws of Moses.<sup>54</sup>

There are cases where saints are explicitly claimed to be like Moses. Most notable among these is Patrick, who is equated with his Old Testament predecessor because both bring God's law to their people, spend a period of time wandering in the desert during

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<sup>50</sup> Lev. 26:25, Deut. 28:33–4, 36, 49–53. *Vita S MacCarthinni episcopi Clocharensis* (Salamanca) 6, pp. 345–6. See for example Exod. 11:10, where God “hardened Pharaoh's heart” (*induravit Dominus cor Pharaonis*). These prophecies may also draw not only on canonical scriptures but on the extra-canonical *Fourth Esdras*, which echoes the sanctions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy against those breaking Mosaic Law. See 4 Esd. 1:33–4, 2:5–6, ed. and trans. Howard Clark Kee, *Cambridge annotated study apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 199. Additional scriptural citations of prophesied or pronounced seizure of land and crops by enemies and destruction of kingdom, of starvation, rejection, death and lying unburied to be eaten by animals and birds upon those disobeying the Laws of Moses are Lev. 26:14–20, 31–41, Deut. 8:19–20, 28:15–20, 22, 25–6 and 28:41–62. See for example *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 11, *VSH* 2, 168–9, where these are the punishments foretold for a man laying hands on and attempting to expel Saint Mochoemóg.

<sup>51</sup> Exod. 9:22–6. *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Dún Blésci* (Salamanca) 4, p. 114 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>52</sup> Deut. 28:38–9, 42.

<sup>53</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 21, *VSH* 2, 10–11.

<sup>54</sup> Lev. 26:22. *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.72, col 0129C; ch. 72, Connolly, 35. See also above, pp. 118–20.

which they obtain food for those traveling with them, speak with a bush burning with divine flames, confront and defeat the forces of unbelieving enemies, liberate God's chosen people from the oppressive darkness of paganism, share a forgiving nature and live for 120 years.<sup>55</sup> As the leader of the Irish Christians who is depicted guiding the Irish into the light of the knowledge of God, Patrick is a natural reflection of the man who took the Israelites from slavery to their promised land.

As these examples of vengeful sanctity show, however, most other saints modeled upon the Mosaic paradigm are not explicitly compared to this bringer of God's commandments. Rather they are figured through their *miracula* as wielding the same divinely-bestowed authority as Moses, as possessing the same ability to deliver and uphold the laws of God and to lead God's people. This pattern is visible in many *vitae* and *bethada* not through outright claims like those in the *Life* of Patrick, but through the use of parallels to the life and deeds of Moses in episodes of saintly retribution.

#### *Aaron, the Irish saint and the corollary of Abraham*

Aaron, God's first chief priest and head of God's religion, is also a model upon whom Irish hagiographers mold their saintly subjects, particularly when saintly retribution is fulfilled through the consumption of malefactors by divine fire. Tírechán's Patrick, for example, raises his left hand and curses (*maledixit*) a druid plotting to kill him, and the druid is immediately immolated (*exustus esse*) by lightning, "as a sign of

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<sup>55</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea* 2.3:1, p. 122. Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.2:1, 1.13:1, 2.5, pp. 68, 82, 116. *Vita IV S Patricii* preface, Bieler, 47; Byrne and Francis, 17. *Bethu Phátraic* II 3062–6, Mulchrone, 152; Stokes, 256–7.

vengeance” (*in vindictae signum*).<sup>56</sup> The inspiration here is drawn from the incineration of 250 Levites who, following the seditious lead of Dathan, Abiram and Korah, rebel against the authority of Aaron and burn incense the Lord does not accept.<sup>57</sup> In another Irish instance, a brigand who assaults, strips and mocks Saint Cainnech, and then tries to abscond with Cainnech’s lantern, is also “nearly consumed, burning with divine fire” (*celesti igne ardens, pene consumptus est*), through passive retaliatory judgment.<sup>58</sup> In addition to resembling the prior biblical tale, this scene also mirrors the fate of Nadab and Abiu, the sons of Aaron who are devoured (*devoravit*) by the Lord’s flame for offering unsanctified fire and incense on the Lord’s altar.<sup>59</sup>

There is an interesting corollary to these episodes that deserves consideration alongside the hagiographical influence of the events surrounding Aaron. In several Irish cases of lightning-borne punishment, the target destroyed is not a person but a settlement or fort (*oppidum* in Latin, *rath* in Irish), sometimes with the buildings and their inhabitants burned together. This form of divine immolation annihilates settlements that refuse hospitality to Saints MacNisse and Declán, for example.<sup>60</sup> While the parallels to the incineration of those who challenge Aaron’s authority cannot be denied and may indeed play a part, a stronger correlation of detail is found in the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in which the house and household of Abraham’s father, Terah—along with

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<sup>56</sup> *Collectanea* 3.42:2–6, p. 156. In *Bethu Phátraic* II 1488–1511, Mulchrone, 81–2; Stokes, 130–131 has the same druid, Rechred, dashed headfirst and then incinerated.

<sup>57</sup> Num. 16:35.

<sup>58</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 44, pp. 193–4; *Vita S Caimnici* (Dublin) 37, *VSH* 1, 165. In Dublin, the divine fire clearly originates from the saint’s lamp; Salamanca is less clear concerning whether the fire has a celestial or local source. This retaliation is also likely a case of fitting punishment to crime; the brigand burned is stealing fire.

<sup>59</sup> Lev. 10:1–2. The biblical text for Lev. 10:2 reads: “And fire coming out from the Lord devoured them and they died in the Lord’s presence” (*egressusque ignis a Domino devoravit eos et mortui sunt coram Domino*).

<sup>60</sup> *Vita S MacNissei* (Salamanca) 10, p. 406 (passive retaliatory judgment). *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 2, 52 (passive retaliatory judgment). See also below, pp. 175–7 for more regarding denial of hospitality.

Terah himself—are immolated by God for making, selling and worshipping pagan idols.<sup>61</sup> *ApocAb* appears to have provided some material for the creation of Adam as related in the *Saltair na Rann*, which would place *ApocAb* in Ireland by at least the 900s.<sup>62</sup> Might these episodes of saintly retaliation suggest knowledge of some or all of this apocryphon? If so, Irish holy men would then be compared to the first Patriarch and pilgrim, the obedient servant of God, Abraham.<sup>63</sup>

Whether *ApocAb* provides inspiration for the lightning-delivered devastation of settlements who deny hospitality may remain a matter of debate, but the ties between the retaliatory immolation of persons and the narratives of Aaron seem clear. Those who would steal sanctioned fire or defy the authority of the Irish saint suffer the fate of those who flout Aaron's God-given priestly status. The saint, therefore, is the recipient of the divinely-backed inviolate power of the chief priest as established in Mosaic Law.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Elijah, Elisha and saintly retaliation*

Elijah, one of the chief prophets of the Old Testament, and the prophet who succeeded him, Elisha, are both featured in the hagiographical vengeance of Ireland's

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<sup>61</sup> *ApocAb* 8:5–7, Sparks, 375.

<sup>62</sup> St. John D. Seymour, "The *Book of Adam and Eve* in Ireland," *PRIA* 36C (1922): 126–7. But compare David Wasserstein, "The creation of Adam and the apocrypha in early Ireland," *PRIA* 88C (1988): 1–17, who does not notice any parallels between the apocryphon and *ApocAb*, but instead argues for the use of a form of the Babylonian Talmud in the formation of *The Book of Adam and Eve* as preserved in *Saltair na Rann*.

<sup>63</sup> Explicit references comparing saint and Patriarch are rare and found only in vernacular texts. *Bethu Phátraic* ll 640–641, 3062–3, Mulchrone, 37, 152; Stokes, 62–3, 256–7 calls Patrick a "true pilgrim" (*tír ailithir*), like Abraham. In *Betha Adamnáin* 18, pp. 60–63, Adomnán is equated with Abraham as the first pilgrim. These equations of saint and Patriarch as pilgrim refer to the biblical text of Gen. 12:1–4, in which God commands Abraham (then still Abram) to depart his home and go to a land of the Lord's choosing, and Abraham obeys. Also see *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 104, pp. 104–5, where Colmán is like Abraham because each is the head of the faith and of true belief.

<sup>64</sup> In no instances of which I am aware are female saints associated with vengeful punishment through lightning immolation, whether against people or against property.

holy men and women.<sup>65</sup> Colmán mac Diarmada, for example, is struck down by a curious vengeance with Elijan echoes. Guilty of abducting a nun under Áed mac Brice's protection, then not only refusing to release the nun but also spurning both Áed and his saintly ally, Cainnech, Colmán is nearly cut in two by the flaming sword of a fiery charioteer who travels through the air over a lake to reach the condemned man. This equipage, described as "a flaming chariot with fiery horses and a terrible charioteer in it, having in his hand a flashing sword" (*currum igneum cum equis igneis et aurigam in eo terribilem, habentem in manu gladium fulgorem*), suggests the conveyance that bears Elijah bodily to heaven at the end of his earthly life, an assemblage also called a *currus igneus et equi ignei*.<sup>66</sup>

Elijah's successor, Elisha, makes his own appearances in Ireland's hagiographical vengeance. In one such instance, Elisha's servant Gehazi is afflicted with punitive leprosy because he tries to demand payment—in direct defiance of Elisha's wishes—from a man whom Elisha has just cleansed of the disease.<sup>67</sup> In a similar fashion two persons who disobey Brigit are also stricken with the dread condition. One of those so punished is a newly-cured leper who refuses to follow Brigit's command to aid the healing of another leper and is returned to his prior unclean state of health.<sup>68</sup> The other to be judged in this fashion is a nun who must suffer one hour of leprosy "with excessive fetor" (*foetore nimio*) because she disobeys Brigit's order to give her clothing to a leper

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<sup>65</sup> Elisha receives Elijah's spirit and abilities in 4 Kgs 2:6, 9, 13.

<sup>66</sup> 4 Kgs 2:11–12. *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 32, p. 190; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 27, VSH 1, 162–3. here I must also note that the warrior's "lightning-like sword" seems likely to be a reference to the similarly described "flaming sword" (*flammeum gladium*) of the cherubim placed by the Lord before the gates of Eden after Adam and Eve are cast from Paradise in Gen. 3:24.

<sup>67</sup> 4 Kgs 5:20–27.

<sup>68</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.76, cols 0129F; ch. 76, Connolly, 37. The episode is retained in *Betha Bhrigdi* (Lismore) ll 1620–1629, pp. 48–9, 196 (passive retaliatory judgment).

so that his own may be taken and washed.<sup>69</sup> In both scripture and *Life*, the authority of the sanctified subject, whether prophet or saint, is thus enforced with a very visible reminder that defiance casts the rebel from the community of the faithful.<sup>70</sup>

Only a few saints are explicitly equated with Elijah or Elisha. Tírechán sees Patrick as another Elijah because both men fast forty days and forty nights on a mountaintop, while Saint Darerca is called “a daughter of the prophet Elijah” (*Helye prophete filia*).<sup>71</sup> Adomnán equates Columba of Iona not only with Elijah but also with Elisha because all three men raise the dead and pronounce prophecy.<sup>72</sup> As the present evidence shows, however, these references present an incomplete picture of the importance of the two prophets in the depiction of retaliatory sanctity among Ireland’s saints.

Punitive judgments with close parallels to the scriptural deeds of these men paint the saints of early Ireland in hues that align them with two of the most significant prophets of the Old Testament, one a prefiguration of the coming Christ, the other his successor in a relationship very like that of apostle to Messiah in the New Testament.<sup>73</sup> Mirrors of their biblical forebears, the holy men and women of Ireland thus share in the authority and divinely-granted power so ably wielded by Elijah and Elisha, taking their

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<sup>69</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 8.54, col. 0126A; ch. 56, Connolly, 29 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>70</sup> This punishment also echoes the affliction that descends upon Miriam, the sister of Moses, for questioning the divine origin of her brother’s dispensation. As a consequence, she is compelled to spend seven days outside the Israelites’ encampment. See Num. 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Collectanea* 3.38, p. 152; *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 19, p. 89. The distinction is retained by Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 3.1, p. 228.

<sup>72</sup> *Vita S Columbae* 2.32, p. 398.

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, 3 Kgs 17:19–23, where Elijah raises a dead boy to life in a manner also seen in Matt. 9:23 (Mark 5:23, Luke 8:41), Luke 7:11–17 and 8:52 and John 11:38–44. Also see 4 Kgs 2:6, 9, 13, in which Elisha receives the gift of Elijah’s spirit prior to Elijah’s elevation into heaven much as Jesus bestows the dispensation of his ability to cure, exorcize and resurrect upon the apostles in Mark 3:15 (Luke 9:2–7; Matt. 11:14, where it is Elijah said to come and preach the revelation rather than Jesus; and Matt. 17:3 (Mark 9:3, Luke 9:30) in which Jesus is transfigured as the anointed Christ in the company of Moses and Elijah.

place in an illustrious lineage of holiness that demonstrates the continued life of the biblical histories in the world of early Irish Christianity.

*The importance of the Psalter in hagiographical vengeance*

The Psalter occupies a prominent position in the portrayals of saintly vengeance in medieval Ireland. The prayers, prophecies and poetic maledictions in the *Book of Psalms* summon or predict a wide array of punitive consequences, many of which are seen in episodes of hagiographical retaliation. There are prayers, such as that of Ps. 68, which seek blindness for God's enemies, while others ask God to cast his enemies into confusion or request the removal from life and the transfer to hell of God's or the psalmist's foes.<sup>74</sup> Some consist of maledictions that death strike down one's adversaries and carry them living into perdition.<sup>75</sup> Others foretell the fall of burning coals on the unjust, the consumption of God's foes in divine fire or the rendering of the fruitful lands of the wicked into salt barrens.<sup>76</sup>

One incontestable use of the Psalter as a tool of saintly vengeance is found in the earliest Patrician literature. When Patrick is confronted by Loegaire's hostile pagan host, Muirchú puts into the saint's mouth the first lines of Ps. 67, "May God rise up, and may his enemies be scattered and those who hate him put to flight" (*Exsurgat Deus et dissipentur inimici eius et fugiant qui oderunt eum*). The result of this prayer is an

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<sup>74</sup> Ps. 68:24 (prayer for God to afflict enemies with blindness), Ps. 6:9–10 (prayer asking God to cast his enemies into confusion), Ps. 16:14 (prayer asking God to remove enemies from life), Ps. 30:18 (prayer that wicked be led to hell).

<sup>75</sup> Ps. 54:16, for instance.

<sup>76</sup> Ps. 10:7 (burning coals), 20:9–10, 96:3–5 (divine fire), and 106:34 (fruitful lands made barren).

earthquake and great darkness that confound the enemy army, causing chaos and the slaying of many warriors by their fellows.<sup>77</sup>

Adomnán's Columba, an inveterate prophet, pronounces complicated foretellings that seem to have origins in the psalms. When, for instance, Nechtan mac Guthriche mocks Columba and refuses to reform despite the saint's repeated rebukes, Columba foretells Nechtan's future discovery in the company of a prostitute (*meretrice*), where he will be slain, his soul will be seized by demons and his body will be decapitated.<sup>78</sup> This convoluted prediction resembles the prayers of Ps. 108 that God's foe will lose his family and lineage, be subjected to the dominion of a sinner, suffer a short, impoverished life and be condemned to hell.<sup>79</sup>

Other saints, too, summon vengeful consequences with parallels to the psalms, such as the muteness that silences a man who speaks against Ciarán of Saigir, a punishment reminiscent of the psalmist's prayer that any who speak with contempt against the righteous be struck dumb, or the prophecy in another psalm that the mouths of those whose words are unjust will be stopped.<sup>80</sup> A feast that putrefies because its host denies Saint Senán hospitality coincides with a pronouncement in the Psalter that God's punishment includes food becoming loathsome, driving sinners near to death from hunger.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Vita S Patricii* 1.18, p. 90. The story is retained in subsequent Patrician texts, including *Vita II S Patricii* 36 and *Vita IV S Patricii* 42 of the early ninth century, Bieler, 91; Byrne and Francis, 124. It is also found in *Bethu Phátraic* ll 476–502, Mulchrone, 29–30; Stokes, 44–9.

<sup>78</sup> *Vita S Columbae* 1.41, p. 290, 292.

<sup>79</sup> Ps. 108:8–15.

<sup>80</sup> Ps. 30:19, 62:12. *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 19, p. 352; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 1, 228–9 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>81</sup> Ps. 106:18. *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 1926–39, pp. 58, 205 (passive retaliatory judgment).



The use of the Book of Psalms, a text the medieval Irish saw as having been written by David, represents an important aspect of the early Irish church.<sup>82</sup> As the work of Martin McNamara has shown, the Psalter held a prominent place in Irish Christianity.<sup>83</sup> Of particular influence in the realm of hagiographical retribution is the use by the seventh century of a subset of twenty psalms as maledictory weapons, the “cursing psalms” (*sailm escaine*). The praying or chanting of the *sailm escaine* conveyed upon the heads of sinners the full force of sacred scripture, allowing the wielding of considerable verbal and spiritual potency, backed by God’s word, without any violation of the ecclesiastical proscriptions against outright malediction.<sup>84</sup>

The hagiographical pronouncement of Ps. 67 by Patrick is, in fact, uniformly termed cursing (*maledictum*, *mallachtain*) in all Patrician texts. Not only has Ps. 67 been shown by Wiley to be a member of the *sailm escaine*, moreover, but so also have Pss. 68 and 108, the use of which in hagiographical vengeance has just been suggested.<sup>85</sup> To the early Irish composers of saintly biography, then, the *sailm escaine* and their accompanying psalmodic prayers were a potent punitive tool employed with great efficacy by their sanctified subjects in the service of establishing and upholding an idealized Christian Ireland under the authority of its saints.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> In the eighth-century *Hibernica minora* ll 99–166, it is argued that David is solely to be credited for the authorship and performance of the Psalms. Ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *Hibernica minora: being a fragment of an Old-Irish treatise on the Psalter* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1894), 4–5, 24–7; see x–xxiii for dating.

<sup>83</sup> “The Psalter in early Irish monastic spirituality,” *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 179–205; *The psalms in the early Irish church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Wiley, “Maledictory psalms,” 262, 274–5.

<sup>85</sup> “Maledictory psalms,” 265, 267, 276. The same list was also observed by Meyer, *Hibernica minora*, 44. The twenty *sailm escaine* are Pss. 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 21, 34, 35, 37, 38, 49, 51, 52, 67, 78, 82, 93, 108 and the chant of Moses found in Deut. 32; in some cases, however, Ps. 108 may be replaced by Ps. 115.

<sup>86</sup> It is worth noting additionally that the *bethada* of Adomnán and of Colmán mac Lúacháin both compare their subjects to David as the Psalmist. *Betha Adamnáin* 18, pp. 60–63; *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 104, pp. 104–5. Saint Mochutu’s Dublin *vita* also equates its saint with David, but does so on the grounds that

*The apostolic exempla of Thomas and Andrew*

The apostles Thomas and Andrew appear to provide inspiration for a number of episodes of hagiographical retribution. Rather than being drawn from canonical origins, the *exempla* of these two disciples are wholly apocryphal. In the *Acts of Thomas*, for instance, a young man fresh from murdering a woman attempts to take communion but is judged by the Host, both his hands shriveling so that he cannot put them to his mouth. Once the youth confesses to Thomas, however, the apostle facilitates his healing.<sup>87</sup>

This punishment and its merciful remission on the heels of confession and, often, penance, appear as a response to the attempted murder of saints, as occurs in the *vita* of Abbán. There, a brigand (*latro*) from Osraige steals livestock from Abbán's monks. Abbán pursues the return of the animals, threatening the rustler "lest he should incur the curse of God and his saint" (*ne Dei et sancti sui maledictionem incurrat*). The brigand instead decides to try to slay Abbán, but God prevents it by causing his hands to shrivel (*arefieri*). When the *latro* bows before Abbán and promises penance, however, the saint restores the brigand's hands to health.<sup>88</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* also contain strong correspondences to the *Lives* through cases of hagiographical vengeance in which the death of a malefactor in combat is followed by the dismemberment of his body and the carrying off of a particular body part by an animal. It is worth quoting the translated apocryphon in full.

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not only were both men shepherds, but they also were both said to be physically attractive. *Vita S Carthagi seu Mochutu* (Dublin) 7, *VSH* 1, pp. 171–2.

<sup>87</sup> *ActsThom* 6:51–2, Elliott, 468–9. *ActsThom* has been shown by McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 1–2, 10, 83, 118–19 to have been available in some form to the Irish by the 600s, as elements of it are identifiable in a seventh-century sacramentary; by the eighth century, it was not only used in the Ps.-Isidorian *Liber de ortu et obitu patrum* but also provided inspiration for the devotional prayer book of the *Book of Cerne*.

<sup>88</sup> *Vita S Abbani abbatis* (Salamanca) 30, pp. 269–70; (Dublin) 37, *VSH* 1, 25 (passive retaliatory judgment).

And as the apostle looked to the ground, one of the cupbearers stretched forth his hand and struck him. And the apostle, having raised his eyes, looked at the man who had struck him, saying, 'My God will forgive you for this wrong in the world to come, but in this world he will show his wonders, and I shall soon see that hand that struck me dragged along by dogs.' . . .

And the cupbearer that struck him came down to the fountain to draw water. And there happened to be a lion there which killed him and left him lying in the place, after tearing his limbs asunder. And dogs immediately seized his limbs, among them a black dog, which grasped his right hand in his mouth and brought it to the place of the banquet.<sup>89</sup>

A similar episode is found in Ireland's hagiography, in which King Áed Róin illegally distrains Saint Mocholmóg's plough oxen, prompting the saint to fast against Áed. Mocholmóg then prophesies Áed's death and dismemberment; he is joined in this foretelling by Colmán mac Lúacháin, who says that, in the ultimate stripping of royal authority and prowess, Áed's *membrum virile* will be displayed to all the saints of Ireland. The next day Áed raids the kingdom in which Colmán's monastery lies, and Colmán aids his own ruler against Áed's foray with prayer-summoned *miracula*.

Thus, then, it was done; and at Faithche Mecnan Áed [Róin] was slain, and his people slaughtered. And wolves carried his *membrum virile* to the porch of Colmán, who said to them: 'Carry it to be exhibited to [Saint] Finnén or to [Saint] Mocholmóg and to the saints of Ireland.' Again, God's name and Colmán's were magnified by that miracle.<sup>90</sup>

Likewise, in a narrative found in the later *betha* of Finnian of Clonard, Bresal mac Muiredach's crime is the seizure and attempted expulsion of the saint; the obliging wild assistant that returns to Finnian with the guilty hand is a hawk.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> *ActsThom* 1:6–8, Elliott, 449–51.

<sup>90</sup> *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 90–91, pp. 92–5. It is Meyer, the editor and translator of the *betha*, who delicately refers to the offending body part as a *membrum virile*. The Irish text, as edited by Meyer, reads as follows (I have expanded the ampersand to the Irish word, *ocus*, throughout; note that here Áed is referred to by the epithet *Dub* rather than *Róin* as earlier in the narrative): *Dorónad tra amlaid sin ocus romarbad Áed Dub ocus ár a muindtíri ic Faithchí meic Mecnán ocus rugcsat meic tíre a ball ferda co dorus an tempuill co Colmán ocus isbert Colmán ría: 'Ber co Finnén nó co Mocholmóc ocus co naemaib hÉrenn hé dia taisbenad.'* *Romórad dano ainm Dé ocus Colmáin trit an firt sin.*

<sup>91</sup> *Betha Fhindein Clúana hEaird* (Lismore) ll 2580–97, pp. 77, 224–5.

For his part, the apostle Andrew is associated with several vengeful consequences that seem likely to have influenced Ireland's hagiographers. In one apocryphal episode, passive retaliatory judgment blinds a pair of nonbelievers who attempt to burn Andrew's house and slay the apostle; when the couple show contrition, their sight is restored.<sup>92</sup> This outline of crime and punishment closely agrees with an episode in the *vita* of Cainnech. Here, Cainnech's home is set ablaze by two brigands (*latrones*), who "immediately attain vengeance from God" (*statim a Deo vindictam sunt consequuti*), and one of the pair is blinded.<sup>93</sup> In another instance, Andrew's prayers for the salvation of people about to be slain for food during a famine causes the executioners' swords to fall from their hands and their hands to turn to stone.<sup>94</sup> A similar paralysis afflicts *latrunculi* who slay nuns in the *vita* of Áed mac Bricc, freezes in place the hand of a man who raises a fist to strike Rúadán, and immobilizes raiders who are guilty of killing one of Berach's monks.<sup>95</sup>

It seems clear that parallels are made between Ireland's holy persons and the apostles Thomas and Andrew in such narratives of saintly retribution. Both of these men

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<sup>92</sup> *Acts of Andrew* (Gregory of Tours epitome) (*ActsAnd* (Greg)) 12, Elliott, 275. According to McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 83, 92, *ActsAnd* is known to have been available in Ireland by at least the 700s, during which century it was used by Ps.-Isidore in the composition of *Liber de ortu et obitu patrum*.

<sup>93</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 33, pp. 190–191 (passive retaliatory judgment). Note that here the brigand suffers blindness by the bursting of the eyes, which may be drawn from the *Lives* of Brigit. See chapter two, p. 88, note 128; also *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 1, 163–4 (blindness afflicted with no mention of eyes bursting; passive retaliatory judgment). In both tales the second brigand is punished by sudden-onset lameness, rendering him unable to walk. Both *latrones* are cured after they perform proper penance.

<sup>94</sup> *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* (*ActsAndMatt*) 22, Elliott, 293. St. John D. Seymour, "Notes on apocrypha," 113 has suggested the use of *ActsAndMatt* by the Moling *Life*, which would provide an approximately thirteenth-century horizon for the knowledge of the text in Ireland; see p. 36 in Chapter One for the dating of the Oxford *vitae*. If the parallels I observe here hold true, however, then *ActsAndMatt* may have reached the island as early as the 700s, prior to the compilation of the Φ O'Donohue *vitae* of Áed mac Bricc and Rúadán.

<sup>95</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 16, pp. 172–3; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 1, 38. *Vita S Ruadani* (Dublin) 15, *VSH* 2, 245–7. *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 24, *VSH* 1, 85; *Betha Beraigh* 29.85–6, *BNÉ* 1, 41–2; *BNÉ* 2, 4. See further discussion of this last episode, as it appears in the vernacular text, in the chapter four study of healing by recapitulation, p. 243.

were members of the elite group of disciples who dropped their former lives in order to follow Jesus, who believed in and witnessed to the divinity embodied in Jesus as the anointed of God.<sup>96</sup> The saints of Ireland whose vengeful acts echo those of Thomas or Andrew are thus also figured as living lives of intensely faithful service to God, attesting to the identity of the Messiah and wielding an authority bestowed upon them due to the depth of their belief. In essence, the Irish saint is made a true apostle of the Lord.

### *The importance of Peter*

The apostle Peter provides two significant models of vengeful holiness, one canonical and the other apocryphal. In the former case, Peter's curse drops both Ananias and his wife Saphira dead where they stand for embezzling money from church donations, lying about the crime and testing Peter in the process.<sup>97</sup> Saint Patrick's malediction has similar effect; when a group of men attempt to disprove Patrick's sanctity by faking sickness, Patrick's mere word causes the immediate decease of the ringleader. Unlike Ananias and Saphira, however, the dead man is returned to life once his co-conspirators confess, convert and are baptized.<sup>98</sup> In like fashion, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise merely smiles at the news of a community member's fraudulent claim of

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<sup>96</sup> See for instance Matt. 4:18 and Mark 1:16, in which Andrew is named alongside his brother as the first fishermen to drop their nets and follow Jesus; Matt. 10:13 and Mark 3:18, where Thomas and—in Mark only—Andrew are named as disciples of Christ; and Matt. 17:3 (Mark 9:3, Luke 9:30) where the twelve witness the transfiguration of Jesus as the Messiah.

<sup>97</sup> Acts 5.

<sup>98</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.23, pp. 102, 104; also *Bethu Phátraic* ll 2612–46, Mulchrone, 131–4; Stokes, 220–223. A similar anecdote is at *Bethu Phátraic* ll 2717–7, Mulchrone, 112–13; Stokes, 184–7.

illness made to evade his share of the harvest work. The offender is then found dead, though once again he is resurrected through the intercession of his household.<sup>99</sup>

The apocryphal *exemplum*, on the other hand, constitutes a dramatic retribution associated solely with Saint Patrick, one which appears in some form in every extant Patrician *Life*. In the earliest narrative, Patrick's prayer causes the druid Lochru to be heaved into the air and dashed headfirst on the stones for mocking the saint and the faith he promulgates.<sup>100</sup> In a slightly later usage of the motif, Patrick's malediction results in the levitation and skull-shattering impact of the druid Rechrab for conspiring to slay the saint and, when confronted, for refusing to acknowledge the saint's god.<sup>101</sup>

This peculiar and jaw-dropping punishment is both explicitly and implicitly compared with a confrontation between Peter and Simon Magus as related in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, and in its descendant text, *Acts of Peter and Paul*, a version of which survives in Irish.<sup>102</sup> In this confrontation, Simon Magus commits an act of thaumaturgical barnstorming, levitating over the hills and temples of Rome in an attempt

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<sup>99</sup> *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) ll 4220–46, pp. 126, 272. Here the saint's smile seems to be taken as some form of malediction, though it may also indicate the saint's knowledge of impending passive retaliatory judgment.

<sup>100</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.17, pp. 88, 90. Tírechán, *Collectanea* 85, pp. 130, 132 also preserves the story in slightly earlier form; Lochru is here called Lochletheneus and labelled not just a reviler but a barking dog (*canem qui oblatrat*). In the descendant version of *Bethu Phátraic* ll 476–86, Mulchrone, 29; Stokes, 44–5, Lochru's crime is elevated from a vague reviling to the explicit blaspheming of the Trinity and the faith, and Patrick is described as angered (*ro-fég*) by the druid's actions. See also p. 116 above.

<sup>101</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 66, Bieler, 103–4; Byrne and Francis, 56. In *Bethu Phátraic* ll 1488–1511, Mulchrone, 81–2; Stokes, 130–131, Rechrab is called Rechred and suffers a damnation made brilliantly visible in the lightningbolt that immolates his broken body. This strike is most likely an inheritance from the encounter between Tírechán's Patrick and Rechrab—there called Recrad—which coincides with other versions of the episode only in the druid's name and conspiratorial plot to eliminate Patrick. According to Tírechán, Rechrab/ Recrad is fried by a bolt from heaven with no other mode of fatal judgment. *Collectanea* 3.42:2–6, p. 156. See also above, pp. 128–30 regarding lightning-borne vengeance and the retaliatory models of Aaron and of *ApocAb*.

<sup>102</sup> Although Bray, *List of motifs*, 17 and Stancliffe, "Miracle stories," 91 note in passing Muirchú's use of the apocryphal New Testament, the parallel is not fully explored until O'Leary, "An Irish apocryphal apostle," who, between the two apocrypha, focuses on the *Acts of Peter and Paul* both in Latin and in Greek, not on the *Acts of Peter*. Richard Price, "The holy man and christianization from the apocryphal apostles to St. Stephen of Perm," in *Cult of saints*, ed. Howard-Johnston and Hayward, 223–5 also mentions Muirchú's use of apocrypha, but does not address the conflict with Lochru directly.

to undermine the identity of Jesus as the Christ by demonstrating godlike powers. Peter ends Simon's blasphemous flight with prayers that abruptly and fatally re-introduce Simon to both gravity and the ground.<sup>103</sup>

As Aideen O'Leary has set forth, the equation of Patrick with Peter sets the Irish saint on a par with the man upon whom Jesus bestowed both paramount status as the head of the church of Rome, the foundation upon whom Christ's congregation was to be built, and the first apostolic dispensation. Because Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, Christ accorded to the apostle the authority to both bind and dissolve bonds in heaven and on earth.<sup>104</sup> Though any parallel between an Irish saint and the church's chief apostle conveys a measure of that authority upon the saint, the fact that punitive death by this peculiar form of skull trauma is reserved solely for Patrician *Lives* sets Patrick apart as possessed of an unusual degree of sanctity and condemns his opponents in such episodes as blasphemers whose powers must have demonic origins.

Just as Peter is the Rock of the universal church, so Patrick is the first apostle to and bedrock of the Irish church, his primacy, power and authority given by the Son of

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<sup>103</sup> *ActsPet* 32, Elliott, 422–3. Here Peter prays to Jesus to let Simon fall and be crippled, but not to die, asking only that Simon be disabled by a leg broken in three places, which happens; Simon dies later of an operation undertaken to correct the fractured limb. In the Irish *ActsPetPaul* 14, Herbert and McNamara, 103–4, Peter prays that the demonic spirits holding Simon above the earth immediately cease bearing him, whereupon Simon's rapid descent shatters his whole body into four parts and kills him. The shift from the more merciful punishment of the older text to the drastically mortal vengeance of the Irish version is curious and seems to reflect the deadly consequence of blasphemy in the Irish mind. The change of a trinitarian leg fracture to the complete quartering of Simon's body suggests that the creator of the Irish apocryphon wished to turn Simon's death from a symbol of the triune Godhead manifest through the Christ Simon mocks, and to whom Peter prays, to a warped mirror-image of the crucifixion Simon blasphemes, in which the four parts of Simon's body signify the four limbs of the cross. Unlike the Son of God, however, Simon neither heals nor rises from the dead. Although McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 101–2, sees the earliest evidence of any portion of *ActsPetPaul* in Ireland as a short prayer to Peter drawn from the apocryphon and preserved in the eighth-century *Book of Cerne*, the presence of the Lochru episode in both Muirchú and Tírechán suggests that it originates with a common source, providing evidence for the presence of one or both apocryphal *acta* (*ActsPet* and *ActsPetPaul*) in Ireland from the very early 600s, if not before.

<sup>104</sup> Matt. 16:15–19.

God, and so also his principal see at Armagh is the Rome of Ireland.<sup>105</sup> Whether the parallel is applied to the head-banging decease of Rechrab or to the abruptly-ended flight of Lochru, Patrick's primatial status as the Peter of Ireland ensures that no other saint can fully lay claim to it. Patrick is not only *a* saint, this type of retribution asserts, he is *the* saint, his holy otherness and his earthly authority directly delivered from the Savior's hand.<sup>106</sup>

*Imitatio Christi in the Lives of Irish saints*

The canonical gospels do not offer much in the way of vengeful example, yet there are elements of Jesus' story likely to have influenced Ireland's hagiographers. In one instance, Jesus declares that those who follow him should remove their eye or cut off their hand if it offends, rather than allow the pollution of these parts to convey the whole soul to hell.<sup>107</sup> Both eyes and hands are punitively removed in the *Lives* of Irish saints. Ciarán of Clonmacnoise curses a servant for keeping a secret from him, telling the man that a crane should pluck out his eye. This malediction is fulfilled, but is later reversed after proper penance is offered.<sup>108</sup> In another case, the hand of Saranus drops from his

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<sup>105</sup> O'Leary, "An Irish apocryphal apostle," observes much the same conclusion. Curiously, O'Leary neglects to note the use of the same parallel not only by Muirchú but by Tírechán, a use which extends backward the chronological horizon by which the apocryphal material must have been known to the Irish.

<sup>106</sup> Columba of Iona is also explicitly compared to Peter, but it is said to be due not to the bestowal of apostolic dispensation upon the church's chief apostle, as with Patrick, but because Peter, in the company of Paul, Christ, Elijah and Elisha, raises the dead. Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.32, p. 398.

<sup>107</sup> Matt. 5:29–30.

<sup>108</sup> *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) ll 4181–90, pp. 124–5, 270. Keeping a secret appears to mingle disobedience with deceit, and therefore puts the servant's soul at risk. See also p. 88, note 128, chapter two for the use of the same scriptural injunction to justify self-blinding to avoid undesired marriage or sexual pollution.



arm through the negative prophecy of Maedóc of Ferns, a penalty for slaying King Brandub and causing the ruler to die unshriven.<sup>109</sup>

In another New Testament moment, Christ curses a fig tree to permanent fruitlessness for lacking figs to feed his hunger, the only canonical instance in which he delivers outright malediction.<sup>110</sup> Both wrong and consequence very closely parallel a moment in Brigit's *Life*. Here, a woman brings an offering of apples to Brigit, then refuses Brigit's request to share the apples with an alms-seeker on the grounds that they are food for the saint alone. Brigit, displeased (*displicuit*), curses the woman's once-laden trees to have eternally bare branches.<sup>111</sup>

Aside from these examples, however, the Christ who provides inspiration for Ireland's hagiographers is apocryphal and considerably less mild-mannered than the Savior of the canonical gospels. Of particular interest is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, some version of which was known in Ireland prior to its translation into Old Irish verse around 700 CE.<sup>112</sup> The child Jesus who is the subject of *InfGosp* summons an array of punitive consequences in a manner much more consonant with Irish saintly biography than the Jesus of the New Testament. A boy who disrupts the child Jesus' play and destroys Jesus' creations, for example, withers and falls dead from the young Savior's malediction; in another episode the same lethal result strikes a lad who either knocks

<sup>109</sup> *Vita S Aidui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 43, *VSH* 2, 307; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 38, pp. 243–4; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 43, *VSH* 2, 157–8.

<sup>110</sup> Matt. 21:19–20; Mark 11:12–21.

<sup>111</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.28, col 0122D; ch. 32, Connolly, 21. The story of this curse is retained in the ninth-century *Bethu Brigitte* 32, 33, pp. 12, 29, where both the paltry size of the initial gift and the instantaneous fruition of the malediction are emphasized, and where the tale is contrasted with a following anecdote in which eternal abundance is the reward of another woman who is immediately generous when asked. In the Lismore version, the curse is expanded to include not only the haughty laywoman's trees but her previously bursting storage barns. *Betha Bhrigdi* (Lismore) ll 1424–30, pp. 42–3, 190. In Lismore, Brigit's reaction is described as “*Ba tochrádh do Brigit*”, or “Brigit was annoyed.” See also the appendix below, 298–300.

<sup>112</sup> Martin McNamara, “Notes on the Irish Gospel of Thomas,” *The Irish Theological Quarterly* n.s. 38 no. 1 (1971): 42–66; also McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish church*, 1, 8.

against Jesus' shoulder running through a crowd (*InfGosp* (GrkA)), throws rocks at the holy boy (*InfGosp* (GrkB)), or merely annoys him (*InfGosp* (Ir)).<sup>113</sup> These episodes are similar to instances in the *vitae* in which immediate decease befalls those who insult or otherwise behave disrespectfully to an Irish saint. A chieftain who offends Mochoemóg, despite the saint's warning against doing so, dies instantly (*statim*) through the saint's malediction, for example.<sup>114</sup>

Those who threaten the youthful apocryphal Jesus are afflicted with blindness and, in *InfGosp* (Ir), deafness.<sup>115</sup> This consequence suggests the loss of sight that results from the bodily seizure and attempted expulsion of saints like Finnian, whose antagonist is prevented from succeeding because he is blinded (*excaecavit*) by "divine vengeance" (*ulcio divina*).<sup>116</sup> In another episode, a Saxon king suffers blindness and deafness for attempting to test Saint Maedóc by declaring falsely that he already was without sight or hearing.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *InfGosp* (GrkA) 3, 4:1, Elliott, 76. *InfGosp* (GrkB) 2, 4, Elliott, 81. *InfGosp* (Ir) 1, 8–12, Herbert and McNamara, 44–5; also McNamara, *Apocrypha Hiberniae*, 460–462. Notably, in the Irish versified *InfGosp* 8–10, the boy cursed—identified in all *InfGosp* texts as the son of the Ananias who is cursed to instant death by Peter in Acts 5—simply falls over in the manner of a withered stick instead of apparently shriveling up as in the Greek antecedents. See also the older edition and translation of *InfGosp* (Ir) by James Carney, *The poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and a poem on the Virgin Mary* (Dublin: ITS, 1964), 89–105, 153–64.

<sup>114</sup> *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 31, *VSH* 2, 180–181.

<sup>115</sup> *InfGosp*(GrkA) 5:1, Elliott, 76. *InfGosp*(Ir) 21, Herbert and McNamara, 45; also McNamara, *Apocrypha Hiberniae*, 466–7.

<sup>116</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 16, p. 100. Here, once penance is performed, a cure is brought about by the touch of Finnian's vestment and *bachall*, which may relate to an episode in *ActsAndPaul* 1, Elliott, 301, where a woman's sightlessness is cured by the accidental touch upon her eyes of the apostle Paul's cloak. Of course, it must also be acknowledged that cures gained from the touch of a holy person's clothing most likely arise from the stanching of a woman's hemorrhage upon contact with the hem of Jesus' robe, Matt. 9:20–22 (Mark 5:27–31, Luke 8:43–8).

<sup>117</sup> *Vita S Aidui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 17, *VSH* 2, 299–300; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 14, p. 236; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 147. A similar sin—deceit and the challenge of Maedóc's sanctity—is represented through different means, namely the use of a disguise to try to obtain extra alms for which the *malfaiteur* is struck blind, can be found at *Vita S Aedui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 23, *VSH* 2, 301; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 19, p. 238; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 23, *VSH* 2, 149.

It also appears possible that descendant texts of the Syriac and Arabic versions of *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* may have provided some inspiration to Ireland's medieval hagiographers. In an episode known from both variants, the young Christ seeks playmates among the village boys, but they hide from him. When their mothers lie concerning their sons' whereabouts, saying they have seen only goats, Jesus summons the 'goats' forward and the boys emerge as quadruped kids; they are returned to their natural forms when the child Savior, responding to their mothers' pleas, again calls to them as humans.<sup>118</sup> Two of Ireland's chief male saints are associated with punitive episodes of metamorphosis, several elements of which suggest the influence of *InfGosp* (Ar) 40, its Syriac cousin or a related text.

The earliest and arguably the most well-known such case is found in Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*, in which a defiant king, Corictic, ridicules Saint Patrick's repeated letters demanding that the ruler cease his persecution, slaying and enslaving of Christians.<sup>119</sup> Corictic's disdain prompts Patrick's petition to God that the ruler be expelled both "from this world and the next" (*de praesenti saeculoque futuro*). Upon learning of the prayer, Corictic's bard and nobles begin to chant a verse calling for the king to forfeit his rule. The moment the sound of the chant reaches Corictic's ears, the recalcitrant fellow is

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<sup>118</sup> *InfGosp* (Ar) 40, Elliott, 106; Elliott observes in note 1 the presence of the anecdote in the Syriac text, but as he does not record the chapter all references here are to the Arabic variant. See also Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, eds, *New Testament apocrypha volume one* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1991), 409.

<sup>119</sup> Muirchú's Corictic is a reflection of the use by either Muirchú or his source—or by both—of the historical Patrick's own writings, in this case a letter the saint wrote to a certain maleficent chieftain, Coroticus. The letter, along with Patrick's *apologia pro sua vita*, *Confessio* (*The confession*), are both preserved in the *Book of Armagh*. See Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 2–3, 20–21, 35, and chapter one, p. 33. Coroticus, Patrick's letter asserts, took slaves from among the newly baptized, leaving a trail of bodies in his wake. The one surviving epistle is also identified as being the last of a number of similar missives dispatched in an attempt to reform Coroticus, each of which, Patrick alleges, were met with derisive laughter. Frustrated at Coroticus' unrepentant attitude, the saint's letter calls the leader and his gang of noble toughs a pack of "rapacious wolves" (*lupi rapaces*) several times. *Epistola ad milites Corotici*, ed. and trans. David Howlett, *The book of letters of St. Patrick the bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), esp. 26–9.

publicly transformed into a “little fox” (*vulpiculus*) who flees, terrified, never to be seen again.<sup>120</sup> In a second Patrician case of punitive transformation, a group of thieves steal, slaughter and consume Patrick’s goat, and then attempt to deny their crime. The thieves receive the doom—not for theft or slaughter of the saint’s animal but for their unrepentant deceit—that one person in every subsequent generation of their kindred will have the head of a goat.<sup>121</sup>

The other saint to bring about a vengeful metamorphosis is Columba of Iona. In his twelfth-century *betha*, a haranguing queen calls Columba a “crane-like cleric” (*corrclerech*, lit. “stooped monk”, a play on the double meaning of *corr* as both “bent” and “crane”). When word of the insult reaches Columba, he declares that the complaining royal and her co-conspiring maid will henceforth be cranes (*cuirr*). Both women are promptly changed into these noisy birds and, the text continues, they remain in their swampy home until the End of Days, a punishment Joseph Falaky Nagy calls both the “personification of a problem” and the “embodiment of satire.”<sup>122</sup>

<sup>120</sup> *Vita S Patricii* 1.29, p. 100. There is also an obsessively brief mention of the tale in *Bethu Phátraic* line 2939, Mulchrone, 146; Stokes, 248–9. The mean form of the king’s new shape mocks Corictic’s virile warrior prowess and acts as a vulpine echo of the historical Patrick’s accusation that Coroticus and his ruffians were *lupi rapaces*. See prior note for reference from *Epistola ad milites Corotici*. It is also worth noting that foxes held a common reputation—much as they do today—as deceitful. Isidore of Seville, for instance, wrote that the Latin word for fox, *vulpes*, derives etymologically from *volubilis* (changeable, shifty) and *pes* (foot), meaning “shifty on its feet.” See *Etymologiae* XII.29; Barney et al., 253. It also seems that here Muirchú may have been comparing Corictic to Herod, whom Jesus calls a fox in Luke 13:32. For exegetical commentary see *Commentarium in Lucam* 13:32, p. 83.

<sup>121</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 73, Bieler, 105; Byrne and Francis, 57. In *Bethu Phátraic* ll 2117–23, Mulchrone, 110; Stokes, 180–181 and 181 n. 2, the thieves are identified as the Uí Torrorrae, and Patrick’s pronouncement is said to fall not upon just one person per generation, as in the *Vita IV*, but upon the entire kindred from that day forward. It would seem the redactors of the *Bethu* held a dim view of the Uí Torrorrae generally.

<sup>122</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* appendix §6, pp. 245, 267. For Nagy’s analysis of the episode, see *Conversing with angels and ancients*, 182. It should be additionally noted that there are also cases of punitive transformation where malefactors become stones rather than animals, as in *Vita IV S Patricii* 74, Bieler, 105; Byrne and Francis, 57. This tale is retained in *Bethu Phátraic* ll 2146–53, Mulchrone, 12; Stokes, 182–5. Also see *Betha Finnhúa* (Lismore) ll 2846–77, pp. 85–6, 252–3. The obvious scriptural antecedent for those episodes changing wrongdoers into rocks is that of the story of Lot’s wife who, as punishment for disobeying the orders of the Lord’s angel, is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). This same form of

Admittedly, the evidence for knowledge in Ireland of either the Arabic or Syriac variants of *InfGosp* is not conclusive. It has already been observed that at least one version of *InfGosp* was present on the island by the seventh century and was used in the versified translation of the text around 700. In support of a later knowledge of at least one of these texts as *InfGosp* (Ar) or *InfGosp* (Syr) is a study by Máire Herbert, in which she convincingly argues that an episode found in the *betha* of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise—a *betha* dating to between 1050 and 1150 and therefore roughly contemporary with the *Betha Coluim Chille* and its maledictory transformation of women to birds—shows strong parallels to and may well rely on Latin translations of the Syriac or Arabic variants of *InfGosp* 37.<sup>123</sup>

Further, Martin McNamara and David Dumville have each observed a noteworthy degree of close correlation between *InfGosp* (Ir) and *InfGosp* (Syr).<sup>124</sup> Dumville, correcting an error made by the prior editor of the Old Irish *InfGosp*, James Carney, shows that the lost Latin exemplar used in the compilation of *InfGosp* (Ir) was much closer to the Syriac than to any other known variant.<sup>125</sup> In addition to providing material for the later episodes, as argued by Herbert's comparison of *betha* and apocryphon, it seems likely that the versions of the *InfGosp* available in the 600s to the creator of the Old Irish text, versions which do not survive in Ireland, may include either translations of *InfGosp* (Ar), *InfGosp* (Syr) or works derived from them. Since these works were transmitted to Ireland in the same era in which Muirchú wrote the earliest episode of punitive metamorphosis, it is more than a little plausible that vengeful transformations

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vengeance, along with its scriptural parallel, have also been noted in the Welsh hagiographical tradition by Elissa Henken, *Welsh saints*, 42–3.

<sup>123</sup> “Infancy narrative of Saint Ciarán.”

<sup>124</sup> McNamara, “Notes on the Irish Gospel of Thomas,” 64–5; Dumville, “Biblical apocrypha,” 304.

<sup>125</sup> “Biblical apocrypha,” 304.

not only in the later *betha* of Columba but also in the much older texts of the *Life* of Patrick draw at least some material from those lost *InfGosp* texts, one of which must have been of Syriac descent.

Whatever the ultimate source of the textual parallels, though, the message of vengeance episodes depicting saints as Irish echoes of Christ remains the same. As the Son of God and fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of sanctity. Any holy man or woman who is portrayed walking in his steps thus follows the patterns of a familiar hagiographical paradigm. Whether drawn from canonical example or from apocryphal origins, the *Lives* of these saints of Ireland conform to the model of *imitatio Christi*.

#### *The place of Mary, mother of Christ*

Mary's place in the episodes of hagiographical vengeance is largely to be found in correspondences between the *Lives* and the apocryphal narratives concerning Mary's death, funerary rites and Assumption, but there are occasional exceptions.<sup>126</sup> In the *Protevangelium of James* and the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, for example, Mary is said to have an attendant, Salome, aid her at the birth of her son, Jesus. Yet Salome does not believe Mary is still virgin, and checks Mary's condition with the fingers of one hand; when she discovers that Mary is still intact, she bewails her foolish disbelief and testing of God, and her hand falls away, burning. Salome is healed, however, once she begs

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<sup>126</sup> As is visible in the episodes of the incarnation of sanctity in the person of the Irish saint, chapter two, pp. 65–8, 69–71, 84–7, 89, Marian theology—especially the emphasis on her perpetual virginity—has a strong place in Irish Christianity from the beginning. See also Peter O'Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988) and Michael O'Carroll, "Our Lady in early medieval Ireland," in *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 178–81.

mercy from God and touches her severed hand to the newborn Jesus.<sup>127</sup> This miraculous judgment is echoed in both the Latin *Assumption of the Virgin* attributed to Ps.-Mellitus and the Irish *Transitus Mariae*, in which a Jew angered at the fracas surrounding Jesus and Mary launches himself at her funeral bier in an attempt to tip it over and knock her body to the ground. His hands instantly become glued to the bier, causing his forearms to be detached when the bier is lifted.<sup>128</sup>

This drastic punitive hand loss is echoed in certain episodes of sudden vengeful amputation in Ireland's hagiography. In one such instance, the hand of a woman who strikes Colmán Élo falls from her wrist.<sup>129</sup> In *AssVir* (PsMell), the hands of the man who seizes Mary's bier shrivel before being pulled from their wrists, a withering that suggests the penalty incurred by a slave-mistress who disrespects Brigit by attempting to haul her slave from Brigit's side. The hand with which this woman seizes her charge immediately becomes wizened, though it is restored once she performs proper penance and releases her bondswoman to Brigit.<sup>130</sup>

At Mary's funeral in *AssVir* (PsMell), blindness afflicts those Jews who intend harm to the apostles. While those who convert are rewarded with the restoration of their

<sup>127</sup> *ProtJac* 20, *PsMatt* 13, Elliott, 65, 93–4.

<sup>128</sup> *AssVir* (PsMell) 12:2, Elliott, 712; *TrMar* 37, Herbert and McNamara, 128. As has been noted with other apocrypha, St. John D. Seymour, "Irish versions of the *Transitus Mariae*," *JTS* 23 (1922): 39–40 observes a close relationship between the Irish, Syriac and Arabic versions of the *TrMar* and would argue dependence by the Irish on the Syriac. Though R. Willard, "The *Testament of Mary*: the Irish account of the death of the Virgin," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 9 (1937): 341–64, agrees with Seymour in part, he also compares the Irish, Latin and Greek versions and posits that each is an independent descendant from a now-lost version. McNamara, *Apocrypha in Ireland*, 122–3 summarizes the arguments of the prior editor of *TrMar*, Charles Donohue, and concludes that the evidence supports an arrival in Ireland of the original source behind all extant versions of *TrMar* sometime in the seventh century. O'Carroll observes, however, that the Assumption of Mary does not appear to be doctrinal in Irish texts until the 700s, despite the early arrival of the apocryphon.

<sup>129</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 2, pp. 209–10; (Dublin) 2, *VSH* 1, 258 (negative prophecy).

<sup>130</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.74, cols 0129D–E; ch. 74, Connolly, 36 (passive retaliatory judgment). There is no mention of withering in the *TrMar* episode.

sight, those who do not proclaim Jesus as the Messiah die.<sup>131</sup> This tale appears to parallel the loss of sight that descends upon a woman determined to murder Saint Coemgen's favored foster-son, Faelán, a punitive consequence of the saint's prayers that God protect Faelán from his would-be slayer's "poisonous and diabolical incantations" (*venenis et incantationibus diabolicis*). When the woman refuses to relent despite her blindness, she is brought to her death.<sup>132</sup>

In *TrMar* the culprits assaulting Mary's bier are not only struck sightless but frozen in place, unable to move.<sup>133</sup> In the world of vengeful Irish sanctity, malefactors who attempt to kill Ciarán of Clonmacnoise are also rendered both blind and immobile until they perform penance, whereupon Ciarán cures them completely.<sup>134</sup> Sometimes, paralyzed malefactors also stick to their ill-gotten gains, hearkening back to the adherence of the angry Jew's hands to Mary's bier. Such a punishment is seen in the *vita* of, among others, Saint Abbán. There, soldiers who are *en route* to expel Abbán from his site find and attempt to remove from their path an enormous vessel of milk. This simple task, however, becomes complicated when they find themselves utterly unable to put the vessel down until they submit to Abbán's authority.<sup>135</sup>

If these parallels are, as appears likely, at least in part inspired by the events in *AssVir* (PsMell), *TrMar* or both, it suggests that, in addition to drawing from Latin

<sup>131</sup> *AssVir* (PsMell) 12:2, Elliott, 712.

<sup>132</sup> *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 1, 251.

<sup>133</sup> *TrMar* 38, Herbert and McNamara, 128.

<sup>134</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatis de Cluain Mic Nois* (Salamanca) 7, p. 79; *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Dublin) 7, *VSH* 1, 202; *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) ll 4090–4094, pp. 122, 267 (passive retaliatory judgment). Note that in the Ciarán episode, as in the story of Colmán Élo above (page 149, note 128), the saint is still a boy when the attack is attempted. See also the discussion below, pp. 168–9, 179–80, regarding this penalty's involvement in episodes of vengeance stirred by the attempted or actual assault of a saint.

<sup>135</sup> *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 27, pp. 268–9; (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 1, 23. Similar episodes can be found in *Vita IV S Patricii* 22, Bieler, 69; Byrne and Francis, 32–3, and *Vita S Caimnechi* (Salamanca) 55, p. 196. See further the analysis below of the role played by property disputes in hagiographical retaliation, pp. 177–81.



translations of the Syriac and Greek variants as observed by St. John D. Seymour and R. Willard, the Irish version of *TrMar* apparently also takes a healthy amount of material from the Ps.-Mellitus version of *AssVir*.<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, however, the implication of the correspondences between hagiographical vengeance episodes and the *exempla* of the Marian apocrypha is that such holy Irish men and women share in the extraordinary purity and obedience to the Lord of this virgin woman. Through such parallels, Ireland's saints are shown to be so sinless of body and mind that their embodied sanctity is equated with that of the immaculate mother of God.

#### *Hagiographical vengeance and heroic saga*

Before leaving behind the subject of the textual models for hagiographical retribution, it is useful to observe two parallels between the *Lives* of Ireland's holy and the narratives of native Irish heroes.<sup>137</sup> It has been seen in chapter one that motifs from heroic literature appear to be shared with like elements of the stories portraying the embodiment of holiness represented in the conception and birth tales of saints.<sup>138</sup> So, too, may instances of saintly retribution mirror moments found in the saga genre of early Ireland.

Chief among the forms of saintly vengeance with some similarities to non-hagiographical, non-ecclesiastical models is that of punitive transformation. As previously discussed, those who cross Patrick and Columba of Iona are subjected to

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<sup>136</sup> Seymour, "Irish versions of the *Transitus Mariae*." Willard, "*The Testament of Mary*." O'Carroll, "Our Lady," 80, considers that the Ethiopic *AssVir* is also very similar to *TrMar*.

<sup>137</sup> This theme has been touched upon by several scholars, and the elements of their analyses are not part of the present discussion. For several key instances, see Ó Briain, "Miracles in the Lives" and "Saga themes;" Heist, "Myth and folklore in the Lives," and "Irish saints' Lives;" and Bieler, "Hagiography and romance."

<sup>138</sup> See pp. 61, 67, 74, 76–7, 78–9, 82–3, 92–3 above.

vengeful metamorphoses that leave them in the form of foxes (Patrick), men with goats heads (Patrick) or cranes (Columba).<sup>139</sup> Shape-changing in general is anything but foreign to the wider world of early Irish narrative, and it is far from implausible that some influence was exercised by such sources.<sup>140</sup>

In the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* of the second half of the ninth century, for example, Tuán lives through the millennia of pagan Irish history by successively becoming a stag, a boar, a hawk and a salmon.<sup>141</sup> Étaín, in the *Tochmarc Étaíne*, transforms into a pool of water when struck by a wand of hazel wielded by her husband's jealous principal wife; subsequently Étaín also changes into both a worm and a fly.<sup>142</sup> In Recension I of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the Mórrígan appears as a beautiful young woman, an eel, a she-wolf, a cow and a one-eyed crone, while druids fleeing murderous pursuit change from men to deer to escape their stalkers.<sup>143</sup> Even in a narrative as late as the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *Oidheadh Chlainne Lir*, the children of Lir are hit with a magical staff by their jealous stepmother and changed into swans.<sup>144</sup> While these episodes do not represent the changing of shape as a punitive consequence—with the possible exception of the metamorphoses effected by jealous women whacking the objects of their envy with sticks—they do demonstrate the existence of the *topos* of transformation outside the *Lives* throughout much of the medieval period, suggesting a

<sup>139</sup> See pp. 145–6 above and notes 119–21.

<sup>140</sup> Some elements have already been assessed in relation to narratives of saintly conception; see chapter two, p. 67 above.

<sup>141</sup> Pp. 93–111.

<sup>142</sup> Chs 16–18.

<sup>143</sup> Lines 942–5, 1845–50, 1982–4, 1999–2002, 2039–41, pp. 30, 57, 59, 62, 151, 176, 180–181. See also Chapter Four's analysis of salvific metamorphosis—especially of saints changing those under their protection into deer to evade homicidal pursuers—on pp. 230–5 below.

<sup>144</sup> James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 311–12 (*Oidheadh Chlainne Lir*), gives a full summary of the text and observes that its modern popularity as *The fate of the children of Lir* seems to originate in nineteenth-century anthological reprints rather than in medieval folklore, the medieval version having not survived intact.

certain Irish appreciation for the motif that may have some roots in pre-Christian oral lore.

Stronger correlations between the radical alterations of appearance associated with saint and saga may be seen in instances where the form the malefactors receive is that of mineral rather than animal. In the *Lives*, fifty pursuers intent upon murdering Patrick are turned into stones in the middle of a ford through Patrick's malediction, an anecdote that has some parallels to episodes of single combat in and around fords.<sup>145</sup> In the *Táin*, for example, the hero Cú Chulainn slaughters his foe Maine mac Ailella at the crossing of the river Cronn, and Maine's retinue of thirty horsemen are submerged in the Cronn's floodwaters.<sup>146</sup> Cú Chulainn slays another twenty-nine men sent against him at a different ford, and a stone at the center of the crossing is said to retain the marks of the battle and to stand alongside the warriors' twenty-nine headstones.<sup>147</sup> Though it is impossible to know for certain whether the *Táin* borrows from hagiography or the influence moves in the opposite direction, the similarities suggest that saints whose vengeful repertoires include the transformation of opponents into stones are viewed as possessing an heroic form of sanctity, resonating with an audience fond of the exploits of a champion like Cú Chulainn.

The *Táin* also appears to have an intriguing parallel to the *vita* of the female saint Samthann through a rather unusual hagiographical moment. In this saga, the battle divinity Mórrígan transforms herself into an eel that entwines itself around Cú Chulainn's ankles as he battles in a ford, disrupting his combat in retaliation for his refusal of her

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<sup>145</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 74, Bieler, 105; Byrne and Francis, 57.

<sup>146</sup> Lines 1165–7, pp. 37, 157. The rising of the Cronn may again drawn upon Mosaic example, as discussed above, pp. 124–5, concerning the *Lives*.

<sup>147</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ll 2561–3, pp. 78, 195.

sexual favors.<sup>148</sup> In Samthann's *vita*, for its part, a lascivious man who will not desist from pestering Samthann's nuns finds himself strangled by an enormous eel that wraps itself around his waist as he tries to cross an engorged river.<sup>149</sup> In addition to the rather earthier interpretation of the eel as a phallic symbol the independent life of which throttles this man's midsection, the eel also suggests an echo of the lusty goddess who trips up a hero. As a divinely-animated embodiment of his concupiscence, it threatens to unman him entirely and only drops off his torso when he begs mercy from Samthann, much as the spurned Mórrígan-eel brings the legendary Cú Chulainn to his knees until the wounded hero smashes her ribs.

Indeed, the eel of Samthann's *vita* appears to be the externalization of a woefully mortal failing that can only be corrected by divine intervention. In the *Táin*, by contrast, the lust is owned by a deity whose interference is suspended by a violent mortal act. That this vengeful consequence only appears in the *vita* of Samthann, a text known for expressing the tenets of Céilí Dé monasticism, including its strict espousal of sexual purity and the necessity of individual control over sexual impulse, cannot be a coincidence.<sup>150</sup> For Samthann, at least, the message is that true sanctity dominates the base urges of the body, whether that body is her own or belongs to a man desperate to free himself from his lust; concupiscence, moreover, can only be conquered by submission to God and to his saint, while leaving it unfettered threatens both his mortal life and his immortal soul.

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<sup>148</sup> Lines 1982–4, pp. 61, 180.

<sup>149</sup> *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 11, VSH 2, 256.

<sup>150</sup> See Follett, *Céilí Dé in Ireland* for a thorough exposition of Céilí Dé monasticism as expressed in medieval texts. Also see pp. 102–3, note 186 above, chapter two.

*Male and female vengeful holiness*

The present discussion shows that although there are parallels between saga hero and saint, the predominant textual inspirations for hagiographical retribution are scriptural; these models, moreover, differ between the *Lives* of male and of female saints. Whether in Latin or in Irish, vengeful male saints are strongly associated with both the *exempla* of the Old Testament prophets and of the apostles in the New, as well as with the apocryphal models of prophet, apostle and Messiah. It is now apparent that New Testament parallels in particular tend to draw on apocrypha like *InfGosp* or *ActsPetPaul*. Indeed, the lineage, legitimacy and power of most male saints descend from the early connections drawn between Patrick and Peter. Just as Peter was the first to receive the apostolic dispensation that elevated him to the illustrious tradition of the Old Testament prophets, a dispensation then bestowed upon the rest of the apostles, so also Patrick was first in Ireland and all other Irish saints, male or female, stand in the shadow of his primacy.<sup>151</sup>

This emphasis on Old Testament and apostolic precedent likely provides some explanation for the fact that not only are holy Irish men much more involved than holy women in retaliatory judgments overall but, of all male vengeance episodes, less than one third allow for any depiction of mercy; nearly all of these instances occur in Latin texts. The remission of retaliatory consequence is not, after all, generally a part of the narratives of punishment associated with figures like Moses, Aaron, Paul or Peter. On the contrary, once vengeance is invoked by such men, or by those modeled upon them, the effects of its fulfillment—as has been shown—tend to be permanent and often lethal.

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<sup>151</sup> Jesus grants apostolic dispensation upon all of the disciples, bestowing upon them the inheritance of some of his sanctified abilities, in Matt. 10:8–10 (Mark 3:15, Luke 9:1–2).

Similarly such textual correspondences also throw light on the incidence of emotion associated with male-mediated saintly retribution. Though only about a dozen male saints evince any temper, this number is considerably higher than that found among the *Lives* of holy women. In contrast to the portrayals of penance, however, the greater proportion of emotional expressions in episodes of male vengeance is not in Latin but in Irish works.

In the *vitae*, for example, Saints Abbán, Coemgen and Maedóc are said to be “displeased” (*displicuit*), while Mochoemóg grows “excessively displeased” (*displicuit nimis*).<sup>152</sup> Stronger Latin terminology also appears, as when Comgall is “upset” (*commotus*) or “enraged” (*iratus*), or when Mochoemóg is depicted as “in a great rage” (*in ira magna*).<sup>153</sup> Féchín of Fore, his face contorted, charges at and whacks a blasphemous English vicar (*vicarius*) in the chest with his *bachall*; the unfortunate man dies three days later.<sup>154</sup> In the *bethada*, on the other hand, Patrick is angered (*ro-fég*), angry (*barae*), even enraged (*ro-ferccaigestar*); similar terminology is also used for Colmán mac Lúacháin, Senán and Finnchúa.<sup>155</sup> One has only to compare the difference between the moderated temper of Jesus casting the moneychangers from the Temple and the rage of the Lord if his Law is transgressed, or of Moses upon seeing the Israelites worshipping a golden idol, to perceive an intimate parallel between the Old Testament

<sup>152</sup> *Vita S Abbani* (Dublin) 42, *VSH* 1, 27 (passive retaliatory judgment). *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 41, *VSH* 1, 254 (curse). *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 172–3 (negative prophecy). *Vita S Aidui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 26, *VSH* 2, 302; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 23, p. 239; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 27, *VSH* 2, 151 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>153</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 21 (negative prophecy), 22 (curse), *VSH* 2, 10–11. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 19 (curse), 30 (curse), *VSH* 2, 174, 180.

<sup>154</sup> *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 18, *VSH* 2, 82–3.

<sup>155</sup> *Bethu Phátraic* ll 476–86 (prayer), 1916–36 (negative prophecy), 2706–20 (passive retaliatory judgment), Mulchrone, 29, 98–9, 136–7; Stokes, 44–5, 164–6, 228–31. *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 68, pp. 70–71 (curse). *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 1940–53 (prayer), 2094–2102 (negative prophecy), pp. 58–9, 63, 205–6, 210. *Míorbuaile Shenáin* 5 (post-mortem *bachall* blow as curse), 9 (post-mortem vengeance through avian intermediary), pp. 8–10, 14–15. *Betha Finnchua* (Lismore) ll 2846–77 (curse, negative prophecy), pp. 85–6, 232–3.

examples upon which Irish male vengeance is modeled and the expression of choler in the retribution episodes.<sup>156</sup>

For female saints the story is a little more complex. The evidence of this chapter's analysis shows that although some subtle female vengeance motifs can be correlated with Old Testament example in the *vitae*, patterns drawn from such figures as Moses are considerably more frequent in the *bethada*. Women in the Latin *Lives*, however, are much more closely influenced by the reports of Jesus' words and deeds in the four Gospels, often even in the way maledictions—particularly those of Brigit—uncannily resemble those of Christ cursing the fig tree.<sup>157</sup> Apocryphal correspondences occur in both the *vitae* and the *bethada* of female retaliatory episodes, but differ again in tone; while *vitae* tend to look to texts like *TrMar*, *bethada* (aside from those instances taken directly from earlier *Lives* of the same saint) can present holy women in rather more bombastic *InfGosp* (Ir) terms. Even so, the predominant biblical inspiration for female saints seems to be the canonical New Testament stories of Jesus.

Here, then, it is not so much Old Testament or apostolic *exempla* that informs the appearance of merciful elements in the *Lives* of vengeful holy women, but is instead the paradigm of *imitatio Christi*. The importance of forgiveness in the teachings of and texts concerning Jesus is amply echoed in representations of penance and the remission of punitive judgment in nearly half of all female-mediated retaliatory episodes.<sup>158</sup> Though again, as with the holy men, the majority of these penitential scenes occur in the *vitae*,

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<sup>156</sup> Exod. 22:24, 32:19 (where Moses is described as “very irate” (*iratus valde*) at the sight of the golden idol), Mark 11:15. For all that Jesus may be presumed angry at the money changers, the actual biblical text uses no emotional language at all. It simply says that Jesus came to Jerusalem, turned over the tables of the moneychangers and sellers of doves and cast them from the Temple.

<sup>157</sup> Matt. 21:19–20, Mark 11:12–21. See again pp. 142–3 above.

<sup>158</sup> See for example Matt. 5:7, 9:13, 12:7 and Luke 10:37.

the number of such cases in the *bethada* of women is five times that of the vernacular vengeance episodes of men. The prevalence of mercy and penance, therefore, emphasizes attention to the model of the Messiah throughout the retribution portrayals of sanctified Irishwomen, whether in Latin or in Irish.

When the issue of emotion is addressed, however, it seems that the concept of emulating Jesus really only applies in Latin. Brigit of Kildare, whose *Life* overall has been shown to consistently look to Christ's example, is the only female saint to show feelings in Latin, and she is described only as "displeased" (*displicuit*) by others' bad behavior.<sup>159</sup> Brigit's annoyance is retained in her later *bethada* and is thus not original to the vernacular works.<sup>160</sup> Lasair, on the other hand, the only other sanctified woman to express emotion, is not merely irked but roused to a "great fury" (*mór feirge*) on a par with any flash of temper displayed by her male counterparts, suggesting a more Old Testament imagining.<sup>161</sup>

Whether the subject saints are men or women, and whether the relevant *Lives* are in Latin or in Irish, it would seem that the work of prior scholars on the subject of wrath in the *Lives* of Ireland's holy has tended to oversimplify a complicated field of evidence. Lester Little's assertion concerning the maledictory skill of Irish saints, for example, is well supported by the episodes reviewed thus far, but his addendum that Irish curses are "hostile" and frequently pronounced in anger is not.<sup>162</sup> In fact, though malediction is the form of vengeance most often associated with saintly wrath, emotional expressions only

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<sup>159</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.28 (malediction), 12.74 (passive retaliatory judgment), cols 0122D, 0129D–E; chs 32, 74, Connolly, 21, 36.

<sup>160</sup> *Bethu Brigitte* 32, pp. 12, 29 (*displicuit*, curse). *Betha Bhrigdi* (Lismore) ll 1424–30, pp. 42–3, 190 (*Ba tochrádh do Brigit*, "Brigit was annoyed"; curse).

<sup>161</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* ll 13–17, pp. 100–101.

<sup>162</sup> "Anger in monastic curses," 28–9 and *Benedictine maledictions*, 173–85.



appear in four percent of all Latin vengeful accounts and only ten percent of the retribution tales in Irish. At the same time, however, it is equally clear that the conclusions of Wendy Davies that anger is reserved only for obstreperous laity are not universally applicable.<sup>163</sup> Instead, while uncommon, it is still possible to see both male and female holy Irish giving vent to feelings that range from displeasure to terrible fury when, as argued by Lisa Bitel, doing so is justified by the actions of those who would defy them.<sup>164</sup>

Ultimately, the combination of scriptural parallels used for saints' retribution—whether it emphasizes the charity and humility of the New or the more dramatic vengeance of the Old Testament, canonical or apocryphal—legitimizes the place of all Ireland's saints in a lineage that extends back to Moses. The common thread in any scriptural parallel, however, both with and without any flavoring of heroic inspiration, is election. It is the saint's identity as the chosen vessel of God's grace that empowers him or her to speak with God's voice. When Saint Rúadán contests with King Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, for instance, it is Rúadán's saintly authority that makes his negative prophecies so much more potent than those of the king, even though Diarmait is a just and righteous Christian ruler. While Diarmait can only prophesy maiming and blemishes upon one man, Rúadán foretells death, dismemberment and devastation not only on the present but on future generations. Diarmait concedes the victory to Rúadán because, as the hagiographer puts it, God loves the saint more.<sup>165</sup> Whether it is scripture or saga that

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<sup>163</sup> Davies, "Anger and the Celtic saint."

<sup>164</sup> Bitel, "Saints and angry neighbors."

<sup>165</sup> *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 12, pp. 163–5; (Dublin) 15–17, *VSH* 2, 245–8. The king's concession speech, in Salamanca, is: "You defend iniquity; I defend truth. You confound my kingdom, for God loves you more. Go, therefore, and take your man, and return a ransom in his place" (*Vos iniquitatem defenditis; ego defendo veritatem. Vos confunditis regnum meum; Deus enim vos diligit plus. Ite ergo, et virum vestrum portate, et pro ipso precium reddite*). See ch. 12, p. 165.

provides inspiration, the message is the same. The saint acts on behalf of God, through a divine dispensation that invests every deed and pronouncement with heavenly authority.

### Lives lacking retribution

It must be observed that there are rare holy persons whose *Lives* depict no vengeful episodes at all. This omission is startlingly evident in the extant Dublin *vita* of Munster's holywoman, Íta, which instead portrays its subject enacting a truly impressive number of cures.<sup>166</sup> Though Íta's Latin *Life* lacks any retaliatory deeds it is surrounded in the Dublin manuscripts by *vitae* with numerous cases of vengeance.<sup>167</sup>

The *Vita S Ite* is the only *vita* of a female saint in the extant Dublin compilation, which may have something to do with its content; if, as Richard Sharpe argues, the Dublin collection was gathered and redacted by a single individual, it is possible that Íta's *Life* lost all its vengeance cases through that person's efforts. But the text that Sharpe has used to demonstrate this individual's habits in compiling Dublin, the *Vita IV S Brigittae*, a *Life* indicated in the extant table of contents to have once been a part of the collection but which has been lost in transmission, retains all the same retaliatory episodes that are known from its surviving source texts.<sup>168</sup> Sharpe views the Dublin

<sup>166</sup> *Vita S Ite*, VSH 2, 116–30. For healings, see chapter four below.

<sup>167</sup> Plummer, VSH 1, xii enumerates the order and subjects of the *vitae* of the Dublin collection. Plummer, for his part, notes that Íta's best text is in Marsh V.3.4, as TCD E.3.11 lacks twenty folios that would have included her *Life*. The *vitae* on either side of Íta's *Life*, moreover, are those of Declán, Ciarán of Saigir, Lugaid and Laurence O'Toole (who is not considered in this study because his hagiographer is not Irish). Íta also has a *vita* in one of the Oxford manuscripts, Rawl. B.505 but, Plummer continues, he does not include that text in his edition because it is just a "shorter and certainly less original" version of the Dublin text (see p. lxxiii), though he does observe "anything of importance" in comparing Dublin and Oxford in the critical apparatus (p. xvii). In the Oxford manuscript, the *Vita S Ite* is surrounded by the *vitae* of Ciarán of Saigir, Senán, Coemgen of Glendalough and Lugaid of Clonfertmulloe (p. xvi), all of whom are associated with vengeful events.

<sup>168</sup> Sharpe himself called *Vita IV S Brigittae* "a revision of *Vita I* by the compiler of D[ublin]," 391. See for instance *Vita IV* 35, ed. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 150 for one such retained anecdote. Sharpe gives considerable space to discussion of how closely the *Vita IV* follows the *Vita I*, 123–6; he considers

redactor as having toned down or omitted more scandalous elements from other Brigidine works, a habit that he argues is applicable to the entirety of Dublin. While that habit might at least partly explain the absence of vengeance elements from *Vita S Ite*, it does not explain their retention in the *Vita IV* of Brigit.

Though there is the possibility that Sharpe's thesis of a single redactor is wrong, or that an intermediary text provided no retaliatory material to the Dublin collector, it seems most likely that there was no automatic assumption that women would not be involved in saintly retribution, particularly given the retaliatory associations made with Brigit. Íta's text, on the other hand, may have more recent roots than the seventh-century origins of Brigit's *Life*, and may therefore arise in an era when a vengeful female could not be deemed sanctified in a Latin text. If so, the attitudes toward holy women may have shifted with time.<sup>169</sup> Whatever the reasons, however, the ultimate effect is that Íta is modeled neither on the *exempla* of the Old Testament nor on any apocryphal source material, but on a canonical, evangelical vision of *imitatio Christi*.

### **Vengeance, the law, sanctity and society**

It has been observed previously that, whatever the ineffable traits of holiness may be, it is its recognition by the people upon whom it acts that constitutes its most critical component. Without the acknowledgment of others, sanctity is meaningless.<sup>170</sup> The enumeration of the scriptural and heroic parallels found in the vengeance episodes of the Irish saints' *Lives* demonstrates one side of this all-important definition of sanctity,

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that the redactor of Dublin revised the *Vita I* "extensively" but does acknowledge some changes may result from an intermediary text between *Vita I* and *Vita IV* (p. 126).

<sup>169</sup> This question requires greater analysis than space here allows. I hope to pursue it further in future work.

<sup>170</sup> Delooz, "Towards a sociological study," 194. See also p. 15, chapter one above.

revealing the religious elements used by Ireland's hagiographers to paint the motion of embodied holiness outward from the saint and into the society of the *Lives*. But there is another side, namely that built not from the signs of the nature and source of a saint's retaliatory authority but from its exercise in a specifically Irish world. Here, then, attention turns to the ecclesiastical and vernacular law of early Ireland and its use in the depiction of an idealized Irish society, of an Ireland built upon the sanctity signified by the textual correspondences of the prior section and upheld through that sanctity's exercise in anecdotes of retribution.

Medieval Ireland was a highly stratified culture in which individual status was hedged around by the determination of honor price, or *enech*, the value of which compensation for injury depended upon gender and social position.<sup>171</sup> Saints moved through this layered society, their deeds and teachings impacting upon the ways in which people lived. In their *Lives*, holy men and women who are associated with retaliatory consequences are essentially portrayed as maintaining the legal structures of Irish society both in the interests of others and—probably much more significantly—in the interests of their churches, their faith and their God. Often this goal is accomplished by the establishment and enforcement of the proper behavior demanded of the community not only toward its own members but toward the saints themselves.

It is the business of this section to uncover the actions of retaliatory holiness in society, not by examination of the consequences or prosecutorial methods of retribution but rather of the reasons hagiographical saints need to pursue such a course. There are more than a dozen such justifications for vengeance. For the sake of space, however, the

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<sup>171</sup> *Críth Gablach* 21, pp. 12–13 and *enech* (honor, dignity), 84–5; §§100–101, MacNeill, pp. 295–6. Also see Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 137.

present study considers only four broad categories within which the legal components of retaliation are uncovered. These categories are verbal assault or injury, bodily assault and homicide, denial of hospitality and property disputes.

### *Verbal assault and the power of speech*

The spoken word had significant power in medieval Ireland. It was seen as able to elevate or destroy a person's status, to heal or to cause injury, even to kill.<sup>172</sup> Not surprisingly, then, there were a number of forms of speech act that incurred the penalty of the victim's full honor price upon the pronouncer.<sup>173</sup> Brigit, for instance, is subjected to verbal assault by an ungrateful leper who berates the saint for not properly bestowing alms upon him; he is subsequently swept away crossing a river.<sup>174</sup> Mockery also falls into this category, such as that seen when Lochru reviles Patrick to his face.<sup>175</sup> One specific type of mockery is that in which the assailant derides some aspect of the target's appearance, especially when the consequence is the coinage of a derogatory nickname—a *forainm* or *lesainm lenas*—that adheres to the identity of the intended victim and destroys his or her status.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>172</sup> See for instance the excerpt of *Din Techtugad* ed. and trans. by Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 358 in which biased judgments raise blisters on the cheeks of the judge who pronounces them, while true judgments given upon him by another judge heal his sores. Also see p. 44, where Kelly lists several examples of injury or death by satire, and p. 137 where he notes that the verbs for satirizing translate as “to strike” and “to cut.”

<sup>173</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 137.

<sup>174</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.78, cols 0130A–B, chs 78–9, Connolly, 37. Also see appendix, pp. 303–4.

<sup>175</sup> See pp. 116, 140, note 100 above.

<sup>176</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 137 and n. 91, where *lesainm lenas* is also suggested to possibly be *lesainm lénas*, “a nickname that wounds.” Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 25–6 discusses the *forainm*, the “extra name”, as it is used to destroy the reputations of competitors for kingship in hagiography and elsewhere. For examples in the saga literature, see *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* II 157–63, where Mend mac Sálchada (son of Sword-heel) is disgraced by the *lesainm* his father is compelled to carry, and is lumped together with other such unfortunates as “sons of churls with nicknames” (*meic na mbachlach cusna lesanmannaib*). So also in lines 175–84, where Cumsraid is shamed by his own *lesainm*, Mend Macha, “the stammerer of Macha.” In both cases, the *lesainm* in question is the result of injuries caused in battle by

This form of instigation has its place in the *Lives*. Sainly retribution is the response, for example, to the public shaming of Fintán of Taghmon, as *clericus leprosus* (“a leper cleric”), the taunting of Mochoemóg as *calve parve* (“puny little bald man”) and the wordplay against Columba of Iona as *corrclerech* (“stooped” or “crane-like monk”).<sup>177</sup> Though the punitive consequences for these verbal attacks vary, in each case the penalty is exacted at least in part as the rightful payment of the saint’s due honor price.

When the target of mockery and reviling is a saint, these acts constitute blasphemy of the saint, the saint’s sanctified authority, the church the saint represents and the God for whom the saint is an agent. Under Irish ecclesiastical law as recorded in the *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, blasphemy and sacrilege are equated with murder, the punishment of which is not deemed to be the spilling of blood, a crime which would incur religious and civil sanction, but the administration of God’s law. To pardon such malefactors, the canon decrees, would bring ruin to the church, because the entire congregation is polluted by the presence of even a single sinner.<sup>178</sup> The *Collectio* also

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the warrior Cét, whose ability to explain the origins of these *lesainman* as brought about by his own actions gains him superiority over both Mend mac Sálchada and Cumsraid Mend Macha in a contest for the choicest portion of meat at a feast. Ed. Rudolf Thurneysen, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (1935; reprint, Dublin: DIAS, 1951), 12–13. For a recent translation see that of Kuno Meyer as improved by John T. Koch and John Carey, *The Celtic heroic age: literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), §80, pp. 72–3.

<sup>177</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 29, p. 207; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 25, p. 254; *Vita S Munnu sive Fintani* (Dublin) 26, *VSH* 2, 236–7. It is possible that Fintán really was a leper; see discussion in chapter two, pp. 89–90, note 139 above. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 19, *VSH* 2, 174. It is unclear whether the mocker, King Failbe Flann, is taunting Mochoemóg for male-pattern hair loss, a clerical tonsure or both; the penalty for any of these three options would remain Mochoemóg’s full honor price, here exacted by a return insult that renders Failbe blind in one eye. *Betha Coluim Chille* appendix §6, pp. 245, 267, and p. 146 above.

<sup>178</sup> *Collectio* 27.8, p. 87. This notion of community contamination by a single member not only makes sense in a religious context where sin is meant to be controlled and eliminated (see Matt. 5:29–30), it also has application in secular laws that stipulate the liability of a corporate entity—usually a familial kindred, but also a crowd or congregation—for the crime of an individual. See for instance the mid-seventh-century *Bechbretha* 34–5, ed. and trans. Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly (Dublin: DIAS, 1983), 70–73 (see pp. 4, 13–14 for dating); also see Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 41–2, 126–7 for discussion of a church or

observes that certain great sins require immediate vengeance; among the biblical examples offered in support of this assertion is the story of the boys torn apart by bears for taunting the prophet Elijah's baldness.<sup>179</sup>

Of especial concern to the Irish mindset was the issue of satirizing. It has already been observed that speech acts could injure or kill, but of greater concern than physical harm was the damage satire could inflict on one's social standing and honor. A potent verbal declamation made—usually, but not exclusively, by poets—in much the same fashion as that in which saints deliver malediction, satire could be either just or unjust.<sup>180</sup> When delivered legally against a target guilty of committing a wrong, a just satire was intended to compel redress, and its target was required to make an immediate oath to either make due restitution or submit to arbitration. If the target did not do so, he legally forfeited his honor price and with it his legal standing. Rulers who neglected to respond to satire were also deprived of their sovereignty.<sup>181</sup>

In the Patrician transformation of Corictic into a fox, the chant raised by the king's nobles is an example of a just satire the challenge of which Corictic permits to go unanswered. Metamorphosis into a frightened *vulpiculus* publicly strips Corictic of his honor price, his status and his power, utterly shaming him. Proper recompense is paid to Patrick, the permanent emendation of Corictic's wicked ways is accomplished, and the king himself is deprived not only of his participation in the community but also of his

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monastery as a liable entity and the distinction between legal and illegal homicide. Kelly also provides the Irish text and English translation of Heptad 6, pp. 348–9, listing the seven instances in which bloodshed is not a legal offence; punishment for sacrilege or blasphemy is not included, indicating the possibility that the particular penalty in *Collectio* 27.8 is of ecclesiastical origin alone.

<sup>179</sup> *Collectio* 27.10–11, pp. 88–9. The scriptural reference is 4 Kgs 2:23–5.

<sup>180</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, “Curse and satire.”

<sup>181</sup> *Críth Gablach* 21, Binchy, 12–13; §§100–101, MacNeill, 295–6. Also see pp. 69 (*áer*, “satirizing”) and 84–6 (*enech*) for further explanation of the impact of a just satire and of dishonor in general.

humanity, losing thereby any hope of heaven.<sup>182</sup> Even threatened satire incurs immediate and lethal reaction, such as when a troop of performers promise to satirize Patrick if he does not provide them with food. Patrick feeds them, saving his honor, but as soon as they have finished their meal they are themselves consumed by the earth, exacting the *enech* of a saint wronged by unjust satire and suffering the same spiritual punishment of instantaneous transport to hell as those who dared to challenge Aaron's authority.<sup>183</sup>

As with mockery, these potent punishments for satire are supported not only in vernacular legal codes but also by ecclesiastical strictures. The Old Irish *Table of Penitential Commutations* of around 800 CE ranks satirizing alongside murder, kin-slaying, incest, and druidism as a sin for which no remission of penance can be gained, no matter the severity of the punishment or the duration of the sentence and its resulting absence from communion.<sup>184</sup> It seems church authorities considered satirizing destructive not only due to its potential for causing damage to the maintenance of social order but also because it was an act often associated with, at worst, paganism and, at best, apostasy.

Of additional importance in the verbal provocation of hagiographical vengeance are instances of deceit, including perjury. Though little is directly said about lying in the vernacular law codes—such as a brief comment that anyone swearing a false oath (*éthech*) cannot give testimony regarding anyone or anything, a reasonable consequence—the ecclesiastics of early Ireland included lying and false witness amongst the many sins demanding action.<sup>185</sup> Penitential works prescribe seven years of penance

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<sup>182</sup> See pp. 151–2 above regarding the possible textual parallels for this transformation.

<sup>183</sup> *Bethu Phátraic* II 2379–2406, Mulchrone, 122–3; Stokes, 202–5. See also pp. 128–30 above.

<sup>184</sup> §5, ed. and trans. D. A. Binchy, “The Old-Irish table of penitential commutations,” *Ériu* 19 (1962): 58–9. See also §6, pp. 58–9, for the explication of the need for commutation to shorten the length of time a person's soul would be separated from God and the Host.

<sup>185</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 201 and notes 78, 79. It is logical that churches would concern themselves with perjury, since among other reasons it is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:16).



for perjury, along with forbidding any future oath-swearing, for example, though some are kind enough to differentiate between false oaths given under duress and those delivered out of greed.<sup>186</sup> Simple deceit has its own penalties, including making satisfaction to the individual wronged and a penitential period of silence.<sup>187</sup> The *Collectio*, listing specific sins for which immediate vengeance is justified, gives the biblical example of the instantaneous death that befalls Ananias and Saphira for lying to Peter.<sup>188</sup>

Hagiographical punishments for deceit and perjury echo these tenets. Individuals who claim to be sick to evade duty to Patrick suddenly die, but are resurrected when others perform penance on their behalf, for instance.<sup>189</sup> Others who pretend blindness, deafness or both to Maedóc are afflicted permanently with the infirmity they fake.<sup>190</sup> Sometimes punitive consequences last for a penitential period of time, such as the seven years Abacuc must spend headless in the care of the monks of Clonmacnoise for swearing a false oath under Ciarán's hand.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> *Penitential of St. Columbanus* A.4a, B.5, B.20, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish penitentials* (Dublin: DIAS, 1963), 96, 100, 104. Note that the *Penitential of Cummean* 3.8 decrees four years for the perjurer, but seven years (3.9) for knowingly leading another into perjury. Bieler, *Irish penitentials*, 118.

<sup>187</sup> *Penitential of Cummean* 3.16–18, pp. 122, 124.

<sup>188</sup> *Collectio* 27.14, p. 90; Acts 5.

<sup>189</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.23, pp. 102, 104; *Bethu Phátraic* II 2171–7, 2612–46, Mulchrone, 112–13, 131–4; Stokes, 184–7, 220–223. See also p. 139 above.

<sup>190</sup> *Vita S Aidi sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 17, *VSH* 2, 299–30; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 14, p. 236; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 147; also p. 144 above.

<sup>191</sup> “Abacuc’s perjury,” ed. and trans. Standish O’Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892), 1:416, 2: 453. See 2: xix for commentary on dating this anecdote, known from the *Book of Leinster* (Dublin, Trinity College MS H2.18 cat. 1339) of around the twelfth century but likely dating somewhat earlier. Abacuc is literally headless in this story, a gangrenous tumor having encircled his neck and caused his head to fall off the moment he voiced his perjury. The ritual of oath-swearing appears to have involved the oath-taker kneeling in front of the saint and making his declaration with the saint’s hand resting on the back of his neck.

*Bodily assault, homicide and the issue of protection*

Though there are no examples of female saints whose lives are threatened, male saints often contend with foes determined to slay them, necessitating some form of punitive response. Vernacular Irish law specifies detailed compensatory penalties for injuries caused by an attack, but it is extraordinarily rare for hagiographical saints to be wounded by assailants.<sup>192</sup> Instead, those who would kill a holy man generally are halted in their tracks by one form or another of pre-emptive retaliation, such as being paralyzed with their hands raised against the saint until they do penance or, more drastically, being incinerated by lightning.<sup>193</sup>

Much more common are cases in which punishment is incurred by the injury or murder of individuals associated with the saint, who is again usually male. Occasionally the slain are collateral damage in attempts on the saint that go awry, as occurs when Patrick's charioteer is killed instead of Patrick; the murderer is struck instantaneously dead.<sup>194</sup> Individuals with the temerity to attack monks or nuns in a saint's community, to hold captives or take slaves without justification, or to harm women or children appear frequently, and the punitive judgments they receive tend to be swift and severe. In one such case Tiranus mac Fiach, for cruel treatment of and refusal to release his slaves at Patrick's behest, is dragged to a drowning death by a chariot team made to run amok

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<sup>192</sup> A particularly extensive text assessing the values of honor price due for each type and degree of wound inflicted upon various social ranks is the *Bretha Déin Chécht*, ed. and trans. D. A. Binchy, "Bretha Déin Chécht," *Ériu* 20 (1966): 1–66.

<sup>193</sup> *Vita S Caimnechi* (Salamanca) 7, p. 183; *Vita S Caimnici* (Dublin) 5, *VSH* 1, 153–4. *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 30, pp. 269–70; (Dublin) 37, *VSH* 1, 25. Tírechán, *Collectanea* 3.42:2–6, p. 156.

<sup>194</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 77, Bieler, 106; Byrne and Francis, 58. The same story is found in *Bethu Phátraic* II 2574–85, Mulchrone, 129–30; Stokes, 216–19.

through Patrick's *troscud*.<sup>195</sup> In another instance, a Saxon king who tries to slay one of Columba's monks is cursed to immediate decease by the Iona abbot.<sup>196</sup>

The vernacular law codes present two layers to the issue of the injury or killing of persons linked to a saint. The first of these is that a person of elevated rank possessed the legal right to extend his protection, his *snádud* or *turtugud*, to those of equal or lesser status. By doing so, the elite individual could guarantee safe conduct and, if necessary, immunity from prosecution for a period of time determined according to his own social grade.<sup>197</sup> In the ecclesiastical realm, this concept also included the extension of sanctuary or asylum.<sup>198</sup> Violation of this protection, or *díguin*, by the wounding or homicide of someone under its aegis constituted a serious crime that did significant injury to the protector's honor, incurring the protector's full honor price as a penalty.<sup>199</sup> The vengeance saints invoke when opponents commit the crime of *díguin* is thus in part the exaction of their due honor price.<sup>200</sup>

The second layer pertains not to the penalties due to a saint for violating his protection, but to the fines and *enech* of the individuals hurt or killed. If the assailed survive, compensatory payments go to them; if the victims are killed, both the status-

<sup>195</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 80, Bieler, 107–8; Byrne and Francis, 59. See also *Bethu Phátraic* II 2586–2606, Mulchrone, 130–131; Stokes, 218–21, where the slave owner's name is Trían mac Féic.

<sup>196</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* note 3, pp. 238, 262–2.

<sup>197</sup> Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 106–7, “*snádud*”; also Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 140.

<sup>198</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 141. Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, “Laws of the Irish,” demonstrate that the legal construction of early Ireland accorded with the same pattern as that set for Hebrew society in the tenets of Mosaic Law, including the place held by asylum—that is, by cities of refuge (*civitates refugii*)—in the Levitical outline of Irish law and society. See esp. pp. 395–6.

<sup>199</sup> *Críth Gablach* 6, 11, 12, Binchy, 1–2, 5–6 and 82–3, “*díguin*”; §§66, 83, 84, MacNeill, 283, 288–9. Also Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 141.

<sup>200</sup> The most famous case of saintly punishment for *díguin* is arguably that of Saint Rúadán's response to King Diarmait mac Cerbhaill's entry into and removal from Rúadán's church of a man seeking sanctuary from the saint. Matters between the two men escalate from paralysis, nightmares and excommunication to an all-out curse war the saint only wins because his sanctity confers higher divine favor than the Christian king's royal status. *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 12, 163–5; (Dublin) 15–17, *VSH* 2, 245–8; also p. 159 above.

dependent honor price and a fixed mulct, the *éraic* or *cró* fine, are due to the kindred of the slain.<sup>201</sup> Though there do not appear to be instances of the penalties claimed by saints being handed over to the kin-groups of the slain, there are cases of retaliation that suggest the punitive exaction of both *enech* and *éraic* to the holy man himself. For example, a Munster king who denies Áed mac Bricc's demand to release a slave woman is struck blind—the honor price—until he does penance, releases the woman and offers many oblations and fields to Áed. Penance and release of the slave cleanse the king's soul; the oblations and land parcels, however, resemble *éraic* payments made to the saint for the injury done a woman under his protection.<sup>202</sup> Elsewhere, the two penalties may be combined into a single act of saintly vengeance for the harm of persons under a saint's protection, collecting thereby just and due *enech* and *éraic* fines, a suggestion particularly attractive where the injured or murdered are nuns or children under the saint's aegis. For these individuals, the church was their family.<sup>203</sup>

Canon law in Ireland tends to be rather more lenient than the retaliations of saints, often calling for a penance of seven or ten years for homicide, while injury penalties are determined according to the degree of wound and social rank of the wounded, as in vernacular codes.<sup>204</sup> The *Collectio* asks seven years' penance where homicide is accidental, but demands capital punishment for deliberate killing.<sup>205</sup> Twenty years' penance in exile and seven men of a status equal to that of an injured man under a bishop's *snádud* are due to the wronged bishop, according to another ecclesiastical text;

<sup>201</sup> Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 84–6, “*enech*” and “*éraic*.” Also Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 126.

<sup>202</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 37, 178; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 27, *VSH* 1, 42.

<sup>203</sup> The Old Irish Cambrai homily calls this separation from all things familiar of home and hearth for the sake of God *bánmartre*, or white martyrdom, and deems it the first level of monastic commitment. Stokes and Strachan, “The Cambrai homily.”

<sup>204</sup> *Penitential of Columbanus* B.13; *Canones hibernenses* 1.2–3, 4, Bieler, *Irish penitentials*, 102, 160, 170.

<sup>205</sup> *Collectio* 28.5–6, pp. 95–6.

if the protected man is slain, the killer owes the bishop subjected to *díguin* all the possessions and assets of himself and of his retinue, and is expected to go into exile as a strict ascetic for a minimum of thirty years.<sup>206</sup>

Though not all of these specific punishments are associated with *díguin* in the *Lives*, the existence of such tenets in canon law serves to underline ecclesiastical claims to the rights of extending and enforcing *snádud*. Some examples, however, do correspond closely. A man responsible for ordering the homicide of someone with whose protection he had been charged by Columba of Iona, for example, receives a negative prophecy from the saint as a consequence; the guilty fellow is told that he will die suddenly in autumn just before consuming pork and be carried to hell, which forecast is fulfilled as described.<sup>207</sup> The exaction of an instantaneous capital penalty has also been seen in hagiographical vengeance, as in the immediate maledictory decease of a man who murders a girl cowering at Columba of Iona's feet; this death is said to occur "just like Ananias in Peter's presence" (*sicut Annanias coram Petro*).<sup>208</sup>

It is also likely that some of the less lethal punitive consequences in the *Lives* represent penitential punishments, especially where the penalty is repealed after due satisfaction is made. In one likely case, passive retaliatory judgment brings down blindness, deafness and muteness upon King Brendán mac Carbri for refusing to release the kindred of St. Camna, despite petitions from both Camna and Saint Colmán Éilo.

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<sup>206</sup> *Tres canones hibernici* 3, Bieler, *Irish penitentials*, 182.

<sup>207</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.23, pp. 376, 378.

<sup>208</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.25, pp. 382, 384, repeated in *Betha Coluim Chille* 25, pp. 227–8, 254. Orthographic variation is original to citation. This episode likely reflects the author's own interests in the protection of noncombatants; see the upcoming paragraphs for discussion of the *Cáin Adomnáin*. The biblical reference is to Acts 5; see also the discussion of Peter as a model of hagiographical retribution, pp. 139–42 above.

Brendán's faculties are restored as soon as he does penance and lets Camna's family return home.<sup>209</sup>

A number of episodes of saintly retribution appear to relate to the enforcement of the *Cáin Adomnáin*, an ecclesiastical law written and promulgated by Adomnán, abbot of Iona, in 697.<sup>210</sup> This law sets forth heavy fines for those who involve women, children, clerics or slaves in warfare or raiding, penalties that could even include the loss of a hand or capital punishment. According to the *Cáin*, these classes of person are defined as permanently exempt from any military service. Stiff consequences are also demanded should any of these civilians—especially women—be slain during the course of their routine duties.<sup>211</sup>

Not surprisingly, Adomnán's own hagiographical work, *Vita S Columbae*, contains several episodes that reflect its author's interests. In one instance, Columba foretells the mortal illness of a Pictish druid, Broichán, for refusing to release an Irish slave girl. Broichán is only saved from death when he relents and sets the girl free, whereupon Columba arranges the druid's healing.<sup>212</sup> In a vivid example of punitive dishonor and debasement from the later *betha* of Iona's first abbot, an arrogant princeling is afflicted with insanity for inciting a mob against Columba, causing the death of twenty-seven Columban monks; thereafter the condemned dynast is only lucid when

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<sup>209</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 44, pp. 222–3; in (Dublin) 30, *VSH* 1, 270–271, the leader subjected to judgment at Colmán Élo's hands is the *dux* Coirpre, who is only struck blind and deaf.

<sup>210</sup> *Annals of Ulster*, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Cork: University College Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2000), 157–8. Available online in separate Irish/Latin and English-translation documents at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt>.

<sup>211</sup> Ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin: an Old-Irish treatise on the Law of Adomnán* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). Although the text of the *Cáin* itself still appears to largely be rooted in the late 600s, the introduction to the extant versions possesses elements that originate in the late tenth or early eleventh century. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "The *Lex Innocentium*: Adomnán's Law for women, clerics and youths, 697 A.D.," in *Chattel, servant or citizen*, ed. O'Dowd and Wichert, 58.

<sup>212</sup> Ch. 2.33, pp. 398–404.

defecating.<sup>213</sup> In the *betha* of Adomnán, the saint prophesies that another prince will die soon and his descendants never rule or exceed five members because the prince decides to carry out a capital sentence on a murderess against Adomnán's wishes.<sup>214</sup>

There are other examples of hagiographical vengeance not directly related to Columban figures that may reflect the tenets of the *Cáin*. It is possible, for instance, that the punitive shriveling of a selfish slave-mistress's hand for attempting to drag her slave away from Brigit—to whom the slave had fled for protection—may be an echo not only of the instant death with which Columba's curse strikes the child-killer, but also of the sickness that afflicts Broichán for not freeing a slave girl despite Columba's demand.<sup>215</sup> If so, these episodes may, ultimately, draw some motivation from the tenets of the *Cáin Adomnáin*. The miraculous blinding of a Munster king for not releasing a slave woman to Áed mac Bricc, the blindness followed by death of a step-mother determined to kill her saint-protected step-son, and the chthonic consumption of a Leinster queen plotting grievous bodily harm against her step-son despite his being protected by Saint Berach may also represent instances of the hagiographical enforcement of Adomnán's law.<sup>216</sup>

In concert with ecclesiastical concerns regarding the protection of those in their community, and particularly of noncombatants, is the hagiographical handling of the serious problem of brigandage. Known in Latin as *fures*, *latrones* or *latrunculi* and in

<sup>213</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* appendix §4, pp. 244–5, 266 (malediction).

<sup>214</sup> *Betha Adomnáin* 3, pp. 48–51. In the *Cáin* women guilty of murder are not exempted from the death penalty; the text specifically prescribes capital punishment upon women not only for murder but for arson and for breaking into a church. *Cáin Adomnáin* 45, p. 30. Also see Ní Dhonnchadha, "Lex Innocentium," 68. It seems that here Saint Adomnán is reacting both because the convicted woman is under his protection and because the prince is flouting Adomnán's express demands.

<sup>215</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.74, col. 0129D–E; ch. 74, Connolly, 36. It is noteworthy that the forfeiture of hands as penalty for the involvement of the noncombatant classes defined by the *Cáin* may also have a bearing on the Brigidine case. Further, if the parallel between *Vita I* and the *Cáin* holds true, the date of the *Vita* cannot fall before the early 700s. See appendix below.

<sup>216</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 37, p. 178; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 27, *VSH* 1, 42. *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 1, 251. *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 10, *VSH* 1, 78–9.

Irish as *díbergaig*, brigands and their activities were particular targets of ecclesiastical censure, and frequent subjects of saintly vengeance, due in no small part to their irritating habit of raiding church properties and involving innocent parties in acts of violence.<sup>217</sup> A brigand who repeatedly raids Columba of Iona's ally, Saint Colmán Élo, is prophesied by Columba to attain only death by shipwreck.<sup>218</sup> Raiders who make off with horses and grain that are under Brigit's jurisdiction experience misdirection; though they think they have gone home, they wake the next day to find they are still in Brigit's community.<sup>219</sup> A *latro* who steals a cow from Ciarán of Saigir's herdsman is swamped and drowned crossing a river as he flees.<sup>220</sup>

Ireland's early penitentials prescribe varying degrees of penalty for raiding, including six months' penance (*Synodus episcoporum*), a return of the stolen goods, 120 days on bread and water or two years spent excommunicate (*Penitential of Columbanus*), a fine equal to the value of seven slave women and seven years' penance (*Canones hibernenses*), or seven-fold restitution and five years' hard penance in exile (*Tres canones hibernici*).<sup>221</sup> The Old Irish *Table of penitential commutations* relegates brigandage (*díberggae*) to the same category as secret murders, heresy, druidism and satirizing as a crime for which no remission of penitential sentence can be permitted, no

<sup>217</sup> For discussion of this topic see Sharpe, "Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the Devil's men," who in part argues that the church desire to quell brigandage had much to do with their engaging in pagan activities as members of the *fianna*, or roving independent war-bands. For a refinement of the place of the *fianna* in Irish society, see Kim McCone, "Werewolves, cyclopes, *díberga*, and *fianna*: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland," *CMCS* 12 (Winter 1986): 1–22. Also see the discussion of recapitulation in chapter four, pp. 242–9, notes 211, 216, below.

<sup>218</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.22, pp. 372–6.

<sup>219</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 9.55, col. 0126C; ch. 57, Connolly, 29.

<sup>220</sup> *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 351; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 20, *VSH* 1, 226. The similarity not only to a prior Brigidine episode of cattle rustlers drowned in a flooding river but to the crossing of the Red Sea is unmistakable. See pp. 123–5 above.

<sup>221</sup> *Synodus episcoporum* 15, ed. and trans. Bieler, "First synod of St. Patrick," *Irish penitentials*; *Penitential of Columbanus* B.19, *Canones* 4.9, and *Tres canones hibernici* 1, Bieler, *Irish penitentials*, 56, 102–4, 170, 182.



matter how severe the punishments may be.<sup>222</sup> Another Irish penitential requires one year's penance for brigandage, reflecting, for instance, the duration of the blindness that befalls Saxon raiders of Saint Maedóc's community in Wales.<sup>223</sup>

Under vernacular law, those who lose their right to seek legal protection from either church or noble include thieves who flee the law and raiders and murderers who abscond without paying their due *éraic* fines.<sup>224</sup> This stricture is nowhere near the condemnation leveled at brigands by the church; it gives the impression that it does not deem raiders to be outlaws *for raiding*, but only for doing so without paying the expected legal penalties. It does appear that a thief who is found still holding the stolen goods could be hanged, however, particularly if the church were the judging entity.<sup>225</sup> Given the opprobrium attached to raiding in ecclesiastical and, to an extent, in vernacular legal texts, it is not surprising that brigands and thieves are the main malefactors in at least two dozen vengeance episodes in the *Lives* of Irish saints.

### *Denial of hospitality*

An important part of the rights due to persons of exalted social status in medieval Ireland was the receipt of hospitality. The noble classes had the reasonable and legal expectation that they would be welcomed, housed and fed by anyone they approached while traveling. In practice this duty most probably fell primarily to settlements of a particular degree of standing with the resources to provide properly for guests and their

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<sup>222</sup> §5, pp. 58–9.

<sup>223</sup> “An Irish penitential” 1.11, 15; 2.17; 3.2, 22; 5.9, ed. and trans. E. J. Gwynn, *Ériu* 7 (1914): 143, 150–151, 154–5, 158–61, 168–9. *Vita S Aidui sive Maedoc* (Vespasian) 18, *VSH* 2, 299–300.

<sup>224</sup> *Bechbretha* 39.2, pp. 74–5.

<sup>225</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 217.

retinues, but the obligation was theoretically shared by all persons of any property.<sup>226</sup>

According to the early vernacular legal writings, refusal of hospitality to an individual of quality—whether ecclesiastical or lay—entitled the injured party to the payment of his full honor price.<sup>227</sup> Two forms of rejection are specified; the first is *étach* or “refusal”, and the second, more severe type is *esáin*, “driving away.”<sup>228</sup> Further, any missed meals the denied party should suffer are considered forced fasts, entitling the hungry elite to an additional recompense.<sup>229</sup>

Canon law, too, reserves a special place for the proper fulfillment of the duties and benefits of hospitality, including devoting entire books to the subject in both the seventh-century *Canones hibernenses* and the early eighth-century *Collectio*.<sup>230</sup> The *Canones* in particular observe that when an ecclesiastic seeking accommodations is turned away out of ignorance or inexperience the guilty party should incur a penance of seven days’ fast on bread and water. On the other hand, a rejection that results from “unkindness” (*inclementia*) demands one year of such penitential sacrifice for each day of hospitality denied, and the excommunication of all responsible.<sup>231</sup> It seems likely that the first, milder form of rejection corresponds to the *étach* of vernacular law, while the deliberate and insulting second form parallels *esáin*.

While the honor price of a rejected king might be satisfied by a payment of cattle or other goods, a saint’s *enech* is rather more severe. The stripping of fecundity from the

<sup>226</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 139. Also Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 81 (“*cóe*”, or “coshering”).

<sup>227</sup> *Críth Gablach* 6, 11, 12, Binchy, 1–2, 5–6; §§66, 83, 84, MacNeill, 283, 288–9. Ecclesiastical ranks were paralleled with their secular counterparts, for example, a king and a bishop commanded the same *enech*. See *Uraicecht Becc* 8–9, trans. MacNeill, “Ancient Irish law,” 273–4; *Bretha Nemed Toísech* 20, pp. 16–17. Both are legal texts of the eighth century.

<sup>228</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 139–40.

<sup>229</sup> Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 87–8 (“*esáin*”).

<sup>230</sup> *De iectione ecclesie graduum ab ospitio*, *Canones* 5, pp. 172, 174; *De hospitalite*, *Collectio* 56, pp. 221–2. Orthographical variations are original to the source.

<sup>231</sup> *Canones* 5.5, p. 172.

land around a settlement denying Eógan of Ardstraw, for instance, both exacts his honor price and imposes the fasting penance of *Canones* 5.2 upon the guilty parties.<sup>232</sup> It has been seen that immolation by lightning evokes the story of the damnation of those who would contravene the authority of Aaron; similar damnation—the consequence of permanent excommunication, whether it is explicitly stated or merely assumed—befalls those who turn away MacNisse and Declán.<sup>233</sup> Importunate guesting demanded from saints also occupies several episodes of vengeance, such as the moment when a royal steward who challenges Colmán mac Lúacháin to provide exorbitant food hospitality, on pain of drowning or burning, is swallowed by the earth.<sup>234</sup> These examples of saintly retribution make clear both the expected treatment of and the nature of the penalties for refusing due hospitality to the holy men of Ireland.<sup>235</sup>

### *Property disputes*

The limited amount of available inhabitable and arable land meant that conflict between church and lay landholders over property was inevitable in medieval Ireland. Four specific issues figure prominently in the representations of hagiographical vengeance concerned with territorial disputes. These are grazing on a saint's land without

<sup>232</sup> *Vita S Eogani* (Salamanca) 16, pp. 403–4. It is also a case of the punishment matching the crime; the saint is made to hunger, so the community must suffer famine.

<sup>233</sup> *Vita S MacNissei* (Salamanca) 10, p. 406; *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 2, 52. See also pp. 129–30 above for the possibility that *ApocAb* plays a role in this particular form of lightning-mediated judgment.

<sup>234</sup> *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin* 55, pp. 58–9. Recall a similar episode is also known from the *Bethu Phátraic*; see pp. 166 above.

<sup>235</sup> There are, it seems, no examples of female saints turned away when seeking hospitality among the landholders of Ireland. This *lacuna* suggests either that holy woman did not travel enough to ask for hospitality, or that when they did they were never refused. It seems likely that the truth was somewhere in the middle, especially as there are episodes in the Brigidine texts that depict Brigit visiting this or that house; importantly, though Brigit may dine at a male host's residence, she and her entourage stay the night only at ecclesiastical communities. A traveling cleric is unlikely to be denied hospitality by another religious foundation, and at the same time a female saint would also be protected from even the appearance of impropriety that might result were she to sojourn in a layman's home. See for example *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.27, 4.29, 6.40–41, cols 0122C–E, 0123F–0124A; chs 30, 31, 33, 42–3, Connolly, 20–21, 24–5.

permission, attempted or actual physical expulsion of a saint from a property or foundation, refusal to cede land requested by a saint and the right of a saint's community or monastic federation to be exempt from the exactions of royal tribute.

In early Ireland, the act of pasturing one's horses on the land of another without permission was one stage in the process of attempting to claim ownership of that property. If the occupant drove away the horses the process was interrupted and the claim rendered null.<sup>236</sup> Hagiographical vengeance depicts saints consistently rejecting such incursions, including the instant death of both Dáire and Dáire's horse for grazing a plot promised to Patrick.<sup>237</sup> Mochoemóg is compelled to drive away the chariot-horses of Munster King Failbe Flann, leading to a series of confrontations that culminate with Failbe losing sight in one eye and, it is assumed, his ability to rule.<sup>238</sup> Féchín and Finnhúa both must deal with equine trespasses when the saints are still lads; in Féchín's instance the horses drop dead, while Finnhúa's curse turns the unwelcome guests into stone.<sup>239</sup> It seems that the holy men of Ireland—there are no such episodes with women, probably because legally females could only inherit a life interest in land, not purchase it outright—are depicted in such retaliatory narratives not only ejecting unwanted invaders but exacting recompense for the trespass.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> The procedures of claiming property ownership legally are fully detailed by Thomas Charles-Edwards, "Boundaries in Irish law," in *Medieval settlement: continuity and change*, ed. P. H. Sawyer (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1976), 83–7. Also see Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 109–10 ("usucaption") and 186–7 (legal claim process); also by Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin: DIAS, 1997), 432–3.

<sup>237</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 1.24, pp. 108, 110 (passive retaliatory judgment). In *Bethu Phátraic* II 2706–20, Mulchrone, 136–7; Stokes, 228–31, Patrick is described as enraged at the trespass.

<sup>238</sup> *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 19, *VSH* 2, 174 (malediction). See also *Bechbretha* 31–2, pp. 68, 69, where the blindness of Congall Cáech (Congall the Blind) is claimed as the reason he lost his throne.

<sup>239</sup> *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 6, *VSH* 2, 77; also in *Betha Féchin* 8, pp. 324–5 (malediction). *Betha Finnhua* (Lismore) II 2846–77, pp. 85–6, 232–3.

<sup>240</sup> See Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 104–5 regarding female inheritance of land.

In some cases, saints are subjected to manhandling by landholders unwilling to permit the holy individuals to remain. In Irish, the terminology is explicit: expelling a person is described as *gabáil lámae duine*, “seizing a person’s hand,” and this turn of phrase carries into Latin as *trahere* or *tenere manum*.<sup>241</sup> Mochutu is grabbed and kicked out of his first community, Rahan, in this manner, and the plethora of punishments that ensue for the guilty retainers who prosecute this injustice include permanent partial-blindness, exile, the extinguishing of lineages and damnation.<sup>242</sup> Senán is seized and dragged by his two brothers; the brother who commits the worst outrage ultimately drops dead in the doorway of his home, condemned to not even enter his own possession.<sup>243</sup>

In all fairness to Ireland’s saints, however, the majority of persons who would eject them are stopped before any physical contact can occur, preventing the outrage of the saint’s person. A man who tries to expel Finnian of Clonard is struck blind until penance is satisfied, for instance, and never even gets close to touching, let alone seizing the saint.<sup>244</sup> Another landholder, Nechtan, is felled by “sudden death” (*subita mors*), while Nechtan’s followers are paralyzed in place, again preventing so debasing an event as bodily expulsion from happening.<sup>245</sup>

Property disputes don’t always occur after the saint has settled. In many instances conflict begins the moment a holy man attempts to obtain the land needed to start a church or community. In one such narrative, a landholder who is unwilling to give Áed mac Bricc a parcel of territory an angel has promised to the saint tries to flee but is felled

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<sup>241</sup> *DIL*, “*gabál*”, subsection (a).

<sup>242</sup> *Vita S Carthagi sive Mochutu* (Dublin) 53–8, *VSH* 1, 190–193 (negative prophecy, malediction).

<sup>243</sup> *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 2249–76, pp. 67–8, 214–15 (negative prophecy).

<sup>244</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca) 16, p. 100 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>245</sup> *Vita S Finniani* (Salamanca), 31, p. 105; also *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) ll 2714–18, pp. 81 (passive retaliatory judgment). See also the tale of adherence to the milk jug for those sent to expel Abbán, p. 150 above.

by severe illness.<sup>246</sup> In another, Anfossaid mac Leda, who mockingly rebuffs Colmán mac Lúacháin's request for permission to settle, is prophesied to gain shame, derision and the servitude of his descendants to Colmán.<sup>247</sup> In a third anecdote, a man named "Fool" (*baeth*) is struck blind for denying Finnian of Clonard the right to settle in Eiscir Branainn.<sup>248</sup>

These vengeful portrayals share one common element; in every case, whether the real estate has been granted or it is still merely being sought, the landholders of the areas in question challenge the rights of the church by refusing or expelling the saint acting as its agent. At the root of these episodes is the denial by these laymen of not only church standing and rightful claim but also of sanctified authority. Whether laying hands on and outraging a saint's person or merely rejecting requests for a parcel on which to build a hermitage, these refusals indicate an implicit denial of the sanctity embodied in the holy man. Honor price, penalties for assault and trespass and other consequences may apply, but the critical message is the knocking down a peg of any with the hubris to view their own claims or rights as superseding those of God's elect.

Once a saint's foundation has been established, vengeance is also triggered by the attempts of secular rulers to demand tribute from ecclesiastical settlements. Numerous retribution episodes testify not only to hagiographical assertions of the exemption of churchlands from such exactions, but also demonstrate an ongoing struggle over the matter throughout much of the history of medieval Ireland. In his tenth-century *betha* Adomnán, for example, prophesies the short life, death at the hands of family and loss of

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<sup>246</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 48, pp. 180–181; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 34, *VSH* 1, 44 (passive retaliatory judgment).

<sup>247</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 36, pp. 34–5.

<sup>248</sup> *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) II 2624–7, pp. 78, 225–6 (passive retaliatory judgment).

sovereignty for the lineage of Fiannachta mac Dúnochadha, king of Tara, for declaring Columban lands subject to tribute.<sup>249</sup> In a *betha* most probably placing to the twelfth or thirteenth century, King Lugaid's demands for payment from Senán result in the loss of Lugaid's racehorse, the removal of Lugaid's lineage from rule and the loss of life and salvation for Lugaid himself.<sup>250</sup>

Though not exclusive to this particular offense, it is within the hagiographical handling of the matter of tribute charged against ecclesiastical lands that an excellent example of the *aithech fortha*, or "substitute churl," may be found. Throughout the episodes of saintly vengeance, it is not unusual to see someone receive punishment other than the actual eminent target of a saint's complaint. When, for example, Saint Fínán Cam tries to obtain remission of his community's tax from King Failbe Flann—who, it seems, was particularly despised by the church, given his chronic presence in the *Lives*—it is not Failbe but his tax collector who refuses the demand.<sup>251</sup> Fínán warns that if the tribute is not forgiven, the tax collector's house will be consumed by fire. In a split second lightning immolates the building, and in that same moment the tax collector is struck mute. Penance, however, is not performed by the tribute collector but by the king, the satisfaction of which restores the former to his usual talkative self.<sup>252</sup>

The tax collector is apparently acting as an *aithech fortha*, a commoner who could legally stand in for the king as defendant and who would be held liable for any penalties

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<sup>249</sup> *Betha Adamnáin* 6, pp. 50–51.

<sup>250</sup> *Betha Shenain* (Lismore) ll 2087–2102, pp. 63, 210. See chapter one, pp. 42–3 above for the chronology of the Lismore *bethada*.

<sup>251</sup> We have also seen Failbe Flann earning, for example, the vengeance of Mochoemóg, p. 164, note 177 above.

<sup>252</sup> *Vita S Finani* (Salamanca) 26, p. 158; (Dublin) 19, *VSH* 2, 92. Note that in the Dublin version, Fínán's prophecy warns only that the tax collector will suffer God's vengeance (*vindicta*). See above, pp. 128–30 for the possible parallels between lightning-borne punishment and both canonical and apocryphal scripture.

incurred by the king.<sup>253</sup> Fínán's response is twofold: he exacts a price from the tax collector as the king's stand-in, then makes it impossible for him to continue to act on the king's behalf by rendering him unable to speak. With his *aithech fortha* out of commission, the king himself is compelled to satisfy Fínán's claim directly or lose his honor, his status and possibly even his life and soul.

### **Conclusion: vengeance and the essence of Irish sanctity**

The evidence of scriptural parallels in representations of saintly vengeance indicates that while the paradigm of idealized, embodied holiness found in *imitatio Christi* is clearly present, the retribution episodes in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints also emphasize other models, making subtle and not-so-subtle comparisons between Irish holy men and women and key Old and New Testament figures. Most notable among these parallels are Moses, Aaron, Elijah and Elisha. Importance is also placed on the prayers and invocations of the Psalter, the deeds of powerful apostolic figures and the role of Mary, mother of the Messiah. Within this array of *exempla*, moreover, some inspirations have roots in the canonical books of scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. Accounts regarding Jesus, Mary and the apostles, by contrast, draw from both canonical and apocryphal texts, indicating a respect for such non-standard sources at least equal to the honor reserved for the Bible itself.

From the earliest examples of hagiographical retribution in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints, the men are equated explicitly and implicitly with Old Testament prophets and the acts of apostles in apocryphal works, with Patrick leading the phalanx as first Irish heir

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<sup>253</sup> "A text on the forms of distraint" 9, ed. and trans. D. A. Binchy, *Celtica* 10 (1973): 80–81; also discussion of section on 84–5. The translation of *aithech fortha* as "substitute churl" is that of Binchy.



to the same apostolic grace and status as Peter. The women have a slightly different trajectory; the retaliatory episodes of Brigit's seventh- and early eighth-century *vitae* display a greater reliance on *imitatio Christi*, but such parallels are less prominent after the *Vita I S Brigitae*. Instead, vengeance episodes of sanctified women in later *Lives* – particularly their *bethada* – also draw in their own ways on the models of authority and election provided by figures such as Moses or Elijah, or upon the apocryphal representations of the apostles.

Emotion is stirred in saints of both Latin and Irish texts, although infrequently overall. Whenever a saint is displeased or outright angered, negative consequences for the *provocateurs* are assured. While Brigit, in keeping with her strong emulation of the model of Christ, expresses less ferocious emotional outrage than do her male counterparts, the female saint Lasair and the holy men of Ireland are linked through the ire of their retaliatory narratives to Old Testament leaders. One has only to think of Moses' rage at the creation of the golden calf for a well-known example of justifiable wrath.<sup>254</sup> Contrary to other scholars, Irish saints are neither frequently overwhelmed by anger nor wholly disconnected from emotion in their prosecution of vengeful judgment.<sup>255</sup>

The involvement of canon and secular Irish law in the representations of vengeance adds another layer to the image of the Irish saint. In these episodes, holy men and women conform particularly to native Irish law, using the legal codes of early Ireland and the peculiarities of legal language to bolster a saint's right to pursue just recompense both to the church in general and to the saint's honor and person in specific. Sainly

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<sup>254</sup> Exod. 32:19.

<sup>255</sup> See pp. 111–13, 155–9 above.

retribution of all types—not merely that of malediction, as asserted in previous studies, as cursing is now visible as but one constituent of Irish saintly reprisal—reinforces not only social, cultural and spiritual but also legal lessons.<sup>256</sup> Hagiographical vengeance thus establishes a specifically Irish outline of social order with Ireland’s holy men and women at its head. Indeed, if the essence of sanctity among saints of any regional tradition is the emulation of Old and New Testament models, what sets apart the Irish saint is, in no small fashion, this adherence to and enforcement of Ireland’s laws.

From Moses to Elijah and Elisha, and then to Christ and his disciples, Ireland’s hagiographers place the entire scriptural narrative into the persons of their saints. The vengeful holy person, far from the flawed and vindictive individual assumed for so long, thus becomes a completed saintly being, an heir to an indisputably ancient authority and a vessel of the same grace bestowed upon Old Testament prophet, New Testament apostle and the Messiah himself. But there is more to the story. As Chapter Four shows, the motion of holiness through the society of the *Lives* is also witnessed in curative deeds. The same Irish saints who curse also cure. They pronounce negative prophecy and potent blessing, invoke lethal retaliation and raise the dead. In essence, Ireland’s holy men and women not only enact retribution but also perform the merciful, healing miracles that are necessary to maintain the physical and spiritual health of the Irish body Christian.

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<sup>256</sup> See pp. 161–82 above.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *From exile to enlightenment*

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“The saints could always heal what they wrought,  
if they chose.”<sup>1</sup>

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#### **The exile of illness**

Very little in human life is as isolating as illness or disability. Whether the ailment is minor or severe, temporary or chronic, as simple as the common cold or as complicated as cancer, the mortal fight for health must be waged by the individual, and thus by its very nature sequesters the sick from the whole. In the *Lives* of Irish saints, the infirm are displaced not only by the inherent physical, social or psychological seclusion of their condition, but also by a very real division from the fellowship of the faithful. To varying degrees, the unwell are segregated from participation both in the daily life of their community and in their normal religious observances. In Ireland’s medieval hagiography, this physical and spiritual exile of the individual results in an injury to the Irish body Christian it is the charge of the saint to undo.

In Chapter Three, the episodes of saintly vengeance found in Ireland’s medieval *Lives* were shown to establish and uphold the structures of an idealized Christian Ireland through the imposition of punishment and penance. This chapter turns to ways in which the portrayals of hagiographical healing accomplish much the same ends. As is true with the punitive deeds of the holy, curative acts also reveal the motion of sanctity through the textual society of the *Lives*. Whether disease or disability is imposed upon a wrongdoer to compel penitential satisfaction or arises as an unfortunate accident of life does not

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<sup>1</sup> Bitel, “Saints and angry neighbors,” 142.

ultimately seem to matter. In Ireland's medieval hagiography, saintly feats of rehabilitation minister to both body and soul, drawing the newly whole back into the fold, strengthening community bonds and augmenting the saint's authority. It is the work of this chapter to explore the ways in which the *Lives* demonstrate the restoration of the healed to both corporal and spiritual integrity, returning them fully intact to Christian society and curing thereby not only the individual but the communal body of the faith.

### **Biblical healings**

Nearly all of the *Lives* represent their saintly subjects engaging in curative acts that often directly echo the words of both the canonical and the apocryphal New Testament and closely parallel the reported deeds of Jesus himself. Those holy Irish who are not linked with one form of such biblical healing are almost invariably associated with others. This prevalence can be demonstrated by considering a selection of the hagiographical remedies delivered according to scriptural precedent.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Sensory deprivation reversed*

Among the most commonly depicted biblical healings are those in which some type of sensory or speech deprivation—blindness, deafness or muteness—is cured through the agency of an Irish saint. Nearly two dozen male saints are portrayed returning speech, sound or sight to petitioners of varying status, nearly all distinct examples of which occur in the *vitae*. Often components that would elsewhere be polluting are here instruments of sanctified medicine. Saint Comgall, for instance, gives

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<sup>2</sup> Resurrection, the ultimate example of a biblical cure, receives its own section later in this chapter. See pp. 237–48.

sight to a blind man who has been led to the saint for aid. When Comgall daubs his saliva on the man's sightless orbs the fellow is immediately (*statim*) cured, "and he received the light and, rejoicing in his light, he returned home" (*lumenque recepit, et in lumine suo gaudens reuersus est*), unaided.<sup>3</sup> Here the model is clearly that of the gospel Christ, who heals a blind man by applying clay mixed with his own spittle to the man's eyes, then commanding that they be rinsed with clean water.<sup>4</sup>

In another tale, Cainnech's blood is accidentally spilled when he strikes his head; when one drop of this blood is given to a king's daughter, she is fully healed of her blindness, deafness and muteness.<sup>5</sup> Again the model is the Messiah, but it is not only the Messiah of the canonical New Testament whose blood was poured out to cleanse sin from the world, it is also the apocryphal Jesus whose blood cures the partial blindness of the spear-bearer, Longinus.<sup>6</sup> It is Longinus who pierces the crucified man's side, the effluvia from the resulting wound spilling onto his hands; when he accidentally rubs his eye, Longinus receives both sight in his once-damaged eye and comprehension of the gospel message.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 10, *VSH* 2, 6. *Lumen*, it must be noted, can mean literally 'light' but also metaphorically 'sight.' Here the meaning appears to be both, referring not only to a cure for blindness but the receipt of the revelation of Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> John 9:1–4.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 25, p. 188; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 20, *VSH* 1, 159.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 26:28 (Mark 14:24).

<sup>7</sup> Longinus is named and healed in the apocryphal *Life of Longinus*. Elements of this apocryphon were certainly known to the Irish by the early 700s, in which era Blathmac used its material in his poems. See Ann Dooley's translation of the relevant verses (as edited previously by Carney) in "The Gospel of Nicodemus in Ireland," in *The medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: texts, intertexts, and contexts in western Europe*, ed. Zbigniew Izydorczyk (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), 366–8; also see 381–3 for the discussion and translation of other Irish versions of Longinus' story, including that found in LFF. The Irish text of Blathmac's verses concerning Longinus are also available in Carney, *Poems of Blathmac* verses 55–8, pp. 20–21. Further see Shirley Ann Brown's commentary on Longinus as represented in early Irish art in Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 252–3. See also the commentary below on the link between sin and blindness, p. 189, note 15.

Among the female saints, Brigit is depicted curing blindness four times and restoring speech in three cases.<sup>8</sup> In one narrative, composed around the same time as the root layers of the Salamanca *vita* of Cainnech, Brigit suffers her own accidental head wound. Her blood, spilled into a river and mixed with the water, is the medicinal agent that cures two young women of their muteness, once again evoking the power of Christ's blood to heal the apocryphal Longinus.<sup>9</sup> Saint Íta also heals those who have been deprived of their sight. In one case she reverses the blindness of a priest from whose hand she has received communion, simply by welcoming him to her community.<sup>10</sup> Íta's prayers also restore to a mute scholar (*sapiens*) his lost power of speech, allowing him not only to return to his teaching but to join his students (*discipulis*) in praying aloud to the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

The restoration of sense and voice comprises a primary component of the healing performed by Jesus throughout the Gospels. Jesus heals these faculties at least six times; the most frequent of such gospel remedies is the cure of blindness, a prevalence that is echoed in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints.<sup>12</sup> The healing of lost faculties by Irish saints, however, not only represents the repetition of the acts of Christ but, in a deeper *imitatio Christi*, also fulfills Isaiah's prophecies that deaf ears and blind eyes will be penetrated

<sup>8</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 3.14–3.15, cols 0137A–B; chs 11–12; Connolly and Picard, 16–17. *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.25, 4.32–4.33, 5.34, 17.108–17.109, cols 0121D, 0122B–C, 0122E, 0134B–C; chs 29.4, 37, 38.2–4, 121, 123, Connolly, 20, 22–3, 47. *Bethu Brigitte* 29, 36, 37, 38, pp. 9–10, 13–14, 27, 30. *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1372–6, 1383–90, 1435–48, pp. 41–2, 43, 189–91.

<sup>9</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.25, col. 0125D; ch. 29.4, Connolly, 20, *Bethu Brigitte* 29, pp. 9–10, 27 and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1383–90, pp. 41–2, 189. See again Blathmac's verses in Dooley, "Gospel of Nicodemus," 366–8. The imagery here of blood and water mingled further calls to mind the effluvia that pour from the wound caused by the centurion (whom the apocryphon later names as Longinus) in the canonical text of the crucifixion, John 19:34. The Salamanca *vita* of Cainnech is a Φ O'Donohue text; see pp. 36–8, chapter one.

<sup>10</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 20, *VSH* 2, 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 19, *VSH* 2, 122–3. The *sapiens* is specifically able, once cured, to speak "clearly" (*clare*).

<sup>12</sup> For example see: Matt. 3:5, 8:22–4, 9:28–30, 11:5, 15:31, 21:14; Mark 7:32–3, 8:22–4, 10:46–52; Luke 7: 21–2, 18:35–42; John 9:1–4, 41.

by a new teaching.<sup>13</sup> These particular senses, moreover, are necessary for an individual to fully participate in the body of the faithful: sightlessness prevents recognition of the New Testament revelation, deafness blocks reception of the preached message in that revelation, and muteness stops a tongue from witnessing to and professing the new truth.

This multi-layered interpretation of the hagiographical cure of sensory loss also finds corroboration in the apocryphal New Testament. Although the evidence presented by the apocrypha in these cases generally also exists in the canonical Gospels, what may remain allegorical in the latter is often made exegetically unambiguous in the former. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, for example, depicts the child Jesus declaring—in an echo of the Isaian text—“let the blind in heart see,” after which those his prior curse stripped of sight are restored to their full senses.<sup>14</sup> The *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* links restoration of sight with returning the healed to the company of God, as Jesus himself says to his audience: “let ... the blind see, and the lame walk straight ... and every one return into a restored state, and abide in him who is the root of life and of everlasting sweetness.”<sup>15</sup>

The return of the blind, deaf and voiceless to their full faculties thus signifies not only the physical but the spiritual restoration of an individual, and through that person’s healing a collective renewal is wrought. As one Irish exegete exhorts to those whose hearing was restored by Jesus, “You [who were deaf but now hear], hear what you have heard with the ears of an understanding heart” (*uos audite auribus intellegibilis cordis*

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<sup>13</sup> Isa. 29:18, 35:5, 42:18.

<sup>14</sup> *InfGosp* (GrkA) 8, Elliott, 78.

<sup>15</sup> *PsMat* 31, Elliott, 90. The notion of blindness and lack of comprehension or belief in the message of revelation is found throughout the canonical Gospels, in for example Matt. 23:16–17, 19, 26; Mark 3:5, 6:52, 8:17; John 9:39, 41, 12:40. The most famous example of this correlation is likely the story of Thomas, who doubts the identity of the risen Jesus until he has visual and tactile confirmation of the crucified man’s wounds. See John 20:27–9. It is in verse 29 that Jesus declares, “You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (*quia vidisti me credidisti beati qui non viderunt et crediderunt*).

*quae audistis*). This passage implies that it is comprehension of Jesus' spoken message that both brings them back to and allows them to remain in the world of sound; it also implies that this world of sound is essentially the world occupied by the community of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The opening of eye, ear and throat to the words of the Messiah enlightens the cured, such that Brigit is declared by Cogitosus to be, like Christ, "the light of the world" (*lux mundi*) because she brings sight to a man blind from birth.<sup>17</sup> Hagiographical healing of lost sight, sound and speech therefore elevates a soul in the light of the faith and unites—or reunites—the cured with the community of Christ, making the body faithful once again whole.

The reversal of sensory deprivation has, for a small group of saints, a corollary in the conferral of extended perception upon particular followers. Instead of curing senses somehow stilled, these holy Irish grant the ability to see what ordinary human eyes cannot, expanding thereby the insight attained by each individual recipient. Brendan of Clonfert, for instance, provides to one of his monks the ability to see Satan, whom the saint was interrogating before witnesses otherwise incapable of perceiving the saint's opponent.<sup>18</sup> Brigit of Kildare, too, permits Bishop Ercc and his houseboy to observe a battle occurring far away by making the sign of the cross over their eyes, a benediction which allows the two males to identify their kinsmen among several of those slain.<sup>19</sup>

Such episodes of unusual visual acuity most commonly feature members of the ecclesiastical community or, less frequently, converted laity, as in the narrative of Áed

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<sup>16</sup> *Commentarium in Lucam* 7.22, pp. 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> *Vita S Brigitae* 3.14, col. 0137A; ch. 11, Connolly and Picard, 16. The biblical story Cogitosus cites is found in Matt. 5:14 (John 8:12) and John 14:12.

<sup>18</sup> *Vita S Brendani* (Oxford) 67, *VSH* 1, 134–5.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 11.68, col. 0128C; ch. 69, Connolly, 34.



mac Bricc's conferral of 'Satan-sight' upon the Christian king Baithéne.<sup>20</sup> Because these individuals are already aware of and professing belief in the message of the New Testament, they require neither the restoration of a lost sense nor a return to God's fold. Instead, the beneficiaries of hagiographically augmented vision are gifted with a glimpse into the mysteries that lie beyond the veil of ordinary mortal sight and are then able to return to Christ's community to witness to their experience.

### *Sickness cleansed*

Among the edicts issued by Jesus to his disciples are instructions to both heal the sick and cleanse lepers.<sup>21</sup> Ireland's hagiographical holy, as embodiments of a sanctity that reflects not only the deeds of Christ but the fulfillment of his teachings in the acts of his apostles, are thus commonly depicted curing conditions from headaches to gangrene, excessive bleeding to difficult childbirth, plague to leprosy. The men and women of the *Lives*—both *vitae* and *bethada*—are associated with some sort of remedy for such ailments even more frequently than with the restoration of sense or speech; the sick become healthy through the reported works of at least half of the Irish saints for whom a *Life* survives.

Adomnán's Columba of Iona, for example, facilitates the return to vitality of numerous people, including a youth suffering from nosebleeds, an episode that may parallel the miraculous cessation of longterm hemorrhage in the woman who touches

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<sup>20</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 34, p. 177; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 25, *VSH* 1, 41–2. Áed provides this gift to Baithéne to compel the ruler to release a bondmaid, in which endeavor the saint, with the help of a view of the horrors of hell, is completely successful.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 10:8–10.

Jesus' hem.<sup>22</sup> When Saint Lugaïd is still an infant, his tears cure an ulcer and return his mother's landlord to full health; as an adult his shoe, used to stir a poisonous drink, purifies it into fine liquor the strength of which inebriates an entire royal feast.<sup>23</sup> Áed mac Bricc's and Declán's newborn infant heads both create concavities in stone that confer healing properties through the rainwater that collects in their hollows.<sup>24</sup> Molaisse of Leighlin, when still a boy, saves his foster-mother's life by signing her snake-bitten hand with the cross; here the parallel is found in *InfGosp* (GrkA), in which the apocryphal child Christ heals his brother James by breathing upon the viper bite in his brother's hand.<sup>25</sup> Moling, evoking the example of Jesus, brings health to an *ydropicus* by having the fellow consume soil taken from a hole the saint himself dug.<sup>26</sup> Declán's prayers combine with the sign of the cross made toward the four directions of Cashel to expel plague from all of Munster.<sup>27</sup>

In the *bethada*, Mochúa is credited with healing the Síl Muiredaig kindred of the yellow plague, absorbing their bilious hue into his crosier; Mochúa also cures gangrene

<sup>22</sup> *Vita S Columbae* 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 2.18, 2.30, 2.31, 2.40, pp. 98, 100, 102, 104, 118, 136, 138, 162. The boy with the nosebleed is cured in ch. 2.18, p. 118. For the cure of the woman with hemorrhage see Matt. 9:20–22 (Mark 5:27–31, Luke 8:43–48).

<sup>23</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 2, 50, pp. 131, 142; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 2, 42, *VSH* 2, 206, 220–221. The episode of Lugaïd healing the ulcer also appears in *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 2, p. 383, but here it is the touch of his hand rather than his tears that is curative.

<sup>24</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 1, p. 168; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 1, *VSH* 1, 34. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 3, *VSH* 2, 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaisse abbatis de Lethglenn* (Salamanca) 2, p. 340. *InfGosp* (GrkA) 16, Elliott, 79. This same episode is lacking in *InfGosp* (GrkB), again suggesting that (GrkB) was not used in the formation of the variants of *InfGosp* to reach Irish soil. See also chapter three, pp. 143–5 and notes 112–13 for additional discussion.

<sup>26</sup> *Vita S Dairchelli seu Moling* (Salamanca) 9, pp. 355–6; *Vita S Moling* (Dublin) 25, *VSH* 2, 201–2. In Dublin the ailment is not that of the *ydropicus*—an apparent fainting disorder that suggests catalepsy or, perhaps, epilepsy, and is usually translated as 'dropsy'—but only tumors in the man's belly. Saint Dagán, too, is said to cure an *ydropicus* in *Vita S Dagaei mic Cairill* (Salamanca) 24, p. 393. The term does not seem to appear in later *vitae*. It does appear in scripture, however, in Luke 14:2–4, where Jesus cures an *hydropicus* (the method is not specified).

<sup>27</sup> *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 24, *VSH* 2, 49–50.

with his bell.<sup>28</sup> Mac Creiche combats pestilence in the form of monsters, slaying disease and beast simultaneously with his breath, his prayer and the ringing of his bell.<sup>29</sup> Colmán mac Lúacháin cures abdominal disease with a touch, and provides healing wash water from his bell, the additional triple striking of which instrument guarantees the elimination of disease and plague.<sup>30</sup> Féchín's grant of absolution to a man afflicted with a severe head ailment instantly returns the man to health, making plain a link between this man's sickness and sin, a connection also drawn in the Gospels.<sup>31</sup> Senán, in a post-mortem visitation, instructs a follower concerning the location of a deposit of lime sufficient to build a new church. The lime itself, the kiln that dries the lime and even a stone taken from the area where the lime is found all possess healing powers thereafter.<sup>32</sup>

Among Ireland's female saints, Brigit of Kildare is the uncontested doyenne of miraculous doctoring. In her *Vita I* alone, Brigit is said to facilitate twelve healings of illness, a number considerably greater than any saint whether male or female. Brigit

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<sup>28</sup> *Betha Mochua Balla* (Lismore) ll 4798–4822, 4843–4, pp. 143–4, 287–8. As an instrument of status on par with a saint's *bachall*, the striking of a saint's bell could demarcate church lands, summon a community to worship or curse foes. As seen in this and subsequent examples, curative powers may come through the bell's sound or through the imparting of its holiness into another substance that is then consumed by or used externally on the affected person. Examples of malediction with bells appear a number of times in the *Lives*, the most well-known of which may be the cursing of Tara by Rúadán; see above p. 159 for references. In *Buile Shuibne* ll 19–37, it is Saint Rónán's ringing of his bell to define the lands of a new church that starts the conflict with Suibne; see Beatrix Färber and J. G. O'Keeffe, ed., *Buile Shuibne* (1952; reprint, Cork: University College Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2001); also trans. Färber and O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibne (the frenzy of Suibne), being the adventures of Suibne Geilt* (1913; reprint, Cork: University College Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2001). For more on the archaeology of bells and bell shrines, see Nancy Edwards, "Celtic saints and early medieval archaeology," in *Local saints and local churches in the early medieval west*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 226 and *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland* (1995; reprint, London: B.T. Batsford, 1996), 128, 140, 145. On the social role played by bells and other saintly relics in Irish society, consult Charles Doherty, "The use of relics in early Ireland," in *Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, ed. Ní Chatháin and Richter, 89–101.

<sup>29</sup> *Betha Meic Creiche* (Lismore) 14.49, 16. 57–16.62, *Miscellanea*, 36, 39–43, 75–6, 79–82.

<sup>30</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 15, 26, pp. 18–19, 26–7.

<sup>31</sup> *Betha Féchín* 14, pp. 326–9. In the Gospels, Jesus heals a paralyzed man by first absolving him, then commanding him to rise and go into his house, Matt. 9:2–7 (Mark 2:5, John 5:6–9). Jesus also says that sin is a kind of sickness, and that he, like a physician, brings his new teachings for those made ill by sin since those who are well do not need his aid (Matt. 9:12 (Mark 2:17, Luke 5:31)).

<sup>32</sup> *Míorbhuile Shendáin* 10, pp. 16–17.

follows the example of Christ at Cana when she turns water to premium ale to restore the health of her foster-mother, or when she transforms water to fresh milk to cure an ailing nun, while in other instances she grants remedies not just through fasting, prayer and the sprinkling of water she has blessed but also through contact with her chariot or her belt.<sup>33</sup> This tradition continues in Brigit's *bethada*, in which the water used to cleanse the saint's feet becomes a curative face wash for a young woman who has been an invalid longer than a year, and in which—in an echo of the apostle Paul—the mere shadow of Brigit's chariot can return a sick woman to vitality.<sup>34</sup>

Íta of the Déisi, by contrast, removes the sickness from just one man, using prayer and blessing to accomplish the cure.<sup>35</sup> While Monenna is also accorded only a single anecdote in which she specifically cleanses illness, she is further said to have received the gift of healing and to be able to expel disease with word and prayer.<sup>36</sup> Saint Lasair, too, is responsible for eliminating the sickness of but one individual, a youth whose four-year battle has left him contorted, blind, deaf and reduced to habitually drinking his own

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<sup>33</sup> Chs 2.10, 3.20, 3.22, 4.31, 5.35, 6.42, 9.58, cols 0119F, 0121A–B, 0122B, 0122E, 0123E, 0126C; chs 13, 24, 26, 35, 38.5–7, 44, Connolly, 16, 19, 22–3, 25, 30. Some of these episodes are also found in *Bethu Brigitte* 8, 24, 27, 35, 39, pp. 2, 8–9, 12–13, 14, 21, 25–6, 29–31, and in *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1236–43, 1368–76, 1499–91, 1514–19, pp. 37, 41, 44–5, 185, 189, 192–3. For Christ at Cana and the changing of water to wine, see John 2:1–11. Brigit also follows the steps of Christ when she multiplies food or drink according to the example set at the Sermon on the Mount. See, for example, Brigit's milking of a cow three times in one day, obtaining three times the normal amount of milk, in Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 2.8, cols 0136C–D; ch. 5, Connolly and Picard, 15; *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.98, col. 0133A; ch. 99, Connolly, 44, Connolly, 44; *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1659–61, pp. 49, 197. Brigit also provides sufficient ale for the entirety of Holy Week for all the churches in Mide and feeds Patrick and his crowd of followers with only twelve loaves, a little milk and one sheep, *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.18, 6.40, cols 0120F, 0123C–D; chs 23.1–4, 42, Connolly, 19, 24; *Bethu Brigitte* 21, 44, pp. 7, 16, 25, 32; *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1355–62, 1470–1477, pp. 41, 44, 188–9, 191–2. In these cases, however, there is no portrayal of healing by the saint, only miraculous provisioning. For the scriptural text of the Sermon and the feeding of the five thousand with fives loaves and two fishes, see Matt. 14:17–19 (Luke 9:13–17).

<sup>34</sup> *Bethu Brigitte* 31, 42, pp. 11, 15, 28–9, 32; see also *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1467–9, pp. 44, 191. Paul's shadow cures the sick in Acts 5:15.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 2, 126.

<sup>36</sup> Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 1.14, 2.2, Esposito, 215, 217–18; USMLS (9): 268–71, (10): 120–121. Notably in the single instance in which Monenna's cure is described in any detail, the individual healed is the son of the English king rather than a commoner or slave.

bodily effluvia. A restorative liquid served from her sacred bell as both drink and balm for the boy's hands, feet, eyes and ears brings him fully back to physical integrity.<sup>37</sup>

Of particular concern to the hagiographers of Ireland's saints are issues of women's health. Special attention is given in such episodes to the relief of excessive blood flow, to the miraculous expulsion of retained miscarriages in a sort of saintly dilation and curettage and to easing the difficulties of pregnancy and childbirth. This concern appears to follow the example seen in the cure obtained by a woman who is healed of her prolonged hemorrhage by touching the hem of Jesus' robe.<sup>38</sup>

Adomnán's Columba, for instance, knowing from Iona that a laboring kinswoman of his is in childbirth distress back in Ireland, obtains relief and safe birthing for her through his petitions to God.<sup>39</sup> Patrick's benediction upon herbs consumed by a pregnant follower cures both infant and mother of the ailment threatening their lives.<sup>40</sup> The mere act of embracing Saint Lugaid brings back to health a woman who has suffered for three years with a defunct pregnancy, causing the dead child to be expelled from her womb that night.<sup>41</sup> Rúadán spits into a vessel of water and has his disciple drink the liquid, then

<sup>37</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* II 19–38, pp. 88–9.

<sup>38</sup> Matt. 8:20–22 (Mark 5:27–31, Luke 8:43–8). One Irish exegete explains that this woman “was a sinner and unfaithful” (*peccatrix erat et infidelis*) until her contact with Jesus' garment, at which point “the faithful daughter returned” (*filia fidelis redit*); see *Commentarium in Lucam* 8:48, p. 72.

<sup>39</sup> *Vita S Columbae* 2.40, p. 162.

<sup>40</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 78<xxxi>, Bieler, 107; Byrne and Francis, 58. The story is retained in *Bethu Phátraic* II 2345–55, Mulchrone, 120–121; Stokes, pp. 200–201. There are no instances of Patrick curing physical ailment in either of his seventh-century texts; even from the *Vita II* and *Vita IV* of the early eighth century onward, Patrick cures only a few of the sick and disabled. See *Vita II S Patricii* 7, *Vita IV S Patricii* 7, *Vita IV* 69, 76, Bieler, 55–6, 104, 105–6; Byrne and Francis, 23–4, 56, 57; *Bethu Phátraic* II 134–44, 2541–5, Mulchrone, 7, 128; Stokes, 12–13, 214–15. There are a number of resurrections brought about by Patrick in later texts, however, for one example, see pp. 239–40 below. For others, see *Vita II / Vita IV* 10, *Vita IV* 11, 67, 78, 87, Bieler, 59, 60, 104, 106–7, 111; Byrne and Francis, 25–6, 56, 58, 61 and *Bethu Phátraic* II 159–66, 1543–53, 2084–2113, 2319–33, 2741–5, Mulchrone, 8, 83, 109–10, 119–20, 138–9; Stokes, 14–15, 134–5, 178–181, 198–9, 232–3.

<sup>41</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 14, p. 134; in the *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 5, p. 383, the woman takes the infant saint into her lap, while in *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 14, *VSH* 2, 210 she clasps the saint and begs for a blessing, and it is the benediction she receives that provides her cure.

proceed to the queen of Leinster, bless water, spit into it and give the drink to the queen to bring about the birthing of a deceased fetus and the return of her strength.<sup>42</sup>

Fintán of Taghmon's ill-tempered refusal to bless water for a woman afflicted with an excessive "flow of blood" (*fluxum sanguinis*)—a refusal born from, as discussed in Chapter Two, a fear of being drawn into sin by contact with the woman—is rectified by his hospitaller, who secretly takes Fintán's chasuble and drapes it on the woman, healing her instantly.<sup>43</sup> Molaisse of Devenish signs with the cross the belly of a woman "pregnant with pain" (*grauata dolore*), restoring her "soon" (*mox*) to health.<sup>44</sup> Curiously, of the holy females of Ireland, only Lasair appears to be associated with this class of ailments, her provision of a drink from her sacred bell bringing about the labor and delivery of a baby boy who clasps in each hand the serpents that had been killing his mother.<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with the command of Christ that the apostles should cleanse lepers, the healing of those afflicted with this dread skin disease also features prominently in the

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<sup>42</sup> *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 9, p. 162; (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 2, 243–4. In Dublin, the story is considerably simplified; the youth doesn't drink the saliva concoction given him by Rúadán, he only carries it to the queen for her to consume. In both Salamanca and Dublin (see ch. 11, *VSH* 2, 243), the youth chosen is selected because he previously received a benediction of learning and skill in the medicinal arts from Rúadán.

<sup>43</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 27, p. 206; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 23, p. 253 (in which there is no mention whatever of the saint's bad humor or initial refusal to aid the sick woman); *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 24, *VSH* 2, 235. See p. 97, note 165, chapter two.

<sup>44</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatis de Dam Inis* (Oxford) 8, *VSH* 2, 132.

<sup>45</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* ll 2–38, pp. 80–81 and ll 1–9, pp. 82–3. See page 194, note 28 above regarding the saint's bell. The similarity between this image and the classic depiction on the Gundestrup cauldron of what is assumed to be the pagan god Cernunnos, cross-legged and grasping a ram-headed serpent in one hand and a torc in the other, is rather startling. See Venceslas Kruta, *Celts* (n.p.: Hachette Illustrated, 2005), page 228 for an excellent close-up view of the pertinent panel. Even more striking, however, is the parallel to a story concerning the infant Hercules, who throttles—one in each hand—the two serpents sent by his step-mother Hera to kill him in his cradle. See Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.288, ed. and trans. Theodore Williams (1910; reprint, Medford: Tufts University Perseus Digital Library, 2008), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>. See also Grant and Hazel, *Who's who in classical mythology*, 161 ("Heracles").

*Lives* of Ireland's sanctified.<sup>46</sup> Among the holy men Saints Rúadán, Abbán, Crónán, Mochutu, Moling, MacNisse, Comgall, Declán, Berach, Mochúa, Columba of Iona, Finnochúa, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise and Féchín of Fore are said to cure lepers.<sup>47</sup> Among the women, on the other hand, Brigit seems to be the only saint explicitly associated with restoration of the leprotic to their former health, and she performs this particular cure at least six times.<sup>48</sup>

Generally lepers are cleansed with some sort of purifying gesture involving water, most probably reflecting the Levitical prescriptions of washing to cleanse away impurities including the corruption of leprotic skin.<sup>49</sup> Rúadán, in a Moses-like gesture, strikes the ground with his *bachall* to summon a spring the waters of which remove every trace of the disease for the twelve lepers who bathe in it.<sup>50</sup> Lepers unwilling to disrupt Crónán's prayers find themselves suddenly caught in a downpour summoned by the saint's vigil; when they shower in the water running from Crónán's roof they are soon (*mox*) free of leprosy.<sup>51</sup> In a familiar act of *imitatio Christi* Comgall's saliva, mixed with soil from the floor then added to a bath, removes the sickness from a sufferer, as does

<sup>46</sup> See Matt. 10:8–10 (Luke 9:1–2, 10:9).

<sup>47</sup> *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 16, p. 166; (Dublin) 22, *VSH* 2, 249. *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 33, p. 270; (Dublin) 39, *VSH* 1, 26; *Betha Abbáin* 19.35, *BNÉ* 1, 10; *BNÉ* 2, 9. *Vita S Cronani* (Salamanca) 5, pp. 275–6; (Dublin) 6, *VSH* 2, 23–4. *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochuda* (Salamanca) 7, p. 336; *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 23, *VSH* 1, 179. *Vita S Dairchelli seu Moling* (Salamanca) 6, p. 355; *Vita S Moling* (Dublin) 15, *VSH* 2, 196; *Genemain ocus betha Moling* 20. 76, pp. 56–7. *Vita S MacNissei* (Salamanca) 6, 8, p. 405. *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 14, 54, *VSH* 2, 8, 19. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 38, *VSH* 2, 57–8. *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 16, *VSH* 1, 81. *Vita S Mochua* (Oxford) 5–6, *VSH* 2, 185–6. *Betha Coluim Chille* 63, pp. 241, 264. *Betha Finnochua* (Lismore) II 3254–64, pp. 97, 254. *Betha Ciarain Clúana mac Nois* (Lismore) II 4132–5, pp. 123, 268. *Betha Féchín* 19, pp. 330–331.

<sup>48</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.19, 3.22, 4.32, 8.54, 11.70, 13.80, cols 0120F–0121B, 0122B–C, 0125D–E, 0128D, 0130A; chs 23.5–8, 26, 36.2–3, 56, 71, 81, Connolly, 19, 22, 29, 34–5, 38. Also see some of these episodes in *Bethu Brigitte* 23, 27, 36, pp. 7–8, 9, 13, 25–6, 30 and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) II 1363–7, 1372–6, 1435–41, pp. 41, 43, 189, 190–191.

<sup>49</sup> Lev. 13:1–46 specifically treats of the various ways leprosy was determined to be unclean and how the afflicted might be declared cleansed.

<sup>50</sup> *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 16, p. 166; (Dublin) 22, *VSH* 2, 249. See Num. 20:11, where Moses produces water from a rock with a blow of his staff.

<sup>51</sup> *Vita S Cronani* (Salamanca) 5, pp. 275–6; (Dublin) 6, *VSH* 2, 23–4.

bathing in water the decrepit and aged saint has used for his own ablutions.<sup>52</sup> For her part, Brigit facilitates the cleansing of lepers with both prayer and the aspersion of the afflicted with blessed water.<sup>53</sup>

An unusual ailment found in perhaps half a dozen *Lives* is that of the “table-faced” (*tabulata facies*) person, usually said to lack eyes, nostrils and sometimes ears. Elissa Henken has proposed that the appearance of this condition in the Welsh *Lives*, where it is that of the “flat face” (*wynepclawr*), may be a reference to leprosy, the advanced form of which causes such degradation of the facial bones that the nose and eyes collapse inward.<sup>54</sup> Although it has been shown that the terminology of leprosy in the texts of early Ireland (*leprosus*, *lobar*, “leper”) often includes a variety of “scabby, scaling, peeling skin diseases”—and admittedly a very small number of the table-faced are said to be so afflicted from birth, possibly suggesting something akin to Down Syndrome—the possibility that some of those “with flattened face” (*cum tabulari facie*) may suffer from late-stage leprosy is intriguing and warrants the inclusion of such cases at this point in the study.<sup>55</sup>

Cainnech, for example, heals a man with a table-face by producing a miraculous fountain, then sprinkling the affected fellow with its water; the man immediately gains

<sup>52</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 14, 54, *VSH* 2, 8, 19. See John 9:1–4.

<sup>53</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.19, 3.22, 13.80, cols 0120F–0121B, 0130A; chs 23.5–8, 26, 81, Connolly, 19, 29. Also found in *Bethu Brigitte* 23, 27, pp. 7–8, 9, 13, 25–6 and *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1372–6, pp. 41, 189.

<sup>54</sup> *Welsh saints*, 50–54.

<sup>55</sup> See for instance Laureen Buckley’s study of leprotic skeletons found in Hiberno-Norse Dublin, which includes an overview of the known or presumed history of Irish leprosy in “Outcasts, or care in the community?” *Archaeology Ireland* 22 (Spring 2008): 26–31; the quote regarding the terminology of skin diseases is found on page 28. *Cum tabulari facie* is the reference made to Cainnech’s patient in *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 16, p. 186. One example of the condition as a birth defect is seen in the *vita* of Maedóc. Here the saint’s prayers cure a man “born from the womb without either eyes or nostrils” (*ex utero sine oculis et naribus natus*). *Vita S Aidui siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 16, *VSH* 2, 299; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 12, p. 236; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 16, *VSH* 2, 146. In Dublin the man is merely described as “having a flattened face” (*tabulatam faciem habens*).



nostrils, eyes and ears.<sup>56</sup> A bath in Colmán Élo's marvelous spring—brought forth in a Mosaic fashion, as is that of Cainnech, by using a *bachall* to summon the waters from the ground—combines with Colmán's prayers to restore a face and eyes to the son of the saint's follower.<sup>57</sup> Baptism, the profession of faith in the Trinity, the prayers of Saint Mochutu and a benediction with the sign of the cross returns eyes and nostrils to a man whose "entire face [is] flattened like a tablet" (*totam faciem in modum tabule complanatam*).<sup>58</sup> In an episode that parallels Elisha's command to Naaman the Syrian to bathe seven times in the river Jordan to cure his leprosy, Brigit's instruction to the mother of a boy with a flattened face and sightless eyes to wash the child's face in the saint's nearby pool bestows a normal appearance and perfect sight on the boy.<sup>59</sup>

The healing of sickness is a common element in biblical texts. The prophet Elisha, as has just been mentioned, cleanses Naaman's leprotic skin.<sup>60</sup> Jesus himself is responsible for restoring health to numerous believers, curing leprosy and other ailments many times.<sup>61</sup> Through apostolic dispensation and the command of Christ, the apostles also gain the ability to remove sickness and restore health, as seen when Paul's shadow heals disease and infirmity, when the disciples as a group eliminate many illnesses, when Peter heals Eneas of eight years as an invalid, or when his touch and prayer grant relief

<sup>56</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 16, p. 186; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 1, 156–7.

<sup>57</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 47, p. 223; (Dublin) 33, *VSH* 1, 272. In Dublin the youth is said to be paralyzed, blind and without nostrils.

<sup>58</sup> *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochuda* (Salamanca) 8, pp. 336–7; there is also an obsessively brief mention at *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 24, *VSH* 1, 179. That healing is accomplished in part through baptism and profession of belief again suggests a perceived link between this man's unbelief and his flattened face.

<sup>59</sup> 4 Kgs 5:10–14. *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.99, cols 0133A–B; ch. 100, Connolly, 44. One line is also devoted to the tale in *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) line 1664, pp. 50, 197.

<sup>60</sup> 4 Kgs 5:10–14.

<sup>61</sup> For example see Matt. 4:23, 8:2–3, 14–15 (Mark 1:30–31, Luke 4:38–9), Matt. 9:35, 12:15, 14:14, Mark 1:40–42 (Luke 5: 12–13), Luke 4:40, 7:21–2, 17:12–14.

from fever and bloody flux for the father of Publius.<sup>62</sup> The inclusion of such elements as the production of miraculous waters brings the example of Moses into the image, then further augments portrayals of the removal of sickness with moments of *imitatio Christi* such as healing through the use of saliva mixed with soil—two otherwise unclean components that nevertheless convey salutary benefits to those with the faith to believe Christ’s message—or the restoration of health with only a touch or command.<sup>63</sup> Hagiographical healing of sickness thus draws on *exempla* found throughout scripture, but nevertheless casts Ireland’s holy most closely in the mold of Jesus and his disciples.

Episodes of curative *miracula* in the apocryphal texts add to the models used by Irish hagiographers. The leprous and the infirm are among those healed merely by the birth of Christ.<sup>64</sup> In the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, the child Jesus commands the instant cure of everyone who is ill, and “all were healed who had fallen into evil infirmities,” emphasizing that restoration to health signifies the elimination of exiling influences and a return of the community of the faithful to full strength.<sup>65</sup> The apocryphal Andrew, continuing the tradition of Jesus’ dispensation to his disciples, heals severe illness for one believer, ends another man’s twenty-two-year affliction, returns that same man’s entire town to health and eliminates the ailment of a prominent Macedonian’s daughter.<sup>66</sup> It

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<sup>62</sup> Apostolic dispensation is given at Matt. 10:8–10 (Mark 3:15, Luke 9:2–7); Christ’s command to heal the sick and cleanse lepers is Matt. 10:8–10. For the apostles, see Acts 5:15, 16, 9:33–4, 28:8.

<sup>63</sup> Moses summons water in Num. 20:11. See Matt. 8:14–15 (Mark 1:30–31, Luke 4:38–9), Mark 1:40–42 (Luke 5:12–13), Luke 4:40, John 9:1–4. In Lev. 15:8, saliva is declared unclean. Jesus himself says that, through the Holy Spirit, the apostles will cure simply by the laying on of hands, Mark 16:18.

<sup>64</sup> “Wonders of the night of nativity,” Herbert and McNamara, 34.

<sup>65</sup> *PsMat* 31, Elliott, 90. Jesus’ command is given as follows: “Let the unfaithful bear fruit, and the blind see, and the lame walk straight, and the poor enjoy good things, and the dead revive, and everyone return into a restored state, and abide in him who is the root of life and of everlasting sweetness.”

<sup>66</sup> *ActsAnd* (Greg) 13, 15, 16, Elliott, 275–6. See chapter 3, p. 138, note 92 above, for dating of the arrival of *ActsAnd* in Ireland.

must be stressed, however, that the notion of illness as a separation from the body Christian is not apocryphal but canonical.

Indeed, Levitical edicts declare leprosy unclean, mandating the isolation of the affected outside the community of the faithful.<sup>67</sup> So also is the case for women who are menstruating, laboring or recently delivered of children. Though not separated completely from the community, these women must neither touch anything sanctified nor enter into God's temple.<sup>68</sup> Priests who suffer from physical imperfection or illness—bleary eyes, eye infections, unhealed wounds, scrofula or sores, for example—are likewise forbidden to enter the Lord's sanctuary or to offer sacrifice to God until they are healed and purified.<sup>69</sup> Thus an unhealthy person, which includes a woman under the influence of her uterus, is unclean and must be cleansed. That healing then returns the newly whole individual to full participation in the religious life of the faithful, according to Mosaic Law; at the same time the community itself is also thus restored.

In the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus build upon these ancient concepts of purity and pollution. In several cases of healing, Jesus declares that it is the sick person's faith that brought him or her back to health (*fides tua te salvum fecit*), a word-play that not only indicates a return to physical integrity but also to spiritual salvation (*salvus*).<sup>70</sup> Jesus' words also directly declare that some forms of sickness are a consequence of sin, suggesting that certain chronic ailments act as punishment and penance for wrongdoing; upon healing one of the afflicted, Jesus declares, "Behold, you are now made well. Do not sin (again) lest something worse should happen to you" (*Ecce sanus factus es iam*

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<sup>67</sup> Lev. 13–14, 22:4.

<sup>68</sup> Lev. 12:4–7, 15:19, 25–8, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Lev. 21:18–21.

<sup>70</sup> See for example Mark 10:51 (Luke 18:42). *Salvus* can mean both "healthy" and "saved."

*noli peccare ne deterius tibi aliquid contingat*).<sup>71</sup> The words of an Irish exegete also proffer this interpretation. Commenting on one leper whose grave condition prior to being healed by Jesus Luke describes as “filled with leprosy” (*plenus lepra*), it is explained that the sick man possesses “all types of sin” (*omnia genera peccati habens*) until he is cured by Christ.<sup>72</sup> The same writer later commands those divested of the disease to “be cleansed of the leprosy of unfaithfulness” (*mundi estote a lepra infidelitatis*).<sup>73</sup>

Taken alongside the Old Testament episodes of affliction that arises as an immediate result of defying the Lord or his agents, as outlined in Chapter Three, it seems that some of the Irish hagiographers who drew from biblical *exempla* saw illness as a signifier of faithlessness, whether through lack of belief or through the commission of sin. The cleansing of ailment and disease in the *Lives* of Ireland’s holy, therefore, often stands as a form of absolution, a washing away of sin and sickness. Whether or not sin is given a role, however, the hagiographical curing of illness restores to integrity both the individual and the community of Christ.

#### *From disability to ability*

Much as is true of the removal of disease or sensory loss, the return to wholeness of those who endure some type of hindrance to normal mobility such as lameness, broken bones, limb withering, paralysis or amputation is also a return of the affected to full involvement in the religious and social community. Again following trails blazed by Jesus and his apostles, a select number of the holy men and women of Ireland are

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<sup>71</sup> John 5:14.

<sup>72</sup> *Commentarium in Lucam* 5:12, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> *Commentarium in Lucam* 7:22, pp. 60–61.

depicted granting health to those whose condition otherwise prevents worship, walking or work.

Columba of Iona, for instance, puts his blessing into a pinewood box; when the box is dipped in water, it creates a sanctified cure for the virgin Maugin's broken hip. The newly mobile nun lives another twenty-five years.<sup>74</sup> Lugaid reattaches his father's amputated foot in one tale, while in another his command to a paralytic to rise and complete his journey is answered with the man's immediate recovery and compliance.<sup>75</sup> Lugaid's curative deeds both echo acts undertaken by Jesus. In the first case, the stronger parallels are to the Christ of the *InfGosp*, who heals a man whose foot is accidentally split with an axe.<sup>76</sup> In the second instance, the hagiographical tale echoes the canonical New Testament, where Jesus cures a paralytic by first absolving him, then by commanding him to rise, take up his bed and go into his house.<sup>77</sup>

Cainnech and Declán both fuse together the shattered leg bones of one of their followers.<sup>78</sup> Maedóc and Buite each heal lame men; in Buite's case the sick fellow's cure is obtained by washing his limbs in the muddy water that collects in the ruts left by Buite's chariot wheels.<sup>79</sup> Féchín of Fore prevents the amputation of a woman's finger due to its strangulation by her wedding ring. Féchín inserts his own digit into a stone that had

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<sup>74</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.5, p. 102. The story is not retained in the *Betha Coluim Chille*, though the *betha* does briefly mention Columba's ability to heal the lame, ch. 63, pp. 239, 262–3.

<sup>75</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 9, 23, pp. 133, 135; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 9, 22, *VSH* 2, 208, 212.

<sup>76</sup> *InfGosp* (Grk A) 10 and (Grk B) 9, Elliott, 78. Notably in (Grk B), rather than the unfortunate axe-wielder splitting his foot, he is said to cut off his sole.

<sup>77</sup> Matt. 9:2–7 (Mark 2:5, John 5:6–9).

<sup>78</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 51, p. 196; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 41, *VSH* 1, 167. *Vita S Declani* (Dublin) 30, *VSH* 2, 53.

<sup>79</sup> *Vita S Aidi siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 15, *VSH* 2, 299; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 11, p. 236; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 15, *VSH* 2, 146. *Vita S Boecii* (Oxford) 15, *VSH* 1, 91.

previously cut him and prays that just as the stone had injured him, it would cure her. The ring that so tightly binds the woman's finger immediately breaks into two pieces.<sup>80</sup>

In the restoration of movement to the immobile Brigit again stands several levels above her female peers, and even above most male saints, healing the lame, crippled or paralyzed at least six times.<sup>81</sup> She restores mobility with prayer, foot-washing, a command to run an errand for her and nights spent in fasting vigil, her actions curing both paralysis and incapacitating deformities.<sup>82</sup> Even Brigit's shadow, as seen with the apostle Paul, returns a crippled woman to full mobility.<sup>83</sup> In one particular episode, Brigit restores a pilgrim's amputated hand, allowing him to join his two companions in their labor.<sup>84</sup> In contrast with the prolific number of rejuvenated persons walking out of Brigit's *Life*, Íta heals only one paralyzed man, telling him God will be merciful and blessing him with the sign of the cross.<sup>85</sup> Lasair, too, facilitates just one return from disability to ability, using clay from beneath her body to cure a warrior's numerous mangling and maiming battle-injuries.<sup>86</sup>

Here the models, as with the cleansing of sickness and leprosy, are profoundly biblical. In the Gospels alone, Jesus Christ heals the paralyzed and crippled no less than ten times, while his disciples do so at least twice.<sup>87</sup> As with the use by Jesus of his saliva mixed with clay to restore sight to blind eyes, again elements normally deemed

<sup>80</sup> *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 8, *VSH* 2, 78.

<sup>81</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.21, 4.32, 4.33, 5.34, 5.38, 8.52, cols 0121A, 0122B–C, 0122E, 0123B, 0125B–C; chs 25, 36.2–3, 37, 38.2–4, 41.1–2, 54, Connolly, 19, 22–4, 28. *Bethu Brigitte* 26, 37, 38, pp. 9, 13–14, 26, 30. *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1433–48, pp. 43, 190–191.

<sup>82</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.32, 4.33, 5.34, 8.52, cols 0122B–C, 0122E, 0125B–C; chs 36.2–3, 37, 38.2–4, 54, Connolly, 22–3, 28. *Bethu Brigitte* 26, 37, 38, pp. 9, 13–14, 26, 30. *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1435–48, pp. 43, 190–191.

<sup>83</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 5.38, col. 0123B; ch 41, Connolly, 41. See Acts 5:15.

<sup>84</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 3.17, col. 0120F; ch. 22, Connolly, 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 15, *VSH* 2, 120–121.

<sup>86</sup> *Beatha Lasrach* ll 30–38, pp. 100–101 and ll 1–13, pp. 102–3.

<sup>87</sup> Matt. 3:5, 4:23, 8:6–13 (Luke 7:3–9), Matt. 9:2–7 (Mark 2:5, John 5:6–9), Matt. 9:35, 12:13, 15:30–31, 21:14, Luke 4:18–19, 7:21–2, Acts 3: 2–6, 8:8.

contaminating, such as dirty water, become, in the hands of Ireland's hagiographical saints, conduits for the salutary sanctity of the holy.<sup>88</sup> Curative touch and command further echo both Christ and his disciples, as does the healing power of even a saint's shadow, an otherwise insubstantial artifact of light that in the *Lives*, as in Acts, possesses some of the essence of the person casting it.<sup>89</sup>

As made explicit when Brigit restores the pilgrim's hand and his ability to contribute to the community, removing the bonds of disability allows the rejuvenated to assume their proper place not only in the daily life of the secular world but also in the expected rituals of the community of Christ. In the words of one Irish exegete, those lame made to walk by Jesus are thereby able to walk "in the love of God and neighbor" (*in dilectione Dei et proximi*).<sup>90</sup> A return to ability is a return to both physical and spiritual integrity; following the strong tradition of *imitatio Christi et apostolorum*, the human body is reunited with the body Christian.

#### *The assurance of a new generation*

Given the importance of producing an heir to insure the succession of a dynasty or that dynasty's control of a religious foundation, it is likely little surprise that Ireland's hagiographical saints are called upon to provide a little generative push for a number of noble or royal couples. While any cure accomplished by a saint demonstrates the action of sanctity in the society of the *Lives*, it is when Irish holy men and women facilitate the production of a new generation for prominent families, whether the new generation is destined for secular or ecclesiastical greatness, that healing acts can become political

<sup>88</sup> John 9:1–4; see also comments above, pp. 186–7, 191–2, 197–8, 199–200.

<sup>89</sup> Matt. 8:14–15 (Mark 1:30–31), Luke 4:38–9, 40 and Acts 5:15, for instance.

<sup>90</sup> *Commentarium in Lucam* 7:22, pp. 60–61.

activism. The similarity between these birth narratives of prominent Irish men and women and the portrayals of certain saints' origins as discussed in Chapter Two is also provocative.<sup>91</sup>

In the earliest stratum of Ireland's hagiography, the saint's aid takes a rather intimate turn, when the objective is not to make a barren womb fertile but to overcome the estrangement of the two parents. Adomnán's Columba of Iona unites his prayers to the fasting vigil of a wife who has lost her interest in her husband to such a degree that she wants to join a nunnery. The result of their petitions is the return of her attraction for her husband, and from then on she never refuses his advances.<sup>92</sup> In what appears to be the only other example of such a narrative, Brigit turns a similarly hate-filled wife into a woman passionate for her spouse by instructing the husband to sprinkle their entire home in his wife's absence—walls, floor, food, drink and bed—with water Brigit has blessed for the purpose.<sup>93</sup> These hagiographical reversals of alienated affections do not specifically claim to result in the production of heirs, but they certainly do create the ideal conditions for conception.<sup>94</sup>

More common are cases in which the Irish saint seemingly stands in for the biblical messengers, whether God or his angels, who bring the promise of a child to figures like Abraham, Zechariah, Joseph and Mary.<sup>95</sup> Áed mac Bricc, for instance,

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<sup>91</sup> See pp. 58–9, 65–8 above; special attention, particularly with respect to the episodes in Mochúa's *betha*, discussed below, should be paid to the parallels with heroic narrative, pp. 67–8.

<sup>92</sup> *Vita S Columbae* 2.41, pp. 164, 166.

<sup>93</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 6.41, col. 0123D; ch. 43, Connolly, 24–5. The tale is retained in *Bethu Brigitte* 45, pp. 16, 32, where it is the woman herself who gets aspersed rather than her house. In *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1478–87, pp. 44, 192, it is again the house that receives the treatment, and the wife's resulting passion for her husband is so intense she claims she will go into the sea unless he comes to her bed.

<sup>94</sup> Both of these texts date to the era surrounding or shortly following the turn of the eighth century. See pp. 34–5, chapter one, and appendix below. To my knowledge the motif of reversed estrangement does not appear in any later *Life*.

<sup>95</sup> Gen. 17:19, 18:14; Matt. 1:20, Luke 1:7–13, 24, 30, 36.



blesses the queen of Tara, the wife of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, and pronounces the impending conception of an illustrious son. Shortly thereafter, the queen births a lamb, “as if to consecrate (her) sterile womb” (*quasi ad consecrandum uterum sterilis*), followed by the delivery of a silver fish she donates to the poor and to the church, then finally her son, Áed Slane, is born, “who was given by God through the prayers of Saint Áed” (*qui per orationes sancti Aidi a Deo donatus est*).<sup>96</sup> In essence, this royal mother’s womb produces two symbols of the Messiah before birthing her son, a future king whose identity then becomes inextricably linked with both Christian saint and Christ himself.<sup>97</sup> Most episodes of saint-facilitated conception, however, are considerably less complex, may result in descendants who are either prominent laity or eminent religious, and tend to appear in later texts.<sup>98</sup>

Molaisse of Devenish, for example, blesses water he then gives to a sterile woman, after which draught she conceives and bears a son, Finnchad, who becomes a noted ecclesiastic.<sup>99</sup> Tigernach blesses the wife of king Áed mac Cormaic, signing a cross over her womb; she then delivers two sons, of whom one matures into the abbot Romanus, a sort of hagiographical sanctification of Romanus’ abbacy.<sup>100</sup> Patrick blesses an Uí Máine queen, and the two daughters who result later take the veil from Patrick himself.<sup>101</sup> Patrick also forms a child, Eochu Baillderg (Redspot), from a clot of gore,

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<sup>96</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 18, p. 173; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 14, *VSH* 1, 39.

<sup>97</sup> See Matt. 4:18–25, John 1: 29–36 and John 21: 1–8 for Christ as the Lamb of God and for preaching and gaining converts as fishing among men. See also chapter two, p. 66, note 63.

<sup>98</sup> It will be remembered that the Salamanca *vita* of Áed mac Brice is among Sharpe’s Φ texts of the O’Donohue group and therefore has a layer that likely dates to the 700s. See pp. 36–8 above, chapter one.

<sup>99</sup> *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaissi* (Oxford) 19, *VSH* 1, 135.

<sup>100</sup> *Vita S Tigernachi* (Oxford) 15, *VSH* 2, 267.

<sup>101</sup> *Bethu Phátraic* II 2034–40, Mulchrone, 107; Stokes, 174–5.

alleviating the miscarriages endured by Eochu's mother.<sup>102</sup> Finnian's benediction is for the womb of the queen of Leinster, whose son, once grown, fathers the eminent Leinster ruler Brandub mac Echach.<sup>103</sup>

Mochúa, like Patrick, participates in two hagiographically-aided conceptions, but the eventual societal roles of the consequent children are not specified; both instances, moreover, have parallels to Irish saga. When still a child Mochúa's tears, captured and swallowed by a barren woman, cause her to immediately conceive, an occurrence reminiscent of the narratives in which offspring result from the mothers consuming a particular drink.<sup>104</sup> As an adult, Mochúa blesses two sprigs of watercress; the sterile woman who consumes them at once conceives fraternal twins, a son and a daughter, echoing the conceptions of both heroes and saints through eating or drinking.<sup>105</sup> Although most of these episodes leave ambiguous the degree to which conception occurs as a result solely of the Irish holy man's benediction, Mochúa's *betha* more closely approaches an explicit saintly production of children entirely without the participation of an earthly father, as seen in Patrick's creation, like a little Irish Adam, of Eochu Baillderg.<sup>106</sup>

Irish holy women also put themselves forward by affecting the next generation of particular families. Brigit's *Vita I* includes a moment of political activism when the saint initially refuses the request of Tara king Conall mac Néill's daughter-in-law for aid producing an heir. Though Brigit eventually relents, her prophecy is not entirely favorable, and she rather acidly predicts a son who will be an accursed and bloodthirsty

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<sup>102</sup> *Bethu Phátraic* ll 2417–21, Mulchrone, 23; Stokes, 206–7. The comparison here to the act of creation in Genesis is startling.

<sup>103</sup> *Betha Fhindein* (Lismore) ll 2578–9, pp. 77, 224.

<sup>104</sup> *Betha Mochua* (Lismore) ll 4649–53, pp. 138, 282. See chapter two, pp. 65–8.

<sup>105</sup> *Betha Mochua* (Lismore) ll 4787–9, pp. 142, 286. See chapter two, pp. 65–8.

<sup>106</sup> Stith Thompson's index notes that while conception from eating a plant also occurs in French and Jewish folklore, it is apparently only in Ireland that the particular plant consumed is watercress. *Motif-index* T511.2.

ruler in what is likely a hagiographical echo of the contention between the Uí Néill and Brigit's patrons, the powerful Leinster Uí Dúnlainge.<sup>107</sup> Íta's promise to her barren sister Ness, by contrast, results in the eventual birth of the illustrious Munster saint Mochoemóg, as detailed both in Chapter Two and in the discussion below on resurrection by recapitulation.<sup>108</sup> Samthann, too, blesses the empty womb of a ruler's wife, then prophesies the child's male gender, name and eventual eminence.<sup>109</sup>

These depictions of Irish saints not only aiding but also, in certain instances, having direct involvement in the conception and birth of needed heirs who then become powerhouses in Irish society present some of the more overtly political acts of hagiographical holiness. The choice to help the next generation of a specific dynasty such as the Uí Máine or the Uí Néill expresses a sort of sanctification of the expected infants, a sanctification that explains, for example, Brigit's reluctance to have a hand in bringing into the world an Uí Néill scion destined to aggravate the Leinster royal family upon whom Kildare depended.

These episodes, however, whether the relevant offspring attain religious or secular prominence, clearly imagine the motion of holiness outward from the saint and into the society of the *Lives*. The benediction of a barren womb and subsequent birth of long-sought children to families of status further appears to parallel Irish saint and

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<sup>107</sup> Ch. 10.60, col. 0126F; ch. 62, Connolly, 31. This same contest is also reflected in other examples of tension between the *vitae* of Áed mac Bricc and of Brigit, one of which is mentioned in chapter two, pp. 80–81. I hope to perform a more in-depth consideration of this rivalry in forthcoming work. Brigit explains her initial refusal to aid by saying that “the sons of kings are serpents, and sons of blood, and sons of death, with the exception of the few chosen by God” (*filií vero regum serpentes sunt, et filii sanguinum, filiique mortis, exceptis paucis electis a Deo*). It is possible that the writer of the *Vita I* is here alluding to the text of Matt. 23:33–5, in which Jesus calls the Pharisees who challenge him serpents (*serpentes*) upon whom falls “all the just blood that has been shed upon the earth from the blood of Abel the just up to the blood of Zacharias the son of Barachias, whom you slew between the temple and the altar” (*omnis sanguis iustus qui effusus est super terram a sanguine Abel iusti usque ad sanguinem Zacchariae filii Barachiae quem occidistis inter templum et altare*).

<sup>108</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 121–2. See p. 64 in Chapter Two and pp. 246–7 below.

<sup>109</sup> *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 21, *VSH* 2, 259.

angelic messenger as the deliverer of the good news of impending nativity.<sup>110</sup> Placing Ireland's holy men and women on a par with God's heavenly agents demonstrates beyond any doubt that those hagiographical saints who facilitate the fruitfulness of sterile women are not only curing a condition that diminishes the ranks of the community of Christ, but also are conduits for a power bestowed by God, firmly rooting Irish holiness in the divine.

*A dearth of demons? Exorcism and insanity in the Lives*

Clare Stancliffe, in an article from 1992, has observed a dearth of episodes involving demons in the earliest *vitae* of Ireland, and a lack of exorcisms in the hagiographical record until the *Vita I S Brigitae*. She concludes that the Irish generally do not show signs of having perceived demons as a commonplace of life in the 600s.<sup>111</sup> This pattern, however, holds well beyond the seventh-century texts; as a dramatic form of healing, exorcism certainly has its place in Ireland's hagiography, but in fact aside from Brigit less than a dozen other saints, all of whom are male, are associated with the expulsion of demons from human hosts. Three of these instances appear in *vitae* of the Φ group, and therefore likely possess roots extending into the 700s. Such a chronology suggests that while the demonic was perceived by some earlier Irish hagiographers to have a presence in daily life, the view was not very common overall. Though exorcisms do appear somewhat more frequently in later *vitae*, moreover, they remain notably scarce in the *bethada* throughout the history of Ireland's hagiography.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> See p. 70, note 74, chapter two.

<sup>111</sup> "Miracle stories," 106–10.

<sup>112</sup> The Φ *vitae* to include exorcisms are *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 49, p. 142, *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 23, p. 167, and *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 27, p. 218. These

Lugaid's prayers, for example, expel three demons from a queen whose possession so disturbs her mind that she must be bound in chains.<sup>113</sup> Colmán Élo casts out a demon whose occupation causes his host to fall frequently into either fire or water.<sup>114</sup> Fintán of Dún Blésci drives a demon from a student compelled by the evil creature to shred and eat his clothing. Inserting three fingers into the student's mouth, Fintán causes the diabolical entity to flee his touch and become permanently trapped in a nearby cliff.<sup>115</sup> This narrative is reminiscent of a gospel story in which Christ drives demons out of two men and into a herd of pigs; the animals then run mad and plummet off an escarpment much like the cliff of Fintán's *vita*.<sup>116</sup> Using a formula learned from the disciples, Mochutu commands "unclean spirits" (*immundi spiritus*) to leave their host

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episodes are retained in the later versions of the *vitae*: *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 23, p. 386, *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 41, VSH 2, 220. *Vita S Ruadani* (Dublin) 29, VSH 2, 251–2. *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Dublin) 20, VSH 1, 266. Other instances of exorcism after the seventh-century *vitae* are: *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Dún Blésci* (Salamanca) 12, p. 116, *Vita S Cronani* (Salamanca) 9, p. 276 and (Dublin) 10, VSH 2, 24–5, *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochuda* (Salamanca) 6, 9, pp. 336–7 and *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 22, 26, VSH 1, 178–9, *Vita S MacCarthyini* (Salamanca) 7, p. 346, *Vita S Baithini abbatis Hiensis* (Salamanca) 8, 9, p. 381, *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 21, VSH 2, 175, *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 16, VSH 2, 82 and *Betha Féchín* 18, pp. 330–331, and *Betha Mochua* ll 4855–6, pp. 144, 288. This dearth of exorcisms in the *Lives* is somewhat surprising since not only does Jesus himself expel evil spirits from a number of the unfortunately possessed (see note 124 below), but there are also extant several texts concerning exorcism that date from the earliest era of Irish ecclesiastical writing. In the seventh-century *Antiphonary of Bangor*, for example, there is a collect specifically intended for the ejection of demons, *Collectio super hominem qui habet diabolum*, ed. F. E. Warren, *The Antiphonary of Bangor* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1895), 28–9 (no. 96). Similar in many ways are the *loricae*, hymns or prayers in which the powers of heaven are invoked to protect the believer from all manner of dangers, including demons. As Jane Stevenson, "Bangor and the *Hisperica famina*," *Peritia* 6–7 (1987–8): 207 has expressed it, "the concept of a *lorica* could be described as a self-directed exorcism." See for example the particularly lengthy verses of the *Lorica of Laidcenn*, formerly the *Lorica of Gildas*, also of the 600s, ed. Michael Herren, *Hisperica Famina II: related poems* (Toronto: PIMS, 1987), 76–93. Editions have also been published by David Howlett, "Five experiments in textual reconstruction and analysis," *Peritia* 9 (1995): 1–50; and by J. H. Bernard and R. Aitkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum volume I: text and translation* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 206–10. Regarding the date and identity of the author of the *lorica*, see Michael Herren, "Authorship, date and provenance of the so-called *Lorica Gildae*," *Ériu* 24 (1975): 35–51. Both Stevenson, "Bangor and *Hisperica famina*," 212 and Patrick Sims-Williams, "Thought, word and deed, an Irish triad," *Ériu* 29 (1978): 78–111 further note that the exorcism formula in the *Antiphonary* closely compares to the *Lorica of Laidcenn*.

<sup>113</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 49, p. 142; *Vita altera seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 23, p. 386; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 41, VSH 2, 220.

<sup>114</sup> *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 27, p. 218; (Dublin) 20, VSH 1, 266.

<sup>115</sup> *Vita S Fintani abbatis de Dún Blésci* (Salamanca) 12, p. 116.

<sup>116</sup> Matt. 8:28–32 (Mark 5:13, Luke 8:30–35).

in the name of Christ or the Trinity, punctuating the order with the sign of the cross.<sup>117</sup>

Saints Baithéne and Féchín both eject demons from monks using prayer and, for

Baithéne, the apostolic directive to depart in Jesus' name.<sup>118</sup>

Of Ireland's holy women, once again it is Brigit alone who is associated with freeing the possessed from an occupying evil force, but it is notable that she is not portrayed actually performing an exorcism as are her male colleagues. In one case, Brigit need only wash the feet of the afflicted, while in another the mere sight of Brigit coming at a distance toward the chained and suffering patient is sufficient to cause his possessing demon to flee. A healed and grateful man is left in its wake, pouring out his thanks to God and Brigit.<sup>119</sup>

Though it could be interpreted that Brigit is portrayed as unable to perform the Christological *miracula* of exorcism to the same degree as her male colleagues, much as it appears she cannot change water to wine but only to ale or to milk, it will be recalled that she certainly accomplishes many other Christlike *acta*, including the restoration of sight to the blind, the cleansing of lepers and the provision from just a few servings of sufficient food or drink for a multitude.<sup>120</sup> In early Ireland, women were commonly tasked with such domestic duties as dairying, provision of food and hospitality and the

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<sup>117</sup> *Vita S Carthachi seu Mochuda* (Salamanca) 6, 9, pp. 336–7; *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 22, 26, *VSH* 1, 178–9. In one instance Mochutu invokes Christ, and in the other, the Trinity. Most of the healings in the book of Acts occur through the combination of other ritual gestures (e.g. prayers, the laying on of hands) and a command issued in Jesus' name. With respect to exorcism, see Acts 16:18 where Paul expels an evil spirit by ordering it to depart the body of the woman it inhabits.

<sup>118</sup> *Vita S Baithini* (Salamanca) 8, p. 381; in ch. 9, p. 381, Baithéne also exorcizes a layman. See also *Vita S Fechini* (Oxford) 16, *VSH* 2, 82 and *Betha Féchín* 18, pp. 330–331.

<sup>119</sup> *Vita I S Brigidae* 4.32, 5.39, cols 0122B–C, 0123B–C; ch.36.2–3, 41.3–7, Connolly, 22, 24. Also *Bethu Brigitte* 36, 43, pp. 13, 16, 30, 32.

<sup>120</sup> See pp. 188, 190 above for healing the blind; for cleansing lepers, see pp. 193–4 and for the multiplication of food see p. 194, note 33. Also see above p. 194 for the creation of healing draughts of ale or milk.

brewing of ale.<sup>121</sup> It seems, therefore, that Brigit follows her Lord's example within the limits of the socially accepted role for an Irish woman. It is not that she cannot execute these miracles, it is rather that she simply does not need to do so. In the realm of exorcism, Brigit's sanctity is so potent that one demon needs but her touch in a footbath, while another is so terrified that it simply absconds the moment it lays eyes on her. Once again Brigit's status with respect to all other Irish saints is highlighted; not only is Brigit alone among the ladies in driving away demons, but she also does not require the prayers, commands and other rituals of her male counterparts to do it.

An additional class of mental disturbance is worth mention here. In Moling's *vita*, the son of a particular king is stricken with so violent an insanity that he, like the unfortunate possessed persons just mentioned, must be kept chained. The youth is brought to Moling for healing, and the saint has him put into Moling's own used bathwater, whereupon the boy dies and is carried to Moling's own bed. There, in a vivid allusion to the power of baptism to remove even serious sickness, the youth is resurrected in pristine health once Moling makes the sign of the cross over him.<sup>122</sup> There is no mention here of demonic influence, however, despite the obvious similarities in narrative. Brigit, too, is said to restore lucidity to a lunatic, in her case by bathing his feet.<sup>123</sup> It

<sup>121</sup> See Ó Corráin, "Women in Irish society," and Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 87.

<sup>122</sup> *Vita S Dairchelli seu Moling* (Salamanca) 8, p. 355; *Vita S Moling* (Dublin) 26, *VSH* 2, 202.

<sup>123</sup> *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1435–41, pp. 43, 190–191. This particular lunatic is the same patient afflicted in earlier versions of the tale with actual demonic possession, though in Lismore there's no mention of the diabolic. See *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.32, cols 0122B–C; ch. 36.2–3, Connolly, 22 and *Bethu Brigte* 36, pp. 13, 30. For all that I resist categorizing other instances of Brigidine *miracula* with similarities to the *acta* of male saints as being lesser versions of those deeds of men, in this case I would concede the point. Moling's act of healing is an obvious allusion to the sacrament of baptism, including the resulting death to an old life and birth to a new one in Christ. Baptism is a sacrament that women most definitely could not perform, not even the eminent Brigit, making her curative footbath a fitting alternative method of applying a similar form of cleansing to her patient. It was after all for the purposes of baptizing those who needed it that Patrick is said to have decreed that Brigit's charioteer must always be a priest, in *Vita I S Brigitae* 5.38, col. 0123A; ch. 40, Connolly, 23–4. Washing of the feet, moreover, is an act of *imitatio Christi*; see John 13:3–9.

seems that some Irish hagiographers recognized that madness was not always a consequence of possession, and treated it instead as a terrible illness to be cured with sanctified waters.

Whether healing insanity or evicting the demonic, however, the parallels to hagiographical treatment of severe mental disturbance are of eminent and honorable lineage. Indeed, the saint whose deed or presence drives away such evil elements walks in the footsteps of Christ and the apostles. Jesus expels no fewer than seven devils, doing so often with little more than a touch or a command to depart.<sup>124</sup> Jesus' instructions to the disciples include the injunction to cast out demons, the power of which is also imparted through the act of apostolic dispensation and upon which the apostles seize.<sup>125</sup> The possessed, for instance, are among those restored by Paul's shadow, a possible echo of which is perceptible in the flight of the demons from the touch or sight of the Irish holy.<sup>126</sup>

In his apocryphal *acta*, Andrew's prayers also banish a possessing demon from a servant boy, while seven cast-out devils in another episode take the form of seven slaving dogs, an apparent adaptation of the possessed swine in the canonical Gospels.<sup>127</sup> The holiness of the Irish saint whose act or existence exiles the powers of darkness from human souls thus continues a living tradition of holiness that descends from the apostles and stands within the aura of sanctity that is integral to the identity of Jesus. The heirs of a purity and power that can come from nowhere else but God,

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<sup>124</sup> Matt. 8:16 (Mark 1:33–4), Matt. 8:28–32 (Mark 5:13, Luke 8:30–35), Matt. 15:22–8 and 17:17, Mark 1:25–6 and 39, Luke 7:21–2.

<sup>125</sup> Matt. 10:8–10, Mark 3:15, Luke 9:1–7, 10:9. See also Acts 5:16, where the apostles are said to expel demons.

<sup>126</sup> Acts 5:15; see pp. 212 above.

<sup>127</sup> *ActsAnd* 5, Elliott, 246; *ActsAnd* (Greg) 6–7, Elliott, 274. See again Matt. 8:28–32 (Mark 5:13, Luke 8:30–35).



exorcizing Irish saints display a power capable of cleansing a mortal body not only of disease or disability but demonic influence, fully reuniting the cured with the community of the faithful.

### **Remedies for specific sins**

In a small selection of *Lives*, the healing deeds of the Irish holy do not cure a sickness in the more narrowly conceived sense—not a wound, an ailment such as cancer or leprosy, or a possession—but instead cleanse a manifestation of a particular kind of mortal sin. Of the seven possible candidates, the two that receive the most attention are lust and gluttony, with special emphasis placed upon lust. While males are those who seek cures for gluttony, it is universally females who fall prey to lust, either their own or, in one rare instance, that of another. For both issues it is the Irish hagiographical saint who must remove the sin and save both body and soul.

### *Lust*

Three male saints and two female saints find themselves dealing specifically with the disruption hagiographers saw arising from sexual desires gone untamed. This issue is exemplified in the earliest layer of *Lives*, those with roots in the eighth century or earlier, by a narrative in which a nun falls from her vow of virginity and becomes pregnant, leading to the revelation of her sin either due to a saint's perceptive skill or because her expanding waistline is undeniable. Compelled by the unavoidable truth, the pregnant nun confesses and performs penance, and then receives—sometimes at her request, more often spontaneously—the saint's benediction. As this blessing absolves her of her sin, it

erases all signs that the sin ever occurred, causing the fetus in her womb to vanish “as if it had (never) been” (*quasi non esset*).<sup>128</sup> In a later layer of perhaps the mid- to late 1200s, the pregnant nun does not herself lapse but is abducted and raped, the resulting child not an indication of her own sin but of that perpetrated against her.<sup>129</sup> Here the removal of the fetus by the saint’s blessing is not absolution, but the cleansing of the stain of shame from a blameless maiden.

In a still later stratum of around 1300, the nun still makes a conscious choice to break from her life of chastity, but there is no absolving diminution of the unborn child. In the Dublin *vita* of Áed mac Bricc, for instance, the nun who in the Φ *vita* of Salamanca receives a benediction that causes her fetus to disappear is instead assumed to carry her child to term. She still must confess her secret sin and perform penance, but there does not seem to be a link between her obtaining forgiveness and the existence of her child.<sup>130</sup> The same holds true for the Dublin accounts of Saint Íta’s handling of the clandestine affairs of nuns. In one episode there is no child, but Íta knows of the nun’s tryst and is able to draw a confession and penance from her by divulging to the nun intimate details of the tryst.<sup>131</sup> In a second episode, the nun who violates her vows is not in Munster with Íta but in Connacht, yet Íta’s prophetic spirit informs her of the transgression and the resulting conception and birth of a baby girl. Once the nun is confronted by Íta with her

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<sup>128</sup> *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 56, p. 197 (a Φ text). *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 15, p. 172 (a Φ text and source of the Latin citation). Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 2.12, cols 0136E–F; ch. 9, Connolly and Picard, 16. *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.100, cols 0133B–C; ch. 103, Connolly, 45. Notably the *Vita I* leaves ambiguous the status of the pregnant woman.

<sup>129</sup> *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 5, pp. 347–8; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 8, *VSH* 1, 220–221; *Betha Sein Chiaráin Saighre I* 7.12, *BNÉ* 1, 105; *BNÉ* 2, 101.

<sup>130</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Dublin) 11, *VSH* 1, 38.

<sup>131</sup> *Vita S Ite* 16, *VSH* 2, 121.

wrongdoing, she does penance. Her soul is returned to salvation and she afterward lives a life of blameless holiness.<sup>132</sup>

It seems that the outward demonstration of total absolution inherent in the benedictory disappearance of an unborn child was deemed problematic by later redactors of the *vitae* unless, as with the *Life* of Ciarán of Saigir, the woman in question is herself completely without sin. But whether the nuns of these episodes become pregnant or not, whether they receive forgiveness that is physical, spiritual or both, the end result is the same: the woman is restored to the full presence of God, her stain—or that inflicted upon her—is expunged, and both she and her nunnery are restored to integrity. This shift in status is explicit in the *vitae* of Brigit and Íta, where the nuns are said to be returned to health and repentance, to be “healed” (*sanata est*).<sup>133</sup> Not only do these episodes emphasize the prominent role occupied by penance in early Irish Christianity, but they also lay bare the totality of its power. Once absolution is obtained, both body and soul are cured and, returned to their prior state of purity, are reunified with the community of Christ and with God.

### *Gluttony*

In two intriguing instances the curative powers of Irish holiness act as remedies not for lust but for what looks to be a form of gluttony. For both narratives the plot is essentially the same: a layman of extraordinary strength whose physical prowess

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<sup>132</sup> *Vita S Ite* 17, *VSH* 2, 121.

<sup>133</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 2.12, cols 0136E–F; ch. 9, Connolly and Picard, 16. *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.100, cols 0133B–C; ch. 103, Connolly 45. *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 16, 17, *VSH* 2, 121. It is unclear whether there is an implied physical return to an intact virginity or just the curing of the taint on the nun’s soul.

demands the daily food intake of many men is healed of these overwhelming dietary demands without any impact on his superhuman abilities. The motif first appears in the earliest surviving *vita* of Ireland's hagiography, the *Vita S Brigitae* of Cogitosus, and then does not seem to be found again until a later medieval *betha* of Féchín of Fore. In the case of Brigit, the gentleman in question is one Lugaid, whose strength and dietary needs are those of twelve men and who is healed of the latter without diminution of the former through Brigit's prayer and benediction.<sup>134</sup> Féchín's patient, for his part, is one Áedán, whose power and appetite are only those of seven ordinary men and who not only is freed of his gluttonous needs through Féchín's prayers but also receives grace and wisdom, again with no reduction in his physical capabilities.<sup>135</sup>

These curious tales—the later vernacular episode apparently drawing from the earlier Latin version—find their strongest correspondences in the world of Irish heroic saga and, it seems, mythology. In the epic of the *Cath Maige Tuired* is found the divine Lug, who leads the Túatha Dé Danann in their preparations for combat and, as indicated by the epithet *Samildánach*, “skilled in many arts,” is the master of every craft from builder to smith, champion to harper, poet to sorcerer, physician to cupbearer.<sup>136</sup> The same narrative also shows some of the heroic superlatives concerning prowess that are additionally known from the earlier *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, particularly concerning the warrior champion as possessing the abilities of seven ordinary men or growing at seven

<sup>134</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 5.26, cols 0138E–F; ch. 23, Connolly and Picard, 20–21. The tale also appears in *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.102, col. 0133D; ch. 108, Connolly, 45.

<sup>135</sup> *Betha Féchín* 24, pp. 334–5. The *betha* is dated by colophon to a redaction of 1329; see pp. 338–9 of the edition.

<sup>136</sup> *Cath Maige Tuired* 55–67, pp. 38–41. Also note the commentary on page 126 indicating that *Lugaid* tends to be the later form of *Lug(h)*. For the homonyms of Lug found in some saints' names—rather than, as here, in a non-sanctified character found in the *Life* of another person—see Ó Riain, “Traces of Lug.” Ó Riain stops short of asserting that saints whose names preserve linguistic elements of the god Lug's name must descend from this pagan figure, but he does argue that the evidence is at least suggestive.

times the normal maturation rate, as discussed in the birth tales of Chapter Two.<sup>137</sup> Lug, for example, can heave up and fling a flagstone that requires eighty oxen to move it.<sup>138</sup> The astounding appetites of both Lugaid and Áedán, moreover, strongly resemble the gustatory capacity of the Dagda, the “good God”, who consumes a porridge consisting of eighty gallons of milk, eighty gallons of porridge meal and fat, and the carcasses of goats, sheep and pigs.<sup>139</sup> Although Áedán does not seem to have an identity aside from this hagiographical reference, his name, “Little Fire”, and his attributes suggest similar origins to those of Lugaid.

Indeed, the healing of Lugaid’s and Áedán’s gluttonous eating habits appears to be a sort of hagiographical euhemerization of men with divine or semi-divine attributes. By eliminating that part of their character most objectionable within a Christian context while retaining that which is of use, hagiographers give every impression of claiming for themselves control over significant pagan personages, a trend Joseph Falaky Nagy has observed outside the hagiographical genre as well. In his analysis of early Irish narrative, Nagy demonstrates the many ways in which Patrick is depicted putting his Christian stamp on the heroic pagan past and its divine or semi-divine protagonists. These “ancients”, as Nagy terms them, become informants to saints who summon them from the ground to be interrogated. These dialogues add a touch of heroic legitimacy to their sanctified interlocutors while simultaneously providing indisputable evidence concerning

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<sup>137</sup> See pp. 91–3.

<sup>138</sup> *Cath Maige Tuired* 72, pp. 40–41. See also the commentaries of scholars from Plummer, *VSH* 1, xxviii to McCone, *Pagan past*, 164–6 regarding the likelihood of a pagan divinity whose attributes may have influenced the profile of Saint Áed mac Bricc; if such a divinity existed he may again be reflected in the character of Áedán depicted in Féchín’s *betha*.

<sup>139</sup> *Cath Maige Tuired* 89–92, pp. 46–7.

long ago epochs.<sup>140</sup> In essence, Nagy argues, the saint mediates between the pagan and Christian traditions.<sup>141</sup>

Such an interpretation of these narratives would also explain their rarity, since early Irish Christians would hardly want to spend much time acknowledging the existence or attributes of pagan deities or demi-gods. Instead, where those attributes offer something Irish hagiographers like Cogitosus or the anonymous compiler of the *Betha Féchín* could manipulate to their own ends, it was convenient to use them, to make manifest the authority of Christianity over the identity and prowess of former divinities by textually taming them. As a consequence of such treatment, the problematic traits of such characters are erased and God rather than the pagan otherworld is made the source of their skill. Even further, the euhemerized personages are then engaged in the employ of the saint, who thus stands, as Nagy has expressed it, on the threshold between the narrative worlds of pre-Christian and Christian Ireland. It would be difficult to find a more explicit statement of the superiority over Ireland's pagan past than that which seemingly was claimed by the early Irish church merely through the hagiographical demonstration of a saint's ability to cure gluttony.

### **Salvific metamorphosis**

In the *Lives* of Ireland's holy men and women, healing does not always involve the mending of a broken body or mind, the expulsion of demons or the application of

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<sup>140</sup> *Conversing with angels and ancients*; see p. 327 for citation.

<sup>141</sup> "Close encounters of the traditional kind," 139–49.

remedies for sin or its consequences. For many Irish saints, curative deeds are preemptive acts intended to prevent harm to the community of Christ. Prime among the depictions of this preemptive healing are episodes of a kind of transformation here termed ‘salvific metamorphosis.’

### *A whole new look*

In a very small number of *Lives*, transformative healing manifests as a change in a believer’s degree of attractiveness. Among male saints, this change turns laymen from homely to handsome. Eógan mac Néill, a man of physiognomic ugliness and unfortunately short stature, gains the comely features of a youth in Patrick’s retinue after both receiving Patrick’s blessing and spending a night sleeping in the same bed with the youth, under one cover, the two males with their arms wrapped around each other. Not only does Eógan find himself to be a carbon copy of the youth the next morning, but merely by expressing the desire to Patrick to be taller is also able to grow on the spot to his preferred height.<sup>142</sup> Wearing Saint Berach’s cowl and sleeping with his head in Berach’s lap for an hour combines with the saint’s prayers to change Áed Dub (Áed the Dark) to Áed Finn (Áed the Fair). The ruler, once deformed, ugly and of blackened complexion wakes to find he is tall, straight, handsome and blond.<sup>143</sup> Féchín, for his part, turns a contorted man into an upright and attractive individual by mixing the saliva spat

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<sup>142</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 71, Bieler, 104; Byrne and Francis, 56 (where Eógan is called Eugenius) and *Bethu Phátraic* II 1755–72, Mulchrone, 92–9; Stokes 150–153.

<sup>143</sup> *Vita S Berachi* (Oxford) 19, *VSH* 1, 82–3; also *Betha Beraigh* 23.65, *BNÉ* 1, 36–7 and *BNÉ* 2, 35–6. Plummer mistakenly indexes the vernacular chapter as not possessing a parallel in Oxford.

upon the ground during his preaching with the soil's clay and, Christlike, rubbing the paste on the man's face.<sup>144</sup>

Quite the opposite effect results from the physiognomic transformative miracles of female saints. Monenna in particular prays, then breathes on the hair of her young, beautiful nun, Orbile, turning Orbile's hair entirely white to protect her from the lust of young men at her new abbatial post. When Orbile still expresses concern because her body remains lithesome, Monenna puts her belt (*zona*) around the nun's waist and blesses her, and Orbile immediately gains the appearance of an old woman.<sup>145</sup> Here salvific metamorphosis explicitly focuses on the preservation of Orbile's safety and virginity, making it possible for her to remain as abbess at one of Monenna's foundations. Orbile's transformation makes her sexuality invisible, whereas the makeovers given laymen render their sexuality even more apparent. How is the latter transfiguration to be understood?

There appear to be two likely explanations for a saint's involvement in the beautification of lay males. In the first case, unattractive men cannot find mates and will not produce heirs, a critical component of any prominent family's function as witnessed

<sup>144</sup> *Betha Féchín* 16, pp. 328–9. It will be recalled that Jesus heals a blind man in this fashion, John 9:1–4.

<sup>145</sup> Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 1.7, Esposito, 210–211; USMLS, 258–61. As a consequence of this transformation, Orbile's name is changed to *Servile*. While the latter has ready translation from Latin as “of base status, servant,” I was unable to find either a Latin or Irish translation for Orbile. Perhaps it is *ór + bile*, “golden tree”? If so, might Servile then be *seir + bile*, “slender tree”? The Latin meaning for *servile* certainly makes good sense here, but some element of word play seems to be lost in translation. Ann Dooley has suggested to me that Orbile's name may have at its root *orba*, “patrimony, landed inheritance, real estate,” indicating Orbile's status as a wealthy person of some significance. Her metamorphosis to Servile, would then indicate an alteration from secular wealth to monastic servitude. Notably *DIL* also has an entry for a verb, *orbaid*, the meaning of which is hazarded to be “longs”, and in the passive, *orbsadar*, “coveted.” This definition, too, presents tantalizing possibilities, as it is Orbile's great concern over becoming the object of male desire that leads to her transformation into a woman of elderly appearance. See, moreover, the issue of female saints—including Monenna—preventing the temptation of men by veiling themselves, chapter two, p. 97, note 165.



by, among other things, the involvement in dynastic succession Irish saints show elsewhere, as discussed previously.<sup>146</sup> In fact, two additional transformative episodes in the *Lives* directly emphasize the hagiographical role in ensuring the presence of an heir. In one, Comgall's blessing transfigures an infant with a dark face to a baby who is "most beautiful" (*pulcerrimus*), reuniting mother and son with the husband and father who had previously denied paternity on the mistaken accusation of adultery due to the child's appearance.<sup>147</sup> In the second episode, Abbán turns a baby girl into a baby boy through the medium of the baptismal rite, providing thereby a successor for a father too old to produce another child.<sup>148</sup> Here the homely-turned-handsome healing would therefore stand as a means by which Irish holy men could guarantee to their followers the production of desired progeny.

The second possible explanation for these miraculous makeovers of male laity may stem from the Old Testament models of priestly fitness, which were assumed into the early Irish laws regarding an individual's fitness for sovereignty. According to the laws of Leviticus, priests who are physically blemished cannot offer sacrifice to God; the Levitical definition of 'blemish' includes a crooked back, a deformity from which two of the four lay males are cured.<sup>149</sup> Further, early Irish law, as Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Aidan Breen have convincingly demonstrated, was built upon a Mosaic

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<sup>146</sup> See pp. 205–10 above.

<sup>147</sup> *Vita S Comgalli* (Dublin) 49, *VSH* 2, 18.

<sup>148</sup> *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 20, p. 266; (Dublin) 25, *VSH* 1, 19–20. Notably the father laughs when told by Abbán that he will have a son, suggesting a resemblance to both Sarah and Abraham—the former because it is Sarah who laughs when told she will bear a child in her old age—and to their son Isaac, whose name means "he laughed" in Hebrew. See Gen. 18:10–15.

<sup>149</sup> Lev. 21: 18–21; see also pp. 202–3 above.

foundation that placed special emphasis on the formulation of Ireland's noble ranks as a Levitical class.<sup>150</sup>

Although that study does not specifically address the question of a leader's physiological fitness for rule, a correlation between Levitical priest and Irish king—the latter already paralleled with the Irish bishop in Ireland's secular laws—may pertain.<sup>151</sup> If so, it would hold that in the miraculous production of physical beauty from twisted deformity, these few Irish holy men are depicted demonstrating a parallel between the expected condition of Levites and the nobility of Ireland. In other words, these episodes of healing by beautification may express the concept that Ireland's kings, like Levitical priests, were expected to possess flawless bodies. By perfecting the imperfect, saints would thus render a man fit for rule who, as a consequence of salvific metamorphosis, would also then possess a divinely endowed sovereignty. Hagiographical makeovers may therefore act as saintly sanctifications of the political power gained by those who receive their transformative gifts, their appearances, their dynasties and the Christian congregation they create all healed in one stroke.

### *Conflict avoidance*

One of the more significant ways in which Irish holiness is depicted moving through and influencing the society that defines and recognizes it is in the extraordinarily

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<sup>150</sup> "The laws of the Irish," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 382–438. Also see the continuation of the study in Ó Corráin, "Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament," in *Bibelstudien und Mission*, ed. Ní Chatháin und Richter, 284–307.

<sup>151</sup> See for instance *Bretha Nemed Toísech* 20, pp. 16–17, in which the ranks of the church are explicitly equated with those of the secular nobility, with kings and bishops both occupying the highest ranks and therefore due the same honor price.

frequent episodes that address the resolution or avoidance of conflict. Though it is a common motif, only a small cross-section of these narratives relates to salvific metamorphosis. One intriguing and apparently unique instance of hagiographical transformation is found in the *Vita I* of Brigit of Kildare. Here the two Uí Néill dynasts, Coirpre and Conall, are feuding over control of the Tara kingship, and each in turn passes by Brigit begging for aid lest his brother slay him. Brigit's blessing alters the brothers' appearance so that neither can recognize the other, and they embrace each other instead of fighting to the death. Brigit's benediction thus obviates the conflict between Coirpre and Conall, at least temporarily, and does so in a fashion that demonstrates Brigit's own immediate neutrality in the matter.<sup>152</sup>

In contrast to Brigit's act of physiognomic obfuscation may be taken non-transformative cases of conflict disruption as undertaken by male saints. "By the merit of Patrick and the mercy of God" (*merito Patricii ... et misericordia Dei*), for instance, an inlet floods between two factions about to contend over the possession of Patrick's body, forcing peace until after the saint's burial. When even that miracle proves insufficient to keep the situation settled, an illusory cart bearing an equally ephemeral image of the shrouded saint draws the two factions away from Patrick's tomb, compelling amity

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<sup>152</sup> Ch. 10.62, cols 0127A–B; ch. 64, Connolly, 31–2. The term used to define the effect of Brigit's blessing is *excaecauit*, "blinded", but at the same time it is also apparent that the blindness is metaphoric, not actual; the brothers see each other, but each is unable to recognize (*agnovere*) his adversary. There is a second case of unrecognized identity in the Salamanca *vita* of Tigernach, but the miraculous act is neither impartial—it aids King Áed mac Cormaic against his foes—nor does it involve an in-person intervention by the saint. Instead the ruler, surrounded by enemies overrunning his fortress, invokes Saint Tigernach's name to save himself and his wife. They then both escape, their would-be killers unable to recognize them. See *Vita S Tigernaci* 15, p. 267. The episode thus appears to weave threads of the Brigidine miracle with the gifts of invisibility bestowed by saints like Fintán of Taghmon or Coemgen, as discussed below, on p. 229, or with acts of salvific metamorphosis in which persons are changed into nonhuman forms to elude pursuit, as on pp. 231–3. Brigit, moreover, does not remain neutral in the Coirpre versus Conall conflict, as seen on pp. 208–9 above and 234–5 and 235, note 182 below.

between them.<sup>153</sup> In another instance Ciarán of Saigir's prayers prevent the kings of Tara and Munster from battling by causing a thick forest to spring forth along the banks of the river flowing between the two forces, a barrier then augmented by the raising of waves too wild to safely cross. The two terrified hosts immediately head for home, their dispute forgotten.<sup>154</sup> It is curious that while Brigit uses salvific metamorphosis on the persons involved, the male saints act on the environment surrounding the would-be combatants, maintaining a semblance of neutrality while still halting the impending violent proceedings.

Chapter Three's analysis of vengeance in the *Lives*, however, has shown that Irish holy men are not above choosing sides, nor are they chary of enforcing that choice, sometimes at the cost of limb or life.<sup>155</sup> It might be argued, moreover, that Brigit's own impartiality is only temporary, since she is scarcely shy about criticizing the fitness of Conall mac Néill or his lineage to hold rule, as seen in the discussion of her involvement in dynastic succession earlier in this chapter, or in the examination below of decapitation deferred.<sup>156</sup> Clearly, the ways in which most male saints avoid or disrupt conflict are generally different from those prosecuted by Brigit. While the majority of Ireland's holy men tend toward the more flashy punitive displays for unwarranted combat that are seen in the episodes of hagiographical retribution, Brigit—if one saint's *Life* can be taken as

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<sup>153</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S Patricii* 2.13, p. 120; *Vita IV S Patricii* 97, Bieler, 114 and Byrne and Francis, 64; *Bethu Phátraic* II 3012–20, Mulchrone, 150–151 and Stokes, 254–7. Similar post-mortem *miracula* are also found in: *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 68, pp. 144–5 and *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 52, *VSH* 2, 223–4; also *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 45, pp. 273–4 and (Dublin) 50–52, *VSH* 1, 31–2.

<sup>154</sup> *Vita S Ciarani episcopi Saigirensis* (Salamanca) 11, pp. 350–351; *Vita S Ciarani episcopi de Saigir* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 1, 225.

<sup>155</sup> See pp. 122–3, 180–181 above, chapter three.

<sup>156</sup> See pp. 208–9 above and 232–3, 235 note 182 below.

representative—prefers to use salvific metamorphosis to prevent the conflict from ever occurring.<sup>157</sup>

In other words, hagiographical claims of impartiality are not the important element of the instances of conflict avoidance addressed in this section. Instead it is the sidestepping of dispute that has the greatest significance. In essence, the compilers of these *vitae* are making statements not so much about the allegiances of their saintly subjects, but about the futility of combat in general. By depicting a holy figure like Brigit altering the appearance of two feuding brothers in the interest of preventing bloodshed, the message conveyed is less that either Brigit or her hagiographer maintained neutrality, but rather that Brigit averted a fight, thus bringing under scrutiny the violence of the secular world. As will be seen presently, however, this condemnation of war and mayhem is not always so muted.<sup>158</sup>

### *Liberating captives*

The freeing of captives, whether they are slaves, hostages or criminals condemned to death, occupies as prominent a place in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints as that held by the neutralization of bloodshed or dispute, whether the latter occurs by salvific metamorphosis, disruption of hosts or vengeance upon those whose conflict is under way. Many of the Irish holy are depicted liberating the imprisoned; among these, the

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<sup>157</sup> For examples of male saints whose vengeance is a reaction to or an attempt to end conflict, see chapter three, pp. 133, 173; also *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 19, *VSH* 2, 174.

<sup>158</sup> See for example pp. 230–238 below for the discussion of “death and decapitation deferred”, or pp. 241–8 for the analysis of cures that take the form of the reattachment of severed heads. I have to wonder at times, however, whether the commentary of Brigit's salvific metamorphosis is as much a condemnation of violence and feuding as it is a hagiographical statement that either option—Coirpre or Conall mac Néill—is equally unpalatable.

emancipatory acts of at least eight saints can be said to involve a type of salvific metamorphosis. The root of all such instances is the story of Peter's liberation in which, at the word of an angel, Peter's chains fall from his hands. He obeys the angel's command to follow, and the two pass unseen through the guards and crowds surrounding and filling the streets beyond the prison.<sup>159</sup>

Saints Áed mac Bricc, Eógan of Ardstraw and Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, for example, fill the role of the angel, coming to captives in person, telling them to accompany the departing saint and then guiding them invisibly past those who would jail them.<sup>160</sup> Moling, for his part, tells the prisoner he seeks to free that God will break his bonds that night. When the chains shatter, Moling says, the prisoner will evade recapture and death by immediately coming straight to the saint, an echo, it would seem, of the Petrine angel's command to "follow."<sup>161</sup> Neither Samthann nor Brigit are physically present for their emancipatory deeds, either. Samthann sends a prioress with the same message Moling delivers in person, while Brigit appears to her subject in a vision hours before his freedom is accomplished.<sup>162</sup>

The Petrine story is embellished somewhat in the *betha* of Columba of Iona. The prisoner in question, Scannlán, is freed when a flash of lightning forces those holding him to fall face down on the ground, followed by the emanation of a voice no one else

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<sup>159</sup> Acts 12:7–10.

<sup>160</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 38, p. 178; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 28, VSH 1, 42. *Vita S Eogani* (Salamanca) 10, p. 402. *Vita S Ciarani abbatis de Cluain mic Nois* (Dublin) 19, VSH 1, 206–7.

<sup>161</sup> *Vita S Moling* (Dublin) 20, VSH 2, 199.

<sup>162</sup> *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 12, VSH 2, 256; *Betha Bhrighdi* (Lismore) ll 1520–1526, pp. 45, 193. This latter tale modifies an earlier version found in *Vita I S Brigitae* 11.65, cols 0127E–F and ch. 66, Connolly, 33, which sees its discussion below under "death and decapitation deferred", pp. 230–237. It should additionally be noted that Samthann is associated with two other episodes of manumission, but while the Petrine loosing of chains and messages to flee directly to the saint still pertain, the narratives do not clearly represent the escapes as including any salvific metamorphosis. While the captives in question may evade recapture by being literally unseen, they may also have simply used more mundane means of stealth. See *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 7, 22, VSH 2, 255, 259.

understands from a bright cloud no one else sees, which voice commands Scannlán to rise, leave his chains, go outside and take an angel's hand. The angel naturally leads Scannlán to safety unperceived.<sup>163</sup> Even greater revision is apparent in the *vitae* of Fintán of Taghmon and Coemgen of Glendalough, where the biblical tale gains what appears to be an apocryphal admixture. Here the individuals saved are not yet fully captive but are only surrounded by foes intent upon their demise, and their escapes are accomplished through an invisibility conferred upon them by the donning of a former article of their patron saint's wardrobe—Fintán's tunic, Coemgen's belt—that allows them to pass undetected through enemy lines.<sup>164</sup> This miraculous power of a holy person's garment is also represented both in *PsMat*, in which Joseph's head cloth resurrects a dead man in Capernaum, and in the *Life of John, the beloved disciple*, where John's tunic similarly restores several deceased men.<sup>165</sup>

Despite the fact that Jesus himself declares that the deliverance of all captives is one of his avowed purposes on earth, the Gospels provide little detail of this *modus vivendi* in operation.<sup>166</sup> Ireland's medieval hagiographers, therefore, sought models for the saintly release of the imprisoned elsewhere, and found them chiefly in the deeds of those associated with Jesus, especially in both the canonical and apocryphal *acta* of the apostles.<sup>167</sup> In depictions of salvific metamorphosis, saints demonstrate a Christlike

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<sup>163</sup> *Betha Coluim Chille* appendix ch. 8, pp. 246, 268.

<sup>164</sup> *Vita prior S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 25, p. 205; *Vita altera S Fintani seu Munnu* (Salamanca) 21, pp. 252–3; *Vita S Munnu* (Dublin) 22, *VSH* 2, 234. *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 39, *VSH* 1, 253.

<sup>165</sup> *PsMat* (*pars altera*) 40, Elliott, 98; *Life of John* 5, Herbert and McNamara, 90. These passages see further mention below, p. 240. It seems to me that these venerated items of wardrobe likely descend from the healing power of Jesus robe in Mark 5:27–31 (Luke 8:48). There, however, Jesus still wears the robe at the moment of healing, while in the *Lives* the curative item is not in contact with the original owner at the time it restores health.

<sup>166</sup> Luke 4:18–19.

<sup>167</sup> There are uncommon cases where a saint's action in freeing a captive without salvific metamorphosis is evidently modeled upon Christ, as when Saints Áed mac Bricc and Colmán Élo walk across water dry-shod

concern for the disadvantaged, then put action to intent in scenes of emancipation that paint the Irish holy in the familiar likeness of Christ's first heir of apostolic dispensation, the disciple Peter, and perhaps somewhat more acutely but with less familiarity, in the image of the angel who facilitates Peter's freedom.

From *imitatio Christi* to *imitatio Petri et angeli*, the source of an Irish saint's sanctity is clearly shown to be God. The motion of that sanctity through hagiographical society, too, is made manifest, revealing the involvement of Irish holy men and women in causes of social justice favored by the gospel message of peace. The restoration of the captive to freedom thus heals the wound caused by his or her imprisonment, returning the body of the Christian faithful to its full complement by welcoming back to the fold those separated from it through the bonds of their servitude or confinement.

### *Death and decapitation deferred*

Salvific metamorphosis finds a particular type of expression in episodes that portray Ireland's hagiographical saints as intent upon protecting their followers from death and decapitation. These transformations take two forms. In the first, the endangered

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to compel a captive's release (*Vita S Aedi* (Salamanca) 31, p. 176; *Vita S Aidi* (Dublin) 23, *VSH* 1, 41. *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 9, p. 212; (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 1, 263. Jesus walks on water in Matt. 14:25 (Mark 6:48, John 6:19). There is also a rare moment apparently drawn from Old Testament precedent, seen in the case of the freedom Colmán Élo obtains for a chained man by causing the sun to stand still, echoing Isaiah's turning back the sun's passage to permit Hezekiah time to heal (*Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 32, p. 219; (Dublin) 24, *VSH* 1, 268. For biblical text see 4 Kgs 20:8–11; it is also notable that the sun is immobilized in the sky for a day while Joshua avenges the Israelites by slaughtering the inhabitants of Gabaon and Ajalon, Jos. 10:12–14). The apocryphal Christ is also emulated; Féchín of Fore liberates a prisoner by entering a fortress the locked doors of which simply open of their own accord—a motif seen as early as Adomnán's *vita* of Columba of Iona in episodes having nothing to do with the emancipation of the imprisoned—in a moment that is closely paralleled not only by the story of Peter's angel-facilitated liberation but also by the shattering of the gates of hell before Christ in the *Descensus Christi ad inferos* (*Betha Féchín* 24, pp. 334–5 and *DescInf* (Lat B) 8:1, Elliott, 203. In Adomnán's *vita* of Columba, one such entry is intended to force a king's conversion, while the other is merely a way for the monks of Terryglass to get into the church out of which they have accidentally locked themselves. *Vita S Columbae* 2.35–2.36, pp. 146, 148).



are altered in the eyes of their pursuers so that they appear to be other things, whether human, animal or inanimate. In the second, illusions provide an experience of the killing of targets and the taking of trophy heads, while no actual bloodshed occurs.

Transformations of those under threat of death and head loss have a long lineage in the *Lives* of Irish saints, though the episodes in which they appear are not numerous. The earliest and arguably most famous extant case is found in Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*, a case the metamorphic aspect of which appears to have strong parallels in saga, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three.<sup>168</sup> Here Patrick's blessing upon his nine monastic companions, one of whom is the boy Benignus, disguises them as eight deer and one fawn in the eyes of King Loegaire, the foe who is after their blood.<sup>169</sup> This Patrician act most directly echoes a moment in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in which the druidic harpers of Cáin Bíle transform themselves into deer to escape capture and death.<sup>170</sup>

Saint Coemgen's *vita* and the *betha* of Colmán mac Lúacháin both apparently draw from Patrician example in very similar plots, differing from Muirchú chiefly in featuring prominent laity in place of monks. Coemgen's benediction protects his beloved foster-son, now an adult chieftain (*dux*).<sup>171</sup> Colmán, on the other hand, in an odd move for a saint, is responsible through the invocation of his name for saving the lives of the king of Offaly, the queen of Tara with whom the king has an affair, a jester in the Offaly king's service and the queen's handmaid, all of whom are pursued by the queen's

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<sup>168</sup> See the importance of saga parallels in the episodes of metamorphosis relating to the genesis of Irish saints in chapter two, p. 67 and the significant place held by saga in punitive metamorphosis in episodes of vengeance, chapter three, pp. 151–3.

<sup>169</sup> Ch. 1.18:7–8, p. 90. The story is retained both in *Vita II S Patricii* 37, Bieler, 92; Byrne and Francis, 48 and *Bethu Phátraic* II 508–20, Mulchrone, 30–31; Stokes, 46–7.

<sup>170</sup> Lines 942–5, pp. 30, 151.

<sup>171</sup> *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 37, *VSH* 1, 252.

murderous husband. When the Tara king catches up to his quarry, he sees only two stags and two fawns.<sup>172</sup>

On another tack, Brendán preserves a *laicus* living under a bishop's rule as a penitent, having him stretch out in the shadow of a pillar stone while the rock takes on the penitent's appearance. His attackers mistake pillar for man and assault it viciously, hacking off what they think is their target's head, while the *laicus* escapes unharmed.<sup>173</sup> A follower of Coemgen eludes the murderous intent of a dozen assailants by casting himself down on Coemgen's doorstep while the saint prays within. His foes see only a log in front of the cottage door, and even sit on the prone man, until he is pointed out to them by the saint himself. The dozen then immediately become monks in Coemgen's community.<sup>174</sup> Similarly Mac Creiche's blessing saves a youth, Becedán, from death and decapitation, his enemies falling upon and hacking the head off what they assume is Becedán only to discover it is sedge grasses. They instantly submit to Mac Creiche.<sup>175</sup> In another instance, the invocation of Brigit's name bestows upon the retinue of Conall mac

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<sup>172</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* 86, pp. 86–9. Based upon the *betha*'s extensive references to locations and topography from the area of what is now Westmeath, it is possible that Colmán's foundation, Lann meic Lúacháin, was an ally or dependent of the royal family of neighboring Offaly. Colmán himself appears to be of the Uí Máine branch of the Uí Néill kindred, who held power in Connacht and, at varying times, in the midland area of Offaly. See the introduction to Meyer's edition and translation, vii–x.

<sup>173</sup> *Vita altera S Brendani* (Salamanca) 5, p. 326; *Vita I S Brendani* (Oxford) 6, *VSH* 1, 101. In the latter text Brendán's prayers are equated with those of Moses against the Amalechites, Exod. 17:9–12. The tale is also reported, with rather more detail than in the *vitae*, by *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) ll 3435–48, pp. 102–3, 250–251. Michael Herren has also drawn my attention to the seventh-century *Hisperica famina* ll 30–31, ed. and trans. Michael Herren, *The Hisperica famina: I. the A-text* (Toronto: PIMS, 1974), 66, in which a young man brags that his sword "hews sacred statues" (*almas trucidat statuas*). The parallel to Brendán's *Life* is notable.

<sup>174</sup> *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 13, *VSH* 1, 240–241. It is worth noting here that Samthann saves two former religious, a man and woman who fall prey to lust and conceive a child they give in fosterage to Samthann, by also giving them the appearance of wood. They are not, however, transformed in some fashion, but are only hidden from the *latrones* hunting them by hiding them in the cavity of a hollow tree. See *Vita S Samthanne* (Oxford) 18, *VSH* 2, 258. See also pp. 123, 136, 173–5 in chapter three and pp. 242–6 below for discussion of the critical role played by *latrones* in the *Lives*.

<sup>175</sup> *Betha Meic Creiche* 3.5–3.7, 4.8, *Miscellanea*, 14, 54.

Néill and their haul of severed heads the likeness of monks praying over their open books, convincing their pursuers that their quarry has escaped.<sup>176</sup>

While it seems clear that there are parallels to the transformation of those targeted for death and dismemberment—particularly where the obfuscatory appearance is that of animals—in the heroic saga of early Ireland, especially in the metamorphosis of druids into deer in the *Táin*, there is an additional correspondence that may have provided some inspiration.<sup>177</sup> In the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew*, the apostle is able to usher his Christian followers to safety by laying his hand on each and saying that Jesus will screen them from the eyes of their enemy, Aegeates. Though they pass right in front of Aegeates, he does not perceive them, just as individuals under an Irish saint's protection are likewise 'unseen' to those intent upon their deaths.<sup>178</sup>

Cases of miraculous makeovers into stone or, by extension, into wood have other apocryphal correlations. In the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, Andrew seats himself in the shadow of a pillar in a town square and observes the events around him, using prayer to prevent heinous deeds, and he remains altogether unnoticed, even when a thorough search is undertaken to find him, until he actually announces himself.<sup>179</sup> The correlation between Andrew's disappearance and that of the targeted individuals in the *Lives* of Brendán, Coemgen and Mac Creiche is intriguing.

The likely apocryphal parallels of these episodes are strengthened in another comparison with the lesser-known *Paraleipomena of Jeremiah*, in which the prophet

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<sup>176</sup> *Vita I S Brigittae* 10.64, cols 0127C–D; ch. 65.7–65.12, Connolly, 32. See p. 235 and note 182 below for additional consideration of this episode.

<sup>177</sup> See page 231, note 170 above for reference here. See also chapter two, p. 67 and chapter three, pp. 151–2 for additional saga parallels.

<sup>178</sup> *ActsAnd* 13, Elliott, 249.

<sup>179</sup> *ActsAndMatt* 22–5, ed. and trans. M. R. James, *The apocryphal New Testament* (1924; reprint, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), 456.

Jeremiah's prayers bestow his own likeness upon an upright stone, allowing him to fully relate the content of a vision to Baruch and Abimelech before the angry crowd stoning his simulacrum discovers that the pillar is not the prophet and turns on the proper target, killing him.<sup>180</sup> Of particular relevance to the Brendán episode, *ParJer* also suggests in a rather attenuated fashion the overlooked targets in the *Lives* of Coemgen and Mac Creiche, both of whom take on the aspect, or have their aspects assumed by, inanimate objects. If these correlations indicate the inspirations accessed by Ireland's hagiographers, the saints whose miracles of salvific metamorphosis mask the appearances of believers facing death and decapitation with those of animals, stones or plants are painted with the same brush as the apostle Andrew and possibly the prophet Jeremiah, linking these Irish holy men with a lengthy, illustrious and legitimizing scriptural heritage as heirs to the same authority and power as their predecessors.

The simulacrum of Jeremiah's stone pillar may also relate to the bloody illusions of the second type of transformative escape from death and decapitation in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints. Contrary to the Patrician example, in which likenesses are altered from human to otherwise, the use of hagiographical phantasms appears only in *vitae*, but seems to occur in texts of a similarly wide chronological spread. The earliest association of saint and simulacrum is found in Cogitosus' *Vita S Brigitae*, in which nine men approach Brigit and swear a vow to murder their foe within the month, a vow the outward sign of which is some sort of sigil worn by each of the nine. Unable to dissuade

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<sup>180</sup> *ParJer* 9:19–32, Sparks, 333. Though I am not aware of the chronology for *ParJer* in early Ireland, the coincidence of elements between the *Lives* and the apocryphon suggests *ParJer* may have had some presence in Ireland by at least the early 1200s, the era immediately preceding the compilation of the Salamanca text of *Vita altera S Brendani*. See chapter one, p. 36, for the dating of Salamanca. Also see chapter two, p. 76, note 93 for another possible parallel to *ParJer* which, if true, might redate *ParJer*'s appearance on Irish shores as far back as the 600s.

them, Brigit pours out unceasing prayers on their behalf. The nine kill, stab and behead their target, returning triumphant and covered in gore, only to realize that the gore and the target were only illusions and the man they think they've slain is alive and well. Their vow thus fulfilled without actual bloodshed through the works of Brigit, the nine make a new oath to emend their lives permanently.<sup>181</sup> Brigit is further associated with such convincing and sanguinary mirages twice more, once to turn aside the avowed feuding of Conall mac Néill and his retinue and once to save the life of a condemned man whose apparent death sentence and decapitation are the delusion of his guards.<sup>182</sup>

The deeds of three male saints appear to build upon this Brigidine foundation. Ailbe's case most closely resembles those of Brigit, appearing in a *vita* with roots roughly contemporary to the compilation of the *Vita I* in the eighth century.<sup>183</sup> Here the saint also attempts to deter warriors intent on "the worst . . . diabolical vow, namely brigandage" (*votum pessimum . . . diabolicum, silicet dibherc*), and fails; this time the

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<sup>181</sup> Ch. 5.25, cols 0138D–E; ch. 22, Connolly and Picard, 20. The story also appears in *Vita I S Brigitae* 11.66, cols 0127F–0128A; ch. 67, Connolly, 33 where the men exclaim, after the revelation of the miracle, that "as a result of Saint Brigit we (both) killed and did not kill a man" (*S Brigitae causa interficimus et non interficimus virum*). Here also the sigils worn to identify the group as unified in a vow of blood feud are called "diabolical sigils" (*stigmata diabolica*), and rather than preaching and praying Brigit simply signs these amulets with the cross. The tale is not continued in either the *Bethu Brigitte* or the later Lismore *Betha Bhrighdi*. See also the commentary on the hagiographical condemnation of blood feud as seen in healing by recapitulation below, pp. 245–6.

<sup>182</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 10.63–10.64, 11.65, cols 0127B–C, E–F; chs 65.1–6, 66, Connolly, 32–3. It is the setting aside of the *stigmata* by Conall and his men that convinces Brigit to reward them with the protection of her invoked name, the fulfillment of which reward is the episode in which Conall's enemies see monks with prayer books rather than Uí Néill men and severed heads, mentioned above p. 232–3. The power of a saint's name to preserve even those guilty of what indeed looks to be blood feud makes the Brigidine narrative seem odd. The emphasis here, however, is on the faith inherent to such a prayer to Brigit, and on the rewards of that faith, whatever unorthodox acts a believer may have committed. Note that while the episode of Brigit's intervention on behalf of the imprisoned man does appear in the Lismore *betha*, the later version lacks the mirage of the man's supposed decapitation, saying only that the chains are loosed and he escapes. See discussion of freeing captives above, pp. 227–30. Regarding the *stigmata*, see Connolly's intriguing commentary, "*Vita I S Brigitae*," 10.

<sup>183</sup> The Salamanca *Vita S Albei* is a Φ O'Donohue text; see pp. 36–8, chapter one regarding the Φ *vitae*, and the appendix below for more discussion of dating the *Vita I*.

supposed dripping heads they think they bear off in triumph are mere rotted wood. Of course, the band then promptly submits to Ailbe.<sup>184</sup>

For Tigernach, the subject initially to be protected is a devout king, but Tigernach's prayers on the king's behalf during a battle ensure not only that the shields of the king's foes shatter, but also that the king's own men perceive a slaughter of their enemies that does not actually occur. The heads and other booty they carry home are ultimately revealed as nothing but swampy clumps of turf.<sup>185</sup> In Crónán's case, the vulnerable are the entire population of the region of Éile, save one man who does not believe in the saint. When Osraige forces come to maraud in Éile, they are certain that they kill, devastate and burn everywhere, but no one—aside from the single hold-out—is harmed, nor is any property damaged. "The eyes of the enemies," the *vita* proclaims, "were fooled" (*oculi inimicorum illudebantur*).<sup>186</sup>

There are cases of illusory burning and pillaging in Ireland's heroic literature. In the *Echtra Nerai*, for example, the protagonist Nera sees what turns out to be a vision of a possible future in which his home fort of Crúachán is burned to the ground, its people slain and decapitated.<sup>187</sup> Similarly, in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, King Conaire believes that the plains of Mide are afire and beset by warbands, only to discover after he has fled that they were magical artifacts sent by phantoms.<sup>188</sup> In the *Lives*, however, the power behind these frightening apparent attacks is the divine dispensation of the saint rather than the mystical workings of the otherworld or its denizens. While such violent illusions

<sup>184</sup> *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 36, p. 126; (Dublin) 31, *VSH* 1, 58.

<sup>185</sup> *Vita S Tigernachi* (Salamanca) 12, p. 110; *Vita S Tigernaci* (Oxford) 10, *VSH* 2, 265–6.

<sup>186</sup> *Vita S Cronani* (Salamanca) 16, p. 278; (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 24.

<sup>187</sup> Pars 6, 8, ed. Kuno Meyer, "*Echtra Nerai* (the adventures of Nera)," *RC* 218, 220; for a more recent translation see that of John Carey, §83 in Koch and Carey, *Celtic heroic age*, 128–9.

<sup>188</sup> Pars 25–6, ed. Eleanor Knott (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1936), 8. An abridged translation, including the relevant paragraphs here, is found in §90, Koch and Carey, *Celtic heroic age*, 171.

may yet own some debt to the pillar of *ParJer*, it seems that the Irish were no strangers to the motif of marvelous—or ominous—simulacra.

Though it seems likely that salvific transfiguration does have some correlation both in the saga genre and in apocryphal scripture, all examples of the motif ultimately may rest upon the transformation of the savor of water to that of wine by Jesus himself, a transformation which itself disguises the original nature of one thing (water) as something else (wine) just as through the saints a human appears as a deer, a stone or wood.<sup>189</sup> From prophet to savior to apostle, then, the line of holiness appears unbroken. Whether male or female, the sanctified Irish stand in the company not only of Jeremiah and Andrew but also of Christ himself.

It is furthermore abundantly clear that through salvific metamorphosis the saints of Ireland are shown extending their sanctity into the communities with which they interact. From the uglification of a nun to the beautification of kings and chieftains, from altering the visage or overall appearance of believers to rendering them unseen, even to the creation of illusory versions of humans under threat of death, salvific metamorphosis effectively demonstrates the saint's ability to protect not just those already sworn to follow him or her but indeed any person in danger. The saints of the *Lives*, through these preemptively curative acts, thus again effectively maintain the health not only of the individual members of the faith but of the whole of the Irish body Christian.

## **Resurrection**

The central message of the New Testament is the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the anointed Messiah, an identity revealed during his life by the miracles he performs and,

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<sup>189</sup> John 2:1–11.

after his death, by the miracles that befall him. Of particular prominence among the works of Jesus are curative deeds, the highest form of which is the return of the dead to life. This act signifies more completely than any other the motion of the divine in a human body; this motion, moreover, is previously seen only in the reported lives of the prophet Elijah and his successor, Elisha.<sup>190</sup> The canonical apostles Peter and Paul, and the Andrew and John of the apocrypha, also raise the dead, echoing as they do not only the deeds of Christ but the *miracula* of Elijah and Elisha that seem to have prefigured them.<sup>191</sup> Jesus' identity as the Christ is, however, ultimately proven beyond any doubt not only by his resurrection of others, which act his successors can also perform, but also by his own bodily return from the grave, a feat no other individual accomplishes without the mediation of a sanctified human.<sup>192</sup> Given the critical importance of this sign of signs, it is hardly a surprise that the raising of the deceased might occupy a similarly prominent role in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints.

In fact, Irish holy men and women resurrect dead laity and religious in more than one hundred episodes, and many saints do so multiple times. Saints generally tend to bring back those whose decease is untimely, often as a consequence of illness or accident. Columba of Iona raises a boy by weeping and praying to Christ and then

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<sup>190</sup> Jesus resurrects a number of the dead, as seen in such episodes as Matt. 9:23 (Mark 5:23, Luke 8:41), Luke 7:11–17 and 8:52 and John 11:38–44. See 3 Kgs 17:17–24 and 4 Kgs 13:21 for Elijah's and Elisha's revivificatory *miracula*; also see again 3 Kgs 19:19–21, where Elisha becomes Elijah's disciple, and 4 Kgs 2:7–10 and 15, in which Elisha is pronounced the heir of Elijah's sanctified spirit and all its endowments.

<sup>191</sup> See Matt. 10:8–10 (Mark 3:15, Luke 9:2–7). Though the dispensation does not specifically list the reviving of the departed among its tenets, it does emphasize the curing of the sick, which can be seen by extension to include resurrection. For instances in the canonical texts see Acts 9:36–42 (Peter raises Tabitha) and Acts 5:15 (Paul's shadow restores the incapacitated and also appears to revivify). With respect to the prefigurations of the New by the Old Testament prophets, see Matt. 11:14 and 17:11–13, where John the Baptist is called the new Elijah; more importantly, however, see the transfiguration of Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah in Matt. 17:1–4 (Mark 9:2–6), signifying the identity of Jesus not only as the Christ but as the fulfillment of a biblical story begun with the Egyptian liberation and the transmission to Moses of the Law, passing then through the first miracle-worker, and finding ultimate expression in the incarnation of the Son of God.

<sup>192</sup> Jesus is pronounced as risen in Matt. 28:6–7 (Mark 16:6, 14, Luke 24:6, 34), John 2:22 and 21:14.



commanding the child to rise, much as Jesus orders a dead lad to get up from his bier.<sup>193</sup>

The beneficiary of Finnian's rejuvenating holiness is the sister of Finnian's hosts, who dies of sickness just as the saint arrives. Here the story echoes not so much a gospel example but that of Elijah, who also returns the son of his hostess to the world of the living.<sup>194</sup>

Rúadán resurrects four young men, including one whose breath returns because Rúadán's chasuble is placed over his body.<sup>195</sup> The closest parallels to this story appear to be apocryphal, as seen in the revivifying powers of Joseph's head cloth and John's tunic.<sup>196</sup> For his part, Lugaid raises the son of Berach mac Bacáin in Laoise by blessing water and sprinkling it on the dead boy, calling to mind the Levitical proscriptions concerning the pollution of death and the removal of that pollution with appropriate ablutions.<sup>197</sup>

A small number of saints resurrect individuals who have been dead for many years, who then recount details about the lost past, pagan Ireland, or mythological races awaiting the saving grace of revelation. Patrick's prayers and the sign of the cross return

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<sup>193</sup> Adomnán, *Vita S Columbae* 2.32, pp. 138, 140. The hagiographical episode may be continued in the *Betha Coluim Chille* 54, pp. 237–8, 261, but as some of the plot differs it is unclear whether the later episode is truly descended from that of Adomnán. See Luke 7:11–17 for biblical narrative.

<sup>194</sup> *Vita S Finiani* (Salamanca) 27, p. 104; 3 Kgs 17:17–24.

<sup>195</sup> *Vita S Ruadani* (Salamanca) 10, 20, 21, 22, pp. 163, 166; (Dublin) 13, 26, 27, 28, *VSH* 2, 244, 250–251.

<sup>196</sup> *PsMat (pars altera)* 40, Elliott, 98. *Life of John* 5, Herbert and McNamara, 90. This form of resurrection occurs elsewhere in the *Lives* as well, as in for example the *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 57, p. 143; *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 29, p. 387; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 44, *VSH* 2, 221. *Vita S Cainnechi* (Salamanca) 39, p. 192; *Vita S Cainnici* (Dublin) 32, *VSH* 1, 164. *Vita S Aidi siue Maedoc* (Vespasian) 48, *VSH* 2, 308–9; *Vita S Aedani seu Maedoc* (Salamanca) 45, p. 245; *Vita S Maedoc* (Dublin) 49, *VSH* 2, 159–60 (here the article used is not clothing, but Maedóc's *bachall*, laid on a dead nun's chest, which is also seen in *Vita S Eogani* (Salamanca) 7, p. 402). The relationship of these apocrypha to the *miracula* of captives—or soon-to-be captives—who elude their foes by donning the clothing item of a saint and are rendered invisible has already been discussed; see p. 229 above.

<sup>197</sup> *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 33, p. 138; *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 16, p. 385; *Vita S Moluae* (Dublin) 28, *VSH* 2, 215–16. Dublin adds prayer to the methods used to raise the boy. See Lev. 11:25, 35 and 21:11 and Num. 5:2 for the corrupting influence of contact with the dead, and Lev. 11:36, 13:58, and 22:6–7 for only a few of the instances explaining the use of water to purify that which has been contaminated.

life to a giant who answers many questions, for example, a narrative also seen in the *vita* of Crónán.<sup>198</sup> Brendán, in another instance, raises a giant mermaid found harpooned on the shore and, as did Patrick and Crónán with their giants, he baptizes her; when he asks details of her life, she answers that her people, who live under the sea, hope for communal resurrection.<sup>199</sup>

Unlike every other form of healing, Brigit does not play a role in the resurrection of dead humans.<sup>200</sup> At first blush this lack appears again to reflect a gender difference, as if Brigit would trespass upon male territory if she returned breath to the dead. At the same time, however, Brigit is portrayed preventing the deaths that are often those her male counterparts must reverse; Brigit does not reattach severed heads, for example, but she does prevent decapitations several times.<sup>201</sup> It seems that Brigit essentially does not need to resurrect people, because she stops them from dying in the first place. Brigit's extensive healing *acta* appear to obviate the necessity to bring life to the wrongly dead, much as demons are expelled by her mere presence while her male colleagues must engage in rituals to accomplish the same goal.<sup>202</sup>

This interpretation of the absence of human resurrection from Brigit's *vita* is supported by the presence of revivificatory acts in the *Lives* of other female saints, showing that gender does not preclude the hagiographical raising of the dead. Monenna, for instance, brings a young nun back to life with her prayers in one narrative; in another,

<sup>198</sup> *Vita IV S Patricii* 62<xxiii>, Bieler, 102; Byrne and Francis, 55. Also seen in *Bethu Phátraic* ll 1404–13, Mulchrone, 76–7; Stokes 122–3 where the giant is named Cass mac Glaiss. *Vita S Cronani abbatis de Ros Cre* (Salamanca) 3, p. 275; (Dublin) 4 (Salamanca) 3, p. 275; (Dublin) 4, *VSH* 2, 23.

<sup>199</sup> *Vita I S Brendani abbatis de Cluain Ferta* (Oxford) 68, *VSH* 1, 135; *Betha Brenainn* (Lismore) ll 3678–90, pp. 109–10, 255.

<sup>200</sup> In Cogitosus, *Vita S Brigitae* 6.29, cols 0139C–D; ch. 26, Connolly and Picard, 22 and *Vita I S Brigitae* 16.104, col. 0133E; ch. 110, Connolly, 46, Brigit is associated with the resurrection of a woman's only calf, slaughtered to feed the saint.

<sup>201</sup> See the discussion of conflict avoidance, pp. 224–7 above.

<sup>202</sup> See pp. 212–13 above.

she works with Íta to bring a drowned girl out from under the waves with a command that the girl respond to her summons.<sup>203</sup> When the girl's voice answers "Behold, I am (here), lady," (*Ecce ego domina*), she is ordered to come to the shore, which she promptly does.<sup>204</sup> On her own, Íta also raises several men, using prayers, the sign of the cross, and commands to the dead to come home.<sup>205</sup>

These few instances are but a snapshot of the many and diverse episodes of resurrection seen in both the *vitae* and the *bethada* of Irish saints. The deceased are raised with prayer, holy water, blessings and verbal commands, resonating with both Old and New Testament models. The *Lives* in which a saint does not bring the dead back to life are the rare exception, numbering fewer than a dozen. By contrast, some thirty-five Irish holy men and women do perform resurrections. In episodes that descend from the *exempla* of Elijah, Elisha, Messiah and apostle, the sanctified of Ireland's hagiography thus maintain the integrity of the Christian community, demonstrating as they do the continued fulfillment of the grand biblical narrative.

### *Recapitation*<sup>206</sup>

Scattered among the more than one hundred examples of familiar resurrection stories are found approximately a dozen in which the deceased have been decapitated, thus requiring that the revivifying saint must reattach their severed heads prior to raising

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<sup>203</sup> The nun is raised in *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 26, p. 91; this episode appears to be echoed in a similar narrative in Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 2.13, Esposito, 224–5 and USMLS, 134–5.

<sup>204</sup> Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 2.9, Esposito, 222–3; USMLS, 130–131.

<sup>205</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 14, 25, *VSH* 2, 120, 125.

<sup>206</sup> This section is essentially a shortened and reframed version of my work as it already appears in print in "Preserving the body Christian."

them from death to life.<sup>207</sup> This motif, termed ‘recapitation’, extends the expected message of resurrection—the signification of an indwelling divine essence capable of curing not only disease and disability but death itself, maintaining thereby the health and integrity of the community of Christ—farther into the realm not just of hagiographical but of human society. Here, the criticism of violence and warfare, also voiced elsewhere in the *Lives*, sees what is arguably its most cogent expression, aiming potent venom at certain early Irish institutions perceived as both supporting and encouraging violence, especially against noncombatants.<sup>208</sup>

Among those institutions for which hagiographers reserved especial attention are the professional warbands known as the *fianna*. Roving retinues of varying size who lived on the edges of society, the *fianna* raided settlements for their sustenance, often targeting ecclesiastical establishments. Though the *fianna* sometimes acted in the service of particular leaders, they more often seem to have served themselves. Simultaneously viewed as protectors and as potential threats, their independence made them both indispensable and suspect. To hagiographers, *fian*-members were dangerous elements bent on attacking and destroying the body of the Irish faithful.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, *fian*-membership is often equated with the practice of *díbergach*, or brigandage, both in

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<sup>207</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatis Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 81. *Vita S Albei* (Salamanca) 26, p. 124. *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 16, pp. 172–3; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 12, VSH 1, 38. *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaisse abbatis de Lethglenn* (Salamanca) 8, p. 342. *Vita S Colmani episcopi Drumorensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 359. *Vita altera S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 25, p. 387. *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 11, 38, VSH 1, 239–40, 252–3. *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 27, VSH 2, 178. *Vita S Boecii* (Oxford) 16, VSH 1, 91–2. *Betha Beraigh* 29.85–6, *BNÉ* 1, 41–2; *BNÉ* 2, 41. *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 18, VSH 2, 121–2.

<sup>208</sup> For other cases of this commentary see, for instance, Brigit’s acerbic assessment of Conall mac Néill’s entire kindred, pp. 208–9 above, the same saint’s miraculous disruption of the dynastic feud between Conall and his brother Coirpre through a benediction of misrecognition, p. 225, and the punitive acts of male saints in response to violence on pp. 122, 128, 133, 137–8, 168–75 of Chapter Three.

<sup>209</sup> Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *Fianaighecht* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis and Company, 1910), ix. Also Proinsias MacCana, “*Fianaighecht* in the pre-Norman period,” in *The heroic process: form, function, and fantasy in folk epic*, ed. Bo Almqvist, Séamus Ó Catháin and Pádraig Ó Héalaí (Dun Laoghaire: Glendale Press, 1987), 75–99, especially 93.

vernacular saga and in the *Lives*.<sup>210</sup> In Irish terminology, *fianas*, the activity of being a *fian*-member, apparently refers to a wider context within which *díbergach* might arise.<sup>211</sup>

This strong critique of out-of-control raiding is apparent in a significant proportion of recapitulation episodes. In the *vita* of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, for example, three of the saint's monks are murdered and decapitated by robbers (*latrones*) while chopping wood. Ciarán retrieves the heads from the malefactors, whom he compels to perform penance, then reattaches the severed parts to their bodies and resuscitates the monks with but a "blood-red scar" (*circulus cruentatus*) around their necks.<sup>212</sup> Áed mac Bricc reunites the heads and bodies of three nuns who were decapitated by "the worst and cruel brigands" (*latrunculi pessimi et crudeles*) while returning home with the day's milk. Áed's actions also force penance from the slayers, rejoin part to whole and raise the nuns "as if from sleep" (*quasi de sompno*).<sup>213</sup> The nun Colmán of Dromore recapitulates is the victim of *latrones*, as is a boy pieced back together and resurrected by Molaisse of Leighlin.<sup>214</sup> Berach's monk, Sillén, is also the subject of attack and recapitulation by murderers who are labeled *díberccach*.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Kim McCone, "Werewolves, cyclopes, *díberga* and *fianna*," especially p. 6.

<sup>211</sup> MacCana, "*Fianaghecht*," 96–7. MacCana further adds that it is possible, in vernacular saga, that the distinction between *fianas* and *díbergach* may have been a legal one in which the former designated the activity of such warbands bound in service to a king, whereas the latter was undertaken by the same man when "free lance" and "without the constraints and responsibilities" of royal patronage. In support of this assertion is a comment in the ninth-century *Tecosca Cormaic* 3, line 23 in which "*fianas* without overbearing" is listed among those things that are best for the people, while in the same text §19, ll 4–5, associating with marauders (*díbergaig*) is equated with "fraternizing with an evil-doer." Hagiographers, however, do not seem to have subscribed to such a delicate distinction.

<sup>212</sup> *Vita S Ciarani abbatís Cluanensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 81.

<sup>213</sup> *Vita S Aidi* (Salamanca) 16, pp. 172–3; *Vita S Aedi* (Dublin) 12, *VSH* 1, 38. This phrase, *quasi de sompno*, appears to draw from the resurrection of a girl dead of sickness by Christ, a feat accomplished when Jesus tells her distraught mother that she is not dead, only sleeping, then takes the child's hand and raises her alive from her deathbed; see Luke 8:52.

<sup>214</sup> *Vita S Colmani episcopi Drumorensis* (Salamanca) 14, p. 359; *Vita S Lasriani seu Molaisse abbatís de Lethglenn* (Salamanca) 8, p. 342.

<sup>215</sup> *Betha Beraigh* 29.85–6, *BNÉ* 1, 41–2; *BNÉ* 2, 41. There is an episode of resurrection involving the same characters in the Oxford *vita* of Berach, but there no recapitulation occurs. See *Vita S Berachi* 24, *VSH* 1, 85.

Again, this concern with marauding is more than merely a hagiographical condemnation of criminal behavior. In Hiberno-Latin, *latrunculus* and *latronus/latro* were not clearly distinguished from *laicus* (warrior, layman), which was in turn linked to the Irish *láech* (warrior) and thereby to *fián*.<sup>216</sup> By recapitulating the innocent victims of brigandage, then, these Irish saints restore the decapitated to physical health, to life and to the community of Christ. The one-time murderers, too, are reunited with the faith not only through their performance of confession and penance, but also through the merciful forgiveness signified by the return of the recapitated, a return that both literally and metaphorically erases their sin much as do the saintly benedictions that cause unplanned fetuses to vanish from their mothers' wombs.<sup>217</sup> The reattachment of severed heads thus condemns *díbergach* and its tendency to sweep noncombatants into its violence, heals both the bodies of the formerly slain and their slayers, and cures the worst wounds inflicted upon the Irish body Christian.

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<sup>216</sup> Richard Sharpe, "Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the Devil's men," *Ériu* 30 (1979): 75–92. According to Sharpe, *latrunculus/laicus/láech/fián* are also to be associated with paganism due to the appearance of these terms in conjunction with non-Christian enemies of the faith in laws that stipulate both ecclesiastical and secular punishments for brigandage, some of which are mentioned below, pp. 246–7; see also Johnson, "Preserving the body Christian," §§26–9 for a more complete discussion. Colmán Etchingham, however, argues cogently that the association of some non-Christian behaviors and symbols—including the *stigmata diabolica* seen in the *Vita I* of Brigit examined above, pp. 235, note 181—with the *fianna* does not necessarily mean that, as a group, they practiced pagan rites. Instead, writes Etchingham, the term *laicus* more likely referred to nominal Christians guilty of great sins, such as the murder and mayhem of brigandage, and who had yet to confess and perform the correct penances to purge those sins and be again welcomed as true members of the community of Christ. See *Church organisation in Ireland, AD 650–1000* (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999), 290–317, especially 300–306. Continued involvement in activities clearly antithetical to Christian doctrine, particularly if in opposition to a prior confession of the faith, would certainly have cemented the enmity of Irish hagiographers toward the *fianna* as pagans and apostates. Etchingham's theory is supported, in the evidence centered on recapitulation, by the fact that brigands are not depicted converting, but instead are treated as severely errant Christians of whom is required full penitential satisfaction. Note also that *latrones* are the targets of hagiographical censure in other episodes of healing, as seen above in the cases of salvific metamorphosis involving simulacra, pp. 233–8. It is arguable, in fact, that the Osraige forces who believe that they devastate the region of Éile, p. 237 above, are *fianna*; the *fián*-bands of Osraige were known for a particular wolfish savagery. See John Carey, "Werewolves in medieval Ireland," *CMCS* 44 (Winter 2002): 37–72, and McCone, "Werewolves, cyclopes, *díberga*, and *fianna*," 20–2. For a non-hagiographical instance of raiding and decapitation committed by a *latrunculus* (here a band of brigands rather than a single individual), see again *Hisperica famina* ll 571–612, pp. 110, 112, with thanks to Michael Herren for pointing me in that direction.

<sup>217</sup> See above, pp. 215–16.

Coemgen of Glendalough's act of recapitulation takes aim at a different target when the saint must reunite the heads and necks of two young girls. Coemgen subjects the men guilty of this deed to a tongue-lashing, scolding them "with very many words . . . concerning the slaying of the feminine sex" (*uerbis plurimis . . . de occisione feminini sexus*). The two men confess to the saint that their crime was an act of retaliation against the girls' parents, from whom the men had received abuse. Once the girls are again whole and hale, their former killers beg Coemgen's mercy and promise to never again commit "such a crime" (*tale neffas*).<sup>218</sup>

Here it is not just *fianas* or *díbergach* in a broader sense that comes under fire, but is specifically the prosecution of blood feud, an issue also criticized in other healing episodes examined previously.<sup>219</sup> According to early Irish law, it was not only permitted but expected that wronged parties for whom no other restitution could be obtained would have the right, even the obligation, to exact blood vengeance.<sup>220</sup> The men Coemgen confronts are not marauders, but admit freely that they were pursuing retribution. As Coemgen's rebuke makes plain, however, their feud went too far not merely because of its violence but also because it included the slaying of innocent children, a crime here compounded by the victims' identification as female.

The involvement in battle or raiding of noncombatants, particularly children and females, was an act decried in both vernacular and canon law. In the codes of the former, an honor price equal to that of a cleric was demanded for the murder of a child seven

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<sup>218</sup> *Vita S Coemgeni* (Dublin) 11, *VSH* 1, 239–40.

<sup>219</sup> See particularly pp. 232–3 above. Arguably every instance of salvific metamorphosis, save those of beautification or uglification, may be taken to criticize not just *díbergach* but blood feud. Note how, for instance, Ailbe's simulacrum disrupts a declared act of vengeance specifically called *dibherc*, pp. 235–6 above.

<sup>220</sup> Binchy, *Críth Gablach* 21, 25 and notes p. 86; also Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 128–9.

years of age or younger.<sup>221</sup> In the latter, killing women and children required heavy penitential exactions also on par with slaying clerics.<sup>222</sup> Harm to noncombatants could even call for limb amputations and the death penalty, as seen in texts such as the *Cáin Adomnáin*.<sup>223</sup> To the laws and to the *Lives*, the commission of blood feud, particularly where noncombatants are targeted, automatically excludes its prosecutors from the community of the faithful. In Coemgen's *vita*, however, the slayers perform penance, and the acceptance of their contrition by both Coemgen and by God is signified by the erasure of their sin through the girls' recapitulation. Even as the girls are restored to physical health, the men are granted spiritual integrity, and the body of Irish Christianity is again made intact.

In addition to hagiographical inveighing against both brigandage and blood feud, recapitulation episodes also express the power of a saint's promise. One such example of the potency of saintly speech is that of Íta, whose vow to her craftsman (*artifex*) and brother-in-law Beoanus that he and his barren wife will have a son is a primary impetus for her re-attachment of Beoanus' head when he is decapitated in battle. As soon as head and body are rejoined and Beoanus again breathes, he reunites with his wife, and shortly thereafter Íta's vow is fulfilled in the birth of Mochoemóg. This baby boy, moreover, apparently receives a touch of the holiness originally conferred to his father through Íta's prayers over Beoanus' broken body; given to Íta in fosterage, Mochoemóg matures into an eminent saint in his own right.<sup>224</sup> Not only does a saint's spoken word possess its own

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<sup>221</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 79, 83.

<sup>222</sup> *Canones Hibernenses* 1–3, 8–10, p. 160 and 1–9, p. 170.

<sup>223</sup> §33, pp. 23–5.

<sup>224</sup> *Vita S Ite* (Dublin) 18, *VSH* 2, 121–2 and *Vita S Mochoemog* (Dublin) 2–3, *VSH* 2, 164–5. Also see above pp. 206–11 for the discussion of healing as a means of providing a new generation, as well as the examination in chapter two, pp. 53–8, especially p. 55 concerning the fitness of particular noble lineages to produce sanctified children. Here Mochoemóg's mother, Ness, is Saint Íta's sister.



vitality, setting in motion events that cannot be forestalled, but again its actions among the faithful draw the community of Christ ever more tightly together, healing a body, a life, a family and a faith with a single vow.<sup>225</sup>

Quite apart from any depictions of decapitation and severed heads in the heroic saga of Ireland, the number of which cases is considerable, there is a strong parallel to the hagiographical rejoining of part to whole found in the apocrypha that demands consideration.<sup>226</sup> In the *Acts of Peter and Paul*, an apocryphon known in Ireland from at least the eighth and probably from the seventh century, there is reported the beheading of the apostle Paul.<sup>227</sup> Not only do both head and body remain uncorrupted for forty years but, when Paul's head is rediscovered after that time and replaced on its truncated neck, the two pieces instantly fuse together as they had been in life.<sup>228</sup> Though Paul does not revive, the similarities between this anecdote and the instances of recapitulation found in the *Lives* are provocative.<sup>229</sup>

Through the healing miracle of recapitulation as depicted in the *Lives*, these few Irish saints return the slaughtered to life and compel brigands to repent, revealing the

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<sup>225</sup> See Johnson, "Preserving the body Christian," §§20, 23–5 for an analysis of the role of a saint's word in another recapitulation episode found in Mochoemóg's *vita*, as well as for the representation of the miraculous reattachment of heads outside the *Lives*.

<sup>226</sup> See Johnson, "Preserving the body Christian," §§5–8 for some key examples of decapitation and bodiless heads in Ireland's heroic genre. See also §§9–13 for the place such representations occupy in the Irish annals.

<sup>227</sup> See chapter three, pp. 140–141, note 103 for the dating of *ActsPetPaul* in Ireland.

<sup>228</sup> *ActsPetPaul* 16, Herbert and McNamara, 104–5.

<sup>229</sup> In Johnson, "Preserving the body Christian," I argue in part that the abundance or nature of bodiless heads and headless bodies in heroic narratives presents an image of the warrior as a critical member of society, an image countered by the example of the recapitating saint in the *Lives*. While I still agree with my earlier assessment that a relationship does exist between the genres, I am more hesitant about claiming that influence must universally run from saga to saint, in no small part due to the questions raised by *ActsPetPaul* 16, questions of which I was unaware at the time of the article's publication. Even here I resist a full conclusion to the issue because I am uncertain to what degree the rejoining of Paul's head to his neck is an element added to the apocryphon by Irish redactors—the text here cited being that preserved in Ireland—and to what extent the same detail may have been found in any version of *ActsPetPaul* as it was transmitted to Ireland.

Irish community of Christ to be an intact organism capable of undoing even the most extreme injury to its body. By taking the decapitated and making them whole again, saints not only reunite head and body for Christians wrongly slain but provide their killers, strayed members of the faith themselves, with the balm of absolution, erasing their sins as their victims wake once again. The revived and the wrongdoer are thus restored to both physical and spiritual integrity, and are brought back not just to the life of this world but to the eternal life of the faithful.

### **Conclusion: absolution and enlightenment**

Whether the saints of Ireland's *Lives* restore lost senses, cleanse sick bodies of disease, disability or demons, expunge the signs of sin, save the threatened with salvific metamorphosis or raise the dead to life, they cure more than just a human body.

Hagiographical healings correct not only somatic but social ills, addressing issues such as conflict resolution, blood vengeance and brigandage. Exercising a holiness the roots of which extend into the Old Testament reports of the deeds of Elijah and Elisha, the flowering of which is the revelation of Jesus' identity as the Christ through his *miracula* and resurrection and the fulfillment of which is the ongoing action of the dispensation bestowed by Christ upon the disciples, the sanctified of the *Lives* thus stand as Irish apostles, walking in the footsteps of their scriptural forebears.

The power of this holiness, moreover, is depicted reaching beyond the humans it influences to actually alter its environment. Elements that would otherwise corrupt, such as blood, saliva, soil or fouled water, are transformed into those that cure, and that which should pollute, purifies. Mere contact with the Irish saint changes the nature of ordinary

items of clothing or symbols of office into elements of considerable medicinal power. Even the spoken word or insubstantial shadow of one of Ireland's sanctified can mend the broken or raise the dead.

Though healing episodes do occur in both the Latin and vernacular texts, they are considerably more frequent in the former than in the latter. Further, while nearly every saint, male or female, performs some type of curative act, and while generally more healing episodes are attributed *per vita* or *betha* to men than to women, it is Brigit who outshines both genders. Cast in the mold of Christ himself in every way save the resurrection of the deceased, the plethora of healings in Brigit's *Life* is unmatched by any other hagiographical saint. It is in fact fair to say that if the men commit some curative deed, almost invariably Brigit commits the same act better and more frequently.

Wielding a sanctity conferred upon them through the motion of the divine in a chosen human form, the Irish holy who heal—from bringing light to the blind to the reattachment of severed heads—demonstrate the full remittance of sin from the sick by returning not just the physical but the spiritual patient to health. In the *Lives*, saints cure not only individuals but the communities from which their actions or ailments have separated them. In essence, by healing the faithful, Ireland's saints heal the faith. The lost are reintegrated into the company of the found, the exiled are absolved and reconciled with the enlightened, and the body of Irish Christianity is preserved fully intact.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Conclusion*

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Hagiographical folklore does not and cannot exist  
in a pure and isolated state.<sup>1</sup>

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#### **At the end of it all**

The preceding chapters have explored broad hagiographical themes with an eye toward the expressions of Irish holiness that lie within them. Chapter Two considered the inception of the holy body, examining the ways in which the medieval *Lives* portray the transition of sanctity from essence to identity. It further discussed the alterations a mortal human form undergoes as a consequence of the immanent essence of divine favor. Chapters Three and Four, moreover, traced the motion of holiness outward from its embodied identity as the Irish saint and into the society depicted in the *Lives*, a motion revealed by hagiographical acts of both retribution and healing. How is all of this evidence to be understood?

It will be recalled that John Coakley considers the prime significance of hagiography to be the revelation of “*the meaning a saint holds for those who venerate*” him or her. To Coakley, the contents of each *Life* indicate how the *Life*’s creator defined the necessary elements of sanctity.<sup>2</sup> What then may be said, here at the end of it all, concerning the meaning an Irish saint had for the writers of Ireland’s medieval *vitae* and *bethada*? It is this query that Chapter Five attempts to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Henken, *Welsh saints*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> “Sanctity in late medieval hagiography,” 17–18; emphasis original to source. For initial review of Coakley’s work, see chapter one, pp. 15–16.

### **Holy body, wholly other**

From the examination of a saint's beginnings in Chapter Two, it is apparent that the *Lives* of Ireland's holy men and women paint sanctity as an inborn essence, a critical facet that is wholly other yet becomes part and parcel of the saint before conception.<sup>3</sup> In keeping not only with the Old Testament precedent of the Lord's words to Jeremiah that he was known and sanctified as a prophet before he was created in his mother's womb, but also with the New Testament account of Jesus as pre-existing his nativity, Irish saints are expected sometimes generations in advance of their arrival.<sup>4</sup> Every holy man, as was Jesus, is foretold, sometimes by pagan figures standing as Irish representatives of Old Testament prophets, and sometimes by other saints.<sup>5</sup> For some, the parallels to Christ are strengthened by Marian echoes in their origin narratives, whether those echoes are found in the signs of their mothers' purity, the fatherless manner of their conception, or the nature of their parturition.<sup>6</sup> For another, very small group, an adulterous nativity more closely suggests the story of the birth of Ishmael, a child who received considerable divine favor, to Abraham and his concubine, Hagar.<sup>7</sup>

From conception onward, the purity and potency of this indwelling essence confers unusual traits upon the mortal body, outwardly marking it as holy. Sainted infants *in utero* may either allow or compel their mothers to observe abstemious dietary or sexual behaviors.<sup>8</sup> Some holy newborns so alter their environments that permanent, often curative changes result.<sup>9</sup> In keeping with Mary Douglas' assertion that sanctity comprises

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<sup>3</sup> See pp. 49–77.

<sup>4</sup> Jer. 1:5; John 1:1–4. See chapter two, pp. 50–53, 68–71, 73–7.

<sup>5</sup> Isa. 7:14, 11:1–11; Jer. 23:5–6; Ezek. 34:23–31. Chapter two, pp. 49–53.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter two, pp. 65–73, 84–7.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 16; chapter two, pp. 58–63.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter two, pp. 71–3.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter two, pp. 80–83; chapter four, p. 192.

both physical and spiritual perfection, impure foods are rejected outright by both infant and very young saints, the contaminating substances immediately vomited. As adults, the sanctified Irish transmute pollution into purity, changing blood, vomit or saliva into physical, spiritual or social cures that can restore speech, hearing, sight or reproductive ability, or which provide precious metal for an alms-seeker.<sup>10</sup> Food, too, may be altered from items that violate to those that obey Levitical dietary proscriptions.<sup>11</sup> And yet, as if in agreement with the writings of Thomas Aquinas that holiness requires an essential purity nothing it contacts can alter, even saints of unorthodox parentage or who are afflicted with physical disability or disease retain their identity and status as *sancti*.<sup>12</sup>

The evidence for an innate Irish holiness goes still further. Its presence within the adult saint allows him or her to withstand austerities or to experience ecstasies ordinary humans cannot, including very rare and late instances of grotesquely extreme self-mortification.<sup>13</sup> The sanctity within the saint also manifests through the workings of punitive and salvific *miracula*.<sup>14</sup> And at the end of life, though some saints suffer the infirmities of their years, they do not become senile; after death, they may emit a heavenly fragrance or remain uncorrupt.<sup>15</sup> For all that this inborn essence of the wholly other may bring them, saints are eminently mortal and must both be born and die, as was Jesus, yet unlike the Messiah they do not rise bodily from the tomb. Instead, in a display befitting the return of one long absent and in accordance with the perception that an Irish

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<sup>10</sup> *Purity and danger*, 49–55; chapter one, pp. 10–11; chapter two, pp. 94–7, chapter four, pp. 188, 203, 204–5.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter two, pp. 94–5.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae, qu. 81, art. 8 as cited in Hamesse, “Image of sanctity,” 135; chapter one, pp. 5–6; chapter two, pp. 58–63, 89–90.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter two, pp. 97–103.

<sup>14</sup> Chapters three and four, pp. 110–249.

<sup>15</sup> Chapter two, pp. 103–7.

holy person's origins are not on earth but in heaven, the sainted soul is welcomed home with great angelic rejoicing.<sup>16</sup>

It is not only the inclusion of vengeful or curative deeds in a saint's *acta* that expresses the effects of holiness upon the Ireland of the *vitae* and *bethada*, it is also the scriptural parallels these deeds bring into a *Life*. Narratives of saintly vengeance, it is now apparent, draw very strongly upon Old Testament tradition, with particular attention given to the Moses, Aaron, Elijah and Elisha of the canonical books, as well as to the potent prayers of the Psalter.<sup>17</sup> Correspondences to the New Testament, by contrast, are almost entirely apocryphal in origin, and include texts concerning apostles like Andrew, Thomas, Peter and Paul as well as works regarding both Jesus and his mother, Mary.<sup>18</sup> As if acting upon Isidore of Seville's view that the violation of that which is *sanctum* demands punishment, the saints of Ireland's *Lives* prosecute those who wrong them, and do so in accordance with a broad scriptural background the range of which firmly signifies that the roots of hagiographical vengeance—and of the wholly otherness such vengeance reveals—pass through the apostles, the Messiah and the prophets to the divine.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the depictions of retribution among Ireland's holy, portrayals of salvific *miracula* have considerably less Old Testament influence. Indeed it is primarily in instances of the cleansing of leprosy or the resurrection of the dead that glimpses may

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<sup>16</sup> Chapter two, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Chapter three, pp. 124–35; also Wiley, “Maledictory psalms.” It will also be remembered that the apocryphal Abraham may have a presence; see chapter three, pp. 129–30.

<sup>18</sup> Chapter three, pp. 135–51.

<sup>19</sup> *Etymologiae*, X 24, ed. W. M. Lindsay, and *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi differentiarum sive de proprietate sermonum libri duo*, I: *de differentiis verborum*, PL 83, cols 59–60, as fully cited in Hamesse, “Image of sanctity,” 132–3; see also chapter one, p. 5 above.

be found of those who prefigured Jesus and his disciples, namely Elijah and Elisha.<sup>20</sup> The vast majority of saintly cures, however, are founded on a New Testament cornerstone, with inspiration flowing from both the canonical and the apocryphal scriptures. The apostles have a strong presence here, particularly Paul, Peter and Andrew, but the overwhelming paradigm of hagiographical healing is that of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>21</sup>

It must also be acknowledged that the scriptures of Bible and apocryphon do not provide the only backdrop for the events portrayed in the *Lives*, whether those events pertain to the embodiment of the wholly other in a holy body or to acts of either vengeance or healing. Considerable new evidence can now be seen for the interdependence of the hagiography and heroic saga of early Ireland, partly reflecting what Hippolyte Delehaye labels the adaptability of sanctity to its cultural milieu.<sup>22</sup> Not only are traits such as biographical patterning or a mediatory position between heaven and earth shared between the genres, as explored by scholars such as Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, Dorothy Ann Bray, Joseph Falaky Nagy, Lisa Bitel and Victoria Lord, but there are also both motifs and narrative outlines held in common by saga and saintly hero alike.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Chapter four, pp. 199–200 and 238. It will also be recalled that Levitical proscriptions play a small role in hagiographical healings, as seen on pp. 197, 201, 224, that Moses is reflected in instances where miraculous springs are summoned, as on p. 197–200, and that there may be discernible echoes of the apocryphal *Paraleipomena of Jeremiah*, as discussed on pp. 233–5. Regarding Elijah and Elisha as prefigurations of Jesus and the apostles, see chapter three, p. 131 note 65.

<sup>21</sup> Chapter four, pp. 194, 199, 214, 238 for Paul (canonical), 199–200, 228–9, 238 for Peter (canonical), and 214, 233, 238 for Andrew (apocryphal). Also see pp. 187–91, 192, 197–8, 200–205, 207, 214, 229–30, 237–40 for correspondences to Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> *Sanctus*, 233, 240, 247; also chapter one, pp. 6–9 above.

<sup>23</sup> Chapter one, pp. 24–7 and chapter three, p. 111. Also Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic biography*, “Between god and man” and “Concept of the hero”; Bray, “Heroic tradition,” *List of motifs* and “Miracles and wonders”; Nagy, “Close encounters,” *Conversing with angels and ancients*, “Liminality and knowledge” and “Wisdom of the *geilt*”; Bitel, *Isle of the saints*, 11–12; Lord, “Nature, fertility, and animal miracles.” See further Ó Cathasaigh, “Curse and satire.”



Parallels and points of contact between the genres may be found in the stories of bastard saints, in the conception of sanctified infants through the act of swallowing stars or fish, in the foretelling of future eminence for fetal saints according to the sound of their mothers' chariots, in the peculiar tale of Saint Ailbe's fostering by a wolf, in the stories of the delayed delivery of holy babies by the straddling of boulders and in the unusual rates of learning depicted of certain female saints.<sup>24</sup> Both punitive and salvific metamorphoses also resemble transformations seen in the saga literature.<sup>25</sup> While in some cases the elements in question serve, unchanged, to frame the saint's holiness with the terms of an ecclesiastical hero, in other *Lives* the saint's superiority to and separation from the warrior hero are emphasized by the inversion of the saga.

This kind of upending of the heroic paradigm in order to elevate the saint is seen in the way the punitive eel of Samthann's *vita* echoes the lusty Mórrígan, the latter the embodiment of a goddess offering sexual license and the former a call to sexual continence.<sup>26</sup> The aid Brigit and Féchín render to gluttonous strong men may signal the taming of pagan divinities or semi-divine heroes.<sup>27</sup> Narratives of illusory raiding and burning are another example; such visual fictions can be found in both saga and saintly biography, but where saga envisions the source of these phantasms as the powers of the otherworld, a saint's *Life* places that source in the hands of the holy Irish person whose salvific deceit is intended not to terrify but to protect.<sup>28</sup>

Among those characteristics shared by both the secular and the saintly hero are numerous liminal elements, the most significant traits of which can be found in stories of

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<sup>24</sup> Chapter two, pp. 61, 65–8, 74–7, 78–9, 80–83 and 91–3.

<sup>25</sup> Chapter three, pp. 145–6, 151–4; chapter four, pp. 231–3.

<sup>26</sup> Chapter three, pp. 153–4.

<sup>27</sup> Chapter four, pp. 217–20.

<sup>28</sup> Chapter four, pp. 236–7.

the parentage, conception and time or place of an eminent individual's nativity, a prevalence also noted by Kim McCone.<sup>29</sup> Both heroic warrior and hagiographical holy person also stand as mediators between the divine and mortal realms, as elucidated by, among others, Peter Brown, Stephen Wilson, Régis Boyer, Edmund Leach, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, Joseph Falaky Nagy, Dorothy Ann Bray and Kim McCone.<sup>30</sup> As individuals who are both a part of and yet apart from society, separated from ordinary mortals by the sanctifying power of the essence dwelling within them, holy men and women can be seen to draw upon a certain amount of the sacred nature of the liminal much as do the warrior protagonists of saga literature.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, however, it is not always or even usually necessary to seek explanations in the exploits of heroic saga for the use of liminality in framing sanctity, as there are plentiful instances when sufficient *exempla* may be found in scripture. Those rare saints born of adulterous unions, for example, may well share liminal traits with warrior counterparts, but they also have nativity stories very like that of Ishmael, whose birth to Abraham and his wife's servant, Hagar, is not only paralleled in some *Lives* in plot detail and outline but is also augmented by the commentary of early Irish exegesis.<sup>32</sup> Still more important is the model of Jesus Christ himself, the wholly human yet wholly divine son of both God and man. Indeed, it is in *imitatio Christi* that the Irish saint's identity as both entirely mortal and as sanctified other comes into the sharpest focus.

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter two, pp. 61–2, 83–4; McCone, *Pagan past*, 182–95.

<sup>30</sup> Chapter one, pp. 9–11, 13, 22–6; chapter two, pp. 61–2, 83–4. Also Brown: *Cult*, 6; “Rise” (1971), 97; *Authority*, 68–76. Wilson, “Introduction,” 2. Boyer, “Typology,” 31. Leach, *Genesis*, 10–11. Ó Cathasaigh: *Heroic biography*; “Between god and man”; “Concept of the hero.” Nagy: “Close encounters”; *Conversing with angels and ancients*; “Liminality and knowledge”; “Wisdom of the *geilt*.” Bray: “Heroic tradition”; *List of motifs*; “Miracles and wonders.” McCone, *Pagan past*, 182–95.

<sup>31</sup> See chapter one, pp. 9–10 and both Leach, *Genesis*, 10–11 and van Gennepe, *Rites of passage*, 18–20. Also Brown, *Cult*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter two, pp. 59–63; Gen. 16, 21:10; Gen. 17:15, *Reference Bible* §§295, 320, pp. 132, 143.

The evidence of scriptural precedent and parallel found throughout the *Lives*, from before conception to the saint's angelic greeting after death, makes plain that the ultimate source of Irish sanctity is God. The biographies of Ireland's holy show no signs of the Pelagian view that their subjects attained grace and sanctification through the correct exercise of human free will.<sup>33</sup> Instead, scriptural parallels and allusions in the *vitae* and *bethada* combine with the depictions of the transition of holiness from essence to human identity to firmly demonstrate that such holiness can only have emanated from heaven. The evidence thus agrees not with Pelagius but with his opponent, Augustine of Hippo.<sup>34</sup>

This rooting of sanctity in the divine is corroborated by the overall plot structure of each *Life*. Rather than conforming only to the heroic patterning observed by Dorothy Ann Bray, this structure—genealogy, foretold conception/birth/eminence, conception, birth, miracle-filled *acta*, death and welcomed return to heaven, all told in a timeless language of 'that time' or 'another day'—closely echoes the paradigm set by the *Gospel of Matthew*, a gospel Irish exegetes markedly preferred over the other Evangelists.<sup>35</sup> In fact, where Bray's outline is generally pieced together by gathering constituent elements from many *Lives*, the Matthean framework is found whole in nearly every individual *vita*

<sup>33</sup> Chapter one, p. 4; also Carney, *St. Augustine*, 32–5 and Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 71–5. I do not dismiss, however, the possibility that there may be other, lesser Pelagian influences in the *Lives*.

<sup>34</sup> Chapter one, pp. 3–4. Also chapter two, pp. 50–109. See further Carney, *St. Augustine*, 8–9, 38–48, 51–8.

<sup>35</sup> See chapter two, pp. 50–53, 55, 73–4, 84–7, 65–8, 105–6 for some of these hagiographical components. For the linguistic timelessness, refer to chapter two, p. 55–6, note 25. The narrative elements of the Matthean outline are: genealogy, Matt. 1:1–17; prophecy of Jesus' origins and eminence to Joseph, Matt. 1:20–21 (with 1:22–3 echoing the Isaian prophecy of a virgin conceiving the Messiah, Isa. 9:2–7); birth, Matt. 2:1; miracle-filled *acta*, Matt. 4–21; death, Matt. 27; (presumed) ascent into heaven, Matt. 28 (Jesus explicitly ascends into heaven in Mark 16:14 (Luke 24:51)). On the preference of Irish exegetes for the *Gospel of Matthew*, see Kelly, "Hiberno-Latin theology," 558–9 and "Das Bibelwerk," 115–22.

or *betha* that survives intact.<sup>36</sup> Not only, then, are the holy men and women of Ireland's *Lives* hagiographical heroes who trade traits with their saga counterparts, but they are also painted with pigments taken from the full sweep of scriptural precedent. Echoing *exempla* from both the Old and the New Testament, from the canon and from the apocrypha, and moving through *Lives* seemingly constructed as gospels of their sanctified subjects, Irish saints and the holiness they embody therefore demonstrate the continued vibrancy of a biblical tradition that lives on a new generation of Hibernian apostles.<sup>37</sup>

### Saint and society in the *Lives*

From the moment that a specific set of parents is selected to birth a new Irish saint, the holy essence dwelling in that saint begins to move through and affect the Irish society depicted in the *Lives*. Once the holy child is born, the influence exercised by his or her sanctity expands and, as observed in differing fashion by other scholars, his or her acts begin to shape an idealized image of a Christian Ireland led by the saint.<sup>38</sup> As the prior two chapters demonstrate, the punitive and curative deeds of the Irish holy provide ample evidence of the society envisioned by the writers of Ireland's *vitae* and *bethada*.

Both canon and vernacular legal codes provide important contributions to the portrayal of hagiographical Ireland, particularly in the prosecution of saintly vengeance.

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<sup>36</sup> Bray, "Heroic tradition," *List of motifs* and "Miracles and wonders." Also refer to chapter one, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Similar conclusions have been put forward regarding both Irish and non-Irish saints by, for instance: Bray, *List of motifs*, 10–11; Nagy, "Reproductions of Irish saints"; Foley, *Images of sanctity*, 40–42; Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the rhetoric of gender*, 32–4; O'Reilly, "Reading the scriptures," 80–106; O'Loughlin, "Reading Muirchú's Tara-event," 123–35; also chapter one, pp. 14, 25–6, 28–9.

<sup>38</sup> Bitel, *Isle of the saints*, 11–12 and "Saints and angry neighbors"; Bishop, "Sanctity as mirror", v–vi; Bray, "Malediction and benediction"; W. Davies, "Anger and the Celtic saint"; Carey, *Single ray of the sun*, 43–5; Herbert, "Observations on the Life of Molaga"; Steinberg, "Origins and role of the miracle-story," 37–45. Also see chapter one, pp. 23–4 and chapter three, pp. 110–114.

Once again echoing Delehayé's notion of the adaptability of sanctity to the culture, region and era producing its texts, the motion of holiness outward from the Irish saint is founded upon the tenets of religious and secular legal writings, and its acts both create and uphold the society defined by such laws.<sup>39</sup> Within this framework, the retaliatory and salvific works of the hagiographical saint make a clear political and social commentary that emphasizes the saint's position as the pinnacle of Irish authority.

According to the *Lives*, the judgments of their saintly subjects can condemn or elevate a dynasty, terminate or perpetuate a lineage, and debase or honor a chieftain or king, depending upon whether the holy person's action is punitive or curative.<sup>40</sup> Both retaliatory and salvific *miracula* criticize brigandage, blood feud and the involvement of noncombatants as collateral damage in acts of violence, whether through the retribution that befalls the guilty or through the healing granted to their victims.<sup>41</sup> The workings of holiness further serve to establish and vigorously defend the rights of the saint, the saint's dependents and the saint's holdings, often through the medium of legal terminology. Territorial trespass, physical or verbal assault, transgression of sanctuary or protection and denial of hospitality incur not only the punishment of the acts themselves but the exaction through those punishments of the fines and honor prices legally due for insult or injury to a holy person's reputation, person or property.<sup>42</sup>

Those who offer the saint the deference his or her rank demands, however, are rewarded with the salvific aid they seek. Hagiographical healing may restore lost

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<sup>39</sup> Chapter one, p. 7; Delehayé, *Sanctus*, 233, 240, 247. Also see chapter two, pp. 60–61, chapter three, pp. 161–82 and chapter four, pp. 241–8 for the appearance of legal elements in the *Lives*.

<sup>40</sup> Chapter three, pp. 122–3, 125–7, 130, 133, 137, 145–6, 168–9, 171, 177–8, 180–181; chapter four, pp. 193–4, 196–7, 206–10, 221–3, 225, 231–3, 236, 239.

<sup>41</sup> Chapter three, pp. 128–9, 136, 138, 173–5; chapter four, pp. 241–8.

<sup>42</sup> Chapter three, pp. 161–84.

faculties or mobility, cure illness, erase the consequences of sin, or protect followers from the threat of foes.<sup>43</sup> Saints may also disrupt hosts or individuals on the brink of combat or bring back the deceased, sometimes through the idiosyncratic method of reattaching severed heads.<sup>44</sup> The use of penance to redeem many who cross an Irish saint demonstrates a concern not as much with vengeance as correction; taken alongside the plentiful healing deeds in Ireland's hagiography, it becomes evident that generally, whether the holy person curses or cures, the goal is to showcase the saint's ability to preserve whole the body of Irish Christianity.

*Male and female sanctity in the Lives*

The examination of Irish holiness as it transitions from essence to embodiment now clearly reveals a gendered expression that begins even before the saints are born. Nearly all male saints are prophesied by both male and female sanctified, whether in advance of conception, while the saint is *in utero* or both. Holy Irishwomen, on the other hand, are not foreseen prior to conception but only once conceived. Sanctified females further merit such foretellings not from Christian colleagues but from druids; in the case of Brigit, this prognostication takes the form of a pronouncement made based upon the sound of her pregnant mother's chariot.<sup>45</sup> In the uncommon instances of a saint's conception without the contribution of a human father, of a mother who observes

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<sup>43</sup> Chapter four, pp. 186–205, 215–212 223, 227–37.

<sup>44</sup> Chapter four, pp. 224–7, 237–48.

<sup>45</sup> Chapter two, pp. 50–53, 73–7; it will be recalled that male saints, too, may be prophesied by the resonance of their mothers' chariot wheels, as on p. 74, but here the foretelling is as likely to be offered by a saint as by a druid.

gestational asceticism or of the birth of a saint without labor pangs, the resulting issue is invariably a boy, identifying these male saints as Irish echoes of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

Sanctified male children are sent away for their schooling, in keeping with general social practice in early Ireland. Girls, on the other hand, remain at home engaged in the expected domestic tasks of their gender—especially that of dairying—and are depicted simply knowing the tenets of religious life and of the Christian faith without receiving any form of education.<sup>47</sup> Only two holy women leave home to receive the sort of schooling normally reserved for boys, namely Monenna and Lasair, and for both women these events occur in late texts. Their learning and wisdom, moreover, increase at an accelerated rate not seen among their male peers either in their own *Lives* or in the texts of men.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the unusual accounts of male saints with preternatural knowledge place the source of such wisdom not in an innate understanding, as with their female counterparts, but in the receipt of lessons from heavenly instructors.<sup>49</sup> In the realms of education and expected tasks, then, sanctified Irish children generally operate within the standard social roles of each gender.

As adults, male saints may demonstrate the complete elimination of sexual desire by handling live embers without receiving any injury.<sup>50</sup> Other holy men must completely avoid temptation, removing themselves from even the sound of the opposite gender.<sup>51</sup> Sanctified women, on the other hand, do not avoid the sight of men, they avoid being seen, preventing their own bodies from leading others astray. While handsome male

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<sup>46</sup> Chapter two, pp. 65–8, 71–3, 84–7.

<sup>47</sup> Chapter two, pp. 91–4. Also see Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 87–91.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter two, pp. 92–3.

<sup>49</sup> Chapter two, p. 93, note 149.

<sup>50</sup> Chapter two, pp. 96–7.

<sup>51</sup> Chapter two, p. 97, note 165.

saints may elude or drive off amorous women, beautiful sanctified females cover or entirely transform their appearance.<sup>52</sup> These portrayals evince an attitude in which male sexuality is deemed to be active and extroverted, requiring control of its expression, while female sexuality is passive, introverted and attractive, demanding the alteration of others' perception.

In the *Lives* it is the men who are, in late and extraordinarily rare instances, so extremely abstemious that they become emaciated, their flesh putrefying on their living bones; the sole mention of a sanctified woman engaged in a similarly austere lifestyle occurs outside the *vitae* and *bethada*.<sup>53</sup> Where a *Life* provides information on the frailties of great age, the subject saint is always a man.<sup>54</sup> When death comes, it is again only male saints who are depicted—if uncommonly—allowing laymen, often specifically identified as brigands, to wash and lie down with the saint in order to depart for heaven at exactly the same moment as the holy man.<sup>55</sup> In each of these instances, the male saints so portrayed are participating in a profound form of *imitatio Christi*, their lifelong suffering or deathbed acts of mercy deeds that both mimic and share in the experiences of their savior.

The *miracula* enacted by saints in Ireland's *Lives* also show clear gender differences, particularly in the prosecution of vengeance, where women are generally associated with less flamboyant and fatal expressions of retaliation than are their masculine counterparts. An Irish holy woman's vengeful act is seldom deadly, for instance, but the retribution of her male colleague may condemn the guilty to

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<sup>52</sup> Chapter two, p. 97, note 165; chapter four, p. 223.

<sup>53</sup> Chapter two, pp. 102–3; the account regarding Íta occurs in the late twelfth-century commentary of the *Martyrology of Óengus*; see *Félire Óengusso* January 15, notes, pp. 42–5.

<sup>54</sup> Chapter two, pp. 104–5.

<sup>55</sup> Chapter two, pp. 105–6.



consumption into the earth, immolation by lightning or other awe-inspiring consequence.<sup>56</sup> Sanctified men are more often portrayed invoking punitive judgment through prayer, *troscud* or negative prophecy than are women; in fact, all three modes of vengeance are very uncommon in the *Lives* of female saints.<sup>57</sup> In keeping with the legal inability of women to own property outright, holy females are not involved in and do not need to punish property disputes, a common issue in the *vitae* and *bethada* of men; curiously there are also no cases in the *Lives* of female retaliation for physical assault or for the denial of due hospitality.<sup>58</sup>

Though emotional affect is rare for both male and female vengeful saints, it is more frequently the men who are roused, whether they are merely moved to displeasure or driven to a righteous fury.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, whatever the means by which retaliation occurs, penance is associated with Ireland's sanctified women nearly one and a half times as often as it is linked to their male colleagues.<sup>60</sup> From mode of retribution to manifest consequence, from instance of emotional response to permission of room for penance, portrayals of hagiographical vengeance consistently align the holy men of Ireland most strongly with the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament and with the apostles of the New, but only slightly with Christ.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, the sanctified females

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<sup>56</sup> Chapter three, pp. 126, 128–9, 151–2, 165–6.

<sup>57</sup> Chapter three, pp. 115–19, 120–122, 126, 132–5, 137, 139–40, 142–3, 145–6, 149. It will be recalled that *troscud* is the prosecution of a legal claim through fasting, prayer and vigil against a defendant who has not made proper recompense for a debt, despite all other attempts made by the plaintiff.

<sup>58</sup> Chapter three, pp. 168–9, 170–172, 175–82; note that Brigit, at least, is subjected to and appropriately avenges verbal assault, p. 163 and appendix, pp. 304. See also Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 104–5 regarding female inheritance and use—but not ownership—of land.

<sup>59</sup> Chapter three, pp. 156–7, 158–9.

<sup>60</sup> Chapter three, pp. 115–16, 118, 120, 122, 123, 155–8, 157. Female saints leave room for penance 44% of the time, while male saints do so in only 30% of their retaliatory episodes.

<sup>61</sup> Chapter three, pp. 155–7.

who are associated with punitive *miracula* have more subtle Old Testament ties, and instead tend to be closely modeled on the paradigm of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>62</sup>

Salvific *acta* in the *Lives* of Ireland's saints are also gendered, but here the distinction is less starkly defined. While both men and women perform much the same curative deeds, following as they do so the example of Christ and the apostles, there are some differences in how cures are made to occur. To make matters more complicated, Brigit's healing works make her an unusual member of her saintly sorority. Although other female saints do not cleanse lepers or expel demons, for instance, both acts common to the *Lives* of the men, Brigit does; Brigit heals nearly every disease or disability, in fact, and she often does so considerably more frequently than any other saint.<sup>63</sup> The only exception to this rule is the resurrection of the human dead, an act other females undertake but Brigit does not.<sup>64</sup>

Brigit and the male saints of Ireland each in their own way transform liquid. Where the male saints turn water into wine, not to heal but to provide for a feast, Brigit produces a potent and curative draught of ale or milk, simultaneously both following the example of Christ at Cana—as do the men—and fulfilling an Irishwoman's expected duties of dairying or brewing.<sup>65</sup> While Brigit and her masculine peers cure leprosy in

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<sup>62</sup> Chapter three, pp. 157–8.

<sup>63</sup> Chapter four, pp. 188, 190, 193–4, 198, 204, 208–9, 212–14, 218 for example.

<sup>64</sup> Chapter four, p. 240; see below for more.

<sup>65</sup> Chapter four, pp. 194, 212–13; also Ó Corráin, “Women in early Irish society” and Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 87. See *Vita S Finiani* (Salamanca) 27, p. 104; *Vita prior S Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 56, p. 143; *Vita S Aedi* (Salamanca) 12, p. 171 and *Vita S Aidi* (Dublin) 8, *VSH* 1, 37 and *Vita S Colmani episcopi Dromorensis* (Salamanca) 7, pp. 358–9. Though there are instances where male saints produce milk or cheese, again it is not for healing, nor is it usually a transformative act. It is instead a miracle of multiplication, and the milk is often still intoxicating, as in the *Vita prior Lugidi seu Moluae* (Salamanca) 46, p. 141, for instance. In a rare case of a holy man producing ale from water, the miracle is performed because the ale of a female saint, Camna, is spilled by her servant; the sanctified man who is her guest, Colmán Élo, transforms the water to ale to avoid offending his hostess. *Vita S Colmani abbatis de Land Elo* (Salamanca) 45, p. 223 and (Dublin) 31, *VSH* 1, 271. Only one female saint, Monenna, is associated with the alteration of water into wine, and here again it is provided to allow her hostess to adequately provide

very similar ways, the same cannot be said of the methods used for expelling demons, both curative acts that follow the steps and the commands of Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup> Where Irish holy men must pray, physically probe the possessed, command the diabolical occupier to depart, sign the afflicted with the cross or enact some combination of these gestures, Brigit expends much less effort.<sup>67</sup> Far from such involved workings, Brigit need only provide a foot wash, apparently evoking not only the cleansing baptismal rite women could not perform but also the humility of Christ, or be seen on the horizon in order for demonic squatters to flee.<sup>68</sup> Brigit's healing works, in company with many other deeds in her *Life*, show that she is more than capable of performing the salvific works of her male counterparts and of Christ.<sup>69</sup> It would seem Brigit simply elects not to do so where it would either be inappropriate for a woman or where to do so is made unnecessary by her sanctified skill.<sup>70</sup>

Nowhere is this treatment of Brigit's abilities more apparent than in the realm of resurrection. Despite the presence of numerous revivificatory episodes in the *Lives* of

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for the saintly guest. *Vita S Darercae seu Moninnae* (Salamanca) 15, pp. 87–8 and Conchubranus, *Vita S Monennae* 2.1, Esposito, 217; USMLS, pp. 118–19.

<sup>66</sup> Chapter four, pp. 197–9, 211–13; also Matt. 10:8–10, Mark 3:15, Luke 9:1–7, 10:9.

<sup>67</sup> Chapter four, pp. 212–13.

<sup>68</sup> Chapter four, pp. 212–13; also see John 13:3–9.

<sup>69</sup> Chapter four, pp. 188, 193–4, 208–9 for example; also p. 194, note 33.

<sup>70</sup> Lisa Bitel, in a recent monograph, *Landscape with two saints: how Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare built Christianity in barbarian Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially 134–5, asserts that Brigit's *vita* as written by Cogitosus portrays the saint altering the ways in which women moved on the early medieval landscape of Ireland; Bitel calls Brigit's behavior "distinctly unwomanly." In fact, Brigit most particularly of the holy females of early Irish Christianity very closely conforms not to some unusual outline of sanctified femininity that defies the expected actions of women in medieval Ireland, but to the laws and social standards of her time and locale. The evidence of Brigit's *Lives*, particularly as reviewed here, demonstrate that while Bitel is correct that Brigit stood out in her landscape, and while she did have a strong role to play in the christianization of Leinster and its immediate environs, on the whole Brigit avoids most of the more masculine activities and *miracula* that would make her "distinctly unwomanly." Brigit's daily tasks and works of wonder firmly depict her as a paragon of Irish Christian femininity, fulfilling the expected domestic and religious duties of a devout female within the laws and mores of early Ireland. She does not defy the law, she upholds it; though the power and influence she wields is unusual, an influence amply supported by the plethora of *lives* in her dossier (as opposed to the mere one or two texts for each of the other rare female saints of early Ireland), it is her unusualness that makes her such an excellent model of proper Irish womanhood within the Christian paradigm.

male saints, and of instances in the *Lives* of other holy women, Brigit does not restore dead humans to life.<sup>71</sup> Instead, the curative *miracula* of Ireland's première sanctified female obviate any necessity to return breath to the wrongly deceased, because Brigit's followers do not appear to become the unjustly dead. Brigit heals the sick and incapacitated much more frequently than any other saint, preventing numerous of the afflicted from dying of their ailments.<sup>72</sup> Brigit's salvific metamorphosis also averts the homicide and decapitation of those in her community five times, a number much higher than is associated with her colleagues.<sup>73</sup> She does not, therefore, have to reattach any severed heads, and indeed there are no Brigidine instances of recapitulation. Women certainly can and do revivify and recapitate, if less commonly than the men, as evidenced in the *Lives* of Monenna and Íta.<sup>74</sup> It seems that rather than Brigit being unable to resurrect or recapitate either due to a lack of sufficient power or due to her femininity, she simply precludes the need, forestalling outright the deaths that so many other saints are depicted reversing.

### *The saint in Latin and in Irish*

The language in which a holy person's texts are written also plays a significant role in the depictions of sanctity's motion through hagiographical society. Further, this linguistic influence shows some gendering. As with the overall question of male or

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<sup>71</sup> Chapter four, pp. 237–48.

<sup>72</sup> Chapter four, pp. 188, 190, 193–4, 198–9, 204, 208–9, 212–13, 218.

<sup>73</sup> Chapter four, pp. 234–6. Most saints who prevent such killings do so only once or twice; for some examples see chapter four, pp. 230–232, 235–7.

<sup>74</sup> Chapter four, pp. 240–241, 246–7. As just mentioned, Brigit also elsewhere performs many Christological miracles, such as food multiplication and the healing of lepers. See for example chapter four, pp. 193–4, 208–9 particularly; also see p. 194, note 33.

female holiness, the defining traits of Latin and Irish sanctity are most readily discernible in the realm of saintly vengeance.

Both holy men and sanctified women are most often associated with retaliatory episodes in Latin texts. Male saints, however, have a slightly higher proportion of Latin to Irish cases (7:3) than do their female colleagues (6:4). Holy Irishmen summon retribution through prayer and *troscud* more often in the *vitae* than in the *bethada*, but pronounce malediction an equal number of times in both languages. Female saints, by contrast, never use prayer or *troscud* in the *bethada*, but curse outright three times more often in Irish than in Latin. Women make no negative prophecies in the vernacular; men do, but Irish instances only account for one third of all maledictory forecasts by male saints. While passive retaliatory judgment is more common in Latin for both genders, the ratio of instances in the *vitae* to those in the *bethada* is markedly greater for sanctified men (9:2) than for their female peers (7:3).

It has been observed that Ireland's holy women allow room for those who are punished to make penitential satisfaction with greater frequency than do their male counterparts.<sup>75</sup> Further, whereas holy women permit penance in more than half of their Latin and in one quarter of their vernacular vengeance anecdotes, men are depicted granting mercy in only one third of the retribution narratives in their *vitae*, and a minuscule six percent of the punitive deeds in their *bethada*. Finally, while male saints are roused to retaliatory wrath more often than are women, for both genders the intensity of emotional response is hotter in Irish than in Latin.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See p. 263 above.

<sup>76</sup> Once again, see chapter three, pp. 115–16, 118, 120, 122, 123, 155–8.

The distinctions visible between Irish and Latin portrayals of holy individuals, especially where they further elucidate masculine and feminine sanctity, likely find some explanation in the expected audiences of the *vitae* and the *bethada*. The general trend of scholarship to this point has been to view Latin texts as intended only for Ireland's monastic elite, while vernacular works have been seen as written for a wider monastic and lay audience.<sup>77</sup> The present evidence, however, suggests that this duality is an oversimplification. It is clear that the *vitae* and *bethada* were each composed for recipients able to understand both the language of the texts and the models of holiness employed in either Latin or Irish. To restrict the targeted populations to either monastic or lay folk, or even to Ireland's shores, though, may well be a mistake.

On the one hand, there can be little question that the *vitae* were written with the expectation that they would be transmitted to those who knew Latin, but there is no need to assume that only the monastic elite were so trained. Monasteries in Ireland were centers of education, and there is evidence to suggest that the Irish lay nobility were taught basic Latinity alongside those students intent upon a religious life.<sup>78</sup> The *Lives*—both in Latin and in Irish—have been shown, for example, to contain the particular terminologies of property rights, reciprocal patronage and service agreements, and privileges concerning gifts, taxes and tributes that illustrate the proper relationship between ecclesiastical and secular leadership.<sup>79</sup> Punitive and salvific acts can also now be seen to support the assertion that the *Lives* depict an idealized image of Christian Ireland,

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<sup>77</sup> See for example: Kenney, *Sources*, 303; Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 210; Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 22–3; Herbert, “Hagiography,” 86–8.

<sup>78</sup> See the comments of McCone, *Pagan past*, ix and 1.

<sup>79</sup> Doherty, “Some aspects,” especially 304–11, 313–20.

often through the medium of legal language.<sup>80</sup> This image would essentially be preaching to the converted, and would therefore have little point, if it were intended for an audience composed solely of clerics. It seems unlikely that Ireland's hagiographers would include the elaborate legal and political imagery of the *vitae* were not at least some of the lay nobility to whom such imagery would be immediately relevant also able to understand the Latin texts.

Furthermore, by virtue of their language alone *vitae* could be and were transmitted both beyond the Irish Sea and across the English Channel. Many of the *vitae* of Ireland's saints were known and disseminated on the Continent, including the *Vita II* and *Vita IV* of Patrick, Adomnán's *Vita S Columbae*, Cogitosus' *Vita S Brigitae* and the *Vita I S Brigitae*.<sup>81</sup> The Oxford *vitae*, for their part, were preserved in England.<sup>82</sup> It is likely, then, that Ireland's hagiographers knew that their Latin works could travel, and may have actually written with that in mind, a possibility supported by the presence in the *vitae* of numerous translations of Irish placenames and poems into Latin for those unable to comprehend the vernacular of Ireland.<sup>83</sup>

The Latin depictions of Ireland's saints, therefore, had to accomplish three goals: to demonstrate the correct order of society for an Irish audience composed of both ecclesiastics and noble laity, to conform to expected social norms for men and women in medieval Ireland and to exemplify proper relations not only between ecclesiastical and

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<sup>80</sup> See chapter three, pp. 117, 163–82 and chapter four, pp. 242–8 for examples.

<sup>81</sup> Bieler, *Four Latin Lives*, 7–12; Byrne and Francis, "Two Lives," 8–10; Picard, "Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*"; Connolly and Picard, "Cogitosus' *Life of St. Brigit*," 5–6; Connolly, "*Vita prima Sanctae Brigitae*," 5–6.

<sup>82</sup> See chapter one, p. 36, note 117.

<sup>83</sup> For just a few instances, see *Vita S Abbani* (Salamanca) 5, p. 258, where *Beg Erin* is translated into *Parva Hibernia*; (Salamanca) 12, pp. 262–3 and (Dublin) 17, *VSH* 1, 14 in which an invocation to Abbán is given first in Irish, then in Latin; *Vita S Cronani* (Salamanca) 7, p. 276 and (Dublin) 7, *VSH* 2, Latin; in which *Lus Mag* is rendered as *Herbosus Campus* (Salamanca) or *Holerous Campus* (Dublin); and *Vita S Carthagi siue Mochutu* (Dublin) 8, *VSH* 1, 172, where *Achad Dian* is given in Latin as *Ager Uelox*.

secular leadership but also between each church and its congregation. More than that, the saints of the *vitae* needed to align with more universal notions of sanctity or risk being labeled either irrelevant or heterodox by non-Irish audiences unable to resonate with them. For these reasons, it seems, holy women in Latin works seldom curse, rarely display temper and then only to become displeased, and both allow penance and perform many types of healings more often than the men. Further, for the saints of both genders it is not the flashy active portrayals of vengeance that dominate in the *vitae*, it is passive retaliatory judgment, while penitential mercy is included with greater frequency than in the *bethada*. Acts of exorcism, curative erasure of the effects of sin and salvific metamorphosis are found far more commonly in Latin than in Irish.<sup>84</sup>

Vernacular *Lives*, by contrast, only needed to appeal to the Irish, whatever their standing in society. Though there are *bethada* that have traveled, by and large they appear to have done so quite late in the era, and then to have remained in close association with Irish communities abroad, such as the *Schottenkloster* of Louvain.<sup>85</sup> The hagiographers of the *bethada* seem to have been vastly more comfortable portraying their saintly subjects wreaking holy havoc when needed. In the *vitae* of Patrick, for instance, there are only twenty-four retribution episodes; in the *Bethu Phátraic*, on the other hand, there are at least fifty cases of vengeance, most of which are not drawn from the *Bethu*'s Patrician predecessors. It is also in the vernacular texts that Brigit's malediction becomes lethal, Lasair levels her opponents with righteous rage, male saints express heated

<sup>84</sup> Chapter four, pp. 210–213, 215–18, 221–37.

<sup>85</sup> A number of extant *bethada* were copied and preserved on the Continent in the 1600s by monks like Michael O'Clery, who devoted themselves to saving what they saw as the last vestiges of an Irish culture thought to be dying under the onslaught of English domination and plantation. O'Clery produced most of his manuscripts at Louvain; they have largely been preserved in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale. See for instance MS 2324-40, in which are found *bethada* of Mac Creiche, Coemgen, Colmán Élo, Abbán, Finbarr and Mochutu; see also MS 4190-200, where *bethada* of Berach, Brendán, Ciarán of Saigir, Rúadán and Mochutu survive. Plummer, *Miscellanea*, 7 and *BNÉ* 1, xi–xiii.



tempers and penance becomes much scarcer, especially in the punitive anecdotes of holy men.<sup>86</sup> It is furthermore in the *bethada* that the sanctified of either gender summon vengeful judgment through more direct means, as the number of passive retaliation cases account for only a fraction of vernacular saintly punishments.

Though the saints of the *bethada* still exemplify the expected roles for their genders and their society, though they still embody the proper relationship of church and community, ecclesiastic and lay, there is less need to conform to an ideal of holiness that might appeal to anyone aside from the Irish themselves. It would seem that vernacular hagiography was aimed at Irish Christians of any rank or station. Its saintly subjects were thus expected to be more active, and more proactive, than their Latin counterparts who, unlike the holy men and women of the *bethada*, might have an international audience.

#### *The place of Moses in the Lives*

Critically, both the *vitae* and the *bethada* reflect an Ireland in which apocryphal and canonical scriptures are both accorded the status of holy writings, and thus both become sources of *exempla* for sanctity. Further, these *exempla* grant considerable standing to Moses and to Mosaic Law, particularly in the realm of hagiographical retribution. In keeping with Jesus' teaching that his message perfects but does not abolish the Laws of the Pentateuch, the models of holiness in the *Lives* do not set aside either the

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<sup>86</sup> For Brigit's deadly malediction, see *Bethu Brigitte* anecdote 7, pp. 18–19, 35. Notably the language used here is legalistic. When a miller refuses to grind grain for Brigit's cook two times, and at the third try casts the grain into the millpond, "She cursed the miller and the mill and invoked of God destruction for both" (*Ro-mallach-sí in saer ocus in muilend ocus ro-attaig Dia imma ndilgend dib línaiib*). *Dib línaiib* (*dá línai* in the nominative) is a legal term for 'both parties' (*lín*), implying a greater degree of autonomy for the Brigit of the *bethu* than is apparent in her *vitae*. The episode is unique to this ninth-century text. See chapter three, p. 158 for Lasair's fury; see also pp. 155–6 for the examples of saintly wrath in the vengeance tales of holy Irishmen.

former for the latter or the latter for the former.<sup>87</sup> This ongoing respect appears to treat Mosaic Law as a living tradition; such a possibility is corroborated by the founding of both the secular and the canon law texts of the Irish Middle Ages upon the principles of the Pentateuch.<sup>88</sup>

Support for a living Mosaic Law is further suggested by a mytho-historical poem of the ninth century, which reveals that Gaedel, the eponymous ancestor of the Irish, knew Moses in Egypt. This same Gaedel then led his tribespeople, the Gaels, through trial, tribulation, settlement and expulsion to their promised land—Ireland.<sup>89</sup> The twelfth-century *Lebor Gabála Érenn* elaborates on this narrative lineage, drawing so closely upon the Old Testament that the story of the Israelites is only barely prevented from becoming that of the Gaels.<sup>90</sup> This pseudo-history even finds its way into the Dublin *vita* of Abbán.<sup>91</sup> The Irish saints of the *Lives* thus receive traits of sanctity from the whole spread of a scriptural history that was seen as a preview for the story of the Irish as a chosen people; the sanctified then reflect back to the audiences of their *vitae* and *bethada* proof not only that the message of the Bible continues in the persons of the holy men and

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<sup>87</sup> Matt. 5:17–20 (Luke 16:16–17).

<sup>88</sup> Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, “Laws of the Irish”; also Ó Corráin, “Irish law and canon law” and “Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament.” Further see Thomas Charles-Edwards, “Early Irish law,” in *A new history of Ireland volume I: prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 258–60 for a discussion of the parallels between *Cáin Sóerraithe* (law of the free fief) and the Pentateuch.

<sup>89</sup> The poem in question, *Can a mBunadus na nGaedel?* (Whence the origin of the Gael?), is edited by R. I. Best and M. A. O’Brien, *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebor na Núachongbála*, vol. 3 (Dublin: DIAS, 1957), 516–23; a summary of its contents can be found in McCone, *Pagan past*, 24, 68. McCone also discusses the relationship between Irish law and the scriptures, pp. 85–104.

<sup>90</sup> §§118–20, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Érenn: the book of the taking of Ireland*, vol. 2 (1939; reprint, Dublin: ITS, 1986), 32–5. Macalister also provides a table of the Pentateuch exodus alongside the Irish origin story in his introduction, presenting the plots in parallel and demonstrating unequivocally their extremely close correspondence. See vol. 1 (1938; reprint, London: ITS, 1993), xxvii–viii. Further analysis also by McCone, *Pagan past*, 29–30, 68–77. See additionally John Hennig, “The literary tradition of Moses in Ireland,” *Traditio* 7 (1949–50): 233–61; reprinted in *Medieval Ireland, saints and martyrologies*, ed. Michael Richter (Northampton: Variorum Reprints, 1989), III, for the history of the veneration of Moses in early Ireland.

<sup>91</sup> *Vita S Abbani* 1, *VSH* 1, 3.

women of Ireland, but also that these saints stand at the head of a society the framework of which is the ongoing authority of scripture.

### **Additional avenues of exploration**

No study can accomplish everything, and this examination is no exception. The evidence presented and discussed in the preceding chapters illuminates many elements of the hagiographical construction and understanding of holiness, as well as of the ways in which holiness affects the society of the *Lives*. The result has been an image both of the idealized Ireland depicted in the *vitae* and *bethada* and of the expected real-world interactions between church and community. A number of potential paths for further work based upon this evidence are also now apparent. Such possible avenues may be loosely divided into broader studies that encompass either large sections of the genre or of general components within it, and dossier analyses, which consider only specific saints by delving into the particulars of the *Lives* that commemorate them.

#### *Broad studies*

Of particular importance for future work is a more detailed analysis of the role of apocryphal writings in the literature of medieval Ireland. In the preceding discussion, consideration of specific textual parallels between the *Lives* of Irish saints and apocrypha such as the *Assumption of the Virgin*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Life of Adam and Eve* or the *Acts of Andrew* shows that, to Ireland's hagiographers, apocryphal scriptures were accorded a place in the lexicon of holy writings and not dismissed as irrelevant or heretical. The appearance of apocryphal correspondences in datable *Lives*

has also provided some insight into the transmission to Ireland of certain works. But what are the full chronological horizons for the appearance of each apocryphal parallel? Are these texts limited to particular centuries, or to *Lives* of a specific region or language? Are the motifs that are taken into earlier hagiographical works adapted as they are assumed from one *Life* to the next over time? How are Irish variants of the apocryphal scriptures altered from those that were transmitted to Irish shores? Do Irish versions see more reference in the *vitae* and *bethada* than their non-Irish cousins? Further, how might those scriptures have influenced or inspired elements of early Irish heroic saga?

The prior chapters have largely focused upon those *Lives* already edited and available in print, but the majority of the Oxford *vitae* remain in manuscript form only. For students of Ireland's hagiography who lack ready access to the vellum texts, the only option is then to rely upon Plummer's admittedly extensive *apparatus criticus* for the ways in which the Oxford texts differ from those in Dublin. Given that many saints' dossiers contain *vitae* found first in Salamanca, then adapted and included in Dublin and ultimately redacted for compilation in Oxford, a comparison of the present evidence with those Oxford works as yet unedited may reveal more concerning both the embodiment and the motion of holiness in the society of hagiographical Ireland.<sup>92</sup>

Earlier arguments in this chapter suggest that the *Life* of an Irish saint follows a structural outline very similar to that of the *Gospel of Matthew*, putting its sanctified subject through paces deliberately selected to evoke an echo both of the Matthean Messiah and of those whose lives and prophecies he fulfills.<sup>93</sup> The exact nature of these

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<sup>92</sup> It also goes without saying that the edition and printing of these neglected Oxford *vitae* would prove invaluable for scholars interested in seeing the texts as integral works rather than having to piece them together from Plummer's *apparatus*.

<sup>93</sup> See pp. 257–8 above. Also see chapter two, pp. 55–6 and note 25.

paralleled biographical outlines would repay close analysis; particular attention should be given to the use of specifically Matthean (as opposed to, for instance, Johannine) citations and allusions throughout the *Lives*, rather than retaining a focus limited to instances noted only within the themes examined in the preceding chapters. It may further prove illuminating to present a parallel textual examination between *Matthew* and a selected group of *Lives*, both Latin and Irish.<sup>94</sup> On a related tack, the present study has occasionally turned to exegetical writings for explanation or corroboration of facets of the *vitae* and *bethada*, and especially of their treatment of the workings of sanctity.<sup>95</sup> A more cautious and focused assessment of the *Life* of an Irish saint as itself not only a Matthean-style gospel but also as a form of exegesis may also offer additional insight into the traits of holiness.

An important section of Chapter Two assesses the lineage of Ireland's sanctified men and women, and pays particular attention to their reported nobility.<sup>96</sup> The assertion made there that noble descent is a key element of Irish sanctity does not, however, take into consideration potential reasons that a lineage might claim a familial tie to a saint. Of what monetary, social, religious or legal benefit would there have been for dynasties whose family trees included a holy man or woman? Was such a claim a means of augmenting the dynasty's secular power? Or was it an attempt to prove tribute rights against the saint's foundation?<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> I intend to pursue this project in future work.

<sup>95</sup> Chapter two, pp. 60–61, 64–5, and 72 note 81; chapter three, p. 134, note 82 and p. 145 note 119; chapter four, pp. 189–90, p. 195 note 38, 202, 205.

<sup>96</sup> See pp. 53–8.

<sup>97</sup> I have recently learned that Dorothy Africa is pursuing a very similar avenue of study; to my knowledge, however, she has not yet published her work.

As also explored in Chapter Two, one of the ways in which the presence of the wholly other is made manifest in the holy body of the *Lives* is through the alteration of ordinary mortal endurance so that incredible religious austerities can be withstood.<sup>98</sup> The most severe instances, it is observed, are those which occur only in *Lives* that can be dated either to or after the late twelfth century, and therefore place after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the 1170s.<sup>99</sup> A thorough exposition of the new religious influences present in Ireland from that decade onward is likely to provide clues into the inspirations for the dramatic and grotesque self-mortification seen in such episodes. Do these cases of extreme emaciation and physiological degradation find roots either in Anglo-Norman material or in the writings that accompanied the continental monastic orders brought to Ireland as the foreigners settled? Or might the beginnings of such depictions actually be found earlier in the 1100s, in the considerable religious and ecclesiastical reforms enacted in the Ireland of that era?<sup>100</sup>

### *Dossier analyses*

It has been observed in this study that the *vita* of Áed mac Bricc and the *Vita I S Brigitae* show several signs of competition with each other, a tension which may reflect an ongoing rivalry not only between their foundations at Killary and Kildare but also between their patrons, the Uí Néill and the Uí Dúnlainge.<sup>101</sup> An exploration of the historical conflicts involving the two churches and their supporting dynasties would elucidate the complex networks of power and patronage that both supported and, in a

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<sup>98</sup> See pp. 97–103.

<sup>99</sup> Chapter two, pp. 102–3 and particularly note 186.

<sup>100</sup> I intend to pursue this matter in future research.

<sup>101</sup> Chapter two, pp. 80–82, and pp. 81–2 note 111.

sense, defined monastic settlements like Killary and Kildare. Such research also offers the promise of further adding to the overall image of holiness and its interaction, through the person of the saint, with the society that identifies and venerates its presence in a sanctified human.<sup>102</sup>

In a similar fashion, it has been noted several times that the Fintán of Taghmon portrayed in his Salamanca *Vita prior* is not very flatteringly presented. Unlike either his Dublin or even his Salamanca *Vita altera*, the *Vita prior* depicts Fintán as crotchety, brusque, and almost altogether unsaintly.<sup>103</sup> Why is this portrait so unkind? An examination of such elements of the *vita*'s origins as date and location of composition, as well as of the historical milieu at the time of the *vita*'s creation, might provide clues to help answer this query. Was the *vita* written by someone who looked upon Taghmon unfavorably? Had the saint or his successors at that community alienated their ecclesiastical colleagues in some fashion? The solutions to such issues may well further illuminate not only the reasons for Fintán's unusual character but also the events of the time and place in which it was composed.

These are only a few of the possible research projects that may draw upon the present discussion. Much work remains to be done in the world of Ireland's hagiography, whether that is taken to include only the *Lives* or follows a more expansive definition of the texts related to saints, as outlined in Chapter One.<sup>104</sup> It is hoped that the material presented here has provided a different perspective on the medieval Irish conception of

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<sup>102</sup> I have begun preliminary work on this project.

<sup>103</sup> See chapter two, pp. 89–91 and p. 97 note 165; chapter four, p. 196; also see my comment, chapter two, p. 91, note 141.

<sup>104</sup> See pp. 31–2. For a relatively recent exposition of numerous additional avenues hagiology could pursue, see Herbert, "Hagiography."

sanctity, of the wholly other, the holy body and the position of the saint in the Ireland both within and outside of the *Lives*.

### **In conclusion**

The motion of holiness as it coalesces into the person of the Irish saint and then travels outward to affect hagiographical society is amply represented in the *Lives* of Ireland's sanctified. It is expressed in the circumstances of a saint's conception, birth, maturation, physical and intellectual ability, punitive and salvific *acta* and death. As the *vitae* and *bethada* flesh out the incarnation of the wholly other into the holy body using allusions to saga, to saint and especially to scripture, it becomes plain that the sanctified men and women of medieval Ireland's saintly biographies are marked by an inborn essence that can only have arisen in heaven.

Irish saints are both explicitly and implicitly aligned with figures from throughout the entirety of the biblical narrative, from patriarch to apostle, yet the core image upon which they are molded is that of the Messiah. Their portraits treat the tenets of Mosaic Law as a vital component of Irish Christianity and respect as sacred the word not only of canonical but also of apocryphal texts. As heirs to this full scriptural dispensation, hagiographical holy men and women thus wield a power and authority received from God through their Old and New Testament forebears, which they utilize to uphold Irish canon and secular law, to defend and maintain the integrity of the Irish body Christian and, ultimately, to shape and direct an idealized Ireland perfected in the image of Christ and his sanctified Irish disciples. Human yet holy, Irish saints testify to the continued presence and workings of the divine in the world; their deeds a demonstration of the



ongoing fulfillment of biblical history, they stride from their *Lives* as Irish personifications of the living Christian faith.

## APPENDIX

### *Towards the dating of Vita I S Brigitae*

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#### **The text itself**

The *Vita I S Brigitae* is so titled not due to any chronological or textual superiority, but simply because the Bollandists placed it as the first *vita* of Saint Brigit of Kildare in the *Acta Sanctorum* compilation of Latin *Lives*.<sup>1</sup> Though a more recent critical edition of the extant manuscripts of the *Vita I* has been completed by Seán Connolly, the edition itself remains unpublished; Connolly has, however, printed a translation of that work.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere this same scholar has examined the manuscript tradition of the *Vita I*, and there pronounces the extant materials “essentially West German,” the surviving copies dating from the ninth through the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> According to Connolly, the “earliest and best manuscript” places to approximately 850 CE but, he emphasizes, this is not the *vita*’s archetype.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the *Vita I* shares a close textual relationship with a macaronic *Life* of Brigit, the *Bethu Brigte*, which also places to the middle of the ninth

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<sup>1</sup> *Februarius I*, cols 0118F–0135A (Brussels, 1658).

<sup>2</sup> “*Vita prima Sanctae Brigitae*: background and historical value,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland [JRSAI]* 119 (1989): 5–49. Connolly’s edition was the basis of his dissertation, “A critical edition of *Vita I Sanctae Brigitae* with linguistic commentary” (National University of Ireland, 1969–70). For the published Latin text, it is still necessary to rely upon the *Acta Sanctorum*; references throughout this essay provide the *Acta* citation first, followed by the chapter and page location in Connolly’s translation. All translations from Latin are my own unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes.

<sup>3</sup> Seán Connolly, “The authorship and manuscript tradition of *Vita I Sanctae Brigitae*,” *Manuscripta* 16 vol. 2 (1972): 67–82; citation p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> London, British Museum MS Additional 34121; “Authorship,” 68.

century. The archetype of the Latin *Life*, therefore, must antedate both extant works and fall prior to 800 CE.<sup>5</sup>

Though there is broad acceptance that the origins of the *Vita I* must be older than the ninth-century *Bethu Brigitte*, no such accord exists with respect to another text with which the *Vita I* possesses elements in common. This work, the *Vita S Brigitae* as written by Cogitosus, is printed immediately following the *Vita I* (the author of which remains anonymous) in the *Acta Sanctorum* and is thus sometimes also designated the *Vita II S Brigitae*.<sup>6</sup> General scholastic opinion does agree that Cogitosus produced his *vita* of Brigit sometime in the third quarter of the seventh century, roughly between 650 and 675.<sup>7</sup> The question that does not seem to have been answered to everyone's satisfaction, however, is whether Cogitosus wrote before or after the *Vita I* was compiled, and whether either text drew upon the contents of the other directly or each independently used a now-lost third *Life*.

It is this question the present work attempts to address. Based not only upon the arguments of previous scholars but also upon some new textual evidence, it is argued that Cogitosus did not take material directly from the *Vita I S Brigitae*. This essay reviews the current field of debate, then assesses the similarities between the *Vita I* and a homiletic text of reasonably firm seventh-century date, the *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* (Concerning the twelve abuses of the world), and proposes that these affinities make it unlikely Cogitosus could have known of the *Vita I* when he penned his own

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<sup>5</sup> Connolly, "Authorship," 68. Also see the introduction to the *Bethu* as edited and translated by Donncha Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS), 1978), ix, xiv–xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Seán Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard have critically edited the Cogitosus *vita*, but again the Latin remains unpublished. For an English translation of that edition see "Cogitosus' *Life of St. Brigit*: content and value," *JRSAI* 117 (1987): 5–27. For the Latin text it remains necessary to repair to *Acta Sanctorum* Februius I, cols 0135B–0141E.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Connolly and Picard, "Cogitosus," 5.

commemoration of Brigit.<sup>8</sup> An additional reference found in the *Vita I* is then considered as a potential dating clue. It is concluded that while a source text held in common by the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte* known as the *vita primitiva* may have been a contemporary of the Cogitosus *vita*, the *Vita I* itself cannot be any earlier than the first decades of the eighth century.

### The debate over the date

The question of dating the *Vita I* is less about which *vita*, the anonymous work or that of Cogitosus, drew upon the other, or whether the two *vitae* separately used a third source now vanished, and more about which text was written first. Naturally, the debaters on this issue fall into two camps, one arguing for the greater antiquity of the *Vita I* and the other as fervently determined to show Cogitosus to be the oldest extant *Life* not only of Brigit but of any Irish saint. As the proponents of the primacy of the *Vita I S Brigitae* include the first scholars to comment upon Brigit's overall dossier, it is to this position attention now turns.

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<sup>8</sup> The most useful published edition of *De duodecim* is that of Siegmund Hellmann, "Pseudo-Cyprianus: *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 34 (1909): 1–60. Aidan Breen has also edited the text, but his edition and translation remain unpublished; see "Towards a critical edition of *De XII abusivis*: introductory essays with a provisional edition of the text and accompanied by an English translation" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity College, Dublin, 1988). References in this essay give Hellmann's text first, followed by that of Breen. Breen has printed his dissertation essays on the sources and dating of *De duodecim*. In "Pseudo-Cyprian *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* and the Bible," in *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 230–231, Breen agrees with the prior assessment of James Kenney and accords *De duodecim* a chronology of 630 x 650. In "*De XII abusivis*: text and transmission," in *Irland und Europa im Frühmittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 82–4, Breen slightly modifies this dating more toward the latter terminus, and assigns *De duodecim* to the middle of the seventh century.

*The Vita I as prior*

Among the first to examine the Brigidine texts was Mario Esposito, who considered that Cogitosus wrote his *vita* of Brigit around 670 CE; in comparison to the elegance and innovation of Cogitosus and of Muirchú—who in his *Vita S Patricii* hails Cogitosus as a pioneer in the world of Ireland’s hagiographical writing and thereby dates his own work after that of the man he calls his father—Esposito saw the *Vita I* as a “primitive and crudely compiled collection of miracles in rustic Latin.”<sup>9</sup> Comparing Cogitosus and the *Vita I* further, Esposito asserts that “of the 30 miracles related by Cogitosus, not less than 21 come directly from the *Vita I*.”<sup>10</sup>

While Cogitosus apparently used some passages *verbatim*, Esposito writes, other portions show signs of having been edited, either to reduce or eliminate “the unpleasant or unconventional” or to add commentary the *Vita I* lacked.<sup>11</sup> From those episodes in Cogitosus’ work with no parallels in the *Vita I*, Esposito infers the existence of a lost source and, based upon a mid-eighth-century poem preserved in Rheims that identifies Ultán of Ardbreccan, Ailerán of Clonard and Cogitosus himself as collectors of Brigidine miracles in that chronological order, he suggests that the *Vita I* may have been Ailerán’s abridgment of Ultán’s vanished list of *miracula*. Esposito further proposes that the *Vita I*, Cogitosus and the later *Bethu Brigte* all draw material from Ultán’s supposed work, and places the composition of the *Vita I* by Ailerán at around 650 CE.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “On the early Latin Lives of St. Brigid of Kildare,” *Hermathena* 24 (1935): 121, 123–4. Though Esposito appears to have seen the relationship between Cogitosus and Muirchú as one of literal familiarity, most scholars assume Cogitosus was either Muirchú’s monastic elder or simply the recipient of an honorific Muirchú bestows out of respect for his predecessor.

<sup>10</sup> “Early Latin Lives,” 135.

<sup>11</sup> “Early Latin Lives,” 133–5; quotation on 134.

<sup>12</sup> “Early Latin Lives,” 125–40.

Seán Connolly, in an early essay, followed Esposito's steps closely, but stopped short of insisting that Cogitosus drew directly from the *Vita I*. Observing that the language of the latter work appears to give "a more archaic impression than that of Cogitosus", Connolly agreed with Esposito that the *Vita I* likely preceded the work of the known hagiographer.<sup>13</sup> Connolly did not make a definitive pronouncement, however; though he held that the anonymous *vita*, the *vita* by Cogitosus and the later *Bethu Brigitte* all derived independently from a missing source, he also tentatively accepted the possibility that the *Vita I* was produced by Ailerán. If true, he wrote, Cogitosus must be later than and dependant upon the *Vita I*.<sup>14</sup>

Richard Sharpe also argues for the primacy of the *Vita I* over the *Vita S Brigitae*, asserting both that Cogitosus directly utilized the anonymous *vita* and that the two *Lives* separately rely upon a lost Latin exemplar he views as the original paradigm for the *Bethu Brigitte*; Sharpe labels this exemplar the *vita primitiva*. Much as had Esposito before him, Sharpe holds that Cogitosus refined and elaborated upon the episodes he took from the *Vita I*. The close correlation between the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte*, Sharpe writes, makes it likely that together they reflect the content of the *vita primitiva*. To Sharpe, the presence of greater detail concerning the names of people and places in the *Bethu* makes the macaronic text a better representative of the lost *Life*. Sharpe does not, however, appear to have considered the possibility that such details were omitted from the compilation of the *Vita I* because it may have been intended for a wider, non-Irish audience for whom the personalities and provinces of Ireland would have been meaningless. Sharpe concludes by denying that any solid determination of authorship for

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<sup>13</sup> "Authorship and manuscript tradition," 69.

<sup>14</sup> "Authorship and manuscript tradition," 69.

the *Vita I* is possible, and proposes a date for the text of the middle of the seventh century.<sup>15</sup>

Entirely apart from the tendency to debate whether or not Cogitosus abbreviated, elaborated or eliminated elements drawn from the *Vita I*, David Howlett turns instead to the Latinity of the *Vita I*. Howlett analyzes such elements of the text's composition as syntax, chiasmus, arithmetical structure and key word repetition in the prologue, epilogue and a selection of Brigit's miracles. Though Howlett acknowledges that his exploration involves less than seven percent of the entire *vita*, he asserts that the data produced prove the *Vita I* to be a "competent and literary work."<sup>16</sup>

Howlett then takes the reports of the Brigidine miracle collectors as found in the Rheims poem as proof that the *Vita I* must predate Cogitosus, and that it must belong to the pen either of Ultán or Ailerán. Returning to the notion that the anonymous *vita* is abbreviating a prior source, Howlett argues for the identity of its author as Ailerán, and bolsters his view with a comparison between the Latinity of the *Vita I* and that of a known work of Ailerán, the *Interpretatio mystica progenitorum Christi* (Mystical interpretation of the forebears of Christ), in which comparison he sees strong parallels. As a result, Howlett concludes that the *Vita I* must date prior to Ailerán's death in 665.<sup>17</sup> Despite his thoroughgoing analysis, however, Howlett does not seem to have considered the possibility that Cogitosus and the writer of the *Vita I* independently used a third source that may itself have been the work of Ailerán.

In two linked articles, Daniel McCarthy also uses a novel approach to the question of the *Vita I*'s priority. Based upon his own work demonstrating the preservation

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<sup>15</sup> "Vita S Brigidae: the oldest texts," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 81–106.

<sup>16</sup> "Vita I Sanctae Brigidae," *Peritia* 12 (1998): 19–20.

<sup>17</sup> "Vita I," 17–23.

of the *Iona Chronicle* in two of Ireland's annals, the *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scotorum*, McCarthy uses the *Chronicle* to assess the chronology of the events of Brigit's life as represented in the *Vita I* and in Cogitosus. The *vitae* and the annals, writes McCarthy, are "independent but chronologically consistent accounts of the same persons", but he sees the order of events in the annals as more closely corresponding to the reports of the *Vita I*.<sup>18</sup> To McCarthy, then, the *Vita I* relies upon historical occurrences for its foundations, while Cogitosus—who claims to follow a different chronology in his preface—does so rather less; for McCarthy, this evidence can only show that the *Vita I* must both precede and be a source for Cogitosus, and therefore dates the former to the mid-seventh century.<sup>19</sup>

McCarthy follows this article with a second in which he again asserts, in support of Howlett, that the annalistic account so closely matches the *Vita I* order of events that the anonymous Latin text must be the "authoritative chronology" Cogitosus claims to upend.<sup>20</sup> McCarthy goes on to compare the depictions of topography and travel in the *Vita I* with the sequence of identifiable persons and their *loci vivendi* as reported in the annals. Again, McCarthy concludes that the annals and the *Vita I* agree, but asserts that they drew upon an earlier source rather than that the *vita*'s compiler used the annals directly.

Notably, McCarthy also observes that some elements of the *Vita I*—namely the topographical associations for a number of key bishops, including Mel and MacCaille, who consecrate Brigit, and Patrick himself—are supported by the Patrician texts of both

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<sup>18</sup> "The chronology of St. Brigit of Kildare," *Peritia* 14 (2000): 275.

<sup>19</sup> "Chronology," 277–80. McCarthy also comments that Ailerán is "most likely" the compiler of the *Vita I*, but he does not commit completely, p. 280.

<sup>20</sup> "Topographical characteristics of the *Vita prima* and *Vita Cogitosi S Brigidae*," *Studia Celtica* 35 (2001): 246.



Tírechán and Muirchú, contemporaries who wrote Patrician hagiography sometime in the second half of the seventh century, the latter slightly more recently than the former.

Based not only upon his own arguments but again following those of both Howlett and Esposito, McCarthy reiterates his conclusion that the *Vita I* predates Cogitosus, was likely written by Ailerán in the middle of the 600s and that, in slight disagreement with those who argue that Cogitosus used multiple sources, the *Vita S Brigittae* relies solely upon the more antique *Vita I*.<sup>21</sup>

In neither article does McCarthy appear to consider the possibility of any intermediate sources for Cogitosus. In fact, he states explicitly that there can be only two relationships between the *vitae*: either Cogitosus adapted and selected specific elements from the *Vita I*, whether they were chronological, topographical or otherwise, and used them in his own sequential structure, or the *Vita I* took elements from Cogitosus and rearranged them into the correct order of events, then scattered them throughout this much longer text.<sup>22</sup> McCarthy does not leave room for a third option in which the text so closely related to the *Iona Chronicle* is not the *Vita I* but a common source it shared with Cogitosus, a source the sequence of events in which the *Vita I* maintained but which Cogitosus reversed, and which may have been the production of Ailerán. Nor does McCarthy consider that the corroboration offered by Tírechán and Muirchú may not be due to their use of the *Vita I* itself but of one of its sources, whether the *vita primitiva* or its foundational miracle collection, a use which could then imply that the Patrician texts became fodder for the compiler of either the *vita primitiva* or the *Vita I* rather than the

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<sup>21</sup> "Topographical characteristics," 257–70.

<sup>22</sup> "Topographical characteristics," 257; in "Chronology," 277 the assertion is the same but is less explicitly stated.

other way around. If any one of these options hold true, the *Vita I* would be pushed back at least to the turn of the eighth century, well after Cogitosus' time.

From McCarthy onward, scholars certain of the priority of the *Vita I* have tended to follow the arguments already published on the issue. Dorothy Ann Bray, for example, generally agrees with the assumptions of Esposito and Sharpe, positing that, of the episodes held in common by Cogitosus and the *Vita I*, the brief "miracle reports" of the *Vita I* are more likely to have been elaborated into "miracle stories" by Cogitosus than to have been abbreviations of his prior work.<sup>23</sup> Lori Ann Knight-Whitehouse, for her part, accepts the Brigidine chronology of McCarthy without comment. For Knight-Whitehouse, as for McCarthy, the *Vita I* dates to the middle 600s and is the only source used by Cogitosus in the creation of his *Vita S Brigitae* in the years surrounding the 680s.<sup>24</sup>

#### *The Vita S Brigitae of Cogitosus as prior*

Among the scholars to assert that it is not the *Vita I* but the *vita* of Brigit as composed by Cogitosus that must be the oldest text is Ludwig Bieler. Bieler not only observes that Muirchú, in his preface to the *Vita S Patricii*, refers to Cogitosus as the only man to have preceded him in writing the *Life* of an Irish saint, but also calls Cogitosus the "earliest Irish hagiographer whom we know by name."<sup>25</sup> While the latter point could still be made were the anonymous *Vita I* prior, the former could not; Bieler thus takes

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<sup>23</sup> "Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints," in *Celtic hagiography and saints' cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>24</sup> Both McCarthy and Knight-Whitehouse assume that the few episodes of Cogitosus that do not have parallels in the *Vita I* must be original compositions of Cogitosus himself. "Articulations of holiness: three case studies from the early Irish church" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 2005), 105.

<sup>25</sup> "The Celtic hagiographer," *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962): 245.

Muirchú at his word as a seventh-century witness to the dawn of Ireland's hagiography, something none of the scholars arguing for the greater antiquity of the *Vita I* appear to do.

Felim Ó Briain more thoroughly explains his view that Cogitosus was the elder hagiographer some of whose passages were abridged by the compiler of the *Vita I*, giving four reasons for his conclusions. In the first place, Ó Briain notes, only a very small part near the end of the lengthy *Vita I* corresponds to the work of Cogitosus, and in every instance Ó Briain deems Cogitosus' writing to be "rhetorically padded" while the *Vita I* offers "more legendary details."<sup>26</sup> In the second, the common chapters show the *Vita I* to either be abbreviating Cogitosus or a shared source, and in some cases the abridgements prevalent in the concluding sections of the *Vita I* are clearly known in their full narratives in texts unrelated to Cogitosus. The shortening of the final chapters of the *Vita I*, Ó Briain asserts, contrasts vividly with the more fully elaborated accounts seen in the earlier sections of the *vita*, in which there are no signs of abbreviation.

Thirdly, Ó Briain can find no logical foundation for why Cogitosus might have taken only thirty *miracula* from the 130 separate wonder-workings included in the *Vita I*.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Ó Briain writes, the essential integrity of Cogitosus' work is retained in the *Vita I*, even where details incorporated into the its narrative contradict Cogitosus. Of particular importance is the clear shift from the rather loose Latin style of the *Vita I* to the tighter syntax and construction of Cogitosus' composition seen in the chapters where

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<sup>26</sup> "Brigitana," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* [ZCP] 36 (1978): 122.

<sup>27</sup> Note that Connolly's edition and translation allot a single chapter to each miracle story, resulting in 130 chapters, but in the *Acta Sanctorum* there are only 115 chapters several of which relate multiple miracle stories.

verbal agreement between the two *vitae* is evident. For Ó Briain, the *Vita I* is a conflated text drawn from many sources, one of which must have been Cogitosus.<sup>28</sup>

The editor and translator of the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte*, Donncha Ó hAodha, agrees with Bieler's assessment against Esposito, but sees the *Vita I* and Cogitosus as relying more heavily upon a lost shared source than either could have depended upon the other. The *Vita I*, Ó hAodha writes, abridges this common source, while Cogitosus elaborates upon it. Describing the *Vita I* as a conflated text, as does Ó Briain, Ó hAodha views the anonymous work as gathering into itself numerous pre-ninth-century Brigidine traditions. Highlighting the extraordinarily close textual relationship between the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigte*, Ó hAodha observes that the uniqueness of the episodes in both works nevertheless proves the latter did not draw immediately from the former but from yet another vanished common *Life* that the *Bethu* more faithfully follows. Ó hAodha concludes by offering a chronology in which the seventh-century Cogitosus remains the earliest author of a *vita*, followed not by the *Vita I* but by the shared source of the *Vita I* and the *Bethu*. Ó hAodha dates this lost work to the early eighth century, then gives an early ninth-century origin to the *Vita I*, a text very rapidly then followed by the only slightly later *Bethu Brigte*.<sup>29</sup>

Kim McCone returns to the evidence argued by Esposito, but refutes Esposito's claim of priority for the *Vita I*. Agreeing with Ó Briain, McCone sees no logic in viewing Cogitosus and his contemporaries as interested merely in abbreviating extant miracle lists. McCone shows further that the Rheims poem, which Esposito uses to declare Cogitosus the borrower of elements from a *Vita I* likely written by Ailerán, is better

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<sup>28</sup> "Brigitana," 112–37.

<sup>29</sup> *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin: DIAS, 1978), xiv–xxv.

interpreted as describing not sequential but nearly simultaneous *vitae* of differing—not overlapping—content and focus; the poem, therefore, shows no knowledge of the conflated *Vita I*. Though McCone sees, along with Ó hAodha and others, that the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte* independently utilize a third source, a *vita primitiva*, he deems the *Vita I* (not the *Bethu*, as argued by Ó hAodha) to be the better representative of the primitive text.

Describing both descendant *vita* and *bethu* as meant to define the geographical extent of Brigit's influence, McCone holds that their shared *vita primitiva*, a text now best represented by the first forty-five chapters of the *Vita I*, must therefore predate a pact between Brigit's Kildare and Patrick's Armagh found in the *Liber Angeli*, a text preserved along with other Patrician works in the eighth-century *Book of Armagh*.<sup>30</sup> The *Liber Angeli* itself was used by Tírechán in the creation of his Patrician miracle miscellanea in the later seventh century, but as Tírechán's writing does not contain the Armagh-Kildare pact, McCone concludes that the accord must have been added to the mid-seventh-century *Liber Angeli* at a later time; as the *Vita I* also shows no recognition of the pact, its addition therefore also postdates the *vita*'s compilation. That the Rheims poem does not know of the *Vita I* means further that McCone is able to construct a chronology in which the Armagh-Kildare pact is of the second half of the eighth century, while the *Vita I* places to that century's middle decades. McCone finally proposes that it is the *vita primitiva*, not the *Vita I*, which may have been authored by Ailerán.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dublin, Trinity College, MS 52. For dating, see James F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland (ecclesiastical): an introduction and guide* (1929; repr., Dublin: Pádraic Ó Tailliúir, 1979), 326–7, 337–9, and Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 1–3.

<sup>31</sup> “Brigit in the seventh century: a saint with three lives?” *Peritia* 1 (1982): 107–45. McCone also summarizes his arguments in “An introduction to early Irish saints’ Lives,” *The Maynooth Review* 11 (December 1984): 34.

In a reversal of his earlier published opinion, Seán Connolly argues for the primacy not of the *Vita I* but of Cogitosus. Reviewing some of his prior work on the manuscript tradition of the *Vita I*, Connolly observes again that the oldest extant copy of the *vita* is of around 850, but does not represent the original text. Connolly then places Cogitosus' *Vita S Brigitae* to 650x675, and agrees with the general field of scholarship in seeing a common source behind the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte*, a source Connolly follows McCone in dating to the early eighth century. Following McCone still further, Connolly observes the lack of recognition for the *Vita I* in the Rheims poem of the same era. Noting that the only remaining plausible date for the *Vita I* cannot fall before the mid-700s, Connolly concludes that such a chronology must mean that the shared episodes of Cogitosus and the *Vita I* signify either the direct use of the former by the latter or that the latter drew independently from the text Cogitosus himself admits using as a source.<sup>32</sup>

Richard Sharpe also slightly alters his previous assessment that the *Vita I* belonged to the source library used by Cogitosus. Though Sharpe does not offer a solid conclusion in his later commentary, he ceases to be definitive concerning the Brigidine chronology over all. Rather than arguing that the *Vita I* must be prior to Cogitosus, Sharpe says only that the former text may be either of the 600s or of the 700s, and that it cannot postdate the earliest surviving manuscript of the 800s. Sharpe further suggests that

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<sup>32</sup> Though brief mention of this chronology is given in Connolly and Picard, "Cogitosus," 5, much more complete discussion is found in Connolly, "*Vita prima*," 6–7.

the form and language of the *Vita I* resembles the generic anonymous *vitae* of other eras more than it evokes the dated and known works of seventh-century Ireland.<sup>33</sup>

Clare Stancliffe also does not specifically commit to a date for the *Vita I* and, much as Sharpe has written, views the anonymous work as an unusual representative of the early genre in Ireland that does not fit in well with the known seventh-century *vitae*. Stancliffe asserts that this anomalous nature identifies the extant *Vita I* as later than Cogitosus, Muirchú and their contemporaries of the 600s. Stancliffe follows McCone in seeing the first forty-five chapters of the *Vita I* as descended from the *vita primitiva* that underlies both the former work and the *Bethu Brigte*, but where McCone would date these chapters between 640 and 660, Stancliffe argues that such a definitive chronology is not possible. Instead, Stancliffe states that the *vita primitiva* cannot be given a placement of any greater specificity than between 670 and 780, leaving the origins of the *Vita I* no more certain than to say it may be—as Sharpe allows in his latest assessment—from either the late seventh or the eighth century.<sup>34</sup>

Laurance Maney, however, attempts to refine the chronology of the *vita primitiva* and, by extension, of the *Vita I* by examining the depicted relationship between Brigit and Patrick, the differing viewpoints of certain chapters concerning political entities in early Ireland, and the contents of specific miracle narratives in the *Vita I*. Maney refutes Sharpe's dating, approves of Stancliffe's view that the *Vita I*'s unusual character sets it apart from the remaining examples of the genre in the Irish seventh century and notes

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<sup>33</sup> *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 13–15. Sharpe also dates Cogitosus' *Vita S Brigitae* rather later than some scholars, giving it a composition date sometime around 680.

<sup>34</sup> "The miracle stories in seventh-century Irish saints' Lives," in *Le septième siècle: changements et continuités*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (London: The Warburg Institute, 1992), 87–8, 100–101.

that the natural extension of Stancliffe's logic is the recognition of three distinct Brigidine traditions that are united in the compilation of the *Vita I*.

Maney analyzes the evolution of the miracles involving Patrick, Brigit and the medium of water, then compares his results with the political history of the relevant areas of Ireland portrayed in the *Vita I*, namely Airgialla, Mide and Leinster. Maney suggests that the *miracula* of the *Vita I* show viewpoints discrete enough to posit dates for their sources. Chapters one through forty-two, focusing on Clann Cholmáin, the Uí Dúnlainge and Brigit as teamed with Bishop Mel of Ardagh draw, according to Maney, from a text of around 630 to 640. The source of chapters forty-three through ninety-five, which show the decline of Clann Cholmáin, the resurgence of the kings of Brega revealed elsewhere as occurring in the second half of the 600s and traits likely to have been drawn from Cogitosus, Maney proposes to place in a range from about 650 to 660. Because Maney views the chapters from ninety-six to the end of the text as descending directly from Cogitosus, they therefore must be rooted between 670 and 680. Maney concludes that the union of all three Brigidine traditions into a single *vita* would be most likely to have occurred during a time of stable alliances between the peoples of Airgialla, Mide and Leinster, and thus the best period for the compilation of the *Vita I* falls between 743 and 759, within the reign of a particular king known for his patronage of the church and his ability to unify these subkingdoms under his rule.<sup>35</sup>

Catherine McKenna takes a different tack when approaching the *Vita I*. Though McKenna's stated purpose is to explore potential signs for the use of pagan traditions in the compilation of Brigit's early *vitae*, the results of her study also lead to a proposed date for the *Vita I*'s compilation. Focusing on the presence and portrayal of "explicitly

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<sup>35</sup> "When Brigit met Patrick," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994): 175–94.



non-Christian holy men”, that is, druids (*druí, magi, poetae, prophetae*), McKenna observes that the *Vita I* places all such characters in the *Vita I*’s initial chapters; after the baptism of a prominent *magus* in chapter fifteen, however, all but one similar personage disappear from the narrative.<sup>36</sup>

McKenna demonstrates similarities between such Irish figures and the *magi* of Matthew 2:1–12; the hagiographical characters thus symbolize not only remnants of pagan tradition but also the transition of Ireland from a gentile to a Christian island through the holiness of Brigit. McKenna further notes that the opening sections of both the *Vita I* and Muirchú’s *Vita S Patricii*—unlike the work of Cogitosus—show similarities in the depiction of *magi*, and suggests as a result the possibility that the *Vita I*’s compiler drew some inspiration from Muirchú directly. Though McKenna does not extend the implications of such reliance to their natural conclusion, it may be stated here that if she is correct, then the *Vita I* must postdate not only Cogitosus but Muirchú, who is generally held to have written between 675 and 700.<sup>37</sup>

Thus stands the field of scholarship concerning the disputed date of the *Vita I S Brigitae*. Other commentators continue to enter the debate and, as above, they align themselves either with those who place the *Vita I* ahead of Cogitosus or those who do the opposite. Judith Bishop, for example, recently followed Sharpe’s later, less definitive chronology without further analysis, allowing for the possibility that the anonymous

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<sup>36</sup> “Between two worlds: Saint Brigit and pre-Christian religion in the *Vita prima*,” in *Identifying the ‘Celtic’: Celtic Studies Association of North America Yearbook Two*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 66–8, quote on 66–7.

<sup>37</sup> “Between two worlds,” 66–74. For the date of Muirchú, see for instance Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans. *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: DIAS, 1979), 1–2, who places Muirchú to 661 x 700. But note that since Muirchú postdates Cogitosus, and Cogitosus wrote 650 x 675, it is logical to place Muirchú slightly later than Bieler’s offered chronology.

work could date considerably later than Cogitosus' text.<sup>38</sup> The present study, however, does not aim to simply retrace the steps of prior scholars. Having established the nature of the ongoing discussion, it is now possible to assess additional evidence that offers the potential of refining the debate. Of especial importance here is the existence of parallels between the seventh-century homiletic work, the *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, and specific episodes of the *Vita I S Brigitae*.

### **The *De duodecim abusivis* and the *Vita I***

The *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* is a lengthy Hiberno-Latin treatise on twelve key issues its author viewed as the cause of social and moral decay in the Ireland of his time. According to Aidan Breen, who has not only published numerous studies of the work but also edited and translated the *De duodecim* for his doctoral dissertation, this text may be dated with reasonable solidity to the middle decades of the seventh century.<sup>39</sup> Breen divides the twelve societal ills in this sermon into two parts; the first six abuses, he writes, pertain to inappropriate, illicit or immoral behavior on the part of the individual, while the final six abuses turn to "breaches of public order and morality" whether committed by "general categories of individual" (such as paupers) or by persons in positions of power who, when they fail in their duties to society, bring about the ailments that become "vices of the Christian corporate body."<sup>40</sup> The abuses specifically addressed are "the wise man without good works" (*sapiens sine operibus bonis*), "the old man without religion" (*senex sine religione*), "the youth without obedience" (*adolescens sine*

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<sup>38</sup> "Sanctity as mirror of society: culture, gender and religion in the three oldest *vitae* of Brigit of Ireland" (Ph.D. diss., Berkeley, 2004), 28–9.

<sup>39</sup> "Text and transmission," 82–4; also see footnote 8 above.

<sup>40</sup> "Text and transmission," 78–9.

*oboedientia*), “the wealthy man without alms-giving” (*dives sine eleemosyna*), “the woman without modesty” (*femina sine pudicitia*), “the chieftain without virtue” (*dominus sine virtute*), “the contentious Christian” (*Christianus contentiosus*), “the arrogant pauper” (*pauper superbus*), “the unjust king” (*rex iniquus*), “the negligent bishop” (*episcopus negligens*), “the community without discipline” (*plebs sine disciplina*) and “the people without law” (*populus sine lege*).<sup>41</sup>

#### Abusio IV and the reluctant almsgiver

One of the *De duodecim* illis to show signs of providing inspiration for the compiler of the *Vita I S Brigitae* is the fourth abuse, “the wealthy man without alms-giving” (*dives sine eleemosyna*). Here the *De duodecim* takes on the rich man who refuses to share his abundance with the needy, who chooses terrestrial goods over the treasures of heaven, providing thereby an expanded interpretation of the gospel injunction that a true believer must bestow all of his earthly belongings upon the poor in order to follow Christ to paradise.<sup>42</sup> The sermon asserts that “No man can ever have (the) treasure (of heaven) unless he shows solace to the poor ... nor therefore should what prevents the needy from sleeping remain dormant in your treasuries” (*Quem thesaurum numquam ullus hominum habere potest, nisi qui pauperibus solacia praestat ... Non ergo dormiat in thesauris tuis, quod pauperes dormire non sinit*).<sup>43</sup> What will remain on earth after death, the text continues, must willingly (*sponte*) be shared amongst the less fortunate; those who do not are greedy (*avari*) and “are called cursed by the most

<sup>41</sup> Breen provides an excellent analysis of the twelve *abusiones* in “Text and transmission,” 78–80.

<sup>42</sup> Matt. 19:21: “And Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfected, go sell what you own and give it to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven’” (*ait illi Iesus si vis perfectus esse vade vende quae habes et da pauperibus et habebis thesaurum in caelo et veni sequere me*).

<sup>43</sup> Hellmann, 38; Breen, 354–5.

righteous judge” (*a rectissimo iudice nuncupantur maledicti*), while those who are merciful are deemed to be blessed (*beati*).<sup>44</sup>

In the *Vita I* the wealthy individual to receive Brigit’s censure is not male but female, a woman whose orchards overflow with apples. On a certain day the woman brings a “small gift” (*munusculum*) of these apples to the saint, and as she is leaving she encounters a group of alms-seeking lepers. Brigit commands that the apples be divided amongst the hungry lepers, but the woman grabs back her given gift, saying she brought the fruit only for Brigit and her nuns. This act displeases Brigit, and she tells the woman “You are behaving wrongly by refusing to give alms. For that reason your trees will never again bear fruit” (*Male agis prohibens eleemosynam dare: idcirco ligna tua non habebunt fructum in aeternum*).<sup>45</sup> As a consequence of Brigit’s curse, the woman returns home to find her previously laden branches are now completely barren, a state in which they remain thereafter.<sup>46</sup>

That Brigit’s pronouncement is a malediction is made clear by its biblical origins. In declaration and effect, Brigit’s words echo those of Jesus, who condemns to eternal sterility a fig tree that lacks fruit to ease his hunger. Seeing the withered plant the next day, Peter exclaims, “Behold, the fig tree that you cursed has shriveled” (*ecce ficus cui maledixisti aruit*).<sup>47</sup> Brigit does not seek apples, however, they are delivered to her; her curse, moreover, is not a consequence of being unable to assuage her own hunger but a response to the stingy action of the woman bringing the fruit. The Brigidine lepers may here be seen to fill the role of the *pauperes* discussed by the *De duodecim*, and the

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<sup>44</sup> Hellmann, 40; Breen, 360–363.

<sup>45</sup> §4.28, col. 0121F; ch. 32, Connolly, 21.

<sup>46</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 4.28, cols 0121F–0122A; ch. 32, Connolly, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Matt. 21:19, Mark 11:13–14, 19–21; the citation is from Mark 11:21.

unwilling woman becomes the *dives sine eleemosyna*. Her initial gift to Brigit and her nuns is cast as rather paltry, a *munusculum* rather than a *donatio* or an *oblatio*, a tiny portion of the plentiful produce of her orchard and therefore an offering less of generosity and more of grudging duty. When she snatches the small basket back from Brigit and refuses to divvy up its contents among the hungry lepers, she condemns herself as lacking in true almsgiving and earns the malediction that afflicts her trees.

Importantly, this narrative is not only among the first forty-five chapters of the *Vita I* that, according to McCone, best reflect the *vita primitiva*, but it is also found in the later *Bethu Brigitte*.<sup>48</sup> It must thus preserve the content of the *vita primitiva* lying behind the *Bethu* and the *Vita I*. As in the latter text, the *Bethu* episode also emphasizes both the scantiness of the woman's gift and the startling miserliness of her rejection of the lepers.<sup>49</sup> It is additionally followed by a second anecdote in which another apple-grower brings a donation (*oblatio*) to Brigit. This latter offering, however, is given "abundantly" (*habundanter*), and when the orchard owner also swiftly and freely disperses her fruit among the lepers she is rewarded with a blessing of productivity as instantaneous and permanent as the curse earned by her parsimonious predecessor.<sup>50</sup>

In the *Bethu*, then, there is a stark contrast drawn between the cursed unmerciful and the blessed generous that strongly resembles the sermon of the *dives sine eleemosyna* in the fourth abuse of the *De duodecim*. The contrast in the *Bethu*, moreover, is clearer than that found in the *Vita I* and therefore suggests that in this case the shared source text of the *vita primitiva* may be better represented in the *Bethu Brigitte* than in the *Vita I*. The correlation of the pairing of two wealthy women, one who gives scantily and grudgingly

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<sup>48</sup> See p. 291 above.

<sup>49</sup> Ch. 32, pp. 12, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Bethu Brigitte* 33, pp. 12, 29.

while the other is freely generous, with the sermon of the fourth abuse is provocative and suggests strongly that the *vita primitiva*'s author may have drawn directly from the *De duodecim*. If so, the *vita primitiva* upon which both the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte* rely cannot date before the final third of the seventh century, thus firmly situating the *Vita I* itself at no earlier than the opening of the 700s.

### Abusio VII and the pugnacious lepers

In the seventh abuse, the *De duodecim* focuses upon the problem of “the contentious Christian” (*Christianus contentiosus*). Here the text inveighs against the individuals who have been baptized and professed the faith, yet who continue to display through their daily behavior a love not of Christ but of temporal things. This preoccupation with the worldly divorces the preoccupied from God and foment strife over the goods that are its focus, such as fine clothes or precious metals. The sole component of earthly existence that should receive a Christian's care and devotion, argues the *De duodecim*, is the Christian's neighbor (*proximus*); though all else is transitory, *proximi* are “co-heirs of the (divine) king” (*regis cohaeredes*) and therefore each one is “part of the heavenly kingdom on earth” (*pars regni caelestis in terra*) and must be honored as such.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the only way to truly be deemed a Christian is to live as Christ did; since Christ was not contentious, neither must any be who profess to follow him.<sup>52</sup>

According to the *Vita I*, two lepers are taken into Brigit's retinue of believers during one of her journeys. Though they are made welcome by the saint, they soon begin

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<sup>51</sup> Hellmann, 47; Breen, 386–9.

<sup>52</sup> Hellmann, 48; Breen 388–91.

to quarrel and come to blows. Immediately, “the hand of the one who was the first to strike his neighbor” (*Manus illius, qui prius percutiebat proximum*) stiffens in a fist and cannot be uncurled, while the other leper is unable to lower the hand he had raised to hit back.<sup>53</sup> The two lepers are compelled to stand immobilized in this fashion until Brigit comes to them, whereupon they do penance and are released to their former free movement.<sup>54</sup>

Here it seems the lepers are meant to portray examples of *Christiani contentiosi*, men who though claiming to be believers nevertheless fight with each other over some unnamed and unimportant temporal thing. Not only does the punishment that paralyzes them thus prevent them from harming each other, but it also forces them to cease their dispute, to be humbled until they recognize their error and make appropriate satisfaction to Brigit and to God. That the lepers are inspired at least in part by the *De duodecim* sermon is particularly suggested by the use of *proximus*, rather than perhaps *socius* (associate, companion, friend) or *unus/alter* (one/the other), to describe the relationship of the first leper to the second, a relationship the *De duodecim* declares—following the words of Christ himself—the sole worldly element a true Christian may love.<sup>55</sup>

As with the *Vita I* episode concerning the *dives sine eleemosyna*, this narrative of the argumentative followers is both among the first forty-five *Vita I* chapters and is also found in the *Bethu Brigitte*, again signaling an episode likely originating in the *vita primitiva* the two *Lives* hold in common.<sup>56</sup> In the *Bethu* the lepers are healed not only of

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<sup>53</sup> §4.30, col. 0122B; ch. 34, Connolly, 22.

<sup>54</sup> §4.30, col. 0122B; ch. 34, Connolly, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Matt. 19:19: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (*diliges proximum tuum sicut te ipsum*).

<sup>56</sup> *Bethu Brigitte* 34, pp. 12, 29. See p. 291 above.

their argument-induced paralysis, but also of their leprosy, indicating a far more thorough cleansing of body and soul than is indicated in the treatment given the story by the *Vita I*. Just as with the example of the stingy orchard-owner, the narrative of the pugnacious lepers also likely draws from the *De duodecim*, and shows that the *vita primitiva* cannot have been written before the final three decades of the 600s. Compilation of the *Vita I* itself, then, must fall sometime in the eighth century.

### *Abusio VIII* and the arrogant lepers

Not only do the contentious lepers who come to blows appear to reflect the seventh abuse of the *De duodecim*, but they also have some parallels to the sermon of the eighth abuse, “the arrogant pauper” (*pauper superbus*). Since even the wealthy are commanded to be humble, the *De duodecim* asserts, the poor have still less right “to raise a mind inflated with the supercilious swelling of haughtiness against God” (*supercilioso superbiae tumore inflatam mentem contra Deum erigere*).<sup>57</sup> The sin of arrogance brought down the powerful from angels to wealthy men, so those who have no earthly substance have even less claim to an attitude of superiority than do those of property. Though the impoverished are compelled by life’s exigencies to accept their status in this world, the *De duodecim* continues, through their behavior they are themselves responsible for choosing their standing in the afterlife; the poor will only inherit heavenly treasures after death if, while alive, they behave with due humility.

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<sup>57</sup> Hellmann, 49; Breen, 392–3.



For a humble pauper is called poor in spirit who, when he is seen to be outwardly indigent, is never exalted in pride, since humility of the mind is more able to seek the kingdom of heaven than is temporal poverty of worldly wealth. For the humble (*humiles*) who have well-possessed riches can be called poor in spirit, but the arrogant (*superbos*) who have nothing are doubtless deprived of the blessing (that is promised to the poor).<sup>58</sup>

In addition to any potential ties between the eighth abuse and the argumentative lepers just discussed, the *Vita I* preserves two chapters in which the arrogant/humble (*superbus/humilis*) pattern of the *De duodecim* is explicitly portrayed. In the first such narrative, two lepers seek healing from Brigit. The saint prays, fasts and blesses water, then commands the two men to bathe each other with the holy liquid. The first leper washed is instantly cured, but when Brigit commands him to bathe his fellow leper in turn, the now-whole man refuses and instead begins to brag about his own health. Brigit tells him again that he should do for his companion what was done for him, and again the hale man rebuffs her. Brigit then aids the remaining leper, healing him and providing him with clean robes. The chapter concludes with the following commentary:

(The cleansed man's) entire body was immediately stricken with leprosy because of his arrogance (*propter superbiam suam*), but the other man was healed because of his humility (*propter humilitatem suam*) and, rejoicing, he thanked God, who had healed him through the merits of Saint Brigit.<sup>59</sup>

The second *superbus/humilis* leper pair approach Brigit seeking not cleansing but alms. Unable to give them anything else, Brigit allows them to take her only cow. One

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<sup>58</sup> *Pauper enim humilis pauper spiritu appellatur, qui cum egenus foris cernitur, numquam in superbiam elevatur, quoniam ad petenda regna caelorum plus valet mentis humilitas quam praesentium divitiarum temporalis paupertas. Etenim humiles qui bene divitias possessas habent possunt pauperes spiritu appellari, et superbos nihil habentes haud dubium est beatitudine paupertatis privari.* Hellmann, 50; Breen, 396–9. I have chosen to follow Breen's translation of the final clause for better clarity; it literally reads "are doubtless deprived of the blessing of poverty."

<sup>59</sup> *Et statim totum corpus eius lepra percussus est propter superbiam suam, alter vero sanatus est, propter humilitatem suam. Et gratulatus gratias egit Deo, qui se per merita S. Brigidae sanavit. Vita I S Brigidae 12.76, cols 0129D–E; ch. 76, Connolly, 37.*

leper thanks the saint, but the other is “arrogant and ungrateful” (*superbus et ingratus*) and refuses to share the animal with his fellow leper. Brigit tells “the humble leper” (*humilem leprosum*) to wait with her for awhile to see what the Lord may deliver, and to “let that arrogant man have the cow” (*ille superbus vaccam habeat*).<sup>60</sup> The haughty leper attempts to depart with his bovine prize, but he cannot drive her alone and returns to Brigit to berate her for bestowing the cow upon him in such a half-hearted fashion that the animal was made fractious. Despite every effort by Brigit to calm the man he continues to heap verbal abuse upon her; annoyed (*displicuit*), Brigit tells him again to take the cow, “though she will not be useful to you” (*sed tamen tibi non proderit*).<sup>61</sup> When later that day a second cow is given to Brigit by another follower, she bestows it upon the leper pair.

And they went to a certain river, and that river drew the arrogant man (*superbum*) with his cow into the depths, and he was absorbed and his body was never found, but the humble man (*humilis*) escaped with his cow.<sup>62</sup>

In both of these episodes haughtiness is punished while humility is rewarded. As expressed in the eighth abuse, the arrogant man will be subjected to divine censure whether powerful or poor; the pauper, therefore, cannot even claim the distinction of riches to excuse supercilious behavior, and if he lacks the humility that is not only proper before God but expected of his station, he will lose even the opportunity to gain heaven. One *leprosus superbus* is re-afflicted with leprosy, the mark of an unclean body and soul

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<sup>60</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.78, cols 0129E; ch. 78, Connolly, 37.

<sup>61</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 12.78, cols 0129E–F; ch. 78, Connolly, 37.

<sup>62</sup> *Et exierunt ad quamdam aquam, et illud flumen rapuit superbum cum sua vacca in profundum et absorptus est; neque umquam inventum est corpus eius: humilis vero euasit cum sua vacca. Vita I S Brigitae* 12.78, col. 0129F; chs 78–9, Connolly, 37. Orthographic variations are original to the text.

and the punishment that befalls those who defy the Lord's chosen representative.<sup>63</sup> The other *superbus*, for his part, is swallowed by the waves of a river much as were the enemies of God's people at the Red Sea.<sup>64</sup> The *leprosi humiles*, by contrast, receive both earthly and celestial blessing. Just as does the *De duodecim*, then, the *Vita I* anecdotes clearly contrast *superbus* with *humilis*, and vividly suggest thereby a hagiographical vision of the sermon of the eighth abuse.

Neither of these arrogant/humble leper chapters can be found in the *Bethu Brigitte*, and both fall after the first forty-five chapters McCone and others have considered to best represent the *vita primitiva*.<sup>65</sup> Their location in the later sections of the *Vita I*, however, suggests that they were among the components lost, either from the copy of the *vita primitiva* or from an intermediate text between the *vita primitiva* and the *Bethu*, and therefore could not be included in the abruptly-ended extant version of the *Bethu Brigitte*. In support of such a possibility is Kim McCone's observation that the mid-narrative conclusion of the *Bethu* was evidently present in the *Bethu*'s exemplar, which itself originally shared the full 115-chapter length of both the lost *vita primitiva* and the extant *Vita I S Brigitae*.<sup>66</sup> As a result, then, the two arrogant/humble pauper oppositions must also have been contained in the *vita primitiva* where again they signify that this source text for the *Vita I* cannot be earlier than the last few decades of the 600s. The compilation of the *Vita I* thus falls within the limits of the eighth century.

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<sup>63</sup> Num. 12.

<sup>64</sup> Exod. 14:27.

<sup>65</sup> See p. 291 above.

<sup>66</sup> "Brigit in the seventh century," 121.

### Epidemics in Ireland: an additional clue?

It will be recalled that Catherine McKenna has proposed that similarities of narrative depiction between Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*, dated to 675 x 700, and the *Vita I S Brigitae* suggest the possibility that the latter drew some inspiration from the former.<sup>67</sup> Though McKenna does not address the potential presence of the *vita primitiva* between Muirchú and the *Vita I*, this omission does not particularly alter the conclusion. Indeed, whether the primitive text or the *Vita I* itself received some influence from Muirchú the result would still place the *Vita I* not in the seventh but in the eighth century.

Muirchú's *Vita S Patricii*, however, is not the only Patrician text that may provide some dating clues for either the *vita primitiva* or the *Vita I*. In a late chapter of the *Vita I*, mention is made of a "severe pestilence" (*pestilentia grauis*) devastating (*uastabat*) the Munster region of Mag Femen, an area between Cashel and Clonmel in present-day Co. Tipperary.<sup>68</sup> Tírechán, too, mentions plague in Ireland, referring in the *Collectanea Patriciana* to "the most recent epidemics" (*mortalitates novissimas*), a comment that has been used to date the *Collectanea*.<sup>69</sup> Tírechán himself is known to have been a student of Ultán of Ardbreccan, who died in 657; several pestilences are mentioned in the annals of Ireland that then fall within Tírechán's lifespan, namely those in 664–8, 680 and possibly in 700–703, and it is therefore generally held that the *Collectanea* must at least partly

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<sup>67</sup> See p. 295 above.

<sup>68</sup> *Vita I S Brigitae* 11.70, col. 0128E; ch. 71, Connolly, 35. See also the entry under *Femen* in James MacKillop's *Dictionary of Celtic mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185 for the location of and summary of mythological associations with Mag Femen.

<sup>69</sup> Ch. II.25:2, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 142. Note that *Collectanea* is the title given to the text by Bieler, not by Tírechán himself; see pp. 38–9.

date after the first of these.<sup>70</sup> In the annals of medieval Ireland this same plague is specifically said to have slain two kings of Munster in turn, along with a host of other nobles, in 665.<sup>71</sup> Might not this dread mortality also have been that to which the *Vita I* draws attention?

There is admittedly no way to be certain of such an assertion, but the possibility cannot simply be rejected, either. If indeed the Mag Femin plague in the Brigidine *vita* is an echo of the same pestilence mentioned by Tírechán, a disease the annals report as sweeping across Ireland from Brigit's Leinster and taking with it numerous kings, abbots and saints, then there may well be a dating clue. The report of mortality in the *Vita I* falls late in the text and is unfortunately among those chapters that were lost from the archetype of the *Bethu* before it was copied into its present form, so it does not survive in the extant macaronic *Life* and cannot be proven to have originated in the *vita primitiva*.

Whether the Mag Femin mortality of the *Vita I* descends from the *vita primitiva* or itself draws directly from Tírechán, the annals or recent memory, the compilation of the *Vita I* would still necessarily postdate 665 and would therefore be unlikely to have preceded Cogitosus. When this potential evidence is taken alongside the data provided by the parallels between the *Vita I*, the *Bethu Brigitte* and the *De duodecim abusivis*, however, it becomes clear that the most likely path of transmission for a textual memory of the

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<sup>70</sup> Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 41–2; Bieler observes that at least Book II of the collection must fall after 664–8 due to the reference found within it, but that it's impossible to know whether or not the work was already in progress by that time.

<sup>71</sup> *Annals of Tigernach* [AT], ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, "The Annals of Tigernach: third fragment, A.D. 489–766," *Revue celtique* 17 (1896): 199; *Chronicon Scotorum* [CS] 665, ed. and trans. Gearóid Mac Niocaill and William Hennessy (1866; repr., Cork: University College Corpus of Electronic Texts [CELT], 2003), available in separate Irish and English-translation documents at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt>. It will be recalled that Daniel McCarthy has shown that AT and CS together provide the closest reflection of the archetypal *Iona Chronicle* and may therefore be viewed as the most authoritative annalistic compilations still extant. See pp. 285–6 above.

Mag Femin mortality is via the primitive shared source of the two Brigidine *Lives*. Such a textual history would again place the *vita primitiva*'s composition to the final decades of the 600s, a date consistent with the *vita*'s apparent use of the *De duodecim*.

Similarly, if McKenna's hypothesis that Muirchú also provided a certain *soupçon* to the narrative treatment of *magi* in creation of the *Vita I*, the same logic suggests again that it may well have been the *vita primitiva* that first received this influence. If true, then the dating of the latter work would have to fall sometime in the last two or three decades of the 600s; unfortunately this last proposal cannot be argued with solidity any more than can the question of the Mag Femin plagues. It may be possible to bolster the relationship between the *Vita I*, its primitive source, Tírechán and Muirchú, however, by recalling McCarthy's data concerning the agreement in topographical detail between the Patrician texts and the *Vita I*, an agreement McCarthy mistakenly concludes must proceed from Brigit's to Patrick's dossier. If this order is reversed, then the topographical concordance may have passed from the Patrician hagiographers either to the *vita primitiva* or to the *Vita I*. Yet again, whether Muirchú and Tírechán influenced the *Vita I* directly or through the *vita primitiva*, the result would be the same: the *Vita I S Brigitae* could not itself date to any time early enough in the 600s to have preceded or been a source for Cogitosus' *Vita S Brigitae*, and in fact could not place any earlier than the opening decades of the 700s.

## Conclusions

The present analysis of parallels between the *Vita I S Brigitae* and the *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* has offered intriguing fodder for the debate concerning the chronology of the constituent texts of Brigit of Kildare's dossier. The presence of strong correspondences between the sermons of the *dives sine eleemosyna*, the *Christianus contentiosus* and the *pauper superbus* and the hagiographical portrayals of the *Vita I* and—for the first two abuses—of the surviving text of the *Bethu Brigitte* makes it likely that the source shared by these two *Lives*, the so-called *vita primitiva*, not only contained these same correspondences but drew them directly from the *De duodecim*. Further, the extraordinarily close correlation of episodic sequence and content between the truncated *Bethu* and the lengthy *Vita I* suggests that the former *Life* as it survives is a copy of a prior exemplar from which the final third of its leaves had been lost; before this damage occurred, however, the *Bethu*-archetype would have probably had the same number of chapters as are now found in the *Vita I*. Both the *Bethu*-archetype and the *vita primitiva* behind it would therefore also have contained the two narratives concerning the arrogant and humble paupers.

According to these data and to the commentary of prior scholars, and under the influence of the possibility that the treatment of *magi* in the *Vita I*, the topographical details of seventh-century Patrician hagiography and the mention of plagues in Mag Femen may all reflect some relationship between Muirchú, Tírechán and the evolution of the Brigidine dossier, it is possible to propose a revised chronological sequence for the early works in Brigit's hagiographical dossier. According to Aidan Breen, the most recent expert on the *De duodecim*, the extant homiletic work was written sometime in the

mid-seventh century, roughly between 640 and 660.<sup>72</sup> Shortly thereafter, the *vita primitiva* was likely compiled, using extant miracle collections, biblical precedent and the *De duodecim* for source material, a compilation likely falling at its earliest sometime between 660 and 700. If the influence of the plagues also mentioned by Tírechán is considered, the *terminus ante quem non* for the *vita primitiva* can be refined to between 664 and 700; if Muirchú's inspiration also played a role, further revision produces a range of between 680 and 700. Around this same period, Cogitosus wrote his *Vita S Brigidae*, using many of the same texts but omitting entirely any reflection of the *De duodecim*.

From the *vita primitiva* were then independently drawn both the archetype of the extant *Bethu Brigitte*, a macaronic text that would have shared the same number of chapters as the *vita primitiva*, and the *Vita I S Brigidae*, which also retained the length of the *vita primitiva* but seems to have omitted occasional narrative elements that were retained by the *Bethu*-archetype.<sup>73</sup> Both *Lives* must have been composed at some point between the end of the seventh century and their mid-ninth-century descendants, namely the earliest surviving manuscript of the *Vita I* and the extant version of the *Bethu*. The latter work, moreover, was clearly taken from an exemplar already truncated by the loss of its later leaves, causing the narrative as it remains to end abruptly.

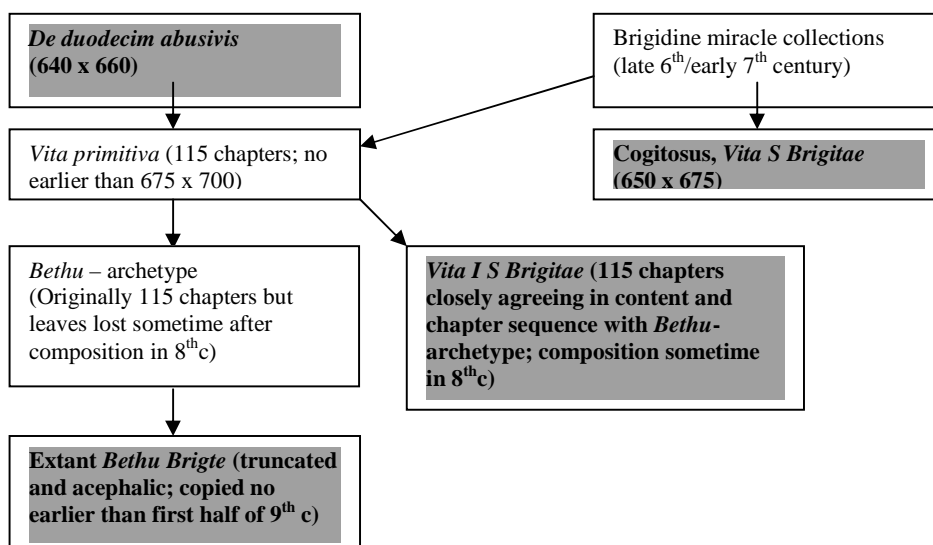
A diagram of this chronology, particularly as it pertains to the chapters that reflect the use of the *De duodecim*, might therefore look something like that on the next page, in which extant texts are in bold with shading, while lost works are in normal typeface.

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<sup>72</sup> See note 8 above.

<sup>73</sup> See for instance the discussion above, pp. 297–8, regarding the *dives sine eleemosyna* in the extant *Bethu* and the *Vita I*.





Ultimately, then, when the entirety of the Brigidine chronology is laid out and the data from the parallels between the *Vita I S Brigitae*, the *Bethu Brigitte* and the *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* are considered, it appears safe to conclude that the *Vita I* cannot have been compiled any earlier than the opening decades of the eighth century.

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