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Citation for published version:

Sowerby, R 2011, 'The lives of St Samson: Rewriting the ambitions of an early medieval cult', *Francia*, vol. 38, pp. 1–31.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Francia

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Sonderdruck aus

FRANCIA

FORSCHUNGEN
ZUR
WESTEUROPÄISCHEN
GESCHICHTE

Band 38 (2011)



Jan Thorbecke Verlag

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RICHARD SOWERBY

THE LIVES OF ST SAMSON

Rewriting the Ambitions of an Early Medieval Cult

In the middle of the ninth century, at the monastery of Dol in Brittany, the Life of the sixth-century saint Samson was rewritten. The rewriter evidently perceived a deficiency in the existing Life of St Samson, and one that many modern historians would come to share: the fact that it had very little to say about Brittany. The first Life (referred to by historians as the *Vita prima Samsonis*) dedicated over fifty chapters to Samson's birth in Gwent, his education at the monastery of St Iltut, and his journeys around Wales, Ireland and Cornwall in search of ascetic rigours before his episcopal ordination and the foundation of his own monastery in Cornwall. But about Samson's subsequent voyage to Brittany, the foundation of Dol, and his deeds on the Continent, the author of the *Vita prima* knew only enough for nine short chapters. The new Life (the *Vita secunda*) sought to say more about this latter part of the saint's lifetime, and it did so almost exclusively by adding miracles¹.

These additions have been considered – if they have been considered at all – to be the commonplace fictions of hagiographic embellishment, offering little of historical value². This is in marked contrast to the treatment of the *Vita prima*. Its preface claimed that the anonymous Breton author was writing around a century after Samson's death, working from an earlier text written by the saint's cousin (a deacon named Henoc) that had been kept in the possession of the monastery founded by St Samson in Cornwall³. On this basis, the *Vita prima* has a claim to be the closest thing that sixth-century Brittany has to a contemporary, primary source. While its narrative is no less miraculous than the *Vita secunda*, its stories seem to hold a promise of historicity based on the testimony of contemporaries – and for that reason, a long

1 *Vita prima Samsonis*, ed. Pierre FLOBERT, *La Vie ancienne de saint Samson de Dol*, Paris 1996 (cited hereafter as *Vita prima*). *Vita secunda Samsonis*, ed. François PLAINE, *Vita antiqua S. Samsonis Dolensis episcopi*, in: *Analecta Bollandiana* 6 (1887), p. 77–150 (cited hereafter as *Vita secunda*). All translations from these and other works are my own, unless otherwise stated. I would like to thank Sarah Foot, Sarah Mallet, Alexander O'Hara, James Palmer, Joseph-Claude Poulin, Chris Wickham and Alex Woolf for their comments on various forms of this paper, and all those who heard a version of it at the University of Oxford in February 2009. This research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

2 For example, FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 38–40. The surveys of Joseph-Claude POULIN have outlined some of the changes made by the *Vita secunda*, and the manuscript history: *Hagiographie et politique. La première Vie de saint Samson de Dol*, in: *Francia* 5 (1977), p. 1–26; *Id.*, *Le dossier de saint Samson de Dol*, in: *Francia* 15 (1987), p. 715–731, at p. 726–729; *Id.*, *L'hagiographie bretonne du haut Moyen Âge. Répertoire raisonné, Ostfildern 2009* (Beihefte der *Francia*, 69), p. 336–344.

3 *Vita prima*, preface, 2 (p. 140–142).

tradition of scholars have sought to unearth whatever historical ›facts‹ may have been transmitted by this textual chain from the age of Samson to the pen of the Breton author⁴. Since the *Vita secunda* provides no biographical information that is not derived from the *Vita prima*, nor claims access to additional early sources unknown to Samson's previous hagiographer, but offers only tales of queens losing their eyes, saints addressing flocks of birds, or the dead returned to life, the historical value of its miracle-stories has more quickly been dismissed.

It is increasingly clear, however, that saints' Lives provide rather better evidence for the contexts in which they were composed than for the historical figure at their centre. Saint's *uitae* were not created, far less rewritten, unthinkingly as part of the basic veneration of a holy individual. They were written in response to specific requirements, whether meeting the edificatory needs of religious communities, or pursuing more politically-motivated agendas to assert present-day claims over property or status. Hagiographers were constantly, therefore, putting the past to the service of the present, but never more self-consciously than when rewriting an earlier Life. The original work was now deemed insufficient in some quality, and old stories were recast in new models that might more appropriately communicate current concerns⁵. What has been termed the »process and significance of rewriting« has thus become a fruitful area of study⁶, for by investigating these retold narratives, historians can hope to reveal the changing preoccupations of individual saints' cults, and thereby surmise something of their changing ambitions and historical circumstances.

The saints' Lives produced in early medieval Brittany provide a rich resource for such study, with a large number of *uitae* extant in multiple rewritten versions. It is a resource that has only recently begun to be tapped, but it remains the preserve of a scholarly minority, and is seldom integrated more fully within broader discussions of medieval hagiography and *réécriture*. The marginal status of Brittany within the wider study of medieval Europe and the particularity of its early historiographical tradition have doubtless exacerbated this tendency⁷, as has the varied availability of printed editions⁸; but the very nature of the Breton corpus has seemed to advocate a

- 4 Ferdinand LOT is typical in considering the other Breton *uitae* contaminated, to a greater or lesser extent, by the ecclesiastical politics of the ninth century: Les diverses rédactions de la vie de saint Malo, in: Id. (ed.), *Mélanges d'histoire bretonne (VI^e-XI^e siècle)*, Paris 1907, p. 97–206, at p. 97; likewise Nora CHADWICK, *Early Brittany*, Cardiff 1969, p. 266.
- 5 On the nature of hagiographic rewriting, see especially the various articles in the two volumes edited by Monique GOULLET and Martin HEINZELMANN: *La réécriture hagiographique dans l'Occident médiéval: transformations formelles et idéologiques*, Ostfildern 2003 (Beihefte der Francia, 58); *Miracles, Vies et réécritures dans l'Occident médiéval*, Ostfildern 2006 (Beihefte der Francia, 65). See also Monique GOULLET, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques. Essai sur les réécritures de Vies de saints dans l'Occident latin médiéval (VIII^e-XIII^e s.)*, Turnhout 2005 (Hagiologia, 4), esp. p. 31–101.
- 6 Bernard MERDRIGNAC, The process and significance of rewriting in Breton hagiography, trans. Karen JANKULAK, in: Jane CARTWRIGHT (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, Cardiff 2003, p. 177–197.
- 7 The recent comments of Wendy DAVIES are of relevance here: Franks and Bretons: the impact of political climate and historiographical tradition on writing their ninth-century history, in: Paul FOURACRE, David GANZ (eds.), *Frankland: The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Dame Jinty Nelson*, Manchester 2008, p. 304–321.
- 8 A useful collation of all complete and partial editions of the Breton *uitae* produced since the nineteenth century is provided by POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 470–482.

certain insularity of approach. The *uitae* appear to be participating in a conversation closed off from the wider world, being mutually dependent on each other and drawing inspiration from a common Breton source: the two earliest Lives of St Samson⁹. Their influence has long been noted, but the handful of studies that have begun to trace the evolution of the Breton *uitae* have largely avoided engaging with them in detail – presumably reluctant to enter into disputes about the date and source material of the *Vita prima Samsonis* that are far from resolved¹⁰. To summarize an exceedingly tortuous historiographical tradition: every date from the early seventh to the mid-ninth century has been proposed for the *Vita prima*; and its author thought by some to have been wholly reliant on his alleged sixth-century source, by others to have simply invented it to lend false authority to his work¹¹. The debate has become increasingly entrenched, for the only explicit statements about the Life's creation are made briefly in its preface, and so allusively that it appears difficult to ascertain their validity. Without a definitive interpretation of the preface, the historical value of the rest of the *Vita prima* has remained an open question.

But hagiographical prefaces are always varied guides as to motive and intention, couched as they are in rhetoric that denies innovation and claims complete authenticity and veracity¹². Reading the earliest two Lives of St Samson alongside each other, as analogous treatments of shared material by two different writers, suggests a different starting-point. The *Vita secunda* has no surviving preface¹³, yet the circumstances in which its production had become necessary are readily apparent underlying the presentation and deployment of its miracle-stories. It is suggested that not only does the rewritten Life reveal the changed circumstances of the cult of St Samson in the ninth century, but also that it utilizes a clear hagiographical strategy with implications for our reading of other early medieval hagiographies, most especially the *Vita prima*. This paper, then, begins with the *Vita secunda* and the impact that its historical context had upon its recurrent themes and additions¹⁴. It will then return to the *Vita*

9 On the influence exerted by the Lives of Samson on the other Breton *uitae*, see especially Joseph-Claude POULIN, *Les réécritures dans l'hagiographie bretonne (VIII^e–XIII^e siècles)*, in: GOULLET, HEINZELMANN (eds.), *La réécriture* (as in n. 5), p. 145–194, at p. 163–166, 193.

10 Julia SMITH does not include Dol in her excellent survey of other centres of *uita*-production: *Oral and written: saints, miracles, and relics in Brittany, c. 850–1250*, in: *Speculum* 65 (1990), p. 309–343; MERDRIGNAC ends his study of the rewritten Lives by stating »I have not examined here the example of St Samson whose *uita* [...] merits an examination which would surpass the limits of this chapter«: *Process and significance of rewriting* (as in n. 6), p. 194. POULIN is a notable exception, including the Lives of Samson within a wide-ranging discussion of the Breton corpus; but since he begins with the *Vita prima Samsonis* and ends in the thirteenth century, the details he provides about each are understandably curtailed: *Les réécritures* (as in n. 9), p. 154–155.

11 The proponents and later adherents of these various positions are discussed in detail by FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 102–111; see also POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 329–336.

12 See the detailed discussion in GOULLET, *Écriture et réécriture* (as in n. 5), p. 31–58.

13 The metrical prefaces printed in Plaine's edition are not original, but of tenth-century date: see FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 40–41; POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 344–347.

14 A similar approach – »to look at some of the themes most regularly presented [...] and to see what can be deduced of the relationship between concerns and circumstances« – proved fruitful for another text stuck within a scholarly deadlock: the chronicle of Fredegar. See Ian WOOD, *Fre-*

prima, and argue that other evidence than the historiographical minefield of its contested preface can reveal the circumstances in which it too was created.

Outgrowing the blushing saints of Britain

The first book of the *Vita secunda* narrates Samson's deeds in Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, and is marked by the very few major changes that it made to the *Vita prima*. The second hagiographer followed the first closely, if with a general tendency to contract rather than expand upon the saint's deeds outside Brittany¹⁵. One consistent and striking change, however, is in the interaction between Samson and the other saintly figures he encounters on his travels. In an episode which is otherwise an almost exact repetition from the first Life, the *Vita secunda* describes the moment when the young Samson asks permission to perform his first miraculous healing of a man bitten by a snake, but adds an unexpected detail about his master Illut's reaction. In both, Samson declares: »My father is proven and experienced; he can free the man from this deadly wound¹⁶.« St Illut assumes that Samson is referring to his biological father and the practice of »worldly magic«, but is corrected by the child citing Scripture to defend his request, for »I have no other father than he of whom the prophet said: ›Your hands made me and fashioned me¹⁷.« The *Vita prima* then had Illut immediately send Samson to the injured man's aid, but the *Vita secunda* first has Illut »blush deeply [to see] such prudence as this in his young one¹⁸. This was not an idle descriptive impulse, for Illut is not alone in blushing. Throughout the *Vita secunda*, every other saint with whom Samson comes into contact is said to »blush« or be »shamed« by a demonstration of Samson's holiness. St Dubricius is deceived into believing that Samson has gluttonously emptied the monastery's cellar, but upon finding the miraculously refilled jars in the store-room, he »turned back straightaway with shame¹⁹. A humble question from St Winniau as to the purpose of Samson's journey across Cornwall meets with a harsh rebuke – for Winniau ought to have known that Samson was on a journey towards eternal life – that makes Winniau »blush with great shame and beg [forgiveness] in a tearful voice²⁰. Finally, in a story

degar's fables, in: Anton SCHARER, Georg SCHEIBELREITER (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, Vienna 1994 (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, 32), p. 359–366.

15 Compare, for example, *Vita secunda*, I, 10 (p. 98–101) with *Vita prima*, I, 32 (p. 192–196).

16 *Pater autem meus compertus ac peritus est, et potest liberare hominem de huius doloris nece: Vita prima*, I, 12 (p. 164); *Vita secunda*, I, 6 (p. 88).

17 *Vita secunda*, I, 6 (p. 88): *Hoc ignoras, magister, quia nullum alium patrem habeo, nisi illum de quo propheta dixit: Manus tuae fecerunt me, et plasmaeuerunt me, et in euangelio: Nolite patrem uocare uobis super terram: unus est enim pater uester, qui in caelis est. Tu quare putasti hoc dixisse me de terreno patre?* Both Lives have Samson recite Job 10:8; the quotation from Matthew 23:9 is the addition of the rewriter.

18 *Ibid.: Magister hoc audiens erubescbat ualde de tanta illius prudentia in sua iuuentute, et stupefactus et nihil aliud ausus.* Cf. *Vita prima*, I, 12 (p. 164).

19 *Vita secunda*, I, 10 (p. 100–101): *Dubricius uero, quando non putabatur, introiuit in cella, et introiens uidit omnia uasa summo tenus plena, et cum uerecundia statim reuersus est.* Cf. *Vita prima*, I, 35 (p. 198).

20 *Vita secunda*, I, 15 (p. 107–108): *Audiens autem hoc Winniaus magna uerecundia erubescbat et uoce lacrimabili eum deprecabatur: Ne indigneris, electe Dei.* Cf. *Vita prima*, I, 46 (p. 212–214).

told only in the *Vita secunda*, when the supply of water to St Germanus' monastery runs out during the preparation of the midday meal, Germanus blushes to admit to the visiting Samson that he is powerless to restore it²¹.

The function of this recurring addition is to demonstrate Samson's supremacy as the more holy figure: Samson's wisdom, even at a young age, surpasses Iltut's understanding; his virtue and purpose should have been beyond doubt for Dubricius and Winniau; and Germanus reveals impotence in his own monastery, being dependent on his visitor to call upon God for him. This reveals two distinct stages in the development of Samson's cult. The *Vita prima* presented its saint encountering a series of known holy men, each of whom instructed him or confirmed his sanctity. Samson's holiness was therefore based not only on his own miraculous deeds but also, by implication, on theirs. This was the reason that the author of the *Vita prima* included a seemingly out-of-place episode that jumps from the moment when Iltut first sees the five-year-old Samson, to a prophecy made by Iltut many years later. The prophecy concerns Iltut's own death and the souls of two abbots, and appears irrelevant to the infant Samson²². Although it breaks the chronological flow, its purpose is to demonstrate Iltut's ability to know the future, so that when the narrative resumes and he proclaims that the young Samson will be »the illustrious priest of all the Britons [and] the most skilful founder of churches since the apostles«, his status as a proven prophet has already been established²³. In contrast, the writer of the *Vita secunda* moves Iltut's vision to a later point in his narrative where it better fits the chronology, and where its function is not to reflect Iltut's prophetic talents but to demonstrate Samson's exemplary devotion to his former teacher, as he launches into a sermon-like eulogy for his dying master²⁴. Where the *Vita prima*, then, suggests a cult at an early stage of development, requiring the presence of more established saints to support its own patron, the *Vita secunda* suggests a more vigorous cult that had outgrown its early dependency on other saints and sought instead to establish Samson's superiority over them. This, indeed, only continued with time, for when the *Vita secunda* was itself rewritten in the early twelfth century, Baudri de Bourgueil made Samson outstrip even his biblical namesake²⁵.

The author of the *Vita secunda* clearly wished to inflate Samson's stature, but he did not do so by proceeding through the Life, systematically inflating each miracle. Samson's encounters with three serpents and a forest-dwelling sorceress, and the wonders associated with his ordinations, are some of the more elaborate miracle-stories in the *Vita prima*, but they are hardly changed in the second Life; indeed, they are repeated largely verbatim²⁶. That is not to say that they were wholly unimportant,

21 *Vita secunda*, II, 10 (p. 131): *Germanus uero erubescens ait sancto Sansoni: Magnam querelam pro penuria aquae habemus.*

22 *Vita prima*, I, 8 (p. 158–160).

23 *Ibid.*, I, 9 (p. 160): *En augustum omnium nostrum caput, en pontifex summus multis citra ultraque mare profuturus, en egregius omnium Britannorum sacerdos, en peritissimus omnium ecclesiarum post apostolos fundator.*

24 *Vita secunda*, I, 18 (p. 112–113).

25 See Armelle LE HUËROU, La réécriture d'un texte hagiographique au XII^e siècle: la »Vita sancti Sansonis« de Baudri de Bourgueil, in: *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 108/2 (2001), p. 7–30, at p. 13–15.

26 Compare *Vita prima*, I, 13, 15, 26, 32, 50 and 58 with *Vita secunda*, I, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17 and II, 8 respectively.

for they are as prominent a part of the *Vita secunda* as they had been in the *Vita prima*. The fact that the rewriter had nothing to add, however, suggests that they were deeds venerated only through readings of that *vita*. They are static traditions that show no evidence of change, development or retelling²⁷.

The contrast is clear when we look to the miracles worked by Samson on the behalf of the deposed ruler of Domnonia in northern Brittany²⁸. The *Vita secunda*'s handling of this part of his narrative shows that Samson's involvement with kings, queens and a contested succession evidently did remain part of a living tradition, retold and expanded outside the written record. The details and importance of this extended narrative in the *Vita prima* will be discussed later, but it can be summarized as follows: Samson discovers that the Domnonian ruler, Jonas, had been deposed by »an unjust and warlike stranger« named Conomor, who had received bribes to hand Jonas and his rightful heir Judual over to the Frankish king, Childebert I, for imprisonment and death. Samson journeys from Brittany to Childebert's court to demand Judual's return, and there he works a series of miracles avoiding poison, an unbroken horse and a lion, all set against him by Childebert's queen, Ultragotha. It is only after evicting a serpent from its cave that Samson wins the support of the royal couple and secures the release of Judual, who overthrows Conomor and reclaims his father's kingdom. So it was in the *Vita prima*²⁹. The *Vita secunda*, however, made extensive changes. It is unnecessary to list every divergence here, but in sum, the *Vita secunda* created a more positive portrait of Childebert (in which he is not complicit with Judual's treatment, and tries to help Samson); a more negative view of Ultragotha (in which she wishes to keep Judual captive because she harbours illicit love for him); and a more active, heroic figure of Judual himself, whose connection with Samson continues after his restoration³⁰. Further, the *Vita secunda* added a gruesome epilogue, in which the queen receives her comeuppance: as she turns her back on Samson in church, her eyes fall from her head and she dies before the service is complete³¹. This

27 There is a possibility that the figure of the *theomacha*, the forest-dwelling sorceress, did form part of a living tradition in Wales: see Bernard MERDRIGNAC, Une course en char dans l'hagiographie bretonne? Saint Samson contre la *theomacha*, in: John CAREY, Mairie HERBERT, Pádraig Ó RIAIN (eds.), Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars, Dublin 2001, p. 140–158. Its significance in Brittany had dwindled to such an extent that Baudri de Bourgueil reduced it into a standard »illusion« in his twelfth-century version: see LE HUËROU, La réécriture (as in n. 25), p. 27–28.

28 Magali COUMERT has recently argued that *Domnonia* in the *Vita prima* should be located in Great Britain, not Brittany: Le peuplement de l'Armorique: Cornouaille et Domnonée de part et d'autre de la Manche aux premiers siècles du Moyen Âge, in: Magali COUMERT, Hélène TÉTREL (eds.), Histoires des Breagnes, 1. Les mythes fondateurs, Brest 2010, p. 15–42, at p. 27–34. The fact that *Britannia* could refer to either side of the Channel certainly complicates matters, but the Breton author is explicit that the Domnonian events happened *in hac Europa*. *Europa*, as Coumert rightly notes, is consistently used in reference to the Continent. Samson first finds out about the usurpation because »the people of the region [*homines regionis*] were in great mourning« after their ruler had been deposed (I, 53): since Samson, at this moment in the narrative, is at Dol, this »region« must be in northern Brittany; and it is illogical to suppose that the kingdom to which Judual eventually returns (*remeare*), named now as *Domnonia* (I, 59), is any region other than that from which he had originally been ejected.

29 *Vita prima*, I, 53–59 (p. 224–232).

30 *Vita secunda*, II, 3–17 (p. 122–140).

31 *Ibid.*, II, 9 (p. 130–131).

is, needless to say, pure fantasy: Ultragotha outlived her husband by some years³². The origins of her fictitious demise are unclear, and the story may have been modelled on another included in the *Vita secunda*, in which the wife of a certain count also loses her eyes for standing up to Samson³³. Whatever the original inspiration for this episode, the story as a whole had evidently developed by drawing increasingly on established *topoi*³⁴. Ultragotha thus became a wicked queen after the biblical models of Jezebel and Potiphar's wife, while Childebert appears as the benevolent benefactor who features prominently in other Breton saints' Lives³⁵. Unlike the static traditions of Samson's miracles in Wales and Cornwall, his dealings with the Frankish and Breton rulers attest to retelling beyond the simple recitation of his *vita*.

That Samson's insular miracles remained largely undeveloped while those set on the Continent saw more active retelling and change may seem unremarkable. Other Breton saints' cults, after all, had an intensely local character³⁶. It is nevertheless important to note that this was not predestined from its inception. The author of the *Vita prima* claimed to have visited the Welsh and Cornish monasteries in which Samson had lived and the places he worked his miracles, interjecting a number of times to note his personal experiences from »the time when I was in Britain«³⁷. Regardless of the truth of this claim, the fact that the author made it at all demonstrates that Samson's ties with insular saints and cult-sites carried significant weight, and that his sanctity, at this time, depended to some extent on his Welsh and Cornish heritage. Almost all of these first-person interjections were removed in the creation of the *Vita secunda* – not because the rewriter had any qualms about presenting the

32 Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum decem*, IV, 20, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, Wilhelm LEVISON, MGH, SS rer. Mer. I/1, Hanover 1937–1951, p. 152; Venantius Fortunatus, *Opera poetica*, VI, 6, ed. Friedrich LEO, MGH, Auct. ant. IV/1, Berlin 1881, p. 146–147.

33 *Vita secunda*, II, 13 (p. 134–135). It seems plausible that the story of the count's wife was the earlier of the two stories, since it had accrued material proof: the stone on which her eyes fell remained bloodstained in the author's day.

34 It is tempting to read the story as an inversion of the miracle ascribed to her by Gregory of Tours, in which her overnight vigil achieves the miraculous healing of three blind men: *Liber de uirtutibus sancti Martini*, I, 12, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Mer. I/2, Hanover 1885, p. 596. The idea that instead of her piety granting sight to the blind, her wickedness brings her own blindness and death is attractive, but since the author was little concerned with researching the queen's historical reality, this is surely an accidental similarity.

35 On the Jezebel motif applied to other queens, see Janet NELSON, *Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Bathild in Merovingian history*, in: Derek BAKER (ed.), *Medieval Women*, Oxford 1978 (*Studies in Church History, Subsidia*, 1), p. 31–77, esp. at p. 57–73. On Childebert's typical image in the Breton *uitae*, see below, p. 15–16.

36 See SMITH, *Oral and written* (as in n. 10), p. 337.

37 *Vita prima*, I, 41 (p. 206): *locusque in quo tres fratres supradicti fuerant usque ad tempus quando ego fui in Brittaniam magno semper uenerabatur cultu*. Other instances of apparently first-hand observations are at I, 7, 20 and 48 (p. 156, 178 and 216). Joseph-Claude POULIN considers only some of these interjections to be the words of the author, the others to be repetitions from his alleged Cornish source: La »Vie ancienne« de saint Samson de Dol comme réécriture (BHL 7478–7479), in: *Analecta Bollandiana* 119 (2001), p. 261–312, at p. 269–271, 266–277, 301–302. This is far from clear from their content, for they share a common intention to demonstrate the claim of the Breton author's preface that he had spent time in Britain (preface, 2, 4). Even if we consider this claim to be false, the first-person statements show a unity of purpose and fit a single authorial agenda: see also FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 87.

original author's experiences as his own, since he chose to repeat one of them almost word-for-word, but because the need to find ancillary verification for Samson's insular roots was no longer among his hagiographer's priorities³⁸. By the ninth century, not only had Samson begun to outstrip his saintly contemporaries so that they began to blush in his presence, but so too had his cult begun to outgrow its insular links³⁹.

The birth of St Samson of Dol

Indeed, although the *Vita prima* fashioned strong links between Samson and the Domnonian rulers, there is a remarkable lack of such a connection between Samson and Dol itself⁴⁰. It is truly the *Vita secunda* that first established St Samson of Dol, as he is now remembered, and exploited the community's links with its founding saint⁴¹. The second Life's chief aim was to portray Dol as the foremost of Samson's many foundations, and to assert that certain of the claims made by the monastery in the mid-ninth century actually originated with him.

At every opportunity, it seems, the *Vita secunda* sought to extend the rights granted to St Samson. Where the *Vita prima* said that Samson had visited two of the Channel Islands on his return from Childebert's court, the *Vita secunda* claimed that Childebert had actually given these islands, along with two others and land in the diocese of Rennes, to be the »eternal possession« of him and »his successors after him without end«⁴². Similarly, Pental (present-day Saint-Samson-sur-Risle; the monas-

- 38 Introducing a story of pagan rites around a hilltop idol in Cornwall, Samson's first hagiographer proclaimed: *In quo monte et ego fui signumque crucis quod sanctus Samson sua manu cum quodam ferro in lapide stante sculpsisset adoravi et mea manu palpaui*: *Vita prima*, I, 48 (p. 216). Cf. *Vita secunda*, I, 16 (p. 109): *In illo eodemque monte grandis lapis stabat, et sanctus Sanson manu sua imaginem sanctae crucis quasi in cera mollissima posuit; in quo monte et ego fui, et imaginem adoravi, manuque propria palpaui*. We should probably not credit the rewriter's claim, since it is so obviously and fully modelled on the words of his predecessor and since he never again refers to having been in Britain. His relocation of the *Vita prima*'s words to the end of the episode on the hill reveals that his purpose was simply to fashion a final proof for the new miracle he had inserted: Samson's bare hand leaving signs in stone »as if in the softest wax«.
- 39 On the general loss of insular culture in ninth-century Brittany, see also Julia SMITH, *Province and Empire: Brittany and the Carolingians*, Cambridge 1992 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, fourth series, 18), p. 167–170. It is notable that the Gothic windows in the later cathedral of Dol continued the trend begun in the *Vita secunda*, depicting only Samson's deeds in Brittany, with none that took place in Wales, Ireland or Cornwall: see Meredith LILLICH, *The Armor of Light: Stained Glass in Western France, 1250–1325*, Berkeley 1994 (California Studies in the History of Art, 23), p. 140–141.
- 40 This has been noted, but not developed, by MERDRIGNAC, *Process and significance of rewriting* (as in n. 6), p. 194.
- 41 A useful comparison is with the cult of St Martin, whose first *uita* likewise established Martin's sanctity, but not truly his connection with Tours: see Allan MCKINLEY, *The first two centuries of Saint Martin of Tours*, in: *Early Medieval Europe 14/2* (2006), p. 173–200.
- 42 *Vita secunda*, II, 14 (p. 135–136): *plebem, quae uocatur Ronau et quatuor insulas marinas, id est, Lesiam, Angiamque, Sargiam, Besargiamque, Hilbertus rex atque imperator sancto Sansoni et suis fidelibus post se successoribusque eius tradidit sine fine in possessionem aeternam*; cf. *Vita prima*, I, 59 (p. 230–232) and II, 13 (p. 262–264). Hubert GUILLOTEL suggests *Rimau* in place of Plaine's *Ronau*, and identifies it with Rimou in the diocese of Rennes: *Les origines du ressort de*

tery in the Seine valley, built in the cave from which Samson had ejected Childebert's serpent) was not only granted to Samson in order that he may »raise up a splendid monastery« there, as the *Vita prima* had it, but to be »entrusted to Dol« and »under its authority in perpetuity«⁴³. An entirely new miracle-story also made Samson the founder of a monastery named *Rotmou* in the Vexin⁴⁴. The key element of all these claims is not just that Samson was thought to have held these lands, but that the rights that he had over them were also perpetual, now properly the possessions of the ninth-century cult that preserved his memory⁴⁵.

The *Vita secunda* is particularly clear about what could happen to those who ignored the saint's hereditary rights. When Samson and Germanus discuss the needs of their respective monasteries, they discover that each produces a surplus of something lacking at the other:

»Then, forming a plan between themselves, it was agreed that every year from then on, a tenth part of the wine from St Germanus' monastery would always be handed over to the monastery of St Samson (the one called Pental); and similarly, without fail, a tenth part of the wax from Samson's monastery would be given to Germanus' monastery⁴⁶.«

The Life maintains that this exchange took place annually, until one year the brothers of Germanus' monastery refuse to relinquish any of their wine. The monks of Pental call on the two saints to judge between them, and the next year at Germanus' monastery the vines bear only the tenth of their fruit owed to Pental. Realizing their error,

l'évêché de Dol, in: Mémoires de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Bretagne 54 (1977), p. 31–68, at p. 50.

- 43 *Vita prima*, I, 59 (p. 232): *monasterium ei magnificum in loco unde serpentem eiecerat, regis opitulatione, construere disponente*. *Vita secunda*, II, 8 (p. 128): *et si Deus tuus in hoc uictoriam tibi dederit, nos illam terram cum siluis et pratis et pascuis, uineisque cum aquarum decursibus tibi in hereditatem perpetuam indubitanter consecrabimus*; II, 9 (p. 131): *Sanctus uero Sanson illud monasterium in loco serpentis constructum, cui Pentale est uocabulum, loco primo sibi constructo, cuius est nomen Dol, licentia et permissione imperatoris Hilberti in subiiectione usque in perpetuum commendauit*.
- 44 *Vita secunda*, II, 21 (p. 143–144): *Contigit uero dum per quendam pagum iter ageret, qui Begesim uocatur [...] et illud monasterium usque hodie Rotmou uocatur, quasi rota moue*. Plaine read the monastery's name as *Rotimon*, but others have suggested *Rotmon* and *Rotmou*: see POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 342, n. 123. The latter seems most likely, as the explanation of the name depends on the pun *rot[a] mou[e]*; a pun with the same construction had been used earlier by the rewriter in II, 1: see below, n. 54.
- 45 The concern for property rights is a marked feature of the wider corpus of Celtic *uitae*: see Wendy DAVIES, Property rights and property claims in Welsh *uitae* of the eleventh century, in: Évelyne PATLAGEAN, Pierre RICHÉ (eds.), *Hagiographie, cultures et sociétés, IV^e–XII^e siècles*, Paris 1981, p. 515–533, esp. at p. 515, 527. Cf. also François KERLOUÉGAN, *La littérature latine religieuse et profane*, in: Léon FLEURIOT, Auguste-Pierre SÉGALEN (eds.), *Héritage celtique et captation française. Des origines à la fin des états*, Paris 1987 (*Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, 1), p. 71–95, at p. 86–87.
- 46 *Vita secunda*, II, 11 (p. 132): *Tunc, inito consilio inter se, conductum fuit ut in unoquoque anno ex tunc usque in sempiternum decima pars uini de monasterio sancti Germani ad monasterium sancti Sansonis, quod uocatur Pentale, redderetur, similiter pars decima cerae de monasterio Sansonis ad monasterium Germani sine fine redderetur*.

the monks repent and resume the annual exchange – which »has continued to the present day«, we are told⁴⁷.

Clearly the threat of divine retribution hangs over this exchange, ensuring that it continues. Since Samson himself does not play an active role in the narrative after setting the terms of the exchange, the *Vita secunda* offers no indication that this same judgement could not be repeated in its own day, long after the saint's passing⁴⁸. Cults functioned in large part by ensuring a saint's benevolent disposition towards the faithful⁴⁹. The other side to that function is that cults had it within their power to direct supernatural vengeance against transgressors. The *Vita prima* had demonstrated this in a far more limited way: an account of the theft of jewels from a cross that had belonged to Samson ended with the thief falling into a frozen lake and becoming locked in the ice⁵⁰. The *Vita secunda* extended this understanding of saintly intervention by showing the monks actively calling upon their saint to wreak his revenge on another monastery's vineyard. The ninth-century cult of St Samson was well aware of the powers at its disposal. It may be that this vengeful aspect was more developed at Pental than at Dol, for it is notable that the miracles concerned with Pental show Samson's powers at their most threatening: it is there that both Ultragotha and the count's wife lose their eyes as they attempt to defy the saint⁵¹. This may suggest a body of stories and traditions that had developed independently from the others recorded in the *Vita secunda*, but of which the author was clearly aware.

Nevertheless, although the Pental miracles had an important function in the *Vita secunda*, it is Dol that is the true centre of the miraculous⁵². The foundation story alone is vastly expanded. The *Vita prima* gave a rather brief account of Samson meeting a man on the shore after landing in Brittany, and healing his leprous wife and demoniac daughter before building the monastery of Dol nearby⁵³. The *Vita secunda*, however, builds a grand narrative, in which a series of ever more wondrous miracles culminate in Dol's foundation. After curing the two women, Samson receives an angelic vision. He is told the appointed hour in which a sign will be seen, »and there

47 Ibid., II, 11 (p. 133): *Et sic usque nunc agitur*.

48 It is notable that this event is not presented as a posthumous miracle, but simply one that took place in Samson's absence. Brittany's lack of concern for posthumous miracles has been noted elsewhere: SMITH, Oral and written (as in n. 10), p. 316, 320, 335–337. Even within this context, the *Vita secunda's* aversion to posthumous miracles is extremely marked, since one from the *Vita prima* is relocated and placed within the saint's lifetime (compare *Vita prima*, II, 10 with *Vita secunda*, I, 20), and another removed altogether (*Vita prima*, II, 15).

49 For further comment, see Patrick GEARY, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca 1994, p. 95.

50 *Vita prima*, II, 10 (p. 254–258).

51 *Vita secunda*, II, 9 (p. 130–131) and II, 13 (p. 134–135).

52 For this reason, I do not consider the inclusion of the Pental miracles sufficient to assert that the author of the *Vita secunda* was from that monastery, as first suggested by Robert FAWTIER, *La vie de saint Samson: essai de critique hagiographique*, Paris 1912, p. 15–16. A summary of the debate is provided by Bernard MERDRIGNAC, *Henoc, les philosophi et Pental: remarques sur la »Vita Ia Samsonis«*, in: Gwennole LE MENN, Jean-Yves LE MOING (eds.), *Bretagne et pays celtiques: langues, histoires, civilisation. Mélanges offerts à la mémoire de Léon Fleuriot*, Saint-Brieuc 1992, p. 167–180, at p. 176–180. Further evidence for locating the author at Dol is given by POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 342–343.

53 *Vita prima*, I, 52 (p. 222).

you will construct a monastery that shall never fail«. The prophecy is fulfilled when Samson comes upon a wilderness filled with locusts, and »a voice emitted from heaven« telling Samson and his monks that the locusts signify that this is the place chosen for them⁵⁴. The monastery is built, and the account ends with an extensive list of the miracles worked there. Dol's self-portrayal as a centre of divine power here rests on the strongest possible miraculous supports: exorcism, prophecy, angelic encounter, wondrous sign, and the very voice of God.

So when, almost at the end of the *Vita secunda*, we read that »St Samson received the archiepiscopacy of the whole of Brittany from the hand of the emperor Childebert«, it comes as no surprise that it is to Dol that he returns with his new title⁵⁵. Even so, to make this extraordinary claim that had no foundation on either historical fact or the *Vita prima*, the rewriter utilized every available earthly and heavenly support. Childebert is usually identified as *rex*, but at this point he becomes *imperator*. The use of the word is not accidental: *imperium* is used highly selectively in the *Vita secunda*, only at moments where it makes claims about Samson's rights and privileges that were knowingly devoid of historical basis⁵⁶. The Breton ruler Jonas had been called *imperator* and given an extended genealogy in order to inflate Judual's lineage for the moment he is restored to his father's *imperium*, for it is then that he grants Samson »the hereditary bishopric of all Domnonia«⁵⁷. Dol, in the *Vita secunda*, was thus a bishopric established by a Breton *imperator*, and elevated by his equivalent (and by now semi-legendary) Frankish counterpart. Divine manifestations confirm the grants made by the highest earthly authorities, for on the new archbishop's return journey, so many miracles take place that »it is difficult to count them« says the author as he launches, nevertheless, into a lengthy list⁵⁸.

The need to establish Dol as a site of exceptional holiness worthy of »the archbishop of the whole of Brittany« is foremost among the other concerns of the *Vita secunda*, more carefully backed up by secular and miraculous supports. Its purpose was to project the mid-ninth-century monastery's ambitions back into the time of its founder. The letters of Pope Nicholas I to Salomon (r. 857–874) in 865–866 reveal that the Breton ruler had requested that the *pallium* be sent to Festinian, bishop of

54 *Vita secunda*, II, 11 (p. 120–121): *Et dum ille admirabatur, uox de caelo emissa est ei dicens: Videte, fratres, quid locusta significat, nisi in hoc loco sta, et locustae quid significant, nisi in hoc loco state.*

55 *Ibid.*, II, 24 (p. 147): *Tunc uero S. Sanson de manu Hilberti imperatoris et uerbo et commendatione archiepiscopatum totius Britanniae recipiens.*

56 For Childebert as *imperator*: *ibid.*, II, 9 (p. 131) and II, 14 (p. 135). The use of this terminology has been noted before by Bernard MERDRIGNAC, but only to highlight the fact that the *Vita prima*'s consistent use of *rex* suggests a date of composition earlier than the ninth century: *La première vie de saint Samson: étude chronologique*, in: *Studia Monastica* 30 (1988), p. 243–289, at p. 257.

57 *Vita secunda*, II, 19 (p. 142): *Tunc Iudualus recepit eum in patrem et in matrem usque ad uitae suae finem et semini suo post se ac totam dominationem totius Domnoniae haereditario pontificali tradidit illi.* For the line of Jonas and Judual, see II, 3 (p. 122).

58 *Ibid.*, II, 24 (p. 147): *ac multas uirtutes in itinere faciens, quas enumerare difficile est, caecos illuminans, leprosos mundans, daemoniacos sanitati restituens, lunaticos curans, de euangelio semper omnibus secum ambulantis praedicans, regnum caeleste cunctis annuntians, poenam ignis gehennae peccantibus promittens, prospero itinere, Deo duce ac protectore comite, fatigatus ex itinere cum magna lassitudine ad Dolum peruenit.*

Dol. The bid proved unsuccessful, but Salomon's interest in creating an archbishopric of Dol has been interpreted as his attempt to foster »feelings of Breton unity and national identity«⁵⁹. This seems the obvious context for a rewritten Life of St Samson that fabricated an ancient claim to Dol's archiepiscopal status.

However, the *Vita secunda* fits rather imperfectly into this suggested royal scheme. Its retelling of Conomor's murderous usurpation of a kingdom would, one imagines, not have sat well with Salomon, given the accidental but inescapable similarity to the circumstances of his own rise to power after the murder of Erispoë in 857⁶⁰. The Life is uncompromising about what comes of such activities, and the bloody revenge of a disinherited son would hardly be suitable as royal propaganda in this context. Yet it seems clear that the *Vita secunda* was written during Salomon's reign. Dol's archiepiscopal claims had not been voiced before 859, to judge from a letter sent by Frankish clergymen at Savonnières to four Breton bishops – including the bishop of Dol – whose authority they did not recognize, which made no reference to any archiepiscopal pretensions among its other grievances⁶¹. Establishing a *terminus ante quem* for the Life's creation is more tentative, but may be suggested by its reference to the monastery of Pental continuing »to the present day«⁶². Pental is last attested in a text composed no later than 851, and was sacked by the vikings at some time in the following decades⁶³. While we therefore can be confident in placing the composition of the *Vita secunda* within Salomon's reign, the available evidence would allow a date either shortly before or shortly after his known involvement with the archiepiscopal bid in 865–866. Since the rewritten Life makes no attempt to diminish its judgement about rulers who owe their positions to assassination, a date before Salomon became Dol's advocate in Rome might be preferable. Given that the *Vita secunda* bears witness to Dol's insistent preoccupation with extending every possible grant of land or rights, the impetus to claim »the archiepiscopacy of the whole of Brittany« need not have been royal. It may first have arisen within Dol itself, as the simply the foremost of a whole network of expansionary ambitions that Samson's successors had begun to claim for themselves. Such confidence to deny the jurisdiction of Tours might plausibly be placed in the context of the peace made between Salomon and Charles the Bald in 863, in which several years of revolts had resulted in substantial

59 This argument, together with a full discussion of the previous historiography, is given in Julia SMITH, The »archbishopric« of Dol and the ecclesiastical politics of ninth-century Brittany, in: Stuart MEWS (ed.), *Religion and National Identity*, Oxford 1982 (*Studies in Church History*, 18), p. 59–70; Salomon's involvement is discussed at p. 67–70. See also Bernard MERDRIGNAC, *La Bretagne et les Carolingiens*, in: Pierre-Roland GIOT, Philippe GUIGON, Bernard MERDRIGNAC, *Les premiers Bretons d'Armorique*, Rennes 2003, p. 121–154, at p. 151–153.

60 *Annales Bertiniani*, s. a. 857, 874, ed. Félix GRAT, Jeanne VIELLIARD, Suzanne CLÉMENCET, Léon LEVILLAIN, *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, Paris 1964 (*Société de l'histoire de France*), p. 75, 196. See also SMITH, *Province and Empire* (as in n. 39), p. 103.

61 The letter is edited by Wilfried HARTMANN, MGH, *Concilia III*, Hanover 1984, p. 480–481; see also SMITH, *Archbishopric* (as in n. 59), p. 64–65.

62 *Vita secunda*, II, 11–13 (p. 132–135); see above, p. 9–10.

63 On the evidence for the destruction of Pental, see FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 38, n. 68. Christine RAUER notes that this final attestation to Pental's existence is often misunderstood as the date of its destruction: *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues*, Cambridge 2000, p. 95, n. 26.

Breton gains in Neustria⁶⁴. The archiepiscopal bid, and its hagiographic expression, may have been an individual bishopric's attempt to capitalize on a moment in which, as a new *status quo* was established, the relationship between the Bretons and their Frankish overlords seemed, perhaps, open for renegotiation.

Placing the impetus for an ›archbishopric of Dol‹ in the context of a competitive and expansionary cult, only subsequently incorporated in a royal initiative, may also explain why it met with such apparent resistance from the other bishoprics under Salomon's control. Rennes and Nantes, Frankish counties granted first to Erispoë and retained by Salomon, remained firmly tied to Tours⁶⁵. But it was Breton Alet that responded with a hagiographical backlash, rewriting the Life of its saint, Malo, sometime between 866 and 872 to add a scene that showed him journeying specifically to Tours for his episcopal ordination⁶⁶. Perhaps, given their proximity, Alet and Dol could scarcely be other than competitive rivals; and since Dol's diocese was originally created at the expense of Alet's, the latter had particular reason to feel snubbed by the attempts of Salomon and the ninth-century bishopric⁶⁷. Certainly, the stance that Dol took in the *Vita secunda* was not gently persuasive but combative, basing its saint's superiority on the shameful blushes of inferior holy men, backed up by the vengeful miracles of Pentel. Establishing that Dol's saint had humiliated his contemporaries into subservience and held the power to wreak miraculous devastation sought to demonstrate that in a contest of cults, there would be only one winner. Salomon's failure to obtain the *pallium* for Festinian did little to check these self-confident ambitions, for while he seems not to have pursued it further after 866, Dol continued to claim the title in its literary output⁶⁸. The hagiographic stance of the *Vita secunda* should probably not be read as the last resort of a disappointed see trying to save face after failure, but as the first attempt by a competitive bishopric that would remain committed to eventual success.

It was against this backdrop that a new *Vita Samsonis* had become necessary. The changes its author made to his source varied from the alteration of small details to the addition of wholly new deeds, but all suggest that the concerns and self-image of the cult at Dol were much changed by the mid-ninth century. Its author was sensitive to those moments at which he made his most important or controversial claims, and sought to place them beyond doubt by drawing on the greatest supernatural supports, piling miracle on top of miracle. To this was added the deliberately inflated

64 Annales Bertiniani (as in n. 60), s. a. 857–863, p. 75–97. Further on Salomon's revolts and their resolution, see SMITH, *Province and Empire* (as in n. 39), p. 100–115.

65 An overview of the Breton control of Rennes, Nantes and other territories is given by SMITH: *ibid.*, p. 100–101, 139–144.

66 Bili, *Vita sancti Machutis*, I, 40, ed. Gwenaël LE DUC, *Vie de Saint-Malo, évêque d'Alet, Saint-Malo 1979* (Dossiers du Centre régional archéologique d'Alet, B), p. 120–122. On the Life and its context, see further POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 147–170, esp. p. 168–170; see also SMITH, *Oral and written* (as in n. 10), p. 332–333.

67 See CHADWICK, *Early Brittany* (as in n. 4), p. 244, 247–250.

68 See especially the *Chronicle of Dol*, 5–6, ed. François DUINE, *La métropole de Bretagne: «Chronique de Dol», composée au XI^e siècle et catalogues des dignitaires jusqu'à la Révolution*, Paris 1916 (*La Bretagne et les pays celtiques*, série in-8°, 12), p. 41. For the subsequent history of archiepiscopal issue, see Paula DE FOUGEROLLES, *Pope Gregory VII, the Archbishopric of Dol and the Normans*, in: *Anglo-Norman Studies* 21 (1998), p. 47–66.

status of the earthly rulers who granted these extended rights, for when Samson was granted his perpetual ownership of monasteries or archiepiscopal status, then Childebert and Judual were transformed from kings into emperors. Divine and earthly authorities combine to create miraculous proofs for claims which are, nevertheless, firmly rooted on a particular moment in the history of Dol, showing it in the process of shaking off its earlier dependency on insular saints as it responded to the new political opportunities of the 860s.

The »Vita prima« and the changing faces of King Childebert

That a rewritten saint's Life projected contemporary concerns into the past is not, in itself, surprising, for such texts always reflect their present as much as they ostensibly narrate the past. What is of more interest is the manner in which the *Vita secunda's* hagiographical strategy addressed these concerns. Even lacking explicit authorial statements of intent, the second Life of Samson wrote its agenda into the very patterning of its miracle-stories, building a miraculous crescendo before delivering its most vitally relevant messages. It is of value to note this strategy if we turn back to the *Vita prima Samsonis* with the hope of determining the circumstances of its production. The question of its sources of information about the saint can, for the present, be left to one side; what is of equal importance is the identification of the ways in which this information had become divorced from any original historical setting and turned to matters of more immediate relevance. Analysis of the *Vita secunda* is, it is true, assisted by the atypical volume of surviving documentation generated by the archiepiscopal controversy. Nevertheless, the remainder of this paper will argue that there is sufficient evidence to ascertain the circumstances in which the *Vita prima Samsonis* attained its present form, and that contemporary politics and ambitions similarly dictated its deployment of the miraculous.

It is not difficult to identify the episode which the *Vita prima* placed above all others in Samson's life, for it is singled out as his »greatest and most wonderful work«⁶⁹. This is the extended sequence of events, mentioned previously, that culminate in Samson's restoration of the falsely imprisoned Judual to his rightful place on the Domnonian throne⁷⁰. The explicit praise of the author simply makes unavoidable the fact that this is the culmination of Samson's story, for the episode also demonstrates that recognisable strategy of piling miracle upon miracle to fashion a grand climax. Samson first works an exorcism, then evades a poisoning attempt, performs a healing, tames an unbroken horse, kills a lion set on him by the queen, and expels a serpent from its cave. This is all simply preparatory to the release and return of Judual, who is granted the victory over the usurper Conomor by Samson's prayers.

That this is the climax of the *Vita prima* seems rather self-evident, but to explain why is more problematic, for the episode has for decades been judged to be a fantasy. Robert Fawtier first raised doubts about the historicity of even the most basic outline of events, citing the silence of Gregory of Tours on any Domnonian power struggle as a major concern, compounded by the similarly groundless manner in which the

69 *Vita prima*, I, 53 (p. 224): *maximum ac mirabilimum opus*.

70 *Ibid.*, I, 53–59 (p. 224–232), summarized above, p. 6.

Vita prima presented Childebert I (r. 511–558) and his queen, Ultragotha, as hostile both to Brittany and to Bishop Samson⁷¹. He considered it doubtful, therefore, that any such event had really taken place, and subsequent historians have shared his concerns as to the historical value of so miracle-laden an episode⁷². Since Fawtier, however, the limitations of Gregory of Tours as an historical source have become better appreciated – especially for early Brittany. Gregory made note of events in Brittany in his Histories only when they directly affected the stability of his diocese; and in any case, his information appears to have been restricted to the south-east of the peninsula⁷³. His silence about a succession crisis in Domnonia in the north thus matches his silence about any aspect of that region. His Histories do mention another event involving Conomor, in which he appears as a villain only marginally less notorious than the ›Breton Bluebeard‹ he would become in later legend; but this can neither support the *Vita prima*'s story nor diminish it⁷⁴. Likewise, Gregory's statement that Childebert's nephew, Chilperic I, baptized one of his sons, in an unusual break from royal tradition, with the name ›Samson‹ might offer a tantalizing suggestion of genuine contact between the saint and the Merovingian kings⁷⁵. Still, this cannot be direct evidence for Bishop Samson's royal connections, since his more famous biblical namesake is just as likely to have been Chilperic's inspiration, nor for Samson's mission to Childebert's court under the circumstances alleged by the *Vita prima*. There is, simply, no direct evidence that either corroborates or condemns the essential framework of events.

Fawtier's observation that the *Vita prima*'s presentation of Childebert and his queen contradicts other evidence for the character of their rule has, however, found greater support⁷⁶. The surviving fragment of Childebert's legislation is often cited as evidence of the king's religiosity, as it concerns the destruction of idols, and correct conduct at Easter and other festivals⁷⁷. In hagiography written both during and after his reign, Childebert appears honouring the words of hermits, fulfilling religious vows and founding monasteries⁷⁸. Ultragotha, likewise, was the subject of praise

71 Robert FAWTIER, *Saint Samson, abbé de Dol. Réponse à quelques objections*, in: *Annales de Bretagne* 35/2 (1922), p. 137–170, at p. 161–170.

72 For example, CHADWICK, *Early Brittany* (as in n. 4), p. 254–255.

73 On Gregory as a source for Brittany, see SMITH, *Province and Empire* (as in n. 39), p. 16–18.

74 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* (as in n. 32), IV, 4, p. 137–138. On the development of Conomor's villainous reputation, see CHADWICK, *Early Brittany* (as in n. 4), p. 222–223.

75 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* (as in n. 32), V, 22, p. 229.

76 For example: Ian WOOD, *Forgery in Merovingian Hagiography*, in: *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*, vol. 5, Hanover 1988 (MGH, *Schriften*, 33/5), p. 369–384, at p. 382; POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 333.

77 *Childeberti I regis praeceptum*, ed. Alfred BORETIUS, MGH, *Cap. reg. Franc. I*, Hanover 1883–1887, p. 2–3. See also Bruno DUMÉZIL, *La royauté franque et la christianisation des Gaules: le »moment« Childebert I^{er} (511–558)*, in: Dominique PARIS-POULAIN, Sara NARDI COMBESCURE, Daniel ISTRIA (eds.), *Les premiers temps chrétiens dans le territoire de la France actuelle. Hagiographie, épigraphie et archéologie: nouvelles approches et perspectives de recherche*, Rennes 2009, p. 41–49, esp. p. 43–44.

78 For a description of ›the kingdom of the most glorious Childebert‹ written during his reign, see *Vita Caesarii episcopi Arelatensis*, II, 45, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, *SS rer. Mer. III*, Hanover 1896, p. 499. For posthumous praise, see Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, 81, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, *SS rer. Mer. I/2*, Hanover 1885, p. 800; and Fortunatus, *Opera poetica* (as in n. 32), V, 2, p. 131–134.

poetry, likened by Gregory of Tours to the Queen of Sheba, remembered for her role in a miraculous healing, and memorialized in the *Vita Balthildis* as »Ultragotha, queen of the most Christian king Childebert, [...] a comforter of the poor and helper of monks«⁷⁹. In reality, of course, the royal couple may not have entirely lived up to their unblemished reputation, but the long-lasting image of religiosity is striking in its consistency⁸⁰. The *Vita prima Samsonis* is thus the sole dissenting voice. Fawtier's conclusion was that this »confusion« in the Life was »difficult to explain if our author's source was the *Vita* of Henoc the deacon, a contemporary and probably an eyewitness«. On these grounds, he judged the author's alleged dependency on an earlier source text spurious, and dismissed his claim to be writing within a century of Samson's death, preferring a late eighth- or early ninth-century date for the *Vita prima*⁸¹. Subsequent proponents of similarly late dates have generally accepted Fawtier's reasoning, seeing in the presentation of the royal couple the well-worn *topoi* of recalcitrant kings and wicked queens, deployed at a time when any historical reality had been forgotten⁸². But when the *Vita prima* is considered within the wider corpus of hagiography from Brittany, it becomes clear that it also runs counter to the prevailing Breton stereotype. In around a dozen, largely ninth-century Lives – including, as we have seen, the *Vita secunda Samsonis* – Childebert appears as the benevolent benefactor of the Breton saints⁸³. If there is a stereotyped portrait of Childebert I, this is it, not the »insolent« king of the *Vita prima*. The fact that a saint's Life remodelled the past in the service of exalting its subject's »greatest and most wonderful work« should not surprise us; but the *Vita prima* fits no less awkwardly with the later Breton saints' Lives than with the contemporary reputation of Childebert and his queen. The mere passage of time cannot, therefore, be held solely responsible for the distorted picture of their rule: as ahistorical as it may be, it does not in itself argue against the Life's creation, as its preface alleges, at some point around a century after Samson's death. Indeed, events in the reign of one mid-seventh-century king polarized later opinion and may have particular relevance for our reading of the climax of the first Life of St Samson.

79 Fortunatus, *Opera poetica* (as in n. 32), VI, 6, p. 146–147; Gregory, *De uirtutibus Martini* (as in n. 34), I, 12, p. 596; *Vita dominae Balthildis reginae*, 18, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Mer. II, Hanover 1888, p. 506: *Vltrogoda fertur, regina Childeberto christianissimi regis, eo quod consolatrix fuisset pauperum et seruorum Dei uel monachorum adiutrix.*

80 Michael WALLACE-HADRILL detects a certain reserve in Gregory of Tours' praise of Childebert, though hardly sufficient to offer an alternative perspective on the character of his reign: *The Long-Haired Kings and other Studies in Frankish History*, Toronto 1962, p. 189–190. See also DUMÉZIL, *La royauté franque* (as in n. 77), p. 42–43.

81 FAWTIER, *La vie de saint Samson* (as in n. 52), p. 74–78; ID., *Saint Samson, abbé de Dol* (as in n. 71), *passim*.

82 POULIN, *Hagiographie et politique* (as in n. 2), p. 11–12; FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 26–29.

83 For example: Wrmonoc, *Vita sancti Pauli Aureliani*, 19, ed. Charles CUISSARD, *Vie de S. Paul de Léon en Bretagne*, in: *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881–1883), p. 450–452; *Vita sancti Tutguali*, ed. Anatole DE BARTHÉLEMY, *Étude sur une vie inédite de saint Tudual, attribuée au VI^e siècle*, in: *Mémoires de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* 44 (1883), p. 104–123, at p. 122–123. See also Bernard MERDRIGNAC, *Les saints et la »seconde migration bretonne«*, in: GIOT, GUIGON, MERDRIGNAC, *Les premiers Bretons* (as in n. 59), p. 93–120, at p. 104, 109–114.

From 629 to 639, the lands over which Childebert I had reigned were held by Dagobert I. In 635, Dagobert called the Breton ruler Judicael to his court. The later seventh-century chronicler known as Fredegar explained that Judicael was summoned »to make amends for the harm they [the Bretons] had done«. Fredegar described not only Judicael's submission, but also his refusal to eat at Dagobert's table, saying that »because Judicael was very religious and had a great fear of God, [...] Judicael left the palace and went to eat at the house of Dado the referendary, whom he knew to be a follower of holy religion«⁸⁴. The *Vita Eligii* – in its surviving form a Carolingian composition but probably based upon an original written by the same Dado, later Bishop Audoin of Rouen – also makes reference to Judicael's actions at Dagobert's court, making it one of the better attested episodes in Frankish-Breton relations⁸⁵. It also suggests that Judicael's submission followed military engagements of some kind, for *Brittani* are recorded among the captives in Dagobert's court released by St Eligius⁸⁶.

Previous historians have commented on the similarities between this incident and the climax of the first Life of St Samson, even suspecting that the *Vita prima*'s story could be a fabrication allegorizing Judicael's submission⁸⁷. Judual and Judicael, two similarly-named Breton rulers remembered for a close relationship with a renowned holy man, are forced, by circumstances not of their own choosing, to spend time in the court of the west Frankish king. To signify the resolution of conflict, both Judicael and Samson are invited to a traditionally reconciliatory meal with the king, which neither ultimately fulfils. Fredegar's reason for Judicael's refusal – »because he was very religious« – renders the court as an impure or unholy space, an implication also made by the author of the *Vita prima*, who asserted that the first person Samson met there was a count possessed by a demon.

Also of interest is Fredegar's characterization of Dagobert. In his chronicle, Dagobert is the king whose greed undermined his early zeal for justice and almsgiving and caused an irrevocable moral decline: »his thoughts turned away from God« as he »surrendered himself to boundless debauchery«⁸⁸. It has been noted that Fredegar's

84 Fredegar, *Chronica*, IV, 78, ed. Michael WALLACE-HADRILL, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations*, London 1960, p. 66: *Dagobertus ad Clippiaco resedens mittit nuncios in Britannia que Brittanos male admiserant ueluciter emendarint et dicione suae se traderint. [...] Sed tamen cum Dagobertum ad minsam nec ad prandium discumbere noluit, eo quod esset Iudechaile relegiosus et temens Deum ualde. Cumque Dagobertus resedisset ad prandium, Iudacaile aegrediens de palacium ad mansionem Dadone referendario, quem cognouerat sanctam relegionem sectantem, accessit ad prandium.*

85 *Vita sancti Eligii*, I, 13, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, SS rer. Mer. IV, Berlin 1902, p. 680. This chapter is incomplete, but what remains is clearly identifiable as the same event. On the composition of the *Vita Eligii*, and the degree to which its extant shape reflects its original content, see variously: Robert MARKUS, *From Caesarius to Boniface: Christianity and paganism in Gaul*, in: Jacques FONTAINE, Jocelyn HILLGARTH (eds.), *Le septième siècle. Changements et continuités/The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity*, London 1992 (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 42), p. 154–172, at p. 166–167; Yitzhak HEN, *Paganism and superstitions in the time of Gregory of Tours: une question mal posée!*, in: Kathleen MITCHELL, Ian WOOD (eds.), *The World of Gregory of Tours*, Leiden 2002 (Culture, Beliefs, and Traditions, 8), p. 229–240, at p. 238–239; Clemens BAYER, »Vita Eligii«, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 35 (2007), p. 461–524.

86 *Vita Eligii* (as in n. 85), I, 10, p. 677.

87 For example, Patrick GALLIOU, *The Bretons*, Oxford 1991, p. 142–143.

88 Fredegar, *Chronica* (as in n. 84), IV, 60, p. 50: *luxoriam super modum deditus tres habebat ma-*

moral judgements are usually very personal, and how much trust we should therefore place in his allegation that »Dagobert's *leudes* were groaning about his wickedness« is unclear⁸⁹. Further objections to the king's character from those who had lived under his rule are, however, suggested by the *Vita Arnulfi*, probably the work of a contemporary writing c. 650. While its narration of Dagobert flying into a murderous rage against the saintly Arnulf with a drawn sword is clearly not dispassionate reportage, the Life does indicate that Fredegar's allegation of contemporary criticism was not entirely of his own making⁹⁰. Fredegar also presented one of Dagobert's queens, Nanthild, as a figure enmeshed in plots and violence, giving permission for a vengeful murder in 641, and the following year engaged in a secret endeavour with the newly-elected mayor of Burgundy, »which is believed not to have been pleasing to God and therefore was not granted success«⁹¹. It must immediately be noted that many Merovingian queens owed their position and influence to manipulating court politics, and Nanthild should not be marked out too greatly from a number of her peers⁹². Fredegar was certainly interested in exploring the political roles of women in recent history, especially the more destructive individuals, most famously Brunhild, and the effect of this upon his account remains to be ascertained⁹³. Nevertheless, his chronicle does present a later memory of a godless king and a scheming queen, ruling the lands that had once been Childebert's at the time when a more active policy towards Brittany culminated in the submission of Judicael.

The similarities should not be overstated: the story of Judual's restoration in the *Vita prima Samsonis* is clearly not a seventh-century event recast with sixth-century characters. But if the events and manner of portrayal raise doubts as to their historicity, they have rather more in common with the actions and later reputation of Judicael, Nanthild and Dagobert I. Dagobert's posthumous image was not, it must be admitted, as monochrome as Childebert's; the *Liber historiae Francorum* subsequently held him up as a model of strong kingship, »peaceable, just like Solomon«. Writing in the early eighth century, its Neustrian author was not slow to praise

xime ad instar reginas et pluremas concupinas. [...] Quod cum uersum fuisset cor eius sicut super meminimus et ad Deum eius cogitatio recessisset.

- 89 Ibid., IV, 61, p. 50: *Cum leudes suae eiusque nequicie gemerint*. On Fredegar's value-judgements, see Roger COLLINS, *Fredegar, Aldershot 1996* (Authors of the Middle Ages: Historical and Religious Writers of the Latin West, IV/13), p. 108–110.
- 90 *Vita Arnulfi*, 17, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Mer. II, Hanover 1888, p. 439. The seventh-century date implied by the hagiographer has been questioned by WOOD, *Forgery* (as in n. 76), p. 370–371; but more recently reaffirmed by Monique GOULLET, *Les saints du diocèse de Toul* (SHG VI), in: Martin HEINZELMANN (ed.), *L'hagiographie du haut Moyen Âge en Gaule du Nord. Manuscrits, textes et centres de production*, Stuttgart 2001 (Beihefte der Francia, 52), p. 11–89, at p. 48–50; ID., *Les saints du diocèse de Metz* (SHG X), in: GOULLET, HEINZELMANN (eds.), *Miracles, Vies et réécritures* (as in n. 5), p. 149–317, at p. 222–224. See also Guy HALSALL, *Settlement and Social Organization: The Merovingian Region of Metz*, Cambridge 1995, p. 15–16, and 263–264, n. 1.
- 91 Fredegar, *Chronica* (as in n. 84), IV, 83, p. 70–71; and IV, 89, p. 75: *Floachatus et Nantildis regina macenauant, quem credetur non fuisse Deo placebelem ideoque non mancepauit effectum*.
- 92 For detailed discussion of comparable careers, see NELSON, *Queens as Jezebels* (as in n. 35).
- 93 See WOOD, *Fredegar's fables* (as in n. 14), p. 362–364. Whether Fredegar's interest makes his works a better source for their activities, or more likely to overemphasize their personalities to present a full range of »types« of queen, merits further discussion.

Merovingian kings like Dagobert who »struck fear and dread into all the surrounding kingdoms«⁹⁴. However, even that highly partisan, pro-Merovingian text portrayed Dagobert's son, Clovis II, as a devilish idolater, and his queen Balthild as »forceful in her slyness«⁹⁵. That is to say that even if the similarities between the *Vita prima*'s Childebert and Fredegar's Dagobert are coincidental, low opinions of seventh-century Frankish kings and their unholy courts are in no way uncommon⁹⁶. But within Brittany, a bad reputation of Dagobert certainly outlived the immediate aftermath of 635. Ingomar's eleventh-century *Vita Iudicaeli* presented the Frankish king as the antithesis of the saintly Judicael, opposite to him in both thought and deed⁹⁷. One cannot imagine that Dagobert's memory was held in any higher esteem in earlier centuries. The situation we are left with, then, is that the »greatest and most wonderful work« in the first Life of St Samson bears more than a passing resemblance to the political events of the 630s, and that its atypical portrait of Childebert and Ultra-gotha is out of step both with their image both in their own day and in the later Breton *uitae*, but parallels more closely that of their seventh-century counterparts.

While we may have reason to see echoes of Judicael's meeting with Dagobert in the *Vita prima Samsonis*, this does not provide the key to unlocking the Life's purpose and intended audience. They remain echoes, and whether they reflect the literary endeavour of an individual hagiographer, or the more collective process of retelling an older story by the community at Dol, is difficult to say. Resonance seems more likely than anachronism: an existing miracle-story grew in stature as political events gave it greater currency and meaning. But while the story gained its present form as a response, conscious or otherwise, to the events of 635, that does not altogether explain its purpose as the climax of the *Vita prima*.

On three occasions, the author states that the Life was written at the behest of Tigernomalus, bishop of Dol⁹⁸. Although nothing more is known about him that

94 *Liber historiae Francorum*, 42–43, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Mer. II, Hanover 1888, p. 314–315: *Timorem et metum in uniuersis regnis per circuitum incussit. Ipse pacificus, uelut Salomon, quietus regnum obtenuit Francorum*. On the importance of conquest to the value-judgements of the author, see Richard GERBERDING, *The Rise of the Carolingians and the »Liber historiae Francorum«*, Oxford 1987, p. 162–166.

95 *Liber historiae Francorum* (as in n. 94), 43–44, p. 315–317: *Balthilde, pulchra omnique ingenio strenua*. This translation is suggested by Paul FOURACRE and Richard GERBERDING, who note the connotations of slyness in the *Liber historiae Francorum*'s use of *ingenium*, and the strongly masculine associations of *strenuitas*: Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640–720, Manchester 1996 (Manchester Medieval Sources), p. 88, n. 32. On the varied assessments of Balthild's character, see Sarah TATUM, *Auctoritas as sanctitas*: Balthild's depiction as »queen-saint« in the »Vita Balthildis«, in: *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 16/6 (2009), p. 809–834, at p. 812–815.

96 For a similar episode, see also Jonas, *Vita sancti Columbani*, I, 19, ed. Bruno KRUSCH, MGH, SS rer. Mer. IV, Berlin 1902, p. 87–90. On the importance of this scene: Mayke DE JONG, *Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms*, in: Mayke DE JONG, Frans THEUWS (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, Leiden 2001 (Transformation of the Roman World, 6), p. 291–328, at p. 307–308.

97 There is no full edition of Ingomar's *Vita sancti Iudicaeli*, but the relevant episode is printed in Hyacinthe MORICE, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, vol. 1, Paris 1742, p. 205. Further extracts are given by François PLAINE, *Vita S. Mevenni*, in: *Analecta Bollandiana* 3 (1884), p. 141–158.

98 *Vita prima*, preface, I (p. 138); II, 1–2 (p. 236–238).

would elucidate his motive for commissioning the text, the appellation has a bearing on the question of the *Vita prima*'s date. Among the early entries in the Annals of Lorsch are a curious collection of notices for the deaths of six individuals bearing Celtic names. The entries read: 704. *mors Canani episcopi*. 705. *dormitio Domnani abbatis*. 706. *mors Cellani abbatis*. 707. *dormitio Tigermal [...]*. 726. *Martinus et Dubdecris abbati mortui [...]*. 729. *Macflathei mortuus*⁹⁹. The same entries appear, in a slightly different form, in the Annals of Moselle, and a shared common source has long been posited¹⁰⁰. Quite when and why these obits were first gathered together remains puzzling¹⁰¹. Nevertheless, we can confidently recognize two of the abbots as Adomnán of Iona and Cellan of Péronne; and *Mac Flathí* may well be the Irish nickname given to the Anglo-Saxon priest Ecgberht by the community at Iona in which he spent his final years¹⁰². Suggested identifications of the other individuals have been more tentative, such as the proposal of Tigernach, bishop of Clones, for the annals' entry of »Tigermal« under the year 707¹⁰³. To be sure, the recorded form of the name in the annals cannot be accurate, and must have originally possessed the stem *tigerno-* or *tigern-* »lord«¹⁰⁴. But the amended name would thus be Tigernmal/Tiger-

99 *Annales Laureshamenses*, ed. Eberhard KATZ, *Annalium Laureshamensium editio emendata*, Sankt Paul im Lavanttal 1889, p. 28. The more readily accessible edition of the annals by Georg PERTZ (MGH, SS I, Hanover 1826) is not based upon the original manuscript, which had then been lost, but was instead dependent upon an eighteenth-century transcription. The manuscript had been rediscovered prior to Katz's edition, and his readings are thus to be preferred: I have therefore followed Katz's *mors Canani episcopi* in place of Pertz's *mors Caniani episcopi*. On the editorial history, see Roger COLLINS, *Charlemagne's imperial coronation and the Annals of Lorsch*, in: Joanna STORY (ed.), *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, Manchester 2005, p. 52–70, at p. 55–56.

100 *Annales Mosellani*, ed. Georg PERTZ, MGH, SS XVI, Hanover 1859, p. 494: 704. *mors Canini episcopi*. 705. *dormitio Domnani abbatis*. 706. *Cellani abbatis*. 707. *dormitio Tigermali*. [...] 726. *Martinus et Buddecris abbas mortui*. [...] 729. *Macflathei mort*.

101 The *Annales Laureshamenses* and *Annales Mosellani* are both dependent on an original Lorsch text which Roger Collins has called »the Lorsch Annals of 785«. This, in turn, was dependent on an earlier set of annals thought to have been compiled at Murbach, upon which a number of other late eighth-century annalistic compilations – the *Annales Nazariani*, *Annales Guelfybertani* and *Annales Alamannici* – also drew: see Walter LENDI, *Untersuchungen zur frühalemannischen Annalistik: Die Murbacher Annalen*, Freiburg 1971 (Scriinium Friburgense, 1); COLLINS, *Charlemagne's imperial coronation* (as in n. 99), p. 55–58. Although the *Annales Nazariani* and *Annales Alamannici* contain entries for the 720s, they do not include either of the Celtic obits for that decade: this may be due to their general disinterest in ecclesiastical affairs; or it may suggest that these notices were not a part of the original »Murbach Annals«, but were first added by the compiler of Collins' »Lorsch Annals of 785«.

102 The latter identification is made by Dáibhí Ó CRÓINÍN, *The Kings Depart: The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon Royal Exiles in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries*, Cambridge 2007 (Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Gaelic History, 8), p. 20.

103 This identification was suggested by Johann LAPPENBERG, *Geschichte von England*, vol. 1, Hamburg 1834, p. XLVI–XLVII, n. 2; and repeated more recently by Rosamond McKITTERICK, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, Cambridge 2004, p. 107.

104 See Kenneth JACKSON, *Language and History in Early Britain: A Chronological Survey of the Brittonic Languages, First to Twelfth Centuries A. D.*, Edinburgh 1953, p. 446–447; ID., *A Historical Phonology of Breton*, Dublin 1967, p. 713. Other difficulties in the handling of Celtic names by Frankish annalists or scribes are suggested by the rendering of what was presumably Dubhdáchrích as »Dubdecris« in the *Annales Laureshamenses*, but »Buddecris« in the *Annales Mosellani*.

nomalus, not Tigernach; and the record of the bishop of Clones' death under the years 549 or 550 in the Annals of Ulster would in any case render him an unlikely candidate¹⁰⁵. While the bishop of Dol is not the only known bearer of this name, the handful of others attested in earlier insular inscriptions or later Breton texts uniformly pre- or post-date the early eighth century by a substantial margin¹⁰⁶. A Breton bishop would certainly not be out of place in a list of exclusively ecclesiastical obits that ranges from Ireland to Picardie, and of the available choices, only Tigernomalus of Dol would not require special pleading. If this identification is correct, and if the date recorded for his death is as close to the reality as those of Adomnán, Cellan and Eggerht seem to be, then this would place the commission and production of the *Vita prima Samsonis* to the very end of the seventh century, or the beginning of the eighth.

This range is somewhat earlier than that suggested by the Life's most recent editor, Pierre Flobert, who argued that the *Vita prima* had an »undeniable« dependency on the works of Bede, and therefore dated it to 730–770. However, none of his three suggested »borrowings« are convincing: two depend on shared use of terminology which is not, in actuality, exclusive to Bede; the other upon a phrase that Flobert misquotes from the *Vita prima*¹⁰⁷. To date the Life to c. 700 instead, on the basis of the annals, would, in fact, entirely accord with the chronology implied by the author in his much-debated preface: that he had gathered information from an old man who had lived a monastic life for »nearly eighty years« in the monastery built by Samson in Cornwall, since »times very close to those of the aforesaid St Samson«¹⁰⁸. This

105 Annals of Ulster, s. a. 549.2, 550.2, ed. Seán MAC AIRT, Gearóid MAC NIOCAILL, The Annals of Ulster (to A. D. 1131). Part I: Text and Translation, Dublin 1983, p. 76. *Tigernmal* is the correct form for this date, the compositional *o* being lost through the syncope of internal unstressed vowels by the sixth century: see JACKSON, Language and History (as in n. 104), p. 643–651; ID., Phonology of Breton (as in n. 104), p. 323–324. The older form was nevertheless preserved as an archaism in Latin texts even as late as Wrmnoc's *Vita Pauli Aureliani* in the ninth century: see below, n. 106.

106 The name appears on a sixth- or seventh-century Cornish inscription: *Conetoci fili Tegernomali*: Robert MACALISTER, Corpus inscriptionum insularum celticarum, vol. 1, Dublin 1945, no. 477, p. 455; Wrmnoc names the second successor to the sixth-century Paul Aurelian as *Tigernmaglus* or *Tigernomaglus*: *Vita Pauli Aureliani* (as in n. 83), 11 and 20, p. 437 and 453; and one *Teuthaer filius Tiarnmael* is mentioned in a charter of 868: Aurélien DE COURSON (ed.), Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Redon en Bretagne, Paris 1863, no. 225, p. 173.

107 FLOBERT argues that the word *theomacha* (*Vita prima*, I, 26–27) came from Bede's *Retractio in actus apostolorum*, V, 39; that a figurative reading of Solomon's Porch (II, 3) is derived from Bede's *Expositio actuum apostolorum*, III, 11; and that a reference to Matthew 13:47 used *rete* rather than the Vulgate's *sagena* to refer to the net of the parable (II, 7) because it followed Bede's *Epistola XII ad Eusebium*: *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 98–99. However, *theomachi* and *theomachiae* equally appear in Jerome's *Commentarioli in psalmos*, LXXXVII, 11 and in Rufinus' translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 2; Flobert misquotes the *Vita prima*'s exegetical comment on Solomon's Porch, which does not read *pacis et ueritatis* (which would indeed parallel Bede's *ueri et pacifici Solomonis*), but instead reads *pacis et unitatis*; and the use of *rete* instead of *sagena* would surely be an obvious word choice for an author from Dol, since the Old Breton word for »net«, itself derived from the Latin, is *roit*. I am indebted to Gwyn Robert Constantine for bringing the latter to my attention.

108 *Vita prima*, preface, 2 (p. 140–142): *quod [audiui] a quodam religioso ac uenerabili sene, in cuius domo, quam ultra mare ipse solus Samson fundauerat, ille, per octogenarios fere annos, catholicam*

tortuous passage of the preface is not precise enough in itself to imply an exact date for the Life: our only historical attestation to Bishop Samson is his signature at the third council of Paris in 562, an event unmentioned by his hagiographer¹⁰⁹. It is assumed that he had died by 567, for he is not named at the council of Tours held in that year, but this is only one possible explanation for his absence. The date for his death offered by Mabillon – c. 565 – has become somewhat traditional, but the available evidence simply does not allow such precision¹¹⁰. Even with a firm date, the author's attempt to downplay the passage of time and stress that his alleged informant was as well-placed as an contemporary does not allow a clear estimate of the time which had elapsed before he wrote the *Vita prima*. The most that can be determined is that if Samson died at some point in the second half of the sixth century, then to follow our author's hints could place his work as late as the end of the seventh century or the beginning of the eighth¹¹¹. Since these hints are bound up with the hagiographic *topos* of invoking the testimony of venerable old men, the author's own rough calculation of the years that separated him from his saint has often been dismissed as inherently unreliable. The identification of an annalistic entry for the death of an ecclesiastic bearing the same name as the Life's commissioner at a suitable date is persuasive independent evidence for a date at the outer end of the range offered by the author, c. 700.

Nevertheless, the utility of a written Life of Dol's founding saint for the bishopric at this time remains unclear. It has been said that »public memory arises from the intersection of memory and politics«: for early medieval Brittany, we know too little of the politics to deduce a direct purpose¹¹². We could speculate about the uses Tigernomalus intended to put a work which ended with a miraculous assertion of Dol's bishop in the resolution of political conflict, but such speculation does not lead far. It is true that a later reference in the Annals of Metz implies political tension between the Bretons and Pippin II at the end of the seventh century, but since the Carolingian compiler shows evident falsehood in his other ascriptions of military prowess to

religiosamque uitam ducens, propissimeque temporibus eiusdem supradicti sancti Samsonis, matrem eius tradidisse auunculo suo, sanctissimo diacono, qui et ipse diaconus consobrinus esset sancto Samsoni, mihi ueraciter adfirmabat multaque de eius admirabilibus gestis ad me misericorditer referens. There has been considerable uncertainty as to whether *propissimeque temporibus eiusdem supradicti sancti Samsonis* refers to the *senex* or his uncle, the deacon Henoc. I follow Lynette OLSON's reasons for relating the statement to the old man: The Early Hagiography of Saint Samson of Dol, in: Geraint EVANS, Bernard MARTIN, Jonathan WOODING (eds.), *Origins and Revivals: Proceedings of the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies*, Sydney 2000, p. 123–133, at p. 130, n. 12.

109 Concilium Parisiense, ed. Friedrich MAASSEN, MGH, Concilia I, Hanover 1893, p. 146: *Samson subscripsi et consensi in nomine Christi*. On the date of the council, see FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 10.

110 Jean MABILLON, *Vita S. Samsonis*, in: *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 1, Paris 1668, p. 165–185, at p. 180. On the problems of using the council of Tours as a means to determine the date of Samson's death, see also FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 11–12.

111 A similar argument is presented by Kathleen HUGHES, *The Celtic Church: is this a valid concept?*, in: *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981), p. 1–20, at p. 4.

112 Catherine CUBITT, *Memory and narrative in the cult of early Anglo-Saxon saints*, in: Yitzhak HEN, Matthew INNES (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2000, p. 29–66, at p. 62.

Pippin, it is unwise to place too much emphasis on this allegation¹¹³. More localized upheaval within Brittany itself is no less likely a background context. A fragmented political landscape in which feuding within and between regions was a recurrent event could easily have generated a situation in which it was advantageous to the bishops of Dol to assert ancient ties between themselves and the Domnonian line. In the dearth of other evidence, more precise speculation may not be possible – especially since, whatever Tigernomalus’ original motives may have been, there is good reason to believe that the *Vita Samsonis* in its final form imperfectly reflects them. The author’s frequent interjections of wonder at moments where he could himself attest to places mentioned in the text reveal a very personal connection between hagiographer and subject: »On this hill I myself have been, and I have adored and stroked with my hand the sign of the cross which St Samson, by his own hand, carved onto a standing stone with an iron instrument¹¹⁴.« The accompanying sermon now preserved as »Book II« of the Life addresses the audience that the author evidently had foremost in mind: the community at Dol, presumably after the recitation of the *uita* in a feast-day context. Judual’s restoration remained the »greatest and most wonderful work« of St Samson in the eyes of his hagiographer, and may well have had a genuine contemporary utility for Tigernomalus, but there remains the very real possibility that the finished text did not address current political circumstances quite as directly as the commissioning bishop might have hoped.

The earliest ambitions of the cult of St Samson

Although its precise contemporary relevance to the situation of Dol c. 700 is unclear, the story of Judual’s restoration was a narrative with clear potential value for Samson’s successors, revitalized by the memory of the less distant events of the 630s. It is exceptional in the *Vita prima* as a whole for other reasons than this, however. While the episode is narrated at precisely the point we would expect, after the foundation of Dol and before Samson’s death, it neither follows easily from the preceding chapter, nor coheres with what comes after. After describing the foundation of Dol, the author notes that Samson established a great many other monasteries and worked other wonders, too numerous to recount individually¹¹⁵. This reads like the beginning of a standard hagiographic denouement, but the author then embarks upon his narration of Samson’s deeds in the Frankish court, ending with Conomor’s defeat and Childebert’s grant of new estates to Samson. Abruptly, the author states: »For instance, one time when he was in his house in *Romania*¹¹⁶, he heard an infamous thing

113 *Annales Mettenses priores*, s. a. 691, ed. Bernhard von SIMSON, MGH, SS rer. Germ. X, Hanover 1905, p. 12–13; cf. the similar list, s. a. 688 (p. 4), which falsely credits Pippin with the conquest of the Bavarians.

114 *Vita prima*, I, 48 (p. 216): *In quo monte et ego fui signumque crucis quod sanctus Samson sua manu cum quodam ferro in lapide stante sculpsisset adoravi et mea manu palpavi.*

115 *Ibid.*, I, 52 (p. 222).

116 The *Vita prima* uses *Romania* to designate to the Frankish parts of *Europa*: the Breton author’s preface explicitly locates it »on this side of the sea« (*citra mare*): preface, 2 (p. 142); cf. also I, 61 (p. 234); and II, 11 (p. 258). The *Vita secunda* identifies this *domus in Romania* as Pental: II, 22 (p. 144).

about a serpent which was doing no less evil than the previous ones ...«, but only briefly recounts Samson's contest with it, repeating his earlier statement that this and other miracles »exceed reckoning, and it is not necessary to examine each of them individually«¹¹⁷. This has seemed something of a disorderly addendum after the sustained climax of Samson's political travails in Francia: the *Vita prima*'s only English translator, Thomas Taylor, suspected that the chapter concerning the serpent may have been an interpolation; but it was certainly known to the author of the *Vita secunda*, who extended it into a full demonstration of Samson's continued vigour in his old age¹¹⁸. In the *Vita prima*, the chapter is not a complete story but a summary, and its brevity is matched by the still more fleeting reference to Samson's troubles with »perverse priests« that follows, and the equally brief notice of his death and burial which concludes the Life¹¹⁹. That is to say that it is only the juncture between Judual's restoration and the story of the serpent that seems abrupt, for otherwise the condensed account of the serpent's expulsion functions adequately as part of the author's final proclamation that Samson's deeds were so numerous that he has not the space to recount them fully.

The *Vita prima* is far less episodic than is the norm in early medieval hagiography. There is a great deal of continuity between events, and internal references are frequently made between chapters as objects and minor characters appear and reappear¹²⁰. The audience is expected to remember what had come before: when Samson rides his chariot through Cornwall, the reader is reminded of his previous trip to Ireland, where he had obtained the chariot; when he goes in search of ascetic solitude, his companions include »the brother of the envious priest«, who had last been mentioned almost forty chapters previously¹²¹. Individual chapters are not self-sufficient *lectiones*, but run continuously from one into the next. It is notable that in the process

117 *Vita prima*, I, 60 (p. 232): *Nam quodam tempore cum esset in domo sua, in Romania, rem infamosam audivit de serpente, quod non minus prioribus malum faceret. [...] Nam quantas uirtutes per eum Dominus ultra citraque mare fecerit. [...] Numerum profecto excedunt nec est opus de his singillatim rimare.*

118 Thomas TAYLOR, *The Life of St Samson of Dol*, London 1925, p. 58, n. 3. *Vita secunda*, II, 22 (p. 144–145). On the *Vita secunda*'s expansion of this episode, see also RAUER, *Beowulf and the Dragon* (as in n. 63), p. 113.

119 *Vita prima*, I, 60 (p. 232): *quantum inuidiae blasphemiaeque, maxime a sacerdotibus prauis, pertulerit!* It has been suggested that this very allusive statement concerns known ecclesiastical events: either the council of Tours in 567: FLOBERT, *Vie ancienne* (as in n. 1), p. 11–12, and 233, n. 3; or the backlash against Dol's archiepiscopal pretensions in the ninth century: POULIN, *Le dossier de saint Samson* (as in n. 2), p. 725–726. If the author's intention was to make a political point, he places such little emphasis on it that even the *Vita secunda* failed to apprehend its meaning and passed over it. Another legendary story, like the envious priest's poison-plot (*Vita prima*, I, 14–19), could equally have been behind the *Vita prima*'s words.

120 The *Vita prima* has previously been praised for its lack of »confusion« in this regard: see, for example, Lynette OLSON, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall*, Woodbridge 1989 (*Studies in Celtic History*, 11), p. 10–11. CUBITT's comments on hagiographic forms render the Life's emphasis on seamless narrative rather more significant: see her *Memory and narrative* (as in n. 112), esp. p. 46–50, 62.

121 *Vita prima*, I, 40 (p. 204); I, 47 (p. 214). The second reference to Samson's journey to Ireland, at an unrelated point in the narrative, may cast doubt on the suggestion that the Irish episode is a later interpolation, as suggested by Pádraig Ó RIAIN, *Samson alias San(c)tán?*, in: *Peritia* 3 (1984), p. 320–323.

of the rewriting, the *Vita secunda* actually broke much of this narrative flow and removed internal references to create a more standard episodic form¹²². Given the unusually continuous nature of the *Vita prima*'s narration, the sudden shift from Samson's dealings with Judual and Childebert to the final demonstration of the innumerability of the saint's other deeds raises suspicions – especially since this theme of innumerability had been the topic introduced by the author just before he began his tale about the Domnonian and Frankish kings. If we were to remove Samson's royal escapades from the Life, this theme would run uninterrupted from the foundation of Dol to Samson's death, with the contracted accounts of the serpent's ejection and the attentions of »perverse priests« indicating the kinds of stories that must remain untold in full. In short, the restoration of Judual is a rare interruption in the narrative of the *Vita prima*. It looks like little other than an addition to an existing text.

As we have already seen, the author did, in fact, claim to have used an existing text: an earlier Life of Samson, written by a deacon named Henoc, and kept in Cornwall at the monastery which Samson had founded before his departure to Brittany¹²³. Whether this work actually existed, and the degree to which the author was dependent on its testimony if it did, has been at the crux of the fierce debate about the *Vita prima*'s authenticity. The author's mentions of it were clearly meant to instil trust in a narrative which he claimed he was merely handing down, not fashioning himself. At the end of the Life proper, for example, he wrote: »Here it ends in the Name of the Lord. Up to this point we have corrected it as much as we were able to¹²⁴.« It is easy to read the author's characterization of his own work as a mere »correction« as wilfully disingenuous. If the author was in fact downplaying his own inventiveness and fabricating a continuous textual pedigree from Samson's lifetime to his own, it would be entirely understandable. The later rewriters of the other Breton *vitae* equally used the terminology of *corrigerere*, *emendare*, *renouare* to refer to their own input, however extensive that might be¹²⁵. Such vocabulary could have multiple meanings: it could indicate the »correction« of literary style, of spiritual content, or of historical or biographical information¹²⁶. Were the closing colophon the only moment at which a »correction« was suggested to the reader, we would be justified in dismissing all these meanings and explaining it as a part of the standard rhetoric of authorial humility.

122 The second reference to »brother of the envious priest«, for example, is removed: *Vita secunda*, I, 12 (p. 103).

123 *Vita prima*, preface, 2 (p. 140–142). OLSON proposes St Sampson's, Golant as a plausible location of Samson's Cornish foundation: *Early Monasteries* (as in n. 120), p. 12–14. Lacking definitive evidence, however, it shall remain nameless in what follows: cf. POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 333.

124 *Vita prima*, I, 61 (p. 234): *Finit in nomine Domini. Vsque hic sicut ualuimus correximus*.

125 See further POULIN, *Les réécritures* (as in n. 9), p. 151.

126 POULIN reads *correximus* in the colophon purely in the sense of »linguistic revision«, but »correction« of content is no less likely a meaning: cf. La »Vie ancienne« comme réécriture (as in n. 37), p. 263; *Id.*, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 334. Elsewhere, POULIN notes the language of »correction« in Baudri de Bourgueil's reworking of the *Vita secunda Samsonis* (preface: *ad codicem antiquum corrigendum*): *Les réécritures* (as in n. 9), p. 151. LE HUËROU'S investigation makes it clear that the nature of Baudri's »correction« was extensive, encompassing both style and content: *La réécriture* (as in n. 25).

However, the fact that Judual's restoration is not only the one episode singled out by the author, that shows remodelling in the wake of seventh-century Breton politics, and had potential utility for the present-day bishop of Dol, but is also a rare interruption to an otherwise unbroken narrative flow might give cause to reconsider the author's claim of »correction« more seriously. It looks exactly like the kind of addition to an existing text that we would expect of an author writing at Dol, c. 700. This, in turn, might seem coincidental were it not that the remainder of the extant *Vita prima* is constructed around an episode that focuses on concerns more suggestive of earlier Cornish, rather than later Breton, origins: Samson's episcopal ordination.

Introduced by a reassertion of Samson's ascetic virtues, confirmed by a miraculous spring of water in his cave retreat by the Severn, the *Vita prima* says that the day on which it was customary for new bishops to be ordained was approaching. In the days leading up to the synod, Samson received a vision in which he was ordained by as bishop by the apostles Peter, James and John. Upon waking, »he perceived by the Spirit that he had now been made a high priest«¹²⁷. At the meeting of the synod, the bishops had selected two candidates for ordination, but »wished to ordain a third, in accordance with a custom handed down from ancient times«¹²⁸. The following night, Dubricius is told by an angel that the third should be Samson, and when the council is told of this and Samson's own vision, »although the wise men believed beyond all doubt that he had already been made a full bishop«, they determined to give him the customary earthly rites as well¹²⁹. During the ceremony, miraculous visions abound, and the Life claims that from then on, angels assisted Samson during his celebration of the Eucharist.

Samson's ordination, then, demonstrates all the traits we have come to expect from hagiographers making their most important claims. It calls on miracles more numerous and of greater significance than is the norm, each building upon the last to demonstrate the momentous nature of the occasion. Human authorities are cited, in the appeal to the wisdom of the elders and the alleged ancient custom that they followed; and also some of the highest spiritual authorities, the angels and the apostles¹³⁰. The Life makes every effort to demonstrate that this routine ceremony was actually a truly momentous event. But this elaborate construction appears an unnecessary step for the author of the *Vita prima*, for whom the restoration of Judual was Samson's »greatest and most wonderful work«.

127 *Vita prima*, I, 43 (p. 208): *et ipse euigilans sensit per Spiritum summum se sacerdotem iam factum.*

128 *Ibid.*: *Venientibus autem illis episcopis ad diem condictum consuetumque duos apud illos ad ordinandum deferentes, tertium secundum morem antiquitus traditum ordinare uolentes.*

129 *Ibid.*, I, 44 (p. 210): *conferentibus ad inuicem sapientibus atque episcopum eum integrum per hoc miraculum iam factum indubitanter credentibus, tamen insedere eum cathedram episcopalem atque confirmare cum aliis duobus pro fidei firmitate statuerunt.*

130 The triple consecration rite described in the *Vita prima* has often been held up as a »typical Celtic practice«: Jean-Luc DEUFFIC, *Le »monachisme breton« continental: ses origines et son intégration au modèle carolingien*, in: ID. (ed.), *La Bretagne carolingienne: entres influences insulaires et continentales*, Saint-Denis 2008 (Pecia, 12), p. 77–138, at p. 135–136. Its mention in the *Vita prima*, however, appears somewhat forced, and one suspects that were it »typical«, the author would not have had to stress that it was a »custom handed down from ancient times«.

The stress laid on Samson's episcopal consecration has been noted before, but explained by the proponents of a later date for the Life as reflecting the influence of ninth-century ecclesiastical politics. In 849, Nominoë summoned together and then deposed all five of the Breton bishops, replacing them with candidates of his own choosing in a move that generated contemporary controversy¹³¹. A *vita* that laid such stress on its saint's episcopal status must, the argument follows, be a reaction to this event, as bishoprics tried to look beyond recent upheaval and reassert that their episcopal pedigree predated any controversy¹³². The argument is attractive, but less conclusive than some of its proponents have supposed. If the *Vita prima* was a mid-ninth-century work, intended as a reaction to an unorthodox deposition and new appointment at the see of Dol, then it chose a curious tactic. One would expect such a hagiographical reaction to have two aims: to demonstrate the orthodoxy of Dol's episcopacy, and to stress continuity from the founder to present-day Dol. The *Vita secunda* of the 860s certainly utilized this double aim, by repeatedly stating that Samson's lands and rights had been granted by famed *imperatores*, who had decreed that they would be passed on to »his successors after him without end«¹³³. The *Vita prima*, on the other hand, made no such connection between Samson's ordination and present-day Dol save by implication, did not stress continuity of succession, and created a process of episcopal ordination if anything *more* unorthodox than Nominoë's »synod« of 849. There remains no echo of ninth-century ecclesiastical politics in the *Vita prima*.

Rather than asserting orthodoxy, what the episode sought to establish was superiority – and the moment at which it does so is important. The ordination is the final stage of Samson's spiritual development before an angel instructs him to leave Wales and cross the Severn for Cornwall. The Life makes explicit the fact that the newly-ordained Bishop Samson was of a different order of holiness than any he found upon his arrival. His course takes him to the monastery of Docco (present-day Lanow, in St Kew parish), but the wisest of those who dwelt there, St Winniau, turns Samson away, explaining that he is too holy to stay there, »for we have become lax in our previous ways«. Winniau urges him »to make the power of the Lord manifest in your own country« before, as he foresees, Samson's journey will continue across the Channel¹³⁴. Samson, therefore, sets up a house more befitting of his sanctity, led by a chain of miracles to a suitably auspicious location¹³⁵. Others have noticed the speed

131 See SMITH, *Province and Empire* (as in n. 39), p. 154–157.

132 POULIN argues that this is confirmed by the *Vita prima*'s echoes of Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*, which he sees as a deliberate attempt to establish Dol's saint as a »new Martin« to challenge the diocesan authority of Tours: *Hagiographie et politique* (as in n. 2), p. 14–15, 20–26; ID., *La Vie ancienne de saint Samson de Dol. À propos d'une édition récente*, in: *Francia* 25/1 (1998), p. 251–258, at p. 256–257. I share the doubts of others who consider the parallels to be overdrawn: Julia SMITH, *Celtic asceticism and Carolingian authority in early medieval Brittany*, in: William SHEILS (ed.), *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, Oxford 1985 (Studies in Church History, 22), p. 53–65, at p. 56, n. 14.

133 Comparable intentions are also to be found in the hagiographical reaction of Alet, discussed above, p. 13.

134 *Vita prima*, I, 46 (p. 214): *hoc enim scire te uolo quod iam in nostris prioribus institutis laxamur. Te uero tuum iter in pace pergentem oportet uel semel antequam transfretaueris in Europa manifestare ut per te adhuc, antequam desis a nobis corpore, uirtus Domini manifestetur in ista patria.*

135 *Ibid.*, I, 47–52 (p. 214–222).

with which the narrative moves from ordination to relocation to foundation, each stage dependent on the last as the momentous events of the episcopal ordination prefigure the angelic command to leave Wales, and explain why it was that Samson established his first monastery¹³⁶. The Life of St Samson as we have it has made the foundation of Samson's Cornish monastery, rather than Dol, into the direct product of the climactic ordination sequence: and it was in this monastery that the sixth-century Life was supposedly kept. Just as the *Vita secunda* pulled out all the stops before Samson took his archiepiscopal status home to Dol, we might expect that a Life produced for that Cornish monastery would do something similar before describing the events that resulted in its construction. The narrative strategy extant in the *Vita prima* would clearly have benefitted a young monastic community attempting to establish itself amidst an existing ecclesiastical landscape. As much as Samson's journey through the Cornish countryside could be presented in the guise of a lone missionary amongst a pagan population, there was no hiding the fact that Samson's monastery was not the first of its kind in the area. Since that monastery had no claim of primacy over its neighbours, it could only claim authoritative status by asserting spiritual superiority. If Samson was no simple bishop, then, but one anointed by apostles, who conducted the Mass with angelic assistance, then his monastery could thereby claim to be the highest pinnacle of spiritual life in the region.

When the author from Dol mentioned the Cornish source to which he had gained private access, he was motivated, as has long been recognized, by a desire to convince his reader of the truthfulness of his account and fend off refutation. That does not, however, necessitate his falsehood. If the Cornish Life was his invention, then he not only fabricated its existence, but also organized his hagiography in such a way as to make it look like a text dominated by overtly Cornish concerns into which a second, Breton, climax had been added. The extant *Vita prima* has Samson reach spiritual perfection at his ordination just before he established his first monastery, in a region which declares – and, by its pagan rites, demonstrates – its religious laxity to him. Samson only leaves his newly-established place of holiness because it had previously been foretold that he would, and the Life moves into a summary of Samson's final deeds on the Continent. This summary is interrupted by a second climax, the »greatest and most wonderful work«, which not only exhibits features befitting of seventh-century development, but is a rare interruption of the usually continuous narrative flow. If this was all the work of an author trying to invent the appearance of an earlier source text behind his work, it seems both excessive and, since the Breton narrative appears as an interruption to what surrounds it, surely self-defeating. The extant form of the *Vita prima* looks, therefore, like a »corrected« text, as its author claims – »corrected« by the insertion of a story with political significance in later Brittany. It is difficult to explain this combination of form, content and context without affirming that the extant *Vita prima Samsonis* is in fact a work of Dol in c. 700, dependent upon an earlier work from the first decades of a Cornish monastery's existence, say c. 600.

It should nevertheless be emphasized that taking the Breton author's statement about his source material seriously does not mean that we can then treat his work as a

136 OLSON has commented on the conflation of the narrative between the ordination and the move to Cornwall, but not developed its significance: *Early Monasteries* (as in n. 120), p. 11.

gateway to his predecessor's text. Some previous historians have worked on the premise that the extant *Vita prima* is a passive receptacle for the opinions of a sixth-century original, and this ›*Vita primigenia*‹ can be excavated from it by removing the contributions of the later writer from Dol. It is true that certain episodes present themselves as additions, incompletely integrated with the narrative and easily detached from it: the author's ›digression‹ on the deathbed prophecy of St Iltut, a story he said he had been told during his visit to the Iltut's monastery, would appear to be just such an addition, especially since it concerns exactly the kind of posthumous events we would expect from a miracle ›related by our catholic brothers who dwelt in this place‹¹³⁷. But we have no guide to help us distinguish between what formed part of the original work, and what was added later; and even if we had, our examination of the *Vita secunda* has demonstrated that a rewriter's influence could be pervasive¹³⁸. The *Vita secunda* inserted gospel quotations and exhortatory speeches into Samson's mouth during episodes carried over from the *Vita prima*, silently updated the names of people and places, and made a host of other small alterations that achieved profound effects upon the narrative¹³⁹. As we have seen, the rewriter even spoke directly in his predecessor's voice at its most personal – ›and on that hill I myself have been, and I have adored the sign [left in a standing stone] and stroked it with my own hand‹ – and yet in the same breath changed the deeds to which those words attested¹⁴⁰. This alone should remind us that although rewritten saints' Lives contain a mixture of the old and the new, the two cannot always be unravelled. A rewritten Life does not allow us unmediated access to its previous textual incarnations. We may be able to detect something of the shape of the earlier Life by following the contours of miracle-stories, the raw material of the hagiographer's trade, and noticing where they coalesce around concerns at odds with, or unnecessary for, the circumstances of the rewritten text. But that earlier work is only visible in broad outline, with its component parts rearranged; it cannot be subjected to close reading, source analysis or any detailed scrutiny when both its substance and its style have been filtered through another writer's agenda and modes of expression. A belief that a pristine sixth-century work can be extracted from the later shell of the *Vita prima* is surely, therefore, suspect.

137 *Vita prima*, I, 7 (p. 156): *cuiusque mirifica gesta si per singula dirimamus, ad excessum de incepto ducemur. Vnum tamen ad confirmandam nostram rem, referentibus nobis catholicis fratribus qui in hoc loco erant, publicamus in medium*; I, 8 (p. 160): *Sed ad id redeam unde digressus sum*. See above, p. 5.

138 POULIN has argued that the lists of chapters preserved in the two earliest manuscripts of the Life, which do not correspond fully with the organization of the contents of the extant *Vita prima Samsonis*, must therefore reflect the organization of the Cornish Life: La ›Vie ancienne‹ comme réécriture (as in n. 37). I am not convinced by his argument: since the manuscripts are of late tenth-century date, there are surely other possibilities as to why the lists imperfectly reflect a text created c. 700 – especially since, as he himself acknowledges, the two lists are not identical.

139 For scriptural insertions, compare, for example, *Vita prima*, I, 12 and 46 with *Vita secunda*, I, 6 and 15. For added sermonizing: see *Vita secunda*, I, 18; II, 4, 7 and 26. For altered or inserted names, compare *Vita prima*, I, 52, 59 and 60 with *Vita secunda*, II, 1, 9 and 22; on which see GUILLOTTEL, *Origines du ressort* (as in n. 42), p. 45–47; and POULIN, *L'hagiographie bretonne* (as in n. 2), p. 342–343.

140 See above, p. 7–8 and n. 38.

Furthermore, the greater antiquity of the Cornish Life does not necessitate that its testimony would be any more reliable. If Henoc the deacon, well-informed cousin of St Samson, was not the fabrication of the Breton author, he could equally be the fiction of the Cornish Life. If we are correct to see Samson's episcopal ordination as the original climax of the Cornish Life, intended to assert the pre-eminence of his first monastic foundation among its neighbours, then clearly that monastery did not lack a literary agenda itself, and had good reason to overemphasize the reliability of Henoc and his own sources of information. In fact, amassing alleged written testimonies from Samson's contemporaries may have been the Cornish monastery's wider goal, for the author of the *Vita prima* mentioned a letter of summons sent to Samson by his ordaining synod: »and that letter I have heard being read«¹⁴¹. He mentioned this, yet again, to assert the firm basis of his narrative upon verifiable authorities; but his words indicate that his primary audience, the monks of Dol, were unaware of this document. It is thus clear that the two documents the author said he had seen at the Cornish monastery but were unknown at Dol, Henoc's Life and the synod's letter, related to the matter of Samson's ordination. That monastery had an absentee founder: Samson did not apparently stay there for long, and his Cornish successors were thereby deprived of his bodily relics. In place of these, they appear to have demonstrated their connection with a saintly founder by amassing – if not, indeed, forging – documents supposedly written by his episcopal contemporaries and his family. Exactly what they intended to do with these materials, we cannot know; but to suggest that it involved competitive claims to rights and privileges would be a context entirely in accordance with those in which other Celtic saints' Lives were written¹⁴². This original hagiographic purpose was, however, unknown in Brittany, for while the author from Dol retained the originally climactic scene of Samson's episcopal ordination in his own rewriting, he sought also to outstrip it with a still greater miracle of more local and more contemporary significance. By the mid-ninth-century, a second rewriter from Dol made Samson's appearance in Cornwall not the culmination of his spiritual development, but simply another occasion in which Samson could make a fellow saint blush in shame. While the basic events remained, they were turned to new purposes by a series of writers pursuing very different agendas to suit their own times.

Conclusions

It has been stated that »it is impossible to trace the development of the cults of Breton saints *ab origine*«¹⁴³. While this is certainly true, the *Vitae Samsonis* have a claim to reveal far more of that development than do the other Breton *uitae*. There are strong reasons to believe that the extant *Vita prima* was a reworking of a late sixth- or early seventh-century text. That text had the specific purpose of asserting the authority of the Cornish monastery that housed it, claiming a more illustrious predecessor than other, older, foundations in the area. Its utility was evidently restricted in both space

141 *Vita prima*, I, 42 (p. 206): *indiculum dirigunt, quod indiculum ego audiui lectum*.

142 Cf. DAVIES, Property rights (as in n. 45); SMITH, Oral and written (as in n. 10), p. 337.

143 *Ibid.*, p. 313.

and time, for there is no evidence that it ever spread further afield or was itself recopied. On the Continent, as we might expect, only the Lives written in Dol were read and copied anew; but even in Britain, when Llandaff made an epitome of the Life of St Samson in 1130, their source was the Breton *Vita prima*¹⁴⁴. What we can guess of the Cornish Life, then, suggests a specific set of needs and circumstances tied to an ambitious monastery trying to establish itself in its first decades. It was perhaps the culmination of an attempt to fashion a dossier of material related to its founder's ordination and pre-eminent sanctity. In around 700, that Life became the basis for a new work, the extant *Vita prima*, at the commission of Tigernomalus, bishop of Dol. His motives remain unclear, but the insertion of a lengthy narrative linking Samson with the Domnonian succession was the new Life's main aim, it seems. That narrative had gained new currency in Brittany in the aftermath of Judicael's dealings with Dagobert I in 635, but a narrative that expressed the bishopric of Dol's close involvement with the forebears of present-day rulers doubtless retained a political utility. Whether the Life's author fully realized his commissioner's ambitions in a work which ultimately addresses the community at Dol as its primary audience is, however, an open question. By the mid-ninth century, possibly in the aftermath of a peace made between Salomon and Charles the Bald in 863, Dol's ambitions extended over a wider area and greater rights, claiming archiepiscopal status and ownership of lands as far away as the Seine valley. A new Life of its founding saint, the *Vita secunda*, became necessary as the cult of St Samson once more used hagiography as a vehicle to propound these ambitions. What any of these Lives ultimately have to say about the historical Samson is difficult to ascertain, but by investigating which parts of the saint's miraculous deeds retained a place in this developing tradition and which became increasingly obsolete, the historian engages with the hagiographer on his own terms, and can hope to reveal the changing character and circumstances of a growing saint's cult. Despite the fact that one has been subjected to intense scholarly scrutiny and the other to equally marked neglect, the Lives of St Samson have much to reveal about the ambitious cult that generated them.

144 See POULIN, La »Vie ancienne« comme réécriture (as in n. 37), p. 300.

ISSN 1867-6448 · ISBN 978-3-7995-8129-5

FRANCIA – FORSCHUNGEN ZUR WESTEUROPÄISCHEN GESCHICHTE

Herausgeberin: Prof. Dr. GUDRUN GERSMANN

Redaktion: Prof. Dr. ROLF GROSSE (Redaktionsleitung; Mittelalter), Priv.-Doz. Dr. RAINER BABEL
(Frühe Neuzeit, 1500–1815), Dr. STEFAN MARTENS (19./20. Jh.)

Redaktionsassistentz: DAGMAR ASSMANN

Anschrift: Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris (Institut historique allemand),
Hôtel Duret-de-Chevy, 8, rue du Parc-Royal, F-75003 Paris
Francia@dhi-paris.fr

Verlagsadresse: Jan Thorbecke Verlag der Schwabenverlag AG, Senefelderstr. 12, D-73760 Ostfildern
www.thorbecke.de

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Druck: Beltz Bad Langensalza GmbH, Bad Langensalza
Hergestellt in Deutschland