

A History of Women Religious in the Early Irish Church:
The Hagiographical Evidence

by
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A Thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

A History of Women Religious in the Early Irish Church: The Hagiographical Evidence

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Department of the Centre for Religious Studies in the University of Toronto, 1995.

This study explores the lives of religious women of the early Celtic Church in Ireland through the eyes of the hagiographers. Few *Lives* of Irish women saints remain, thus much use has been made of the numerous references to women found in the *Lives* of men. Other genres of Irish texts have also been consulted.

While the Irish hagiographical genre cannot, except rarely, be regarded as an accurate historical record of individuals, it does, at the very least, reflect a view of the world familiar either to the writer or to their sources. It is thus through an analysis of the attitudes and assumptions of these early writers that some idea of the daily lives of holy women emerges.

Although much time has been spent during this exploration upon a reconstruction of daily routine through a collation of the data available as an alluvial depository source, considerable time has also been spent examining the use of metaphor in the above genre. This has been particularly helpful in the attempt made here to shed some new light upon the spiritual life of religious women. This latter methodological approach has also been of particular benefit in determining the limits of the power and status enjoyed by these women within Irish society.

In the final analysis, it is evident from the picture which emerges that these women played an important and often very active role in the life of the Church.

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Introduction

While much attention has been given in recent years to the rediscovery of Celtic Christendom in all its variety, little attention has as yet been focused upon the women who were an important factor in the dissemination of Christianity in the Celtic world of the embryonic Church. This thesis has arisen as an effort to rectify this lack in some small way. Because of the variety of expression found among Christians, even within different Celtic groups, I have chosen to concentrate on one particular Celtic country, and while my decision to concentrate upon the women of Ireland in particular was an arbitrary one, even within a closely defined group such as this diversity proves itself to often be the rule rather than the exception. However, despite the existing diversity, some attempt has been made to form a composite picture of the life of a female religious of the Church in Ireland within that period beginning with the fifth and ending with the twelfth century. It has also been my intent in this thesis to focus upon these religious women as women, and not as goddess figures surviving from paganism.¹ It should be remembered that these were real women living real lives, who held an important position within the society in which they lived, and who demanded and received both respect and devotion. They were at times feared, but also loved. Their lives, in many ways, were little different to those of the religious men of their time, and the power that was theirs often similar to that of the

¹ The latter is probably the more popular approach. It is evident, for example, in the work of Pádraig Ó Riain, who claims that the story of Brigit's elevation to the rank of bishop stems from Christian attempts to come to terms with the high status enjoyed by the pagan goddess whose name she bears. Indeed Ó Riain makes further claim that Brigit never existed as a real person, and that she, instead, is a character taken by tradition directly from mythology (Padraig O'Riain, "Sainte Brigitte: paradigme de l'abbesse celtique?", in P. Rouche & J. Heuclin (eds.), *La femme au moyen-âge*, Meuberge: 1990, 30-31).

men they came in contact with.

When I speak of women of the Church, or religious women, I include all those women who chose to live a life withdrawn from the everyday affairs of the world around them, a withdrawal which most frequently appears to have led them to live within a monastic setting. While often throughout the thesis the title 'virgin' is used to describe these women who had chosen the life of poverty and chastity in imitation of Chirst,² at the same time there is a recognition that men were, at times, described as 'virginal.' ("Penitential" 1b, Walker *Opera*, 177; Stokes, *The Martyrology of Gorman* Jan. 5; *Moling* 4: 11).

While the data in respect to these holy women has been drawn from a number of different sources, I have drawn the bulk of the evidence for the thesis from that body of material recorded by the hagiographers. In this, the edited collections of *Lives* by scholars such as C. Plummer, W. Heist and W. Stokes, have proved more than useful. Individual editions with translations such as those of Donncha Ó hAodha, W. Stokes, L. Gwynn and K.Meyer, have also proved invaluable.

The manuscripts that the above collections have drawn from are largely of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. They are themselves copies of pre-existing manuscripts, at times known copies of copies, the originals of which were probably compiled from already existing material. In respect to the *Lives* of the women in particular,

² The title has its roots, of course, in the very early Church. See C. Tibiletti, "Virgin-virginity-velatio," *EOEC* 871-72.

I have used a variety of editions, not least of which are those of the Bollandists, which at times reach back to seventh and eighth century sources.

Although we may accuse the hagiographers of taking little interest in certain roles filled by women in society, and we may at times suspect resistance to the idea of women as molders of men, as witnessed in the tension between Ita and Erc in the *Lives* and the consequent weakening of Ita's role, their resistance is still a far cry from that found to the same ideas in modern scholarship. This may be part of the reason why so little research has been done on these women when compared with that which has taken place over the years in respect to the deeds of holy men.

The Latin translations throughout the following work are my own unless stated otherwise. Quotes from *The Irish Penitentials* are however those of the editor of that text as are Latin passages from the *Bethu Brigte*. All Irish translations have been taken from the texts cited unless stated otherwise. Emendations may at times have been made, but these are always noted.

The first attempt to describe in any detail the monastic life as it existed in early Ireland was made by John Ryan in his monumental work *Irish Monasticism*. But Ryan, despite the enormous task he had set himself, appears to have had little interest in the doings of women. Indeed, he devoted no more than a few pages, and these immediately following upon a section titled "Less Important Foundations", to a description of their accomplishments. This trend continued in the scholarship of the following decades. However, in recent years, along with the rising interest in women's studies in general, more

serious attempts have been made to describe the role of these women in the Church. Of particular interest in this regard is the work of Margaret MacCurtain, my only regret being that she has not proceeded further with this line of research. Other scholars who have contributed to our knowledge in this area include such authors as Dorothy Bray, Alice Curtayne, Pádraig Ó Riain and Lisa Bitel. But despite the work of these recent pioneers, a truly comprehensive picture of the lives of these women and the function they filled within the Church has not been forthcoming, and thus this work attempts to fill this need.

Only a few women's *Lives* have survived the centuries, and every effort has been made to extract as much information from these as possible. Recourse has of course also been made to the *Lives* of men and these have yielded a surprising amount of material about women. A variety of methodologies has been employed in this attempt to extract from texts that which at times they proved reluctant to disclose. This reluctance was particularly evident in respect to any attempt to understand the inner workings of the spiritual lives of women. In this instance I have turned to an analysis of the use of metaphor in the *Lives*, which after all are first and foremost also literary texts. However, on other occasions the texts have proved quite accessible, and thus I have employed a type of archaeological approach, finding an artifact here, another there, and bringing them together to form a final picture. The final result has been, at least to myself, a source of surprise and even of excitement, for what at first appeared to be a record with little data, was seen, in the final analysis, to be one as rich and intricate as any piece of art coming from those same hands.

Chapter I

Daily Life

Introduction.

From the inception of Christianity, there were women who chose to live a life of celibacy and renunciation, and by the mid-fourth century the life of the female religious was very much a part of developing church structures. Indeed, as early as the second century, various writers attest to their presence in the west.¹ The models for such a life were embedded within the Gospel literature, and as Christianity spread, these models were adopted, expanded, and adapted within a variety of cultural settings.² When Christianity reached Ireland many eagerly sought the monastic life,³ and Ireland soon saw numerous men and women travelling to and fro preaching the word and searching for their 'place of resurrection'⁴.

¹ *RB* 1980, #3 - #5, 316.

² Both Basil and Pachomius saw monastic life as "an imitation of the life of the earliest Christian community as idealized by Luke" (*RB* 1980, 33). Indeed Cassian was moved to give monasticism an apostolic origin (*RB* 1980, 8).

³ Fry remarks that "the criterion for distinguishing monastic life in the strict sense from ... pre-monastic forms of asceticism can only be that of living separately from the rest of the Christian community" (*RB* 1980, 43).

⁴ It is this picture which is consistently presented in the Irish *Lives*.

The monastic vocation.

A variety of monastic models are apparent in the hagiographical texts, many of them taking the major part of their impetus from biblical models and the Egyptian desert.⁵ These were organized in such a way that they formed an integral part of Irish society, and from their ranks rose such women's foundations as Kildare, Clonbroney, Killeedy, and Kileevy. Their gain in status and power is partly due to the fact that Irish society was quickly becoming a Christian society, but probably even more so because organized monasticism had adapted itself to the social fabric of Ireland, adopting societal models such as leadership roles and the system of fosterage.

The effects of the adoption of the fosterage system within the confines of developing monasticism should not be disregarded, for when we go on to enquire why people entered the monastic life, we have to admit that many simply had little choice in the matter. They were often children fostered in the monastery and reared for the religious life, the 'first fruits' of the lay tenants of monastic lands, and/or children of the

⁵ For example, the Pachomian *corpus*, as does the literature commemorating the ascetics of the desert, speaks of the abbot as 'father', 'man of god', 'blessed', and 'holy.' It also speaks of Pachomius' charismatic gifts, of his absorption in prayer, discernment of spirits, humility, extraordinary asceticism, visions, *kardiognōsis*, power over demons, understanding the Scriptures ... his exercise of spiritual fatherhood on behalf of his monks (*RB* 1980, 339). Moreover, it should be remembered that the *apa* of 'father' has his agency from God who is both father and mother (*RB* 1980, 368; Hos. 11:3-5; Isa. 66:13; Matt: 23:37; 1 Cor. 3:2). Thus spiritual fatherhood is not a male prerogative (*RB* 1980, 368-69) and indeed when we turn to the Irish evidence we find the attributes of the *apa* mentioned above to be equally applicable to the abbess of the Irish monastery.

upper classes and royalty⁶ whose vocation had been chosen for them. We must also include here those children abandoned⁷ and probably those orphaned who were rescued and nurtured by some caring monk or nun. Despite these external circumstances, a number of those who had become part of the monastic community for various reasons which had little to do with the spiritual quest, appear to have continued in their vocation with a deep commitment to monastic ideals.

Women also at times seem to have entered a monastic community to avoid unwanted suitors and the consequences of marriage, a common enough happening in continental Europe at this time, and one which may be intimated in the Irish texts which speak of the miracles of God which came to the aid of a particular virgin and helped her avoid the pressures of a family desiring marriage for a girl who instead insisted upon entering the religious life.⁸ Brigit is said, for example, to have plucked out an eye to render herself an unsuitable candidate for marriage when family pressure became too great.

Gair iarum do-lluid fer do thig Dubthaig do thochmurc Brigte.
Dubthach dí a nomen-side mac ui Lugair. Ba maith fria athair
7 lia brathrea a n-i-sin. 'Is ansa[e] dam', ol Brigit, 'ad-ropart
m'ógi do Dia...' Ba sáeth lia brathrea gait di-si in tinscrae erru.
Batar doini dommi hi fochruib do thig Dubthaig. Luid-si læ n-

⁶ Senán: *BL* 2148.

⁷ St. Ailbe of Emly was said to have been abandoned and then fostered by the Church (Ailbe: *VSH* I, 1). Other children were often fostered at a very young age, possibly as part of the 'first fruits' due to the monastic ruler. Very young fosterage is evident, for example, in the *Life of Colman of Lynally* (Colman: *VSH* I, 1). See also the *Félire* which mentions a babe being left in a basket on top of a cross within the monastic precincts at Killeedy (*Félire* Nov.12, 243).

⁸ See, for example, Monenna: Heist 3.

and 7 erene bec furi doib. Co[n]-rancatar a brathir friæ-si. maic a athar; do-lotar de Muig Liphi. Boi drecd dib oc gairib impi; lin ali nibtar fælti frie, .i. Bacene as-bert: 'Int shuil alaind fil it chiund-su ar-nenustar do fiur cith scith lat'. La sodain statim ad-aig-si a mmér foa suil. 'Ausu duit in(t) suil n-alaind-sin', ar Brigit. 'Dóig lim', olsi, 'ni cunte nech cuccaib filiam cecam'.⁹

Shortly afterwards a man came to Dubthach's house to woo Brigit. His *name* was Dubthach moccu Lugair. That pleased her father and her brothers. 'It is difficult for me', said Brigit, 'I have offered up my virginity to God...' Her brothers grieved at her depriving them of the bride-price. There were poor people living close to Dubthach's house. She went one day carrying a small load for them. Her brothers, her father's sons, who had come from Mag Lifi, met her. Some of them were laughing at her; others were not pleased with her, namely Bacéne, who said: 'The beautiful eye which is in your head will be betrothed to a man though you like it not'. Thereupon she *immediately* thrusts her finger into her eye. 'Here is that beautiful eye for you', said Brigit. 'I deem it unlikely', said she, 'that anyone will ask you for a *blind girl*'.¹⁰

The theme is also found in the *Life of Osmanna* which reads:

Cum autem tandem viderent beatam virginem a via veritatis nolle separari, eam cuidam nobili in matrimonium dare volebant, vt gaudio vacaret et christianos odio haberet.

but when they saw that the blessed virgin did not wish to be separated from the way of truth, they wished to give her to a certain nobleman in matrimony, so that he might devoted himself to pleasure and hold Christians in contempt.¹¹

⁹ The parentheses are those of the editor.

¹⁰ *B. Br.* 14-15.

¹¹ *Osmanna: NL II*, 237 (line 18-20).

As a result, Osmanna fled Ireland with her servant and settled by the river Loire.¹² We find also such incidents introduced in other *Lives*. For example at one time Patrick¹³ is said to have gone to Eochaid, son of Muiredach, king of Ulster, to plead for two virgins being forced into marriage and idolatry by him.¹⁴ Elsewhere we read that Samthann avoided the consummation of her marriage and managed to convince all concerned that she be allowed to enter the monastic life.

Sequenti uero nocte celebratis nupciis, ambo, ut moris est, intrantes talamum, sponsus ait ad eam: 'Exue,' inquit, 'uestes tuas, ut in unum conueniamus.' At illa respondit: 'Inducias peto, usque quo qui in domo sunt dormiant.' Consensiens sponsus, post paululum sopor oppressit eum. Tunc ipsa orationi instabat, pulsans ad fores misericordie diuine, ut uirginitatem illibatam custodiret. Et exaudiuit Deus depre[ca]cionem eius, et Dominus orationem eius suscepit... Tunc ait rex: 'De cetero te uiro non tradam: set iudicium sit in manu tua.' Et ait illa: 'Hoc est iudicium meum, ut amodo me Deo offeratis, et non homini, in sponsam.'¹⁵

On the following night, when the wedding was celebrated, both entering the tent as is the custom, her spouse said to her: 'take off' he said 'your clothes, so that we might come together as one.' But she replied: 'I ask a delay until all those who are in the house are sleeping'. Her husband consenting, after a while sleep came upon him. Then she asked in prayer, beating at the door of divine mercy, that she might keep her virginity unimpaired. And God heard her prayer, and the Lord accepted her prayer... Then the king said: 'For the rest I will

¹² Fry notes that "the monastic movement ... was characterized from the beginning by a certain withdrawal from the ordinary framework of society and the creation of a special culture" (*RB* 1980, 4).

¹³ For an excellent discussion of the Patrick mission in Ireland see Dumville 1993, 133-145.

¹⁴ Patrick: *BL* 372-374.

¹⁵ The parentheses are those of the editor.

not hand you over to a man; but let the decision be in your hands.' And she said: 'This is my decision, that you offer me henceforth to God, and not to a man, as spouse.'¹⁶

Thus we see that despite the fact that many became members of the monastic community through chance, it is also evident that many others sought this life in response to the call of the Spirit, and the Spirit was to move them in a variety of ways.

Monastic life was (and is) a life in imitation of Christ, and thus imitation of Christ by necessity meant imitation of the Gospels. Within these pages every Christian who so desired could find a suitable archetype to model his/her life upon. For here we find hermits, ascetics, priests and prophets, married couples leading a holy life, holy men, holy women, and the widows, possibly most especially the widows, who gathered together to live a life centred upon Christ and Christian ideals. Many couples took up a monastic life after the pressures of child-rearing were past, and some founded monasteries, though we encounter far more widows¹⁷ joining the monastic ranks. A number of these were the mothers or sisters of famous saints, such as the sisters of Ciarán of Clonmacnois, the widows Lugbec, Rathbeo and Pata, who were buried at Tech Meic int-saeir.¹⁸ In the *Life of Findian of Clonard* we read that his sisters Rignach and Richenn along with their mother established Cell Rignaige, a monastery which appears to have been associated with

¹⁶ Samthann: *VSH* II: 1-2.

¹⁷ We should entertain caution however, for the term may be an ecclesiastical title which has here little to do with secular widowhood. Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit* mentions both young women (*puellas*) and faithful widows accompanying the abbess (Cogitosus, *Brigit: AASS* Feb.1, 8:7). It is equally clear that by *puellas* Cogitosus meant *virgines* (virgins). See *ibid.*, prol. 2.

¹⁸ Ciarán: *BL* 3989. Pata is here identified as a 'pious widow'.

Finnian's monastic *paruchia*.¹⁹ We even hear of a widow joining a monastic community and of her young male infant taken into fosterage within that community.

Cui, prout referunt, in primis octo virgines unaque vidua cum suo infantulo, nomine Luger, sunt iuncte. Quem ipsa Darerca (i.e., Monenna) in filium adoptavit.²⁰

Especially, as they relate, eight virgins and one widow with an infant called Luger, were joined to her. Which child, Monenna herself adopted as a son²¹.

Some, following their biblical counterparts, took the veil²² and led an ascetic life while continuing to live within the family home.²³ Others adopting the celibate life, gathered together and settled in a separate dwelling while still remaining part of the community at large.²⁴ It is implied in the *Lives*, for example, that Brigit spent some time in the family home after she took the veil, for we hear that at one time, a nun who lived near her

¹⁹ Findian: BL 2661. The hagiographer relates that Rignach and Richenn are the sisters of Findian, and that their mother is also the mother of Findian and of Ciarán. While in this case we seem to be on reasonably secure ground, familial relationships should not always be taken at face value. The *Life of Ciarán of Clonmacnois* speaks of the 'earthly' father of Ciarán, and while this seems to refer to the biological father of Ciarán, we must remember that besides natural parents, and siblings from this first household, there are also foster-parents and siblings, monastic parents and monastic brothers or sisters, and then of course there is one's heavenly father who should not be discounted in the reckoning.

²⁰ the parentheses are mine.

²¹ Darerca: Heist 2.

²² The Irish *caille* 'veil' formed the base for the Irish word for 'nun' (*cailleach*).

²³ Darerca: Heist 3.

²⁴ TP 88-91.

father's house came to ask her to attend an assembly with her.²⁵ Immediately following this event the same narrator says: "Another time thereafter she wished to visit her mother who was in slavery in Munster, and her father and fostermother would scarcely allow her to go" (*Fecht n-ale iar sin voluit vi[s]itare matrem bat i ndoiri i tír Muman, 7 ba gair nis-leceth a pater 7 mummi*).²⁶ On occasion, we find men and women residing in a common dwelling, and these at times brought upon themselves the criticism of those leading a more regulated lifestyle.

The behaviour for example of the bishop Mel who lived together with his kinswoman Lupita seems to have drawn the unfavourable attention of at least the later compilers, for we are told that Patrick, hearing the gossip, acted decisively and arranged for her to go to Druim Chea where there was an establishment for women.²⁷ Married couples, too, at times chose to lead a religious life while remaining together in the family dwelling, and although much has been said by scholars about a married clergy and even married monks, we should never forget that celibacy is the state lauded throughout the

²⁵ *B. Br.* 11.

²⁶ *B. Br.* 12.

²⁷ *TP* 88-91. The problem Patrick is faced with here would appear to be that of *virginæ subintroductæ*, a testing of one's commitment to celibacy in an attempt to return to the purity of the Garden of Eden. See (Reynolds "Virginæ Subintroductæ") for a full discussion. The practice seems to already be coming under censure in the penitential of Finnian where we read: "If, however, he is on familiar terms with many women and has given himself to association with them and to their lascivious embraces, but has, as he says, preserved himself from ruin, he shall do penance for half a year..." (*Si autem multarum feminarum habuerit familiaritatem et earum commansionibus et osculis inlecebrosis seipsum dederat, sed ipse, ut dicat, se seruauit a ruina, dimedium annum peniteat...*) (Finnian: *IP* 15). The translation is that of the editor.

hagiographical texts. Married clergy also seem to have lived together with their wives and families in a common dwelling, and their special status is noted in the texts in which we find precepts dictating that the wives of such clergy were expected to wear the virgin's veil.²⁸ These precepts date from as early as the seventh century.²⁹ In these various lifestyles, we find reflected those ideas inherent in the *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*,³⁰ a document which declares that the first order of saints did not shun the society of women and did not fear the temptations of the flesh.³¹ Nevertheless, while some, apparently unhampered by the flesh, seem able to have followed a different lifestyle in the midst of everyday life,³² others found such interruptions and distractions too disturbing.³³ Thus those wishing to commune more intimately with God sometimes sought the secluded life of the hermit,³⁴ and both men and women finding such a life attractive, established their little dwellings in more isolated areas.³⁵ And while many others went forth and founded monasteries, we should also bear in mind that the concept of 'hermitage' and that

²⁸ Gougaud 1932, 233; First Synod of St. Patrick: *IP* 6.

²⁹ The Irish Canons: *MHP* 117.

³⁰ *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*: Heist 81-83.

³¹ *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*: Heist 1

³² Finnian: *IP* 27. Here we read of married clergy who still live with their families. Celibacy, however, is expected in such an arrangement.

³³ Darerca: Heist 3.

³⁴ *TP* 233.

³⁵ *Conch.* 2:12.

of 'monastery' often went hand in hand, for many saints not only built their foundations in secluded spots, but also established for themselves a little hermitage apart in which to retreat periodically in order to commune more intimately with God.³⁶ Accompanied by a handful of followers and with their trust in divine intervention, these intrepid martyrs³⁷ journeyed on until they found a suitable site the location of which was chosen through a sign from God. Something as simple as the loss of a wagon wheel could be taken as such a sign, though at times we do find the choosing of such a site described in a more dramatic manner.

DEINDE beata uirgo Yta orauit ad Dominum, ut ostenderet ei locum in quo sibi seruiret. Et ecce uenit angelus Domini ad eam, dicens: 'Relinque hanc patriam tuam, et uade ad illam regionem que uocatur Hy Conayll, et manebis in occidentali parte eiusdem regionis, iuxta radices montis Luachra. Et ibi angelus Domini ueniet ad te, et ostendet tibi locum in quo erit ciuitas tua, in qua migrabis ad Christum....Hiis uerbis angeli auditis, sancta Yta cum suis commitibus ad illam regionem perrexit, et mansit iuxta radices montis Luachra sicut sibi angelus dixit. Et statim angelus Domini uenit ad eam et assignauit ei locum in quo Deo seruiret...

Then the blessed virgin Ita prayed to the Lord, that he might show her the place in which she could serve him. And behold the angel of the Lord came to her saying: 'Leave this your fatherland, and go to that region which is called Hy Conayll, and you will remain in the western part of that same region, next to the foot of Luachra mountain. And there the angel of the Lord will come to you and show you the place in which your city will be, in which you will migrate to Christ...Having heard the angel's words, holy Ita travelled to that region with her companions and she remained by the foot of Luachra

³⁶ Ita: *VSH* II, 23.

³⁷ For a discussion of the association of the term 'monk' with 'martyr' see *RB* 1980, 14.

mountain, just as the angel told her. And immediately the angel of the Lord came to her and he assigned to her a place in which she might serve the Lord...³⁸

In addition to Ita, Brigit and Monenna were women of independence who travelled widely, and who showed autonomy and self-reliance in establishing their foundations. St. Gobnata, a virgin of the sixth century, was another independent woman, and although she is said to have been settled at Bornech in Co. Cork by the abbot Abban,³⁹ she went on to found a number of women's monasteries in southern Ireland, including one on Inisheer in the Aran Islands, before she established her final foundation at Cork.⁴⁰ The search seems to have been one for the pure life, built around notions of asceticism.⁴¹ Thus often we find both men and women travelling from their homes to take up the monastic life close by some ascetic, male or female, known for their spiritual fortitude. Certainly a number of men seem to have been settled in the vicinity of Ita's foundation at Killeedy, and whether or not there was any official tie between them, we learn that her company was sought by these same men on various occasions.⁴² Brigit ran a double monastery and administered a wide *paruchia*, and many men were drawn to seek her help and advice, while some

³⁸ Ita: *VSH* II, 8.

³⁹ That is, Ballyvourney (Baile-mhuirne; Baile-boirne etc.) in Co. Cork, which was founded in the 6th century. (Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 313,417; Mould 1976, 107).

⁴⁰ Mould 1976, 144.

⁴¹ While true cenobitism may or may not be a late development within Christianity, the ascetic tradition goes back to the New Testament (*RB* 1980, 4).

⁴² Ita: *VSH* II, 13, 17, 19, 22, 24, 31, 35; Mochoemog, *VSH* II, 8.

obviously would have remained to become monks in her monastery.⁴³ Indeed, we are told that when Brigit began her foundation here, both men and women flocked to her and that she nurtured them in the monastic life looking after their welfare until finally she chose a bishop to help her in this work.⁴⁴ In the same manner, women sought to learn from men who had earned a reputation as ascetics and teachers. Thus Monenna followed St. Ibar to Beggery island, remaining for a while in order to learn further of the monastic life and to continue her studies and those of her nuns.⁴⁵ That she took his lessons to heart can be seen by her own frugal lifestyle.⁴⁶ When Bairre established his monastery and school at Edergole on Loch Irce, a number of women flocked to him there, and these we are told “offered their churches to God and to Bairre in perpetuity” (*Ro edhbairset in lucht sa uile a cealla do Dhá 7 do Bhairri i mbith-dilsi*).⁴⁷ Others impelled by the reputation of Senán sought to follow that monastic model. And when Senán, a noted teacher and ascetic who presided over a large and expanding *paruchia*, founded a monastery on Inis Luinge, virgins flocked to him. Among these were the daughters of Brenainn, king of the Uí Figeinte. Senán is said to have then left this church with them.

IS ann sin tancatar na noebhógha adhochum .i. ingena
Brenainn righ o bhFigeinte, 7 ros-idbrait do Dia 7 do Shenán.

⁴³ *B. Br.* 20, 23, 27, 34, 40; *Cogitosus* 5:2, 7:2, 8:1, 10:1, 11:2, 15:2, 19:1, 22:5-6.

⁴⁴ Ryan 1931, 180-181.

⁴⁵ Monenna: Heist 3.

⁴⁶ Modwenna; *NL* II, 199 (line 16); 200-201 (lines 40-41, 1-4). The texts, particularly the monastic rules, prefer the word ‘poor’ to describe such asceticism.

⁴⁷ Bairre: *BNE* 10:22.

Ba hi sin primit Eoganachta Gabra do Senán. Facbaidh Senán iarum in recles[-sin] leosom.⁴⁸

Then came the holy virgins to him, even the daughters of Brenainn king of the Húi Figeinte, and offered themselves to God and to Senán. That was the first-fruits of the Eoganacht Gabra to Senán. Then Senán leaves that church with them.⁴⁹

Cell Eochaille, a monastery associated with the daughters of Ner, was also part of his *paruchia*.

Luidh iarum i leth-sin 7 aidhleadh leis co Cill [E]ochaille d'acallaim ingen Neir robatar ann .i. næbhogha craibhdech roghabhsat caille fo láimh Senáin 7 robatar for a anmcairdius. Ailit-sidhe dano do Senán co tardta corp manaigh umhail dá mhuinntur cucasomh 'da adhnacal ocainn co rabdais a reilce oc ar n-imcoimet.' 'Dobérthar cucaibh [eiccin],' ar Senán, 'nech dia targha bar n-imcoimét na bídh a shnim foruibh.'

So he went on that side, and he visited Cell Eochaille to commence with Ner's daughters who were dwelling there, - pious, holy virgins, who had taken the veil at Senán's hand, and who were under his spiritual direction. Then they entreat Senán that the body of (some) lowly monk of his community might be given to them, 'to be buried by us, so that his relics may be protecting us.' 'Verily,' saith Senán, 'this shall be granted to you.'⁵⁰

Other famous male saints are connected with foundations for women. Brendan the voyager, given a site by the king of Connaught, founded a monastery for his sister Brig at Enach Dúin.⁵¹ The short description of the death of Brendan indicates in its referral to

⁴⁸ the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁴⁹ Senán: *BL* 2151-2153.

⁵⁰ Senán: *BL* 2478-2484.

⁵¹ now Annaghdown, Co. Galway (Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 312).

‘sister’ and ‘brethren’ what appears to be a foundation for both men and women at Enach Dúin. The narrator proceeds:

Luidh Brenainn iarsin do accallaimh a shethar .i. Bríge, co dún Aedha meic Eachaid, dianidh ainm Enach nDúin indiu...‘Ata Dia’, ol se, ‘agum gairm si dochum na flatha suthaine; 7 mo chorp do bhreith co Cluain Ferta....’ In tan tra tairnic dosomh a radh sin uile, bennachais dona braithribh, 7 da shiair .i. do Bhríge; 7 an tan ro siacht for tairsech na heccailsi...Ro fháidh a spirat iar ccomhlanucchadh tri mbliadan nochat...

Brendan after this went to visit his sister Brig at the fort of Aed son of Eochaid, which is now called Enach Duin...(and after having done all manner of things) he said. ‘God is calling me to the eternal kingdom, and my body must be taken to Clonfert. When he had finished saying all this, he blessed the brethren and his sister Brig, and when he reached the threshold of the church...he sent forth his spirit having completed ninety three years...’⁵²

A similar foundation seems to have existed at Druim Etir Dá Loch.

Luid Finnén iarsin i crích Connacht co Druim eitir da Loch i n-Húaibh Oililla. Fuair Muisi 7 Ainmire ann arachind 7 siat toirrsech do écaib a sethar an lá sin. O roairigh Finnén innisin luidh isin tech i mbai corp na sethar. Dorighne depraccoit ndicra ndedhghair fri Dia, cu rothodhuisc in caillig a báss....Roedbair iarsin Múisi 7 Ainmire a reclés do Día 7 d’Finnen.

After that Findian went into the province of Connaught to Druim Etir Dá Loch [‘ridge between two lakes’]. He found Moses and Ainmire there before him, and they were sad at the death of their sister on that day. When Findian perceived that, he entered the house wherein the sister’s corpse was lying, and he made fervent vehement prayer unto God, and brought the nun to life out of death ... Thereafter Moses and Ainmire

⁵² Brendan: *BNE* 69: 206,207,208. The parentheses are mine. For the identification of Enach Duin with Annaghdow, see Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 60.

offered their church to God and to Findian.⁵³

A comparable situation may be described in an anecdote from the Irish *Life of Coemgen* which claims that he restored to life two nuns who while out walking had been attacked and killed by robbers, and took them under his protection.⁵⁴ The story probably exists to explain the presence of a group of Benedictine Dominican nuns at a site associated with Coemgen, but what is important is that the hagiographer saw no discrepancy in associating women with Coemgen or his foundation. Daig of Inis Cain Dega is said to have received censure for having virgins in his monastery living under his rule and Tigernach, an abbot trained at Candida Casa in Britain, a monastery school which accepted female as well as male students, is said to have had a multitude of women and men at Cluain Eois.⁵⁵ Patrick is said to have established the monastic sites of Temple Brigid⁵⁶ and Temple naFerta at Armagh as foundations for women, the latter being associated with his sister Lupita. Temple Brigid is said to have been subject to Temple na Ferta.⁵⁷ Liadain, the mother of Ciaran of Saigher, chose to establish a monastery within the monastic federation of her son. In imitation of the existing political system, we often find lesser monasteries allying themselves with those more powerful. It is not surprising that a number of women's

⁵³ Findian: *BL* 2696-2704. The parentheses are those of the editor.

⁵⁴ Coemgen: *BNE* 18:34.

⁵⁵ Ryan 1931, 143.

⁵⁶ i.e., Templebreed (Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 132).

⁵⁷ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 132.

foundations chose to join the federation of some powerful saintly figure who happened to be male, just as we should be open to the possibility that men's foundations may have formed part of the federations of obviously powerful women such as Brigit, Ita, or Monenna.⁵⁸ Moreover, not all of these foundations may have had the associations they have been credited with. The great popularity of the cult of the saints which flourished in Ireland, if nothing else, led members of communities to lay claim to illustrious connections which may not have previously existed. The confused history of the beginnings of Clonbroney may be one example of such tamperings with historical reality. The *Life of Samihann* claims that Fuinech founded Clonbroney and became its first abbess, while another insists that Patrick founded the monastery for the daughters of Mil-chú who had received the veil at his hands.⁵⁹

The preparation and consecration of nuns.

Although we know that many women were trained from early childhood in the monastic schools in preparation for their future vocation, as Brig did for example at the school of Bishop Erc, the *Lives* of our women saints show varying patterns of

⁵⁸ The warrior who leads the host to do battle, is a motif that is operating here, but the battle is spiritual not physical, and both men and women assume the role of the heroic conqueror. And although undeniably monasteries did go to war, and obviously had to defend themselves at times against aggressors, something they seem to have done rather ineffectually, this is not the focus of power in a religious setting.

⁵⁹ *Sources*, 464-5; *TP* 91.

preparation,⁶⁰ patterns we might expect to find within a Church whose structure was still fluid, and which still looked to the Gospels including the apocrypha, to the early martyrs, and to the Egyptian desert for its exemplars. When Osmanna fled her home with a loyal servant she sought a remote hermitage where she lived a life comparable to the most ascetic of the desert monks.

...illa...parentes et patriam dereliquit, et assumpta secum ancilla nomine Aclitenis, transito mari in siluam iuxta Ligerim fluuium, ab hominum habitatione remotam, domunculam ex foliis et frondibus fecit, et radices herbarum et folia in cibum sumpsit, vestes ex iuncis (T. *iunctis*) et longioribus herbis sibi fecit...

She ...fled her parents and her fatherland, and taking with her a servant call Aclitenis, having crossed the water to a wood by the Loire river, remote from human habitation, she made a little home from leaves and branches, and ate for her food the roots and foliage of plants, and made clothes for herself from rushes and longer plants.⁶¹

This abridged *Life* shows Osmanna acting from a spiritual impulse very much in the tradition of the Egyptian monks. In this case there is no mention of preparation for her chosen life; the response comes from an inner commitment and resolve.⁶² There is also

⁶⁰ For early church practice see *RB* 1980, 442-9.

⁶¹ Osmanna: *NL* II, 237 (line 20-25). Her response is very similar to that of Monenna who retreated to a mountain top and existed there on raw herbs, roots, and tree bark. (Modwenna: *NL* II, 201 (line 1-4).

⁶² Fry remarks that "in the earliest time one could simply go to the desert and assume a monastic mode of life. Each monk sought out an elder who clothed him in the monastic habit and taught him how to conduct his life. There was no established pattern of formation, and the profession of the monastic way of life was sufficiently indicated by assuming the habit." (*RB* 1980, 437). Fry adds further that gradually the necessity for the testing of the new candidates was realized (*RB* 1980, 437).

no mention of consecration, and common sense dictates that, in an age in which Christianity was spread by wandering Christians preaching the Gospel, those who formed a resolution to commit themselves to such a life might not always have found it expedient to wait until some priest travelled by before beginning their work. In the Old Irish *Life of Ciarán of Saighir* we learn that Mansenna, the mother of Brendan of Birr, decided to go into exile on Oilén Doimle.⁶³ Ciarán advised her instead to go to Tallaght. Once again any mention of preparation or consecration is omitted.⁶⁴ At times preparation, when it did take place, must have been rudimentary. In the *Life of Monenna*, the hagiographer relates that when Patrick came to the province, Monenna went to him for consecration. This itinerant bishop then told her to take other virgins under her care, women whom she had either instructed herself before this ceremony, or whom Patrick had instructed.

ergo...eam in proposito incepto corroborans...ei mandavit quod alias virgines sibi copulasset, quas Dei docuisset timorem...Deinde cuidam religioso presbitero, prope parentes eius inhabitanti, curam custodiendi eam psalmosque docendi commisit...

then...encouraging her in her proposed undertaking...he sent word to her that he had joined to himself other virgins, whom he had taught the fear of God...Then he entrusted her to a certain priest, living near her parents, to look after her and teach her the psalms..⁶⁵

⁶³ i.e., Inis Doimle.

⁶⁴ Ciarán of Saighir II: *BNE* 25:53.

⁶⁵ Darerca: Heist 2.

The Latin at this point would indicate that it is Patrick who had taught the women, since the two preceding verbs in the sentence have Patrick as the obvious subject. However, if this is the case, such instruction must have been extremely superficial, since immediately preceding this incident the story relates that Patrick is not resident in the area but simply passing through. From the above we can also see that Monenna is only now beginning studies which we saw others entering upon at a very young age.⁶⁶ Indeed, the fact that she is a believing Christian with a wish to devote herself to the celibate life, seems to have been all that was required to present herself to the bishop to receive the veil. Ita also appears to have had little formal preparation for her new vocation, but was instead, so the hagiographer boasts, 'instructed by the Holy Spirit' (*Spiritu Sancto docta*).⁶⁷ Indeed the spontaneity of the actions of these women is exemplified in the *Life of Ita*, who while she may have been depicted as being given the veil in a church, on the other hand is portrayed as preaching and teaching even before this event took place.⁶⁸ Once again, in the *Life of Attracta*, we receive no indication that this virgin received any formal instruction before her consecration. Attracta, a virgin who is said to have received the veil from Patrick when he was making a circuit through Connaught, is reported to have left the family home hurriedly and to have gone immediately to that bishop to dedicate her life

⁶⁶ Of course, we have no idea how old Monenna is at this point, but one would assume that she is around fourteen to sixteen years of age, at which time most would be beginning to think about adult responsibilities.

⁶⁷ Ita: *VSH* II, 4.

⁶⁸ Ita: *VSH* II, 6-7.

to God.

patriâ & parentelâ relictâ fugit ad S. Patricium tunc in regione Connaciæ...iuxta prædictum lacum Techet verbum Dei prædicantem, è cuius manu sacrum suscipiens velamen, perpetuam Deo consecrauit virginitatē.

having left homeland and family, she fled to St. Patrick then in the region of Connaught...by the aforementioned Lake Techet preaching the word of God, and she taking up the sacred veil from his hand, consecrated her perpetual virginity to God.⁶⁹

What we are presented with here is, of course, a picture of the holy women, the extreme ascetics who are part of the body of saints who laid the foundations for Irish monasticism. Taught by the spirit, it appears that they need only formalize their intention. In some cases, even that was not deemed necessary. These women were the exceptional ones, thus possibly even the exceptions, for we know that many nuns were trained from childhood in the monastic way, groomed carefully for their future life. This is the picture portrayed by the hagiographer of those women who played leading roles in the beginning centuries of Christianity in Ireland. Even in the *Life of Samthann*, a virgin who lived in the eighth century, there is no indication that she received training or even that she was consecrated. Even if one is to say that this omission in the lives is due to the lack of interest on the part of the hagiographer, a position I would in this case, considering the later date of Samthann, readily endorse, it is still a lack of interest because the hagiographer does not perceive this particular aspect of the saint's development to be very important, and the

⁶⁹ *Attracta: AS* Feb. 9, (3-5), p. 278a.

lacuna should not be dismissed lightly. We are simply told that she entered the monastery of Ayraidy⁷⁰ where she performed the office of steward. This, despite the fact that we read in the Lismore text that there was ordination of ‘folk of every grade’ (*aes cecha graidh*),⁷¹ and that we read elsewhere in the same manuscripts that nuns were reckoned within the third grade of the Church.⁷²

We must presume from the preceding tract that some women were elevated to the third grade, obviously with some kind of ceremony involved, although even this tells us very little. Moreover the *Life of Colmán*, albeit speaking of men in the monastic life, can proclaim with confidence that

dorada fa láim epscoip hi ciund mís 7 ruct[h]a hi ciund secht mblíadna co hanmc[h]airdib 7 rolégsat hi salma 7 a n-imna 7 an-ord n-ecalsa ule léou. Rocoiméta tra co trebar 7 co genmnaid ó sin immach co cend cethri mblíadna déc cen nach n-ellned cuirp ná anma 7 roaidbairset féin i n-ógiu don Chomdid ó sein imach.

at the end of a month they were confirmed; and at the end of seven years they were taken to spiritual directors, and with them they read their psalms and hymns and all the order of the Church. They were preserved in prudence and chastity to the end of fourteen years, without any sullyng of body and soul, and thenceforward they offered themselves in virginity to the Lord.⁷³

⁷⁰ Airnaidi (Ir. Ernaide). Index Locorum: *VSH* II, 314.

⁷¹ Patrick: *BL* 519.

⁷² Brigit: *BL* 1122.

⁷³ Kuno Meyer *Betha Colmáin*, 8. The passage reflects a well-ordered Church, and thus would seem to belong to a time when monasticism has become institutionalized.

However, on the whole, the picture presented in the lives is one of a society still in flux, a society in which people are still responding in an individual manner to their religious urges and in which some religious rituals have not as yet developed. Thus some women simply follow their spiritual urges and seek out a lonely spot to pray and be with God. Many however, albeit often with little or no instruction, sought a more formal entry into the life of the Church, and when the bishop came on his circuit in order to preach, baptize and take care of the community's spiritual needs, these women joined the others who flocked to him. We do not hear of men joining in this manner, but the motif occurs in the majority of the few *Lives* of women that have survived. The ceremony appears to be a simple one, though we can't assume that it had any fixed form, or that it did not change over time. The *Lives* leave us with a sharply focused mental picture of a few earnest young women standing in line and patiently waiting their turn as fellow villagers were baptized and given communion. Thus we read that

LUID *Brigit* 7 araii ogha maille *fria* do ghabail chaille o espoc
 Mel i Telcha Mhidhe...Anais *Brigit* for umhaloit co mbad hi
 déidhinach for a tartta caille.

Brigit and certain virgins along with her went to take the veil
 from Bishop Mèl in Telcha Mide...For humility Brigit stayed
 so that she might be the last to whom a veil should be given.⁷⁴

From the *Life of St. Attracta*, we receive the impression that a veil, which has been blessed and which is given to the candidate, is taken as a sign of the Christian community's acknowledgement of the nun's new role in the life of the Church. Moreover, the

⁷⁴ Brigit: *BL* 1341-1343.

hagiographer him/herself notes that Patrick offered (*obtulit*) to her “a certain veil, (that)⁷⁵ fell from heaven into his lap” (*quoddam velum destinatum cœlitus cecidit in gremio*).⁷⁶ How the veil is bestowed is unclear, and we know little of the ceremony beyond this. When *Attracta* entered the religious life, we are merely told that she took the veil from the hand of Patrick and dedicated her life to God. However, the simple act seems to have carried with it certain implications, for the writer adds that

Quàm placitum fuerit cælesti sponso hoc connubium ipse
præclaro tunc testatus est miraculo

This union was pleasing to the spouse of heaven, which he
gave witness to through an outstanding miracle.⁷⁷

Once again, in the *Life of Ita*, we find that little time is spent on the nun's consecration, the hagiographer being more interested in her spiritual worthiness than in any official sanction which may have been given her new status:

Et ipso die, completo triduo ieiunio, uirgo Domini ad
ecclesiam Dei ... accipere uelamen uirgineum perrexit....Tunc
angeli Dei desuper aduenerunt...Virgo...Domini, consolantes
eam angeli Dei...ad ecclesiam peruenit; et in ea ius[s]ione
angelica ilico ab ecclesiasticis viris consecrata est, et uelamen
uirginitatis accepit.⁷⁸

And on that day with three days of fasting having been
completed, the virgin of the Lord went to the church of God
...to take up the veil of a virgin...Then the angels of God came

⁷⁵ the addition is mine.

⁷⁶ *Attracta*: *AS* Feb.9, (6), p. 278a. The parentheses are mine.

⁷⁷ *Attracta*: *AS* Feb. 9, (5), p. 278a.

⁷⁸ the parentheses are those of the editor.

from above...The virgin of the Lord, with the angels comforting her, came ... to the church; and on the order of the angels she was here consecrated by ecclesiastical men, and she took up the veil of virginity.⁷⁹

Immediately after this event the virgin set forth establish her monastery and to begin her work.

The use of *accipio* in the passage above and elsewhere in the various texts should be noted, for its use places the emphasis on the emblem of office rather than upon the person who will accept its responsibilities. Language is used in a similar manner elsewhere in the *Life of Ita*:

IN ILLA VERO nocte angelus Domini uenit ad patrem sancte Yte, dicens ei: 'Cur prohibes filiam tuam, ut ipsa in Christi nomine uelamen uirginitatis acciperet?'

And on that night the angel of the Lord came to St. Ita's father, saying to him: 'Why do you forbid that your daughter accept the veil of virginity in the name of Christ?'⁸⁰

Once again it is the veil that is given value, and it is for the initiate to decide whether to accept it or not. There is possibly a tie between such a concept and the idea prevalent in early Irish spirituality that virginity was not a physical state but rather a spiritual state.

It is, however, in the *Tripartite Life* that we discern a slight shift of focus in whatever ritual exists in women's initiation into the Church.

Luid íarom *Patricc* iTetba tuaiscird .i. coirich Coirpri, bali roedbrad dósom *Gránard* omaccaib Coirpri, *ocus* forácaibsom indúsin *epscop* Gúasacht macc *Milcon* acomalta *ocus* nadí

⁷⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 6-7.

⁸⁰ Ita: *VSH* II, 6.

Eimir sethracha inhísin; *ocus* ité *conáccubsat* itúus iClúain Brónaig...Intan, *immorro*, rosén *Patraic* cailli *forsna* ógaib rémráitib, dochótar a ceitri cossa isincloich *ocus* feidligit innti a follichta semper.

Then Patrick went into northern Teffia, namely to Coirpre's territory, where Granard was offered to him by Coirpre's sons. And he left in that place bishop Guasacht son of Milchu, his foster-brother, and the two Emers, sisters (were)⁸¹ those, and they first set up at Cluain Brónaig...Now when Patrick blessed the veil on the aforesaid virgins, their four feet went into the stone, and their traces remain therein *semper* (always).⁸²

And again in the *Lismore Lives* we read that:

LUIDH *Patraic* iarum tar Magh mBreg i crich Laigh(en) co dun Nais. Ata lathrach pupla *Pátraic* i fhaighthi fria sligid anair, et ita tipra fria dun atuaidh du in-robaisd *Patraic* da mac Dunlaing .i. Ailill 7 Illann 7 di ingin Ailill .i. Mugain 7 Fedhelm ro i(d)ber(tatar) a n-oighi do Dhia, 7 senais *Pátraic* caille for a cenn.⁸³

Then Patrick went over Magh Breg, into the province of Leinster, to the fort of Naas. The place of Patrick's tent is in the green to the east of the road; and to the north of the fort is a well wherein Patrick baptized Dunlang's two sons, namely Ailill and Illann, and Ailill's two daughters, namely Mugain and Fedelm, who had offered their virginity to God, and Patrick blessed the veils on their heads.⁸⁴

The *Salmaticensis Life of Monenna* deviates inasmuch as it is the virginal habit which is blessed, though here, once again as in many of our previous examples, it is not the virgin

⁸¹ the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁸² *TP* 90-91. The final parentheses are mine, the remainder those of the editor.

⁸³ the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁸⁴ Patrick: *BL* 396-400.

who is said to have been consecrated but the garment signifying her new status. Patrick then confirmed (collaudans) her in her new life.

sanctum Patricium in eam, in qua ipsa fuit nata, devenisse provinciam.... inter ceteros undique confluentes sancta Darerca veniens eidem se representavit episcopo...virginalem ipsa habitum consecratum prope Briu piscinam, accepit...salutaribus monitis eam in proposito incepto corroborans ac virginalis vite dignitatem collaudans, ei mandavit quod alias virgines sibi copulasset...

(When) Patrick came to that province in which she was born...Saint Darerca, coming among the rest gathering together from every side, presented herself to the same bishop. And...she accepted the consecrated virginal habit near Briu fish-pond...(and) with helpful advice, encouraging her in her proposed undertaking, and praising the dignity of the virginal life,⁸⁵ he told her that he had gathered to himself other virgins...

The Bollandist life elaborates a little. This narrator tells us that after waiting in line to be given the veil, and finally coming before Patrick, he blesses her, counsels her, and she receives the habit. Patrick then gives further advice along with encouragement, and then gave her further instructions on what her next steps in her new life must be. Thus, having waited in line to present herself to Patrick, Monenna finally comes before the bishop:

Quam Pontifex sanctus, Spiritu sancto plenus intuens, sanctum propositum ejus intelligens, fervensque desiderium ad serviendum Deo percipiens, benedictione data, monitisque competentibus adhibitis, virginalem ipsa habitum, consecratum prope Brius....d picinam, quod in Latinum translatum largitatem seu abundantiam sonat, accepit, per quod dabatur intelligi ipsam futuram esse fontem vivum aquarum spiritualium, de quo multi pocula vitæ haurirent. Prædictus ergo Pontifex salutaribus monitis, eam in proposito incepto corroborans, ac

⁸⁵ Darerca: Heist 1-2. The parentheses are mine.

virginalis vitæ dignitatem cellaudans, ei mandavit, quod alias virgines sibi copulasset, quas Dei docuisset timorem, quarum et adjutorio suffulta, solatio ædificata, bonum, quod inceperat, facilius perficere posset. Deinde cuidam religioso presbytero prope parentes ejus inhabitanti, curam custodiendi eam psalmosque docendi commisit.

The holy bishop being filled with the holy spirit perceiving, knowing her holy purpose, and observing a desire to serve God burning (within her), gave his blessing, and with much competent counsel having been given, she took the virginal habit, consecrated near the fishpond of Brius....d, which translated into Latin means bounty or abundance, through which it was given to be understand, that virgin would be a living font of spiritual waters, from which many would draw draughts of life....Therefore that aforementioned bishop, with helpful advice, encouraging her in her proposed undertaking, and proclaiming (ie. installing - confirming - her in) the dignity of the virginal life, he told her that he had gathered to himself other virgins, whom he had taught the fear of God, and she, supported by their help, strengthened by their comfort, so that she could more easily complete the good work that she had begun. Then he entrusted her to a certain religious priest, living near her parents, to look after her and teach her the Psalms.⁸⁶

We find this mention of a habit as early as the *Life of Brigit* by Cogitosus.

illa coelitus inspirata se Virginem castam exhibere Deo volens. ad Episcopum sanctissimum beatae memoriae Mackalle perrexit. Qui coeleste intuens desiderium et pudicitiam, et tantum castitatis amorem in tali Virgine, pallium album et vestem candidam super ipsius venerabile caput imposuit. Quae coram Deo et Episcopo ac altari genua humiliter flectens, et suam virginalem coronam Deo omnipotenti offerens, fundamentum ligneum, quo altare fulciebatur, manu tetigit:

Brigit, inspired by heaven, wishing to present herself to God as a pure virgin, went straight to the holy Bishop Mackalle of

⁸⁶ Darerca (= Monenna): *AASS* July 6, 2 (291a). The parentheses are mine. The use of *callaudans* in this passage is possibly of more significance than is immediately evident.

blessed memory. Which Bishop, perceiving her heavenly desire and modesty, and such love of chastity in this outstanding virgin, placed over her venerable head a white pallium and a white robe. She, before God and the bishop, kneeling humbly at the altar and offering her virginal crown to omnipotent God, touched with her hand the wooden foundation on which the altar was supported...⁸⁷

Here Cogitosus tells us that Mac Caille, seeing the desire of Brigit, “placed a white veil and white habit over her head.” Once again we are presented with the picture of an earnest young woman, who moved by the spirit, expresses a desire to live a life dedicated to Christ. With little or no preparation she approaches a bishop, who upon perceiving her desire to be earnest, places a ‘*pallium*’⁸⁸ and a habit over her head in a ceremony which in this instance appears to take place in a church.⁸⁹ We learn nothing further of the ritual in this particular *Life*, other than that Brigit kneels for at least part of it. The Lismore *Life of Brigit* adds to this information. As with Monenna, Brigit too waits in line to take the veil, and the bishop seeing her, calls her to him.

It is here within the story of Brigit’s consecration, that the picture changes radically. Not only is the veil blessed on her head, an act with its focus on the initiate rather than upon the symbol of her calling,

Advenienti hora consecrationis, elevatum ab angelis velamen de manu Maic Calle ministri super caput sanctæ Brigitæ ponitur. Curvata hautem sub incantationem, interi[m] tenuit lignum fraxeinum altare sustinentem...

⁸⁷ Cog. 1:5.

⁸⁸ It would appear that the *pallium* refers in this instance to the veil.

⁸⁹ I assume this is within a church since some type of permanent foundation is mentioned as the base for the altar.

The hour of consecration having arrived, the veil was raised by angels from the hand of Mac Caille, the minister, and is placed on the head of St. Brigit. During prayers (which seem to have followed) she knelt and grasped the ashbeam which supported the altar...⁹⁰

but we also find that a ritual of some description is read over her, a mistake being made in the form of ordination because the bishop was in the grip of the Spirit.

Ibi episcopus Dei gratia inebreatus non cognovit quid in libro suo cantavit. In gradum *enim* episcopi ordinis (*for* ordinans/ordinavit?) Brigitam. 'Hæc sola,' inquit Mel. 'ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo.'

The bishop, intoxicated with the grace of God, did not recognize what he recited in his book. And he ordained (*ordinis*) Brigit with the grade of a bishop. 'This virgin alone,' said Mel, 'will hold the episcopal order in Hibernia.'⁹¹

The story almost from beginning to end stands out in its non-conformity with the remainder of the picture presented in the *Lives*. Apart from the error made by Mel, the whole ritual is much richer and more formulated. The ceremony takes place in a church as did also that of Ita, but here we perceive a ceremony which seems to focus solely on the consecrations taking place. Brigit is ordained along with a group of nuns, in a ceremony already fixed within the written text, and the scene is from a church already established and confident of its place in the society in which it is placed.

⁹⁰ *B. Br.* 18. The translation is that of the editor. However, the addition in parentheses is mine.

⁹¹ *B. Br.* 19.

Looking at the general picture of the virgin's consecration, what we note primarily is the simplicity of formula operative in the texts. This simplicity is also evident in the initiation of monks as seen in the story of the clipping of Moling.

Ro tesc Collanach sacart a folt iarsin, *ocus* dorad berradh
manaigh fair, *ocus* ro gab pater imme, *ocus* asbert fris techt co
Maedóc [Fearna L] do bith a dalusa fris.

Thereafter Collanach the priest⁹² clipt Moling's hair, and put upon him a monk's tonsure, and said a paternoster over him, and told him to go to Maedóc of Ferns and be his pupil.⁹³

The ritual which emerges includes some or all of the following. When a bishop⁹⁴ happened by, those wishing to take the veil would wait in line along with others seeking his services in order to formalize their intention. The candidates appear to have approached the bishop individually. He then proceeded with a ritual which included a blessing, the bestowing of a veil which had been blessed and the imparting of some advice. A brief period of prayer which possibly included the beatitudes also formed part of the ceremony.

I n-ochtmadh uathaid rogenair Brigit, i cedain sainriudh: i n-ochtmad dec rogabh caille: i n-ochtmad .lxxx. dochoidh docum nime: i n-ochtmad rocoisecradh Brigit fo lin ocht mbiaidi in t-soiscela rocomallastar. 7 biaid in trocaire doroega Brigit dibsaidhe.

On the eighth (of the month) Brigit was born, on a Thursday especially: on the eighteenth she took the veil: in the eighty eighth (year of her age) she went to heaven. With eight virgins

⁹² note that a priest performs the ritual, so the services of a bishop are not deemed necessary.

⁹³ Stokes *Life*: 8:29. L = the R.I.A. ms. *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*.

⁹⁴ The title 'bishop' probably does not carry the same significance it did elsewhere in medieval Europe. These bishops were numerous, their ordination irregular, and their power eclipsed by that of the abbots and abbesses.

was Brigit consecrated, according to the number of the eight beatitudes of the Gospel which she fulfilled, and of them it was the beatitude of mercy that Brigit chose.⁹⁵

Confirmed now in her vocation the nun would often immediately embark upon her new undertaking.

There is no indication that promises were made, or vows taken, an observation corroborated by the editor of the *Lismore Lives* who remarked that “Holy Orders are referred to in these Lives but not as sacraments.”⁹⁶ We cannot assume that there was a fixed ritual, despite the story in the *Life of Brigit*, or that any ritual which may have existed would not have changed over time. The most important aspect seems to have been the blessing of the veil and the candidate’s receiving of the veil, for that is not only the single motif which is persistently repeated, but is in fact the act by which the dedication of a woman’s life to virginity was referred, since the phrase ‘she took the veil’, ‘she received the veil’ has become, and even at this early period had become, synonymous with dedication of a life to Christ.

Many of the women we hear of went on to found monasteries, and the physical layout of these foundations copies faithfully the model already familiar to us from other sources.⁹⁷ Nuns lived in individual cells, and shared other buildings such as the refectory

⁹⁵ Brigit: *BL* 1351-1354.

⁹⁶ *BL* cvii.

⁹⁷ For those unfamiliar with the monastic architecture of early Christian Ireland see Lisa Bitel *Isle of the Saints*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 57-82; Françoise Henry *Irish Art* vol.I, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965, 76-91; and Máire & Liam de Paor *Early Christian Ireland*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978 (1960), 49-72).

with their sisters. An oratory or church was also an essential part of the monastic foundation, and a cross is also mentioned.⁹⁸ Shelter must also have been provided for any livestock necessary to the community's survival. A little hermitage was often established a short distance away. Although many Irish monasteries were surrounded by protective walls, this was not always the case. There is no evidence, for example, that Kildare had a protective wall surrounding it. Nevertheless, prohibitions behind which lay the authority of St. Brigit provided an adequate defense, at least for a period of time.⁹⁹ In the *Life of Samthann* we catch a glimpse of the sisters themselves becoming involved in the building of their foundation, though exactly how involved remains unclear. Thus the hagiographer describes how that abbess had sent at least one of her sisters into the forest to find suitable trees with which to expand the monastery buildings.

Alio quoque tempore sancta ancilla Christi cenaculum ad opus sororum construere uolens, Natheam prioris[s]am cum artificibus in Connacteorum nemora pro lignis pineis misit.

At another time the holy handmaid of Christ wishing to build a room for the work of the sisters, she sent the prioress Nathea with artisans to the woods of Connaught for pine logs.¹⁰⁰

The hagiographical texts frequently mention individual dwellings for the use of the virgins. When Monenna constructed her monastic settlement at Cellisclivium, she is said to have built individual dwellings for the nuns who accompanied her.

⁹⁸ *Féire* Nov.12, 243.

⁹⁹ Lisa Bitel *Isle of the Saints*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Samthann: *VSH* II, 16.

Assumptis autem quadraginta [nouem] virginibus, in monte quodam cenobium construxit, et a cellis, que construebantur in cliuo montis. Celliscliuium appellauit.¹⁰¹

And with forty (nine) virgins having joined her, she built a monastery on a certain mountain, and from the cells which were constructed on the slope of the mountain, she called it Cellisclivium.¹⁰²

It is no accident that the word 'cella' has become synonymous with that of 'monastery' in Irish hagiographical literature, and the word having been assimilated into Irish has become part of numerous place names which bear witness to early Irish ecclesiastical history.¹⁰³ However, women did not only establish monasteries. Stories are also told of these women establishing churches and oratories. For example, when Brigit of Kildare took the veil, the people of the region are said to have given her a place in Fid Eoin called Ached hí to build a church.¹⁰⁴ We also read of the construction of a church at Killeevy in the time of Darlaare, one of the successors to Monenna,¹⁰⁵ and when Samthann became abbess of Clonbroney one of the first things she did was build a new oratory. Later she took on the task of modifying various buildings in the settlement, including the church, to provide more space. She hired carpenters and other workmen for these projects, although, we are told,

¹⁰¹ the parentheses are those of the editor.

¹⁰² Modwenna: *NL* II, 200-201 (line 40-41, 1).

¹⁰³ Kells, Kildare, Killare and Killeevy, to name but a few.

¹⁰⁴ *B.Br.* 20.

¹⁰⁵ Darerca: Heist 33.

she only managed to provide for them through miraculous intervention.¹⁰⁶ It is obvious then that these monasteries had their churches and oratories, and it is equally obvious that these were the centre of monastic spiritual life, so much so that 'monastery' became synonymous with 'church'. Thus the monks Moses and Ainmine offered their church to Findian of Clonard, when the latter resuscitated their sister who was with them,¹⁰⁷

Senán gave the church on Inis Luigne to the daughters of the king,¹⁰⁸ the virgin Lasre is said to have given her church to Brigit,¹⁰⁹ Ciarán of Saighir's oxen used to go to the chapel of Cochae, his foster-mother, to plough for her,¹¹⁰ and the *Life of Columcille* records the existence of a group of nuns who had their chapel not far from the abode of Cruthnechán, the fosterer of Columcille of Iona.¹¹¹

The monastic founders

But who were these women who ruled so confidently, and where did they acquire their skills? Many monasteries came into being when a group of women gathered around a single individual who then decided to establish a foundation. We must also realize that

¹⁰⁶ Samthann: *VSH* II, 6,14. It is clear from the texts that these workmen employed by the monasteries were not always particularly well compensated for their efforts.

¹⁰⁷ Findian: *BL* 2696-2704.

¹⁰⁸ Senán: *BL* 2151-2153.

¹⁰⁹ *B.Br.* 44.

¹¹⁰ Ciarán of Saighir II: *BNE* 18:43.

¹¹¹ Colom-cille: *BL* 825-833.

some of these foundations may have been quite small, and many may have been little more than a hermitage with two or three women attached. The *Annals* make mention of numerous foundations belonging to women, many of which we know nothing about, and most of which have disappeared with the passage of time. The leaders of these groups may at times have been chosen for their sanctity, but on the whole it appears that these women were members of already powerful families, and those who entered the monastic life with them were more than likely members of the same ruling classes, part of the familial household, or attached to familial land. Many of these founding abbesses were young women, who had taken the veil when they were entering their teens, setting forth with a number of women they had gathered around them while still in or close to the family dwelling, but we also hear of widows taking their daughters along with a couple of retainers, and setting forth to establish a foundation. Most of these leaders, whether young or old, seem to have been members of the ruling classes, embarking upon this new life with a group of others who were already attached to them through bonds of loyalty and economics. New leaders, when possible, were chosen by the abbess herself, and many of these appear to have been once again drawn from the ruling classes, and the training they had received at the hands of fosterers seems to have prepared them well for their lives ahead. Brigit, for example, is portrayed as having received an excellent training in household management, and we see this motif consistently repeated in her life as she deals forcefully and authoritatively with members of her extended household as she maintains order within her monastic *paruchia*, and as she deals with and solves one household

emergency after another. Samthann, too, seems to have been well trained in the skills of household management, and we see that as soon as she was given permission to become a nun that she thereupon entered Ayraidy where she was immediately given the office of steward.¹¹²

But we shouldn't think of these women as simply assuming the role of head housekeeper, or even that of the lady of the house, and bearing in mind the spiritual intent of the material before us, we should at least leave ourselves open to the possibility that the hagiographer had in mind much more than we are aware of in his/her use of such household themes. Moreover, these women had been born into households in which the wielding of power was as natural as eating and breathing, and they came well equipped to fill their new roles in the spiritual sphere. As abbesses they rule, subservient to no one, and all classes from labourers to kings knelt to them and did their bidding. And they took charge of everyday necessities efficiently and effectively. Thus when Samthann, for example, took over the government of Clonbroney, she immediately set to work organizing builders for the construction of the new oratory, and thought nothing of sending a group of her nuns into the woods to cut trees so that they might add another little cell to their settlement. Monenna too, without any hesitation, supervised the construction of more than one monastic settlement, and it is quite possible that, when it came to the construction of the more humble dwellings, such as a wattle and daub hut or even a beehive dwelling built

¹¹² We should perhaps not forget that the steward is the chief slave of biblical literature, and thus holds a very important position in the household.

of rocks, abodes which followed time-worn traditional patterns, nuns were just as efficient in their construction as anyone else in that society.¹¹³

Within the monastery.

There can be no doubt that a nun spent a good part of her day in work and prayer. Part of the day was obviously devoted to work, if for no other reason than to take care of the tasks necessary to the continuance of monastic life. Abbesses had not only to be administrators, but had also to care for the needs of those within their *paruchia*. The *Lives* abound in anecdotes which point to their deep involvement in everyday community affairs. One such story concerning Brigit is to be found in the Brendan texts. On this occasion a man went to Brigit to complain that he had lost the love of his wife and that she refused to sleep with him. He requested a spell from Brigit to restore his wife's love for him, and as a consequence of Brigit's help and advice, the couple once again resumed their married life.¹¹⁴ Throughout the texts associated with that saint, Brigit is portrayed as constantly busy, making ale, attending to the dairy, going to synods, looking after the needs of the laity under her jurisdiction and even advising kings. However, it is in the various *Lives* of Monenna that we find frequent reference to manual labour. It would appear that this virgin personally would dig the trenches and hoe the crops in her monastic retreat.

¹¹³ See, for example, Samthann: *VSH* 16.

¹¹⁴ *Voyages* 17.

But prayer and meditation¹¹⁵ were also categorized as work on occasion, and much mention is made of work in this context. *The Rule of Ciaran* makes this perfectly clear, for it declares:

Ailche do chuirp a tosach . beth a troiscib i náine
ité lá Críst in clerech . cusna dernanmaib fæna

Firstly your bodily habits should be fasting and penance. In Christ's eyes they are really monks whose hands are calloused.¹¹⁶

The same thought is echoed elsewhere.

Ro-focht Brenaind do Brigit cid sáthar do-gnid dia codnach.
'Apair róm', ol Brigit. 'Tós dlígius ferscal'. 'Dar ar cuphus', ar Brenaind. 'niro-chingiusa .vii. n-imairi riam cen mo chuimne a nDia'. 'Deo gratias', ol Brigit. 'Ro-fitir Mac na hIngine. ó doratus-sa mo menmain inn. ná tucus as cose'.

Brendan enquired of Brigit what work she used to do for her Master. 'You speak first', said Brigit. 'A man has the right to speak first.' 'By my conscience', said Brendan. 'I have never traversed seven ridges without having my mind on God'. 'Thanks be to God', said Brigit. 'The Son of the Virgin knows that, since I put my mind on Him. I have not taken it off Him up to now'.¹¹⁷

Such persistence in prayer, and indeed such persistence in the spiritual quest, often amounted to a heroic feat.

¹¹⁵ Fry notes the close relationship of *meditatio* (meditation) to prayer and study. Indeed, he remarks that "medieval monastic writers considered *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio* to be four successive stages involving the mind, the heart, the will and the body." (RB 1980, 447)

¹¹⁶ Strachan, J. "Two Monastic Rules", p. 227.

¹¹⁷ B. Br. Appendix 6.

(Monenna)¹¹⁸ quasi fortis heremita, cum suis consororibus tenacissimo caritatis glutino sibi invicem indissolubilter coherentibus, in predicto deserto fortissimam fertur peregrisse militiam. Ibi enim, ut lucerna super candelabrum posita, miraculorum lumine clarescens, tetras aquilonalium tenebras efficacia devote orationis effugasse non dubitatur. Quantis etenim orationum vigiliarumque frequent[i]ationibus¹¹⁹ quantisque manuum laboribus se afflixerit et qualibus preliis contra demones desudaverit et quantis miraculorum effulserit coruscationibus, nullus ad plenum numerare vel scire potuit.

(Monenna,) as though a steadfast hermit, bound indissolubly each to the other by the strongest bond of love, is said to have completed very valiant service in the aforementioned desert. And there, as a shining light placed upon a candlestick, brilliant with the light of miracles, by the efficacy of her devout prayer, she did not hesitate to drive away the horrible shadows of the north. And indeed, no one could have fully counted or have known how numerous the frequency of her prayers and vigils, or how great the manual labours she inflicted upon herself and her company, and in what battles against demons she exhausted herself, and with how many eruptions of miracles she flashed forth.¹²⁰

Elsewhere, Ita is said to have persisted without interruption in meditation and prayer.¹²¹ Moreover, another sister learning of this, returned to her monastery and now performed with greater zeal than previously the task of prayer and contemplation.¹²² However, we should not forget that prayer was an important focus of monastic life, and much mention

¹¹⁸ the addition is mine.

¹¹⁹ the parentheses are those of the editor.

¹²⁰ Darerca: Heist 19.

¹²¹ Ita: *VSH* II, 11.

¹²² Ita: Rowl. B. 505, 170' col. b, line 22-25.

is made of it in all the *Lives*. Brigit is said to have been frequently at prayer.¹²³ Cochae the foster-mother of Ciarán of Saighir used to pray on a rock among the waves of the sea,¹²⁴ and Samthann was noted for her dedication to a life of prayer.¹²⁵ The occasions for prayer were many. For example, upon the death of Flann, a friend of the monastic community, Samthann tells her sisters “Turn yourselves at once to prayer, for now the soul of our friend is being taken to the place of punishment by demons” (*Orationi instanter intendite; nunc enim anima amici nostri Flanni a demonibus ad penalia ducitur loca*).¹²⁶ Considering the great emphasis placed upon prayer in the *Lives*, and the desire of abbesses as well as abbots to spend time alone in prayer, a motif repeated consistently in the *Lives*, it is obvious that communal as well as solitary prayer held an important place in the spiritual life of the nuns.

We also find some reference to the celebration of the major feasts of the liturgical year. The birth of Christ was one such important event. In the *Life of Ciarán of Saighir* we read, for example, that the saint visited his foster-mother Cochae on Christmas Eve and did not return to his monastery until the following day.¹²⁷ But the main celebration of the liturgical year was obviously that of Easter, and a number of anecdotes, mainly of

¹²³ Brigit: *BL* 1694.

¹²⁴ Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 19:45.

¹²⁵ Samthann: *VSH* II, 20.

¹²⁶ Samthann: *VSH* II, 13.

¹²⁷ Ciarán of Saighir II: *BNE* 19:44.

a fabulous nature, surround this feast.

Do-bert banscal n-iresach o Fíid Éoin boin di-si isind lau-sin na Cascc...‘Iss ed is maith tra’, ar Brigit fria ingena, ‘ol is [s]i ar cet-idbairt in so iar ggabail in disi(e)rt-siu: Berar dund epscup ru-bendach calli forar ce(i)ni’.¹²⁸

A woman from Fíid Éoin who was a believer gave her a cow on that Easter Day...‘This is what we must do’, said Brigit to her maidens, ‘for this is the first offering made to us since occupying this hermitage, let it be taken to the bishop who blessed the veil on our head.’¹²⁹

And again we read:

Do-luid Mél dia Luain arabarach doc[h]um Brigitte do precept 7 do ofriund di eter di C[h]aisc. Tucad bó di-si dano a laa n-í-ssin. Do-breth dano d’epscup Mél iar mbreith na bó aili.¹³⁰

On the following day, Monday, Mel came to Brigit to preach and say Mass for her between the two Easters. A cow had been brought to her on that day also and it was given to Mel the bishop, the other cow having been taken.¹³¹

Maundy Thursday, a day of liturgical significance in the re-enactment of those events immediately preceding the apprehension and execution of Christ, was also of particular importance. This was a day on which personal cleanliness was emphasized and on which nuns washed their hair.¹³² Gougaudd traced the tradition to the Gospel of John,¹³³ the

¹²⁸ the parentheses are those of the editor.

¹²⁹ *B. Br.* 22.

¹³⁰ the parentheses are those of the editor.

¹³¹ *B. Br.* 24. See also 21, 23, 25, 26, 28 and 29 for further miracles/miraculous stories associated with Easter.

¹³² Darerca: Heist 19; Gougaudd 1932, 321.

evangelist from whom the Irish claimed to have received their Christianity and whom they loved above all others. The custom is mentioned in the *Life of Monenna*, which also makes claim that at the time of the writing of her *Life*, the comb of that saint, along with other relics associated with her, were still preserved with much reverence by her successors.

Eius enim sarculus fossoriumque in suo monasterio post eius obitum pluribus annis honore debito sunt reservata. Eius etiam pelliceam melotenque, olosericis vestibus preciosiora, et pectinem ligneum, quo semel in anno, in Cena videlicet Domini, nisi summa neccessitas infirmitatis compelleret, crines pectinare consueverat, cum magna veneratione longo tempore reservaverunt.

And her hoe and spade were preserved with due honour in her monastery for many years after her death. And her sheepskin covering, more precious than silken garments, and the wooden comb, with which once a year, namely on the Feast of the Lord¹³⁴, except when compelled by the utmost necessity of infirmity, she was accustomed to comb her hair, these (too)¹³⁵ were preserved with the utmost reverence for a long time.¹³⁶

Evidence exists that these women may also have occupied part of their day in reading and/or writing. Such would be expected since many were educated, and in turn were responsible for the education of various foster-children in their care. Total neglect of personal studies under these circumstances does not seem likely. However, a two-fold

¹³³ Gougaud 1932, 321; John 12:9.

¹³⁴ i.e., Maundy Thursday

¹³⁵ the addition is mine.

¹³⁶ Darerca: Heist 19.

division of the day would have been in the spirit of true Desert tradition, and considering the influence of the Desert monks on early Christianity in Ireland, one must expect that at times this may have been the model adopted. But the Irish loved their Gospels which they illustrated lavishly with care and affection.¹³⁷ Moreover, they showed an untiring thirst for knowledge, and therefore it is not surprising to see that a three-fold division of the day was as common, at least among the monks of Ireland, as it was within Christian monasticism at large.¹³⁸ At least one nun we hear of also saw study as essential to the spiritual vocation.

Quidam aliquando magister, nomine Dayrcellach, ad uirginem accedens, dixit ei: 'Studium postponere propono, et orationi uacare.' Cui illa: 'Quid ergo,' inquit, 'mentem tuam stabilire possit, ne uagetur, si studium spirituale neglexeris?'

A certain teacher by the name of Dayrcellach coming to the virgin (Samthann), said to her: 'I propose to put off my studies and devote myself to prayer. St. Samthann said to him: 'And what then' said she, 'would bring stability to your mind, that it not wander, if you neglect the study of spirituality.'¹³⁹

Others as well appear to have perceived study as an integral part of religious life.

Monenna setting out on the religious life

Cepit igitur Modwenna literis sacris intendere, vanitates seculi contempnere

¹³⁷ We know that an outstanding copy of the Gospels existed at Kildare for Gerald of Wales praises it in his *Topographia*. (Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hiberniae* 71-72).

¹³⁸ See Hughes 1972, 92-93.

¹³⁹ Samthann: *VSH* II, 24.

Monenna began to concentrate upon sacred literature (and) to have contempt for the vanities of the secular world¹⁴⁰

and speaking to her sisters she said:

Ad remotiora ab omnibus loca debemus recedere, ubi orationi tantum et lectioni possimus vacare, et angelis Dei pro notis et cognatis visitari sit possibile.

We must withdraw to places more remote from everybody, where we will be able to devote ourselves only to prayer and to reading, and it may be possible for angels of God to visit us rather than acquaintances and kindred.¹⁴¹

And when Monenna took her nuns to live by Bishop Ibar and to study under him, she is said to have spent much time reading.¹⁴² Indeed her biographer is moved to remark that

Marie ad pedes Domini sedentis ... bonam partem eligentis exemplum imitatur.

She choosing the good part imitated the *exemplum* of Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord.¹⁴³

We should also remember that the women we hear of at various schools often received their training alongside their male counterparts, and one would expect to find little difference in their approach to the spiritual life. Indeed we know of one woman who not only trained a monk for the monastic life, but also prepared him for the priesthood, a

¹⁴⁰ Modwenna: NL II, 198-199 (line 32, 1).

¹⁴¹ Conch. 1:6.

¹⁴² Conch. 1:5.

¹⁴³ Conch. 1:5.

monk whose hagiographer depicts as celebrating the canonical hours.¹⁴⁴

Women also appear to have celebrated the hours, although this is not stated explicitly in the women's *Lives*. What we are told, is that they had a particular zeal for prayer and vigils. It is this statement which is itself most revealing, for we learn from the *Rule of Columcille* that 'vigil' is in fact a referent to the monastic hours.

Do coitchend figell ón tráth co alaile foréir neich nach aili.

Concerning the general vigil, that is to say, one canonical hour to another: let it be under the direction of someone, it doesn't matter who.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, there is reference to women observing the hours in the Tallaght document.

Bui araile caillech ocaild uatne. Duine corrath dé niconeirged cen *pater* do cantain. Niconsesed cen *pater* dochetul. Antan atraiged som iarum do gabail na gabail nogebéd *pater* statim iar neirgi 7 is iarum tindscanad a gabail. O roscithet iarum ind gabail hísín nósuided 7 nogebéd *pater* statim iarsuidiu 7 iarum toinscanad ingabail di cétul ina suidiu.

There was a certain nun from Caill Uaitne endowed with the grace of God. She would not rise without singing a *pater*. She would not sit down without chanting a *pater*. When she rose to recite the divisions [of the psalms] she used to recite a *pater* immediately after rising, and then she would begin the division. Then when that division was finished she would sit down and she would recite a *pater* immediately after sitting down, and then she would begin to recite the [next] division sitting down.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Moechomog: *VSH* II, 16.

¹⁴⁵ The translation is mine. See Kuno Meyer "Regula Choluimb Chille," *ZCP* 3 (1901) 15 (29).

¹⁴⁶ *MT* 32. The parentheses are those of the editor. See also (*ibid.* 30,31) which make clear that the reference is to the observing of the hours.

The *Life of Lasair* also makes reference to nones, one of the canonical hours, and to what is undoubtedly the singing of the canonical hours by Lasair.

Ronán 7 Lasair...La sodhain doghlúaisiodar rompa otha sin go hoirer Locha Moir Máothla ... 7 doronsat árus caithmhe 7 comhnuidhe ann 7 dothigdís ar Inis Móir Máothla gacha nóna 7 donídís a nurnaidhthe ar úaignios ann 7 donídís codladh goirid gaibhtheach ann iarsin. Lá dá raibhe Lasair ag solusghabháil a psalm 7 a psaltrach 7 ag molamh an Duilemhan go bfacaidh an macchléireach ag techt don duirrtheach...

Ronán and Lasair...With that they set forth thence to the shore of Loch Mór Máothla...and erected an house for their use and dwelling, and came daily to Inis Móir Máothla at none-tide, and there recited their prayers in solitude, and took a short and meagre repose. One day as Lasair was singing clearly her psalms and her psalter, and praising the Creator, she perceived a young cleric approaching the cell...¹⁴⁷

Elsewhere, Brigit speaks of the place in the church where it is usual for her to pray,¹⁴⁸ the *Lives* of Monenna make frequent mention of that virgin's dedication to vigils,¹⁴⁹ and Ita is said to have "punished herself with vigils and fasts" (*ieiuniis et vigiliis macerabat*)¹⁵⁰. Conchubranus comes closest to a description of the hours, for in his *Life* he has Monenna explain to her sisters that they have gathered together "to hear spiritual songs day and

¹⁴⁷ *Life of Lasair*, Gwynn 90-91. I would prefer to read 'church' and not 'cell' for *duirrtheach* in this instance.

¹⁴⁸ Brigit: *BL* 1603-1604.

¹⁴⁹ Conch. 1:3; Darerca: Heist. 18-19.

¹⁵⁰ Ita: Rawl. B. 505, 170^r col.a, line 29-30.

night” (*spiritalis cantus die ac nocte...audire*).¹⁵¹

Conclusion.

The first two centuries of Christianity in Ireland saw a variety of monastic models emerge. But the model which was to gain the most prominence, whether it was a foundation of men or of women, was that of the monastic *civitas* such as existed at Kildare and Cloonbroney, settings in which religious communities managed to seclude themselves without being entirely separated from the lay community at large. Women flocked to the religious life.¹⁵² and while many admittedly appear to have had little choice when it came to their initial entry into the more active life of the church, others we hear of willingly sought the life in response to the Gospel message. Often with little preparation for their vocation, many sought out some travelling ecclesiastic, from whose hands they could receive the veil. Such a ceremony appears at times to have been quite simple and often immediately afterwards, the new nun would set out to establish a neophyte community. Others seem to have dispensed with such preliminaries, and we hear of them simply setting out and founding their monastery or hermitage without hesitation.¹⁵³ These women are portrayed as courageous, forceful, competent and intelligent, standing steadfast in the

¹⁵¹ Conch. 1:6.

¹⁵² The large numbers of women listed in the martyrologies bear witness to a virtual sea of women who flocked to the monastic life in the early centuries of Christianity in Ireland.

¹⁵³ Fry remarks that “monastic profession in the West, as in Egypt of the fourth century, was an act of the monk, not a sacramental rite or act of the Church. It began to be conceived as such however in the East ... in the fifth century” (*RB* 1980, 455).

face of trial and constant danger. Within their monastic boundaries they not only took care of their own needs, but of those of the local community who sought their aid. Their spiritual life was not neglected and the major feast days, especially that of Easter were observed here as elsewhere. At least some of these monasteries observed a three-fold division of the day, in which part of the day was dedicated to prayer, part to work, and part to reading and/or writing. The canonical hours also appear to have been observed, and their exclusion would have been unusual to say the least within a monastic system which indeed revolved around their observation.

Chapter II

Women and Education in the Monastic Setting.

Formal education in Ireland was not something which began with Christianity. The Celtic peoples had a long tradition of learning,¹ and the training or education of the young is mentioned in a number of texts that remain. In the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, for example, we find mention of a school run by Cathbad, the druid, at which there were one hundred pupils.²

Elsewhere, in the 7th century text of *Tírechán*, we learn that two daughters of King Loeghaire were fostered at the court of the king of Connaught at Rath Cruachan, and that they were tutored there by two of the king's druids.³ It is clear that schools or tutors were made available for the education of the young, although any form of higher education seems to have been restricted.⁴ Scholars generally perceive an imbalance present within the educational system provided. Daughters do not always appear to have been taught the

¹ Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H.J. Edwards, ed. T.E. Page, (The Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, 6: 14, 14. Caesar speaks of schools for the training of druids and speaks of the druids instructing the young in religion and natural philosophy.

² Kinsella *The Tain* 84; O'Rahilly *Táin* 25, line 921-924.

³ *TP* vol.1, 99ff.

⁴ The law tracts set out carefully the obligations of fosterparents to educate those within their care. But education is practical, fitting each, both male and female, for their future role in society. (Kelly 1988, 87; *CIH* 1760.21-2). See also O'Curry's comments on the training of girls. (O'Curry *Manners and Customs* Vol. II, 355).

special skills of art or craft, nor was access to higher education always available to them,⁵ but when no sons were available, then a daughter might fill the gap in a society which supported a hereditary learned class.⁶ It is probably more fitting to say that education was designed to prepare a child for his or her position in society. Since most women would quickly become burdened with familial responsibilities, it was for this type of life that their training prepared them. Thus, although in the manuscript sources we find mention of women druids, female poets,⁷ and even female warriors, we must also admit that the same sources point to most women receiving more traditional training in the art of housekeeping, weaving, sewing, and other household chores. Few women appear to have taken their places among the learned of the land, and it would appear that only those women who fitted into a 'special class' could step across the invisible boundary and enter what seems to have been almost exclusively a male preserve. However, we should also note that when they did, their ability never seems to have been in doubt. There is no evidence of this type of discrimination in the early texts, and its absence is highly significant. Moreover, we should not forget that records in a patriarchal society are kept primarily by men for men, and in such a situation there always remains the possibility of

⁵ Kelly 1988, 91.

⁶ Kelly 1988, 91, 49, 77; *AI* 934 AD.; *AC* 905 AD; Common sense dictates that the education of women must have been at least sufficiently thorough that with possibly some supplementary work they could slip into the gap created by the absence of the male destined to follow the father's craft. We can't assume that all these positions women held were instantly filled by a female family member who had received no training before the time of need arrived.

⁷ Kelly 1988, 91.

bias in the texts. The following comments, albeit from a classical author, should warn us to be cautious. Pliny the Elder once remarked that while women worked at times outside the home, nobody wrote about them because the most praiseworthy woman went through life so quietly that she remained unnoticed when alive, and so modest, that she was not remembered when she was dead.⁸ Such comments teach us to approach even the silence of the texts with caution and scepticism.

Fosterage.

The education of the young went hand in hand with fosterage,⁹ a system by which the children of one family were brought up and educated in the household of another.¹⁰ The institution pre-dated Christianity and through it the upper classes of Irish society formed their many alliances along with an intricate network of life-long friendships and obligations.¹¹ Thus, through fosterage, the ruling classes not only took care of their children's education but formed intricate political alliances to which those fostered often

⁸ Joan Morris *The Lady was a Bishop*. xi. I have as yet been unable to locate this in Pliny.

⁹ Kelly 1988, 91.

¹⁰ In the *Life of Abban*, for example, we note that he was first sent to be fostered with a couple who could teach him the skills necessary for his future role in life as both king and warrior. However, the call of God not to be denied, his own wishes were finally fulfilled when at the age of twelve his parents sent him to his mother's brother, the Bishop Ibar, to be trained for the monastic life. (Abban: *VSH* I. 3).

¹¹ Nora Chadwick 1974, 115; Kelly 1988, 89-90.

remained committed even into adulthood.¹²

With the advent of Christianity, the Church embraced this established institution.¹³ By adopting the system, the Church, too, forged the bonds of alliance and kinship,¹⁴ creating a web of affection and obligation not only between itself and the secular and non-secular world around it,¹⁵ but possibly even more importantly, between those fostered within its walls. Fosterage was not the only institution adopted by the developing Church, but it was probably one of the most important, especially to the relationship between the Church and the outside world.¹⁶ Indeed fosterage was one of the main links with which Irish monasticism forged close ties with the secular realm.¹⁷ This system of alliance and obligation is evident in the Irish *Life of Maedoc* where we read the following:

Dalta ó comarba Maodhócc i ndaltus do righ Breifne. 7 an dalta sin do frestal do biadh, 7 d'edach, 7 d'ecna, i nonoir Maodhócc, goma heolach a leighen 7 a lain-ecna é; oír ní dlighend mac righ no taoisigh, brucchadh no biataigh, o gabhus forba no feran chuide, gan dalta o Maodhócc do beith aice; 7 fos dlicchid rí Ó mBriuin inghen comharba Maodhócc do

¹² Witness, for example, the tension between the foster brothers Cúchulainn and Fergus whom fate places as opponents in battle in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Consider also the affection between Ita and Brendan, the latter seeking the advice of his foster-mother well into his adult life.

¹³ The special nature of Christian fosterage and its importance is discussed by John Corbett in "The Foster Child: A neglected theme in early Christian life and thought," pp. 317-21 in *Traditions in Contact and Change*.

¹⁴ See Kelly 1988, 90, who mentions its importance.

¹⁵ Kelly 1988, 89-90; Maedoc: *BNE* 18 (43).

¹⁶ Thus we note without surprise that Carthach son of the king of Cashel was fostered by the abbot Ciarán who also became his soulfriend (Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 42).

¹⁷ This is not surprising, seeing that it was within the monastic setting that the *Lives* were compiled.

tabairt d'fíor, 7 crodh 7 tionnsgra do tabairt lé. Failte do chur re comarba Máedog da mhionca da ffaicfi é; 7 tuarustal amhail gach mbruccaidh o ríoghraidh Breifne do cumdach ecclaisi 7 tempuill Maedhóig i ngach áit i mbia.

A foster-child from the coarb of Maedoc to be fostered by the king of Breifne, and to be supplied with food, and clothing, and learning in honour of Maedoc, till he be proficient in study and good learning; for no son of king or chief, of landowner or hospitaller, from the time that he enters on his landed inheritance, ought to be without a foster-child from Maedoc. Moreover, the king of Uí Briuin is bound to give in marriage the daughter of the coarb of Maedoc, and to provide her with stock and dowry. He must welcome the coarb of Maedoc whenever he sees him, and the kings of Breifne (*sic*) must contribute like every landowner to the upkeep of Maedoc's church or temple in every place where one exists.¹⁸

In early Christian Ireland the spiritual realm to some extent reflected the secular. Both occupying the same space, though not necessarily co-terminous,¹⁹ the Church took its political structure from the world around it, the world with which it had to come to terms and in which it had to survive and hoped to prosper. The picture of the early Church in Ireland which dominates the texts is that of a mainly monastic Church, one in which monasteries and monastic leaders, with few exceptions, became very much a part

¹⁸ Maedoc: *BNE* 18 (43).

¹⁹ See McCone 1991, 145. The far-flung *paruchia* of Columcille (d. 521), a scion of the Uí Neill, which lay within the territory under the overlordship of the Uí Neill clans, presents an excellent example of the overlap of and interplay between the spiritual and profane realms within a given territory. For the extent of Uí Neill control see Donncha O'Corráin *Ireland Before the Normans*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972, 14-23.

of the fabric of society.²⁰ This is as true of women's foundations and of those who ran them as it is of the foundations of men. While Irish monasticism took its impetus from the Egyptian desert,²¹ an ideal commemorated in a number of place names associated with early Irish founders, for example Dysert O Dea in Co. Clare and Disert Oenghusa in Co. Limerick, and Irish monks led varying forms of the ascetic life and the life of withdrawal from the world such as we find at Skellig Michael in Co. Kerry, in actuality many of these early monastic foundations combining the contemplative with the active, became part of the larger world serving the spiritual and often the physical needs of those around them. However, the founders of such establishments never lost sight of the ascetic ideal, and managed to form their own spiritual oasis in the midst of what must have been at times the rigorous demands of the secular world of which they were very much a part. A number of monastic foundations including those of the virgin Ita at Killeedy (d. 570), and of Abbot Comgall at Bangor (f.c. 558), became celebrated as centres of education, institutions responsible for the intellectual as well as the spiritual life of their charges.²² Their leaders advised and admonished kings, and became very much involved in the legal as well as the political decisions of their time. Foundations such as these should not be thought of as large cloistered dwellings such as those so familiar to us from the

²⁰ Even such apparently remote monasteries as Church Island, Valencia, gave spiritual care to the coastal community and some island communities such as that of St. Enda on Beggery Is. were famous schools, to which not only men, but also women, flocked.

²¹ De Paor 1978, 49-50.

²² R. Flower *The Irish Tradition*, Oxford: 1947, 1-23

continent,²³ or even as replicas of the establishments of the early monks in the Egyptian desert.²⁴ While resembling the latter, they show a distinct Irish character, being best thought of, as Kathleen Hughes suggested, as ‘cities with a religious purpose’,²⁵ and frequently referred to in the texts as *civitates*. These monastic cities (or villages) housed those from the very ascetic to the laity, the latter consisting of the married couples and their families who worked the monastic lands, the *manaig* (L. *monachus*) or lay monks of the texts.²⁶

The role of secular leader in this society was constantly fraught with instability and danger and such leaders attempted to survive through a combined system of hostage

²³ John Blair & Richard Sharpe, eds. *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, Leicester: University Press, 1992, 101. The entry of the continental orders into Ireland, with its accompanying change in architectural styles, really began with the work of St. Malachy and his introduction of the Cistercians into Ireland in the twelfth century. Moreover, Meyer in his introduction to the *Life of Malachy* remarks: “He brought all Ireland under the Roman ecclesiastical discipline, bringing to an end the older Celtic liturgies.” (Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Life and Death of Saint Malachy the Irishman* (trans. Robert T. Meyer), Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1978. See also Robert Stalley *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 1-2.

²⁴ Some evidence for this lies in the Irish use of *cella*, which may reflect such influence. Its meaning is often ambiguous, and in the *Lives* it is used variously to mean ‘cell’ (ie. an individual dwelling of a monk within a monastic enclosure), a monastery, and even at times a church. The most convincing evidence, however, comes from the names of some of the early sites still known to us today, for the term *dyser* is at times preserved in the placenames associated with these foundations.

²⁵ Hughes 1977, 6-7.

²⁶ Hughes 1972, 93-94; Hughes 1977 6-7, 48; But also see De Paor 1978, 52-64.

taking, marriage, fosterage and clientship.²⁷ Part of this system was adopted by the church, and considering the short life spans of many secular rulers once in power,²⁸ the ecclesiastical system was, or at least appears to have been, surprisingly stable. The most popular alliances within the monastic setting were those of fosterage and clientship. Through fosterage the church too had its offspring, and familial metaphors permeated the monastic psyche to such an extent that the word used to refer to the monastic household or monastic community (O.I. *muinter*)²⁹ survived into modern Irish as a word for 'family'. Monastic parents seem to have been well-loved,³⁰ as names such as Monenna (my Inna), Moita (my Ita), and Mocoemoc (my little Coemgen), containing the prefix *mo* 'my' suggest, being used in very much the same manner that present-day north country English use the prefix 'our' to indicate a close loving relationship, usually though not exclusively with family members. That the love was returned is just as clear from the use of the diminutive 'my

²⁷ For an informative summary of both fosterage and clientship as it functioned in the early centuries in Ireland, see Gearóid Mac Niocaill *Ireland Before the Vikings*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1972, pp.59-66.

²⁸ A short glance at the *Annals* will convince even the casual reader that the position of ruler was not on the whole the healthiest of occupations.

²⁹ The word is of disputed derivation. Some authors, and here we include Thurneysen, are convinced that it derives from the Latin *monasterium*. De Jubainville claims that it comes from the Latin *manu-tera* (that which is under the hand, thus under authority), but Vendryes considers it to be of Irish derivation, coming from the native *muin* 'protection'. (*Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language* M. col.191).

³⁰ This motif of familial love has been discussed by Lisa Bitel *Isle of the Saints*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 90-91.

little sons' found in a number of the *Lives*.³¹

Compilers have given the men of this developing religious society the larger role by far in any discussion of or reference to the system of fosterage, but women also played their part. In one *Life of Ciarán*, abbot of Saighir, we are told that he was fostered by the holy widow Cochae (Cuinche).³² Elsewhere his fostermother Cochae is identified as a nun and ascetic who seems to have had a monastery at Drumbangher.³³ The virgin Monenna had foster-children under her care, among them the daughter of a local king who finally betrayed her fostermother and forced Monenna and her nuns to move. Such unhappy relations between those fostered and their fosterparents would appear to have been rare, and we hear much more of the attachment between them, such as that of Ciarán of Saighir who frequently visited his fostermother Cochae in her island hermitage.³⁴ Brigit was fostered by a virgin among the Uí Fháilgi³⁵ and she in turn fostered the future abbess Derlugdacha.³⁶ However the most important of these was the famous ascetic, the virgin Ita, who was noted for her fostercare. And although little specific information has come down to us, two important figures in the growing Church, Brendan of the famous voyages,

³¹ As for example in the *Life of Mochoemog* (Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 22) where we read: "ait pater sanctus: 'O filioli mei'" (the holy father said: 'O my little sons').

³² Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 35; Index of Persons: *BNE* vol.2, 385.

³³ Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 45.

³⁴ Ciarán of Saighir I: *BNE* I, 35-36. Cochae (Cuinche) was also abbess of Rossmanagher (Index of Persons: *BNE* II, 387).

³⁵ *B. Br.* 7.

³⁶ Derlugdacha: *AS* Feb.1, 2.

and Mochoemog a nephew of Ita and founder of Leath-mór,³⁷ were numbered among her foster-children. While some children were given over into the care of one fosterparent, others were bound by the ties of fosterage to a number of people, often of some note.³⁸ The latter seems to have been reasonably common, and the same concept lies behind the poet's question in the following:

Quis est Deus
et ubi est Deus
et cuius est Deus
et ubi habitaculum eius?

Si habet filios et filias.
aurum et argentum. Deus vester?

Si vivus semper.
si pulcher,
si filium eius
nutrierunt multi?

Who is God
and where is God,
of whom is God,
and where is His dwelling?

Has He sons and daughters,
gold and silver, this God of yours?

Is He ever-living,
is He beautiful,
was His son

³⁷ Liath-mor (Leamakevoge; Leighmore) in Co. Tipperary, was founded by Mochoemog latinized to Pulcherius by Colgan. He became a monk at Bangor, Co. Down under Comgall, and from there founded a monastery at Arderin. He finally founded Liath-mor. (Ryan 1931, 139; Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 40).

³⁸ Kelly 1988, 90.

fostered by many?³⁹

This custom of multiple fostering is witnessed in the *Lives*. For example the voyager Brendan of Clonfert was fosterling to a wealthy hosteller named Airde mac Fidach who lived some distance from the home of Brendan's father,⁴⁰ to Bishop Erc⁴¹ who was a noted teacher, to the virgin Ita, both fostermother⁴² and *anmcharae*,⁴³ and even, the compiler adds, the angels of heaven who coming from heaven to foster him, appeared as virgins in the company of St. Ita.⁴⁴ Elsewhere we find reference to Bruinech, a daughter of the king of Munster,⁴⁵ and a virgin in the monastery of Liadain.⁴⁶ The king's daughter is further identified as a fosterling of both Liadain, holy widow and abbess, and of

³⁹ James Carney *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, Dublin, 1967, pp. 2-3. See also Ludwig Bieler, ed. *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin, 1979, 142.20.

⁴⁰ Brendan: *BL* 3341-3353; Brendan: *BNE* 4-5.

⁴¹ Brendan: *BL* 3354-3366; Brendan: *BNE* 11.

⁴² Brendan: *BNE* 9.

⁴³ The term *anmcharae* refers to the person who acts as soulmate or spiritual guide and confessor to others. The *anmcharae* in the early church was a seer, either male or female, who was known for their asceticism and sanctity. Thus Brendan is portrayed on a number of occasions as seeking help and advice from Ita (Brendan: *BNE* 19, 92 and particularly 165), and on one occasion Ita assigns Brendan penance for a fault he has committed (Brendan: *BNE* 165). The spiritual guidance offered by the *anmcharae* was similar to that offered by the holy persons in the Egyptian and Syrian desert communities of the developing Church of the first centuries of Christianity. For an excellent description of the role played by these early spiritual guides see Irénée Hausherr *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Kalamazoo, 1990 particularly pp. vii-xxvii. See also *RB* 1980, 347-8, in which Fry shows the development of the idea of the abbot being responsible, even to Judgment Day, for the souls of his disciples.

⁴⁴ Brendan: *BNE* 10.

⁴⁵ ie. Bruinech, a nun of Killyon (Ciarán of Saighir I: *BNE* 11-15).

⁴⁶ Ciarán of Saighir I: *BNE* 11.

Liadain's son Ciarán, abbot of Saighir. Many of these fosterparents took an active role in the rearing of their charges. We see this for example in the *Life of Brendan of Clonfert* which tells us that when Brendan was five years old, Ita sent him to be educated by Bishop Erc.⁴⁷

The relationship between Ita and Brendan is portrayed as close and affectionate, for the hagiographer notes that 'the nun loved him exceedingly' (*Tucc an chaillech gradh dermair dó*).⁴⁸ And when Brendan was sent to Erc for his education, Ita is said to have missed the child, for, notes the hagiographer, "the time seemed long to Ita without him" (*7 ba fada le hItae a beith ina feccmais*).⁴⁹ Such a statement claims not only a certain fondness for the child on the part of Ita, but also carries the implication that Brendan at some point returned to his fostermother. Thus Ita, too, was left free to forge the bonds of love and politics which ensured some sort of stability in what must at times have been a fluid society. Ita's feeling for Brendan was not rare.⁵⁰ We often see that the ties of fosterage were ones of love and affection, and although there must have been many exceptions, this relationship between fosterer and fostered seems largely to have been a

⁴⁷ Brendan: *BNE* 5 (11).

⁴⁸ Brendan: *BNE* 3 (9).

⁴⁹ Brendan: *BNE* 5 (11).

⁵⁰ Foster-parents on the whole would appear to have been kind to their charges and seem to have borne in mind that these same charges would one day also become significant adults within their community. We see it for instance in the *Life of Abbanus* where the hagiographer notes the following: "Abbanus was reared very carefully by his fosterers, they thinking that he would be king after his father" (*Diligentissime sanctus puer Abbanus a nutritoribus suis nutritus est, putantes eum regem esse post patrem suum*). (Abbanus: *VSH* I, 3).

positive one. The fosterparent's obligations towards a fosterchild were taken very seriously, and the concept is well illustrated in the following excerpt from the *Life of Brigit*, the celebrated virgin who founded and was abbess of the double monastery at Kildare:

FEACHT ann dodhechaid Brigit do thigh araile oighi...O dhochuadur *immorro* Brigit cona hoghuibh do chaithium a proinne roghab Brigit for fegadh na méisi cofada. Rofhiafraig an Brigit aile: 'Cid rathaigi-sea?' Doraidh Brigit: 'Atciu Deman for in meis.'...INdis duinn iarum,' ar Brigit, 'cid dia tangais cugaind 'nar caillechaib?' 'Araile og craibdech fil sund,' ar Deaman, 'is 'na coimiteacht atussa ag furail leisce 7 maindeachtnaige uirre.'...Adubairt Brigit: 'Cidh ara n-imghaibhe in dalta icá tai leasugud fria re cian?' Dorighne inn ogh airighi iarsin. 7 rohicadh on Demon.

Once upon a time Brigit went to the house of another virgin...Now when Brigit with her virgins went to eat their dinner, she began to look for a long while at the table. The other Brigit asked, 'What perceivest thou?' Said Brigit, 'I see the Devil on the table.'...Tell us then,' saith Brigit: 'why hast thou come to us among our nuns?' 'There is a certain pious virgin here,' saith the Devil, 'and in her companionship am I, enjoining upon her sloth and negligence.'...Said Brigit: 'Why dost thou shun the fosterling whom thou hast been tending for so long a time?' The virgin then made repentance and was healed of the demon.⁵¹

Although admittedly some monastic foundations may not have had their fosterlings, the *Lives* of the saints abound in references to them, and while we find little boys and young men mentioned as foster-children at women's monastic foundations such as that of Ita at Killeedy where both Brendan and Mochoemog were fostered, we also find mention of girls or young women as fosterlings of men, such as Brig the fosterchild of Bishop Erc.

⁵¹ Brigit: *BL* 1402-1423.

Since the ties and obligations between fosterparent and fosterling, and even between foster-siblings, were so firmly established by custom and by law, and the institution was obviously such an important one in early Irish society, the really surprising element here is that any discussion of God as fosterer appears to be absent.⁵² Nevertheless, we do find reference to Christ as fosterling to various saints.⁵³

Education within the ecclesiastical setting.

Before the advent of Christianity, the only known form of writing in use in Ireland was that of Ogham. This alphabet was extremely clumsy and its use limited. Learning was instead oral, and aimed at developing prodigious memories along with other skills. As Christianity spread and established its own schools this ideal of a well-developed memory was retained.⁵⁴ In the *Life of Abban* we read:

Briathra Dé ro canadh som gibe ní no canta fris; 7 ro an in
scribtúir aicce gan sáethar gan meabhruccadh.

Whatever was recited to him of the words of God he would
recite, and he remembered the Scripture without any trouble
or committing to memory.⁵⁵

⁵² On the other hand, one could probably say that the saints performed this function as agents of God. Socio-political relationships between male, monkess, and God, appear to have taken place within the institution of clientship.

⁵³ This aspect of Celtic spirituality will be discussed in the following at some length.

⁵⁴ Such memory skills are evident for example within the *Lives*. The Irish loved the Book of Psalms, and quote them often. These quotes however consist predominantly of first-lines, pointing to a text which has been committed to memory, and which can be recalled to mind through a mnemonic device, here the first line of the psalm.

⁵⁵ Abban: *BNE* 1 (3).

The pedagogical method would then appear to be similar to that found in a Roman school in which we find a heavy emphasis upon memory training, beginning with the early years.⁵⁶ In the *Life of Brendan* we find that he had already developed a fine memory at an early age. One day, so the story goes, having upset the bishop Erc, the ten-year-old Brendan was sent to do penance, and immediately he began to recite "his psalms and his hymns of praise to the Lord" (*a shalma 7 a immna molta don Coimdhid innti*).⁵⁷ The virgin Monenna was also praised for her excellent memory. We learn that upon taking the veil, Monenna was put into the care of a certain priest:

curam custodiendi eam psalmosque docendi commisit. Sub huius magisterio ipsa aliquanto tempore degens, ingenii subtilitate tradita facile percipiens, memorie firmitate percepta tenaciter retinens, brevi spacio magnum accepit incrementum.

that he might guide her and teach her the psalms. She spent some time under his tutelage, learning easily what was taught by the subtlety of her nature, retaining those things learned firmly by the strength of her memory, she developed greatly in a brief space of time.⁵⁸

With the growth of the monastic movement these centres of learning multiplied.⁵⁹ Their

⁵⁶ Stanley F. Bonner *Education in Ancient Rome*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, 39-40.

⁵⁷ Brendan: *BL* 3416-3417. The importance of these texts to the spiritual life and education of the early monk, indeed both being aspects of the religious life which were one and the same, is evident from an early date (*RB* 1980, 467).

⁵⁸ Darerca: Heist 2.

⁵⁹ This emphasis placed upon education is reflected in *The Rule of Ciarán*, written in the late seventh or early eighth century. It advises that all knowledge which is to be learned in the scriptures is worthwhile. Moreover, it claims that it is even more worthwhile to pass one's knowledge onto others. See J. Strachan, ed. "Two Monastic Rules. Riaguil Chiarain." *Ériu* 2 (1905)

fame spread to such an extent that Aldhelm of Sherbourne, living in the seventh century, was forced in his chagrin to complain of the veritable troops of students flocking from England to Ireland, commenting at the same time that an equally good education was available to them in England. Thus, by implication, Aldhelm tells us that by the seventh century a high standard of education was available within the Irish monastic school setting. The Venerable Bede writing in Britain in the eighth century was also moved to comment on the schools of the Irish.

Erant ibidem eo tempore multi nobilium simul et mediocrium de gente Anglorum, qui tempore Finani et Colmani episcoporum, relictâ insula patria, vel divinae lectionis, vel continentioris vitae gratia illo secesserant. Et quidam quidem mox se monasticae conversationi fideliter mancipaverunt. alii magis circumeundo per cellas magistrorum, lectioni operam dare gaudebant: quos omnes Scotti libentissime suscipientes victum eis quotidianum sine pretio, libros quoque ad legendum, et magisterium gratuitum praebere curabant.

There were in that same place at that time many nobles as well as common sort of English race, who in the time of the bishops Finan and Colman had left their native island and departed aside thither either to read sacred writings or to live more strictly. And certain of them forthwith bound themselves faithfully to the monastical life, while others wandering rather

227-8. Although tradition has claimed that St. Patrick brought Latin learning to Ireland, it seems more likely that the Gaulish *litterati*, fleeing before the barbarian invasions into their territory at the beginning of the fifth century, brought the knowledge of Latin with them. See particularly Kuno Meyer *Learning in Ireland in the Fifth Century and the Transmission of Letters*, Dublin: Hodges & Figgis & Co. Ltd., 1913, p. 11. However, other influences may also have come to bear not only upon the actual transmission of learning, but also upon methods of instruction, including those of early missionaries and traders. We should however note that the introduction of Latin and Roman letters, do not necessarily mean that the Irish at this time had a wide knowledge of classical literature. For a discussion of this latter see Michael Herren "On the Earliest Irish Acquaintance with Isidore of Seville" in *Visigothic Spain*.

about the cells of such as taught gladly gave good heed to reading: all of whom the Scots entertained cheerfully and were forward to give them daily sustenance free, and also books for reading and teaching without payment.⁶⁰

Large numbers of students flocked to these schools, not only from Ireland and from Britain, but also from other parts of Europe.⁶¹ These schools seem to have begun to spring up with the first outgrowth of Christianity in Ireland, and we hear of schools being established as early as the fifth century. St. Abbanus, whose orbit encompassed such notable saints as Patrick and Monenna, is said to have instructed a group of one hundred and forty clerics at his monastic foundation.⁶² Around the same time, St. Mochae (d. 497),⁶³ having established Nendrum, began the foundations of what was later to become a large monastic school.⁶⁴ By the sixth century Ireland must have been literally studded with schools, and Findian had founded his monastic school at Clonard, a school which is said to have accommodated as many as 3,000 students,⁶⁵ and Ita had begun a school at her monastery of Killeedy.⁶⁶ Schools grew up elsewhere, such as that of Comgall at Bangor,⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Bede III, 27. The translation used here is that of King. King also remarks that "the Irish monasteries had regular officers for teaching. The subjects were grammar, geometry, physics and the interpretation of Scripture." (*ibid.* 485 n.4).

⁶¹ De Paor 1978, 65.

⁶² Abban: *BNE* 40.

⁶³ *AU* 497.

⁶⁴ Notes: *BL* 294; Mould 1976, 19.

⁶⁵ Mould 1953, 71.

⁶⁶ Ryan 1931, 140.

a school at which we find a number of prominent Irish saints at one time or another.⁶⁸ Famous schools also became established at Clonmelsh, Drumbane, Clonmacnois, and at many other monastic centres.⁶⁹ All of these, except for Ita's school at Killeedy, would appear to have been run by men.

While we have quite a deal of information on the education of men, either gleaned from the *Lives* and other sources, or from the writings themselves of particular male authors such as Adomnán, Columbanus and Eriugena, we know very little about the education of women. No known *Life* written by a woman remains, and nothing remains of the literary efforts of those women who chose a religious vocation except for a couple of poems which have been attributed to them. Ita and Brigit have both been claimed by tradition as authors of poems which have survived. Certain authorship after such an expanse of time is at best tenuous, and in the case of the poem *Jesukin* accredited to Ita, modern scholars have tended to prefer to give it a later date.⁷⁰ However, O'Dwyer gives the credit to St. Ita for its authorship, declaring that "this is one of the few female compositions we can be reasonably sure about."⁷¹ Despite the differences of opinion, what is important, is that those in the past have found no fault with such claims, and that in

⁶⁷ Mould 1953, 69.

⁶⁸ For example, Mochua of Balla was a pupil at Bangor. (Mochua: *BL* 4640-4648).

⁶⁹ Mould 1953, 67-81.

⁷⁰ O'Dwyer 1981, 188-189.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

fact they saw the training of these women in the craft of the poet, one which involved a long, rigorous, and technical training, as a real possibility. Even less is known about the role women played in the scribal schools of the day. Certainly no female scribes are known to us, nor are we told that any of their monasteries nurtured a school of scribes.⁷²

Nevertheless there is much evidence implicit in the *Lives* that supports the premise that monastic women at least on occasion, received an education comparable to that of monastic men. For example, women played a role at assemblies, meetings at which legal decisions involving both the laity and ecclesiastics were made. Ireland had a long tradition behind such assemblies, which had previously involved a well-educated learned class in their decision-making process. As Christianity took hold, the church hierarchy began to hold its own assemblies. Brigit and Mel attended one such assembly at Tailtiu, where those assembled had to decide upon a paternity case involving a cleric.⁷³ It is Brigit to whom the credit is given for solving the case, albeit through means of a miracle. We are also informed that on another occasion Brigit went to assembly at the invitation of an elderly nun who lived near her.⁷⁴

The *Lives* consistently portray these monastic women as intelligent, politically active, and able to influence even powerful men when serious decisions had to be made. Such a sphere of influence implies that some of these women received considerable education.

⁷² We do know, however, that an elaborately decorated Gospel Book existed at Kildare at the time of Giraldus Cambrensis (J.J. O'Meara *Topographia Hiberniae* 71-2).

⁷³ *B. Br.* 36.

⁷⁴ Notes, Brigit: *BL* 320.

a claim substantiated in at least some of the hagiographical writings.⁷⁵ Certainly the company of those we hear of was sought by their well-educated male counterparts. Both Ita and the famous Brigit of Kildare are said to have entertained frequently. Bishops, clerics, nuns, and even royalty, along with their companions who travelled with them, all seem to have visited on occasion. In the *Life of Ita* we read of one such event:

ALIO tempore sanctus Luchtichernus et sanctus Lasreanus, abbates, dixerunt ad inuicem: 'Eamus visitare famulam Dei, sanctam Ytam.' Tunc quidam adolescens...dixit eis: 'Quid est uobis, sapientibus et magnis uiris, ire ad anum illam uetustam?'

One day the abbots St. Luchtichern and St. Lasrean said to themselves: 'Let us go visit the servant of God, St. Ita.' Then a certain young mansaid to them: 'Why do you, such learned and important men, go to that ancient little old lady?''⁷⁶

The question is meant to grasp the hearers' attention, and to force them to make the same query. It implies first of all that the men chose to make this call for their own pleasure. The visit appears to have been motivated by friendship, and it would seem that Ita had been friends with at least one of these men for some time. Indeed the *Life* informs us that St. Luchtichern was such a frequent visitor at the monastery of Ita, that the nuns recognized him immediately. While the young man's remark carries the implication that elderly women are of little consequence, the story that carries it conveys the idea that the young are also lacking in good judgment. Ita's remark upon his arrival

⁷⁵ Darerca: Heist 2, 25; Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 8. See also Brigit: *BL* 1566-1569.

⁷⁶ Ita: *VSH* II, 31.

is also enlightening:

‘Cur tu uenisti ad anum uetustam, cum dixisti, quid prodesset sanctis uenire ad me?’ Tunc ille egit penitentiam, rogantes sancti pro eo.

‘Why did you come to an ancient little old lady, when you said, what could it profit saints to come to me?’ Then he did penance, the holy men interceding on his behalf.⁷⁷

For it portrays Ita as the one with authority, the one who dictates the penance the young man must do, and the only role given the men is that of interceder. One is left with the whole question of what politics are in actuality operative here, for the men appear to have some tie to Ita inasmuch as, while she is able to prescribe penance in respect to the younger man, the older men are left as passive bystanders able only to ask for her leniency. Thus despite the young man’s comment, Ita is portrayed as a woman of some power, whose company and whose help and advice were to be sought by others. Visitors welcomed at her table probably came for a variety of reasons, but there can be no doubt that some of these came because of Ita’s reputation for learning and sanctity. One such visit, for example, seems to have revolved around a discussion of the theological implications of Biblical literature.

QUADAM die quedam uirgo sancta religiosa accessit ad sanctam Ytam, et loquebatur cum ea in diuinis preceptis.

On another day a certain holy and devout virgin came to St. Ita, and was speaking with her on the divine commandments.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ita: *VSH* II, 31.

⁷⁸ Ita: *VSH* II, 11.

Such visits between holy virgins within the monastic setting appear to have been a frequent occurrence. But men also came. Brigit is said to have had to prepare for frequent visitors, both rich and poor, both female and male. One such occasion speaks of

secht n-epscoip tancatar co Brigit a Huib Briuin Chualand, o
Thelaig na n-Epscop sainrud, co Cill dara.

seven bishops who came to Brigit out of Húi Briuin Chualann
from Telach na n-Epscop in especial, to Kildare.⁷⁹

The men who came to visit and dine at these tables also participated in discussions centering upon religious life. Brendan went to Kildare to commune with Brigit, at times for advice,⁸⁰ at others to converse on a different level with that saint.⁸¹

Another female saint, the virgin Samthann, was known for her clever and wise sayings, and number of these have been preserved.⁸² Many are said to have come to seek her help and advice on various matters or simply to visit. A story is told of one such visit.

*Alio quoque tempore abbatem Daminensis monasterii cum
centum quadraginta aliis vno farine modio in duo diuiso in
cibo et potu per septimanam refecit.*

At another time the abbot of the monastery of Daminensis
along with one hundred and forty others, was refreshed in food
and in drink for one week by one measure of meal divided in
two.⁸³

⁷⁹ Notes to lines 1680 to 1688, Brigit: *BL* 332. Text from p. 40 of the Franciscan *Liber Hymnorum*.

⁸⁰ Brendan I. *VSH* I, 86.

⁸¹ *B. Br.* 6.

⁸² See, for example, Samthann: *VSH* II, 24.

⁸³ Samthann: *VSH* II, 10. But see also 3, 11, 13, 20, 24.

But women were not only sought for their conversation. We have already seen that the virgin Ita founded a monastic school which must have been of some note, since it was for this above all else that she was remembered by future generations. But notwithstanding her apparent importance, we know little of the preparation she received for such a role, or that of others like her. And despite the obvious learning and intelligence of many of these women, we know little of the mechanics of the education they received. However, various fragments of information exist which when viewed together may help us understand the extent of their education. For example, folk tradition has preserved a story which claims that Ethne and Fedelm, the daughters of Laoghaire, High King of Ireland, were instructed by Patrick upon taking the veil.⁸⁴ Others, also, are said to have been handed Grellan in Druim Draighnighe, and Caelchú and Mogenna, and Modimócc, and Santan, over to priests for instruction.⁸⁵ But to say that women received only catechetical instruction does not do justice to the evidence, however meagre it may be. Women also appear to have attended various monastic schools, schools which, at least in the eyes of some hagiographers, accepted both male and female students, and allowed male and female students to study together. We have already noted the virgin Brig's presence as a student at the monastery of Bishop Erc where she studied along with her brother. Another school was that run by Bairre, who had a school at Addrigoole on Loch Irce⁸⁶ at which

⁸⁴ Lady Gregory *The Voyages*, p. 52.

⁸⁵ Darerca: Heist 2.

⁸⁶ i.e., Loch Eirce (Index of Places: *BNE* II, 375).

we find a number of female saints.

Ocus is í so scol ro bóí occ Bairri isin loch .i. Eolang a oitte, 7 Colmán Dhaire Dúncon, 7 Baichine, 7 Nesan, 7 Garban mac Findbairr, 7 Talmach, 7 Finnichad Dhomhnaigh Moir, 7 Fachtna Ria, 7 Fachtna Ruis Ailithir, Luicer 7 Caman 7 Loichine Achaidh Airaird, Cairine 7 Finntan 7 Eothuile fuilet hi Rus Caerach, Treallan fuil i nDruim Draighnighe, 7 Caolchú 7 Moghenra, 7 Modíomócc, 7 Santan, 7 Luiger mac Coluim...Ite *divo* ro bhattar aicce i nEttargabhail .i. derbhshiúr Bhairri, 7 Crothru inghen Conaill, 7 tri hinghena Meic Cártainn, 7 Cóch caillech Ruis Benvicuir, 7 Moshillan Rátha Moiri, 7 Scothnat Cluana Bicc, 7 Lasar Achaidh Durbcon, 7 téora inghena Luigdech, Dune, 7 hEr, 7 Brigit Airnaidhi. Ro edhbairset in lucht sa uije a cealla do Dhía 7 do Bhairri i mbith-dilsí.

And this was the school which Bairre had on the lough (Loch Irce). Eolang his tutor, Colman of Daire Duncon, and Baichine and Nesan, and Garban son of Findbarr, and Talmach, and Finnchad of Donaghmore, and Fachtna of Ria, and Fachtna of Ros Ailithir, Luicer and Caman and Loichine of Achad Airaird, Cairine and Finntan and Eothuile who are in Ros Caerach, and Luiger son of Colum. ...These also were with him in Edergole: Bairre's own sister, and Crothru daughter of Conall, and three daughters of Mac Carthainn, and Coch a nun of Ross Banagher, and Moshillan of Rathmore, and Scothnat of Cluain Bec, and Lasar of Achad Durbcon, and three daughters of Lugaid, Dune, and Er, and Brigit of Airnaide. All these offered their churches to God and to Bairre in perpetuity.⁸⁷

Elsewhere we find a daughter of the king of Tara at Clonard, studying with Findian in

⁸⁷ Bairre: *BNE* 10 (21-22). In a footnote Plummer adds the following female saints from a passage in a separate manuscript, "...and Duineda of Achad Duin, and Echtach, and Brigit of Tipra nandhe..." (...7 *Duineadha Eachaidh Duin, 7 Eachtach 7 Brighid Tiobraide nandhe...*) (Bairre: *BNE* n. 27, (15)). See also Gwynn and Hadcock 1988, 312; Ryan 1931, 143. We observe here an excellent example of the ties formed through fosterage which lasted well beyond childhood.

preparation for the monastic life. Her story has been encapsulated succinctly in the following:

She was brought to St. Finnian to study Holy Writ under his direction. Ciarán was at the time among Finnian's pupils and the master thought it no harm for the young monk and the handmaiden of Christ to read the Scriptures together till such time as a cell of virgins should be built for her. She was wont to take her meals and to sleep with a certain holy widow...⁸⁸

Finally, we note that males, also, seem at times to have been reared and educated with females, for we find not only Brendan present at the monastery of the virgin Ita, at least in early childhood, but we also find Mochoemog who must have been educated alongside of, if not with, the girls St. Ita is known to have fostered.⁸⁹ The future bishop's *Life* relates that when his parents found no other suitable place for his education, they brought him to St. Ita who reared and educated him.

Et per viginti annos beatissima abbatissa Yta in moribus honestis scientiaque literarum nutriuit eum Deo, nominans ipsum nomine quo supradiximus, id est Mocoemhog; ut sacerdos fieret, et locum Deo edificaret.

And for twenty years the blessed abbess Ita fostered him for God⁹⁰ in virtuous behaviour and knowledge of letters calling him by that name we mentioned above, that is Mocoemhog;

⁸⁸ Gougaud 1932, 249; Ciarán: *VSH* I, 16.

⁸⁹ For example, there is mention of a foster-child of Ita, a favourite, whom Maedoc of Ferns is said to have raised from the dead. (Maedoc II: *BNE* 164-165).

⁹⁰ There is an implication here which needs further exploration, for the comment forces us to ask whether the Irish considered God to be one of the foster-parents of these future ecclesiastics. If so the bonds binding them to the monastic life would have been even firmer than already supposed and the implications far-reaching.

so that he became a priest, and built a place for God.⁹¹

Despite obvious moves on the part of women to seek an education, the only place we find any real indication of a general interest in the education of women is in the *Life of Monenna*. Here we find a much fuller picture of the educational opportunities which might be open to a young woman under the care of an imaginative abbess. But apart from the information provided in this one text, the *Lives* of the women saints are reticent in respect to women's education, and even more so in respect to women as educators. However, a number of men's *Lives* have survived, and these speak frequently of schools and schooling. Although, as one would expect, they have much more to say about men and what men were doing, they give us at least some idea of what was taught in the monastic schools. Periodic mention is also made of women at these schools and from such incidental comments found in these *Lives* we can attempt to reconstruct some picture of women's education during the early centuries of Christianity in Ireland.

The school curriculum.

The first task for the beginning student was to learn the alphabet. Some evidence of this has been brought to light by the archaeologist's spade. For example excavations at Nendrum in the 1920's uncovered the remains of a schoolhouse with its stone tablets and slate marked with letters, and iron styles with which students would have formed their letters on wax tablets, the existence of which has been uncovered elsewhere. The *Lives*

⁹¹ Mochoemog: *VSH* II. 8.

abound with stories of children struggling through their initial difficulties. In the *Life of Columcille* we learn that he had some difficulty with his letters, and his teacher in desperation consulted a wise woman who advised that the letters be marked on cakes and given him to eat.

O tainic tra aimser leiginn dó, luid in clérech co araili faid bui isin tir da fiarfaigi dhe cuin bud choir tinnscetal don mhac. O rofhegh in faidh in nemh is *ed* roraidh: ‘Scribh innosa dho aibghitir.’ Roscribad in aibghiter i mbairgin 7 [is amlaid doromailt Colum cille in bairgen .i. a leth fri huisce anair 7] a leth fria huisci aniar.⁹²

Now when the time for reading came to him, the cleric went to a certain prophet who abode in the land, to ask him when the boy ought to begin. When the prophet had scanned the sky, he said: ‘Write an alphabet for him, now.: The alphabet was written in a cake. And Colomb Cille consumed the cake in this wise, half to the east of a water, and half to the west of a water.’⁹³

Elsewhere in the *Life of Comgall* we catch a glimpse of a young lad learning to write:

set nemo potuit eum docere, quia quod scribebat vix agnosci poterat, vtrum manus hominis aut vngula avis illud depinxerat... veniens ad Comgallum, vir sanctus benedixit oculos eius et manus; et ilico scripcio eius meliorata est, ut ceteros scriptores precelleret.

But (our narrator notes), no one was able to teach him, because what he wrote, it was impossible to tell whether it was the hand of a man or the talon of a bird that formed it...(however)...the boy coming to Comgall, the holy man blessed his eyes and hands, and there his writing improved so that he could surpassed the rest of the scribes.⁹⁴

⁹² the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁹³ Columcille: *BL* 812-816.

⁹⁴ Comgall: *VSH* II, 29. The additions in parentheses are mine.

Having learned the alphabet, the student then proceeded to learn to read. The Psalter was probably the first reader in the Irish schools.⁹⁵ and its use in this manner occurs repeatedly in the *Lives*. The sequence, for example, forms the base for a miracle story found in the *Life of Columcille*.

Roherbadh ria aidi-sium risin clérech ord sacairt do dhenamh isinn inad-sin arin sollamun. Rogabh imnaire eside cor'éimidh in salm do rocht do do gabail Misericordias. Gabhuis immorro fer in raith .i. Colum cille in salm dia raith acht cena ni rolegh-som acht aibghiter nama cosin.

It was entrusted to his fosterer, the cleric, to perform a priest's duties in that place at the hightide. But bashfulness seized him, so that he was unable to chant the psalm that came to him: *Misericordias Dei* was that psalm. Howbeit the man of grace, Colomb Cille, chanted the psalm in his behalf, and yet he had not read till then aught save an alphabet.⁹⁶

The sequence is again evident in the *Tripartite Life* which states of Fiacc:

Berrthir, baitsithir, scríbhthir abgitir dó. Légaíd ašalmu anóeló, ut mihi traditum est.

He is tonsured: he is baptized; an alphabet is written for him. He reads his psalms in one day, as hath been handed down to me.⁹⁷

Again, in the *Life of Ciarán of Clonmacnois*, we observe Ciarán in his beginning studies learning the psalter. The story relates that Ciarán was taught by his fosterfather Justin, a married cleric whose dwelling was a distance from him. The distance proved no barrier,

⁹⁵ Hughes 1977, 10.

⁹⁶ Columcille: *BL* 820-824.

⁹⁷ *TP* 190-91.

for a fox miraculously carried the lessons back and forth between them. In this manner, we are told, Ciarán learned the Psalter, and having completed these studies he left and went to Clonard where he studied philosophy under Findian.⁹⁸ In the *Life of Colmán*, we learn that when he was seven years old he went to study with Bishop Etchen where “he read the psalms and the hymns and the whole order of the Church” (*7 ro leg na salma 7 na himnu 7 in ord n-ecalsa ule ace*).⁹⁹ Upon completing his studies with Etchen, Colmán is said to have gone to study further with Mochuta at Raben. Later when he was

⁹⁸ Ciarán of Clonmacnois: *BL* 4038-4105.

⁹⁹ Kuno Meyer *Betha Colmáin*, 18. In his reference to the ‘whole order of the Church’ the author of the *Life of Colmán* probably means the liturgical order of the various offices of the church. Reference to the church order appears elsewhere. *The Life of Moling* notes:

IS annsin ro bóí Máedócc ina ecclais ic dénamh a uird eclastadai im teirt. Ro falsiged do Máedócc áighidh uasal anaitnidh do thiactain cuce. Lécidh duin ind ord annsin. ar Máedócc...Doroich Moling in ecclas...Doníther in t-ord iarum.

Maedóc was then in his church performing his ecclesiastical order at terce. It was revealed to Maedóc that a noble unknown guest had come to him. “Leave off for us the order there,” says Maedóc ... Moling reached the church....the order is then performed. (Moling 8:30).

Another report tells of a blind priest called Feidhlimidh who held in memory the order of baptism. (Comgall *VHS* II, 6). Elsewhere we hear a tale of Tairchell (Tarchill, i.e., Moling of Luachair. Index Nominvm: *VSH* II, 369) who when pursued by spectres ran to the church of Collanach. However, we are told that “until he had finished his order and his mass Collanach did not look at Tairchell” (*Nocor’ derc Collanach fair co tarnaic dó a ord is a affrend*). (Moling 6:21). Finally in Ameotosus’ *Life*, we read that

Tunc B.Brigida viros sapientes Romam misit, ut ipsi inde Missas et regulam Ecclesiasticam ferrent.

Then Blessed Brigid sent wise men to Rome that they might bring the Ecclesiastical rule and masses from there. (Ameotosus: 3:11 (161)).

seventeen years old, he went to further his biblical studies for another seven years with Mochuta of Lismore.¹⁰⁰ Again, in the *Life of Brendan*, we find a reference to the formative years of education, for we are told that when Brendan left Ita when he was five or six years old, that “the bishop took him and taught him letters” (*episcopus adduxit, atque litteras edocuit*).¹⁰¹ Here also he studied the Scriptures. Thus, we know that, by the time he leaves the school run by Bishop Erc he could read and write and had some knowledge of the Scriptures, which itself implies, since these Gospel books were written in Latin, that he studied and had some competence in that language. This education would seem to have been also available to women, since we know his sister attended school here with him. Brendan then proceeds further with his education, an education which our hagiographer implies, preceded ordination.

Iar ffoghlaim *immorro* na canoine fétarlaice 7 nua-fhiadhnaisi do Bhrenainn, dob ail leis riaghail naomh *Ereinn* do sccriobadh 7 d’foglaim. Cettaighis tra espocc Eirc do somh dol d’foghlaime na riaghla sin...*Ocus* atbert espocc Eirc fris: ‘Tair arís cuccam sa, 7 na riaghla sin lat, co ngabha tu gradha uaim si.’

Now after learning the canon of the Old and New Testaments, Brendan wished to write out and learn the rule of the saints of Erin. Bishop Erc gave him leave to go and learn this rule... And he said to him: “Come back to me, and bring the rules with you, that you may receive orders at my hands.”¹⁰²

Brendan’s fostermother Ita also advises him to go learn the rules. Thus, we are told that:

IAr scribeann tra riaghla ind aingil 7 riagla noebh n-Eirenn

¹⁰⁰ Colmán 21.

¹⁰¹ Brendan I, *VSH* I, 4.

¹⁰² Brendan: *BNE* 8 (18).

cona mbesaibh 7 cona crabud do Brenainn, impais co hespoc Eirc, 7 gabais gradha uaidh.

Now after the Rule of the angel and the Rules of the saints of Ireland, with their usages and with their piety, had been written by Brenainn, he returned to bishop Eirc, and received ecclesiastical orders from him.¹⁰³

This study of the Rules, whatever that might embrace, would seem then to have been thought to consist of some higher form of education.

No women's Rules survive which might tell us something of the studies of nuns in monasteries. Looking further afield, we know that in Gaul, Caesarius of Arles had by the sixth century brought a number of nuns within his sphere of influence, and had placed them under a rule which not only demanded stability, but also insisted that a certain part of the day be put aside for study.¹⁰⁴ But if Ireland copied any patterns from Gaul at this early date, it was not that which followed Caesarius who insisted on women being cloistered. What we find instead is a less restricted though no less ascetic life-style, a life-style patterned on the books of the Bible and of the Apocrypha. Here groups of wandering clerics and nuns must have frequently been seen passing through the countryside¹⁰⁵ as they went on their circuits, or as they travelled to visit another monastic, or even as they wandered following the will of God. Such a lifestyle must have been highly

¹⁰³ Brendan: *BL* 3554-3556.

¹⁰⁴ Caesarius *Opera Varia* (vol.2 of *Opera Omnia*), ed. G. Morin (vol.1 of 2 vols. Maredsous, 1937-42), trans. Maria Caritas McCarthy, S.H.C.J. *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960, 2, 18-20.

¹⁰⁵ Lasair 83, 89, 95; Ita: *VSH* II, 11, 13, 14, 20; Darerca: Heist 3, 4, 8, 19; Ameotosus 6, 8, 12.

compatible with the existing society, in which royalty went on circuit, and a learned class had freedom of travel to spread religion, to disseminate learning, to clarify the law, and to exercise their artistic skills. The new Christian *literati*, as it grew and replaced the preceding structures, simply slipped into the established organizational pattern, one which worked very well within the existing political framework of Ireland of that day.

All of this is visible in the patterns of monastic education, in which students may be seen travelling here and there from teacher to teacher, learning all that one teacher could give then going on to another whose reputation had caught their attention, a custom seemingly a well-entrenched part of the whole educational system, and one upon which the Irish were to fall back on in the later penal times when education was forbidden and went underground.¹⁰⁶ When Brendan for example decided to go off to learn the Rules of the saints of Ireland, he went to a certain Iarlaith son of Lug, attracted to that devout man by his fame as a teacher.¹⁰⁷ This mobility of the early saints, monks and nuns, weaves

¹⁰⁶ A story noted by Gougaud and recorded by Mariannus Scottus for the year 1053 could possibly demonstrate a link between the systems. "Mariannus Scottus, tells of..Aed the bearded clerk, a man, he says, of admirable piety and ... high repute...He conducted a school, a mixed one, it would appear, and he took it into his head to shave all his pupils, girls as well as boys, leaving them only a circular fringe of hair on the crown...(this)..led to his banishment from Ireland." (Gougaud 1932, 249).

¹⁰⁷ Brendan: *BNE* 21, 22. The master does not appear to have done all the teaching herself or himself. Brighter or more advanced students were set to work assisting the master, who seems at times to have also had other teachers working under them. The *Birth and Life of St. Moling* portrays Collanach, the monk who fostered Moling, as a monk in a monastery under Brénainn. Brénainn ran a school, and Collanach was the monk assigned to teach Moling. Moling proved to be a bright pupil, and was quickly set to helping the other boys about him. The system is easily recognizable in the of the Hedge schools of a later period. (Moling 13). In another of the *Lives* we find Ciarán at school reading together with one of the female students who was also studying there (Ciarán of Clonmacnois: *VSH* I, 16).

a familiar pattern which forms a backdrop to the various *Lives*. Thus we read that when Senán left his father's house and took the monastic tonsure, he first went to Cassidan to read the psalms and learn ecclesiastical discipline. Having completed this training, he then went to Cell Manach Droichit in Ossory to read further under Notál.¹⁰⁸ Senán went on to become a famous teacher, and among his pupils we find not only the son of a king, but also we note the presence of a group of women learning at his school, who had come to “offer themselves to God and to Senán” (*ros-idbraít do Dia 7 do Shenán*).¹⁰⁹

It is clear from the texts that during the period in which the events witnessed in the *Lives* were first recorded, that women were not cloistered, that they moved about freely, and at times they too set forth to seek some teacher of merit. Some seem to have been very determined to receive their education at the hands of the teacher of their choice, a determination evident on the part of the virgin Monenna, founder of Killeevy. For Monenna, bringing her nuns with her, followed St. Ibar to his monastic school at Beggery Island, and stayed nearby for a time that she and her nuns might receive instruction from him. Ireland had many celebrated schools, and women are periodically to be found at these, and some schools seem to have been open to both boys and girls, men and women. Thus when Brendan was sent to study with the Bishop Erc, he was joined there by his sister Brig, also destined for the monastic life.

IS annsin boi Bríg inna farrad-sum .i. derbhshiur dhó [í.] 7 ba dermhair méid a grada lais...7 rofhégadh gnúis a aidi amail

¹⁰⁸ Senán: *BL* 1954-1968.

¹⁰⁹ Senán: *BL* 2152.

ruithen [n]grene samhrata.

Then dwelt Brig with him; she was an own sister of his, and exceeding was the greatness of his love for her...and her fosterfather used to see her countenance as it were the radiance of a summer sun.¹¹⁰

Women are also said to have attended other monastic schools. For example we find the young Abban at a school run by Bishop Ibar, who seems to have been a teacher of some renown. We learn that

Duodecim ... annorum ad sanctum pervenit antistitem supplex discipulus, sapientia et sanctitate imbuendus. stetitque cum eo multis annis...autem cepit...sapientia litterarum divinarum et humanarum clarescere... Licet autem innumerabiles sancti monachi, clerici et sanctimoniales sub cura et doctrina sancti Ibar in diversis monasteriis et aliis locis degerent...

At twelve years of age he came as a disciple in supplication to the holy bishop, that he might be filled with wisdom and sanctity, and he stayed many years with him. And he became... distinguished in the knowledge of divine and human literature. Although, moreover, innumerable holy monks, clerics, and nuns lived under the care and instruction of St. Ibar, in various monasteries and other places.¹¹¹

Before going to Ibar, we might note, he was said to be already thoroughly learned in scripture.¹¹² We have already seen how Monenna, upon committing herself to the life of the virgin, was given into the care of a local priest to be given guidance in her new

¹¹⁰ Brendan: *BL* 3400-3402.

¹¹¹ Abbanus: Heist 5. The text speaks of information in the *Life* as coming from a contemporary source, for the compiler claims to be the grandson of one baptized by Abbanus (*ibid.* 21).

¹¹² Abbanus: *VSH* I. 4.

vocation and to be taught the psalms.¹¹³ She spent some time with this teacher and proved herself to be an exceptional student.¹¹⁴ Having completed her studies under this priest she proceeded to the school of St. Ibor, first on Beggery Island,¹¹⁵ then at Airdconal.¹¹⁶ Here Monenna and her virgins continued to receive further instruction.¹¹⁷

Reversa...ad episcopum Ibor, habitavit in Airtchonis. Congregatis ibi simul multis Christi virginibus, sub potestate episcopi vivebant, quarum cotidie augebatur numerus, et non solum virginum et viduarum multitudo, sed et regine et quamplurime matrone ad illas cotidie confluebant.

Having returned to Bishop Ibor, she lived in Airdconal. They were living here under the authority of the bishop, many virgins of Christ having likewise gathered there whose numbers were increased daily, and not only a multitude of virgins and widows, but even queens and a great number of women were joining them daily.¹¹⁸

This school attended by Monenna and her *familia* must have been one of some importance, and its teacher one with a certain reputation. Moreover, it was with this same master that Abban is said to have become 'distinguished in the knowledge of divine and human literature' (*sapientia litterarum divinarum et humanarum clarescere*),¹¹⁹ attending

¹¹³ Darerca: Heist 2.

¹¹⁴ Darerca: Heist 2.

¹¹⁵ Darerca: Heist 3-4.

¹¹⁶ Darerca: Heist 8.

¹¹⁷ Darerca: Heist 3-4.

¹¹⁸ Conch. 2:4. The story is identical to that of the Salmanticensis ms. See Darerca: Heist 8.

¹¹⁹ Abban: Heist 5.

his school at Beggery Island.¹²⁰ Thus the school at Beggery Island would appear to have accommodated both male and female students, for, as we have observed above, Monenna, too, is said to have attended Ibar's school both at at Beggery island. Many other women are also said to have attended this school.¹²¹ We find also in the educational profile of Monenna a pattern of education evident in other sources, namely that of a curriculum beginning with the psalter, then proceeding to further studies. Moreover, these studies imply that she must also have learned Latin. Her preliminary studies were then followed by education elsewhere. This advanced education would seem to have been available to a considerable number of ecclesiastical women as well as certain women of the laity, although the latter were probably destined for the Church. Some women may even have gone far afield to continue their studies. In the *Life of Monenna* we hear that:

quedam virgo, nomine Brignat cum sancta virgine cohabitasse traditur...eam in Britanniam insulam, de Rosnatensi monasterio conversationis monastice regulas accepturam, misisse perhibetur.

it is said that a certain virgin called Brignat lived with the holy virgin (Monenna)...(and) it is said that she was sent to the island of Britain, that she might receive the rules of monastic life from the monastery of Rosnat.¹²²

Rosnat was a monastery famous in the early Celtic Church with an important school to

¹²⁰ Abban: Heist 6.

¹²¹ Darerca: Heist 4. For the identification of the island called Modicam Hyberniam here with Beggery Island see Liam de Paor "The Life of St Darerca, or Moninna, the Abbess," in *Saint Patrick's World* 282.

¹²² Darerca: Heist 25. The parentheses are mine. The Irish always referred to Ninian's monastery in Britain as Rosnat.

which the names of a number of prominent male saints became attached by the hagiographers. We learn further that:

Illa...ad optatum locum...pervenit. Mansit ergo prope prefatum monasterium...in quodam hospiciolo, ubi psalmos aliosque sibi neccessarios perlegit libros...sic et...ad suam reversa est abbatiam.

(Brignat) came to that distinguished place, and remained near the aforementioned monastery, in a certain little guesthouse, where she read the psalms, and other books necessary to her...Then...she returned to her abbess.¹²³

Moreover, once again we observe an educational setting in which male and female learned and interacted, for another writer continues:

Roerb Finnen ra Ciaran an ingin, cumad aigi noleghudh a salma. Ni fhaca tra Ciaran do curp na hingine cein batar immale acht a traighthi nama.

Findian entrusted the girl to Ciarán, and with him she used to read her psalms. Now, so long as they remained together, Ciarán saw nothing of the girl's body,¹²⁴ save only her feet.¹²⁵

Thus the *Lives* suggest that women did have opportunity to educations, and as above, often in important schools. For example, one text notes that

Tucadh ingen righ Cualann fechtus as[in] Finnen do léghadh a salm iar n-idhbairt a hoighi do Dhia.

Once upon a time the king of Cualann's daughter was brought to Findian to read her psalms, after having dedicated her

¹²³ Darerca: Heist 25.

¹²⁴ It was a custom in Celtic Christianity to keep ones eyes perpetually lowered out of modesty. This was expected not only of women but of men also.

¹²⁵ Ciarán: *BL* 4130-4131.

maidenhood to God...¹²⁶

We have observed that a number of these students travelled to get the type of education they deserved, and teachers too travelled here and there, practising their craft as they journeyed. Not only do we see the bishop Ibar wandering about and stopping first here to teach and then there, but also we find Findian on a circuit and stopping for a period of time at Kildare, the monastery of St. Brigit, where we are told he remained for a time teaching and preaching.¹²⁷

Women as teachers and instructors of the faith.

Hagiographers have shown little interest in the teaching role of the holy women of Ireland. However, the well-established links between fosterage and education, and those between the *anmcharae* and education¹²⁸ would lead us to believe that these monastic foundations must have incorporated some type of educational facilities. It is impossible to believe, for example, that Kildare, not only a monastery of some note housing both men and women, but also head of some type of monastic federation, did not have a school of

¹²⁶ Ciarán: *BL* 4128-4129.

¹²⁷ Findian: *BL* 2613-2614.

¹²⁸ Kelly 1988, 86-91; Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 42; Brendan: *BNE* 9, 19, 92, 165.

some sort. It, like other monastic foundations, had its fosterlings,¹²⁹ and these must have been educated somewhere. One only need look at the end product to realize that the women who had been processed through these establishments did not end up as semi-illiterates. Elsewhere we discover a reference to a school associated with the virgin Lasair, for in her *Life* we find her addressed in the following manner:

a Lasair naomhtha nsoirrderc thusa 7 do choimhthionól
sruitheadh náomh dfaghail linn a lenmain ar néigin 7 ar
neson[ó]ra¹³⁰ 7 dfúasgladh 7 dfóirighthin an tsagairt as
lámhaibh a namhad...

O Lasair sainted and noble of customs, to have thee and thy
congregation of holy scholars with us, to take vengeance for
our straits and dishonour, and to assist and release the priest
from the hands of his foes.¹³¹

Images which bond women to the world of education are scattered throughout the literary texts. Monenna for example shows a great interest in the education of her nuns, and at times goes to some lengths to ensure that they receive it. Brigit, who received at least part of her own education from a nun, is said to have been trained in literature from childhood.¹³² Brigit was also acclaimed as the patron of young scholars. This event

¹²⁹ Derlugdacha: *AS* Feb. 1, 2 (229). In the Old Testament, instruction is a natural outgrowth in which the father takes responsibility for the total formation of the child (*RB* 1980, 326, 330, 332). The close association between education and fosterage in Irish monasticism reflects the persistence of such ideas.

¹³⁰ the parentheses are those of the editor.

¹³¹ Lasair 93.

¹³² See Ultán's Hymn to Brigit in Stokes *Goidelica*, pp. 133-7; see also Colgan *Trias Thaumaturga*, p. 527.

supposedly came about because Brigit once prayed with Nindid the scholar and healed him.¹³³

Coníd assein doralá cumthanús mac leighinn in domuin re Brigit, co tabair in Coimdhí doibh tria atach Brigte gach maith fhoirbhthi chuinghid.

Wherefore thence it came to pass that the comradeship of the world's sons of reading is with Brigit, and the Lord gives them, through Brigit's prayer, every perfect good that they ask.¹³⁴

Indeed Brigit's title of patron of the scholars of Ireland points to some connection between Kildare and the general world of education, a world in which we have noted the custom of fosterage firmly rooted.

The fosterage of the young and its accompanying responsibilities was taken very seriously. The *Laws of Ireland* state clearly the obligations of the fosterer in respect to the education of the fostered child.¹³⁵ In the case of multiple fostering these obligations were divided,¹³⁶ as they appear to have been in the case of Brendan, who is said to have spent part of the time with Ita and part with Bishop Erc.¹³⁷ When Brendan wished to proceed further in his education he went for advice once more to Ita, who told him to go learn the rules as Erc had suggested, but cautioned him not to go to women for this education

¹³³ This is not stated explicitly but is implicit in the text.

¹³⁴ Brigit: *BL* 1567-1569.

¹³⁵ Kelly 1988, 87. See, for example, *CIH* 1760.33-4; 1760.21-2, which describe the obligations of a fosterparent toward the son and daughter of a king respectively.

¹³⁶ Kelly 1988, 90.

¹³⁷ Brendan: *BNE* 3.4.

since this would cause people to gossip. For Ita says “do not study with women nor with virgins, lest some one revile thee” (*Na dena foghlaim ag mnaibh na ac óguibh cu nach demtar h'égnach*).¹³⁸ Such a cautionary note points to the fact that women were indeed active as teachers and, in fact, were instructors of adults seeking a higher education. The virgin Rychena who lived in the area of the Liffey basin has been remembered for her role as teacher and *anmcharae*. One tradition claims that Columbanus was her pupil, a claim which may have a foundation of truth since Ionas, the biographer of Columbanus, saw fit to record that he had a female confessor.¹³⁹ Monenna too must have had some hand in the formation of young minds, and we find among her fosterlings a daughter of the local nobility. When one of her young nuns is encouraged to go to Britain to complete a higher education, we find no questions raised as to the ability of this young woman to move on in her studies. Thus some provision must have been made for her earlier education. However, despite the positive images found in the material relating to women such as Brigit and Monenna, it is Ita whom tradition remembers as teacher, a role subsequent writers seem to have had some difficulty accepting.

Although we may accuse the early hagiographers of being indifferent to certain roles filled by women in society, and we may at times suspect resistance to the idea of women

¹³⁸ Brendan: *BL* 3453-3456. Note that here the Irish implies that pupils are going to the women in order to be taught. The Irish ‘oc’ is the equivalent to the Latin ‘apud’ and its function is similar to that of ‘chez’ in French.

¹³⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 24. In the *Life of Ita* it would appear that Rychena was his teacher until as an adult he went to Columcille to receive the rank of bishop. Ionas in his *Life* gives a different account of the education received by Columbanus.

as molders of men, as witnessed in the tension between Ita and Erc in the Brendan material and the consequent weakening of Ita's role, their resistance is still a far cry from that found to the same ideas in modern scholarship. In his monumental *Irish Monasticism* John Ryan notes the following:

The most remarkable feature of her monastery is that she seems to have established in it a school for small boys. Brendan of Clonfert...spent five years of his early childhood under her care. At the end of that period he was withdrawn by Bishop Erc and set to commence his literary studies. Many others are said to have received their youthful training in piety likewise from St.Ita...¹⁴⁰

The monastic school of Ita must have been an active one, for the *Brendan Life* declares "For this virgin fostered many of the saints of Ireland from infancy" (*Hec enim uirgo multos sanctorum Hibernie ab infantia nutriuit*).¹⁴¹ It is clear that Ita was involved in the education of the young, but when Ryan and others claim that the school was strictly for little boys, a re-assessment of the evidence is in order, especially since no other models for such a school exist in Ireland until under English influence at a much later date. As a consequence of Ryan's work, this idea that Ita ran a school for little boys has become a persistent thread in later scholarship. However, nowhere in the texts themselves do we find such a claim, and we are left with the impression that this particular claim results rather from a more modern cultural bias. That this has happened becomes clear from Ryan's own work, for he continues his preceding statement with the following:

¹⁴⁰ Ryan 1931, 139.

¹⁴¹ Ryan 1931, 139; *Brendan I: VSH* I, 3.

After St. Brendan, the most famous of her pupils is St. Mochoemóg, who is said to have spent twenty years under her tuition..... but this sojourn is open to serious doubt, as well because Mochoemóg survived Ita by about eighty years (Ita. d. AU. 570-577; Mochoemóg 656)¹⁴² as also because the presence in her monastery of a student so mature in years would be open to grave objection... all things considered, then, we are probably right in concluding that Ita won a great reputation as the religious educator of small boys, but that she sent these on to masters of their own sex before the years of boyhood were ended.¹⁴³

Ryan's claim as to the difference in age between Ita and Mochoemog must at least be considered. The problem here of course is that of the reliability of dates. For the dates of saints' obits in this early period are at best hypothetical.¹⁴⁴ Thus whether or not saints' obits exist together in a specific time frame is not important here. What is of importance, is that the *Lives* portray Ita as both aunt and fostermother of Mochoemog, and the hagiographers have been adamant in tying the two lives together. Moreover, if we accept the dates of the *Annals* without question, then further questions emerge in respect to the relationship between Ita and Brendan. For while on one hand the Brendan corpus portrays a very young Brendan spending his first years in a monastic settlement already well established and under the guardianship of a fostermother who is very much an adult, on the other hand that same adult, according to the *Annals*, died only five years prior to

¹⁴² Ryan notes here by way of a footnote that, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, Ita died 570-577 and Mochoemog in 656.

¹⁴³ Ryan 1931, 139-140. See also (Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 8). The idea is repeated more recently by Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 40.

¹⁴⁴ De Paor 1993, 117.

Brendan who supposedly lived to the ripe old age of eighty-nine. Thus the picture of Ita and Brendan is that of the two saints as contemporaneous, putting into question the Ita-Brendan stories¹⁴⁵ of the Brendan corpus. This simply serves to show how precarious our framework for dating is. As to Ryan's second argument that Ita would quickly send pupils to be taught by masters of the same sex out of a sense of propriety, this argument ignores the consistent evidence of the *Lives*, which portray a system of education in which women studied at monastic schools that also taught male students, and at which, at least at times, little effort appears to have been made to segregate the sexes.¹⁴⁶ It also ignores the tradition which claims that women at times were the teachers of men, and possibly most importantly of all, it ignores the close ties formed by fosterage between a number of famous male saints and their fostermothers, ties which could not have been so firmly cemented if a final separation took place at the age of seven.¹⁴⁷ Neither has any mention been made in all of this of the girls fostered by Ita in the monastery, in respect to which even the *Lives* themselves remain silent. Surely, they too received an education. It is equally significant that Ryan makes little mention of Monenna, a virgin very much on the move, a woman greatly interested in pursuing an education, of whom Ryan merely says

¹⁴⁵ There is no reference in the Ita corpus to Brendan as fosterchild of this virgin nor is it said that he attended a school which she ran. However, his actions in regard to her indicate that she is his confessor, thus by implication his former teacher and fostermother, and possibly also in his actions we find implied that his monastery is in some way subordinate to her foundation. (Ita: *VSH* II, 17,18,22,34).

¹⁴⁶ Ciarán: *BL* 4128-4129.

¹⁴⁷ Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* 35.

that “we must regard with suspicion” the story of her many peregrinations and her many foundations abroad,¹⁴⁸ and although admittedly there is much confusion between the Irish Monenna and the English Modwenna on the part of the hagiographers, the life-style attributed to the Monenna of the Irish *Lives* is consistent with that of other women depicted in similar texts. Ryan’s evaluation of the work of early monastic women becomes further suspect when we consider his comments in respect to St. Brigit and the education that virgin herself received, for the hagiographer’s claim that Brigit was well educated from childhood,¹⁴⁹ was countered by Ryan’s comment: “but study (if the statement that she applied herself to it be true) did not prevent her from performing ordinary farmyard duties.”¹⁵⁰ One wonders why Ryan hesitates to accept the hagiographer’s account. If scholarly caution in the face of a hagiographical text, it is caution which seldom appears evident when speaking of men and claims made for them in the same texts. One suspects rather that it is caution in the face of female activity contrary to that acceptable for women of the Church of a later age. Kathleen Hughes and Ann Hamlin in *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church* take all this a step further, saying little of the education of women or of their teaching role, and indeed discuss education as if it were strictly a male domain, at least implicitly through the unconscious use of selective language, if not explicitly. by speaking of education as if it were the sole prerogative of the male society:

Formal education was provided by the monastic school. Boys

¹⁴⁸ Ryan 1931, 137-138.

¹⁴⁹ Ryan 1931, 135.

¹⁵⁰ Ryan 1931, 135. The parentheses are those of Ryan.

were taught in a Latin, ecclesiastical tradition. They learned the Latin language, and study of the notes and marks in manuscripts shows how Irishmen tried to help themselves with the more difficult aspects of the Latin texts they were using. Here we can get very close to the Irish student or master as he tries to guide himself through the various elements in a long Latin sentence, putting in Irish translations of Latin words....Serious study made some Irishmen fluent Latinists who enjoyed playing with words...But the first text book which all boys used was the Psalms.¹⁵¹

Ryan's work has not only influenced that of Hughes and Hamlin, but in fact permeates much of modern scholarship on the subject.¹⁵² Ryan's premise would appear to have been built on what we know of the relationship between Ita (d. 570) and Brendan the Navigator (c. 486 - c. 575). But Brendan, even in the Brendan corpus, is never depicted as being taught by Ita. He is the child of a number of fosterparents, and it is to another of these that the child goes when he leaves Ita. It is to this fosterparent, the Bishop Erc, to whom is given the role of instructor to Brendan.¹⁵³ Yet the hagiographer seems to be constantly in the midst of a balancing act between what would appear to have been a strong tradition which tied Brendan to Ita, fosterparent and *anmcharae*, and another equally strong tradition which pointed to Erc as the author of his education. What we would in fact seem

¹⁵¹ Hughes 1977, 9-10. Criticism on this one point is not meant to detract from the importance of the work of Hughes or Hamlin. I have, in fact, relied on them rather heavily.

¹⁵² Hughes 1977, 10; Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 40.

¹⁵³ We find little mention of this bishop outside the *Lives* of Brendan, and reference to him has been omitted in the *Life of Ita*. The strong tie between Ita and Erc formed by the figure of Brendan, makes one wonder whether the good teacher was in fact tied to Ita's own monastery, possibly as bishop and teacher. However, the lack of evidence for a double monastery at Killeedy prevents one from taking the idea beyond that of suspicion.

to have here are two opposing traditions, one which states boldly that Erc was the teacher of Brendan, and the other which implies, not only through Ita's function as *anmcharae* to Brendan, but also by its silence in respect to Erc, that Ita was the teacher of Brendan. However, having considered the preceding claims, we are forced to the conclusion that the texts do not at any time give explicit support the claim made by Ryan that Ita taught Brendan as a little boy. Brendan, according to the Brendan corpus, remains with Ita until the age of six, an age at which, although a year earlier than was usual, a child might begin fosterage, and subsequently also his or her education. And indeed from the evidence in the *Lives* this would be the general age when a child would begin formal education.¹⁵⁴ That this is the age a child begins school is stated clearly in the *Lismore Lives* which declares that when Finchua was seven years old he began his studies "like every other pupil" (*amal cech ndalta ele*).¹⁵⁵ Ita, too, rears the child Brendan until he is of school age. Throughout all of this Ita acts typically in the manner of a caring mother. She loves the child and forms his character, and when he leaves for school, the writer notes that she misses the child, a child who when grown returns to Ita periodically throughout his career for advice on the major decisions and obstacles in his life. Thus the metaphor of motherly

¹⁵⁴ When Ailbe baptizes Findchua as a babe, he declares that he will be devoted to study at the end of his seventh year. Ailbe is then said to have been fostered by Cumscach, king of Teffia, and son of Findchua's sister (Findchua: *BL* 2831- 2836). Coemgen of Glendalough was sent to the monks to begin his studies when he was seven years old. Declan was handed over to the monks to be fostered and to learn to read at the age of seven (Declan: *VSH* II, 5). The practice is also witnessed in the *Life of Colmán* which notes that students go to a confessor at the age of seven and study under that confessor (Colmán 19).

¹⁵⁵ Finnhua: *BL* 2845.

love within the family is very strong in this instance and one suspects it is a deliberate ploy on the part of the writer. The metaphor is indeed carried further, for Ita is commemorated in the texts as 'the fostermother of the saints of Ireland,'¹⁵⁶ a title which indicates that a large number of important Irish saints were fostered under her command. Such a title rather than detracting from the importance of this saint, points instead to the phenomenally high status which was afforded her by the writers of the hagiographical texts.

¹⁵⁶ Ryan 1931, 139.

Chapter III

Status

A close examination of the textual sources, reveals a certain amount of ambiguity as to the status of ecclesiastical women in early Irish society, and more importantly, to the status of those same women within the church hierarchy itself. It is the examination of these very ambiguities which serves as the focus of both this chapter and the chapter that follows.

There can be no doubt that, within the ecclesiastical setting, women at times enjoyed a great deal of power and indeed commanded the same respect accorded men in the same milieu. The virgin Cranat, for example, is said to have had the whole of the kingdom of Fermoy under her jurisdiction.

Tucc Fínán *imorro* do Chranatain a shíol dia foghnámh, 7 a dhún *cona* ferann .i. o Dobernaitt a túaidh, 7 ó Árd Ratha go Nem lind-maighrigh risan abar Abhan Mór. *Ocus* forfaccuibh si búadha móra dó, gé ro ben righe fair

Finan then gave Cranat his seed in service to her, and his fort with its land <and stock>, to wit, from Dobernaitt on the north, and from Ard Ratha (height of the fort) to the Nem with its salmon-pools, now called Abann Mór (the great river). And she bequeathed great excellences to him, though she deprived him of the kingdom.¹

Some indication of the importance of these women and the influence they wielded can be perceived in the power-titles, especially those connected with royalty, that the early

¹ Cranat: *MHH* 3.

writers used to describe them. We know that within the realm of their spiritual kingdoms women ruled with the same power and privileges as men.² This spiritual kingdom was seen as analogous to that of the earthly realm,³ with the abbot holding power, though admittedly a different type of power, equal to, if not at times superior to, that of secular royalty.⁴ Indeed the abbot who was head of his *paruchia* was said to be a 'king of kings.'⁵ We find similar reverence accorded Brigit, for Ultan, in his hymn in praise of Brigit, hails her not only as queen, but indeed as 'queen of queens.'⁶ For women too were head of their *paruchia* and as such wielded power equal to that of any abbot.⁷ The power of Brigit of Kildare⁸ was so great that the hagiographers went to great lengths to show that the

² MacCurtain 1985, 39-40; Ryan 1978, 8-9; Hughes 1966, 157-8.

³ Hughes 1977, 7.

⁴ Hughes 1966, 74, 157-158; Hughes 1977, 7; Kelly 1988, 41; *CIH* 570.31-2; *CIH* 1618.7; *CIH* 2282.27; *CIH* 2334.35-6; Binchy 1962, 60-61; *Adom.* 90-92; Bray 1983, 153; Walker *Opera*, xv.

⁵ Hughes 1972, 74. Elsewhere Kelly notes that the abbot of a great monastery was granted a higher status than was given the bishop. (Kelly 1988, 41; *CIH* 1618.7; *CIH* 2282.27; *CIH* 2334.35-6).

⁶ Ultán's Hymn: *BL* 199.

⁷ Helen Lanigan Wood, "Women in Myths and Early Depictions," pp. 37-50 in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanain, Dublin: Arlen House, 1985, p. 18; Margaret MacCurtain, "The Historical Image," *ibid.*, p. 39. Abbesses in Ireland were not under the authority of bishops. Abbesses as well as abbots took rulers to task and were often successful in their dealings with these monarchs. The virgin Fanchea convinced Endeus, then king, to give up his title and his warring ways and to become a monk. Later she appears to have become his confessor (Endeus: *VSH* II, 4-6). Other virgins also had success in dealing with monarchs, including Ita, Monenna, and Samthann (Ita: *VSH* II, 31; Monenna: Heist 17; Samthann: *VSH* II, 7,12,22).

⁸ When Brigit was still an infant, so the compilers claim, she declared "Meum erit hoc" (this (land) will be mine)(Brigit: *BL* 1220). Brigit also appears to deal on equal terms with royalty. for we observe her making a covenant with a king, granting him long life and victory in return for certain favours (Brigit: *Ameotosus* 8).

authority of Patrick, Ireland's patron saint, extended not only into the south of Ireland but into Brigit's *paruchia* itself. Nevertheless, evidence of Brigit's power and authority remain, and we catch at least some glimpse of the power enjoyed by this abbess in the titles bestowed upon her, not only of 'royal queen'⁹ but indeed of 'queen of the south.'¹⁰ Just how far Brigit's *paruchia* extended has not been determined, but her realm is said to have included the plain of the Liffey¹¹ and the people of Leinster.¹² The power of this particular monastic empire must have continued for some time after the death of Brigit, for in their efforts to deal with the problem Brigit's power posed, the hagiographers made her a bishop and conferred the title of bishop on the women who succeeded her.

IS ann roraidh espoc Mel: 'Tair, a noeb-Brigit, co rosentar caille *for* do chenn riasna hoghuibh aili.' IS edh dorala ann tria *grasa* in *Spirto Nóibh* *gradh n-espuic* do eirleghiunn *for Brigit*. Asbert Mac-caille nar'bho ord *gradh n-espuic for* bannscail. Adubhairt espoc Mel: 'Ni leam a *commus*. O Dhia doratad in anoir-sin do Brigit seoch cach mbannscail,' *conidh* anoir *espuic* doberat fir Eirenn do comarba *Brigte* osin ille.

Then said Bishop Mél: 'Come, O holy Brigit, that a veil may be sained on thy head before the other virgins.' It came to pass then, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, that the form of ordaining a Bishop was read out over Brigit. Mac-caille said, that a bishop's order should not be conferred on a woman. Said Bishop Mél: 'No power have I in this matter. That dignity hath been given by God unto Brigit, beyond every (other) woman.' Wherefore the men of Ireland from that time to this

⁹ Brigit Be Bithmaith: *LH* line 20, 39.

¹⁰ Brigit: *BL* 1703.

¹¹ Columcille: *BL* 976-981.

¹² By the seventh century the territory under the jurisdiction of Kildare may have reached beyond Leinster. (Hughes 1966, 84).

give episcopal honour to Brigit's successor.¹³

Although the royal prerogative, as a literary device, is more frequently used to confer status on male monastic leaders rather than female, its use when applied to women is of some significance. The few references which do exist are sufficient to establish that women in the monastic setting were given high status, and that this status at times paralleled that awarded men.

This equality of status can be viewed, though admittedly briefly, in the hagiographical use of the motif of 'chariot under king' which is found in several of the *Lives*. In the *Life of Brigit* we read the following:

FEACHT ann doluid Dubthach 7 in cuma! inmaille fris i carpat seoch thegduis araili druadh. O rochuala in drai foghar in carpait is ed roraidh: 'A ghilla,' ar se, 'fegh cia fil isin carpat, ar is fogur carpait fo rig inso.' Roraidh in gilla: 'Dubthach,' ar se, 'fil ann.'... Asbert in drai: 'Bidh amhra in gein fil ina broinn...Foighena sil do mhna-sa do sil na cumaili...

Once upon a time he (Dubthach) and the bondmaid¹⁴ along with him went in a chariot past the house of a certain wizard. When the wizard heard the noise of the chariot he said, 'My boy,' saith he, 'see who is in the chariot, for this is a noise of chariot under king.' Quoth the boy: 'Dubthach,' saith he, 'is therein.' Said the wizard: 'Marvellous will be the child that is in her womb....the seed of thy wife shall serve the seed of the bondmaid...'.¹⁵

This hagiographical device for the conferring of status is to be found in a number of the

¹³ Brigit: BL 1344-1350.

¹⁴ The mother of Brigit.

¹⁵ Brigit: BL 1161-1171.

Lives, though admittedly it occurs mainly in the *Lives* of male saints. The motif makes its appearance, for example, in the *Life of Mochoemog*, foster-son of Ita.

Cum beata Ness partui proxima esset, uenit cum suo marito ad monasterium sancte Yte, alloquentes eam. Et cum reuersi essent, tenuerunt dolores partus Nessam; et sedit in curru. Cumque sancta Yta sonitum currus audisset, ait suis: 'Sub rege sonat iste currus; videte sub quo currit.' Nuncii reuertentes dixerunt ad sanctam Dei; 'Soror tua Nessa sola sedet in curru.' Sancta ait: 'Vere sub rege sonat; quia filius qui in vtero eius est, in regno celi Dei gratia magnus sedebit.'

When the blessed Ness was close to giving birth, she went with her husband to the monastery of St. Ita to speak with her. And when they had turned about, birth pangs seized Ness; and she sat in the carriage. And when St. Ita had heard the sound of the carriage, she said to her followers: 'That carriage resonates under a king; see under whom it runs.' The messengers returning said to the saint of God; 'Your sister Ness sits alone in the carriage.' The saint said: 'Truly it resounds under a king; because the boy who is in her womb, will sit great in the heavenly kingdom through the grace of God.¹⁶

The motif is again found in the *Life of Ciarán*, Abbot of Clonmacnois. Here once again we find mention of a divination which predicts the future greatness of a particular saint:

O rochuala in drai i n-araili lo fogar an carpait, 'Fogur carbait fo rig annso,' [ar se.] O'tcotar na gille imach ni fhacatar *acht* Beoid 7 Darerca isin carput. O rotaitbiset na gille imon ndraidh, is *ed* roraidh: 'In mac fil i mbroinn na bannscaili,' ol se, 'bidh ri mor he...

On a certain day, when the wizard heard the noise of the chariot, he said this. 'Look,' saith he, 'my lads, who there is in the chariot; for here is 'noise of chariot under king.' When the gillies went out they saw nothing save Beoit and Darerca in the chariot. When the lads laughed at the wizard, he said this:

¹⁶ Mochoemog: *VSH* II. 5.

'The child that lies in the woman's womb,' saith he, 'will be a mighty king...'¹⁷.

The motif is found yet again in the *Life of Patrick*, though here we might better refer to the motif as 'noise of boat under king'.

Olaili laithi dodechaid Diarmait inaethur sech port Clúana maiccNoiss, cocuala Cíaran fógur *ocus* sesbém innalungai *ocus* doroghrad insinport, et dixit Cíaran, "Tair cucum, ar it mac rí, *ocus* toraind inreclés (in marg. .i. eclais mbic) *ocus* edbair dam inport." Qui (.i. Diarmait) dixit, "Non sum rex." Cui Cíaranus dixit, "Rex eris cras."

On a certain day Diarmait came in his boat past the harbour of Clonmacnois, and Cíaran heard the noise and rattle(?) of the vessel, and (Diarmait) was called to the harbour, and Cíaran said: "Come to me, for thou art a king's son, and mark out the *reclés* (i.e. little church), and offer the harbour to me." Diarmait said: "I am not a king." To whom Cíaran said: "Thou wilt be a king to-morrow."¹⁸

It is evident that the phrase is a standard hagiographical device¹⁹ for portending future greatness, and from the addition to the *Life of Cíarán*, it is equally obvious that the hagiographers associated the phrase with the child about to be born and not with another who accompanied or was associated with the child. All of the above portents make

¹⁷ Cíarán of Clonmacnois: *BL* 4013-4016.

¹⁸ *TP* 88-89.

¹⁹ The concept underlying this motif probably hearkens back to ancient Irish tradition which seems to have thought that the earth cried out in some way in recognition of a true king. For we find the idea expressed in claims associated with the Lia Fáil, the Stone of Destiny, an inauguration stone at Tara which is said to have "roared when the king was accepted." (Harbison 1977 (1970), 192). The motif reflects the hierarchical model in which Christ is seen as Overking or even as High King. See, for example, the Lismore text (*BL* xxi) where Mary is called "Mother of the Overking" (*Muire máthair in airdrig*).

reference to future rulers, both male and female, of monastic domains. This sharing in power has been commented upon by Hughes who made note that *princeps* (prince) and its feminine form *dominatrix* were titles bestowed upon the leaders of the early Irish Church.²⁰

The use of the above motif in the *Life of Brigit*, would indicate that the hagiographers had little problem with the idea of bestowing the title of 'king' upon a woman who was to become a prominent abbess. Since the word 'king' is gender specific, the reader is left wondering why the honorific of 'king' and not that of 'queen' was applied to her. That the phrase 'chariot under king' was a hagiographical ploy to indicate power is probably reason enough, but the motivation for its use has a much broader scope. The title is a popular one in the religious sphere, and its use traceable to biblical sources which acclaim Christ as King.²¹ As representatives of the King of heaven, abbots and abbesses apparently shared in this vision of royalty.²² These rulers, for example, periodically went on circuit, as did secular rulers, and we see a number of references in the *Lives* to such a practice.²³ Thus John Ryan, in referring to Brigit, was led to remark that "the abbess of Cill Dara wielded monarchial authority over all the churches and church lands attached

²⁰ Hughes 1966, 157-158.

²¹ John 1:49; 12:13.

²² MacCurtain 1985, 39-40; Ryan 1978, 8-9.

²³ Hughes 1966, 151. There is frequent reference to the practice in the hagiographical literature.

to her monastery within the Kingdom of Leinster.”²⁴

This view of the kingship of Christ became absorbed into the religious language of the Irish at an early date. A praise poem written upon the death of Columcille (c. 597 AD) names Christ the ‘King of the Priests’ (*ri na sacart*),²⁵ while a poem written by Columbanus in the same century calls him ‘the King of virtue’ (*rex...virtutum*).²⁶ But religious language also incorporates both symbol and metaphor, and thus the Lismore text, in a description of these early Christians, calls Christ ‘the King of the white sun.’

Lucht na foghluma feighi
fognitis do Righ grene

Folk of severe discipline
who served the King of the white sun...²⁷

This same appellation, became attached to Christ’s representative in the person of the head of the monastery, thus the writer of the *Rule of St. Carthage* can declare that the abbot is the chief of the Church (*toirech eclairi*) and the heir of the king (*comorbur in*

²⁴ Ryan 1978, 8,9. For further discussion see MacCurtain 1985, 39.

²⁵ Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (Eds.). *Lebor Na Huidre: Book of the Dun Cow*. Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1929. line 710, 25.

²⁶ Walker *Opera* 192. One can safely assume that it is no accident that Columbanus has here chosen the word *virtutum*, a word which unites both the monastic ideal of moral virtue with the corresponding idea of maleness to describe Christ and those values, and by extension those followers, connected with him.

²⁷ *BL* cxi, 4562-4563. The translation ‘white sun’ is that of Stokes. No word for ‘white’ occurs in the Irish.

rig).²⁸ Moreover, it is clear that, at least in the monastic setting of pre-eighth century Ireland, abbots held no greater power within the church than did abbesses, and thus it is logical to also extend the title above to an abbess. This fits well with what we know of the metaphorical use of 'sun' in the texts, for the writers of religious history not only used the term in connection with Christ but also used it to describe his early representatives, namely the abbesses and abbots. Maelruain (d. 792), an abbot remembered best as the founder of the reform movement of the Céli Dé, is called 'the great sun of Meath's south plain' (*grían mór desmaig Midi*).²⁹ Brendan looking upon his foster-father, saw "the face...of the holy bishop Erc, as if the globe of the sun" (*et faciem...sancti silicet Erci episcopi, quasi globum solis*).³⁰ Ita, commemorated on January 15, is proclaimed 'the white sun of Munster's women' (*ingrían bán Muman*).³¹ Brigit also is compared with the sun in the *Salmanticensis Life* which declares:

Sicut enim stellas sui claritate sol exuperat, sic virgines huius regionis sue merito virtutis anteibit.

For just as the sun with its own brightness surpasses the stars,
thus she by the merit of her virtue will excel over the virgins

²⁸ Mac Eclaise, "The Rule of St. Carthage," *IER* 1. The image is found in stories of the Desert Fathers, where we read eg. that when one day Abbot Sisois was sleeping, those sitting close by saw his face "shine like the sun." (Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* 127). The idea was picked up eagerly by Gregory the Great, a writer whom we know was popular among the Irish. This idea of the light of God is a key concept in the work of Gregory, an idea which can be traced to Cassian and back to the Desert tradition. (Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: Conferences*, 33).

²⁹ *Féire* v.225, 26.

³⁰ Brendan: *VSH* I, 4.

³¹ Jan.15: *Féire*, 36.

of this region.³²

It is obvious that this association of saint with source is indicative of the immediate presence of the divine in the person of the saint. This may at times be perceived as a theophany of the Holy Trinity,³³ and at others, as we have noted in our discussion of sun imagery above, it is thought of as the very real presence of Christ. Indeed, Christ is perceived as being so immanently present that his divine light suffuses the saint, who as a holy and pure container, in fact becomes the light. This idea of saint as receptacle is found expressed through three different motifs, that of saint as pure container for the eucharist, saint as pure container suffused by the Holy Spirit, and saint as container for the light of Christ. This motif of 'saint as container' is echoed in the theology of the *Tripartite Life* which Stokes encapsulates succinctly:

The Son pours into us the gift of the Holy Ghost...The Holy Ghost makes us sons of God and joint heirs with Christ.³⁴

The monastic leader, who as such functioned as the visible example for his/her followers living a life in imitation of Christ, and whose body had been purified through

³² Brigit: Heist 2. Elsewhere Brigit is called "Vine among trees" (*BL* 1689), a name which recalls just one of the various metaphors used in reference to Christ in the Gospels (John 15:1). The passage quoted here reflects John's vision in the Book of Revelation in which he sees "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars". (John, Rev:12). See *Eve: The History of an Idea* for some discussion of the use of this text elsewhere in medieval writings. (John A. Phillips *Eve: The History of an Idea*, San Francisco and Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1984) 138.

³³ Ita: *VSH* II, 23.

³⁴ *TP* cxxxv. For further discussion on this idea see *RB* 1980, 332, 333, 378.

austere ascetic practice, is often portrayed as a receptacle for Christ's power on earth.³⁵ The hagiographers handle the theme in a variety of ways, and behind the theme lie resident dualistic notions of matter and spirit,³⁶ in which the soul cannot help but be sullied by the material, ideas we have explored in the previous chapter. This material includes not only the body, but anything earthly the body comes in contact with, including the earth's natural products. Thus Brigit is said to have been so pure in body that she could not tolerate the food offered her by the druid,³⁷ while elsewhere she is described as a 'fitting casket' for the eucharistic offering.³⁸

A recurring motif throughout the texts is that of saint as vehicle for Christ's power,

³⁵ Brigit: Aneitosus, 7-9.

³⁶ MacCurtain has also noted a penchant for dualistic thinking in the Irish literary inheritance. (MacCurtain 1981, 540).

³⁷ *B. Br. 5*. More than one metaphor is obviously operative here, and there are eucharistic dimensions to the story. We should also possibly remember at this point that members of the Celtic church refused to eat with non-believers. We find the custom mentioned in a letter from Laurence, successor to Augustine at Canterbury, and preserved by Bede who says: *antequam cognosceremus, credentes quod iuxta morem universalis Ecclesiae ingrederentur, in magna reverentia sanctitatis tam Brettones quam Scottos venerati sumus, sed cognoscentes Brettones, Scottos meliores putavimus. Scottos vero per Daganum episcopum in hanc, quam superius memoravimus, insulam, et Columbanum abbatem in Galliis venientem, nihil discrepare a Bretonibus in eorum conversatione didicimus. Nam Daganus episcopus ad nos veniens, non solum cibum nobiscum, sed nec in eodem hospitio quo vescebamur, sumere voluit*, (where thinking, before we had experience, that men walked according to the customary way of the universal Church, we honoured with great reverence of holiness as well the Britons as the Scots, but having experience of the Britons we thought the Scots better. Marry now, we have learned by bishop Dagan, coming to this before-mentioned island, and by the coming of Columban, abbot in France, that the Scots do nothing differ from the Britons in their conversation. For bishop Dagan coming to us would not only not eat with us, but not so much as take his meat in the house where we were eating). (Bede, vol. 1, 220). Thus any food offered by or belonging to unbelievers, would be anathema. The motif therefore helps direct our attention to the extreme sanctity at a very tender age of this venerated saint. See also Aldhelm: Letter 4, 158.

³⁸ Brigit: *BL* 1689.

and it should be kept in mind that women as well as men are portrayed in the texts as fitting both to receive and to wield such power. We see further that the belief seems to exist that the saint is not only a receptacle for the power of Christ but indeed somehow contains Christ, an idea expressed in the notion that Christ worked (and does work) often in the world through the instrumentation of his holy followers. Christ, even in a particular text, may appear in many guises, for it was thought that while he was ever-present in the person of the guest,

QUADAM die...audiuit...hospites clamantes ex aduerso, et festinus
sine ulla mora obuiam eis. quasi Christo, nauigauit

On a certain day he heard guests shouting from (the bank)
opposite, and without any delay he quickly sailed to them as
if to Christ³⁹

he was also very much present in the semblance of the poor.

Nevertheless, while Christ may be present in the guise of the lowly, the power of Christ becomes visible through the medium of his saint.⁴⁰ Thus the saint is portrayed as a vessel filled with the Holy Spirit, and thus with divine power, and as such at times the line between the world of the human and the divine becomes blurred, enabling the holy man or woman to be equated with the source of divine power, ie. with Christ. Examples are numerous. The compiler of the *Life of Carthage*, writing of the childhood of that saint, depicts him as a worthy vessel of the Holy Spirit. Through the tongue of another he

³⁹ Moling: *VSH* II, 4.

⁴⁰ Brigit: *Ameotosus*, 7-9.

proclaims: "I see a...fiery column from his head all the way to heaven..." (*Video enim... columnnam igneam a capite eius usque ad celum*).⁴¹ The motif is repeated in the *Life of Brigit*, which states that at one time when the druid's uncle was visiting and the druid was observing the stars at midnight, he saw a "fiery column rising out of the house." Upon being told of this event, the uncle who was a Christian, remarked that it was obvious that Brigit was 'a holy girl' (*noeb filia*).⁴² This use of light to indicate divine presence is an oft used device of hagiographers. We are told, for example, that when St. Comgall prayed at the cross at Cluana Edhnech "a supernatural light surrounded him" (*lux superna circumfulsit eum*).⁴³ Again, when Samthann was looked upon by her intended bridegroom while she lay sleeping, he saw that her face was illuminated by rays of light, as if they were rays of the sun.

...quasi solis radium per culmen domus in lectum in quo
Samtana...iacebat, extensum uidit;

⁴¹ Carthage: *VSH* I, 8. The motif is a common one in antiquity. Light as indicative of the paranormal is not confined to the Christian context, but is widely evoked as a metaphor in a variety of religious traditions. Homer, Book 18, mentions the hero light in respect to Achilles (Homer, *The Iliad*, Loeb Classical Library, vol.II, Book 18, 305). Old and New Testament writers used the metaphor freely as we see for example in the stories of Moses and the burning bush and the star of Bethlehem.(Ex. 3:2; Acts 7:30; Mat. 2:2,9,10). Early Christian writers associated the motif with Christ and the real presence. Clement, a writer who dearly loved metaphor, equated the blood of Christ with milk, that which gives life, that which "dazzling white...is the light of Christ". (Clement *Paedagogia* 39).

⁴² *B. Br.* 3.

⁴³ Comgall: *VSH* II, 4.

He saw that (a brightness) as of the rays of the sun rose up through the roof of the house in which Samthann lay in bed.⁴⁴

The groom is said to have been delighted to be betrothed to one “bathed so in celestial light” (*que luce celesti sic perfundebatur*).⁴⁵ This idea of saint as pure receptacle for divine power, is particularly evident in the *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*⁴⁶ in which the first order of saints, those we are told were the most pure and holy, are likened to the sun. It is through this light that the divine makes its presence visible. Thus we learn that once when Brendan had given the last rites to a dying brother, ‘angels of light’ (*angelis lucis*) came to take possession of the dead man’s soul.⁴⁷ In the *Life of Bishop Erc*, the association between the manifestation of light and holy presence is clearly stated, for here the chronicler remarks through the lips of Erc:

(Once upon a time) when Erc was asked why he had risen before Patrick, he replied that the words that came from the lips of the Missioner were full of living fire and light...⁴⁸

This association between the phenomenon of light and that of divine presence is equally clear from the *Life of Ita*:

QUODAM quoque die sancta puella Yta sola dormiuit in cubiculo; et totum illud cubiculum visum est hominibus ardere... quia gratia Dei ardebat circa famulam Christi... Et cum surrexisset sancta Yta de sompno, tota forma eius visa est

⁴⁴ Samthann: *VSH* II, 1. The parentheses are mine.

⁴⁵ Samthann: *VSH* II, 1.

⁴⁶ *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*: Heist 81-3.

⁴⁷ Brendan 1: *VSH* I, 20.

⁴⁸ Erc: *LBS* II, 460.

quasi forma angelica.

On a certain day the holy maiden Ita slept alone in a bedroom and it appeared to others that the whole room burned...because the grace of God was burning about the handmaiden of Christ...and when the holy Ita rose from sleep, her whole form appeared like the form of an angel.⁴⁹

Moreover, we can perceive upon a close examination of the hagiographer's use of light-imagery in the *Vitae*, and in associated material such as the *Martyrologies*, that light is used in this framework to indicate holy presence, a presence which at times consumes the saint to such an extent that one can easily assert that "Christ is ever-present in his saint."⁵⁰ The writer of the *Rule of St. Carthage* must certainly have had this in mind when framing his monastic code in which he describes the abbot as 'representative of the King.'⁵¹ And since it is clear from the preceding discussion that abbesses were perceived as being equal to abbots not only in their ability to channel divine power, but also in their worthiness to do so, it also seems equally valid to claim that not only abbots, but abbesses too, especially in view of the discussion above, were indeed 'representatives of the King.' It would appear that this concept of abbess or abbot as King is transmitted in the hagiographical literature through the device of the royal title. Thus the writer of the Old Irish poem on the Hill of Allen begins his praise of Brigit by declaring her "the sovereign lady with banded hosts that presides over the Children of Catháir the Great" (*is tú banflaith buidnib slútaig fil for*

⁴⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 2.

⁵⁰ The statement is mine.

⁵¹ MacEclaise "The Rule of St. Carthage". The idea is also clearly stated in the *Life of Naile* (Naile: *MHH* 8:12).

clannaib Catháir Máir),⁵² and in his concluding stanzas declares:

A Brigit 'sa tír atchíu, is cách a úair immudrá, rogab do chlú
for a chlú ind rí, is tú fordatá.

Oh Brigit whose land I behold, on which each one in turn has
moved about, thy fame has outshone the fame of the king -
thou art over them all.⁵³

The royal title afforded Brigit may be one of the ideas at the heart of the poem "Brighitt"⁵⁴ in which that saint expresses her wish to provide an alefeast for Christ. For the *Críth Gablach* declares that the provision of ale is one of the duties expected of a king "for he is not a rightful ruler who does not provide ale."⁵⁵ Although other female saints may not have been lauded in such an extravagant manner, vestiges of the idea are evident in the *Life of Samthann* in which almost as though by a slip of the tongue the hagiographer informs his/her audience that when Samthann was put in charge of her own monastery, that "having undertaken the responsibility of ruling" (*suscepta autem cura regiminis*)⁵⁶ she began her work. It should be noted carefully that in this instance the writer uses *regiminis*, a word frequently used to refer to royal power.

⁵² Kuno Meyer, *Hail Brigit* Halle: Max Niemeyer and Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., Ltd., 1912, v.1, 13. Meyer dates the poem to the eighth or ninth century (*ibid.*, 11).

⁵³ *ibid.*, v. 25, 18.

⁵⁴ David Green, "St. Brigid's Alefeast," *Celtica* II (1954)

⁵⁵ *CG: Ancient Irish Law*, 4:334:129.

⁵⁶ Samthann: *VSH* II, 6.

The title 'bride of Christ' or 'spouse of Christ,' and even 'mother of Christ,' which is often used in the *Lives* and other religious literature to describe a female religious, especially one of some importance, may also be worthy of consideration here. For we learn from the law tracts that, at least in certain cases, a woman is granted half the status owing to her husband or son.⁵⁷ Moreover, in a society in which women take their status from husband and/or other family, being wed to the king of heaven would have ensured a position of particularly high-status.⁵⁸ Whether or not this also affected the bestowal of status upon the men of the Church is difficult to determine, but it is important to remember that within the early Church, the term 'spouse of Christ' embraced both male and female virgins who dedicated themselves to a life of renunciation and chastity.⁵⁹ It is not a term therefore which limited the power of women, but rather, enhanced it. Nevertheless, it is evident that with the passing of time that women were denied privileges they had enjoyed earlier, and it is more than likely that part of the reason lies not only in the development of a gender-specific use of the above title, but also in changing models

⁵⁷ *UB: Ancient Irish Law*, V 70:28.

⁵⁸ See the Lismore text in which Christ is called overking. (Senán: *BL* 2457).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Gregory of Tours. Gregory relates how Patroclus, when his mother suggests finding a wife for him, replies: "Non coniungor mundanae coniugi, sed quae concepit animus cum Domini voluntate perficiam" (I will not marry an earthly bride, but with the Lord willing, I will do that which I have in mind). [Gregory of Tours: *LVP* 9, 1 (*MGH SRM* 1.2, 703)]. And elsewhere in his preface to his *Life of Illidius*, Gregory makes the following comment: "De quo ea tantum capere potui, ut cognoscerem, Iesum Christum, filium Dei, ad salutem mundi venisse atque amicos eius, qui, accepta cruce austerae observantiae, sponsum secuti sunt, dignis obsequiis honorare" (From whom I was able to grasp to such an extent the (teachings of Avitus) that I came to know that Jesus Christ, son of God, came for the salvation of the world, and came to honour with worthy homage his friends who having taken up the cross of austere observance, have followed the Bridegroom)(*ibid.*, 669). The insertion above is mine.

in which women no longer lived a life *in imitatio Christi*⁶⁰ but were confined rather to a life in imitation of Mary⁶¹ as virgin and in which spousal models now copied those of secular society.⁶²

The saint as representative of Christ, whether male or female,⁶³ acted as source of divine power on earth. The consequent high status afforded women at times is visible in the story in the *Life of Brigit* which describes a visit by Brigit to what was possibly a regional synod.

Fecht n-aile iar sin senior caillige craibdigi baí hi fochruib du
t[h]ig Dubthaig esestair in n-í Brigit do thecht do a(a)ccallaim

⁶⁰ An idea that is basic to much of this chapter.

⁶¹ Mary as *exemplum* may be found as early as the 8th century in the Northumbrian Church, where Mary functions as model of humility and chastity for both monks and nuns (O'Dwyer 1988, 14).

⁶² The work of Hollis has concentrated on such models, and could be of much use in developing a picture of the later Church in Ireland. (Stephanie Hollis. *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*. Woodbridge: Rochester: The Boydell Press, 1992) especially chs.2,4. Reference to Mary is sparse in the hagiographical literature, and in the writings of early Irish Christianity. See, for example (Bray 1987, 211-212). The dearth has also been noted by Margaret MacCurtain who points out that the popularity of Mary arises just before the coming of the Normans to Ireland, though the development of the cult of Mary is probably even later. (MacCurtain 1981, 541). Peter O'Dwyer in his book *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland* tends to differ, offering the opinion that the Irish would not have been ignorant of the findings of Church synods elsewhere. O'Dwyer also notes that while the first reference to Mary in the Irish record occurs around the beginning of the seventh century (O'Dwyer 1988, 32), by the mid-seventh century, an Irishman who calls himself Augustinus refers to the physical intactness of the virgin Mary (O'Dwyer 1988, 33; PL 34, col. 2193). This however is not the model presented in the Lives which contain surprisingly few references to Mary, and such references as are made concentrate on Mary not as virgin, but as mother of Jesus. Indeed there are indications in the Lives that the concept of physical intactness, at least among the writers of this body of literature, was not of major importance. Associated concepts which were of importance were those of obedience and chastity.

⁶³ The idea is stated clearly in Basil and the Lausiaca history. Basil, for example, remarks that "women join in the campaign at Christ's side, being enrolled for the campaign owing to the manliness of their souls and not rejected for the weakness of the body." (Clarke 1925, 58; Palladius *The Lausiaca History* ed. Cuthbert Butler, Cambridge, 1898-1904 pref. I, ix, i).

.xx.vii *et* noeb Lagen i n-oendail...Fordo-eracht iarum æss inna dala[e] 7 lotir dia [aca]llaim.

On another occasion after that an old pious nun who lived near Dubthach's house asked Brigit to go and address twenty-seven Leinster saints in one assembly... the people of the assembly rose up before her and went to converse with her.⁶⁴

That others rose before Brigit is a very significant statement, for in this early society rising before others was a mark not only of respect, but a signifier of high if not superior status.⁶⁵ In the *Life of Moling* this social custom can be seen operating more clearly.

Táinic Molling remhe andes iarsin, *ocus* ro innis do ríghaibh úa Néill corb'í a toisc d'iarraidh maithme na Boromha. Nír'bo maith *dano* ra hUib Néill inní sin, 7 ro ráidset ule cen comhérghe i tigh remhi. Táinic *iarum* in clérech isin tegh iarsin, 7 ní fuair coimhéirge remhe noco n-érracht Murchadh mac Ae[r]medaigh remhe .i. athair Domhnaill. *Conadh* ann asbert Molling: Rop let *ocus* lat shíl flaithius tría bithu. *Ocus* ro suidh Moling iar sin, *ocus* báí ic iarraidh na cairde forra.

Moling then came along from the south, and told the kings of the Húi Néill that it was his errand to ask for the remission of the Boroma. That was not pleasing to the Húi Néill, and they all said that no one should rise up before him in the house. Then the cleric entered the house and found no rising before him until Murchad son of Airmedach, Domnall's father, rose up before him. Whereupon Moling said: "Let the lordship be thine and thy seed's for ever." And then Moling sat down and was asking them for the respite.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *B. Br.* 11.

⁶⁵ See *BL* cxiv; *TP* 52; *CG: Ancient Irish Law*, 4:338.

⁶⁶ Stokes *Life*, 19:59. For rising as a mark of respect see also *TP* 45; *BL* cxiv.

Through these indications of the high status at times accorded women, it becomes clear that abbesses as well as abbots were deserving of the royal prerogative, and thus the hagiographer's use of such in our original motif of 'chariot under king,' warrants little surprise. The use of the gender-specific prerogative 'king' becomes even more understandable when we examine further existing attitudes toward women who had chosen to live a celibate life.

In her book *Women in Medieval Life*, Margaret Wade Labarge declares that "queens, saints, or abbesses... cannot be considered representative of the general female population."⁶⁷ While this is true, the notion, at least as far as saints and abbesses are concerned, must be taken a step further. Indeed, it is probably more true to say that saints and abbesses cannot be considered to be representative of the female sex. For these women achieved sanctity, not by being outstanding women, but by overcoming the very fact that they were women.⁶⁸ That women ordinarily were in some way considered to be inferior to men, and that this inferiority was associated with their sexuality, is evident in the Old Testament from Genesis on. Similar ideas are found to be pervasive in Hellenistic society.⁶⁹ In the *Politics* Aristotle declares that "by nature the male is superior, the female

⁶⁷ Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986, 18.

⁶⁸ Bray has also commented on the phenomenon (Bray 1987, 213).

⁶⁹ That Christianity probably at times drew from a general stream of ideas from Hellenism is witnessed by Fry. He remarks that while there is no evidence of direct links between Christ and various groups within Hellenism, these groups contributed to a sea of ideas with Hellenism which at times possibly influenced Christianity (*RB* 1980, 11).

inferior, therefore the man rules and the woman is ruled.”⁷⁰ This same idea was expounded in the work of Philo of Alexandria, who viewed the male virginal state as representative of the highest nature of humanity⁷¹ and women with their uncontrolled sexuality as the lowest. But he also conceded that through the virginal life, women could overcome their feminine nature and reach the higher stages of human attainment by becoming ‘like a man.’⁷² From this sea of ideas, Christian concepts about women developed. That successful women took on male characteristics is evident from a number of sources. Peter Brown brings our attention to the story of the wife of Diognetos (a possible one-time tutor of Marcus Aurelius b. 121 AD.), who having been left to care for her husband’s estate while he was abroad, “dreamt that she had a beard on the right side of her face.”⁷³ The motif is also found in the stories of those female martyrs who suffered persecution in the beginning struggles of Christianity. In the story of Perpetua and Felicitas (c. 203 AD), the narrator describes a vision that Perpetua had shortly before her martyrdom, a vision in which she overcame the devil because she had become ‘just like a man.’⁷⁴ In her vision, Perpetua found herself standing in the middle of the amphitheatre.

⁷⁰ Aristotle *The Politics*, The Loeb Classical Library, I: ii: 12.

⁷¹ Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 18, 46-47.

⁷² Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 2-5; Philo. *De Cherubim* 50.

⁷³ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, ed. R.A. Pack. Leipzig: Teubner, 1963, 4.83. Trans. R.White *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (Noyes Classical Studies), Ridge Hill, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975, 217; Brown 1988, 16.

⁷⁴ Musurillo 1972, v.3.

Having been stripped of her clothing, she discovered that she had suddenly become a man, and as such was rubbed down with the oil of the athlete.⁷⁵ This latter image of the preparatory oiling of the athlete adds further to the male imagery the text applies at this point to Perpetua, and which is later to become part of the inheritance of the Irish hagiographical corpus in which we find, for example, the virgin Fanchea described as 'a new athlete of Christ' (*novus athleta Christi*).⁷⁶ It is through taking on the image of the male that Perpetua wins her struggle, a struggle which is really one with the devil, and thus with her weaker female sex.⁷⁷ The Christian Apocryphal texts echo the same idea. Here the Gospel of Thomas proclaims that a woman must be 'like a man' to prevail.⁷⁸

Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."⁷⁹

Such notions seem to have been readily absorbed into the ideological framework of the early Irish Church. Out of this developed two streams of thought which were evidently co-existent, one heavily misogynist and the other accepting of women, at least in some circumstances, as spiritual equals. The latter view finally became overwhelmed by the

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 119. See also Brown 1988, 74; *RB* 1980, 4.

⁷⁶ Fanchea: Jan 1, *AS* 5.

⁷⁷ Musurillo 1972, 119.

⁷⁸ Gospel of Thomas: *NHL* 37:20-35, 121, 43:25-35, 124-125.

⁷⁹ The Gospel of Thomas: *NHL* (1140), p. 138.

former, a fact recognized by the author of the *Catalogue of Saints* who declares that while the earlier saints did not reject the society of women, those who followed, those he/she claims to be less holy than the first, fled the company of women, rejected their services, and excluded them from their monasteries.⁸⁰ The victory of misogyny is encapsulated in the poem “Eve’s Lament” written somewhere between the tenth and fourteenth centuries.⁸¹

MĒ Éba, ben Ádaim uill:
mé ro saraig Ísu thall;
mé ro thall nem ar mo chloinn:
cóir is mé do-chóid sa crann.

...

Me tuc in n-uball an-úas;
do-chúaid tar cumang mo chraís:
in céin marat-sam re lá
de ní scarat mná re baís.

Ní bíad eigred in cach dú:
ní bíad geimred gáethmar glé;
ní bíad iffern; ní bíad brón;
ní bíad oman, minbad mé.

I am Eve, great Adam’s wife;
it is I that outraged Jesus of old;
it is I that stole Heaven from my children;
it is I that should have gone upon the Tree.

...

It is I that plucked the apple;
it overcame the control of my greed;

⁸⁰ *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*: Heist 1-4.

⁸¹ MacCurtain also sees suspicion of women as a later development in Irish Christianity (MacCurtain 1981, 541). For further discussion of misogyny in Ireland see (ibid. 540-541).

for that, women will not cease from folly
as long as they live in the light of day.

There would be no ice in any place;
there would be no glistening windy winter,
there would be no hell, there would be no sorrow,
there would be no fear, if it were not for me.⁸²

Misogyny has been well documented in all the major world religions, and Christianity in early medieval Ireland was no exception. In Ireland it is probably most obvious, not only in the later practice of placing men and women, and more especially men and female sinners, in separate burial sites,⁸³ and in the again later practice of placing a separate church for women outside the monastic walls,⁸⁴ but also in the frequently documented practice of excluding women from the precincts of male monastic establishments.⁸⁵ These monasteries appear to have been the exception rather than the rule, but their incidence is frequent enough to bring to our attention a counter-stream of an attitudinal nature to

⁸² Text and translation from Gerard Murphy *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp. 50-53.

⁸³ Helen Lanigan Wood, "Women in Myths and Early Depictions," in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, 20; Killanin *The Shell Guide* 94, 266; Mould 1976, 20.

⁸⁴ Observe, for example, Inchcleraun, Inishglora, Inishmurray, and Clonmacnoise, all men's monastic institutions which provided a Church for women outside their monastic walls. (Harbison *Guide*, 158, 173, 216-7, 204; *The Shell Guide* 206, 111). These may have been influenced by practices such as we find in the double monastery, such as at Kildare, where the male and female congregation was divided by a screen (Hughes 1972; *The Book of the Angel*: Hughes 1966, 277; Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit* (Geraldus Cambrensis?). However, despite standing theories, theories which cannot and should not be discarded, we must also bear in mind that these trends toward separation are also the product of a Church in flux, and that this emerging Church may not be so parochial in character, and that the monastery has become more focused upon the spiritual needs of those within the enclosure and less upon the needs of the external community, both religious and lay, which it is obviously still responsible for in some way.

⁸⁵ Findchua: *BL* 2989; *VSH* I, cxxi; Senán: *BL* 2426.

that in which men saw women as non-threatening and sought their company. Such exclusion does not simply protect males from female company, but also effectively prohibits women access to and thus excludes women from liturgy and the relics,⁸⁶ and probably what has even more long-range effects, it prohibits women access to monastic libraries and thus the repository of knowledge so integral to status in any society.

Underlying this fear of women is the notion of woman as representative of Eve, of woman as temptress and instrument of the demonic forces which draw men from the work of God. Thus men must protect themselves from the lures of women whose purpose is to entrap the unwary male.⁸⁷ The motif of woman as temptress appears in the *Life of Brendan*, where it is used to emphasize the chastity and deep commitment to the life of the Spirit developed by that saint even as a child.

Cum uero puer esset decim annorum...episcopum ad docendum plebem...Descendente uero uiro Dei de curru...currum...cure discipuli commisit. Cumque psalmos Deo suo deuote caneret, inuidens inimicus bonis eius operibus, puellam quondam nobilem incantauit, atque ad ludendum cum eo concitauit. Ad currum quoque puella regia accedens, puerum Brandanum suppliciter rogauit, ut eam currum ascendere, atque cum eo ludere concederet. Quod uerus castitatis amator abhorrens, ne silicet colloquia praua mulieris animam eius corrumperent, mox ut discederet imperauit...'Quare huc uenisti, maledicta inter mulieres? Ad propinquos tuos reuertere, et cum coetaneis tuis digneris ludere.' Et cum redire non acquiesceret, accipiens flagellum eam uerbarauit. Et quia uexacio dat intellectum, licet tristis, reuersa est sic confussa ad suos.

When the boy was ten years old, the bishop (Erc) (journeyed)

⁸⁶ Nichols & Shank *Medieval Religious Women*, 38-9.

⁸⁷ Ionas: *Life of Columbanus* 8; Ita: *VSH* 24.

to teach the people. And the man of God descending from the carriage, left the carriage in the care of his disciple (Brendan). And when Brendan was singing psalms devoutly to God, the enemy (Satan) envying his good works, enchanted (incantavit) a noble girl, and incited her to play with him. Therefore, the royal girl (puella) approaching the carriage, entreatingly asked the boy Brendan if he would allow her to come into the carriage with him and play with him. But the true lover of chastity abhorring this, indeed lest the wicked suggestions of a woman (mulieris) corrupt his soul, quickly ordered her to get down. 'Why have you come here, cursed among women? You ought to return to your companions and play with those your own age. And when she refused to leave, taking up a whip he beat her. And because vexation imparts intelligence⁸⁸, although with tears, confused she returned to her companions.⁸⁹

The passage is rich in imagery. The narrator begins by telling us the boy's age, thus emphasizing that he is only a child and still at an age of innocence. He is part of a holy mission, accompanying Erc on his preaching rounds. When left alone, despite his age, he also occupies himself in the work of God. That is, he sings the psalms. In this manner the narrator sets the stage by establishing the innocence and saintliness of the boy Brendan. But to further prove his worthiness, he must resist temptation, i.e., sexual temptation. This is introduced through the motif of the woman as temptress. 'Enchanted' by the devil, the girl approaches Brendan. The fact that she is enchanted, thus acting apart from her own will, saves her neither from punishment at the hands of Brendan nor from the castigation of the hagiographer. The narrator begins by calling her a girl (puella), but in her role as

⁸⁸ Is.28:19. The phrase occurs again in a collection of anecdotes about St. Fanchea in which we read: "sed quia vexatio frequenter dat intellectum;" (but because vexation often imparts intelligence) Fanchea: *AASS* 5.

⁸⁹ Brendan I: *VSH* I, 5.

temptress she is referred to as a woman (mulier) who makes wicked suggestions. By this sudden transition of the girl to a woman, the writer emphasizes and brings into focus the sexual nature of her invitation. Women do not play the games of children. Also, she is given the title 'cursed among women,' a parody of a biblical phrase⁹⁰ used here to imply the harlot, the very opposite of the 'blessed' virginal mother of Jesus. In this manner the writer identifies the girl/woman of our story with Eve and Eve's role as vehicle for the devil and as corrupter of men. Brendan, in a display of his purity, beats her with a whip. Then, because 'vexation imparts intelligence' she returned to her family. The phrase is taken from Isaiah⁹¹ who in the way of prophets is in this passage in the midst of warning Israel, also frequently depicted as a wanton woman in the biblical texts, to leave her sinful ways. Of equal importance is the biblical passage immediately preceding the above, one in which Isaiah warns that "when the beating scourge shall pass through, you will be trodden down by it" (*flagellum inundans cum transierit, eritis ei in conculcationem*).⁹² The motif has once again been adopted by the writer of the Brendan text, the scourge in the passage being the whip wielded by Brendan, the whip with which he not only overcomes the woman and the temptations of the flesh, but Satan himself. In conclusion, we are told that the woman, shedding tears, departed. Through this final statement the hagiographer makes a subtle reference to the 'tears of compunction,' a prelude to the tale which follows

⁹⁰ Luke 1:28,42

⁹¹ Is.28:19.

⁹² Is.28:18-19.

in which our writer tells how the girl becomes a nun, that is, takes up a life of penance and enters a monastery attached to the *paruchia* of St. Brendan.

The preceding example illustrates amply the idea of woman as weaker and more sinful than man which runs as a continuing thread through the ecclesiastical material of early Ireland.⁹³ But as we have noted, this is not the only thread woven into this material. Another is that of woman as intelligent, powerful, the equal of man. We must ask therefore how it is possible for such opposing views to co-exist. The evidence tends to indicate that most of the time they did not. What appears to have happened is that certain women were perceived to rise above their female nature, and these were awarded privilege, respect and status, and as such were able to hold positions of much power and

⁹³ The motif of woman as temptress has been noted by MacCurtain, who sees the idea at the heart of the lessening of women's ministerial role in the Church, and who lays part of the blame for the declining role of women within the Church in Ireland upon the practice of syneisactism. The practice existed in the early Church in the East where male and female virgins at times not only lived together chastely but also acted as partners in their ministry to others. We know the practice made its way to Brittany where such a group aroused the anger of the local bishops, for these allowed women (*virgines subintroductae*) to act as *conhospitae* and to distribute the wine to the congregation during the celebration of mass (Ed. L. Duchesne "Lovocat et Catihern," *Revue de Bretagne et de Vendée* 57 (1885) 6-7). In the West, the practice of syneisactism developed into a test of one's power in the face of temptation, and a gauge of the victory one had achieved over the passions. Under influence of this latter philosophical stance, women were seen as temptresses and seducers of men.(MacCurtain 1981, 540-541). (But see also Roger E. Reynolds, "Virgines Subintroductae in Celtic Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968) 547-566. Reynolds in this seminal article has brought this important topic to the attention of modern scholars). MacCurtain does not blame solely the practice of syneisactism for the lesser role assumed by women in the later Church, but says that the part played by pseudo-Clementine's *De Virginitate* in formation of the attitudes of the young should also not be ignored. For, says MacCurtain, the work was influential in separating men from women in the service of Christ in Ireland since it taught misogynist attitudes to young men when studying during their formation.(MacCurtain 1981, 540-541). In my opinion MacCurtain has made an important point here, for we should never ignore nor underestimate the influence young people might have been subject to in the various phases of the growth and spread of Christianity.

prestige. This is the woman whom Kerstin Aspegren refers to as the male-woman.⁹⁴ Such a woman in having crossed over the boundary of imperfection lying between male and female, and by becoming more perfect, has entered the male realm. Special vigilance is still needed, but maleness has been attained.

These ideas developed within a philosophical milieu which conceived of women not as a separate sex, but as incomplete and thus as imperfect men.⁹⁵ Faced with this situation, women strove to imitate a model of maleness which saw itself as more perfect and closer to that of the divine image.⁹⁶ The motif of the male-woman, as already noted, is found in a number of other sources including that body of literature commemorating the Christian martyrs. The language of the arena of martyrdom, a battle in which women conquered their own nature and assumed that of the male athlete to become victorious, was adopted into the language and thought of monasticism. With the end of the persecutions, the idea of dying for Christ took on new meaning which found expression in the monastic life, a life in which women as well as men had a place, for in martyrdom female and male became one. When martyrdom became a metaphor for the monastic life, the language of the arena came to be applied to those who chose to 'die to the world.'

With the spread of Christianity, language and metaphor came to act as a vehicle for the transmission of these ideas and those of a similar nature. These same themes are

⁹⁴ Aspegren, Kerstin, *The Male Woman*, Uppsala, 1990.

⁹⁵ Brown 1988, 10-11.

⁹⁶ Gospel of Thomas: *NHL* 114.

evident in the Irish *Lives* in which women struggle with the devil in their efforts to live the life of chastity. In the *Life of Ita* we are told that a certain virgin said to Ita: “Everywhere you avoid demons” (*demonia ubique fugas*).⁹⁷ Such success must however have appeared difficult, for on another occasion Ita is made to remark to the virgin Richena, foster-mother of Columbanus:

‘Ancilla Dei, iter tuum prosperum non esset, nisi episcopus tecum ueniret, quia multum demones insidiantur nostro sexui.’

‘Handmaid of God, your journey would not have prospered if the bishop had not come with you, because demons plot greatly against our sex.’⁹⁸

The remark carries the implication that without the help of a man, a woman cannot help but succumb to temptation. Similar attitudes seem also to have helped shape the story of Ita’s own struggles with the devil, and has helped reinforce the notion stated above that women need particular help in overcoming demonic forces. Thus when Ita is attacked by demons as she approaches the church for her consecration, it is not she who is depicted as conquering these forces, but rather it is the angels who have come to her aid who fight them manfully (*viriliter*) and finally overcome them.⁹⁹ It is in the use of the word ‘*viriliter*,’ and the noun to which it is attached, that the hagiographer has in this particular instance effectively stripped the female of all power and autonomy, and simultaneously reinforced those existing ideas associated with the weakness of women in the face of evil. This use

⁹⁷ Ita: *VSH* II, 11.

⁹⁸ Ita: *VSH* II, 24.

⁹⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 7.

of the word '*viriliter*' is of certain significance, for it is a word associated with the athlete whose virility has been increased by sexual abstinence.¹⁰⁰ For according to the ancient medical writer Soranus, "Men who remain chaste are stronger and better than others."¹⁰¹ The notion stems from medical theories of that time which claimed that it is the decisive amount of 'heat' or 'vital spirit' which produces the male, the foetus that has reached its fullest potential.¹⁰² Women as failed males lack this 'vital spirit,' and since it was possible for men also to lose their heat, they could regress and become like women in nature. Thus men were under constant pressure to remain 'virile,' and warned to constrain their sexual activity, since such activity could diminish this heat.¹⁰³

What we realize from this preceding discussion, is that when a hagiographer uses the word '*viriliter*' in reference to a woman, he/she is saying something very important in respect to that woman. Indeed the writer is saying that this particular woman has through celibacy managed to change her body to the point where she has become as virile or as manly as a male, and thus has achieved the 'athletic' perfection of a man. In doing so she also becomes in the image of God. Moreover, we must realize that when a particular word such as this travels elsewhere within a similar religious environment, that a whole body of ideology migrates with the use of such a word. Thus at some point in the evolution of

¹⁰⁰ Brown 1988, 19.

¹⁰¹ Brown 1988, 19; Soranus, *Gynaecia*, ed. J. Ilberg, Leipzig: Teubner, 1927, 17, 30.2; O. Temkin (trans.) *Soranus' Gynaecology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956, 27.

¹⁰² Brown 1988, 9-10.

¹⁰³ Brown 1988, 18.

Celtic spirituality in Ireland, the idea of woman as incomplete man made its way into the conceptual framework that nourished Christian thinking, and the female hero¹⁰⁴ who set forth and conquered the enemy in the form of her weaker female nature, was the female hero who had taken on manly attributes. Such a one was St. Monenna. When Monenna constructed her little monastery where she lived with Athea and her brother Ronan, she instituted a spartan lifestyle for herself and her followers. Indeed,

nemini onerosa existens, nullius elemosinam petens, de operibus manuum suarum sibi suisque victum querens, virilem animum in sexu femineo preferebat.

as a burden to no one, requesting no alms, and seeking sustenance for herself and her followers by the work of her own hands, she displayed a manly (*viriliter*) disposition in the female sex.¹⁰⁵

The word '*viriliter*' is also used in reference to the virgin Derlugdacha, a woman trained by Brigit of Kildare, the latter being widely venerated and whose sanctity forms the backdrop for many a popular tale. In the *Life of Derlugdacha* we find two separate versions of a particular story both of which use the referent '*viriliter*' to describe the action of this saint.

Darlughdacha...vidit aliquem militem, et in amore ejus capta est.....et fecerunt inter se conventionem miles et Virgo Darlughdacha...et inenarrabile certamen habebat in corde, inter amorem et timorem...Et conversa ad se orabat Dominum, ut adjuvaret eam in magna angustia. Et inspirans in ea gratia Dei, implevit duos ficones suos vivis carbonibus ignis, et intinxit

¹⁰⁴ For some discussion of saint as hero see (Bray 1982, 111ff.; Bray 1983, 153. Also see (Bray 1988) for further discussion of hero and model). As Bray so aptly points out, Christ, the model of monastic life, is the ultimate hero. (Bray 1982, 115ff.).

¹⁰⁵ Modwenna: *NL* II, 199 (line 21-24).

duos pedes suos in eos...et dolor dolorem vinceret: atque ita in suum lectulum pedibus combustis reversa est...Crastina autem die beata puella suum peccatum confessa est. Cui sancta mater Brigida ait: Ego vidi, filia, certamen tuum: sed quia viriliter dimicasti, et....ignis carnalis iterum non tentabit te.

Derlugacha saw a certain soldier and was seized with love of him and they arranged to meet. There was an indescribable struggle in her heart between love and fear, and searching within she prayed to the Lord, that he might help her in her great anguish. And the grace of God coming upon her, she filled her two shoes with living coals of fire and placed her two feet in these and pain vanquished sorrow, and thus with burned feet she returned to her bed. But on the following day, the blessed girl confessed her sin and the holy mother Brigit said to her: I, daughter, knew of your struggle, but since you fought manfully (*viriliter*) and the fire of the flesh will not again take hold of you.¹⁰⁶

While admittedly the occurrence of the use of the word '*viriliter*' in reference to women is sparse in this body of literature, the act of striving for 'virility' for 'manliness' receives a great deal of attention.

As a consequence, a great deal of the hagiographers' attention is focused upon the asceticism and celibacy of the various saints. This particular emphasis is not confined exclusively to the Irish female saints, since it is obvious that men too saw themselves as susceptible to the frailties of the flesh.¹⁰⁷

A correlation was drawn between the amount of blood in the body and the

¹⁰⁶ Brigit: *AS* (Feb. 1) p 169A, ch. 57.

¹⁰⁷ Death from fasting was not unheard of. We note, for example, that Columcille son of Fedlimed died of voluntary fasting. *Lebar Brecc* p. 236 col. 2 (pp. 301-302 Stokes *BL* "7 is do ghorta atbath, *acht* ba gorta tholtanach sin chena." "and he died of hunger, howbeit that was voluntary hunger.") See also (Cainnech: *VSH* I, 29) where a young boy dies as the result of a too severe fasting regime.

propensity to sin. Since women menstruated, bled with the birthing process and produced milk (processed blood) to feed the newborn infant, it was thought that women had more blood than men and thus were more prone to the passions than men, and therefore more sinful than men.¹⁰⁸ This was however a situation not without remedy, for sin was seen as an illness which could be cured in a system in which contraries healed contraries. The method was adopted indirectly from the ancient medical schools, and formed the foundation for the Irish penitential system.¹⁰⁹ It is in this manner that Molaise cures the virgin Copar of her malaise.

Molaisi daimindsi Sur laisiom copar a ainm Ropo trom iarum accobar forsind ingin ar ita trian forcraid de accobur in mulieribus sech na firu *Conidmidethar* som iarom ammod 7 a fit co cend mbliadnæ .i. fit mesraighti som. Doluid iarum cuci som día bliadna 7 cupidinem suam confessa est adhuc permansisse. Bui siom oc huamim ara cind. Sadais iarum ind snathaid fo tri inda dernaind co tolnadar na tri srotha folae asind laim Is iarum atbertsom is deithbir olse cid ansa don curp hitá a tóla morasa a congbal Dorragab som iarum ind praind iterum. Roboisi dano forsuidiu co cend mbliadna 7 cupido adhuc permansit Sadidsiom dano ind snathat fo tri inda laim isuidiu co tultatar dano na tri srothe fole eisse Dogabsom dano ind praind iterum co cend mbliadna 7 sadais and snathait isuidiu. Nicotolid immurgu bandae fola essiu isuidiu Is iarum asbert som frie congab tra i fechtsa olseisiom forsind fit sin cot ec.

Molaise of Daiminis had a sister Copar. Now desire lay heavily upon the girl, for it is a third part as strong again in women as in men. Then he regulates her portion and her pittance for a year: that is, a measured pittance. On that day year she

¹⁰⁸ p.177 Hughes *Church and Early Irish Society*; Padraig (Pádraig) Ó Fiannachta, "The Spirituality of the Céli Dé," 22-32 in *Irish Spirituality*, ed. by Michael Maher, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1982. See also Peter Brain *Galen on Bloodletting* 6, 25-26.

¹⁰⁹ McNeill, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* 44ff.; Peter Brain, *Galen on Bloodletting* 7.

came to him, and confessed that her desire still persisted. Now he was very busy sewing before her. Then he thrust the needle thrice into her palm, and three streams of blood flowed from her hand. Then said he, 'No wonder,' said he 'if it is hard for the body, wherein are these strong currents, to contain itself.' Then he diminished her meals a second time. She was on that ration for a year, and her desire still persisted. So after that time he thrusts the needle into her hand thrice, and three streams of blood flowed from it. So he reduced her meals again for a year, and at the end of that time he thrust the needle (again into her hand). This time, however, not a drop of blood came out of her. Then he said to her: 'In future, keep on this pittance until thy death.'¹¹⁰

The same motif appears in a description of Samthann in what might well be viewed as a portrait of the ideal of the holy woman. In this story, using her own body as *exemplum*, Samthann impresses upon the mind of a messenger the way she expects the monk Maelduin should act, namely, to live a holy life removed from the temptations of the flesh. She proceeds to pierce her cheek with a pin and squeezes vigorously. No blood emerges and even the drop of moisture which finally appears does so only after much pressure has been applied.¹¹¹ This characterization must have spoken graphically to a medieval Irish audience which would have immediately recognized in the action of Samthann that of the holy woman who has put aside her feminine nature.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ The parentheses are those of the editor (*MT* 60).

¹¹¹ O'Dwyer 1977, 85; *MT* 61.

¹¹² The theme, although admittedly expressed a little differently, is very popular in the literature of the Egyptian desert. Here we find mention of women who lived incognito in the desert disguised as men beneath the habits of monks. The most famous of these in Lower Egypt were Apollinaria, Hilaria and Anastasia. (Lucien Regnault, *La vie quotidienne des pères du désert en Égypte au IV^e siècle*, Paris: Hachette, 1990, 38).

Thus while it is woman's nature to be less holy than man, nevertheless, through holiness woman can transcend nature. The holy woman is portrayed in hagiographical literature as one who fasts. She may meditate, pray, work miracles, attend the sick, and perform any number of other saintly acts, but first and foremost she must fast. Ita fasts so frequently that an angel is sent to administer a warning, Brigit refuses to eat earthly food,¹¹³ Monenna lives on roots and herbs,¹¹⁴ while Samthann appears to have reduced her body to that of bloodless flesh lacking all sensation.¹¹⁵ This particular phenomenon of voluntary starvation is what Rudolph Bell has called 'holy anorexia.' The ostentious aim was to become a fitting vessel for the body of Christ, a pure container for the eucharistic host,¹¹⁶ but another important though not unrelated aim was to become more manly, and thus, as a consequence, more in the image of God. In many ways these women achieved their goal. Such extreme fasting as is described in the hagiographical record would have a number of obvious results. Female fat would disappear, body hair increase, sexual appetites decrease, and possibly most important of all, menstruation would be diminished or disappear altogether.¹¹⁷ The suppression of the monthly cycle was an important factor,

¹¹³ Fasting tends to cause headaches, a complaint Brigit was noted for.

¹¹⁴ Modwenna: NL 199.

¹¹⁵ T 61. The motif of body as vessel appears in the prologue to the Bollandist edition of the anonymous *Life of Moninna* taken from the Salmaticensis codex, where that saint is hailed as "spotless Moninna, pure virgin, radiant vessel" (*Moninna munda, virgo pura, aurum nitidum*) (Moninna: AASS July 2, 3).

¹¹⁶ BL 1689.

¹¹⁷ Rudolph N. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* pp.1. 3, 8; Betty B. Alford & Margaret L. Bogle, *Nutrition During the Life Cycle*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1982. pp.244-246; Arthur C. Guyton, *Textbook of Medical Physiology*, 5th ed., Philadelphia, London, Toronto: W.B. Saunders

for the penitentials prohibit a menstruating woman from receiving the eucharist. This prohibition deserves serious consideration, for in a religious climate wherein women's spirituality appears to have centered upon a devotion to the eucharist, indeed within a climate in which it would seem that at least at times women survived totally upon the eucharist, an intervening menstrual period would have achieved more than nuisance value. For it would not only deprive such women of their only source of food, but would also have been a tangible reminder to those women of their continuing unclean nature. In considering this connection between blood and sin, it is of some importance to note that the confessor, the doctor of the soul, was also called a leech,¹¹⁸ and the confessor consistently prescribed fasting as a remedy for sin, especially for those sins that were of a sexual nature. Nevertheless, despite this emphasis, women could, and did, act as confessor or 'doctor of the soul.' In this capacity they, once again, are portrayed as serving as 'representatives of the King.' for Christ too was called 'true Leech of every disease' (*A fír-liaig cecha tédma*).¹¹⁹

Conclusion

We have seen in the preceding discussion that women as well as men were at times, through the device of poetic licence, given the royal title of 'king' or 'queen.' While

Company, 1976, p.977.

¹¹⁸ *BL* 2470.

¹¹⁹ *TP* xx.

this was not an actual title bestowed upon ecclesiastics, its use in poetry and prose points to the high prestige given these leaders of monastic communities by a people whose whole legal and social system rested upon the amount of status owing each member of society. We have also discovered that the title 'king' could be applied to a woman, since women as heroes in the ascetic quest took on male attributes in overcoming their fragile female nature. Thus the successful female hero was the male-woman,¹²⁰ who in the world of the monastic *paruchia* could take her place beside men on a somewhat equal footing.

¹²⁰ The term is that of Aspegren (*The Male Woman*).

Chapter IV

Women's spirituality and the cult of the eucharist.

In the *Life of Ita* we read how that saint, yearning to receive the holy offering from one who was worthy, was miraculously transported to the monastery of Clonmacnoise where she received the eucharist as she had desired.

QUODAM sancto die rogavit beata Yta Deum, ut de manu digni sacerdotis corpus et sanguinem Christi illo die acciperet. Gratia autem 'Dei' duxit ancillam suam per longa spatia terrarum occulte ad ciuitatem Cluayn meic Noys; et accepit de manu digni sacerdotis corpus et sanguinem Domini, sicut ipsa uoluit.

On a certain holy day blessed Ita asked God that she might receive the body and blood of Christ on that day from the hand of a worthy priest. The grace of God secretly led his handmaid across a great distance of land to the monastery of Clonmacnoise, and she received the body and blood of the Lord from the hand of a worthy priest as she had wished.¹

The story gives at least some indication of the importance of the eucharist within the spiritual life of a woman who had dedicated her life to Christ. However, its importance is more far-reaching than indicated here, for a closer look at the record, often hidden in abstraction and couched in metaphor, indicates that the eucharist formed an even more important focus for the spiritual lives of consecrated women than is initially apparent. To elucidate this further we will examine a number of important motifs which not only appear with regular frequency in the literary corpus associated with the female saints of Ireland,

¹ Ita: *VSH* II, 20.

but which are also readily identifiable with the eucharist. These motifs include (a) the hospitable host who feeds the multitude (b) otherworld food, and (c) the preparation of the body to receive otherworld food. In making the latter identification we have kept the following in mind: in the service of the eucharist one is offered food from heaven in the form of bread and/or wine which through heavenly intervention has miraculously become the body and blood of Christ. This otherworld food is offered by an appointed host, one given particular authority to do so by the church hierarchy. Those receiving this food from the otherworld make careful preparation before ingesting the holy offering. This takes the form of a ritualistic cleansing that commonly includes some form of fasting. The main inspiration for this chapter is the work of Carolyn Walker Bynum, whose book *Jesus as Mother*² forms the foundation of the thesis presented here. It is also an underlying assumption of this chapter that the eucharist played such an important role in the spirituality of women leading an ascetic life, that the preceding motifs became a fundamental part of the fabric of the literary record associated with them, and that these same motifs at times, as in the Brigit corpus, took on a life of their own.

In her above-mentioned book, Bynum proposes the thesis that the motif of Christ feeding the multitude with his own body and blood in the eucharist became inverted in women's spirituality, particularly of the 12th to the 14th centuries, where it often found expression in metaphors of food and the feeding of Christ as an infant. Behind such metaphors, says Bynum, lies the idea of Christ as nurturer, Christ as mother, an idea

² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

which has its roots in medieval medical theory which saw breast milk as processed blood, and perceived the mother as feeding her child with her own substance. Bynum draws our attention to the fact that this correlation between blood and milk, both life-giving fluids of the body, is evident in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, who “as early as the second century makes explicit the connection between breast milk and the blood supplied to the foetus in order to use the nursing Christ as the image of the eucharist.”³ Moreover, adds Bynum, “in medieval devotions like the sacred heart, milk and blood are often interchangeable, as are Christ’s breasts and the wound in his side.”⁴ This metaphor of Christ as mother becomes inverted in what is predominantly a women’s spiritual phenomenon,⁵ in which the woman becomes the nurturer and suckles the infant Christ at her breast. Bynum claims the metaphor to be a reflection of women’s desire not only to ingest the eucharist to achieve union⁶ with Christ, but also of women’s lack of access to the eucharist, and even more importantly, of a desire to handle Christ’s body themselves,⁷ a priestly function usually reserved for the male hierarchy. This metaphor of mystic as mother nursing the Christ-child, is thought by Bynum to be an outgrowth of 14th century

³ *ibid.*, 132-3; Simon P. Wood, trans. *Christ, the Educator of Little Ones*, 6:36, 6:39.

⁴ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 132-33.

⁵ Bynum, in her investigation of 13th century devotion to the wounds of Christ, sees this as a women’s creation. (*ibid.*, 18).

⁶ This whole concept of union is a common motif throughout all the Irish hagiographical texts, and takes on political as well as spiritual dimensions.

⁷ Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 227, 230; Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 8, 191, 257.

women's mysticism developing from ideas ultimately traceable to St. Bernard.⁸ However it is my intention to show that the idea is not confined to continental Europe, nor is its origin to be found in the 12th century. The phenomenon is readily observable in the Irish hagiographical literature, and while metaphors of food and the feeding of Christ are of central importance in the *Lives* of both Saints Ita and Brigit they also are to be found in the *Lives* of other Irish women saints.

Often such metaphors find expression in notions of hospitality ultimately dependent upon the gospel texts for their primary inspiration. Irish monasteries made more than adequate provision for such hospitality, and it would seem that guests frequently came and went, intent upon sampling the generosity of the those within. The motif of the hospitable host holds a place of considerable importance in all genres of early Irish literature, a body of material which shows clearly that the concept of hospitality was one of the important binding agents of the social framework of early Irish society. This was true not only for early Christian Ireland, but also for what we know of the social structure of pagan Ireland,⁹ Indeed, so important was the custom within this early society, that both the giving and receiving of hospitality were carefully explicated and prescribed in the law tracts, and

⁸ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 92.

⁹ Hospitallers formed a very important social class within Irish society (McCone 1991, 32) and hospitality appears as one of a number of themes in such tales as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Knott 1936); *Fled Bricrend* (Henderson 1899); *Togail Bruiden Da Choca* (Stokes 1900); *Escnada Tige Buchet* (Greene 1955).

those who infringed these precepts were punished severely.¹⁰ However, while the motif recurs constantly in that literature we consider generated by a pagan society, material which relied ultimately for its transmission and preservation upon Christian scribes, we should not consider the motif as it occurs in these texts or in those that followed to be a strictly pagan phenomenon, nor accept too readily its presence in Ireland as due solely to a pagan inheritance.¹¹

Regardless of origin, the motif is widely spread throughout Irish hagiographical material,¹² and it is obvious that the practice of hospitality was one of some importance to the early Irish Church. Moreover, although we admit that some encouragement for the practice may have come from the surrounding society, it would also appear that the

¹⁰ *The Irish Canons* (c. 675) give much attention to the question of hospitality. Canons 2 and 3 of section five, speak of punishment for those who refuse hospitality and canon 4 mentions rewards given those who had in the past bestowed hospitality. Canons 6 to 10 of section five, which are concerned with the question of hospitality toward the clergy, declare that those addressed must feed the poor and hungry. They also declare that if priests and other clerics have been refused hospitality and, as a result, the death of one or more results, penance must be undertaken and compensation given according to the rank of the deceased. (*Irish Canons: IP* 5:2-4, 6-10). The views on hospitality expressed in the *Lives* are also in harmony with the precepts of the law tracts (*CIH* 13.1; *CIH* 14.1-2). We should however remember that changes may have taken place within these same tracts due to Christian influence, and that such influence is a matter of considerable current debate amongst scholars. For further information on this see McCone 1991, particularly Ch.4.

¹¹ The monks of the Egyptian desert offered hospitality to strangers (Ryan 1931, 323). When the sister of Pachomius established her foundation for women, she included a guest-house within its confines (Chitty, 1967, 21). In 473 AD. Abbot Euthymius making preparations for the welfare of his monastery before his impending death, established rules of hospitality for his desert monastery (*ibid.*). We note also that Basil, emphasizing the importance of hospitality, advises that Christians give hospitality, quietly and frugally, one to the other (Clarke 1925, 38). And in the west, Martin of Tours washed the feet of arriving guests and offered them hospitality (Ryan 1931, 323).

¹² See, for example the *Life of Brigit* (*B. Br.* 41), in which the author relates how travelling saints are billeted in the neighbourhood.

main impetus for the practice can be found within Christianity itself. The Gospels themselves relate that:

Et convocatis duodecim discipulis suis...Hoc duodecim misit Iesus: praecipiens eis, dicens...In quamcumque autem civitatem aut castellum intraveritis, interrogate, quis in ea dignus sit: et ibi manete donec exeatis...Et quicumque non receperit vos...exeuntes foras de domo, vel civitate, excutite pulverem de pedibus vestris.

And when he (Jesus) had called the twelve disciples to him...These twelve Jesus sent forth and commanded them saying...Into whatsoever city or town you shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy: and remain there until you go on your way...And whosoever shall not receive you....when you depart from the courtyard of that home, or from that city, shake the dust from your feet.¹³

From this and similar passages, Christianity took its models of hospitality which were to become so important to monasticism in the centuries which followed. In the years immediately following the death of Christ when the emphasis was on the imminent coming of the Kingdom, the need of these wandering preachers for food and shelter was great and Christians were urged to give aid to others: "Give hospitality one to the other without complaint" (*Hospitales invicem sine murmuratione*) declares the apostle Peter.¹⁴ Such unstinting generosity was seen as a sign of goodness, and in the stories of the desert fathers we find many examples of such kindness. On one occasion, for example, it is related that God told Paphnutius of a certain man who gave hospitality to strangers, who

¹³ Matt.10:1,5,11,14.

¹⁴ I Pet.4:9.

greeted them, washed their feet and gave them food for their journey. God noted this man had only one fault — he was not a Christian, a fault Paphnutius set out to remedy without delay.¹⁵

When Christianity reached Ireland, the Irish, with their own well-developed traditions of hospitality,¹⁶ placed much emphasis on such teachings, and we find frequent reference to them in the various hagiographical tales. Typical is the story of the devil and St.Moling, in which Moling declares:

INtan dothéiged *crist* doacallam nacéle ndé nipochorcarda na
(rígda) dothéiged *acht* irrechtaib natróg .i. nallobor 7 naclam
nobíd *crist*.

When Christ used to come to converse with the servants of God (*Culdees*), not in purple nor royally did he come, but in the shapes of the wretched, namely, of the sick and the lepers. used Christ to be.¹⁷

The theme of the holy traveller seeking hospitality, and the associated motif of the worthy host,¹⁸ occurs frequently throughout the Irish texts. In the *Rule of Ailbe*,¹⁹ a work which

¹⁵ Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (repr. of 1936 ed.), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976, 48-9.

¹⁶ Fergus Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, (Early Irish law series, vo. III) Dublin: the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988, 36, 139-140, 156. Reference to the custom is made to the practice in a number of early Irish law tracts, (*Crúth Gablach* xv; *CIH* 1123.22-4; *CIH* 15.15; *CIH* 13.1; *CIH* 14.1-2). But also see (McCone 1991), particularly ch.4, 84-106, where that author advises caution in the use of the law tracts as evidence for pre-Christian practice. For a history of Indo-European linguistic usage see Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969, 87-101.

¹⁷ Stokes, *Goidelica*, 179-180.

¹⁸ Brigit, for example, refuses to eat until her host is baptized (*Life of Brigit: BL* 1460).

stresses humility, obedience, and hospitality, the ancient author advises the monk:

Ferthaiges ²⁰ umal aurlithe	don chumang conicc,
bendachad ocus fálte	fri cech n-óin dodnic.
Tech glan donaib óigedaib	ocus tene mór,
ossaic is indlat doib	la dergad cen brón.

(Let there be) a steward, humble, obedient, to the extent of his power,
blessing and welcome for everyone who comes to him.
A clean house for the guests and a big fire,
washing and bathing for them, and a couch without sorrow.²¹

Women's foundations as well as men's allowed for the housing and feeding of guests. Ita, Brigit, Lasair and Samthann, all are said to have welcomed guests at their monasteries,²² and while they always made provision for guests generously, at times this hospitality obviously strained the resources of the monastic community.²³ This concept of hospitality

¹⁹ Although the language is that of 8-10th century Old Irish, it is believed that the rule was written by St. Ailbe who was a contemporary of St. Patrick. (Vincent O Maidin, "The Monastic Rules of Ireland," *Cistercian Studies* XV (1980) 25-26.

²⁰ Literally 'man of the house' i.e., host.

²¹ Joseph O'Neill "The Rule of Ailbe of Emly," *Ériu*, III (1907) 92-115: verse 40^a, p. 106. But see also *ibid.*, 11, 14. The parentheses are mine.

²² *Cog.* 8; *B. Br.* 28, 32; Lasair 98-99; Darerca: Heist 4, 5; Ita: *VSH* 19, 20, 24; Samthann: *VSH* II 4, 13. Of interest also Senán: *BL* 2426.

²³ There are numerous stories that relate how a number of visitors descend upon some monastery seeking hospitality and, since no food is available to feed the extra mouths, all are provided for through some miraculous event. (Samthann: *VSH* II 3, 4, 9, 10; Comgall: *VSH* 28; *Cog.* 11; Cronan: *VSH* 23, and many more). In the *Life of Comgall* we see just how vulnerable these communities must have been at the time to hunger and poverty, for here we are told how the monks' supplies were stolen by robbers, leaving the community in dire straits (Comgall: *VSH* 17). See also *VSH* I, cxvii. In the *Life of Monenna* by Conchubranus we again catch a glimpse of the absolute poverty that could at times afflict these religious communities (Conch. 8).

became attached to the Christian notion of charity²⁴ that demanded that one feed and provide for the poor and those in need, for it was held that through such action one also fed and communed with Christ.

The person on whose shoulders the responsibility ultimately rested for feeding these guests, as well as others who came to the doors of the monastery seeking food and alms, was the steward of the monastery.²⁵ The office is not always distinct and though, at times, the responsibility appears to have been divided, the function itself is perfectly clear. The person or persons who carried out this function were important and powerful people within the monastic hierarchy,²⁶ and bore a tremendous responsibility for the welfare of those within their communities.²⁷ This authority was augmented by, or combined with, that of the guest-master, whose responsibility it was to care for those who came seeking

²⁴ Cassian, *Conferences* 61.

²⁵ The *Life of Samthann* provides us with an excellent example. (Samthann: *VSH* II 25).

²⁶ Samthann: *VSH* II 25. Kim McCone points out that in the so-called 'genuine' prologue to the *Senchus Már* (*CIH* 348.24-349.25), the secular hospitaller in ancient Ireland was one of a group given very high status by both the people and the law. (McCone 1991, 22); More importantly, McCone draws a parallel between the hospitaller (*brügu*) of the ancient tradition, and the giving of hospitality in the hagiographically literature, here more particularly, in the early Brigit corpus (*ibid.*, 162).

²⁷ Ryan declares that these were leading monastic officials, and divides this responsibility between the *cellarer* and the *oeconomus* of the monastery. (Ryan 1931, 274). However, while the title of *cellarer* appears regularly in the Lives, that of *oeconomus* occurs much less frequently. Moreover, Plummer notes that this latter officer appears under a number of various titles (*VSH* II 'oeconomus' 383) and that "the title '*dispensator*' is variously applied, being used synonymously with '*magister hospitalis*', with '*economus*', and with '*cocus*'...in different monasteries the various duties may have been differently distributed, and in the smaller ones a single officer would have to discharge many functions" (*VSH* I cxviii n.6).

hospitality and alms.²⁸ In these functions of the steward or guest-master, we once again observe biblical parallels.

Quamobrem in ipsis foribus accedentes ad dispensatorem domus locuti sunt...Et introductis domum, attulit aquam, et laverunt pedes suos, deditque pabulum asinis eorum...Praecepit autem Ioseph dispensatori domus suae, dicens: Imple saccos eorum frumento, quantum possunt capere: et pone pecuniam singulorum in summitate sacci.

Therefore they (the brothers of Joseph) approached those at the entrance, that they might speak with the steward (*dispensatorem*) of the house...and when they were taken into the house, he brought them water and they washed their feet, and he gave food to their asses...And Joseph commanded the steward of his house, saying: Fill their sacks with as much grain as they are able to carry: and place the money of each in the mouth of his sack.²⁹

The motif is carried from the Old to the New Testaments, where it appears among other places in the parable of the unjust steward.

Dicebat autem et ad discipulos suos: Homo quidam erat dives, qui habebat villicum: et hic diffamatus est apud illum quasi dissipasset bona ipsius. Et vocavit illum, et ait illi: Quid hoc audio de te? Redde rationem villicationis tuae: iam enim non poteris villicare.

And he said to his disciples. There was a certain rich man, who had a steward (*villicum*): and this steward was accused in the presence of the master that he had wasted his master's goods. And he called him and said to him. What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship: for you may no longer be steward.³⁰

²⁸ See for example Darerca: Heist 4.

²⁹ Gen.43:19, 24; 44:1, parentheses mine.

³⁰ Luke 16:1,2.

As with many other biblical motifs, that of the steward and the concept of stewardship are used both literally and figuratively in the sacred literature,³¹ and one must at least ponder the significance of the use of the same motif in the *Lives* of the Irish saints.

When Samthann took the veil her hagiographer notes that she immediately entered the monastery of Airnaide, and there assumed the office of steward (*dispensatrix*).³² In this position she cared for and fed those who came seeking alms, and, being in charge of the reserves of the monastic community,³³ she provided food for guests.³⁴ When Findian of Clonard raised the sister of Moses and of Ainmire from the dead, this virgin served as Findian's steward in their monastery at Druim Etir Dá Loch. In this capacity she killed her only calf for him and is said to have provided him with a pail of milk and water.³⁵

Brigit too, although not given the title of steward or any related title, is nevertheless portrayed as performing that function throughout the literature associated with her.³⁶ However, in this instance the metaphor is more noticeably biblical in character than in the

³¹ The allegorical and metaphorical nature of biblical literature has probably been no better illustrated than in the work of Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1983; Middlesex: Penquin Books Ltd., 1990. See, for example, 10, 24, 84-85.

³² Samthann: *VSH* II 2. Note that the author of the Life uses the same word for steward that Jerome used in Gen. 43:19, and that Samthann, just as the steward of Joseph in the biblical texts, looks after guests and provides alms for the poor.

³³ Samthann: *VSH* II 3.

³⁴ Samthann: *VSH* II 4.

³⁵ Findian: *BL* 2696. This incident is important, for it shows that Druim Etir Dá Loch was probably part of Findian's monastic *parouchia*.

³⁶ McCone has made the same connection (McCone 1991, 3).

Life of Samthann. In the biblical texts the steward is responsible for his lord's resources, the lord being identified with the Heavenly Father and with Christ.

Dixit autem Dominus: Quis, putas, est fidelis dispensator, et prudens...Beatus ille servus quem, cum venerit Dominus, invenerit ita facientem.

And the Lord said: Who do you suppose is that faithful and wise steward (*dispensator*)...Blessed is that servant, whom when the lord shall come will act thus.³⁷

In the house of her foster-father Cathbad, Brigit controls the produce of the dairy, and while acting in this capacity she gives the bounty of her 'father' to the poor.³⁸ On another occasion Dubthach, her natural father, attempts to sell her as a slave complaining that she has taken all and given it away.

Tainic Brigit iarsin 7 a máthair le co tegh a hathar. Cacha bhfaghbhaitis immorro a lamha-si do chrudh 7 bhiadh 7 airilliudh a hathar doberreadh do bhochtaibh 7 aidilcnechaib in Coimhdhed, cur'bhó dimdhuch a hathair dhi aire sin, curo acobhrastar a reic na hi noebhBrighdi.

Thereafter Brigit went with her mother to her father's house. Of her father's wealth and food and property, whatsoever her hands would find or would get, she used to give to the poor and needy of the Lord. Wherefore her father was displeased with her and decided to sell the holy Brigit.³⁹

³⁷ Luke 12:42, 43.

³⁸ *B. Br.* 12. Hasty assumptions should not be made as to the identification of the 'poor' mentioned in these texts. Certainly the monastery would have a lay community toward which it probably bore some economic as well as religious responsibility. However, the same texts, on a number of occasions, identify these 'poor' as some wandering monk or ascetic, or even an abbot known to the community, who has come to the monastery seeking alms. The problem deserves further investigation. See, for example fn.10 of this chapter.

³⁹ Brigit: *BL* 1308.

The story also appears in the Old Irish *Life* edited by Donncha Ó hAodha, although in this instance, instead of giving her father's goods to the poor, she gives them to the 'clients of God' (*célt dé*).⁴⁰ In this *Life* Brigit's authority in the household is already evident, and while it may appear that she has misappropriated this authority, we also realize that the underlying implication of the author is that the lord to whom she owes fidelity is not the father Dubthach, but rather the Lord of heaven. We note also that in this Old Irish *Life* the identification of the poor with Christ is made more explicit. On this occasion, Dubthach, wishing to sell Brigit as a slave, took her to the king:

'Cren dí-m-sa m'ingin dochum fognama duit, ar at-rolleset a (m)besa.' 'Cid dathar di?', ol in(d) ri. 'Ni ansæ. Is dichmarcach,' ar Dubthach, 'nach ad-chi gataid a lám'.

'Buy my daughter from me to serve you, for her manners have deserved it.' 'What cause of annoyance has she given?', said the king. 'Not hard', said Dubthach. 'She acts without asking permission; whatever she sees, her hand takes'.⁴¹

Dubthach then returned to Brigit, and discovered his sword missing, and asked her to explain. She replied: '*Christus portavit*' (Christ has taken it).⁴² This was obviously thought to have been a sign of Brigit's special chrism, for we find the complaint repeated, though in this particular case within an entirely new narrative context, in the Ameotosus' *Life of Brigit*.⁴³

⁴⁰ B. Br. 13.

⁴¹ B. Br. ch. 13.

⁴² B. Br. ch. 13.

⁴³ Brigit: Ameotosus 14.

Brigit's hospitality has been noted on more than one occasion by the hagiographers. One such story tells of a crisis during the Easter festival. As virgin and abbess she must distribute the bounty of the heavenly father at the feast of the Lord at Easter and, although supplies are critically short, through a miracle she manages to supply her whole monastic federation with beer for the duration of the festival.⁴⁴ This concept of hospitality became attached to the Christian notion of charity,⁴⁵ Brigit's special chrism, and most especially to that aspect of charity that demanded that one feed and provide for the poor and those in need. Thus food, and the act of giving food to others, became intrinsic to Christian spirituality. The motif certainly receives much attention in our Irish *Lives*, but it is within the *Life of Brigit* that we find its more intensive manifestation. Indeed, we are told that when Brigit took the veil the beatitude which she chose was that of charity.⁴⁶ For whatever reason, the motif of charity, and thus of hospitality, and, more importantly for our argument in this chapter, associated motifs revolving around food and drink, became closely associated with Brigit and form the foundation of what we are told of her life.

This whole emphasis on food in the lives of these women, and most particularly in the *Life of Brigit*, is not without significance. The texts consistently portray her in connection with the production of food and in the act of feeding guests or the poor. Brigit claimed that in feeding these she fed Christ, "for she used to say that Christ was

⁴⁴ Brigit: *BL* 1355.

⁴⁵ Cassian, *Conferences* (trans. Colm Luibhéid), New York/Mahwah/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1985, 61.

⁴⁶ Brigit: *BL* 1341.

in the person of every faithful guest” (*Ar atbereadh-si bidh Crist i persoin cech aighedh irisigh.*)⁴⁷ The idea comes directly from the Gospels, for resident behind the metaphor of food and the giving of food exist a number of biblical passages:

Tunc dicet rex his...esurivi enim, et dedistis mihi manducare: sitivi, et dedistis mihi bibere; hospes eram, et collegistis me: nudus, et cooperuistis me: infirmus, et visitastis me: in carcere eram, et venistis ad me. Tunc respondebunt ei iusti, dicentes: Domine, quando te vidimus esurientem, et pavimus te: sitientem, et dedimus tibi potum? quando autem te vidimus hospitem, et collegimus te: aut nudum, et cooperuimus te? aut quando te vidimus infirmum, aut in carcere, et venimus ad te? Et respondens rex, dicet illis: Amen dico vobis, quamdiu fecistis uni ex his fratribus meis minimis, mihi fecistis.

Then the King shall say to them....For I hungered and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in: naked, and you clothed me: sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came to me. Then the righteous answered him, saying: Lord, when did we see you hungry, and fed you? Thirsty, and gave you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and took you in? or naked, and clothed you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and came to you? And replying the king shall say to them...I say to you truly: as long as you have done this for one of these, the least of my brothers, you have done it for me.⁴⁸

There seems to have been a penchant on the part of the Irish to use and manipulate an existing metaphor⁴⁹ while at the same time treating the image contained in it in a purely

⁴⁷ Brigit: *BL* 1266.

⁴⁸ Matt.25:34-40.

⁴⁹ McNally in his work on Irish exegesis speaks of the Irish tendency “to discover meaning beyond meaning.” He goes on to remark on its “facility to see reality behind reality, to allegorize and spiritualize to create what is not and to re-create what is.” (Robert E. McNally, “The Imagination and Early Irish Biblical Exegesis,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 10 (1969) 24, 26.

literal manner.⁵⁰ Certainly the metaphor of the feeding of the poor has been treated accordingly, for the belief was well established, in Ireland as elsewhere, that Christ himself was fed in the person of the poor.

Boi Brigit tara héisi, 7 ara[e] in druadh oc ingaireu na cet[h]ræ,
7 nach maistreth do-gnith na-randad a toruth i nde-r(e)ainn
deac cona gruth, 7 no-bith in tres chuit dec i mmedon 7 ba
mo-s(u)idi(u) ambui cach cuit. 'Ceth torba[e] lat in sin?',
aluiriga. 'Ni ansæ,' ol Brigit. 'Ra-chuala ro-batar da apstal deac
apud Dominum, 7 he-som fessin in tres deac. Rom-bia-sa la
Dia: ticfat .xiii. pauperes in unaquaque die fo chomlin Críst 7
a apstal.'... 'Is ansa[e] dam-sa,' ol Brigit, 'a biad feissin do gabail
do C[h]rist.' ⁵¹

Brigit was working in her stead, and the druid's charioteer was herding the cattle, and every churning she made, she used to divide the produce into twelve portions with its curds, and the thirteenth portion would be in the middle and that was greater than every other portion. 'Of what advantage do you deem that to be?', said the charioteer. 'Not hard', said Brigit. 'I have heard that there were twelve apostles with the Lord, and he himself the thirteenth. I shall have from God that thirteen poor people will come to me one day, the same number as Christ and his apostles' ...(for) 'It is difficult for me,' said Brigit, 'to deprive Christ of his own food.'⁵²

⁵⁰ This of course is not exclusive to the Irish, but the Irish did have a propensity, especially when it came to ascetic behaviour, for taking ideas to their extreme limits. An example of such literal treatment of textual ideas may be seen for example in the *Voyage of Brendan*, where Brendan, wishing to celebrate the Easter festival, is said to have sent his monks to find a 'perfect lamb' for the passover sacrifice (Brendan: Heist 12). The concept is evident also in the Irish habit of treating the Gospels as a relic and the placing of these codices in shrines, and the corresponding claim in the *Leabhar Breac* which declares the Gospels to be the body of Christ (Martin McNamara "The Bible in Irish Spirituality," in *Irish Spirituality*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1981, 34; but see also Robert Atkinson *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac*, (Todd Lecture Series, vol. II, part II) Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1887, 185, 433.

⁵¹ The parentheses are those of the editor.

⁵² *B. Br.* 12. The parentheses are mine. With the passage of time the motif becomes even more explicit, as can be observed in the tales collected by Lady Gregory. Here in a recounting of the same event, Brigit is made to say: "It is in the name of Christ I feed the poor; for Christ is

Charity was an important aspect of Irish spirituality, and we find the motif not only in the literature pertaining to Brigit but also in that associated with other women saints. Brigit is said to have had for a time the virgin Monenna as a nun within her monastery. During this period Monenna held the position of *portaria hospitalis* which here seems to have been that of guest-master, for in carrying out her assigned duties she is said to have not only healed the sick but also to have driven out demons.⁵³ For this, we are told, she received many gifts,⁵⁴ but having a charitable nature, and much to the chagrin of some of her fellow sisters, she gave all she received in alms to the poor.

Omnibus igitur monasterialibus obediens iussionibus, iubente abbatissa, fit portaria hospitalis. Hoc quoque officium ipsa, omnibus complacens, sollicite complevit. Donavit enim ei Altissimus gratiam conferendi sanitatem infirmis ac expellendi ab obsessis demones. Talibus itaque signis in vulgo de ea notificatis, omnibus extitit venerabilis in tantum quod alimentis ac muneribus a pluribus sue sanctitati collatis cotidie

in the body of every poor man." Lady Gregory *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, Dublin, Dun Emer Press, 1906, 16; repr. as *The Voyages of Saint Brendan the Navigator & Tales of the Irish Saints*, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth Ltd, 1973.

⁵³ Darerca: Heist 5.

⁵⁴ Gift-giving was a custom which formed an important part of the fabric of Irish society, thus we find many stories in which the laity show their appreciation to a monastery by giving gifts (alms) when favours have been executed. Such generosity was not confined to the laity, and we find not only clerics or other members of monasteries show appreciation in the same way, but even God on occasion was seen to do the same. An Irish *Life of Ciarán* tells the story of two kings, one of whom sought the help of Ciarán. King Concra, fearful of the wiles of the wife of King Aengus, went to St. Ciarán. Ciarán helped him and in return "Concra offered himself and his seed to Ciarán" (...7 tuc Concrach e fein cona shiol do Ciaran). Elsewhere in the same tale we hear of a woman who having been restored to life by the saint, "she gave the land called Léim Achaill to God and to Ciaran" (...7 tucc si an ferann, darab ainm Léim Achaill, do Dhía, 7 do Chiarán). (Ciarán of Saighir: *BNE* II 12:36, 27:56) In the *Annals* we find reference to an assembly of the clergy and laity of Munster. The group, called together by Donnchadh son of Brian, King of Ireland, enacted a law designed to protect the people. Then, so the annalist says, "God gave peace and favourable weather in consequence of this law." (*AFM* AD.1050)

visitaretur; sed ex hiis omnibus nichil sibi reservans, in Deum curam suam iactans, cunctaque pauperibus ad se venientibus propter Christum erogabat.

Therefore she obeying all monastic orders, and being obedient to the abbess, became the guest-master. And she also filled this office carefully, pleasing all. And the Almighty bestowed grace upon her, so that she healed the sick and drove out demons from those possessed. Therefore, with such signs noted by the common people concerning her, her venerable nature was evident to all so much that she was visited daily by those gathered there on account of her sanctity, with food and gifts; but keeping nothing of all of this for herself, entrusting her welfare to God, and was distributing everything, for the sake of Christ, to the poor who came to her.⁵⁵

We see from the above comments that in her appointed position, Monenna not only cares for the sick who would have come to the monastic guest-house for aid, but she also wields the authority to distribute food and other necessities to those who come begging alms. Thus it becomes obvious that Monenna performs those duties that we associate with the position of steward during her stay at the monastery of Brigit.

It is clear from what has preceded, that the motif of hospitality, that of the steward, and the motif of charity, are all closely related. What is of even greater importance to our present discussion is that these three motifs centre upon food, and while a focus on food is evident in the *Lives* of the men in Irish monasticism, food holds a much more central place in the *Lives* of Irish women saints. Food acts as a metaphor in the *Lives* of Brigit, Ita, Monenna and Attracta. All of these, except for the *Lives* of Brigit, centre upon fasting, and while admittedly all evidence points to fasting as a very real phenomenon in the

⁵⁵ Darerca: Heist 5.

milieu of Celtic spirituality, this does not mean that food does not function, at one and the same time, as a metaphor in these *Lives*. Indeed, in the *Life of Ita*, the use of food as metaphor will become more than obvious to the reader. The *Lives*, most especially that of Brigit, consistently portray women offering food to others. This food, as will be seen in the argument which follows, is often of a miraculous nature. This is more than evident in the stories of Brigit, for the texts give much attention to the efforts of this saint to provide through miraculous means for those in need. These efforts revolve around a number of miracles involving primarily the production of milk, a well established metaphor for blood, and beer, a weakened metaphor for the blood of the eucharist. Moreover it is no less significant that in offering these to others, Brigit makes claim that she is offering nourishment to Christ, nourishment that predominantly takes the form of milk or milk products.

Another significant motif which appears in the Brigit literary tradition is that of saint as mother of the Saviour, and reverential titles given Brigit include 'the Mary of the Gaels', 'the mother of Jesus'⁵⁶ and 'the mother of the high-king.'⁵⁷ This identification of Brigit as a manifestation of the virgin Mary is said to have been made by Bishop Ibhair as the result of a vision, the details of which we find in the following story:

FEACHT ann dorothluigh araili bannscal irisech co tised Brigit le
i MaghLife, ár robui coimhthinol senaid Laigen ann.
Rofoillsighedh d'espoc Ibhair bai isin dail Muire Ingen do

⁵⁶ "Ultán's Hymn in Praise of Brigit" line 6, p.135 and "Broccán's hymn in Praise of Brigit" lines 4 & 63, pp.137, 139, in *Goidelica*; Brigit: BL 1260.

⁵⁷ "Broccán's Hymn", *ibid.*

thecht isin dail. Teit in bannscal arnamharach, 7 Brigit maille fria, docum na dala. Is ann roraidh espoc Ibhair: 'As i so in Mhuire adconnacsa.' Robennachisat in uile shlógh inhi noemh-Brigit, conad hi Brigit Muire na nGæidel o sin ille.

Once upon a time a certain faithful woman visited Brigit to go with her into Moy Liffey, for a gathering of the synod of Leinster was held there. It was manifested to Bishop Ibhair, who was in the assembly, that Mary the virgin was coming into the assembly. [add] Then said Bishop Ibhair: 'This is the Mary whom I beheld.' And the whole host blessed Saint Brigit. Wherefore Brigit is henceforth called 'the Mary of the Gael.'⁵⁸

The motif has also been woven into the fabric of a poem honoring Brigit, where it has been used to color the whole of the text:

Brigit be bhithmhaith...don-fé don bhithfhlaith an ghrian tind toidlech...an máthair Íssu. An fhirógh inmain go n-ordan adhbhuil...Robet iar sinet ar cuirp a cilicc dia rath ron-bræno, ron-særa Brighit.

Brigit, excellent woman...May she, the sun dazzling, splendid, guide us to the eternal Kingdom!...the mother of Jesus! The true virgin, dear, with vast dignity...Let our bodies after old age be in sackcloth: With her grace may Brigit rain on us, free us!⁵⁹

The loving mother nourishes her child with her milk, and it is thus of no little importance that milk forms a dominant motif in the Brigit literature, and that with this milk, she feeds Christ in the guise of the needy and the poor.⁶⁰ The milk motif in this literature is often connected in a general way to the the motif(s) of hospitality and charity. While many of

⁵⁸ Brigit: BL 1260.

⁵⁹ Brigit: BL 1742-1754.

⁶⁰ B. Br. ch. 12; Brigit: BL 1308.

the stories pertaining to Brigit centre upon feeding the poor and almsgiving, just as many others focus their attention upon the act of hospitality and the care of guests, and thus upon the act of feeding Christ through them. Once again, milk and milk products receive much attention and hold a place of importance in such stories. We are told, for example, that on one occasion when seven bishops came to visit there was little to eat, but Brigit miraculously caused her cows to give a third milking and there was plenty for all.⁶¹ This act of feeding, and more particularly, the act of feeding milk, becomes a powerful symbol and metaphor in these *Lives* and takes upon itself the nature of the eucharist. For milk has both a liquid and solid state, and in light of those medieval beliefs which equated milk with blood, can be viewed in its various states as both flesh and blood. Indeed, milk products were called 'white meats.'⁶² and held their own special place of importance in the regimens of the ascetically inclined.

We have seen in the preceding discussion that desire for contact with Christ occurs frequently in the Brigit corpus, and that this desire is expressed most frequently through the motif of saint as mother. It is, however, within the text of the *Félire Óengusso*,⁶³

⁶¹ Brigit: *BL* 1680.

⁶² McNeill *MHP* 144, fn.7. For a description of the various milk products available to the early Irish see Harold Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, 184.

⁶³ Jan.15 *Félire* 42.44. Stokes remarks that this particular story was copied from several other old manuscripts by O'Clery and others. The story was certainly known to Oengus, for the main entry in the *Félire* under Jan.15 says: Foráith már ngur ngalar, carais már tromm tredan, in grían bán ban Muman Íte Chluana credal. (She succoured many grievous diseases: she loved many severe fastings, the white sun of Munster's women, Íte the devout of Cluain.) (Jan.15 *Félire* 36). The story may have been recorded within the ranks of the Céili Dé, however we find that at least at Tallaght such extreme asceticism was frowned upon, for the tradition preserved here spoke forcibly against

compiled by a member of the Céli Dé community about 800 AD. that the motif finds its most remarkable expression. In the *Félire* we discover an unusual story⁶⁴ about the virgin Ita and her fosterling, here portrayed as a dung beetle (*dael*)⁶⁵ which she allows to suck⁶⁶ upon her side for nourishment. Women feed their young with their own bodily substance, and this motif forms the heart of the tale we find in this instance attached to the virgin Ita. The story preserved by Oengus relates how:

Foraith mor ngur ngalar .i. ro fortachtaig Dia di *nó* ro reithistar mor ngalair .i. ár ba mor in galur di, dael oc diul méitigh^{ther} oirce ro chlóid a lethtaeb uile, ní fítr nech sin furri. Téit fecht n-óen amach: tic in dael assa fochlai dia heis. Atchiat na caillecha hé 7 marbait *didu* hé. Tic-si iarsin [7] ór na tainic sim *didu* iarfaigis cid dochuaid mo dalta? ar sí, 7 cia *dusfaraill* hé? Na gat nem foirnd, ar na caillecha, 7 sinde ro marb hé, 7 ní fetamur nabbo urchoitech hé. Cid fil ann *didu*, ar sí, acht ní geba caillech *tre* bithu mo chomarbus issin ngnim sin, 7 ní geb-sa *didu*, ar isi, óm Thigerna. co tuca [a Mac] a nim a richt naíden dia altraim dam *dono*. Co tainic in t-aingel no gnathaiged timthirecht disí ara hamus. Mithig em. atbered sí fris. Co n-erbairt fria: doberthar duit inní *conaighi*. Co tainic

it (Gwynn and Purton, *The Monastery of Tallaght* #77. See also #80).

⁶⁴ The dating of this anecdote is discussed in ZCP I p.345

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the Irish *dael*, see Whitley Stokes "Irish Etymologies," ZCP 3 (1901) 468. The reference to the dung beetle (*dael*) is highly significant and entirely apt in the referential framework operative here. That which is the lowest and most insignificant is the most exalted, i.e., Christ himself. Christ who brings the promise of resurrection to the human race is fittingly represented here through the symbol of the dung beetle, the scarab, which was the symbol of the creator god Khopri in early Egyptian religion, a symbol of the sun and bringer of life out of death. For a discussion of this aspect of the dung beetle see Jacquetta Hawkes *The First Great Civilizations*, London: Penguin Books, 1973, 430-431.

⁶⁶ That the writer has chosen a sucking word, a word we associate with the feeding of babes. instead of a chewing or eating word, is further indicative of a relationship between the prose and poem section, for by its inclusion the author draws a correlation with the use of '*alid*' in the verse section, and tends further to tie the fosterling in the first section to the infant Christ in the following section.

Crtst chuici a richt naíden. Conid ann atbert si:

She succoured great grievous disease, i.e. God helped her, or much of disease ran (to her), i.e. for great was her disease, a stag-beetle as big as a lap-dog a-sucking her destroyed the whole of one of her sides.⁶⁷ No one knew of that upon her. Once upon a time she goes forth, and the stag beetle comes out of its den after her. The nuns see it and then kill it. Thereafter she comes, and since it came not to her she asked, "Where has my fosterling gone?" she says, "and who has visited it?" "Do not rob us of heaven!" say the nuns: "tis we that have killed it, for we knew that he was hurtful." "However that may be," saith Íte, "for that deed no nun shall ever take my succession. And I will not take (aught) from my Lord until He give me His Son out of heaven in the shape of a babe to be fostered by me." Then came towards her the angel who used to attend her. "Tis time indeed," quoth she to him. Whereupon he said to her: "What thou askest will be given to thee." So Christ came to her in the form of a babe, and then she said:⁶⁸

The anecdote has to date received little attention. Kenney refers to it as a 'disgusting story,'⁶⁹ while Baring-Gould and Fisher suggest the saint had cancer,⁷⁰ an interesting conclusion since Ita seems to have been quite energetic most of her life, and

⁶⁷ Findchua, who is reputed to have hung himself on hooks placed under his armpits, is also said to have been covered with holes from beetles (*dhaeluibh*) (Findchua: *BL* 2954); *Félire* Stokes Nov.25; *Martyr. Donegal* pp.316, 318) But the metaphor is that of the suffering martyr, with the emphasis placed upon the suffering itself, while that in the Ita story serves an entirely different function.

⁶⁸ Notes to Jan 15, *Félire*, p. 42-45. We might note in passing that, if the Annals are correct, other women did indeed succeed Ita, thus the narrator here possibly errs in assuming that Ita was the last woman to rule her monastery.

⁶⁹ Kenney, *Sources* fn. 55, 389.

⁷⁰ *LBS* III

was thought to have lived into extreme old age.⁷¹ These explanations are of course totally inadequate. The problem lies in the tendency to give these stories a literal interpretation, even though we know from early Irish poetry, literature and art, that the Irish were capable of so much more, and at times had a tendency toward complete abstraction. Bearing this in mind, I would like to propose that this story of St. Ita and her pet is not to be taken literally, but rather should be viewed as a metaphor for the eucharist, one which became quite common on the Continent in women's spirituality of a later date.⁷² It is this metaphor of the eucharist which binds the 'beetle as fosterling' anecdote to the poem which immediately follows in the martyrology, thus bringing together as a unit two literary pieces which initially appear to focus upon widely divergent subjects.

Further, in light of the thesis set forth so clearly by Bynum, there can be no doubt that the wound in Ita's side is nothing less than an inverted metaphor for the wound in

⁷¹ Certainly this is the view of the writer of at least one story in Ita's life where we find an incident in which we find a group of men including SS. Luchtichernus and Lasreanus accompanied by a young man, all on their way to visit Ita. The young man, shown in the text to be speaking out of youth and ignorance, asks: Quid est uobis, sapientibus et magnis uiris, ire ad anum illam uetustam? (Why do you, learned and great men, go to (visit) that old lady?) (Ita: *VSH* 31). We note also that Ita (d. 570-7) is said to have had responsibility for the care of Brendan (b.c. 486) before he passed into the hands of Bishop Erc for further education. (Brendan of Cluain Ferta: *VSH* I 4).

⁷² Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 130. For further background on women and women's spirituality of the middle ages, see Bynum, *ibid.*; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, New York: Zone Books, 1991; John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, eds., *Medieval Religious Women*, 2 vols., Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1984; John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, eds. *Peace Weavers*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987; and Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Christ's own side from which he feeds the faithful.⁷³

The prose of the narrative above, however, cannot be fully understood without reference to the poem which immediately follows, in which Ita discusses the coming of Jesus as her fosterling and her nursing of him in her hermitage. Admittedly, the whole question of the relationship between the prose and poetry in such a literary unit is one that is open to debate, but on this occasion there can be no doubt that the two belong together. In support of this, we note that the prose and poetry sections have been preserved together, not only in a number of the manuscripts of the *Félire*, but also in the Lecan text.⁷⁴ We also note that such a mixture of prose and poetry is a well-known literary form in Irish, "the prose," according to Carney, "being used for narrative, the verse for emotional statements by the characters involved."⁷⁵ Quin also notes this penchant for alternating prose and verse in early Irish texts, and remarks that while at times these may not necessarily have originated as a unit, one cannot, on the other hand, simply assume that they did not.⁷⁶ It is clear that Oengus, when recording the tale in his *Félire*, saw the

⁷³ Jan.15 *Félire* 42-44.. The story also exists in the *Book of Lecan* f.166v. The idea is not so unique, for Bynum notes that "later medieval writing stresses suckling with blood and is...frankly eucharistic". (Bynum 1984 153). This feeding motif has precedents in the text of the Old Testament. The connection, though admittedly weak, appears in Isaiah 60:1,4 which declares "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee...Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughter shall be nursed at thy side."

⁷⁴ E.G. Quin, "Ísucán," *Cambridge Medieval Studies* I (Summer 1981) 41.

⁷⁵ James Carney, "Two poems from Acallam na Senórach," pp. 22-32 in *Celtic Studies: Essays in memory of Angus Matheson 1912-1962*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, 22, 24 ; Quin 1981, 51.

⁷⁶ Quin 1981, 50-51.

prose and the poem which followed as an unbroken unit, for not only were the pieces recorded together, but what is more significant, he took care to make one part flow naturally from the other.⁷⁷ Further, it is not only this which binds the two, for there are a number of significant factors in the *Féire* anecdote, and in the poem which follows, which bring the two apparently widely divergent topics together in such a way as to make an important statement in respect to women's spirituality. The narrator begins by telling us that Ita had a pet which she allowed to feed from her side, and in the first incidence of dialogue in the text, dialogue placed, we should note, on the lips of the main character of the text, a device pointing to the importance of the statement, Ita identifies this pet as her fosterling.

“Where has my fosterling gone?” she says, “and who has visited it?” (*cid dochuaid mo dalta? ar sí, 7 cia dusfaraill hé?*)⁷⁸

But moving to the poem, we note that once again that the first words uttered in the piece come from the lips of Ita, words in which she identifies her fosterling as none other than the Christ-child, come to be fed and reared by her.

Co tainic Críst chuici a richt naíden. conid ann atbert:

ISucán · ala lim im dissertán
Altrum alar lim dom thigh · ní haltram nach dóerathig.

So Christ came to her in the form of a babe, and then she said:

⁷⁷ “So Christ came to her in the form of a babe, and then she said:” (*Co tainic Críst chuici a richt naíden. Conid ann atbert si:* (note to Jan.15, *Féire*, 44-45)

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

Jesukin who is nursed⁷⁹ by me in my little hermitage
 The nursing that is nursed by me in my house is not the nursing of a base
 clown.⁸⁰

Certain factors in the above composition have, in combination, led me to identify the fostered beetle with the baby Jesus. The fosterling is a pivotal character in both sections, and the fosterling in both sections receives its nurture and nourishment from the other central character, that is, from the virgin Ita. Keeping in mind ancient medical ideas that saw milk as processed blood, medieval iconography that saw Christ feeding the faithful from the wound in his side, and Christian ideology that saw the death of Christ as a prelude to his resurrection, the sea of ideas from which the writer of the composition that we find recorded by Oengus has drawn is clearly evident. The fact that in the first section the child drinks from the saint's side and in the poem from her breast is interesting in itself, for in portraits of Christ one can observe an historical shift from a wound in the lower side to the raising of that same wound close to the breast. The loss of her fosterling and its consequent replacement is symbolic of death and resurrection, and as such acts as a reminder to a religious community of Christ's saving grace. Much of the imagery in the composition brings Christ to mind. Monastic spirituality is by its very nature Christ-centred, and it would appear that for women who yearned to become closer to Christ, eucharist-

⁷⁹ The Irish uses the word *alar* from the verb *alid* 'rears', a word secured to the act of fostering, and the associated concepts of 'nurturing', 'nourishing', and 'feeding'. (Anne O'Sullivan and E.G. Quin, *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1964) vol. A, col.294; Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish* (transl. by D.A. Binchy and Osborn Bergin), Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946, 461.

⁸⁰ Jan, 15, *Félire*, 44-5.

centred. Thus we read that the foster-child in the first section drinks from the saint's side, from that wound which when inverted, becomes the wound of the Saviour. For it is clear if we heed the thesis of Bynum, that the story of the fostered beetle acts as a metaphor, through which device this virgin covertly expresses her desire to feed upon the eucharist by overtly willing that Christ come to feed upon her.

The motif 'saint as mother' is not confined solely to that spirituality associated with women. This motif gives rise to two basic metaphor types which have been given some amount of emphasis in the texts, namely, eucharistic metaphors, and teaching metaphors. What we observe is that while eucharistic metaphors abound in that material associated with women's spirituality they are not given similar emphasis in male spirituality, and while teaching metaphors occur in the *Lives* of both male and female saints, teaching metaphors that have been occasioned by the motif of 'saint as mother' tend to be confined to tales about men. Both types of metaphor as they exist here in both male and female spirituality, owe much of their existence to the work of Clement of Alexandria, who in his *Paedagogos* calls Christ 'The Educator,' adding that he is "our nourishment, the milk flowing from the Father by which alone we little ones are fed."⁸¹ Clement, in emphasizing this role of Christ as both mother and teacher, combines the idea of nourishment of the faithful through the Word of God, namely, nourishment through participation in the eucharistic

⁸¹ Clement *Paedagogos* 1:2:6; 1:6:42. The Father's breast (the Word) provides the nourishment for us, his little ones. (ibid.). See also (Bynum 1984, 126) and particularly (ibid., 132).

meal, with that of nourishment through the word of the Gospel.⁸² The idea is expanded in the literature associated with Ita and Brigit, wherein it takes on a more frankly eucharistic character. In the *Lives* of the male saints of Ireland, we find the emphasis placed upon the idea of nourishment through the written word of God, an emphasis placed upon 'word', rather than 'Word'. In the *Life of Berach*, for example, the writer describes the apostle John as "the man who sucked the fountain of true wisdom from the breast of the saviour" (*anti ro suidhig topur in fhir-eccna do ucht an tslainicedha, ise ro scrioph na briatra sa*).⁸³ Elsewhere Colmán gives Columcille the following advice regarding two children born of an incestuous relationship:

'Atá mo comhairle si ullamh', ar Colman 'i. tabair damhsa da naltrom, 7 da noilemain iatt. *Ocus* dénam cadach fá ccend: óir átaid da cích accamsa, nach raibhe acc naomh romham riamh .i. cioch lemnachta, 7 cioch meala; 7 dobér doibhsion íatt.' *Ocus* tuccadh do Cholman íatt, 7 atbert an laidh and:

Dá chích acc Colman Eala,
Cioch lemhnachta, cioch meala;
A chioch des do Bhaoithín ban,
Is a chioch ele d'Ulltan.

⁸² We know that at least by the time of Oengus the Irish had access to some works of Clement, for he appears as a source in the Irish Biblical commentaries of the same period. (see McNally - Patristic Paper - mainly of the 8th - 9th centuries). Direct reference is made to Clement in the document of Tallaght, giving his authority to the precept demanding that a man restrain from intercourse during his wife's menses. (MT 14).

⁸³ Berach: *BNE* 1:2. An early example of the metaphor operating as a teaching metaphor is found in the hymn of St. Secundinus which declares that Patrick was chosen by God to feed the faithful with divine teaching (Ludwig Bieler, ed. "St. Secundinus Hymn on St. Patrick," in *The Works of St. Patrick*, Westminster: The Newman Press & London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953, lines 58-59.

'My advice is soon given,' said Colman, 'give them to me to nourish and to foster. And let us make a covenant⁸⁴ respecting them, for I have two paps such as no saint ever had before, a pap with milk, and a pap with honey, and these I will give to them (to suck).' And the children were given to Colman, and he spoke this lay there:

Two paps has Colman Ela,
A pap of milk, a pap of honey;
His right pap for fair Baithin,
And his other pap for Ultan.⁸⁵

The same *Life* preserves a poem which relates the saints' many miracles, in which we find the following verse:

Gach aon duine d'Feraib Ceall
Nach bia dom réir si go tend,
Guidhim si an táon Día co fir,
Nar faghait lucht a dámh-cích.

Every man of the Fir Cell
Who shall not be steadfastly at my command.
I entreat the one God truly
That they may not get the milk of my two breasts.⁸⁶

The motif occurs again in the *Life of Findchua*, who given the boy Finntan to rear, gave him his right breast to suckle, which filled with milk to nourish the babe.⁸⁷ This maternal

⁸⁴ The language used here is that of the New and Old Testaments, particularly of the Old Testament. It lends special authority to the words of the saint in this instance. See for example (Gen. 17:2, 16:28, 31:44; Ex. 34:10; Deut. 29:14; Jer. 31:33 which motif we see carried forward in Heb. 8:10, 10:16). While this list in no way exhausts all references to covenant-making in the biblical texts, it does accurately reflect the fact that the motif is more common to the Old Testament than to the New Testament.

⁸⁵ Colmán Ela: *BNE* 5:24,25.

⁸⁶ Colmán Ela: *BNE* 5:29.

⁸⁷ Findchua: *BL* 2989. In "A Poem in Praise of Colum Cille" attributed to Dallán Forgaill, the poet calls the saint 'a tit to the poor'. (p.6, *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Thomas

nature of both Findchua and Colmán differs from that of women, inasmuch as it is the teaching aspect of the mothering metaphor which is emphasized, whereas in the *Lives* of the women saints, what is emphasized is the eucharistic aspect of the metaphor. In the *Life of Moling* we find an anecdote that to some extent echoes mothering metaphors found in the women's *Lives*. Here we are told that Moling wished that the Christ-child come to him in the form of a seven-year-old child, and that this having taken place, "he was fondling Him till the hour of rising on the morrow" (*co raibhi ic báidhe imme co tráth éirge amabárach*).⁸⁸ But here the motif lacks the feeding aspect, demonstrating motherly love rather than the giving of nourishment by the mother. Finally one more major difference exists between the feeding metaphor when applied to men and their spiritual experience, and that which is used to describe women's spirituality. For while men are depicted as feeding or nourishing other males who will one day be significant members of the monastic community, women are portrayed as feeding Christ. The difference is one of fundamental importance to our discussion of women's spirituality.

Scattered among the mothering metaphors in the *Lives* of both Ita and Brigit, are

Kinsella) The motif is also found in Patrick's *Confession* in (Bieler 1953 18.12). This peculiar story may be a reference to Patrick's refusal to accept false learning, or what he would consider a false allegiance, as a condition for his transportation. The motif was obviously a popular one, and looking further afield outside of the immediate Irish corpus, we discover its very effective used in the work of Aldhelm (d. 709). In a letter to the abbots of Wilfrid, one of the key figures at the synod of Whitby, Aldhelm remarks: "What harsh or cruel burden in existence, I ask, would separate you and hold you apart from that bishop, who like a wet-nurse gently caressed you, his beloved fosterchildren, warming you in the folds of his arms and nourishing you in the bosom of charity...." (Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, *Aldhelm, the Prose Works*, Cambridge & Totowa, N.J.: D.S.Brewer Ltd., 1979, letter xii, 169.

⁸⁸ Stokes *Life* 12:39. See also (Moling: *VSH* II xxix).

metaphors which at times are even more frankly eucharistic in character, such as, for example, an anecdote we find in the *Life of Brigit*.

Sancta caidid *Brigita* im medio vado, nesio qua causa paventes euui, illussumque lapidi sanctum in vertique vulneratum caput aquasque cum sanguine cruentavit largiter perfusso. Sanctaque *Brigita* at alteram locuta est mutam filiam: 'Aquam sanguine permixtam circumfunde tuo collo in [n]omine Dei.' *Et* sic fecit, 7 illa dixit: 'Sanasti me; gratias ago Deo.'

(One day) the holy Brigit falls in the middle of the ford, the horses being frightened for some unknown reason, and the saint's head was dashed against a stone and was injured on top, and it richly stained the waters with the blood which was shed. The holy Brigit said to one of the two dumb girls: 'Pour the water, mixed with blood about your neck in the name of God.' And she did so, and that one (Brigit) said 'You have healed me. I give thanks to God.'⁸⁹

Blood and water are the elements of the eucharistic wine and this idea of the healing power of the eucharist is one firmly rooted in scripture.⁹⁰

This relationship between blood and healing has also been caught up in milk symbolism in the *Lives*.⁹¹ Once again in the *Life of Brigit* we read:

Do-fobair crith-galar ingin de muntir *Brigte* co tabrath coman di. 'In fil n  beth mian duit?' ar *Brigit*. 'Fil', olsi, 'manam-thi lemlacht, at-bel nunc'. Con-gair *Brigit* cuci ingin, 7 dixit: 'Tuc dam mo chuad feisin l n, isi n-ibim linn, de uisciu. Du-n-uc fot choim.' Do-breth di-si iarum, 7 sensi combo lemnacht

⁸⁹ *B. Br.* ch. 29.

⁹⁰ 1 Pet.2:24. Also see Is.53:4-5 which was taken by the Christian Church to be a prophecy about Christ.

⁹¹ One must of course always bear in mind the practical side of such references, for to those who restricted their diet to raw vegetables, or who pruned this still further, such as Columcille, who is said to have lived solely on nettle soup, the addition of milk to the diet must have had spectacular results at times.

imbrothach, 7 ba ógslan statim filia ubi gustavit. condat da f_{irt}
sin simul, id est lactis de aqua factis, sanitas filia[e].

(At Easter) ague assails one of Brigit's maidens and she was given communion. 'Is there anything you might desire?' said Brigit. 'There is,' said she. 'If I do not get some fresh milk, I shall die at once.' Brigid calls a maiden and said: 'Bring me my own mug, out of which I drink, full of water. Bring it without anyone seeing it.' It was brought to her then, and she blessed it so that it became warm new milk, and the maiden was immediately completely cured when she tasted of it. So that those are two miracles simultaneously, ie. the changing of water to milk and the cure of the maiden.⁹²

In the above passage the narrator mentions a miracle at Easter which centres upon milk,⁹³ and also mentions the eucharist, almost in the same breath. This sequence should be noted, as should the occurrence of the story of a bread miracle immediately followed by the telling of a wine (beer) miracle,⁹⁴ both of which almost immediately precede the aforementioned milk miracle. Within the Christian context, the most important symbol for blood is that of wine, most particularly the wine of the eucharist. The metaphor of wine as Christ's blood, though in this instance weakened, is given centre stage in an eleventh century Old-Irish poem in which Brigit expresses a desire to give a great alefeast for Jesus.

Ropadh maith lem
cormlind mór do rígh na rígh:
muinntir nimhe
aca hól tre bithe sír.

Ropadh maith lem

⁹² *B. Br.* ch. 24.

⁹³ *B. Br.* ch. 24.

⁹⁴ *B. Br.* ch. 7, 8.

taurte creitme, crábaid glain;
 ropadh maith lem
 sústa etla oc mo threib

Ropadh maith lem
 fir nimhe im thegdais féin;
 ropadh maith lem
 dabcha amneit do a réir.

Ropadh maith lem
 lestru déirrce do dáil;
 ropadh maith lem
 escra trócaire dia dáimh.

Ropadh maith lem
 soichell do bith ina luss;
 ropadh maith lem
 Ísu beos do beith i fuss.

Ropadh maith lem
 na teora Mairi, miad a clú;
 ropadh maith lem
 muinntir nime da cech dú.

Ropadh maith lem
 corbam císaige don flaith;
 mad chéss imned
 forsa tipredh bendacht maith.

I would like a great alefeast for the king of kings, and that the
 people of heaven should be drinking it eternally.

I would like the fruits (?) of belief, of pure piety; I would like
 flails (?) of penitence in my dwelling.

I would like the men of heaven in my house: I would like
 casks of patience to serve them.

I would like to distribute beakers of alms; I would like vessels
 of mercy for the company.

I would like hospitality to follow them; I would like Jesus to
 be here continually.

I would like the three Maries, of fair fame; I would like the
people of heaven from every place.

I would like to be a tributary of the Prince; happily has he
suffered care on whom He would bestow a good blessing.⁹⁵

This emphasis upon drinking and good cheer points to Brigit's wish to give hospitality to the heavenly host, and most particularly, to Christ. The poem is similar to that ascribed to Ita, inasmuch as both poems not only are concerned with food, but more specifically with the feeding of Christ who in turn feeds them, and as in the case of Ita, with her/his own flesh. Both commemorate the celebration of the eucharist, though in the poem assigned to Brigit, it is eucharist as love feast, an idea which does not weaken the connection, but rather points to the antiquity of the ideology of the textual sources. But what is of prime importance in this poem is that it expresses longing on the part of Brigit, here the longing to provide the wine, here weakened to beer, for Christ at the feast. If we accept that the beer is a weakened metaphor for the wine of the eucharist, and that the feast is the celebration of the eucharist itself, the desire expressed here in this poem by Brigit reminds us instantly of Bynum's thesis that mothering metaphors in women's spirituality were partly the result of women's desire for the eucharist and partly the result of a yearning to participate in the priestly role. The same motif, that is, of turning water to beer, occurs in another story concerning this virgin. In this instance Brigit is said to turn

⁹⁵ "Brighitt" in David Greene, *St. Brigid's Alefeast*, in *Celtica* 2 (1954) 151-152.

water to ale which she then gives to Bishop Mel and the virgins.⁹⁶ The motif in this instance is even more obviously eucharistic in nature.

It is clear from our discussion that eucharistic metaphors, and eucharistic imagery, are central to the *Lives* of Ita and Brigit, and that the eucharist itself forms the focus of their spirituality. Indeed Bynum's thesis that women hungered so for the eucharist that they lived on it alone is also readily observable in the Ita-Brigit corpus, for both are said to have lived, at least for a time, solely upon food of the otherworld, food that in a Christian context can be none other than the body and blood of Christ. In the *Life of Ita* we are told that the saint lived for some period of time on food sent from heaven. This saint was noted for her asceticism, and her habit of fasting became so austere that an angel is said to have come to scold her, warning her that such severity was not conducive to good health. The hagiographer gently censures such extreme behaviour through the following tale:

BEATISSIMA uirgo Yta omne studium in biduanis et in triduanis et frequenter in quadriduanis ieiuniis viuere dedit. Angelus autem Domini quadam die, cum ipsa esset fatigata fame, uenit ad eam, et ait ei: 'Sine mensura corpus tuum affligis ieiuniis; et ne ita facias.' Sponsa vero Christi nolente onus suum laxare, dixit ei angelus: 'Tantum tibi Deus gratiam donauit, ut ab hoc die usque ad obitum tuum cibo celesti reficiaris. Et tu non poteris non comedere in quacunque hora angelus Domini ueniet ad te, afferens tibi prandium.' Tunc beata Yta inclinans se ad terram, gratias egit Deo; et de illo prandio sancta Yta aliis dabat, quibus sciebat dignum esse donari. Sicque sine ullo dubio usque ad obitum suum annona celesti vixit, ministrante sibi angelo.

⁹⁶ Brigit: *BL* 1377.

The blessed virgin Ita gave herself with great zeal to live with two, three, and frequently four-day fasts. However, on a certain day, when she had become weak with hunger, the angel of the Lord came to her and said to her: Without measure you damage your body with fasts; and you should not do thus. The bride of Christ then not wishing to lighten her labour, the angel of the Lord said to her: 'So much grace has God to you, that from this day on, to the day of your death, you will be refreshed with heavenly food. And you will not be able not to eat in whatever hour the angel of the Lord may come to you, offering sustenance to you.' Then blessed Ita, prostrating herself on the ground, gave thanks to God, and Saint Ita gave others of this food, those whom she knew worthy to receive it. In this manner, without any doubt, she lived up to the time of her own death, by sustenance from heaven being ministered to her by an angel.⁹⁷

Bread from heaven, for a Christian, can be none other than the bread of the eucharist,⁹⁸ and it is not of minor significance that Ita is said to have taken this same bread and shared it with other worthy people.⁹⁹ That the angel further advised Ita that she would "not be able not to eat" the proffered bread, points to a cult of devotion to the eucharist which at times may have been carried to extremes in early Irish women's spirituality.¹⁰⁰ Ita is not our only example of such a cult. We are told that when Brigit was weaned her body could not tolerate ordinary food, so the Druid, her foster-father,

⁹⁷ Ita: *VSH* 10.

⁹⁸ The sharing of Christ's body is of course prefigured by the manna with which the Israelites were sustained during their wanderings in the desert (Ex. 16:35) during which they too lived on this heavenly food alone (Num. 11:6).

⁹⁹ Ita: *VSH* 10. The claim is discussed further in the following chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Bynum notes that "saints' Lives and legislation reveal that some nuns had to be forbidden from communicating constantly in an effort to consume as much of Christ as possible..." (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 18).

purchased a pure white red-eared cow with whose milk she was subsequently fed.¹⁰¹

In tan ba mithig a gait de c[h])ígh ba deithidnech di in drui.
Na[ch] ní do-bereth-side di-si na-sceth-si fa chet-hoir, 7 nibu
messa de a blath. 'Ra-[f]etur-sa tra,' ar in drui, 'a(n) daas ind
ingen, quia ego sum immundus'. Ro-erbad iarum bó find
audercc dia taiscid 7 ba slan di.

When it was time to wean her the druid was anxious about
her; anything he gave her (to eat) she vomited at once, but
her appearance was none the worse. 'I know,' said the druid,
'what ails the girl, (it is) because I am impure.' Then a white
red-eared cow was assigned to sustain her and she became well
as a result.¹⁰²

The story has long captured the interest of writers because of its mythological referents, for such a cow obviously belongs to the realm of the otherworld.¹⁰³ Thus the hagiographer has used narrative clues, not only in this story, but elsewhere scattered throughout the hagiographical literature which would have been instantly recognized and indeed further processed by the hearer. The hagiographer's audience could be expected to understand immediately that the food obtained by the father to nourish the child, is nothing less than

¹⁰¹ The evidence of miraculous happenings surrounding a child early in life were often used as indications of future sanctity. Thus Bairre when he was a little boy cried for a drink of milk, and it was provided for him through a miracle. (Bairre: *BNE* 3:8).

¹⁰² *B. Br.* Ch. 5. The parentheses are those of the editor. See also *BL* 319.

¹⁰³ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1970, 34, remarks that Brigit "is fed from the milk of a white, red-eared cow...that is, by Irish usage, a supernatural cow". The anecdote can also be taken as a comment on the sanctity of the saint, for as Weinstein and Bell have noted, "saints...were exceptional; more often than not their childhoods reflected what the society viewed as unusual, sometimes strange, occasionally bizarre, so that the saint's early years may appear as the reverse of the experiences of lesser mortals". Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982 & 1986, 19.

heavenly food, which once again, translated into Christian nomenclature, can only be identified with Christ and the eucharistic meal.¹⁰⁴ Such extravagant freedom of the mythic imagination is not uncommon in Celtic literature generally, and its existence elsewhere has drawn the following comment from the noted Celtic scholar, Proinsias Mac Cana:

What is clear...is that the Celtic idea of the otherworld... allowed remarkable imaginative fluidity with the natural and supernatural seeming continually to merge and commingle in an almost free variation...¹⁰⁵

This variation at times revolves around ideas of food, and Mac Cana has drawn our attention to the fact that undiminishing food in Celtic myth is a metaphor for otherworld food.¹⁰⁶ The motif of undiminishing food, and that of food which appears miraculously, is common in the *Lives*. We learn that Samthann, while she served as a steward at Airnaide, had a vessel of butter from which she not only fed the community of virgins, but also guests who came to the gates of the monastery. We are told that this vessel, because of the efficacy of her prayer, lasted a full year, during which time it never became empty.¹⁰⁷ Brigit, in a similar manner, is said to have miraculously filled a number of containers from a small amount of butter, having given the remainder to the poor.¹⁰⁸ On one occasion,

¹⁰⁴ Bynum, speaking of medieval fasting practices amongst women, says that it was observed that "fasting girls generally vomited out any food they were made to receive...(but were able) to tolerate the eucharistic bread". (parentheses mine). (Bynum 1987, 228).

¹⁰⁵ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 53.

¹⁰⁷ Samthann: *VSH* II 4.

¹⁰⁸ *B. Br.* ch. 12.

significantly at Easter, Brigit produced from one single sack of malt, enough beer to celebrate the Easter festival in seventeen churches¹⁰⁹ and on yet another occasion, Brigit turned water into milk to cure a sick nun.¹¹⁰ All of these miracles, at least covertly, make reference to the eucharist, for the butter had been given to feed Christ in the name of the poor, the beer had been given to nourish guests celebrating the Lord's feast at Easter, and the milk was used to cure a gravely ill nun, an oblique reference to the healing power of the eucharist. We are left to conclude that the idea of otherworld food is an important theme in the *Lives* of these women, that it permeates the Brigit literature, and holds a place of some importance in the *Life of Ita*. That both Ita and Brigit, at least for a while, were sustained solely by otherworld food, is an important motif in the same literary tradition, a claim which when transcribed into the vocabulary of Bynum, leads us to the conclusion that both women lived for a period exclusively on the eucharist. In this manner, both Ita and Brigit act as a focal point of the divine, and in their persons this world and the other world meet, a common enough concept in hagiographical *sapientia*.

¹⁰⁹ *B. Br.* ch. 21.

¹¹⁰ *B. Br.* ch. 24.

Moreover, by being so privileged as to be fed through non-human agents, the sanctity of the virgins is highlighted, and they are indeed shown to be the perfect vessel¹¹¹ for the Perfect Food. Resident behind such a motif is the idea of body as a container for the soul, the latter being on loan from God and to be returned in pristine condition. The motif, which appears in the *Life of Anthony*, made its way into Irish hagiographical literature as early as Adomnán's *Life of Columcille*.¹¹² It was an idea well entrenched in earlier philosophical thought, but its existence in both the *Life of Anthony* and the biblical texts¹¹³ is likely basic to its entry into Irish theological concepts. The idea became an important and influential concept in Irish spirituality, and most especially in women's spirituality and its struggle toward mastery of, and the final elimination of, the passions.¹¹⁴ It is evident in the writing of Columbanus, for example, that the flesh was thought to be

¹¹¹ The perfect vessel is that which has been purified through abstinence. In the *Life of Coemgen*, we learn that he fasted even when a babe, sucking on one teat only on fast days. Like Brigit, he too was fed by a white cow which was accustomed to come for his feeding. In this tale the metaphor of otherworld feeding lacks some of the implications which it embodies in the Brigit story. For here in the *Life of Coemgen*, it is never indicated that the saint has refused earthly food entirely, but rather that he has chosen to limit his allotted portion. This manner of fasting compares well with known Irish practice. (Coemgen: *BNE* 6:10).

¹¹² Adom. 123b, 125b-126a. Elsewhere, Adomnán likens Columcille to the apostle Paul whom he calls a 'vessel of election' (*vas electionis*) (ibid., 45a). The idea of the pre-existence of souls, that souls are in essence divine and something separate from the mortal bodies which contain them, is a concept already developed in the work of Plato (Plato *Phaedo*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, 1954 repr., trans. Hugh Tredennick, Hammondsorth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1979, 126ff.

¹¹³ I Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Robert C. Gregg (trans.), *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, New York: Ramsey & Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980, 45.

¹¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the motif in early Christianity see Brown, *The Body and Society*, 31.

unclean by nature, and that this could be cleansed through ascetic practices.¹¹⁵ This unclean nature of the flesh is no better illustrated than in the story of the two clerical students found in the *Book of Lismore*. The story relates how these two friends agreed that whoever should die first would come back to speak with the other. But although one did die before the other, communication was found to be impossible. For as the one who died first later explained,

‘Na[ch]am-cairigh didiu’, oul a chele. ‘Tanac mor fechtus co mbinn for cinn h’ adhairt oc nemele frit, 7 nimchualais, ár ni cluinet[h])ar in corp tiugh trom ind ainim n-aerdha tanaidhi.’

‘Upbraid me not, now,’ saith his comrade. ‘I came many times, and was at the end of thy pillow complaining to thee; and thou heardest me not, for the thick, dense body heareth not

¹¹⁵ “*quare te ipsam non consideras, o misera humanitas, intus putridam, felle, humore, liquore, sanguine, flegmate plenam, foris vero pellem lavatam, sed numquam tamen mundatam? Semper enim de intimo immunditiae caeno coinquinaris, pollueris; licet cottidie lavaris, cottidie violaris. O pullatam pellem, frustra lavaris, quae natura immunda es. O inversam caecitatem, quod lavas, quod ornas, natura putredo.*” “Why do you not take notice of yourself, wretched mankind, inwardly rotten, full of bile, rheum, fluid, blood, and phlegm, but outwardly a skin washed yet never clean? For you are always stained and defiled from the inner filth of your uncleanness; though you be daily washed, you are polluted daily. Defiled skin, in vain are you washed that are unclean by nature. Perverse blindness, what you wash and gild is by nature corruption.” (Walker *Opera* sermon 7:1) 90-91. (The translation here is that of Walker). The body could, however, be made a fit dwelling place for God (“Monks’ Rule” *ibid.*, 6) by the purging of the vices (*ibid.*, sermon 3:2; *ibid.*, “Monks’ Rule” I-X)). Columbanus however, in a style reminiscent of Basil, cautions moderation, and thus while he says “Let him (the monk) come weary to his bed and sleep walking, and let him be forced to rise while his sleep is not yet finished.” (“Monks’ Rule” X “*Lassus ad stratum veniat ambulansque dormitet, necdum expleto somno surgere compellatur.*”), and “let the monks’ food be poor and taken in the evening, such as to avoid repletion,” he also remarks that the “use of life must be moderated, that the possibility of spiritual progress may be kept with a temperance that punishes the flesh. For if temperance exceeds measure, it will be a vice and not a virtue.” “*Cibus sit vilis et vespertinus monachorum satietatem fugiens...Ideo temperandus est vitae usus sicut temperandus est labor, quia haec est vera discretio, ut possibilitas spiritualis profectus cum abstinentia carnem macerante retentetur. Si enim modum abstinentia excesserit, vitium non virtus erit.*” (*ibid.*, “Monks’ Rule” III).

the aerial, attenuated soul.¹¹⁶

The concept may come from the desert fathers, in whose work we find the idea, later copied so ardently by Irish ascetics, that “the greater the austerity the greater the holiness”.¹¹⁷ The idea permeates the Irish hagiographical material, although this too at times cautions against such fasting.¹¹⁸ Irish asceticism emphasized strongly the need to purge the flesh, which basically meant to reduce the flesh and bring what remained into submission in its battle against the passions or sin. Some were thought to have won the battle, as can be seen in the following story from the *Life of Brendan*:

A m-batar ann iarum imonn innsi imacuairt *confhaicet eclais*
clochdha innte 7 senoir etlaidhi aighedhbhan ic ernuighthi innti.
As amhlaid bai in senoir-sin, cen fhuil, cen fheoil, *acht* leathar
tana truagh forsna cnamhaibh cruadhloma-sin.

While they were going round about the island, they behold therein a church built of stone, and a penitent white-faced old man praying therein. Thus was the old man, bloodless, fleshless, only a thin wretched leather on those hard-bare bones.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Preface: *BL* xii.

¹¹⁷ Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Basil, whose work was known to the Irish (*Amra Choluimbchille* 4:48), discouraged excessive fasting. Basil advises that no one should fast beyond their strength, since such action constitutes a danger to one's well-being. (Way 1951, 277; Waddell 1976, 10). Cassian, though he shows a penchant for fasting, also speaks out against excessive fasting, cautioning the monk that fasting, along with other ascetical tools, is the means and not the end, and that the monk had need to practice some constraint in order to be able to continue the work of God (*Cassian Conferences* 42, 61-62, 64 ff.).

¹¹⁹ Brenainn: *BL* 3789-3792.

Similar signs of sanctity are evident in the *Life of Columcille* who, according to his biographers, consumed no ale or meat, never ate to satiety, and who was so devoid of flesh that

Antan *imorro* nolighed isin gainim 7 lín n-eduighthi uime, ba leir *slicht* a hasna trena lín

when he would lie down in the sand with a sheet wrapt round him, the track of his ribs was apparent through his sheet.¹²⁰

While the purging of the flesh was a popular ascetic practice among both men and women, the notion seems to have been given a place of prominence in the spirituality of women. Indeed holy women are usually portrayed as giving much attention to fasting, a practice that in this context had as its initial aim the reduction of the amount of blood in the body. Indeed this is explicitly stated in the document from the monastery of Tallaght which says:

Aos duanat foibdi a tolæ bes la coibsenugud no *imradad tantum* no la oitid. Abstinit dedirn doa traothad fobithin is roimmad fola inda cuirp *ised* adrali. Andand fofeiscren iarum ind fuil is and fofeiscren ind tol 7 an accobar.

Persons whose desires are excited, it may be through hearing

¹²⁰ *BL* p. 316. One tradition preserved in the *Book of Lismore* claims that Columcille decided that his monks could live on nettles alone, and that he himself died at a young age from the ravages of voluntary fasting. (*BL* 301-302). It would appear, that at least on this occasion, the practice was associated more with the performance of the heroic task than with the purging of sins. It is also significant that in the stories concerning women and fasting that the practice is never devoid of some reference, no matter how oblique, to purification. Restrictions on the consumption of meat occur frequently in the Irish corpus. See, for example, the 10th century *Rule of Cormac* that not only prohibits meat, but also praises the practice of fasting. (#5, 8, 9 John Strachan, ed., "Rule of Cormac mac Cuilennáin," *Ériu* 2 (1905) 5, 8, 9). The penitential tracts also consistently prescribe the elimination of meat or a diet of bread and water as a cure for sin. Indeed such restrictions are found frequently throughout even the earliest of the Irish tracts which was composed by Findian some time before 579 AD (Finnian: *IP* 4).

confessions, or merely with meditating, or through youth, need strict abstinence to subdue them, because it is excess of blood in their body that is the cause. Afterwards, when the blood fails, then lust and desire fail.¹²¹

The same document then illustrates the point with the following story.

Molaisi daimivdsi Sur laisiom copar a ainm Ropo trom iarum accobar *forsind ingin* ar ita trian *forraid* de accobur *in mulieribus* sech na firu *Conidmidethar* som iarom *ammod* 7 a fit co cend mbliadnæ .i. fit mesraigti som. Doluid iarum cuci som día bliadna 7 *cupidinem suam confessa est* adhuc *permansisse*. Bui siom oc huamim ara *cind*. Sadais iarum ind snathaid fo tri inda *dernaind* co toltadar na tri srotha folae asind laim Is iarum atbertsom is deithbir olse cid ansa don curp hitá a tóla morasa a congbal Dorragab som iarum ind *praind iterum*.

Molaise of Daiminis had a sister named Copar. Now desire lay heavily upon the girl, for it is a third part as strong again in women as in men. Then he regulates her portion and her pittance for a year, that is, a measured pittance. On that day year she came to him, and confessed that her desire still persisted. Now he was very busy sewing before her. Then he thrust the needle thrice into her palm, and three streams of blood flowed from her hand. "No wonder," then said he, "if it is hard for the body, wherein are these strong currents, to contain itself." Then he diminished her meals a second time.¹²²

Central to such notions of sin and corruptibility in Irish spirituality was the belief, widespread in the ancient world, that there was a direct correlation between the amount of blood in the body and the passions, and more significantly, sexual passion. The more blood in the body, the more prone to the passions, and since women bled with

¹²¹ MT 59. The fact that the author has here used a female character to illustrate an incidence of sin caused through excess of blood, should not be ignored.

¹²² MT 60.

menstruation, and in childbirth, they were thought to have more blood than men and as a consequence to be more lustful and sinful.¹²³ This excess of blood however, could be controlled by fasting,¹²⁴ and it is through the absence of blood, and indeed an almost complete lack of all bodily fluid, that the virgin Samthann displays her sanctity.

Arale cendaigi taithigit hi tír muman ind amsir samdine
 dobered huadisi imchomrac na mac bethad ind tíre *congraid*
 iarom disi hé 7 ronáil fair *cona* tormaigfed nó na digebad cid
 a oen focul dia briathraib si *no* di briathraib ind cáich cossa
 fuided. Asbertsi *fris* iarum conarbera dam olsisi *fri* maolruain
no fri fer da crich acus is dóchu ón fobith isuidiu rombóí
 maolruaoin *quam* samdan. Is si mo sansercsa di cleirchib ind

¹²³ MT 59-60; Ita: *VSH* I xxiv. See also (Bynum 1991, 100). While the mind was occupied with physical nature and its needs, total contemplation of God was not possible. The goal of Irish monasticism was union with God, a state not possible while the passions held the body in their grip. Complete elimination of the passions meant release from the demands of the body, and allowed instead immersion in the divine presence. The concept, says Kathleen Hughes, formed the foundation of Columban's perception of the religious life, which he saw as encompassing three stages: (a) that of the elimination of self, (b) the purging of vices, and (c) perfect and perpetual love of God (Hughes 1977, 2-5). See, for example, Walker *Opera*, Sermon X).

¹²⁴ Fasting as a means of purging the soul was a practice common to Christian monasticism, although some carried the practice to greater extremes than others. Of this practice Bell has remarked: "Behind the Christian praise of fasting as a way of moderating lust, cleansing the brain and body, and preparing the soul for God's inspiration, lay a Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic desire to escape the body that dragged the spirit ever downward. In the words of Clement of Alexandria (d.215 AD) 'Fasting empties the soul of matter and makes it, with the body, clear and light for the reception of truth'." (Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae propheticae*, 14.2, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, ed. Otto Stählin *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte* 17, vol. 3, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970) 140; Bynum 1987, 36; Herbert Musurillo "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers," *Traditio* 12 (1956) 13; Weinstein and Bell express the idea succinctly, saying: "In theological terms concupiscence was....much more than lust; it was the desire for any part of the world, any need of the self that stood in the way of loving God." (Weinstein & Bell *Saints and Society*, 84). As we have seen, the fluids of the body could stimulate the desires and get in the way of loving God. Clement (*Paedagogos* (9:46) reflects a widely held notion that the intake of fluid affects the body humors, and he consequently restrict the intake of fluids, in his effort to curb the bodily appetites. There is, however, no evidence that I am aware of, for the existence of any ascetical practice of fluid restriction in Ireland. However we might suspect that the idea had taken root in this soil, since frequent bathing, one way Clement notes the body may take in water, is definitely discouraged.

deiscirt 7 ni conebera *fris dús* ind airim banscala for a cubus 7 *dus* and geba mo *anmcairdessa*. Negotiator *hæc* retulit. Andand *immurgo* frisiom romba si *sainserc* samdine hé atrecht fochetoir 7 dohuargaib a dé laim hi crosfigill 7 atluchestar bui do dia. Anddond *iarum* atbert *fris dus* ind aithcomraictis banscale *fris 7 dús* ind arfaomad a *anmchartisi imdercad* corrici a ucht 7 slechtais fo trí 7 spatio magno siluit. Is *iarum* atbertsom apur siu *friesi tra* olsesem *conimthisi* comarli hude Postea narravit negotiator *omnia hæc uerba* do *samdin 7 illa dixit* anda lim ol sisi dorrage ni don mac sin. Is *iarom* doticsa a delg asa brut 7 clandti inda *gruaid conidairsir* isind chnaim 7 da srenga ais *iarom*. *Nicontuilid immurgu* cid a oen bande folæ ass. Fecais ind cendaig for quí 7 torrsi oca faicsin sin Gabesi *iarum* ind crecht eitir a dí mer 7 fecais for a fáscud rée mór 7 *nicontaldad banna* as Asendad *iarom* dolduid bannan bec bec as lasind fascad fottai. Banna bec son de usci 7 robúi buidetai bec fair do caomclod a datha. Dobertsom for a hūgin *iarum* in dibúrsin mbic sin. Asbertsí *tra* airet bés *iarum* olsí a cutrumesi do sūg inda curpsom ni be mundteras inda taobatu dó *frí* banscala.

There was a certain itinerant pedlar in Munster in the time of Samdan, who used to carry greetings from her to the “sons of life” in that country. Once she called him to her and bound him not to add to nor take away a single word that she said, nor a word that anyone should say to whom he was sent. Then she said to him: “Say to Maelruain for me,” said she (— or to Fer Da Chrich, and this latter is more likely, since Maelruain was more venerable than Samdan), “that he is my favourite among the clerics of the Descert, and another thing thou shalt say to him: ask, does he receive woman-kind to his confession, and will he accept my soul-friendship?” The pedlar took this message. But when he told him that he was Samdan’s favourite, he rose at once and raised both hands as in a cross-vigil and gave thanks to God. When the pedlar asked him next whether women took counsel of him, and whether he would accept Samdan’s soul-friendship, he blushed down to his breast, and made three genuflections, and fell silent for a long time. Then he said: “Tell her,” said he, “that I will seek counsel from her.” Then the pedlar told all these sayings to Samdan, and she said: “I trow,” said she, “something will come of that youth.” Then she draws her brooch out of her mantle and drives it into her cheek till it stuck in the bone, and then there

came out two filaments of milk: yet not a single drop of blood came out. At that sight the pedlar began to weep and wail. Then she took the wound between two fingers and began to squeeze it for a long time, and not a drop was wrung from it. Then at the last by reason of the long squeezing out came a little tiny drop. It was a little drop of water, and there was a little yellow on the surface enough to change its colour. Then she put this little driblet on her nail, and she said: "So long," said she, "as there is this much juice in his body, let him bestow no friendship nor confidence upon womankind."¹²⁵

It is clear that the theme of severe fasting, and indeed the theme of the absence of blood, act as sign-posts in the text pointing to the extreme sanctity of a particular saint.

This preoccupation with the elimination of the flesh, although by no means absent in the *Lives* of the men, was particularly important in the formation of women's spirituality. For although women are portrayed in the *Lives* as persons wielding significant power in the monastic system then current, women are at one and the same time viewed as weak and sinful creatures,¹²⁶ or as a potential threat to the celibacy of the monk,¹²⁷ The words of condemnation are placed on the lips of the women themselves, and probably not insignificantly, upon the lips of those who so obviously enjoyed a position of power and respect. We find, for example, such words uttered by Ita, whose remark that "demons plot greatly against our sex"¹²⁸ echoes her own experiences in having prevailed in attacks by

¹²⁵ MT 61.

¹²⁶ MT 60-61; Ita: VSH 24.

¹²⁷ This idea is so common in the *Lives* that we list but a few. See (Maedoc: BNE 37:101; Brendan: BNE 7:13; Colmán Ela: BNE 1:2).

¹²⁸ Ita: VSH 24.

those same forces.¹²⁹

As a consequence of this philosophical stance, fasting appears as a major component of early Irish women's spirituality.¹³⁰ Moreover, in the presence of a cult of devotion to the eucharist, this search for the bloodless body, for the 'perfect container for the body and blood of Christ' can only have gained in strength from the fact that these women were denied the eucharist during their menses. The Tallaght document, for example, states clearly that "nuns were not to receive during their monthly sickness for they are unclean at this time."¹³¹ The sin of uncleanness was to be strictly avoided, for the penitential tracts list it as one of those vices which separate humanity from the kingdom of heaven.¹³² The use here of such words as 'sickness' and 'unclean' warrant the reader's attention, for the prohibition, in a philosophical climate which not only equated sin with sickness, but which fostered the notion that excess blood was a sign of a propensity towards sin, was a prohibition against the outward manifestation of women's

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁰ Modwenna: Conch. 8; Ita: *VSH* 10. Cautions against excessive fasting existed alongside beliefs that fasting was a holy act. Cassian declared that a monk had to eat to guard his strength (Chadwick *John Cassian*, 81), and although Basil advised that food should be simple and cheap, noting that obsession with food keeps one's mind from concentration on God (Basil *Letters*, 183), the extremes found on a number of occasions among the Irish are not evident here.

¹³¹ It is clearly stated in the *Bigotian Penitential* which prescribes that women not receive the eucharist at the time of their menses nor be allowed to enter the church at this time (Bigotian: *IP* 7:1). A precept found elsewhere in the same penitential decrees that "no one ought to receive the sacrifice unless he is clean (*mundum*) and perfect and nothing mortal is found in him" (*ibid.*, 8:1). Such a proscription would of course once again include menstruating women. See also (O'Dwyer *Céli Dé*, 89).

¹³² Bigotian: *IP* 37.

given biological nature. The above proscription in delineating a relationship between blood (sickness) and uncleanness (sin), echoes clearly the philosophical stance found in the penitential tracts, the remedies of which make it evident that the Irish saw a direct correlation between sickness and sin.¹³³ Such philosophical constructs acted to deprive women of the focus of their spiritual lives, particularly that of the presence of Christ in the eucharist. Since fasting was seen to control physical desires, and since one of the consequences of severe fasting was the lessening or even elimination of the menstrual flow, the presence of which was a sign of concupiscence, it is not surprising that ideas of abstinence and fasting take centre stage in the *Lives*, and that proof of sanctity was offered by referring to a particular saint's asceticism, qualities of maleness,¹³⁴ and/or absence of blood. An idea such as this must have had a tremendous impact on the formation of attitudes towards women for the word 'unclean', in the hands of those shaping monastic and penitential formulae, became a referent to all women, but never to all men.¹³⁵ It is

¹³³ Indeed the penitential tracts are built upon the notion that sin was a sickness which could be cured, an idea found in the ideology of the Desert Fathers, but which came to the West with the work of Cassian.

¹³⁴ The idea is to be found, for example, in the writings of Philo who in his work *Joseph and Asenath*, written in the first century BC., equates virginity with maleness. (p. 19, *Sly Philo's Perception of Women*; C. Burchard (trans.) *Joseph and Asenath*, vol.2, Charlesworth, 225 ff.).

¹³⁵ While the Old Testament passages of Lev. 15 may have had some influence in the formulation of such notions of ritual purity in Christianity, the major impetus for their development came from Hellenist influences. We must remember that the purity laws were not developed within the Testament itself, but rather in the Mishnah. These developed at the same time that they were being developed within Christianity, and under the same philosophical and cultural influences. For a discussion of the development of ideas about women in the Mishnah see (Judith Romney Wagner *Chattel or Person?*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) esp. 146ff. The Leviticus passages are discussed in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992, p. 40. For some background to the whole development of cleanliness taboos in respect to women see Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger*, 1966

also significant that the same word which was applicable to all women was the exact opposite to that appellation given Christ.

Eoin mac Zebedei...is é roscribh na briatra-sa 7 rofhacuibh a cuimne lasin n-Eclais don fhochraic 7 don logh rothidnaic Dia don tres *grad* na hEalsa [.i.] do lucht na hoighe .i. tochoisceim inn uain neimheilnidhe...‘Hí *sunt* qui secuntur agnum’ .i. is iat lucht leanait in t-Uan [cipe] *conair* theit. Is e leanmhain in Uain, Crist do intsamail 7 do thocoisceim tria comallad rechta 7 t-soscéla gan sainnt na talmandai...¹³⁶

John son of Zebedee...he it is who wrote these words, and left them with the Church in remembrance of the reward and of the guerdon which God hath given to the third grade of the Church, even to the virgins, that is, the following of the undefiled Lamb...‘These are those who follow the Lamb. These are the folk that follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. This is to follow the Lamb; to imitate Christ and to follow Him by fulfilling the Law and the Gospel, without the desire of earthly things...’¹³⁷

Moreover, this specific sin of uncleanness was tied to women’s sexuality, the very antithesis of the *imago* of Christ, ‘the undefiled Lamb in the virginity of the flesh’, for the same writer continues:

‘INtsamlaid, didiu,’ ar an t-ecnaid, ‘amail bis an t-uan neimheilnidhe ind oigi colla, as inann on 7 corp neimhthruailnidi Meic in Athar Noeibh. INtsamlaid, dano, in t-uan rundai .i. Crist, a n-oighi 7 a næibhe menman amail

repr., Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, Brown *The Body and Society*, and Prudence Allen R.S.M. *The Concept of Woman*, Montreal & London: Eden Press, 1985.

¹³⁶ The parentheses are those of the editor.

¹³⁷ *BL* 1120-1131. The importance of the statement lies in the fact that virginity was not simply a physical state, but rather a frame of mind. Women were thought to have particular difficulties because of their nature. Thus we see the striking significance of the statement of Brigit to Brendan that from the time she first became a nun she had not once taken her mind from God (*B. Br.* 6).

roraidestar fein: 'Bidh cunoeb 7 cugenmnaidh,' ar in Coimdi, 'ár am noebh-sa fein 7 am ennac.' Ár ni ferdi *genus* an cuirp madh anfhóirbhte 7 mad eilnídi ind ainim.

"Imitate then," saith the wise man, "as is the undefiled Lamb in the virginity of the flesh, so is the undefiled body of the son of the Heavenly Father. Imitate then the mystical Lamb, even Christ, in virginity and holiness of mind, as He himself said: 'Abide holily and chastely,' saith the Lord, 'for I am holy and I am innocent.' For not the better is the chastity of the body, if the soul is imperfect and defiled."¹³⁸

Thus to be undefiled is to be chaste and free of earthly desires. Menstruation points too clearly to women's human nature, to their attachment to the desires of the flesh, and thus to their unclean nature. This tie between blood and the non-virginal state is to be found in the philosophical writings of Philo in the first century BC, who makes reference to post-menopausal women as virgins. Indeed, the whole concept of woman and the ideology centered around the notion virginity are to be found in the work of Philo. In her book *Philo's Perception of Women*, Dorothy Sly notes a number of ways in which Philo distinguishes virginity from femaleness and womanhood: virginity can be lost and regained, and virginity is a state in which one is free from lust and the other passions; women who menstruate cannot be called virgins since Philo repeatedly associates the passions with the menstrual flow; while the sexual act may rob a woman of virginity, since with the act she becomes defiled, virginity can be restored through union with God; women who no longer menstruate are virgins since they are no longer subject to the passions; and not surprisingly, considering the immediately preceding statement, Philo equates virginity with

¹³⁸ BL 1138-1143.

maleness.¹³⁹

Indeed, Philo's ideas concerning women help explain the initially puzzling dichotomous views towards women found consistently in our Irish texts. For while on one hand we find extreme misogyny expressed in much of the Irish literature generated by the Church, at one and the same time we find existing a more general acceptance of monastic women among the virginal ranks.

For the writer above is also admittedly saying that the third grade of the Church includes all monks and nuns, for he/she concludes the preceding remarks with the following:

Sochaidhe tra do noebuibh 7 do fhirenuibh rocomuillset in
timna-sa na hoighi a nufhiadhnuisi feibh rocomuill in
noebhógh...

Now a multitude of holy and righteous men fulfilled this
commandment of virginity, even as the holy maiden fulfilled
it...¹⁴⁰

However, the negative influence was pervasive enough that women were often driven to extremes in their search for perfection, and the ideas so deeply entrenched, that men, too, were at times driven to the same extremities. Despite this latter fact, it was women who were more deeply affected, and women who carried the taint by the mere fact that they were women.

Nevertheless, it is of some consequence that the above text does not associate

¹³⁹ Sly *Philo's Perception of Women*, 71 ff., 19.

¹⁴⁰ Brigit: *BL* 1144-1145.

virginity with physical intactness, but instead equates it with chastity,¹⁴¹ and with the absence of bodily desires, a concept in agreement with that found in the remaining hagiographical literature. And while virginity, on one hand, posed an impossible ideal for women, yet nevertheless, it was an ideal many women managed to embrace.¹⁴² We must ask therefore how this was accomplished. "The good virgin," says Peter Brown, is the one who "remained loyal to her betrothed and to her husband."¹⁴³ Those women who entered the monastic life, in Ireland as elsewhere, were consistently referred to as 'brides of Christ,'¹⁴⁴ and through strict asceticism, particularly through physical deprivation, the

¹⁴¹ The idea that chastity and virginity were one and the same is also found in English Church of the seventh century, a church which had not yet completely thrown off its Celtic heritage. See Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, trans. *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd. & Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979, p. 54; *De Virginitate*, *ibid.*, c. XIX). For an informative discussion of these views of Aldhelm on the question of the nature of virginity see Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 51ff.

¹⁴² i.e., that they become men. In the *Life of Monenna*, a young nun is told to take charge of the monastery in the absence of its abbess. But the young woman says she fears the presence of youths who are apparently nearby, on account of the beauty of her hair and her comely body. Saint Monenna, miraculously changing the woman's appearance to that of an elderly lady, tells her not to worry and to act in a brave (*viriliter*, i.e., 'manly') manner. (Modwenna: *NL* 200).

¹⁴³ Brown *The Body and Society*, 71.

¹⁴⁴ Samthann: *VSH* 2,24; Fanchea (Jan. 1) *AS* 1:7; Ethnea and Fedelmia (Jan.11) *AS* 1:3, 3:7; Ita: *VSH* 29,31,32,34. Stephanie Hollis in her book *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, Woodbridge & Rochester, The Boydell Press, 1992) sees this image as damaging to the status of women, since women within the marriage contract tended to be chattels, not equal partners (p.10ff). Hollis, is of course, speaking of a church within the Anglo-Saxon culture of England. For the Church in Ireland, we must look at earlier concepts and earlier patterns. Here we are speaking of spiritual marriage not secular marriage, and patterns for such were copied from early classical models. See (see Brown, *The Body and Society* 71). Nevertheless, Hollis' work could prove very important for tracing changes in the status of the women within the Church, even in Ireland, for as various cultural influences came to bear upon the Irish Church, and the shape of religious ideas underwent change, it is not only possible, but probable, that the ideology which attaches itself to the concept of 'bride of Christ' also underwent change.

appetites which might lure them from this loyalty were suppressed. Therefore it was loyalty rather than physical intactness that was the mark of the virgin.¹⁴⁵ Thus virginity was a state only attained after the flesh had been subdued and all desires, except the desire for the Lord, had been quenched. But nevertheless, if the battle be temporarily lost, it was also a condition which could be achieved anew. The *Penitential of Finnian* (c. 525-50) bears witness:

Si autem genuerit, ut diximus, filium et manifestum peccatum eius fuerit, ui. annis, sicut iudicatum est de clerico, et in septimo iungatur altario, et tunc dicimus posse renouare coronam et induere uestimentum album debere et uirginem nuncupare.

But if, as we have said, she bears a child and her sin is manifest, <she shall do penance> for six years <with bread and water>, as is the judgement in the case of a cleric, and in the seventh year she shall be joined to the altar, and then we say her crown can be restored and she may don a white robe and be pronounced a virgin.¹⁴⁶

Virginity was therefore a state which could be restored, and we hear of a number of nuns who having committed the sin of fornication, later repented, and having done penance were accepted back into the religious community.¹⁴⁷ The virgin was the disciplined person,

¹⁴⁵ Brown *The Body and Society*, 71; Sly *Philo's Perception of Women*, 71ff.. As Brown points out, within the early years of Christianity, virginity did not necessarily refer to physical intactness, but rather, speaks of virginity as a period during which one is prone to temptation. (Brown *The Body and Society*, 71). Elsewhere Basil speaks of the violation of the monk's promise of virginity as infidelity, and in the work of Cassian we find that for a monk to leave the monastery of his own accord is seen as infidelity (RB 1980, 450).

¹⁴⁶ Finnian: IP 21. The translation and parentheses are those of the editor.

¹⁴⁷ Ita: VSH xvi, xxxiv; Ciaran of Saighir: BNE vi-viii.

one who through asceticism had gained the strength to resist the temptations of the appetites which might weaken the bonds of loyalty¹⁴⁸ to the Spouse, that is, to Christ. The body, now free of desire, becomes the perfect container for the soul and receptacle for the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁹ The Irish believed that the soul in its pure state was given on loan to each individual, who then had the responsibility of eventually returning it in pristine condition. As a thing of spirit it was not to be sullied by that which was earthly and a source of defilement.¹⁵⁰ The motif of body as container comes from the New Testament, and occurs in the Irish corpus as early as the writings of Adomnán who in his *Life of Columcille* speaks of the soul as a deposit from God.¹⁵¹ Elsewhere we find the motif in a description of Senán who is called 'the pure vessel by which the wine of God's word is dealt out to the people' (*in leastar glan triasa ndailter fín breithre De dona popluibh*).¹⁵² The motif is also found in the *Lives* of the women saints, thus Monenna is described as 'pure virgin, radiant vessel.'¹⁵³ The author of the Lismore *Life of Brigit* has the same concept in mind when he/she declares:

Ba comra choisecartha coimeta chuirp Críost 7 a fhola. Ba

¹⁴⁸ Brown *The Body and Society*, 25, 71.

¹⁴⁹ Brigit *BL* 1689, 2466-67; *Adom.* 123b, 125b-126a; Monenna: *AASS* 2.

¹⁵⁰ *BL* xi-xii.

¹⁵¹ At the death of Columcille Adomnán relates that an angel came 'to recover a deposit dear to God' (*ad repetendum aliquod deo carum...deposuitum*) (*Adom.* 125b) and that Columcille 'described as a deposit his own holy soul, entrusted to him by God' (*sanctam propriam a deo sibi commendatam animam depositum nuncupavit*, *Adom.* 126a).

¹⁵² Senan: *BL* 2466-67.

¹⁵³ Monenna: *AASS* 2.

teampul De. Ba righshuidi tairismhe don *Spirut* Noebh a cridhe
7 a menma.

she was a consecrated casket for keeping Christ's Body and his
Blood: she was a temple of God. Her heart and her mind
were a throne of rest for the Holy Ghost.¹⁵⁴

This state of perfection was brought about, as we have seen, through self control,¹⁵⁵
models for which can be seen within the Gospels, and most particularly within the life
of Christ.¹⁵⁶ Such ideas of perfection and purity probably lie behind the following
description of an Irish confessor:

He is the true leech that healeth the ailments and diseases of
the soul of every faithful man in the Christian Church.¹⁵⁷

The Druids, who had been the priests, doctors and lawyers of the religion that had
preceded Christianity, had also been often given the title of 'leech', a name which comes
from the medical practice of the day of bleeding the patient to bring about a cure. Thus

¹⁵⁴ Brigit: *BL* 1696-7.

¹⁵⁵ which includes control of the body's fluids.

¹⁵⁶ Within the pages of both the Old and New Testaments there are numerous occasions
recounted on which holy men separated themselves from the things of this world in order to seek
communion with God. Many also fasted, especially during this period. But the most perfect portrait
is that of the man Jesus, who remained celibate, advocated a life of poverty, and retired to the
desert to commune with his Father.

¹⁵⁷ Senan: *BL* 2457. In *The Trip. Life of Patrick* Stokes calls God 'physician'. (Stokes, *TP* 200-
201). The poem "*Urra ar leighis Dia na ngrás*" refers in its very title to Christ as physician, and
calls Mary 'leech', an interesting referrent for Mary, since in this instance it gives Mary, and thus
women who adopt the role of Mary as model, equality with Christ. For these references see Peter
O'Dwyer *Mary: A History of Devotion in Ireland*, Dublin: The Four Courts, 1988, 85-86. The idea
is once again entrenched in Hellenistic philosophy. For an informative discussion of this idea see
Thomas Spidlik *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1986,
267 ff.

once again we find oblique reference made to a correspondence between blood and corruption, and the idea that through decreasing the amount of blood a cure could be effected.

Conclusion.

Hospitality to guests and compassion for the poor were much emphasized in early Irish women's spirituality. A great deal of attention is given in the women's *Lives* to this function, and much of the miracle literature associated with these women focuses upon it. This is especially true of the Brigit material. In providing for guests and the poor, the saint is said not only to have distributed the goods of the lord of the household, namely of Christ, but also at one and the same time to have fed the Lord in the guise of these same poor and needy. Much of this charity is associated with the miraculous production of milk, and we can therefore say that through the practice of hospitality, Christ was fed milk, the food of babes. Food is used metaphorically throughout this body of literature, and as a metaphor reveals its full significance in the story of Ita and her strange fosterling, a story which becomes clarified through the poem that follows. Although the story of Ita's fosterling, and the poem commemorating Ita as the foster-mother of the Christ-child initially appear as widely divergent in topic, and although the poem has on a number of occasions in the past been treated as though it stood alone,¹⁵⁸ the two sections

¹⁵⁸ That is, while the poem has received a great deal of attention, little has been given to the prose section accompanying it. See for example the article of Quin which discusses work done previously on the text. (E.G. Quin "Ísucán," *Cambridge Medieval Studies* 1 (Summer 1981) 40-42.

nevertheless belong together, creating a metaphor through which the author makes a statement about women's spirituality. The story brings us to realize that at the heart of women's spirituality in Ireland lies a cult of devotion to the eucharist, and indeed the two main concepts of their lives, charity and 'purity of heart' have as their central aim, union with Christ.

To achieve this union required full control and subjugation of all desires, seeking to render the body perfect to become a fitting receptacle for the body and blood of Christ. This was the state of virginity, that state in which all desire except for the love of God had been eliminated. This concept of purity involved the decrease of bodily fluids which controlled the humours, and thus fasting was greatly emphasized in women's asceticism. Both Ita and Brigit are said to have refused food of the material realm, living instead on food provided by other-worldly sources. That Ita lived on this bread provided by heaven while she fasted from other foods, and that Brigit refused all other food except that from the otherworld, agrees well with Bynum's observation that women at times desired and hungered for the eucharist to such an extent that they lived on it alone.

Chapter V

The ministerial role of women in the early Irish Church.

Although women were noted for the frailty of their flesh and the weakness of their will when tempted by the sins of the flesh, nevertheless, through asceticism, a woman could overcome her nature and achieve much sanctity, respect, and even homage. Moreover, probably as an end result of their asceticism and sanctity, ecclesiastical women did at times wield considerable power. This power was concentrated in the person of the abbess, whose authority reached out into the secular world and its affairs.¹ The authority of the abbess,²

¹ Immediate family certainly seem at times to have bent to the command of the saint. When Ita needed a craftsman to erect needed buildings for her, she brought one from the north and gave her sister as a wife together with a holding of land (Ita: *VSH* II, 18). At another time Ita is said to have called her cousins to her and made them perform a lengthy and expensive penance on behalf of their father who had died (Ita: *VSH* II, 29). Both male and female saints were petitioned to turn back invading armies (Ita: *VSH* II, 33). The sick of the community were brought to them (Ita: *VSH* II, 28), and we even come across a farmer, who wishing to improve his stock of horses, requests a miracle from the saint (Ita: *VSH* II, 26). Women saints also had dealings with royalty, and thus we hear of an important queen who came bearing gifts for Brigit (Brigit: Ameotosus 14), and of another queen who was without issue and who wishing to conceive came to Brigit requesting her help (Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 6:29, 164). Requests of kings seem frequently to have been made through them, thus Brigit was sent as emissary for her father to the King of Leinster to request a gift. She also asked the king that an important slave be released into her care (Brigit: Ameotosus 8). Another time Brigit is said to have requested the remission of a hostage into her care (Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 34, 164). Ita sent Brendan to redeem a woman and her daughter held in bondage by the King of Connaught (Ita: *VSH* II, 34), while on another occasion she had the king release a young man held for execution and had him handed over into her care (Ita: *VSH* II, 31). Such transactions did not always go smoothly, and at times met with much resistance. Thus we learn that Samthann sent messengers to the king requesting that he release a certain hostage. When he refused, Samthann, through a miracle, herself brought about his release (Samthann: *VSH* II, 7).

² The following has been noted in respect to Brigit and the abbesses who followed her: "Brigid, founder of the great monastery of Kildare, which under her rule and that of her successors as abbesses laid claim to a wide parochia of over thirty churches around 630 AD. Though Brigit was under the authority of the church as a consecrated nun, her jurisdiction over the local church in Leinster was undisputed at a period when the organization of the Irish Church was far from

expressed in such titles as *patrona*,³ *domina*,⁴ and later *dominatrix*,⁵ often reached beyond the walls of her own immediate foundation, for like abbots, abbesses were rulers of monastic empires both large and small. Their position as head of their *paruchia*⁶ gave them a great deal of authority, and when that *paruchia* was large, their influence must have been far-reaching. Brigit is said to have had quite a large area under her dominion,⁷ the virgin Cranat is credited with authority over the whole of the region of ancient Fermoy,⁸ Ita appears to have had monasteries other than Killeedy under her care,⁹

complete..." (MacCurtain 1985, 39).

³ Gobnata: *AS* Feb.11, 6; Ita: *VSH* II, 24. Also see (*AFM*: AD.928) which includes a note on Caireach Dearnain, sister of St. Endeus, who is called a patroness of Cloonburren.

⁴ Modwenna: *NL* II, 199 (line 33); Ita: *VSH* II, 24; Derlugdacha: *AS* 3, which makes reference to Brigit as *domina*; Brigit: Ameotosus 8, 12, 15, 24; Darerca: Heist. 7; Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 8; Samthann: *VSH* II, 6, 11.

⁵ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 320.

⁶ For some interesting comments on the development of the parochia see (A.H.M. Jones "The Western Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," in *Christianity in Britain, 300-700*, ed. M.W. Barley & R.P.C. Hanson, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968, 10-13, 16(n.24).

⁷ The abbess Lasair, for example, ruled a monastery which was subject to Brigit and Kildare (B.Br. 44). Cogitosus makes the claim that the whole of monastic Ireland was under Brigit's jurisdiction (Cogitosus, *Brigit*: *AASS* Feb.1, prol. 2), a position claimed also by Armagh for its patron saint Patrick.

⁸ Cranat: *MHH* 3.

⁹ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 326. The high status given Ita is portrayed chiefly through the function of fosterage for she is said to have fostered a number of famous saints including Brendan the Voyager. The custom of multiple fostering signified the high prestige of the fosterer (as did a number of foster-parents signify the high prestige of the foster-child). Thus Ita with her many foster-children signifies that she, if not in fact, at least in the eyes of the hagiographers, is a very important person indeed. See, for example, comments in the *Tripartite Life* on multiple fostertering (*TP* 101).

Samthann was abbess of both Clonbroney and Cloonburren,¹⁰ and Gobnet founded a number of monasteries in southern Ireland including her more famous foundation in Cork.¹¹

Their position appears to have given these women the right not only to attend church synods, but also to participate in these assemblies. At these meetings legal decisions involving both laity and ecclesiastics were made. Ireland had a long tradition behind such assemblies, which had previously involved a well educated learned class in their decision-making process. As Christianity took hold, the church hierarchy began to hold its own assemblies. Thus we learn that once Brigit accompanied the bishop Mel to an assembly at Telltown. The assembly sat in judgment on a paternity case involving a cleric:

Do-tiagat iarum do T[h]alti. Is and boi Patricius. Batar im cheist n-*aneturgnaid* and .i. Do-luid alali banscal do t[h]athchor maic for clerech do muntir *Patraic*, .i. Bron nomen eius. 'Cindus ro-mbecht in so?', ar c(h)ach. 'Ni *ansæ*', ar in ben. 'Do-dechod-sa co Bron do senad chailli form chend 7 edbairt m'ogi do Dia. Iss ed a n-í do-geni mo c[h]lerech, mo chortan, co rucus mac dó'. A mbatar forsna *briathraib*, iss and do-luid doc[h]um na dala[e]. Is and as-bert Mel fri *Patraic*: 'Do-fil in noeb-ingen, in n-i *Brigti*, doc[h]um na dala[e]; 7 ru-festar duib tri(a) meit a rait[h] 7 t[r]i(a) ocse a fertá dus in fir fo gau in so, ar nicon fil gnim i(a)ter nem 7 talmain no-geissed dī do C[h]rist...arm[b]ad era di...'...Ta[n]ic *Brigit* iarum. Fordo-eraigh in sluagh.¹²

They come then to Tailtiu. *Patrick* was there. They were debating an obscure question there, namely a certain woman came to return a son to a cleric of Patrick's household. Brón

¹⁰ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 314.

¹¹ Mould 1976, 144.

¹² The parentheses are those of the editor.

was the cleric's name. 'How has this been made out?', said everyone. 'Not hard', said the woman. 'I had come to Brón to have the veil blessed on my head and to offer my virginity to God. This is what my cleric did, he debauched me, so that I have borne him a son'. As they were debating, Brigit came towards the assembly. Then Mel said to Patrick: 'The holy maiden Brigit is approaching the assembly, and she will find out for you by the greatness of her grace and the proximity of her miracles whether this is true or false; for there is nothing in heaven or earth which she might request of Christ, which would be refused her...Brigit came then. The host rises up before her.'¹³

It is to Brigit that the credit is given for solving the case, albeit through means of a miracle, an oft-used hagiographical ploy for limiting the power of women. On the other hand, in all fairness to the particular biographer on this occasion, we must also note that the section concludes: "The people rejoiced, the bishop was liberated, and Brigit was glorified" (*Populusque letatus est, episcopus liberatus, Brigita glorificata est*),¹⁴ and not the usual formula one would commonly expect after such an extravagant claim, such as "and God was glorified through his saint" or even "and glory was given to God." Thus the credit for the miraculous judgment remains firmly in the hands of Brigit. Similar homage is said to have been shown Brigit at another synodical assembly. On this occasion, we learn

¹³ *B. Br.* 40. See also Brigit: *BL* 1449. The practice is also to be found in the Anglo-Saxon Church, for here we also find mention of abbesses at church councils. For example Hilda attended the synod of Whitby, and the abbess Ebba, daughter of King Ethelfrith of Northumbria, attended a Northumbrian council c. 680. See Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg "Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)," in Nichols & Shank *Medieval Religious Women* I, 66). Gerald of Wales, writing in the twelfth century, remarks that when in a certain instance a particular bishop called a synod, he invited the bishops and abbots from the surrounding neighbourhood to attend as well, that they too might contribute their counsel and advice (*Giraldus Topography*, 52).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

that

Fecht n-aile iar sin senior caillige craibdigi baí hi fochruib du
t[h]ig Dubthaig esestair in n-í Brigit do thecht do a(a)ccallaim
.xx.vii *et* noeb Lagen in n-oendail...Fordo-eracht iarum æss inna
dala[e] 7 lotir dia llaim.

On another occasion after that *an old* pious nun who lived
near Dubthach's house asked Brigit to go and address twenty-
seven Leinster saints in one assembly...The people of the
assembly rose up before her and went to converse with her.¹⁵

That a woman should be invited, and indeed by another woman, to address a
church assembly, especially in light of Irish law which placed so many restrictions on
women's legal capacity,¹⁶ once again gives testament to the fact that while ecclesiastical
women were thought to be different to other women,¹⁷ some of these were especially
revered, and enjoyed privileges that were often the sole reserve of men. The special status
given Brigit is emphasized through the use of the motif of 'rising as a mark of respect',
a motif which appears on two separate occasions and in connection with her attendance
at a synod. Thus in the two preceding anecdotes we are told that the people of the
assembly rose up before Brigit. This honour shown Brigit at both assemblies deserves
special notice, for we see that through this device the elevated status of Brigit is brought

¹⁵ *B. Br.* 11.

¹⁶ Kelly 1988, 207; *CIH* 443.30-444.6

¹⁷ The special status of a woman religious has been noted by Kelly, who has remarked that
"a nun has certain legal rights not possessed by laywomen". (Kelly 1988, 78).

to the foreground.¹⁸ In this instance she is treated as equal in position to an abbot, for the special status of at least one abbot, and of those who succeeded him, is made clear in the *Life of Findchua* which declares that “the king of Munster should always stand up before Findchua’s successor” (*coimeirghe re bhfear a inaidh dogres ó righ Muman*).¹⁹ The act of rising before another as a special mark of status is also illustrated in the following story from the *Life of Senán*:

Nir’bho cian iarsin intan boi mordhal Corca-baiscinn ind oenbhaile. Tainic *dano lanumain* docum in airechta. Amal dorochtatur in t-airecht adracht in drai boi isind airectus rompa. O’tconncadar cach sin adracht in t-oirecht uile rompa, ár ba mor anoir in druad acusom isin aimsir-sin. Faitbis [iarum] in t-airecht imon drai. 7 atbertsat fris. ‘Ba linn,’ ar siat, ‘dodeachaid dhuit Gerrginn aithech 7 a seitig doghní do ureirghi.’ Atbert in drui: ‘Ni do aithech doghniu-sa ureirghi, *acht* [is in] *mac* fil a mbroinn na mna thall, ár adressed Corcu-baiscinn uili roime. IS dó fhoighenat. Is e *bus* flaith doibh cobrath.’

It was not long afterwards when there was a great gathering of the Corco-Baiscinn in one place. So a married couple came to the assembly. As they reached the assembly the wizard who was at the meeting arose before them. When every one saw that, the whole assembly rose up before them, for great was the honour that they had for the wizard at that time. Then the assembly laughed at the wizard, and said to him, ‘It seems to us good!’ say they. ‘Gergenn, the peasant, and his wife have come to thee, for whom thou makest thy uprising.’ Said the wizard, ‘It is not to a peasant that I make uprising, but it is to the child that is in the womb of the woman there, for the Corco-Baiscinn will all rise before him. Him will they serve, it

¹⁸ Underlying this particular story may be the claim that Brigit was made a bishop, for even a king must rise in the presence of the bishop (Kelly 1988 41; *CIH* 570/31-2; *CG* 4:338:137; *CG*: Binchy 48).

¹⁹ Findchua: *BL* 3132-3133.

is he who will be their prince for ever.’²⁰

It is obvious from the preceding anecdotes that Brigit’s elevated status has been underscored by her various hagiographers through the medium of the motif of ‘rising as a mark of respect’. It is also obvious from the Brigit corpus that women not only attended synods, but addressed those assembled and passed judgment when the need arose. Looking further, we discover yet again a reference to that saint travelling to attend an assembly, an important assembly we are told, this time in Munster at Mag Feimin.²¹ Other women attended these assemblies, including Samthann, the famous female saint of the Céili Dé. In this instance the hagiographer notes:

Ro báoi *dano* *socraidhe* mór isin comhdáil sin .i. ro báoi Aodh dubh mac Fercna, 7 sluagh Breifne maraen ris. Ro báoi Áedh mac Brénainn, 7 *sluagh* Tethbha maráen ris. Ro batar *sochaidhe* do naemaibh isin dáil sin. Ro bai Daigh mac Cairill, 7 Cruimter Fráoc[h]...Samhtann 7 Arnáin; 7 ro batar náeimh *imdha* ele asin ccomhdáil sin.

There was a great multitude in the assembly, Aedh Dubh son of Fergna, the forces of Breifne with him; Aedh son of Brenann and the forces of Tethba with him. There were a great number of saints at the meeting, Daigh son of Cairell, the Presbyter Fraech...Samthann, and Arnain, and many other saints.²²

Women not only attended church assemblies, but also performed a number of other

²⁰ Senán: *BL* 1875-1883.

²¹ *B. Br.* xvi; *V. Pr.* 70. The story is probably another example of the Uí Néill efforts to establish the supremacy of Patrick and his see at Armagh. See Dumville 1993, 147-152; McCone 1991, 242 ff.

²² This particular assembly had been called to resolve a property dispute that involved a layman and a cleric (*Berach: BNE* 23:62).

duties normally associated with the role of the cleric. It is clear that women served some type of ministerial function, and that in the process of carrying out their duties they performed many tasks which later were seen as the sole prerogative of a male priestly hierarchy. Indeed textual evidence lends support to the claim that such privileges were enjoyed by women in the early Irish Church. Some indication of this is preserved in the work of Stokes who notes:

The proper name *Cruimtheris*²³...is = presbyterissa. Whether she was a church-officer...or the wife or widow of a presbyter, does not appear. Deaconesses (*ban-dechuin*) are mentioned in the Würzburg Codex Paulinus, 28^c. A *ban-abb* (abbess) and *ban-airchinnech* (gl. antistita) are also mentioned, but not in the documents now published.²⁴

It is in support of the above office of deaconess in the early Irish Church that the most comprehensive evidence exists. Indeed, even a cursory examination of the hagiographical legacy shows that there is every possibility that the abbess in Ireland exercised the privileges of the deaconess, privileges which at times seem to have extended beyond the duties and rights of women exercising that position elsewhere, and which tend to be more

²³ Cruimtheris is said to have established herself as an anchorite at Cengoba, near Armagh (*TP* 232-233).

²⁴ *TP* clxxi. Women who bore the title of *presbyterissa* appear to have also existed in the early Jewish synagogue, for we read: "Six ancient Greek inscriptions have been found in which women bear the title 'elder' (*presbytera/presbyteresa* = *presbyterissa*). In addition to these, there exists one Greek inscription in which a woman is called *PRESBYTNS* (sic), most likely *presbytis*." (Bernadette J. Brooten *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, (Brown Judaic Studies 36) Chico: Scholars Press, 1982, 41). The identification of the word *Presbytera* with that of 'elder' is an interesting one, for Fanchea too is identified as *senioris* (ie. 'senior' or 'elder') in the Irish manuscript tradition. (Fanchea: *AS* Jan.1. 17)

reminiscent of the charismatic movement of the early Christian Church.²⁵ Support for such a claim exists within the glosses of the *Codex Paulinus* which declares that

Diaconos...Habentes ministerium fidei. Et hi autem probentur primum. Mulieres similiter pudicas (.i. *arrobatar bandechuin andsom isindaimsir sin*)²⁶...Qui enim bene ministraverint, gradum sibi bonum adquirunt.

Deacons have the ministry to the faithful. But these are proven first. Likewise the women should be modest. That is, at that time women were in this case deaconesses. And those who minister well acquire the good grade for themselves.²⁷

In an article in which he has traced the evolution of women's ministerial function within the church, Jean Daniélou presents a carefully constructed sketch of the development of the role of the deaconess and outlines the duties and privileges of women elevated to that position.²⁸ It is to these duties and privileges that we should give especial attention, for they are also duties and privileges often associated with the abbess by the Irish hagiographers.

²⁵ The possibility that women filled a clerical function within the Irish Church has implications for the reading of other textual sources, particularly those of the penitential tracts. The paucity of prescriptions directed specifically toward nuns is outstanding in light of the clear evidence that women not only received spiritual counselling but acted as confessors to both male and female penitents. Thus those tracts directed toward clerics, may in fact be intended, at least on occasion, to include women as well as men.

²⁶ An Irish gloss on the Latin text.

²⁷ Whitley Stokes, ed. & trans. "Codex Paulinus, Fol. 28^c," in *The Old-Irish Glosses*, London: Cambridge: The Philological Societies of London & Cambridge, 1887, 166. (The translation is mine).

²⁸ Fr. Jean Daniélou, S.J. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (trans. by Glyn Simon), Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1974 (1960). I have relied rather heavily upon Fr. Daniélou's article for this discussion of the role of the deaconess. But see also Karen Jo Torjesen *When Women were Priests*, San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

Daniélou remarks that in the early church in the East, there existed two different positions which gave ministerial privileges to women, namely, those of the deaconess²⁹ and the Holy Widows (*sanctimoniales*). It is evident that the latter formed a definite order which, says Daniélou, brought with it specific duties.³⁰ This group of women came to be recognized as part of the ordained ministry,³¹ although we find textual evidence elsewhere which forbids them the privilege of ordination.³² Thus we note that as early as the New Testament period women were active in the church's ministry to the laity. Both the endurance of these roles and their development can be traced in the various documents which have survived. For example, in the Eastern Church the Order of Widows, which allowed women minimal ministerial privileges, developed gradually into that of the deaconess. As another development, the position of 'head deaconess' was absorbed by that of the monastic abbess³³ who inherited the privileges of the deaconess without necessarily assuming her title.³⁴ This latter seems to have been a natural outcome since at least in mainstream Christianity, their privileges were limited by their function as women who aided the priest in the church and who ministered to women within the privacy of

²⁹ 1 Tim. 3:8-12.

³⁰ Daniélou 1974, 13; Titus 2:3-5.

³¹ Tertullian *De Pudicitia* in Tertullian, *Opera*, eds. Augustus Reifferschied and Georgius Wissowa, vol.20, Prague: F. Tempsky, 1890, 13 (243); Daniélou 1974, 17.

³² Daniélou 1974, 19. The existence of such precepts, would of course imply that the practice did indeed exist, even though in this instance it met with complete disapproval.

³³ Daniélou 1974, 14.

³⁴ Daniélou 1974, 24.

their homes.³⁵ It is this deaconess-abbess who is of special interest to us in the investigations of this particular chapter, although there is no evidence that women's ministerial role in Ireland was confined solely to caring for the needs of women, and indeed the evidence would in fact indicate the contrary.

In the eastern Church the duties or privileges of the deaconess may have fallen short of the sacerdotal function, but they were comprehensive nevertheless. Deaconesses gave religious instruction but were forbidden to speak on the official teaching of the church. They gave spiritual direction. Deaconesses were also known to preach, to do missionary work, prepare converts for baptism and attend upon women at baptism, and they gave instruction to female catechumens after baptism. In the church they prepared the chalice, poured the wine into the chalice,³⁶ and communicated themselves. At times they censed the Bible and read the Gospel. They distributed communion to the women and children. They chanted the psalms, gave the supplication, and prophesied. Outside the church they cared for the sick, which at times included the laying on of hands. They may also, because of propriety, have given the sacrament of extreme unction to women.³⁷ Thus these women can be seen performing many tasks considered the domain of the male

³⁵ Daniélou 1974, 9.

³⁶ The practice was criticised by Irenaeus. Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, English translation: in A. Roberts and W.H. Rambaut, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Library: The Writings of Irenaeus*, vol.2. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869, 1:13:1-2.

³⁷ Daniélou 1974, 28-30. Jerome speaks, for example, of women who prophesy (Jerome: Letters 7 (26-27)).

clerical role. Moreover, while this may have been the position of the deaconess within mainstream Christianity, women at times had a tendency to move beyond the boundaries set by orthodoxy. In Tertullian for example we read:

What effrontery we find amongst these female heretics! They actually dare to give the Church's teaching, to engage in disputations, to practice exorcisms, to promise cures, perhaps even to baptize!³⁸

Elsewhere, we find that the Gnostic Marcus had women helping at the eucharist, and allowed them to serve the wine.³⁹

The installation of the deaconess also seems to have varied with place and time. Thus while we find that on one hand early authorities claim that the deaconess was at times ordained with the laying on of hands whereby she received the Holy Spirit, in another source she is said to have been ordained without the imposition of hands.⁴⁰ In the West, where attitudes towards women in the ministerial function were more resistant than in the East, the Council of Orange (441 AD) forbade the ordination of women.⁴¹ But despite this prohibition the practice must have persisted in Gaul, for we find that the

³⁸ Tertullian *Praescript* 41:5; Daniélou 1974, 15. See also Tertullian *De Baptismo*, in Tertullian, *Opera*, eds. Augustus Reifferscheid and Georgius Wissowa, vol.20, Prague: F. Tempsky, 1890. English edition with trans. in Ernest Evans *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, London: S.P.C.K., 1964, 1,17), in which Tertullian denies women the right to teach, and to baptize. The translation here is that of Daniélou.

³⁹ Elaine Pagels *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York: Vintage Books, 1981 (1979), 71.

⁴⁰ Daniélou 1974, 21-22.

⁴¹ "Concile D'Orange," in Charles Joseph Hefele *Histoire des conciles*, vol.II part 1, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908, canon 26.

virgin Radegund (518-87 AD)⁴² was ordained as deaconess by Bishop Medard by the laying on of hands,⁴³ and both the Council of Epaon (517)⁴⁴ and the Council of Orléans (533 AD)⁴⁵ prohibited the office. This position was reaffirmed by the Council of Tours (567 AD).⁴⁶ All of this testifies to the existence and persistence of the office in Gaul.

Three things here need to be noted. First of all we should note that the office of deaconess was a reality in the Church of Gaul in the early centuries, although the existence of this function of certain women was not left unchallenged, and synods passed legislation in attempts to limit this power. Also, we must remember that the deaconess was not necessarily ordained nor necessarily given the title of that office,⁴⁷ a fact which makes it more difficult to reconstruct women's early history. Finally, we should note that there were peripheral groups of women who assumed clerical duties beyond the limits of those set out within orthodoxy, just as one would expect in a Church in which women as well

⁴² "Radegunde, St.," in F.L. Cross, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 1155.

⁴³ Radegund: *AASS* Aug.III, 12.

⁴⁴ "Concile d'Épaone, en Bourgogne, en 517," in Charles Joseph Hefele, *Histoire des conciles*, vol.II, part 2, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908, canon 21.

⁴⁵ "Deuxième Concile D'Orléans," in Charles Joseph Hefele *Histoire des conciles* vol.II, part 2, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908, canon 18.

⁴⁶ Canon 19, pp. 189-90 in Charles Joseph Hefele *Histoire des conciles* vol. 3, part 1, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1909.

⁴⁷ Daniélou 1974, 24.

as men still often played a charismatic role.⁴⁸ It is to these charismatics that we should possibly look for the models for any function of the deaconess in Irish society. Moreover, in light of the preceding review of the information available, we must realize that the existence of the deaconess may or may not become immediately apparent simply from whatever title a woman of position has been given by a particular religious group, nor is her existence necessarily absent when the literary sources of that particular group lack references to her ordination.

Turning to the evidence existing in Ireland, some tantalizing shreds of information which may indicate the existence of an ordained ministry for women exist, and while I have included some of the possible evidence in an earlier section where I have connected it with the consecration ritual of those women newly entering the church, we must also realize that there is a real possibility that what we are looking at is not part of the procedure for the consecration of a woman who has newly assumed a vocation, but for the consecration of those who are to be given the special privileges within the church hierarchy.

The *Life of Brigit* is our most detailed source of information in our search for evidence for the possible ordination of Irish monastic women. In the Lismore *Life* we read the following:

Intan ropo áil do Brigit grad n-athrige do thabairt fuirri luid

⁴⁸ MacCurtain also reminds us of the varied influences that came to bear upon the Church in Ireland, noting that it was inspired by "a hidden stream of Gnosticism and the Johannine traditions". (MacCurtain 1981, 540).

igitur co Cruachan Bri Ele i n-Uib Failge...O rancatar tra i comfocraib cosin baile ir-rabi epscop Mel, asbert Brigit fri Mac Caille go rosuidiged calle dar(a)cend⁴⁹ arna digsed cen fial dara cend cosna cleircib, 7 comad e sen caille forathmentar. Iar riactain dissidano issin tech ir-rabai epscop Mel...ol epscop Mel...‘Cid dia tancatar na caillecha ille?’ ar epscop Mel. ‘Do thabairt grad aithrige,’ ar Mac caille...Iarsein tra roeirlegait grada fuirri, 7 is grad *epscuip* dorala do epscop Mel do thabairt for Brigit, ciar’bo grad *athrige* nama rop ail disi féin. *Ocus* is andsein rochoingab Mac caille caille uas cind Brigitte...

When Brigit desired to have the order of repentance conferred upon her, she went to Cruachan Bri Ele in Offaly. ..Now when they drew nigh to the stead wherein was bishop Mel, Brigit bade Mac Caille to set a *caille* (veil) over her head, so that she might not go to the clerics without a veil over her head. And that is the *caille* which is commemorated. So after she had entered the house wherein bishop Mel abode...saith bishop Mel...‘Wherefore have the nuns come hither?’ ‘To have orders of penitence conferred (upon them),’⁵⁰ saith Mac Caille...So thereafter the orders were read out over her, and it came to pass that bishop Mel conferred on Brigit the episcopal order, although it was only the order of repentance that she desired for herself. And it is then that Mac Caille lifted up a veil over Brigit’s head.⁵¹

In the tradition handed down by Cogitosus, Mac Caille is the one who consecrates Brigit.⁵²

In other texts, texts later than Cogitosus, it is Bishop Mel who consecrates Brigit.⁵³ But what we are faced with here in these later Brigit texts is in fact a two-fold tradition. Mac

⁴⁹ the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁵⁰ the addition is that of the editor.

⁵¹ From the Franciscan *Liber Hymnorum*, p. 40., quoted in Notes to Brigit: *BL* 1341-1344.

⁵² Cogitosus, Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 2:1-3.

⁵³ Brigit: *BL* 1341-1354; Notes: Brigit: *BL* 1341-1344; *B.Br.* 17-19.

Caille gives Brigit the veil before she goes to Bishop Mel, and Mel then confers upon her, and upon several others, the 'order of penance'. The statement is of some significance, for the Council of Epain of 517 in Gaul promulgated the following decree:

On doit abolir dans tout le royaume l'ordination des diaconesses, on se contentera de leur donner la *benedictio paenitentiae*, si elles viennent à se convertir.

One must abolish throughout the kingdom the ordination of deaconesses. One must be content to give them the blessing of penance if they come to be converted.⁵⁴

In light of the above, we must entertain the real possibility that Brigit, along with several other virgins, had the order of deaconess conferred upon them. Their function within the Irish Church supports such a premise, for we know that Irish abbesses were, for example, confessors⁵⁵ not only to women but to men, and not only to those in monasteries under their jurisdiction but to others as well. Moreover, it is common in ecclesiastical literature to portray the saint as modest, and unwilling to claim a higher office for himself or herself. Thus it would be totally in character to claim that Brigit had a higher grade of the Church conferred upon her, although, in fact, she sought only the lower grade. If Brigit had indeed been given the grade of deaconess, it would explain much of the confusion which appears

⁵⁴ "Concile D'Épaone En Bourgogne, en 517," in *Histoire des conciles*, canon 21. The translation is mine.

⁵⁵ Brigit: *BL* 1630-1636; Fanchea: *AS* Jan.1, 14-16, 19. *The Rule of St. Carthage*, apparently addressing men, declares that the duties of a soulfriend are to hear confession, teach the ignorant, be a chaste example, sleep where there is not a layman in the house, sing the requiems at each canonical hour as his special right, and that he is to attend mass with a penitent heart, with the shedding of tears and the raising of his hands, and that he must perform two hundred genuflections at the Beata daily, and to sing three-times-fifty psalms each day. (*Reg. C.* 45-66).

to revolve around her ministerial role.

In turning once more to Daniélou, we discover that the deaconess was given the robe of the deacon at ordination.⁵⁶ No explicit statement of such happening in the Irish *Lives* can be claimed, but the few references to the presentation of a habit at the time of consecration should be noted carefully, especially since these references involve the bestowal of a habit upon women who are known to us as abbesses and confessors. For the virgin Brigit is said to have received a white robe at her consecration,⁵⁷ and Monenna was presented with a habit when she was consecrated.⁵⁸

The preceding description of the ordination of Brigit also makes the claim that Brigit was ordained a bishop, and one has to wonder what truth lies behind such a tale. Moreover, the claim was apparently taken seriously by later compilers who declare not only that Brigit was mistakenly ordained a bishop,⁵⁹ but that indeed this was a privilege enjoyed by those abbesses who succeeded her. On this occasion the writer declares:

7 is do sen dlige comarba Brigte dogres grad n-epscaip fuirri

⁵⁶ Daniélou 1974, 23. While in the East the new monk was clothed in a habit upon his acceptance into the monastery (*RB* 1980, 438), tradition claims that upon her entry into the life of the Church the virgin was given the veil (see C. Tibiletti, "virgin-virginity-velatio", *EOEC* 871-2). Thus while the *habitus* mentioned above may simply refer to the monastic habit, it is equally possible that what we are confronted with is a reference to the dalmatic, a white habit conferred upon deacons, and at times sub-deacons at their consecration (see V. Pavan, "vestments, liturgical", *EOEC* 865).

⁵⁷ The text simply states that the garments were placed on her by Mac Caille. Brigit, *Vita* II: *AASS* Feb.1, 1:5.

⁵⁸ The hagiographer remarks that Monenna received a consecrated (consecratum) habit. It does not say that Monenna herself was consecrated. (Darerca: Heist 1-2; Monenna: *AASS* July 6, 2).

⁵⁹ *B. Br.* 19.

7 honoir epscuip.

and hence Brigit's successor is always entitled to have episcopal orders and the honour due to a bishop.⁶⁰

The story of the erroneous ordination of Brigit has received a great deal of attention, with some claiming that Brigit did indeed enjoy such a position in the Church hierarchy,⁶¹ with others declaring the incident to be a complete fiction,⁶² and still others arguing that the claim springs from political rivalry between the cults of Brigit and Patrick.⁶³ There is also a further possibility. In the enigmatic story of Brigit's ordination in which she was given the episcopal order, we are told that Bishop Mel, inflamed by the Holy Spirit read from the wrong text, and thus by mistake ordained her a Bishop.⁶⁴ This is the story found in the *Lives* subsequent to that of Cogitosus. But the story as told by Cogitosus claims that she was consecrated by bishop Mac Caille and that when she presented herself to him "he placed over her venerable head a white pallium and a white robe" (*pallium album et vestem candidam super ipsius venerabile caput imposuit*).⁶⁵ It is thus possible that the use of the word *pallium* in the text of Cogitosus has confused or led astray later redactors.

⁶⁰ From the Franciscan *Liber Hymnorum*, p. 40, quote in the Notes to Brigit: *BL* 1341-1344.

⁶¹ Joan Morris *The Lady was a Bishop*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. The claim by Morris is inherent in the title of her book, but see also ix, 14, 17.

⁶² Ryan 1931, 183.

⁶³ McCone 1991, 242 ff.

⁶⁴ *B. Br.* 19. The idea of the intoxicating power of the Holy Spirit is to be found in Acts 2:13. This motif of inebriation is also to be found in the work of Jerome. (Jerome: *Homilies* 13 (95)).

⁶⁵ Cogitosus, Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 1:5.

The *pallium* is normally considered to be the emblem of office belonging to a bishop. But the history of the *pallium* is far from clear, for the word *pallium* appears to have had a different meaning for various people at different times. In the second century BC. we hear of a *pallium* as a rectangular piece of cloth worn by a Roman matron over her robe somewhat like a mantle which could be drawn up over her head.⁶⁶ In the Christian church it came to be used as the insignia of the bishop, and even before the sixth century the use of the *pallium* had taken on a definite liturgical significance.⁶⁷ It is of course interesting that Cogitosus has chosen to use the word *pallium*, mention of which we find again elsewhere in the *Life of St. Fanchea*, where it can only refer to a large flat garment worn by that virgin:

Cumquè ad mare venissent, & nauem ad transfretandum non habuissent, pallium suum S. Fanchea super mare expandit. atque confidenter super vndas siccis pedibus ambulauit...

When they had reached the sea, and they did not have a boat to take them over the water, St. Fanchea spread her *pallium* upon the sea and filled with faith they walked upon the waves with dry feet.⁶⁸

It would seem possible that the use of the word *pallium* by Cogitosus caused confusion in the minds of the medieval redactors who may have mistakenly thought that she had been presented with the bishop's *pallium*. The bestowal of the *pallium* indeed needs further

⁶⁶ *The Clothing of the Ancient Romans*, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁷ Joseph Braun, "Pallium," (Old) *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, 427b-429b.

⁶⁸ Fanchea: *AS* Jan. 1, (17), p. 2b. In the same *Life*, we learn further that when Fanchea died, the *pallium* formed her burial shroud. (Fanchea: *AS* Jan. 1, 20). The practice of burial in a simple shroud is attested to by Harold Mytum (Mytum 1992, 94).

investigation, for it not only appears in the *Lives* as a garment given ritually to a woman we know to be an abbess, but it appears elsewhere as a garment associated with a famous Irish abbot. The story is basically that found above in the *Life of Fanchea*:

Hiis quoque peractis, sanctus Mochua duxit beatum Kyennanum cum suis usque ad fluuium cui nomen est Lyn Corchaygi, qui est aqua ualde impetuosa pro tempore. Cumque aquam illam profundam ac rapidam clerici cernerent, atque inmeabilem sine scapha iudicarent, sanctus Mochua pallium suum in uirtute illius, qui in pallio Helye desiccauit aquas Iordanis, misit super aquas, et in eo sanctum Kyennanum cum suis quindecim discipulis ultra flumen, tanquam in rate tutissima, transuexit. Sancto igitur Kyennano cum suis ad cellam suam properantibus, pallium latum caritatis sancti Mochua non complic[a]tum⁶⁹ in aliquo, nec humefactum, ad ipsum reuersum est.

After these events took place, St. Mochua escorted the blessed Kyeannan and his followers all the way to the river whose name is Lyn Corchaygi, whose waters are very swift at times. And when the clerics perceived that that water was deep and swift, and they judged it (*inmeabilem*) without a boat, St. Mochua, by virtue of whom, the man Elye crossed untouched by the waters the river Jordan on his cloak, sent St. Kyennan on that pallium, along with his fifteen disciples across the river, just as if he crossed on the safest raft. When therefore St. Kyennan hastened to his monastery with his company, he returned the wide pallium of St. Mochua neither wrinkled nor damp in any way.⁷⁰

All of this leads us to the conclusion that women who were abbesses, at least at times, were given some type of ecclesiastical grade which set them apart from others. It is also possible, that Brigit's second consecration, if such did indeed take place, was that as

⁶⁹ the parentheses are those of the editor.

⁷⁰ Mochua: *VSH* II. 9.

deaconess. If Brigit were ordained as a deaconess and even consecrated as abbess, this could help explain the hagiographer's confusion over the ordination of this famous virgin. For indeed she would have been established as overseer (*episcopa*) of her monastic *familia*. In light of this it is worthy of note that Cogitosus refers to Kildare not only as the see of the bishop who assists Brigit in her *paruchia*, but also as the see of Brigit. Nevertheless, no matter what our opinion may be regarding the ordination of Brigit one thing is perfectly clear, namely that without a doubt the Irish saw a difference between the consecration or ordination⁷¹ of an abbess and that of ordinary nuns, for *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* announces that "it is the principal of Granard who always ordains the chief of the nuns in Cluain Brónaig"⁷² (*ocus airchindech Granaird ortnesscenn caillech dogres iCluain Bronaig*)⁷³. The Irish '*cenn caillech*' used here means 'head of the nuns',⁷⁴ a term which in this context can only mean the abbess. It is she, who in the Eastern Church, absorbed the role of the 'head deaconess'. Moreover, surprising claims are made at times for the power of these Irish abbesses, claims which at least the respective hagiographers appear to have been quite comfortable with. For example, we are told that Monenna elevated her

⁷¹ A distinction drawn between consecration and ordination is a modern innovation. The medieval mind perceived no such distinction. See ("Orders and Ordination," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1004).

⁷² that is, Clonbroney. See Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 421.

⁷³ TP 90.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

foster-child Luger, the founder of Ruscach, to priestly orders.⁷⁵

(Luger)⁷⁶quem ipsa Darerca in filium adoptavit, deinde, ecclesiasticis moribus imbutum, pontificalis ordinis honore sublimavit.

Then Luger, whom Darerca herself adopted as a son, imbued in ecclesiastical ways, she raised to priestly orders with honor.⁷⁷

In the *Life of Lasair* we find an incident in which Lasair recites the prayer, and a priest utters the response.⁷⁸ On another occasion we learn that it was Brigit herself who chose the archbishop whose seat was in Kildare.⁷⁹ Further, we might also note that the *Lismore Lives* declares that virgins constitute the third order of the Church (*tres grad na hEalsa*).⁸⁰ That 'grad' refers to a ministerial order is evident from its use in reference to the priestly order *gradha sacair*.⁸¹ A passage in the *Uraicecht Becc* gives witnesses to the existence of seven grades within the Church, namely those of lector, usher, exorcist, sub-deacon, deacon, priest, and bishop in that order.⁸² Thus the list gives possibility to the grade of exorcist or deaconess being conferred upon those within the ranks of ecclesiastical women.

⁷⁵ Darerca: Heist 1.2.

⁷⁶ the addition is mine.

⁷⁷ Darerca: Heist 3.

⁷⁸ Lasair 93

⁷⁹ Ameotosus 15.

⁸⁰ Brigit: *BL* 1122.

⁸¹ Brigit: *BL* 1466.

⁸² *Uraicecht Becc* 22:8, *Críth Gablach* 5: 320:104. In Eoin Mac Neill "Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise," *PRLA* 36c, 1923.

However, it is most likely that the grade referred to is that of deaconess. Daniélou has shown that women were at times included within the clerical orders, although they generally formed a fourth order following that of deacon, and served as the deacon's assistant.⁸³ The deaconess was expected to help the priest in performing those duties necessary to minister to women, while the deacon aided with those involving men.⁸⁴ Ireland would appear to have adopted patterns it had found elsewhere in the early church. For example, there is certainly much evidence for the existence of 'holy widows' in Ireland. Indeed the *Life of Brendan* declares that not only did that saint make his father a monk, but that he made his own mother a *viduam sacratam* (holy widow), although they do not appear to have enjoyed any special privileges.⁸⁵ In this context 'widow' does not carry a meaning that we are normally accustomed to in a secular environment.

Further evidence pointing to an official ministerial role for women in early Ireland exists elsewhere. There is also the matter, for example, of the passing references to the learning of the 'rules' in various Irish texts, and although admittedly taking him out of context in this instance, we might add here that O'Dwyer in speaking of the Céli Dé remarks that "learning and familiarity with the rules and laws are marks of a worthy priest."⁸⁶ In the *Life of Brendan the Voyager* we read that not only did Brendan learn the

⁸³ Daniélou 1974, 17.

⁸⁴ Daniélou 1974, 21.

⁸⁵ Brendan I: *VSH* I, 71, n. 3.

⁸⁶ O'Dwyer 1981, 126. See also Mac Eclaise, "The Rule of St. Carthage," *IER*, vol. 27, 4th series, 1910, D.2.

rules before receiving orders, but that he was warned not to learn them from women, not because they were unqualified or inept, but simply to avoid scandal.

Iar ffoghlaim *immorro* na canoine fectarlaice 7 nua-fhiadhnaisi do Bhrenainn, dob ail leis riaghail naomh Erenn do sccriobadh 7 d'foglaim. Cettaighis tra espocc Eirc do somh dol d'foghlaime na riaghla sin, ar ro fhittir *gurab* ó Dhia ro boi an chomhairle sin do somh. *Ocus* atbert espocc Eirc fris: 'Tair arís cuccam sa, 7 na riaghla sin lat, co ngabha tu gradha uaim si.' Iar ndola do somh do accallaimh a muimmi .i. Itea, issedh atbert si an céttina friss .i. riaghail noemh Erenn d'foghlaime. *Ocus* atbert fris: 'Na dena foghlaim ag mnaibh na acc oghaibh; 7 na derntar hécnach fríu...Iar sccribenn tra riaghla na náemh cona mbesaibh, 7 cona ccrabhadh do Brenainn, impois co hespocc Eirc doridhisi, 7 gabhais gradha uadha.

Now after learning the canon of the Old and New Testaments, Brendan wished to write out and learn the rule of the saints of Erin. Bishop Erc gave him leave to go and learn this rule, for he knew that it was of God that this counsel had come to him. And he said to him: 'Come back to me, and bring the rules with thee, that thou mayest receive orders at my hands.' When he went to consult his foster-mother, Ita, she said the same thing to him, viz. that he should learn the rule of the saints of Ireland. And she said to him: 'Do not learn of women or of virgins lest thou be reproached in regard to them.'...So after writing the rule of the saints, and their customs, and devotion, Brendan returned to Bishop Erc, and received orders from him.⁸⁷

Finally, we are told that the virgin Brignat was sent to the famous monastery of Candida Casa in Britain "that she might learn⁸⁸ the Rules of the monastic way of life" (*conversationis monasticae regulas accepturam*).⁸⁹ Thus here we see women both being

⁸⁷ Brendan: *BNE* 8:18-19, 11:25.

⁸⁸ literally 'receive'.

⁸⁹ Monenna: *AASS* July 6, 30 (294).

sent to learn the 'rules' which are claimed elsewhere to be the mark of a worthy priest, and a prerequisite for ordination, and we find women teaching those same 'rules' to those preparing for orders.

Some slight evidence might also exist in the use of titles common within the Irish Church. For example the word *sanctimonialis* occurs with some regularity throughout the hagiographical corpus, a title we have already learned was given those special widows who acted as deaconesses in the eastern Church, and which absorbed into the language of the Church becomes one of the everyday titles for a nun. Women in Ireland who chose the monastic life were also called *monachae*,⁹⁰ *puellae*,⁹¹ *moniales*,⁹² *sanctae uirgines*,⁹³ *virgines*,⁹⁴ *sorores*,⁹⁵ and *caillech* (nun) from *caille* (L. *pallium*) 'veil'.⁹⁶ But of greater significance is the use of the word *ministra*. Pliny the Younger, in a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, spoke of "two handmaids who are called *ministrae*"⁹⁷ (*duabus ancillis, quae ministrae*

⁹⁰ TP 99. The word *monachos* means 'alone' (RB 1980, 304-9), and came to mean 'single', and thus 'unity', 'undivided', and even 'unmarried'. Thus the word *monachos* came to refer to those leading a singular life, a life of renunciation which emphasized celibacy and which demanded that monks live as though of "one mind and one heart." (RB 1980, 62, 308-11).

⁹¹ Fanchea: AS Jan.1, 17.

⁹² Boecius: VSH I, 10.

⁹³ Aed: VSH I, 15.

⁹⁴ Fanchea: AS Jan.1, 9.

⁹⁵ Fanchea: AS Jan.1, 10.

⁹⁶ Féilire 58; Gougaud 1932, 80 fn.1.

⁹⁷ the translation is mine.

dicebantur) by the Christians.⁹⁸ In his remarks to Trajan, Pliny translates the Greek word *diakonissai* as *ministrae*.⁹⁹ Thus, in his references to this text, Daniélou translates *ministrae* as 'deaconesses'.¹⁰⁰ The identification of *ministrae* with *diakonissai* is of some importance to our argument, for in praising the virtues and greatness of St. Samthann, the compiler of her *Life* also calls her, among other things, *ministra*.¹⁰¹ Kathleen Hughes has brought attention to the fact that *ministerium* in the Irish canonical texts refers to the office of deacon¹⁰² and thus there is some justification in assuming that *ministra* may mean the office of deaconess. In the *Life of Senán* in the Lismore texts, women are spoken of giving ministry to Christ (*oc timterecht do Crist*),¹⁰³ while the *Catalogue of Saints* further declares that the first order of saints did not disdain the ministry (*administrationum*) and society of women.¹⁰⁴

There is also irrefutable evidence that the staff of office which was commonly used by abbots, was also the prerogative of the Irish abbess. Certain of these are either

⁹⁸ Here Pliny refers to two Christian women who have been taken into custody and tortured. See Pliny, *Selected Letters*, (with notes by) Constantine E. Prichard & Edward R. Bernard, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961 (1872), letter 90 (= X, 96, letter to Trajan from Bithynia).

⁹⁹ Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 416 n.305.

¹⁰⁰ Daniélou 1974, 15.

¹⁰¹ Samthann: *VSH* II, 25.

¹⁰² Hughes 1966, 159 n.3

¹⁰³ Senán: *BL* 2434-5.

¹⁰⁴ *De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae*: Heist 1.

mentioned in the hagiographical literature,¹⁰⁵ or have come down to us enshrined as relics, as have been those of abbots and bishops. For example, the staff of St. Dympna, a sixth-century abbess¹⁰⁶ has been preserved. But whether or not these were presented during a consecration service or other liturgical ceremony is not known, and the evidence that does exist would be against such a happening. Nevertheless, it is clear that the *bacula* or croziers were an insignia of office which made manifest that these women who were abbesses and confessors and in some way different from other nuns, and an insignia of office which was identical to that of abbots. That they were accorded this particular badge of office is of interest, since once again it shows that these women had preempted areas of authority which elsewhere were the sole right of men.¹⁰⁷

Apart from these references and the fleeting references elsewhere in the Patrick corpus to that bishop blessing the veils on the heads of the two Emers and Ailill's two daughters, which may or may not refer to a laying on of hands,¹⁰⁸ we have no further explicit evidence that would support a claim that women were ordained as deaconesses in Ireland. However, if we look closely at the function of these women in the early Irish Church, we will find that there is a great deal of evidence which supports a claim that whether or not these women were raised to a ministerial order, they did in fact perform

¹⁰⁵ Brigit: Ameotosus 9; *B. Br.* xvi.; Monenna: *NL* line 17.

¹⁰⁶ Geo. Coffey *Celtic Antiquities of the Christian Period Preserved in the National Museum, Dublin*, Dublin, 1909, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Coffey 1909, 58-59.

¹⁰⁸ *TP* 91; Patrick: *BL* 396-400.

the duties of such a position and enjoyed the privileges of that same position.

We have already noted the presence of women at church assemblies, and that at times they seem to have played a major role at such assemblies. But this is not the only area in which their intrusion upon male prerogatives is evident. There are, for example, a number of references to women preaching. Some references are oblique, such as in the story of Monenna with its veiled reference to preaching, in which the hagiographer declares that it was foreseen that Monenna would become 'a living font of spiritual waters' (*fontem vivum aquarum spiritualium*).¹⁰⁹ It is also implied in the story of Brigit and Nindid the scholar. Once upon a time when Brigit was out tending her sheep,¹¹⁰ so the story goes, Nindid ran by her. Stopping, he said: "pray the Lord that it may be easy for me to go to heaven, and I will pray the Lord for thee, that it may be easy for thee, and that thou mayest bring many thousands with thee unto heaven." (*guid in Coimdhe leam gurub soraidh dhamh dul docum nime 7 guidhfet-sa Dia forsu curob reidh dhuit, 7 forruca ilmhile lat docum nime*).¹¹¹ The latter is an obvious reference to the souls to be saved by Brigit through preaching and conversion, especially since it follows upon references to Brigit attending her flock. Others references are at times quite direct. The story of Mac Póil,

¹⁰⁹ Monenna: *AASS* Jul.6, 1:2.

¹¹⁰ This is most likely a reference to her spiritual flock, for one would think that a busy abbess would have little time for such a time-consuming task of an agricultural nature, especially in light of her large *paruchia*. It is in all probability a metaphor with biblical roots. The reader should be aware, however, that there are those who would disagree with my claim that the abbess had a ministerial role in the early church of Ireland. Indeed they would disagree with any claim for such a role being filled by a monastic, male or female. See, for example Blair & Sharpe 1992, 99.

¹¹¹ Brigit: *BL* 1564-1565.

abbot of Cell Becáin, relates how in a vision that abbot saw a 'gospel-nun' (*mainces soiscela*)¹¹² who had recently died. That the Irish had coined a term for those women who proclaimed the Gospel is itself ample witness to the existence of the preaching-nun. Such was the virgin Fanchea, who is described by the manuscript tradition in the following manner:

...in ista Apostolica faemina quod dixit Dominus Apostolis ad
praedicandum missis, completum est.

in that apostolic woman that which the Lord said to the
apostles 'you are sent forth in order to preach' was filled.¹¹³

A story preserved in the Brigit corpus gives witness to a tradition that this beloved saint of the Irish also filled such a role. We are told that once when Patrick was preaching, Brigit fell asleep and beheld a vision.

'Innis in fhís,' ol *Pátraic*. 'Atconnac,' ol *Brigit*, 'cethra harathra
anairdeas roairsetar an indsi uile...'...ol *Pátraic*. 'Na .iiii.
harathru toisecha adconnacuis, misi 7 *usa* sin, silmaid
cethirleabur in t-soiscéla co silad irsi 7 *creidmhe* 7 *crabhuidh*.'

'Declare the vision,' saith Patrick. 'I beheld,' saith Brigit, 'four
ploughs in the south-east, which ploughed the whole
island....,'...saith Patrick. 'The first four ploughs which thou
beheldest, those are I and thou, who sow the four books of the
Gospel with a sowing of faith, and belief, and piety.'¹¹⁴

This story declares not only that women preached the Gospel but that they also were teachers. It also illustrates that these same women had not been simply assigned a

¹¹² *BL* xv. See also *ibid.* xv n.6 which remarks "read perhaps soiscélda 'evangelical'."

¹¹³ Fanchea: *AS* Jan.1, 11-12.

¹¹⁴ Brigit: *BL* 1501-1511.

background role of religious instructor, although this latter would have also been a necessary duty of both men and women in their own particular *paruchia*e. One famous teacher was, of course, Ita, who not only is said to have given her mother religious instruction but to have taught a number of saints of Ireland at school at Killeedy.¹¹⁵

Women also founded churches, and we hear of women consecrating and blessing these churches. Ryan reminds us of the activity of Monenna in this regard, and no less than six churches are said to have been founded by her.¹¹⁶ Thus once again we see women performing tasks usually reserved for male clerics, for the same *Lives* report that the duties of a priest include not only the responsibility of going on preaching rounds,¹¹⁷ but also the duty of the founding of churches.¹¹⁸ The Lismore *Life of Brigit* claims that Brigit founded and aided “monasteries and churches and altars in abundance” (*cheall 7 eclas 7 altorach n-imdha*).¹¹⁹ The Irish *Life of Columcille* tells of a group of nuns who had a chapel not far from the dwelling place of Cruthnechán, the foster-father of Columcille of Iona.¹²⁰ The *Life of Ciarán of Saighir* speaks of the chapel of Cochae, the foster-mother of Ciarán, which was at Drumbanagher.¹²¹ There is a nun Lasair, said to have been a

¹¹⁵ Ita: *VSH* II, 4; Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 8; Brendan: *VSH* I, 3.

¹¹⁶ Ryan 1931, 138.

¹¹⁷ Columcille: *BL* 1024-1025.

¹¹⁸ *BL*: cxviii.

¹¹⁹ Brigit: *BL* 1760.

¹²⁰ Columcille: *BL* 830-832.

¹²¹ Introd.: *BNE* vol.1, xix.

disciple of Findian of Clonard, who is named as founder of a church at Daire mac Aidmecain.¹²² Lasair daughter of Ronan is said not only to have consecrated Cill Lasrach in Oireacht Ui Mhainnín but also to have blessed a church at Cill Lasrach on Loch Mc nÉn.¹²³ Colgan speaks of the tabernacle of Attracta,¹²⁴ Brigit is said to have consecrated either a church or a monastery for the virgins Induae and Indiu.

Ba and-sin do-lotar di ingin óga co *Brigti* co ndigsed leu do c[h]osecrad¹²⁵ a luic 7 a tigi leu. Induae 7 Indiu nomina illarum.

It was then that two virgins came to Brigit that she might go with them to consecrate their foundation and house along with them. Induae and Indiu *were their names*.¹²⁶

Moreover, while we do have comments in the Patrick corpus which can only intend to limit the power of women, such as Patrick's remark to Brigit that she should never travel without a priest,¹²⁷ we also note an entirely different perspective existing within the same texts. Indeed, a close textual reading of these same sources indicates that Patrick's behaviour towards ecclesiastical women is reminiscent of attitudes found in the early centuries in both Britain and Gaul, and rather than tending towards restricting the power

¹²² Ryan 1931, 141. That such words as 'disciple' and elsewhere 'apostle' were used by tradition to describe these women saints is a fact of no little import.

¹²³ Lasair 83.

¹²⁴ Attracta: *AS* Feb.9, 11.

¹²⁵ the addition is that of the editor.

¹²⁶ *B. Br.* 35.

¹²⁷ *B. Br.* 41.

of those women, it would appear that he nurtured that power which women inherited from an earlier stratum. One of the most significant episodes in the Patrick corpus occurs in the story of the consecration of the virgin *Attracta*. The narrator tells us that after the consecration of that virgin, Patrick not only placed her in charge of a monastery which he had prepared for her, but that he left there for her a chalice, a patten and a chasuble, the latter having been miraculously sent from heaven for the new abbess. The chasuble being a garment associated with the priestly function, tradition prudently also has the virgin refuse the gift.

Forothaig iarsin Cill *Atrachtæ* ingregraidi *ocus* ingen Talán inti, quae accepit calli deláim *Patraic*, *ocus* forácaib teisc *ocus* cailech léa. *Atracht* ingen Talaín meicc Cathbaid de Gregraidi Locha Teichet, síur Cóeman Airtne Coemán. Senais *Patraic* calli foracend. Drummana ainm intíri imbátar. Machari indíu. Docoras casal donim inucht *Patraic*. “Bíth lat inchasal, achaillech.” ol*Patraic*. “Nato,” olsí, “ní dam doratad *acht* dut bonnæ.”

After that he founded Cell *Atrachta* in Gregraide, and (placed) in it Talan's daughter, who took the veil from Patrick's hand; and he left a patten and a chalice with her, *Atracht*, daughter of Talan, son of Cathbad, of the Gregraide of Loch Techet, a sister of Coemán of Airtne Coemáin. Patrick sained the veil on her head. Drummana was the name of the place in which they were biding. It is (called) Machare to-day. A chasuble was sent from heaven into Patrick's breast. “Let the chasuble be thine, O nun,” saith Patrick. “Not so,” saith she: “not unto me hath it been given, but to thy goodness.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ *TP* 108-109. The parentheses are those of the editor.

The mention of the chasuble is more than of passing interest, for in the Byzantium tradition, at her ordination, the deaconess was clothed with the deacon's robe,¹²⁹ ie. the orarion,¹³⁰ or the chasuble.¹³¹ Mention of the chasuble, a sacerdotal garment,¹³² is also found elsewhere in association with women. The *Félire* preserves a story of two maidens who used to lie with the cleric Scothín.

No laigdis dano da ingin chorrchíchecha immi cach n-aidchi comad móide in cath dó fri Demon, cor' himraided a ailiugud trit-sin. Co tainic Brénaind dia derbad, co n-derbairt Scoithin: Loighed am lepaidsea in cleirech anocht, ar se. O ro siacht iarum co huair chumsanta and tecaít na hingena issin tech a raibe Brenaind 7 a n-utlaige do grissaig ina caslaib, 7 ní ro loisc in teine iat, 7 doirtid i fiadnaisi Brénaind 7 tiagait issin lepaid chuide.

Now two maidens with pointed breasts used to lie with him every night that the battle with the Devil might be greater for him. And it was proposed to accuse him on that account. So Brénainn came to test him, and Scothín said: "Let the cleric lie in my bed to-night," saith he. So when he reached the hour of resting the girls came into the house wherein was Brénainn, with their lapfuls of glowing embers in their chasubles; and the fire burnt them not, and they spill (the embers)¹³³ in front of Brénainn, and go into bed with him.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Daniélou 23.

¹³⁰ "orarion.", see F.L. Cross *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1001-1002.

¹³¹ Roger E. Reynolds "Vestments. Liturgical." in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol.12. pp. 397-404.

¹³² F.E. Warren *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881, 112-113.

¹³³ the addition is that of the editor.

¹³⁴ *Félire* 40-41.

It is of interest here that tradition has chosen the holy garment as the focus of the story, for in doing so the continued purity of the maidens and their companion is emphasized. These women can be none other than *conhospitae*, women who helped certain clerics in their administration to the people and who lived in close association with these same men that they aided.¹³⁵ One of the duties of these women was to aid in the distribution of the eucharist, a function described briefly in a letter written to two Breton priests who had women companions assisting them.

cognovimus quod gestantes quasdam tabulas per diversorum civium vestrorum capanas circumferre non desinatis et missas, ibidem adhibitis mulieribus in sacrificio divino, quas conhospitas nominastis, facere praesumatis, sic ut erogantibus vobis eucharistiam illae vobis positis calices teneant et sanguinem Christi populo administrare praesumant.

we have learned that you do not desist from carrying portable altars to your various congregations around the countryside, and indeed that you presume to allow women, whom you call *conhospitae*, to serve in the divine sacrifice, so that when you stand serving the eucharist to the people, they hold the chalice and presume to administer the blood of Christ to the people.¹³⁶

The existence of the practice has been remarked upon by other scholars. For example, Gwynn and Hadcock, in their monumental work, have noted that at the time of Patrick's mission the "consecrated virgins and widows are said to have helped in the service of the

¹³⁵ For further information on these women, see Reynolds "Virgines Subintroductae," 551. The practice is mentioned by Jerome who speaks of it disparagingly (Jerome: *Letters* 22 (80-81).

¹³⁶ L. Duchesne "Lovocat et Catihern." *Revue de Bretagne et de Vendée* 57 (1885) 6.

churches.”¹³⁷ Ryan in his work on Irish monasticism has also noted the practice.

A nun named Comgella rendered special aid to Bishop Cethiacus, who himself may have had monastic vows; whilst Cipia, mother of Bishop Betheus, two sisters of Bishop Felartus, and a sister to an anonymous bishop of the race of Corcu Teimne, are among the other pious women who assisted in the work of conversion.¹³⁸

That women at times administered the eucharist is implied elsewhere. St. Ita is said to have received bread from heaven, which she then shared with others.¹³⁹ Elsewhere we find reference to an abbess who received the eucharist through the protection of divine aid. Thus Brigit of Cluain Inghíde is said to have received the eucharist from Senán, who had floated the sacred offering down the Shannon river in a little basket.¹⁴⁰ Often, too, we find hidden in metaphor references to what appears to be the distribution of the eucharist. We note one such reference in the Lismore *Life of Brigit*, a story in which we are told how Brigit, immediately the preaching was finished, distributed food among the assembled congregation.

I N-ARAILE aimsir ann adconncatur *Patraic* chuca. Senadh mor
maille fris. Doraidh Lassair re Brigit: ‘Cidh doghenam frisin

¹³⁷ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 1. We know that in the eastern Church that in at least one text deaconesses are said to have equal standing with deacons, and thus it is important to note that the Council of Arles in 314 complained that deacons offered the sacrifice of the Mass, and declared that these same deacons were no longer to be allowed to do this. At the same time we must also be aware that there were no women signatories witnessing this particular document. See Liam de Paor in *St. Patrick's World*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993, 54-56).

¹³⁸ Ryan 1931, 81; *Arm. Tír.*, 24a. cf. 454a, 22b, 24b cf. 254b, 29b.

¹³⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Senán: *BL* 2399-2415.

sochaide tangatar chucaind?’... ‘Ni fhil,’ ar Lassair, ‘*acht* aen chúra 7 da bhairghin déc 7 becan loma.’ ... O thairnic do Phatraic in proicept tucad an biadh co Brigit dia roinn, 7 robennach, 7 rosasta in da phopul De .i. samad *Brigte* 7 samad *Pátraic*...

At another time they saw Patrick coming to them. (A great multitude together with him, *om.* Stokes) Said Lassair to Brigit: ‘What shall we do for the multitude that has come to us? There is nought,’ said Lassair, ‘save one sheep, and twelve loaves, and a little milk.’ When Patrick had finished the preaching, the food was brought to Brigit that she might divide it. And she blessed it, and the two peoples of God, even Brigit’s congregation and Patrick’s congregation were satisfied.¹⁴¹

The miracle of the feeding of the multitude, a story which came to be used at an early date as a metaphor for the eucharist,¹⁴² is based on the model found in the New Testament,¹⁴³ and while it is common in the hagiographical corpus as a whole, it is particularly common in the Brigit material. The twelve loaves mentioned in the Brigit story above, are of course a play on the twelve apostles. The sheep is Christ the sacrificial lamb, and the milk his blood. Brigit blesses the milk/blood and the bread, breaks it, blesses it, and distributes it to the congregation - a powerful statement in light of the claim that she was ordained a bishop. A reference to Christ and the apostles, represented above by the lamb and the twelve loaves, occurs again in the story of Brigit’s distribution of the dairy produce.

7 nach maistreth do-gnith na-randad a toruth i nde-r(e)ainn

¹⁴¹ Brigit: *BL* 1470-1477.

¹⁴² Irenaeus *Haer.* 3.11.5

¹⁴³ Mark 8:1-8.

deac cona gruth, 7 no-bith in tres chuit dec i mmedon 7 ba
mo-s(u)idi(u) ambui cach cuit...ol Brigit. 'Ra-chuala ro-batar
da apstal deac apud Dominum, 7 he-som fessin in tres *deac*...'

and every churning she made, she used to divide the produce
into twelve portions with its curds, and the thirteenth portion
would be in the middle and that was greater than any other
portion (for)¹⁴⁴ said Brigit. 'I have heard that there were
twelve apostles *with the Lord*, and he himself the thirteenth.'¹⁴⁵

The serving of food to the apostles by Brigit is here highly significant, for in doing so she mimics not only the action of Christ at the last supper, but also re-enacts the role of the priest at the eucharist. We have discussed previously the significance of milk as a metaphor for blood. If we accept the possibility that the motif of the feeding of the multitude is operative here, we realize that the imagery evoked is unmistakably that of the eucharist.

As has already been noted, eucharistic metaphors are abundant in the Brigit corpus and the hagiographers allow them to break into their work at every conceivable opportunity. Indeed the Brigit corpus' central focus is that of food, the food of salvation which is Christ. Such an occurrence cannot be overlooked. Many of these metaphors are built around common motifs, often biblical, which are woven throughout the *Lives*. Among these we find that of turning water into wine, a story which has its origins in the tale of the wedding at Cana, and which already in the work of Irenaeus was given a eucharistic

¹⁴⁴ the addition is mine.

¹⁴⁵ *B. Br.* 12.

interpretation,¹⁴⁶ The miracle thus becomes associated with the priestly act. This motif was adopted and adapted by the Irish hagiographers. St. Findian is said to have turned water into wine¹⁴⁷ as did Ciarán whose biographer remarks:

Fer lán do cosmailijus o ilmoduibh re hIssu Críst, re cenn na n-uile. Ar doríne an fer-sa fion don uisce dia mhuinntúr 7 dia áigeduib isin cathraig-si amail doríne Issu fin togaidi don usqui ic fleidh Cannan Galale.

(He was)¹⁴⁸ a man full of likeness in many ways to Jesus Christ, to the Head of all things. For this man made wine of the water for his household and for his guests in this monastery, even as Jesus made choice wine of the water at the feast of Cana in Galilee ...¹⁴⁹

The motif repeated in the *Life* of the abbess Monenna, a motif which possibly significantly follows immediately upon a miracle involving a silver vessel:

Ipsa namque benedicens vas aqua plenum, Deo per ipsam operante, aqua illa in optimum vinum convertitur.

And she (Monenna) blessing the vessel filled with water, with God working through her, that water was turned into the finest wine.¹⁵⁰

However it is within the Brigit material that we find a number of references to the miracle, albeit in a weakened form in which the water is turned not into wine but into ale.

¹⁴⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.5; John 2:1-10.

¹⁴⁷ Findian: *BL* 2701-2702.

¹⁴⁸ the addition is mine.

¹⁴⁹ Ciarán: *BL* 4504-4507.

¹⁵⁰ Darerca: Heist 15.

Thus in the *Life of Brigit* we read:

Mirabili quoque eventu ab hac venerabili Brigida leprosi cerevisiam flagitantes. cum non haberet illa, videns aquam ad balnea paratam, et cum virtute fidei benedicens, in optimam convertit cerevisiam, et abundanter sitientibus exhaustit. Ille enim, qui in Cana Galilææ aquam convertit in vinum, per hujus quoque Beatissimæ fidem aquam mutavit in cerevisiam.

In another marvellous occurrence, lepers were beseeching ale from the venerable Brigit. Since she had none, seeing the water prepared for the baths, and blessing it with the virtue of faith, she turned it into excellent beer, and she poured it generously for those who were thirsting. For he, who at Cana in Galilee turned water into wine, on account of the faith of this most blessed virgin, turned the water into beer.¹⁵¹

Here the hagiographer, though admittedly weakening the metaphor, draws an analogy between the action of Brigit and that of Christ at the wedding feast. Elsewhere the motif is repeated. Brigit, we are told, wished to visit her father and he came to get her. Along the way to her parent's home Brigit's nurse took ill and Brigit effected her cure.

7 a muime malle fria Brigit, cu roghab galar a muime ar toidhecht, cor' faidhed Brigjit 7 ingen aile do chuinghidh dighi do coirimm dhí co araile fer oca ndernadh fled mhor. Bæthchu a ainm-sidhe. Dorat era for Brigit. Taraill Brigit iarsin co araili topur gur'lin lestar as, 7 robeannach cu rosoudh i mblas corma, 7 dobert dia muime, 7 ba oghshlan fokedair.

And her nurse was along with Brigit, and illness seized her nurse as she was wending her way. So Brigit and another girl were sent to ask a drink of ale for her from a certain man named Baethchu, who was making a mighty feast. He refused Brigit. Then Brigit went to a certain well, and filled her vessel thereat, and blessed (the water),¹⁵² so that it turned into the

¹⁵¹ Cogitosus, *Brigit* II: AASS Feb.1. 11.

¹⁵² the parentheses are those of the editor.

taste of ale, and she gave it to her nurse, who straightway became whole.¹⁵³

Although in this instance the metaphor of turning water into wine has been once again weakened, its original meaning has been retained in its veiled reference to the healing power of the eucharist, a motif which we meet with in another story concerning Brigit in which through the use of her blood mixed with water she causes the mute to speak.¹⁵⁴ The motif is also operative in the tale which relates that Brigit turned water into milk to cure a sick nun, for we have already seen that milk was often used as a metaphor for blood.

The significance of the motif of turning water into ale (wine) comes to the forefront in the following anecdote:

FEACHT O rochomhoicsigh sollaman na casc duthracair tria dhesheirc coirm do denamh dona hecalsaibh imdhaibh robatar impe...Rofodhlad iarsin o Brigit in chuirm do .uii. n-ecalsaibh dec bhFer Tulach, cu ro fherastar toradh in oenmheich bracha iat re shobharthan Brigitte o chaplait co minchaisc.

Once when the hightide of Easter drew nigh, she desired through charity to brew ale for the many churches that were around her.....(this she produced miraculously).¹⁵⁵ Then the ale was distributed by Brigit to seventeen churches of Fir Tulach, so that the produce of one measure of malt supplied them through Bridget's grace from Maundy Thursday to Low Sunday.¹⁵⁶

The story is repeated elsewhere where we are told that Brigit miraculously provided ale

¹⁵³ Brigit: *BL* 1238-1242.

¹⁵⁴ Audomarus, *Brigit* I: *AASS* Feb.1, 5:25.

¹⁵⁵ the addition is mine.

¹⁵⁶ Brigit: *BL* 1355-1362.

for the churches of Mag Tailach at Eastertide,¹⁵⁷ while yet another source notes that she ministered to (*ministravit*) eighteen churches from one measure from Maundy Thursday to the end of Easter.¹⁵⁸ This particular anecdote combines the two motifs just mentioned, that of the turning of water to ale (wine), and that of the feeding of the multitude, both used in the early patristic period as metaphors for the eucharist.

Another recurring theme in the *Lives* of our women saints is that of prophecy. Brigit prophesied of past and future events, and had miraculuous knowledge of events belonging to the immediate present. Monenna was hailed as a daughter of John the Baptist and of the prophet Elijah and was accredited with the gift of prophecy.¹⁵⁹ Samthann is said to have prophesized the blood to be shed in the battling between Aedh Allán the high-king and Aedh son of Colcu king of Leinster.¹⁶⁰ But it is in the *Life of Ita* that the motif receives special emphasis. It would appear that the hagiographers perceived the gift of prophecy as a special chrism bestowed upon this virgin, for references to her as a prophet and uttering prophecies abound within the *Life*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ *B. Br.* 21.

¹⁵⁸ Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 15:2 (119).

¹⁵⁹ Ameotosus, Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 19; Monenna: *AASS* July 6, 10. It is well to remember that women prophets were active in the primitive church as witnessed in Acts 2:18; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:15; Rev. 2:20.

¹⁶⁰ *AT* p. 241, *Four Masters* 733, *Annals of Ulster* 737; O'Dwyer 1981, 58.

¹⁶¹ Ita: *VSH* II, 4, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 24, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35.

Healing is a much more common motif in the *Lives* of women. This may be because healing was an acceptable role for women and was not necessarily seen as part of the clerical role. The Lismore *Life of Brigit* for example, mentions a women's monastery in Teffia which ran a hospital in which the elderly and ill were cared for.¹⁶² On the other hand, stories of miraculous healing dominate the texts with many of the stories adopting healing motifs from the life of Christ. Brigit heals the leper, makes the blind see and the dumb speak, and miraculously returns the use of their limbs to the paralytic.¹⁶³ The hagiographer relating the deeds of the virgin Lasair, not to be outdone, claims that this saint healed a certain boy who was prostrate with sickness, crippled, blind, deaf, and insane,¹⁶⁴ while the writer of the *Life of Ita* claims that virgin Ita raised the dead.¹⁶⁵

While there is no clear evidence that women performed baptisms, we are told in the *Life of Mochoemog* that Coemgen was given his first name, that is his baptismal name, by S. Ita.¹⁶⁶ Elsewhere, in the *Life of Lasair*, we find that virgin giving instructions to a lad for the collection of taxes due her, including the tax owed for baptism.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Brigit: *BL* 1435-1441.

¹⁶³ From Rawl. b. 512, fo. 32 a, 2. quoted in the Notes to Brigit: *BL* 1372-1376. (*Ac per hoc inlumina[n]tur ceci, leprosusque mundatur...*) (and through this the blind are made to see, and the leper cleansed). See also Brigit: *BL* 1431-1434; *ibid.* 1442-1448; *B. Br.* 26.

¹⁶⁴ Lasair 89.

¹⁶⁵ Ita: *VSH* II, 14-15.

¹⁶⁶ Mochoemog: *VSH* II, 6. We see this first name associated with the baptismal name in (Brendan: *BL* 3360-3362).

¹⁶⁷ Lasair 99.

There is an equal lack of evidence that women administered the *viaticum*, though mention of the dying being given the eucharist occurs frequently enough in the *Lives*.¹⁶⁸ However, it does appear that the dead were at times anointed with either oil or water that had been blessed, and some slight evidence exists that women may at times have anointed the dead or dying.¹⁶⁹ In the *Life of Ciarán of Clonmacnois* the writer claims that when that saint was dying “Coemgen blessed water and administered the communion to Ciarán” (*Beannachuis dano Cæimhgen uisqui, 7 dognt comman do Quiarán*).¹⁷⁰ When Dáire lay dying, Patrick blessed water to be given the man.¹⁷¹ The virgin Ita performs a similar function, for when Abbot Comgan lay dying he requested that she attend him.

SANCTUS abbas Comhghanus, cum sciret sue remuneracionis tempus aduenire, rogata est a se sancta Ita, ut ueniret ad eum. Et dixit ei sanctus Comhghanus: ‘En moriar hac infirmitate cicius, et rogo te in Christi nomine, ut ponas ‘manus’ tuas super labia mea, et claudas os meum in hora dormicionis mee. Scio enim ab angelo Dei. super quemcunque morientem posueris manus tuas, quod angeli Domini animam eius ilico deducunt in regnum Dei.’

The holy abbot Comgan when he knew the time of his reward was approaching asked St. Ita to come to him and St. Comgan said to her, ‘Behold I shall die very soon and I ask you in Christ’s name to put your hands on my lips and to close my mouth in the hour of my falling asleep. I know from the angel of God that whenever you put your hands on a dying person

¹⁶⁸ Brenainn: *BL* 3760-3766; Finan: *VSH* II, 6; Brigit: *BL* 1764-1765; Patrick: *BL* 643-644.

¹⁶⁹ Ita: *VSH* II, 13, 35. A twelfth-century missal mentions the anointing of the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, feet, navel and heart of the dying with sanctified oil along with a blessing (Warren *Liturgy* 233).

¹⁷⁰ Ciarán: *BL* 4469.

¹⁷¹ Patrick: *BL* 565-570.

that the angels of the Lord will lead his soul into God's kingdom at once.'¹⁷²

That women must at times have administered to the dying, is also implied in the *Life of Brigit*.

Co comarnactar for conair fri óclaigh do acallaim na caillech lasa luid *Brigit*. 'Cucaib-si do-dechad', ol sude, 'on gallrach-sa co ructhar carput ara c[h]end'¹⁷³, combad i llius libsi da-n-arsitis ec'.

On the way they met a youth [who had come]¹⁷⁴ to speak to the nuns with whom Brigit was going. 'I have come to you', said he, 'from this ill person, that a chariot might be brought to him, so that he might die in the same enclosure with you.'¹⁷⁵

Irish women saints are also said to have been favoured with the chrism of the casting out of demons. Monenna is said to have exercised the right to cast out demons, and her hagiographer remarks that

Donavit enim ei Altissimus gratiam conferendi sanitatem infirmis ac expellendi ab obsessis demones.

The Almighty gifted her with the grace of bringing healing to the sick and of casting out demons from the possessed.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Ita: *VSH* II, 13.

¹⁷³ the addition is that of the editor.

¹⁷⁴ the addition is that of the editor.

¹⁷⁵ *B. Br.* 35.

¹⁷⁶ *Darerca*: Heist 5.

Brigit also is said to have acted as exorcist, for we are not only told that demons fled before her, but that she healed (*sanavit*) those afflicted with demonic attacks.¹⁷⁷

But it is really in their function as confessor (soulfriend, *anmcharae*), a role they performed side by side with men and on an equal footing with men, that we see one of the most important functions that women performed, in which they not only cared for their own communities' needs, communities which reached beyond the boundaries of their immediate circle of nuns, but also for the needs of their male colleagues as well.¹⁷⁸ Indeed some of these men seem to have at times covered vast distances specifically in order to consult with their soulfriend, whether male or female, whenever the need for confession and spiritual guidance was an issue. Even Columbanus, the famous abbot and founder of Bobbio, who is said to have declared that confession should be to a priest,¹⁷⁹ did in his youth have a woman confessor. Indeed, he is said to have travelled out of his way to consult with her when the occasion arose from necessity.¹⁸⁰ St. Fanchea appears to have

¹⁷⁷ "illas....sanavit....alia daemoniaca" (i.e., she healed those (afflicted by) other demonic possessions). (Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 15:3 (119); Brigit: *AASS* Feb.1, 5:39 (123).

¹⁷⁸ The practice was not confined to Christian Ireland, nor even to Christianity. Philo speaks of ascetics living in the desert, both men and women, who were called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides and who, he says, received their names "either because, like physicians, they relieve from the passions of evil the souls of those who come to hem and so cure and heal them, or because of their pure and sincere service and worship of the Divine." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. I, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975. 147). The practice was also common in early Christianity and in the fourth century, the practice of soul-guidance was recommended both by Clement and Origen (*MHP* 10). At the same time, Jerome speaks of the soul has having many ills and of God healing these ills (Jerome: *Homilies* 29 (220)).

¹⁷⁹ Walker *Opera* 1,23.

¹⁸⁰ Ita: *VSH* II, 24; Mac Neill 1923^a, 103.

acted as confessor to the abbot Endeus. This is particularly noticable in his response to her advice which he had sought.

& vade ad Britanniam ad Rosnatum Monasterium, & esto humilis discipulus Manseni magistri illius monasterij. Audiens hæc Endeus dixit sorori suæ. Per quantum tempus debeo ibi manere? Respondit Virgo: quousque fama tua bona ad nos veniat.

(Rychena said) 'Go to Britain, to Rosnat Monastery, and be a humble disciple to Mansenus the teacher of that monastery. Hearing these words Endeus said to his sister. 'How long ought I to stay'? The virgin replied: 'Until the fame of your goodness should come to us.'¹⁸¹

Such claims should not to be passed by lightly, for the so-called *Riagail Phátraic* declares that:

the bishop is soul-friend for nobles and heads of churches, and also for those in orders, the *áes gráid*.¹⁸²

Fanchea is also called 'apostle' by her hagiographer, an important distinction in light of Jerome's comment that the apostle is a spiritual physician.¹⁸³

Samthann offered her services as confessor to Maelruain, but is said to have subsequently withdrawn her offer.¹⁸⁴ St. Ita acted as confessor to Brendan the Voyager and to "a certain

¹⁸¹ Fanchea: *AS* Jan.1, (14-16), p. 2a.

¹⁸² John Blair and Richard Sharpe *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, Leicester: 1992, 74; *CIH* 2119. 7-8, 37-38.

¹⁸³ Jerome: *Letters* 22 (70-71).

¹⁸⁴ *MT* 61.

man who had killed his brother" (*quidam vir occidit fratrem suum*).¹⁸⁵ Some indication of the significance and importance of the role of the *anmcharae* may be gleaned from stray statements in the texts. The Lismore *Life of Senán* states the following:

TANCATAR dano Brenaind 7 Ciaran cu roghabsat Senán do
anmcharuid doibh, ár ba sine inait fein, 7 ba huaisli a gradh
.i. espoc Senan, 7 sacairt in dias aile.

Then Brenainn and Ciarán came to get Senán for their
soulfriend, for he was elder than they themselves, and his rank
was higher, Senán (being) a bishop and the other two
priests.¹⁸⁶

Elsewhere we find it decreed that one was to receive Holy Communion from one's confessor at the Easter celebration.¹⁸⁷ This does not however necessarily also imply that the individual confessor had at the same time consecrated that offering.

Whether or not we wish to go so far as to claim priestly status for these women, and no matter what we wish to either call or refrain from calling these same women, it cannot be denied that a function was claimed for them by the hagiographers which to a large extent mimicked that which we traditionally assign to the clerical role, and indeed embraces that function we have previously seen carried out by the deaconess. At the same time, we have to admit that the role claimed for the women by the hagiographers reaches

¹⁸⁵ Ita: *VSH* II, 25. Here is related a story of man who had killed his brother. "and touched by contrition, he came to St. Ita, and did penance according to her command" (*et tactus penitentia, uenit ad sanctam Ytam, et egit penitudinem secundum iussionem eius*).

¹⁸⁶ Senán: *BL* 2350-2352.

¹⁸⁷ *MT* 51; O'Dwyer 1981, 89. It is of interest that the precept occurs within those same documents which also bear witness to the continued existence of the woman confessor, though it is apparent that feeling towards this function of women is beginning to change.

at times beyond the boundaries of the role of deaconess set by orthodoxy, and that these more likely reflect the charismatic Church as it was in the beginning Christian era.

There is no doubt that within the early years of Christianity in Ireland women held at times powerful positions. Nevertheless as Ireland moved towards orthodoxy, and as we see certain roles come further under the supervision of the church hierarchy, we see this power granted women gradually weakened. Such a weakening of the female role can be observed for instance in the penitential tracts, which not only show a tendency to limit the former rights of the woman confessor but also in doing so reshape the role as a purely male function.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Mac Neill 1923^a, 103.

Conclusion.

In the previous pages we have examined the everyday life of women religious in the Irish Church from a number of different perspectives. One of the most striking features of this life is the obvious ease with which these women were able to travel about and the lack of strictures on their movement. The only group allowed such freedom in Ireland at an earlier age was that of the learned classes, such as poets and priests. The ranks of the latter appear to have been predominantly, though not exclusively, male. It is clear that as the new *literati*, members of the new Christian cult, usurped the privileges of their predecessors, that the ranks of these wanderers were now swelled by large numbers of women, for both men and women are said to have moved about with equal freedom in this new milieu. This fact alone bears witness to the learning of these women, and to the high status awarded them by the people they wished to move amongst and to serve.

Indeed we find these women, as we do men, at some of the best of Irish monastic schools, and sometimes travelling as they searched out a particular teacher noted for learning. At these schools men and women often mingled freely, though the Lives do also emphasize the decorum with which they comported themselves when together. It is equally clear that within the confines of their monastic *paruchia* that women travelled freely as they went about on circuit, much as the royal king made a periodic circuit of the territory under his jurisdiction.

Life itself was often hard and was rendered even harsher by being built upon a solid foundation of a philosophy of self-denial. The daily round was similar to that found in monasteries of men, as women attended the daily hours, adhered to the religious

calendar observing its feasts and fasts, and at the appointed times partook of the eucharist. The *Lives* place much emphasis on the spiritual life of nuns, especially upon the holy abbess who plays a central role in the particular tale. Much attention is given to prayer and meditation. Indeed monastic life appears to have been one of constant prayer and meditation with each action being seen as a meditative act in the service of God. The abbess ruled her monastery firmly and those under her rule were expected to treat her with deference and to obey her in all things.

Women in Ireland, as they did elsewhere, joined a monastery for a variety of reasons. Some were born to it, some joined when they were widowed, some after child-rearing was ended, and some because they were responding to a holy call. Young women appear to have needed parental consent, and this was not always easily obtained. Fathers appear to have been particularly reluctant to give daughters permission to join the Church, and while this action may have been mainly the result of a hagiographer's wish to fill out his/her narrative and to portray the dedication of a particular virgin to the religious life, we cannot doubt that families at times parted reluctantly with a daughter who might have provided them with a strong political alliance elsewhere through a judicious marriage. We are after all speaking of the privileged upper classes of Irish society.

Monastic life followed closely upon the paradigm offered by the Gospel narrative, a common motif in which was the giving and receiving of hospitality. This particular ideal was given central importance within Irish monasticism, and since the ideology in which Christian hospitality was rooted became attached certain biblical stories such as the miracle

of the feast of Cana, the feeding of the multitude, and the last supper, food and feeding and the image of Christ became irrevocably intertwined. Eating is a very intimate act, bringing one closer to the eaten than is possible through any other act. Indeed the eaten object is not only ingested, but becomes part of the very fabric of the body which is attempting to assimilate it. Since the object eaten was holy, much attention was given to that which was about to assimilate this holy food and ideas connected with purification and purity took on prime importance. Out of this sea of ideas arose a cult of the eucharist found exclusively among the women of this developing Church, a cult which placed much emphasis upon ascetic practices, most particularly that of fasting. Through fasting women achieved a state of purity, which not only took them beyond the boundaries of their inherently fragile and impure female nature, but indeed placed them firmly in the category of the male. Thus women, too, could be perceived as being in the image of Christ, and as such exercised a great deal of power within this Church and played a role within the clerical sphere which at times appears to have reached beyond the bounds of orthodoxy.

Throughout the whole medieval period Irish women played a greater role in monasticism than elsewhere in the Church, and since the monasteries of Ireland were numerous and independent of outside authority, we should not be surprised to find that its women played a significant role in the function of that Church. As structural changes took place within the Irish religious establishment, as the sphere of the bishop gained power and that of the monastic abbot and abbess waned, and even more importantly as these women lost the privileges and powers that they had previously enjoyed, we hear less

and less of the women who operating from within the framework of a monastic setting had been very much a part of the life-blood of the Church.

Although there is overwhelming evidence that numerous women's foundations flourished in Ireland during the early centuries of Christianity in Ireland, by the time of the Norman invasion very few of these seem to have remained. Certainly by this time we hear very little of them. The reason or reasons for their demise remains one of the unanswered questions of present-day scholarship. Kathleen Hughes postulated that the problem lay in the inability of women to hold more than a life interest in land, a theory adopted by those who have followed in her footsteps. Unquestionably, the law tracts speak of women not being allowed to pass family land on to others upon their death. But it is equally clear from the *Lives* that the Irish people were at times more than generous when it came to donations to the monasteries of their favourite saints, and it is clear that women as well as men were given land as well as other material wealth in the form of alms.¹ The wealth of women such as Ita and Brigit was sufficient to enable them to bestow land upon others, land which at times was used for the establishment of a church and at times in payment for services rendered. We are told for example that when Brigit was consecrated she was given a place called Ached hí. Refusing this land for herself, she instead gave it to three *peregrini*.² Ita is also said to have on one hand refused land that was offered and on the other to have given land to another for his support, in this case

¹ Hughes 1972, 8.

² *B. Br.* x.

to the husband of her sister who was a lay builder employed by the monastery. Samthann is also said to have refused land. Yet the monastery of Clonbroney had been long in existence, being claimed by one tradition as the foundation of Patrick for the daughters of Milchu,³ and by another as the foundation of the virgin Fuinech.⁴ It was obviously important enough to also survive for some time after the death of Samthann, and we hear of its existence as late as the sixteenth century.⁵ Brigit's foundation also survived her death, and that of Ita appears to have continued for some time, at least until the writing of her *Life* as it exists. In light of the ability of some women's establishments to survive, it is possible that the laws governing the transfer of land were not the only reason for the decline of the women's monasteries. Samthann's holdings existed before she became an abbess, and continued long after. Ita had land enough to run a school, and her monastic lands were large enough to support a lay population. These lands were also vast enough to bequeath land to another. Her monastery was obviously very influential, at least during the time of Ita, and despite the claim in the *Fellre* that Ita had predicted that no woman would follow her,⁶ we find a record elsewhere of abbesses who were her successors. It is also to be noted that the writer of the *Life of Ita* has assumed the continued existence of her monastery, and indeed there is a very real possibility that the *Life* which we have was

³ *TP* 169.

⁴ Samthann: *VSH* II, 5.

⁵ Gwynn & Hadcock 1988, 315, 325.

⁶ a story which tells us basically that by 800 AD. at the latest, Ita's monastery had disappeared.

a product of that monastery since the hagiographer uses with some persistence the Latin *venire*, indicating that the frequent visitors who enjoyed the hospitality of Killeedy 'came' to Ita rather than 'went' to Ita, a subtle though important difference. Brigit's monastery, too, survived her death by many years, and we know the names of a number of abbesses who followed her. Moreover, we should not think of women who headed monasteries as being the same as other women, legally or otherwise, for it is clear that the Irish themselves perceived holy women as having placed themselves outside the boundaries that separated male from female. Also, we should perhaps keep in mind that the antiquity of the law tracts themselves have recently been placed in doubt,⁷ leading us not necessarily to scepticism but at least to caution. One of the questions we might ask is why so many women are portrayed as refusing land which has been offered as a gift by the laity whom they serve. The motif could have its roots in ideas of asceticism, or, if one tends more towards cynicism, the hagiographical claims could, in light of the law tracts, allow male monastic foundations, as time passed, to absorb much of this land up to that time in the hands of women. But all of this ignores the fact that much else was happening in Irish history at the same time. For example we know that as early as the sixth and seventh centuries a Romanizing party was making its presence felt in Ireland, and efforts were already being made to attempt to bring Ireland in line with the rest of Christendom. Such action could only result in changing ideas which would ultimately affect women's position in the Church hierarchy. Other influences had possibly even more far-reaching results,

⁷ McCone 1991, 1-28.

although once again they are influences which have, at least initially, political underpinnings. We know, for example, from the *Annals*, that in their frequent incursions into neighbouring territory, the Irish also often raided the monastic lands of another. Indeed when the occasion arose, monastery raided monastery, killing and pillaging and seizing land and property. With the coming of the Viking invasions, monastic foundations suffered at the hands of this new group of invaders. Kildare was ravaged on a number of occasions, by Norse and Irish alike and Ita's monastery was plundered at least twice by the Norse.⁸ It would be naive to assume that rape would not have been part of this battle scene. Indeed the possibility of such a reality is made more than clear in an anecdote in the *Life of Lasair*, a story which recounts the scene of battle carnage in the monastery of Molaise and in which we find expressed the relief of that saint when he found Lasair not only unhurt but 'undefiled'⁹ That rape was possibly at times a constant threat to the monastic virgin is an important point, for it is evident that ideas associated with the integrity of the body, more especially the female body, changed over time. In the early centuries of the Irish Church, virginity appears to have been, at least for many, a state of mind rather than a state of physical intactness. We find the idea expressed, for example, in Finnian's penitential, that a woman can have intercourse, bear a child, do penance, and once more be declared a virgin.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the life of Ita we find reference to a nun

⁸ J.H.Todd *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The War of the Gaedhil with the Gail*, 104

⁹ *Lasair*, 77.

¹⁰ Finnian: *IP* 21.

who had been guilty of fornication and who upon doing penance was healed (*sanata est*),¹¹ in other words, was made whole once again. Ideas of virginity as being a state of mind, one in which one gave one's total loyalty to Christ, seem eventually to have been displaced by an ideology which, by the time of the Norman invasion, perceived of virginity as physical intactness. We find clear evidence for this in the action of Diarmuid MacMurrough, the man upon whose shoulders history lays the blame for the Norman invasion of Ireland. For in 1132 AD. he arranged that one of his soldiers rape the reigning abbess of the monastery of Kildare in order to render her unfit for office and to place an immediate relative of his own in her stead. Thus in assessing the reasons for the demise of the women's establishments in Ireland, we should not ignore the role that was possibly, and even probably, played not only by political strife in the Ireland of that period, but also by a changing theology. Probably we should not attempt to lay the blame upon one particular cause. It is more likely the decrease of the importance and proliferation of women's establishments was due to a variety of causes.¹²

It is evident that there is much to say, and indeed much more that can be said, about the role women played within the monastic Church of pre-Norman Ireland. There

¹¹ Ita: *VSH* II, 16. See also *idem* 17, which is simply a different version of the same story. While one might argue that the necessity for healing expressed might rather lend weight to an argument for virginity requiring bodily intactness, we should remember that the whole idea of penance was to bring one once more to that state in which one was not susceptible to bodily desires, and thus to mend the rift between the penitent and God.

¹² Lisa Bitel has also remarked that we must look for the causes of the decline of women's monastic foundations in the political, social, economic and spiritual pressures of the time. (Lisa Bitel, "Women's monastic enclosures in early Ireland," *Journal of Medieval History* 12, 1 (1986) 15-36).

is, for example, a need for a review of the law tracts and the picture they transmit of the role played by religious women in this early period. There is also room for further study on the clerical role of women in Irish Church, a role which could have major implications in the reading of the penitential tracts, and the editions and translations of the same which often do not distinguish between gender specific or gender inclusive pronouns. Translations can be critical to attitude formation, and the constant rendering of the pronoun suffixed to a verb as 'he' for example, while commonly used, when occurring on a continual basis cannot help but lead the reader to the final conclusion that men are being referred to or addressed, and that women are included only infrequently. We must also entertain the possibility that the frequent references to 'clergy' in the same texts refer on occasion to women as well as men. Such an inclusion would seem to be highly likely considering the evidence. However, Kathleen Hughes may have spoken correctly when she claimed that the Penitential tracts reflect an attempt on the part of a more structured Church to place the power assumed by women firmly in the hands of a male clergy. Yet women acted as *anmcharae* well beyond the time when some of these tracts were written. One would assume therefore that at least some of the tracts should reflect their usage by women and for women, yet given our current interpretations of these texts, apart from women being a source of sin to be avoided by men, their appearance in these tracts would appear to be minimal. Looking further afield, there is yet another body of source material which could help expand our understanding of the role of women in the Irish Church. An in depth study has yet to be made of attitudes towards women expressed in Irish biblical

commentaries, and while this may or may not yield a rich harvest, such information can nevertheless contribute significantly to our growing knowledge of the world of religious women.

It is also of some importance to point out that little attention has been given in the preceding pages to historical development. The reason for this lacuna lies within the nature of the hagiographical material itself. The manuscripts which transmit this genre are on the whole of late date, and while we can say with certain confidence that they relate to the Celtic Church before the Norman invasion, and often to that of the Church before the coming of the Vikings, it is only with a certain amount of conjecture that a more definite date can be given to many of the tales in question. When dating is evident and conditions have changed, change has been noted. However, such information is not often to be had, and the major part of the preceding material has been treated as data pertaining to the Church in general without any effort being made to tailor it to a more detailed time frame. Perhaps, in time, as scholars come to accept the hagiographical texts as a valuable resource, further study will bring to light information which will aid in dating these texts more accurately. For now, the efforts here must suffice.

List of Sources

- AASS = *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Bollandus.
AC = *Annals of Clonmacnois*, ed. Denis Murphy, S.J.
Adom. = *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. A.O. and M.O. Anderson.
AFM = *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters* ed. John O'Donovan.
AI = *Annals of Inisfallen*, ed. Séan MacAirt.
Ameotosus = Ameotosus' Life of Brigit, Feb. 1 AASS.
Ancient Irish Law = Eoin Mac Neill, "Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise," *PRIA* 36C 1923, 265-316. [AS I22 D75]
AS = *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Colgan.
AT = *Annals of Tigernach*, ed. Whitley Stokes.
AU = *Annals of Ulster*, ed. W.M. Hennessy and B. MacCarthy.
Bede = Bede. *Historical Works*.
B. Br. = *Bethu Brigte*, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó hAodha.
BL = *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes.
BNE = *Bethada Náem nÉreann*. ed. and trans. Charles Plummer.
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CIH = *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D.A. Binchy (1978). [AS I22 D75]
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Lismore Lives = BL
LVP = *Liber Vitae Patrum* in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.
MGH = *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.
MHH = *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica*, ed. Charles Plummer.
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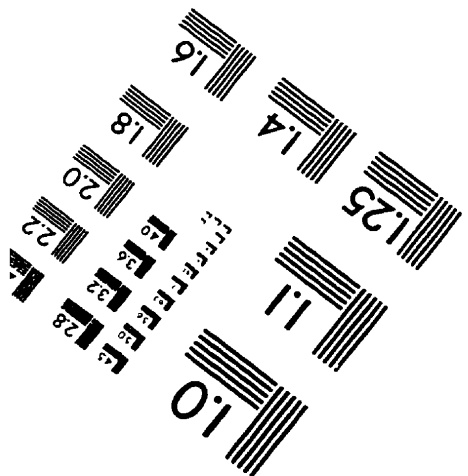
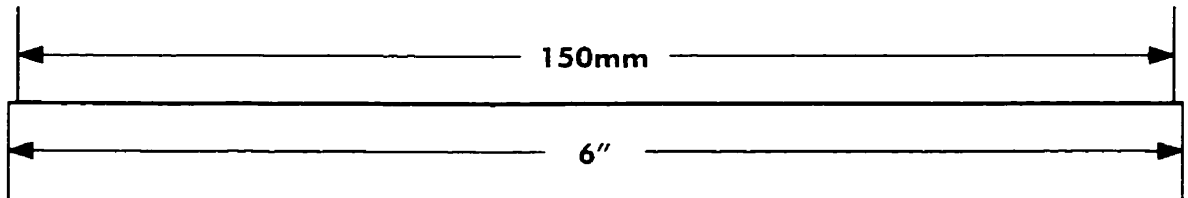
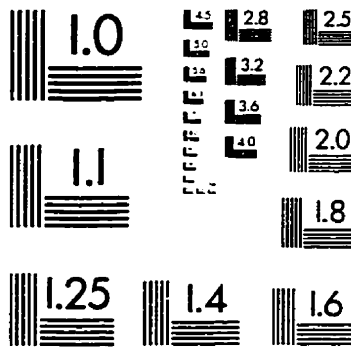
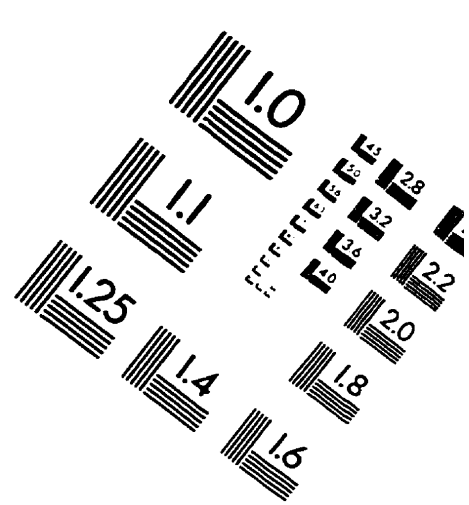
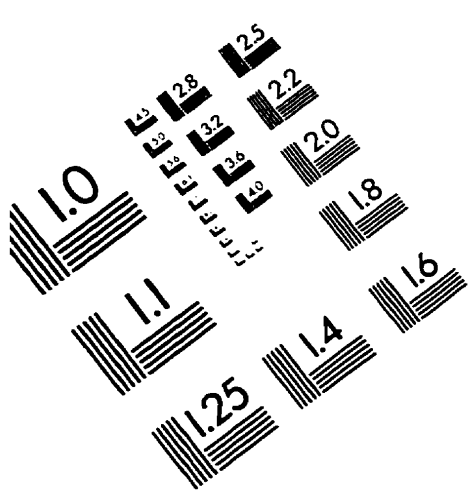
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P.S. 1/1

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