

Lynette Olson (ed.), *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. 219pp. £60. ISBN 978-1-78327-218-1

The First Life of Samson of Dol, otherwise known as the *Vita Prima Samsonis* (henceforth *VIS*), is a crucial source for the early history of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales. Samson's Life begins with his birth in South Wales, then carries the reader to his schooling under St Illtud in Llanwit Fawr, his journey to Ireland, to Cornwall, and finally, his *peregrinatio* to Brittany. The text, however, has tended to raise more questions than it answers. To begin with, scholars cannot even agree on a date, which ranges from the seventh to the ninth century. The content of the *VIS* is also puzzling. The majority of the Life occurs in Britain and has very little to say about Brittany. The author also references an earlier source which is not extant, but it calls for an examination of the relationship between the *VIS* and this possible earlier source. In order to fully contextualise, and indeed, understand the *VIS*, these conundrums must be worked out.

The present book, *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*, addresses these issues in a study which brings together an impressive list of experts on the early Celtic world. It comprises eight essays which reflect the contributors' own research interests, yet all seek to shed light on St Samson and the historical *milieu* in which he lived. It is also the thirty-seventh volume of the Studies in Celtic History series, a series that has produced some of the most phenomenal studies on the medieval Celtic world. The present publication deservedly belongs in this list.

It opens with an introduction by the editor, Lynette Olson, who examines the prologue of the *VIS* in which the author explains how he acquired access to a previously written source from 'beyond the sea' which recorded Samson's deeds on the Continent. This source is attributed to Henoc, a deacon and cousin of Samson. Olson argues that this text, which is referred to frequently, did not focus solely on the saint's Continental

career but seemed to be a full Life. Due to the prominent and consistent place it occupies in the *VIS*, all of the contributors in the book agree on the existence of this text, which they refer to as the *Vita primigenia*. The introduction also provides a compelling explanation of the ecclesiastical structure of Dol.

In his essay, 'A Family and its Saint in the *Vita Prima Samsonis*', Richard Sowerby explores why the saint's family plays such a prominent role in *VIS*. Given the hagiographical norm to disregard details about a saint's family once that saint had entered religious life, the extent to which Samson interacts with his family in the narrative is peculiar. Sowerby demonstrates how the hagiographer carefully crafted a balanced narrative in which Samson was a successful ascetic who renounced earthly affairs and a man who, simultaneously, elevated his family's position within the Church, bestowing offices on his uncle, his father, and his cousin. The hagiographer did this by giving prominence to the miraculous scene in which Samson's father redeems himself upon his deathbed and the entire family enters religious life. Pointing to instances where it seems that the hagiographer felt the need to justify the continual presence of Samson's family, Sowerby argues that the *VIS* was intended to defend the familial-ecclesiastical network that Samson had created before leaving for Brittany, from claims of nepotism. This hinges upon Sowerby's previous argument that the *Vita primigenia* was written in the monastic foundation Samson had established in Cornwall, and that the author was associated with this house. Some other contributors in the book, namely Jean-Claude Poulin, are hesitant to accept the former argument. Sowerby concludes by suggesting that Samson's family was responsible for disseminating his cult as a means of legitimizing their own position within the ecclesiastical landscape. Overall this is a useful way of rethinking how saints' cults were created and promulgated.

A thorough and ambitious essay in French (with a summary in English) by Jean-Claude Poulin tackles the hotly debated question of

dating of the *VIS*. In particular, he aims at analysing the *VIS* ‘as a system of information’ (37), working under the hypothesis that it may be the result of the rewriting of the *Vita primigenia*. Poulin approaches the dating of the text by first establishing a chronological chain using the mediators mentioned in the *VIS*; then attempting to demarcate what sections possibly came from the *Vita primigenia* and which were added by the anonymous writer of the *VIS*; and, finally, looking at borrowings within the text and when these borrowings circulated in Brittany. Based on citations from Julian Pomerius’s *De vita contemplativa* and a homily of Pseudo-Bede, Poulin concludes that the *VIS* must date to the end of the eighth century because these texts did not circulate in Brittany before then.

The literary influence of Venantius Fortunatus’s *Vita Sancti Paterni* (written before 600) on the *VIS* is examined by Caroline Brett who aptly notes that, while there are no actual verbal borrowings, the narrative structure of the latter resembles the former too much to be dismissed. Based on the analysis that the earlier author wrote the chapter headings, Poulin believes that material from *Vita Sancti Paterni* was present in the *Vita primigenia* and was not added later by the later writer. Aside from the fact that Paternus and Samson were active around roughly the same geographic area, Brett argues that *Vita Sancti Paterni* was used as a model for the *VIS* precisely because the two saints’ careers were so similar. We know that the two were definitely contemporaries as they both attended a Council of Paris in the sixth century, yet their respective Lives do not mention one another. The *VIS*’s silence on Paternus could be attributed to Paternus’s legitimacy over Samson, who was what Brett describes as ‘an immigrant bishop’ (88). The chapter then turns to trace the saints’ connections to each other beyond their Lives, particularly after the Viking incursions and the flight of saints’ cults, relics, and clergy out of Brittany.

Using the *Translatio Sancti Maglorii*, Brett shows how the relics of Paternus and Samson were mingled in exile, to the point where later liturgical texts group the two together. The cult of Paternus increasingly

became eclipsed by the cult of Samson, mainly because Samson's community received royal patronage as befitted new post-Columbanian monasteries, two key advantages that the community of Paternus lacked.

Ian Wood puts forth a compelling and interesting argument in his essay, which explores the activity of Britons among the Merovingians, using Columbanian sources such as the *Vita Columbani* and Columbanus's own letters as evidence. Jonas's *Vita Columbani* records Columbanus as arriving on the Continent in a place which he referred to as *sinus Britannicus*. Wood rejects the long-standing argument that the site of Columbanus's arrival was Alet, in the north-east of Brittany, and instead points out that if one looks at the definition of *sinus* in Classical Latin, it implies a bay or a gulf, therefore making the Golfe de Morbihan the probable site. To support his argument, he turns to the tradition of St Gildas, in particular the Life which records his death in Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, and demonstrates that Columbanus had a clear attachment to the British saint by pointing to the instances where Columbanus cites Gildas as a Church Father. Therefore Wood deems it likely that Columbanus travelled from Bangor to Morbihan precisely because of its association with Gildas. More generally, evidence from Columbanus shows that the area around the mouth of the Loire was populated by Britons, some of whom even accompanied Columbanus to the Vosges. Wood's essay highlights the British context for Columbanus's activity on the Continent, drawing similarities between the careers of Samson and Columbanus.

Constant J. Mews attempts to understand how early medieval Irish and British monks understood the role of the liturgy by comparing the *VIS* and the *Ratio de cursus*, otherwise known as 'Explanation about the Liturgies', which dates from the mid eighth century. Together, the two texts uphold British and Irish liturgical practices as being equally valid with Roman liturgical practice. The *Ratio de cursus* features the idea that Irish liturgy was a descendant of the ascetic practices of the Egyptian desert, in particular the liturgy taught by St Mark, an idea that is also found in the

VIS, which places the apostles Mark and John on equal footing with Peter. Because of the absence of St Patrick, Mews dates the *VIS* to the seventh century, while arguing that the *Ratio de cursus* was composed in the eighth century as it reflects concerns over the Frankish Church attempting to replace Irish (and Gallican) liturgy with the Roman liturgy.

Jonathan M. Wooding explores the theme of monasticism and the practice of *peregrinatio* within the *VIS*, considering that the latter is rare within the context of the early British Church. Wooding in particular studies the different stages of what he aptly calls the ‘monastic narrative of initiation’ (138): in Samson’s case, his journey as a monk into one of a *peregrinus*, all the while respecting the monastic emphasis for stability and his desire to lead an extreme ascetic life. His analysis reveals that the author of the *VIS* sought to convey the principle of monastic *caritas* through Samson, as well as demonstrate the different flavours of early British monasticism, by illustrating encounters when Samson’s monastic practices differed from other holy figures in the narrative.

The final essay in the volume, by Karen Jankulak, concerns itself with tracing the cult of St Samson in Wales, for which there is practically no evidence, much less liturgical. Jankulak first dismisses Welsh Church dedications attributed to Samson where no evidence exists, and concludes that the only two dedications to Samson in Wales date to the twentieth century and not the Middle Ages. Several geonyms associated with Samson are also examined, but the picture is complicated by the fact that many of these features could be named after the biblical Samson, and that we do not know for certain when these features were associated with Samson in the first place. The *VIS* itself mentions some key sites from Samson’s voyages, notably the Cornish monastery which he founded, but even then, it did not seem to result in a Church dedication. For some final remarks, Jankulak compares Samson’s absence in Wales to that of Gildas’s, as neither has any church dedications in Wales. Perhaps the key contribution

of this essay is that it encourages us to rethink the process by which saints acquired cult sites.

In the end, there is not a solid consensus among the contributors regarding a date for the text. Jean-Claude Poulin is inclined towards the eighth century, but the other contributors believe it to be from the seventh. One regret, which the editor mentions in the preface, is the absence of a French contribution in the book, which admittedly was beyond the editor's control. However, despite being a Québécois, Poulin's contribution in the study of Breton hagiography compensates for this drawback, as does also the rich bibliography which incorporates a substantial amount of French scholarship on the subject.

It is refreshing to read a book which deviates from the positivist tradition of determining the historical value of hagiographical sources. The unique avenues explored by each contributor, as well as the remarkable analysis offered as a whole, makes *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales* a valuable collection for those interested in approaching hagiographies in new ways, as well as those interested in early Breton history and its links with its Celtic neighbours.

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