

Translating a Saint:
The Life of Saint Ita and Early Irish Christianity

by

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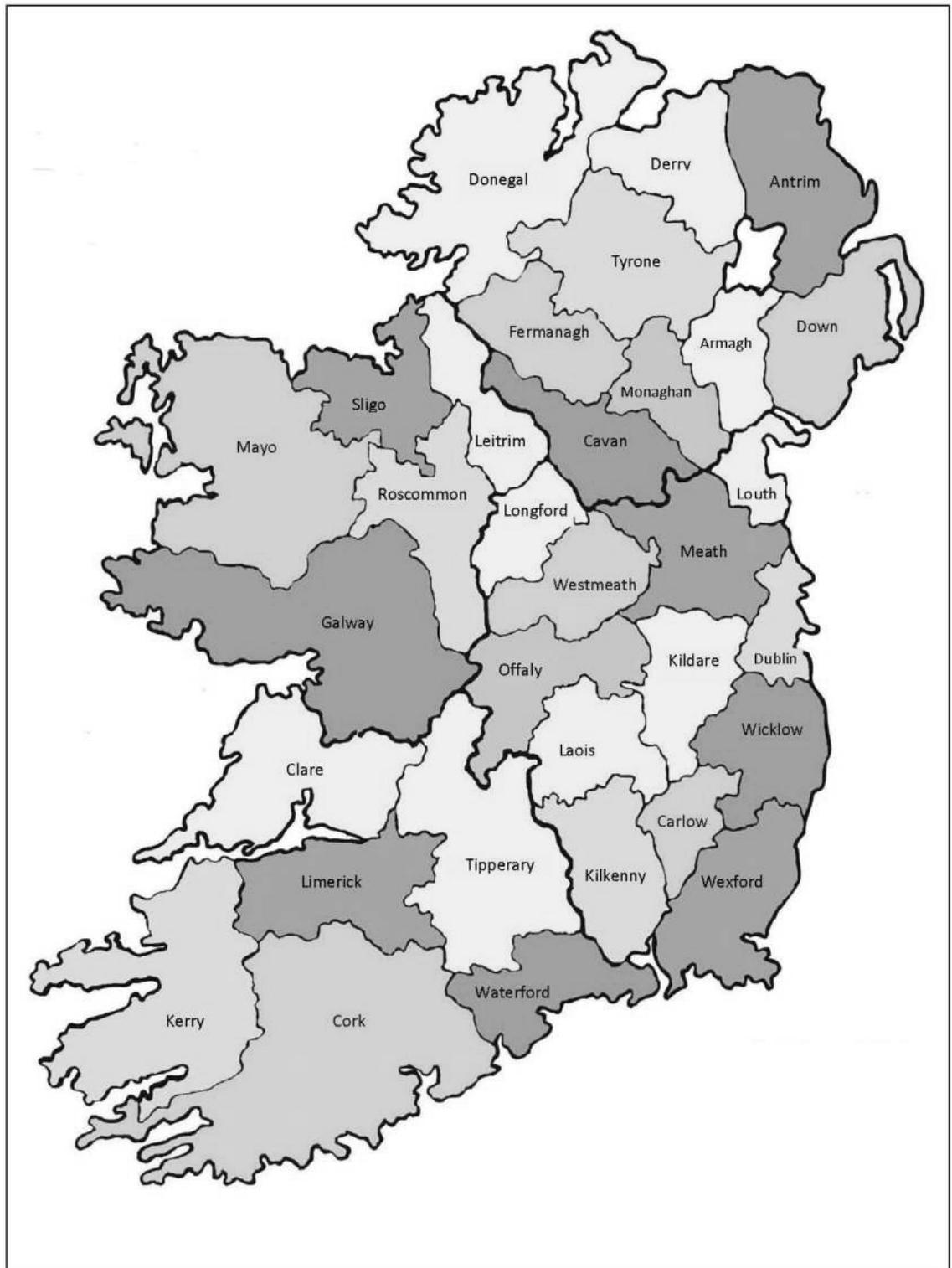


Figure 1 Map of Ireland with Modern-Day County Lines. Courtesy of <http://www.vousden.name/ireland.htm>

Introduction

Ireland is one of those places that tickle our contemporary imagination. Popular culture likes to think of Ireland and her neighbor, Britain, as they are portrayed in Arthurian legends and kitschy novels, which are filled with dragons and magic. People who have read or encountered the Lives of Irish Saints focus on the unusual miracles and believe they are examples of permeating paganism. However, this strikes a dissonant chord, when you think about how Christianity and Catholicism are so rooted in Irish identity. I have used Saint Ita of Killeedy's Life to explore the birth of the Irish Church and understand the unique aspects of its development. Things that seem pagan are often just examples of differences from the earlier Lives of the Saints from the continent, like Martin of Tours. Her Life, a piece of hagiography, gives hints about the historical setting under which the Church formed and operated and eventually negotiated the pre-Christian past.

My goal has been to demonstrate how the Irish Church developed, but through a very small lens, the *Life of Saint Ita*. I think that we must look at the details of history in order to confirm the assumptions about greater themes of the past. A hagiography of one of the lesser known early Irish saints is an opportunity for an exercise like Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*; a single piece of literature can bring to life a process or mentality of an era and a region. I have used this hagiographical document to exhibit the nuances in the Irish hagiographical tradition in contrast to the Continent and demonstrate the how Christianity in some ways preserved pre-Christian culture and

society. Historians have been ignoring an opportunity to try to understand why some aspects of ancient Celtic culture faded away, while others permeate society to this day.

As Patrick Geary noted in 1996, the use of hagiographies as sources for historians of social and cultural life has been a recent development.¹ It was in the sixties that a historian dared to make a thorough use of the lives of saints for any other type of history besides religious. In the interim, texts like the *vitae* were used primarily in devotional settings, or as curiosities from bygone years; neither literary scholars nor historians paid them much heed. In particular, historians largely disregarded these *vitae* as too stylized and fantastical to be able to glean from them any historical or factual, which had for a long time been the aim of professional historians. It would be a long time for historians like Jill Lepore, Hayden White, and the Annalists to advocate the importance of looking to a wider range of sources in order to gain a better understanding of past societies. It was with Frantisek Graus' monumental work in 1965 on the Merovingians that scholars began to gain a new appreciation for those tales of holy men.²

Peter Brown, in the seventies and eighties, made the Cult of the Saints a legitimate, attractive, and respected area of study; it had previously been a phenomenon left to theologians focused on Late Antiquity, a time period ignored between the height of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the Middle Ages.³ Most likely on account of being one of the forerunners in his field, he focuses on interpreting the greater themes of Late Antiquity. *The Rise of Western Christendom* shows the evolution of medieval Christianity on a broad scale; the entirety of Western Europe has a place in this masterful work of

¹ Patrick Geary, "Saints Scholars and Society: the Elusive Goal," *Saints: Studies in Hagiography* (Birminghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996) 4.

² František Graus, *Volk, Herrscher, und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie ved, 1965).

³ Geary, 6.

scholarship. Again, in *The Cult of the Saints* he addresses the broader themes with specific examples. Though Ireland does merit a few chapters in the former book, Brown does not seem as concerned with the individuality of the regional formations of saints' cults, though he does note it, as he is with the broader context and pattern of the development of medieval Catholicism throughout Europe. His goal is to show the similarities among regions in their development of Christianity. His works are helpful, but need some supplementary work written to show some of the peculiarities and nuances of Ireland within the broader trend and why they existed. Likewise, the conclusion of Geary's own review essay is that historians have not had enough time to delve as deeply as they should into the vast resources of information lying dormant in the lives of saints.⁴

Much of the recent thorough analyses of saints in Ireland have been done by predominantly Irish scholars—Patrick Montague, Padraig O Riain, Muireann ni Bhrolchain, and so on — often with a sense of nationalism, which may be construed as contaminating their scholarship. They are also written with an eye for what developed after, as if the development of Irish Catholicism, as unique, was inevitable and as if it were deliberate. Perhaps it is time for an outsider, with a greater distance from current cultural conceptions of saints and their roles in Ireland, to attempt to explain the development occurring in the first millennium. Coming from a society that is already steeped and connected with its Catholic or Christian heritage, it would be difficult to understand the Late Antique Ireland, when the survival of both Christianity and Christians wasn't always certain.

Though there is considerable scholarship on the Catholicism and Saints of Ireland,

⁴ Ibid, 1.

which is still one of the strongholds of Catholicism, there is as yet no thorough examination of Saint Ita and her cult. Most Irish saints have been examined, not as individual characters, but as representing characteristics of the three best known Saints, Patrick, Columba, and Brigid. I would like to look at how Ita stands out from her peers and what this says not only about Irish hagiography and Christianity, but also about the wider context of Irish society in this age of change. The rise of the cult of Saints marks a transition into Christianity and continental influences. Ireland had been extremely isolated until the influx of missionaries and the departure of the Romans from England. Therefore, I see an analysis of the text of Saint Ita's Life as an opportunity to look at the combination of native Irish/Celtic and continental Christian influences present. But this has been done before. *Irish Jesus, Roman Jesus*, by Graydon Snyder, is an entire treatise on the relationship between Irish and the Jesus traditions of the orthodoxy in Rome,⁵ while there has also been a recent call for greater attention to be paid to the folklore element present in the pages of these religious texts.⁶ So, I propose that by looking at the interplay of these ethnic traditions, a historian will be able to get beyond the mere acceptance of their interaction, and will come to a better understanding of *why* this interaction existed. It will also be important to observe what aspects of foreign cultures and religious practice became prominent in Ireland in order to comprehend what Irishmen valued and sought to emulate or, on the other hand, identified with and perceived as already pertinent to their lives and customs. For example, they found particular resonance

⁵ Graydon F. Snyder, *Irish Jesus, Roman Jesus: the Formation of Early Irish Christianity*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2002)

⁶ Dorothy Ann Bray, "The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand," *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, Ed. John Carey, Maire Herbert, and Padraig O Riain, (Portland OR: Four Courts Press, 2001) p. 268-277.

in the Old Testament tribes, who seemed so socially familiar. This particular saint, who is said to have been born a princess, allows us to get a glimpse into ascetic practices, early nuns, church founders, and miracles. She seems to warrant greater analysis in terms of the role she and her hagiography played in the broader context of Irish Christianity that informed her worship.

Chapter one starts off with my own translation of Ita's Life. This is accompanied by an explanation of its dating and origins. I will also explain the selection of the *vitae* of Martin, Radegund, and Benedict as my models of continental sainthood and hagiography and those of Columba, Brigid and Patrick as modeling the Irish and emphasizing aspects of Ita's Life.

Chapter 2 pertains to the development of the structure of the Irish Church as a whole and the role saints, especially monastic founders, played. I will seek to prove that saints led their community in a way that resembled *ri*, the secular leaders of clan groups, called *tuatha*. Christianity absorbed the structures and traditions of Irish society and politics just as the continental Christianity grafted onto the Roman Empire's bureaucratic system and hierarchy.

Chapter 3, follows with an examination gender and family in Ita's Life. She acts contrary to the continental mould of a cloistered nun acts as the head of her spiritual family, akin to the Irish *derb fine*, who was the leader and spokesperson for smaller familial units. Also, I will show how the importance of genealogy and the collective identity of a family or clan carries over into Christianity.

Finally, Chapter 4 reveals how figure of a druid-poet-seer, or *fil*, is converted into the Irish saint. I will pay special attention to the prophetic miracles so common within

Ita's *vitae* in relation to those found in *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnge* and *The Colloquy of the Old Men*, as the primary sources for the pre-Christian narrative tradition. In no way are these miracle unfounded on Christian models found within the Bible or hagiography, but they communicate an affinity for a motif also found in pre-Christian oral tradition.

Ireland does not create a religion, but translates one to their society and culture.

Sources of Sanctity

Hagiography was not native to Ireland, so part of this project has been to show how this stylized genre was adapted into an Irish tradition. It had developed on the continent and arrived in Ireland with missionaries and texts of the Lives of continental saints. Therefore, we can understand Irish hagiography as an attempt to translate this practice to an Irish purpose or for an Irish subject and audience. Within each work, we can note various nuances that differentiate Irish *vitae* from those of the mainland, like Gaul. Whether deliberate or unconscious, it is important to note these differences as evidence of a distinct perspective and interpretation of Christianity. What values of pagan days of yore survived the Christian conversion will help to come to grips with values of Late Antique Ireland and those that the Irish people may have clung to as an ingrained part of their identity. We must also take note the speed at which Latin was replaced by a written form of the native Celtic tongue in comparison to other regions, and the unusually peaceful transition to Christianity without Irishmen feeling as if they were sacrificing their identity. We can see more inklings of this in the tendency of these converts to identify and sympathize with the tribes of Old Testament, whose lifestyle might have seemed reminiscent of contemporary conditions.

The earliest sources of information on saints are the *vitae*, or the literature composed to narrate the story of their lives and their miracles. Sadly, the originals are long lost, and the copies available to scholars, and college students for that matter, are distant relatives, transcribed time after time by monks and other scribes. In this instance,

translation is the historians' obligation in order to describe and contextualize this era to a wider audience, which is not fluent in medieval Hibernian Latin. Unfortunately, the assumption that those who would be most interested in the life of Saint Ida would most likely be able to read Latin, has resulted in a lack of translations of texts about her. I believe that this is a mistake, hence my wish to turn this Latin text into an English one.

It is difficult to say whether the Latin Lives found in the *Acta Sanctorum* and the *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* are completely pure exemplars of the time when they were first written, because mistakes, emendations and corruptions are inevitable over the course of centuries. The people of the era I am studying had very little concern for the authenticity of texts; when a manuscript began to wear out, it was transcribed and disposed of, because the story was much more important than the paper it was written on. It is not until the modern era that historians desired originals. Nevertheless, authors still had anxiety about the future of their texts. Adamnan ends his Life of Columba with an admonition: "I beseech all those that may wish to copy these books, nay more I adjure them through Christ, the judge of the ages, that after carefully copying they compare them with the exemplar from which they have written, and emend them with the utmost care..."⁷

An Introduction to the Text

The text that we have, which I have translated and annotated, is controversial. The text I used comes from the *Acta Sanctorum*, which uses the *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* by Charles Plummer. He in turn takes the text of Ita's Life from the version known as the

⁷ Adamnan, *Adamnan's Life of Columba*, transl. Marjorie Oglivie Anderson and Alan Orr Anderson (Oxford Medieval Texts. Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1991) iii.23.

D manuscript.⁸ Robert Sharpe, the current authority on Irish saints' Lives, dates it as stemming from an original "written no later than the twelfth century,"⁹ while other historians argue for a much earlier date, like the 7th century.¹⁰ Proponents of the earlier date cite a reference to a man from Kileedy, who is the son of one of the characters in the life.¹¹ Even if this is a literary trope, a compromise between these two dates and opinions appears to be the most logical in my mind. Though the tale was most likely altered to address contemporary concerns and questions, Ita's abbey had been in existence, presumably since her life, but at least since the 9th century. References to Ita crop up in *The Chronicle of Ireland*, which was compiled no later than the beginning of the 10th century, but T. M. Charles Edwards gives evidence of "contemporary recording" at least as early as the 6th century.¹² Also, Oengus, who was abbot of Kildare in the early 8th century, mentions her in his *Martyrology of Oengus*.¹³ This implies that even if an actual *vita* did not exist recounting her life and miracles, Ita and her acts were known and noted in annals. Therefore she must have existed and had some reputation outside of her community. Surely, within such an oral culture, her tales and virtues were passed down by word of mouth, even if not with a pen. The advent of literacy and the ability to record tales provided the Irish an opportunity to write down what may be lost by the "forgetfulness and loss of memory... for gatherings of people and noblemen in times to

⁸ There are a total of 3 versions of Ita's Life. This one comes to us from the *Codex Kilkennensis*.

⁹ Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives : An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1991) 394.

¹⁰ "[J. F.]Kenney believed that all versions went back to a seventh century original..." Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church : Ireland, 450-1150* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)194.

¹¹ "whose son is still living ..." *Life of Ita*, 5.4.

¹² T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, 2 vols. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006) 8.

¹³ Oengus recounts how "Ita is said to have decreed that no nun would ever succeed her..." *Martyrology of Oengus*, notes on 4 Apr. found in Harrington, 177.

come...”¹⁴ So I have preserved the story of Saint Ita and translated it for the reader’s enjoyment and for the sake of historical scholarship.

¹⁴ Maurice Harmon and Sean O Coileain *The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland : A New Translation of Acallam Na Senorach* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009)18. This quote references the recording of folk-tales, but it also conveys a concern about the oral transmission of tales. It is especially apt because *The Colloquy* was composed around the same time of the Life of Ita’s manuscript’s earliest date, the 12th century.

**Life of Saint Ita,
Uncertain Author**

CHAPTER 1 Saint Ita, the Young Virgin Consecrated to God

1 We wish to recount briefly a study concerning the life and miracles of the most blessed Virgin Ita: for many things about her miracles are hidden from us, because she herself always hid them, and what happened to her alone, she told no one: we omit other things which we know for brevity's sake. The most sacred Virgin Ita was descended from a very celebrated family of Ireland, that is, from the seed of Feighlim Reachtmhuir,¹⁵ by whom all Ireland was ruled for many years in the greatest power in the royal town Themoria.¹⁶ He had three sons, Fiacha, Conn, and Eochaidh. Fiacha, having three sons, in fact died without being king, or before the kingdom of his father came to him. However Conn, his surviving brother, mightily ruled all of Hibernia after his father with the greatest good fortune; and he (alas the grief!) was struck down in the war, which was joined on the plain of Cotha, by the King of the Ulster, who was called Tybraide Tireach.¹⁷ However three of the sons of his brother, Fiacha, with great crowds and a large army, came to the land of the Mumeniens¹⁸ from Themoria, and there they nobly and mightily seized with their swords a very large region. Today this race is called the Huadesi.¹⁹ From this race the most well-born Virgin, Saint Ita, was born, she who was filled with the Holy Spirit at the baptismal font: for all were wondering at the moderation and character of the child, and her restraint on the days on which a handmaid of God ought to fast; and many signs

¹⁵ A legendary King of Meath

¹⁶ another name for Tara

¹⁷ A king of Ulster

¹⁸ Modern-day County Waterford.

¹⁹ Better known as the Desi.

were seen to take place because of her, when she was a little girl. And when she was able to speak and to walk, she appeared wise in speech and deed, sweet in address, and constant in mind; always producing the most chaste words from her own mouth, gentle to all, exceedingly generous, and both fearing and loving God; always forbidding evil and recommending good deeds. Ita lived in the house of her parents in her girlhood.

2 Also, on a certain day the sacred girl, Ita, slept alone in her bedroom, and it seemed to some men that that entire bedroom burned. When, however, those men approached to help, the room appeared unburnt and untouched by flames. And while all of them were greatly wondering at this, it was said to them from above that the grace of God was burning around the servant of Christ, who was sleeping there. And when Saint Ita arose from sleep, her entire form seemed like the form of an angel; she then had such beauty as she had neither before nor after; for her aspect then was such, that her friends were scarcely able to recognize her, and then they all understood that the grace of God was inflaming her in this way; and after a short interval the virgin of God was turned back into her own appearance, which was indeed very pretty.

3 On another day when Saint Ita was sleeping, she saw an angel of God come to her, and give her three precious stones. And when she arose from sleep, the handmaiden of Christ did not know what that vision signified, and concerning this the holy woman of God had a question in her heart. Then the angel of the Lord descended to her, saying, “Why do you inquire about this vision? Those three precious stones, which you saw were given to you, signify that the sacred Trinity came to visit you, and that is a visitation of the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and always in sleep and in the vigils, the angels of God and the sacred visions will come to you; for you are the Lord's in body and spirit." And saying these things, he departed from her.

4 On another day, the most blessed Virgin Ita approached her mother, declared to her the divine orders, instructed by the Holy Spirit, and asked her, to beseech her father for her; that with the license of her father, Saint Ita might be consecrated to Christ. But he in no way wished to give this permission, because a noble and powerful young man sought her from him, and this very much displeased her mother; and though others joined in asking him, he refused with an oath. Then Saint Ita, filled with the spirit of prophecy, spoke to all: "Leave my father alone for a time: my father now prevents me from consecrating myself to Christ, but hereafter he will advise and order this; because he will be compelled by my Lord, Jesus Christ, to give me leave to go wherever I wish to serve God." And so it happened. However, how it happened will be told afterwards.

5 Afterward, but not long after, the blessed Virgin Ita fasted for three days and three nights. However during those days and nights, a wicked spirit²⁰, in dreams and awake, clearly fought many fights against the Virgin of God, and the blessed virgin most wisely resisted him in all things, sleeping as well as waking. On the last night, the devil appeared sad and mourning, at dawn he departed from the servant of God, saying with a mournful voice: "Alas! Ita, you will free not only yourself from me, but also many others." On that very night, the angel of God came to the father of Saint Ita, saying to him: "Why do you prohibit your daughter from receiving the veil of virginity in Christ's name? For she will

²⁰ Understand: the devil

be a great and honored virgin before God and His saints and the patroness of many on the day of judgment. You not only will grant to her to receive the sign of virginity, but you will send her wherever she wishes to go to serve Christ. She will serve God among another clan, and she will be the protectress of that clan²¹.” Then the father of the girl came without any delay to her, and told her all of these things; and, just as the virgin previously prophesied concerning him, he not only gave the desired permission, but also urged her that very day to accept the veil of virginity and to go wherever she wished.

6 And when that period of three days had been completed, the virgin of the Lord proceeded to the church of God, which was in the same county, to accept the virgin’s veil. And when Saint Ita was making the journey, behold! many demons came against her on her way, and began to argue fiercely against the virgin of God. Then the angels of God came from above, and fought with the demons bravely for the bride of Christ. And when the demons were conquered by the angels of God, they fled through the remote countryside, shouting and saying: “Woe to us, because we will not be able to struggle on this day against this Virgin; and we wanted to avenge our injuries upon her on this day; and the angels of God have freed her from us. For she will destroy our habitation in many places, and will snatch many from us in this world and from hell.²²” Meanwhile the virgin of God, with the angels of God consoling her on earth, approached the bishop, and in the sight of the angels, she was consecrated there by the men of the church and she received the veil of virginity.

²¹ *Gens* may be understood as *tuath*, Irish for “clan.” More on *tuatha* in Chapter 2.

²² Perhaps alluding to her ability to save those already dead, like her pagan uncle. More in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2 Monastery Constructed; Most Sacred Life

1 Then the Virgin Ita prayed to God to point out to her a place to serve him. And behold the angel of God came to her, saying: “ Leave this fatherland, and proceed to that region, which is called Hyconaill,²³ and you will remain in the west part of that region, near the foothills of Mount Luachra; and there the angel of the Lord will come to you, and he will show to you a place in which will be your community, in which you will pass on to Christ: for you will be the patroness of the clan in Huaconaill, which people have been given to you and Saint Senan²⁴ by God.” When she heard these words of the angel, Saint Ita came to that place with her comrades, and remained near the foothills of Mount Luachra, just as the angel told her. And immediately the angel of God came to her, and assigned to her a place, in which to serve God. And immediately the fame of the most sacred virgin spread through that entire region; and many virgins from all-over came to Saint Ita, to serve God under her care, and she herself received all of them piously and with cheerful mind.

2 Having heard about the very great sanctity of most blessed virgin Ita, the race of Huaconhaill came to her with its leader, and they wished to give to her and to God for eternity all the land, which surrounded the cell of Saint Ita. However the servant of God, not wishing to be occupied by secular cares, accepted no land from them, except only four acres to use for gardens. And this displeased the leader²⁵ and his companions greatly, and they said: “What you do not wish now to accept, will be given to you, when you pass

²³ In modern day County Limerick. The site of the community is now known as Kileedy, “The Church of Ita.”

²⁴ Also a patron saint of a tribe in modern day County Limerick. He also founded a monastery.

²⁵ In Irish, *ri*. More in Chapter 2.

on to the kingdom of God.” This is what happened. Then the entire race of Huaconnaill accepted Saint Ita as their patroness now and in the future, just as the angel prophesied; and the sacred Virgin blessed that race and its land with many blessings, which are continually fulfilled. And they returned with great joy to their property and always brought in honor of Saint Ita great gifts and alms and donations to this cell, for the use of the sacred virgins who were there.

3 The most Blessed Virgin Ita gave all her devotion to performing two-day, three-day, and frequently four-day fasts. However the angel of the Lord on a certain day, when she was fatigued from fasting and hunger, came to her and said to her: “Without measure you hurt your body with fasting; do not act in this way.” When the bride of Christ wanted to ease her burden, the angel said to her: “God has granted so much grace to you that you may ever from this day to your death be nourished by heavenly food, and you will not be able not to eat, at whatever hour the angel of God comes to you bearing a meal.” Then Ita prostrating herself on the ground gave thanks to God: and from that meal Saint Ita gave to others, whom she knew to be worthy of the gift: and thus without any doubt she ever lived up to her death on heavenly food, with an angel serving her.

CHAPTER 3 Grace of Miracles and Their Origins; Gift of Prophecy

1 One day, a religious Virgin came to Saint Ita and began to speak with her about divine teachings, and while they were speaking to each other, that maiden said to Saint Ita: “Tell me, in the name of God, why you are favored by God more than other virgins, whom we know to be in the world? For, a meal is given to you from the sky by God, you cure all

sicknesses with your prayer, you prophesy things past and in the future, you make demons flee everywhere, the Angels of God speak with you daily, you continue always in meditation and in prayer to the most sacred Trinity without letting up.” Then Saint Ita said to her: “You yourself answered your question, saying: Without letting up, I continue in meditation and prayer to the holy Trinity. For, if anyone acts so, God will always be with him: and if I was so from infancy, all these things, of which you spoke, for that reason have happened to me.” That sacred Virgin, hearing these words from blessed Ita about speech and meditation of God, returned, rejoicing, to her cell. However, God bestowed so great a gift of prophecy, that she herself would know if the sick would live with their sickness, or they would die.

2 When the holy Abbot Comganus²⁶ knew that the time for his reward had come, Saint Ita was asked by him, to come to him, and Saint Comganus said to her: “Behold, I will die shortly from this illness; and I ask you in Christ’s name to place your hands upon my lips, and close my mouth in the hour of my slumber. For I know from the angel of God that whomsoever at his death you place your hands on, the Angels of God will lead his soul straightaway into the kingdom.” The sacred Virgin said to him: “O sainted Father, what do you say? A sinner ought to speak this word. Great is your reward at the house of God, and you will be glorious among the saints of God. Why do you require me?” Saint Comganus said: “Truly I say because of this for which I have asked, no demon will dare to approach my journey, or dare to accuse me of anything now.” Meanwhile the sainted man, Comganus, migrated from this world among a choir of sainted Angels, and that

²⁶ Also known as Coemgen.

which he sought, Saint Ita carried out.

3 Then the glorious Virgin of God, Ita, returned to her cell. And when she, the servant of God, approached her monastery, she heard a large and great ululation from nearby. For there were three dead nobles, who had died on that day, and their friends, shouting and mourning them: and the friends, knowing that Saint Ita was passing by, had come down and begged the servant of God with tearful voice, to come and at least pray for their souls. Immediately the Virgin Ita said to them: “What you wish more than to pray for their souls will be done for you in Christ’s name.” They still did not understand this speech. Blessed Ita spoke this word, because she, filled with the Spirit of prophecy, knew that she would resuscitate them from death in God’s name. And the holy woman of God went down with them, where the dead were, and, praying, she signed the bodies where they lay with the sign of the sacred cross: and they rose alive at her command, and the bride of Christ presented them living before everyone.

4 In that place there was a paralyzed man, possessed by the greatest infirmity; and his friends, seeing the dead men resuscitated, took hold of him, and led him to Saint Ita to cure him; For they did not doubt that she could cure the sick, because she resuscitated the dead. And, the maidservant of God seeing the great misery of that man, looked into heaven, and she said to him: “May God pity you.” And, saying this, she signed him with the sign of the holy Cross. It is very wonderful to relate: While the maidservant of Christ was still signing the paralytic, he at once rose cured and safe before all, as if he had never been gripped by paralysis. Then a shout of all the people rose up to heaven, praising God,

and giving thanks to him, and lauding the maidservant of Him with worthy honor.

Afterwards, the maidservant of God arrived with her people at her cell.

5 A nun, who was under the care of Saint Ita, committed fornication in secret: and on the next day Blessed Ita called her to herself and said to her: “Sister, why did you not care to guard your virginity?” When she denied what she had done, Saint Ita said to her:

“Yesterday, you fornicated in that place, didn’t you, and didn’t this happen to you?” And immediately she, knowing that Saint Ita was a prophetess concerning things past and future, confessed the truth of the matter, and doing penitence according to the order of Saint Ita, she was cured.

6 Also, another Virgin, who was far from Saint Ita, that is, in the province of the Connacti,²⁷ was engaging in adultery with some man in secret. However, Saint Ita, full of the spirit of prophecy, knowing this, ordered Saint Brandan²⁸ to lead that woman to her. So Saint Brandan made her come to Saint Ita. For the maidservant and bride of Christ told that maiden, among other things, how she conceived and bore a daughter, for she bore a daughter to that man. But she, hearing her iniquity from the mouth of a maidservant of God, underwent worthy penitence, and her spirit was restored to eternal salvation, afterwards leading a life of sanctity. Moreover, the whole family of Saint Ita, and everyone else knew her ability of prophecy, was feared her absence as much as her presence.

7 A certain good craftsman, who was an respectable man from the province of the

²⁷ Connaught or Connacht, west central Ireland. This is the area directly north of Ita’s community.

²⁸ Also known as Brandan the Navigator

Connacti, came in exile to the land of the Mumenenses. And hearing the fame of his art, Saint Ita asked him to make buildings for her. That carpenter sought a wife for himself from Saint Ita, and land to live on. And blessed Ita gave to him her sister²⁹ and land, on which to settle. And he, with every devotion, was making buildings in the monastery of Saint Ita. However, it came to pass that two lords waged war between themselves one day, and that carpenter went out into war with one of those lords, for he was experienced in warfare. The lord, with whom the carpenter was put to flight, and all his men were killed, among whom the carpenter died and was decapitated; however his head was taken far from him. And when this was told to Saint Ita, it was very displeasing to her. For she herself promised the carpenter in Christ's name that he would have a son to succeed; and at the time he did not have a child, because until then his wife was sterile. And Saint Ita came with her people where the headless body of Beoanus, the carpenter, was; (for the carpenter was called Beoanus) and when his head was not found, Saint Ita prayed that the head be shown to her: and divine power carried the head through the air, and it stood where the body was, before the maidservant of Christ: and the lord in response to the urging of his handmaiden, made the head adhere to the body, so well as it had never been cut off; but only a trace of the wound remained. But with the saint of God praying, and in the span of one hour having passed, Beoanus rose, alive, saluting the handmaiden of God and giving thanks to God, and everyone who was there similarly gave thanks to God and Saint Ita. And rising up, the sacred handmaiden of God went to her monastery. And he who had been resuscitated accompanied them. Then the carpenter, Beoanus, slept with his sterile wife, and she conceived and bore a son, just as long before Saint Ita promised

²⁹ Some historians, like Harrington, claim that this references her own, biological sister, but it is also plausible that she references one of her fellow nuns.

him. The holy woman of God, Ita, herself raised this son, who is called Pulcherius,³⁰ and he himself is a most sacred abbot, in the honor of whom the community, Liath, was built.

8 A certain wise man lost his speech by an accident and was made mute and came to Saint Ita with his students to seek a cure. And the sainted maidservant of God prayed to the Lord for him; and immediately, while she was still praying, his speech was restored to him, and he spoke clearly: and, after they prayed together to God with joy, he returned to his property.

CHAPTER 4 Piety, Hospitality, Other Virtues

1 On a certain festive and sacred day Saint Ita asked God to receive the body and blood of Christ from the hand of a worthy priest on that day. Then, the grace of God led his servant through a long extent of land to the community of Cluainmicnois,³¹ and she received the body and blood of the Lord from the hand of the worthy priest, just as she wished; but no one saw her coming there, or receiving communion, or returning, and immediately on that very day she was found in her own place. And since the priests did not know what happened concerning the body and blood of the Lord, all the people and the clergyman fasted with them on that day, so that the Lord might show the mystery of this event to him. Afterward, the angel of God came to some sainted elder among them and told him everything that had happened.

2 However, that priest, who conducted the mass, which Saint Ita received came with other clerics to her on a long journey, so that the handmaiden of the lord might bless

³⁰ Also known as Mochoemog of Leakmokevogue, in County Tipperary.

³¹ In modern day County Offaly

them. And when they were making the journey, one of them was made blind by some mishap. Consoling each other, they said: “Blessed Ita, bride of Christ, when we reach her, will request by the grace of God the light of the eye of our brother.” And blessed virgin Ita indicated to her people their arrival prophetically, and predicted it. And when they were arriving at that place, the handmaiden of the Lord, rejoicing, received them, and the grace of God cured the light of the eyes of that blind brother immediately. And Saint Ita instructed that priest, from whom she received God’s communion in the community of Cluainmicnois secretly, to sing Mass before her. And the blessed virgin instructed her sisters and daughters to give to that sainted priest the vestments for the mass, in which he said Mass. But he refused, saying: “We are not now able to take anything with ourselves, because our abbot, Aeneas,³² instructed us not to accept anything from you, except your prayers.” The sainted prophetess, Ita, said: “It will not be displeasing to your sainted abbot, Aeneas to receive this from me, because I will give to you a sign for him. One day he himself arrived at the monastery of virgin Chinreacha Dearcain³³, and the sainted virgin asked him to wash his feet, and that he agreed. Then the most sainted virgin Chinreacha washed the feet of Saint Aeneas, and dried them with a cloth; I, however, (with God as witness) held the head of the cloth, and dried his feet with the virgin. When your abbot hears this, he will rejoice, and happily he will receive my gift.” Afterwards, when they took those things and the companions were wondering at these things and received the blessing of the Saint, they returned on their way, and all things came about, just as Saint Virgin Ita predicted.

³² No reference found. He was possibly an obscure religious figure.

³³ A reference to Saint Carecha Dergain or Cairech Dergan of Cluain-borean or Cloonburren in modern-day County Longford.

3 A certain secular man, very rich and very eloquent, came to Blessed Ita, holding a great gift of silver for alms, and placed it at the feet of the most holy Virgin: who, reaching out the hand, touched the silver, and, esteeming it little, threw it from her feet, not wishing to see it with her soul or eyes. Therefore, after the maidservant of God touched the aforesaid silver with the hands, she said to her daughter, attending: “Give me water so that I may wash my hand, with which I touched the corruptible silver.” So the maidservant of God shunned the silver, and all luxuries of the world, as if she had touched something unclean. Then the one who gave the gift asked Saint Ita, saying: “To whom ought a gift to be given, to rich and powerful men, or to the poor and strangers?” The servant of God replied: “To both ought to be given, to the rich and powerful for the sake of their worldly honor, however to the poor and weak for reward in the heavens.” He said: “If I were not able to give to both, what should I do?” The sainted maidservant of God replied: “It is in the power of man to give his substance for worldly honor, or to the Lord God, from whom he received it, and who will repay eternal life for goods of this world.” Edified by these words, having received a blessing, he left.

4 One time, Saint Brandan asked Blessed Ita about the three tasks, which please God most, and about the three which are very displeasing; the handmaiden of Christ, Ita, responded thus: “True belief with a pure heart toward God, a simple life with religion, generosity with charity: these three please God very much. However a mouth corrupting men, and the emotions of the wicked: miserly pride in riches, these three displease God very much.” Saint Brandan and all who were there hearing such a sentiment, glorified God in his maidservant.

5 A certain holy virgin, wishing to explore how the most sainted virgin lived in a most secret location, in which she had been accustomed to devote herself only to God, went out at a certain hour to see her. However, entering there, she saw three most brilliant suns, similar to that sun of the world, which illuminates the entire world, lighting the entire place and surrounding area, and she was not able to enter for fear, but immediately turned back. The mystery of this miracle is hidden for us, unless it should be the gift of the most sainted Trinity, which made all things out of nothing, whom the most blessed virgin Ita served continually in body and spirit.

6 There was a certain Virgin in the plain of Liffe,³⁴ Rethna by name, who had a holy foster child, who was named Colummanus,³⁵ who going to the island Hy³⁶ to Saint Columba, there received the rank of bishop, and returned again to his fatherland. After coming to his foster-mother, Saint Rethna, the Blessed Virgin said to him: “My son, my sweet daughter is troubled by great illness, and so come with me to Saint Ita, so that she may bless you, and so that she may help your friend.” And thus the bishop gratefully undertook this. After the horses were hitched to the chariot, the bishop and his nurse with their companions took to the road. But a demon began to make many traps for them on their journey. Blessed Ita, a prophetess, said to her family: “Prepare a bath and banquet, because today holy guests will come to us from a faraway land of the Lagensi.”³⁷ Moreover, on that day they arrived, and immediately Saint Ita said: “Let the bishop come to me, and place the hand on my head in blessing.” The arrivals wondered at how the Saint of God knew that he was a bishop, with no one indicating it to her. Blessing each

³⁴ Near County Kildare

³⁵ Rethna and Colummanus both seem to be obscure references.

³⁶ Iona

³⁷ People of Leinster, near Kildare.

other, just as it pleased the bishop, blessed Ita said, though they had not yet informed her about the ill Virgin: “Our daughter, whom you have brought, choose either that she may be well in body, and die in sin; or be here in pain and live in eternal life? Just as the Apostle said: ‘For virtue is fulfilled in infirmity.’³⁸” They chose along with the daughter that she be in pain here and live in eternal rest, and so it came about. Saint Ita turned to Saint Rethna and said to her: “Handmaiden of God, your journey would not prosper, if the Bishop did not come with you, because many demons lay traps for our sex.” And delaying several days at the house of Saint Ita in true charity, they began to return. Then, Saint Rethna said to Blessed Ita” “There is a most dear virgin, a companion to me, in the southern part of Ireland: and what does my mistress advise me, should I go to her?” Saint Ita said to her: “No, but with your people take a direct path to your cell, and that virgin will meet you in the boundaries between the Lageniensi and the Mumeniensi, wishing to go to you.” Thus it was done. Then, when they left with blessing, the aforesaid virgin met them there, and they blessed the prophetess, Saint Ita, rejoicing together.

CHAPTER 5 Various Miracles and Predictions

1 A certain man killed his brother, and, touched by repentance, came to Saint Ita, and underwent penitence according to her command; and the most blessed Ita said to him, seeing that his spirit was devout: “If you adhere to my words, you will not die a sudden death, but you will depart to eternal life.” However it happened to him afterwards to go with his Leader into war, because he was a soldier, and when the war intensified against

³⁸ 2. Cor. 12:9.

them, he himself was killed among the rest. Hearing this, Blessed Ita said: “I promised that man to finish the course of his life happily, because he followed what I ordered him,” and she said to her attendants: “Go from me, and in the name of my God in the battlefield call him by his name, and I believe that he will rise up to you.” After they acted in this way, he rose up from the slaughter, as if he had never been killed, and he ran to them, who were calling him, and he came with them to blessed Ita, and afterwards it happened just as the maidservant of Christ promised.

2 At a certain time a certain secular, rich man, came to Blessed Ita, saying: “I ask you, saint of God, that my mares bear male foals with heads of white and coats of red this year.” Saint Ita responded to him: “It is not consistent with my humility to do what you say; But it is God’s part to make from his own elements what he wishes.” Then he more urgently asked her, saying: “Ask the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, who, God three and one, colored the colors of earth and sky, of sea and of men, of clothing and animals, to make the colors of the foals just as I wish.” The maidservant of God said to him: “Because you believe in this way in God, so will your foals this year be just as you wish.” He left, rejoicing on account of such a prophecy, and all things came out for him, just as the maidservant of God said.

3 At another time in the cell of nuns, which is called Doirechuisgrigh,³⁹ a most disquieting question arose concerning a theft that happened there. Everyone there was questioned about it. And so, in the face of everyone’s denial, the abbess of that place said to her daughters: “Let us go to blessed Virgin Ita, and I believe that this obscure question

³⁹ Uncertain

will be solved by her.” For it was displeasing to them that this entire suspicion came upon an innocent virgin of Christ. Afterward she traveled to blessed Ita. And Saint Ita prophetically said to her family: “Prepare a banquet and bath, because the maidservant of Christ will come to us today.” Afterward the visitors, entered in order before Saint Ita, kissing her. However that one, on whom there was suspicion, did not dare to approach nearer to the handmaiden of Christ, although she was innocent and pure of conscience. Then Blessed Ita said to her: “ Most innocent virgin of Christ, come and give me a kiss, it is certain that you did not commit the theft which you were accused of.” Straightaway those virgins in Christ’s name asked Saint Ita what person stole it. Blessed Ita responded to them: “She who hid in penitence for another fault among you, she herself stole this, and hid it amidst the cloth of her veil and her meadow,⁴⁰” and added saying: “you will find it safe; but she who stole it, will not remain in your cell, but, as the Prophet said, her brow has become that of a prostitute.”⁴¹ And all things happened in this way. For that stolen thing was found, and that unhappy one, leaving her habit, remained among the forest dwellers in debauched fornication.

4 At another time, a certain man, by the name Feargus, whose son is still living, was led to Saint Ita in the greatest pain of eyes and body. For scarcely did his friends know if he was alive or dead. But this sick man, almost dead, blind in the eyes, and despaired of by all, returned to his property very well in body and with most clear-sighted eyes, and he

⁴⁰ A troublesome phrase: “inter lignum veli & pratum suum...” I would hazard to say that this means the stolen object was perhaps wrapped in her veil and placed in a neighboring field. There are no biblical or other references to be found concerning the figurative meaning of this phrase, so it must be taken literally. The second *her* might be better understood as *her community's*.

⁴¹ Jeremiah 3:3, “Therefore the showers have been withholden, and there hath been no latter rain; and thou hadst a whore's forehead, thou refusedst to be ashamed.”

lived up to his death with healthy limbs through the prayer and blessing of most blessed Ita.

5 At a certain time, the uncle of Saint Ita died, who had eight sons. They were living in the region of Handesi;⁴² and, from the land Huaconnaill, the maidservant of God, calling them, summoned them. After they arrived, the bride of Christ addressed them, saying: “My uncle, your father is dead: Woe to us! Because he will be tortured with harsh and dire punishments for his sins; moreover, it has been revealed to me by the divinity, how he is tortured; but let us do something for the salvation of his spirit, in order that he can be rescued; Therefore do what I say, that is that each of you give through this entire year every day bread with nourishment of meat or butter for his spirit, and as many lights, and at the end of the year return to me.” For the men were rich, and they did just as the handmaiden of Christ ordered them, and they returned after a year to Blessed Ita, who said to them: “Your father, has been half removed from his punishments through your gifts and my prayers: Now go and give equal gifts this year, and come again to me.” And so they did. Having come again in the same manner, the Virgin of Christ spoke to them: “Your father has been snatched entirely from punishments; but now is without clothing, because he gave to no one a item of clothing in Christ’s name; therefore, perform alms of clothing so that he can be dressed,” and they, giving alms of clothing, after another year returned to Saint Ita. She said to them: “Your father now enjoys rest by your gifts and my requests, through the great mercy of God. Now you, guard yourselves from those forbidden secular desires and longings, for which your father was tortured,” and they, praising God and giving thanks to his handmaiden, returned to their home.

⁴² Probably, the people of Ita’s clan, the Desi in modern-day County Waterford.

6 On a certain day, a layman, deeply saddened by the death of his son, came to Saint Ita crying, speaking out rudely, and saying: “Saint of God, know this for certain that I will not depart from your dwelling, and I will not stop wailing, until you resuscitate my dead son.” Blessed Ita responded gently to him: “What you ask from me, o man, is not fitting for my virtue, but for that of the Apostles and their like.” Then the man said: “For this reason, I grieve so greatly, because the speech of my son was lost before his death, so that he was not able to confess to God, nor to speak any word to us: I beg you to ask the holy Trinity, that my son may again live for one day at least, so that I may be able to hear his words.” Saint Ita responded to him: “With how much time will you be content, if God in his mercy, who enlivens the dead, pities you and resuscitates your son?” He said: “I am grateful, even for the time of one day.” The maidservant of God said: “He will live for seven years, and seven months, and seven days.” Afterwards, when the blessed virgin prayed, the dead one immediately rose, and neither less nor more did he live than just as it was foretold to him by the mouth of the prophetess Virgin.

7 At another time Saint Luchtighernus and Saint Lasreanus⁴³, abbots, said to each other: “Let us go to visit the maidservant of God, Saint Ita.” Then a certain young man, foolishly and ignorantly, said to them: “What reason is there for you, wise and sainted men, to go to that old woman?” The saints, rebuking him, said to him: “Brother, you have spoken foolishly, for already the prophetess of the Lord knows what you have said.” Then the saints traveled to Saint Ita, taking that youth with them. However, coming to the

⁴³ Saint Lasren or possibly Laissren of Devenish

door of the monastery, the virgins recognized Saint Luchtighernus, because he frequently visited Saint Ita, and entering the brides of Christ announced, saying: “It is a good day for us today, because Saint Luchtighernus⁴⁴ is visiting you.” The sainted mother responded to them: “No less before God is the one who comes with him, that is Saint Lasreanus, son of Colmannus, whom you did not greet because you did not recognize him.” For, through the spirit, Saint Ita knew him by name and merit, whom she never saw. And approaching before Blessed Ita, so that she might bless them, immediately the handmaiden of God said to that aforementioned youth: “Why have you come to an old woman, when you said, what benefits the saints to come to me?” Then he performed a penance, as the Saints pleaded on his behalf, and remaining there happily for three days, having received permission and blessing from the very saintly Ita, they returned to their home.

CHAPTER 6 Other Predictions, Death

1 The prophecy of Saint Ita has been shown in many miracles, as you will hear in this miracle. One day the virgin of Christ, Ita, said to her family: “What words do I hear? See who have come to our place.” And some of them went outside and saw two brothers of the same womb, very well known to her. And upon returning, they said to the maidservant of God: “These are two brothers from this land, whom we know well.” Then the prophetess, blessed Ita, said lamenting: “Alas! Alas for them, woe grows for me and them, because one will kill the other soon”; and already this the outcome has proved in the following way. For the brother has killed his brother with his own hands. Then that evil-doer was bound in chains by the lord of the region Huaconaill, to be handed over

⁴⁴ Otherwise known as Saint Luchtichernus is an uncertain reference.

swiftly to death. But the Virgin of Christ, Ita, pitied him, saying: “The mother of those ones will be sad, since she has lost the first, and if she loses this one, will be deprived of them both. Even the son of God, whom my soul loves, does not wish that he die in his sins, but wishes to preserve him for forgiveness.” Afterward, she sent to the aforesaid Lord, asking him that that man be sent to her, and he was sent to her, the messengers saying to her: “Virgin of god, free him, and receive him into trust, if it seems good to you; and if he does anything of evil against the kingdom, it will fall to your account. Therefore raise him up, so that he may undergo penance,” Saint Ita responded to them: “I know that he will not undergo penance swiftly, but afterwards he will yet be properly penitent.” Thus it was done. For immediately the criminal who was sent to her did not wish to undergo penance, but just as Saint Ita, the bride of Christ, predicted, she waited for him patiently, so that now he underwent a punishment not forced but of his own accord, because God set free each one in her control.

2 And so with these things having occurred, a great war was raised against the clan of the Huaconaill by many enemies. But in the presence of their matron the race sought the aid of God by her against the greatest multitude of enemies. Then saint Ita, having pity on them, asked God, saying: “Sacred Trinity, and inseparable unity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, assist with your aid my few and miserable people, who have received me kindly in your name in their territory, and have taken me as their matron: for whom there is no human help against this great multitude of the Western Mumonia.” The race of Huaconaill trusting in the prayers of blessed Ita, courageously set forth against the very great horde of enemies; and they fought spiritedly, and after they fought each other with

very great wounds, the enemy were turned to flight in the war by the aid of God, evidently through the prayer of Saint Ita, and the race of Huaconail made the greatest slaughter among them. And returning most victoriously from war, the tribe Huaconail gave thanks to God and to most blessed Ita, their patroness, for the victory granted them. The victors of Christ were few against very many, because Saint Ita prayed for them. Then, Saint Ita said to one of her servants: "Go where the war was waged, and seek that one there, who promised to undergo penitence for me, and until now has not done it, and you shall find him in the slaughter of battlefield, unobserved and wounded. For he was a soldier, and was wounded in the first battle in the war," and the messenger of the virgin found him, just as she had told him, and led him back to blessed Ita, and he was kindly taken in by her. And he was cured of his wounds, and afterward underwent worthy penitence according to the command of most blessed Ita, and died in a blessed life.

3 At another time, blessed Ita said to her daughters: "In this hour a spirit is defiled from our family, go and diligently consider, who of ours now is stolen by a treacherous wolf from our flock." Then the family of blessed Ita looked for the crime that had been performed, and they were not able to know what person of them sinned. And the whole family was assembled before Ita, all denying, individually said: "I did not do that sin." She who sinned was denying with the rest. Full of the spirit of prophecy, blessed Ita said to that one, who denied her crime: "You sinned today in fornication." And she did not repent, nor did she confess; but with the ignominy of the sin, she left. After wandering through many places, she was made a servant in the region of the Connacht, and bore a daughter. After much time, Saint Ita said to her family: "Our sister, once free, is now a

servant and a slave in the house of some great man in the region of the Connacht, and she now feels repentance; and if she were free, she would faithfully correct herself.

Afterward sainted virgin Ita sent messengers to the abbot, Saint Brandan, living in the region of the Connacht to seek the freedom of the aforesaid woman. And Saint Brandan humbly in accordance with the command of the bride of Christ went to the King of the Connacht for that woman, and he obtained freedom for her and her daughter, and she with her daughter was sent from Brandan, came to Saint Ita, and was received by her, rejoicing in her return. And she, undergoing worthy penitence, remained ever in sanctity up to her death with her daughter in the monastery of most pious Virgin Ita.

4 One day, most blessed virgin Ita in venerable old age with her virgins assembled before her, indicating that soon she would die, gently said to them: “The abbot of the Cluainmicnoi, Macnissius sent messengers to me, to fetch blessed water from me for Abbot Aeneas, who is very ill, because they hope for his health, if it should happen that he drink the water consecrated by me: I will bless the water now. The messengers are sad; say to them that I have blessed the water for him. For I will not die before they come here; and after they return home, Saint Aeneas himself will pass on to heaven.” And so all things happened according to the prophecy of the most sainted virgin Ita.

5 After the most sainted matron Ita was caught up in infirmity, and began to bless and instruct her community and the clergy and people of Huaconnail, who received her as their patron saint: and, visited by many saints of each sex, among choirs of saints, with happy angels going forth to meet her spirit, after a very great crowd of miracles, most

happy in the sight of the most sacred Trinity, the most glorious virgin Saint Ita, on the 15th day of February passed away. Her most blessed corpse, when many people collected around it and miracles were performed which up to now have not ceased to be shown, most gloriously after the rites of mass in her monastery (which Saint Ita gave distinction to, she, who in no way seemed inferior to Saint Brigid in merits and character) was entrusted her internment, with Our Lord Savior Jesus Christ reigning, who with God the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns through the infinite ages of ages, Amen.

Continental Sources

In the following chapters I will focus on other saints' lives as primary documents. I think this is the best way to look at Ita's life, given that it was written under the assumption that it was part of a larger genre. The continental Lives that I use were well-known to the authors of Irish Lives. Sulpicius Severus' Life of Saint Martin, issued around 396 CE, was probably the most influential. Not only was Martin the subject of the first Western European *vita*, but his journeys around Gaul and among pagans paralleled many themes within the Lives of Brigid, Columba, and, in particular, Patrick. Liam de Paor notes that his Life "had a wide circulation in Ireland,"⁴⁵ and this is widely accepted given the frequency with which Irish scholars allude to Sulpicius Severus and the *Life of Martin*.⁴⁶

Saint Benedict's Life from the pages of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, written around 593 CE, will mostly be used in conjunction with miracles of prophecy, which were so popular in Ireland. However, Gregory the Great's writings were quite influential in Ireland, especially for hagiographers like Adamnan,⁴⁷ who "in fact quotes from the *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Liam De Paor, *Saint Patrick's World : The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 46.

⁴⁶ There is more to be said on this subject, but one striking example is in the *Book of Armaugh*, which records the New Testament, the writings by and about Saint Patrick, and Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*. This is one case that displays the importance of Saint Martin to the development of Irish Christianity. Michael Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours in the Seventh Century / Michael Richter* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 226.

⁴⁷ Clare Stancliffe, "The Miracle Stories in seventh-century Irish Saints' Lives," *Le Septième Siècle, Changements Et Continuités : Actes Du Colloque Bilatéral Franco-Britannique Tenu Au Warburg Institute Les 8-9 Juillet 1988 = the Seventh Century, Change and Continuity : Proceedings of a Joint French and British Colloquium Held at the Warburg Institute 8-9 July 1988*, Studies of the Warburg Institute V. 42. eds. J. N. Hillgarth, Jacques Fontaine, and Warburg Institute (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1992) 88.

⁴⁸ Anderson, lxviii.

The *vita* I use with the least evidence of popularity in Ireland is that of Radegund. Walter Berschin wrote a study comparing the lives of Radegund, a queen turned saint of Poitiers, and Brigid, the daughter of a pagan and his slave and the founder of a great monastery in Kildare.⁴⁹ He gives evidence that Cogitosus was familiar with Fortunatus' Life that was written around 587 CE. Given that this date is so close to that of Benedict's, I think it is plausible that Fortunatus' text was one that made its way to Ireland. More importantly, Radegund is a model of typical female sainthood. If there is a link between she and Brigid, I think Radegund and Ita, sometimes called a *secunda Brigida*, are a worthy comparison; they were both born of an ancient and royal family, and, as children, they displayed signs and manners, which hinted at their future heavenly vocation. Also, these two are quite disdainful of secular wealth and power. This is just one aspect of both's adherence to asceticism; Ita and Radegund frequently fasted and, as mentioned, abstained from luxuries. Furthermore, the two perform somewhat similar miracles, mostly those of curing illnesses and raising the dead. Some argue that these are the provenance of female saints; they are limited by male hagiographers to miracles and manners that can easily be related to the typical virtues of their sex.⁵⁰ I think the plethora of commonalities demonstrates continuity from the Life of Radegund to the Life of Ita, despite the geographical and chronological separation. Saint Ita does break away from the mould of Radegund in some very significant aspects, but their similarities make the comparison valid.

⁴⁹ Berschin, Walter. "Radegundis and Brigit." *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*. Ed. John Carey, Maire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain. Portland OR: Four Courts Press, 2001.

⁵⁰ Lisa M. Bitel, "Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality and Male Monastic Mentalities," *Journal of Medieval History* 12, no. 1 (1986) 26.

The Irish *Vitae*:

There is less of a necessity to point out how the Irish Lives informed each other, but I will say a bit about the dates of the primary texts I use and how they fit into this paper. The best place, and truly the only place to start when talking about the Irish conversion to Christianity is Saint Patrick. He is the patron saint of Ireland and one of the most well known saints ever to exist. Saint Ita, though her Life never mentions Patrick by name, is undoubtedly influenced by her predecessor. I will mainly use his Life by Muirichu,⁵¹ but I reference his own writings⁵² and the Life by Tirechan.⁵³ Patrick is the model for Irish saints, just as his *vitae* are templates for later authors, but I will also draw connections to the lives of Columba and Brigid, two more of the Irish Trinity of Saints. Columba's Life, written by Adamnan around 688 CE, is important for its treatment of prophetic miracles. The late seventh century *vita* of Brigid by Cogitosus is useful because of all of the comparisons drawn between Ita and Kildare's patroness. This is not just in contemporary historical analyses, but the author of Ita's Life alludes to this contemporary practice by defending the reputation of Ita, "who in no way seemed inferior to Saint Brigid in merits and character."⁵⁴

There is a great deal of interplay between all of these sources, but I think it is important to stay close to the literary tradition in which Ita's *vita* was written. Confining my analysis to primarily hagiographical sources is limiting, but I think it will better shed light on the unique aspects of Ita and Irish hagiography. Upon uncovering these

⁵¹ From the seventh century

⁵² *The Confession* and *The Letter against the Soldiers of Coroticus* both date from around the middle of the 5th century. Saint Patrick died in either 463 or 493, so his dating is a bit hazy.

⁵³ From the *Book of Armaugh*, c. 670-700 CE.

⁵⁴ *Ita*, 6.5.

idiosyncrasies, I address the contemporary Irish context, within which adjustments were made to the Christian tradition to accommodate Irish society and culture.

Righteous *Ri*: Structure and the Secular

One of the reasons that the Irish Church developed so distinctly from the Continental Church was due to the nature of its distinct political and social structure. Unlike the Celts of Gaul and Briton, the Irish were never conquered by the Roman Empire, whose bureaucratic structure converted easily to the needs of Ecclesiastical organization. Indeed, the hierarchy of priests, bishops and the pope mimicked that of local magistrates, governors, and an emperor. New, growing institutions are wont to graft themselves onto old and powerful ones in order that they might acquire some of the other's success, or model themselves after those familiar that have been tried and proven resilient. Though there are many similarities between the conversion of the Franks and the conversion of the Irish, like the focus on converting leaders and chiefs, there is no evidence that the Irish looked to their eastern neighbor as similar. The Irish looked much further East for inspiration, especially since the Franks, in the person of Clovis, weren't converted until 496 CE, nearly 60 years after Patrick's arrival in Ireland. Perhaps outsiders may have lopped the two groups together, but the Irish didn't, and I am more concerned with their perspective than that of outsiders.

Our information about the pre-Christian society and political system is tainted. As Doris Edel points out, because “the lack of written documents or Urkunden—the law functioned orally—the law-in-action can only be guessed at.”⁵⁵ She and Charles-Edwards descriptions of what society would have been like according to the laws collected in the

⁵⁵ Doris Edel, *The Celtic West and Europe : Studies in Celtic Literature and the Early Irish Church* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 53.

Senchas Mor around 8th century, around the same time that clerics were recording Ecclesiastical law. Thus it is difficult to trust that these compilations are pure records of the oral law tradition, but historians have done their best to weed out anachronism and give their fellow scholars a notion of what life was like in Ireland before Christianity and its influence. Just as Edel and Charles-Edwards have to trust some of what they read in these old manuscripts, I am compelled to take their research as well-informed and useful in my own work of scholarship.

Now, because the Irish had not been conquered by the Roman Empire but came into contact with its modes of rule through trade and interactions with Britain, the Celts on Eire had retained their traditional social and political structure. People and land were first divided into five distinct regions (*coiceda*): Connachta in the West, Ulster in the North, Leinster in the East, Munster, the eventual home of Ita in the South West, and Meath in the center. Each of these regions was dominated by one or a small number of *tuatha*, a word connoting both a clan group and the area that the clan inhabited. Usually, these groups would claim a single legendary ancestor, such as the Ui Neill who claimed King Niall Noigiallach as their forefather. Each of these clans was led by a *ri*, or king, who “represented the interests of the *tuath* externally.”⁵⁶ The next social-political division was the *fine*, a group with closer and well-established, close family ties and shared a common land. At its head was an *agae fine* or *derb fine*, who would represent the rest of the familial group in the larger society. As opposed to the Continental model, with a central secular authority to whom allegiance was owed, the Irish political system was much more disparate. For the most part, clans were contained to a specific geographical

⁵⁶ Bernhard Maier, *The Celts: A history from earliest times to the present*, transl. Kevin Windle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) 130.

area and not unified by subservience to a single ruler of all Ireland. According to Maier, the centralizing structure of a High King only began to appear with the arrival of Christianity, when clans with links to powerful monasteries could press their case to hold this supreme authority.⁵⁷

Though Saint Patrick allegedly divided Ireland into bishoprics, monasteries and their abbots or abbesses were the true wielders of ecclesiastical authority. Normally, in accordance with the structure of the Church of the Continent, a bishop would administer rather large areas and the priests and monasteries within them. In contrast, it was these monastic communities that were the seats of power until nearly the 8th century in Ireland, when a structure like that long familiar on the continent, with bishops at the head, came to the fore. Until then, monasteries operated much like *tuatha* or sometimes in conjunction with the local rulers. They possessed land, raised tribute, and interacted with their neighbors, secular and ecclesiastical, much as any other political entity would.

The proof of this lies within the pages of the saints lives and *The Chronicle of Ireland*, both of which note instances when saints or monasteries even become involved in outright battle. Many of the actions within the *Chronicle* and *vitae* reflect pre-Christian secular or political customs and modes of conduct among the political elite: exchanges and refusals of gifts as signifiers of power and dominance, the bestowing of blessing or curses as political currency, and the exchange of foster-children to cement relationships. However, there is evidence that these types of actions do not wholly depend on Irish antecedents. In fact, there are biblical and hagiographical parallels, that lend suggest such behaviors were in accordance with Christian practice. I will seek to demonstrate that such

⁵⁷ Ibid, 133.

practice, because they resonated in a traditional Irish-Celtic Culture, were emphasized to the Irish audience of these lives, the social and literate elites. Ita and her Irish counterparts take on the personae both of members of the *tuatha*-system and leaders of their own communities with responsibilities and powers parallel to that of *ri*.

REFUSAL OF GIFTS

Ita's first interaction with secular authorities occurs when she reaches Limerick.⁵⁸ The Huaconnaill, the local clan, and their leader come to her with a gift of land in the area around her cell, which the Angel of God had indicated as the home of Ita's future monastery. Ita refuses all but four acres because she "did not wish to be worried about secular cares."⁵⁹ In response the lord is displeased and asserts that after her death, at least, the lands he offered will be given to her followers. What he promised came true, as what the Angel foretold, and Ita became the patroness of the Huaconnaill and they in turn gave her and her nuns alms and other donations in return for her heavenly stewardship.

This passage illustrates two very different trends in Irish Christianity: on the one hand the influence of continental saints, on the other accommodation to existing Irish political and social structures. In the manner of other non-Irish saints, Saint Ita shows the typical ascetic disdain for secular wealth and interaction with worldly officials and matters. Radegund disencumbers herself of her worldly wealth, while Martin and Benedict, whose order of monks is known for its strict style of living, shun earthly possessions and status in exchange for the spiritual. Such is Martin's disregard for material and worldly concerns like fine clothes, that he is even mocked for his uncouth

⁵⁸ *Ita*, 2. 2

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

and slovenly appearance.⁶⁰ Such saints maintained that interaction with the worldly had a corrupting influence on their holiness and reduced the closeness to God that they had attained through their ascetic practices. Martin shunned society as a hermit until his sanctity caught the attention of those who made him bishop of Tours. Much against his will, as bishop, he was forced to interact with secular authorities.

Radegund, on the other hand, remained cloistered for her entire life after she took up the veil. Her interactions with civil authorities were confined to letters to the Emperor to secure for her convent, particularly a fragment of the Holy Cross. Her other involvement in secular politics comes from before her entrance into the cloistered world of nuns: as the wife of the king, Clothar, she interceded on behalf of convicts and a man sentenced to die at her husband's command.⁶¹ These activities, though pious were performed while Radegund was still part of the court world, though she wished to be elsewhere. It is not necessarily her in role as an ascetic or Christian that she saves these men, but as a wife and queen.

So, Ita, who also practices asceticism, follows some of the models set down in the lives of these continental saints. She is by no means the only Irish example of saintly disdain for secular wealth or worldly power. Patrick also on occasion refuses gifts from pagan kings. In his *Confession*, he is adamant about accepting nothing from kings or even “pious women, who would give [him] unsolicited gifts... and [he] would return it to

⁶⁰ Sulpicius Severus, "The Life of Saint Martin of Tours," transl. F. R. Hoare. *Soldiers of Christ : Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Thomas Head and Thomas F. X. Noble (London: Sheed & Ward, 1995) Chapter 12.

⁶¹ Venantius Fortunatus, "St. Radegund." *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992) Chapter 10.

them, and they would take offense...⁶². He is particularly keen in his writings to demonstrate how little he regarded monetary profit. In fact, some historians see his *Confessio* as a rebuttal of the claim that he accumulated vast sums of wealth from the Irish. The Irish seemed inclined to model themselves and their saints after the models of saints like Martin, who was the first western saint to be the subject of a saint's life; Ita, Patrick, Columba, and Brigit all exhibit some of the hallmarks of an ascetic, such as fasting. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there is evidence that the authors of Irish Lives knew the works of Sulpicius Severus and Gregory of Tours and used these works as templates. Hagiographers in Ireland depicted their saints as part of the Christian narrative by imitating the lives of ascetic saints.

Nevertheless, Irish saints are more apt to relent and accept gifts or to treat with neighboring rulers than their Continental counterparts. Though Ita refuses the land offered by the neighboring *tuath*, her *familia*, the succeeding nuns, will profit from the acreage. Similarly, Patrick accepts gift and uses them to build more churches and monasteries and to perform various other charitable acts. These are offered by kings and powerful lords, who admire and fear Saint Patrick and wish to convert to Christianity, which has power to defeat the druids. I would like to emphasize the mutual exchange taking place, kings and lords offer land and resources and receive in return the protection of a powerful patron. This is not to say that they were purchasing indulgences, like those from the Renaissance, as an easy way to salvation through their power and wealth. It is more probable and evident that these men were following ancient customs of gift-giving between powerful lords and clans, *tuatha*. A *ri*, or the king of a specific *tuath*, would

⁶² Patrick, "Declaration," transl. A. B. E. Hood, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life*, ed. A. B. E. Hood (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) Chapter 49.

receive a gift from an overlord or more powerful king (*ruiri*) and would pay the same figure a tribute. This type of reciprocity seems to be mimicked in the interactions between Ita, as also Patrick, Brigid, and Columba, and regional secular leaders. It seems that the leadership of a monastery is akin to leadership of a *tuath*, and abbots and abbesses were treated as such.

In distinction to the Roman Empire, Ireland was not accustomed to different layers of government: a Roman bureaucracy and a local/traditional ruling body. All governing structures were incorporated into this *tuath*-system, likewise the new structures within the Christian Church were adopted into this type of system. During the 6th century in particular, monasteries became the more significant centers of ecclesiastical power, rather than bishoprics. Communities of holy men or women led or founded by a saint, often operated in the greater social arena as rather powerful *tuatha*, strengthened by access to spiritual power and knowledge. It is possible that the refusal of gifts by Ita and her fellow Irish founders would be construed by her contemporaries, and later readers, as refusal to accept the local lord as their *ruiri*.

With particular reference to Patrick, Charles- Edwards postulates that this type of action could be indicative of the Irish saints' removal from the typical power relationships prevalent in Ireland. On the other hand, such a refusal could demonstrate that a saint or founder of a religious community did not want to acknowledge a secular authority as superior.⁶³ Either interpretation indicates that these early Christian leaders were forced to participate in the secular sphere and adjust their behavior and responses in accordance with local mores and customs.

⁶³ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 221.

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

In contrast to their reluctance to accept gifts, even those given as penance, Irish saints are keen to dispense blessings, perform miracles, and voice prophecies to local leaders. This was the method by which Patrick gained many royal converts: battles with druids and marvelous healings inspired fear and awe in the hearts of Irish pagans, which cowed the population and motivating conversion. Wonders were the only currency available to the Saints, for material wealth had been shunned by those, who followed the model of saints like Martin. While Patrick and his Irish successors were trying to negotiate a place within Irish-Celtic society, the miracles continental saints performed were not often undertaken to achieve conversion. It was more likely that they punished those remaining hold-outs, who stubbornly shied from baptism.

One important difference between Irish saints and their continental predecessors lies in the performance of miracles. Almost always, the authors of continental saints' lives depict their subjects as conduits of God's power; they are intercessors, praying for miracles to happen by God's power. On the other hand, Irish hagiographers often depict their patrons as endowed with grace, which allows them to perform miracles and wonders of their own accord and at will.⁶⁴ Therefore, Irish saints, in contrast to the continental examples, seem to grant gifts independently to whomever they deem worthy. In this way, they are capable of operating within the system of gift-giving and receiving that was so important to the power dynamics in pre-Christian Ireland.

⁶⁴ See chapter 2 for more on miracles and prophecy.

An explicit example of Ita's independence: "While the maidservant of Christ was still signing the paralytic, he at once rose cured and safe before all, as if he had never been gripped by paralysis."⁶⁵ Conversely, Benedict resuscitates a boy, but it was "the result of his prayer."⁶⁶ Whereas Benedict steers God's blessing, Ita seems endowed with a share of God's power. Similarly, it is by Patrick's own blessing that a field is freed of the snow a druid had caused to fall upon it.⁶⁷ This manner of performing miracles allows Irish saints to deploy blessing and healing as their own resource. In interacting with secular authority, the giving of gifts, normally in the form of blessings and religious instruction, could have been construed as a sign of preeminence or leadership, while at the same time being in accordance with models of charity and beneficence derived from their predecessors across the Channel.

Ita, like Benedict or Martin, may also employ her resources to demonstrate the merciful power of Christianity. Ita is persuaded by the cries of a father to revive a son,⁶⁸ and Patrick performs miracles that convert the formerly disdainful Macuil.⁶⁹ The latter was a secular ruler and had planned to test the foreign, holy man but was confounded by the wonder-working power of Christianity. Ita's suppliant begged and threatened to the point that she gave in, finally persuaded by his concern for his son's soul, which would not be able to attain salvation because the boy couldn't speak, even to confess his sins. Likewise, Benedict is accosted by a mourning father, who also refuses to leave the

⁶⁵ *Ita*, 3. 4

⁶⁶ Gregory, Odo John Zimmermann, and Benedict Raymund Avery, *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict :Book Two of the Dialogues* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980) p. 64.

⁶⁷ Muirchu, "Life," transl. A. B. E. Hood, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life*, ed. A. B. E. Hood (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) p. 91.

⁶⁸ *Ita*, 5. 6

⁶⁹ Muirchu, Chapter 23.

monastery until his son is revived.⁷⁰ With Ita and Benedict, the resurrection miracles have a similar pattern: a saint is begged, or threatened, to perform a miracle of healing, he/she is reluctant to do so, but with evidence of the suppliant's faith and pity felt by the saint, the son is resurrected and the fathers rejoice in the majesty of God and his servant. These two saints exhibit the mercy of God, which instills in the recipients of their healing an incredible gratefulness to God and his saint, a gratefulness which might lead to greater faith and loyalty. Though Patrick's miracle is not performed out of pity for a grieving father, he acquires a new member of the Christian community by performing a miracle. His may seem more aggressive, but, in the end, it has a similar effect on the population, awe and reverence toward Christianity and her saints.

Reverence towards saints was exhibited by visitations to their humble dwellings by both royalty and bishops. Ita is remarkable for the queue that makes the journey to Mount Luachra and begs for her advice and blessing, but Benedict, Radegund, Martin, Patrick, Columba, and Brigit were similarly approached. This was a method by which leaders of a community could demonstrate their piety and/or pay homage to a particularly holy individual. This could also express a sense of humility in great men, who chose to humble themselves before those who were weaker at least in temporal terms. In the eyes of an Irishman, however, the receiving of great blessings, like the resuscitation of a loved one or foretelling the future, would be a great boon, indicating superiority of the giver. A youth asks to elder saints, who are also abbots, "What reason is there for you, wise and sainted men, to go to that old woman?" In reply, one of them scolds, "Brother, you have badly spoken."⁷¹ He insinuates that there is no question that Ita is worthy of being visited

⁷⁰ Benedict, 65.

⁷¹ Ita, 5.8

and continues on to say that the young man will be in trouble because Saint Ita, as a prophetess, will already know what he has said.

FOSTERHOOD, a kingly obligation

Ita is known as the Foster-Mother of Irish Saints, mainly due to her relationship with Saint Brandon, the Navigator. However, later tradition, postdating the Life I am studying, describes Ita as setting up a school for boys, many of whom would become priests or saints. This role of foster mother, besides evoking Christian imagery of a Mary as a mother, would also connote to a traditional Irish audience the duties and privileges of a king or ruler of a *tuath*.

Fosterhood was another method by which kings and lords could assert dominance or win favor in Ireland. A weaker *tuath* might send a prince to be raised by the more powerful over-king in order to cement good relations between the two. As Charles-Edwards asserts, the fosterage system connected foster parents to natural parents.⁷² On the other hand, tight relationships between foster-child and foster family was quite common in Ireland; a boy or girl would live in the foster-household from the age of seven to fourteen. Furthermore, these foster-children were lawfully bound to their foster-family, or foster-*fine*, as well as their biological one.⁷³ In the same, we could say that kings and elite families were attempting to create a closer relationship with the church by handing over their children. In return for the fostering, the natural parents would often provide resources to the fostering household or institute, which for a religious institution might be alms. However, the Irish model of fostering was not without a corollary on the Continent.

⁷² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 82.

⁷³ Edel, 56.

Wards and hostages were common among the nobility of Europe. Children were handed over to more powerful kings to ensure an under-lord or unruly ruler's obedience and docility.

What is striking about the Ita's example of fosterage is that the product of the fostering is usually another monk or priest, like Brandon. In the Life of Ita, there is Saint Rethna and her "sacred foster child, who was named Colummanus,"⁷⁴ and Ita raises the Pulcherius, son of Beoanus, the carpenter she resurrects in Chapter 3. Such fostered youths do not return to the secular world after they are raised, but usually take up the cloth like their foster mothers: "Ita, herself raised this son, who is called Pulcherius, and he himself is a most sacred Abbot, in the honor of whom the community, Liath, was built."⁷⁵ A clan, which has given over a son or daughter to be fostered in a monastery, gains a connection to that monastic community and to the heavenly realm by means of the child's religious status. Such children do not resume their former role within their ancestral home. The child may return to the geographical homeland, but they remain a member of the heavenly family and often return to their foster-parent for advice and guidance; At least three times in Ita's Life, Brendan comes to Ita for guidance or instruction.⁷⁶

I would argue that the Irish Church took the traditional Irish practice of fosterage and the concepts and ideals that surrounded it and applied it to a different situation within the Church. The foster-children appear to be more like novices or holy-people in training.

⁷⁴ *Ita*, 4. 6

⁷⁵ *Ita*, 3. 7

⁷⁶ *Ita*, 4. 4: "One time, Saint Brandon asked Blessed Ita about the three tasks, which please God most, and about the three which are very displeasing..."; *Ita*, 6. 3: "Afterward sainted, Virgin Ita sent messengers to Abbot Saint Brandan, living in the region of the Connacht to seek the freedom of the aforesaid woman. And Saint Brandan, humbly in accordance with the command of the bride of Christ..." *Ita*, 3.6: "Saint Ita, full of the spirit of prophecy, knowing this, ordered Saint Brandan to lead that woman to her. So, Saint Brandan made her come to Saint Ita."

There are more similarities to the practice of daughters and second sons entering convents or monasteries, sometimes along with dowries or other gifts of one sort or another. It would appear that this type of model didn't have any obvious precursors in Ireland, so terminology from a similar cultural and political institution were used to understand it. Nevertheless, it is still important to see how this custom of kings and nobility was reinterpreted in an ecclesiastical framework both imposing obligation and implying power on a monastic leader.

ITA in Battle:

“But in the presence of their matron the race sought the aid of God by her against the greatest multitude of enemies. Then saint Ita, having pity on them, asked God, saying: “Sacred Trinity, and inseparable unity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, assist with your aid my few and miserable people, who have received me kindly in your name in their territory, and have taken me as their matron: for whom there is no human help against this great multitude of the Western Mumonia.” The race of Huaconail trusting in the prayers of blessed Ita, courageously set forth against the very great horde of enemies; and they fought spiritedly, and after they fought each other with very great wounds, the enemy were turned to flight in the war by the aid of God, evidently through the prayer of Saint Ita, and the race of Huaconail made the greatest slaughter among them. And returning most victoriously from war, the tribe Huaconail gave thanks to God and to most blessed Ita, their patroness, for the victory granted them.”⁷⁷

One of Ita's most startling forays into the secular world is her intervention in a battle “in which the Corcu Oche of Munster were laid low by the prayers of Ite of Cluain

⁷⁷ *Ita*, 6.2

Credail.”⁷⁸ This would be a familiar context for the late antique Irish. In fact, they were well acquainted with battling clans, who raided each other to assert dominance or to decide disputes of other sorts. The *Chronicle of Ireland* is filled with battles, deaths of lords, and the decimation of armies.⁷⁹ Tuaths were relatively geographically insulated, only interacting on the borders of their territories, so when battle was waged the lines were drawn up by clan; familial groups fought under the leadership of a chief or lord, *ri*, or the *derb fine*, who was the leader of the family, something like a patriarch.

Saint Ita is depicted praying for the neighboring lord’s army, which is greatly outnumbered, and ensuring their victory. Indeed, this is not unusual within the scheme of Christian motifs. Though, Christ preached a rather pacifistic doctrine, the Old Testament patriarchs, like Moses, might lend their support and miraculous abilities to their people in warfare.⁸⁰ As I mentioned earlier, the Irish eager to see their race as closely related to the old tribes of Israel with more affinities to the Old Testament than the New. So, these converts tended to identify and sympathize with the tribes of Old Testament, whose lifestyle seemed reminiscent of contemporary conditions.⁸¹

Saint Martin was forced into military at an early age; he followed in the footsteps of his father. When he is finally about to be tested in battle, he refuses to take up arms and as a punishment is threatened with being put in the front lines, where he would assuredly die. However, by the grace of God he is miraculously saved and the enemy

⁷⁸ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, 2 vols (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006) 100.

⁷⁹ e. g. The entry for 577 marks three separate battles: Teloch, Baig, and Loch da Eices.

⁸⁰ Exodus 17: 9, “And Moses said unto Joshua: ‘Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.’” While the rod is raised, the Israelites are victorious.

⁸¹ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003) 244.

sues for peace before the battle is joined.⁸² Sulpicius Severus gives an example in Martin's life of God giving victory to his saint's side in battle, though this was not the intended message of the passage.

Unlike in Ita's case, there is no bloodshed because of Martin's actions, but he does give victory to his side. There is a penchant for pacifism in the Gallic saint that is entirely absent from Ita; though she is not leading the army herself or instigating conflict, she doesn't try to stop the battle but makes sure her people end up as victors. Ita has taken up the cause of her community, the Huacconnail clan, who have adopted her as their patron. She may have moved across the isle from her genetic family, but the monastery and the Christians around it have become her *familia*. Similarly, Columba is strongly linked to the Ui Neill clan, which is in fact the clan to which he is biologically tied, before he establishes his community on Iona. The Ui Neills were probably the most well-known and most powerful clan in Ireland at the time. Columba left the secular life and became a prolific establisher of monasteries and enlister of monks, but he still remained closely intertwined with his family. On one occasion, the battle of Miathi, Columba does act like Ita, and prays for the victory of a clan: "Now let us pray earnestly to the Lord for this people, and for the king Aidan... Now the barbarians are turned to flight."⁸³ This passage is highly reminiscent of the one from St. Ita's life, and probably served as a model.

In the case of both Ita and Columba, they act as a member of their respective *tuath*; while Ita defends her clan from approaching danger, as if mustering a *slogad*(army), in the form of her prayers, Columba's family sometimes acts on his behalf,

⁸² Martin, Chapter 4

⁸³ Columba, i.8.

to defend his honor as one of their own. Columba was involved in two separate battles. One began when he copied a book of another Saint without permission. When the other Saint, Finnian, took the matter to a local lord and that one sided against Columba, his clan rose up against the *ri*, Dermott, and defeated his forces in the battle of Cooldrevny in 561.⁸⁴ When Columba felt himself slighted or felt that his prestige or privileges were being questioned, he engages in battle much as the kings of Ireland would. Though Columba does not take up a sword and personally slay men, he uses the tools he has on hand, his powerful family and its army and the special power of his prayers. Battle broke out on account of a dispute over territory. Reminiscent of secular land and resource disputes, it provides more evidence of patron saints and their monasteries assuming the role of secular authorities in Ireland. It is especially pertinent that the saints use martial means to settle spiritual matters or at least matters that pertain to religious institutions. It would appear that monastic institutions were becoming secularized and intertwined with local clans; religious and secular powers rally to each other's defense.

However, this martial action does have consequences, for Columba is told that he must save as many souls as he sent to the after-life in the battle. Although there isn't any description of the battle or its circumstances in Adomnan's life, he does mention that a synod excommunicated Columba shortly after the battle.⁸⁵ We may attribute this to Adomnan's reluctance to engage Columba in such matters or the legend may be fictitious. Nevertheless, Columba was seen as involved in Cooldrevny before 911 CE, because this date marks the end of the Chronicle, in which he is noted as praying for the victory of the Ui Neill. The self-imposed exile to Iona, as penance, seems to be a form of

⁸⁴ *Chronicle*. "They conquered by means of the prayers of Colum Cille."

⁸⁵ Columba, iii.3

apologetics; a saint facilitating the demise of so many would indubitably strike Christians, particularly those familiar with other Saints' Lives and Christ's teachings, as bizarre and blasphemous. Nonetheless, to a strictly Irish audience, the penance that Columba undergoes would appear uncalled for given the frequency of such battles in like disputes. If we are to assume that Adomnan knew Columba had some part in Cooldreivy, his comment that the excommunication occurred "on a charge of offences that were trivial and very pardonable."⁸⁶ If they had followed Martin's model, Ita and Columba would have kept away from battles and settling matters with warfare. Admittedly, Benedict foretells how a king would succeed in war, but this is depicted as an act of prophecy.⁸⁷ In no way does he seem to influence God's designs, but just acts as a messenger to a supplicant.

CONCLUSION: Saint and *Ri*: Monastery and *Tuath*

The Irish saints take a much more active role in secular matters, cursing and blessing lords and their armies; they do not passively relay the will of God, but they either participate via miraculous deeds or intercede directly with the Lord. They do not even seem obligated to act in this way; at least Columba initiates the conflict, while Ita just manipulates the outcome in her people's interests. Ita becomes something of a *ri* among the Huaconnail, even going so far as to arrange a marriage between a carpenter and one of her sisters—whether an actual blood-relation or a nun, is unclear.⁸⁸ This indicates the beginnings of the process in which the local monastery became inextricably tied to the local ruling family. In the era following the death of Ita, presumably when her

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Benedict, Ch. 15.

⁸⁸ *Ita*, 3.7

vita was first recorded, monasteries were supplied by the local elites daughters and second sons. This allowed for the religious leadership to be closely monitored by the secular; both were members of a single *tuath* with the participation of a leading family of the area. This development is further compounded by the fact that bishops were relatively powerless in the beginnings of the Irish Church; their lives are infrequently recorded. Monasteries were the centers of the Church, and the saints who founded them became akin to the legendary heroes of pre-Christian Ireland. Their lives and stories were written down and remembered, and they became the patrons of various areas.

In contrast, it was the bishops who were most notable on the Continent, and bishoprics provided the logistical framework of the Church. A hierarchy was set up in the Continent to help prevent various families with strong secular connections from dominating ecclesiastical orders, whereas this was necessary and positively embraced in Ireland. Powerful families kept the Church going, with donations and manpower. Although Ita traveled from her home and established her monastery on the other side of the Isle, she was subsumed into the Huaconnaill clan, and she acted in their interest in the manner expected from a member of the *tuath*.

I think an appropriate comparisons to draw is one between the leaders of the tribes of Israel, like Abraham, and Irish monastic saints. The tribes of old had a patriarch that would lead them in worship and in interactions with God and also in battle. The tribes were almost miniature theocracies, a form of organization to which the Irish seem to feel a special connection. There is some literature that called the Irish a lost tribe and many instances of authors connecting their Celtic identity to an older Old Testament one.⁸⁹ The

⁸⁹ Edel, 116.

political structures found in Ancient Israel were, indeed, more similar to the Irish condition than the Roman Empire in the age of Jesus. In trying to accommodate a new religion it would seem that the Irish found particular resonance in the earlier writing of the Old Testament as opposed to the authors of lives on the continent who regularly saw saints as replicating the virtues of Christ.

The process of conversion to Christianity in Ireland confronted a problem; there was not the same infrastructure there as their counterparts on the Continent enjoyed thanks to the Roman Empire. Furthermore, there was a great deal of difficulty in establishing continuity between themselves and their saintly predecessors, like Martin, who operated in an entirely different social milieu according to the setting of his *vita*. Christianity found a foothold in Ireland because it could adapt to its new practitioners historical and social traditions. In so doing, it emphasized aspects of the Bible less prominent in the continental church and reshaped beliefs and traditions, thereby creating an apparently seamless fit between the Irish Context and the Christian Religion. Michael Richter succinctly puts it: “Christianity had been absorbed into Irish society while leaving much of [the society’s] basic fabric intact.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Michael Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* / Michael Richter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 30.

Fine, Family, and the Female

The last chapter concluded with images of Ita as not only the member of a *tuath* but also a leader or a *ri*. This was unusual by comparison with her continental predecessors and contemporaries who tried as far as possible to separate themselves from the secular world and the anxieties and responsibilities connected with it. In the last chapter I largely concentrate on the wider society, with interactions bridging different locations and showing the role of saints and monasteries as leaders themselves or closely linked to other leaders. Another important area of analysis is the role of family and femininity in the Church and how it reflected Irish cultural attitudes.

As was glossed earlier, the *fine* was one of the most important social groups; it was comprised of Irishmen who held a great-grandfather in common. This group would live and work on common land and appointed a leader to represent them in a wider social setting. Not only did the monastic communities, of which Ita was a part, begin to mimic the interactions of these families, with an abbot or abbess as the head, but hagiographies reflect the importance of these genealogical linkages. As in marriages, children could be given to the church to cement alliances or gain prestige for a certain family; bloodlines were still traced in the hagiographical texts, despite a saint's removal from their hereditary family and their abandonment of any role in continuing the line; miracles ensuring fertility and the salvation of past and future ancestors are frequent in the pages of *vitae*, as a reminder of the importance of the clan and of collective identity and well-being.

However, there is another element in the equation, as yet untouched upon: the question of Ita's gender. As a female saint, one would expect her to be cloistered and to concern herself much more with the mystical and personal side of sainthood, in the manner of Radegund. A female saint's miracles would primarily be confined by the monastery's walls. By comparison, female saints of Ireland were not only mobile, but it was necessary to travel in order to perform their duties in the early ages of the Irish Church. Furthermore, they frequently took up the role of abbot or even, in the case of Brigid, bishop, because they were the leaders and founders of monastic settlements; Ita's interactions with secular powers were similar to those of Columba. What appears to occur in Ireland is that a woman's sex becomes of secondary importance when she takes on leadership in the community as a religious figure, and when she becomes a nun, or in particular a founder of a community. This seems to be the result of the historical context, in which Christianity was just developing and women were becoming important apostles and practitioners of the faith. Religious communities were perceived as families, or *fine*, with the head, whether woman or man, receiving the same responsibilities as the *derb fine*.

Refusal of Marriage

One of the first interactions with her nuclear family narrated in Ita's Life is the circumstances surrounding her refusal to marry. Since she was a princess, especially, it would have been an important form of diplomacy to have Ita marry someone of high status. A politically savvy marriage could ensure peace with a neighboring clan or secure a strong ally. Furthermore, "women were an integral part of their kindreds and an

important tool in their strategies for economic well-being.”⁹¹ In fact, bridegrooms were accustomed to offering the bride’s family a bride price, as opposed to the continental custom of a dowry that would become more popular later among the Irish nobility. It is interesting to note that Ita’s family succumbed and allowed her to take up the veil. This is especially interesting if we treat, cautiously, the angelic intervention as literary tropes. So it would seem that the *derb-fine*, the leaders of a familial group, were ignoring fiscal and political benefits when allowing a daughter to remain a virgin.

Regarding the former motivation, women could become a material drain if they never married. When a young girl gained a husband, his house acquired a new member and another mouth to feed and back to clothe. A nubile maiden, whose bride-price was eagerly awaited, would incur no such benefit for her family if she were to enter a monastery. As a bride of Christ, the benefits endowed by her new husband, Christ, were primarily spiritual. For example, when Ita approached her parents, in hopes of consecrating herself to Christ her father was unmoveable: “But he in no way wished to give this permission; because a noble and powerful young man sought her from him, and this very much displeased her mother; and though others joined in asking him, he refused with an oath.”⁹² This type of reluctance by fathers was typical in hagiographies of women. Brigid escaped marriage by either pluck out her own eye or be horribly disfigured by an eye infection to be released from matrimonial duties. Muirchu notes the tale of Monesan, a princess who refused a suitor, and for this was tortured. After neither she nor her parents had succumbed, Patrick is called by the parents to intercede, and

⁹¹ Harrington, 131.

⁹² *Ita*, 1.4

rather than hand her over to a groom, he allows her to die and be venerated as a Saint.⁹³

Radegund was also forced to marry despite her objections, but her case is different because her parents were killed by Clothar, who then took her as his wife, a war-bride. I would still emphasize the model she puts forth of reluctance to marry. Even male saints incurred some parental or familial wrath when they ignored their worldly duties.

On the other hand, the structure of the Irish Church led some fathers or leaders of the *fine* to be persuaded to release their daughters in return for prestige. Indeed, as explained in the last chapter, monasteries had developed into quite powerful entities, closely linked to prominent families and wielding wealth and power in their own right. Being a nun became a respectable position for a woman, as she might win her family much prestige, either by becoming an abbess or by connecting her family to a possible political ally. Eventually families might place their women in important monasteries, hoping they would then rise to positions of authority and the monastery would come largely under the sway of that family: much as Kildare came under the thumb of the Ui Dunlaigne.

It would seem that marriage to God could be as beneficial as marriage to a worldly prince in Ireland. The only opportunity for a woman to accrue any monetary or social power was if she were the only surviving heir of her parents, a *banchombara* (female heir). As such she “assumed the legal role of the son and, on marriage, the legal role of the husband.”⁹⁴ This was in no way the ideal situation, so families would look for other opportunities to use their daughters as social currency. Especially when an alternative to getting rid of excess unmarried daughters to hand her over to a wealthy man

⁹³ Muirchu, Ch 27.

⁹⁴ Edel, 56.

as his *adaltrach*, or concubine. Though this was legal and fairly widespread, a woman's status might decline lower than that if she were a nun, "and her status would reflect at least indirectly upon her family."⁹⁵ Though Ita and Brigid did have ready suitors, all was not lost for a family if its daughters pursued a life in the Church. The advantages were particularly marked if a daughter rose to a position like Ita or Brigid, who caused their families to be mentioned and immortalized in their *vitae*, and who attained acclaim and influence that far surpassed what a woman might normally attain as a wife and mother. When angels finally come to Earth to convince, or more accurately order, Ita's father to give her freedom to take the veil, they assure him that, "She will serve God among another clan, and she will be the protectress of that clan."⁹⁶

Though Lives, like that of Saint Martin, are the most obvious models for Irish hagiography, Harrington argues that the real models for itinerant female saints, like Ita, are the Apocryphal Acts, which contain images and ideas of women as "a valuable resource in conversion and missionary activity rather than encouraging them to the patristic ideal of enclosed perfection."⁹⁷ Just as the Irish found more resonance in the Old Testament than the new, it appears that these texts, in particular the Acts of Rebecca, Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Thecla, enjoyed greater popularity and understanding in Ireland than the images of cloistered ascetics, like Radegund. During the 5th century, these texts were widely circulated in Western Europe and even Patrick himself seems to draw upon them as a model; Edel remarks that the Irish preserved the most apocryphal

⁹⁵ Harrington, 133.

⁹⁶ *Ita*, 1. 5.

⁹⁷ Harrington, 63.

texts in all of Western Europe.⁹⁸ This is perhaps one of the sources for the legitimization of the unusual behavior of Irish female saints.

Departure from Home

Not only does Ita leave her homeland in Eastern Ireland, but she remains relatively free to move about Ireland while an abbess. This is one of the most unusual aspects of Irish nuns: they are un-cloistered. Harrington asserts that this freedom of movement was normal practice for female saints of late antique Ireland (Samthann and Monenna, the other female saints whose Lives survive, both traveled across Ireland). It is difficult to say how widespread the ability of holy women was to leave the monastery, but the fact that all four surviving examples of Irish sanctity were mobile suggests that in general there were less stringent restrictions on the travel of female ecclesiastics in Ireland than elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, the same pattern is reflected in the unusual amount of travel by male monastics of the time; because monks and abbots were more highly regarded and their monasteries more important than episcopal dioceses, these monastics took up the role otherwise played by a traveling bishop, such as Martin or even Patrick. One needs only look to the life of Columba, who traveled up and down the East coast of Ireland establishing monasteries until he settled in Iona.

The writer of Saint Ita's Life attributes her initial departure from her homeland among the Huadesi to an angel messenger, who instructed that she "Leave this fatherland, and proceed to that region, which is called Hyconail, and you will remain in the West part of that region, near the foothills of Mount Luachra..."⁹⁹ According to Bitel, nuns

⁹⁸ Edel, 66; Harrington, 32.

⁹⁹ *Ita*, 2. 1.

more often than not were established in nearby monasteries, thereby creating close links to their birth and spiritual families. This would promote the practice of establishing close political allies with monastic communities through family ties. Radegund enters a monastery not far from her husband and family, despite wishing for no part in their secular world. In this way, Saint Monenna establishes herself near her homeland of Conaille and Brigid's seat in Kildare is near her ancestral home. Nonetheless, all four of the female Irish saints of the earliest era, Monenna, Samthann, Brigid, and Ita, traveled a great deal and established communities or temporarily lived in communities far from home.

On a different point, Bitel seeks to argue that nuns and women in general were contained to local areas, with travel an anathema, because of a fear of women escaping the confines of the monastery or of danger accosting them on the road.¹⁰⁰ An episode in the Life of Ita supports this, describing a former nun who engages in intercourse, leaves the monastery and leads a life of ill repute as a prostitute in the woods.¹⁰¹ Saint Ita even admonishes a fellow nun-traveler, "Handmaiden of God, your journey would not prosper, if the Bishop did not come with you, because many demons lay traps for by our sex."¹⁰² In these sections, Ita seems adhere to the religious writers of early medieval Ireland, like a group of Christians, who wanted to be more similar to the Church in Rome (thus, they were known as the *Romani*) who give the "only such exhortation to claustration in Ireland

¹⁰⁰ Lisa M. Bitel, ACLS Humanities E-Book (Organization), and American Council of Learned Societies, "Land of Women Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland," (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998) 7.

¹⁰¹ *Ita*, 5:3

¹⁰² *Ita*, 4:6.

before the eleventh century.”¹⁰³ Because the majority of Ita’s actions and travels so contradict these two episodes, I would argue that they were additions and modifications in one of the later manuscript, dating after the 11th century, which didn’t necessarily follow the original legends of Ita.

On the other hand, Ireland at the time of Ita’s life, the late 6th century, was quite culturally removed from contemporary Gaul. Less than a century and a half had passed since the commencement of Patrick’s mission in Ireland; Christianity had been adopted as the state religion of the Roman Empire nearly one hundred years before that and had gained a firm foothold in the empire for some time before Constantine converted. In Ireland, Christianity had no such strong roots and her Christian leaders were struggling to develop an organized Church, while their continental counterparts already an institutionally established ecclesiastical structure. Radegund took up the veil within the confines of a system already put in place. Ita physically had to establish her monastery and travel to receive her veil and communion; her mission was to establish a new Christian foothold in Western Ireland, the frontier of conversion. So, the movement of female saints around Ireland does not definitely connote a different cultural treatment of women and religious figures, but it would imply a difference in the stage of religious conversion. Perhaps this is why the Irish relied more on the themes of the Apocryphal Acts, while adhering to the structure of saint’s *vitae*. Though Radegund had to fight with a bishop to be veiled and build her convent, she did have the benefit of a religious community and structure within Poitiers. Ita was a pioneer and depicted as a holy woman building a community and a monastery from scratch in the wilderness of Western Ireland.

¹⁰³ Harrington, 95; *Hiberensis*, book 45, ch. 14 (H. Wasserchleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig, 1885)).

Miracles for the Outside

Female saints of Ireland were uncloistered and far less restricted in their interactions with the outside world and in the scope of their miracles than the women of the continent, who were confined by social mores and the rule of Caesarius of Arles.¹⁰⁴ The differences between Radegund and the somewhat contemporary Irish brides of Christ could be accounted for by the fact that Brigid and Ita were establishing structures of Christianity in their respective communities. Radegund could look to the nearby ecclesiastical hierarchy to oversee the community's spiritual needs, but Brigid and Ita acted as the main bulwarks of Christianity in their area. They did depend on priests for the administering of sacraments, but otherwise their movements were unhampered; their focus and their mission were to be shepherds for a flock without one. Radegund and her continental counterparts models of ascetic piety and humility, deriving saintly powers from their virtue, while Brigid and Ita were part of the process of teaching the Irish what piety and faith were and how they were practiced. Although at this time the number of non-believers was not large, Ita had to prove herself to the recently converted, just as the author of her *vita* strives to show how she outdid the wondrous folktales of druids and pagan magic.

Ita is unashamed to advertise her miracles or her saintly qualities. This is not to say that she performs in Homeric boasts, but she is quite removed from the Radegund in Venantius Severus' text, whose "miracles told the story that she herself would have kept hidden."¹⁰⁵ On the whole, the Life of Ita is far more full of the miraculous, in terms of

¹⁰⁴ *Regula Virginum*, 512 CE.

¹⁰⁵ *Vita Radegund*, 26.

deeds and actions, than that of Radegund, whose Life is far more detailed and personal. Fortunatus gives the reader a fairly good impression of personality and manners. In contrast, Ita's Life centers on her actions, while her personality is vague and somewhat inconsistent, wavering between confidence and humility. While Radegund's miracles seem a by-product of her extreme sanctity and devotion to God, Ita's sainthood is defined by her miracles. The author of Ita's Life seems to be following the tradition of Patrick, in which the saint has to prove his power and thus the power of their Lord through miracles and wonders. It is as if the Irish saints' audience need more tangible proof of saintly power than asceticism or persistent prayer. This may be a by-product of a narrative tradition in which action and magic were more important than character development; *The Colloquy of Old Men* and the *Cattle-Raid of Cualnge* have rather shallow characters, often characterized by their strength or their magical abilities, but an action packed narrative.

In conclusion, it seems that the historical context under which Ita, Brigid, and other early Irish female saints lived and worked allowed for their sanctity and role as holy women and founders of monasteries to circumvent what was normally expected of women. It is not, as Bitel argues, that these women become masculinized,¹⁰⁶ but the nature of their sex becomes subordinate to the nature of their vocation. This will become clearer in the discussion of saints' miracles in the following chapter, but, suffice to say, that regardless of gender, saints' miracles tend to be quite similar. When a young man questions Saint Luchtighernus' and Saint Lasreanus' intention to visit an "old woman", who is Ita, for her blessing, he is scolded by these two saints and must undergo penance

¹⁰⁶ Bitel cites Ita and Brigid as prime examples of this.

after realizing his error.¹⁰⁷ This episode expresses of Ita's preeminent position as a saint and prophetess and refutes any diminution of her standing because she is a woman.

The Familia

With regard to Ita's miracles, many of them reflect her role as head of the *familia* or *fine* that was represented by her religious community. It appears that, as the head of this religious community among the Huiconnail, she took on some of the duties of a *derb fine*. She seemed to take responsibility for arranging marriages and ensuring the continuance of families, typical responsibilities of family leaders. She represented her nuns to the outside community, punished their sins, and led them back to the community when they strayed.

One of the most marked examples of this is the story of Beoanus. He was an artisan or carpenter of sorts, who assisted Ita in constructing various buildings around the monastery. In return for his services, the saint offered him land and a wife, her own sister—whether a nun or her biological sister, it is unclear. In either case, Ita's action reflects the fact that she stood at the head of the family capable of arranging marriages, in the manner of the *derb fine*. This is an unusual action, especially since Beoanus “sought a wife for himself from Saint Ita, and a field for living.”¹⁰⁸ So even Beoanus, a lay figure saw Ita as the head of a family and community. At this point in time, there were no

¹⁰⁷ *Ita*, 5: 7

¹⁰⁸ *Ita*, 3: 7

continental equivalents; no female saint gives her sister, of any sort, as a bride, nor does a man seek a wife from her.

Furthermore, after resuscitating the man from death (an episode to be later recounted more fully), Ita made sure to make his wife fertile, because the man had died childless and without heir. Though Beonus exhibits no exceptional piety, he is granted these blessing from Ita for the services he renders to her; again, Ita seems to act as the leader of a secular community. She grants miracles, her form of currency, for actions that in this case are secular in nature. Beonus seems to be the recipient of gifts in order to secure his services in a community, which needed skilled men. Healing and restoration of fertility are not in themselves unusual. Curing miracles were common on the Continent and infertility was a universal concern. Even in the Bible women were purported to bear children after decades of barrenness, like Abraham's Sarah or Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. The presence of this type of cure in Ita's story reflects genealogical concerns that permeate her life, and those of her Irish counterparts.

The model Irish saint, Patrick, too, is preoccupied with heredity and progeny. The majority of his curses and blessings, primarily within the Lives, affect entire clans or families. When a king or leader slights Patrick or refuses him passage, the Saint curses him or prophesies that the man's progeny will lose their kingdom. Even worse, "... Saint Patrick said to the king, 'Because you opposed my teaching and were a stumbling block to me, though the days of your rule will be prolonged, no one of your seed shall be king after you for ever.'"¹⁰⁹ It seems a worse punishment than losing rule for yourself is depriving your successors of their rightful inheritance. Just as an individual was

¹⁰⁹ Muirchu, 22.

inextricably tied to his family, so to do curses affect not just the individual but also those to whom he is closely affiliated. By the same principle, the *derb fine* were obliged to pay for their members' crimes and conversely received communal prestige for their feats. By winning him fertility, Ita continues Beoanus's line; similarly, the descendents of the leader, who offered land to Ita, would receive prestige from Ita's monastery accepting the land. Though she refuses the clan while she was alive, after her death, the author tells us, the monastery did accept the land.¹¹⁰

On another occasion Ita exhibits compassion for family interests when she instructs her cousins to rescue their father from damnation by means of their own good deeds.¹¹¹ Gregory depicts a similar miracle, in which Benedict saves the souls of two nuns, who, while alive, had been unable to "curb their smart tongues."¹¹² Their nursemaid, who recognizes their condition and is aggrieved, is instructed by Benedict to offer oblations for the women's souls so that they will be "freed from excommunication." Gregory explains that Jesus' incarnation occurred for the "very purpose to impart to earthly man this heavenly power... of sitting in judgment even over spirits."¹¹³ Whereas Benedict saves two nuns who otherwise lived righteously, Ita saves a family member. While Gregory emphasizes Benedict's power and ability, the author of Ita's Life makes sure to emphasize the familial connection, though using a miracle modeled by a continental saint. I argue that his communicates the importance of ancestors. Also, note how preoccupied Irish hagiographers are with drawing long genealogical tables linking their saints and the characters in their Lives back to mythical warriors and kings. Ita

¹¹⁰ *Ita*, 2.2.

¹¹¹ *Ita*, 5. 5

¹¹² *Benedict*, 23.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

herself is said to be a princess of a family of the kings of Tara.¹¹⁴ Patrick's early converts are not just kings themselves but the possessors of bloodlines going back to legendary heroes. the salvation of a father was achieved by this sons. All of the above tendencies demonstrate both the Irish concern for their hereditary identity and also the burden of their ancestors' salvation, upon the arrival of Christianity. Just as curses could be passed down from ancestors, so Irishmen wished to save their ancestors from damnation by posthumously saving them.

Pelagian, Palladius, and Patrick

This type of miracle relates to a wider universal Christian problem during late antiquity of dealing with ancestors who died without baptism or salvation. However, the lives of the saints from the continent have a completely different attitude to their heathen or pagan predecessors. Saint Martin is primarily concerned with rooting out the paganism that still existed in Gaul. Thus, Sulpicius Severus depicts pagan gods and idols as demons.¹¹⁵ As I related in the section above, this difference in mentality could be attributed to the difference in the conversion process in Ireland and on the continent. Not only had Christianity become a state-sponsored religion, but anti-pagan legislation abounded by the end of the 4th century in continental Europe. The remaining hold-outs were depicted as obstinate heathens, undeserving of forgiveness and leniency; they broke laws of heaven and earth.

¹¹⁴ *Ita, I.I.* "from the seed of Feighlim Reachtmhuir, by whom all Ireland was ruled for many years in the greatest power in the royal town Themoria"

¹¹⁵ *Life of Martin*, 15. "unhallowed sacrificial rites were being performed, for it was the custom of the Gallic rustics, in their lamentable infatuation, to carry round their fields images of the demons covered with white veils."

On the other hand, Irishmen had relatively recently been introduced to Christianity, at least in an organized fashion around 450 CE. Therefore, Irish saints, in hagiography, approached conversion and salvation in an accommodating manner. They did not view “pagans or non-Christians (here seen rather as pre-Christians) as being in any sense under the devil’s sway.”¹¹⁶ Saints, like Patrick and Ita, perform miracles to convince even the most stubborn and hostile rulers to convert, in the former’s case, and make sure their family or community is safe in the faith of Christianity. Due to the close clan affiliations and the collective mentality within *fine*, Irishmen felt the obligation to help their brethren along and coerce them onto the right path. When relatives were too late to save themselves, the Irish felt obligated to seek their salvation. Just as the entire *fine* shouldered the burden of a member’s crime, so to did the family or community feel responsibility to a collective salvation. The Continental perspective was much more concerned with the individual; note Radegund’s solitariness and Martin’s blanket condemnation of pagans.

Before the arrival of Palladius in Ireland, on a mission from Pope Celestine, there is evidence of a Pelagian sentiment there: the belief that men and women could be saved by their noble spirit and actions without the intervention of divine grace. It is especially important to note the Pelagius himself was a Briton, a a fellow countryman of those who first introduced the Irish to Christianity. Thus, it would make sense that the earliest interpretations of Christianity in Ireland, around the 420s CE, would be influenced by the contemporary issues on their neighboring Island. Charles-Edwards makes the case that Celestine worried over the nature of the Irish Church that was developing in the distant

¹¹⁶ Stancliffe, 104.

Christian outpost, especially under the leadership of heretical Pelagian Britons, and so sent Palladius not only to serve as the first bishop of Ireland, but also to assure the Irish adherence to orthodoxy.¹¹⁷ This doctrine was soon marked as heresy by the Church, but the miracles of Irish saints continue to show Pelagian elements long after the doctrine's official condemnation.

Pelagius could be construed as offering an opportunity for salvation that was impossible otherwise; the Irish had a chance to save their souls through righteous deeds without the necessity of divine grace or aid. Pelagius describes how Job could be “a man of the Gospel before the Gospel was known.”¹¹⁸ This was perhaps part of the reason that Irish ancestors were said to prophesy the coming of Christianity, and why they “viewed their past as parallel to the Jewish past of the Old Testament period.”¹¹⁹ Just as the Israelites and those patriarchs had not received the Gospel but were undoubtedly in heaven, according to Pelagius, the good and noble men of Irish past could have attained salvation without encountering Christianity. If they had lived according to the prescriptions of Christ and his Doctrine, which they did naturally, they could be enjoying heaven. Irishmen felt responsibility for their ancestor's souls particularly keenly. The Irish seem inclined to legitimize their immortal past rather than erase it and start anew, showing no hesitation in advertising great ancestors and legends of the past instead of casting them off as heathen and devil worshippers.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Charles Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 205.

¹¹⁸ Charles Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 208 and Pelagius, *Ad Demetriadem*

¹¹⁹ Stancliffe, 104.

¹²⁰ The next chapter will talk more about the legitimization of the legendary past in regards to miracles' folk motifs.

Conclusion

This chapter has been primarily concerned with the importance of the family and the *fine* that reverberates in the life of Ita. Monastic communities are often referred to as *familiae*, but the Irish Church's version reflects some of the traditions and social customs distinct to that Island and Celtic culture. Women's refusal of marriage, a common trope in all hagiographical sources, turns into a political benefit when a woman became the bride of Christ, her family's relationship to her monastic community becomes akin to the bond formed, by means of a secular marriage, with another *fine* or *tuath*. The necessity of a leader for a community, or family, was reflected by the ability of women to take up the role as of a *derb fine* to her religious sisters and daughters. Her femininity only became an issue after the age of Ita and Brigid, when the Church was more established and anxiety from the continent over uncloistered women became a more prevalent attitude. Due to the particular Irish historical context and culture, a prevailing concern with ancestors and the legendary past shines through early Irish hagiographies.

The Prophet and the *Fil*

“Patrick asked if the King of heaven and earth wished him to listen to the stories of the Fian. ‘Beloved holy cleric,’ the angels said, ‘because of forgetfulness and loss of memory these old warriors can only tell you a third of their stories. Make sure that what they say is written on poets’ tablets and in the words of the learned for gatherings of people and noblemen in times to come will be delighted to listen to those stories.” – The Colloquy of the Old Men¹²¹

The excerpt above is from a collection of folk tales recorded in the late 12th century. It narrates a fantastical tale of Saint Patrick, who encounters and travels with the Fian, a collection of legendary heroes and warriors. While not explicitly pertinent to Saint Ita’s Life, I would hazard the suggestion that it is indicative of the Irish mentality that influences the record of Kileedy’s patroness.

I have talked about the importance of familial blood-lines and ancestors, but I would also like to emphasize the importance of legends and tales that make accessible the distant past. Many *tuatha* claim direct descent from warriors in these tales; ancient rivalries are rooted in these tales; they supply the etiology of various place names and customs. If these tales were to be discounted as demonic allusions and pagan or sinful, Irish culture would be cast adrift and rootless. For this reason, Irishmen began a process of accommodating the Irish historical narrative to Christianity.

As addressed in my first chapter, there is always a problem for historians in using these stories, because they were not recorded until after the arrival of Christianity and Latin, and are therefore somewhat suspect, but they are all that is available. These stories

¹²¹ Maurice Harmon and Sean O Coileain. *The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland : A New Translation of Acallam Na Senorach* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009) 16.

were being recorded around the same time that the saints' *vitae* were being composed and transcribed, so, since the community that produced literature, ecclesiastical and secular, was so interconnected in Irish society at the time,¹²² it is likely that there was some sort of conversation between the two genres. This is most evident in the *Colloquy*, but some interaction is likely between texts like the *Cattle Drive of the Cualnge* and the *Life of Saint Ita*.

Within Ita's Life there are a multitude of miracles, each deserving individualized scrutiny, but, in a thesis, some selectivity is inevitable. It would be illuminating to examine the connection between Beonau's re-capitulation and those found as miracles wrought by druids.¹²³ When Ita grants that a man's "foals this year be just as [he] wish,"¹²⁴ we might talk about the prominence of natural miracles in Irish hagiography, which Stancliffe remarks relates to the influence of traditional folk-lore.¹²⁵ However, following the pattern of the past two chapters, I will seek to show how Ita has taken up yet another role from traditional Irish society: the druid or *fil*, poet. The miracles discussed in the following pages will pertain to Ita's title and achievements as a prophet. As we will see, this term takes on a number of unexpected definitions and interpretations, but amounts to an illustration of how the Irish past was reformed and merged with a Christian model to create a distinct character.

When the *fil* and druid of folklore became saints and prophets, there arose a "close bond which is developed between the poetic and ecclesiastical classes in early

¹²² Maire Ní Mhaonaigh, "The literature of medieval Ireland, 800-1200: from the Vikings to the Normans," *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 34.

¹²³ Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969) E34

¹²⁴ *Ita*, 5.2.

¹²⁵ Stancliffe, 89.

Christian Irish society.”¹²⁶ So, men, who had once remembered the *Tain*, were now learning Latin and recording hagiographical works. There was a great intermingling of these cultures, that of Christian and traditional Irish, to the point that there was little anxiety about reading “pagan” or apocryphal texts or about faith being threatened by study of the classics.¹²⁷ Since studying these two types of literatures and traditions went hand-in-hand, it is natural that the two would influence each other in various genres of literature. “As the work of numerous students of oral tradition has amply demonstrated, the existence of such pervasively established patterns within a body of early literature can be most reasonably explained if we assume the continuation into a new medium of the narrative patterns permeating the oral tradition which preceded, and co-existed with, the literary tradition.”¹²⁸

Miracles of prophecy, and references to this gift, are ubiquitous in the Life of Ita. She is a prophetess and seer; this is the manifestation of God’s grace and her individual holiness. Irish hagiographers drew from biblical and continental hagiographical sources for models of sainthood. These texts often characterize the saint as a prophet and contain miracles of prophecy, which encompass foretelling of coming events and having a share of the omniscient knowledge of God. It appears, because of the frequency with which Irish saints’ miracles are labeled as prophetic, that Irishmen had a special affinity for such actions. I will argue that this was because of a cultural tradition of characters, druid and *fil*, that performed similar marvels in the traditional legendary tales that had been passed

¹²⁶ Joseph F. Nagy, “Close Encounters of the Traditional Kind in Medieval Irish Literature,” *Celtic Folklore and Christianity : Studies in Memory of William W. Heist*, eds. William W. Heist and Patrick K. Ford (Santa Barbara [Los Angeles]: McNally and Loftin ;Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore & Mythology, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983) 142.

¹²⁷ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature*, (Dublin ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2009) 14.

¹²⁸ Nagy, 136.

down orally for generations. Although some of these stories may be fictional, it is also important to recall that the druid was also a real figure, who did not just exist in the pages and verses of poets.

The following few sections will outline the tradition of prophesy in the Christian tradition, the pre-Christian Irish tradition and folk-lore, and the Christian Irish exempla as found in the Lives of other Irish saints. The last section draws out specific examples from Ita's Life in order to elucidate how she fits into all three.

Christian Precedent: Bible and Benedict

Prophecy and visions are quite common throughout the Christian narrative. Biblical and hagiographical tales exhibit foresight and divine Knowledge quite often, especially in regards to the coming of the Messiah. We might note that her role as prophet aligns Ita, again, with characters from the Old Testament. There are legends of Irishmen foretelling the coming of Christianity—of course, this must be a post factum creation—in the same way that Old Testament brethren allegedly foretold Christ. There were also prophets who admonished their communities to right their devilish ways or suffer divine retribution; the role of the prophet/prophetess was something that the Irish could identify with and seemed to find commonalities between their own cultural typologies and that of Christianity and the Bible.

In the bible, prophets receive direct messages from God. For example, “The word of the LORD came to Elijah...”¹²⁹ This demonstrates how the prophets of the Old Testament are largely antennae for God and are granted this boon in return for their faith.

¹²⁹ 1 Kings 17:2

Sometimes prophets seem to be radio transmitters with God as the broadcaster. Again and again, there are passages, like the one above, in which a patriarch is granted divine knowledge to share with the Israelites or another people. This Old Testament emphasis on prophets, prophecy, and their importance to their community, was significant for the Irish understanding of Christianity, and was undoubtedly an influence on its presence in Irish hagiography.

However, more importantly, we must look at models for prophecy and seers in hagiographical sources on the Continent, as this is the tradition with which the Irish wish to associate themselves. Though there are instances of other saints foretelling coming events and seeing things in the present time that were either hidden or far away, Saint Benedict provided a special and influential model.¹³⁰ His gift of prophecy is by no means the most important of Benedict's saintly attributes, but his Life is one of the few that thoroughly address this type of miracle; Gregory the Great cites him to exemplify this particular power in his *Dialogues*. Many saints before and after Benedict (b. circa 480) are said to have prophetic powers, including both Martin and Radegund. But because Benedict was credited with quite a few miracles of prophecy, Gregory the Great, his hagiographer, chose his life as an opportunity to explain the mechanics of this type of Grace. Benedict is better known as the founder of the Benedictine Order of monks; he established a set of rules for men to follow in order to achieve the ideal ascetic life. Nonetheless, his Life, as told in the *Dialogues*, is important to understanding prophecy and its earlier manifestations in continental lives.

¹³⁰ See Chapter 1

Gregory's understanding of Benedict's gift was that the man had become connected to God by means of his piety and his one-ness with the Lord; he cites First Corinthians, "The man who unites himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with him."¹³¹ Because of this, he can share the knowledge and sight of God. His miracles of prophecy may refer to great events, like the crumbling of Rome,¹³² or more provincial concerns, like the salvation of two nuns.¹³³ Martin enjoys a similar ability: "He also foretold, long before hand, to this same Maximus [a contemporary Gallic usurper] that if he made an expedition into Italy, where he was wanting to go... he could count on being victorious at the first onset, but also on utter destruction a little later. And this we saw come to pass."¹³⁴ Martin and Benedict give rather straightforward messages to the men, who wish to know their future, and there is no sense that these outcomes are contingent on anything. What they foresee occurs. Just as God's omniscience is undeniable, so too are the visions and knowledge he grants to the saints.

Like many continental saints of the late antique period, Benedict performed miracles of prophecy; the saints of Ireland follow in his and other saints' footsteps. However, the Lives of Benedict, and Martin and Radegund do not put particular emphasis on miracles of prophecy. It would be more appropriate to say that prophecy is part of being a saint, just another power acquired by their extreme piety. At least this appears to be the perspective of the authors of the three saints' *vitae* I just mentioned. On the other hand, for the Irish saints, their miracles and saintliness depend largely on this gift of prophecy.

¹³¹ Benedict, 16.

¹³² Benedict, 15.

¹³³ Benedict, 23. More details of this miracle are in the previous chapter.

¹³⁴ Martin, 22.

Filid and Folklore: Prophets

The seer was not just an icon of folklore, but an integral part of pre-Christian Irish and Celtic society. Even Julius Caesar in his account of interactions with the Gallic Celts attributes a central importance to the figure of the druid.¹³⁵ Like the *ri* or the *derb fine*, the *file/drai*, which both fall under the anglicized term, druid, was a part of the social hierarchy. Whereas the former two were primarily occupied with political and familial concerns, respectively, the “the *fili* [was] a poet , but also a scholar and guardian of traditional knowledge; he [was] especially a prophet and a seer and [could] wield supernatural powers.”¹³⁶ Celtic society endowed these men, and sometimes women, with special capabilities and duties that set them apart from the rest of society and also supplied them with the authority of rulers in certain contexts.

Though popular culture has depicted druids as pagan priests and wizards, like Merlin, the images we get from Irish writers or those who record orally transmitted legends paint a picture of druids as members of a social network, largely lacking any link to an organized religion. Though they do sometimes make sacrifices, we have very little knowledge of any type of pagan belief system; instead of priests to gods and spirits, it seems that these druids were preservers and protectors of culture and identity. They transmitted traditional tales learnt from their predecessors, they preserved genealogies, and they interacted with the Otherworld and shades of ancestors. It was this interaction,

¹³⁵ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, ed. Emmanuel Hoffman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898) vi.13: “magnoque hi sunt apud eos honore...”

¹³⁶ Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966) 21.

which gave them otherworldly powers. This last attribute is probably the least significant of their roles. I would argue that the Irish saw druids as sources of knowledge much more than of miracles.

From *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnge*, Fedelm, “the prophetess of Connaught”, is a apt example of the pre-Christian, Irish version of prophecy; her example will be even more appropriate when we look at Ita’s prophetic abilities at the end of this chapter. Queen Medb, who is planning the titular raid, approaches Fedelm to “look for [her] how it will be with [her] hosting.”¹³⁷ The queen is forced to look for a good omen, because the poet and druid attendants of her assembled lords advise delaying the march until a favorable omen is ensured. According to legends, rulers were evidently quite dependent on these wise men and women. Though Fedelm foresees doom in a vision of red, Medb continues on her quest and is, as foretold, met with disaster and defeat. Besides demonstrating the importance of seers and druids, this passage also illustrates the mechanics of prophecy. Fedelm was taught how to prophesy in Scotland; this ability was not innate. This follows the evidence that druids would be trained for their duties in society; they were not, like saints, divinely inspired with this ability.

Though Irish *vitae* do not have saints trained to foretell the future, the Christian prophets, like Fedelm and her fellow *filid* and druids, advise rulers. Even the druids who served the kings hostile to Patrick are depicted as protecting the traditional way of life and their ruler’s interests: at Loegaire’s summons, his attending *magi*, which seems to be the Latin term used for druids in Christian sources, attack and duel Patrick.¹³⁸ It is for their king that they work miracles and contend with Patrick. Though their magic may be

¹³⁷ L. Winifred Faraday, *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnge (Tain Bo Cuailnge)* (Grimm Library, London: Nutt, 1904) 3.

¹³⁸ Muirchu, 18.

harsher and more dangerous than the saints', the Irish hagiographer does not call them demons or deny their mystical powers, but instead he demonstrates the surpassing might and beneficence of Christianity.

IRISH Christian MODELS: Columba

“...Along with the miracles that, by the gift of God, this man of the Lord performed while he lived in mortal flesh, he began from his youthful years to be strong also in the spirit of prophecy; to foretell future events; to declare absent things to those present, because although absent in the body he was present in spirit, and able to observe what took place far away. For according to the words of Paul, ‘he who clings to the Lord is one spirit’ [Cor. 6:15]... with divine favour the scope of his mind was miraculously enlarged, and he saw plainly, and contemplated, even the whole world as it were caught up in one ray of the sun.”¹³⁹

Saint Columba (b. 520 CE) has more in common with Ita than Patrick and Brigid. All four are distinctively Irish and their Lives have a similar flavor, but Ita and Columba appear to have been active in approximately the same period and among similar types of people. Ita's life could even seem to be a simplified version of Columba's, whose Life is much richer in detail and miracle stories. Ita is represented as a prophetess, this being the most important or utilized aspect of her sainthood. As seen in the quotation above, Columba is similarly characterized; most of the miracles in the second book of his life are accompanied by prophecy. Much of his wonder working includes some form of foretelling or otherworldly knowledge.

¹³⁹ Columba, i.1

As with Benedict, prophecy isn't the most important attribute of Columba. But it is the most important in comparing him to Ita. Though Columba seems to be more important as a community leader than a miracle worker, his powers often seem to derive from his prophet status, as do Ita's. Though Patrick and Brigid do demonstrate similar miracles, Columba and Ita seem to embody more precisely the process of translating the role of *fil* and druid to that of the saint/prophet.

The prophetic powers of Irish saints differ from those attributed to saints in other traditions; they are able to work miracles that have no real parallel in the Lives of continental saints like Benedict. While Benedict and Radegund prophesy "in so far as they are one with Him"¹⁴⁰, Ita and Columba both seem to be blessed with a gift of the title prophet by God's Grace. As a prophet, Ita raises the dead, advises rulers and other figures, foresees or knows the truth of what is happening or will happen, and is responsible for a community. It would seem as though Irishmen saw a connection between the *fil* and the prophet of the biblical and hagiographical tradition, particularly as depicted in *The Dialogues* by Gregory, which is quite similar to Adamnan's explanation of Columba's abilities,¹⁴¹ and recast the typical Christian saint in the mould of a pre-Christian social institution. To the Irish elite, or persons acquainted with the Finnian cycle or traditional myths/epics of the oral tradition, a resuscitation performed by a prophet would seem quite unproblematic.

Ita as Saint and Seer:

¹⁴⁰ *Benedict*, 40.

¹⁴¹ See the quotation at the beginning of this section.

In what follows, I will primarily consider examples of Ita's miracles, particularly those that are credited to her role as a prophet. I will seek to demonstrate the similarities those miracles bear to the accounts of continental hagiographers, who created the tradition the author of Ita's Life tries to follow, as well as the differences and nuances created in the Irish Church to accommodate Irish cultural institutions and as the result of a cultural translation process. Whether intended or not, the author of Ita's Life had the effect of creating a figure, who incorporated the Irish of her own community into the greater Christian one by of impressing them with her knowledge and prophetic ability.

“God bestowed so great a gift of prophecy ,”¹⁴² which manifests itself in the same way as any other form of perception. There is no evidence that she was given intermittent views into the knowledge of God, but she could summon it whenever she desired. Martin may “know” things and have occasions of prophecy, but he is not heralded as a prophet, which in the Irish tradition seems to encompass foresight and divine knowledge that can be utilized at will. The insistence, with which Ita is entitled prophet is the strongest indication of a difference from other hagiographical sources. As with Columba, Ita's various feats are derived from her gift of prophecy.

On the other hand, Ita does not need training to possess the extra-fore-sight, like Fedelm and druids or *fil*. She is given a gift from the Christian God at birth. Furthermore, just as Benedict is revered because “all realized that nothing could be kept secret from heir holy abbot, since he could hear even the unspoken sentiments of the heart,”¹⁴³ people are wary and respectful of Ita's prophetic knowledge: a nun who had sinned, “knowing that Saint Ita was a prophetess concerning things past and future, confessed the truth of

¹⁴² *Ita*, 3.1

¹⁴³ Benedict, 20.

the matter.”¹⁴⁴ Ita’s and Benedict’s power to prophetically know and see is portrayed as a preventer of sin, especially within their own communities. When people realize that the leader of their community can see their sins as plainly as their faces, they are obliged to confess or refrain from any sinful act. However, the style in which she is depicted using this power is much more reminiscent of the folk or secular seers of Ireland than the saints in older hagiography. She and Columba are visited by rulers for the sake of their ability to tell the future fates of rulers and nations.

The most typical type of prophecy which Ita performs involves foreseeing the future, which she is able to do without external aid or even prayer. The arrival of visitors is a common trope within hagiographical texts, as it is in the *Life of Ita*. Radegund is particularly notable for her treatment of visitors, for “if she received a report that any of God's servants was on his way to see her, either of his own accord or by invitation, she felt full of celestial joy.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, when a group of clerics are on their way to visit the saint, the “blessed Virgin Ita indicated to her people their arrival prophetically, and predicted it. And when they were arriving at that place, the handmaiden of the Lord, rejoicing, received them.”¹⁴⁶ In both cases we see that these ascetic saints are thrilled to have visitors, but Ita learns of it prophetically, while Radegund receives notice of a more worldly nature. Just like Ita, Columba performs the same kind of prophecy, especially while he is on Iona.¹⁴⁷ This type of miracle usually allows time for the community to ready food and lodging and impresses visitors with the saint’s power. They are greeted by a saint, who was able to foreknow their coming. Furthermore, the motif of foreseeing

¹⁴⁴ *Ita*, 3.5.

¹⁴⁵ Radegund, 8.

¹⁴⁶ *Ita*, 4. 2

¹⁴⁷ Columba, i.4. “Of the arrival of the abbot Saint Cainnech, which Saint Columba had prophetically foretold.”

visitors might also indicate how isolated these early Irish communities could be; Ita and Columba both founded their respective monasteries in foreign lands, and travel from *tuath* to *tuath* or community to community was irregular given how insular social groups were.

Another interesting demonstration of Ita's prophetic power, is when she foresees that one brother will kill another. This fratricide is detestable, but she also can see that this man will eventually achieve salvation through penance.¹⁴⁸ It is odd that Ita does not, or possibly cannot, stop the deed from occurring. Benedict foretells evil events, like the fall of Rome and Totila's eventual defeat.¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, I would like to recall how he saved the two nuns from excommunication; this type of prophecy prevents men and women from committing a crime or sin. Martin also uses his abilities to stop sinful actions, committed intentionally or not, before they condemn the practitioner.¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, Ita, like Fidelm, sees clearly what will happen, but she can only help to rectify its consequences after it has taken place. This seems to be an instance Irish influencing Christian understanding of miracles. The Irish Christian prophet is given knowledge of what will happen, and then they can advise how to go through penance. Another example I have looked at earlier is the posthumous salvation of Ita's uncle; Irish saints often perform miracles that deal with deeds done instead of interrupting events in progress. This parallels the process of legitimizing the pagan past; in both cases the Irish have no qualms about righting what has already occurred.

¹⁴⁸ *Ita*, 6.1

¹⁴⁹ Benedict, 15.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, 11. Filled with suspicion and unease, Martin discontinues the veneration of martyrs, who are uncovered to be thieves.

Ita's power to see events presently occurring or already performed that she can have no direct knowledge of deeds is a rather different twist on prophecy. This is less like prophecy and more like a gift of knowledge, but the hagiographer uses the same term for both,¹⁵¹ so we must assume that he and his contemporaries conceived of these things as identical or closely connected. Martin, for one, has similar powers, such as when he knows that a tomb, worshipped as the site of a martyr's internment, is not as it seems.¹⁵² After praying to God to reveal to him the truth, he discovers that the corpse is that of a thief, by conversing with the spirit of the man (reminiscent of some druid's and heroes' conversations with spirits from the Otherworld—the *Colloquy of the Ancients* is based around Patrick receiving knowledge from resurrected heroes of the past). However, he is not called a prophet because of this, nor does the hagiographer interpret this as prophecy. Martin has the knowledge because he prays for it and is such a holy man and so close to God that his request is granted.

The most common circumstances for this type of vision involve Ita seeing the crimes of her *familia* or her fellow nuns who have strayed from their monastic vows. In the case of Ita's nuns, the crime normally involves an act of sexual intercourse¹⁵³ and, on one occasion, theft.¹⁵⁴ In one case, Ita calls the woman in, says that she knows she has sinned, and proceeds urge her to penance: ““Yesterday, you fornicated in that place, didn't you, and didn't this happen to you?”” And immediately that one, knowing that Saint Ita was a prophetess concerning things past and future, confessed the truth of the matter,

¹⁵¹ The author uses forms of *scire* (to know) and of *prophetia* interchangeably to describe Ita's foresight and omniscience.

¹⁵² Martin, 14

¹⁵³ Ita, 3.5; Ibid, 3.6; Ibid, 6.3.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.3

and doing penitence according to the order of Saint Ita, she was cured.”¹⁵⁵ Martin, and Benedict both possess this prophetic ability to know the truth of events. This divine inspiration agrees with Gregory’s interpretation of prophetic miracles that it is a result of their connection with God that saints share some of his divine omniscience.

Ita foresees how far the sinner has strayed and determines if she can be reintegrated and saved. Most of the time the woman will undergo penance and be part of the community once again. One instance even has a nun, who had illicitly begotten a daughter, return to Ita’s community and after “undergoing worthy penitence, remained ever in sanctity up to her death with her daughter in the monastery of most pious Virgin Ita.”¹⁵⁶ Ita informs her community of sins being committed and ferrets out the sinner so as to ensure the purity of her *familia* and the salvation of the men and women, for whom she is responsible, as the community’s leader. In this way, she has a similar purpose to mainstream Christian tradition, whether like Gideon in Genesis, or Martin in Gaul. Ita tries to ensure that her community might attain righteousness and uses her Gift as a tool to do so.

An unusual example of her pursuit of salvation is the occasion when she aids her cousins to save their father, a recently deceased sinner, from damnation.¹⁵⁷ discussed in the previous chapter on familial obligations and connections, this miracle parallels events in the folklore. Part of Ita’s prophetic abilities seem to stretch all the way into the after life, similar to the legendary Otherworld, the interaction with which gives many heroes

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 3.5.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.3.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 5.5.

and seers their miraculous abilities. One of the heroes of the Finian cycle of Irish legend, Finn mac Cumail, “the classic figure of the outsider poet,” gets his abilities as a poet and seer, a *fil*, from his contact with this Otherworld.¹⁵⁸ As the Christianized *filid*, Irish saints interacted with the souls in heaven or hell, and this gave them some of their prophetic abilities. Ita was able to see into hell and thus perceive how to free her uncle from damnation. While Martin and Benedict both have the power to speak with the deceased, folk tradition also gives credence to Ita’s abilities as a prophet and as a connection to the spiritual realm.

Conclusion

Ita was a saint, whose prophetic powers receive special emphasis. Just as Finn was a hero and also a prophet. Saints of Ireland usurped the duties of the *fil* in society and finds expression in the hagiographical texts that commemorate them. Through the Life of Ita, we can gain an insight into how folk-themes and motifs survived. This is not to say that paganism survived, or Irishmen sought to hold onto a belief in a Celtic pantheon, thinly disguised by saintly robes or under a Christian veneer. This would have seemed outrageous to Irishmen who were well versed in texts that described how, “Quite often, the devil, resorting to a thousand malicious tricks to score off the holy man, would thrust himself upon him under forms of utmost diversity. Sometimes he presented himself with features disguised to resemble Jupiter, very frequently Mercury, often even Venus or Minerva.”¹⁵⁹ Christianity held rigorously to a belief in monotheism and the blasphemous and damnable nature of other religions. When Patrick asks the leader of the Fiana, Cailte,

¹⁵⁸ Bhrolchain, 138-9.

¹⁵⁹ Martin, 23.

whether they knew why they were alive again and is met with ignorance, he replies “So that you may dedicate yourselves to the gospel of the King of heaven and earth.”¹⁶⁰

Patrick not only saves the souls of long-dead men, but also embodies the legitimization of pagan folk-lore in a Christian context.

It is more likely that the conception of spiritual power and miracles of the legendary past informed the Lives of saints; the conceptualization of miracles was colored by the magic of *fil* and other Celtic legends. The stories of Christian miracles and God’s wondrous acts were consumed by Irish converts and repeated and reinterpreted for their Irish listeners in recognizable forms. On the other hand, the legends handed down are narratives for the most part completely devoid of religion; the tales give no indication of the doctrine ancient Celts followed or what comprised their beliefs.¹⁶¹ Either Christians who recorded the stories edited out questionable material, or that aspect of Irish culture was not nearly as important as the narrative of ancestral deeds and etiological vignettes. Even within the Lives of the Irish saints, we are rarely confronted with lengthy expositions on doctrine and beliefs. Ita’s Life is more centered on her deeds and actions than her characteristics and personality. For example, we know that various figures undergo penance, but we are left completely ignorant of what this consists. Either it is omitted because the reader was expected to know the penitential practices and an explanation would be redundant, or, as I believe, Irishmen favored a story over a sermon.

¹⁶⁰ Harmon, 18.

¹⁶¹ Knott and Murphy, 106.

Conclusion: The Re-Capitulation

My Study has shown that Ita and her fellow Irish Saints have taken up the duties and attributes of many dominant figures of pre-Christian Celtic society: *derb fine*, *ri*, and *fil*. This is not a form of subversion, but a method of translation. Irishmen gathered from the teachings of Christianity and from the hagiographical documents that came to them from Britain and the Continent a sense of what saints were and how Christianity operated. When the models seemed alien, Irishmen reinterpreted them in familiar terms. Saints as monastic leaders governed their family like a *derb fine*; religious leaders had to interact and treat with secular rulers to survive in Ireland, like a *ri*; saints and clerics were responsible for carrying on traditions and exhibited miraculous markers of otherworldly or divine contact, like the druid or *fil*.

On the Continent the institutional church and religious practices were well established; the Irish were forced to play a bit of catch-up. Attempts to imitate literary forms, like hagiographical writing, produced quite distinct results. For, not only was Ireland based on a different social and political structure than the Continent, which had the Roman Empire to thank for its bureaucracy, but she was late to receive the doctrine. So while the Lives of Benedict and Radegund describe a setting of relative ecclesiastical stability, the contemporary Irish Lives depicted the foundations of the Christian institution in Ireland. This undoubtedly contributed to the fact that pre-Christian Ireland was depicted as a seamless and benign precursor to Christianity and its beliefs. Thus, a two-fold translation was taking place in pre-Medieval Ireland: a translation of both time

and place. On the one hand, Irish Hagiography was distinct because it was created at the early stages of the Irish Church's development, while the continental examples, on-hand and being created contemporaneously, were set within a society with an established Church; on the other hand, Ireland's history, culture, and traditions were unique to Ireland, so Christianity had to accommodate Eire and the faithfulness to her past.

Given all of this, a question still looms: How is Ita important to record of the rise of Christianity in Ireland? I have demonstrated how in so many ways she followed the examples of Patrick, Brigid, and Columba, the three most popular of the early Irish saints. This would support earlier historians' practice of using her Life to illustrate larger themes. One distinct aspect about Ita is the emphasis on her identity as a prophet. No less than 21 times is a word with the root *proph-* used in reference to Ita, and her life is only six chapters long. Though her gift is bestowed by God, according to the continental Christian model, and most of her miracles aren't outrageously folk-ish, like Brigid's, the role and position she assumes within her community is more reminiscent of the images of the druid or *fil* than the role of any other Irish saint. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons her Life survived; she exhibits an aspect of the conversion process in a way that is absent in any other saint's Life.

This is the type of information that can be squeezed out of primary sources, even those that are obscure, short, or belonging to an extremely stylized genre. Historians and classicists alike miss an opportunity for greater understanding when primary sources are left untapped. Even Ita's Life has yet more to reveal. For example, the relationship to Briton and her saints is an area untouched upon in this work. To compare Ita to a similarly obscure female saint in Britain would be illuminating in light of the fact that

interactions with Britain were at the beginning of the conversion process in Ireland. Also, because these two peoples have such a similar origin, it might even further highlight the distinct aspects of the Irish Church.

I began this project in the hopes of better understanding how Ireland became Catholic Ireland. It is easy to see how the love of heroes in legends was transferred to passionate adoration of saints, especially since they took on so many aspects of their forerunners. Furthermore, Christianity in Ireland developed in such a way that it almost seemed inevitable, although this may be an impression created by expert story-tellers, who manipulated their own past to create seamless narrative in response to Christianity's imminent triumph. They created tales that portrayed Irish as Israelites, old heroes coming back to be baptized, and seers who prophesied the coming of the Gospel. This process was not confined to literature and the image it communicated. In a similar way the structure of the church and its maintenance was informed by the extant social structures and traditions in Ireland. What I have come to realize is that Irish Christianity, and eventually Catholicism, flourished not only because of Christian adaptability, but also because an Irish stubbornness and reluctance to forsake their past.

The author of Ita's *vita* concludes his work with an anxiety that the patroness of the Huaconnail would be overshadowed and even forgotten. Much as Ita re-capitulated Beoanus and gave him hope for a future, I hope that my translation of her Life and the accompanying analysis of her importance to the historiography of the Early Irish Church has returned to her authority, importance, and an opening for a future in the pages of history and Christian narrative.

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