

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 15

JULIA M. H. SMITH

RELICS AND THE INSULAR WORLD,  
*c.* 600–*c.* 800



HUGHES HALL  
&  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hughes Hall was founded in 1885 to take women graduating from the universities and give them a one year training to become teachers. As the first college in Cambridge specifically for graduates it broke new ground. Originally called the Cambridge Training College (CTC) it was re-named in 1948 in honour of its first Principal, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes, who had been one of the early students of Newnham College and became a respected leader in the theory and practice of education.

E. P. Hughes came from Wales and was a proponent of the language and culture of Wales. But, apart from this Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures.

Hughes Hall became a full college of the university in 2006. It consists currently of around 50 Fellows and some 650 student members, men and women, who study for doctoral or MPhil degrees, for the postgraduate diplomas and certificates offered by the University, and, as mature undergraduates, for the BA degree. The academic community of Hughes Hall is now extremely diverse, including students of over 60 nationalities and representing almost all the disciplines of the University. Enquiries about entry as a student are always welcome. Information can be found on the college website at <http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate-admissions/>

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first and only Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College, and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon, 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982.

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. Each year's lecture will be published as a pamphlet by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic on behalf of Hughes Hall.

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Relics and the insular world, *c.* 600–*c.* 850

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## **PREFACE**

In 2000, thanks to an anonymous benefaction, an annual lecture was established at Hughes Hall in memory of Dr Kathleen Hughes, 1926-1977. A Fellow of Newnham College, Kathleen Hughes was the first Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (ASNC).

Over the years the lectures have embraced a wide range of topics in the early history and culture of the British Isles, reflecting the wide scholarly interests of Kathleen Hughes. Each lecture has been published as a printed pamphlet to coincide with the following year's lecture. They are listed on the back cover of this booklet. Hughes Hall is grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for acting as publisher. Copies are available from ASNC.

The College is pleased to host the annual lecture and hopes that this academic initiative will make a significant scholarly contribution in the research areas in which Kathleen Hughes was a distinguished scholar.

**Anthony Freeling**  
President  
Hughes Hall

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- AASS *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur*, ed. J. Bollandus *et al.* (Antwerp and Brussels, 1634–1940)
- CCSL Corpus Christianorum series latina (Turnhout, 1953–)
- ChLA* *Chartae latinae antiquiores. Facsimile-edition of the Latin Charters Prior to the Ninth Century*, gen. eds Albert Bruckner and Robert Marichal. 49 vols (Olten/Dietikon-Zurich, (1954–1998).
- MGH SSRM Monumenta Germaniae historica, scriptores rerum merovingicarum. 7 vols (1885–1951)

## RELICS AND THE INSULAR WORLD, c. 600–c. 800

This lecture reorients the study of saints and their relics in early medieval Insular Christianity by changing both the things at the centre of enquiry and the methods used to study them. Instead of the conventional preoccupation with the tomb-based cults of Anglo-Saxon saints along with the books, bells and *bachalls* of their Irish counterparts, my focus is on tiny, highly portable fragments of Christianity in the pre-viking Insular world, minuscule objects which originated everywhere from the Sinai peninsula to the Hebrides.<sup>1</sup> Approaching them from the perspective of the history of material culture rather than as a chapter in the story of conversion and Christianisation, I first use well-known historical and hagiographical texts to explore how relics were transported, used and represented. Then, in the second part, I draw upon a source base which has not hitherto been brought to bear on the study of early medieval Insular Christianity, a corpus of evidence which survives on the Continent and which demonstrates the ebb and flow of specific relics to and from Britain and Ireland. By combining different sources, methods and focus, I am able to sidestep the constraints imposed by literary and archaeological evidence.

Several general questions frame my enquiry. They are straightforward ones which can, in principle, be asked of relics in almost any context, although they are sometimes hard to answer: What sorts of things became relics? What can we establish about their object-biographies? How were they packaged, stored, and transported? Did people know what they were, and if so, how? What memories might accumulate around them? How did these objects function as agents of cultural transfer? Although there is not enough space here to explore the Insular dimension of all these questions in equal depth, they tap directly into the multifaceted comparative framework afforded by the developing Continental cult of relics.

There is a cogent reason for adopting a Continental vantage point for, as far as we can tell, relic-based practices were not indigenous to such pockets of Christian activity as may have survived in post-Roman Britain.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, they seem only to have reached northern Gaul, including the Gallic shore of the English Channel at the end of the fourth century, just as the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a development of an approach I first outlined in ‘Portable Christianity: relics in the medieval West (c. 700–1200)’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 181 (2012), 143–67.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Sharpe, ‘Martyrs and local saints in late antique Britain’, in Alan T. Thacker and Richard Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 75–154.

province of Britain was slipping out of Roman control.<sup>3</sup> So in post-Roman Britain as in Ireland, both relics themselves and the cultural practices associated with them were a foreign import, at least initially. In this context, the following pages address one specific question: how did British, Irish and Anglo-Saxon churches respond to the evolving relic-practices of Continental Christianity?<sup>4</sup> How did they encounter them, what aspects did they appropriate—or choose not to appropriate—and how did they adapt what they experienced?

Overall, I shall argue for a much greater degree of familiarity with the relic practices of the Mediterranean world than has previously been realised. Differentiating the Irish, Northumbrian, Southumbrian and Brittonic strands of evidence leads to the conclusion that the Irish culture province, including Argyll and the islands, was the most enthusiastically relic-minded region of the early medieval Insular world.

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Relics are material objects whose primary role is as non-sacramental channels of interaction between humans and the divine. As objects quite literally and inextricably bundled up with religious significance, they are in effect material symbols (or signifiers) which make present places and persons that are remote in Christian time or place. They flourish in the interstices of this-worldly contexts and the hereafter or, in Augustinian terms, they mediate between the *saeculum* and the *aeternum*. The evolution of their role in late antique Christianity in and around the Roman empire can be traced from the mid-fourth century onwards, and although it developed in

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<sup>3</sup> This is implied by the date—396—and context of Victricius of Rouen, *De laude sanctorum*, a sermon delivered on Victricius's return from a trip to Britain (eds R. Demeulenaere and J. Mulders, CCSL 64 (Turnhout, 1985), ch 1, pp. 70–1). See further Gillian Clark, 'Translating relics: Victricius of Rouen and fourth-century debate', *Early Medieval Europe*, 10 (2001), 161–76; David G. Hunter, 'Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: ascetics, relics and clerics in late Roman Gaul', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7/3 (1999), 401–30. For archaeological evidence of saints' cults in northern Gaul in the late fourth century, see Michèle Gaillard and Christian Sapin, 'Autour de la tombe de saint Quentin: histoire et archéologie d'un culte (milieu IV<sup>e</sup> – début VIII<sup>e</sup> s.)', in Michèle Gaillard (ed.), *L'empreinte chrétienne en Gaule du IV<sup>e</sup> au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Turnhout, 2014), 271–88.

<sup>4</sup> The main earlier discussions are Charles Doherty, 'The use of relics in early Ireland', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1984), 89–101; David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989); Jean-Michel Picard, 'Le culte des reliques en Irlande (VII<sup>e</sup>–IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)', in Edina Bozóky and Anne-Marie Helvétius (eds.), *Les reliques: objets, cultes, symboles. Actes du colloque international de l'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer) 4–6 septembre 1997*, *Hagiologia*, 1 (Turnhout, 1999), 39–55; Thacker and Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches*. Niamh Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout, 2015) attempts a reappraisal of the Irish evidence.



Rome somewhat later than elsewhere, was well established there by the time of Palladius's mission to Ireland in 431.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the sixth century, when Augustine set out for Canterbury, the cult of relics had already acquired some of the features which it would retain throughout the Middle Ages, yet still remained close to its late antique roots. One of those characteristics was quantity; another was regional diversity. Gregory the Great had reassured Augustine about the validity of local variation in Christian tradition, and among the differences Augustine encountered as he travelled through Gaul, he would probably have experienced a range of relic practices.<sup>6</sup> No-one can have had a broader knowledge of the multifarious nature of relic cults than Theodore of Tarsus however, whose personal experience of saints' cults extended all the way from the Syriac-speaking east, via Constantinople and Rome, to the struggling new Christian communities of south-eastern Britain.<sup>7</sup> By the middle decades of the seventh century, exactly when Theodore resided in Rome, the Eternal City had become something of a microcosm of that varied activity, with a wide spectrum of ways of engaging with relics evident simultaneously.<sup>8</sup>

In the Insular world also, we find variety—although admittedly not as great as on the Continent. One element of that concerns the placement of relics. At Hexham, according to Bede, Acca dedicated altars for the

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<sup>5</sup> Steffen Diefenbach, *Römische Erinnerungsräume, Heiligenmemoria und kollektive Identitäten im Rom des 3. bis 5. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Berlin, 2007); idem, 'Urbs und ecclesia —Bezugspunkte kollektiver Heiligerinnerung im Rom des Bischofs Damasus (366–384)', in Ralf Behrwald and Christian Witschel (eds.), *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum* (Stuttgart, 2012), 193–249; Marianne Sághy, 'Renovatio memoriae: Pope Damasus and the martyrs of Rome', *ibid.*, 251–266; eadem, 'Scinditur in partes populus: Pope Damasus and the martyrs of Rome', *Early Medieval Europe*, 9/3 (2000), 273–87; Alan Thacker, 'Rome of the martyrs: saints, cults and relics, fourth to seventh centuries', in Éamonn Ó Carragain and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (eds.), *Roma Felix—Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome* (Aldershot, 2007), 13–59.

<sup>6</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), I.27, question 2, pp. 80–3. For saints' cults, see Brigitte Beaujard, *Le culte des saints en Gaule. Les premiers temps. D'Hilaire de Poitiers à la fin du VIe siècle* (Paris, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lapidge (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 11 (Cambridge 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Julia M. H. Smith, 'Care of relics in early medieval Rome', in Valerie Garver and Owen Phelan (eds.), *Rome and Religion in the Medieval World: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. X. Noble* (Aldershot, 2014), 179–205; idem, 'Cursing and curing, or The practice of Christianity in eighth-century Rome', in Ross Balzaretto, Julia Barrow and Patricia Skinner (eds.), *Italy and Medieval Europe: Papers for Chris Wickham on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Past and Present Supplements (Oxford, forthcoming); Maya Maskarinec, 'Saints for all Christendom: naturalizing the Alexandrian saints Cyrus and John in 7th- to 13th-century Rome', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (forthcoming).

veneration of the relics he had collected.<sup>9</sup> This could mean either that he deposited them inside the altars, in conformity with seventh-century Roman custom, or that he placed the relics in splendidly jewelled reliquaries on or near the altars, as was becoming common in seventh-century churches in Gaul. At Ripon, some relics remained available for use in processional liturgies, for the monks carried them out to meet Wilfred's funeral cortège on its arrival from Oundle in 709.<sup>10</sup> We cannot tell whether Lindisfarne's collection of apostle and martyr relics was static or portable, but do know that it acquired something of a reputation for working miracles, although it was outstripped by Cuthbert's tomb in this respect.<sup>11</sup> And despite Bede's silence about what happened to the relics forwarded by popes to their missionaries in England, or gifted to Anglo-Saxon rulers, Alan Thacker has established that, at Canterbury at least, those sent by Gregory the Great to Mellitus in 601 remained in portable reliquaries as late as the fifteenth century, seemingly never sealed into the *sepulchrum* of an altar.<sup>12</sup>

Bede also emphasises these relics' ideological significance as metonyms for Rome and as markers of orthodoxy.<sup>13</sup> At Armagh, according to the *Liber Angeli*, Roman relics also fulfilled a heavily charged role, here linked to assertions of primacy within Ireland.<sup>14</sup> In an Irish context, Armagh was distinctive, however, for there is no explicit evidence for either Roman relics, or an ideological role for any relics, anywhere else. We should not, however, allow the narrative emphasis on Rome as the proper source of these Christian particles to stand as a statement of the reality of relic flow, for in practice, the Eternal City was only one of their many sources. We shall turn to distant locations, especially the Holy Land, in due course, but in this context, it is worth remembering that, according to Bede, Acca gathered relics of the apostles and martyrs from all over the place – from

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<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.20, pp. 530–1.

<sup>10</sup> *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), ch. 66 p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1985), 'Anonymous Life' IV.15, pp. 132–4; 'Bede's Prose Life' ch. 41, pp. 288–91.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.29, p. 104 (relics sent to Augustine via Mellitus); III.29, p. 320 (gift of relics from Vitalian to Oswy and his queen). For the fifteenth-century disposition of the relics sent by Gregory the Great in 601 see the evidence cited by Alan Thacker, 'In search of saints: the English church and the cult of Roman apostles and martyrs in the seventh and eighth centuries', in Julia M. H. Smith (ed.), *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Studies in Honour of Donald A. Bullough* (Leiden, 2000), 247–77, at 259.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 263–4.

<sup>14</sup> *Liber Angeli*, ch. 19 and Tirechán, *Collectanea*, 48.3, both in *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *Scriptores latini hiberniae*, 10 (Dublin, 1979), pp. 186–8, 160–1. See also Richard Sharpe, 'Armagh and Rome in the seventh century', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1984), 58–72; Picard, 'Culte des reliques', 45–8.

“everywhere”.<sup>15</sup> There is ample evidence that major shrines in Gallic cities such as Lyon, Vienne, Auxerre, Paris, and Tours produced relics in considerable numbers, and it is hard to believe that Benedict Biscop refrained from acquiring any when he passed through Vienne, or that Wilfred, eager relic-hunter that he was, entirely ignored Lyon’s many relic-generating martyrial shrines during his extended stay there.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to accumulating relics and processing with them in ecclesiastical contexts, we find other, more intimate modes of portability. Bishops such as Germanus of Auxerre and Gregory of Tours owned relics as their personal property, and, in Germanus’s case, carried them about strapped to his body under his clothing. As well as using them for curing and exorcising, both also relied on them for direct protection of body and soul, especially while travelling.<sup>17</sup> This is another Continental practice with Insular echoes, for Wilfred wore relics around his neck, and as a young priest, Willibrord travelled to Ireland with his own miracle-working fragment of the stake on which Oswald’s head had been displayed after his death, although we cannot say exactly how he carried it.<sup>18</sup> Also in the seventh century, Gallus, probably a disciple of Columbanus and perhaps also of Irish origin, carried relics of the Virgin Mary and Sts Desiderius and Maurice as he travelled. By planting his staff in the ground and slinging the relics’ carrying strap on its crook, he thereby designated an open-field site as the sacred spot on which he would build a church.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Anglo-Saxon missionaries active on the Continent in the eighth century are widely reported as carrying relics with them and, in the case of Willehad, wearing them exactly as Wilfred did, for the reliquary round his neck saved his life by deflecting an assassin’s blow.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As note 9 above.

<sup>16</sup> Bede, ‘History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow’, chs 4, 6 in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, eds Christopher Grocock and I. N. Wood (Oxford, 2013), pp. 30–1, 34–5; *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, chs 3–6, pp. 8–15. For evidence that both Lyon and Vienne were among the active centres of relic production in the late seventh century, see Julia M. H. Smith, ‘Les reliques et leurs étiquettes’, in Pierre Alain Mariaux (ed.), *Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d’Agaune, 515–2015, II: Le trésor* (Gollion, 2015), 221–31.

<sup>17</sup> *Constance de Lyon, Vie de Saint Germain d’Auxerre*, ed. René Borius (Paris, 1965), I.4, III.15, pp. 128–9, 150–3. Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ch. 83, MGH SSRM 1/ii: 94–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ch. 39, pp. 78–9; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.13, pp. 252–5.

<sup>19</sup> Wetti, *Vita Galli*, ch. 11, MGH SSRM IV: 263. For Gallus’s origin, see the comments of Ian Wood, ‘The Irish on the continent in the seventh century’, in Franziska Schnoor *et al.* (eds.), *Gallus und seine Zeit. Leben, Wirken, Nachleben*, Monasterium Sancti Galli, 7 (St. Gallen, 2015), 39–54, at p. 40 and n. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Details: Julia M. H. Smith, ‘Material Christianity in the early medieval household’, in John Doran, Charlotte Methuen and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Religion and the Household*, Studies in Church History, 50 (Woodbridge, 2014), 23–46, at p. 39, n. 37.

Early Insular hagiographers depicted their subjects using a variety of techniques to bring about healings and exorcisims. In many instances, there is a clear indebtedness to either biblical exemplars or the precedent of Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*, while on other occasions, saints are shown relying on a range of para-liturgical procedures involving material substances such as chrism, salt, bread or holy water which they have themselves sanctified.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps even more than other Insular holy men, Columba was reliant on material intermediaries of his saintly *virtus*, for in Adomnán's account, cures involving bread, water and stones are as common as those involving prayer and body contact.<sup>22</sup>

By a careful reading of one of these episodes, it is also possible to deduce that the community of Iona was familiar with the instrumental use of relics to bring about healing. If Adomnán's narrative does indeed contain a kernel of recollection of Columba's actual practices, albeit somewhat garbled in transmission during the intervening century, then we may posit that Mediterranean relic practices had already reached Iona during the saint's lifetime.

The passage in question is Adomnán's account of what happened when, in Ireland, the "holy virgin" Mogain called on Columba for help when she broke her hip. The hagiographer specifies that, when news reached the saint, he sent his monk Lugaid equipped with "a little pinewood box with a blessing inside it" (*pineam tradit cum benedictione capsellam*), on whose lid he had written the number of years Mogain would continue to live. His instructions to Lugaid were to dip the blessing in a jar of water, then pour the water over the woman's hip while invoking God.<sup>23</sup> We may note that Sulpicius had described how Martin's ability to work miracles might be transmitted to a distant place by means of a portable material object, in this case a letter Martin had written.<sup>24</sup> Adomnán, however, updated the theme to both emphasise its quasi-sacramental nature and bring it into line with the Continental relic practices of his—and Columba's—own times.

Two pieces of Continental evidence support the contention that Adomnán depicted Columba using a relic to work a miracle at a distance. In the first place, *benedictio* was one of the established fifth- and sixth-century words for a relic-object and was used with this meaning by Gregory the

<sup>21</sup> The subject deserves fuller treatment than can be given here; for illustrative examples, see, for example, *La vie ancienne de Saint Samson de Dol*, ed. Pierre Flobert (Paris, 1997), I.12, 19, 28, 38, 54, pp. 164–7, 176–9, 188–9, 200–3, 224–5; *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ch. 18, 23, 37, pp. 38–41, 46–7, 74–7; Muirchú, 'Vita S. Patricii', in Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), I.24, pp. 108–11.

<sup>22</sup> *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, eds Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (London, 1961), II.4, 6, 7, 33, pp. 330–7, 338–41, 398–405. For his cures involving only prayer and sometimes also touch, see *ibid.*, II.18, 31, 32, 40, pp. 364–5, 394–9, 434–7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, II.5, pp. 336–9.

<sup>24</sup> *Sulpice Sévère. Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, 3 vols (Paris, 1967), ch. 19, I.292–3.

Great, among others.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, tiny unadorned wooden reliquary-boxes have been found in several very early relic assemblages including Columbanus's foundation at Bobbio, a monastery whose Irish associations long endured.<sup>26</sup> The cathedral treasury at Aachen has even preserved one small, almost square wooden one whose sliding lid states, in uncial, the identity of the relic still inside, and later examples of wooden boxes inscribed with a note of their contents survive elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> In this passage of Adomnán, then, we have a fairly accurate description of seventh- to eighth-century Continental relic practices, even though the nature of the inscription on the lid seems to be mis-represented. Another tiny cuboid reliquary-box with a sliding lid can be adduced here: the one found at Dromiskin (Co Louth), now in the National Museum of Ireland. Probably of sixth- or seventh-century date, this comprises an outer box of sandstone complete with a sliding stone lid, together with the remains of an inner wooden box, also with a sliding lid, whose dimensions are very similar to the Aachen relic-box.<sup>28</sup> So this type of tiny relic container did indeed reach Ireland: we may legitimately conclude that Adomnán's account depicts Columba instructing Lugaid in how to use a relic to replicate the para-liturgical production of holy water for curative purposes, while at the same time deferring to the Martinian paradigm of a miracle-working object bearing text written by the saint's own hand.

It remains somewhat unclear to what extent the relic shrines of seventh- to eighth-century Gaul and northern Italy followed eastern precedent in distributing body-part relics of their patron saints, or to what extent they, like the churches in Rome controlled by the papacy, declined to dismember their saints. That corporeal relics did circulate in the early medieval West is not in doubt; rather it is their origins and ubiquity which are so difficult to determine. In this perspective, the Whitby Life of Gregory the Great is valuable for its insight into Northumbrian assumptions about what constituted appropriate relic-objects around the year 700. As the background to the narrative of Gregory's famous sacramental miracle, the Whitby hagiographer recounted how the pope gave relics of Roman saints to a certain "western lord", placing them in separate boxes and sealing them

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<sup>25</sup> For details, see Julia M. H. Smith, 'Relics: an evolving tradition in Latin Christianity', in Cynthia Hahn and Holger Klein (eds.), *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, *Dumbarton Oaks Symposia and Colloquia* (Washington, DC, 2015), 41–60, at pp. 58–9 and nn. 101, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Eleonora Destefanis, *Il monastero di Bobbio in età altomedievale* (Florence, 2002), pp. 97–98.

<sup>27</sup> Helga Giersiepen, *Die Inschriften des Aachener Doms* (Wiesbaden, 1992), no. 4, p. 5. For further examples, see Dieter Quast, *Das merowingerzeitliche Reliquienkästchen aus Ennabeuren* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Christoph Stiegemann, Martin Kroker and Wolfgang Walter (eds.), *Credo: Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter*, (Petersberg, 2013), II: 221–2, no. 180.

with his seal. In accordance with a procedure well attested in Gregory's correspondence, the pontiff had given them small pieces of cloth.<sup>29</sup> Wishing to reassure themselves as to what was inside, the Northumbrian envoys broke the seals en route home, and on finding out what the relics actually comprised, returned to Rome to confront Gregory's archdeacon and the pope himself. Their dismay stemmed from the mistaken belief "that they were taking back bones or at least something more important in the sight of men than rags", a clear indication that Northumbrian expectations about the material character of relics was not primarily informed by papal practice, but by the customs of many other shrines in and around the Mediterranean.<sup>30</sup>

The papal preference for textile relics contrasts with the practice of many churches, especially those in olive-oil producing regions, which issued *ampullae* of miracle-working oil. Archaeological finds taken in conjunction with textual accounts suggest that seventh-century Insular communities were also aware of this custom, replicating it as best they could. In the first place, we should note archaeological traces that *ampullae* reached Britain. These include several specimens of the mass-produced pottery phials from the Egyptian shrine of St Menas, although only one comes from a fairly secure archaeological context—at Meols, on the Wirral.<sup>31</sup> In addition, small glass flasks of a form common in the late antique Mediterranean have been found in several locations in Ireland.<sup>32</sup> Then there are the textual narratives in which miracles relying on the use of holy oil presuppose its availability in portable containers. Thus, for example, Bede describes how, when Aidan sent his priest Utta to accompany Eanfled from Kent to Northumbria by sea in 643, he equipped him with an *ampulla* of consecrated oil for use when the travellers encountered storms at sea.<sup>33</sup> Bede must have heard this story from a Kentish or Northumbrian informant, and, even if not necessarily an accurate report of Aidan's own practice in the second quarter of the seventh century, the account certainly indicates that small miracle-working flasks of holy oil were known about in Bede's day.

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<sup>29</sup> John McCulloh, 'The cult of relics in the letters and 'Dialogues' of Pope Gregory the Great: a lexicographical study', *Traditio*, 32 (1976), 145–84.

<sup>30</sup> *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 21, pp. 108–10. On this passage, see also John F. Romano, *Liturgy and Society in Early Medieval Rome* (Farnham, 2014), p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Suzanne Bangert, 'Menas ampullae: a case-study of long-distance contacts', in Anthea Harris (ed.), *Incipient Globalization? Long-Distance Contacts in the Sixth Century*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 1644 (Oxford, 2007), 27–33; David Griffiths, Robert A. Philpott and Geoff Egan, *Meols: The Archaeology of the North Wirral Coast* (Oxford, 2007), 58–60.

<sup>32</sup> Ewan Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report, 157 (York, 2007), 62–63. I thank Ewan Campbell for guidance about finds of flasks and *ampullae*.

<sup>33</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.15, pp. 260–1.

In sum, narrative sources from the early decades of the eighth century reveal widespread Insular familiarity with the relic practices of seventh-century Gaul and the Mediterranean. Small, highly portable relics feature in many different contexts and fulfilled multiple roles in early medieval Insular Christianity. Their material specifics—textile, bone, consecrated oil, unspecified substances—have precise analogues among the relic objects familiar in late antique Christianity. So too do their containers, whether phials or boxes. Insular churches were clearly not only intimately familiar with their material nature, range of possible uses and symbolic value but had also appropriated many associated practices. The evidence for this is nevertheless thinly spread, and no Insular church is likely to have had the opportunity to amass relics on the same scale as the major centres in Gaul, where relics easily circulated through established ecclesiastical networks. This means that the overall picture is clear, even though the evidence for any specific Insular church is, perhaps inevitably, sparse. Yet there is a significant way to enhance this conclusion and reveal a hitherto undetected flow of relics into and out of Britain and Ireland, to which we now turn.

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Whereas previous scholarship has concentrated on assembling the evidence of hagiographical and liturgical manuscripts for the diffusion of individual Insular saints' cults, my analysis now turns to documentary evidence of a kind never previously brought into discussions of Insular Christianity: relic labels extant in Continental ecclesiastical treasuries.<sup>34</sup> Although a few of them were first published over a century ago, significant recent discoveries make it opportune to review all relevant specimens here, with a view to reaching some more general conclusions about which Mediterranean relic-producing shrines received Insular visitors and what they obtained there; about the production of relics by churches in Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Brittonic-speaking regions; and about important nodes in the networks of their circulation.

The documents in question are the tiny tags affixed to relics to identify them. Approximately 500 specimens survive from the period prior to c. 900, almost all of them in archives and ecclesiastical treasuries in Italy, Switzerland, and France, but with outliers in Belgium and Germany; none

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<sup>34</sup> Cf Alan Thacker, 'Membra disjecta: the division of the body and the diffusion of the cult', in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, 1995), 97–127; Simon Young, 'Donatus, bishop of Fiesole 829–76, and the cult of St. Brigit in Italy', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 35 (1998), 13–26; Jean-Michel Picard, 'Adomnán's *vita Columbae* and the cult of Colum Cille in continental Europe', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 98C (1998), 1–23; John Hennig, 'Scottorum gloria gentis. Erwähnungen irischer Heiliger in festländischen Liturgietexten des frühen Mittelalters', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 52/2 (1970), 177–91.

survives in Britain or Ireland. This discussion isolates two categories: those in Insular minuscule (and its Continental derivatives) and those naming Insular saints. Together, they form a corpus of 22 pieces of evidence: details are provided in the Appendix. Enhanced for the purposes of this discussion by proxy evidence from a ninth-century manuscript that bears on eighth-century labels, they supplement and nuance the picture derived from narrative and liturgical texts.

They have survived in ecclesiastical institutions which managed to preserve their relics, and sometimes also their reliquaries, through all the upheavals of later centuries. Early medieval relics characteristically comprised small quantities of liquids such as oil or water placed in a sealed flask or tiny solid objects wrapped in fabric or, occasionally, parchment. Each package or flask was labelled on a small tag of papyrus or parchment, now mostly separated from the relic-object, but originally either wrapped and tied around it like a collar, or bound tight along its length. These labels state the name of the saint or holy site represented, but rarely specify the material nature of the object in question. Thus although they are powerful evidence for the diffusion of cult-related activity, they do not provide insights into the tangible materialisation of holiness.

Before exploiting the textual and palaeographical evidence they afford, several notes of caution are required. Firstly, being normally hidden inside reliquaries, early medieval relic labels were not intended for reading or viewing on any regular basis. For this reason, they are commonly very scrappy, being made from irregular parchment offcuts and trimmings, or sometimes repurposed fragments of older manuscripts. In consequence, their scripts rarely conform to the practised hands found in books or charters. Generally less regular and formal than book scripts, they are also much messier, having more in common with casual marginal annotations and scribbles. As a consequence, they can be hard to date or place in a clear developmental sequence.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see, relics travelled through complex networks of contact and patronage which might involve several stages separated in space and time, while churches might also undertake a sustained programme of relabelling relics already in their possession. In consequence, no assumptions can be made about the relationship of the palaeographical information to the relic-object's itinerary from place of origin to its final deposit.

The labels presented here have all survived in ancient ecclesiastical institutions north of the Alps, and, with a single exception, come from the three locations which, between them, preserve the great majority of the corpus as a whole, Saint-Maurice d'Agave, Sens and Chelles. Our survey

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<sup>35</sup> For the same reason, they attract differing interpretations. In the course of reflecting on the scripts of these labels, I have consulted Julia Crick, Richard Gameson, David Ganz, Richard Sharpe, Mark Stansbury and Jo Story; while I am extremely grateful for their advice, I know that not all of them share all of the interpretations proposed here.



commences at the exceptionally important early medieval relic shrine of St Maurice and the Theban Legion, ancient Agaune. Located at the northern foot of the main Roman road over the Alps from Italy into Gaul and on to the Channel ports, Insular travellers to Rome and beyond will naturally have paused in hostelries here, as modern pilgrims still do. Relics of—or, at least, church dedications to—Maurice and his companions abound in early medieval Europe, making this one of the most vigorously relic-producing churches anywhere.<sup>36</sup> Early medieval Agaune also amassed an exceptional collection of relics which remained housed until the second half of the twentieth century inside the abbey’s medieval reliquaries: the labels which were attached to the relic-objects are a prime source of information about the movement of objects and people in the centuries from c. 600 to c. 800.<sup>37</sup>

In the first place, there are traces of travellers returning north on their way home from the Holy Land and Rome who deposited relics at Agaune, travellers whose Insular identity is betrayed by their script. Ian Wood’s observation that *peregrinatio* was more characteristic of the Irish than the Anglo-Saxons, who generally preferred directed missionary work, encourages the view that some of these objects may have been brought by Irish pilgrims.<sup>38</sup> One specimen (**Appendix 1**) on a long narrow strip of parchment and in a vigorous, heavily clubbed script had been brought by someone who had collected soil from the church on the site where St Peter had first been buried.<sup>39</sup> Traces of Insular pilgrimage to the Holy Land are more numerous than to Rome, however, and surely reflect Irish and Anglo-

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Zufferey, *Die Abtei Saint-Maurice d’Agaune im Hochmittelalter (830–1258)* (Göttingen, 1988); Bernard Andenmatten and Laurent Ripart (eds.), *Saint-Maurice d’Agaune 515–2015, I: Histoire et archéologie*, (Gollion, 2015); Nicole Brocard, Françoise Vannotti and Anne Wagner (eds.), *Autour de Saint Maurice* (Saint-Maurice, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Elisabeth Antoine-König, Pierre Alain Mariaux and Marie-Cécile Bardoz, *Le Trésor de l’abbaye de Saint-Maurice d’Agaune* (Paris, 2014); Pierre Alain Mariaux (ed.), *Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d’Agaune, 515–2015, II: Le trésor* (Gollion, 2015). For an appraisal of Agaune’s early medieval relic collection, see Smith, ‘Les reliques et leurs étiquettes’, revised and extended as: ‘One site, many more meanings: the community of Saint-Maurice d’Agaune and its relic collection’, in Maureen Miller and Edward Wheatley (eds.), *Emotions, Communities, and Difference: Essays in Honor of Barbara H. Rosenwein* (Abingdon, 2017), 59–76.

<sup>38</sup> Wood, ‘The Irish on the continent in the seventh century’, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Early medieval traditions disagree where this was: the earliest stratum of the *Liber Pontificalis* asserts Peter was buried close to his place of execution on the *via Aurelia* (*Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire*, ed. Louis Duchesne, 3 vols (Paris, 1886–1957), I: 118. Pilgrim itineraries prefer the *basilica apostolorum* on the *via Appia* (‘Notitia ecclesiarum urbis Romae’, *Itineraria et alia geographica*, CCSL, 175 (Turnhout, 1965), 305–11, ch. 20 p. 308; ‘Itinerarium Einsidlense’, *ibid.*, p. 334).

Saxon fascination with the earthly as much as the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> Three labels are relevant here. Two, written by the same hand and cut very unevenly from the same scrap of parchment, betray a pilgrimage to Bethlehem and the place where John the Baptist was beheaded (**Appendix 2, 3**). The third testifies to a journey to the top of Mount Sinai, to the spot where Moses was believed to have received the Tablets of the Law (**Appendix 4**).

Insular travellers must have passed through Saint-Maurice d’Agaune in both directions, and the reliquary-head of St Candidus, Maurice’s lieutenant, has yielded unprecedented evidence of Irishmen heading southwards across the Alps. Specifically, one individual, or a group, must have come from Kildare, for nowhere else could have been the source of relics of Brigit together with her successor Dar Lugdach, and her bishop, Conláed (**Appendix 5**). The orthography of the Old Irish names and the energetic but informal Insular minuscule letter forms on this tiny parchment converge on a date around 700, or perhaps even slightly earlier.<sup>41</sup> Its unusual, almost square postage-stamp size and columnar format are also notable, features which may either reflect the presence at Kildare of papyrus exemplars similar to two rectangular inventory-labels surviving at Cantù, near Como (measuring 34 x 41 mm, 49 x 54 mm), or may suggest that the relics had originally been placed in a square wooden box similar to those discussed above.<sup>42</sup> Support for the latter hypothesis comes from the compression of the letters at the end of line two, an indication that the text was added after the parchment had been trimmed to size.

Its significance is twofold. This is not the place to dwell at length on its importance to the early history of cult activity at Kildare; suffice it to say that although Cogitosus’s description of the church and its shrine, perhaps penned c. 675, is justly famous, he only mentions tomb-cults of Brigit and Conláed.<sup>43</sup> Dar Lugdach features instead in the *vita prima* of Brigit, of disputed date, which identifies her as Brigit’s *alumna* and appointed successor.<sup>44</sup> Evidently her memory was fostered in analogous ways, despite

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Lawrence Nees, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Art in Jerusalem* (Leiden, 2016), 55–57; Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Perceiving Palestine in early Christian Ireland: martyrism, exegetical key, relic and liturgical space’, *Ériu*, 54 (2004), 125–37.

<sup>41</sup> The spelling of Dar Lugdach’s name, *derluigdag*, departs from the more usual Old Irish spelling, Luigdech.

<sup>42</sup> *ChLA* XXIX no. 862/6–7, pp. 2–3 for the Cantù specimens; p. 7 above for miniature square reliquary boxes.

<sup>43</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Brigitae*, ch. 37, *AASS Feb.* I: 141 (translated in Sean Connolly and J.-M. Picard, ‘Cogitosus’s “Life of St Brigit”: content and value’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 5–27, at 25–7). See also Richard Sharpe, ‘*Vita S. Brigitae*: the oldest texts’, *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 81–106.

<sup>44</sup> *Vita prima Brigitae*, ch. 16 §96, ch. 17 §109, 113. *AASS Febr.* I: 132, 134. For other evidence of her cult, see Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin, 2011), 257–8.

Cogitosus' silence about her and the failure of her cult to be consolidated in the longer term.<sup>45</sup> In brief, this label challenges reliance on narrative content as the main source for the early history of Kildare.

Particularly important for our purposes, however, is the striking, albeit approximate, conjunction of relic-making and hagiographical production at Kildare in the closing decades of the seventh century. However unusual the contents of Brigit's two early Latin *vitae* may be, the flurry of activity suggests a determined effort to shape the site into something recognisable by the norms of saints' cults elsewhere. The production of portable, labelled relics and their transport to the Continent in modest wooden boxes would have immediately signalled to recipients that here was a significant church with not one, but three notable saints. Just as relics of Ambrose of Milan travelled as an ensemble alongside the relics of Gervasius and Protasius, whose bodies he had discovered, so Kildare made available material tokens of a trinity of its saints.<sup>46</sup> Viewed from this angle, this label demonstrates unequivocally that Continental relic-making practices had been appropriated at Kildare by the end of the seventh century.

Also from Saint-Maurice comes a heavily worn and irregular quadrilateral piece of parchment naming a different trio of saints, Columba, Adomnán (his hagiographer and eighth successor as abbot of Iona), and Finnian (**Appendix 6**). The grouping suggests an origin at, or closely associated with, Iona, for the last-mentioned was evidently the *Uiniauus*, or *Findbarrus* or *Finnio* whom Adomnán mentions several times as having taught Columba in his youth in Ulster.<sup>47</sup> It must, then, postdate Adomnán's death in 704 (who himself soon became culted), but may date from the second half of the eighth century.<sup>48</sup>

The layout of its text indicates that it had been folded twice in each direction, to form a flat packet around its contents, just as a letter was folded, for a gap between the fourth and fifth lines of lettering marks where a string

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> For groups of Milan saints on the same label, see Julia M. H. Smith, 'Catalogue des étiquettes', in Pierre Alain Mariaux (ed.), *Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, 515–2015, II: Le trésor* (Gollion, 2015), 152–177, Etiquettes 3, 4, p. 233.

<sup>47</sup> Finnian's presence on this label does nothing to resolve the uncertainties about the interconnected cults of saints called by these variant name forms, but does emphasise the role of the *familia* of Columba in promoting him: cf Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, I.1, II.1, III.3, *Life of Columba*, pp. 196, 324–6, 470. For the name forms, see Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, p. 318. On the problems of identity, see Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London, 1995), p. 11 and note 210, pp. 317–18; David N. Dumville, 'Gildas and Uuiniau', in Michael Lapidge and David N. Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), 207–14.

<sup>48</sup> For the relic-circuit of Ireland made with Adomnán's body in 727–30, when his law was promulgated, see Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), 61, 150.

had been passed around to secure the tiny parcel.<sup>49</sup> Adding text in pale brown ink was the final stage in its preparation. Filled with relic-matter, the packet cannot have provided a smooth writing surface, and its small size will have exacerbated the difficulty of the scribe's task. The irregularly spaced lettering lacks the calligraphic grace of a book hand, and several of the characters are awkwardly written, with obviously uneven ink flow. The fully latinised name forms provide no orthographic help in dating it, while on purely palaeographical grounds the Insular-style script is probably Irish, it might have been written on the Continent. From a strictly historical point of view, however, the most plausible explanation is that this relic package originated on Iona, where all three named saints were certainly venerated, rather than at an Irish foundation in Francia.<sup>50</sup>

The packaging technique and the choice of wording of this relic bundle strengthens my argument for Iona's familiarity with Continental relic-making practices. A close parallel for wrapper-labels constructed in this fashion survives in the Vatican Library: a set of seven pieces of a discarded uncial manuscript of Livy from c. 400 which had been recycled as wrappers for relics from Jerusalem in the late seventh to early eighth centuries, and whose fold- and tie-lines are also clearly visible.<sup>51</sup> The use of the word *patrocinia* (split across the fourth and fifth lines) to refer to the relics inside also has Continental analogues, while the final word, *sunt*, is redolent of the epigraphic *hic sunt...* formula found on some early Frankish labels at Agaune and elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> Accepting that it was made on Iona, it provides additional compelling evidence for the Columban monks' adoption of Continental relic-making customs.

Explaining the presence of Irish relics at Agaune is an exercise in speculation, but nevertheless well worth undertaking. Unlike Péronne, where its founder Fursa, so his ninth-century *vita* claimed, had installed relics of Patrick plus those of two of his own spiritual associates from his youthful

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Wealdhere's letter to Brihtwold of Canterbury of 704/5 (BL Cotton Augustus II.18), discussed by Pierre Chaplais, 'The letter from bishop Wealdhere of London to Archbishop Brihtwold of Canterbury: the earliest original 'letter close' extant in the West', in M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (eds.), *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts & Libraries: Essays presented to N. R. Ker* (London, 1978), 3–23.

<sup>50</sup> Palaeographical uncertainties concerning the label's origin do not, however, reduce its significance: if Continental, it becomes strong evidence for the movement of the relics of revered holy men around the eighth-century Irish-speaking world.

<sup>51</sup> *Les authentiques de reliques du Sancta Sanctorum*, ed. Bruno Galland, Studi e Testi 421 (Vatican City, 2004), nos. 118–24, pp. 145–51. See also my comments and further bibliography in 'Care of relics', pp. 199–200. For digital images, see [http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.lat.10696](http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.10696).

<sup>52</sup> For the use of the word *patrocinia*, see Smith, 'Relics: an evolving tradition', p. 58 at note 101. For Saint-Maurice examples of labels using a *hic sunt...* formulation, see eadem, 'Catalogue des étiquettes', *Ets* 20, 22, p. 237.

days in Ireland, Saint-Maurice is not known to have housed an Irish colony.<sup>53</sup> Agaune's dual nature as a major shrine in its own right and a halting point on the *via francigena* raises the possibility that Insular pilgrims may have spread the cults of their own saints by making donations of their relics wherever they travelled.<sup>54</sup> Alternatively, perhaps the monks of Iona and Kildare who had embarked on their journey carried material tokens of their own patronal saints as gifts for St Peter rather than St Maurice, but died en route, so that these relics remained at Agaune, much as the Codex Amiatinus became stranded at Monte Amiata after Ceolfrith died before reaching Rome. Similarly, the traces of Insular travellers returning northwards from the Holy Land and Rome via Saint-Maurice may suggest that it was customary for pilgrims to acquire sufficient relics during their pilgrimage to make a donation to each religious house which offered shelter on the long journey home, in effect reciprocating their board and lodging with a gift of spiritual value.

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The evidence from Agaune thus suggests that the number of Irish saints' relics reaching the Continent may hitherto have been significantly underestimated. Strong confirmation of this comes from an intriguing relic list which survives in a Carolingian miscellany of the mid-ninth century, Sélestat, Bibliothèque humaniste, MS 14, ff 1-68. The manuscript itself was at Weissenburg by the eleventh century, but is unlikely to have originated there, probably stemming instead from one of the other middle Rhineland scriptoria.<sup>55</sup> Four lines at the foot of f. 45r read as follows:

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<sup>53</sup> *Virtutes Fursei*, ch. 19, MGH SSRM IV: 446–6, 'ubi ipse sanctus prius multorum sanctorum condidit pignora, id est Patricii, Beoani, Meldani et ceterorum quos secum detulit'. The seventh-century *vita Fursei* ch. 3 identifies Beoan and Meallan: MGH SSRM IV: 435–6. Additional evidence for the cult of Patrick is provided by Kuno Meyer, 'Verses from a chapel dedicated to St Patrick at Péronne', *Ériu*, 5 (1911), 110–11.

<sup>54</sup> This paragraph restates my discussion in 'One site, many more meanings', p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> Digital edition: [http://bhnumerique.ville-selestat.fr/client/fr\\_FR/search/asset/4890](http://bhnumerique.ville-selestat.fr/client/fr_FR/search/asset/4890). Hans Butzmann, *Die Weissenburger Handschriften* (Frankfurt, 1964), 20, 35–36; Bernhard Bischoff, 'Ein Reliquienverzeichnis', *Anecdota novissima: Texte des vierten bis sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1984), 91. I am grateful to Michael Allen for his judgement that the manuscript is from the middle Rhine area, and datable to the third quarter of the ninth century. Bernhard Bischoff preferred a date in the second quarter of the century: Bernhard Bischoff and Birgit Ebersperger, *Katalog der festländischen Handschriften des neunten Jahrhunderts (mit Ausnahme der wisigotischen)*, 3 vols (Wiesbaden, 1998–2014), III: 346. For details of the manuscript's contents, see Hubert Mordek, 'Von Patrick zu Bonifatius ... Alkuin, Ferrières und die irischen Heiligen in einem westfränkischen Reliquienverzeichnis', in Klaus Herbers, Hans Henning Kortüm and Carlo Servatius (eds.), *Ex ipsis rerum documentis. Beiträge zur Mediävistik. Festschrift für Harald Zimmermann zum 65. Geburtstag* (Sigmaringen, 1991), 55–68, at p. 61. Mordek's argument about the origins of both the list and the manuscript are unconvincing.

S(an)c(t)ae mariae petri pauli. De sepulchro d(omi)ni. De ligno paradisi  
 patricii. brigidae. congelli. brendani. cerani. columbae  
 camni/c/hi. finniaui. macthail. coemgeni. Donanni martiris.  
 De oleo sepulchri d(omi)ni. De terra s(an)c(t)a. s(an)c(t)i bonifacii;

Written in the same hand as the rest of the page, only a very modest offset of the left-hand margin indicates that the text does not continue directly from the preceding line, the conclusion of the second of two short treatises on weights and measures in the ancient world which occupy ff 43<sup>v</sup> to 45<sup>r</sup>, and which relay information excerpted from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. On the verso of the folio, the same scribe has carefully laid out the capitula to the next text, Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiis*. The four lines are a relic list, in the same ninth-century caroline hand as the rest of manuscript but the orthography of the Old Irish names points to an early eighth-century date (Plate 1). While the possibility that it was added as an afterthought cannot be excluded, on balance the page layout and consistent ink colour suggests that it was copied at the same time as the treatises on weights and measures. If so, the list's association with the metrological treatises predated the production of Sélestat MS 14.

Before considering the implications of this, we must address the eleven Irish relics named in lines two and three. Nine of its saints are readily identifiable, while there is no certain means of distinguishing between homonyms in the remaining two cases, Finnian (Moville or Clonard) and Brendan (Clonfert or Birr). It commences with two of Ireland's three premier saints, Patrick then Brigit, but demotes the third of the trio, Columba, to sixth place. Interposed between Brigit and Columba are three other saints whose early prominence is confirmed by a mention in Adomnán's *vita Columbae*: Comgall of Bangor, Brendan, and Ciarán of Clonmacnoise. Columba is followed by another two names which feature in Adomnán, Cainnech of Aghaboe, then Finnian. The list ends with three names outwith the cultic landscape as represented by Adomnán. These are two Leinster saints, Mac Táil of Old Kilcullen (whom Tiréchan asserts was baptised by Patrick<sup>56</sup>) then Coimgen (Kevin) of Glendalough and, finally, the early Irish church's only martyr, hailed as such, Donnán of the Hebridean island of Eigg (d. 617).

It is immediately apparent that the list follows neither a clear geographical sequence nor any calendrical order. Nor can it be fully explained as a list of saints propelled to prominence by hagiographical acclaim. Perhaps the most striking feature of the list is the inclusion of the obscure Mac Táil. Together with the presence of several other north Leinster saints, this may suggest that the core of the collection originated there, but subsequently was supplemented with relics from further afield. If so, this

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<sup>56</sup> *Patrician Texts*, 128, 162.

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collection's earliest stratum may have been somewhat older than the early eighth century, and thus very approximately contemporary with the Kildare label discussed above.<sup>57</sup>

So, fossilized in a Carolingian manuscript, we seem to be dealing with details of an early Irish relic assemblage, perhaps with some additions made no later than the early eighth century. How, then, did a list of its contents reach the Sélestat manuscript? Isidorean treatises on weights and measures were well known to the Irish: were it not for the presence of one recent Continental saint, Boniface of Fulda (d. 754), we might suppose that the list travelled in the margins of a manuscript that was taken to the Continent by an itinerant Irish scholar, in other words, that the text of the list, not the relics themselves, was transferred from Ireland to the Continent.<sup>58</sup> But the relic of Boniface in the collection implies that the task of compiling an inventory of the relics took place on the Continent, and that the Irish relics had indeed been carried abroad.

On this basis, one plausible reconstruction of the assemblage's subsequent history runs as follows. Clearly labelled, someone took the relics to the Continent, quite possibly all contained in a single portable shrine, such as the Irish house-shaped shrines which survive at Bobbio, Bologna and Monte Amiata.<sup>59</sup> The collection found its way to a monastery with Anglo-Saxon as well as Irish connections, where it was enhanced by an additional eight relics, four from the Holy Land, three of universal saints, and, at some point after 754, a relic of Boniface. Later, a scribe who was able to transcribe Old Irish names correctly decided to make a list of his church's little relic collection. To do so, he made use of a blank space at the foot of a treatise on weights and measures in a manuscript that subsequently acted as the exemplar for the metrological texts in Sélestat 14. This was an exceptional decision, for early medieval relic lists either survive in books very closely associated with the altar (including gospels, sacramentaries and *libri vitae*) or deliberately embedded in narrative contexts. Whatever reasoning prompted the earlier scribe's decision, when his manuscript was copied, the consequence was that the relic list was transmitted along with the Isidorean extracts.

This argument, then, proposes that the scribe of Sélestat 14 carefully reproduced everything in front of him in his fully formed caroline hand. Whether he worked in the same place as the previous scribe cannot be determined, but, on the basis of his script, he seems to have hailed from one of the major ninth-century scriptoria of the middle Rhineland, perhaps

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<sup>57</sup> My comments on this list and its dating follow the advice given to me by Thomas Charles-Edwards.

<sup>58</sup> Marina Smyth and Immo Warntjes kindly helped me with Isidorean treatises in Ireland.

<sup>59</sup> Quast, *Reliquienkästchen*, 60–3, 125–7 and plates 23, 24, 29.



Murbach.<sup>60</sup> On this reckoning, upwards of one and a half centuries had elapsed since the initial labelling of the Irish relics in Leinster, and even longer since the kernel of the assemblage had been gathered together.

Three conclusions follow—one firm, one probable, and one tentative. Certainly, many more Irish churches were actively distributing relics of their saints by the early eighth century than has hitherto been appreciated. In all likelihood, those relics were reaching the Continent in considerable numbers, neatly labelled in writing that would remain legible to scribes trained in the norms of caroline minuscule more than a century later. Perhaps one or more major churches, either in Ireland itself or in the Rhineland, acted as nodes for the circulation of Irish relics.

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The second relic collection to contain Insular material strengthens the surmise that a few communities with strong Insular ties exercised this role: the huge accumulation still housed in the cathedral treasury at Sens. The finds here fall into three groups, and although almost all present considerable palaeographical and/or interpretative problems, they are, cumulatively an important part of my argument.<sup>61</sup> First, three ninth-century labels testify to the presence at Sens of relics of famous Irish saints. A small, scrappy tag in a (probably Continental) Insular minuscule refers to relics of Columba (**Appendix 7**), while a ninth-century caroline hand labelled up a bundle containing relics from the vestments of Ciarán, Comgall, Columba “and other saints” (**Appendix 8**). Somewhat later, perhaps in the tenth century, a different caroline hand used a long strip of pale parchment to label relics of St Brigit. The scribe struggled to use abbreviations correctly, but did specify that the items were from the saint’s bones and her clothing (**Appendix 9**). The latter two are handy testimony to the care that was often taken to rewrap and relabel relics in course of curating a relic collection.

The second group of relevant labels at Sens all appear to refer to relics of New Testament figures. In every case, a narrowly Insular attribution is problematic, since certain features of their letter-forms instead suggest that they are likely to have been the work of scribes working on the Continent. The first relic comes from the execution block of an unnamed person—by analogy with Appendix 2, almost certainly John the Baptist (**Appendix 10**). Awkward lettering, with open wedges on short ascenders, in pale brown ink takes up the length of a scrappy offcut of a dark, yellowish-brown parchment, with due allowance for a generous right-hand margin. The failure to name the saint in question suggests either that a second line of text has been excised

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<sup>60</sup> I have discussed the list with Pádraig Ó Riain, who intimated to me that Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel suggests that the manuscript might have been written at Murbach.

<sup>61</sup> My discussion of these labels draws heavily on the palaeographical expertise of Julia Crick.

or, more likely, that the scribe abandoned the label incomplete when he realised that he had badly misjudged the space available.

Next in this group comes a very long, thin strip of parchment bearing text in a rapid, rather cursive script (**Appendix 11**). This is a composite label for relics of Sts Peter and Paul (ie from Rome) to which have been added relics of Simeon ‘in Syria’. It testifies to the relabelling of older relic-objects of diverse origin.

The next pair of relics should also be attributed to Rome. They feature on postage-stamp shaped labels on parchment of differing colour and look like the work of a single scribe, one whose script is characterised by exuberantly long, slightly curved descenders. In both instances, the text has been neatly positioned within the frame of the trimmed parchment, but is syntactically incomplete, rather like a personal *aide-mémoire*. Both refer to places. One mentions the site where the head of St Paul did something unmentioned; this can only refer to the site where the apostle’s head was reputed to have bounced three times when he was beheaded just outside Rome, a site known in the early Middle Ages as *ad Aquas Salvias* (**Appendix 12**). The other mentions “the rock where St Peter prayed”, most plausibly the kneepoints left in the stone on which Peter and Paul had prayed together in Rome, over which Pope Paul I (757-767) built a church (**Appendix 13**).<sup>62</sup> That Rome continued to be the major source of relics for Insular monks on the Continent is to be expected.

As evidenced by the contents of its treasury, Sens also had contacts of some sort with the Anglo-Saxon world. A curious strip of parchment repeats the otherwise unattested name Torhtburg in a rapid, rather irregular Insular minuscule, but an attempt to cut it into two separate labels has not fully severed the two halves (**Appendix 14**). This survived alongside a very odd little document in Latin and Old English (**Appendix 15**).<sup>63</sup> Not strictly a relic label at all, but presumably originally stored inside a relic-chest, it refers to something that had been sent to named persons elsewhere. A reminder of the fugitive nature of textual information about early medieval communications, it impels us to reflect on how these Anglo-Saxon traces might have reached Sens.

The metropolitan city of Sens neither lay on the main pilgrim route across Gaul nor, as far as we know, did it house an Irish colony or an Anglo-Saxon mission station, so the presence of these parchments requires a different kind of explanation. To find it, we need to think in terms of individuals who were central to networks of contact and nodes of dissemination. In this instance, we should look to the episcopate of the Anglo-Saxon Beornrad, from 775 abbot of Echternach and, from 785/6 until

<sup>62</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ch. 27, MGH SSRM I: 53; *Liber Pontificalis*, I: 465.

<sup>63</sup> N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), no. 383, p. 455 with comments on uncertain readings in lines 1, 7, and 9.

his death in 797, simultaneously archbishop of Sens. Probably of Northumbrian origin, he may have studied under Alcuin at York, but was certainly Alcuin's friend, correspondent and the dedicatee of his *vita Willibrordi*. With the nickname Samuel, he was also a member of the literary coterie around Charlemagne, and he served as the king's envoy to Hadrian I.<sup>64</sup> Founded by the Northumbrian Willibrord, Echternach is well known for its interest in the cults of both Anglo-Saxon and Irish saints, and may very plausibly have functioned as a centre for rewrapping, relabelling and forwarding relics, both those brought home from pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem by its own monks and those originating in the Insular world. Beornrad, or members of his household and retinue, offer a plausible context for a cluster of relics at Sens with clear ties to both Ireland and England, but also containing the work of Continental Insular scribes.

Beornrad himself may provide the clue to perhaps the most intriguing of all the labels from Sens. Written in a transitional eighth-century Continental minuscule, it commands attention for the saint who features on it: St Paulinus, bishop (**Appendix 16**). The only plausible candidate is Paulinus of York, hailed by Alcuin as 'a Roman citizen of high renown and great distinction... a pillar of justice, a true lover of piety, a doctor of the Church, [who] bestowed the gifts of Heaven upon the peoples dwelling by the sea.'<sup>65</sup> It is not too far-fetched to propose that, just as Willibrord had himself taken a relic of Oswald when he went to study in Ireland, so too the Northumbrian Beornrad carried a relic of York's first bishop with him throughout his career on the Continent, and that it passed into the Sens clergy's care after his death.<sup>66</sup>

In striking contrast to the many Irish saints whose relics have featured in this discussion, the only saint of whom a relic definitely travelled from England to the Continent prior to c. 800 is Oswald. Willibrord took his relic of the murdered Bernician king with him to Frisia, just as earlier in his career he carried it with him to Ireland; another one reached Chelles, east of Paris.<sup>67</sup> The nunnery founded here in 658/9 by Balthild, Anglo-Saxon slave turned Frankish queen, is the provenance of the third and final major collection of

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<sup>64</sup> 'Beornrad', *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Munich-Stuttgart, 1980–1999) I: 1925; *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* ([http://pase.ac.uk/jsp/pdb?dosp=VIEW\\_RECORDS&st=PERSON\\_NAME&value=3527&level=1&lbl=Beornrad](http://pase.ac.uk/jsp/pdb?dosp=VIEW_RECORDS&st=PERSON_NAME&value=3527&level=1&lbl=Beornrad)). I thank Jelle Visser for suggesting Beornrad's significance in this context.

<sup>65</sup> Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ed. Peter Godman (Oxford, 1982), lines 135–40, pp. 14–17. I exclude Paulinus of Nola on the grounds that there is no evidence whatsoever that relics from the duchy of Benevento circulated north of the Alps in the early Middle Ages; and reject Paulinus of Trier on the grounds that his relics were not discovered until 1072.

<sup>66</sup> For Willibrord, see above, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.13, pp. 252–5.

early medieval relics to have survived north of the Alps. (It is now housed in the Archives nationales, Paris.) Like any relic assemblage, it has a distinctive profile. Lacking the early seventh-century stratum so characteristic of the collections at Saint-Maurice and Sens, its main characteristics are its strongly Neustrian flavour, its interest in female saints, and its careful re-ordering and curation by the nuns of Chelles around the time when their abbess was Charlemagne's sister Gisela (d. 810), activity traceable in numerous labels composed in the distinctive b-minuscule which Bernhard Bischoff identified as the work of the Chelles nuns.<sup>68</sup>

This script was used for a relic of Oswald of Northumbria which the nuns may have acquired from Echternach, or perhaps through their court connections (**Appendix 17**).<sup>69</sup> The Carolingian court could also have been a nodal point for the distribution of relics of St Boniface: to the nuns' relic of this saint was attached a tag in a calligraphic Insular hand which cannot postdate the saint's death by more than a few decades, at most, and which may well have been penned at Fulda itself (**Appendix 18**). The rapid spread of Boniface's cult reflected his iconic status as the Carolingian church's newest martyr rather than his Anglo-Saxon origins, and the presence of his relic at Chelles underscores the scarcity of evidence for the Continental dissemination of relics originating from England itself, despite Chelles' own close connections there.<sup>70</sup>

The circulation of relics via political networks centring on the royal court is unlikely to have been a new phenomenon in the early Carolingian era, and may explain the presence at Chelles of relics of one or both of the community's Brittonic saints. The first is a relic of Samson, labelled in a gawkish semi-uncial hand on the hair side of an offcut of thick brown parchment (**Appendix 19**). There are good reasons for suspecting that, rather than deriving from his Breton house at Dol, it may have originated at his Neustrian monastery at Pentale (Saint-Samson-sur-Risle), at the mouth of the Seine, and that its route to Chelles was circuitous.<sup>71</sup> Notably, for some

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<sup>68</sup> Bernhard Bischoff, 'Die Kölner Nonnenhandschriften und das Skriptorium von Chelles', *Mittelalterliche Studien*, 3 vols (Stuttgart, 1966–81), 16–34; Jean-Pierre Laporte, *Le trésor des saints de Chelles* (Chelles, 1988), 125–8; David Ganz and Walter Goffart, 'Charters earlier than 800 from French collections', *Speculum*, 65/4 (1990), 906–32 at pp. 928, 931. Rosamond McKitterick, 'Nuns' scriptoria in England and Francia in the eighth century', *Francia*, 19 (1992), 1–35 wonders (p. 11) whether the b-minuscule labels might have been written at Jouarre rather than Chelles, or by Jouarre nuns transferred to Chelles.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Thacker, '*Membra disjecta*: the division of the body and the diffusion of the cult', at 118–119; Ganz and Goffart, 'Charters earlier than 800', at p. 929.

<sup>70</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III. 8, IV.23, pp. 238–9, 406–7; *Vita Bertilae abbatis Calensis*, ch. 6, MGH SSRM VI: 106–7.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Julia M. H. Smith, 'Oral and written: saints, miracles and relics in medieval Brittany, c. 850–1250', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 309–43 for the argument that Breton cults functioned in strikingly different ways from those in the Frankish world, and retained

years after 649, Pentale was under the control of Geremar, a vigorous abbot closely connected to the court of Balthild and her husband Clovis II (639–658), who fell victim to the machinations of his monks and then retreated as a hermit to the cave in the banks of the Seine which Samson was reputed to have rid of the serpent that inhabited it.<sup>72</sup> It is thus conceivable that the Samson relic formed part of the earliest phase of the Chelles collection, possibly dating back to Balthild’s own day and acquired through court connections, even if subsequently relabelled.<sup>73</sup>

The presence of Samson’s relics in bundles alongside non-Brittonic saints strengthens the suggestion that they circulated from a fairly early date. Two labels are particularly relevant here, one from Chelles, the other the only outlier not originating at Saint-Maurice, Sens or Chelles. The first, in a scrappy eighth-century Frankish minuscule on a torn fragment of parchment with its edges scalloped by hungry vermin, names first the martyr Victor and then Samson (**Appendix 20**). The second, in Caroline minuscule, was found amidst an assemblage of labels of ninth- to twelfth-century date in a shrine in the parish church of Lierneux (formerly a dependency of the Carolingian monastery of Stavelot) in the diocese of Liège. In its current form, it names two unassociated saints, Samson, styled as “bishop”, and the Picard saint Aldegundis of Maubeuge, although both its stepped shape and the visible tip of the descender of a missing character imply that at least one name has been excised (**Appendix 21**). The Frankish scribes of both must have redacted the information available on older labels, indicating a modest circulation of Samson’s relics in the formative stages of collection development.<sup>74</sup>

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distinctive modes of articulation until dislocated by the traumas of the viking era. The best evidence for the dissemination of Breton relics as a consequence of the early tenth-century dislocation of Breton monastic communities is provided by the eleventh-century Exeter relic lists: see my ‘Rulers and relics, c. 750–950’: “treasure on earth, treasure in heaven”, in Alexandra Walsham (ed.), *Relics and Remains*, Past & Present Supplement, 5 (Oxford, 2010), 73–96.

<sup>72</sup> *Vita Geremari*, chs 9–12, MGH SSRM IV: 630–631. On Geremar and Pentale, see Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich. Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung, 4. bis 8. Jahrhundert*, 2nd edn. (Munich, 1988), 131, 156, 175, 299; Ian N. Wood, ‘Columbanus, the Britons and the Merovingian church’, in Lynette Olson (ed.), *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales* (Woodbridge, 2017), 103–114, at pp. 112–14 for a re-evaluation of the significance of Pentale. Caroline Brett questions whether Dol’s possession of Pentale dated as far back as Samson’s lifetime: Caroline Brett, ‘The hare and the tortoise? *Vita prima Sancti Samsonis, vita Paterni*, and Merovingian hagiography’, in Lynette Olson (ed.), *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales* (Woodbridge, 2017), 83–101, at pp. 90–1.

<sup>73</sup> Hartmut Atsma and Jean Vezin assigned this label to the eighth/ninth century: *ChLA* XVIII, no 669/cxiv, p. 104, but there are no secure grounds for this suggestion, and an earlier date is quite possible.

<sup>74</sup> The eleventh-century Samson label from Lierneux postdates the peripatetic journeying of the clergy of Dol in the early tenth century and their establishment in 930 at Orléans

The remaining candidate for a Brittonic relic from Chelles is altogether more mysterious, for the name *Uurgonezlo* as spelled is of uncertain philological identification (**Appendix 22**). Although it is carefully redacted in the nuns' distinctive script, one possibility is that it is a Breton name transcribed by ear by a Frankish scribe, and perhaps also mis-copied at a later date using non-Breton spelling conventions.<sup>75</sup> This putative reconstruction would be congruent with an origin at Pentale followed by relabelling at Chelles. In any case, we have here another example of an otherwise unknown figure. Like the Torhtburg label from Sens, it is a reminder that some efforts to establish cults had no enduring success.

\* \* \*

Acca of Hexham had told Bede about a miracle worked by the relic of St Oswald's stake carried to Ireland by Willibrord as a young priest, a story which Acca had heard Willibrord tell when he stayed with him in Frisia many years later.<sup>76</sup> Like stories, relics travelled. Like stories, they must be tracked across time and place, but unlike stories, they have an irreducible material aspect which repays close attention. This lecture has emphasised both their materiality and their mobility by arguing that the cult of relics arrived in the Insular world in the baggage of missionaries who brought both relic-objects and assumptions about their nature and role in Christian tradition, and that travel abroad deepened Insular awareness of the varied relic behaviours of Continental and eastern Mediterranean churches. I have demonstrated what that meant in practice through a fresh reading of familiar hagiographical and historical sources. In drawing attention to familiarity with Christian habits of making holy persons and places mobile through the collecting and distributing of small material tokens, the first section of my argument was, necessarily, constrained by the discursive priorities of early Insular hagiographers. As a counterbalance, a comprehensive review of the tiny writings preserved on the Continent as identification tags for Insular relics reduced reliance on narrative sources and opened new perspectives. Providing the framework in which to make sense of an early Irish relic list, this hitherto unexploited corpus of evidence both strengthens and nuances the picture.

The two parts of my argument enable a re-evaluation of the role of particle relics in early Christian Ireland. By c. 700 at the very latest, the Irish were fully conversant with late antique relic terminology and conventions, and were collecting, distributing and issuing relic-objects with great

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and is irrelevant here (Philippe George, *Les reliques de Stavelot-Malmedy: nouveaux documents* (Malmedy, 1989), no. 9, p. 48).

<sup>75</sup> I owe this suggestion to Paul Russell. See also Léon Fleuriot, 'Brittonica et Gallica: 24. *Samsoni, Uurgonezlo*, noms des saints bretons dans les reliques de Chelles', *Etudes Celtiques*, 24 (1987), 194–7.

<sup>76</sup> See note 18 above.

enthusiasm, not only at major shrines but also more obscure locations. For this reason, we fundamentally misunderstand the materiality of early Irish Christianity if we only note the Roman items mentioned in the *Liber Angeli* and Tirechán. Rather, we need to take seriously the pronouncement of the early eighth-century law tract *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, whose list of the qualifications which ennoble a church commences with “the shrine of a righteous man, [and] the relics of saints...”.<sup>77</sup> The evidence adduced here gives substance and specificity to this pronouncement, and confirms that, by the early eighth century, churches in Ireland were eagerly distributing relics of their saints while at the same time accumulating material tokens of other churches’ holy patrons. Irish practices developed out of direct familiarity with the relic habits of the late antique West, renewed and refreshed by pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land. As Cummian reported from Rome in 632/3, relics and the miracles they worked provide “more certain proofs” of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxis.<sup>78</sup> Modest, portable relics of Irish saints labelled in Latin, or in Latinised Old Irish, were but one aspect of doing Roman Christianity properly. As such, they flowed back to the Continent in considerable numbers, either via important Iro-Frankish centres such as Péronne and Echternach, or directly, in the pockets of Irishmen on the move.

Furthermore, however closely intertwined early Irish Christianity was with its British progenitor, and however much Brittonic churches were nourished by their Irish associations, it seems that the cross-fertilisation across the Irish Sea did not extend to the adoption of relic-related practices. The Christian communities of early medieval Wales, Cornwall and, by extension, Brittany drew their inspiration and tradition from the archaic Christianity of late Roman Britain, and ignored these imported, new-fangled habits. The argument has to be made *e silentio*: accepting that Samson’s relics were disseminated from Pentale not Dol, the Continental relic collections reviewed here include nothing of British or Brittonic origin. That this should be interpreted as evidence of absence (rather than merely absence of evidence) is supported by the deafening silence about collecting relics that runs throughout almost all Welsh and Breton hagiography.<sup>79</sup> The overall pattern of the evidence points to the conclusion that British and Brittonic churches saw no need to disseminate material tokens of their saints nor, so

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<sup>77</sup> Liam Breatnach, ‘The first third of the *Bretha Nemed Toísech*’, *Ériu*, 40 (1989), 1–40 at pp. 8–9. My thanks to the author for drawing this to my attention.

<sup>78</sup> *Cummian’s Letter De controversia Paschali*, eds Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Studies and Texts*, 86 (Toronto, 1988), pp. 92–95.

<sup>79</sup> For a late medieval reference to a miracle-working relic of St David, see Michael Curley, ‘The miracles of St David: a new text and context’, *Traditio*, 62 (2007), 135–205 at p. 185. I thank Paul Russell for this reference.

far as we can tell, to accumulate relics of either Rome or Jerusalem. All this is concordant with the isolationism and conservatism, indeed archaism, notable in other features of the early Welsh church.<sup>80</sup>

As for the Anglo-Saxons, whose local Christian traditions were nurtured by Roman, Frankish and Irish models to varying degrees, the hagiographical evidence suggests that here, as in Ireland, there may have been an even greater degree of familiarity with Continental practice than has hitherto been acknowledged, especially in Northumbria. Northumbrian and Southumbrian churches alike benefitted from the influx of relics which accompanied missionaries from Rome, or which were brought back by returning Anglo-Saxon churchmen, but with one—or possibly two—Northumbrian exceptions, seem not to have adopted relic-making customs themselves.

Paradoxically, the exceptions themselves strengthen this assessment: Oswald and perhaps also Paulinus. The former enjoyed strong links with Dál Riata, and the circulation of his relics can be viewed as an outlier of Irish practices, reinforced by Willibrord's activities. In a somewhat looser way, the Roman-born Paulinus, if this unusual relic is indeed his, fits too within the ambit of Irish influence via the likely role of Echternach in its dissemination. In sum, despite the flow of relics from Rome into Anglo-Saxon England, the only identifiable traces of the production and circulation of Anglo-Saxon saints' relics point to Ireland rather than Rome as the main cultural influence.

There is one further feature of this new corpus of evidence for early Insular relic cults to note. Apart from the clothing of several Irish saints, and one late mention of the bones of Brigit, the relic labels discussed here contain no indication of what sort of substances might have comprised these relic objects. To grasp the material specificities of these cults, we can either fall back on hagiographical accounts, with all their limitations and tendentiousness, or we can accept that early Insular Christians were more interested in the fact that saints and holy places could be materialised in portable form than in the minutiae of what sorts of objects fulfilled this role. And that outlook too was one they shared with seventh- and eighth-century Christians on the Continent: possession of a relic was what mattered, not its material details.

On balance, the pre-viking Insular world was both a microcosm of and a testing-ground for the material practices of post-imperial Christianity. It was a microcosm in the sense that it reflected the diversity of relic practices evident on the Continent, but a testing ground inasmuch as its various regional culture provinces appropriated, adapted or spurned elements as best suited their own interpretation of authentic Christianity. Relics, then, offer

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<sup>80</sup> Nancy Edwards, *The Early Medieval Sculpture of Wales: Text, Pattern and Image*, Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures, 13 (Cambridge, 2015), esp pp. 18–20.



a distinctive prism through which to chart the creative responses of early Insular Christianity, one whose full spectrum only becomes visible if we look far beyond these islands.<sup>81</sup>

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### *Afterword*

At the beginning of the Preface to *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, Kathleen Hughes observed that “one should not write history in compartments, as this book is arranged.”<sup>82</sup> Giving the Kathleen Hughes lecture in 2016 was a public acknowledgement of my debt to Kathleen by attempting to follow her injunction. Her friendship and support commenced in December 1974, when she admitted me to read History at Newnham College, and her intellectual influence continued to shape me long after her tragically early death in April 1977, shortly before I sat my Part I exams. In 1977-78, I nevertheless took the History Part II Special Subject on “The Conversion of the British Isles” which she and Peter Hunter Blair had devised, a course which propelled me into my Oxford doctorate on Carolingian Brittany.<sup>83</sup> When in 1988 I returned to Cambridge to take up the Kathleen Hughes Memorial Research Fellowship at Newnham, and to wrestle with the challenge of turning the dissertation into a monograph, I held her scholarship constantly in mind as a beacon of how to analyse difficult material in clear, limpid prose that is accessible to the non-expert but avoids dumbing-down. For that, and so much more, I remain grateful to her.

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<sup>81</sup> As my footnotes indicate, in the course of this research I have been even more reliant than usual on the generous help and advice of many colleagues on a wide range of specific points. In addition, Lesley Abrams, Thomas Charles-Edwards, Wendy Davies and members of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic took the time to comment in detail on the penultimate draft. Myriah Williams transformed digital images of varying quality into a professionally illustrated appendix. Edel Bhreathnach and Ragnall Ó Floinn organised a tailor-made seminar in Dublin to discuss the Irish material at a formative stage in my work. I am deeply grateful to all concerned.

<sup>82</sup> Kathleen W. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London, 1972), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Wendy Davies stepped in at short notice to provide the lectures on the ‘Celtic’ half of the course, a task which she fulfilled brilliantly.

## APPENDIX

## Corpus of relic labels from the insular world

Entries are numbered according to the order cited in the text and include the archival call-mark; the most recent place of publication, and URL for digital images (where available). In all cases, the most recent place of print publication supplies older bibliographical detail. Dimensions refer to length and height, taken at the widest point.

*Key to abbreviations and references in the Appendix:*

AASM      Archives de l'Abbaye de Saint-Maurice

AN          Archives nationales, France

ChLA      *Chartae latinae antiquiores. Facsimile-edition of the Latin Charters Prior to the Ninth Century*, eds Albert Bruckner and Robert Marichal. 49 vols (Olten/Dietikon-Zurich, 1954–98).

Ganz and Goffart 1990    David Ganz and Walter Goffart, 'Charters earlier than 800 from French collections', *Speculum*, 65/4 (1990), 906–32.

George 1989      Philippe George, *Les Reliques de Stavelot-Malmedy: nouveaux documents* (Malmedy, 1989).

Prou and Chartraire 1900    Maurice Prou and E. Chartraire, 'Authentiques de reliques conservées au trésor de la cathédrale de Sens', *Mémoires de la Société nationale des antiquaires de la France*, ser. 6, 59 (1900), 129–72.

Smith 2015      Julia M. H. Smith, 'Catalogue des étiquettes', in Pierre Alain Mariaux (ed.), *Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, 515–2015, II: Le trésor* (Gollion, 2015), 152–77.

1

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*de terra aeclisiae in qua sepultus (est) petrus primo*

Insular minuscule, s. viii<sup>1</sup>

109 × 6 mm

AASM, CHN 64/1/16

Smith 2015, p. 236 (Et. 16)

[http://www.digi-](http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20001%20016)

[archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20001%20016](http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20001%20016)

2 and 3

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2

*de p(re)sepe d(omi)ni*

Insular minuscule, s. viii

60 × 12 mm, tapering to a point at the right

AASM, CHN 64/2/89

Smith 2015, p. 246 (Et. 58)

[http://www.digi-](http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20089)

[archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20089](http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20089)

3

*de cippo super quo decolatus est  
ionnis bab(tista)*

Insular minuscule, s. viii      115 × 15 mm

AASM, CHN 64/2/2

Smith 2015, p. 240 (Et. 31)

<http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20002>

4

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*de petra ubi data (est) lex m<oysi>*

Insular minuscule, s. viii      38 × 7 mm

AASM, CHN 64/1/34

Smith 2015, p. 239 (Et. 29)

<http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20001%20034>

5

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*s(an)c(t)æ·brigtæ*  
*s(an)c(t)æ derluigdag*  
*s(an)c(t)i conlaith :-*

Insular minuscule, c. 700      37 × 40 mm

AASM, CHN 64/2/88

Smith 2015, p. 246 (Et. 57)

<http://www.digi->

[archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show  
&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20088](http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20088)

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*columbæ  
cillæ adam  
nani finnio  
nis patro*

*cinia  
s(un)t*

Insular minuscule, s. viii      110 × 102 mm; upper and lower margins folded over

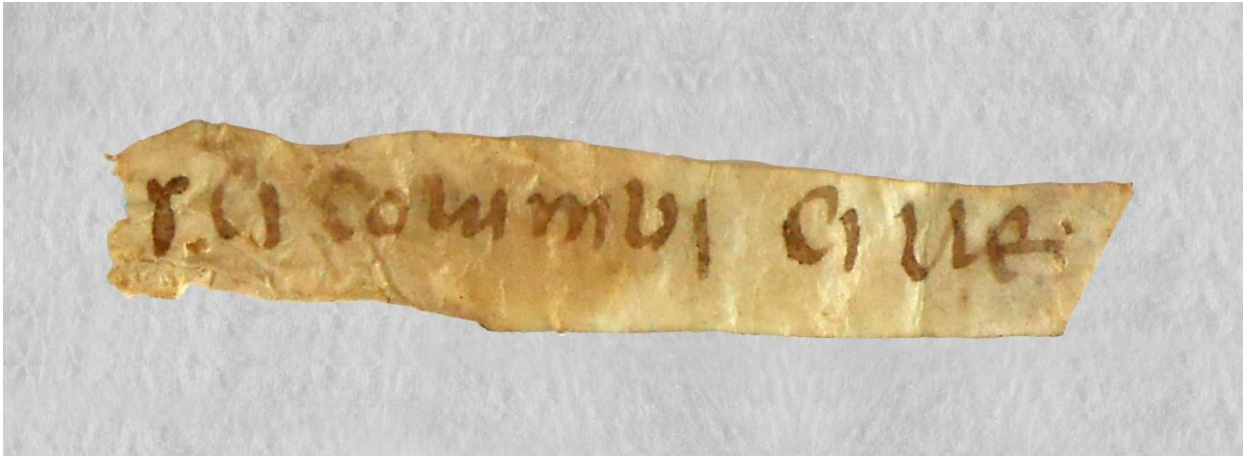
The lower, folded margin bears a secondary text in mixed majuscule, s. ix–x: *s(an)c(t)i iuliani*

AASM, CHN 64/2/10

Smith 2015, p. 241 (Et. 36)

<http://www.digi-archives.org/fonds/aasm/index.php?session=public&lang=fr&action=show&ref=CH%20AASM%20CHN%20064%20002%20010>

7



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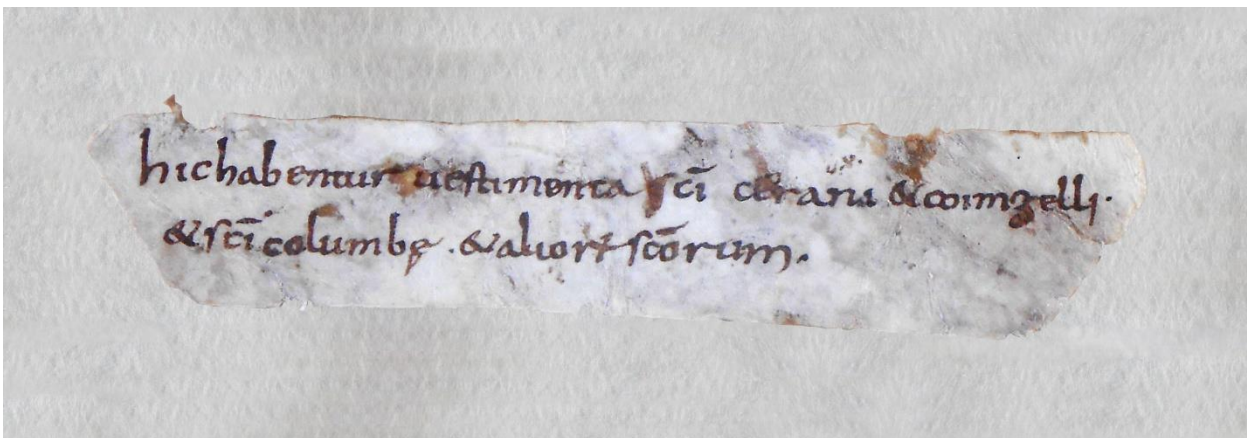
*s(an)c(t)i columbi cille*

Insular minuscule, s. viii–ix                      49 × 9 mm

Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 124

Prou and Chartraire 1900, no. 44, p. 149

8



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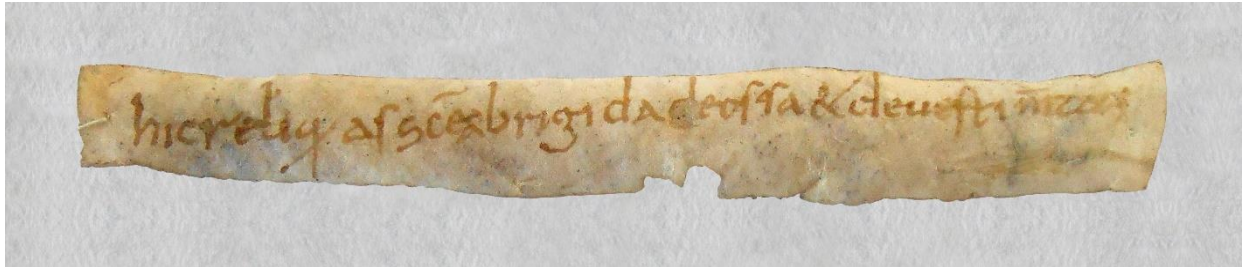
*hic habentur uestimenta s(an)c(t)i cerani et coimgelli.  
et s(an)c(t)i columbe. et alior(um) s(an)c(t)orum.*

Caroline minuscule, s. ix                      74 × 14 mm

Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 613

[unpublished]

9



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*hic reli(quia)as s(an)c(t)æ brigida de ossa et de uestim(en)ta*

Caroline minuscule, s. x?      79 × 10 mm  
 Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 49  
 Prou and Chartraire 1900, no. 37, p. 148

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*de cyppo in quo diaculatus*

Insular minuscule, s. viii–ix      69 × 8 mm  
 Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 76  
 ChLA XIX no. 682/92, p. 59



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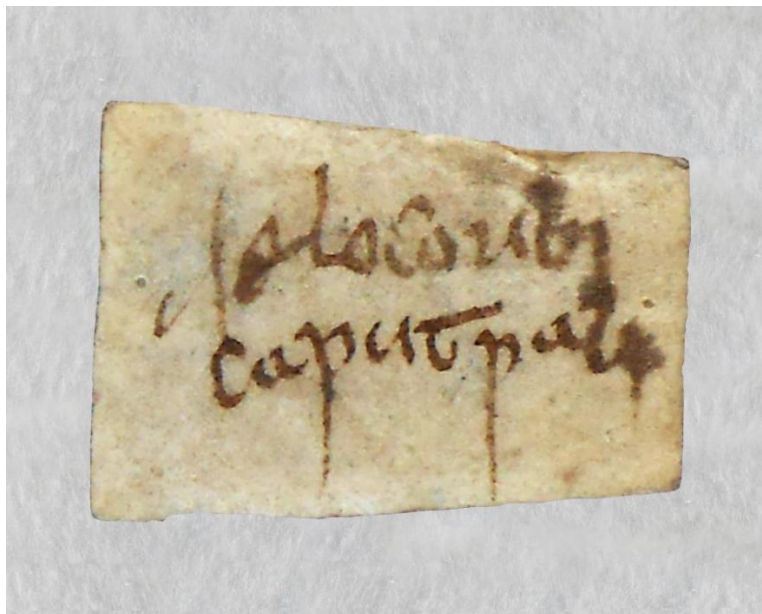
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*s(an)c(t)i petri et pauli et simonis in siria*

Insular-style minuscule, s. viii–ix                      90 × 9 mm  
Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 8  
Prou and Chartraire 1900, no. 118, p. 159

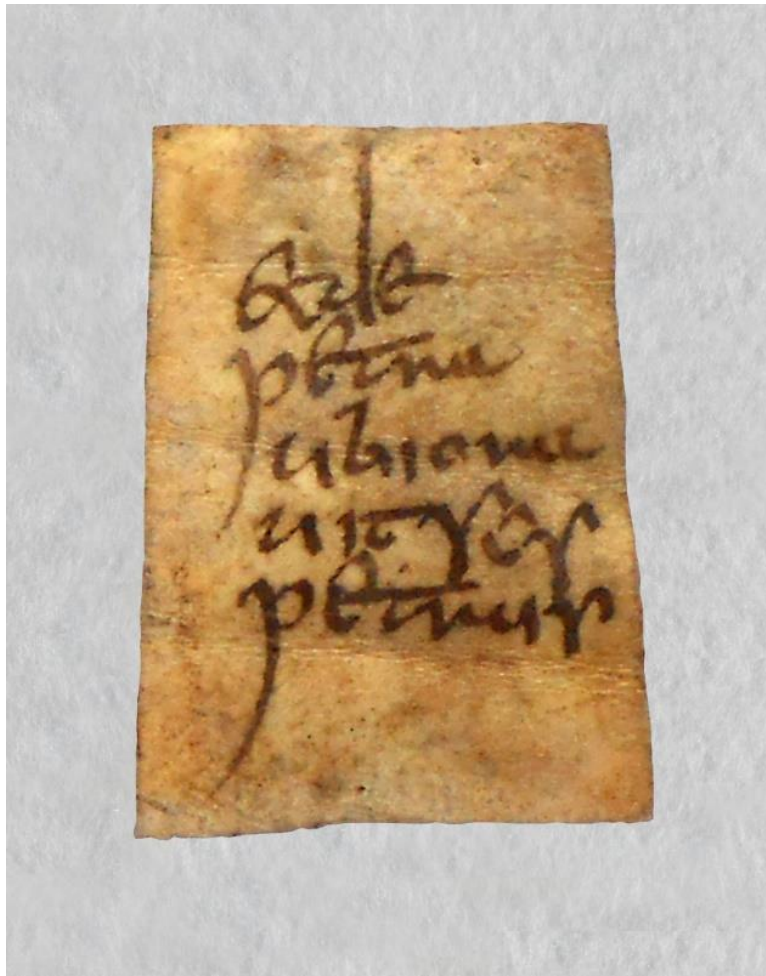
12



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*de loco ubi  
caput pali*

Insular-style minuscule, s. viii–ix                      29 × 20 mm  
Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 63  
*ChLA* XIX no. 682/65, p. 54



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*et de  
petra  
ubi ora  
uit s(an)c(tu)s  
petrus*

Insular-style minuscule, s. viii-ix                      23 × 33 mm  
Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 67  
*ChLA* XIX no. 682/71, p. 55

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*torhtburg torhtburg*

Insular minuscule, s. viii–ix                      50 × 7 mm  
Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 74  
*ChLA* XIX no. 682/94, p. 59

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*uingu misit*  
*hominib(us) ad s*  
*unnu husl*  
*and raecisl*  
*and oeli*  
*and d[.]et*  
*guirdisl*  
*in daem*  
*bind[.]dae*

Insular minuscule, s. viii-ix                      25 × 36 mm

Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 78

*ChLA* XIX no. 682/93, p. 59

Ganz and Goffart, 1990, p. 929 propose the following tentative translation: “Virgu [following Ker’s suggestion] sent to the men at s [perhaps Sens] the Eucharist and incense chains and oil and girdle in the bundle.”

16

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*[Reli]quiae s(an)c(t) paulini ep(iscop)i*

Minuscule, s. viii<sup>2</sup>                                      52 × 12 mm

Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale, J 623

*ChLA* XIX no. 682/67, p. 54

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*s(an)c(t)i osuualdi regis*

Chelles minuscule, s. viii<sup>ex</sup>

33 × 10 mm

AN, AB/XIX/3971, pièce 90

*ChLA* XVIII, no. 669/90, p. 100

<https://www.siv.archives->

[nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN\\_IR\\_052903/c-cofc1hcrw-1c6ft8pp8qyfm/FRAN\\_0005\\_203\\_L](https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN_IR_052903/c-cofc1hcrw-1c6ft8pp8qyfm/FRAN_0005_203_L)

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*de barba s(an)c(t)i bonifatii*

Insular minuscule, c. 800

59 × 9 mm

AN, AB/XIX/3971, pièce 23

*ChLA* XVIII, no. 669/23, p. 88

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19

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*s(an)c(t)i samsoni*

Half uncial, s. viii?

85 × 15 mm

AN, AB/XIX/3971, pièce 114

*ChLA* XVIII, no. 669/114, p. 104

<https://www.siv.archives->

[nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN\\_IR\\_052903/c-341b4oo0j--1xwtqxel8gt8/FRAN\\_0005\\_261\\_L](https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN_IR_052903/c-341b4oo0j--1xwtqxel8gt8/FRAN_0005_261_L)

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[...] *Victori mar*[...]

[...] *s(an)c(t)i Samsoni* [...]

Frankish minuscule, s. viii<sup>2</sup>

35 × 15 mm

AN, AB/XIX/3971, pièce 136

*ChLA* XVIII, no. 669/136, p. 107

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21

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*hic s(unt) reliquię .*

*s(an)c(t)i samson . ep(iscop)i . s(an)c(t)a aldegund*

Caroline minuscule, s. ix–x

50 × 15 mm

George 1989, no. 1, p. 45 with plate p. 49

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*reliquias s(an)c(t)i uurgonezlo*

Chelles minuscule, s. viii<sup>ex</sup>

71 × 14 mm

AN, AB/XIX/3971, pièce 137

*ChLA* XVIII, no. 669/137, p. 108

<https://www.siv.archives->

[nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN\\_IR\\_052903/c-49vtvma9-15maxp3u25jpo/FRAN\\_0005\\_315\\_L](https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/media/FRAN_IR_052903/c-49vtvma9-15maxp3u25jpo/FRAN_0005_315_L)

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