Lynette Olson, ed., *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*. Studies in Celtic History. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 219. £60.00. Hardback.

This collection of eight essays makes a useful contribution to scholarship on the *First Life of Samson* (identified with the acronym *VIS*), and thus to the study of the Insular milieu in the early medieval period generally, since this text is a valuable source for this time and place, if the date and context of its composition can be reconstructed correctly. In her introduction Lynette Olson sets out the state of the question clearly and leads the reader through the arguments about the date and stages of composition of *VIS*, and its relation to an earlier life, termed the *Vita primigenia* or the *primigenia*. Olson agrees with Sowerby in thinking it likely that the *Vita primigenia* was composed in a monastery founded by Samson in Cornwall probably by a member of Samson's family, and was reused to create the *VIS* by a monk writing in Dol. Olson pays careful attention to detail of both text and historical context and raises some interesting points, for instance in relation to the arrival of the bishop of a group of colonists into an area close to an existing see at Alet and the parallel with British colonists on the north-western coast of Spain.

Richard Sowerby draws attention to the way that Samson's family features prominently in the *VIS*, and how the hagiographer has to work hard to accommodate this with the norms of ascetic renunciation of family. Sowerby relates this to how nepotism is treated in the *VIS*, and suggests that its detailed narrative about the sincere conversion of Samson's father and mother may have been the result of the need felt by the family monasteries founded by Samson to defend themselves against criticism of nepotism, since Samson's family held interests in the monasteries and churches the saint founded. Sowerby locates the context for this in the monastery founded by Samson in Cornwall, headed by Samson's father Amon. Sowerby makes a convincing case that such a prominent theme in the *VIS*, taking up much space, could only have stemmed from the earlier life, because for a monk writing at Dol in the late seventh or early eighth century such issues would not have been a concern. Sowerby suggests a date of around 600 for the **Vita primigenia*. This context of criticism of the family in a Cornish milieu has the advantage of explaining the detail in the *VIS* concerning Samson's younger sister who left the ascetic life, which the author had Samson prophesy and so excuse; the purpose of this story is otherwise perhaps hard to fathom.

Joseph-Claude Poulin also addresses the question of the dates of the *VIS* and the *Vita primigenia, with analysis of the traces of reworking in *VIS*. His essay is in French with an English summary. He offers several tables setting out his analysis of the *VIS* as a 'system of information'; his conclusion is that a monk of Dol reused the **Vita primigenia* towards the end of the eighth century to create the VIS. Poulin stresses borrowings in the VIS from Julianus Pomerius' *Vita contemplativa* and from a homily by Gregory the Great, reused in a pseudo-Bedan homily; he uses these to date VIS, arguing that the *Vita contemplativa* was unknown in Gaul until at least the start of the ninth century (although Alcuin knew Pomerius at the end of the eighth century). Flobert saw the borrowing from a homily as derived from Gregory the Great, and given the communication between Columbanus and Gregory the Great, and between Columbanus and Breton monastic houses, this seems possible. Poulin closes his essay with a series of questions, and overall his discussion seeks to raise questions.

Caroline Brett's essay discusses the implications of the fact that the author of VIS and the author of the *Vita primigenia borrowed from the Vita Paterni written by Venantius

Fortunatus before 600 AD. Paternus was an ascetic who became bishop of Avranches, not far from Dol, and Brett highlights the similarities between the careers of the two ascetic bishops Paternus and Samson. Brett deftly explores the historical implications of the geographical proximity of the Gallo-Roman ascetic bishop and the immigrant British ascetic bishop; she makes a convincing case for a political and ecclesiastical context for the composition of VIS after the 'Columbanian revolution' in Frankish monasticism which led to royal patronage and land grants to monasteries, citing Dol's foundation Pental as an example of such a royal grant. The fact that *VIS* was composed after the introduction of royal patronage of monastic foundations meant that it was written from this new perspective, and this enabled Samson's foundations to be more successful than Paternus' in the long term.

In a thought-provoking essay Ian Wood relates the evidence about Columbanus, Gildas and Uinniau/Ninnian with the evidence for Samson to make a very useful contribution to our understanding of the early medieval history of Brittany; in so doing, he also corrects the historiographical tendency to privilege the impact of Irish ascetics on the Continent. Wood notes that Dol is not described as an episcopal seat in *VIS*, and Samson could have attended the Council of Paris as abbot of Dol (although the stress on Samson's *apostolic* status in *VIS* might perhaps best be interpreted as stress on his episcopal status). Wood draws attention to details about Columbanus' arrival on the Continent to say much about the presence of Britons and British ascetics on the Continent in the sixth century, arguing that Columbanus headed for the Morbihan because of the Britons there and Gildas' possible earlier presence there. Wood also draws out the implications of the fact that a Briton, Carantoc, was head of a religious foundation in the Vosges and was in a position to help Columbanus at Luxeuil. Where Brett compares Samson with Paternus, Wood compares Samson and Columbanus as two 'spiritual advisers of Merovingian royalty'.

Constant Mews highlights the claim in *VIS* that Samson was consecrated bishop by Peter, James and John, the apostolic founders of Rome, Jerusalem and Ephesus. Mews makes the case that this choice of personnel at Samson's consecration symbolised the universality of the Church in the East and the West, and she relates it to the eighth-century century text *Ratio de cursus* which was written to defend Irish and Gallican liturgies on the basis that they derived from the apostolic authority not only of the church of Peter but also that of Mark and John. Mews points out that the Ratio de cursus also derives its liturgy from Cassian and the monks of Lérins, through whom a link was made back to the desert Fathers. She then looks at the historical context for the Ratio de cursus, and gives an English translation of the text.

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