

Hysbysiad Hawlfraint

Dyma atgoffa staff a myfyrwyr y Brifysgol hwn fod hawlfraint yn gymwys ar y darn hwn ac ar y gwaith y mae'n dod ohono. Gwnaed y Copi Digidol hwn yn unol â thelerau Trwydded yr Asiantaeth Trwyddedu Hawlfraint, sy'n golygu eich bod yn cael:

- Gweld a lawr lwytho copi
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Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu argraffedig a roddir ichi neu a wnaed gennych yn ôl telerau'r Drwydded hon i'w ddefnyddio yng nghyd-destun y modiwl hwn neu'r cwrs astudio hwn. Cewch gadw'r copïau hyn ar ddiwedd y cwrs, ond dim ond at eich defnydd eich hun.

Rhaid i bob copi (gan gynnwys copïau electronig) gynnwys yr Hysbysiad Hawlfraint hwn a rhaid iddynt gael eu dinistrio neu eu dileu os bydd y Brifysgol yn gofyn ichi wneud hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn sy'n dderbyniol yn ôl darpariaethau cyfraith hawlfraint, ni cheir copïo, cadw na dosbarthu (gan gynnwys dosbarthu drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd y sawl sy'n dal yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ymadrodd sy'n cynnwys arlunydd a'r sawl sy'n creu gweithiau gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol ar y gwaith ac ni chaiff staff na myfyrwyr achosi na chaniatáu i'r gwaith gael ei anffurfio, ei lurgunio na'i addasu fel arall, na'i drin mewn unrhyw fodd difriol arall, a fyddai'n gwneud cam ag anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

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Enw'r Awdur: **Bitel, L.M.**

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Women's monastic enclosures in early Ireland: a study of female spirituality and male monastic mentalities

Lisa M. Bitel

Early Irish communities of religious women have never been adequately studied. However, Irish hagiography, unique among medieval saints' lives because of the incidental details it offers, provides much evidence about nuns and nunneries. Because the Irish saints' lives were written by monks, this information also reveals the monastic attitude towards nuns. Hagiography shows that many nunneries were established before the seventh century. But these communities began to disappear soon after, so that today only the location of a dozen or so are known to historians.

Women's religious communities disappeared for a combination of reasons, political, social, economic, and spiritual. Secular society was hostile towards these communities from the start because they consumed a resource considered precious by men: unmarried women. Male ecclesiastics held an ambiguous attitude towards nuns and nunneries. They believed that women could attain salvation as well as themselves. Yet the entire church hierarchy of Ireland was dominated by supposedly celibate men, whose sacral functions and ritual celibacy were

threatened by women, especially women's sexuality. Hagiography expressed this threat with the theme of sinful, lustful nuns; even the spirituality of women vowed to chastity and poverty was suspect. This attitude affected the structure, organization, and eventually the survival of women's monastic enclosures in early Ireland.

During the past sixty years, medieval historians and Celticists have begun to rescue early Irish monks and their monasteries from obscurity and to place them in a visible historical context. John Ryan has described the spiritual origins of Irish monasticism and the formal rituals of monastic life (1931). Kathleen Hughes has reconstructed the complex political and familial relationships of the monks (1966). Others have also sought to chronicle the suspiciously secular political activities of various houses, and to chart the monastic cycles of decadence and reform. Archaeologists have defined the shape of monastic walls and catalogued the contents of monastic trash heaps from sites around Ireland. Hadcock and Gwynn have tried valiantly to locate hundreds of monastic sites mentioned by the annals and other sources, a great many of which remain today as sacred places, marked either by parish churches or by National Monument plaques (1970).

However, few have thought to search for the nuns of early Ireland. Written sources prove the existence of communities of religious women. Why has no one described Irish female monasticism, or tried to analyze the role of the women's monastic community in early Irish society? Perhaps because the nuns and their religious enclosures, while appearing frequently in the earliest writ-

ten sources, began to disappear from some of the documents as early as the eighth or ninth century. No plaques mark the sites of the hundreds of pre-Norman nunneries mentioned in the Irish saints' lives; the exact locations of only a dozen or so are known to us today (Hadcock and Gwynn 1970:20ff., 307ff.). Where did these communities go? Many seem to have been dissolved or absorbed by men's communities between the ninth century and the late twelfth, when the Normans established their own nunneries. The problem of disappearing nunneries and invisible nuns is a perplexing one. Hughes has argued that women's lack of property prevented their establishing enduring communities (Hughes 1972:234-5). But a combination of factors, demographic, social, cultural, and above all, spiritual, was more likely responsible.

The sources for early Ireland used most often by historians, such as monastic annals and genealogies, only briefly mention religious women and their monasteries. The laws and ecclesiastical penitentials and canons also contain relatively few references, and these are often contradictory. Of course, all of these texts provide some information, from an interesting variety of perspectives, about religious women; but this information is especially useful in conjunction with hagiography. The corpus of Irish hagiography offers abundant detail about the way religious women lived, felt, and thought. The saints' lives suggest that a considerable number of women in early Ireland devoted themselves to celibacy and communal living.

The purpose of Irish hagiographers was to glorify their saintly patrons. In doing so, the scholar monks surrounded their fifth- or

sixth-century subjects with realistic detail of their own, later milieux, in order to persuade their monastic readers and, indirectly, their lay audiences, to believe in the wonders of the saints. In fact, Kenney has suggested that the authors of the saints' lives lacked the historical imagination necessary to describe anything but a true picture of the hagiographers' own age (Kenney 1929:297). The lives provide an enormous amount of incidental information about monasteries, their inhabitants, and surrounding society, mostly of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries.¹

It is difficult to use this evidence to determine the historical identities of particular women mentioned in the hagiography. It is also hard to locate the many obscure places in which the nuns, both saintly and less perfect, are supposed to have lived. Many Celticists believe that because of these difficulties, the *vitae* are largely useless for social, economic, or cultural historical analysis. Pádraig Ó Riain, for example, treats the lives as retroactive legal and political charters, rather than scenes from monastic life (Ó Riain 1977, 1983).

But whatever function the hagiographers intended the lives to serve, they serve another for the historian. It becomes clear after reading many *vitae* that several sorts of evidence are available in the texts. The lives contain outrageous claims to jurisdiction and dues by the saints' communities; these provide the charter information for scholars such as Ó Riain. Much incidental information concerns the material life of the monks, where they lived, what they ate, what types of labor they performed, how they prayed, and so forth; this is the stuff of the *Kulturgeschichte* for which Kenney suggested we use

the lives. However, the lives also describe the supernatural character and deeds of the saints. Hagiographers simultaneously reported the most greedy of property claims, the most homely monastic customs, and the most wondrous of saintly miracles.

All three sorts of information are integral to a discussion of the ecclesiastical world. My use of the *vitae* must include an analysis of how female ecclesiastics lived in material terms, but also the hagiographers' interpretation of that life, as reflected in the political and supernatural aspects of the texts. By analyzing the repetitive themes of the lives and gathering details of the typical, we can begin to understand the material world inside the female monastic enclosure. By considering these themes and details from the point of view of the monks, a point of view that was both Irish and Christian as well as thoroughly male, we can begin to place the women's communities in the larger context of Irish ecclesiastical society, and early Irish society in general.

The hagiographic canon shows that the experience of women inside the Irish monastic enclosure was different from that of men. The structure and organization of women's communities were unique. This directly affected the location of women's enclosures. The functions of women's communities, while seemingly similar to those of men, were distinguished by the fact that life in a religious community was the only legitimate alternative to married life that free women in early Ireland had. And the attitudes of Church and society toward women's communities were different from their attitudes toward male monasteries, because of their ambiguous ideas about women's spirituality. Although the male

clerics initially inspired the creation of women's communities, their doubts about women's spirituality eventually contributed to the disappearance of such communities.

An important difference between male and female religious communities concerned property. A nun or monk in early Ireland needed a monastery. To create a monastery he or she needed land for a walled enclosure in which to live and pray, and also fields to farm. By the seventh or eighth century, there was probably little desirable wilderness left unclaimed; archaeologists have shown that monks did not always seek out isolated, uninhabited places for settlement. However, the brothers were sometimes content to build their enclosures in the bogs and forests that repelled the more sociable laity (Hurley 1982:307-11; Smyth 1982:28-32). But the obsession with donations and endowments in all types of ecclesiastical literature suggests that monks and nuns generally were forced to seek land from those who already owned it (Binchy 1955:66-7; Bieler 1975:104, 144, 182; Waserschleben 1885:113, 116, 117; Heist 1965:125-6, 214; Bieler 1979:123-79). Even for men this caused theoretical difficulties, because land supposedly belonged to family units, not to individuals. According to formal laws, a man who wanted to endow a religious community had to gain the permission of the people who shared ownership of his land, even if they were his heirs. Like all the tribal aspects of early Irish society, this custom was probably already eroded by the early period of Christianization; however, his relatives continued to cite their property rights when a man attempted to alienate land (Binchy 1954:58; Stokes 1887:162.10; Heist 1965:168).



Figure 1. Map of Ireland showing sites mentioned in the text: (1) Ard macha, (2) Cluain eóis, (3) Cell sléibhe, (4) Fochard, (5) Tamnach?, (6) Cluain bronaig, (7) Cluain moccu nois, (8) Cluain ferta, (9) Saiger, (10) Cill dara, (11) Glenn dá locha, (12) Iní cathaig, (13) Cell Íte.

Of course, Irish families were quick to incorporate monastic property into the established system of landholdings. As early as the seventh century, monastic estates were held and inherited much as secular property (Hughes 1966:157–72; Ó Corráin 1973). They were actually prime real estate, as suggested by the dynastic conflicts over them recorded in the annals. Not only did they yield the crops, livestock, and rent of secular holdings, but they also brought in religious dues of all kinds as well as endowments and donations. In addition, they offered their owners positions of high status (Doherty 1984; MPL 72:790). Still, the ecclesiastical literature continued to reveal a series of moral themes related to monastic property and family control of it down to the very latest hagiography – one of the many contradictions between spiritual ideals and material reality prevalent in the lives.

A woman faced greater problems in acquiring land of her own, since the land she might legally inherit was only life-interest land, and not her own absolute property to be passed on to her heirs. A woman could be given land as a gift or she could obtain it through limited rights of contract; these sorts of land she could alienate as she pleased, at least according to formal law. In fact, the eight-century *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh show a woman doing exactly this. The *Additamenta* described in lengthy detail how the nun Cummen obtained an estate through devious but legal trading, which she presumably donated to Patrick's church at Armagh (Thurneysen and Binchy 1936; Bieler 1979:174).

The hagiographers never explicitly mentioned men's endowments of women's com-

munities, although it seems most likely that many communities were created through this process. Tírechán, writing in the seventh century, referred to numerous churches and hermitages inhabited by women, but he never explained how women got there. For example, Mathona, sister of Patrick's successor Benignus (Benén), took the veil from Patrick and "went out across the mountain of the sons of Ailill and established a free church at Tamnach ..." (*et exiit per montem filiorum Ailello et plantavit aeccliesiam liberam hi Tamnuch ...*). Who gave her a place at Tamnach, some family of the Uí Ailella? Or did Mathona just squat somewhere in Co. Sligo and establish a community? Tírechán made another reference to a woman called Laloca, Patrick's sister, whom Patrick *posuit* in Ardd Senlis (Bieler 1979:140–7). But where did he find land and house to put her in? Someone must have provided land and labor to support communities of nuns in early Ireland, for not only the *Itinerary* of Tírechán, but all the saints' lives abound with references to such communities. The hagiographers took it for granted that nunneries littered the Irish landscape, and that everyone who read their works would know how women found places to settle, and how they attained ownership or usufruct of the land.²

The monks have left a few clues to this problem of the endowment of women's communities. It seems that the interests of the kin-group influenced both the structure and organization of women's communities, and thus their locations. Women celibates, unlike their brothers, remained close to their families and home territories. For men it was different, at least according to the lives. Like Brendan or Columcille, men went out

into unknown territory to build monasteries. They sought exile from their earthly families in order to create pseudo-familial communities of monks; there they might concentrate on heavenly matters and avoid the worldly concerns of inheritance and political conflict. In fact, St Molua was advised by a friendly king that his house would never prosper if he settled in his own *patria*, for "a cleric does not receive honor in his own homeland, and your kinfolk, who keep out foreign monks, will rule alone in your monastery forever" (*Clericus enim in sua patria honorem non habet et gens tua sola, reiectis peregrinis, in tuo loco semper regnabunt*, Heist 1965:137).

The annals clearly show that monasteries in the period of the *vitae* were frequently occupied by members of the local ruling family. The ideal of the pilgrim hermit was an exception to the rule of tradition. But the hagiographers never lost the ideal, and continued to emphasize the theme of the saint who cut himself off from his family and homeland to concentrate on his holy mission among strangers. The ideal was no less important to the monastic mentality merely because it lacked practical reality.

The hagiographers hardly considered the possibility of females carrying their missions into alien territory, with the exception of Tamnach, mentioned earlier. Religious women remained close to home and kin. For years after she declared her celibate vocation, Monenna lived at home with her parents, but 'apart' (*seorsum*), because there were no nunneries nearby. She built her first monastery at Fochard in her home territory of Conaille Muirtheimne. Even her major house was established near *cog-nationem propriam*, and near enough the place

where her brother Ronan lived that she could send him on frequent errands (Ulster Society for Medieval Latin Studies, hereafter USMLS, 1979-82:252-9). Ciarán's mother, Liadain, lived close to her son in their home territory of Osraige, where she and her women spent their days *vitam sanctorum imitantes* (Heist 1965:347-8). Even when hagiographers did not make it clear whether religious women lived in their native provinces, we find that women lived in family groups. For example, Finnian's mother and sister lived together in a community near his monastery (Heist 1965:21). Daig mac Cairill taught the three daughters of Colum *literarum scientiam*, and founded a monastery for the three of them (Heist 1965:392). Tirechán mentioned several communities where sisters lived together, or where a sister lived with her brother (Bieler 1979:132-3, 145-7, 153-5). Sometimes women lived near enough their saintly male relations that the latter could visit and oversee their foundations. Fintan's mother sent for her son to visit her and his sisters so frequently that he ordered her to stop bothering him, threatening to go into exile in Britain (Heist 1965:250). Other men were willing to help their female relations, like Ciarán, or Cainnech and Ruadán, whom the hagiographers portrayed as enjoying their sisters' hospitality (Heist 1965:162, 190).

Women's communities seem to have been dependent upon men. Of course, nunneries needed male priests and male laborers. But women usually lived in enclosures set up in their kin's territory. Otherwise they lived in houses dependent on male monasteries, run by their brothers, sons, or other male relations. The strength of these familial ties

suggests that women may have been allowed to enter enclosures near home only under certain conditions; when, for instance, family land was not needed for more pressing purposes, and when the family had more unmarried women than they could dispose of. As Hughes has suggested, perhaps this is why so few names of women's communities remain to us today. Women may have set up houses on family land for the duration of their lives, gathering a few neighbor women to them; the community would have been dispersed at the founder's death, and the land reverted to her family (Hughes 1972:234-5).

The hagiographers were familiar with the problem of disappearing nunneries. Daig, Mochuda, and Ailbe were all offered churches and land by communities of nuns (Heist 1965:126, 392; Plummer 1910a:185). The reverse happened to Fintan; he gave up his establishment in Eile to a virgin named Emer and her five companions, believing her argument that he could more easily build a new place with his fifty strong youths than she could, with her five weak nuns. But he was not gracious about it, prophesying that the place would not be remembered as Emer's but as the place of the monk named Taille, that is, Tech Tailli (Plummer 1910b:230; Heist 1965:250-1). Clearly, by the time the lives were written down in the eighth or ninth century, the transformation of a nunnery into a male monastery was a phenomenon well known to people in early Ireland.

The Irish knew that they made it more difficult for women to establish or enter religious enclosures than it was for men. Of course, some men of high nobility had political responsibilities that prevented them

from considering the monastery. Some of the lower classes were bound into economic dependence of various types, or by duties to produce families and pass on property. But much of the surplus male population could probably have disposed of itself in religious houses. Women, however, do not seem to have been legally allowed to choose a religious life for themselves. Hagiographers and their readers were aware of the formal laws and extra-legal sanctions that prevented women from selecting their own careers. The earliest laws laid down the theory that women were not legally independent. As the *Díre* text put it precisely (Thurneysen and Binchy 1936:213-4; Quin 1913-76 M:191):

Her father watches over her when she is a girl; her *cétmuinter* watches over her when she is the wife of a *cétmuinter*; her sons watch over her when she is a woman with children; her kin watch over her when she is a woman of the kin [i.e., with no other natural guardian, father, husband, or son;] the Church watches over her when she is a woman of the Church ...

The hagiographers often depicted women being donated to religious foundations not by themselves, but by their fathers; that is, moving from the guardianship of their fathers to that of the church. The legal parallel to marriage in this practice is obvious.

The monks who wrote the lives also knew that their church laws urged women to become brides of Christ. For example, the *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, compiled in Ireland in the eighth century, was extremely enthusiastic about women remaining religious virgins after the age of twelve. The *Collectio* also recommended that widows take the veil as penitents (Wasserschleben 1885:180-3; McAll 1980:7-9).

Caught between the demands of the churches that they devote themselves to celibacy, and the demands of society that they marry and produce heirs and laborers, the decision of women to become nuns seems to have caused frequent controversy. Sometimes their guardians had other plans for women, especially noblewomen, who were not only potential mothers and mistresses, but also useful political tools in the network of political and social alliances. Some male guardians of women displayed violent opposition to women joining the Church. Hagiographers knew of this complex situation and took it for granted, for references to it and symbols of it recur in the lives.

Patrick wrote in the fifth century of young *virgines* who refused marriage to pursue careers in the Church, "not with their fathers' consent; no, they endure persecution and their own parents' unfair reproaches, and yet their number grows larger and larger" (Hood 1978:31). Likewise, when Brigit's kinfolk wished her to marry, according to Cogitosus, she had no means of refusal except to flee (MPL 72:778). The ninth-century Irish life of Brigit enlarged on this early tradition and helps us to understand why families opposed to loss of their daughters to the Church. When Brigit rejected a prospective husband, "her brothers grieved at her depriving them of the bride-price" (*Ba saeth lia brathrea a gait di-si in tinscrae erru*). Her male kin were so unhappy at Brigit's depriving them of all the potential economic, social, and political returns which giving her in marriage would bring that she had to put out one of her eyes to escape marriage (Ó hAodha 1978:5).

Other women had to go to extremes to avoid marriage. Tírechán wrote of two daughters of Lóegaire mac Néill, king of the Uí Néill, who met Patrick at a well one morning and asked to see the face of his God. Despite the efforts of their father's druids to prevent it, the women were baptized and immediately died as true brides of Christ (Bieler 1979:138-40, 142-5). In lives of Tigernach and Mochta, two princesses forced to marry died before their virginity could be fouled; both these women were resurrected and made nuns (Heist 1965:109, 397). It seems unlikely that a great many early Irish noblewomen suffered death and resurrection before being allowed to devote themselves to religion, but the theme of parental objection is too obvious in the saints' lives to be ignored. The upper strata of Irish society must have valued their women's social functions too highly to allow many of them to sit, as they saw it, unproductively behind the walls of the sacred enclosure.

The theme of violent parental objection is related to other, more disturbing themes in the lives. The hagiographers wrote frequently of the abduction and murder of virgins. For instance, all recensions of the life of Ciarán contain what must have been a popular abduction story. Bruinech, a nun and fosterling of Ciarán's mother, was kidnapped by Dímma, king of the Uí Fiachach. In the earliest version, Dímma kidnapped and raped the woman, and when Ciarán miraculously rescued her, the king demanded restitution. The woman had been made pregnant by Dímma, although Ciarán miraculously aborted her foetus. Bruinech died of fear when Dímma came to get her a second time. Ciarán eventually discouraged Dímma and revived Bruinech, who settled

down to a life of quiet nunhood. The most telling detail in this episode is Dímma's demand for restitution after Ciarán retrieved Bruinech from him. Dímma believed himself to have some legal right to Bruinech, a right which the hagiographer apparently understood since he included it in his tale (Heist 1965:347-9).

The hagiographers wrote of the murder of virgins, revealing an even more violent social objection to nuns. Three women of the community of Druimm Ard were decapitated by thieves while carrying provisions to their monastery (Heist 1965:172-3; Plummer 1910a:38). Colmán of Druimm Mór revived a decapitated virgin (Heist 1965:359, 223). Two women on pilgrimage to Coemgen at Glendalough were stripped and beheaded by thieves (Plummer 1922a:164-5). The three virgin daughters of *Erclay* were killed by *latrones* and raised again by Daig mac Cairill.³ The women were always resurrected by saints and the criminals usually – though not always – punished. The clerics of Ireland clearly understood a social situation which included a dangerous antagonism toward religious women.

As David Herlihy has pointed out, early Irish society was characterized by resource polygyny, a system in which only the elite males acquired enough resources to support several women in their households (Herlihy 1985: chap. 2; Plummer 1910a:206-7). This system left some men from the lower social orders without women. The effects of such a system in early Ireland are clear; nobles and freemen kept wives, concubines, and female servants, while many unfreemen worked as single dependents of the great households, both lay and monastic. *Latrones*,

raiders, and rustlers plagued the early Irish. These were castouts who roamed the wilderness taking cattle and other resources where they could (Herlihy 1985; Sharpe 1979). True, *latrones* killed monks and layfolk as well as nuns, although in the *vitae* monks were certainly decapitated less often than nuns. But the very existence of such bands of men suggests a society in which women were scarce and inequitably distributed. This, along with the frequent references in the lives to abductors and killers of women, points to a society which fought over its women because it valued them highly, and which often opposed women's religious functions.

The hagiographers, at least, understood such opposition; the theme of violence in the lives reflected a monastic awareness of the situation of Irish laymen, who were trying to maintain control over their precious women. In the lives, the *latrones* represented not so much the objections of respectable society, but the objections of criminals and bad Christians. Any father who tried to prevent his daughter from becoming a nun committed a sin equal to that of King Dímma, the abductor of Bruinech; he committed it from the same principle of opposition, and deserved the same exemplary punishment as Dímma received. The lives were intended, after all, as lessons and warnings for Christians. From the over-protective parents of Patrick's time to the decapitators of later *vitae*, the opposition of the Irish to nunneries was a thoroughly familiar theme in the religious literature.

Despite secular society's idea that nunneries were socially and economically unproductive, the functions of women's communities seem to have been largely similar

to those of male monasteries. Life inside the religious enclosure was primarily one of meditation, prayer, ritual, and domestic labor (USMLS 1979:82; 428–31). Women's houses had no functions specific to themselves. Cogitosus described in detail the great church of Kildare; how the male members of the double community entered on one side, and the women on the other, how the church was partitioned and decorated, and the altars arranged. The church must have been very grand and meant for extensive use. Mention of the hours of prayer recurs in the lives as incidental references for other activities. Some episodes described the prayers of the nuns in more detail. For instance, Conchubranus recounted how Monenna and her nuns were at prayer in their church when the normal signal for silence at the end of prayer was given with a knock. Monenna interrupted the proceedings; it seemed that their prayers could not pass through the roof to heaven as usual, because some sin of the sisters was preventing it (USMLS 1979–82:434–7). Íte's hagiographer described how the monks of Clonmacnois came to her house in Limerick to say mass for her (Plummer 1910b:122–3). Ciarán used to travel miraculously to Ross Banagher and back on Christmas Day, to say mass for his foster-mother (Plummer 1922a:108–9). Women, like men, prayed for their own meditative purposes, to heal the sick, to provide sustenance for the poor, to protect their communities or their secular neighbors, to retrieve the souls of relatives or friends from hell. In return for extensive donations, Íte and her nuns arranged with the saint's cousins to pray for their father's soul, and successfully promoted him from hell to heaven (Plummer 1910b:126–7).

Women also prayed over their food before they ate it. They prayed over sinners to drive out demons. Much could be written about the importance of prayer and ritual gesture in the daily lives of nuns and monks in Ireland.

The hagiographers never mentioned any parish functions of nunneries. But laywomen and men visited the women's communities for a variety of reasons. Cogitosus described the bustling *civitas* of Kildare (MPL 72:790):

Et quis enumerare potest diversas turbas et innumerabiles populos de omnibus provinciis confluentes: alii ob epularum abundantiam, alii languis propter sanitates, alii ad spectaculum turbarum; alii cum magnis donis venientes ad solemnitates natiuitatis sanctae Brigidae ...

And who can list the chaotic crowds and countless folk flocking in from all the provinces: some for the abundance of food, others feeble for their health, others just to look at the mobs; others coming with great gifts to the festival of Saint Brigit ...

Poor people used to visit Monenna every day, knowing that at Cell Sléibhe (Killevy) they could always pick up free food and possibly clothing. Just as many came to give a gift to take; people came to Monenna *ut magnam etiam donis et muneribus cotidie ditaretur* ... ("so that she was also daily enriched by great gifts and presents ...") (USMLS 1979–82:120–1). Women's monasteries were also refuges. Widows retired inside the monastic enclosure. St Fintan's mother, for instance, lived with three of her daughters, one a virgin and two *mulieres penitentes* (Heist 1965:250). The women who lived under Bishop Ibar's jurisdiction included not only virgins and widows, but queens and married women. Cell Sléibhe hosted penitents

one of whom sinned by keeping the shoes of an ex-lover had given her (USMLS 1979–82:122–5). The lives do not suggest why women moved from the secular world to the monastic enclosure. The frequent mention of widows suggests that it was a common alternative to remarriage; certainly, the canons urged widows to choose the nunnery over a second husband (Wasserschleben 1885:181–2). Probably, as on the Continent, women's houses became refuges-cum-prisons, where useless, undesirable (in both senses of the word), and dangerous women were put. This might have included ex-wives, ex-queens, and extra princesses (Wemple 1981:166–74; Bergin 1970:313–14).

Women's communities seem to have supported themselves through farming and donations, as did male communities. However, in male communities, the monks themselves performed much of the manual labor to provide food for the community, at least in the early centuries of monasticism or in the smaller communities. In women's houses, the heavy agrarian labor and other traditionally male occupations such as construction of buildings seems to have been delegated to servants, tenants, or professionals. A frequent theme in the lives was the request by women to male patrons for plough animals for their farmers. Maedóc visited the daughters of Áed mac Cairpri to bring two oxen to them, *ut pro virginum victu ararent* ("so that they might plough for the sustenance of the virgins"). When Maedóc over-generously donated one of the beasts to a female leper, the virgins' ploughmen asked plaintively, *Vir Dei, quid faciemus? Quia unus bos est nobis ita necessarius ut sine eo arare non possimus* ("Man of God, what shall we

do? For we need an ox so badly that we cannot plough without it" (Heist 1965:240). Survival by agriculture was a difficult business, impossible without proper equipment.

St Sciath of Fert Scéithe asked Ailbe for a more precious gift. She wanted to borrow his *scriptor* to write out the Gospels for her community (Heist 1965:127). Many women's communities included schools or libraries as well as churches and farms. The communities of Íte and Monenna exchanged books. In fact, Monenna herself was so good at psalms and divine studies that *cito legens et firmiter lecta mente retinens, lectio augebatur de die in diem* ("reading quickly and keeping what she read firmly in her mind, her reading advanced daily ...") (USMLS 1979–82:120–3, 130–1). Finnian's sister, Rígnach, sent her nun Lassar to learn letters from Finnian, then sent the woman to start a new community in her homeland (Heist 1965:102). Íte educated her nephew Mochoemóc for twenty years *in moribus honestis scientiaque literarum* (Plummer 1910b:118). Women's communities were places of learning, keeping books and passing on the scholarly tradition. We do not know whether any of the hagiographers, poets, and scholars who recorded the corpus of Irish literature and learning were women, since no woman ever left her name on a document. But on the Continent many manuscripts attributed to men have been shown to be the products of women's hands; perhaps this will be the case in Ireland as well (Wemple 1981:179–81; Bischoff 1957:395–401).

Women's houses filled a variety of other social needs. Like male monasteries, the walls of a nunnery enclosed a sacred space which not only surrounded the nuns but ref-

ugees and the valuables of lay neighbors as well. Kildare, according to Cogitosus, protected the *thesaurus* of kings, with both its walls and the sanctions of the saint (MPL 72:790; Mac Airt 1951:312–3). Other, more obscure houses protected treasure. A nun friend of Bishop Áed got into trouble because she and her hermitage had been entrusted with a rod of gold by a local king. One of the king's enemies came to her community and stole the rod, casting it into the sea. Fortunately for the nun, Áed miraculously recovered the rod, preserving her reputation and the sanctity of her house (Heist 1965:177). When Aldfrith of Northumbria decided to finish his visit to Conall of the Southern Uí Néill, who needed to find a parting gift for his friend, Conall's soldiers advised him to raid Cell Sléibhe because it was full of riches. Conall was well aware of the sanctions guarding Monenna's house, but nonetheless, he encouraged his steward to rob the place (USMLS 1979–82:268–71; Smyth 1982:120).

Women's houses were guesthouses for travelling bishops and abbots. Abbesses had to scurry to find food and drink for their important guests, for the lives often mention a community's lack of provisions for hospitality (Heist 1965:171, 173–74; Plummer 1910b:254; Ó hAodha 1978:7, 9, 16; MPL 72:779–80; USMLS 1979–82:118–21). The houses played a political role in Irish society too. Women often treated with local rulers for the release of hostages, just as did abbots. A certain holy virgin named Camna, with Colman's aid, liberated her people from heavy dues to Brendan mac Cairpri (Heist 1965:222–3). Íte was the *matrona* of the Uí Conaill Gabra, and prayed for their victory in battle (Plummer 1910b:117–18).

Mothers often sought out female saints or abbesses to help free their sons from one or another sort of bondage (Plummer 1910b:128). Kildare must have played an unusually important role in Leinster politics, because it was the only women's community to appear with frequency in the annals.

Women made their communities into ritual centers, sanctuaries, farms, and proto-urban centers, schools and libraries, guesthouses and political bases. The creation of that second career choice, nunhood, by the arrival of Christianity in Ireland must have caused a major shift in Irish social structures and values.⁴ Never before had Ireland seen such a thing as a land-owning, legal unit, complete with families and specialized social functions, composed entirely of women. Before Christianity, Irish women had no choice but to accept the roles assigned to them of legal or extra-legal sexual partners, of childbearers and nurturers, of farm workers and, if they were of high status, of heads of households. Even when communal celibacy became an option, all women did not get to take it. But some braved the opposition of their guardians and some gained permission to leave the traditional structures of Irish society and enter the world of the monastic enclosure. There they could exercise powers nowhere else available to Irish women; they could organize and take part in important rituals, they could run their own farms and estates to a certain extent, and they could play many of the political and social roles filled by male clerics. Most significantly, they could act out, in ritual and prayer, a spiritual and philosophical commitment. The importance of Christianity in providing

an alternative lifestyle for early Irishwomen has been underestimated as, I suspect, has its effects on the lives of laywomen.

Christian values affected the place of women in Irish society in more subtle ways than offering them power and sanctuary within the enclosure. In fact, Christian ideals placed Irish women at a disadvantage in the male ecclesiastical world. Before women could enter the sacred walls, their society had to believe them capable and worthy. In most of its historical contexts, including early Ireland, Christianity had fostered an ambiguous attitude towards female spirituality. St Paul himself, a popular authority among Irish ecclesiastics, was unclear on the subject; while he advised the Corinthians to let their "women keep silence in the churches", he reminded the Galatians that there was "neither male nor female" in Christ Jesus (Cor. 14:34; Gal. 3:28).

The positive aspect of the ambiguous Christian attitude came as a surprise to the Irish, whose own cultural traditions maintained less ambivalence concerning women (Sjoestedt 1940:34–51; Ross 1967:204–33; Ní Bhrolcháin 1980:12–19; Mac Cana 1980:9). Irish society regarded its women as a precious resource, but not by any means as members with extensive rights. The laws, with their restrictions on women's freedom and property, reinforced this mentality. As the partners of elite males, women were valuable. The highest ranks of wives were accorded certain rights of divorce and property-holding, which has misled scholars as great as MacNeill into believing that Irish women enjoyed an almost equal status with men (MacNeill 1935:64–6; Ó Corráin 1979). But only a minority of women en-

joyed such rights, if indeed the laws can be trusted to reflect actual custom; and even rights of divorce and property do not necessarily imply freedom and high status. A woman's value to Irish society, reflected in her honour-price, was equal to a man's for a very short period: her first seven years. When she turned from infant to girl, her price was calculated according to her father's. When at twelve she became a woman, her price plummeted in comparison to her brother's (McAll 1980:7). Women had very limited rights of contract, subject to their male guardians' permission, of witness, of gift-giving, and of inheritance. We have seen what difficulties women encountered when trying to choose their life's occupations.

Thus, the native Irish attitude was sometimes confirmed by the Church's ambivalent position on women, sometimes contradicted. As good Christians, the hagiographers and their brother monks sometimes promoted a positive religious image of women, but they just as often degraded the female characters of their *vitae*.

Many women became renowned for their sanctity through the hagiographic canon, as well as through popular worship. The four most famous religious women of early Ireland are the only four whose *vitae* survive: Brigit, Íte, Monenna, and Samthann. Many more religious virgins appeared in the martyrologies and saints' lives, and in related religious poetry. The most important evidence for positive female spirituality is the quiet evidence of these anonymous women. Hundreds of women, with and without names, declared their spiritual vocation by maintaining celibate communities scattered across Ireland. Each of the female saints

founded several communities for women. Nuns often appeared as incidental characters in hagiographical episodes. References to nuns usually included such adjectives as *sancta* or *cráibdech*. Clearly, women were common and active participants in the Christian world of the monks and their saints.

The positive aspect of female spirituality appeared to male hagiographers in two ways. Some women were deemed holy for imitating men. The hagiographers never specified which virtues were male and which were female. It is possible that they conceived of no sexual distinction in virtue, and thought of saintly characteristics in general. However, the majority of Irish saints were male; an even larger proportion of *vitae* were of male saints. The monasteries which produced most if not all of the *vitae*, the annals, and other religious texts were inhabited by males. The hierarchy of the churches in Ireland and abroad was male. The bishop of Rome, the creators of the Christian canon, Jesus himself, were all male. Clearly, even the model for general saintliness was male. By adhering to the male model, women could also become saintly.

For example, St Íte warned her foster-son about consorting with nuns like herself and ruining his reputation (Plummer 1910b:119). Íte also practiced asceticism in the manner of the great male saints, such as Coemgen and Ciarán. She wasted away from not eating, less fit for fasting than her brothers, until an angel came to her and promised to bring her lunch every day (Plummer 1910b:119). Hagiographers depicted women saints as having many of the same virtues as male saints. Íte, like Brigit

and Monenna and Samthann, was a healer (Plummer 1910b:119–20, 122; MPL 72:781; USMLS 1979–82:130–1, 136–7; Ó hAodha 1978:6–10, 12–13, 15–16). Like men, holy women were prophets who knew when people would die and always had advanced warning of guests (Plummer 1910b:119, 121, 124–5, 127–8; Heist 1965:107–8). Women could also curse as well as male saints; Brigit permanently withered the orchard of an uncharitable nun with a few words (Ó hAodha 1978:12). Monenna avoided the other sex; she refused to look at men. If she needed to go out into society, she went at night, wearing a veil. Monenna also participated in the tradition of blessed absentmindedness initiated by Cainnech and other men. Monenna was forgetful of the world around her to the point of starving and dehydrating her nuns (USMLS 1979–82:120–3, 135–8). St Brigit was the only Irishwoman to have clerical functions. Her seventh-century biographer described how she preached to crowds assembled for that purpose. She was also the only woman consecrated a bishop, though by accident as many of the saints' lives mention; but this, her later hagiographers were quick to point out, was due to a mistake on the part of Bishop Mel, who mixed up the ritual (Ó hAodha 1978:6). These women were portrayed with the same virtues as men in order to honor them; to be more of a saint was, in early Ireland, to be less of a woman.

But women managed to practice some, particularly feminine virtues as well, and female saints performed some unique miracles inside their sacred enclosures. While celibacy was a desirable virtue for the medieval Christian elite, it was the definitive virtue of every sort of religious

woman, from penitent widow to powerful saint. Unlike men's houses, women's communities were by definition celibate. This is not to imply that male saints were less chaste than female saints; only that the dynastic control of monasteries appeared far less frequently in women's communities, and there it took a different pattern than in men's houses. No evidence exists to show that mothers passed their functions as abbesses to their daughters, as fathers passed abbacies to sons (Hughes 1966:157–72; Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983:232, 238, 242, 246, 250, 258, 260). Without a firm place in the kin-dominated economic and political systems, the nunneries were short-lived, as Hughes has suggested (Hughes 1972: 234–5). But a nunnery could not become secularized, in the sense that included married or non-celibate nuns, or else it was no longer a nunnery. This explains such incidents as the rape of the abbess of Kildare, in 1132; once dishonored, she was forced to yield her position to another woman who was, not coincidentally, a kinswoman of the rapist's tribal leader (Dolley 1972:30). This also helps to explain the hagiographers' heavy-handed praise of women for their chastity. The monks knew, for instance, that Patrick had preached the benefits of virginity to Monenna. She learned well that *virginitas enim prima est virtutis indicio, Deo proximior ...* (USMLS 1979–82:254–7).

Women often had to fight their families to be allowed to remain religious virgins, and to retreat within the enclosure. They rejected secular suitors to become *sponsae Christi*, or, more humbly, *ancillae Christi*. As Samthann put it, she wanted her fosterer to offer her "to God in marriage, not to a man", (*ut amodo me Deo offeratis, et non homini*

in sponsam) (Plummer 1910b:253–4). Many male saints rescued young women from potential spouses and even death, helping them to become brides of Christ. Men could emulate the Savior, but women could marry him, with all the social and spiritual connotations that marriage implied. The virgin Flandnait was given by Mochuda in marriage to Christ complete with dowry, a fort (*ráth*) that later became her monastery (Plummer 1910b:184–5). Women were intimate with Christ. They not only married him, but at least one of them fostered him. Íte is the subject of a well-known poem describing her relationship with Isucan, the baby Jesus (Quin 1981:39–52; Murphy 1956:26–9; Stokes 1905:44–5):

Ísucán,
alar limm im dísertán
cía beith clérech co llín sét
is bréc uile acht Ísucán ...

... Canaid cóir a ingena
d'fiur dlíges for císucán;
atté na purt túasucán
cía beith im ucht Ísucán.

Isucan
who is in fosterage with me in my hermitage –
though a cleric have many sets
all is false save Isucan ...

...Sing a fitting harmony, maidens,
to the legal recipient of your tribute.
Isucan is at home on high
even though he be in my bosom.

Likewise, Íte, as mentioned before, was the spiritual mother of the Uí Conaill Gabra, both the tribal group and its territory, where her principal church was located; as an angel put it, she would be *multorum matrona in die iudicii*. As their mother, Íte's duty was to protect them, for example, when they went into battle against the Munstermen (Plummer 1910b:117–18). But other women

fostered or tutored one man at a time. St Fainche preached at her brother, Énda, until he gave up the leadership of the Airgialla and came to live in her community, where he learned to be a monk and a saint (Plummer 1910b:61). Tigernach of Cluain Eóis, who was named by Brigit, later dedicated a monastery to *matrem suam spiritualem* (Plummer 1910b: 268). Women's enclosures housed fosterers, teachers, and mentors to both men and women.

But even the most intense and positive manifestations of spirituality inside women's enclosures, women's miracles, were not quite so positive as men's miracles. Male hagiographers rarely distinguished female miracles from normal male miracles. But, in general, female saints performed wonders less awesome and somehow more practical than those of their male counterparts. Men considered these miracles to be smaller than their own. Ailbe, for example, once witnessed the nun Bithe milking a stag; Bithe wanted the milk for an ailing sister in her community. Ailbe was embarrassed by his *muinter*, his retinue of clerics, into performing the same miracle. But an angel came to scold him: "Leave little miracles to women, and don't even consider them. They are proper for women ..." (*Minima miracula feminis relinque, et illa aspicere noli. Feminarum enim propria sunt ...*) (Heist 1965:129). Ailbe could move mountains if he wished; the everyday miracles of feeding people, minor medical miracles, the refilling of butter jars, these were for women. Íte was moved by a mother's grief to protect her son from the penalties for murder (Plummer 1910b:128). Brigit fed meat to hungry paupers, pilgrims, and lepers every day (MPL 72:781). Samthann fed her hun-

gry carpenters when they were at work cutting wood for her church (Plummer 1910b:254-5). Monenna caught some thieves who stole the meager food of a female hermit, and punished them gently by causing them to wander lost in the woods for three days. Women wonder-workers passed on their powers to other women. Monenna's fourth successor, Derlaisre, performed miracles with her patroness' help (USMLS 1979-82:132-5, 446-9). Samthann's prioress, Nathea, used the saint's girdle (*zonam*) as a miraculous talisman while overseeing a construction project (Plummer 1910b: 257).

Women were aware of their lesser spiritual status, according to hagiographers or, at least, the hagiographers were aware of it. Irish society knew that women were subject not only to the temptations of the flesh but also to limitations on their miracles and spirituality. Monenna advised a frightened nun that "Perhaps you came upon horrible beasts or devils, all of these things which tend to turn up in lonely places - and a little thing can upset a woman." (*Forsitan bestiarum vel demonum horrorem invenistis que omnia in desertis solent acciderere et sexum femineum potest modicum commovere*) (USMLS 1979-82:436-9). But they also knew that it took only three virtues to please God: as Íte put it, a pure heart, a simple life, and generosity were his three favorite characteristics (Plummer 1910b:123-4). And Brigit knew that God showed her a little more favor than He showed to St Brendan the wanderer merely because she stayed put in her monastery like a good woman, and concentrated all the time on God. Brendan, beset with worries of pilgrimage, had to turn his mind oc-

asionally to the dangers around him (Plummer 1910a:143). Women never battled demons, as did Abbán, or spent Lent standing in the mud with birds' nests in their outstretched hands, like Coemgen. The men knew this, and women accepted it. Their communities sometimes grew prominent and powerful, like Brigit's Kildare, but women themselves were limited to homely virtues and minor miracles, safely performed within the walls of their own communities.

As long as religious women remained inside their enclosures, their miracles and their lives were tolerated, though not encouraged, by the Irish. Living by themselves in nunneries, their spirituality was merely second-rate; when religious women escaped the enclosure, they became a threat to society, to male monastic society in particular. In presenting such situations, the hagiographers seemed specially to relish the traditional disapproval of women rather than the positive aspect of the Christian attitude towards them. Partly as a reaction, partly as a cause of this disapproval, Christian churches generated an ascetic elite early in their history. While priests and bishops in Ireland and elsewhere continued to consort with women throughout the middle ages, everyone knew that the best Christians were men who prayed hard, avoided socializing and followed a strict diet of little food and no sex. As Suzanne Wemple has shown in her work on Frankish society, denial of sex often became confused with the rejection of women. Women were sex, sex was a threat to celibacy, therefore women were a threat to the ascetic elite (Wemple 1981: 129-36).

Thus, hagiographers often portrayed Ire-

land's ecclesiastical establishment, the male saints, as celibate misogynists. People believed that Molua, for example, was particularly wary of women. He refused the suggestion of an angel that he settle and build a monastery between Lough nEchach and Lough Erne because "greatly bothered by the temptation of women, he could not live there" (*temptatione mulierum valde gravatus, habitare non potuit*). He could not stand living at Ros Bilech either, because he heard sheep bleating nearby and he knew, like Coemgen, that *Ubi enim fuerit ovis, ibi erit mulier, et ubi fuerit mulier ibi peccatum; ubi vero peccatum, ibi erit dyabolus, et ubi dyabolus, ibi infernus est* ("Where there is a sheep, there will be a woman, and where there will be a woman, there will be sin; where truly there will be sin, there will be the devil, and where the devil, there will be hell," (Heist 1965: 136-7; Gwynn 1927:79-80).

St Senán of Inis Cathaig also had a distaste for women and would not allow them into his island monastery. One day a nun named Canair came walking across the Shannon to Inis Cathaig, or Scatterry Island, and standing just a few feet offshore, politely requested some hospitality from Senán. He reminded her of his rules and suggested that she trot across the waves to her sister's place, to the east. But Canair, who knew the appropriate Scripture well, scolded him:

'Cid dia ta latsa sin?' ol Canir. 'Ni messa Crist, ar ni lugha thainic do thathcreic ban inás do thathcreic fher. Ni lugha roces ardaigh ban inás ardaigh fher. Robhatar mná oc umaloid 7 oc timtereacht do Crist 7 dia aps[t]jalaib. Ní lugha, dano, thiaghuit mná isin bhflaith nemhdha inait fir. Cidh, dano, arna gebhthasa mná cucat at indsi?'

'How can you say that?' said Canair. 'Christ is no worse than you. Christ came to redeem women no

less than men. No less did He suffer for the sake of women than for men. Women have served and administered to Christ and his Apostles. Indeed, no less than men do women enter the heavenly kingdom. Why then shouldn't you take women on your island?"

Senán's reply was typically male: *Is talchar atai*, he said, "You are stubborn" (Stokes 1890:72-3, 219-20; Hughes and Hamlin 1981:8).

Maedóc cursed a woman for washing clothes in the stream which ran by his monastery; he feared pollution from her garments (Heist 1965:239; Plummer 1925:158-9). St Ciarán taught psalms to a local king's daughter, but never looked at any part of her body but her feet (Stokes 1980:123). Moling beat a woman with tree branches for trying to make love to him (Heist 1965:345-5). And Mac dá Cherda, the idiot protege of St Cummine Fota, dived into the chilly Suir and remained there overnight just because he caught sight of a woman walking along the river's banks (O'Keeffe 1911:35).

The saints and their weaker brothers seem to have had good reason to fear women, according to the *vitae*. The most frequent sins committed by nuns in the Irish saints' lives were sexual. This may have been because the nuns were as lustful as the monks believed them to be. But like the goddesses of Irish myth, the sex-hungry nun who appears so often in the lives was more likely symbol than reality. Like much in the *vitae*, lascivious nuns represented a certain monastic mentality. For instance, in the life of St Ciarán, a monk became enamored of a nun in the community of Ciarán's mother. They arranged to meet in the woods, but when they tried to embrace, a flame from heaven separated them and

blinded the nun. The monk was sent on pilgrimage for his sins, and was welcomed home by Ciarán years later, but the nun never recovered her sight (Heist 1965:351-2). It is difficult to see why the hagiographer presented such a discrepancy in punishment if he did not believe the nun to be more sinful than the monk, even though their sins seem identical to modern readers.

Some nuns were initially more successful in sinning. The theme of the pregnant nun recurs in the lives. Bishop Áed mac Brice once visited his nun friends in Druimm Ard. When he noticed that one of them was pregnant he would have left without eating his dinner if she had not confessed and done penance (Heist 1965:172). Áed, like Ciarán, Íte, and Monenna, forgave errant sisters and miraculously caused their foetuses to disappear. In fact, in the earliest recension of Ciarán's life, the saint miraculously aborted the foetus of a nun, rather than using a more usual method and making the foetus disappear (Heist 1965:347-8). Generally, the nuns seem to have been forgiven once they had confessed their sins. One of Íte's nuns actually gave birth to a child after fleeing the community of Cell Íte (Killeedy), but was rescued from servitude by Íte's fosterson, Brendan, and welcomed back with her child as a full member of the community (Plummer 1910b:129; USMLS 1979-82:434-7).

The hagiographers usually dealt with errant nuns by making them repent and sending them back to the monastic enclosure. It seems that the enclosure not only protected holy women; it also protected men on the outside from impious women. Perhaps even women who just thought about tempting clerics were put inside the enclosure. When

thirty young virgins fell in love with Mochuda, which was understandable since he was the "comeliest man of his time" (*Mochuda dino nech as cruthaighe bai ina aimsir*) he convinced them all to become nuns instead (Plummer 1922a:295). The same fate awaited all young women who threatened the celibacy of the saints, such as the would-be seductress of Ciarán, mentioned earlier. Some amorous religious women tried to leave the nunnery, but not successfully. When one of Samthann's nuns arranged to run off with a "certain lascivious cleric", she only got as far as the river with her companion. The water rose to the waist of the cleric and an eel wrapped itself around his loins. Only when they returned to Samthann, the woman vowing never to leave the nunnery again, did the eel disappear (Plummer 1910b:265; Bieler 1975:54.9). This not so subtle episode reveals the notion common in the saints' lives that women were safest when securely surrounded by monastery walls. Once women's sexuality was under control inside the monastic sanctuary, it was no longer threatening to the Christian equilibrium.

Even some lesser crimes committed by nuns had sexual connotations for the Irish. When a nun of the community at Daire Cuisgred committed a theft and fled the monastery, St Íte predicted that she would become a whore and live like a beast in the woods (Plummer 1910b:125-6). The other sin committed most frequently by nuns was that of pride. St Lassar had two women in her house who refused to eat meat, even when it was the only food available and even though St Colmán agreed to eat it. They were punished with blindness, lameness, and by being forced to eat snakes

(Heist 1965:213). The biblical allusion here was probably intentional, but I suspect that the sexual metaphor was subconscious.

With this sort of hagiographic propaganda so popular in Ireland, and the mentality it represented so clearly pervasive, no wonder that the religious climate was never entirely favorable towards nuns and the establishment of nunneries. Even the most devout Christians always had doubts about female spirituality. Communities of nuns seem to have flourished in Ireland mainly during the periods of high religious enthusiasm: the initial, zealous centuries of Christianization; the seventh and eighth centuries, when nuns appeared throughout the *vitae*, then first put together; the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the Normans inspired a reorganization of the churches. The seventh and eighth centuries were also, perhaps not incidentally, the time when the Céli Dé began their attempt to reform the already decadent monasteries. But the Céli Dé, like nuns, eventually disappeared into the mainstream monastic establishment; every prominent monastic community, such as Clonmacnois and Armagh, had its token Céile Dé anchorite just as it had its nun's church (Hughes 1966:175; Hadcock and Gwynn 1970). By the later eighth and ninth centuries, the early asceticism and separatism of Irish churches had given way, and the churches became more and more secularized. Family interests and property claims dominated religious life. Communities engaged in alliances and antagonisms; some houses became subordinate to larger *paruchia*e in their search for support. Women's communities, like other ascetic communities, by nature non-worldly

and celibate, would not have fit into the new style of monasticism.

The arrival of the Vikings probably accelerated the secularization of monasteries, as well as encouraging the disappearance of women's houses. How much more vulnerable to attack would a small *ráth* full of women be, with their few male fieldworkers and a priest or two, than the mighty houses of Cluain and Ard Macha; yet even the greatest monasteries were raided and burned, as the annals show. In the wake of the Viking raids and political chaos of the middle ages, many male communities suffered an economic and demographic decline, as we can see from the many double abbasies appearing in the annals with increasing frequency after the eighth century. Except for Kildare, women's communities simply did not appear in the annals after the early references to the deaths of female saints and abbesses.

Male opposition to women's religious vocation, already strong for social and economic reasons, may have increased during the ninth century and after, because of demographic changes. The need to reproduce the population became suddenly more urgent, as occurred on the Continent after the invasions of the early middle ages. Certainly during the initial Viking attacks the population must have declined. The number of women, always a valuable commodity in traditional societies, must have decreased because of death and abduction. The legal changes of these centuries show that the status and rights of women increased slightly; this is not to say that women gained any sort of social equality, for as I have shown, women's legal rights remained limited. But when women became

more precious, at least the elite among them were given more property to control and more freedom to discard unsatisfactory mates for more pleasing ones. Thus, greater legal rights also signified that the ratio of women to men may have dwindled (Thurneysen and Binchy 1936; Jenkins and Owen 1980). So, besides losing some of their communities, religious women also lost potential recruits.

Finally, as Irish Christianity became less Irish and more orthodox, women may have lost enthusiasm for the religious life, for that life became more restricted. On the Continent, the great age of female preachers, abbesses, and hermits was the sixth and seventh centuries; by the time of the Carolingian reform, religious women spent closely circumscribed lives meditating in cloisters instead of overseeing double monasteries, preaching to pagans, or building great libraries (Wemple 1981:129-36). Likewise, in the reforming context of eleventh and early twelfth-century Ireland, female ascetics were unlikely to be allowed to exercise influence in ecclesiastical affairs. Brigit the bishop, travelling in her chariot to exhort the masses, gave way to silent black nuns.

Because of the power communal celibacy offered women, society felt compelled to restrict and control women's communities. The abduction and murder of women in hagiographic accounts symbolized this; the disappearance of women's houses proves it. Bishops and abbots came to exercise close jurisdiction over nunneries. Soon after Christianity first recruited women, it relieved them of preaching and clerical functions. In fact, after the enthusiasm of conversion waned, the churches grew more and

more suspicious of nunneries. The spirituality of women became more dubious; the ecclesiastical establishment's distrust of its women was published by the hagiographers, via their fornicating nuns. The churches could not entirely accept women's enclosures. Lay society was against them from the start.

The fact remains that nuns were regular characters in the saints' lives. The *vitae* treated women as an accepted part of monastic life in early Ireland. Like Canair, the nuns were stubborn. They ignored the objections of the monastic establishment and of secular society. They accepted the fact that monks found their spirituality and their miracles somehow *minima*. Or maybe they did not accept it; the lives do not tell, and we cannot know for sure. But certainly many early Irish women led quiet, pious lives, shut safely within the sacred walls of their enclosures.

Notes

¹ Kenney 1929:293-304. Kenney assumed that because the lives, in the late medieval manuscripts that remain today, were probably originally written after the tenth century, that the lives' contents were equally recent. However, the lives collected in the *Codex Salmanticensis* seem to reflect earlier customs and mentalities than those in the lives of other collections. Several lives of important saints such as Patrick, Brigit, and Columcille can also be securely dated to earlier centuries. It seems likely that hagiographical writing became widespread soon after Cogitosus and Tirechán initiated the tradition in Ireland. Lives were copied and revised well into the early modern period.

² McAll 1980; Wasserscheben 1885:116. Again, the sources are at odds in this point. As I shall show later in this article, hagiography suggests that women's communities could potentially become as self-sufficient as any secular estate. Women's houses had many of the same economic functions as men's.

However, property laws restricted women's ownership of land, probably reflecting a less formal legal arrangement but one which still limited women's rights as heirs and alienators of land (McAll 1980). The laws thus imply that women's religious communities were economically unproductive, a bad investment. A compromise between the ideals of the *vitae* and the reality of property-holding can be seen in the *Collectio*, an eighth-century collection of canons which attempted to modify secular law in order to allow women greater rights of alienation, preferably to the churches (Wasserscheben 1885:116.209).

³ Heist 1965:394. References to lower class thuggery and murder rarely appear in the elite secular sources, but many references to theft, rustling, and murder appear in the lives. Interestingly, hagiographers often depicted these outcasts converting and becoming monks (Plummer 1910a:240-1; Hennessey 1871:131).

⁴ Celticists have made much in the past of the *banfile*, *bandruí*, *bancháinte*, and *bangaiscedach* (female poet, magician, satirist, and warrior) who appear occasionally in saga and poetry (O'Curry 1873: clxxi; Mac Curtain 1980:26-7). However, the very addition of the feminine adjective suggests that these roles were not normal for women. A more likely pre-Christian alternative for noblewomen may have been the pagan equivalent of the nun's function, female tenders of a goddess's shrine (Doherty 1984:60-1; MacAlister 1919:340-1; Ó Corráin 1979: 1-13).

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