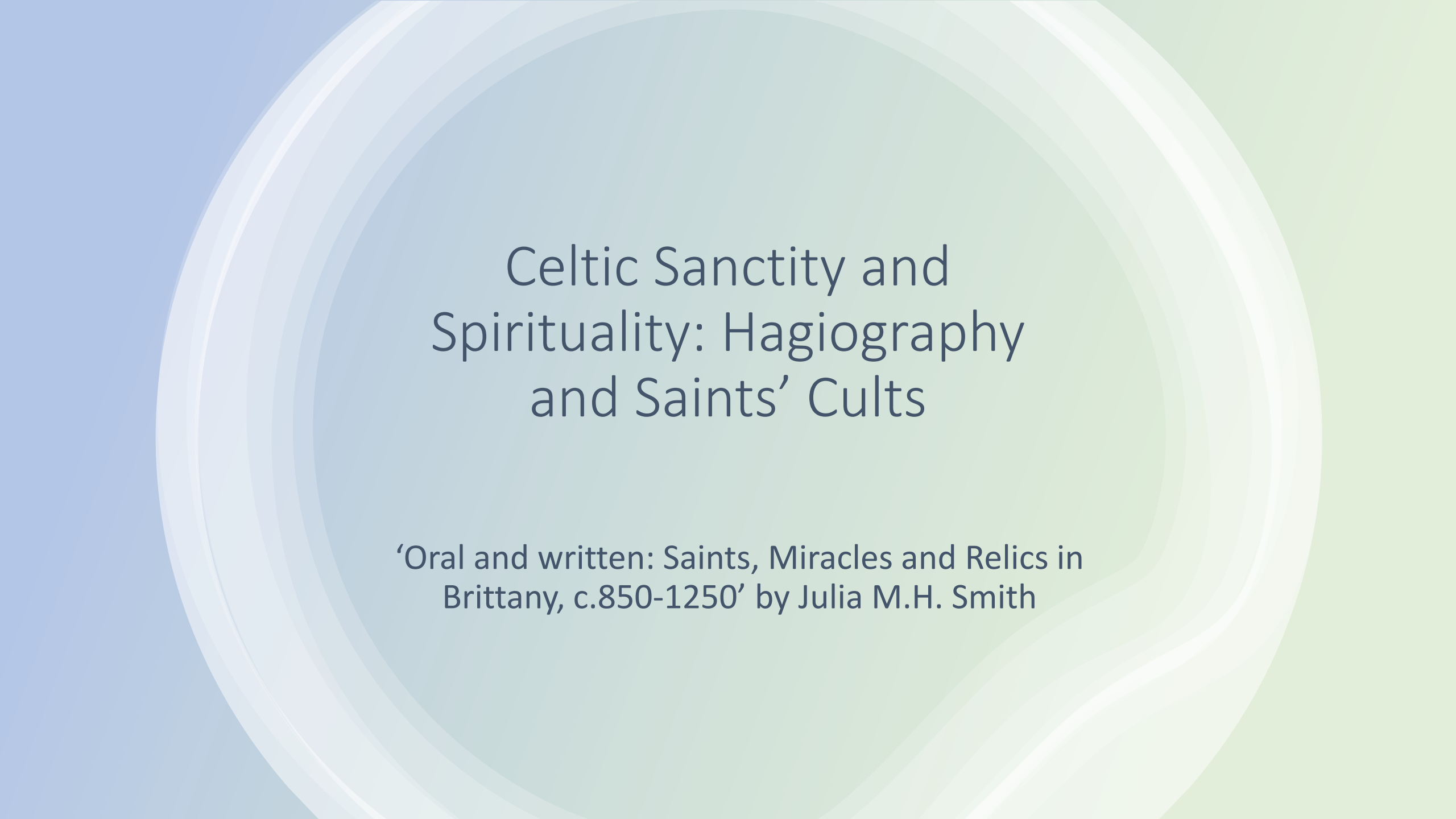




Celtic Sanctity and Spirituality: Hagiography and Saints' Cults

'Oral and written: Saints, Miracles and Relics in
Brittany, c.850-1250' by Julia M.H. Smith

Professor Julia Smith

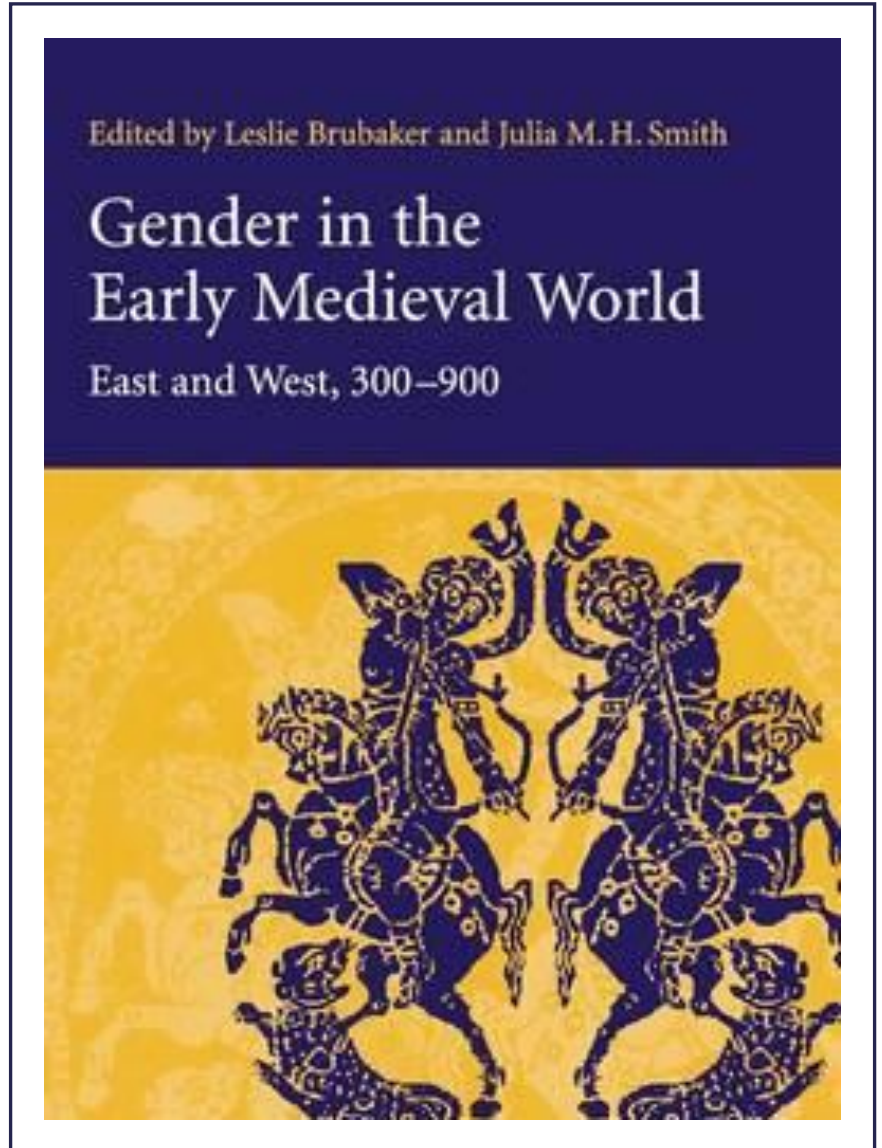
- Professor of Medieval History at All Souls College, Oxford.
- “I specialise in the period from the end of Antiquity to the central Middle Ages, and especially enjoy finding new and unusual angles from which to address seemingly familiar topics... I developed new specialisms in hagiography and saints’ cults, plus the history of women and gender in the early Middle Ages.”
<https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-julia-smith>



Publications

- Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250, *Speculum* Vol. 65, No. 2 (Apr., 1990), pp. 309-343
- 'Portable Christianity: relics in the medieval West (c.700-1200)', Raleigh Lecture in History for 2010, Proceedings of the British Academy 181 (2012) pp. 143-67
- Cambridge History of Christianity, volume III: Early Medieval Christianities AD 600-1100, co-edited with Thomas F X Noble (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. xiii+384.
- Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900, co-edited with Leslie Brubaker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
- Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West (Leiden: Brill, 2000)
- Province and Empire: Brittany and the Carolingians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<https://www.asc.ox.ac.uk/person/professor-julia-smith>



Research Interests:

- Late antique and early medieval history c.400-1100
- History of women and gender
- Cultural history of religion
- “Beyond that, I am interested in developing interdisciplinary approaches to studying the abundant material remains of late antique and early medieval relic-objects which I have discovered while undertaking field work in the treasuries of some of Europe’s oldest churches.”
<https://www.asc.ox.ac.uk/person/professor-julia-smith>
- “For a distinguished academic, Professor Julia Smith is interested in surprisingly ordinary things – twigs, stones, flasks of water, baked clay cakes. But they are not just any old natural and man-made objects. They are, or were, sacred.”
<https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/news/birkbeck-lecture-series-sacred-relics-through-early-christian-experience/>

Julia's contribution to her field

- “Her research in the treasuries of some of Europe’s oldest church has unearthed a wealth of apparently ordinary things, preserved as holy relics...”
- “Literally lifting the lid on old chests and opening cupboards, often forgotten, in church treasuries has confirmed Professor Smith’s conviction that holy relics are not only the saints’ bones deemed so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her argument is that relic practices evolved slowly over the centuries, and that to understand them, we must stop relying on hand-me-down definitions of previous scholarship.”
- “She adopts a more **anthropological approach** than some historians, which brings a different vocabulary and aids understanding of what people did with things of religious significance in the pre-modern era.”

<https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/news/birkbeck-lecture-series-sacred-relics-through-early-christian-experience/>

A summary of the text

- A look at how saints' relics and hagiographies were treated in Brittany as opposed to other contemporary countries such as neighbouring France and England. This was a time of growing Carolingian influence, which Brittany was able to stave off.
- Starts by using Guibert of Nogent (abbott of Nogent-sous-Coucy from 1104) as an example of a very different form of veneration to that of Brittany. He was cynical of such relic worship. "In Guibert's opinion the acceptable sign of veneration was the existence of 'scriptorum veracium traditio certa'. Unimpeachable written evidence was exactly what the Breton saints lacked." (p.309)
- She then looks specifically at 5 churches in Brittany – those of Saint-Méen, Landévennec, Alet (now Saint-Malo), Saint-Pol-de-Léon and Quimper.
- Julia argues that Brittonic relic culture is more of an oral tradition, much in line with that of Wales and Ireland. This is quite different to the practices in England and France. "It was a society in which oral or visual testimony and collective memory formed the essence of proof, not written documentation." (p. 342)
- "...the intensively local character of Welsh saints' cults and the representation of saints' powers through places and tangible objects rather than enshrined bones..." (p.342)

Image: Abbaye de Landévennec (Landévennec Abbey – Heritage Dico (dico-du-patrimoine.fr))



Summary continued



- The Saints of Brittany (and Wales) were venerated without the need for a body being present. They seemed more concerned with the tangible. “A preference for bells, staffs, and springs...” (p.343)
- Oral (Breton) traditions were as much an integral part of the cults of saints as were written (Latin) texts... Far from being the “popular, inauthentic and disreputable”, oral traditions were universally accepted, authentic and authoritative.” (p.343)

Images: Quimper Cathedral (29 - Cathédrale Saint-Corentin - Quimper - La Sarthe et les petits coins et recoins de l'hexagone ! (dnadine-passion-photo.com))

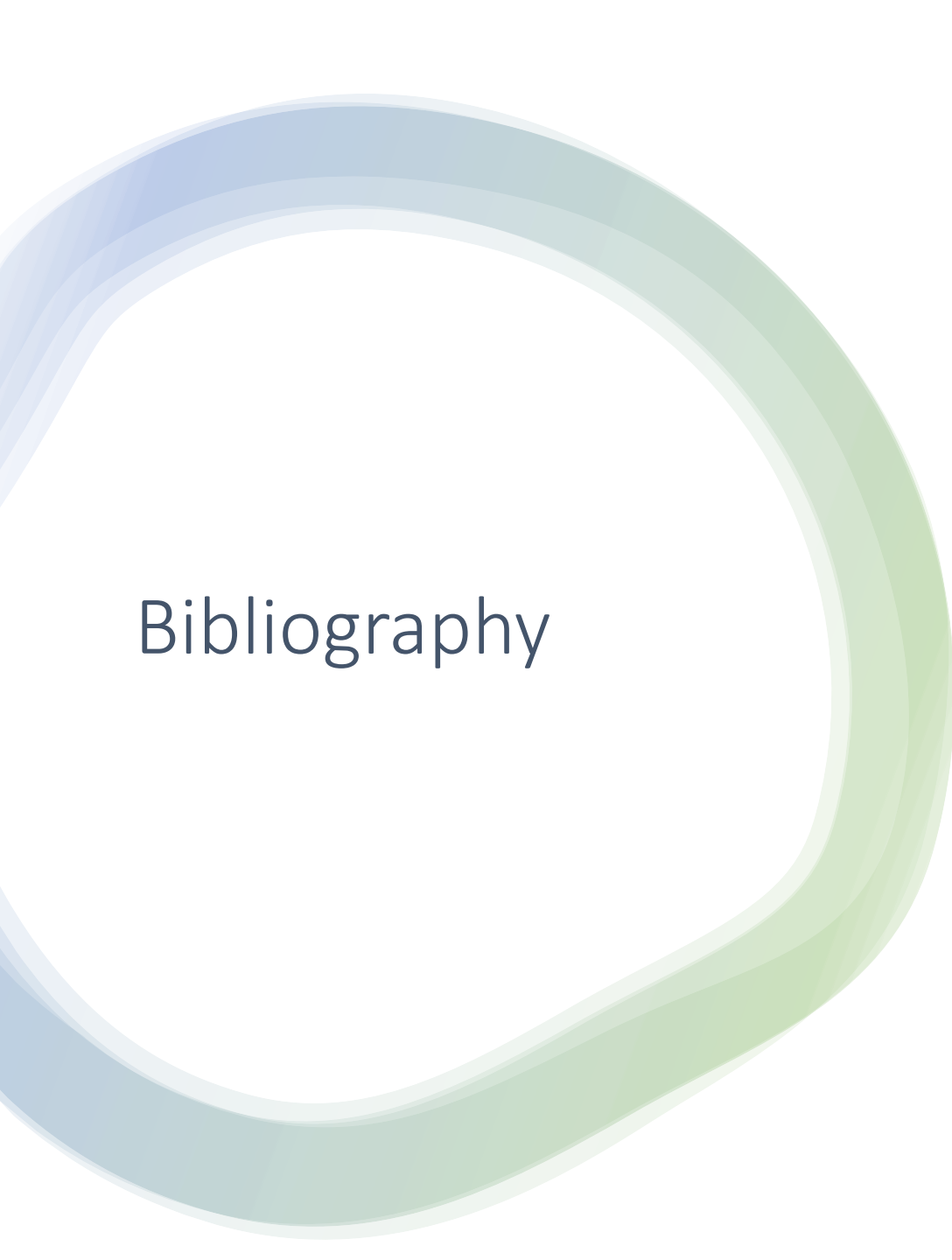
An appreciation

- The focus on a few examples keeps the article shorter and more concise.
- Excellent use of comparison between Breton, Welsh and Irish Saints cults in relation to the wider Western Medieval church.
- Fascinating focus on the people who worshipped in their own local traditions whilst fighting off growing influences from outside.

(images: 1. The Celtic World (Iberian vs. Italic look. - Page 43 (theapricity.com)

2. The Carolingian Empire (The Empire that was always Decaying: The Carolingians (800-888) - Medievalists.net)





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- <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/news/birkbeck-lecture-series-sacred-relics-through-early-christian-experience/> (28th September 2022)
- <https://dico-du-patrimoine.fr/la-grande-epopee-des-abbayes-en-france-une-breve-histoire-du-monachisme/abbaye-de-landevennec/> (1st October 2022)
- dnadine-passion-photo.com/2020/03/cathedrale-saint-corentin-quimper.html (1st October 2022)