

BRETON HAGIOLOGICAL STUDIES OVER THE LAST 150 YEARS

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Adopting a long-term view of literary history, J.-C. Poulin (2009: 64), one of the most renowned specialists of Breton hagiography, has defined it as a “a coherent corpus of collective works dealing with the memory of origins”.¹ This is pertinent in the sense that this subject is part of an ongoing debate about the origins of Armorican Brittany. Such an approach, which we can describe as hagio-historiographic, must be accepted as valid for one good reason: hagiographical works and medieval historical texts belong to a “genre which, in the end, is common to both” (Henriet 2003: 80–1).²

In addition, it would be perfectly anachronistic, vain and, in fact, quite absurd to reproach the medieval chroniclers and historians for not having adopted a critical approach to their sources as compared to the contemporary scientific methods used by scholars today.

I have taken the precaution here of stressing this point because some historians at the beginning of the 20th century were apparently inspired by their overzealous faith in what might be described as a kind of “destructive positivism”. The latter went so far as to criticise the hagiographers themselves for their lack of historical honesty. This leaves the researcher with an impossible choice, that is, assessing the data in terms of what is true or untrue.

1 Nevertheless, this scholar raises the question: “but was it perceived as such by medieval authors?” As far as the late Middle Ages are concerned, the answer to this question is unquestionably “yes” (see the following note). From at least the end of the fourteenth century onward, this is evident in the *Chronicon Briocense*, whose opening lines are explicitly borrowed from the *Vita Gobriani*.

2 The term “hagio-historiography” is used, in particular, by M. Goulet ([1996], 1997: 283), with reference to the publications of B. Schütte (1994a; 1994b), *Untersuchungen zu den Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde* and *Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde* (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung).

A good example is found in Robert Fawtier's article (1925: 198)³ on the hagiography of Judicael (ruler of Domnonia,⁴ NW Brittany, c. 630–658), which he describes as follows:

vaine au point de vue historique, car Ingomar n'est pas un historien, mais un romancier, et, qui plus est, un romancier doublé d'un généalogiste. On a le droit de se méfier d'un romancier, on a le devoir de se méfier d'un généalogiste. Ingomar se donnait — car nous n'avons nulle raison de suspecter l'honnête Le Baud — comme un contemporain de l'abbé Hinweten, donc comme écrivant au début du XI^e siècle.

worthless from a historical perspective because Ingomar is not a historian but rather a 'novelist' in addition to being a genealogist. One can doubt the novelist but one is duty-bound to mistrust a genealogist. Ingomar⁵ claimed to be — and we have no reason to suspect Le Baud's honesty⁶ — to be a contemporary of Abbot Hinweten, and thus to be a writer of the beginning of the 11th century.

Having said this, certain recent historians have been legitimately suspicious of the hagiographical tradition when it becomes apparent that it lacks in rigour and prudence. Let us note in passing that the work of Arthur de La Borderie (Fig. 1), which was largely lacking in both qualities during his own lifetime, had significant influence on regional studies as a consequence of the appeal and vigour of his style. Among his supporters were linguists, including Joseph Loth and Léon Fleuriot, who were not always successful in freeing themselves from his influence. Many erudite scholars, historians and compilers adopted the same perspectives concerning the production of the Breton hagiographical tradition until at least the 1970s.

From hypercritical to “traditionalist” intuitions

It is thus essentially in the domain of historiography that hagiographical literature,

3 Nevertheless, Fawtier makes several useful points in this article.

4 Devon, in southwestern England, is the modern reflex of *Dumnonii*, identified by Claudius Ptolemy around 150AD, the Brythonic-speaking population that lived there. British *Dumnonia* is believed to be related to the Breton *Domnonia*.

5 Ingomar was a monk of the abbey of SaintMéen and the purported author of the *Life of Judicael*.

6 Le Baud (circa 1450–1505), Breton historian and author of *Compilation des croniques et ystoires des Bretons* (1480s–1490s).

which was especially abundant between the 9th and 13th centuries, became the topic of ongoing debate. Finally, especially with the development of the *École méthodologique*,⁷ it also was the target of considerable criticism.

Starting at the beginning of the 20th century, Ferdinand Lot and his students of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (ÉPHÉ)⁸ criticised La Borderie's overly positive vision of the Middle Ages and his tendency to glorify the period beginning with the arrival of the insular Brythons (i.e. Celtic Britons) to the Armorican peninsula and ending with annexation of the Duchy of Brittany by the Kingdom of France, a period that extends from the second half of the 5th century until the first half of the 16th century. In this manner, despite certain dramatic episodes which characterise key periods of the history of Brittany, La Borderie viewed the Middle Ages as a sort of Breton "Golden age".

The historians' study of the saints' *vitae* is not only justified by the dearth of documents for this period which shed light on other historical sources dating to the earliest periods. This cannot be explained simply because, as a militant Catholic, La Borderie displays (like his competitor Dom François Plaine)⁹ an apologetic vision of religion. Above all, this is due to his conviction that it was through an intimate union of the Christian faith and Breton patriotism, a view which is radically different from the "pagano-Christian syncretism" advocated by Théodore de La Villemarqué (Giomar 1987: 406), that the Armorican Brythons were victorious against the Franks' and Vikings' attempts to conquer them.

7 The *École méthodologique* emerged in 19th- and early 20th-century France in reaction to the unscientific excesses of scholars inspired by the ideals of the Romantic movement. The *École méthodologique* is particularly associated with historians working on medieval history, hagiography, and philology. These historians emphasised rigorous, systematic methods in the study of texts, sources, and historical evidence.

8 Cf. Fawtier (1925) for his excessive remarks about the work of Arthur de La Borderie and Robert Latouche.

9 Plaine, who played a central role in Breton hagiographical research in the 19th century, has not yet been the subject of the biographical treatment that his scholarly contributions deserve. Nevertheless, Guigon (2015) has devoted several studies to him, notably in connection with his editorial work on Plaine's correspondence with the Bollandists.



Fig. 1: Arthur de La Borderie
(Free of rights)

It was very easy for Lot and his students to destroy the positions defended by the scholars supporting La Borderie's views, known as the Labordists; but very often the critical rhetoric of these authors went far beyond what was necessary, especially when they

mentioned that the immense majority of the saints' *vitae* were odious nonsense, thus reducing these texts to the level of a "lowly literature comparable to modern dime novels" (Lot 1927: 185). Ferdinand Lot, was especially influenced by the positivist viewpoint which dominated the period and could not conceive of how the Breton hagiographical tradition could have contributed to the study of cultural history of the period when the texts were composed.

Put another way, while La Borderie analysed the hagiographical data as valid historical sources, Ferdinand Lot and his students, on the contrary, considered the hagiographical texts to be not only worthless as serious historical sources but also that any attempt to analyse them in this manner was ridiculous. With regard to the narrative Commor, Tréfine, and Tremeur¹⁰ in St Gildas's *vitae*, Lot stresses that the hagiographer had skillfully inserted a 'Mother Goose tale' into the text (Latouche 1911: 3). By making this sarcastic reference to traditional lore, Lot inadvertently identified the key to interpreting hagiographical literature, that is, that popular lore often preserves fragments of earlier belief systems

10 Commor is the central figure of a very dark hagiographic tale. Etymologically, his name is thought to stem from Connor (*Cono-maros the "great hound"). He is the archetypal tyrant, a violent lord who has murdered his previous wives and who also kills the last of his wives, Tréfine, a highly virtuous and religious woman. Commor also kills their son, Tremeur. Both the son and the mother are miraculously brought back to life. Interestingly, in the *vitae* of St Goueznou, Commor is portrayed in a more positive light (Bourgès 1996: 423–425).

and, for this reason, their interpretation should be undertaken from the perspective of folklore and mythology.

Along with all the inane hypotheses of his old, deceased competitor (i.e. La Borderie), Latouche, a student of Ferdinand Lot, also flatly rejected La Borderie's approach writing: "It is a futile endeavour to seek traces of historical events in fairy tales" (Latouche 1911: 3). Following Lot's line of argument, Latouche equally rejected the historical value of the *vitae* of Guenolé, Idunet and Ronan¹¹ in his study of the history of Cornouaille¹² given that these compilations discuss matters pertaining to the oldest periods of Breton history. And yet, in a few words, he makes a relevant mention of the possible parallel between an anecdote reported in the *vita* of Guenolé and a "Welsh folklore theme" (Latouche 1911: 27).¹³ He also points out that "the name of the mother of the saint is also mythical" and, "instead of stemming from place names, they seem to derive from a folklore tradition" (ibid., 30–3).¹⁴



Fig. 2: St Guen Teirbron "Gwen of the three breasts", mother of Guénolé, Plouguin, Léon (Free of rights)

Furthermore, Latouche suggests that Fragan's name stems from a place name (there is only one, Ploufragan, Tregor). Fragan, however, is first mentioned in the Life of Wrdisten (9th c.) as the father of Guenolé. There is no mention of St Gwen here and Ploufragan is not attested before 1167. Therefore, it is hard to see how a place

11 As we have seen, Guenolé (Winwaloe) is presented as the founder of the Abbey of Landevennec while Idunet is portrayed as one of his disciples. Ronan, of course, is the traditional Irish founder of the parish of Locronan, west of Quimper (for Brittany's ties with Irish saints see Bourgès 2021).

12 Breton Cornwall, *Bro Gerne(w)* in Breton.

13 Moreover, this parallel was suggested to him by Ethel Jones, whom he describes as his "fellow student," and who later went on to marry Fawtier.

14 In fact, it would be more appropriate to speak of "genea-mythology," as Latouche demonstrates (1911: 30–3).

name could result in such a tradition. The connection between St Gwen and Fragan was made by Albert Le Grand (1637). According to late Breton tradition, Fragan would have been a high-ranking Celtic Briton who settled in Armorica during the colonisation period. This tradition portrays him as St Gwen's husband. Logically, they were thus the father and mother of three sons: St. Winwaloe (Gwenolé), founder of Landevennec, St. Jacut and St. Guethenoc (hence St. Gwen's epithet, Teirbron "three breasts" (Fig. 2)). This is the kind of historiography that Latouche fervently condemns.

One simple reference in Pierre Saintyves's book (2007: 93) was enough to suspect Ronan of lycanthropy, a delusion in which one imagines oneself to be a wolf. In less than five lines, the mere mention of a fountain in Locronan led Latouche to justify his own hypothesis about the existence of a pagan divinity honoured in this place before the supposed arrival of the saint.

Continuing my discussion of the influence of La Borderie's works on the study of Breton hagiography, I would like to move on to present the views of scholars who were critical of his methodology. These include certain members of the clergy, more specifically Monseigneur Louis Duchesne (Fig. 3) and Abbot François Duine (Fig. 4) whose sympathies for the modernist approach were clearly evident. Although they always denied it, their approach as purportedly to guarantee a prudent approach to the subject.

Msgr. Duchesne was from Saint Malo and was a scholar of international renown. He had been a student involved in the ÉPHÉ colloquia and, later, became its director before being nominated to run the French School of Rome in 1899. Finally, he was appointed member of the French Academy in 1910. Msgr. Duchesne submitted an unsigned, critical review of La Borderie's study of the three *vitae* of Tugdual¹⁵ which appeared in 1889. The text is short, the tone is straightforward and to the point because, as he put it, his objective was to present simple notes which, under this form, were not destined to be presented publicly.

15 Tugdual was one of the seven traditional founding saints of Brittany and, according to tradition, the founder of the town of Tréguier, Tregor/Cotes d'Armor. He received his religious training at Llaniltud Fawr, Glamorgan, South Wales.



Fig.3: Monseigneur Louis Duchesne (Free of rights)

This may also have been a ruse on his part to take revenge for the stinging criticisms that La Borderie had levelled against him four years previously. Indeed, La Borderie had pointedly attacked Msgr. Duchesne's thesis on the origins of the ancient bishoprics of Dol and Alet during

the Congress of the Breton Association held in Saint Malo.¹⁶ In any case, the controversy generated a considerable body of polemical writing, and Msgr. Duchesne seized every opportunity to assail La Borderie. Msgr. Duchesne did this even though, as Abbot Duine explained, he sometimes "displayed a spirit of rigidity" which sometimes got him into trouble (Heudré & Dufief 2009: 235). In general, however, one can conclude that his criticisms of La Borderie were fair and well-founded.

16 The report of the sixth session, dated 6 September 1885, as it appears in *BAAB*, 5, 1886, records the opening remarks of La Borderie as follows: *Je dois avouer que j'aurais désiré que M. l'abbé Duchesne s'exprimât avec plus de netteté sur la valeur qu'il attribue aux anciennes Vies des saints de Bretagne, notamment celles de saint Samson et de saint Malo, dont il nous a entretenus. Je ne parle ici, bien entendu, que de l'aspect historique et naturel de ces documents, les éléments surnaturels échappant à notre compétence. Ces Vies ne sont-elles, selon M. Duchesne, que des variantes de légendes sans aucune autorité historique, dont on peut prendre ou laisser ce que l'on veut, selon son bon plaisir ? D'après certaines expressions du savant professeur, il y a lieu de le croire.* ("I must admit that I would have wished M. l'abbé Duchesne had expressed himself more clearly regarding the value he assigns to the ancient Lives of the saints of Brittany, particularly those of Saint Samson and Saint Malo, which he has discussed with us. I speak here, of course, only of the historical and natural aspects of these documents, the supernatural elements being outside our purview. Are these *Lives*, in M. Duchesne's view, merely variations of legends without any historical authority, from which one can take or leave what one pleases, according to whim? Based on certain expressions of the learned professor, there is reason to believe so"). Msgr. Duchesne, however, had already attempted to defuse his own provocative statements by explaining that he would limit himself "to outlining, in a brief talk, the ancient religious history of the Aléthien region" and by indicating that he was aware that not all of his conclusions would receive "the assent of M. de La Borderie, a man whose scientific rigour I hold in the greatest esteem and whose knowledge of Breton history is, as it were, his own domain." Yet, he immediately added: "Despite the scepticism that this circumstance might inspire in my audience, and which it inspires in me, I nevertheless believe it necessary to proceed. In this, as in many other matters, the public deserves to hear one's own opinion, not that of one's neighbour."

The final stage occurred in 1898 in a review of the first volume of La Borderie's *History of Brittany*. Msgr. Duchesne easily dismantled the chronological system proposed by La Borderie and laid bare the approximate philological interpretations and methodological missteps that had led to a flawed reading of the hagiographical sources. In conclusion, he denounced the historian's "patriotic passions" for Brittany, which, in his view, distorted his judgment, as well as his lack of restraint and civility toward critics who challenged his writing: *quant aux auteurs contemporains qui ont eu le malheur de n'être pas de l'avis de M. de la B., je laisse à penser quels égards il a pour eux. Ah ! pauvres nous !* ("With regard to the contemporary authors who have had the misfortune of contradicting Mr. La Borderie, I can only imagine what his opinions of them are. Oh, poor us!" (Duchesne 1898: 191)).

One of Msgr. Duchesne's local disciples was Mr Duine, from Dol (north-eastern Brittany, Ille-et-Vilaine). Although his career was less brilliant than Msgr. Duchesne's, the content of his work on Breton hagiographical studies proved to be far richer over the long term than that of his illustrious predecessor. The scientific approach adopted by Duine had been inspired by a specific intuition which he later explained in his memoirs and which he attempted to put in context. In 1901, during his stay at Saint Malo, he regularly went to the municipal library and took out a "copy of a few legends from the Gothic breviary of Saint Malo with the hope of, one day, analysing Breton hagiography in detail" (Heudré & Dufief 2009: 144). He adds the following observation:

En même temps, persuadé qu'on ne comprend pas la formation des anciennes vies de saints sans connaître le folklore vivant et la manière dont les mythes naissent et se transforment parmi les paysans, j'explorais le pays malouin en amateur des traditions populaires.

(Heudré & Dufief 2009: 144)

At the same time, persuaded that one cannot understand the structure of the ancient saints' lives without understanding living folklore and the manner in which the myths are born and transformed among the peasantry, I explored the area of Saint Malo as a folk tradition enthusiast.

Duine and his research programme

At this stage, Abbot Duine presented a thorough research programme which he organised around five central axes:

Depuis plusieurs années, lorsque je vins à Guipel, j'étais hanté par ce dessein : répandre dans notre monde provincial les résultats acquis par les savants et relever le niveau des études hagiographiques parmi ceux qui s'intéressent à l'histoire de leur pays, en offrant des bibliographies qui devaient entraîner à l'examen personnel des questions, en attirant l'attention sur la similitude qui existe entre la formation des légendes écrites et les données du folklore vivant, en relevant avec une exactitude rigoureuse les traces du culte, qui peuvent suggérer des observations utiles sur les biographies et la vie du saint après sa mort, en publiant de nouveaux textes, et en mettant par terre la méthode d'autorité qui, au lieu d'argumenter par analyses des sources, bataille avec les noms de Lobineau et de La Borderie.

(Heudré & Dufief 2009: 184)

For a number of years, when I came to Guipel, I was obsessed by the following idea: diffusing the results acquired by specialists throughout our provincial world (Brittany) in order to elevate the level of hagiographical studies among those who are interested in the history of their country. This would be done by proposing bibliographies which would draw attention to the similarities existing between the formation of written legends and contemporary folktales. This would necessitate the rigorous documentation of traces of the saint's cult under study by suggesting useful observations regarding the biographies and life of the saint after his death and by publishing new texts as well as by doing away with overly authoritative approaches which only rely on the names of Lobineau and La Borderie instead of constructing arguments based on an analysis of sources.

To summarise, the five central axes of his research programme included:

- (1) Diffusing academic research beyond the specialist circles in Brittany alone
- (2) Raising the standards of hagiographical studies among regional historians and specialists
- (3) Offering bibliographies to improve the critical investigation of sources

- (4) Encouraging comparative studies of legend and folklore
- (5) Rejecting authority-based scholarship (*méthode d'autorité*) in favour of source analysis, the systematic study of cult practices (shrines, dedications, practices), publication of new textual sources,

The programme outlined by Abbot Duine allowed him to achieve a mastery of the Breton hagiographical material which was by far superior to the work accomplished by the majority of his contemporaries and which remains, in many respects, unrivalled even today. Poulin (2009: 37) highlights Abbot Duine's achievements, praising his *répertoires d'ensemble encore indépassés* ("general inventories which have never been surpassed"). Above all else, however, it is his methodological approach connecting the composition of hagiographical texts and the data yielded by "modern folktales" (i.e. with reference to the 19th-century collections).



Fig. 4: Abbé Duine (Free of rights)

In this way, Abbot Duine succeeded in accomplishing what La Borderie had been unable to achieve on account of his methodological approach, which was both restrictive and founded on La Borderie's excessive confidence in the veracity of regional hagiographical material.

This is something Lot and his students refused to do, the hagiographers' miraculous narratives suggesting that these were of no historical value. This, on the contrary, is precisely what Abbot Duine deliberately added to his axes of research. To critics of this approach, the

so-called folklorist and traditionalist aspect sometimes appears to be of secondary importance to them. Abbot Duine's discoveries in this domain are generally relegated to short notes or, at best, the object of short publications which were scattered in various journals, most notably in the *Revue des traditions populaires*. In addition, these notes were often signed under pseudonyms or initials, as if their authors sought to distance themselves from their own opinions.

Yet, this aspect of his scientific personality merits more investigation because it is inseparable from the rest of his scholarship. While his *maître*, Msgr. Duchesne, who as early as 1904 had imagined him to be the author of the definitive book on Breton hagiography (P. Riché 1998: 21), expressed only mistrust regarding a comparative folklore approach, Abbot Duine, on the other hand, may well have adopted some of Renan's ideas regarding the religion of the Bretons.

Ernest Renan's opinions on the subject could have been expressed by Abbot Duine himself.¹⁷ With regard to the religion of the Bretons, Renan (1876: 489–90) wrote in his *Souvenirs d'enfance*:

c'est surtout par le culte des saints qu'elle était caractérisée, entre tant de particularités que la Bretagne possède en propre, l'hagiographie locale est sûrement la plus singulière [...]... vrai trésor de mythologie celtique et d'imaginaires populaires, [formé par] d'inappréciables récits, dont la mythologie comparée et l'histoire sauront tirer un jour le plus riche parti.

it is above all via the cult of saints that is characterised...Among the many characteristics that Brittany possesses, the local hagiography is assuredly the most striking ... a real treasure of Celtic mythology and expressions of popular imagination" composed of "priceless narratives the richest elements of which will be, one day, revealed by specialists of comparative mythology and history.

Unfortunately, Abbot Duine was ostracised by his contemporaries and died prematurely in 1924 at the age of 54. His students and followers, André Oheix, Jean Allenou, René Largillière, suffered the same fate, which explains why a school devoted to the study of Breton hagiographical studies had never been founded.

¹⁷ See B. Joassart (2002: 106).

In this way, while Lot and his students, with their salutary mission to discredit la Borderie's research now accomplished, turned their attention to other subjects of study, scholarly interest in Breton hagiography withered away by the end of the 1920s. Abbot Kerbiriou made a noble but ultimately vain effort to revive these studies in the wake of the publications of the Anglican minister Gilbert H. Doble on the saints of Cornwall, whose cults were of direct interest to continental Bretons.¹⁸

The awakening of Sleeping Beauty

After fifty years of very reduced activity, a turning point came in the 1970s and 1980s with a renewal of interest in the question of Breton hagiography. Fleuriot (1980) proposed his views on the question in his first volume of his *Origines de la Bretagne*. Bernard Merdrignac had already begun to collect a part of Abbot Duine's life's work (Riché 2009: 335) in his DEA (*Diplôme d'étude approfondie*,¹⁹ defended in 1978), to discover the connection between the hagiographer who composed the life of Saint Ronan and elements belonging to the folktale tradition. The work enabled scholars to envisage the possibility of the transmission of a very rich cultural patrimony reaching back to the Brythonic immigration to Armorica. This approach was at the very heart of Merdrignac's doctoral thesis, which he defended in 1982. Yet, for all of that, Merdrignac did not neglect the intellectual training which the hagiographers had received through teaching and their access to books.²⁰ Gwenaél Le Duc (1979), with his joint edition of the *Vita* of Malo by Bili and the Anglo-Saxon adaptation of this text, along with French translations, brought in 1979, after nearly 50 years, a welcome first response to the 4th point of the "Duinisian programme",²¹ that is, encouraging comparative studies of legend and folklore.

Poulin (1977: 1–26; 1978: 610–5) demonstrated an intimate knowledge of the various components of the relevant hagiographical dossier in two studies devoted to Samson of Dol. The first was written in response to the dissertation defended in 1977 by Guillotel (1977: 43–64) on the origins of the bishopric of Dol. A few years

18 In addition to these translations, see the pamphlet entitled *Les saints bretons*, Brest, Imprimerie Le Grand, 1933, by Doble and Kerbiriou. See also Riché (1987: 21).

19 The DEA, which no longer exists, functioned as the first year of a PhD.

20 The results are contained in the first volume of Merdrignac's thesis (1985: 73–98).

21 This adjective appears in the writing of Fr. Duine, cf. Heudré & Dufief (2009: 30).

later, he provided a meticulous analysis of this material in a broader framework in *Les Sources hagiographiques de la Gaule* (SHG) (Dolbeau et al. 1987: 715–31). He must be considered as a follower of Abbot Duine from whom he adopted the method of identifying, recording, classifying, and evaluating the sources (cf. Poulin 1990: 160–78).

Guillotel (2014), following his doctoral viva in 1973 and other works, is renowned for his critical use of Breton hagiographical material, including data drawn from other disciplines. In his study of Saint Suliac, archaeological, palaeographic and legal-evidence is brought into dialogue with hagiographical texts (Guillotel 1998: 5–25). Regrettably, this *maître partagé* (“shared master”), as one of his students described him, died too young, as did Le Duc and Merdrignac. Nevertheless, for more than two decades he left a lasting imprint on research into regional hagiography as it developed after 1985.

A founding colloquium²²

In 1985, after nearly three years of preparation, an international scientific colloquium entitled “Landévennec and Breton monasticism during the early Middle Ages” was organised to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of the supposed foundation of this Cornouailles abbey (Fig. 5). Riché, Fleuriot, and Merdrignac and several others, joined by Father Marc Simon, a monk of Landévennec, were on the organising committee. This colloquium was exceptional in its scope.



Fig. 5: Ruins of the Abbey of Landévennec, Cornouaille (Free of rights)

The colloquium was convened over the course of three days, including papers on various topics, such as

22 I have borrowed this formulation from Fischler (2005–2006: 88–91). The conference in question, which took place in September 1972 at Royaumont at the initiative of Edgar Morin, brought together molecular biologists Jacques Monod, François Jacob, and Salvador Luria, and attracted some of the leading figures in the human sciences: anthropologist Maurice Godelier, historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, social psychologist Serge Moscovici, and others.

archaeology, hagiography, diplomacy, toponymy, art history and musicology. Discussions provided ample evidence to the fact that the legacy of Armorican Brittany contains both Celtic and Romano-Frankish religious and cultural heritage reflected in the works of hagiographers of the period – and obscured in the works of historians of different schools – adhering to opposing – and sometimes openly conflicting – points of view. This inheritance is faithfully reflected – insofar as we know how to interpret them – by the hagiographers of the period, most often deliberately and at times also involuntarily. This dual heritage, at once distinct and interwoven, long the bearer of contradictions and no doubt even sources of conflict, had fortunately not been obscured over time by the positions adopted by historians of one school or another.

The colloquium took place in 1985 in commemoration of the *aggiornamento*, the traditional date for the foundation of Landévennec in 485 given in the now obsolete work of La Borderie, nearly ninety years after Duchesne's demolition of it. Guillotel's research resulted in the definitive destruction La Borderie's legacy. At the same time, by being the first on this occasion to illustrate the complexity of the tradition surrounding the various *vitae* of Guénolé,²³ Guillotel allowed the academic community a glimpse of the richness and full significance of the relevant hagiographical dossier.

The year following this Landévennec conference, its members founded the *Centre international de recherche(s) et de documentation sur le monachisme celtique* (known by its acronym CIRDoMoC, recalling the names of characters such as Matmonoc, Wrmonoc and Liosmonoc, Kerlouégan 2004: 13) to provide a forum to discuss the entire question of hagiography. In this way, the intention was to favour an approach in which the entire Breton hagiographical material, and in a broader sense, the Celtic hagiographical material, would have been included. Presided by Pierre Riché and led by Guénolé Le Duc, the CIRDoMoC became an association in July 1988 with its headquarters at the Abbey of Landévennec. Its first seminar was entitled *Irish and Bretons in Europe during the Dark Ages* (Guillotel 1986: 97–114).

23 Guénolé, the purported 5th century founder of Abbey of Landévennec is thought to have come from Cornwall. Guénolé is the modern gallicised form of the saint's name (*Uuinuualoe* in the Cartulary of Redon) and is still quite a common forename in Brittany.

In all, 140 lectures were given, which shed considerable light on this period. A large number of these have dealt with research in the domain of hagiography. Numerous scholars who have come here, before large numbers of spectators, present the results of their work to their colleagues. This is a research laboratory for which there are no constraints. A publication entitled *Britannia monastica*, financed by its own sales, has been published regularly since volume 6 came out in 2002 to collect the acts of workshops and publish special editions of collections. It is in this framework that specialists of Breton hagiography, renouncing the comfort of paradigms defined by historians and which had been a comfort zone for many, deliberately opened the doors to literary historians who advanced a new type of documentation to the level of a specific object of history.

Nothing demonstrates this shift in attitudes better than the 1995 study carried out by Jean-Christophe Cassard (1993: 361) dedicated to “putting the past into text by hagiographers of Landévennec in the 9th century”. In this way, Cassard integrated the concept of the “effect of reality” into his own approach, a concept elaborated by Roland Barthes.²⁴ Influenced by Joëlle Quaghebeur’s thesis (Quaghebeur 2001), Cassard examined the notion of “monastic memory”, its authenticity, and the *vectors* of its transmission (Quaghebeur 2001: 364). Regrettably, Cassard’s article, which could be considered as a founding document in many respects, did not receive the recognition that it deserved,²⁵ considered to be far too regional in scope.

Beyond the possible traces of a few “real facts” which may have occurred at the time of the saint (Cassard 1993: 362), if in fact the existence of the latter can be attested, incontestable and precious memories have no real historical value in the traditional sense. This is aside from the possible presence, under strata of successive rewritings of the *vitae* of the saint, of a sort of “hagiographical palimpsest” which was a concept that was precious to Merdrignac (2012: 15–30): “the monk-writers are not historians,” recalls Cassard (1993: 363). The disastrous attempts at reconstitution

24 The “effect of reality” (*effet de réalité*) is a concept coined by Roland Barthes (1984: 167–74). It refers to the use of apparently insignificant descriptive details in a text that do not serve narrative or symbolic functions but instead create the illusion of realism. These details signal “the real” to the reader, reinforcing the impression that the representation is natural and authentic, even though it is in fact a constructed effect of discourse.

25 Only Garault (2009: 148) explicitly indicates that she drew inspiration from the framework suggested by Cassard (1993), the author of the article in question.

and synchronisation attempted by La Borderie rendered the excessive criticisms made by Lot and his followers useless, notably their accusations that the hagiographers forged their *vitae*. He described the hagiographical tradition as having a long, rich and dense definition which we believe is still relevant today.

Les Vies sont en effet, avant toute autre chose, des œuvres littéraires composées dans une optique particulière qui sous-tend l'ensemble du travail de recollection et d'exposition dépassé effectué par leurs auteurs, au demeurant des hommes de grande qualité et de haute culture. Fondamentalement, elles se présentent comme des récits de vérité. Des récits de vérité sur les origines monastiques, des récits qui s'imposent à la vénération des frères présents et à venir -qu'ils imprègneront d'autant plus qu'ils contribuent à leur formation aux lettres latines -, voire, de façon seconde, à celle des laïcs de leur entourage ou des clercs séculiers qui les recevront pour une raison ou pour une autre. Ce sont à proprement parler des actes de foi appelés à devenir des 'autorités', au sens médiéval d'auctoritas.

(Cassard 1993: 362–3).

The *Vitae* are in effect, and above all, literary works composed with a very special viewpoint in mind which underlies the entire presentation of the past that was undertaken by their authors. Furthermore, these men were figures of high distinction and refined culture. Fundamentally, they are presented as “narratives of truth”. These narratives of truth about monastic origins are narratives that highlight the veneration of present and future monks and clerics. This is all the more significant because hagiographical narratives played a role in the cultivation of their Latin literary and writing skills. At another level, they also contributed to the education of secular individuals or clerks, who engaged with these texts for various reasons. Clearly, these were expressions of faith, deliberately invoked to acquire the status of “authorities” in the medieval sense of *auctoritas*.

Thus, Breton hagiographical production is composed of works which, to quote Cassard (ibid.), “present themselves as narratives of truth” concerning the religious origins of Brittany, narratives which are deeply inspired by the spirit of the members of the communities who wrote them—abbeys of monks, of canons, or cathedral chapters—who impose a certain vision of historical memory. However, in the absence of factual evidence concerning the existence of the saint in question, the problem is not simply to identify the components of these narratives. As Latouche (1911: 3) observed, they were composed “with the aid of topological, folkloric, and mythological legends,

and even through poorly disguised borrowings from other hagiographical texts.” This is a characterisation which, despite their differences, Merdrignac (2012) and Poulin (2009: 158) tacitly accepted. It also entails an effort to determine, with a degree of subtlety, the circumstances surrounding the composition of these works, as well as the role played by their authors — a role that has for too long been minimised and is still too often reduced to that of a “centonist” (i.e. patchwork) approach (Poulin 2009: 158).²⁶

Nevertheless, in the absence of factual evidence about the existence of the saints in question, the point is not only to know the content of the narratives but also to understand the influences stemming from topological legends, folktales and elements Celtic mythology as well as borrowings from other hagiographical texts.

One of the goals was also to determine, in a subtle way, the circumstances of the composition of these works as well as the role played by their authors. Indeed, their role has too often been underestimated. The modern cut-and-paste technique used in word processing today is not that far removed from the practice used by these authors in medieval times.

If one looks at the themes of the CIRDoMoC’s study days, they have not changed since the beginning of the 20th century. However, it appears that the perspectives through which the subjects have been approached have been constantly renewed. For example, three days of conferences entitled *Territoires et Christianisation* held in 2010, 2011 and 2012 included contributions from archaeologists as well as hagiographers. In addition, their field of investigation covered the period before the British migrations, thus reintroducing the Armorican populations into the historiographical debate, hitherto excluded by La Borderie and Loth. Geographically, this domain was enlarged to insular Britain, as well as to the east of the Armorican peninsula, especially the ancient bishoprics of Dol, Alet and Rennes.

This was done while examining differences and similarities, ruptures and survivals and pushing the comparative approach to the point of investigating Christian sects that once lived on the fringes of the Byzantine Empire!

26 Concerning Bili, the deacon of the Cathedral of Alet, who composed/compiled a hagiography of Malo around 870.

What about Celtic mythology in all this?

Among the various processes of territorialisation²⁷ with a sacred, religious, or ecclesiastical dimension, particular attention may be drawn to the institution known in Brittany as the *Troménie* of Locronan.²⁸

If one accepts that the CIRDoMoC, despite its relatively recent establishment, has offered a reliable reflection of a significant segment of Breton hagiography, it becomes evident that the dimension of Celtic mythology has received only marginal attention. Even the study of folktales—despite the central place accorded to them in the work of Merdrignac—has remained comparatively underdeveloped.

Although Merdrignac and Le Duc invited a number of leading specialists, including Claude Sterckx (1995), Philippe Jouet (1996), Bernard Robreau (1998), and Bernard Sergent (1999) within the framework of the CIRDoMoC, it must be acknowledged that sustained interest in Celtic mythology failed to attract much interest. What accounts for this relative lack of engagement? As suggested above, it cannot be attributed to any lack of interest on the part of the principal actors. On the contrary, in other scholarly contexts and in collaboration with different colleagues, Merdrignac, to cite but one example, has presented substantial research on this topic. Instead, might this situation be better explained by the enduring influence of a more traditional scholarly paradigm, of which Guillotel saw himself as a leading exponent?

The examination of Celtic mythological sources, which requires a rigorous internal analysis of the hagiographical texts, is not without risk. When dealing with aspects of a technical nature, such as the field of onomastics, for example, the knowledge we possess may still be insufficient to allow for a correct interpretation of the texts. Various scholars, including Bernard Tanguy (1975) and others, were not particularly interested in the question of folktales or mythology. Having said this, there is obviously no

27 'territorialisation' is used in reference to human geography, sociology, political theory.

28 The '*troménie*' (from *tro minihi* meaning 'the pilgrimage around the "sanctuary"') is an ancient procession and pilgrimage which takes place every six years and in which participants follow a circular itinerary around the village of Locronan and a path around the mountain and forest of Nevet. This place name is thought to stem from *Nemet(on)*, meaning a 'sacred' or 'venerated' place and is attested in Old Breton with the same meaning.

imperative need to refer to ancient Celtic cosmogony (theories concerning the creation of the universe) in order to deal with the makeup of Breton hagiography because there are many other interpretative models available for which the level of conjecture is not any greater. This explanation is insufficient, however, and is due to the realisation that the mythological approach was obviously not part of the change of perspective which permitted the renewal of hagiographical studies within the CIRDoMoC.

Obviously, this institution has never claimed, and indeed has never sought, to represent the entirety of Breton hagiological studies, and numerous other initiatives have made significant contributions to the field. Notably, research conducted within the long-running, over thirty-year project *Sources hagiographiques de la Gaule* (SHG) and, in particular, the work of Poulin, whose valuable synthesis appeared in 2009 under the title *L'hagiographie bretonne du haut Moyen Âge. Répertoire raisonné*, which exemplify such contributions. Poulin, alongside Jean-Claude Schmitt, advocates the “historicisation” of folkloric traits, proposed by Bray (2001). He consistently expresses reservations regarding a hagio-folkloric approach to hagiographical material — a method he observes to be currently fashionable among Breton scholars. In practice, however, this trend appears rather limited, with Merdrignac as a notable exception, and Poulin’s (2009: 57) critique directed primarily at Merdrignac’s substantial contribution.

Poulin is equally skeptical about the “validity” or even the “usefulness” of certain analytical frameworks, particularly those borrowed from structuralism. He firmly rejects any attempt to rely on a text’s potential folkloric dimension as a means of refining its dating, favoring instead the “traditional methods” of scholarly erudition (2009: 59). Yet he explicitly acknowledges — albeit indirectly, in reference to Merdrignac’s study of the Malo corpus — that such traditional approaches can sometimes produce results that are comparable to those achieved through structuralist methods (Poulin 2009: 170).

Finally, Poulin’s critique targets what he sees as an overreliance on questionable conceptual frameworks, especially when the works in question appear to be mere reiterations of long-established theories portraying the saint as a heroic-mythical figure (2009: 38, 59) — a line of interpretation earlier developed by Alwyn D. Rees in the context of Celtic hagiography (Rees 1936: 30–41).

Was Ernest Renan too optimistic when he declared that “comparative mythology and history will, one day, yield fruitful results” with regard to “the true treasure of Celtic mythology and popular imagination that constitutes Breton hagiography, as in the case of oral literature?” (Renan 1876: 490).

As in other scientific disciplines, would there be a hagiology “from above” from which myth and folklore would be excluded and a hagiology “from below” where they would be the focus of all attention? The specialists of hagiology have not yet made a decision about the amount of space that hagiographical material should take up when studying medieval historical sources. It is no longer a question of sweeping the subject under the carpet as hypercritical historians once did at the end of the 19th century. Rather, after its rehabilitation as a genuine literary genre, should we, in the manner of the supernatural lays and the Arthurian romances, restrict the study of these sources to specialists of medieval literature?

It would be tempting to interpret the hagiographical material as a sort of repertoire of “mythemes” (identifiable myth types) which reflect the mental universe of medieval Bretons, or to demonstrate that some of these mythemes were, voluntarily or not, degraded by the hagiographers under the influence of folktale types that were still in circulation at the time of the *vitae* of the saints.²⁹ Yet, such an approach, which often permits subtle analyses and useful explanations, can lead to heuristic impoverishment in the same way as the hagiologists did when they resorted, in an excessive way, to *Quellenforschung* (“the study of the sources”). The principal inconvenience of this method, as Pierre Flobert (1997: 92) implies with a touch of humour tinged with annoyance, is that it begins “with the false assumption that the author is incapable of inventing anything on his own and that he must copy in order to fill a mental void”.³⁰ As Jacques Gascou (1984: 6) pointed out regarding the role played by the author:

29 In this vein, the beliefs and practices of the ancient, predominantly rural Breton tradition — studied by Pierre-Jakez Hélias — may have retained some vestiges of the Celtic past.

30 The critique here is directed more specifically at Poulin, who has since responded (2009: 54): “*Quellenforschung* is therefore not an instrument for measuring the writers’ lack of talent, as Flobert erroneously claims (1997, 92), but an effort to identify the place and role of intertextuality in the practice of the hagiographer’s craft; the identification of materials serves as a means of recognising the resources and working methods employed to achieve the objectives pursued.”

la Quellenforschung conduit trop souvent à des exagérations qui relèvent d'un causalisme naïf: le texte dont on recherche l'origine serait le produit exclusif d'une source déterminée, qu'il s'agisse de faits ou de jugements. C'est là mettre entre parenthèses la personnalité de l'auteur dont on étudie l'œuvre et nier toute possibilité d'activité créatrice, de transformation ou de déformation d'une source, voire de combinaison de sources différentes ou opposés.

Quellenforschung too often leads to exaggerations stemming from a naïve sense of “causalism”: the idea that the text whose origins one seeks to determine would be the exclusive product of a specific source, whether when dealing with facts or judgements. The implication here is that the personality of the author would be incapable of the slightest creative activity or ability to transform or deform a source, or even of combining different or contradictory sources.

But is it not possible that the scepticism exhibited by many hagiologists towards the work of mythologists be interpreted to be the same kind of disdain shown by some medievalists toward hagiographical material? Indeed, Alain Guerreau (1997: 363) describes hagiologists as “a handful of good souls [who] strive to justify its iterative and stereotypical character, while others, even fewer in number, endeavor to glean from it a few concrete or ‘mental’ traits, of highly questionable reliability.” A similarly disdainful observation appears in the work of Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, who warns of the risk of “being confined to an overly naïve reading of literary testimony, above all with regard to the saints’ lives”.³¹

In this way, the specialists of hagiology and mythology would finally be embarked on the same quest: a search for recognition of the scientific legitimacy of their respective work, legitimacy that is now refused by historians and which they now seek to obtain from anthropologists and ethnologists.

31 See Guizard-Duchamp (2009: 15) who clarifies his critique as follows: *C'est en effet dans ce courant d'études que l'on retrouve les topoi antithétiques de locus amoenus (lieu agréable) et locus horridus (lieu horrible), trop souvent transposés du domaine de la littérature à celui de l'étude des sensibilités. Or, les descriptions de lieux sauvages, loin de toujours nous renseigner sur la vision de ces lieux, peuvent aussi bien nous égarer, en accumulant des motifs conventionnels qui ne témoignent pas d'une réelle perception.* (“It is indeed in this current of studies that one finds the antithetical topoi of *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) and *locus horridus* (horrible place), too often transposed from the realm of literature to that of the study of sensibilities. Yet descriptions of wild places, far from always informing us about the perception of these places, can just as easily mislead us by accumulating conventional motifs that do not reflect a genuine perception”).

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