ÍTE: PATRON OF HER PEOPLE?

ABSTRACT. St Íte, who flourished in the sixth century, founded the medieval Irish monastery of Killeedy, situated in Co. Limerick. She was celebrated as a nurturer and protector of her people. This paper will trace these representations and relate them to complex developments in the saint's cult and to the gendered language used to describe her. This language had its origins in early medieval Ireland as well as in the controversies of christian communities in the later Roman Empire.

KEYWORDS: saints, Íte, Uí Chonaill Gabra, Corco Óche, *matrona*, Roman Empire, women, virginity, fosterage, patronage.

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Saints are christian chameleons, holy shape-shifters. They are imitators of Christ—they are subject to the imitations of christian believers. The saints promise patronage to the devotee in the afterlife; more practically, patronage in the here and now is promised, not by the saints but by their followers. These followers live in the afterglow of the saints' half-remembered triumphs. This afterglow is magnified and transformed through legend, faith and pragmatic propaganda. Saints are the most malleable of historical ghosts. They are more than ghosts—they survive in their Lives, their cures, their curses and their tombs. The early medieval Irish, like early medieval christians everywhere, revered their dead saints with living words and worship.[1] They knelt at their graves and their reliquaries; they supported their representatives, the powerful christian clergy; they lived on an island superimposed with the names of monasteries, in a topography brought into life by saintly imagined deeds.

The early medieval Irish church was dominated by the cults of Brigit, Columba and Patrick. It lived beneath the lights of Kildare, Iona[2] and Armagh, the chief foundations dedicated to these three christian heroes. Dominance did not deaden

[1] Peter Brown, *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin christianity* (London 1981) is an influential study; a recent collection of essays in James Howard-Johnston, Paul Antony Hayward (eds), *The Cult of saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford 1999)

[2] The Columban federation changed its headquarters from Iona to Kells in the early ninth century.

variety. The Irish honoured hundreds of saints.[3] With the exception of Brigit, the most important were men. Women were not excluded from the christian fold of sanctity. They were the supporting props in an enormous cast led by male protagonists: Patrick, Columba, the two Ciaráns, the two Brendans, the numberless Colmáns. The christian landscape, however, bears witness to their less vocal presence. At the four corners of the compass, churches were dedicated to saintly women.[4] These women were in the shadow of men, but even more, they were overshadowed by Brigit, an anomalous and powerful figure of female sanctity.[5] Most of them were not remembered in a hagiographical Life. Such a Life signalled membership of the ecclesiastical establishment. It required resources, a hagiographer, the constituency of an audience. Some women were worthy of the trouble: Brigit, of course, St Mo Ninne of Killeevy, St Samthann of Clonbroney and St Íte of Killeedy. All were patrons of their churches; St Íte was also the patron of her people, a protector and nurturer. She was a central presence for communities of belief and contested communities of power.

Like many Irish saints she lived during the sixth century, the age of christianity's triumph on the island, but an age clouded by a paucity of historical evidence. This paucity did not stop those who followed in the footsteps of revered church-founders. The saint is given two different death-dates. According to the Annals of Inisfallen she died in 579; for the Annals of Ulster her death occurred in 570. Both dates are probably notional, expressing a knowledge of Íte's sixth century origins and career but some uncertainty regarding their exact chronology. Imagination fleshed out the decay of memory; it was better and brighter than reality; it was more useful in struggles for power and ecclesiastical influence.

Her cult was well-articulated and imagined. Killeedy, her main religious foundation, was relatively important. Its earliest name was Cluain Credail and only later did it call itself after its founder, Cell Íte 'Church of Íte'. The monastery was situated south of what is now Newcastle West at the foot of the uplands of Sliab

[3] The number of Irish saints is extraordinary. The large corpus of saints' genealogies gives some idea. These are edited by Pádraig Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1985).

[4] The evidence is almost exclusively hagiographical, genealogical and onomastic. Random examples include Kilrainy on the borders of Meath and Kildare, dedicated to St Rígnach; Urney on the Tyrone-Donegal border, prominent in the career of St Samthann; Ballyvourney in Co. Cork dedicated to St Gobnait; the community of women associated with Kilcolagh, Co. Roscommon.

[5] This has made Brigit the subject of considerable debate; interpretations have varied, some stressing the pagan nature of Brigit, others her christian identity. For the former, Kim McCone, *Pagan past and christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990) ch. 7; for the latter, Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the fire from heaven', *Études Celtiques* 29 (1992) 105–13.

Luachra. Originally an institution for women, it was ultimately dominated by men. The Annals of the Four Masters note the death of Cathasach, abbot of Killeedy in 815 (AFM 810=815), and of abbot Cellach in 834 (AFM 833=834). No abbess is recorded. This does not necessarily imply that the female monastery disappeared. Some literary sources do portray Íte's successor as being a woman.[6] On the other hand, a Middle-Irish anecdote in *Félire Óengusso* hints that women lost power in Killeedy.[7] The anecdote's suggestion that this was because Íte's nuns accidentally killed the saint's favourite beetle (a beetle that gnawed on her flesh in a bizarre example of christian ascetic masochism) is, of course, symbolic. Either way, the saint's cult flourished. Íte is celebrated in a variety of sources. The saint is the subject of a medieval Latin Life, which is unlikely to be pre-twelfth century in its present form, although arguably earlier in original execution.[8] The saint is also remembered in the annals, hagiographical anecdote and, most famously, the Old-Irish poem *Ísucán*.[9] The Life draws on, and expands, this material.

Íte was born among the Dési of what is now Co. Waterford, and in her Life she is given a royal genealogy—typical of the elitist attitudes of Irish culture.[10] Status and morality were imagined to form an identity. She is also praised as protector of the Uí Chonaill Gabra, a dynasty that held extensive lands in Co. Limerick. The Uí Chonaill were an important branch of the Uí Fidgeinte, themselves a Munster dynasty of some note. The kingship of Uí Fidgeinte generally alternated between them and their rivals, the Uí Chairpre. Killeedy's status flowed from the fact that it was, essentially, a royal church of the Uí Chonaill. Íte's supposed royal birth suited the Uí Chonaill's royal pretensions. Yet, it seems likely that the Uí Chonaill were her changeling and posthumous children, the supplanters of Íte's original followers—cuckoos. The evidence is fragmentary but compelling. According to the Annals of Ulster, the Uí Chonaill defeated their neighbours, the Corco Óche, in battle. The entry for 552 reads as follows:

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[6] Whitley Stokes (ed), *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London 1905) 210, tells the birth-tale of Cuimmíne Fota which features an abbess of Killeedy.

[7] Ibid, 44, has Íte declaring to her nuns: *acht ní geba caillech tre bithu mo chomarbus issin ngnim sin* 'but no nun will ever take my succession, because of that deed...'

[8] The Life is edited by Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1910) 2 Volumes, II, 116–30 [henceforth VSH].

[9] For example, Stokes, *Martyrology of Oengus*, 44. The Old-Irish poem is found with a Middle-Irish anecdote in ibid, 42–5; edited separately by Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics: eighth to twelfth century* (Oxford 1956) 26–9; by E. G. Quin, 'The early Irish poem Isucán', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981) 39–52.

Bellum Cuilne in quo ceciderunt Corcu Oche Muman orationibus Itae Cluano.
The battle of Cuilen in which the Corco Óche of Munster fell through the prayers of Íte of Cluain [Killeedy].

This annal is certainly retrospective, as are a fair proportion of the sixth century entries. It records things as they should be; it is not a record of what happened. In fact, it is likely to be purposefully misleading. The Corco Óche and the Uí Chonaill Gabra were rivals for control of the fertile lands of Limerick. The heart of the Golden Vale, Limerick was agriculturally wealthy and could support a large population. Over the centuries many peoples claimed it briefly, only to be swallowed into quicksand obscurity. The Corco Óche were the last of this line of losers in early historical times. They survived long enough to make an indentation. The Laud genealogies preserve an account of them that dates to around 700. It details their legendary prehistoric Ulster origins and traces their exodus into the Promised Land of Munster.[11] Most interestingly, it tells of a battle fought by the Corco Óche, apparently in Co. Limerick. It is the mirror opposite of the annal entry. The Corco Óche are victorious through the prayers of Íte.[12] They defeat the aggressive men of Ireland. This last detail echoes the common Ulster Cycle idea that the heroes of that province stood alone and victorious against the united armies of the rest of the island. It seems probable that the Uí Chonaill Gabra have been exaggerated into the men of Ireland.

How to account for this discrepancy? The second half of the seventh century and the first half of the eighth saw jarring shifts in power. The greater dynasties and overkingdoms gained a position of political pre-eminence; lesser peoples fell by the wayside.[13] Contemporary Munster history is tantalisingly obscure, wrapped up in anecdote, fragment and genealogy. Unlike the Uí Néill, the Munster kingdoms have not left us with coherent, streamlined invented historical narratives. Instead there is confusion, sometimes artful, usually frustrating, occasionally more revealing than the carefully constructed fictions of the Uí. Néill. Nevertheless, it is clear that seventh- and eighth-century Munster was characterised by radical and violent political change.

[10] VSH II, 116 § i; the genealogy is embedded in a short account of the Expulsion of the Dési.
[11] Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'The Laud [610] genealogies and tribal histories', *ZCP*, 8 (1911), 307-9.
[12] Ibid, 309.5–6.

The Corco Loígde, to take the best example, fell from considerable power and were confined to West Cork. Yet, memories of their former state persisted and were polished.[14] Similarly, although not on such a scale, the Corco Óche appear to have been supplanted from a dominant position in east Limerick. The fascinating text known as the 'West Munster Synod' gives the Corco Óche a prominent position in a *bráithirse* 'brotherhood' of saints and Munster peoples.[15] They were pushed to the margins by the expansionist Uí Fidgeinte, particularly the Uí Chonaill Gabra. In the process, it is likely that they lost control of Killeedy and other important churches such as Mungret,[16] probably after a series of battles and confrontations. Íte had new children and the Uí Chonaill Gabra a new patron. Killeedy was now positioned at the southern boundaries of Uí Chonaill. It may even be possible that the monastery became dominated by men at this point, an Uí Chonaill abbot taking over from a Corco Óche supported abbess. This must remain highly speculative in the absence of other evidence. The interpolated entry in the Annals of Ulster makes the Uí Chonaill's triumph retrospective. The state of affairs is underlined by the Latin *Vita* of Íte. In the Life's account of the battle of 552, Íte is the *matrona* of the Uí Chonaill: she defeats a multitude of enemies from West Munster. At this stage the Corco Óche had become obscure and the hagiographer needed a more dangerous adversary to magnify Íte's power. There was none better than West Munster, traditionally seen as being politically opposed to East Munster, the kings of Cashel and their allies, including the Uí Fidgeinte.

The *Vita*'s account of Íte's military efficacy is notable for another reason as well: she is called a *matrona*.[17] The word is not very common in Hiberno-Latin usage and most often refers to a married woman.[18] This is not, at first glance, appropriate for a virgin saint who is praised for her extreme, sometimes disturbing, bodily asceticism

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[13] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland' in T. W. Moody (ed), *Nationality and the pursuit of national independence*, Historical Studies: Papers read before the Irish Conference of Historians 11 (Belfast 1978) 9.

[14] The most impressive material evidence for this is an Ogam stone found at Thomastown Co. Kilkenny which commemorates VEDDELLEMETTO MUCI LOGIDDEAS AVVI MUNICCONA. Damian McManus, *A guide to Ogam*, Maynooth Monographs 4 (Maynooth 1991) 73–5, no. xiv, discusses the stone and endorses, with reservations, the equation of Logiddeas with Corco Loígde. The literary evidence is discussed by Francis John Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 180–81.

[15] Meyer, 'Laud genealogies', 315.

[16] Nessán, the founder of Mungret, was a member of the Corco Óche. Mungret became an important Uí Fidgeinte church.

[17] VSH II, 118 §vii (twice), §viii, 119 §ix, 128 §xxxiii (twice), 129 §xxxiii, 130 §xxxvi (twice).

and unceasing spiritual combats with demons.[19] Moreover, the Life is specific in its vocabulary. It only makes use of *matrona* when referring to Íte. In all cases, but one, this describes her particular relationship with Uí Chonaill Gabra. The one exception is a prophecy that Íte will be the *matrona* of many on Doomsday.[20] This is an extension of the saint's relationship with the Uí Chonaill, as well as a sly usurpation of St Patrick's prerogative as the Apostle and judge of all the Irish at the end of time.[21] The contexts of the word's appearance in the Life suggest that *matrona* has political and protective overtones for its author. For him, Íte's role as protector of the Uí Chonaill is not unique. She shares it with St Senán, the founder of the monastery of Inis Cathaig on Scattery Island in the Shannon Estuary. Inis Cathaig was a major monastery that lay at the northern boundary of Uí Fidgeinte power. It was a significant barometer of Uí Fidgeinte influence. The single Uí Fidgeinte and Uí Chonaill Gabra king of Munster, Ólchobur mac Flainn († 796) began his career as abbot of Inis Cathaig. It is worth examining the Life's description of the saints' shared duty. An angel tells Íte:

> *Tu enim matrona gentis hUa Conaill eris; que gens tibi et sancto Senano donata est a Deo*.[22]
> For you will be the *matrona* of the Uí Chonaill, which people have been given to you and to St. Senán by God.

The words are carefully chosen. The Uí Chonaill have been legally placed, *donata est*, under the protection of the two saints by God. The implication is that they fulfil the duty of patrons. Senán is a *patronus*. The female equivalent of *patronus* is *patrona*. Yet, the Life chooses to describe Íte as a *matrona*. This is despite the fact that Íte would be an effective *patrona.* A *patronus*, and by extension *patrona* in this case, could be a legal advocate as well as protector. Íte as *matrona* on Doomsday is imagined as an advocate, for her followers, before the throne of God. Why then is she not identified as a *patrona*?

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[18] Examples in Antony Harvey, Kieran Devine and Francis J. Smith (compilers), *Royal Irish Academy archive of Celtic-Latin literature*, first (preliminary) CD-Rom edition (Turnhout 1994).

[19] VSH II, 117 §v, 119 §xi.

[20] Ibid, 118 §vi.

[21] Promoted by Muirchú in his Life of Patrick, written in the second half of the seventh century: Ludwig Bieler (ed), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 117 § II 6.3.

[22] VSH II, 118 §viii.

The most convincing explanation is that the Life is drawing on, and responding to, Íte's highly gendered traditional image. The saint is consistently portrayed as a nurturer and/or mother, appropriate depictions for a woman, however holy, that served to reinforce the sexual stereotyping prevalent in early medieval Irish culture. Íte might be a saint. It is never forgotten that she is a woman. This is apparent in the Lives of other saints where she makes cameo appearances. Íte is the fostermother of St Brendan of Clonfert, a detail which may go back to the seventh or eighth century.[23] She advises Brendan on how to succeed on his famous imaginary voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints, but as a woman stays at home. Not for her the dangers of the ocean. Íte is also, and appropriately, the fosterer of her nephew St Mo Chóemóg.[24] Fosterage was extremely important for the early medieval Irish and, as a secular institution, is described in the fragmentary Old-Irish law tract known as *Cáin Iarraith*.[25] The bonds created by fosterage were sometimes thought to be stronger than biological relationships. The ecclesiastical version, although related, must have been more institutionalised than secular fosterage. The *Vita Prior* of the Leinster saint Munnu of Taghmon, a text which may have been written between 750 X 850,[26] provides a snapshot. It tells how a king sends his two sons into fosterage, one with an anchorite and the other with the ascetic Munnu. The son who is fostered by the anchorite receives a worldly upbringing while the child who is fostered in Taghmon receives a religious one. The former dies a violent death while the latter becomes a holy cleric. Munnu is a good fosterer, an alternative father. Importantly, from Íte's point of view, it allows a virgin saint to be portrayed as a mother. She is maternal but untainted by the stain of sexual intercourse.

The representation of Íte as fosterer is her most characteristic pose. Its best example is the Old-Irish poem *Ísucán*.[27] This is preserved, along with a later Middle-Irish prologue, in the notes to *Félire Óengusso*. The poem, spoken in the first person, is only six stanzas long. It tells how the baby Jesus comes to nestle at Íte's breast. As

[23] There are several recensions of the *Vitae*: see VSH I, 98–151; also W. W. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels 1965), 56–78; 324–21.

[24] Íte is described as St Mo Chóemóg's fostermother in VSH II, 167 §viii, 170 §xiv.

[25] *Cáin Iarraith* (=*CIH* 1759.6–1770.14) is translated by W. Hancock et al, *The ancient laws of Ireland*, Volume 2 (Dublin 1865–1901) 147–93; discussed by Kathleen Mulchrone, 'The rights and duties of women with regard to the education of their children', in Rudolf Thurneysen et al (eds), *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin 1939) 187–205.

[26] Edited by Heist, 'Vita prior S. Fintani seu Munnu', in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice Salmanticensi*, 198–209, §24; the dating is discussed by Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to the Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1991) 329, 334–37.

its most recent editor E. G. Quin has pointed out, the theme is the commonly attested one of the child Jesus *in sinu sanctorum*.[28] However, this particular poem is both apposite in subject and exceptionally coherent in its imagery. This imagery is twofold in expression. It is evoked in the language of clientship and lordship,[29] key related institutions in early medieval Ireland. It is also expressed through the use of terms appropriate to fosterage. Íte declares, in the first lines of the poem, *Ísucán/ alar limm im dísertán* 'Little Jesus who is in fosterage with me in my little hermitage'. This sets the tone for later stanzas.[30] Íte is a virgin but the child lies at her breast. She is superior to the biological mother—Jesus would not visit such an impure women. Íte is closer to Mary than to an ordinary woman. She is the *muime* 'fostermother' of Jesus. At the same time, the use of the metaphors of lordship and clientship gives a political and secular undertone to Íte's fostering. It is typical of early medieval Irish writers that this connection with the male world of political organisation can only be created in ways that stress Íte's female identity. The poem does not threaten the basic premises of medieval Irish attitudes towards women.

This raises, again, the significance of *matrona*. It is related to the word *mater* 'mother', while at the same time carrying a distinct meaning. Originally, the *matrona* was a Roman married woman who managed her household. She was inferior to her husband, the patriarchal *paterfamilias*, but, nevertheless, she held a position of some status in Roman society and was honoured highly. The *matrona* was the envy of other less fortunate women. Early christians attempted to give radical new meanings to Roman institutions. Ascetic christians believed that the relations between the sexes had to be transformed in anticipation of the Last Day.[31] Many early converts to the christian message were upper-class women and it has been argued that some of them revolted strongly against the matronal role.[32] Marriage was not for them; only virgins could await the final divine judgement with any certainty. These virgins, however, demanded the honour accorded to the *matrona*. Thus, christian virgins adopted the veil of the married woman or even dressed as a *matrona*, undermining role

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[27] Quin, 'Isucán', 39–52.
[28] Ibid, 51.
[29] Ibid, 40–1.
[30] Thus stanza 2.1–2; stanza 4.3.
[31] The fullest study of this is Peter Brown, *The body and society, men, women and sexual renunciation in early christianity* (New York 1988).
[32] Jo Ann McNamara, '*Matres Patriae/Matres ecclesiae*: women of the Roman Empire', in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz (eds.), *Becoming visible: women in European history* (Boston, 2nd Edition 1987) 118.

expectations.[33] This history of the veiling of virgins and its significance reached the Irish along with christianity and its writings. Naturally, as this conflict had occurred in a very different society, *matrona* could not have carried the same charged meaning in common usage. But, it is arguable that the author of Íte's *Vita* is drawing on a knowledge of early christian history when he uses it. Íte, like the christian virgins of the late empire, was not married, yet she did metaphorically manage the household of her people. Furthermore, Irish texts show an interest in the veiling of women.[34] This is given extra significance by the established image of Íte as a fostermother. She is a *matrona* and a *muime*. Yet, the two words are not identical. *Muime* is generally translated by the Latin *nutrix*. By choosing to use the much less common *matrona*, the hagiographer is making a subtle and appropriate point. Íte is a fostermother; she is also a political patron; the Uí Chonaill Gabra are her clients. But, lordship and clientship are male institutions. How could Íte's power and the political weight of Killeedy be expressed without violating the tenets of Irish society? *Matrona* provides a satisfying answer. It evokes Íte's role as a fostermother and as a protector; it shows that she is a woman and, at the same time, the patron of her people. Ironically, and probably unintentionally, it is a reminder that the Uí Chonaill are indeed fosterchildren. Íte's real children, the Corco Óche, have been displaced. Ties of fosterage prove stronger than blood. The saint's cult is chameleon, its subject a shape-shifter. Her patronage, and by extension Killeedy's, is contested by communities of power. The cult of Íte demonstrates their very fragile nature.

[33] Aline Rousselle, 'Body politics in ancient Rome', in Pauline Schmitt Pantel (ed.), *From ancient goddesses to Christian saints*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, A history of women in the West 1 (Cambridge MA., 1992) 315, has pointed out that Christian women in general adopted the matronal role.

[34] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, '*Caillech* and other terms for veiled women in medieval Irish texts', *Éigse* 28 (1994–95) 71–96.