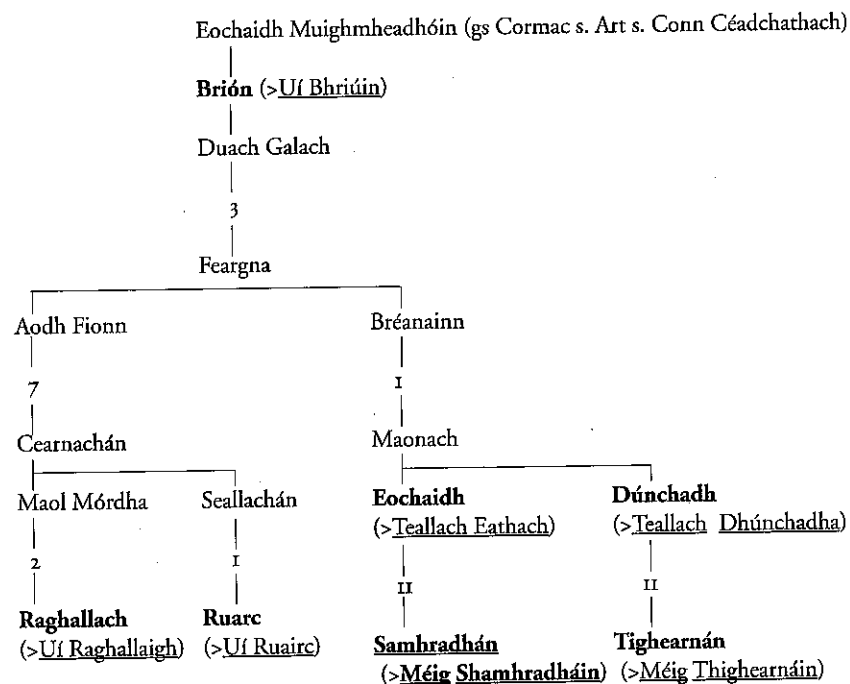
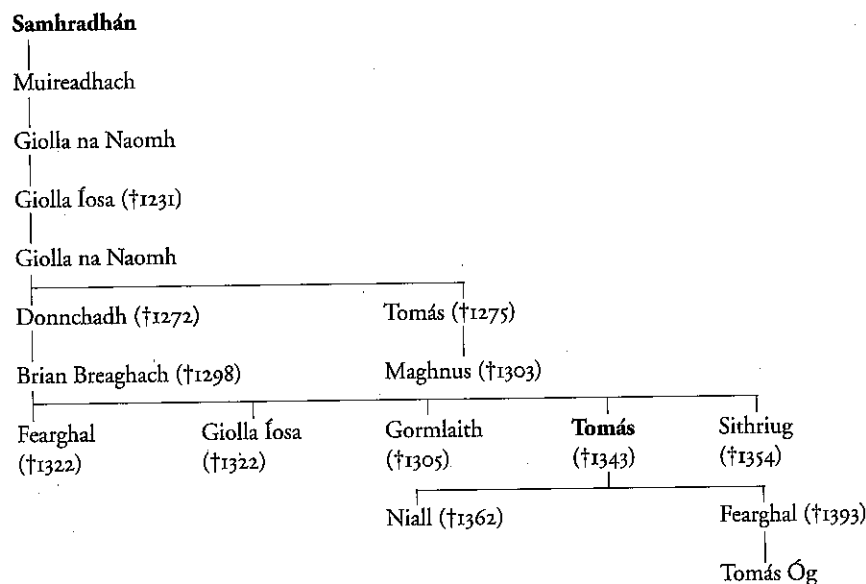


## DESCENT OF CHIEF FAMILIES OF BRÉIFNE



## MÁG SHAMHRADHÁIN DESCENT



## 'Wily women of God' in Breifne's late medieval and early modern devotional collections

SALVADOR RYAN

There are three manuscript collections of the late medieval and early modern periods with important connections to Breifne/Cavan which are particularly worthy of attention. These are BL Egerton MS 1781 (1484–7), Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B. 513 (last quarter of the fifteenth century) and BL Egerton MS 136 (1630). These compilations are characterized by material of a devotional, didactic and hagiographical nature in addition to some medieval romances. There is a degree of overlap between the material found in these collections and, furthermore, this material bears many similarities to a devotional collection commissioned by a Donegal noblewoman, Máire Ní Mháille, (d. 1522), wife of Ruaidhrí Mac Suibhne Fanad, in what became known as the 'Book of Piety', which was completed in 1513 and which forms part of the larger *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*.<sup>1</sup> We know far more about the life of Máire Ní Mháille than we do about those for whom the other three collections were compiled. There is a sense, then, in which the identification of a devotee 'puts flesh' on devotional material, allowing us to imagine how certain tales might have been heard, prayers prayed, etc. This marks Máire Ní Mháille's 'Book of Piety' as quite unique in that regard; nevertheless, the above-mentioned collections were to pass to different owners and readers over time and their contents also provide important evidence of the devotional world to which these owners, their families and, undoubtedly, their wider communities, were exposed.

Firstly, a word about the collections themselves. Egerton MS 1781 was written by members of the Mac Parrthaláin family, well-known scribes and dependants of the Mag Shamhradháin, lords of Tullyhaw in modern-day Cavan. Part of the manuscript was compiled (most likely by Conall Bacach Mac Parrthaláin) in the house of Niall Ó Siaghail in Linn Ealna, a location Brian Ó Cúfú identifies as Lynally in the barony of Ballycowan in Offaly, and the other part (by Diarmaid Bacach Mac Parrthaláin) in two locations – at Derrycassan Lake, adjoining Ballymagauran Lake, and also at Mogue's Island in nearby Templeport.<sup>2</sup> This man-

<sup>1</sup> RIA MS 475 (24 P 25); for a discussion of some of the contents of the 'Book of Piety' see Ryan, 'Windows on late medieval devotional practice: Máire Ní Mháille's "Book of Piety" (1513) and the world behind the texts'. <sup>2</sup> There is a scribal note of Diarmaid Bacach Mac Parrthaláin to this effect at fo. 128. See Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, pp 539, 542; Ó Cúfú, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, i, p. 256.

uscript was later in the hands of the O'Rourkes of Leitrim during the sixteenth century, one Sebraidh Ó Ruairc requesting in an inserted note a blessing from whoever might read his inclusion.<sup>3</sup> The second manuscript, MS Rawlinson B. 513, which is roughly contemporaneous, is also the work of two scribes in collaboration, one of whom was Conall Ballach Mac Parrthaláin, who was, again, writing in the house of Niall Ó Siaghail in Offaly.<sup>4</sup> The third manuscript, Egerton MS 136, does not include the name of a scribe, but does have the date 'anno domini 1630' written at the foot of folio 4.b in the same hand. It also includes the name of the book's owner: Cormac Mac Parrthaláin. The note requests that God have mercy on the soul of the compiler of the manuscript and on Mac Parrthaláin himself.<sup>5</sup> A seventeenth-century inscription demonstrates that the manuscript was at another time owned by one 'Patricius Vardaeus', undoubtedly a member of the Mac an Bhaird family of poets. The fact that manuscripts which may have originated in the Tullyhaw barony could eventually find themselves in the hands of owners in the neighbouring territories of the O'Rourkes and perhaps further afield, is hardly surprising. The kind of devotional material found in these collections has parallels in other collections of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from Roscommon, such as the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (RIA MS 476/23 O 48) and the territories of Desmond (BL Additional MS 30512). The table found at Appendix 1 includes the religious/devotional material found in the Breifne manuscripts, showing, where applicable, the items which occur in more than one manuscript, in one form or another, and how they relate to the other three collections.<sup>6</sup> It is one thing to compare what can perhaps be described as the favourite pious legends and devotional treatises of the age (in so far as one can, given the limited number of surviving manuscripts); it is quite another, however, to delve inside the texts themselves to examine their content. By doing this, one can gain a better appreciation of the sort of hagiographic and didactic material which was clearly in vogue and thus gain albeit limited entry into a particular devotional world. This is the approach taken here. Rather than attempt a close textual analysis of the various recensions of the tales themselves, the primary emphasis here is on their content, and specifically what this tells us about the prevailing influences on the devotional lives of the people who obviously enjoyed them most. Because we know that one of the collections with which the Breifne manuscripts are compared, that of the Donegal 'Book of Piety', was specially commissioned for the

<sup>3</sup> Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 526. <sup>4</sup> Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, i, p. 256. <sup>5</sup> Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 554. <sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the table does not include all the religious material found in the other manuscripts: only the material which has parallels in one or more of what might be called the three Breifne manuscripts is included. This information has been gleaned from the following sources: Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*; Gwynn, 'The manuscript known as the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*'; Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*; Walsh (ed.), *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*.

noblewoman Máire Ní Mháille, particular attention is paid to the role of women in the tales examined.

An Irish version of the Fierebras legend found in Egerton MS 1781 and additional manuscripts recounts Charlemagne's conflict with the Saracens, especially the Saracen king Admirandus and his son, the giant Fortibras (Fierebras). This chivalric romance, featuring the well-known characters Roland and Oliver, has parallels with a mid-thirteenth-century French poem 'Fierebras', which was rendered in its Middle English version as 'Sir Firumbras' (late fourteenth century). In all three manuscripts, *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, Egerton MS 1781 and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, the tale follows directly from the legend of the finding of the true cross by St Helena. What Whitley Stokes calls 'Stair Fortibrais' constitutes an Irish translation of a Latin text found in TCD MS 667, a Franciscan manuscript written c.1455 and most probably associated with the friary at Ennis, Co. Clare.<sup>7</sup> Many elements of this rather protracted tale provide important insights into the kind of material wealthy Irish patrons considered worth investing in.

The story begins with the raiding of Rome by the Saracens, the killing of the pope and the theft of the crown of thorns, the nails of the true cross and the relics of the saints from the city. These passion relics were, of course, highly prized in the later middle ages, as the ubiquity of their appearance of the *arma Christi* or 'Instruments of the Passion' in late medieval art and devotional literature demonstrates.<sup>8</sup> The task of recovering the precious relics is entrusted to the emperor Charlemagne and his knights and thus a series of adventures begins. The tenor of the tale is replete with medieval religious concerns. Firstly, there is the theme of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. The giant Fortibras, who guards the tower where the relics are now held, sneeringly boasts to Oliver that it was he who stole the crown of Christ and the relics of the saints and 'enslaved the city of Helena where your God was buried'.<sup>9</sup> Oliver, meanwhile, claims that he was sent by Charlemagne to exhort the giant to receive baptism and come to the faith of Christ or face death. Oliver reminds the giant that 'it is right to slay everyone who denies almighty God and believes in the idle deities'.<sup>10</sup> It was common for chivalric accounts of Christian-Saracen conflicts to display little understanding of Islam, the Saracens being believed to worship a pantheon of different gods and, above all, to worship Muhammad. Throughout this tale, the Saracens are depicted as calling on Mahomet as their God and the fact that they

<sup>7</sup> See Colker, *Trinity College Dublin: descriptive catalogue of the Medieval and Renaissance Latin manuscripts*, ii, p. 1141; Stokes, 'The Irish version of Fierebras'; O'Rahilly, 'Review of *The conquests of Charlemagne*', ed. Douglas Hyde, Dublin, 1919', 668-70; Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, pp. 138-40. <sup>8</sup> For the *arma Christi* in an Irish context, see Ryan, 'Weapons of redemption: piety, poetry, and the instruments of the Passion in late medieval Ireland'. <sup>9</sup> Stokes, 'The Irish version of Fierebras', 29. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31, 37.

worship him is explicitly referred to. Fortibras is portrayed as refusing blankly to 'forsake my own God, even, Mahomet'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, when Oliver defeats the giant, has him baptized and enlists him to help Charlemagne, Fortibras' father Admirandus is incensed, lamenting 'O Mahomet, who art my God, what is it brought my son to be overthrown ... and sad it is that he was not killed before he was made a Christian'.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, however, before Fortibras is defeated by Oliver and becomes a Christian, he displays some confidence in what might be regarded as a passion relic, namely balsam that was applied to the dead body of Christ in the sepulchre. Spying some blood dripping from underneath Oliver's breastplate, Fortibras is reluctant, for reasons of honour, to proceed with the fight. He tells Oliver, 'Now I have two flasks of the balsam which was rubbed on Christ in the sepulchre, and which I found when I destroyed Rome, and no matter how little thereof a man shall consume he will be whole'.<sup>13</sup> This curious expression of faith by a Muslim in a Christian passion relic underlines the potency which such relics were thought to possess.

However, it could be argued that the true hero of this tale is neither Oliver nor Charlemagne but, instead, Fortibras' sister, Floripas. When their father, Admirandus, succeeds in capturing Oliver and his companions, Floripas manages to enter the jail where they were being held by striking the jailer 'on the crown of his head and dash[ing] out his brains'.<sup>14</sup> Floripas makes a deal with the Christians and proceeds to lead them to safety. When, en route, her governess recognizes the captives and begins to remonstrate with Floripas, threatening to tell her father, Floripas takes the woman by the calves and casts her out a nearby window into the sea.<sup>15</sup> Floripas' chamber is described in Edenic terms; we are told that an apple grew there that could heal all their ailments. She proceeds to act almost as an Eve-like figure to the wounded Oliver (except with very different consequences) for she 'went into the garden for [an] apple and gave it to Oliver and as soon as he tasted it he was healed'.<sup>16</sup> Such a parallel with the story of the Fall in Genesis would not have been lost on a medieval audience.

In a series of examples of ingenuity and quick-wittedness, Floripas outmanoeuvres her father and his forces time and again, rescuing the Christian knights at every turn: extinguishing fires, removing the pangs of hunger from knights by means of a miraculous girdle and threatening to break the 'ill-coloured teeth' of any jailer who dares to confront her.<sup>17</sup> When the tower which Roland and his Christian knights had conquered and where the relics were held, was about to be re-taken by the Saracens, it was Floripas who remained at the forefront of the Christian defence, opening the coffer where the relics of the saints were lying and bringing them up the tower with her, whereupon the knights prostrated them-

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 37. <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 119. <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33. <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 125. <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 129. <sup>16</sup> Ibid. <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 145.

selves before them. One knight, whose name was Nemer, took them to the top of the tower and displayed them to the pagans who fell to the ground and 'broke necks, legs and arms, some of whom died'.<sup>18</sup> It was Floripas once again who conceived the idea of using the relics as lethal weapons. In an earlier incident, she rallies the Christian forces by producing the relics which were duly invoked and after which the Christians 'went at the barbarians as sparks would spring out of a fire'.<sup>19</sup> As the tale nears its end, Admirandus is captured and offered the chance to accept baptism. He vacillates and the knights become impatient. However, it is Floripas who repeatedly requests them to show mercy until it is clear that Admirandus has definitively chosen to reject Christianity, upon which he is killed. Floripas is then baptized and she marries the Christian knight, Guy of Burgundy, to whom she has been promised. It is Floripas who personally returns the precious relics to Charlemagne, underlining her central role as the heroine of the tale.

Other tales in which women play a prominent role include the story of Pontius Pilate's death at the instigation of Veronica, which is found both in the Breifne manuscript Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B. 513 and in Máire Ní Mháille's Donegal 'Book of Piety'. The story of Pilate's demise or *Mors Pilati*, featured in the famous *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, a thirteenth-century bishop of Genoa and hagiographer, had great currency during the middle ages in its various versions.<sup>20</sup>

This tale recounts how the gravely ill Emperor Tiberius sends Volusianus to Judaea as he has heard that there is someone there who can cure him. Pontius Pilate is approached in order to seek the man out. At this stage, Christ has already been put to death, so Pilate panics and asks for some time to accomplish the task. He is given twenty-four days. In the meantime, Volusianus encounters Veronica (who in the story is described as a relative of Christ) who tells him the truth of what has happened and gives him the towel upon which Christ's face is imprinted in order that he might bring it to Tiberius. When he asks how much it might cost, Veronica replies that the only requirement is that it be used with heart-felt devotion. And so Volusianus brings the towel with the sacred image back to Rome. The relic heals Tiberius but the emperor, seething with rage at Pilate's deception, demands justice and calls Pilate to Rome. Pilate comes before the emperor wearing the seamless garment of Christ, which the Virgin Mary made for her Son, and each time he stands before Tiberius while wearing the garment, the emperor's rage subsides and he cannot act against him. Not understanding why this is happening, it is only when Veronica (who has also travelled to Rome) approaches the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 283. <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 167. <sup>20</sup> For the wider context see Hourihane, *Pontius Pilate, anti-Semitism and the Passion in medieval art*. Many saints' lives from the *Legenda Aurea* are to be found in medieval Irish manuscripts, demonstrating how well-known Voragine's anthology was in Ireland.

emperor suggesting that the problem lies with the seamless garment which Pilate wears and which is warding off Tiberius' anger that the matter is resolved.<sup>21</sup> Only when Pilate is induced to remove the garment is Tiberius enabled to sentence him to execution. Before the sentence is carried out, however, Pilate takes his own life. His body is thrown into the Tiber but then causes storm demons to rise up on the river and is subsequently sent to Vienne in France (Via Gehennae) and dumped in the Rhone.<sup>22</sup>

Once again, it is the truthfulness and virtue of a woman, Veronica, who, in the minds of the medieval constructors of the account, helps Pilate to receive his just desserts. Once again, passion relics feature prominently; in the previous tale Floripas succeeds in the recovery of passion relics from the Saracens, but also uses the relics as powerful weapons when required to repel the foes of the Christian knights. In the Pilate legend, the *Vera Ikon* or true image of Christ's face on Veronica's towel has healing properties just as the balsam applied to Christ's dead body was reputed to have healing properties in the previous tale, even in the words of the Saracen giant Fortibras. In the Pilate legend, the curious incident in which Christ's seamless garment protects the obvious malefactor in the story from what is portrayed as the just anger of Tiberius, is of some interest. As not only a passion relic, but also a regular feature of the set of passion symbols known as the *arma Christi*, the performance of the garment in this matter is not altogether untypical. The *arma Christi* or 'Instruments of the Passion' were routinely invoked in medieval spirituality for protection against the judgment of God in much the same way as the blood of the five wounds of Christ were. In this way, they came to function as what might be referred to as 'weapons of mass redemption'. There are numerous examples of medieval Gaelic Irish bardic poets referring to the instruments in this manner and their frequent inclusion on medieval tomb surrounds along with other intercessors, such as the Virgin and the twelve apostles, further underlines this perceived role.<sup>23</sup>

There is a further element regarding the seamless garment, moreover, which is worthy of note: the version of the tale found in MS Rawlinson B. 513 emphasizes that this is the garment which was made for Christ by his mother. It is, therefore, quite literally 'Mary's garment'. This element is not recorded in the version found in the *Legenda Aurea*. It is significant that the 'sinner' Pilate wears the 'garment of Mary' and is thus preserved from punishment, for that was just how the Virgin Mary's intercession was understood to work in the later middle ages. Mary was the intercessor *par excellence* for all manner of rogues and sinners and was routinely

<sup>21</sup> There is no mention of Veronica's intervention at this point in the Latin text of the *Legenda Aurea*. <sup>22</sup> Mac Niocaill, 'Dhá leagan de scéal Phíoláit', 207–10. <sup>23</sup> See Ryan, 'Weapons of redemption'; idem, 'Fixing the eschatological scales: judgment of the soul in late medieval and early modern Irish tradition'.

invoked as protectress when all else failed.<sup>24</sup> An unattributed bardic religious poem to the Virgin entitled *Clú nach caithtear clú Muire*, found in the Book of O'Connor Don (c.1631), concisely captures how the Virgin was perceived to weigh in on the side of the sinner and subvert the course of divine justice in the phrase 'she lays waste God's wrath'.<sup>25</sup> The bardic poet Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn, who composed the poem *Ar ghuth enfhair anaid Breifnich* for Niall, son of Tomás Mag Shamhradháin of Tullyhaw some time in the mid-fourteenth century, also believed that his hope of salvation lay with Mary on Judgment Day: 'twill profit me on the Monday of the Souls that I have kept close to her, that shapely-cheeked maid'.<sup>26</sup> The Pilate story as presented in MS Rawlinson B. 513, therefore, tells us something indirectly of devotion to the Virgin Mary and recourse to her advocacy in medieval Breifne.

The intervention of the Virgin in time of crisis also features in a tale found in BL Egerton 136, which was completed in 1630 and owned by Cormac Mac Parrthaláin. This tale, commonly known as 'The Jew of Bourges', is also found in the Donegal 'Book of Piety' of Máire Ní Mháille and has a long history going back to thirteenth-century exempla collections of figures such as Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. 1240), Étienne de Bourbon (d. 1261) and Étienne de Besançon (d. 1294).<sup>27</sup> The story also appears in Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique MS 20978–9, which dates from 1616–18 and is most likely of Donegal provenance.<sup>28</sup> The details of the story are as follows: there was once a gentle and virtuous Jewish boy who had many Christian friends, some of whom invited him to enter a church dedicated to Mary with them and to take communion there, which the Jewish boy duly did. They also show the boy a statue of the Madonna and Child in the church. On arriving home that evening, the boy told his father where he had been. His father, who was a baker, was heating up an oven at the time and, upon hearing his son's words, flew into a rage, grabbing the boy and placing him in the oven. His mother, seeing what the father had done, ran from the house screaming and wailing. Some Christians ran to help the woman; they entered the house and quenched the oven fire. However, to their amazement, they found the boy sitting happily and unperturbed on the hot coals as if on a bed of flowers. In some versions, the Christians remove the boy and place the father inside instead. The boy proceeds to explain to the still startled Christians that the woman who was in the church with the child while he was eating the bread had covered him with her mantle and thus he was unharmed. Thereupon the child, his mother and many

<sup>24</sup> Idem, 'The persuasive power of a mother's breast: the most desperate act of the Virgin Mary's Advocacy'.

<sup>25</sup> McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána*, ii, poem 87, stanza 10. <sup>26</sup> Idem (ed.), *The Book of Magauran*, poem 32, stanza 40. <sup>27</sup> Ní Uallacháin, *Exempla Gaeilge*, pp 158, 185, 151–2. In addition, the tale is found in BL Egerton MS 91, a fifteenth-century collection of saints' lives in the hand of the prolific scribe Uilleam Mac an Leagha. <sup>28</sup> Ní Uallacháin, *Exempla Gaeilge*, p. 60.

other Jews were converted. Here, once again, the protective function of a mantle associated with the Virgin Mary can be discerned.

Two of the Breifne manuscripts (Egerton MS 1781 and Egerton MS 136) include an Irish translation of a Latin life of the early martyr, St Juliana of Nicomedia, a version of which is also found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*. This life was, of course, included in the *Legenda Aurea* which, as noted above, was well-known in medieval Ireland.<sup>29</sup> This is the story of a young African Christian who is betrothed to the prefect of Nicomedia, but refuses to become his wife unless the prefect accepts the Christian faith. Her father, scandalized by her refusal of the prefect, has her stripped and beaten. Juliana tells the emperor that if he adores her God she will agree to marry him; however, her father expresses fear of the emperor to which Juliana replies: 'If you are so afraid of a mortal emperor, how can you expect me not to fear an immortal one?'<sup>30</sup> Juliana is imprisoned and hung up by the hair of her head. She is given the opportunity to be released if she will only make sacrifice to Apollo and Diana; however, she refuses. Juliana is visited by a demon in disguise while in prison who attempts to change her mind; however, she resists the temptation and, having definitively overcome it, begins to interrogate and intimidate the demon himself, demanding to know his name. As Juliana's confidence grows, she ties the demon's hands behind his back, throws him to the ground and begins to violently thrash him with her chains, resulting in the demon's pitiful cry for help: 'By Christ crucified, let me go!'<sup>31</sup> Orders are given for Juliana to be released from prison and she leaves the jail, dragging the demon along after her, finally depositing him in a sewer.<sup>32</sup> Juliana is subjected to multiple tortures, including the breaking of her bones on a wheel; however, an angel intervenes to destroy the objects of torture. The onlookers are impressed by this and profess belief in the Christian God after which they are reported to the emperor with the result that one hundred and thirty of them are beheaded.<sup>33</sup> Juliana is then placed in a bath of molten lead which quickly cools and, enraged, the prefect tears his clothes and curses his gods for having allowed him to be thwarted once again. Juliana is eventually beheaded and her soul goes to Heaven. As for the prefect, he and thirty-three companions are shortly afterwards drowned at sea, their bodies cast ashore to be devoured by the wild birds.

More well-known early Christian female martyrs such as St Catherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch, whose cults were quite strong in medieval Ireland, feature in Egerton MS 1781, also appearing in Máire Ní Mháille's collec-

<sup>29</sup> Mac Conmara, 'An léann eaglasta ag baile, 1200-1500', p. 115; de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, i, pp 160-1; see also Vendryes, 'Betha Iuliana', 312-23. <sup>30</sup> de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, i, p. 160. <sup>31</sup> Vendryes, 'Betha Iuliana', 319. In the *Legenda Aurea*, the demon appeals to Juliana directly and not through Christ to have pity on him. <sup>32</sup> de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, i, p. 161. <sup>33</sup> Vendryes, 'Betha Iuliana', 121.

tion. Perhaps less familiar, however, is the passion of St Cyricus (Quiricus) and his mother Julitta, which is included in Egerton MS 1781.<sup>34</sup> Julitta is brought before the governor of Tarsus to answer charges of being a Christian, while holding her three-year old child, Quiricus in her arms. Refusing to sacrifice to the gods, Julitta is scourged by soldiers while Quiricus cries loudly. The governor tries to soothe the infant with kisses but the child promptly attacks him, clawing his face with his fingernails and crying out 'I too am a Christian!'<sup>35</sup> When he bites the governor on the shoulder, the ruler has enough and throws the child down a series of steps, killing him. His mother, Julitta, meanwhile, rejoices that her son has gone to heaven before her. She is soon after thrown into boiling pitch and then beheaded.<sup>36</sup> The evidence from medieval Irish manuscripts demonstrates that gruesome accounts of early Christian martyrdom such as these were extremely popular. The feast day of Quiricus is included under 16 June in the ninth-century Irish martyrology, *Féilire Óengusso*, which was still being copied in the fifteenth century as is evident from RIA MS 1242 (23 P 3), written in 1467 by the famous scribe Uilleam Mac an Leagha at the house of Oedh Occ Magraith on the border of Tipperary and Kilkenny.<sup>37</sup> It also appears in the Martyrology of Gorman.<sup>38</sup> The late-eighth-century BL MS 7653 invokes the saint next to St Patrick in a litany hymn entitled *Rogo Patrem*.<sup>39</sup> In the Martyrology of Turin, which, it has been suggested, may have been composed for a convent of Augustinian nuns at Lismullin, Co. Meath, in the first half of the twelfth century,<sup>40</sup> the entry for Quiricus (recorded as Círic here) is in majuscule, along with the entry for Vitus (another child saint) on 15 July and Moling on 17 July. The use of capitals underlines the significance of the saint for the author of this text.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the status of Quiricus in Irish hagiography was quite considerable in the later middle ages.

The appearance of these two rather obscure martyrs in Egerton MS 1781 may also have something to do with the reputation which Saints Quiricus and Julitta had as intercessors for women and children, and, in particular, for women in childbirth.

A prayer charm from late-fourteenth-century England, which includes Middle English instructions and a prayer in Latin, is a good example of this. It is suggested

<sup>34</sup> It is also found in Additional 30512. <sup>35</sup> de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, i, p. 324. <sup>36</sup> Ibid. <sup>37</sup> [http://www.isos.dias.ie/master.html?http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/RIA/RIA\\_MS\\_23\\_P\\_3](http://www.isos.dias.ie/master.html?http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/RIA/RIA_MS_23_P_3) (accessed 14 January 2009). Irish Script on Screen. For the dating of the *Féilire Óengusso* see Ó Riain, 'The Tallaght martyrologies redated', 21-38. See also Stokes (ed.), *The martyrology of Oengus the Cldee*, p. 151. <sup>38</sup> 'Great Cyricus the child (and his mother) Julitta by whom I would not swear': Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Hui Gormáin: the martyrology of Gorman*, p. 117. <sup>39</sup> Warren (ed.), *The antiphonary of Bangor*, ii, pp 91-2. He also appears with Peter, Paul, Philip, Mary, Bridget and Felix in a quatrain from an eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript: see Grosjean, 'Un quatrain irlandais dans un manuscrit anglo-saxon', 269-71. <sup>40</sup> Ó Riain (ed.), *Four Irish martyrologies: Drummond, Turin, Cashel, York*, p. 129. I am grateful to Prof. Pádraig Ó Riain and Dr Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel for drawing my attention to this reference. <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

that the parchment roll on which this prayer is written may well have been wrapped around women in childbirth as a 'birth girdle'. It contains eight promises for those who carry it with them or look upon it, the eighth being the following:

If a woman in childbirth lays this on her womb the child shall be baptised and the mother shall have the service of purification, since St [Quiricus] and St Julitta, his mother, desired these gracious gifts of God, which he granted to them, and this is recorded at Rome.

[*Latin*] Hail O Quiricus, with the blessed Julitta, glory of children, soldier of the king of angels. Christ and Mary, save us at the hour of our death. Amen.<sup>42</sup>

It appears that the cults of Quiricus and Julitta enjoyed some popularity in Cornwall, with church dedications at Luxulyan, Veep and Calstock in addition to Tickenham in Bristol and Swaffham Prior in Cambridgeshire.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly one of the most popular lives, as evidenced in the appendix of manuscripts provided, was that of St Alexius, which is found in the Liber Flavus, Egerton MS 1781, Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne, Additional MS 30512 and Egerton MS 136. Alexius was the son of a Roman king who initially forsook having children out of a desire to preserve his virginity and would have continued that way were it not for the persuasion of his council who quietly told him that the royal line would die out if he did not do something about it. The son he eventually produced was a good and pious boy named Alexius, who, persuaded to take a wife, clearly inherited some of his father's aspirations. When the marriage feast was over and the newly-married couple were in their chamber, Alexius proceeded to suggest that they both retain their virginity for the Lord. He then gave his bride a ring (in a later Irish version<sup>44</sup> he breaks the ring in half; one half she was to keep and the other he. Alexius announced that, upon his death, the other half would come to her – a rather cheerful conversation, given the occasion!). He then rose, turned his back on his wife and departed. He proceeded to board a ship and to don the garments of a poor man, finding devotees of Christ in whatever port he arrived at. Although a search party was issued for Alexius the following day, he was already far gone and did not return for seventeen years. Once again, the female characters in the story exhibit a considerable degree of fortitude and forbearance. Alexius' mother vowed that she would clothe herself in penitential garb and remain in her court without music, company, drink, pleasure or entertainment but, instead,

<sup>42</sup> Shinnars (ed.), *Medieval popular religion: a reader*, p. 289. <sup>43</sup> www.tickenhamchurch.org.uk (accessed 13 January 2009). <sup>44</sup> Egerton MS 112 (dated 1782 and written by Maurice 'Hook-nosed' O'Connor, a Cork shipwright's apprentice): see Dunn, 'Life of Saint Alexis', 133–43.

occupy herself with prayers and matins and almsgiving for the sake of her only son. For her part, Alexius' wife alludes to the story of the turtle-dove which, when its partner dies, never mates again and declares that she will do likewise. She, too, agrees to don penitential garb and to recite her hours and psalms for love of the soul of her husband. Alexius finally returns to Rome as a beggar and enters his father's house where he is not recognized. Nearing his death, he writes a full account of his life and when he dies he is still clutching the text in his hand. All efforts to free the writing from his clasp fail until the pope personally commands the corpse to surrender it, which it duly does. And so Alexius' identity is revealed and both his mother and wife rush to see his body.<sup>45</sup>

Some of the additional material found in the Breifne manuscripts concerns the reception and, in one case, the administration of the sacraments. The latter refers to the entries in Egerton MS 1781 and Rawlinson B. MS 513 on the administration of extreme unction. However, most of the entries regarding the sacraments concern the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. In Egerton MS 1781, a sequence can be discerned leading from a 'Form of Confession' to the 'Twelve articles of the faith' and 'the obligation of the Christian to receive the Eucharist once a year' (as laid down at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215).<sup>46</sup> Both the 'Form of Confession' and 'Twelve articles of the Faith' are also found in Egerton MS 136.<sup>47</sup> The 'Form of Confession' constitutes a template of a model confession that a penitent might follow, facilitating an examination of conscience following the order of the seven deadly sins, sins with the bodily senses, sins against the articles of faith (perhaps this is why the scribe chose to include these immediately afterwards in Egerton MS 1781), sins which break the Ten Commandments and the failure to perform works of mercy.<sup>48</sup> The 'Sixteen Conditions for a good confession' found in Egerton MS 1781 are modelled on the *Confessionale-Defecerunt* of St Antoninus of Florence and constitute a commentary on a short verse attributed to St Thomas Aquinas which exhorts penitents to ensure their confessions are 'simple, pure, humble, faithful, frequent, unadorned, discreet, willing, ashamed, whole, secret, most tearful and prompt, strong and reproachful and showing readiness to obey'.<sup>49</sup> The reform of late medieval confessional practice, which was one of the major aims of mendicant orders such as the Observant Franciscans, would continue to be a major concern for members of the order right into the early modern period.<sup>50</sup> The seventeenth-century diocesan priest and scholar, Geoffrey Keating, would also highlight similar problems with the way the sacrament was received in his work

<sup>45</sup> For a fuller outline of the story see de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, i, pp 371–4. <sup>46</sup> Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 532. <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 556, 561. <sup>48</sup> See Geary, 'An Irish homily on Confession'. <sup>49</sup> Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400–1534*, pp 151–2. <sup>50</sup> Ryan, 'Windows on late medieval devotional practice'; *idem*, 'A wooden key to open heaven's door: lessons in practical Catholicism from St Anthony's College, Louvain'.

*Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis*.<sup>51</sup> The 'Twelve articles of the Faith' which follows the 'Form of Confession' in Egerton MS 1781 contains an important link between the two entries, underlining the importance of good Confession for salvation. It enumerates three bolts left on Hell's door by Christ (after his Harrowing of Hell): contrition, confession and satisfaction.<sup>52</sup>

In the Rawlinson B. 513 manuscript, the allegory of a man who is crossing a plain encountering along the way a unicorn, a lion, seven poisonous serpents and two worms, appears as part of a lesson on sin and death. Both the unicorn and the lion chase the man as far as a tree in which the man hopes to take refuge; however, he finds the seven serpents waiting at the base of the tree along with two worms, one bright and the other dark. The man manages to climb the tree and he finds some sweet apples there, which takes his mind off his adversaries below.<sup>53</sup> A variation of this tale is found in Geoffrey Keating's *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis* in which a unicorn, four serpents and two mice (one dark and one bright) appear. In this version, the man falls into a pit at the bottom of which a dragon lurks waiting to devour him; the man holds on to the root of a tree above, but finds that the two mice are gnawing at the root and will soon sever it; in addition four serpents wait at the top of the pit. The man is distracted from his predicament, however, by drops of honey which ooze from the root of the tree and soon forgets his predicament. The man represents the sinner, the unicorn death, the pit the world, the tree the fresh, green-tipped tree of life, the bright mouse day and the dark mouse night. The four serpents represent the four elements of the body and the dragon the devil.<sup>54</sup> Keating's version is that found in the larger tale of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat, which, is included in Egerton MS 136.

As noted above, it is possible, and indeed tempting, in the case of Máire Ní Mháille's collection of devotional material, since we know that it was she who commissioned it, to speculate on the reasons for her choice of various legends, treatises, etc.<sup>55</sup> It is not so easy to do this in the case of the Breifne manuscripts. However, what can be discerned is the sheer range of hagiographic, devotional and religious material which was being copied in the manuscripts of Breifne in the late medieval and early modern periods. The inclusion of excerpts from more serious theological works such as the *Breviloquium* of St Bonaventure and the *Liber Scintillarum* (or 'Book of Sparks', an early eighth-century collection of biblical and patristic material) is also noteworthy.<sup>56</sup> More esoteric inclusions such as that found

<sup>51</sup> Keating, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis*, pp 153, 281–3. <sup>52</sup> Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 532. <sup>53</sup> Mac Niocaill, 'Exempla', 237–8. Because the manuscript is partially damaged there is no way of elucidating what exactly the animals were understood to represent in this version although, of course, one could quite easily make some reasonable assumptions. <sup>54</sup> Keating, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis*, p. 21. See also de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, ii, p. 180. <sup>55</sup> I have attempted to do this elsewhere; see Ryan, 'Windows on late medieval devotional practice'. <sup>56</sup> Mac Niocaill, 'Blúire de "Breviloquium" N. Bonaventúra', 323–9.

in Egerton MS 1781 which tells of the abbot of Drimnagh who was transformed into a woman, subsequently bearing seven children, before becoming a man again, await fuller examination.<sup>57</sup> What is clear, however, is that in order to understand more fully these manuscript collections and the *raison d'être* behind their inclusions, tales such as these must be engaged with in some depth and placed in a broader context. In acknowledging the major contribution of figures such as Gearóid Mac Niocaill and many others in the past in bringing this material to a broader audience, it should be noted that many of the versions found in the Breifne manuscripts and elsewhere remain unedited. Until this situation is rectified, a comprehensive comparison of texts within the context of the larger medieval Irish devotional collections and a broader European and, in the case of many of the legends of the early martyrs, Near Eastern context, will not be possible.

This work is also found in the surviving late medieval Franciscan Youghal library catalogue: see Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400–1534*, p. 174; Mac Conmara, 'An léann eaglasta ag baile, 1200–1500', p. 120. <sup>57</sup> Bergin et al. (eds), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, i, pp 76–9; Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 542.