



Pious Women in a “Den of Scorpions”

The Piety and Patronage of the Eleventh-Century Countesses of Brittany

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Abstract • Chroniclers observing the complex politics of medieval Brittany referred to it as a “den of scorpions.” Eleventh- and early twelfth-century Brittany was politically unstable, with comital power under threat from both local lords and ambitious neighbors. The counts of Brittany depended upon their wives to bolster relationships with other regional powers, including the church, and to create alliances. These women brought with them relationships, ties, and associations to many powerful ecclesiastical foundations. This article examines the experiences of Countess Havoise (r. 1008–1034), Countess Bertha of Blois (c. 1020–1100), Countess Bertha (d. 1085), wife of Geoffrey Grenonat, and Countess Constance (r. 1076–1090), who all used ecclesiastical patronage to solidify the power of husbands and sons. This support allowed women to develop relationships with medieval clerics, making them, like Queen Esther, ideally placed to intervene and negotiate when tensions arose between the counts and the church.

Keywords • Bertha, Brittany, Constance, countess, Havoise, Marmoutier, patronage, St. Georges

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As the mythic home of Merlin and King Arthur, Brittany held an important place in the imaginations of medieval people, but Brittany also had a reputation as an unstable, uncivilized backwater. Baudri of Bourgueil, the bishop of Dol, referring to Brittany, stated that “where I live, surrounded by scorpions ... Twin and savage ferocity ... surround[s] me.”¹ Bishop Marbode of Rennes displayed a similar prejudice about Brittany, describing it as full of brigands and savages.² While the complaints of these bishops, both transplanted from the “civilized” lands of the eastern Loire, need to be viewed cautiously, eleventh-century Brittany did experience political instability, the causes of which were both internal and external. The Viking invasions of the tenth century ravaged Brittany. Monasteries and towns were burned to the ground and looted. The tenuous stability established by the early kings of Brittany was torn asunder as rival lords jockeyed for power. Two



houses emerged to compete for authority over all of Brittany: the counts of Rennes and the counts of Cornouaille. Their attempts to establish hegemony caused them to search for allies outside of the county, particularly the houses of Anjou and Normandy, who had their own aspirations for power in Brittany.³

Securing the support of the church was crucial: the battling counts needed the clergy to help them legitimate their rule as “Christian” princes. Like aristocrats throughout medieval Europe, these counts depended on their wives to forge close relationships with the church.⁴ Patronage was central to the countesses’ efforts—but patronage for these women was more than giving gifts to an ecclesiastical community. It also entailed protecting the community, intervening between the monks or nuns and secular powers (who might very well be their family members), and supporting efforts at reform. The contributions of four eleventh-century Breton countesses will be examined here: Havoise of Normandy, Bertha of Blois-Chartres, Bertha the wife of Count Geoffrey Grenonat, and Constance of Normandy (see Table 1). Following the model of Queen Esther from the Old Testament, each of these women helped their husbands and sons cultivate relationships with the church.⁵

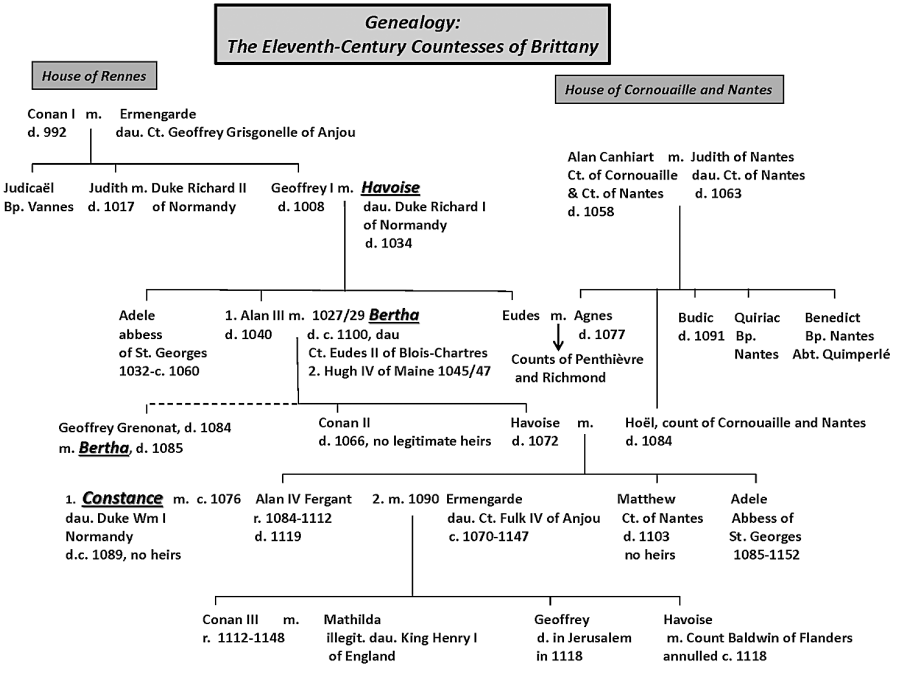


Table 1

Modeling Queen Esther

As counts, dukes, and kings attempted to establish their legitimate right to rule, the clergy and secular elite invoked Old Testament kings and queens as role models. For women, Queen Esther was held up as an *exempla* of how a secular woman could mediate between her “people” and religious institutions. Clergy recognized the persuasive power that women, particularly wives, could have over their male kin. The combined role of wife/mother with that of dedicated Christian meant that women were ideally placed to mediate and intervene between their male kin and the church. Indeed, Robert of Arbrissel used the example of Esther when he penned a letter of advice to a twelfth-century countess of Brittany, Ermengarde. He wrote: “Remember the holy woman Esther, who was married to the infidel prince Ahasuerus, and greatly benefited God’s people.”⁶ Disputes over property and jurisdiction meant that aristocratic men often clashed with the church. Fortunately, through their patronage and support, aristocratic wives often had the favor of local ecclesiastical communities and leaders. Hence, when a husband or son found himself at odds with an abbot, bishop, or monastery, his female relatives were able to intercede on his behalf and restore him to the good graces of the church. Similarly, if a nobleman wished to bolster his power or prestige through association with the church, his wife, mother, sister, or daughter was well-placed to advise him. Fostering relationships with clergy was an important political strategy, and aristocratic women often acted as the linchpin between their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers and the clergy. The result of their efforts was an increase in the power of the count, but also a renewal in Breton religious life.⁷

Havoise of Normandy (r. 1008–1034)

In 1008, Countess Havoise became guardian of her young sons upon the death of her husband, Count Geoffrey I, on a pilgrimage to Rome.⁸ She faced several threats to her power. Externally, Havoise had to worry about the intentions of Count Fulk Nerra of Anjou, who had already made inroads into Brittany and was hoping to add the county to his expanding territories. Internally, she had to deal with the ambitions of the counts of Nantes and Cornouaille, as well as other lords who might have tried to unseat her and her children from power. Around 1024, Havoise and her sons, Alan and Eudes, faced just such a challenge. The bastard son of Judicael, Count Geoffrey’s brother, defied the authority of Havoise and her sons by fomenting revolt among the Breton barons and seizing one of their castles.⁹ As Alan and Eudes were preparing for war, Havoise advised them to make a gift “for the soul of their father, their mother, for imminent victory in war, and for all of Brittany.”¹⁰ The setting for her advice is telling: Havoise’s sons were

in front of the castle they had just seized when she gave them her counsel. The countess was in the thick of events, in this case the recent capture of a castle, and actively advising her sons both in military concerns and fostering relationships with the church. Nor was this the only time Havoise took part in military matters. When the Count of Cornouaille joined with her brother-in-law in challenging her right to rule, this countess was not intimidated and, as one nineteenth-century historian describes, led her own troops—including her two sons—in running the count out of Brittany all the way to Poitou.¹¹

However, the gift made by the comital family described above was more than a simple benefaction. It was a restoration of a venerated Breton abbey that had been ravaged by the Vikings in the previous century: the abbey of St. Méen. At the turn of the eleventh century, the Breton church was in a serious state of disrepair as a result of the Viking incursions and was in need of support. Before his death, Count Geoffrey and Havoise had begun restoring old and honored Breton houses, such as those of the abbeys of Landevennec and St. Gildas of Rhuys. The couple had also reached out to prominent houses of the Loire Valley for assistance. Count Geoffrey wrote to Abbo of Fleury and asked for help in restoring these monasteries, and the abbot sent Brother Felix to re-establish St. Gildas.¹² Havoise and her sons' choice to restore St. Méen in particular was politically savvy. Like the other houses she and Geoffrey had previously restored, St. Méen was well established, with roots going back to the sixth century. By rebuilding this community, she sent the message that she and her sons were acting as rightful counts and pious leaders in restoring ecclesiastical houses, just as their predecessors had done before them. Moreover, the counts closely supervised the rehabilitation of this community, and Havoise and her sons visited it after their initial benefaction.

Havoise also wisely maintained close contact with the monasteries of the Loire, particularly with St. Florent-de-Saumur and Marmoutier, located on the outskirts of Tours.¹³ These were two ancient and respected monasteries in France, and the monks there could count some of the most powerful men and women of the region as their patrons.¹⁴ Fostering relationships with these houses thus connected the counts and countesses of Brittany with the power brokers of medieval France. Havoise and her sons went beyond mere benefaction, however; they also established priories of these houses in Brittany. A priory of St. Florent was placed in Livré-sur-Changeon, close to the comital seat at Rennes.¹⁵ Havoise, Alan, and Eudes also restored the church of St. Exupère of Gahard (another old and venerated Breton monastery) and gave it to Marmoutier as one of the house's priories.¹⁶ Establishing priories allowed Marmoutier and St. Florent, which were seedbeds of church reform, to have a presence in Brittany. Patronage of monasteries in the Loire also helped insure that if Havoise needed assistance in managing threats from Anjou or Blois-Chartres, she would have potential allies who

were well-placed to inform, advise, and also intervene. When Havoise and her son Count Alan III began to consider whom he should marry, they reinforced their connections to the Loire by choosing Bertha of Blois-Chartres, daughter of Count Eudes II of Chartres and lay abbot at Marmoutier.¹⁷ Later counts would use these priories and relationships to help introduce the ideas of reform into Brittany.¹⁸

Countess Havoise was a strong and determined woman who capably oversaw the county while her children were minors, but her influence continued even after her sons came of age. She appears in nearly every one of their extant acts before her death in 1034. She acted as Alan's adviser and coruler for most of his adult life. Sadly, Alan would outlive his mother only by six years. Her other son, Eudes, also frequently appeared in acts with his mother and brother. Mother and sons seemed to have acted as something of a triumvirate in governing Brittany. Undoubtedly at his mother's urging, Alan undertook a new ecclesiastical venture: the foundation of a new abbey.

Sometime in the 1020s, Count Alan III founded the abbey of St. Georges in the old city of Rennes. The creation of this community was a considerable financial and spiritual undertaking. The initial endowment included two mills, vineyards, fertile lands, and considerable holdings in the old city, as well as a church, four villas, and six mills just outside of Rennes. Playing on Matthew 6:19–21, "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal," Alan also gave "his most precious treasure," his sister Adele, as abbess.¹⁹

Alan's endowment of St. Georges in and of itself was not unusual among his class. Founding religious houses garnered respect and demonstrated the piety of the donors. But there was also an important political context behind Alan's foundation. Havoise and her sons ruled the part of Brittany that was known as the county of Rennes. As mentioned earlier, another comital family, that of the counts of Cornouaille, controlled the county of Nantes but also western Brittany (often referred to as Cornouaille and Celtic in culture and language). While the counts of Rennes and Cornouaille often cooperated in keeping their mutual enemies (specifically the Normans) at bay, starting in the 1020s competition for authority between the two families began to mount.²⁰ Alan Canhiart (1028–1059), perhaps one of the most respected and gifted leaders of the Cornouaille counts, married the sister of the Count of Nantes, thus joining two families who both rivaled (and surrounded) the counts of Rennes. The increased threat of the Cornouaille counts contributed to Rennes's desire to found a new religious house, thus at once demonstrating their piety and the resources they commanded, deepening their ties to the church, and reinforcing their status as Christian princes.

Ecclesiastical foundations also fostered networks that bound lords and ladies to each other as well as to the church. When Alan established St. Georges, the daughters, wives, and mothers of several prominent men, in-

cluding the bishop and viscount of Rennes, also joined the community along with Alan's sister. It is significant that Alan chose to establish a women's house, as it testifies to the influence he knew women could command and the networks they could create or foster—something he would have witnessed firsthand. The lack of complaint by the clergy about the quality of the religious life of the nuns or comital influence is striking.²¹ It appears that Alan and his successors had little influence over the convent. Much of the credit for this can be attributed to the very effective and long-lived management of his sister, Abbess Adele.²² The charters indicate that not only was she a good steward of the community, but she also fiercely protected the abbey from secular influence.²³ Clearly Adele was very much her mother's daughter. Adele's brothers, Counts Alan and Eudes, and her nephew, Count Conan II, also lent their influence in guarding the abbey's independence from secular lords and defending its property. Their support of Adele and the nuns signaled that they were good sons of the church and faithful Christians. Havoise was evidently successful in schooling her children to be faithful protectors of the church.

One of Havoise's last acts was to make a gift herself to the abbey of St. Georges.²⁴ She gave her dower property to the nuns, along with additional land in Rennes and property on which the nuns could build two mills.²⁵ Havoise was a learned woman and peppered her donation charter with discussions of the importance of pious gifts and excerpts from Scripture, including, "Make unto you friends of the mammon of iniquity; that when you shall fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings" (Luke 16:9). This benefaction was the final act for a woman who had spent her life both carefully nurturing the church and securing her family's power. In educating her children to be constant in their support and defense of the church, in her dedication to revitalizing the Breton church, and in her generosity to various ecclesiastical houses, Havoise was the very emulation of Queen Esther.

The influence that this countess commanded becomes apparent after her death, when the carefully constructed web of relationships Havoise had nurtured began to come apart. Her sons, Count Alan and Count Eudes, fell out as Eudes plotted with the rival counts of Cornouaille to challenge Alan.²⁶ Peace was eventually established, but only through the intercession of Havoise's brother, Duke Richard II of Normandy. Ironically, Havoise's natal kin had not played much of a role when she was countess; perhaps they were preoccupied with their own issues in Normandy, or perhaps Havoise herself was reticent to invite their intervention in the county. While Havoise's family may not have been an active presence in Brittany, she did maintain contact with them through her patronage of Norman monasteries. In 1032, Count Alan III, who describes himself as "by the grace of God, Count, and Duke of the people of Brittany," confirmed a gift his father and mother had made of extensive ecclesiastical properties to Mont St. Michel.²⁷ Neither Alan nor Havoise could have predicted the profound impact that contact with Havoise's natal kin would have on the next generation.

Bertha of Blois (c. 1020–1100)

The disinterest of Havoise's natal kin in Brittany transformed after her death. A bond was forged between her nephew, Duke Robert I, and her son, Count Alan III.²⁸ For when Robert left for the Holy Land on pilgrimage, Alan went to Normandy to act as guardian to young Duke William I—with tragic results: Alan fell prey to a poisoning plot and died in Normandy.²⁹ This left Brittany once again with a minor count, as Conan II was only three months old at his father's death, which put Conan's mother, Countess Bertha, in a critical position.

The nineteenth-century editor of the cartulary of St. Georges of Rennes rather colorfully recounts Countess Bertha's reaction to the news of her husband's death: "In the first moments of her sadness, the princess exhaled her regrets, and to obtain the most fervent prayers for the soul of the illustrious deceased from the nuns of St. Georges, she made a gift to them of the parish of Plogasnou in the territory of Léon, with all rights seigneurial and lordly, the privileges, rents, and revenues that pertained to the suzerainty of the count."³⁰ What is interesting about this charter is how the donation was formulated. The charter begins with a rather bleak assessment of the current state of the world as a time when king turned upon king, people upon people, and neighbor upon neighbor: perhaps an accurate assessment of a county beset by rivalries left without an adult count and a woman left to rule with a three-month-old baby.³¹ Moreover, it may capture the tension between Bertha and her brother-in-law, Eudes, who was attempting to take control of the county and the infant Conan. While charters in general do share some common elements, Bertha's charter bears a striking resemblance to the one recording Havoise's earlier gift.³² The charter uses the same quote from Scripture, citing the mammon of iniquity—used only two times in the cartulary, in these two charters—but also concludes with a similar admonitory clause. Given the parallels between Havoise and Bertha's situation—both widows with young children—perhaps the charter was crafted deliberately to emulate Havoise. Like the wording of the charter, the choice of the donation to the abbey of St. Georges is also significant. Bertha's first act as reigning countess was to make a gift to the abbey the comital family of Rennes had founded and sponsored. She opted for enriching Breton nuns as opposed to the more prestigious Benedictine foundations of St. Florent-de-Saumur or Marmoutier—given Bertha's position as daughter of Count Eudes II of Blois-Chartres, either would have been appropriate. But what better way to signal her position as part of the Breton comital family and mother of the count than by making her first donation to secure prayers from the very house her husband had founded in the heart of the city that was the base of his comital power?

Countess Bertha's experience as a widowed countess deviated somewhat from that of her mother-in-law, however. Between Alan's death in 1040 and her remarriage to the Count of Maine between 1045 and 1047, Bertha divided her time between Brittany and her homeland of Blois-Chartres.³³

During this period, she appeared with her son Conan in a Marmoutier act confirming a donation by one of their Breton vassals. The charter indicates that the vassal requested that Conan confirm the gift so that it would remain “firm for perpetuity.” Both Bertha and Eudes affirmed the gift and corroborated it by making their sign—an indication that Conan’s mother and uncle were sharing *auctoritas* over him and the county.³⁴ It is possible that Bertha took Conan with her when she visited Blois-Chartres. Sometime between 1045 and 1047, Bertha married the Count of Maine and disappears from the Breton sources. Her marriage would have certainly benefitted Brittany by securing an ally. However, by 1051 Bertha was again widowed and driven out of Maine with her two children from her second marriage because of a civil war. She sought refuge with her daughter, Havoise, who was married to Hoël, then Count of Cornouaille, but who eventually succeeded Conan II as Count of Rennes at Conan’s death in 1066.³⁵ Shortly after her return to Brittany, she appeared with Conan in making a donation to Marmoutier, for which Bertha received a countergift of twenty *solidi*.³⁶

About 10 years after her exile from Maine, in 1062, Bertha acted with her son Conan, who was now of age, to reconfirm the gift they had made right after Alan III’s death.³⁷ For most of his tenure as count, Conan II battled continuously against two men who would wrest the county from him: his uncle, Eudes, and his illegitimate half brother, Geoffrey Grenonat.³⁸ During his minority, Conan had been under the tutelage of his uncle, and even after he came of age, he had to constantly negotiate with Eudes to remain in control. Upon the death of Alan III, his bastard son, Geoffrey, was given the county of Rennes as his inheritance, but he continued to battle for more land and control of all of Brittany for the entirety of Conan’s reign as count and even after his death.³⁹ In the face of these threats, Conan II actively cultivated allies in the Touraine through his mother, Bertha.

The charter evidence suggests that Conan visited Bertha’s brother, his uncle Count Thibaut III of Chartres, on several occasions. As a young man, Conan visited Thibaut in Chartres to plan military action in the Touraine and likely fought on his uncle’s side in the conflict. In 1065, Conan led an army into Anjou to besiege Pouancé. Unfortunately, just as he was poised to take Château Gontier the following fall (October 1066), Conan sickened and died shortly thereafter. Rumors of poison were suggested by Norman chroniclers. Orderic Vitalis intimated that Duke William I of Normandy had his agents poison Conan. William of Jumièges added more detail, saying that because the Normans had poisoned his father, Conan refused to join in William’s conquest of England. In response, William had Conan’s gloves, saddle, horn, and bridle poisoned, so that once he touched his mouth after encountering the poison, he would immediately fall ill.⁴⁰ Whatever the cause, Conan was dead by December and was buried in Rennes at the church of St. Melaine.⁴¹

Association with his maternal uncle provided Conan with a formidable ally, but also connected him to Marmoutier. The counts of Chartres had a long association with this monastery and had been lay abbots there. Conan

himself cultivated relationships with this abbey and made a gift to earn “the benefit of *societas* of God himself and the monks [who are] the servants of St. Martin.”⁴² Being part of the monks’ *societas* gave Conan spiritual allies as well as secular, but also tied him more closely to the house of Blois-Chartres. It was through his mother, Countess Bertha, that Conan was able to foster these relationships and alliances. Bertha resided at least part-time in Chartres in the 1070s and 1080s, for the charters of the abbey of St. Père record that she intervened to resolve disputes and make gifts in those decades.⁴³ Bertha was also a patron of Marmoutier, frequently appearing in the house’s charters. Indeed, her last recorded act was a gift to Marmoutier. Like Queen Esther, Bertha helped to foster relationships between her son, the count, and the church, in this case the monastery of Marmoutier. These connections helped strengthen Conan’s status as count in the face of internal and external threats.

Conan was more than a generous patron to Marmoutier: it was during his tenure as count that the Breton bishops began to introduce the tenets of what would become the Gregorian Reform movement into Brittany.⁴⁴ Specifically, the bishops of Nantes began to insist that the laity return any ecclesiastical property or revenues they might control. This nascent reform coincides with Conan II’s almost exclusive patronage of Marmoutier, which may not be coincidental, since Marmoutier was a center for reform. Unlike earlier counts, who patronized a variety of ecclesiastical foundations, Conan seems to have invested all of his spiritual capital in one house. It is tempting to argue that this was the result of his mother’s influence. Given that the alliance with Bertha was made to secure the support of the Chartrain counts to counteract the threats from Anjou and Normandy, perhaps it is not surprising that their dedication to Marmoutier would have left a mark on the counts. Bertha provided a tie to her politically powerful natal family, but also acted as a bridge between the counts of Brittany and the reform efforts from Marmoutier.

The Other Countess Bertha (d. 1085)

For the year 1085, the *Chronicon Brittanicum* recorded the following: “Bertha, devout countess, died, who restored the desert-like monastery of St. Melaine, where at that point in time she abided in the society of the brothers.”⁴⁵ Who was this Countess Bertha?⁴⁶ Contrary to assertions made by some scholars, she was not the Bertha who was wife to Count Alan III and mother to Conan and Havoise. Rather, the woman commemorated in this obituary was the wife of Count Geoffrey Grenonat, the illegitimate half brother of Conan II (see Table 1). Strikingly, this entry for Bertha comes right after the notice for 1084 that indicates her husband, Geoffrey, had been defeated by Count Alan IV, imprisoned at Quimper, and died shortly after. Bertha followed him in death the next year.

As mentioned earlier, Geoffrey Grenonat inherited the county of Rennes upon the death of his father, Alan III. He continued to try to claim more of Brittany and went to war with three successive counts—Conan II, Hoël I, and Alan IV—to assert his rights. These attempts and his alliance with those who sought to challenge the power of the descendants of Alan III made him a divisive figure.⁴⁷ Although his illegitimate birth was apparently not an obstacle to his ability to be count of Rennes, it did hamper him in terms of the kin group he could draw upon for support.⁴⁸ His wife, Bertha's, family background is not known, but the extant evidence indicates that she was instrumental in forging relationships with the church as a way of bolstering her husband's attempts to rule all of Brittany and compete with the other counts.

According to the *Chronicle of Saint-Florent*, in 1055, just as Geoffrey was in the midst of a bitter war with Count Conan II, "his venerable wife Bertha counseled and urged him" to undertake a restoration of the monastery of St. Melaine of Rennes. This community was the oldest in the city of Rennes. Named for St. Melaine, who was the first bishop of Rennes in the sixth century and an early Christian missionary to the Bretons, a cult developed around his tomb in the ninth century. During the Viking invasions of the following century, the monks of St. Melaine moved inland to the Touraine. By the eleventh century, they were back in residence in Rennes, and word spread of miracles wrought by St. Melaine from the 1020s to the 1040s. However, four decades later, by the 1060s, the community had fallen on difficult times. The *Chronicle* reports that the abbey had been reduced to such extreme poverty that only one monk was left. Geoffrey was so saddened when he learned this that he and Bertha acted to restore the monastery. Messengers were sent to St. Florent-de-Saumur to implore the abbot to assist in reforming this house. After consulting with his brethren, the abbot agreed and sent a monk, Even, to Rennes. With support and assistance from the count and countess, Even revitalized the community and became St. Melaine's abbot. Indeed, Even was so successful he became the archbishop of Dol. A lead plaque from his tomb reported, "When he became abbot of St. Melaine, he found only one monk. But after twenty-seven years of his leadership as abbot, upon the day of his death, there were one hundred monks."⁴⁹

Significantly, Geoffrey Grenonat's obituary does not refer to his role in the restoration of St. Melaine. Rather, Bertha is remembered for restoring the "desert-like" community. Through her intercession and counsel, the monastic house was rescued from extinction, and Bertha and Geoffrey were able to associate themselves with a long line of Breton leaders who had supported and fostered this community and center of sanctity. Undoubtedly motivated by piety, this was also a politically canny move. In competition with other counts whose descent was perhaps more illustrious than their own, this comital couple gained important status and political capital through their association with St. Melaine. Furthermore, by reaching out to St. Florent to

help resuscitate the monastery, they harkened back to Count Geoffrey I and Countess Havoise, who had also used assistance from a prominent monastic house of the Loire region to restore Breton houses about 50 years earlier.⁵⁰ Just as Conan II, Geoffrey and Bertha's political rival, elicited support from his uncle, the Count of Chartres, and associated himself with Marmoutier, Geoffrey and Bertha's association with St. Florent provided them with allies outside Brittany and offset whatever advantage Conan might have achieved through his Chartrain allegiances.

Like her peers, Havoise and Bertha of Blois, this Countess Bertha emulated Queen Esther and acted as an intermediary between her difficult spouse and the church. She fostered relationships with the monks—as evidenced by her “abiding” in the society of the monks of St. Melaine. Consequently, she was well-placed to advise her husband about his own interactions with the church and how to use ecclesiastical support to their advantage.

Constance of Normandy (r. 1076–1090): A Countess in Transition

In the next generation, the political pendulum swung back to Normandy with the marriage between the Breton count and the daughter of William the Conqueror. Like every other countess, Constance's marriage was brokered for political reasons. According to Orderic Vitalis, after the bloody battle of Dol, William I decided that war with the Bretons was no longer the answer. So he offered his daughter in marriage to Count Alan IV Fergant.⁵¹ In Orderic's estimation, Constance was a shining example of what a noblewoman should be:

She lived with her husband as a faithful wife for fifteen years and did everything in her power to further the welfare of her subjects and fellow creatures. For she longed for sweet peace wherever she went, loved the poor and showed great reverence to all servants of God, who were deeply grieved when she died leaving no issue. All peace lovers in Brittany would have been overjoyed if there had been any heirs of this blessed union to rule them, to hold the balance of justice virtuously for the unmastered Bretons and govern them according to the precepts of divine law and human reason.⁵²

The documents bear out Orderic's praise. Constance did help her husband govern and maintain peace. She was also a good patron of the church, but new political circumstances directed the couple's patronage choices. Alan and Constance continued to make gifts to the monasteries that their predecessors had supported: St. Georges, the abbey of Redon, and St. Florent-de-Saumur. Constance, however, also made generous donations to a house that had gone unendowed by the previous countesses of Rennes: Ste. Croix of Quimperlé.⁵³ The competition between the two comital houses of Rennes and Cornouaille/Nantes that had affected Breton politics throughout

the eleventh century was assuaged through the birth of Constance's husband, Count Alan IV, who was the son of Havoise, the daughter of Countess Bertha and Alan III, and Hoël, the son of the Count of Cornouaille and Nantes. For the first time, rule of the counties of Rennes, Cornouaille, and Nantes was consolidated in one person: Alan. Because Ste. Croix of Quimperlé had been founded by the Cornouaille family, the counts of Rennes had not made benefactions to this foundation.⁵⁴ Only after Alan IV, the product of both houses, became count did the comital family of Rennes consider it politically appropriate to patronize this house.

As a true model of Queen Esther, Constance was more than a patron of the church; she was an advocate. In a dispute between the monks of Redon and the count's chaplain, Constance played peacemaker—much as Orderic's encomium describes. The matter was resolved at her court, in the presence of her household.⁵⁵ Because Constance and Alan did not have any children, it is difficult to determine if her patronage choices had an immediate impact on succeeding generations. Nevertheless, as the first countess of a more unified Brittany, Constance needed to strike a delicate balance between supporting the houses that the counts of Rennes had traditionally patronized and those of the Cornouaille clan. The extant charters suggest she achieved this goal and that this contributed to a peaceful transition in joining the houses of Rennes and Nantes. Constance was buried under the tower at St. Melaine in Rennes: an indication of her status as a true and faithful daughter of Brittany.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The women who became countesses of Brittany in the eleventh century brought with them relationships with kin and clergy that connected Brittany to secular and ecclesiastical developments of Western Europe. These countesses were integral to forging ties with religious foundations outside of Brittany, such as St. Florent and Marmoutier, which helped in both the restoration of monastic life in Brittany and political stabilization. Like Queen Esther, the Breton countesses used their influence to connect their families to the church. Countess Havoise oversaw the restoration of monasteries that had been destroyed in Viking raids in the previous century. She and her children also created new institutions of prayer, like St. Georges of Rennes. Priors of some of the great monastic houses of the Loire were also constructed and would be vital to both restoring and reforming religious life in eleventh-century Brittany. Countess Bertha of Blois, herself a daughter of the Chartrain counts, would continue to foster these connections, as would her son, Count Conan II. The other Countess Bertha, wife of Conan's bastard brother and rival, Geoffrey Grenonat, also understood the importance of such alliances. She advised her husband to reach out to St. Florent to restore the abbey of St. Melaine. As the first countess of a unified Brittany,

Constance had to strike a careful balance in her patronage choices between the foundations of the comital house of Rennes and those of the counts of Cornouaille. Politically, the Breton countesses may have found themselves in “a den of scorpions,” but by modeling themselves after Queen Esther through their intercession and dedication to the church, they neutralized the scorpions’ sting.

Notes

Although I did not know Shona Kelly Wray well, I found her to be a delightful colleague and feel privileged to contribute to a collection of articles in her honor. It is also meaningful for me to be a cocontributor with Stanley Chojnacki, as I first encountered medieval women’s history in his graduate seminar at Michigan State University. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for introducing me to a topic that continues to fascinate and inspire me.

1. Bruce L. Venarde, ed. and trans., *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2003), 8.
2. Jules de Pétigny, “Lettre inédite de Robert de Arbrissel à comtesse Ermengard,” *Bibliothèque de l’école de chartes* 15, no. 1 (1884): 215–216.
3. Hubert Guillotel, “Le premier siècle de pouvoir ducal Breton (936–1040),” in *Actes du 103e Congrès nationale des sociétés savants* (1979), 63–84.
4. Sharon Farmer, “‘Persuasive Voices’: Clerical Images of Medieval Women,” *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (1986): 517–543; Erin Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Madeline Caviness, “Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen: Donors and Patrons or Intercessors and Matrons?,” in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 105–154; Philadelphia Ricketts, “Widows, Religious Patronage and Family Identity: Some Cases from Twelfth-Century Yorkshire,” *The Haskins Society Journal* 14 (2004): 117–136; Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Families in the Lands of the Loire, 1000–1200* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 189–203.
5. Lois Huneycutt, “Intercession and the High Medieval Queen: The Esther Topos,” in *The Power of the Weak*, ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally Beth MacLean (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 126–146; David d’Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60–63; Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 51–52, 201–212.
6. Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 74.
7. Joëlle Quaghebeur has examined the lives of two of the four countesses discussed here. See “Havoise, Constance et Mathilde, princesses de Normandie et duchesses de Bretagne,” in *Bretons et Normands au Moyen Age: Rivalités, malentendus, convergences*, ed. Joëlle Quaghebeur and Bernard Merdignac (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 145–162.
8. André Chédeville and Noël-Yves Tonnerre, *La Bretagne féodale, XIe-XIIIe siècle* (Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, 1987), 37.
9. Dom Gui Alexis Lobineau, *Histoire de Bretagne: Composée sur les titres et les auteurs originaux*, 2 vols. (Paris: Chez Charles Osmont, 1707), 2:cols. 99–100.

10. *Ibid.*, 2:col. 100. The record of these events is based on two redactions of a document. For an in-depth analysis, see Philippe Charon, Philippe Guigon, Cyprien Henry, Michael Jones, Katharine Keats-Rohan, and Jean-Claude Meuret, eds., *Hubert Guillotel: Actes des ducs de Bretagne (944–1148)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), no. 26, pp. 218–226; hereafter, Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*. This is a posthumous publication of Guillotel’s *thèse*, an edition of the acts of the dukes. An edition of the acts was also published in the nineteenth century: Arthur de la Borderie, ed., *Recueil des actes inédits des ducs de Bretagne* (Rennes: Imprimerie Charles Chatel, 1888). In this edition, the act recording this information is no. 1, p. 3. Where an act appears in both editions, a citation is provided to each.
11. Paul de la Bigne-Villeneuve, ed., *Cartulaire de l’abbaye de Saint-Georges de Rennes* (Rennes: Imprimerie Charles Chatel, 1876), 19–20.
12. Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, 16–17; Guillotel, “Pouvoir ducal,” 83–84. Felix remained in Brittany for sixteen years. According to the life of St. Gildas, he returned to Saumur during the revolt because “Felix was not able to live quietly and in peace in the midst of this tumult.” Quoted in Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, 219.
13. Jérôme Beaumont, “Implantation et expansion d’un réseau de prieurés à l’époque féodale: L’exemple des prieurés de l’abbaye Saint-Florent de Saumur dans le diocèse de Rennes et la Seigneurie de Dol-Combours (XIe–XIIIe siècles),” *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’ouest* 113, no. 3 (2006): 73–90; Hubert Guillotel, “Combours: Proto-histoire d’une seigneurie et mis en oeuvre de la réforme grégorienne,” in *Family Trees and the Roots of Politics*, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 269–298.
14. Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 65–116.
15. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 13, pp. 180–181; Borderie, *Recueil des actes*, no. 2, pp. 6–8.
16. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 19, pp. 201–203; Borderie, *Recueil des actes*, nos. 3, 4, 5, pp. 11–14. Alan, Eudes, and Havoise made other benefactions to Marmoutier as well. See Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 10, pp. 174–175; no. 19, pp. 201–203; no. 23, pp. 212–213; no. 24, pp. 214–215; no. 25, pp. 216–217.
17. Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin*, 69–72.
18. For analysis of the relationship between the Breton elite and the church, see Regan Eby, “Aristocratic Sociability and Monastic Patronage in Eleventh and Early Twelfth-Century Brittany” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2015).
19. Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 1, pp. 89–94; Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 28, pp. 227–233. See also Étienne Mathieu, “La naissance des prieurés de l’abbaye féminine Saint-Georges de Rennes (1024–1047),” *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’ouest* 113, no. 3 (2006): 93–104.
20. For an in-depth study of this family, see Joëlle Quaghebeur, *La Cornouaille du IXe au XIIe siècle: Mémoire, pouvoirs, noblesse* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002).
21. Elite families often constructed religious structures that became associated with their patrimony and served as the family necropolis. Gregorian reformers, attempting to expunge secular influence from the church, found these “family” foundations offensive and encouraged nobles to restore them to church control, as well as insisting on autonomy in electing abbots and abbesses. See Constance

- Brittain Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister: Nobility and the Church in Burgundy, 980–1198* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). Guillotel demonstrates that even “simoniacal” bishops could be dedicated reformers: “La pratique du cens episcopal dans l’évêche de Nantes,” *Le Moyen Âge* 80, no. 1 (1984): 5–49.
22. Adele remained in control of St. Georges for about 40 years.
 23. For Adele’s efficient management of the abbey, see Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, nos. 3, pp. 99–100; no. 7, pp. 102–103; no. 12, pp. 108–109; no. 13, pp. 110–111; Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 29, pp. 234–235.
 24. Havoise was not the only Breton aristocratic woman to support this convent. See Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 11, pp. 107–108; no. 12, pp. 108–109; Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 39, pp. 257–258.
 25. Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 10, pp. 106–107; Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 32, pp. 240–241.
 26. Moreover, Eudes married into the Cornouaille family. His wife was Agnes, the daughter of Alan Canhiart and Judith of Nantes.
 27. Lobineau, *Histoire*, 2:cols. 110–112. See also Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 22, pp. 209–211; no. 17, pp. 192–193; no. 18, pp. 194–200. See also Pierre Bouet, “Le Mont-Saint-Michel entre Bretagne et Normandie de 960 à 1060,” in Quaghebeur and Merdignac, *Bretons et Normands*, 165–200.
 28. Alan and Robert’s paths intersected at various points. In 1032 they confirmed a charter of King Henri I at Orléans. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 21, pp. 205–208.
 29. Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–1981), 3:89, 2:117. Alan was memorialized with an epitaph at Fécamp: Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, 22.
 30. Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, 32.
 31. There remain two redactions of this act, which differ as to later confirmations of the donation. See Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 45, pp. 272–275; Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 18, pp. 118–119.
 32. Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 10, pp. 106–107.
 33. E. Mabilie, ed., *Cartulaire de Marmoutier pour le Dunois* (Châteaudun: Lecesne, 1874), no. 5, pp. 6–7.
 34. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 46, pp. 276–277.
 35. Lobineau, *Histoire*, 2:col. 116, 1:96.
 36. Archives départementales, Ille-et-Vilaine, 6 H 33, no. 4. The absence of Eudes from this act suggests it occurred after Conan reached his majority and claimed his independence in 1047.
 37. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 45, pp. 272–275; Bigne-Villeneuve, *Cartulaire de Saint-Georges*, no. 18, pp. 118–119.
 38. Dom Pierre Hyacinthe Morice, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l’histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Charles Osmont, 1742), 1:col. 430, 1:col. 442.
 39. Lobineau, *Histoire*, 1:96–98, 1:103. Geoffrey Grenonat caused trouble for Conan’s successors as well, ending only with the succession of his nephew, Alan IV.
 40. Orderic, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:313. See also William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum ducum*, ed. J. Marx (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1914), 194. David Douglas dismisses Orderic’s account of Conan’s murder: see David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 409–410.
 41. Lobineau, *Histoire*, 1:97–98.
 42. *Ibid.*, 2:col. 117.

43. Charles Métails, ed., *Marmoutier cartulaire-Blésois* (Blois: Moreau, 1889–1891), no. 40, pp. 51–54; Benjamin Guérard, ed., *Cartulaire de Saint-Père de Chartres*, 2 vols. (Paris: Crapelet, 1840), 1: no. 1, p. 25; no. 86, pp. 210–211, no. 5, p. 231; 2: no. 34, pp. 291–292.
44. Archives départementales, Loire-Atlantique, H 112, no. 2; Archives départementales, Ille-et-Vilaine, 6 H 2.
45. Morice, *Mémoires*, 1:103.
46. Most recently, Julien Bachelier has identified this Bertha as Countess Bertha of Blois, wife of Alan III and mother to Conan II and Havoise. See “L’abbaye Saint-Melaine de Rennes: Présentation historique (VIe-début XIVE siècle),” in *Cartulaire de Saint-Melaine de Rennes suivi de 51 chartes originales*, ed. Chantal Reydellet, Monique Chauvin-Lechaptis, and Julien Bachelier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 29; hereafter, *St. Melaine*. In contrast, Melissa Lurio argues in her doctoral dissertation that Conan III, Alan IV’s son from his second marriage, was responsible for reforming St. Melaine. Melissa Lurio, “An Educated Bishop in an Age of Reform: Marbode, Bishop of Rennes (1096–1123)” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2004). There is considerable confusion over which “Countess Bertha” reformed St. Melaine. It was assumed that the Bertha who died in 1085 and described as the restorer of St. Melaine was the widow of Alan III, Countess Bertha of Blois. But evidence from the Chartrain indicates that this Bertha lived beyond 1085 to around 1100. The assumption that Bertha of Blois and not Bertha the wife of Geoffrey Grenonat was responsible for restoring this house is compounded by one of the earliest acts from the cartulary of St. Melaine from 1139, where Count Conan III affirmed what his great grandparents, Count Alan III and Countess Bertha, had given and stated that they were responsible for restoring St. Melaine (*St. Melaine*, no. 1, p. 57). Conan and/or the monks likely preferred to remember Count Alan III and Countess Bertha of Blois as those who reformed their community rather than the problematic, and less illustrious, Count Geoffrey Grenonat and his Countess Bertha. However, the *Chronicle of St. Florent-de-Saumur* states unequivocally that it was Geoffrey Grenonat the Bastard (as he is labeled in the chronicle) and his wife Countess Bertha who reformed St. Melaine (Lobineau, *Histoire*, 2:cols. 88–89). Hence, the Countess Bertha of Brittany who died in 1085 and who restored the monastery of St. Melaine was Bertha the wife of Geoffrey Grenonat, the bastard son of Alan III.
47. Geoffrey variously supported the Normans and Angevins against the Breton counts, as well as playing off the Cornouaille kin group against Conan II and even Hoël. Geoffrey also worked with members of the Breton nobility to challenge the power of both counts. See Lobineau, *Histoire*, 1:95–97.
48. Indeed, in eleventh-century Brittany illegitimate birth did not seem to be an impediment to inheritance or gaining power. For example, the bastard Aluered witnessed and affirmed his father’s gift in Archives départementales, Ille-et-Vilaine, 6 H 33, no. 4.
49. *Extrait de la Cronique de S. Florent de l’Abbé Michel*, in Lobineau, *Histoire*, 2:cols. 88–89; see also Bachelier, “L’abbaye Saint-Melaine de Rennes,” 27–33.
50. That is, the abbey of Fleury. Between 1013 and 1022, Count Alan III also made donations with his mother and brother, Eudes, to St. Florent-de-Saumur. Guilotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 13, pp. 180–181.
51. Orderic, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:350–352.

52. Ibid.
53. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 95, pp. 379–380; Léon Maitre and Paul de Berthou, eds., *Cartulaire de l'abbaye Sainte-Croix de Quimperlé*, 2nd ed. (Rennes: Plithon and Hommay, 1902), no. 111, pp. 268–269; hereafter, *Cartulaire de Quimperlé*.
54. *Cartulaire de Quimperlé*, 91; Borderie, *Recueil des actes*, no. 8, pp. 17–18.
55. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 99, pp. 386–388; M. Aurélian de Courson, ed., *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Redon en Bretagne* (Paris: Imprimerie imperial, 1863), no. 290, pp. 238–240.
56. Conan II was also buried at St. Melaine. Lobineau relates that Constance's tomb was found in 1672 under the church tower. Her body was encased in leather, and a cross of lead was found with her name engraved upon it, as well as those of her father and husband, and the dates of her birth and death. Lobineau, *Histoire*, 1:104.