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Constructed Landscapes and Social Memory; Tales of St. Samson in Early Medieval Cornwall

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Abstract

This article considers the historical geography of place and space within the context of medieval Britain. Through examining the geography invoked within a particular hagiographic account about the life of St. Samson, the paper explores how the medieval 'natural' world is both rendered understandable through its sacred symbolism, and also reified as a familiar 'map' of instruction and collective social memory. Following a general discussion of the meaning of medieval hagiographies (which are comprised of curious compilations of factual and imaginative material relating to the 'lives' of saints from an even earlier time), I focus on their role as mediators of cultural identity. It is the premise of this paper that hagiographies are profoundly geographical, shot through with environmental metaphors and references to spaces, places and landscapes. I examine how they both served as crucial tools of religious instruction, and also carried geographical co-ordinates that helped to establish a sense of place. Through instilling local identity and collective memory with reference to an imagined landscape of religious order, these saintly legends literally showed people *how* to experience the familiar landscape that they inhabited.

Key words/phrases
Hagiography; Environmental metaphors; Sense of place; Memory; Cornwall

Introduction

Despite a traditional concern for the reconstruction of medieval landscapes, pioneered by Darby (1977), Donkin (1978) and others, recent trends in historical cultural geography have left the medieval world under-developed in terms of theoretically-informed and contextualised analyses. Happily, this situation is beginning to be addressed, with notable recent 'forays' into the medieval world by geographers such as Jones (1998a; 1998b; 1999a; 1999b; 2000), Lilley (1999; 2000), Philo (1997) and Harvey (1997; 2000a; 2000b). Notwithstanding the theoretical sophistication and depth of these works however, there is still a great need for further geographical research in this area, both as part of a project that seeks to add depth to our understanding of medieval patterns, practices and spaces, and also in order to consider how the spaces and places associated with that period are remembered in the present.

This paper examines the geography of medieval hagiographic myth. Rather than investigating the actual life of a particular saint or the veracity of the documents involved, it is their role as vehicles of collective social memory and mediators of cultural identity that is the subject of this essay. The legends of the saints can be seen as vehicles that convey messages about the politics of cultural reproduction, thereby telling us more about the time in which they were written than the time in which they were set. The literal truth of the martyrdoms and miracles, serpents and dragons, therefore, matters less than the meaning that they conveyed (or attempted to convey) and the instructions that they carried. By focusing on the nature of the topography in the legends, and the meaning of the encounters with nature that occur

within them, this paper explores the environmental and spatial context of hagiographies. Such legends are saturated with geographical messages and formed an important strand of how people came to recognise and experience the world around them.

Hagiographies comprised an intimate binding of popular and oral myth and legend, together with authoritative messages of control and order that were conveyed with reference to real and imaginary landscapes and places. These larger claims are illustrated through exploring the specifics of one individual saintly life, St. Samson who, according to legend, died in Brittany in 565 AD (Orme, 1992, page 169). This paper examines how the hagiographic stories of St. Samson, which were written down and related from the seventh century through to the late medieval period, acted as carriers of geographical information and as crucial tools of religious instruction. The metaphorical use of nature and environmental discourse is explored, together with the appropriation of memory and the manufacture of a particular sense of 'place' within the hagiographies. Samuel and Thompson (1990, pages 4-7) see myth as a fundamental component of human thought that is embedded in real experience; 'both growing from it, and helping to shape its perception'. This paper examines how the saintly legends and myths of Cornwall mediated people's experience of the natural world and the space which they inhabited within it.

Previous geographically-oriented work on medieval religious identities and practices in Britain paint a vivid picture of an emerging Christian societal and administrative order, unevenly spreading over a variegated landscape of pre-Christian belief systems (Bowen, 1932; Thomas, 1981; Blair and Sharpe, 1992). In addition to the meeting (or 'melding') of a pre-Christian and Christian world, writers such as Beresford-Ellis (1985) also see a tension between a 'Celtic' Christian and a 'Latin' or 'Roman' tradition. While it is important that neither of these labels is essentialised into coherent groups whose competition is reified into a one-dimensional, formal opposition,[i] the situation of complex negotiation over identity and practice is thus further complicated.

It is into this world of early Christian ministry that we are borne by many of the saintly hagiographic stories, and Bowen (1945; 1969; 1982) provides the basic geographical co-ordinates of many of the Celic *vitae* in particular. Through the mapping of supposed routes of travel and dedication, Bowen has produced the best geographical study hitherto undertaken on saints. Over-all, however, his work seems to ask more questions than it answers. Viewing the stories as 'too fabulous', and the actual texts as 'too problematical' to be of use, Bowen (1945, page 175) simply remarks that most hagiographies were written far too long after the alleged events by "Norman monks eager to re-orientate local legends to their own particular theological and ecclesiastical prejudices". Although this remark seems to call for further work on the very nature of these processes of 're-orientation', very little work appears to have been carried out by geographers that utilises hagiographic sources in a more inventive way. Although very useful and interesting examples in their own right, Darby's (1940) work on St. Guthlac, and Philo's (1997) work on a series of local saints and healing wells in western Britain, have really been small parts of much wider projects, and have thereby provided just a tantalising glimpse of the potential for using hagiographic evidence. The stage is set, therefore, for more geographical work to be done on hagiographic sources as a means of exploring the spatial practices of medieval society.

Much recent work on hagiography has stressed the importance of recognising the context in which these discourses were both produced and consumed; a sentiment that this essay very much echoes (see for instance Le Goff, 1980; Bartlett, 1982; Gurevich, 1988; Smith, 1990; Vauchez, 1997; Schmitt, 1998; as well as the pioneering work of Delahay, 1955). In order to understand the meaning of hagiographies and saintly legends therefore, one has to be sensitive to the wider 'transformations of social structure' (Schmitt, 1998, page 387). As Gurevich (1980) and Bornstein (1997) among others recognised, however, one must also never lose sight of the local context of popular discourse and perception. Hagiography, therefore, can perhaps best be seen as stemming from a dialogue between various interested parties and certainly not as an essential and internally logical 'instruction', laid down by a singularly centralised and monolithic 'Catholic Church'. Indeed, allowance must be made to simply see the more fantastic tales as products of good story-tellers weaving a bit of 'local colour' into their narratives in order to add a dramatic effect.

As well as emphasising this social context, recognition of a spatial context is also of crucial importance. This concern was reflected in the work of Bartlett (1982, page 118) for instance, when he noted that "miracles were not disembodied phenomena", but were placed within a physical environment, which was often local and particular in its nature (also see Vauchez, 1997, page 157 for instance). In this sense, one should emphasise the crucial relationship of the importance of myth in the shaping of the physical world and the importance of space, place and landscape experience in what Cosgrove (1993, page 281) calls the 'constitution of social life'. The experience of particular landscapes contributed to the form of specific stories which, in turn, influenced the organisation and perception of the physical world, both on a local scale of specific landscape features, and at a wider scale of apparently essential environmental attributes.

As well as acknowledging the importance of recognising the context of hagiographic legends, this paper is also concerned with examining their meaning at a deeper level in society. The geographical co-ordinates and metaphorical associations with nature that are carried by hagiographic writing are related to the creation of a communal memory and an understanding of how people relate to the world around them. In other words, the role of hagiographies is examined in what Giddens (1979; 1981) calls the production of a *locale*; an embedded and historically contingent process in which institutional and individual practices are interwoven with structural features (Pred, 1984, page 280). In this sense, the role of hagiographies will be explored less in terms of their spiritual meaning, or their place in the legitimisation of power and property relations, and more in terms of how they mediated the social experience of space and the literal production of place.

This purpose closely follows the landscape phenomenological 'manifesto' as set out by Tilley (1994). According to Tilley (1994, page 26), we need to understand the role of contextualised landscape experience in the production and perception of space. He particularly points at the need to interpret the significant symbolic meaning of environmental elements. Accordingly, places become humanised, with feelings of belonging, rootedness and familiarity, through the recognition of symbolic qualities in the 'natural' environment, "by association with current use, past social actions, or actions of a mythological character (Tilley, 1994, page 24). In

this respect, hagiographies may be seen as means through which people made sense of their environmental context, 'humanising' places through their recognition within such (semi)-mythological stories.

Historians have sometimes been criticised for privileging the factual over the supernatural and symbolic (Samuel and Thompson, 1990, page 1). However, as Eliade argues (1957, page 130), "it is through symbols that the world becomes transparent". This paper seeks to explore the symbolic categories through which the reality of the world is perceived, thereby making room for myths and myth-making as real and relevant factors in people's experiences and practice in the world. Both landscapes and myths are "signifying systems through which social relations among individuals and groups, and human relations with the physical world are reproduced and represented. ....Myths may both shape and be shaped by landscapes (which are) imaginatively constituted from human experiences in the material world and represented in spoken and written words" (Cosgrove, 1993, pages 281-282). Through an investigation of a particular set of hagiographic myths, therefore, aspects of social and institutional development and organisational change are examined and related to ideas of continuity, memory and a particular notion of heritage. Therefore, this paper is less interested with the veracity of supposed miraculous events and more interested in the symbolic meaning of these myths.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. Following this introduction, the general context for hagiographic writing is considered from a wider perspective. Germane debates within the relevant literature are drawn out along a general theme of examining the uses and purposes of hagiography in the medieval world. The paper then turns to consider the hagiographic stories of St. Samson; an important 'inter-Celtic' saint of the sixth century AD. Following a short discussion of the background to the writing of Samson's *vita*, the complex invocation of the 'natural' world within the stories is uncovered through the examination of a series of environmental metaphors. The second section that explores the detailed specifics of Samson's life, reflects upon the reification of particular 'humanised' places or *locales* within which the mythological events take place. These two strands are then brought together in the conclusion, which seeks to link the specific illustrating examples of St. Samson to much wider claims about hagiography and the geography of the medieval world.

<u>Hagiographies and the purpose of myth</u>
Although this paper is not the place to go into detail, some sketching of debates over hagiographies and the folkloric traditions that supposedly lie behind them is necessary.[ii] A dichotomy is neatly outlined by Smith (1990, page 311), when she notes that "the written culture of the Middle Ages was the product of a society in which oral communication was the norm, but whose religion was based on the *written* word of God". Despite the acknowledged power of writing as a tool of control for which the Church held a monopoly (Schmitt, 1998, page 381), the debt to oral forms of communication is widely recognised (Ong, 1984; Gurevich, 1988; Smith, 1990; Bornstein, 1997). Some scholars have even sought to uncover 'oral' histories from such written sources (Gurevich, 1984, page 51; Byock, 1984). For

Gurevich, this dichotomy of orality and writing is equally reflected in parallel by a distinction between a learned society and a folkloric society (Gurevich, 1984; 1988). The idea of hagiography representing a 'dialogue' between clerical or literate cultures on the one hand, and folkloric or lay societies on the other, echoes the work of Delahaye (1955) among others, and more recently has been expressed as an almost formal opposition in which a culture of learned and Latin clericism overcomes folkloric culture through the 'weapon' of the written word (Le Goff, 1980; Schmitt, 1998). Vauchez (1997, page 157) however, steers a more realistic course by noting that the relationship between lay and clerical traditions differed according to time and space, while Hutton (1994, page 72) intimates that any attempt to distinguish between popular and élite cultures of medieval religion are not necessarily very helpful. Commenting on this debate, Smith (1990) calls for a more nuanced account of such sources, arguing that the extreme polarity between orality and writing is perhaps not valid. Implicitly, this raises the question of what purpose hagiographies served rather than the direct evidence they supposedly give (factual or otherwise). Therefore, following the sentiments of Rose (1996, page 283), rather than asking how 'true' hagiographies may be, we should examine how they functioned to produce an image of the world, and investigate what they actually *meant* for the world in which they were produced.

This brings us to the uses of hagiography in the medieval world. Vauchez (1990) sees hagiographies as vehicles for a wide variety of specific temporal purposes that reflected the changing concerns of their age. For instance, many authors have written about the connection between hagiographic texts and rights over property, some arguing that in certain cases, the inclusion of a land grant within a saintly story may even have been the primary motive for its manufacture (Davies and Fouracre, 1985, page 213). The *vita* of St. Dunstan for instance, appears to be an important legitimating factor for the wealth and property of Glastonbury Abbey (Costen, 1992, page 150), while Smith (1990, page 321-2) for instance, notes an occasion in the *vita* of St. Winwalloe where the detail of a miraculous event was mentioned almost as an 'aside' to the main story about a certain land donation to the Monastery of Landévennec.[iii]

The role of saints and saintly legends in guarding property rights and the status of their 'chosen' foundations is a very common phenomenon, and, as Gurevich (1988, pages 45-8) shows, they could be quite vindictive and jealous in doing so![iv] However, despite certain contradictions of stressing humility and forgiveness on the one hand, while punishing and 'paying' for prestige on the other, hagiographies were undoubtedly used to provide a role model of self-discipline and orderliness (Vauchez, 1990, pages 336-8). In many respects, hagiographies are a case of where elements of the supernatural are *used* to regulate social behaviour (Bartlett, 1982), and where themes of stability and monastic rule were demonstrated in a repeated series of 'set pieces' which would have been understood as such by a medieval audience. Certain social values were confirmed and supported through the constant repetition of motifs in hagiography, through a process in which such written accounts went hand in hand with the wider reform movement in the pursuit of an ordered society with a hierarchical Church authority acting as its crucial pivot (Gurevich, 1988; Moore, 1998).

This idea of hagiographies containing a sort of 'moral geography' encoded within them is an important theme, and can perhaps be related to Sibley's work (1981; 1995) on geographies of exclusion. Sibley (1995, pages 36-9) considers that moral

geographies are expressed through the opposition between notions of purity and defilement. In terms of hagiography, this imposition of a symbolic order is established through the opposition between godliness and sinfulness; and between spiritual reward and damnation. Certainly, the processes of canonization and hagiographic memorialisation contains a very potent relationship, with the installation of a particular moral order that reflected wider societal negotiations, practices and transformations in the medieval world (Vauchez, 1990).[v]

In the Middle Ages, religion was very much about participation in rituals and symbolic practices that represented relationships 'among men, between men and nature, and between men and the divine' (Schmitt, 1998, page 384). Hagiographies demonstrated a code of existence; provided a map of how to experience the world. Through their dialogue between so-called lay and elite cultures, they contextualised relationships, events and people within existing and understandable societal structures. Perhaps most importantly, they helped to legitimise developing authority and particular power relations, and are deeply implicated in the cultural reproduction of memory and identity. The production of hagiographic legends and miraculous stories represented an appropriation of 'magic' by the Church, as a necessary component in the instilling of religious and political order (for instance, Meens, 1998, pages 286-7).

At first sight, this interpretation appears decidedly top-down in its sentiment, with a unified and centralised Church Authority (in the singular) literally 'pulling the strings' of cultural production. In reality, however, we see a complicated dialogue between various facets of a complex ecclesiastical hierarchy, and multiple bodies of lay population, whose practice of life was dictated neither by 'strings from above', nor by 'primordial attachment', but whose *habitus* reflected the familiarity of 'conventional wisdom' (Bourdieu, 1977).[vi] In this sense, if 'the Church' in all its multi-faceted guises, did not initiate such strands of power and control, it certainly encouraged and exploited them for its own profit (Semple, 1998, page 123).

Tales of St. Samson and the natural world
The earliest surviving saint's life in relation to Cornwall is that of St. Samson; a sixth century bishop of Dol, in northern Brittany, who arrived there from Wales, journeying via Cornwall (Thomas, 1994; Orme 1996). Bowen (1969, page 167) argues that the life itself could have been written as early as 625 AD, and notes that it is "the earliest, longest and fullest of all those of the Celtic saints that have come down to us".[vii] Samson, it seems, was from south west Wales and was of relatively high birth, thereby fitting in well with the 'noble-saint' phase of hagiogaphy production that Vauchez (1990, pages 318-21) identifies with the late sixth to late eighth centuries. The original version of the hagiography is now lost, but the accounts survived through a system of transcribing and copying, via a ninth century version with interpolations, to some twenty versions dating from the tenth century or later (Thomas, 1994, page 224). This process of propagation, copying and re-copying reflects the Church's massive investment in the production and reproduction of a particular heritage, which supports the unquestioned integrity of its earthly organisation and of its spiritual ministry (Harvey and Jones, 1999, page

228). Importantly, the twenty versions of this *vita* that were produced after the tenth century suggests the importance of stressing continuity with a particular past during this time.

In terms of the wider context of the *vita*'s production, the description of St. Samson as both of noble blood, and as being particularly closely related to a burgeoning Episcopal hierarchy, firmly associates the hagiography with an agenda that sought to legitimise an ecclesiastical authority, and add prestige to the bishop (Vauchez, 1990, page 320). Importantly, although reference to ascetism is implied through reference to Samson enduring certain environmental hardships (see discussion below), his actions are always conducted in an entirely orthodox fashion, within the context of a hierarchical organisation, and never as an 'independent' or impoverished local 'holy man'. Indeed, Samson comes across as living comfortably, being materially quite wealthy, and there is certainly not much room in the legend for any martyrdom! In this respect, the production of the hagiography can be strongly related to a programme that sought to portray a "conception of saintliness founded upon an illustrious birth, (and) the exercise of authority, …all put to the service of the propagation of the Christian faith" (Vauchez, 1990, page 320).[viii]

After studying hard at a great monastery in south Wales, Samson becomes an abbot, visits Ireland, and is elected Bishop (Bowen, 1969, page 167). He is described as possessing many books and a personal chariot, all of which he takes with him on his journey across Cornwall to Brittany, where he founds the monastery of Dol, along with several other establishments (Bowen, 1969, page 168; see the map in figure 1). Interestingly, he even seems to have had contact with Childebert, King of Paris (511-558 AD), perhaps indicating that he should be associated with what Vauchez (1990, page 319) describes as a 'hagiocracy' – in which saints are closely associated with civil power and administration.

FIGURE ONE NEAR HERE

It appears that even the original writer had no first hand, direct knowledge of his subject, and Orme (1999) suggests that the whole story may have been a complete fabrication. This itself raises the question, that if the stories are not a report of the literal facts, nor even an embellishment of some actual episodes and occurrences, then what do they actually represent, and what did they actually mean to the world which had invested so much in their production? Although the authenticity of the documentation and factual analysis of this hagiographic text can be debated much further, this essay is more interested in how this text represented a means by which a society mediated, and came to know the landscape in which it was set. As with other hagiographies (see Bartlett, 1982), the miracles and events are shown within a concrete physical setting. In addition, an array of environmental elements play a variety of roles in the story, mirroring the role of 'vile animals' and meteorological phenomena noted by many authors as being common in hagiography (for instance, Gurevich, 1988, pages 44-6; Boesch-Gajano, 1998, page 331).

The acknowledgement that landscape and the 'natural' environment plays a crucial role in the constitution of social practice and construction of cultural life, has become an increasingly important theme over recent years for geographers,

archaeologists and anthropologists alike (see Butlin, 1993, page 52; Bradley, 1998; Tilley, 1994; 1996; Richards, 1996; Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995 for instance). Conceptions of nature and of space, therefore, are intrinsically embedded and interwoven within the production and reproduction of social norms, practices and understandings. In other words, while some aspects of the environment are clearly external to us, what each of us actually experiences is selected, shaped and coloured by what we know (Basso, 1988, page 99; Hirsch 1995). In medieval society, interpreting this 'what we know' entails the recognition that nature and the environment were meaningful through reference to a sacred cosmos in which the human world was participating; "medieval space was oriented towards Rome and Jerusalem, and structured by the holy stories of the Bible and the tracks of saints" (Lemaire, 1997, page 13). In this respect, we need to treat hagiographic stories as cosmological manuals, with geographic material coded into them.

Mirroring the example of Burgess (1990), and MacDonald (1998) among others, therefore, we need to explore the environmental discourses within the hagiography and decode the symbolic meaning and politicised nature of its environmental representations. As noted above, within Christian writings, environmental discourse takes on an extra significance, with the entirety of nature and the physical landscape supposedly being the work of God. "Nature is never 'natural'; it is always fraught with religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness" (Eliade, 1957, page 116). Harvey notes (1996, pages 182-3) that in the same way that political arguments are not ecologically neutral, then ecological arguments are never socially neutral. Therefore, societies strive to create an environmental niche that is both conducive to their survival and a reflection 'in nature' of their particular system of social relations. In the context of medieval society, the world was a divine creation, and could be used as a model from which to 'learn' order and control, so that the rhetoric of environmental order reflected the rhetoric of societal control. "The world exists, it is there, and it has structure; it is not a chaos but a cosmos, hence it presents itself as creation, as the work of gods" (Eliade, 1957, page 117). Following from Harvey's work, therefore, we need to explore how elements of societal order and developing mechanisms of control are manifested in articulations of nature within the hagiographic stories.

Here is an example of how environmental elements within a saintly legend can be seen to be of a symbolic nature;

> Now it came to pass on a certain day as the brothers went forth,
> ....to take weeds from the crop, that a certain reptile darting from
> a blackberry bush, bit one of the brothers in the groin and he fell
> to the ground and remained just alive.
> *Vita Samsonis* (pages 17-8)

In this example, the brothers are intent on creating the 'ecological conditions and environmental niches' for the propagation of their work, yet are prevented from doing so by an element of environmental disorder. St. Samson, however, understands the divine nature of the cosmos and so, through "sending forth prayers, and blessing water mixed with oil" for three hours, Samson manages to miraculously heal the young brother (*Vita Samsonis*, page 19).

Burgess (1990, pages 139-40) has argued that a huge variety of texts contain environmental meanings which are encoded by specialist groups of producers (in this case, by certain ecclesiastical authorities), to be decoded by an audience who interprets the 'preferred' meanings that the producers intended. With this example, not much is left to the imagination, as holy brothers who are intent on spreading order and control in the world by 'taking weeds from the crop', are at first seemingly defeated by dark forces, before being saved from 'environmental disorder' by the disciplined example set by the hero saint. For the medieval Christian, the manifestation of the sacred (or 'hierophany'), through ordinary aspects of nature would have been completely understandable (Lemaire 1997, page 7), and so any such environmental messages would have been actively decoded by a contemporary audience (Eliade, 1957, page 11). For instance, later in his travels, Samson kills a 'provoked and angry lion' and calms an 'unbroken and furious horse' in further acts of bringing order, and, above all, 'domesticity' to more wild aspects of nature (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 55-6). In this case, the lion cannot be domesticated, but the horse can, and is.

It is a truism that society has always viewed itself in terms of the 'Other'; "a figure that is necessarily fictitious in its discourse, no matter what the objective reality is" (Schmitt, 1998, page 376). In the context of hagiography and its relationship with the natural world, the 'Other' is a world of wilderness, wildness and disorder, and is inhabited by 'vile creatures'. The theme of ordering and calming a wilderness is common in hagiography (for instance, Gurevich, 1988, pages 45), and comes across in the tales of St. Samson in a number of guises.

> Ever bent on fasting and exercised in unceasing prayers, also very often immersed in searching and in learning the Holy Scriptures, without any pause he went on praying according to the exhortation of the Apostle Paul in cold and nakedness all night long through wintry frosts, subdued not by winds of winter or by the oppressive heat of summer.
> *Vita Samsonis* (page 21).

The message is clear; that the inclement elements of nature can only be overcome through strict religious discipline, guided by the words of the Apostles, and through compliance with holy orders, as laid down in scripture. Samson's religious discipline, demonstrated in numerous instances of fasts, strict vigils, never sleeping in a bed and even vegetarianism (*Vita Samsonis*, page 22), also helps him overcome a poisonous mix of herbs during an assassination attempt (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 21-26). Animals that were compliant, such as the furious horse, were domesticated and brought 'within'. Beasts that were beyond domestication were killed and literally cast out;

> The serpent, however, as soon as it saw him (St. Samson), trembled exceedingly and was disposed to turn itself and bite its tail with passion; but he, quickly seizing the linen girdle that was around him, without more ado, slipped it on its neck, and dragging the beast near to him, flung it from a certain height and charged it in the name of Jesus Christ not to live any longer.

Vita Samsonis (page 51).

In this case, the beast, and its wilderness cannot be domesticated into an ordered world. It is of the lowest genre; an alien phenomena of a type that Cosgrove (1993, page 297) would call the 'pre-social'. In this sense, the Church literally consumes the natural environment and orders it according to its own ends.

During his travels, St. Samson meets out a similar sense of 'divine justice' to a range of vile creatures who habitually seem to reside in caves, dense woodland, or other areas of natural darkness and disorder. For instance, although he tries hard to 'cure' a 'misshapen sorceress' that dwelt in a vast forest, in the end he has to kill her (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 30-33), but the 'fire-spitting serpent' who lived in a 'dreary wilderness' seems to have not been given any chances before Samson commands it "in the name of Jesus Christ to die in our presence at this very hour" (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 35-7).

These examples of medieval 'othering' and practices of excluding the 'profane' can be related to the interpretation of more recent subject matter by David Sibley (1981, 1995). Working from Sibley's ideas, the hagiographic legends of St. Samson outlined here, contain episodes of 'imaginative purification' that outlines an ordered and sacred universe that is set apart and separated from the disorder of non-sacred, (literally) blasphemous (and, therefore, 'non-natural') elements of the world. These notions strongly resonate with ideas developed by Cresswell (1997) in his interpretation of geographical metaphors that are used to displace inappropriate actions. In Cresswell's work (1997, pages 334-343), metaphors of 'weeds, plagues and bodily secretions' are explored as a means of exposing how governments and the media focus attention on the 'out of placeness' of various people and actions. Transposing these ideas to medieval hagiography, one can see how similar environmental metaphors of 'weeds, wildness and vile creatures' are used to establish a moral order that views the cosmological teachings, exclusions and inclusions of the Church as accepted common sense.

There are always two sides presented; one of unkempt wilderness and the other of order, discipline and sublime beauty. St. Samson casts out wild and fabulous beasts, while during his ordination, a dove 'sent from heaven' came and sat on his right shoulder throughout the service (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 19-20). Interestingly, this dove was only made visible to the Bishop, the master of the church, and a deacon who had just sung a Gospel, again demonstrating the worth of religious discipline and the reality of an ecclesiastical power hierarchy within the developing Church. Extending from Vauchez's thesis (1990, page 314), legends and stories associated with the cult of saints, provided an overtly anthropomorphic map of the universe, and subjected the natural world to human control. Hagiographic accounts contain evidence of how the Church appropriated the natural world within its sphere of symbolic capital. The quelling of unkempt nature and wilderness by the forces of religion and disciplined Christianity, reflected the Church's hegemony over social identity and the relationship with the natural world, both metaphorically and in practice.

Hagiography, memory and place
Smith (1990) notes how hagiographies were fluid and responsive to local need. In many respects, we can see how they were made practical to contemporary societies by explaining features that were relevant to people's lives. They provided a bridge

between contemporary features and their origins in the deep past. In this sense, they became the stuff of memory; not just of personal experience, but of the collective experience that sustains the reproduction of social systems (see Giddens, 1981, page 39). The Church, therefore, can be seen as a specialist, which (particularly through its virtual monopoly on writing) has a large input in the production of what Giddens (1981) calls the 'collective past-present relationship'. Through devices such as hagiography, the Church could write a particular past that stressed specific essential elements that suited its own propagation in the present, reflecting Davies's (1998, page 621) comment that the remembrance of an ideal existence in the past helps to actualize the possibility of its existence in the present. Whether by design or not, the Church literally struggled with existing ideas of the past, and transformed them into notions which were more conducive to their own requirements. With respect to the legends of St. Samson, this process is 'writ large' in the story of Samson's dealings with a group of idolaters;

> When St. Samson saw it (the image), selecting two only of the brothers to be with him, he hastened quickly towards them, their chief, Guedianus, standing at their head, and gently admonished them that they ought not to forsake the one God who created all things and worship an idol. And when they pleaded as excuse that it was not wrong to celebrate the mysteries of their progenitors in a play, some being furious, some mocking, but some of saner mind strongly urging him to go away, the power of God was made clearly manifest. For a certain boy, driving horses at full speed, fell from a swift horse to the ground, and twisting his head as he fell headlong, remained just as he was flung, little else than a lifeless corpse.
> *Vita Samsonis* (pages 49-50).

This time it only took two hours of disciplined praying to bring the boy back to life, and in thanks to Samson, the group "prostrated themselves at St. Samson's feet and utterly destroyed the idol" (*Vita Samsonis*, page 50). This story doesn't just show the inevitable victory of the forces of discipline and devout Christian order, triumphing over evil, it actively transplants an existing collective identity with a more conforming version. The most important message from this story is that it is *not* 'alright' to celebrate pre-existing mysteries, even in a play. Rather, a new 'play' is created to guide the local population along a 'correct path' and a new collective memory is created which re-enforces a particular set of power relations and a particular way of seeing the world (compare, for instance with a contemporary example in Pred, 1998).

The important thing to remember is that these tales and fables were actually relevant to people, - they actually meant something - and they helped people understand their environment and to locate themselves in the wider world. Eliade

notes (1957, page 22) that landscapes and 'places' *need* to have explanation in terms of the sacred; 'if the world is to be lived in, it must be founded'. In the case of St. Samson's dealing with the idolaters, for instance, the author of the *vita* heavily stresses the topographical location of the ensuing events and carefully contextualizes the entire story within a physical landscape that was similar to the landscapes that any audience would be familiar with;

> (The travelling party) saw in front of them, resting on the summit
> of a certain hill, an abominable image. On this hill I myself have
> been and have adored and with my hand have traced the sign of
> the cross which St. Samson with his own hand carved by means
> of an iron instrument on a standing stone.
> *Vita Samsonis* (pages 49).

As well as illustrating the obvious appropriation of a pre-Christian standing stone into the constructed memory of a Christian identity (see for instance, Semple, 1998, page 123), this story also places the legends within a geographical context. Gurevich (1984, page 57; 1988, page 43), for instance, recognises the importance of supplying 'geographical co-ordinates' for hagiographic legends, particularly stressing how such contextualisation provided a much easier path to the 'consciousness of the common people' than did the idea of a distant, invisible, and awe-inspiring God. In her work, Smith (1990, page 323) also notes the popularity and importance of such 'topographical legends'. With few exceptions, saints nearly always appear as local characters, anchored within a particular landscape and associated with specific holy wells, healing springs, caves and rocks (Smith, 1990; Bornstein, 1997; Schmitt, 1998).

In a comparable hagiographic text of the Cornish saint Gwinear, an entire landscape of nameable places and locations is conjured up and related to holy origins (Doble 1997; Harvey 2000b). As well as the site of Gwinear Churchtown, various springs, shrines, hills, a specific tree (which 'may be seen to this day'), and even a cursed village on a hill (where 'women were quarrelling noisily') are all mentioned within the text of Gwinear's *vita*, conjuring up a sense of local solidarity that was given meaning within a larger divinity (Doble 1997, page 103). The fewer references to specific nameable locations in the *Vita Samsonis* suggests that the intended geographical 'reach' of the Samson stories was on a different scale to the largely locally-oriented hagiography of Gwinear. Even so, the *Vita Samsonis* contains the first documentary recognition of the territorial hundred of Trigg, provides further evidence for the early establishment of the Camel-Fowey trans-peninsular route, and also the monastery of Landocco (see figure 1).[ix] Certainly, a religious landscape is revealed which is comparable to that of Brittany which Smith (1990, page 326) described as being "where features of the landscape, and bells and crosses were the focal points for saint's cults, ...firmly rooted in local topography and topynomy". Hagiographies help ritually, to transform certain sites and physical features, and serve to anchor collective memory in the landscape. "By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else* yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu" (Eliade, 1957, page 12). Through the propagation of such sacred memory, nature and the landscape are, therefore, not just neutral physical objects, settings or locations; they are 'places' with meanings attached (Dietler, 1998, page 86).

Often, quite ordinary features of the physical landscape (such as trees and hills) are 'apprehended' and given value and significance by virtue of the ideational system of Christian cosmology (see Basso, 1988, page 100). In this sense, the physical landscape is appropriated and used as a basis for the expression of collective memory and local identity through the naming, recognition and what Pred (1984) calls the becoming of place.[x] Pred (1984, page 282) argues that certain dominant institutions can *produce place* through their control over the limited resources of the resident population. In the case of the medieval Church, their control over daily routines, ritual, writing, and explanation of a wide range of everyday experiences, allowed them to articulate a 'sense of place', and ferment a scheme of territorial organisation, (the parish), to re-enforce such social constructions.

Giddens (1979; 1981) prefers the word *locale* to that of place, because it stresses an integral involvement with the structural constitution of social systems. Hence, "all collectivities have defined *locales* of operation: physical settings associated with the 'typical interactions' composing those collectivities as social systems" (Giddens, 1981; page 39). Hagiographies sought to express a 'social space' or *locale* so that the local population came to define their 'territories of occupation' for particular social contexts according to the landscape of the Church and the emerging idea of the parish. Stemming from the ideas of Dietler (1998, pages 86), therefore, places provide an authenticating material link between a mythological narrative of the past, and a set of current circumstances, 'to materialise prototypical events and persons in the creation of communal memory'. *Place*, in this sense, is not just a physical space or location, rather, it involves a transformation of space and nature, mirroring the transformation of society in time and space (see Pred, 1984, page 279). Hagiographies helped to order the world through the explanation of the landscapes and assimilation of everyday objects. Following the sentiments of Eliade (1957), they helped to provide a cosmological context in which to understand the local landscape and such emerging devices as the parish. Hagiographies, therefore, are a key tool in the production of *place*, contributing to a particular history in a specific context through the creation and utilisation of a physical setting.

The physical setting of the Samson stories stretches from Ireland to Brittany, via named places in south-west Wales, Cornwall, an island off the coast of Wales, and even a castle and cave near the river Severn. These locations suggest a relatively wide 'geographical reach' for the legends; a claim that is supported by the shear quantity of copies made of Samson's *vita* throughout the medieval period. In addition, the actual prologue of the text narrates how the stories were passed on orally, via relatives and associates of the saint himself residing in various parts of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, to be pieced together many years later by the actual writer (*Vita Samsonis*, pages 3-7). In this sense, the whole story is portrayed as the product of dialogue and piecemeal memory of a relatively widely-based community, over quite a considerable period of time. Particular places and regions are, thereby, formalised and reified into contemporary geographical imaginings of the world around them.

The emerging organisational systems of the Church laid claim to particularised social spaces and, thereby, needed to legitimate their authority over the material environment. The performance of contextualised rituals and localised practices associated with hagiographic tales helped to formalise this authority and make it accepted as 'natural'. Hagiographies supplied key material from which an awareness of belonging to an inclusive community with a certain identity was built.

In this respect, the "locales that dominate lives are not merely 'backdrops' but are actively organised" (Giddens, 1981, page 161). They comprised an integral part of how people made sense of the material world and the social relations within it. According to Pred (1984, page 280), place is an 'historically contingent process', in which institutional and individual practices are interwoven with structural features. The nature of the landscape and place representation in hagiography, therefore, is predicated by existing and developing social power relations which are then legitimated through this representation, thus revealing the power of 'place' in the construction and description of society.[xi]

Conclusions
Writing on environmental messages in the mass media of the late twentieth century, Burgess (1990, page 141) noted that "media texts of many different kinds are, in fact, saturated with geographical messages and meanings". As we have seen in the legends of St. Samson, such geographical saturation also occurs in hagiography. Messages of authority, discipline and correct practice are coded through environmental metaphors to be decoded, as intended, in order to support the hegemony of the Catholic Church. In addition, hagiographies emphasised a particularly local association which helped people articulate their relationship with the landscape which they inhabited. These ideas are also reflected in the tales of other saints, and is recognised by Smith (1990, page 323), in her analysis of the *vita* of St. Paul Aurelian, when she notes that "beneath the rhetorical exercises can be glimpsed a saint who was remembered in local, oral traditions attached to healing springs and notable landmarks and objects".

In many respects, a distinction based upon 'geographical reach' may be drawn between the 'environmental' messages within the *Vita Samsonis*, and the messages pertaining to the practice of naming and locating places and spaces. The moral geography that is encoded through environmental metaphors in the Samson stories would have been understood anywhere within Christendom, and utilised for instruction and exemplification. The evocation of a local topography however, would have 'travelled' less easily, though may still have been strongly involved in the support of pilgrimage over a relatively long distance. With this in mind, one might understand why the Camel-Fowey route of travel figures so highly in the Samson stories; Samson being a very important 'inter-Celtic' saint with a very large 'culture area' over which the stories were utilised.[xii] Importantly however, these two strands should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. The very being of a nameable place, involves issues of inclusion and exclusion, and cannot be separated from wider moral messages (Sack, 1999, page 26). Therefore, whether taken in a general sense (unordered weeds, dark caves etc.) or in a specific sense (a named hill), hagiographies produce 'places' that are coloured by the same moral code.

A notion of place was the essential link between relics and settings, oral tradition and the writing of hagiographies.[xiii] In this sense, hagiographies can be seen as key tools in the production of place by being implicated in the process by which people came to know their surroundings. Their experience of the physical world was literally 'guided' by the Church. In many ways, they can be related to what Pred

(1984, page 287) calls 'space-specific biographies', with the physical environment transformed through place-specific social reproduction to 'become place'. The representation of place, therefore, is a cultural practice and, as such, must be understood in relation to wider social power relations reflecting the sentiment of Rose (1994, page 46) when she noted that, "the question of the representation of place, is also necessarily a question of ideology". Whatever the debate over whether hagiographies represent a folkloric tradition, they undoubtedly included the coded messages of certain dominant groups in society, rendering certain values as common sense, and legitimating a particular social hierarchy

Dietler notes (1998, page 85) that "political ritual is not always effective in naturalising hegemonic discourse of the state". With hagiography too, one must not simply generalise about an apparently oppressive and all-powerful ecclesiastical 'Authority' cynically manipulating 'The People' through a supposedly very top-down scheme of cultural production. The creation of a notion of 'place' and a communal memory through the coded messages of hagiography are neither the reflection of the 'wishes' of a cynically repressive regime of control 'from above', nor the democratic representative of a primordial 'folk attitude'. Rather, they are the result of a dialogue between interest groups, which is set within the context of what would appear familiar and natural to a contemporary 'conventional wisdom'. Whatever the dimensions of the space with which people are familiar and in which they regard themselves as situated, "religious man (*sic*) feels the need always to exist in a total and organised world, in a cosmos" (Eliade, 1957, page 44). However 'true', in terms of material facts they were, and whoever literally 'produced' them, hagiographic writing had to conform to the existing notions of what a hagiographic story 'should be like'; it had to conform to an existing *habitus* (see Bourdieu, 1977). Importantly, the spatial code of this medieval *habitus* was dominated by a cosmological symbolism that gave further strength and authority to Christian explanation (Lemaire, 1997, page 7). In this respect, hagiographies may perhaps be related to what Bakhtin (1981, page 342) calls an 'authoritative word'; demanding acknowledgement, and organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. The Samson stories provided the means through which the hierophany, or sacredness of the entire universe is a 'given-fact'.

To return to the question of what these hagiographic accounts actually meant, and what exactly prompted people to write them, as we have seen, there are many accounts of how such saintly legends helped to police society and guide them along the proverbial 'straight and narrow'. We have also noted many incidents of how hagiographies were used to protect ecclesiastical privileges, status and property. To these motives, I would also add that hagiographic legends helped to produce a sense of place. Through instilling local identity and memory with reference to an imagined landscape of religious order, often through the use of environmental metaphors, these saintly legends literally showed people how to experience the familiar landscape that they inhabited.

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Caption for Figure 1.
Figure 1.
Map showing Samson's journey from Wales to Brittany, via Cornwall.
(Places mentioned in the text are highlighted)

Endnotes

i   The category of 'Celticity' in particular, is a complex and, some would say, problematical term (Chapman 1992). Both Roman and Celtic 'traditions' were completely orthodox in their use of Latin, and in their allegiance to Rome, thereby making the *separate* category of a 'Latin' or 'Roman' Church misleading. For a more detailed discussion of this division centring on the west Cornish hagiography of St. Gwinear, see Harvey (2000b).

ii   For a much fuller account of the whole sub-discipline of hagiographic studies, see Vauchez (1997).

iii Smith also sees the whole of St. Corentin's *vita* as being very overtly more to do with the Cathedral of Quimper's property rights than with the life of its holy patron (Smith, 1990, page 327). See also numerous examples in Abou-el-Haj (1997). On a much larger scale, a useful illustration of the proprietorial purpose of the writing of medieval 'lives', is found in the Abbot Suger of St. Denis's *Life of Louis VI of France*. Within this work, the King's possession of Normandy, and his overlordship of Henry I of England (who was the Duke of Normandy), comes across as one of the central tenets (Reynolds, 1997, pages 279-81).

iv   For instance, Gurevich (1988, pages 46-8) tells of a story of when a knight, whose broken arm had been mended by St. James forgot to visit the saint's property in Reading, whereupon the saint punished him by breaking his other arm. St. Avitas on the other hand, broke someone's neck for not attending a liturgy, while St. Remi once fixed a dispute over the ownership of a mill by simply making the mill disappear.

v   Abou-el-Haj (1997) again provides numerous examples of saints performing punitive miracles (even involving the killing of kings and noblemen) as part of a programme of moral 'instruction'.

vi   Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* involves the generation and structuring of principles, practices and representations which are objectively regulated without obedience to rules, adapted to goals without conscious aiming and collectively orchestrated without being the product of conscious direction (Bourdieu, 1977, page 72). The *habitus* therefore is the "product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history and objective structures" (such as language and economy) to succeed in reproducing themselves in institutions and individuals which are "lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1977, page 85. See also Harvey, 2000a).

vii Despite it being the 'longest and fullest' example of a Celtic saint's life, it should be noted that such descriptors are merely comparative! The daily movements and activities of Samson are not recorded. Rather, the hagiographies record a series of 'set pieces' which are the subjects of the present paper.

viii The section of the *vita* in which Samson persuades his father and numerous other relations to give all their property to the Church and join the priesthood tends to support this (*Vita Samsonis*, page 34).

ix   Bowen (1945) agrees with conventional interpretation when he sees 'Landocco' as being at the monastic site of St. Kew. More recently however, Orme (1999) has argued that this interpretation is very problematical.

x   To take the example of parochialisation, one can see that the recognition of the developing territorial parish framework often depended upon the association of a delineated area around a particular holy site. This zone reflected a sort of 'sphere of influence' of a particular saint (Olson and Padel, 1986; Olson, 1989; Blair and Sharp, 1992; Harvey, 1997). In this respect, the institutional development represented by parochial organisation can be related to what Pred (1984) calls the 'becoming of place'.

xi   For more on the representation of place, see for instance, Daniels (1992) and Rose (1994).

xii The much more locally-oriented stories of St. Gwinear on the other hand perhaps reflects a much more local readership.

xiii Smith (1990, page 341) even notes that in many cases, the cult site was more important than any relics, as with the holy spring of St. Wenefred which continued as a cult site long after the saint's bones had been taken away to Shrewsbury.