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Lynette Olson (ed.), *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*, Studies in Celtic History 37 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017). Pp. viii + 222. ISBN 978-1-78327-218-1. £60.

This very welcome set of essays arises from a colloquy on St Samson, and principally on the *Vita Prima S. Samsonis* (*VIS*), organized by Lynette Olson in Sydney in 2013. Until now the results of the colloquy have been available only through an intriguing blog post by Caroline Brett (<http://anglosaxonnorseandceltic.blogspot.ie/2013/07/st-samson-colloquy-report.html>), but finally we have the opportunity to study the arguments in detail. They certainly reward the effort.

*VIS* is one of the principal texts of the Brittonic early Middle Ages, but also one of the most difficult to handle. Written at Dol, Brittany, by an anonymous author, it offers in addition to the usual challenges of dealing with hagiography a markedly individual authorial voice. Furthermore, its date is keenly disputed, being variously placed between the seventh and ninth centuries. The choice matters: is *VIS* the outstanding pioneering work of hagiography in the Brittonic-speaking world, or a local Breton response to Carolingian conquest? Much rests on how we read the convoluted Latin of the author's prologue, in which he outlines his sources. Olson usefully reproduces the crucial passage with a translation (pp. 3–4). It is important to note, however, that the Life is peppered with other authorial statements, treated in detail by Joseph-Claude Poulin in Chapter 3.

Scholarship on *VIS* has been dominated by the question of its date. It is a welcome feature of this new volume that much of it focuses on other issues and opens up new lines of inquiry. However, the continuing importance of the dating question, and the related one of the integrity and sources of *VIS*, can give the reader the feeling of having intruded into a conversation which started some time ago and is in full flow. This is especially true of Olson's introduction, which is largely a response to an article by Richard Sowerby in the 2011 issue of *Francia*, but it applies also to Sowerby's own contribution here and to Poulin's lengthy chapter. As Olson acknowledges, the 2011 article reanimated scholarship on *VIS*. In it Sowerby provided an excellent analysis of the later *Vita Secunda S. Samsonis* and a powerful argument for an early dating of *VIS* to c. 700. The value of his contribution is demonstrated by the degree to which the current volume engages with his arguments. However, one further conclusion of his has proved especially attractive to some: that the portion of *VIS* dealing with Samson's career in Britain derived from an older, 'Cornish Life' from Samson's own monastery in Cornwall. Sowerby was not the first to posit a hypothetical older Life or \**Vita primigenia*, attributed to the deacon Henoc, nephew of Samson, whom the prologue of *VIS* cites as a source: the idea has been the subject of several publications by Poulin, most importantly in *Analecta Bollandiana* for 2001. There are significant points where the two scholars differ. Poulin places the work in the later eighth century, which leads him to some doubts about the historical reality of Henoc (p. 76). Sowerby maintains the traditional belief in Henoc, but thinks that his \**Vita primigenia* represented the viewpoint of Samson's Cornish monastery, rather than that of his later church of Dol; his hypothesis allows for a quite early date for the source underlying *VIS*. In either case, the belief that *VIS* is a *réécriture*, a rewriting of a hypothetical older Life, greatly complicates the question of authorship, date and context, and now looks set to reassert itself as a crucial issue in the scholarship.

Yet, on the concept of a Cornish \**Vita primigenia*, covering all of Samson's Insular career, it seems to this reviewer that reservations are called for. The key claim is that, as Sowerby expresses it here (p. 30), 'the extant Life [i.e. *VIS*] is indeed, as the late seventh or early eighth-century Breton author claimed, a reworking of an earlier, now lost Life of the saint kept at and probably written for that very community [i.e. Samson's monastery in

Cornwall]’. This is, however, something that the author of *VIS* does not claim. The content of Henoc’s written work was Samson’s *prodigiosis actibus, quae citra mare in Britannia ac Romania mirabiliose fecit*: the words *citra mare*, from the perspective of Dol, indicate that we are dealing with deeds that took place on the Continent only. Henoc’s text thus should have corresponded at most to the Continental chapters of *VIS*, so i.52–61. This is the opposite of Sowerby’s claim that it covered events up until then and no further. Furthermore, Henoc’s written work is mentioned only in second place, after testimony obtained from a *venerabilis senex* whom the author met in Britain (and who also showed him Henoc’s work). Admittedly, the *venerabilis senex* himself claimed that his testimony derived ultimately from Henoc as well. One might just make a case that the distinction drawn is between two sections of a written work which had two different origins – a part written by Henoc on the Continent, and dealing with Continental matters, which he then took to Britain, and another part, also Henoc’s but written later in Britain and deriving from testimony told to Henoc by Samson’s mother, after Henoc had arrived from Brittany. However, such an interpretation of the author’s words would lie at the outer margins of admissibility at best, and would leave the role of the *venerabilis senex* unclear. It is unwarranted to extend Henoc’s written work backwards to cover, potentially, all of Book i of *VIS*; and even if we did so, it could not be described as a ‘Cornish Life’ that extended only to Samson’s career before he left for Brittany.

Olson is clearly tempted by the ‘Cornish Life’ (pp. 3–11). She tries to address the difficulty by showing that Henoc wrote also about Insular events (pp. 5–6), but the passage which she cites (*litterae ipsius loco ultra mare catholice conscripta, VIS ii.8*) is not secure. The text does not explain where the story of ii.7–9 is located. Samson presumably took the deacon Morinus into his service in south Wales, but the dénouement happened some time later and potentially in Dol or Pentale, not necessarily in Britain. Furthermore, Olson is herself uncomfortable with the excision of Continental events required by the ‘Cornish Life’ theory, and she makes valuable points about the importance of Pentale and Dol in the narrative. In fact the author of *VIS* tells us that Henoc wrote about Dol and Pentale, for that is the only reasonable interpretation of *citra mare in Britannia et Romania*. The fact that Olson has to make the argument that Pentale featured in Henoc’s text (p. 11) shows that critical debate has drifted too far from where it should be anchored, in the author’s own statement regarding what was in Henoc’s work. It is problematic to override his testimony, for once we are prepared to do that, then we escape any external control on the content of the alleged \**Vita primigenia* and are free to choose our own criteria in deciding what belongs to ‘Henoc’ and what to the *remanieur dolois* or ‘Dol redactor’, as Poulin has termed him.

We can agree that the author of *VIS* obtained most, though not all, of his information from Samson’s monastery in Cornwall, but it came both through the testimony of the *venerabilis senex* and Henoc’s written work, which was preserved there. That is sufficient to explain the strong Insular focus of *VIS*, but it does not amount to a pre-formed ‘Life’, an idea that can be extrapolated from the prologue of *VIS* only with difficulty. The purpose of this passage of the prologue is to establish how both the British and Continental parts of Samson’s career are documented. The Continental part rests on the authoritative written evidence of the impeccable Henoc; the Insular on the authoritative oral evidence of Samson’s mother, safely transmitted through Henoc (and the *venerabilis senex* if, as is the most natural interpretation of the passage, this testimony continued to be oral). In other words, everything goes back to eyewitnesses, and nothing is personal invention. That is what the author of *VIS* cared about. He is so concerned that he returns to the same point in chapter 4 of his prologue, where *uiros* makes clear that the old man was not his only oral source. He also heaps praise on his written source, Henoc’s work. Had Henoc written a complete Life of Samson, the

author of *VIS* could have made that clear without detracting at all from his case, but he does not do so.

Sowerby (Chapter 2) offers a development of his 'Cornish Life' theory, with discussion of one of the strangest features of *VIS*: its focus on Samson's biological family. This is a generally excellent treatment, rightly making the case that the wealth of circumstantial details in *VIS*, including even some unfavourable ones, points to the preservation of genuine historical information about this early ecclesiastical dynasty, in spite of the hagiographical shaping of the narrative. However, it need not follow that these details were extracted from a pre-existing Life. The issue of nepotism was a live one at all times in the Middle Ages, and the desire of the author to make exemplary comment on it should be considered, as well as the possibility that Samson's lineage could still have been in charge in the later seventh century. A more cautious formulation would be that traditions about Samson's family were preserved, in whatever form, at his Cornish house even as late as the time when the *VIS* author visited it.

Apart from Olson and Sowerby, the other contributor most fully engaged in the textual question is Joseph Claude-Poulin, whose long Chapter 3, in French, is a massively detailed exposition of the 'who, what, where and when' of *VIS*, assembling and reviewing every scrap of information from the text itself. It concludes with a diagram setting out his view of the development of the text. The exercise promises to be exceptionally useful. However, for this reviewer the value of the treatment is undermined by the insistence, from the very beginning, on the existence of *\*Vita primigenia* by Henoc and the consequent downgrading of the author of *VIS* to a *remanieur dolois*. It is hard to accept that these ideas emerge naturally from the evidence presented, rather than being dominant in Poulin's thinking from the start.

It is unclear how we can ever know what was in Henoc's text or how much the *VIS* author adapted it, and the safest course would seem to be to analyse *VIS* in its own context. Fortunately this new volume offers several ways of doing so. Caroline Brett (Chapter 4) contrasts St Samson with his near-neighbour, Paternus of Avranches. Starting with the clear dependency of *VIS* on Fortunatus' *Vita Paterni*, she goes on to consider the similarity of the two historical saints and the different fates of their later cults. Her core argument is that Dol managed to secure important and partly royal patronage, whereas the churches associated with Paternus were marginalized and went into decline. She doubts whether Dol's success really belonged to the time of Samson, as *VIS* suggests; instead she suspects that the important foundation of Pentale was acquired later in the seventh century, during the wave of ecclesiastical and monastic patronage that owes at least something to the influence of Columbanus. From that point it would appear that Samson eclipsed the older saint, though it may be that traditions of Paternus travelled to Wales along with *VIS*, where they influenced the hagiography of St Padarn. Brett accepts the *\*Vita primigenia*, in Sowerby's form rather than Poulin's. It is all the more striking, then, that she demonstrates (p. 86) that the not very well-known *Vita Paterni* of Fortunatus was a pervasive influence on the sections of *VIS* attributed to the alleged *\*Vita Primigenia* and to the Dol author alike. Olson describes this as 'one of the most interesting' findings in the book (p. 16). To this reviewer, it should be read alongside Brett's observation that *VIS* is marked by a strong individuality and stylistic unity (p. 87, and again on p. 89) and serve as a further caution against attempts to divide *VIS* between the alleged contributions of Henoc and the Dol author.

There are areas of marked disagreement between Brett and the next contributor. Ian Wood (Chapter 5) offers an intriguing comparison between Samson and the much more famous Columbanus. Pointing to evidence in Columbanus' letters and in Jonas' *Life*, Wood argues that Columbanus had significant British followers, and that he himself came in the footsteps of British figures such as Carantoc, abbot of *Salicis*. Wood also emphasizes the

importance of Pentale, whose Frankish royal associations are reminiscent of the much more famous monasteries of Columbanus. The argument is good, but Wood may go too far in arguing that the see of Dol was not founded before the ninth century (pp. 103, 111), since that the Life nowhere mentions it. This seems excessively sceptical: *VIS* is dedicated to a Bishop Tigernomaglus, and in ii.15 a Bishop Leucherus is mentioned specifically at Dol. Samson is destined, furthermore, to be *ultra mare in ecclesia maximus, maximo sacerdotali honore condignus* (i.45), a status that must be episcopal. Some aspects of Wood's argument are also rather speculative, notably his acceptance of very late hagiographical evidence that Gildas settled in south-east Brittany in the mid-sixth century, and putative links between Uinniau, Whithorn, Bangor and Pelagianism. These issues aside, Wood's chapter is a salutary reminder of the neglect that the topic of British *peregrinatio* on the Continent has suffered.

Constant Mews' contribution (Chapter 6) is mainly a study of the eighth-century *Ratio de cursus*, a tract which argues that Gallican and Irish liturgies were of apostolic origin. A useful translation of the tract is supplied in an appendix. The relevance to Samson is largely one of contrast: Mews argues that *VIS* is concerned not so much with the validation of liturgical practices against Roman centralization as with defending Samson's position as an Insular *peregrinus*, partly in the face of the Irish, Columbanian foundations. This, along with an examination of the theological writings used by the author of *VIS*, leads Mews to a quite early dating for the Life, within the seventh century.

Jonathan Wooding (Chapter 7) analyses *VIS* as a portrait of monastic formation and *peregrinatio*. This chapter maintains a sensitive balance between matters historical-archaeological and theological. Thus, although Wooding discusses the identification of the British sites mentioned in the Life and their archaeological reality, he also locates each one within a narrative shaped by monastic and hagiographical models of spiritual progress. As he acknowledges (p. 139), the relationship between monastic and pastoral roles is complex, but he argues that the Samson of *VIS* is predominantly a monastic figure who does not embrace a pastoral role until he leaves Britain. It follows that Wooding focuses almost entirely on the Insular portion of Samson's Life. A further matter of interest is the formative, if often unacknowledged, influence of *VIS* on older archaeological models, especially those of O. G. S. Crawford and E. J. Bowen, models which Wooding argues (here and elsewhere) to have been deeply flawed. Wooding is carefully noncommittal on the matter of the *\*Vita primigenia*, and although his focus on the part of the Life extending down to the departure from Cornwall might have led him to endorse the theory of a 'Cornish Life', he remains cautious. It should be noted that the saint's pastoral role is strongly foreshadowed in the earlier part of the Life (for instance, in i.5, where the *librarius* prophesies that he shall be *sacerdos multis profuturis*), such that the monastic import of *VIS* is balanced by a pastoral interest throughout, and it would have been worth continuing the discussion to consider the Breton part of the Life as well. Wooding does however see Cornwall in *VIS* as a staging-post between Wales and Brittany, a view that respects the shape of the text as it stands. He shows how the whole can be read as a spiritual journey in which each place has a spiritual significance. Cornwall, in this reading, is distinctly liminal (p. 155), the 'desert' that lies between Egypt (i.e. Wales) and the Promised Land of Brittany. Overall, this is a fine chapter that shows how much is to be gained from reading the text as a literary and intellectual unity. Wooding's argument would allow further development in which Samson's Continental career takes its proper place as the climax to a narrative of *peregrinatio*.

Karen Jankulak dissects the evidence for the Welsh cult of Samson and finds it meagre. *VIS* itself indicates that a cult existed, but it seems to have waned during the early Middle Ages and was only reintroduced by Bretons who arrived in Wales among the Norman conquerors; hence the influence exerted by *VIS* at Llandaf in the early twelfth century. Jankulak neatly deconstructs previous, inflated views of how widespread was Samson's cult

in the landscape, especially (once more) in the work of E. G. Bowen. She considers both the biblical and possible local saints of the same name. She makes the very valuable point that *VIS* shows us a Brittonic saint's cult at an early stage of formation, one or two centuries after his death, unlike the bulk of Welsh hagiography which reflects the situation half a millennium later. She concludes by comparing Samson with Gildas, who is far more often mentioned in texts from Wales, but again lacks known cult-sites. This is an excellent treatment, full of food for thought. One point that might be questioned, however, is the idea that the Llandaf redaction of *VIS* alters Samson's place of birth from Dyfed to Meath in Ireland. The reading *deregione methiana* looks rather like a copying error for *de regione [de]met<h>iana* and may have no significance.

So, do we in fact 'get somewhere' with the First Life of St Samson of Dol, as Olson hoped (p. 1)? Emphatically, yes. This is a collection that significantly advances our understanding of this text and reveals new avenues for exploration. As such, the participants and especially the guiding light behind the colloquy, Lynette Olson, are to be congratulated. I emerged, however, with the feeling that the most progress was made through focusing on the text which we actually possess. *VIS* reveals the *auteur dolois*, as I would prefer to call him, to have been a truly exceptional individual, a scholar who undertook fieldwork and showed a remarkable thoroughness in acquiring his information. His work is a carefully planned, coherent, thematically and stylistically unified account of *peregrinatio* that leaves little hope of safely distinguishing its sources. How rich *VIS* is, and how much can be achieved through sensitive reading of it, emerge clearly from the lucid expositions in this volume. Further progress is likely to come from focusing on it rather than on its irrecoverable antecedents.

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