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# Saints in the Tristan Legend

Peter S. Noble  
University of Reading

Many years ago Hoepffner commented briefly on the differences in the use of saints' names by the various French writers of the Tristan poems, drawing attention to the only mention of a saint in the *Folie d'Oxford* and adding that saints were '... rares aussi chez Thomas, elles sont par contre fréquentes dans Fb et chez Beroul'.<sup>1</sup> In fact there seem to be no references to saints in the surviving fragments of Thomas and only three in the *Folie de Berne*, whereas Beroul mentions ten, most of whom do not appear in twelfth-century writers such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France in her *Lais*.<sup>2</sup> Chrétien, for example, ignores saints almost entirely in *Erec et Enide*, mentioning only St Samson's Isle,<sup>3</sup> while in the other non-Grail romances he uses the names of very common saints such as St Peter, St Paul, St John and St Mary. The only slightly more uncommon saint is St Sylvester in the *Charrete* (6524) who was an early Bishop of Milan supposed to have baptised Constantine. As there were many legends circulating about him, he was well known in Western Europe and his presence is not particularly surprising.<sup>4</sup> Marie de France mentions three saints, St Aaron in *Yonec* (467), and in *Eliduc* St Clement and St Nicholas (822) who are linked with the Virgin. St Aaron is either a British martyr at Caerleon around 304 AD to whom there were local dedications<sup>5</sup> or a Briton who crossed to Brittany where he became a hermit at St Malo and subsequently the abbot of the community dying around 552.<sup>6</sup> *Yonec* is one of the more overtly Celtic *lais* and it may well be that Marie is drawing on Breton background for this *lai* and using the Breton saint. St Clement, Pope and Martyr who died around 100 AD and St Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, were both well known saints with extensive legends and their presence is not indicative of any special interest in saints.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly in the *Folie d'Oxford* the only saint to appear is St John. Brangein is speaking to Iseut.

Dame, je quid, par sen Johan,  
K'il seit le messenger Tristan. (597-8)

Clearly St Johan is used partly for the rhyme. Presumably Brangein is referring to St John the Apostle who was a very well known figure in the middle ages, although not so popular as St John the Baptist.<sup>8</sup> The use of such a common saint's name tells us nothing about the interests of the writer, especially when it appears in a half line which is both a cliché to fill the line, and it is needed to rhyme with the key word of the next line, Tristan.

The saints in the *Folie de Berne* are very different. Mark in his opening speech twice calls on saints.<sup>9</sup>

Se poise moi, par saint Odé... (25)

Saint Odé is identified with Saint Andrew by Payen,<sup>10</sup> and if this is correct, there is a Cornish link here in that Saint Andrew was the patron saint of the parish of Tywardreath near Golant. St Andrew also appears in Beroul, again called upon by Mark, and as the *Folie de Berne* and the text of Beroul have many links, this could be another example of them drawing on the same tradition. Mark's second saint is also a Cornish one

Par Saint Samson de Cornouaille... (28)

Saint Samson, who died around 565 as the Bishop of Dol in Brittany, was Welsh in origin but made many missionary journeys to Cornwall where his disciples included Saint Austell, Saint Meuran and Saint Winnow. His cult was well established in Wales and Brittany.<sup>11</sup> His presence here coupled with that of Saint Andrew does suggest a certain knowledge of Cornwall in that these saints were particularly appropriate. On the other hand the third saint in the *Folie de Berne* is Saint Christine who has no local connection that I can discover.

... Por Sainte Estretine,  
As tu oir del fol merveilles? (261-2)

Iseut is speaking and there seems to be no particular reason for the use of Saint Christine. Her name is not essential either metrically or

for the context. Christine was a very popular saint in the west, although her legend is a conflation of two Christinas, the legendary Christina of Tyre and the genuine Christina of Bolseno.<sup>12</sup> Presumably Iseut is calling on a well-known female saint in a moment of crisis but precisely why the author chose Saint Christine is unclear and likely to remain so.

In Beroul Mark is again the character who most frequently refers to the saints. Tristan calls on Saint Evrol in his monologue at the fountain.

Ha! Dex, beau sire saint Evrol,  
Je ne pensai faire tel perte. (238-9)

Saint Evrol was a nobleman, Ebrulf, from Bayeux who became a hermit in Normandy, converting robbers and stressing the benefit of manual labour. He died around 706 and his relics were brought to England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the monks of St Evroul who became abbots in England.<sup>13</sup> As his cult was well known in England he seems a more likely candidate than the abbot of St Fascien au Bois who was the founder of monastic life in the Beauvaisis.<sup>14</sup> Evrol is partly chosen for the rhyme (with *sol* in 237), but that is not likely to have been the deciding factor. Beroul has chosen a saint well known on both sides of the Channel and no doubt familiar to his audience. Mark also calls on Saint Tresmor and Saint Andrew.

Par Saint Tresmor de Caharés,  
Ge vos ferai un geu parti. (3076-7)

Saint Tremeur was a sixth century Breton saint, the son of Saint Triphina, and was murdered at Carhaix by his stepfather Count Conmore. He became the patron saint of Carhaix.<sup>15</sup> Saint Andrew, the apostle, is more than just a local saint to Mark.

Par saint André que l'en vet querre  
Outre le mer jusqu'en Escoce... (3132-3)

Mark clearly knows him as the patron saint of Scotland and, as he is threatening to banish the treacherous barons at this point, the saint of a distant country is a logical choice. Despite Saint Andrew's local

connections, already discussed for the *Folie de Berne*, Beroul has probably chosen him deliberately as the saint of the country to which Tristan had said he would go and to which the barons might be sent. Mark's other references to saints are to Saint Martin (476), Saint Thomas (1126) and Saint Stephen the Martyr (3070). The cults of Saint Martin and Saint Stephen were widespread in England, the latter particularly after the Norman Conquest,<sup>16</sup> and Saint Stephen had a Cornish connection as well. He was the patron saint of the parish of Saint Stephen-in-Brannel near Golant, like Tywardreath where Saint Andrew was the patron saint.<sup>17</sup> Saint Thomas is probably the apostle. It seems very early to be Saint Thomas of Canterbury who was canonized in 1173.<sup>18</sup> As the date of the poem by Beroul is so uncertain, it is, however, impossible to rule out St Thomas of Canterbury, which would mean that another saint associated with the south of England would figure in Beroul's list.

Saint Riquier is cited by Gawain when he is threatening to take vengeance on Guenelons, in his eyes the worst of the three barons.

Se gel retien, par saint Richier,  
N'i estovra Tristran venir. (3466-7)

Saint Riquier died about 645 as a hermit after founding the monastery at Celles. He had been to England during his lifetime and his life was written by Alcuin, so that he too would be well known on both sides of the Channel. Saint Samson appears twice in the poem at 2973 and 2994 as it is to his church that Iseut goes after her reconciliation with Mark and it is there that the chasuble which she donated can still be seen, according to Beroul. Beroul's local knowledge is well established, and he clearly knows the church about which he is writing.<sup>19</sup> Saint Samson is another local saint familiar to the audience. There is more doubt about the two remaining saints, Saint Lubin and Saint Hilaire.

Avoit mandé que l'endemain  
Tristran venist a lié matin;  
Li rois iroit a Saint Lubin. (4348-50)

Ewert following Muret said that Beroul was referring to places in the diocese of Chartres and that these references were introduced by Beroul or his scribe.<sup>20</sup> It seems from the text, however, unlikely that Mark

would be heading across the Channel and much more likely that St Lubin is somewhere in Cornwall. There is no certain identification possible but the obscure Celtic saint, Saint Ludgvan, was the patron of Ludgvan or Ludan in Cornwall. It is just possible that there was some confusion between this saint and the better known Saint Lubin, who was Leobinus, the Bishop of Chartres, who died about 556.

Finally the most discussed saint of all is Saint Hilaire, the saint by whom Iseut swears her ambiguous oath. Jonin argued fluently and at length for Saint Hilary, the Bishop of Poitiers, showing that he was a particularly appropriate saint to choose in the circumstances. Legge, however, in her review of Jonin's book showed that there was an alternative explanation in that Saint Hilary was the patron saint of a parish in Cornwall, near Malpas on the river Fal which has been identified with the ford in the poem of Beroul.<sup>21</sup> It is possible, of course, to combine the two in that Beroul chose a local saint who was peculiarly suitable in the context. Once again, however, it seems that Beroul chose a saint who had Cornish connections, whatever the wider spread of his cult.

The difference between Beroul and the other French writers of Tristan poems in their use of saints seems clear. Beroul had a good knowledge of local Cornish saints and uses either these saints or else saints who were well known on both sides of the Channel or Celtic saints like Saint Tremeur. The author of the *Folie de Berne* also uses local saints, drawing perhaps on Beroul or else on the tradition which he shared with Beroul. The author of the *Folie d'Oxford* had no interest in Cornish saints and very little interest in saints in general while, on the evidence of the surviving parts of Thomas, Thomas saw no role for the saints in his poem either. Marie de France mentions no saints' names in *Chevrefoil*. If it is accepted that Beroul was writing for a less sophisticated audience than Thomas, as seems probable, given the differences in style and content in the two poems, then this greater use of local saints' names may well be intended to involve the audience by enabling them to identify with the characters as they call on the saints well-known in Cornwall. Thomas writing almost certainly for a non-Cornish audience and probably for sophisticated members of a court circle had no need for such names. Even in the depths of their despair Thomas's Tristan and Iseut ignore all saints, including the widely celebrated ones mentioned by Chrétien. In Thomas there is little interest in religion as the characters grapple with the problems of love and death. Beroul, on the

other hand, at least superficially, is aware of the role of religion in the lives of people and the references to saints' names help to convey this interest and the passion with which Tristan, Mark and Iseut express their views. Thus the use of saints' names by the authors can be seen to be indicative of their very different approaches to the material with which they worked

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *La Folie Tristan d'Oxford*, publiée avec commentaire par E. Hoepffner, Rodez, 1943, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> References are to the following editions. *The Romance of Tristan* by Beroul, edited A. Ewert, Oxford, Vol. I (1939) Vol. II (1971); *Tristan et Yseut. Les Tristan en vers*, édition par J.C. Payen, Paris 1974 (References to *La Folie de Berne* and *Chevrefoil*); *Erec et Enide*, édition par M. Roques CFMA 80, Paris, 1952; *Le Chevalier de la charrete*, édition par M. Roques, CFMA 86, Paris 1958; Marie de France, *Lais*, edited by A. Ewert, Oxford 1944.

<sup>3</sup> 1. 1234 St Samson's Isle was the scene of the battle between Tristan and the Morholt. Chrétien mentions it only to emphasise that Erec's joy in victory was greater than Tristan's.

<sup>4</sup> D.H. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Oxford 1978. (Henceforth DHF), p. 366.

<sup>5</sup> DHF pp. 227-28.

<sup>6</sup> *The Book of Saints* by the Benedictine Monks of St Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate, London 1966 p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> DHF p. 83 and pp. 292-93.

<sup>8</sup> DHF pp. 213-14.

<sup>9</sup> Mark does this only in his opening speech when he is vowing vengeance on Tristan.

<sup>10</sup> Payen pp. 261-62.

<sup>11</sup> DHF pp. 351-52. See E.M.R. Dittmas, 'Beroul the Minstrel' *Reading Medieval Studies* VIII, 1982, especially p. 41, for details of Beroul's local knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> DHF p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> DHF p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> F.G. Holweck, *Bibliographical Dictionary of Saints*, St Louis and London 1924, republished Detroit 1969.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Saints*, p. 692.

<sup>16</sup> *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, edited by H. Thurston and D. Attwater, London 1956, Vol. IV, p. 313.

- <sup>17</sup> G.H. Doble, *Saints of Cornwall*, Oxford 1970, Vol. V, p. 102.
- <sup>18</sup> DHF pp.376-78.
- <sup>19</sup> See Ditmas cited in n.11.
- <sup>20</sup> P. Jonin, *Les personnages féminins dans les romans français de Tristan*, Gap 1958, pp. 343ff.
- <sup>21</sup> *Cahiers de Civilisation médiévale*, III, 1960, p. 512.