

Hagiography and History: the Legend of Saint Ursula

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Ursula and her XI thousand companions.... have the spiritual Hypocrites by the heale of their spirituall father the Deuyll practised innumerable lies... They saye, they all vowed virginite,...and so went... to Rome on pilgrimage with great deuotion *ii* and *ii* together, and were honourably receiued ther of the Pope and his cleargy. If this be not good ware, tel me. I thincke there wanteth no spirytual occupying, for the time they were there, if the story were true... Diuersly is this holy legende handled of *Jacobus Bergomas*, ...*Vorago*, ...*Caxton*, *Capgrave*, ... and a great host more... There going out of Brytany was to become honest Christian mens wiues, and not to go on Pilgrimage to Rome.¹

The *Legenda aurea* and Medieval Hagiography

The vigorous condemnation of the legend of St. Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins by the Tudor iconoclast John Bale is more ambiguous than it initially appears. Bale expressed the typical Reformation scepticism regarding the lives of the saints, popular in medieval Catholicism. However, he went further by implying that the journey of the eleven thousand may be historical, but that the motive for the journey was 'to become honest Christian mens wiues' not pilgrimage. This reveals his acquaintance with the story as recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*. Yet this 'history' is as misleading as the hagiographical 'legend'. The other important fact to note is that Bale's list of versions of the story are proof of its popularity. In fact, the legend of the eleven thousand virgins was retold frequently, and translated into several different languages throughout the Middle Ages.

The most famous medieval collection of saints' lives was the *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend) of Jacobus de Voragine (b. *circa* 1230), a Dominican who became Archbishop of Genoa in 1292. Jacobus was made Provincial of his Order in 1267, and it is thought

¹ John Bale, *English Votaries*, London, 1550, p. 23 f.

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that the *Legenda* was compiled before 1260.¹ It was not merely a collection of saints' lives, but a service book for the feasts and celebrations of the church, and was 'not just a popular book in our sense; it was almost a cultural institution',² which surviving manuscripts confirm as a medieval best-seller. By the mid-fourteenth century it had been translated into Dutch, with a second Dutch translation from around 1400; in the fifteenth century there were five translations into High German and one into Low German.³

When William Caxton printed his translation of the *Golden Legend* in 1483 he worked from the Latin original, a mid-fourteenth century French translation by the Hospitaller Jean de Vignay, and an 'English version, of which eight manuscripts survive, all representing one translation made before 1438'.⁴ This *Gilte Legende* is sometimes attributed to the East Anglian Augustinian Osbern Bokenham, who was educated at Cambridge University, receiving the degrees of *baccalarius* and *magister*, and wrote several other works, including the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, completed in 1447.⁵ In addition to direct translations, there are compilations such as the thirteenth-century *South English Legendary*, which depend to some extent upon the *Legenda aurea*. This collection shows direct dependence on Jacobus only for approximately twenty per cent of its material,⁶ and itself generated another revision soon after.⁷

¹ Pierce Butler, *Legenda Aurea-Legende Doree-Golden Legend*, 1899, Baltimore, p. 2.

² Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda Aurea A Reexamination of its Paradoxical History*, Madison, 1985, p. 3.

³ Werner Williams-Krapp 'German and Dutch legendaries of the Middle Ages: a survey', in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature A Symposium*, Odense, 1981, pp. 67-8.

⁴ Helen C. White, *Tudor Books of saints and martyrs*, Madison, 1963, p. 32.

⁵ Sheila Delany, (trans.), Osbern Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women*, Notre Dame and London, 1992, p. xiv.

⁶ M. Gorfach, 'The *Legenda aurea* and the Early History of the *South English Legendary*', in Brenda Dunn-Lardeau (ed.), *Legenda Aurea: Sept Siecles de Diffusion*, Actes du colloque international sur la *Legenda aurea*: texte latin et branches vernaculaires a l'Universite du Quebec a Montreal 11-12 Mai 1983, Editions Bellarmin, Montreal, Paris, 1986, p. 304. See also Klaus P. Jankofsky's '*Legenda aurea* Materials in *The South English Legendary*: Translation, Transformation, Acculturation' in the same volume, pp. 317-29.

⁷ M. Gorfach (ed.), *An East Midland revision of the South English Legendary*, Heidelberg, 1976.

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The term 'legendary' did not originally refer to the Reformation claim that the stories contained therein were false. It is derived from the Latin *lego* and denotes primarily anything collected:

as a *legion* of soldiers; in an analogous sense, anecdotes or histories gathered into a narration. By a figure of speech called Synecdoche, in which a part is put for the whole, or *vice versa*, the word came to mean the reading of the collection: hence legend means simply anything read, or to be read.¹

The medieval attitude to the miracle stories contained in legends is complex. White suggests that the earliest hagiographic genre to develop was the address by a martyr to the faithful to sustain them in time of persecution,² which gives rise to the popular lives of the martyrs; and Ryan cautions that unless readers attempt to see the world as medieval Christians did the significance of miracle stories will continue to elude them. He notes that Jacobus' *History of the Lombards* 'contains little of the history we would expect, but gives attention to developments in Church doctrine and liturgy, to heresies, to saints and miracles'.³

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries both Catholic and Protestant critics attacked the legends of the saints, as the medieval attitude of pious belief was giving way to textual criticism and a concern for historical accuracy.⁴ The subsequent history of the *Legenda aurea* was chequered, with the Bollandists being forced into defending the contents by the Counter-Reformation's reluctance to admit error.

The Legend of Saint Ursula

Jacobus' inclusion of the tale of the eleven thousand virgins in his compilation is unsurprising, in that it was one of the best-loved virgin martyr legends. These were a sub-group within hagiography, in which female saints overcame threats to their chastity and attained

¹ Anonymous, 'Introduction' to Edmund Hatfield, from the original edition by Wynkyn de Worde, London, Hotten 1869, pp. 72-99 facsimiles of original edition, *The Legend of Saint Ursula and the Virgin Martyrs of Cologne*. London, Piccadilly 1869, pp. i-ii.

² White, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton, 1993, vol. 1, p. xxiv.

⁴ Reames, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

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the crown of martyrdom. These stories have been thought of as 'women's stories', but there is evidence that

virgin martyr legends thrived among male audiences too...the genre flourished largely because monks wrote virgin martyr legends for other monks. Such laymen as Chaucer and William Paris also write virgin martyr legends, most probably for other men.¹

Ursula, as a young and beautiful princess accompanied by such a large number of virtuous female companions, and as one who suffered martyrdom with her fiance Aetherius at the hands of the barbaric Huns near Cologne, was a picturesque and compelling figure. Devotion to her in the later Middle Ages was enthusiastic, although always more extravagant in the Cologne region. However, there are many 'versions' of the story, and important problems in the relationship of the legend to historical fact.

Jacobus' version contains all the principal elements: Ursula is the daughter of a British king called Notus or Maurus, whose hand is sought in marriage by Ethereus, prince of Anglia. To avoid the marriage she stipulated the following conditions:

the king and her father were to assign to her ten carefully chosen virgins as companions, and to her and each of the ten the company and service of a thousand virgins; triremes should be rigged and provisioned for their transportation; an interval of three years should be given her to fulfill her dedication to virginity; the young man [prince of Anglia] himself should be baptized and during the three years receive instruction in the faith.²

¹ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, Ithaca and London, 1997, p. 17. Winstead's point being taken, however, it is interesting to note that Osbern Bokenham drew on an impressive range of female patrons for the lives in his collection; see A. S. G. Edwards, 'The Transmission and Audience of Osbern of Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Late-Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission*, York Manuscripts Conferences: Proceedings Series vol. III, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 157-168.

² Ryan, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 256. The Latin text is as follows: 'patri suasit, ut praedicto regi assensum praebet, ea tamen conditione proposita, ut ipse rex cum patre decem virgines electissimas sibi ad solatium traderet et tam sibi quam aliis mille virgines assignaret et comparatis trieribus inducias triennii sibi daret ad dedicationem suae virginitatis, et ipse juvenis baptizatus in his

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The desire to preserve virginity is a common late antique and early medieval Christian motif, with the second to fifth century Fathers of the Church developing a theology which relied heavily on the imitation of the virginity of Jesus. Two different views of virginity were advocated by Jerome and Augustine of Hippo: the former saw virginity as a physiological state and was concerned that virgins be protected from the defilements of the world; where the latter drew a distinction between physical virginity and 'true' virginity, which 'was moral and psychological'.¹ The rise of monasticism after the fourth century created a formal structure for men and women who wished to preserve their virginity within the framework of the Church.

Jacobus' narrative offers two possible dates for the passion of Ursula and her companions, which is relevant to the above discussion. He states:

Their passion took place in the year A.D. 238. There are some, however, who maintain that the events above related could not have occurred at that date. Sicily, they reason, was not a kingdom, nor was Constantinople, at the time when the queens of these kingdoms are alleged to have been with these virgins. It is therefore thought to be more likely that this wholesale martyrdom took place when the Huns and Goths were warring upon each other, long after the reign of the emperor Constantine - namely, in the reign of the emperor Marcian (as we read in one chronicle). Marcian reigned in the year A.D. 452.²

This passage demonstrates that Jacobus is aware that there are certain problems with the historicity of elements in the legend. The earlier date, 238 AD, predates the development of the doctrine of

tribus annis in fide instrueretur,' in Jacobi a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. T. Graesse, 1890, Osnabruck, 1969, pp. 701-2.

1 Clarissa W. Atkinson, "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass": the Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages', *Journal of Family History*, Summer 1983, p. 134.

2 Jacobus, trans. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 259. The Latin text is as follows: 'Passae sunt anno domini CCXXXVIII. Ratio autem temporis, ut quibusdam placet, non sustinet, quod haec tali tempore sint peracta. Sicilia enim tunc non erat regnum nec Constantinopolis, cum hic fuisse dicatur cum virginibus has reginas. Verias creditur, quod diu post Constantinum inperatorem, cum Hunni et Gothi saeviebant, tale sit martirium celebratum, tempore scilicet Marciani imperatoris (ut in quadam chronica legitur), qui regnavit anno domini CCCCLII', Jacobus ed. Graesse, *op. cit.*, p. 704.

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virginity, and is also incompatible with the presence of the Huns in the narrative.

These problems are magnified by the fact that the fleet sailed to a 'port of Gaul' called Tyella (Tiel, Holland) and the party then proceeded to Cologne, presumably along the Rhine as the ships are explicitly abandoned later in the narrative at Basel, before journeying to Rome. This recognition of the Rhine as a major trade and travel route would suggest that the legend post-dates the shift from the primacy of the Mediterranean for trade and commerce to the north, which Pirenne linked to the rise of Islam in the seventh century.¹ From Cologne, where Ursula received an angelic vision of the martyrdom of the companions, they travelled to Rome, where the majority of the virgins were baptised by Pope Cyriacus, identified as the nineteenth pope after Peter, a native of Britain and with blood relations among the party.² This pope, unknown in the records of the Church, is then alleged to have accompanied the band on their return journey to Cologne, a dereliction of duty which is alleged to have resulted in his name being expunged from the records by the Curia. Returning to Jacobus' dates, in 238 Fabian was pope, and he ruled during 'a period of exceptional peace, prosperity, and growth for the church, Emperor Gordian III (238-44) dropping his predecessor Maximinus' persecution of Christianity and Philip the Arab (244-9) being sympathetic towards it',³ and in 452 the reigning pontiff was Leo I, called 'the Great'.⁴

The martyrdom of Ursula, her now-baptized fiance Aetherius, and the eleven thousand, at Cologne was at the hands of the Hunnish army, commanded by 'Julius'. His kinsmen, Maximus and Africanus, both in the Roman army, had advised him of the approach of the saint and her companions, and all were butchered by his soldiers. Julius was overcome by Ursula's beauty and offered her his hand, but she scorned his attentions, as is fitting in a virgin martyr legend. She died transfixed by an arrow, however, a notably sexual image. The story illustrates well Douglas' interpretation of the dichotomy of body and spirit, where the individual is related to 'the world' (economics, politics, family) through the body, and to God through the spirit.⁵

¹ Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. Bernard Miall, Totawa, N.J., 1980, *passim*.

² Jacobus, trans. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

³ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, Oxford, 1986, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ Bernhard Lang, 'The Sexual Life of the Saints: Towards an Anthropology of Christian Heaven', *Religion*, vol. 17, April 1987, p. 151.

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Ursula rejects her sexuality and the possibility of worldly power, and embraces martyrdom joyfully. Jacobus' account concludes with a brief review of some miracles associated with the shrine of the martyrs at Cologne, and an account of the translation of some relics.¹

Retellings of the legend between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries tended to stick closely to Jacobus' version. Osborn Bokenham, in the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, makes Ursula's father the king of Brittany, not Britain, and Pope Cyriacus likewise a native of Brittany, but otherwise his tale is the same. Delany argues that Bokenham's work is an ecclesiastical answer to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, and observes that 'the story of Thisbe, Chaucer's second tale, narrates the engagement of a young couple, together with the circumstances that prevent the marriage and lead to the couple's death. The same outline constitutes the plot of Bokenham's fourth story, that of Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins'.² This may be relevant in that the *Legendys* is not directly dependent on the *Legenda aurea* for its contents. This is of no value, however, if Bokenham is the author of the anonymous *Gilte Legende*. The Middle English prose *Life of St. Ursula*, found in Huntingdon MS. HM 140, similarly resembles Jacobus (and locates Ursula's home in Britain), although many pseudo-historical elements are missing.³

Other high medieval versions of the legend contain elements absent from Jacobus, and which direct attention to other sources. Christine de Pizan (1365- c.1429), in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, refers only briefly to Ursula:

What else should I tell you, dear friend, in order to fill our City with such a company? May Saint Ursula come with her multitude of eleven thousand virgins, blessed martyrs for the name of Jesus Christ, all of them beheaded after they had been

¹ Jacobus, trans. Ryan, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-59.

² Delany, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

³ G. N. Garmonsway and R. R. Raymo (eds and trans.), 'A Middle-English Prose *Life of St. Ursula*', *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. vol. IX, 1958, pp. 353-61. Garmonsway and Raymo list the following omissions: 'the construction of Ursula's armada, the *mystique* of the sisterhood, the great concourse of spectators from the Continent to Britain to observe its growth and to partake in its sports and chivalric games, the mention of Tiel in Holland (Gelderland) as a port of call, the Curia's lack of sympathy for the sisterhood after Pope 'Ciriacus' had resigned and their wanton deletion of his name from the *Liber Pontificalis*, and, finally, the omission of the catalogue of pilgrim martyrs,' p. 354.

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sent off to be married. They arrived in the land of unbelievers who tried to force them to renounce their faith in God: they chose to die rather than to renounce Jesus Christ their saviour'.¹

This would seem to vindicate Bale's 'rational' explanation of the motivations of the journeying virgins, but adds little to the tale. Caxton's translation has already been mentioned, and Edmund Hatfield, a fifteenth-century monk of Rochester, composed a metrical *Legend*, dedicated to Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, which was printed by Wynkyn de Worde.² This version makes Ursula's father king of Cornwall, and calls him Dionotus, presumably derived from 'Deonotus' which means 'known to God'.³ Britain is under the subjection of Rome, in the person of Maximian; and its rightful ruler has been exiled to Brittany:

Than to recompence this Conan meriedorke,
Maximian conquered the londe of amoricain.⁴

This 'Conan meriedorke' is the historical Conan Meriadec, founder of the ruling dynasty of Brittany, discussed below. This detail suggests a deliberate attempt on Hatfield's part to produce a rendering of the legend which could serve Tudor political purposes. Henry Tudor was Welsh, and he encouraged a revival of the Celtic sovereignty legends of King Arthur, after whom he named his first-born son. Geoffrey of Monmouth, another patriotic Welshman, had in c. 1136 completed an epic 'history' of Britain, the *History of the Kings of Britain*. Most of his material is fictitious, although it is not clear whether Geoffrey was the inventor. He records the conquest

¹ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, foreword Marina Warner, 1983, p. 240.

² Margaret Beaufort was a great patron of learning and commissioned many translations, including romances, saints' lives, and works of mystical theology. She herself worked on a translation of Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, which was published by Pynson in 1504. Wynkyn de Worde printed Walter Hilton's *Scala Perfectionis* for her in 1494, and had an ongoing relationship with her. See Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King's Mother*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 174-84. John Fisher, bishop of Rochester from 1503, was her confessor. See Anne Crawford (ed.), *Letters of the Queens of England 1100-1547*, 1994, p. 147.

³ Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

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of Gaul by Maximianus,¹ his request to Dionotus, Duke of Cornwall, to send wives for his troops, and concludes:

The ships ran the hazard of the seas and for the most part they foundered... The women were either slaughtered by the uncivilized islanders or were sold into slavery. They had fallen in with the execrable army of Wanius and Melga, who on the orders of Gracianus, were killing off those who lived on this coast and in Germany. Wanius was King of the Huns, and Melga king of the Picts.²

This episode is not important in the heroic treatment of Arthur, and could not really be used by Edmund Hatfield, as it would spoil his story. However, his metrical legend reveals an awareness of the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, probably due to his Tudor patronage.³

Before considering the historicity of certain elements of the legend, it remains only to indicate the concrete evidence for the popularity of Ursula's cult and its full acceptance as historical by Church authorities. An extraordinarily beautiful reliquary of St. Ursula was designed by the Flemish artist Hans Memling (b. Bruges 1439) which depicts the events of the pilgrimage.⁴ Angela Merici of Brescia (1470/75-1540) founded the Company of Saint Ursula in 1537. When she set off as a pilgrim 'to the Holy Land in 1524 and to Rome in the following year... [she was] following in the footsteps of Saint Francis and the courageous martyr Ursula'.⁵ Merici, a lowly-born woman known to posterity through a hagiography written by Francesco Landini in 1566, drew inspiration and encouragement from virgin royal saints in particular; and in her study of Merici Gabriella Zarri argues that the cult of Ursula in the late fifteenth century and after became focused on religious

¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 141.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ I am grateful to Professor Sybil Jack of the Department of History at the University of Sydney for alerting me to the political elements in Hatfield's writings.

⁴ Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁵ Gabriella Zarri, 'Ursula and Catherine: The Marriage of Virgins in the Sixteenth Century' in E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (eds), *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, Philadelphia, 1994, p. 244.

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tensions involving women's desires for more active involvement in 'missions and ecclesiastical reform'.¹

Angela Merici's was not the only religious confraternity established under the patronage of the saint. These groups were known as 'the skiffs of Saint Ursula' and their symbol was the ship, which was carried through the streets on her feast day: 'the oldest of these was ...at Cracow. The most famous was naturally at Cologne. In the fifteenth century these guilds became more frequent. Prominent among them was the Scuola di Santo Orsola at Venice'.² Several artists of distinction were commissioned to paint 'Ursula cycles', including Tomaso de Modena's fourteenth century depiction in Treviso, and Vittore Carpaccio's mid-fifteenth century canvases executed for the above mentioned Venetian Scuola.³

From Legend to History: What Really Happened?

Giles Constable has remarked that the modern student of the medieval period frequently is puzzled by the 'the tendency to combine apparently incompatible and inconsistent elements and to separate form and theme, investing ancient forms with modern meanings and presenting ancient themes in modern form'⁴ in medieval art and literature. The legend of Saint Ursula takes place in an imagined late antiquity, a period which medieval people were fascinated by. The ideal of a return to *Romanitas* is powerful as early as the court of Charlemagne, yet even for the scholars of the 'twelfth century Renaissance', antiquity 'meant, not the first century BC, but the great era of Christian Rome in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries...'.⁵ It was from this period that the great Christian monuments of Rome dated: the Basilica of Constantine in the Forum; the basilicas of San Giovanni in Laterano and Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline; and the church of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

² M. Tout, 'The Legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins' in T. F. Tout and James Tait (eds), *Historical Essays*, London, 1902, p. 46.

³ Zarri, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁴ Giles Constable, 'A Living Past: The Historical Environment of the Middle Ages' in Constable, *Culture and Spirituality in Medieval Europe*, 1996, V, p. 60. See also Giles Constable, 'Past and Present in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries' in Constable, *op. cit.*

⁵ Constant J. Mews, 'The Discovery of Antiquity in the Twelfth Century', in *Medieval France and Spain: The Pilgrim Routes to Santiago de Compostela A Handbook*, 2nd edition, Australians Studying Abroad, 1995, p. 80.

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Moreover, late antiquity was a time of persecution of the Church and great heroism on the part of the martyrs. A virgin martyr legend such as that of Ursula fits naturally into such a milieu. However, the history of the development of the legend offers an extraordinary insight into the medieval *mentalité*, well beyond the fantastic and somewhat hackneyed subject matter. At this point it is important to stress the necessity of separating Ursula from the eleven thousand virgins. The earliest mention of Ursula is in *Relatio de Historia sanctarum Agrippinensium virginum*, usually called *Fuit tempore*, from its opening words, usually assigned to the third quarter of the tenth century. The writer, a native of Cologne, doubted the legend but met a 'Count Hoolfus' who had been the ambassador to England at the time of the betrothal of Lady Edith to Otto the Great. During his visit he had visited Canterbury, met Saint Dunstan, the Archbishop, and had heard the story of the martyrs from him.¹

This text is dedicated to Archbishop Gero of Cologne (969-976) and indicates that Dunstan (who died in 988) is still living. However, the marriage of Edith and Otto took place in 929, when Dunstan was a child of four,² so the pseudo-historical detail of *Fuit tempore*, and its invocation of so saintly an authority as Dunstan are intended to soothe Cologne's anxiety regarding the authenticity of its most profitable saint. An awareness of the dubious historicity of the legend is demonstrated in the other early account, *Passio sanctarum undecime millium Virginum*, usually called, from its first words, *Regnante Domino*, which cannot have been written much earlier than 1100'.³ That Ursula is not mentioned before the tenth century is firmly established, and that her establishment as leader of the expedition is even later can be supported by the presence of Pinnosa or Vinnosa, often cited as 'admiral' of the fleet. She does not appear in Jacobus' retelling, but is prominent in earlier versions, such as the eighth or ninth century *Sermo in Natali SS. Virginum XI millium*, which omits Ursula entirely. There are many examples of 'saints', both historical and legendary, becoming associated with particular sites, such as Saint James and Santiago de Compostela. Ursula's connection with Cologne is therefore a familiar device.⁴

The *Sermo in Natali* states that the virgins fled from Britain during the persecution of Diocletian and Maximian, led by Pinnosa, and were martyred by Cologne. This is further supported by an

1 Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

2 Douglas Dales, *Dunstan: Saint and Statesman*, Cambridge, 1988.

3 Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

4 Ursula Hall, *St Andrew and Scotland*, St Andrews, 1994.

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entry from c. 850 in the metrical *Martyrology* of Wandelbert, a monk of Prum:

Tunc numerosa simul Rheni per littora fulgent
Christo virgineis erecta trophaea maniplis
Agrippinae urbi; quarum furor impius olim
Millia mactavit ductricibus inclyta sanctis.¹

The persecution of Diocletian would place the martyrdom in the early fourth century. However, the identity of 'Maximian' is a more fruitful avenue of investigation. Geoffrey of Monmouth identifies Maximian as the imperial pretender Maximus who was finally defeated in 388. He had left Britain in 383 with the entire garrison of the province and went to Gaul. The remnants of his army, under the leadership of Conan Meriadec, stayed in Gaul, where the men took wives and Conan founded a 'long-enduring dynasty'.² That there was settlement of Gaul and Armorica (Brittany) by the British at this time is confirmed by both Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* and Procopius' *De Bello Gothico*, remembering that both these texts are sixth century. Gildas believed that the Anglo-Saxon conquest was the impetus for the settlement, where Procopius attributed it to natural factors such as population growth.³

However, Geoffrey's rather prosaic account contains as little real 'history' as the more extravagant of the high medieval legends. For example, he attributes the martyrdom to the Huns and the Picts, an impossible combination. Caxton's version of the legend suggests that the reigning emperor at the time was Severus Alexander, but he was murdered in 235, three years prior to Jacobus' date of 238.⁴ Curiously, he was succeeded by Maximinus, who may lie behind the legend's 'Maximian'. Because every attempt to identify a historical period or person appears doomed to fail, archaeological evidence becomes crucial in establishing the basis of the legend.

The earliest textual evidence for the martyrdom of the virgins is the so-called 'Clematius inscription', carved c. 400 AD and located in the choir of the church of Saint Ursula at Cologne. The inscription reads:

¹ Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

² Patrick Galliou and Michael Jones, *The Bretons*, Oxford, 1991, p. 131.

³ *ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴ Robert Lee Cleve, *Severus Alexander and the Severan Women*, Los Angeles, 1982, p. xiii.

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The Consul Clematius frequently incited by divine visions and attracted by the renown of the martyrdom of the heavenly virgins, came from the East, and in fulfilment of a vow, restored this church from its foundations at his own cost. Should anyone deposit in this church - where the holy virgins poured out their blood for Christ - any body except that of a virgin, may he know that he will be punished with flames of everlasting fire.¹

This stone is a physical object, and verifies that by the early fifth century there was a tradition of the martyrdom of virgins at Cologne, and that the church dedicated to these martyrs had already fallen into disrepair. This would tend to confirm the earlier, third century, date given by Jacobus and others, and to dismiss the date of 452 as a rationalization by those who were disturbed to find mention of the Huns in the tale.² Reference to physical objects also may clarify why the number of the virgins became fixed at eleven thousand in the tenth century: Farmer notes that this was 'probably through the wrong expansion of an abbreviated text which read "XI MV" into "undecim millia virgines" (= eleven thousand virgins) instead of "undecim martyres virgines" (= eleven virgin-martyrs)'.³

However, in the twelfth century excavations at Cologne revealed the remains of many dead, taken to be the virgin martyrs. These excavations began in 1106, and in 1121 Norbert of Xanten, founder of the Premonstratensian order visited and located relics almost immediately. After 1155 the dig was directed by Rainald of Dassel, 'archbishop of Cologne, Barbarossa's chief minister, and a zealot for the glory of the Church and city'.⁴ It would seem, then, that the motivations of the relic collectors were less than pure. This is further made clear by the extraordinary part played by the revelations of the local mystic, Elizabeth of Schonau. From 1152, she began to have visions which she related to her brother Egbert, later Abbot of Schonau, who wrote them down. Medieval Germany had its own 'Sibyl of the Rhine', Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), an older contemporary of Elizabeth of Schonau, who

¹ Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

² Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas J. Dunlap, 1997, ch. 5, 'The Hunnic Alternative'.

³ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Third Edition, Oxford and New York, 1992, p. 473.

⁴ Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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advised popes and kings.¹ Moreover, Cologne had been associated with prophetic women since the mysterious Veleda of the Bructeri had assisted the Batavian rebel leader Julius Civilis in the first century.²

Elizabeth died in 1165, but the revelations continued to appear; two further books in 1183 and 1187. These were attributed till the nineteenth century to the English monk John the Premonstratensian, but are now believed to have been by the Blessed Hermann, called Hermann Joseph, a monk of Steinfield near Cologne, who died c. 1240.³ The important thing is that the Schonau visions, which purported to explain such inconsistencies as the discovery of two bodies of Ursula, were incompatible with textual accounts, particularly *Regnante Domino*, which was accepted as authoritative by the twelfth century. The net result of the Schonau visions was to increase scepticism about the cult of the saint, although the bones uncovered did encourage translations of relics to a variety of ecclesiastical sites around Europe from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The one fascinating and irrefutable fact was that the collection of bones unearthed at Cologne was so extensive that it was quite in keeping with a mass martyrdom, rather than the eleven virgins which Farmer's reading of the inscriptions would suggest.

Modern investigation of the legend of Saint Ursula commenced with Oskar Schade's *Die Sage von der Heiligen Ursula und den elftausend Jungfrauen*, published in Hannover in 1854. In the mid-nineteenth century it was fashionable to seek the origins of strange religious practices in the pre-Christian traditions of Europe, and Schade identified Ursula with the Germanic goddess Nehalennia, worshipped in Thuringia as Horsel.⁴ He noted that the carrying of a ship was regarded as pagan in medieval Europe, save when it was associated with the cult of Ursula.⁵ Contemporary scholarship gives no credence to Schade's etymologies, and the theory that Ursula

1 Peter Dronke, 'Medieval Sibyls: Their Character and Their *Auctoritas*', *Studi Medievali*, Serie Terza, Fasc. II, 1995, pp. 581-615.

2 Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 211-229 and 247-261.

3 Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 32-3. See also David Herlihy, 'The Family and Religious Ideologies in Medieval Europe', *Journal of Family History*, vol. 12, nos 1-3, pp. 3-17, especially p. 11.

4 W. Levison, *Das Werden der Ursula-Legende*, Cologne, 1928. Garmonsway and Raymo, *op. cit.*, note that 'It is plausible to think that the story has its origin in pagan myth. We might note that the heroine's name, diminutive of the Latin *ursa* "bear", is cognate with the Irish *art* and possibly with the Greek Artemis, the goddess of chastity', note 4, p. 354.

5 Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

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was originally a goddess has all but been abandoned. The Vatican reformed the calendar of the saints in 1969, and Ursula was one of its casualties: 'her feast is no longer in the universal calendar, but is permitted in certain localities'¹ (principally Cologne).

Tout, whose 1902 study is still the best introduction to the history of the legend in English, cautiously concludes that

[t]he early date and authenticity of the Clematian inscription, the evidence of St. Cunibert's Life, of the *Sermo in Natali*, of *Fuit tempore* and *Regnante Domino*, which agree as to a martyrdom of thousands of maidens, though they differ in details, the existence of an office of the Blessed Virgins even before the *Sermo in Natali*, the evidence of early calendars, martyrologies and charters, the finding of so many bodies of girls, point to the likelihood of the massacre before the end of the fifth century of many Christian maidens at Cologne.²

However, it may be valid to argue that the Ursuline cultus was very influential, with worship of the virgins being widespread, although the number of churches dedicated to them was small. This approach locates the significance of the story in elements other than its historicity. The legend of Saint Ursula had many attractive features: the virgin martyr princess, the pathos of her relationship with her fiancé, what Garmonsway and Raymo call 'the mystique of the sisterhood',³ the late antique setting which was redolent with associations for high medieval culture, and also features which might best be described as exotic, such as the presence of the barbarian Huns (and occasionally Picts), and the evocation of foreign lands like Brittany and Germany. Certain versions of the legend, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Edmund Hatfield most clearly, have employed the tale for broadly 'political' reasons, which may have been apparent to their audiences.

High medieval women (such as Angela Merici), seeking to serve Christ more fully and to escape the confinement of their lives, found in adventurous female saints (such as Ursula) role models. Her example could empower them to defy authority, paternal, husbandly and ecclesiastical, in realizing their spiritual ambitions. Ursula, though ultimately obedient, chaste and pious, enjoyed a freedom which was enviable. Dumont connects this freedom with her world-renunciation: in 'pre-modern societies... 'individualism'

¹ Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

² Tout, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

³ Garmonsway and Raymo, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

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as a value was only known to, and practiced by, the world-renouncers... Although not truly autonomous in the modern sense, they enjoyed the privilege of moral choice and innovation. They were free'.¹ For those readers of and listeners to the legend who were not seeking to emulate the saint, messages were conveyed about the power of the martyrs to intercede on behalf of the sinner, and to work miracles in the name of Christ. While it is easy to appreciate the post-Reformation concern for historicity; and to applaud those who have struggled to identify the few nuggets of historical truth contained in the legend in answer to its challenge; it only remains to note that scholarly interests in the late twentieth century are more likely to appreciate the legend of Saint Ursula anew, simply as a narration which contains much useful information about how medieval people understood the nature of God, the world and the people in it.

¹ Quoted in Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 152.