

## ***Nepantla* in The Ninth Century: The Monastery of Redon and The Frankish-Breton Borderlands**

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### ***Abstract***

*Medieval scholars write often about frontiers, but infrequently about borderlands. In this essay I bring together medieval studies and borderland studies, specifically the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, to read anew the Gesta Sanctorum Redonensium (Deeds of the Holy Men of Redon). This late ninth century text describes the establishment (in 832) and early history of the monastery of Redon, which took place within multiple, overlapping, and contested borders. By translating Anzaldúa's nepantla into a ninth-century idiom, I read the Gesta as a borderlands text, written by and for residents of the Frankish-Breton borderlands. The fluidity of this borderlands region, I argue, fostered the conflict and becoming essential to nepantla. This enabled the monks to formulate a transgressive identity, and community, that worked around and between and sometimes against both secular and ecclesiastical power.*

**Keywords:** Redon; borderlands; Anzaldúa; monasticism; medieval

*In fact, borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.*

– Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

One day, around the middle of the ninth century, a monk named Riwen left his monastery of Redon (in Brittany), in the company of some of his brethren, to work drying hay. They crossed the river Vilaine, which flowed past the community just to the east, in a small boat and worked in the fields until midday. At that point, Riwen begged leave to return to the monastery, for he was also a priest, and he had yet to celebrate the Eucharist that day. The other monks consented, and Riwen began combing the banks of the river for the boat. Or so he thought. Miraculously, not only did he reach the opposite side of the river, but he did so without getting wet. His crossing took place not by boat but by walking on the surface of the water. For this pious monk, the river was neither boundary nor barrier (Smith, 2002: 181; Brett, 1989: 150-153). Riwen's crossing was miraculous because it was transgressive. Even though the monks could penetrate the border formed by the river, they still needed a boat to do so; all of them, that is, except for Riwen.

The Vilaine was not the only border present in ninth-century Brittany. The monks of Redon lived in a bounded world, in a borderlands landscape whose features are recognizable when viewed from the present. The Vilaine river, which starts in Juvigné (Mayenne) and flows southwest until it joins the Atlantic, anchors the region around Redon. In the early ninth century, two polities opposed each other on either side of the Vilaine. Starting on the west bank, and stretching across the entirety of the Armorican peninsula, the Breton dukes (sometimes kings) held sway. Across the river from them lay

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the vastness of the Carolingian empire, in the 830s ruled by Louis the Pious (d.840), Charlemagne's only surviving son (Brett, et al., 2022: 18). Wendy Davies characterizes the region in which Redon sat as "shape-changing." She explains that it was "alternatively held by the Carolingian nobility, integrated into the Seine/Loire Carolingian kingdom, dismembered, re-established, handed over to the Breton ruler Erispoë, assigned to his cousin Salomon, and extended further east into Neustria, before it (or some of it) is finally handed over to the Loire Vikings in 921" (Davies, 2018: 306). There were other borders in this region as well: the linguistic border between Breton and Frankish and Latin speakers; the religious borders of multiple episcopal jurisdictions in the two Christian polities; the administrative and physical borders of local land division, whether Breton or Frankish; and the river itself, of course (Brett, et al., 2022: 18; Davies, 2018).

It was into this landscape of overlapping and often contested borders, at the confluence of the Vilaine and the river Oust, that another monk, Conwoion (d.868), led a group of like-minded men in 832 to establish a religious community. Redon was the result of their efforts, and the borderlands context in which it sat profoundly shaped the fortunes of the monastery. Borderlands are "anchored in spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and the ambiguities of power" (Hämäläinen and Truett, 2011: 338). In this essay I propose to understand Redon not from the perspective of empires or kingdoms or lordship but instead from a position grounded in the borderlands region in which the monks lived. To do this I adapt Gloria Anzaldúa's visionary work on borderlands as sites of identity formation to a ninth-century context. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa advanced the notion that "borderland" serves as "a metaphor for all types of crossings – between geopolitical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations, and the crossing necessary to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts" (Cantú and Hurtado, 2012: 6). These crossings need not be confined to the border between the United States and Mexico in which Anzaldúa lived.

By translating this borderlands approach to the study of Redon in the ninth century, I reinterpret secular and ecclesiastical power relationships, perhaps the most significant of the region's borders on an everyday basis. To do so, I read the *Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium* (*Deeds of the Holy Men of Redon*, hereafter *Gesta*) through a borderlands lens. Sometime between 868 and 888, a monk who had been raised in Redon wrote this text, in which he both created and articulated the identity of the monastery and the brethren who inhabited it within the specific socio-cultural, economic, and political context of the border region between Breton- and Frankish-controlled areas (Brett, 1989: 1-11, 144-45; Brett, et al., 2021: 120). What emerges is a group of monks, led by their abbot, who not just navigated local power relationships, they transgressed and transcended them.

### *Mapping Borderlands Across Time and Space*

Contests over territory and resources, the quest for lordship and followers, the expansion and contraction of polities, and similar analytic categories form the backbone of early medieval history. Scholars have assessed the early history of Redon in the context of Frankish-Breton political relationships, using traditional frameworks such as the expansion of the Carolingian polity and the resistance to that expansion by the Breton elite (Brett, et al., 2022: 100-113; Brett, 2013; Smith 1992; Davies 1988). Those studies that seek to highlight uniquely Breton features do so in contrast to a supposed Frankish norm or to Brittany's place in a world conceived of as Carolingian (Tonnerre, 1992). An important exception to this is Julia M. H. Smith who, in "Confronting Identities: The Rhetoric and Reality of a Carolingian Frontier", argued that the *Gesta* described the foundation and early fortunes of "a richly-endowed community that was neither Breton nor Frank" but rather one that identified as *milites Christi* (Smith, 2002: 182). Smith thus usefully complicates the rhetorical



construction of Redon while working with traditional identity categories as well as within traditional analytical frameworks of empire and frontier.

Recently, however, some scholars have begun to question the long entanglement of medieval studies with empire and colonization and with domination and subjugation, although not without critique (Pohl and Kramer, 2022: 3-8). This impulse comes from several directions, including indigenous, borderlands, postcolonial, and subaltern studies, and travels alongside the “global turn” pursued by some scholars (Andrews, 2020). As Tarren Andrews (Bitterroot Salish) notes, one important component of the path forward, away from and overcoming the limitations and harm caused by older epistemologies, is methodology, where indigenous approaches inspire indigenous and non-indigenous scholars alike (Andrews, 2020: 13; Cleaves, 2020; Otaño-García, 2020). Anzaldúa, who described her work as “about questioning, affecting, and changing the paradigms that govern prevailing notions of reality, identity, creativity, activism, spirituality, race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Anzaldúa, 2015: 2) offers an alternative framework for interrogating familiar texts.

Anzaldúa used the word *nepantla* to describe the experience of feeling torn between different and conflicting (and sometimes contradictory) ways of being (Upton, 2019: 135-36; Scott and Tuana, 2017: 6-9; Anzaldúa 2015; Anzaldúa, 2012: 100; Anzaldúa and Keating, 2002: 1). This is, as she wrote, “a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing.... It is very awkward, uncomfortable and frustrating to be in that Nepantla because you are in the midst of transformation” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 100). Furthermore, I emphasize that *nepantla* was “Anzaldúa’s place of transformation, of critical thinking, of new perspectives that arise out of conflict” (Radlwimmer 2011: 19). Conflict, overt, implied, and/or anticipated, suffuses the pages of the *Gesta*. The resolution to those conflicts manifested as the transgression of efforts to force the monks to act within traditional non-monastic boundaries of power, with the monks undergoing their own process of becoming, a second point of emphasis. Here too the monastic way of life facilitates our identification of the *nepantla* that they occupy, for they “live an in-between life” (Ortega, 2008: 79). The borders of secular and religious authority intruded upon the ideal of monastic enclosure and removal from the world; and at times, as when they made themselves a focal point for cultic activity, the monks positioned themselves in between the world and the haven they founded their monastery to be.

Other scholars have used Anzaldúa’s writings to interrogate regions outside of the borderlands that inspired and shaped her work, including metaphorically (Bornstein-Gómez, 2010). As Anne Donadey reminds us, however, this extension to other borderland environments is not without concerns about the appropriateness of doing so. To counter the critiques, Donadey returns to Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking first book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, to argue that Anzaldúa herself anticipated such an application of her work (Donadey, 2007: 23). In 2011, Norma Cantú edited a special edition of the journal *Signs* dedicated to the international reach of Anzaldúa’s scholarship, “across many miles and in many cultural contexts” (Cantú, 2011: 2). Romana Radlwimmer and Ewa Majewska each contributed essays that used an Anzaldúan framework to interrogate European borderlands. Radlwimmer hears echoes of Anzaldúa in the European Union. Despite claims of a borderless society, Radlwimmer finds that informal and unspoken borders permeate everyday life (Radlwimmer, 2011). Majewska seeks to reconcile her experiences in eastern Europe with Anzaldúa’s on the US-Mexico border, but wonders, like Donadey, if such a comparison is possible. She concludes that the embodiment, positionality, and life experiences that shaped Anzaldúa indeed can be found, and interrogated, in multiple places around the world (Majewska, 2011). In their introduction to the fourth

edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Norma Cantú and Aida Hurtado echo this sentiment as they document the global reach of scholarship inspired by Anzaldúa (Cantú, 2012: 9-11).

But the global borderlands cited by Cantú and Hurtado, as well as those explored by Radlwimmer, Donadey, and others inspired by the powerful writing of Anzaldúa, exist in the present. Rarely have scholars of Europe's Middle Ages sought to perform a similar analysis, as medieval historians work more comfortably with the older frameworks of frontier and march (Jamroziak and Stöber, 2013: 6-7; Wolfram, 2001). Encouragingly, scholars have begun to bring together borderlands studies and medieval studies in recent years. Lindy Brady's study of the Mercian-Welsh borderland in early medieval England depends specifically on Anzaldúa and other postcolonial scholars. Brady describes a landscape where contingency and negotiation, not constant and active conflict, characterized people's everyday lives (Brady, 2017). Nahir I. Otaño-García's reading of Chaucer uncovers border making at work in the General Prologue. By delineating the borders of Europe far to the south and east of England, Chaucer turns it "into an open, borderless nation within Europe, that is free from the dangers posed by those that are supposedly threatening Europe" (Otaño-García, 2020: 40). England's safety is assured by its geographic remove not just from external threats but also from the unpredictability of the borderlands formed by the bordering present in Chaucer.

Bringing Anzaldúa and Redon together in a similar manner requires a shift in the frame of reference, from her intensely personal and often painful account to the collective world of an early medieval monastery (Keating and González-López, 2011: 1-3). To accomplish this shift we can understand the *Gesta* as a text in terms approximating Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Both authors were born and raised in a borderlands region. Both experienced the unequal power relations that characterized that region, and both were members of groups who shared their experiences. Anzaldúa wrote from her own personal perspective but extended that perspective to include others in similar life circumstances. The author of the *Gesta* inverted that structure, writing about the larger group (his monastic community), which of course included himself. Both texts are statements about identity, the specific kind of identity forged in a borderlands context, one that facilitates the transgression of expectations, boundaries, and borders.

As a vehicle for identity formation, the *Gesta* is just as entangled, ambiguous, and malleable as the borderlands region in which its author lived. It is at once a familiar text, containing vignettes that used topoi common to similar medieval texts. But this did not make the text derivative, for with them the *Gesta* author "guided their [the audience's] expectations, making the message easier to digest" (Kramer and Novokhatko, 2020: 219). That message was one of monastic identity, and the *Gesta* author delivered it most successfully when he illuminated familiar themes with even more familiar local details, anchoring the text squarely within the Frankish-Breton borderlands. The *Gesta* did not so much contain Redon's history from the 830s and 840s as construct it, while simultaneously co-constructing the identity of the auditors, the author's brethren, in the later half of the ninth century (Kramer and Novokhatko, 2020: 217, 221).

Even though only a few decades separated the events described by the *Gesta* author and the time of its composition, much had changed for the monks of Redon by the 860s (Smith, 1992: 86-115). They had successfully carved out a place for themselves in their borderlands landscape, natural and human, secular and sacred (Davies, 1988: 188-200). From that perspective, the *Gesta* author documented the *nepantla*, the transformation through struggle and conflict, underwent by the monks who founded the monastery. But as Anzaldúa noted, *nepantla* is not a finite process, but an ongoing and continuous state of identity formation (Anzaldúa, 2015). That identity, forged in the early decades of Redon's existence, continued to develop in response to the new challenges that the brethren faced after 860



or so. The material included in the *Gesta*, therefore, also reflects the “anxieties of a monastic community left increasingly insecure” (Smith 2001: 381) by the events of the final decades of the ninth century.

*Monasteries and Early Medieval Border(land)s*

In thinking about monasteries as transgressive spaces, I borrow an approach from historians of gender in the early Middle Ages. When considering the development of monasticism in Late Antiquity, Albrecht Diem, for example, suggests that both the male and female monastic experience “offered relatively nongendered ways of life within societies that were otherwise profoundly shaped by gender differences” (Diem, 2013: 432). In her study of the monastery of Fulda, Redon’s contemporary, under the leadership of Hrabanus Maurus (d.842), Lynda Coon describes the Carolingian monastery as a queer space. She argues that the prohibition against sexual relations denied the primacy of opposite-sex relationships that defined secular gender roles in the ninth century (Coon, 2010: 249). Just as monasteries transgressed gender expectations, so too Redon’s monks transgressed the strictures of institutionalized power, facilitated by their position in the Franco-Breton borderlands.

An Anzaldúan perspective focuses on individuals and their experiences in a borderlands environment. Those individuals “who are exposed to multiple social worlds” become able “to navigate and challenge monocultural and monolingual conceptions of social reality” (Cantú and Hurtado, 2012: 7). Unlike approaches that derive from concepts of march and frontier, however, an Anzaldúan reading of medieval sources dispenses with the binaries that have become so comfortable to scholars of the ninth century. Instead, I acknowledge that contingency and positionality shaped the actions of Redon’s monks, as well as their historical memory, recorded in the *Gesta*. Franks and Bretons, monks and bishops populate the pages of the work of that anonymous monk, but “there are no absolute ‘sides’ in conflict, but rather, contingent adversaries whose perceptions and perspectives can be understood by examining (and empathizing with) their perspectives” (Cantú and Hortado, 2012: 8). Redon’s monks successfully navigated and negotiated the mutable, labile borderlands world that they inhabited, creating a space for themselves despite, not because of, the networks of secular and sacred power that surrounded them.

It was not unusual in the ninth century for Frankish monks to compose texts like the *Gesta*, although the genre in which they wrote differed. Fulda, a monastic foundation in the eastern part of the Frankish world that was roughly contemporary with Redon, furnishes a comparative example. At Fulda, hagiography, the sacred biography (*vita*) of illustrious members of the community (almost always abbots), was the preferred genre. As Janneke Raaijmakers has shown in her study of Fulda’s textual tradition, the authors of these *vitae* did more than describe the lives that their subjects lived. These texts were “social efforts on the part of the monks to create meaning and unity” (Raaijmakers, 2012: 8). Inspired by literary criticism and postmodernism, Raaijmakers argues that these expressions of community were perilous and unstable. The monks of Fulda, by continuing to write over the course of the ninth century, constantly created and recreated their monastic identity, responding to developments both inside and outside the monastic enclosure. The *Gesta* served the same purpose for Redon, although it is a singular text. Its author recorded stories of sanctity, holiness, and miraculous occurrence as they related to the position of the brethren relative to the agents of power structures that sought to constrain the monks’ activities.

Conwoion founded Redon in an area of contested and competitive Frankish and Breton lordship, where Breton, Frankish, and Latin speakers all vied for secular and spiritual prominence. The monk

who wrote the *Gesta*, which relates the challenges and successes of Redon's inmates, was an oblate, someone who had been raised and educated by the monastery since childhood (de Jong, 1996). By his own admission he knew many of the protagonists in the stories that he shared, monks "who brought me up from my boyhood and taught me in the knowledge of God" (Brett, 1989: 144-145). He either witnessed the events he described or inherited the knowledge about their occurrence from those who did. He was a borderlands resident, therefore, conscious of his borderlands positionality, and his work reflected the lived experience of the Frankish-Breton borderlands, both his personally and the monastery's collectively. It also shaped that experience, and was a "narrative which, as a product of the same kind of communal thinking that it hoped to catalyze, instilled a sense of togetherness among the audience (Kramer and Novokhatko, 2022: 210).

The *Gesta* author described his brethren (and by implication himself) as transgressive borderland inhabitants in two distinct ways. In the first, they negotiated the complicated power dynamics between themselves and entrenched powerholders at both the top and bottom of the socio-political hierarchy. In their dealing with emperors and dukes, but also elites at the local level, they experienced, sometimes through conflict, the in-betweenness and constant state of becoming of *nepantla*. Conwoion and the other monks elicited support from Frankish and Breton rulers without becoming beholden to them, allowing Redon to occupy a space in between the two neighboring polities. They also overcame resistance from their landholding Breton neighbors. Aided by a series of miraculous events, Redon's monks maintained a position simultaneously within and outside of local networks of power. Secondly, they took advantage of the fluidity and dynamism of their borderlands location to circumvent institutionalized religious authority by promoting Redon as a new center of cultic activity, thus reshaping the sacred landscape of the Frankish-Breton borderlands.

#### *Secular Power in the Borderlands*

Borderlands frequently are places of contested power, and the same is true for the Frankish-Breton borderlands in the ninth century. For Anzaldúa, such conflicts were characteristic of the *nepantlisma* undertaken by borderlands residents, who can thereby embrace "fluidity, ambiguity, and the possibilities for transcending strict categorization" (Upton, 2019: 135-36) in search of their own identity. From its very founding, Redon's monks faced resistance at multiple levels of authority, marking them as intruders upon or outsiders within the region (Smith, 2001: 367-371). At the top of the secular hierarchy, they successfully solicited assistance and recognition, despite resistance from other powerful elites. On a local level, they asserted themselves against those with competing landed interests, aided by a series of miraculous interventions. Taken together, their conflict and struggle with secular authority formed a fundamental part of their *nepantla* while they happened in the 830s, and offered comfort and advice to the community as it continued to form and re-form its identity later in the ninth century.

The scenes in the *Gesta* where Conwoion interacted with Breton and Carolingian rulers were of the utmost importance to establishing both the legitimacy of Redon and the relationship between the monastic house and the two most powerful secular rulers in the area, Nominoe and Louis the Pious. The author of the *Gesta* presented parallel encounters that shared three common elements. In each case, Conwoion and his monks sought an audience with the ruler, a local notable interfered and tried to turn the ruler against the monks and their foundation, and then the monks prevailed against the structures of secular power that sought to constrain them. They managed to wring concessions from Breton and Frank alike without committing themselves fully to either power. This removed the monks from the typical machinations of the landed elite and emphasized to both Bretons and Carolingians their impotency in the face of the claims of Redon.



In Brett's edition of the *Gesta*, the interview with Nominoe is Book One, Chapter 1 (I.1). The manuscript that contains the *Gesta* begins imperfectly, so the first extant chapter is not the original first chapter. Nevertheless, very early in the text the abbot sent Louhemel, one of his monks and a "suitable and faithful man" (*idoneum atque fidelem*) to meet with the Breton ruler (*principem Britanniae*). This took place when "these servants of God were still novices", that is, not long after the establishment of the monastery, when "many enemies threatened them from around and wished to hinder the holy work that they had begun" (Brett, 1989: 106-107). That threat came primarily from a machtiern named Illoc, whose family held land in the area around Redon. When he objected to the monks' presence on what he considered to be his land, the Breton ruler, in an emotional response that began "with exceeding anger", which was "transported into a great rage", berated Illoc, calling him "wicked" (*impius*) an "enemy of God" (*inimice Dei*) (Brett, 1989: 108-109).

The system of granting, holding, and inheriting land determined the boundaries of authority and action in the ninth century. Conwoion found himself, it seems, ensnared in a local land dispute from the very beginning of Redon's foundation. Medieval monasteries supported their right to the land on which they sat by means of a written instrument called a charter. The foundation charter of Redon, that is, the document that validates its existence, came from a machtiern named Ratulus, who himself may have disputed with Illoc's family as well (de Courson, 1863: 1, Davies, 1988, 26). It is easy to read the meeting between Louhemel and Nominoe simply as the confirmation of the charter in favor of Redon and against Illoc, but instead I would emphasize the ability of the monks to navigate their way around and through the bordering of their world on a local level.

The author of the *Gesta* followed a similar pattern when he described the encounters between Conwoion and the Frankish ruler Louis the Pious. Instead of confining his narrative to one chapter, he presents four different meetings (or attempted meetings) with the emperor across the final four chapters of Book One (I.8-I.11). Nonetheless, the pattern remains the same, with the monks ultimately triumphant over other local elites who would attempt to confound them. Perhaps as a testament to the greater status of Louis, this time Conwoion himself traveled from Redon to the Limousin to meet with the Frankish emperor. There he met with opposition from both Count Ricowinus of Nantes and Rainarius, Bishop of Vannes, who previously had been Conwoion's ecclesiastical superior. Again it seems that the ambiguity of early medieval landholding, which often generated multiple claimants for the same territory, motivated the antagonism of what the *Gesta* author called the "opponents and enemies" (*contrarii et aduersarii*) of the monks (Brett, 1989: 132-133). Ricowinus was new to the region in the 830s, coming most likely from the Rhineland to serve as count after the rebellion by and dispossession of the previous holder of that title, Lambert, in 834/5 (Smith, 1992: 84). Ricowinus asserted his own newly won lordship in the region by countering the claims of the monks. Rainarius's motivation most likely also stemmed from his local situation, where he vied for control with Counts Wido of Vannes and Rorigo of Poutrecet, both of whom Louis held in high regard (Smith, 1992: 76).

Just as Nominoe had, Louis too grew angry after local magnates objected to the monks' petition, but unlike the Breton ruler, Louis directed his anger at Conwoion, who he immediately ordered out of his presence. The same summary dismissal happened the second time Conwoion attempted to meet with Louis. This time, the emperor's rebuttal was so hasty that Redon's abbot couldn't even deliver the gifts that he had brought for Louis. Conwoion's fortune changed on his third visit. This time, Conwoion had company in the form of Breton allies, including Worworet, a Breton emissary from Nominoe, and two Breton bishops, Hermor of Aleth and Felix of Quimper. Kindness replaced anger in the emperor's heart, and Louis donated land and resources to Redon. With a description of a fourth



meeting, the *Gesta* author brought Book 1 to a close on a positive note for the monks (Brett, 1989: 136-141). This final encounter took place during a time of increased tensions between the Franks and the Bretons, during which a Frankish count, Gonfred, harassed Redon locally, much as Breton *machtierns* had in Chapter I.1. Louis sided with Conwoion against his own count just as Nominoe had with Louhemel against Illoc, and the abbot returned with yet more territory (Brett, 1989: 140-141).

While the monk who wrote the *Gesta* attributed Louis's changed attitude towards Conwoion and the monks of Redon to divine assistance, at no point does he claim that anything miraculous occurred. This changes when he relays the efforts of local elites to interfere with the monastery. It was at the local level that the monks encountered the borders and boundaries of secular power in the ninth century the most frequently and immediately. The *machtierns* who controlled landed resources, and the people who lived on and worked them, on a local level were fiercely independent, and their presence in the immediate vicinity of the new foundation made them formidable opponents (Brett et al., 2022: 90; Smith 1992: 28-32; Davies 1988: 163-187). The miraculous interventions described by the *Gesta* author validate both the monastery's existence and its transgression of local borders.

Illoc, the "enemy of God and hater of monks" (Brett, 1989: 1-8-109) from I.1 reappears in I.5. The hostile *machtiern* and his family formulated a plan that called for either eviction or death for the monks of Redon, most likely as part of the same dispute that caused the his outburst in front of Nominoe. The miraculous healing of a tenant who had been brought to Redon (the *Gesta* author does not indicate whether of Redon or of Illoc) named Ioworet frightened Illoc into reconsidering (Brett, 1989: 120-123). After being healed, the author explains that Ioworet lived "joined together" (*ingiter*) with the monks from that point forward (Brett, 1989: 122-123). By framing the story of his sudden affliction and miraculous cure with Illoc's abortive plan for violence against the monks, the *Gesta* author establishes a connection between the two individuals. The work that Ioworet performed for the monks symbolically transferred his tenancy to them and, given the dispute between Redon and Illoc, away from the *machtiern*, bolstering their claims to the contested land.

Illoc disappears from the *Gesta* after this incident, although a later charter suggests that he eventually made peace (*fecerunt pacem*) with the monastery (de Courson, 1863: 66). His family was not so easily deterred, and his nephew Hincant (also styled a *machtiern*) continued the struggle against the monks. The story that the *Gesta* author relates in I.6 occurred at the same time (*paene eo tempore*) as the conflict with Illoc (and, presumably, his plan to destroy Redon, with Hincant a likely participant). One day during this contentious time, Hincant arrived at Redon, demanding that the abbot buy his sword, threatening to exert himself against the monks if Conwoion refused. The abbot in fact refused, and Hincant left "with many threats and arrogant words" (Brett, 1989: 124-125). As he crossed the Oust River, just west of Redon, another miracle protected the monks. The *machtiern* suffered a wound in his foot (the author provided no details about how and by whom) so severe that he died in agony (*tormentis*) three days later (Brett, 1989: 124-125).

Illoc and Hincant were not the only *machtierns* who resented Redon's presence among local structures of power or who sought to get rid of them. In I.7, the *Gesta* author tells of the ill-fated actions of two other related Breton *machtierns* Ristweten and Tredoc. (Brett, 1989: 126-131). As it did with Illoc, property and inheritance again lay at the heart of another conflict when one Ristweten began a dispute with the monastery over land he believed to be his. Ristweten interrupted a dispute settlement with tenants, presided over by Conwoion and Louhemel, claiming that they wrongly possessed his inheritance and eventually accepting a payment of 20 *solidi*, which he received at Redon the next day. As he departed Tredoc, confronted him, accusing him of "selling our inheritance" and





threatening violence against the monks (Brett, 1989: 128-129). Ristweten then admitted in confidence to his relative that his negotiations had been a façade and that his only concession had been to swear a vow, which, unlike the 20 *solidi*, he had no intention of keeping. Soon thereafter, in an unrelated conflict, the Franks miraculously (or so the *Gesta* author interpreted it) killed both machtierns and, equally miraculously, Conwoion subsequently recovered the 20 *solidi* along with (presumably) undisputed rights to the property in question (Brett, 1989: 128-131).

Once again, the *Gesta* author describes the labile nature of power on a local level, which was subject to discussion rather than statute. The conversation between Conwoion and Ristweten was not about who had a stronger claim to the land, but rather a negotiation in order, as Conwoion reportedly put it, “to see whether we will have harmony or conflict” (Brett, 1989: 126-127). Ristweten chose conflict, as did Illoc and Hincant. The give-and-take of Frankish and Breton power relationships takes on a greater significance when viewed from the perspective of those who lived both within and between them, for the contingency experienced by the monks of Redon magnified the disruptive effect that borderlands have on formal power arrangements. The monks occupied a tenuous and ambiguous position, one that, given the threats from local machtierns, threatened both their foundation and their lives. The monks of Redon experienced firsthand the conflicts that catalyzed *nepantla*, and became *nepantleras*, “continuously constructing [their] identities in the ‘cracks between worlds’” (Upton, 2019: 136), here meaning the worlds of secular power, their monastic world, and the porous border between the mundane and the spiritual that made the miraculous possible.

#### *The Sacred Landscape of the Borderlands*

*Nepantla* has two interrelated aspects – conflict and becoming – that are never truly independent. If we can see the conflictual more clearly in the tensions that existed between the monks of Redon and secular power, we can understand their becoming best through their relationship with ecclesiastical power. Redon sat in a borderlands region not just with respect to secular authority, but religious authority as well. Unlike other monasteries that were founded on the borders of Frankish control, Redon was not a Christian outpost in a non-Christian wilderness. Irish and British missionaries had converted Brittany long before the ninth century, and the Armorican peninsula boasted other, older monastic foundations. Bishops enjoyed a longstanding presence here as well, and despite being nominally subject to the authority of the archbishop of Tours, in practice they functioned independently (Davies, 1988: 24-28).

The religious borders that encompassed Redon, then, were the lines of authority that defined the Christian world in the ninth century. As Brett, Edmonds, and Russell point out, most of the episcopal authority in the region was Frankish rather than Breton (Brett, et al., 63-64). Of these, the most important were the bishoprics of Vannes, Rennes, Nantes, and Tours. In a sacred landscape dominated overwhelmingly by Frankish ecclesiastical interests, the monks of Redon looked both to co-opt existing cultic resources and to acquire spiritual protection greater than that available to local bishops. Moreover, since the probable composition dates for the *Gesta* overlaps with an effort by Breton bishops to free themselves from Frankish authority, the text affirms Redon’s ninth-century *nepantla*, their time of becoming, in the context of this episcopal jurisdictional conflict.

The episcopal authority upon which Redon relied came from the holy bodies of two long-dead bishops, Hypotemius and Marcellinus. The acquisition of these relics was important enough that the *Gesta* author, who closed out Book I with Conwoion’s eventual success with Louis, placed them in the final chapters of Book II, establishing a rhetorical equivalency between the two. The presence of the holy dead was not unique to Redon, of course. But thinking about Redon as a borderlands

monastery forces a reconsideration of precisely which saints they acquired, and what those acquisitions might mean. Claiming, or creating, cultic sites was the spiritual equivalent of exercising lordship over property, which allows us to read Redon's acquisitions alongside their struggles with the local *macht*tierns.

The first saint to arrive in Redon was Hypotemius, whom the *Gesta* author calls a bishop of Angers. Angers was a diocese firmly within Frankish territory, over 100 km almost due east of the monastery. Conwoion happened to visit the city with Louhemel and another monk, and they told their host of their desire to acquire the relics of a saint for their monastery, someone "who could be their patron and defender" (Brett, 1989: 170-171). Heldewald, the person with whom they lodged, informed them of the resting place of the former bishop, and helped them plan to acquire his remains.

This plan involved sneaking into the church where the body lay, quietly removing the heavy stone that covered the tomb, and escaping the city undetected to carry Hypotemius back to Redon. Each step required a miracle, and the successful completion of the theft revealed the saint's approval of this change to his place or repose. As the monk who wrote the *Gesta* put it, instead of being smuggled out clandestinely, Hypotemius "brought us the protection of his holy body" (Brett, 1989: 196-197). The trio of monks made their way back to Redon, and Conwoion sent the other two ahead to prepare an entry procession for Hypotemius, while he stayed in a place called *Langon* with the relics. Word spread throughout what the *Gesta* author called "the province" (*prouinciam*), and a "great number of people" turned out to escort the saint to his new home (Brett, 1989: 172-175). The monks' acquisition paid off immediately, for Hypotemius got right to work, healing a young girl who touched his bier as the monks carried him into the monastery. Once installed, Redon's holy intercessor continued to "reveal himself by great virtues", meaning the strength of the miraculous cures he effected (Brett, 1989: 174-175).

Once installed at Redon, Hypotemius performed two miracles that quickly established the authenticity and power of the new cultic site. In the first instance, he assisted a member of the monastic community, the monk and priest Iarnhitin, who suffered from a fever. The erstwhile resident of Angers appeared to the brother in a dream, identified himself as the saint to whom Iarnhitin was particularly devoted, and promised a miraculous cure to him and promised the same "to all who call on my name" (Brett, 1989: 198-99). Iarnhitin awoke to find his fever gone. The second miracle benefitted a visitor to the monastery. Fighting between Charles the Bald (d.877), king of western Francia after Louis's death, and Lambert, count of Nantes displaced one Gauslin, abbot of the monastery of St.-Maur in Anjou. He soon began to suffer from the same fever-inducing malady that had afflicted Iarnhitin. He sought and received access to Hypotemius's relics, although he had to be carried, and that same night, as he began to fall asleep next to the body of the holy bishop, he started awake, stood up, and found himself cured. After four months in Redon Gauslin left, with a promise to install and celebrate the feast of St. Hypotemius annually for the rest of his life upon his return to Anjou (Brett, 1989: 202-203).

By translating Hypotemius from Angers to Redon, the monks accomplished more than simply acquiring the relics of a saint. They stole the cult as well, and transferred the holy power of the bishop from the Frankish see of Angers to the monastery (Geary, 1990). Pilgrims who sought Hypotemius's aid now traveled to Redon instead of Angers, and the *Gesta* author provides more evidence of the bishop's potency to both teach and strengthen the monastery in chapters III.4 and III.5. Redon's position in the Frankish-Breton borderlands facilitated the monks' ability to draw upon their ambiguous place within episcopal networks of power and to enhance the prestige of their monastery by spreading the cult of St. Hypotemius outside of their region. These stories supported Redon by



amplifying the faith of the monks, but also, through their transmission, both heightened its holy reputation in the region and promoted its newly established cultic site.

Redon's monks escaped the constraints of living bishops not just by acquiring Hypotemius, but also by ranging farther afield to acquire the relics of St. Marcellinus, a pope who was martyred under Diocletian in 304. The pope, of course, is also the bishop of Rome, so by securing his relics the brethren augmented their access to episcopal power and patronage. Unlike his adventure in Angers, this time Conwoion needed no subterfuge or divine intervention, for he was sent to Rome by Nominoe on a diplomatic embassy to resolve a local episcopal conflict. While there, the abbot secured the body (*corpus*) of Marcellinus. They (the abbot and the holy corpse) returned to Redon without incident, a scene that the *Gesta* author wrote to parallel the arrival of Hypotemius. This time, Nominoe and other elites came to Redon to welcome the saint, who didn't need to perform a miracle immediately to prove to everyone his sacred power. Miracles did occur, of course, and the monastic author devoted the first three chapters of Book III to them.

Marcellinus's reputation at Redon eventually reached back to Rome itself, but he also worked closer to home. In Redon itself, Marcellinus cured an oblate named Mutan. Unable to pray aloud, Mutan prayed silently for Marcellinus to lift his affliction, which he did (Brett, 1989: 192-195). Just as Hypotemius had, Marcellinus also interacted with visitors to the monastery, in one case Britoc, a refugee from in-fighting at the northern Breton monastery of Lehon. While there for what the *Gesta* author calls a "long time" (*diu in monasterio*), he became seriously ill. He was tended to by the monks, and one night while he was sleeping Britoc experienced a vision of three saints: Martin of Tours, Hilary of Poitiers, and Samson of Dol. They informed him that they were there to visit their master (*magistrum nostrum*), Marcellinus (Brett, 1989: 194-197). Their visit seems to have been the point of including Britoc's story, for he died the next morning.

Those names bore great significance in the ninth century. Tours was nominally the metropolitan authority for all of the bishops in Brittany, Poitiers lay just inside the Frankish border to the southeast of Redon, and Dol was the preeminent bishopric in Brittany proper, with aspirations to metropolitan status itself. Placing themselves under the authority of Marcellinus was not (just) a statement about the importance of the papacy but rather about Redon, in the context of the lines of episcopal authority in this border region. This story also offered a neat parallel to that of Iarnhitin. The two stories established Redon as a destination for disaffected monks residing in other communities, and asserted Redon's independence from both Frankish and Breton ecclesiastical power. The inclusion of Samson of Dol would have resonated with the *Gesta* author's audience as that see vied with Tours for control of Breton sacred space. Marcellinus's continued presence at Redon was a warning to both Dol and Tours not to attempt to encroach upon the monastery's liberties.

Marcellinus exerted his influence in Rome as well. The *Gesta* author began Book III with the miraculous penance performed by a deacon who lived in a monastery in Spoleto. This unnamed cleric accidentally killed his half-brother, and went to Rome to confess and seek penance. The pope placed chains around his neck and arms and ordered him to visit all of the sacred places in Rome, and to accompany this penitential procession with unceasing prayer. While undertaking this penance, the deacon prayed to Sts. Peter and Paul for forgiveness and reconciliation. After a few days of this, he experienced a vision in which "certain beautiful forms" (*quaedam pulchra species*) told him to stop bothering them and instead go to Marcellinus in Redon. He arrived on Palm Sunday, and joined the liturgical celebration. While everyone was silently listening to the Gospel reading, his chains suddenly broke and fell to the floor, which all attributed to the power of Marcellinus (Brett, 1989: 188-193).

This story led off Book III most likely to validate the translation of Marcellinus with which Book II ended. Taken together, however, these three miracles claim power for Marcellinus and for Redon at the local, regional, and transregional levels. The miracles wrought by Hypotemius and Marcellinus established Redon as a site of sacred power in its own right, the equal or superior of the bishoprics surrounding the monastery. Whether by relocating a formerly Frankish cult, spreading that cult into other Frankish territory, or subordinating Frankish and Breton saintly bishops to themselves, the presence of the sacred dead allowed Redon to assert its own power in a borderlands region. Episcopal authority in the borderlands in which the monks of Redon lived was just as contested as was secular authority, yet by not just enduring these conflicts but by repurposing them for their own uses, the brethren embraced their own *neplantisma* and took control of the building of their own borderlands religious identity.

## Conclusion

Ninth-century monasticism was not monolithic, and not all of the literary products that monasteries created served the same purpose that the *Gesta* did for Redon. Monasteries whose foundation dated back beyond the Carolingian usurpation of power in the mid-eighth century, as well as those located within the Frankish heartland, articulated their identities and their relationships with power very differently. Even religious foundations in other (arguably) borderlands regions, such as the tradition associated with Benedict of Aniane that came out of Aquitaine in the early ninth century, could support Carolingian power (Kramer, 2022). The monks of Redon lived in a place where border crossing was more common than border-making, where outright confrontation yielded to flexibility and contingency.

However imaginative it is, I like to think that the author of the *Gesta* was Mutan, the little boy given in oblation who miraculously received the ability to speak and then found his “voice” further by writing a document that continuously (re)created Redon’s identity. But whichever monk wrote the *Gesta*, he did not do so from the perspective of the Frankish imperial court, or the halls of the Breton elite, or even the more local concerns of the *machtierns*. The *Gesta* is a monastic document, born of lived experience, both the personal experiences of its author and the collective experiences of the community at Redon of which he was a part, and that formed the audience for the text. It is the product, that is, of the specific situatedness of its author and auditors within the multiplicity of borders and boundaries that structured their locality (Smith, 1990). Like landscapes, borderlands are “a dialogue between physical environment and human perception. A sense of place is thus construed as dynamic, lived experience – or, put another way, as a window into human experience” (Lees and Overing, 2006: 1). By reading the *Gesta* we place ourselves inside a monastic community within the Frankish-Breton borderlands, and we understand those borderlands on their terms.

Just as Anzaldúa claimed to “have no country” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 102), the community at Redon belonged to no early medieval polity, nor to any networks of local, landed elite. A borderlands approach allows us to think of Redon as sitting not within Frankish or Breton territory but as situated in a place where both Franks and Bretons held secular (landed) and sacred interests and sought to exercise power in each area. The *Gesta* was not just a history of the monastery and of the lives of its illustrious early inhabitants. It was the product of a monk working through his own identity while affirming the collective identity of the foundation, a creative reimagining and transformation of his/their history to craft a document that spoke to their later-ninth-century present. In the Frankish-Breton borderlands region in which they lived, the monks of Redon transgressed the boundaries of



power familiar to the early Middle Ages, such as secular lordship and institutionalized episcopal authority.

Perhaps most importantly, borderland are places where “master narratives” collapse (Hämäläinen and Truett, 2011: 338). The *Gesta* is in some ways a timeless document, one that continues to interact with those who read it – including scholars in the present, who aspire to “figure out new methods of reading medieval hagiography in the twenty-first century” (Kramer and Novokhatko, 2022: 226). By thinking along with Anzaldúa (and other borderland scholars), by translating her conceptual framework into ninth-century terms, we decenter and disrupt entrenched historiographic realities of empire and frontier. Monks were not subaltern, colonial subjects, of course, nor were they oppressed in the same way as Anzaldúa. But also, as Radlwimmer cogently writes, “Anzaldúa, dealing with both the physical and symbolic dimensions of borders, reminds us that ‘we revise reality by altering our consensual agreements about what is real’” (Radlwimmer, 2011: 21). For the early Middle Ages this includes colonial narrative frameworks such as institutional authority, the exercise of lordship, and the advance and retreat of polities. It also includes the coopting of medieval history by racist, anti-semitic, far-right extremists. By reading texts such as the *Gesta* using non-Western epistemologies, we can transgress within our own reality just as surely as Riwen did and build a more inclusive and just academic community. *Nepantla*, after all, is a work of imagination, and “imagination opens the road to both personal and societal change – transformation of self, consciousness, community, culture, society” (Anzaldúa, 2015: 44).

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