

I

Introduction

It is widely recognized that there was an exceptionally developed cult of the Virgin Mary in pre-Conquest England. Edmund Bishop commented on the spread of devotion to Mary from the end of the tenth century to the Conquest,¹ while Rosemary Woolf went so far as to say that England 'had been one of the chief originators in western Europe' of many forms of Marian piety;² and Frank Barlow, too, remarked on the 'wave of devotion' to the Virgin in England in the tenth century.³ There has, however, been no detailed examination of the cult and the present study is an attempt to fill this lacuna.

By the tenth century, Anglo-Saxon devotion to the Virgin had resulted in the dedication of large numbers of churches and monasteries to her, in the composition of private and of public liturgical prayers, in the celebration of the yearly round of Marian feasts, in the acquisition of relics of Mary and in the composition and dissemination of vernacular texts describing the life and death of the Virgin. Few of these practices were invented in England and the Anglo-Saxon cult of the Virgin cannot be understood without some knowledge of how devotion to Mary had developed throughout the church in the preceding centuries. In this introductory chapter, I should like to survey briefly the growth of Marian doctrines and legends, concentrating particularly on those aspects most relevant to an understanding of the English evidence.⁴

We know almost nothing about the historical mother of Christ. The

¹ 'On the Origin of the Prymer', in his *Liturgica Historica*, p. 227.

² *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), p. 114.

³ *The English Church 1000–1066*, p. 18.

⁴ General introductions to the cult of the Virgin can be found in Graef, *Mary*; du Manoir, ed., *Maria*; G. Söll, *Mariologie*.

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Excerpt

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earliest references to her are in the gospels, but here the Virgin's place is a comparatively minor one.⁵ In Mark she is mentioned only twice: in Mark III. 31–5, in a context which appears to be derogatory, Jesus rejects his earthly mother and brothers in favour of those who do the will of God, and in Mark VI. 3 the Jews refuse to believe in Christ's divinity, asking 'Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Joseph, not Mary, and continues with a description of the events surrounding Christ's birth. He affirms the conception through the Holy Ghost and the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah VII. 14: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and shall bring forth a son . . .' Matthew then relates the story of the Adoration of the Magi, the flight into Egypt and the eventual return to Nazareth, again in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Christ's explicit presentation in Matthew as Emmanuel (in Hebrew 'God is with us'), from the moment of his birth, was of great importance for the beginnings of Marian doctrine, leading to an affirmation of Mary's divine maternity. Mary is not mentioned by name in the rest of Matthew, being introduced only in the repetition of the scene in Mark where Christ asks 'Who is my mother . . . ?' (Matt. XII. 46–50). Luke offers an even more extended infancy gospel, describing the Annunciation, the Presentation in the Temple after forty days and the losing of the twelve-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem. In his account of the public ministry, Luke, like Mark and Matthew, shows Christ's deliberate distancing from his mother (Luke VIII. 21 and XI. 28). He shares Matthew's affirmation of the conception by the Holy Ghost, and his infancy gospel is composed of a web of Old Testament quotations and reminiscences. Mary's behaviour at the Annunciation is schematically contrasted with that of Zachariah at the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist and was, therefore, of importance in the later ethical portraits of the Virgin. The greetings of Gabriel and Elizabeth and Mary's hymn, the *Magnificat*, were also of primary importance in the development of devotion to the Virgin. In John, Mary is mentioned in only two scenes: the marriage at Cana, in which she asks her son to perform a miracle (John II. 1–11); and at the Passion, where Christ commends Mary and John to each other's care (XIX. 26–7). The last reference to Mary in the New Testament is in the Acts, where she prays with the apostles (I. 14), and her death is not mentioned.

⁵ For Mary in the New Testament see A. Feuillet, 'La Vierge Marie dans le Nouveau Testament'.

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From the whole of the New Testament, therefore, the early Christian community would have derived the impression of a betrothed virgin, who conceived through the Holy Ghost without loss of her virginity and was prominent in the story of her son's infancy, but who had little to do with his public ministry. The New Testament contains no explicit statement about Mary's virginity after the birth of Christ, but the natural inference from the reference to brothers and sisters is that she did not remain a virgin.

The bible tells us nothing about Mary's life before the Annunciation, but already by the second half of the second century there were attempts to fill in the missing background. A combination of natural curiosity about biblical characters and the necessity to counter anti-Christian calumnies lies behind the earliest Greek apocryphon describing the birth and conception of Mary. This narrative, the *Proteuangelium Iacobi*, was extremely influential in the West and gave rise, directly or indirectly, to all other legendary treatments of the topic.⁶ It is named after its supposed author, James, the brother of Christ and first bishop of Jerusalem, but appears to have been written by a non-Jew, possibly in Egypt.⁷ The oldest incontestable reference to the *Proteuangelium* is by Origen (*ob.c.* 253),⁸ but the text may lie behind Clement of Alexandria's (*ob.* 215) allusion to the midwife who proclaimed Mary's virginity *post partum*.⁹ The oldest manuscript dates from the fourth century.

The *Proteuangelium* deals with Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and their long period of childlessness, her miraculous conception and birth, her upbringing in the temple until the age of puberty, when she was committed into the care of Joseph, the Annunciation, the birth of Christ, the visit of the Magi and the Massacre of the Innocents. The need to combat Jewish and pagan charges naturally led the author to exalt Mary, and he followed biblical models for the story of her conception and birth: Anna and Samuel, Sarah and Isaac, Elizabeth and John the Baptist and Mary herself and Christ all influenced his portrayal of Anna and Mary. The whole apocryphal gospel has even been described as a midrashic exegesis of the

⁶ *Evangelia Apocrypha*, ed. C. Tischendorf, pp. 1–48; *Le protévangile de Jacques*, ed. E. Amann, pp. 178–281.

⁷ For the view that the author was an Egyptian, see E. de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne*, pp. 419–23; H. R. Smid, *Proteuangelium Iacobi*, pp. 20–4, presents a cautious argument for a Syrian provenance.

⁸ See Amann, *Le protévangile de Jacques*, p. 82. ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

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first two chapters of Matthew and Luke.¹⁰ The *Proteuangelium's* interest does not lie only in its narrative: it also testifies to the development of nonbiblical Marian beliefs even at this early date. In some early manuscripts it has a reading which implies that Mary was conceived without sexual intercourse: the angel announces to Joachim (who, ashamed of his barrenness, has fled to the desert) that his wife has already conceived and the time-scale of the work suggests that the conception took place while Joachim was in the desert.¹¹ Other manuscripts have a future tense here instead, reflecting a widespread unease at the implications of the past. Mary's virginity *post partum* is explicitly affirmed in an episode obviously modelled on the disbelieving Thomas and Christ's wounds: the disbelieving midwife, Salome, tests Mary's virginity after the birth and is punished for her lack of faith. The brothers of the Lord, including the eponymous James, are presented here as children of Joseph by a former marriage, an explanation which continued to find favour in the East. In this and other early apocrypha (the *Ascension of Isaiah*¹² and the *Odes of Solomon*,¹³ for example), Mary gives birth without pain and, although it is nowhere asserted that the act of childbirth took place without violation of her virginity, this lack of pain, coupled with the insistence on her virginity *post partum*, opened the way for a belief in her virginity *in partu*. There is no complete surviving text of the Latin translation of the *Proteuangelium*, but different fragments have been transmitted in various ways.¹⁴

References to the Virgin in the works of the Christian Fathers also begin

¹⁰ Smid, *Proteuangelium Iacobi*, p. 8

¹¹ See the discussion by Amann, *Le protévangile de Jacques*, pp. 17–21; J. Galot, 'L'Immaculée Conception', in *Maria*, ed. du Manoir (1964) VII, 9–116; J. Gijssels, 'Zu welcher Textfamilie des Pseudo-Matthäus gehört die Quelle von Hrotsvits Maria?', p. 286.

¹² This text dates from the second century. It is translated and discussed in *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, ed. Hennecke and Schneemelcher, II, 454–68. See also E. Cothenet, 'Marie dans les apocryphes', p. 78, who interprets the text as a witness to Mary's virginity *in partu*.

¹³ W. Bauer, 'Die Oden Salomos', *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, ed. Hennecke and Schneemelcher, II, 576–625. The text dates from the second century.

¹⁴ In, for example, *Latin Infancy Gospels: A New Text with a Parallel Version from Irish*, ed. M. R. James (Cambridge, 1927); in a version ed. F. Vattioni, 'Frammento latino del Vangelo di Giacomo', *Augustinianum* 17 (1977), 505–9, from Vatican City, Reg. lat. 537, but also found in the English manuscripts Cambridge, Pembroke College 25 (s. xi) and Cambridge, St John's College B. 20 (s. xiii); and in many fragments, on which see E. de Strycker, 'Une ancienne version latine du protévangile de Jacques avec les extraits de la Vulgate de Matthieu 1–2 et Luc 1–2', *AB* 83 (1965), 365–90.

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in the second century. The first to mention Mary is Ignatius of Antioch (*ob. c. 110*).¹⁵ For him and for the other Fathers of the second and third centuries Mary is of importance chiefly for what the manner of her childbirth revealed about the nature of Christ. Defence of Christ's full humanity, on the one hand, and his divinity, on the other, in opposition to both Gnosticism and Judaism, led to a stress on the reality of his birth from Mary and on her virginity *ante partum*. Justin the Martyr (*ob. c. 165*) was the first to discern a parallel between Mary and Eve, suggested probably by Paul's parallel between Christ and Adam.¹⁶ This underlined Mary's importance in the plan of redemption and was to be much developed by later writers. The idea of Mary's powers of intercession was introduced by Irenaeus of Lyons (*ob. 202*), who emphasized her active participation in the redemption of mankind, and he also seems to have been the first to propose Mary's purification by the Holy Ghost at the Incarnation.¹⁷ There was, however, some controversy over Mary's virginity *in partu* and *post partum*. Tertullian (*ob. c. 220*) denied Mary's virginity both in and after the birth and also asserted, on the evidence of the gospels, that Mary had refused to believe in Christ.¹⁸ It seems probable that his pupil Origen (*ob. 253*), too, denied the virginity *in partu*.¹⁹ Origen also believed, as did Irenaeus, that Mary had faults, but despite this he regarded her as a model worthy of imitation. Growing devotion to Mary is attested by the title *Theotokos*, which came into use about this time (the earliest incontestable reference is in the works of Alexander of Alexandria, who died in 382, but it may have been already used by Origen)²⁰ and by the beginnings of prayer to the Virgin. A fourth-century fragment of the prayer *Sub tuum praesidium* is extant.²¹

The following period saw a gradual change in the comparative freedom of views evinced by the early Fathers in Mariological questions, especially

¹⁵ Söll, *Mariologie*, pp. 31–3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4; but see also G. Joussard, 'La nouvelle Eve', pp. 35–6.

¹⁷ See J. Garçon, *La Mariologie de S. Irenée* (Lyons, 1932); G. Joussard, 'Marie à travers la patristique', pp. 73–5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–80.

¹⁹ Origen seems to have held that Mary's womb was opened in childbirth and closed immediately afterwards, but his writings are unclear and contradictory on this point. See Söll, *Mariologie*, p. 46 and Graef, *Mary*, I, 44.

²⁰ Söll, *Mariologie*, p. 48.

²¹ O. Stegmüller, 'Sub tuum praesidium: Bemerkungen zur ältesten Überlieferung', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 74 (1952), 76–82.

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in the West. Affirmations of Mary's virginity *in partu* and *post partum* became more frequent, and the title ever-virgin came into use (for the first time in Peter of Alexandria (*ob.* 311)).²² The flourishing of asceticism contributed to the growth of a depiction of Mary as the ideal virgin, for example, in Athanasius (*ob.* 373), and the idea that Mary herself had voluntarily taken a vow of virginity, soon to be brought into prominence by Augustine, was broached by Gregory of Nyssa. The concept of what was considered fitting for the mother of God, of what seemed appropriate to the *sensus fidelium*, also became evident, as in its use by Basil of Caesarea (*ob.* 379) as a proof of Mary's virginity *post partum*, and this was to be of great importance in the working out of Mariological doctrine. Ephraem (*ob.* 373) was the first in the East to suggest that Mary had conceived through the ear (an image of the faith she manifested at the Annunciation), an idea taken up by Zeno of Verona in the West (*ob.* 372).

The subject of Mary's death was first discussed at length by Epiphanius (*ob.* 403). The only New Testament reference to Mary after Christ's death is in the Acts of the Apostles 1. 14, in which it is reported that the apostles 'with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren'. Epiphanius raised the question of Mary's end in the course of combating opponents of her perpetual virginity:

let them search the traces of Mary in the scriptures, and they will find there no mention of her death, neither whether she died or did not die, nor whether she was buried or was not buried . . . Still, though we are unable to certify her death, we may perchance find some traces of that holy and blessed one that bear upon it. For there is, on the one hand, what Simeon says to her: 'Thine own soul also shall a sword pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed' and, on the other hand, St John tells us in the Apocalypse that the dragon hastened against the woman, who had brought forth the man-child, and there were given to her the wings of an eagle, and she was taken into the desert that the dragon might not seize her. This then may have been fulfilled in Mary. However, I do not decide, nor say that she remained immortal; nor either will I vouch that she died.²³

This passage is generally regarded as crucial evidence on whether or not there was an early Christian tradition concerning Mary's death. It is usually interpreted negatively, although the theory has been propounded that Epiphanius was deliberately ignoring anterior traditions and restricting

²² Graef, *Mary*, 1, 46.

²³ Translated in T. Livius, *The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers*, p. 343.

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himself to the bible.²⁴ Whether or not such traditions existed before him, Epiphanius's formulation of the question was of paramount importance to later writers. In particular, his attitude to the subject – a confession of ignorance and an unwillingness to state categorically his own views on the matter – was imitated by many.

Epiphanius, then, may or may not have known about the apocryphal assumption narratives, but there is no doubt about his knowledge of the *Proteuangelium*. In the course of a condemnation of a Marian sect called the Collyridians, Epiphanius contended that the past tense in the angel's speech to Joachim, which seemed to imply Mary's conception in the absence of her father, referred only to God's foreknowledge of the event, and he insisted that Mary was born of Joachim and Anna, in accordance with the normal laws of nature.²⁵

Despite his reservations about Mary's birth and death, however, Epiphanius also declared that he was willing to ascribe to Mary whatever was most excellent in any other saint. This sentiment was a leading one in the development of Mariology and had important repercussions for the development of the belief that the assumption of the Virgin occurred in the same fashion as that described in the apocryphal *Acta Ioannis* concerning John the Evangelist, who had been assumed into heaven, body and soul. Those saints whose resurrection at Christ's Passion is described in Matthew XXVII.52 were also commonly judged to have been assumed into heaven with him – a view held, for example, by Ambrose and Augustine.²⁶

One long-lasting result of the Eastern theological crisis of 429–31, which culminated in the Council of Ephesus, was a major advance in Marian devotion. The controversy was in essence Christological, with Nestorius claiming that there were two separate persons in Christ, human and divine, but it had been sparked off by his objections to the use of the term *Theotokos*, 'God-bearer', to describe Mary. At the height of the Council in 431, a torch-lit procession progressed through the streets of Ephesus chanting *Theotokos*, and a side-effect of the dispute was a greater emphasis on the importance of the Virgin.

²⁴ See Cothenet, 'Marie dans les apocryphes', p. 144; J. Galot, 'Le mystère de l'assomption', in *Maria*, ed. du Manoir VII, 153–237, at 166.

²⁵ Amann, *Le protévangile de Jacques*, p. 20.

²⁶ See PL 33, 712 for Augustine's views and M. Jugie, *Le mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge*, p. 69, for a discussion of Ambrose's rather contradictory statements on this question.

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Just as the *Proteuangelium* emanated from a desire amongst the faithful for information about Mary's life before the Annunciation, so, too, there was a desire to be informed about her life after Christ's ascension and about her final fate. By the fifth century, at the latest, apocryphal accounts of Mary's death and assumption were circulating.²⁷ These numerous accounts existed in many different languages and offered widely differing descriptions of the circumstances surrounding Mary's departure from the world. The earliest apocryphal narratives probably took the mention of Mary in the Acts of the Apostles as their starting-point and they seem to have been modelled to some extent on the apocryphal *Acta* of the saints.²⁸ The apostles probably featured even more prominently in the first accounts than they do in the surviving ones. Evidence of this can be seen, for example, in the discussion between John and Peter on who is to precede the coffin bearing the palm-branch given to Mary by the angel and, in particular, in the final part of *Transitus B*, where the apostles are asked by Christ to decide on the fate of Mary's body.²⁹ The main theological reason offered by the apocrypha for Mary's corporal assumption is her virginal maternity: that the body which had given birth without corruption should not suffer corruption in death is the reasoning behind the scene in which Christ and the apostles decide the fate of Mary in *Transitus B2*, for example.

In order to be able to classify the Anglo-Saxon texts dependent on the apocrypha, it is necessary to describe the Western branches of this tradition in some detail. There are two main textual families. The first family, which is represented in Syriac and Coptic, in a Greek text which is ascribed to John the Evangelist and in a Latin version known as *Transitus D*, recounts how the Virgin's incorruptible body was brought to paradise, where, surrounded by light and fragrantly scented, it was worshipped by the

²⁷ Some critics, e.g. Cothenet, 'Marie dans les apocryphes', p. 145 and O. Faller, *De priorum saeculorum silentio circa assumptionem B. Mariae Virginis*, Analecta Gregoriana 36 (1946), place these apocrypha much earlier, as far back as the beginning of the third century. In view of the already very widespread diffusion by the end of the fifth century, an early dating does not seem unlikely.

²⁸ See B. Capelle, 'La tradition orientale de l'assomption d'après un ouvrage récent', *RB* 40 (1958), 173–86, reprinted in his *Travaux liturgiques*, III, 376.

²⁹ There are two versions of this text: *Transitus B1* is ed. C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, pp. 124–36; *Transitus B2* is ed. M. Haibach-Reinisch, *Ein neuer 'Transitus Mariae'*.

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saints, while her soul was assumed into heaven.³⁰ The second family, the R-texts, originally described the corporal assumption of Mary and the reuniting of her body and soul, although some of the surviving versions have an altered ending which does not have this reunification.³¹ The texts which survive from Anglo-Saxon England all belong to the R-family.

In the R-texts Mary dies and her soul is taken to heaven immediately, while her body is laid in the sepulchre for three days. Christ then comes and either takes the body with him to paradise, where it is reunited with the soul, or, bearing with him Mary's soul, he joins it with the body at the tomb, before bringing Mary back with him to paradise. A lost fifth-century Greek text appears to be the source of most of this group of texts and it must have been very similar to the Syriac fragments in manuscripts of the fifth century which were published by Wright.³² This Greek text was the direct source of another Greek version R,³³ shortened for liturgical use, and of the two accounts of John of Thessalonica (610–49), T and TI.³⁴ It was also the direct source of a lost Latin translation which can be partly reconstructed from the variants entered in the M manuscript of *Transitus C*.³⁵ In turn this Latin text was the source of a shortened version A, written some time between the seventh and ninth centuries.³⁶ Its awkward Latin shows that it is still very close to the original Greek source. The same lost translation was the source of the account which Gregory of Tours (c. 540–94) summarizes in his *Miraculorum libri*³⁷ and of another lost rendering. This lost text in turn gave rise to *Transitus C*, the Colbert narrative³⁸ and the two versions of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Melito*, *Transitus B1* and *Transitus B2*. *Transitus B2*, the older, probably dates from the fifth century and shows how quickly the apocryphal texts were disseminated and revised. The only other well-known apocryphon, *Transitus A* (not to be confused with the A of the diagram),

³⁰ For a translation of the Greek text, see *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. James, pp. 201–9. The Latin *Transitus D* is ed. A. Wilmart, *Analecta Reginensia*, pp. 357–62.

³¹ For this textual family, see especially A. Wenger, *L'assomption de la très Sainte Vierge*.

³² *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament*, ed. W. Wright (London, 1865).

³³ Summarized by Wenger, *L'assomption de la très Sainte Vierge*, pp. 31–58.

³⁴ *Iohannis Archiepiscopus Thessalonicensis sermo de dormitione B. Mariae Virginis*, ed. M. Jugie, PO 19 (1926), 375–431.

³⁵ Collated by Wilmart in his edition of *Transitus C*, *Analecta Reginensia*, pp. 323–57.

³⁶ Ed. Wenger, *L'assomption de la très Sainte Vierge*, pp. 245–56. ³⁷ PL 71, 708.

³⁸ See Capelle, 'Vestiges grecs et latins'.

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was thought by Tischendorf to be the oldest text but it is now recognized as a late composite account.³⁹

In unravelling the complexities of this textual family, Wenger's diagram is helpful:⁴⁰

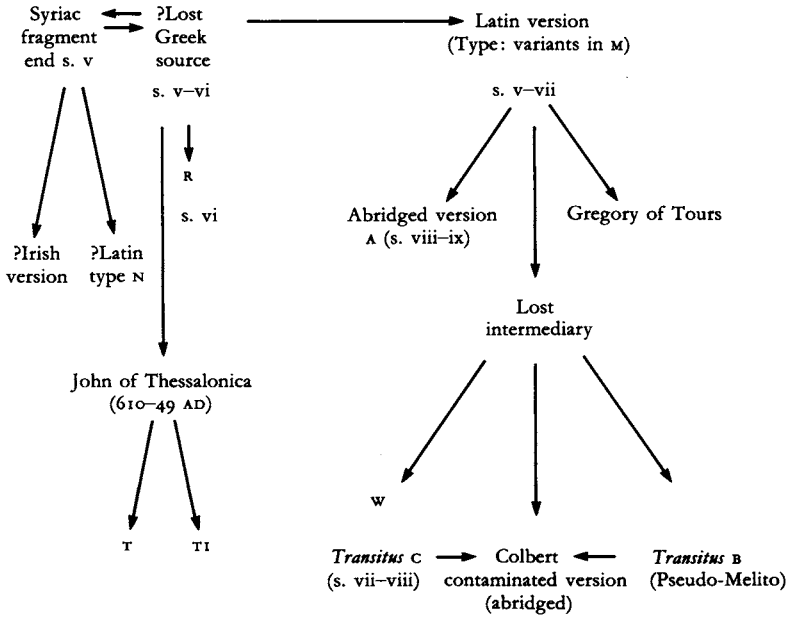


FIG. 1 The relationship of apocryphal accounts of Mary's death and assumption in the R-family of texts

Wenger has shown that the ultimate source of the R-family undoubtedly asserted the Virgin's corporal assumption.⁴¹ But the many objections voiced by the Fathers of the church were not without effect and in the extant texts there is a wide variety of endings. Some preserve the full corporal assumption, others prevaricate and avoid an explicit statement on the issue: John of Thessalonica, for example, omitted the resurrection of Mary's body. Similarly, the manuscripts of *Transitus c* differ widely in their conclusions: the version in Cambridge, Pembroke College 25 (a late eleventh-century English manuscript not collated by Wilmart), for example, ends:

³⁹ *Evangelia Apocrypha*, ed. Tischendorf, pp. 113-23.
⁴⁰ *L'assomption de la très Sainte Vierge*, p. 66
⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-6.