

Essay 2

Among the saints who define the spiritual character of Ireland, one of the most beloved, most contested and most deeply entwined with the ancient world is Brigid of Kildare. The Irish Brigid or Brigit is widely venerated as one of the three patron saints of Ireland alongside St. Patrick and St. Columba. Brigid holds an extraordinary position in the religious and cultural imagination of the Irish people and indeed of the wider culturally related areas in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Mann, England and Brittany. She had an incredible amount of motifs that went along with her association.¹ Motifs served to anchor sacred figures into the established cultural landscape as well as to validate their holiness.

In Scotland her name was *Bride* or *Brìghde*, in Wales she was *Bride* or *Ffraid* and in Brittany, *Brigitte*. In Ireland and Scotland, she is associated with well over a hundred various sacred places including churches, towns, rivers and wells and around sixteen places in Wales have her namesake as a few examples.² Her feast day, the first of February, coincides with the traditional folk festival of Imbolc, the threshold of spring. Her sacred flame was once tended by a community of holy women in Kildare and burned for centuries. Many of her associations are incredibly similar to a goddess of the same name celebrated in pre-Christian Ireland.^{3,4}

The difficulty in defining Brigid is that she resists simple categorization. She was likely a real historical figure born around 451 CE and dying sometime around 523 CE whose life is documented in three major Latin hagiographies and numerous vernacular sources. Her attributes mirror those of the folk goddess Brigid, daughter of the Dagda in Irish mythology. Scholars have long debated whether the saint was constructed to absorb and Christianize the goddess, or whether a real abbess of remarkable ability genuinely inspired enough devotion that spurred mythological

¹Riain, Pádraig Ó, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), pp. 118–24.

² Martin Crampin and David Parsons (eds), *The Cult of the Saints in Wales* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2023), <<https://saints.wales/saint/23>> [accessed 22 April 2026].

³hÓgáin, Dáithí Ó, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 44–47.

⁴Cambrensis, Giraldus, *Topographia Hibernica*, ed. and trans. John J. O'Meara (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1951), II. xxxiv, pp. 81–83.

layers.^{5,6} This essay will explore many of these hagiographic elements tracing what historical evidence exists for the life of Brigid of Kildare, examining the principal literature, and analyzing the most important and persistent motifs that define her cult from the early medieval period to the present day.

The earliest and most authoritative text on Brigid is the Latin Life of Brigid, the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*. This was composed by Cogitosus, a monk of Kildare who wrote in the mid-seventh century, approximately 650 CE. Cogitosus is one of the earliest identifiable hagiographers in the Irish tradition, and his work is remarkable not only for its portraits of Brigid herself and her miracles but for its description of the church at Kildare, which provides modern historians with an extraordinary piece of architectural testimony. Scholars including Kim McCone and Máire Herbert have earmarked Cogitosus's text as a highly deliberate piece of ecclesiastical propaganda, mainly in asserting Brigid's and Kildare's importance over other saint-like figures as well as churches of Ireland.⁷

The traditional accounts of Brigid's birth are themselves deeply symbolic, placing her origins at the threshold between worlds and between the sacred and the mundane. According to the earliest accounts, Brigid was born to Dubthach, a nobleman or druid of Leinster, and a slave woman named Broicsech (also spelled Brocca in some sources), who had been baptized by the missionary bishop Patrick. The union of a free man and a bondswoman ensured that Brigid's status at birth was ambiguous by the legal standards of early Irish society, making her both of the nobility and of the unfree within early Irish law.^{8,9} In Wales, she is included in the Welsh *Bonedd y Saint*. This Welsh genealogy diverges from Irish accounts in her parentage where she is quoted as the daughter of Cadwrthai or Cadwthlach Wyddel, otherwise Dwyppws ab Cevyth. This adjustment of her ancestry is a notable feature of Welsh reception of the saint.¹⁰ This purpose is likely similarly to place her within the local landscape and further familiarize her.

⁵McCone, Kim. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), pp. 162–70.

⁶ O'Rahilly, T. F., *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946), pp. 314–17.

⁷Herbert, Máire, Iona, Kells, and Derry: *The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 12–13; and McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 159–61.

⁸*Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ed. and trans. Séan Connolly and J.-M. Picard, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 5–27 (p. 6)

⁹Bethu Brigte, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó hAodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), §§1–3, pp. 1–4.

¹⁰ Robert Williams, *Enwogion Cymru* (Llandoverly: William Rees, 1862), pp. 156–7.

Cogitosus recorded that Brigid was born on the threshold of her father's house, neither inside nor outside, as her mother carried a vessel of milk and crossed the doorway.¹¹ This liminal birth is a recurring motif in the hagiographic tradition and it places Brigid outside the normal categories of social order from the very moment of her arrival in the world. This detail is intimately tied to Irish mythological literature patterns because thresholds were seen as powerful, mysterious and sacred spaces. It was the domain of those who straddled different realms of being and as such, may have gone on to do great and wonderful things with their life, as is the case with St. Brigid.¹² It's a motif that followers would recognize as a divine pattern with valuable meaning behind it.

The date assigned to her birth, approximately 451 CE in Faughart, near Dundalk in present-day County Louth, is partly conventional. The *Annals of Ulster*, one of the most important chronicles of early medieval Ireland, record her death under the year 524 CE: "*Quies Brigitae virginis*" ("The rest of the virgin Brigid"), suggesting a lifespan of unusual historical credibility for the period.¹³ The *Annals of Inisfallen* give the year 526 CE, while the *Annals of the Four Masters*, compiled in the seventeenth century, record 525 CE. These minor variations are typical of annalistic records and do not undermine the basic historical probability of a real abbess at Kildare.¹⁴

The geographical anchor of Brigid's life is Kildare, *Cill Dara* in Irish, meaning "Church of the Oak," a name that itself could point toward the pre-Christian framework of her cult. The oak was among the most venerated of trees in the broader culturally 'Celtic' world, associated with druids and with the liminal power of the natural world.¹⁵ That Brigid's foundation should be at a place associated with oaks is not by accident. She established her monastery and convent there in the late fifth century, on land granted to her in the territory of the Uí Dúnlainge kings of Leinster. The site's earlier sacred character may have been that of a druidic center

¹¹The Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae, in Acta Sanctorum, February I (Antwerp, 1658), I.

¹²McCone, Kim. Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), pp. 78–80.

¹³Annals of Ulster, s.a. 524, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), p. 56. The entry reads "*Quies Brigitae virginis*."

¹⁴The Annals of the Four Masters, ed. and trans. John O'Donovan, 7 vols (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1851), I, s.a. 525, p. 175; Annals of Inisfallen, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951), s.a. 526, p. 84.

¹⁵Green, Miranda. The World of the Druids (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 56–58; and Brian Lacey, Brigid of Kildare: Saint, Goddess, Legend (Dublin: Columba Press, 2020), pp. 22–25.

of learning and would have made it a theologically purposeful choice with the Christian abbey planted in the familiar roots of the older world.

In his preface, Cogitosus writes of Brigid's growing fame, that her name had spread over the whole of Ireland and her flock over all of Ireland.¹⁶ This claim, that Kildare's abbess exercised a spiritual jurisdiction across the entire island, was a bold assertion in a church where Patrick's Armagh was competing for supremacy.¹⁷ The double monastery at Kildare was a rich monastic community that housed both men and women and was governed by an abbess who wielded authority over both. Cogitosus describes the Kildare church with architectural precision that is unique in early Irish hagiography.

The church was divided by a screen of planks hung with linen curtains, separating the male community on the right from the female on the left, with the relics of Brigid and her associated bishop Conleth enshrined in decorated tombs on either side of the main altar.¹⁸ This was not unique in early medieval Christianity where the double monastery had precedents in Britain. However, the scale of Kildare's authority, its claim to spiritual priority over all of Leinster and perhaps over all Ireland, was extraordinary.^{19,20} Cogitosus's description again suggests a church of genuine material wealth and artistic ambition by the seventh century, with decorated tombs and hanging crowns of gold and silver, a description that reads with the confidence of local knowledge.

Cogitosus overall preserves thirty-one chapters of miracles, including the famous event in which Brigid hangs her wet cloak on a sunbeam, the multiplication of butter and bacon to feed unexpected guests, and the healing of a leper who then becomes her faithful companion.²¹ Central to the Cogitosus narrative is Brigid's compassion for the poor and the destitute, her radical generosity that alienates her father (who attempts to sell her to the king of Leinster), and her miraculous ability to satisfy hunger in a world where food insecurity was the defining condition for

¹⁶Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, preface, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 13. The Latin reads: "per totam Hiberniam nomen eius divulgatum est et grex eius per totam Hiberniam diffusus est."

¹⁷Hughes, Kathleen, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London: Methuen, 1966), pp. 70–78; and Ó Riain, A *Dictionary of Irish Saints*, p. 121.

¹⁸Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 32, trans. Connolly and Picard, pp. 22–23.

¹⁹Harrington, Christian, *Women in a Celtic Church*, pp. 45–60.

²⁰Bitel, Lisa M., *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 166–72.

²¹The miracle of the sunbeam cloak appears in Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 3, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 14. The butter and bacon multiplication is at ch. 9, p. 16.

many people. Brigid also heals through touch and through prayer. In the most remarkable of the healing stories, she gives temporary sight to a blind nun so that the nun may properly appreciate the beauty of the natural landscape.²² These are all incredibly important motifs that establish the moral virtues of Brigid as a saint and add a cultural framework to work within for the betterment of her followers where qualities of worth were exemplified.

Another well known text extolling Brigid's virtues is a poem by Iorwerth Fynglwyd written in the fifteenth century in Wales. This *cywydd* is the most substantial piece of Welsh literature regarding the saint. Iorwerth (c. 1480–1527) was a poet from St Bride's Major, Glamorgan, itself a parish dedicated to the saint, and his verse both transmits Irish hagiographic tradition and introduces specifically Welsh material on her.²³ The poem recounts the familiar Irish miracles, her food miracles, her perpetual virginity, and her avoidance of an unwanted marriage. In a well-known passage the poet relates this miracle in verse:

Y dydd, y ceisiodd dy dad, wra yt, a'i roi atad, un o'th lygaid a neidiawdd, o'th ben, hyn a'th boenai'n hawdd; a thrannoeth aeth yr wyneb, oll yn iach, ni bu well neb.

*The day your father attempted to find you a husband, and give him to you, one of your eyes jumped out of your head, and this inevitably hurt you; but the next day, all your face healed, no one had ever felt better.*²⁴

In a prose summary of the poem's content, it is said that she floated from Ireland to Wales on a turf. She made rushes (*brwyn*) into fish called *brwyniaid*, which she scattered among the watercress. A related Welsh folk legend preserved in oral tradition and later transcribed concerns a fish famine on the River Conwy. Saint Ffraid was said to be walking along the banks of the River Conwy and threw rushes into the water. She prayed the famine would end and within a few days the rushes were turned into fish. Soon the river was teeming with fish, which became known as *brwyniaid* ('sparlings'), meaning 'rush-like'. This idea of being associated with fish and abundance has parallels to Jesus himself.²⁵

²²Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 16, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 18.

²³Elissa Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 161–7.

²⁴*Cywydd* by Iorwerth Fynglwyd, cited and translated in 'Feminine Sanctity: The Female Saints of Wales', <<http://cymraeg.lamp.ac.uk/Department/English/current/sanctity.php>>.

²⁵Robin Gwyndaf, *Welsh Folk Tales*, 2nd edn (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1995), p. 13.

Alongside the Cogitosus's *Life*, scholars work with a slightly later version of Brigid's life called *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*, preserved in Latin by an anonymous author. Also, the *Bethu Brigitte*, with an anonymous author as well, is a text composed probably in the ninth century, drawing on older materials. The *Vita Prima* is significant for its preservation of what appear to be different miracle sequences and they have quite a more explicitly mythological atmosphere.^{26,27} One of the most historically significant aspects of Brigid's legacy is what the hagiographic tradition implies about the position of women in the early Irish Church and about the degree to which the figure of Brigid embodies and justifies a form of female religious authority that was quite remarkable for the patriarchal society she was born within.²⁸

The most extraordinary passage related to this is found in the *Vita Prima*, which relates the circumstance of her consecration. According to this account, Bishop Mel of Ardagh consecrated Brigid, but as he read the words of the ceremony over her, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and he read the order for episcopal rather than abbatial consecration. When other bishops protested that a woman could not be a bishop, Mel replied that the Holy Spirit had acted and it could not be undone. The *Vita Prima* notes that thereafter 'the honour of a bishop pertained to her' and that she had authority over all the clergy of her province.²⁹ Scholar Lisa Bitel argues that the hagiographies of Brigid consistently present a figure whose authority exceeds the normal limits placed on women in either secular Irish law or canon law. Specifically, Brigid casts out demons, negotiates with kings as an equal, and governs a community of both men and women, powers that would normally belong only to a male ecclesiastic. This makes her quite a unique and powerful woman.³⁰

This tradition of remarkable female authority at Kildare did not die with Brigid. The abbesses of Kildare continued to exercise unusual powers for several centuries after her death. The Annals of Ulster recorded a series of powerful abbesses, and the title *Comharba Brigide* ('successor of Brigid') carried significant weight and

²⁶Bray, Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), p. 11-15.

²⁷ Ó Riain, Pádraig, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, pp. 119-20.

²⁸Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 162-95.

²⁹*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*, I. xix, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February I, col. 124: "honor episcopalis Brigidae attribueretur."

³⁰Bitel, Lisa, *Land of Women*, pp. 168-70.

power. The succession of abbesses at Kildare intersected with the succession of abbots, and in some periods the abbess appears to have had primacy over the abbot, an arrangement very unusual in the wider Church and suggestive of the very early character of the foundation.³¹

The *Bethu Brigitte* is particularly valuable for the vernacular Irishness of its perspective. Composed in Old Irish rather than Latin, it connects Brigid more explicitly to the landscape she was born out of and social structure of early medieval Ireland. The text begins with a remarkable episode in which a druid prophesies Brigid's birth, seeing a vision of a woman with a crown of gold whose radiance fills all of Ireland. The druid accepted the Christian prophecy and he recognized in Brigid the fulfilment of a sacred power he could not himself fully comprehend. This may have been a common hagiographic strategy and motif for converting pre-Christian religious authority into a witness for the new faith. Any sort of uniqueness in their birth may have been considered as a familiar truth based on cultural norms to justify a person's sanctity.^{32,33}

A later but important source is the twelfth-century *Life of Brigid* preserved in the *Book of Lismore*. This text draws on all earlier materials and adds further legendary details, including elaborate accounts of Brigid's interactions with Patrick, whom she is said to have met and received the veil from in the ceremony of her consecration to religious life.^{34,35} The meeting of Patrick and Brigid is historically unlikely as the chronology makes it extremely improbable but mythically it is understandable why it was added, asserting the continuity and complementary relationship of two great founding figures of Irish Christianity. Overall, there are many recurring hagiographic patterns and motifs that appear within the various texts we have available about Brigid.

The relationship between the saint Brigid and the goddess Brigid is one of the most intensively debated questions in Celtic studies. The goddess appears in the *Cath Maige Tuired*, one of the primary mythological texts of medieval Ireland, as the

³¹Annals of Ulster, s.a. 738, 769, 805, ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill; and Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 74–77.

³²*Bethu Brigitte*, §1, ed. and trans. Ó hAodha, pp. 1–2.

³³McCone, Kim, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 163–65.

³⁴Stokes, Whitley, ed., *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), pp. 182–200

³⁵Harrington, Christina, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450–1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 54–58.

daughter of the Dagda, the great father-god of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Her son Ruádán is killed in battle, and the text preserves what appears to be a primal scene of mourning, 'She [Brigid] came and keened her son. She was the first person who ever keened in Ireland.'³⁶ This act, the first keening, the first formal lamentation for the dead, positions the goddess Brigid as the originator of one of the most important rituals of Irish social and emotional life. This is also an example of a practice that was inevitably amalgamated and associated with both the saint and the goddess.

The tenth-century *Cath Maige Tuired* also associates the goddess with cattle, the land's fertility, and the power of poetry and learning.^{37, 38} The Irish mythological triad preserved in *Cormac's Glossary*, the ninth-century work attributed to Cormac mac Cuilennáin, Bishop of Cashel describes Brigid as three sisters, a goddess of poetry, a goddess of smithcraft, and a goddess of healing. All three qualities are not coincidentally directly mirrored in the attributes of the Christian saint. These motifs of learning, poetry and the sacred cow are significant and provide symbolic sustenance in regard to cultural continuity.³⁹

'Brigit, that is, a learned woman, i.e. a daughter of the Dagda. It is she who is the goddess whom the poets adore, because very great and very distinguished was her superintendence. Therefore they call her goddess of poets. Her sisters were Brigit the female physician and Brigit the female smith; their names were Brigit.'

- Cormac mac Cuilennáin, *Sanas Cormaic* (Cormac's Glossary), c. 900 CE

The festival of Imbolc, the February feast associated with the beginning of spring, the first lambing and the returning light was the occasion on which Brigid's feast was placed, ensuring that the Christian saint presided over a cultural and agricultural turning point that had been sacred before Christianity arrived in Ireland.⁴⁰ Many scholars place stock in this assumption of purposeful supplantation. James MacKillop affirms that the attributes of the goddess Brigid, poetry,

³⁶Cath Maige Tuired, ed. and trans. Elizabeth A. Gray, Irish Texts Society, 52 (London, 1982), §125, p. 54. Also, Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle*, pp. 45–46.

³⁷Cath Maige Tuired, §125, ed. and trans. Gray, p. 54.

³⁸ MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 44–45.

³⁹Cormac's Glossary [Sanas Cormaic], s.v. "Brigit," ed. Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: O.T. Cutter, 1868), §150. The tripartite description of the goddess is: "bandé ndelbae .i. Brigit banfhile ingen in Dagdai. Is í Brigit bancerd fora ndénta cetcerd; Brigit léig, i.e. goddess of smithcraft... Brigit healer."

⁴⁰Ó hÓgáin, *Dáithí, The Sacred Isle*, pp. 44–48..

smithcraft, healing, and the sacred fire correspond with remarkable precision to those of the saint, suggesting a deliberate process of *interpretatio christiana* by which the Church absorbed the cult of the goddess into the veneration of the saint. Thomas O’Rahilly also argued forcefully for the near-identity of goddess and saint, suggesting that the historical figure of Brigid was elaborated almost entirely on the template of the older mythology.^{41,42} However, more recent scholarship has been mindful to question this overlap. Pádraig Ó Riain has argued that the historical Brigid was a real figure of genuine authority whose cult naturally drew into itself elements of the goddess tradition, much as Patrick’s mission drew on earlier sacred landscapes and ritual forms.^{43,44} Despite some moderate supplantation, it is still possible they were two unique figures and simply associated with similar things because of the nature of their shared qualities as powerful and liminal women in Ireland, both living and mythical.

Reviewing the saint’s most powerful motifs, fire is the primary symbol of Brigid in virtually every strand of her veneration. The saint is associated with a column of flame visible above her head from birth. The *Bethu Brigitte* describes how a column of fire rose from her head into the sky the night of her birth, visible to the druids and recognized by them as a sign of extraordinary sanctity.⁴⁵ Symbolically, this is a house that seems to burn but is not consumed and there is intersectionality in Brigid herself being alight with divine fire that does not harm her. At Brigid’s church a perpetual flame was kept burning in a sacred enclosure tended exclusively by women. The twelfth-century Welsh cleric Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) provides the most detailed historical description of the flame in his *Topographia Hibernica*, composed around 1188 CE. Gerald records that twenty nuns tended the fire in rotation, one for each day of the cycle, and that on the twentieth day the last nun would leave the fire and say, ‘Brigid, guard your own fire, for this is your night.’ He reports that the fire was never extinguished and produced no ash, and no man was allowed to enter the sacred space or there could be dire spiritual or mysterious consequences.⁴⁶

⁴¹MacKillop, James. Dictionary of Celtic Mythology, pp. 44–45.

⁴²O’Rahilly, Thomas Francis, Early Irish History and Mythology, pp. 314–17.

⁴³McCone, Kim, Pagan Past and Christian Present, pp. 162–74.

⁴⁴Ó Riain, Pádraig, A Dictionary of Irish Saints, pp. 118–19.

⁴⁵Bethu Brigitte, §2, ed. and trans. Ó hAodha, p. 2.

⁴⁶Giraldus Cambrensis, Topographia Hibernica, II. xxxiv, trans. O’Meara, pp. 81–83.

The perpetual flame has drawn the attention of scholars interested in continuity with pre-Christian practice. Fire-tending and sacred fires were well established in the broader Irish cultural landscape. From that lens, the Christian community at Kildare appears to have absorbed and sacralised a practice whose roots may have extended into the pre-Christian religious landscape.⁴⁷ The flame was extinguished in 1220 CE on the orders of Henry de Loundres, Archbishop of Dublin, who considered the practices of the women of Kildare irregular and suspected of paganism. The fire was relit, then extinguished again, through the upheavals of the Norman period and the Reformation. In 1993, it was relit by the Brigidine Sisters in Kildare town, where it has burned ever since as a symbol of peace and of the enduring spiritual presence of the saint. This motif likely serves as a literal symbol of light, warmth and sustenance considering the wide array of the importance of fires for survival.⁴⁸ This fire imagery again connects Brigid to the forge tradition associated with the goddess, to the hearth fire as mentioned as the center of domestic order, and to the theological language of the Holy Spirit as fire and light. In early Irish Christian poetry, Brigid is invoked as a flame of charity and a light of wisdom and the Breastplate of Brigid in later Hiberno-Latin tradition echoes the protective fire imagery of the *Lorica* of Patrick. She is symbolically seen as sustenance, warmth and comfort.⁴⁹

The motif of the cow, milk and dairy abundance runs throughout the Brigid tradition with extraordinary persistence as well. In the hagiographies, Brigid multiplies butter and milk for her community and for the poor. She is associated with a miraculous white cow with red ears, a sacred animal in Irish and Welsh mythology, the colors of the Otherworld, and in this case, a sacred animal that gives milk without limit. The *Vita Prima* includes the story that as a child, Brigid was nourished by the milk of a white cow without any earthly blemish, a cow sent by God specifically to sustain her.⁵⁰ These dairy miracles are not simply lovely folk tales. In the agro-pastoral economy of early medieval Ireland, cattle were the primary measure of wealth and social status, and the abundance of milk was a literal measure of divine blessing on Brigid and the wider community around her.

⁴⁷Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, pp. 97–100; and Green, *The World of the Druids*, pp. 100–03.

⁴⁸Malone, Mary T., *Women and Christianity*, 3 vols (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000–03), I, pp. 237–38.

⁴⁹Herren, Michael and Ann Brown, Shirley, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 214–16.

⁵⁰*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, I. x, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February I, col. 121.

Imbolc itself her feast day is etymologically connected by medieval Irish scholars to the phrase *Imbolg* meaning ‘in the belly,’ referring to the ewes whose milk would return with the beginning of the lactation season. From this lens, she is representative of purity, abundance and sanctity.^{51,52}

Water is another elemental motif of Brigid, balanced with fire and with the milk of pastoral abundance and significance. Sacred wells dedicated to Brigid are found throughout Ireland, Scotland, and areas of Wales with estimates suggesting over thirty holy wells in Ireland alone bearing her name. They are concentrated in Kildare, Louth (near her traditional birthplace at Faughart), and the county of Connacht. The practice of ‘pattern days’ at these wells, in which pilgrims would circumambulate the well in prayer and leave offerings of cloth tied to nearby trees, persisted in rural Ireland into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and arguably, into the present as the practice is still witnessed.⁵³ Today, clothes, cloaks or shawls are still traditionally left outside on the eve of St. Brigid’s Day and the morning dew that collected on the cloth is considered holy and healing. The healing power of Brigid’s wells also connects her to the pre-Christian tradition of sacred water sources, which were understood as having associations to divine goddesses or the Otherworld in general and as such, were places of divine power.

Aside from motifs, there are a few symbols of Brigid that are well established. The Brigid’s Cross is a well known symbol associated with Brigid which is a four-armed cross woven from rushes, traditionally made on the eve of St. Brigid’s Day and hung above the door of the house, in the windows or above the hearth to protect the household from fire and illness throughout the coming year. This is perhaps the most universally recognized symbol associated with the saint. The origin legend for it tells that Brigid sat at the bedside of a dying pagan chieftain, seeking to convert him. As she sat beside him, she picked up rushes from the floor and began to weave them into the cross form, explaining the meaning of Christianity as she wove. The chieftain was convinced enough to be baptised before he died.⁵⁴ The cross itself is not a conventional Christian cross as it has four arms of equal length and is sometimes made with a square woven center, a form that more closely resembles older solar or swastika symbols found in pre-Christian

⁵¹Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, p. 44

⁵² MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 229.

⁵³Logan, Patrick, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980), pp. 40–55.

⁵⁴Book of Lismore Life, in Stokes, *Lives of Saints*, p. 191.

art than the Latin cross of Christian iconography. Scholars have debated whether the Brigid's Cross is a Christianised version of a pre-Christian protective symbol, with the legend of the dying chieftain being a retrospective explanation.^{55,56}

Another beloved symbol of Brigid is her cloak. According to the version preserved by Cogitosus and later elaborated in vernacular tradition, Brigid asks the King of Leinster for land on which to build her monastery. The king refuses to give her any substantial grant. Brigid then asks for only as much land as her cloak will cover. Amused by the apparent modesty of the request, the king agrees. Brigid then spreads her cloak on the ground, and it begins to expand in all four directions, east, west, north, and south eventually covering an ever-larger area of the Curragh, the great plain of Kildare.^{57,58} The story illustrates multiple important ideas related to Brigid. It possibly alludes to Brigid's victory over male power through spiritual means and the capacity of divine intervention to overflow all human limitations. It also asserts the claim of the Church on the landscape of Ireland. The Curragh of Kildare may have been a genuine significant grant, and the story serves to immortalize in quite a unique and magical way, the economic and political foundations of the Kildare monastery. The cloak itself is also a symbol of warmth and comfort.⁵⁹

The cult of Brigid spread beyond Ireland to wherever Irish missionaries and emigrants carried it. In Scotland, she became a figure of equal importance in the Gaelic tradition of the Highlands. The Scottish *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of oral literature gathered by Alexander Carmichael in the late nineteenth century, contains some of the most beautiful surviving prayers and folk songs associated with Brigid in any language.⁶⁰ In the Scottish tradition, Bride is the midwife of Mary, attending the birth of Christ, a role that connects her to the beginning of the Christian era as well as to her own feast on the first of February.^{61,62} Carmichael records the practice of 'Bride's Bed' on the eve of February 1st, in which women would prepare a small bed of straw and a doll representing Bride, inviting her into

⁵⁵Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, pp. 46–47.

⁵⁶ Green, Miranda, *The World of the Druids*, p. 193.

⁵⁷Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 5, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Book of Lismore Life, in Stokes, Whitney, *Lives of Saints*, p. 187.

⁵⁹Bitel, Lisa, *Land of Women*, pp. 185–87.

⁶⁰Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1900–71), I, Hymns LXX–LXXIII, pp. 165–73.

⁶¹Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, pp. 165–66.

⁶² MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 46.

the house for the night. In the morning, the women would look for a mark in the ashes of the hearth, a sign of Bride's presence and blessing on the household for the year ahead.^{63,64} In Ireland, there is a similar practice and living tradition of making a 'Biddy' doll where she is paraded around town in a procession on the night before or on St. Brigid's Day.

The Scottish *Carmina Gadelica* preserves many prayers to Bride such as the following...⁶⁵

*'Brigit! Brigit! come thou in, Thy welcome is truly made,
Brigit! Brigit! come thou in, Thy welcome is truly made.'*
(*Carmina Gadelica*, vol. I, Hymn LXX, p. 165)

In Brittany, where the Irish monastic mission had significant influence in the early medieval period, Brigid is associated with several churches and wells in the Breton countryside. The dedication of churches to Brigid in Wales is very apparent as already mentioned and there are other places named after her such as St. Bride's Bay in Pembrokeshire and the church of St. Bride's on Fleet Street in London. This is one of the oldest church sites in the city, which testifies to the spread of the cult along the lines of Irish ecclesiastical influence in Britain.^{66,67}

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a revival and continued strong interest in Brigid. Within Christian communities, the unique 'Celtic' spirituality movement of the 1980s and 1990s brought Brigid to new prominence as a model of hospitality, compassion, and women's religious leadership. The Brigidine Sisters, founded in 1807 by Bishop Daniel Delaney of Kildare specifically to revive the traditions of Brigid's community, have been particularly active in this renewal and have developed a spirituality of peace focused on her qualities and veneration.^{68,69}

Brigid, both the saint and the goddess have become a central figure in the revival

⁶³Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, pp. 169–70.

⁶⁴ Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, p. 48.

⁶⁵Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, Hymn LXX, p. 165.

⁶⁶Pierre-Yves Lambert, *La langue gauloise* (Paris: Errance, 1994), p. 210.

⁶⁷ Stow, John, *A Survey of London* (1598), ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), I, p. 56.

⁶⁸Dundon, Mary and Kilroy, Phil, *The Brigidine Sisters: A Two Hundred Year Story* (Kildare: Solas Bhríde, 2007), pp. 1–20.

⁶⁹de Waal, Esther, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), pp. 60–63.

of ‘Celtic’ folk practices and arguably, many Neopagan traditions. The goddess Brigid recorded in *Cormac’s Glossary* is one of the most widely worshipped deities in the Neopagan calendar, celebrated notably at Imbolc with fire ceremonies, the making of Brigid’s crosses, and the tending of sacred flames.^{70, 71} This collective reverence and recognition has continued into the present and Ireland added a recognized bank holiday for St. Brigid’s Day in 2023. In announcing the holiday, the Irish government explicitly linked it to both the Christian saint and the pre-Christian festival of Imbolc, recognizing the layered character of the tradition and the significance of Brigid as a symbol of Ireland that speaks to multiple cultural inheritances.⁷² The life of Brigid of Kildare and her motifs, insofar as we can reconstruct it from the hagiographic, annalistic, and archaeological record was that of a woman of spectacular abilities and spiritual authority who founded one of the most important monastic communities in early medieval Ireland and whose influence shaped Irish Christianity in its formative centuries.⁷³

So many of Brigid’s motifs are incredibly beautiful and deeply symbolic. In summary, she became the vessel into which the Irish and later the Scots, the Welsh, the Bretons, and the diaspora poured their deepest aspirations for finding the sacred in everyday life. She is fire and light, the perpetual flame that does not consume itself and the warmth in the hearth. She is milk and abundance, the miraculous cow and the divine generosity that overflows all expectations. She is the cloak spread over the land, the protective covering holding together community and faith and the sacred boundary keeper between common human desire and the larger divine plan. She is water and healing at sacred wells, the touch that restores sight and the pilgrimage made in hope.

What makes Brigid unique among the saints of the early medieval Church is not merely the richness of her mythological inheritance and motifs, though that inheritance is among the richest available to any Christian saint in Western Europe. It is the way in which the historical woman and the mythological genuinely interconnect, as though a real person of sufficient religious power exemplified the same values as her mythical predecessor. These must have been radical generosity,

⁷⁰Matthews, Caitlin, *The Celtic Tradition* (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1989), pp. 75–79.

⁷¹Hutton, Ronald, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 134–37.

⁷²Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Ireland), press release, 6 October 2021.

⁷³*Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 524, ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 56.

the sanctity of the mundane, the sacredness of the everyday arts of living and the important power of women's wisdom and women's communities. Brigid was quite possibly a powerful and wondrous woman who made such a strong impact on her community that her personhood could only be compared with that of a goddess. Brigid endures and still belongs exactly where she was born, at the threshold. She exists between nature and culture, between the ancient and the modern, between the goddess and saint, dwelling within a sacred liminality that is uniquely hers.

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