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Considering the Bethu Brigitte

St. Brigid of Kildare, along with Patrick and Colm Cille, is one of the three patron saints of Ireland. While both Patrick and Colm Cille spent much of their lives outside of Ireland, Brigit is not known for her travels. The earliest known writings about her were written after her death in possibly 525 (Cogitosus 2022, 5). The earliest written references to Brigit are the two hymns, 'Ultan's Hymn' and 'Broccan's Hymn', neither of which give any biographical details. There is some controversy as to whether or not she was an actual person and if she was, whether or not she could have been as much of a compatriot of St. Patrick's as some versions of her life claim given the questions regarding possible dates. Miranda Green places her in the 5th or 6th century but writes that she 'may belong to legend rather than to reality.' (Aldhouse-Green 2015, 198) James MacKillop mentions that there are fifteen Irish saints with some form of the name (Brigid, Brighid, Brid, Bride, Bridget) in addition to the pre-Christian goddess (MacKillop 2004, 58). Green points out that 'the name Brigid ... is a title rather than an actual name and that it implies power and authority' (Green 1995, 196). O'Riain reports that 'The basic meaning of the name, 'power, authority, virtue', is also present in the cognate Brighid (Brigit). He goes on to claim that the name 'Brígh.' was common amongst the sisters at Kildare. (O'Riain 2011). The name itself implies some of the same connotations as the word 'saint' so that it may be that 'Saint Brigid' is somewhat like 'River Avon', i.e. saying the same thing twice. In the spoken form, the versions of the

name sound very much alike but when they are written, trying to determine who is being referred to can become less clear and symbolically demonstrates the futility of trying to have a definitive written life of Brigit.

Following the hymns, there are several 'lives' of St Brigit. These include the *Vita Prima (Vita I)* and the *Vita Brigitae* by Cogitosus, *The Meterical Life* by Donatus, and *Life of St Brigid* by Laurence who was the prior of Durham during the 1130s. The work by Cogitosus is from the 7th century and Connelly is now convinced that it is at least a century earlier than the *Vita Prima* (S. P.-M. Connelly 1987) which would place both the *Vita I* in the 8th century at the earliest with the *Bethu Brigitte* somewhat later than that although this is something that continues to be subjected to ongoing debate. There is very little, if anything, that can be documented without question regarding Brigit. Connelly points out that in the *Bethu Brigitte* 'Not only the Latin but the Old Irish at times corresponds word for word with *Vita I*. Besides, the order of episodes is almost identical. *Vita I* contains two paragraphs which are not in and the latter has eleven which are not in the *Vita I*.' (S. Connelly 1989, 6) O'hAodha, the translator of the *Bethu Brigitte*, concludes that both the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte* are based on a common Latin source, a *vita primitiva* (D. Ó hAodha 1978, xiv-xxv).

And yet Saint Brigit remains an enigma, seeming to both historically and contemporarily become and yet refuse to become what people want her to be. There is the St. Brigit of the Celtic church, there are stories of a pre-Christian Celtic goddess who is sometimes three people, there is a Swedish Brigit, the Welsh Fraidd and there are numerous locations of wells associated with a Saint Brigit. Oddly, 'Bridewell' is the name of prisons notably in both London and Bristol and to be 'thrown in the brig' is to be imprisoned. It is appropriate that both prisons and wells, locations often associated with her name are very liminal places.

I wanted to look at the *Bethu Brigte* because it seems to have been intended for a different audience than the Latin versions. Latin versions could have been easily written for, shared with, and read by people outside of Ireland. The *Bethu Brigte* is written in approximately 75% Old Irish with 25% in Latin (D. Ó hAodha 1978) so that while it does preserve some of the exalted position of the language of the church, it also is accessible to the Irish who might not have been educated in Latin. It could also be a way to familiarize Irish speakers who did not know Latin with the language of the church. The mix of languages is another instance of the idea of bridging dichotomies that is so much a part of the lives of Brigit. The author is not known.

It is worth considering why the *Bethu Brigte* was written. Saint Bridget was, the dossier tells us, a holy woman who founded the Christian establishment at Kildare and is supposed to have been active in the 5th and 6th centuries, possibly making her a contemporary of Patrick at a time when Ireland was becoming Christian. Delahey wrote about the influence of culture on the hagiographer and presented hagiography as a literary genre that combines biography with moral instruction (Delehay 1962). Maire Johnson points out that parallels between some of the events in common in the *Bethu Brigte* and the *Vita I* seemingly exemplify some of the 'twelve abuses' listed in The *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, the Hiberno-Latin text which Aidan Breen dates to the mid 7th century and describes as 'a series of brief but comprehensive moral-theological treatises of the chief sources of evil within humanity which lead to its damnation' (Breen 1988). Possibly the *vita primitiva* reflected some of the points of the *De duodecim*.

The *Bethu Brigte* consists of 49 sections that purportedly describe miraculous events in the life of St Brigit of Kildare. It begins with Brigit's childhood and a recognition of her Christian sanctity by a Druid. There is an echo in this of the birth of Christ in that the recognition by the pagan Druid of the infant Brigit as a holy

person recalls the recognition of Christ by the pagan Magi. There is a constant, seemingly casual intermingling of people of both the old and new faiths and we see that from the beginning. We also learn that Brigit's mother, Broicsech, was a bondswoman belonging to her father and there is, in that, an implication that Brigit may well have been the product of rape which could lead one to wonder if that event was pre-ordained as it seems that Brigit's sainthood was. The idea of a pre-ordained rape, when something other than free will compelled the begetting, is something that we see with other Celtic saints such as Saint David (Sharpe 2007, 113). If Brigit's father, Dubthach, was a rapist or polyamorous is seemingly incidental in the story of Brigit's life. We see her living in a space *between* classes, religions, and later by virtue of the power she yields, of gender. The initial section is also the first instance of fire as a signifier of holiness which is a motif in many religions and will eventually be part of the Brigidine cult and the keeping of an eternal flame (Brigidine Sisters 2022, Harrington 2002). Green points out that this fire is sometimes viewed as a correlation to Sulis Minerva at Bath (Green 1995, 196).

In section §5 the Druid to whom Brigit and her mother were sold is unable to provide Brigit with food that she can keep down because he is 'impure'. Tellingly, he resolves the dilemma by providing a white, red-eared cow which would have been a familiar motif to an Irish audience. Jessica Hemming notes that 'the war goddess known as the Morrigan transforms herself into a white heifer with red ears when she tries to destroy Cu Chulainn. There are further references to these cattle- always noted for their beauty or purity and frequently specified as coming from the fairy mounds...' (Hemming 2002). In this Christian work, the pagan gives the saint food that comes from the fairies. In §12 the Druid converts to Christianity and frees Broisach who is not heard of again. The work presents people as symbols rather than as people.

Brigit, in §6, goes to live with her father and less than admirable step mother (a very persistent stereotype) in Leinster and later a foster mother. Remniscent of the wedding at Cana, beginning in §7, we see that Brigit is always able to provide ale and food for however many people need to be fed, an ability that also seems an echo of the magic cauldron of the Dagda. The constant provisioning of food gives Brigit a maternal aspect which is an interesting trait in a figure whose virginity is paramount. She is very good with livestock, makes a lot of butter, and can heal many ailments; she is useful. Unlike some religious persons, Brigit performs miracles herself and does not need to pray for assistance thus making her seem oddly like a goddess rather than a saint who would be an intermediary and therefore need to pray for intercession. Elva Johnston questions whether it is the pagan aspects or the Christian which have made Saint Brigit such an enduring figure (E. Johnston 2002) and in her discussion of early Irish hagiography, Dorothy Ann Bray discusses the motifs of food, health, and debility as common to both the pagan and Christian concerns. (Bray 2001, 268-277). Much of the *Bethu Brigitte* seems to be comparing Brigit to sacred beings of either of the two religious streams. Interestingly, in §40 we read that Brigit ‘will not preform miracles in the prescence of the holy Patrick’ but are not told why that is, whether it is his holiness, his maleness, or something else entirely that she finds inhibiting. In tone it is somewhat similar to that of the Druid when he recognized Brigit as a Christian.

In §11, we read ‘The assembly was held where now is Kildare, and there Ibor the bishop says to the brethren: ‘This site is open to heaven and it will be the richest of all in the whole island; and today a girl for whom it has been prepared by God, will come to us like Mary.’ (D. t. Ó hAodha 2010) Promoting Kildare is expected but proclaiming that Brigit is ‘like Mary’ does, like the provisions of ale and food, come very close to equating her with the highest order of Christianity.

There are other instances that echo scripture. In §15, Bridget plucks out her eye in order to keep from having to marry and curses her brother. There is an echo of Saint Lucy in the action but, unlike Lucy, Brigit is quickly healed and can continue on in her saintly way. The controversy over §19 continues. In this section, Ó hAodha's translation reads 'The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop. 'This virgin alone in Ireland', said Mel, 'will hold the Episcopal ordination.' While she was being consecrated a fiery column ascended from her head'.

On the one hand, a female bishop was not acceptable to the men of the church hierarchy. On the other, Brigit is credited with the founding of many religious institutions and could not have done so if she was not a Bishop. Again we see Brigit able to cross boundaries. The column of fire symbolizes the sanctity of the event. Nevertheless, other than the founding of churches, Brigit does not take on the role of Bishop. Once she has taken the veil, the remainder of the *Bethu Brigitte* is basically an inventory of miracles preformed. There is much provisioning and healing and even a love potion in §45. The last extant section lets us know that she can also control weather, again seeming more like a goddess than a Christian saint. Delahaye wrote that

'If we are told that the ideas disseminated by hero-worship disposed people's minds more readily to accept the role of the saints in Christianity, as intercessors before the throne of God, I do not see any reason for disputing the statement. The undoubtedly rapid spread of the cultus of martyrs and saints may well be explained by the fact that people were already prepared for it.' (Delehay 1962, 151)

Pre-Christian Irish society had a strong oral tradition and the *Bethu Brigitte* plays into that by using the language that people would have understood and telling the story in small, easy to remember sections. Oral traditions are organic in that the

story may be altered or emphasis put on different aspects depending upon the audience. The manner and gestures of the telling can indicate meaning in ways that words alone might not. With the act of channeling the life of St Brigit of Kildare into written words, the author has, in one sense, made a claim on the narrative of St Brigit's life. Defining a life by writing it and therefore 'owning' the story was, is, a way for people to try to own her and use her to support myriad political/religious ideals. Geoffrey Ashe writes on the persecution of Christians 'in Ireland it never happened. Hence, while clerics might fulminate, the Celtic people of the islands could regard the myths of the old order in a relaxed manner and domesticate its dieties in their storytelling, disguised as kings, queens, enchanters.'" (Ashe 1990, 63) And perhaps as saints. What I find particularly satisfying is that no one completely succeeds despite centuries of effort. It seems that disguising something that cannot quite be defined and whose actual name is always slightly elusive is an exercise in futility. In keeping with her most distinguishing feature, time has become yet another of the liminal areas that Brigit seems to effortlessly wander through. While the printing press took away the humanity of scribe-written manuscripts which had somewhat codified the oral traditions, the accessibility of the printed word and now the digital word returns the stories to anyone who wants to read them and many people find a version of Brigit that means something to them whether it be as a goddess, a saint, or something else. It is possibly even harder now for any person or specific group to try to define her or control her story. St. Brigit's day and Imbolc both being on February first just serves to emphasize that she continues to be important in the more than one of the religious traditions of Ireland and that no single belief system can claim her as strictly its own.

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