

MA in MDS

HPC57005

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Assignment 1: Critical Appreciation of a Celtic saint – St BRIGIT

Saint Brigit (*also known as Brigid, Bridget, Brigidae, Brid, San Ffraid*) born around 450, although subject to much speculation, can be described as one of most significant female saints in Celtic Hagiography. The *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* (Life of Saint Brigit) by *Cogitosus* (c.650) stands as one of the primary Latin sources and one of the earliest surviving texts of this highly remarkable yet complex Celtic female saint, Brigit. Similarly, sources such as *Bethu Brigitte* (The Old Irish Life of Brigit) from the ninth century and *Vita Prima Sanctae* from possibly eighth century afford us with important cultural context and incredible miracle accounts. Just as important, one could argue, are other primary sources such as Irish martyrologies (Oengus), Irish Annals (Ulster), and Medieval Hymns and Prayers (Brigit Be Bithmaith), because they too shed light on Brigit with details of feast days and other devotional aspects. However, can one say with fair certainty that the Brigit we read in *Cogitosus'* work and subsequent Latin lives stand high above the rest as reliable and impartial accounts of her life? Do they give us an accurate and comprehensive depiction of her, or do they offer to some extent a copious retelling of miracles with Kildare as its epic center of religious power? It can be argued that the Latin lives of St Brigit deliberately depict this female Celtic saint as a holy miracle worker with the intention of establishing her as a pious, powerful being with abundant Christian qualities while also elevating Kildare as a crucial medieval religious location.

If we are to explore St Brigit from the Latin lives' perspective, we must start with The *Vita Sancta Brigidae* which dates from around 650 and was written in Latin by *Cogitosus*, an Irish monk from Kildare, Ireland. This written source is significant for many reasons, one being that it is a seventh century document making it a valuable contemporary source. There are multiple English translations of this work, including versions by Connolly and Picard in 1987 and Liam da Paor in 1993, which not only gift us the chance to learn about her in an accessible way, but also

add fuel to the debate of whether Cogitosus, *Vita I*, *Vita II*, or *Bethu Brigitte* came first or they drew from each other (see Connolly, 1989 , also Mc Cone 1982, and Sharpe, 1982). In its vernacular, *The Vita Sancta Brigitae* stands arguably as her earliest Latin life, being the first formal biography of this saint. In it, Cogitosus himself declares in the prologue that he is asked by others to write about this extraordinary woman, “*Brothers, you press me to begin an account of the miracles and works of the virgin Brigit...*” (De Paor, 2007) As one continues to read these first few lines it becomes more evident that he is a less reliable narrator than anticipated when he immediately suggests that he feels inadequate and pressured to tackle this monumental job. He describes himself as not the best choice for this task but hopes that with might, patience and audience understanding, he will prevail “*...all eyes may see clearly the great qualities of that virgin, who flourished in virtue. Not that my memory, my indifferent talent and my rustic style of writing are adequate for the performance of so great a task; but your cheerful faith and sustained prayer can help to me good the author deficiencies.*” (De Paor, 2007). Perhaps Cogitosus humbly stated this as a formulaic Latin biography standard or indeed he offered an indication that his simple words may not encompass all that St Brigit was said to be and represent at those times.

Cogitosus’ Life of St Brigit does briefly mention the saint’s parentage, also somewhat debated (see Johnston 2002), but mostly recounts her miracles and describes Kildare’s monastery in thirty-two chapters. Her abundance of miracles, which range from helping the needy and vulnerable, transforming water into ale, saving animals, and even moving a river, serve an especially important purpose. It has been argued by some (see Connolly, 1987) that this text, in a way, served as a mean to catholicize and impart Christian lessons to its readers, at a time where religion in Ireland was evolving. A common thread amongst her miracles is that they exalt pious and key religious characteristics such as faith, charity, and virginity. For instance, in chapter 8 we learn that people with leprosy asked Brigit for ale but having only water she transformed it by blessing it with the power of faith, into the much-needed ale. Additionally, in chapter 11 we learn she cures a blind man by “*following the example of the Savior*” since “*The lord has His followers license to imitate His work...*” (De Paor, 2007). Furthermore, in chapter 2 we learn that “*Brigit, inspired from above and wanting to devote herself as a chaste virgin to*

God, went to the most holy bishop Mac Caille of blessed memory. Seeing her heavenly desire and modesty and seeing so great a love of chastity in this remarkable maiden, she placed the white veil and white garment over her venerable head.” (Connolly and Picard, 2007). Her life and her miracles then can become vehicles for the qualities most desired by Christians.

More importantly, Cogitosus’ text also contains a detailed description of Kildare’s church and monastery as a major pilgrimage center, evident as said text asserts that *“She built her monastery on the plains of Mag Liffe on the firm foundation of faith. It is the head of almost all the Irish Churches with supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish and its paruchia extends over the whole land of Ireland, reaching from sea to sea”* (De Paor, 2007). This text, it seems then, successfully presents the legitimacy of Kildare as a significant religious center. Thus, also presenting Brigit as the foundational religious head of the area and confirming that for Kildare pilgrims were an integral part of the abbey’s ability to acquire income. Likewise, Cogitosus reminds the audience that Kildare’s developed into a *City of Refuge* for many, imparting charity and sanctuary to those in need: *“It is a great metropolis, within whose outskirts -which St Brigit marked out with a clearly defined boundary- no earthly adversary is feared, nor any incursion of enemies. For the city is the safest place of refuge among all the towns of the whole land of the Irish, with all their fugitives...”* (De Paor, 2007). Undoubtedly, Cogitosus’ work gives us valuable insight into Kildare structure and physical relevance; however, one can argue that it also served the institutional interests of the monastery.

As other Latin lives of St Brigit developed (Vita I, Vita II, Vita III) and more miracle stories and prophetic elements emerged, we continue to see her charity and wisdom center stage. In *Vita I* (or *Vita Prima*) there are examples of Brigit’s unique healing powers as well, such as when she heals a crippled old woman: *“...he set his mother down on the ground upon saint Brigit’s shadow. And as soon as the woman had touched the shadow she got up and said, ‘I thank God because immediately I touched your shadow, O holy one of God, I was healed and free of pain.’”* (Connolly, 1989). In this text too we find a strong connection of St Brigit to St Patrick. Here in addition to meeting Patrick’s disciplines, Brigit also meets with Patrick more than eight times, declaring yet another valuable religious connection for this female saint. For example, in chapter 39 when a woman who claimed to have had a baby by a certain bishop of St Patrick’s

group of disciples, Brigit is called to settle the issue and “*so saint Brigit made the sign of the cross of Christ in the woman’s mouth and at once her whole head and tongue swelled up. But even at that she did not repent. Then Brigit blessed the baby’s tongue and said to him Who is your father...*” (Connolly, 1989) to which the truth came out, absolving the bishop of any wrongdoing. Also, in *Vita Prima* for instance, one can gleam an additional purpose that the text served to establish ownership of lands, for instance in chapter 42 as “*St Laisre offered herself and her place to saint Brigit in perpetuity*” (Connolly, 1989).

Historically speaking, one must include the reality of the religious landscape during the fifth and sixth centuries, to which the Latin lives contribute significant information. At this time, Irish Christian spirituality, which can be traced back to the period from 400 CE to 800 CE, was transforming as Ireland was transitioning from a substantial pagan belief system to a more polished version of the Christian religion. It seems fair to state that during this period there was a gradual move towards Christianity and monasteries becoming key centers of learning, political power, and community services. Brigit became a powerful messenger for this, as well as an instrument to legitimate Kildare’s purpose and significance. Authors like Lisa Bitel and Thomas Charles-Edwards reminds us that St. Brigit was promoted as a saint whose “*presence imparted a quality of sanctity to the land*”. (Bitel, 2009).

Similarly, it can be argued that her Latin lives do provide examples of contemporary gender roles as a means to exalt her unique yet powerful divine attributes. In medieval times when women were not typically in charge and were in fact more prone to subordination, Brigit not only performs a wide array of miracles but also founds a monastery, administers monastery business, and meets with significant figures that require her knowledge and assistance. In Connolly’s translation of *Vita I* for example we learn in chapters 48, 49, and 53 that a certain queen came to visit her with gifts, a certain king come to celebrate Pentecost with her, and that bishop Cellan visited too. (1989)

On the other hand, “*many of her attributes have long been considered transferences from a Celtic deity of the same name, consisting of tripartite manifestations and association with fire and light*” (Bacola, 2021). In fact, authors like Meredith Bacola and Lisa Lawrence

present the argument that the presence of fire can provide a strong connection between St Brigit and the goddess Brigit. If one sets out to explore St Brigit's Irish life, primarily as showcased in *Bethu Brigte* and its translation into English *The Old Irish Life of St Brigit*, one can begin to see her in a new light; even contemplate if her audience gladly received and connected to the more traditional Irish elements mentioned there as being part of her identity. *Bethu Brigte* written in the 800s both in Irish and Latin, with more native Irish elements than the Latin lives, succeeds in asserting in general a stronger connection to folk traditions as well as to natural elements and landscapes. For example, it contains instances of the saint and the element of fire, often associated with the Celtic goddess Brig – “*In the middle of the night the druid was watching the stars and saw a fiery column arising of the house in which were the slave and the maiden.*” (O'Brien, 1938). Similarly, in her Irish life we learn of her enduring fire kept alive by the nuns at the *Church of Oak* (Kildare) which is significant as oaks are sacred in Irish traditions. Likewise, Brigit's associations to fire and light can be interpreted further as a driving force in the choice of a February 1st feast day, which can be linked to the pagan spring festival Imbolc. (see Bacola, 2021)

When one examines closely all these lives one can see distinctions between them but also it would be wise to keep in mind, as hinted above too, that they may have had at their core, different audiences and purposes in mind. And where her Latin lives venerate her as a saint and present her as holy in several ways in order to transmit key religious qualities to the audience, her Irish life reminds us too of her connection to the pagan world and the Christian one. For instance, in *The Old Irish Life of St Brigit* she is presented with an emphasis on her role as “Mary of the Gael”. In chapter 11 Brigit is begged by a nun to address a group of saints of Leinster and in that group a bishop had related a dream about Mary “*...I saw this night the maiden Mary in a dream and that a certain venerable cleric said to me ‘This is Mary who will dwell among you’... Just then the nun and Brigit came to the assembly. ‘This is Mary who was seen by me in a dream among you’...*” (O'Brien, 1938) Under this light, Brigit can be seen as the Irish version of the Virgin Mary, giving the reader a strong sense that she too had the sacred aspiration to be associated with the virtues of Mary Mother of God. Additionally, “*...these two vitae (Vita Prima and Bethu Brigte) made the very first hints that Brigit's sanctity was greater, not despite but*

because of her gender and pagan reputation. They hinted that her femaleness gave her territorial and numinous powers.... that she governed the landscapes of Ireland long before Patrick and Christianity ever came to Ireland.” (Bitel, 2004).

There seems also to be common threads between the Latin and Irish lives of St Brigit which showcase the saint performing miracles and confirming her exceptional standing in the community. They serve too as a link between pre-Christian and Christian traditions, and a symbol of Irish Christian identity. Both St Brigit and St Patrick are widely recognized as part of Irish traditions and contributed to the distinguishing character of Irish Christianity, albeit with slightly different focuses, with St Brigit’s displaying nurturing and monastic traditions. It is said by some that Brigit was claimed as having created the first Irish double monastery model where both men and women co-existed. (see Callan, 2019 and Birge, 2024). Additionally, it is worth briefly mentioning the value in exploring text authorship within the gender context as *“Irish hagiographers were men, and the experiences of the female saint are described and imagined by men”* (Johnston, 2002). One can argue the same about Cogitosus’ and others’ work. In consequence, one may set out to challenge all together the dispositions of such authors when it comes to an unbiased depiction of her, and any other female saint.

However, to examine the Latin and Irish lives independently is rather detrimental as it devoids them of their richness and interconnectivity. It is undeniable that the Latin lives set out to glorify Brigit and set her firmly as a venerable saint. These lives do emphasize St Brigit’s wisdom, chastity, charity, and female leadership, valuable qualities in a medieval saint; all of which also can be taken as a reframe of Irish ways within a Christian view. Nonetheless, one can also question if these Latin lives in reality frequently exhibit cultural appropriation of Irish aspects and significant political interests at the time. As such then they can become less reliable sources, thus giving way to intellectual conflict where one can argue that the Latin lives should not stand in isolation. It seems evident that the Latin lives were a vehicle driven by a clear purpose and assimilated pre-Christian Celtic practices into more Christian ones, used Brigit’s narrative as a tool to foster and promote Christian values, and placed Kildare monastery as an influential ecclesiastical epicenter. In light of this, and aided by the written work of various authors and historians, one valid interpretation to put forward is that the Latin lives fall short of

offering a comprehensive image and biography of St Brigit. Therefore, it can be suggested that to truly be able to see Brigit in a more complete light and justly evaluate her religious and Celtic legacy, her Latin and Irish lives should be studied together, not merely as opposing forces but rather as converging references that shape her identity.

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