

To what extent is landscape important in the Lives of the Celtic Saints? Illustrate your answer with reference to the traditions associated with one particular saint from the Celtic regions.

“Celtic Britain” (nowadays the areas of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and parts of Northern England) has a strong cultural heritage which has enabled the peoples of these areas to maintain discrete identities and senses of separate nationhoods, and of which early Christianity was a vital part. The rural landscapes of these areas are rich in material heritage of Celtic Christianity, in the forms of churches, standing stones, sacred trees and holy wells, as well as remote spaces (Wooding:195), and provide plentiful resources for learning about the spiritual history of their places and their links to the saints whose stories and significance were only later manifested in textual form.

Of course the connection between the natural features of the landscape and religion did not arrive with Christianity, but was already a core feature of existing religious beliefs: “...the essence of Celtic religion was the recognition of the supernatural in all aspects of nature - in trees, water, mountains and the sun. Accordingly, sanctuaries were frequently associated with natural features” (Aldhouse-Green:167). Existing spiritual understandings and practices of the areas were incorporated into the new Christian belief system, enriching theological and cosmological ideas with a deep understanding of the importance of the natural aspects of the new God’s Creation, and this gives a multi-layered picture to be considered for the purposes of this question.

The significance of landscape in this matter is enhanced by the work of anthropologist Christopher Tilley whose work explores the relationships between humans and non-human aspects of the landscape and redefines the “subject/object” assumptions which are often inherent to modern studies (e.g. Tilley:22). When we are able to recognise that these features of the landscape possess agency in their own right, we can better understand the powers they held and effected to the people who identified and created them. The conceptualisation of landscape is further enhanced by the work of another anthropologist, Tim Ingold, for whom landscape means more than an arrangement of physical phenomena but is rather an interaction of place, human activity and time (e.g. Ingold:2016). Ingold’s insights into human movement and dwelling and the interactions of these with particular places opens up ontological boundaries which may enable us to deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of being present within the landscape and the implications of these legacies left by the Celtic saints and those devoted to them.

The above point is illustrated by the phenomenon of pilgrimage, a recurring expression of spiritual journeying and “For the Celtic Church....a fundamental expression of the Christian life.” (Aist:3), featuring in both the devotions to and stories of many of the Celtic saints including the particular one I shall be discussing below. Aist identifies three main themes being expressed by pilgrimage through landscapes in the Lives of the Celtic saints. The journey itself can be understood as a metaphor for the earthly life, as in the writings of St. Columbanus (Aist:4), with features of the landscape representing its pleasures (such as life-giving water) and perils (such as dangerous seas). Alternatively the wanderings of saints and those following in their footsteps can be understood as “Abrahamic” pilgrimage (Ibid:9): the experience of spiritual exile and of living outside one’s homeland in the way of Abraham wandering in the desert (Genesis:12-22). The movements across landscapes of Saint Patrick and Saint Brendan are presented in this manner, these men achieve sainthood through their strategies of focussing on God and bringing the gospel to the places in which they are exiled. Aist’s

third model for pilgrimage is teleological: a reaching of the holy city wherein there is no more suffering and one may finally reconnect with Heaven. *De locis sanctis* (On the Holy Places), by Adomnán of Iona uses this theme, comparing the holy island of Iona to the holy city of Jerusalem, a place filled with angels and running with rivers of life (Aist:9). In short, a physical landscape or place can represent a spiritual state or goal.

Having set the scene with a selection of themes and ontologies I now turn to a particular saint through whose traditions I hope to explore the question in hand more deeply. As the patroness saint of Ireland and with a cult which reached across the British Isles and into parts of Europe (Jones:195) Saint Brigid is one of the most prominent of the Celtic saints and yet this is not because her work and achievements during her life are made clear. In fact there are doubts over whether an historical figure actually existed, as the extant annals give differing dates for her life and death showing that even the Irish clerics who first recorded Brigid had little certain information about her. The sources we do have today are from the later hagiographical Lives of Cogitosus, writing around 650AD, the anonymously written Vita Prima (so called because it was assumed to predate Cogitosus although this is now doubted) and the Bethu Brigte, also written by an anonymous monk around 800AD. In addition to these, hymns, genealogies, poems and anecdotes can flesh out or be used in critical comparison to test or better understand the content of the extant Lives. It must be borne in mind, both when interpreting the Lives and in consideration of St Brigid in the landscape, that hagiography as a genre is not devoted to presenting raw historical data but is rather more fluid and subject to influence by political and theological imperatives and ideologies. An important part of this consideration is the gendered assumptions about women, and what it was to be a holy woman, for a male celibate scribe working within middle Medieval Western Christianity and its preoccupations with female asceticism and chastity. As well as this consideration there is that of the overlap with the other main form of storytelling and literature of the time which in this case was the Irish sagas, and there are frequent identifications between local saints and mythological heroes, hence the belief by some that Brigid was in fact the Christianisation of an older, Pagan Celtic goddess (Johnston:61). Indeed, Brigid is identified strongly with nature throughout the later two Lives (the Vita Prima and the Bethu Brigte) and it could appear on early examination that this indicates a Pagan more than a Christian figure. However, I shall explore below how Christian writers employed natural and landscape motifs in order to strengthen Brigid's Christian identity rather than this being a remnant of pre-Christian heroine myths.

Whilst our sources for Saint Brigid are not tidily chronologically linear, it appears that Cogitosus' Life is our earliest extant text, and in order to provide some structure to my discussion I shall therefore consider what this source offers us before moving onto the others. If Brigit's bodily existence is doubted, her mythological existence is magnificently brought to life and her life brought to bear on tangible, geographical Ireland by Cogitosus' work. Cogitosus in mid-7th century Ireland was one of a tiny minority of literate people yet he knew how to impart his concept to the majority who learned through symbolic and sensory information. His writing was intended to be read publicly at gatherings, a performance piece (Johnston:63), and it employs space, pilgrimage and natural features as its language. There are two main features which differentiate Cogitosus' Life from the later ones, firstly its concentration on the humanmade, Christianised landscape and secondly its acceptance of Brigid's authority as the abbess of this landscape (female authority was regarded with far less acceptance by the time the later Lives were written, one of the reasons historians are able to date them). The work is composed of 32 chapters, each of which details a miracle performed by Brigid. Her early miracles reflect the circumstances of her early life and involve domestic and pastoral events

such as producing enough butter to feed the hungry and enabling a dry harvest on a wet day, and as her eminence increases her miracle working reaches larger and less domiciliary scales of moving trees, manifesting liturgical paraphernalia, and facilitating the building of a grand church. Cogitosus' Life describes Brigid's church at Kildare as a vast monastic city, in the style of the "Jerusalem" pilgrimage model outlined above, though in this case Rome is used as the model for the holiest place on Earth. Here Brigid has created a safe sanctuary, the goodness of which spreads to the natural landscape around it, for the benefit of all good Christian pilgrims. Cogitosus emphasises that Brigid always returns to Leinster and to Kildare at its heart after travelling around Ireland leaving new churches. *"Their episcopal and conventual see spread on all sides like a fruitful vine with its growing branches and struck root in the whole of Ireland."* (Chapter 28; quoted in Connolly & Picard:23). His description of the Kildare church creates a sensory experience invoking the grandest and holiest of cathedrals, detailing its decoration, where its lamps were, where Brigid's remains lay near the altar, how its choirs were organised, where its liturgies and other prayer should take place. It is a sensory invocation of a different time and space, a new cosmology, with Brigid as the instigator, which must have been very attractive to its audiences who were still getting to grips with the new cosmological ideas and culture brought by Christianity. (It almost seems churlish of me to mention that there is no other historical or archaeological evidence remaining for a construction of this physical grandeur, and that the latter cathedral buildings for which evidence remains are on a much more modest scale. (Bitel:161)) In Cogitosus' Life Brigid's body is present as her relic at the cathedral at Kildare, showing that she has personally achieved triumph over a primitive pastoral existence, and making the idea of Brigid into a real physical presence for her would-be devotees. This reflects the political and religious landscape of the time whereby a person of spiritual or religious influence was brought under the umbrella of the Church and their identity and culture Romanised, whilst their personhood was identified with a geographical place in order to promote its importance (a phenomena which can be seen in the histories of many other saints, perhaps most notably St. David). Brigid's presence however returns to the natural landscape in her later Lives to which I now turn.

Whereas Cogitosus devised Brigid as a builder and organiser of civilized spaces, the authors of Vita Prima and Bethu Brigte *"presented her as an intermediary between the historic pagan wilderness and the enclosed Christian society of forts, monasteries, and churches."* (Bitel:165). Again, landscape is used subtly but powerfully to convince audiences of a new representation of the saint. Cogitosus shows us a powerful monastery at Kildare with both a female abbess and a male bishop, and this is confirmed by monastic annals from 639AD until 936AD, which also show how episcopal and monastic rule gradually passed from the people who were most pious and learned to members of Leinster's ruling elite families, the rigid social structures of which included strongly differentiated gender roles. Tírechán's Life of Saint Patrick (accessed online: link referenced below) written in the early 9th century illustrates this shift better than Brigid's own hagiographies, depicting monastic men as superior to women's religious communities who had no institutional authority over them. Despite her faith, virtue and wisdom, political and clerical structures meant that Brigid had to be relocated away from the power base of the cathedral and monastery at Kildare.

Both the later Vitae have the baby Brigid travelling through Connacht, which is far from her native land, crying out *"this will be mine!"* (Bitel:175) in order to indicate her dominance of provinces beyond Kildare and thus the rights of her ecclesiastical successors to collect revenues under her putative authority. As her life goes on she continues to travel throughout Ireland demonstrating her holiness and working miracles, but in the open landscape or in farmyards and kitchens. The later hagiographers do not show Cogitosus' gradual teleological movement of Brigid towards the powerbase at Kildare but continue to locate her in the rural landscape where she shows mastery of nature and protection for others who are themselves travelling within the landscape. Brigid is

celebrated but her authority of the ecclesiastical powerhouse at Kildare has been relinquished. Her location within the landscape now symbolises something quite different.

All the three Lives agree that Brigid was born in Leinster to a bondmaiden (slave) named Broicsech who was impregnated by a nobleman (a free client of the king of Leinster) called Dubthach. This was a common happening at the time, with neither the bonded women nor their subsequent offspring having any legal rights or privileges despite the actions of the noblemen (Johnston:63). Brigid's case was different though. While she was still in her mother's womb, according to the Vitae, she was sold to an Ui Neill poet, then to a druid whose parents were from Munster in the north of Ireland and Connacht in the south, meaning that even before her birth she had connections through her households throughout the provinces of Ireland. Also whilst still in her mother's womb, she was travelling through Ireland in a chariot with both her mother and her father, an occurrence which historically would have been most unusual for two people of different social strata but which mythologically presents a powerful image of a male and female and their procreant moving dynamically throughout the landscape. As they passed the house of a druid Brigid somehow communicated her presence to him, and he came out of his house and prophesied to Dubtach "*take good care of this woman, for the child she has conceived will be extraordinary*" then advised Brigid's pregnant mother "*You will give birth to an illustrious daughter who will shine in the world like a sun in the vault of heaven.*" This imagery presents audiences with clear themes of pre-Christian significance and revitalises the importance of the druids and of natural phenomena in the mental landscape of early Christian Ireland. Brigid's mother goes on to give birth to her on the threshold (a liminal symbol) of the druid's house just after milking cows (a symbol of nourishment) and Brigid is then washed in the pure new milk (another common motif in native mythology and the written heroic sagas). Another druid confirms the prophecy of the first saying he saw a column of fire rising from the house where the baby is, which echoes both the fiery shafts which shoot from the heads of heroes in the Irish sagas and the fire and flames of Christian imagery when a person is empowered by God, such as Moses (in Exodus:3) or the new Christians at Pentecost (in Acts:2). According to these literary devices then, at her moment of entering the world, Brigid is connecting Ireland's pagan past of magic and druids to its Christian future of saints and miracles.

Brigid radiating fire continues as a motif throughout the Vitae, as several times people are panicked by fireballs which leave Brigid and those under her protection unharmed. As with other stories of Brigid, this would impact its listeners with their associations with fire and link their traditional understandings with Christian emphases. Likewise, the young Brigid would only drink milk from a white cow with red ears, a creature familiar as magical in Irish mythology, but would refuse food prepared in the house of a druid, thus rejecting the nourishment of the old religion.

Brigid continues to travel and be uncontained by manmade boundaries, again echoing the heroes and heroines of earlier myths, but also indicating her ecclesiastical rule which is recognised by the characters she encounters and thus by readers and listeners of her hagiographies. In the Bethu Brigte version, in the episode described above where the baby Brigid claims Connacht, she makes her pronouncement in Latin although the story itself is written in Irish, whilst lying in the shape of a cross. Her use of ecclesiastical language and postures marks her as being no mere layperson, and as a missionary in the uncivilised regions of Ireland. This caused resentment in Connacht, and the druid's household in which Brigid and her mother live are expelled by their neighbours. The druid however recognises Brigid's authority and power beyond the bonds of slavery and existing territorial claims, and he himself converts to Christianity and releases Brigid's mother from her slave bond. Brigid then goes to live with a Christian foster mother in Leinster, thus completing a geographical circuit of Ireland (from conception in Leinster to Ui Neill territory then Connacht then Munster then

back to Leinster) which would have been recognised as a complete cycle in the manner of the heroes' cycles of the sagas.

Like all good female saints (e.g. St. Winefride, St. Ursula), the teenage Brigid came under pressure to marry but resisted, and was eventually allowed to make her vows of chastity and take the veil, at the moment of which she manifested another fiery column and touched a wooden altar rail in the cathedral which instantly became living wood and remains a green, living tree into the times of all three hagiographers, although their accounts differ as to what species of tree it was. The accounts also differ in their identifications of the bishop presiding at Brigid's consecration, an overt divulgence of their differences in political loyalties which are in other parts of the *Vitae* more subtly indicated. As in the episode of her babyhood, the event takes place in the Latin language, emphasising the importance of the event and Brigid's transcendence from common personhood to a superior way of being. According to the *Bethu Brigitte*, the bishop was so overwhelmed by her presence that he mixed up the liturgies and accidentally consecrated Brigid as a bishop, which he attributed to being "intoxicated by the grace of God" and therefore interpreted as an act of God thus allowing Brigid to be the *only* female bishop in Ireland, although Brigid was suitably humble enough not to enjoy the full privileges of this and still sought out male priests when someone requested baptism. She continued to travel throughout the land performing miracles of healing, feeding the hungry, preventing banditry and murder, and bringing peace and founding communities of vowed women (who remained nameless). In Cogitosus' *Vita* Brigid's travels always start and finish in Leinster, reflecting the political power balance of the time, whereas in the latter two *Vitae* she travels throughout the provincial landscape and eventually completes several circuits of Ireland. The *Vita Primae* emphasises her relationship with Saint Patrick, patron of territories which has by the 8th century when it was written become the more politically powerful. In this way Brigid's power is acknowledged, but the writer is careful to show audiences that it should co-exist with Patrick's authority. Indeed, eager to prevent Brigid's accidental ordination becoming a precedent for female episcopal authority, motifs of femininity are employed to make clear the differences between a faithful and virtuous woman and a divinely appointed religious authority.

One of the ways in which this was done was by locating most of Brigid's miracles (with the exception of her bringing the wood to life at her veiling) outside the physical church architecture having her wayfaring throughout natural landscapes instead of exercising her power within the male precincts of the cathedral (which ironically Cogitosus said was raised by her). According to the *Vita Primae* (chapter 21) one of her crucial miracles took place while she was literally on the move. Noticing from her chariot a household of people weary from travelling with heavy loads, she offered them her chariot then sanctified the spot by miraculously ordering a well to appear. This provided much needed refreshment for the travellers she had stopped to assist, but suddenly a chieftain with his armies also travelled past in need of water and were also given refreshment, at which point who else but Saint Patrick himself and his followers came past weary and in need of water. Some scholars (e.g. Bitel:182) have noticed that this congregation of people from all walks of the social spectrum mirrors the congregation present in Cogitosus' cathedral. Whereas Cogitosus has Brigit leading high worship and presiding at the sacramental table, this version excludes her from such sanctified abilities and instead emphasises the everyday practices of eating and drinking and giving thanks together nowhere near a church. Another episode has Brigid travelling through Ui Neill territory and aiding Patrick to resolve a dispute with another bishop as to who is the father of a woman's new born baby. In resolving the dispute Brigid shows her powers, but also confirms the lack of power and virtuosity of the other bishop in order to increase Patrick's moral superiority over him, in this way the story asserts Patrick's claims to authority over Ui Neill territory. Later on in the same location, Brigid is invited to dinner at a man's house and causes him to convert to Christianity. This is another

miracle which occurs in a domestic space, she is not allowed to perform the sacrament of baptism which formalises this though, this must be performed by a male priest inside a church, meanwhile she continues travelling (driven by a male charioteer) throughout unbuilt landscapes enacting more miracles.

Brigid's control over the material world sometimes altered people's perceptions of their physical landscape, for example in chapter 47 of the *Vita Prima* her befuddlement of a man who got so lost in his "own native place" led him to a church, and in chapter 85 other travellers who miraculously but unintentionally on their part ended up bringing gifts to the religious house at Kildare. In chapter 55 of the *Vita Prima*, Brigid is with Saint Patrick and while he is preaching a sermon in his cathedral she falls asleep and is given a vision directly from God of herself leading ploughmen who are sowing good seed and reaping new milk in a fruitful land. This confirms the differentiation of environments in which the male and the female saints are to enact their missions. Whilst we may recognise Brigid as being equally spiritually gifted, she accepts her role as a woman, facilitating male ministry, and even agreeing to weave Saint Patrick's burial shroud after his death (Ibid: chapter 58). In a text called *Liber Angeli* (Book of the Angel), written after Cogitosus but before the later *Lives*, a compromise is reached by which Brigid agrees to retain control of Leinster only whilst Saint Patrick is given dominion over the rest of Ireland. As detailed above, in the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* Brigid has dominion over Ireland but not ecclesiastical authority: this is conferred on Patrick only. Rather, her dominion is over the natural landscape, a feminine, nurturing power which is likened to that of the Virgin Mary (chapter 11 of *Bethu Brigte* refers to her as "Mary of the Gael") rather than a saviour herself as previously portrayed by Cogitosus. Patrick's hagiographers detail the relics he leaves in the churches he has founded, Brigid meanwhile is no longer present in this form but in the blessings, healings and feedings she offers people around the countryside.

In summarising my arguments above, I would like to return to the contrast of Cogitosus' model of the built environment against later hagiographers' depictions. For Cogitosus, Christian missionary activity in Ireland brought building, settlement and roads, signifying its civilizing influence and representing a new order of cosmology. The later works, on the other hand, depict Brigid as a more ephemeral being, travelling not by conventional roads but almost magically throughout the physical landscape as through space and time. Above I have largely ascribed this differentiation to the gendered as well as the political landscapes within which they were written, arguing that Brigid was conferred with supreme spiritual power over Ireland, and that her subsequent relocation outside of the cathedral could be seen to represent a dramatic demotion. Personally, I do not think it necessarily needs to be understood as demotion as I shall attempt to explain.

Early Christianity was ambivalent about the concept of holy places, seeing God as present in all of Creation as well as in his followers in the form of the Holy Spirit. People, however, have identified sacred spaces for themselves for millennia, and inbuilt, almost instinctual habits such as these were virtually impossible for missionaries to root out, no matter how attractive and convincing their spiritual and philosophical messages. In fact, the established Church must itself have recognised and given in to this as it gradually but solidly created holy places of its own in the form of basilicas, churches and pilgrimage sites.

The religious significance in the imagery of the natural landscape which was instinctually recognised and unquestioningly understood by peoples who learned knowledge and wisdom through storytelling and myth rather than philosophy and text was therefore the most powerful tool which could be employed in the conversion of places such as Celtic Britain, and it was an act of great insight

on the part of early hagiographers to incorporate it with the new messages they wished to get across. Whilst it is difficult to show the relevance of the story of people living in lands many thousands of miles away in cultures and landscapes unrecognisable to people on the outer fringes of Western Europe, the idea of a virtuous, caring, miracle working person could be brought to the Irish landscape in the form of someone not completely unrecognisable to audiences well used to mythological renderings of greater cosmic truths. The natural landscape is rich in motifs of both beauty and evil, nurture and danger, as seen throughout the Biblical book of Psalms as well as Celtic religious culture, and the early Christian saints were provided with a rich canvas upon which to paint their story. Further motifs such as that of the fiery pillar translate easily from one mythological system to another, and the fact that a lit fire continued to be maintained for many years at Kildare cathedral attests to the power of its symbolism for peoples of any level of education or none.

As the years went on, as the Church became more established and as patterns of political as well as religious power affected the retellings of the lives of the saints, landscape motifs continued to be employed, attesting to their enduring power. Even when the historical existence of a figure is doubtful, in the natural and the built landscape she or he can be manifested firmly. It is perhaps for this reason that the saints remain alive to us today. Humans have employed both built and natural landscapes in communicating religious ideas and effecting political control for many thousands of years, and it is our interactions with these landscapes which form our inner understandings of the world (Ingold:2016). Likewise, storytelling has always been a key tool in imparting understanding. In the Celtic saints these two powerful elements are brought together to allay our worst fears and assure us of our brightest hopes, whilst instructing us in Christian theology and virtue. Yet the saints remain alive for many who reject their overt Christian instruction, and the natural landscape inherent to their existence nonetheless inspires a similar sense of spiritual connection and hence a devotion to figures presented through these means.

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