

Critical Appreciation of Cogitosus's Life of St. Brigit.

By Peter McCormack, 2215310.

Background

The lives of the Celtic saints in written form (rather than orally transmitted) typically date from the 11th – 16th centuries. Only four lives (*vitae*) are attributed to a period nearer in time to the proposed dates of the saint in question. These are; Tirechan's *Collectanea* on St Patrick, Muirchu's *Vitae Patricii*, Adomhnan's *Vita Columbae* and Cogitosus's *Vitae Brigitae*¹ The deeds of St. Brigit are described or referenced in many early sources but it is generally agreed that her two lives in Latin (*Vita I* [*Vita Prima*] and the one under discussion here [the *Vitae Brigitae*]) along with what Oliver Davies calls 'The Irish Life of St. Brigit' in his book on Celtic Spirituality² are the most important. Scholars concur that the *Vita Brigitae* (also given as *Vita Brigitae*) was written between 650 and 690 AD³. It exists in a large number of MSS, the majority of which are listed on CODECS: Collaborative Online Database and e-Resources for Celtic Studies⁴. Davies notes the aversion early Celtic Christianity had to the written word and this might go in some way to explain why these written lives occur so late⁵. Bartlett says, 'The Irish Annals place the death of Brigit in the 520s (although these entries are not contemporary)'⁶ We can thus posit that Cogitosus wrote this text c. 150 years after Brigit passed away.

As is true of many of these works we know little or nothing about the authors themselves. Autobiographical details are usually extrapolated from the context in which the work was written and cross-referencing with other works. Connolly is brief and says of Cogitosus; 'it seems reasonably certain that he was a religious of the Brigantine monastery of Kildare'⁷ and leaves it at that.

Structure

The work opens with the usual statement of self-deprecation by Cogitosus followed by a eulogy to Brigit and an account of her establishing a monastic community with Bishop Conleth. Extremely brief details of her birth and parentage follow. The story of her life proper is principally concerned

1 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAL, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p5.

2 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p32.

3 Ibid, p32.

4 CODECS: Collaborative Online Database and e-Resources for Celtic Studies (Feb 2024), accessed 27th Feb 2024, [https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Vita_sanctae_Brigitae_\(Cogitosus\)](https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Vita_sanctae_Brigitae_(Cogitosus)).

5 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p14.

6 Bartlett, R, (2013), *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, p33.

7 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAL, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p5.

with listing her miracles. Connolly and Picard list 32 miracles in total⁸. These – with some notable exceptions – deal in the main with the provision of food/livestock and healing the sick. The exceptions make interesting reading and are discussed in more detail below. The final passages of the story give a description of the church at Kildare (though Kildare, as such, is never mentioned in the text) and how it accommodates those in attendance at Mass, etc. Cogitosus concludes with a further declaration of his lack of qualifications for the task of composing Brigit's life and asks that readers to pray for him.

The Text

Apologia

Cogitosus's 'self-effacing' opening remarks are particularly strident in this text. In the opening paragraph he is 'compelled' by his brethren. In the second paragraph 'constrained' by their commands and in paragraph three their 'blessed faith' in him and their 'daily prayers'... 'deserved a reward' (i.e. his composing of the life). Again in paragraph seven he reiterates that he is 'compelled' by the brethren⁹. The reason for this urgency is given in paragraph four when he states that Kildare (i.e. Brigit's monastic 'city') 'is the head of almost all the Irish Churches with supremacy over all the monasteries and its *paruchia* extends over the whole land'. At this point in time there was controversy over the supremacy of churches in Ireland¹⁰, Kildare vying with Armagh and the legacy of St. Patrick, the 'Apostle of Ireland'¹¹. Cogitosus, we can claim with some confidence, is making a case on behalf of Kildare. In fact, he seems under instruction to do so.

Style

Cogitosus presents his story well. He has a facility for descriptive and dramatic passages. His account of rain runs; 'rain poured down in torrents all over the surrounding provinces and overflowing streams of water coursed in spate through the glens and fissures of the land'¹². Again when describing the descent of the millstone (miracle 32 in the Connolly/Picard list) he writes, 'And so, toppling it down with strong faith, they let it descend by itself and it gradually came downhill, now avoiding rocks, now jumping over them, running along the wet ground which lay at the bottom and was so deep that neither men nor oxen could stand in it; and it went along with them in marvellous procession, without any fragment being chipped off, to the level ground where the

8 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p12.

9 *ibid*, p11-p12.

10 Bradley, Ian (1999), *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, Edinburgh University Press, P2.

11 Bartlett, R, (2013), *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, p173.

12 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p14.

oxen were'¹³ He captures the scene perfectly. When Brigit is 'sowing the most salutary seeds of the Lord's word in the hearts of all according to her habitual custom, she saw nine men¹⁴ in a certain peculiar guise required by a godless and diabolical superstition, shouting in a grotesque tone of voice and showing signs of utter insanity, and in their paths lay destruction and misfortune'¹⁵ Druids, no doubt, with their behaviours skilfully filtered through a Christian sensibility by Cogitosus.

Cogitosus's eulogising of Brigit starts early when she is 'chosen by God'¹⁶ and is peppered throughout the work. She is rarely mentioned without some suitable epithet; 'our holy Brigit'¹⁷, 'our most blessed Brigit'¹⁸, 'venerable Brigit'¹⁹ His earnest devotion to her is seen in this.

Miracles

There is a domesticity to Brigit's miracles in comparison to that – say – of St. David. In the main they are practical, day-to-day help-outs. She gives butter and milk away yet it is miraculously restored (Miracle 1²⁰). She gives bacon to a dog yet it is restored (Miracle 3²¹). Extra milk from a cow (Miracle 5²²). Water turned to ale (Miracle 8²³). Stone turned to salt (Miracle 10). Honey appearing under a floor (Miracle 29²⁴). Another miracle (13) in which a dog yet again gets the bacon but it is restored...and a deal more involving missing livestock etc. that are miraculously restored to life (Miracle 26 – for example) or saved from destruction (Miracle 19²⁵). Even her miracle of saving a millstone from destruction has at its root the ensuring of bread for the community (though not for Druids!²⁶). She even has the power to reduce appetite (Miracle 23²⁷). Her faith causes a large tree to be moved out of the way helping 'those who ply their trade in a timber forest'²⁸, i.e. workers who need to earn their daily bread. Hunger is a constant in the lives of these people. No miracle is greater than that which assuages it.

13 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAL, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p25.

14 Thrice three, a sacred number in Celtic Mythology. Further evidence of Druidism perhaps?

15 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAL, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p20.

16 Ibid, p13.

17 Ibid, p15.

18 Ibid, p16.

19 Ibid, p15.

20 Ibid, p13.

21 Ibid, p14.

22 Ibid, p15.

23 Ibid, p15.

24 Ibid, p23.

25 Ibid, p18.

26 Ibid, p25.

27 Ibid, pp.20-21.

28 Ibid, p21.

It is interesting to note that Cogitosus only mentions honey once in his narrative and this in a situation where there was none available for a petitioner before Brigit's miraculous intervention. She was 'grieving in her heart at not having any honey to hand'²⁹. A hive is found – rather haphazardly – under floor boards. Yet honey was a significant component of diet and medical treatment (especially in the case of monks and nuns who lived on bread and water if the Rule of David³⁰ and the Rule of Columbanus³¹ are to be regarded at standard) at the time. The Breton Laws (written down in 700 AD but existing in oral form for centuries before that) have 20 pages of laws dealing with honey, bees, hives, etc. 'The honeybee (Old Irish *bec*) was very important in the early Irish economy, as demonstrated by the special law-text...Bechbretha ('bee-judgments'), composed in the seventh century'³². Curiously, St David (c.500 – c.589) is credited with a miracle in which he sends bees to Ireland, a place where – prior to the miracle – it was 'well-known that they were unable to survive there previously'³³. If their dates are correct he would have been a contemporary of St Brigit. Bees, of course, were also necessary for candle wax. This begs the question: what, if any, was the status of beehives at Kildare?

Cogitosus also presents Brigit as motherly figure. She is far from being remote though she can be distracted in an otherworldly 'saintly' way; '...her mind was absorbed in meditation upon heavenly things, as was her regular custom'³⁴. No one who comes to her goes away empty-handed. She always finds away. Cogitosus in Miracle 27 where she is approached by three lepers for help describes her as 'that most cheerful of women'³⁵. In the miracle 12 she is one 'who is affable and cheerful to all'³⁶. Here, in Miracle 12 she holds the hand of a reticent girl – allegedly dumb – until she gets a response. There is something very cogent in this description and one gets the impression that Cogitosus is telling us about a real woman. Indeed, maybe a cunning woman with touches of 'traditional' ways: in Miracle 9 she removes a pregnancy presumably for a nun (one who had taken 'a vow of virginity'³⁷). I think it likely that this refers to an abortion. Scholars debate that Brigit is based or linked to a Celtic goddess, a goddess of fire³⁸. I don't see that this comes across in Cogitosus's work. Davies stresses a link to the sun in one of the miracles in Cogitosus concerning

29 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p23.

30 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, pp191-213.

31 Ibid, pp246-259.

32 Trinity College Dublin, Director's Uncut, <https://www.tcd.ie/library/exhibitions/directors-choice/brehon-law/>, 22nd April 2020, accessed 4th March 2024.

33 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p205.

34 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's '*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*'. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p17.

35 Ibid, p22.

36 Ibid, p16.

37 Ibid, p16.

38 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p32.

the sun³⁹ (Miracle 6⁴⁰). But the sun is an ubiquitous symbol in Christianity (not to mention Christ as Apollo⁴¹) as evidenced, for example, even as late as the 19th century by the famous Anglican hymn written in 1827 ‘Sun of my Soul, thou Saviour Dear,’ by John Keble (1792-1866)⁴². Must we account for Gerald of Wales’s noting a sacred fire at Kildare tended by 19 nuns (with Brigit tending it herself on the twentieth night) as being a pagan fire?⁴³ We do not know what Brigit and her nuns believed. They were baptized for the remission of sin, no doubt. This is the *sine qua non* of the Christian faith. The Eucharist at Mass and Psalms in the various hours of prayer. (The current seven sacraments were set out in the Sentences by Peter Lombard, and these seven were confirmed by the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215⁴⁴) But as to Christology, the nature of the Trinity, the ‘heresy’ of Pelagius: what did she actually believe? Cogitosus doesn’t tell us.

Cogitosus closes his text with an elaborate description of Kildare, stating ‘a city gets its name from the fact that many people live there’⁴⁵. Kildare, of course, means Church of the Oak. ‘Cill’ though used to describe a church/chapel stems from the Latin ‘cella’, a room. The reference to the oak suggests a Druid holy place. Kildare is in the middle of the Central Plain and was ‘used as a meeting site during Pre-Christian societies’⁴⁶. Yet the original habitation must have been modest⁴⁷ not the ‘vast metropolitan city’⁴⁸ of Cogitosus. DePaor’s translation goes: “City’ is the right word for it: that so many people are living there justifies the title’⁴⁹ This cannot mean that it was urban in the medieval or modern sense. The population of Ireland at this time is c 450,000⁵⁰.

If we think beyond the term the ‘city’, and consider the wider area we are dealing with The Curragh, a flat green open plain, we may get a truer sense of the reality Cogitosus is describing of when he speaks of ‘outlying suburbs’, which must refer to farmsteads (ringforts) etc. But his

39 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p466 (Note 88).

40 Connolly S & Picard J M, Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p15.

41 Media Storehouse, <https://www.mediastorehouse.com/heritage-images/christ-shown-apollo-lyre-byzantine-4th-century-14861017.html#:~:text=Entitled%20%22Christ%20shown%20as%20Apollo,a%20lyre%20in%20his%20hands>, no date given, retrieved 8th March 2024.

42. "Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press. Web. 4 Mar. 2024. <<http://www.hymnology.co.uk/s/sun-of-my-soul,-thou-saviour-dear>>, accessed 4th March 2024.

43 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p31.

44 Cantor, Norman F. (2011), *The civilization of the Middle Ages*, Blackstone Audio, Inc., ISBN 978-1-4551-2602-6, OCLC 1035075517, retrieved 28/02/24.

45 Connolly S & Picard J M, Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p26.

46 Wikipedia, The Curragh, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Curragh, 3rd March 2024, retrieved 7/3/24.

47 See for example, Skellig Michael, built between 6th-8th centuries. https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=ed313d50f24d50b8&rlz=1C1VDKB_en-GBGB948GB948&hl=en-US&q=skellig+michael+monastery&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj-kOrP1OKEAxWMX0EAHXm9BxYQ0pQJegQIEBAB&biw=1920&bih=953&dpr=1, accessed 7th March 2024.

48 Connolly S & Picard J M, Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p26.

49 De Paor, Liam, (2007) *Saint Patrick's world: the Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*, Four Courts Press, p223.

50 What-When-How, Population Medieval Ireland, <https://what-when-how.com/medieval-ireland/population-medieval-ireland/>, no date given, retrieved 7th March 2024.

account continues with ‘who can count the different crowds and numberless people flocking from (iall the provinces’⁵¹ Surely this is hyperbole with an agenda in mind? (ise Kildare v. Armagh⁵²) Cogitiusus, of course, is writing from his own personal experience of the monastery but is it likely to be as truly ‘Christian’ as he suggests⁵³? ‘The High Kings of Ireland continued pagan practices until the reign of Diarmait mac Cerbaill c. 558’⁵⁴. Perhaps Kildare with its environs was a traditional and even pagan community with a holy Abbess, a bishop and their monastery as part the set-up.

Cogitosus takes Brigit’s miracles – often prosaic as noted above – at face value. Miracle 20⁵⁵ merely describes one fox being replaced by another, which subsequently absconds. The portions of the silver chalice all weigh the same... perhaps this is just someone being deft with a weighing scales in order to avoid continued controversy⁵⁶. The millstone that survives careering down a mountain could simply be down to the fault-free quality of the stone in the first place⁵⁷ The ‘coat on a sunbeam’ miracle could quite easily be someone seeing a large wet woollen cape entirely covering a small wooden stool/chair over which it is draped to dry in a shaft of sunlight⁵⁸. Miracle 10 surely describes rock salt which the Celts mined from ancient times on the continent⁵⁹. Perhaps it was a gift from abroad. Other examples could be cited. Cogitosus is unquestioning. This lack of what we might call a ‘modern critical faculty’ is absent with these hagiographers in general. Cogitosus is looking for reasons to believe and lives in a world where the supernatural is natural.

Translations

A number of translations of Cogitosus life of Brigit exist, translated from Hiberno-Latin to English. I have accessed those by Oliver Davies⁶⁰, Connolly & Picard⁶¹ and Liam DePaor⁶². They are each trying to produce, of course, a not only readable but what we might call a ‘felicitous’ narrative in English. They differ in style and emphasis which affects their content. What Connolly/Picard

51 Connolly, S & Picard J M , Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p27.

52 Davies W. (1992), ‘The Myth of the Celtic Church’, in Edwards N. & Lane A. (Eds), *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, p14.

53 Connolly p27.

54 Wikipedia, History of Ireland (400-795),

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Ireland_\(400%E2%80%93795\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Ireland_(400%E2%80%93795)), 6th Jan. 2024, retrieved 7th March 2024.

55 Connolly, S & Picard J M , Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p14.

56 Ibid, p23.

57 Ibid, p24.

58 Ibid, p15.

59 Salt in Ancient Ireland, <http://atriptoireland.com/2013/10/16/salt-in-ancient-ireland/>, 16th Oct 2013, retrieved 7th March 2024.

60 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, pp.122-140

61 Connolly, S & Picard J M , Cogitosus’s ‘*Life of St Brigit, Content and Value*’. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): pp.5-27.

62 De Paor, Liam, (2007) *Saint Patrick’s world: the Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age*, Four Courts Press, pp207-224.

translates as ‘the famous miracle ‘ (regarding cooked bacon being given to a dog)⁶³ Davies translate simply as ‘another miracle’⁶⁴. More complex choices have been taken: what Connolly/Picard translate as ‘your blessed faith and your daily prayers deserve a reward which is beyond the capacity of the narrator’, DePaor has as ‘your cheerful faith and sustained prayer can help to make good the author’s deficiencies.’ It would be otiose to enumerate more examples and indeed space precludes. Nonetheless in the light of historiography, and the modern theories on historicity and the interpretation of texts it would be remiss not to note that these translations are creating new intellectual properties which in themselves can be subject to critical analysis and even agendas.

Conclusions

One must conclude that Cogitosus composed his texts on the basis of what he could recall himself from what he had heard over the years. As he describes it he is ‘unsupported by any privilege of knowledge’⁶⁵. This is a somewhat formulaic nicety of speech but he does not add or express any gratitude to others who may have provided additional details, anecdotes or changes. He does make reference to stories being handed down by ‘well-informed elders’⁶⁶ These, he states, are ‘without any shadow of ambiguity’. Nonetheless we must conclude that they are uncorroborated. Cogitosus admits the need that a ‘proof-reading’ may be necessary when he states that some of his readers may set about ‘even emending this’⁶⁷ i.e. his text.

ENDS

63 Connolly, S & Picard J M , Cogitosus’s *‘Life of St Brigit, Content and Value’*. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27 , p14.

64 Davies O. et al, (1999), *Celtic Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, p125.

65 Connolly, S & Picard J M , Cogitosus’s *‘Life of St Brigit, Content and Value’*. JRSAI, vol. 117 (1987): 5-27, p27.

66 Ibid, p11.

67 Ibid, p27.