

Essay 2

Among the saints who define the spiritual character of Ireland, none is more beloved, more contested, or more deeply entwined with the ancient world she inherited than Brigid of Kildare. Brigid is widely venerated as one of the three patron saints of Ireland alongside St. Patrick and St. Columba. Brigid occupies an extraordinary position in the religious and cultural imagination of the Irish people and indeed of the wider Celtic world in Scotland, Wales and England.¹ 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. It was extinguished only by the hand of the Reformation. Her association with healing, poetry, smithcraft, and the protection of livestock reaches back not only to Christian hagiography but to a goddess of the same name celebrated in pre-Christian Ireland.^{2,3}

The difficulty in writing about Brigid is that she resists simple categorisation. 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, that scholars have long debated whether the saint was constructed to absorb and Christianise the goddess, or whether a real abbess of remarkable ability genuinely inspired enough devotion that spurred mythological layers.^{4,5} This essay will explore both of these dimensions tracing what historical evidence exists for the life of Brigid of Kildare, examining the principal hagiographies and their literary contexts, and analyzing the most important and persistent motifs that define her cult from the early medieval period to the present day.

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

²hÓgáin, Dáithí Ó, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 44–47.

³Cambrensis, Giraldus, *Topographia Hibernica*, ed. and trans. John J. O'Meara (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1951), II. xxxiv, pp. 81–83.

⁴McCone, Kim. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), pp. 162–70.

⁵O'Rahilly, T. F., *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946), pp. 314–17.

The traditional accounts of Brigid's birth are themselves deeply symbolic, placing her origins at the threshold between worlds, between the sacred and the mundane. According to the earliest hagiographies, 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 in spirit and of the unfree in law.^{6,7}

The earliest and most authoritative Latin Life of Brigid, the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, records 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.⁸ 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 not merely picturesque in Irish mythological thinking as thresholds were seen as powerful, dangerous, mysterious and sacred spaces. It was the domain of those who straddled different realms of being and may have gone on to do great and wonderful things with their life, as is the case with St. Brigid.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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

⁶Vita 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)

⁷Bethu Brigitte, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó hAodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), §§1–3, pp. 1–4.

⁸The Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February I (Antwerp, 1658), I. i, records the threshold birth;

⁹McCone, Kim. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), pp. 78–80.

¹⁰*Annals 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*."

annalistic records and do not undermine the basic historical probability of a real abbess at Kildare.¹¹

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 sacred landscape. The oak was among the most venerated of trees in the broader Celtic religion, associated with druids and with the liminal power of the natural world.¹² That Brigid's foundation should be at a place of oaks is not by accident. According to the hagiographic tradition, 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 cult center and would have made it a theologically charged choice... the Christian abbey planted in the roots of the older world.

The most widely known Latin Life of Brigid is the *Vita Sanctae Brigitae* 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's miracles but for its concluding 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 analysed Cogitosus's text as a highly deliberate piece of ecclesiastical propaganda, asserting Kildare's importance over the other churches of Leinster.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ The political subtext of Cogitosus should not, however, blind us to the historical

¹¹The 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.

¹²Green, 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.

¹³Herbert, 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.

¹⁴Cogitosus, *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."

¹⁵Hughes, Kathleen, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London: Methuen, 1966), pp. 70–78; and Ó Riain, A *Dictionary of Irish Saints*, p. 121.

value of his narrative. Cogitosus describes the Kildare church with architectural precision that is unique in early Irish hagiography... the church 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.¹⁶

Cogitosus's *Life* preserves thirty-one chapters of miracles, including the famous episode 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.¹⁷ 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 of most lives.

Alongside the Cogitosus *Life*, scholars work with two other major sources: the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* (also known as the "First Life"), preserved in Latin and long attributed to a figure called Animosus, though this attribution is disputed. Also, the *Bethu Brigte*, a vernacular Old Irish life composed probably in the ninth century, drawing on older materials. The *Vita Prima* is significant for its preservation of what appear to be older narratives than Cogitosus, containing different miracle sequences and they have quite a more explicitly mythological atmosphere.^{18,19}

The *Bethu Brigte* 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 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 recognised in Brigid the fulfilment of a sacred power he could not himself fully comprehend. It was seemingly a

¹⁶Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 32, trans. Connolly and Picard, pp. 22–23.

¹⁷The 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.

¹⁸Bray, Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), p. 11–15.

¹⁹Ó Riain, Pádraig, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, pp. 119–20.

common hagiographic strategy for converting pre-Christian religious authority into a witness for the new faith.^{20,21}

A later but important source is the twelfth-century Life of Brigid preserved in the *Book of Lismore*, one of the great Irish manuscript collections. *The Book of Lismore* 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.^{22,23} The meeting of Patrick and Brigid is historically unlikely as the chronology makes it extremely improbable but mythically it is essential, asserting the continuity and complementarity of the two great founding figures of Irish Christianity.

The institutional achievement that anchored Brigid's historical significance was the foundation of the double monastery at Kildare which was a rich monastic community that housed both men and women, governed by an abbess who wielded authority over both. This was not unique in early medieval Christianity where the double monastery had precedents in Gaul and Britain. But the scale of Kildare's authority, its claim to spiritual primacy over all of Leinster and perhaps over all Ireland, was extraordinary.^{24,25}

Cogitosus describes the Kildare church as enclosed in a high embankment with the church itself divided as mentioned by a screen of planks hung with linen curtains, separating the male and female communities.²⁶ The description 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.

The most famous of all elements associated with Kildare is the perpetual flame, kept burning in a sacred enclosure tended exclusively by women. The

²⁰Bethu Brigte, §1, ed. and trans. Ó hAodha, pp. 1–2.

²¹McCone, Kim, Pagan Past and Christian Present, pp. 163–65.

²²Stokes, Whitley, ed., Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), pp. 182–200

²³Harrington, Chrsitina, Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450–1150 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 54–58.

²⁴Harrington, Chrsitian, Women in a Celtic Church, pp. 45–60.

²⁵Bitel, Lisa M., Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 166–72.

²⁶Cogitosus, Vita Sanctae Brigitae, ch. 32, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 22: "aream amplam vallo in altum erecto conclusam." pp. 22–23.

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 that no man was permitted to enter the sacred enclosure or there may be dire supernatural consequences.²⁷

The perpetual flame has drawn the attention of scholars interested in continuity with pre-Christian practice. Fire-tending was well established in the Roman world, and sacred fires tended by women had deep roots in the broader Celtic religion. In fact, the women still tended the hearth fire into the 20th century in Ireland and arguably, into the present. Possibly, not coincidentally, the goddess Brigid in Irish mythology was associated with the forge, the sacred smith-fire and with the hearth fire as the centre of domestic and communal life. The Christian community at Kildare appears to have absorbed and sacralised a practice whose roots may have extended deep into the pre-Christian religious landscape.²⁸

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.²⁹

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 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.’³⁰ This act... the first keening, the first formal lamentation

²⁷Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica*, II. xxxiv, trans. O'Meara, pp. 81–83.

²⁸Ó hÓgáin, *Dáithí, The Sacred Isle*, pp. 97–100; and Green, *The World of the Druids*, pp. 100–03.

²⁹Malone, Mary T., *Women and Christianity*, 3 vols (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000–03), I, pp. 237–38.

³⁰*Cath 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.

for the dead, positions the goddess Brigid as the originator of one of the most important rituals of Irish social and emotional life.

The tenth-century *Cath Maige Tuired* also associates the goddess with cattle, the land's fertility, and the power of poetry and learning.^{31, 32} 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 directly mirrored in the attributes of the Christian saint.³³

'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

MacKillop notes that the attributes of the goddess Brigid, poetry, 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. O'Rahilly 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.^{34,35}

More recent scholarship has been careful to complicate this picture. 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.^{36,37} The festival of Imbolc, the February feast associated with the beginning of spring, the first lambing, the returning light was the occasion on which Brigid's feast was

³¹Cath Maige Tuired, §125, ed. and trans. Gray, p. 54.

³² MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 44–45.

³³Cormac'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 foran dénta ceterd; Brigit léig, i.e. goddess of smithcraft... Brigit healer."

³⁴MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, pp. 44–45.

³⁵ O'Rahilly, Thomas Francis, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, pp. 314–17.

³⁶McCone, Kim, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 162–74.

³⁷ Ó Riain, Pádraig, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, pp. 118–19.

placed, ensuring that the Christian saint presided over a cultural and agricultural turning point that had been sacred long before Christianity arrived in Ireland.³⁸ Despite this 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.

Fire is the primary symbol of Brigid in virtually every strand of her tradition. The saint is associated with a column of flame visible above her head from birth. The *Bethu Brigte* describes how a column of fire rose from her head into the sky the night of her birth, visible to the druids and recognised by them as a sign of extraordinary sanctity.³⁹ The perpetual flame at Kildare, discussed above, is the institutional expression of this motif, but it appears throughout the miracle tradition, a house that seems to burn but is not consumed, Brigid herself alight with divine fire that does not harm her.

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.⁴⁰

The motif of 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 mythology, the colors of the Otherworld, 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.⁴¹

These dairy miracles are not simply charming 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

³⁸Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, pp. 44–48..

³⁹Bethu Brigte, §2, ed. and trans. Ó hAodha, p. 2.

⁴⁰Herren, 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.

⁴¹*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, I. x, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February I, col. 121.

the community. Brigid's capacity to multiply dairy produce reflects her role as a patroness of the agricultural year. 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.^{42,43}

One of the most beloved stories of Brigid is the miracle of her cloak. According to the version preserved in 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.^{44,45}

The story encodes multiple important ideas. It alludes to Brigid's victory over secular male power through spiritual means and the capacity of divine abundance to overflow all human limitation, and the claim of the Church on the landscape of Ireland. The Curragh of Kildare was indeed a significant grant, and the story serves to immortalize the economic and political foundations of the Kildare monastery.⁴⁶

Water is the third great elemental symbol of Brigid, balanced with fire and with the milk of pastoral abundance. Sacred wells dedicated to Brigid are found throughout Ireland, Scotland, and areas of Welsh and English Celtic heritage 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.⁴⁷

The healing power of Brigid's wells connects her to the pre-Christian tradition of sacred water sources, which in Celtic religion were understood as entrances to the

⁴²Ó hÓgáin, *Dáithí, The Sacred Isle*, p. 44

⁴³MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 229.

⁴⁴Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, ch. 5, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 14.

⁴⁵Book of Lismore Life, in Stokes, Whitney, *Lives of Saints*, p. 187.

⁴⁶Bitel, Lisa, *Land of Women*, pp. 185–87.

⁴⁷Logan, Patrick, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980), pp. 40–55.

Otherworld and as places of divine power. In the hagiographic miracle tradition, Brigid heals through touch and through prayer. In the most remarkable of the healing stories in *Cogitosus*, she gives temporary sight to a blind nun so that the nun may properly appreciate the beauty of the natural landscape of which she has never seen a miracle given not for practical necessity but as an act of divine generosity toward natural beauty.⁴⁸

The Brigid's Cross, a four-armed cross woven from rushes, traditionally made on the eve of her feast on February 1st and hung above the door of the house to protect the household from fire and illness throughout the coming year is perhaps the most universally recognised symbol associated with the saint. The origin legend 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 baptised before he died.⁴⁹

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 centre, a form that more closely resembles older solar or swastika symbols found in pre-Christian Celtic 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.^{50,51}

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 remarkable even by the standards of early medieval Christianity.⁵²

The most extraordinary passage in the entire hagiographic tradition of Brigid is found in the *Vita Prima*, which relates the circumstance of her episcopal 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

⁴⁸Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, ch. 16, trans. Connolly and Picard, p. 18.

⁴⁹Book of Lismore Life, in Stokes, *Lives of Saints*, p. 191.

⁵⁰Ó hÓgáin, *Dáithí*, *The Sacred Isle*, pp. 46–47.

⁵¹Green, Miranda, *The World of the Druids*, p. 193.

⁵²Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 162–95.

him and he accidentally 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 already acted and the act 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.⁵³

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. Brigid in the hagiographic tradition 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.⁵⁴

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 enormous prestige. 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.⁵⁵

The cult of Brigid spread beyond Ireland to wherever Irish missionaries and emigrants carried it. In Scotland, where she is known as Bride or Bríde, she became a figure of extraordinary importance in the Gaelic tradition of the Highlands and Islands. The Scottish *Carmina Gadelica*, the great collection of oral literature gathered by Alexander Carmichael in the late nineteenth century, contains some of the most beautiful surviving prayers and folk traditions associated with Brigid in any language.⁵⁶

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

⁵³*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, I. xix, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February I, col. 124: "honor episcopalis Brigidae attribueretur."

⁵⁴Bitel, Lisa, *Land of Women*, pp. 168–70.

⁵⁵*Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 738, 769, 805, ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill; and Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 74–77.

⁵⁶Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1900–71), I, Hymns LXX–LXXIII, pp. 165–73.

feast on the first of February.^{57,58} 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 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.^{59,60} This ritual, recorded in nineteenth-century Gaelic Scotland, is a remarkable survival of a practice with obvious roots in the pre-Christian marking of the threshold of spring.

The Scottish *Carmina Gadelica* preserves many prayers to Bride such as the following...⁶¹

*‘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 appears as Sainte Brigitte, associated with several churches and wells in the Breton countryside. The dedication of churches to Brigid in Wales, St. Bride’s Bay in Pembrokeshire, for instance and the church of St. Bride’s in Fleet Street, London, one of the oldest church sites in the city, testify to the spread of the cult along the lines of Irish ecclesiastical influence in Britain.^{62,63}

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in Brigid. Within Catholic and 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, tending the flame relit in 1993 and developing a spirituality of peace and ecological concern inspired by Brigid’s associations with the natural

⁵⁷Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, pp. 165–66.

⁵⁸MacKillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 46.

⁵⁹Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, pp. 169–70.

⁶⁰Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *The Sacred Isle*, p. 48.

⁶¹Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, Hymn LXX, p. 165.

⁶²Pierre-Yves Lambert, *La langue gauloise* (Paris: Errance, 1994), p. 210.

⁶³Stow, John, *A Survey of London* (1598), ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), I, p. 56.

world.^{64,65}

Brigid, both the saint and the goddess have become a central figure in the revival of ‘Celtic’ folk practices and arguably, many Neopagan traditions. The goddess Brigid, the triple goddess of poetry, healing, and smithcraft 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.^{66, 67}

This collective reverence and recognition has continued well 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, recognising the layered character of the tradition and the significance of Brigid as a symbol of Ireland that speaks to multiple cultural inheritances.⁶⁸

The life of Brigid of Kildare, insofar as we can reconstruct it from the hagiographic, annalistic, and archaeological record was that of a woman of extraordinary ability and spiritual authority who founded one of the most important monastic communities in early medieval Ireland and whose influence shaped the character of Irish Christianity in its formative centuries. The *Annals of Ulster* recorded her death, Cogitosus and his successors elaborated her virtues and miracles while the perpetual flame burned at Kildare for seven hundred years. These are not the materials of pure legend.⁶⁹

However, Brigid is more than the sum of her historical documentation, because she became the vessel into which the Irish and later the Scots, the Welsh, the Bretons, and the diaspora poured their deepest aspirations for the sacred in everyday life. She is fire and light, the perpetual flame that does not consume, the column of brightness above the house, the warmth at the hearth. She is milk and abundance, the miraculous cow, the multiplied butter, the divine generosity that overflows all

⁶⁴Dundon, Mary and Kilroy, Phil, *The Brigidine Sisters: A Two Hundred Year Story* (Kildare: Solas Bhride, 2007), pp. 1–20.

⁶⁵de Waal, Esther, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), pp. 60–63.

⁶⁶Matthews, Caitlin, *The Celtic Tradition* (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1989), pp. 75–79.

⁶⁷Hutton, Ronald, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 134–37.

⁶⁸Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Ireland), press release, 6 October 2021.

⁶⁹*Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 524, ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 56.

expectations. She is the cloak spread over the land, the protective covering holding together community and faith, the sacred boundary keeper between common human desire and the larger divine architecture. She is water and healing, the sacred well, the touch that restores sight, the pilgrimage made in hope.

What makes Brigid exceptional among the saints of the early medieval Church is not merely the richness of her mythological inheritance, 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 resonances seem genuinely to correspond, as though a real person of sufficient spiritual magnitude recognised that the symbols available in her culture pointed toward the same values she herself lived, radical generosity, the sanctity of the mundane, the sacredness of the everyday arts of living, the power of women's wisdom and women's community. The welcome is made across fifteen centuries of devotion. Brigid remains at the threshold, between nature and culture, between the ancient and new, between the goddess and the saint, exactly where she was born, within the liminal, exactly where she belongs.

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