

Reflective Report for Dissertation (HHP6902) - Heidi Wyldewood (2110492)

Working title: How does the modern 'Brigid's Way' in Ireland compare to similarly dedicated medieval pilgrimages to Kildare or Faughart in its form and function?

Research Questions:

In 2017, during a personal pilgrimage and research trip in Ireland, I learned about the 'Brigid's Way' pilgrimage created in 2013 by a group of volunteers and Brigid devotees. It runs between Faughart, traditionally the birthplace of St Brigid, and Kildare, where she founded her monastery. Unconnected to the previous information or people, I was also shown a small track between two fields near Allen cemetery that had apparently been called Brigid's Way about a century earlier and was part of an old route. In July 2023 I walked 'Brigid's Way' with a group of pilgrims as part of my dissertation research, and I was informed by one of the instigators of 'Brigid's Way' of the possible existence of an article by the historian Harold O'Sullivan that alluded to that similar, but much earlier, pilgrimage route. Whilst this paper primarily aims to look at historical evidence for medieval pilgrimages to Faughart and Kildare, the veracity of the claims regarding an earlier route between the two will be explored. Regarding function, included will be a discussion of how a pilgrimage of this nature serves the pilgrim and the community today, compared with medieval pilgrimages. The decision to focus on a comparison between the old and the new was based on feedback given by Jane Cartwright in July before I went to walk in Ireland. Therefore, the research questions are:

- What is Brigid's Way?
- What evidence is there for medieval pilgrimages to Faughart or Kildare?
- Is there any evidence beyond hearsay for an existing pilgrimage route between Faughart and Kildare prior to the one proposed today?
- Why were pilgrimages taken in the Middle Ages to Faughart or Kildare, and what was the pilgrim experience?
- Why are pilgrimages undertaken today to, and between, Faughart and Kildare, and what is the pilgrim experience?
- How do these pilgrimages, dedicated to St. Brigid in different ages, compare with one another?

Methodology:

The comparison relies on a presentation of reported historical activity and its scholarly interpretation sitting alongside a representation of the non-academic experience of a recent phenomenon. Whilst the research pertaining to Kildare and Faughart, as destinations in connection to the saint, and the medieval pilgrim experience will provide some idea as to the form and function of an earlier pilgrimage, it is the personal accounts from founding members of Brigid's Way and recent pilgrims that will primarily provide the information about the modern incarnation of a similarly dedicated pilgrimage. Therefore, the comparison is in part based on assessable facts about the physical route and pilgrim practice, and partly a reflection and interpretation of the pilgrims' experience and the impact of the pilgrimage as an event on the surrounding communities. This requires both objectivity and sensitivity regarding the subject narrative. The means of gathering information are:

- Primary sources
 - Historical accounts

- Hagiography
- Semi-structured interviews with three of the founding members of 'Brigid's Way'
- Short structured interviews with five to ten pilgrims
- Maps relating to the route
- Photographs of physical landscape features and manmade structures
- Secondary sources
 - Books about the topic
 - Scholarly articles about the topic
 - Journals and proceedings of archaeological or historical societies
 - Emails, phone calls or unstructured interviews with experts on aspects of the topic

Existing scholarship:

Outside of the volunteer group's own promotion of the route very little exists on 'Brigid's Way', so I will talk to the founders, Karen Ward (Moon Mná and Slí an Chroí), Dolores Whelan (Brigid of Faughart Festival), and Anthony Murphy (Mythical Ireland), about the motivations and process behind formulating the route. Archaeologist Louise Nugent has written specifically about pilgrimage in medieval Ireland, and I would like to contact her regarding questions I have that are not answered in her book 'Journeys of Faith'. The journals and proceedings of the historical societies in County Louth, County Kildare and Dundalk will be one avenue of research. Jane Cartwright has suggested that Barry Lewis at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies might be a good contact too.

Progress so far:

I have:

- Walked the modern pilgrimage route in Ireland and established 'Brigid's Way' and pilgrim contacts.
- Gathered material on medieval and modern pilgrimage, and more specifically pilgrimage in Ireland.
- Read some of the hagiography pertaining to St. Brigid.
- Gained ethics approval for interviewing pilgrims and those who might further my research.
- Composed a tabled list of historical societies, interviewees, questions, and topics for the various research aims.
- Learned how to use assistive technology for the purpose of transcribing the interviews.

Reflection:

There may be an absence of evidence, or it may be difficult to retrieve in the time allowed, regarding a route similar to, and known as, Brigid's Way or Path prior to the route walked now - the supposition being that it was an echo of the one the saint herself traditionally took, and that it remained for some time in local knowledge and was walked as such. If this proves to be the case then the dissertation will focus only on historic pilgrimages to Faughart and Kildare, and their comparison with Brigid's Way today, rather than trying to verify the prior existence of the route in some form. If the reverse turns out to be true, and local knowledge does point to a previous form of the route which can be checked in any way, then the dissertation will focus on the comparison of form only, rather than form and function. This decision to narrow or broaden the topic in this way was confirmed by feedback from my supervisor given in October.

I anticipate a couple of difficulties with gleaning the relevant research. Firstly, the instigation of and completion of the in-person research may be challenging due to the contacting of people and

opening communication not being one of my neurodivergent strong points. I aim to tick this section of research off little by little to avoid overwhelm. I aim to use assistive technology to write up the transcripts for the appendices. Secondly, not all the relevant resources and sources are known to me yet, although I hope this becomes clearer after contacting Louise Nugent; Barry Lewis; and the relevant historical societies. Additionally, many articles of interest I've found pertaining to Faughart appear to be only accessible to members of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society. Finally, the idea of Brigid's Way today being an echo of a previously established route between Faughart and Kildare may turn out to be wishful thinking on the part of some, and this could lead to unproductive research, so I am going to limit the time spent on it if initial results are not promising.

I consider too that the question 'why is this research important' being key to the conclusion of the dissertation, so that it becomes not just a comparison without purpose. Lastly, I am aware that in light of my personal involvement with 'Brigid's Way', as a pilgrim, official photographer for the recent pilgrimage, and generator of some of their social media, I need to maintain objectivity throughout this process and be unattached to research outcomes.

Project Management Plan:

Two-week time blocks

Project goals

End November 2023	Reach out to Brigid's Way founders
	Formulate interviewee emails and question summaries
Beginning December 2023	Contact pilgrim interviewees to arrange Zoom meetings
End December 2023	Begin pilgrim interviews
Beginning January 2024	Brigid's Way founder interviews
	Reach out to scholars
End January 2024	Finish pilgrim interviews and transcripts
Beginning February 2024	Reach out to parish records or historical societies where appropriate regarding Brigid's Way
	Collate Kildare and Faughart historical research via primary and secondary sources
End February	Write up modern Brigid's Way experience
Beginning March	Create presentation
End March	Write up comparison and conclusions
Beginning April	First draft and appendices
End April	Final write up, referencing and bibliography

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