

Assignment 1

Critical Appreciation of Saint Brigid

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Saint Brigid has the distinction of being the only female saint in the trinity of the three national saints of Ireland, the others being Saint Patrick and Saint Columba. In many ways, Brigid's contemporary worship has become syncretic, and while she remains a beloved saint in Irish Catholicism, her influence has transmitted far beyond the confines of the Catholic Church. A cursory internet search reveals that she has become an inspirational role model for many modern women, and that her influence is growing. A new bank holiday dedicated to Saint Brigid was instituted in Ireland in February 2023, and the programme 'Brigid 1500' in 2024 marks 1500 years since her death with a yearlong schedule of events to celebrate her life and works.¹

Modern interpretations of Brigid also hold relevance in numerous neo-pagan communities, where she has been connected to the pre-Christian goddess Brigid, and often overlaid with personal gnosis represented as historical fact. The conflation of Saint Brigid with an ancient pagan goddess by the same name is so widespread that it often goes unquestioned not only in modern neo-pagan goddess spirituality, but also by some scholars. This paper will mainly consider *The Life of St. Brigid of Kildare* by Cogitosus, a work that is arguably the earliest written account of her life. Given Brigid's popularity in contemporary goddess spirituality, this essay will also touch on the question of whether the saint and the goddess can be connected.

¹*Brigid 1500* (2024) <<https://brigid1500.ie/>> [accessed 09 March 2024]

St. Brigid is undeniably the most esteemed female luminary in Irish Christianity.² She has a bigger dossier than any other Irish saint except Patrick, and within 1000 years of Cogitosus' vitae, another seven Lives devoted to Brigid were written.³ Wells, towns, and churches dedicated to Brigid are located throughout the Irish landscape. After her death her cult continued to grow not only in Ireland, but carried far beyond its shores by Irish missionaries to Britain and continental Europe.⁴ In *The Dictionary of Irish Saints*, professor Pádraig Ó Riain underlines the eminence of her cult, stating that St. Brigid '...stood alone among the women saints of Ireland ... an abbess whom all other abbesses revered, a bishop in all but name, of such high status that she came to be regarded ... as 'Mary of the Irish''.⁵ To further underline her primacy not just in Ireland but abroad, it is of note that the feast of St Brigid on February 1st is distinguished as being among the earliest to be listed outside her country of origin.⁶

Although Saint Brigid was born in Ireland around the year 450, the three earliest extant Lives of Brigid contain similar fundamental biographical information with some important differences that reflect the political purpose and time in which they were written.⁷ Setting the stage for her widespread and enduring popularity, the *Vita Brigatae* written by the monk Cogitosus around the year 650 is considered to be the earliest hagiographical work in Ireland.⁸

² Philip Freeman, *The World of Saint Patrick*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 95, <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=IGXYAwAAQBAJ&pg=GBS.PP4&hl=en>> [9 March 2024]

³ Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), p.123, <<https://search-ebscohostcom.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2491967&site=ehost-live>> [4 March 2024]

⁴ Freeman, p. 97, 98

⁵ Ó Riain p. 124

⁶ Ó Riain, p. 125

⁷ Lisa M. Bitel, 'Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigantine Tradition', *Textual Practice*, 16.2 (2002), 209-228 (p. 212) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360210141466>>

⁸ Sean Connolly, J.-M. Picard, 'Cogitosus' "Life of St. Brigit" Content and Value', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117. (1987), 5-27 (p. 5) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25508920>> [accessed 2 March 2024]

Although many scholars assert that it was written almost 100 years before her second Life, the *Vita prima Sanctae Brigatae*, there have been ongoing debates in academic circles concerning which was written first.⁹ At any rate, Cogitosus' Life was initially addressed to the bishop and other clerics at the monastery of Kildare, which was then transmitted to other significant churches throughout Ireland.¹⁰

On one hand, the purpose of Cogitosus' Life of Brigid is political, underlining Kildare's prestige as an esteemed center of religious life and place of pilgrimage, with Brigid as the primary abbess.¹¹ Cogitosus describes that as Brigid's fame grew, pilgrims of both sexes gathered to her from all corners of Ireland, '... making their votive offerings'.¹² As a result, she founded a double monastery at Kildare, lauding it as '... the head of virtually all the Irish churches, and occupies the first place excelling all the monasteries of the Irish. Its jurisdiction extends over the whole land of Ireland from sea to sea'.¹³ His choice of words from the outset suggests that he is claiming dominance for Kildare in the name of St. Brigid.¹⁴

After this laudatory declaration, Cogitosus explains that not only was Brigid's intent spiritual in nature, but that '... she was concerned about the churches which adhered to her in many territories',¹⁵ That these territories are described as 'many' once again emphasizes the reach of Kildare, as well as the saint. She then 'takes thought' demonstrating her prudent nature,

⁹ Sean Connolly, J.-M. Picard, p. 5

¹⁰ Charles-Edwards, T.M. 'Brigit [St. Brigit, Brigid] (439/452-524/526), Patron Saint of Kildare.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) Oxford University Press. <<https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3427>> [accessed 1 March 2024].

¹¹ Sean Connolly, J.-M. Picard, p. 1

¹² Phillip Campbell, *The Life of Saint Brigid of Kildare and Other Selected Writings*, (Michigan: Cruachan Hill Press, 2022), p.62.

¹³ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 62

¹⁴ Charles-Edwards

¹⁵ Campbell; Cogitosus p. 62

and decides that in order to found her monastery, she would need a priest, because as a woman there were certain ecclesiastical duties that she was not able to perform.¹⁶ This communicates to the listener that Brigid is not only wise and considered, she knows her place in the highly gendered world of the Church in the fifth century. In other words, she does not threaten the powers that be, thus demonstrating humility as well as practical wisdom. Further, the reputation of her chosen priest is beyond reproach, he is described as a ‘famous hermit’ who would rule with her in ‘episcopal dignity’, building a church in ‘happy partnership, guided by virtue’.¹⁷ Cogitosus writes of the positive result of this partnership, which not only underlines Brigid’s wisdom in her choice of priest, but touches again on the far reaching influence of Kildare, ‘Their episcopal and feminine see, like a fertile vine expanding everywhere in growing branches, spread throughout the whole island of Ireland’.¹⁸

After this introduction, Cogitosus begins with a brief mention of Brigid’s parents, her father Dubtach and her mother Broicsech, who he describes as both noble and good Christians from the tribe of Eochu.¹⁹ Brigid is described as exhibiting saintly qualities from an early age, and that she was ‘chosen by God ... of sober manners, modest, and womanly, constantly improving her habit of life’.²⁰ Although the details of her family of origin are scant, the reader is immediately alerted that Brigid is set apart. The Life then proceeds with a selection of miracle stories attributed to Brigid.

The setting of most of these miracles take place in a rural, agricultural environment, deeply rooted in the landscape of fifth century Ireland. And while on the surface they are often

¹⁶ Campbell; Cogitosus p. 62; Bitel, p. 215

¹⁷ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 62

¹⁸ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 62

¹⁹ Charles-Edwards

²⁰ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 63

domestic in nature, these stories are clearly meant to guide, encourage, and inspire the listener toward good Christian ethical and moral behaviour. Through the humble chores of her early life, such as making butter and cooking pork, listeners could identify with Brigid, because although she is a saint, she is also human. She demonstrates that the power of faith can quite literally create miracles, setting an example for others to strengthen their own faith in times of difficulty or when presented with challenges. Through these seemingly simple stories, Cogitosus' Life is a teaching tale intended to have an influence on the people who heard it. Brigid's miracles as set down by Cogitosus are often drawn from the stories of Christ from the gospels, in that she turns water into ale, multiplies food for the poor, and heals those who are sick.²¹

Besides the repeated emphasis on faith throughout the Life, Brigid's miracle stories are also woven with numerous examples of Christian virtues.²² As mentioned above, she exhibited prudence and diligence when she sought out a priest in founding her monastery. The virtue of chastity is also central to the Life, as Cogitosus implores in the introduction that '... all eyes clearly see the great qualities of that virgin, who flourished in virtue'.²³ Compassion and charity are also central themes which recur throughout the text. Brigid demonstrates these virtues as well as her generosity when she gives away all the milk and the butter she makes to the poor. But turning to God in prayer, her faith was answered and miraculously the dairy she bestowed on those in need was not only restored but multiplied.²⁴ She also shows compassion for animals, feeding a hungry dog a measure of pork she was cooking, only to have the whole amount when

²¹ Freeman, p. 95

²² Referring to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, as well as the cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude, and prudence. Antonio Disalvo, 'Ramon Lull and the Language of Chivalry', *Mystics Quarterly*, 14.4 (1988), 197-206 (204) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20716891>> [accessed 12 March 2024]

²³ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 61

²⁴ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 64

the time came to feed her guests.²⁵ She further exemplifies the virtue of compassion, as well as a strong sense of justice, when the lives of a man and his family are in jeopardy after he accidentally kills the king's pet fox. The Life tells the listener that Brigid was "Grieving in the depths of her heart for the unhappy man who had been so unjustly judged ...".²⁶ She then prays to God and the Lord supplies one of his own wild foxes to replace the king's fox, thus the man was set free and his family safe.²⁷ Through these tales and others, Brigid models not only the power of faith, but imparts various Christian virtues. As homely as these miracles may seem, these stories contain deeper layers of spiritual meaning and symbolic truth.

However, some of St. Brigid's miracles as outlined by Cogitosus seem almost magical in nature and have perhaps given rise at least in part to the conflation of St. Brigid with a pre-Christian goddess by the same name. Not only did Brigid exhibit love and compassion for animals, but some of her miracles suggest what could be interpreted as a supernatural association. A wild fox sits calmly at her side under her cloak;²⁸ Wolves resist their prey drive and herd pigs because of their high regard for the saint;²⁹ Ducks flock to her at her command and allow her to pet them.³⁰ Further underlining the fascinating notion of Brigid's apparent magical connection to animals, Cogitosus asserts, 'And from all these examples it is plain that the whole order of beasts, flocks, and herds, was subject to her rule'.³¹ When taken out of context, this line might infer associations with a pagan nature goddess to some readers.

²⁵ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 65

²⁶ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 74

²⁷ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 74, 75

²⁸ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 74

²⁹ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 73

³⁰ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 75

³¹ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 75

Apart from her kinship with animals, St. Brigid also appeared to have what some might consider supernatural control of the weather and other natural phenomenon.³² She comes in out of the rain and hangs her wet cloak on a sunbeam;³³ A torrential rainstorm leaves only her crops undamaged; ³⁴ she changes the course of a river. ³⁵ And while Cogitosus affirms that she performs all these miracles through the grace of God, it is not difficult to see how the idea of a pagan nature goddess might have been applied to some of Brigid's miracle tales. In fact, various studies have attempted to connect the early lives of some Irish saints with the possibility of pagan derivation.³⁶ However, in her article, *Saint Brigit and the Fire from Heaven*, Dorothy Ann Bray reasons that this correlation may be misleading, and could suggest that, 'The miracles of the Irish saints, especially those dealing with nature, could thus prove that Irish Christianity with its affinity for the natural world and its veneration of female paganism is not really Christianity at all, but early paganism with a Christian veneer.' ³⁷

As tempting as it is to believe for some, particularly neopagans who cherish the notion of a saint with divine origins in a misty pre-Christian past, connecting St. Brigid to a goddess of the same name is problematic. Bray upholds that '... very little is known about Brigit the goddess. No cohesive mythology exists for her and few traditions survive'.³⁸ Importantly, with the exception of what is written in the Lives, all that is known of the goddess Brigid is derived from two primary origins, a short passage from Cormac's Glossary written in the ninth century, and

³² Bitel, p.13

³³ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 66

³⁴ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 65

³⁵ Campbell; Cogitosus, p. 82

³⁶ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the Fire from Heaven', *Études Celtiques*, 29. (1992), 105-113 (p. 107) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1992_num_29_1_1995> [6 March 2024]

³⁷ Bray, p. 107

³⁸ Bray, 107

extant place-names associated with this goddess.³⁹ In *Pagan Imagery in the Early Lives of Brigit*, Lisa Lawrence explains that although ‘...Brigit was a fairly significant goddess among the Celts ...all we know of Brigit’s personality and cult is that she was allied with fire and patronized three traditional Irish arts’.⁴⁰

Indeed, Professor Lisa Bitel makes a strong case in, *Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess*, that the hagiographers of the next two vitae, *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*, may have purposely associated Brigid with an ancient heroic goddess for political purposes, namely for her cult to stake a bolder claim for supremacy than the cult of St. Patrick.⁴¹ Bitel argues that while Cogitosus emphasised the remains of Brigid’s body as a foundation for sanctity, the later hagiographers did not have access to the body, and so shifted Brigid’s sanctity to ‘... literary allusions of the pre-Christian past’.⁴² She explains, ‘In short, these two vitae slyly made the very first written hints that Brigit’s sanctity was greater, not despite but because of her gender and pagan reputation’.⁴³ Moreover, these later vitae employed imagery and motifs that evoked pre-Christian Ireland. For example, Brigid’s mother is recast as a slave sold to a druid, who brings the newborn Brigid into the world over a threshold, after which she bathes the child in new milk. Further, the infant will only consume milk from a red-eared white cow, a motif found in Irish mythology.⁴⁴ Thus, St. Brigid is redefined with a divine origin that not only increases her status

³⁹ Lisa Lawrence, ‘Pagan Imagery in the Early Lives of Brigit: A Transformation from Goddess to Saint?’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 16/17. (1996,1997), 39-54 (p. 41)
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557314>>

[5 March 2024]

⁴⁰ Lawrence, p. 42

⁴¹ Bitel, p. 10

⁴² Bitel, p. 10

⁴³ Bitel, p. 10

⁴⁴ Bitel, p. 10; Lawrence, p. 50

in the Irish Church in the eighth and ninth centuries, but the seeds are planted for future goddess worshippers to find spiritual inspiration with imagined roots in a pre-Christian past.

There seems to be a tendency in contemporary goddess spirituality to require that numinous figures be rooted in an ancient past to legitimize their worship, even if that ancient past is fabricated. Too, an element of fantasy and romance is often interwoven with fragments of historic material that evokes an emotional response. But in truth, this may not be so very different to what the later hagiographers accomplished when they added pre-Christian imagery to the Lives of St. Brigid to increase her prowess for a new audience. While there is undeniably a difference between Brigid the saint and Brigid the goddess, in the hearts and minds of many, these two faces have been syncretized into a third face, the archetypal Brigid. However, it is important to recognize that while these three faces are sometimes taken as one, they each have a distinct shape. Bray also reminds us that in comparison to what is known of the goddess Brigid, ‘there exists far more documentation on Brigit as a saint within Christian tradition ...’.⁴⁵ It must

⁴⁵ Bray, p. 107

be remembered that St Brigid is a historic figure, a flesh and blood woman who moved mountains at a time when women had little power.

At the same time, the archetypal Brigid has become a powerful symbol for many women as an alternative to patriarchal religious figures within Christianity and beyond. Christian, neo-pagan and secular women alike may find in the figure of Brigid a relatable model of female spirituality. As a symbol, Brigid not only models the timeless virtues of compassion, kindness, and justice, she presents a life affirming experience of the numinous through the lens of the sacred feminine. Perhaps the renewed appreciation of Brigid in contemporary times will revive interest in a religious institution that for many, has lost relevance in recent years.

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