

Assignment 2 – Motifs
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This paper will explore three core hagiographical motifs in St Brigid's Life, the *Vita Prima*, including Fire, Liminality, and Miraculous Provision. And while numerous scholars have linked aspects of these motifs to a native Irish fertility goddess by the name of Brigid, clear examples for the sources of all three of these motifs can be found in the Bible, as well as repeated throughout the Lives of other saints. Although there are various saints whose Lives contain similar miracle patterns, this essay will touch solely on several female Celtic saints for comparison. Robert Bartlett concedes that 'motif analysis is a tricky business' and suggests that miracle accounts are often explored using statistical analysis because of their formulaic pattern. However, he adds that there are other ways to approach motifs, '... and one that is particularly rich to start with is the fact that these miracle accounts are narratives, and to study them as such'.¹ While the purpose of these motifs in the *Vita Prima* are theological, they were also intended to bolster Brigid's cult by demonstrating her sanctity in recalling biblical narratives and comparing her Life with the works of Jesus.

To set the stage, although her historicity is arguable, in the Middle Ages Brigid's cult had spread even further afield than that of Saint Patrick, as travelling Irish monks transmitted her name first into Britain and then to continental Europe.² Her feast day is February 1st, and her

¹ Robert Bartlett, 'Medieval Miracle Accounts as Stories', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 82.2. (2017) 113-127 (no page numbers listed) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140017689996> PDF>

² Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 33.

name is recorded in calendars, litanies, and martyrologies throughout Europe.³ But while her cult is prodigious, there is no extant evidence that she was a living woman. On one hand, the enigmatic figure of St Brigid is seen by some scholars as originating in the pagan goddess Brigid, and transformed into a saint when Christianity came to Ireland. Some dismiss her completely as a historical figure. And still others suggest that she may be a synthesis of several women of the early Irish Church, fragments of a native goddess, and motifs drawn from Mary, Mother of God.⁴ However, in her book, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland*, Maeve Callan argues that ‘... it seems more likely that the cult grew around an actual fifth-and/or sixth-century woman who dedicated her life to God, exemplified exceptional charity and devotion, and established religious communities and churches’.⁵ Whatever the truth of her origins, it cannot be argued that Brigid was a significant contributory figure that helped to lay the foundations of Irish hagiography, and her cult has had significant, far-reaching influence within the Church.

The Life of Brigid by Cogitosus and *The Vita Prima* are widely considered to be the first Lives written on S Brigid, with Cogitosus’ version thought to be penned in the mid seventh century, around one hundred years after her death.⁶ Cogitosus is thought to have been a cleric at the monastery of Kildare, and the purpose of his writing to establish the monastic centre of Kildare as superior to Armagh and St Patrick’s territory. He declares that the basis for the miracle accounts of St Brigid are passed down from his elders and that he takes pains to submit them in a straightforward manner to avoid breaking the rules of conformity. His Latin is consummate, and

³ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* 33, 34.

⁴ Maeve Brigid Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland*, Hagiography Beyond Tradition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 85 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvsextfj>>

⁵ Callan, 89

⁶ Philip Freeman, *Two Lives of Saint Brigid*, (Chicago: Four Courts Press, 2024), p. 8.

he uses references that suggest that he was well educated and acquainted with the conventions of hagiography.⁷

In contrast to Cogitosus' Life, the Latin Life, known as the *Vita Prima*, is anonymous. It bears its name because it was positioned first in the five lives of St Brigid in the *Acta Sanctorum* compiled by the Bollandists in 1658.⁸ Whether it was the earliest Life of St Brigid has been the subject of much conjecture between scholars, but Sean Connolly writes that having originally considered the *Vita Prima* the first of St Brigid's Lives, he '... is now persuaded of the priority of The Life of Brigit by Cogitosus ...'.⁹ The *Vita Prima* was written in the early eighth or ninth century, is double the length of Cogitosus' Life, and includes 30 of the same miracle accounts, although they are articulated in different ways.¹⁰ One of the main contrasts between the two Lives is that in the *Vita Prima*, Brigid travels extensively throughout Ireland, while Kildare is only cited once, which Philip Freeman in his book *Two Lives of Saint Brigid*, suggests gives it '... the sense of a national rather than local narrative'.¹¹ In comparison, Cogitosus centers on Kildare, and documents only one instance of travel from that province.¹² Freeman also points out that St Brigid encounters St Patrick on numerous occasions, whereas Cogitosus does not mention Patrick at all. Freeman underlines that rather than positioning Brigid in competition with Patrick, she is characterized in the *Vita Prima* as 'subordinate', although at the same time he establishes that Brigid is 'a more forceful and uncompromising character than in Cogitosus' Life', even as she concedes Patrick's supremacy.¹³ And while St Brigid was an immensely powerful female

⁷ Freeman, p. 8, 9

⁸ Seán Connolly, 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value', *The Journal of the Royal Society of the Antiquaries of Ireland*, 119. (1989), 5-49 (p. 5) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25508969> [28 March 2024]

⁹ Connolly, p. 5

¹⁰ Freeman, p. 8, 9

¹¹ Freeman, p. 9

¹² Freeman, p. 9

¹³ Freeman, p. 9

abbess, this acquiescence highlights gender norms and power imbalances both in society and in the Church in the Middle Ages.

There are further differences between these two Lives that reflect the different time and purposes of the authors. Cogitosus does not go into detail of Brigid's origins beyond naming her parents and mentioning that they were both 'Christian and noble', and from the 'most wise clan of Ectech'.¹⁴ In contrast, the *Vita Prima* provides much more detail, casting her mother as a slave, describing her as '...beautiful, excellent in character and a good servant'.¹⁵ That this description is prefaced with a comment on her appearance could be construed as gendered, particularly when followed with a passage describing Dubthach's desire for her and that she becomes pregnant by him. When Dubthach's wife discovers that her husband has made the slave woman pregnant, she is angered and calls on him to throw her out so that Broicsech's child will not outshine her own children. This narrative echoes the biblical passage in Genesis where Abraham's wife Sarah requests that he banish the slave woman Hagar after she bears his son.¹⁶

In contrast to Cogitosus, The *Vita Prima* also introduces the figure of the druid and aligns this figure with prophecy. The druid knows immediately that the unborn child in Broicsech's womb is special and prophesizes that the children of Dubthach's wife will serve the child of the slave woman, '... until the end of the age'. He declares, 'You will give birth to a famous daughter who will light up the world like the sun in the height of heaven'.¹⁷ This is the first mention of the motif of Fire, which will be covered in more detail below. The pregnant Broicsech is later sold to another druid. This druid prophesies to a guest in his house, a queen also about to give birth, that if the child '... is born tomorrow with the sun rising, it will have no

¹⁴ Freeman, p. 19

¹⁵ Freeman, p. 67

¹⁶ Freeman, p. 67

¹⁷ Freeman, p. 67

equal in the world'. However, instead of the queen giving birth at sunrise it is Broicsech who enters the house with the rising sun and gives birth on the threshold.¹⁸ While this account may seem suggestive of a connection with an earlier pagan deity with its mention of a druid and symbolism of nature and liminality, Freeman cautions that notions of St Brigid '... as a thinly veiled pagan figure from an earlier time ... are well meaning but misguided'.¹⁹ Her earliest stories clearly indicate that she is a Christian figure whose main imperative is to transmit the word of God.²⁰

A hagiographical motif can be defined as a recurrent pattern, theme, incident, or narrative reiterated throughout the Lives of saints to illustrate a saint's sanctity and power through the performance of miracles.²¹ Thomas Head explains that 'such stories were borrowed, sometimes with little change, from earlier saint's lives and were intended to convey a moral message rather than historically accurate information'.²² Thus, the purpose of a saint's Life was not biography, but to evoke an image of the saint as a paragon of saintly attributes.²³ In *A List of Motifs in the Lives of Early Irish Saints*, Dorothy Ann Bray affirms that 'miracles were at once the manifestations and testimonies of the saint's holiness'.²⁴ The saints are portrayed as holy personages and venerated as vessels of God's power, and their miracle accounts are often paralleled with those of biblical characters. Saints typically embody a list of cardinal Christian virtues, and their task is not only to carry on the work of Christ in leading by example, but to act

¹⁸ Freeman, p. 69

¹⁹ Freeman, p. 8

²⁰ Freeman, p. 8

²¹ Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum, 1992), p. 15. <file:///C:/Users/daniel/Downloads/dokumen.pub_a-list-of-motifs-in-the-lives-of-the-early-irish-saints-9514106741.pdf> [23 March 2024]

²² Thomas Head, 'Thomas Head's Hagiography: A Brief Introduction', *The ORB: The On-Line Reference Book for Medieval Studies* (2013) <https://www.hagiographysociety.org/?page_id=678> [28 March 2024].

²³ Head, Hagiography: A Brief Introduction

²⁴ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 11

as intermediaries between heaven and earth.²⁵ Thomas Head explains that ‘stories, themes, and motifs were repeated from the Life of one saint to that of another, each hagiographer adapting a traditional pool of material to the needs of the narrative at hand’.²⁶

Typically, a Life would conform to an established convention which would begin with the particulars of the saint’s birth, including their parents and the attendant miracles surrounding the birth, and culminate with the death of the saint which would also be patterned with thaumaturgic events.²⁷ Between the saint’s birth and death, the Life would be comprised of a selection of miracles that would showcase both their virtue and potency.²⁸ Bray suggests that in early Irish hagiography native Irish beliefs and Christian tradition were blended, establishing ‘... a continuity which would link its own traditions with that of the mother Church in order to share in the latter’s heritage in the widest sense’.²⁹ Bray’s *List of Motifs* lists 40 Irish saints within the early Irish period and is sorted into categories centered on ‘miracles and other manifestations of divine grace’, and is divided into eleven primary themes: Animals, Benediction, Conflict, Divine Person, Healing, Heavenly Phenomenon, malediction, Marvels, Power over Matter, Power of Nature, and Prophecy which are then further sectioned into twenty-two classes.³⁰ Among the sources used in compiling her list of motifs, Bray cites *The Motif Index* by Stith Thompson and the *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature* by Tom Peete Cross, although she acknowledges the limitations of both in terms of analyzing hagiography.³¹ Bray also grants that while her list may

²⁵ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 10

²⁶ Head, *Hagiography: A Brief Introduction*

²⁷ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 11

²⁸ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 11

²⁹ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 20

³⁰ Bray, *Motifs*, 21

³¹ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 21

exemplify the motifs available to the hagiographers, it may need adjustment at a future date regarding the selection.³²

Nevertheless, any analysis of motifs in the Lives of St Brigid is best placed in context with the particulars of the landscape of her origin. Not only did she exemplify essential teachings of Christianity, but she also reflected the mores of the Irish people.³³ She is referred to as ‘Mary of the Gael’ in both the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte* as well as the *Vita Prima*, and although she was compared to Mary, Callan writes that ‘... she lived her own, thoroughly Irish life’, and ‘... like Mary, Brigid captured the heart of Irish devotion’.³⁴ In Ireland during the beginning of the fifth century, a distinct expression of Christian tradition evolved that differed from some of the conventions of Rome.³⁵ To this end, Thomas Head states, ‘The Irish quickly both adopted and adapted monasticism ... tempered by a boundless enthusiasm for the wonders of the natural world’.³⁶ Philp Freeman further supports the argument of a distinctly Irish hagiographical perspective, ‘It was natural and advantageous for Christians establishing a new faith in Ireland to draw on the traditions and stories of the native religion as much as possible to ease the transition of new converts’.³⁷ And finally, Bray claims that although the Lives of the Irish saints reflected the norms of the Church, at least on the surface, they are ‘... also possessed of an exuberance ... of imagination and narrative akin to secular Irish storytelling ...’.³⁸ She further argues that this particularity is reflected in the kind of motifs woven throughout the lives of the Irish saints.³⁹

³² Bray, *Motifs*, p. 22

³³ Callan, p. 85

³⁴ Callan, 87

³⁵ Thomas Head, *Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity*, (Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY, 1999), p. 4. The ORB: On-Line Reference Book for Medieval Studies. <https://www.hagiographysociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Head_Women.pdf> [27 March 2024]

³⁶ Head, *Women and Hagiography*, p. 4

³⁷ Freeman, p. 7

³⁸ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 13

³⁹ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 13

Bray also points out a comparison between the ‘hero tale of Irish narrative tradition’ and the Lives, noting a similarity of composition in the basic storylines of each. She also notes that while the hero is often seen as a warrior, scholar Tomas O Cathasaigh conveys that the heroic narrative is indeed evident in the Irish narrative tradition but also pertains to characters who are not identified as warriors.⁴⁰ Thus, saints could ostensibly be cast as heroic figures.

Fire

Fire is a recurring hagiographical motif in the lives of the early Irish saints, evoking the Pentecostal flame which filled the apostles with the Holy Spirit, and the use of fire imagery in a Life denoted a saint’s connection with God’s power’.⁴¹ There are numerous Fire miracle motifs associated with St Brigid. Fire symbolism is first mentioned in accordance with her mother’s pregnancy as a holy man sees ‘a ball of fire in the place where the slave woman was sleeping’, and after this, Brigid’s birth is marked with the rising of the sun.⁴² However, the first exceptional example of Brigid’s association with fire describes an account where the infant Brigid is asleep while her mother is out milking the cows. The house is engulfed in flames and people rush to put it out, but when they arrive, they find the house undamaged, and the infant safe and sound, ‘with a beautiful face and rosy cheeks’.⁴³ In *A List of Motifs* Bray lists this miracle under ‘*Divine Person: Illusion, House of saint appears on fire*’.⁴⁴ The motif of fire which burns but does not harm is repeated in the Latin Lives of SS Ita, Samthann, (whose name means “summer fire”) and

⁴⁰ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 14

⁴¹ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the Fire from Heaven', *Etudes Celtiques*, 29 (1992), 105-113 (105) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1992_num_29_1_1995> [24 March 2024]

⁴² Freeman, p. 68

⁴³ Freeman, p. 69

⁴⁴ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 39

the Middle Irish Life of Saint Lasair, (whose name also means “fire”).⁴⁵ However, Bray points out that ‘...the motif seems to originate, in Irish hagiographical tradition, with Brigit’.⁴⁶

The fire that burns but does not consume is reminiscent of the story in the Old Testament of Moses and the Burning Bush.⁴⁷ This would have been a recognizable motif to those who heard it, and creates an immediate biblical parallel, with the implication that this child is set apart, or holy. Underlining this connection, those who gathered to behold this miracle declare, ‘This girl is filled with the Holy Spirit’.⁴⁸ Bray suggests a further connection between Moses’ face ‘alight with a heavenly glow’ when he descends from Sinai with the young Brigid’s rosy cheeks after the fire.⁴⁹ This motif is reiterated in the story of Saint Ita, who was said to have been taught directly through the Holy Spirit, and like Brigid, Ita is known for her gift of prophecy and healing miracles.⁵⁰ In one of her early accounts, Ita’s room bursts into flames, but she emerges untouched and ‘awakens more beautiful than ever’ and ‘the grace of God blazed around her’.⁵¹ A similar but slightly different fire miracle occurs in the *vita* of Samthann as she escapes consummation of her marriage with the help of a phantasmal fire which does not harm her.⁵² In addition to the biblical narrative of Moses and the Burning Bush, another biblical correspondence with fire that does not burn calls up the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refuse to bow to a false idol and are subsequently thrown into a fiery furnace by king Nebuchadnezzar, but emerge unscathed and with a fourth man, presumed to be the Son of

⁴⁵ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p.105

⁴⁶ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 105

⁴⁷ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 109; Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Second Edition (London: British Museum Press, 1997), p.199.

⁴⁸ Freeman, p. 69

⁴⁹ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 109

⁵⁰ Callan, p. 114

⁵¹ Callan, p. 115, 116

⁵² Callan, p. 136

God.⁵³ After thus witnessing God's power, the king acknowledges the divinity of God, and sets the men free. This story shows the power of faith, which is echoed in Brigid's miracle, suggesting that she is possessed of the same kind of faith in God that preserved the three men. If the fourth man in the blaze is taken to be Jesus, it conveys that he walks with the faithful and therefore may hint that he also accompanies the infant Brigid in the illusory house fire. This would also be the suggestion inherent in the similar miracles of SS Samthann and Ita.

Following Brigid's house fire miracle, the next narrative describes a thematically similar event when a cloth on the girl's head 'bursts into flames'. However, when people go to put out the fire, it was as though it had never been.⁵⁴ It is of note that immediately after these two accounts, a druid sees two clerics in a dream baptizing the girl, and one of them pronounces, 'Call this virgin Brigid'.⁵⁵ This is a significant moment in the narrative and the first mention of her name in the *Vita Prima*. Robert Bartlett explains, 'Invocation means uttering a name, and the name itself has power'.⁵⁶ When Moses encounters the Burning Bush, one of his tasks is to ask the name of God, which Bartlett writes, '... unlocked supernatural energy ... 'and similarly, to invoke the saints was to summon up their power through the utterance of their name'.⁵⁷ Thus, by naming her following the Fire motifs, the *Vita Prima* indicates Brigid's sanctity and holiness from the outset.

Liminality

Liminality is another significant motif in Brigid's Lives and has numerous correlations connected to the life of Christ. Among the narratives that convey her liminality is that she was born of a

⁵³ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 109; Daniel 3:13 - 3:20, New Revised Standard Updated Edition. <https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/quicksearch=Shadrach%2C+Meshach+and+Abednego+&version=NRSVU> [10 April 2024]

⁵⁴ Freeman, p. 69

⁵⁵ Freeman, p. 69

⁵⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, p. 95

⁵⁷ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, p. 95

slave woman and a nobleman and raised by a druid, thus she is not associated with any one place in society but belongs everywhere at once. She entered the world at sunrise, which is a liminal time, and on a threshold, which is neither within the house or outside of it.⁵⁸ Further, she was born in the household of a druid, yet she was a Christian. Callan writes, 'From her start, Brigid integrated opposites ... between heaven and earth, between God and humanity ...'⁵⁹ Both Miranda Green and Maeve Callan argue that at least part of Brigid's association with liminality is rooted in Ireland's pagan past. Commenting on the liminal motifs in Brigid's Lives, Green maintains that 'she belonged to both the pagan and Christian worlds', highlighting that the saint was fed from the milk of an Otherworld cow, which Green interprets as connecting her to the pagan world.⁶⁰ Callan also mentions the Otherworldly cow narrative as a possible link between the Christian and the pagan and cites the baptism with cow's milk and the druid's dream as suggestive of Brigid's liminality in representing the two worlds. Nevertheless, Callan also acknowledges that although these motifs depart from the typical pattern, 'Brigid's unorthodox experiences do not diminish her holiness ...'⁶¹ Therefore, these pagan associations may simply be indicative of the particularity of Indigenous Irish storytelling tradition, without proving that the saint is necessarily linked to a pre-Christian past.

Indeed, as mentioned above, the liminality of the events around Brigid's origins parallels motifs in numerous stories of Jesus. Jesus bridges two realms, signifying that he is a figure that can be considered betwixt and between. He was of both heaven and earth, the son of God and a human mother, incorporating the duality of the divine and the physical. Moreover, his mother underscores the motif of liminality in that she is both a virgin and a mother. Further, Jesus was

⁵⁸ Callan, p. 92; Green, p. 199

⁵⁹ Callan, p. 92

⁶⁰ Green, p. 199

⁶¹ Callan, p. 92

born in a manger or a stable, a place on the margins: not within the confines of a house, but not quite outside either, which is mirrored in Brigid's birth on a threshold. The birth of Jesus takes place around the winter solstice, a liminal time when the dark gives way to the light. And although the precise time of the birth of Jesus is not recorded, it is commonly believed to have been at around midnight, a liminal time much like dawn, when Brigid came into the world. Apart from the circumstances surrounding his birth, Jesus also reflects the motif of liminality throughout his life. For example, throughout his life Jesus associated with both the rich and the poor, and Brigid also dines with kings, bishops, and the poor.⁶² This demonstrates a recurring motif in which Brigid follows Christ's example of offering compassion as well as teaching to all 'sinners', regardless of their socioeconomic status. Additionally, while he was born a Jew, Jesus might be called the first Christian. And as Brigid was raised by a druid, a correlation might be inferred in that while she straddled two spiritual worlds at the beginning of her life, she moved towards Christianity. Liminality and the threshold motif are also reflected in Holy Saturday, a time of suspension between the death of Jesus on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter morning.

Abundance, Generosity, and Miraculous Provision

One of the most prevalent motifs in the Lives of Brigid centers around her generosity and miraculous ability to provide and multiply food. There are in fact, so many of these accounts that only a few will be considered. In its first pages, the *Vita Prima* points out that '... when the holy girl grew up, she served in the house and whatever food her hand touched would multiply'.⁶³ This immediately signifies to the listener that miraculous provision is a hallmark of Brigid's sanctity. Her accounts of miraculous provision can be directly traced to biblical motifs, either

⁶² Callan, 94

⁶³ Freeman, 70

echoing Christ's first miracle at the wedding in Cana where he turns water into wine, or his miracle regarding the multiplication of food when he feeds a crowd of 5000 with five loaves and two fish.⁶⁴ These stories would have been familiar to anyone hearing them, and would at once associate her with Christ, signaling both her sanctity and her faith in God to provide. In times when food was scarce, a saint's ability to multiply food would have been a significant and welcome miracle indeed, which would have promoted their stature and their cult.

Echoing Christ's first miracle at the wedding at Cana, Brigid turns water into ale on several occasions, demonstrating an Irish version of this familiar Bible narrative. Bray lists this motif under Transformation.⁶⁵ In the first example of this motif in the *Vita Prima*, Brigid seeks beer at a neighbor's house to cure her ailing foster mother but is turned away. She then went to a well and drew water which was subsequently transformed into 'the finest beer', and when her foster mother drank it, 'she rose up cured'.⁶⁶ In another account, Brigid wanted to have an Easter banquet for her neighboring churches, but 'there was a shortage of food at those times in that region'. And although she only had one vat of beer, it miraculously became enough to supply eighteen churches throughout the feast days of Easter.⁶⁷ In yet another similar narrative, Brigid worries about having enough ale for a visiting bishop. The nuns bring her water to bless, and thinking the nuns have brought her beer, Brigid gives thanks to God for the libation, and the water is instantly changed to ale 'like the finest wine'.⁶⁸

Another equally important motif repeated throughout Brigid's Lives is the occurrence of food multiplication, a narrative which is clearly rooted in Christ's miracle of the Feeding of the

⁶⁴ John 2: 2-11, NRSVUE <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%202&version=NRSVUE>> [11 April 2024]

⁶⁵ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 41

⁶⁶ Freeman, p. 70

⁶⁷ Freeman, p. 74,75

⁶⁸ Freeman, p. 76

5000. This miracle is reiterated in all four gospels, in which a hungry crowd of 5000 follows Jesus to an isolated place. The gospels record that ‘Jesus had compassion on his followers and healed their sick’. He takes the five loaves and two fish and looks to heaven to give thanks as the twelve disciples distribute the food which miraculously multiplies to feed the entire crowd. When the people are satiated, they exclaim, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is come into the world’.⁶⁹ That this motif is repeated throughout Brigid’s narratives may hint that Brigid herself is a kind of prophet.

In addition to her ability to multiply food, compassion, generosity, and charity are qualities repeatedly demonstrated in the Lives of Brigid, directly echoing core motifs from the works of Jesus. However, her charity is often extended not only to people, but to animals. She gives meat to a hungry dog that is meant for guests, but at supper time the portions are undiminished. The guest, clearly moved by this miracle, exclaims that the food should instead be distributed to the poor.⁷⁰ This response not only highlights Brigid’s sanctity in performing this miracle but underlines the virtue of charity. In another account, the druid and his wife arrive on her doorstep and ask her to fill a large vessel with butter. She has only a meager amount and the druid’s wife scorns the small amount of butter she has to offer. Brigid prays to God and the entire vessel becomes filled. In recognition of this miracle, the druid gifts her with the butter, twelve cows, and her mother’s freedom. He then becomes baptized, and she gives everything he has given her to the poor.⁷¹ This miracle not only emphasizes Brigid’s generosity and her ability to multiply food, but it is also a teaching tale that demonstrates the power of God to non-believers. It is of note that the number twelve is also a recurring motif in many of Brigid’s narratives,

⁶⁹ John 6:5-14, NRSVUE, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206&version=NRSVUE> [11 April 2024]

⁷⁰ Freeman, p. 71

⁷¹ Freeman, p. 72

recalling the twelve apostles of Jesus. There are twelve cows, she divides butter into twelve parts, and in another food multiplication miracle, St Patrick comes to stay with a large company and Brigid only has twelve loaves at hand. Brigid says, 'That will be enough for all of us, for sacred scripture will be read to us so that we will forget about bodily food'.⁷² The modest amount feeds the entire crowd, and Brigid's response recalls the words of Mathew 4:4, 'You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'⁷³

The Welsh version of Brigid, San Ffraid, also demonstrates the motif of miraculous provision by changing rushes into sparlings. This miracle is an important motif in Welsh folklore and hagiography connected to San Ffraid, which has spurred many retellings and interpretations that continue in contemporary times.⁷⁴ In her unpublished Master's thesis, Jeanne Mehan notes that in a poem by Fynglwyd, San Ffraid performs the miracle of extracting honey from a stone, which Mehan states is the only source for this account, and summarizes it as part of a Welsh tradition. Mehan also mentions the narrative of Brigid making salt from a stone and observes that this miracle is not presented in the stories of San Ffraid.⁷⁵ However, while the foodstuff obtained from the stone is different, the underlying motif is that sustenance or nourishment is gained from an object where one would least expect it, which would certainly be a significant miracle if provisions were difficult to come by. San Ffraid's honey from a stone miracle might even be a blend of several narratives, as Brigid miraculously obtains honey when she is in need, not from a stone, but granted by God on the floor of her house.⁷⁶

⁷² Freeman, 84

⁷³ Mathew 4:4, NRSVUE. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+4%3A4&version=NRSVUE> [12 April 2024]

⁷⁴ Jeanne Mehan, 'The Search for San Ffraid' (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2013).

⁷⁵ Mehan, The Search for San Ffriad

⁷⁶ Freeman, p. 124

St Brigid is especially associated with food miracles concerning dairy. Narratives involving milk, butter, and cows repeatedly feature throughout her Lives. Among many examples in the *Vita Prima*, Brigid milks a cow three times in a single day and turns nettles into butter.⁷⁷ Ireland was greatly dependent on agriculture during Brigid's time, and cows and milk were an important currency that reflected wealth.⁷⁸ Illustrating its symbolic importance to the early Irish, Brigid is baptized in milk, associating her birth with abundance, wealth, and plenty. Bray lists 'miraculous milking' under 'Provision' miracles, and Brigid being fed by the white cow under miracles which are considered a 'Sign of Sanctity'.⁷⁹ St Samthann was also associated with food miracles, particularly dairy, and could make one pat of butter last an entire year to feed her nuns and her guests. She also miraculously provides bread and dairy for the workers building her monastery and can feed 50 guests with the milk of one cow. Samthann's stories closely parallel motifs found in Brigid's miracles.⁸⁰ And while St Ita, known as a 'second Brigid' was not involved with food miracles, she does have an interesting connection to milk, in that she nursed the infant Jesus from her own breasts.⁸¹

Further reiterating the pattern of Miraculous Provision and the symbolism of milk is the martyred Welsh saint Gwenfrewy, who was beheaded for resisting Caradog's advances, after which St Beuno resurrects her. Her holy well was created when her blessed blood mixed with a spring, intimating the symbolism of the Eucharist. This became her holy well which was associated not only with her martyrdom, but '... a place of new life and miracles of restoration

⁷⁷ Freeman, p. 121

⁷⁸ Finbar McCormick, 'The Decline of the Cow: Agricultural and Settlement Change in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia*, 20 (2008), 209-224 (211) <https://www.brepolonline.net/doi/10.1484/J.Peri.3.632>

⁷⁹ Bray, *Motifs*, p. 39

⁸⁰ Callan, p. 138-140

⁸¹ Callan, p. 130

and healing.⁸² ‘The well is said to have turned to milk following the defeat of the French in Gwyedd, and was reputed to have miraculous healing qualities.’⁸³ In *The Development of the Cult in St. Winefride*, T. W. Pritchard highlights the imagery and symbolism of milk in Sion’s poem to Gwenfrewy, ‘The well is the paradise of all Britain’ and with the moon’s reflection in the water it becomes a ‘silver relic, and contains excellent ‘milk-breast’.⁸⁴

And while milk has obvious connections to physical nourishment and miracles concerning dairy feature in many of the stories of Brigid as well as other saints, it is also related to spiritual sustenance. In the *Vita Prima*, Brigid describes a dream to St Patrick, where ‘streams of new milk’ filled the freshly planted furrows. Patrick interprets her dream as sowing the word of God, and that in doing so, ‘... we offer the milk of basic teaching’.⁸⁵ As a symbolic motif of its own, milk has countless biblical references and symbolizes abundance, plenty, and fruitfulness. For example, the promised land is a ‘land flowing with milk and honey’.⁸⁶ A prophecy proclaims that, ‘In that day/the mountains shall drip sweet wine/the hills shall flow with milk’.⁸⁷ And Scripture is referred to as, ‘The sincere milk of the word of the gospel’.⁸⁸

While the hagiographical motifs of Fire, Liminality, and Miraculous Provision in the *Vita Prima* have been considered by some scholars as evidence for St Brigid’s origins as a pagan goddess, the sources for each of these motifs are unquestionably documented in the Bible. Fire

⁸² T.W. Pritchard, *The Development of the Cult in St. Winefride*, in ‘Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission’, p. 72, (Bridge Books, 1860), pages scanned: 45-88. The Female Saints of Wales CYCS7007.<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/457662/mod_resource/content/3/CYCS7007PRI45.pdf [18 April 2024]

⁸³ Pritchard, p. 74

⁸⁴ Pritchard, p. 74

⁸⁵ Freeman, p. 91, 92

⁸⁶ Deut 26:9, NRSVUE. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%2026&version=NRSVUE> [21 April 2024]

⁸⁷ Joel 3:18, NRSVUE. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Joel+3%3A18&version=NRSVUE> [21 April 2024]

⁸⁸ Isaiah 60:16, NRSVUE. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+60%3A16&version=NRSVUE> [21 April 2024]

has long been considered a mark of sanctity with correlations to the Holy Spirit as well as the Burning Bush and the fire that does not destroy. Liminality is a prevailing motif throughout the life of Christ, and stories of Miraculous Provision echo down through the ages from the wedding at Cana and the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. And while the origins of these motifs are clearly rooted in Scripture, they are also written through an Irish lens, which has given them a unique narrative character that picks up on native storytelling and heroic saga. However, this does not prove that St Brigid is a pre-Christian goddess. As Bray explains, while the hagiographers would likely have known about a goddess by the name of Brigid, ‘... it is also difficult to believe they set out to transform this goddess into a Christian saint’.⁸⁹ If the purpose for the selection of the motifs in the *Vita Prima* was to promote Brigid’s cult, the hagiographers have achieved their aim, as it has endured throughout the ages and continues to thrive 1500 years after her death.

⁸⁹ Bray, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 110

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