

Write a critical appreciation of any saint's Life associated with one of the Celtic regions. In your answer you should consider issues such as the text's authorship, its purpose, transmission, key themes, literary and historical context.

St Brigid is Ireland's first and foremost female saint, her miracles and works being recorded in only three Irish *Vitae*. These works are Cogitosus' Life of St Brigid the Virgin, the anonymous Latin *Vita Prima* and the old Irish *Bethu Brigte*. These works were contained within the *Acta Sanctorum*¹, and various versions of these *Vitae* have been found across Europe. In this essay I will review the hagiography written by Cogitosus², considering the text's authorship and its purpose, the transmission of the text, and the key themes. By the end of the essay, I will try to put the work into a literary and historical context and be able to demonstrate Cogitosus' work in promoting the cult of St Brigid and Kildare.

Cogitosus was a monk from Kildare, an important monastery in Ireland. He wrote the *Vita Sanctae Brigidae (VSB)*, considered to be the oldest extant Life of St Brigid, around 650. He was named as the first Irish hagiographer by the monk Miurchú, who wrote *Vita Sancti Patricii*. It is probable that Cogitosus drew from earlier written sources which had preserved some details about Brigid's life and miracles, and from his work later Lives were written. As an educated literate man, Cogitosus was part of the societal elite, and this must be remembered when reading the text.

It is likely that Cogitosus had two aims when writing *VSB*. The first would have been to write the account of Brigid's miracles and works, as he states in his prologue. The second would have been to promote and champion the rights and privileges of the church of Kildare with a view to "establish a locus of pilgrimage with a view to both financial and spiritual gain."³

According to the Annals of Ulster Brigid was born in 452 to noble parents, and died sometime in the 520s, with various dates of death being recorded. She founded Kildare around 500. Cogitosus describes Kildare as a double foundation with both a monastery and an abbey, ruled by a prior and an abbess respectively, and stated that it was one of the greatest centres of pilgrimage in Ireland.⁴ Johnston confirms that the church of Kildare was both wealthy and influential, and that Brigid is portrayed as being more powerful than other female saints.

Cogitosus acknowledged in *VSB* that he would not be able to give a full account of Brigid's miracles, and instead opted to select a few to offer as examples. He noted that her miracles increased by the day until it was almost impossible to count them. Like Cogitosus, I will not go into detail over every miracle, but will pull out some examples and group into themes.

The first group of miracles I will describe as heavenly favours, where God ensures that Brigid does not fall short of what is needed. Cogitosus references Brigid giving away the "foreign and exotic robes"⁵ of bishop Conlaeth, and then they are replaced by a stranger who repays her generosity.

¹ A critical collection of saints Lives dating back to the seventeenth century, organised by Saints' feast days. The work was started by the Jesuit scholar Heribert Rosweyde, and continued by the Bollandist society.

² The version of Cogitosus' Life of St Brigid the Virgin used can be found in De Paor, L. *Saint Patrick's world: the Christian culture of Ireland's apostolic age* (Four Courts Press, 2007).pp. 207-224.

³ Cartwright, J. *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press Cardiff, 2008) p. 75.

⁴ A. Breen, *Cogitosus*, October 2009 <<https://www.dib.ie/biography/cogitosus-a1809>> accessed 29 March 2023.

⁵ De Paor, St. Patrick's World, p. 219.

There are many instances of this generosity. Brigid had been working in the dairy, with other women. She chose to “obey God rather than men”⁶ by giving away the milk and butter to the poor. Upon having to produce her butter, which she had given away freely, she prayed to God who heard her prayers and produced more than enough butter for her needs. Other miracles like this are detailed. Brigid was cooking pork and gave some to a hungry dog. When the pork was divided among the guests, there was enough food to go between the guests and the amount in the cooking trough remained undiminished. Brigid was also able to turn water into beer and produce salt from a rock. These miracles put the reader in mind of the parables of Jesus being able to provide sufficient food for all the faithful.

On the theme of folklore miracles, we find the miraculous recovery of a brooch from the stomach of a fish which vindicates a woman accused of theft and maintains the woman’s chastity. The woman gives herself over to Brigid’s company upon her innocence being proven, and the wicked man who had sought to enslave the woman confessed his fault to Brigid. Another miracle is that of the miraculously replaced calf and loom. The loom was broken up for firewood and the calf slaughtered for dinner for Brigid. Brigid, a protector of the poor, miraculously caused the loom to be remade and the cow to discover another calf, before heading on her way.

A popular motif is animal miracles, where animals behave against their nature in the presence of the saint. Brigid was able to leave a large quantity of bacon to be guarded by a dog, and the dog did not eat it. Cogitosus clearly states “as docile guardian of the bacon, he was tamed by divine power and was seen to act against his nature”⁷. On one occasion a wild boar ran into Brigid’s herd of swine whilst escaping a hunting party. Brigid blessed the boar, and it settled amongst the herd like a domestic pig. There was an instance where wild wolves acted as swineherds for Brigid, escorting pigs to her on the road. Cogitosus notes the wolves “because of their enormous reverence for the blessed Brigid...left the great forests and the wide plains to work at herding and protecting the pigs”.⁸

There is the story of the wild fox which took the place of the King’s pet fox when the pet fox was accidentally slain by a visitor. Again, through Brigid’s intervention and her sense of justice, God acted through her to replace the fox with a wild fox who could do all the things that the tame fox had done. The visitor was released, and not long after, the wild fox fled back to its den. This miracle is presented like a parable, showing that the wild animal would only obey Brigid as she was holy and favoured by God, and when she and the visitor had gone the wild animal eventually returned to its nature and fled.

Even inanimate objects and natural features such as rivers were bound to the saint. A river overwhelmed thieves who had stolen a cow from Brigid, forming a wall around the cow allowing it and other stolen animals to go free. A huge tree which was cut down was so huge and heavy that it could not be moved until Brigid interceded, and then it could be carried without any difficulty. Another river miraculously changed its course to enable a road to be built by Brigid’s tribe, after another tribe had forced them to work on the most difficult section.

I must mention the miraculous millstone associated with Brigid. Brigid’s labourers carved a millstone but were unable to move it from the place they had created it. The prior advised that invoking the name of St Brigid would allow them to move it, as “nothing is impossible”⁹. They were able to throw

⁶ De Paor, St. Patrick’s World, p. 209.

⁷ De Paor, St. Patrick’s World, p. 212.

⁸ De Paor, St. Patrick’s World, p. 214.

⁹ De Paor, St. Patrick’s World, p. 221.

it down the mountain, where it miraculously rolled to the exact spot where the oxen team were waiting for it. Once it was in place, another miracle was reported when the millstone would not grind the grain of a druid but it ground all the other grain without issue. Later, when the millhouse caught fire, the millstone was untouched by the flames. The stone was brought to the monastery where it was placed in the gate, curing the diseases of the faithful who touched it.

Least represented within *VSB* are healing miracles, although there are some, the miraculous millstone being one of them. There is the miracle of the altar which Brigid touched when she took her vows of chastity to God, and which “to the present day...it cures infirmities and diseases of the faithful.”¹⁰ Brigid was able to cure a person’s blindness, with God’s divine favour working through her, and another person’s inability to speak. Cogitosus explains that God has given her the ability to do this as she is one of his chosen ones, and his apostles are able to act in his place to do his work.

There is a higher proportion of helpful miracles in Brigid’s *Vita* than in the accounts of Patrick, the pre-eminent Saint of Ireland. Patrick is often portrayed as a missionary apostle, and most of his miracles vindicate the rights of Armagh and the saint as he carried out his conversions¹¹. Kildare and Armagh were in competition for the control of churches in the areas where they shared borders, although these attempts were not sustained much beyond 700¹². In contrast to Patrick, Brigid in line with her femininity is providing food and caring for those less able than herself.

Notable by his absence in this *Vita* is the old adversary, the Devil. Various sources state that the Irish *Vitae* place no importance on the part played by the Devil, whereas on the continent he was an ever-present threat, tempting church and lay folk alike and bringing misfortune. This may have been due in part to the breaking of links between the Mediterranean world and the outer western fringes of Christendom when the Roman Empire began to fracture, meaning the Augustinian view of Christendom was not transmitted to Britain and Ireland. Instead, a more open view of the world of God developed, one in which the Devil did not feature very heavily.¹³

I would be remiss in my analysis if I did not mention the ongoing theme of virginity within the text. Virginity was almost considered a prerequisite for feminine sanctity.¹⁴ Female saints were always held to the ideal of chastity and virginity, and a woman who withdrew from the world to follow a religious life was both to be celebrated and feared. There are many accounts of these women being desired by evil men or being at risk of being married off, and through God’s intervention they are able to continue with their religious lives. In the anonymous *Bethu Brigitte*, Brigid undergoes bodily disfigurement to avoid an earthly marriage, and her devotion to God is rewarded when her physical state is restored. This has a precedent in the *Acts of St Peter*, where Peter’s daughter was inflicted with bodily deformity to preserve her chastity.¹⁵

In Ireland, the Christian traditions developed with very little input from the Roman world. Missionaries from Britain and Gaul converted the kingdoms of Ireland in the first half of the fifth century, bringing with them their own practices. The early Irish movement produced many holy men

¹⁰ De Paor, *St. Patrick’s World*, p. 209.

¹¹ C. Stancliffe, ‘The Miracle Stories In Seventh Century Irish Saints Lives’ (from *The Seventh Century Change and Continuity Proceedings of a joint French and British Colloquium held at the Warburg Institute 8-9 July 1988*), London (1992), pp. 87-115 (p. 98).

¹² W. Davies, *The early church in Wales and the west*, ed. By Edwards, N. and Lane, A. (Oxbow Books, 1992) pp. 12-21 (p. 14).

¹³ C. Stancliffe, ‘The Miracle Stories In Seventh Century Irish Saints Lives’, 1992, p. 105.

¹⁴ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 85.

¹⁵ C. Stancliffe, ‘The Miracle Stories In Seventh Century Irish Saints Lives’, 1992, p. 92.

and women. Head notes that Irish monasticism was “especially severe in its ascetic rigor but, tempered by a boundless enthusiasm for the wonders of the natural world”¹⁶. Numerous Latin works can be securely dated to the seventh century which celebrated the lives of the greatest saints, namely Patrick, Columba and of course Brigid. Cogitosus was a learned man and would have been aware of the continental hagiographical tradition. In his preface, he placed his work within this tradition, thus beginning the Irish hagiographical tradition.

I will now touch on the other *Vitae* mentioned. *Vita Prima* provides an extended heroic biography of Brigid. There are approximately 30 shared episodes between *VSB* and the *Vita Prima*, although the links are occasionally tenuous. Stories told at length in one version are given half a sentence in the other. Connolly thinks it likely that both drew from a common source, a point further expanded upon in *Bethu Brigte*.¹⁷ Brigid’s father is a nobleman, her mother a bondmaid. Johnston notes that this would put readers in mind of the Virgin Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, and therefore Brigid is a Christ-Like figure who can free those in bondage.¹⁸

Brigid is also identified as Mary in both *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte*, and is regarded as exceptional in this. *VSB* puts her as the most exalted virgin of all time. Johnston notes that Brigid is a major figure from *Cath Almaine*, a pre-Christian saga. Bradley notes that Brigid is described as another Mary in a poem dating from around 600.¹⁹ It is almost certain that the vernacular Irish sagas celebrating the deeds of pre-Christian and Christian heroes would have influenced the hagiographical writings. This sets St Brigid up as a saint-hero figure, and therefore more than just a woman.²⁰

The cult of Brigid was linked to the North Leinster kings, and in hymns and poems we can see the description of Brigid as both a saint of the Leinsterman and the sovereign queen of them.²¹ Although Ireland did not produce powerful queens, Brigid is linked with this role, indicating that she could bring strength to an area by association with her.

Ludwig Bieler has comprehensively catalogued the surviving manuscripts of *VSB*, the earliest of which is originally from the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Thierry, northeastern France and is dated to the 9-10th century.²² It is known that Irish monks travelled to Scotland and England during the sixth and seventh centuries, founding a monastic tradition much like that in Ireland. They also travelled to the Frankish kingdom, where St Columbanus and his followers were able to implement their own monastic tradition. In this way, the *Vitae* would have travelled across Europe. The hagiographies also found their way into the *Acta Sanctorum* compiled by the Bollandists.

I stated my aim at the outset to try and put the work of Cogitosus into a literary and historical context of promoting the cult of St Brigid and Kildare. *VSB* was one of the first hagiographies to originate from Ireland, and essentially began the Irish hagiographical tradition. I have reviewed the

¹⁶ T. Head, *Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity*, 1999, <http://www.hagiographysociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Head_Women.pdf> [Accessed 29 March 2023] p. 4.

¹⁷ S. Connolly, ‘Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol 119 (1989), pp. 5-49, (p. 7).

¹⁸ E. Johnston, ‘The pagan and Christian identities of the Irish female saint’, in *Celts and Christians*, ed. By M. Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002) pp. 60-78, (p. 64).

¹⁹ I. Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making myths and chasing dreams*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 9.

²⁰ Johnston, pp. 62-63.

²¹ Johnston, p. 69. Referencing the hymn *Brigit bé bithmaith* and the old Irish poem known as *Hail Brigit*.

²² P. Freeman, ‘The Life of Saint Brigid by Cogitosus’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 39 (2019), 109-133 (p. 110).

miracles described by Cogitosus, and can appreciate that the selected stories do much to honour and glorify Brigid.

The miracle stories featured are more of the natural and folkloric types, unlike later *Vitae* which demonstrate a much more Heroic influence. Miracles are integral to Irish hagiography, and hagiography itself should be read as literature which intertwines Christian, pagan, oral and literary motifs. The miracles do much to portray Brigid as being in receipt of God's favour and channelling his divine will to work miracles for the good of the populace, intended to remind people of God's power and serve as a lesson in active piety. The stories are grouped thematically, and Cogitosus' interest in building the prestige of the Kingdom of Leinster is reflected in the divine favour shown to Brigid, the founder of Kildare. Association with Kildare therefore meant association with Brigid, and the divine favour shown to her.

As well as being a record of donations of lands and goods to Brigid such as the rich robes received by Conlaeth, *VSB* also shows her generosity in giving wealth away. This is a lesson of detachment and caution against avarice. The objects of her compassion are always the needy and underprivileged. Brigid is always portrayed as generous towards those who are unable to help themselves.²³

Cogitosus has described miracles associated with certain objects which at that time were still in situ, such as the altar of Brigid or her millstone. This would have served to encourage pilgrims to visit the church, to touch the physical emanations of her divinity, and potentially get closer to God themselves. *VSB* represents a particularly Irish type of hagiography with a proliferation of folklore and nature miracles, direct communion with the divine, and low numbers of healing, exorcism, or demonic encounters.

I therefore conclude that the *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* was more than just a collection of miraculous deeds associated with a person. It was both historical record and propaganda, responding to the political position of the day and bolstering the rights of Kildare Abbey through its association with St Brigid.

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²³ S. Connolly, 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae', p. 8.

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