

St Brigit¹ is an Irish saint who has continued to remain popular into modern times. The extant literature surrounding St Brigit is abundant when compared with other saints, particularly other female saints of the Celtic regions.² She has two Latin Lives, the *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* written by Cogitosus and the anonymously authored *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*.³ There is also a later Irish *Betha*, the *Betha Bhrigde*.⁴ Though there is no Welsh *Buchedd* regarding St Brigit, or San Ffraid⁵ as she is known in Wales, there is a 15th century poem⁶ written to her, attesting to her popularity throughout the centuries. As does the spread of her cult throughout Ireland, Wales and continental Europe.⁷

The study of motifs within saints' Lives has been a focus of hagiographical study in recent decades. In the introduction to *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*, Dorothy Ann Bray states that 'motifs are the materials used to create the image of the hero-saint'⁸ showing the way in which motifs work as foundational building blocks within *Vitae*. Similarly, Elissa Henken has noted throughout her work that the Lives of saints are formulaic and adhere

¹ Here we will refer to the saint as St Brigit, but in discussion featuring other sources the versions Brigid, Bridget and the Welsh San Ffraid, amongst others, may be seen.

² There are other Irish female saints for whom we have Latin Lives including St. Íte, St. Samthann and St. Moninne yet without the abundance of literature as St Brigit, and still far fewer in number than the Lives and surrounding iconography of male saints. The only two female Welsh saints to have extant Lives are St Winefrede and St Melangell.

³ The two Latin Lives of St Brigit are *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* and *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* or 'Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit.' The translations we will be using here will be the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* trans. by Seán Connolly in Connolly, Seán 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae Background and Historical Value' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 119, (1989), pp. 5-49 and will henceforth be referred to as *Vita Prima*. For Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit,' we will be using the version found in Connolly, Sean, and J. M. Picard. 'Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit' Content and Value' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 117, (1987), pp. 5-27 and will henceforth be referred to as Cogitosus's Life.

⁴ *Betha Bhrigde* is the Irish Life of St Brigit, thought to have been composed in the 9th Century and found in the Book of Lismore. Charles-Edwards places the *Betha* in the 9th C, noting the similarities with the *Vita Prima* that they most likely both derive from a lost 7th Century manuscript. See Charles-Edwards, T. M. 'Early Irish Saints' Cults and Their Constituencies' *Ériu*, vol. 54, (2004), p. 82. There is certainly a lack of recent scholarship surrounding *Betha Bhrigde* with focus being on the two Latin Lives. The translation we will be consulting is *Betha Bhrigde*, in ed. and trans. By Stokes, W., *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890).

⁵ San Ffraid is a composite saint, comprised of St Brigit and St Birgitta of Sweden, for further information on the Welsh saint, see San Ffraid's entry in the *Seintiau* project <<https://seintiadur.saints.wales/chwilio.php?saintid=23>> [accessed 24/04/2026].

⁶ Iorwerth Fynglwyd (1480–1527) wrote 'I San Ffraid' attesting to her cult in Wales at this time. For detailed discussion and translation of the poem see Meehan, J., (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2012), p. 26.

⁷ For an examination of the spread of the cult of St Brigit, see Meehan, J., (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2012).

⁸ Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), p. 14.

to very similar patterns, including the use of motifs.⁹ Here we will analyse a range of motifs found in the Life of St Brigit to determine how they function within the narrative and what their purpose may be. Our focus will primarily be upon the *Vita Prima* though reference will also be made to the other Latin Life and the later Irish Life or *Betha* of St Brigit. Though its name suggests that the *Vita Prima* is the oldest extant version of the Life of St Brigit, it is now believed by scholars that *Cogitosus's Life* is, in fact, older.¹⁰ Scholars do agree, however, that the two Latin Lives both date from the mid 7th to early 8th centuries, placing them amongst the earliest examples of Irish hagiography.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to define what is meant here by ‘motif’, as the term is often confused with other literary devices such as themes and symbols. The Oxford English Dictionary offers a definition of motif as ‘a recurrent theme, subject, or image’¹¹ including theme in its definition. Conversely, James Morgan states that ‘motifs are normally concrete (e.g., repeated objects, expressions) and themes are abstract (e.g., concepts, main ideas, values)’¹² showing the difference between motifs and themes. As Horst S. Daemmrich writes ‘scholars devoted to motifs have written excellent, incisive investigations, yet have failed to reach agreement on the nature of motifs’¹³ showing the changeability of literary terms. Here then, we will work with the definition of motif as a repeated subject or image with the acceptance that this may touch upon wider thematic material.¹⁴ Examples of motifs that fit this description can be found across multiple genres of literature. In his seminal index, Stith Thompson presents a vast collection of motifs found in folkloric stories demonstrating their

⁹ Elissa Henken *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives*, (D.S. Brewer, 1991).

¹⁰ For discussion on the dating of the Lives of St Brigit see Maney, L., ‘The Date and Provenance of Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 23, (2003), pp. 200-18 and Higgins, J., ‘Saints’ Lives in Seventh Century France and Ireland’ *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies*, vol. 16, (2024), pp. 3-24.

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary entry ‘motif’ <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/motif_n?tab=meaning_and_use> [accessed on 04/04/2026].

¹² James M. Morgan, ‘How Do Motifs Endure and Perform? Motif Theory For The Study Of Biblical Narratives’ *Revue Biblique* (1946-), Vol. 122, No. 2, (2015), p. 198.

¹³ Horst S. Daemmrich, ‘Themes and Motifs in Literature: Approaches: Trends: Definition’ *The German Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 4, (1985), p. 567.

¹⁴ For further discussion on the definition of motifs see Morgan, James M. ‘How Do Motifs Endure and Perform? Motif Theory For The Study Of Biblical Narratives’ *Revue Biblique* (1946-), Vol. 122, No. 2, (2015), pp. 194–216.

permeation throughout this genre.¹⁵ Similar prevalence can be found within hagiography and the work of Dorothy Ann Bray and Elissa Henken has shown the use of motifs throughout saints' Lives. Although Bray's work on motifs within Irish hagiography has been of great importance to the field, there are several motifs found within the *Vita Prima* and several other Irish saints' Lives that are not documented in the index. These are the motifs mostly relating to the experience of female saints. There are no entries relating to the common motifs of beauty, forced marriage, rape or virginity in Bray's index. Though Bray herself does state that the index is 'an exploratory attempt to identify, classify and document the majority of motifs'¹⁶ so it is perhaps expected that not all motifs present would be included. However, as these are inextricably linked with female saints it is still surprising that they are absent from the index. Going forward, we shall discuss these and other motifs, yet what follows is not intended to be a complete catalogue of the motifs contained within the *Vita Prima* but an examination of several key ones found and their purpose.

A large number of saints' Lives employ motifs from the outset when relaying the birth stories of a saint. Unusually for a female saint, in the *Vita Prima* we receive the story of Brigit's conception and birth, when typically we meet female saints only at the point where they are challenged with adversity.¹⁷ We are told that her father Dubthach is a 'nobleman,' perhaps belonging to the 'flaith' or 'aire' class, meaning Lord.¹⁸ This is reflective of the strict hierarchal system in place during early medieval Ireland as described in the Irish Brehon Law tractates¹⁹ *Uraicecht Becc* and *Críth Gablach*.²⁰ We are told that her mother Broicsech is a 'bondmaid'

¹⁵ Thompson, *Stith Motif Index of Folk-literature*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).

¹⁶ Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*, p. 9.

¹⁷ For example we meet St Winefrede only just before her attack, for her Life see *Vita S. Wenefrede*, R. Pepin and H. Feiss, trans., *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride* (Toronto, 2000), pp. 97–126. *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae*, Pepin and Feiss, trans., *Two Medieval Lives*, pp. 27–93.

¹⁸ For further discussion on the hierarchy within early medieval Ireland see O'Sullivan, Aidan, and Triona Nicholl. 'Early Medieval Settlement Enclosures in Ireland: Dwellings, Daily Life and Social Identity' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, (2011), pp. 59–90 and Aitchison, N. B. 'Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland' *Traditio*, vol. 49, (1994), pp. 45–75.

¹⁹ The early Law codes of Ireland are termed Brehon Law, with the *Senchas Már* being the largest surviving collection. For detailed discussions on the origins of the Irish Law texts see L. Breatnach, 'The Early Irish Law Text *Senchas Már* and the Question of its Date,' E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lecture 13 (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 38–49 and Charles-Edwards, T., 'Early Irish Law, St Patrick, And The Date Of The *Senchas Már*' *Ériu*, vol. 71, (2021), pp. 19–59.

²⁰ *Uraicecht Becc* and *Críth Gablach* are two of the Irish Law tractate concerning status. For an early but relevant discussion and translation see MacNeill, Eoin, 'Ancient Irish Law. The Law of Status or Franchise' *Proceedings*

and ‘good-living’²¹ extolling her virtuous nature. To explain Broicsech’s pregnancy, the *Vita Prima* states that ‘Her master Dubthach desired her and slept with her and she became pregnant by him’²² thus removing Broicsech’s agency, in a parallel to the conception of St David, where Non is raped in order to become David’s mother.²³ We see this explained as a pre-ordained prophecy with ‘the child she has conceived will be extraordinary,’²⁴ the motif of prophecy being a common occurrence within saints’ Lives to legitimise them and frame them as holy from the start. Brigit’s actual birth, is seen with ‘she fell astride the threshold and gave birth to a daughter’²⁵ thus highlighting the special circumstances surrounding her birth. The description is similar to another magical birth story found in Celtic literature, that of Arianrhod’s giving birth in the *Fourth Branch of The Mabinogion* whereby ‘as she stepped she dropped a large, sturdy, yellow haired boy’²⁶ showing the association of the supernatural with thresholds and elevating the story of those who are born upon them. The situating of Brigit’s birth in this liminal space establishes her as being special from the moment she is born, thus we see how the motifs of prophecy and liminality work together to achieve this.

Following this, with regards to Brigit’s early life, Isabel Birge points out that ‘her rearing by a druid contradicts what we might think of as a traditional model of sainthood’²⁷ and is not a typical feature of saints’ *Vita*, particularly given the limited location of the Druids. What *is* a typical feature though is an adverse start in life that the saint has to overcome in order to reach holiness. The Druidic connection serves to further ‘reflect the liminality with which Brigit is associated’²⁸ as Birge notes. The conversion or attempted conversion of Druids features in several stories of Irish saints including the other two saints of the Irish saintly triumvirate, St

of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature, vol. 36, (1921), pp. 265–316.

²¹ *Vita Prima*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²³ For the story of the rape of St Non, see ‘Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David’, ed. by Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and J. M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), pp. 107–155 and for detailed discussion see Cartwright, J. ‘St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and Breton Hagiography’ in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 95–121.

²⁴ *Vita Prima* p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁶ *The Mabinogion*, trans. S. Davies, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 54.

²⁷ Isabel Birge, ‘Saint Brigit of Kildare, The ‘Mary Of The Gaels’: The Many Faces Of Ireland’s Only Female Patron Saint’ *Dies Legibiles*, Vol. 4, (2024), p. 113.

²⁸ Birge, ‘Saint Brigit of Kildare, The ‘Mary Of The Gaels’: The Many Faces Of Ireland’s Only Female Patron Saint’, p. 113.

Patrick and St Columba.²⁹ It is seen in the *Vita Prima* with ‘Then the druid believed in the Lord and was baptized’³⁰ showing a full conversion of a Druid to Christianity. The function of this motif then is to show the triumph of Christianity over Pagan ways. It is important to point out however that the appearance of Druids within the translations of saints’ Lives does not necessarily constitute the same account of the Druids who feature in the Classical sources.³¹ The original Latin word used in the *Vita Prima* is ‘Magus,’ which modern translators interpret as ‘Druid.’ The plural, ‘Magi’ is also the term found in the Bible for the wise men appearing in the story of Jesus’ birth³² perhaps accounting for the acceptance of their inclusion within hagiography. In his 1890 translation of the *Betha Bhrigde*, Whitley Stokes uses the word ‘Wizard’³³ for this figure, although the Lismore manuscript he was working with does use the Old Irish for Druid, ‘druí’³⁴, so it is perhaps pertinent to note that by their very nature, translations are not static and can move with the current culture they find themselves in. However, the purpose of the motif is still the same in that the symbolism is of the Christian saint triumphing over the non-Christian.³⁵

In a juxtaposition with Pagan elements, the association with other saints is a common motif and in the *Vita Prima* we see the appearance of St Patrick in Brigit’s Life, seen with ‘St Patrick came with a large crowd’³⁶ forming an oft repeated trope whereby other saints make ‘cameo’ appearances in *Vitae*. This is done to elevate the saint to a greater status and legitimise their

²⁹ For the life of St Patrick see *Saint Patrick’s world: the Christian culture of Ireland’s apostolic age* ed. by L. de Paor, (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 1993) For St Columba see *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* ed. by R. Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1995). Druids also make appearances in the legends of Saint Mochuda and Saint Guénolé of Brittany.

³⁰ *Vita Prima*, p. 17.

³¹ For detailed examination of the historical sources regarding the Druids, see Hutton, R., *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009).

³² Matthew 2:7–12 (NKJV)

³³ *Betha Bhrigde*, in ed. and trans. By Stokes, W., *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 319.

³⁴ *Betha Bhrigde*, in ed. and trans. By Stokes, W., *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 319.

³⁵ Further to this, Brigit’s association with Kildare and the etymology of the place name may add further significance. The old Irish for Kildare is Cill Dara, meaning Cell or Church of the Oak. The Irish ‘Dara’ is cognate with Welsh ‘Derw,’ also meaning oak, with the Welsh for Druid being Derwydd. It has been established in the classical sources that the Druids were associated with oak trees and so perhaps the linking of the name here and Brigit’s subsequent establishment of her church at Kildare is further emphasis of the conversation of Pagan beliefs to Christianity. For a classical source relating to Druids see Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* Book XVI, who wrote the Druids ‘held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, supposing always that tree to be the robur.’ See Hutton, R., *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009) for further discussion on the classical sources relation of Druids.

³⁶ *Vita Prima* p. 24.

cult or the church they have founded. Similarly, St Brigit's association with the Virgin Mary serves to validate her holiness and also is a frequently found motif, associating female saints with the Virgin Mother. However, in the *Vita Prima*, Brigit is identified as actually *being* Mary with 'This is holy Mary,'³⁷ aligning her with the Blessed Virgin. The cult of the Virgin Mary was popular throughout medieval Europe and as Jane Cartwright states 'Mary's behaviour thus set a pattern for the female religious to follow'³⁸ and so Brigit is linked with this ideal. Cartwright emphasises that Mary was 'the most important of all female saints'³⁹ showing that the devotion to her cult was widespread and as mother of Christ, permeated every other saints' cult also. Diane Peters Auslander writes;

Brigid was conceived as being to Ireland what Mary was to the whole Christian world: mother, redeemer, powerful protectress and virgin saint, and mediator between god and man⁴⁰

This then, demonstrates how through this motif, Brigit is shown to embody the ultimate qualities of the female saint, even when those ideals seem to come into conflict. As Jaroslav Pelikan observes, Mary represented 'a model of the life of virginity and self-denial,'⁴¹ a model that female saints such as Brigit emphasize through their *Vitae*. Brigit is both maternal through her compassionate acts, yet virginal, reflecting the ideal depiction of women during the Middle Ages. The purpose of this motif and 'Mary of the Gaels' attribution serves to further legitimise her cult.

One of the most prevalent motifs to feature in saint's Lives is the recounting of miracles performed by the saint. These may feature being performed either during the life of the saint or posthumously, thus ensuring the continued sanctity of the saint long after a saint's death. The inclusion of miracles works to establish the connection of the saint with the divine, often mentioned alongside the miracle is that of the power of God working through the saint. As Bray

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸ Jane Cartwright 'The Welsh Cult of the Virgin Mary' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Diane Auslander, 'Gendering the 'Vita Prima': An Examination of St. Brigit's Role as 'Mary of the Gael,'' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 20/21, (2000), p. 202.

⁴¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, 'The Paragon of Chastity and the Blessed Mother' *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, Yale University Press, (1996), p. 116.

tells us, miracles prove ‘the sanctity of the saint’⁴² through connection with God and also the replication of familiar stories from the Bible. It was an expected part of any saints’ Life that there would be displays of *Imitatio Christi*, that is an imitation of Christ, to confirm their sanctity. Many of the miracles follow, as Bray states, ‘a pattern established in the Gospel record of the life of Christ’⁴³ and so mirroring these within saint’s Lives makes a statement that the saints are comparable to Christ. Though the *Vita Prima* does follow Brigit’s life chronologically, most of the episodes are self-contained, so if one was to be forgotten during a sermon or by a story teller, then the rest would still make sense, indicating their foundation in an oral tradition. This is certainly true of much of medieval Celtic literature which developed orally, being passed on through the memorisation of stories.⁴⁴ Just as the triadic grouping of similarly themed subjects, as found in *Trecheng Breth Féne*, *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* and the *Welsh Law*, act as mnemonic devices to aid memory,⁴⁵ operating similarly are the relatively short stories of the events and miracles in the *Vita Prima*. Comparing their work to that of the *fili*,⁴⁶ Bray notes ‘the professional hagiographer, it seems, was expected to know his miracle stories,’⁴⁷ demonstrating the importance of miracles as motifs in *Vitae*, as we shall see in the following discussion.

⁴² Dorothy Ann Bray ‘Miracles and wonders of composition in the Lives of the early Irish saints’ in Cartwright, J. *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults* / Jane Cartwright. (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru / University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 140.

⁴³ Bray, ‘Miracles and wonders of composition in the Lives of the early Irish saints,’ p.140.

⁴⁴ For discussion of the Welsh oral tradition see Sioned Davies, ‘Written text as Performance: The implications for Middle Welsh prose narratives.’ In *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. by H. Pryce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.134.

⁴⁵ *Trecheng Breth Féne* are a 9th century collection of folkloric and historical fragments grouped in threes, possibly to aid oral reciting. For a brief discussion on the Irish Triads see Morris, Henry. ‘From ‘The Triads of Ireland,’ *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, (1921), pp. 35–36. For the full triads see *The Triads of Ireland* ed. by Meyer, K (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1906). This 1906 translation of the triads by Kuno Meyer is still commonly used despite his now known association with nationalist propaganda. For discussion on this episode in Irish history see Stewart, I., *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 363–396. Like the Irish triads, *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* or *The Triads of the Islands of Britain* are a collection of fragments of folklore and history, collated in threes, thought to be a memory aid for the reciters at the time. For the full text see *Trioedd Ynys Prydain: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, ed. by Bromwich, R., (University of Wales Press, 1961). *Cyfraith Hywel* contained triads, thought to be used as a memory aid for Lawyers. For discussion on the use of triads within the Welsh Law codes see Pryce, H., ‘Lawbooks and Literacy in Medieval Wales’ *Speculum*, vol. 75, no. 1, (2000), p. 38.

⁴⁶ The *fili* were the bardic class in Ireland, comparable to the *Beirdd y Tywysogion* poets in Wales. For discussion on the *fili* see Breatnach, L., ‘Satire, Praise and the Early Irish Poet’ *Ériu*, vol. 56, (2006), pp. 63–84.

⁴⁷ Bray, ‘Miracles and wonders of composition in the Lives of the early Irish saints,’ p. 143.

Before we proceed with discussion of the motifs found within Brigit's miracles, it is important to note that the medieval definition of magic differs to modern thought.⁴⁸ Emer Kavanagh writes that 'to a medieval scholar, then, miracles would certainly not count as 'magic''⁴⁹ displaying that though we may see magical acts when we study saints' miracles, during the Middle Ages, magic was actually defined in opposition to miracles. No matter the gravitas of the saint in question, it was clear to medieval audiences that their wonderous acts always originated with God, the saint merely being a channel for a greater power. That miracles were used to emphasise divinity over Pagan ritual is perhaps more pertinent with St Brigit as it is often suggested she is a Christianised version of an earlier Celtic deity.⁵⁰ For Elizabeth Lerner 'the nature and food-oriented elements of her character seem very likely to harken back to the primal Irish goddess Brig'⁵¹ highlighting the possible Pagan elements. Yet it is not surprising that animals feature prominently, particularly domesticated animals in what would have been an agricultural community. In the miracles within the *Vita Prima*, it is made clear that Brigit's power resides with God seen in the text with 'by God's power the big vessel was filled.'⁵² Ultimately, for Kavanagh there is 'very little indication that the authors were attempting to synchronise a pagan goddess with a Christian saint'⁵³ illustrating that the texts themselves do not offer any definitive answer here for the argument aligning Brigit with an earlier deity. Most recent scholarship refutes the suggestion of syncretism, with the view that rather than elevating Brigit, the conflation with the Pagan Goddess actually detracts from her story. Elva Johnstone notes that 'this extraordinary achievement by an Irish woman has been obscured by debates about her identity'⁵⁴ showing how devoting so much resource to proving whether Brigit existed

⁴⁸ For discussion surrounding the changing definition of 'magic' see Kavanagh, Emer, *Signs and Wonders: Exploring Aspects of Ritual and Narrative Representations of Magic in Medieval Ireland*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2024), pp. 8-10.

⁴⁹ Emer Kavanagh, *Signs and Wonders: Exploring Aspects of Ritual and Narrative Representations of Magic in Medieval Ireland*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2024), p. 16.

⁵⁰ A debate has long ensued discussing whether the origins of St Brigit can be found with an older Pagan Goddess. For discussion on this see Catháin, S. Ó 'Hearth-Prayers and Other Traditions of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 122, (1992), pp. 12–34 and Lawrence, L., 'Pagan Imagery in the Early Lives of Brigit: A Transformation from Goddess to Saint?' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 16/17, (1996), pp. 39–54.

⁵¹ Lerner, E., 'Virgins and Mothers: Feminine Ideals and Female Roles in the Early Irish Church' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 14, (1994), p. 163.

⁵² *Vita Prima.*, p. 17.

⁵³ Kavanagh *Signs and Wonders: Exploring Aspects of Ritual and Narrative Representations of Magic in Medieval Ireland*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ Elva Johnston 'Making St Brigit Real in the Early Middle Ages' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, (2024) p. 2.

or was indeed a Goddess, is at the detriment to the study of the medieval literature that we *do* have extant.

Turning now to the miracles themselves. Though the inclusion of the miracles is in itself a prevalent motif, we can break the content of the miracles down further as they include several typical elements found within hagiography. The healing of disease is one such prominent motif within the *Vita Prima*. Leprosy⁵⁵ is a disease which features heavily in the *Vita Prima* seen with ‘the leper after having taken off his clothes was healed of his leprosy’⁵⁶ displaying the motifs of both leprosy and miraculous healing. Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan notes that ‘it is clear that leprosy had contemporary relevance’⁵⁷ at this time, showing that the inclusion of certain afflictions reflects the genuine fears and ailments of medieval Irish life. However, recent research indicates that leprosy was possibly not prevalent in Ireland during early medieval Ireland. Recent genetic research by Taylor et al. concludes that it is ‘suggestive that a previously overlooked aspect of the Viking legacy was the introduction of leprosy to Ireland’⁵⁸ perhaps showing that true leprosy was not present in Ireland during the time the *Vita Prima* was composed, given that the first Viking raids were not until the late 8th and early 9th centuries.⁵⁹ Despite the lack of physical evidence surrounding leprosy being prevalent in Ireland, what is evident is that a deep fear of contracting it was present, likely due to its frequent inclusion in the Bible. Ciara Crawford believes that a range of skin conditions ‘became enmeshed and associated with Biblical interpretations of ‘leprosy’’⁶⁰ highlighting the fear of any signs which may have indicated the disease. Stuart Fleming names ‘syphilis, psoriasis and diabetes

⁵⁵ Leprosy is now known as Hansen’s disease after the scientist who discovered the pathogen. A curable disease in modern times, it was highly feared during the early period and Middle Ages due to its contagious nature, however it was thought to be more contagious than it actually is and so those who contracted it were often confined to separate colonies or excluded from public life. For more detailed research on the history see Eichman. P., ‘The History, Biology & Medical Aspects of Leprosy’ *The American Biology Teacher*, vol. 61, no. 7, (1999), pp. 490–95.

⁵⁶ *Vita Prima*, p. 29.

⁵⁷ Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, ‘The Anatomy of Power and the Miracle of Kingship: The Female Body of Sovereignty in a Medieval Irish Kingship Tale’ *Speculum*, vol. 81, no. 4, (2006), p. 1047

⁵⁸ Taylor GM, Murphy EM, Mendum TA, Pike AWG, Linscott B, et al. ‘Leprosy at the edge of Europe—Biomolecular, isotopic and osteoarchaeological findings from medieval Ireland’ *Plos One* 13 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0209495>>[accessed on 16/04/2026]

⁵⁹ There is however, academic debate surrounding the date of the Vikings (a term itself which is arguably debateable) See Atwood, Roger. ‘The Vikings In Ireland,’ *Archaeology*, vol. 68, no. 2, (2015), pp. 46–49 and Harrison, Stephen H. ‘The Vikings in Ireland and beyond new research and new directions?’ *Studia Hibernica* 43, (2017) pp. 127-136.

⁶⁰ Ciara Crawford *Disease and Illness in Medieval Ireland* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Maynooth University, 2011), p. 160.

mellitus'⁶¹ as just a few conditions mistaken for leprosy during the Middle Ages. In *Betha Bhrigde*, the Old Irish word used for leprosy is 'clam'⁶², meaning a general sickness or skin disease⁶³ and cognate with Welsh 'claf,' yet also used for leper, so a little more ambiguous. Whitley Stokes does translate 'clam' as 'leper'⁶⁴ however. Despite the panic surrounding leprosy, it was also viewed as a disease which possibly elevated the afflicted as Crawford states 'symptoms could simultaneously indicate that the person was the chosen one by God'⁶⁵ through suffering. Jesus' interactions with lepers set a standard which many saints are shown to follow, including St Brigit. As noted, other cutaneous conditions could be mistaken for leprosy so it is difficult to ascertain a true picture of the presence of the disease in 4th-7th century Ireland from the extant sources. As we often see in hagiography however, it is not necessarily an accurate recording of historical facts that these texts offer us, but instead an insight into the thoughts and experiences of those living at this time. As Stephen Wilson points out 'saints belong to and reflect the societies that produce and honour them'⁶⁶ showing the value of *Vitae* in illuminating the period in which they were written when approached cautiously. Therefore, historical truths aside, we can see that fear of disease was very real in medieval Ireland and how the motifs of leprosy and miraculous healing work to frame Brigit in a compassionate manner, comparable to Christ, furthering her *Imitatio Christi*.

Another miracle based motif which parallels the actions of Christ is that of providing sustenance from seemingly nothing, echoing the feeding of the five thousand.⁶⁷ In the *Vita Prima* there are multiple instances of Brigit providing food or drink when the situation at first seems hopeless, seen with 'the provisions did not run short for seven days'⁶⁸ showing the

⁶¹ Stuart Fleming, 'Science Scope: The Leper's Dilemma' *Archaeology*, vol. 36, no. 1, (1983), p. 68.

⁶² *Betha Bhrigde*, in ed. and trans. By Stokes, W., *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 330.

⁶³ Entry 'claf' eDIL 2019: *An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, based on the Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913-1976) <<https://dil.ie/search?q=clamh> (www.dil.ie 2019)> [Accessed on 16/04/2026].

⁶⁴ *Betha Bhrigde*, in. *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* ed. and trans. by Stokes, W., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 330.

⁶⁵ Ciara Crawford *Disease and Illness in Medieval Ireland* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Maynooth University, 2011), p. 107.

⁶⁶ Stephen Wilson, *Saints and Their Cults: Studies In Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Matthew 14:13-21 (NKJV)

⁶⁸ *Vita Prima*, p. 38.

miracles of transformation and abundance. As Dominic Alexander points out they depict a ‘traditional Christian view of the saint and nature, in that problems of scarcity in a fallen world are overturned’⁶⁹demonstrating that their inclusion follows a well-established pattern within *Vitae*. Life during this time could be extremely challenging and uncertain, crops being dependent on the weather and animals being relied on to stay healthy and safe from attack.⁷⁰ Any unplanned occurrences in terms of weather, storms or drought, could be fatal in pre-industrial society. With this in mind, it is not difficult to see why there is such a focus on receiving abundance within saints’ Lives, providing hope for a brighter future. On the other hand, it also serves as a deterrent for any behaviour which may be seen as outside of societal norms, inciting fear of punishment from God in the form of failing crops, alluding to several incidents within *The Old Testament*.⁷¹ The idea of Brigit turning water into beer also appears several times throughout the *Vita Prima*, echoing Christ turning water into wine.⁷² The supplanting of beer, however, makes the story relevant to audience the Life was intended for, with beer an important source of nutrition in the medieval period and also a task associated with women.⁷³ Further to this, in medieval Irish society, there was an emphasis on equating food with status and indeed the Irish Law tractate, *Críth Gablach*, details the types of food which should be present when welcoming esteemed guests, with the visitor being able to formally complain upon not receiving the adequate sustenance required for their rank. Cherie Peters writes that the clause in the Law tractate ‘allowed these guests to justly accuse their host of failing in his/her obligations if a named food, to which their grade was entitled, was absent’⁷⁴showing the purpose of this specific addition to the Laws. In the *Vita Prima*, this is seen most explicitly in the chapter where Brigit asks her cook to prepare for ‘distinguished

⁶⁹ Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, Boydell & Brewer, (2008), p. 58.

⁷⁰ For discussion on life in medieval Ireland and its challenges see O’Sullivan, Aidan, and Triona Nicholl. ‘Early Medieval Settlement Enclosures in Ireland: Dwellings, Daily Life and Social Identity’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, (2011), pp. 59-90.

⁷¹ There are multiple instances of severe famine found in *The Old Testament*, often related to divine retribution. Amongst many, examples can be found here in Genesis 43:1 (NKJV) and Amos 8:11 (NKJV).

⁷² John 2:1-11 (NKJV)

⁷³ For an in-depth study on beer making in medieval Ireland see Jessica Sandra Marie Gleman ‘Behind the Brew: the process of beer production in early medieval Ireland, A.D. 400-1100’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University College Dublin, 2022). Gleman finds that in the Old Irish story of ‘The Colloquy of the Ancients’ or ‘Acallmh na senórach’ from the Book of Lismore that ‘A major part of this story was the making and serving of beer. This likely was meant to emphasise an aspect of women’s duty at this time,’ p. 70.

⁷⁴ Cherie N. Peters. “He Is Not Entitled to Butter”: The Diet of Peasants and Commoners in Early Medieval Ireland’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, vol. 115C, (2015), p. 80.

guests’⁷⁵with ‘bread and butter and onions and lots of courses’⁷⁶showing the types of foods suitable for notable guests, as corresponding to the Law codes. Therefore, in the chapters dealing with food which miraculously appears, there is a reflection of a real concern that there would be consequences for a host unable to serve the correct foods. With this in mind then, the divine intervention of the miracle is enhanced because the wider social faux pas and potential subsequent punishment is avoided as well as showing Brigit’s generosity and good nature at providing for people so well.

Additionally, the miracles associated with food often make it clear that despite being the daughter of a nobleman, the actions required of Brigit are not typically those of the nobility. She is often seen in a domestic setting, ‘Brigit with the help of God’s power milked the same cow three times’⁷⁷showing her carrying out tasks associated with lower status or slaves. As mentioned, Brigit’s mother was a bondmaid yet even after they both return as free people, Brigit continues to be associated with the domestic. As Alexander notes ‘despite her miracles, Brigit fitted into the sexual division of labour, and was in no danger of disrupting the gender hierarchies of society through her saintly power’⁷⁸showing how Brigit was not particularly a disrupter of social norms in this sphere. Slavery in Ireland during this time was very common, as it was across the whole of Europe during the Middle Ages.⁷⁹ There are multiple examples of saints being former slaves, including St Patrick, and it seems significant that two out of the three most popular saints in Ireland share a background of being indentured. The inclusion of slavery serves as a motif both by itself and also relates to the common theme of the saint overcoming adversity, leading to spiritual transformation. This serves to act as an ideal for the audience, showing them that, as saints endure hardship and survive, so must they as part of a good, pious life. Christopher Paoella states that ‘for the enslaved Irish Christians, the men were destined for hard labor and the women for sexual exploitation as well as for labor,’⁸⁰an

⁷⁵ *Vita Prima.*, p. 38.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁸ Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, Boydell & Brewer, (2008), p. 59.

⁷⁹ For an overview on slavery in Europe at this time see Paoella, Christopher. ‘Early Medieval Slave Trading’ *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe: Slavery, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 41–82. For an older yet relevant discussion on Slavery and the Church see Pijper, Frederik. ‘The Christian Church and Slavery in the Middle Ages’ *The American Historical Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, (1909), pp. 675–95.

⁸⁰ Christopher Paoella, ‘Early Medieval Slave Trading’ *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe: Slavery, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), p. 61.

account which is in keeping with the *Vita Prima* with the depiction of Broicsech. Paoella further states that ‘the ransoming of slaves is a trope in medieval hagiography’ and that ‘this behaviour was expected of saints by their cults’⁸¹ with the kindness of the saint being highlighted through freeing those in bondage. In the *Vita Prima* Brigit secures the freedom for her own mother with ‘let me have my mother back as a free woman’⁸² thus further proving her goodness and also providing a satisfactory conclusion to her mother’s story. Similarly there are multiple examples within the *Vita Prima* of Brigit working to free prisoners, following a similar pattern to that of freeing slaves found within the Bible⁸³ and thus having the purpose of showing Brigit’s compassion.

Whilst not slaves, medieval women did not have full freedom over their lives either, with this reflected in many female saints’ *Vitae*, often through their experiences of being attacked and martyred. Unusually for a woman, Brigit is considered a confessor saint as none of her Lives feature her being killed.⁸⁴ The *Vita Prima* does however depict the motif of forced marriage, reflecting the realities of medieval life for women and highlighting the importance placed on virginity by both secular and religious society.⁸⁵ As Katherine Harvey tells us virginity often defined and that ‘the virgin-martyr was a particularly important figure’⁸⁶ so it is unusual that the *Vita Prima* does not follow this well-established pattern. Here then, the threat to Brigit’s virginity is a man coming to Brigit’s father to ‘seek his daughter in marriage,’⁸⁷ a common practice in the Middle Ages where marriages were arranged by a woman’s kin. We are told that

⁸¹ Paoella, ‘Early Medieval Slave Trading’ *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe: Slavery, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution*, p. 63.

⁸² *Vita Prima* p. 17.

⁸³ For examples see Deuteronomy 5:15 (NKJV) and Exodus 21:2 (NKJV).

⁸⁴ Saints are often classified as to their story pattern. Confessor saints are saints who followed the early period of saints martyred for being Christian, achieving their sainthood through living a virtuous life. Other Celtic confessor saints include St Columba and St David. For an older but useful examination, see O’Reilly, M., *Lives of the Irish Martyrs and Confessors* (New York: James Sheehy Publishers, 1878). Martyred saints are those who are killed for an aspect of their faith, with female saints usually dying whilst protecting their virginity. Celtic martyred saints include St Gwenfrewy, though she is resurrected by St Beuno. For discussion on martyred Celtic female saints see Cartwright, J., ‘Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales’, *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (2002), pp. 1-28.

⁸⁵ Virginity was important to those living in the Middle Ages for multiple reasons. In secular life, an emphasis was placed on protecting virginity until marriage to ensure any resulting pregnancy would carry the desired lineage. In religious life, virginity denoted purity of spirit and a rejection of the material. For further discussion see Rieder, P. M., ‘The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny: A Critical Historiography of the Language of Medieval Women’s Oppression’, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 38, no. 1, (2012), pp. 1–18.

⁸⁶ Katherine Harvey, ‘Episcopal Virginity in Medieval England’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2017), p. 274.

⁸⁷ *Vita Prima*, p. 18.

‘Brigit turned him down’⁸⁸ suggesting that Irish women did have the choice of accepting or refusing marriage. The Welsh Law tractates confirm similar for Wales with T. P. Ellis finding in *Cyfraith Hywel*⁸⁹ that a ‘woman must be a free consenting party to her marriage’⁹⁰ yet we do not know how much this right was able to be exercised in practice given as R.R. Davis points out, women were regarded as a ‘non-person.’⁹¹ As we see in the *Vita Prima*, despite Brigit’s declaration, her kin continue to coerce her into accepting with ‘they began to put great pressure on her to marry the man’⁹² reflecting women’s role in medieval Celtic society serving as ‘a unifying force between kins,’⁹³ as Morfydd Owen observes. We are told that ‘Brigit asked God to afflict her body with some deformity’⁹⁴ to avoid being given away in marriage, with the subsequent description of her eye becoming deformed. This serves to show her sanctity, that she would prefer to be maimed than to relinquish her virginity. Jane Cartwright notes that ‘there are numerous examples of saints and nuns who plucked out their eyes or cut off their noses in order to avoid marriage or rape’⁹⁵ perhaps reflecting the real fears of women in the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, the Irish Law tractate mentioning rape, the *Cáin Lánamna*, stipulates that ‘Union by rape or by stealth...Full éraic is paid for a virgin, for a young nun who does not reject her veil,’⁹⁶ specifically referencing virginal women and nuns to show that the level of compensation

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸⁹ *Cyfraith Hywel*, *The Laws of Hywel Dda* are the Welsh Law texts of medieval Wales. Hywel ap Cadell or Hywel Dda (Hywel the good) governed much of Wales in 10th Century AD and is synonymous with the codifying of medieval law, though stemming from oral tradition we do not know the exact authorship of the laws. For more detail and the full laws see *The Law of Hywel Dda - Law Texts From Medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins, (Y Lolfa, 2025) and *The Welsh Law of Women*. Ed. Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

⁹⁰ T.P. Ellis, 'Legal References, Terms and Conceptions in the Mabinogion', *Y Cymmrodor*, 39, (1928), p. 124.

⁹¹ R.R. Davies 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage in late-medieval Wales' in *The Welsh Law of Women*. Ed. Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 101.

⁹² *Vita Prima*, p. 18.

⁹³ Morfydd Owen 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin' in *The Welsh Law of Women* ed. By Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p.40.

⁹⁴ *Vita Prima*, p. 18.

⁹⁵ Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales', *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (2002), p. 14.

⁹⁶ *Cáin Lánamna* trans. by Donnchadh Ó Corráin as published on <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T102030.html>> [accessed on 19/04/2026]. For the printed text see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Cáin lánamna (The law of the couple)', in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.), 'Early medieval law, c. 700–1200', in: Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Geraldine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd and Clair Wills (eds.), *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing*, iv (Cork, 2002), 6–44: 22–26.

was reflective of the gravity of the crime.⁹⁷ This corresponds with the *Vita Prima* to offer us a picture of how highly prized virginity was in medieval times. However, as Elva Johnston tells us, ‘the experience of the female saint are described and imagined by men’⁹⁸ reminding us that we are viewing Brigit through the lens of the male gaze⁹⁹ and as such, her narrative is not truly representative of a medieval woman. So the inclusion of this graphic incident, whilst it may be relevant to medieval women’s lives, is also revealing of the thoughts of the Church regarding the suffering of women. Marina Warner observes in hagiography the ‘particular focus on women’s torn and broken flesh’¹⁰⁰ to the point of pornography and despite on a reduced scale compared with other female saints,¹⁰¹ we witness this with Brigit’s horrific eye injury. So though not featuring a martyred saint motif, the threat to the saint’s virginity is still here through a potential arranged marriage. As with many of the Lives of female saints, we see St Brigit commit to being a bride of Christ through adopting the ‘veil of virginity,’¹⁰² with Christina Harrington stating that ‘virginal dedication was like marriage’¹⁰³ a popular motif within female saints’ Lives, being wed to Christ. The purpose of these motifs being that Brigit’s sanctity is reinforced through her prayer for disfigurement and subsequent miraculous healing and becoming a bride of Christ.

These miracles, then, have shown how motifs work to elevate the saint to a hero like status and as Henken’s folkloric research has shown ‘the saints are, indeed, Christianized folk

⁹⁷ Like Welsh Law, the Irish Brehon Laws were based on a compensation structure rather than punitive. In Irish Law, *éraic* was to be paid upon a violent bodily crime, whereas as *galanas* is the similar term in Wales. For more on *galanas* in relation to women see Morfydd Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation; Women’s Place in the Kin’ in *The Welsh Law of Women*. Ed. Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 41.

⁹⁸ Elva Johnston, ‘The Pagan and Christian Identities of the Irish Female Saints’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, (2024) p. 62.

⁹⁹ For the feminist theoretical perspective outline the concept of the male gaze see Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ *Screen*, 16, 13, Autumn, (1975), pp. 6–18 which although a theory developed for film media, is applicable to literature and Hagiographical texts.

¹⁰⁰ Marina Warner, ‘Virgin’ *Alone Of All Her Sex: The myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary*, (London, Picador, 1985) p. 73.

¹⁰¹ Several female saints are violently mutilated during their martyrdom including St Katherine/ Catrin and St Agatha. For detailed discussion on several female saints who are tortured or similarly injured see Cartwright, J. ‘Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales’, *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (2002), pp. 1–28

¹⁰² *Vita Prima*, p. 18.

¹⁰³ Harrington, C., ‘Religious Women in the Conversion Period c. Ad 400–600’, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450–1150* (Oxford, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2010), <<https://doi.org/uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198208235.003.0002>>,

[accessed 25 Apr. 2026]

heroes'¹⁰⁴revealing the similarities between folklore and hagiography. A connection with animals¹⁰⁵ is also a common motif within the Lives of saints and is something that features very prominently with the *Vita Prima*. This motif certainly strengthens the idea that saints' Lives hold a strong connection with folk tales, with Stith Thompson's Folk Motif Index featuring thousands of entries of motifs associated with animals.¹⁰⁶ In terms of the medieval Celtic literary corpus, animals feature often in *The Mabinogion* wherein one such example can be seen in *The Second Branch* with Branwen rearing a starling and teaching it to speak.¹⁰⁷ Notably in the *Vita Prima*, there are an unusually high number of incidents involving domesticated animals, something which Dominic Alexander calls a 'striking difference'¹⁰⁸ compared with other saints' Lives, pointing out that the inclusion of these episodes marks a difference to other medieval hagiography. The reason for this is likely to be a reflection of Irish society at the time which, as we have previously mentioned, placed a high level of importance on domestic animals in agricultural life during this time with Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey stating that 'cows were of exceptional importance'¹⁰⁹ in food production thus here we find that reflected in the *Vita Prima*.

Whilst most of the animals featured within the Life of St Brigit are domestic, several episodes also feature wild animals, such as wolves and foxes. The taming of wild animals is a motif serving to demonstrate the extent of Brigit's power, particularly at a time when wild animals were feared for the destruction they could bring upon farming communities. We are told that 'even the brute beasts and animals could not resist her words and wishes'¹¹⁰thus making it overt just how powerful a saint Brigit is. Foxes were both feared and revered during the Middle Ages, killed for their potential to destroy food supplies and also to be used in medicines.¹¹¹The fox

¹⁰⁴ Henken *Traditions of the Welsh Saints* P. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Several saints Lives feature a connection with animals including St Melangell. whose Life can be found translated by Pryce, H, 'A New Edition of *Historia Divae Monacellae*' in *Montgomeryshire Collections*. 82, (1994) pp. 23–40. Interestingly though, it is Santes Dwywnwen who is the patron saint of ill animals, though her story does not centre around animals. The connection is thought to have arisen from her time as a nun on Ynys Llanddwyn where she is said to have offered healing to humans and local farm animals.

¹⁰⁶ See Thompson, Stith *Motif Index of Folk-literature*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).

¹⁰⁷ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, Boydell & Brewer, (2008), p. 58.

¹⁰⁹ Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey, 'Historical Food Products' *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 30, no. 2, (2016), p. 37.

¹¹⁰ *Vita Prima*, p. 45.

¹¹¹ For detailed discussion of the tradition of the fox throughout folk traditions see Uther, Hans-Jörg. 'The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a 'Fictional Animal,' *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 65, no. 2, (2006), pp. 133–60 and Wackers, Paul, *Introducing the Medieval Fox*, (University of Wales Press, 2023).

was a popular animal throughout folk literature at this time, appearing in many fables and stories. Animals are often anthropomorphised to symbolise human qualities and most commonly, the fox stands for craftiness and guile. As Hans-Jörg Uther tells us, ‘the fox is taken to be the incarnation of cunning, slyness, perfidy, and even wickedness’¹¹² showing the commonly held beliefs surrounding foxes. Indeed, in this chapter the fox lives up to the notion of high intelligence, learning tricks as a ‘source of entertainment’¹¹³ for the court. The episode ends with ‘the wily fox cunningly merged into the crowd’¹¹⁴ thus escaping the court, following the tropes set out in folk tales of sneaky foxes. Uther states that ‘in early Christian and medieval thought the fox was considered to be a demonic animal’¹¹⁵ and thus the fox disappearing aligns with this thought. Here then, the fox motif is simultaneously the vehicle through which Brigit is able to save a man’s life thus showing her compassion and a way of exhibiting that she can tame wild, potentially demonic animals. The tale concludes with ‘all who saw it were astonished at God’s power manifested through Brigit’¹¹⁶ reaffirming that, despite allusions to cultural motifs, this is a recounting of God’s power. Paul Wackers notes that ‘a remarkable aspect of these stories is that they show that in an Irish context a fox could be a tame animal, a pet’¹¹⁷ perhaps reflecting the desire to find control over nature, to ensure food security. The motif alludes to Genesis that man shall have dominion over all living creatures.¹¹⁸ Of course, as the majority of motifs function, it also serves to show God’s ultimate power and the sanctity of the saint.

Finally, the rooting of the Life within a particular place is a commonly employed motif within *Vitae*. The idea of *loca sanctorum*¹¹⁹ is often central to saints’ Lives, situating the saint and their associated miracles within a particular region and often as specific as a designated church. This is done so to establish the link between the saint and the physical, geographical location in order to confer the sanctity bestowed upon the saint to the land they resided on also,

¹¹² Hans-Jörg Uther, ‘The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a ‘Fictional Animal,’ *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 65, no. 2, (2006), p. 133.

¹¹³ *Vita Prima* p. 48.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁵ Uther, ‘The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a ‘Fictional Animal,’ p. 139.

¹¹⁶ *Vita Prima* p. 48.

¹¹⁷ Paul Wackers, *Introducing the Medieval Fox*, (University of Wales Press, 2023), p. 35.

¹¹⁸ Genesis 1:26-28 (NKJV)

¹¹⁹ *Loca Sanctorum* meaning ‘holy place’ featuring in saints’ Lives demonstrates the inextricable link between saint and place. For discussion on this see Thacker, Alan, ‘Loca Sanctorum: The Significance of Place in the Study of the Saints’, in Alan Thacker, and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Local Saints And Local Churches: In The Early Medieval West* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-44.

establishing a cult designed to continue long after the saint dies. In doing so, the particular town or monastery would be more likely to receive interest from pilgrims which was a lucrative source of income during the Middle Ages.¹²⁰ Charles-Edwards tells us that Brigit was ‘the premier female saint of all Ireland, but she was also the premier saint of the province of Leinster’¹²¹ showing both her national and local importance. In the Latin Lives of St Brigit, the different Lives emphasise different places as being the most holy. It is clear in Cogitosus’s Life that Brigit is firmly rooted in Kildare. Yet in the *Vita Prima*, the locations included are not so precise. Charles-Edwards writes that ‘the *Vita Prima* probably envisaged a wider readership and was appropriately written in a simpler style reminiscent of the Gospels’¹²² displaying the difference in motivation between the two Lives. Politically, this makes the *Vita Prima* more wide reaching also, as can be seen from the interactions Brigit has across the entire class system of Ireland at the time and the motifs included are clearly designed to connect Brigit across the hierarchy of medieval Ireland.

As we have seen, motifs are a standard and indeed expected feature of saints’ Lives. In terms of Celtic saints, the motifs are utilised to offer specific meaning to speak to the audience they are intended for. Their local purpose then is to increase the veneration of the saint and their associated locations, with the simultaneous wider purpose of modelling a Christian way of living. We see this in the motifs found within the *Vita Prima* that are specifically relatable to a medieval Irish audience, concentrating on agricultural life, importance of virginity and fears surrounding illness and famine. The *Vita Prima* is reflective of the Irish Brehon Laws as well as those of the wider Christian Church. In the absence of extant evidence, the debate surrounding Brigit’s pre-Christian origins is certain to continue. Perhaps scholars of Celtic hagiography will have their own miracle with the discovery of further material relating to St Brigit, which feels not impossible following the discovery of an additional manuscript relating to the Welsh St Cybi as recently as 2018.¹²³ However, with regards to the very Christian St Brigit, there is much value still to be gleaned in the study of motifs found within her *Vitae*, with more scholarship needed on the specific motifs relating to her experience as a female saint and

¹²⁰ For more on the financial motivation behind saints’ cults see Wilfrid Bonser, ‘The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages’, *Folklore*, vol. 73, no. 4, (1962), p. 235.

¹²¹ Charles-Edwards, ‘Saints’ Cults and the Early Irish Church’ *Clogher Record*, vol. 19, no. 2/3, (2007), pp. 177.

¹²² Charles-Edwards, ‘Early Irish Saints’ Cults and Their Constituencies’ *Ériu*, vol. 54, (2004), p. 82.

¹²³ A previously unstudied Life of St Cybi was found in 2018 by David Callander in Yale, Beinecke Library, Osborn fb229 manuscript containing unique material relating to St Cybi, for more see <<https://saints.wales/new-life-of-st-cybi-discovered/>> [accessed 19/04/2026].

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the valuable information they can offer us on life as a medieval woman in Ireland and the Celtic regions at this time.

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