

THE IMAGE OF ST. BRIGIT IN THE EARLY IRISH CHURCH

BY
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In any consideration of women in the early Irish Church, St. Brigit stands as the archetype of the female religious leader and saint. Indeed, in view of the paucity of material concerning women of the church in the early days of Irish Christianity, Brigit's widespread cult and enduring popularity has made her one of the best-known saints of Ireland. She is also one the least known, in historical terms, for her life is based almost entirely on legends and no substantial evidence remains to attest to her career, or even her existence. All that can be said with certainty is that she was revered as the founder of the great monastic community of Kildare and as an exemplary virgin saint. Her life by Cogitosus, which is one of the earliest extant, is little more than a series of miracle stories, mainly in the tradition of continental hagiography. Cogitosus glosses over her early life, her birth and parentage, stating only that she was born of noble and Christian parents.¹ The historicity of Brigit is further obscured by her obvious pagan associations with the triple goddess Brigit, the pan-Celtic great goddess Brigantia. Like the goddess, she is honoured as the patron of poets, craftsman, and women in childbirth,² a function which goes beyond the mere similarity of names; and, it is surely no coincidence that her feast day falls on 1 February, the day of the Celtic festival of Imbolc.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AB *Analecta Bollandiana*.
BL *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes (Oxford 1890).
BNE *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, ed. and trans. by Charles Plummer, 2 vol. (Oxford 1922; rpt. 1968).
Heist *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. by W. W. Heist (Brussels 1965).
PL *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by J.-P. Migne.
PRIA Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy.
VSH *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. by Charles Plummer, 2 vol. (Oxford 1910; rpt. 1968).

1. PL 72 (1878), col. 777.

2. See P. Grosjean, "Notes d'Hagiographie Celtique", AB 61 (1943), 103-105.

These familiar points argue for a pagan origin. As Brigit's legends developed, her story, particularly of her birth, took on the elements of a native heroic saga.³ She becomes the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman and his slavewoman, born at sunrise on the threshold of the house (a magic boundary point) and fed on the milk of a white red-eared cow (a breed much prized and usually associated with the Celtic Otherworld).⁴ The Irish context is further underlined in her Old Irish Life by the fact that she is born in a druid's household and is sent out to be fostered, following Irish custom.⁵ Brigit's miracles as a saint can also be interpreted as the acts of a Celtic mother goddess. Her fame rests to a large extent on her enormous bounty and charity. She refuses nothing to any suppliant, much to the consternation of her father.⁶ She is able to supply seemingly endless amounts of food without diminishing her larder;⁷ her cows are milked three times in one day to provide, a "lake of milk" for her guests;⁸ one churning of butter from her churn fills several baskets.⁹ Her greatest talent, however, is the brewing of ale; at Easter, one measure of malt provides enough ale for seventeen of her churches.¹⁰ When caught short on one occasion, she turns water into ale to feast her guests.¹¹ Such generosity and largesse, and such divine power, suggest the function of a fertility goddess.

The native "pagan elements", however, do not overshadow the Christian aspect of St. Brigit's Life. The miracle of turning water into wine (or, in the Irish context, ale) can be traced to the miracle at Cana. Christ also performs the miracle of multiplying food for his followers (the miracle of the loaves and fishes) and advocates in word and deed the giving of charity to the poor. Similar miracles occur in the lives of other Irish saints, including the lives of SS. Ita, Monenna, and Samthann.¹² Brigit behaves with the modesty and humility

3. See K. McCone, "Brid Chill Dara", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 12 (1982), 42-44.

4. BL l. 1120 f.; and *Bethu Brigte*, ed. and trans. by Donncha Ó hAodha (Dublin 1978), 2.

5. *Bethu Brigte* 1-2.

6. *Ibid.*, 4; BL l. 1308 f.

7. Cogitosus 777-779; *Bethu Brigte* 2-3; BL l. 1250 f.

8. Cogitosus 779; BL l. 1659 f., L. 1680 f.

9. *Bethu Brigte* 3; BL l. 1266 f.

10. *Bethu Brigte* 7; BL l. 1355 f., L. 1377 f.

11. *Bethu Brigte* 9; BL l. 1377 f., L. 1676 f. See also Cogitosus 780—Brigit turns water to ale for a leper; and, *Bethu Brigte* 2 and BL l. 1237 f.—Brigit turns water to ale for a cure.

12. For example, multiplying of food occurs in VSH: Cronan 29. Samthann 10; in BL: Ciaran of Clonmacnois, l. 4191 f.; in BNE: Maedoc 48 (II); in Monenna, "Conchubrani Vitae Sancta Monenna", ed. by Mario Esposito, *PRIA* 28 (1910), 229; and Heist 88

Turning water into wine, ale or milk occurs in BL: Ciaran of Clonmacnois, l. 2696 f.;

expected of a Christian saint, while at the same time displaying a strength of will over her faith. She scorns the idea of a secular marriage, preferring to take the veil as a "sponsa Christi", and is fiercely protective of her virginity.¹³ Yet, surprisingly, the most obvious female Christian image, the Virgin Mary, is never strongly represented in the lives of St. Brigit and her sister saints. Although Brigit acquires the epithet of "Mary of the Gael",¹⁴ and in her Old Irish Life appears in a vision as Mary,¹⁵ the association does not extend far beyond the acknowledgement of Mary's status.¹⁶ Early Irish hagiographers often compared their saints to Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, thus heightening their dignity as well as placing the Irish saints firmly in the mainstream of Christian culture. Cogitosus, however, makes no comparison of Brigit with the Virgin Mary or with any other woman of Biblical stature.

The maternal St. Ita, who is supposed to have fostered young boys, shares the Brigidine qualities of charity and bounty; in her life, she is declared a "secunda Brigida",¹⁷ not another Mary. The tradition that she once prayed to have the infant Jesus to nurse, and was granted her desire, inspired a lullaby in her name but no evocation of the Mother of God in this very Marian image.¹⁸ St. Monenna also shares certain Brigidine characteristics: like Brigit, she provides food and drink miraculously;¹⁹ she turns water into wine;²⁰ she gives all her possessions to the poor, much to the dismay of her less charitable sister.²¹ In Cogitosus' Life of St. Brigit, a calf killed for the saint is restored the next day;²² the same motif occurs in the Life of St. Monnenna.²³ Brigit shows herself capable of punishing wrongdoers, as well as being generous, when thieves who steal her cows find themselves drowning

Patrick l. 108 f.; in BNE: Ciaran of Saigir 16 (I), 2, 14 (II); Mochuda 22, 28; Ruadan 10; in VSH: Ciaran of Clonmacnois 3, 31; Ciaran of Saigir 17; Coemgen 8; Colman Elo 31; Mochuda 47, 67; Molua 20; Ruadan 14; in Monenna PRIA 28 (1910) 217, 236 and Heist 87-88, 90-91.

13. As is St. Samthann, who flees on her wedding night; see VSH Samthann 1.

14. BL l. 1703 f.

15. *Bethu Brigte* 3; see also BL l. 1260 f.

16. In Broccán's Hymm, the poet appeals to Brigit saying "ni fuar a sset acht Maire" ("I have found not her like save Mary"), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, ed. by W.R. Stokes and J. Strachan (Cambridge 1901; rpt. Dublin 1975) II, 349, In the *Félire Oengusso* (ed. by W.R. Stokes, London 1905; rpt. Dublin 1984), Mary is also called upon in a like manner, but such comparisons are curiously rare and underemphasised in Brigit's lives.

17. VSH Ita 36.

18. See *Early Irish Lyrics*, ed. and trans. by Gerard Murphy (Oxford 1956), 26-28.

19. See n. 12.

20. See n. 12.

21. Heist 85.

22. Cogitus 785; BL l. 1665 f.

23. Heist 87.

in a river suddenly in flood.²⁴ In a similar instance in Monnenna's legends, the thieves find the river turning scalding hot as a punishment.²⁵ Both Ita and Monenna, in a Brigidine manner, are powerful abbesses and miracle-workers. The worship of the Virgin Mary seems to have had little influence on the representation of these holy women by their hagiographers.

This point was raised by Margaret MacCurtain in a brief study on the religious image of Irish women.²⁶ MacCurtain compared St. Brigit, not to Mary, but to Medb, the legendary queen of Connacht. Brigit, in MacCurtain's view, is a static representative of religious womanhood, praised for wisdom, generosity, spiritual fertility, and virginity (which, she considers, is not overly emphasised). Medb, she sees as Brigit's secular sister, possessing the same strength, "psychological freedom", and fertility but with human passions.²⁷ Both, in MacCurtain's argument, arise from the same model (model in the sense of a consistent structural element in myth, a symbolic representation of that society's values).²⁸ The model of womanhood in Irish myth, which she perceives in Medb, Brigit, and Brigit's sister saints is certainly not that of the Virgin Mary, although she points out that the cult of Mary later develops into the kind of model which she describes in relation to historical events and sociological changes. Unfortunately, MacCurtain does not discuss in detail the kind of paradigmatic relationship she ascribes to Medb and Brigit, nor the effect of Christian ideology on the mythic model; however, the association prompts some interesting observations.

Medb, on a mythic level, is related to the Irish goddess of sovereignty, the representative of the land to whom the kings of Ireland were joined in a symbolic marriage in order to consolidate their authority and ensure prosperity. In Irish myth, this marriage constituted a sexual union between the hero and the goddess.²⁹ In the *Táin*, Medb boasts of her many lovers and makes it clear that her husband derives his right to rule from her. Her sexual activity and royal command are evidence of the goddess' functions of fertility and sovereignty. The theme of the hero's union with the goddess is recurrent in Irish saga literature and comprises several motival

24. Cogitosus 782; BL 1. 1492 f.

25. *PRIA* 28 (1910) 209.

26. "Towards an Appraisal of the Religious Image of Women" *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin 1982) 39-543.

27. *Ibid.*, 540.

28. *Ibid.*, 539. MacCurtain defines a mythic model according to I. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London 1974).

29. See Proinsias MacCana, "Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature", *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955-56) 76-114, 356-413; 8 (1958-59) 59-65.

elements, one of the more prominent being the hag-figure, another aspect of the goddess. While Medb is never described as a hag, her fierce temperament is enough to give that impression. In the story of Niall of the Nine Hostages, the goddess manifests herself to him as a decrepit crone guarding a well. When Niall, in need of water, agrees to a union with her, she transforms into a beautiful young woman who bestows on him the kingship. St. Brigit's beauty is never denied, but when her half-brothers mock her for refusing to marry she plucks out her own eye.³⁰ Her disfigurement, a hag-like one, thus spoils her chances of marriage and demonstrates her determination to enter the church. Since her union with God is then assured, Brigit miraculously calls forth a well and heals her injured eye with the water. This incident coincides with Niall's encounter with the goddess in the elements of female ugliness and female beauty restored, the sacred well, and the achievement of authority. In Brigit's case, she does not bestow authority on the hero; she is the hero, the Christian hero, who proves her faith and the sovereignty of her God.

In a Christian context, the hag motif has a different connotation. By spoiling her beauty, Brigit removes herself entirely from temptation and desire, from sins of the flesh. When one of St. Monenna's disciples fears her beauty may be a temptation to men, Monenna by her divine power, transforms the nun into a white-haired old woman.³¹ The emphasis is on spiritual beauty through physical purity. In the early Irish Church (as elsewhere), female sexuality made women, in eyes of misogynist monks, sources of sin and instruments of the Devil. They believed in the complete subjugation of the body for the elevation of the spirit, and a renunciation of physical desires. Most of the ascetic practices of the early Irish saints had the effect of suppressing sexuality. Women were acceptable to the Church only by denying their femininity and their dangerous capacity for evil, and only then did physical beauty become prized as a manifestation of spiritual beauty.

The image of the hag appears also in the Life of St. Ita. In her old age, an arrogant novice refers to her as "anum illam vetustam".³² Ita is aware of this and gently takes the lad to task for it, demonstrating that an aged appearance is immaterial beside her virtues and divine power (a similar instance occurs in the Life of St. Samthann).³³ Presumably the Irish hagiographer had in mind the term "caillech" which came to mean both "nun" and "old woman". There is evidence to suggest that women tended to enter the Church when well past their

30. *Bethu Brigte*, 5; BL 1. 1332 f.

31. PRIA 28/210-11.

32. See VSH Ita 31.

33. See VSH Samthann 23.

youth in spite of the interpretation which can be laid on the poem "Caillech Bérrí" which is variously translated as "The Old Woman of Beare" or "The Nun of Beare". The poem suggests that the woman who laments her lost youth and all its pleasures has become a nun and lives in abject poverty. She complains of her deprivations and advancing age, whereas in a Brigit or an Ita one would expect a celebration of the end of worldly cares and temptations, and an anticipation of the life hereafter, or, at least, a penitent's regret of the sins of youth. The Caillech Bérrí is no penitent and no saint; she belongs to the secular and physical world of death and decay. The hag-like appearance of Ita or Samthann, on the other hand, hides, like the goddess's guise, a woman of beauty and power, but in a spiritual sense.

The hero's act of union with the goddess is often, in Irish mythology, symbolized by the giving of drink (as in Niall's case, the hag guards a well). This act is reflected in Medb's name, meaning "she who intoxicates";³⁴ she is the one who offers the draught of sovereignty. At this point, Brigit's activity as brewmistress of the Church takes on a new significance. Brigit provides intoxicating drink mainly at the time of the Easter festival, the most sacred feast in the Christian calendar when Christians renew their faith, their union with God. Brigit's miracle at this time exemplifies the overlay of Christian belief which differentiates the saint from the goddess; like the wine at Cana, her ale is provided for celebration and hospitality. However, when she produces ale for her honoured guests, it is they who honour her.

What is missing from the image of Brigit of the overwhelming sexuality of the goddess, manifested in the promiscuity of Medb. In its place is an equally overwhelming spirituality. On a mythic level, St. Brigit stands as the spiritual counterpart to Medb/Brigid, as moulded by Christianity. The Irish image is transformed by Christian ideology to accord with the new system of beliefs. In spite of the pagan elements surrounding her, Brigit is a Christian saint in character, and this is brought out most clearly in her lack of female sexuality.

The image and legends of St. Brigit demonstrate how native Irish traditions and perceptions were combined with Christian beliefs to create a new tradition. In a mythic structure, Brigit and Medb can be seen to derive from the same model, but each manifests herself according to the requirements and values of the society and institutions which make use of her. The strength of the native Irish tradition in Brigit's Life is apparent in that she derives her image from the most powerful

34. See Tomás Ó Maille, "Medb Cruachna", *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 17 (1927-28), 129-46.

female representative in Irish tradition, the great goddess; however, she owes her existence as a saint to the traditions and beliefs of Christianity.

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RÉSUMÉ. — *L'image de Sainte Brigide emprunte à la fois des éléments de la déesse païenne Brigit, et des éléments provenant de la christianisation. Plutôt qu'à la Vierge Marie, il faut la comparer à une grande figure de l'épopée irlandaise, la reine Medb, ainsi qu'aux sorcières surnaturelles représentant la souveraineté. Brigide est restée associée aux manifestations de la fertilité, et en particulier à la fabrication de la bière.*