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Brigid of Kildare: The Saint Who got a Facelift

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## Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, on the wild western edge of Europe, a woman emerged who, as her name suggests, became exalted and powerful. Saint Brigid of Kildare, a patron saint of Ireland whose feast day is still celebrated on the first of February, created a place for herself in the church by assuming roles which were uncommon for women.<sup>1</sup> Brigid, a highly respected bishop during her lifetime, became a problematic figure for the Roman Catholic church in the middle to late medieval ages. The church took issue with Brigid's miracles, how she ran her monastery, and the fact that a woman held the position of bishop. Unable to completely disregard her work and influence within early medieval Ireland, the papacy edited, tucked, and tightened Brigid's history, giving her a more Catholic-approved face.

## Historical Brigid

Brigid was born in 451CE and died in 525CE.<sup>2</sup> Christianity was still very new in Ireland, Saint Patrick having recently finished his mission work to the people there. Consequently, St. Brigid helped form the identity of Christian Ireland, but Patrick, in connection with Europe and the church as a whole, became the more recognized saint.<sup>3</sup> Christianity was an established religion in early medieval Ireland, but the pomp and circumstance of the Roman papacy had not yet reached Ireland. Ireland, in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Brigid, had never experienced

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<sup>1</sup> "St. Brigid of Ireland," Saints & Popes, Britannica, last modified August 20, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Brigit-of-Ireland>.

<sup>2</sup> "Saint Brigid of Ireland," Saints & Angels, Catholic Online, [https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=453](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=453).

<sup>3</sup> Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare*, 606, 607.

Roman control mostly because the Romans viewed Ireland as a frontier to exploit for economic reasons rather than being a mission field.<sup>4</sup>

Brigid's religious zeal was first recognized when her parents arranged for her to be married.<sup>5</sup> As stated in records by the Irish monk Cogitosus, Brigid desired to devote herself to God instead of marrying.<sup>6</sup> Cogitosus wrote the *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* (The Life of St. Brigid), recording the early life of Brigid and her decision to wed Christ rather than a man, the miracles she performed, and her role as the Bishop of Kildare.<sup>7</sup> Despite the large pagan presence in Ireland, Brigid was known throughout the island, and served her community on the basis of faith, attracting both men and women to her monastery.<sup>8</sup> A possible reason for her large following is her connection to Irish mythology. In Celtic lore there is a goddess by the name of Brigit.<sup>9</sup> Both the goddess and the saint are connected to children, women, and poets.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not her allure came from sharing a name with a pagan Irish goddess, the lack of Papal authority in Ireland allowed for a fluidity of belief between pagans and Christians.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that until the late medieval period, there are few sources on women in Christian Ireland, making judgement of Brigid to other women's roles incomparable. The church was, and is, a male-dominated institution and with the already scant number of sources about

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<sup>4</sup> Elva Johnston, *Religious Change and Frontier Management: Reassessing Conversion in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies, 2018), 107. Marina Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland* (Dublin: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies, 2019), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, trans. Sean Connolly and J. M. Picard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that "Brigid" can be spelled a multitude of ways. In researching "Brigid" was the most common and frequently used, but can also be spelled, "Brigit" or "Bridget."

<sup>8</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare: The Imaginative Architecture of a Seventh-Century Hagiographer* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 606.

<sup>10</sup> Whitney Hopley. "Biography of Brigid of Kildare, Irish Patron Saint." Learn Religions, June 10, 2019.

[https://www.learnreligions.com/who-was-saint-brigid-124534#:~:text=Brigid%20of%20Kildare%20\(c.%20451,founded%20several%20monasteries%20in%20Ireland.&text=Brigid%20is%20the%20patron%20saint,farmers%20\(especially%20dairy%20farmers\).](https://www.learnreligions.com/who-was-saint-brigid-124534#:~:text=Brigid%20of%20Kildare%20(c.%20451,founded%20several%20monasteries%20in%20Ireland.&text=Brigid%20is%20the%20patron%20saint,farmers%20(especially%20dairy%20farmers).)

<sup>11</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 68.

women's history in general, within the medieval period there is a significant lack of comparable evidence.<sup>12</sup> One of the reasons hagiographers represent Brigid of Kildare as the only female bishop could be the lack of evidence.<sup>13</sup> Historians, with any evidence they can find, are required to speculate much of women's lives in medieval Europe. Dianne Hall writes, "Although there are limitations imposed on inquiry by the availability of evidence, scant sources have not and should not deter investigations into the lives and concerns of medieval women."<sup>14</sup>

In later medieval Ireland, though information is still scant, there is more evidence of women and their roles within the church. Map 1.1 is a layout of the nunneries in later medieval Ireland (1100-1540).<sup>15</sup> One of the nunneries is in Kildare, where the monastery of St. Brigid was. Though her monastery has since been destroyed, figure 1.2 is the Kildare cathedral supposedly in the place of where the nunnery stood, and most likely Brigid's church.<sup>16</sup>

### Bishop

Brigid built her monastery at Kildare, assuming the role of bishop, head of the church. As her influence grew, so did her monastery. Though monasteries are typically masculine institutions, Brigid's drew both men and women, the flame of her good works drawing people from all over Ireland who pledged vows to her.<sup>17</sup> St. Brigid was vigilant in caring for her followers, and knowing that she could not singularly maintain her monastery, she called upon a hermit, Cunleth, to aid her. Lisa Bitel writes that, ". . .later hagiographers. . . represented her as

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<sup>12</sup> Dianne Hall, *Towards a Prosopography of Nuns in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Catholic Historical Society of Ireland, 1999), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-14. Hall lists a number of females from the 1100s-1500s none of whom are titled "bishop," the highest role being abbess.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Tracy Collins, *Space and Place: Archaeologies of Female Monasticism in Later Medieval Ireland* (London: University of London Press, 2019), 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, 11.

the only female bishop of early Christendom. . .”<sup>18</sup> Hence, it is interesting to note that not only was Brigid a bishop within the Catholic church, but her position was so superior that she was able to hire Cunleth to function as Kildare’s high priest, elevating herself over him despite the fact that men were seen as superior to women during this era.<sup>19</sup> Exemplifying her power further is the fact that Brigid presided at every mass, which historically, women were not allowed to participate in.<sup>20</sup> Her title as bishop, overseeing mass and other religious ceremonies alone were controversial in the church. Furthering the controversy, she ran a mixed monastery, including both men and women in roles of nuns, monks, priests, bishops, and abbesses.<sup>21</sup> The sexes were not commonly mingled within a monastery, hence the presence of nunneries, a “female version” of a monastery. Amazingly, Brigid oversaw all of these people at a level of power unheard of for a woman in a male-dominated institution like the church.

Understanding medieval Ireland in the time of Brigid’s life provides a clearer assessment to examine her miracles as well as how she ran her monastery as a female bishop. Early medieval Ireland was well out of reach of the influence of the Papacy and Catholic church, which allowed Brigid flexibility to run her monastery.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of attachment to the Roman church proved for looser Christian rules and regulations within Ireland, which allowed Brigid to advance in her religious roles. Even the relationship between the church and the community was more of a contract, where the monasteries and churches provided status and assured salvation for the wealthy.<sup>23</sup> While in later

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<sup>18</sup> Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare*, 617.

<sup>19</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare*, 617.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 608.

<sup>22</sup> Until the 1000s, there was no outlined requirements to become a saint. Individuals could simply be sainted without approval of the Catholic church. There are many female saints, but it could be suggested that because the Catholic church did not approve of Brigid’s role as a female bishop, or some of her miracles, they would not have approved her as a saint in later medieval Europe.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

centuries the Roman church criticized Brigid's inappropriate conduct (by their standards), there was no Papal authority to instruct Saint Brigid on her leadership and "appropriate" role as a woman. The Irish had relaxed ideas of Christianity. As mentioned above, Brigid presided over Mass, traditionally a male priest's role, but Irish Christians were not compelled to attend except for the Easter Vigil, which even then was only strongly encouraged.<sup>24</sup> Christianity in early medieval Ireland was only just beginning to grow, with Marina Smyth writing that, even by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, ". . .that the only difference between the grave of a pagan and Christian might be a wooden cross."<sup>25</sup>



Map 1.1 Later medieval nunneries in Ireland



Fig. 1.2 Kildare cathedral in the present day

<sup>24</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

## Sainthood

As displayed in Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, Brigid's power expanded beyond the physical realm into the spiritual one, demonstrated by her ability to perform miracles. While over thirty are mentioned, there are three specific miracles which spark interest. Firstly, the miracle of the wild boar. In short, a wild boar entered Brigid's herd of pigs and when she saw it she blessed the unclean animal. It became tame and remained with her other pigs.<sup>26</sup> Second is a miracle similar to the one performed by Jesus of Nazareth recorded in John chapter 2.<sup>27</sup> A group of lepers asked St. Brigid for ale and having none, she turned the water which had been prepared for some baths into "excellent ale."<sup>28</sup> Lastly, and very controversially, Brigid performed an abortion for a woman who had taken a vow of virginity, but, "lapsed through weakness into youthful concupiscence."<sup>29</sup> Almost humorously, the record of the miracle notes the fetus in the woman's womb simply, painlessly disappeared. This "miracle" is the first recorded abortion performed in Ireland. While abortion has historically been a controversial topic, to this day, within the Roman Catholic church, abortion is a sin.

While her miracles did not appear to cause a stir while she was alive, after her death and sainthood they became an issue for the church. As well as her miracles, the fact a woman had held so much power over men within the institution made her a target for the papacy.

## Medieval Facelift

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<sup>26</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> John 2:1-11 (NIV).

<sup>28</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 16. The title of the miracle is "Of the Pregnant Woman Blessed and Spared the Birth-Pangs."



Entering the 1000s, papal power began to rise and with it came societal change and reform. Within Ireland, the monastery at Kildare was replaced by a nunnery (map 1.1) which appears to have survived there until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Besides her monastery undergoing change, Brigid herself was scrutinized by the church and some of what they found they decided to alter. Looking at sources for women in medieval history, which are already sparse and hard to find, the role of the Roman Catholic church in changing Brigid's history becomes even more frustrating due to the lack of records. Saint Brigid of Kildare is the first, and only female patron saint of Ireland and because Romanization had not reached Christian Ireland yet, their social constructs did not apply to her.<sup>31</sup> As papal power grew, the church decided her life and legend did not fit the ideas the church had about women's roles, and thus required modification. Historian John McCafferty of University College Dublin clearly lays out the issues the church had with Brigid. Her problem lay with her gender and Cogitosus' *vita*, which presented a series of embarrassments.<sup>32</sup> A woman running a double monastery which included both men and women, not to mention her miracles involving animals such as pigs, was scandalous.<sup>33</sup> Though past the medieval era, writer Robert Rochford reordered Brigid's life to resonate with other female saints to keep her legacy in line with church-approved female sanctity and sexuality.<sup>34</sup> "Tidying" Brigid even more, historian Canisius left out her controversial vanishing a fetus.<sup>35</sup> To put it nicely, Brigid, according to the Catholic church, needed a facelift.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hall, *Towards a Prosopography of Nuns in Medieval Ireland*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare*, 609, 610.

<sup>32</sup> John McCafferty, *Brigid of Kildare: Stabilizing a Female Saint for Early Modern Catholic Devotion* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2020), 54-64.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Robert Rochford was a Franciscan who produced a ten chapter work about the life of Brigid. Henricus Canisius was a Dutch canonist and historian. Both wrote in the 16/17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

There is even earlier evidence of individuals and the institution of the papacy and church trying to reform St. Brigid. *The Old Life of Brigid* states the claim that she was made bishop accidentally.<sup>37</sup> Another, when listing the patron saints of Ireland, puts Brigid last though traditionally the saints were listed with Brigid in the middle: Patrick, Brigid, Colmcille (Columba) became Patrick, Colmcille, Brigid.<sup>38</sup> This change is a small one, but signifies Brigid being “put in her proper place.” Even recent historiographies of Brigid ignore much of her church and relics, tending to focus on her ecclesiastical politics instead.<sup>39</sup> Figure 1.3 is of the three patron saints, Brigid, again, being last.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 1.3 The three patron saints of Ireland: Colmcille, Patrick, and Brigid (from left to right).

### Irish Identity

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: the Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 175.

<sup>38</sup> McCafferty, *Brigid of Kildare*, 67. In 1571, Pope Paul V leaves Brigid out completely when recognizing the saints of Ireland.

<sup>39</sup> Bitel, *Ekphrasis at Kildare*, 605.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Messingham, *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum* (Paris: Cramoisy, 1624), 6. Apologies for the odd coloration. When scanned, it appears the color did not transfer correctly.

Though Brigid, by Roman standards, was unorthodox, looking at Irish economy and traditions during her lifetime provides context to her miracles and role as a female bishop. Addressing her mixed monastery, the layout of it suggested by Cogitosus demonstrates that the church was most likely organized with men and women separated in the nave.<sup>41</sup> Nuns would have been on one side, and monks on the other, her mixed monastery not promoting promiscuousness. Author and historian Thomas Cahill notes that one reason the Roman Catholic church had an issue with Brigid's mixed monastery was because it placed her over men which they saw as a perversion of the natural order.<sup>42</sup> Saint Brigid was able to achieve this high status because of the lack of Roman papal authority; there was no one to "regulate" her. Had early medieval Ireland seen a problem with this mixed monastery, Brigid would not have held such a great following.

Besides her controversial position as bishop, Brigid was scrutinized for her miracles. Looking back at the three previously mentioned, Irish culture at the time easily accounts for Cogitosus' record of them, and why they would have been important. Cattle were an essential part of the early Irish economy, which included pigs.<sup>43</sup> Brigid of Kildare's miracle concerning her blessing a boar makes perfect sense in context. Because pigs were used for their meat as well as hides, by adding a boar to her herd Brigid was acting as any farmer would have. A male pig allowed for reproduction within the herd, providing Brigid with more food and skins for practical use. Moving to the miracle of turning water to beer, Brigid was again within the lines of the culture at the time. There are laws expressing that a king was expected to serve beer to his household on Sundays, and that any self-respecting farmer should have beer available for any

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<sup>41</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 71. A nave is simple the central part of a church.

<sup>42</sup> Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 172.

<sup>43</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 74.

visitors.<sup>44</sup> While drunkenness was frowned upon within the church, Brigid, by serving beer to unclean lepers, was bestowing them with some respect, and acting within cultural norms of hospitality.

Lastly, is the miracle concerning the young woman whom Brigid spares from birth pangs. Controversial enough to be left out of later records of her miracles, Brigid was acting out of compassion. Looking at the historical consequences of having a child out of wedlock, especially from a woman who had taken a vow of virginity, Brigid was sparing the woman a strict penance. During early medieval Ireland, if premarital sex resulted in the birth of a child, the penance was far greater than if it did not lead to a pregnancy.<sup>45</sup> Even still, if the woman “destroys by magic” the unborn child, she would still serve a half-year penance which restricted her from having wine or meat, allowing only for bread and water.<sup>46</sup> It is likely Brigid, seeing the desperation of the young girl, was acting out of kindness. Though the penance is not death, having a child out of wedlock and after vowing virginity would have irreparably hurt the woman’s reputation within the community. Because abortion is considered a sin within the Catholic church; however, the reasons behind it did not matter. That miracle, the first recorded abortion in Ireland, gave Saint Brigid a “cleaner” history, one the papacy was more willing to accept.

### Conclusion

Understanding Irish identity is paramount to Saint Brigid of Kildare’s history, her miracles and role as bishop. Though later on deemed unacceptable, her roles were appropriate for the society at the time. The far-removed papacy had little control or influence within early

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<sup>44</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Smyth, *Monastic Culture in Seventh-Century Ireland*, 99.

<sup>46</sup> Christina Harrington. *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

medieval Ireland which is what allowed Brigid to achieve a level of church status which few women had during the medieval period. But, consequently, her legend was manipulated to fit the more acceptable role of a woman in a male-dominated system. Despite later medieval church trying to give her a “facelift,” and the general lack of information and sources on women in the medieval era, Brigid’s story lives on, remaining a part of Irish history and culture as one of the patron saints who shaped Christianity within the island.

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