

SAINT BRIGIT OF KILDARE, THE “MARY OF THE GAELS”: THE MANY FACES OF IRELAND’S ONLY FEMALE PATRON SAINT

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Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries was undergoing an era of transformation. With the canonical arrival of St. Patrick dated at 432, Christianity began to spread throughout the island, largely through the conversion of Irish kings and the reclaiming of sacred polytheistic spaces as Christian ones. Severed from the traditions of the territories of the former Roman Empire, this Celtic version of Christianity developed a reputation for rigorous practices of confession and fierce asceticism from the models of figures including Patrick and Palladinus. Among the hundreds of Christian holy folk from this *insula sanctorum*, there is but one female patron saint to be found, and that is St. Brigit of Kildare. Among the limited sources available to historians on her life, hagiographies prove the most cohesive. Cogitosus’ *Life of Saint Brigid the Virgin* (termed *Vita II* by seventeenth-century Bollandists) is the only *vita* for which we have authorship, while the authors of the Latin *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* (*Vita I*) and the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte* are unknown. These *vitae*, as well as a number of hymns recorded in praise of Brigit, remain the primary sources of Brigit’s dossier, which has been studied far less extensively than those of her saintly male counterparts. Although our knowledge of her may be limited, a study into the origins, life, and cults of St. Brigit reveals a wealth of insight into the role of women in the Celtic monastic tradition and female expressions of spirituality both in Ireland as well as on the European continent.

Among the controversy as to the validity of Brigit's three *vitae* is the argument that Brigit was not an individual herself, but an amalgamation of various holy women, as well as that this saintly figure was a Christianization of the Celtic fire goddess bearing the same name. Regardless of the conflicting views that exist on the matter, from these three lives of St. Brigit, we can easily discern that she was a figure steeped in liminality and duality. As *Vita I*—which provides the most detailed accounts of her upbringing—reveals, Brigit was born to a nobleman of Leinster, Dubthach, and his slave, Broicsech, and later was sold with her mother to a druid.¹ Upon her birth, the druid delivered a double message, telling her father that “Your wife’s progeny will serve your bondmaid’s progeny until the end of the world,” and her mother that “the grace of your little infant will set you free.”² The druid’s message to both parents subverts the position of servitude into which Brigit is born, prophesying a child that will surpass one of her parents and deliver the other from enslavement. Her rearing by a druid contradicts what we might think of as a traditional model of sainthood. Unlike her predecessor, Patrick, Brigit was a Celtic native and did not claim status by birth. Moreover, her upbringing attests to her dual nature; *Vita I* paints her with sympathy towards polytheistic Ireland. In *Vita I*, when Brigit was born, her mother was “neither in the house nor outside the house, and the infant’s body was washed with the warm milk which she was carrying.”³ The very circumstances of her birth, described with allusion to the pre-Christian Celtic literary tradition, reflect the liminality with which Brigit is associated.⁴ Here, we see that it is precisely this quality which gives Brigit a type of authority that is fundamentally different from that of her male counterparts.

Out of the three extant recounts of St. Brigit’s life, *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte* bear the most in common, especially in the chronicles they provide of Brigit’s upbringing, the latter of which exhibits an understanding of the polytheistic backdrop upon which this saint is cast. These hagiographies recount the early evidence of the child’s prophesied holiness with similar language, both drawing on allusions to Ireland’s pre-Christian past. Fire imagery — symbolism often associated with the Celtic goddess Bríg — figures heavily into both hagiographies. In *Vita I*, a “holy man” saw a “ball of fire in the place where the bondmaid slept.”⁵ Similarly, in *Bethu Brigitte*, the author recounts: “In the middle of the night the druid was watching the stars and saw a fiery column arising out of the house in which

¹ Seán Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25508969>.

² Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 14.

³ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 15.

⁴ Lisa M. Bitel, “Body of a saint, story of a goddess: origins of the Brigidine tradition,” *Textual Practice* 16, no. 2 (2002): 217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360210141466>.

⁵ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 15.

were the slave and the maiden.”⁶ The fact that this feat is recognized by both a Christian and a pagan as remarkable and spellbinding establishes her presence as a powerful one within both faiths. Brigit’s connection with fire, while it links her to pagan traditions, does not take away from her Christian sanctity. If anything, it enhances the proof of her holiness. For the author of *Vita I*, this ball of fire all but confirms that “this girl is full of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ Indeed, this allusion to the Celtic goddess bridges the gap between the pagan and Christian spheres that existed within Ireland at the time, reflecting the blending and breaking down of the rhetorically constructed boundary between the two traditions that Brigit exemplifies. Many readers, at first glance, are wont to take the correspondence of the Feast of St. Brigit with the Celtic holiday of Imbolc on the first of February as proof of Brigit’s pagan transmutation.⁸ While the argument that Brigit emerged in the wake of the Celtic deity cannot be discarded in totality, reading her *vitae* presents a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which her figure blurs this imagined boundary, providing insight into the manifold ways in which Christianity was embraced by the polytheistic peoples of Ireland.

As Christianity spread throughout the isle, the Irish developed a religious tradition that was largely centered around monasticism. Monastic enclosures, disparate from secular society, presented a unique opportunity for women. For free women in early medieval Ireland, taking the veil was the only legitimate alternative to marriage; within the confines of the nunnery, women could devote themselves to God by becoming brides of Christ.⁹ This spiritual parallel to legal marriage, however, was not necessarily widely adopted, or available, to women. Thus, Brigit’s story of taking the veil should be taken as an exceptional example of female spirituality, rather than the norm. According to Cogitosus, Brigit’s parents wished her to marry, but for her “virginal love of chastity,” she took the veil on her “saintly head” from the bishop Mac Caille.¹⁰ The monk of Kildare presents us with a relatively innocuous narrative of Brigit’s decision, whereas *Bethu Brigte* and *Vita I* characterize it with a greater degree of desperation and violence. In *Vita I*, Brigit prayed to God for a bodily deformity, and subsequently, “one of her eyes burst and liquified in her head. For she preferred to lose her bodily eye than the eye of her soul and loved the beauty of the soul more than that of the body.”¹¹ In *Bethu Brigte*, while Brigit is still the agent of action in the narrative, she causes the deformity with her own hands,

⁶ M. A. O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” *Irish Historical Studies* 1, no. 2 (1938): 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30006061>.

⁷ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 15.

⁸ Phillip Campbell, “Appendix: Brigid the Pagan Goddess?” in *The Life of Saint Brigid of Kildare by Cogitosus and Other Writings* (Grass Lake: Cruachan Hill Press, 2022).

⁹ Lisa M. Bitel, “Women’s monastic enclosures in early Ireland: a study of female spirituality and male monastic mentalities,” *Journal of Medieval History* 12, no. 1 (1986): 17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-4181\(86\)90011-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-4181(86)90011-4).

¹⁰ Cogitosus, “Life of Saint Brigid the Virgin,” in *St. Patrick’s World: The Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age*, trans. Liam De Paor (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 209.

¹¹ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 18.

rather than through divine intervention: “Here is that beautiful eye for you.”¹² The Brigit of the latter two *vitae* is a force to be reckoned with, while Cogitosus’ Brigit, though powerful, is pious and charitable to the point of passivity. The bodily violence with which the latter two *vitae* characterize her taking the veil—as well as her brothers’ anger at being deprived of their *tinscrae*, or bride-price—reflects not only the value of women within Irish society, but also the exceptional case that was the story of St. Brigit.¹³ For Brigit’s family, the potential economic gains of marrying her off was threatened by her desire to take a vow of chastity and enter the nunnery. Thus, the position of nuns in early medieval Ireland was not one to be romanticized. The power they were able to wield within religious enclosures, as well as the threat they posed to the patriarchal hegemony, was not easily tolerated. St. Brigit, perhaps more so than any figure of her time, exemplifies this notion.

Of the abbey at Kildare (or *Cell Dara*, meaning “church of oak” in the Old Irish), Cogitosus tells us that “Its jurisdiction extends over the whole land of Ireland from sea to sea.”¹⁴ He makes a bold claim that should be acknowledged with hesitance, as his *vita* reads more as an advertisement for Kildare than it does a chronicle of this saint’s life. What is also particularly remarkable about Brigit’s supposed founding of the abbey at Kildare is its double monastery model. Historians have often cited Ireland as the origin of mixed-sex monasteries, with Brigit herself as the founder of this model.¹⁵ The significance of this model is such that it transcends the assumption that in Christian communities in the early middle ages, men and women were kept distinctly separate. There were specific roles to be found for women within the abbey, however. At Kildare, a sacred fire was maintained exclusively by female virgins; men who violated its sanctity supposedly went mad or lame.¹⁶ Brigit’s holy fire served as a distinctly female space within the double monastery model. Women were able to wield (limited) power within the walls of the abbey, with Brigit being the source of this jurisdiction. Brigit’s story of ordination is an unusual one. As it goes in *Bethu Brigte*: “There the bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God did not recognize what he was reading from his book, and consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop. ‘This virgin,’ said Mel, ‘alone in Ireland will have the episcopal ordination.’”¹⁷ This accidental ordination seems a fitting tale to supplement Brigit’s hybrid origins, including her mixed-class parentage, her simultaneous pagan and Christian influences, and her birth upon the threshold of a house. All of these circumstances suggest that it is because of these anomalies— perhaps

¹² O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 125.

¹³ O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 125.

¹⁴ Cogitosus, “Life of Saint Brigid the Virgin,” 207.

¹⁵ Maeve B. Callan, “‘The Safest City of Refuge’: Brigid the Bishop,” in *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 99.

¹⁶ Callan, “‘The Safest City of Refuge,’” 99.

¹⁷ O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 126.

even because of her gender—that Brigit could claim power that, at the time, was only reserved for elite men.

Brigit was often identified by medieval sources as a Mary or Christ figure—a comparison which earned her a great deal of reverence from these sources. Her hagiographies represent her as either figure, sometimes within the same narrative. In *Bethu Brigte*, a bishop recounts a vision of Brigit’s coming to Kildare, in which he was told: “This is Mary who will dwell among you.”¹⁸ The bishop’s vision presents her with a certain degree of humility that represents the ideal Christian leader: a moral model to follow, but ultimately, an equal. Just as Mary came from ordinary beginnings, Brigit, too, is prophesied to rise above her peers in terms of moral excellence and piety. Similarly, in St. Broccán’s hymn, Brigit is likened to Mary; the last stanza of the poem reads:

There are two nuns in the Kingdom,—
I implore their aid with all my effort,—
Mary and St. Brigid;
may we be under the protection of these two.¹⁹

In coincidentally invoking Mary and St. Brigit for protection, the speaker not only draws a parallel between these two figures, but reflects the need for Ireland’s own virginal mother figure. In denoting Brigit as the “Mary of the Gaels,”²⁰ her Irish worshippers lay claim to their very own Mary. Where perhaps the Biblical story of Christ’s birth seems distant, through Brigit, they invoked a motherly figure who was distinctly connected to Ireland for their protection. Thus, Christ’s power is made manifest on the island. Moreover, some of her miracles mimic those of Christ. Notably, Brigit recreated Christ’s first miracle, as recorded in Biblical sources, with a classic Irish spin: “Marvellous for her the bath which she blessed: / about her it was red ale.”²¹ A similar miracle is recorded in *Bethu Brigte*, in which Brigit produces eighteen tubs of ale from a single sack of malt, and “there was no lack of feasting in every church.”²² Brigit’s doubleness as a saint also manifests in her portrayal as both a Mary and a Christ figure. This duality complicates the ways in which her gender relates to her sainthood.

While Brigit’s gender and her saintliness did not always connect in a coherent manner, her position as “Mary of the Gaels,” or the spiritual head of women in Ireland created an important, but atypical, model for female spirituality on the island. Brigit’s liminality—her gender, in particular—embodies the message of Galatians 3:28, which asserts that within Jesus Christ, all binaries,

¹⁸ O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 123.

¹⁹ Broccán, “Bróccán’s Hymn in Praise of St. Brigit,” in *Goidelica: Old and Early-Middle-Irish Glosses, Prose and Verse*, ed. Whitley Stokes (London: Trübner and Co., 1872): 137.

²⁰ Sean O’Riordan, “The Cult of St. Brigid,” *The Furrow* 2 (1951): 91.

²¹ Broccán, “Bróccán’s Hymn in Praise of St. Brigid,” 143.

²² O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 126.

including that of gender, are transcended.²³ The same principle applied to Brigit, whose hagiographers portrayed her with many of the same virtues that would often be ascribed to male saints in order to elevate her status. Cogitosus, for instance, writes that “she earned the great authority that came to her,” referencing the fact that according to his narrative, she was the only early Irishwoman to exercise clerical functions.²⁴ Moreover, Ultan’s hymn calls upon Brigit to “save us beyond throngs of demons!”²⁵ Here, Ultan presents Brigit with the masculine, “warrior-of-Christ” language that was typically ascribed to saints. Although Cogitosus references her “temperate ways” and “virginal heart,” she too is also presented with distinctly masculine language that seems to transcend or overwrite her gender.²⁶ As Lisa Bitel writes: “By adhering to the male model, women could also become saintly.”²⁷ This is clearly reflected in her hagiographies, especially *Vita II*, in which Cogitosus primarily aims to assert the dominance of the monastery at Kildare as a Christian institution by valorizing its saint. The spiritual model which Brigit embodied for women was based largely in her departure from typical “womanly” values. She served not as a model which women should strive to emulate, but as a motherly guardian figure. According to Bitel, “to be more of a saint was, in early Ireland, to be less of a woman.”²⁸ While holy women could become brides of Christ, it was Brigit—somewhat removed from her own gender—who presided over these women as their “Mary” and as their bishop.

Aside from her clerical authority, Brigit’s hagiographers deemed her many recorded miracles to be the preeminent evidence of her holiness. Each of her hagiographers, through their flowery language and frequent epithets, sought to establish the validity of Brigit’s sainthood by presenting a catalog of miracles, each one more splendid than the last. Cogitosus adheres more closely to this model than Brigit’s other hagiographers, but he does not record nearly as many miracles as *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigte*. Brigit’s miracles tie her to the very land of the Irish, making her a staple saint for the Irish to call upon for protection. Her miracles display a sympathy for, as well as a command over, the natural world; in *Vita I*, she made wolves guide a group of pigs back to their master without harming them.²⁹ In a later miracle, she “changed a certain river from one place to another and it still runs as she ordained.”³⁰ Both acts, defying the laws of nature, assert her ability to govern the natural world of Ireland, a land that was still very much undergoing Christianization. This connection to nature implies that Brigit wielded

²³ Callan, “The Safest City of Refuge,” 91.

²⁴ Cogitosus, “Life of Saint Brigid the Virgin,” 212.

²⁵ Ultan, “Ultan’s Hymn in Praise of Brigit,” in *Goidelica: Old and Early-Middle-Irish Glosses, Prose and Verse*, ed. Whitley Stokes (London: Trübner and Co., 1872): 136.

²⁶ Cogitosus, “The Life of Saint Brigid the Virgin,” 209, 212.

²⁷ Bitel, “Women’s monastic enclosures in early Ireland,” 28.

²⁸ Bitel, “Women’s monastic enclosures in early Ireland,” 28.

²⁹ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 48.

³⁰ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 49.

such authority for the Irish people, in part, because of her proximity to pre-Christian Ireland. Moreover, her hagiographers chronicle a number of miracles relating to dairy, which was a motif present in her birth and upbringing.³¹ As Bitel notes, milk— particularly the bathing of newborns in milk as Brigit was—also shows up as a literary motif in Irish secular stories, frequently symbolizing purity.³² This demonstrates these two texts’ greater sympathies towards Ireland’s pagan roots as well as Brigit’s transformative power, which translates to her miracles. One in particular, in *Vita I*, records Brigit blessing a glass of water and turning it into milk when there was no cow; the milk, which was “warm as if it had been milked just then,” healed a sick nun.³³ This miracle fuses Brigit’s connection to nature with her qualities of chastity and purity and, through this fusion of qualities, creates a healing power that is ordained by the divine. Through this analysis, studying her hagiographies brings context and insight to the way in which her cult operated, both in Ireland and abroad.

From her monastery at Kildare, which Cogitosus called “the safest place of refuge among all the towns of the whole land of the Irish, with all their fugitives,” Brigit’s cult as Ireland’s patron and protector was extensive.³⁴ Worship of her was primarily centered around the home, with the Feast of Saint Brigit canonically observed on the first of February.³⁵ Brigit’s dual nature extends to her cult; she was invoked in matters of fertility relating to the land as well as that of the family unit. Tenth-century hymns referenced the fact that “Brigid takes the winter away,” and she was also invoked during childbirth.³⁶ Early medieval Ireland was a largely agrarian society; social units would have been structured around agriculture, fostering an intimate relationship between the family and the land which they worked. Brigit was therefore an integral figure in ensuring the survival of both the family and their land through her power over fertility. Moreover, befitting her manifold associations with fire, in Irish tradition, Brigit was invoked alongside Mary in the essential practice of keeping the fire in one’s hearth alive through the night. For the Celts, fire had a purifying power, and the distribution of these blessed ashes and embers would be used to ensure the fertility of crops.³⁷ With her deep connection to the land, Brigit, akin to the Virgin Mary, captured the hearts of the Irish, and acted as a more accessible spiritual figure when contrasted with other Irish saints. The line, “Brigit mother of my Lord,— of heaven’s kingdom best was she born,” in Broccán’s Hymn speaks to the intimacy of her relationship with Christ, especially compared to a figure like St. Patrick, whose presence proved more distant and

³¹ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 18.

³² Bitel, “Body of a saint, story of a goddess,” 217.

³³ Connolly, “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae Background and Historical Value,” 19.

³⁴ Cogitosus, “The Life of St. Brigid the Virgin,” 223.

³⁵ Séamas Ó Catháin, “Hearth-Prayers and Other Traditions of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman,” *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 122 (1992): 14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25509020>.

³⁶ O’Riordan, “The Cult of St. Brigid,” 90.

³⁷ Catháin, “Hearth-Prayers and Other Traditions of Brigit,” 13.

reverence more austere for the Irish.³⁸ Through their worship of Brigit, individuals were allowed to hope that they might follow the bridge she created from the earthly to the divine; “May (she), the sun dazzling splendid, bear us to the eternal kingdom!”³⁹ The majesty of her power was not confined to Ireland, however; through Irish missionaries, her cult spread throughout the British isles and to parts of western Europe.

From the sixth to eleventh centuries, an increasing number of Irish learned men opted to quit their native land in order to pursue missionary work on the European continent, particularly in the territories of the Franks. These Irish *peregrini* were drawn by the appeal of Frankish court; there, they could undertake their very own pilgrimage to a newfound “Rome,” as well as spread the word of their gospel and, by extension, their saints.⁴⁰ Moreover, some sources point to the fact that Irish exiles were drawn to the continent because of the threat of Viking raids.⁴¹ In Ireland, within a monastic tradition that was somewhat disparate from that of the continent, the love and study of classical languages thrived and contributed to an intellectual identity that was one of the main boasts of these exiles. Along with other Irish saints, the cult of St. Brigit flourished abroad just as it did in Ireland. The main evidence remaining of the veneration of Irish saints on the continent is through manuscripts. In a tenth-century manuscript from Reims, along with an extensive list of Breton saints, the names of Patrick, Colum Cille, Brendan, and Brigit are commemorated.⁴² Moreover, the oldest and most complete version of Cogitosus’ *Vita II* was produced in Reims, and no early manuscripts of this *vita* are linked to Ireland.⁴³ This reveals that there was a demand for her hagiographies in the northern territories of the Carolingian world, indicating that her cult was present and active in these areas. Based on her veneration in Ireland, her powers over fertility and the land would have had a somewhat universal appeal, especially given the commonality of agrarian life between Ireland and Carolingian Francia. Brigit’s dominion was vast and multi-national, extending far beyond what Cogitosus claimed for her. How, then, can we understand the role of Brigit as the patron saint of Ireland and a universal protector and mother in relation to Ireland’s more prominent saints, namely, St. Patrick?

St. Patrick, in name, at the very least, was embedded in the core of the early Irish identity, while Brigit—also deeply important as a figure—remains much more elusive. In the Book of Armagh’s *Liber*

³⁸ Broccán, “Broccán’s Hymn in Praise of St. Brigit,” 142.

³⁹ Ultan, “Ultan’s Hymn in Praise of Brigit,” 136.

⁴⁰ Gerard Murphy, “Scotti Peregrini: The Irish on the Continent in the Time of Charles the Bald,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 17 (1928): 41.

⁴¹ Murphy, “Scotti Peregrini,” 43.

⁴² Jean-Michel Picard, “*Omnes Sancti Chori Hiberniae Sanctorum Orate Pro Nobis*: Manuscript Evidence for the Cult of Irish Saints in Medieval Europe,” in *Music, Liturgy, and the Veneration of Saints of the Medieval Irish Church in a European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 70.

⁴³ Picard, “*Omnes Sancti Chori Hiberniae Sanctorum Orate Pro Nobis*,” 71–72.

Angeli, dated at around 700, Brigit and Patrick are called the “pillars of the Irish,” and the text goes on to speak highly of their friendship: “they were of one heart and one mind.”⁴⁴ This tale of their supposed spiritual unity hearkens back to the tendency of male-dominated narratives to overwrite those of women; ecclesiastical sources are no exception. Here, there is little sense of Brigit’s agency or voice. Instead, a homogenous narrative meshes the two saints together. Just as abbots so often served as the overlords of women’s religious spaces within the double monastery system, Patrick took precedence over Brigit in this passage from the Book of Armagh. The fact that Patrick supposedly established a monastery at Armagh further speaks to this likelihood. Brigit’s hagiographies also attest to the connection between the two saints. In *Bethu Brigitte*, she goes to meet Patrick so that “he may bless [her],” and it is said that “she will not perform miracles in the presence of holy Patrick.”⁴⁵ While she performs miracles on the way to meet Patrick, as soon as she is in his presence, the narrative shifts to focus on him, and Brigit is reluctant to put her power on display. Brigit is portrayed with passivity and is reduced to a mere patron of this great saint; she is only glorified with his permission. Moreover, Patrick decrees that Brigit should be accompanied by a priest at all times, again, reflecting Patrick’s position as Brigit’s overlord.⁴⁶ In a larger sense, the power dynamic between these two is reflective of the gendered ecclesiastical politics of early Ireland. Ultimately, it was Armagh that held the preeminent spiritual power, not Kildare, despite its alleged independence. Although Brigit was powerful in her own right, the patriarchal structures of early Ireland ultimately capped her jurisdiction so that it would not surpass that of any holy man’s.

St. Brigit of Kildare had many faces: that of a pagan fire goddess, an accidentally ordained bishop, a Christ figure, a “child” of St. Patrick, and perhaps most prominently, the “Mary of the Gaels.” Her cult, both within and without Ireland, demonstrates the universality of her appeal. Whether an individual was invoking Brigit during childbirth, the beginning of spring, or while milking a cow, she was the figure that bridged the gap between the Irish and the divine, the pagan and the Christian, the female and the male. Unlike her fellow St. Patrick, Brigit was native to the island of her patronage. Her connection to land itself embodied the personal and localized understanding individuals had about the world around them, and this connection extended to Ireland’s polytheistic roots. She did not set out to eradicate Ireland’s pre-Christian traditions and replace them with Christian ones, but to blur the lines between these two sets of practices. Her authority was not without limit, though. While her case of found freedom through the church was an exceptional narrative, her figure was and is still subject to being overwritten by patriarchal forces. The reverence paid to her as “Mary of the Gaels” was extensive, but the power this title wields was ultimately an extension of its

⁴⁴ Callan, “‘The Safest City of Refuge’: Brigid the Bishop,” 90.

⁴⁵ O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 132–133.

⁴⁶ O’Brien, “The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit: Part I. Translation,” 133.

male source; Mary herself was only venerated for her role as a mother and her embodiment of chastity. Nevertheless, the cult of St. Brigit is vital to understanding the spiritual and gender dynamics of the early medieval Irish world, and her feast is still celebrated in Ireland to this day.

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