

Brigid – Saint or Goddess

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St Brigid - Mary of the Gael - second only to St Patrick in the esteem of the Irish people. She is, of course, specially associated with Kildare and this whole area of Magh Life. It would appear however that the veneration of St Brigid incorporates elements of a much older tradition.

When the Celts came to Ireland, maybe around 500 B.C., they brought with them their Druidic religion. They had many gods, who interacted with the people, sometimes for good, and sometimes for evil. Many of the gods and goddesses were associated with cult sites at particular places. The pagan religious framework of the Celts is not well documented, and what details we have, are mainly of the religious practices of the continental Celts as described by Roman writers, who of course never visited Ireland. So their accounts would not relate directly to the practices in Ireland, though there must have been broad similarities. The pagan religious practices of the Irish Celts were not encouraged by the Christians, and when they did record them, they would not have wished to present a balanced picture, even if they fully understood the rituals. So we actually have very little knowledge of the religious practices and rituals of the Druidic religion. On the other hand, the early Christian Church in Ireland did not seem to associate the Druidic religion with cruel and barbarous practices, which would have to be eliminated entirely. The names, and many of the attributes, of the Celtic Irish gods were preserved in an oral tradition though the Gods themselves were reduced to the ranks of fairies; they were not gods, but they were greater than human, they were the Sidh or the Tuath de Danann. The Christian traditions treated the Tuath de Danann with a certain sympathy and they are frequently shown as coming forth from their pagan world, being embraced in the Christian fold, and entering into heavenly bliss i.e. the stories of the Children of Lir, Oisín, and the tale of Eithne. It was not so easy to get the ordinary people to completely forget the pagan Celtic gods and elements of paganism survived for hundreds of years after Christianity became firmly established. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that some of the more popular deities were absorbed into the Christian tradition as local saints, and the rituals associated with their worship survived as folk customs right up to very recent times. This would appear to have happened, at least to some extent, in the case of St Brigid.

The head God of the Irish Celts was The Dagda. The Dagda Mor was the father and chief of the people of Dana (the Tuath de Danann). A certain conception of vastness attaches to him and his doings; for instance, an ancient tale records the visit of the Dagda to a camp of the Fomorians who gave him porridge. The porridge and milk were poured into a vast pit dug in the ground and the Dagda eats it with a spoon big enough for a man and woman to lie side by side in its bowl. With this spoon he scrapes the bowl when he is finished, and shovels earth and gravel unconcernedly down his throat. He was a master of music, as well as other magical endowments, and owned a harp that came flying through the air at his call.

Dana was the greatest of the de Danann goddesses; she was the mother of the Irish gods. Daughter of the Dagda, and like him associated with the ideas of fertility and blessing, Dana was also known as Brid "the poetess". Brid is identified with the goddess Brigantia, territorial deity of the Brigantes, a powerful Celtic tribe of North Britain. Brigantia was associated with water and gives her

name to rivers; the Brigid in Ireland; the Braint in Wales; and the Brent in England. Place name evidence would also suggest that the goddess Brid was known in Celtic Europe. The name Brid was originally an epithet meaning "the exalted one". She is sometimes mentioned as a triple goddess i.e. three sister goddesses named Brid; one goddess associated with poetry and traditional learning in general; one associated with the smith's art; and the third associated with healing. However over time the separate attributes of the three goddesses became merged in the one figure. The Irish goddess Brid was specially concerned with the arts and with poetry. As such she was venerated by the *filidh* who were poets and prophets, and who had perhaps a rather academic interest in her. The Christian approach to the *filidh* seems to have been to allow them to maintain their literary, historical and legal responsibilities while suppressing their ritualistic role. However, it is mainly as a goddess of the ordinary people, concerned with healing, with flocks and stock and the yield of the earth, that she has survived to become a Christian saint.

So what of the Christian St Brigid? Brigid's father was Dubtach descendant of Con of the Hundred Battles, her mother Brotseach of the house of O'Connor. Her mother was said to have been a slave of Dubtach and she was sold, shortly before Brigid was born, to a Druid who lived at Faughart, a few miles from Dundalk. The date of Brigid's birth is disputed, but may be between 451 and 458; commonly it is taken as 453. Memories of the saint still linger around her birthplace. Her father's family were natives of the Province of Leinster and Fr. Swayne, late Parish Priest of Kildare, claims that they were from Umaras, between Monasterevin and Rathangan. Another explanation of how she came to be born in Faughart was that her mother was visiting some relatives at the time. In any case she was baptised in the Christian faith, receiving the name Brid or Brigid. It is said that she was reared on the milk of a white red-eared cow, the colour of the beasts of the Tuath de Danann.

From earliest childhood the stories of her kindness and miracles associated with her are told. While still a child she was put in charge of the dairy by her mother. One day she had given away so much milk and butter to poor people that none remained for the family. She feared her mother's displeasure and so resorted to prayer. When her mother visited the dairy she found such an abundance of milk and butter that she praised the dairy maids for their industry. Brigid was also renowned for her love of animals and many stories were told of her kindness to stray and starving dogs.

The *Tripartite Life of St Patrick* mentions her meeting with St Patrick. We are told that while still a child she was brought to hear him preach, and that as she listened to him she fell into an ecstasy.

When Brigid came to marriageable age she decided to enter the religious life. Accompanied, it is said, by seven other young girls she left her home and traveled to Co. Meath where St Maccaille was Bishop. At first St Maccaille hesitated to take them into the religious life as they were very young, and he rather doubted their motives. However there was a great congregation in the church when Brigid and her companions entered to pray. They were all astonished when they saw a column of fire that reached to the roof of the church resting on Brigid's head. When the Saint heard of this miracle he hesitated no longer but gave the veil to the eight young girls.

St Maccaille's church was on Croghan Hill, in Co. Westmeath and it is here that St Brigid founded the first convent in Ireland. A large number of noble ladies entered the convent as postulants and here Brigid and her companions completed their novitiate. At the end of the novitiate Brigid and her original seven companions, journeyed to Ardagh where they made their final vows to St Mel, bishop of Ardagh and nephew of St Patrick. Here in Ardagh she founded another convent and remained for twelve years, during which time the convent flourished. At the request of many bishops she sent sisters to various parts of Ireland to establish new foundations.

St Brigid now went on a journey around Ireland. On her way she visited St Patrick who was preaching at Tailte or Telltown in Co. Meath. Having obtained St Patrick's blessing she continued on her journey. Many stories are told of miracles and the foundation of convents in various parts of the country during that journey.

The Leinstermen were always conscious that Brigid was from their province, and they constantly asked her to return and make her home amongst them. She was offered any site in the province. She decided to make her foundation on Drum Criadh (the ridge of clay) near the Liffey, in what is now the town of Kildare. On the ridge grew a large oak tree and Brigid decided to build her oratory beneath its branches.

The new foundation prospered and developed rapidly. Soon, it is said, Drum Criadh was covered with the cells of the community. From all parts of Ireland and even from abroad girls came to join the community. Bishops and priests went to Cill Dara (the Church of the Oak), as it was now named, seeking Brigid's advice and guidance. The poor, the sorrowful, and the afflicted flocked there in search of help and consolation, which was never refused. Kings showered gifts on the convent, and the privilege of sanctuary was conferred on the foundation, so that any who had offended against the law were safe within the precincts.

A most unusual community developed with both monks and nuns on the one site. It became necessary to have a bishop appointed to the foundation, as only a bishop could ordain priests. However the story is also told that St Mel was old, and a bit dodderly, when he professed Brigid, and instead of professing her as a nun he consecrated her as a Bishop. St Brigid for that reason had all the privileges of a bishop. In any case, St Brigid chose Conleth, a saintly hermit who lived at Old Connell (Connell of the Kings) near Newbridge. St Conleth visited St Brigid in Kildare where they first met. He stayed some days preaching to the congregation and made a good impression. When the time came for him to return to Old Connell he mounted his chariot and asked Brigid for her blessing. He journeyed home across the Curragh plains, and it was only when he got home that he discovered that the wheel of his chariot had been loose throughout his journey, and it was a miracle brought about by Brigid that it had not fallen off and killed him. About the year 490 St Conleth was consecrated the first Bishop of Kildare. He may also have been Abbot of the community of monks in the foundation. Brigid and Conleth seemed to have worked well together though they had a somewhat complex relationship. A story is told of Brigid having given away the vestments which Conleth used for saying Mass, when she had nothing else to give the poor. These were vestments he had got from Italy. When he went to robe for Mass, they were gone! It appears that he was none too pleased. Brigid prayed to God with "great

fervor". Vestments exactly resembling those given away immediately appeared, and Conleth was appeased.

Despite her anxiety about Conleth's vestments, it appears however that St Brigid continued to hold the reins firmly in her own hands and ruled over both communities, monks and nuns. Her authority is well illustrated by the story of how St Conleth met his end. He decided to go on a pilgrimage to Rome (to get more vestments?) without obtaining Brigid's permission. He did not get very far as he was attacked and killed by a wolf near Dunlavin in 519.

There is no exact date for St Brigid's death. It is said that she died at the age of seventy, which would make the date of her death somewhere between 521 and 528.

After her death the monastery flourished. The first Life of St Brigid was written not much later than 650, and perhaps even within a hundred years of her death. The author was a monk of the foundation in Kildare named Cogitosus. The "Life" was not really a biography as we would understand it, but rather a compilation of stories of St Brigid. It gives us a fascinating glimpse of life in Kildare some 1400 years ago. It would need another lecture to deal with that subject. However he describes the great church of Kildare where the bodies of Sts Brigid and Conleth were:

"laid on the right and left of the ornate altar and rest in tombs adorned with a refined profusion of gold, silver, gems and precious stones, with gold and silver chandeliers hanging from above and different images presenting a variety of carvings and colours"

The Annals record that in the year 836 a Danish fleet of 30 ships arrived in the Liffey and another in the Boyne. They plundered every church and abbey within the territories of Magh Liffe and Magh Breagh. They destroyed the town of Kildare with fire and sword, and carried off the shrines of St Brigid and St Conleth.

It is said that in fact in the previous year, 835, the remains of St Brigid were removed for safe keeping to Down. However Down suffered too from the "Danes". Accordingly her body was removed from Down and buried in a place known only to a few priests so that eventually all knowledge of her burial place was lost. In 1185 St Malachy was bishop of Down, and wanting to discover the burial place of St Brigid who was supposed to have been buried with St Patrick and St Columba, prayed hard to the Lord to reveal the burial place. A beam of light settled over a spot on the floor of the church and sure enough when St Malachy dug at this spot he found the graves of Saints Patrick, Brigid and Columcille. Malachy petitioned Pope Urban 111 for permission to move the bodies to Down Cathedral. The move took place on 9 Jun 1186, the Feast of St Columcille. At the dissolution in the reign of Henry VIII, the sacred shrine was despoiled and the relics of the Saints were scattered. Luckily some were saved from destruction. The head of St Brigid now rests in a chapel devoted to her, in the Church of St John the Baptist in a town called Lumiar, near Lisbon, where her feast is celebrated yearly. The farmers in the locality regard St Brigid as their special patroness.

Let's take a look at the similarities between the pagan Celtic Goddess Brid and the Christian Saint Brigid:

- a. St Brigid's Day. Celebrated on 1st February, the pagan feast of Imbolg, the festival of Spring, the coming of fertility to the land. Even today it is still the occasion of popular and patently un-Christian rituals such as the Bridoge and the Biddy doll.

- b. St Brigid's Fire. Described by Giraldus Cambrensis in the 12th century, as having been tended by twenty "servants of the Lord", at the time of St Brigid, Brigid herself being the twentieth. When Brigid died the number stayed at nineteen. Each of the nineteen nuns took their turns at night and on the twentieth night the nineteenth nun puts the logs on the fire and St Brigid miraculously tends the fire, which never goes out. Although the fire had been burning for some 600 years, by the time of Giraldus, the ashes had never had to be cleaned out and had never increased. He goes on to describe the fire being surrounded by a hedge which NO man may cross. One archer who was with Strongbow is said by Giraldus to have crossed the hedge, and he went mad. Another had put his leg over the hedge when he was restrained by his companions. However the leg he put across was maimed and he was crippled for the rest of his life. There is another legend associating Brigid with fire. When she was a child, her mother had gone out one day leaving the child asleep. The neighbours saw the house on fire but when they went to rescue the child there was no fire. The cult of fire is very ancient indeed, going back into pre-history. The fire continued to be tended for at least 1,000 years, with one interruption in the 1200s when Henry of London, Norman arch-bishop of Dublin, ordered it to be extinguished as he considered the tending of the fire to be a pagan practice. It was soon relit, by the locals, but was finally extinguished at the Reformation. Gentlemen, the flame has again been burning in the Square of Kildare at the recent Feile Brid, so don't say you haven't been warned.

- c. The Oak Tree As with many other peoples, certain trees and groves of trees were sacred to the Celts and treated with veneration. The Druids appear to have been specially concerned with the oak tree, and they are described by a Roman writer as being dressed in white while climbing the oak with golden sickles to cut mistletoe. They then sacrificed a white bull and held a feast. We may assume that a special tree was associated with many of the cult sites. The place-names and literature of the Celtic world contain much evidence about the use of single sacred trees and sacred groves as the focal points for ritual and tribal assembly. One such tree would appear to have been sacred on the hill of Kildare, and it was under this tree that Brigid built her cell. The stump of this tree is said to have still been there in the 10th century and it was held in great veneration as many miracles were wrought through it. No one dare cut it, but might break off a bit with the fingers.

- d. St Brigid's Crosses These might actually be symbols of sun worship representing the sun in the centre with rays of light coming from it in the shape of the arms of the cross. A story of St Brigid miraculously hanging her wet clothes on a sunbeam to dry may also be associated with an older tradition of sun worship.

- e. St Brigid's Wells We have numerous wells associated with the Saint, not alone in Ireland but in Britain also. Wells were also often the sites of veneration in the Druidic religion. Sometimes the wells had an associated sacred tree, and this is still to be seen in the association of particular trees with holy wells around the country. Votive offerings (seen nowadays as the custom of hanging rags on trees at holy wells??) have been recovered from some of these sacred Celtic wells which seemed to have a healing function, as they still have. St Brigid is associated with healing, her girdle being capable of curing all disease and illness. Many of the miracles attributed to her are to do with healing - the blind man seeing, the dumb girl speaking and a very strange one of the virgin who lapsed and became pregnant. This woman she blessed so that and I quote Cogitosus "what had been conceived in her womb disappeared, and she restored her to health and to penitence without childbirth or pain."

- f. Widespread Veneration Finally it is worth noting that while St Brigid was not a missionary saint, nor widely traveled, yet in Ireland she is second only to St Patrick in popular favour, and dedications to her are found throughout Britain as well as Ireland. As far away as the Hebrides, she was popular in Catholic areas until recent times and was invoked as patron of childbirth by the women, and revered as the midwife of the Virgin Mary. It would appear that the cult of Brid was established in Celtic Britain before the coming of Christianity and to have made the transition from pagan goddess to Christian saint in the areas associated with her.

So, was the Christian Saint Brigid a real historical person, or the mythical Celtic pagan goddess in another form? The truth is that we don't know. Somebody established a Christian foundation on the hill of Kildare. That foundation prospered and became the great and unique Celtic Christian monastery of monks and nuns. There is on the other hand NO doubt that the legends of the Christian saint contain elements of a far older tradition. Does it really matter? Perhaps what does matter is that the site of Kildare Cathedral has been the site of unbroken worship for over 1,500 years in the Christian faith and may very well have been a sacred site for many hundreds of years more. I have NO hesitation in claiming it as one of the oldest, if not **the** oldest, sites of continuous worship in Ireland. When next you go to the cathedral, in the quiet of the church, stop and think of, and say a prayer for, the countless generations of people who have stood and prayed on that spot before you.