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The 'pagan' and 'Christian' identities of the Irish female saint

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Introduction

Irish female saints, especially Brigit, are subject to feminist, religious, literary and historical speculations. They have been imagined as avatars of pre-Christian goddesses; they are celebrated as symbols of a lost matriarchal Ireland; they become harbingers of a peculiarly 'Celtic' spirituality. Mary Condron has stated that Brigit was the central figure of pagan Irish cosmology, the Mother Goddess and the divine serpent who was overthrown by the deadening hands of clerical patriarchs and Christian patriarchy.¹ Idiosyncratically, Robert Graves recognized in Brigit the White Goddess, whose many faces purportedly included Athene, Isis, Ishtar, Freya and Ceridwen.² A recent starring role has been as a powerful alien in a science fiction series.³ More seriously, Kim McCone has delved deeply in search of the Indo-European associations of her cult,⁴ while Séamas Ó Catháin has identified the folklore surrounding Brigit as being both ancient and essentially pagan.⁵ On the other hand, Dorothy Ann Bray has stressed the Christian elements that made up the cults of Brigit and her fellows.⁶ This chapter will centre on the perceptions of early Irish authors. Mainly clerics, their texts form our oldest substantial evidence for the cult of the saints in Ireland. These authors were members of the elite, for the ability to read and write was a marker of high status, and they rarely give us insights into the workings of popular devotion.

Nevertheless, the sources, varied in content and form, have much to offer. They include saints' Lives (*vitae*), hymns, genealogies, poems and religious anecdotes. The material, composed in

Latin and Irish, ranges in date from the seventh century to the twelfth century and after.⁷ I will concentrate specifically on the Lives and, where necessary, other supporting items from the hagiographical dossiers of four female saints: Brigit of Kildare (d. 524/26/28),⁸ Íte of Killeedy (d. 570/79),⁹ Mo Nínne of Killeevy (d. 517)¹⁰ and Samthann of Clonbroney (d. 739).¹¹ I have chosen these saints for two reasons: first, the choice is necessarily limited because there are far fewer Lives of female saints than male saints and, second, these particular women and their respective churches can be identified. Not all holy women and their churches can be pinpointed with any certainty and, obviously enough, secure identification is important for contextualizing the material.¹² Of the four, Brigit presents the greatest difficulty. Her death notices in the annals are clearly artificial and it is doubtful whether early Irish clerics were very sure of her chronology. This has cast a cloud over Brigit's historicity, a point to which I will return. In spite of this problem, the richest and fullest documentation comes from the Brigidine corpus. Brigit's church of Kildare was wealthy and influential and the saint is portrayed as having more power than any other female religious figure. Should Brigit's power be linked to the issue of pagan and Christian identities? Does her importance have a non-Christian root?

Two concepts are particularly important: one is gender, the other the merging of what is arguably native Irish material with early Christian traditions. I will begin with gender. Joan Scott has argued that gender is the social organization of sexual difference, highlighting the potential gendering of all aspects of life from the family to the workplace.¹³ This recognizes the social character of sex-based distinctions. However, gender is neither monolithic nor identical with biological sexual difference. It cannot be viewed as immutable throughout time and space and it has been treated and imagined in many ways. The sex/gender distinction played its part in medieval thought. Some of the Church fathers believed that ascetic virgins could transcend the feminine state and be transformed, in a spiritual sense, into men.¹⁴ This transformation rid them of the inherent weaknesses of women and of the female susceptibility to fleshly temptations. Female subordination was reinforced while, simultaneously, the possibility of freedom from a defective femaleness, usually through virginity, was highlighted.¹⁵ Such possibilities are expressed in the Lives of Irish female saints.¹⁶

These Lives originated in a specific environment. Irish hagiographers were men, and the experiences of the female saint are described and imagined by men. This, with some exceptions, is typical of early medieval Europe.¹⁷ But it must be remembered that these men were individuals. Their perceptions did vary and, although they generally link into a dominant ideology that excluded ordinary women from power, they are not always simple and repay careful, and individual, examination. The ideology in question was strongly influenced, but not completely shaped, by Christianity.¹⁸ Native Irish ideologies played a role as well. Indeed, as the experience of other Western European societies shows, Christianity was not homogeneous. Adaptability was one of its great strengths.¹⁹ In Ireland, the contact between Christianity and native culture created a variegated hybrid that was dominated by clerics and aristocrats.²⁰ Irish hagiography bears the imprint of an aristocratic, clerical and stratified society that circumscribed the roles of women. They were generally held to be inferior to men and were legally dependants.²¹ Motherhood was valued within social structures that empowered men. A woman's honour price, the marker of her social and legal status, was usually half that of her husband, father or male religious superior. This legal inferiority had important consequences. The capacity of women to make contracts was limited; women could not act as witnesses; they had little direct impact on the socio-political level. Does the literary portrayal of Brigit, Íte, Samthann and Mo Ninne reflect this reality? Do their identities mirror the perceived roles of women in Irish society?

Their portrayal was not only rooted in Irish culture. They were saints as well as women and were bound by the conventions of the international genre of hagiography. These very conventions liberated the hagiographers for, within the boundaries of subject and style, the aims of hagiography are flexible, ranging from the theological to the political. Irish hagiography was influenced by the local as well as the international and had a close relationship with the vernacular Irish sagas that celebrate the deeds of pre-Christian and Christian heroes. The saga hero and the saint are closely related – the saint being the ultimate ecclesiastical hero. Brigit is a major figure in the Middle Irish saga *Cath Almaine* (The Battle of Allen).²² Patrick and the pagan hero Cú Chulainn form an unlikely alliance in the Middle Irish tale *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* (The Phantom Chariot of Cú Chulainn).²³ The cult of

Brigit benefited from such interactions: she is a saint-hero and this sets her apart from other women.

Ordinary lives?

How far was she set apart? The answer lies in her hagiographical dossier. The two contenders for being the earliest extant saint's Life in Irish hagiography certainly celebrate Brigit. Both texts are in Latin: the Life of Brigit written by the Kildare cleric Cogitosus, at some time around the middle of the seventh century, and the anonymous Life known as *Vita Prima*.²⁴ The latter, even if it is not as early as Cogitosus (and it may be earlier), contains significant seventh-century material.²⁵ These two Lives complement each other. Kildare is as much Cogitosus's hero as Brigit and he gives a valuable snapshot of its political ambitions. In contrast, *Vita Prima* was the trendsetter for the later literary development of the cult. It gives us an extended heroic biography of Brigit, one that is even further developed in the ninth-century Old Irish Life of Brigit, *Bethu Brigte*.²⁶ The term heroic biography has been used by mythologists and anthropologists to describe the life cycle of the hero from birth to death and it is eminently applicable to a saint.²⁷

Her status as a hero is clear from the outset of *Vita Prima*. This is announced by a 'resounding' chariot, a fairly popular motif in Irish hagiography whose first appearance is in *Vita Prima*.²⁸ Here, Brigit's father and her pregnant mother, travelling in a chariot, pass a druid and his servants. The druid remarks that the chariot is resounding *sub rege* 'under a king'. This reflects the future greatness of Brigit; the saint is separated from ordinary women just as the king is from ordinary men. It might be argued that the resounding chariot points up a basic paganism in the cult of Brigit – after all, a druid interprets the event. His presence could equally be the result of the fact that Brigit was supposed to have been born into a pagan Ireland. However, the calling out of the chariot could, and probably should, be linked with the screaming of the Lia Fáil, a stone slab and symbol of sovereignty, under the feet of the rightful king of Tara.²⁹ A motif of undoubtedly native origin is used to express the power of a Christian saint.

Brigit has other unusual characteristics. According to *Vita Prima* and later Lives, Brigit is conceived out of wedlock. Dubthach, her father, is a nobleman while her mother, Broicsech, is a bondmaid.³⁰

This is irregular in Irish legal terms. Cogitosus alone describes her parents as married Christians, presumably of equal social standing.³¹ In *Vita Prima* the female slave, as mother of the saint, breaks the norms of Irish society, paradoxically highlighting the saint's sanctity.³² The violation of a taboo serves only to prove its relevance. The extraordinary, by necessity, cannot be the usual. The man who impregnated a bondmaid had to arrange for the rearing of the child on his own,³³ and the son of a bondmaid could not join the ranks of the noble, whatever his paternity.³⁴ The bondmaid was a unit of exchange rather than a person with the ability to contract. If anything, *Vita Prima* stresses the servile status of Brigit's mother. We are told how she is sold and undergoes many tribulations before Brigit wins her freedom.³⁵ In fact, Dubthach thinks of selling his daughter when she displeases him.³⁶ There is an underlying Christian message: Brigit's mother is an *ancilla* (bondmaid/handmaid). This reminds us of the Virgin Mary who is the *ancilla Domini* (handmaid of the Lord). Brigit, by implication, is a Christ-like figure who can bring freedom to those in bondage.

Brigit frees herself from the possibility of marital bondage. She follows a well-worn literary path in her opposition to marriage, an exceptionally common motif in early Christian writings. The fullest account is in *Bethu Brigte* where, to avoid marriage to an aristocratic suitor, Brigit gouges out one of her eyes. Her brothers are angry because they will lose the lucrative bride-price that formed a central component of the Irish marriage contract.³⁷ Obviously, the economic loss to a kindred when a female member entered the religious life was considerable and it was probably widely discouraged. One of Brigit's brothers objects and mocks the saint. The result is that his eyes burst apart in his head and his descendants are cursed forever.³⁸ A very similar incident is described in an anecdote about the Fermoy female saint, Cránait,³⁹ an incident almost certainly based on Brigit's example. In both cases the mutilation is miraculously temporary. Saints can adopt extraordinary strategies.

Brigit's sanctity is extraordinary. An examination of the careers of other female saints is instructive. Íte was a saint of Déisi origin,⁴⁰ but patron of the Uí Chonaill Gabra, a dynasty who held lands in what is now Co. Limerick. Her Latin Life, as it stands, is nowhere near as early as the first Brigidine Lives and is dependent on the Brigit traditions.⁴¹ In this *vita*, Íte's parents discourage her

celibate vocation. To avoid marriage Íte fasts for three days and three nights against her father.⁴² The hunger strike is successful, and reflects a well-known legal redress that the weak could use against the powerful, a redress of native origin.⁴³ Cleverly, the Life puts it in the context of Íte's battle against the Devil. Thus, an attentive medieval audience would be reminded both of a legal strategy and of Christ's fast for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Íte's identity is both local and international.

The legal strategy shows Íte as a suppliant. Íte often adopts what would have been considered appropriate female roles, although as a saint she has more power. One such is that of nurturer and/or mother. The *vita* describes her as *matrona* of the Uí Chonaill Gabra.⁴⁴ The term *matrona* carries a different sense from *mater* 'mother'. The Roman *matrona* was a married woman who managed her household and the matronal position was honoured within Roman society. It has been argued by some historians that Christianity revolted against the matronal role.⁴⁵ Christian virgins in the late Roman Empire wore the veil of the married woman or even dressed as a *matrona*, simultaneously claiming high status and flouting expectations.⁴⁶ It is difficult to be certain how far the Irish made distinctions between the *matrona* and other types of women. However, as has been shown, the term was used for 'mother goddess' in pre-Christian Gaul.⁴⁷ The word is not particularly common in Hiberno-Latin and when used most usually refers to a married woman.⁴⁸ Íte was not married but she did metaphorically manage the household of her people. Moreover, the Life only uses *matrona* when referring to Íte and, specifically, in reference to her relationship with the Uí Chonaill Gabra. The one exception, where it is prophesied that she will be the *matrona* of many on Doomsday, is an extension of the saint's relationship with the Uí Chonaill.⁴⁹

It seems that Íte's hagiographer viewed the *matrona* as partly fulfilling the role of the *muime* (foster mother). *Matrona* and *muime* do not form an identity. The usual Latin term for foster mother is *nutrix*. However, there is an overlap between *muime* and *matrona* in Íte's case. Foster motherhood did not carry the direct biological weight of motherhood, something appropriate for a virgin saint. Furthermore, although the Uí Chonaill are Íte's clients in a religious sense, the political language of lordship and clientship was generally applied only to men. The term *matrona*

covers the grey area and gives Íte the status of an overlord without violating the gendered language of lordship. Íte appears as a foster mother elsewhere and it formed a prominent aspect of her cult. In the Lives of Brendan she is that saint's foster mother,⁵⁰ and she fosters other saints as well.⁵¹ Perhaps the best example of Íte as fosterer is in the Old Irish poem *Ísucán*.⁵² The poem portrays her as the foster mother of the baby Jesus who nestles at her breast. As E. G. Quin has pointed out, the theme is the commonly attested one of the child Jesus *in sinu sanctorum*.⁵³ The poem may be the earliest evidence for this perception of Íte. It considerably predates the Latin *vita*. The relevance to Íte is striking and it resonates with her political relationships as the poem contains legal metaphors of lordship which could, perhaps, be read subversively.⁵⁴ Yet Íte is portrayed as a client of God in the poem rather than as a lord in her own right. The poem celebrates a religious, not a secular, clientship and Íte's spirituality is imagined in ascetic Christian terms. It would be unwise to view Íte's matronal identity as having its origins in pagan Ireland or in pagan Celtic religion, despite the term *matrona* (as 'goddess') being attested among the Continental Celts. The Irish are unlikely to have been aware of the Continental Celtic practice but would have been knowledgeable about the Roman/early Christian background. Therefore, Íte as *matrona* and *muime* is most easily explained by the realities of Christian Ireland and, possibly, the subversion of those realities.

These realities form the backdrop to the Latin Life of St Samthann. Unlike Brigit, Íte and Mo Ninne, she was not a church founder. Instead she was an eighth-century abbess of Clonbroney, an already existing monastery.⁵⁵ Her Life recalls a real historical person in a way that the other Lives of women saints do not. She also figures in near-contemporary documents.⁵⁶ Samthann's less spectacular sanctity seems more grounded in the experiences of religious women than Brigit's career. There is an unusual emphasis, for an Irish saint's Life, on the actual running of a monastery. Samthann's Life also intersects with the more common images of female sanctity. Like Íte and Brigit, her guardian – in this case her foster father – tries to force her into marriage. Unlike these two saints, Samthann does not openly object. Only the dramatic intervention of God at the opening of the *vita* saves Samthann. He brings down a fire from heaven that appears to burn the house where Samthann is staying. The household rushes to prevent the

blaze. Meanwhile, Samthann flees in the confusion, escaping the consummation of her marriage for a religious vocation.⁵⁷

There is a similar emphasis on the religious life in the Lives of Mo Ninne, the founder of Killeevy, but the slant is different and profoundly idealized. There are two Latin Lives of this saint. The later of the two Lives was written by Conchubranus in the middle of the eleventh century and it was preserved by the English foundation of Burton-on-Trent.⁵⁸ The earlier Life can be plausibly dated to the late seventh or early eighth century and forms the basis of the text preserved in *Codex Salmanticensis*.⁵⁹ It is linked to the hagiography of Brigit, a major figure in the early Life. Brigit is downgraded and turned into a disciple of Mo Ninne by Conchubranus. The latter makes free use of Scottish and English materials to create a composite saint. Along with Irish churches he credits Mo Ninne with at least four English and seven Scottish foundations, including Edinburgh, Dumbarton and the castle of Sterling.⁶⁰ None is remotely credible.

In the *Codex Salmanticensis* Life and in the *vita* by Conchubranus, Mo Ninne's depiction as abbess is central; so is her pastoral role within the religious community. Conchubranus's Life places a great weight on the importance of virginity, indeed unusually so. For Conchubranus, virginity literally frees Mo Ninne from female defects. He describes how she has the soul of a man in the body of a woman, drawing on and extending a passage from the earlier Life.⁶¹ Even this body is hardened by Mo Ninne's asceticism and she is enabled to engage in physically demanding agricultural activity. Virginity is power in this exceptionally gender-conscious text, a text that draws on patristic literature, later Christian commentators, as well as the earlier Life. The main identities of Conchubranus's saint are the Christian ones of church founder and virgin. It would seem then that the identities of Brigit, Íte, Samthann and Mo Ninne are both gendered and Christian. Brigit was very much a heroic saint and her identity overlapped with that of the hero. She stands apart from the other female saints and has the most complex identity. The question remains as to how far these identities empowered the female saints and to what extent this empowerment may be seen as non-Christian.

Female authority

Despite their status as saints, Íte and Samthann, in particular, operate in a female sphere. They spend much of their time supervising their respective monasteries and guiding nuns. The saints do negotiate with kings, and they do have political overtones to their careers, but these pale into insignificance beside the activities of Brigit or even Mo Ninne. Brigit's career resembles that of a male saint such as Patrick; she is on a par with men. In a passage in *Vita Prima* it is Brigit rather than Patrick who is able to save one of Patrick's bishops from an unjustified accusation of paternity.⁶² This suggests that Brigit is a figure of authority. Such female authority was more viable in the early Middle Ages when the role of religious women was less defined.⁶³ The careers of Hild, abbess of Whitby, or of Radegund, Merovingian queen and later abbess, are instructive. Brigit, as a female saint, fits well into an age of powerful abbesses and double-monasteries of monks and nuns.

Kildare appears to have been the only long-term viable Irish double-monastery. Killeedy was an early double-monastery, much like Kildare, but there is little evidence for the survival of the monastery of nuns, as opposed to monks. Killeevy and Clonbroney were communities of nuns from their inception. It is not surprising, then, that Kildare's concern with its female founder spills over into a greater interest in questions involving female authority than might otherwise be the case. No doubt this is one of the reasons that Brigit is given the status of a bishop in *Bethu Brigte*, a status not given to any other Irish woman, as the Life emphasizes.⁶⁴ As impressive as this is, the Life goes on to say that Brigit cannot fulfil priestly sacramental duties.

Brigit's authority is underlined by the use of fire imagery – an imagery that is common in Irish literature.⁶⁵ Fire is a powerful symbol in any religion and it easily adapted itself to the Christian fire of God.⁶⁶ In *Vita Prima*, fire imagery serves to identify Brigit as the hero. We should beware of seeing a solar deity here. The great Charles Plummer even went so far as to find a solar deity in the undoubtedly historical Samthann by fancifully suggesting that the Irish may have etymologized her name as 'summer fire'.⁶⁷ This tendency has been reinforced, in the case of Brigit, by Gerald of Wales's famous description of the perpetual fire at Kildare attended by nineteen nuns.⁶⁸ This is one of the most commonly

quoted features of Brigit's cult, even though it is not attested before the twelfth century. Fire is not necessarily pagan. After all, the apostles were visited by tongues of fire at Pentecost and this did not transform them into sun gods.

Brigit is consistently portrayed in heroic terms. This heroism could be political. Her cult was partly linked to the fortunes of the North Leinster kings,⁶⁹ and the saint is portrayed as an active patron of the Leinstermen. In the hymn, 'Brigit bé bithmaith',⁷⁰ which is not later than the eighth century, Brigit is called a *nóib di Laignib* (saint of the Leinstermen).⁷¹ Brigit consistently protects and advises her people in time of conflict. In another Old Irish poem, usually called 'Hail Brigit', Brigit's patronage of the Leinster kings is further underlined. She is the *banfhlaith* (sovereign queen) of the Leinstermen, a paradoxical description.⁷² Unlike Merovingian Frankia, Ireland did not produce powerful and influential queens. Figures such as Queen Medb are strictly imaginary. Brigit is a type of Christian virago, capable of adopting roles normally associated with men.⁷³

The warrior is one such. The participation of women in battle is criticized in other Irish sources as a pre-Christian perversion that conflicts with maternal duties.⁷⁴ Brigit, saint and protector of Leinster, transcends the normal female state. *Vita Prima* emphasizes Brigit's warlike abilities. The saint offers the king of Leinster eternal life and kingship for his descendants, but he chooses victory over his arch-enemies in warfare instead.⁷⁵ Later, Brigit is described going into battle before the king of Leinster with fire blazing from her head.⁷⁶ The saint is a major character in *Cath Almaine*, a saga account of a battle between the Leinstermen and Uí Néill fought in 722.⁷⁷ The narrative describes how Brigit appears above the Leinster army. The opposition of her fellow saint, Colum Cille, is brushed aside. Her role is most explicit in the Yellow Book of Lecan recension where the very sight of an actively threatening Brigit is enough to bring a Leinster victory.⁷⁸ The transcendent power of Brigit reaches its apogee here. It is just possible that Brigit's identity as a warrior may owe something to late Latin epic as well as to native traditions. In the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius the virtues and vices are pictured as female warriors and, later, the Anglo-Saxon Aldhelm would describe his female heroes as warriors in *De Virginitate*. Both of these, of course, drew on the classical works of Homer and Virgil.

The warlike ardour of Brigit is not often reflected in the dossiers of the other female saints. There are some examples, however. Íte, who is a notable fighter of demons,⁷⁹ successfully prays for her adopted people, the Uí Chonaill, in a battle where they are outnumbered.⁸⁰ The battle is recorded for 552 in the Annals of Ulster, perhaps reflecting that this was a well-known legend when the annals were first written down in the sixth and seventh centuries. The entry in the Annals of Ulster is as follows: 'Bellum Cuilne in quo ceciderunt Corcu Oche Muman orationibus Itae Cluano' (the battle of Cuilenn in which the Corco Óche of Munster fell through the prayers of Íte of Cluain [Killeedy]). Here, the Corco Óche, neighbours of the Uí Chonaill, are clearly the losers. Yet, in the account of a battle between the Uí Chonaill and the Corco Óche in the Laud genealogies, the Corco Óche are victorious.⁸¹ The Laud account is not later than the ninth century and probably dates between 700 and 750. The difference between the two accounts may represent the absorption of the saint's cult by the Uí Chonaill, a major dynasty, and the displacement of the weaker Corco Óche. This is completed in the *vita* version of the battle where the Uí Chonaill are the foster people of Íte and she is their *matrona*. Her support for them in battle, however retrospective it might be, is an extension of her matronal duties. The *vita* magnifies the battle. The Uí Chonaill are described as being opposed by a great multitude of enemies from West Munster – a most impressive enemy.

Samthann is far less active. In her Life, the hagiographer refers to a battle between Connacht and the neighbouring kingdom of Tethbae.⁸² A devotee of hers goes into battle against the Connachtmen without Samthann's blessing and dies. But Samthann does not totally desert him and, through her prayers, she ensures his soul's salvation. The contrast between armed conflict and prayer is paralleled by the opposition of male and female. While the opposition is gendered, it does not serve as a critique of battle. Samthann's 'femaleness' necessitates the polarity. There is a similar incident in Íte's Life involving the saint's brother-in-law, the artificer Beóán. Like Samthann's follower he goes to battle without his patron's support and dies. Íte has mercy and resurrects him and he goes on to become the father of a saint.

Brigit is not only a warleader. She is also an Irish equivalent of the Virgin Mary. The early archaic Fothairt poem, 'A Eochaid

Airtt Fuath', declares: 'Bid ala Maire már-Choimded mathair' (she will be another Mary, mother of the great Lord).⁸³ 'Brigit bé bithmaith' describes her as *in máthir Ísu* (the mother of Jesus).⁸⁴ Another hymn, 'Ní car Brigit búadach bith', claims that Brigit shares equal status with Mary in heaven.⁸⁵ The hagiographers are similarly explicit. Brigit is identified as Mary in *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*.⁸⁶ The late Middle Irish Life in the Book of Lismore drives home the point, stating *Is sí Muire na nGaeidhel* (she is the Mary of the Irish).⁸⁷ Such glorification did not reflect on Irish women in general. Like Mary, Brigit was regarded as exceptional rather than representative. The sustained comparison with Mary is not used to anything like the same degree for the other female saints.

Mo Ninne comes closest. The collection of materials relating to the saint at Burton-on-Trent includes two Latin hymns, 'Deum deorum dominum' and 'Audite fratres facta'.⁸⁸ These hymns do not seem to contain any internal evidence which might suggest a firm date. There is no reason to push their date back as far as the earliest Life. The sentiments of these compositions are along the same line as the Brigidine hymns, and they probably ultimately originate in the same tradition. In 'Deum deorum dominum' the saint is compared to Mary.⁸⁹ There is a similar comparison in 'Audite fratres facta'.⁹⁰ Mo Ninne imitates Mary but she is not a second Mary. *Féilire Óengusso* describes her as *siur Maire máre* (sister of great Mary).⁹¹ She is a sister of Mary, not a Mary reborn. In a sense Brigit is a Mary reborn, as her designation 'Mary of the Irish' makes clear. Brigit tops the hierarchy of female saints. Thus, Íte's hagiographer is content to declare that Íte is a *secunda Brigida* 'second Brigit'.⁹² There could be no more flattering comparison.

Conclusion

Brigit is the most prominent of the female saints and the most powerful. She alone is given an extended heroic birth tale, fights in battle and is imagined gaining episcopal status. These attributes, combined with the confusion concerning her chronology, have led people to see in Brigit the direct descendant of a Celtic goddess, clothed in the disguise of a Christian saint.⁹³ Most tellingly, the Old Irish glossary *Sanas Cormaic* mentions the three divine sisters

named Brigit, daughters of the Dagda. This threefold divinity was so important that, according to *Sanas Cormaic*, the name 'Brigit' could be used as a synonym for goddess.⁹⁴ Moreover, the pan-Celtic nature of dedications and geographical sites associated with Brigit are impressive.⁹⁵ It seems indisputable that a goddess named Brigit, or the like, was honoured among Celtic communities.

It is another thing, however, to try to match the characteristics of the goddess with the saint. It is often pointed out that Brigit is associated with cattle and agricultural miracles and that her feast-day on 1 February is the same date as the pre-Christian agricultural festival of *imbolc*.⁹⁶ Yet, other saints are also associated with cattle miracles and this is hardly surprising in an agricultural society where cattle acted as a major form of wealth and marker of status. Irish saints' Lives have a high proportion of what could be considered folkloristic miracles, magical stories and nature miracles, just the type that we find in the Lives of Brigit. This would seem to be an inheritance from a pre-Christian culture that valued such things, and these inheritances shaped Irish Christianity. It does not turn saints into pagan gods and goddesses.

It is very likely that Brigit's cult represents a successful and complex fusion of Christian and native. Thus, the saint is both the healer of cattle and a second Mary. Her feast-day may have been attracted to that of the pre-Christian festival through this fusion. It might be best to view Brigit's cult as one that grew up around a saint named after a divine figure, gaining many adherents for that reason. The pre-Christian element of the cult was probably particularly important in its early phases and it must have imbued the figure of the Christian saint with extra power. But while the status of Brigit arguably had pre-Christian roots, this is expressed in Christian terms and her essential identity is a Christian one. It is an open question as to how far Irish hagiographers were aware of the origins of their creation. For them Brigit was surely a Christian saint and the goddess no more than a distant memory. Cogitosus believed that the tomb he venerated in Kildare contained her bones.⁹⁷

It might be more useful to look at the identity of the female saints in gendered terms. Sanctity allowed women to escape the straitjacket of gender yet this sanctity could be expressed in ways that mirrored the position of women in Irish society. Íte's role as a

matrona draws on ideas of the woman managing the household. This does not imply female autonomy. Indeed, as Íte points out to another woman, it is often better to have male support because 'multum demones insidiantur nostro sexui' (demons greatly beguile our sex).⁹⁸ However, other aspects of these saints – their ability to perform miracles and interact successfully with the secular world – did not generally reflect on perceptions of 'ordinary' women. While the political role of women in the shifting marriage alliances of early Ireland was undoubtedly important, women were not seen as the agents in this relationship. Their influence was covert. The overt influence of the female saints was unusual. Thus, the image of the 'ordinary' woman and the image of the female saint do not constitute a two-way street. The female saints did things which women did not do. The female saint, and above all, Brigit, is a woman liberated by sanctity. Through sanctity these saints transcended the perceived limitations of their gender and gained the identity of Christian heroes.

Notes

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- ¹ Mary Condron, *The Serpent and the Goddess* (New York, 1989).
- ² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London, 1961).
- ³ Julian May, *The Saga of the Exiles*, 4 vols. (London, 1981–4).
- ⁴ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), ch. 7.
- ⁵ Séamas Ó Catháin, *The Festival of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman* (Blackrock, 1995).
- ⁶ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the fire from heaven', *Études celtiques*, 29 (1992), 105–13; *eadem*, 'The manly spirit of St Monenna', in R. Black et al. (eds.), *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic studies*, i (East Linton, 1999), 171–81.
- ⁷ For some idea of the range of extant materials: Charles Plummer (ed.), *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* (Brussels, 1925); James F. Kenney (ed.), *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. An Introduction and Guide* (New York, 1929); Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1985); J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (eds.), *Liber Hymnorum*, Henry Bradshaw Society 13–14, 2 vols. (London, 1897–8).

- ⁸ These three Annals of Ulster dates are suspect: Séan Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (eds.), *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983).
- ⁹ The first date is from the Annals of Ulster; the second comes from the Annals of Inisfallen: Séan Mac Airt (ed.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin, 1951).
- ¹⁰ The date is from the Annals of Ulster; a second obit is interpolated for 519.
- ¹¹ Samthann has a trustworthy obit in the Annals of Ulster.
- ¹² Two other saints might have been considered: Lasair and Attracta. The Life of Lasair of Achad Beithe is late; that of Attracta of Cell Sáile cannot properly be studied until the site of Cell Sáile and the chronology of the saint's life is determined.
- ¹³ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), esp. 15–27.
- ¹⁴ Joyce Salisbury, 'The Latin doctors of the church on sexuality', *Journal of Medieval History*, 12 (1986), 279–89; *eadem*, *Church Fathers: Independent Virgins* (London, 1991), 4–58; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); John Anson, 'The female transvestite in early monasticism: the origin and development of a motif', *Viator*, 5 (1969), 1–32; Vern L. Bullough, 'Transvestites in the Middle Ages', *American Journal of Sociology*, 79 (1974), 1391–4.
- ¹⁵ Noticeable in Paul, Gal. 3: 28 in contrast with Col. 3: 18; discussion by William Walker, '1 Corinthians 11: 12–16 and Paul's views regarding women', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 94 (1975), 94–110. See also Jerome, letter 22 to Eustochium, in *Patrologia Latina*, xxii, col. 325–1197; Ambrose, *De Virginitate*, in *Patrologia Latina*, xvi, col. 187–232.
- ¹⁶ Elva Johnston, 'Transforming women in Irish hagiography', *Peritia*, 9 (1995), 198–220; Bray, 'Manly spirit', 171–81.
- ¹⁷ An exception is the Life of St Radegund by Baudonivia. For a study of Radegund, Etienne Delaruelle, 'Sainte Radegonde, son type de sainteté et la chrétienté de son temps', *Études Mérovingiennes: Actes des journées de Poitiers* (Paris, 1953), 67–74.
- ¹⁸ The relationship between the two has been subject to controversy. The dominant position is summed up in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', in T. W. Moody (ed.), *Nationality and the Pursuit of National Independence* (Belfast, 1978), 1–35.
- ¹⁹ Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (London, 1987), 90.
- ²⁰ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 1–35.
- ²¹ For an overview, Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), 68–79. Recent studies include: Donnchadh Ó Corráin

- 'Women and the law in early Ireland', in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society* (Belfast, 1995), 45–57; Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1996); Bart Jaski, 'Marriage laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages', in C. E. Meek and M. K. Simms (eds.), *The Fragility of her Sex? Medieval Irish Women in their European Context* (Dublin, 1996), 16–42.
- ²² Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Cath Almanie*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 25 (Dublin, 1978).
- ²³ Diplomatic edn. in R. I. Best and Osborn Bergin (eds.), *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin, 1929), 278–87.
- ²⁴ For Cogitosus, *Acta Sanctorum*, 1 February (Brussels, 1658), 135–41 (henceforth Cogitosus); translated by Séan Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard, 'Cogitosus: Life of St Brigit', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*, 117 (1987), 5–27. *Vita Prima* is edited by John Colgan, *Triadis thaumaturgae acta* (Louvain, 1647), 517–45 (henceforth *Vita Prima*); trans. S. Connolly, 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*, 119 (1989), 14–49. I will use Colgan's section numbers for *Vita Prima*. For Cogitosus, I will give the pagination from the *Acta Sanctorum*, followed by Connolly and Picard's section number.
- ²⁵ Richard Sharpe, 'Vitae S. Brigitae: the oldest texts', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 81–106, argues that the *Vita Prima* is the oldest Life; Kim McCone, 'Brigit in the seventh century: a saint with three lives?', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 107–45, gives the priority to Cogitosus; David Howlett, 'Vita I Sanctae Brigitae', *Peritia*, 12 (1998), 1–23, has argued for the seventh-century date and priority of *Vita Prima*.
- ²⁶ Donncha Ó hAodha (ed.), *Bethu Brigitte* (Dublin, 1978). The later Middle Irish Lives come from the same tradition: for the first Irish Life see Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Three Middle Irish Homilies on the Lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit and Columba*, (Calcutta, 1877), 50–82; *idem* (ed.), *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1890), i. 34–51.
- ²⁷ Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963).
- ²⁸ *Vita Prima*, §2; for other examples, Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1910), II. 4, §v (Comgall); 141, §ii (Máedóc); 166, §v (Mo Chóemóc) (henceforth *VSH*); another example concerns Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, Stokes (ed.), *Lives from the Book of Lismore*, vol. 1, p. 120, ll. 4013–17.
- ²⁹ Tomás Ó Broin, 'Lia Fáil: fact and fiction in the tradition', *Celtica*, 21 (1990), 393–401; Johnston, 'Transforming women', 206–7.
- ³⁰ *Vita Prima*, §1.

- ³¹ Cogitosus, 129 (*recte* 135), §1.
- ³² Similar tales are related of Ailbe, *VSH*, I. 46, §i; Finbarr, in Charles Plummer (ed.), *Bethada Náem nĒrenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1922), I, 11–12 §i. It is, of course, common in many mythologies.
- ³³ Kathleen Mulchrone, 'The rights and duties of women with regard to the education of their children', in Rudolf Thurneysen et al. (eds.), *Studies in Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1936), 191–2.
- ³⁴ Kelly, *Guide*, 95–6.
- ³⁵ *Vita Prima*, §15.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, §16.
- ³⁷ *Bethu Brigitte*, §§14–15.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, §15. See also *Vita Prima*, §19.
- ³⁹ Edited by Plummer in *Miscellanea*, 160–3.
- ⁴⁰ The Déisi dominated what is now Co. Waterford.
- ⁴¹ Edited in *VSH*, II. 116–30.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 117, §v.
- ⁴³ D. A. Binchy, 'A pre-Christian survival in medieval Irish hagiography', in Dorothy Whitelock et al. (eds.), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 165–78.
- ⁴⁴ *VSH*, II. 118, §vii (twice), §viii, 119, §ix, 128, §xxxiii (twice), 129, §xxxiii, 130, §xxvi (twice). For a fuller discussion, see Elva Johnston, 'Íte: patron of her people?', *Peritia*, 14 (2000), 421–8.
- ⁴⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, 'Matres Patriae/Matres ecclesiae: women of the Roman Empire', in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (eds.), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 2nd edn 1987), 118. For a discussion of veiling in an Irish context, see Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Caillech and other terms for veiled women in medieval Irish texts', *Éigse*, 28 (1994–5), 71–96.
- ⁴⁶ Aline Rousselle, 'Body politics in ancient Rome', in Pauline Schmitt Pantel (ed.), *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *A History of Women in the West*, i (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 315, has pointed out that Christian women in general adopted the maternal role.
- ⁴⁷ For the Continental Celtic belief, Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970), 49–50.
- ⁴⁸ Examples in Antony Harvey, Kieran Devine and Francis J. Smith (compilers), *Royal Irish Academy Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature*, first (preliminary) CD-Rom edn. (Turnhout, 1994).
- ⁴⁹ *VSH*, II. 118 §vi.
- ⁵⁰ There are several recensions of the *Vitae*: see *VSH*, I. 98–151; also W. W. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels, 1965), 56–78.

- ⁵¹ Íte is described as St Mo Chóemóg's foster mother in *VSH*, II. 167, §viii, 170, §xiv.
- ⁵² The poem is contained in the notes to *Félire Óengusso* but is edited separately by Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1956), 26–9; by E. G. Quin, 'The early Irish poem Isucán', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 1 (1981), 39–52.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–1.
- ⁵⁵ Her Life is edited in *VSH*, II. 253–61.
- ⁵⁶ She appears as Samdan in E. J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton (eds.), 'The monastery of Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, (C) 29 (1911–12), 149–51, §61.
- ⁵⁷ *VSH*, II. 253–4, §ii.
- ⁵⁸ Ed. Mario Esposito, 'Conchubrani Vita Sanctae Monennae', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, (C) 28 (1910), 202–38; reprinted in Mario Esposito, 'Conchubrani Vita Sanctae Monennae', in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Irish Books and Learning in Mediaeval Europe* (London, 1990), 202–38; ed. with a trans. by the Ulster Society for Medieval Latin Studies, 'The Life of St Monenna by Conchubranus: part 1', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha*, 9 (1979), 250–73, part 2, 10/1 (1980–1), 117–41, part 3, 10/2 (1982), 426–54.
- ⁵⁹ Ed. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice . . .*, 83–95. Mario Esposito, 'The sources for Conchubranus' Life of St Monenna', in *Irish Books and Learning*, 73–8, dates the text to 600 × 624; Johnston, 'Transforming women', suggests 665 × 690 or sometime soon after.
- ⁶⁰ *Conchubrani Vita*, 209, 210, 230, 233–4.
- ⁶¹ *Vitae Sanctorum ex Codice*, 89, §19; *Conchubrani Vita*, 228, §1; discussed by Johnston, 'Transforming women', 210–13; Bray, 'Manly spirit', 171–81.
- ⁶² *Vita Prima*, §39.
- ⁶³ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'Women's monastic communities 500–1100: patterns of expansion and decline', in Judith M. Bennett et al. (eds.), *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1989), 208–39.
- ⁶⁴ *Bethu Brigitte*, §19; discussed by Johnston, 'Transforming women', 214–15.
- ⁶⁵ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 161–78.
- ⁶⁶ Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the fire from heaven', 105–13.
- ⁶⁷ Plummer, 'Introduction', in *VSH*, I, lxxxviii.
- ⁶⁸ John J. O'Meara (ed.), *The History and Topography of Ireland* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1982), §§67–9.
- ⁶⁹ Felim Ó Briain, 'The hagiography of Leinster', in John Ryan (ed.), *Féilsgribhinn Eoin Mhic Néill* (Dublin, 1940), 33–42.
- ⁷⁰ John Strachan and Whitley Stokes (eds.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 2

- vols. (Cambridge and Halle a.S, 1901–3, repr. Dublin 1975), ii. 323–36.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 326, l. 8.
- ⁷² Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Hail Brigit: An Old Irish Poem on the Hill of Alenn* (Dublin and Halle, 1911), 12, l. 2.
- ⁷³ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, xi, ch. 2, §§21–2; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993), 205–6.
- ⁷⁴ A classic statement is Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adamnáin: An Old Irish Treatise of the Law of Adamnán* (Oxford, 1905), §3.
- ⁷⁵ *Vita Prima*, §90.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Ó Riain, ‘Introduction’, in *Cath Almaine*, xxiii–xxvii.
- ⁷⁸ *Cath Almaine*, 21.
- ⁷⁹ *VSH*, II. 117, §v, 119, §xi.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 128–9, §xxxiii.
- ⁸¹ Kuno Meyer (ed.), ‘The Laud [610] genealogies and tribal histories’, *ZCP*, 8 (1911), 307–9.
- ⁸² *VSH*, II. 256–7, §xiii.
- ⁸³ M. A. O’Brien (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, i (Dublin, 1962), 80.
- ⁸⁴ *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, ii. 325, l. 6.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., 349, ll. 105–6.
- ⁸⁶ *Vita Prima*, §14; *Bethu Brigitte*, §11.
- ⁸⁷ *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, i. 51, l. 1705.
- ⁸⁸ Ed. Esposito, *Conchubran Vita*, 239–42 (*Deum deorum dominum*), 242–4 (*Audite fratres facta*).
- ⁸⁹ Stanza 15, 22.
- ⁹⁰ Stanza 12.
- ⁹¹ *Martyrology of Oengus*, 161.
- ⁹² *VSH*, II. 130, §xxxvi.
- ⁹³ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 34–5.
- ⁹⁴ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Sanas Cormaic: An Old Irish Glossary Compiled by Cormac Ua Cuileinnáin King-Bishop of Cashel in the Tenth-Century Edited from the Copy in the Yellow Book of Lecan*, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, 5 (Halle and Dublin, 1913, repr. Felinfach, 1994), §150.
- ⁹⁵ E. G. Bowen, ‘The cult of St Brigit’, *Studia Celtica*, 8 (1973), 33–47.
- ⁹⁶ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 34–5.
- ⁹⁷ *Cogitosus*, 141, §32.
- ⁹⁸ *VSH*, II. 124, §xxiv.

4

Saxon or Celt? Cædmon, ‘The Seafarer’ and the Irish tradition

MARK ATHERTON

‘Saxon or Celt?’ she continued, laughing in the darkness.¹

In E. M. Forster’s novel *Howard’s End*, Margaret Schlegel stands one dark evening on an old castle mound in the Welsh border country and shouts out the challenge of a medieval border guard: ‘Saxon or Celt?’ She is heard, of course, by the disapproving Charles Wilcox, who half recognizes the irony of her repartee, since the connotations of ‘prosaic Saxon’ and ‘visionary Celt’ were commonplace by the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.² With his Saxon name, Charles Wilcox is the pragmatist, the philistine and the businessman, the one who favours ‘things as they are’, whereas Margaret Schlegel represents the Romantic;³ she is the artist and idealist striving for ‘things as they ought to be’. In his playful irony, Forster the novelist thus aligns the associations of ‘Saxon’ and ‘Celt’ with other pairs of opposites which he sees as characterizing the spiritual state of England in his own time. His use of the term ‘Celt’ raises questions not only of identity but also of mentality, personal expression and spiritual attitude.

But what of the ‘Saxon’ element? According to the historian Bede, writing in the early eighth century, the island of Britain consisted of four national groups: English, Irish, British and Picts; each had their own language, but all were linked by Latin, the language of the Church. Throughout this period, Latin, or ‘Book-Latin’ as it was called, remained the main medium by which both texts and ideas were transmitted from one culture to the next. Given the geographical proximity to Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and Ireland and connections with Irish centres of Hiberno-Latin on the continent of Europe, it seems likely that