

The True Patron of Ireland:  
Saint Brigit and the Rise of Celtic Christianity

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## **Abstract**

When Saint Patrick landed in Ireland in 432 AD, history says that he brought Christianity to the Irish. In actuality, though, Patrick's arrival was the beginning of a religious struggle between Rome and Ireland. Patrick's Church was based on Roman traditions and his mission in Ireland was not just to defeat paganism, but to intercede in the foundations of an already developing Celtic Church. To challenge Patrick and his Roman ways, Ireland exalted a saint of its own. Saint Brigit (452-525 AD) and the characteristics she represented in Irish hagiography clearly illustrated the ideal Irish saint. Ireland's reverence for nature, animals, and wisdom are all championed in the accounts of Brigit's existence. She established Kildare, the first double monastery, and some scholars, like Liam de Paor, suggest that it was Ireland's first monastery in a rich legacy of monasticism. When the Roman Church once again attacked the Celtic Church in 664 at the Synod of Whitby, Ireland resurrected Brigit as one of its most respected and admired leaders. Toward the end of the seventh century, Cogitosus, her first biographer, used Brigit's life and the prestige of Kildare to bid against Patrick's house, Armagh, for status as Ireland's archdiocese. As Ireland passionately strove to protect the Celtic Church and preserve its heritage, Saint Brigit's life developed mythological roots, imbuing her with a fascinating combination of enchanting goddess and praying nun. Even though Rome eventually prevailed, and absorbed the Celtic Church into Roman tradition, Ireland never lost sight of its Celtic heritage. Moreover Saint Brigit's role as Ireland's first saint illustrates that enduring pride.

## Introduction

The Christian Church in Ireland was a unique development in Western Civilization and Christianity. The common observation was that the Celtic Church had a strange air about it, something special. Most scholars accept Saint Patrick as the traditional founder of the eccentric Irish Church, but Ireland's history tells a different story. The twists and turns of his relationship with the Irish as a British youth and political bishop cast a different, darker light on his religious role as the patron of Ireland. Patrick's life and his mission in Ireland constantly contradicted Irish culture. Patrick came to Ireland in 432 AD as a Roman Bishop and until his death he remained a representative of the Roman Church and its episcopate order.<sup>1</sup>

The episcopate system, however, was incongruous with Ireland's traditions, society, and even geography. The Celtic Church was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to mirror the Roman Church's organization and hierarchy. In response to Patrick's Roman agenda and his alliance with the tyrannical Uí Néill clan, the masses of Ireland sought out their own Christian leader. Saint Brigit embraced all of the peculiarities of Irish culture that Patrick so heartlessly dismissed. The Celtic Church had found its guardian and in the tales and miracles of Brigit, Ireland sought to preserve its individuality in the face of Christianity's intimidating expansion.

Saint Brigit is one of the most revered religious figures in Irish history. Her monastery, Kildare, established around 500 AD, grew to be a powerful center of

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<sup>1</sup> Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 34.

monastic life in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Its authority was second only to Armagh, Saint Patrick's own church. Saint Brigit is a mystery to most, her persona a fascinating blend of praying nun and enchanting goddess. She goes by many names. Saint Brigit, *Brig* the goddess, and Mary of the Gael are just a few. Ireland, with its cultural, geographical, and economical distinctions, demanded an extraordinary approach to Christianity. And although Saint Brigit was undeniably a devoted Christian, she was not cut from the same cloth as her Roman counterparts.

Saint Brigit's pastoral life appeared unsophisticated to the bishops in Rome, but she was able to engineer the foundations of a Celtic Church. She was such a successful figure in the Irish Church, not because she replicated the customs of Patrick, but because her character encompassed so many of Ireland's own traditions. Her relationship with nature, the Irish monastery, and even the myths of Irish femininity only served to endear her further to the Irish heart. Brigit's virtue and grace inspired Celtic monks and nuns long after her death, and they continued Brigit's religious traditions until Celtic Christianity rivaled the religious glories of Rome itself.

Over a hundred years after her death, the Celtic Church was to come to an end. There could be only one Catholic Church and Rome was determined to squelch Ireland's faction. At the Synod of Whitby, in 664 A.D., the two Churches debated the official day to celebrate Easter, and it was an argument the Irish lost.<sup>3</sup> And even

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<sup>2</sup> Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1997), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201.

though the Irish resisted fervently, not fifty years later, at the Synod of Birr (696 A.D), Ireland succumbed to Rome and its religious order.<sup>4</sup> Saint Brigit, however, was not lost. Even as the Irish Church began to establish Churches and religious networks under Roman episcopate guidelines, monks and the educated members of Ireland's proud culture revived, with certain fondness, Saint Brigit and Celtic Christianity in their hagiography. She would always be their haven, their protectress, and their church's true patron.

### **The Roman Invader: Saint Patrick and Ireland**

When Saint Brigit was born in 453 AD, Ireland was still a society of pagans. Throughout her lifetime, Ireland struggled to find a niche for the young Christian church amidst its political and social traditions. According to Neysr Patterson, in his book *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, "the period between the late fourth and early sixth century was one of social upheaval in Ireland."<sup>5</sup> Powerful chieftains of the Ui Neill tribe were taking command in the North, determined to build a dynasty and become Ireland's first absolute rulers. In addition to this political turmoil, Saint Patrick's arrival in 432 AD marked the beginnings of a fierce battle for Irish souls. Patrick and Druids dueled for their place beside kings, displaying miracles and magic reminiscent of the Old Testament. The Church Patrick promoted, however, was a product of a falling Empire and its emerging formidable religious force, not Ireland. The remarkable monasteries and eccentric customs that are associated with the Irish

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<sup>4</sup> Chadwick, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Neysr Thomas Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 37.

Church were the manifestations of a native movement inspired by Brigit and her intimate relationship with the Irish. To understand Ireland's appreciation and need for a figure like Brigit, though, Saint Patrick's role and Ireland's rocky relationship with Rome and its Church must also be considered.

When Patrick penned his autobiography, *Confessions*, he described a startling dream that had inspired him to devote his life to the souls of the Irish.

I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. His name was Victoricus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: "The Voice of the Irish." As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea – and they cried out, as with one voice: "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." I was pierced by great emotion and could not read on, and so I woke. Thank God that after many years the Lord answered them according to their cry.<sup>6</sup>

This dream of ecclesiastic destiny firmly wove Patrick into the history of Ireland, making his persona practically inseparable from the Irishman's identity. To this day, he is considered the Father of the Irish Church, but even as people celebrate St. Patrick's Day and the eccentricities of Irish culture every March 17<sup>th</sup>, few realize the Saint himself was not Irish.

To accept the *Confessions*' lyrical and heroic portrayal of a life fully devoted to Ireland's pagans is naïve. Patrick was familiar with Irish society, no doubt, but Patrick's relationship with Ireland was entangled in a sticky web of tense politics, ecclesiastic feuds, and embittered memories from his childhood in Britain, all of which weighed on him in his travels through Ireland. There is some debate as to where and when he was actually born, but most concede that his home "Bannavem

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<sup>6</sup> de Paor, 100.

Taburniae” is on the western coast of Britain. Others go further and suggest that the name was miswritten, and the villa that Patrick grew up was likely in the Northern frontier, near Hadrian’s Wall, an area that always faced invasion. This location on the frontier suggests a long history in the presence of legions and Roman occupation, where there was a vivid difference between the ruthless barbarians and even the roughest Roman soldiers.

Patrick’s family had other ties to Rome and its sense of civilization. His father, Colpernius, was a deacon and his grandfather, Potius, a priest in the growing dioceses of the Roman Church.<sup>7</sup> Even on the fringes of the Roman Empire, these British men would have felt like Roman citizens, sharing their same abhorrence for barbarians and the uncivilized pagans who skulked on the outskirts of their land. The bitter and violent relationship between the Irish and Britons was not a product of modern times. In this suspicious and violent environment, Patrick’s childhood in the late fourth century would have been filled with an array of stories spun around the reputations of these vicious invaders. The Irish were probably one of the most despised of these barbarians.<sup>8</sup> These Celts danced around Roman territory, some to pilfer, others to actually form small Irish settlements barely blinking an eye at the Roman fortresses and their legions. Patrick would have known the Irish best in their role as pirates. Their raiding skills were notorious, and their stealthy pirate ships stalked the Irish Sea for treasures, slaves, and anything else that caught their eye.

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Freeman, *Saint Patrick: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 2.

<sup>8</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur: The History of the British Isles from 350-650* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 8.

Rome's mighty legions never managed to set foot on Irish soil much less intimidate their wayward sailors. When Irish pirates kidnapped Patrick at the age of sixteen, it was like a nightmare come true.<sup>9</sup>

After six years of tending sheep in snow, rain, and ice, under a man he called an "obdurate pagan chieftain," Patrick returned home around 409 AD.<sup>10</sup> He thought he had escaped a life among heathens and returned to the civilized, Christian embrace of his British family, but that was not the case. His homeland was in the throes of a fierce barbarian invasion, and for the first time, Rome's political and social superiority were in question. Saxons flooded across the channel and into Britain. Bellicose warriors from Pictland, present day Scotland, flanked the Saxons' relentless armies and Patrick's own nemesis, the Irish, closed in on Britain from the west.<sup>11</sup> No help arrived from Rome; its legions had evacuated to strengthen the capital's vulnerable walls and never returned to the fringe. Everything Patrick knew about Britain and the Roman Empire was crumbling.

On August 24, 410 AD, though, the heart of western civilization stopped beating.<sup>12</sup> Rome watched aghast as Goths dared to scale her walls, burn her buildings, and loot her treasures. It was not until 475 that history admitted to Rome's defeat, but by then the stoic Empire was a mere shell of its former self. As is often the case, however, when one form of stability collapses a new order steps into its place. The Christian Church saw itself as Rome's successor and the enforcer of the

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<sup>9</sup> Freeman, 18.

<sup>10</sup> de Paor, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, 22.

west's new order. As historian John Morris discussed in his book, *The Age of Arthur*, Christians were "impatient to clear away the debris of the past that they might build upon its ruins a new society."<sup>13</sup> In the place of emperors and soldiers, the Church recruited bishops and priests to extend the influence of its urban centers like Rome, because as Philip Hughes commented in *A History of the Church*, "it [was] the Church alone which continue[d] to breed thinkers and orators and rulers."<sup>14</sup>

Uniting the Western world in the name of Christ, however, was a full order to fill. The expansion of Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries was a peaceful mission, but no less intense for its lack of violence and force. On the frontiers such as Britain, society's abrupt disconnection with Rome along with the absorption of thousands of Saxons, resulted in a revival of pagan worship.<sup>15</sup> According to some historians, since Rome never conquered Ireland, there was more tolerance of the natives' pagan religion. As Kathleen Sherman remarked, in *The Flowering of Ireland*, "because Christianity came easily, without martyrdom, there never existed the fear and hostility to pagans that made religion orders on the Continent so fanatically evangelical."<sup>16</sup> This peaceful relationship budding between Ireland's Christians and pagans never ceased to make the Roman Church suspicious of Ireland's early Church.

The early Roman Church was never fully satisfied that Irish Christians had actually abandoned their pagan roots. At the beginning of the fifth century, the

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church* Vol. 2, *The Church and the World the Church Created* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Scherman, *The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars, and Kings* (New York: Little Brown Co., 1981), 51.

Roman Church implied that Ireland was breeding heresy. A monk named Pelagius hailed from the British Isles to spread a new doctrine of Christian faith that challenged the concept of original sin. His writings on freewill were a direct criticism of St. Augustine and his autobiography, *Confessions*. According to Gerald Bonner, in his *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, Augustine's *Confessions* "expressed all that [Pelagius] found most intolerable in the excuse of the slothful."<sup>17</sup> Augustine's complete dependence on grace allowed him to shrug off responsibility, and this laziness disgusted Pelagius' ascetic morals. Here began the controversy between the concept of grace and free will. Along with his ambitious and outspoken student, Caelestius, an Irishman nonetheless, he stirred the Christian world

Although Pelagians believed that God's grace was essential, they stood on the notion that man's free will was an influential factor in salvation. They did not see Adam and Eve's Fall as a plague of mankind because mankind ultimately had a choice, or a freewill, which enabled it to decide between good and evil. Therefore, without original sin, man could attain a righteous and sinless life through his own efforts.<sup>18</sup> St. Jerome, one of Rome's most erudite ascetics, despised Pelagius, and although St. Augustine remained on good terms with Pelagius, he devoted much of his time to crushing Pelagianism with his passionate polemics.<sup>19</sup> To St. Augustine, Pelagianism suggested that any person, regardless of their relationship with the Church, could become righteous. In 415, St. Augustine's *On Nature and Grace*

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 317.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Hughes, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Bonner, 324.

emphasized that “if we are now in Christ a new creature, we were yet by nature sons of wrath, even as the rest.”<sup>20</sup> Eventually in 418, in front of a synod of over two hundred bishops, Augustine engineered the excommunication of Pelagius and rejected his doctrine of freewill.

According to Oliver Davies, though, Pelagius and his ascetical writings continued to survive in pastoral Ireland. In his anthology, *Celtic Spirituality*, Davies remarked that the monk’s writings “can be understood as the cry of indignation of an uncompromising rural monastic at the fashionable Christianity of Rome....[and] to this extent at least Pelagius belongs to the Celtic world.”<sup>21</sup> The Roman Church not only saw Ireland not only as uncompromising, but as an unconquered, primitive land of heretics and pagans as well. Ireland represented the far ends of the earth and if the Roman Church were able to add just that little island to its collection of dioceses, it would accomplish a feat that had escaped even the most elite soldiers of the Western world; Saint Patrick’s role in Ireland was as a soldier of the Roman Church. Nora K. Chadwick, the author of *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, observed that Patrick’s arrival in Ireland (432 A.D.) was “exactly the time when Pelagianism was powerful in Britain.”<sup>22</sup> His mission in Ireland was to vanquish Pelagians and sculpt the Irish into a devout Roman Catholic episcopate. In his biography of St. Patrick, Philip Freeman described the Roman Church’s hopes that if Patrick accomplished this feat, churches in Ireland “might act as balance against churchmen in Britain resisting

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<sup>20</sup> Bonner, 325.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas O’Laoughlin and Oliver Davies tr, *Celtic Spirituality* (Wales: Paulist Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>22</sup> Chadwick, 18.

orthodox views.”<sup>23</sup> Having spent six years as the Irish’s slave, Patrick was more equipped to handle the job than other Roman officials; nevertheless, Patrick’s mission in Ireland faced many adversaries both pagan and Christian alike.

Despite the popular portrayal of Patrick as a courageous holy man against pagan Druids, Ireland’s resistance to Christianity did not just stem from its pagans. Patrick also had to gain loyalty from Irish Christians, many of whom found the Roman bishop’s high-handed and foreign ways irritating. Philip Freeman mentions four bishops, Ciaran, Ailbe, Declan, and Ibar, who were already present when Ireland finally caught Rome’s eye.<sup>24</sup> Most allow these pre-Patrick proselytizers the title bishop but their exact connections to an organized church or Rome are debatable. Either way, these men must have gathered the beginnings of a reasonable following otherwise Rome would not have justified providing Ireland with its own bishop. As Philip Freeman stated, “bishops were never sent anywhere unless there were already Christians living there who had requested a spiritual leader.”<sup>25</sup> Not everyone, though, found Patrick to be their ideal “spiritual leader.”

Of these four Irish bishops, Saint Ibar was the most vocal in his protest against Saint Patrick’s foreign presence. And although history states he eventually conceded to Patrick’s authority, he represented those Celtic Christians who resented Roman Christianity, feeling that it was inappropriate or unwanted in Ireland.<sup>26</sup> His initial aversion suggests that Patrick had arrived in Ireland not to begin a Church in a land of

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<sup>23</sup> Freeman, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>26</sup> D.P. Conyngham, *Lives of the Irish Saints* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, n/d), 129.

pagans, but to intercede in the development of an already present Church based on Ireland's rural traditions and not Rome's urban customs. Ireland was not unified nor did it have cities, yet Rome still expected it to develop into a mirror of its own organization.

Patrick stormed into Ireland to face the barbaric and bloodthirsty pagans of his enslaved adolescence believing he was destined to become a martyr for Christ. Instead he laid siege to a civilization and church that was prospering outside of Roman influence. Its people were never forced to sacrifice their heritage, culture, or pride, and they never saw themselves as Roman, or even British. And although there may not have been a sense of national identity among Ireland's five provinces in the fifth century, Patrick was not Irish, and his Church appeared ill suited for their society. Ireland needed one of its own to preserve its Celtic heritage while ushering it into a new age of monasticism and an afterlife of heaven.

### **Saint Brigit and the Rise of Celtic Christianity**

As the first advocate of the Celtic Church, Brigit embodied key Irish traits which were never attributable to Patrick. Unlike Patrick's biographies, Saint Brigit's *Lives* did not emphasize her ability to convert pagans as much as they bragged on her charms with the local people. The rural Celtic society cherished the land and local traditions in such a way that Patrick's urban Roman customs always appeared foreign and out of place. Concerning Ireland's admiration for Saint Brigit and other native saints, Oliver Davies observed that, "The ancient *dindsenchas* or "place-lore" tradition of early Christian Ireland is also testimony to the enduring sense of locality,

as is the extensive tapestry of local saints and their folklore, which dominated the popular culture of the Celtic lands.<sup>27</sup> Where Patrick constantly strived to change Ireland, Brigit fulfilled her role as Ireland's patron saint by embracing its rustic society and melding it with an intense devotion to the morals of Christianity.

Born in a druid's hut around 450, Brigit's life modeled Ireland's bucolic culture. Her father, a druid and landowner, was a loyal servant to the pagan king of Leinster. His handmaiden, and Brigit's mother Brochessa, was a Christian slave.<sup>28</sup> David Conyngham, in *The Lives of the Irish Saints*, outlined Brigit's parents' impressive lineages, which included ties to "Con of the Hundred Battles" and the noble O'Connor family. Brigit's own saintly reputation was predicted before she was ever born.<sup>29</sup> In the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, druids and bishops congratulated Brigit's parents on the conception of their miraculous daughter. One druid reassured Brochessa saying, "Keep your spirits up; no one can harm you; the grace of your little infant will set you free. You will give birth to an illustrious daughter who will shine in the world like the sun in the vault of heaven."<sup>30</sup> Patrick was already proselytizing among the Irish, but still they awaited their true patron. Brigit, one of their own, was destined to rise and provide her people with a saint they could sympathize with and look to in times of trouble.

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<sup>27</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Sean Connolly tr. "Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae: Background and Historical Value," *JRSAI* 119 (1989), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Conyngham, 142.

<sup>30</sup> Connolly, 14.

## *The Nature of Brigit*

Brigit's saintly persona established close relationships with Ireland's bucolic society and its common people. While Patrick's urban ideals were at a loss in this rural culture, Brigit was its savior. In her lecture "Saint Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess" Lisa Bitel stated, "Patrick concentrated on ruling men and churches; [Brigit] focused on feeding and clothing the poor, healing the sick, and receiving visions from God."<sup>31</sup> Patrick did not understand the ruling men he sought to convert had not removed themselves from Ireland's rustic nature.

Katherine Scherman, author of *The Flowering of Ireland*, observed "nearly everyone, no matter how high his rank, was basically a farmer."<sup>32</sup> Ireland's economy, religious rituals, and unique traditions were all influenced by its dependence on nature.

Immersed in its pastoral existence, Ireland expected every man to be a 'land man', or as the Irish called it, *mruifher*. Both Brigit's father and druid fosterer, each owning herds of animals, were proud members of this rural society. In her introduction to *A History of Medieval Ireland* by A. J. Otway-Ruthven, Kathleen Hughes described what being a *mruifher* entailed: "He was supposed to have land worth twenty-one *cumals* stocked with twenty milch cows, two bulls, six oxen, twenty pigs, twenty sheep, four boars, two brood sows and a horse."<sup>33</sup> Animals were

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, "Saint Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess," (February 2001), <http://www.monasticmatrix.usc.edu/commentaria/article.php?id=6>.

<sup>32</sup> Scherman, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Hughes, an Introduction to *A History of Medieval Ireland* by A.J. Otway-Ruthven (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 5.

a mark of prosperity, and Ireland's high regard for cows created an economy where coins were rendered useless. During Brigit's life, the common unit of trade was the *sét*, a young heifer. The *cumal*, a slave woman, was a higher unit of trade valued at four to six *séts* to Irish tradesmen. In the *Bethu Brigitte*, Brigit gives the king of Leinster's bejeweled sword to a leper, and her father berates her asking, "Why did you give the value of ten cows to a leper, my daughter?"<sup>34</sup> Concerning Ireland's economy, Francis J. Byrne noted, "the Irish had a simple agrarian economy and did not use coined money."<sup>35</sup> The Irish were familiar with more luxurious riches, but when payments were due, they were made in *sét* and *cumal*.

As their saint, Brigit was also heavily involved in pastoral chores and miracles. When she lived in Connacht, she churned butter and cared for the druid's cows. In Leinster, she took responsibility for Dubtacth's swine and watched over his sheep and cattle. All her *Lives* portrayed Brigit at ease among nature's creatures, proudly documenting her ability to find lost animals and calm wild beasts. Patrick's biographies never implied that he was at home in Ireland's pastoral setting. In Muirchu's biography, Patrick was reported to have lost a herd of pigs he had been shepherding. Only when an angel came to his rescue, were the swine recovered.<sup>36</sup> Brigit, on the other hand, never lost an animal. If one were stolen, it miraculously reappeared when the herd was counted. Cogitosus detailed an occasion when a thief had stolen seven of Brigit's sheep, but when "they were counted very carefully two or

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<sup>34</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Francis J. Byrne, "Early Irish Society (1<sup>st</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Century)," *The Course of Irish History*, Ed. T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1967), 51.

<sup>36</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 98.

three times, their number was amazingly found to be complete, without any loss.”<sup>37</sup>

Bitel wrote “[Brigit’s] control over even the wildest of animals had been well established by Cogitosus and repeated in the two later vitae: fierce boars, elusive foxes, cattle and sheep all followed her commands.”<sup>38</sup> Where Patrick struggled to watch over Ireland’s animals, Brigit’s miracles staunchly protected the herds that were essential to Ireland’s bucolic culture.

In addition to her accomplishments as a shepherdess, Brigit was also a skilled horsewoman. This esteem for horses was shared throughout Ireland and was deeply enmeshed into their society and culture. Katharine Scherman explained “the Irish-Celts rode [horses] from their earliest years (a prince received his first horse when he was seven), drove them and raced them.”<sup>39</sup> The Irish and other Celtic mythologies adored horses for their wise and intuitive natures. The Irish idolized their equestrian heroes, and in the tradition of Celtic warriors such as Queen Medb and Cuchulain, Brigit was a skilled charioteer.

As an Irish saint, Brigit’s charioting was a source of pride. In Cogitosus’ *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, Brigit prayed and meditated in her chariot.<sup>40</sup> The *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* added to her equestrian reputation, reporting that a charioteer Brigit blessed was “able to travel a journey of two days in the space of a single instant.”<sup>41</sup> Patrick blatantly disregarded this aspect of Celtic culture. Unlike Brigit, he harbored no admiration for horses or their riders. Biographer Muirchu quoted him disdainfully

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 126

<sup>38</sup> Bitel “St. Brigit of Ireland.”

<sup>39</sup> Scherman, 38

<sup>40</sup> O’Loughlin and Davies, 129.

<sup>41</sup> Connolly, 27.

challenging the mounted King Loiguire with the declaration that “some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but we shall walk in the name of [the Lord] our God.”<sup>42</sup>

Patrick’s definition of a faithful Christian was a stark contradiction to Brigit’s *Lives* and Ireland’s Christian community.

The intense admiration for nature and animals was ingrained in the Irishman dating back to the days of the ancient Druids. The oak tree, which represented wisdom, was a symbol of the Druids’ pagan religion and their reverence for nature.<sup>43</sup>

Druids served as political advisors to kings and keepers of the law tracts. Their primary jobs were to fulfill their divinatory duties to Ireland’s pastoral people.

Miranda Green’s *The World of the Druids* emphasized this very important role. “The right or wrong days for ploughing, sowing and reaping had to be calculated, and the divinatory powers of the Druids would have been central to these predictions.”<sup>44</sup>

These men were instrumental in determining Ireland’s agricultural calendar, designating festival days, and presiding over pagan rituals.

Beltane, the summer festival, celebrated the herding of cattle to the high pastures. Its rituals required the Druids to lead the cows between two fires, symbolizing protection from disease. In the autumn months, bringing in the harvest was the most important event.<sup>45</sup> Druids organized the rituals of the fall festival, Lughnasadh, hoping to secure a bountiful harvest.<sup>46</sup> Winter’s festival, Samhain, however, was a dangerous time when the dead were reported to have walked among

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<sup>42</sup> O’Loughlin and Davies, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Patterson, 141.

the living. In addition to its ominous connections to the Otherworld, Samhain marked the return of the cattle to the lowlands in preparation for the cold winter.<sup>47</sup> After the New Year, *Imbolc* celebrated the coming of spring, the lambing season, and the return of warm weather. The goddess *Brig* presided over this festival and its process of purification.

In Patrick's eyes, the druids who stood over these pagan festivals were nature's wizards, and when the saint and druids clashed there were manipulation of the seasons or weather. In Muirchu's *Life of Patrick*, the saint battled druids who covered the plains in snow "that reached the height of a man's belt" and "called down the deepest darkness over the land."<sup>48</sup> Patrick managed to reverse these tricks of nature, but his defensive response to natural challenges, animals or weather, did not convey mastery.

Like the druids, Brigit's mastery of nature was effortless. Besides taming all animals, she commanded rivers, ceased the rain, and even hung her cloak on a sunbeam with the greatest of ease. According to the *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, Brigit's prayers once changed an obstructive river's route away from her kin's land.<sup>49</sup> Cogitosus reported many miracles regarding Brigit's control of weather: "While all other reapers throughout that region were stopped from working by the downpour, her own workers, with not hint of rain, labored all day."<sup>50</sup> In some versions of her cloak miracle, Brendan the Navigator wrestled to hang his own cloak up, trying in

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Jerome Smith, "Festivals and Calendar Customs," *Irish History and Culture*, Ed. Harold Orel (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1976), 130.

<sup>48</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 103.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

vain to mimic Brigit's control of nature.<sup>51</sup> Bitel's lecture, "Saint Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess," described Brigit as a "mistress of the landscapes" with nature-based miracles that "pointed toward a mastery of nature and territory that even Patrick could not claim."<sup>52</sup> With such little involvement in Ireland's countryside, Patrick could not have related easily to its Christians.

Brigit's attentiveness toward Ireland's pastoral concerns earned her an essential role in the lives of all Irishmen. Her saint's day is February 1<sup>st</sup>, the same day as the spring festival, *Imbolc*.<sup>53</sup> The Roman Church attempted to explain away this "coincidental" calendar assignment hoping to erase its pagan implications, but they were not successful. Robert Jerome Smith's essay, *Festivals and Calendar Customs*, relayed the Church's acclaimed compromise between Brigit and the Virgin Mary. "It is said that when Mary was giving birth to Jesus, Brigid averted the eyes of the onlookers, so a grateful Mary let Brigid have her festival first." The Virgin Mary's day is February 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>54</sup>

Brigit was the patron of many things, from blacksmiths to poets and healers, but of all these, her depiction as a dairymaid was most prevalent in the *Lives*. The sketch of Saint Brigit in Rev. Baring-Gould's *Lives of the Saints* beautifully illustrates Brigit kneeling beside the symbols of her pastoral culture.<sup>55</sup> *Imbolc*, as the spring festival, marked the arrival of milk after a long winter. The health of cattle and the production of the year's first milk were pivotal to the survival of the Irish. With the

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<sup>51</sup> Scherman, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Bitel "St. Brigit of Ireland."

<sup>53</sup> Patterson, 129.

<sup>54</sup> Smith "Festivals", 131.

<sup>55</sup> Rev. S. Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. 2, *February* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1914), 16.

year's first planting still a couple months away, pantries were bare after a long cold winter. During this "hungry spring," the season's first milk, and all its byproducts like cheese and butter, were important supplements to the Irish's sparse diet.<sup>56</sup>

Meager diets during *Imbolc* made spring a very anxious season for the Irish. There was always the fear that thieves would steal someone's milk or cow and leave them to starve. Neyrs Patterson discussed this social anxiety claiming "supernatural protection from these pressures was sought, often from St. Brigit."<sup>57</sup> Ireland's reliance on Saint Brigit throughout this stressful time was emphasized in her *Lives*. As a newborn, Brigit's mother accidentally soaked Brigit in fresh milk, as if baptizing her to Ireland's rustic traditions. Brigit became a loving caretaker of the poor and sick, providing them with heifers, milk, and butter whenever needed needed. Katharine Scherman described the extent of Saint Brigit's nurturing generosity: "She supplied the countryside round about with the bounty of her farm and her kitchen, even brewing ale one Easter for all the neighboring churches."<sup>58</sup> In Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, the generous nun once "gladly and promptly gave the best of all the cows and prime calf of another cow to [a] sick man."<sup>59</sup> Cogitosus even boasts that Brigit once milked a cow three times, gaining "from one cow what she would have normally have expected to get from three of the best cows."<sup>60</sup> This essential synthesis of Christianity and Irish culture, which Saint Patrick lacked, endeared Saint Brigit to the Irish.

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<sup>56</sup> Patterson, 132.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.,137.

<sup>58</sup> Scherman, 114.

<sup>59</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 128.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 125.



**Figure 1: This bucolic depiction of Saint Brigit, which the Irish could identify with, contrasts sharply with Saint Patrick's more formal rendering. Pictures gathered from Baring-Gould, 16 and Carmel McCaffrey and Leon Eaton, *In Search of Ancient Ireland: The Origins of the Irish from Neolithic Times to the Coming of the English* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 111.**

Celtic Christianity, in the example of Brigit, gladly adopted Irish culture, with its ties to nature and animals. Nature for Brigit and other Irish saints represented another sanctuary in which to praise God, the animal kingdom another congregation. According to stories, Saint Ciaran's first disciples were animals and his church was nestled deep in the forest.<sup>61</sup> The Irish even incorporated nature into Christ's holy cross. The popular stone and metal Celtic Crosses were designed as if the sun's illuminating rays shined behind them. Saint Brigit's own rendition of the cross, which was placed in the roofs of homes for protection, was a humble weaving of dried rushes.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Scherman, 83.

<sup>62</sup> MacCaffrey and Eaton, 120.

Nature was also the manifestation of wisdom in Celtic cultures. The legends of Brigit's double monastery, Kildare, highlighted this synthesis between nature and wisdom. Kildare, translated as 'church of wood', was founded in an oak tree grove and grew into one of the most respected communities of scholars.<sup>63</sup> Brigit is known as the patron saint of students, because in the Irish society, long before civilized Rome made an appearance, Ireland revered its wise men, the "*aes dana*." Druids, bards, and *filid* were the keepers of history, law, rituals, and other mainstays of Irish society, and some were as influential as kings and bishops. They were given the uncontested freedom to travel around the island, through all provinces, and across the lands of powerful leaders.<sup>64</sup>

Christian Ireland's fascination with the educated stemmed from this Druid heritage. A Druid's education was intense, lasting for up to twenty years, and all their knowledge was proudly memorized. Ireland did possess a written alphabet, Ogham, but it was extremely complicated and rarely used. The mastery involved in Ireland's oral traditions was astounding, even to the civilized Roman writers of antiquity.<sup>65</sup> The Irish embraced a powerful oral tradition and this emphasis on memorized stories and tales kept their history alive throughout generations. Not until the seventh century, when their religion was challenged, did the Irish monks finally take up their pens with the passionate fervency for which they became known. Nora Chadwick, author of *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, believed that the "Irish

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<sup>63</sup> Conyngham, 161.

<sup>64</sup> Byrne, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Green, 50.

monastic Church never turned a cold shoulder on its ancient secular traditions, but lovingly collected them.”<sup>66</sup> Saint Brigit and her Celtic Church marched along a different route to salvation than what Patrick had in mind. The Roman blueprint of religion, with its starched structure and urban traditions, was unattractive and perhaps suffocating for the pastoral Celts. For the Irish, the monastery was the perfect device to channel their reverence for nature and learning into the world’s quickest growing religion.

### ***Brigit and the Monastery***

As the founder and abbess of Kildare, Brigit nurtured a religious structure that blended Irish culture and Christianity almost effortlessly. Monasticism, unlike the episcopate system of Roman dioceses, generated an intense sense of community, a concept Irish society embraced. Historian Katherine Scherman observed that monasticism “rested easily on the foundations of the Celtic family structure.”<sup>67</sup> During Brigit’s life, Ireland’s political system was based on the *tuath*, or Irish kingdom. Throughout the five main provinces, there were over 150 *tuatha*.<sup>68</sup> At the core of the *tuath* resided the *fine*, or the family, not a structured hierarchy of authority.<sup>69</sup> There was no single Irish king uniting his people from a capital city. In fact, there were no cities at all in Ireland during Brigit’s lifetime.

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<sup>66</sup> Chadwick, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Scherman, 97.

<sup>68</sup> Peter and Fiona Somerset Fry, *A History of Ireland* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 29.

<sup>69</sup> Byrne, 49.



**Figure 2: Ireland's Five Provinces as shown in Cahill, 111.**

“Each tribe,” wrote Irish historians Peter and Fiona Fry, “retained its integrity and individuality.”<sup>70</sup> Each *tuath* chose a king to represent them, but in most cases the king was merely a figurehead with little influence in the construction of law. The king did not even have control over the selection of his successor. The law of succession in Ireland was not primogeniture, and any male relative was an eligible candidate for succession.<sup>71</sup> They lived their lives in accordance with the Brehon laws, which specifically outlined proper conduct. Members of *aes dana* upheld these laws and some, like the druids, acted as judges throughout the five provinces. For the most part, the Irish discouraged traveling outside the boundaries of one’s *tuath*.<sup>72</sup> Each person was expected to contribute to society and kingdoms depended on their

<sup>70</sup> Fry and Somerset Fry, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Hughes *A History*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Scherman, 32.

participation for their survival. Therefore, social order was derived from the bond of kinship and culture rather than a centralized government.

Ireland's decentralized society inhibited the Church's organization and structure as well. Norman Davies, author of *The Isles: A History*, wrote, "Given a fragmented tribal society, with numerous rival power centres and few towns, the standard diocesan organization of the Roman Church was slow to take root."<sup>73</sup> Their independent monasteries, which included over twenty houses, rallied around their abbots and abbesses, giving the ordained bishop little recognition. Ireland's monastic communities plainly contradicted the strict hierarchy of the Roman Church. From his residence in Rome, the Pope relied on the fact he could maintain contact with all of Christendom through his network of archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons. Without cities and powerful urban centers, Ireland's dioceses had no way to support such an expansive and interconnected ecclesiastical network. To keep informed about the Irish Church's status, the Pope had to contact each abbot and abbess that governed a Christian community.<sup>74</sup> And although Patrick was familiar with these unique aspects of Ireland and its people, he insisted on building an Irish Church in the style of the Roman episcopate system.

In *A History of Ireland*, historians Peter and Fiona Fry suggested that Patrick "spent several years establishing his mission and setting up an organization in Ulster on the Roman model."<sup>75</sup> In the absence of a supreme capital, he aligned himself with

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<sup>73</sup> Davies, 178.

<sup>74</sup> Fry and Somerset Fry, 35

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.,34.

the rising dynasty in the north. By the time Patrick returned to the home of his kidnapers, the Uí Néill family had forced its adversary, the Uliad tribe, to the far northeast corner of Ireland. Through control of the midlands, the ambitious Uí Néill orchestrated a violent bid for recognition as Ireland's supreme rulers.<sup>76</sup> They established Emaín Macha as the capital of their kingdom and professed to be the sole residents of Ireland's coveted and symbolic site of national prestige, Tara. Not surprisingly, Patrick's famous Armagh was set up in 444, not one mile away from Emaín Macha, where he hoped to build a new, more centralized Ireland<sup>77</sup>

The Roman Catholic tradition was expected to spread from this potential political center, but to no avail. In 450 just six years after Patrick founded Armagh, the Uí Néill's rivals in Connacht destroyed Emaín Macha.<sup>78</sup> The *Tain Bo Culainge*, written in 7<sup>th</sup> century, related the enthralling encounter between Ulster's warrior, Cuchulain, and Medb, Queen of Connacht, to reveal how enduring the grudge was between Ulster and Ireland's other provinces. Uí Néill warriors and the Ulster province also faced rebellion and attacks from the southern kingdoms at Leinster and Munster.<sup>79</sup> Territory was not the only source of conflict between Ireland's provinces. Societies in the northeast and in the south functioned under slightly different parameters. The northeast's clan system revolved around a hierarchy of power based on the property ownership. In contrast southern provinces, especially Munster, relied

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<sup>76</sup> Morris, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Bryne, 44.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>79</sup> Fry and Somerset Fry, 17.

longer on their Celtic traditions and the control of artisans, like priests and druids. Eventually the north found secular laws just as binding as religious restraints.<sup>80</sup>

Patrick and Brigit's differences were mirrored in this division of social systems. Patterson briefly remarked on this tension between the northern and southern provinces and how it affected the spread of Christianity in his book *Cattle Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland*. When Patrick established Armagh near Emaín Macha, he was announcing to Ireland his "Christian mission [which] had much to say about war, politics, law and order."<sup>81</sup> Patrick challenged kings, threatened soldiers, and even had a hand in the compilation of Irish law in the *Senchas Már*. Brigit's Christianity, however, was based on Ireland's artisan system where the "legendary founder-saints of the south (including Leinster) were predominantly natives, and generally associated with skills and learning."<sup>82</sup> Patterson indicated other famous saints like Ciaran the carpenter and Brendan the Navigator, who were both renowned for their specific skills and not necessarily their political activities.

On occasions when Brigit did contribute to political events, she was very protective of her parishioners and of Ireland. Her blessings led the king of Leinster against the power hungry Uí Néill clan in over thirty victorious battles. Even though her biographers never insinuated that poor relations existed between Brigit and holy communities to the north, many of her travels took her through Meath, the

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<sup>80</sup> Patterson, 45-46.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 46.

controversial territory in the battles between Ulster and Leinster. The protective blessings she bestowed on the king of Leinster also extended to campaigns outside Ireland.<sup>83</sup> The Leinster king forged nine successful campaigns in England; the Leinster tradition recorded these battles during the rule of King Illan (r.495-512).<sup>84</sup> Her later biographies emphasized Brigit's loyalty to her kin. In the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, two blind Britons and their leprous servant approached Brigit, hoping for a miraculous cure. When she promised them only a meal and the prayers of well-being, they chastised her. Irish historian and linguistic, Sean Connolly translated the text concerning this humbling moment for Brigit. "They [the Britons] said indignantly, 'You heal your own folk's sick, but us you don't bother to heal for Christ because we're strangers.'" <sup>85</sup> Brigit did heal the Britons, but it was apparent that her loyalties were firmly with the Irish.

Brigit was born four years after Connaught's warriors destroyed Emaín Macha. From the looks of her political contributions, though, the struggles with the Uí Néill had not collapsed with the capital. Frances J. Byrne, professor of early Irish history at the University College in Dublin, suggested that Emaín Macha "may still have been the most important political centre."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the Uí Néill of the late fifth and early sixth centuries had yet to earn the allegiance of a united Ireland. In addition to the independent social structure of the *tuath* and the absence of urban centers, Ireland's own geography hindered any real efforts towards unification. In her

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<sup>83</sup> Connolly, 41.

<sup>84</sup> Morris, 125.

<sup>85</sup> Connolly, 19.

<sup>86</sup> Byrne, 45.

book, *Isle of the Saints*, Celtic historian, Lisa Bitel, concluded, “Since the topography of Ireland compartmentalized the political landscape with hills and drumlins, bogs, rivers, and forests, the land itself helped prevent any sort of national authority.”<sup>87</sup> All these Irish peculiarities - their traditions, their society, and even their geography - were daunting obstacles in the path of Patrick’s mission to establish a diocese in the Roman tradition.

When Patrick died in 461, the foundation of his episcopate Church was unstable. The Patrician Church required certain political structures, including cities and centralized governments, which were impossible for the rustic Irish to develop at that time. Patrick, and his Roman traditions, thrived in and around capitals of power and without them, the Roman Church and its bishops floundered in Ireland’s rural society. Some historians, like Peter and Fiona Fry, suggested that Patrick initiated Irish monasticism, but upon further investigation, this does not seem likely.<sup>88</sup> In his work, *Saint Patrick’s World*, Irish historian and archaeology student, Liam de Paor, doubted that Patrick’s churches were anything but Episcopal in nature. He admits Patrick’s evangelistic mission might have founded a few communities, “but we know of no monastic communities which go back to the fifth century.”<sup>89</sup> In contrast, Brigit did not resist Ireland’s decentralized governing style or its natural progression toward independent monastic communities. Kildare, Brigit’s unique double monastery, was founded according to de Paor no later than 500 A.D., thirty-nine years after Patrick’s

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<sup>87</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, *Isle of Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 146.

<sup>88</sup> Fry and Somerset Fry, 34.

<sup>89</sup> de Paor, 43,

death.<sup>90</sup> *The Lives of the Irish Saints* by D.P. Conyngham dated Kildare to 487 A.D., but the author gives no evidence for this claim.<sup>91</sup>

With Kildare's founding, Brigit set in motion Celtic Christianity and monastic legacy. As one of the first monasteries in Ireland, Kildare began as a humble community. When monks and nuns were not working or praying in the monastery's small church, they dwelled in simple wooden huts, or *cellae*. The settlements were usually enclosed, providing some protection for the monks or nuns as they prayed and worked. If the monastery was prospering, as many Irish communities were, it might build a refectory, guesthouse, and school inside its walls. Unlike the strict monastic orders, which originated on the Continent, Irish monasteries were not exclusive to just clerics.<sup>92</sup>

In 530, when Saint Benedictine recorded his monastic rules, the ideal religious community was composed of celibate monks devoted to labor and prayer. The Irish parish, known as a *paruchia*, however, was a diverse collection of people. Besides the bishops, abbots, and ascetics, the monastery also depended upon a variety of laymen. Cooks and stewards probably assisted the holy men in their daily tasks. *Paruchiae* also looked to monks referred to as *manaig* for assistance. These Irish monks were married laymen, who in return for labor and taxes received many benefits. According to ecclesiastic legislation, Kathleen Hughes explained that the *manaig* were entitled to "the spiritual ministrations of the church and a clerical

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<sup>90</sup> de Paor., 43.

<sup>91</sup> Conyngham, 161

<sup>92</sup> Máire de Paor and Liam de Paor, *Early Christianity Ireland* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), 53.



bequeathed to one person, the abbot, and was passed down through his family line. This system, called the *coarbship*, was unique to Celtic Churches and helped explain the abbots' substantial authority and other peculiarities such as why the abbacy was attainable to the *manaig*.<sup>94</sup> Ludwig Bieler emphasized in *Ireland: The Harbinger of the Middle Ages* that, "it was in the nature of early Irish society that a monastery should have close links with its founder's family and with the tribal kingdom (tuath) in which it was situated."<sup>95</sup> Bishops were stripped of the authority given to them by Rome, and replaced by the more territorial Irish abbots and abbesses. Abbots even took control of Armagh, where Patrick and bishops had once reigned supreme.<sup>96</sup>

It was as Kildare's abbess that Brigit ascended to the ranks of Ireland's most popular and respected religious advocates. She is only second to Saint Patrick, himself, and stands as one of the three most renowned Saints of Irish Christianity. The *Liber Angeli*, the *Book of the Angel*, reassured Ireland that their patron Brigit would forever take care of them. These writings convey only the most congenial relations between Brigit's Kildare and Patrick's Armagh.<sup>97</sup> In truth, Irish monasticism suffered from its fierce and competitive environment. With bishops so weak, each abbot and abbess greedily expanded their monastic community, eager to watch it grow and take other *paruchia*e into its territory. At the head of this competition resided the grand houses of Kildare and Armagh, a brutal battle that

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<sup>94</sup> Chadwick, 63.

<sup>95</sup> Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland: The Harbinger of the Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 48.

<sup>96</sup> An t-Athair Tomás O Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity: 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries," *The Course of Irish History*, Ed. T.W. Moddy and F.X. Martin (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1967), 65-66.

<sup>97</sup> Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78.

would come to represent Celtic Christianity's stubborn stance against Roman Catholicism.

### ***Saint Brigit the Woman***

As Patrick's competitor, Brigit displayed one controversial attribute that made her role in Celtic Christianity complex. Brigit's markedly independent and competent nature was incongruous with the inflexible gender roles in the average medieval society. In his popular book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill marveled at Ireland's powerful abbesses. Even though the Roman Church was irritated with Ireland's rejection of the episcopate system, Ireland's powerful abbesses were "a development that would make any self-respecting Roman's blood run cold."<sup>98</sup> Yet despite Brigit's femininity, Ireland still favored her as a patron of the Christian Church.

Brigit stands out as an influential and ambitious woman. Her gender, like her connection to the land and animals, served to secure her firmly to the traditions of Ireland. Complex and paradoxical views of women are characteristic of Irish thought. Even as Irish law tracts struggled to define women and their place in society, Irish mythology painted inspiring pictures of headstrong queens and female warriors. Historian, Lisa Bitel, observed that in the Irishman's opinion, "the behavior of

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 173.

woman, and thus descriptions of it, defied any kind of definition,” which left questions as to just how free a woman, such as Brigit, was in Irish society.<sup>99</sup>

In her book *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*, Bitel investigated Ireland’s view of its own enigmatic women. As children, both boys and girls were assigned the same honor price, or legal value. It was equivalent to that of an adult cleric, obviously marking them valued members of society. Once adults, boys were accepted into the ranks of their fathers and their honor price increased accordingly. Society only allocated girls half the honor price of their fathers and brothers. Bitel argued that if it were that easy to dismiss women as a “submale other” then the Irish literati would not have found women so perplexing. She claimed, “for the writers of gnomic tracts, women could be defined only by their multiplicity and ultimate undefinability.”<sup>100</sup>

Irish law tracts and mythology attempted to define women by associating them with members of society they were able to understand. They were rarely considered in the eyes of the judicial system. If somehow they were unavoidably involved in a legal battle, their rights were equivalent to those of the insane, another member of society that appeared inexplicable. To the Irish *mruifher*, women could be nothing more than a sign of wealth; the *cumal*, or slave woman, was worth as much as six heifers, and therefore a useful measure of prosperity. When Irish law defined marital relationships between men and women, it recognized no less than nine

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<sup>99</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

categories of unions.<sup>101</sup> Each one involved a different description of women, again illustrating the complexity of a woman's role in Ireland. A woman's place in Irish society was multifaceted and difficult to define by the law's objective eye.

Unlike law, mythology enabled a culture to create fantastical explanations for the inexplicable. As Robert Jerome Smith remarked in his essay, "Irish Mythology," myth allowed "men to resolve contradictions that they [found] either in the real world or in their explanations of that world."<sup>102</sup> Women in these epics took forms that were familiar to the Irish, and in many cases were depicted as animals or warriors. Ireland was enamored with the concept of the Otherworld, and its women often visited the Irish in the disguise of animals, especially birds like the raven and crane. These incidents of shape-shifting suggested that women were never far from a primitive or animalistic state, which the Irishman felt he could easily comprehend. Besides animals, the bellicose Irish also believed that they understood the nature of warriors, and so they portrayed many women in this incongruous role. Connaught's Queen Medb has already been mentioned in this context. Other noteworthy Irish warrior women, like Scathach, were hailed for their wisdom and lethal techniques, which were passed on to young warriors.<sup>103</sup> At the head of Kildare's mighty following, Brigit is sometimes portrayed as Christian Ireland's representative warrior queen and mentor.

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<sup>101</sup> Patterson, 296.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Scherman, 246

Above warrior queen or wise mentor, Brigit's feminine power alluded to a more divine origin. Her name closely resembled that of the goddess, *Bríg*, who was related to the great judge *Sencha*, but her main link to pagan deities lies in a trinity of goddesses known as the Brigid sisters. These sisters were the daughters of the Irish god of goodness, *Dagdae*, and each displayed amazing abilities. One was a blacksmith and talented crafter; another sister was skilled in the art of healing. The final sister was instilled with the gift of poetry and wisdom.<sup>104</sup> Aspects of these three clever goddesses appeared in Saint Brigit's extensive list of miracles. At the request of Bishop Mel, Brigit once fused together the broken pieces of what her *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* identified as "the septiform cup", a "precious vessel of marvelous craftsmanship."<sup>105</sup> On another occasion, she divided a dish into exact thirds for three peasants. As a healer, Brigit proved herself many times as pilgrims made their way to her doorstep in search for miraculous cures. Brigit was intuitively wise, frequently acting as judge, augur, and seer for Ireland's bishops and monks.<sup>106</sup>

These intimations of paganism in Brigit's life were mostly derived from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century hagiographers who wrote the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* and *Bethu Brigte*. In "Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition," Lisa Bitel states, "Christian exemplars alone simply could not articulate a woman's territorial control within the tribal politics of Ireland. Without a body they

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<sup>104</sup> Bitel "St. Brigit of Ireland."

<sup>105</sup> Connolly, 20.

<sup>106</sup> Bitel "St. Brigit of Ireland."

had not saint, unless that saint was a goddess.”<sup>107</sup> Casting her miracles in this manner and alluding to goddesses granted Brigit a respectable and assertive place of authority among the Irish that the common woman lacked.

When 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historians examined Irish mythology, with its epic tales of Queen Medb and warrior women, they assumed that Ireland was a matriarchal society of respected, independent women.<sup>108</sup> The notion that women ruled Ireland is unlikely, although historians, like Nerys Thomas Patterson, are confident that Irish women were not without some independence. Patterson stated “Irish tradition itself from all periods gives evidence of the participating of women of the elite in politics and warfare.”<sup>109</sup> In her book, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 480-1100*, Christina Harrington warned against the popular assumption that Ireland was a matriarchal society. After reviewing 8<sup>th</sup> century legal tracts, like Adomain’s Law, she reminded her readers that they “famously alleged that the pre-Christian status of women had been deplorable and owed it to Christianity to bring women out of the gutter.”<sup>110</sup> In Harrington’s opinion, and many other scholars concur, Christianity’s inclusive doctrine and desperate need for followers spurred a revolution in women’s rights across the world, including Ireland.

Women in early Christian Ireland found great liberty in taking the veil and becoming a bride of Christ. In early Ireland, entering a monastery or joining a Christian mission was a very brave statement of independence. Once a girl joined a

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<sup>107</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, “Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess Origins of the Brigidine Tradition”. *TextualPractices* (2002), 225.

<sup>108</sup> Harrington, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Patterson, 25.

<sup>110</sup> Harrington, 6.

community of nuns, she was suddenly free to travel and manage lands. She could give testimonies in court trials and even give advice regarding political treaties. Some would follow in the line of Brigit and work miracles of their own.<sup>111</sup> Choosing this lot in life was not always easy. To their families, nuns appeared to be opting out of society and the all important *tuath*, which relied on marriages and other alliances.

Brigit's own decision to take the veil was marked by social criticisms. Days before she took her vows, her father and other male relatives selected a suitor for Brigit. Her beauty was well known, her sweetness and modesty admired, but when her father's choice arrived she diverted him to another woman. Angry at her refusal, one of her brothers sneered, "The beautiful eye in your head will be betrothed to a man whether you like it or not."<sup>112</sup> Brigit's response was passionate, if somewhat impetuous; she jabbed her own eye out, destroying what stood in the way of her ambitions. Her risky sacrifice got her father's attention and he abandoned his betrothal schemes.

When Brigit took her vows her beauty and eye were restored, but she became more than just another pretty girl. Before emerging as a compelling abbess, Brigit was mistaken for a bishop and the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Saint Ibar, the most vociferous of Saint Patrick resistors, once dreamed of a woman in white among a group of bishops. A few days later, at a synod, he saw Brigit and exclaimed, "Behold the Blessed Virgin whom I saw in my vision!"<sup>113</sup> This was the likely origin for

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<sup>111</sup> Bitel *Land of Women*, 168.

<sup>112</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 144.

<sup>113</sup> Conyngham, 145.

Brigit's designation as Mary of the Gaels. While taking her vows, she was accidentally ordained as a bishop. Her later *Lives* tell a story of Bishop Mel, who when "intoxicated by the graces of God," ordained Brigit as one of his own. Her ordainment seemed to be the will of God, and as Bishop Mel stated, "only this virgin in the whole of Ireland [would] hold the Episcopal ordination."<sup>114</sup> These fantastic titles of Mary of the Gaels and bishop were her biographers' attempt to lend Brigit's femininity some legitimacy in the language of the Church.

Christianity clearly expanded the horizons of Irish women, but Saint Brigit had an independent streak that was unique compared to other Christian women. Her rumored status as Bishop or Virgin Mary aside, Brigit the nun and Irish abbess was still exceptional. Harrington compared the life of Brigit to other accounts of female saints and determined that "the Irish did not get their blueprint of female sainthood from any of the popular models."<sup>115</sup> Sulpicious' *Vita Martini*, which historians believe was the primary influence on Irish hagiography, held to a strict principal of separation between nuns and monks. Martin also did not have the same appreciation for peripatetic missions, which involved extensive traveling.

Saint Patrick's own writings welcome holy virgins and their contributions to Christian works, but he could not have imagined a woman ever rising to the ranks of bishop or head of the Irish Church. As a student of the Roman Church, his ideal holy virgin was probably not someone as innovative and independent as Brigit. They made fine martyrs, but church leaders they were not. Brigit's role in Ireland was not

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<sup>114</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 145.

<sup>115</sup> Harrington, 60.

restricted by her gender because as Bitel said, female saints like Brigit were “heroes first, saints second, and women last.”<sup>116</sup> In Cogitosus’ *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, there is no hint of sexism or condescension toward women, an absence that is especially noteworthy in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Cogitosus held the virtuous abbess above all others, including Patrick, as the head of the Irish Church.

With a reputation that combined one part bishop, one part abbess, and a dash of goddess, Saint Brigit appealed to a wide variety of people. As a bishop, Brigit assumed religious authority according to Rome’s own standards. Her blessed title of Mary of the Gael exalted her to an almost untouchable status in Christianity that demanded respect. Brigit the abbess, however, clearly sympathized with the common Irishmen in the *tuatha* and their peculiar approach to Christianity. She could travel further than any bishop and the expansion of her Celtic *paruchia* was due to her own evangelistic hand.<sup>117</sup> Finally, Brigit the goddess protected Ireland’s appreciation and nostalgia for its mystical and pagan ancestry. The air of mythology that surrounded this devout saint also helped secure Brigit’s name in history. Even if Saint Patrick and his northern parish, Armagh, should supercede Brigit, she would still maintain her unbreakable connection to Ireland.

From the accounts of Cogitosus, a 7<sup>th</sup> century monk in Kildare, Brigit’s bond with Ireland was very strong even a hundred years after her death. After Brigit died in 525 AD, the jurisdiction of Kildare stretched from one coast to another. Cogitosus boasted, “This city is a great metropolis within whose borders, which St. Brigit

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<sup>116</sup> Bitel *Land of Women*, 195.

<sup>117</sup> Bitel “St. Brigit of Ireland.”

marked out as a clear boundary, no earthly enemy nor hostile attack is to be feared.”<sup>118</sup> Crowds of countless pilgrims arrived at the monastery, and Kildare housed everything from fugitives to the King’s own treasures all on the grounds of Saint Brigit’s blessed reputation. Kildare’s grand *paruchia* threatened the superiority of Armagh, the Ui Neill’s Patrician *paruchia*. Lisa Bitel, in her lecture “Saint Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess”, discussed this increasing tension which spread through monastic communities. Churches had to decide between Patrick and Brigit’s *paruchiae*, and whether “to throw their allegiance with Kildare, whose saint had supposedly founded their churches and whose holiness now guarded them from harm, or to accept the political patronage of the Uí Néill and their own patron, Patrick.”<sup>119</sup>

The Celtic Church’s monks and nuns also had to choose between Ireland’s two premiere religious leaders. The generation of holy men and women that followed Brigit looked to her for guidance and inspiration. Her amazing monastery attracted curious holy men and women hoping to learn how to continue the Irish Church in her tradition. Finian, who contributed to Ireland’s penitential rules and founded the Clonard monastery, came to Brigit to learn from the most experienced abbess in Ireland.<sup>120</sup> Brendan the Navigator was always amazed by Brigit’s unwavering focus on God and in some versions of his saga, she was the first person he visited upon returning home from his famous sea voyage. Brigit foretold the birth of Columcille,

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<sup>118</sup> O’Loughlin and Davies, 138.

<sup>119</sup> Bitel “St. Brigit of Ireland.”

<sup>120</sup> Scherman , 115.

one of Celtic Christianity's most devoted followers and champions. He eschewed his royal Ui Neill lineage for the abbacy of Iona. In the tradition of Ireland's *filid*, Columcille addressed Brigit in one of his many poems as "the glorious virgin slave, patroness of Ireland, and foundress of female religious life in the island of Saint's."<sup>121</sup> She was a pillar in the Irish Church, which when it felt threatened always returned to her for protection and comfort.

### **The Last Days of Celtic Christianity and the Resurrection of Saint Brigit**

The seventh century was a tumultuous one for the Irish Church. The tensions once centered on competing monasteries, such as Kildare and Armagh, had spread to include the two most potent forces in Western Christianity. As Saint Columcille's missionaries expanded down from Iona and into Northumbria, Rome's rejuvenated evangelists welcomed Anglo-Saxon kingdoms back into Christendom from the south. The Roman Church, with a firm foothold in Britain, no longer had to tolerate the unconventional habits of the Celtic Church.

In the two centuries following Saint Patrick's death, the monasteries of Brigit's era had usurped many of the Bishop's Roman foundations. With Rome's reappearance in Britain, and the subsequent change in church dynamics, Patrick's episcopate foundations were reawakened. Roman Church sympathizers, also known as the *Romani*, materialized in Ireland and began to preach Armagh's superiority. In her introduction to *A History of Medieval Ireland*, Kathleen Hughes made it clear that

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<sup>121</sup> Conyngham, 247.

Armagh was eager to accept Rome as “the supreme ecclesiastical court of appeal.”<sup>122</sup> Once it was recognized as Rome’s Irish headquarters, it could expect that unprecedented political matters “would be referred to the successors of Patrick at Armagh”<sup>123</sup> and not to the Celtic center, Kildare. The organized and urban Roman Catholics quickly took notice of Ireland’s religious oddities. Their Easter holy day, their tonsure, and the customs of their monasteries immediately became circumspect. All of these peculiarities that had seduced thousands of pagans to Christianity were now smeared with charges of heresy.

In the midst of this growing tension, one of Kildare’s monks challenged Armagh and the *Romani*’s efforts to stamp out Ireland’s native church. In 650, Cogitosus began Ireland’s hagiographic tradition, with the *Vitae Sanctae Brigitae*. The purpose of Brigit’s first biography was to address political concerns of the Church and legitimized Brigit as Kildare’s founder.<sup>124</sup> Cogitosus, at the urging of his brothers, produced an amazing and clever work of propaganda for the sake of the Celtic Church. There were no overt statements against *Romani* opposition; Cogitosus was more subtle than that. Even while he praised Brigit as “the living and most blessed member of the highest head, [who] was able to bring about all that she wished,” he emphasized her humble servitude to the Irish.<sup>125</sup> He took her unique double monastery, Kildare, and erected a city of metropolitan proportions protecting

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<sup>122</sup> Hughes *A History*, 17.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> O’Loughlin and Davies, 27.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

more treasures and pilgrims than most communities, perhaps even Armagh, could have dreamed.

In fact, Patrick and Armagh were never mentioned in his account of Brigit's life. Cogitosus' strategy of attack was ingenious. He replaced Patrick with a bishop that Brigit, herself, had chosen. Cogitosus described Brigit's partner, Bishop Conlaeth, as "the anointed head and principal of all the bishops."<sup>126</sup> Conlaeth, an Irish blacksmith, had replaced the grandson of a British priest and student of Gaul's proud theologians. Although bishops were practically unnecessary to the Irish, all of Ireland adored the art of metalwork. Their smiths produced amazing works of art based on techniques dating from prehistoric times.<sup>127</sup> After undercutting Patrick, Cogitosus only twisted the knife further. He made it clear that the whole of Ireland had "always been ruled over by the Archbishop of the Irish and by the abbess...by a blessed line of succession and perpetual rites."<sup>128</sup> In just a few sentences, Cogitosus erased the existence of the Roman invader from Britain, and secured Ireland for Brigit.

Unfortunately, it was not so easy to claim victory in 664 at the Synod of Whitby. King Oswy's ruling in the council trumpeted Celtic Christianity's last days as its own unique Church. Ironically, Oswy was one of Ireland's most vocal supporters. His kingdom, Bernicia, in Northumbria had had close ties to Irish monks and Celtic Christianity since its exiled princes, Oswald and Oswin, were raised in

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<sup>126</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 123.

<sup>127</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, "The Art of Prehistoric and early Christian Ireland," *Irish History and Culture*, Ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), 49.

<sup>128</sup> O'Loughlin and Davies, 123.

Iona decades earlier. When Oswald reclaimed the crown, he also welcomed his Irish mentors into his primarily pagan kingdom. Saint Aidan, the founder of Lindisfarne, supported Oswald, and later his brother, throughout their bloody battles against Penda, pagan king of Mercia.<sup>129</sup> Oswy defeated Penda in 655 and, according to historian M. Deanesly, “Celtic Christianity spread, under the rule of Oswy, not only over Northumbria, but over Penda’s old kingdom of Mercia.”<sup>130</sup> With Roman and Celtic Churches prospering in Britain, Rome and Ireland could no longer ignore their religious differences.

Oswy arranged the Synod at Whitby between the Celtic and Roman Churches as a way to settle a religious difference between him and his Roman Catholic wife, concerning the correct date for the Easter celebration. Ireland’s Easter day had not changed since Saint Patrick. In 447, Roman bishops, through new calculations, had modified Easter’s exact date. Later, Victorius of Aquitaine had devised a more accurate calendar, but the Irish never chose to adopt it, and by 457, Rome had abandoned the old system altogether. Later when Columcille converted Scotland, he passed on Ireland’s outdated church calendar.<sup>131</sup> At the synod, their refusal to implement Rome’s updated system was grounds for heresy.

The monk’s tonsure also became a matter of contention at the council. Like their calendar, the Irish monk’s characteristic haircut was conservative and dated. Their heads were shaved from ear to ear, leaving the rest of their hair growing long in

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<sup>129</sup> P. Hughes, 102.

<sup>130</sup> M. Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church: 590-1500* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1950), 47.

<sup>131</sup> P. Hughes, 103.

the back. Roman monks, on the other hand, were already sporting their recognizable shaved crowns. At Whitby, there were some accusations that the Irish tonsure was a throw back to a first century magician, Simon Magus, and therefore also heretical.<sup>132</sup>

These two discrepancies were just the most noticeable variations between the two Churches. Irish abbots and abbesses still ran their monasteries without the input of bishops. There were even rumors that Irish Christians had returned again to Pelagianism. “These details,” according to Geoffrey Ashe, “were mere rallying-points in more profound conflict of will, temperament, and philosophy.”<sup>133</sup> This synod determined how the Christian Church was going to develop in the West. It was either going to follow the Celtic traditions or the Roman Order. Wilfred, the abbot of Ripon and Rome’s speaker, was a clever man. When he proclaimed that Peter himself held the keys to the Roman Church, Iona’s Columcille appeared pagan in comparison. It was a common belief that Saint Peter’s grave was directly under Rome’s Church, and his presence provided a divine connection with God. When Wilfred quoted from the Holy Scriptures, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against, and to thee I will give the keys of my kingdom of heaven,” there was nothing Bishop Colman could say that could have possibly bested such a powerful alliance. Oswry had no choice but to rule in favor of Wilfred and the Roman Order.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Scherman, 168.

<sup>133</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Quest for Arthur’s Britain* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 218.

<sup>134</sup> Scherman, 169.

The Celtic monks, struck down by this disappointing ruling, retreated from Northumbria. To be told that their Christianity, which seemed so natural to them, was heretical and blasphemous could have only come as a shock to the devout Irish. No one appeared more devoted to the spread of Christianity or ascetic living than the Irish monk and nun. Surely, they did not deserve such recriminations. In the *Flowering of Ireland*, Katharine Scherman dramatically mourned Ireland's defeat at Whitby claiming, "With the defection of the Irish after Whitby, a pure and primitive virtue went out of the English Church."<sup>135</sup> A remorseful Saint Colman gathered his followers and exiled himself to Inishbófin, an island off the west coast of Ireland, near Mayo.<sup>136</sup> Other Celtic monks, like Columbanus, set out for the Continent, hoping that a better reception awaited them and their eccentric Christianity.

In 696, thirty-two years after Oswy ruled in favor of the Roman Order, a Synod was convened at Birr in Offaly, Ireland. This synod marked northern Ireland's official acceptance of the Roman Order.<sup>137</sup> Afterwards, Brigit's life and the history of Ireland's church were redefined to complement a Roman Church in Ireland. Although Saint Brigit and Saint Columcille's first *Lives* never mentioned Patrick, Muruichu described him as his spiritual father. Just as Patrick defeated pagans at Tara, Muruichu and his fellow *Romani* had defeated the Irish Church at Whitby and Birr.<sup>138</sup> As for Brigit, she was eternally bound to Saint Patrick in Church manuscripts. The new Roman Order and its Ui Neill allies exhumed her body from

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<sup>135</sup> Scherman, 171.

<sup>136</sup> Chadwick, 128.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>138</sup> Hughes *A History*, 16.

its honorary grave beside Kildare's altar, and she was reburied in Downpatrick, right beside the watchful eye of Patrick and his successors.<sup>139</sup>

The *Liber Angeli*, written around 700 AD, officially ordained Patrick as the patron and founder of the Irish Church.<sup>140</sup> Regarding Patrick's sudden praise, Liam de Paor, in *Saint Patrick's World*, commented, "the primacy of Armagh by eight and ninth centuries required wholesale revisions of the hagiographical tradition so that Patrick's Armagh founding... was placed in superior relationship to the various local founders."<sup>141</sup> He was granted all of Ireland except for Leinster, which remained Brigit's. The hagiography had to be completely changed. Monks now surviving in a Roman Order, fabricated a beautiful relationship of friendship and mutual respect between Brigit and Patrick, despite the fact that Patrick died when Brigit was eleven. The Ulster Annals, recorded after Whitby and Birr, presented three dates for Patrick's death and thus extending his authority into Brigit's world.

Brigit, however, found her way back into the lives of the Irish at the most opportune times. After Cogitosus' *Vita*, her next biographies were written around the ninth century, as Ireland faced an onslaught from the North. The Vikings pillaged through Europe and across the Atlantic, but with their wealthy monasteries, Britain and Ireland suffered the worst of their looting. By 840, all of Ireland's most prestigious monasteries had been burned to the ground and emptied of their treasures until they were mere shells of their former glory.<sup>142</sup> The chaos and horror wrought by

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<sup>139</sup> Bitel "Body of a Saint," 209.

<sup>140</sup> Harrington, 78.

<sup>141</sup> de Paor, 50.

<sup>142</sup> Cahill, 211.

the Norsemen eventually drove the Irish against each other and revived tensions and rivalries that they thought they had under control. In 856, Armagh and Kildare, both in ruin, resorted to violence, sending their monks to battle each other.<sup>143</sup>

Pandemonium erupted in Ireland. Not only were its people defending themselves from invaders, they were killing each other. Brigit reappeared here in the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* and later the *Bethu Brigitte*, but her role was slightly altered from Cogitosus' version of her as the virtuous head of the Irish Church. There was still the rivalry between Brigit and Patrick, but Armagh and Kildare were no longer centers of competition. Later biographers did not even mention Kildare, much less expound on its brilliance and essential function in Irish society. In them, Brigit sought to unify Ireland by her sheer connection to the common Irishman. Her extensive travels were accentuated and her relationship with Ireland's more eccentric traditions, such as its affinity for nature and folklore, became more obvious. As Brigit made her way through Ireland, trekking across vast amounts of territory, she reclaimed each province for the Irish.<sup>144</sup> She returned to them the pride and prestige that the Vikings had ruthlessly stripped away.

By the time Brian Boru defeated the Vikings in 1014, Brigit was a veritable goddess.<sup>145</sup> Not all of her reputation, however, was a product of the Irish. Gerald of Wales, in his 12<sup>th</sup> century exploration of Ireland, was offended when he discovered what he assumed was a pagan ritual being played out in Kildare's monastery. Lisa

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<sup>143</sup> Bitel *Isles of the Saints*, 96.

<sup>144</sup> Bitel "St. Brigit of Ireland."

<sup>145</sup> McCaffrey and Eaton, 239.

Bitel described the suspicious ritual in her article, “The Body of a Saint, the Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition.” When Gerald saw “an ever-burning fire tended by [Brigit’s] nineteen nuns and, each twentieth night, by the saint herself,”<sup>146</sup> the ritual’s resemblance to vestal virgins and pagan rites were striking. Bitel admitted that Gerald was unashamedly condescending toward the barbarian Celts and he may well have exaggerated his accounts to emphasize their uncivilized and pagan appearance. Eventually, in 1220, archbishop Henry de Loudres had the flame put out.<sup>147</sup> Brigit’s pagan reputation was not as easily extinguished and debates as to whether Brigit was a goddess or saint continue to flare up among historians.

To the Irish, Brigit’s goddess persona was a natural development. After the Synod at Whitby, the Irish ignited a passionate interest in their ancient and pagan heritage. Even as Cogitosus was writing the *Vita Brigidae*, monks were recording many of the mythological sagas appreciated to this day. In hopes of preserving Irish culture, Saint Brigit’s ties to Celtic goddesses and Ireland’s ancient lore were cherished along with her devotion to Church and God. The Irish could safely store the customs and legends of their heritage in this fascinating combination of enchanted goddess and praying nun. It did not matter whether there was any proof of her existence or whether they could proudly display her relics. Even as she helped preserve Ireland and its unique approach to life and religion, Ireland returned the favor by ensuring that Brigit would never be forgotten. Her gender guaranteed

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<sup>146</sup> Bitel “Body of a Saint,” 224.

<sup>147</sup> Conyngham , 175.

attention, her bond with the land kept her close to all her admirers, and her divinity kept her alive.

When the Irish used their story telling talents to weave an enthralling and mythical aura around Brigit, they bestowed upon her a wonderful gift. Robert Jerome Smith believed that “the stories that the people of Ireland tell about themselves and their ancestors have their primary value, not in the history they may contain or their literary merit...but rather in their life-bestowing power.”<sup>148</sup> Lisa Bitel was right when she said, “they were not transforming a goddess into a saint. They were casting a saint as a goddess.”<sup>149</sup> As an enchanting nun, Brigit was an amazing synthesis of Irish folklore and Christianity. The poor Irish girl was a stunning success at doing what Rome’s bishops were never able to accomplish. If Patrick had had his way and Ireland had become a mirror of Rome, the island that never ceases to captivate the hearts of the world would have lost some of its charm. Brigit, however, united Ireland and Christianity in a way that sent the Irish soaring, a unique star in Europe’s history.

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<sup>148</sup> Smith, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Bitel “St. Brigit of Ireland.”

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