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### A Tale of Two Brighids

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# **SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL**

This Honors thesis entitled

**“A Tale of Two Brighids”**

written by

**Erin Shirl**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for completion of the  
Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

May 12, 2006

Every year on the seventeenth of March, the world goes wild. Saint Patrick's Day has arrived, and even those who are not descended from the Irish earn an honorary place in the Irish fold. For one twenty-four hour period, everyone who wants to be can be Irish Catholic-- even Protestants. Saint Patrick and the day named for him have become symbols of Ireland and Irish culture to such an extent that sometimes it seems there is little about Ireland that does not relate to Patrick, the shamrock, or the color green. But long before this slave-turned-missionary set foot on the Emerald Isle, Ireland was devoted to another religion, a pagan religion, in which gods and goddesses walked the green hills and brought magic to Eire.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more intriguing figures in this pagan culture was the goddess Brighid, venerated by healers, blacksmiths and scholars. She was a goddess of fire, and her followers kept a perpetual flame burning in her honor. Later, after the Irish had largely converted to Catholicism, another Brighid came to hold great esteem among the people. This Brighid, a humble woman from County Kildare, became so important to the faithful that she remains one of the three patron saints of Ireland. As much mystery surrounds the life of Saint Brighid as once surrounded the myths of the old pagan goddess. The real mystery of Brighid is a tale of two Brighids: the goddess and the saint. So much of the mythical goddess is made manifest in the actual life of St. Brighid that it merits some comparison. The seemingly worldwide appeal of St. Patrick has overshadowed attempts within the scholarly community to delve much into the world of mystery surrounding the life of St. Brighid and the ancient myths of the goddess. The stories of the goddess of

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary pgs. 23-24

legend and the saint of history seem to blend together after the death of St. Brigid, producing tales and traditions associated with an historical Catholic figure that are actually pagan in origin. Among the most striking characteristics shared by the two Brighids are the dates of their major holidays, the rituals associated with the celebration of those holidays, the legends and stories told of them, and the areas over which their followers believed them to hold sway. Before comparing the similarities between the two figures, however, it is necessary to survey of the story of the goddess and the history of the saint.

### **Brigid as Goddess**

There is no exact date for the genesis of Brigid-worship amongst the Celtic people. She most likely originated on the Continent long before the Celts migrated to the British Isles, though at that time she was not known as Brigid. Over the centuries, as the Celts came into contact with other peoples and their religions, she evolved, taking on new attributes. By the 500's BCE, when the Gaelic Celts began to colonize Ireland, a more specific concept of this goddess must have emerged, because other conceptualizations of Brigid can be found in the religious practices of the Celts on the Continent, such as the Celtic people of Gaul, and the Celts of Ireland's neighboring islands, such as the Welsh, the Scots, and the Britons.

In his writings on the Gallic people from the late first century BCE, Julius Caesar names as one of the major Gallic deities the goddess Minerva Belisama. Though Caesar may have thought of this tribal Minerva as a more primitive form of the Roman goddess of the same name, his description of her, combined with the writings of Solinus in the third century BCE, describe a goddess more closely aligned with the insular Brigid than

with the Roman Minerva.<sup>2</sup> Based on the combined accounts of Caesar and Solinus, the Gallic Minerva Belisama was a patroness of arts, crafts and healing whose sanctuaries usually maintained a perpetual fire, hence her epitaph "Belisama," which means "Most Brilliant."<sup>3</sup> In these qualities, this continental goddess maintains far more similarities with Ireland's Brighid than with Rome's Minerva, for the Irish glorified Brighid as a patroness of poetry, the arts, education, healing, the easing of women's pain during childbirth, and smithcraft.

Linguistically, it is far easier to see the interrelated aspects of the island versions of Brighid. She was worshipped as Brigantia in Britain, Brigindu in Wales, Bride in Scotland, and Brighid in Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Brigantia, the protector goddess of the Brigantes, watched over the seasons, particularly spring, and women in childbirth. She was reputedly weaned on the milk of a supernatural cow, white with red ears, who came from the mystical Otherworld.<sup>5</sup> In the late second century the Brigantes came to associate her with victory and paid special honor to her during the 150-year period in which they resisted Roman rule.<sup>6</sup> To the Scottish Celts, Bride embodied the beginning of spring, and it was this goddess who ended the cruel winter brought by the aging crone, Calleiach.<sup>7</sup> All these incarnations of Brighid share a connection to fire, generally through the way their followers worship her.

To understand the mythical history of the goddess Brighid, it is necessary to have at least minimal knowledge of the Irish myth cycles, which are complex at best.

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<sup>2</sup> Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mysteries* (London: Hamlyn, 1973), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> MacCana 35.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Russell Coulter and Patricia Turner, eds. *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities* (London: McFarland & Co, 2000), 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Hallam, ed. *Gods and Goddesses* (New York: MacMillan, 1996), 149.

<sup>7</sup> Coulter and Turner, eds. 107.

According to tradition, the Irish people are the descendants of the sons of Mil, who survived the Great Flood and traveled to Ireland from Spain.<sup>8</sup> Once there, they encountered a people much taller in stature and much more skilled in craft than themselves. These giants they called the Tuatha de Danann, or the People of the Goddess Danu<sup>9</sup>. The sons of Mil deposed the Tuatha de, who moved underground to rule the Irish Otherworld, or *Sidhe*.<sup>10</sup> It is from the Tuatha de Danann that Brighid comes. The different myth cycles of Ireland, once told as oral tradition and later recorded by early Irish poets, tell long tales of the deeds of the Tuatha de and their battles against the first inhabitants of the island.

The Tuatha de Danann supplanted two other groups of people when they invaded Ireland. According to the Irish *Book of Invasions*, the very first invaders of the island were known as the Fir Bholg,<sup>11</sup> whom the Tuatha de defeated at the battle of Magh Tuiredh. The Fir Bholg went into exile, but not without significant loss to the Tuatha de. The Tuathan king Nuadu, wielder of a mythical sword that none could escape, lost his hand in the battle. The law of the Tuatha de specified that no disfigured man could rule as king, and so temporary rule passed to a young half-breed, Bres.<sup>12</sup> This interim king was the son of a Tuathan mother, but his father was of the second race of invaders, the Fomorians.<sup>13</sup> The Fomorians<sup>14</sup> are not treated kindly in the Irish myth cycles. They are described as a demonic people of terrifying visage, a race of Cyclopes that challenged the rule of the Tuatha de. Bres temporarily ascended to the throne of the Tuatha, but he ruled

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 80.

<sup>9</sup> See glossary pg. 25-26

<sup>10</sup> John Sharkey, *Celtic Mysteries* (New York: Crossroads, 1975) 6.

<sup>11</sup> See glossary pg. 23

<sup>12</sup> Miranda Jane Green, *Celtic Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993) 18.

<sup>13</sup> Coulter and Turner, eds. 107.

<sup>14</sup> See glossary pg. 24

as an Irish version of Ebenezer Scrooge. His tight-fisted rule soon resulted in rebellion, but not before he took a wife: the goddess Brighid.

After the arrival of the Gaels (sons of Mil),<sup>15</sup> the Tuatha de Danann relinquished their physical rule over Ireland in favor of a more metaphysical authority over the Otherworld. The sons of Mil worshiped the most prominent Tuathan figures as gods and infused the stories of the Tuatha de with the deities they transplanted from the continent. Brighid is one of these transplants, worked into the myth cycles as the daughter of the high king and father of the Tuatha de, the Daghdha.<sup>16</sup> Brighid resulted from a sexual encounter between the rather sexually insatiable Daghdha and the Celtic war goddess, the Morrigan.<sup>17</sup> She married the half-Fomorian, Bres, by whom she had one son, Ruadan, who suffered a tragic end after attempting to spy on the Tuathan blacksmith, Goibhnu. Brighid's subsequent mourning was said to be the first keening wail heard in Ireland.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this tragic innovation, Irish myth also reports that Brighid invented whistling, which she used to call her friends to her.<sup>19</sup>

Because the myth cycles are based on oral tradition, they are not lacking in discrepancies. In some legends, Brighid appears as three goddesses. The three goddesses were sisters, all offspring of the Daghdha and the Morrigan, and each had her own particular area of expertise. The first governed poetry and learning, the second functioned as a goddess of healing, and the third ruled over smithcraft. From these three eventually evolved a single goddess whose followers could pray to her for all these things.<sup>20</sup> A tri-

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<sup>15</sup> See glossary pg. 24

<sup>16</sup> See glossary pg. 23

<sup>17</sup> See glossary pg. 25

<sup>18</sup> J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (London: Constable Press, 1911), 58.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Monaghan, *Goddesses and Heroines* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1997), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Roy Willis, ed. *World Mythology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 186.

partite goddess is not unusual to the Celtic pagan religion, where the triple goddess appears almost as frequently as a single embodiment of a deity. Brigid's mother, the Morrigan, provides an excellent example. Some accounts separate the Morrigan into three parts herself, each identified by a particular animal whose form she chose to take, while others portray her as one-third of a war goddess triad comprised of the Morrigan, Badb, and Macha.<sup>21</sup> Unusually, the triple Brigid remains young in each incarnation, whereas in other triads, the goddesses separate by age. Each goddess in this triple formation generally appears as maiden, bride or crone, but the three Brighids do not display these various manifestations. This distinction signifies that the triple Brigid represented something quite different from these other triads. In her capacity as the honored goddess of spring, Brigid retained her youth.

In spite of the differences found in the myth cycles, all accounts of Brigid place her as the goddess of poetry and learning, healing, smithcraft, and the home. Cormac's Glossary, written in the 900's CE, reports that Brigid was quite adept at *filidhecht*, which roughly translates as poetry and general learning.<sup>22</sup> In accordance with this skill, the Irish *filidh*, or poet-scholar, worshipped her. The poet in early Irish society was well-respected, revered for his learning and literacy. This idea is reflected in the Irish myth cycles, where poets wielded power even over the gods. In one such instance, the chief poet of the Tuatha de, Cairbe, writes poetry so polemic about the miserly Bres that the king's face erupts in boils.<sup>23</sup> Poets often invoked Brigid at the beginning of their writings. Brigid, however, did not only appeal to the upper tiers of early Irish society. The sick offered prayers and supplication to her for healing, the smith worshipped her as patroness of art

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<sup>21</sup> Sharkey 7.

<sup>22</sup> MacCana 34.

<sup>23</sup> Coulter and Turner, eds. 107.



and smithcraft, and women cried out to her to protect and comfort them in childbirth. Her multi-faceted nature made Brighid an important goddess to all Irish people, regardless of social station or gender.

The most important day for Brighid's devotees would have been the first of February, a pagan holiday known to the Celts as Imbolc. Also called Oimeic (Gaelic for "ewe's milk"), this holiday celebrated the arrival of spring and represented one of the four major holidays in the Celtic calendar, along with Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain.<sup>24</sup> Imbolc rituals centered around the crops and animals that represented a new year of life and prosperity for the community. It also symbolized rebirth and renewal. The people burned sacred fires to the goddess, and women marked the occasion by carrying out special domestic rites. In one such ceremony, the women of the household constructed a corn effigy of Brighid, carried it out of the home to be cleaned and purified, and then brought it back inside to preside over the hearth.<sup>25</sup> Because fire, both that of the hearth and of ritual burning as a symbol of renewal and rebirth, was so associated with Brighid, her followers tended the sacred fires burned in her honor so they would burn for the entirety of the holiday. While watching the fires, the women tending them would sing, "Brigid, excellent woman, sudden flame, may the bright fiery sun take us to the lasting kingdom."<sup>26</sup> Modern pagans continue to carry out these traditions, even scribing their own invocations to the ancient goddess, such as the following example:

*Brighid of the holy wells,  
light-bringer, hope-bearer  
comforter to women in labour  
and lambs in the cold fields.*

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<sup>24</sup> See glossary pgs. 23-25

<sup>25</sup> Claire Hamilton, *The Celtic Book of Seasonal Meditations* (Boston: Red Wheel, 2003), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Monaghan 74.

*Brigid-- eternal flame hidden in heart,  
 Bring Blessings.  
 Bride,  
 crowned with candles, cleanser and healer,  
 pure as snow.  
 milk-white, golden-haired  
 guardian of the sacred word,  
 mystical flame-bearer, inspirer of women.<sup>27</sup>*

### **Brigid as Saint**

Multiple biographies of the life of Saint Brigid exist, written by Catholic scholars in the centuries after her death. They differ in many instances, but on the whole seem to agree that the woman who would be St. Brigid was born around 450 CE to moderately wealthy parents in Faughart in County Louth. Her many biographers differ on the exact nature of her family situation. Brigid's father, Dubhthach, held the honorable position of tribal chieftain of Leinster.<sup>28</sup> Her mother was most likely a slave in his household and was either an early convert to Christianity or a dedicated Druidess.<sup>29</sup> Beyond these simple facts, tales of Saint Brigid merge with those of the legendary goddess rather than remain grounded in reality: she was said, for example, to have been able to hang her cloak upon a sunbeam. Some of the less fantastic stories provide some interesting insight into both the possible personality of the saint and her life's intriguing correlations with her divine namesake.

Under what exact circumstances the young Brigid converted to Christianity remains a mystery, but it is certain that once a convert, she made a passionate commitment to spreading the message that Saint Patrick had brought to her people.

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<sup>27</sup> Hamilton 72.

<sup>28</sup> "Catholic Encyclopedia Online: St. Brigid of Ireland." <<http://newadvent.org/cathen/02784b.htm>> (accessed 12 November 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Green 17.

Legend places her conversion at an early age, probably in her mid-teens. Her newfound faith caused her pagan father Dubhthach much distress, particularly when it compelled her to give away his possessions to the poor. In one such tale, he even attempted to give her away as a slave to the king of Leinster:

*Following her conversion, her father, an extremely wealthy man, was appalled to find his beautiful daughter giving away his stores to beggars. Quite out of control, he threw Brighid back into the back of his chariot, screaming, 'It is neither out of kindness nor honor that I take you for a ride, I am going to sell you to the King of Leinster to grind his corn.' Arriving at the king's enclosure, the father unbuckled his sword, leaving it in the chariot beside Brighid, so that-- out of respect-- he could approach the king unarmed. No sooner had the father gone off than a leper appeared, begging Brighid for her help. Since the only thing handy was her father's sword, she gave it to him. Meanwhile, the father was making his offer to the king, who. . . insisted on meeting the girl before accepting. When king and father came out to the chariot, the father noticed immediately that his sword was missing and demanded to know where it was. When Brighid told him, he flew into a wild rage and began to beat her. 'Stop,' cried the king, and called Brighid to him. 'Why do you steal your father's property and give it away?' 'If I had the power,' answered Brighid, 'I would steal all your royal wealth, and give it to Christ's brothers and sisters.' The king quickly declined the father's kind offer.<sup>30</sup>*

Unlike her pagan namesake, St. Brighid did not have to suffer a lifetime of a husband's miserly ways. Brighid refused to marry, which probably sent poor Dubhthach into another fit of apoplexy. But Brighid's mind was set: she would become a nun. She took her vows and received her veil from one of Patrick's bishops, Macaille, at Croghan Hill. If Brighid indeed knew St. Patrick, it must have been at this point in her life, near the end of his ministry and the beginning of hers. There is some evidence to support their possible association. The Book of Armagh, an Irish manuscript from the eighth century, recalls their friendship. In good Latin, the verses read:

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<sup>30</sup> Cahill 173-174.

*Inter santum Patricum Brigitanque Hibernesium columnas amicitia caritatis inerat tanta, ut unum cor consiliumque haberunt unum. Christus per illum illamque virtutes multas peregit.*

(“Between Saint Patrick and Saint Brigid, the columns of the Irish, there was so great a friendship of charity that they had but one heart and one mind. Through him and through her Christ performed many miracles.”)<sup>31</sup>

At Patrick's main church in Armagh, there also existed an abbey and church named in Brigid's honor. Fire destroyed them in 1179 CE, and there is no record of the exact date of their founding. Other stories suggest a friendship between the two saints, but these have the flavor of folk tales and hardly speak of historical fact, such as the following:

*On one occasion, [St. Patrick] delivered a sermon to a devout Irish congregation, which lasted four days and four nights. Among his hearers was that mother of religious activity and thorough woman of business, St. Bridget [who], worn out by her virtuous activity, was fast asleep, and a compassionate miracle kept her so, 'til the sermon came to its conclusion. When the devout maid awoke, she looked up at Patrick and blushed. . . she excused herself by a hint that she had yielded only to supernatural influences, for she had an allegorical dream which was almost as good as the sermon, and which she described at a length almost equal to that of the discourse under which she had succumbed.<sup>32</sup>*

Though not factual, this story sheds interesting light on the Irish perception of St.

Brigid. She blushes when she wakes, much like the "devout maid" the storyteller states that she is, but she is also simultaneously a "mother of religious activity" and a "thorough woman of business." The tale also depicts Brigid as tenacious and responsible-- even as a maid she has the maturity to play mother to those who are new in the faith. Patrick also

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31 Catholic Encyclopedia. Online ed. "St. Brigid of Ireland."

32 W.G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland* (London: Kennikat Press, 1902.)

allows her to speak at her leisure, and her discourse is nearly as long as his own, which may point to the larger role of women in the early Irish church.

Aside from tales like this one and writings such as those from the *Book of Armagh*, little physical evidence exists to suggest that these two venerated saints knew one another. Certainly, Brigid could be called Patrick's "strongest partner," an advocate for the faith and crusader for the church.<sup>33</sup> To accomplish all that she did, a personal friendship with Patrick would have aided her, but her deeds would not have been impossible without his help.

After taking her vows on the hill at Croghan, Brigid reputedly gathered seven other nuns with her and attempted to found a monastery<sup>34</sup> near the church there. For reasons unknown, they did not remain at Croghan, but soon relocated to present-day Kildare, where, at the site of an ancient Druid temple, Brigid and her followers founded a monastery under a large oak tree. They named it Cill dara, "Church of the Oak."<sup>35</sup> The second Life of St. Brigid, written by Cogitosus, a monk at Brigid's monastery in the eighth century, gives an intricate description of the monastery in his time period. He details the lavish decorations, beautiful woodwork, and proud stone tower all built in the years following the monastery's founding. By the time of Cogitosus' writing, Brigid's initial following of seven women had flourished into what he called the "head of almost all the churches of Ireland, standing like a mountain peak over all the Irish monasteries."<sup>36</sup> Cogitosus, along with Brigid's other biographers, reported that the

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33 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996).

34 Although this is certainly an institution founded by women, men were also allowed and encouraged to join, making this a double convent and monastery. Since men are involved, the usual term is monastery, which will be used to describe the church Brigid founded at Kildare.

35 Catholic Encyclopedia Online ed. "St Brigid of Ireland."

<sup>36</sup> McNamara 121.

saint's monastery was unusual in that it was open to both men and women.

Building a functioning abbey for both genders required endless labor. Brigid's first biography, written in metrical verse by St. Broccan Cloen within a century of her death, states that:

*Ni bu Sanct Brigid suanach  
Ni bu huarach im sheire Dé,  
Sech ni chiuir ni cossens  
Ind nóeb dibad bethath che.*

(“Saint Brigid was not given to sleep, nor was she intermittent about God's love; Not merely that she did not buy, she did not seek for The wealth of this world below, the holy one.”)<sup>37</sup>

That she slept little must be factual, for to accomplish all she did during her lifetime she would have found small time to slumber. Her abbey was famous for its charity and hospitality to all those who requested help, and she is associated with several "food multiplication miracles" much like Christ's feeding of the five-thousand.<sup>38</sup> The table grace associated with St. Brigid reflects her hospitable nature:

I should like a great lake of finest ale

For the King of Kings.

I should like a table of the choicest food

For the family of heaven.

Let the ale be made from the fruits of faith,

And the food be forgiving love.

I should welcome the poor to my feast,

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<sup>37</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia Online, “Saint Brigid of Ireland.”

<sup>38</sup> McNamara 138.

For they are God's children.  
 I should welcome the sick to my feast,  
 For they are God's joy.  
 Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place,  
 And the sick dance with the angels.  
 God bless the poor,  
 God bless the sick,  
 And bless our human race.  
 God bless our food,  
 God bless our drink,  
 All homes, O God, embrace.<sup>39</sup>

The monastery at Kildare also functioned as a school, with high emphasis on the arts of metalwork and manuscript illumination. So beautiful were some of the books produced by the scribes at Kildare that one twelfth-century viewer proclaimed them to be the work of angels and not mortal man.<sup>40</sup> In her position as abbess, Brigid administered all the daily workings of the abbey and monastery. There is much debate over her actual powers and position. Older histories simply state that Brigid and her nuns ran the abbey while St. Conleth, a man chosen by Brigid, administered the monastery and cathedral.<sup>41</sup> More recent scholarship suggests that Brigid, like a handful of other Irish women, achieved equal status with men in the early Irish church, and actually held the title of

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<sup>39</sup> Cahill 174-175

<sup>40</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia Online, "Saint Brigid of Ireland."

<sup>41</sup> Canon D'Alton, "The Island of Saints and Scholars," in *The Glories of Ireland*, ed. Joseph Dunn and PJ Lennox (Washington DC, 1914), 11.

bishop. Cogitosus reports in his *Life of Saint Brigid* that Bishop Mel, when conferring upon Brigid the position of abbess, accidentally read the rites confirming a bishop instead. Bishop Mel may have been aging, but he surely was not senile. If Brigid was in fact given a bishop's powers, it was certainly intentional, whether or not the Church in Rome agreed with the position. In all likelihood, the Irish church at that time was so new, and so far removed from the center of Roman Catholicism that Rome did not hear of such happenings until after the people involved had died. Also, the fledgling Irish Catholic church had few-- if any-- available models of the Catholic Church to imitate. Regardless, it is nearly certain that Brigid and her successor abbesses, in whatever capacity, heard confessions, may have celebrated Mass, and even ordained clergy.

St. Brigid died on the first of February in 525 CE. According to St. Donatus in the preface to the sixth version of the *Life of St. Brigid*, the aging Brigid was attended on her death bed by St. Ninnidh, who "was ever afterwards known as 'Ninnidh of the Clean Hand' because he had his right hand encased with a metal covering to prevent its ever being defiled, after being the medium of administering the *viaticum*<sup>42</sup> to Ireland's Patroness."<sup>43</sup> Upon her death, her followers buried her in a tomb at the Kildare Cathedral, but Scandinavian raids in the late 800's forced the faithful to relocate her body to a safer locality. Brigid's remains lay today in Downpatrick, County Down, in Northern Ireland, at the Downpatrick Cathedral. Interred with her are Sts. Patrick and Columcille.<sup>44</sup> St. Ultan penned the following hymn in her honor in the years following her death:

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<sup>42</sup> The Eucharist, when administered to one who is on the verge of death.

<sup>43</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia Online, "St. Brigid of Ireland."

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



*Christus in nostra insula  
 Que vocatur Hivernia  
 Ostensus est hominibus  
 Maximis mirabilibus  
 Que perfecit per felicem  
 Celestis vite virginem  
 Precellentem pro merito  
 Magno in mundi circulo.*

("In our island of Hibernia, Christ was made known to man by the very great miracles which he performed through the happy virgin of celestial life, famous for her merits through the whole world.")<sup>45</sup>

By the time of Brigid's death, Catholicism had spread throughout Ireland, with Irish monasteries settled as far away as the Cornish coast,<sup>46</sup> and "her [Brigid's] example was followed by St. Ita, St. Fanchea, and many others; and if at the close of the sixth century there were few districts which had no monasteries and monks, there were few also which had no convents and nuns."<sup>47</sup> The Irish Catholic people call her "the Mary of the Gael," and continue to celebrate her feast day on the first day of February and pray for her blessings on the people, as this Irish prayer illustrates:

*"Invocation to Saint Bride"*

*Dear Saint Brigid of The Kine*

*Bless these little fields of mine,*

*The pastures and the shady trees,*

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

<sup>46</sup> McNamara 122.

<sup>47</sup> Dunn and Lennox (Alton), eds. 11.

*Bless the butter and the cheese,  
 Bless the cows with coats of silk,  
 And the brimming pails of milk,  
 Bless the hedgerows, and I pray  
 Bless the seed beneath the clay,  
 Bless the hay and bless the grass,  
 Bless the seasons as they pass,  
 And heaven's blessings will prevail,  
 Brigid-- Mary of the Gael.<sup>48</sup>*

The monastery at Kildare still stands, and there are over eighty churches named after her in Ireland today. Indeed, churches in her honor exist worldwide, with several congregations in the United States, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy.<sup>49</sup> Followers of St. Brigid continue to pray to the saint for help and guidance. The following prayer comes from an American congregation, St. Brigid Parish in Midland, Minnesota:

*Dear Saint Brigid:  
 You came from a broken family;  
 Pray for our families,  
 that as they learn to pray  
 and care for each other,  
 they may grow stronger.  
 You called women from all of Ireland to*

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48 John Irvine, *A Treasury of Irish Saints* (London: The Dolmen Press, 1964), 12.

49 Cahill 195

*the religious life;*

*Pray for the people of this parish that*

*we may value,*

*and teach our children to value,*

*lives dedicated to God;*

*even as we recognize our own call to holiness.*

*You cared for the poor in a special way;*

*Pray for us, that we may always*

*welcome the poor as part of our parish life,*

*and be kind and generous to them.*

*You encouraged learning when that was unusual;*

*Pray for us, that we may never cease*

*learning about our faith.*

*Above all, Pray for us that we may come*

*to know God in a loving and personal way,*

*as you did yourself;*

*so that with you and all the saints,*

*we may come one day to the fullness*

*of eternal life with God.*

*Amen.*<sup>50</sup>

The Catholic church of the present day would refer to the veneration of Brigid as beatification, not canonization. Official church position in the Catholic encyclopedia

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<sup>50</sup> "Saint Brigid's Catholic Church, Midland, MN." <<http://www.stbrigid-midland.org/prayer.htm>>(accessed 15 April 2006)

states that beatification differs from canonization in that the former implies "a locally restricted, not a universal, permission to venerate, which is a mere permission, and no precept; while canonization implies a universal precept."<sup>51</sup> Holy Mother Church does recognize Brigid as a saint, however, because the formal process of canonization did not exist during her lifetime. While today the process of canonization in the Catholic Church is lengthy, often taking years, saints in Brigid's day assumed their titles according to popular veneration, usually contained within a specific geographical region. This practice continued well into the thirteenth century, with the formal process used today only coming about in 1634 after Pope Urban VII issued a papal bull making canonization the special province of the Holy See alone. This practice of regional beatification explains the high number of regional saints, adored by a particular country or nationality but whose influence does not extend far beyond the geographical areas in which they ministered.

Brigid is one such saint, as is Ireland's most famous saint, Patrick, though certainly tales of his miracles have extended far beyond the Emerald Isle. While Patrick has arguably achieved international fame, Brigid remains ensconced in relative obscurity. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but it is most likely a combination of factors. First, the Irish venerate Patrick above all other saints because he is responsible for bringing Christianity to the island. Although Brigid, a disciple and contemporary of Patrick and certainly the island's premier female saint, also deserves a great deal of similar praise and respect, Patrick receives much of the glory because he arrived first. Second, Patrick's feast day has helped spread his popularity. The massive celebrations

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<sup>51</sup> "Catholic Encyclopedia Online: Canonization." <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02364b.htm>> (accessed 15 March 2006)

dedicated to Patrick on St. Patrick's Day extend well beyond the borders of Ireland. In the United States, even Protestants celebrate the holiday. The meaning of St. Patrick's Day has become less a veneration of the saint and more a celebration of Irish heritage. Some scholars have speculated that Brighid's second-class status has more to do with her gender than any other factor, but this argument does not explain why Ireland's other popular male saint, Saint Columcille, lacks the adoration given to Patrick. In short, the overwhelming popularity of Patrick eclipses all of Ireland's saints.

### **Comparisons Between Goddess and Saint**

Both the major holiday of the goddess Brighid, Imbolc, and the feast-day of St. Brighid fall on the first of February. That date had long been held sacred by the pagans in the Celtic tradition, well before they had any encounter with Christianity. The official Catholic history of Saint Brighid, as well as most of her early biographers, report that she died on the first of February. Other versions of Brighid's life assert that she was also born on the first of February.<sup>52</sup> The significance of a birth on Imbolc has extreme importance in the Celtic pagan tradition. Imbolc symbolized the beginning of spring, rebirth and renewal. It was the special day of the great goddess Brighid, whose name meant something akin to "Brilliant and Exalted One." Only three other major holidays exist in the Celtic pagan religion, and of those only one, Lughnasadh, is dedicated solely to one god or goddess.

The rites and rituals associated with both Imbolc and St. Brighid's feast-day share remarkable similarities. To prepare for Imbolc, women constructed and purified a corn effigy of the goddess Brighid to watch over the home. After the Saint's death, Catholics began to celebrate her feast-day, called Candlemas Eve. One ritual associated

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<sup>52</sup> Sharkey 22.

with this special day involved a similar action: "On Saint Bride's day (Candlemas eve) women dressed a sheaf of oats in female clothes and set it with a club in a basket called 'Briid's bed.' Then they called, 'Briid is come, Briid is welcome.'"<sup>53</sup> In Kerry, on the coast, a girl or boy impersonating Brighid, here called "Bidly," would sing, "Something for poor Bidly! Her clothes are torn. Her shoes are worn. Something for poor Bidly!"<sup>54</sup> When the group was only young men, dressed in women's attire, they were called "Bidly boys." Giving food and money to the Bidly callers was thought to bring a good harvest in the following season.<sup>55</sup> Hope for a good harvest was one of the primary reasons for Brighid-worship during the season of Imbolc. As the winter drew to a close and spring planting began, pagan followers of Brighid sang and sacrificed to her in the hopes that she would bless them with food to last until Samhain and a good harvest when the weather was right.

These comparisons also extend into the present. For example, on the same day that Catholics today venerate St. Brighid, modern pagans celebrating Imbolc continue the old traditions and construct effigies of Brighid. Writes one neopagan author: "Imbolc is for new beginnings, hope, cleansing, healing. Celebrations involve lighting candles, kindling fires, and domestic rituals, like carrying corn effigies of Brighid, and letting her preside over the hearth."<sup>56</sup> Other modern pagan traditions involve the reading of poetry, because Brighid was the goddess of the poet.

As mentioned before, one of the myths of the goddess Brighid's birth involved her suckling at the teat of a supernatural cow from the Otherworld. The Otherworld, or

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<sup>53</sup> MacCullough 69.

<sup>54</sup> MacManus 4.

<sup>55</sup> Monaghan 66.

<sup>56</sup> Hamilton 68.

Sidhe, was the domain of the Tuatha de Danann, of which Brighid was a member, so this is not terribly strange in her case. It is strange to find similar stories told of the saint, who also reportedly suckled from a mystical cow, white with red ears.<sup>57</sup> Other stories of the goddess seem to have transferred to the saint, such as the goddess' sacred fires, which the Druids tended long before Patrick arrived.<sup>58</sup> Brighid-the-goddess had always been associated with fire, as she was in part the goddess of smithcraft, and in part the goddess of home and hearth. Her worshippers would light sacred fires on Imbolc in her honor to celebrate the increasing strength of the Sun, which would warm the land in the coming months. Saint Brighid's biographers report that she also kept sacred fires burning at the abbey at Kildare.<sup>59</sup> They were surrounded by hedgerows and could only be attended by women-- men could not even pass near the entrance.<sup>60</sup> Brighid and nineteen of her nuns guarded the fire, each taking a day to tend to it, with Brighid herself guarding on every twentieth day.<sup>61</sup>

The followers of the goddess prayed to her for her help in certain areas, just as Catholics light candles to the saints and the Virgin Mary. Interestingly, the pagans who begged the help of the goddess and the Catholic Christians who asked for divine help from the saint both requested help in similar areas, as both Brighids ruled over the areas of poetry, learning, art, metalwork, and healing.

Given the striking similarities in the veneration of these two women, there appears to be a strong correlation between the important aspects of the goddess and the later attributes of the saint that catapulted them both to such popularity among the Irish people

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57 MacCana 34.

58 Wood-Martin 279.

59 David Leeming, *From Olympus to Camelot: the World of European Mythology* (Oxford UP, 2003) 81.

60 MacCana 34.

61 MacCullough 68.

at various points in Irish history. The explanation for these similarities is inconclusive, however, and so this tale begins and ends in mystery. These similarities could be coincidental or inconsequential. Perhaps an infusion of the goddess into the life of the saint was necessary for the peaceful assimilation of the pagan religion's followers into the Catholic faith, but no evidence exists to support such a claim. Similar studies of Celtic mythic heroes and their correlations with the life of St. Patrick have concluded that Patrick's hagiographers intentionally drew on the wealth of myths and legends Celtic culture provided to embellish the life of Ireland's patron saint. A similar phenomenon may have taken place with Brighid's hagiographers. Perhaps the explanation is simpler still: St. Brighid, inspired by the qualities she knew that her namesake possessed, attempted to live in accordance with those characteristics, but decided to use them for the faith in which she believed and to which she dedicated her life.

Though the similarities between the goddess and saint are great in number, there is little evidence to suggest that they are anything more than an odd series of coincidences. To prove that an intentional incorporation of pagan beliefs into Irish Catholicism had occurred, documentation of some sort would be necessary. Such documentation does not presently exist, though perhaps (if that is the case) these writings have yet to be discovered. At best, it is clear that there is a distinct and suggestive correlation between the lives and rituals associated with these two women.



## Glossary of Terms

*Badb.* One of the Celtic war goddesses, Badb could transform into a raven. She was also seen as a goddess of death, and her presence on a battlefield signified certain doom. In some legends, she is part of a triplet of war goddesses along with the Morrigan and Macha.

*Beltaine/Beltane.* One of the four major holidays of the Celtic Calendar, Beltane occurred on May first. It was the traditional first day of summer. Beltane was not dedicated to a single god or goddess, but was rather a general celebration of the coming of summer.

*Bres.* Bres was the son of the Tuathan earth mother goddess, Eriu, and the demonic Fomorian sea god, Elathan. He ruled over the Tuatha de Danann as a tyrant while married to Brighid, with whom he had one son, Ruadan.

*Daghda, the.* The Daghdha was the omnipotent father-god of the Tuatha de Danann, and ruled over them for a time as their king. He possessed a magical club that had the power to kill instantly or restore life, depending on which way he turned it. Even the Daghdha was subservient to the king of the Tuatha, however, and was put into forced menial labor by the tyrant king Bres, who had married the Daghdha's daughter Brighid.

*Eire.* Gaelic for Ireland. The name supposedly derives from the name of the mother goddess, Eriu, whom the sons of Mil decided to honor by giving their new island home

her name.

*Fir Bholg.* The Fir Bholg people suffered defeat at the hands of the Tuatha de Danann at the first battle of Mach Tuireg. According to legend, these giant people built the fort on the island of Innismore.

*Fomorians.* The Fomorians, or Fomori, were demons constantly at war with the Tuatha de Danann. This race of cyclopes fought for control of Ireland but ultimately lost. The myth cycles generally portray them as dark and wicked, while the people of Danu (Tuatha de Danann) are depicted as people of light and goodness.

*Gaels.* In Irish legend, the Gaels were the sons of Mil, descendants of Abraham and Noah who had survived the Great Flood and came to Ireland from Spain. The sons of Mil subdue the Tuatha de Danann through a series of battles, at which time the Tuatha de move underground to the eternal realm (called the sidhe). The Gaels separate them into two groups, one of gods and goddesses, whom they worship and revere, and one of the infamous "little people."

*Lughnasadh.* One of the four major Celtic holidays. This was a celebration devoted to the sun god, Lugh. It is also a celebration dedicated to the harvest and occurs on the first of August, though festivals usually ran from mid-July to mid-August, during which time people performed religious rituals and held contests centered around physical strength, one of Lugh's strongest attributes.

*Morrigan, the.* Like Badb, the Morrigan was a Celtic war goddess. She was also associated with prophecy and appears to have been as sexually insatiable as the Daghdha [Celtic father god], so it is not surprising that they encountered one another and produced a child [Brighid]. The Morrigan could change form at will, sometimes appearing as a crow, sometimes as a woman in various phases of life, and sometimes as an inanimate object such as a river.

*Ruadan.* Son of the miserly Bres and goddess Brighid. Bres inadvertently sent Ruadan to his death when he asked him to go and spy on the Tuathan blacksmith, Goibnu, who caught Ruadan and killed him by repeatedly stabbing the young prince with his own spear. His mother, Brighid, produced the first keening in Ireland after her son's death.

*Samhain.* Samhain was the Celtic new year, celebrated on the first of November. It also marked the beginning of winter. Samhain was a time for spiritual renewal and remembrance of loved ones who had died.

*Tuatha de Danann.* The Tuatha de Danann, or "Children of the Goddess Danu," represented the fifth wave of invaders to come to Ireland, according to the Irish Book of Invasions. After several years and many major battles, they finally managed to subdue the Fomorians, a race of cyclopes that previously ruled the island. The Tuatha de Danann eventually submit to the sons of Mil and move to the underground of Ireland in the mystical realm. Each member of the Tuatha de was given a sidhe, or mound, which

served as their gateway to the outer world. The more important members of the Tuatha de were worshipped as gods and goddesses, but the lesser members came to be known as "the little people," and appear in folklore as fairies, sprites, leprechauns, banshees, and other such creatures.

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1. Downpatrick, St. Brigid's burial place.
2. Armagh, site of St. Patrick's first church.
3. Dundalk, near St. Brigid's supposed birthplace.
4. Kildare, site of the double convent and monastery founded by St. Brigid and her followers.

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