Lisa M. Bitel

Body of a saint, story of a goddess: origins of the Brigidine tradition

Since the early Middle Ages, historians, celticists and students of religion have pored over the earliest written lives of St Brigit of Kildare to prove the chronological development of the Celtic goddess Brigit into the saint. Scholars have sought non-Christian, unorthodox, unwittingly pagan details in her three earliest vitae. They have seized upon passages that jar with traditional, continental academic definitions of a female saint, anecdotes that resonate with later medieval mythological texts, and episodes that seem related to Iron Age evidence of Celtic deities, as evidence of enduring pagan associations. They suppose that hagiographers included this evidence unintentionally in otherwise Christian texts, or that monastic writers still loyal to pagan Irish culture hid their true sentiments in saints' lives, or that writers evoked the goddess Brigit out of some sort of nativist loyalty for a lost, pre-Christian past. Over the past twenty years, they have explained Brigit as a tripartite hospitaller, lawgiver and warrior-woman based on the British goddess Brigantia; a goddess of 'sun and fire'; a structuralist hero who manifests power by crossing boundaries of time and space (McCon); the 'most powerful female religious figure in all of Irish history. . . . a Triple Goddess, a Virgin Mother, a Lawmaker, a Virgin Saint, and . . . a folk image whose shadows still move over Ireland' (Conrad); 'a suitable patron for the Irish women's liberation movement'; and the Irish equivalent of both the satyr Pan and the Indian destroyer-goddess Kali (De Paor). One historian decided that a flesh-and-blood St Brigit never even existed to supplant the original goddess. ¹

Granted, modern scholars have lacked a proper Delehany dossier for Brigit. Her body was once in the cathedral at Kildare, honourably enshrined and crowned, but the clerics of Armagh hijacked it to Ulster sometime between 878 and 1185. In the latter year, Gerald of Wales wrote, the bodies of the three saints Brigit, Patrick and Columcille were found and translated together into one tomb at Dún Lethglaise (Downpatrick), a situation repeated by later medieval sources, including a fourteenth-century poem

Textual Practice ISSN 0950-236X print ISSN 1470-1308 online © 2002 Taylor & Francis Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/09502360210141466
and Manus O’Donnell’s life of Columba. But during the dissolution
the tomb was destroyed and Brigit’s putative remains strewn abroad. A
lone native shoe survives in a bronze shrine from the later Middle Ages,
housed in the National Museum in Dublin. A piece of cloak remains
in Bruges, where it arrived in the eleventh century courtesy of an Anglo-
Saxon noblewoman. Brigit’s head purportedly but improbably went to
Lisbon, courtesy of Irish crusaders – or perhaps it is her hand – where
pilgrims may visit it today. On the other hand, the possibility exists that
her head went either to Neustadt or Cologne. Of the several depictions
of the saint in manuscript and metal, none dates from earlier than the
Romanesque period.

The saint’s textual dossier is even more mysterious than the ultimate
fate of her corpse. Brigit’s variant genealogies attest to a conflict of ancestors.
The monastic annals from the seventh and later centuries list two birth
dates (452, 456) and three different dates of death (524, 526, 528). Her
feast-day is 1 February, not coincidentally the ancient pre-Christian feast of
Imbolc, which celebrated lambing (pre-calendrical reform on a date closer
to mid-February). While St Patrick, by comparison, left us a Confessio, we
have no writings by Brigit herself. No one composed her biography until
more than a century after her death when the monk Cogitosus penned
a vita from Kildare (c. 650). Cogitosus celebrated Brigit’s resting place in a
tomb at Kildare. But the saint’s other hagiographers neglected to mention
Kildare, the tomb or the body, despite the fact that by the seventh century
orthodox cult-keepers normally required physical remains, possessions of
the saint, or at least brandea to establish an authentic shrine. Instead,
Brigit’s disciples chose an effective, innovative combination of hagiography
and ancient Irish history to create the saint’s reputation for their own
churches. They purposely cast Brigit as a goddess-heroine who left no traces
of her own physicality but controlled her physical environment like a
territorial goddess from the ancient past. Cogitosus, whose church had
properly enshrined Brigit’s remains in a Roman-style basilica, had never
whispered of Brigit’s pagan origins. Eighth- and ninth-century vitae (based
on earlier exemplars) produced in southern Úi Néill territory (modern
County Louth) to the north of Kildare gave the saint a new history of
divinity. Deprived of the saint’s immanence manifested at her tomb,
hagiographers and cultists chose to relocate the physical saint. They found
her in the landscape around them and the territory beneath their feet.
No body, no saint – unless that saint happened to be a numinous figure
recaptured from the heroic, pre-Patrician, Irish past, re-infused into the very
land itself.

Early medieval writers were as eager to promote Brigit’s bodiless past
as were the Celtic revivalists of the nineteenth century and more recent
scholars of the Brigidine tradition. The rhetorical excess of modern
nationalists and goddess-hunters is more explicable, however, than the sly suggestions of early medieval hagiographers. Even for the sake of building a cult, why would eighth- and ninth-century writers choose the literary method of identifying their own saint with a pre-Christian goddess? It was hard enough for the first generations of Christians to create persuasive cases for the veneration of female saints, since women were denied most of the avenues to sainthood available to men. The rumour of pagan sympathies would have endangered the reputation of a holy woman elsewhere in Christianizing territories; hagiographers of Merovingian saints such as Genovefa and Radegund made very clear the women’s orthodox practice, to the extent that early medieval royal and noble women gained a reputation for converting their pagan or Arian husbands. If the Irish had maintained a cult dedicated to the goddess Brigid before they became Christians, surely the same clerics who had successfully commemorated her as a saint would have tried to destroy memories of her pagan source.

Brigid’s hagiographers were making a textual case, as writers of saints’ lives must do, for the superior virtus of their subject. They had trouble because they were necessarily innovators. Their models, which came mostly from abroad, were male saints. Cogitosus, for instance, announced his dependence on the structure of Sulpicius Severus’ Vita Martini. What is more, their own saint, their churches and their political allies were competing for souls with Kildare, the cult of Patrick, and other saints in stronger kingdoms. Although they lost the battle for leadership of Brigid’s cult and Ireland’s churches, the tactics of Brigid’s hagiographers in Louth established Brigid as one of the premier patrons of Ireland and set a precedent for other hagiographers. They gave us the goddess Brigit and impelled Irish Christianity in the nativist direction for which it is still famous today.

Three vitae

We have plenty of stories about the woman called Brigit, Christian saint of Kildare, although this material was not contemporary with the woman herself. The oldest extant vita written in Ireland is the Vita Sanctae Brigidae produced around 650 by a monk of Kildare who called himself Cogitosus. Vitae of Patrick and Columcille appeared in the seventh century. Two more anonymous lives of Brigit appeared shortly after, both probably based on a Latin original that supplied Cogitosus with information, too. One of these vitae appeared in the eighth century (c. 750) and is now called Vita Prima (VP) because the Bollandists believed it was older than Cogitosus’ text. The other existed by the end of the ninth century and has come down in mixed Irish and Latin form, now called Bethu Brigit (BB). The VP and BB were
probably based on seventh-century texts by Ultán moccu Conchobair (d. 660), who came from Síl nÁedo Sláine of the southern Uí Néill and framed his hagiographic politics accordingly; and Ailéran the Wise (d. 665) who located some of Brigit’s adventures among the Uí Chairpre, also under southern Uí Néill domination; as well as Cogitosus the Leisterman. The three extant early lives of Brigit, composed over the space of 150 years, told overlapping versions of the same history of the Leinster holy woman who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries. None of the vitae yields very precise historical information, in either modern or early modern terms, for Brigit’s existence. Finally, only one vita locates her dead body in an exact place and recognizable material surroundings. All three hagiographers agreed on the basic details of Brigit’s saintly career, although their texts varied in hagiographic and political emphasis and structure. She was born on one of her possible birth dates in the north of the province of Leinster, a child of the tribe called the Fothairt. Her mother was called Broicsech. The two later vitae revealed that Broicsech was a slave girl from another province, owned and impregnated by Brigit’s father Dubthach, a free client of the king of Leinster. The child Brigit grew up in the pastures, dairy and kitchen of her father according to Cogitosus, or in the house of her mother’s owner according to the other two versions. She herded animals, cooked bacon and made butter, all typical female provisioning chores in well-supplied but not royal households. In these domestic settings the child-saint performed homely miracles from an early age, multiplying scarce food and giving it away to the poor or even to begging dogs. Her habit of charity also led her to give away all of her father’s possessions. In the later two vitae, Dubthach was so annoyed with her holy thieving that he tried to sell her in slavery to the king of Leinster. While Dubthach was haggling with the king, he left Brigit in the chariot outside the house. She cheerfully donated his sword to the first beggar who asked. Fortunately, the king recognized her holiness and refused to enslave her.

Eventually, after resisting marriage, Brigit was allowed to make a vow of chastity and take the veil, thus becoming a professional Christian. She travelled from church to church, house to house around the provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connacht. In the two later versions, she also went north into Mide to meet St Patrick and visit his churches there. She performed miracles en route, favouring different political leaders and tribes depending upon who wrote her history. She also healed plenty of lepers and other patients, fed crowds, halted bandits, prevented murders and made peace. She took on female followers, probably vowesses rather than nuns under a particular rule, and set up religious communities around her territories, a few of which were named in the vitae. According to Cogitosus, she ended up in her own home church of Kildare where she died and was buried. The other two vitae remained silent about Brigit’s burial in her
home church. VP does not mention Kildare at the end, but tells the story of how Brigit’s successor, Darlugdach, wished to accompany her to heaven (129, 129a). The hagiographer insisted that ‘where her venerable body rests or [emphasis added] wherever her name is mentioned, benefits come to those who seek [her] help’ (129b). BB, meanwhile, placed Brigit at Kildare for her veiling but not at her death (11).

Condensing the three vitae into one brief summary does no justice to the texts, but it is exactly how medieval hagiographers composed their lives of Brigit: gathering oral testimony and written versions of her deeds and then revising them into one new narrative. They repeated the good bits, improvised other anecdotes, and purposely changed some things to suit their agendas and audiences. Yet to describe the contents of the vitae and rehearse them as a single story of Brigit from her birth to her death reduces the artistry and personal style of Brigit’s individual hagiographers, as well as obscuring the structure of their texts. The vitae were not life-to-birth narratives, but followed birth stories with categorized miracles. Writers of saints’ lives wanted to build their readers’ amazement miracle by miracle, each saintly deed leading to another, more wondrous feat, all couched in vivid language replete with references to Jesus, other saints and the Bible. Hagiographers wanted audiences to do more than just read a saint’s life; Christians were supposed to learn from the example of a life led piously, meditate on the life journey of the saint, catch certain thematic links, conceive of a deeper meaning to the order in which events occurred, marvel at the saint’s replication of Jesus’ deeds, understand references to Old Testament figures, and receive other encoded messages.

What is more, hagiographers were writing not prose, but liturgical drama. During the early Middle Ages the reading of a saint’s vita was a public event on the saint’s feast-day, part of a ritual cycle or pilgrimage, accompanied by various celebrations. So when Brigit was cooking bacon in a big cauldron and looked a dolefully hungry dog in the eye, it was meant to be a crowd-pleasing scene shared by her loving devotees, gathered together to hear again the familiar story of their heroine. When Brigit gave the dog the bacon meant for family dinner, listeners chuckled together; when the dog came back for more, they may have spluttered with outrage. But when the bacon reappeared untouched in the cauldron, ready for family supper, they were meant to gasp in recollection of Jesus’ own miracles and to sigh while marvelling and learning from Brigit’s simple-hearted act and the supreme charity which informed it. No doubt the abbess-saint’s successors distributed charitable gifts on her feast-day, since generosity towards the poor and ill was one of the saint’s major characteristics (VP, 44, 48).

The drama varied according to which of Brigit’s three early vitae the audience heard. Different versions were probably used in different churches.
of different regions of Ireland, and the tribal politics of the text shifted according to territorial context. In the later two vitae, for instance, the saint performed miracles for the people of Mide, an area to the north of her homeland, because the original versions of these vitae were probably written by Mide-men. When episodes moved from one vita to another, their mutations may have been slight but such variant details were crucial. The goddess is in those details, as is the saint and the ecclesiastical politics of early medieval Ireland. If later writers excluded Cogitosus’ description of Brigit’s shrine and instead hinted at Brigit’s pagan associations in their vitae, it was for precise political purposes. For hagiographers also had one last important job: to prove the existence, the immanence and the superior powers of their saint to aid and protect her followers during her lifetime and after her death. If a hungry dog could expect the bacon of charity from Brigit’s own hand, then prayerful Christians could expect protection from illness, ease in childbirth, help with harvests, defence from violence, and even salvation. In return the saints’ followers were obliged to contribute to churches serving the saint, supporting the clerics and nuns who tended the saint’s shrines. Thus all three hagiographers had also to prove that Brigit’s churches, either her main shrine at Kildare or other sites dedicated to the saint, could transmit the favours of the saint.

Nowhere in Cogitosus’ version of her deeds, written around 650, was Brigit a pagan, associated with pagans, or sympathetic to them. He described her as a holy woman of such stereotypical virtues that her vita might have been written in Gaul or Rome as well as in Ireland (although she was less learned and cosmopolitan than continental holy women of the same period). 16 She was virtuous, tireless and humble to the point of seeming passivity. Cogitosus’ Brigit never argued with men of authority in either church or kingdom, as was fitting for a woman in early medieval Ireland and a professed virgin within a world of male ecclesiastics. Yet she did sometimes ignore their direction, confident in her adherence to the higher instructions of her Lord. She placated kings, murderers and bishops with miracles and prayer rather than confronting them with angry words or displays of power in order to get her way (22, 23, 27, 28, 30).

Cogitosus knew how to keep a listener’s attention by telling riveting yet didactic tales. In one such story, for instance, Brigit protected a woman from a lustful nobleman. The man had entrusted a silver brooch to the woman for safekeeping but then deviously threw the piece of jewellery into the sea. He charged her with stealing it, knowing that he could take her as a sex slave if he publicly accused the woman of theft. The woman fled to St Brigit’s community, the ‘safest city of refuge’ available. When Brigit learned of her case she took the woman in but did not march out to argue or threaten the perpetrator; she deliberated until, by seeming chance at the last minute, one of her fishermen hauled in a fish which, when cut
open, proved to have swallowed the brooch. In great relief, Brigit and the woman went off to the legal assembly where everyone testified that the brooch belonged to the cruel, lustful man. The mortified nobleman freed the woman, confessed his sin, and bowed his neck in submission to Brigit. Brigit's humility before God and her non-confrontational methods brought obedience from the criminal (25). Submission, obedience, faith and charity were themes linking this to other miracles in Cogitosus' vita.¹⁷ Brigit obeyed God and men, and thus men, women, animals, and even the forces of nature obeyed the saint. Pigs and wolves did her bidding, kings and bishops abided by her will, and even rivers moved when she prayed hard enough.

For Cogitosus, her seeming passivity was part of Brigit’s great claim to saintly virtue (power), for the counterpart of obedience was authority which Brigit tactfully wielded over others. Cogitosus began the vita by claiming ‘supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish’ for Brigit’s church at Kildare. ‘Its parochia [parish] extends over the whole land of Ireland, reaching from sea to sea.’ He noted that the saint had provided a rule for organizing religious life and had vigilantly watched over the churches established in her name. She designated a bishop, Conláed, to help govern her parochia because, as a woman, she could not confer ordination or say Mass. After Brigit’s death, her nuns, monks, priests and the laypeople at Kildare continued to be governed by Brigit’s abbess-successors and her bishops, who spread their government ‘like a fruitful vine with its growing branches and struck root in the whole of Ireland’. The whole vita substantiated Brigit’s claim to her place as premier saint of Ireland. Cogitosus was arguing that other nuns, monks, priests and bishops were to look to Kildare for ecclesiastical and theological decisions, the proper conduct of ritual and behaviour and the maintenance of Christian laws. They were to pay dues for this privilege. Laypeople were to journey to Kildare as pilgrims to pay homage to the great woman saint at her tomb. Brigit was the greatest saint, her church at Kildare the finest, her tomb the most ornate, and her congregation and city the most populous and worthy of admiration.

The basis of all these claims was Brigit’s sanctity which she continued to manifest after her death in her enshrined body. She derived holiness from charisma and orthodox virtues. She was not, like Patrick, the first purported missionary to the island. Neither was she, like later Irish saints, a child of royalty. She did not claim status by birth or by marriage, the two ways in which secular women normally gained influence. She was neither royal nor male, so she had no legal claim to rule the great territory dominated by Kildare. In early Ireland, women could not inherit office from kinsmen, and could only inherit property under certain legal restrictions. Brigit could not have obtained Kildare’s properties or clients by legal means or by virtue of
ecclesiastical office. She never played a role in the religion inappropriate to women, who were forbidden by Christian leaders to become priests, conduct rituals or even preach. When she travelled the provinces healing and nurturing, she never dared to explicate gospel or administer the Eucharist, although she did speak to crowds. Her miracles imitated those of Jesus. Cogitosus specifically portrayed her as following in the saviour’s footsteps but never claimed for her the kind of direct authority that might threaten bishops or any other clerics.\textsuperscript{18} Nor was Brigit an extreme ascetic; she cheerfully doled out food and beer to her clients and herself participated in great religious feasts. Cogitosus argued for Brigit’s \textit{virtus} and thus Kildare’s authority and territorial dominance over Irish churches, from sea to sea, purely because of Brigit’s inherent merits.

For Cogitosus, the basis of Brigit’s sanctity lay in her thaumaturgy both during and after her life, evidenced in the miracles performed near her body in the church at Kildare. Cogitosus described at length the approach to Kildare, the building and expansion of the church, the decoration of its interior, and the tomb in which Brigit rested. He mentioned a stone with powers to heal brought miraculously down the hill by the saint after her death, and the wonders that attended the work on her church (31, 32). Kildare was the new Jerusalem. As Sean Connolly has pointed out, the hagiographer’s very choice of Latin words to describe Brigit’s city echoed the Old Testament, implicitly comparing Kildare to biblical cities.\textsuperscript{19} For Cogitosus, Brigit’s miracles demonstrated her sanctity while the presence of her body validated the claims of Kildare’s community to convey Brigit’s protections. As he put it,

\begin{quote}
It was not only in her bodily life, before she laid down the burden of the flesh, that she worked a great many miracles, but the bounty of divine generosity still continues to work other miracles in her monastery where her venerable body rests. These miracles we have not only heard of, but seen with our eyes.
\end{quote}

(31)

Brigit’s body was not available to her next two hagiographers, who operated in different political and religious milieux from Cogitosus. The eighth- and ninth-century vitae of Brigit took new approaches to territorialism and sanctity for their slightly more northerly audiences. Both of these vitae were produced in Louth, in what had once been Leinster borderlands to the northeast of Kildare, although they probably derived from a more southerly source.\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Vita Prima} and \textit{Bethu Brigit} recounted many of the same stories and repeated some of the same themes as Cogitosus’ vita, emphasizing Brigit’s humility and charity, and her nurturing and healing miracles. Events surrounding the saint’s birth, life and death
were much the same. However, the two vitae differed significantly from Cogitosus’ text by relocating much of Brigit’s activity to different locales and altering the political implications of her life. Brigit’s relations with Patrick and Kildare’s competition with Patrick’s main church at Armagh grew more tense in these vitae. What is more, *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* claimed a different kind of authority for Brigit, based not only on her innate virtue manifested in her enshrined remains, but on literary allusions to the pre-Christian past. In short, these two vitae slyly made the very first written hints that Brigit’s sanctity was greater, not despite but because of her gender and pagan reputation. They hinted that her very femaleness gave her territorial and numinous powers both Christian and Other and, further, that she had governed the landscapes of Ireland long before Patrick and Christianity ever came to Ireland. Without the body of the saint to bolster her cult, these hagiographers and their audiences located the bodiless saint’s powers directly in the ground beneath and the landscape surrounding them.

The Brigit of the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* was more sympathetic to pagan Ireland than Cogitosus’ saint from the time of her birth. In these two versions of her life her father Dubthach had to sell his slave Broiscech when she became pregnant with Brigit. Dubthach already had a wife who was angry because a druid had predicted that Broiscech’s child would rule over her own. (This motif appears in secular tales of hero-kings, where the younger son or the son of a concubine or slave turns out to be the next king.) Dubthach sold Broiscech first to a poet who then (in some manuscript versions) resold her to a druid, although the unborn baby remained free. The druid took Broiscech west to Connacht where she gave birth standing over a threshold, just after milking the cows, to a child whom she washed in the new milk (another literary motif common in stories of heroes). After Brigit’s birth, while the druid watched the stars for signs, the baby shot columns of fire out of her head, which even the druid understood made her special. Christian readers would have recognized a blatant indication of Brigit’s direct spiritual connection to God but they may have considered also the warrior’s fury, *liam láith*, evinced by the heroes of saga. Brigit would not eat the druid’s food, but would only drink milk from a red-eared white cow, an animal that turned up elsewhere in Irish mythological literature as magical. One day the tiny infant cried out distinctly, ‘This will be mine!’, indicating her future dominance of territory. Eventually, the druid manumitted Brigit’s mother and converted to Christianity after he witnessed one of the girl’s food multiplication miracles. Brigit returned home to Leinster to a Christian foster-mother’s house. She performed miracles similar to those in Cogitosus’ life: she multiplied food and drink and distributed it to the poor, transformed water into beer, and healed lepers, the mute, the lame. She also saved herself from
marriage by praying for a deformity that would discourage her suitor; God obligingly caused her eye to burst and liquify (reminiscent of St Lucy). After taking the veil she was healed.

The Brigit of the two later vitae was also more peripatetic than the Brigit of Cogitosus’ vita. The text emphasized her time on the road rather than any permanent architecture built by her. Her travels signified in hagiographic language her ecclesiastical rule. She went to every one of the five provinces, including prolonged sojourns up north with Patrick and his colleagues. As the Celtist Kim Mccone has pointed out, Brigit’s journeys comprised three great circuits of Ireland covering northern Leinster and Mide (territory of the southern Úi Néill); Munster, and Connacht; and forays north, sandwiched between visits back to Leinster. In Cogitosus’ day, the mid-seventh century, the kings of Leinster still had the potential to govern central Ireland, but by 700, the kings of the southern Úi Néill, the most powerful dynastic confederation in Ireland, had pushed their borders south into Leinster territory. Brigit’s hagiographic actions while on tour in Mide and the borderlands had political significance because by the time these two vitae were written, at least seventy-five years after Cogitosus had composed his vita, Mide had become the region of Patrick, patron of the Úi Néill. As Mccone has argued, the common textual source of Vita Prima and Bethu Brigte was probably composed before the Úi Néill moved permanently south. However, by the eighth century, when Vita Prima’s author wrote of Brigit’s superior miracles before Patrick and his bishops, he was still claiming her authority in this territory later lost by Leinster. Brigit’s miracles in these territories, as well as stories of her acquisitions of endowments and of communities belonging to other women, staked her claim to ecclesiastical dominance up north (VP, 42, 44, 57).

Once they had exhausted the political vocabulary of trans-territorial travel, Brigit’s biographers turned to a distinctly female vocabulary of sainthood in order to bolster their claims to and for the saint. They composed this propaganda as stories of saintly interactions. For example, Brigit once solved a paternity dispute before an entire assembly of clerics headed by Patrick. The accused was an episcopal colleague of Patrick. Brigit caused the newborn infant to name its real father, demonstrating that her knowledge trumped that of clerics trained in theology and law (VP, 39). In another episode, Brigit nodded off during one of Patrick’s lengthy sermons only to reveal upon waking that she had received a vision directly from God. She had seen ploughmen sowing good seed and reaping new milk in a fruitful land; this, Patrick informed her, was himself and herself spreading the word of God. She had also glimpsed evil ploughmen sowing weeds and water streaming from furrows; this, according to Patrick, was an apocalyptic vision of non-believers and evil-doers (VP, 55). Just as the paternity episode demonstrated Brigit’s vision, so the dream episode proved Brigit’s intimate
link to God as well as making her a missionary equal of Patrick. If Patrick played Joseph when interpreting her dream, Brigit was pharaoh, ruler of the lands; at the same time, Patrick functioned as the typical witness and publicist of a private miracle, a figure prominent in Irish hagiography as the sidekick to visionary saints. Brigit herself interpreted visions for male clerics, helped them find their way across hostile territory, and clothed them in the vestments necessary for Christian ritual. She agreed, for example, to weave Patrick’s own burial shroud (VP, 58). Without her, the vitae taught, bishops could not understand what they saw, go where they needed to go, make informed decisions about church law, perform the rites of their churches for the people of Ireland, or even have a proper burial. Likewise, she healed, directed and protected kings and noblemen, as well as their women.

Yet Brigit accomplished all this, according to the authors of the VP and BB, without reference to her territorial capital at Kildare or to the wonder-working powers of local relics. Brigit’s houses in Mide may well have had relics of the saint but, if so, the writers of her vitae never mentioned it; this is utterly unlike the tactic of Patrick’s earliest hagiographers, who admitted his body lay at Dún Lethglasise rather than Armagh but recited a litany of Patrician liturgical tools, books and bodily parts left by the saint with the churches he founded. In seeking ways to publicize her prowess, Brigit’s second and third hagiographers had to turn the lack of body parts into an advantage rather than a liability. They had several tactics. First, they established Brigit not as Patrick’s equal but as his partner. She became the paradigmatic Christian woman who set standards for all other women in early Irish society. When Brigit went north on her hagiographic journeys into Patrick’s territory, she moved like a royal bride from her father’s house to a new place in a foreign territory, beyond the guardianship of her Leinster kinsmen. She was responsible, as any good wife, for acting as liaison between her groups of men in the north and south of Ireland, enforcing peace among them and protecting both groups. Already, by the time these vitae were written, Kildare and Armagh had made a treaty limiting Kildare’s jurisdiction to the churches and people of Leinster and officially subordinating Brigit’s authority to that of Patrick. Inscribed in a text called the Liber Angeli (Book of the Angel) composed around 700 – between Cogitosus’ time and the writing of the two slightly later vitae of Brigit – this text laid out a compromise agreed to by churchmen and women of the two most powerful communities in Ireland.

Between holy Patrick and Brigit, pillars of the Irish, there existed so great a friendship of charity that they were of one heart and one mind. Christ worked many miracles through him and her. The holy man, then, said to the Christian virgin: O my Brigit, your paruchia will be
Textual Practice

deeded to be in your province in your dominion, but in the eastern and western part it will be in my dominion.26

In other words, Kildare would order the churches of the province of Leinster only, while Armagh controlled the rest of Ireland. This was the Armagh version of Brigit’s authority; the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* told a different version. Either way, though, in both versions Brigit formally submitted to Patrick as a good wife to her husband, or a daughter to her father, or as the Virgin Mary to Patrick’s Jesus. The *Bethu Brigte* put it emphatically: while Bishop Ibor recounted before a group of Leinster clerics his dream of the Virgin Mother arriving in Ireland, Brigit approached. Ibor announced that ‘today a girl, for whom it has been prepared by God, will come to us like Mary’ and, as the hagiographer wrote, ‘It happened thus’ (*BB, 11*).27

Yet, though they acknowledged that Armagh was the premier church of Ireland and (by their silence regarding relics) that Kildare held Brigit’s body, her hagiographers still sought to establish her power by other means. They claimed territory for Brigit and her representatives based not only on her motherly sanctity and wifely partnership with Patrick, but on two other kinds of arguments. One argument was based on Brigit’s heroic characteristics and references to stories about long-lost kings and warriors. Brigit’s unusual birth on the threshold of a house, her connections with a prophesizing druid, her insistence on drinking only the milk of a red and white cow, and her head-gashing leap from the chariot all referred to tales about ancient Ireland and established Brigit as a native hero in the Irish tradition. Patrick had been born a foreigner and brought as a slave to Ireland; Brigit had been born a hero, reared by a druid with magical powers and marked for greatness from birth.

But the hagiographers constructed a second, even stronger argument for Brigit’s territorial dominance based on allusions to secular literature and on the saint’s gender characteristics. The two hagiographers invoked another kind of feminine power derived from their construct of pre-Christian beliefs, focused on Brigit’s control of the landscapes and political territories. Whatever religion men and women followed before Christian missionaries came to Ireland, hagiographers and other writers depicted it as distinctly female (as opposed to the masculine character of Christian organization), nature-oriented (as opposed to the architecturally enclosed rituals of Christianity), irrational and magical (like both women and druids), and intimately linked to political authority (just like Christianity).28 Brigit’s mastery over even the wildest of animals had been well established by Cogitosus; the two later vitae repeated tales of fierce boars, elusive foxes, cattle and sheep that followed the saint’s commands. Indeed, any Irish reader or hearer of Brigit’s vitae knew that boars and cattle were important
animals in the iconography of Celtic traditions in Ireland and elsewhere (for instance, the Bible), and turned up frequently as magical characters in the secular literature of the early medieval period. Brigit also reigned over the natural features of the landscape and the weather. Rain neither fell upon her harvests nor storms threaten her sheep. In the *Bethu Brigit*, she sang this verse:

Grant me a clear day  
for Thou are a dear friend, a kingly youth:  
for the sake of thy mother, loving Mary,  
ward off rain, ward off wind.

My king will do it for me,  
rain will not fall till the night  
on account of Brigit today,  
who is going here to the herding

(46)

Landscape and weather yielded to her. Dark and impenetrable woods gave up easy paths to those under her protection, while thieves lost their way in broad daylight. In one episode in the *Vita Prima*, her female companions were halted at a river with the Connachtmen and Úi Néill, both traditional enemies of the Leinstermen. The armies refused to help them cross. So Brigit manipulated the waters. While the river roiled up above the unhelpful soldiers’ heads, the waters remained calm for Brigit’s nuns, reaching only their knees, so that they were able to wade across (95). By comparison, in the seventh- or eighth-century cattle-rustling saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the numinuous powers of the river Cronn whipped its waters to prevent the passage of impious armies while heroes moved easily across peaceful landscapes.²⁹ Finally, Brigit also interpreted the skies as easily as druids read the stars; besides shooting fire from her skull, she informed a crowd of admirers that the thundercloud lowering over their heads signified Patrick’s burial place (58). In one famous episode, she even hung her cloak on a sunbeam (91).

Her constant safe travel across the lands of Ireland, her ability to interpret and control the landscape and the skies, and her power to protect or destroy men on the move all pointed towards a mastery of nature and territory that even Patrick could not claim. True, the earliest vitae of Patrick put him on the plains before Tara (Temair) clearing the skies of darkness and halting druidic snows, and he also controlled the bounty of fish in rivers.³⁰ But this was Christian counter-magic. Patrick did not display the ease with nature’s creatures, or consistently perform the same kind of nature-based miracles as Brigit. Continental hagiographers turned their
saints into weather-masters, as did later Irish writers, but in the earliest Irish hagiography of the seventh and eighth centuries, only Brigit was a mistress of the landscapes.\textsuperscript{31}

Brigit's hagiographers were also purposefully invoking 'pre-Christian' history in their allusions to territory and landscape. Once, they proposed, heroines, warrior-women and territorial goddesses from myths and king-tales had wielded feminine power in a land that denied women political authority.\textsuperscript{32} The writers of \textit{Vita Prima} and \textit{Bethu Brigte} used these traditional models to cast Brigit as protectress of the Leinster people in danger of invasion by their enemies, especially the invading Uí Néill. In one episode, she granted to the king of Leinster a long life and victory in his 'perennial feud with the Uí Néill', even though other parts of her vitae showed Brigit to be on good terms with the southern Uí Néill and their bishops in Mide. Soon after, the king went to battle to prevent the invasion of his homeland and called on Brigit's support against the Uí Néill. His men cried to heaven and immediately had a vision of Brigit in the van of battle, her staff in her right hand and the usual column of fire blazing skyward from her head. The king thereafter waged thirty successful battles in Ireland and conducted nine campaigns in Britain. Almost more importantly, Brigit's supernatural shield remained effective after his death, for when the Leinster men carried his body into battle against the Uí Néill, they routed the invaders (\textit{VP}, 88, 89).\textsuperscript{33}

Like the territorial goddesses alluded to in myth and saga, Brigit ruled the land of her kin and protected its kings, at least according to her hagiographers. As Thomas Torma points out, they must have known texts similar to \textit{Baile in Scáil}, a symbolic narrative in which a queenly sovereignty doles out the liquor of political authority to successive kings; Medb, the dominant queen of seven feeble kings and ruler of Connacht, was a familiar figure from Ulster-based tales.\textsuperscript{34} Hagiographers dwelt among points on the landscape and even whole territories that had gained their names from female characters touted in ancient history, although medieval scholars recorded little of that history in explicitly religious terms. Nor had any custom of naming the land after a pagan sovereignty or territorial goddess called Brig[it] endured – if such customs had lasted, we may be sure that these hagiographers would have exploited them.\textsuperscript{35} Yet Brigit was the chaste consort of Leinster kings. Her biographers and devotees knew that her first church of Kildare was located only a few short miles from one of the ancient inaugural sites of Leinster kings, the hill of Ailenn. No evidence indicates that Brigit or her clerical followers chose Kildare in order to link it with the ancient kings of Leinster, although this seems quite likely. But poetic evidence reveals that, after Brigit's time, her successors interpreted the proximity of the pagan and Christian sites as further proof of Brigit's near-divine powers over the land. A poem written about 840 by a bishop of
Kildare (and translated in royal archaic by Kuno Meyer) declared Brigit the new ruler over Ailenn, the political symbol of the province:

Sit safely enthroned, triumphant Brigit, upon the side of Liffey far as the strand of the ebbing sea. Thou art the sovereign lady with banded hosts that presides over the Children of Cathair the Great. . . .

Oh Brigit whose land I behold, on which each one in turn has moved about, thy fame has outshone the fame of the king – thou art over them all.

Thou hast everlasting rule with the king apart from the land in which is thy cemetery. Grandchild of Bresal son of Dian, sit thou safely enthroned, triumphant Brigit.\[36\]

Kings came and went, kingdoms rose and fell, implied the bishop-poet, but the supernatural reign of Brigit had begun well before and continued long past any man's death. Similar to Temair or Tailltiu, the sacred sites of northern kingdoms, Ailenn and Brigit of Kildare together remained the guiding force of Leinster political ambitions. Neither the saint herself nor churchmen beyond Kildare needed her physical remains so long as the saint's immanence permeated the land itself. Just as Tara's control shifted from one branch of the Úi Néill to another, so the leadership of Brigit's churches could migrate from Kildare to one of her other communities.

By the eighth century, then, Brigit's hagiographers and other supporters of her paruchia had realized how effective a reputation for divinity could be in making a case for her sanctity. They knew, from Cogitosus' version of her vita or from their common Latin source, and from visits to Kildare itself, that Brigit's body lay at the heart of Leinster, infusing her sanctity into the larger landscape. Plenty of wells called after the saint dotted the hills and fields of Leinster and other provinces, where healing waters could cure believers of headache and other ills.\[37\] Indeed, by 900, according to Cormac mac Cuilennáin, a scholar, bishop and king of Munster, the very word 'Brigit' had come to mean 'goddess':

Brigit .i. banfile ingen in Dagdae. Isí insin Brigit bè n-èxe .i. bandēa no adratis filid. Ar ba romôr 7 ba roân a frithnam. Ideo eum deam uocant poetarum. Cuisus sorores erant Brigit bè legis 7 Brigit bè Goibne ingena in Dagda, de quorum nominibus pene omnes Hibernenses dea Brigit uocabatur.

[Brigit, that is, the female poet, daughter of the [god] Dagdae. This is Brigit the female seer, or woman of insight, i.e. the goddess whom poets used to worship, for her cult was very great and very splendid. It is for this reason that they call her the goddess of poets by this title,
and her sisters were Brigit the woman of leechcraft and Brigit the woman of smithcraft, i.e. goddesses, i.e. three daughters of the Dagdae are they. By their names the goddess Brigit was called by all the Irish.] 38

In Cormac's version there were three goddesses called Brigit, each with her own specialization: poetry, healing and artistic creation. 39 One of the Dagdae's Brigits turned up again as Brígh in the ninth-century saga Cath Maige Tuired (Second Battle of Moytura), a story of the fight for Ireland between two supernatural tribes. This Brígh was one of the Túatha Dé Danann (tribe of the goddess Danu), the supernatural clan that supposedly inhabited the side or fairy-mounds that still litter the island. In this historical account and other, later histories, Brigit was important mostly for inventing keening, the characteristic Irish shrieking and weeping over the dead. 40 But once the principle of Brigit's territorially was established she conquered Ireland; instead of just three goddesses, Christian holy women called Brígh or Brigit littered the hagiographic and genealogical literature.

By the twelfth century, Brigit had acquired the reputation for divinity that would haunt her literature to the present day. In that same century, Gerald of Wales came to Ireland with the Norman invaders and recorded strange stories of Kildare. He heard that the plains of Kildare boasted unharvested fields dedicated to Brigit, that the saint's monastery could not be violated by a man at pain of death, that the nunnery kept an ever-burning flame tended by her nineteen nuns and, each twentieth night, by the saint herself. 41 (Gerald also wrote that Irish women had sex with goats and that all Irishmen were dirty, duplicitous axe-slingers.) By the time the Normans came to Ireland, then, centuries of hints at Brigit's pre-Christian divinity had fully infused her cult, turning her late medieval vitae into veritable fairy-tales of miracle-making. But the process was neither accidental nor haphazard. Brigit's earliest hagiographers – Cogitosus and the authors of Vita Prima and Bethu Brigté – had sought different ways to claim authority, power and territory for the saint of Kildare, her churches and her clerical successors. Cogitosus had lacked models for Ireland's first female saint, for hagiography was new to Ireland; Christian women still did not have many ways to become saints in the patriarchal societies of early medieval Europe. He emphasized the physical relics of the saint and the importance of her main shrine at Kildare, with its Roman-style church, to authenticate Brigit's dossier. He established her as a saint despite her gender, who travelled, interpreted Christianity for converts and provided churches for her followers.

The writers of the slightly later Vita Prima and Bethu Brigté had no body on which to base their claims for the saint. In Lacanian terms, they had to provide the ego for her corps moiré; in early medieval terms,
without a body to convey the saint’s immanence, disciples of Brigit had no vehicle for her miracles or authority. So her hagiographers drew on witnesses’ stories of Brigit, Cogitosus’ vita, the Bible and continental models to establish the saint’s reputation and her church’s control of territory. They also looked nearer to home to local literary traditions and heroic history in order to cast Brigit as a mistress of the animals, territory and landscape, and the elements, incidentally creating a mold for Celtic sanctity that would spread to other cults and hagiographers in Ireland. For hagiographers and their audiences, such characteristics enabled a bodiless but highly gendered Brigit to protect the people who inhabited or roamed her territories, too. No devotees needed to visit her material remains; the saint could perform marvels wherever she or they went, even in the territories of Patrick, even though her special concern was for the kings and people of her home province, Leinster. Her body must still have lain at the heart of Leinster in the eighth and ninth centuries, when the authors of the second and third vitae acknowledged her specially gendered guardianship. Only later would Patrick’s men carry it north. But before her translation, the only way for Brigit’s hagiographers to express the posthumous power of a holy woman – while lacking her physical relics – was through the language of gender, heroics and territorial divinity. Even comparisons to queens and the Virgin Mary were not enough to establish Brigit’s authority. Christian exemplars alone simply could not articulate a woman’s territorial control within the tribal politics of Ireland. Without a body they had no saint, unless that saint was a goddess. These two post-Cogitosan hagiographers, writing explicitly didactic tales in order to teach Christians how to be more Christian, reached back into the ancient history of pagan Ireland to prove the sanctity of Brigit.

Notes


3 AASS, 1 February, p. 112. This work on Brigit is part of a larger project in progress on the cults of St Brigit and St Genovefa of Paris. I treat the physical remains of Brigit in a paper for the annual California Celtic Colloquium, 15–17 March 2002: ‘St. Brigit after the seventh century: a saint with three heads?’


7 R.A.S. Macalister wrote in 1919: ‘No Christian lady would willingly bear a name so heathenish while paganism was still a force.’ Unfortunately, Macalister deduced without evidence that St Brigit was originally a priestess of the goddess who converted but whose later devotees unthinkingly connected her with the deity. Macalister, ‘Temair Breg: a study of the remains and traditions of Tara’, PRIA (©) (1919), p. 340.


9 Muirchú, writing the life of Patrick in the last part of the seventh century, called himself the second hagiographer in Ireland, the first being Cogitosus: Ludwig Bieler (ed.), Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh (Dublin, 1979), p. 62; Picard takes this for literary humility; pp. 67–8.


12 As Connolly points out, Cogitosus’ vita and Vita Prima share about thirty-two episodes: ‘Vitae prima sanctae Brigitae’, 7.

13 Ó Ríain, Corpus Genealogiarum, p. 3.


15 The fact that Bethu Brigit is partially in Irish suggests a public reading to a non-clerical crowd; Latin vitae were read out in churches at saints’ feast-days.


17 Connolly, ‘Cogitosus: Life of Brigit’, 5.

18 Connolly, ‘Cogitosuis’s Life of Brigit, 7, 9.
22. Cross, p. 163: D.1515.3.
23. For explanation and references see *Dictionary of the Irish Language (Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials)*, compact edn (Dublin, 1983), p. 443, col. 224 under 2 liàn.
25. Ó hÓgain, *Hero in Irish Folk History*, p. 22.
35. Contra McConne, ‘Brigit in the seventh century’, pp. 110–11 *et passim*: there is no evidence beyond the names themselves to support a pre-Christian association of these sites with Brígh/Brigit.