

**Female Celtic Saints:
Cross-Cultural Connections from Across the Irish Sea**

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The lives of the Celtic saints are composed of fact and fiction, steeped in oral tradition full of myths and legends. They lived in a period of immense change as paganism gave way to Christianity, and were significant in the conversion of the Celtic population. There are numerous churches, monasteries, poems and stories dedicated to these saints. The saints were involved in widespread cults, with famous men and women leaving their marks on society. Although the female saints such as Brigid, Winifred and Tryphine lived remarkable lives, a question arises whether they actually existed or were superimposed over older pagan myths. Whatever the case, these women and what they represented were able to cross more than just gender boundaries, extending their cults through cross-cultural connections that were a part of the European wide hagiographic idiom. Despite the fact that the Celtic world was segregated geographically, the *topoi* and hagiography developed within an overall European context.

Saints Brigid, Winifred and Tryphine are useful models for a study of female Celtic saints. The Celtic world helped to introduce hagiography, the study of the lives of saints. All three saints had far-reaching cults, although they were composed in different centuries and in different manners. Saint Brigid's life composed by Cogitosus is arguably the earliest *vita* of a saint written during this time period.¹ Saint Winifred's well in Wales was quite possibly the most visited pilgrimage site of its kind. As for Saint Tryphine, she appears in a completely different manner, through literature, but is still connected with important historical characters such as

¹ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200* (England: Pearson Education Limited, 1995), 208.

King Arthur. Each *vita* of these three saints detail different phenomena, but their overall context and impressions they left bears mention.

The Life of Saint Brigid

Not much is known about the life of Saint Brigid (453-523). Literacy mainly existed only in the religious community and accounts of a saint's life had to be hand-written, most likely by a monk. Druids, who were pre-Christian priests in early Ireland, did not like to record their knowledge. They believed that their wisdom could be tarnished if other people became aware of what they knew.² Thus, many of the myths and legends were shared orally. Another possible reason for the difficulty of discovering a saint's biography could be the fact that many saints had similar or identical names. "In the Tallagh Martyrology there are as many as seven Brigid commemorations apart from that of Brigid of Kildare... S. Brigid had several disciples of the same name as herself."³ The spelling of Brigid of Kildare also differs.

Saint Brigid is one of the most famous patron saints of Ireland, second only to that of Saint Patrick. It is very likely that the life of Brigid was superimposed over a goddess from the pagan era; these myths and rituals were carried over to make the transition from paganism to Christianity that much easier.⁴ Her life was mainly composed of helping the poor and those in need, as well as establishing one of the first double monasteries in Ireland. Her *vita* is the earliest recorded known to date, and her memory still lives on today through her places of veneration.

The oldest existing *vita* of Brigid, which was written two-hundred years after her death, was composed by an Irish monk from Kildare named Cogitosus. Although the life written by

² Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Legends* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 11.

³ S. Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints, Vol. 1-4* (London: Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1907), 285.

⁴ James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical, A Introduction And Guide* (1929. Reprint, Portland: Four Courts Press, 1993), 357.

Cogitosus is short, what makes it unique is the meticulous description of the monastery at Kildare and other elements of contemporary life.⁵ There are no surviving copies of the Irish manuscript by Cogitosus, but “it is known from over sixty Continental manuscripts of the ninth century and later, and a further twenty-odd manuscripts contain lections excerpted from Cogitosus.”⁶ This leads one to believe in the importance of the *vita* by Cogitosus.

Brigid was most likely born around 453 AD in Ireland. She could have possibly had noble bloodlines through her father, the pagan chieftain Dubtach. According to *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, a monk in the monastery of Clonenagh, Dubtach had a further genealogy:⁷ “Dubthach [sic] son of Demre, son of Bresal, son of Connla, son of Art Corp, son of Cairbre Nia, son of Cormac, son of Oengus the Dumb, son of Eochaid Find Fuathnairt, son of Feidlimid Rechtmad.”⁸ Brigid’s father was a descendent from “Fedlimidh Rechtmar, king of Ireland in the second century of the Christian era.”⁹ Her mother, Broicsech, was a slave owned by Dubtach. When Broicsech became pregnant, Dubtach’s wife grew jealous and forced her husband to sell his slave. Broicsech was sold at first to a poet of the Ui Neill clan, who then sold the slave to a druid from Meath in the eastern section of Ireland, where Brigid was born.¹⁰

From the beginning, Brigid was reportedly able to perform miracles; in fact her birth itself was a miracle. Broicsech, but not the unborn child, had been sold to another household, and a druid predicted that the child that was born neither inside nor outside of the house would be the

⁵ Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 14.

⁶ Sharpe, 14.

⁷ Oengus lived from about 793 until 817. His real name is unknown because he concealed it out of humility. At first a monk, Oengus eventually became an abbot-bishop. *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*. Edited by Whitley Stokes (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905), xxvi.

⁸ *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, 65.

⁹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 268. The description by Baring-Gould and Fisher is a composite of six printed lives of Brigid. They give background information that Cogitosus’ life omits. Cogitosus’ description gives the closest account of Brigid’s life from a contemporary standpoint, with Baring-Gould and Fisher filling in details with the other lives.

¹⁰ Cogitosus, *Bethu Brigte*. Ed. Donncha O’hAodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), x.

greatest child in Ireland. The next day, as Broicsech was going over the threshold into her house, she gave birth to Brigid.¹¹ Cogitosus also connected Brigid with fire from an early age:

Broicsech went to milk and she leaves nobody in her house *except* the holy girl who was asleep. They saw that the house had caught fire behind them. The people run to its aid... The house is found intact and the girl asleep... And Brigid is revered [there] as long as it may exist.¹²

A druid and his family were outside of Broicsech and Brigid's dwellings when they saw a column of fire rising out of the spot where Brigid was standing. The druid knew then that Brigid would be a holy girl.¹³

Women in medieval Ireland were treated with more respect than other communities, but they were usually kept separated from men.¹⁴ A lower class girl would spend her youth as a servant, while upper class girls would be taught basic training on how to serve a husband. After their youth the women would have been expected to marry. Brigid most likely received the traditional Irish education of the time period for an upper class girl, which consisted of learning how to "sew and spin and manage a noble household."¹⁵ She lived with a foster family, because her mother had been sold.¹⁶ Fosterage was a form of kinship in Ireland.¹⁷ It was an agreement between natural parents and foster-parents for the care of the child. "The foster-parents bound themselves to maintain the child at a level appropriate to its status and to give instruction."¹⁸ When she was old enough, Brigid requested she be sent back to her father, who complied and brought her back to live with him in Ui Fhailgi.¹⁹

¹¹ Sean O'Duinn, *The Rites of Brigid: Goddess and Saint* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2005), 9.

¹² Cogitosus, 20.

¹³ Cogitosus, 20.

¹⁴ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 8.

¹⁶ Cogitosus, 21.

¹⁷ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 82.

¹⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 116.

¹⁹ Cogitosus, 21.

As Brigid grew older, she continued to perform miracles while being in her father's care. Many of Brigid's miracles involve her giving food to the poor. There are numerous stories of the saint refilling a larder with butter or having a never-ending supply of loaves of bread.²⁰ Even when she was seen taking food to give to a person in need, the food was always refilled. Brigid had the power of the Holy Spirit within her and legend tells of her blessing water and turning it into ale.²¹ This theme would figure in greatly to the spread of her cult and the knowledge of her throughout the Celtic world. Brigid would become known during her lifetime as the "Mary of the Gael." This equated her with the Virgin Mary. In the Bible, it is the Virgin Mary that tells Jesus to turn water into wine.²² Ibor the Bishop had a vision of the Virgin; when the Bishop saw Brigid, he realized that it was Brigid he had seen in his dream. Bishop Ibor then told the brethren of Kildare that "...a girl, for whom it has been prepared by God, will come to us like Mary."²³ This would also develop the spread of her cult into an ale festival which took place in the later Middle Ages.

Dubtach grew weary of her continuous generosity, feeling that his own property was being depleted, and attempted to sell her as a serving slave to Dunlang, King of Leinster.²⁴ Because Dubtach had noble bloodlines, he would have gone straight to the King, rather than going to a fellow noble, to rid himself of Brigid. The King ultimately refused, because he did not want the girl to give away all of his possessions either,²⁵ and because he recognized her for more than a slave. "It is not right for us to deal with this young woman, for her merit before God is

²⁰ Cogitosus, 22.

²¹ *Celtic Spirituality*, translated by Davies, Oliver and Thomas O'Loughlin (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) 147.

²² *The Holy Bible, Douay Rheims Version*. Revised by Bishop Richard Challoner (Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1971), 105. This will be developed further on in the paper.

²³ Cogitosus, 22.

²⁴ Brigid's father was from Leinster; thus, he went to the King of Leinster for help. Cogitosus, x.

²⁵ "Weapons may often have been given by kings and lords to those below them: a sword in the possession of Brigit's [sic] aristocratic father, Dubthach [sic], belonged to the king." Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 69. While Dubtach was attempting to sell Brigid to Dunlang, she gave away the sword to a beggar.

higher than ours.” Dunlang officially declared Brigid a free woman.²⁶

Brigid left the care of Dubtach on her own accord to help her mother, who was ill and still a slave in Connacht.²⁷ Her mother had to tend to the cows and help with the production of butter. Brigid assumed most of the chores that were under Broicsech’s duties. Brigid continued to give away the butter, but true to form the stores were never depleted. Broicsech’s owner watched Brigid perform these miracles, and was so impressed that he offered to give her a herd of cows.²⁸ Brigid requested that instead of the cows, Broicsech be set free. The master agreed, saying “...your mother shall not be in service from today... and I shall be baptized and I shall never part from you.”²⁹ Broicsech and Brigid returned to Dubtach, and afterwards Brigid would be portrayed in such things as paintings and stained glass as having a milk cow at her feet.³⁰

When Brigid and her mother returned to Dubtach, she learned that her father had chosen a poet for her to marry. Poets were highly regarded in early Irish society; they were grouped with clergymen and considered second only to the kings.³¹ Her family was very supportive of the union because it would have raised their family’s wealth and stance in society. Brigid, however, refused because she had “offered up her virginity to God.”³² Her brothers became angry because

²⁶ Edward Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (1993. Reprint, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1998.), 71.

²⁷ Female slaves would have been so since birth. They were considered more valuable than male slaves because they could be taken advantage of sexually, and it was harder for them to escape than men. During times of war, women would often be enslaved. Brigid’s mother was most likely enslaved due to this reason. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 69. See also Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): Peasant women, like Brigid’s mother, were captured and kept as slaves well into the Middle Ages. “Slavery was a gendered issue in the minds of ninth-century Irish writers: to be powerless and exposed was to be female” (193). Adomnan of Iona emancipated women in the eighth century, and showed his disapproval for it in his *Life of Saint Columba*. Adomnan of Iona. *Life of St Columba*. Introduction by Richard Sharpe (New York: Penguin Books, 1995). Many saints did what they could to free slaves because they saw it as unchristian. Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

²⁸ O’Duinn, 11.

²⁹ Cogitosus, 22.

³⁰ O’Duinn, 36. Irish folklore tells of Brigid and St. Brigid’s Cow visiting a house to bless those living inside. Irish people would place symbols of Brigid over the doorstep in the dairy to make the cows produce more milk.

³¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 127.

³² Cogitosus, 23.

they would lose the valuable dowry they would have received, had the marriage taken place.³³ The exchange of a dowry was mainly found among the nobility, which Brigid, through her father, was a member.³⁴ “The bride went to the groom’s family in return for a marriage payment or bride-piece... for her folks...”³⁵ At a marriage, the bride and bridegroom would contribute moveable wealth, which at that time consisted mainly of cattle. Herds of cattle allowed a person to be admitted into the noble class, and the more cattle a person had, a higher ranking noble the person would become.³⁶ Although in this instance, Brigid would have had to contribute her own cattle, the wife still obtained this property as her own. However, “since her status was dependent on that of her husband, there was every reason why her cattle should help to raise his status and thus her own.”³⁷ As Brigid’s status in society would have grown with her marriage, her family would have been affected by this as well. When her family continued their torment and encouragement of the marriage, Brigid gouged her own eye out, saying, “I deem it unlikely... that anyone will ask you for *a blind girl*.”³⁸ Legend also says that a spring grew at the place where she had plucked her eye.³⁹ Her family agreed to support her venture as a nun, and Brigid healed herself.⁴⁰

Brigid joined a group of seven other virgins who were to take the veil, all meaning to

³³ “Her brothers grieved at her depriving them of the bride-price.” Cogitosus, 23.

³⁴ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 467.

³⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 43.

³⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 465.

³⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 465.

³⁸ Cogitosus, 23.

³⁹ “Her brothers rush about her at once save that there was no water near them to wash the wound. ‘Put’, said she, ‘my staff about this sod in front of you.’ That was done. A stream gushed forth from the earth.” Cogitosus, 23.

⁴⁰ Not all religious women were nuns. Rather, a nun referred to a cloistered female. The cloistered females secluded themselves from everyone they knew and lived in monastic centers in order to become better Christians. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134-53.

become nuns. They were to receive the veil from Bishop Mel⁴¹ with the assistance of Bishop Mac Caille.⁴² As Brigid received the veil,

The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit [sic] with the orders of a bishop. ‘This virgin alone in Ireland,’ said Mel, ‘will hold the episcopal ordination.’ While she was being consecrated a fiery column ascended from her head.⁴³

This depiction once again equates Brigid with fire, affiliating her with that of Brig, the Irish goddess of fire and light.⁴⁴ When Mac Caille protested that a woman could not be given the honor to be a bishop, Mel replied that it was God’s will that had him read the specific prayer. It is highly unlikely that a woman, even one of Brigid’s reputation, could have actually been a bishop. Women were sometimes cast in the important roles that men normally held, such as chiefs and landowners, all the while still being wives and mothers. Rather than attempting to create a new political space for women, the writer “employed Brigit [sic] and her like to consolidate gender boundaries and reinforce the two models already available to women.”⁴⁵ While at first it may seem that women were making a huge leap by Brigid being anointed a bishop, in actuality they were being put back into their rightful places in society.

Between the years 480 to 490 AD, the King of Leinster gave Brigid land at Kildare (Cell Dara), where she founded her own small monastic community.⁴⁶ She would be able to gather like-minded women around her. With the help of the bishop of Ardagh, Mel, who was a follower of Saint Patrick, she formed her community on an ancient tract of land at Kildare. The monastery, whose name meant ‘church of the oak’ because it was built beneath an ancient oak

⁴¹ Bishop Mel was from Ardagh, which was the principal church of Southern Tethbae in Ireland. Mel was the patron saint of Ardagh and was connected with any story involving Ardagh. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 33.

⁴² Bishop Mac Caille was a bishop from Westmeath in the northern section of Ireland. John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches: A History, AD 200 to 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 79.

⁴³ Cogitosus, 24.

⁴⁴ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), 162.

⁴⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 192.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Rees, *Celtic Saints: Passionate Wanderers* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2000), 33.

tree, came into fruition.⁴⁷ The land where the monastery was built already had a connotation with the fire goddess Brig.⁴⁸ When the land was under the rule of Brig, it had an ever-burning fire on the site. When Saint Brigid's monastery was built on the same land, the land became Christian, but the fire continued to burn.⁴⁹

Kildare became a treasured center for learning and education in early Ireland.⁵⁰ As the abbess of Kildare, Brigid was involved in all the changes of the community. Kildare, as an early settlement, began to grow after the formation of the monastery. It became well-known for its work with illuminated manuscripts, possibly including the Book of Kildare, which has since been lost in history.⁵¹ When Gerald of Wales was traveling through Ireland, he recorded seeing a book, presumably the Book of Kildare. He declared that the majesty of the book was “the result of the work, not of men, but of angels.”⁵²

The monastery at Kildare was a double monastery, having space for both men and women. This phenomenon was new to Ireland, but had already been established as a European tradition.⁵³ It was watched over by an abbess, Brigid being the first, and a bishop-abbot.⁵⁴ This was considered unique in fifth-century Ireland. Kildare became “one of the greatest ecclesiastical

⁴⁷ McNeill, 79.

⁴⁸ Brig is also depicted as a female judge. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 268. See also Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*. Brig was a fertility goddess. Brig, or “Brigant” was also the goddess of sun and fire. Lisa Bitel, “Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition,” *Textual Practice* 16 (2002).

⁴⁹ Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 44.

⁵⁰ Kenney, 356. The monastery was innovative in Ireland for its double-monastery set-up. It had a large church of ‘unusual size and ornamentation,’ and became a highly visited place in the Middle Ages.

⁵¹ McNeill, 214. The Book of Kildare is an unsolved mystery. It was only ever mentioned by Gerald of Wales. In his description of the book, he speaks of its ‘intricate, delicate and subtle patterns... its fresh and vivid colors.’

⁵² Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*. Ed. John J. O’Meara (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 84.

⁵³ “This [Kildare] is the only authenticated example in Ireland of the ‘double monastery,’ a type which had a considerable vogue elsewhere.” McNeill, 79. According to Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100*, outside of Ireland, “archeological and textual evidence together suggests possibly sixty or seventy mixed-sex communities in England in the eighth and ninth centuries... they also existed elsewhere in Europe, too, as at Chelles [France]...” (Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 146-147).

⁵⁴ T.W. Moody and F.X Martin, *The Course of Irish History* (Lanham: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2001), 46.

settlements in Ireland.”⁵⁵ Pilgrims would flock from all over the country just to see the double monastery format and to be near Brigid’s legend. Even though the monastery was for both monks and nuns, when they were on the grounds, everything was segregated. Cogitosus detailed in *Bethu Brigte* the many gifts that followers donated to the monastery. During Cogitosus’ time in the seventh century, the church had become more ornate with decorated tombs covered in precious gems and metals. Many monastic and religious places begun by female saints were less wealthy and established on family lands that a father was able to spare for his daughter. Others, such as Kildare, were more prosperous, but the wealth of the monastery was measured in the privileges, clients and amount of food the place had. It was apparent that Kildare was wealthy by just having Cogitosus in their employ. “...the very ability of Cell Dara to support a scholar of his caliber attested to the community’s wealth.”⁵⁶

After Brigid formed and established Kildare, she traveled throughout the countryside, spreading the message of Christianity and helping in the conversion of many pagans. She is also said to have met Saint Patrick and helped him with a parentage dispute for a child.⁵⁷ The *vita* by Cogitosus ends abruptly, without addressing the death of Brigid at all. This leads one to believe that there are pieces of the text missing.⁵⁸ Brigid was said to be born on the first of February, which is also the day she died.⁵⁹ She died most likely in the year 523, and was buried at her monastery of Kildare, although her remains were later moved to join with those of Saint Patrick.⁶⁰ In the present day, Brigid is remembered for her generosity towards others and her love of Christianity. Brigid had also become known as ‘Mary of the Gael,’ equating her with the

⁵⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 155.

⁵⁶ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 173.

⁵⁷ Cogitosus, 31.

⁵⁸ *Bethu Brigte*, xvii.

⁵⁹ *Celtic Spirituality*, 139. “...others come with great gifts for the feast of St. Brigit [sic], who fell asleep on the first of February, safely casting off the burden of the flesh, and followed the Lamb into the heavenly mansions.”

⁶⁰ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 282.

Virgin Mary. During Brigid's lifetime, a nun had a vision of seeing the Virgin Mary; when the nun saw Brigid, the nun stated, "This is the Mary whom I saw in my dream."⁶¹ Both a bishop and a nun had the same vision of Saint Brigid as Mary. Making Brigid the embodiment of Mary was another way to show how much power and influence Brigid held.

It is quite feasible that Saint Brigid was a real person. The facts that are recorded, however, can be brought in to question. It is impossible to know how true her miracles were, and the very dates of her birth and death are open to discussion as well.⁶² There is something about Saint Brigid that has made her stand the test of time for over a thousand years. The legend of Brigid and what she meant to the people of the Celtic world and to the people of Europe and the world today are the lasting marks of Brigid's life. These lasting marks are more important than whether or not a saint actually lived, and it is sure that her legend will continue well into the future.

The Life of Saint Winifred

There is even less information on the life of Saint Winifred than with Brigid. She is connected to other saints through their lives, myths, and folklore, and has multiple places of dedication to her name. Instead of a monastery, her most lasting mark on the land has been her well at Holywell in north Wales. Also like Saint Brigid of Kildare, Winifred has different spellings to her name. In Welsh she is known as Gwenfrewi (or Gwenfrewy), although this has also been disputed.⁶³ One of the *vitae* written concerning Winifred specifies that she was known by the name Brey, but a

⁶¹ *Celtic Spirituality*, 142.

⁶² Saint Brigid has been affected by the euhemerist method, which is when the mythological or folk account of a person has been turned into fact. This possibly could have helped the cult of Brigid last the gap between the pagan and Christian times. "By...humanizing and mortalizing the divinities of pagan Ireland, they [historians] hoped to eradicate the pagan beliefs that still lingered on among many of their countrymen." Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 261.

⁶³ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 191.

white thread that she wore around her neck caused her to be called Gwenn Vrewy.⁶⁴ Gwen and Gwyn were common prefix and affix for people in Wales.⁶⁵ In Wales, it was said that Winifred “was generally known as ‘Candida Wenefreda.’”⁶⁶

Saint Winifred lived during the seventh century in Wales, and her earliest *vita* was written in the twelfth century, almost five-hundred years later. One well-known edition of her *vita*, *The Lyfe of St. Wenefreide*, was written most likely in the year 1401.⁶⁷ Despite the fact that her story was known throughout Wales, Winifred is not mentioned in such primary works as *The Domesday Book*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* or even Gerald of Wales in his journey through his and Winifred’s homeland. In the *vita* from the fifteenth century, it was written that Winifred was the only daughter of Teuyth.⁶⁸ Varying sources describe Teuyth as a valiant soldier or as a powerful chieftain, directly below King Eliuth.⁶⁹ Winifred was not of noble birth, but the family did have some wealth. Winifred’s mother was Gwenlo, daughter of Bugi, who was also the father of Saint Beuno.⁷⁰ In what is now known as Flintshire, Beuno would later save his niece Winifred’s life.⁷¹

From an early age, Winifred decided to devote herself to “a heavenly bridegroom, and, rejecting mortal men, dedicated her virginity to him alone.”⁷² At first, Teuyth was unhappy with her decision to devote herself to God, because he would have no heirs. Ultimately, however, he

⁶⁴ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 190.

⁶⁵ The prefix Gwyn and Gwen could possibly mean white. “The name of one of the three *villae* owned by Teuyth was Gwenffynonon, ‘the White or Fair Well.’” Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, pg. 190.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 186.

⁶⁸ A. W. Wade-Evans, “The Life of Saint Wenefred,” *Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Board, 1944), 289.

⁶⁹ Baring Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 188.

⁷⁰ Saint Beuno lived during the seventh century as a holy man from Wales. Aside from helping his niece Winifred, he traveled extensively to spread the word of Christianity. Before he died, Beuno had a vision of Heaven. His day of commemoration is April twenty-first. Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 208-221.

⁷¹ Wade-Evans, 293.

⁷² Wade-Evans, 289.

grew to accept the idea.⁷³ Teuyth contacted Winifred's uncle, Beuno, to train his daughter in the ways of religion. Beuno agreed to train Winifred in exchange for a tract of Teuyth's land. In order to complete the transaction, Teuyth needed the consent of the king to transfer lands.⁷⁴ Teuyth traveled to see King Eliuth, who granted the request.⁷⁵ On his new land, Beuno built a cell and a chapel.

According to her *vita*, sometime later, when Teuyth and Gwenlo were hearing mass at Beuno's church, Winifred had stayed behind at her parent's house in order to prepare for mass that day. A man named Caradog was riding nearby when he decided to stop for a rest and to ask for something to drink. When Caradog called out for the man of the house, Winifred answered the call and told him that her father was hearing Beuno's mass. Caradog, "being a young man of ungovernable passions, and without scruple, attempted familiarities."⁷⁶ Winifred initially tried to discourage his lust by saying she was betrothed to another man, but the young Caradog grew angry and forcefully told her that he desired her for a wife. Winifred attempted to buy herself some time by telling Caradog to wait, and that she would return momentarily after going to her room to change her clothes.⁷⁷

Winifred escaped through the back of her house to try and make it to Beuno's chapel. Caradog realized that he had been tricked and made a fool, and got on his horse to go after Winifred. She had arrived at the door of the monastery, but the young man had caught up with

⁷³ "To this Teuyth there was given no progeny saving a daughter only, named Wenefred [sic]. She steadfastly from an early age began to love intensely a heavenly bridegroom, and, rejecting mortal men, dedicated her virginity to him alone. Her father, discovering this, is partly distressed and unhappy, partly glad, as one to be congratulated. For sadness was on him in that he lacked offspring, she alone excepted, and in that she declined to marry a man to the maintaining of his patrimony in the future, which indeed he bore heavily. On the other hand, he was glad that his child yielded herself to the rule of God, for which favor the warrior resolved to devote his daughter to the liberal arts." Wade-Evans, 289.

⁷⁴ Wade-Evans, 289.

⁷⁵ Wade-Evans, 291.

⁷⁶ Baring-Gould and Fisher, 188.

⁷⁷ Wade-Evans, 293.

her. “And when she would place her foot within the threshold, the man anticipated her with a sword, cutting off her head.”⁷⁸ Winifred’s parents were in shock over what had just happened to their only daughter in front of them. Beuno went to the door to see who had committed the murder, and at the sight of Beuno, Caradog died and melted away.

Then Bennon [Beuno], returning to the corpse, adjusted the head, which had been thrown within by the sword’s stroke, to the body which was lying without, earnestly beseeching God to vivify that body, lest the enemy should rejoice over it. And directly on the prayer the body with power received back the soul, not a scar showing except a thin one on the neck. But the ground stained with her blood cracked, and a rapid spring gushed out in that place full of water, the stones of which to this day are seen bloody as on the first day.⁷⁹

The miracle that occurred, where the life went back into the dead Winifred, caused a spring to rise from where her head had fallen. The well, called Holywell, would become one of the most important pilgrimage sites of the medieval world, which has continued into present day.⁸⁰ In an attempt to repay Beuno for what he had done for her, Winifred promised to send Saint Beuno a handmade cloak on the vigil day of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. The cloak would never get wet or be affected by the wind.⁸¹

Beuno eventually left Flintshire and the chapel that he had built, with Winifred leaving her home soon after. According to one of the recorded *vitae*, Winifred traveled through Wales, first to Bodfari, then to Gwytherin.⁸² She was under the supervision of an older woman named Theonia. When the older woman died, Winifred became the ‘leader’ of the other virgins that Theonia had kept watch over.⁸³ Winifred then traveled to Rome to visit the relics and other holy sites of the apostles. She returned home to attend a council, with other fellow saints of the time,

⁷⁸ Wade-Evans, 293.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Francis Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954), 49.

⁸¹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 219.

⁸² Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 189.

⁸³ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 189.

called the Synod of Wenefredus.⁸⁴ The synod was called to advise the saints that were living across Britannia to join together in monasteries. Winifred “was chosen to preside over eleven virgins, that they might take from her an example of life and holy conversation.”⁸⁵ Winifred and the eleven virgins resided together at Gwytherin, where Winifred lived out the rest of her days. According to Prior Robert of Shrewsbury, in 1137 her remains were dug up and transported to Shrewsbury.⁸⁶

During her lifetime, Winifred also produced many miracles for those around her. Even after her death, the importance of the well was written in her *vita*. It was stressed that any visitor who came to the well and “unlawfully polluted her sanctuary, should thereafter be encompassed by mocking and derision, jeering and opprobrium.”⁸⁷ The healing qualities of Saint Winifred’s well were known throughout the medieval world.⁸⁸ Anyone who was ill or suffering could wash in the well, pray to God and Winifred, and would be instantly cured. Winifred actively cured her followers and pilgrims through her well, even though she was no longer living. Epilepsy was one of the main diseases the well was known to cure, “for none is more destructive that this... and because it is so, she is particularly bent on curing this.”⁸⁹

The well of Saint Winifred is different than other wells in the Celtic world. One simple fact is that the water is more powerful and runs in a greater quantity than other known wells in

⁸⁴ Wade-Evans, 295. See also: Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, pg. 190.

⁸⁵ Wade-Evans, 295.

⁸⁶ Nancy Edwards, “Celtic Saints and Early Medieval Archaeology,” *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*. Edited by Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 250.

⁸⁷ Wade-Evans, 301.

⁸⁸ Holy wells during the Celtic period were thought to possibly be sites of pre-Christian cult centers (Ó Cróinín, 31). See also: Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*. The veneration of water goes back to pre-Christian times, with many bodies of water being named after gods. During the conversion to Christianity, many wells were converted for uses with Christianity.

⁸⁹ Wade-Evans, 303.

the Celtic world. The well is also regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of Wales.⁹⁰ Another unique aspect to the well is that the water never freezes, despite being “intensely cold.”⁹¹ People from all over the Celtic world traveled to her well, because they knew of its healing powers and unique waters.

As with Saint Brigid, Saint Winifred could also have been a real person. Winifred’s story is even more outrageous than Brigid’s miracles. Modern society would have a much harder time believing a story of a young woman, pursued by a zealous young man, who ultimately had her head cut off in a jealous rage. Then, for the head to be placed back upon her body, and the young suitor to have melted in his spot. Once again, it is the meaning of her legend that perseveres through the ages.

The Life of Saint Tryphine

The life of Saint Tryphine is different than many other hagiographical tales because she mainly appears in literature instead of in *vitae*. She is connected to several famous names in history and even then she does not play an enormous role in the stories. However, she must have meant something to the Celtic people of Europe and the British Isles, based on the very fact that she is connected to these people of historical significance. As with Saint Brigid and Saint Winifred, there are various spellings to the name Tryphine; most are similar in makeup, except for Stivina, which is another variation of her name.⁹²

The story of Saint Tryphine takes place mainly in Brittany. Those in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany spoke a similar language and dialect.⁹³ This fact leads one to believe that the Celtic

⁹⁰ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 194.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Dictionnaire des Saints Bretons*. Edited by Tchou (Paris: La Bibliotheque Bretonne, 1979), 351.

⁹³ Rees, *Celtic Saints, Passionate Wanderers*, 9.

peoples were in contact with one another, even those from across the channel. The inhabitants of these Celtic nations were trading knowledge with one another and can be grouped under the overall name of Celtic.

The records of Tryphine are from a much later date than those of Saint Brigid and Saint Winifred. Although she is first mentioned only briefly in accordance with Saint Gildas, she is still connected to an earlier time period. Gildas lived during the sixth century.⁹⁴ The later stories involving Tryphine also take their information from this early tale, where she is beheaded by her husband, and Saint Gildas reattaches the head to her body. Tryphine incorporates some of the main themes from the Celtic period as well, such as the aforementioned beheading. Tryphine is connected to King Arthur and King Childebert, which shows the spread of her cult. Although the sources are from a later date, the cult aspect is still apparent. The cult connected her to famous people in history as well as through different genres, such as a theatrical play and Arthurian legend, than just a *vita*. Because of this fact, it is valuable to compare her to the other saints from an earlier period to understand these connections.

Saint Tryphine first appeared in the story of the life of Saint Gildas. It has been disputed when Saint Gildas was born. In the book of *De Excidio Britanniae*, Gildas wrote that he was born in the same year that the Battle of Mount Badon was fought.⁹⁵ The date of the battle has been calculated into different years, and thus Gildas' birth date has been debated. Most likely he was born in the late fifth century. Gildas married in Arecluta and according to Welsh genealogies, he had five children.⁹⁶ His wife most likely died soon after, which ultimately caused Gildas to turn to a life devoted to Christianity, and was very devout. He traveled all over

⁹⁴ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 82.

⁹⁵ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 83.

⁹⁶ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 104.

Europe to spread his message of the faith.⁹⁷

Saint Tryphine appears in the life of Saint Gildas connected to Conmore, lieutenant of King Childebert. After Conmore's wife died, he married Tryphine, who was the daughter of Weroc (or Guerech), Count of the British of Vannes, in the south-east portion of Brittany.⁹⁸ There was a legend that Conmore killed all of his wives after they conceived his children.⁹⁹ Because of this legend, when Tryphine conceived, she attempted to escape the wrath of Conmore. Saint Gildas arranged for Tryphine that once she gave birth, she would be held safely in a religious house and the child would be given to Gildas.

The other variation for the tale of Tryphine was that both Gildas and her father Weroc were scared for Tryphine's life.¹⁰⁰ When she found out that she was pregnant, Tryphine decided to run away. When Conmore discovered her plan, "he was incensed with greater anger, and pursued her. Having found her on the road-side, hiding under some leaves – for she was wearied by her journey – he drew out his sword, cut off her head, and then returned home."¹⁰¹ Gildas heard of what had happened and rushed to the lifeless body of Tryphine and her unborn child. He knelt on the ground and prayed for her life to be returned, and then when he placed the head back on Tryphine's body, a miracle occurred and she came back to life and arose.¹⁰² When Tryphine's son was born, he was named Trechmorus.

One notable element to this original story from the Life of Saint Gildas is that Tryphine is connected with King Childebert, because her husband Conmore was a lieutenant under Childebert. King Childebert was one of the four sons of King Clovis who equally split apart the

⁹⁷ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 107.

⁹⁸ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 119.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 120.

¹⁰¹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 120.

¹⁰² Ibid.

kingdom of the Franks upon the death of their father.¹⁰³ King Childebert came to power in the year 511 and ruled from Paris.¹⁰⁴ Throughout his rule, Childebert led various expeditions and battles in order to extend his kingdom, although Childebert was never able to extend his rule into Brittany completely. After the death of his brother Theuderic, Childebert and his other brother Lothar attempted to seize his kingdom, in order to further their own power.¹⁰⁵ Childebert extended his rule farther than any of his brothers in the Merovingian realm. He died in 558 and was buried in the church of Saint Vincent.¹⁰⁶

The original story of Tryphine, just a short part to the life of Saint Gildas, spawned other stories centuries later. These stories sometimes featured Tryphine as a main character, and others just had her as a small supporting character. The next time that Tryphine appeared in print was in the story of Bluebeard, written by Charles Perrault. It was first published in 1697, when Perrault was actively involved in creating stories based on folk tales. The story begins with Bluebeard (*Le Barbe-Bleue*), a wealthy man, wishing to find a wife. He had been turned down by many women in the past due to the state of his appearance. He weds a young woman who is solely interested in him for his wealth. After the wedding, Bluebeard must go on a journey and leaves the keys to the house with his new wife; his only instructions are for her to not use the smallest key, which opens into a forbidden room.

After Bluebeard leaves on his journey, the wife immediately opens the prohibited door. Inside a small room she finds the murdered corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives. She drops the key on the floor, which is covered in the dead wives' blood. The wife picks up the key and runs back to her room, but is unable to wash away the blood on the key no matter how much effort

¹⁰³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe (England: Penguin Books, 1985), 162.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1994), 50.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory of Tours, 184.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory of Tours, 215.

she exerts. That evening, Bluebeard unexpectedly returns and questions his new wife as to why there is blood on the key. Ignoring her excuses, he realizes that she went into the forbidden room. He tells her, “You must now go back and take your place among my other wives.”¹⁰⁷ She asks for time in order to say her prayers, but in actuality she is waiting for her brothers, who are arriving that evening, to save her life. Just as Bluebeard is about to chop off his wife’s head, her brothers arrive and save the day, killing the murderous Bluebeard.

The folk tale that most closely relates to Charles Perrault’s story of Bluebeard is the tale of Tryphine. In a tale that Perrault would have been familiar with, Tryphine was a nobleman’s daughter and was pregnant with Conmore’s baby.¹⁰⁸ Tryphine goes to a chapel and is visited by the ghosts of Conmore’s previous wives. She flees but Conmore catches up with her and beheads her. Saint Gildas finds her body and brings her back to life. Gildas then finds Conmore and causes the walls of his castle to fall and kill Tryphine’s husband.

The Bluebeard parallel becomes stronger yet when one considers a series of frescoes depicting Triphine’s [sic] story in the Breton church St. Nicholas des Eaux. One panel of these medieval paintings shows Cunmar [sic] handing a key to his young bride, while another shows her entering the chamber where his previous wives are hanging.¹⁰⁹

The fact that the frescoes were in a church reinforces the idea of Tryphine being a saint. It also shows that the story was far-reaching and was not just in the literary world, but rather had reached the religious realm as well.

The next prominent use of Tryphine in literature was in a French play from 1863, written by François-Marie Luzel. This theatrical work combines hagiography with Arthurian legend, once again connecting Tryphine with a very prestigious personage in history. In the introduction, Luzel wrote that Tryphine was chosen for the play because of her literary and historical

¹⁰⁷ Terri Windling, “Bluebeard and the Bloody Chamber,” in *Fitcher’s Brides (Fairy Tales)*, ed. Gregory Frost (New York: Tor Books, 2002), 329.

¹⁰⁸ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 121.

¹⁰⁹ Windling, “Bluebeard and the Bloody Chamber,” 329.

significance, and that she was the most popular character in all of the Breton plays. Also of note is that in the play, King Arthur chose Tryphine to be his wife because she was a princess of Ireland.¹¹⁰ Previously, Tryphine had mainly lived in the Celtic legends of Brittany, but with the marriage to Arthur and being described as a princess of Ireland, her cult was instantly widened.

The story, which is a play in eight acts, begins by establishing the characters. Tryphine's brother, Kervoura, is very jealous of his sister's happiness, and he ultimately wants to take the position of his brother-in-law as King of Brittany. Kervoura plots with Abacarus, King of the 'country of Englishmen,'¹¹¹ as well as a sorceress. With the help of the sorceress and Abacarus, Kervoura learns that his sister is to give birth soon. He devises a plan, and when Tryphine gives birth a few months later, he has the child taken and hidden. The child, Tremeur, is taken by boat to Saint Malo in northern Brittany, where they are met by the bishop. An angel has instructed the Bishop to take the child and protect it until the day when it may know his father.¹¹² At Arthur's court, Kervoura then accuses his sister of killing her own child: "This woman killed your first born, who was destined to wear the crown, if he had lived."¹¹³ A few scenes in the play later, Kervoura tells Arthur that Tryphine also plotted the downfall of the King himself. Fearing for her life after being wrongfully accused, Tryphine prays to the Virgin Mary and Christ for guidance, and eventually escapes and lives in hiding for six years.¹¹⁴ One of Arthur's servants ultimately locates her and brings her back to the kingdom, reuniting Tryphine and Arthur.

After the reunion, Tryphine gives birth to a daughter, who is not mentioned for the remainder of the play. Kervoura, seeing his original plan slip away, accuses his sister of adultery,

¹¹⁰ "Il fait choix d'une princesse d'Hibernie pour être sa femme, et vivre avec lui dans son palais: c'était une jeune fille des plus belles, et de plus une sainte; son nom était Tryphine." François-Marie Luzel, *Sainte Tryphine et le roi Arthur. Mystère Breton en deux journées et huit actes*. Ed. M. l'abbé Henry (Quimperlé: Claret, 1863), 3.

¹¹¹ Luzel, 4.

¹¹² Luzel, 117.

¹¹³ "Cette femme a tué son premier né, destiné à porter la couronne, s'il avait vécu." Luzel, 153.

¹¹⁴ "Je vous le dis clairement, cette femme est Tryphine, l'épouse de notre maître Arthur, et la reine de ce pays." Luzel, 259.

which a false priest swears is true. Arthur believes the evidence right away and says that it is clear that he has an adulterous queen in his house.¹¹⁵ The punishment for adultery was to be put in jail, publicly denounced and eventually beheaded. Wrongfully accused for the second time, Tryphine turns to the Virgin Mary for guidance. Tryphine was very vulnerable and was trying to turn anywhere she could. Tryphine, no matter her protests, does not seem to have much sway when defending herself, and she also realizes that Arthur has once again turned on her.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, Tryphine's son, Tremeur, had been hidden in Saint Malo and is alive and well. A bishop found him, and on the day of Tryphine's beheading, just as the final blow was about to fall and behead her, Tremeur appeared and proclaimed his mother's innocence and his uncle Kervoura's guilt. Tremeur battles Kervoura, killing him after he confessed his plan.¹¹⁷ The original family became whole again, and Arthur asked Tryphine for forgiveness. Tryphine reclaims her role as the loving wife to King Arthur and forgives him instantly.

François- Marie Luzel most likely looked upon the Life of Gildas as well as the story of Bluebeard for inspiration. Arthur turns on his wife, just as Bluebeard did after the forbidden closet door was opened. Tryphine was willing to accept her fate and took on the role of the martyr, asking for the final guidance from Christ and more importantly, the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁸ It is never fully explained why Kervoura was so jealous of his sister, other than the fact that he wanted to be the King of Brittany. Kervoura was only afraid of a male heir, which is why Tremeur was removed from court where as the baby daughter that is born in the latter-half of the play only shows up briefly.

¹¹⁵ "Voilà qui est clair, et qui me donne à croire que j'ai dans ma maison une reine adultère." Luzel, 339.

¹¹⁶ "Arthur un homme juste? Oh! Oui, je le sais, monsieur le juge; mais je suis accusée, et c'est lui l'accusateur... Je me suis vouée à la Vierge sainte; qu'elle réponde, si elle le veut, pour moi, je ne le ferai point." Luzel, 379.

¹¹⁷ Luzel, 433.

¹¹⁸ Brigitte Cazelles and Brett Wells, "Arthur as Barbe-Bleue: The Martyrdom of Saint Tryphine (Breton Mystery)," *Yale French Studies*, No. 95, Rereading Allegory: Essays in the Memory of Daniel Poiriron (1999), 146.

Tryphine is much harder to believe as a real person, but there must have been a tale in Brittany from early Celtic times that was so powerful that it caused a female saint to be connected to Saint Gildas, and subsequently to be used in various literary works. Perhaps the reason why Tryphine is thought to be a princess of Ireland in *Sainte Tryphine et le roi Arthur* is because she was in the life of Saint Gildas, who was originally from Wales.¹¹⁹ Today Tryphine is steeped in folk tale and myth, as are many of the Celtic Saints that are still prominent in the present day.

Themes

During the medieval period, education and literacy was not a privilege for every person in society. It was mainly bestowed to men and saved for those in the church, such as monks and bishops. Women were usually in inferior positions in society, compared to now, especially in the public sphere. Religious women were to be cloistered and kept in the private sphere. A reoccurring theme for these women was a transgression of these pre-established boundaries. As mentioned earlier, Saint Brigid was most likely given an education reserved for a girl in the upper-class echelon, which consisted of learning to sew, spin and manage a household. Although Saint Brigid's mother was a slave, her father was wealthy and thus, Brigid was given a better education. This was not a phenomenon reserved for everyone, and women of the lower class might not have had an education at all. Because of the lack of education in society, many of the stories were passed down from one generation to the next through an oral tradition. It would be fair to say that themes would be purposefully recurring so that the story would be remembered easier and thus, transferred from one generation to the next. Reoccurring motifs, whether Celtic or non-Celtic, use traditional materials to express the functions, characteristics and duties of a

¹¹⁹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 82.

saint.¹²⁰ Themes of the poems, lives of the Saints, and other stories recur and some topoi were more important to the Celts than others.

The themes to be discussed will center on the female, the Celtic, and the saint aspect. Women during the middle ages were usually treated in a certain way. Although some were able to break from the mold that society enforced, the overall context they were held in was rigid. Women, specifically female saints, depicted during the Celtic period were expected to have certain qualities, such as to have the unwanted pursuit of a man. Women that actually did break away were doing something very different during this society.

The qualities that the Celtic peoples embodied were also specific, but were spread throughout the medieval world. Important aspects in the oral tradition were tales of mutilation, such as through beheading or blindness. Due to the connection with paganism, the theme of fire played a significant role in the evolution of the cult of Saint Brigid. Although these aspects were prevalent in Celtic stories, it is also evident that Christian saints from the continent were being affected by the same medieval ideals.

The relationship to the continent that the saints established was made possible through their cross-cultural connections, which were spread through the veneration of relics, churches and holy sites. Holy wells played an important role in the lives of Brigid and especially Winifred. The religiosity of Brigid, Winifred and Tryphine is exposed in their saintly endeavors. Winifred and Tryphine were geared more towards the upper class, through Tryphine's connections with the King of Brittany and Arthurian legend, and Winifred's well at Holywell being visited by the monarchy. Brigid, meanwhile, was able to cross gender and class boundaries to become important enough for all those in society at the time. Brigid was also made into the personification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, making her even more important to all Christians

¹²⁰ Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 9.

during the time period. The connections that these women made and their universal themes were able to transcend across the boundaries of the Celts and spread further into the European continent.

Female

For much of history, women have been relegated to inferior positions compared to those of the men.¹²¹ Their stories come to modern day scholars through the writings of men or by being connected to men's stories. When one compares the lives of Saint Brigid, Saint Winifred and Saint Tryphine, there are certain elements that are typical of women in general. A main element to Winifred and Brigid, and many female saints on the whole, is that they were virgins. Women were defined by their virginity; to have sexual intercourse lowered a woman's status in society. "Virginity was the 'eliminator of vices' and 'conqueror of lust' ... virgins were automatically able to practice all sorts of other virtues..."¹²² To be a virgin was to be considered the best kind of woman.¹²³ Another element was that each woman was almost compromised by a man, whether it was through Saint Brigid's brothers attempt to marry her off and thus make her lose her virginity, Winifred's attempt to run away from Caradog instead of be taken as his wife, or Tryphine being betrayed by her brother Kervoura, or being murdered after conceiving a child.

Although the archetypal representation of women would be with duties around the household and with children, Celtic women had a fuller life than what was normally represented. For instance, although they were rare, there were women writers. The earliest known female French poet was Marie de France, who lived during the twelfth century, and it has been said that

¹²¹ M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (1979. Reprint, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 9.

¹²² Bitel, *Land of Women*, 33.

¹²³ However, even when a woman followed all of the rules and kept her virginity intact, she was still considered lower than a man. Bitel, *Land of Women*, 33.

she was the most gifted poet writing in the lai form. Lais were short story-poems based on Celtic tales from Brittany, whose characters were often portrayed as being fraught with the trials and tribulations of love.¹²⁴ There are different suggestions as to who Marie was, but there has never been a fully convincing argument as to her identity. She presumably came from a high-class background. Her education could have been obtained during time at a convent or from being brought up at court.¹²⁵ It is obvious in the lais that the author was familiar with folk tales. Other authors and upstanding figures must have been familiar with her work as well, because in the introduction to the first story, *Guigemar*, Marie writes,

Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents. Those who gain a good reputation should be commended, but when there exists in a country a man or a woman of great renown, people who are envious of their abilities frequently speak insultingly of them in order to damage this reputation. Thus they start acting like a vicious, cowardly, treacherous dog which will bite others out of malice. But just because spiteful tittle-tattlers attempt to find fault with me I do not intend to give up. They have a right to make slanderous remarks.¹²⁶

Marie was met with hostilities because she was doing something women were not necessarily encouraged to do. She was very steadfast in her abilities, not giving up when others were trying to take her down. She even had the wherewithal to allow others their rights to criticize her, as can be seen from her persistence to allow others the right to make remarks against her ability.

In other medieval literature, women held high roles in their places in society and were even respected by men. Early Celtic women fought on the battlefield alongside men, and were hailed for their strength and might. The famous female warrior of the Iceni tribe, Boadicea, led a revolt against the Romans in Britain.¹²⁷ In *The Táin Bó Cuailnge*, from the eighth century, Queen Medb had extreme power over men, including her husband, King Ailill. The woman

¹²⁴ *The Lais of Marie de France*, Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 8.

¹²⁵ Marie de France, 18.

¹²⁶ Marie de France, 43.

¹²⁷ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100*, 39.

Scathach taught the hero Cuchulainn battle moves. Medb was in charge of inspecting the armies and would give orders to kill those who betrayed her.¹²⁸ In the climactic battle scene at the end of *The Táin*, Medb herself “took up her weapons and hurried into battle.”¹²⁹ *The Mabinogion*, written in the eleventh century, also features women in power. They help their husbands with their enemies and rule the kingdom by their side. In the tale *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed*, Rhiannon advises Pwyll how to defeat an opposing suitor for her love.¹³⁰ In the story *Math Son of Mathonwy*, a woman named Aranrhod lives in her own refuge of Caer Aranrhod. She greets the visitors and watches over the people in the community, as well as shunning her role as a mother, which is unique in itself for a woman of the time period.¹³¹

Although women were shown in positions of power and strength, they were also shown, sometimes in the same sources, as being weak and untrustworthy. Women were often the first to be blamed if a child went missing or died. Saint Tryphine was blamed for the loss of her son in *Sainte Tryphine et le roi Arthur*, and King Arthur was quick to find her guilty. Rhiannon’s son in *The Mabinogion* went missing in the night while he was a newborn, and she was immediately blamed and made to pay penance for her sin.¹³² After the battle scene at the end of *The Táin*, many of Medb’s and Ailill’s men died during the battle. One of the soldiers comments, “We followed the rump of a misguided woman... it is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.”¹³³ With the battle being over, Medb was the one blamed for the armies shortcomings. In *The Wife’s Complaint*, a source from the same time period, the husband had been told of the woman’s supposed misdeeds and sends the woman away to an isolated den as

¹²⁸ Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 66.

¹²⁹ Kinsella, 247.

¹³⁰ *The Mabinogion*, Translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (1949; reprint, London and Vermont: J.M. Dent and Charles E. Tuttle, Everyman, 1997), 12.

¹³¹ *The Mabinogion*, 54-55.

¹³² *The Mabinogion*, 15-16.

¹³³ Kinsella, 251.

punishment.¹³⁴ A similar story is *The Old Woman of Beare*, where a woman has been sent far away. She laments of her body succumbing as old age washes over her. She too has been exiled and longs for the past when she was among the beautiful attributes of her country.¹³⁵ The strength and independence that Aranrhod shows in *The Mabinogion* can only go so far, and with the threat of a physical attack from a fleet of ships arrives, she must call out for advice and arms the men she finds to help her cause.¹³⁶

Women were depicted in many different ways during this period. Different stories of a person's life could also have varying tales. In the Breton play with Saint Tryphine, when she learns of her fate, she runs away for six years in order to protect herself. In the story of Bluebeard, the wife does not try to defend herself but rather stalls to buy time until her brothers can arrive and defend her. Saint Brigid developed the double monastery for both men and women, but they were still separated within the walls of the Kildare. "...once they entered Brigit's [sic] church, they stood and prayed segregated by sex, for a wall divided men's and women's sections of the building."¹³⁷ Women may have had more freedoms than later societies, but they were still considered separate and different from men.

Celtic

During the medieval period, the people considered "Celtic" would most likely not have even called themselves that. The Celts were deemed as people who lived in the West, which is not anywhere as specific as historians have made the term today. In 1707, the word "Celtic" was

¹³⁴ "The Wife's Complaint," *The Earliest English Poems*, edited by Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 58

¹³⁵ "The Old Woman of Beare," *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, edited by Barbara Hughes Fowler (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 41.

¹³⁶ *The Mabinogion*, 57.

¹³⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 155.

used by George Buchanan and Edward Llyud to study linguistic similarities of Irish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Cornish, Breton and Gaulish.¹³⁸ Eventually the term “Celtic” grew to its modern connotation.

Celtic literature and oral tradition is laden with many recurrent themes. One of the very prominent themes was mutilation. Many of the stories include tales of beheading. Saint Tryphine was beheaded by Conmore, and Saint Winifred was beheaded by Caradog. Other Celtic tales contain the theme of beheading as well. The fourteenth century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, included a beheading section.¹³⁹ King Arthur and his knights were feasting at Camelot when the Green Knight arrived and challenged anyone to use his axe and take a swing at him, as long as one year from that time the Green Knight could repay the blow. Sir Gawain volunteers himself and uses the axe to chop off the Green Knight’s head. The Green Knight picks up his head and before leaving, reminds Gawain of his promise.¹⁴⁰

The tale of Brnwen Daughter of Llyr, from *The Mabinogion* includes a beheading when Bendigeidfran requests that his head be severed. He had been wounded in the foot after a battle, and he knew that his fellow men had a long journey in front of them. He asked for his head to be severed so that they could carry it with them on their journey for company, and finally to bury it once they had reached London.¹⁴¹ The character of Cuchulainn appears in the story *Bricriu’s Feast*, which includes a beheading sequence.¹⁴² Úath proposes a challenge to Cuchulainn who accepts his test. Cuchulainn effortlessly lops off the head of Úath, who picks up his head, places it on his chest, and returns to his home. The next day Úath returns and attempts to return the

¹³⁸ *Celtic Spirituality*, 4.

¹³⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Translated by Burton Raffel (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1970), 60.

¹⁴⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 60.

¹⁴¹ *The Mabinogion*, 31-32.

¹⁴² “Bricriu’s Feast,” *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. Translated by Jeffrey Gantz (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 246.

gesture, but Cuchulainn's head does not leave his body.¹⁴³

Another form of mutilation that is seen is through blindness. The theme of the eye was important during the medieval period and continued through history, even so far as Sigmund Freud in the twentieth century interpreting the eye with his psychoanalysis.¹⁴⁴ Saint Brigid has an eye-plucking episode. Her brothers were upset that she promised herself to God and would remain a virgin her whole life, which meant that there would be no dowry. When her brothers continued to pressure her, Saint Brigid plucked out her own eye, saying "I deem it unlikely... that anyone will ask you for *a blind girl*."¹⁴⁵

In the Celtic realm, fire also plays a role as a theme. Saint Brigid was very connected with fire. It is possible that Brigid's legend was super-imposed over that of Brig, who was the Irish goddess of fire and light.¹⁴⁶ Although this poses a problem with sorting out fact from fiction, comparing a person to a legend would possibly have enabled the Celts in Ireland to accept Christianity easier into their everyday lives.¹⁴⁷ In his *History and Topography of Ireland*, Gerald of Wales traveled to her monastery of Kildare and commented on the ever-burning fire. At Kildare, there was a fire kept in dedication of Brigid, which was noted to be inextinguishable.¹⁴⁸ It is questionable as to why the monastery would have chosen a fire to commemorate Brigid if for no other reason than to equate her with Brig, once again combining the old pagan beliefs with those of Christianity.

¹⁴³ "Bricriu's Feast," 246.

¹⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud believed that when one was afraid of losing one's eyesight, it was symbolic of being afraid of castration. The art movement known as Surrealism, from the early twentieth century, were great followers of Freud. The Surrealists depicted this fear of blindness often through their imagery, such as from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog)*, where the opening sequence has the main character's eye being slashed. The Surrealists were also interested in a short story by E. T. A. Hoffman called *The Sandman*, where one of the characters punishes children by 'tearing out their eyes.' Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis," in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (1993. Reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 196.

¹⁴⁵ Cogitosus, 23.

¹⁴⁶ McCone, 162.

¹⁴⁷ Rees, 10. See also O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, 160-162.

¹⁴⁸ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, 81.

Brigid is said to have been born and died on February first, which is also her feast day; “not coincidentally the ancient pre-Christian feast of Imbolc, which celebrated lambing...”¹⁴⁹ Brigid’s eternal fire at Kildare, according to Gerald, was tended to by nineteen nuns, and surrounded by a hedge. No man was allowed to cross the hedge.¹⁵⁰ An archer who tried to blow on Brigid’s eternal fire went mad after doing so.¹⁵¹ The fact that men could not approach the eternal fire probably had to do with old Irish or pagan tradition as well. The fire burned until the early thirteenth century, but was relit and burned until the reformation of the sixteenth century.¹⁵²

Just as the themes were taking place in an overall European context, the Celtic world was not cut off from one another. Although there were different countries and even different languages that were taking part in Celtic tradition, such as peoples from Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, England, and Brittany, the spread of the cults and the cross-cultural connections united all the differences. Tales that were taking place and flourishing in Ireland were also being depicted in Wales and Brittany, despite the distance and other various barriers that could have hampered the spread of knowledge. Irish Saints appear in Welsh lives, Welsh saints appear in Irish lives, and both occur in British lives. The Celts shared “an affinity of language, supporting some kind of affinity of culture between the Celtic-speaking areas, reinforced by extensive cultural contact based on close geographical proximity.”¹⁵³ These medieval places were connected and were sharing their information with one another, which was connecting them all through a Celtic tradition. Although the Celtic land was mainly segregated from the rest of the world, the influence could still be felt.

¹⁴⁹ Bitel, Lisa. "Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition," *Textual Practice* 16 (2002), 211.

¹⁵⁰ Gerald of Wales, 82.

¹⁵¹ Gerald of Wales, 88.

¹⁵² Rees, 34.

¹⁵³ *Celtic Spirituality*, 11.

Saints

There are hundreds of saints that have been venerated in the Catholic Church, all for different reasons that had to do with events and elements of their lives. There are patron saints of specific places, as well as churches and parishes dedicated to saints. It could be because there was a relic of a saint, which may have spread their cult. An example of this would be Saint Winifred's well at Holywell, with the church at Shrewsbury where her bones were moved. Another example of saint veneration could be because a saint actually established the holy place, such as Saint Brigid and Kildare, or Saint Gildas with his various churches. Whatever the case, all of these elements combined helped to further the cult of the saints.

Churches dedicated to saints can be found all over the Celtic lands and into Europe itself. Although Brigid and Winifred were saints from Ireland and Wales, respectively, their veneration sites are much further spread. Saint Brigid's cult can be seen through churches in Devonshire, the southwestern portion of England bordering on Cornwall, as well as Western Brittany, and spreads north into Scotland.¹⁵⁴ It is well-known that Ireland spread its knowledge greatly outside of its home country, and the appearances of veneration sites to Brigid show this fact. Currently there are over seventeen churches dedicated to Saint Brigid in Wales, known as Llansantffraid, as well as numerous other smaller chapels dedicated in her memory. There are places dedicated to her in Devon, Cumberland, Chester, Herefordshire, Somersetshire, London, and Scotland. In Cornwall, Brigid has at least two parishes dedicated to her in Madron, dating at least back until 1522.¹⁵⁵ In Brittany there are "thirteen dedications in Finistère, and fourteen in Morbihan, and several in Côtes-du-Nord."¹⁵⁶ Brigid also is venerated in Alsace, Flanders and Portugal. Her cult could possibly have been spread so far due to sister branches of Kildare. There were multiple

¹⁵⁴ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 283.

¹⁵⁵ Nicholas Orme, *The Saints of Cornwall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75.

¹⁵⁶ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 1, 284.

Brigid's however, and probably even many more churches, chapels and veneration sites than listed here, and it would be incorrect to assume that they are all dedicated in the memory of Saint Brigid of Kildare.

Saint Brigid also had multiple holy wells dedicated to her name. In Wales alone, she has wells in the counties of Anglesey, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Merioneth, Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire.¹⁵⁷ Her sites are most often dedicated under the names Ff. Ffraid, St. Bride, Ff. St. Ffraid or Ff. Santffraid.

Aside from Saint Winifred's veneration at the chapel at Holywell and Shrewsbury, she has various other wells dedicated to her such as that at Woolston in England. She has veneration in Devon, Nottingham, Yorkshire, Cheshire, and Oxford. Aside from actual churches and parishes, there are many figures, statues and stained glass containing her image, such as in Llandyrnog Church at Clwyd.¹⁵⁸ It can also be assumed that in places of veneration to Saint Beuno, images of Winifred might possibly be found as well.¹⁵⁹

Saint Tryphine, meanwhile, has a commune dedicated to her in Guingamp in Northern Brittany, as well as a church at Corlai in the abbey of Coëtmalœn.¹⁶⁰ Tryphine is venerated at Mur-de-Bretagne, Callac (Côtes-du-Nord), Bannalec, Finistère and Pontivy in Morbihan. Aside from veneration to the saint herself, she is also commemorated in churches dedicated to her son, Saint Tremeur, in other places in Brittany. In Magoar in the district of Guingamp, the pulpit of the parish church shows the resurrection of Tryphine.¹⁶¹

Why were these saints important to each place? Why were people traveling from different parts in Europe in order to view the sites? One aspect as to why people traveled from

¹⁵⁷ Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, 140.

¹⁵⁸ Baring-Gould and Fisher, vol. 3, 195.

¹⁵⁹ This is an assumption by the author.

¹⁶⁰ Luzel, xl.

¹⁶¹ *Dictionnaire des Saints Bretons*. Edited by Tchou (Paris: La Bibliothèque Bretonne, 1979), 351.

afar to the veneration site was because of what the saint could help them with. It was believed that the tomb to the saint on earth actually held the soul of the saint, and when a Celtic person made a pilgrimage to the tomb, they were getting as close as possible to someone who could facilitate in their healing process.¹⁶² Religious sites would become known for curing certain ailments, such as Saint Winifred helping to cure epilepsy.

The idea of water as a cleansing agent was also very prevalent during this time period. Saint Winifred's well had a strong reputation for its waters having a healing quality to them, and the fact that Winifred herself was cured from something as serious as a beheading probably figured in to that idea. She also became a symbol of transformation because of the ordeal she had gone through of the beheading and subsequent death to being reinvigorated back to life. Winifred's sites, Holywell and Shrewsbury, became popular sites for pilgrimage. The pilgrim would thus stop at each site and gain access to what the place of veneration had to offer. During the medieval period, the most famous person to take this path was King Henry V, in 1416.¹⁶³ "Edward IV is reputed to have done the same, while Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, built the fine chapel still standing at Holywell after the battle of Bosworth Field (1485)."¹⁶⁴ Perhaps the poet who created *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* took the same pilgrimage as the monarchs. Comparisons done between the poem and the Life of Saint Caradog, written about the youth who beheaded Winifred, indicate that the stories are quite similar.¹⁶⁵ He may have gotten the idea to behead his Green Knight because of the well-known legend of Winifred.

Another way that saints' cults were spread was through the sale of relics. Many Catholic churches are dedicated to a saint because they have a piece of the saint housed in the church.

¹⁶² Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁶³ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 545.

¹⁶⁴ Farmer, 545.

¹⁶⁵ Larry D. Benson, "The Source of the Beheading Episode in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Modern Philology*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Aug., 1961), p. 1-2.

Winifred's cult was spread outside of the well at Holywell by moving her bones to Shrewsbury. Saint Brigid's relics are spread across Europe, such as a piece of her cloak being in Bruges, and her head going to Lisbon, Neustadt or Cologne.¹⁶⁶ It is obviously impossible for one skull to be in three places, but this would have spread her cult throughout Europe in a more tangible way for those who lived after Brigid. The spread of Saint Tryphine would have been much easier as time wore on, due to the fact that her cult was mainly housed in literature and oral tradition. Peasants could have traveled to saints sites on their feast-days in order to receive gifts; this would have been part of the pilgrimage as well as playing into one of the major ideals of generosity that saints were celebrated.¹⁶⁷

Saint Brigid has become known as the personification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Brigid's feast-day is on February first, whereas Mary's is February second. Mary's feast is on February second because it is forty days after Jesus' birth.¹⁶⁸ After a woman gave birth, she must be welcomed back into the church and be purified again. Forty days after the birth of Jesus on December twenty-fifth turned out to be February second. During Brigid's lifetime, a nun had a vision of Mary, and when she saw Brigid, the nun said that Brigid was the person in her vision.¹⁶⁹ It could also be based on a vision by Bishop Ibor, who saw Saint Brigid as the embodiment of Mary, "She is the Prophetess of Christ, she is the Queen of the South, she is the Mary of the Gael."¹⁷⁰ Brigid became so closely intertwined with Mary that even into the 1300's, there are records of people not brewing beer at the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Bitel, *Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess*, 210.

¹⁶⁷ Bitel, *Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess*, 213.

¹⁶⁸ Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, Vol. 1 and 2*. Translated by William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 143.

¹⁶⁹ Cogitosus, 22.

¹⁷⁰ Kenney, 358.

¹⁷¹ London: Public Record Office (PRO SC 2/218/6 m. 20d). Elissa R. Henken refers to records of townspeople brewing beer in celebration of a feast day for Brigid, but she says the records are unavailable (Elissa R. Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987). Here are the records. A record from 1358

During her lifetime, Brigid was well-known for praying over water and turning it into beer.¹⁷²

The religiosity of the saints, specifically looking at Saint Brigid, Winifred and Tryphine, shows the polarization of what a saint can come to mean. Saint Winifred and Saint Tryphine gestured more towards high religion, or the upper-class. As well as being venerated by the upper-class, Saint Brigid was embraced by the low religion, or for the lower-class end of the spectrum. Saint Tryphine is shown mainly through literature, which for many years was known only for the clergy and the upper class. Just the fact that she is shown in Arthurian legend, which is very prestigious with its Knights of the Round Table and tales of honor and glory, shows her affiliation with high religion. Tryphine's story would have appealed to a courtly audience, who would have been familiar with the tales of Arthurian legend. Saint Winifred could have been revered by both upper and lower classes, but when the monarchs such as King Henry V began taking her pilgrimage tour, and the mother of King Henry VII building a new shrine, her story is geared more towards the upper class.

Saint Brigid, however, was venerated by all. She is remembered in the *vitae* for performing many miracles, but those miracles were to help the poor, especially those close to her in her village.¹⁷³ Brigid had noble bloodlines, but she never went without helping a person in need. She gave away her father's priceless sword, even though she was in danger of being

details a person being punished for not brewing beer for Sanffraid at the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A record recorded in 1389 describes an inquisition concerning a man and his eleven colleagues, who must pay a fine for not taking part in the festival and brewing beer, "in accordance with the custom..." (London: Public Record Office (PRO SC 2/220/6 m. 21d). The same incident happened in 1397, for a person also being fined for failing to take part in the custom (London: Public Record Office (PRO SC 2/221/1 m. 24d).

¹⁷² It is logical that Brigid would be closely related to beer, because the Virgin Mary is related to wine. It was Mary that encouraged Jesus to turn the water into wine. This takes place in the bible, John: 2, 2-12: "AND the third day, there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee: and the mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus also was invited, and his disciples, to the marriage. And the wine failing, the mother of Jesus saith to him: They have no wine... Jesus saith to them: Fill the waterpots with water... Draw out now, and carry to the chief steward of the feast... And when the chief steward had tasted the water made wine, and knew not whence it was, but the waiters knew who had drawn the water... This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee; and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him." *The Holy Bible*, 105.

¹⁷³ Before Brigid left Kildare to travel the countryside, Cogitosus lists many of Brigid's miracles for those in her village. Examples include giving bacon to a hungry dog and giving food to the poor (Cogitosus, 22).

sold.¹⁷⁴ Brigid gave her stores of food to the poor, and it was a miracle that the stores were never depleted. This gives good cause as to why Brigid is so revered. She was raised in an upper-class life, but dedicated herself to those in need. She created a monastery for both men and women, but did not stop traveling and helping those around her. Brigid dedicated her life to God, but ultimately she dedicated herself to all Celtic people's plights.

Celtic vs. European Context

Christianity was introduced into and developed on the British Isles after contact with the continent of Europe. Previously, everyone had followed a pagan religion, but missionaries in Britain slowly began to spread the word of this new faith. In order to allow for a smoother and quicker assimilation into Christianity, early followers super-imposed some of their beliefs from paganism onto that of Christianity. Saint Brigid is a good example of this, because she is very similar in some aspects to the fire goddess Brig. Brigid is associated with fire, and even at her monastic site of Kildare, there is an ever-burning fire as a reminder.

While Celtic Christianity is distinctive, it is still taking place in an overall European context. It did not develop like Europe, due to the mere fact of geographical location and the early difficulty with distance. As communication and an exchange of ideas grew, the European continent was able to reconnect fully with the Celts. The early Christians on the European continent and those in the Celtic worlds all lived during a time of immense change, but were still under the banner of Christianity. Irish monasteries were well-known for their knowledge of Latin. In fact, during his rule, Charlemagne brought in Irish texts among his other resources to

¹⁷⁴ Cogitosus, 23.

further the growth of knowledge in his empire on the continent.¹⁷⁵

The Irish figure Columbanus showed the connections between the Celts and Europe. There was probably a connection between Ireland and the continent beforehand, but the permanent contact was made “when Columbanus and his companions, some Irish, some Britons, established themselves in eastern Gaul towards the close of the sixth century.”¹⁷⁶ He was born in Ireland in the sixth century but eventually left for Gaul. He traveled all over Europe and founded monasteries, and was also friendly with Pope Boniface. “His letter to Pope Boniface on the sensitive issue of the dating of Easter shows the extent to which Irish Christianity could be expressly Roman in its orientation.”¹⁷⁷ Despite coming from Ireland and traveling to Europe, the Christianity of Columbanus and that of Boniface was similar enough for a pope and a saint to communicate.

The idiosyncrasies of the Celtic stories can even be observed on the continent Europe as well. For instance, the act of beheading, which was seen in the lives of Saint Winifred and Saint Tryphine, could also be seen in Europe. The Bible, the very book that the Christians based themselves off of, includes beheading. In Revelations 20:4, beheading is written as punishment for the martyrs that defended Jesus.¹⁷⁸ *The Golden Legend*, one of the most popular books of the

¹⁷⁵ In two lives written about Charlemagne by Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, both mention the King’s relations with Ireland. In Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*, he details “By the rich gifts which he gave them, Charlemagne had so influence the Kings of the Irish that they never addressed him as anything else but their lord, and called themselves his slaves and subjects. There exist letters which they sent to him in which this subservience towards him is clearly shown.” The fact that the kings of Ireland and Charlemagne were exchanging letters shows the interrelations of their societies. In Notker the Stammerer’s *Charlemagne*, he tells of two Scots from Ireland traveling to Charlemagne’s kingdom and being taken in as scholars and teachers. Charlemagne himself “was always an admirer and great collector of wisdom.” Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1969) 70, 94.

¹⁷⁶ Kenney, 183.

¹⁷⁷ Davies, 19.

¹⁷⁸ “And I saw seats; and they sat upon them; and judgment was given unto them; and the souls of them that were beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and who had not adored the beast nor his image, nor received his character on their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” *The Holy Bible*, 295.

Middle Ages after the Bible, also shows this punishment of beheading.¹⁷⁹ One of the most notorious religious figures to be decapitated was Saint John the Baptist. King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded after John reprimanded Herod for wanting to marry his own brother's wife.¹⁸⁰ Saints Saturninus, Simplicius, Faustinus, Secundus and Gordianus are saints that have been beheaded due to their faith. Saint Denis, after being beheaded, picked up his head and traveled miles away to a place that he had chosen as his final resting place.¹⁸¹ The epic poem *Beowulf*, written between the seventh and the eighth centuries, contains this theme of beheading when the hero is killing Grendel's mother:

...he struck such a savage blow
 that the sharp blade slashed through her neck,
 smashed the vertebrae; it severed her head
 from the fated body; she fell at his feet.
 The sword was bloodstained; Beowulf rejoiced.¹⁸²

Beowulf also finds the corpse of the monster Grendel, and severs the head from the lifeless body.

Even the theme of having one's eye gouged out is shown elsewhere in the Middle Ages. Saint Lucy is the patron saint of blindness. She lived at the cusp of the time period when paganism was being replaced by Christianity. She was accused of being a Christian and acting against the laws, and when she would not give in, the consul Paschasius ordered Lucy to be raped. She still would not turn against Christianity, and when guards could not move her, a fire was built around her and she was drenched in oil. Lucy kept shouting the praises of God, and the guards gauged her eyes out, but that did not stop her.¹⁸³ Lucy died but did not turn against her

¹⁷⁹ *The Golden Legend*, 133.

¹⁸⁰ *The Golden Legend*, 133.

¹⁸¹ "Finally, before the idol of Mercury, the heads... were cut off with swords in confession of the Holy Trinity. Instantly the body of Saint Dionysius [Denis] stood up, took his head in its arms, and, with an angel and a heavenly light leading the way, marched two miles, from the place called Montmartre, the hill of martyrs, to the place where, by his own choice and by God's providence, he rests in peace." *The Golden Legend*, 240.

¹⁸² "Beowulf," *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*. Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.

¹⁸³ *The Golden Legend*, 29.

principles. Saint Lucy was blinded for her faith, and is now the patron saint of blindness. Saint Perpetua was a woman of noble lineage, and was imprisoned for refusing to sacrifice to false idols and renounce Christianity. Perpetua's father came to visit her in jail, saying that she had dishonored their family. "When she told him that she was a Christian, he rushed at her and tried to gouge her eyes out, then went away shouting wrathfully."¹⁸⁴ In general, blindness is healed most often by the saints of the medieval period. This shows how important the sense of sight must have been to people living during the time period.¹⁸⁵

The Celtic saints themselves were also able to transcend the geographical barriers to be important with all of Christianity, not just the Celts. While Saint Brigid had many sites of veneration in Britannia, she also was able to spread her cult onto the European continent. Saint Winifred had a legend so important that her well was visited by many monarchs throughout the centuries.¹⁸⁶ Saint Tryphine as well easily spread throughout the continent, because her legend was so well-known that it was altered and adapted to fit other stories. She was combined with Arthurian legend, which was recognized all over Europe, as well as with the story of Bluebeard. Because of her relationship with Brittany, Tryphine is also connected to Frankia.

Ireland was not cut off from the rest of Europe, which can also be applied to the places of Britain, Wales, and Cornwall. Saint Columbanus made it to Gaul and began to establish monastic settings and converse with Pope Boniface. Irish writings were most likely spread before that

¹⁸⁴ *The Golden Legend*, 342.

¹⁸⁵ Henken, 51.

¹⁸⁶ A great number of English kings visited her well: "The well and chapel of Holywell had been granted in 1093 by the Countess of Chester to the monastery of St. Werburg, and in 1115 her son, Earl Richard, made a pilgrimage to the well. Its possession reverted to the Welsh lords, and in 1240 Dafydd ap Llewelyn granted it to Basingwerk Abbey, which held it until 1537. In 1189 Richard I sheltered in Basingwerk when attacked by the Welsh while he was on pilgrimage to St. Winifred's well...Edward IV is said to have made a pilgrimage to it. Richard III conferred an annuity of 10 marks upon the Abbot of Basingwerk for maintaining a priest at the well. The Lives record many stories of miraculous cures at this well. Bards like Iolo Goch, Ieuan Brydydd Hir, and Tudur Aled, sang the praises of Winifred and her well." Michael Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbors in the Seventh Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 29.

throughout Europe as well, because of the thriving trade that had been occurring. Irish scholars were well-versed in the study of Latin, and thus were probably in touch with those in Rome and other sections of Europe where it was widely used. The Celts were an educated group of people, who “were in touch with the most recent developments in Europe. It would be wrong to regard Ireland as isolated from the continent.”¹⁸⁷

The oral tradition was always prevalent in medieval society, and especially with that of the Celts. They held on to the tradition for centuries, even after literacy was released from the confines of religion and experienced by the common people. It is possible that the cult of the saints grew because Christianity was increasing its membership and was extending beyond its original boundaries, and men hoped, “by multiplying intercessors on their behalf, to find an easier road to Heaven than the straight and narrow path that had been offered by the early Christian communities.”¹⁸⁸ The Christian religion was united through the process of their beliefs, their traditions, and by the saints themselves who helped on their journey through life and their ultimate destination of Heaven.

Conclusion

The cross-cultural connections of Saint Brigid, Saint Winifred and Saint Tryphine are exemplary models for female saints during the medieval period. These connections can be seen through their *vitae*. Saint Brigid was destined to be a holy girl; even from her birth it was prophesized that she would be great. The immense change that was occurring, with a new religion known as Christianity replacing paganism, Brigid would have been able to reach a large audience. Her father was a pagan and her mother was a Christian, connecting her firmly to both worlds.

¹⁸⁷ Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbors in the Seventh Century*, 29.

¹⁸⁸ Brown, 67.

Because of her association with fire, it is apparent that Brigid became the Christian version of the fire goddess, Brig. Brigid performed miracles for the people of her town and the surrounding areas as well. She spread her cult through the establishment of her monastery at Kildare, which according to Gerald of Wales, held an ever-burning fire in Brigid's memory. Brigid also had the distinction of establishing the first example of a double monastery in Ireland. The monastery grew in wealth and importance, with a great settlement growing in Kildare and spreading outwards. Saint Brigid was connected to such great figures as Saint Patrick, and she was even considered the personification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ale festivals dedicated in Brigid's memory from the late middle ages attest to her lasting influencing even eight centuries later. There were many ancient establishments as well as contemporary veneration sites that are attributed to the memory of Brigid. Saint Brigid, the most famous saint in Ireland behind Saint Patrick, has left her mark indelibly on society.

Saint Winifred had a remarkable life and still-extant legacy. She led an ordinary life until her beheading, which transformed her story into something extraordinary. Winifred was beheaded by an overzealous young man, even though she had dedicated herself firmly to a life of Christianity. Her uncle, Saint Beuno, replaced her head upon her body, resuscitating her life and invigorating her memory. A holy well sprung from the place of her beheading, which eventually became one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the medieval world. Winifred later left her hometown and reportedly traveled throughout Wales and into Rome, spreading her legacy. After her death, the relics of Winifred were moved to Shrewsbury, causing her line of pilgrimage to extend further. She also continued to perform miracles from beyond the grave. Winifred was embraced by the upper class and her well was renowned for its healing qualities. Religious sites dedicated in her memory also spread throughout the Celtic realm.

Lastly, Saint Tryphine, who led a very different life and left a different kind of memory in her stead. She was connected directly to the early Celtic era by Saint Gildas, who detailed her legend where she was beheaded by a murderous husband after becoming pregnant. Tryphine was restored to life, and her lasting impression on oral tradition were restored as well. Perhaps Tryphine's most unique quality is her great connection to the literary custom. Her story was altered to make her the wife of Bluebeard in Brittany, and later was changed further into a play involving the majesty of King Arthur and his court, set in Brittany. In the play, Tryphine is depicted as a princess of Ireland. The elements of her different stories and connections, through Gildas, Bluebeard, and Arthur, place Tryphine firmly in Wales, Ireland and Brittany. Tryphine's connections to the literary traditions show that her memory surpassed the oral tradition, and was important enough to be recorded for generations after her death.

The themes of those living during the Celtic period are also shown clearly through Brigid, Winifred and Tryphine. Each of these three women were female, and they were expected to show certain elements. They all had either their virginity or their livelihood compromised by a man. Brigid's brothers and father attempted to marry her off to an upstanding person in society, but she mutilated herself instead of succumbing to their wishes. Winifred was beheaded because she refused to yield to a man who wanted to marry her, and force her give up her promise to God. Tryphine was compromised by her husband, whether it was Bluebeard killing her after conceiving a child in the life of Gildas, the threat of beheading after opening a forbidden room, or having Arthur believe the lies Tryphine's brother, Kervoura, created. Winifred and Brigid were steadfast virgins, who were considered the best people in society but were also held to a higher standard. Although these are just three examples of the themes, they are models for other female saints of the time period.

Other upstanding women were such examples as Marie de France, the earliest known female poet. There were also famous warrior women not afraid to charge into battle, such as Boadicea or Medb. The women of *The Mabinogion* were also steadfast in their defense of their kingdoms. Conversely, women were also shown as inferior. After Medb went into battle, she was blamed for the army's shortcomings. The women in *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Old Woman of Beare* did something to displease the men in their lives and were thus sent away. Although women were more respected in Celtic society, they were still a part of the down-trodden.

The *topoi* of the Celtic world involved self-mutilation, such as the beheading of Winifred and Tryphine, or the self-inflicted blindness of Brigid. Brigid is greatly connected to fire, which continued to burn at her monastery of Kildare long after her death. These themes shown in certain places such as Ireland or Brittany were shown throughout the Celtic world during the medieval era.

Finally, as saints, their religiosity was exposed in different ways. As previously mentioned, Brigid was able to connect to all people in society, either pagan or Christian, whereas Tryphine and Winifred were mainly venerated by the upper class. Winifred's well was visited by monarchs and Flintshire and Shrewsbury became official trails of pilgrimage. Tryphine is based mainly in the literary tradition, a privilege enjoyed mainly by the male upper-class for the better part of history, as well as connected to the kings of Brittany and Arthurian legend. Perhaps Saint Brigid's most important aspect as a saint was that she was the personification of the Virgin Mary, and festivals in her honor were held far into the future after her death. Each saint has multiple churches and parishes dedicated in their memory in the ancient world as well as the contemporary.

Ultimately, these women and what they represented shows that the Christianity that

developed in the Celtic world was taking place in an overall European context. The Irishman, Columbanus, connected the Celts to Europe through his travels and his correspondence with Pope Boniface in Rome. The themes the women embodied, such as the beheading and the mutilation of the eye, can be seen on the European continent through such figures as Saint John the Baptist and Saint Lucy. Saint Brigid was able to turn water into ale because it was Mary that encouraged Jesus to turn water into wine in Galilee. Their sites of veneration are seen throughout the Celtic world and have spread further through the continent. The great oral tradition and exchange of ideas, which Charlemagne embraced, enabled the cross-cultural connections.

The Celtic saints were a distinct group of people with connections all over Europe. They were persecuted for believing in the new religion of Christianity during the time of paganism, but never backed down from their faith. The female Celtic saints were unique from their male counterparts as well. They were able to hold a diverse amount of positions in society, whether as a devoted wife and mother, a caring and steadfast virgin, or as queens and warriors. They knew their place in society, but also pushed the boundaries and knew that they were strong. The strength these women showed, whether it be Queen Medb defying her husband and leading an army, Marie de France defying the stereotypes and being the first woman writer in a sea of men, or Saint Brigid defying the boundaries and extending her influence far outside the Celtic borders, still resonates today. Their stories are known the world over, and are well respected for their persistence and determination. The women still knew their place, such as Aranrhod from *The Mabinogion* being unable to defend her land against an outside attack, or Saint Tryphine having to run for her life when her insistence that the disappearance of her son was not her fault falls on deaf ears. The female Celtic saints illustrated the prominent themes of Celtic society, being affected by such things as beheading and blindness. While all this was occurring, they were still

connected to the continent of Europe, influencing the peoples of the medieval world. These women and their stories are legendary, and will resonate in history for years to come.

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