



MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

an
Enterprising
Irish
Saint

HELEN MARTINEAU

AN ENTERPRISING IRISH SAINT

Myth descends into the human realm

When the Celtic goddess Brigid moved from the mythological realms into historical time as a powerful and saintly woman, this was an affirmation of the feminine divine living on in Irish Christianity. This woman even bore the name of the goddess, for she was Saint Brigid, also known as Bride.

Brigid survived as a beloved saint well beyond the demise of Celtic Christianity and the rise of Catholicism in Ireland. Today she still has a devoted following and many shrines to St Brigid are dotted across Ireland. Two are especially popular pilgrimage sites. One, with a holy well, is at her legendary birthplace on the Hill of Faughart near Dundalk. Another is at Kildare where she founded her first monastery in 470 beside an ancient oak tree. The monastery was quite democratic with nuns, monks and laypeople making up its community.

This Kildare shrine also has a sacred well. The waters are known for their healing powers and stones mark a Way still walked on her saint day, 1st February. Marking the direct link, this is also the day of the Celtic feast of Imbolc and the goddess Brigid who welcomed in the light after the darkness of winter.

A sacred flame burns nearby. In ancient times it was dedicated to the goddess and tended by priestesses. St Brigid continued the tradition with her nuns keeping the fire alight. It was only extinguished during the sixteenth century suppression of the monasteries (in the reign of Henry VIII) but was rekindled in 1993 by Brigidine nuns. It is now part of the Solas Bhríde centre. Thus, the fiery aura of Brigid lives on in this western isle.



St Brigid statue at her well holding aloft the sacred flame.

Who was she?

Saint Brigid was born around 450 and lived to 523. Tales of her miraculous deeds are numerous, but not so much is known about the real Brigid, with legends filling the gaps. As a child she is said to have made this extraordinary prophesy:

My garment shall be laid upon the Lord of the World ... the king of the elements himself shall lean upon my bosom. And I shall give him peace.

She became known as the foster mother of Christ, assisting the Virgin Mary with the holy babe. In Celtic society foster parents played vital and important roles – we have a faint echo today with the naming of godparents at infant baptisms. Then it was far from symbolic.

The story goes that Brigid-Bride was led by a white dove through a grove of rowan trees, the Celtic tree of life, to a place that was none other than the Holy Land and to a stable where she undertook to act as an aid woman to the Mother of Jesus. She placed three drops of water on the infant's brow to unite him with the earth and sang special runes to the cows gathered around so they would give of their milk. She gave this to baby Jesus, deepening his connection with Mother Earth and all her children. Lastly, she wrapped her blue mantle about the child, claiming him as the Irish people's Lord of the Elements.

For this she was named Bride of the Calm, Bride of the Mantle and Bride of the Kine (cattle). Her mantle was believed to have gained magical powers.

Brigid's life story begins as the child of a slave woman Brocca and her owner, a man called Dubthach. But Dubthach sold Brocca to a Druid in whose service Brigid spent her early childhood. She was returned to her father around ten years of age. She worked hard without complaint. One characteristic got her into trouble and meant she was passed on to various owners. This was her charity. She gave away anything she could to people in need, so lavishly she reduced the wealth of households and farms.

Finally, her desperate father tried to sell her to the king of Leinster. As Brigid waited while negotiations were proceeding, she noticed a man begging. She also saw the King's jewel-encrusted sword, which she took and gave to the beggar so he could barter it for food for his family. Dubthach came back and realised what she had done. 'This is a disaster,' he raged. 'Don't you know the sword's value?' Brigid replied, 'Yes, that's why I gave it to the poor man.'

Her father must have dreaded the outcome, but the king, a Christian, was impressed. 'Leave her alone; her merit before God is greater than ours,' he said, and he freed her.

Thus, because of young Brigid the weapon of war became a means of sustenance, which harks back to the vision of the prophet Isaiah – the sword turned into the ploughshare – and the all-encompassing goddess who is never overwhelmed

redefined herself within Celtic Christianity through a new impulse of peace and the hope of its fruition.

Individual freedom of worship was a vital aspect of the Celtic church. Throughout the Celtic lands a lone individual or a small group would settle in wild places away from the affairs of the world, striving to discover the inner divine through an austere existence immersed in the spirit in nature that was so integral to this form of spirituality. St Kevin in constant communion with God beside the isolated lake of Glendalough, with birds and animals as his companions, and the small community on the lonely rock Skellig Michael off the stormy coast of Kerry are well-known examples.

Because one's personal spirituality was acknowledged, females were not excluded. This meant women had status. They helped celebrate the mass and in many monasteries men and women lived and worked together. There was also a tradition of 'soul friends', *amachara*, where two pilgrims of the way walked the spiritual path together as loving friends and helpers. Mutual alignment was the key through the soul meeting of male and female.

After dedicating herself to religious life Brigid established monasteries all over Ireland, including joint ones. Within them the busy saint promoted scholarship and the arts. The Irish church became a bastion of learning and culture at a time when a stultifying darkness was emerging from the Roman church on mainland Europe.

Her symbols



St Brigid's cross: The unusually dynamic shape of her cross may have its origin in the Bronze age sun wheel found in many ancient cultures, including the Celtic.

Today it is made from rushes or straw and people hang it up on St Brigid's feast day – it is believed to keep fire, hunger and evil from the household. This cross became the saint's symbol from one of her legends. While ministering to an old chieftain, possibly her father, on his death bed, she took reeds from the floor and wove them into the distinctive pattern. Her rhythmic weaving action accompanied all the while by loving words calmed the old man's restless soul and he departed this world peacefully. This is a potent symbol of active spiritual work.

The anemone: it is also known as windflower, from the Greek *anemos* 'wind' for the way its colourful heads sway in the breeze. The anemone is found across temperate lands and in flower language symbolizes anticipation. As an early spring-blooming flower, it readily became associated with St Brigid and her goddess antecedent. One variety is named for her. In Christian lore the red flower represents the blood of Christ and anemones often appear in artworks depicting the grieving women at the crucifixion, such as on this page from a medieval manuscript, showing the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.



The legend of St Brigid at the holy child's birth as a helper in close association with the Virgin Mary, mystically links her through to the women's experience at Golgotha, which includes Mary Magdalene.

And the Magdalene through her experience of Golgotha, was united with Mother Mary on a soul level and spiritually with divine Sophia. This interweaving leads us into the mystery of the Holy Grail.

Celtic Christianity, St Brigid and Mary Magdalene as Grail bearer.

In Portal Four I wrote about St Brigid's link with Glastonbury and the Holy Grail, which indicates that some people did recognise her soul's significant connection with Mary Magdalene. To recap. Brigid is said to have sojourned at Glastonbury. And in 2015 evidence of a Celtic Christian community was found dating to her time. Bride's Mound, a small hill with a view of the Tor, marks her pilgrimage site. It is where her chapel, originally dedicated to Mary Magdalene, once stood.

On a macrocosmic level the Grail is the Christ spirit, now permeating the spiritual atmosphere of the earth. The world soul has become a sacred chalice. The Virgin Mary, holy mother, image of divine Sophia, emerged among other things as an archetype of the bearer of the Holy Grail.

In the microcosm the Grail is the Christ spirit settled in the receptive, awakened human soul as the individual I AM. So it was for Mary Magdalene.

In further incarnations her soul has brought an impulse into the world that would emerge as a soul picture for humans when the inner meaning of the Christ mystery was in real danger of being lost. It would reach its external expression in the Holy Grail stories of late twelfth century.

Yet the Grail is timeless, and the ongoing purpose of the Magdalene's enlightened soul has been to be a Grail bearer and messenger at specific times. In the fifth century this impulse was like a seed.

In the distinctive understanding of the Christ mystery which came to be known as 'Johannine' – with the Christ as both Lord of the elements and the destiny of individual souls – Mary Magdalene had been a key participant in initiation through Christ alongside the beloved disciple called John.

Hers is a purposeful story that continues. And I wonder whether those deeply perceptive Irish 'Johannine' Christians recognised the Magdalene soul reborn in Brigid their beloved saint.

And I wonder whether they perceived this soul helping to bring the mystery of the Holy Grail, not yet known by that name, into their world and into their souls in preparation for what was yet to awaken, like the anemone, the flower that represents 'anticipation'.

