



## **The Conversion to Christianity in Medieval Ireland: St. Patrick vs. St. Bridget**

Moriah Gerrish

History 30319

November 2010

## **The Conversion to Christianity in Medieval Ireland: St. Patrick vs. St. Bridget**

The study of the lives of saints, or hagiography, has always been a fascinating field. Historians and everyday people study saints, not only in order to find a connection to God through his disciples on earth, but because many saints were influential in historical events, such as the spread of Christianity or the development of Church doctrine. Two saints, in particular, were responsible for the dramatic spread of Christianity throughout medieval Ireland, and their activities have been recorded in medieval texts. These saints are Saint Patrick and Saint Bridget of Ireland. Saint Patrick worked as a missionary in Northern Ireland during the early half of the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> Saint Bridget was an abbess of Kildare in the central eastern portion of Ireland from roughly 450 to 520 A.D., and is famous for being the only female bishop in the Christian Church.<sup>2</sup>

Both St. Bridget and St. Patrick are patron saints of Ireland, but each had very different methods of converting people to Christianity from paganism during medieval times in Ireland. The main reason for the differences in their approach was due to their difference in origins and target audience. St. Patrick's approach was more aggressive and was aimed towards people in the druid class who were advisors to kings. St. Bridget's approach, which was gentler and welcoming to the Irish people, was directed toward commoners who continued to follow pagan rituals until her influence. Although their methods varied, it is evident that St. Bridget's approach to conversion yielded greater results than St. Patrick's, because it did not impose

---

<sup>1</sup> O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 3. There is some debate about the actual time period when Saint Patrick did his ministry because the first saint's life about him was not written until two hundred years after he was active.

<sup>2</sup> Knowles, *St. Brigid*, 24-25. There are disputes about when exactly Saint Bridget lived. This is due in part to the fact that the first recorded history of her life, the *Vita Brigitae* was written nearly a hundred years after she was said to have died. Additionally, other sources written later in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century take on a legendary aspect, and as such may not be entirely accurate in their description of this saint's life.

religion on the people, but instead molded their previous pagan beliefs into a genuine and devout acceptance of Christianity.

Saint Patrick originated from a high ranking Roman family in Britain and was born in the early 400s A.D. His father was a deacon named Calpurnius and his grandfather was a priest named Potitus.<sup>3</sup> Married clergy were not unusual during this time, although Pope Siricius insisted on the celibacy of the clergy.<sup>4</sup> He lived on an estate owned by his grandfather near the village Bannavem Taburniae. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was captured by Irish raiders and taken to Ireland with thousands of others to become a slave.<sup>5</sup> Once in Ireland, he was sold to a slave owner in what is modern Co Mayo and worked as a shepherd on the mountain sides for six years. Patrick described his time as a slave as a humiliating experience, since he was originally a high ranking Roman nobleman. During this time, Patrick felt that he became closer to God and gradually developed his faith as a Christian.<sup>6</sup> Patrick states in his Confession of Grace, “more and more the love of God and fear of Him came to me, and my faith was increased, and my spirit was so moved that in one day I would pray as many as a hundred times...”<sup>7</sup> The spiritual awakening Patrick felt included visions with warnings that he believed to come straight from God.<sup>8</sup> Patrick cites his origins in his Confession many times. He repeatedly refers to how he came from a free-born clergy family, but gave it up for the Irish people. This continuous reminder of his origins was supposed to make his brethren and the people of Ireland respect him

---

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick*, pg. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick*, pg. 7. Pope Siricius left behind a wife and children after having been unanimously elected pope, because he believed clergy could not lead people properly in matters of faith if they were concerned about their families.

<sup>5</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 63. The reference to thousands of slaves may be an exaggeration. It is not known exactly how many were captured.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick*, pg. 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 66, section 16. This text translates the letters of Saint Patrick into English and Irish from Latin.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. xviii. The warnings came to Patrick throughout his life, foretelling him about future events.

more and realize that he would not have went to Ireland on a mission of conversion and put himself in danger had God, Himself, not asked Patrick to. This is a form of justification for his actions as a missionary.

At the end of six years, a voice told Patrick it was time to escape by “a Voice” and return to Britain because his ship was ready.<sup>9</sup> Patrick believes the Voice to be a messenger sent to him by God in order to make him believe the in the legitimacy of the message. After a grueling journey back to Britain, one that repeatedly lacked food and lasted for many days, Patrick was welcomed joyously into his home by his parents. However, his time spent at his boyhood home was short lived. While at home, Patrick had many dreams of pleas from the Irish asking to be saved. It was through these visions from God that Patrick decided to return and liberate the people of Ireland from paganism by bringing Christianity to their lives.<sup>10</sup> Patrick wandered throughout Ireland converting people to Christianity for nearly twenty years.

Unlike Saint Patrick, Saint Bridget was a native of Ireland. Her father, Dubhthach, was a high ranking Irish nobleman and pagan. Her mother, Brotseach, was one of his slaves and a Christian. Bridget was named after the most powerful goddess, Brigid, in Dubhthach’s religion, who ruled over healing and inspiration. Some scholars doubt that a woman named Bridget actually lived, but rather the pagan goddess was humanized when Christianity reached the region of Ireland. It is more a matter of common sense to believe that a real woman named Bridget did exist, and was given a name of the goddess simple because her father worshipped the goddess. Even today, many children are named after famous people or heroic warriors, because their parents find comfort in naming their children something that speaks of greatness. For example, many people name their female children Mary after the mother of God because they want their

---

<sup>9</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 33-34.

<sup>10</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 49-51.

daughters to embody the principles of Mary's existence; piety, faith, and love. The origin of Saint Bridget's name enabled her to gain understanding and relate to people who had previously followed the powerful goddess' works before Saint Bridget converted them to Christianity.<sup>11</sup> This gave Saint Bridget a distinct advantage over Saint Patrick who had no local ties to pagan Ireland, thus no connection of familiarity with its people.

Saint Bridget was born at sunrise while her mother stepped across the threshold of the door. "The place just inside the door is considered sacred [in Ireland] and passing over it is a sacred act. Thus the birth of Saint Bridget on the threshold reveals her connection to Ireland's pagan past, and she serves to bridge the threshold between pre-Christian and Christian ideas."<sup>12</sup> At the behest of Dubhthach's jealous wife, Bridget and her mother were sold to a druidic priest. As a child, Saint Bridget was known for her generous manners because she did many charitable acts.<sup>13</sup> It is told that the druid and his wife who owned Bridget and her mother even converted to Christianity under her influence.<sup>14</sup> When Bridget was a young woman she asked to return to her father's house in Faughart.<sup>15</sup> She was granted her request, but her father and his wife grew angry when she gave away many of their possessions to the poor.<sup>16</sup> Saint Bridget gained her freedom after meeting the King of Leinster, Dunlang mac Enda, whom her father intended to sell her to. The Christian king realized the value and depth of Bridget's faith, and ordered her father to let her become a freewoman. In order to escape marriage Saint Bridget traveled to meet Bishop Mel at Armagh, who became her patron and spiritual guidance counselor. After a few years at the convent, Saint Bridget audaciously asked the King of Leinster to provide her with land to found

---

<sup>12</sup> Rowley, *On Saint Bridget and pagan goddess in the kingdom of God*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Sherlock, *Some Account of Saint Bridget and the See of Kildare with its Bishops*, pg. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> Sherlock, *Some Account of Saint Bridget and the See of Kildare with its Bishops*, pg. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Knowles, *Saint Bridgid*, 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland: The Life Stories of Saint Bridget and Columcille*, pg. 31-32.

her own convent.<sup>17</sup> The convent was set at Kildare, and a monastery was later added, both of which Saint Bridget ruled over as abbess until her death.<sup>18</sup>

Saint Bridget's target audience included common people who were not in the upper social class, the men and women under her rule, and those who sought her advice. Common people, especially those in poverty, often benefitted from Saint Bridget's generosity of spirit. There are many examples in Saint Bridget's life story in which she angered the wealthy by giving away their gifts to the poor or tearing up their clothes in order to clothe the poor. Saint Bridget has been described as, "Saint Brigid was a saint whose sanctity forcibly appealed to the warm-hearted and generous people, amongst whom she lived. There was nothing austere or repulsive in her methods of training the young and inexperienced in the ways of Christian perfection."<sup>19</sup> From this we can see that she was regarded well by those who encountered her because her methods of teaching Christianity were simple and genuine, not harsh. "She lived to serve Jesus by feeding the poor and vanquishing misery wherever she found it."<sup>20</sup> People could not help but admire and respect her. They recognized a sense of familiarity in her spirit which comforted them, and enabled them to believe that the new religion of Christianity did have significant merit.

Unlike Saint Bridget, Saint Patrick often encountered legal trouble as a foreigner in Ireland, because he was not associated with any clan, and thus had no legal rights. He explains the trouble he had in Ireland in a passage of his Confession with, "...so that I came to the heathen Irish to preach the Gospel and to endure the insults from unbelievers; to hear myself being taunted as a foreigner; to experience many persecutions unto bonds; and to surrender my

---

<sup>17</sup> De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland: The Life Stories of Saint Bridget and Columcille*, pg. 38-40.

<sup>18</sup> Sherlock, *Some Account of Saint Bridget and the See of Kildare with its Bishops*, pg. 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Knowles, *Saint Brigid*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Mulhern, *The Festive Abbess*, 1.

free-born status for the benefit of others.”<sup>21</sup> And thus, before Patrick could preach Christianity, he needed the approval and cooperation of local kings of the region he planned on going to.<sup>22</sup> “Any one traveling within Ireland, such as Patrick and his companions, would have had to be accompanied by and be under the protection of one the privileged few or he could have been killed with impunity.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, Saint Patrick most likely realized that by converting the upper class, those in the lower class would be forced to convert because of pressure from above. As a result Saint Patrick’s target audience included people of the druid class, the kings or noblemen who listened to the counsel of the druids, and wealthy noble women.

From Patrick’s letters he tells how he had to pay many kings in order to receive their cooperation. Saint Patrick states, “And all that time I used to give presents to the kings, in addition to paying wages to their sons who traveled with me...”<sup>24</sup> Through the support and generosity of wealthy noblewomen he was able to pay the fees the kings demanded of him. He also states, “But you know yourselves how much I paid out to those who wielded authority throughout the districts I more frequently visited. For I estimate that I distributed to them not less than the price of fifteen men...”<sup>25</sup> By moving from kingdom to kingdom he slowly converted people to Christianity, but he was limited by the support he received from the ruling class of the Irish. The few people who did welcome Patrick were the slaves of the royal households he visited. Most of the Christian slaves were from Britain, and were glad to see of priest from their previous life. They welcomed him, but he could do little for them without

---

<sup>21</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 70-71, section 37.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 90-92.

<sup>23</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 84.

<sup>24</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 74, section 52.

<sup>25</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 74, section 53.

angering their pagan masters, whom he was beholden to for safe passage throughout their kingdoms.<sup>26</sup>

The strongest opponent to Saint Patrick's ministry was the druids, because they had the most to lose with the advancement of the Christian religion. Patrick's new religion was a serious threat to the power of the Druid's in spiritual matters and in advisory positions. As kings converted to Christianity, they began to listen to the advice of Christians when governing, rather than druids, who previously held the position. Although most texts describing Patrick's encounter with druids were written by clergy who had an agenda to make druids appear pathetic, some truth about the real encounters can be understood from the texts. It is most likely that Patrick's attempt to convert people to Christianity was met with anger by those who he sought to make insignificant. For example in one account it states, "The hand of God seemed raised in special benediction over this favored land, increasing and multiplying the fruits of St. Patrick's apostolic zeal and labor. The altars raised to Pagan deities were overthrown and destroyed."<sup>27</sup> From this it is evident that Saint Patrick attempted to destroy the items that matter most for pagan people in Ireland by claiming divine order from God to do so.

It was important for Patrick to not antagonize anyone of significant power, because he would no longer have safe passage to other regions. However because of his belief in divine righteousness he was unable to do this successfully.<sup>28</sup> Many times he angered the men escorting him and in his *Confession of Grace* remarks on how this occurred, "...and nonetheless they [his escorts] seized me with my companions, and on that day were keen and avid to kill me, but my time had not yet come, and everything they found with us they seized, and myself they bound in

---

<sup>26</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Knowles, *Saint Brigid*, 4. This text begins by saying how Saint Patrick's efforts paved the way for the efforts of Saint Brigid to reach fruition, and records how Patrick was able to do this.

<sup>28</sup> Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, pg. 92.



irons...”<sup>29</sup> Another example of how Patrick was negatively received by the people in Ireland is from his own words with, “I live for my God, to teach the heathens, even if I am despised by some.”<sup>30</sup> From this account it is clear that Patrick knew that many did not like him and expressed their dislike for him, which he commented on. Patrick also describes the Irish unfavorably in his Confessions when he remarks, “Consequently then in Ireland, they who never had knowledge of God, but up until now always worshipped idols and abominations...”<sup>31</sup> By blatantly tearing down their shrines, and by calling their form of religion an abomination, Saint Patrick made many enemies of the pagan people of Ireland. It is not surprising that many people did not welcome him openly into their arms as they did Saint Bridget.

The problem with Saint Patrick’s approach to converting the Irish to Christianity was that he immediately assumed the pagan religion had no merit, and argues with the pagan why their beliefs are wrong. The reason Saint Patrick argued with the pagans, was that he thought that he was in the right, because he believed God sent him to Ireland on a mission and as a result his actions towards the Irish were dictated by this belief. “He sees and affirms himself as the apostle of Ireland, mysteriously chosen by divine providence to be commissioned by the Church. His life is enveloped in the consciousness of being under orders from Christ, to bring the Gospel to Ireland.”<sup>32</sup> Had Saint Patrick approach them in a non-argumentative light, as Saint Bridget does, he may have been more successful in gaining the aid and respect of the Irish noblemen.

Many of the miracles associated with Saint Patrick, demonstrate his power over the power of druid priests. The ship to Britain included pagan sailors that at first would not allow Patrick to join them, but later relented. During the journey home the sailors and Patrick could not

---

<sup>29</sup> <sup>29</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 74, section 52.

<sup>30</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 77, section 1. This quote comes from Patrick’s letter where he excommunicates Coroticus.

<sup>31</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Conneely, *The Letters of Saint Patrick*, 119.

find food for many days. They asked Patrick why his God would not help them find food, so he prayed and a group of wild boars were sent to them.<sup>33</sup> This is the first instance in which a miracle can be attributed to Patrick. Much of the time during Saint Patrick's ministry he is forced to do a miracle because people question the power of his God, compared to the power of their God. Essentially, the theme of these miracles comes down to the age old idea of "my God is better than your God." To combat the druids and prove the his God was indeed better than the pagan gods, Patrick had to do miracles such as killing druids after their high king, Loíguire of Tara tried to murder Saint Patrick with poison. The druids warned the king to kill Saint Patrick in order to prevent the destruction of their pagan Gods.<sup>34</sup> There is some dispute about this miracle. Some do not believe it to be accurate because there was no high king of Tara at this point in medieval history and this was written by Christian monks. Despite this, the story of the miracle does have merit because it demonstrates how Patrick was viewed by not only the druids of Ireland, but also by people who feared the result of change that came with the wide spread acceptance of Christianity. It can be understood that Saint Patrick's miracles are a metaphor for how he had to combat the beliefs in pagan gods daily. While Saint Patrick miracles were often demonstrations of power against pagan followers, Saint Bridget's miracles were not as forceful and more often had to do with simple matters of healing or comfort.

The miracles of Saint Bridget often had to do with things associated with her namesake, the goddess Brigid, such as control of fire. The perpetual fire at Kildare is one such example. By being able to control similar elements to the pagan goddess, God gave her powers similar to her namesake as a way to comfort those hesitant to leave paganism for conversion to Christianity. Familiarity is the greatest form of comfort. This gave Saint Bridget great allowance to ensure

---

<sup>33</sup> Freeman, *Saint Patrick of Ireland*, 39-41.

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, *Saint Patrick of Ireland*, 89-90.

that those who converted to Christianity under her influence did so out of genuine belief, rather than force conversion by an overlord. Other miracles of Saint Bridget are based on her ability to heal people, regardless of their origins. Saint Bridget went to a church in Teffia for Easter and while she was there she washed the feet of the old and the sick.<sup>35</sup> After washing the feet of a consumptive man, a madman, a blind man, and a leper, they were healed from their diseases and grateful to Saint Bridget. “She could not bear to see anyone, pagan or Christian, enduring the pangs of hunger, or tortured on the rack of pain.”<sup>36</sup> Her ability to heal and provide for those in need endeared the people of Ireland to her. As a result, they were more willing to hear her message about the new religion Christianity.

A great miracle of divine authority was bestowed on Saint Bridget when she was taking her orders as a nun. Bishop Mel was prepared to welcome Saint Bridget official into the Church, but he was seized by a holy spirit and instead of giving the orders of the nunnery he instead gave Saint Bridget the orders of a bishop. As a result, Saint Bridget became the only female bishop in Church history. After becoming bishop she was given Kildare to rule over. Saint Bridget left a great legacy of divine approval as abbess of Kildare, giving Kildare great power in Ireland. The name Kildare was derived from the Irish phrase Cell dara, meaning “church of the oak tree,” which demonstrates how pagan influences pervaded the transition to Christianity.<sup>37</sup> To the pagan religion of Ireland, oak trees had significant means and were honored by Druids. In medieval times the pagan rituals often took place under an oak tree. “Bridget’s style as abbess of Kildare was that of the perfect hostess, always welcoming the great and the lowly with equal warmth, serving generously and meeting every need.”<sup>38</sup> Since Bridget was consecrated as bishop, “This

---

<sup>35</sup> Stokes, *On the Life of Saint Bridget*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Knowles, *Saint Brigid*, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Gillespie, *St. Brigid’s Cathedral Kildare: A History*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Mulhern, *The Festive Abbess*, 1.

gives Saint Bridget and her successors an authority which surpasses that of other nuns and abbesses; it extends her position which equals that of bishops and rivals the powers of her male contemporaries.”<sup>39</sup> Despite this fact, other churches in Ireland still sought supreme dominancy over Kildare and others.

The people of Armagh sought the same token of power in the north of Ireland as Kildare had in the south of Ireland, and achieved it by appointing Saint Patrick as their patron. “Armagh claimed it was the rightful heir of Patrick, God’s own apostle to the Irish, and therefore had supremacy over the other churches on the island.”<sup>40</sup> The claim of supremacy was not limited to spiritual matters because the dominate church in Ireland also controlled the financial obligations of all subordinate churches. In order to prevent a church from becoming subordinate to another that church would put forth a founding saint who had more legitimacy than another founding saint. Armagh’s rise to become one of the dominate churches of Ireland was not done so easily. The church based its claim of supremacy because of its location; where Saint Patrick brought Christianity to the area. Other churches disputed this claim by saying how other saints worked in the area before Patrick even arrived in Ireland, such as the missionaries Ailbe, Declan, Ibar, and Ciarán. However, Armagh eventually did gain supremacy over many other churches and became a dominate power in Ireland, close in power to Kildare.

Saint Patrick was unable to endear the people of Ireland to him, and as a result few would have been willing to listen to his message about Christianity. Although Saint Patrick may have converted more people to Christianity than Saint Bridget of those who were converted it is unlikely that few peasants did so out of faith, but rather were forced to do so by their king or noblewoman because the king had converted for various reasons. Of those converted by Saint

---

<sup>39</sup> Rowley, *On Saint Bridget and pagan goddess in the kingdom of God*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Freeman, *Saint Patrick of Ireland*, 71-72.

Bridget, it is likely that most, if not all, were done so by great faith in Christ. They did not convert merely because Christianity was the same religion as their old one, just with a new name. Instead, they converted because Saint's Bridget's familiarity with pagan beliefs enabled her to have the ability to employ those beliefs in a Christian setting and help people understand why Christianity was a uniquely different; Christianity offers salvation from sins because a savior chose to die for people because He loves them, regardless of how the people feel or believe in Him. Saint Bridget bridged the gap between the old and the new spiritual beliefs. Her understanding of the old religion helped her to explain how the new religion would affect the lives of the people of Ireland, should they choose to convert. Many were converted because her explanation of the new religion of Christianity was welcoming, and for those she healed or clothed, they found a deep connection with a saint of this new religion.

## Bibliography

Conneely, Daniel. *The Letters of Saint Patrick: A Study of Their Theological Dimension*.

Maynooth: Saint Patrick's College, 1993.

De Blacam, Hugh. *The saints of Ireland: The life stories of Saint Brigid and Columcille*.

Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1942.

Freeman, Philip. *St. Patrick of Ireland: A biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Gillespie, Raymond. *St. Brigid's Cathedral Kildare: A History*. Kildare: Kildare Archaeological Society, 2000.

Knowles, J.A. *St. Brigid: Patroness of Ireland*. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1907.

Mulhern, Kathy. *The festive abbess*. Christian History: vol. 17, Issue 4, 1998.

O'Loughlin, Thomas. *Discovering Saint Patrick*. New York: Paulist Press, 2005.

Rowley, Sherry. *Saint Brigid and pagan goddess in the kingdom of God*. Canadian Woman Studies: vol. 17, Issue 3, 1997.

Sherlock, W. *Some Account of St. Brigid, and of the See of Kildare, with its Bishops and of the Cathedral, now restored*. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1896.

Stokes, Whitley. *On the Life of Saint Brigit: A translation*. University College Cork: Corpus Electronic Texts Edition, 2001.

Thompson, E.A. *Who was Saint Patrick?* Great Britain: The Boydell Press, 1985.