

Brigit of Ireland: Gifting Values and Practices

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Maternal Gift Economy Movement Salon #73

Maternal Gift Salons

What we have learned so far from : ----

Indigenous Societies

Marija Gimbutas

Matriarchal Studies

Now we need to explore the Indigenous
Roots of Old Europe

Sources for Brigit in Ancient Irish Material

Lives of Saint Brigit: *usually considered to be a saint*



Saga Material where a female called Brig or Brigit appears : *some considered her to be a goddess*



Living Traditions: ritual, material artefacts, landscapes : *Ever present reality: Source of comfort, healing, solace, and inspiration*

Which comes first?



*Lives of Saint Brigit
comprise the first written
traditions on Saint Brigit*



Saga and other material
usually comes later and
contains variations on the
name Brigit and Brig




Living traditions survive to
the present day. Rituals,
material artefacts,
symbols, landscape

Focus here on Written Texts

- ▶ Written materials compiled in monasteries controlled by small dynasties and ecclesiastics (they were intertwined) Texts must be approached cautiously
- ▶ Many texts now lost or untranslated
- ▶ Many layers of colonisation and invasion
- ▶ Hostile witnesses to Old Irish culture
- ▶ Yet, leaky documents where information can be found
- ▶ Reading documents backwards: *What Brigit Did Not Do*

Gifting in the *Lives of Saint Brigit*

One unfortunate *nun* gave Brigit a beautiful basket of apples, which Brigit promptly passed on to lepers. When the *nun* complained, Brigit cursed her orchards.



In contrast, another *nun* brought Brigit apples and sloes, who promptly passed them on to some lepers. When the *nun* did not object, Brigit blessed her orchards and increased their fruitfulness. BB 33.

Lepers: Wealth must be continually circulated

In another story, two lepers came to Brigit asking to be healed. She healed the first and then told him to heal his brother who was still infected.

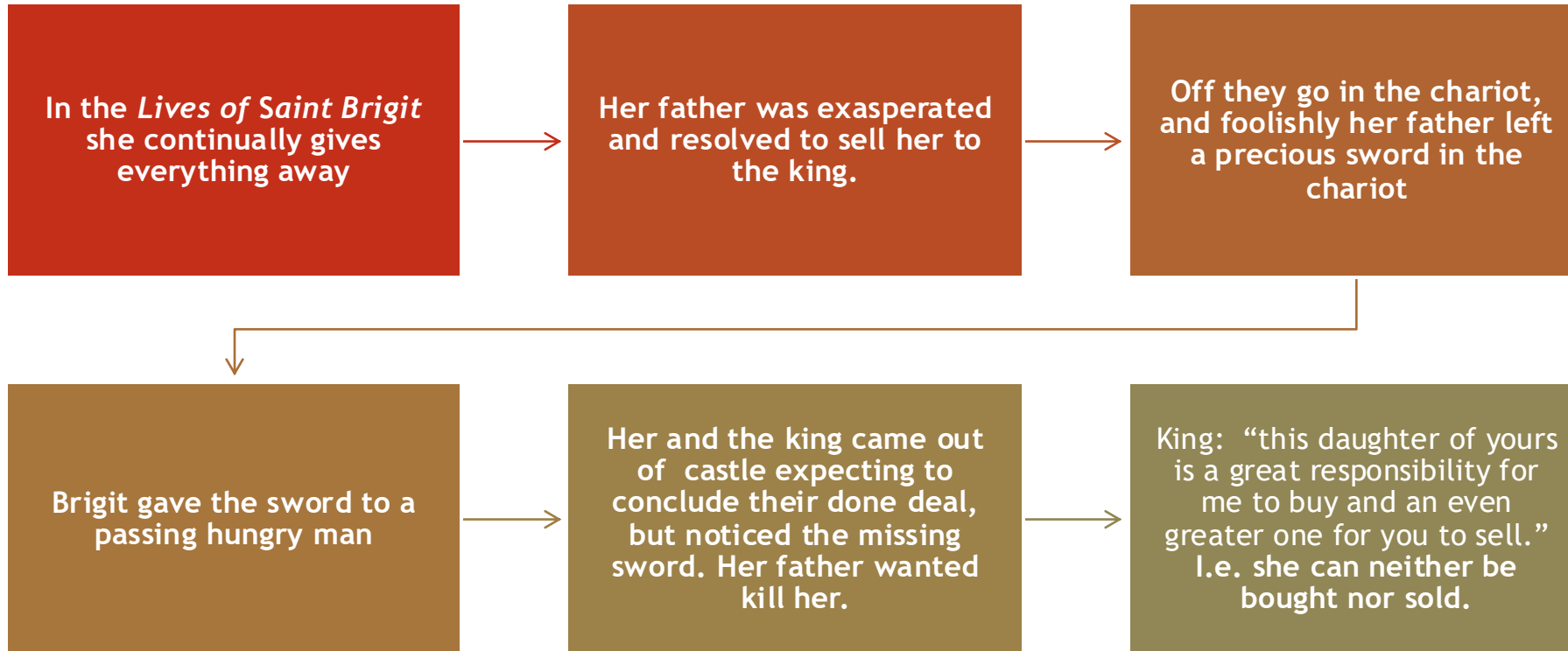
The first leper told her he would have nothing to do with his brother, as he was now clean.

Exasperated, Brigit re-infected the first leper and healed the second one.

The moral of the story is that grace and healing exist in abundance but they must be passed on.

If someone arrested it, kept it, or thought it emanated from themselves, she soon disillusioned them.

Brigit: Can Neither be Bought Nor Sold





Abundance vs Scarcity Regeneration vs Redemption

- ▶ The theme of abundance runs through the *Lives of Saint Brigit*. In the *Lives*, (check which one: BB) twenty three out of thirty two stories concern her generosity. Brigit hands out butter, milk, meat, and whatever else comes to hand to every passing stranger, human or animal, who expresses their need.

Trace Hauntings of the Indigenous Traditions of Old Europe: Taboos of Kings of Ireland

In early Ireland kings were essentially sacral kings, whose main responsibility was that of ensuring that communities stood in right relationship to the cosmos and to nature.

No woman should die in childbirth

Fruit should always appear on the trees. Crops should be successful

Dyeing should also be successful. Cloth played a hugely important role in early communities. *Dyeing* might have been considered a magical art.

Legitimacy of Kings



In ancient Ireland, the king derived legitimacy not from holy books, or from weapons, but by the extent to which his rule honoured nature and the natural cycle, to ensure the physically sustainable and ethical life of the community.



The king entered into a symbolic *sacred marriage* with the goddess, or female divinities of the land.



Such ritual *matings* often took place at the holy wells

False judgments and damage to crops. cf. O'Leary, 1986, 13. Elements serve as sureties, i.e. swearing on the Sun, Moon.

Brigit: Often Assumed that She Belonged to the Tuatha Dé Danann

This name, **Tuatha Dé Danann**, is very late. The name did not arise until the 9th or 20th centuries, and it appears to have been formulated to distinguish the *Old Irish gods* from the *genuine* Tuatha Dé, (People of God)

and various attempts have been made to associated Brigit with other international goddess and rivers such as the Danube.

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The Name Tuatha Dé Danann

- ▶ In the saga material, the name is designed to distinguish the *Old Irish Gods* from the *New Gods, of Hebrew and Christians who came to Ireland and were called the sons of Mil (the Milesians)* ,
- ▶ Brigit is said to be part of the Tuatha Dé . However, the TD are not considered to be necessarily benevolent forces in Irish saga literature.
- ▶ In other words, the legitimate **Tuatha Dé** refers to the new Christian world order, while the **Tuatha Dé Danann**, will be **relegated below ground**. They are allowed out at the Quarterly Festivals, but general they are the *unconscious of the social order*. .

TD: *People of the Gift.* *Danann is now contested.*

- ▶ The word **Dán**, however, might also mean **GIFT** in the wider sense of that word.
- ▶ The God, **Lugh**, for instance, was called the **Samildánach** : *the man of all arts, or the man of all gifts*
- ▶ Many references in Irish texts to three figures, female and male, with several gifts. In Brigit's case, a/c to *Cormac's Glossary* her gifts were poetry, healing and smithwork
- ▶ Wisdom is sometimes called *Son of the three gods of art.*
- ▶ Throughout Old Irish texts, the word **Dán** refers to **gifts, poetic, scientific, artistic, musical, spiritual, or theological**

Who were the TD?



- ▶ Earth Spirits
- ▶ Euhemerised : made human in order to be ridiculed and destroyed in many sagas
- ▶ Yet sagas reveal underlying reveal trace haunting of their value systems
- ▶ Now they are often called the *Síd* , a word that means *peace*. Did not like Iron.
- ▶ No weapons found in Ireland until after the many invasions
- ▶ Like the Greek *Furies*, *defenders of the matri-centred system*, the *TD* were relegated to live below the earth when the Sons of Mil arrived in Ireland (representing) Hebrews and Christians) .
- ▶

Tuatha Dé and Gifts

- ▶ *Gifts are said to have come from several sources*
- ▶ Gifts of Nature
- ▶ *Shamanic practices*
 - ▶ Praying over grave mounds
 - ▶ Poetic Inspiration
 - ▶ Psychedelic substances
 - ▶ Drumming etc.
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Gifts from God

Brigit in Other Documents: Was *Brigit* a Goddess?

- ▶ “Brigit, i.e. the poetess daughter of the Dagda. This is Brigit the female seer or woman of insight, i.e. Brigit a goddess whom *filid* worshipped. For her protecting care was very great and very wonderful. So they call her the goddess of poets by this title. Her sisters were Brigit woman of healing and Brigit woman of smith-work, i.e. goddesses, i.e. three daughters of the Dagda, from whom among all the Irish a goddess used to be called Brigit. Brigit, then, i.e. *breo-saigit*, a fiery arrow. Whitley Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1862), p.8.

- ▶ These “Brigits” have no mother?
- ▶ Always a clue as to what is really going on.
- ▶ Several references to the Dagda (Great Lord) - apparently a unique figure in world mythology
- ▶ Dagda is ridiculed in one of the key texts of the demise of the *Tuatha De*
- ▶ Ridiculed for his greed, and seldom appears in other mss related to the TD

Notes on this passage

Saga: Cath Maige Tuired: Second Battle of Moytura

Valuable evidence of the overthrow of a matri-centred system.

Trace haunting of the values and ethics being replaced by the rule of weapons.

First Battle of Moytura Sacral king, Nuadu, overthrown

Choice of New King (check translation)

- ▶ 14. There was contention regarding the sovereignty of the men of Ireland **between the Tuatha De and their wives**, since Nuadu was not eligible for kingship after his hand had been cut off. They said that it would be appropriate for them to give the kingship to Bres the son of Elatha, to their own adopted son, and that giving him the kingship would knit the Fomorians' alliance with them, since his father Elatha mac Delbaith was king of the Fomoir.
- ▶ Brigit of the TD marries Bres of the Fomoiri (traditional enemies of the TD)

Mother Gave Him Land



The sovereignty of Ireland was given to that youth; and he gave seven guarantors from the warriors of Ireland (his maternal kinsmen) for his restitution of the sovereignty if his own misdeeds should give cause.



Then his mother gave him land, and he had a fortress built on the land, Dun mBrese.



Bres dishonours his promises through meanness and greed.

Poet Visits the King Requesting Hospitality

- ▶ On one occasion the poet came to the house of Bres seeking hospitality (that is, Coirpre son of Etain, the poet of the Tuatha De). he entered a narrow, black, dark little house; and there was neither fire nor furniture nor bedding in it. Three small cakes were brought to him on a little dish--and they were dry. The next day he arose, and he was not thankful. As he went across the yard he said,

Poet's Satire Against Bres

- ▶ "Without food quickly on a dish,
Without cow's milk on which a calf grows,
Without a man's habitation after darkness remains,
Without paying a company of storytellers--let that be
Bres's condition."

"Bres's prosperity no longer exists," he said, and that was true. There was only blight on him from that hour; and that is the first satire that was made in Ireland.

Bres exacts taxes on behalf of his Paternal Kinsmen

- ▶ there was not a smoke from a house in Ireland which was not under their tribute.
- ▶ Warriors of Ireland were reduced to serving him: Ogma beneath a bundle of firewood and the Dagda as a rampart-builder, and he constructed the earthwork around Bres's fort.
- ▶ (Dagda was supposedly his father-in-law)
- ▶ But neither service nor payment from the tribes continued; and the treasures of the tribe were not being given by the act of the whole tribe.

Bres was Deposed for Meanness

- ▶ Battle begins between the TD and their traditional enemies the *Fomoiri*
- ▶ TD are winning. Fomoiri ask the son of Brigit and Bres to go to the TD and request one of their superior weapons
- ▶ The TD cannot refuse a request from a *mother's son*
- ▶ They make what Ruadan thinks is a weapon that he then tries to use to kill the smith of the TD, his maternal uncle Goibniu.
- ▶ Goibniu grabs the weapon and kills Ruadan
- ▶

Brigit Keened and Wailed

Brig came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and shrieking were heard in Ireland. (Now she is the Brig who invented a whistle for signalling at night.)

Keening and Wailing were forbidden by the church at the time that the final version of the Second Battle of Moytura was compiled

Weaver's Beam, Rather than a Sword

- ▶ It appears that the *weapon* was not a sword but a *weaver's beam*.
- ▶ This deserves much more explanation. It may be that the weaver's beam as an instrument of authority. Using it to kill is sacriligious.
- ▶ A comment from the text: *So the spear was given to Ruadan by his maternal kin, and for that reason a weaver's beam is still called "the spear of the maternal kin" in Ireland.*

TD Won the Battle but their Spiritual Authority was now Overthrown

- ▶ The *battle* was won by the *Tuatha Dé*
- ▶ However, they also realised that their social system was now completely overthrown. Not *weaving* but *weaponry* would be
- ▶ **The** Morrigan issues an ominous announcement of the end of the World as they had known it.

She also prophesied the end of the world, foretelling every evil that would occur then, and every disease and every vengeance; and she chanted the following poem:



166. Then after the battle was won and the slaughter had been cleaned away, the Morrigan, the daughter of Ernmas, proceeded to announce the battle and the great victory which had occurred there to the royal heights of Ireland and to its sid-hosts, to its chief waters and to its rivermouths. And that is the reason Badb still relates great deeds. "Have you any news?" everyone asked her then.



"Peace up to heaven.
Heaven down to earth.
Earth beneath heaven,
Strength in each,
A cup very full,
Full of honey;
Mead in abundance.
Summer in winter. . . .
Peace up to heaven . . ."

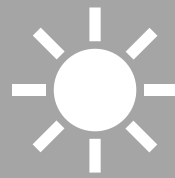
I Shall Not See a World that Will be Dear to Me.

- "I shall not see a world
Which will be dear to me:
Summer without blossoms,
Cattle will be without milk,
Women without modesty,
Men without valor.
Conquests without a king . . .
Woods without mast.
Sea without produce. . . .
- False judgements of old men.
False precedents of lawyers,
Every man a betrayer.
Every son a reaver.
The son will go to the bed of his father,
The father will go to the bed of his son.
Each his brother's brother-in-law.
He will not seek any woman outside his
house. . . .
An evil time,
Son will deceive his father,
Daughter will deceive . . ."

Gifts Available to all in Religions of the Hearth



Religions of the Hearth continue to be practised by what some theorists called the *Lower Orders* .



Quarterly Festivals: Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, Lughnasadh



Alignment with the cosmos, community and one's body is the dominant theme.

Gift Travellers Between Worlds

- Such healers, sometimes called intermediaries or shamans, can seemingly travel between worlds or to other dimensions of human experience or *knowing*. They cultivate acute intuition, communication, and kinship consciousness to communicate with the *natural world* and *spirit world*, to heal, advise and reassure, a capacity we may have lost, or atrophied through lack of use.





Gifts controlled by Religions of Empire

- *Religions of the Hearth* now superseded by *Religions of Empire* presided over by the Higher Orders
- Gifts can only be offered in the form of *supernatural grace (conditionally)* by *priestly orders* who almost *unilaterally exclude women from their precincts*
- *The Hearth* is replaced by *altars of sacrifice*
- *Worship* is now more important than *alignment*

Some *Goddesses* now become Ciphers of Male Power

Important to distinguish between Indigenous Divinities and Goddesses of Empire who have become ciphers of male power.

In many cases, the *Mother Goddess* has now become the sovereignty queen legitimating male rulers

Their powers have often now been appropriated for political propaganda

Indigenous Understanding : Gifts, Reciprocity and Native Tradition of Healing

*Her wisdom and her healing powers have the nature of a gift, which she in turn, as intermediary between human experience and the ancestral otherworld, is obliged to dispense as generously as the landscape itself dispenses its abundant herbal favours. She requires only to have her services requested of her by those who share an allegiance to the cosmological perspective in which the figures of the Cailleach-goddess and the wise healer personify the gendered ancestral understanding of how the forces of the cosmos interact with human life and with the human imagination as it later expresses itself in cultural construction. Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach*, p.190*