

BRIGID: THE GODDESS BEHIND THE SAINT

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St. Brigid is both historical figure and character of folklore and shared more than a name with her Pagan Goddess counterpart. It is through St. Brigid that the clearest glimpse into Brigid the Goddess can be found.— *Brigid: History, Mystery, and Magick of the Celtic Goddess*, Courtney Weber

If you spend any time researching the subject, there are numerous theories that describe how the Saint and Goddess are connected. The one that resonates with me most strongly these days comes from the excellent research done by Courtney Weber in *Brigid: History, Mystery, and Magic of the Celtic Goddess*. According to Weber, one of the commonalities between various Celtic cultural traditions was a term for an exalted being: *Brig* or *Brid*. It was applied to more than the Goddess, and was also used to refer to women in positions of power in society. One example is a first century Irish lawyer called Brigh which was probably not her name but was a reference to her occupation as a female judge.

When nuns take their vows, they leave their secular name behind and choose a new one. Based on Weber's work it is possible that the nun in question chose the name Brigid which was quite fitting since she held a powerful position as the founder of the cathedral in Kildare (which was built on top of a Pagan shrine) and abbess of a monastery. She also had a reputation for being generous to the poor and was known for healing miracles and compassionate care for animals.

When Brigid died and was declared a saint, there is no doubt the folklore surrounding her continued to grow. It's my theory that many of the qualities that were once attributed to the Goddess Brigid became attached to St. Brigid since the worship of the Goddess remained strong in Ireland in spite of Christian attempts to eliminate it. This way, the Celts could have their Goddess in the guise of saint's clothing. It was a win/win for both sides!

There are others beside myself who believe in this theory. Robert Ellsberg in *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time*, says "It has been noted that in ancient times Brigid was, in fact, the name of the Celtic sun goddess. This has given rise to the suggestion that in St. Brigid, a nun and abbess of the fifth century, we find the repository of primeval religious memories and traditions. In any case, it seems that with the cult of St. Brigid the Irish people maintained an image of the maternal face of God with which to compliment the more patriarchal religion of St. Patrick and subsequent missionaries."

Edward C. Sellner in *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, says "These attributes (*of the goddess*) were eventually identified with Brigit, the saint, whose feast day, February 1, came to be celebrated on the same day as that of the Pagan goddess. Early hagiographers also portray crucial turning points in Brigit's life and ministry as touched

with fire. It is clear that St. Brigit stands on the boundary between Pagan mythology and Christian spirituality.”

In my own personal spiritual practice, Brigid plays a big part as my “go-to” Goddess. I have an icon of her above my altar in the form of St. Brigid to remind me of the connection between my Christian and Pagan paths. For me she is a bridge-builder and reconciler whose healing power might help to bring us all closer together! Hail Brigid, and I wish you all a blessed celebration of Imbolc!

Triple Goddess— The Brigid first worshipped in ancient times was the daughter of the great Irish god Dagda, the 'Good Father'. She had two sisters who were also named Brigid. Taken together, they were called the 'Three Mothers', 'Three Sisters', or simply the Goddess Brigid. Unlike in Greek mythology where the Triple Goddess represented the three chronological stages of a woman's life (Maiden, Matron, and Crone), the Bridgets were all of the same generation and the distinctions between them were based on their domains of responsibility:

- Brigid, the 'Fire of the Hearth', was the goddess of fertility, family, childbirth and healing.
- Brigid, the "'Fire of the Forge', was like the Greek goddess Athena, a patroness of the crafts (especially weaving, embroidery, and metal smithing), and a goddess who was concerned with justice and law and order.
- Brigid, the 'Fire of Inspiration', was the muse of poetry, song history and the protector of all cultural learning. (from Brigid, the Celtic Goddess: Triple Goddess and Beloved Christian Saint)

St. Brigid's Cross—The cross reminds me of the spokes of the wheel that the goddess Brigid turns toward spring during the celebration of Imbolc. The four "spokes" of this cross represent the two solstices and two equinoxes of the year. With all the connections that can be made between Brigid and St. Brigid, it's not hard to believe that the cross is a Christian adaptation of the wheel of the year. The earliest origin of St Brigid's cross may possibly be the “sun cross” or “wheel cross” that dates back to prehistoric times, especially during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. Wheel crosses appear frequently in artifacts associated with religious rites. They call to mind the spokes of a chariot wheel.

Maman Brigitte—Did you know that Brigid made her way to Africa and then to Haiti and the United States? Maman Brigitte is worshipped by voodoo practitioners of Haitian Vodoun and New Orleans Voodoo. She is a death loa (goddess/spirit) and is the only white loa among the other gods who originated from Africa. She is also a spirit of fertility and motherhood.