

# Saint Brigid



Holy Wells, Patterns and Relics.

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and  
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In 1956, as a nine year old child living in Oxfordshire, Michael Peyton was taken by his Irish relatives to visit the well of St. Brigid at Liscannor, County Clare. His aunt said that it was a holy place but this did little to aid his understanding. He saw statues, quantities of offerings and faded paper. He was puzzled by their saying of the Rosary and prayers in Irish. She was eager to collect the well's water, some being sprinkled liberally on all members of the party and the remainder taken back to Newmarket-on-Fergus. As the years have progressed, and certainly since his retirement, Mike has reflected on this experience recalled from childhood. In collaboration with a former colleague this paper has been produced to examine the significance of such wells, the story of St. Brigid, and to set out what is known of her surviving relics and attitudes towards them.



One view of such wells was expressed in 1908 by Most Rev. John Healy, D.D., Archbishop of Tuam in an article entitled "The Holy Wells of Ireland":-

"As a rule, all the Irish saints have one or more blessed wells dedicated to their memory in the immediate neighbourhood of the churches which they founded. Indeed, the church was never founded except near a well. Pure water was necessary, not only for Baptism and for the Holy Sacrifice, but also for the daily needs of the holy men and women whose lives were given there to the service of God. What wonder these became holy wells - blessed for Baptism, used at mass, giving daily drink to generations of saints, who, with pure and grateful hearts, blessed God who gave them those crystal springs.

We believe that some of their (i.e. the saints') ancient holiness still lingers round our blessed wells, that their holy patrons still pray in a special way for those who frequent them in a pious and confiding spirit, and that God often hears those fervent prayers and grants special requests to the faithful suppliants through the fervour of their faith and the merits of the saints."

In a 19<sup>th</sup> century survey it was found that Ireland was home to nearly three thousand holy wells, of these about two hundred and twenty remain in County Clare, as indicated on the map below. These wells are generally believed to have spiritual and healing properties. Wells known to cure toothache include St. Mavee's and St. Senan's in County Dublin. St. Columcille's at Sandyford is said to treat effectively sore throats and hoarseness. Wells for the treatment of arthritis include St. Bernard's in Limerick.



“The Holy Wells of Ireland” by author Patrick Logan lists fifteen wells dedicated specifically to St. Brigid in eleven counties and there are likely to be several more undocumented. Pope Gregory the Great counselled Bishop Augustine, the missionary to the English, not to destroy pagan shrines but to adopt them for Christian use. It is likely that the Irish missionaries adapted the same approach. All wells were sacred to the Celts for they were the doorway to the Underworld and the womb of our Mother, the source of all life.

There is considerable debate about the origins of the Christian St. Brigid, Ireland’s female patron saint. While there are several Irish saints with the same name, St. Brigid of Kildare was born c. 450. Her friendship with Saint Patrick is attested by the following paragraph from the Book of Armagh:-

"inter sanctum Patricium Brigitanque Hibernesium columnas amicitia caritatis inerat tanta, ut unum cor consiliumque haberent unum. Christus per illum illamque virtutes multas peregit".

(Between St. Patrick and Brigid, the pillars of the Irish people, there was so great a friendship of charity that they had but one heart and one mind. Through him and through her Christ performed many great works.)

When dying, St. Brigid was attended by St. Ninnidh, who was ever afterwards known as "Ninnidh of the Clean Hand" because he had his right hand encased with a metal covering to prevent its ever being defiled, after being the medium of administering the viaticum to Ireland's Patroness. She is believed to have died at Kildare on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 525. After her death it was said that her remains were set in a shrine of honour at the high altar of her cathedral, with a tomb “adorned with various ornaments of gold and silver.” No evidence of this exists today, nor of the reputed “Book of Kildare” believed to rival the Book of Kells in its magnificence.

Her shrine was plundered by the Vikings c835, but not before her remains were safely removed to Downpatrick. There, according to tradition, they were discovered in 1185 and reinterred in Down Cathedral in a single tomb with the two other patron saints of the land, Patrick and Columba.

Her first hagiography, written around 650 by St. Broccán Clóen , features legends that seem to evoke the essence of a pagan goddess, complete with magical stories involving cattle and agriculture, and also with sacred fire and holy wells. A second Vita was written by Cogitosus, a monk of Kildare in the eighth century

and a further eighth century account is attributed to Coelan. One school of thought is that she is merely a Christian appropriation of a far earlier pagan goddess, others see her almost entirely in a Christian context. In Irish mythology, Brigid, Brigit or Bright ("the exalted one") was possibly the daughter of the Dagda, the "good god". He was a figure of immense power, armed with a magic club and associated with a cauldron. According to one account she was "born at the exact moment of daybreak, [and] rose into the sky with the sun, rays of fire beaming from her head." In Druid mythology, the infant goddess was fed with milk from a sacred cow from the Otherworld. She had two sisters, also named Brigid, and may be considered a Celtic Triple Goddess.

Brigid was the goddess of the Sacred Flame of Kildare and the patron goddess of the Druids and seems to have been the Celtic equivalent of the Roman Minerva and the Greek Athena. She was the goddess of high-rising flames, highlands, hill-forts and upland areas; and of elevated characteristics such as wisdom, excellence, perfection, high intelligence, poetic eloquence, craftsmanship, healing ability, druidic knowledge and skill in warfare. After Christianity came to be adopted by the Celts, some believe that Brigid was considered the foster mother of Jesus, "Mary of the Gaels" and was renamed St. Brigid.

Professor Dáithí Ó hÓgáin and others suggest that the saint had been chief druidess at the temple of the goddess Brigid, and was responsible for converting it into a Christian monastery. After her death, the characteristics of the goddess became attached to the saint. Some historians and theologians are sceptical of a direct link between a pagan goddess named Brigid and St. Brigid. According to these sources, the goddess Brigid was first introduced into the literature in the ninth-century *Sanas Cormaic* (Cormac's Glossary). But it wasn't until Whitley Stokes published his 1862 translation that the connection with the festival of Imbolc, and thus St. Brigid, was introduced. Stokes was a lawyer and civil servant, described as "the greatest of the celtologists."

Brigid of Kildare was a bishop, a unique status for a woman in the Catholic church. This seems to have arisen in error since she was supposed to take the veil as a nun. An account is given in "An Leabhar Breac" of which the following is an 1878 translation by Whitley Stokes.

"Brigit, and certain virgins with her, went to Bishop Mél, in Telcha Mide, to take the veil. Glad was he thereat. For humbleness Brigit staid, so that she might be the last to whom the veil should be given. A fiery pillar arose from her head to the ridgepole of the church. Bishop Mél asked: 'What virgin is there?' Answered MacCaille: 'That is Brigit,' saith he. 'Come thou, O holy Brigit,' saith Bishop Mél, 'that the veil may be sained on thy head before other virgins.'

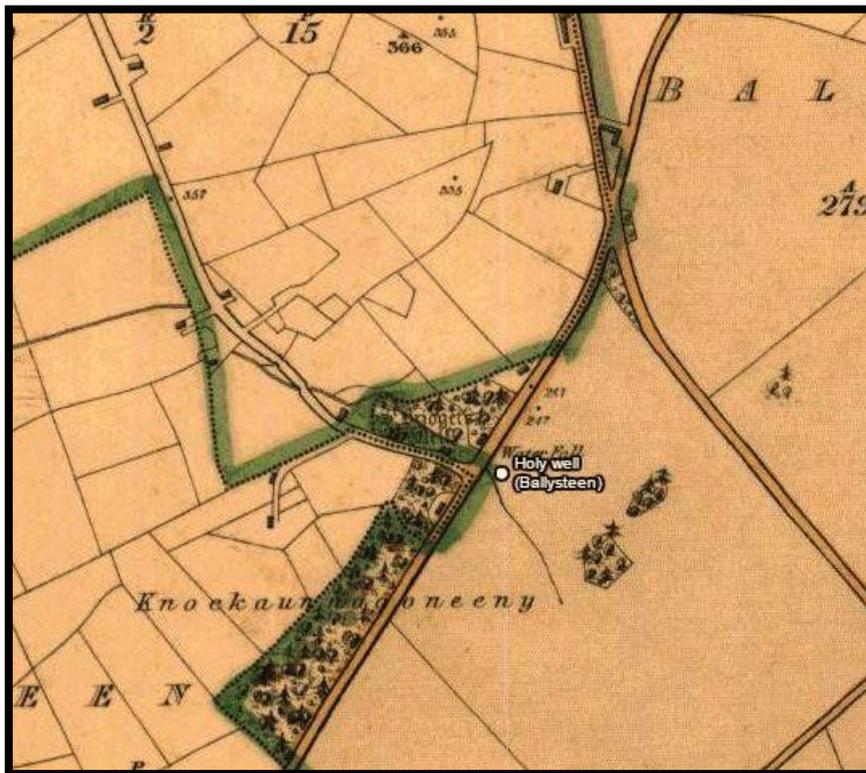
It came to pass then, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, that the form of ordaining a bishop was read over Brigit. MacCaille said that 'The order of a bishop should not be (conferred) on a woman.' Dixit Bishop Mél: 'No power have I in this matter, inasmuch as by God hath been given unto her this honour beyond every woman.' Hence, it is that the men of Ireland give the honour of bishop to Brigit's successor."

Oliver Davies in "The Irish Life of Brigit" describes the behaviour of Bishop Mél, who, "being intoxicated with the grace of God there, did not know what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop." As a bishop, she established side-by-side monasteries, one for men and one for women. These monasteries developed into great centres of learning and the arts, with influence over a wide territory. For centuries Kildare was ruled by a double line of abbot-bishops and of abbesses; the Abbesses of Kildare, while not being bishops themselves, continued to have a bishop's jurisdictional authority. This authority was respected for many centuries, and the other Irish bishops customarily sat at the feet of Brigit's successors until the Synod of Kells ended this custom in 1152.

Brigid's Well, Dabhach Bhríde, is found near the Cliffs of Moher. George Petrie was one of a circle of scholars, antiquarians and artists who was fascinated by Irish history and folklore. In this painting dating from about 1830, he shows the well from across a narrow stream.



A number of pilgrims perform the various stages of the Rites associated with the well; some kneel in prayer while others circle the well, which is marked by a standing stone inscribed with a cross. The well is depicted in its original location before being moved to a more convenient site in 1853, where it remains today. Although romantic and sentimental in style, his work was accurate in its representation of the subject matter.



From the 1842 6 inches to a mile map

Behind the well on a higher level to which steps lead is an ancient cemetery in which the Uí Bhrian, the Kings of Dál gCais, are buried. There is a large cross there and a circular path around it and part of the Rite of the Holy Well is performed in this area known as the 'Ula Uachtarach' or upper sanctuary.

The Well itself is in the lower ground, the 'Ula íochtarach' or lower sanctuary, now enclosed in a little house full of votive offerings such as holy pictures, rosaries, medals and so forth left by pilgrims. A feature of many of the holy wells is the presence of sacred trees. Often it is an oak tree that is associated with St. Brigid, one of these at Kildare was known to have miraculous healing properties when parts of it were taken as relics.

There were four different Pattern or Patron Days on which large numbers of the faithful attended the Well. These were St Brigid's Eve, Garland Saturday & Sunday - the Saturday and Sunday of Crom Dubh (the last Sunday of July and its vigil), and The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, on 15<sup>th</sup> August. On these days tents were erected for the supply of food and drink to sustain the pilgrims in devotion.

St. Brigid's Day, 1<sup>st</sup> February, was known in pre-Christian times as Imbolc, a spring festival, midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, The word derives from a Neolithic expression meaning "in the belly", referring to the pregnancy of ewes. As Imbolc approached, Brigid's Crosses and a corn doll-like figure of Brigid, called a Brídeóg, would be made.



The familiar rush-woven St. Brigid's Cross may have derived its shape from a symbol of that most fiery of objects, the sun. On the eve of Imbolc all the girls and young women of a village would gather in a one house and stay up all the night with the Brídeóg. Later the young men would seek permission to enter the house and would pay reverence to the doll-like figure. Items of clothing would be left outside for Brigid to bless. The head of the household would smother the fire and smooth the ashes. In the morning the ashes would be inspected for signs that she had entered the house and walked on them. On the

following day the figure representing the saint or goddess would be paraded from house-to-house and treated with great respect. This ritual was practised in parts of Ireland until the mid twentieth century. Holy wells were also visited on this occasion.

The most important annual occasion at the Well was Domhnach Chrom Dubh and people of Clare and of Aran spent the whole night there. "Mason's Parochial Survey, 1814-1819" describes the event:-

"The last Sunday in July is a patron day, when a number of people assemble at Lahinchy: they amuse themselves with horse-racing on the strand, dancing, &c. near it. This Sunday is called Garlic Sunday, but for what reason is not known. On Saturday evening preceding this Sunday, numbers of people, male and female, assemble at St. Bridget's well, and remain there the entire of the night. They first perform their rounds, and then spend a good part of the time invoking this saint Bridget over the well, repeating their prayers and adorations aloud, and holding their conversations with the Saint, &c. When this ceremony is over, they amuse themselves until morning by dancing and singing, &c. They then (on Sunday morning) repair to Lahensey, distant from this well at least three miles, to conclude their merriment. This well is also resorted to, on the first of February."

The Catholic authorities were concerned that "superstitious practices" should not be part of the ceremonies at the Well. Some indication of what these may have been appears in the legislation passed at a synod in the Ecclesiastical Province of Tuam in 1660:-

"Dancing, flute-playing, singing in harmony, intermingling and other such abuses are all forbidden during the visitation of wells and other holy places, especially during the periods when indulgences can be earned. Also forbidden are those practices that involve a striving to have children and such, since such practices smack more of superstition than devotion. Take care too that people do not use the appearance of devotion during these visitations to avoid hearing Mass on Sundays and holy days."

Luckily, in Wikipedia, there is an account of the Rite of Dabhach Bhríde, which records a combination of prayer and “rounds” which were formerly completed barefooted.

#### The Rite of St Brigid’s well at Liscannor

##### Introduction

Go on your knees in front of the statue of St. Brigid and express your intention (for example, you come to have your headache/arthritis healed). Then say:-

*Go mbeannaí íosa duit, a Bhrighid Naofa,  
Go mbeannaí Muire duit is go mbannaím Féin duit;  
Chugat a thána’ mé ag gearán mo scéil chugat  
Agus d’iarraidh cabhair in onóir Dé ort*

An English translation is:-

*May Jesus bless you,  
O holy Brigid,  
may Mary bless you  
and may I bless you myself.  
It is to you I have come  
making my complaint  
and asking your help  
for the honour of God*

Go on your knees and say five Our Fathers, five Hail Marys and five Glorias.

Stand and proceed to make a round of the Statue of St Brigid (sunwise/desiceal keeping the statue on your right)

Recite the Creed while moving.

Do this five times.

Go on your knees at the Well.

##### San Ula Uachtarach (In the Upper Sanctuary)

Go on your knees and say five Our Fathers, five Hail Marys and five Glorias.

Stand and make a sunwise circumambulation on the long path while reciting the Creed

Do this five times.

##### At the Cross

Make a circumambulation (sunwise/desiceal) of the Cross while saying once the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Gloria.

Kiss the Cross.

Do this five times.

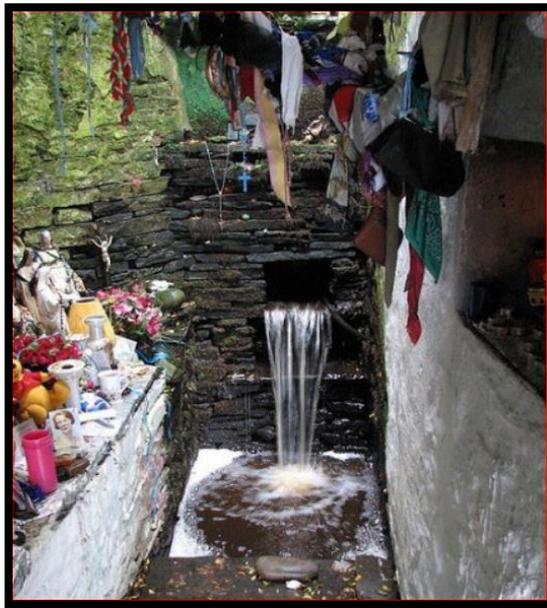
##### At the Well

Descend the steps to the Ula lochtarach and go to the Well.

Drink the water three times.

Go on your knees and express your intention again.

Presumably the pilgrims deposited their votive offerings on the wall before beginning their rounds. According to tradition there is a fish in Liscannor Well and if the pilgrims see the fish they are certain to obtain their request. As with many other holy wells, tradition holds that the water there will not boil. Sometimes the pilgrims performed the rite for nine consecutive days. If the rounds were made outside of the four Pattern Days then they had to be repeated three times to obtain the same results. The Well was regarded as a place of healing and crutches were left there as an indication that a pilgrim has been cured through the intercession of the Blessed Brigid. M.P. Carroll in “Irish Pilgrimage:- Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion.” explains that Irish Catholics went to holy wells for a favour, be it cure of an ailment or release from sin. Leaving behind an object was a metaphor for separation from the sin or removing the ailment. Separation from the ailment was achieved by the drinking of the water or washing the affected area. For spiritual problems, the separation was achieved by performing the “rounds”.



A fascinating book exists dating from 1840 entitled "The Holy Wells of Ireland" by Philip Dixon Hardy. The tone of this text is strongly Protestant, anti-Catholic and highly critical of the practices described at Ireland's holy places and of those who encouraged them. It makes no comment on activities at St. Brigid's well but the conduct and atmosphere there undoubtedly would have been similar to that described elsewhere.

THE  
HOLY WELLS  
OF IRELAND,  
CONTAINING AN  
AUTHENTIC ACCOUNT OF THOSE VARIOUS PLACES  
OF  
PILGRIMAGE AND PENANCE  
WHICH ARE STILL ANNUALLY VISITED BY THOUSANDS OF THE  
ROMAN CATHOLIC PEASANTRY.  
WITH A MINUTE  
DESCRIPTION OF THE *PATTERNS* AND STATIONS  
PERIODICALLY HELD IN VARIOUS DISTRICTS OF IRELAND.  
*(Third Thousand.)*

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BY PHILIP DIXON HARDY, M.R.I.A.  
AUTHOR OF "THE NORTHERN TOURIST: OR STRANGER'S GUIDE TO THE  
N. AND N.W. OF IRELAND; "PICTURE OF DUBLIN," &c. &c.  
AND EDITOR OF "THE DUBLIN PENNY JOURNAL."

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1840.

"I trust I shall be believed when I declare, that the object I have in view is simply, by holding up to the eye of the public the SUPERSTITIOUS AND DEGRADING PRACTICES I have described, by thus bringing public attention to bear upon them in their true colours, clearly to demonstrate, that they are really the prolific sources of much of the IRRELIGION, IMMORALITY, and VICE which at present prevail to such an awful extent through so many portions of our highly favoured land. That they are not only opposed in their nature and tendency to every precept of the moral law and of the Christian religion, but are so many stains upon the character of a civilized and even nominally Christian people, and consequently a disgrace to the age and the country in which we live.....

It might naturally be expected that educated and enlightened Roman Catholics would most readily join with Protestants in an endeavour to suppress them, especially as they are well known to be mere remnants of heathen superstitions, practised by our forefathers before the Christian era, and afterwards appended to the rites and ceremonies enjoined by the Church of Rome in the darker ages of Christianity; and this more particularly as they have been the subject of serious animadversion by intelligent individuals travelling through our island. ....The simple fact of numerous Holy Wells, Patterns, and Stations, being still not only sanctioned but patronized by the priests of the Roman Catholic church, must appear proof positive, that they are still considered by such, as a part and portion of the machinery with which they maintain their dominion over the minds of the ignorant and uninformed.....

It is impossible, indeed, for any traveller, to pass over any considerable portion of the country, more especially in the south and west, without meeting with numerous Holy Wells and other places of superstitious resort, celebrated either for the cure of cattle, or the restoration to health of beings of the human race; and having around them various emblems of superstitious reverence, such as rags and ribbons hung on holy places, as memorials of the sacredness of the waters - as offerings to the tutelary saint, who is supposed to preside over and impart to them their healing virtue.....

St. Patrick's Purgatory, in Lough Dearg

"EXTRACTS FROM "THE LOUGH DEARG PILGRIM."

*(This was a three day pilgrimage.)*

"I noticed, through the gloom of the place, many who were actuated by genuine, unaffected, piety, from whom charity and kindness beamed forth through all the disadvantages around them. Such people, for the most part, prayed in silence and alone. Whenever I saw a man or woman anxious to turn away their faces, and separate themselves from the flocks of gregarious mummers, I seldom failed to witness the outpouring of a contrite spirit. I have certainly seen, in several instances, the tear of heartfelt repentance bedew the sinner's cheek.....

Although there could not be less than two hundred people, young and old, boys and girls, men and women, the hale and the sickly, the blind and the lame, all climbing to gain the top with as little delay as possible, yet was there scarcely a sound, certainly not a word to be heard among them. For my part, I plainly heard the palpitations of my heart, both loud and quick. Had I been told that the veil of eternity was about to be raised before me at that moment, I could scarcely have felt more intensely. Several females were obliged to rest for some time, in order to gain both physical and moral strength - one fainted; and several old men were obliged to sit down. All were praying - every crucifix was out - every bead in requisition, and nothing broke a silence so solemn, but a low, monotonous murmur of devotion; although, perhaps, at that moment there was not a single heart engaged in the prayers which the mouth was uttering.....

Think, therefore, what I must have suffered, on surrounding a large chapel, in the direction of from east to west, along a pavement of stone spikes, every one of them making its way along my nerves and muscles to my unfortunate brain. I was absolutely stupid and dizzy with the pain, the praying, the justling, the elbowing, the scrambling, and the uncomfortable penitential whining of the whole crowd. I knew not what I was about, but went through the forms in the same mechanical dead spirit which pervaded all present.

At last night came; but here to describe the horrors of what I suffered I hold myself utterly inadequate. I was wedged in a truckle bed with seven others, one of whom was a Scotch Papist - another a man with a shrunk leg, who wore a crutch - all afflicted with that disease which northern men that feed on oatmeal are liable to; and then swarms that fell upon my poor young skin, and probed, and stung, and fed on me I - it was pressure and persecution almost insupportable, and yet such was my fatigue, that sleep even here began to weigh down my eyelids."

A respectable Roman Catholic Prelate, Dr. Bray, of Cashel, speaking of a Patron in his diocese, observed "It is become such a scene of drunkenness and quarrelling, and of other most abominable vices, that religion herself is brought into disrepute, nay, mocked and ridiculed; intemperance and immorality are encouraged; the tranquillity of the country is disturbed, and the seeds of perpetual animosities and dissensions are sown....."

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Within Michael Peyton's family regular participation in such activities is recorded. His paternal great-grandfather was Michael (Micky) Peyton, born in 1848 in Culduff, County Mayo. His wife, Mary McDonnell from Kilmactigue, near Belclare, County Sligo, was born in July 1850. The 1901 Census shows that they and their eight children, of whom Mike's grandfather James was the youngest son, lived in a three room cottage, scratching a livelihood from twenty acres of land which was mainly rock.



Micky ascended the 2,500 feet mountain, Croagh Patrick in County Mayo, known as The Reek, more than thirty times. The ascent would take place on the last Sunday of July, "Reek Sunday" or when they had sufficient time in the summer months. His wife also made this journey but on fewer occasions, since the farm animals could not be left untended. Micky, in the company of his grandson, Paddy McNulty, would travel by horse and trap on the Saturday a distance of about fifteen miles to the mountain. He would start to climb during Saturday night, on the Westport side of the mountain, and would reach the summit by noon on Sunday. He would go barefooted for part of the way. At that time a chapel had not been built on the summit. After making their devotions at the summit, he and his grandson would return home to be ready to resume farming on the Monday. This ritual was followed as a penance, as an atonement for sins, in the hope of

receiving a divine favour or as a mark of thanks for favours received. Mike's grandfather, born in 1886, also made the ascent but on far fewer occasions than his father since he moved from Ireland to England.

A sacred fire burned in a "fire temple" in Kildare in pre-Christian times tended by nineteen virgin priestesses called "daughters of the flame". They were thought to invoke a goddess named Brigid to protect their herds and to provide a fruitful harvest. When St. Brigid built her monastery and church in Kildare she continued the custom of keeping the fire alight in a "fire temple".

Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) a Welsh Chronicler, visited Kildare in the twelfth century when he reported that the fire of St. Brigid was still burning in Kildare and that it was being tended by nuns of St. Brigid. A few attempts were made end the practice but without success. In 1220, the Bishop of Dublin, Henry de Loundres (1213-1228) ordered the flame to be extinguished but, if this was done, the effect was only temporary. Possibly it survived up to the suppression of the monasteries in the sixteenth century when George Browne, Archbishop of Dublin, ordered that the sacred flame be extinguished.

The sacred fire was re-lit in 1993, in the Market Square, Kildare, by Mary Teresa Cullen, the then leader of the Brigidine Sisters. Since then, the Brigidine Sisters in Kildare have tended the flame in their centre, Solas Bhride. Each year the flame burned in the town square for the duration of "Feile Bride", an annual celebration marking the feast day of St. Brigid.

In 2006 on February 1<sup>st</sup>, St. Brigid's Day, the flame was perpetually lit in the town square from the flame tended in Solas Bhride for the previous fourteen years and the Kildare County Council had commissioned a sculpture to house the flame. The piece comprises a twisted column, which flourishes at the top into large-scale oak leaves, nestled into which there is a bronze acorn cup holding the flame.



The use of oak leaves symbolises both the Christian beliefs of St. Brigid and the earlier Druidic worship of the trees. The monument was unveiled by President Mary McAleese.

By far the most important relics of St. Brigid consist of sections of her skull, found chiefly in Portugal. Unfortunately there is uncertainty and disagreement about their origin, validity and translation.

It is believed that in Armagh there was a "Templum Brigidis"; namely the little abbey church known as "Regles Brigid", which contained some relics of the saint, destroyed in 1179, by William FitzAldelm. One well-known account is that her skull was taken from Armagh to Portugal in 1283 by three Irish knights travelling to the Aragonese Crusade. King Denis of Portugal had a small convent of Cistercians founded during his reign at Odivelas, a few miles outside Lisbon and quite near Lumiar. In 1276 the Bishop of Lisbon decided to build a church at Lumiar and he placed it under the patronage of the nuns at Odivelas. When the King heard that three Irish knights were bringing St. Brigid's head to Portugal, he wanted to have it preserved in the convent of Odivelas, but in fact it was placed in the church at Lumiar, Igreja São João Baptista (Church of St. John the Baptist), where it remains to this day.



This event is recorded in an inscription on the tomb of the knights let into the wall of St. Brigid's chapel:-  
"Aqui nestas tres sepulturas jaz enterados os tres Cavaleiros Ibernios q, trouxera acabeea Da Beanaventurada S. Brigida Virge D. Ibernica, cuja reliquiaesta nesta Capella, para memoria Do qual hos officias Da Mesa Da Beanaventurada da S. mao Darao fazer este JANEIRO 1283"

"Here in these three tombs lie the three Irish knights who brought the head of St. Brigid, Virgin, a native of Ireland, whose relic is preserved in this chapel. In memory of which, the officials of the altar of the same Saint caused this to be done in January AD 1283."

In *Hibernia Dominicana* the Bishop de Burgo wrote "I saw the head of St. Brigid, the Patroness of Ireland, in the year 1770 in the chapel dedicated to her in the Church of Saint John Baptist, at Lumiar, near Lisbon. Her Office and Mass are celebrated February 1<sup>st</sup>, and the members of the Sodality founded in her honour assist at them. Sheep and cows are brought there to be blessed."



**The skull of Saint Brigid, Lumiar**

Another version is that when the relics of Saints Patrick, Columba and Brigid were destroyed in Downpatrick in 1538, on the orders of Lord Leonard Gray, Governor of Ireland, part of the skull of St. Brigid was taken to Neustadt in Austria. In 1587, the skull relic was translated from Neustadt to Lisbon, to the church of São Roque (St. Roch), the principal church of the Jesuits in Lisbon. This account is to found in "The Life of St. Brigid", by "An Irish Priest" published in New York in 1861. He wrote that in 1587 Rudolf II gave the relic to John Borgia, Spanish Legate at the Court of Vienna. John took the relic to Spain, and in honour of his father, Saint Francis Borgia, he presented it to the Jesuits of Lisbon.

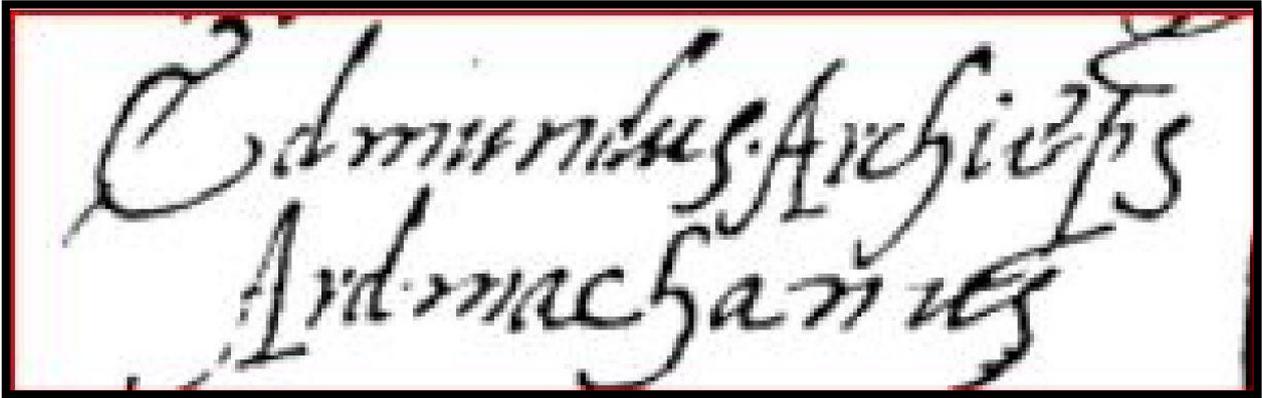


São Roque is a church the façade of which conceals a most lavish interior.



The skull of Saint Brigid, the church of São Roque

Edmund MacGauran (1548 – 1594) was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh from 1587 to 1593.



According to Wikipedia, on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1588 the Archbishop presented to the church of São Roque part of the skull of St. Brigid in a beautiful reliquary. A contemporary account stated- "The feast of São Roque was celebrated this year with the accustomed solemnity of a solemn Pontifical Mass to hear the Irish bishop officiate. The best singers in the city were there and assisted by several musicians. The bishop preached and was heard by the secular nobles and men of quality, as well as various religious orders, many of whom ate that day in our dining hall with three bishops present." The present authors believe this account to be highly misleading, as will be explained below.

The "Irish Priest" comments on the skull of St. Brigid at the Church of St. John the Baptist, Lumiar:-  
"We can assign no probable reason to the early removal of the relics of St. Brigid and indeed all the *à priori* reasons would render the whole account very doubtful. But then it may be said that no amount of reasoning can upset positive facts. But we can say in reply, that there were eight or nine saints of the name of Brigid in Ireland, and it may be the relic of one of these. I suppose that they had no or little authority for believing it to be St. Brigid of Kildare, except that of the three Irish knights; and it is impossible to say how far their testimony would go to make the thing credible. But whatever may be said of these different statements, we may at least conclude that the fame of St. Brigid spread over the entire continent and that her virtues and merits were well known in Portugal during the thirteenth century."

A highly important contribution to the debate concerning the location of the relics of St. Brigid is to be found in "The treasure of São Roque: A sidelight on the counter-reformation", Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1932), by W. Telfer M.A., Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge. His research was undertaken in preparation for an award of a B.D. degree by Cambridge University. Canon William Telfer (1886 - 1968) became Ely Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University (1944–1947) and Master of Selwyn College, Cambridge (1947–1956).

He writes:-

"The starting-point was an enquiry into the cultus of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. The skull of this saint is claimed by Lisbon, where it is preserved among the relics in the church of São Roque. The donor was Don Juan de Borgia..... I looked for further information, and found my way to Senhor Victor Ribeiro's *A Santa Casa da Misericordia* in which he recorded the rediscovery, in a tin box, of these deeds of authentication..... A holiday visit to Lisbon put the matter to the test, and resulted in a dozen good hours' work on the contents of the tin box about eighty deeds, of which one referred to the skull of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. This particular deed proved curiously unsatisfying, but the collection as a whole seemed too interesting to lie *perdu*. Hence the present work."

Chapter VIII deals with "Imperial Gifts".

"DEED No. 8 being much more magnificent than any of the others, has been placed on show in the Museum of São Roque. There are illuminated capitals, and the imperial seal on it, and the signature of Rudolph II. It certifies, in fact, a gift of relics to Borgia by the Emperor himself. He styles himself:-



Rudolphus II., Divina Providentia, electus Imperator semper Augustus Romanorum Rex Germanise, Ungarise, Bohemise, Croatiae et Sclavonic, Archidux Austrise, Dux Burgundies Styrisse, Carinthisse, Carniolse et Wurtembergii, Comes Tyrolensis, etc. and says: -

'We profess.... that whereas the Magnificent and Our well-beloved Don Juan de Borgia, Councillor of the most Serene and Catholic Don Philip, King of the Two Spains, Sicily and Jerusalem, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy and Milan, etc., Our well-beloved maternal Uncle, by Him commissioned to us as Ambassador, has now for several years exercised the same office by command of the Catholic King, and attentive to his interests, by fidelity and zeal, as well as by his remarkable prudence, industry and dexterity in affairs; .....We are explicitly resolved not to let these his deserts pass in silence, without Our consideration, but to give him some permanent affirmation of Our good opinion, and Our warm affection. We therefore declare that for Our marked

appreciation of his aforesaid virtues, as of his outstanding and pious devotion to the Catholic religion, and the veneration of sacred Relics.....We are resolved to reward these so notable deserts of the aforesaid Don Juan de Borgia, and his devotion to Our Person, by granting to him certain relics preserved in Our Chapel-royal in Our Castle of Neustadt, in the city of Our beloved Lambert, Bishop of Neustadt. These relics are, the skull of St. Brigit the virgin, a large bone from the body of St. Gereon the martyr, another large bone from the body of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg, and an arm of St. Elizabeth the widow; trusting that the same Don Juan de Borgia will take care that they receive the respect that is their due, and are conserved in a place as fitted for them as that from which they have been brought. And that no one in future may have any doubt that such relics are authentic, as We have given to Don Juan de Borgia, We have caused to be transcribed here, word for word, the letters testimonial of the bishop of Neustadt above mentioned, of which the tenor is as follows.'

Here follows the full text of deed No. 38 (ii.), and then the Emperor continues:-

'And further, for the fuller authentication, We give these Our letters-patent, subscribed with Our own hand, and affix thereto Our Imperial seal. Given in Our Royal castle of Prague, on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of April, in the year of our Lord, 1580, and Our fifth year in the Kingdom of the Romans, our eighth in the Kingdom of Hungary and our fifth in the Kingdom of Bohemia.'

Deed No. 38 (ii.) in the tin box, is itself a copy, and not the original certificate of the Bishop of Neustadt, which, we must suppose, remained in the imperial chancery. Needless to say the copy bears no seal. Lambert, Bishop of "Neapolis" in Austria (i.e., Wiener-Neustadt), certifies that he sends to Ernest, Archduke of Austria, for conveyance to the Emperor, the head of St. Brigit, a bone of St. Otto of Bamberg, a bone of St. Gereon, and an arm of St. Elizabeth the widow. The bishop writes of the Archduke as having written to him, but there is no specification of the manner of handing over of the relics. The date is very little earlier than that of the imperial deed, so that the relics were clearly sent for, direct, for the purpose of presentation to Borgia. It is not clear why the Archduke Ernest comes into the transaction unless it is really he who is the initiator of the gift.

The head of St. Brigit at Neustadt was famous and .....was contained in a silver-gilt bust of the Saint. Its coming to Lisbon must, it seems, have caused some embarrassment to the sisters in the convent of Lumiar, just north of Lisbon. They had claimed to possess the head of St. Brigit in their church. But Jorge Cardoso, in his *Agiologia Lusitano* relates a story of the miraculous disappearance of this relic.

He does not note any connection between this story and the coming of the famous relic to Lisbon. But the incident suggests that the public recognised degrees of authenticity in relics, and expected the less established competitor to give way when brought into proximity with another."

Telfer provides an account of the movement of the holy imperial gifts to the church of São Roque. Apparently it was originally intended for the church of the Escorial. However in 1588 preparations for the Armada were well underway in Lisbon and these were thought to furnish an appropriate background for the translation of the relics. In the first instance the relics were taken to the Cathedral, so that their actual reception at São Roque might be carried out with every possible public solemnity. Full information is provided since The Viceroy, Cardinal Archduke Albert, arranged for the publication of an elegant little souvenir book. The relics were richly provided with documents of authentication, which received canonical inspection by the Archbishop of Lisbon, Miguel de Castro, or rather by his "Provisor", Doctor Christovao de Matos. Archbishop Miguel was more than satisfied with the authentications. Many of the relics were found to be not only venerable, but of moving appeal to Catholics because they had been rescued from lands infested with heresy. The Viceroy purposed that the procession that was to carry the relics from the Cathedral to São Roque should surpass in magnificence anything that had been seen in Lisbon since 1173. Unfortunately the weather was bad and only on January 21<sup>st</sup>. St. Vincent's eve, did the weather turn beautifully fine and so remained for just ten days. At once they started on the decorations, and worked with a will, so that the translation might take place on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Conversion of St. Paul, some of whose relics were included in the treasure. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, all-night vigil was kept in São Roque, which was brilliantly illuminated. And when morning came without wind or rain, the streets quickly filled with dense crowds. Visitors came, it was said, from thirty and forty leagues away. Places in windows on the route fetched high prices, especially in the tall houses of the Rua Nova. At nine o'clock the procession moved off from the Cathedral. First came the children of the catechism, wreathed with flowers and variously habited as friars and clerks, with their image of the Child Jesus, and emblems. Then followed the notables of Lisbon and the confrarias, a procession with some hundred processional crosses, besides banners and lights. Three hundred religious followed, and then the secular clergy, the Cathedral chapter and other dignitaries, and finally the Archbishop, and the Dean of the Chapel Royal. At intervals in the long procession came richly adorned litters, twelve in all, each laden with reliquaries, and borne on the shoulders of four priests clad in dalmatics. In addition to the litters, there was a reliquary carried under a pall borne by Royal Chaplains over the "Bishop of Hibernia" as bearer of the reliquary. This is described as "..... an oval silver reliquary which, with its foot, stood 2 palms high, ornamented with garlands in relief, and set with stones.....".

It is interesting to note that a review was made of Telfer's work by John MacErlean in "An Irish Quarterly Review", 1933, a publication of the Irish Province of the Society of Jesus. He refers to the "Bispo de Hibernia" who carried the reliquary and who presented it to the Cardinal Viceroy to be kissed. Although Telfer does not identify this Irish Bishop, MacErlean believes him to be Connor O Melrian, bishop of Killaloe (1576-1616) who had been in the Iberian Peninsula since 1582. However, from the "Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society" which mentions Edmund MacGauran, Archbishop of Armagh, being involved in a ceremony at São Roque on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1588 we deduce that he was the bishop to whom reference was made. At the time he was actively involved in rallying support for the planned invasion of England to restore the true faith. The Wikipedia reference to him "presenting part of the skull of St. Brigid" is misleading since he would only have been part of the ceremony held in connection with the skull donated by Rudolf II.

The reviewer quotes without additional comment the embarrassment caused to the convent of Lumiar by the arrival of the imperial gift. The concluding paragraphs of the review are worthy of note:-

"Mr. Telfer is to be congratulated on the way in which he has executed his task.....Mr. Telfer is impartial and proved thereby that an historian can be critical and at the same time write sympathetically of the devotional practices of Catholics."

During the course of this work we made contact with the Church of São Roque and received most useful information in the email reproduced below.

“Following your phone call and the email just received, and in answer to your question regarding the relic of St. Brigid of Kildare, in the Church of São Roque, I am going to clarify the subject of your query:

The skull of St. Brigid is in the sanctuary of relics at the Church of São Roque, attached to Museu de São Roque. This relic is only a portion of her skull, because the Church of St. John the Baptist of Lumiar Parish, on the North side of Lisbon, claims to have her skull as well. So, both churches in Lisbon do have relics of her skull, which were brought to Lisbon in two different stages: the first relic came to Lisbon brought by Irish knights, in 1283 and was given to the Monastery of Odivelas, whose nuns were mostly Irish.

The second relic came to Lisbon in 1587 and was offered to the Jesuits of São Roque by D. Juan de Borja, together with a huge amount of relics and reliquaries, which were amassed by Juan the Borja during his stay as ambassador of Spain in Prague. This one was offered him as a special gift by the emperor himself Rudolf II of Saxony, and this relic had been taken to Neustadt (Austria) by Irish crusaders in 1538. The treasure of relics offered by Borja to Jesuits of São Roque, was formally dispatched from Madrid to Lisbon in September 1587, but the ceremony of "Recebimento" (official procession) was only carried out on the 25th January 1588. This part of the story you can read in TELFER, The Treasure of São Roque, chapter VIII.

However, the original reliquary in silver richly ornamented disappeared long time ago, probably during the time of the Jesuits, as did disappear the sumptuous reliquary of St. Gregory Thaumaturg, most likely in the 16th or 17th centuries. So, these very important relics were once upon a time transferred into second hand reliquaries, which were adapted to the relics. The famous relic of St. Brigid can be seen and venerated at the reliquary altar of the Holy Virgins and Martyrs, on the right side of the Main Chapel in Saõ Roque church. Attached I send you an image of her relic and reliquary.

Yours faithfully

António Meira  
Museu de São Roque  
Lisboa”

(Mr. Meira appreciated his error is stating that the relic had been taken to Neustadt by Irish crusaders. He subsequently made reference to the “The Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society” (1895) which refers to St. Brigid’s head being carried to Austria by Irish clergy.)

Parts of the skull, or skulls, of St. Brigid are to be found in Ireland. On the internet, several sources exist, including Wikipedia, which state that a fragment of the Lumiar skull was brought to St Bridget's Church, Kilcurry in 1905 by Sister Mary Agnes of the Dundalk Convent of Mercy.



In 1907, the Rev. J. A. Knowles wrote “St. Brigid. Patroness of Ireland”. He refers to a relic of St. Brigid in the form of a tooth being held in St. Martin’s Church, Cologne. Part of this was obtained in 1884 for the Brigidine Convent in Sydney, Australia by His Eminence Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney.

Some disputed accounts refer to the monastery of St. Martin of Tours being established in the late seventh century by Irish monks on Roman foundations situated on what was then an island in the River Rhine. Warinus, Archbishop of Cologne, (976-984) built or repaired the monastery, gave it to Irish monks and appointed the Irish Abbot Mimborinus who died in 986 or 987. The Archbishop created near the monastery a chapel dedicated to St. Brigid of Kildare which served later as a parish church. In

1586, almost fifty years after the destruction of the Downpatrick shrines, a finger and other relics of Saint Brigid were taken to the Abbey of St. Martin. In 1806, during the occupation of Cologne by French forces, the chapel of St. Brigid was pulled down and the Abbey of St. Martin of Tours became the parish church.



**The church of St. Martin of Tours, Cologne**

The Cardinal wrote about the circumstances in which he obtained the tooth in a letter to the Rev. Mother:-  
“I went all the way to Cologne on my return from Rome in 1884, on my appointment of Archbishop of Sydney to secure a portion of the precious relic of St. Brigid preserved there for over a thousand years. It is venerated at present in the Parochial Church of St. Martin to which in olden times was attached a famous Irish monastery..... The relic is, if I remember aright, a tooth of the Saint. At Cologne I found great difficulty in securing a portion of this relic. It was at first peremptorily refused. The Pastor of St. Martin’s declared that his parishioners would be at once in revolt if they heard that their great parochial treasure was being interfered with. I then had to invoke the aid of an influential Canon of the Cathedral of Cologne, whom I had assisted in some of his literary pursuits and he set his heart on procuring the coveted relic. One of his arguments was somewhat amusing: It was the first time that an Irish Archbishop of the remote See of Sydney had solicited a favour from Cologne. It was the new Christian world appealing to the old for a share of its sacred wealth. At all events our pleading was successful and, and I bore away with me a portion of the bone, duly authenticated, which is now the privilege of you good Sisters to guard and venerate....”

Attempts were made to determine the current location of this hard-won relic. Contact with Jo Robertson - Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia, elicited the following response:- "A comprehensive search was conducted to locate references or material in Cardinal Moran's collection relating to the location of the relic of St Brigid that you mention, unfortunately to no avail.

The only information we have on St Brigid is located in the writings of Cardinal Moran titled St Brigid, the Virgin, from published by the Australian Catholic Truth Society. This publication is available at the National Library of Australia and The University of Queensland Library".

Patricia Egan, the Archivist of the New South Wales Brigidine Community, Coogee, NSW Australia informed us that:-

"The Brigidine Sisters did have the relic but it is no longer in their possession." In 1906 Cardinal Moran wrote in response to an inquiry from Mother John Synan (Provincial) about how he acquired the relic in 1884. The Brigidine Archives (NSW Province) has a digital copy of the letter as well as a transcription of the letter....." (The letter is reproduced in full towards the end of this Paper.)



Another portion of the Lumiar skull, was given to the Rev. Father Traynor of Killester, under seal of the Cardinal of Lisbon, Dom Manuel Cardeal Gonçalves Cerejeira, on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1928 for Killester Church. The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Edward Joseph Byrne, approved it on November 26<sup>th</sup> 1928, and on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> 1929 the solemn ceremony of translation took place, recorded by British Pathé News. The casket follows the design of that holding St. Patrick's Bell. The reliquary is in the form of a bronze and old-plated Irish cross, the centre of which contains a metal cylinder with a glass front. The relic is bound with gold into the receptacle and sealed in place with the Seal of the Archdiocese of Dublin.

Unfortunately a source currently in use to describe the origins of the Killester relic, "The Life of Brigid" by Rev. John A. Gaffney, contains a number of factual errors. He refers to "Queen Dinez" rather than King Denis. The relic of the skull was not transferred to the Church of St. John the Baptist, Lumiar in 1706, nor was it placed in a special shrine in 1780.

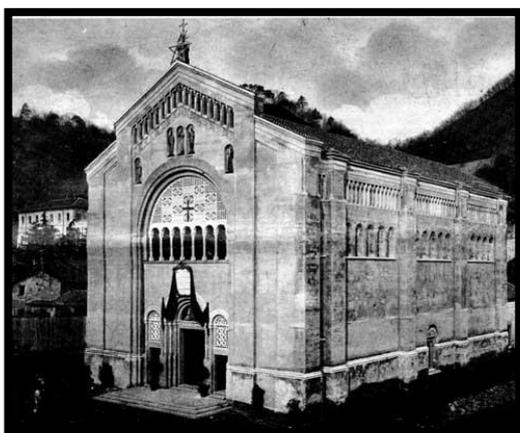


During our researches, our attention was drawn to a document dating from July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1934. This is a "Souvenir of the First National Pilgrimage to Faughart, St. Brigid's Birthplace." located close to Kilcurry. The event was the subject of a report in "The Tablet" of 7<sup>th</sup> July 1934 which speaks of "Mary of the Gael" being honoured by a pilgrimage in which several thousand took part. It was said to be "The most impressive spectacle of its kind witnessed in Ireland in recent years." Those present included Cardinal MacRory and Mr De Valera. Within the "Souvenir" there is a section entitled "Translation of the Official Document dealing with the relic" which gives a fuller account of how it came to Ireland. It states:-

"On 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1903, at the request of Sister Mary Dominic of the Convent of St. Dominic de Beneficia, a part of this same holy head under the seal and authentication of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph, Patriarch of Lisbon, was sent by Father Pius McAlinney, O.P., to Mary Agnes McAlister, a Sister of Mercy in Dundalk, who was a native of Faughart, the birthplace of St. Brigid, and solemnly translated and placed the same Sacred Relic under the High Altar in the Church of St. Brigid at Faughart, in the presence of the Most Rev. Mgr. Patrick Segrar, P.P., V.G., Drogheda, many priests and a great concourse of the Faithful."

According to "Faughart of St. Brigid" by F.P. Carey, prior to 1907 "Cardinal Logue had detached a portion, which is now preserved at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh". Our inquiry with an official at the Cathedral in September 2015 resulted in the response "Saint Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Armagh does not possess a relic of St. Brigid."

It would appear that the 1905 date frequently stated for this translation is erroneous. However, more difficult matters arise. The "Translation of the Official Document" provides a brief history of movement of the skull of St. Brigid. It states that the relics of St. Brigid, St. Columba and St. Patrick were gathered at Downpatrick but that the Shrine of the Relics was destroyed by Leonard Gray in the reign of Henry VIII. The Translation states "The head of St. Brigid had been transferred to Neustradt (sic) or Neopolis in Australia (sic) – a long time before – although we are ignorant through what disturbance or in what manner that came about." The account describes Rudolf II making a gift of the skull to John Borgia and it arriving in 1588 with other sacred relics in a house of the Society of Jesus in Lisbon, the Church of St. Roch. Having set out this explanation, the document used the key phrase "**a part of this same holy head**" when describing the gift of a section of skull to Sister Mary in 1905.



If we accept the account in the "Translation" it would appear that that the two first class relics of St. Brigid in Ireland come from different sources. The Killester relic seems to come from Lumiar, the skull which reached Portugal via the Irish Knights in 1283, and the Kilcurry relic is part of the skull (or skull section) given to the Jesuit church at São Roque by Emperor Rudolf II three centuries later.

In our researches we were somewhat surprised to discover that the cult of St. Bridget had been extremely strong in Northern Italy, around Como, since the late Middle Ages, probably due to the activities of Irish Benedictine monks. Evidently contact had been made between this region and

Ireland in the late 1940s which led to the donation of a part of the Kilcurry/Faughart relic to the church of Santa Brígida Vergine d'Irlanda, Camerlata, Como.

The authentication of the gift as being "ex ossibus" ("from the bones of" rather than "from the head of" St. Brigid) was signed and sealed on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1948 by John D'Alton, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland. The relic was protected and firmly secured with silk cords in an airtight theca, given into the custody of parish priest with the authority for the relic to be exposed for the veneration of the faithful. The gift led to a letter of thanks from the Parish Provost, Don Cesare Panizza, countersigned and sealed by Felix Bonomini, Bishop of Como, who expressed his great thanks for the gift. This material was provided for us by Roddy Hegarty, Director of the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Library & Archive, Armagh, Northern Ireland. (The documents are reproduced at the end of this Paper.)

Mention is made of a bone of Brigid still venerated in the church of St Peter, Strasbourg, something which we have been unable to verify.

The Rev. John O'Hanlon writing in "Lives of Irish Saints" (1887) comments on various lesser relics of Saint Brigid:-

"It is certain the great St. Brigid's relics were preserved with great honour, at Kildare, and afterwards, at Down, for many years after her death. Among other relics of our saint, Hanmer mentions a bell, called "Clogg Brietta" or "Brigid's Bell," ..... Colgan shows that the relic in question had existed from a remote period.... At the church of Scrin, in Ireland, was preserved a shroud, in which St. Brigid's corpse is said to have been wrapped, together with other much venerated relics of this same church. Doctor Petrie tells us, that he had

in his own cabinet, the celebrated reliquary, which contained a slipper of Saint Brigid. It is said, that a part of St. Brigid's sacred relics, and especially the wood that became green, were preserved at Candida Casa, until these had been profaned at the period of the Reformation..."

The Rev. J. A. Knowles in Chapter 8 of "St. Brigid" mentions St Brigid's mantle in Bruges, a portion of which is held in the Convent of the Redemptoristines in Drumcondra. F. P. Carey stated that this was "duly authenticated by Mgr P. Debrabanere, Vicar General of Bruges, it was given by him to a Miss Ainsworth, who entrusted it to the keeping of community in 1881". Contact was made with the Prioress of this convent, Sister Gabrielle, as part of our research; she confirms that the relic is still held in the convent and that it is a dark red small piece of cloth.



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The Antiquaries Journal, Vol 2, Issue 3 1922 contains a "Note on St. Brigid's Shoe".

"A shoe-shaped reliquary of brass, known as St. Brigid's Shoe, formerly in the Petrie Collection, is preserved in the Irish National Museum.....It was mentioned by Petrie (*Round Towers of Ireland*, pp 341, 342) as an example of the custom of swearing on the relics of saints. He printed the inscription on the reliquary, stating that from these it appeared the shoe was formerly preserved at Loughrea, co. Galway, where there still remained, a short distance from the Carmelite Friary, a small church dedicate to St. Brigid.

The shoe measures 9.6 in. in length. It is much broken. Its ornamentation consists of an oval setting now empty, with above this a small bearded head with an inscription S\*Jhon\*BAPTIST. Below the setting is a figure of Our Lord; INRI on a scroll being placed above it. At each side is a circle, the larger of these contains the letters I.H.S. surmounted by a rayed cross and having below a heart and three nails; in the smaller the cross is not rayed and the heart is absent. At the Saviour's feet is an empty rectangular rayed setting. The raised side of the shoe is incised S\*BRIGID \* KILDARIENSIS HIBERNIAE \* PATRONA. Below this is engraved a figure, apparently intended for St. Francis, the stigmata being indicated; and some floral ornament. On the other side the inscription reads HOC \* EST IVRAMENTUMM NATURALE Lochreich ANNO \* DOMINI \* 1410. Below this is floral ornament, the heel also being decorated with floral scrolls.

Petrie appears to have considered the shoe to be of ancient date, but it cannot belong to a period earlier than the seventeenth century. Possibly the date 1410 engraved upon it refers to an earlier shrine which, having been destroyed, was replaced by the present specimen. Irish relics were frequently destroyed. The *Annals of Ulster* record, under the year 1538, the burning of the monastery of Down by the Saxon Justiciary, and the carrying off of the relics of Patrick, Columcille, and Brigid, and the image of Catherine, while in the same year the image of Mary of Trim, the Holy cross of Ballyboggan and the Staff of Jesus were burned."

Another notable relic is the so-called "mantle" of St. Brigid. We can do little better than quote extensively from a 1936 Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland Paper by H. F. McClintock entitled "The Mantle of St. Brigid at Bruges."

"There is in the ancient Flemish city of Bruges a relic of great antiquity and interest which claims to be of Irish origin. This is the so-called Mantle, or Cape, of St. Brigid – La Mantelle de Sainte Brigide d'Irlande – which is preserved in the cathedral of that city. I say "so-called" because the name of "Mantle" is a misnomer; it is not a complete cape or garment of any sort but simply a rectangular piece of woollen cloth measuring about 21 by 25 inches, of a dark crimson colour, and covered all over on its face with tufts of curly wool resembling the fleece of a sheep....

The following history of this interesting relic is for the most part taken from an article in a Flemish periodical called "Rond Den Heerd" (Round the Hearth") of the year 1868..... According to this, the relic is stated to have been bestowed on the Cathedral of St. Donaas at Bruges, together with jewellery and other gifts by the Princess Gunhild, a sister of King Harold of England, who took refuge in Flanders after the defeat and death of her brother at Hastings in 1066, and who died there in 1087. Princess Gunhild's exile, and death in Flanders, are historical facts, but so far as the Mantle of St. Brigid is concerned this part of its history appears to rest only on tradition. It gains some support, however, from the fact that Gunhild's family had some intimate connections with Ireland; because when in 1051 her father, Earl Godwine, having quarrelled with his son-in-law, King Edward the Confessor, was exiled from England and took refuge in Flanders, his sons, Harold and Leofwine, went to Ireland, where they stayed with Dermot, King of Leinster, and busied themselves in collecting ships and men to assist their father in gaining his restoration. This....was amicably accomplished in 1052. Nothing could be more likely than that the two young nobles during their exile in Ireland, and before embarking on a desperate venture, should have visited so famous a shrine as that of St. Brigid of Kildare and returned with relics in memory of their pilgrimage. Gunhild was merely following the example of her father and would expect to meet and receive help from friends who had known him there fifteen years earlier.

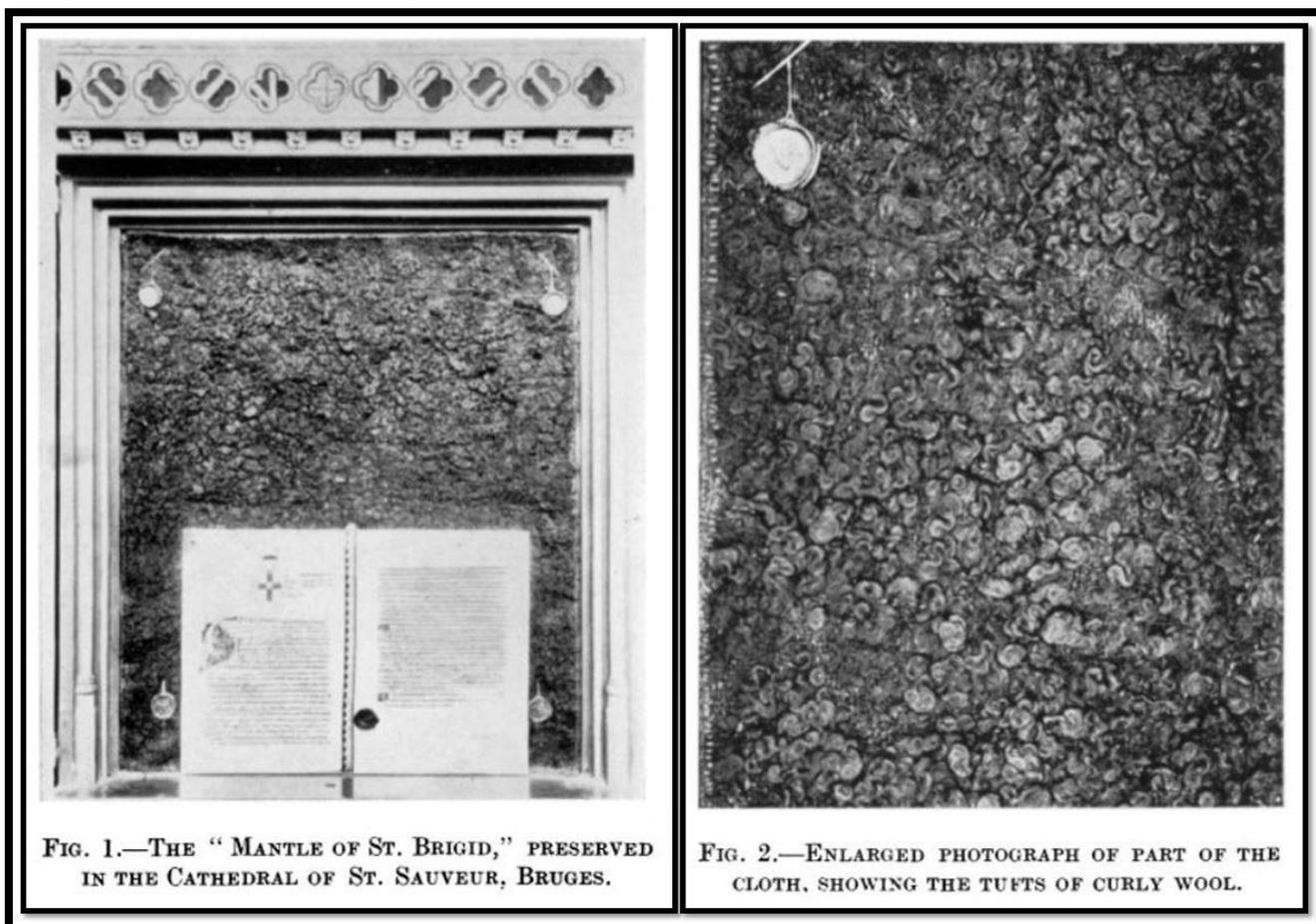
The first documentary mention of the relic is in the year 1347 when it figures in a list of Church property belonging to the Cathedral of St. Donaas. It was kept at the Cathedral till towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was annually exposed for veneration on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February – St. Brigid's Day. St. Donaas' Cathedral was destroyed at the French Revolution, but the relic had been previously placed in safety and was subsequently

presented to the Church of St. Sauveur, which was adopted as the Cathedral of Bruges.... and where it remains to this day.

Until about 70 years ago it had the appearance of a cape, or shoulder-cloak, of yellow silk interwoven with gold thread and decorated with gold lace..... But in 1866, when it was examined, the cape was found to be merely a decorative covering which appeared from the nature of its materials to have been made about the year 1400. The original relic was discovered inside, and was found to consist of a piece of shaggy cloth, with some sort of lining of blue and green linen which showed signs of wear. It was at this time that the silk covering was removed...

Last year it was arranged....to have a technical examination made of the cloth in order to ascertain, as far as possible, its nature and probable origin. This was done by the Department of Textiles of the Royal Museum, Brussels."

(A large section of this technical report is included.)



"From this description it is clear that we have to deal with a very peculiar piece of cloth, quite different in type to any made now in Western Europe. The main question is how the tufts of wool on the surface were produced..... the key is probably provided by the shaggy cloths still made on hand looms by the peasants in some parts of Hungary and the Balkans.....

Shaggy cloth of this nature is of great antiquity in Europe and has been found in graves of the Bronze Age in Denmark. It continued to be made in North Western Europe (though not in England, so far as I have yet been able to ascertain) till the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century..... To come to Ireland. There is ample evidence that a shaggy cloth of this nature was extensively made in Ireland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Several English writers of the Elizabethan period speak of the Irish "Shag-rugs" or "Shag-rug Mantles". It is less easy to prove the existence of such shaggy cloth in Ireland at the time of St. Brigid, or even in that of Gunhild; though it may reasonably be presumed that this method of weaving, which is known to have been so ancient in Europe, was no new introduction to Ireland, but has been practised there from pagan times....

It will be clear that it is not possible to prove for certain that the cloth of which the relic is made is of Irish origin; but there is no evidence whatever against this, and, on the contrary, a good deal of evidence, both in the nature of the cloth itself and in the known history of the persons associated with it, to support the tradition that is really of Irish make."

An earlier account of the mantle was written by William Brady in The Irish Ecclesiastical Record of 1888. The section of article referred to is "The Relic of a Portion of the Mantle of St. Brigid, The Mary of Erin." It states:- "I regret much that my account of this precious relic is but meagre; still I can testify as to its real presence in Bruges..... The most ancient account we have, except the one on the leaden plate, of the relic, is to be found in an inventory of relics preserved in the Church of St. Donatus, and written about the year 1300. This inventory is now printed and can be seen in Le Beffroi, vol. iii., pp. 199 to 202. In the fourteenth century this tunic was set in a reliquary of precious stuff having the form of a mantle. This cloak reliquary is mentioned in an inventory of objects given by the Chapter of St. Donatus to the care of Giles of Ghent, Cure and Sacristan of this church, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 1347, under this designation ' Item Mantellum Beate Brigide ' (sic.) In 1866 the relic was extracted and placed in its present reliquary."

We have summarised the considerable efforts made by church leaders and religious centres over several centuries to obtain and safeguard the relics of Saint Brigid. It is appropriate to end with some discussion as regards the attitude of the Catholic Church towards such relics. The formal position is set out in the "Codex Iuris Canonici" promulgated on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1983 by Pope John Paul II and which obtained force of law on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1983.

"PART II  
THE OTHER ACTS OF DIVINE WORSHIP  
TITLE IV.  
THE VENERATION OF THE SAINTS, SACRED IMAGES, AND RELICS (Cann. 1186 - 1190)

Can. 1186 To foster the sanctification of the people of God, the Church commends to the special and filial reverence of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Mother of God, whom Christ established as the mother of all people, and promotes the true and authentic veneration of the other saints whose example instructs the Christian faithful and whose intercession sustains them.

Can. 1187 It is permitted to reverence through public veneration only those servants of God whom the authority of the Church has recorded in the list of the saints or the blessed.

Can. 1188 The practice of displaying sacred images in churches for the reverence of the faithful is to remain in effect. Nevertheless, they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order so that the Christian people are not confused nor occasion given for inappropriate devotion.

Can. 1189 If they are in need of repair, precious images, that is, those distinguished by age, art, or veneration, which are exhibited in churches or oratories for the reverence of the faithful are never to be restored without the written permission of the ordinary; he is to consult experts before he grants permission.

Can. 1190 §1. It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics.

§2. Relics of great significance and other relics honoured with great reverence by the people cannot be alienated validly in any manner or transferred permanently without the permission of the Apostolic See.

§3. The prescript of §2 is valid also for images which are honoured in some church with great reverence by the people.

PART III  
SACRED PLACES AND TIMES  
TITLE I:  
SACRED PLACES (Cann. 1205 - 1243)

Can. 1237

§2. The ancient tradition of placing relics of martyrs or other saints under a fixed altar is to be preserved, according to the norms given in the liturgical books.”

A highly useful account of the abuses of relics over time and the safeguards which were put in place may be found in Thurston, H. (1911). “Relics”. The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company.

“As early as the end of the fourth century, St. Augustine denouncing certain impostors wandering about in the habit of monks, describes them as making profit by the sale of spurious relics..... At the beginning of the ninth century, as M. Jean Guiraud had shown (Mélanges G. B. de Rossi, 73-95), the exportation of the bodies of martyrs from Rome had assumed the dimensions of a regular commerce, and a certain deacon, Deusdona, acquired an unenviable notoriety in these transactions..... What was perhaps in the long run hardly less disastrous than fraud or avarice was the keen rivalry between religious centres, and the eager credulity fostered by the desire to be known as the possessors of some unusually startling relic.....In such an atmosphere of lawlessness doubtful relics came to abound.....On the other hand it must not be supposed that nothing was done by ecclesiastical authority to secure the faithful against deception. Such tests were applied as the historical and antiquarian science of that day was capable of devising. Very often however, this test took the form of an appeal to some miraculous sanction..... Nevertheless it remains true that many of the more ancient relics duly exhibited for veneration in the great sanctuaries of Christendom or even at Rome itself must now be pronounced to be either certainly spurious or open to grave suspicion..... Still, it would be presumptuous in such cases to blame the action of ecclesiastical authority in permitting the continuance of a cult which extends back into remote antiquity. On the one hand no one is constrained to pay homage to the relic, and supposing it to be in fact spurious, no dishonour is done to God by the continuance of an error which has been handed down in perfect good faith for many centuries. On the other hand the practical difficulty of pronouncing a final verdict upon the authenticity of these and similar relics must be patent to all. Each investigation would be an affair of much time and expense, while new discoveries might at any moment reverse the conclusions arrived at. Further, devotions of ancient date deeply rooted in the heart of the peasantry cannot be swept away without some measure of scandal and popular disturbance. To create this sensation seems unwise unless the proof of spuriousness is so overwhelming as to amount to certainty. Hence there is justification for the practice of the Holy See in allowing the cult of certain doubtful ancient relics to continue.... It would probably be true to say that in no part of the world was the veneration of relics carried to greater lengths with no doubt proportionate danger of abuse, than among Celtic peoples. The honour paid to the handbells of such saints as St. Patrick, St. Senan, and St. Mura, the strange adventures of sacred remains carried about with them in their wanderings by the Armorican people under stress of invasion by Teutons and Northmen, the prominence given to the taking of oaths upon relics in the various Welsh codes founded upon the laws of Howell the Good, the expedients used for gaining possession of these treasures, and the numerous accounts of translations and miracles, all help to illustrate the importance of this aspect of the ecclesiastical life of the Celtic races....”

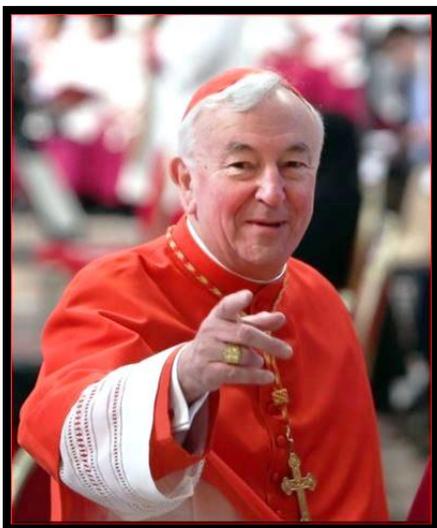
It interesting to look at the use of papal language when referring to the relic of the Shroud of Turin.

Pope John Paul II stated in 1998 that: "Since it is not a matter of faith, the Church has no specific competence to pronounce on these questions. She entrusts to scientists the task of continuing to investigate, so that satisfactory answers may be found to the questions connected with this Sheet". He said: "The Shroud is an image of God's love as well as of human sin ... The imprint left by the tortured body of the Crucified One, which attests to the tremendous human capacity for causing pain and death to one's fellow man, stands as an icon of the suffering of the innocent in every age." In 2000 Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that

the Shroud of Turin is "a truly mysterious image...." and during his visit in Turin on Sunday May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, as Pope Benedict XVI, he described the Shroud of Turin as an "extraordinary Icon....".The Pope also said that in the Turin Shroud "we see, as in a mirror, our suffering in the suffering of Christ".

On March 30<sup>th</sup> 2013, as part of the Easter celebrations, Pope Francis described the image on the shroud as "this Icon of a man", and stated that "the Man of the Shroud invites us to contemplate Jesus of Nazareth." In his carefully worded statement Pope Francis urged the faithful to contemplate the shroud with awe, but "stopped firmly short of asserting its authenticity."

Popes Francis and Benedict XVI have used a variety of expressions to explain the role of relics in the modern Church. These include "a focus for prayer", "intensifying a believer's connection to the Son of God", "a representation of Christ's suffering", "a reminder of the pain and injustice suffered by so many", and "an inspiration". Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelisation, announced that on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2013 the Year of Faith will culminate with "the exposition for the first time of the relics traditionally recognized as those of the apostle who gave his life for the Lord here". These were the bones found by Professor Guarducci during excavation work under the altar of St. Peter's Basilica.



In an article in the "Catholic Herald" of June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011, in connection with an exhibition of relics and reliquaries at the British Museum, the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, now Cardinal, a contemporary of one of the present authors at the Venerable English College in Rome, was reported as saying:-

"It's perfectly clear that relics are a very important part of the expression of religious faith as well as of cultural importance in the way that people cling to a souvenir from a person they've loved or a place that they have been to. And what that conveys is the connecting of this moment with the treasured moment of the past. And if that connection is made through an object which, maybe, forensically won't stand up to the test, that is of secondary importance to the spiritual and emotive power that the object can contain, and does contain.

I think that's where the setting of the relic is as eloquent as the relic itself. If you look at a lot of these reliquaries you do not actually see

the relic. The relic is, as it were, the end of an inner journey. So what they're looking for is the viewer to really enter their own soul to understand how they enter into the value of the treasure of the relic that is before them.

So it's a spiritual dialogue that takes place between this object and the person themselves. That is why they're called "Treasures of Heaven", because it is through the spiritual that our hearts are raised to heaven."

For some authenticity is important and unquestioned but symbolism seems to be the modern approach to relics. Undoubtedly, amongst some of the Faithful, both in Portugal and Ireland, the various relics of St. Brigid retain huge symbolic and spiritual power.

David W. Atherton  
and  
Michael P. Peyton  
October 2015

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The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland for photographs of St Brigid's Slipper.  
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Monsignor Alex Stenson P.P., St.Brigid's Parish, Howth Road, Killester, Dublin.

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The letter of Cardinal Moran.

St Marys Cathedral  
Sydney.  
March 13 1906

My dear Mother Provincial

In reply to your query regarding the Relic of St Brigid, you will find some reference to it, I think in the little Life of the Saint published by the Catholic Truth Society of Melbourne. I went all the way to Cologne on my return from Rome in 1884 on my appointment as Bp of Sydney to secure a portion of the precious Relic of St Brigid preserved there for over a thousand years. It is venerated at present in the parochial Church of St Martin to which in older times was attached a famous Irish monastery renowned for its learning & piety throughout all Germany in the early middle ages. In the special lessons for St Brigid's feast in the Breviary of Cologne mention is made of this Relic as held in the greatest veneration from time immemorial

and frequented by pilgrims from all parts on  
the 1<sup>st</sup> of Feb. The Relic is, if I remember aright  
a tooth of the Saint. At Cologne I found great  
difficulty in securing a portion of the Relic.  
It was at first presumptuously refused. The  
Pastor at St Martin's declared that his  
parishioners would be at once in revolt if they  
heard that this their great parochial treasure  
was being interped with. I had then to invoke  
the aid of an influential Canon of the Cathedral  
of Cologne whom I had assisted in some of his  
literary pursuits, and he set his heart on securing  
the coveted Relic. One of his arguments was  
somewhat amusing. It was the first time that  
an Irish Archbishop of the remote See of Sydney  
had solicited a favour from Cologne. It was the  
new Christian world appealing to the old for a  
share of its sacred wealth.

At all events our pleading was successful and  
I bore away with me a portion of the bone duly  
authenticated which it is now the privilege of  
your good Sisters to guard & venerate. I hope  
that St Brigid may by her intercession  
obtain for her Australian Communities some  
share of the zeal & holiness which were so

Characteristic of her times in the older times  
Wishing yourself or sisters every best blessing

I remain  
Yours in Christ  
+ Patrick J. Cardinal Moran  
Archbp of Sydney.

JOHN ASH  
AUSTRALIAN NOTE AND STAMP PRINTER.

Documents relating to the gift and authentication of the Killester relic

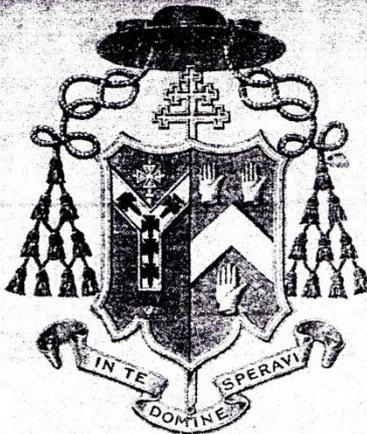
A portion of the letter from Manuel, Archbishop of Mytilen to Edward, Archbishop of Dublin, 1928, concerning the donation of part of the head bone of St. Brigit venerated at the Church of St. John the Baptist, Lumiar.

“.....tituli Ss. Marcellini et Petri Presbyter Cardinalis, Dei miseratione et Apostolicae Sedis gratia Patriarcha Olyssiponensis.

Praesentes litteras inspecturis notum facimus et testamur in capsula crystalli operculo argenteo cooperta, vita serica alba ligata et cera Nostro sigillo (cujus exemplar hic exhibemus) munita ligata, alias clausa, contineri particulas Ossis Capitis, hucusque inde atempore immemoriali in veneratione esse in Ecclesia paroeciali Santi Joannis Baptistae, vulgo dicta, “la Lumiar” ut pertinente Sancti Birgittae. Datae Olyssipione sub Signo Reverendissimi Archiepiscopi Mytilenensis, Vicarii Nostri Generalis, et Sigillo Nostro, die 16 mensis Novembris anno millesimo nongentesimo vicessimo octavo.

+ Emmanuel, Archieps. Mytilen”

Dei et  
Sedis  
Archiepiscopus  
Hiberniae



Apostolicae  
Gratia,  
Dublinensis,  
Primas.

Universis et singulis praesentes litteras inspecturis, fidem facimus et testamur quod Nos, ad maiorem Omnipotentis Dei gloriam, suorumque Sanctorum venerationem, quas recognovimus Sacras Reliquias Sanctae Brigidae, fragmentum scilicet calvariae ossis, ex authenticis locis, ut e litteris Em̄i ac Rm̄i Dñi Cardinalis Patriarchae Lisbonensis quas inspeximus constat, extractas, eas reverenter reponi et collocari fecimus in panno serico albi coloris, intra thecam argenti deaurati, unico crystallo bene clausam, a posteriore vero parte duobus filis aureis transversis ac cera rubra sigillo nostro obsignata colligatam; easque solemniter in sacrario pretioso ad eas specialiter instructo in ecclesia Sanctae Brigidae dicata apud Killester intra parocciam de Coolock, hodie posuimus et fidelium venerationi exposuimus.

Datum Dublini, sub signo sigilloque nostro, ac Secretarii nostri subscriptione, anno Domini millesimo nongentesimo vigesimo nono, die vero mensis Ianuarii vigesimo septimo.

+ Edwardus  
Arthur. Sullivan

De mandato Illmi ac Rmi mei Archiepiscopi:

Thomas Donnell

Secretarius.

Bishop Edward Byrne's letter for Authenticity of Relic

*Copy*

TESTIMONIUM AUTHENTICITATIS RELIQUIARUM

43

Universis et singulis praesentes litteras inspecturis fidem facimus, et attestamur, Nos, ad maiorem Omnipotentis Dei gloriam suorumque Sanctorum venerationem, recognovisse sacras particulas ex <sup>ossibus</sup> ~~Capite~~ *S. Brigidae* quas ex authenticis locis extractas reverenter collocavimus in theca *ex aere confecta*, crystallo munita, bene clausa, et funiculo serico coloris rubri colligata, ac sigillo Nostro signata, et consignavimus *Rev. Dom. Caesari Provoste* cum facultate apud se retinendi, aliis donandi, et in quacumque ecclesia, oratorio, aut cappella, publicae fidelium venerationi exponendi.

In quorum fidem has litteras testimoniales manu Nostra subscriptas Nostroque sigillo firmatas expediri mandavimus.

Datum apud *Armagham* ex aedibus Nostris Episcopalibus, anno Domini... *1948*... mensis *Septembris*... die *XXV*..

+ *Joannes D'Alton*  
.....  
*Archiepiscopus Armacanus Primas*  
*Istius Hiberniae.*

De Mandato Ill<sup>m</sup>i et R<sup>m</sup>i  
Dni Archiepiscopi

..... *Joannes Donnelly* .....

Notarius.



CASA PREPOSITURALE  
CAMERLATA (Como)

Your GRACE

the kindness and charitable benevolence of Y.G.  
at last, fulfilled our great and eager desire for being now  
in possession of the Holy Relic of St. Brigid the Virgin.

We do not know how to recompence the DONOR for such  
a great gift for our beloved population who has a great  
veneration for their PATRON St. Brigid.

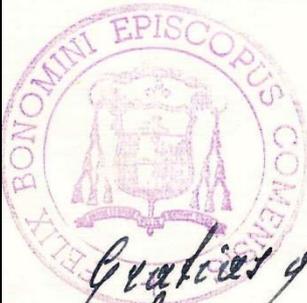
May God, with His divine Graces, bless this small na-  
tion of great Saints.

The only POPE from COMO (the Innocence XI) by his  
own and personal chois, gave ARMAGH the Martyr BLESSED  
OLIVER as its Archbishop, and we hope that this Holy  
Relic may be an holy link of gratitude for both:

A R M A G H and C O M O .

Please recommend us at the sanctuary of FOUGHART.

Humbly begin Your BLESSING, I am of Your Grace in XTO



*Don Cesare Panizza*

Don Cesare Panizza Parish-PROVOST

*Gratias quam maxime in Porzijo offerimus  
ob insignem donationem hereditariam.  
+ Petrus Porzorio -  
Ep. Com.*