Brigit (Brighid, Bríd, Bride, Bridget) (possibly c.450–524), reputed foundress and first abbess of Cell Dara (Kildare), is the female patron saint of Ireland, but it is uncertain whether she existed as a person. Most scholars regard her as a ghost personality generated in the period of transition from paganism to Christianity, replacing the pagan goddess Brigit, the Irish manifestation of the Celtic Brigantia. There is no contemporary evidence for St Brigit, but she, or her cult, is well documented in the annals, hagiography, genealogies and liturgical literature.

**Annalistic evidence** The annalistic notices and obits (522/4) cannot be regarded as evidence for Brigit’s existence as a person if the scholarly consensus that the earliest annals were compiled c.700 is correct. If, however, A. P. Smyth and Daniel McCarthy are right in their independent claims that the annals are contemporary from c.550 – a mere generation after her death – the case for her existence is much stronger. Furthermore, McCarthy argues that the annalistic source for the period was St Colum Cille (qv) (c.521–597) and that he would probably have known the circumstances of her life and the date of her death, as his parents, teachers and senior colleagues would have been contemporary with her. McCarthy also claims that of the alternative annalistic notices those placing her obit at 524 (Ann. Tig.; Chron. Scot.) and her birth at 439 (seemingly calculated from the alleged age of 86 at death) represent the Iona chronicle, and are the most authentic. While the age of 86 could only represent tradition and was most likely exaggerated, the annalistic evidence as a whole allows for the possibility that Brigit did indeed exist and that her life spanned most of the second half of the fifth century and the first quarter of the sixth. Eleven people with whom Brigit is associated in her Lives are independently attested in the annals, and their datings support such a lifespan.

**Hagiography** St Brigit is well represented in hagiography, her dossier being one of the earliest and most extensive of any Irish saint. The three principal Lives date from the seventh to the ninth centuries and are preserved in over 100 medieval manuscripts, mostly written on the Continent. They consist of a Latin Life by Cogitosus (qv) dating from c.650–675; an anonymous seventh/eighth-century Latin Life known as ‘Vita Prima’ (as classified in the 1658 Acta SS, Feb. I edition); and an anonymous early ninth-century Life, ‘Bethu Brigte’, in Old Irish and Latin. The ultimate source of these and various later medieval Lives appears to have been a lost Life written by Ultán (qv) (d. 657), bishop of Ard Breccáin (Ardbraccan, Co. Meath). Presumably, Ultán’s Life was based on traditions current in the first half of the seventh century, at a remove of about four generations from the time of Brigit’s alleged death; the extant Lives substantially represent that tradition. The Lives were primarily concerned with Brigit’s way of life rather than her life as such, and focused on her saintliness and the miracles that testified to it. The Cogitosus Life
seems to have been mainly designed to confirm Brigit’s reputation, as a means of promoting the status of Kildare at a time when it was in competition with Armagh for precedence in the Irish church. But irrespective of the motivation of the authors, the Lives may include a stratum of biographical information. The Lives and the genealogies (generally later) together provide the following scenario – the Brigit story.

The Brigit story Brigit was the daughter of Dubthach son of Deimre, a nobleman or military leader. He was of the Ui Bressail (Rawl. B. 502, 126a 28), a sept of the Fothairt, a subject people located in the present Co. Offaly, but with branches elsewhere. Brigit’s mother was named Broicsech; she is presented in alternative accounts as Dubthach’s wife (Cogitosus) or slave. When Broicsech becomes pregnant by Dubthach, in the scenario where she is a slave he sells her to a poet but retains ownership of the unborn child. The poet later sells Broicsech to a druid (magus) in whose house Broicsech gives birth to Brigit, who is born with the status of a slave. The location is not stated; claims for Faughart, Co. Louth are based on late medieval tradition. The druid kindly allows Brigit to live with her father Dubthach whose house was seemingly located in the area east of Cruachan Breg Éile (Croghan Hill, Co. Offaly). She is particularly involved with dairying and looking after the cattle, activities commonly represented in her iconography. She is especially kind to the poor and performs various miracles on their behalf. Her father and brothers want her to marry a suitor, but she refuses as she is committed to a celibate life in the service of God. Her father eventually allows her to take the veil. The ceremony is performed, according to different accounts, by one or other of the bishops Mel (qv) (d. 487) or Mac-Caille (qv) (d. c.489), the location probably being in Mag Tulach (the present barony of Fartullagh, Co. Westmeath).

Brigit is said to have established a convent at Kildare, but the Lives are silent regarding the date and the circumstances. According to Cogitosus, she invited Conláed (qv) (Conleth) (d. 516/20) grandson of Eimire, a member of Dál Messin Corb (in the present Co. Wicklow area), to serve as bishop and govern the community jointly with her. According to ‘Bethu Brigte’, Brigit herself had the status of a bishop, a status afterwards accorded to successive abbesses of Kildare until the twelfth century. Brigit seems to have operated mainly as a missionary and the Lives mention various journeys by chariot (the itineraries are plotted by McCone, 1981); the intention of the hagiographers was probably to mark territory and so legitimise Kildare’s claims to an extensive paruchia, especially outside of Leinster. Kildare developed into a great double monastery of nuns and monks. Cogitosus states that at the time of writing the remains of Brigit and Conláed were enshrined at either side of the altar in a magnificent reconstructed wooden church, ‘with its awesome height towering upwards’, which he describes as consisting of three compartments and catering for religious and laity.

The hagiography of St Brigit is typically Christian and it echoes the Old and New Testaments, the Apocrypha and the early Fathers. It presents her as wise, humane,
charitable to a fault, and concerned with the welfare of the common people. She is in constant communion with the Lord and is a prolific worker of miracles, which are almost invariably attributed to divine intervention and often have precedents in the New Testament. Many of the miracles and other aspects of the Lives, however, seem to reflect pagan religion or superstition; for example, the story of Brigit's origin features a poet and a druid, both from classes with important functions in pre-Christian society; her suitor is the fictional poet Dubthach (qv) of the moccu Lugair, who is represented in seventh-century literature as a pagan who converts to Christianity; the only milk she can tolerate as a child is that of a white red-eared cow; and she resolves an unwanted pregnancy as if by magic. A notable feature of the Lives is a preoccupation with fire and light: a column of light rises from Brigit's head; she hangs her cloak on a sunbeam to dry; the house in which she is asleep catches fire but remains intact.

Such symbolism and motifs, however, were not exclusively pagan. Fire and light feature prominently in Judaeo-Christian literature – for example, Paschal fire, tongues of flame, and haloes around the heads of saints. Nevertheless, scholars generally regard the symbolism in the Brigit Lives as reflecting the cult of the goddess Brigit.

**Folklore** Echoes of pre-Christian religion and superstition are also intrinsic features of the folklore associated with St Brigit. Her feast-day (Lá Fhéile Bríde) on 1 February coincides with the pagan festival of Imbolc, one of the four quarter days of the pagan year, which marked the beginning of spring, lambing, and lactation in cattle. The feast of a saint was normally celebrated on the anniversary of the death, but there is no evidence that Brigit died on 1 February. Cogitosus states that she did, but the context suggests that his only evidence was her feast-day. In any case, the celebration of St Brigit's feast-day retained various features of the pagan festival, including probably the straw or rush crosses, believed to bring luck to the home and the byre, and the strips of cloth representing Brat Bhríde (St Brigit's mantle) which were claimed to protect virginity, cure barrenness, and relieve women in labour. The ceremonial often included visits to Brigit's wells, some of which were thought to cure sterility. While much of the imagery relating to Imbolc was probably censored or Christianised at an early date, some of the folk customs associated with St Brigit's Day retained explicit references to sexuality and fertility. Séamas Ó Catháin has identified parallels in the international folklore of northern Europe, especially that of Scandinavia, which suggests that the cult of the goddess was widespread and tenacious.

**The goddess Brigit** The goddess Brigit is historically best known from the gloss in ‘Sanas Cormaic’, the glossary attributed to Cormac (qv) (846–908) son of Cuilennán: ‘A poetess, daughter of the Dagda [the principal god of the pagan Irish]. This is Brigit the female sage, or woman of wisdom, i.e. Brigit the goddess whom poets adored. . . . Whose sisters were Brigit the female physician [and] Brigit the female smith. . . .’ It may have been that in the period when Irish society was in the process
of transition from paganism to Christianity the cult of the goddess was Christianised and attached to a mythical Christian saint; alternatively, St Brigit (if she existed) may have become popularly confused with the goddess by virtue of the shared name and attracted elements of the pagan cult. The process by which the pagan cult was Christianised can only be conjectured. For example, R. A. S. Macalister (qv) suggested that the head of a college of priestesses who honoured ‘the fire-goddess Brigid’ at Kildare was regarded as her incarnation and bore her name, ‘but one of the succession came under Christian influence, and . . . accomplished the tremendous feat of converting the pagan sanctuary into a Christian religious house’. Whatever the circumstances, it is probable that goddess and saint, or their cults, became confused, and that many of the placenames, sites, rituals and customs associated with the goddess were annexed in the interests of the saint and her foundation – for example, the maintenance of a perpetual fire at Kildare as attested in the later middle ages. If St Brigit was indeed a historical figure, her identification with the goddess might have given her a competitive edge in attracting converts and donations, which could account for her remarkable success, despite being a woman in a patriarchal society, and the rapid growth of Kildare and its parochia.

The cult in Ireland The cult of Brigit has been widespread in Ireland from the seventh century to the present day, particularly in Leinster, whose armies she was thought to protect in battle. In modern times she has been promoted by both the Catholic and Protestant churches. The popularity of her cult is evident from the large numbers of placenames, dedications of churches and holy wells, representations in sculpture, paintings and stained glass, and commemorations in liturgy and prayer. Various forms of her name, especially Bríd and Bridget, have been popular for girls, and in 1807 an order of nuns, the Brigidines, was founded in her honour. She is particularly well represented in folklore, in which she is venerated as midwife to Mary, as Mary of the Gael, and as foster-mother of Jesus.

The cult overseas The cult has been widely established overseas by Irish missionaries and emigrants: in Europe from the seventh to the ninth century, and in America, Africa and Australia in recent centuries. It flourished particularly in England, Scotland and Wales, Brittany, northern and eastern France, the Low Countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and northern Italy, being generally manifested in church dedications, artwork, folklore and medieval manuscripts. For example, in Brittany, Brigit has over thirty church and chapel dedications, and is venerated in folklore as midwife to Mary and protectress of cattle. In Belgium, the cult was introduced by St Foillan (qv) (d. 655), and a fragment of a medieval Irish shawl known as ‘St Brigit’s Mantle’ is venerated at Bruges. In the diocese of Cologne in Germany, four parish churches and seven chapels are dedicated to her. In northern Italy, the cult was introduced by the Irish scholar Donatus (qv) (d. c.876), bishop of Fiesole, who compiled the metrical Life of Brigit. In Spain, the cult at Olite in Navarre was probably introduced c.1200 by settlers from Troyes and Picardy in northern France, regions where it was well established.
Brigit today Since the mid-twentieth century the cult of Brigit has generally declined in Ireland, reflecting changing trends in society at large. Brigit is no longer a popular model for young women, parents do not name their daughters after her in such numbers, and the folk tradition is dying out. Nevertheless, while the cult has certainly declined, Brigit has to some extent been adopted as an icon by feminists who admire her achievement in a patriarchal society – echoing Maud Gonne (qv) and Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Erin) who promoted her as a model for women at the beginning of the twentieth century. On another front, with growing interest in alternative forms of religion, various so-called neo-pagans are attracted by the supposed goddess aspects of Brigit. As the cult of Brigit in one persona or another has been a feature of Irish society for probably three millennia or longer, it is unlikely to be in serious jeopardy for the foreseeable future.

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