



MÚSAEM CATHRACH NA GAILLIMHE
GALWAY CITY MUSEUM

About Saint Bridget

St Bridget, sometimes known as ‘the Mary of the Irish’, is a patron saint of Ireland.

Tradition has it that she was born at Faughart, Co. Louth, around AD 439. Her father was a chieftain named Dubhtach (Duffy), and mother was a slave named Broicsech (Brocessa). Bridget was raised with her father near Croghan Hill, on the Offaly-Kildare border.

Dairy

According to tradition, the young Bridget was tasked with looking after her father’s dairy. The story goes that she gave milk to every poor person who visited her dairy and that no matter how much she gave away her milk churn always remained full. And so, Bridget is the patron saint of dairy workers.

Religious Life

Bridget’s father wanted her to marry but she instead chose to follow a religious life. She is said to have founded a small church next to an oak tree at Kildare. When Bridget was ordained a bishop and her followers grew in number, she decided to build a bigger church and convent so she approached a local king to ask for land. The king was reluctant, so she asked for only as much land as her cloak could cover. The king agreed. Bridget took off her cloak. Her four companions took each corner and began walking in different directions. The cloak grew and grew until Bridget had enough land for her plans.

St Bridget’s Cross

Another story tells that Bridget was called to attend the bedside of a dying pagan chieftain. As she prayed,

Bridget began to fashion a cross out of the straws or rushes that were strewn on the floor of his home. When he asked what she was going, she explained the story of Christ and the chieftain was converted to Christianity before he died.

Patron Saint of Ireland

According to tradition, Bridget died on 1 February, AD 524. It is said that she is buried in Dowpatrick, Co. Down, alongside St Colmcille and St Patrick, whom she cared for when he was old and dying. The short rhyme goes: “In Down, three saints one grave do fill, Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille”. Bridget, Patrick and Colmcille are the three patron saints of Ireland.

St Bridget’s Day and Imbolc

St Bridget’s Day coincides with the ancient festival of *Imbolc*, one of the four quarter days of the pagan year, which marked the beginning of spring. An important turning point in the Wheel of the Year, it is the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

Pre-Christian Origins

Some scholars believe that St Bridget is the Christian version of the Irish pagan goddess Brigit, who in turn was the Irish version of the Celtic goddess Brigantia.

Popular Irish Name

The name Bridget/Brigid means ‘exalted one’. For many years, it was one of the most common girls’ names in Ireland. There are many variations of the name – Bridget, Brigid, Brigid, Brighde, Brigit, Bríd, Brídín, Bríd, Bride, Breeda, Biddy, and Bríg.

Further Reading:

- Maire Heaney (1994) *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends*
- Noel Kissane (2012) ‘Brigit (Brigid, Bríd, Bride, Bridget)’ in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* (online)
- Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (2006) *The Lore of Ireland: An Encyclopaedia of Myth, Legend and Romance*
- John J. Ó Ríordáin (2001) *Early Irish Saints*