

Alice: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact, the podcast bringing you queer history from around the world and through time. I'm Irene.

Alice: I'm Alice.

Eli: And I'm Eli.

I: And today we're going to be talking about St. Brigid, one of the two patron saints of Catholic Ireland and an iconic figure for queer Catholic women in Ireland.

[intro music plays]

I: Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge that we're recording this podcast on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation. We offer our respect to their elders past and present and acknowledge them as the custodians of an oral history tradition far older than this podcast.

I don't really have many content warnings for this episode. There's a brief mention of self-inflicted eye trauma in a kind of mythological context.

A: Alright. That's a new one.

I: A brief mention of slavery, some non-explicit discussions of sex and abortion. It also includes mentions of religiously motivated self-harm, including eye trauma and burning. None of it's particularly detailed, but if you want to avoid any of that, you can move along now.

I'm going to start by confessing to you, as with almost all mediaeval saints, that we don't really have any written primary sources about Saint Brigid's life.

E: Confession seems a good way to start a Catholic episode.

I: Yeah, that's true.

[laughter]

E: I... I don't really know why I'm allowed to be here, I don't know anything about this, I'm just like "Ha-ha! I know that...thing!"

I: I feel like we need both flavours of people here, like, definitely it would be wrong if me and Alice just had an Irish Catholic episode together.

E: Uhum, okay.

I: Because there are listeners we have that don't know anything about Ireland or Catholics.

E: Yeah.

I: So I'm glad you're here to help with that.

E: Thank you.

[laughter]

E: I'm... the listener insert.

I: [laughs] Yes.

I: So, the earliest written record of St. Brigid that we have is Cogitosus's "Life of St. Brigid", which appears to have been written around the year 650, which is about 200 years after her birth, and about 130 years after her death.

A: Okay, so we've got spoilers, she's going to live for about 70 years.

I: She is going to live for about 70 years.

[laughter]

I: There are a couple of other similar texts, generally dated to some time in the eight or ninth century, but these are the earliest works that we have.

A: Do these people appear to be building on earlier, like, lives or biographies that we no longer have, or do they appear to just be kind of making stuff up from two hundred years later?

I: Ahm... Cogitosus very much appears to be writing as, like, the first person to have done this. He's like "I've been inspired to set down the life of St. Brigid, a momentous task"

A: Ah, okay.

E: Oooh, okay.

[laughter]

After which he proceeds with, like, a long list of miracles that she's performed.

A: Oh, okay, right, right, right, so that's the kind of source we're dealing with, not someone who's like "I've pulled together all of these existing Histories and I'm trying to write a History".

I: No, somebody who's very much writing, like, a life of a saint, if you know what I mean.

A: Yeah.

I: And all three texts are quite similar in this regard. They're mostly, like, little paragraphs about every miracle that's been attributed to her, through which we can maybe glean some facts about her real life.

A: Okay.

I: I'm also going to warn you now that there are some scholars who believe that St. Brigid as a human being did not actually exist at all.

[laughter]

I: I disagree with them, but I thought I'd better bring this up.

A: I was going to ask you that, though. I was like "is it rude to immediately start the episode by being like "is this all fake or what?""

I: Prior to christian Ireland there is an Irish goddess who is also called Brigid, and over time a lot of mythology about the goddess Brigid gets kind of folded into the stories about Saint Brigid. To the point where some scholars are, like: "We don't think St. Brigid actually existed, we think that she's kind of a fiction that's used to, like, combine the two religious traditions in order to make christianity more palatable to the Irish people.

In general, I think it's probably more likely to say that St. Brigid did exist.

E: Okay.

I: And that over time they've been ko connected to each other.

I did read a statistical analysis of her miracles. A very funny document to read. Somebody just, like, collected all the miracles that, like, were recorded of her doing, and statistically analysed them based on theme, and concluded that they had no particular leaning towards the domains of the goddess Brigid. Compared to what other saints were doing. There's no indication in the very early texts that she has an association with the goddess.

E: Okay.

A: Ah. Okay.

I: By the 1300s, Gerald of Wales visited the abbey that St. Brigid founded in the 1300s, and described a flame there, an eternal flame, that's kept constantly alight in honour of St. Brigid, which is drawing on an earlier tradition surrounding the goddess Brigid, who is associated with, like, light and hearthfire.

A: Isn't an eternal flame in a church, like, quite common, though?

I: Yeah, specifically – I'll tell you specifically about the ritual involved with this one. So, it's kept constantly alight, there are nineteen nuns assigned to tend to the fire, one for each night, and on the nineteenth night, the final nun would, like, verbally pass the responsibility of keeping the fire on the twentieth night to Brigid herself. And on the twentieth night, the flame was just left untended and Brigid magically keeps the fire alight.

A: Ah yeah, good on her.

I: And then they start again.

A: So Brigid's just, like, on the roster with, like, some–

I: Just, like, on the roster with the other nuns, yeah.

I: So yes, there are eternal flames in other churches, but this has a unique ritual associated with it.

A: Ah, okay.

E: And that's to do with the goddess, not with the saint?

I: Yes, so the eternal flame being tended by this group of virgins is associated with the goddess

E: Oh, okay.

A: Okay

E: I guess that does sound a bit pagan.

[laughter]

E: When you put it like that. So kind of the overall point, just to make sure I'm keeping up, is that there is an association between the saint, who you understand to have been a real human woman, and the goddess, but that it developed over time and was not present in the earliest sources, therefore it cannot explain her not being a real human woman.

I: Yeah, that's sort of my contention here, it's that it's, like, the goddess Brigid is not present in the early sources in any...

E: So it can't play the function that some scholars have argued that it played.

I: Yeah, yeah. A lot of the pre christian Brigid stuff is drawn in later on. And even increasingly later than that, like, beyond the 1200s, elements of the goddess Brigid continue being pulled in.

E: Yeah. And now we're like the— like, you know, more than half a millennium away from when this woman actually lived, allegedly.

I: Yeah, exactly. Now we're so long away that if you look at, like, popular knowledge about St. Brigid now, they seem very closely intertwined.

E: Yep, yep, cool.

A: Yep.

I: With all that in mind, I'm not going to pretend that I can somehow pull out the correct facts about St. Brigid's life.

A: It's called Queer As Fact, Irene.

[laughter]

I: Well, yeah, I'm sorry ...

E: Well, that's always been a lie, hasn't it?

[laughter]

A: "Queer As Conjecture".

I: Yeah, "Queer As Conjecture", "Queer As Niche Catholic Speculation". But I will do my best to give you a brief rundown of, like, what we know about her life before we talk about her legacy as a sort of Irish catholic figure.

A: Mhmokay.

E: Alright.

I: The Irish Annals which is a collection of various annals from Ire—

E: From Ireland?

[laughter]

I: From Ireland [laughs].

Which basically, like, lists the births and deaths of important figures.

E: Yep.

I: Contains an entry under the year 452, which reads: "Here, some say, was the birth of St. Brigid". The following entry, in 456, says: "The birth of St. Brigid, as others say".

A: So, when would these annals have been written?

I: I don't have an exact year for you, sorry. But they're compiled in a similar era to, like, Cogitosus, like, I think, like, a couple hundred years later they're being compiled, with knowledge of religious figures from the past, kind of.

A: So they're some nice numbers, but we don't have much reason to believe they had any inside knowledge there.

I: There's – Yeah, there's general consistency that she was born around the middle of the 400s.

A: Ok.

I: But, like, that's all I can really say to you about that.

E: I do feel, despite this uncertainty, much more grounded now that we're in the traditional, like, "this person was born" section, because all of that stuff started happening about, like, eternal flames and things and I was, like, "huh?! What?"

[laughter]

A: We're meant to start, lit review, birth. That's the format!

[laughter]

I: Yeah, I felt like I had to contend with, like, "did she really exist?" first, before I launched into what she did.

E: No, that makes perfect sense, and, like, I got there, but I was kind of wondering if we were just going to continue in from there into yet more esoteric catholic things.

[laughter]

E: And I was becoming a little alarmed, but no, no, no, someone was born in some year, good, I'm fine with that.

I: Early biographers differ a little bit on the matter of her birth and childhood. According to Cogitosus, she was born to wealthy parents. Other sources have her born to a wealthy druid father and his christian slave.

A: Uhum...

E: Okay.

A: I understand that, like, "born to wealthy parents" is a standard thing they say about saints who they don't know who they were born to, just to be like "look, this person came from a good family", essentially...

I: Yeah...

A: By "they", I mean like mediaeval christians in Europe.

I: Yeah, that's very much a thing that happened, and there's also a lot of, like, later sources will kind of increasingly want to link her with old Irish families.

A: Uhum...

I: Or like, druids, or that kind of thing, in the same way to, like, link her to older Irish traditions.

A: Yeah.

I: She was either fostered out in childhood to another powerful family, which was a normal thing to do if you were a wealthy family in Ireland, it serves a kind of similar function to a political marriage.

E: Uhum.

A: Yep

I: Or, alternatively, if her mother was a slave, the two of them were sold together to another household.

E: Ok.

A: It's interesting that like, you've got – In both stories, where she's raised in a household that's not her birth household, but it's from, like, the two extremes of the,

like, social spectrum. Like, it's either because this is something that, like, wealthy, high up families do, or because she's a slave whos been sold.

I: Yeah, I think you can kind of see, and that's what I mean when you read these texts, you can kind of glean some facts about her life.

A: Mhm, yeah.

I: But what they actually are is hard to say, you're, like: "I can see she was born, I can see she was raised outside of her father's house", but that's all we know about that.

A: Yeah.

E: What was slaverly like in this period? Like, were looking at, like, chattel slavery, or is it kind of, like, indentured servitude thing, to people born into poverty, like, what kind of social condition does that apply?

I: Uhm. It's – Usually here it's, like, a consequence of war.

E: Okay.

A: Uhum.

I: So they'll be, like, prisoners of war, or captives from something like that, her mother, as a slave is supposed to have been Pictish, which is another, like, minority indigenous group in Ireland and Scotland.

E: So, that implies that sort of prisoner of war background to some extent, I suppose.

I: Yeah.

E: Okay.

I: Generally what the, like, lives of St. Brigid-type biographies tell us about her early life is that she does a bunch of miracles relating to food production, like, she milks cows and they produce twice as much milk as they should.

A: Was there like a lot of famine or scarcity in Ireland at this time?

I: Like, the normal amount.

E: [laughs]

A: So, “the normal amount” for mediaeval times, I understand, is a fair bit.

I: Yeah.

I: And it’s certainly a recurring theme in her miracles, is her ability to, like, give away food to the poor and then magically still have enough to serve dinner at the convent.

A: Ah, yeah.

I: And that kind of thing.

Supposedly – This is another one of those apocryphal stories which may or may not fit into her real life – Supposedly, her father tried to give her away in service to the king of a nearby region, because she kept giving away his stuff in charity.

[laughter]

I: [laughs] Ahm, while she was, like, waiting in the carriage and he was chatting to the king, and he was like: “I’ve got my daughter to give you, she’s great, she can scrub floors” or whatever”, she gave away her father’s sword to a passing beggar.

A: [laughs]

E: Oh my god!

I: The king saw this happen and was like: “Yeah, what a holy woman, I’ll take her on”.

E: “I have so much stuff that could be given away.”

I: Anyway, an untrue story that made me laugh.

E: What’s a beggar realistically going to do with a sword?

A: Sell it, I guess.

E: I guess sell it. I like the idea that his beggar is, like: “Well. It’s time to turn to a life of crime” and just went to, like, stab some person to death for some bread, or something.

A: [laughs] The beggar’s like just holding up convenience stores with a sword...

E: Yeah, I guess the modern equivalent would be “Here, my child, have this gun”.

A: [laughs]

I: [laughs] Yeah, like, a jewelled gun, belonging to the chieftain.

E: Yeah. Have, like, the sheriff's fancy gun.

I: Yeah.

A: You're saying that the king saw her and thought "oh, what a holy woman", so that implies that the king is also christian? Is Ireland christian at this time?

I: Christianity is very new in Ireland at this time. There are some christians in Ireland, there are some non christian in Ireland. Converting people to christianity and spreading christianity throughout Ireland is one of, like, the key actions of Irish saints in this era.

A: Yeah.

E: Yeah.

I: And so you'll see in her later life, Brigid does a lot of travelling. She has a coachman, who is ordained as a priest, solely so that she'll always have a priest with her to baptise people.

A: Ah, Yeah. Practical.

I: Practical. And stuff like that. Ireland is like it's— We're somewhat in the middle of the period where catholicism comes to Ireland. Whether people are christian or not in kind of anecdotes, very much depends on what's going to be good in the story.

[laughs]

A: So in this case they were, like: "It would be better in this story if the king is like "well. She was touched by God!"

I: Yeah. Yeah.

E: It's interesting to think about how it took, like, four hundred years for chritisanty to make its way from Italy to Ireland.

A: Yeah, yeah.

E: I don't really know a lot. Like, obviously I know like crhistiany started and then it spread everywhere, but, like, the exact steps and how long that took, and why and things, I don't know the details about. That's interesting...

I: Ireland is quite, like, remote from the rest of the catholic world of this time, and you can tell they have, like, unique power structures and slightly different traditions and a bunch of things like that, which I will tell you a bit more about later when Brigid founds her abbey.

E: To... let some people cross off her bingo card squares. This is something that Anne Rice depicts a little bit in her "Mayfair Witches".

I: Oh, really?

[laughter]

E: I think it might– I don't know it specifically, partly because Anne Rice isn't very good at cultural specificity, I feel. She'll just be like "this is... the History place...". It could have been Scotland. It might have been in Scotland.

A: I think it's in Scotland.

E: But it's the same sort of, like, gradual coming of christianity sort of vibes.

I: Yeah.

E: And then there's a demon about.

[laughter]

A: Are there any demons in this episode?

I: There aren't any demons in this episode,

A: Is St. Patrick going to be here?

I: St. Patrick is previous to St. Brigid. There are some stories which suggest that they met each other, or had some interactions, but, having said that, as best as we can date the two of them, he dies before she is born.

A: That was why I asked, because, I was, like, "I'm sure that I've heard that they met, but I also don't think that's true". [laughs]

I: Yeah. They did not meet. But everyone would love for them to have met.

E: Yep.

A: Yep.

E: And been besties

I: And been besties, or, I don't know, related, or, like, something.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

I: That's kind of all we really get of, like, Brigid 's youth. I will read to you one of the miracles that she's said to have done at this time, just because I found it funny.

E: Good.

I: So, from our man Cogitosus:

[laughter]

I: "This further deed of hers should surely remove all doubt from those who have not yet heard it." "All doubt" being all doubt that she was, you know, chosen by god.

A: It's going to be a good miracle.

I: It's a great miracle.

E: I'm so ready to want to become catholic.

[laughter]

I: I'll try. I'm not intended for this podcast to do that to you, I did not design it this way

E: [laughs]

I: "While her mind was immersed in contemplation of heavenly matters, raising her association from earthly to heavenly things, as was her constant want, she let a dog take not a small, but a large piece of bacon.

[laughter]

I: "And when the bacon was sought, it was found, whole and intact, a month later, not just anywhere, but in the dogs own spot, for the dog would not dare to eat what had been entrusted to the blessed virgin, but proved himself a patient and proper guardian of the bacon, contrary to his customary character."

A: So is this really, like, Brigid's miracle or is this Fido's miracle. What did she do? She just gave some bacon to the dog.

E: You can't even be a good boy anymore without letting – without people attributing it to Saint Brigid.

[laughter]

A: I love that it specifically said that she was so busy thinking about God that she gave all the bacon to the dog, like, "to be clear, this is because she's so holy, not because she was just kind of distracted and the dog looked cute and sad".

I: Yeah, no, presumably she was just, like, in the kitchen, thinking about God, while the dog hopped up on the table, grabbed the bacon and ran away.

E: I loved that they say "a month later".

I: I guess that's how bacon is, it's meant to be preserved. I understand that historical bacon, like, kept much better than modern bacon because of refrigeration so we just don't bother anymore.

E: That makes sense, but the initial image is extremely good.

[laughter]

I: Yeah, fully. Anyway, that's the kind of thing that Brigid is up to. And if you want to know, like, the themes of her miracles in general, she turns a lot of milk and water into beer.

[laughter]

E: Alright.

A: Good christian stuff.

I: Yeah, good christian stuff, you know.

E: So, would you say the barrier to being a saint is a lot higher these days than it used to be?

I: Absolutely, because you need to either have been martyred or have two miracles to do it, there's, like, a whole checklist.

E: And I'm sure that a miracle like this isn't –

I: Yeah, getting two miracles is much harder now.

E: Yeah. And thankfully so is being martyred.

A: Yeah

I: Yeah, true

A: You may not remember, but in the Hildegard episode, I cannot remember how much we talked about it, but that was the time where they really brought in the bureaucracy of becoming a saint, and so Hildegard was never officially made a saint, because she could never clear the bureaucratic hoops.

E: Yeah. I remember something of this discussion going on in the background of my life with... Uhm... Mary MacKillop.

A: Yeah!

I: Yeah, I was literally just about to bring that up. Uhm. And they managed to get Mary MacKillop eventually two miracles, I think, which were like, you know, "some kid was sick, and then his parents prayed to Mary MacKillop and then he got better" kind of thing.

E: Sure.

I: But yeah, it's definitely much more difficult to become a saint now. And a little while ago as well, the catholic church, like, chucked a bunch of saints, like, from the past.

E: Oh, no!

I: That they were like: "These wouldn't clear our new standards, these are out".

A: Well, I feel – with specifically people where they're, like, "we have no concrete evidence that these people existed". Like, I know one was St. Christopher who, like, carried Jesus across the river when he was a baby.. And that's obviously just, you know, an anecdote. You could never prove that man was real.

E: Once you start applying the burden of proof to this, though, I imagine that's like a runaway freight train kind of...

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: And I think, you know, despite Catholicism being a very, like, bureaucratic religion, there's not actually a clear list of, like, who are the saints and who aren't the saints that's been consistent over time, so they may have, like, scrapped these saints, but these saints aren't gone.

E: Yeah, I was going to say I cannot imagine that like a catholic person who really likes St. Christopher was like "Oh, yeah, absolutely not! I'm going to throw out this –"

A: Medallion.

E: "Yeah, whatever". I imagine like "Oh yeah, cool, so anyway, as I was saying, Christopher".

[laughter]

I: Yeah, no, that's exactly right, and if you get in catholic people's cars, they'll still have their little St. Christophers there.

Anyways, so, St. Brigid comes of age and her family starts discussing her marriage, and she says she'd rather not to, and swears to remain chaste and serve god.

According to Cogitosus her parents made no objection to this. Uhm, according to some other sources her family were disappointed due to losing the financial boost of the dowry that they would have received from her and she also had a suitor who was very disappointed and made a comment about how her beautiful eyes would serve some man eventually.

E: So... the dowry *her* family would have received from her? Okay, please explain that

I: Yes. From her. So she would have married into another family who would have paid her family for her. Essentially–

A: Oh

E: Oh! Okay. So... Okay

A: So, like, a bride price, rather than a dowry.

I: Yeah, I guess that's the correct word for that.

E: So the opposite of a dowry.

I: Yeah, the man paid a dowry I guess.

E: Okay.

I: You're right, I guess that's probably not the correct word for that.

A: So we don't know much, but we know that she has beautiful eyes.

I: She has beautiful eyes and her suitor commented that her beautiful eyes would be of benefit to some man eventually. At which point she thrust her finger into her eye.

[gasp]

I: And pulls it out and is like "Alright, have it then, no one is going to want me if im blind!"

[gasp]

A: I totally forgot about that content warning...

I: I'm so sorry guys.

E: I was so in – [laughs]. Just one or both?

I: Just one, as far as I can tell, after which her brothers, like, rush around looking for water to wash her face and she – this is where the miracle comes in – she gives them her stuff and is like "strike that ground there".

A: Moses style.

I: Yeah. They strike the ground. A Stream bursts forth, they wash her face, and her eye's magically healed, so that's fine.

A: Oh. Okay.

E: I was going to ask if she's like... you know, has an Eyepatch for the rest of her–, or if she's, like, depicted having only one eye.

I: I don't know. Nobody mentions her – like, her sight is not an issue that comes up again.

A: Okay.

E: Okay.

A: So she was just healed and that was it.

I: Whether she was just healed or whether this never happened at all...

A: I'm willing to bank that this never happened at all.

I: I'm willing to bank that this never happened at all, but I'm also willing to believe that maybe she was – Had poor sight in one eye.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah, maybe

I: And people were like "what happened?" "yeah, it was probably god related."

E: Yeah... Lestat also loses one eye and it's restored to him in religious circumstances

A: You really got Anne Rice on your brain today, don't you?

[laughter]

I: I get the feeling that Anne Rice was a catholic.

E: She was a catholic, yeah.

I: So she's – She's healed, she survives that experience and she takes a vow of chastity and makes a plan with some other women to start a... Abbey.

A: Was that, like, normal to do at the time?

I: To start an abbey?

A: Yeah, to, like, get your friends together and start an abbey.

I: Yeah, it doesn't seem to be, like, an unusual..., like, it's a holy thing to do. She's very holy, but no one's, like, "that's outstanding", like, women in the celtic churches at this time have a lot more autonomy and a lot more power than they do more broadly.

A: Yeah that's kind of why I was asking, because most of my frame of reference for this is learning about Hildegard and, when she founded an abbey, women really didn't do that, they waited for men to found abbeys for them, basically.

I: Oh, okay. I'll tell you a little bit more. I'm literally just about to tell you about, like, women's role in the Irish church at this time, so.. Anyway, whatever's going on in the rest of Europe, Ireland's quite isolated. Christianity is also very new there, which

means that a lot of its, kind of, structures are heavily influenced by the established culture. To the point where... So, they kept the- calculated easter by a different method and had it by a different day, a situation which wasn't resolved for another few centuries after this.

A: Oh!

I: It was a big controversy at the time. They also had a kind of power structure which historians call Celtic Monasticism now. And what that means is. So, generally in the catholic church there's like a hierarchy. So there's monks and nuns at the bottom, and then priests, and bishops, and then archbishops, and then cardinals, and then the pope, and then God.

A: Yeah.

I: That's it, it's like a big pyramid.

E: It's a pyramid scheme...

[laughter]

I: Yes.

A: You've got to make all your friends priests.

I: [laughs] The original pyramid scheme.

E: That was in Egypt...

[laughter]

I: Yeah, good point, good point.

Anyway, by comparison. The monastery in the Irish church holds a lot more power and has a lot more autonomy.

A: Uhum.

I: They'll often, like, there'll be a monastery, they'll have land holdings in the surrounding area, and inhabit this kind of almost feudal position.

A: Ah, okay, yeah.

I: And so they'll be making-- They'll have sort of economic and political power in their area. And so the abbess who might be the head of that, like, monastery.

A: Or convent, I guess, in this situation.

I: Or convent, Yeah.

A: If there's an abbess is not a monastery

I: Yeah, they also had - no, they had a lot of mixed gender monasteries, which were also uncommon on the mainland.

A: And. Women could be in charge of those? Crazy.

E: Oh, really cool.

I: Single, like, single sex religious establishments seem to have been relatively uncommon at this time.

A: Huh!

I: And yeah, so, a man or a woman can be in charge, and then, like, the priest and the bishop still exist. They have a kind of symbolic, a sort of official function rather than making- having actual decision-making power.

A:Mhmokay.

I: The abbey will make decisions and then they'll have to wait for a travelling bishop to come and put his official stamp on it in a kind of governor general style.

[laughter]

I: And you can see this when Brigid decides to become a nun and start her convent, she has to wait for the bishop to come around to, like, ordain her properly. She just makes a vow on her own, and is, like, "I vow to serve god and be chaste" and then the bishop comes around to do it properly...

A: Yep.

I: ...later on. So It's said that when bishop Mel came around to ordain her – Do you call it ordaining when a nun...

A: I think you can, yeah.

I: Yeah, so bishop Mel comes around to ordain her to be a nun, and it's said that when he's reading the rites, he's so overwhelmed by the holy spirit in that woman, that he accidentally reads the rites for a bishop instead.

A: Ah!

[laughter]

A: And she's like "you said it now!"

E: "No taking it back!"

I: Yeah, she's like "you said it now". His assistant commented and he's like "you can't do that to a woman" and he's like "well the holy spirit came upon me"

A: So.. What's happened?

I: So.. What's happened now? The source of this anecdote comes from, the, Uhm, the Bethu Brigte, which is one of those lives of Brigid, which is written, like, two or three hundred years later.

It may well be that this anecdote was designed to kind of explain why she had unusual power as a woman.

E: Yep.

A: Yep.

I: In this time. Which. At the time wouldn't have been so unusual, but in hindsight they kind of had to justify how this came about.

A: So women had become less powerful in Irish Catholicism since Brigid's time?

I: Yeah, so over time, the actual roman catholic church kind of gets a better grip on Ireland.

A: The Italians read it in the paper and they were like "they're doing what, now?"

[laughter]

I: Exactly. And they start to have a little bit more control over what goes on in Ireland and bring it more in line with what's happening in the rest of Europe.

A: Yeah.

I: So, she starts an abbey at *Cill Dara*, which means church of the oak.

A: Ah! That's what Cill Dara is!

I: I knew you would say that.

[laughter]

I: I have a little note that's, like "Alice will make a remark here".

E: [laughs]

A: Good.

I: That is what Cill Dara is. It means church of the oak, it's also the name of a catholic school in Melbourne.

E: Also the name of a catholic school in Adelaide.

[laughter]

Also, more specifically, it's "kildare" [kil·dare /kɪl'dæə/], which I assume is the same, but

I: Yeah, it's like an anglicisation. So, the town in Ireland is called Kildare now.

E: Yeah, my friend Chloe went there. Shout out to my friend Chloe.

[laughter]

I: Shout out to chloe. You have St. Brigid to thank for your education.

A: I think the primary school that you and I went to, Irene, was a Brigidine one, was it not?

I: Yes, it was.

A: I have Brigid to thank for my education, too.

I: That's true.

E: Brigid has nothing to do with my education.

[laughter]

E: I went to a public school. Thank you, The South Australian Government.

I: Thanks, South Australian Government.

She starts a convent at Cill Dara and the convent at Cill Dara becomes, like, becomes a central point for catholicism in Ireland.

A: Uhum.

I: So she travels a lot, like, outwards from there. Like, founding other churches. Other, like, smaller churches, that kind of thing. There is again a theory that this was already the site of a temple to the goddess Brigid, and she did not found a convent so much as she was a priestess to the goddess Brigid who was being christianized. I have no way of verifying that. Somebody did point out that, with a simple archeological dig, we could find out if there was a temple there before the year 500.

A: That's what I was about to say. You said you had no way of verifying, I was about to go, like, "dig it up".

[laughter]

I: You literally could. But no one's done that yet so we can't say.

E: That's a lot to expect of Irene.

A: Yeah, get over there, Irene.

I: I did not fly to Ireland and dig it up myself, but if you are an archaeologist in Ireland, like, please consider this.

A: I'll volunteer in your dig.

I: Yeah, we'll come down.

E: I guess I'll come too.

A: Yeah.

A: So. I assume from what you said then, that we don't have, like, clear written evidence of, like, a temple to the goddess Brigid on that site, that's more speculative.

I: No. There's no written evidence of it, there's no physical evidence that anyone's bothered to dig up yet.

A: So it's just an idea.

E: [laughs]

I: It's just that people really feel, like, these, like, two religious figures should be the same thing.

A: So is it really just assuming that they weren't the same person. The name Brigid is just common enough that that was fine.

I: Yeah, the name Brigid was common. She's a very significant, like, the goddess Brigid is a very significant figure in, like, pre christian religion in Ireland, so it's not strange that many people have this name.

A: Okay.

I: I do think that in a lot of ways, when you're moving from one religion to another as a culture you'll, like, - you know, "we need a significant woman figure here."

[laughter]

A: Yeah, like, obviously I can see how, assuming Brigid was a human person, after her death they'll be, like, so a lot of the things that we did believe about the goddess we can kind of transfer-

I: transition into ...

A: Yeah.

I: One of the things that Brigid the goddess' domain was, was blacksmithing.

A: Cool!

I: And I did read an article from a 1934 Australian newspaper about St. Brigid.

[laughter]

E: Good.

A: Great research.

I: It's great research! Which, describing the abbey at Cill Dara said: "She was joined by her kinsman, a hermit and skilled crafter in metals; He became bishop of the community, under his inspiration and Brigid's a decorative metal school was developed in Kildare, and they turned out bells, crosiers, shrines and other articles for churches near and far."

A: So did that, like, happen?

I: From what we know of people visiting the abbey at Cill Dara in its, like, original state - it's no longer there, it was destroyed in the 1300s – but Gerald of Wales visited there also in the 1300s and what he commented on was, like, their illuminated manuscripts were fantastic loved that, it was beautiful.

A:ok, So some standard abbey stuff, not anything specifically, like, blacksmith related.

I: Yeah, he commented on the eternal flame and he was, like, their manuscripts were fantastic.

A: But then, there could have been a blacksmith there for hundreds of years, then not, for hundreds of years, and then Gerald turned up.

I: Yeah, yeah.

E: We should dig it up and look for metal.

I: Maybe we should.

I: And that's also something that historians comment on when Gerald is, like, "this flame is being kept since the time of St. Brigid" , but they're, like, "there is evidence that there was, like, a firehouse there, which the eternal flame was in, and other sources mention the eternal flame, but thus far we have no way of knowing whether this went back to the four and five hundreds".

A: So we know there had been a flame there for a while, but we don't know when the flame started, okay.

I: Yeah, there may have been a flame there, they think at least from the tenth century.

A: Okay.

I: Which is definitely long enough for Gerald to come and be, like, "this has been here for a hundred years", that's long.

A: Yes.

I: So, as I said: Women in the Irish catholic church were able to hold a lot of power at this time. Cogitosus, about the abbess at Cill Dara, even after Brigid's death, describes her, like, co-ruling with the archbishop –, like, co-ruling christian Ireland, basically and says: 'The chief of all bishops and the most blessed chief of the virgins, with happy association between them, ruled Ireland.'

A: Okay.

I: And, Charles Edwards is a modern scholar, and he described the abbess of Cill Dara as the most important woman in Ireland.

A: Mhmokay. She's doing well for herself.

I: She's doing well for herself, she's a very significant woman.

A: So, when you said that, like, Charles Edwards said she was the most significant woman in Ireland, or that other thing about how the two of them ruled Ireland together, are they talking about the time of Brigid or later on or...

I: They're talking about Brigid and her successors.

A: Oh, okay.

I: So, they're talking about the abbess of Cill Dara as kind of a political role.

A: Do we know how much of that was established in bBrigid's life versus later on, like, did she set up this power position quite quickly during her lifetime or was this something that grew post Brigid?

I: Uhm. She established it to some degree, in that she travels a lot throughout her life, she's almost, like, setting up the christian church in Ireland to a great extent.

A: Ah, yeah.

I: While we're talking about women and the Irish christian church, I wanted to share with you another miracle that Brigid is said to have done.

A: The bacon was very good so this has a high standard to live up to.

I: this ones a very interesting one. So:

"With her powerful and inexpressible strength of faith, she confidently blessed a certain woman who had made a vow of virginity, but was led astray in human frailty and fell prey to youthful lust, and had then become pregnant, with her uterus swelling. At once, what had been conceived in her womb disappeared."

A: Oh. Okay.

E: Oh!

A: So. Her miracle's an abortion.

I: Yes.

A: Interesting. There's a lot to unpack there.

I: Yeah. It's not the only abortion miracle which occurs in, like, the early Irish saints.

A: Okay!

I: The other two are by men. Brigid is the only woman to have done an abortion miracle.

A: Uhum. So, I don't expect you to know the full history of abortion in the catholic church, but, like, was abortion okay at the time in the catholic church?

I: So, I did actually look into this and we can glean what's acceptable in terms of, like, sexual life and that kind of thing from penitentiaries, which are those documents which are printed and they're, like, advice to priests on how various sins should be punished.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: Which makes for super interesting documents. Cause they're literally just lists of, like, "ok, if a man does *this* with another man, he should do penance on bread and water for this long".

A: So, it's really, like, ranking, like, a really clear idea of, like, what the sins are and how bad they consider each sin to be in comparison to the others.

I: Yeah, and in one of the Irish penitentiaries in around, like, the year 1000, the thing that it says about abortion is, essentially, that if that a woman induces a miscarriage after the seed has been established in her womb there's, like, a minor penance, until it says the soul has entered the body of the child.

A: But does it say when the soul enters the body?

I: It doesn't tell you exactly when that is. At various times, in various christian teachings it's been when you can hear a heart beat, it's been when you can feel the child move, it's been when you, like, when the child takes its first breath. It's been a bunch of different times depending on the christian teachings.

I'm not sure exactly what they meant there. But it's obviously clear that there was a period at which they thought it was a very minor sin, after which it became a much more significant sin, at a certain point of development.

A: Okay.

E: So, what do modern catholics have to say about abortion miracles? Or did they not say anything about them?

[laughter]

I: This is an interesting situation, St. Brigid very much got kind of taken up as a, sort of symbolic figure for the abortion debate in Ireland, I don't know if you two remember, they had a referendum on abortion a couple of years ago, and St. Brigid very much becomes, like, a key figure in that debate, and there's, like, I read about a couple of women who had, like, tattoos of the St. Brigid's cross

E: Okay.

A: Uhum.

I: And there were like women at protests and the, like, dressed as St. Brigid, with their pro-abortion signs.

E: That's... very cool and interesting.

I: And then, conversely to that, I found a lot of, like, nonsense articles on, like, catholic magazines that were, like, "the left are trying to reinvent Brigid as a lesbian abortionist!"

[laughter]

E: True, I guess so.

A: Yes!

I: Yes, we are, that's why we're here today.

E: I mean, she just *is* an abortionist though.

A: Yeah.

E: I can't wait to hear if she also just is a lesbian.

I: The development of anti-abortion teaching, like, the way that it is in Christianity today is actually very recent.

E: How recent are we talking?

I: I'm talking "second half of the twentieth century".

E: Oh, okay, wow!

I: Like, it's kind of under debate before that, in that way where, like, "this is obviously wrong, at some point, but we're not sure exactly when in the child's development", and there's sort of debate about when the soul enters the body, and under what circumstances it's acceptable. But anti-abortion rhetoric the way that it is today is quite recent.

And very much in terms of sex and sin in mediaeval Ireland at this time, a lot of the kind of regulation around sex is, like, about having inappropriate sex with people in your community, kind of.

Don't, like, you don't have sex to someone who's married to someone else, don't have sex with your cousin, don't have sex with – but having sex with a passing stranger is not such a sin.

A: Ah! So it's about maintaining community cohesion rather than any kind of personal chastity.

I: Yeah. And that's kind of a pre-Christian culture about sex in Ireland which gradually shifted as the Catholic Church got it's... fingers in.

[laughter]

E: It's little tendrils in everything.

I: Yeah, yeah. But in, like, early Christian Ireland the, like, "sex is a sin" thing hasn't really dug in yet.

E: Ok. I guess we would still say probably don't have sex with someone who has a partner, and don't have sex with your cousin. Seems pretty solid, but yeah, like, a passing stranger is all good. I really like this idea of, like, a tiny town and, like, you know, a guy passes through and everyone's, like, "oooooooooooooh yessss!"

[laughter]

I: Yeah. Now that I've told you about that. We are going to talk about the lesbians.

A: I was thinking as it was kind of time to talk about sex in Ireland, I was, like, is this where we transition to the gay part?

I: Yeah, yeah, it is.

E: Good.

I: so. The suggestion that Brigid is a lesbian in modern scholarship comes from a man named Peter Cherici, who was writing in the early nineties. He bases this on a few anecdotes we have about Brigid and her, like, kind of second in command nun.

[laughter]

I: That's not a real— a real turn of phrase. Basically, she has another, slightly younger companion nun who she's very close to and they have a sort of mentor-mentee relationship which is very intimate. Which is written about in the early lives of St. Brigid.

A: What's this woman's name?

I: Her name's Darlughdach, with apologies to Irish speakers because I'm not one, but you know, we do our best.

[laughter]

I: So, the two women are very close. During the day they work together, and study together, and during the night they share a bed.

A: Good, good, good.

I: It's unclear at this time whether that's —

E: Normal.

I: Sexual or not, they may have shared a bed for warmth.

E: Okay.

I: They may have shared a bed for companionship, platonic or sexual. I don't really know.

A: So do we know or have evidence about other, like, women sharing beds at this time, like, was that a normal thing that people were doing for, like, warmth and platonic reasons at this time?

I: Yeah, I can't say anything for women specifically but we definitely have men sharing bed platonically for warmth and that kind of thing. Like families sharing beds, and that sort of thing. I don't know whether it would have been normal, like, in this abbey.

A: But overall, culturally, there's lots of reasons to share a bed.

I: Yeah. So, there are two versions of the story I'm about to tell you. In the first, Darlughdach, being young, was overcome with lust for a hot man that happened to be passing through town.

E: Hell yeah.

I: And she agrees to sneak out of the convent in the middle of the night to break her vow of chastity and have sex with him.

A: Okay.

I: And then, she's lying in bed at night, and Brigid's beside her, asleep, and she's having a lot of inner conflict about whether she values her vow of chastity and her, like, service to god or whether she values her opportunity to have sex with this man more, and finally, looking for a way to overcome her temptation, she puts her feet into the bed of hot coals that are in the fireplace and the pain from burning her feet overcomes her unfulfilled lust and she goes back to bed.

A: Yeah it would!

E: Just casually goes back to bed...

I: Yeah, that's literally how it is, she goes back, she cuddles up to Brigid and goes to sleep.

Anyway, in the morning, Brigid wakes up and tells Darlughdach, that she was actually awake watching her have inner conflict this whole time and she just didn't want to, like, interrupt her and she's so, like, she's proud of her for the decision that she made, and she heals her feet.

A: Thank you. I was waiting for you to be, like, "and does she heal the feet?"

I: Yeah, she heals the feet and that's that, that's the end of that story.

A: Okay, no offense, but that didn't turn *that* gay.

I: Okay, Peter Cherici shares a slightly different version of this story, which I wasn't able to source directly, but that seems to be in, like, general circulation. In this different version of the story, Brigid is awake during Darlughdach's inner conflict and Brigid instructs her to put her feet in the hot coals as a punishment for being tempted.

A: But she hasn't even broken the vow yet.

E: At least let her have sex with the guy first.

[laughter]

A: She's being punished for impure thoughts?

E: Brigid is big brother... big Brigid.

[laughter]

I: Big Brigid. Yeah.

So, Peter Cherici and scholars following him, including Peter Berresford Ellis, a different Peter, interpret this punishment as an example of an expression of jealousy on Brigid's part.

A: I see that this is an interpretation, but I don't think that the story points towards that interpretation any more than it points to a religious interpretation.

I: Yeah, that is kind of what I thought. Ellis says that we're left with little doubt that Brigid had a lesbian relationship.

A: No way.

E: What?

A: But that doesn't hold up. We're not, like, especially because there's a version of the story where she burnt her feet of her own accord, like, clearly positions the burning of the feet as a, like, either punishment for her lust or a, like, way of...

I: Yeah, like, a way of challenging her attachment to her physical body.

A: Yeah, yeah. That's, like, clearly how that's positioned and having Brigid step in and do that doesn't change that positioning.

I: No.. That's sort of how I felt that, like, it positions Brigid in that version of the story as I guess more of a guiding figure to Darlughdach.

A: Yeah.

I: And more of an authority figure.

A: But I don't think that it positions her as a lover.

I: Yeah, no. Both Peters seem convinced that because we see Brigid in the past, like, so strongly rejecting the advances of men, and then being upset when her close companion did this, they interpreted it as jealousy. That's generally what people refer to when they talk about Brigid being a lesbian.

A: Ah...

I: There's some slightly more interesting things that she says, which kind of complicate her relationships in a way that's not so clear cut, like, "Brigid was a lesbian".

A: Yeah, so something I was going to say, just before you said that, was, like, I feel like The Peters are taking quite a simplistic approach to sexuality in saying that, you know, "Oh, Okay. She, Brigid, obviously had a really strong response to not wanting to be with a man – like the whole eye situation – and also a really strong response to not wanting Darlughdach to be with men – burning her feet – therefore she's a lesbian which I feel like fails to explore the possibility of religious chastity or perhaps asexuality, like, it fails to explore other possible ways of being your sexuality that aren't "attracted to men" or "attracted to women"

I: No, yeah, I agree with this. So, the thing that I'm going to bring up now is a conversation that Brigid is recorded having with a young cleric who comes to visit her community,

Again this happens in Bethu Brigte, which is a hagiography [laughs].

A: Look, we've accepted that nothing is real in this story, you just have to analyse what it means.

I: Yeah, I think you have to kind of take this story more in terms of analysing how people perceive this figure.

A: Yep.

I: Than analysing "was Brigid a lesbian?"

A: We're not trying to find the facts of Brigid's life.

I: Yeah.

And so the story goes like this: A young cleric of the community of Ferns - I don't know where Ferns is ...

A: Community of Ferns sounds very idyllic, I'm picturing like a little rain foresty, like, one of those children's movies with little faeries living around the rain forest.

E: Specifically Ferngully, you're specifically thinking of Ferngully.

A: Yeah, I just couldn't remember what it's called .

[laughter]

A: Except mine has to be, like, you know, they come and top down the forest and, like, yeah

E: yeah. Well, that's probably not going to be a problem in Ireland for a while after what we are talking about.

I: So, a young cleric of the community of ferns used to come to her with wishes. He was with her in the refectory to partake of food. "Well young cleric there", says Brigid, "hast thou a soul friend?"

A: Like a bestie.

[laughter]

I: Yeah, the word. The word in Gaelic, is "anamchara" which is, like, literally "soul friend." And the cleric says "I have, let us sing his requiem for he has died."

E: Ahw, his soul friend!

I: And Brigid says "thou without any head on thee for thy soul friend has died and anybody without a soul friend is a body without a head".

So, I bring this up to say - like you said - I feel like the Peters and other scholars with similar views are kind of taking a reductive view of this, that they're, like "this needs to be an exclusive lesbian relationship that we can identify through Brigid's jealousy, to be significant to us.

Where many people interpret Brigid's insistence on the importance of a soul friend as an expression of her value of Darlughdach as a friend, as, like, an intimate friend that she has.

A: Yeah, I mean, even if she's not talking about Darlughdach here, it's quite clear that she's recognizing, like, the very high value of an intimate friend that's not a heterosexual romantic relationship.

I: Yeah. Exactly right. I think that that's something that's just worth pointing out. When I read that story and we're all like "that doesn't seem gay", I don't want to be, like, "okay, we'll throw that all out."

A: Time to go home now.

I: I do think that that, like, one-on-one intimacy that she's having with a woman is significant in terms of the relationships that she's chosen to have in her life.

A: And even if she's not talking about Darlughdach back there, she's acknowledging that significance.

I: Yeah, the fact that she's so strongly rejected marriage specifically, but she does express the value of this intimate close friendship with another person.

A: Yeah, it's a framework in which one could be queer.

I: Yeah.

A: So, do you know anything more about, kind of, the cultural context of the time, or as close as we can get to the time, obviously we're lacking some sources, of, like, this idea of a soul friend?

I: I can't really say anything exactly about the time, regarding the sources, but something that comes up in Irish mythology a lot in terms of, like, warriors, they'll often have, like, an Achilles-Patroclus situation.

[laughter]

E: Yeah.

I: So there's generally a strong emphasis in, like, pre-Christian Irish culture on, like, same-gender close relationships of that kind.

A: For both men and women? Just cause the example you gave was quite masculine.

I: Yeah, when I was reading about *anamchara* people said it existed for women, but I don't have any concrete examples.

So, while we're here, I do want to talk a little bit about, like, same gender attracted women in mediaeval Irish literature of the era. That are not Brigid but I think can sort of illustrate something to us about the existence of this and where it sort of stood in society.

So, we have this story which focuses on king Niall Frossach, who was king of Ailech, which is an area in northwestern Ireland.

A: I understand that Niall is, like, a very old name.

[laughter]

I: That people in Ireland have had for a long time and you know can be very respectable, like King Niall, but to me Naill is just, like, it's there with, like, Bruce, Keith and Dave, it's just, like, such a generic name.

I: Like King Greg.

A: Yeah, it's just like some guy, you know.

E: I like how you mention, like, generic names that sound out of place and you include "David".

[laughter]

A: Yeah, but if you said King Dave, that would sound silly.

I: That's a you problem. You chose to call him Dave, nobody has a child and is, like, "yeah This is Dave, not David."

A: Let's just go back to my examples of Bruce and Keith, shall we?

I: I'm pretty sure that Keith is also, like, an ancient Scottish name.

E: Bruce is not ... a recent-

I: Bruce may also be an ancient Scottish name.

A: I mean, like, Robert The Bruce exists.

I: Yeah, I mean why is he "the Bruce", though, what's a Bruce?

[laughter]

E: I've known this in my lifetime.

I: Okay, anyway, so: Niall Frossach is there, he's the king and a woman comes to him for his wise kingly judgement as you subjects do, so Niall is king in about the 700s, this is a story about him which we have written evidence of from much later.

A: Okay, so this is not historical fact.

I: But I think it gives you, again, a sense of people's perceptions of, like, same gender relationships.

So a woman comes to him for his wise kingly judgment and she's, like, "as you see, I'm pregnant, even though I haven't had sex with a man for many years. How do I find the father, I need child support." Fair question.

And Niall is, like, "Okay, reasonable question. How about women, have you had a tumble with any women lately?"

A: Ah...

[laughter]

I: Just straight into it. And she's, like, "Yeah, yeah, I do often."

And so Niall is, like, "Look. It's the woman that you had sex with. Married. She's probably recently had sex with a man, and in your. In your sex with her, sperm has been transferred to you." Which is a common theme in Irish stories, like, unusual conceptions. People will conceive through oral sex, or you know, conceive through general sperm getting into them in unusual ways.

E: We both sat in a hot tub...

I: Yeah.

[laughter]

I: Exactly, exactly. So he's, like, "Look, the father of this child is probably your girlfriend's husband".

A: Okay.

E: Cool. I would love this sitcom.

[laughter]

E: Set in this time period.

I: The wild part of this story starts now.

A: What, that was not the wild part of this story?

I: No there is more. So, Niall says that and then, BAM, a priest descends from the sky.

[laughter]

A: He doesn't just walk in?

I: No. And he's, like, "thank you so much Niall."

Niall's, like, "What?"

And the priest is, like, "I've been stuck up there for years, I accidentally made a deal with a demon while trying to raise money to renovate my church and I have been trapped floating around the sky ever since. With your holy pronouncement I'm now free"

A: What? What does the husband being the father have to do with the priest being stuck in the sky?

I: Basically what happens is that the priest hears this, like, holy truth and is, like, "That's such a piece of wisdom, it's so wise and so true".

A: It's not, though...

I: "I'm freed from my curse and I'm here on the ground".

A: So, the piece of wisdom that's so wise and so true is just, like, being smart enough to -- assuming this is factually correct -- being smart enough to realize that you can get pregnant through lesbian sex if the woman you're having sex with has recently had sex with a man.

I: Yeah, basically

A: To be clear, listeners, you cannot.

I: You cannot, no.

I: I bring this up basically to show that same sex relationships with women are something that exist and are understood in this society and are not considered to be sinful.

A: And it's put on quite a level with a relationship with a man in the way it's framed in, like, "I haven't slept with any men", "Well, have you slept with any women?", like, they're kind of, comparable in this story

So what's the upshot of this, like, who pays child support, does she have the baby?

I: That's the end of the story, so I do not know. I'm assuming that she went to the husband and was, like, "I'm pregnant. It's yours" and he's, like, "excuse me?"

A: Does he know she's been sleeping with the wife?

I: I don't know, I don't know. This is all the information in this story. I have paraphrased it somewhat because it was funnier, but that's literally how the story goes.

A: Okay, okay. I need more information.

I: We can also get a general sense of perceptions of women's relationships with women through Christine McCann's study of penitential handbooks, which I mentioned earlier.

So, she examined a range of penitential handbooks including eight from Ireland, between the years of 600 and 1000.

A: Uhum.

I: And one thing she noted was that, compared with 40% of anglo saxon penitential handbooks and an even greater percentage of french handbooks, only 2 out of the 8 Irish penitentiaries refer to homosexuality. And there's only one mention of sex between women.

It's generally seen as a far smaller sin...

A: Than sex between two men?

I: Than sex between two men, so, she doesn't tell me specifically what the sex between women mentioned was in the Irish penitentiary, but she gives me a general statement about how it's seen in the church, mostly in anglo-saxon penitentiaries where it comes up the most. So it's seen as a lesser sin than sex between men, it carries the same punishment as practicing solitary vice.

A: Mhmokay.

E: Okay, yeah.

I: With the exception of if the two women fornicate *per machina* – using a device. So, If you get a dildo and you penetrate another woman, that is a greater sin, because it's subverting the natural order of things.

E: Sure

A: Ah, as opposed to “two women have sex kind of it's equivalent to masturbation”.

I: Yeah, if two women have sex they're just having sex, but if they, like, simulate a phallus with some separate device, that's subverting the natural order of things, and carries a penance of seven years rather than three.

A: Seven years of what?

I: It always just says penance of seven years and then at the backs of the books there are , like, lists of what the penances may involve and sometimes it's, like, having bread and water only on holy days, like...

A: Ah, Okay.

I: Or abstaining from wine or things like that.

A: Okay, so it's seven years of doing something that's some kind of fast, that kind of thing.

I: But it always just, in the actual text, just says however long of penance and it might be, like, twenty days or seven years or the rest of your life.

A: Seven years is quite a long time.

I: Seven years is quite a long time, but some of the penances are quite mild.

A: yeah.

I: So it's kind of hard to say.

A: Up to the discretion of your priest.

I: Yes.

A: So, Brigid is a nun...

I: Uhum.

A: So she's obviously taken a vow of chastity

I:Uhum.

A: Do you have any information about how sex between women is viewed in the context of a vow of chastity, like, is that considered to be breaking that vow?

I: I don't have any information about that.

A: Okay.

I: I can confirm that sex between women occurs between nuns throughout mediaeval Europe, that's all I can tell you.

A: Okay

I: I've read some sexy poetry by nuns, but they were from Germany.

A: Yeah, see, I only have the context of Germany as well and Hildegard and, like, conversation in that context of, like, you know twelfth century germany about how, like, any strong relationship, sexual or non-sexual, whatever, is kind of not appropriate for a nun because your focus should really be in your relationship with God. So I was wondering if we had any comparable attitudes in Ireland.

I: Yeah, no, I can't really say.

A: I guess, I mean, I'm speculating here, but obviously there is a distinction being made between sex between women and penetrative sex between women. So it could be that, you know, some sex acts may have been acceptable within your vow of chastity and some may have not. But I'm just speculating.

I: Yeah, and I mean, It's something, I guess it's a recurring thing that we see in discussions of sexuality historically, that penetration does kind of play a key role in how people interpret the significance of the act.

A: Uhum, yeah.

I: So, that's all of the facts I know about, like, women attracted to women in mediaeval Ireland.

A: Okay.

I: In 2023, which has not happened yet...

E: Uhum...

[laughter]

A: I was kind of in my mind being like, “Aw yeah, so just like, a few years ago”

[laughter]

E: Oh no...

I: In 2023, which has not occurred yet, Ireland has declared that the first of February will be a public holiday, in honour of Saint Brigid’s feast day.

E: Nice.

A: Oh, so this is like a brand new thing.

I: This is a brand new thing, it’s first going to happen next year.

A: That’s exciting.

I: Which is exciting, but very unusual in that Ireland in general has been moving in a more secular direction for years.

A: Yeah, what’s the public holiday situation in Ireland now, like, do they have like St. Pat’s day off, for example?

I: They have St. Pat’s day, they’ve got christmas day, they’ve got easter monday, and they’ve got St. Steven’s day, which is the day after christmas day.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah, but it’s a very interesting choice for them to introduce a new catholic holiday, when generally, politically, Ireland has been going in the direction of like, separating itself from the catholic-protestant split,

A: Yeah, yeah.

I: Politically, for obvious reasons. There’s a general perception that I saw when I was reading news articles about this decision, that there’s been a revival of interest in St. Brigid, in the past twenty years or so.

A: Okay.

I: There's some veracity to this. The work of scholars like Peter Cherici emphasised her potential to be a sort of modern figure, a figure that's palatable to modern Irish catholic people.

A: A lesbian abortionist, if you will.

[laughter]

I: Yes, a lesbian abortionist, if we will. And her ability to demonstrate the power of women in early Ireland, which has made her a relatable figure for progressive Irish people, who have sort of found the traditional Irish catholicism of the last couple of centuries to be quite repressive.

Having said that, when I was looking into this, when I searched for, like, St. Brigid revival, I was finding newspaper articles for the last hundred plus years being like, "revival of interest in St. Brigid!".

A: So there's just been continual interest in St. Brigid that people are occasionally discovering and are being, like, "Ah, hey, people are into St. Brigid!"

I: Yeah. I mean she's always been a very significant catholic figure. I think that it's less of a revival in interest in this case and more of a kind of reinterpretation of the figure of St. Brigid, which allows a different group of people to connect to her.

A: Yeah, so I guess that you could say, like, "a revival among progressive women".

I: Yeah.

A: From just a revival overall.

I: I want to finish, by, just going to read a brief quotation from Keeva Darby, who is an Irish lesbian who wrote very recently about her feelings on St. Brigid, and her desire to root her identity as a lesbian in Irishness, and why this makes her connection to St. Brigid very important to her.

She started out by writing about how difficult it was for her growing up in Ireland in the 90s as a young queer woman with a single mother, because there was really no place for her in an Irish catholic – sort of traditional Irish catholic culture which focused very much on the nuclear family. And she says that she found some sense of belonging when she discovered the american queer movement, but she didn't want her identity to be entirely rooted off shore.

And she says then that discovering Brigid's potential sapphism was pivotal for her. She's speaking about the burning coals story that I told you earlier she says:

“While this may only be rumoured sapphism, with many scholars reading this rather as evidence of her devotion to God, I would much rather see her as a pioneering Irish queer; her my Mother Mary and me, her petulant, devilish daughter.”

A: [laughs]

I: And I wanted to wrap up there, with that because I feel like I told you a lot of things where I’m, like, “this may not be significant, and it may not be true, but people kind of think this.” And so I just wanted to emphasise why it’s important in this case what people think.

E: Uhum.

A: Yeah. I don’t think we’ve come out of this going “factually, St. Brigid was born in 452 and she did have sex with Darlughdach”, like, that’s not the conclusion we’re going to draw and we can’t possibly know or not know if that ever occurred. But I think it is still significant to talk about, like, the importance that can hold to Irish people and to Irish lesbians in particular as a part of their history, even a reinterpreted part of their history.

I: Yeah.

Thanks for listening. We’ve been Queer As Fact. I’m Irene.

A: I’m Alice.

E: And I’m Eli.

I: If you like this podcast and you want to hear some more, you can find us pretty much anywhere where you find podcasts. We’re on spotify, we’re on apple podcasts, we’re on podbean, we’re probably on whatever your podcatcher is.

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All of this information, along with our sources, are available on our website queerasfact.com. We’ll be back on October the 1st, when Alice will be telling us about the Australian queer micronation, the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea.

Thank you, see you then.

[Theme music plays]