

3-1-2010

Review of Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, by L.M. Bitel

Joseph F. Kelly

John Carroll University, kelly@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Joseph F., "Review of Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, by L.M. Bitel" (2010). *Theology & Religious Studies*. 33.

http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub/33

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology & Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

moments of biblical narrative in the written lives of heroic contemporaries implied an open-endedness to scripture, inviting the reader to aspire to a similar heroism, which might allow him or her, as Williams puts it, “to join the ranks of authorised lives” (235).

Megan H. Williams
San Francisco State University

doi:10.1017/S0009640709991442

Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe. By Lisa M.

Bitel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xvi+299 pp. \$34.95 cloth.

The reader must take the apparently whimsical title quite seriously. The book does not deal with the Irish saint Brigit or the French saint Genovefa (hitherto Geneviève) but rather with the impact that devotion to them made upon the landscapes of northern France and eastern Ireland in the early Middle Ages. Bitel focuses on the *realia* that survive from those periods but occasionally on what does not survive since many buildings or sites she refers to now lie in ruins; some lay in ruins even in the Middle Ages.

Why do the buildings carry such weight? “Once Germanic itinerants came through town gates, the city’s built environment would cast its Christianizing, romanizing spell upon the barbarians and make them human. This was the most lasting legacy of northern colonization by Mediterranean people: the notion of civilization as a process marked visibly” (16). These sentences encapsulate the author’s approach. Many church historians would argue that Christianity was the most lasting legacy or perhaps the introduction of Greek and Roman learning and ideas, but Bitel does not back down from this premise: Genovefa and Brigit carry less importance than the effects of their cults upon the local landscapes. Their faith also carries less importance; on two occasions (31, 37) the author speaks of how “Christians had invaded Gaul.”

Interpretative questions aside, Bitel has done a fine job. She begins with Paris before Genovefa, focusing on pagan Paris, touching first on the pagan structures and then on the Christian fondness—à la mode Martin of Tours—for bashing pagan statues and replacing them with Christians ones. She does not waste space trying to find tenuous links between a pagan cultus and Genovefa’s (anonymous) hagiography, but she does focus on the importance of Genovefa’s discovery of the body of Saint Denis, which in turn led to the construction of a shrine to the saint and thus to a growing Christian impact in Paris, a city that grew in importance as a capital of one of the sixth-century Merovingian kingdoms.

Bitel well explains Genovefa's popularity, even though her miracles imitated those of other Gallic saints, particularly Martin. "Fifth-century Christians were not much interested in unusual wonders, preferring instead the proof of recognizable miracles" (67). Particularly good is her demonstration of how Genovefa lost importance to Saint Denis because the seventh-century Merovingian king Dagobert so expanded that saint's shrine that by the eleventh century the shrine's clergy claimed the king rather than the woman saint as the original builder of Saint Denis's resting place.

More information survives on Brigit, and Bitel is able to do a more thorough treatment of the Irish saint, starting with knowing the name, place, and time of her hagiographer. Cogitosus wrote in the middle of the seventh century when paganism had gone into terminal decline in Ireland, so Brigit—who probably lived in the sixth century—had no need to vanquish it. He focused on her impact upon Christians.

Pre-Viking Ireland had no cities, so, unlike Genovefa's Paris, Brigit's Kildare, originally a monastery, had no architectural models nor pagan structures to react against. Bitel does a superb job in describing the growth of sacred spaces among the Christian Irish, including their appropriation of locations with historical symbolism. The elusive historical Brigit knew something of this, and Bitel claims that she influenced serious building in east-central Ireland, the symbolic center of the country. Here Irish history played a role: "Gender had been built into the Irish landscape long before Christianity arrived. Land belonged to men, but much of the landscape belonged to women or female entities" (132). This leads to one of the best sections of the book—how Brigit's popularity spread outside of Ireland to Scotland (Saint Bride), England, and even to Rome at the very time that the male leaders of the Irish church, the bishops of Armagh, commissioned hagiographers of their ancestral bishop Patrick to bring Brigit into the larger, male-dominated Irish church. In fact, those hagiographers failed. Patrick became the national saint, but Brigit held her own at Kildare.

Cogitosus portrayed his saint as working well with men, but eighth-century writers toned that down; eventually male saints (at least in their hagiographies) went off as hermits to avoid women completely. But Brigit kept possession of Kildare and numerous other sites in Ireland associated with her, what Bitel calls "Brigit's special authority over sacral sites and consecrated spaces" (181).

A final chapter on relics recounts what happened to the saints' bodies in later centuries. Traditionally associated with Saint Denis, patron of the monarchy, Genovefa received favor from the Bourbons, so the Revolutionaries considered her "a royalist collaborator . . . and tossed her ashes into the Seine" (217), but she was later redeemed with a painting in the Pantheon. Brigit fared less well artistically, getting a roadside shrine that looks like a telephone booth, an astonishingly phallic pillar with her statue on top.

This is a complicated, wide-ranging book that focuses on landscapes and the author's interpretation of them. Clearly moderns will never know exactly what early medieval people thought about women saints, and this approach of using landscapes is a fruitful if incomplete one (Bitel never suggests her interpretation is complete). Also, most church historians would prefer at least some treatment of the historical Genovefa and Brigit, if for no other reason than to understand upon what if any base the hagiographers and architects built. But Bitel has produced a creative, thought-provoking study that establishes the landscape as an element in understanding early medieval saints, especially the women whose achievements later generations of writers conspicuously diminished.

Joseph F. Kelly
John Carroll University

doi:10.1017/S0009640709991454

The Cambridge History of Christianity: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600–c. 1100. Edited by **Thomas F. X. Noble** and **Julia M. H. Smith**. The Cambridge History of Christianity 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xxii+846 pp. \$195.00 cloth.

Peter Brown's elegant and learned essay, "Introduction: Christendom, c. 600," opens *Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600–c. 1100*, the third volume in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. His vision is panoramic; from Visigothic Spain to the Sasanian Empire, moving in and out from "churched" and "unchurched" Christianities, from urban episcopal "nerve centres" to rural "de-Christianized" regions, in a sweeping and evocative narrative. John H. Van Engen ends the volume with a surprisingly parochial essay, "Conclusion: Christendom, c. 1100," which, apart from focusing exclusively on western Europe after 1100, seems unaware of (or simply has no interest in) either the early medieval world or the intentions and objectives of the other contributors. Between these two essays are twenty-nine mostly exceptional articles (largely exemplifying Brown's expansive vision) spread over five thematic parts by thirty-two leading scholars. The volume more than justifies the historiographical assumption of contingent and variable early medieval "Christianities" rather an unchanging and immutable "Christianity."

Part 1, "Foundations: Peoples, Places, and Traditions," has six essays, beginning with Philip Rousseau's superb "Late Roman Christianities." Andrew Louth follows with "The emergence of Byzantine Orthodoxy,