



**Lisa M. Bitel.** *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xvi + 299 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-533652-8.

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## Two Women, Piles of Stone, and Hundreds of Miles Between

Topography as a category of analysis has become familiar to early medieval historians, particularly through Peter Brown's emphasis on *praesentia* as a central feature in the cult of saints, and the studies in Frans Theuws, Mayke De Jong, Carine van Rhijn, eds., *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (2001). In *Landscape with Two Saints*, Lisa M. Bitel combines this close attention to place with gender analysis in the cases of two distinctive early medieval saints, Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare. The book emerges naturally from the background of Bitel's prior works on Irish monastic spirituality and early medieval women. An evocative introduction describes this book as a personal project, an effort to "cure an obsession" with two characters who had haunted her through those prior projects.

Although a study of two saints in whom Bitel finds significant similarities, the book deals with Genovefa and Brigit separately until the end. Chapters 1 through 4 address Genovefa's relationship to Paris or, perhaps better, Paris's relationship to her. They discuss, respectively, the city's pre-Christian landscape, its Christianization, the impact of Genovefa's own activity and that of her cult on the region, and the development of that cult into the later Middle Ages. Bitel turns to Brigit in chapters 5 through 7, again following the story of her rise and fall chronologically; the construction of a Christian Ireland in her own generation, the flourishing of her cult reflected in the *Life* (ca. 650) written by Cogitosus, and the subsequent dis-

semination of her cult which both broadened her appeal but also revised her portrait into one more amenable to gendered expectations.

The eighth chapter, "Relics," discusses the fate of both women's cults over the longer term; both losing their geographic specificity and corporal presence as relics and buildings alike were abandoned or neglected. Brigit became the patroness of holy wells scattered around Ireland and elsewhere, and a shadowy third saint of Ireland after Patrick and Columba; Genovefa became a symbol of Christian Paris, deployed with shifting meanings but no longer tied to particular locations or institutions in the city's landscape.

The divided structure—and approach—of the book is its most frustrating quality. As the title implies, what ties these two female saints together, for Bitel, is their relationship to particular landscapes. In an age when few people of any background traveled, Brigit and Genovefa's *vitae* depict them as constantly on the move; in an age when the architectural legacy of Rome was decaying (or, in Ireland's case, had never been felt), both women put up Christian buildings. After their deaths, their shrines became powerful foci of sacral topography. The slow erosion of their cults, however, gradually erased them from the landscape as palpable presences.

Bitel declines to suggest any relationship or connection between the two saints beyond their thematic par-

allels, however. She stresses at various points that, however much each traveled within her own region, neither ever visited the other's territory. She rejects any possibility of literary influences between the writers of their respective *vitae*, and does not pursue any possibility of common sources in the pagan, biblical, or patristic literature of late antiquity. In Bitel's presentation, Brigit and Genovefa appear as unusual, even eccentric saints, with odd similarities but no direct relationship. One wonders if their activities might have been placed in a broader context; the narratives of St. Helena's activities in the Holy Land, for instance, constructing the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or the missionary work of St. Nino of Georgia, who is also credited with extensive regional travel and the establishment of foundational churches. Bitel is certainly aware that empresses and queens were patronesses and builders of churches. This lack of connection between her two chosen saints is the book's chief weakness; it threatens to break apart into two separate, rather brief, studies of different saints' cults rather than forming a cohesive study of a single phenomenon.

In some areas, readers may also wish for more direction in the book's scholarly apparatus. For instance, Bitel's chapter on one of her core sources, Cogitosus's *Vita sanctae Brigitae*, carries the title "Ekphrasis at Kildare." However, I have been unable to find any reference in the notes or bibliography that might guide one to studies of the literary genre of *ekphrasis* in its original, Byzantine context.

What Bitel achieves in *Landscape with Two Saints* is an effective portrait of topographies in the early stages of Christianization, and a reminder that the Christian geography that developed in Europe was constructed, not given, and that it could remake older topographies and itself be remade as cults and institutions rose and fell. On the plastic raw material of land just becoming Christian, Bitel finds spaces opening up in which women—non-royal women—were able to play a role in the shaping of the new Christian landscape. The moment proved fleeting, but left lasting traces in texts, if not in buildings.

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