

2010

# Review of Bitel's "Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe"

Caitlin Corning

*George Fox University*, [ccorning@georgefox.edu](mailto:ccorning@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Corning, Caitlin, "Review of Bitel's "Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe"" (2010). *Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies*. Paper 47.  
[http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist\\_fac/47](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/47)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History, Politics, and International Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi + 299. \$34.95.

**Reviewed by Caitlin Corning, George Fox University, Oregon**

Lisa Bitel has written a fascinating study that examines the ways in which Genovefa (Geneviève) of Paris (c. 420-502) and Brigit of Kildare (c. 450-524), along with their cults, altered the built landscape around them through the process of Romanization and Christianization. She explains that the purpose of her book is to “use the unique histories of Genovefa and Brigit ... to explain the connections between religious change, landscapes, and gender over roughly four centuries” (xv). Through this approach, Bitel has constructed an interesting window into the physical, cultural, and religious transformations that occurred in Ireland and Gaul during the fifth through the eighth centuries.

The first four chapters focus on Paris and Genovefa. Chapter one explores Roman Paris, including its fortunes during the third through the fifth centuries and the rising influence of bishops and the occupation of the city by the Franks. Chapter two surveys the religious landscape of the city in the fifth century. It becomes clear that in the eyes of educated Christians “urbanization aligned with architectural complexity, orthodoxy, and masculinity. Lack of settlement, monuments, and superstitious religion spoke of femininity”(28). It was into this environment that Genovefa would exercise her influence.

Next, Bitel discusses the major events in Genovefa’s life, including her role as protector of the city, a builder of ecclesiastical structures, and a traveling saint expanding her territory—all unusual characteristics for a female saint. Genovefa also broke traditional gender norms in the influence she exercised over ecclesiastical space, the authority she commanded, and the types of miracles she performed (69-71). Chapter four explores the fate of her cult and her physical relics in the Merovingian period.

Chapters five through seven examine Kildare and St. Brigit. Chapter five explores the Irish landscape to the mid-fifth century, both pagan and Christian, contrasting the difficulties with establishing Christianity and the values of *romanitas* in Ireland versus Roman Gaul. Bitel also discusses the gendered nature of property ownership and the fact that in Ireland “women had always been disenfranchised, had limited property rights, and

could not travel as freely and visibly as men” (132). Having laid this foundation, chapter six discusses Cogitosus’s *Life of Brigit* and its portrayal of the saint as the founder of the community at Kildare, a co-ruler with her bishop, and her authority over dependent communities. Bitel also includes an extensive section analyzing Cogitosus’s description of the church at Kildare and his allusions to *romanitas* (144–61).

Chapter seven discusses the portrayal of Brigit in the later *Vita Prima* (c. 750) and *Bethu Brigitte* (c. 900). These writers were less focused on Kildare, presenting Brigit traveling throughout Ireland, interacting with other saints, advising kings and bishops, and performing miracles. Bitel also argues that these later hagiographers constructed Brigit in such a way as to allude to earlier pagan goddesses and queens (187–94).

The last chapter explores the later history of the cults of Genovefa and Brigit and focuses on their transformation from women who transgressed gendered boundaries of both space and authority to more traditional female saints who submitted humbly to male ecclesiastical dominance. They each became divorced from their physical space as well. Brigit’s body disappeared from Kildare and the later *vitae* located her miracles at hearth and home. Genovefa fared somewhat better since her relics continued to be carried in procession throughout the Middle Ages when Paris needed healing and protection; but, from the late Merovingian period on, it was the cult of Saint Denis that received royal patronage.

Bitel’s approach—comparing two influential women saints who both transgress traditional gender expectations in the fifth and sixth centuries—reveals both the possibilities and constraints of women’s leadership in the early medieval period. The book is well-written and clearly argued so that while the reader needs some understanding of the early Middle Ages, even upper-division undergraduates should be able to profit from it. For graduate students and specialists, this book provides an interesting approach to re-examining a period that is difficult to reconstruct and is under debate. There is an extensive bibliography and a good selection of maps and illustrations to assist the reader.

The discussion of Brigit provides a good summary of the status of women in Ireland during the conversion period and helps to put to rest the popular understanding that Ireland and the “Celtic Church” allowed women significantly more power and standing than could be found in the Roman Church. That said, it would have been interesting had Bitel included more extensive discussion on the roles of women in the early Medieval Church in the West to more clearly delineate both the unique accomplishments of Brigit and Genovefa and the ways in which the conversion period allowed women to influence the church.

This small complaint aside, this is an excellent book and highly recommended. Bitel has brought her considerable expertise in gender and hagiography to this important study that should be of interest to specialists in the late Roman and early medieval period, as well as those concerned with gender, conversion, and hagiography.