Christ-Carrying Men: Cognitive Essentialism in the Early Lives of Saint Columba and Saint Brigit[1]

Mikko Heimola

1. Human minds and saints

As Peter Brown has put it, the guiding principle of all hagiography is explaining the world in relation to a single point, the saint. But rather than surrender before the inexplicable, the hagiographer strives to describe why and how the saint, the intermediary of God on earth, was capable of all those wondrous deeds he has described (1982, 234). Thus, one can agree with Ritari (2006) that hagiography can be seen as presenting theology in a narrative form. While the genre is influenced by both Christian dogma and earlier patterns of belief, one can also discern the part the human mind has played in the various stages of its formation. In this article I will discuss the notion of the saint from the point of view of cognitive essentialism. While my findings concerning the nature of sainthood in early hagiographical literature are to large extent compatible with existing scholarly interpretations, my purpose is to illustrate how cognitive faculties common to all humans have influenced the form this nature has taken.

My approach belongs to the field known as cognitive science of religion, which attempts to explain features of religious phenomena by focusing on the cognitive structures of the human mind and their influence on the recurrence and form of cultural beliefs (Barrett 2007). It suggests all such beliefs, or representations, held by individuals are products of a cultural input as processed by human minds (Martin 1996, 220; Sjöblom 2000, 20). A guiding theoretical assumption behind my study is the epidemiology of representations developed by Sperber. This theory views culture as consisting of representations that spread and compete for survival in a way similiar to an epidemic, and claims that the most widespread representations (the cultural beliefs held by the most people) are those with maximum relevance. A relevant representation is one that fits the intuitive assumptions made automatically by the inference systems of our cognition (so is easy to absorb) and leads to useful inferences concerning already held beliefs (Sperber 1996, 57-97, 114, 139-140). However, this is not all, as people can also reflect upon and modify these

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Mikko Heimola, mikko.heimola@iki.fi, Department of Comparative Religion, University of Helsinki
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representations, for example in the context of religion to comply more closely with proper dogma. This latter phenomenon, termed "theolological correctness", may make it more difficult to track the influence of these inference systems (Barrett 1999). Cognitive scientists of religion have paid a lot of attention to anthropomorphic representations and their central place in religion, which is usually credited to human mind's natural affinity with reasoning about other humans (see Boyer 2001, 99, 142-146; Barrett 2004, 31-44). It should go without saying that with saints we are dealing with anthropomorphic representations. However, my own hypothesis is that in addition, a crucial inference system is our essentialist intuition, the influence of which should thus be observable in surviving representations of saints.

My analysis will proceed deductively, for my method is to test this assumption by scanning the hagiographic material for features predicted by the theory of psychological essentialism. As material from the early middle ages provides a window through which one can observe both the cult of saints in its medieval form and the theological thought of late antiquity (cf. Brown 2003, 220), I have chosen to analyse three early lives of Irish saints, all written in Latin: *Vita Columbae* by Adomnán (VC), *Vita Brigitae* (VBC) by Cogitosus and the so-called *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* (VPB).[2] The life of Saint Columba, founder of the monastery of Iona, was probably written during 696-700 by his successor and relative Adomnán (Sharpe 1995, 43-64; see also Herbert 1988). The life of Brigit by the relatively unknown figure Cogitosus (who was from Saint Brigit's foundation of Kildare) has been dated to the 650s (Connolly 1987). This text is closely related to *Vita prima*, which was written by an unknown author, as they share a large portion of material. Some view *Vita prima* as the oldest surviving life of an Irish saint, but it is more generally assumed to be a work of the eighth century (Connolly 1989, 6; Ritari 2004, 18-19). As O'Loughlin (2000, 14) has argued, these texts can be seen to some extent as products of a shared cultural milieu: the new culture of Christianity forced all Irish hagiographers to learn both a new language (Latin) and the intellectual tradition that came with it. It seems both Cogitosus and especially Adomnán knew well the conventions of Latin hagiography well, and attempted to place their own works within this tradition (Stancliffe 1992, 88).

2 I have primarily used the translation of *Vita Columbae* by R. Sharpe, but the Latin excerpts are from the edition prepared by A. O. and M. O. Anderson. I have used *Vita Brigitae* as translated by S. Connolly and J.-M. Picard, and *Vita prima* as translated by Connolly. For details see bibliography.

2. Cognitive essentialism

Scholars of cognitive psychology have built a strong case about the centrality of categorisation on human information processing. People are differentiated from animals, men from women, children from adults. This processing is in a large part done intuitively, but it leads to further inferences: when something has been categorised as a human, we assume it to need food for sustenance and to die one day. Furthermore, our intuitive assumption is that these features are the result of an internal essence or nature unique to beings of this category. Both category membership and observable features are taken to be consequences of this essence. For example, since people of different ethnicity are perceived to have different mores and language, they are assumed to differ from each other in essence as well (Rosch 1978; Medin 1989, 1476; Ahn et al. 2001, 61; Boyer 2001, 40-45, 57-61).

From the point of view of essentialist reasoning, categories are taken to be part of natural, objective reality, not random or man-made. A specific essence is both necessary and sufficient criterion for membership of the corresponding category. But as essences are not perceivable directly, category membership (and consequently the existence of the essence) is deduced from external features. The role of essentialist reasoning here is to supply a folk theory, a causal model that can be used to explain and predict the behaviour of phenomena. (Gelman, Coley & Gottfried 1994, 341-344) It appears that essentialising is a universal disposition for humankind: it occurs cross-culturally, it develops during early infancy, and education does not have a substantial effect on it.[3]

A cognitive facility that can be considered closely related to essentialising is belief in the contagious properties of dirt and other substances, including essences. This phenomenon was already discussed by early anthropologists Frazer and Mauss, but their observations have since been supplemented by psychological experiments conducted by Nemeroff, Rozin and their colleagues. According to Frazer, in "magician's logic" things which have once been in contact with each other are always in contact (Frazer 1993, 11-12, 37-45; see also Mauss 2001, 79-83). However, he was mistaken in thinking this to be an artifact of primitive thought, something that cultural evolution would dispense with (in Frazer 1993, 711-712). Nemeroff, Rozin et al have clearly demonstrated that this mode of thought can also be found in the minds of modern Americans: even though some people have more propensity for it than others, only few are completely immune to it (see for example

3 See for example Atran (1998) on biological taxonomies among Lowland Maya, Gelman (2003) on essentialism in children, and Hirscfeld (1996) and Gil-White (2001) respectively on the understanding of race among educated American adults and half-nomadic Mongols. One should note that Strevens (2000) has disputed this theory of psychological essentialism, claiming it has little explanatory power. However, Ahn et al. (2001) have disproved his argument.

Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff 1986; Rozin & Fallon 1987; Rozin, Markwith & Ross 1990; Nemeroff & Rozin 1994).

A belief in contagion is not limited to situations which resemble microbial infection, but people seem to differentiate between biological and interpersonal contagion, and use different models for these. Nemeroff and Rozin tested how people reacted when presented with a sweater which had been in contact with various sources of contagion. Positive and negative essences originating from different persons were thought to neutralise each other (for example if Mother Teresa had used the sweater after Adolf Hitler had worn it), but these essences had no effect on sweaters contaminated by germs. In particular, if the contaminant was some kind of "spiritual essence", neutralising it was nigh on impossible, apart from by burning or contact with opposite-valued essence. Also, the free responses of test subjects to positive contagions (which were all from persons) conveyed a sense of interaction with the source. It suggests that there exist qualitative differences between sources of contagion (Nemeroff & Rozin 1994, 171-179).

3. Essentialism in the Lives of Saint Columba and Saint Brigit

The cult of saints and especially that of their relics would seem to offer an easy example of belief in the *pars pro toto* principle and the contagiousness of sacred essence. However, representations of saints can be mined to reveal thoroughly essentialised conceptions of them. Following Gelman, who has made substantial contributions to the theory of psychological essentialism, I present here a list of features that imply the presence of essentialist reasoning and the assumptions behind them (Gelman, Coley & Gottfried 1994, 346; Gelman 2003, 12, 22-23). These are:

1) Explicitly invoking an internal essence or fundamental nature of beings to explain perceived or experienced effects associated with them.

2) Treating categories as natural and discrete structures of reality, and viewing members of a single category as sharing features and quality.

3) Expecting a life-cycle to be defined by birth or origin, not by environmental factors.

4) Assuming that causal powers and features a being has are tied to something that is inside it.

5) Expecting contact to transmit some or all of these features to an object.[4]

4 Gelman does not discuss belief in contagiousness of essences except in Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999, where it is acknowledged that phenomena described by Rozin and Nemeroff are probably related to cognitive essentialism. I take this to be true here.

These features are implicitly present in many of the narratives featured in lives of Brigit and Columba. Adomnán's text especially hints at an idea that holiness is something concealed inside the saint, though it may occasionally be revealed. In the second preface to the *Vita* he says that Columba offered a dwelling for the Holy Spirit within himself (*qui in se columbinis moribus spiritui sancto hospitium praebuit*), and elsewhere describes holiness as something in the saint's heart (e.g. VC i.3, i.13, i.18). In the epilogue to the first book Adomnán says Columba experienced many more inward revelations, of which only few trickled out, like "drips through the seams". Following Lakoff and Johnson, these metaphoric expressions can be interpreted as hints on how the saint was conceptualised (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, 3-9, 22-32): as a kind of vessel or container, inside which was concealed a power, or even substance, that was affiliated with the Holy Spirit.

The notion of saints as a natural and discrete category is indicated by narratives which present a particular saint as having powers comparable to those of other saints. Adomnán draws a parallel between Columba and both Old Testament prophets and Christendom's great saints Peter, Paul and John (VC i.1, i.43, ii.25, ii.32, iii.8). Other saints featured in *Vita Columbae* (such as St. Cainnech) perform miracles comparable to those of Columba (VC i.4, ii.12, ii.13, ii.34). Similarly, Brigit is equated with Mary (VPB 15), but the other saint featured most prominently in her lives is Patrick. When they meet, Brigit is presented as being humble and submissive, but Patrick often responds by recognising her as his equal (VPB 39, 58).[5]

One noted peculiarity of the surviving early Irish lives is that unlike in continental and Egyptian ascetic traditions, the saint is rarely portrayed as struggling against temptations, lest he strays from the path to sanctity. Instead, these texts present the saint as predestined for sainthood by God even before birth. (Stancliffe 1992, 106) In VC, St. Brendan states this predestination explicitly (iii.3), but more revealing of essentialising are the special circumstances associated with the saint's birth. They can be seen as relieving the dissonance created by two conflicting thoughts, belief in the extraordinariness of the saint on the one hand, and that ordinary parents should beget ordinary children on the other. The best example of this is in *Vita prima*: portents are seen before and after the birth of Brigit (VPB 4, 7, 8, 10, 20; also with Columba in VC, e.g. iii.1 and iii.2). The birth itself happens (in accordance with a prophecy) neither inside or outside the house but on a threshold, with one foot of the mother inside and the other outside (VPB 6). Brigit's body is washed with spilled warm milk, to which beneficial properties were credited (Connolly 1989, 11-12). Borders and boundaries seem to gain religious meanings

5 Essentialist hypotheses aside, this is not surprising, as it has been suggested that a possible motive for the writing of *Vita prima* was setting out the balance of power between these two saints and (consequently) their followers (Connolly 1989).

universally (Anttonen 1996; Douglas 2000), and so it was also in pre-Christian Ireland: sacredness dwelt on threshold areas, where cosmos and chaos interacted (Sjöblom 1994, 161-164).

Of features mentioned above the most difficult one to examine is whether causal powers and features were thought to be connected to internal essence. As *Vita Columbae* for example is in practice a catalogue of miraculous deeds performed by Columba, it is evident that saintliness was associated with extraordinary capabilities. As to the origin of these powers, Adomnán's explanations are varied: it is either the saint's own power (VC ii.26), God's power working through him (VC i.40), or God fulfilling the saint's wishes (VC ii.30). When attributing the source of power for Columba's miracles he does not seem to follow any identifiable logic. To Adomnán the saint is a human conductor for divine power, who apparently holds a portion of this power inside his body, and can work miracles because of this. But at times God or the Holy Spirit actively works through him.

In contrast, Cogitosus has an identifiable rationale in *Vita Brigitae*. Even though VBC consists mostly of narrative depictions of miracles, Seán Connolly has pointed out it also has theological depth. The monastic virtues of faith, charity and to lesser extent chastity, obedience, prayer and preaching form a thread running through the life. In Cogitosus's mind, Brigit is capable of miracles because of her faith, but all miracles are manifestations of God's power. (Connolly 1987, 5-9) Cogitosus makes an explicit reference to her virtues in more than half (twenty out of thirty-three) of the narratives in VBC, connecting the miracle worked directly or indirectly to them (however in VPB there are only seven such narratives of out of a total of 129). In many of them (e.g. VBC 3, 7, 14) it is Brigit's overflowing charity that is followed by an extraordinary happening. One should note VBC 6, though: "miracle in which the pure mind of the virgin and God's co-operating hand clearly appear to combine". Thus, in Cogitosus's mind, it is not only God's hand that is at work, but also the saint's own power. I will return to the connection between virtue and miraculous powers below.

A second peculiarity of early Irish sources is that they contain few references to the cult of relics (Lucas 1986, 6; Clancy 1999, 7). Still, they do feature a notion similiar to that of relics: that saintly power is something which can be transmitted to items which can thereafter independently manifest it. *Vita Columbae* in particular contains several such events: the saint sends a follower of his to those needing help, taking with them an item on which a blessing or healing has been placed (VC i.1/ii.33, ii.4, ii.5, ii.6, ii.7). For example, when Columba sees a storm cloud that will bring a deadly disease, he sends one of his monks with a blessed loaf of bread, which he is to dip in water and then sprinkle the water over the diseased (VC ii.4). In VC ii.33 it is clear that the blessed item is thought to work independently of the saint: Columba gives strict instructions to his followers not to give the item

in which the healing is embodied to a wizard unless he has relented to the saint's will. Other examples of this contagiousness of the saint's power include wells the saint blesses (VC ii.11) and books written by him that have become waterproof (VC ii.8, ii.9).

The importance of books to Adomnán is underlined by the narrative describing how he as abbot organised a ritual to break a drought (VC ii.44, see also VC ii.45). The ritual succeeds, which he attributes to the commemoration of St. Columba's name using his tunic and books. Sharpe suggests that this narrative (and possibly the actual ritual, too) was influenced by a story in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, set in Nursia. However, in this version it is only the saint's tunic that was used. (1995, note 331). Why does Adomnán have this preoccupation with books? In addition to literary activity being part of the daily routines at Iona (ibid., note 125), Brown stresses the importance of the Latin language to the Irish: as well as reading and writing it brought with it literary models for writing historical narratives—new Christian myths—from both the Old Testament and Roman culture. To gain access to these resources early Irish theologians had to get hold of one of the few books brought from the continent. To the Irish, Latin was the "blessed white language" of Christianity. (Brown 2003, 8, 239, 336) It was also associated with the spread of Christianity in Ireland, as St. Patrick was said to have given new converts books and implements for writing, of which the druids were afraid (Nagy 1997, 5-10, 20, 93-95). Thus, it is not surprising that Adomnán thought books would be especially good vessels for the scholar-saint's power.

One should also note the mimetic aspect of the rain-making ritual: the saint's books are read aloud on a spot where he was said to have conversed with angels. Similiarly, Gregory of Tours tells how his headache was cured after he doused it with water from the well in which Saint Julian's head had been washed after being cut off. The miraculous powers of relics were thus connected to the associations people attached to them (Brown 1982, 228). These acts involving rituals reminded people of the saint, but the saint was treated as a person who might also need reminding about his role: for example in VC ii.45 Adomnán chides Columba for his being stranded on the saint's feastday – and obtains help. As the saint was ever present in his relics, by re-enacting his own acts he could be roused to remember his powers and responsibilites towards his followers.

4. The extraordinary essence of saints

It is now quite clear that hagiographers thought saints had a very special essence inside them. What in their view this essence was can be gleaned from theological musings of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. It should be remembered that

the notion of God becoming man in Christ was groundbreaking for the worldview of late antiquity: the barrier that split the world into two halves, human and divine, had been crossed by him (Brown 1981, 2-4). The view presented by Athanasius of Alexandria would become predominant: in Christ God had participated in humanity. Furthermore, this Christ who shared a common being with God was a powerful but also intimate, immanent figure familiar with human concerns. Still, at the Council of Chalcedon it was put forth that his human body was so full of divine power that even the touch of his fingers was enough to cure the sick, as described in the gospels of Matthew and Mark (Brown 2003, 117-121).

The gospels were models for hagiography, and the saint was depicted as following the example set by Christ in both his life and his deeds. This idea was taken further by the end of sixth century: not only was the holiness of saints from Christ who they followed, but they collectively lived the same life with him, carrying Christ inside them. As all holiness was thought to reside in Christ, anyone holy had to share his being, his essence (Brown 1987, 6-9; Heffernan 1988, 5-11). Imitating Christ, *imitatio Christi*, was given a prominent place in Christian thought already in the time of the early Church. In Paul's writing, Christ is presented as a cosmic body of whom all believers will be members. Patristic texts do not make as clear a distinction between imitating Christ's humanity and divinity as was made later, but in earlier times more weight was put on his role as saviour, whose divinity a Christian could participate in. This was especially so with the Eastern church; the Latin church fathers appreciated more Christ's humanity and the ethical example set by him, but they also thought the ultimate goal in imitating his life was to be participating in his divinity in salvation. In the words of a pseudo-Augustinian writer, God became man so man could become God. (Constable 1995, 146-148, 154-156) Similarly with Origen, following whom the monastic visionaries Athanasius, Evagrius and John Cassian stressed how a monk who imitates Christ is not only following a human example, but striving to gradually become one with God. The saint was thought to be just such a "Christ-carrying man" (Brown 1987; Constable 1995, 148-152, 175-177; Brown 2000, 10-14).

How then, did one recognise an individual who had attained a special connection with Christ? The antique literary tradition emphasised the importance of a virtuous life as a responsibility towards one's society, hoping it would inspire others to follow this example. At the same time it elevated persons who lived such a life. A saint, however, did not seek virtue only for the good of his fellow men, but to attain unity with Christ. But this was something one could not do alone. Only God in his mercy could bestow true virtue. Instead of trusting in the capacity of a human individual this view of divine virtue belittled it. As a person could be virtuous only as a result of God's mercy, such people and their acts were held to be imbued with divine power. Thus, hagiographers began using virtue (*virtus*) as a synonym for

miraculous (*miraculum*). This also contributed to their lack of interest in portraying a saint's personality, as their priority was illustrating the presence of divine virtue. (Heffernan 1988, 145-157)

5. Essentialism in hagiography

The early Irish notion of holiness was greatly influenced by John Cassian and Gregory the Great among others, and it was for most part in agreement with mainstream Christian theology of the time. In the Martyrology of Oengus (*Félire Oengusso*) written circa 800 the saints are addressed as a collective, sharing a common holiness. (Ritari 2006) The connection Columba had with Christ and God is exemplified by Adomnán's quoting of Paul, "He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (VC i.1) and depicting how his followers worshipped Christ through Columba (*Christum in sancto uenerantur et beato uiro*, VC i.37, also i.44). The Latin word *virtus* is also used of the ability to work miracles. The saint's power is thus both the result and a sign of his virtuousness and closeness to God, whose power he (as an intermediary) actually uses. (Ritari 2005) "For, since she [Brigit] was a living and most blessed member attached to the supreme head, she used to have the power to perform all the things she desired", wrote Cogitosus (VBC 28), who in his *Vita* clearly connected virtue with miracles. The analysis in this article of each of the three texts has revealed a similiar notion of sainthood. I summarise them as follows:

1. Hagiographers view the saint as a container or vessel, inside whom is a special substance or essence. This is because of the saint's close connection with the Holy Ghost and Christ: both are referred to as something inside him or her. This bestows similar powers on the saint, both inherent in himself and as an intermediary to divinity. But the hagiographers do seem unsure of (or uninterested in) what was the exact source of power for specific miracles.
2. To hagiographers saints are *sui generis*, a separate species of natural reality. Their holiness comes from God, and gives all saints similiar abilities, although some may be greater and more revered than others. Saints also have a life-cycle like other living things. Their holy essence defines this, and means everything the saint does is holy. Also, the saint is not born only of his mother and father, as portents show divine power to be at work. A saint is a saint born and a saint dead.
3. A saint's power stays and interacts in objects they have blessed or touched. This also goes for most profane things such as a foot bath that can be turned into a healing potion (VPB 31). After this has happened, this power works somewhat

independently of saint's will, and even automatically. As his person was thought to reside in these objects, they could ease contacting him after his death.

One should note, though, that while these conclusions are for the most part compatible with the theories of psychological essentialism and contagiousness, they might also not surprise early hagiographers very much. *Uas electionis*, "chosen vessel", says Adomnán of Paul and Columba (VC i.43), and people said Brigit to be "full of the Holy Spirit" (VPB 7). When Adomnán wants to shed light on how Columba receives his prophetic visions, he does this by putting the words into the saint's mouth (VC i.43). The notion of saints as a collective category is made explicit by Gregory of Tours, who sees the life of Christ as animating the bodies of all saints (Heffernan 1988, 7). That is why Columba's whole life was holy, *sanctam eius conuersationem* (second preface to VC). Even though Adomnán does not explicate his views on the power of relics, he treats them as sketched in point three in narratives dealing with his own abbacy (VC ii.44-45).

Based on the analysis above it seems evident that the representations of saints in these three lives are thoroughly essentialist, and as such easier for people to acquire. This is all the more revealing, as hagiographers were theological experts, who certainly had their chance to reflect upon (and "correct") the representations they were about to commit on paper. This may be due to the origin of the cult as a lay phenomenon adopted by the church (Brown 1981, 2-12, 31-38). Representations of saints can also be thought of as being relevant (in the sense set out by Sperber's theory), because the idea of God becoming man in Christ, whom all Christians should follow and imitate, created for the saints the position of imitators *par excellence*. Indeed, as pointed out by Brown (in the context of the late antique cult of martyrs), for ordinary Christians this vicarious sanctity might even have been a relief, as sermons by Augustine and his followers show that many did not deem personal imitation necessary. It was enough for the saints and martyrs to have attained their holiness, which others were content to benefit from. Moreover, if every Christian could have imitated the saints (or Christ) and thus brought them down to their own level, it would have undermined the antithesis between the sacred and the profane (Brown 2000). To summarise, as thoroughly essentialised carriers of Christ, saints were a meaningful and easily acquirable formulation of Christian theology. If one is to assess the reasons for the wide diffusion and longevity of their cult, this factor should be taken into consideration.

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