

Rethinking Imbolc

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Imbolc marks the midpoint between the winter solstice and spring equinox, and is held as the beginning of spring itself. Certainly the days are growing perceptively longer so that the power of night is moving, however slowly, towards its eventual defeat during summer. In Irish Neopagan tradition, it's also the feast of the goddess Brigit, and in some reconstructionist circles of her Gallo-Brittonic forms, such as Brigantia or Brigindona, based on the same day's Feast of St. Brigit, a figure who is more goddess than saint, even in her own medieval *vitae*.¹

While Imbolc is undoubtedly a feast of spring, and a feast celebrating Brigit, there is, I think, a third element to the feast which is sometimes overlooked—it is likely that Imbolc is a feast of purification, and perhaps represents a longer period of purification, analogous to several other Indo-European and even Christian festivals. Moreover, this feast of purification is intimately bound up with the holiday's other meanings honoring spring and Brigit—that all three are important to understanding the origins of Imbolc.

The Etymology of “Imbolc” and the Importance of Milk

The etymology of Imbolc has fairly conclusively been tied to the word for milk (Hamp, 106). The etymology in *Sanas Cormaic* (ca. 900) made this out to be *oímelc*, “sheep's milk”, but Eric Hamp has argued that the (complicated) etymology should be **uts-molgo-* < **ommolg* so that *oímelc* is a misunderstood spelling for **ommolg*. **Molgo-* in turn likely comes from the Proto-Indo-European root **Hmelg-* which meant “to cleanse”, and which is very close to **melg-* the root for “milk.” Ultimately, Hamp derives *Imbolc* from a root meaning both “milk” and

¹ That Brigit can be identified as the goddess known in Britain as Brigantia is strengthened by the fact that St. Brigit is closely associated with the province of Leinster, which in the time of Ptolemy was inhabited by the Brigantes tribe, whose titular goddess was, of course, Brigantia. Brigit is so closely associated that in the text “The Battle of Allen”, she appears on the battlefield to bring the Leinstermen victory.

“purification” (111). Hamp mentions instances in Irish literature wherein milk is a cure for poison darts², where it is poured into the battlefield furrows of Eremon³, and the odd detail from the story of Suibhne, wherein he drinks milk from a hole made in manure—the implication of originally being that milk would purify even dung.

Purification is also an element in sources referencing Imbolc. A poem on the high days, found in manuscripts Rawl. B 512, and Harl. 5280, refers to Imbolc:

*Fromad cach bíd iar n-urd,
issed dlegair i n-Imbulc,
díunnach laime is coissi is cinn,
is amlaid sin atberim.*

Tasting every food in order,
This is what behoves at Candlemass,
Washing of hand and foot and head,
It is thus I say.

Imbolc (translated here as *Candlemass*, the English name for the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, which I will cover later) is mentioned as a time of washing, while the other quatrains refer to types of food to be eating. Imbolc has no specific foods mentioned in this poem, though other poems more explicitly mention butter, but the poem’s reference to washing which may point to the use of milk here not as a foodstuff alone, but as a purifying (here “washing”) element.

Brigit, Goddess of Purification?

The connection between milk and purification, specifically in the stories associated with St. Brigit, has been discussed elsewhere; Torma points to the *Bethu Brigitte*, the earliest

² And many early Irish magical charms use butter as a curative agent; cf. Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms”.

³ Eremon is the mythical first Milesian—i.e. human—king of Ireland; his name is thought to derive from the same origin as Aryaman/Airyaman, the Indo-Iranian embodiment of “Aryan-ness”, i.e. nobility and the ruling class.

vernacular version of the life of the saint, where milk is used as evidence of Brigit's purity and power:

It should come as no surprise then that a festival associated with purity would come to have an association with Saint Brigit. Of the forty-six miracles in the *Bethu Brigitte*, six of them are concerned with milk. Milk is used a tool to promote the purity of Brigit and to promote her claims by showing her control over such an economically important commodity. For Brigit, as with any saint, purity was an essential part of her personality. An example of this can be seen in §5 of *Bethu Brigitte*, when she was nursed by a white cow with red ears due to the impurity of the druid's food. Other saints nourished by mystical kine include Cainneach (Plummer 1910, VSH I, I), Coemgen (Plummer 1910, VSH I,ii) and Enda (Plummer 1910, VSH II, xxii).

Brigit—both the goddess and the saint—is also closely tied to fire, which like milk was a purifying agent.⁴ *Sanas Cormaic* gives the etymology of her name as *Breo Saighead*—“fiery arrow”. And while this etymology is wrong⁵, it is one of many examples wherein Brigit is associated with fire:

“In the Lives we read of Brigit having sent a house in which she was staying in flames up to heaven and we hear of a fiery pillar rising over her head. Giraldus Cambrensis ... writes about her ‘perpetual ashless fire watched by twenty nuns, of which no male could enter ...’” (Ó Catháin, 56)

Much of Ó Catháin's book also details Brigit's role as an overseer of fecundity of both women and cattle, and the association between human milk and that of livestock as an important

⁴ Fire as a purifying element is of course also found in rites associated with Beltane, such as the driving of cattle between two bonfires to preserve them from disease.

⁵ In fact, her name derives from *brig- meaning “high”, with the probable sense of “exalted one”.

foodstuff, the latter being especially important in the long period between harvests. It's also worth noting that Juno, the Roman goddess who presided Lupercalia (see below), was also closely associated with both cattle and childbirth.

The issue of milk as food should be addressed. As MacLeod notes, “the return of fresh milk... would have been extremely important. ... Old food supplies were depleted and new supplies had not yet come” (262). Women and milk were naturally closely associated, not only because of human lactation, but women also largely oversaw the production of butter and cheese (263). The lambs, having only just being born in February were not yet ready for eating, but the ewes lactating would provide food not only for their offspring, but for the tribe.

Other Feasts of Purification

Hamp points to the Roman month of February, which not coincidentally is the same time as Imbolc. February's etymology, while obscure, is tied to *februum*, the goatskins used in the purification ceremonies of Lupercalia, celebrated on February 15th. According to Ovid, Juno is the goddess who commanded Romulus and his followers to let goats impregnate the Sabine women to cure their infertility; this is interpreted to whipping the women with goatskins. What Hamp doesn't mention is that milk played a role in the Lupercalia, which falls in the middle of the month; sacrificial blood on the young men's foreheads was wiped off using wool soaked in milk (Franklin, 84-86). Finally, Juno—a goddess to whom the cow was sacred, just as Brigit is associated with cattle—was, according to Ovid's *Fasti*, originally honored on February 1st (though he says the practice had died out). Moreover, this Juno Sospita has been found depicted wearing a goatskin—*februum*— on her head (Furtwängler, 227).

Lupercalia falls within the month of purification, but it is also a fertility festival—the goat strips were said to have been originally used by Romulus and his men to beat the infertile Sabine women, with the result that their bareness would be reversed. The commandment is attributed to Juno, who was of course, among other attributes, the goddess of childbirth.

Ó Catháin also points to a common terminology for both Brigit and Juno, specifically Juno Lucina—Juno of light, and the goddess of childbirth. “Februa was but one of many significant epithets born by Juno... Juno Lucetia was the feminine principle of celestial light... Goddess of light, she was by derivation the goddess of childbirth, Juno Lucina, for the newborn baby was brought into the light and as such Juno Lucina was invoked (8).⁶ Much like Juno Lucina, Brigit is associated with fire, and even referred to as “Bride boillsge” in Scotland. This is recounted by Carmichael (169):

It is said in Ireland that Bride walked before Mary with a lighted candle in each hand when she went up to the Temple for purification. The winds were strong on the Temple heights, and the tapers were unprotected, yet they did not flicker nor fail. From this incident Bride is called 'Bride boillsge,' Bride of brightness. This day is occasionally called 'La Fheill Bride nan Coinnle,' the Feast Day of Bride of the Candles, but more generally 'La Fheill Moire nan Coinnle,' the Feast Day of Mary of the Candles-- Candlemas Day.

The close association of a period of purification and a festival of fertility is reflected then both Roman and Irish tradition, with the goddesses of childbirth overseeing the events.

⁶ Dionysius of Halicarnassus notes that gifts for newborns were left at the temple to Juno Lucina (Dionysius, 231), and the festival of Matronalia was celebrated here on March 1st (Platner, 289).

There are other festivals of purification that fall at this time. As mentioned above, February was a period of purification in the Roman calendar; and in Christianity, Lent is a similar period of purification. Now, the word *Lent* itself is interesting, as it comes from the Old English *lencten* “spring,” the name of the season itself. The Christian period of Lent usually begins in February, counting backwards forty days (minus Sundays) from Easter. Easter is calculated to take place the first full moon after the spring equinox, and it’s hardly controversial to see in the names *Lent* and *Easter* pre-Christian Germanic concepts of springtime.

Lent had a dual connotation in England—“a season at which flowers, foliage, warmth, and light were all increasing and yet food and fuel would also be at their shortest. The time was admirably suited to a period of self-denial and spiritual doubt” (Hutton, 169). Lent was a period of fasting not just for spiritual reasons, but for very practical reasons—this was the lean time of the year, a fact also noted by MacLeod above. Fasting is a common form of purification, of course, and having a practical, supply-based fasting coincide with a period of purification is highly logical, and may have something to tell us about the nature of Imbolc.

Bede also records that February was known to the English as Sol-monath, referring to a feast of cakes offered to their gods, though we don’t know much more than that (Hutton, 140).

If we count backwards the same period of time as Lent (forty days, plus seven Sundays) from March 21st, we arrive at February 3rd—which falls just after Candlemas, February 2nd, and two days after Imbolc. The Christian season of Lent Roman period of *Februarius*—both periods of purification—take place in the interval.

Now, I have not addressed the fact that Imbolc falls a day before Candlemas, which is the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, though in origin its focus was on the presentation of Jesus in the temple, not the purification of Mary. I don’t believe that Candlemas derives from

⁷ Using March 21 as an estimate for the equinox; obviously, it does vary.

Imbolc; there are references to it as early as the fourth century, largely in sermons given by Eastern Fathers of the Church (Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, etc.), where it was celebrated on February 14th, not the 2nd, as Christmas was celebrated on January 6th, not December 25th. It was not a major festival until the sixth century, and not even mentioned in the West until the eighth century. The dating of Candlemas is forty days after Christmas, which follows Mosaic law, which considers a mother unclean for forty days after giving birth. Ultimately, it's difficult to understand why or how an Irish pagan festival would have traveled to fourth century Jerusalem, and be adopted by the Church, which didn't adopt any other Irish festivals for several centuries afterwards. The simplest explanation is that the origins of the two holidays have little to do with each other.

However, it is well known that, given circumstances related in the gospels, Jesus' birth was likely not set at the winter solstice, but some time in the spring; Clement of Alexandria gives a date around May 20th, while other Church Fathers rejected the notion of celebrating the birthday of God. The celebration of Christmas was placed at the winter solstice by at least 354 CE, and likely before. If the dating of Jesus' nativity was moved to align with the winter solstice, it's entirely possible that the Feast of the Purification, while fitting the timeline of Mosaic law, could have been created to compete with popular Pagan festivals like Lupercalia (which, conveniently, fell the day after the Eastern reckoning of the feast); certainly Innocent XII seemed to think so (Walsh, 168-9). Whether it was created to compete with other purification festivals, or naturally grew out of them, doesn't matter as much as the fact that there were several festivals associated with purification, beginning in February.

And finally, I mention the Coligny calendar. It's mentioned last because there is disagreement about when the calendar begins; if, however, the month of Samonios begins around

November (which would align the calendar with the Irish calendar beginning with Samhain), then the month of Anagantios would align with February. What makes this interesting is that *Anagantios* is thought to mean “ablutions”—i.e., it is the month of washing and purification, and thus would be parallel to the Roman month of February. While we can’t assume that the Irish and the Gauls had a common calendar, the month of the name of Anagantios adds to the suggestion that this period was one of purification, and perhaps one longer than a single day.

Imbolc and Lughnassadh: More Than a Day?

The four main feasts of the Celtic calendar—commonly known by their Irish names Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnassadh—when their themes are examined, form a series of corresponding concepts. Samhain is a feast of winter, death, and the ancestors, while Beltane is a feast of summer, sexuality, and fertility. Lughnassadh is associated with marriage, sports, and the harvest, and Imbolc with birth and purification.

Lughnassadh was not only a feast celebrated around August 1st, but was actually a period called Lughna Dubh in Ireland and Iuchar in Scotland, lasting around a fortnight, while incorporating other festivals, such as Taitiu’s Monday, Crom Sunday, the three days dedicated to Aine, all taking place within a period wherein fishing was bad, a contrast with the first fruits of the harvest being celebrated on land (MacNeill, 15-16).

If Hamp is right, and Imbolc is analogous to the February period of purification found in Roman and Christian tradition, then perhaps Imbolc, like Lughnassadh, was a period and not a single day. It is currently impossible to prove that the pre-Christian Irish observed Imbolc as such a period, but as we have seen, we have analogous ideas in neighboring cultures, and even a Gaulish month called “purification” which falls around the time of February.

Imbolc Today

It is worth asking whether this view of Imbolc, historical or not, has a practical application. In other words, does the period of time between the feasts of Imbolc and the spring equinox benefit us as a period of purification, even fasting? Most of us no longer live in a setting wherein the abundance of food is determined by the local growing season (whether this is good or not is another matter), so the need for fasting on a purely physical, preserving-the-food-stores-until-harvest level is no longer relevant.

But modern life has its period of excess seen during the winter holidays. Many of us go overboard buying gifts at the holidays, eating and drinking at parties, indulging in various ways on New Year's Eve. Many of us no doubt make resolutions to lose weight, to pay off those credit cards, to hunker down for the long winter. It is perhaps only natural that we should look at the following period as a time to pull back, to cut our spending and our eating, in order to start over again.

For why is a period of purification bound up with a festival of fertility, of spring and birth? In retrospect, the answer seems quite obvious—what is purification, but a type of rebirth? We wash ourselves clean of the past in order to start anew. Rebirth can't be done in a single day, hence the need for a period of time for purification. This is the heart of the meaning of Imbolc—it is a time to make oneself anew, aided by Brigit, spirit of childbirth and purification (among many, many other things).

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