

The Voyage of St. Brendan: Celtic Otherworld Tale, Christian Apologia, or Medieval Travelog?

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*Abstract: This essay examines various theories on the composition of the ninth- or tenth-century Hiberno-Latin text, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* ("The Voyage of St. Brendan"), including its relation to the Celtic *immram* or voyage tale (e.g., *Immram Brain*), its support for the Christian order which had replaced the native religion, and its role as a travelog intended primarily to entertain a monastic audience. Based on a close reading of the text, the essay challenges many of the received notions about the work. The essay also looks at the influence of the *Navigatio* on medieval and early modern explorers, including those who journeyed to the New World during the 15th through 18th century.*

In a seminar I conducted at St. Anselm College in Manchester, N.H., in June 1999, the question arose during discussion of the ninth- or tenth-century Hiberno-Latin text, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, whether this was in fact a latinized version of an earlier Celtic *immram* or voyage tale, a support for the Christian order which had replaced the native religion, or a travelog intended mainly for the delight of its monastic audience. The former interpretation has been suggested by Celtic scholars such as James Carney, David Dumville and Proinsias Mac Cana. Carney, for example, thought that a primitive version of the tale was composed within 100 years of St. Brendan's death (ca. 570-83), i.e., sometime in the late seventh century.¹ He thought that this account was mainly ecclesiastical in nature but that it influenced the creation of the heroic, secular *Immram Brain maic Febail* ("Voyage of Bran"), written in Irish during the late seventh or early eighth century. Carney dated the extant *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* to the early ninth century, though this is over a century earlier than Carl Selmer's dating of the text in his Latin edition (based on his hypothesis that it was written by an Irish bishop, Israel Scottus, who flourished at the court of archbishop Bruno of Cologne, brother to the emperor Otto the Great).² Dumville believes the tale dates from the second half of the ninth century:

The earliest extant manuscripts, which already present a corrupt text and more than one family, belong to the tenth century and probably to its second half. Selmer assigned the writing to the first half of the tenth century, which is certainly too late. Carney's suggestion of ca. 800 is, however, too early, being based on the assumption (which has yet to be demonstrated) that this text was written in Ireland whence it was exported to the Continent. The author was unquestionably an Irishman; the structure is that of the famous *immram*; the ethos is Irish; the work draws on Irish

sources; but there is nothing to suggest that Selmer was incorrect in believing this text to have been written on the Continent.³

Dumville also includes the text among voyage tales in discussing the generic differences between *echtrae* (“adventures”) and *immrama* (literally, “rowing-around tales”) in Old Irish tradition. He writes:

The Latin *Navigatio* must be considered here because its structure is obviously that of the *immram* and because it is the most widely known of all the texts under consideration. Briefly, one may state that it is a text which is motivated and constructed in a more determinedly Christian fashion than any of the vernacular works. Nor need this be surprising, for whatever the limits which may or may not have operated on the circulation of such vernacular texts, the restriction on readership imposed by the Latin language of the *Navigatio* would make this a purely ecclesiastical text.⁴

Mac Cana agrees with a ninth-century dating of the text, indicating that neither Carney’s nor Dumville’s “argument or the evidence” is “at all conclusive,” but that it is generally accepted that a form of the *Vita Brendani* (the Latin saint’s life) existed before the *Navigatio*, with the three references to the Brendan legend in the Litany of Pilgrim Saints related to the *Vita*, not to the *Navigatio*.⁵ He admits that it is difficult to construct a clear chronology of the Irish and Latin Voyages, but that the genre was developing from the seventh century onwards and “probably recognized as a distinct genre by the early ninth century.”⁶ The author of the *Vita Tripartita* composed at that time felt constrained to include an episode in which St. Patrick undertakes a rudimentary voyage during which he encounters a couple on an island who have lived in perpetual youth since the time of Christ.⁷ Regarding the composition of the major voyage tales, Mac Cana writes:

...The indications are that the ninth century had seen the composition of the *Navigatio Brendani*, the *Voyage of Máel Dúin* and the *Voyage of the Uí Chorra*. Of these the *Navigatio* is the most thoroughly ecclesiastical... but, as James Carney has repeatedly emphasized, all the voyage tales are by their very nature of monastic provenance and inspiration, whatever native pre-Christian elements may have been incorporated in their narrative. As a group they share many of the same episodes and draw freely upon the Bible and Isidore of Seville, upon Christian apocryphal traditions and upon various learned (or pseudo-learned) compilations, such as bestiaries and lapidaries, that were accessible to their authors through the mediation of the monasteries. They are in fact the most distinctive and characteristic category of storytelling created by the early Irish monastic *literati*.⁸

One of the key concepts found in both the Irish and Latin Voyages is that of *tír tairngiri* or *terra repromissionis*, conveying the notion of both the Promised Land of the Old Testament and the Kingdom of Heaven in the New, though the Irish term also occurs as the name for a native paradise.⁹ In this text, where it becomes St. Brendan’s ultimate destination after which he can die happy, it is located west of the Island of Delights, related, of course, to the happy Otherworld found throughout world myths (e.g., the Garden of Hesperides, Elysian Fields, or Avalon).¹⁰ Said to

be located *juxta montem lapidem*, which John J. O'Meara translates as "near Slieve League" (O.I. *sliab liacc*),¹¹ the monks here live off the fruit, nuts, roots and other greens growing wild. The western isle is a vast land taking seemingly fifteen days to circumambulate, which later turns out to be over a year (time in the Otherworld generally does not correspond to earthly time). St. Barinthus (Barrind), who had previously visited it, describes it to Brendan as follows: "We saw no plants that had not flowers, nor trees that had not fruit. The stones of that land are precious stones."¹² A river crosses the center of the island, beyond which mortals may not cross (analogous to the River Styx in Virgil's *Aeneid* or Dante's *Inferno*), since the other side of the island is intended only for God's saints. Various individuals, beginning with D. F. McCarthy in 1848, have attempted to identify the "island" as America, with the river representing the Ohio (or more recently, the Mississippi).¹³

After setting sail from Brandon's Creek on the north side of the Dingle Peninsula in their hide-covered *currach*, Brendan and his men (numbering 18 all together), land on an uninhabited isle where they are provided with food and drink; an island of sheep (possibly representing the Faroes, derived from the Danish *faar* meaning "sheep"); the back of a whale named Jasconius (from Irish *iasc*, "fish"); and a paradise of birds, all in the first part of the story. Biblical numbers such as 40 and 7 are found throughout the text, and the Christian themes of death, salvation, and resurrection dominate. Noteworthy, on the uninhabited island one of the three latecomers (who arrive after Brendan's monks have already boarded the boat) is found to have a stolen *frenum* (bridle or necklace) hidden in his bosom, given to him by the devil, depicted as a small Ethiopian (based on the common medieval notion that the devil is a black man, still called *fear dubh* in Modern Irish). When the monk confesses his sin, the devil flies out of his bosom. The monk receives Holy Communion, dies and is buried on the spot, though his soul is "received by the angels of light."¹⁴ The devil, on the other hand, is cast into hell. After this the monks encounter a Procurator, a youth who provides the travellers with food throughout their journey and helps them find their way to the Promised Land. He tells them that they have a long journey ahead, but that neither bread nor water will fail them until Easter, presumably representing a Lenten fast. The importance of the principle Christian feast days cannot be underestimated in this story, particularly Easter (from which the others were calculated, hence the conflict over the date for Easter in the early Celtic church). The monks spend Holy Thursday through Holy Saturday on the Island of Sheep, and then find themselves on Easter Sunday on the back of Jasconius, thinking it an island until they light a fire and the whale begins to thrash around.¹⁵ Brendan helps bring the monks onto the *currach* (cf. Jonah's deliverance from the whale as a type of Christ's Resurrection from the tomb).¹⁶ They repeat the sequence of travel from one island to the next each year for a total of seven.

On the next island, they learn that the white birds are fallen angels who, though not as guilty as Lucifer, were implicated in his revolt. They are allowed to see God but are prevented from sharing in the joy of those who were faithful. They wander through "various regions of the air and the firmament and the earth, just like the other spirits that travel on their missions." However, they are given time off for good behavior: "But on holy days and Sundays we are given bodies such as you now see so that we may stay here and praise our creator."¹⁷ They are possibly based on the stormy petrels which inhabit the many inaccessible islands off the Irish coast, whose cries are said to resemble the human voice. However, unlike the Irish voyage tales and the modern Irish folk belief, where they represent the souls

of the departed, the birds here have taken on an obviously Christian function, dwelling in a sort of Limbo (comparable to the medieval Catholic belief that unbaptized babies were denied the beatific vision). A possible connection with the historic St. Brendan may be seen from the fact that Giraldus Cambrensis mentions bird sanctuaries in his honor in south Munster.¹⁸

The birds observe the canonical hours, praising God with psalms taken from Scripture. After the octave of Easter has ended, the Procurator appears to Brendan and his monks. Once again he offers them food and drink but warns them about a spring on the island, saying that anyone who drinks from it will not awaken for twenty-four hours (analogous to the lotus plant in the *Odyssey* which causes men to forget their homes). After Pentecost they sail for three months until they reach the island community of Ailbe. A wind blowing from the shore keeps them from landing for forty days. After spending three days in fast and abstinence they see a landing place, large enough for only one boat. The monks debark and meet a white-haired elder who refuses to answer their questions until eleven brothers come to meet them with reliquaries, crosses and hymns, chanting a verse which may have been an actual processional hymn used to greet guests in Irish monasteries. Ailbe's monastery appears to be an ideal one, observing the Benedictine Rule with regard to hospitality as it had been developed on the Continent:

When they had exchanged the kiss of peace, they led them to the monastery as the custom is in western parts to conduct brothers in this way with prayers. Afterwards the abbot of the monastery with his monks washed the feet of the guests and chanted the antiphon: 'A new commandment.'¹⁹

In a passage which does suggest Celtic mythological influence, though here rationalized and Christianized, we learn that the monks have been on this island for eighty years (cf. the company of Bendigeidfran in "Branwen ferch Llŷr/ Branwen daughter of Llŷr," the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, who are magically entertained at Harlech for eighty-seven years with food, drink and Otherworldly birds).²⁰ In "The Voyage," Ailbe tells St. Brendan that they have heard no human voice except when praising God... and that none of them has "suffered ill in the flesh or from the spirits that infest the human race,"²¹ probably a testament to their healthy diet and lack of stress as much as to miraculous causes.

Brendan and his monks celebrate Christmas with Ailbe and his community, remaining there until Epiphany. Then they set off into the ocean, rowing or sailing until the beginning of Lent. Once again they encounter a soporific well, though this time the monks drink from it and fall asleep for varying lengths of time, depending on how each monk interprets Brendan's injunction against using too much of the waters (cf. Odysseus' warnings to his men about opening the bag of winds or eating the cattle of the sun god). After being becalmed for twenty days in a coagulated sea (perhaps the Sargasso Sea, west of the Azores, if the account is based on actual expeditions into the Atlantic), they eventually reach the Island of Sheep in time for Holy Thursday and the triduum. When they reach the whale (Jasconius) on Easter Sunday morning they find the pot which they had left behind the year before and, disembarking from the boat, Brendan chants the hymn of the three "boys," presumably Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, rescued from the fiery furnace (another Resurrection symbol).²² After finishing the hymn, Brendan uses the incident as a warning to the monks not to enter into temptation and as an example of God's power to subject the savage beast without any inconvenience to them.

They spend Easter to Pentecost again on the Paradise of Birds where they are greeted

by the birds singing psalms. After sailing for forty days they see a sea-monster which is killed by an even more powerful monster. This, of course, reminds Brendan of David and Goliath and, not surprisingly, of Jonah and the whale. They land on another island where they remain for three months (cf. Christ's three days in the tomb). The number three is repeated in the next chapter, where they encounter three choirs of people: one of boys, one of youths and one of elders (the only female presences in the book are the avian interlocutor on the Paradise of Birds and later a Gryphon). The choirs sing more psalms to them and then offer Brendan and his men fruit the size of a large ball (which some have identified as grapefruit). Also, in attempts to locate these isles in an Atlantic geography this island has been identified as the Bahamas.²³ After this they visit an island of grapes of an extraordinary redness, perhaps berries, which would suggest the place called Vinland by the Vikings (usually identified as Newfoundland, where early eleventh-century Viking remains have been found at L'Anse aux Meadows). More fancifully, this has also been identified as Jamaica.²⁴

Regarding the possibility that the Irish could have reached Newfoundland, or Jamaica for that matter, before the Vikings, the Irish monk Dicuil (closely associated with the Carolingian court) records in 825 that Irish monks had inhabited the Faroes for almost a hundred years but abandoned them because of the Northmen, and had even reached Iceland some thirty years before (ca. 795).²⁵ In addition, Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabók* ("The Book of the Icelanders," written ca. 1130) records that when the Northmen reached Iceland in 870 they found Christians whom they called *Papar*, who departed since they did not wish to live with heathens, but left behind some Irish books, bells and croziers from which it could be ascertained that they were Irish.²⁶ Whether the Irish made it to Greenland or to North America is, of course, conjectural. However, Tim Severin proved in 1976-77 that it was at least possible given the boat-building technology of the sixth century, by sailing in a two-masted, hide-covered boat from Ireland to the Hebrides, the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland.²⁷ Geoffrey Ashe has suggested that the Irish reached Greenland ca. 900 and the Sargasso Sea about the same time.²⁸

After encountering the Gryphon, a monstrous bird which is killed by a benevolent bird from the Island of Grapes, Brendan and his men return to the community of Ailbe, where they celebrate Christmas. Later, when celebrating the Feast of St. Peter the Apostle (a famous "fisher of men") in their boat the sea appears to be absolutely clear below them, with the fish "like a city of circles as they lay, their heads touching their tails."²⁹ This suggests the rich cod banks off the coast of Newfoundland, known to British, Irish and Continental fishermen perhaps as early as the mid-fifteenth century, well before Columbus' voyages of discovery.³⁰ In the next episode they encounter a "crystal pillar," which sounds very much like an iceberg, as one would expect if they were sailing in the North Atlantic (though obviously not the Caribbean!). Soon after this, they come to an island of smiths, where one of the inhabitants hurls lumps of burning slag at them, suggesting a volcanic eruption such as one would find in Iceland or the Canary Islands, though it also evokes the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey* (found as well in the *Aeneid*).

In the next section of "The Voyage" they come upon Judas Iscariot, "shaggy and unsightly, sitting on a rock,"³¹ who is punished for betraying Christ but allowed respite on Sunday and various feast days. Apparently the idea of relief for damned souls during the weekend is quite ancient and came into Christian literature as early as the fourth century. It is probably connected with the visit of St. Paul to hell, and with his and St. Michael's intercession with Christ to allow this relief.³² Shortly after this they come to the island of

St. Paul the Hermit who had lived there without any bodily food for sixty years (quite a fast!), with food provided by an animal for thirty years before that. He predicts the end of their journey (now in its seventh year), that they will stay in the Promised Land of the Saints for forty days, after which they will return to Ireland. A great fog encircles this land, which suggests the fogs associated with the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Taking samples of the fruit and precious stones from the *terra repromissionis*, Brendan and his monks spend three days enjoying the hospitality of the monks on the Island of Delights. Soon after returning home Brendan begins preparing for his death and fortified by the divine sacraments, he migrated from among the hands of his disciples in glory to the Lord, to whom is honor and glory from generation to generation. "Amen".³³

The search for Brendan's Promised Land acted as a stimulant for much of the western exploration from the Middle Ages until as late as the nineteenth century. The purported location of St. Brendan's Isle shifted west and south from the North Atlantic to equatorial sites over this period as "the development of navigation and the direction of commerce" were extended to lower latitudes westwards from Europe.³⁴ This is clearly seen in medieval cartography, where it becomes identified with one of the Canary Isles (also called the *Insulae fortunatae* or "Isles of the Blessed").³⁵ Among Hispanic explorers, the search for this lost isle of "San Borondon" was eventually transferred from the Canaries to northeast Argentina, where it gave rise to the place-name Samborombon, and to coastal Ecuador (Samborondon in the Guayas Basin).³⁶ A related legend, that of Hy Brasil (literally "island of beauty," but also re-analyzed as "isle of the blessed"), located west of Ireland by cartographers but possibly based on the Azores, may have eventually led to the name Brazil.³⁷ A recent letter to the *Irish Times* suggested that this legend led "St. Brendan the Navigator to set out from Corca Dhuibhne and 'discover' American 900 years before Columbus."³⁸ Though citing the rival theory that the name derives from the red dye-wood, brazil, felled along the Atlantic rain forest, the letter writer prefers the notion that the name was already current among Atlantic navigators and cartographers: thus, it was "a place first 'imagined' in Ireland and then 'conquered' by Europeans."³⁹

Whatever the actual situation regarding the naming of Brazil, in the case of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* we have seen that, although it drew on the Celtic *immram* tradition, it was reformed in a Christian context with motifs taken from Classical, Near Eastern and possibly Germanic travel lore, becoming ultimately an archetypal myth of man's confrontation with the sea and his own desires.

Works Cited

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2. C. Selmer, ed., *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis from Early Latin Manuscripts* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1959), xxvii-xxviii. See also Dáibhí Ó Cróimín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 229-30, for a more recent discussion of this hypothesis.
3. D. N. Dumville, "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition," *Ériu* 27 (1976), 73-94: 89, n. 88.
4. Dumville, 75.
5. P. Mac Cana, "The Voyage of S. Brendan: Literary and Historical Origins," in John de Courcy Ireland and David C. Sheehy, eds., *Atlantic Visions* (Dún Laoghaire: Boole Press, 1989), 13.
6. Mac Cana, 14.
7. *ibid.*; Dumville, 89.
8. *ibid.*

9. Selmer, xxi; Mac Cana, 6.
10. For a fuller account of the relationship between the Celtic Otherworld and that found in other mythologies, see James E. Doan, "The Otherworld Journey: A Celtic and Universal Theme," in Bruce Stewart, ed., *That Other World: The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), 49-65.
11. J. J. O'Meara, tr., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (Mountrath: The Dolmen Press, 1976), 3.
12. O'Meara, 4.
13. D. F. McCarthy, "The Voyage of St. Brendan," *Dublin University Magazine* 16 (Jan. 1848), 60-74; Robert T. Reilly, *Irish Saints* (New York: Avenel Books, 1964), 37.
14. O'Meara, 14.
15. This motif is found throughout world literature, e.g., the Persian Avesta; Arabic, early Christian, Irish and classical literature; the Talmud and bestiaries). The belief that it is derived from Sinbad's travels today holds little currency (see Selmer, 86, n. 30).
16. O'Meara, 18-19.
17. O'Meara, 21.
18. J.F. Dimock, ed., *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera V* (London, 1867), 125, cited in Selmer, 87, n. 31.
19. O'Meara, 27.
20. Gwyn and Thomas Jones, tr., *The Mabinogion* (London: Dent, 1970), 39.
21. O'Meara, 31.
22. Daniel 3: 8-30.
23. O'Meara, xii.
24. *ibid.*
25. Dicuil, *Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, VII, ii, cited in O'Meara, xi; Mac Cana, 12-13.
26. H. Zimmer, "Über die frühesten Berührungen der Iren mit den Nordgermanen," *Preuss. Akad. Sitzungsber.* 1891, 288, cited in Mac Cana, 13. See also Régis Boyer, "The Vinland Sagas and Brendan's Navigatio," in *Atlantic Visions*, 37-44, for the suggestion that the Norse may have been influenced by "The Voyage of St. Brendan" in composing the Vinland sagas.
27. Tim Severin, *The Brendan Voyage* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
28. Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West* (London, 1962).
29. O'Meara, 49.
30. For a discussion of Breton fishermen in Newfoundland and other early Breton contacts with Canada, see Claude Evans, "Early Breton Voyages to Canada," in *Atlantic Visions*, 159-66.
31. O'Meara, 56.
32. Selmer, 90-91, n. 91.
33. O'Meara, 70.
34. A. von Humboldt, *Cristóbal Colón y el Descubrimiento de América* (1833: rpt. Buenos Aires, Centro de Difuso del Libro, 1946), 323, cited in Kent Mathewson, "St. Brendan's Mythical Isle and Toponymic Drift: From Iceland to Ecuador," in *Atlantic Visions*, 53.
35. The last expedition from Spain was sent out as late as 1727 (Selmer, 91-92, n. 101). See also David B. Quinn, "Atlantic Islands," in *Atlantic Visions*, 77-93.
36. Mathewson, 51-60.
37. James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 237. A student of Brazilian origin in my seminar at St. Anselm College indicated a local belief that Brazil derived from an Irish word for "blessing," though etymologically it derives from *bres*, "beauty" or "worth."
38. Angus Mitchell, "Irish Links with Brazil," *Irish Times*, July 17, 1999. My thanks to Jeffrey Dudgeon for bringing this to my attention.
39. Loc. cit.