

*The Legend of St. Brendan*

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William Wycestre, a native of Bristol who became secretary to that Sir John Falstaff who gave his name, but nothing more, to Shakespeare's hero, left an *Itinerarium* in which appeared the following entry :

“ On July 15, 1480, a ship .... of John Jay, junior, of eighty tons burden, began a voyage from Kingroad near the port of Bristol in search of the island of Brasylle, to the west of Ireland .... On September 18 news came to Bristol that they had sailed over the sea in the aforesaid ship for about nine months [probably we should read weeks] without finding the island, but in consequence of storms they had returned to a port in Ireland.” [1]

On July 15, 1498, Pedro de Ayala, representative of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain at the court of London, wrote as follows to those sovereigns, in reference to the discovery of land in the west by John Cabot in the preceding year :

“ I think Your Highnesses have already heard how the King of England has equipped a fleet to explore certain islands or mainland which he has been assured certain persons who set out last year from Bristol in search of the same have discovered. I have seen the map made by the discoverer, who is another Genoese like Columbus, who has been in Seville and at Lisbon seeking to obtain persons to aid him in this discovery. For the last seven years the people of Bristol have equipped two, three (and) four caravels to go in search of the island of Brazil and the seven Cities according to the fancy of this Genoese.” [2]

We can see what a very real connection there was between the popular ideas of mediæval Europe regarding strange islands out in the Atlantic, and the first voyages of discovery to America. These popular ideas were based mainly on two sets of legends, the Spanish legends of the Seven Cities, and the Irish legends of a wonderful land to the west, a land of many names, of which one of the most popular with the geographers of the later middle ages was “ Hy Brasil.” [3] In Ireland there were many stories of this western land, but only one, the Legend of the Voyage of St. Brendan, passed into general European literature, because it alone was written in the Latin language. Put in form early in the tenth century, at latest, it was known very soon afterwards to the hagiographers of Brittany. It would appear from a quatrain in the old French *Roman du renard* that there was a *lai* of St. Brendan in the Breton language :

Je fot savoir bon lai Breton,  
Et de Merlin et de Foucon,  
Del roi Artu et de Tristan,  
De chievre oil, de Saint Brendan.

However, the earliest translation still extant is that written in Norman French about 1121 for Alix, second wife of Henry I of England. Translations followed into Old French, Middle English, Flemish, Dutch, German, Italian, Norse. To the south it became one of the sources which inspired Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to the north, as Dr. Nansen has recently shown, [4] it probably exercised considerable influence on the shaping of the sagas relating to the dis-

covery of “Wineland the Good.” For these reasons the Legend of St. Brendan has more than a local interest for students both of history and of folklore.

## I

### The Historical Brendan

St. Brendan “the Navigator” died, according to the Annals of Ulster, in 577 or 583. The only other annalistic entry relating to him states that he founded the monastery of Clonfert, west of the Shannon river, in Galway county, in 558 or 564.

The earliest document mentioning Brendan, to which an approximate date can be assigned, is Adamnan’s Life of St. Columba. Adamnan was abbot of Columba’s monastery on the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, from 679 to 704. The Life was written probably about 690. Adamnan mentions “Brendenus mocu Alti” in two places, [5] once when speaking of a monk who was said to have served Brendan twelve years, and again in connection with a visit which Brendan himself, accompanied by three other famous Irish churchmen, paid to Columba in the island of Hinba. Hinba has not been identified with certainty, but was some island on the Scottish coast closely associated with Iona, possibly *Eileann na naoimh*, or Saints’ island, near Scarba. [6] If this positive evidence were lacking, the sojourn of Brendan in the Scottish isles would be a reasonable inference from old Scottish traditions and the several place-names and church dedications associated with him in the islands and on the mainland of Scotland. [7] The Lives of the saint—which are, however, of much later date than Adamnan—give an account of this visit to Britain and state that he founded churches in Heth and Ailech. Heth—in Latin, *Ethica*—is the modern Tieve, and there is some slight reason to believe that Ailech was identical with *Eileann na naoimh* and Hinba. [8]

Mocu Alti, or Altai, the designation attached to Brendan’s name in Adamnan’s work and in the genealogies and other early Irish records, is a tribal name indicating that he was one of the Altraige, a division of the Ciarraige, the people from whom the modern county of Kerry derives its appellation. The Altraige lived in the north-west of Kerry, around Tralee. [9] This is the district to which the Lives assign Brendan’s origin, and the modern place-names Brandon Bay, Brandon Point, Brandon Headland and Brandon Hill preserve the association.

The historical Brendan was, then, a sixth century churchman, a native of that wild western Irish coast the inhabitants of which have for untold generations looked out across the unbroken Atlantic. The greater part of his life was, doubtless, spent there or in his monastery of Clonfert up the neighbouring river Shannon. At some time during the sojourn of Columba at Iona, that is, within the period 563-597, he visited the equally wild west coast of what is now Scotland, and probably made a stay of considerable length among its many islands.

It was natural that a large maritime element should enter into the *acta* of such a saint. It was equally natural that whenever a Christian, or Christianised, myth of the sea should arise in Ireland it should attach itself to the name of Brendan. [10]

## II

### The Historical Background of the Legend

Irish *acta sanctorum*—as other—were, as a rule, the production of a monastery which claimed foundation by the particular saint in question, or the possession of his relics, and of an age removed by several generations, or, indeed, several centuries, from the epoch in which he flourished. The extent and survival of the *acta* serve as an index to the importance of the monastery rather than of the saint. And although genuine historical tradition was usually present, in general the bulk of the matter reflects the age of the composer, not that of the hero.

Now Clonfert became one of the great ecclesiastical centres of mediæval Ireland. Accordingly we find that the legend of Brendan was well developed and his *acta* comparatively numerous.

Christianity in early mediæval Ireland was dominated by monastic ideals. The country was organised ecclesiastically into a series of monastic churches and monastic church unions ruled by the successors, the “ heirs,” of the church founders of the fifth and sixth centuries. The spirit of asceticism pervaded these institutions, and displayed itself in many forms of self-mortification. One of the most general of these penitential practices was that religious exile which is designated in Latin *peregrinatio* and translated into English as “ pilgrimage.”

The “ pilgrim” was not, as in modern usage of the word, one who made a journey to some definite locality in order to perform certain devotional exercises. The Irish “ pilgrim” was a man who, from religious motives, left his home or his native land and went to reside for a period of years or for the rest of his life in another locality or in a foreign land. The command of God to Abraham—“ Go forth out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and out of thy father’s house, and come into the land which I shall shew thee” [11]—was regarded as having an application to Christians, as a counsel of perfection, and, as the call to sacrifice all that the Irish heart held most dear, seems to have exercised a peculiar fascination over the ascetics of the western isle. It is frequently quoted in the literature relating to these ancient religious exiles. [12]

Even in the sixth century men were passing “ on pilgrimage” beyond the Irish coasts ; in the seventh and eighth centuries this emigration movement grew to vast proportions. Some went east and south—to Britain and the continent ; others north and west. Columba’s, voyage to Scotland and settlement at Iona was, there can be little doubt, primarily such a “ pilgrimage.” Brendan’s own sojourn there was, according to one of the Lives, “ on pilgrimage.” [13]

The voyages were made sometimes by single monks, sometimes by small groups. The vessels used were either wooden merchant ships, or, more often, those skin-covered coracles which are still found on some parts of the Irish coasts. Occasionally voyages may have been entered on in that fantastic spirit of religious fatalism of which a curious instance is related by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as late as 891:

Three Irishmen came to King Alfred in a boat without any oars from Ireland ; whence they stole away, because they would live in a state of pilgrimage, for the love of God, they recked not where. The boat in which they came was made of two hides and a half ; and they took with them provisions for seven nights ; and within seven nights they came to land in Cornwall, and soon after went to King Alfred. [14]

So we find Brendan in the Legend ordering the monks to ship oars and rudder and, leaving the sails unfurled, entrust themselves and the ship to the will of God. [15] Such a procedure was not unique, but must have been quite exceptional. The usual course was to travel in normal fashion to a destination already determined upon, or, if a hermitage among the islands of the west and north was sought, to make a carefully prepared exploring expedition in search of a suitable locality. That already in Adamnan’s day, and probably in Columba’s, such voyages were often of long duration and not always successful must be inferred from passages in Adamnan’s work in which he tells of the experiences of one Baitan, who after long wandering, abandoned the attempt to find a suitable desert island, and of Cormac úa Liathain, who made three such fruitless voyages. [16]

Cormac was one of the three ecclesiastics who were with Columba and Brendan in the island of Hinba. His story as told by Adamnan has the appearance of a historical narrative just passing into legend, and we may assume that the Legend of Cormac was one of the forerunners of the Legend of Brendan. On one of these voyages, in which he spent several

months, he visited the Orkneys and there owed his life to the intervention of the local king, to whom he had been recommended by Brude, king of the Picts, at the request of Columba. One voyage was a failure because, according to Columba, he took with him a monk who had left his monastery without the consent of the abbot. Analogous features of the Brendan story will be noticed. On the third attempt he sailed northward for fourteen days and was forced to turn back through encountering vast numbers of marine animals a shoal of jelly-fish, say some commentators.

Archæological remains of the early anchorites are still in existence on many of the Irish and Scottish islands. Some of these retreats may well have been in the mind of the author of the *Navigatio Brendani* when he was describing the extraordinary islands which his hero found in the midst of the western ocean. Skellig Michael, which lies off the Kerry coast, about thirty-six miles south-west of Brandon Hill, was, as we know from the annals, an abode of religious in 824, when it was ravaged by the Northmen. It is a rocky mountain which rises to a height of 704 feet above the sea; on an artificial plateau at an elevation of 545 feet are the beehive shaped stone cells and oratories of the anchorites. The plateau was reached by a stairway cut in the rock, of which 620 steps remain. Away to the north of Brandon Hill, on the coast of Clare, is the rock known as Bishop's Island, or, to give the literal translation of the Irish name, the Island of the Starving Bishop. Its sides are perpendicular or over-hanging cliffs rising about 250 feet, and the top a barren expanse of about three quarters of an acre. Access to the top can be effected only after a long period of fine weather, and then with the greatest difficulty; yet on this barren top are some of the most interesting early Christian archaeological remains. [17]

It has been seen that, according to Adamnan, writing about 790, Irish anchorites had reached the Orkneys before the end of the sixth century. In Adamnan's own time, or soon after, they had pushed on to the Faroes, and in another hundred years, before the end of the eighth century, they had discovered Iceland.

Dicuil, Irish geographer at the court of Charlemagne, is the chief source for these discoveries. Writing in 825, and speaking, it would seem certain, of the Faroes, he says :

There are many other islands in the ocean north of Britain, which can be reached from the northern British Isles in two days' and two nights' direct sailing with full sail and a favorable wind. A certain conscientious priest told me that he had reached one of these islands by sailing for two summer days and a night in a small vessel with two benches for rowers. These islands are for the most part small, and are divided from each other by narrow straits. On them have dwelt for nearly a hundred years hermits who proceeded thither from our own Ireland. But now they are once more as they were from the beginning deserted by the anchorites, on account of the Northman pirates, but are filled with innumerable sheep and a great number of different kinds of sea-birds. We have never found these islands spoken of in written books. [18]

It is to be noted that the Norse name Faroes also means Sheep Islands.

Of Iceland, which he identifies with the Thule of classical writers, Dicuil says:

It is now thirty years since I was told by certain Irish ecclesiastics, who had been on that island from the 1st of February to the 1st of August, that not only at the time of the summer solstice, but also during the days before and after, the setting sun at evening hides itself as if behind a small mound, so that it does not become dark for even a very brief space of time. . . A day's sail northward from it they found the frozen sea. [19]

Dicuil is an interesting personage. He was an Irishman who probably entered the monastery of Iona before 772, and went to the continent before 810, perhaps fleeing before

the Viking raids on Iona of 802 and 806. He became closely associated with the Frankish court and may have been a teacher in the palace school. He wrote several books, of which the most famous is his geographical treatise, *De Mensura Orbis Terrae*. [20] Although mainly a compendium of classical sources, it contains an amount of original information and personal observation which for the time is truly remarkable. From it we learn that this man who had conversed with anchorites from Iceland and the Faroes had also, when a youth, listened to the narrative of one of a band of Irish monks who had visited Egypt and Palestine before 767, and himself in France had seen the elephant which Harun al Raschid, Calif of Bagdad, had presented to Charlemagne in 804. The recital of these facts is sufficient to make clear the possibility that streams of influence many and varied beyond immediate apprehension may have entered into the composition of the *Navigatio Brendani*.

Dicuil's testimony as to the residence of Irish monks in Iceland is corroborated and expanded by that of the Norsemen. The oldest antiquarian of Iceland, Are Frode Thorgilsson, in the *Islendingabok* [21] written about 1130, after speaking of the first Norse settlements in the island, says:

There were Christians here whom the Norwegians called 'pa par;' but they went away afterwards, because they would not be here with pagan men ; and they left behind them Irish books, and bells, and croziers, from which it could be learned that they were Irishmen.

Similar statements are to be found in other passages of early Icelandic literature.

Did the Irish anticipate the Norse also in the discovery of Greenland and America ? It is possible, but there is no evidence of weight. Dicuil's friends *may* have sailed beyond Iceland until stopped by drift ice, and others of whom no record has survived *may* have escaped the ice and come to land in the western hemisphere. Several passages in the Icelandic sagas indicate that there came into the Norse world, through their brethern who settled in Ireland in the days of the great Viking expansion, stories of a land to the westward which Norsemen, and possibly Irishmen, called " White Men's Land" and " Ireland the Great." [22] It was in the neighbourhood of " Wineland the Good," of which also, as Nansen has pointed out, the earliest knowledge displayed in northern literature seems to have come from Hiberno-Norse sources. But, as will be seen, there were other descriptions of lands lying out in the western ocean which were current in Ireland in the ninth and tenth centuries besides any authentic records of the discoveries of the anchorites.

### III

#### The versions of the Brendan Legend

The story of the voyage of Brendan is extant in many manuscript versions, almost all of which, however, can be classed as derived from one or other of two texts, a *Navigatio Brendani* which has been preserved fairly pure, and a *Vita Brendani* which has, in almost every manuscript, been contaminated by additions from the *Navigatio*. Sufficient material is available however, to make possible a very full restoration of the original *Vita*. [23]

The date of composition cannot be accurately determined. There is at least one tenth century manuscript of the *Navigatio*, [24] and it is manifestly a copy of an earlier *Vorlage*. Two Lives of the Breton, St. Malo, [25] originally written in the ninth century, contain considerable matter drawn from the Brendan Legend in both its forms, but this matter may well be interpolated, and therefore not much older than the earliest manuscripts, which are of the tenth century. It can be inferred that the *Navigatio Brendani* was composed not later than the first half of that century. The voyage portions of *Vita Brendani* seem older than the *Navigatio*, and it is very probable that those sections were themselves an interpolation into a still older *Vita* which contained no voyage matter except the account of the journey to Britain

found in the later chapters. There can be little doubt, then, that the Brendan Legend had taken form at latest in the ninth century. [26]

The place of origin undoubtedly was Ireland. It is possible that the *Navigatio Brendani* may have been composed by an Irishman on the continent. Schroder thought he could trace its centre of dissemination in Europe to the lower Rhine valley, a region in which Irish scholars and ecclesiastics were numerous in the ninth and early tenth centuries.

In the *Vita Brendani* the saint's oceanic adventures are divided into two voyages, the first unsuccessful, the second successful.

The First Voyage [27] takes place soon after Brendan's ordination to the priesthood. He remembers the command to Abraham, is filled with a great desire to go on pilgrimage, and prays the Lord to show him a hidden land to which he may retire. He is told in sleep that his wish will be granted. Ascending a high mountain, he sees a beautiful island, and hears a voice saying : " As I promised the land to the people of Israel, and was their help that they should attain it, so do I promise you the island which you have seen, and will make good the promise in deed." Brendan then builds three skin-covered coracles, each holding thirty men, and sets forth.

They sail over the waters for five years, and see many islands, but not the one sought. They are nearly engulfed by a whirlpool, but Brendan calms it. [The Irish were, of course, familiar with the whirlpools resulting from tidal movements among the Irish and Scottish islands ; that between Rathlin and the coast of Antrim is frequently mentioned in the early literature.] The devil alights on the mast and shows Brendan the mouth of hell ; one of the monks asks to see it, and dies at the sight. Brendan revives him, but, we are assured, not without great labour. On a seacoast they find a dead girl of a stature of one hundred feet. Brendan brings her to life and baptizes her, after which she once more expires.[Resuscitation for the sake of baptism is a commonplace- of hagiography, but the other elements of the episode bring into the Brendan legend the myth of the *muirgeilt*, " sea-wanderer"—an Irish variation of the mermaid story—who, according to the independent form of the myth, was baptized by Brendan's contemporary and friend, Comgall of Bangor. [28] At length they come to an island with high, perpendicular sides [we are reminded of Bishop's Island], on which they see a church whence wonderful singing is heard. After they have long attempted in vain to land, a tablet is let down to Brendan telling him that it is not the island he seeks, and that he is to return home. This he does.

The Second Voyage follows soon after the first. Brendan visits St. Ita, who had reared him when he was a child, and is told by her that the cause of his failure is that he sought the sacred island in the skins of dead animals. He will find it in a ship built of planks. He acts on this lesson in contagious magic, and builds his ship. Sixty persons are taken on board, among them the carpenters and smiths as we proceed we find there was only one smith, and probably only one carpenter and a herald, or buffoon. They set out from St. Enda's monastery on the Aran islands in Galway bay. [This is probably a Connaught version, which had been modified when ocean going ships of the Viking model began to take the place of coracles on the west coast. As will be seen the *Navigatio* harmonizes the Connaught and Kerry versions, but ignores the wooden ship.] They come to an island where they are attacked by mice as large as cats. The buffoon sacrifices himself—we have all heard of the faithful serf—and receives heaven as his reward. The smith dies at sea, but what became of the carpenter, who in the original form of this version must also have been disposed of, we are not told. They come to an island filled with demons in the shape of pigmies, on which no one can land except him who has waged war and shed blood. Having anchored off it for seven days, they lose their anchor. Brendan blesses the hands of a priest, who then makes a perfectly good anchor a magical acquisition of technical skill not unknown elsewhere in hagiography and folklore. They find an island where dwells an old hermit, the survivor of

twelve who had come from Ireland. At his warning they fly from a monstrous cat which pursues them; Brendan prays, a beast rises from the sea, engages the cat, and both sink. The cat had developed from a “very friendly little cat” brought by the pilgrims at their first coming. [This also is an adaptation of another Irish story which has independent existence. [29] The old man shows them how to reach the land they sought, and then, after receiving the viaticum, expires. So the goal is finally attained. Here too they are welcomed by an old man, this one clad in feathers as clothes. He has been here for sixty years and has awaited Brendan's arrival. He is fed by a bird which on this occasion brings half a loaf and part of a fish for each. [This is the only passage in the *Vita* dealing with the food problem, a problem which troubled at least one redactor. The author of the *Navigatio* makes a special point of solving the difficulty. [30]] After giving good precept and example to Brendan he bids him abandon his desire to spend the remainder of his days on the island, and return to teach the way of life to the Irish. His relics and those of his monks will be brought hither seven years before the day of judgment. [The final resting place of a saint's relics is always a matter of importance in Irish hagiography. The author has in mind the belief, which finds expression in the Book of Armagh, [31] written early in the ninth century, that Ireland would sink beneath the sea seven years before the judgment]. The hermit dies and is buried, and Brendan and his companions sail for home.

It would appear that we have here two traditions which have become attached to Brendan's name, one of an unsuccessful voyage in search of a place of hermitage, such as those of Baitan and Cormac úa Liathain, and the other a semi-Christianised myth of an expedition made in accordance with certain magical formula to a wonderful supernatural land lying in the ocean. These stories, decked out with Christian ideas regarding hell and the devils, and some accretions drawn from other sea myths, and the whole rather crudely joined together, were adopted by the monks of the churches which claimed Brendan as founder and inserted in his *Life*, partly because the fame of their patron was thereby exalted, partly, perhaps, because of the authority this imparted to their monastic rule, which would be the permanent record of that “way of life” to teach which Brendan had been ordered back from the supernatural land.

The *Navigatio Brendani* is a very different composition. It manifestly is a version of the same legend, but has been worked up to produce another result. Several of its episodes are evidently doublets of incidents occurring in the *Vita*, but for the greater part the details of the two narratives are quite distinct. The *Navigatio* is the work of a literary artist of high merit. The theme is the voyage only, not the life, of the saint, and the plot is much simpler and better worked out, while the narrative is enriched with an amplitude of incident and detail quite unknown to the other versions. Even yet the story has sufficient literary power to hold the reader's interest; in its own day this tale of the wonders of the sea then to all minds the region of mystery and terror told in a simple and free-flowing style, with its matter-of-fact tone and unfaltering resourcefulness of imagination, must have been most impressive. The author—or authors—drew freely from the resources which the geographical knowledge, the literature and the folk-lore of Ireland and of western Europe offered, and shaped all with care to his own purpose. But that purpose was not solely, nor indeed primarily, to describe the wonders of the ocean. As we note the meticulous care with which he elaborates the precepts of Brendan, and the rules of life, the devotions, the method of observing the canonical hours, the psalms sung, the prayers said, the penances observed among the inhabitants, human and superhuman, of the oceanic islands, we come to realise that the author is painting a picture of the ideal monastic life. The *Navigatio Brendani* is the epic shall we say the *Odyssey* of the old Irish Church.

The *Navigatio Brendani* [32] opens with an account of a visit paid to Brendan at Clonfert [in the *Vita* the voyage is placed before the founding of Clonfert] by an abbot Barinthus [perhaps in Irish Barrfind] who is returning from a visit paid to a disciple of his, named Mernoc, the head of a community of anchorites, on an island, apparently in Donegal bay. He

relates how Mernoc had taken him to a wonderful country, the “ Land of Promise of the Saints” (*terra repromissionis sanctorum*). After his departure, Brendan and fourteen chosen monks decide to seek that land. They visit first Enda at Aran and then Brendan’s native district in Kerry, where a coracle is built, apparently at Brandon Headland. [Here follows our best description of the construction of these skin-covered ships.] As they are about to depart three monks arrive who have followed from the monastery, and are allowed to come on board. After getting safely beyond geographical control by the device of a night wind that drives them they know not in what direction, they come to a lofty island, on which they are able to effect a landing only after three days. A dog guides them to a town and a wonderful palace where no living person is seen, but a banquet is miraculously set before them each day of their stay. [All this, of course, is part of the stock fairy lore of almost all lands.] When leaving one of the supercargo monks attempts to steal a silver bridle. At Brendan’s upbraiding he confesses his fault, the devil is driven out of him in the form of a small Ethiopian, and he dies penitent. Next they come to the Isle of Sheep. [The name, at any rate, was doubtless derived from reports of the Faroes.] Here they are met by a man who provides them with food, and continues to do so at regular intervals during the whole period that they are on the sea. Easter eve and morning they spend on a neighbouring island. When they light a fire for the morning meal the island begins to move, and they escape just in time before it submerges. It is Jasconius, the largest of marine creatures. Next they come to the Paradise of Birds, where they ascend a river to its source, a sleep-producing fountain. Here they remain till the octave of Pentecost. Vast numbers of birds sing psalms and hymns to them at the canonical hours. They are fallen angels who, not having shared in sin, are permitted to remain here in this form. [A similar explanation is given by modern Irish folk tales of the origin of the fairies.] Next they come to the Island of the Family—that is, the religious community of Ailbe. On this island are fountains of hot and cold water, and a monastery and church of remarkable construction. Twenty-four brethren have lived here for eighty years, since the time of the saints Patrick and Ailbe, supernaturally supplied with food, and leading a life of the strictest monastic discipline. [There are several allusions in Irish sources to this overseas family of St. Ailbe. According to one of these, he wished himself to go to the island of Thule, but being prevented sent a band of his monks into exile over the ocean. [33]] In the church Brendan sees the candles lighted by a miraculous fire that enters through a window. Brendan and his people remain here from Christmas to the octave of the Epiphany. Throughout the whole seven years of their voyage they spend the same holy seasons at the same places, Holy Thursday and Good Friday at the Isle of Sheep, Easter on the back of the sea monster, Pentecost at the Paradise of Birds, from Christmas to Candlemas at the island of the Family of Ailbe.

At the beginning of Lent in the second year they visit another island having a soporific fountain, and soon after come to a place where the sea is coagulated. After leaving the Paradise of Birds they are pursued by a monster which threatens to swallow them, but is killed by another. Later they obtain a supply of meat from the body, all except Brendan, who never touches animal food. Some time later they discover a land variously named the Island of Anchorites, of the Three Choirs, or of Strong Men, where live three groups of religious, one boys, the second young men, and the third old men, who spend their whole time in devotional exercises. The second of the three supernumerary monks remains in this place. The next discovery is the Isle of Grapes, of which they have foreknowledge by a bird which brings them a branch loaded with huge grapes. [The grapes of Escol, and the dove returning to the ark, will be recalled.] The island is covered with trees which are heavy with the vintage, and has an abundance of edible herbs, and six springs of water. An adventure with a griffin, a creature otherwise little known to Irish myth, follows, and has an outcome similar to that with the sea monster in this narrative and with the cat of the *Vita*.

The author now passes over several years to bring us to the final adventures. Once, on the feast of St. Peter, the water was so clear that the bottom of the ocean and all the monsters of the deep could be seen. Hearing the voice of Brendan saying mass, they rise to the sur-

face, to the great terror of the monks, but remain respectfully at a distance. Later they come to an immense column of crystal standing in the ocean and surrounded by a canopy of silver colour. With difficulty an entrance is effected, and four days are spent sailing under the canopy. .[This seems to be in part based on some confused knowledge of icebergs, in part on the folk tale of the island supported on columns, usually on four columns, which is the number given in the *Vita*. [34]] The pilgrims are now approaching the confines of the infernal regions. They come first to the Island of Smiths, hairy and horrible creatures who, after hurling masses of fiery rock from their workshops at the visitors, give the whole island to flames. [The *goba*, or smith, is in Irish legend a person of magical, and sometimes of diabolical, attributes. [35]] Next they approach a volcanic island where the third supernumerary monk is dragged off by demons who are invisible to all but Brendan. Then follows what is, perhaps, the most remarkable product of the author's imagination, the description of Judas Iscariot sitting on a rock, buffeted by wind and water, where, partly because of certain slight acts of kindness performed by him when living, he receives a respite on Sundays and some holy days from his torments in the fiery mountain. The incident ends with Brendan successfully defying the demons and extending Judas' leave for some hours.

We are nearing the end. A lofty island is visited whereon dwells a hermit named Paul, an old man clad in white hair, who, having been a disciple of Patrick, came here by that saint's direction and has remained for ninety years, being miraculously supplied with food. [Variations of certain elements of the *Vita* will be recognised.] Paul tells them they are at the end of their wanderings. They spend the paschal season as in previous years, except that the sea beast Jasconius, as a farewell courtesy, carries them on his back to the Paradise of Birds. After forty days' sailing they pass through a dark cloud and land in a beautiful country, full of fruits and gems, where there is always sunshine. At the end of forty days they come to a great river which they may not cross. A youth of resplendent countenance appears and tells Brendan that this is the land he sought and that he had not found it sooner because the Lord wished to reveal to him the secrets of the ocean. [We may be certain that in an earlier form of the Legend this land could be attained only once in seven years. There is, or was, a tale told on the coast of Clare of a land which could be seen every seven years. [36]] He bids Brendan return home, assuring him that this land will be shown to his successors when the time of tribulation for Christians is at hand, and to all the elect when the Almighty has subjugated the peoples to Himself. They depart, pay a visit to the island called " of Delights," [37] and arrive home, where Brendan soon after dies.

#### IV

#### The Background in Literature and Folk-lore

The sources of many of the elements entering into the Brendan Legend have been indicated in the running analysis or can be readily deduced from what has been said as to the historical conditions amid which it arose. Irish churchmen would know from the experiences of their anchorite brethren, possibly also from their Norse enemies, of rocky islands, whirlpools, icebergs, perhaps of drift ice, volcanic eruptions, and small, shaggy beings who could serve on occasion as demons. The common stock of European folk-lore and saint-lore would furnish food bringing birds, talking birds, angels in bird form, banquets spread forth miraculously without human agents, supernatural food, sleep-producing fountains, dogs that guide strangers.

The sea-monster Jasconius is of more remarkable texture. The name is Irish from *iasc*, still the usual word for fish. He is described as the largest creature of the deep, who is continually trying to join his head to his tail, traits which seem to identify him with the *Midgardsworm* of Scandinavian mythology. The facts that such a creature seems otherwise unknown to Irish myth, and that from the ninth century onwards Irish associations with the Norse were very

close, make the northern origin of these elements most probable, although it must be remembered on the one hand that Norse borrowings from Irish are being found to be much greater than hitherto had been suspected, [38] and on the other that the monster who lies in the outer ocean forming a circle around the world is one of the oldest of oriental ideas, going far back into early Babylonian mythology. The other element of the story, the mistaking of the monster for an island, until he alarms his visitors by beginning to move, seems to be of purely eastern origin. We know it through the story of Sinbad, but it is said to be found in Persian sources long antedating the Arabian Nights. [39]

From the east may also have come the idea of the miraculous fire lighting the candles in the church of the Family of Ailbe. It bears a suspicious resemblance to the Sacred Fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. And the volcanic phenomena, if not of Icelandic, are probably of Mediterranean provenance. [40]

Of literary sources the most obvious is the Bible : probably the Apocalypse of St. John was especially familiar to the author of the *Navigatio*. Heinrich Zimmer has shown that Vergil's *Æneid* served as a model to Irish authors of voyage literature, and may have been a direct inspiration for the story of Brendan. It would seem probable also that in some way a slight knowledge of the *Vera Historia*, of Lucian and of the wanderings of Odysseus had reached early Christian Ireland. In any case, the classical ideas of the Fortunate Isles, the Islands of the Blest, were familiar, if not from older writings, then from the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, the favourite encyclopædia of the Irish as of other mediæval peoples. [41]

But the chief immediate sources and models of our legend were undoubtedly the tales, in the Irish language, and largely pagan in origin, known as *immrama*, "voyages." [42] In pagan Ireland there must have been a widespread belief in a happy oversea land where divine beings dwelt and whither they sometimes invited mortals. Thither in pursuit of fairy women went Connla son of the High King Conn, and Oisín son of Finn, and Bran son of Febal. It was known by many names—the "Land of the Young," "Land of the Living," "Happy Plain," "Great Strand," and in more modern documents *Hy Brasil* and *Tir na Fer Fionn*. This last would be the exact equivalent of the Norse "White Men's Land," but it has not been shown to have been in use in mediæval times. Heinrich Zimmer, who made an elaborate study of the Brendan Legend, elucidating in particular its associations with Irish saga-literature, has pointed out that by the eighth century the term *tir tairngiri*, "Land of Promise," the Christian Irish designation of the Land of Canaan and of the Heavenly Kingdom, was getting itself associated with the other title, *tir innambeo*, "Land of the Living Ones," which meant the overseas pagan elysium. Such an association is behind our "Land of Promise of the Saints," and behind the whole conception of the Christian voyage literature. [43]

There are three such voyage tales in the Irish language each containing many passages identical in substance with parts of the Brendan Legend "the Voyage of Maelduin," "the Voyage of the Húi Corra," and "the Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla." The last two are of much later date, and the resemblances in their case may be due to direct borrowing. The relations between the Brendan and the Maelduin story are not so clear. It seems certain that in the main the Maelduin legend is older than that of Brendan : Zimmer has argued that it was the model upon which and the quarry out of which Brendan's Voyage and the later *immrama* were constructed. But it appears probable that there was also a re-action, and that the Voyage of Maelduin, which was evidently a pagan, or at least secular, tale which passed through a Christianising development, contains in its present text passages that are really later interpolations from the Brendan story.

The following brief summary of the more strikingly analogous incidents in the romance of Maelduin will make clearer what has been said:

Maelduin [44] wishes to go in pursuit of the murderer of his father, who lives in an island near the Irish coast. He consults a druid and receives precise directions as to how his ship is to be built. It is a coracle of three hides, and is to carry exactly sixty men. Unfortunately Maelduin breaks the magical formula by taking on board at the last minute his three foster-brothers. Because of this they are driven out to sea by a storm. After various adventures they come to a palace where a meal is spread out for them. When they leave one of the foster-brothers attempts to steal a neck-band, and is slain by a little cat. They come to an island where everyone is weeping, and the second foster-brother, landing, begins to weep also, and cannot afterwards be distinguished. The third brother is lost in a like manner on the island of laughter. Other passages to be noted are the description of the island of singing birds ; of the old hermit clad in white hair who is fed by angels ; of the island of smiths ; of the transparent sea ; of the silver pillar with canopy of silver ; of the island supported on one pillar ; of the bird that carries a branch laden with large, grape-like fruit; of the old hermit who, like Paul of the *Navigatio*, had been a grave-digger, and now tells Maelduin that his voyage is at its end.

It is evident that we have in Maelduin and Brendan two elaborate, and intimately related, literary developments, the one in Irish, the other in Latin, of the folk-lore and mythology of ancient Ireland, gathered around the central theme of a “ happy otherworld” situated in the western ocean. Of that central theme Alfred Nutt published an extensive study in connection with Kuno Meyer's edition of “ the Voyage of Bran son of Febal.” [45] The relationships he thought to find with the elysium beliefs of other races seem in some cases far-fetched, but his conclusion is, perhaps, sufficiently conservative : “ The vision of a Happy Otherworld found in Irish mythic romances of the eighth and following centuries is substantially pre-Christian ; it finds its closest analogues in that stage of Hellenic mythic belief which precedes the modification of Hellenic religion consequent upon the spread of the Orphic-Pythagorean doctrines, and with these it forms the most archaic Aryan presentment of the divine and happy land we possess.”

[1] Nasmyth *Itineraria* (Cambridge, 1778) p. 267: quoted by Henry Harrisse, *Discovery of North America* (London, 1892) p. 659.

[2] H. P. Biggar, *The Precursors of Jacques Cartier* (Publications of the Canadian Archives No. 5: Ottawa, 1911) pp.27-28.

[3] Cf. T. J. Westropp “ Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. XXX (1912), sect. C, pp. 223-260 ; W. H. Babcock “ The So-Called Mythical Islands of the Atlantic in Mediæval Maps” *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, May-August, 1915, pp. 261-269, 315-320, 360-377, 411-422.

[4] *In Northern Mists*, 2 vols. (London, 1911). Chap. ix, “ Wineland the Good, the Fortunate Isles, and the Discovery of America.”

[5] *Lib. I, cap. xxvi; lib. III, cap. xvii.*

[6] W. Reeves *Life of St. Columba by Adamnan*, in W. F. Skene's *Historians of Scotland*, vol. VI (Edinburgh, 1874) app. I ; Skene *Celtic Scotland* vol. II (2nd ed. Edinburgh, 1887), pp. 128 *et seq.*

[7] Skene, *op. cit.* pp. 76-78; A. P. Forbes *Kalendars of Scottish Saints* (Edinburgh, 1872) p. 286 ; P. F. Moran *Acta S. Brendani* (Dublin, 1872), p. viii.

[8] Skene, *loc. cit.*

[9] E. Hogan *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), *s.v.* “ Altraige.”

[10] The fortuitous manner in which such myth material might find a personality to which to attach itself is illustrated by the story of the “ Voyage of Bran, son of Febal,” textually the oldest of these Irish “ voyage” legends. Bran mac Febail is a name unknown to historical records. Thurneysen has suggested with much probability that it originated in a mis-interpretation of the name of a promontory on the coast of Donegal, *Srub Brain*, “ Raven's Beak.” *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, vol. X (1915), p. 424.

- [11] Gen. xii, 1.
- [12] L. Gougaud *Chrétientés Celtiques* (Paris, 1911), p. 136.
- [13] Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- [14] Ingram's translation.
- [15] Jubinal's ed., p. 8.
- [16] *Vita S. Columbae* I, vi, xx; II xlii.
- [17] Wakeman's *Handbook of Irish Antiquities* (3rd ed. by J. Cooke, Dublin, 1903), pp. 279 *et seq.*, gives a brief description of some of these islands.
- [18] *De Mensura Orbis Terrae* VII iii.
- [19] *Ibid.* VII ii.
- [20] Edited by Walckenaer (Paris, 1807) ; Letronne (Paris, 1814) ; and Parthey (Berlin, 1870).
- [21] Published with English translation in Vigfusson and Powell's *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford, 1905), vol. I, pp. 279-306.
- [22] Landnámabók, Eyrbyggja Saga, Eiríks Saga Rauda. In Landnámabók the story of Ireland the Great is traced back to a certain "Ravn Hlymreks-farer," a Northman who had dwelt in Limerick for a long period, apparently about the beginning of the eleventh century.
- [23] The Rev. Charles Plummer has published important studies on the relationships between the different versions of the legend in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* vol. V (1905), pp. 124-141, and in the introduction to his *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910). Critical studies of value are to be found also in Carl Schroder's *Sanct Brandan Ein lateinischer und drei deutsche Texte* (Erlangen, 1871); Gustav Schirmer's *Zur Brendanus-Legende* (Leipsic, 1888) ; Heinrich Zimmer's "Brendans Meerfahrt" in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum*, vol. XXXIII (1889), pp. 129-220, 257-338; and Alfred Schulze's "Zur Brendanlegende" in *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, vol. XXX (1906), pp. 257-79.
- [24] British Museum Addit. 36737, formerly of the Abbey of St. Maxim at Treves.
- [25] Edited by Dom F. Plaine and Arthur de la Borderie in *Bulletin de la Société archéologique d'Ille et Vilaine*, vol. XVI (Rennes, 1884), pp. 138-312.
- [26] That is, more than one hundred years before the date at which Leif the Lucky is said to have discovered America.
- [27] The following are the principal versions of *Vita Brendani* :
- Two versions in *Codex Salmenticensis* (s. XIV), published by C. de Smedt and J. de Backer *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice Salmanticensi* (Edinburgh, etc., 1888) cols. 759-772, 113-154.
- Version in the Irish language in the *Book of Lismore* (s. XV) and other MSS: Whitley Stokes *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore (Anecdota Oxoniensia : Oxford, 1890)* pp. 99-115, 247-261, 349-354.
- Version in the Bodleian MSS. Rawlinson B485 (s. XIII or XIV) and B505 (s. XIV): C. Plummer *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910) vol. I, pp. 98-151.
- Version in *Codex Kilkenniensis* (s. XIV) : P. F. Moran *Acta Sancti Brendani* (Dublin, 1872), pp. 1-26.
- John of Tynemouth's version in *Nova Legenda Anglie* : edited by Carl Horstman (Oxford, 1901), vol. I. pp. 136-153.
- Version in the Irish language in various MSS. of the fifteenth century and later :
- R. Thurneysen *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, vol. X (1915), pp. 408-420.
- [28] *Aided Echdach maic Maireda* in Standish H. O'Grady *Silva Gadelica* (London 1892), vol. I, pp. 233-327, II, 265-269. Cf. *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, vol. III (Halle and Dublin, 1910), p. 10 ; *Annals of Ulster s. a. 572*.
- [29] Scéla an trir maccléirech, published by Henri Gaidoz in *Mélusine*, vol. IV (1888), pp. 6-11, and by Whitley Stokes in *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* pp. viii-x. See also Plummer in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* V 128 n.l.
- [30] *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice Salmanticensi* col. 767.
- [31] Edition by Dr. John Gwynn (Dublin, 1913), p. 30. Also in Whitley Stokes *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, Part II (Rolls Series: London, 1887), p. 331.
- [32] The most important editions of the original Latin text are : Achille Jubinal *La Légende*

*latine de S. Brandaines* (Paris, 1836), pp. 1-53; Carl Schröder *op. cit.*; P. F. Moran *op. cit.* There is a critical examination of the manuscript texts by C. Steinweg, “Die handschriftlichen Gestaltungen der lateinischen Navigatio Brendani,” in *Romanische Forschungen*, vol. VII, pp. 1-48.

- [33] Cf. Reeves *The Life of St. Columba Written by Adamnan*, p. 168, and Plummer *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, vol. I, p. clxxxiii.
- [34] Moran *op. cit.* p. 23.
- [35] Cf. *inter al.*, St. Patrick’s Hymn.
- [36] Cf. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. XXX (1912), Sect. C, pp. 251, 257.
- [37] This seems to designate the island occupied by Mernoc and his monks.
- [38] Cf. Nansen, *op. cit.*; Sophus Bugge *The Home of the Eddic Poems* (London, 1899); Alexander Bugge “The Origin and Credibility of the Icelandic Saga,” *American Historical Review*, vol. XIV, no. ii (Jan., 1909), pp. 249-261; C. W. vonSydow “Tors Färd till Utgard,” *Danske Studier*, 1910.
- [39] Blochet *Sources orientates de la Divine Comédie*, par. iv, noticed by Plummer.
- [40] Other elements possibly oriental in origin are noted by M. J. de Goeje “*La Légende de St. Brandan*” in *Actes du Huitième Congrès Internationale des Orientalistes*, 1889 (Leiden, 1891).
- [41] Cf. Nansen *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 345.
- [42] Such as the tales designated “the Voyage of Bran, son of Febal,” “the Adventures of Connla the Fair,” “the Adventures of Cormac in the Land of Promise,” and portions of “the Sick-bed of Cuchullain.”
- [43] A feeling of the need of reconciliation between the two ideas evidently inspired some of the opening passages of the “voyage” section of *Vita Brendani*.
- [44] The prose version of *Immram Curaig Maileduin* was published, with translation, by Whitley Stokes in *Revue Celtique*, vol. IX (1888), pp. 447-495, X (1889) 50-95. 265. There is a French translation by Ferdinand Lot in Arbois de Jubainville’s *Cours de littérature celtique*, vol. V : *L’Epopée celtique en Irlande* (1892), pp. 449-500. An English translation, not very close, was published by P. W. Joyce in his *Old Celtic Romances*, and was used, he tells us, by Tennyson as the basis for his poem on the subject. The version in verse has been edited by R. I. Best and Kuno Meyer in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, vol. I (Halle and Dublin, 1907), pp. 50-74, and by Kuno Meyer in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, vol. XI (1916), pp. 148-165.
- [46] *The Voyage of Bran son of Febal, to the Land of the Living An Old Irish Saga edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, With Essays upon The Irish Vision of the Happy Otherworld and the Celtic doctrine of Re-birth by Alfred Nutt*, 2 vols. (London, 1897).

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