

THE VOYAGE OF ST BRENDAN LANDSCAPE AND PARADISE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL

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Abstract : The *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* (Voyage of St Brendan) is an important early medieval text, dating from the eighth century and written in Ireland. It was an influential narrative and was widely known and adapted across Europe, even coming to be seen as a forerunner of the voyages to the New World during the Age of Discovery.

It tells of how St Brendan, a prominent early Irish abbot who lived in the sixth century, is called to go on a journey to the Promised Land of the Saints which, the text tells us, can be found in the Atlantic Ocean to the west of Ireland. He is accompanied by a crew of monks on his voyage which takes places over several years. The saint and his companions must overcome temptations before they reach their destination. On the way Brendan visits what are almost certainly the Faroes in the north Atlantic, encounters monks and hermits, passes a demonic island, celebrates Easter on the back of a whale and encounters Judas Iscariot. The space in which he travels is at once real and imaginary. Fascinatingly, then, Brendan's voyage is securely placed within the actual geography of the north and west Atlantic Ocean. As a result, the *Nauigatio* offers insights into Irish views of the landscape and its symbolic significance. This paper will explore the spiritual geography of St Brendan's journey and will connect it to the expression of monastic ideals in early medieval Ireland. What can the *Nauigatio* tell us about the collective self-perceptions of Irish monks? Can we detect echoes of real lives in real landscapes along the Irish western seaboard? This skilful combination of the symbolic and the actual is what sets the *Nauigatio* apart from other early Irish texts and arguably explains why it went onto become one of the most popular of all early medieval narratives.

Keywords : Viagens – São Brandão – Geografias

Resumo : O *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* (Viagem de São Brandão) é um importante texto medieval antigo, datado do século VIII e escrito na Irlanda. Era uma narrativa influente e era amplamente conhecida e adaptada em toda a Europa, chegando a ser vista como precursora das viagens ao Novo Mundo durante a Era das Descobertas.

Ele conta como São Brandão, um importante abade irlandês que viveu no século VI, é chamado a fazer uma viagem à Terra Prometida dos Santos, que, segundo o texto, pode ser encontrada no Oceano Atlântico a oeste da Irlanda. Ele é acompanhado por uma tripulação de monges em sua viagem, que se prolonga por vários anos. O santo e seus companheiros devem vencer as tentações antes de chegarem ao seu destino. No caminho, Brendan visita o que são quase certamente as Ilhas Faroé no Atlântico Norte, encontra monges e eremitas, passa por uma ilha demoníaca, celebra a Páscoa nas costas de uma baleia e encontra Judas Iscariotes. O espaço em que ele viaja é ao mesmo tempo real e imaginário. Fascinante, então, a viagem de Brandão é colocada com segurança dentro da geografia real do norte e oeste do Oceano Atlântico. Como resultado, o *Nauigatio* oferece insights sobre as visões irlandesas da paisagem e seu significado simbólico. Este artigo explorará a geografia espiritual da jornada de São Brandão e a conectará à expressão de ideais monásticos na Irlanda medieval antiga. O que os *Nauigatio* podem nos dizer sobre as percepções coletivas dos monges irlandeses? Podemos detectar ecos de vidas reais em paisagens reais ao longo da costa oeste da Irlanda? Essa combinação hábil do simbólico e do real é o que diferencia o *Nauigatio* de outros textos irlandeses antigos e, sem dúvida, explica porque ele se tornou uma das narrativas mais populares dentre todas as primeiras narrativas medievais.

Palavras-chave : Travels – St. Brendan - Geographies

INTRODUCTION

The *Voyage of St Brendan the Abbot* is one of the most famous of all early Irish texts and is the subject of much debate and speculation. Some people believe it describes an actual voyage to the Americas, undertaken by early medieval Irish monks, while others interpret it as a symbolic religious text. Today, I will highlight major strands which connect into your conference theme of landscape and see whether these can throw light on the meaning of the tale.

First, however, I will introduce the text. The *Voyage of St Brendan* is a Hiberno-Latin narrative which was probably written in Ireland during the second half of the eighth century or, at the latest, towards the beginning of the ninth, although this is open to some debate.¹ It tells of how St Brendan, a prominent early Irish abbot who lived in the sixth century, is called to go on a journey to the Promised Land of the Saints which, the text tells us, can be found in the Atlantic Ocean to the north and west of Ireland. He is accompanied by a crew of monks on his voyage which takes place over seven years. The saint and his companions must overcome temptations before they reach their destination. On the way, Brendan visits islands in the north Atlantic, encounters monks and hermits, celebrates Easter on the back of a whale and meets Judas Iscariot. The landscape in which he travels is at once real and imaginary. The tale explores the best way for an abbot to create, and a monk to live in, the perfect monastic community. The text draws on a rich and diverse literary heritage which may stretch back into the early seventh century.²

Today, I wish to examine landscape in the *Voyage of Brendan* and explore its deeper meaning. To do this, I will explain the importance of Christian views of the world, especially of geography. This will be linked to the development of a religious ideal known as *peregrinatio*, or exile. In turn I will combine these two elements – Christian geography and religious ideal – and show how they are connected to the real and imagined landscapes of our text.

CLASSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Christian writers inherited the Classical geographical tradition. It was believed that the world, or *orbis terrarum*, was a globe made up of the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. It was enclosed by uncharted waters, *oceanus*.³ The globe was surrounded by stars and these, along with the sun and moon, revolved around the earth. The Romans believed that the most civilised peoples lived near the centre of the world, literally the Mediterranean. As one left the centre people became less civilised and the climate worsened. So, for the Romans, geography was not just geography. It gave them a way to interpret the world and assert their superiority as a culture.

This view of the world was the foundation of how most educated Christians thought about the geographical landscape. It was popularised by Christian writers such as Augustine in the fifth century, Cassiodorus in the sixth and Isidore of Seville in the seventh. For instance, Isidore's enormously influential *Etymologies* drew on it directly. Furthermore, Christians combined the Bible with the Classical inheritance. They put Jerusalem at the centre of the world and they mapped the ethnic divisions of Genesis onto it. Thus, Africa, Europe and Asia were believed to be the home of the descendants of Noah's three sons, Ham, Japhet and Shem, respectively. The continents were united through pilgrimage to the Holy Places in the Mediterranean. Geography was regarded as important. Cassiodorus, for example, felt that studying it could lead to a greater understanding of God. Furthermore, time was linked with space as Christians believed that they were created together. For them, one of the characteristics of paradise was that it existed beyond time.

There was another factor as well. Christians believed that there might be an earthly paradise, although they debated about its nature and its location. For some it was the Garden of Eden, lost in the east. For others, there was a paradise under the Caucasus Mountains in Central Asia. Usually, this paradise was located to the east but, eventually, many more came to see it as being hidden in the ocean to the west. Like Heaven, time ran differently there; its inhabitants were often imagined as being

immortal. It was also seen as an actual physical place. These speculations play a major role in the *Voyage of Brendan's* paradise, the Promised Land of the Saints (*terra repromissionis sanctorum*).

PEREGRINATIO

It is now necessary to examine what religious ideals influenced the *Voyage of Brendan*. One of the most important is the concept of *peregrinatio pro Christo* or Exile for Christ. *Pergrinatio* was a form of religious renunciation which was inspired by the words of Jesus in the Gospels, telling believers that they should put aside their home place and their family in order to follow God. Originally the term *peregrinus* meant a stranger but, among the Irish, it came to mean an exile and *peregrinatio* was a form of exile for the sake of God. A simple definition of *peregrinatio* would be that it involved a *peregrinus* 'pilgrim' permanently leaving his homeland or home territory to serve Christ in a foreign place.⁴ By the seventh century, the Irish regarded an overseas *peregrinatio* as the truest form of ascetic renunciation and it became the inspiration for many of the Irishmen who left for the Continent and for Britain, men such as Columba the founder of Iona and Columbanus the founder of Luxeuil in Burgundy and Bobbio in northern Italy. It was believed that *peregrinatio* was a form of martyrdom. We are fortunate in that *peregrinatio* features in a wide variety of the extant written sources, Irish and non-Irish.⁵ It is probably one of the best understood concepts of the early medieval Irish Church.

How does this relate to our tale? First of all, it has been argued persuasively that a whole genre of literature, made up of narratives known collectively as voyage tales, was inspired by the actual historical experiences of *peregrini*.⁶ These tales usually involve the protagonists leaving Ireland and rowing about a multitude of often imaginary islands. They draw on a variety of sources being influenced to some degree by christian apocrypha, and, in a very general way, by classical examples such as the *Aeneid* and, less directly, the *Odyssey*. It is worth noting that the earliest voyage tale

types are written in Latin and, later, these appear to directly influence the vernacular genre known as *immrama* (rowings about).

Although there has been a debate about the origins of voyage tales, and their relationship to a genre of otherworld adventures known as *echtraí*,⁷ there is little reason to go into the details. It is enough to say that, while both genres feature adventures in otherworldly locales, the *immrama* focus on a multiplicity of overseas otherworld islands. These were arguably inspired, at least in part, by Isidore's discussion of islands in Book XIV of his *Etymologies*. There, his influential depiction of Ireland is soon followed by a description of the Fortunate Isles.⁸ Isidore tells the reader that these were mistaken for paradise by the gentiles because of their natural fertility and bounty. This actualising of an overseas paradise is carried one step farther by Irish writers who present the islands of the ocean as religious and social laboratories in order to explore concepts of monasticism, heaven and hell.

Many critics have sought an historical origin for this defining characteristic. Kathleen Hughes has suggested that voyage tales are a literary reflex of *peregrinatio*.⁹ She shows that it is but a small imaginative leap from its actual practice to the idea that a penitent or *peregrinus* might be found sailing on the wide western seas. This is strengthened by the fact that some of the earliest influences are monastic. The neat fit is highlighted by the oldest extant references to a type of 'rowing about', those of the *peregrinus*-cleric Cormac, recorded by Adomnán in *Vita Columbae*.¹⁰ Cormac is portrayed as searching for a *terra secreta* (secret place) in the ocean where he can fulfil his ascetic vocation. However, there is a major distinction between these examples and the structure of the voyage tales, including the *Voyage of Brendan*. These voyages are bound in by a shared point of departure and destination. In other words, the voyager nearly always returns home while the *peregrinus* was expected to remain an exile.

There are other historical considerations. It has been argued that by the end of the eighth century the Irish pattern of *peregrinatio* had changed under the dual influence of the Vikings and the ideals of Céle Dé ascetics.¹¹ The latter are probably the more directly significant, particularly in ideological and theological terms. The Céle Dé, who drew their inspiration from the strict Máel Ruain († 792),¹² were influential right up to the end of the ninth century. They emphasised strict monastic ideals closer to those of

stabilitas, often at the expense of *peregrinatio*.¹³ Máel Ruain discouraged pilgrimage overseas and urged that monks should stay in their monasteries and practice an austere lifestyle among their fellow monks, something we find echoed at the end of the *Voyage of Brendan*. However, the Céli Dé were not unique in their championing of *stabilitas*. Irish monastic rules, such as the *Rule of Ailbe*, forbade the monk to leave his monastery in normal circumstances.¹⁴ A widely disseminated emphasis on *stabilitas* may have meant that the literal journey of the *peregrinus*, of a Columbanus or Columba, shifted into a quest for the otherworld.

REAL LANDSCAPES

All of these elements, geographical, religious and historical, play a role in the landscapes presented in the *Voyage of Brendan*. For the rest of the paper I want to explore them and see how they relate to the ideas that I have outlined. I am going to concentrate on three types of landscape, the real, the liminal and, finally, the apocalyptic. What do they tell us about the early Irish Church and its beliefs?

It must be emphasised that the island geography which forms the core of the *Voyage of Brendan* is, actually, real. This is based not only on the physical descriptions, which we will examine in a moment, but also on other supporting evidence. For instance, we know that Irish clerics explored the north Atlantic. The early ninth-century Irish geographer Dicuil gives an important insight into the motivations and accomplishments of Irish clerical voyagers in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*. He describes how Irish clerics sought out the north Atlantic islands in order to live the religious life, in effect a form of *peregrinatio*. However, the arrival of the Vikings has brought an end to their settlements. Moreover, in a famous and memorable passage, he depicts an expedition of Irish monks to the then unsettled Iceland, dated to around 795 AD. The monks closely observed what they regarded as unusual physical and astronomical data, including the phenomenon of the midnight sun during the Icelandic summer:

...clerics who had lived on the island...told me..that the sun set in the evening...in such a way there was no darkness...and a man could do whatever he wished as though the sun were there, even remove lice from his shirt...*Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, vii §11

Indeed, when the Norse reached Iceland they retained a memory of previous Irish monastic settlements there, as well as in northern islands such as the Faroes.

This historical landscape of north Atlantic voyaging, inspired by *peregrinatio*, is fundamental to the *Voyage of St Brendan*. The use of the real, described in simple direct language, grounds the story and makes it more accessible. I have put a few examples on the slide. For instance, the Island of Sheep and the Paradise of Birds, located beside each other and among other islands, are almost certainly the Faroes. These North Atlantic islands are described in straightforward language as being full of sheep, fish and seabirds. The description is very similar to that offered by Dicuil in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (vii §15) and this is believed to be a depiction of the Faroes. In fact, pollen evidence, does support the idea that there were Irish religious settlements in these islands before the coming of the Vikings.

Similarly, the image of the crystal pillar, found after sailing across a clear sea, appears to evoke a north Atlantic iceberg and the meteorological conditions associated with sighting one. The Island of Smiths, ‘rough, rocky, and full of slag’ seems to be Iceland while the fiery mountain (*Nauigatio* §24) which was ‘very smoky on top’ is a pretty accurate depiction of a volcano, although its eruption is put down to demons rather than geology. As you can see, there are very many examples of this grounding in the real. I want to focus on one in particular, the Island of Paul the Hermit.

When they got to the shore they could not find a landing-place because of the height of the cliff. The island was small and circular...There was no earth on it, but it looked a naked rock like flint....

The physical description matches the small isolated north Atlantic islet of Rockall, nowadays most famous because there is a dispute about potential oil and fishing rights there between Ireland, Iceland and Britain. In the text it is located south of the Island of Smiths, which is probably Iceland as we have seen, and north-west of Ireland. This is a very good match for the actual location of Rockall. Once again, a real place, is the inspiration for the maritime landscapes of the *Voyage of Brendan*.

These maritime landscapes are so convincing that some historians have gone so far as to argue that the Irish reached Greenland by ca. 900 as well as the Sargasso Sea. These suggestions are very speculative, however, and do not have historical or archaeological justification. Indeed, one of the most popular misunderstandings about the *Voyage of Brendan*, is that it tells how Irish monks reached North America in the sixth century. As we will see, the description of the Promised Land of the Saints is enormously symbolic and is highly unlikely to represent America. The real geography of the *Voyage of Brendan* is firmly rooted in the north Atlantic world of Irish clerical voyages to the Hebrides, Faroes and Iceland. In fact, the *Voyage of Brendan* is an example of how empirical observations of the North Atlantic fed into intellectual speculations and into explorations that took place in the imaginations of writers. The author of the *Voyage of Brendan* constructed a narrative that was rooted in actual maritime experiences. However, he wove together actuality with religious concerns. It is a testimony to the skill of the text that so many people still take it literally.

MONASTIC LANDSCAPES

Scholars have long recognised that the *Voyage of St Brendan* is a monastic text in the broadest sense. In other words, it is not only an ecclesiastical product but is also concerned with the monastic life and its organisation. The text opens with the visit of the monk Barinthus to Brendan's monastery of Clonfert. Soon after, Barinthus paints an evocative image of the monastery of his son, Mernóc: "...the brothers (monks) came like bees swarming, from their various cells to meet us. Their housing was scattered but they lived together as one in the faith...".

The community is described as comprising small individual monastic cells and is very much in agreement with what we know from the archaeological record. As a result, from the very beginning, the reader is presented with what seems to be a realistic portrait of early medieval Irish religious life.

Moreover, the heroes are all monks. But the text goes further. It offers us sustained landscapes of the monastic life. As we have seen, it powerfully evokes Brendan's community at Clonfert and Mernóc's monastery near Slieve League in the North West of Ireland. Furthermore, Énda of Aran, an important church founder, plays a role as Brendan's mentor. Typically of this tale, these real monasteries are compared with ones which are far more idealised and, also, imaginary.

Thus, Brendan visits the community of Ailbe in the course of his voyage. This monastery is inhabited by monks who do not age and who live in perfect harmony with God. The monks may be immortal but their existence is grounded in their practice of a vow of silence and in their simple lifestyle. Even here, the monks live in the type of individual cells that we saw at Mernóc's monastery. Similarly, the Island of the Three Choirs, where one of Brendan's monks is accepted into the community, seems less fantastical because the liturgy of its monks is carefully described.

The vocation of the hermit is also a focus of the text. The eremetical strand of monasticism was deeply admired by Irish writers and the famous hermits, St Paul and St Anthony of Egypt, feature on Irish high cross sculpture. Brendan encounters Paul the Hermit, who is inspired by these figures. He is clothed in nothing but his hair and relies on an otter to be fed. The remarkable nature of his life is counterbalanced by the realistic description of his island, at which we have already looked.

Throughout the text, Brendan's role as abbot, as father to his monks, is emphasised. He is constantly referred to as the holy father (*sanctus pater*) or venerable father (*venerabilis pater*). He looks after his monks, leads them in the liturgy and reassures them when they are in danger. When he finally returns to Ireland, the monks he had left there glorify God because the father than they love has returned. This attractive portrait of Brendan is highly idealised, for sure, but it does give us an insight into how the abbot was imagined in early medieval Ireland.

The landscapes in the *Voyage of Brendan* are also liturgical, a reflection of the fact that it is such a monastic text. The monks' days are governed by the daily canonical hours and the recitation of the psalms. The overarching narrative is, in turn, structured around the celebration of the liturgical year, culminating in Easter, the most important feastday in the Christian calendar. This cycle is repeated over the years of the voyage and is clear on even a quick reading of the text. I will give three examples of this theme in order to further explore its significance but, bear in mind, that there are many more instances of it.

My first illustration of the importance of liturgy is the way that the text emphasises the canonical hours of matins, nones, sext, vespers and so on. These were fixed points during the day when monks chanted the psalms. They are referred to constantly in the *Voyage of Brendan*. However, the high point is surely the celebration of Easter on the Paradise of Birds where the monks chant the psalms at midnight, dawn, mid-morning, midday, afternoon, evening and night, giving us the full monastic day of prayer.

Throughout the tale, Holy Week is emphasised. It was particularly important for early Christians as it culminated with the betrayal, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, on the Island of Sheep, which as we saw previously is almost certainly one of the Faroes, Brendan makes a point of celebrating the Eucharist. Furthermore, the sheep are presented symbolically. The monks feast on a 'spotless lamb' from the flock which is implicitly compared to Jesus and his sacrifice. The most memorable Easter celebration is that which takes place on the back of Iasconius, the sea creature who is usually identified as being a whale. Brendan sings the mass there and the monks only realise that they are on a living creature when they attempt to cook food by lighting a fire on its back.

These examples illustrate one of the key characteristics of the *Voyage of Brendan*. The monastic day and the liturgical year are shown as being actualised in the landscape. They are part of it rather than being something which is simply carried out in a church or a monastery. The *Voyage of Brendan* presents us with an externalisation of the monastic life in north Atlantic locales. The most unusual, of course, is Iasconius. The giant sea creature is a nod to Jonah's whale as well as to Pliny's account of a

similar fish upon which sailors landed. However, he also provides a deeper symbolic lesson. He is a representative of unfallen nature, where even animals are at one with God's plan. The presence of Iasconius points towards the deeper concerns of the narrative.

LIMINAL LANDSCAPES

These are also reflected in what I term the 'liminal landscapes' of the *Voyage of Brendan*. These contain clearly supernatural or religious elements but, like elsewhere, are also presented with a degree of surface realism. In the tale, they are used to show the movement of the voyagers from one state of time or state of being to another. I wish to highlight both processes.

Firstly, I will focus on beings which are in a liminal state. Our first encounter with them is on the Paradise of Birds. As we have seen, scholars who promote the idea of the tale as recording an actual voyage often point towards the realistic description of the island's landscape. However, it is impossible to separate this from the fact that the birds are far more than they seem. When Brendan first sees them they are perched together on a tree. One of them flies to him, her wings making the sound of a handbell, echoing the monastic call to prayer. She tells Brendan that the 'birds' are actually the souls of beings who were caught up in the Fall of Lucifer from Heaven, although they do not share in his sin. As a result, although barred from Heaven, they are still in God's presence and they tell the saint that: "We wander through various regions of the air and the firmament and the earth...But on holy days and Sundays we are given bodies...so that we may stay here and praise our creator (*Nauigatio* §11)".

This passage identifies them as the neutral angels of medieval Christian apocrypha. These beings sided with neither God nor Satan because they were deceived. Later, they side with God, but only after the fall of Satan. The belief in neutral angels was condemned in mainstream Christianity. At the time the *Voyage of Brendan* was written it was quite uncommon and it is possible that the native Irish image which links

‘bird people’ with the otherworld plays a role here as well. For instance, the Old Irish sagas *The Dream of Óengus* and *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel* prominently feature birds of this type. This connection does seem likely as the *Voyage of Brendan* is rooted in an Irish world. The bird goes onto prophecy to Brendan the length of his voyage (seven years) as well as its ultimate success, showing that the neutral angels now carry out God’s plan.

The imperfect, but still paradisaic existence of the neutral angels is contrasted with another example of God’s mercy – the temporary release of Judas from Hell. The voyagers meet him undergoing what appears to be a severe penance on a rock in the ocean: “They found a man, shaggy and unsightly, sitting on a rock. As the waves flowed towards him from every side they struck him even to the top of his head...”(*Nauigatio* §22).

However, Judas reveals that this is a ‘Paradise of Delights’ (*paradisus deliciarum*) compared to his punishment in Hell. It is a divine act of mercy, given to him on Sundays, during the Christmas and Easter Seasons, and on the feastdays associated with the Virgin Mary. Significantly, this very closely mirrors God’s dispensation to the neutral angels. Both the angels and Judas move through liminal states, the angels from the air to the earth and Judas from the depths of hell to the earth. In both cases theological ideas are given a reality through their realisation in the landscape.

The clearest example of a liminal landscape is that which accompanies the passage from this world into the Promised Land of the Saints. The latter is an earthly paradise but is also the Heavenly Jerusalem, the apocalyptic Heaven at the end of time. The *Voyage of Brendan* begins and ends with this passage between worlds. The story opens with Barinthus’ tale of how he and his son, the abbot Mernóc, travelled from a monastery in the north-west of Ireland to this promised land.

We embarked and sailed, but a fog so thick covered us that we could scarcely see the poop of the prow of the boat. But when we had spent about an hour like this a great light shone all around us, and there appeared to us a land wide, and full of grass and fruit. (*Nauigatio* §1)

Their journey, although much shorter, prefigures Brendan's very closely as can be seen in the second passage on the slide:

...as the evening drew on a great fog enveloped them, so that one of them could hardly see the other...After the space of an hour a mighty light shone all around them again and the boat rested on the shore...they saw a wide land full of trees bearing fruit...(Nauigatio §28)

Note how the fog, in each instance, is an outward sign that the voyagers are passing from one state of existence to the next. The move from darkness to light and from the insubstantial (the fog) to the substantial (the land).

APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPES

This liminal state is the necessary introduction to the final landscape, that of the apocalypse. By this I mean the appearance of the Heavenly Jerusalem, as described in the Book of Revelations, also known as *Apocalypsis*—the last book in the Christian Bible. The culmination of this text, which prophecies the end of time and space as we know it, tells of a new heaven and a new earth with the Heavenly Jerusalem at its centre. It is beyond time and lit by the presence of God. The Heavenly Jerusalem was a powerful image for Christians and is a mainstay of visionary literature to this day. It is also central to the *Voyage of Brendan*. This text's two descriptions of the Promised Land of the Saints, at the beginning and at the end, are sustained reimaginings of the Heavenly city onto an island landscape. It leaves no doubt that the island and the city are one and the same. On the slide, I have pinpointed common elements shared by the Heavenly Jerusalem of Revelations and the Promised Land of the Saints in the *Voyage of Brendan*.

Light is an important component of both places. In Revelations, the Heavenly Jerusalem shines with the light of God (Rev 21:11, 23-5) and has no need of the sun or moon. In the same way, the Promised Land of the Saints is lit by the light of Jesus (*Nauigatio* §1, §28). The lack of sun and moon indicates that Brendan has moved beyond earthly time into eternity.

This removal of earthly time is shown in the Heavenly Jerusalem by the lack of earthly seasons. Thus, the Trees of Life bear fruit throughout the year. In the Promised Land of the Saints, Barinthus finds that each plant is in flower and each tree in fruit at the same time. When Brendan finds trees bearing fruit he is told by an angelic messenger that this is always the case. The parallel with the Trees of Life in Revelations is clear. Many Christians believed that seasons were the result of Original Sin in the Garden of Eden. In the Heavenly Jerusalem and in the *Voyage of Brendan* there is a return to the perfection of Eden. Furthermore, The Book of Revelations emphasises the annihilation of normal time (Rev 10:6 *et passim*). This too is a feature of the *Voyage of Brendan*. When Barinthus and Mernóc reach the Promised Land of the Saints they spend what they think is fifteen days there. In fact it is much longer and Barintus sees this as a sign of its holy nature.

Both the Book of Revelations and the *Voyage of Brendan* emphasise the precious stones of paradise. These stones were the subject of a whole branch of exegesis where they were connected with spiritual virtues. In fact, Brendan is told to bring some back to Ireland with him as evidence for his voyage. More importantly, the angel tells the saint that the island will become known to his successors, many years in the future after the persecution of Christians, surely a reference to the end of the world in the Book of Revelations.

Finally, the Heavenly Jerusalem is described as being divided into the two parts by the River of Life which flows from the throne of God. Barinthus tells Brendan that the Promised Land of the Saints has a river flowing through it from east to west (*Nauigatio* §1) while Brendan himself sees that it divides the island in two (*Nauigatio* §28). The saint is unable to go beyond the river as he must await the Final Judgement at which point he will be able to fully enter the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Is it the genius of the *Voyage of Brendan* that this clearly otherworldly island has so often been taken literally. I will return to this in a moment but, what is the text trying to tell us? Barintus remarks to Mernóc's monks that they live *ante portam paradisi* 'at the gate of Paradise' (*Nauigatio* §1). Their monastery is near Slieve League (*mons Lapidus*) and the journey from it to the Promised Land of the Saints seems short. On the other hand, Brendan travels for seven years. However, he is explicitly told that this is God's will; he only reaches the island when he and his monks are ready. To do this, Brendan turns eastwards back towards Ireland, rather than travelling further west. So again, the narrative suggests that the island can be found close to the Irish coast. Of course, it is not really a physical island at all, as the tale's readers would have realised. Instead, they would have understood it in theological terms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

However, it is the genius of this text that it could be appreciated beyond theology. It was very popular on the Continent, being represented in over 100 manuscripts. Moreover, it was adapted into other vernacular languages including early attempts in Middle Dutch (*De reis van sint Brandaan*) and Anglo-Norman French (*Voyage de St Brendan*). These adaptations are really new texts. They tend to focus more on action than the *Voyage of Brendan* and are more fantastical. However, they also helped popularise the notion that the tale, in some way, was a record of a real voyage or contained actual geographical knowledge. As we have seen, the geography of the north Atlantic does, indeed, play a crucial role in the text. But, it was not this which inspired the imaginations of later readers. It was the Promised Land of the Saints. This became conflated with other Irish otherworld islands as well as being inspired by the speculations of Classical geographers. Thus, was born the idea that there was actually a Saint Brendan's Island to be found in the Ocean to the west of Europe. This, of course, runs contrary to the original tale which explicitly has Brendan sail east, back towards Ireland, in order to reach paradise.

This mythical island was sometimes called St Brendan's Island or *isla de san Borondón* and was a mainstay of medieval and renaissance cartography. The island features on the thirteenth-century Hereford World Map (a T-O *mappa mundi*) off the coast of Africa while the map of the Pizzigani brothers places it just north of the Canaries. By the Age of Discovery it was believed to be located somewhere in the Atlantic, perhaps west of the Canary islands or, further out, beyond the Azores. It was sometimes considered to be the mysterious 'eighth island' of the Canaries. Between 1526 and 1721 four naval expeditions left the Canaries in search of the promised land of St Brendan. More confusingly, a link was made between this island and the even more mysterious Hy Breasail or Brasil. This appears on fifteenth-century maps as *Insula Brasil*. The origin of this island is controversial and it appears to represent a conflation of several otherworldly locales. It is sometimes associated with Brazil but this seems to be a coincidence because of the similiarity to the name of the Brazilwood tree.

That last example, however, the conflation of Hy Brasil with Brazil, is a symptom of a popular approach to the *Voyage of Brendan*. This sees it as recording Irish knowledge of the new world, although usually this is seen as referring to North rather than South America. The highpoint of this is Tim Severin's attempt to reconstruct Brendan's voyage in 1976. Taking the *Voyage* as his guide, he built the type of boat which would have been used by Irish clerical voyagers in the early middle ages. His experiment certainly offered further support to the capabilities of these voyagers. On the other hand, his belief that the text recorded a journey to Newfoundland is not founded in an analysis of what it actually says. We have already looked at the description of the Promised Land of the Saints and I have shown how closely it is modelled on the Heavenly Jerusalem. It is certainly not Newfoundland. Moreover, attempts to locate Brendan's destination in the Americas run contrary to the text's assertion that the Promised Land of the Saints can actually be found right next to Ireland.

However, this is not to denigrate the rich and fascinating responses to the *Voyage of Brendan* from the middle ages up until the present. These, I would argue, are tied into the theme of this conference, the importance of landscape for human perceptions of the world. And finally, I want to stress that the *Voyage of Brendan* compellingly presents a variety of landscapes, real and imaginary. It shows Heaven,

Hell and the liminal states in between. It is this combination of realism, the theological and the fantastical that makes the text so special and so influential.

¹ Selmer ‘Introduction’, *Navigatio*, xxvii–xxix, argues for a tenth-century date and a Continental origin. However, significant divergence in the tenth-century copies of the text led Carney, ‘Review’, 37–44, to suggest a date in the first half of the ninth century and an Irish origin. M. Esposito, ‘L’éditio de la “Nauigatio S. Brendani,”’ *Scriptorium* 15 (1961), 288, affirms a ninth-century date and an Irish provenance, as does I. Orlandi, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani: Introduzione* (Milan, 1968), 72–3, 131–60. D. N. Dumville, ‘Two approaches to the dating of “Navigatio Sancti Brendani”’, *Studi Medievali* 29 (1988), 95–9, uses an ingenious political argument to date the text to eighth-century Ireland.

² Carney, ‘Review’, 37–44.

³ A useful, is somewhat dated, study of classical geography is J. O. Thomson, *History of ancient geography* (New York 1965); the reception of this classical tradition by medieval christianity is studied in detail by N. Lozovsky, *The Earth is our book’: geographical knowledge in the Latin West ca. 400–1000* (Michigan 2000); a good example of Irish knowledge of these traditions is found in the work of Dicuil, edited by J. J. Tierney, *Dicuili Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Dublin 1967) esp. I § 2.

⁴ T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The social background to Irish *peregrinatio*’, *Celtica* 11 (1976), 43–59.

⁵ For example, a famous historical example is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle s.a.* 891, which describes three Irishmen who reached Cornwall in a boat without oars and subsequently went to Alfred’s court.

⁶ W. F. Thrall, ‘Clerical sea pilgrimages and the imrama’, in *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature* (Chicago, 1923), 276–83; K. Hughes, ‘On an Irish litany of pilgrim saints compiled c. 800’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 77 (1959), 305–31; J. Wooding, ‘Monastic voyaging and the *imrrama*’, in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. J. Wooding (Dublin, 2000), 226–45.

⁷ D. N. Dumville, ‘*Echtrae* and *Immram*: some problems of definition’, *Ériu* 27 (1976), 73–94.

⁸ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIV, 6.8 (ed. Lindsay, vol. ii; tr. Barney, 294).

⁹ Hughes, ‘On an Irish litany’, 305–31.

¹⁰ VC 1.6, 2.42 (ed. & tr. Anderson & Anderson, 28–31, 166–71).

¹¹ Hughes, ‘Changing theories’ 146–7.

¹² W. Follett, *Céli Dé in Ireland: Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), is the most complete modern study of the Céli Dé.

¹³ A good example is *The Monastery of Tallaght*, §17 (edd. & tr. Gwynn & Purton, 133).

¹⁴ J. O’Neill (ed. & tr.), ‘The Rule of Ailbe of Emly’, *Ériu* 3 (1907), 104–5 (§33).