

The other *immrama*: *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla* and *Immram Curaig Ua Corra*

The Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla: texts

This text is found in one manuscript. It consists of a prose telling of the story interspersed with poetry, which also tells the story. Mixed texts of prose and verse are quite normal in early Irish narrative literature. Nevertheless, those scholars who have studied this *immram* have concluded that the prose and the verse belong to different periods and were not composed by the same author. It is generally believed that the verse is earlier, and that the prose is derived from the verse. For the voyage core of the text, this seems quite plausible, though it is worth noting that the frame narrative is much fuller in the prose version.

It should be borne in mind that the verse version is embedded, section by section, in the prose version. Therefore, although the verse may be read as a separate work (if we accept the theory that it is an earlier work), the prose on its own may well never have been intended as a separate work, but to be read in conjunction with the verse.

Because scholars believe that the prose is secondary, the two parts of the *immram* have generally been treated separately. The prose was edited and translated by Whitley Stokes. You will find a link to his text on Moodle. The verse has been translated by Donncha Ó hAodha. This may not be easily available to you, but since the prose tells the same story more fully, it is not absolutely necessary for you to read the verse.

NB. There is a later prose version (B) as well, which I am not covering in this course. It is discussed by Clancy.

Synopsis: verse version

Snédgus and Mac Riagla are clerics of St Columba's federation. They put to sea on *peregrinatio*. At first they row themselves, but when Christ intervenes to save them from death by thirst they resolve to trust in his direction and leave their oars in the bottom of the boat. We have seen this idea in other tales. They then visit a series of islands, in which they are fed miraculously and are preached at by a bird. Eventually they reach an island inhabited by Irishmen, exiles of the people called Fir Roiss who were set adrift after killing their king Fiacha son of Domnall. In the same island are the biblical figures Enoch and Elijah, waiting for the apocalypse, which is described. In the last island which they visit, they receive a warning that the sins of the Irish will soon lead to half their country being occupied by foreigners (presumably a reference to the Vikings).

Synopsis: prose version (A)

This version has a long introduction telling the story of the Fir Roiss and their oppression by Fiacha son of Domnall. After they slaughter Fiacha, his brother Donnchad consults the clerics of St Columba's federation, namely Snédgus and Mac Riagla. It is they who suggest the punishment of setting the Fir Roiss adrift (Donnchad had wanted to burn them alive). Only as the two clerics are on their way back to Iona do they resolve to undergo the same penance as the Fir Roiss, but voluntarily. After that the story is much the same as the verse version.

Interpretation

This tale combines both the voluntary, monastic *peregrinatio* of the kind we saw in the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*, and the kind of involuntary punishment *peregrinatio* imposed on a layman which we found in the Maccuill story. We might well argue that the voyage of Máel Dúin turned into a forced *peregrinatio* of that kind as well, once he was blown off course and out into the trackless ocean. Thus it is worth bearing both the Brendan story and the Máel Dúin story in mind when reading this *immram*.

Clancy, who discusses all three versions of the voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla, argues that this *immram* has a much more explicitly religious message than the voyage of Máel Dúin. It is also an explicitly apocalyptic message: repent before it is too late. And it is very clearly directed at laymen as much as clerics. The Fir Roiss do penance for their resort to violence, and are cleansed of their sin. The rest of the Irish need to do the same, or else they will be punished by God. That punishment will occur both in this world (the Vikings) and the next (after Judgement Day).

The voyage of the Uí Chorra: text

The textual situation of this tale is complex and unsatisfactory. The earliest copy, in the Book of Fermoy (15th century), was edited by Stokes, but he took the beginning from a later copy (dated 1744), because the Fermoy copy was illegible here. There is also another late copy. Moreover, there is another version of the tale, in mixed prose and verse, extant in several late manuscripts.

The manuscripts have been analysed by Caoimhín Breatnach. Breatnach argues that even the early version, in Fermoy and the other two manuscripts, is composite. He considers that the introduction to the tale, which is mainly about the Uí Chorra themselves and relates the events that led up to their pilgrimage, was added to the voyage section, in which the Uí Chorra play a much less prominent role. In this latter section the main protagonist is one of the clerics accompanying the Uí Chorra. He is called *in sruith* 'the elder' in the

Irish text (note that Stoke's translation in section 56 is wrong: he translates 'elder (brother)', trying to make out that the *sruith* is one of the three Uí Chorra brothers, but this is not a tenable translation of *sruith*).

For our purposes it is not necessary to worry further about this problem: the text, as we have it, was put together by an author who intended both introduction and voyage narrative to be read together, whatever we make of their earlier history, and we can read it as it stands.

Synopsis

Conall the Red ua Corra, a landowner of Connacht, has no children. He and his wife make a pact with the devil and in return they have three sons, the Uí Chorra. When they grow up they turn to evil and become marauders who specialize in raiding and burning churches. They go to their grandfather's church, Clogher, intending to kill him and burn his church. Nevertheless they accept his hospitality for the night. One of the brothers has a vision of heaven and hell in his sleep, as a result of which the three Uí Chorra repent and are converted to righteousness. They go to St Findén (i.e. Finnian) of Clonard to receive their penance. He tells them to rebuild every church they destroyed. The last of these is Kinvara (in co. Galway), which is on the coast. When they observe the sea, the Uí Chorra resolve to go on *peregrinatio*. They take with them three clerics, a shipwright, a servant ('gillie' in Stokes's translation) and a jester who insists on joining them. As usual in the *immram* genre, they visit many islands. The jester dies and goes to heaven in the shape of a little bird. Many of the islands they visit are places of savage punishment for sinners, especially for people who worked on Sundays. In the last island they meet a cleric who foretells their fate. He tells the three clerics that they are to found a church. The tale concludes with an account of how the story of the Uí Chorra was preserved, and a poem.

Interpretation

This is clearly an account of a penitential pilgrimage like that of Maccuill in the Patrick stories. The three Uí Chorra are the worst kind of sinners imaginable, at least to a medieval Irish churchman – they are plunderers and burners of churches and murderers of the clergy. Clancy points out that the jester, too, belongs to a category of people defined as deeply sinful. Yet all are saved: the message is that repentance is available to all, however bad. By contrast, the Uí Chorra and their companions meet many sinners on the journey who did not repent in time, and are thus caught in hellish torments for all eternity. This contrast may be seen as basic to the structure of the tale.

There is clearly considerable influence on this tale from another genre, that of visions of heaven and hell. To a large degree, what the Uí Chorra see on their voyage are scenes from heaven and hell respectively. The most famous of such texts was the *Visio Pauli*, the Vision or Apocalypse of Paul. This late antique

text survives in many languages. In it Paul is shown both paradise and hell. Another, Irish vision text is the Vision of St Fursa (or Fursey).

Conclusion: the otherworld in the *immrama*

Can we generalize at all about the otherworld in the Irish voyage tales, including the four *immrama* and the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*?

Each voyage starts in the rooted society of early medieval Ireland. We find here named people and places; there is no doubt that we are meant to feel ourselves in a familiar and well understood world. That changes when the boat puts to sea and leaves the familiar shore behind. Out in the ocean, there are strange sights, wonders of nature, visions and symbols of the Christian afterlife. Few of the people we meet are given names, unless, like Ailbe, they have brought their names with them from Ireland. The ocean is otherwise quite lacking in such familiar points of orientation. It is disorientated. Out here, we are carried along by the will of God. What we see belongs to another plane of existence. Much of it may be argued to be symbolic of the life to come, of the fate of the soul, of judgement, heaven and hell.

The voyage tales thus do indeed participate in the otherworld paradigm. We can see how they relate to actual penitential practices in the early medieval Gaelic world. What is much more difficult to know is to what extent, if at all, their otherworld paradigms owe anything to pre-Christian beliefs. And how – if at all – does *Immram Brain* fit with the other texts called *immrama*?

Reading

The prose version of Snédgus and Mac Riagla is edited in:

Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla', *Revue Celtique*, 9 (1888), 14–25. [Link on Moodle](#).

The poetic version (translation only):

Donncha Ó hAodha, 'The Poetic Version of the Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla', in A. Ahlqvist and V. Čapková (eds.), *Dán do Oide: Essays in Memory of Conn R. Ó Cléirigh* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 419–29.

The Uí Chorra:

Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', *Revue Celtique*, 14 (1893), 22–69. [Link on Moodle](#).

The main interpretative studies are those of Hillers and Clancy, for which see the introductory essay to '*Immram Curaig Máele Dúin*', also in this unit.

Caoimhín Breatnach's analysis of the text of the Uí Corra story is highly technical, but you should be aware of at least the outlines of his argument:

Caoimhín Breatnach, 'The Transmission and Structure of *Immram Curaig Ua Corra*', *Ériu*, 53 (2003), 91–107.

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