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The Latin Version

John J. O'Meara and Jonathan M. Wooding¹

Manuscripts, Editions and Translations The *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* ('Voyage of Saint Brendan the abbot') was one of the most widely read and imitated texts in the Middle Ages, and the consequent range of variant and subsidiary versions has served to make the task of editors a particularly complex one. In addition to the surviving recensions of the canonical text (Burgess and Strijbosch 2000), there also exists a number of translations into vernacular languages, as well as a variety of abridgements and conflation with the more conventional Latin and Irish lives (*vitae* / *bethada*) of Brendan (Selmer 1959, 103-4; Sharpe 1991, 390-91). The *Navigatio* also spawned a number of imitations, both in Ireland, where the *immram* genre is mostly derived from the *Navigatio*, and in Europe, where evident counterparts to St Brendan occur in a number of voyage tales. From an early date the *Navigatio* was an international tale and this is reflected in its complex textual history. One hundred and twenty-five surviving copies of the *Navigatio*, located across most of the nation-states of modern Europe, indicate, by medieval standards, a very wide readership.

The oldest manuscripts of the *Navigatio* date from the tenth century. The earliest manuscript tradition of the *Navigatio* is entirely continental, and exemplars of the *Navigatio* in Irish manuscripts derive from French and German families of the text (Dumville 1988, 88 n. 9). The *Navigatio* made an early appearance in print, an English version being printed by Caxton in 1483; Latin and vernacular versions were reprinted intermittently throughout the early modern period.

The popularity of the work was doubtless more as a tale of wonders than as a saint's life. The interest of the *Navigatio* was very often seen as being more historical and geographical than theological. Columbus

1. The introduction to this chapter has been written by Jonathan M. Wooding; the translation, by John J. O'Meara, is published by permission of Colin Smythe.

undoubtedly read the *Navigatio*, and St Brendan's Isle appeared on maps as late as the modern period. The Bollandists, by contrast, were notably unimpressed by the *Navigatio* and refused to print it or the *Vita* (by then most likely only available in conflation with the *Navigatio*) in the *Acta sanctorum* (Esposito 1938, 344).

The first modern editions of the *Navigatio* were those which eschewed the continuous tradition of the text in favour of an attempt to reconstruct the primary text from manuscripts. The rich body of material presented problems of scale and nineteenth-century editions were typically diplomatic texts, or they were based on a few recensions with limited reference to the range of variant readings. The earliest edition, by Achille Jubinal (1836), was taken from two Paris manuscripts and it included a useful introduction and a discussion of the Old French versions. This edition had only a limited print-run. In 1871 Carl Schröder published a new edition based on MS Leipzig, Pauliner Bibliothek 844 and collated with Jubinal's edition and one other manuscript. Cardinal Moran (1872), in his *Acta sancti Brendani*, printed the text from a Dublin manuscript (Archbishop Marsh's Library, Z.3.1.5, the Codex Kilkenniensis or Codex Ardmachanus), along with other documents relating to the saint's cult.

These texts, particularly those published by Moran, formed the basis of most discussions of the *Navigatio* prior to 1959, the year in which Carl Selmer published an edition from a *codex optimus* (MS Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek 401), with variants from seventeen further manuscripts, selected from among an identified total of 120. Although in technical terms this was an adequate edition, several weaknesses can be identified. James Carney (1963, 37-39) demonstrated that the editor's reconstruction of the opening sentences of the text, which are concerned with the identity and genealogy of the saint, was poor. Selmer's unlikely theory concerning the date and place of authorship also led him to questionable conclusions regarding the composition and form of the early text (1959, xxviii-xxix). Esposito (1961) was also critical of the editor's apparent belief that the text preserved some record of the discovery of America.

Though it has a copious textual tradition, the *Navigatio* is – the later recensions aside – a relatively homogeneous text, and the readings of the manuscripts bear witness to an original common version. Most variants are relatively minor and in many cases the readings of the original text can be established with confidence. A new edition would be useful, but it is not of pressing importance. Giovanni Orlandi has undertaken a critical edition of the text based on the collation of a larger range of manuscripts; so far only the introductory volume and a preliminary version of the text have appeared (1968). An edition by Michaela Zelzer (Vienna) is in

progress. Orlandi's edition has identified a number of variants from Selmer's edition, few of them of great substance. The most notable is his identification that the last portion of Selmer's text, §XXIX, which provides an account of St Brendan's death, is not present in the earliest versions, demonstrating that so far as genre is concerned the original *Navigatio* was almost completely distinct from a saint's *vita*.²

Setting aside the Middle English version in the *South English Legendary* and Caxton's printed version, the first English translation of the *Navigatio* was O'Donoghue's translation of Moran's edition (1893). In 1965 J.F. Webb made the first full translation of Selmer's text. However, the translation by John J. O'Meara (1976), printed in the present volume, is in general more satisfactory; it takes account of the *corrigenda* published in reviews of Selmer's edition, especially those of Carney.

Authorship The *Navigatio* is anonymous, which is not unusual for a text dating from the early medieval period. The text itself does not record explicitly where or when it was written. It is written in a clear, mostly culturally neutral Latin idiom and, although it may draw on earlier tales and traditions, this does not obscure the fact that, as we have it, it is clearly the work of a single, immensely gifted and original author who would appear to have been a monk. That he was an Irishman is evident from his use of genealogical and topographical details, as well as from some words and names – for example the great fish Iasconius, whose name is from Old Irish *í asc* 'fish'³ – and the occasional instance where we suspect that the Latin syntax represents a calque on Old Irish sentence structure.⁴

The author had available to him traditions concerning the deeds of St Brendan, who had lived some two hundred years before the text was written. Stories of the voyages of St Brendan were doubtless already in circulation, as can be seen by references in works which cannot have been influenced by the *Navigatio*, such as the *Vita Columbae* ('Life of Columba') and the *Vita Machutis* ('Life of St Malo').⁵ The author also had access to

2. We cannot rule out the possibility, however, that an early text in the stemma simply lost its final folio.

3. John Carey has kindly drawn my attention to the Hisperic Latin word (*s*)*calta* (§XVII), translated by O'Meara as 'fruit' (though it is more commonly translated as 'flower'). This is likely to reflect Irish origin (see Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 166, Harvey and Power, 'Hiberno-Latin *scaltae*', 277-79).

4. For example the opening line '*filius . . . nepotis*', which is a calque upon either Irish '*macc . . . moccu*' or (later) '*macc . . . ua*' ('son of . . . of the sept of').

5. See Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* III.17, ed. Anderson and Anderson, 206-7; for the *Vita Machutis* see Mac Mathúna 1994b.

stories of voyages made by St Ailbe and his brethren as well as accounts of the journeys of more recent marine pilgrims (*peregrini*), who, probably in the early 700s, had voyaged from the western coasts of Ireland and Scotland in search of a 'hermitage in the ocean' (*herimum in ociano*). This activity, in imitation of the Desert Fathers' retreat into the wilderness, was inspired by texts such as the *Vita Antonii* ('Life of St Antony') of Athanasius, the *Historia monachorum* ('History of the Monks') of Rufinus and the *Vita Pauli primi eremitae* ('Life of Paul the First Hermit') of St Jerome. These texts, or works which cited them, were also used by the author of the *Navigatio*. Whether or not the author had available to him an early version of the *Vita Brendani* is unclear. That the *Vita* is of early medieval date appears likely in view of the citation of its details in the *Litany of the Pilgrim Saints* (c.800-900). While the *Navigatio* and the *Vita* have certain themes in common (see below), there is no definite evidence of the influence of one upon the other in their primary detail, though the two texts were later to be conflated.

In terms of style, the author has an eye for narrative consistency and a very delicate touch when representing detail, which has frequently inspired his audience to see a degree of verisimilitude in descriptions of details which are clearly of metaphysical character (e.g. Ashe 1962; Severin 1978). Details of the monastic life are lavishly described. More fanciful details are sometimes subtly understated.⁶

At the very beginning of the text, St Brendan is introduced by the words *Sanctus Brendanus, filius Finlocha, nepotis Alti de genere Eogeni, Stagni Len Mumenensium ortus fuit*: 'Saint Brendan, son of Finlocha, of the sept of the Alltraige of the Éóganacht of Loch Léin, was born in Munster.' This bears witness to the author's detailed knowledge of Munster genealogy, though, as it stands, the genealogy itself is defective. The Alltraige cannot be described as located in the territory of the Éóganacht of Loch Léin (Ó Corráin 1969, 27-37; 1970, 19-22). Some attempts to date the text have treated this as reflecting a particular historical claim. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, however, in a personal communication, suggests that in all probability the text is corrupt at this point. If this is so, the defect must have occurred very early in the textual tradition, as it is common to all exemplars.

6. A very striking example of this is in the respective descriptions of what lies beneath the transparent sea in the *Navigatio* (§XXI) and *Immram Máele Dúin* (§XXIII). In the *Navigatio* there are schools of fish 'lying in herds like pastures . . . so numerous that they looked like a city of circles'. In *Immram Máele Dúin* (inspired in this case by the *Navigatio*) there are actual 'roofed strongholds and a beautiful country . . . and a drove of herds' (ed. Stokes 1889, 55).

The detail in the *Navigatio* concerning sites in Corca Dhuibhne (west of Dingle, Co. Kerry) is clearly based on local knowledge of their orientation. The mountain on which Brendan pitches his tent (cf. Daniel 11. 45) in the 'distant part of his native region where his parents were living' (§IV)⁷ is described as 'extending long into the ocean', which is an adequate description of the elevation of the north side of Brandon Mountain, and though the description of Brandon Creek, Feohanagh, as 'having entry for only one boat' (*ubi erat introitus unius navis*) would appear to understate its size very slightly there can be little doubt that this is the location that the author had in his mind's eye.

These elements point to the author having been an Irishman. The author need not necessarily have been resident in Ireland at the time of writing. An Irish *peregrinus* on the continent could just as easily have composed the text. Dicuil, writing in Aachen in 825, includes in his *De mensura orbis terrae* ('Of the Measurement of the Earth' (ed. Tierney 1967)) details of the voyages of Irish *peregrini* which he had probably acquired from earlier residence in Iona (Wooding 2000b). These voyages include accounts of the Faroe Islands and Iceland, and the same voyages appear to have been known to the author of the *Navigatio* – for example, the fantastic description of the islands inhabited by sheep and birds appears to have been based on an account similar to the one used by Dicuil in his description of the Faroe Islands. This does not mean, of course, that Dicuil himself was the author. The author we are looking for would perhaps have been a slightly earlier figure, albeit one whose knowledge of the experience of ocean voyaging by the *peregrini* was similar to Dicuil's.

Selmer's candidate for author of the *Navigatio* was such an Irish exile. On the basis of the distribution of the earliest manuscripts, he attempted to locate him in tenth-century Lotharingia (Selmer 1950); he even went as far as to ascribe authorship to a specific person, Israel Episcopus. However, Selmer's views have not found acceptance. The mid-tenth-century date of the earliest recension of the text and the overall textual tradition indicate a date of composition considerably earlier than the *floruit* of Israel. Moreover, the gap, probably two centuries or greater, between the original composition and the Lotharingian exemplars does not argue for an early date for these manuscripts within the stemma. The fact that the earliest textual tradition is continental does not prove continental authorship – even for texts of known Irish authorship the earliest copies are often exclusively in continental manuscripts. Claims

7. I suspect that this passage is intended to highlight the tension between the ties of kin and the monastic vocation (cf. Matthew 10: 37).

based on manuscript tradition are of limited value for determining the provenance of the tale.

Date and Context If we seek evidence which will assist us in dating the text itself, as opposed to the earliest manuscripts, we can identify a number of details which can be dated with some degree of precision. In a brief discussion of the relationship between the *Vita Albei* ('Life of St Ailbe') and Munster historiography, Herbert (1999) has suggested that the reference in the *Navigatio* to St Ailbe's voyage may be part of a tit-for-tat comparison between the voyaging traditions of the two saints. Herbert dates the *Vita Albei* to the period between 721 and 742, and the *Navigatio* can plausibly be dated to the same century. Dumville (1988) has placed the text before c.786 on the basis that Brendan's Alltraige / Eóganachta genealogy relates to a period in which there were close connections between these two peoples.

As the *Navigatio* incorporates details seemingly derived from datable monastic sea voyages between the late 500s and the early 800s, these may also be used to suggest a *terminus post quem* by which certain sources were available to the author of the *Navigatio*. Perhaps the most plausible contribution to the *Navigatio* by genuine voyaging is a description of the Faroe Islands (§IX). Dicuil (ed. Tierney, 76-77) states that Irish anchorites lived on these islands from c.730 onwards, and if the details in Dicuil and the *Navigatio* derive from the same source this would seem to rule out a date much before the mid 700s. We may yet hope for other evidence of cited sources. The wealth of liturgical detail in the *Navigatio*, such as the antiphons chanted in the Office (§XII and §XVII), would seem to offer possibilities for dating.⁸

An upper limit for the composition of the text is harder to set (see Orlandi 1968, 72); the textual tradition would suggest a date no later than the ninth century. But the overall context seems to be a pattern of voyaging and its commemoration in literature centred on the period c.730-830.

Content and Structure The text is structured around a series of episodes connected by a symmetrical narrative, based on the feasts of the monastic year (Bourgeault 1983; Bray 1995; O'Loughlin 2000, Ch. 9). For convenience, these are outlined here by reference to the chapters as

8. See Stevenson 1998, 314. My colleague Tom O'Loughlin, who kindly read this introduction in typescript, informs me that the antiphons are of an undoubtedly early type. The close resemblance of these to the antiphons in the Antiphonary of Bangor has been noted by Curran 1984, 169-77.

numbered in the accompanying translation, though it should be noted that these chapters derive only from late manuscripts and that in all probability the text originally contained no divisions. The structure of the text can be broken down into the following divisions:

- (1) Barrind's account of the journey to *Insula deliciosa* and thence to the *Terra repromissionis sanctorum* (§I)
- (2) Brendan obtains permission for his voyage from the elders and departs (§§II-V)
- (3) The journey to the Isle of Sheep / Paradise of Birds archipelago. The start of the symmetrical cycle (§§VI-IX)
- (4) Adventures on the ocean. The circuit of voyages with occasional northward diversions into the perilous zone. Final return to the Isle of Sheep / Paradise of Birds archipelago (§§X-XXVII)
- (5) The eastward voyage to the *Terra repromissionis sanctorum*. Thence to *Insula deliciarum*. The return to Ireland (§XXVIII)
- (6) The death of Brendan (§XXIX)

The narrative begins with the genealogy of the saint (§I). A vision of the Promised Land of the Saints (*Terra repromissionis sanctorum*), which will be Brendan's destination, is revealed to him through the visit of Barrind,⁹ who tells him of a visit he had made to this place with Abbot Mernoc.¹⁰ The two men had set off across the sea from Mernoc's monastery on *Insula deliciosa* ('Isle of Delights'), itself located off the coast of Slieve League in Donegal.¹¹

What was for Barrind simply a place to visit and for Mernoc a place of regular retreat became for Brendan what is termed in other Latin saints' lives 'a higher place of pilgrimage' (*potioris peregrinationis locus*), i.e. the personal destination which would be the ultimate goal of his *peregrinatio* (see Charles-Edwards 1976). Brendan then shuts himself up for forty days with fourteen chosen companions (§II). This is followed by a visit to St Enda (in Aran), then by retreat to Brandon Mountain (§IV). After this (§V), the monks build a boat; they are joined by three supernumerary companions, who have left without permission of their abbot (for which reason Brendan predicts that they will not return). They set out in the direction of the solstice.

Events henceforth are episodic. After forty days they come to the rocky island (§VI); a brother is tempted and dies, but his soul is saved

9. The name Barrind is a 'pet name' or hypocorism *Barr-finn* 'little / dear Finn / Finnian'.

10. Mernoc is a hypocoristic name for St Ernán (*Mo-Ern-óc* 'my little/dear Ernán').

11. Slieve League is rendered *Mons lapidum*. See Carney 1963, 39, who identifies *Insula deliciosa* with *Imis Caim*, a monastery of St Ernán (though the discussion of its location is inaccurate).

(§VII); a youth gives them food (§VIII); they come to the Isle of Sheep, where they stay until Holy Saturday (§IX); the first encounter with Jasconius, the giant fish, takes place (§X); they land in the Paradise of Birds, where birds chant the canonical hours (§XI); they visit the monastery of the surviving followers of St Ailbe (§XII); they drink of the soporific well (§XIII); they sail north and encounter the Coagulated Sea (§XIV); they spend Easter again on the Isle of Sheep, Jasconius and the Paradise of Birds (§XV); they sail for forty days and encounter a sea monster (§XVI); they sail north and come to the Isle of the Three Choirs or Anchorites (§XVII); a bird brings them grapes and they land on the island from which they came (§XVIII); they encounter the gryphon (§XIX); they spend Christmas in St Ailbe's community and Easter on the Isle of Sheep, Jasconius and the Paradise of Birds (§XX); they come across the clear sea (§XXI), the Crystal Column (§XXII), the Isle of Smiths (§XXIII) and the fiery mountain (§XXIV); they meet Judas Iscariot (§XXV) and Paul the Hermit (§XXVI); they again spend Easter on the same sites (§XXVII); they visit the Promised Land of the Saints and return to Ireland (§XXVIII); Brendan dies (§XXIX).

This brief analysis of the structure of the *Navigatio* reveals a number of features. Criticism of the text's geography has been distracted by the tension existing between, on the one hand, those who would reconstruct the sequence of episodes in terms of a half-recalled voyage via a stepping stone route to America and, on the other hand, the sceptics of such readings. In amongst this debate, it is not often noted that the author had both a vision of the geography of his ocean and a conception of its chronological relations to the lives of other saints.¹² Brendan was a sixth-century saint and tradition had it that Ailbe was a contemporary of the fifth-century Patrick; therefore, in reality Ailbe should be dead by Brendan's time. When the latter visits Ailbe's community (XII), the author is careful to note the length of time (eighty years) which has elapsed since Ailbe's time.

The voyage takes place in the Atlantic, to the west and north-west of Ireland. Most critics of 'rationalizing' readings of the text have pointed out that the voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints is reached after a voyage in an *easterly* direction and for this reason cast doubt on those who would read the *Navigatio* as a voyage to the western Atlantic. A far

¹² There is a continuous tradition of criticism of the *Navigatio* which views it as representing a voyage to America or Canada (see Introduction, pp. 9-11). Suggestions that Brendan discovered North America, however, depend on a reading of the text as a single westward voyage by the saint (see esp. Little 1945; Chapman 1973; Severin 1978; Wooding 2000b).

westward voyage it certainly is not, but not because the Promised Land lies in the east. Initially, Brendan leaves Ireland and sets sail on the ocean. He reaches the Isle of Sheep / Paradise of Birds and then voyages for seven years in a cycle. To get to the Promised Land of the Saints, he eventually goes *east* from the Paradise of Birds. After that, he returns via *Insula deliciarum* (§XVIII). The latter is clearly the same place as *Insula deliciosa* in chapter I (Bieler 1976; O'Meara 1976, xviii-xix and *pace* Carney 1963).¹³ Barrind and Mernoc went west from *Insula deliciosa* to the Promised Land of the Saints. The Promised Land of the Saints is therefore west of *Insula deliciosa* / *deliciarum*, but east of the Paradise of Birds. The Promised Land of the Saints is to the *west* of Ireland, able to be reached from a liminal space in the ocean between Ireland and other islands. It is not the uttermost west, nor east. The Isle of Smiths (§XXIII) and the coagulated sea (§XIV) are both reached after a voyage northward from the Paradise of Birds. The north constitutes a zone of peril (see Borsje 1996, 164).

Sources The *Navigatio* clearly uses earlier sources, which fall into several categories. It has a close relationship with other voyage tales, the priority of which has not yet been clearly established with respect to the *Navigatio* (Dumville 1976; Mac Mathúna 1994a). The *Navigatio* makes reference to the tradition of the voyage of the brethren of St Ailbe. This is mentioned in the ninth-century *Litany of Pilgrim Saints* (Hughes 1959; Sanderlin 1975) and in the *Vita Albei* (§XXIX, ed. Heist 1965, 129). Of non-Irish sources, texts relating to desert monasticism are clearly known to the author. The episode in which one of the brethren is possessed by a devil in the form of an Ethiopian boy (§VII) is in all probability based on an episode in Athanasius (*Vita Antonii*, §VI). The description of the monks swarming from their cells on *Insula deliciosa* derives from Rufinus's *Historia monachorum*.¹⁴ Paul the Hermit is clearly the 'first hermit' of Egypt commemorated by St Jerome in *Vita Pauli primi eremitae*, which the author of the *Navigatio* appears to have used.

The story is an eschatology, and typically the events of the Bible, as well as possible reference to apocrypha, are close at hand. Selmer has documented the direct quotations from Psalms; the many indirect citations of Scripture remain largely uncatalogued. Discussion of the sea monsters, following the example of Borsje (1996), is also a *desideratum*. O'Loughlin (1999) has argued that the description of the river and

¹³ At least to the author of the *Navigatio*, who may have been conflating separate locations in Irish tradition.

¹⁴ I owe this identification to my research student Dan Tipp.

distances in the *Terra repromissionis* derives from the Book of Revelation. Esposito (1960) and Dumville (1988) have suggested that the presence of Enoch and Elijah in the *Tír Tairngire* ('promised land') in the *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla* ('The Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla') indicates strongly that the author of the *Navigatio* had in mind the very same place, where Enoch and Elijah await the end of the earth (McNamara 1975, 25-27). Esposito (1960) maintained that the Irish had access to a specific tradition, available in Brittany, which located Enoch and Elijah's land in the ocean. The evidence for the latter is persuasive, but not compelling.

Zimmer (1889) argued strongly that the *Navigatio* was dependent on Virgil's *Aeneid*, an argument which was convincingly dismissed by Thrall (1917); some influence, however, perhaps indirect, remains more than likely.

Genre The *Navigatio* is first and foremost a monastic tale of a monk who is drawn from the timeless task of 'fighting the good fight' (cf 1 Timothy 6: 12, 2 Timothy 4: 7) in the wilderness to set forth on a search for a revealed higher place of exile. In many ways, the tale is unique in structure, although many of its motifs are paralleled in Old and Middle Irish *echtraí* ('adventures') and *immrama* ('voyages'), as well as in Middle Irish and Latin hagiography and 'visions' (Old Irish *fisi* / Latin *visiones*).

In Irish tales such as *Echtrae Condle* ('The Adventure of Condle'), *Bail in Scáil* ('Phantom's Prophecy') and *Immram Brain* ('The Voyage of Bran') tokens are brought to draw the recipient to an immanent otherworld (Carey 1982-83). In the *Vita Brendani* the saint is vouchsafed a vision from a mountain top of a *Terra secreta* ('secret place') in the ocean, while in *Dá apstol décc na hÉirenn* ('The Twelve Apostles of Ireland') a flowering branch is carried on the breeze to an assembly of clergy (Plummer 1922, 96). In the *Navigatio* Brendan's vision is more mundane, being acquired from Barrind by word of mouth, although, like St Ailbe and the monks Snédgus and Mac Riagla (§XVII, ed. Stokes 1888, 21), he does pick up a flowering branch while on his voyage (§XVIII).

When setting off on his voyage, Brendan takes with him three monks who have left without permission. This motif is also seen in the episode concerning the attempt by Cormac Ua Liatháin to voyage north from Iona in the *Vita Columbae*, where his voyage fails because he has taken along with him a brother who has departed without his abbot's permission. In the *immrama* such supernumerary figures also fulfil the function of extras who are marked for a different fate, though there they are not monks.

Various locations are shared between the *Navigatio*, the *immrama* and *vitae*, especially the two longer *immrama* of Máel Dúin and the Uí Corra. Examples are too numerous to be listed here in full, but they include the Crystal Column, the Coagulated Sea, the Isle of Sheep, various islands where processions are held and islands where the occupants throw objects at the boat, in the manner of the Isle of Smiths. These parallels were traditionally taken as evidence that the *Navigatio* was a Latin text derived from an established genre of *immrama*. But, as Carney (1963), Mac Mathúna (1994b) and others have shown, it is more likely that the *Navigatio* is the source for *Immram Máel Dúin*, which was itself used by the author of *Immram Ua Corra*. Carney has also speculated that *Immram Brain* may be modelled on an older version of the *Navigatio*, but this remains to be demonstrated convincingly. Such a work would have been completely different to the *Navigatio* which we now have.¹⁵

In terms of genre, then, we may conclude that the evidence points to the *Navigatio* as having developed originally from the type of voyage episode (perhaps inspired by native *echtraí*) found in the *vitae* of several early Irish saints, for example Saints Columba, Patrick and Ailbe.¹⁶ These can reasonably be seen as a sub-genre of Latin *navigaciones*, of which St Brendan's is the only one to be developed as the *leitmotiv* of an entire tale.¹⁷ At the moment we should regard the *immram* genre as a direct translation of the concept – as well, perhaps, as the term – into vernacular literature.¹⁸

The Author's Purpose At the centre of the *Navigatio*'s structure lies the monastic life; in terms of narrative structure the text is an allegory of monastic progression. The monks are not on a pilgrimage or a mission; the three latecomers aside, they are following their monastic vocation with permission and guidance and alternately fast, pray and row. Every year, they celebrate the festivals of the calendar in the same places; they exist in a life of monastic *stabilitas* and *stasis*, until they are called to a higher place. Such a structure almost defies any attempt at narrative

15. David Dumville informs me that he hopes to publish Carney's surviving correspondence on this theory.

16. For example, the various voyages of Cormac Ua Liatháin in Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* II.42, 168-69), also I.20, 46) and the voyage of Macc Cuill in Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, 104, see Bieler 1979).

17. Likewise, Brendan is the only saint to be the subject of voyage narratives in Irish such as *Dá apstol décc na hÉirenn* and the poem 'Mochen Mochen a Brénaínd'. Other tales of clerical voyages, such as *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla*, are not about saints.

18. On the *immram* genre see Dumville 1976 and Mac Cana 1980, 43; 76-7. *Immram* (literally 'rowing about') seems likely to be a translation into Irish of *navigatio*.

progression. Later, vernacular versions of the *Navigatio* insert into the story an element of progressive education and purification which are lacking here. The only reason given for the length of time taken to reach the Promised Land of the Saints, which Mernoc and Barrind reached in only a few hours, is the steward's statement: 'You could not find it immediately because God wished to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean' (§XXVIII).

There may be retarding factors. The three latecomers are not destined to find the Promised Land of the Saints (§XII) and the last of these must be jettisoned before this Promised Land can be found (§XXIV). In the *Vita Brendani* an additional retarding factor occurs; here the *Terra secreta* is a sacred place, which the saint's hide boat cannot enter because it is made of dead flesh. In the *Navigatio* this motif is absent, as the hide boat seems to present no obstacle (but the saint himself, it is observed, abstains from eating the flesh of animals and has done so since his ordination, §XVI). From the beginning, Brendan himself is doubtless worthy of entry to the Promised Land of the Saints, though this distinction may hint at the need for his companions to become worthy through their experiences. If anything, however, the experiences described by the steward as 'trials' (§XV) seem only likely to cause regress rather than progress. Brendan is concerned that, contrary to the requirements of his vocation as famously set out by Augustine in *On the Work of Monks*, he is living on food provided by God, rather than by dint of his own labours (§XXVI). The example of Paul the Hermit shows that this is a higher calling, and Paul's life without any food at all may be a satire on the extreme asceticism of the *Céili Dé* in the ninth century. The *Vita Pauli* presents a conflict between the vocation of the monk and that of the hermit, which is echoed in the *Navigatio* and may echo the concerns leading to the ban on *peregrinatio* in the ninth century (Hughes 1960).¹⁹

To attempt to tie the *Navigatio* to contemporary events, however, may be to miss the point of the story. Orlandi has identified the *christianorum persecutio* ('persecution of the Christians') in chapter XXVIII with the Viking raids (see Dumville 1988). The *Navigatio*'s eschatology is, however, more generally millenarian in character (cf. Revelations 20). It is not an urgent narrative; its cyclical nature reflects the circular path of the monastic year and the religious life. The text arose from social circumstances very like those which produced the romances of the twelfth century, in a mentality which R.W. Southern famously defined as

19. The motif of the brethren who depart without permission (cf. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 891) is probably another exploration of this theme of the tension between the eremitic and communal life.

characterized by the journey motif (1953, 212-18). In the hierarchical society of Ireland, exile was a common phenomenon. In monasticism, ascetic exile was its reflex, and allegorical tales of quests in the 'desert' were perhaps a logical development. In the *Navigatio* this quest is given a specific and especially holy destination, and as in the Old French *Queste del Saint Graal* tension is created between the normal moral development of the allegorical tale and the requirement of purity in the person who will attain the sacred place which is the object of the quest. As in the story of the Grail, the resolution is uniquely achieved, in this case by making the tale an allegory of the monks' quest to sustain the 'good fight' (§I) and maintain their purity, not simply to *attain* it. To sustain the tension of this tale, the author packed it with lavish detail of the voyages being made by his contemporaries on the ocean and of the monastic life which they lived in it. In this way, the *Navigatio* appeals to the monastic reader and the armchair traveller alike. There is certainly a need for future criticism to treat of the religious content of the work in greater depth. The voyage on the sea has been seen as evidence of 'le naturalisme celtique', in the words of Ernest Renan, and with respect to this reading details such as the monastic structure and the motifs of monsters, symmetrical pillars and the miraculous feeding of the monks have tended to be explained away. Monasticism, however, is the subject of the story and such detail is crucial to the interpretation of this unique religious allegory.