

# ***Peregrinatio* and Island Monasticism**

The importation of Christianity, Latin learning and manuscript culture into Ireland opened up vast new perspectives for Irish people. One of these was geographical: Ireland was now part of a Christian world that extended through Britain to Gaul and Rome, and even further to the original heartland of Christianity in the Near East. The new texts, both Christian and classical, that arrived in Ireland saw the world from a Mediterranean perspective. To this perspective Britain, and even more Ireland, were utterly peripheral. They were remote, mysterious and rather unsettling places, islands marooned in the vast and fearful expanse of the ocean. Classical geography saw the ocean in sharp contrast to the familiar and relatively friendly Mediterranean Sea. Unlike the Mediterranean, the ocean was boundless. No-one knew its extent, and of course no-one then knew of the existence of the Americas beyond. Thus the Gaelic world of Ireland and northern Britain really was the very edge of the world.

This sense of being on the edge instilled in Irish churchmen two related, but distinct, impulses to travel. On the one hand, there was the urge to move in towards the centre, to visit the great Continental centres of Christian learning, and perhaps even Rome and the Holy Land itself. On the other, the ocean beckoned. Here was the Gaelic equivalent of the Egyptian desert. Early medieval Ireland might contain landscapes that we would consider wilderness, but in fact every inch of it belonged to someone and was exploited economically by someone. In the Life of St Columba, we read of the holy man Báetán, who wanted to find a hermitage, yet Columba prophesies that he will fail, and in the end will lie in a spot where ‘a woman will drive her sheep over his grave’ – in other words, he will not manage to escape the society of other people. To find that degree of remoteness, it would be necessary to set off into the ocean and search for an island retreat, but would one ever present itself in that vast expanse?

## **The idea of *peregrinatio***

Though many Irishmen travelled as pilgrims (*peregrini*) in a sense familiar to us today – in other words, they intended to return – others left behind their homes for ever. Such permanent exile is a feature of the spirituality of the early Irish church. It seems to have been very common for monastic founders to leave their native area and settle elsewhere. Ireland was a land of many kingdoms, so one might simply leave one’s native kingdom and settle in another. More ambitious was a move such as that of Columba, from Ireland to Britain, though still within the Gaelic-speaking zone. Beyond that one might move entirely out of one’s native culture and head to England or the Continent. St Fursa, for instance, was active in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia, and later in northern France.

Thomas Charles-Edwards has investigated the relationship between the idea of *peregrinatio* and the structure of early medieval Irish society. Early Irish law assigned inferior status to a man who left his native kingdom in order to

marry a woman elsewhere. Such a man had abandoned his own kin, from whom his legal status derived. Moreover, exile was also prescribed in early Irish law for certain very grave offences such as kinslaying. The concepts of leaving one's land and leaving behind, or being deprived of, one's social role were thus present in Irish secular society at the same time as the development of religious *peregrinatio*. Religious *peregrini* undertook this separation from society voluntarily. It was an Irish equivalent to the Egyptian monks' withdrawal from village life into the desert.

## Early textual references

A very short voyage story appears in the *Life of St Patrick* by Muirchú (late 7th century). In this episode a layman called Maccuill sets a trap for Patrick, but he is thwarted. As a punishment, Patrick tells him to leave Ireland, unarmed and naked save for a single poor garment, without touching either food or drink. He is to bind his feet with a fetter and to throw away the key. Then he is to get into a boat made of a single animal hide, without rudder or oar. He is to go wherever the wind and the sea take him, and when he reaches land, is to live a religious life there. We then learn that Maccuill did all this and landed in the Isle of Man, where he met with two Christian missionaries who acted as his spiritual mentors from then on. Eventually Maccuill became bishop of the island.

It is not necessary to believe in the literal truth of this story – we have no corroborating evidence for it. But it does reveal that the practice of penitential pilgrimage was known in late 7th-century Ireland. The essence of the sentence handed down to Maccuill is that he is to place himself at God's mercy. He is not to rely on any human assistance, such as man-made tools or clothing. God will direct him to where he needs to go and provide for his needs. This will be a very obvious idea in the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*.

Pilgrimage was not just used as a punishment for certain crimes, but it was also undergone voluntarily. Two such episodes occur in the *Life of St Columba* by Adomnán of Iona (written c.700). One concerns a certain Cormac Ua Liatháin, who laboriously sought a 'desert' in the ocean (*herimum in ociano laboriose quaesivit*). One voyage fails because Cormac takes with him a monk who left without the permission of his abbot. We shall see when we examine the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* that illicit passengers are an *immram* theme. On another occasion Cormac is driven so far north that it seems impossible for him ever to return. Moreover his boat is attacked by strange creatures. He is, however, saved by the prayers of St Columba. A second voyager, Báetán Ua Nia Taloirc, is also unsuccessful in finding a hermitage in the ocean, as I mentioned earlier.

Adomnán's sources for these episodes would probably have been oral memories, and since Columba lived a century before Adomnán's time, we cannot place much reliance on them as accurate accounts. It is likely, nevertheless, that real events lie behind these stories. In any case, the fact that these stories are found in the *Life* shows that the motif of ocean pilgrimage was well understood c.700 if not earlier.

In fact there is abundant evidence that this kind of voyage did indeed take place. Around 825 an Irish geographer called Dicuil, working on the Continent, wrote a survey of the world. Most of it is derivative, but when he came to the Atlantic islands Dicuil tells us that he was drawing on personal experience and eye-witness testimony by other Irish monks who had travelled there. It is likely that Dicuil had lived on Iona for a while. He describes islands which have been convincingly identified with the Faroes, and says that Irish anchorites lived on them before the onset of the Norse attacks. He also talks of Irish hermits on 'Thule', which seems to be Iceland. Again, the arrival of the Norse appears to have put an end to their life there.

## **Island and coastal monasteries**

There is plenty of both textual and archaeological evidence for the founding of monasteries in or on the edge of the ocean. The most famous of such monasteries is Iona, founded by Columba c.565, while the best-known of the wilder retreats is Skellig Michael off the coast of Kerry. The likely Irish settlements on the Faroes and Iceland are an extreme northern extension of a well-evidenced phenomenon.

## **The ocean and the otherworld**

The ocean was in a sense an obvious substitute for the desert of Egypt and Syria. A desert does not have to be sandy and hot. The Latin word *desertum* simply means 'uncultivated place', 'unfrequented place'. Egypt is a land almost without rain. There was and is a great gulf between the inhabited parts, watered by the river Nile, and the desert beyond. Emptiness, remoteness and danger are the hallmarks of the desert. For Irish people, the ocean stretching westwards and northwards from their own shores was an obvious parallel.

We have seen that the growth of the voyage tales coincided with actual monastic voyaging in the Atlantic by Irish monks. Their inspiration was clearly derived from the bible and from the monastic movement that began in Egypt and spread to western Europe, Gaul and Britain in the late Roman and early medieval centuries. But in the Life of St Ailbe, we read that Ailbe returned from one such voyage bearing a flowering branch. Máire Herbert has discussed this passage, noting both biblical parallels and parallels from the Irish otherworld literature. Was the monastic voyage in some way a Christian reinterpretation of an existing Irish tradition of an overseas otherworld, or did the monastic ideal give rise to the idea of an overseas otherworld? You may recall that this question arose earlier, in Unit 5. In the next unit we will turn to the Irish voyage texts themselves, and look for answers there.

## **Reading**

On the ocean as a location, see:

Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', in C. Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 11–23.

The starting point for understanding the Irish concept of *peregrinatio* is:

Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *Peregrinatio*', in Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 94–112.

The key article that brought the Irish voyage tales into contact with the idea of *peregrinatio* is:

William Flint Thrall, 'Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the Immrama', in Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 15–21.

Two important and fairly recent surveys of Irish monastic voyaging are:

Jonathan Wooding, 'Monastic Voyaging and the *Nauigatio*', in idem (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 226–45.

David N. Dumville, 'The North Atlantic Monastic Thalassocracy: Sailing to the Desert in Early Mediaeval Insular Spirituality', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *The Papar in the North Atlantic: Environment and History* (St Andrews, 2002), pp. 121–31.

If you wish to pursue the passages from Muirchú's Life of Patrick and Adomnán's Life of Columba that I discussed earlier, you will find references for them in all of the above articles.

Finally, an important study of St Ailbe:

Máire Herbert, 'Literary Sea-Voyages and Early Munster Hagiography', in Ronald Black et al. (eds.), *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies* (East Linton, 1999), pp. 182–9.

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