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Subversion at Sea: Structure, Style and Intent in the *Immrama*

Thomas Owen Clancy

Who then is God? He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God. Seek no farther concerning God; for those who wish to know the great deep must first review the natural world. For knowledge of the Trinity is properly likened to the depths of the sea, according to that saying of the sage, 'And the great deep, who shall find it out?' If then a man wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him first if he is able scan that visible sea, and the less he finds himself to understand of those creatures which lurk below the waves, the more let him realise that he can know less of the depths of its Creator.¹

St Columbanus, the author of those words who died in 615, was himself a voyager, leaving first his own homeland in Leinster to join the monastery of Bangor in the north, then travelling across seas to the continent.² In this passage he alerts us to one vision, one metaphor for the sea present in the early medieval Gaelic world: a field on which the greatness and marvels of God are displayed, and which can bring people to humility.

Another image of the sea was equally if not more prevalent in early Ireland: the sea as a purgative force, a place of repentance. The Introit to the Mass in the Irish Stowe Missal, written perhaps around 800, begins: 'We have sinned, Lord, we have sinned. Spare us sinners and save us: You who guided Noah across the waters of the flood, hear us; and who by a word rescued Jonah from the deep, free us; You who stretched out your hand to the sinking Peter, help us'.³ A poem by the bishop-king of Cashel, Cormac mac Cuilennáin, who died in 908, contemplates a journey of penance on the sea:

Shall I go, O King of the Mysteries, after my fill of cushions and music, to turn my face on the shore and my back on my native land? ...

Shall I cut my hand with every sort of wound on the breast of the wave which wrecks boats? Shall I leave the track of my two knees on the strand by the shore?

Shall I take my little black curragh over the broad-breasted, glorious ocean? O king of the bright kingdom, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

Whether I be strong or poor, or mettlesome so as to be recounted in tales, O Christ, will you help me when it comes to going upon the wild sea?⁴

Both these images of the sea, as a mystery to be contemplated and as an instrument of purgation, are present in the Irish genre of the *immram* or voyage tale. In these tales a character or characters travels at God's will on the sea, sees many beautiful and fear-inspiring marvels, meets ascetic hermits on islands, and returns, often changed. Although tales of voyages are common to many cultures, medieval, ancient and modern, the *immram*, or 'rowing about', as a specific literary genre is unique to the medieval Irish. In addition to the famous Latin saint's voyage, *Navigatio Brendani* (the Voyage of St Brendan), one of the most widely-read texts in the middle ages, we have from Ireland texts of three voyage tales in Irish, of which two exist in more than one version. In addition there are texts which add to our knowledge of the genre: a fourth *immram* which remains something of a riddle, later elaborations of the *Navigatio*, incidents in saints' lives and titles of now-lost voyage tales. We know of the titles of some other voyages, and of the existence of other tales, both from tale-lists of the eleventh century, and from a litany of pilgrim saints from c.900.⁵

Past work on the voyage tales of medieval Ireland has tended to concentrate on generalities, in particular on defining the *immram* as a genre.⁶ Interest has focussed on the sources of the tales and their literary antecedents, both in overall structure (their relationship to, for instance, the *Navigatio Brendani* and the *echtrae*, or otherworld journey-tale) and in detail (the sources for the motifs found in them, particularly the otherworldly islands they depict).⁷ Prime interest has also been given to the ugly duckling of the group, *Immram Brain*,

abiso uerbo reuocasti, libera nos; qui petro mergenti manum porrexisti auxiliare nobis'. (Translation and punctuation mine).

4 Greene and O'Connor, eds, *A Golden Treasury*, 151-3; a complete and more scientific edition is in Henry, *The Early English*, 54-63, 222-3; for the authorship, see Breatnach 'An Edition of *Amra Senáin*', 20-3.

5 MacCana, *The Learned Tales*, 43, 76-7; Hughes, 'On an Irish Litany'; Sanderlin, 'The Date and Provenance'.

6 Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', 79. A refreshing recent review of the subject is Hillers, 'Voyages between Heaven and Hell'.

7 See most recently Mac Mathúna, 'The Structure and Transmission'.

1 Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 64-5.

2 Ibid., ix-xxxi. On the authorship of these sermons, see Stancliffe, 'The Thirteen Sermons'.

3 Warner, ed., *The Stowe Missal*, vol. II, 3: 'Peccaumus domine, peccaumus. Parce peccatis nostris et salua nos: qui gubernasti noe super undas dilu[ui]i, exaudi nos; et ionam di

(the Voyage of Bran) – which differs substantially from what will be treated here as the three main *Immrama*.⁸

Critical investigation of the genre has, however, been hampered by many of the preoccupations which until recently plagued research in medieval Irish literature. Both the cult of the ancient and the fear of the foreign have been present in investigations of the voyage tales. A desire to discover 'pre-Christian' *immrama* is frequently evident in writings on the subject, closely coupled with attempts to discern in the adventures of the tales' protagonists glimpses of a pre-Christian, native view of the afterlife and the otherworld. The tales have been classified by how ecclesiastical or secular they are and by how far Christianity 'intrudes' into the framework of the tale.⁹ This is in spite of the clear and usually acknowledged fact that the three main tales we have are not only set in Christian times (in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries) and contain characters who are obviously Christian (nuns, church stewards, hermits) and motifs and quotations from the bible and church fathers, but they also declare their Christian ethos very explicitly.¹⁰ For instance, the most recent discussion of one of the *immrama*, the *Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin* (the Voyage of Máel Dúin's Coracle, henceforth *Immram Maíle Dúin*), while it sets forth a promising and worthwhile analysis of the tale, goes out of its way to establish the pre-Christian, pagan credentials of this quintessentially Christian tale.¹¹ Equal energy has therefore been devoted by other critics to pointing out the foreign and ecclesiastical influences at work in the *immrama*, and defending them as a Christian genre. Some critics who have acknowledged the Christian basis of the tales have, however, gone on to impose further confusing delineations, classifying the tales by whether they are pre-Viking or post-Viking, on the once-popular premise (now virtually abandoned) that the Viking raids in the ninth century had profound effects on the culture and particularly on the literature of early medieval Ireland.

Common in all these outlooks is a sense of influence as intrusion and a desire to recreate something lost beneath the texts' obscuring layers. Unfortunately, the parameters of the debate have caused the texts themselves to be somewhat lost or under-analysed. In the quest for definitions and antecedents, the fact that the three main *immrama* we have are individually quite different, in terms of their structures and dramatis personae, has been neglected. Rarely is there a

sense of the texts we have as being specifically rooted in a time or place, or of the essential disparities among them.¹²

Discussion of the structure of the tales has alluded to them being 'framework tales', in which the core otherworld voyage among marvellous islands is inserted in a variable set of framing circumstances.¹³ While this description is essentially accurate, the description of the beginnings and ends of these stories as 'frames' implicitly downplays their integral relationship with the distinctly different otherworld visions in each of the stories, and differences in style and structure found in different versions of the same tale. Commentators have also noted the 'penitential' structure of the tales, Mac Mathúna positing the paradigm of 'crime–punishment–penitence' with a resulting 'reconciliation of the wrongdoer with either the victim, the victim's surrogate, or/and God', and Hillers summarising that 'the *immrama* are best understood as penitential quests'.¹⁴

While this analysis fits at least one of the tales, it is not completely adequate as an explanation of them all, and the basic motivations of the various voyages are in need of further exploration. My purpose here is to concentrate on the structures of the individual texts, on their different styles, and on the purposes which such examination reveals underlying the texts. I do not see a globally applicable paradigm as being overly helpful at this stage in criticism of the *immrama*. Accordingly, I want to reverse the current impression of the *immrama*: these are not at their heart tales about the otherworld, with a trivial and variable narrative frame, but rather tales about the saving of souls which use a voyage on the sea as the means of redemption. I also see them as texts belonging firmly to the early medieval Irish world, and expressing the world-view of that time and place. More specifically, I want to at least hint at ways in which the individual texts can be seen as very much part of their own more narrow places and times of composition, with a longer discussion of contextual readings for one of the tales.

THE 'IMMRAMA'

We have remaining to us only a limited sample of *immrama*. Three written in the Gaelic language exist, some in more than one version, in addition to the already mentioned *Immram Brain*, which I will not be discussing further. These are: *Immram Maíle Dúin*, of which there is a prose version from the eighth or

8 Mac Mathúna, ed., *Immram Brain*; Carney, *Studies*, 280–95; Carney, 'The Earliest', [q.v.]; MacCana, 'Mongán mac Fiachna'; idem, 'On the "Prehistory"'; idem, 'The Sinless Otherworld' [q.v.].

9 See Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*.

10 As Carney notes: 'It is unnecessary to labour the fact that all the *Immrama* are of their very nature of monastic provenance' (*Studies*, 294).

11 Aguirre, 'The Hero's Voyage'.

12 The need to concentrate on texts is emphasised by Hillers, 'Voyages between Heaven and Hell', 74–5.

13 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 51, 59; Dumville, 'Echtrae and *Immram*', 82; Mac Mathúna, ed., *Immram Brain*, 276–80.

14 Mac Mathúna, ed., *Immram Brain*, 278; Hillers, 'Voyages between Heaven and Hell', 69.

ninth century, and a verse version, probably from the early tenth century;¹⁵ *Immram Snédgusa 7 Meic Riagla* (the Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla, henceforth *Immram Snédgusa*), which exists in five versions: one in verse, probably early tenth century;¹⁶ a prose version A, perhaps late eleventh century;¹⁷ and a prose version B, probably written in the 1160s;¹⁸ a fourth version exists which may be from the thirteenth or fourteenth century;¹⁹ and a fifth version, substantially the same as the fourth, is incorporated into a longer work of the sixteenth century.²⁰ Finally *Immram Curaig Ua Corra* (the Voyage of the Coracle of the Uí Chorra, henceforth *Immram Ua Corra*) is as it stands probably a twelfth-century text, though a story about the protagonists was known as early as c.900.²¹ An early modern version of this tale was also made, comprised of prose with insertions of lyric and occasionally narrative verse.²²

There is a certain amount of cross-influence detectable – but not always easy to pin down – among these tales, particularly in the appearance of similar otherworld islands in the voyage sequences.²³ One notable case of influence, however, is stylistic: the appearance of a verse version of the *Immram Snédgusa* appears to have motivated the author of the verse version of the *Immram Maíle Duín* to compose a similar work in the same metre.²⁴ All these tales are in the vernacular, then, and most are ‘late’ by certain standards within medieval Irish studies (after 900). These tales share another feature, in addition to language and lateness: their protagonists, in the main, are lay-people, or converted lay-people, and I will be focusing on that point below.

15 Stokes, ed., ‘The Voyage of Mael Duín’; Van Hamel, *Immrama*, 20–77; Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Duín*, 89–179.

16 Verse: Thurneysen, ed., *Zwei Versionen*, 9–26; Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 87–92; Caoimhín Ó Muirigh (Kevin Murray), ‘An Edition of the Verse *Immram Snédgusa* agus *Maic Riagla*’, unpublished MA Thesis, UCD (1994) – I am grateful to Kevin Murray for a copy of his edition and translation of the text; Ó hAodha, ‘The Poetic Version’.

17 Stokes, ed., ‘The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla’; Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 82–5.

18 Thurneysen, ed., *Zwei Versionen*, 31–50; Stokes, ed., ‘The Adventure of St Columba’s Clerics’.

19 Tomás Ó Máille, ‘Merugud cléirech Choluim Chille’.

20 O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, eds, *Betha Colaím Chille*, 382–401. I will discuss the datings of these different versions below.

21 Stokes, ed., ‘The Voyage of the Húi Corra’; Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 96–111. On the earlier reference, see Dumville, ‘*Echtrae* and *Immram*’, 87.

22 Mac Mathúna, ‘*Clann Ua gCorra*’. This version falls outside the scope of the present discussion, but presents interesting questions of a similar sort to those I attempt to answer here, regarding the adaptation and augmenting of earlier versions of voyage tales.

23 On this, see Mac Mathúna, ‘The Structure and transmission’; Hillers, ‘Voyages between Heaven and Hell’, 73–4, and Abigail Burnyeat, ‘Tradition and Creativity: Authorial Response to Literary Genre in Early Irish Voyage Literature’, Unpub. M.Phil. paper, University of Glasgow, 1996.

24 Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 80–1; Thurneysen, ‘Zur keltischen Literatur und Grammatik: 2’, 278.

The *Navigatio Brendani*, which has been tentatively redated to the eighth century by Dumville,²⁵ and the versions of Brendan’s Life which contain variations on his voyage,²⁶ provide a more thoroughly monastic parallel for the *immrama*. Although the *Navigatio* has often been linked generically with the *immrama*, and there are clear instances of influence at both a basic structural level and in detail,²⁷ the former seems to me to remain distinct by virtue of the sanctity of the protagonist and the lack of transformation in the hero as a result of his journey.

Before examining the tales themselves, it is necessary to point out some factors in the evolution of the genre of the voyage-tale. The exact plan of this evolution has not yet been resolved, and may never be, but certain elements in the background of early medieval Ireland which helped to give it life can be recognised, elements both in society, and in the literary arena.

One of the most important aspects of early Irish society was kinship. The kin-group held property, negotiated contracts, fought law-suits, took care of dependents. From the kin group, and not solely from one line, leaders, from tribal chiefs to overkings, were chosen. Most of the political divisions in early Ireland were at least nominally based on kindreds, and the language of monastic and church organisation was very much that of the family.²⁸

To go outside this structure was dangerous. To leave one’s homeland involved not only travel in the wilderness, the dwelling place of beasts and brigands, but travel into another territory. To settle there meant loss of status, protection, and loss of basic rights. To travel outside Ireland itself was hardly thought of in early sources – although it certainly happened. The sea journeys we hear of from the pre-Christian period which have an air of history about them are often the journeys of displaced and land-hungry tribes, or of pirate raiders and marauders.²⁹

This displacement from the kin-group into the unknown was openly courted, indeed seen as a type of martyrdom, by early Irish monastics. They sought life in pilgrimage, *i n-ailithre*, literally ‘in another country’. This deliberate choice of loss of security and status took on extreme manifestations, and the sixth and seventh centuries are full of accounts of Irish monks setting off for deserts in the ocean, setting up shop in foreign lands, in Scotland, England, and on the Continent, as well as in different territories within Ireland.

25 Dumville, ‘Two Approaches’ [q.v.]. For the text, see Selmer, ed., *Navigatio*; translation Webb, *Lives of the Saints*, 33–68.

26 Kenney, *The Sources*, 410–17.

27 See Mac Mathúna, ‘Structure and Transmission’.

28 Kelly, *A Guide*, 12–15; Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 41–4; Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 85–114.

29 See generally Charles-Edwards, ‘The Social Background’ [q.v.]. Also Kelly, *A Guide*, 5–6.

A seventh-century poet writing in praise of St Columba gives vivid, differential images of the separation from status the saint underwent in leaving Ireland to found the Scottish monastery of Iona:

He possessed books, renounced fully claims of kinship:
for love of learning he gave up wars, gave up strongholds.

He left chariots, he loved ships, foe to falsehood;
sun-like exile, sailing, he left fame's steel bindings.³⁰

Columbanus, the saint quoted at the outset, is another good example of this separation. According to his biographer he literally stepped across his mother's prostrate body to leave his homeland, and that journey carried him all the way to Northern Italy. Not just in actions but in words he espoused a theology of journey. In a series of sermons he treats the image of life as a roadway through a foreign country, headed always for one's true homeland, in God.³¹ For many of these monks, in time this separation itself formed the basis of a new type of high status, a new form of power, which would then itself need to be subverted through ascetic reform.³²

To these two social phenomena must be added a third. In Irish law, punishments existed for certain crimes which involved not only exile, but the casting adrift of the criminal on the sea. These appear to have existed in pre-Christian times in a minor form for minor offences, and also seem to have been used for children of incest (applying a recognisably liminal test to these riddles of parentage and ethics), but churchmen seem to have encouraged it as a means of leaving to God certain types of problematic judgment. Kin-slaying and the like were included among crimes for which this was a punishment. In *Cáin Adomnáin* (the Law of Adomnán), framed by the ninth abbot of Iona and enacted in 697 to protect women, as well as clerics and children, from violence, women guilty of murder were subject to this punishment. God was to judge: if returned to land by the sea, the guilty party was allowed to live, but sometimes with the reduced standing of the immigrant; if he or she died, that was God's will; if he or she found themselves in another country, they were to live their life in exile.³³

Penitential attitudes had much to do with both the self-willed exile of the pilgrim and the enforced exile of the criminal. Sin was seen as being forgivable,

30 Kelly, ed., 'Tiughraind Bhécáin', 84–5; translation from Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 148–9, and see 157–60 for discussion.

31 Jonas, *Vita Sancti Columbani* I:3 (Krusch, ed., *Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani*, 156); trans. Munro, *Life of St Columban*; Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 84–101 (*Instructiones* V–IX).

32 Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background', 58 [q.v. 107–8].

33 Byrne, 'On the Punishment' [q.v.]; Kelly, *A Guide*, 219–21; Meyer, ed., *Cáin Adomnáin*, 30–1.

but the sinner must purge him or herself, often by such extreme means as these. Not only in law-tracts do we find exile prescribed, but also in penitential manuals.³⁴ Adomnán in his *Vita Columbae* (Life of St Columba) also describes many instances of sinners being told by the saint to do penance by means of long periods in exile. Indeed, this is almost a theme of that work, and it has long been thought possible that Columba's own semi-exile in the Hebrides was the result of his culpable involvement in the battle of Cúl Drebene.³⁵ A saint, in his coracle on the ocean, saw himself as sloughing off his sin: so too the criminal. The juxtaposition of the saint and the criminal can be seen early on, in the defensiveness shown by the author of the seventh-century poem in praise of Columba who while telling us that the saint 'crucified ... his body on the grey waves' stresses that it was 'not for crimes'.³⁶ The sea as a venue of repentance was not only a literary image but an actually existing fact, and all the social notions of kinship, territory, wilderness, crime and exile fed into its resonance.

There are, however, other, literary influences at the back of the *immram*. First, there is the existence of tales involving the hero's journey to the otherworld, or an other world, where his life is changed: he receives wisdom, or revelation, or a wife. Stories of this type are told of kings to explain the otherworldly qualities of their prosperous reigns; or of warriors to explain where their supernatural fighting skills came from. These tales are called *echtraí*, literally 'outings', and the basic parameters of these tales no doubt influenced the development of the *immram*. Understanding of this process is complicated by recent critical assessments of our earliest *echtraí* as being themselves Christian allegories. Nonetheless, a type of story involving heroes in watershed trips to the otherworld certainly existed, before and after Christianity's arrival.³⁷

A clearly Christian genre also fed into the development of the *immram*. This is the vision tale: the story of a man or woman who experiences a vision, often in a dream, of the afterlife, of heaven and hell. The dream often takes the form of a journey, and the dreamer is conducted, sometimes by an angel, through this Christian and moral other world. We know of a number of such visions from seventh and eighth century Ireland, Scotland and England: Fursa, the exiled Irishman; Drythelm, the Northumbrian living in Ayrshire who later joined the monastery of Melrose; the Monk of Wenlock in Shropshire. Most of the texts in which these are described are based in some degree on an early apocryphal text, called the Vision of St Paul, originating in a 4th century Greek version, which was stunningly successful throughout Europe in the early

34 For example, Bieler, ed., *The Irish Penitentials*, 271–2.

35 For example, *Vita Columbae* I:22, II:39. For Columba's *peregrinatio*, see the most recent discussion in Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, 12–15.

36 Kelly, 'A Poem', 8–9; translation from Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 136–7.

37 Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', 73–4; for recent discussion, see McCone, *Pagan Past*, 79–82; Carey, 'The Rhetoric'.

middle ages.³⁸ Columba's biographer, Adomnán, is accorded such a vision in the eleventh-century text *Fís Adomnáin* (the Vision of Adomnán), a brilliant example of the type.³⁹ These vision tales can be seen partially infiltrating the voyage tale, especially when otherworld islands seem to be floating hells, or purgatories, or preludes to Paradise. The popular later (twelfth century) Latin-Irish productions, St Patrick's Purgatory and the Vision of Tnudgal draw on vision literature and the *echtraí*, as well as on the voyage tales in producing their journeys to the otherworld.⁴⁰

From all this background information we can already see that the new genre of the Voyage Tale was very much an evolved one, a complex mix of influences and intentions. The marvellous otherworld which forms the centre-piece of the tales no doubt has much to do with fertile imaginations, classical bestiaries and travellers' tales, as well as the demonstration of the inscrutable marvels of God's creation. But the structure in which this extravagance is set needs closer examination.

Indeed, bearing in mind the convergence of ideas of pilgrimage and penitence, if we try to understand these tales as tales of conversion, we will begin to understand much better both the relevance of parts of the otherworld shown to them, and the basic motivations of each of the tales. Though anecdotes such as those from the *Vita Columbae* and tales like the *Navigatio* have often been invoked as models for the *immrama*, they do not share the crucial problem of conversion. A story with the same narrative framework as the *immrama*, but without the marvellous inset of the otherworld, can be found in the seventh-century Latin Life of Patrick, by the cleric Muirchú moccu Machtheni, written between 661 and 700.⁴¹ This tale is instructive in showing us the narrative structure we need to look for, and the signs to pay attention to, in the voyage tales themselves.

The tale is of an extremely wicked petty king, called Mac Cuill moccu Greccae. We are told he was nicknamed Cyclops: in early Irish tales, to be a one-eyed king was to be fundamentally blemished, inherently unjust, unworthy of ruling.⁴² Muirchú pulls out the stops to tell us how awful he was: 'His thoughts were evil, his words haughty, his deeds wicked, his temper angry, his body given to sin, his mind cruel, his life pagan, his conscience vain'.⁴³ He rules a gang of bandits, wears cruel insignia, and kills travellers. He is a *díberg*, a bandit, a figure in society fiercely opposed by the early Irish church, not only for his seeming paganism, but for his thoroughly nasty violence.⁴⁴ Mac Cuill

sees Patrick striding along the road one day, and decides to trap him. One of the bandits lies down in the road and feigns death, and Mac Cuill tell Patrick that he has fallen ill, and, mockingly, tries to get him to heal the man. They find the man is indeed dead, and Mac Cuill reacts in shock. Mac Cuill repents, and is baptised by Patrick. Patrick prescribes that Mac Cuill go to the shore unarmed, in one garment, and fettered set out to sea on an unstable boat. Mac Cuill promises to do so. The dead man having been revived, Mac Cuill sets out, and is blown to the Isle of Man, where two saintly men take him in, train him in holiness, and when they die he succeeds them as bishop of Man.

What we have then in this tale is a sea-voyage, in which God is the guide, protector and steersman, which is prescribed as the penance for the worst sort of sinner one can imagine, a tyrant, bandit, a pagan, someone with no justice. The result of the voyage is a cleansing, such that Mac Cuill even becomes a saint himself. The message, then, is one of potential forgiveness. If even this sort of man can be saved, surely, with repentance, there is hope for the rest of us. Outside the central message, two other aspects of this tale are relevant to the consideration of the *immrama*. First, the use of a very familiar type of violent man as the protagonist. We shall see that the *immrama* themselves are much concerned with violent crime. And second, it is important that the protagonist is a layman: that is, we are not concerned with the travels of monks or saints here, with people who are assumed by the audience to have already made it. Brendan learns a lot about God and right living in his journeys, but there is not the same sense of doubt and transformation. In this tale, and in the *immrama* themselves, we meet Christian literature which is about, and probably directed towards, ordinary people.

'IMMRAM MAÍLE DÚIN'

Let us look then at our three main voyage tales, *Immram Maíle Dúin*, *Immram Ua Corra*, and *Immram Snédgusa*, to see what the structures of these tales can tell us. *Immram Maíle Dúin* is in many ways the clearest in morals and in narrative, as well as being the earliest linguistically, as early as the eighth century or the ninth. Its numerous biblical quotations and references, as well as one quote from Vergil and its use of medieval bestiary literature, mark it out as a literary, monastic product.⁴⁵ It has clearly taken some of its otherworld islands from the *Navigatio Brendani*, and perhaps some of its inspiration too (one should note that geographically it belongs to the same south western part of Ireland).⁴⁶

45 Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', 76-7.

46 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 60-6. In what follows I use the 'chapter' divisions used by Stokes and followed by Oskamp.

38 Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 243-72; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 160-3.

39 Best and Bergin, eds, *Lebor na hUidre*, 67-76; Kenney, *The Sources*, 444-5.

40 Kenney, *The Sources*, 741-2, 354-6.

41 Bieler, ed., *The Patrician Texts*, 102-7.

42 Kelly, *A Guide*, 19; McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes', 21-2.

43 Bieler, ed., *The Patrician Texts*, 102-3.

44 Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *laicus*'; McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes'.

But Máel Dúin is a different hero from Brendan. He is conceived in violence: a warrior on a raid rapes a nun, and Máel Dúin is the product of this union. Born in him then are two potential futures, a holy one and a violent one. His mother sends him to be fostered with the local queen, but eventually the taunts of jealous teenagers cause him to discover his true parentage. He sets out for his father's homeland, in Co. Clare, and there is taunted with not having avenged his father's own violent death at the hands of sea-pirates, bandits. He then turns to a druid for advice on how to find the bandits, and on how to build a boat, and the most propitious means of procedure.

Thus far our author has taken us firmly into the secular and violent world of hero-tales. The fostered hero, born in odd circumstances, going off to avenge his father and reclaim his heritage are well known narrative circumstances in early Ireland.⁴⁷ So too is turning to a druid for advice on the future, and in one legal text, the druid's status is enhanced by his ability to provide victory in battle.⁴⁸ All is prepared, in the text and the reader's mind, for the revenge of Máel Dúin. But the druid's advice is broken when Máel Dúin takes his foster brothers along over and above the recommended crew of seventeen. When the crew approach the island where the sea-pirates live and hear the boasts of Máel Dúin's father's murderer, his companions assume all is well. Máel Dúin's two main warrior friends cry, 'This is victory into our hands. Straight has God brought us and God was leading our barque before us. Let us go and destroy those forts since God has revealed to us our enemies'.⁴⁹ Immediately a gale blows them away from the bandits' island.

What has happened here, then? First, our literary expectations, as well as the crew's, have been subverted: the expected revenge is not to be.⁵⁰ We can go deeper than this however. We know that revenge was frowned on by the church, receiving harsh penances in the penitentials.⁵¹ We know too that in the context of this tale and its historical setting, the druid is not likely to be a neutral character. The druid was execrated by the church, and this seems to have little to do with religious differences, and more to do with the practice by druids of types of divination, and his particular association with bandits. In one text we are told 'the druid, the brigand, the satirist ... it is more fitting in God's sight to spurn them than to support them'. Another text tells of a devilish feast, 'i.e.,

47 Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography*, 16, 62–8.

48 See for instance, O' Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cuailnge: Recension I*, 19–20; Kelly, *A Guide*, 61.

49 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 106–7.

50 At the same time, it should be noted, our literary expectations are fulfilled: the giving of advice is often followed by its disregard, and both Adomnán and the *Navigatio Brendani* include accounts of the extra crew and the misfortune they bring. See *Vita Columbae* 1:6; Selmer, ed., *Navigatio*, §5, and Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 36–7, 53–4.

51 Bieler, ed., *The Irish Penitentials*, 271.

a feast which is given to sons of death and bad people, i.e., to [druids?] and satirists and poets and fartars and clowns and bandits and pagans and prostitutes and other bad people'.⁵² In *Immram Maíle Dúin* again, we see this association of druids and violent men: the best time and means for a successful raid are plotted by the druid. We can also, if we look carefully, see Máel Dúin's motives in his attempted vengeance: he is egged on all the time by taunts, about lack of noble parentage, about his failure to avenge his father: in general, then, about his failure to conform to the rules of aristocratic society. In the end it is his pride, his vanity, his holding too high his worldly connections and his blood, that bring him into the boat with sword in hand. He rejects the fostership of the queen, and almost leaves without his foster brothers, in his eagerness to renew the ties of blood through blood-feud. All this is perfectly acceptable, and respectable in an ordinary secular tale. But this is not one.

It is no accident, then, that just before the wind kicks up, a long speech about God providing vengeance has been spoken. The failure of the raid is a result not of ignoring the druid's sage advice (the apparent cause),⁵³ but of following ungodly ways, of Máel Dúin's kinship and vanity driving him to violence, to the use of wizards, and of trying to claim God's support for these actions. If the foster brothers are guilty of breaching the druid's advice, and therefore to be condemned, then they can also be seen as Máel Dúin's unwitting saviours: they prevent him from damning his soul through violent action, turn his path before he has gone too far. Not only here, but later, when they are each in turn lost in the dangerous otherworld islands, they can be seen saving Máel Dúin from a fate that might have been his.

This is completely subversive of our expectations, and indeed, past commentators' readings of the incident of the foster-brothers, and of the failure of the mission of vengeance, have been clearly influenced on the one hand by the incidents in Adomnán and the *Navigatio* in which the advice of a cleric is ignored, to the cost of the voyage of a monk, but also by the secular mind-set the tale has provided for Máel Dúin. The resulting tale of conversion begins then from a reversal of the patterns both of secular and of ecclesiastical models.

Máel Dúin himself is in two minds about the turn in his fortunes, and we hear both of them in the tale. After the gale blows them out to sea, he tells the crew to leave the journey in God's hands and to stop rowing. But then he turns and accuses the foster brothers of being to blame, for breaching the druid's advice. Once more we may discern in the hero of the tale his dual propensity to both right action and wrongdoing. He has not yet shaken off the mind-set he has inherited from the violent world of his father. While he is prepared to leave his fate in God's hands, he is still in awe of the druid's power.

52 McCone, *Pagan Past*, 220–3.

53 See Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', 76.

Medieval Irish writers were fond of a certain chiasmus in their texts, often involving a shaded parallelism or opposition of characters or events. So, here, if we turn to the very end of the tale, we see the unfolding of the structure. The very last island that the crew land on is the dwelling of the Hermit of Tory (§33). This real wise man gives them true advice: concerning Máel Dúin's father's killer, he says, 'Slay him not, but forgive him, because God has saved you from many perils, and you, too, are men deserving of death'.⁵⁴ Máel Dúin then voyages again to the bandits' island, and this time he is welcomed joyfully. They are given new clothes and tell their tales (§34).

The parallels and contrasts being worked out here are clear. The Hermit of Tory is placed in contrast to the druid of Corcomruad, the one advising peace and reconciliation, the other advising violence. The complexity of the author's intent is revealed when we see that the wise Hermit of Tory is himself a repentant sinner. In another characteristic device, the tale inserts a flashback narrative, told by the character himself, which provides a parallel to the main events of the story.⁵⁵ The hermit tells Máel Dúin that he was a cook at the monastery of Tory who used to sell the food for treasures and jewels. He says himself, 'Great was my pride and vanity'.⁵⁶ Intervention from God, in the form of holy men and ghosts, changes his life. As he gets in a lovely new boat with all his belongings to set off from the island monastery, the sea becomes becalmed. A man appears to him sitting on a wave, and tells him that his boat will not move until the cook does his will, this being to rid himself of all his precious possessions. He flings all he has overboard, and the sea carries him off, and casts him up on a rock. God feeds him miraculously for seven years.⁵⁷

Note then, the parallels with Máel Dúin: to attain his goal, or to get his boat to go where he wants, he must first sever himself from his past, sinful life. When the boat crew first see the hermit, he is covered only in his white hair, and here we should anticipate the new clothes given to Máel Dúin and his companions when they reach the bandits' island. The sea voyage has acted then almost as a second baptism: no accident, perhaps, if we consider the retailing of the meaning of water in salvation history at the Easter vigil, for instance. Indeed, a popular early Irish religious work discusses the 'three waves' which pass over a person in baptism, and how these convert a person from being a 'son of Death' (also used as a synonym for brigands and men of violence) to being a 'son of Life'.⁵⁸

Once we realise the intent and shape of the tale, it is easier to discern the meaning behind some of the incidents on the ocean and their relevance to the tale as a whole. Take for example Máel Dúin's encounters with women. The first is with a woman who feeds the crew, after which they try to persuade her to sleep with Máel Dúin. After too much persuasion, the island and the woman all disappear (§17). On the other hand, the sexually fulfilling Island of Women proves threatening when the crew try to leave, and the queen of the Island pulls them back each time with a magic thread (§28). The otherworld island of women, a motif which appears elsewhere, does indeed seem to be part of the pre-Christian thought-world of the Irish, and in other tales appears to have been allegorised by recourse to such texts as the Song of Songs.⁵⁹ Here however the Island appears to be interpreted in a negative way, as a distraction from the road ahead and the final reconciliation. The island presents an opportunity of unfailing youth and life, and endless sex as well, but the difficulty they have in leaving, to the extent of cutting one of the crew's hand off, seems to imply that staying was against the imperatives of right action.

Both these episodes reflect elements of the framework. The first encounter should be understood in terms of Máel Dúin's own conception, in the forced union of an innocent and holy woman with a warrior. The woman on the island tells them she does not know what sin is.⁶⁰ She herself saves them from perpetuating Máel Dúin's own sordid past (forcing her into a sexual encounter with Máel Dúin) by suddenly disappearing and leaving them on an empty, hard rock. We should perhaps contrast the two queens in the tale too, one queen who fosters Máel Dúin in his childhood, and the other queen of the Island of Women. Máel Dúin's ease in leaving the good life of his fosterage for blood-ties and vengeance contrasts with his sloth in leaving the comfort of the Island of Women for the hard road ahead.

These are just some of the ways in which an understanding of the framework and intention of the tale can enhance also our interpretation of what is revealed to the travellers. Some of the islands, particularly those which would seem most at home in a Jules Verne adventure, are no doubt simply there for the sake of imaginative fancy and as wonder-tales. I would not want to suggest that the meaning of the text is completely revealed by the neat structure of its framing episodes. On the other hand, even such incidents as the sightings of man-beasts on the islands may have relevance to the larger intent of the tale: warriors, and bandits in particular, are often portrayed in beastlike and savage language, as wolves, dogs and the like.⁶¹ But a few vignettes, most of which are told in greater

54 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 172-3.

55 For comment on this technique elsewhere in the literature, see Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Theme', 84-5.

56 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 168-9.

57 Ibid., 170-3.

58 Clancy and Márkus, 205-6; Hull, 'Apgitir Chrábaid', 74-5.

59 MacCana, 'The Sinless Otherworld', 110-11 [q.v. 67-8]; Carney, 'The Earliest', 186-9 [q.v. 83-6]; McCone, *Pagan Past*, 81-3.

60 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 134-5.

61 McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes', 15-21.

detail, have wider significance, a significance understood in terms of the gradual conversion of Máel Dúin to a different life. He does not, of course, become a saint. That is not the point. He remains an ordinary man, a layman, but one whose life has been radically transformed through his voyage on the sea.

One incident may give us some idea of the world of which this tale is a part. When the voyagers come upon a crystal pillar in the sea, from which depends a net of silver, one of Máel Dúin's warrior companions cuts off a piece of it, and later, we are told, deposits it on the altar at Armagh. This version of a common motif serves the purpose of providing concrete 'proof' of the fantastic journey, but it also links the tale into the larger framework of society. In the eighth and ninth century, in particular, Armagh was active in the south and west, promoting the *Lex Patricii* (Law of Patrick), a measure against violence, particularly violence against clerics.⁶² What success it had seems to be minimal, but this gift or reparation which the crew member makes at the very end of the tale may be seen as tied into the basic themes of the tale: violence, revenge, repentance, forgiveness.

Before moving on it may be worth discussing the other version of *Immram Maile Dúin*. This is written in narrative verse, one of two *immrama* which appear in this form. Narrative verse is a neglected phenomenon in medieval Irish studies, the prevailing wisdom being that tales were told in prose, with occasional intervening lyric moments in verse. Nonetheless there is, from as early as the seventh century, a small but steady flow of texts telling tales in verse. Many of these have a religious content (saints' lives, versions of biblical stories and apocrypha) and some have a didactic purpose. Clearly, two writers were sufficiently motivated to turn the stories of voyage tales into a difficult metre, and we should ask whether this reflects mere academic activity or instead the audience or mode of performance of the tale.

What can be said about this version is that we know the name of its author: Áed, called 'the sun of learning of Ireland'.⁶³ I believe it is possible to identify him as Áed úa Raithnén, a scholar of the monastery of Saigir, in the south east midlands, who died in 923.⁶⁴ His kinsman Sluagadach had been involved in forging a peace between warring local lords late in the previous century.⁶⁵ Locating the tale in time and space has the advantage of providing a context for his version of the tale. Áed lived during a time in which the dominant families in his locale, and the patrons of his monastery, were engaged in destructive internecine feuds. From 912 on, the region, Osraige, was split in two and in the

war, we are told, many freemen were killed and many churches were laid waste. The father of one of the main figures in these feuds had not long before been killed returning from a raid in which he destroyed a church of nuns and killed its priest.⁶⁶ Against this background, it is possible to see why a cleric from the local monastery would retell a tale set elsewhere, leaving out many of the original local characteristics, a tale in which revenge and forgiveness are urged on the son of a man killed returning from a raid in which he sacked a church of nuns and raped one of their number, a tale which urges an end to blood feuds, strife and mutual reconciliation.⁶⁷

This is not to say that the author of the tale is not interested in the otherworld. On the contrary, he declares as his stated aim to enumerate the wonders of the world on the ocean. Elsewhere he refers to these wonders as mysteries (*ruin*), and he treats them as allegories, the secret intent of which will be revealed by scrutiny.⁶⁸ This monastic author, then, had very specific views of the tale which he adapts into a new style, views which are in concord with both his own monastic, exegetical outlook, and with the violent world in which he was situated.

'IMMRAM UA CORRA'

The second tale to examine, *Immram Ua Corra*, is equally recognisable as a tale about the saving of souls. Like *Immram Maile Dúin*, the moral here is so obvious that the way it pervades the tale has not really been examined. The conception of our heroes here is, like Máel Dúin's, somewhat suspect. The three Uí Chorra's parents make a pact with the devil in order to have children. This heritage causes the three to fall into bad ways. In one of the tale's many bits of wry humour, the three sons say to each other, 'If it is the Devil who is our king and lord, it is hard for us not to rob and plunder and persecute his enemies, that is, to kill clerics and burn and wreck churches'.⁶⁹ Like Máel Dúin, it is the call of their inherited past which leads them to violence, rather than anything intrinsic in their upbringing. They go off to sack all the churches and monasteries around them, and then remember that they have forgotten to kill their grandfather, who was steward of the monastery of Clogher (§1-12).

It is here that, as with Máel Dúin, the Uí Chorra's mixed heritage pays off, for this encounter with their grandfather is what sets them on the right road.

⁶² Hughes, *The Church*, 149-52.

⁶³ From a colophon to the verse version, Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 77 v. 223; also paraphrased in a prose version in Egerton 1782: Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 178.

⁶⁴ AI 923; AFM 920 (=922).

⁶⁵ Radner, ed., *Fragmentary Annals*, 130-1 (c.868).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 178-9, 174-5.

⁶⁷ A fuller discussion of this identification is in Clancy, 'The Author and Context of the Verse Version of *Immram Curaig Maile Dúin*', forthcoming.

⁶⁸ Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 100-1, 136-7.

⁶⁹ Stokes, ed., 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', 28-9. References to the text follow Stokes' divisions.

They come to the monastery and are fed and housed, although, the author tells us, 'the secret intention of the cleric towards them was not that which they had towards him, but to kill him and burn and wreck his church'.⁷⁰ In the night, however, one of the three has a dream of heaven and hell, and the archangel Michael appears to him and tells him they should leave their weapons and follow God. Their grandfather confirms to them that God would accept even their repentance, and they resolve to change their lives. They go off to be trained in the new life by Finnian of Clonard. In another comic set piece, when the monks of that monastery learn that is the Uí Chorra who are approaching, they all flee, until the three throw from them their staves which they had made from their spears. They are given a penance, when they seek it, of repairing all the churches they had burned. The last church they repair takes them to the sea, and they feel the urge to go journeying on the sea, to find out its wonders (§13–31).

The structure of *Immram Ua Corra* differs from that of *Immram Maíle Dúin* in a number of ways. In this tale, as in the story of Mac Cuill from the Life of Patrick, the conversion of the heroes precedes their journey on the sea. Like that story too, the brigands are painted in as despicable a light as possible. Here they are literally Sons of the Devil, or Sons of Death: popular parlance in medieval Ireland for bandits and men of violence.⁷¹ They are already more or less redeemed when they go on the sea, having done their penance, and their voyage on the sea merely reinforces the message of the possibility of forgiveness, and the inadvisability of not changing one's ways. We should perhaps here recall the sequence of renunciation of sin, followed by immersion and anointing in baptism ceremonies.

Some of this is illustrated by the small linking incident of the jester (*crossán*) who joins the Uí Chorra's crew. The 'extra crew member' motif has been much discussed, but the ways in which it varies among the different tales, and the relationship of these variations to the tales themselves has been neglected. This interloper has clear significance for the story: he is not a foster brother as in *Immram Maíle Dúin*, nor a monk as in the *Navigatio*. Like bandits and druids, jesters and satirists came in for heavy condemnation by the Irish church. So here, the appearance of another of the lowest of the low on the scene lends a parallel case to the Uí Chorra's own. The jester himself recognises the meaning of the scene: he sees them about to set sail, and says 'by my word, they do not need more than I to go and seek for heaven'. When the jester decides to defy his own crowd of buffoons and join the sailors, he must leave even his uniform behind, and go stark naked into the boat. It is at this point that the Uí Chorra receive an object lesson. When the jester explains he is 'a wretched man going with you on his pilgrimage', the crew wish to bar him, saying 'You shan't come,

with you all fierce and stark-naked'. But the jester sets them right, asking them to take him for God's sake, and they do so.⁷² Later, the jester is the first to die, and they mourn him, but his soul appears to them as a bird, telling them that it goes that moment to heaven (§34–7, 46).

So, after their own rescue from sin and death, the Uí Chorra must learn humility, and treat others around them as capable of receiving God's mercy like them. An incident in an Irish Life of St Brendan also draws this message, in a more homiletic fashion, from the voyaging of a jester (*crossán*, again) with the crew. This jester has likewise pleaded with Brendan to let him go with him, 'for God's sake' and he is allowed in. When Brendan and his crew come to an island of fierce Sea-Cats, the jester is told to take communion and sacrifice himself, for his time had come. 'Lord', he said, 'what good thing have I done, since I am taken at once to Heaven?' He leaps to shore, and the sea-cats gobble him up. The author of the Life draws this moral: 'It is manifestly from the mercy of the Lord, that the notoriously sinful man who came last into the vessel should be chosen to go first to heaven. Even so then will every well-meaning person who shall come last into the church go first into heaven, through his excess of good will beyond those who had been before him: as Christ says, "The first shall be last, and the last first"'.⁷³

It may be as well to note here that this view of the *immrama* may shed some light on later versions of the Life of Brendan which include two voyages – one exploratory and unsuccessful with monks and the other, ultimately successful with a very mixed crew. This incident with the jester comes from the second voyage. We seem to have here a conflation of the saintly voyage tale with the penitential one, the second of which includes lay people in its crew. It may be that these Lives are directed towards a wider audience than the earlier ones.

Immram Ua Corra, then, like *Immram Maíle Dúin*, is about the saving of notoriously sinful people, bandits, the sons of the Devil, jesters. But there are a few other aspects to it which distinguish it from the earlier tale. The otherworld sequence on the sea is very clerical, the most clearly purgatorial of any of the *immrama*, taking its cue from vision literature. Most of the sights seen are essentially the sights of punished sinners played out on the waves, or, by contrast, happy hermits. There is an emphasis, too, on sabbatarianism: awful punishments for such trifling offences as carrying firewood on Sunday. The import of these, beyond a 'keep Sunday special' message, is that none of these sinners have repented their wrongdoings. The Uí Chorra were much worse than any of the tortured souls they meet, yet they are assured that they are not going to Hell (§56). Far from it. At the beginning and end of their journey they

70 Ibid., 30–1.

71 McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes', 4–6.

72 Stokes, ed., 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', 38–41 (translation slightly adapted).

73 Stokes, ed., *Lives of Saints*, 111–12, 257.

build and found churches, one on their own land in Ireland, and one is founded by their companions, possibly in Galicia (§38, 75–6).

What is also happening in *Immram Ua Corra* is a teaching process. This tale is extremely message-oriented, and its audience seems to be the men of violence of its own age. The tale as we have it was probably written in the eleventh or twelfth century, a time when pillage was rife, and the burning and sacking of churches common. One example should suffice, from the Annals of Ulster at 1042: 'Maedóc's great monastery of Ferns was burned by Donnchad son of Brian. Glenn Uisen was burned by the son of Máel na mBó and the oratory broken down and a hundred people slain and four hundred taken out of it in revenge for Ferns'. This tale attempts to put at least one message over to the men of violence, the message spoken by Finnian to the Uí Chorra: 'You will not succeed in putting souls back into the men you have killed, but at least you can rebuild houses in place of the churches you have destroyed, and restore everything in the churches'.⁷⁴

Although I have not attempted to root the tale more firmly in time and place, I believe that the tools are there for doing so. The story has a strong Connacht setting. The Uí Chorra are from Connacht, the church they rebuild before setting off on the sea is at Kinvarra, and the church at Tuam is mentioned several times. Moreover, the monastery which they found on the continent may have some significance, as must the details of the transmission of the tale at the end. These ingredients seem to be a recipe for a historical and contextual reading of the tale. That the recipe has not been tried to date is one more indication that the generic qualities of the voyage tales have over-ridden their more specific attributes.

'IMMRAM SNÉDGUSA 7 MAC RIAGLA'

The final tale of the three main *immrama* is in a somewhat different category, and for that reason I intend to examine it in some more depth. What makes *Immram Snédgusa* so interesting is that we have from before 1200 AD three versions of the story, three different texts, each seemingly based closely on the preceding ones, and yet we see conscious changes in both style and substance in each.⁷⁵ We thus have an opportunity to see the changes which three different authors make to their basic material. Added to this are some later versions which take the tale in still other directions. Expanding on the basic theme of

⁷⁴ Stokes, ed., 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', 36–7, translation slightly adapted.

⁷⁵ See note 16 above for details. References to the texts will follow the verse numbering and line numbering found in Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, for versions 1 and 2, and the section divisions of Stokes, ed., 'The Adventure of St Columba's Clerics', for version 3.

this discussion, then, we can see that not only do the individual *immrama* differ from each other, but different renditions of the same tale are adapted to suit changing political and literary circumstances.

The scenario of this *immram* is different as well, because it combines, in many ways, the plot of a saint's voyage, like the *Navigatio*, and the layman's voyage, like that of Máel Dúin. What I want to do now is to examine each version individually, first as regards its literary characteristics: style, themes, highlighted incidents; then, in reverse order, with regard to the details which point to the particular aims and interests of the author of each version, and the circumstances under which each version of the tale is likely to have been composed.

The most obvious stylistic aspect of version 1, the verse version, is that it is a poem, a piece of narrative verse. If we look at the quality of the verse, we find that, all linguistic considerations aside, the author of this poem was a poor poet. On the other hand, he was a good storyteller: despite his use of creaking chevilles, he keeps the story moving, and unfolds the island scenes which call out to our attention not really by descriptive, poetic force, but by the circumstances, the actions which take place in and on them. We may contrast with this poet the author of the verse version of *Immram Maile Dúin*, usually believed to be influenced by the verse *Immram Snédgusa*, who is a fine poet, but often loses all sense of narrative.

The main focus of this version of the tale, as opposed to the later ones, is very clearly the two clerics. The opening emphasises this, since we have no explanatory introduction, but rather a description of the clerics, *in medio oceani*, setting off on their adventures. 'Adventures' does not adequately describe the clerics' encounters: the poet calls them mysteries of God ('mór di rúinib Dé', v. 3),⁷⁶ and it is striking how, especially in the verse version though also in later ones, each island appears almost as a separate allegory, communicating a particular message about God or the church. Many of the islands present the image of the clerics being fed in the desert: by God on the ocean, by his servants in hostile lands, by birds, by a mystical king on the final island they visit. Combined with this is an attention to God's mercy, and protection from danger, and this helps to reinforce some of the apocalyptic messages the clerics are given at the very end about the fire and water which hover beyond Ireland and will engulf it if God's saints do not continue to pray for mercy, and about the retribution, in the form of the Vikings, which the people of Ireland should expect because of their lack of piety.

As this version of the tale seems the one in which the voyage aspect of the tale clearly holds centre stage, it is as well to go briefly through the encounters of the clerics in it. Later versions repeat the sequence of islands with few adaptations.

⁷⁶ I follow Ó Muirigh and Thurneysen in dropping the preposition *for*, in the line which is hypermetric in the MS ('Dosrala for mor di rúinib de'). Ó hAodha and van Hamel drop *de*.

The tale begins with the clerics in the sea who, after three days, become thirsty. God has mercy on them, sending them a stream of water like new milk. The clerics, on the basis of this food in the watery desert decide to leave their voyage to God: they ship oars and led themselves be led (vv. 1–8).

The first island they come to contains a weir of pure silver into which a huge salmon springs, which feeds the clerics. On the next island, they find fierce warriors with cat heads and human bodies. On this island is a Irishman, sole survivor of a crew, the rest of whom were martyred by the inhabitants. This man brings the clerics food, and they leave him (vv. 9–21). Note the emphasis on feeding in these first two encounters.

The third island is one of the most magnificent: the island of the tree of the birds of the plain of heaven. One bird sings on the branches of a tall tree, and its singing is preaching – that is what the poem calls it – of the story of salvation: of creation, of the incarnation, crucifixion, burial and resurrection. It sings too of the day of judgement, and at this point all the birds shake their wings and blood pours out, on account of the crucifixion. The blood we are told, was royal ointment, was wine, was communion, a holy relic ('ba hola rí, ba fin, ba comman, ba cretair', v. 29). Finally a leaf comes down from the tree to the clerics, as wide as the hide of an ox. The clerics are told to take this with them. 'It was on the altar of Colum Cille' ('boi for altóir Choluim Chille', v. 31) we are told.

Before moving on, some comments on this scene: this tree of preaching, with its scenes from salvation history told on it is reminiscent of a cross, perhaps a high cross. Certainly it is meant to bring the cross to mind, as similar images of a mystical tree in patristic literature do. Here too the clerics receive food – sacred food – and also an object, a relic of their travels, one which in its description ('as broad as the hide of a great team-ox', 'lethir seiched rodaim riada', v. 30) recalls a manuscript leaf, the usual place in which one would find such biblical stories. Finally, we are told of this tree that it is beautiful, that neither its form nor its colours would decay, and that all the men of Ireland would find a shelter under its shade (vv. 22–33).

The next island repeats some of the earlier themes. It is an island with dog-headed, horse-maned inhabitants, where a cleric comes to give the monks food: fish, wine and wheat. The clerics go off, singing psalms on the ocean, and then from another island they hear one of the songs of Ireland being sung by women. The clerics go with these women to the house of the king of their island, who asks them for news of Ireland, and of the sons of Domnall, king of Tara. The clerics say that three sons are still alive, but one was killed by the Fir Rois for which sixty couples of them were set adrift. It turns out that this king of the island is the murderer of Domnall's son, and the island in which they dwell is the same as that of Enoch and Elijah, where they await the day of judgment and the battle with the Antichrist. These murderers, then, are in an especially blessed place, and the murderer himself is king. The clerics speak

with Elijah, and they receive warnings too about an imminent fate overhanging Ireland: a loch of fire and a loch of water which, but for the prayers of Patrick and Martin, would have long since engulfed Ireland (vv. 34–66).

On the final island, an ecstatic eucharist is performed, on the island of a good and righteous king. After communion, the king predicts a vengeance on the people of Ireland for their neglect of God's teaching. So the theme of eating, of communion, continues and the theme of repentance, or of salvation from sins, is extended to the people of Ireland. The tale closes with a prayer to Patrick, Enoch and Elijah (vv. 67–76).

As already noted, there is an allegorical quality to many of the episodes in this version and indeed in the later versions as well. The overall force of this version is clearly religious: it is directed at monks, of Columba's *familia* particularly, but perhaps at people at large, enjoining them to be aware, as Snédgus and Mac Ríagla are made aware, of God's mercy, of its root in the atonement described by Scripture, and of how it is to be found most clearly in the exchange of food, particularly in the eucharist. It may be noted how the communion references get progressively more specific: water like new milk, a salmon, blood and flesh from the birds' sides, wine fish and wheat, and finally communion itself. The final prophecy of invasion by foreigners, the real version of which by this time was into its second wind, serves to reinforce the need for repentance.

Before moving on to the other versions some of the more specific matters which help to contextualise the poem should be noted. There is reference at the start to the setting in the late eighth century, the king reigning being the Clann Cholmáin dynast Donnchad Midi son of Domnall, 763–97. Other useful references are to the altar of Colum Cille, and to the saints Patrick and Martin as guardians. We might note as well the stress laid throughout the tale on Irishness: the people who greet them in a wilderness of pagan savage animal-like beings are Irish (they practice Irish law, sing Irish songs), and are identified as such by their faith. Some of these aspects change in the later versions, and though many remain the same, we can take these as indicative particularly of the circumstances pertaining to this first version.

The second version retains the voyage part of the tale. In general it follows very closely the plot and the language of the first version. This is Prose version A: its style is the short, concise narrative prose of the early medieval period. Its major innovation is the longer introduction, which gives the reasons for the exile of the Fir Rois (ll. 1–40). The voyage shifts in focus as a result of this introduction. The clerics no longer go to sea merely to understand God's mercy, but now to follow the Fir Rois who, they note, went on pilgrimage against their will.

The introduction is a document of extraordinary political radicalism for early medieval Ireland. The theme of oppression is made clear from the opening sentence: 'Buí dochraite mór for feraib Roiss iar ndíth Domnall',

('There was a great oppression upon the Fir Rois after the death of Domnall'; ll. 1–2). It constructs a scenario which by biblical allusion leads to the clear conclusion that the action of the Fir Rois against an unjust oppressor was fully justified.⁷⁷ We open with the death of one king and the introduction of a new oppressive one (echoing Exodus 1:8–14, where a sympathetic pharaoh is replaced by the hard-hearted pharaoh whose oppression leads to the departure of the Israelites in search of the promised land). The text notes (anachronistic though it is) that the Fir Rois were used to living without kings (perhaps echoing the situation of the people of Israel before the events in the Book of Samuel (especially 1 Samuel 8), which includes the prophet's warning against kings).

The introduction is not just a political story, designed to highlight the oppressiveness of the king, Fiacha. It ties in to the biblical strand which the earlier version displayed: the feeding of God's people in the desert (highlighted now by the Old Testament orientation of the introduction), the salvation history recounted by the birds, the ending with its echoes of the Book of Revelation. And in this version the fate of the Fir Rois is thrown into high relief by the introduction: their living in the island with Enoch and Elijah is 'good, without sin, without wickedness'. If they had sinned in their overthrow of an unjust king, they are completely absolved by this point. Although the change in the historical setting to the tale, placing it now over a century earlier after the reign of the seventh-century Northern Uí Néill king Domnall mac Áeda, no doubt has political overtones, it also has implications for the narrative. Domnall is generally portrayed in literature as an archetypal just king, and here the injustice which follows his death suggests almost the end of a golden age. In deferring to the judgement of the saint in deciding what to do with the rebellious Fir Rois, Donnchad shows the same restraint that his putative father Domnall shows in some tales about him, the same deference to the authority of God. Implicitly, his following of just action, like his father, is set in contrast to the unjust and ultimately fatal behaviour of Fiacha as king.

So this tale appears to be politically motivated, especially against the imposition of non-native kings on people, and against oppressive behaviour by kings. The rest of the tale serves, perhaps, to re-analyse the nature of kingship. Note the two kings at the end of the tale, one a murderer, and one presiding at an island in which a hundred priests are dispensing communion. These elements are there in the verse version, but the introduction changes our understanding of them, balanced as they are now by the two kings of the introduction, one oppressive, the other restrained, at the beginning of the tale. This version gives us a clearer sense of the trajectory of the leader of the Fir Rois from murderer of Fiacha to otherworldly king.

⁷⁷ This may be implied in the verse version as well, if we read '[ba] coib córach', 'it was a just victory', in v. 49. See Ó hAodha, 'The Poetic Version', 426 n.43.

Besides the new introduction, version 2 also has some notable changes in detail. The shift of kings from Southern Uí Néill to Northern Uí Néill is no doubt important. In addition, a highly significant passage notes that the leaf the clerics receive from the tree 'is Colum Cille's flabellum today, and it is in Kells' ('Conid hí cuilefaid Coluim Chille andiu, a Cenandus atá-side'; ll. 75–6). I will return to these points in due course.

The third version, Prose B, bases itself on the earlier ones, using the introduction found in Prose A, and the voyage nucleus common to both earlier versions (though occasionally the author seems to base his version on the verse rather than the prose). It however makes a radical shift in setting and sympathy. In its new style, the fulsome prose familiar to readers of *Buile Shuibne*, the Book of Leinster *Táin* and the like it completely redirects the point of the introduction by changes both in detail and in tone. Now the king imposed over the Fir Rois is lord by right, second in line to the king of Ireland. His oppression is still gruesome, but not depicted as oppression: instead he works lazy peasants hard. The reason they have no king, here, is because they used to kill their own (§1–2). We have moved from the world of Exodus into the world of Julius Caesar, as the Fir Rois plot the downfall of Fiacha, ambush him and slay him. His brother, Donnchad shows restraint in this version as before by not slaying the Fir Rois outright, but the emphasis here is not on the possible innocence of the Fir Rois but on the need to preserve law and not to violate the rights of the two protectors, Rónán Find and Máine mac Néill. A property aspect is introduced into Columba's judgment as well: the land of the Fir Rois is granted to Armagh in compensation (§4–5). And the focus has shifted even further from the clerics, who are named almost as an afterthought. These clerics stay with the king for a while, and are given accommodation at Derry (§6–7).

So this reworking of the introduction contains much in the way of shift of emphasis and of detail. The other major change in this version is the inclusion of a version of the *Fís Adomnáin*. This tale, originally written in the early eleventh century, involves an extra-corporeal journey through heaven and hell. The clerics in the *immram* experience it after gazing at the leaf from the tree, which here is explicitly a manuscript: 'Now this is what was on the leaf, the story of the palace and the household of heaven, and of the angelic station and of hell' ('Isead immorro bai sin duillind, scél in rigthigi 7 munteri nime, 7 in tsosaid ainglidi 7 ifrinn'; §13).

This insertion lengthens the voyage part of the text, but also extends the themes already latent, of judgement and of mercy, and of the community of God. But further understanding of the motives for its insertion must await examination of the proposed contexts of the various versions.

Turning to that examination now, it is as well to make two general observations. First, I think it fairly certain that all three versions were composed, at various times, within the *familia* of Colum Cille. The protagonists are members of the

Columban *familia*, and there are localising references to Kells and Derry in versions 2 and 3, and to Colum Cille's altar in version 1. Second, the changes in detail, of historical circumstance and of monastic setting, seem to be good indicators that the tale has been changed owing partly to differing political imperatives. The techniques of shadowing contemporary circumstances with stories of the past have received copious analysis in recent years and do not need a lengthy defence here. Two good and relevant analyses of this sort of technique in action are Máire Herbert's examination of the Middle Irish *Betha Adamnáin* (Life of Adomnán) and her reassessment of the Middle Irish *Fléd Duín na nGéd*.⁷⁸

Of all the versions of *Immram Snédgusa*, version 3 seems to be the most specifically placeable, primarily because of the extraordinarily specific changes we have seen in the introduction. The language suggests a twelfth century date, or possibly later, but I would propose a much more specific context than that.

Let us take the innovatory items in turn, starting with the shift of Columban focus to Derry and Iona. In this version, in a complete departure from the earlier versions, Columba's monks are sidetracked before setting out to sea when the king invites them to Derry and houses and feeds them there. Iona is also specifically mentioned more times in this version than the other two (§5, 13). Máire Herbert has shown that the rise of Derry, and its taking of centre stage in the Columban community was essentially a product of 1150 and after. Indeed, John Bannerman has referred to 1150 as the *annus mirabilis* of Derry.⁷⁹ From this date, Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin assumed both the abbacy of Derry and the headship of the Columban *familia*. He also maintained close connections with Armagh: his family had been involved in Armagh for many years and the contemporary bishop of Armagh, Gilla Meic Liag, had originally been abbot of Derry himself. John Bannerman has shown that the relations between Armagh and Derry were even closer at this period, sharing political interests and staff, including *fir léinn*.⁸⁰ Moreover, the monastery of Derry had enthusiastic support from one of the most powerful kings of the day, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, king of Cenél nEogain and the Northern Uí Néill, for a time 'king of Ireland without opposition' and by his own estimate *rex totius Hibernie*.⁸¹ His base was in Derry, and this, I believe is part of what is represented in the wintering of the clerics in Derry: the relationship that existed between the Uí Néill king in the third quarter of the twelfth century and the monastery of Derry, best symbolised in the major building programme

78 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 151–79; Herbert and Ó Riain, eds, *Betha Adamnáin*, 1–31; Herbert, 'Fléd Duín na nGéd'.

79 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 109–23; Bannerman, 'Comarba Coluim Chille', 41.

80 Bannerman, 'Comarba Coluim Chille', 35–43.

81 Duffy, *Ireland*, 54–6.

undertaken by Flaithbertach and Muirchertach in the 1160s. By 1164 the church had reached a height (or length?) of 90 feet.⁸²

Iona is a relevant factor here as well: we are reminded not only of the temporary Derry base for the monks but of Iona as their spiritual home. This is where the birds command the manuscript leaf to lie upon the monks' return (not in Kells, or Derry). In 1164 (*Annals of Ulster*, henceforth AU), an offer had come to Flaithbertach, suggesting that he take up the abbacy of Iona. He was prevented by Mac Lochlainn, the bishop of Armagh and others, but the connection had certainly been made. As Herbert points out, by the 1170s Derry had started to decline and the Columban community started to fragment.⁸³ all of which leads to a suggestion of sometime between 1150 and 1170 for the composition of this version.

The inserted property reference supports this. The land of the Fir Rois (and here, of the Mugdorna Maigen also) is given over to Armagh forever (§5). As we have seen, at this period the interests of Derry and Armagh by and large coincided, and Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin and Gilla Meic Liag can be seen working closely on many occasions. The land described in the tale is undoubtedly Louth, the area of which roughly corresponds to that of the Fir Rois and Mugdorna Maigen. Gilla Meic Liag, bishop of Armagh, fought during this period to claim Louth back under the sway of Armagh. It had been attached by his predecessor to Clogher, and more recently the centre of this new diocese had been transferred by the powerful Airgialla king, Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, to Louth itself.⁸⁴ This statement of property intent then partakes of the air of the same period (although it is fair to note that the struggle to regain Louth was still going on in the next century).

A further innovation is the introduction of the protectors, Rónán Find (*mac Beraig* in version 4), and Máine mac Néill. Why do these anachronistic figures suddenly intrude and who are they? Rónán may be one of two saints, either Ronan Find, generally associated with Lann Rónáin Finn in Co. Down, or Rónán mac Berach, of Druim Inesclainn, Co. Louth. I believe the latter more likely: both were constantly confused, and indeed conflated at this period.⁸⁵ Máine mac Néill is not a saint at all, but an ancestor figure of the Southern Uí Néill kingdom of Maine, later Tethba. At this period it was ruled not by the descendants of Máine mac Néill but by the Uí Ruairc of Bréifne who had gradually extended their sway over Meath during the eleventh century.⁸⁶

In brief then, these two protectors may be seen as foils for contemporary figures: Rónán Find, I believe, for Donnchad Ua Cerbaill in whose territory his

82 Ibid., 35; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 110, 121.

83 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 121–3.

84 Byrne, *Irish Kings*, 126–7.

85 Ó Riain, 'The Materials', 176–8.

86 Byrne, *Irish Kings*, 91–2.

church was, and Máine for Tigernain Ua Ruairc, king of Bréifne. Their contemporary image as protectors is reinforced by the Annals of Ulster for 1157, in which they took revenge for the breaking of the protection of the laity and clergy of the north of Ireland by a king of Meath who killed an enemy through treachery. It is probably not just the protectors who shadow contemporary figures in this version of the tale. The focus of the introduction is very much on the restraint Donnchad shows in not taking immediate revenge on his enemies, but instead bowing to the will of Colum Cille. If he violates these protections, it is warned, no protection will be left in Ireland ('ní bia comairgi a nÉrinn iar-sin'; §5).

Donnchad, here a northern Uí Néill character, seems clearly to represent the Cenél nEogain king, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn. More specifically, it may be proposed that the events referred to in this version of the introduction are the events of 1165 (cf. AU), in which Mac Lochlainn with his allies stemmed a revolt by the Ulaid and peace was only made with the guarantees of Donnchad Ua Cerbaill and of many of the clergy including Flaithbertach, abbot of Derry and successor of Colum Cille. Peace must have been sworn on the relics both of Patrick and of Colum Cille, as when that peace was later broken it was in dishonour of those relics. A large number of the 'finest and best' of the Ulaid were taken hostage as guarantees as well before Eochaid, the king was restored to power.

In 1166, these guarantees were all broken, Mac Lochlainn blinded the king of the Ulaid, and the treachery and violation of his protection led to Donnchad Ua Cerbaill changing political allegiance, joining with Ua Ruairc and the king of Connacht against Mac Lochlainn. The ensuing battle led to Mac Lochlainn's death.⁸⁷

Thus I believe this work to have been written in 1165 itself, during the period of tension between the newly restored king of Ulster and Mac Lochlainn. A tale already extant within the Columban *familia*, and already associated with political criticism, was reanalysed and recreated as a commentary on the current situation. It was from Derry that this text emerged, reminding Mac Lochlainn of the beautiful relationship between the Columban *familia* and his dynasty (and of its fragility), *inter alia* making a statement on Armagh's right to Louth, but most specifically urging respect for the protection of the Ulaid king, represented here by the Fir Rois, respect not least of the peace-making efforts of Columba's own successor.

How does the interpolated Vision of Adomnán fit into this? First of all, we can understand how it got in: it too is probably a text with a provenance in the Columban *familia*. More to the point though, its emphasis on the choice between heaven and hell is germane to the themes of the tale. Also, the elaborate depiction of the heavenly city, its towers and porches and gates, I

believe, is intended to echo the new building of Derry's great church. It too then calls the king back to the relationship between him and Derry, and calls him towards a different city, a different kingdom.

This then is a political text with a number of specific quarries, yet it is also religious; it advocates the maintenance of civil law and the acknowledgment of saintly guarantors, but in the voyage section it points also to notions of heavenly kingship, of the communion shared between kings, of the shared nationality of the Irish and the heavenly city. Although we cannot provide a specific author for the text, its concerns, it is argued, reflect fairly specifically those of Derry around the year 1165.

The second version provides its own *terminus post quem*: it tells us that the leaf from the heaven tree was Colum Cille's flabellum (*cuilefaid*), and that it was in Kells at the time of writing. We know when it was taken there: in 1090 (Annals of Tigernach), when it came from Cenél Conaill to Kells possibly to be reshined. At the same time the famous Cathach was put in a shrine as well and since we know it returned to the North it may be that the flabellum did as well; hence this version should perhaps not be dated much later than 1090.⁸⁸ We know who brought the flabellum to Kells: Óengus úa Domnallain, chief confessor and later head of the *dísert* of Kells, who died in 1109. But we also know one other thing about the flabellum: this was probably not the genuine item. A flabellum had been drowned in the seas off Scotland in 1034 (AU) along with the lector of Kells and three relics of Patrick. So one purpose of the note inserted in the text of this version might be to give some origin and authenticity to the relic then on the altar of Kells by identifying its origins not with Columba himself, but with a mysterious trip to the otherworld.⁸⁹ In version 1 it is certainly not a flabellum.

It is difficult to be more specific for the context of the second version. It should be noted that by the end of the eleventh century Southern Uí Néill patronage had ebbed and Meath was fracturing quickly under the sway of Ua Ruairc. Thus by the change in the identity of the kings in this version, from southern to northern Uí Néill, Kells may to some extent have been looking to Northern Uí Néill patronage, to the reforging of links we can see in the transaction of enshrining the relics from Cenel Conaill.⁹⁰

The time is also well suited to the general political message of the piece, to its anti-oppression stance (especially *vis-à-vis* the area of Co. Louth, under pressure from both Airgialla and Meath at this point), in particular against the

88 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 93. Bannerman, suggests that the relics had been on a tribute circuit, 'Comarba Colum Chille', 44. See discussion of the *cuilefaid* in Ó Floinn, 'Insigniae Columbae I', 155–8.

89 See Ó Floinn, 'Insigniae Columbae I', 156.

90 On the political situation, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 94–7. Note also the dominance of Domnall Mac Lochlainn in 1090.

87 Ibid., 128; Duffy, *Ireland*, 56 brings out the ultimate consequences of these actions.

outside imposition of kings. Land alienation and the establishment of puppet kings were becoming prevalent at this period as an instrument of political conquest. Perhaps our text represents some opposition to the grim realities of a changing world.

Finally, the text suits the apocalyptic mood of the period. Eschatological fears were rife, especially around 1096 (cf. AU), the year of the great fear, on the feast of St John, of a great fire which would engulf Ireland. I would tentatively suggest then that the text is a product of the last decade of the eleventh century and of the monastery of Kells.

The first version, the verse version, has the fewest specific references, but it is nonetheless possible to suggest a plausible context for it. We should note the original political setting here, during Clann Cholmáin rule (prevalent right up to the early eleventh century), and recall that this setting was changed by the authors of the later versions. The best dating guide, however, is the way in which this clearly Columban text has also a noticeable devotion to Patrick: it is Patrick's prayers with Martin's which stem the lake of fire and water, and to Patrick's prayers that the author commends himself at the end of the poem (vv. 64, 76). The text then should belong to a period at which some connection was apparent between Armagh and the Columban community. This can be seen at either end of the tenth century, when Armagh abbots attained also the headship of the Columban *familia*.⁹¹ Only the situation in the first part of the century will really suit the text. From 891–927 a strong abbot, Máel Brigte mac Tornáin, ruled both Armagh and the Columban churches with their base at Kells. Also at this time, a particularly strong Southern Uí Néill king gave way, with a three year interregnum, to another (Flann Sina died in 916 and Donnchad Donn became king of Tara in 919) Both these dynasts were direct descendants of the Domnall and Donnchad of the poem's opening and setting.

Moreover, one of Flann Sina's sons died by the treachery of a small clan in 901, and another died in 915. In the second decade of the century, it seems to have been true (as the verse tale puts it) that there were three sons left to the former king of Tara, one of whom was about to assume the kingship and proceed to eliminate his rivals. So it may be that the brief political allusions in the poem also suit this period. On the other hand, the political situation seems more incidental to this earliest version than to the later ones.

Nonetheless, eschatological expectations are a feature of this period as well. In 892, a great wind on the feast of St Martin destroyed trees, oratories and houses (note Martin invoked as protector against apocalyptic elemental disaster by the poem). And in 917, a year after Flann Sina's death, portents of ice and fire were seen west beyond Ireland. The Norse were once again ravaging the area, especially around Kells, and the final message of the poem would certainly

91 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 74–6, 83–5.

have been applicable. Indeed, in 919 the reconquest of Dublin by the Norse occurred, with the disastrous defeat of the king of Tara.

Finally, some physical evidence may help to corroborate the theory that the verse version of *Immram Snédgusa* belongs to the abbacy of Máel Brigte mac Tornáin. Roger Stalley has recently argued convincingly that the Tower Cross at Kells is also product of the reign of Máel Brigte, partly on the basis of the dedication of the cross to Patrick and Columba together.⁹² This cross, with its scenes of feeding (Paul and Anthony, the multiplication of loaves and fish), as well as its vision of the upraised lamb, its crucifixion and its judgment, I would suggest belongs to the same milieu as our tale, with its description of a tree which would never decay or change colour, under whose limbs all Ireland could find shelter.⁹³

There is a message too, if this period is the correct one, for the Columban *familia*, only recently breaking its ties with Iona and choosing an abbot from mainland Ireland who remained there with Kells as his base. Its drifting monks find faith in the desert among the people of Ireland, among Gaelic speakers, singers of Irish songs. It is to the national saint that the poet looks for comfort. There is in this tale, then, a reorientation for the Columban *familia* as they root themselves more firmly in the soil of Meath.

These are three versions of the same tale, each attempting a new literary vision, each very much rooted in its own time, yet maintaining a core otherworld voyage section. One version, a text in narrative verse of the early tenth century, seeks to show a religious vision of God's mercy to his faithful as well as to enforce a sense of the need for new religious commitment. The second, a product of the late eleventh century, is a radical political statement directed at the changing politics and patronage of the time with an interest in the nature of kingship and in the nature of sin and redemption. The third is a very specific plea for restraint during a period of political tension, directed towards Muirchertach MacLochlain in 1165.⁹⁴

I am aware that a certain amount of game-playing is involved in finding the context for such tales, and that alternatives could be proposed which may be more or equally likely. What the search does, at the very least, is heighten our awareness to the specific details, the tone, the points of emphasis used in each

92 Stalley, 'Scribe and Mason', esp. 260–4.

93 I hope to explore the connections between these two 'texts', the cross and the tale, in the near future.

94 A fourth version, with newly created lyric poetry, was written sometime afterwards, perhaps in the 13th century. It has left both Kells and Derry behind, and at the end of the tale the clerics return not to Ireland but to Iona, where, we are told, the leaf (here, again, consciously a manuscript) and another relic, unique to this version (a cowl acquired on their travels) still remain, it says. It may be that this fourth version of the tale owes its composition to the newly rejuvenated abbey at Iona.

version of the tale. If nothing else then, our search for the purpose and context of each version gives us a closer, more dedicated reading than we might otherwise obtain. I hope that this examination of the three earlier versions of *Immram Snédgusa* will have at least engendered some respect, perhaps admiration, for the later two authors who, far from simply rehashing old material with their own, misunderstood, traditions thrown in for good measure, skillfully, in two very different prose styles, took the tale for their own ends and wove new, well-made tapestries from the old threads.

I wish to point briefly to one image in the four earliest versions of the tale to give a final sense both of the way in which these versions have distinct visions of the themes of the voyage tale, and also of the way in which such details constitute important and conscious changes rather than simple divergences from a core tradition. On one of the otherworld islands, as we have seen, birds in a tree recount salvation history for the clerics. After this, a leaf falls from the tree, as wide as the hide of an ox, and the clerics are urged to take it with them. In the first version we are told 'It was on the altar of Columba' (probably in Kells; vv. 30–1). It seems to me most likely that the leaf is meant to be, metaphorically, a manuscript in this version, though there is no explicit explanation in the text. In the second version, the leaf is explained: 'That is Columba's flabellum today. It is in Kells' (§4). We know that this flabellum was in Kells in 1090, when it was brought from Donegal. It may well be that this tale was recreated around this period.

But in version three, the leaf is once more a manuscript. The clerics look at the leaf: 'Now this is what was on the leaf, the story of the palace and the household of heaven and of the angelic station and of hell ... After rising, they did not see the island, nor the tree nor the birds, but they saw the leaf and the tale that was on it, that is, the tale of the household of heaven and of the noble King Himself, etc'. A storm arises and they are immediately wafted into a vision of heaven and hell (§13). In version four the leaf, once more a manuscript of sorts, is taken back to Iona, and is used to record the adventures of the monks, and we are told that it is there as a relic today.⁹⁵

The leaf functions in each version as the token of the authenticity of the voyage, the truth of the fiction, and in each it is brought back to rest on the altar of Columba. But in each version the location of that altar changes, and in each the concrete identity of the leaf shifts. Moreover, especially in the final versions, its symbolic meaning is changed. In the last two versions its literary character is asserted: in version three it is a manuscript already written which serves as a literary entry into the otherworld; in version four it is a literary memorial of the

95 At least in the Book of Fermoy copy of this version: 'and this tale was written on the leaf, and it remains still on the altar of Colum Cille' ('7 roscribad an scel so sa duillind 7 mairid fós .r. altoir ... Coluim Cilli'), Ó Máille, 'Merugud cléirech Choluim Chille', 324.

clerics' visit to the otherworld, inscribed on the very stuff of that world. Presumably it is the manuscript from which the reader might, on Iona, be reading the tale of the voyage of Columba's clerics. These are clever, self-conscious conceits which open up a new outlook on the voyage tales, written by authors who reflected on their meaning and reinterpreted them across the centuries.⁹⁶

There is a great deal more that could be said about these tales. What I have tried to do here is simply to show that in order to understand the otherworld of these voyage tales, we must first understand the structure of the narratives and their motivation. There are some general questions as well, concerning the nature of the audiences of the tales – secular, ecclesiastic or both?⁹⁷ – and the purpose of different media for its transmission (verse rather than prose). I hope, at least, to have succeeded in shifting attention away, momentarily, from the origins of motifs like the Island of Women and the survival of souls after death in the form of birds, arresting as these images are, and away from the use of these texts as mines in which to dig for a pre-Christian system of beliefs. Equal importance lies in how these early Irish authors applied the teachings of Christianity to their own distinctive world, a world of thieving cooks and violent men, a world of jesters and vengeance, of oppressive kings and displaced tribes, and a land where kinship was paramount, and exile dangerous. The consistent message of all three main voyage tales which remain to us is one of mercy, of God's tender care for his people, of his feeding them on the ocean, sending them fresh water like new milk on the salty desert of the sea, and his constant willingness to forgive.

The American poet Wallace Stevens wrote, 'The sea severs not only lands, but also selves'.⁹⁸ What the Irish authors of the *immrama* have given to us is a theology, told in tales, in parables, of what the cleansing waters of baptism and the purging nature of repentance means. On the other side of that water, blood-feuds give way to celebrations and welcome, the repentant murderer is king, the Son of Death becomes a Son of Life, and the terrorist and bandit becomes a saint.⁹⁹

96 See further on this Burnyeat, 'Tradition and Creativity'.

97 A medieval comment on the voyage of Máel Dúin envisaged a secular audience, saying the tale was arranged as 'an entertainment of mind for kings and for people', Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 53, ll.9 71–3.

98 Stevens, 'The Comedian as the Letter C'.

99 This article is based on two talks, one given at Blackfriars, Edinburgh, in November 1992, and again to the Colloquium on Orality, Writing and Culture at New York University in October 1993; and the second given at the Irish Conference of Medievalists in Maynooth in June 1993. I am grateful to the audiences at all these talks for useful discussion at them. I must also acknowledge my debt to the British Academy for the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship which supported me when much of the original research for this article was done. Finally, a number of colleagues contributed substantially to my ideas on the subject through discussion and encouragement, and I am very much in the debt of Abigail Burnyeat, John Carey, William Gillies, Gilbert Márkus, Donald Meek, Kevin Murray, and Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh.