

Nauigatio Sancti Brendani: The Voyage of St Brendan

The *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* is one of the best-known and most influential Latin texts of the Middle Ages. It survives in over 120 manuscripts, a huge number. Moreover, later versions were made in many of the languages of medieval Europe, including French, English and Old Norse. Nevertheless much about the *Nauigatio* is obscure.

Who, where, when?

We do not know the name of the author, nor when or where the *Nauigatio* was composed. Two things about him are fairly obvious, though: he must have been an Irishman, because the text shows a detailed knowledge of Irish geography and genealogy, and he must have been a monk, simply because the *Nauigatio* is an exploration of the monastic ideal.

It is disputed, however, whether the unnamed author was working in Ireland or on the Continent. This is simply because the earliest copies of the *Nauigatio* are all from Lotharingia, i.e. what is now north-east France and Belgium. Carl Selmer, who edited the Latin text of the *Nauigatio*, thought that the author was an Irishman who had emigrated there, as many Irish churchmen did in the early Middle Ages. But equally the *Nauigatio* might have been written in Ireland and simply brought to Lotharingia by one of those early churchmen.

The date when the *Nauigatio* was written is even more difficult to decide. The earliest copies date to the 10th century. David Dumville, however, argues that the work was written not later than 786, because political changes after that date would have caused the text's statements about St Brendan's family connections to become outdated. Another key question is the Viking raids that began in the 790s. They would have had a devastating impact on the kind of monastic life in the ocean that the *Nauigatio* describes, yet the *Nauigatio* does not seem to mention the Vikings. That supports an earlier date, in Dumville's view. Wooding suggests the period c.730–c.830 as likely.

A summary of the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*

It is the story of St Brendan's journey from Ireland to the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* – the 'Land of Promise of the saints'. This is a paradise on earth which the *Nauigatio* represents as being on an island in the ocean westwards from Ireland. Brendan is inspired to undertake this voyage when he hears that two other monks – SS. Barrind and Mernóc – have already been there. They, however, found it with no difficulty, whereas for Brendan and his followers the journey is greatly extended, and on the way they visit many other places in the ocean and have numerous adventures. After seven years they reach the land of promise, and after a stay there, they return home to tell others of their voyage.

How can we interpret the *Nauigatio*?

Is the voyage of Brendan a reflection of real travels by Irish monks across the Atlantic? To a degree, the answer to this must be yes. As we will see in the next unit, there is plenty of historical evidence for such voyages. If we take this kind of reasoning, we can try to identify the places visited by Brendan. For instance, the Island of the Sheep (chapter 9) has been identified with the Faroe Islands. We know Irish monks reached these islands before the Norse did. More adventurously, some have argued that the Land of Promise is in fact North America, and that Irish monks discovered it before the Norse. The internal geography of the text makes this highly unlikely, however.

It is reasonable to think that parts of the story do reflect travellers' tales current among Irish monks of the time. But is that why they are in the *Nauigatio*, or are they there for symbolic reasons? Most scholars now accept that the *Nauigatio* provides an exploration of the life of the monk. The journey represents the monk's progress in leaving behind the material world and seeking closeness to God (i.e. the Land of Promise). The journey does not appear to be a straight line, but rather a series of circuits, and crucially Brendan and his followers return at certain times of year to the same places: Easter they celebrate on the back of the sea monster Iasconius, and Christmas on the island of Ailbe. This reflects the recurring liturgical observances that structure a monk's life. The *Nauigatio* thus has a circular structure as well as a linear one, just as does the monastic life.

Reading

The best introduction to the *Nauigatio* is:

Jonathan M. Wooding, 'The Latin Version', in W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess (eds.), *The Voyage of St Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation* (Exeter, 2000), pp. 13–25. On Moodle.

You should now also re-read this useful introduction to the Irish voyage genre:

Jonathan Wooding, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. xi–xxviii.

Carney's fundamental article was actually a book review. It is reprinted in Wooding's anthology:

James Carney, 'Review of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*', reprinted in Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 42–51.

The first few pages deal with the Irish geography of the story. The more important second section is on the relationship between the *Navigatio* and the Irish *immrama*. We will deal with this in Unit 8.

Two good studies of the *Nauigatio* as a monastic text are these:

Cynthia Bourgeault, 'The Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio* of St. Brendan', *Monastic Studies*, 14 (1983), 109–21.

Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Distant Islands: The Topography of Holiness in the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales, Exeter Symposium VI* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 1–20.

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