

Immram Curaig Máele Dúin

So far we have encountered the work usually known as *Immram Brain*, and the Latin *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*. Scholars have argued over the status of both of these texts as *immrama*, or ‘voyage narratives’. In the case of *Immram Brain*, this is because it seems rather different from the other *immrama*: it is much shorter, it does not have an explicit Christian or monastic context, it may, in fact, have closer generic affiliations with the *echtraí* tales. In the case of the *Nauigatio*, the difficulty is simply linguistic: it is a work of medieval Latin literature, not medieval Irish literature.

Nevertheless, the *Nauigatio* is often read side-by-side with the Irish-language *immrama*. Jonathan Wooding goes so far as to insist that they belong to a single genre of Irish voyage narratives. He has a very strong case for saying so. It seems clear that the *Nauigatio* profoundly influenced the *immrama* texts, indeed it was the inspiration for them. In this unit we will begin by examining the best-known of the remaining Irish *immrama*, *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin*.

Synopsis

The frame narrative: Máel Dúin is the son of a warrior called Ailill from the Aran Islands. While on a raid in Leinster, Ailill rapes a nun (or, in another version, the abbess) of a monastery (Kildare). Soon afterwards he himself is killed by raiders in his own land, after taking refuge in a church. The nun bears a son, Máel Dúin, but she gives the child to the queen of a local king, who rears him as her own son. Máel Dúin only discovers his true identity when he is mocked by someone at court. He travels to the Aran islands to be with his own kin. One day, however, he is mocked again, this time for unwittingly playing a game over the remains of his unavenged father. Máel Dúin now puts to sea to seek out his father’s killers, who live on an offshore island. A druid in Corco Mruad (north-west Clare) tells him where to go and how to get there. Máel Dúin’s three fosterbrothers insist on coming too, even though this contravenes the druid’s instructions. They reach the island of the marauders, but then a contrary wind blows them away before they can exact vengeance.

The **main body of the *immram*** now follows. Máel Dúin encounters many different islands and has many adventures. His three fosterbrothers are lost, one by one, as could be predicted. He spends a long time on an island of women, very similar to the *tír inna mban* of *Immram Brain*.

Conclusion: At last Máel Dúin reaches an island inhabited by a solitary cleric. The cleric warns him not to seek vengeance against the marauders who killed his father, because he and his own men are themselves men of violence who deserve death. Máel Dúin rediscovers the island of the marauders and, instead of killing them, accepts their hospitality and is reconciled with them. He returns to his own land to tell his story.

What is *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin*?

This is really the question I want you to think about for this unit, rather than me giving you a single answer. Here are some pointers, though.

For a start, it is clearly related to the Latin *Nauigatio Brendani*. Many of the islands seem to derive from islands in the *Nauigatio*. There has been some disagreement in the past about the relative dates of the two works, but Carney made a very strong case for the priority of the *Nauigatio*. Moreover, Dumville's dating of the *Nauigatio* to the late 8th century makes it highly likely that the *Nauigatio* came first, because the language of the Irish *immram* is arguably later than that.

The more interesting question, however, is how the *Immram* is related to the *Nauigatio*. What, in fact, is the author of *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* doing?

Carney argues that the *Immram* is a kind of secular version of the *Nauigatio*. Instead of the main protagonist being a monk, he is a secular hero of a kind fairly typical in Irish saga. However, Carney is not so clear as to why this was done: for him, the *Immram* 'lacks the integration of [the *Nauigatio*]'.

There are some brief comments in Villers's article (below) which suggest that she favours a more thoroughgoing interpretation of the *Immram* as a penitential voyage. There is a much more detailed and lengthy exposition of a Christian, monastic interpretation by Clancy.

In this view Máel Dúin is a sinner, a man of violence, like Maccuill in the Patrick tradition. We saw in an earlier unit that being set adrift in a boat, at the mercy of God, was a punishment imposed in early medieval Ireland, and we saw too that some monks underwent such voyages voluntarily.

Máel Dúin's voyage is undertaken initially for the opposite reasons: to do violence upon his father's killers. In doing this he is acting quite in accordance with the expectations and moral code of his own secular society. For Máel Dúin not to seek vengeance for the death of his father is a shameful thing, as the mocker in the churchyard at Dubhchluain points out to him. And yet: he is prevented from carrying out his vengeance by what appears to be divine intervention. Only then does he turn to God, instructing his men to leave the direction in which they sail to God's judgement. At the end of the tale, he heeds the Christian advice of the cleric to forgive his enemies. This is in contrast to the role of the pagan druid in encouraging Máel Dúin on his voyage of revenge.

The frame narrative of *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* is thus open to a coherent and satisfying religious interpretation. But what of the body of the text, the islands and the adventures? You will find some attempts to interpret these as part of the penitential process in Clancy's article. But Clancy himself admits that not all of this material is easily brought into his interpretation. Are, in fact, 'some of the islands ... no doubt simply there for the sake of imaginative fancy and as wonder-tales'? And what of the island of women? Clancy offers a negative interpretation of this island, yet the Irish author offers us no

commentary either way. This is quite typical of medieval Irish narrative: events are set out in a non-committal manner, the audience being left to judge the morality for themselves.

Conclusion

The *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* begins in the lived world of early medieval Ireland. There is a realist tone to the narrative of the hero's upbringing. This lasts until he reaches the island of the marauders for the first time. At this point he is directed into the unknown, into the vast ocean beyond Ireland's shores. Here he is in an otherworld zone of extraordinary islands and creatures. It may be interpreted as a penitential zone, where men go under the supervision of God to shrive their sins; certainly, there are men in it who live a holy life, and it is one of these who sends Máel Dúin home again at the end.

There is no doubt that the author was a Christian and a churchman in an Ireland that had been Christian for many centuries. It's a 'Christian' text, then, not a pagan one. But is an interpretation that simply sees it in terms of Christian doctrine adequate to cover the whole colourful variety of what we find in this work? At the end the author himself says that he put together his *immram* in order to delight his audience. To what extent may we consider the Irish otherworld(s) as place(s) of pure entertainment? Does the marvellous element in *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* overwhelm the ostensible penitential message?

Reading

Text and translation:

Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Voyage of Mael Duin', *Revue Celtique*, 9 (1888), 447–95; and 10 (1889), 50–95, 264.

Stokes's translation is on Moodle in the form of a Word file. You can access the whole of his edition (and indeed anything else you need in *Revue Celtique*) online via the weblink I have posted in Moodle too.

Some useful interpretations:

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.

Barbara Hillers, 'Voyages between Heaven and Hell: Navigating the Early Irish *Immram* Tales', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), 66–81.

Thomas Clancy, 'Subversion at Sea: Structure, Style and Intent in the *Immrama*', in Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in*

Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism (Dublin, 2000),
pp. 194–225.

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