

*Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* ‘The Voyage of Brendan’:  
Landscape and Paradise in Early Medieval Ireland

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*I. Introduction to the Nauigatio*

*Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, the *Voyage of St Brendan the Abbot*, is one of the most famous of all early medieval Irish texts.<sup>1</sup> It is a Hiberno-Latin narrative which was probably written in Ireland by the second half of the eighth century (Dumville 1998) or during the ninth (Esposito 1961; Carney 1963). It describes how St Brendan, a sixth-century early Irish abbot, is called to go on a journey to the Promised Land of the Saints which, the text tells us, can be found in the Atlantic Ocean to the west of Ireland. He is accompanied by a crew of monks on a voyage lasting seven years. The travellers must pass various tests before reaching their goal. Brendan visits islands in the north Atlantic, encounters monks, celebrates Easter on the back of a giant sea creature and meets Judas Iscariot. After reaching the Promised Land of the Saints, Brendan and the remaining monks return home. The text draws on a rich literary heritage which may stretch back into the early seventh century (Carney 1963). It is widely believed in popular culture that it describes an actual voyage to the Americas, undertaken by early medieval Irish monks (Ashe 1962; Severin 1978). Most scholars, however, interpret it as a symbolic religious text which should not be read literally (Bourgeault 1983; O’Loughlin 1999; O’Loughlin 2005). This paper will highlight the different landscapes described in the *Nauigatio*, exploring how they provide the tale with interpretative depth. To do this, the importance of early Christian views of the world, especially of geography, will be explained. This will be linked to the development of an Irish religious practice known as *peregrinatio*, or exile. Together they help give the narrative meaning.

*II. Geographical and religious contexts*

The *Nauigatio* sends its voyagers through a carefully described and consistent geographical space. This is based on the Classical geographical tradition, one which was inherited, and developed, by Christian writers. They combined the Bible with the Classical legacy, re-categorising the knowledge of antiquity in the process. They put Jerusalem at the centre of the world; they mapped Biblical history and Old Testament

ethnic divisions onto the Classical geographical model. This was imagined as a globe, the *orbis terrarum*, containing the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, enclosed by the great outer ocean, *oceanus* (Lozovsky 2000: 6–8). The Romans believed that the most civilised peoples lived on the shores of the middle sea, the Mediterranean. As one left the middle, people became less civilised and the climate worsened. This ideological geography gave Romans a way to interpret the world and assert their cultural superiority. Roman assumptions were the foundation of how most educated Christians thought about the geographical landscape. They were popularised by writers such as Augustine in the fifth century, Cassiodorus in the sixth and Isidore of Seville in the seventh (Lozovsky 2000: 10–20, 53–5). For instance, Isidore’s enormously influential *Etymologiae* drew on them directly (Delumeau 1995: 44–5).

In addition, space was linked with time as Christians were convinced that they were created simultaneously. These ideas fed into the common belief in an earthly paradise, although Christians debated its nature and location. Paradoxically, one of its characteristics was that it existed beyond time (Delumeau 1995: 10–12). Its inhabitants were often imagined as being near immortal, awaiting the Last Judgment and the end of all things (Delumeau 1995: 30–1). The earthly paradise was also portrayed as an actual physical place which could be found on a map (Lozovsky 2000: 50–67; Bockmuehl 2010: 198–201). Usually, it was situated in the east, and frequently identified with the Garden of Eden. Some believed that it was separated from the normal world by the ocean (Delumeau 1995: 42–56). These speculations play a major role in the *Nauigatio*’s *terra repromissionis sanctorum*, the Promised Land of the Saints, even though its location, like the Classical Fortunate Isles, is to the west rather than eastwards.

At this point it is worth examining how religious practice influenced the *Nauigatio* and explore how it feeds into the temporal and geographical concepts just discussed. This is the practice known as *peregrinatio pro Christo* or exile for Christ. *Peregrinatio* was a form of religious renunciation, inspired by the words of Jesus in the Gospels, exhorting believers to put aside home and family to follow God (Hughes 1960; Stancliffe 1982). Originally the term *peregrinus* meant a stranger but, among the Irish, it came to mean an exile and *peregrinatio* was exile for the sake of God. A basic definition of *peregrinatio* would be that it involved a *peregrinus* ‘pilgrim’ permanently leaving his homeland in order to better serve Christ. By the end of the sixth century, the Irish regarded an overseas *peregrinatio* as the highest form of ascetic renunciation and it inspired many of the Irishmen who left for Britain and the Continent, including Columba († 597) and

Columbanus († 615), both famous church founders (Richter 1999: 48–88, 109–26; Johnston 2013: 42–58). It was further believed that *peregrinatio* was a type of martyrdom (Stancliffe 1982), one which metaphorically identified *peregrini* as martyrs, even though many of them died of natural causes and at advanced ages.

How does this relate to the *Nauigatio*? It has been argued that a whole genre of vernacular narratives, known collectively as *immrama*, was influenced by the experiences of *peregrini* (Thrall 1923; Hughes 1959). *Immrama* usually involve their protagonists leaving Ireland and ‘rowing about’ a multitude islands, some real and many imaginary. They draw on many sources, including Christian apocrypha (Esposito 1960; Dumville 1976: 79) and, in a more general way, Classical texts such as the *Aeneid* (Eldevik 1984; Mac Mathúna 1996: 256–7). Voyage tales are also related to a genre of Irish otherworld adventures known as *echtraí* (Dumville 1976). However, while both genres feature adventures in the otherworld, the *immrama* focus on islands in the ocean. These were arguably inspired by Isidore’s discussion of islands in Book XIV of his *Etymologiae*. There, his influential depiction of Ireland is soon followed by one of the Fortunate Isles (Lindsay 1911: XIV 6.8). Isidore tells the reader that these were mistaken for paradise by the gentiles because of their natural fertility and bounty.

Significantly, the earliest voyage tale types, such as the *Nauigatio*, are written in Latin rather than Irish. It is these which influenced the vernacular genre of *immrama* rather than vice versa (Johnston 2003: 240–1). For instance, Adomnán’s († 704) description in *Vita Columbae* of the monk Cormac’s voyage to find a *terra secreta* in the ocean predates the earliest *immrama* by well over a century (Anderson & Anderson 1961: 28–31, 166–71). Moreover, Kathleen Hughes (1959) persuasively suggested that the *immrama* creatively re-imagined the penitential journey in an era when these journeys had become less common. She (1960: 146–7) further suggested that this was a result of a change in the Irish pattern of *peregrinatio* by the end of the eighth century. In particular, Hughes pinpointed the emergence of the Céli Dé as a distinctive group within the Irish Church who emphasised *stabilitas* at the expense of *peregrinatio*. They discouraged pilgrimage overseas and urged monks to stay in their monasteries, practicing an austere lifestyle among their brethren (Gwynn and Purton 1911–12: 133. The Céli Dé were not unique. Irish monastic rules, such as the *Rule of Ailbe* (O’Neill 1907: 104–5), forbade the monk to leave his monastery in normal circumstances. These factors may have shifted real *peregrinatio* into the realms of literature. However, there is a major distinction between *peregrinatio* and the structure of the voyage tales, including the *Nauigatio*. These

voyages are circular, bound in by a shared point of departure and destination. The voyager nearly always returns home to Ireland while the *peregrinus* was expected to remain an exile.

### *III. The influence of Irish north Atlantic voyaging*

All of these elements, geographical, religious and historical, shape the landscapes presented in the *Navigatio*. It must be emphasised, from the outset, that much of the island geography which forms the core of the tale is, actually, real. This is based not only on the physical descriptions of individual islands, which will be examined shortly, but also on other supporting evidence. For instance, Irish clerics explored the north Atlantic in the era before the arrival of the Vikings. The early ninth-century Irish geographer Dicuil gives an important insight into the motivations and accomplishments of Irish clerical voyagers in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Tierney 1967: 72–3, 74–7). He describes how Irish clerics sought out the north Atlantic islands in order to live the religious life, in effect a form of *peregrinatio*. However, according to Dicuil, the arrival of the Vikings brought an end to their settlements (Tierney 1967: 76–7). Moreover, in a famous and memorable passage, he depicts an expedition of Irish monks to the then unsettled Iceland, dated to around 795 AD. The monks closely observed what they regarded as unusual physical and astronomical data, including the phenomenon of the midnight sun during the Icelandic summer (Tierney 1967: 74–5). Indeed, the Icelanders came to believe that Irish monks had settled on the island before them. While the existence of these so-called *papar* may be questionable (Sveinbjarnardóttir 2002), they do function as a memory of the by then vanished north Atlantic clerical world of the Irish.

This historical landscape of north Atlantic voyaging, directly inspired by *peregrinatio*, underlies the *Navigatio*. The use of the real, described using simple direct words, grounds the story and makes it more accessible. For example, the Island of Sheep and the Paradise of Birds, located beside each other and among other islands to the north of Ireland, are almost certainly the Faroes. The islands and their environs are described in straightforward language as being full of sheep, fish and seabirds (Selmer 1959: §9, 17–20; §11, 22–8). The descriptions are very similar to those offered by Dicuil in what is believed to be a depiction of the Faroes (Tierney 1967: 76–7). Moreover, archaeological evidence does offer tentative support for the existence of pre-Viking Irish religious settlements on these islands (Arge *et al* 2005: 597–9). Similarly, the image of the

crystal pillar, found after sailing across a clear sea, appears to evoke a north Atlantic iceberg and the meteorological conditions associated with sighting one (Selmer 1959: §22, 58–61). The Island of Smiths, *ualde rusticam, saxosam atque scoriosam* ‘very rough, rocky, and full of slag’, seems to be Iceland (Selmer 1959: §23, 61), while the fiery mountain *ualde fumosus...in summitate* ‘very smoky...on top’ is a volcano, although its nature is attributed to demons not geology (Selmer 1959: §24, 64–5). These are a few of the many examples of how the tale situates itself in the real. It is worth taking a specific case, however, to tease out its role within the text. The following is the depiction of the Island of Paul the Hermit.

*Cum autem appropinquassent ad litus, minime poterant aditum inuenire pre altitudine ripe illius. Erat autem parua et nimis rotunda illa insula quasi unius stadii. De terra uero nihil habuit desuper, sed petra nuda in modum silicis apparuit* (Selmer 1959: §26, 71).

When they got to the shore they could not find a landing-place because of the height of the cliff. The island was small and circular—about two hundred yards in circumference. There was no earth on it, but it looked a naked rock like flint (O’Meara 1976: 61).

The physical description matches the small isolated north Atlantic islet of Rockall, nowadays most famous because it is at the centre of an on-going international dispute about potential oil and fishing rights. In the narrative it is found south of the Island of Smiths, most likely to be identified with Iceland, and north-west of Ireland. This is a very good match for the location of Rockall. Once again, an actual place is the inspiration for the maritime landscapes of the *Nauigatio*. These maritime landscapes are so convincing that some have gone so far as to argue that the Irish reached Greenland by ca. 900 as well as the Sargasso Sea (Ashe 1962: 136–8, 153–5). These suggestions are very speculative, however, and do not have historical or archaeological justification. Instead, the geography of the *Nauigatio* is firmly based on the north Atlantic world of Irish clerical voyages, bound in by Iceland to the north-west and the Faroes to the north-east. Brendan, basically, travels between these points in a continuous and repeating circle for the seven years of his voyage.

#### *IV. Landscapes of monasticism*

While the author of the *Nauigatio* constructed a narrative that was rooted in maritime experiences, he wove together reality with religious themes. Scholars have long

recognised that the *Nauigatio* is a monastic text. Not only is it an ecclesiastical product but the narrative is deeply concerned with the monastic life and its organisation. Its heroes are all monks. The narrative opens with the visit of the monk Barinthus to Brendan's monastery, Clonfert. Soon after, Barinthus paints an evocative image of the monastery of his son, Mernóc:

*Nauigantibus nobis in predictam insulam occurrerunt obuiam sicut examen apum ex diuersis cellulis fratres. Erat enim habitacio eorum sparsa, sed tamen unanimiter illorum conuersacio in fide...*(Selmer 1959: §1, 4).

As we were crossing in a boat to the island the brothers came, like bees swarming, from their various cells to meet us. Their housing was scattered but they lived together as one in the faith...(O'Meara 1976: 3).

The community is described as comprising small individual monastic cells of the type familiar from the archaeological record (Edwards 1990: 99–131). From the very beginning, therefore, the reader is presented with a convincing portrait of early medieval Irish religious life. This is underpinned by Brendan's role as abbot, as father to his monks. He is constantly referred to as holy father (*sanctus pater*) or venerable father (*venerabilis pater*). He looks after his monks, leads them in the liturgy and reassures them in times of danger. When Brendan finally returns to Ireland, the monks he had left there glorify God because the father that they love has returned (Selmer 1959: §29, 81–2).

But the text goes further. It offers us sustained landscapes of monastic practice (Bourgeault 1983). The *Nauigatio* powerfully evokes Brendan's community at Clonfert and Mernóc's monastery near Slieve League in the north-west of Ireland (Selmer 1959: §§1–2, 3–10). Furthermore, Énda of Aran, an important sixth-century church founder, plays a role as Brendan's mentor (Selmer 1959: §3, 10). Typically of this tale, real monasteries are compared with the utopian and imaginary. Brendan's first visit to the Island of the Community of Ailbe is a case in point (Selmer 1959: §12, 28–37). The monks of the community do not age because they live in perfect harmony with God. On the other hand, their existence is grounded in the practice of a vow of silence and in a simple lifestyle. Just like Irish monks they live in individual cells. Similarly, the Island of the Three Choirs, where one of Brendan's monks is accepted into the community, seems less fantastical because the liturgy of its monks is carefully described (Selmer 1959: §17, 49–53). The vocation of the hermit is also a focus of the text. The eremitical strand of monasticism was deeply admired by Irish writers and the famous hermits, St Paul and St Anthony of Egypt, feature on Irish high cross sculpture (Harbison: 2005, 218–21).

Brendan encounters Paul the Hermit, who is inspired by Paul and Anthony (Selmer 1959: §26, 70–6). He is clothed in nothing but his hair and relies on an otter to be fed. The remarkable nature of his life is counterbalanced by the convincing description of his island, which has already been discussed. As the *Nauigatio* demonstrates with impressive consistency, the real creates the environment in which the imagined can flourish.

The landscapes in the *Nauigatio* are also liturgical, a reflection of its monastic theme. The monks' days are governed by the daily canonical hours and the recitation of the psalms (O'Loughlin: 2005). The overarching narrative is, in turn, structured around the celebration of the liturgical year, culminating in Easter, the most important feast-day in the Christian calendar. This cycle is repeated over the years of the voyage and is clear on even a quick reading of the text. Nevertheless, it is useful to explore concrete instances in order to further understand its significance. Firstly, as O'Loughlin (2005, 113–15) has demonstrated, the text emphasises the canonical hours. These were fixed points during the day when monks chanted the psalms. The climax of this pattern is surely the celebration of Easter on the Paradise of Birds where the monks chant the psalms at midnight, dawn, mid-morning, midday, afternoon, evening and night, completing the full monastic day of prayer (Selmer 1959: §11, 22–8; O'Loughlin: 2005, 117–19). Moreover, the celebration of Holy Week is a major thread of the *Nauigatio*. Thus, on the Island of Sheep, Brendan liturgically marks Holy Thursday through Easter Saturday (Selmer 1959: §9, 17–20). The sheep of the island take on a symbolic meaning. The monks feast on an *agnus immaculatus* 'spotless lamb' from the flock which is implicitly compared to Jesus and his sacrifice. The most memorable Easter celebration, by far, is that which takes place on the back of Iasconius (Selmer 1959: §10, 20–1), the sea creature who is usually identified as a whale (Mackley 2008: 111). Brendan sings the mass there and the monks only realise that they are on a living being when they attempt to cook food by lighting a fire on its back. The giant sea creature is a nod to Jonah's whale as well as to Pliny's account of an enormous fish upon which sailors landed. However, Iasconius also provides a deeper symbolic lesson. He is a representative of unfallen nature, where even animals are at one with God's plan. These examples also illustrate one of the key characteristics of the *Nauigatio*. The monastic day and the liturgical year are made integral to the landscape rather than being confined to the monastic space, or, it could be argued that it is the monastic space which has expanded so that it encompasses all of nature.

*V. Between worlds and beyond time*

Religious themes are essential to what can be termed the ‘liminal landscapes’ of the *Nauigatio*. These landscapes contain clearly supernatural elements, related to passing between life and death and between this world and paradise. Nonetheless, like elsewhere, these are presented with a degree of surface verisimilitude and in deceptively simple language. In the tale they mark the movement of the voyagers from one state of time or state of being to another. The *Nauigatio* also features beings who, themselves, are liminal. Both aspects, moving through liminal space and encountering liminal creatures, are key elements of the narrative. These culminate when Brendan and his monks cross the threshold into a paradise that exists beyond time.

The voyagers first encounter with clearly liminal beings is on the Paradise of Birds (Selmer 1959: §11, 22–8). As the paper has already shown, this island is described realistically. However, it is impossible to separate its seemingly believable landscape from the fact that the birds are far more than they seem. When Brendan first sees them they are perched together on a great tree, which evokes imagery of the Garden of Eden. One of them flies to him, her wings making the sound of a handbell, echoing the monastic call to prayer (Selmer 1959: §11, 23). She tells Brendan that the ‘birds’ are actually the souls of beings who were caught up in the Fall of Lucifer from Heaven, although they do not share in his sin. As a result, although barred from Heaven, they are still in God’s presence and they tell the saint that:

*Vagamur per diuersas partes aeris et firmamenti et terrarum...Sed in sanctis diebus atque dominicis accipimus corpora talia qualia nunc uides et commoramur his laudamusque nostrum creatorem* (Selmer 1959: §11, 24).

We wander through various regions of the air and the firmament and the earth...But on holy days and Sundays we are given bodies such as you now see so that we may stay here and praise our creator (O’Meara 1976: 21)

This passage identifies them as the neutral angels of medieval Christian apocrypha (Mackley 2008: 116–24). These beings initially supported neither God nor Satan during the War in Heaven because they were deceived. Later, they did side with God, but only after Satan’s Fall. The belief in neutral angels was condemned in mainstream Christianity. At the time the *Nauigatio* was written it was uncommon and, arguably, this text influenced the later popularity of the legend (Dando 1980: 275). Furthermore, it is possible that the otherworldly ‘bird people’ of early medieval Irish vernacular saga may



have played a role in the depiction of the neutral angels in the *Nauigatio*. For instance, the Old Irish sagas *Aislinge Óenguso* (Shaw 1936) and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Stokes 1901) prominently feature supernatural birds of this type. In the *Nauigatio*, the bird foretells for Brendan the length of his voyage (seven years) as well as its ultimate success, showing that the neutral angels now carry out God's plan.

The imperfect, but still paradisaical, existence of the neutral angels is contrasted with another example of God's mercy—the temporary release of Judas from Hell. The voyagers meet him undergoing what appears to be a severe penance on a rock in the ocean (Selmer 1959: §25, 65–700). However, Judas reveals that this is a *paradisus deliciarum* 'paradise of delights' compared to his punishment in Hell (Selmer 1959: §25, 66). It is an act of divine mercy, extended to him on Sundays, during the Christmas and Easter Seasons, and on the feast-days associated with the Virgin Mary. Significantly, this very closely mirrors God's dispensation to the neutral angels. Both the angels and Judas move through liminal states, the angels from the air to the earth and Judas from the depths of hell to the earth. Theological ideas are given reality through their realisation in the landscape.

The clearest example of a liminal landscape is the fog through which the voyagers must pass before reaching the Promised Land of the Saints. The latter is the earthly paradise but, as O'Loughlin (1999: 11–13) has shown, is also the Heavenly Jerusalem, the apocalyptic Heaven at time's end. The *Nauigatio* begins and concludes with this passage between worlds. The story opens with Barinthus' tale of how he and his son, the abbot Mernóc, travelled from a monastery in the north-west of Ireland to this promised land.

*Ascendentibusque nobis et nauigantibus, nebule cooperuerunt nos undique in tantum ut uix potuissemus puppim aut proram nauiculae aspicere. Transacto uero spacio quasi unius hore, circumfulsit nos lux ingens, et apparuit terra spaciosa et herbosa pomiferosaque ualde* (Selmer 1959: §1, 5).

We embarked and sailed, but a fog so thick covered us that we could scarcely see the poop of the prow of the boat. But when we had spent about an hour like this a great light shone all around us, and there appeared to us a land wide, and full of grass and fruit. (O'Meara 1976: 4).

Their journey, although much shorter, prefigures Brendan's very closely as can be seen in the following passage which occurs near the end of the text:

...uespere imminente cooperuit eos caligo grandis, ita ut uix alter alterum potuisset uidere...Post spacium uero unius hore iterum circumfulsit eos lux ingens, et nauis stetit ad litus...uiderunt terram spaciosam ac plenam arboribus pomiferis...(Selmer 1959: §28, 78–9).

...as the evening drew on a great fog enveloped them, so that one of them could hardly see the other...After the space of an hour a mighty light shone all around them again and the boat rested on the shore...they saw a wide land full of trees bearing fruit...(O'Meara 1976: 67)

In both cases passing through the fog is an outward sign that the voyagers are moving from one state of existence to the next. They emerge from darkness into light, from the insubstantial into the substantial and from the mundane into the heavenly. Their journey is literally an *apocalypsis*—an unveiling.

This unveiling signals the appearance of the Heavenly Jerusalem, as described at the very end of the Book of Revelations, the *Apocalypsis*, the last book in the Christian Bible. The Heavenly Jerusalem exists beyond time in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21–22). It is lit and sustained by the presence of God. While the Book of Revelations is part of a rich Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic tradition (Yarbro Collins 1996: 158–97), it was, in itself, the most powerful contributor to that tradition's on-going vitality among Christians. The Heavenly Jerusalem became a mainstay of visionary and apocalyptic literature. It is central to the *Nauigatio* (O'Loughlin 1999: 9–13). In fact, the text's two descriptions of the Promised Land of the Saints, featuring appropriately at the narrative's beginning and end, are sustained re-imaginings of the Heavenly city onto an island landscape. The *Nauigatio* leaves no doubt that the island and the city are one and the same.

This can be seen through a close comparison of the two. Light is an important component of both places. In Revelations, the Heavenly Jerusalem shines with the light of God (Rev 21:11, 23-5) and has no need of sun or moon: they have vanished along with the time that their passage across the heavens marked. In the same way, the Promised Land of the Saints is lit by the great light (*lux ingens*) of Jesus (Selmer 1959: §1, 7; §28, 80). Brendan has moved from time into eternity. The Heavenly Jerusalem's eternity is revealed in its lack of earthly seasons. Thus, the Trees of Life bear fruit throughout the year (Rev 22: 2–3). Barinthus notes that each plant is in flower and each tree in fruit in the Promised Land of the Saints (Selmer 1959: § 1, 6); Brendan is told by an angelic messenger that the trees always bear fruit in the *terra repromissionis* (Selmer 1959: §28, 80). The parallel with the Trees of Life in Revelations is clear. Many

Christians believed that seasons were the result of Original Sin in the Garden of Eden. In the Heavenly Jerusalem and the *terra repromissionis* paradise is regained. Furthermore, the Book of Revelations emphasises the annihilation of normal time (Rev 10:6 *et passim*). This too is a feature of the *Nauigatio*. When Barinthus and Mernóc reach the Promised Land of the Saints they spend a year there although they think it is only fifteen days (Selmer 1959: §1, 6–7). This is a sign of the island’s holy nature.

Finally, the geography and the materiality of the Promised Land of the Saints is emphasised by the *Nauigatio*. For instance, the Heavenly Jerusalem is described as being divided into two parts by the River of Life which flows from the throne of God (Rev 22: 1). Barinthus tells Brendan that the Promised Land of the Saints has a river flowing through it from east to west (Selmer 1959: §1, 6) while Brendan, himself, sees that it divides the island in two (Selmer 1959: §28, 79). The saint is unable to cross the river as he must await the Final Judgement at which point he will be able to fully enter the Heavenly Jerusalem. Furthermore, both the Book of Revelations and the *Nauigatio* draw attention to the precious stones of paradise. These stones were the subject of a whole branch of exegesis where their number and appearance carried spiritual resonances (Yarbro Collins 1996: 131–4). Indeed, Brendan is greatly honoured when the angelic messenger tells him to bring some of the island’s fruit and precious stones with him back to Ireland. These create a physical and portable connection between the two islands, one which is also a bridge into the indeterminate future when the persecution of Christians will signal the end times (Selmer 1959: §28, 80). This is a remarkable example of the way in which the *Nauigatio* situates its spiritual landscape in the objectively real. The fruit can be eaten; the precious stones can be gathered and brought home. What is the text trying to tell us through this externalisation? Barinthus remarks to Mernóc’s monks that they live *ante portam paradisi* ‘at the gate of Paradise’ (Selmer 1959: §1, 7). These words suggest that paradise is at once tangible and intangible. Fruits and stones can be brought back from it to Ireland but to do so involves passing through a gate that transcends time and space.

## *VI. Mapping Brendan’s journey*

The *Nauigatio*, then, is a deeply symbolic text which expresses its symbolism through the use of the mundane – rocks, and stones, and trees. Intriguingly, these elements are central to mapping Brendan’s voyage through actual physical space; they are also

central to the misunderstandings which have grown up about the text, ones which assume its historicity and place it within a narrative of geographical as opposed to spiritual discovery. It is worth re-iterating the point made earlier: the voyage depicted in the *Nauigatio* is a circular one, extending from Ireland to the Faroes, to Iceland and back again towards Ireland. Crucially, Brendan's voyaging each year always brings him back in the direction of home. This is a significant hint concerning the location of the Promised Land of the Saints and one which is in agreement with the description of the journey of Barinthus and Mernóc at the beginning of the tale. The text tells us that Mernóc's monastery is on an island near Slieve League (Selmer 1959: §1, 4), and the voyage from it to the *terra repromissionis* seems short. Moreover, this apparently short journey is supported by the evidence of Mernóc's monks. They tell Barinthus that Mernóc frequently leaves them for times of varying duration and occasionally this amounts to less than a week (Selmer 1959: §1, 7). Barinthus consoles them by telling the monks that they live at the gate of paradise. Clearly, the implication is that the *terra repromissionis* can be found relatively close to the Irish coast. Why then does Brendan's journey take seven years, a length of time which might be thought to imply a long distance voyage? The *Nauigatio* provides an answer consistent with Barinthus' suggestion that Slieve League is *ante portam paradisi*. Brendan is explicitly told that the length of his journey is God's will; he only reaches the island when he and his monks are ready (Selmer 1959: §2, 17; §11, 24; §15, 43–4; §26, 76; §27, 78). To do this, Brendan turns eastwards (*contra orientalem*) towards Ireland, rather than travelling further west (Selmer 1959: §28, 78). Following this, Brendan returns home directly, again implying that the island lies close to the Irish shore. Of course, the *terra repromissionis* is not really a physical island at all. The distance between the Promised Land of the Saints and Ireland is measured in morality not length and breadth.

However, it is the genius of this text that it could be appreciated beyond theology and this undoubtedly contributed to its popularity as an adventure story. Significantly, its adaptation into European vernaculars, including Middle Dutch and Anglo-Norman French (Strijbosch 2000; Mackley 2008), created new narratives that are more obviously fantastical than the original. They also helped popularise the notion that the tale, in some way, was a record of a real voyage to the west or contained actual geographical knowledge. However, it was not the knowledge of the north Atlantic which inspired these adaptations of the Brendan legend; it was the Promised Land of the Saints. This became conflated with other marvellous islands, from various traditions,

and these nourished the speculations of cartographers (Delumeau 1995: 97–109; Freitag 2013: 3–30). In particular, Isidore’s Fortunate Isles, already mentioned, helped solidify the notion of paradise-like islands in the west. This confluence of traditions fed belief in an otherworldly island or islands in the far western ocean (Delumeau 1995: 99–100). A mythical island, frequently called St Brendan’s Island or *Isla de San Borondón*, was a mainstay of medieval and renaissance cartography (Delumeau 1995: 103–4). By the Age of Discovery it was believed to be in the Atlantic, perhaps west of the Canary islands or, further out, beyond the Azores. It was sometimes considered to be the mysterious ‘eighth island’ of the Canaries. Between 1526 and 1721 four naval expeditions left the Canaries in search of the promised land of St Brendan (Delumeau 1995: 104). More confusingly, a link was made between this island and the even more mysterious *Insula Brasil*, Brasil Island, the etymology of which is contested (Freitag 2013: 215–19). This is very unlikely to be of Irish origin (Carney 1963: 37). *Insula Brasil* is a conflation of several otherworldly locales, none of which have anything to do with the modern country Brazil but many of which were inspired by the *Nauigatio*.

That last example, however, the false identification of *Insula Brasil* with Brazil, is symptomatic of a popular approach to the *Nauigatio*. Ironically, for a text so thoroughly contextualised and with such a precise sense of geographical direction and location, its one major departure from the mundane, the Promised Land of the Saints, is the element which later readers have been most determined to make real. As recently as 1976, Tim Severin’s attempt to replicate Brendan’s journey ignored the specific statement of the text: the monks turn east to find the Promised Land of the Saints. They do not sail beyond Iceland towards North America, as Severin did with impressive success. Their *terra repromissionis* is not distant and inhospitable Newfoundland. It is hidden beyond a gate whose opening is next door to Ireland; paradise is at home. For those who are worthy it is just around the corner and on the horizon. And, for the author of the *Nauigatio*, this is, perhaps, the most important moral of all.

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<sup>1</sup> The standard edition of the *Nauigatio* is Selmer 1959. I will be using Selmer's text, providing both chapter and page numbers.