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**Title:** Some Celtic otherworld motifs in Brendan's Voyage to Paradise

**Creators:** Mackley, J. S.

**Example citation:** Mackley, J. S. (2010) Some Celtic otherworld motifs in Brendan's Voyage to Paradise. Paper presented to: *International Medieval Congress (IMC) 2010, University of Leeds, 12-15 July 2010*.

**Version:** Presented version

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# Some Celtic Otherworld Motifs in Brendan's Voyage to Paradise

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J S MACKLEY for the IMC, Leeds, 12 July 2010

## Introduction

The *Voyage of Brendan* needs no introduction in this environment. Dating from the beginning of the ninth century, the Latin *Navigatio* tells of a sixth-century Irish abbot who is inspired to travel the ocean to see hell and paradise before he dies. On his cyclical voyage, Brendan sees many marvels and once the brethren have learned the lessons of the ocean, they progress towards Paradise, and the marvels become more supernatural. However, the *Navigatio* shares a relationship with some early Irish texts, most particularly *Immram Brain* and the *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* (the *Voyage of Bran* and the *Voyage of Máel Dúin's coracle*), and in this study, I shall discuss some of the Celtic motifs which echo through the *Navigatio* as Brendan approaches Paradise.

In the *Navigatio*, a monk named Barrind inspires Brendan to travel to the *Terra repromissionis sanctorum* (The Promised Land of the Saints), which he assures Brendan is only a short distance away. Brendan's voyage lasts seven years and the journey is punctuated by key encounters at significant occasions in the liturgical year. However, towards the end of the journey, the encounters change: in one episode, Brendan celebrates the festival of St Peter. The sea is so clear that the brethren can see the depths of the ocean. They ask Brendan to continue the mass in silence, concerned that they will be pursued by the fish; Brendan berates them, reminding them that they celebrated Easter on the back of the largest fish of the ocean and sings as loudly as he can; the multitude of fish swim around the coracle in a wide arc, then disperse at the end of the mass.

## The Feast of St Peter

One can view this scene as an example of Christ's power over the ocean, demonstrating that nature is subject to God's command as demonstrated in Psalm 148. Delahaye's *Legends of the Saints* contains a comparable story of the animal kingdom, describing how animals who cannot vocally praise God raise their paws in worship (Delahaye, 63). However, the scene of the clear sea has its roots deeply planted in Celtic mythology. Scholars have noticed parallels between *Immram Brain* and the *Navigatio*: Proinsias Mac Cana saw *Immram Brain* as 'an aesthetic rapport between the pagan concept of the Otherworld and the Christian concept of Paradise' (Mac Cana: 52). However, the composer of the *Navigatio* occasionally appears

uncomfortable with the material he uses, unsure how the Celtic imagery fits in with the Christian message of salvation.

Many of the *Navigatio* encounters correspond with episodes in texts such as the *Immram curaig Máele Dúin*. For example, in the scene prior to the celebration of the feast of St Peter, Brendan arrives at an island of choirs, where three generations of monks incessantly sing psalms and move around the island which, as Liam de Paor suggests, could have its roots deep in Irish lore (de Paor: 225). In the *Immram curaig Máele Dúin*, the travellers discover an island where the inhabitants are afflicted by incessant laughter; as soon of one of Máel Dúin's foster brothers touches the shore, he becomes indistinguishable from the island's other people. Likewise, in the *Navigatio*, one of the late-coming monks is blessed to stay with the three choirs. However, it could be argued that the motif has been Christianised and the Three Choirs are a representation of the three orders of saints of Ireland as described by St Patrick. James Carney sees a parallel with the *Vita Kentigern* and argues that this scene 'seems to reflect some type of liturgical reception in the early Irish Church' (de Paor: 226; Carney: 43).

### **The Land beneath the waves**

When we consider the clear sea in the *Navigatio* and the relationship with *Máele Dúin*, there is a comparable encounter in Chapter 22:

After that they voyaged till they entered a sea which resembled green glass. Such was its purity that the gravel and the sand of that sea were clearly visible through it; and they saw no monsters nor beasts therein among the crags, but only the pure gravel and the green sand. For a long space of the day they were voyaging in that sea, and great was its splendour and its beauty.

They afterwards put forth into another sea like a cloud and it seemed to them that it would not support them or the boat. Then they beheld under the sea down below them roofed strongholds and a beautiful country. And they see a beast huge, awful, monstrous, in a tree there, and a drove of herds and the tree, and flocks round about the tree and beside the tree an armed man, with shield and spear and sword. When he beheld yon huge beast that abode in the tree he goeth thence in and flight. The beast stretched forth his neck out of the tree and sets his head into the back of the largest ox of the herd and dragged it into the tree, and anon devours it in the twinkling of an eye. The flocks and the herdsmen flee away, at once. and when Mael Duin and his people saw that greater terror and fear seize them, for they supposed that they would never cross that sea without falling down through it, by reason of its tenuity like mist.

This description parallels the crystal clear sea of the *Navigatio*. However, the passage in *Máele Dúin* describes how the travellers can see 'roofed strongholds and a beautiful country' underwater. There is also a danger: a huge beast lurks in a tree. Aware of the danger, the herdsmen stand armed with shields, spears and swords, but this protection is insufficient. Thus, the tranquillity of this pastoral landscape is shattered. Something 'Other' has penetrated the herdsmen's defences. The sublime world relates to an aspect of the Celtic Otherworld: the Land beneath the Waves, which is named in *Immram Brain* as *Tìr fo Thonn*. The Lord of *Tìr fo*

*Thonn* is Manannán, a sea deity, son of the sea-god, Ler. He appears from an Elyssian kingdom to aid gods and men with his supernatural powers and can lead characters to the Otherworld, for example, the infant Mongán, son of Bran. We will discuss him in more detail later.

### The Cauldron

One notable motif in the Celtic tradition of the Land beneath the Waves is the association with a cauldron. Central to the Celtic household, the cauldron was symbolically imbued with restorative and even resurrective powers. *The Lad of the Ferule* describes how, at the end of his service, he asks his employer for a ferule to fit his stick: the only one that is appropriate is at the bottom of a lake. The lad's employer goes to the bottom of the lake and discovers the ferule and a cauldron of great power which ultimately leads him to the land of *Tír na n-Óg* – the land of Youth – still in the land under the waves). Other significant cauldrons include that of the Dagda, the fertility god, which was one of the four treasures of the *Túatha dé Danann*, from which no one left hungry.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, hagiographic texts such as Adamnán's *Life of Columba* mention the whirlpool between Jura and Scaba, the gulf of Corryvreckan, which derives its name from the Irish *coire* meaning Cauldron and either a proper noun *Breccán*, or the adjective *brecc*: 'speckled' (thus, *Breccan's Cauldron*, or 'The Cauldron of the Speckled Seas'). Celtic tradition places the whirlpool as an entrance to the Otherworld. The motif of the whirlpool is one of the four encounters in the text of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland (another encounter being that of Jasconius): in this voyage, during a storm the monks are dragged towards the whirlpools, but in a manner of Christ calming the waves (Matthew 8:25), Brendan also calms the whirlpools.

The symbolic cauldron is found in encounters in the *Navigatio*: Brendan's monks celebrate *Easter* on an island that turns out to be a giant fish named Jasconius. The fish starts to move when the monks light a fire under a cauldron: the monks flee, leaving the cauldron behind. When they subsequently encounter Jasconius, they discover the cauldron again. Jasconius is mentioned when Brendan sings mass at the feast of St Peter: "why are you afraid of those fish when you were not afraid of the devourer and master of all fish of the sea, sitting and singing psalms ... on his back? Indeed you cut wood and lit a fire and cooked meat there!" Like the powers of the cauldron in Celtic tradition, *Easter* is associated with resurrection. I suggest that from this encounter, Brendan and his monks have moved into *an* otherworldly realm. Symbolically, St Peter holds the keys to the kingdom of Heaven and, from here, the boundaries

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<sup>1</sup> Arawn, the Welsh god of the underworld, possessed a magic cauldron which Arthur stole (*Preiddeu Annwne* in the Book of Taliesin); perhaps this is symbol later develops into the Holy Grail. There is also a link between Arthur and Brendan through Barrind: the monk who directs Brendan towards the Promised Land also conveys Arthur to Avalon. Kymideu Kymernvoll had a cauldron of rebirth which she gave to Bran which he later returned to the Irish (the cauldron was destroyed by Bran's step brother, who pretended to be dead and was placed inside. He burst the cauldron from the inside, killing himself in the process).

between Brendan's normal sphere of existence and the otherworldly realms are blurred and separated; the brethren are seemingly placed in a liminal otherworld between our realm and the realm of Paradise.

### Other encounters

The brethren face five encounters between the Festival of St Peter and finally reaching Paradise. I have discussed these in greater detail elsewhere; however, briefly, these encounters are presented as binary oppositions: a tranquil crystal pillar where the monks say mass is juxtaposed with the terrifying encounter at the mouth of hell. The Otherworldly motifs are apparent if we consider that the crystal pillar which Brendan meticulously measures represents the hill of the *Sidhe* which one must encircle seven times to reach the Otherworld; the fiery mountain represents a fire barrier that separates Máel Dúin from the Island of the Blessed. In the *Navigatio*, the scene at the fiery mountain culminates in the damnation of one of the supernumerary monks, whereas, immediately prior to the mass at the clear sea, Brendan witnessed the salvation of one of his brethren, blessed to stay on the Island of the Three Choirs, and, of course Máel Dúin's coracle is blown off course because of the additional foster brothers who travel with him.

Following the damnation of the monk, Brendan witnesses the extremes of humanity: the ultimate sinner, Judas Iscariot, and the angelic hermit, Paul, who exist respectively in a state of torment and blessedness. However, the monks must witness their circumstances in order to progress to a higher level of understanding, like Odysseus or Æneas did. However, the monks leave this realm by means of another Otherworldly motif, that of the fog barrier which surrounds paradise. Just as Máel Dúin recognises that he cannot cross the fire barrier to Paradise without assistance, so it is with the wall of fog in the *Navigatio*: the monks can only pass through with the help of the mysterious procurator who periodically appears to provide provisions and guidance for Brendan and his crew.

### The Mist Barrier

In the *Navigatio*, the motif of the mist barrier is symbolic of physical blindness that leads to spiritual disorientation – the same blindness is shown in the *Navigatio* in the Deserted Citadel where one of the brethren is tempted towards damnation. However, as Giovanni Orlandi observes, there is a strong Old Testament connection with the fog barrier as Moses travels 'into the mist of the cloud' because the 'sight of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel' (Exodus 20:21). Likewise, when Brendan crosses the mist barrier, he travels to a place where the 'light is Christ' (*Navigatio* 28, 17 [33-34]). In addition, the mist could represent Brendan himself: in the *Vita Brendani*, he

receives the name *Broen-finn*, which means ‘white mist’ because of the mist that rose when he is born (Stokes, Book of Lismore, 248).

The wall of fog motif is effectively another water barrier to the Otherworld, like the motif of the Land under the Waves. It appears in *Cormac’s Adventures in the Land of Promise*, where Cormac meets a grey-haired warrior.<sup>2</sup> The warrior carries a branch of silver, reminiscent of the flower from the Land of Promise given to the Twelve Patriarchs in a text entitled the *Twelve Apostles of Ireland* (also the silver branch that was given to Bran and the fruitful branch that bears testimony that St Ailbe had travelled to the Otherworld. In the *Navigatio*, Brendan and his monks stay with the Community of Ailbe from Christmas to the Octave of Epiphany, another suggestion of the Otherworld). The stranger takes away Cormac’s daughter, son and wife to the Otherworld, and unable to bear their loss, he follows them through the great mist.

Water is a means of travelling to the Otherworld; and the primary water barrier is the sea itself across which Brendan and the monks sail for seven years before reaching their destination. Brendan is told at the beginning that the *Insula Deliciosum* is ‘but a short distance away’. When Barrind and Mernóc returned from their initial journey, they told the monks ‘you are living undoubtedly at the gate of Paradise’. The Otherworld borders the natural world, and the boundaries are fluid.

### Paradise

Earlier, I mentioned how Manannán carried Bran’s son Mongán to the Land of Promise. David Spaan argues that the Elyssian kingdoms with which Manannán is associated were exclusively for the immortals, which hints at a realm *beyond* the land of Promise (first there is the land of Promise, *then* we reach the Elyssian kingdoms). In the *Navigatio*, *Paradise* lies beyond the realm of the Otherworld, just as Christ had to pass through hell before the Resurrection. What Brendan reaches is the Promised Land of the Saints. The full glory lies beyond the impassable river: there is a further land that he cannot explore with his physical body, only his immortal soul can travel there. Thus, as Spaan continues, Manannán ‘breaks down the spatial barrier between gods and men to lead a chosen warrior to his land of promise’ (Spaan: 179). This is also the role of the procurator in the *Navigatio*; even though Brendan and his monks need to understand the mysteries of the ocean as well as learning the lessons of obedience, abstinence, hard work and spiritual dedication, this is still insufficient to reach paradise by

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<sup>2</sup> The warrior is clad in purple, a motif seen in Brendan’s visit to the island of the Three Choirs: the Elder group of the choirs are clad in purple, which Warren observes is a representation of sanctity in Irish Art as *The Book of Leinster* contains an illumination of Christ wearing purple as he appears to St Mulling (Warren, p. 123-24).

itself. The monks can only reach Paradise with the help of the procurator, himself proved to be a divine assister. Indeed, the cloud obscuring Paradise is an echo of the host's own island in the *Navigatio* which is described as an 'island like a cloud' – *quasi nubes* (*Caput* 15, l. 1), suggesting a link between the host and the divine. When approaching the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* in the *Navigatio*, a fog envelops the monks' coracle and it is only after a disorientating hour that the monks find themselves on the shores of Paradise.

Time is suspended in the Otherworld. Up to this point in the *Navigatio* there has been a definite chronology between the realms: Brendan's encounters correspond with the principal celebrations of the liturgical year: these are also the dates that Judas Iscariot receives some respite from his torture in hell. In his supplication to Brendan, Judas focuses on more short-term aspirations: he is allowed a weekly day of comparative respite, whereas Paul the Hermit describes time in relation to his unusually long life-span. The *Navigatio* describes how the journey through the mist barrier is *like* that of an hour (*uero unius hore*). However, having arrived in the *Terra repromissionis*, time cannot be measured by human senses: there is no alternation between day and night by which one can measure time. Although Barrindus and Mernóc believed they had stayed for forty days, it transpires they survived for a year without sustenance; just as Bran is told that people know his name in legend when he returns from the Land of Women.

However, having surveyed the *Terra repromissionis sanctorum*, Brendan's exploration is thwarted by a final Celtic barrier that has been adopted by medieval Christianity: Like Moses reaching the river Jordan and being unable to reach the Promised Land, or the dreamer in *Pearl* who cannot reach his daughter, Brendan cannot cross the river. The river represents the limits that the brethren may explore within the Promised Land of the Saints – it also represents the limits of the monks' capacity to understand the divine mysteries. The mysteries of what lies beyond the river must wait until Brendan has shed his physical form, and perhaps it is like the river Lethe in Dante's *Purgatorio*, that one must pass (and consequently forget their human lives) in order to reach Paradise. As well as a search for the divine, Brendan's voyage has become a representation of the limits of human understanding.

## Conclusion

There is a strong Celtic and secular heritage to much of the imagery that we have seen here; the Celtic means of passing to the Otherworld includes the fire barrier, the mist barrier, the hill of the Sidhe, the land across the water and the land under the waves (and the association with the cauldron). We also see parallels with the pagan heritage of the island of laughter in *Máele Dúin* and the arrival of Manannán in *Immram Brain*. Like Bran being told details of the

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Otherworld from Manannán, Brendan can complete his voyage to the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* by by-passing certain Celtic Otherworldly motifs and with the assistance of the mysterious procurator. However, both the *Immram Brain* and the *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* have been worked over to make their content more appealing to a Christian audience, which suggests that there was some distance between the author of the *Navigatio* and his understanding of the sources he was using. But, despite the *Navigatio's* Christian imagery and message of the salvation, the ghosts of the Pagan heritage still linger.