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The Brendan problem

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It might well be supposed that the last word had long since been spoken upon St. Brendan, but the subject seems to have a perennial charm. Indeed, it would seem as if discussion about the life and the works of the saint would have no end. It is a subject that interests students of Romance, Celtic and early English philology, of legends, hagiology, voyages and comparative literature. For over a thousand years even the "general reader" has enjoyed the tale of daring adventure and boundless faith of the intrepid sailor-saint and the flavor of romance and picturesque details with which it has been narrated. Is it any wonder, then, if *Brendaniana* are almost without number and are constantly being added to? In spite of all that has been written on the subject, however, many points are still unsettled, and, concerning some of them, the more that is written the more, it would seem, the subject becomes confused and embroiled. Many of the documents are obscure and all of them must be lighted up by new interpretation. The object of the present article and of the bibliography which is appended to it is merely to give a general survey of the results already achieved, and to point out some of the problems which still await solution, in the hope that some student may be induced to do what the distinguished Franciscan, Father John Colgan, had planned to do, in the seventeenth century, namely, to examine the legend afresh, and to bring together in one comprehensive volume all the sources and all the legends and associated myths bearing upon St. Brendan in all the vernaculars of Europe.

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Despite the profound study which has been given to the subject, considerable obscurity still remains as to the source of the episodes which have been employed to construct the mosaic-like story of the Voyage of St. Brendan: old Irish myths, reports of earlier sea voyages, Christian legends of Irish missionaries, and perhaps even the Orient, have probably all contributed material, though in different degree. Some of the episodes appear strikingly like reminiscences of classical literature, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, for example, with which the early Irish were familiar.

Navigation and shipbuilding had reached a high stage of development even among the ancient Celts. In the short campaign which he carried on in Britain, Julius Caesar obtained ideas of naval construction from the native ships which he turned to advantage the following year, in his sea fight with the Celtic Veneti in the Bay of Biscay. Though the Romans were successful in that engagement, the naval equipment of the Celts was superior and there may have been some Irish ships in the fleet of the Veneti. [1] There is no reason to believe that Irish sailors were not at least as daring and enterprising as the mariners of other lands. Tacitus, writing in the first century after Christ, says that the harbors of Ireland were better known on the continent than were the harbors of Britain. In the fourth and fifth centuries of our era, the Irish carried on a flourishing commerce with southern and western Gaul, not via Britain, but directly, bringing back, among other commodities, wine in exchange for the products of their own country. They are known to have been north of the Clyde in the fifth century A. D., where they fought the Picts, the British and the Angles; that they were on the

west coast of Wales and Cornwall in the same century is testified to by inscriptions of Irish origin which are found there. It is stated in the mythical history of Ireland that King Mogh Corb, son of Cormac Cas, in the third century, A. D. went, “ with a manning of 300 ships,” to invade Scandinavia. [2] Later, however, in the ninth and following centuries, when the Irish came into contact with the Northmen, who were above all a seagoing people, these Vikings controlled the seaport towns which they established in Ireland and gathered into their hands all Irish commerce. A mark of their influence is seen in the fact that most of the words for large ships and parts of a ship in Irish are of Scandinavian origin. In ancient Irish saga tales, such as *Echtra Connla*, “ The Adventures of Connla,” appear boats of glass in which fairy women came to earth, or copper boats, as in the tale known as *Serglige Conculaind*, “ The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn,” or such a crystal boat as Merlin sailed in in search of the blessed islands. There is mention also of a self-moving boat which led through a blinding mist to Manannan’s marvelous island. But the Irish had also safer and more businesslike ships, provided with sails, ropes and tackle and everything needed to steer and manage the vessel. Adamnan mentions no less than nine kinds of ships as in use among the Irish of his day (seventh-eighth century), of which the “ navis longa” and “ navis oneraria,” cargo ships, must have been capable of going on extensive voyages. But the boats to which the Irish mariner monks trusted themselves on the sea were very light, their sides and bindings being of osiers fixed to some solid pieces of wood and overlaid with hides and smeared with oil and gum. They were small enough to be drawn overland, when necessary, and brought down again to the sea when it was time to leave. Boats of this kind are called *curach*, in Irish, and they are not quite extinct on the west coast of Ireland. [3] They are described, in ancient times, for example, by Caesar, [4] Lucan, [5] Pliny, [6] Avienus, [7] and Solinus, [8] Lucan speaks of the Britons navigating the ocean in their boats of osier : “... the bending willow into barks they twine, then line the work with skins of slaughtered kine.” [9] Sidonius Apollinaris [10] describes the British boatman,

. . . . Cui pelle salum sulcare Britannum
Ludus et assuto glaucum mare findere lembo.

and Avienus tells how “ They sew skins to skins and plow the pathless seas in furthest parts with keels of leather.” Finally, Auguste Brizeux, the poet of *Les Bretons*, describes the Irish sailor-monks :

Dans leurs barques d’osier recouvertes de peau
Ils voguaient, engourdis par les vagues glacées
Et les côtes partout de neiges hérissées. [11]

In the Irish Book of Lismore is a poem in four quatrains, by an unknown poet, which describes Brendan's boat and crew, the company which he took with him and the number of ships in which they sailed. It begins, “ Tri longa seolais in saoi” : [12]

Three vessels the sage sailed
Over the wave- voice of the very wet sea ;
Thirty men in each vessel he had.
Over the storm of the crested sea.

When he returned home from his first cruise his foster mother counseled him to sail again, but this time in a wooden ship. He then built in Connaught “ a great marvelous vessel,” which held all his household, his Wrights and smiths, his plants and seeds, and everything that was needed for the voyage.

Brendan was not the only Irish monk who filled his sails with adventurous winds and embarked on a monastic journey. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, [13] under the year 891, tells of three Irishmen named Dubslane, Macbeth, and Maelinmuin, who set out to visit King Ælfred: “And they came in a boat without oars, from Ireland, whence they had stolen away; because for the love of God they desired to be on pilgrimage, they recked not whither. The boat in which they sailed was made of two hides and a half; and they took with them provisions for seven nights. And on the seventh night they came on shore in Cornwall and fared at once to King Ælfred.” In Manus O’Donnell’s *Betha Coluim Chille*, “Life of Columcille,” [14] is related an adventure of Columcille with Mongan mac Fiachna, son of the king of Ulster, who came to match skill and knowledge with him and who declared that he had knowledge of many of the countries and islands and the hidden isles of the world. “In especial know I the thrice fifty islands that are westward from Erin in the sea. And thrice the measure of Erin is each of these islands.” “And who is it dwelleth in those lands and districts whereby until today we have had no tidings.” saith Columcille. “There dwell therein,” saith Mongan mac Fiachna, “worshipful folk of fair shape and form, both men and women, and there be bright cows with red ears there that have with them calves of like hue. And there be white sheep, exceeding many. These be the cattle and gear they have.” [15] Columcille himself was a good sailor. On a time that he was traveling the sea by the coast of Alba, a great wind arose so that the ship was in great danger of sinking. And through humility Columcille bailed the bilgewater out of the ship. [16] Many if not most of these sea tales grew out of the practice of Irish monks of seeking a solitary place of meditation, penance and prayer, in the deserts of the ocean. During the course of the sixth century there arose in the seacoast dwellers of Ireland the same desire to go forth and become hermits and missionaries which, in the preceding century, had won for their countrymen the reputation for wandering which they enjoyed during the early Middle Ages. Possibly another reason why the Irish sought retirement on distant islands was because Roman ecclesiastical customs were beginning to spread all over Ireland. At the close of the Synod of Whitby, held in 664, when the king of Northumbria decided in favor of the institutions of Saint Peter as against the Irish practices of St. Columcille, several conformed to the practice of their opponents, the others retired in silent discontent to Iona. [17] Later, with the spread of the new regulations, the stubborn Irish monks were obliged to retreat into the very ocean. This yearning for a place of utter retirement from the world became with the Irish a passion. It is constantly referred to in the lives of Irish saints and has left its impression on the topography of the country in the Latin word *desertum*, which, though disguised in Anglo-Irish writings under a variety of spellings, most frequently occurs as Dysart or Dysert. Such was the ascetic ardor of these Irish anchorites, as almost to outdo the hermits of the sandy deserts of Syria and Egypt. Yet deserts of sand still attached them to earth, from which, if they could, they would escape entirely. So they sought for a desert in the ocean: “Eremum in oceano quaerere,” and “Pro Christo peregrinare votens, enavigavit,” are constantly recurring expressions. Gradually their island cloisters studded the coast of Ireland, “insulas veluti monilia,” “like a necklace,” [18] and the circle widened until finally, in the latter part of the fourth century, [19] there was hardly a spray-swept isle off the coast that was not occupied by a small community or by an Irish anchorite, and the more inaccessible and further their retreats were removed from the mainland, the more saintly were held to be those who dwelt in them. Many of these adventurers must have lost their lives which they had entrusted to cockle shells of wattled twigs, and, as no tidings were ever heard of them, the belief could easily have arisen that they had reached the far off shores of the Land of the Blessed, from which there was no return. In a litany in the Book of Leinster, [20] and the Speckled Book, [21] is mention of an “anchorite whom Brendan met in the Land of Promise, with all the saints that had perished in the dark islands of the ocean.” Those whom they had left at home in the ease and peace of the cloister dreamed of the terrible adventures, which, they supposed, had befallen their fellows. These dreams they told for mere amusement or for edification; other tales were highly colored yarns, purporting to be

accounts of their adventures in search of the Land of Promise, spun by the adventurers themselves who were fortunate enough to return to their native land. In Adamnan's *Life of St. Columcille* is mention of a certain Baitan, who was Columcille's first successor in the monastery of Iona, and who, along with others, sought a desert "in pelago intrans-meabili." [22] About the same time, St. Cormac ua Liathain sailed to northern seas for the same purpose. He made at least three voyages and became known as Cormac Leir, "Cormac of the Sea," [23] "qui tribus non minus uicibus eremum in oceano laboriose quiesivit, nec tamen inuenit." Similar tales are connected with St. Ailbe (Albaeus), of Emly, who lived at the close of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century, and his "family." [24] It is related of him that he had planned to sail to Ultima Thuli, but being dissuaded by the King of Cashel to undertake the voyage alone, he agreed to send twenty-four of the brethren in his stead. On his own journey, Brendan came upon the monastic family of Ailbe on an island which has many of the characteristics of the Land of Promise, though it is not identical with it. Punishment was sometimes inflicted by setting the guilty person adrift in a light skiff or wicker boat with one paddle, or in a leathern box without any paddle at all, with a vessel of meal and water and sometimes with a club for keeping off the beasts of the sea. Many even imposed such an ordeal upon themselves as a penance. This punishment of setting adrift is described in detail by Muirchu [25] and is referred to in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* [26]: the criminal "must go unarmed to the shore, having nothing but a small and vile garment. He must bind his feet with an iron fetter and fling the fetter-key into the sea. He must then enter a 'navis unius pellis,' a coracle whose wicker framework was covered with hide only one fold deep, and, without food, sail, or rudder, commit himself to the mercy of the elements."

Besides the love of wandering, which was a peculiar ascetic trait of the early Irish Church, the mysterious attraction which the sea has always exercised on the minds of the Celts was a powerful impulse in driving many of the holy men of Ireland to the islands of mid-ocean. This attraction was reinforced by a lingering belief which they held in the existence of a delectable island beyond the waves, where the setting sun sinks in the western regions, and by the belief of the learned Fergil the Geometer, and possibly of other early Irish scholars, in the existence of men at the antipodes. This belief in a Great Land in the west was originally essentially pagan, and, even as such, vestiges of it still haunt the imagination of the longshore folk of Brittany and the west of Ireland. Such a belief in a happy other world is found, of course, among other peoples besides the Celts, but, with the latter, the spirit that pervades it is peculiarly Celtic. This pagan Elysium of the "Sidh" ("fairy") dwellers, the Irish called, and still call, Tír na n-óg, "the land of the (ever) young," Tír na mbeo "the land of the living," Tír na mban, or Tír na nIngen, "the land of women," Mag Mór, Mag Mell, Trag Mór, "the great plain," "the plain of delight," "the great strand," and by other names. The joys of this "Isle Delightful," or "Land of Biheste," were anything but spiritual. It remained for Christianity to add the spiritual element, and it is the incomplete amalgamation of Elysium and Eden which has produced the Irish conception of Tír Tairngire, "the Land of Promise," sought by Brendan.

Men thought it a region of sunshine and rest,
And they called it Hy-Brasil, the isle of the blest. [27]

The garments of those who had spent but a few hours in that Promised Land bore the sweet scent of its fragrance for forty days. In the Dutch "Brendan" the returned voyagers ask: "En kendi niet den roeke van onsen clederren dat wi in dat paradijs hebben geweest," [28] "And know ye not from the fragrance of our garments that we have been in paradise." [29]

Thus one reason for the great popularity which the Voyage of St. Brendan enjoyed was that it had its roots in an older popular tradition. Another was that, unlike most of the other

sea voyages, it had the good fortune to be written in Latin as well as in Irish. It thus came within the ken of western Europe and became a part of the world's literature. Moreover, it was pervaded by a strong mysticism, a peculiar sense of magic, a terrible yet graceful supernaturalism, a vivid love of natural beauty, and by luxuriousness of detail and color. Still another reason was that it combined the marvelous with the edifying and satisfied a natural desire to read of voyages even though one is not able to take part in them. The Irish imagination always ran riot in the oversea voyage literature; nay, the marvelous voyages of the Argo and of Ulysses are reasonable and possible when compared with those of the Irish. And what legends took rise among them! Legends of saints who put to sea in cockle shells and even in stone troughs, in which they were wafted without oar or rudder from Ireland to Wales or from Wales to Brittany. And what stronger proof of the reality of those voyages could we demand than the very stone troughs themselves which are still to be seen in Brittany and in which fond mothers place their babes as a cure for many of the ills that flesh is heir to!

When in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Irish historians and encyclopedists gathered into great collections the disjecta membra of the old tradition, they quite arbitrarily classified them according to subject under several heads. The tales of the over-sea type they divided into two classes, to which they gave the technical names "Longes" and "Immram." By "Longes," an abstract built on the Irish word *long* (Latin *navis longa*), "a ship," they meant a voyage entered upon involuntarily or a banishment over the sea. In later times the word was used to mean any banishment, not only by sea or abroad but even from one Irish district to another. The most famous example of the class is *Longes mac nUsnig*, "The Exile of the Children of Usnech." The word "Immram" (pi. Immramha) had a wider scope. Its primary meaning was "a sailing round" or "circumnavigation," but it came to import a voyage of discovery or adventure, or any freely undertaken sea voyage wherein the description of the incidents is the leading motive. The Voyage of Brendan is also called, in Latin, *Navigatio* and *Peregrinatio*, and *Muridecht Brenainn*, in Irish. These tales of the sea seem to have developed between the middle of the seventh and end of the ninth century. Though there must have been many such, only seven are catalogued in the Book of Leinster, [30] and, of these, only three are known to exist, to which must be added the Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla, which is not mentioned in the catalogue. The "Immramha" may be divided into what, for the sake of convenience, may be called, the one, a pagan, and the other a Christian, group, though in all of them there is a curious overlapping of ecclesiastical and secular elements. In general, the pagan framework has been preserved in the Christian "immramha," and it is only in spirit and influence that the two classes differ. The chief representative of the Christian class is the Voyage of Brendan. To this class belongs also the Voyage of the hÚi Corra, which in some of its parts is one of the earliest of the "Immramha." From the events narrated, it would appear to belong to the middle of the sixth century of our era, though the manuscripts in which it has been preserved are much later. The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla, like the Brendan story, bears a strong ecclesiastical stamp. It is a poetic description of a voyage of some Irish clerics who were driven by a tempest northwestward to the Shetlands. The piece was probably written originally in verse, which was afterwards replaced by a prose version which appears to belong to the end of the eleventh century. There are, besides, many smaller tales or mere episodes having the character of this group, such as the story of the Three Young Clerics and their Cat, the navigation of two Monks of the Order of St. Columba, who had been driven into northern seas and saw strange marvels there, [31] the Voyage or Exile of Breccan, who was ship-wrecked off the Irish coast, famous in the literature and legends of Wales. Breccan had fifty boats trading between Ireland and Scotland, and on one of his voyages he was swallowed up in the great whirlpool. His fate was not known until, many years after, Lugaid, the blind poet, came to Bangor. The poet's attendants strayed from the town down to the strand, where they found the bleached skull of a small dog on the beach. They brought it to Lugaid and asked him whose it was. The poet

commanded them to put the end of his poet's wand upon the skull, and then he told them that the skull was that of Breccan's little dog, and that Breccan himself with all his ships and people had been drowned in the whirlpool which ever since is known as "Breccan's Cauldron." Of the "Immramha" which are pronouncedly secular, the most remarkable are *Immram Brain maic Febail*, "The Voyage of Bran to the Land of the Living," which, partly by reason of the name of its hero, may have had considerable influence on the development of the Brendan legend—in fact, there are almost identical episodes in both stories—and *Immram Mael Duin*, "The Voyage of Maelduin," which has always been regarded as the type of this class of mythic literature, since it is both the oldest and shows no signs of Christian influence. Its composition probably antedates the raids of the Vikings in Ireland. Both the Maelduin and the Brendan story have so many points in common that the latter would appear to be nothing but the Christian adaptation of the former, or at least to have had its principle source in it.

Thus, in these and other pagan "Immramha," the author of the Voyage of Brendan had a framework ready at hand and elastic enough to allow the inclusion of all sorts of adventures, but it would be difficult to account for his choice of Brendan as his hero, unless the legend was founded on some basis of fact. In the earlier versions of the saga, Brendan set out in search of a place of retirement amid the waves of the ocean. In the later conception of the event, he engaged in a seven years' voyage to discover the Earthly Paradise, and it is on the strength of this that he has chiefly acquired his reputation of a navigator. The former idea must have had an historical basis: it was only one of a large number of cases of which there can be no uncertainty. Whatever doubt remains concerns only Brendan's reputed voyage to the Land of Promise. He had been preceded in his quest, as we have seen, by his master Barintus, and by Mernoc, and in turn Brendan's example was followed by his favorite disciple, Machutus. This youth, who is also known as Maclovius, or in modern times as Malo, was born between 510 and 520 in Monmouthshire, and, consequently, was a Welshman but, according to Joannes a Bosco he was an Irishman, and according to Sigebert of Gembloux, a Breton. The story of his life is nearly as remarkable as that of his master. He became a disciple of Brendan at Llancarvan, in his native county, and is credited with having been one of the sailor-monks who sailed under the great Irish navigator. In the course of the development of the legend of St. Malo, the rôles of master and disciple have become inverted and in some versions the pupil seems to have usurped the place of his superior and got his celebrity, it would seem, at the expense of St. Brendan. St. Malo also was the hero of a strange Sindbad-like adventure on a whale's back and he is said to have been persecuted by the wicked Britons who, owing to a curse which he had laid upon them, suffered various reverses in battle. Saint Brendan intervened in the quarrel. In the following lines Johannes de Garlandia describes the punishment which Brendan inflicted upon the Britons for having ill-treated his disciple:

Fracta pace Deus irascitur : Edocet illud
 Prælustri sancto Scotia clara viro.
 Brandanus Eusebio maledixit teste Britannos :
 Iccirco flebant multa pericia pati.

Trans mare se misit et eos prece solvit eorum ;
 Et peregre licuit ire venire viro
 Frangentes igitur pacem maledictio franget ;
 Gratia nee fractos quae reparabit erit. [32]

Sufficient instances have perhaps been adduced to show that the early medieval Irish were daring and enterprising sailors, and, what is more, it is now generally held by geographers

that it was Irish sailor-monks who effected the earliest voyages northward to the Arctic Circle, of which there is literary mention. The celebrated Irish geographer Dicuil has never been charged with being a fantastic writer. About the year 825 he wrote his famous work *Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, in which we find the following statement : “ A certain priest who is worthy of credence has told me that, after a sail of two summer days and one night in a small ship with two thwarts, he landed on one of the islands (Shetlands). There is also another group of small islands (Faroes) divided from one another by narrow sounds, in which for about one hundred years (i.e. from 725 to 825) dwelt hermits from our Ireland. But as from the beginning of the world these islands were always deserted, so now, because of the destruction by the Northmen, there are no anchorites on them, but they are occupied by great flocks of sheep and a great variety of sea birds.” Dicuil’s statement is confirmed by Icelandic sources, and there is an interesting bit of Irish testimony to the same effect, going back two and a half centuries earlier. In the year 565 St. Columcille happened to be at the court of Brudeus, the converted king of the Picts of Scotland, and, the chief of the Orkneys being present, he told the king that some of his clergy had lately emigrated in the hope of finding a desolate country “ in the impenetrable ocean,” and he asked Brudeus to recommend those monks to the chief of the Orkneys so that he might take them under his protection.

It is now known positively that Irish anchorites were in the Orkneys as early as the year 579 and that they were driven out of the Shetlands in 620. It is also recorded that, about the year 670, some of them came to the Faroes ; nor were they necessarily the first comers, but they may have been going to kinsmen who had settled there we know not how much earlier. But the tranquillity which they sought in those northern regions was of short duration : neither the rigorous climate nor the dull skies could save them from the incursions of the robbers of the sea, which, beginning in 725, finally in 795, drove the Irish settlers to an uninhabited island in the sea of ice which we now know as Iceland. In the year 861, even this place of refuge was discovered by the Northmen. It so happened that a Norwegian pirate named Nadoddr, while sailing toward the Faroes, was surprised by a storm and driven within sight of a strange land covered with snow. [33] He went ashore, climbed to a tall mountain, looked for a sign of habitation, and returned to Norway, praising the verdure and climate of the land he had visited and which he named Snaeland “ Snowland.” Nearly a century elapsed and, during the political troubles in the reign of Haraldr Hárfargi “ Harald the Hairy” (860-930), the first king of Norway, many Norwegian refugees sailed over to Iceland and forthwith proceeded to inflict upon the Irish settlers there even worse cruelty and oppression than they themselves were fleeing from in Norway. Most of the Irish were slaughtered. Of those who escaped, some no doubt were lost at sea ; others found their way back to Ireland, and still others, perchance, reached Greenland and even the shores of the Western Continent. The Book of Leinster [34] and the Martyrology of Donegal [35] mention the massacre of Donnan, abbot of the island of Eig (Egg), slain as he said Mass, and of his fifty companions, whose names are given. It remained, however, for a descendant of those Norwegian invaders, namely, Ari Thorgilsson, the father of Icelandic history, surnamed Fróde “ the learned” (1067-1148), to atone for the wrongs which his forefathers inflicted upon the unfortunate Irish colony, by handing down to posterity the most precious account we possess of the presence of the first Irish navigators in Iceland. In his *Islendingabók*, and similarly in the Prologue to *Landnáma*, he says, speaking of Iceland at the time the Norwegians reached it : “ Thâ voru hêr menn kristner, their er Northmenn kalla papa, en their fôru síthan a braut, af thvî at their vildu eigi vesa hêr vith heithna menn, ok létu eptir boekr I’rskar ok bjöllur ok baglar. Af thvî mátti skilja at their voru menn Irskir.” Christian men were there whom the Northmen call Papae, ‘ priests,’ and they left the place because they did not wish to remain there with pagans, and they left behind them Irish books, bells and croziers, from which one may conclude that they were Irishmen.” We are not to conclude from this, however, that all the Irish Icelanders were clerics. According to the *Breve Chronicon Norvegiae*, [36] “ Papae

vero propter albas vestes, quibus ut clerici induebantur, vocati sunt, unde in teutonica lingua omnes clerici Papae dicuntur,” “ They are called Papae because they wore white clothes and dressed like priests, wherefore in the Teutonic tongue all priests are called ‘ Papae.’ ” This word, which may be simply the Latin word *papa* or from the ecclesiastical use of *papa*, “ master,” has left its mark to this day on several of the islands in the Shetlands group and thereabouts. The Norwegians also called the Irish Icelanders “ Westmen,” “ men come by sea from the west,” that is, from Ireland, which, to the Norwegians, was a western land.

This article is not intended, nor is the present writer competent, to treat, with the fullness it deserves, of the thorniest question which still awaits solution in the intricate St. Brendan problem, if indeed the question can ever be decided without peradventure, namely, the discovery of America by Irish seamen. The literature on the subject is almost without limit and most of it has been printed. This material, however, both published and unpublished, must all be thoroughly sifted again with the closest scrutiny, and new light thrown on the subject from untried angles and with the aid of all the resources of Celtic and Scandinavian philology, geography and the allied sciences. Here it will be sufficient to state briefly a few phases of the problem and to refer to some of the greatest authorities for a more detailed discussion of the subject.

Most of our information concerning the early voyages of the Irish we owe to Icelandic historians, who have never been accused of drawing overmuch on their imagination or of lacking in a good memory, sobriety, and veracity. The twelfth century Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, [37] speaking of them, could truthfully say, “ Indeed, they count it a delight to learn and to consign to remembrance the history of all nations, deeming it as great a glory to set forth the excellence of others as well as to display their own.” There are three Scandinavian documents which are supposed to refer to Irish settlements in America. In the Landnámabók, Ari Thorgilsson, referred to above, tells how his great-grandfather, Ari Marsson, a powerful Icelandic chief, who lived toward the end of the tenth century and was descended from Carroll (Irish *Cearbhal*, Icelandic *Kiarvalr*.), king in Dublin, and some other Icelandic adventurers were blown by a storm upon Hvíttramannaland, “ White Men’s Land” (that is, men of white (not red) skin, or because they dressed in white), by some called Írland it Mikla, “ Great Ireland.” That country, it has been proved, was situated toward the west, near the sea and near Vinland it Góðha, “ Wineland the Good,” six weeks’ sail, as they said, from Ireland. Ari goes on to relate how his great-grandfather was hospitably received by the Christian settlers in “ White Men’s Land,” was converted and became chief of the colony. This story was first told by a certain Hrafn Hlymreksfari, “ Hrafn the Limerick trader,” who was a contemporary of Ari Marsson and had lived for a long time in Limerick, Ireland, and had probably heard it from Irish or Icelandic sailors returned from “ White Men’s Land.” Further, Ari Fróde records that his own uncle, Thorkell Gellison, remembered hearing Icelanders say that they had heard Thorfinn, Earl of the Orkneys (whose father Sigurd was killed at Clontarf, in 1014), tell about Ari Marsson, how he had been recognized in “ White Men’s Land” and settled down there. Now, this celebrated expedition of Ari Marsson must have taken place about the year 983, and Vínland, near which was “ Great Ireland” or “ White Men;s Land,” is generally regarded as corresponding roughly to the northern New England States and New Brunswick. It must be admitted, of course, that it does not necessarily follow from the mere fact that the new land was called “ Great Ireland” that it had been discovered by the Irish ; it is just as possible that it was so called merely because of some imagined resemblance to Ireland. It is interesting to note that an echo of the Scandinavian belief in the existence of “ Great Ireland” was heard as far away as Sicily, whither the Normans had carried it with them and where, in the twelfth century, the Arabian geographer Edrisi translated the name of the country into Arabic as “ Írland ah-al-Kabirah.”

The next Icelandic text which is supposed to refer to pre-Columbian Irish in America is the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which was composed after the year 1148. It tells how a certain Icelander, Gudhleif Gudhlaugsson, was sailing home from Ireland, whither he had gone on business, when his ship, being west of Ireland, was driven by a great northeast wind southwestwards, until finally it reached a great land where the people seemed to be speaking Irish. After spending some time among them, Gudhleif and his companions returned to Ireland where they passed the winter and then in the spring sailed home to Iceland. The third of these texts is the mythical saga of Thorfinn Karlsefni, also known as the Saga of Eiric the Red, who, while sailing from Vínland to Greenland, which he discovered in 986, was driven by a south wind to Markland (Newfoundland) which, he was told, faced “White Men’s Land.” Still another possible reference to Írland it Mikla may be seen in the famous work of the Venetian Zeno brothers, though the authenticity of the narrative has been disputed. They engaged in several voyages late in the fourteenth century and on their return they reported rumors of an island far in the west. They landed and met one of the inhabitants who spoke Latin, and from him they learned that the island was called Estotilanda, which may possibly point to “Great Ireland,” Labrador, or to some other northern region on the east side of America, or may be merely an error for Escotilanda (“c” and “t” being often indistinguishable in medieval manuscripts) and refer to Ireland or Scotland. It is the “cold Estotiland,” of which Milton wrote. [38]

Probably many more Icelandic mariners than those mentioned here were driven by violent winds on to the coast of “Great Ireland,” but those are the only ones whose names have been preserved. In view of the frequent sailings off the west coast of Ireland, which is proved by numerous voyages that are recorded as having taken place during a century at least to and from the northern islands, it would be surprising if no Irish ship was blown out of its course in a storm and forced to cross the Atlantic. It need not be objected that such extensive voyages were not feasible in the simple vessels that were in use in those days. Some no doubt were shipwrecked, but that the feat was not impossible has been proved by authentic cases of boats no larger than those of the Irish drifting or in some way making the trans-Atlantic voyage. Furthermore, it is known positively that from the year 1003 to the year 1347 sailings between Iceland and Nova Scotia were not uncommon. While the Icelandic texts just quoted may prove nothing or may prove very much, this much is certain, that the Icelanders themselves believed that it was the Irish who first reached the western shores and first introduced Christianity into the New World. Nowhere do they ascribe to themselves the credit or glory of the discovery. Even had they been so disposed, one may conjecture that the claims of the Irish were too notorious to be disputed. And is it not inconsistent that, while nobody hesitates to take the candid word of the Scandinavians when they state that the Irish had preceded them to Iceland, their most positive statements that they had also gained the start of them in reaching America awaken suspicion? While, then, it has not yet been proved, to the entire satisfaction of all unbiased minds, that America was first discovered—and in part colonized—by Irish mariners, it would be unreasonable to reject *en bloc* all the evidence which has been advanced in favor of the reality of the Irish sea voyages, merely because there is so much of the marvelous in them. The early writers, unfortunately perhaps, were not so much concerned with placing on record historical events and geographical discoveries as with providing edifying or amusing stories, and it is precisely the fabulous elements that explain the preservation of these legends. While we ought not to be too positive about asserting or denying the truth of the events narrated, it is not too much to allow that there must have been some framework of fact on which was woven the web of adventure. The possibility, nay, the probability, of Irish forerunners of the Norsemen in America has been admitted by some of the most eminent modern geographers, Alexander von Humboldt, for example, whose opinion deserves to be quoted: “I do not at all share the contempt with which these national traditions have often been treated. On the contrary, I am firmly persuaded that with a little

diligence the discovery of facts entirely unknown today will clear up many of these historic problems." It has also been admitted by such distinguished historians as Rafn, and Tarducci, and by the American authority who has made the most exhaustive study of the question : " It seems likely," says Mr. Babcock, " that America was actually reached by the Irish even before the Norsemen and certainly long before all other Europeans ; [39] and again, " In view of what they (the Irish) really achieved, their known fearlessness and very special impulsion, why should it be incredible that in one thing more they should outstrip others, reaching at some point the mainland of America, though they might not be able to return, and their settlements must die out if reinforcements failed ? If their supplanters in Iceland, the Norsemen, had not recorded the presence there of these ecclesiastical Irishmen, it is likely that we should still be debating it today, though it continued so long ; [40] and finally, " One must feel that Irish monks, blinded to everything beyond their absorbing purpose, may very well have been here before any Norsemen ; but it seems at present beyond proving. [41]

It is to be feared that the case for the Irish discoverers has been discredited by the extravagant nature of some of the claims advanced in their favor by overzealous partisans. There have been many fantastic notions regarding the Celtic pre-Columbian discoveries of America. The height of absurdity was reached some fifty years ago by a French geographer who maintained that the Irish in America were descended from Brendan or from some one of the obscure Irish precursors of Christopher Columbus, and that there is a close likeness between the Irish language and the Algonquin and other Indian dialects. Some of these would-be philologists have indeed proved to their own satisfaction that the word Algonquin itself is of Irish origin ! It will be sufficient merely to mention in passing some of the most fanciful statements which have been put forward in connection with this subject. From time to time we read in the newspapers of the discovery of Celtic remains in the New World. Wherever towers are found, as in Colorado and New Mexico, showing the slightest resemblance to the round towers of Ireland, or heaps of stones suggesting Irish beehive cells, the discoverers at once jump to the conclusion that they must be due to Irish builders. The letters of old navigators, like Cartier, Champlain, and Cortes, have been ransacked for the purpose, and any superficial analogies which they show to have existed between the rites and customs of the American and Mexican Indians and Christianity have been singularly exaggerated and attributed to the influence of Irish missionaries. The Indians, as is well known, had immemorial traditions of the presence of white men in the country before the coming of the Spaniards, and some of their tribes were taught that their ancestors crossed a great lake full of islands, very much as Irish sailors may have crossed the Atlantic by using the northern islands and Greenland as stepping stones. Some writers have held that the white Esquimaux are descendants of early Irish settlers ! The civilization that existed in Mexico from the seventh century onward has been said to have been founded on the laws and customs of the ancient Irish, and some have even gone so far as to assert that Quetzalcohuatl, the more or less mythical Mexican hero-god or reformer, was one of these Irish legislators, or, who knows, perhaps even St. Brendan himself ! But the Welsh were the greatest sinners, in the long yarns they spun of Indians speaking Welsh or Irish. [42] This was chiefly in the days when celtomania was rampant. For example, at the time of Sir Walter Raleigh, reports spread in England that the English colonists in Virginia were surprised to be saluted in Welsh by the redskins. Then there is the well-known case of the Rev. Morgan Jones, who was made prisoner in Virginia in 1669 by the Tuscaroras, who, he discovered, spoke a language resembling his own. Jones afterwards preached to the Indians and became their adviser in difficult matters. An almost identical story is told by Charles Beatty in his *Journal of Two Months' Tour* (1768), how a party of Carolina savages were about to scalp him, but they spared his life when he happened to exclaim a few words in Gaelic. Captain Stewart believed that he had come across Celtic books among the Natchitoches on the Red River, [43] and the Carolinians were said to possess a copy of the Bible in Irish. All these questions were for a

long time a hotly controverted point of Welsh history. A few years ago a rusty knife blade, bearing the date 1257, and heavily incrustated with sulphur, was dug up from an Indian mound near Sulphur Springs, Ark. The finder, Mr. Thomas W. Barton, also claimed to have collected legends among the Creek Indians of the existence of a colony of white men among them some 600 years before, and that the Creek language has preserved many Welsh words which have been handed down from generation to generation. According to Mr. Barton, some boat-loads of Welshmen must have been blown across the Atlantic into the Gulf of Mexico, where they entered the Mississippi, went up the Arkansas, and became assimilated with the Indian tribes of New Mexico and Arizona. While all such stories as those just cited must of course be received with the utmost caution, the Welsh really had a naval hero whose fame bid fair for a time to rival that of St. Brendan himself. It is an historic fact that in the year 1170 a dispute arose as to the succession to the throne of Owain, king of Gwynedd, North Wales. One of the princes, Madoc, disgusted with the civil wars, is said to have decided to leave his people and to set sail due west in the ocean. After a while he returned home, and, as a result of the glowing account which he gave of the land he had visited, he had no difficulty in persuading a large number of his countrymen to accompany him on another voyage. This event is referred to in the Welsh Triads [44] (transcribed probably in the twelfth century) which, enumerating the “ three complete losses suffered by the Isle of Britain,” mention “ Madawg ab Owain Gwynedd,” who put to sea in ten ships with three hundred men, “ ac ni wyddys i ba le ydd aethant,” “ and arrived, no one knows where.” It is also narrated by Caradog of Llancarvan in the *History of Cambria*, and by divers other historians. [45] In the margin of the St. Gall manuscript [46] is the following gloss in Old Irish : “ Do inis maddoc dún. i. meisse 7 coirbbre,” which may mean “ we belong to the island of Madoc, I and Cairbre,” and refer to an Inis Madoc (Island of Madoc), in the lake of Templeport, County Cavan, Ireland, or to a St. Maiddoc, or Mogue, of Ferns, who was born near that lake. [47] Robert Southey made *The Voyage of Madoc* into an epic, now almost forgotten, and Thomas Stephens, the historian of Welsh literature, gathered the material into an exceedingly interesting though imaginative volume entitled, *Madoc, An Essay on the Discovery of America by Madoc*. [48] As late as the year 1792 a zealous Welshman named John Evans undertook a voyage to America to visit the Welsh colony which was believed to have been left here by Madoc. After traveling far and wide, exhausting his funds, being taken for a spy, thrown into prison and suffering many other hardships, he abandoned the quest and died of fever.

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[1] *De Bella Civili*, I, liiii.

[2] Keating, *History of Ireland*, ed. DINNEEN, II, 354-3.56.

[3] REEVES' *Adamnan*, p. 170, note k.

[4] *De Bella Civili*, i, liiii.

[5] *Pharsalia*, iv, 130-135.

[6] *Hist. Natural.*, vii, c. 57.

[7] *Ora Marit.*, v, 101-107.

[8] *Polyhistor.*, c. 22.

[9] *Pharsalia*, iv, 136.

[10] *Carmen i*, 1.370-371.

[11] *Les Bretons*, chant III, p. 31.

[12] *Lismore Lives*, p. 106.

[13] Edit. Thorpe, ii, 69, Master of the Rolls Collection.

[14] Pp. 78-81.

[15] O'KELLEHER and SCHOEPERLE, *Life of Columcille*, p. 78.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 296.

- [17] LINGARD, *The History and Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, 2d edit., vol. i, ch. 1.
- [18] AMBROSE, *Hexam.*, iii, c. 5.
- [19] BURY, *Life of St. Patrick*, pp. 294-295.
- [20] *Book of Leinster*, p. 373, col. 4.
- [21] *Leabhar Breac*, “The Speckled Book,” p. 23, col. 2, l.43.
- [22] ADAMNAN, ii, 14 ; *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, viii, 1883, p. 704.
- [23] ADAMNAN, i, 6; ii, 42; iii, 17; WAILUND, o. c, xxii.
- [24] COLGAN, *Acta Sanctorum*, p. 241.
- [25] *Tripartite Life*, ii, 222, 228, clxxiv ; O’KELLEHER and SCHOEPFERLE, *Life of Columcille*, p. xviii, note.
- [26] Cf. *Chronicon Scotorum*, 622 ; *Cáin Adamnáin*, ed. Kuno Meyer, p. 43.
- [28] Gerald Griffin.
- [29] MOLTZER, *Leven*.
- [30] *Book of Leinster*, 189c, l.29 fl.
- [31] Todd’s *Analysis of the Book of Fermoy*, p. 28.
- [32] USSHER, *Works*, vi, p. 51-52.
- [33] *Islands Landnámabók*, pt. 1 ch. I, p. 5—6.
- [34] *Book of Leinster*, 359a,
- [35] April 17.
- [36] In *Monumenia historica Norwegiae*, pp. 89, 208. L. Duvau. in *Journal des Savants*, 1899. pp. 697 fl.
- [37] *Saxonis Grammatici historia danica*, recens. Müller, Copenhagen, 1839, I, pp. 7-8.
- [38] *Paradise Lost*, x, 686.
- [39] W. H. BABCOCK, in *The Glories of Ireland*, p. 37.
- [40] Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, p. 27.
- [41] *Ibid.*, p. 30. I
- [42] *Dictionnaire des Sciences Naturelles*, t. xxi, p. 392 ; *Revue Encyclopédique*, No. 4. p. 162.
- [43] HUMBOLDT, *Examen crit. de l’histoire de la Géogr. du nouv. Cont.*, 1837, ii, 144
- [44] Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales, p. 401 ; J. Loth, *Les Mabinogion*, 2 ed., ii, pp. 301-302.
- [45] HAKLUTT’S *Voyages*, iii (1600), p. 1; *The History of Cambria, now called Wales*, . . . trans, by Humphrey Lloyd, . . . corrected ... by David Powel, London 1584, pp. 227-229.
- [46] Page 194a.
- [47] J. C. ZEUSS, *Grammatica Celtica*, xiii; O’CURRY, *Manuscript Materials*, p. 27. JOYCE, *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, I, p. 489. E. HOGAN, *Onomasticon Gadelicum*.
- [48] London and New York, 1894 ; *Revue Celtique*, xv, 124.

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