

SEARCHING FOR THE *SCOTI PEREGRINI* IN THE ISLANDS OF OCEAN

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## INTRODUCTION

In 563 CE, St Columba (d. 597), a scion of the prominent Irish dynasty of the Northern Uí Néill, left his native island to become one of the first of the *Scoti peregrini*. These were the celebrated Irish monastics who expressed their vocation through a process of retreat—not just from the bonds of secular society, but across borders and even over the sea to live amongst strangers. The more famous of the *peregrini* went to the Continent, following in the footsteps of Columba’s younger namesake, St Columbanus of Bobbio (d. 615).<sup>1</sup> Others followed the elder Columba (Columcille) northward to settle in the Irish/Gaelic-speaking kingdom of Dál Riata, in what is now western Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Here Columba founded his principal monastery on the island of Iona. The subsequent influence of Iona and its family of monasteries upon British and Irish affairs is well-documented. My interest here is in another outreach, that took monks northward and westward into the ocean. The northern Atlantic had only intermittently engaged the attention of Classical geographers, who saw it as a forbidding space, possibly at the edge of the Earth; the monks of Iona had a similar perception.<sup>3</sup> Writing around 700 CE, Abbot Adomnán of Iona (d. 704) described his predecessor Columba as an ‘island soldier’ (*insulanus miles*), evoking motifs of early monasticism as spiritual warfare conducted in desert places. Other monks he said sought a ‘desert in the ocean’ (*herimus in ociano* or *desertum in ociano*); these voyages are described in terms that evoke meta-narratives of the mission of the church into liminal, empty spaces on the edge—or even

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<sup>1</sup> *Scoti* was the early medieval term for Irish people, living either in Ireland itself or in colonies outside Ireland, such as Dál Riata (Scotland) and Dyfed (Wales). In Classical Latin, *peregrini* were ‘strangers’ or ‘outsiders’, but in the early Christian context it meant a pilgrim or self-exile ‘for love of Christ’ (*pro Christo*). See Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae, Second Preface*, in *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, eds Alan Orr and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1961), p. 186. He describes Columba as travelling *pro Christo perigrinari*.

<sup>2</sup> Irish and Scottish Gaelic were the same language in this period.

<sup>3</sup> James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 121-71; Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The View from Iona: Adomnán’s Mental Maps’, *Peritia* 10, no. 1 (1996): pp. 98-122.

at the end—of the world.<sup>4</sup> Later sources, some also connected to Iona, describe monks who had found suitable desert islands to settle in.

The literary sources for the settlements of the ocean *peregrini* are limited in their historical detail, but there are new data emerging from archaeology and paleoecology that bear on this topic. The new data offer the opportunity, as well as the challenge, to write multi-disciplinary histories—including ones that might reconcile the dry materialities of island settlements with the particular thought-world of the monks who were their main, if not their only, personnel. This will be my main theme in what follows. I also want to reflect on the nature of research into seafaring and the question of re-enactment of voyages as a research activity, which has influenced the reception of stories of voyaging by the *peregrini*.

### AN ENCOUNTER WITH A GREEN VOLUME

As this is an inaugural lecture, I will allow myself a brief reflection on how my interest in this topic was formed. In my first term at university [this university] I chose to study medieval history, to complement the ancient and modern history I had studied at school. I was almost immediately set to read a book that remains my favourite of all medieval texts: the *Life* of St Columba (*Vita S. Columbae*), written around 700 CE by the aforementioned Adomnán. Over the course of a week—in an unusually cold month of May for Sydney—I sat shivering in the university library, wholly engrossed in the 1961 edition of this text. It is a physically lovely volume to read, with soft green covers and pale yellow pages, on which the translation faces a Latin text sprinkled with eye-catching archaic Irish personal- and place-names.<sup>5</sup> The narrative itself is a series of parables, presented out of chronological order, some so rich in detail that one could imagine oneself sailing in open boats alongside monks whose woollen garments glisten with the salt spray of the monster-filled ocean. You can see that this book captivated me. A little over two decades later I would have the honour of convening a conference, held on Iona itself, to commemorate the thirteenth centenary of Adomnán. It shows you where reading one book can lead you.

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<sup>4</sup> David N. Dumville, 'The North Atlantic Monastic Thalassocracy: Sailing to the Desert in early medieval Insular Spirituality', in *The Papar in the North Atlantic: Environment and History*, ed. Barbara E. Crawford (St Andrews: St John's House, 2002), pp. 121–31, 124–8; Diarmuid Scully, 'The Third Voyage of Cormac in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: Analogues and Context', in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and its Insular Context in Honour of Eamonn Ó Carragáin*, eds Alastair Minnis and Jane Roberts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 209–230; Dan Tipp and Jonathan M. Wooding, 'Adomnán's Voyaging Saint: The Cult of Cormac Ua Liatháin', in *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, eds Jonathan M. Wooding, Rodney Aist, Thomas Owen Clancy and Thomas O'Loughlin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 237–52; Meredith D. Cutrer, 'Early Irish *Peregrinatio* as Salvation History', in *Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early Medieval Celtic World*, eds Jonathan M. Wooding and Lynette Olson (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020), pp. 76–91.

<sup>5</sup> The Latin text comes to us from a very early manuscript (Schaffhausen Generalia 1), written on Iona itself by a scribe (Dorbéne, d. 713) with a known obit.

I soon found I could connect the world of Adomnán's monks to other voyage narratives of which I was already aware.<sup>6</sup> The most famous of these was the Latin tale of the *Voyage of St Brendan the Abbot* (*Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis*). Probably written around 850 CE, it is the story of an Irish monk who voyaged to a mystical promised land in the ocean.<sup>7</sup> It appears to incorporate, amongst a number of wholly imagined islands, at least a few that are inspired by reports of real monastic voyages. I had also read the Norse (Old Icelandic) sagas that describe Norse settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Canada in the period c. 870-1000 CE. The *peregrini*, whom the saga-writers called *papar* ('priests'), feature in these stories as the denizens of Iceland when the Norse settlers first arrived there, c. 870 CE.<sup>8</sup>

The Norse sagas of Atlantic voyaging are sufficiently factual in tone to allow their use to reconstruct some of the historical events of Norse settlement—though they still require interpretation as literary narratives of land-taking.<sup>9</sup> The *Navigatio* of St Brendan is a work less susceptible to literal reading, but there is still a long tradition of trying to reconstruct it as a travelogue of a real voyage across the Atlantic.

In my undergraduate years the travelogue interpretation of the *Navigatio* was in the ascendent, when tables in Sydney bookshops groaned under piles of remainder printings of Tim Severin's 1978 book *The Brendan Voyage*. This is an inspiring, compelling account of Severin's own voyage (1976-7) from Ireland to Canada in a leather-covered boat, the type of vessel used by St Brendan in the *Navigatio*. It is an article of faith to some people that Severin's successful crossing proved St Brendan to be the first European visitor to North America. Other critics found different messages in the *Navigatio*, however, which—without prejudice to Severin's fascinating book—I find more compelling. The Cistercian writer Thomas Merton saw in it a 'symbolic tract on the monastic life'.<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis was inspired by it to write a children's book,

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<sup>6</sup> Through reading criticism of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, in particular: Paul Kocher, *Master of Middle Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 181-8. I think it was reading Henry Treece's *Vinland the Good* (1967) that first inspired me to read the Icelandic sagas.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan M. Wooding, 'The Date of *Navigatio S. Brendani abbatis*', *Studia Hibernica* 37, no.1 (2011): pp. 9-27. For a dating on different criteria, that would put the text earlier: Giovanni Orlandi and Rossanna E. Guglielmetti, *Navigatio S. Brendani* (Florence: Edizioni de Galluzzo, 2014), pp. cii-cxix.

<sup>8</sup> There also appears to be some influence by Irish narratives upon the Norse sagas: Séamus Mac Mathúna, 'The Question of Irish Analogues in Old Norse-Icelandic Voyage Tales in the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus', in *Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys* eds Matthias Egeler and Wilhelm Heizmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 283-345.

<sup>9</sup> See the exemplary anthropological critique by Margaret Clunies-Ross, 'Land-Taking and Text-Making in Medieval Iceland', in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, eds Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1998), pp. 159-84.

the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), that mainly explores the apocalyptic messages of the *Navigatio*. Cynthia Bourgeault has succinctly criticised a tendency to:

... prior assumption that the verifiable reality of this tale [the *Navigatio*] consists of boat-building and navigation and that the monasticism is merely part of the “delicate naïveté” of the medieval setting’.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, if we are to identify in our sources any verifiable reality of travel or settlement we need to understand them holistically. The authors of the Hiberno-Latin sources were monks; their protagonists and/or informants were also monks. Even apparently mundane material details need to be understood in the context of the particular world-view of monastics.<sup>12</sup>

From the outset in my studies I was struck by how frequently people were inclined to take evidence from the cult of saints—such as church dedications and hagiography—as a basis for projecting routes of early migration, exploration, and settlement. Around the time I entered this field, the ‘saints and seaways’ model, most fully set out by the geographer E. G. Bowen (1900-83), was highly influential.<sup>13</sup> This model took data of the early Celtic saints—from the evidence of literary narratives and patterns of church dedications—and projected it into patterns of church settlement. This process seemed to pass lightly over the details of the stories of saints, which are to a large degree about miraculous events. It also seemed that evidence of dedications was likely to have more to do with the travels of people who founded churches in the name of saints than the journeys of the saints in their own lifetimes.<sup>14</sup> The saints and seaways model turned out to owe much to the ‘diffusionist’ presentations of prehistoric data by a famous graduate of the University of Sydney, Gordon Childe (1892-1957).<sup>15</sup> His mapping of prehistoric

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, ‘To Dame Hildelith Cumming, 22 July 1964’, in *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Spiritual Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), pp. 222-3.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, ‘The Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio* of St Brendan’, *Monastic Studies* 14, no. 1 (1983): p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘St Brendan’s Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea in Columban and Related Hagiography’, in *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, eds John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 77-92; response by David Stifter, ‘Brendaniana etc.’, *Keltische Forschungen* 1, no. 1 (2006): p. 207; Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘Peregrini in the Ocean—Spirituality and Reality’, in *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland: Essays in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin*, eds Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter and Julianne Nyhan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), pp. 411-7.

<sup>13</sup> Most fully articulated in Emrys George Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> For a focused critique of this approach: Owen Chadwick, ‘The Evidence of Dedications in the Early History of the Welsh Church’, in *Studies in Early British History*, ed. Nora K. Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 173-88.

‘cultures’ traced diffusion of ideas outward from eastern centres of innovation into northern Europe—on which he based some rather sweeping comparisons:

Are not the Megalithic tombs of Britain the counterparts of the Celtic chapels founded by the Welsh and Irish saints in much the same parts of the British Isles? If so, their founders might be called ‘megalithic’ saints ... It may be instructive to pursue the analogy further. The Celtic saints were inspired by a faith that had originated in the Eastern Mediterranean as our Megalithic religion supposedly did.<sup>16</sup>

These saints, however, were often not the primary evangelists of the countryside, but early founders of monasteries. Monasticism was a trend in Christian spirituality that arrived in Britain sometime after the arrival of Christianity itself—though this fact alone would not invalidate Childe’s broad comparison, as monasticism is still an eastern religious trend that arrived into early medieval Britain. What was different was monasticism’s inherent geographical direction. Early monastic settlement was often as much about retreating from society as toward it.

I will offer two short case-studies to illustrate the problems of inferring historical routes or narratives from such data. In 2013, having completed a large study of the medieval and early modern dedications to St Brendan, I decided it might be informative, as a comparison, to document as many of the modern (post-1800) churches dedicated to him as I could find. Amongst other things, I found that dedications to the saint in the USA and Canada formed a pattern along the north-eastern seaboard of North America that extended into the St Lawrence and around the shores of the Great Lakes. This naturally was *not* a route of a voyage by St Brendan, but simply where modern people placed churches, inspired by any number of symbolisms or connections. My second case-study is of data I collected about the medieval and modern monasteries on the Welsh island of Caldey in Pembrokeshire. This fascinating island was occupied by monastic communities from the sixth through to the sixteenth century, then again from 1906 to the present.<sup>17</sup> The island cemetery is of special interest archaeologically for being unused between the early 1500s and 1918, when the first monk of the new community died. This monk I imagined to have been an elderly Anglican who had come to Caldey from Painsthorpe in Yorkshire with his community in 1906, to live out his life on the island. A look into his life story, however, showed that he had come in 1908 from a different community (Capel-y-Ffin), where he had then only recently returned from taking priest’s orders from an Old Catholic bishop in Winnipeg, Canada. He did not stay long on Caldey, but left again for North America, first to minister to a utopian

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<sup>15</sup> See Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘The Representation of Early British Monasticism and *Peregrinatio in Vita prima S. Samsonis*’, in *St Samson of Dol and the earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*, ed. Lynette Olson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017), pp. 157-60.

<sup>16</sup> V. Gordon Childe, *The Prehistory of European Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 128-9.

<sup>17</sup> The Anglican community converted to Catholicism in 1913 and then sold the island to the Cistercian order in 1928, which remains in occupation.

community in Mexico and then in El Paso, Texas—only re-joining the Caldey community a short time before his sudden death at the age of 40.<sup>18</sup> The human journey of a monk in search of his vocation was vastly different to the one I would have inferred from a simple artefact, the grave, and an assumption of Benedictine ‘stability of place’!

These case-studies have been a brief digression from the voyages of the *Scoti peregrini*, but I hope they illustrate the danger of superficial or anachronistic reading of limited data. Peter Brown, perhaps the most influential historian of late-Antique monasticism, stresses the need to see early monastics in terms of the inner experience, not just the external image, of their acts of separation from society.<sup>19</sup> David Dumville, writing on the *peregrini*, also firmly questions whether ‘ascetic self-propulsion into the desert was exploration in the usual modern sense ... the search for the desert seems motive enough’—though he also observes that we sometimes need to credit monks with ‘the spiritual vice of curiosity’.<sup>20</sup>

### THE DESERT IN THE OCEAN

Early Greek and Roman visitors to the Atlantic shores were fascinated by the dynamism of the ocean, which they personified as ‘Ocean’, whose powerful tides contrasted with the negligible ones of their Mediterranean home. Ocean was potentially a perilous force: a region of flux, a zone of death. Early medieval theology nuanced these Classical conceptions in terms of new, Christian narratives of mission, encounter, and apocalypse.<sup>21</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin identifies in the works of St Patrick and his early hagiographers a model in which the conversion of Ireland was perceived as a stage along the path of progressive baptism of nations, leading to both the physical and temporal ends of the earth (Matt 24:14).<sup>22</sup> The promised land that St Brendan finds in the ocean beyond Ireland is also understood in terms of early Christian narratives of apocalyptic; it is explicitly a take on the prophecy (Rev 20:4-6) that Christ will reign with chosen companions for 1,000 years in the Last Days.<sup>23</sup> In the *Navigatio*, monks

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh Allen, *New Llanthony Abbey* (Shrewsbury: YouCaxton, 2016), pp. 376, 389-91, 397-8.

<sup>19</sup> Peter R. L. Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): p. 370.

<sup>20</sup> Dumville, ‘The North Atlantic Monastic Thalassocracy’, p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Bernhard Maier, ‘Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid: Celtic Myth and Christian Creed in Medieval Irish Conceptions of the Afterlife’, in *Writing Down the Myths*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 105-31; 118-19; Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Living in the Ocean’, in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997), pp. 11-23; Scully, ‘The Third Voyage of Cormac’, pp. 209-230.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, *Discovering St Patrick* (London: DLT, 2005), pp. 72-92.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Distant Islands: The Topography of Holiness in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*’, in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), pp. 9-13; Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘The Location of the Promised Land in

visit an antechamber of the place in which this will occur, but they are separated from it by a river that they cannot yet cross; in another Hiberno-Latin text the same river becomes a place where saints have stations on the boundary of the future paradise.<sup>24</sup> The sojourn of hermits on ocean islands is in this way symbolised as both an extreme retreat from the secular world and a vigil on the world to come.

### DESERTED ISLANDS

Early in the story of the *Navigatio*, St Brendan arrives at an archipelago where he celebrates Easter, during which he progresses through three different locations over the days between Maundy Thursday and Easter Monday, including an island with giant sheep, the back of a giant fish, and an island where angels take the form of birds. He repeats this pattern over the next seven years, visiting many places in the ocean, but returning to the archipelago for Easter each year. Finally, he sails east from this ‘Easter archipelago’ to the promised land and then returns, via a short voyage, to Ireland. This, we should observe, undermines the argument that St Brendan’s paradise island is based on some location in North America. If you reconstruct the voyage in the *Navigatio* in terms of its internal geography, the paradise is not in the west of the ocean, but in the east of it—lying between the Easter archipelago and Ireland.<sup>25</sup>

So far, we have been talking about Atlantic voyages in hagiographical literature, but there are other accounts of voyages by the *peregrini* to islands in the North Atlantic.<sup>26</sup> These, too, concern islands that, while deep in the ocean, are closer to Britain and Ireland than North America. The key account is by Dicuil, a teacher at the palace schools in Aachen, the central city of the Holy Roman Empire. In 825 he wrote a treatise on geography titled *De mensura orbis terrae* (On the Measure of the Earth). Dicuil seems to have been by origin a monk of Iona—a reference to an early teacher named Suibne shows that he most likely had been a novice under Suibhne, abbot of Iona 766–772.<sup>27</sup> Viking raids threatened the Hebridean monastic communities in 795, so it is probable that Dicuil came to Aachen as a refugee from the raids.

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Hiberno-Latin Literature’, in *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland*, eds Jacqueline Borsje, Ann Dooley, Séamus Mac Mathúna and Gregory Toner (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2014), pp. 99–102.

<sup>24</sup> The promised land and the river appear to be derived from the early Christian apocalypse the *Vision of Paul* (*Visio S. Pauli*). See Wooding, ‘The Location of the Promised Land’, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Wooding, ‘The Location of the Promised Land’, pp. 99–105.

<sup>26</sup> For other surveys of this material see: Dumville, ‘The North Atlantic Monastic Thalassocracy’, pp. 121–131; Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘Monastic Voyaging and the *Nauigatio*’, in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 226–245. A useful discussion of the Irish and Norse voyages in the context of wider European expansion in J. R. S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 154–73.

Dicuil's *De mensura* is, like much of the scholarship of its era, a compendium of Classical and Patristic knowledge, but Dicuil is not above adding some personal comments based on his own knowledge of places that fell outside the purview of Classical geography.<sup>28</sup> After referring to Orkney (the *Orcades*), he adds the following:

There are many other islands which lie in the ocean to the north of Britain which can be reached from the northern islands of Britain in a direct voyage of two days and nights with sails filled with a continuously favourable wind. A pious priest told me that in two summer days and the intervening night he sailed in a two-benched boat and entered one of them.<sup>29</sup>

The islands of Orkney and Shetland were settled in the Neolithic, around 5,000 years ago. The archipelago of St Kilda, which lies some 64km west of the Hebridean island of Uist, was also settled in prehistory. There are no signs of prehistoric settlement, however, on islands that lie further to the north-west. On the tiny island of North Rona, 140km due west of Orkney, a stone hermitage with early Christian sculpture is apparently the earliest human settlement. 240 kms beyond North Rona are the Faroe Islands. Here again the earliest settlement appears to be in the first millennium CE. The Faroes appear amongst Dicuil's unnamed islands as a:

... small set of islands, nearly all separated by narrow stretches of water; in these for nearly a hundred years hermits sailing from our country, Ireland, have lived. But just as they were always deserted from the beginning of the world, so now because of the Northman pirates they are emptied of anchorites, and filled with countless sheep and very many diverse kinds of sea-birds. I have never found these islands mentioned in the authorities.<sup>30</sup>

The detail of this passage is much discussed and I will not rehearse all of it.<sup>31</sup> As Dicuil is not talking about Orkney, which he names explicitly, he can only be describing the

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<sup>27</sup> Dicuil, *De mensura* VI.12, in *Dicuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, ed. and trans. J. J. Tierney (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 62-3.

<sup>28</sup> See Natalia Lozovsky, *"The Earth is Our Book": Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West Ca. 400-1000* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 147-9.

<sup>29</sup> Dicuil, *De mensura* VII.14, in *Dicuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, ed. and trans. J. J. Tierney (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 74-5.

<sup>30</sup> Dicuil, *De mensura* VII.15, in *Dicuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, ed. and trans. J. J. Tierney (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 76-7.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Jacob Debes, 'Problems Concerning the Earliest Settlement in the Faroe Islands', in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the eleventh Viking Congress*, eds Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 458-9; Símun V. Arge, 'The Landnám in the Faroes', *Arctic Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (1991): pp. 101-120; Wooding, 'The Date of *Nauigatio S. Brendani abbatis*', pp. 15-23.

Faroe Islands or Shetland—but Shetland, as we have noted, was settled in prehistory and is close enough to Orkney that it must have been regularly known from there. The Faroes are remote islands separated indeed by narrow fjords. They have an abundance of seabirds. It is likely that the Easter archipelago in the *Navigatio*—probably written after *De mensura*—is based on a similar description to Dicuil’s of the Faroe Islands. It has one island of untended sheep and another of sea birds, separated by a narrow channel. These echoes of the distinct features which Dicuil describes imply that Dicuil and the *Navigatio*-author were aware of the same reports, but of which the latter made a freer use in a more literary context.

Dicuil, in 825, says these islands had been settled for almost/about (*ferme*) a century. On the face of it, this should indicate a first settlement around 720-30 CE. One would also infer from his statement that the hermits were the only occupants up to his time. These descriptions, though in a scientific treatise, may also contain theological codes. It mattered to the *peregrini* that an island was previously deserted and that it had become deserted again. The *peregrini* were looking for ‘deserts’—a powerful symbol in monastic spirituality.<sup>32</sup> The first monks had lived in the Near-Eastern desert. In the Pentateuch the desert was where people encountered God. In the New Testament Christ retreated to and was tested in the desert. Claims of deserted lands might also evoke the aforementioned apocalyptic narrative of St Patrick: if there were no people left to convert in remote islands, perhaps the end had been reached? Did the monks who settled on the Faroe Islands indeed consider themselves as materially near to the end—both physically and temporally—of the world? If so, it seems peculiarly tragic that the life of this very remote hermitage was suddenly disrupted by Viking raiders; the advent of the apocalypse might have seemed a very immediate possibility.

The deserted character of Dicuil’s islands is also a problem to be assessed in archaeological terms. His own people, as far as they could tell, were the first ever to have lived on the Faroe Islands. Can we take their word for this? We should observe that Irish people could be expected to recognise a prehistoric tomb or monument when they saw one; such artefacts are found in their native islands and featured in their mythology. Many monks, coming from farming families, should also have been able to identify as man-made, an agricultural drain or field boundary. Such would be observation from experience, not science; we cannot presume that early medieval monks would discern anthropogenic changes to flora or fauna. For example, if there were wild sheep on the islands when the monks arrived they might not have understood that these necessarily had arrived through human agency.

A recent project using fecal biomarkers and sedimentary DNA from Eiðsvatn on the island of Eysturoy has been modelled to suggest introduction of sheep to the islands around 500 CE and certainly before 630 CE.<sup>33</sup> Earlier evidence from a cemetery at

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard McGinn, ‘Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition’, *Journal of Religion* 74, no. 2 (1994): pp. 155-81.

<sup>33</sup> Lorelei Curtin, William J. D’Andrea, Nicholas L. Balascio, Sabrina Shirazi, Beth Shapiro, Gregory A. de Wet, Raymond. S. Bradley and Jostein Bakke, ‘Sedimentary DNA and Molecular Evidence for

Tjørnuvík, 5 kilometres away on the adjacent island of Stremoy, has yielded uncalibrated radiocarbon dates of 650 ±100 CE and 620 ±100 CE.<sup>34</sup> The site of Á Sondum on Stremoy has also produced a range of dates between the fifth and eighth centuries.<sup>35</sup> Radiocarbon dates notoriously yield a broad possible range, but the weight of evidence is starting to pull us earlier than the date of first settlement implied by Dicuil's comments. One should be wary of seeing these discrepancies between Dicuil and the archaeologists as necessarily a refutation by science of literary narrative. Rather, it might inspire us to re-assess how we read the detail of the narratives.

### RE-ENACTING THE PAST

I have placed much emphasis thus far on this problem of modelling the world-view of the *peregrini*. I want now to say a little more about the value of re-enactment as a research method. R. G. Collingwood, the noted philosopher of history, observed that 'all history is the history of thought, and that the historian knows a past thought by re-enacting it in the present'.<sup>36</sup>

Looming over all studies of the ocean *peregrini* is the influence of Severin's voyage re-enacting what various scholars have reconstructed as a voyage by St Brendan to North America.<sup>37</sup> Severin's interpretation set up two propositions. Firstly, could a voyage deep into the Atlantic as described in the *Navigatio* be successfully made? Secondly, by such re-enactment, could some of what is taken as fantasy in the text be shown to reflect real phenomena? We can place these questions in an already established paradigm of what is termed 'hyper-diffusionism'. This posits that migration was more common in antiquity than is often recognised. Accordingly, where there are sources or artefacts that suggest trans-oceanic migrations have occurred, if technology can be shown to make such voyages possible, this adds weight to the argument that they were made. An example of this is Thor Heyerdahl's 1947 'Kon-Tiki' voyage, which sought to prove it was possible that Polynesian culture was influenced from South

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Early Human Occupation of the Faroe Islands', *Communications Earth and Environment* 2, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>34</sup> P. C. Buckland, Eva Panagiotakopulu, 'A Palaeoecologist's view of Landnám: A Case Still not Proven?', in in *Símunarbók. Heiðursrit til Símun V. Arge á 60 ára degnum*, eds Caroline Paulsen and Helgi D. Michelsen (Tórshavn: Faroe University Press, 2008), pp. 33-4.

<sup>35</sup> Mike J. Church, Símun V. Arge, Kevin. J. Edwards, Philippa L. Ascough, Julie M. Bond, Gordon T. Cook, Steve J. Dockrill, Andrew J. Dugmore, Thomas H. McGovern, Claire Nesbitt, Ian A. Simpson, 'The Vikings Were Not the first Colonizers of the Faroe Islands', *Quaternary Science Reviews* 77, no. 1 (2013): p. 229.

<sup>36</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 244-5.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Severin, *The Brendan Voyage* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978); Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West: St. Brendan's Voyage to America* (London: Collins 1962); Paul Chapman, *The Man Who Led Columbus to America* (Atlanta: Judson Press, 1973).

America. Proving a voyage is possible in terms of technology does not, however, prove anyone previously undertook it. And while re-enacting historical narratives of travel can reveal a reality behind some apparently tall stories, one cannot apply this method equally to all texts.<sup>38</sup>

In May-July 2011 I was delighted to join an expedition to Iceland, led by the Irish yachtsman Paddy Barry on his yacht *Ar Seachrán*. This expedition ('Iomramh Bhréanainn 2011') was focused on the voyages of the *peregrini* and sits in a series of historically-focused voyages by Barry and his colleagues.<sup>39</sup> Alongside his ensemble crew, academic specialists and representatives of the arts joined the vessel for segments of the voyage. Wherever we went there was music and talk with local people who were conscious of the role of the *Scoti peregrini* in their history and who were keen to talk about them.<sup>40</sup>

Afterwards, most people asked: 'could you learn anything if you didn't voyage in a boat made of hide, as St Brendan did?' This would certainly be an informative exercise, but it had already been done—and we have already noted that much in the narrative of the *Navigatio* is symbolic; it is quite likely that Dicuill's voyagers did not sail in hide-boats. The value of re-enactment can lie in the data it provides by which to assess the capacity of technology in the context of particular sites and environments.<sup>41</sup> The maritime archaeologist Alan Parker has observed that:

the very basis of sea travel, the surface of the ocean, is changeable and mobile, unlike the firm land, which can preserve, in its surface features, the record of past activities and be read like a palimpsest by the landscape historian or archaeologist.<sup>42</sup>

One thus cannot read continuous trails through a seascape, but must assess potential routes with reference to coastal sites—ones that a range of data suggest might have been points of arrival and departure.

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<sup>38</sup> Severin's approach was formed, for example, in re-enacting journeys by more historical travellers such as Marco Polo (1961) and early modern travellers along the Mississippi (1967).

<sup>39</sup> One earlier voyage ('South Aris') re-enacted aspects of Ernest Shackleton's journeys around South Georgia in the Antarctic. Paddy Barry and Jarlath Cunnane, 'South Aris', *Flying Fish: Journal of the Irish Ocean Cruising Club* 9, no. 1 (1998). Another ('Northabout') traversed the Northwest and Northeast passages: Jarlath Cunnane, *Northabout: Sailing the Northwest and Northeast Passages* (Cork: Collins Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> The late Danny Sheehy wrote a travelogue of the voyage in Irish: Dónal Mac a tSíthigh, *Iomramh Bhréanainn MMXI* (Dingle: An Sagart, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Andrew J. Dugmore, Andrew F. Casely, Christian Keller and Thomas H. McGovern, 'Conceptual Modelling of Seafaring, Climate and Early European Exploration and Settlement of the North Atlantic Islands', in *Global Origins and Development of Seafaring*, eds Atholl Anderson, James H. Barrett and Katherine V. Boyle (Cambridge: McDonald Institute, 2010), pp. 213-225.

<sup>42</sup> A. J. Parker, 'Maritime Landscapes', *Landscapes* 2, no. 1 (2001): p. 22.

One insight came from sailing the coasts of the Faroe Islands. These islands are characterised by high peaks and ridges, on either side of which are narrow coastal strips, now mostly unwooded and only having low woods at the time of the first settlers. If the Irish were convinced that there were no previous settlers one could see that a lot of the land would have been visible to them when they made this assessment. I also saw how Norse settlers, coming after the Irish, and later adopting Christianity, might have naturally built their own churches on still visible Christian cemeteries left by the Irish. We saw grave-slabs from two sites in the islands that have strong claims to being Irish: Kirkjubaer (Stremoy) and Ólansgarður (Skúvoy).<sup>43</sup>

Sailing to and around Iceland offered other insights. The visitor to Iceland today usually arrives by air into Keflavík Airport, one of the westernmost points of the island. A traveller leaving the Faroe Islands on a broadly north-west route is likely to make their first landfall on an eastern or mid-point of the south coast of Iceland, orienting themselves first on the great snow-capped mass of Vatnajökull, with its high point (Hvannadalshnúkur) rising to over 2000 metres. At the eastern side of this huge glacier, Djúpvogur ('deep haven'), in Berufjörður, is a very fine natural harbour. We made landfall in a substantial gale; on coming into the lee of the eastern headland of Berufjörður we found the entire environment changed in a very short time from one of extreme wind-chill to comparative warmth. The entrance to Berufjörður was broad and naturally deep water, with creeks that would have made easy enough landing for medieval craft. While modern vessels, mainly for commercial priorities, tend to use the harbours at Seydisfjörður and Höfn, these are made usable by artificial dredging and marking that would not be necessary here. Behind Djúpvogur is the mountain of Búlandstindur (1069m): its cone a very distinctive shape. A navigator coming from the south and aiming for the eastern end of Iceland would thus make early landfall with a good margin for error in drift, with a distinctly identifiable mountain to aid their finding this safe harbour.

Djúpvogur is historically significant because of an island offshore named Papey (*papa* + *ey*: 'priest's island'). When the Norse came to Iceland around 870 CE they said Irish clergy (*papar*) were in occupation. These left in advance of the Norse, so as not to live with 'heathen men'—and the Norse could only identify them as Irish from their detritus of religious artefacts. We should suspect that this tidy displacement is symbolic and that there was at least some more direct encounter, whether peaceful or violent, between the Irish and the Norse.<sup>44</sup> The island of Papey, anyway, is a site directly

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<sup>43</sup> See Ian Fisher and Ian G. Scott, 'Early Medieval Sculpture from the Faroes: An Illustrated Catalogue', in *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300*, eds Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 363-78. A problem here, however, is that the early Norse settlements had a strong element of Irish population, so it is difficult to dissect Hiberno-Norse sculpture from Irish.

<sup>44</sup> The primary account comes from the Book of the Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) of Ari Þorgilsson (c. 1130), written long after the event and primarily a church history, in which the Irish play the role of baptising the land, but their silent departure means they conveniently do not influence the character of

associated with the *papar* in the Hauksbók version of the Medieval Icelandic *Landnámabók* (Book of the Settlements).<sup>45</sup> Excavations by Kristján Eldjarn and Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, however, were notably inconclusive as to whether Norse-era settlement on Papey was preceded by any Irish presence.<sup>46</sup> The experience of the mariner at least shows it to be easily located and accessed from the sea by a traveller from the south-east.

As we coasted west from Djúpvogur to our planned stop at the Vestmanneyjar (‘Westman Islands’) I was struck by how much this location, too, stood out as a natural landfall for mariners approaching from the south and east. These islands lie south of the southernmost tip of Iceland so, when we were reaching westwards along the coast, we easily saw them standing out from the land. They are also located right at the point where the snow-capped massif of Eyjafjallajökull gives way to a great estuarial plain at the southern end of the Rangárvallasýsla region. As at Papey, there are distinctive landmarks able to be seen from well offshore. Islands have the virtue of being able to be approached from any direction, an important factor when making landfall in pre-modern craft—which, as Severin observed in his voyage, often perform poorly when sailing or rowing into the wind.<sup>47</sup> They also have intrinsic qualities that appealed to early monks as ‘deserts’.<sup>48</sup> The pattern of a monastery on a small island off the coast of a larger (Iceland), would be, after all, only the same as that at Iona itself, which is a small island off the larger Hebridean island of Mull.

Sailing these coasts also simply just made one more familiar with conditions. I had never fully assimilated the fact that there was not really any darkness at all in June. This would also have its disadvantages; the continual daylight in summer, among other things, would limit the value of lights on shore serving as navigation marks—unless early visitors were sailing to Iceland in winter, which apparently they were.

Dicuil offers evidence of Irish knowledge of Iceland in his description of a visit by ‘clerics’ to an Atlantic island which he names ‘Thule’—the name of an island which Classical geographers claimed as the farthest north of lands:

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the subsequent church, which takes its ethnic identity from the corporate conversion of the Norse settlers 130 years later.

<sup>45</sup> *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Hid Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), p. 32: ‘i Papey austr ok i Papýli.

<sup>46</sup> Paul C. Buckland, Kevin J. Edwards, J. Blackford, Andrew H. Dugmore, J. Sadler and Gudrun Sveinbjarnardóttir, ‘A Question of *Landnám*: Pollen, Charcoal and Insect Studies on Papey, Eastern Iceland’, in *Ecological Relations in Historical Times: Human Impact and Adaptation*, eds Robin A. Butlin and Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 245–264.

<sup>47</sup> Severin, *The Brendan Voyage*, pp. 97–9, 121–9, 288–91.

<sup>48</sup> See Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Island Monasteries: Christian’, in *Encyclopaedia of Monasticism*, ed. William M. Johnston (London: Routledge, 2000), 1,669–73.

It is now 30 years since clerics, who had lived on the island from the first of February to the first of August, told me that not only at the summer solstice, but in the days round about it, the sun setting in the evening hides itself as though behind a small hill ... Therefore those authors are wrong and give wrong information, who have written that ... day without night continues right through from the vernal to the autumnal equinox, since these men voyaged at the natural time of great cold and entering the island had day and night alternately except for the period of the solstice.<sup>49</sup>

These *clerici* he says voyaged at the ‘time of great cold’, so they had actually voyaged there in January or February. The evidence of the Norse settlers makes it most likely that Dicuil’s Thule is Iceland.<sup>50</sup> Dicuil gives a fairly strong impression that the only Irish settlers of the Faroes were hermits, but we are given no clear impression of who might have been living in Iceland—his *clerici* appear to be ‘fly-in/fly-out’ visitors. That there were people there already when they visited seems most likely, as people arriving in winter would surely have needed to take shelter immediately on arrival. The English scholar Bede, writing earlier in the 700s, refers to people who come from ‘Thule’ in his time, but he might not be referring to the same place as Dicuil.<sup>51</sup>

Dicuil met his informants c. 795 CE, so presumably when he still lived in North Britain. Were the visitors out of his community, or just people—perhaps not even Irish—who called in there on the way to Iceland? Dicuil compares their observations to the accounts of the ‘Midnight Sun’ given by Pliny and other authorities, an interpretation that reflects the interests of the Carolingian schools where he worked.<sup>52</sup> Were these the same questions that inspired the visitors, or were their interests more directly theological?

The Vestmanneyjar and the adjacent estuarial region were a focus of our attention because, like Berufjörður, they had been marked out by earlier scholars as a place of interest. On the island of Heimaey (Vestmanneyjar) there is a cross carved onto a cliff above the harbour: it is a form with expanded terminals that is recognised as an Insular (British and Irish) type. A settlement at Herjólfssdalur, on Heimaey, has also yielded radiocarbon dates from the seventh century CE—though the accuracy of these is debated.<sup>53</sup> At Seljaland, on the coast immediately opposite Vestmanneyjar, there are

<sup>49</sup> Dicuil, ‘*De mensura VII.11-13*’, in *Dicuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, ed. and trans. J. J. Tierney (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), p. 74-5.

<sup>50</sup> For a general account: Barry Cunliffe, *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2001), pp. 116-53.

<sup>51</sup> Bede, ‘30 Questions on the Book of Kings’, in *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, eds W. Trent Foley and Arthur G. Holder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), pp. 129-130.

<sup>52</sup> For a brief survey, see Bruce S. Eastwood, ‘Astronomy in Christian Latin Europe, c. 500-1150’, *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 28, no. 1 (1997): pp. 238-50.

<sup>53</sup> Árný E. Sveinbjörnsdóttir, C. Bronk Ramsey and J. Heinemeier, ‘The Settlement Date of Iceland Revisited: Evaluation of 14c Dates from Sites of Early Settlers in Iceland by Bayesian Statistics’, *Radiocarbon* 58, no. 2 (2016): pp. 235-45.

caves with similar cross-sculptures to the one on Heimaey. One of the cave complexes (Seljalandshellar), which has cross-carvings running into the hundreds, exhibits a number of cross-forms comparable to cross-sculpture from the Argyll region in western Scotland.<sup>54</sup> These caves at Seljaland are man-made, part of a group of around 200 man-made caves across the Rangárvallasýsla region. Here excavation by Kristján Ahronson in 2001, of what appears to be spoil thrown out from the digging of one of the caves (Kvaerkhellir), showed it to be sealed by an ash layer (tephra) that comes from a volcanic eruption dated to 871/2 CE; the layer is known as the ‘landnám-tephra’ (from Old Icelandic *landnám*: ‘land-taking’) because it is more or less coincident with the first recorded Norse settlement (874 CE). If the sealed deposit is spoil from the cave, by implication the cave was dug prior to the historical Norse settlement.<sup>55</sup> The region around Seljaland has separately been the subject of sustained studies of environmental change around the time the Norse arrival. These offer a wider data-set in which to contextualise the caves, as well as to develop new strategies for using tephra to refine the chronology of anthropogenic change.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The first settlement of these Atlantic islands, which appears to occur only in the first millennium CE, is an unusual historical event inasmuch as the first settlers appear to have been monks travelling from—or via—western Scotland, whose cosmology as well as materiality were subversive of some norms of secular exploration and settlement. The particular challenges of the evidence have inspired a range of innovative research strategies—including some from scholars of religion and Celtic studies—which may serve to retrieve the *peregrini* from an often silent role as precursors of Norse settlement, to be understood more on their own terms.

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<sup>54</sup> Kristján Ahronson, *Into the Ocean: Vikings, Irish and Environmental Change in Iceland and the North* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 148-99; Kristján Ahronson and Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘A Possible Early Monastic Complex in South Iceland: Enhanced Recording and Fieldwork (a Mick Aston Grant report)’, *Newsletter of the Society for Medieval Archaeology* 61 (2019): p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ahronson, *Into the Ocean*, pp. 101-30.

<sup>56</sup> Ahronson, *Into the Ocean*, pp. 135-45; Kevin J. Edwards, Andrew J. Dugmore, Eva Panagiotakopulu, Ian A. Simpson, J. Edward Schofield, Kirsty A. Golding and Andrew F. Casely, ‘Footprints on the Edge of Thule: Landscapes of Norse-Indigenous Interaction’, *Journal of Northern Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): pp. 117-29; Andrew J. Dugmore, Guðrún Gísladóttir, Ian A. Simpson and Anthony Newton, ‘Conceptual Models of 1200 years of Icelandic Soil Erosion Reconstructed Using Tephrochronology’, *Journal of the North Atlantic* 2, no. 1 (2009): pp. 1-17.