



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Conference or Workshop Item

Title: Disguising natural exotica: St Brendan's travels to 'Iceland'

Creators: Mackley, J. S.

Example citation: Mackley, J. S. (2008) Disguising natural exotica: St Brendan's travels to 'Iceland'. Paper presented to: *International Medieval Conference (IMC) 2008, University of Leeds, 07-10 July 2008*.

Version: Presented version

Official URL: <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2008.html>

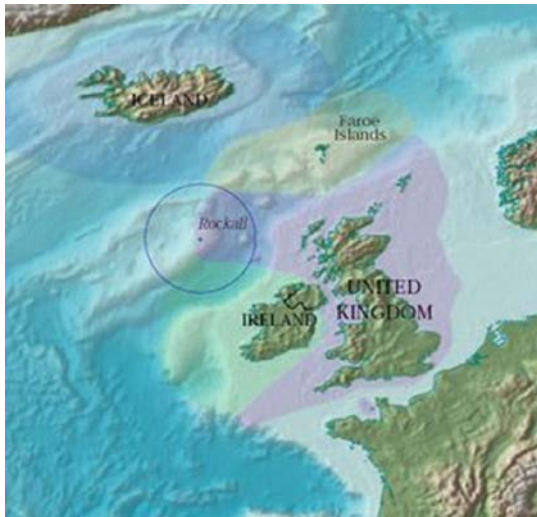
<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/5018/>



Disguising Natural Exotica: St Brendan's Travels to 'Iceland'

The composition of the *Navigatio sancti Brendani Abbatis* The geographer Dicuil describes the desertion of the Faeroes in 795, and the earliest surviving manuscript dates from around 950, which gives us some indication of the dates of the *Navigatio* – probably from the ninth century. It tells the story of St Brendan, a sixth-century Irish abbot and his journey across the ocean, witnessing many marvels *en route*, until he reaches his destination, the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* – the *Promised Land of the Saints*. The popularity of this tale – which still exists in around 130 manuscripts dating back as far as the tenth century – influenced Portuguese and Spanish Navigators.

The *Navigatio* as an actual Voyage



Scholars and geographers alike have looked at the descriptions of the locations in the *Navigatio*. They have suggested that the legend describes a route from Ireland via the Faeroe Islands and towards Iceland. Here, the *Navigatio* perhaps describes the northern icepack, an iceberg and an erupting volcano. The brethren then possibly take a short detour to Rockall before landing in Newfoundland.

This is the thesis of some scholars, who include George Little, Geoffrey Ashe and Tim Severin. Severin

has, at least, put his money where his mouth is and in the months of May, June and July of 1976, having built a replica coracle, he travelled from Brandon Creek in Ireland to Reykjavik, with the second



journey from Reykjavik to Newfoundland in May and June the following year. Thus, Severin demonstrated that such a journey is indeed possible.. Elsewhere, I have described Severin's feat as 'courageous' and of academic importance, although I tempered this by pointing out that Severin had various advantages over the sixth-century monks, including accurate maps, radar, radio and advance weather warnings. However, Brendan had God on his side, so maybe

the two balanced out. However, what I feel is that by focussing on the geography, we are distracted from the message of the *Navigatio* and the study of the sources that the narrative uses. The author of the *Navigatio* used Biblical, Classical and Apocryphal exemplar to shroud natural exotica in mystery to convey a Christian message of salvation.

That said, I'm not suggesting that Brendan himself was so irresponsible as to up-sticks and leave three thousand monks to fend for themselves for seven years – although this is a recurring theme in the *Navigatio*. I suggest that the voyage is based on a conglomeration of stories that have been drawn together from descriptions of a well-travelled pilgrim route. If this was a description of an actual journey, then Severin, for example, didn't deviate *en route* to stop and take in the Rockall nightlife.



So, focusing more particularly on the details of Brendan's journey and its possibility of leading towards Iceland: of the locations of note in the descriptions in the *Navigatio*, we might consider the Faeroe Islands – the Old Norse name for the Faeroes – *Færeyjar* – actually translates as the 'Island of Sheep', and the Islands have a sheep on their coat of arms. Furthermore, it was customary for medieval navigators to leave sheep on an island in anticipation of future voyages. Dicuil, writing in 825 describes the Faeroe islands as a haven for anchorites. Another important location mentioned by Dicuil is the island of Vagar, one of the Faeroes, which is famous for its variety of birds and suggests a parallel with the Paradise of Birds, where neutral angels – those that sided neither with God nor Lucifer – sing praises and psalms and direct Brendan on his continuing journey. Furthermore, concentrations of sperm whales are found around the Faeroes and Western Iceland, which would equate to the image of Jasconius, the Island fish. Historically, we know that a community of Irish monks had reached Iceland by 795 AD. The Icelandic settlement book *Landnámabók* and Ari Thorgilsson's



Libellus Islendorum (c.1125) describes that Norse explorers referred to them as 'Papars' and that when the monks departed, they left behind Irish books, bells and crosiers. Certainly, this enforces the suggestion of seafaring monks who travelled to establish places for serene and silent worship.

This practice is illustrated in the *Navigatio* by the monastic community of St Ailbe, whose worship is untroubled by worldly distractions.

Episodes in the <i>Navigatio</i>	
1. Brendan's heritage and the story of Barindus	14. The Coagulated Sea
2. Brendan Chooses his Companions	15. The Celebration of the Festivals
3. Brendan Visits Enda	16. The Fight of the Fish
4. The Construction of the Coracle	17. The Island of the Three Choirs
5. The Three Late-coming Monks	18. The Island of the Grapes
6. The Uninhabited Island	19. The Fight of the Birds
7. The Stolen Bridle	20. Second Visit to the Community of Ailbe
8. The Procurator	21. The Transparent Sea and the Wonders of the Ocean
9. The Island of Sheep	22. The Crystal Pillar
10. Jasconius	23. The Smithy of Hell
11. The Paradise of Birds	24. The Death of a monk
12. The Community of Ailbe	25. Judas Iscariot
13. The Intoxicating Spring	26. Paul the Hermit
	27. The Celebration of the Festivals
	28. The <i>Terra repromissionis sanctorum</i>
	29. Brendan's Return and Death

There are three principal locations that could equate to areas around Iceland. Naturally, it is impossible to accurately identify the locations, but they appear in the *Navigatio* as the Coagulated Sea, the Crystal Pillar and the Smithy of Hell. I should stress that, if the *Navigatio* was intended as a geography of the North Atlantic, the three scenes would be closer together. There are twenty-nine scenes in

total. As it is, the monks depart Ireland in section 6; they encounter the Coagulated Sea in section 14, while the Crystal Pillar and the Smithy of Hell are sections 22 and 23 respectively).

The Coagulated Sea

The scene of the Coagulated Sea is short in the *Navigatio*. The narrative describes how the monks travel in a northerly direction and after three days the wind drops and the sea becomes *as if* coagulated 'mare ... quasi coagulatum'. The coracle is suspended thus for twenty days until God raises a favourable west wind which carries them away. Although the scene of the Coagulated Sea is presented here as a test of obedience – Brendan says that God will direct their vessel wherever he desires – the Coagulated Sea is a geographical phenomenon which has appeared in many accounts: Tacitus mentions it in his *Agricola*; Strabo in his *Georgics*. It is mentioned by Pytheas of Marseille, writing around 320 AD, who undertook a journey to Thule, six days north of Britain. It is also discussed by Dicuil, who has been mentioned above, writing the *Liber de mensura orbis terrae* in 825, he observed: 'Sed nauigatione unius diei ex illa [Thule] ad boream congelatum mare inuenerunt'. Most readers presume that Dicuil's Thule is Iceland, but it is also worth noting that Dicuil is almost repeating details from his Classical forebears, he adds a few details of his own. Also, in the eleventh century, Adam of Bremen says that Harald, King of the Norwegians, had seen a phenomenon that he describes as the *mare concretum*. In the context of travelling to the northern world, then, the Coagulated Sea may be recognised as the northern ice pack, which is how commentators such as Little, Ashe and Wooding have interpreted it. For the purposes of the *Navigatio*, however, the Coagulated Sea represents spiritual disorientation and the need to submit to the will of God.

The Crystal Column

The second encounter and third encounters in the *Navigatio* that can be considered in relation to a potential journey in the area of the Arctic Circle are those of the Crystal Pillar and the Smithy of Hell, and they should be considered in relation to each other.

The Pillar of Crystal rising from the ocean appears without explanation of its significance: the *Navigatio* simply describes that the column appeared 'one day'. The pillar is not described directly: it is instead illustrated in terms of comparisons and uncertainties which fail to provide a suitable explanation. The *Navigatio* describes a structure that 'seemed quite near' and yet it is a three-day journey to reach the column. Neither do the series of comparisons and similes provide any exact details of the structure. The author of the *Navigatio* is ambiguous even about the texture of the pillar, whether a hard rock (like marble) or a soft metal like silver. Indeed, even having arrived at the column, Brendan cannot see the summit. By describing the structure only through comparisons, the author of the *Navigatio* avoids offering any explanation of what the column represents, only that it is a miracle created by Christ.

Quandam uero die, cum celebrassent missas, apparuit illis columna in mare et non longe ab illis uidebatur, sed no poterant ante tres dies appropinquare. Cum autem appropinquasset uir Dei, aspiciebat summitatem illius, tamen minime potuit pre altitudine illius. Namque alcior erat quam aer. Porro cooperta fuit ex raro chonopeo. In tatum rarus erat nauis posset transpire per foramina illius. Ignorabant de qua creatura factus [esset] chonopeus. Habebat colorem argenti, sed tamen durior illis uidebatur quam marmor. Columna erat de cristallo clarissimo.

...

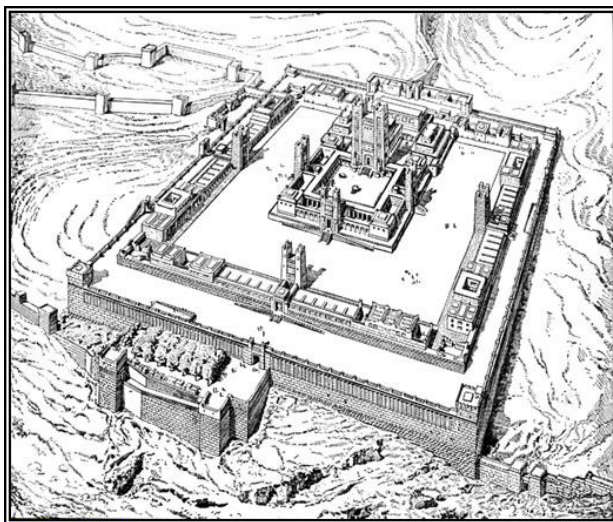
Tunc sanctus Brendanus mensurabat foramen unum inter quattuor chonopeos, quattuor cubitis in omnem partem. Igitur nauigabant per totum iuxta latus unum illius columne et per umbram solis calorem poterant sentire ultra. Ita usque ad horam nonam. Sic et ipse uir Dei semper mensurabat latus unum. Mille quadringentis cubitis mensura una per quattuor latera columne erat. Sic per quatridduum operabatur uenerabilis pater inter quattuor angulos predictae turris.

One day when they had celebrated mass, a pillar in the sea appeared to them that seemed to be not distant. Still, it took them three days to come up to it. When the man of God approached it, he tried to see the top of it – but he could not, it was so high. It was higher than the sky. Moreover, a wide-meshed net was wrapped around it. The mesh was so wide that the boat could pass through its openings. They could not decide of what substance the net was made. It had the colour of silver, but they thought that it seemed harder than marble. The pillar was of bright crystal.

...

Then St Brendan measured the four sides of the opening of the net: it was about six to seven feet on every side. They then sailed throughout the whole day near one side of the pillar and in its shadow they could still feel the heat of the sun. They stayed there until the hour of nones. The man of God kept measuring the one side. The measurement of each of the four sides of that pillar was the same, namely about seven hundred yards. The venerable father was engaged for four days in this way around the four angles of the pillar.

Gustav Schirmer was among the first scholars to identify the column as a melting iceberg. This description is entirely plausible – colossal icebergs have been recorded (up to 78km² in the northern hemisphere and a height of twenty metres above the water level). However, if this *is* a description of a natural phenomenon, then it is more likely that the author is describing a glacial front, that is where an extensive glacial ice shelf meets the sea: the caverns in the structure would be caused by erosion in the ice by tidal forces. Such a front might be a good many hundred feet sheer from the water; there would be caverns hollowed out by the waves through which a boat could enter. Such a glacier could appear to merge with the island ice and give the illusion of rising two miles into the sky, which would be in keeping with the descriptions in the *Navigatio*. Thus, the description of a glacial front would echo the journey of Eirik the Red in the *Vinland Sagas* where Eirik sees glaciers, but not icebergs, off the coast of Greenland.



Despite this geographic argument, it is easy to see why this natural phenomenon could be mistaken for a location of supernatural and divine significance, although it would not have the mathematical perfection that the narrator of the *Navigatio* describes. However, there is no attempt to ground this description in relation to a natural phenomenon. The column is presented as a marvel. Lacking any concrete portrayal, it is easy to impose a divine form on

a natural structure, simply because the description is achieved through comparisons. The ambiguity is a means by which the author of the *Navigatio* makes the natural appear supernatural, thus serving to mystify the crystal structure. The accuracy of the structure is measured over four days, echoing the description of the temple in Ezekiel (40-47). The symmetry of the structure removes any suggestion that it is a natural feature, but instead it is one that has been specifically *created* for divine worship.

Although I do not have time to fully discuss this subject, the *Navigatio* shares some details with the early Irish Voyage tales, or *Immrama*. The lack of detail concerning the Crystal Column in both the *Navigatio* and the Voyage tales suggests that there is a shared source of understanding of the symbolism for the early Irish audience that has since been lost. In Celtic mythology crystal pillars act as a conduit through which the souls of the dead can travel from earth to heaven. However, the *Immram curaig Ua Corra: Máel Dúin* describes a silver column with a net and, like Brendan, he is

unable to see the summit. Elva Johnston observes that the column is described as *airgid* (silver) rather than *glau* (glass/purity) but further notes that *airgid* is often associated with the Otherworld because the otherworldly king, Nuada, is known as *Airgetlám* (silverhand) when he appears in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Battle of Moytura) a text contemporary with *Máel Dúin*. In *Máel Dúin*, one of the crew tears away some of the mesh to offer on the altar of Armagh – this event corresponds with Brendan's taking a chalice from the column and the silver branch brought back from the Otherworld by Ailbe.

Despite the ambiguity in the marvellous description of the Crystal Column, it *is* a sacred space in which the audience can take a brief respite from the monstrous imagery immediately preceding this scene. It is a moment of calm before the barrage of descriptions of the demonic and the terrors that are to follow. The precision of measuring the column and the repetition of the number four is reminiscent of the *Tetragrammaton*, representing the consonants of the unspoken name of the God of the Israelites. Furthermore, the monks find a chalice with which they can celebrate mass. Thus, even if an audience recognises the pillar as a natural structure, the symmetry of the column and the presence of the chalice suggest that this is not a natural structure at all.

The description of the Crystal Column in the *Navigatio* is a spiritual image that draws upon images of the Otherworld from Irish mythology. However, although the narrative appears to be discussing a natural phenomenon, the symmetry of the structure and the vague descriptions only serve to defamiliarise the mundane and to describe exotica as supernatural. By drawing from otherworldly imagery the *Navigatio* suggests that Brendan himself is travelling to the Otherworld in order to hear the final lessons before achieving Paradise. This is underscored by the fact that the column echoes details of the temple in Ezekiel and the New Jerusalem. This scene provides a moment of respite from the violence of the previous encounters and those that follow.

The Smithy of Hell

The scene immediately following the tranquillity of the encounter at the Crystal Column could be read in terms of a volcanic eruption, although it is described in terms of smiths' forges. Indeed, the entire scene is charged with contrasts: whereas the monks had said mass at the Crystal Column and anticipated eternal life, the encounters on the shores of hell conclude with the damnation of one of Brendan's crew. In contrast to the symmetry of the Crystal Column, the rough and rocky land is presented as chaotic, a land forsaken by God and characterised by red and black colouring. Brendan declares that he has no wish even to approach the island. However, the monks are powerless against the strong winds that drive them to the shores. Thus, Brendan must obey the will of God in order to learn the lessons of hell.

Ergo illis pretereuntibus parumper, quantum iactus est lapidis, auderirunt sonitus folium suffancium quasi tonitruum, atque mallorum collisiones contra ferrum et incudes.

As they were sailing for a moment beside it, a stone's throw away, they heard the sound of bellows blowing, as if it were thunder, and the blows of hammers and anvils.

As with the parallel imagery of the Crystal Pillar and the iceberg, the *Navigatio* does not suggest that the Smithy of Hell should be equated to a volcano. This is partially to maintain the otherworldliness of the narrative, the imagery is not contextualised by natural exotica. Even if such a parallel were drawn, the natural exotica were at the periphery of human understanding, as there was a widespread medieval belief that volcanoes represented an entrance to hell supported by, amongst others, Isidore of Seville.



Hekla, one of the Icelandic volcanoes, is still active: the most recent eruption was on 26 February 2000. Although it is difficult to predict accurately the time of the next eruption as they are varied and may last for a week or ten days in some instances, or for two years as demonstrated in the 1766-68 eruption, locals believe that it is due some time in mid to late 2008. One eruption is recorded at 1104,

which would be slightly earlier than the earliest composition of the Anglo-Norman Voyage. After at least 250 years of sleep, Hekla erupted violently with an explosive eruption that sent tephra (volcanic rock and glass fragments) northward, covering more than half the country. The earlier eruption, two-and-a-half centuries before, would be halfway through the suggested dates of the composition of the *Navigatio* (795-950) and may well have been a tale that influenced the scene in the *Navigatio*. That said, throughout the Middle Ages, Hekla was referred to as the 'Mouth of Hell'. Although there is no evidence that describes this eruption, an earlier eruption had a massive global environmental impact: dated to 1159 BC, the Hekla 3 eruption is considered the most severe eruption of Hekla during the Holocene. It may have triggered an eighteen-year span of climate worsening that is recorded in Irish bog oaks. The eruption is detectable through Greenland ice-cores, the bristlecone pine sequence, and the Irish oak sequence of extremely narrow growth rings. As far away as Sutherland, northwest Scotland, a spurt of four years of doubled annual luminescent growth banding of calcite in a stalagmite, otherwise unaccountable, coincided with the eruption.

Throughout the narrative, the purpose of the *Navigatio* is to maintain a sense of moving progressively closer to hell through the adversaries that the monks face. Brendan's anxiety shows that this is a place that should be feared. However, the subsequent description of the smiths is in bestial terms – hairy and barbaric – rather than one using demonic imagery. However, this *is* one of the most frightening sections of the *Navigatio*. The fiery missiles, which the creature hurls, pass over the coracle, showing that the brethren were in range of the demonic forces.

The arrival at the Smithy of Hell is one of the pivotal moments in the narrative: Brendan admits that he is not in control of their destiny. The descriptions of the demonic in the *Navigatio* would no doubt demonstrate, to any pilgrims visiting an ecclesiastical house dedicated to Brendan, the strength of faith of a monk who faced demons. The presence of the demonic had the potential of creating a very real fear in the hearts of any audience. A secular audience may well have correlated the allegory of the demonic smith with the vivid Biblical descriptions of hell and this may have shaken them into considering their own salvation. In the *Navigatio*, the encounter at the Smithy of Hell avoids any overtly graphic descriptions: the *Navigatio* was composed for spiritual edification to encourage its respective audiences towards God and salvation. Its principal message is of mercy, rather than of terror. Thus, as the narrative progresses towards its final scenes, the audience may well have generated an empathy with Brendan.

Although he confronts the demon smith and successfully flees from him, Brendan's encounters at the shores of hell culminate in the damnation of one of the supernumeraries. The power of the



damnation of one of the crew in the *Navigatio* derives not from what is described in this scene, but from what is left *unsaid*. The narrative describes the 'unhappy' crewmember, burning among a multitude of demons, while Brendan impassively observes: 'Woe is yours, my brother, that you have received so evil an end to your life'. The monk's actions are

involuntary and his transgressions are never explained. Indeed, he cries out to Brendan that he is 'forcibly torn away', then, reaching the shores, he is dragged away by a multitude of demons, burning among them. The horror of the damnation from the fact that the monk is actually alive as he is taken into hell. This allows the audience to draw on sermons and *exempla* that they might have heard in order to imagine and address their own interpretations of the torments. However, each

audience would recognise elements associated with the Biblical descriptions of hell as the mountain spews forth fire, pitch and sulphur. When we consider this in the context of an actual voyage, is it possible that the narrator is describing the death of a monk having trodden on the lava flow?

The Crystal Pillar and the fiery mountain are exotica that would have been familiar to each audience through medieval geographers' writings, but the authors of each version have defamiliarised these elements to give them a supernatural quality. Thus, the two exotica are familiar, yet unfamiliar at the same time. They represent elements of our oceans that have been transposed into a supernatural realm and this vagueness of description gives them an ethereal quality. The exotica are presented as two polarities with a series of oppositions: ice/fire, light/darkness, symmetrical/craggy, calm/fear, salvation/damnation.

The scenes with the Crystal Column and the Smithy of Hell serve to counterbalance each other. On the one hand, we have the column presenting a message of hope to each audience. It is also described in terms of being light, symmetrical and tranquil. The descriptions echo those of the temple of Ezekiel. Thus, the column is charged with positive Biblical symbolism. It is linked with the Otherworld through its association with apocryphal or classical symbolism and it concludes with a Christian mass, symbolising eternal life. On the other hand, the Smithy of Hell is a noisy and violent place, distinguished by its red and black colouring. The horrific descriptions are not dissimilar to the volcanic entrances to hell as described by medieval geographers. The Smithy of Hell should be considered as such, especially with the damnation of the supernumerary. The passage from the Crystal Column, to the Smithy of Hell and then to the descriptions of hell provided by Judas Iscariot, suggest a fall from salvation, which can only be arrested by the discipline as described by Paul the Hermit.