Chapter 1

Did St. Brendan Discover America?

St. Brendan was running a monastery in Ireland when a visiting abbot told him of his voyage across the ocean to the "Promised Land of the Saints." Brendan decided to see it for himself.

So, sometime in the middle of the sixth century, Brendan and seventeen other monks set sail in a small boat they framed with wood, then covered with ox hides, much like the curraghs still sometimes seen in Ireland. Their adventures were many and marvelous.

They came, for example, to one island filled with giant white sheep, and another covered by hymn-singing birds. They found a huge pillar of crystal floating in the ocean, surrounded by pieces of marble, and a whole island on fire, from which they were pelted by hot rocks. Brendan told his fellow monks they'd reached the edge of hell.

Another island appeared rocky and black, and the monks went ashore to cook a meal. As soon as the cauldron began to boil, the island started to move, and the monks scrambled back into their boat. Turns out, Brendan figured, the island was actually the ocean's largest fish.

More pleasantly, there was a spacious and woody island, and one with luxurious colors and fruit unlike anything the monks had seen before. And finally, after seven years, there was the Promised Land of the Saints, where a young man told the monks the land would be given to their successors. Brendan then returned to Ireland.

This is Brendan's story, as told in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis,* a Latin manuscript by an anonymous author. Scholars date the *Navigatio* back to sometime after A.D. 800, at least a hundred years after Brendan's death. The story was tremendously popular throughout the late Middle Ages—understandably, given its mix of maritime romance and Christian theology.

Also understandably, most modern scholars viewed the *Navigatio* as a work of literature, not history. Brendan seemed to have more in common with King Arthur, or perhaps with Odysseus, than with an actual historical figure. Many placed the work in a genre of early Irish literature known as *imrama;* these were generally filled with fantastic sea stories.

But there was a key difference. Unlike *imrama,* the *Navigatio* contained navigational directions and detailed descriptions of the places the monks visited. By plotting their course on a map and comparing the descriptions to actual islands, historians sought to reconstruct Brendan's journey. Some concluded that the Promised Land of the Saints was in North America.

If so, Brendan reached America about a thousand years before Columbus.

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Among those who tracked Brendan's voyage were Geoffrey Ashe in the 1960s and Paul Chapman in the 1970s. Ashe was a medieval historian, Chapman a World War II navigator familiar with the North Atlantic from ferrying planes across the ocean.

Some of the islands were fairly easy to identify, and most historians agreed which of these was which. The sheep and the birds were most likely in the Faroes, an archipelago in the North Atlantic between Scotland and Iceland. True, the sheep there aren't giant and the birds don't sing hymns, but there are plenty of both. *Faeroes,* in fact, is Danish for sheep, and the island of Vagar is known for its kittiwakes and arctic terns.

The crystal pillar could have been an iceberg, a likely sight as the monks headed north. What appeared to be marble could have been patches of ice that had broken off from the berg. The hot rocks? Molten slag from an erupting volcano near Iceland, according to some speculation, or farther south near the Azores, according to others. Both are areas of volcanic activity.

The moving island is surely a tall tale. But whales are common north of the Faroes, and there were undoubtedly more of them around in the seventh century. So, for Brendan enthusiasts, the story could be seen as confirmation that the monks were in that area.

Now it gets trickier. Brendan and company drifted for twenty days, then were swept west for another forty before reaching the large, wooded island. Chapman concluded this must have been the heavily forested Barbados. Heading north from there, the fruit he soon found may have been grapefruit, which was native to the Caribbean and unknown in Europe. Ashe was less certain of all this, saying only the "effect of the whole passage is West Indian."

The Land of the Promised Saints is even more amorphous. There were another forty days at sea—a number whose recurrence makes one suspect its significance is more biblical than nautical. Equally problematic, Brendan was at this point, according to the *Navigatio,* sailing east, presumably *away* from America.

Ashe concluded the Land of the Promised Saints was a "literary-religious figment," one that fulfilled the promise of the opening chapter but not the demands of historical reality. Chapman agreed that the *Navigatio* did not prove Brendan reached the mainland. He figured Brendan probably stopped at the West Indies, just as Columbus did.

The *Navigatio* alone, then, could not make the case for the Irish in America. Nor could other medieval Irish texts. Brendan had a minor role in a ninth-century *Life of St. Machutus,* another saint; there was also a tenth-century *Life of St. Brendan.* Both texts were useful in confirming Brendan was a real person, renowned for many sea voyages, but neither offered anywhere near the detail of the *Navigatio.*

There were, however, three medieval texts that did place the Irish in North America. Surprisingly, these came not from Ireland but from Iceland.

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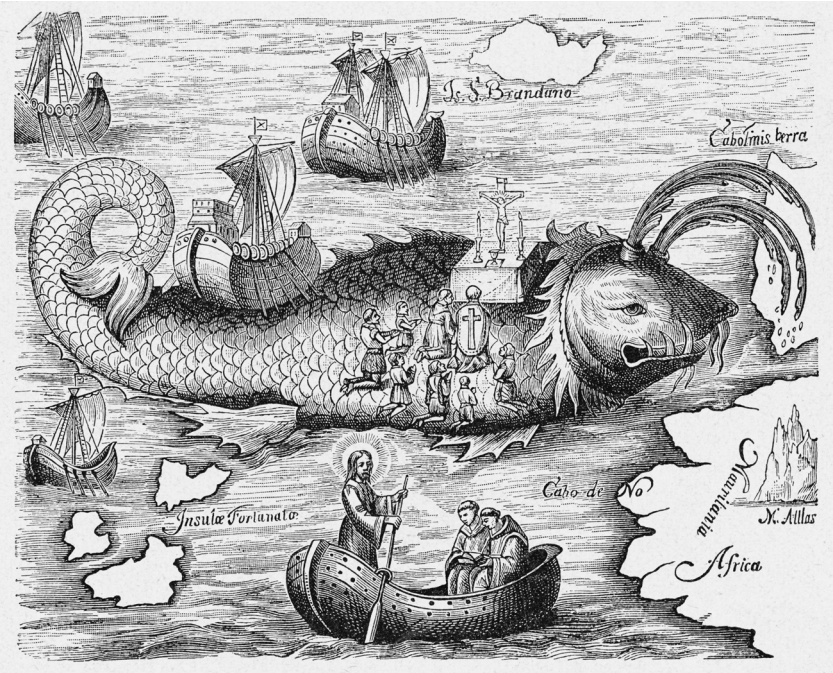
For most of American history, historians treated the Icelandic sagas much as the Irish *imrama.* They were ancient stories, not quite as ancient as the Irish ones perhaps, but equally inadmissible as historical evidence. All that changed when a Norwegian archaeologist, Helge Ingstad, uncovered a Norse spindle whorl amid the remains of a village in northern Newfoundland. Here was proof that the Norse had reached—indeed had settled in—America hundreds of years before Columbus.



On his way to the "promised land," according to the Navigatio Brendani, *Saint Brendan celebrated mass on the back of whale. This illustration comes from an early edition of the* Navigatio. *(Mary Evans Picture Library)*

The Icelandic sagas, of course, told the stories of Eric the Red and Leif Ericsson and other Norsemen, not of Brendan or the Irish. Yet the Irish did appear in three of the sagas, and each time they were in the New World.

In the *Saga of Eric the Red,* the Norse reached America, captured some natives, and taught them their language. The natives then told the Norse of a land whose people wore white clothes and marched with poles that had cloths attached to them. To the Norse who heard this story, according to the saga, this sounded a lot like a procession of Irish monks. A second saga mentioned a land west of the Norse settlement in America, "which some call Ireland the Great." And a third had a lost Norseman wash up on American shores, where natives spoke a language that he thought sounded like that of the Irish.

In one sense, these stories made a lot of sense. The Norse knew well that the Irish monks were accomplished seamen. The Irish had beaten them to the Faroes and Iceland and Greenland, so why not America?

Indeed, it was the Norse who pushed the Irish monks out of Iceland, perhaps prompting them to head west. This was sometime in the ninth century, too late for Brendan to be the first Irishman to reach America, but still well before Leif Ericsson, let alone Columbus.

There were a number of problems with this theory, however. First, the sagas were vague about the location of "Ireland the Great." If the ninth-century Irish monks headed west from Iceland, they would have come to Greenland before America, and they might very well have founded a colony there. Second, there's no archaeological evidence that the Irish made it to America; no one has found an Irish equivalent of Ingstad's Norse spindle whorl.

And third, Leif Ericsson and the Norse didn't reach America before the end of the tenth century, more than a hundred years after the Irish monks left Iceland. So either these monks had reached Old Testament-like ages, or they had met some Native American women and abandoned their vows of chastity.

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Most modern historians, therefore, would deny Brendan's claim. Even some of those who believed the Irish reached the West Indies weren't sure it was Brendan.

"Over a period of two or three hundred years, many Irish monks besides Brendan made actual voyages," wrote Ashe. "And as so often in legend-making, the most famous figure came to be credited with deeds not authentically his."

Ashe concluded the *Navigatio* was not so much the record of a specific voyage as an amalgam of knowledge the Irish accumulated, not only from their own travels but from studying traditions and legends from Plato's Atlantis to the Celtic "otherworld."

Samuel Eliot Morison, the premiere chronicler of the European voyages across the ocean, would grant neither Brendan nor any Irishman an American landing, even in the West Indies.

"We are not straining the evidence to conclude that Brendan sailed for several trips . . . on the circuit Hebrides-Shetlands-Faroes-Iceland, possibly as far as the Azores," Morison wrote in 1971. "But, discovery of America—no!

"The imagination of certain modern . . . writers, no whit less than that of the early storytellers, has brought Brendan to Newfoundland, the West Indies, Mexico, and even the Ohio River!" Morison continued.

"They do not even boggle at peppering the Antilles with Irish monasteries which have disappeared, or ascribing to Brendan's curragh the speed and endurance of a clipper ship."

Tim Severin, a British explorer and writer, believed Morison was wrong, at least about the capabilities of the boat. To prove it, Severin stitched together forty-nine ox hides, stretched them over a wooden frame, put together a crew, and in May 1976, set sail from the west coast of Ireland. The ship—christened *Brendan*—reached the Faroes in June and Iceland in July. There *Brendan* rested until May 1977, when Severin and his crew headed west. Less than two months later, they reached Newfoundland.

Granted, Severin equipped the boat with some modern equipment, including a radio. But the medieval equipment, such as extra hides with which the crew patched leaks in the middle of the North Atlantic, came in just as handy and proved a lot more durable than, for example, the plastic food bags that were quickly inundated by seawater.

The trip did not, of course, prove that the Irish monks had reached America; merely that it was technologically possible.

"A leather boat that some had feared would disintegrate in the first gale off the Irish coast had successfully crossed the Atlantic. *Brendan* had demonstrated that the voyage could be done," Severin wrote. "But in the final analysis the only conclusive proof that it had been done would be if an authentic relic from an early Irish visit is found one day on North American soil."

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Assume for the moment that Brendan reached America. Or, as Ashe did, that the Irish monks at least knew about America. The question then arises: What did Columbus know about Brendan and the Irish?

Since the *Navigatio* was so widely known, Columbus may very well have read it, or at least heard about it. A pre-1492 globe includes "the Isle of St. Brendan," in what could be construed as the West Indies. Chapman believed Columbus followed Brendan's route, and intentionally hid that fact so that he could claim the New World for Spain.

That seems a stretch, especially since most of Columbus's biographers—including his own son Ferdinand and, more recently, Morison—maintained that the admiral was searching for a new route to Asia, not a New World. Indeed, even after Columbus reached America, he continued to describe it as an island, or perhaps a peninsula, off the Asian mainland.

Still, even the most skeptical historians, such as Morison, don't deny that Brendan may have been an inspiration—and therefore in some sense a forerunner—to later explorers, including Columbus.

"No, here is not a discovery of a New World," Morison wrote of the *Navigatio,* but then added that it was "a captivating tale which led men of later centuries to sail into the unknown, hoping to find Brendan's islands, confident that God would watch over them."

☆ To investigate further:

Selmer, Carl, editor. *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. Dublin: Four Courts, 1989. A reconstruction based on 18 of the 120 known Latin versions.

Ashe, Geoffrey. *Land to the West*. New York: Viking, 1962. Ashe focuses on what the Irish monks *knew,* as opposed to what Brendan *did*.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. Morison's elegant prose is informed by his extensive knowledge not just of history, but also of the sea.

Chapman, Paul H. *The Man Who Led Columbus to America*. Atlanta, Georgia: Judson Press, 1973. The title has two meanings: Brendan came first, and Columbus used the *Navigatio* as a guide.

Severin, Tim. *The Brendan Voyage*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. Regardless of its historic import, this is a dramatic and well-told sea story in the tradition of Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*. Originally published in 1978.