CHAPTER ONE

ST BRENDAN: THE MAN AND THE MANUSCRIPTS

Part One

The authors and manuscripts of the Navigatio and the Anglo-Norman Voyage

Introduction

This chapter will consider what can be deduced concerning the authors of the Latin Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis (hereinafter referred to as the Navigatio) and the Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan (hereinafter the A.N. Voyage) based on the textual evidence and the manuscript traditions. This chapter also considers what can be determined about the possible audiences of both versions, based on the approximate date of composition and the form and genre of each of the narratives. Although touching upon some of the fantastic imagery within both versions, this chapter is principally concerned with establishing the framework of the legend of Brendan, the literary and cultural context and the historical evidence concerning the composition, and the audiences of the Navigatio and the A.N. Voyage.

The second half of the chapter addresses the evidence concerning the ‘historical’ details from the legendary life of Brendan. This is based on the information provided in the early Irish annals and the hagiography presented in the seven different versions of the Latin and Irish lives of St Brendan, the Vita Brendani and the Betha Brénnain. These narratives differ greatly from the two versions of the Brendan narrative that will be compared in this study, although some of them have become conflated with the story of his journey. They offer a valuable insight into the development of the legend, especially in comparison with other seafaring saints and the traditions of pilgrimage and exile.
The dates, manuscripts and audience of the Navigatio

As with most medieval texts, no manuscript provides the name of the author of the *Navigatio*. Carl Selmer observes that we can glean something of his reading and qualifications from his work. We can tell, for example, that he was well acquainted with Irish hagiography, including an early version of the *Vita Brendani*, as well as the life of St Ailbe.\(^1\) He would have been familiar with the *echtra* and *immram* traditions of Irish literature, which would have included the *Imram Brain maic Febuil* (*The Voyage of Bran, Son of Fébal*).\(^2\) The author displays an excellent command of theology, history and Latin. However, Selmer’s suggestion that a likely candidate for authorship was Israel Episcopus, an Irish exile and author of Latin works in the first half of the tenth century, is unsustainable.\(^3\) By Selmer’s own admission, the two earliest surviving manuscripts, *Brit. Lib. Add. 36736* in London and *Clm. 17740* in Munich, both dating from the tenth century, belong to two noticeably different families.\(^4\) Both of these manuscripts were copied in Germany, the former in St Maximin in Trier and the latter in St Mang, Stadtamhof, Bavaria.

The numerous deficiencies in both manuscripts suggest a now-lost source text. Although it is possible for the manuscript tradition to produce two families with defects, Selmer’s suggestion that these changes occurred within several decades is a largely rejected because of the nar-

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\(^1\) Selmer, *Navigatio*, p. xxvii. For a discussion concluding that the *Navigatio* borrowed from the *Vita Brendani* and not vice versa see Mac Mathúna, ‘Structure and Transmission,’ pp. 318–37. The *Vita Brendani* will be discussed below on pp. 44–50.

\(^2\) Put simply, *echtrae* (literally translated as ‘adventures’) are concerned with human entry into the Otherworld, whereas the *immram* (lit. ‘rowings about’)—penitential voyages—focus on the voyage itself. Wooding suggests that the term *immram* may well be a translation of ‘navigatio’ into Irish; see Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘Introduction to the Latin Version,’ *The Voyage of St Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*, eds W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 23. For the debate as to whether the *Imram Brain maic Febuil* belongs technically to the *echtra* or *immram* genre, see, for example, Dumville, ‘*Echtrae and Imram*,’ 73–94 and Oskamp, *Máel Dúin*, p. 42. The *immram* tradition will be discussed below on pp. 55–59.


\(^4\) The genealogy of the manuscripts of the *Navigatio* and the A.N. *Voyage* will be discussed in appendix one on pp. 245–55 below.