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*Irish monks may have
reached the New World
in leather boats 900 years
before Columbus.*

By GERALD SCHOMP



Brendan's

Last May 17th five men set sail in a 36-foot leather curragh outfitted with two goatskin sails to try to prove that an Irish monk, St. Brendan the Navigator, *could* have discovered America in such a boat 900 years before Columbus. By early August they had survived treacherous storms and completed 40 percent of their journey before storing their vessel for the winter in a coastguard aircraft hangar in Iceland. The crew will resume their historic

The "Brendan" under full sail. (Courtesy of author)



Fantastic Voyage

expedition in May, supremely confident that they will sail into Boston Harbor during the summer.

It is known that Columbus had access to manuscripts about Brendan's 6th-century explorations in currachs. Irish legend has it that Columbus journeyed to Galway in 1492 to collect information about Brendan and to recruit sailors for his expedition to a New World.

Not a great deal of specific verifiable information is available about St. Brendan himself. The patron saint of County Kerry, he was born near the Lakes of Killarney about the year 500 A.D. and founded a monastery at Tralee and another in Galway. He supposedly died at the age of 93.

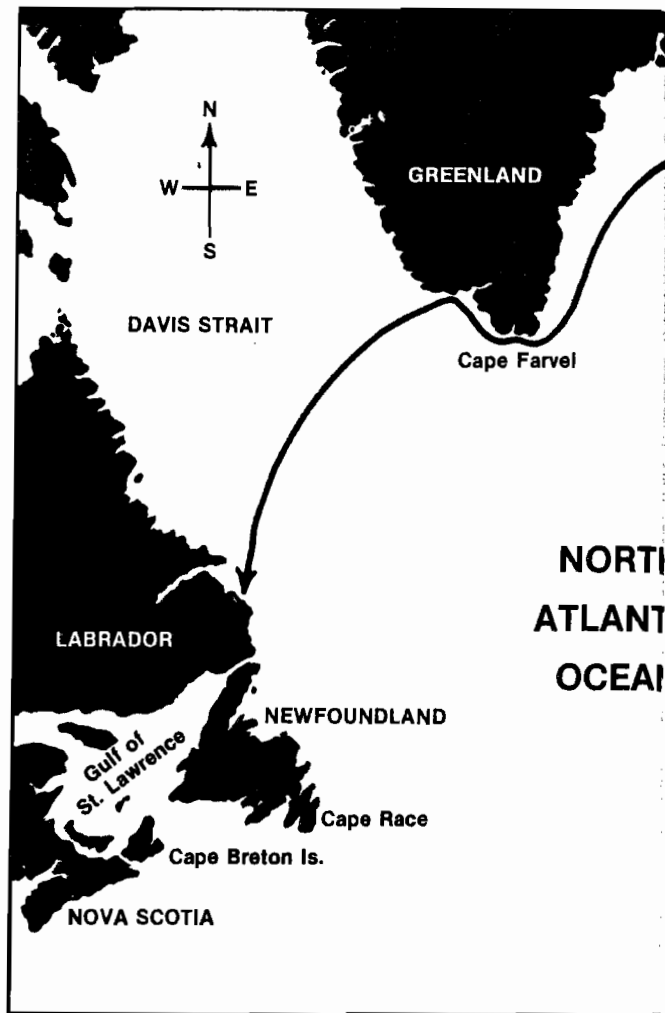
Brendan's family was descended from one of the most warlike of Irish kings, Nial of the Nine Hostages, who had led his armies successfully against the Romans in England, Scotland, and Brittany. Although Brendan's kinsmen inherited the warlike qualities of their ancestry, Brendan followed the custom of the time for a first son — becoming a monk. Accordingly, he was sent to a convent school and then on to the monastery of Bishop Erc, known as the "silver-tongued," a Druid who had been converted to Christianity by St. Patrick. Under Bishop Erc the young Brendan gained superior knowledge of astronomy and mathematics.

Scarcely less valuable was the opportunity to live and study by the Atlantic, surely a source of constant fantasizing for would-be adventurers in those days. In his venturings away from the monastery Brendan must have met foreign travelers who roamed Ireland's roads; and he probably heard stories about Hy-Brasil, the Island of Promise, an earthly utopia that was said to lie beyond the unsailed mysterious sea.

Indeed, many of the explorers of that age were monks with missionary zeal who traveled by currach across seas searching for new peoples to convert. The earliest Irish literary work to touch upon seafaring is a poem written about 500 A.D. to a Wexford prince, advising him to emulate his predecessors and seek glory upon the sea. Today we recognize the language of the poem as an exhortation to piracy. The poem and others like it substantiate the assertion that Ireland at that time was a land looking out upon a world populated by Roman tribunes and legions. In fact, the words used for ships are all borrowed from Latin, and the native currach is only referred to infrequently.

Pilgrimage for the sake of Christianity was a common avocation among the monks. St. Columba left Ireland to found Iona in 563. Columbanus is known to have sailed to Gaul in 585 and started monasteries at Luxeuil and Fontaine in the Vosges. Other monks from Columbanus' generation sailed to the Orkneys in 579, to Shetland and to the Faroes and Iceland. Additional travels by other Christianizers are well documented.

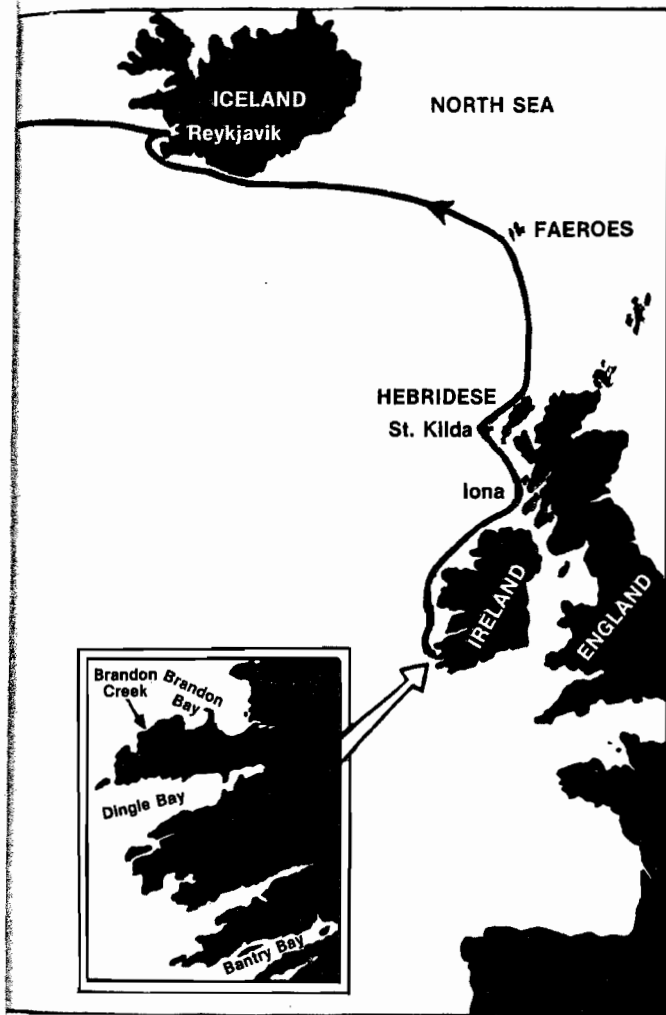
A great deal has been written about Ireland as the



Map of proposed route of the "Brendan." (AHI Staff)

land of saints and scholars. That was certainly true of the age in which Brendan lived, but another aspect is worth noting. Many of the factors that gave Ireland the image it still enjoys were of foreign making. Invading Vandals and Teutons on the continent of Europe drove clerics and intellectuals westward to set up a new seat of higher learning. These influential immigrants broadened Irish monastics and whetted their appetite for scholarly search and accomplishment. With the renewal of curiosity came general consensus in Ireland (at a time when the idea had faded elsewhere) that the earth was round (as had been suggested earlier by Pythagoras, Aristotle, Eratosthenes, Plato, and the Stoics). This belief quite naturally led to the conclusion that there were probably other lands beyond the horizon.

According to Professor James Carney, School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, the earliest casual reference to Brendan is in a 7th-century Irish poem. In this a monk addresses a young student on the contents of the leather school satchel that he carries upon his back. Among the contents was a "poem which Brendan had made while at sea." Thus we have testimony from



discovery today—through the publicity of a best-selling book. The medieval equivalent was the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, a fanciful account of St. Brendan's sea adventures that was apparently written by an anonymous Irishman and published in western Germany in the 10th century. It was almost immediately translated into a number of European vernaculars (no less than eighty-eight manuscripts survived to modern times—the earliest known copy is in the British Museum).

Although the *Navigatio* was published in the 10th century, the story was known in Ireland in some form two centuries earlier, for it inspired a secular imitation called "The Voyage of Mael Duin." And that account seems to have come from what is termed "*Immrama*," oral versions of voyages which were passed through the generations by professional story-tellers bound by strict traditions of consistency.

Accounts of the *Navigatio* are not necessarily about Brendan's own voyages (for he would have been at least 70 years old when he set sail), but possibly about the adventures of Brendan's monks which he strung together into one continuous tale. Whether or not Brendan himself made any part of the epic journey, the *Navigatio* almost certainly recounts a number of voyages to different places.

The *Navigatio* is embellished with a fanciful, mythical narrative through which runs a consistency of detail that has convinced a number of important scholars that an actual transatlantic voyage (or voyages) did indeed take place. The manuscript, for example, presents a practical description of a workable vessel: "a wicker boat with ox-skins covered o'er." It explains how oxhides were tanned in oak bark, the joints of the hull tarred with ox tallow to render them waterproof, and butter stored aboard with which to dress the leather during the voyage.

In the *Navigatio* Brendan's first landfall is a steep, rocky island with streams falling down the cliffs; its only access is a small cove. St. Kilda's Island in the Hebrides fits the description well and had an Irish monastic settlement. From there Brendan sailed to two islands, one distinguished by snow-white sheep, and the other lying just to the west of it, grassy, filled with white birds, and with a narrow stream emptying out on its southern shore. These details seem to pinpoint the island of Streymoy and Vagar in the Faeroes. Indeed, "Faeroes" means "sheep islands" while Vagar, just to the west, is renowned for its birdlife.

Brendan's monks suffer great hardships until they reach the "Island of St. Ailbe," thought to be Madeira. Drifting farther "without oar or sail," Brendan lands on an island where his men drink from a stream and nearly die from poison. This description suggests the island of St. Michael in the Azores, where extremely dangerous noxious springs still exist.

After escaping from a mass of "thick curdled sea" (an enormous stretch of seaweed in what is now known

about a century after Brendan's death that he was known not merely as a voyager, but as a poet as well. The Irish on the continent held Brendan in such reverence that in their cups they would maintain that St. Bridget was Christ's mother and St. Brendan his brother.

Some of Brendan's travels are documented beyond dispute. He visited the Hebrides at least twice, Wales, and Brittany—no small accomplishment in a leather curragh crossing treacherous seas. Today there are place names that testify to these momentous voyages—Brandon Hill in Bristol, Brendan's Retreat in Mull, St. Brendan's Haven in Perthshire, and Kilbrandon near Oban. In fact, Brendan's fame as a sailor was so widespread that the leading maritime city of that day, Venice, claimed him as a native son. Many maps of medieval Europe include what was often called "St. Brendan's Isle." The medieval cartographers seldom drew it in the same shape or put it in the same position in the mysterious sea, but there it was—an unmistakable indication that Europeans at that time recognized that there was land somewhere out there in the Atlantic.

St. Brendan's greatest fame as an explorer came in much the same manner as it might come with an important

Gerald Schomp is a lecturer in communications at the National Institute for Higher Education in Limerick, Ireland. Although his sources for the article were primarily interviews with the people concerned with the voyage, the main text is from the Navigatio, a medieval text by an anonymous author.

as the Sargasso Sea), Brendan supposedly stopped on the volcanic coast of Iceland where burning coals were said to have been tossed at his men—and where he was terrified by mountains “spouting flames and red-hot rock and the air stinking with fumes.” Quite naturally the monks thought this to be a vision of hell itself.

Sailing past what is thought to be Greenland and crossing the Davis Strait, Brendan sailed into “thick clouds” (dense fog of Newfoundland, perhaps) just as winter was setting in. It is worth noting that archaeologists have been puzzled by the fact that when the Vikings reached Greenland they found the wrecks of skinboats and even bells, books, and croziers. The late Professor Carl Sauer, American historical geographer and former chairman of the geography department of the University of California at Berkeley, contended that these things were the remains of a colony of Irish monks who were driven out by the Vikings. It is also noteworthy that there was a firm and accepted tradition among the 10th-century Norse navigators that the Irish had been to the west before

them. References to this belief are numerous in the Norse accounts.

Furthermore, archaeologist Robert McGhee recently found a huge lichen-covered rock in Newfoundland. The rock is covered with intricate geometric lines. Dr. McGhee, a professor at Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland, is cautious about making any claims. He says only that the script *might* be Ogham, an ancient alphabet of the Irish Druids that went out of use about the time Brendan was supposedly making his voyages to strange lands. Professor David Kelly of the University of Calgary, who has studied various world calendar and writing systems, has seen photographs of the so-called Ogham Rock and has tentatively identified the script as Ogham. However, there is no conclusive evidence to substantiate what could be a discovery of immense importance to those who subscribe to the Brendan theory.

The *Navigatio* contains descriptions of the many hardships Brendan and his monks endured, including hailstones of such enormous size that they could only have been of diabolic origin. They also saw hideous monsters, with “cat-like heads, eyes the colour of a bronze cauldron, fuzzy pelts, boar’s tusks and heavy, spotted bodies.” The monsters’ continuous bellowing sent the terrified monks

Timothy Severin, left, leader of the “Brendan” expedition, checks work on the hull with George Moloney, center, sailing master, and John O’Connell, master saddler, who supervised all the leather work. The hull is covered with the hides of twenty-five oxen that were tanned in oak bark liquor for a year and dressed with wool grease and tallow. (Courtesy of author)



fleeing from an island—leaving what must have been walruses in sole possession of their breeding ground.

Before the monks are finally guided by a procurator to an enormous river which they cannot cross (the St. Lawrence, some speculate), they have encountered little men (who could only have been Eskimos), a repellent vision of hell (volcano), crystal palaces (icebergs), a whale mistaken for an island, Judas Iscariot perched atop an iceberg, and other romantic and fantastic spectacles. There is great confusion as to whether Brendan's voyage ended at the St. Lawrence, went as far as the Ohio River and Chesapeake Bay, or continued all the way south to the Bahamas and what is now Miami, Florida. As vague as their travels were, however, there is enough substance in the *Navigatio* to motivate some scholars (particularly in France) and explorers to investigate the many parallels between fanciful stories and existing landmarks, identifiable animals and fishes, characteristics of known seas, and vegetation. Whoever it was who wrote the *Navigatio* certainly knew something about the North Atlantic.

Backed by a joint book contract with *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*, Timothy Severin, an India-born Englishman married to a scholar from America, organized the "Brendan Voyage," a major expedition in the relatively new field of experimental boat archaeology.

Last May 17th Severin and his crew bade farewell to a crowd of newsmen from many nations and set sail from Brandon Creek (named after St. Brendan) in the rocky Dingle Peninsula of southern Ireland bound for Boston Harbor. Their thin-skinned curragh, christened the *Brendan*, was hand-fashioned in County Cork from the hides of forty oxen tanned in oak bark and dressed in wool grease, cod oil, and tallow, true to ancient specifications.

The leather is lashed to a frame of oak and ash timbers by over a mile of leather thongs which, throughout the six-month voyage, are being dressed with butter to keep them pliable in the ancient manner. However, unlike the Irish monks who depended upon the stars and their prayers for navigation, the *Brendan's* modern sailors have the latest in electronic navigational gadgetry at their disposal. "To sail with anything less than the safest navigational equipment available would be an injustice to my crew," said Severin.

For advice on what kind of leather to use on the *Brendan* and how to treat it in a way consistent with medieval techniques, Severin called on the British Leather Institute in London. That organization formed a panel of experts within three days and began an extensive testing

program for the fifteen varieties of leather considered historically authentic.

"The leather," explained Severin, "had to be flexible enough to give with the force of the sea and tough enough to withstand a remarkable breaking strain of 6,000 tensile pounds." The variety that measured up best to the criteria established by the Leather Institute was oak-bark-tanned leather—"precisely what St. Brendan is thought to have used."

Sean McGrail, head of the Department of Ship Archaeology at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England, had explained that, of course, there is no existing archaeological evidence of medieval skin boats for the simple reason that the leather and light timbering used as a frame could not possibly have survived over the centuries. Therefore, the design of the *Brendan*, currently in Iceland, had to come from several points of reference: ancient and medieval literary evidence, rock carvings and models, the living tradition of skin boats (particularly the currachs still in use off the southern and western coasts of Ireland), and common sense based on how such a boat would have been built in Brendan's time using the raw materials that were then available.

The *Brendan* is 36 feet long, has a beam of 8 feet, a draft of 1 foot, and weighs 2,000 pounds empty and 6,000 fully loaded. It is powered with two goatskin sails and is steered by a traditional quarter oar/rudder arrangement and six thin-bladed oars working on fixed pins. The oak and ash timbers used in the frame

The Breton maritime expert, Jacques-Yves Tounelin, believes that a genuine journey to North America was hidden in the exploits reported in the *Navigatio*. Gustav Lanctot, former National Archivist of Canada, thinks that Irish monks reached America before the Norsemen. Bjorn Landstrom, Finnish marine historian, is likewise convinced. A biographer of Columbus, Charles Duff, says there are 100 recognizable Celtic roots in words which were used by pre-European inhabitants of the places where Irish monks are supposed to have landed.

New geographic data reinforces the possibility that St. Brendan or his monks could have sailed where they are said to have sailed. Synoptic weather charts of the North Atlantic show that prevailing weather patterns would have permitted a small boat to make such a voyage. The flow of ocean currents is also consistent with the legendary voyages.

Obviously one believer is author-explorer-scholar Timothy Severin. "My whole voyage is a kind of detective story," he said before launching his replica of St. Brendan's curragh. "We have important clues on the route Brendan took and we will follow them the way he did."

were available in early Christian Ireland. Colin Mudie, joint chairman of the Small Craft Group of the Royal Institute of Naval Architects (England), prepared the lines and construction plans for the *Brendan*. Paddy Lake, a skilled shipwright, constructed the *Brendan*, and John O'Connell, a master saddler, was responsible for assembling a young crew of leather-workers to stitch together the leather hull with flax thread.

The *Brendan* is an open boat, although covered fore and aft with a wet-weather canopy. The curragh gets its buoyancy from a curved bow and stern—riding atop the waves rather than slicing through them. The *Brendan* is also round-bottomed and keel-less, which means that it has a tendency to be pushed sideways by the wind. As Severin indicated just before he launched the *Brendan*, "the real challenge will be to learn again the lost art of handling these leather boats far out at sea on a long voyage."

Even if he succeeds in reaching Boston Harbor, Severin knows that he has proved only one thing: that it would have been possible for St. Brendan's monks to have made such a voyage in such a boat. It does not prove, of course, that such a voyage was ever made.

What Severin hopes to accomplish is "to focus attention on medieval Irish voyages as a way of encouraging further research. Lesser-known medieval texts need to be scrutinized by scholars for additional clues. The Coasts of Greenland and North America must be examined for traces of occupation by Irish explorers."