SAINT BRENDAN'S GREEN VOYAGE:

SUSTAINABLE INSIGHTS FROM

A MEDIEVAL IRISH LEGEND

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies,

Drew University in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Letters

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May 2016

ABSTRACT

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The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies
Drew University May 2016

The Celtic Otherworld overlay clearly influenced the *Navigatio*, or *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, with a spiritual terrain superimposed on the physical. This is most apparent when certain islands sync to the liturgical calendar. Some of the *Navigatio's* locations have clear links to real world places, others are entirely imaginary, and others combine aspects of multiple places. Nevertheless, the *Navigatio's* powerful geographical verisimilitude indicates a strong fascination with the natural world. Several episodes promote restraint toward drinkable water. A positive attitude toward nature accompanies this ethic of restraint, as other episodes depict animals participating in the worship of God. This picture is complicated, though, by monsters that attack Brendan's boat. Other creatures protect the monks, but the attacks reveal the violent and hostile side of nature. Nevertheless, the *Navigatio* ultimately affirms the goodness of creation.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the teachers, professors, and mentors who steered me along my educational journey—in particular, Dr. James Pain and Dr. Laurel Kearns, who guided me through that journey's final leg. (Or at least, the last formal leg; we never stop learning.)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 2013, I visited the *Brendan*, the leather-bound boat that British adventurer Tim Severin sailed from Ireland to North America four decades ago. Irish sailors have used such boats, called curraghs, for centuries, and medieval monks chose them for pilgrimages into the Atlantic. The *Brendan*, named after one of Ireland's most famous sailor saints, is displayed at Craggaunowen, a history park in County Clare. Later that evening, after leaving Craggaunowen, I jotted down the following poem:

> Hunger clawed your guts, thirst scraped your throat,
> abbott-captain of an overcrowded
> curragh on the endless ocean.
>
> But, undeterred by terror, you kept in sight,
> guided your monks with awe toward the divine
> craft that dwells in monstrous waves and beasts.
>
> Whereas I feel my sense of wonder slip
> if my blue jeans get drenched in a downpour.

The Brendan whom I addressed was not the historical figure, but rather a literary character, although the former stands behind the latter. The historical Saint Brendan of Clonfert was known for founding monasteries and ocean voyages. In the centuries after

his death, he became a magnet for nautical legends. As Carl Selmer put it, "Gradually the one-time sea-faring abbot and missionary was transformed into an adventurer and discoverer and the hero of the most incredible exploits that incredulous imagination could produce. Folklore was all too readily inclined to credit him with deeds and achievements originally attributed to other heroes" (xx). The *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* or *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*, a Latin text from approximately the early ninth century, cemented Brendan's reputation as an exemplary voyager and pilgrim. Selmer noted that "as early as the twelfth century it was translated into the vernaculars of various countries and became part of their folklore" (xxxi). Although less famous than the exploits of Saint Patrick or King Arthur, Brendan's voyage continues to inspire new fiction, poetry, art, music, and scholarly speculation. The *Navigatio*, though, can also inspire our environmental imaginations. Both Dorothy Bray and Patricia Rumsey noted the tale's positive attitude toward the natural world, but this was not the primary topic of their investigations (Bray 182, Rumsey 20). As such, this positive attitude still needs to be demonstrated and explicated, not just asserted. That is the task of this project.

The scholarly literature on the Brendan legend is immense, and the following chapters will draw heavily on such work. The best starting points for Brendan scholarship are *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation* edited by W. R. J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* edited by Jonathan M. Wooding, and *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions* edited by Burgess and Clara Strijbosch. Given the *Navigatio's* centrality to this project, a brief synopsis is appropriate:

Inspired by a story from his fellow abbot Barinthus, Brendan decides to seek a

holy island, the Promised Land of the Saints, along with fourteen of his monks. Three additional monks beg to join them, but Brendan warns that two of those will come to harm. Early on, a demon tempts one of these monks into theft. Brendan exorcises the demon, saving the monk's soul, but the monk dies later that day. Brendan and his remaining monks reach an island that proves to be the back of a whale, and another with talking birds—fallen angels who stayed neutral during the war between God and Satan. One of the bird-angels tells Brendan that he will travel the same circuit of islands for six more years before reaching his goal. They witness many wonders, visit remote monasteries, and meet Judas Iscariot near the gates of Hell. The second last-minute monk is carried off by demons. Finally, they sail for forty days through a cloud of darkness to reach the Promised Land of the Saints. They reach an unfordable river, and a young man reveals to Brendan the significance of his voyage.

Admittedly, the resonance between the *Navigatio* and environmental thought is not obvious from that brief outline. For the *Navigatio*, the divine is in the details; physical, spiritual, and narrative geographies interpenetrate, creating a web of mythic yet natural relationships. What we now consider ecological sentiments appear throughout the work—though we must use "ecological" in a loose sense, as the scientific concept of "ecology" is modern (Ayres 15). In one early episode, Brendan chastises monks who try to capture the fresh water flowing off of a cliff, saying, "God does not yet wish to show us a place to land, and do you want to be guilty of plundering?" (O'Meara, *Latin Version* 30). At the climax, a divine messenger explains, "There before you lies the land which you have sought for a long time. You could not find it immediately because God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" (O'Meara, *Latin Version* 63). In the

Navigatio, respect for God's sovereignty is connected to respect for nature. We must postpone delving into the tale's geography and environmental spirituality, though, in order to recognize two areas of study that provide the context for this project—early Irish Christianity and the environmental humanities. A complete survey of either is beyond the scope of this project. For those looking to study early Irish Christianity, I recommend starting with *Saint Patrick's World* edited by Liam De Paor, *Celtic Spirituality* edited by Oliver Davies, and *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* by Thomas O'Loughlin. For the environmental humanities, I recommend *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* edited by Ken Hiltner, the *Great New Wilderness Debate* anthologies edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, and the Religions of the World and Ecology series edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. What follows, however, are snapshots of these areas that ground the more explicit work on the *Navigatio* and ecology.

Early Irish Christianity

What Albert Schweitzer wrote in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* about the diverse nineteenth century lives of Jesus might also be applied to the study of early Christianity in Ireland: "But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus" (4). Similarly, scholars have frequently projected their own theological traditions onto the early Irish church, thus summoning visions of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, proto-Protestant,

and quasi-pagan Christianities. According to Thomas O'Loughlin, this appeared in scholarship on medieval Ireland as far back as the seventeenth century: "The Franciscans saw it as much their duty to preserve the cultural legacy of Gaelic Ireland as to engage in post-Reformation apologetics, while Protestant investigators saw a link between being non-Roman and pro-English" (*Celtic Theology* 3). Although Daniel De Vinne insisted in his 1870 *History of the Irish Primitive Church* that "the Irish Primitive Church was of Greek origin," his distinction between Irish and Roman Christianity owed more to Protestant polemics than Eastern Orthodox thought (50). He claimed,

> They differed in essentials, in regard even to the basis on which their respective churches were founded—the Irish Church building on the Scriptures of God as the rule, and the only rule, of faith and practice; while the Church of Rome was based on the Scriptures and tradition, and on both only as they were interpreted by the priesthood, a construction of which throws everything into the power of the priest, who lords it over God's heritage. (De Vinne 89)

In the early twentieth century, Robert Stuart MacArthur, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, pushed the proto-Protestant claim a step further by arguing that Saint Patrick "was born in Scotland, and as far as the ceremony of the baptism was concerned, believed as the Baptists of to-day" ("What Men" 145). Both De Vinne and MacArthur projected post-Reformation controversies onto a much earlier historical period. Although the proto-Protestant position now seems somewhat dubious, it gestures

toward a level of instability regarding Ireland's place in the early western church that we might otherwise overlook. As Liam De Paor noted in *Saint Patrick's World*, "Since Ireland was outside the Roman Empire it provided no ready-made model for the framework of church organization … And the great organized European system from which Christianity had come to Ireland collapsed within the first generation or so of the effort" (44-45). To use Protestantism as a metaphor for historical divergences from modern Catholic structures, however, replaces one anachronism with another.

There is a stronger argument for an Orthodox character to early Irish Christianity. Oliver Davies noted the influence of the *Life of Saint Anthony* by Athanasius on Irish monasticism, and Chrysostomos Koutloumousianos observed, "Some striking similarities have been traced between Irish and Eastern Christianity in the field of theology and spiritual life, with monasticism being the meeting point of these physically distant traditions" (Davies 26, Koutloumousianos 337). He elaborated,

> The Celtic and the Greek minds insist on divine immanence without overlooking or relativizing the ontological gap between the created and the uncreated. … That is why the Irish exegesis of the Lord's Transfiguration follows the interpretive lines of the Greek Fathers, emphasizing the direct disclosure of divinity through the flesh and its transformational power upon creation. (Koutloumousianos 347)

If we oppose this eastern influence to western influence, though, we introduce a divide that the early Irish Christians would not themselves have recognized. Rather, they

enjoyed a fruitful, theological hybridity in those centuries before the Great Schism between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Although the theological and ecclesiastical differences that would lead to the east-west split were already emerging by the ninth century, Ireland remained a theological nexus. We see in the *Navigatio*, then, themes that would be carried forward in both eastern and western Christianity. Regarding the western influence, Thomas O'Loughlin insisted,

> The theological writers who lived in the Celtic lands in the early Middle Ages were conscious, every time they wrote a sentence in Latin, that they were part of a great Christian family. … They were also conscious, every time they spoke to someone nearby, that they had a native culture and that they belonged to a people who had converted to Christianity … The result was a local theology: a specific, local slant to its picture of Christianity … a part of the mosaic of local theologies that make up the theology of the western church. (*Celtic Theology* 205).

If we treat the positions of O'Loughlin and Koutloumousianos as complementary, rather than oppositional, we will better grasp the character of early Irish Christianity.

O'Loughlin's acknowledgment of a "native culture" that preceded Christianity points toward the possibility of a quasi-pagan Christianity. In *A Single Ray of Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland*, John Carey noted two ways of explaining pre-Christian gods that "were widespread in medieval Christianity as a whole … These are *euhemerism* and *demonization*" (14). The former reinterprets the gods as ancient humans,

the latter as demons. The Irish, though, also produced creative variations on these approaches that elevated the status of their former gods. In one story from the era, the goddess Banba claims, "I am descended from Adam … I am older than Noah … I was on the peak of a mountain in the flood" (Carey, *Single Ray* 31). Mary Low observed, "This is a good example of euhemerisation and also of 'synchronisation'—the process by which Irish and biblical traditions were boldly and freely combined into a new understanding of Ireland's place in the world" (26). About this and similar legends, Carey argued, "These undying, unfallen beings are … a branch of the human race which somehow escaped the contagion of the Fall ... This is the oldest attempt to find a Christian identity for the Irish gods, and is one for which I know of no analogues elsewhere" (*Single Ray* 31). The conflation of the goddess Brigit with the monastic founder of Kildare exhibited a similar form of "baptism." According to John R. Walsh and Thomas Bradley in *A History of the Irish Church: 400-700 AD*,

> The Celts had a goddess named Brigit. Many of the attributes of this goddess—and even her festival at the beginning of spring and the perpetual fire kept burning in her honour—would seem to have been transferred to the cult and legends surrounding the Christian holy woman of the same name. We have no doubt, nevertheless, that a nun called Brigit existed. … The daughter of a slave-girl, she managed, despite intense opposition, to become a nun, and founded the most important double monastery of Kildare. (71)

According to Carey, the notion of "half-fallen angels," which is associated with birds in the *Navigatio*, was sometimes applied the old gods—arguably a denatured variant of demonization (*Single Ray* 23). This was taken even further in some tales, with the ancient deities transformed into "guardian angels, the messengers of God" (Carey, *Single Ray* 38). These positive approaches were not universal, for as Carey noted, rather than "a monolithic consensus" there was "diversity of opinion in Ireland" (*Single Ray* vii). Muirchú, the early biographer of Saint Patrick, presented a more hostile attitude toward the old gods when he declared, "With the advent of Patrick came the destruction of the cult of idols, and everything was filled with the universal faith of Christ" (96). Despite their diversity, these Irish theological speculations generally conformed to the matrix of orthodox Christian faith. Carey insisted that "however interesting the peculiarities of early Irish theology may be, they were supplemental to a faith which was in all essentials that of the rest of Christendom" (*Single Ray* vii). A brief sketch cannot do justice to several centuries of religious thought. We should note, though, that the *Navigatio* emerged from a cultural milieu in which both eastern and western Christian motifs synchretized with Celtic pagan ones.

Two widely acknowledged aspects of early Irish Christianity are particularly relevant for studying the Brendan legend—monasticism and ocean pilgrimage. Monasticism was integral to Irish Christianity both when Saint Brendan lived in the sixth century, and when the *Navigatio* was written two centuries later. Walsh and Bradley explained, "In the sixth and seventh centuries the Irish Church was distinctly monastic in character and constitution and the diocesan system seems to have been partly submerged by it" (54). Similarly, Oliver Davies noted,

> By the seventh and eighth centuries the power of the bishop was equaled by that of the abbot, especially in major monastic foundations, and the territorial diocese had been partly superseded by the monastic *paruchiae*, which were the conglomeration of different foundations all of which traced a common lineage. Different reasons have been put forward for this change, apparent already in the vigorous expansion of monasticism during the sixth century. (18)

Ocean pilgrimage or *peregrinatio* was an influential motif in Irish monastic life and literature. Thomas Charles-Edwards observed, "Though *peregrinatio* was not a peculiarly Irish custom, it was taken up with enthusiasm in Ireland"; he also noted the Irish "distinction between two grades of *peregrinatio*" (94). The former was a journey by land, the latter by sea, with "the superior *peregrinatio* … prominent in the *Vita Columbae*" (Charles-Edwards 95). Saint Columba, or Colum Cille, was the archetypal ocean pilgrim for the medieval Irish; his voyage out from Ireland paralleled Saint Patrick's into Ireland. Adomnan declared near the beginning of his *Life of Columba*,

> Swelling waves also, that once in a great storm rose like mountains, quickly subsided at his prayer and were stilled. And his ship, in which he himself chanced to be sailing, was at that time, when the calm fell, carried to the desired haven. … At other times also, through his prayers, winds unfavourable to voyagers were changed to favourable ones. (195-97)

Similarly, Beccan the Hermit praised Columba in verse:

> Connacht's candle, Britain's candle, splendid ruler;
> in scores of curraghs with an army of wretches he crossed the long-haired sea.
>
> He crossed the wave-strewn wild region, foam-flecked, seal-filled, savage, bounding, seething, white-tipped, pleasing, doleful. (Riordan 59)

In the opening of the *Life of Patrick*, with language similar to Adomnan's, Muirchú used ocean travel as a metaphor for the writing process: "I have set out on the dangerous and deep ocean of sacred narration in what is, given my abilities, a little child's coracle. The ocean has towering waves and sharp reefs and no one has sailed it before me except my father, Cogitosus" (91).

Saint Brendan appears in the *Life of Columba* as one of "four holy founders of monasteries" who "crossed over from Ireland, to visit Saint Columba" (Adomnan 501). The *Life of Brendan*, which is older than the *Navigatio*, includes an early version of Brendan's voyage. However, all existing copies of the *Life of Brendan* have either been abridged or conflated with the *Navigatio* (Mackley 45). The *Navigatio* is also clearly related to a group of Irish voyage tales, the *immrama*, in which the seafaring adventurers are usually either monks or warriors. Among these tales, the *Voyage of Bran* precedes the *Navigatio*, while the *Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla* follows it (Strijbosch 128). As

for the *Voyage of Mael Duin*, the *Voyage of the Hui Corra*, and the *Navigatio*—cross-fertilization among early versions of these tales makes it difficult to establish their order (Strijbosch 163). However, determining priority is not essential for this project, so it is enough to treat these works a related. Clearly, the *Navigatio* emerged from a cultural period that produced a substantial body of voyage literature rooted in monastic practice and ocean pilgrimage.

Environmental Humanities

Environmental studies can be divided into three areas—environmental science, environmental policy, and environmental humanities. Environmental science examines the state of the natural world, and the human effect upon it, using multiple physical and life sciences. Following the technical details of science often requires special expertise, but scientists and science journalists frequently translate core concepts for general audiences. For example, *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes*, jointly produced by the British Royal Society and the U. S. National Academy of Science, described the scientific consensus on a critical environmental issue:

> Since 1900, the global average surface temperature has increased by about 0.8 °C (1.4 °F). This has been accompanied by warming of the ocean, a rise in sea level, a strong decline in Arctic sea ice, and many other associated climate effects. Much of this warming has occurred in the last four decades. Detailed analyses have shown that the warming during this

> period is mainly a result of the increased concentrations of CO2 and other greenhouse gases. Continued emissions of these gases will cause further climate change, including substantial increases in global average surface temperature and important changes in regional climate. (2)

The above excerpt helps us answer the following question: what is going on? Yet there are two follow up questions that science does not automatically answer. First, why should we care? Second, what should we do about it? The last question is the domain of environmental policy. Although natural science can help us understand our biophysical parameters, how we respond to those parameters is a matter of economics, politics, and policy. Even the most sensible policies, though, might collapse due to opposition or lack of passion. Hence the prior question—why should we care? This question taps into our moral principles, our aesthetic sensibilities, and even our narrative concept of the world. This is the domain of environmental humanities. Certainly, the environmental humanities depend on the broader insights of environmental studies, but they also take seriously the fundamentally human impulses that must gird effective environmental action.

A complete survey of contemporary thought in the environmental humanities lies beyond the scope of this project. A quick glance, however, will help clarify the ideas and concerns that drive this new look at the Brendan legend. Over four decades ago, *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, edited by Ian Barbour, anticipated the trajectory of interdisciplinary environmental humanities. The collection drew on history, literature, philosophy, theology, and policy studies, with some of the areas of contention identified by Barbour still very relevant. He asked,

- Has the biblical doctrine of man's dominion over nature been a major source of western man's exploitative attitudes toward the world? Or was the rise of industrial capitalism more significant among the historical roots of environmental destruction?

- In accounting for historical change in the past, or in trying to bring about change in the future, should attention be directed to beliefs and attitudes? Or are changes in social and economic institutions primary?

- Is the ecology movement a cop-out from more urgent problems of poverty, race, and the ghetto; is it a middle-class evasion of the glaring inequalities of our society? Or can we seek the goals of ecological wisdom and social justice at the same time? (Barbour 4-5)

In the early twenty-first century, these questions have resurfaced in second-wave ecocriticism. According to Ken Hiltner in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, "Because of the environmental justice movement, ecocriticism has greatly benefited from the work of literary critics exploring issues like gender, class, race and colonialism" (133). As we can see from Barbour's earlier introduction, these issues were already on the radar of some environmental humanities scholars by the early seventies—a decade before the emergence of the environmental justice movement, and two decades before the emergence of first-wave ecocriticism (at least as these movements are usually dated).

Regarding the difference between the first and second waves of ecocriticism, Hiltner observed, "Second-wave environmental critics, careful not to overly romanticize wilderness (as did some of their predecessors), are more likely to direct themselves to sites of environmental devastation and texts that do the same" (131). This focus on "present environmental issues rather than an improbable pastoral past" might allow ecocriticism "to have real cultural and political relevance in the twenty-first century" (Hiltner 131).

We might assume from this emphasis on the present that the study of a medieval text has no place in second-wave ecocriticism, but Hiltner included in his reader an excerpt from *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to the Early Medieval Landscape* by Alfred Siewers. Siewers' work is an important source for this study of the Brendan legend, but we must return to it later. For now, it is sufficient to note that second-wave ecocriticism is not exclusively defined by which texts are read, but also by how they are read. Hiltner explained,

> Second-wave environmental critics can still take up some of the same interests as their predecessors, though they are generally very aware of the implications of doing so. For example, a second-wave ecocritic might note that Rachel Carson intentionally … romanticized nature as a rhetorical strategy … [A] second-wave ecocritic would generally not be led by Carson into making a fetish of nature. (131)

Rereading premodern texts with postmodern eyes may prove challenging, though. Literary critic Greg Garrard argued,

> The underlying narrative structure of Christian mythology claims a directionality and coherence for the history of Creation that is at odds with evolutionary and ecological processes. Such ancient tropes, as adapted by environmental discourse, have the advantage of deep roots in our culture, but the liability of anachronism in the postmodern era. (202)

Nevertheless, many religious thinkers have embraced the challenge of rethinking their traditions and sacred texts in the light of ecological science. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller indicated this in the introduction to *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, championing "the ecosocial metamorphosis of the biblical heritage." They argued that Christianity should pursue "an ongoing critique of its own ideologies and an analysis of its own shifting social habits" through "theological approaches" that "seek the difference of other religions, other spiritualities, secular philosophies and environmental ethics as resources for Christian self-deconstruction and metamorphosis" (Kearns and Keller 5). This brief treatment—from Barbour to Kearns and Keller—hardly resolves the outstanding disagreements in the study ecology, religion, and literature; it simply conveys the timbre of one intellectual conversation shaping this Brendan project. The chapters that follow will draw on voices from the broad environmental humanities conversation that are particularly useful for exploring the medieval legend.

We should note that several scholars have looked explicitly at the medieval Irish understanding of nature. Susan Power Bratton suggested that Celtic monasticism "may have served as a bridge from the Hebraic and heroic values of the desert fathers to Francis's love for the small and gentle. Furthermore, Celtic literature represents not only an important expansion of Christian interest in nature, but also an aesthetic peak in its expression" (20). The *Navigatio* is a significant product of that "aesthetic peak." In *Celtic Christianity and Nature: Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions*, Mary Low offered a vivid survey of the role of nature in Irish Christian thought:

> Certainly, the theme of Creation was popular with Irish writers, as were titles like 'King of cloudy heaven' and 'God of the Elements.' … God, though hidden, was still approachable through nature … People also believed that the landscapes before their eyes were not the only landscapes; that there were other levels of reality where one might see the Tree of Life, meet with biblical characters, visit paradise islands, and converse with angels or human souls in the form of birds. (190)

Both "paradise islands" and angels "in the form of birds" appear in the *Navigatio*. John Carey, however, noted that attitudes toward nature were not homogeneous in Irish hagiographical literature. While Saint Brigit's miracles appear to cooperate with the laws of nature, those of Saint Patrick and Saint Columba often seem to violate them (Carey, "Nature" 135-36). Similarly, Patricia Rumsey suggested that the *Navigatio* and the Céile Dé movement had different attitudes toward nature, with the former being more positive

(20). The Céile Dé, an Irish monastic reform movement, was active during period of the *Navigatio's* composition. Rumsey's argument contradicts an earlier, nature-friendly interpretation of the Céile Dé that was rooted in "large number of early nature poems" whose authorship, according to Low, "has rightly been challenged in recent years" (14). The debate over the Céile Dé, though, is less important for this project than situating the *Navigatio* within a nature-friendly theological tradition. Even if the affirmation of nature was not homogeneous or universal among early Irish Christians, the *Navigatio's* environmental sensibility was no anomaly.

As noted above, early Irish Christianity had both eastern and western Christian influences. We find a contemporary parallel to this in a joint environmental statement by Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The statement's theological language provides a rhetorical counterpoint to the scientific language on climate change, so it will close this discussion of the environmental humanities. Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew stated:

> It is our profound conviction that the future of the human family depends also on how we safeguard—both prudently and compassionately, with justice and fairness—the gift of creation that out Creator has entrusted to us. Therefore, we acknowledge in repentance the wrongful mistreatment of our planet … We reaffirm our responsibility and obligation to foster a sense of humility and moderation so that all may feel the need to respect creation and to safeguard it with care … [W]e appeal to all people of goodwill to consider ways of living less wastefully and more frugally,

> manifesting less greed and more generosity for the protection of God's world and the benefit of his people. (387-88)

Spiritual Geography and Environmental Spirituality

Ecocriticism and geography overlap, as both study interactions between human culture and the natural world. For this reason, the next chapter will explore the *Navigatio's* geography. Literary terrains refer to the external world, but are not identical to it. The character of the reference-referent relationship varies. Geographical texts of the *Navigatio's* era studied creation to understand the Creator, and in pursuing this theological task often trusted ancient sources over contemporary accounts (Lozovsky 141, 156). The *Navigatio*, though a narrative text, similarly sought to understand the divine. The Celtic Otherworld overlay clearly influenced the *Navigatio*, with a spiritual terrain superimposed on the physical (Siewers, "Desert Islands" 42). This is most apparent when visits to certain islands are aligned with the liturgical calendar (O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* 178). Although the story has a linear flow from beginning to end, the liturgical cycle alters this flow in the middle. Some of the *Navigatio's* locations have clear links to real world places, others are entirely imaginary, and others combine aspects of multiple places. Nevertheless, the *Navigatio's* powerful geographical verisimilitude indicates a strong fascination with the natural world.

The subsequent chapter will look carefully at episodes that reveal the *Navigatio's* environmental spirituality. Several episodes, for example, promote restraint regarding drinkable water. Twice Brendan delays his monks' access to water—insisting that they

first need permission either from God or local religious authorities. Another time, when his monks are debilitated by a water source, he chastises them for misusing it. Humans do not own fresh water in the *Navigatio*; it is granted to us out of divine care. Rather than possessiveness and exploitation, this should inspire gratitude and restraint. A positive attitude toward nature accompanies this ethic of restraint. Several episodes depict animals participating in the worship of God. Birds sing hymns to their Creator, and fish swirl around Brendan's boat during mass. The great fish Jasconius even allows Brendan's monks to hold Easter mass on his back—as long as they do not start fires. All of creation, then, responds to God. This picture is complicated, though, by the sea monster and griffin that attack Brendan's boat. Other creatures protect the monks, but the attacks reveal the violent and hostile side of nature. Contemporary theologians struggle to reconcile God's goodness with the suffering inherent in evolution (Southgate 12). The beastly battles, though, suggest that Christians faced similar questions long before Darwin. Nevertheless, the *Navigatio* ultimately affirms the goodness of creation when an angelic youth declares, "God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63).

Overall, this project unfolds and historically situates the largely unexplored environmental sensibility of the *Navigatio*, a sensibility woven throughout the work. By better understanding that text and its world, we connect a piece of our cultural heritage to contemporary environmental concerns. The ability to draw meaningfully from our past, even in this time of great cultural and ecological change, can provide us with a sense of continuity, which in turn can inspire the hope and energy necessary to address our environmental challenges.

Chapter 2: Spiritual Geography

The *Navigatio* is a literary text, but is it also a geographical text? Certainly, some scholars have thought so. In *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: A Study in Medieval Geography*, William Henry Babcock examined Renaissance maps that predate the voyages of Columbus. The cartographers, Babcock noted, credited Saint Brendan with a "quest of some warm island … the Madeira group receiving his special approval" (48-49). Geoffrey Ashe, while cautious about granting the historical Brendan all of the adventures attributed to him in legend, nevertheless suggested in *Land to the West: A Search for Irish and Other Pre-Viking Discoverers of America*,

> The writer or re-writer of the *Life of Saint Brendan* … is aware of the ocean as a phenomenon of nature; he tries to convey the awe of it; he introduces the creatures that swim in it; he sees his islands as points on the map of it, even though he knows little or nothing of its configuration. … Somewhere behind the mist and spray loom the figures of real voyagers reporting real experiences. That authenticity comes surging, no longer muted, into the far greater *Navigatio*. (66-67)

Ashe was sufficiently impressed by the *Navigatio's* verisimilitude, that he attempted to map its locations (301-02). Others, however, have argued that geographically mapping the text distracts from its clear narrative, allegorical, or spiritual character. J. J. O'Meara acknowledged that the *Navigatio*, like the Homeric epics, "cannot but reflect some

history," but he insisted that the medieval work "is mainly an integrated *literary* tale" ("In the Wake" 112). Similarly, Dorothy Bray argued,

> While popular imagination prefers to find the facts of a true voyage behind the tale, the allegorical reading uncovers a far greater reality, especially when seen within the history and traditions of early Irish monasticism. … The familiar metaphor of the ocean voyage as a voyage through life is intricately tied to monastic existence, revealing lessons concerning faith in God, avoidance of sins, and obedience to the monastic rule. (175)

In recent decades, Brendan scholarship has heavily favored literary and spiritual perspectives over geographical ones. A notable exception is Jonathan Wooding, whose recent work on the *Navigatio* and physical geography largely supersedes that of his predecessors. Examples of Wooding's literary-geographical approach include his contributions to *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (which he also edited) and to *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland*. In many cases, political concerns influenced earlier work on the *Navigatio's* geography, for the Brendan legend allowed the colonized Irish to claim the status of legitimate European explorers. The section on "colonialism and ecology" in the final chapter explores this in more detail. Nevertheless, the relationship between story and geography in the *Navigatio* remains a fertile area for exploration. Locations in the *Navigatio* have links to both real and imaginary places. Understanding the nature of these links allows for a deeper understanding of the story.

One point of embarkation for such scholarship is to compare the *Navigatio* to a geographical text of its period. The Irish monk Dicuil's *Liber De Mensura Orbis Terrae* is an obvious candidate, as it has frequently drawn the attention of Brendan scholars for describing locales resembling those in the *Navigatio*. We must, though, place these texts in their medieval context. How was geographical knowledge understood in the early medieval period? What was its purpose? What were the genre conventions of systematic geography? The first two sections of this chapter will establish the context for early medieval geographical literature and Irish adventure tales. The next two sections will investigate the *Navigatio's* liturgical geography and the locations that anchor it—the islands where Brendan and his monks celebrate Easter and Christmas. Finally, the last two sections will connect landscape metaphors both to the *Navigatio's* narrative arc and to the Hell and Paradise motif. This will provide a robust, interdisciplinary understanding of the *Navigatio's* complex geography.

Sacred Geography

According to historian Natalia Lozovsky in *The Earth Is Our Book: Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West ca. 400-1000*, medieval geographical texts were inspired by different motives and governed by different methods than modern geography—a difference that has led modern scholars to misunderstand or even disparage the medieval works. Lozovsky insisted that "only by thinking of this tradition as an integral part of medieval culture, tightly connected to other areas of learning and corresponding to the needs of medieval society, can we begin to understand early

medieval geographical knowledge" (156-7). Geography was not considered a distinct discipline during this period. Instead, if it appeared in an "early medieval classification of sciences," it was treated as part of physics, history, biblical studies, or another subject (Lozovsky 10, 33-34). Geographical ideas contributed to physics insofar as they added to knowledge about the physical structure of the world (Lozovsky 21). Similarly, geographical ideas contributed to history by clarifying the physical setting of historical events. This included, of course, the events of sacred history, for medieval scholarship was frequently driven by sacred rather than secular concerns (Lozovsky 15-16). Lozovsky explained that "this knowledge aimed at preparing people for biblical studies, so that they might achieve the ultimate goal of Christian learning—to gain knowledge about God. Pursuing this ultimate goal … geographical knowledge developed its own methods and rules" (156).

That "ultimate goal" helps explain an aspect of early medieval geography that may easily confuse modern readers. The writers and compilers of geographical works almost exclusively favored classical sources over contemporary reports, even when the latter were available. Lozovsky insisted that this was "by choice rather than by ignorance" (139-41). With this claim, she departed from some of her predecessors. Early in the twentieth century, for example, medievalist Mario Esposito offered this somewhat harsh appraisal of *Liber De Mensura Orbis Terrae*, a geographical treatise by the Irish monk Dicuil:

> Such is the analysis of this strange and ill-digested compendium of the geographies of different ages. Were it not for a very few passages the

> reader would get the impression that the work had been written for the instruction of people living in the last days of the Roman Empire! Still, notwithstanding the author's ignorance and carelessness, he has succeeded in preserving for us a few valuable pieces of information, which to the historian of geography are valuable, and would otherwise have remained buried in oblivion; for this let us try to be grateful, and try to look upon his shortcomings with indulgence. (676)

Esposito did make a strong argument regarding Dicuil's carelessness, portraying the latter as an enthusiastic but sloppy scholar (675). However, the charge of ignorance stems, at least in part, from misunderstanding the genre conventions within which the Dicuil worked. In *Medieval Views of the Cosmos: Picturing the Cosmos in the Christian and Islamic Middle Ages*, Evelyn Edson and Emilie Savage-Smith pointed out that past events, such as Adam and Eve sinning in the Garden of Eden, and bygone locations, like Troy or the Tower of Babel, often appeared on medieval maps. The purpose of such maps was not to provide a current, physical picture the world, but rather a moral and spiritual picture of the cosmos (Edson and Savage-Smith 118). In the "hierarchical system" that constituted the medieval universe, "At every level was found a moral lesson for humanity and a satisfying metaphor for the nature of God" (Edson and Savage-Smith 9). Although Lozovsky focused on written texts rather than maps, she also concluded that metaphysical concerns drove medieval geographical thought. According to Lozovsky,

> Regarded as part of the knowledge about the created world, geographical learning reflected general ideas about how and why this world should be studied. For "geographers," as for theologians, God represented the source and goal of all existence and knowledge. … Sharing the Platonic skepticism about knowledge gained through senses, "geographers" valued an intellectual cognition of the world over an empirical one. (145)

Lozovsky recognized that this theoretical image of the world could not have served every need, for "practical situations, such as travels or foundations of monasteries," required concrete details about places (Lozovsky 153). Such concrete details, though, fell outside the primary scope of theoretical geography. The purpose of the latter was to provide a conceptual object, so that by contemplating creation, a reader might obtain "a better understanding of the Creator" (Lozovsky 155). However, the separation of practical and theoretical knowledge was not absolute. Some authors, such as Dicuil, incorporated new information into their accounts, even if they generally showed deference to the classical authors (Lozovsky 148-49). Esposito criticized Dicuil's incautious enthusiasm, but this very quality may have led the latter to break from the "authorities" and include eyewitness accounts that lacked classical parallels—the very details Esposito found so valuable (Esposito 676). Ironically, had Dicuil been a more careful scholar, he might have followed the rules too well to provide us with this unique information.

Our attention to Dicuil is not arbitrary; Brendan scholars frequently cite the information Dicuil passed on from monastic voyagers. Indeed, Jonathan Wooding not only placed the composition of the *Navigatio* within Dicuil's lifetime, but even suggested

that Dicuil or a similar source may have influenced the *Navigatio's* composition ("Date" 21). The relevant passages receive more attention below; for now it is enough to note that Dicuil's "measure of the world" provides a window into the cosmology of that era. How exactly, though, does the *Navigatio* fit into this medieval geographical picture? As a narrative work, it falls outside the genre described by Lozovsky, and therefore need not be constrained by the expectations of that genre. Still, the purpose of the *Navigatio* overlaps with that of the geographical works, for both seek a better understanding of God. If the geographical books do so through a theoretical measure of the world, the *Navigatio* does so through a fictional narrative. We should not expect strict fidelity to empirical geography, as we now understand it, from either type of work.

In *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, literary critic Kenneth Burke proposed that "terministic screens," or symbolic filters, affect our perception of the world. Such screens, Burke further suggested, are rooted in two primary modes of thinking—the "scientistic," which defines that which is, and the "dramatistic," which declares what should be (44-45). Burke's distinction is useful for comparing Dicuil's *Liber De Mensura* to the *Navigatio*. At first glance, a measurement of the globe is clearly "scientistic," whereas an allegorical adventure is obviously "dramatistic." However, geography was also a spiritual pursuit in the medieval world, complicating any simple classification. Burke acknowledged that "the 'scientistic' and 'dramatistic' … are by no means mutually exclusive," but he also argued,

> [L]ater the two roads diverge considerably, and direct our attention to quite different kinds of observation. … [T]he scientistic approach

> culminates in the kinds of speculation we associate with symbolic logic, while the dramatistic culminates in the kinds of speculation that find their handiest material in stories, plays, poems, the rhetoric of oratory and advertising, mythologies, theologies, and philosophies after the classical model. (44-45)

A few years before Burke offered this analysis, C. P. Snow proposed a similar distinction in his famous Rede Lecture, "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution." Rather than two diverging roads, though, Snow argued that "literary intellectuals" and "physical scientists" had migrated toward opposite intellectual poles (4). The difference between these metaphors, for any who occupy an intellectual middle space, is the difference between being on or off the map. The middle space between two poles can be part of a spectrum, whereas the middle space between two roads might be lost in the woods. This matters for works like Dicuil's *Liber De Mensura* that draw on both of Burke's modes.

The respective opening lines of *Liber De Mensura* and the *Navigatio* hint at each work's location between the "scientistic" and "dramatistic" poles. Dicuil began his book:

> Having composed my letter on ten questions of the art of grammar, I considered that a book might follow on the measurement of the provinces of the earth, according to the authority of the men whom the holy emperor Theodosius had sent to measure the said provinces; and I desire to indicate their dimensions, supplementing this information on the high authority of Plinius Secundus. (45)

From such an opening, we would expect a "scientistic" work. As Lozovsky made clear, though, the genre of medieval geographical writing drew heavily on "theologies and philosophies after the classical model," reflecting the non-exclusivity acknowledged by Burke. Whereas contemporary physical geography lies near the "scientistic" pole, Dicuil occupied a space nearer the metaphorical equator. Conversely, while "scientistic" elements are not completely absent from the *Navigatio*, this work clearly lies close to the "dramatistic" pole. The *Navigatio* opens by describing Brendan's ancestry and qualities —that is, it defines the saint. This takes fewer than thirty words, though, before the action of the story begins:

> When he was fighting the good fight, in a place called Clonfert of Brendan, there arrived one evening one of the fathers whose name was Barrind, a descendant of Niall. When this Barrind was plied with many questions by the holy father, he wept, prostrated himself on the ground and stayed a long time praying. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 26)

Admittedly, "fighting the good fight" is not an exact translation; Oliver Davies translated the same phrase as "engaged in spiritual warfare" (Davies 155). A literal translation of "*cum esset in suo certamine*" would be "when he was in his struggle," but this is inferior in English to the choices made by O'Meara and Davies (Selmer 3). However we translate the phrase, though, this work is clearly "dramatistic" in Burke's scheme. Geographical texts like Dicuil's *Liber De Mensura* certainly illuminate the *Navigatio's* world, but they

cannot explicate the tale's narrative character, for the *Navigatio* ultimately belongs to a different genre. To fully understand this narrative work, then, we must place it among the *immrama*, or Irish nautical adventures.

The Otherworld Overlay

The *Navigatio* belongs to the genre of *immram*—that is, Irish nautical adventure tales. These tales, according to ecocritic Alfred Siewers, contributed to "literature about the Otherworld, a parallel spiritual realm entwined with physical landscape" ("Desert Islands" 37). The boundaries of the genre are permeable. The *Navigatio* borrows conventions from hagiography, whereas the *Voyage of Bran* (the earliest extant *immram*) comes close to an *echtra*—an Otherworld adventure with a shorter journey and a longer stay (Hillers 70). Nevertheless, the handful of surviving *immrama* have enough of a family resemblance to reveal some common features. A combination of pre-Christian lore, monastic spirituality, and Ireland's island geography provoked these literary expeditions into the "Otherworld's overlay landscape" (Siewers "Desert Islands" 36). As the Anglican priest David Adam claimed in *A Desert in the Ocean: God's Call to Adventurous Living*, "The otherworld is always near to the Celtic mind and breaks into our world, allowing us to enter and enjoy it even now. There are not two separate worlds but the material and the spiritual are deeply interwoven in one" (5). Adams was not alone in remembering the ancient motif. Late in the twentieth century, literary critic Elliott Gose, Jr. observed that Irish folktales still tested their heroes in the Otherworld (5). Similarly, Siewers argued that English "green world" tradition of Edmund Spenser,

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and J. R. R. Tolkien had its roots in the Otherworld overlay (53). The term "green world," which comes from literary critic Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, describes a naturalistic realm in which fantastic events may occur (Frye 182-84).

Siewers proposed a conceptual link between "overlay" and "archipelago." He found that the archipelago's mix of sea and land shaped the medieval Irish environmental imagination. The archipelagic blending of physical elements modeled the interpenetration of this world and the Otherworld (Siewers, "Desert Islands" 37). Siewers explained, "In an archipelago, the sea both separates and connects. Islands alternatively and simultaneously are blank spaces or full, and the sea vice versa" (Siewers, "Desert Islands" 39). For Siewers, archipelagos represented indeterminacy and liminality, and therefore encouraged a worldview in which the boundary between realms was permeable. The liminality that Siewers attributed to archipelagos echoed that which Rachel Carson found on the Atlantic shore: "When we go down to the low-tide line, we enter a world that is as old as the earth itself—the primeval meeting place of the elements of earth and water, a place of compromise and conflict and eternal change" (Carson vii). There was a clear, reciprocal influence between Irish and Latin works in early medieval Ireland, and this is particularly apparent in the *immram* literature. This permeability between languages echoes the literature's metaphysical permeability. Just as the boundary between land and water becomes unstable in an archipelago, so did the boundary between this world and the Otherworld in the minds of the medieval Irish. Thus a spiritual landscape was overlaid on the physical landscape.

Siewers found in the *Voyage of Bran* a particularly potent example of the Otherworld archipelago (*Strange Beauty* 3). In this tale, a mysterious woman appears in Bran's royal hall and tempts him away with a song (Meyer 2-4, 16). While pursuing the woman, Bran and his crew meet the sea god Manannan mac Lir, then sail past the Island of Joy, before finally reaching the paradisiacal Land of Women (Meyer 16, 30). According to philologist Kuno Meyer, "The Voyage of Bran was originally written down in the seventh century. From this original, sometime in the tenth century, a copy was made, in which the language of poetry, protected by the laws of metre and assonance, was left almost intact, while the prose was subject to a process of partial modernization" (xvi). There are two long poems embedded in the Bran tale. The first is the song of the woman who woos Bran out to his voyage (Meyer 4). The second comes from the god Manannan mac Lir, "the special patron of sailors," who encounters Bran on the sea. (Meyer 16, Squire 60). The god sings,

> Bran deems it a marvelous beauty
> In his coracle across the clear sea :
> While to me from my chariot from afar
> It is a flowery plain on which he rides about.
>
> What is a clear sea
> For the proud skiff in which Bran is,
> That is a happy plain with a profusion of flowers
> To me from the chariot of two wheels. (Meyer 16-18)

There is more to the song, but these verses are enough to illustrate the overlay of one world upon another. The veil between the ordinary and sacred realms turns partially translucent. It is as if the sacred either secretly envelops the ordinary or hides within the ordinary—or perhaps both. Siewers captured this duality when he claimed, "Bran here encounters a doubly enfolded landscape" (3). When Bran reaches the Land of Women, though, he has fully crossed from one realm to the other. Although that blissful Otherworld is physically and spiritually set apart from our ordinary world, Siewers noted that "it is also contiguous with the sea that adjoins Bran's own home" (3). *The Voyage of Bran*, therefore, offers two treatments of the link between this world and the Otherworld —the distinct realms are superimposed, then contiguous. These are not treated as competing hypotheses in Bran's tale, but rather are simultaneously true. Thus even if the sacred is close at hand, Paradise may still be the proper goal of a quest.

This idea of questing for a paradisiacal Otherworld resurfaces in the *Navigatio*. Indeed, Siewers observed, "The saint encounters a spectrum of Christian ascetic practices on a chain of islands that evokes the native Otherworld" (*Strange Beauty* 4). While Brendan's tale is overtly monastic, the *Voyage of Bran* was also the product of an Irish Christian culture. Bran's tale, although set in pre-Christian times, reflects the newer faith's apprehension of both traditional folklore and "the physical environment of Europe's Atlantic archipelago" (Siewers, *Strange Beauty* 7). This Christian influence is apparent when Manannan mac Lir prophesies,

> A noble salvation will come

From the King who has created us,
A white law will come over the seas,
Besides being God, He will be man. (Meyer 22)

The mysterious woman makes a similar prophecy, though the transition from enticement to prophecy is a bit jarring. This may indicate that Christological references were woven into older material. The woman sings,

There are thrice fifty distant isles
In the ocean to the west of us ;
Larger than Erin twice
Is each of them, or thrice.

A great birth will come after ages,
That will not be in a lofty place,
The son of a woman whose mate will not be known,
He will seize the rule of many thousands. (Meyer 13-14)

The low-born hero who rises to prominence is a common folklore motif. For example, Joseph Jacobs closed *Celtic Fairy Tales* with the peasant lad Tom's betrothal to the Princess of Dublin (235). In a Christian context, though, the prophecy suggests the Nativity of Jesus. Indeed, the next stanza makes it clear that this figure, like Manannan mac Lir's God-man, is divine.

> A rule without beginning, without end,
> He has created the world so that it is perfect,
> Whose are earth and sea,
> Woe to him that shall be under his unwill! (Meyer 14)

In the cultural context of early medieval Ireland, these are clearly Christological references placed in the mouths of pre-Christian characters. We have, then, another overlay—Christian upon pre-Christian. Indeed, John Carey argued that the notion of an overseas Otherworld, rather than a subterranean one, was itself a product of Ireland's Christian period ("Location" 119). This innovation is certainly plausible if, as James Carney argued, "The authors are far from being passive traditors of ancient 'Celtic' ideas. They are … men of their time creating literature of edification or entertainment; they use old material, they add, subtract, reform, plagiarize and substitute, but each is an author in a very full sense" (42). The Celtic subterranean Otherworld, then, was transformed by certain writers of Ireland's early Christian period into an overseas Otherworld, with both Christian and pagan echoes.

With Siewers' concept of the Otherworld overlay in mind, what kind of geography should we look for in the *Navigatio*? Jonathan Wooding and Bertrand Westphal, through complementary arguments, point us toward an answer. According to Wooding, "real locations on the Irish coast" and "recently discovered islands in the ocean" likely inspired some of the places that Saint Brendan and other *immram* heroes visited ("*Peregrini*" 413). Although Wooding emphasized continuity between real

locations and fictional ones, he he also recognized the frequent discontinuity between the two. Many of the fictional places were only "partially sourced" in real world locations, and recognition of "the Promised Land itself … would depend entirely on Biblical and Patristic knowledge" (Wooding, "*Peregrini*" 413). In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Westphal also acknowledged the relationship between real and fictional locations in the Brendan legend, but emphasized their discontinuity:

> When Saint Brendan, legendary Irish monk, leaves the coast of Kerry to undertake a *navigatio* toward paradise, he adopts the liturgical calendar and a course marked out by his memory of the Bible. … Space and the world in which it unfolds are the fruits of a symbolic system, of a speculative movement, which is also a glimmer of the beyond, and (let us venture the word) of the *imaginary*. (Westphal 1)

However, Westphal also recognized that reality and fiction were not entirely discontinuous. He clarified, "This imaginary is not entirely cut off from reality. The one and the other interpenetrate according to a principle of nonexclusion that is regulated within the religious canon" (Westphal 1). To better understand how this interpenetration between the real and the imaginary manifests in the *Navigatio*, we must examine several representative locations and connect them to the tale's overall structure—both its cyclical and linear aspects. Let us first turn to the cyclical, an aspect hinted at in Westphal's reference to the liturgical calendar, then later considering the story's more linear narrative arc.

Liturgical Geography

In *Geocriticism*, Westphal claimed, "In the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, no attempt was made to account for the physical, *objective* world, but only for a world designed by God and recognized by men. Thus Brendan sailed amid the waves of an unknown sea as a space governed by the liturgical calendar" (58). With this, he seemingly denied a "physical, objective" geography in favor of a spiritual or "liturgical" one. This distinction between physical and spiritual geography might strike one as a relativist assertion, a reduction of the physical world to the experience of the perceiver. However, Westphal later insisted that "reality has an essence that fiction cannot subsume" and that "whatever the level of representation, reality is always the referent of discourse" (86-87). Yet if we may say that "reality" and "the imaginary" interpenetrate, as Westphal does, then we may certainly assert a geography that is both symbolic and physical (1). Alfred Siewers made such an assertion about the *Voyage of Bran*, a text with less geographical verisimilitude than the *Navigatio*.

In *Landscape Perception in Early Celtic Literature*, the Italian poet and philologist Francesco Benozzo analyzed the same *Bran* episode from a strictly secular viewpoint. He argued that humans have an innate capacity to perceive landscapes as ambiguous, and that Bran's Otherworld overlay is a "narrative resolution" of this psychological tendency (Benozzo 14-15). Benozzo also affirmed the link between real and referent when he claimed that "so complex an image … arises (and remains anchored to) the concrete elements of landscape, and has to do with archetypes of perception which

belong strictly to the field of the relationships between human mind and physical space" (18). These "archetypes of perception" cannot mediate our experience of "physical space" unless the latter exists. Rather than choosing between a physical and symbolic geography in the *Navigatio*, we may wish to determine how the two realms interact.

Westphal, though, was certainly correct in asserting the importance of liturgy. Thomas O'Loughlin identified three layers of liturgical time in the *Navigatio*: daily, weekly, and yearly (*Celtic Theology* 177-78). The yearly cycle is connected to the daily and weekly rituals, so we must consider all three to properly understand the *Navigatio's* spiritual rhythm. O'Loughlin also explained that the Liturgy of the Hours, "the regular, daily course of prayer, centred on the psalms," was originally subject to great diversity and regional variation—and this diversity extended both to prayer times and psalm choices ("Monastic Liturgy" 114). Martin McNamara, a scholar of early Christian literature, analyzed the form of Divine Office used in the *Navigatio*. Although he could not identify which monastic community produced the text, McNamara noted that the psalms used were inconsistent with Benedictine practice (167). As O'Loughlin explained, the expansion of Benedictine influence occurred slowly over the course of several centuries, and so "there was no 'standard' monastic way of celebrating this liturgy" in Ireland when the *Navigatio* was composed ("Monastic Liturgy" 114). This situation provided a great deal of creative freedom for the *Navigatio's* author. McNamara even speculated "that the Divine Office put before us in the work … was an idealized one, the author's own composition, put together for reasons important for him but unknown to us" (187). Given the pre-Benedictine diversity of practice, the *Navigatio's* author may have been "conversant with a variety of forms of the Divine Office and moulded this tradition

for his own ends" (McNamara 187). Whatever the origins of the tale's liturgy, it professes a spiritual pattern embedded in daily life.

The daily Liturgy of the Hours blends into the the sacred rhythm of the week in the *Navigatio*. Although the liturgy is a daily office, O'Loughlin observed that it "was most elaborate and lengthy" on Saturday and Sunday ("Monastic Liturgy" 117). Just as the Liturgy of the Hours marks particular times of the day, the extended liturgy marks particular days of the week. Weekly time, furthermore, connects to yearly time. O'Loughlin noted that "the souls that had been given the bodies of birds" could rest and worship "on Sundays and feasts" (*Celtic Theology* 177). The feast days, of course, mark out the liturgical year the same way the hours of prayer mark out the day. In *Sacred Time in Early Christian Ireland*, Patricia Rumsey linked the three layers of time together. After first acknowledging the rhythms of the daily and weekly prayer cycles, Rumsey noted that "the annual cycle encompassed both of these in its rhythmic journey from Advent to Christmas to Lent to Pentecost" (167). McNamara identified three descriptions of the Liturgy of the Hours in the *Navigatio*, two of which occur on islands associated with Easter and Christmas, the holidays that anchor the liturgical year (McNamara 163-65).We have then, not just sacred and liturgical time, but sacred and liturgical geography. As Charles Plummer wrote of Brendan and his monks,

> They wander for seven years and meet with various adventures, always however returning to certain points at certain seasons of the ecclesiastical year, at Maundy Thursday to the Sheep Island, at Easter Eve to the Whale,

> at Easter Day to the Paradise of Birds, at Christmas to the Isle of the family of Ailbe. (5)

Dorothy Bray and Patricia Rumsey drew connections between this liturgical geography and environmental themes. Bray recognized that the *Navigatio's* author, by pairing the festivals of the liturgical year with specific locations, overlaid cyclical time onto cyclical space (178). Although Bray acknowledged that voyages to "island monasteries and hermitages" were an authentic cultural practice of the *Navigatio's* time, she argued that the tale's "geographical presence" served a spiritual purpose—namely, to model the monastic Christian path through life (175-76). However, spirituality does not oppose physicality in the *Navigatio*, but rather the spiritual and the physical cooperate. Because of this, the tale is saturated with "the joy of nature and the celebration of God's creation" (Bray 182). Nature is the vehicle of God's providence, for Saint Brendan and his monks always find life-sustaining food and water when they are most in need. They learn, therefore, to appreciate the creative works of their merciful Creator. As Bray observed, "Despite the many dangers on the ocean, the monks experience supreme awe at the natural world which surrounds them" (Bray 182). The next chapter will provide a detailed validation of Bray's insight on this matter. For now, it is sufficient to note that the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography includes a clear affirmation of the created world. Indeed, Rumsey noted this several times throughout her book, stating near the end,

> The 'timescape' of the *Navigatio* was supremely positive in its view of sacred time and the whole of creation; the seven-year voyage was

> presented as being ‘so that God might reveal his wonders’ to the brethren on the ocean. Theirs was an optimistic attitude to life, seeing good in all the inhabitants of the various islands on which they arrived, and revering the wonders of God in everything. (216)

Further consideration of the *Navigatio’s* environmental spirituality must wait, for our exploration of its liturgical geography remains incomplete. Although the overall pattern is clear, the status of specific locations within this pattern is not. Therefore, let us first look at the islands associated with the Easter season, before turning to those associated with the Christmas season, for the former are far easier to identify.

Easter and Christmas

Near the end of Lent, Saint Brendan and his monks reach an island that is filled with white sheep, so many that they sometimes obscured the ground. Then, on Easter Sunday, the travelers find a smaller island near the first. The second island holds no sheep, but rather an enormous tree so filled with white birds that its branches are nearly hidden (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 33-36). Ashe argued that these islands "are almost certainly Streymoy and Vagar in the Faroes,” for the name of this small archipelago to Ireland’s north comes from the Danish word for sheep, and Dicuil associated it with birds, sheep, and Irish settlement (Ashe 87). The relevant passage in Dicuil is particularly interesting because it was based on contemporary accounts, not classical sources:

> There is another set of small 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. (Dicuil 77)

Two decades ago, Jonathan Wooding argued that "Irish activity in this region clearly overlapped with Norse activity and may be influential in the Norse settlement of the Faroes" (Wooding, *Communication* 104). More recently, Wooding was confident enough with the Faroes identification to use it as the basis for dating the *Navigatio*. For Wooding, the size of the sheep on the first island was a significant detail—or more precisely, the reason given for their size. The sheep grow so large because there is no one around to milk them. This indicates, Wooding argued, that the *Navigatio* was composed sometime after the desertion of the Faroes due to Norse raids (18). Based on the records of other raids, Wooding estimated that the *Navigatio* was written after 795 (22). Only a few years have passed since Wooding offered this very plausible hypothesis, so it is still too early to know how well his proposal will hold up. Nevertheless, his analysis clearly indicates the strong resonances between the Faroe Islands, those islands described by Dicuil, and those depicted in the *Navigatio*.

Recent archaeological evidence has verified pre-Norse settlement of the Faroes, although this evidence does not indicate whether or not the settlers were Irish (232).

According to Mike Church and his colleagues in a 2013 article for *Quaternary Science Reviews*, the pre-Norse settlers burned peat and grew barley. The archeologists did not find remains of these earliest settlers homes, though, as those were likely "destroyed by the construction of the later Viking longhouse" (231). However, the archaeological evidence also suggests that Dicuil's clerics had predecessors. Church and his colleagues concluded that settlement of the Faroe Islands occurred "in two separate episodes from the 4th-8th centuries AD" (231). Although these recent discoveries cannot tell us who the pre-Norse settlers were, the second period of settlement appears compatible with Dicuil's literary evidence. If we consider the archaeological evidence alongside Dicuil's testimony, the link between this archipelago and the *Navigatio's* sheep and bird islands is not just plausible, but extremely likely.

Although we cannot fully recreate the experience or worldview of those sailor-monks, modern voyage literature does offer us a boatside sighting of the Faroe Islands. In 1976, Tim Severin and his crew visited the Faroes in their replica curragh, the *Brendan*, while sailing from Ireland to North America. Of his first glimpse of the archipelago, Severin wrote, "*Brendan* was still more than fifty miles from the Faroes, yet we picked out the islands with ease from the tall columns of cloud building up over them, thousands of feet in the air" (Severin 120). We can only speculate about how the first Irish monks to settle these islands would have interpreted such a signal (if the same atmospheric phenomenon occurred in the Middle Ages), but they surely knew of the cloud pillar that led the Israelites through the wilderness in Exodus (Exodus 13:21). However, this element did not make its way into the *Navigatio*, despite, as Giovanni Orlandi noted, numerous parallels between the adventures of Moses in the biblical tale and those of

Brendan in the medieval one (230). This absence may indicate a gap in the author's knowledge about the Faroes, as the cloud pillar would surely have proven a tempting detail. As for the Paradise of Birds, Severin offered this:

> The cloud base rose another thirty or forty feet, and we saw them: thousands upon thousands of seabirds, pouring out from the cliffs of Mykines: gulls, guillemots, razorbills, fulmars, gannets, puffins, skuas, and terns. They came in droves, in squadron after squadron, wheeling and turning, and swooping down toward the queer, lumpy, contorted sea. Driven by primeval experience, they had emerged to fish in the waters at a time when they knew the combination of wind and tide would bring the shoals of fish close to the surface. I was awed. If there was any place which fitted the idea of a Paradise of Birds, this was it. (124)

The *Navigatio's* author most likely did not visit such an island directly, but just as we have Severin's report, he had reports from his own era's sailors to stimulate his imagination. The *Navigatio's* placement of the island-fish Jasconius near these islands may reflect, as Ashe observed, that "whales abound in the waters round the Faroes, even if they seldom behave like Jasconius" (88). Severin watched one such whale "hurtling out of the depths and leaping into the air again and again as if it were a salmon" (124). For medieval monks, whale reports would occupy a mental territory already populated by Jonah's fish and Job's leviathan. Thus the *Navigatio* employs the classical ouroboros motif, as the great fish attempts to touch it tail to its head (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 35).

In the story, Brendan and his monks arrive at the sheep island on Maundy Thursday, celebrate Easter mass on the back of Jasconius, then continue on to the Paradise of Birds (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 44-45). The Faroe Islands offer very solid referents in the real world for these literary locations.

There is another passage from Dicuil, though, that complicates this identification —a direct quotation from the sixth century geographer Priscian: "There is also an island to the left side of the Black Sea, opposite the river Dnieper, which they call White island, since it feeds many birds of snow-white colour. Here, they say, the souls of famous heroes live free from care, a fair reward for virtue" (87-89). The *Navigatio's* birds are also white, unlike the diverse fowl Severin observed, so this Black Sea island deserves closer attention. To understand Priscian's comment, let us look even further back to *On Heroes* by the third century Greek philosopher Flavius Philostratus. In this philosophical dialogue, a vinedresser describes to a Phoenician captain the pastoral afterlives of fallen heroes. The spirits of Achilles and Helen, for example, enjoy a happy, post-mortem marriage on an island sanctuary in the Black Sea. Poseidon created this island, *Leuke*, specifically for their use, as "no land under the sun had been fated for them as an abode for the immortal part of their life" (Philostratus 81-82). This island's name comes from a Greek word for white (Hunter 2510). Priscian (and therefore Dicuil) used the Greek word to name the island, but the Latin *candor* to describe the color of the birds (Dicuil 86-88). This adjective indicates a dazzling whiteness, which is appropriate given the birds mythological status. *Candor* is derivative of the verb *candere* (to shine), as is *candidissimus* (most brilliantly white), the adjective used to describe the birds in the *Navigatio* (Selmer 23). Regarding the *Leuke* birds, Philostratus explained, "They say that

white birds live on this island and that these marine birds smell of the sea. Achilles made them his servants, since they furnish the grove for him with the breeze and rain drops from their wings" (82). Many types of seabirds burrow in guano, which may partly explain their white color in these fictional narratives (Lacapra). The color is also clearly symbolic, though, in both the *Navigatio* and *On Heroes*.

Using the "naturally more precise" description of *Leuke* from Arrian's first century *Voyage Round the Euxine Sea*, classicist Christopher Jones identified the ancient abode of Achilles and Helen with the Black Sea isle now known as Snake Island, upon which "Ukrainian archaeologists have rediscovered the remains of the temple of Achilles" (145). Arrian offered a description of avian activity very close to that of Philostratus, so he is a likely source for the later writer. Intriguingly, Arrian placed several kinds of birds on the island. He claimed that the island itself was white, perhaps referring to the its pale cliffs (Arrian 16-17, Hedreen 320). From Arrian to Philostratus, then, the birds experience a mythic transformation in color. When Dicuil's "very many diverse kinds of sea-birds" on an Atlantic island turn into the *Navigatio's* "white birds," this may reflect the superimposition of the Black Sea island over the north Atlantic one. More precisely, aspects of the former's mythical overlay have been transferred to the latter. The pagan influences are Christianized, of course; the *Navigatio's* birds prove to be angels who sing psalms praising God (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 36-37). We will consider their spiritual nature more carefully in the next chapter. For now, let us simply note that the Paradise of Birds has a primary referent in the north Atlantic, but a secondary one in the Black Sea. With this, we turn from the complex but identifiable Easter archipelago toward a far more opaque Christmastime geography.

After leaving the Paradise of Birds, "the holy father, with his group, was driven here and there for three months over the space of the ocean" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39). The monks do not set foot on another island until autumn, but they then remain there with the Community of Saint Ailbe through Advent and Christmas "until the octave of Epiphany" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 43). Unlike the Faroes at Easter, Saint Ailbe's island resists revealing its real world equivalent. Both Paul Chapman (who speculated that Columbus extracted his route from the *Navigatio*) and Geoffrey Ashe argued that the *Navigatio* depicts islands to the west of the Iberian peninsula and northern Africa (Chapman 175, Ashe 101). Chapman and Ashe both liked the Azores for Brendan's first stop among the southern islands (Chapman 80, Ashe 101). Chapman suggested, "The birds may also have 'told' Brendan to head south in the sense that many of these were migratory sea fowl which had flown north to the Faroes, but went no further" (81). As for St Ailbe's Island itself, Chapman proposed Flores in the western Azores whereas Ashe preferred Madeira (Chapman 85, Ashe 102). Their disagreement, however, indicates that this identification is not as straightforward as the Faroes.

If we turn to Dicuil, he cannot help us choose between these options. Dicuil was apparently unfamiliar with the Azores, writing, "We do not read of islands being found in the sea west or north of Spain" (73). Similarly, his conception of those islands to the west of Africa did not match modern geography: "There are the Fortunate islands, and the Gorgodes, and the Hesperides, and many authors state that these islands lie in the sea west of Africa. The Gorgodes are farther from Africa than the Fortunate, and the Hesperides farther than the Gorgodes" (Dicuil 73). Dicuil suggested a sequence of three archipelagos strung out to the west of Africa (Ashe 137). The closest match we might

find to these are the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, and the Madeira group (unless we swap the Azores for Cape Verde, despite Dicuil's explicit disclaimer). Although Cape Verde is somewhat west of the Canary Islands, it is much farther south than west; Madeira is directly north of the Canary Islands (National Geographic). Therefore, a north-south axis makes far more sense than Dicuil's east-west axis.

According to William Henry Babcock, the Gorgades were identified with the Cape Verde islands during the Renaissance, if not before, and "surviving derivatives of the last eight-century Beatus map also bear the inscription 'Insulae Fortunate' where the Canary Islands should be" (1, 39). Both the Fortunate islands and the Gorgades, though, were mythological locations before becoming associated with fixed places. As Henry Riley noted in his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Gorgades were the dwelling place of gorgons (169). Historian Vincent Cassidy observed that the location of the Fortunate Islands was fluid in antiquity (35). The Hesperides remain mythological, as they have no contemporary geographical referent.

Dicuil's confused reading of his mythologically inflected ancient sources provides a stark contrast to his clear exposition of first-hand accounts. His understanding of the southern Atlantic was, at best, foggy. The identifications proposed by Ashe and Chapman, though, would require the *Navigatio's* anonymous author to have far more precise geographical knowledge of the middle and southern Atlantic than what Dicuil showed in his *Mensura Orbis Terrae* (that is, his measure of the world). Given that the *Navigatio* and Dicuil's *Liber De Mensura Orbis Terrae* were roughly contemporary, we should require very strong evidence before projecting geographical knowledge onto the storyteller that the geographer clearly lacked. Even granting the early medieval deference

to ancient authorities, Dicuil proved more willing to incorporate new information than other geographers of his era (Lozovsky 148-49).

Geoffrey Ashe argued that the lengthy, three month trip to St. Ailbe's island indicates that the author of the *Navigatio* "meant the boat to traverse a vast space of sea" (100). However, there is a very good temporal reason for this narrative decision—to clearly establish the voyage's liturgical pattern. The author's interest in this liturgical pattern is very evident in the text itself, whereas the concern for depicting realistic distances may be a modern projection. Ashe favored a southern direction because the *Navigatio* "says nothing of bad weather or downright contrary winds," but this reads too much into a single sentence's concision (100). Jonathan Wooding argued against the southern hypothesis, for he insisted that aside from "the Island of Grapes," which has a parallel in the more farcical *Voyage of Mael Duin*, "the details of wildlife and geography, whether or not they are entirely fantastic, are consistent with the northern world of monastic islands, concerning ice, volcanoes, sea birds, sheep and sea beasts" (Wooding, "Monastic Voyaging" 237; Oskamp 159). Wooding's critique reframes an earlier declaration by Ashe: "Brendan is either in the general region of the Azores or in a Never-Never-Land with a chance to resemble it—hardly, however, in any other definable place" (Ashe 101-02). This remains true, but with Never-Never-Land as the stronger hypothesis.

The Eastertime visits to the sheep and bird islands and the Christmastime visits to St. Ailbe's island anchor Brendan's voyage to the liturgical calendar. We can clearly identify the former with the Faroes, but St. Ailbe's island lacks a fixed real world referent. These locations parallel each other, so the urge to physically situate both is understandable, especially if "the encounter with the monastic community of Ailbe is one

of the most plausible in the Brendan narrative" (Mackley 131). However, the *Navigatio's* author did not work from modern geography; reports of the Faroes and lore regarding St. Ailbe's island likely proved equally useful as story sources. We should not be surprised to discover, then, that beneath the *Navigatio's* verisimilitude lies a blend of physical and archetypal locations. Not only is the story anchored at Easter and Christmas, but also in the real and the imaginary.

The Narrative Arc

Despite the liturgical cycle noted above, the *Navigatio* still follows Aristotle's basic plot order; it begins at its beginning, ends at its end, and goes through a series of events along the way (Aristotle 41). Before we can consider how these cyclical and linear motions fit together, we must first examine the narrative arc in its own right. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell proposed a sequence of "separation-initiation-return" for heroic journeys: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men" (30). Campbell elaborated the stages of this quest later in his book, but that detailed exposition only partially matches what we find in the *Navigatio*. Nevertheless, the two locations from Campbell's basic description—"the world of common day" and "a region of supernatural wonder"—match Brendan's Irish monastery and the mystery-filled ocean, respectively.

Most of the tale occurs in the second region, though, so let us subdivide it further using the schema theologian Steven Lewis proposed in *Landscape as Sacred Space: Metaphors for the Spiritual Journey*. Lewis offered three landscape metaphors: mountaintops, valleys, and deserts. Mountaintops are where we have our peak experiences, but we cannot live on them. We must bring the mountaintop insights down into our daily lives (Lewis 5-6). Valleys are the place of everyday living, but they too contain the sacred (Lewis 7). Deserts are frequently a place of confusion and struggle (Lewis 8). Within this structure, Brendan's monastery is a spiritual valley, the Land of the Promise is a mountaintop, and the ocean between them is a spiritual desert. As described by Lewis, spiritual valleys correspond to Campbell's "world of common day," whereas mountains and deserts correspond to the "region of supernatural wonder." These three spiritual landscapes also correspond to the three realms of Celtic cosmology—earth, sea, and sky (Mac Mathuna 10). According to linguist John Shaw, the Celts inherited this cosmology from their Indo-European ancestors (52). Yet even if this worldview was not unique to the pre-Christian Celts, it was certainly central to them. This correspondence between the spiritual landscapes and the cosmological realms holds especially well given the association of sea with desert and sky with heaven in medieval Irish thought (Adomnan 225, Mac Mathuna 15). These parallels were probably not intentional on the part of Lewis. He was, however, inspired by other Celtic ideas, like "thin places"—an alternative way of expressing the Otherworld overlay (Lewis 94). As for the *Navigatio*, its narrative arc follows a Christianized version of the tripartite cosmic pattern.

According to Lewis, spiritual valleys invite us to find joy and grace in life's ordinary events. If spiritual mountaintops provide emotional highs, valleys offer a subtler

sense of the sacred (Lewis 62). Brendan's tale begins in a spiritual valley—specifically, his Clonfert monastery in Ireland's County Galway. As a monk, his daily routine is linked to spiritual living. The miracle of Clonfert, for Clonfert means "meadow of miracles" in Irish, is the sacredness of everyday life (Adams 19). For Lewis, the valley offers us a "spiritual home," the necessary, metaphorical balance to a spiritual quest (75). Brendan's story is an adventure, though, so he must explore other terrain. When preparing to leave Ireland,

> He pitched his tent at the edge of a mountain stretching far out into the ocean, in a place called Brendan's Seat, at a point where there was entry for one boat. Saint Brendan and those with him got iron tools and constructed a light boat ribbed with wood and with a wooden frame, as is usual in those parts. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 29)

Richard Mac Cullagh offered a modern parallel to this scene in *The Irish Currach Folk*, when he described "a near-eighty-year-old master currach-builder in his long wooden workshop situated on this fringe of land that points westwards towards America, a professional boat-builder whose father and grandfather were currach-builders too" (125-26). Boatbuilding as a cultural activity extends from Brendan's time to ours, and so falls into the pattern of ordinary life. The *Navigatio* reveals, however, that boats built in ordinary places may launch us into the unknown.

Just as Brendan's monastery functions as a spiritual valley at the beginning of the story, the Land of Promise functions as a spiritual mountaintop at the end. The mountain

metaphor has a Celtic precedent. According to Mary Low, “Mountains and hills were seen as places of theophany where sacred beings had once appeared and might appear again. … [T]he reality of an externally-existing Otherworld or spirit-world was taken for granted in rural Ireland at this time and to some extent is still with us today” (56). Obviously the *Navigatio's* paradise island is not a literal mountain, but it is the place of peak spiritual attainment. Mountaintop spirituality, Lewis argued, is currently the most popular form of spiritual experience. It is characterized by excitement, euphoria, and emotional highs (Lewis 14-15). The danger, though, is that we might never want to come down from the mountaintop, where we should apply its lessons to our daily lives (25).

The dignified tone of the *Navigatio’s* Land of Promise episode may seem a mismatch for the frenzy of a spiritual mountaintop, but Lewis recognized that not everyone experiences a spiritual event the same way. Brendan’s experience was closer to that of Moses, who “learned simply to rest in the presence of God, enter into dialogue about life, and receive assurance before returning to the valley to share some of his experiences about others” (Lewis 15). Like Moses descending the mountain, Brendan returns to his spiritual valley, Clonfert, to share his experiences with the monks who joyfully welcome him (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 64). The angelic youth, before sending Brendan home, not only gestures towards the spiritual valley, but also the spiritual desert. Lewis warned, “One of the great tragedies of an exclusively mountaintop spiritual experience is the loss of the desert as sacred space” (28). However, the youth explains to Brendan that “God wanted to show you his varied secrets of the great ocean” (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 63). We will return to this important phrase in the next chapter, but it clearly honors Brendan’s long voyage through a spiritual desert.

The spiritual desert is a difficult but necessary zone of testing and purification. It disorients, discomforts, and rarely offers a linear path (Lewis 40-41). The cyclical roving of the *Navigatio* suggests the indirect transit that the bewildering desert demands. However, according to Lewis, “At some point in our desert sojourn, the desert blooms. It is transformed from a place of death and desolation, to an environment filled with life and beauty” (59). Similarly, in the *Navigatio* the ocean blooms when its vibrant life reflects the glory of God. There are physical parallels between Brendan's ocean and the desert. Islands function as oases, and warm air hovering over cold water may produce arctic mirages (Severin 180). This association between desert and ocean predates the *Navigatio.* In Adomnan’s *Life of Columba* the monk Cormac “sought with great labour not less than three times a desert in the ocean, and yet found none” because his traveling companion neglected to obtain his abbot’s permission to leave (225). According to Adomnan, Columba intervened with both earthly and divine powers to protect Cormac during these voyages (441, 447). During one voyage, Cormac’s ship was blown “towards the region of the northern sky … beyond the range of human exploration” (Adomnan 443-45). Columba, however, perceiving their danger, triggered a rescue wind through intercessory prayer (Adomnan 445-47).

Adomnan used *heremus*, a loan word from Greek, interchangeably with the more common Latin word *desertum*, but both words indicate a wilderness or deserted place (Adomnan 224, 440; Lewis and Short 654). This reflects the blend of eastern and western Christian influences on Irish monasticism. In "Irish Voyages and Visions: Pre-figuring, Re-configuring Utopia," literary critic Tom Moylan noted that the *Navigatio* and related works “were inspired by the successful desert practices of the Egyptian 'Desert Fathers'

… who had retreated to the nearby wilderness to find refuge, silence, and holiness" (243). Similarly, in *Celtic Spirituality*, Oliver Davies observed that "the Celtic hagiographical tradition" combined an "ascetical monasticism" influenced by the Egyptian desert traditions with a "magical potency" rooted in pre-Christian folklore (26). The *Navigatio*, then, represents a healthy engagement with the spiritual desert as a necessary and valuable stage in life's journey.

We can further clarify the *Navigatio's* structure using J. S. Mackley's *The Legend of Saint Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions*, in which Mackley modified Tzvetan Todorov's typology of the fantastic. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov used three categories—uncanny, fantastic, and marvelous—to describe mysterious events. According to Todorov, the fantastic "lasts only as long as a certain hesitation" in which both "reader and character" decide whether the events of a story fit within "the laws of reality" or not (41). If the story, however strange, allows for a realistic explanation, then it is "uncanny." If it requires a supernatural explanation, the work is "marvelous" (Todorov 41). Mackley used these categories to map the *Navigatio's* plot, but added "the mundane" and "beyond comprehension" in order to better fit the tale (6). These last two categories correspond to the valley and mountaintop portions of the tale, whereas Todorov's original trio fits the desert portion. To summarize the associations, Campbell's "world of common day" corresponds to Lewis's valley, Mackley's "mundane," the Celtic earth, and the *Navigatio's* Clonfert monastery. Campbell's "region of supernatural wonder" corresponds to Lewis's mountaintop and desert. The mountaintop corresponds to Mackley's "beyond comprehension," the Celtic sky, and the *Navigatio's* Land of

Promise. The desert corresponds to Todorov's uncanny-fantastic-marvelous, the Celtic sea, and the *Navigatio's* ocean. We can visualize these associations using the following chart:

Navigatio	Monastery	Ocean (Liturgical Cycle)	Land of Promise
Celtic Cosmology (Mac Mathúna/Shaw)	Land	Sea	Sky
Steven Lewis	Valley	Desert	Mountaintop
J. S. Mackley/ Tzvetan Todorov	Mundane	Uncanny | Fantastic | Marvelous	Beyond Comprehension
Joseph Campbell	World of Common Day	Region of Supernatural Wonder	

As the chart indicates, the desert/ocean (the largest portion of the tale) completely contains the Easter to Christmas liturgical cycle. If we imagine a ship sailing into a whirlpool, circling around and around, then finally sailing out again, this suggests how linear and cyclical time fit together in the *Navigatio*. Alternatively, we can think of the recurring cycle of the seasons, whereas each year passes, never to return. Time is also mapped onto space, as the Easter and Christmas islands indicate. As Moylan observed, "While the cyclical pattern of the episodes moves through recurring descriptions of the ambience of the islands, the behaviour of the creatures, and the religious practices of the monks, the linear sequence takes Brendan and his monks—and the reader—toward the

geosophical climax on the Promised Land" (251). Sacred time and sacred geography come together in the *Navigatio*, as do Christian and Celtic influences. This complex layering reflects both Lozovky's sacred geography and Siewer's Otherworld overlay. Thus we have a liturgical order embedded within a heroic adventure.

Todorov's model, Mackley observed, designates supernatural events that fall outside the reader's worldview as "marvelous." However, because Todorov wrote with a modern context in mind, his model does not account for supernatural events that fit within a reader's worldview (Mackley 176). For this, Mackley proposed the category of "beyond comprehension." Although the chart above segregates Mackley's "beyond comprehension" from Todorov's categories, for Mackley they could blur together (176). Mackley applied this to the *Navigatio's* Crystal Column episode, which scholars have interpreted as an encounter with an iceberg since the nineteenth century. Conversely, Mackley suggested that the column was inspired by the front of an ice shelf, with "the caverns in the structure … caused by erosion in the ice by tidal forces" (179). Regardless of whether the column reflected an iceberg or an ice shelf, Mackley argued that a natural phenomenon with a supernatural gloss should be "fantastic-uncanny." Yet the story presents it as a divine mystery, and therefore "beyond comprehension" (Mackley 180).

According to Mackley, this episode is part of a sequence of "divine and diabolical marvels" that Saint Brendan and his monks must pass through before finally reaching Paradise (175, 177). As is appropriate for non-Manichean theology, Paradise lies beyond the oceanic tug-of-war between good and evil. O'Loughlin noted that the medieval Irish "seem to have appreciated … that heaven and hell are not symmetrical either as human destinies or as objects of human knowledge" (*Celtic Theology* 186). The chart above

reflects this, as does Mackley's observation that the Paradise river prevents Saint Brendan "from seeing more than he can comprehend," thus forcing him "to acknowledge the limitations of his understanding and return to Ireland" (Mackley 62). Brendan may glimpse what lies beyond human comprehension in the ocean (desert), but the incomprehensibility of Paradise (mountaintop) surpasses even the ocean's marvels. Perhaps nothing illustrates this so effectively as the mappability of Hell's mouth versus the concealment of Paradise. As such, let us give these two locations closer attention.

Hell and Paradise

From the Crystal Column, Saint Brendan and his monks sail into a volcanic region. The wind blows them near an island of monstrous smiths. When these "fiery and dark" smiths see the small boat, they bombard it with burning slag (Davies 182). The last image of the island is particularly volcanic: "It looked as if the whole island was ablaze, like one big furnace, and the sea boiled, just as a cooking pot full of meat boils when it is well plied with fire" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 55). Brendan then warns his monks that they are near the boundary of Hell. Soon thereafter, they reach a tall, smoky mountain. Here, the hellish nature of the region is reinforced when demons carry off one of the late-coming monks. This episode also ends with a volcanic image: "The whole mountain from the summit right down to the sea looked like one big pyre" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 56). As with the Crystal Column, Mackley observed that the "defamiliarization of the volcano" transforms a natural phenomenon into a supernatural one; he further noted that

"the natural exotica were at the periphery of human understanding, as there was a widespread medieval belief that volcanoes represented an entrance to hell" (188).

Regarding the location of these volcanoes, Geoffrey Ashe placed the first on the coast of Iceland, and identified the second with Jan Mayen, an island-mountain "in the desolate seas between Norway and Greenland" (90, 109). Although Jan Mayen is a good physical match for the *Navigatio's* second volcano, it is farther away than the story suggests. We must remember, though, that the *Navigatio's* narrative space is not identical to our physical space. Locations inspired by Iceland and Jan Mayen could have drifted towards each other in the author's imagination. Alternatively, from a sufficient distance Iceland's Mount Snaefellsjökull, whose white peak Severin called "the beacon for our arrival," also resembles a solitary mountain in the ocean (160). Narrative transformation does not require a perfect match. According to the Smithsonian Institution's Global Volcanism Program, neither Jan Mayen nor Snaefellsjökull were active during the early medieval period. However, several Icelandic volcanoes were, including a very active Hekla. Even if we cannot identify the exact peaks and eruptions that inspired the *Navigatio*, this is most likely the correct region.

Unlike the Azores, there is strong supporting evidence for Irish activity in the Icelandic region during the early medieval period. Dicuil noted that "farthest Thule" was variously described in his sources as "six days sail to the north of Britain" or as "the farthest island of the ocean, lying between north and west beyond Britain" (75). The first reported voyage to Thule was that of the Greek explorer Pytheas, who sailed north from Britain into the Arctic over two millennia ago. For centuries, geographers and historians have tried to determine the exact location of Thule (McGhee 23). Although Iceland is a

popular choice, archaeologist Robert McGhee preferred the Orkney Islands, the Shetland Islands, or Norway for Thule, as Iceland "was almost certainly uninhabited" when Pytheas made his journey (McGhee 23-24). However, we do not need to determine the place Pytheas visited, but rather Dicuil's location for Thule. For the latter, Iceland appears likely. Dicuil wrote,

> It is now thirty 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 in such a way that there was no darkness … [T]hose authors are wrong and give wrong information, who have written that the sea will be solid about Thule … But one day's sail north of that they did find the sea frozen over. (75)

We must consider, of course, that the earlier authors gave the "wrong information" because they were describing a different place entirely. Regardless, Dicuil appeared to describe Irish activity in Iceland, and his geography fit with Severin's account. Severin worried about being blown off course to the north of Iceland, despite having sufficient supplies, for even in summer there might have been sea ice around Greenland (154).

Alongside Dicuil's textual evidence, we should consider archeologist Kristján Ahronson's recent, tentative conclusions in *Into the Ocean: Vikings, Irish, and Environmental Change in Ireland and the North*. While examining landscape changes in southwestern Iceland, Ahronson acknowledged the "archaeological invisibility of

Dicuil's eighth-century Gaelic clerics," at least compared to the clear ecological footprint of Norse farmers (99). However, Ahronson also analyzed crosses carved into the stone walls of caves and alcoves, the caves being in southern Iceland and the alcoves on the Westman Islands. He concluded that these "rock-cut crosses" constituted "a coherent sculptural tradition" (Ahronson 148-49). After comparing these carvings to other Norse and Irish crosses, Ahronson determined that their closest match was "the pre-Viking age sculpture of western Scotland," which would connect the Icelandic crosses to Irish monastic travels (199, 203). He estimated, based partly on debris analysis, that one artificial cave with such crosses was constructed around 800 CE (Ahronson 127). If this is true, then the Icelandic region could certainly have served as the primary referent for the *Navigatio's* hellish episodes.

As we saw with the Paradise of Birds, though, the *Navigatio's* geography is not identical to real world geography. Although the Faroes are the primary referent for the Easter sequence, elements of Achilles and Helen's Black Sea abode are superimposed over the Atlantic archipelago. The same may be true of the Icelandic region. Medievalist Margaret Burrell observed that the *Navigatio* appears to describe an underwater volcano when a lump of burning slag hits the ocean: "Then the sea, where it fell, began to boil, as if a volcano were erupting there. The smoke rose from the sea as from a fiery furnace" (Burrell 40; O'Meara, "Latin Version" 55). However, after consulting the estimated dates for medieval volcanic activity around Iceland, Burrell could not find a plausible source for the *Navigatio's* undersea eruption (52-53). The story's fictional geography, though, would certainly accommodate a volcano relocated from another part of the physical

globe. Indeed, Iceland's propensity for volcanic activity could have made it a narrative magnet for such elements.

After looking farther afield for "a submarine eruption resulting in a new island," Burrell did find a Mediterranean possibility—the 726 eruption of Santorini in Greece (42). The story of Santorini could certainly have reached Ireland by the time of the *Navigatio's* composition. Not only would "the flourishing network of Irish-founded monastic houses … have provided a ready conduit" for the news of the Mediterranean volcano, but such an event could very easily have captured the medieval imagination (Burrell 42). Indeed, Burrell argued that it "must have been the subject of oral tales and fearful interpretations," which is certainly credible given the medieval association between volcanoes and Hell (42). If Burrell's hypothesis is correct, then the *Navigatio* overlays onto the northern Atlantic not only a Black Sea island, but also a Mediterranean volcano. Locations in the *Navigatio* may have both major and minor referents in our physical world, precluding an exact correspondence between our geography and that of the tale. Despite this, the very verisimilitude of the *Navigatio's* geography testifies to its anonymous author's fascination with the natural world. This inexact match between literary and real world geographies is hardly unique to medieval literature. Bertrand Westphal found similar phenomena in works by William Shakespeare and Enrico Brizzi, prompting Westphal to observe, "When such interference or blurring occurs, the connection between reality and fiction becomes precarious. The referent becomes a springboard from which the fiction launches itself" (104).

This instability of reference intensifies when the *Navigatio* moves from Hell to Paradise. According to Lozovsky, both the literal and allegorical approaches to Scripture

were firmly entrenched in the early church, so Paradise might simultaneously be understood as a spiritual symbol and a physical place (51). Certain theologians might favor one option or the other, but it was quite possible for a literary work like the *Navigatio* to hold the two understandings together in creative tension. Lozovsky noted that Paradise or Eden in medieval geography was most often placed in the far East, beyond India; Paradise was inaccessible, but nevertheless produced the rivers that water the world (59-60). An alternative tradition insisted that Jerusalem was built on the original location of Paradise (Lozovsky 61). The medieval superimposition of literal and allegorical understandings of Paradise came close to Siewers' Otherworld overlay, for as Lozovsky explained, "The terrestrial Paradise could easily turn into a celestial one; the latter lent additional holiness to an already holy place" (53). Dicuil, however, followed neither the tradition that placed Paradise east of India nor the one that associated it with Jerusalem. Paradise made no appearance in his *Liber de Mensura*, and he only briefly mentioned Jerusalem while discussing the course of the Nile (Dicuil 63). Thus when Brendan reaches the Promised Land of the Saints, he has sailed beyond Dicuil's world.

If we turn from Dicuil to Britain's Bede, however, we find some useful ideas. Lozovsky noted that Bede pushed Paradise farther East than even the edge of Asia, suggesting that it lay instead across an ocean (55). As Columbus famously understood, on a round globe, farthest east must eventually merge with farthest west. Perhaps this lent credence to the notion of a Promised Land reachable from Ireland (Cassidy 36). Bede also infused his descriptions of Ireland and England with paradisiacal resonances. He wrote of Ireland,

> Snow rarely lies longer than three days, so there is no need to store hay in summer for winter use or build stables for beasts. There are no reptiles, and no snake can exist there … In fact, almost everything on this isle confers immunity to poison … The island abounds in milk and honey, and there is no lack of vines, fish, and birds. (Bede 39-40)

Bede used such imagery to situate his English church, narratively and geographically, within a larger sacred history that "manifested through places as well as events" (Lozovsky 94). Bede's description of Ireland seems more fantastic than the *Navigatio's* understated description of Paradise, but they both draw from the same tradition. When the monks reach the Promised Land of Saints in the *Navigatio*,

> They saw a wide land full of trees bearing fruit as in autumn time. When they had gone in a circle around that land, night had still not come on them. They took what fruit they wanted and drank from the wells and so for the space of forty days they reconnoitred the whole land and could not find the end of it. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63).

As Wooding pointed out, the fruit trees, gems, and endless day all echo the New Jerusalem ("Location" 97). O'Loughlin also considered this Promised Land a manifestation of the New Jerusalem, and identified the island's perpetual light with "the uncreated light of Christ" (*Celtic Theology* 188-89, 196). Indeed, O'Loughlin argued that

if the light truly shines all around, then it should not cast a shadow, as the light would be equal from all sides (*Celtic Theology* 194). No purely physical light has this quality.

As both Bede and the *Navigatio* attest, the insular medieval Christians perceived Paradise to be both near at hand and nearly inaccessible. Wooding investigated the precise location of Paradise in the medieval Irish imagination. He explained,

> The ultimate destination of the *Nauigatio* and other monastic voyage tales … is not what we would regard in modern terms as a geographical location, but a destination derived from elements of biblical, patristic and possibly native cosmology. Its "location" is nonetheless able to be placed on the mental map of monks who wrote particular works. (Wooding, "Location" 95-96)

Early in the *Navigatio*, Barrind, Brendan's visitor, mentions a stone mountain (*mons lapidis*) while describing his voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints (Selmer 4). The Irish for "stone mountain" is *sliabh liag*, leading Wooding and others to identify this with County Donegal's Slieve League, famous for its great cliffs ("Location" 100). O'Meara followed this identification when he used "Slieve League" in his translation, whereas Davies more cautiously chose "rocky mountain" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 26, Davies 155). This identification is strengthened through a comparison to other texts of the period. Wooding observed, "Whether or not the author of the *Navigatio* intended his *mons lapidis* to be understood as Slieve League, there can be no doubt that this was the intent of the author of *Vita s. Munnu*" ("Location" 102). Although monastic texts from

the *Navigatio's* era described islands that were deep in the ocean, these texts frequently placed Paradise near Ireland ("Location" 95). Thus, far from being a scribal error as Severin hypothesized, the eastward direction of the *Navigatio's* final leg toward Paradise fits with a broader tradition (Severin 276). As Wooding argued, "East is a sacred direction, but, more fundamentally, if the other islands visited by Brendan are understood to be located deep in the ocean, his return journey is in the direction of Ireland" ("Location" 105). If Wooding's hypothesis is correct, this indicates a further divergence between the *Navigatio's* geography and ours. Brendan and his monks leave from the Paradise of Birds when they sail "for forty days towards the east" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 62). The Faroe Islands, however, are directly north of Ireland. It is plausible, though, that the *Navigatio's* author did not know the precise location of the Faroes, but rather drew creatively from a body of tales about islands out in the Atlantic.

Despite its location close to Ireland, we will not find a real world referent for The Promised Land of the Saints on any modern map. As Wooding noted, "It is not what we would regard in modern terms as a geographical location" ("Location" 95). Unlike Saint Ailbe's Island, this unmappability is not due to a gap between the medieval imagination and modern geography. Rather, it is implicit in the tale's theology. The island is literally shrouded. Early in the *Navigatio*, the abbot Barrind recounts his own journey to the Paradise. He describes a dense fog that even obscures the ends of his small boat. When he reaches the Promised Land, though, a bright light dispels the fog (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 27). These details recur at the end of the tale when Brendan's boat passes through the same fog (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). As Mackley noted, Saint Brendan and his monks neither find nor penetrate the mystical fog unassisted; piety alone is

insufficient. Crossing the threshold of Paradise requires a special act of grace, and the steward who guides them embodies this (Mackley 225). This contrasts strongly with the mouth of Hell, which Brendan stumbles across during the "desert" portion of his journey, and which has a clear geographical association.

Although close again to Ireland, the monks must sail beyond this world's limits to reach Paradise. They pass through a liminal zone that "is neither air nor water, yet composed of both" to fully enter the Otherworld, for the Land of Promise is an Otherworld as surely as Bran's Land of Women (Mackley 226). This echoes the impassable barrier Pytheas encountered when he sailed north—a mixture of land, sea, and air, according to the ancient geographer Strabo, "which you can neither walk nor sail upon" (399). The three realms of Celtic cosmology collide in this description, making the underlying natural phenomenon difficult to recognize. The suspension of "time and space" that O'Loughlin recognized in the *Navigatio's* "veil of fog" echoes the older Celtic mythology, but the theologian noted the threshold's Christian symbolism, for crossing it is "analogous to moving from the earthly to the heavenly Jerusalem" (*Celtic Theology* 194). This supernatural barrier makes it possible to conceal Paradise anywhere; therefore, it can be simultaneously inaccessible and close to home. The *Navigatio's* author found it unnecessary to create an enormous physical distance between Ireland and Paradise, for all physical distances pale compared to the spiritual distance between Earth and Heaven. If we draw near the divine, or if the divine draws near us, the tale suggests, it is only through God's grace.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a lot of territory (both literally and metaphorically), so a summary is in order. As Westphal argued, there is a real but inexact relationship between the geographies of fictional works and their real world referents (87). The reference-referent relationship, like literary works themselves, is cultural. We can better understand this relationship in the *Navigatio* by placing the tale in the context of both early medieval geographical thought and the *imramma* genre. As Natalia Lozovsky explained, medieval geographers believed that knowledge of the created world could contribute to a better understanding of God (156). Just as the allegorical meaning of scripture could overlay the literal meaning, so could the heavenly Paradise overlay the earthly Paradise (Lozovsky 53). Alfred Siewers explored the Otherworld overlay in the medieval Irish *imramma* genre. The overlay is particularly prominent in the *Voyage of Bran* when the sea god Manannan mac Lir describes the ocean as a flowery plain. Siewers recognized that this genre drew on both Celtic pagan and Christian antecedents; the Celtic sea god foretells the coming of Christ, revealing the cultural hybridity of both the tale and its genre ("Desert Islands" 41-42).

As multiple scholars have observed, Brendan's travels are synced to the liturgical calendar. In particular, Brendan visits the same islands every Christmas and Easter (O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* 178; Plummer 5; Bray 178). Thus sacred time sanctifies space. This liturgical cycle, however, is overlaid on a linear narrative arc (Moylan 250). The tale begins in the mundane world, to use Mackley's terminology—or to use that of Lewis, a spiritual valley (Mackley 6, Lewis 7). It then moves into a spiritual desert, for the association between desert and ocean dates back at least to Adomnan's *Life of*

Columba (Lewis 97, Adomnan 225). At the end of the *Navigatio*, Paradise functions as a spiritual mountaintop that is "beyond comprehension" (Lewis 5, Mackley 6). The bulk of the tale occurs in the desert/ocean, where we find both Todorov's progression of uncanny-fantastic-marvelous and the aforementioned liturgical cycle (Mackley 171-72). As suggested above, the overall flow of the tale is somewhat like that of a ship that sails into a whirlpool, circles around, then sails out again.

Four locations, in particular, are useful for mapping the reference-referent relationship in the *Navigatio*. The islands Brendan visits around Easter are clearly the Faroes, but Snake Island in the Black Sea is likely a secondary referent for the Paradise of Birds (Wooding, "Date" 15-18). This reminds us that the narrative world is not identical to our own, and this reminder is reinforced by the ambiguous location of the island where Brendan spends Christmas. Thus the liturgical cycle at the center of the tale is anchored in both the real and the imaginary. Brendan encounters the mouth of Hell in the latter part of the tale's desert section. Iceland provides a real world referent for the *Navigatio's* hellish volcanoes, but Santorini in Greece provides a likely secondary referent (Burrell 42). Paradise, despite its narrative location off the coast of Ireland, cannot be found in our physical world (Wooding, "Location" 95). This is theologically appropriate; the fog that conceals the island in the *Navigatio* suggests divine transcendence (Mackley 225). Overall, the verisimilitude of the *Navigatio's* locations indicates a fascination with the natural world, but we have not yet carefully examined this attitude toward nature. Therefore, an exploration of the tale's environmental spirituality must be the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Environmental Spirituality

Storytellers and critics have different tasks. The former weave spells; the latter untangle them. These different tasks often require different forms. This chapter's narrative analysis starts near the beginning of the *Navigatio* and finishes at the end, but in between proceeds thematically rather than chronologically. The themes highlighted below—self-restraint, nature's liturgy, and the problem of evil—are quite appropriately woven together in the original story. By untangling them, though, we can clarify the story's environmental spirituality. Admittedly, "environmental spirituality" is a modern concept. There was no exact medieval equivalent for "environment" or "ecology." As botanist Peter Ayres noted in his biography of Arthur Tansley, one of the founders of scientific ecology, "The roots of scientific ecology are to be found in the 18th and 19th centuries" (16). Defining "ecology," even in a modern context, "has proved endlessly debatable, largely because of ecology's mixed parentage, arising as it did out of biology, geology, and geography" (Ayres 15). "Creation" was a medieval concept, but "creation theology" does not automatically convey care for the natural world, as theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou recognized when he called for "a more positive understanding of created nature" in Orthodox creation theology (120). Any choice of phrase, then, is unavoidably approximate.

In this chapter the focus shifts from geography to characters and actions, for the *Navigatio's* attitude toward the natural world is often expressed through the actions and statements of both Brendan and other characters. Although this chapter and the previous one are largely independent, Kenneth Burke's "Definition of Man" from *Language as*

Symbolic Action can help us identify resonances that smooth out the transition. Bertrand Westphal commented on the problem of referentiality with an eye toward geography, but Burke came close to the same concept while considering what if means for our species to be the "symbol-using animal" (Westphal 108, Burke 5). Burke noted,

> Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so 'down to earth' as the relative position of the seas and continents? ... [H]owever important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbol systems. (5)

Burke was not denying the existence of the external world, or in Westphal's terms, the referent. Rather, he claimed that words are both "a link between us and the nonverbal" and "a screen between us and the nonverbal" while acknowledging that "much of the 'we' that is separated from the nonverbal … would not even exist were it not for the verbal" (Burke 5). Our powerful capacity for symbolism, then, is clearly related to Westphal's problem of reference and Alfred Siewers' Otherworld overlay (Westphal 87; Siewers "Desert Islands" 36). Burke suggested just such a relationship when he warned that "an 'ideology' is like a god coming down to earth, where it will inhabit a place pervaded by its presence" but also "like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways" (6). The ideology or screen or overlay can manifest both through geography and through characters. The former was the focus of the previous chapter, the latter the focus of this one.

This verbal or symbolic screen can be useful, as Burke illustrated using a geographical example: “A road map that helps us easily find our way from one side of the continent to the other owes its great utility to its exceptional existential poverty. It tells us absurdly little about the trip that is to be experienced in a welter of detail” (Burke 5). If the symbolic screen allows us to strip away layers of meaning through abstraction, though, it also allows us to superimpose new layers of meaning onto what already exists. The *Navigatio* remains fascinating due to its multiple layers. We hear an echo of Burke's road journey in Barbara Hillers commentary on the *immram* genre:

> The entire voyage takes place at sea, which is in itself already a liminal, and certainly a perilous place. The sea is the perfect betwixt-between; it touches heaven and earth, and stretches from the known world of the Western Irish coastline into the unknown. Humans can use the ocean surface like a road, but its surface is particularly untrustworthy, offering what one might call 'open access' to the otherworld. (66)

The liminality that Hillers and others perceived in the *immram* genre, Burke identified with our fundamental human nature. We are, Burke contended, a blend of “animality” and “symbolicity” (6).

Two other aspects of Burke’s “definition of man” resonate with the themes of this chapter—namely, that humans are “moralized by the negative” and “moved by the a sense of order” (16). According to Burke negation “is solely a product of human symbol systems” (9). He noted, for example, that our language allows us to clarify that a

thermometer does not show a specific temperature. Burke argued, though, that "there's no such thing as it's simply *not* being 54; it *is* 53, or 55, or whatever" (Burke 9-10). The negative, for Burke, provided a foundation for both law and morality by introducing the principle of restraint. He recognized monasticism as a prime example of this, Burke wrote, "One can appreciate the situation most readily by thinking of monastic discipline. The day may be filled with a succession of positive acts. Yet they are ultimately guided or regulated by a series of proscriptive principles, involving acquiescence to vows consciously and conscientiously taken" (11). Given the heightened monastic concern for discipline, it makes sense that an ethic of restraint would be extended to the natural world in at least some monastic literature. The *Navigatio* exemplifies this, as this chapter will make clear.

Burke also claimed that humans are "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)" (16). Due to social differentiation, "King and peasant are 'mysteries' to each other. Those 'Up' are guilty of not being 'Down,' those 'Down' are certainly guilty of not being 'Up'" (Burke 15). This ordered hierarchy may be cosmically projected. Burke wrote, "The medieval pageant probably represents the perfection of this design. All the various 'mysteries' were represented, each distinct from all the others, yet all parts of the same overarching order" (16). In one of the founding documents of the environmental humanities, historian Lynn White, Jr. connected this hierarchical worldview to a mechanistic philosophy that permitted the exploitation and degradation of nature (26-27). Although controversial, White's hypothesis has proven an important stimulus for eco-theology. The eco-theologian Sallie McFague was particularly concerned with reframing the medieval natural order in a more horizontal, democratic

manner (51). To use Burke's terms, she sought an ecological "sense of order" that did not depend upon "the spirit of hierarchy."

In the *Navigatio*, Brendan and his monks are not only moved by a sense of cosmic order and hierarchy, but they physically move through that order. As Westphal put it, "Brendan sailed amid the waves of an unknown sea as a space governed by the liturgical calendar" (58). Since we considered the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography in the last chapter, this chapter will focus on the ethic of restraint that permeates the tale's cosmic order. In particular, we will explore the importance of water, the role of animals, and the vision of Paradise on Earth. This chapter, however, does not propose a constructive eco-theology, but rather an ecocritical reading that uses eco-theology as the rhetorical screen. This deserves some clarification.

Good literary criticism rests on three foundations: close reading, attention to context, and honesty regarding one's own critical perspective. A Peter Barry noted in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, "'English studies' is founded on the notion of close reading, and while there was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when this idea was frequently disparaged, it is undoubtedly true that nothing of interest can happen in this subject without close reading" (4). The short-lived rebellion against close reading challenged an earlier orthodoxy that downplayed context and critical theory (Barry 17). Literary critics realized, though, that these emphases were not exclusive. The importance of close reading for literary scholarship is almost self-evident. How can one adequately analyze a text without paying careful attention to its contents? The importance of context is nearly as easy to grasp. By understanding the culture, historical period, and literary influences that shaped a text, we can achieve a more

complete understanding of the text itself. The previous chapter provides an example of this.

The third foundation of good literary criticism—honesty regarding one's own critical perspective—is less intuitive. The twentieth century advocates of "pure" close reading, Barry argued, read literature through the lens of a particular moral vision—but they presented their work as unfiltered and non-ideological (16, 31). This misrepresented both the act of reading and the nature of literature. A literary narrative is not an instruction manual; there are multiple, plausible interpretations of every literary text. A particular critical approach may illuminate possibilities that a different approach would overlook. Critics, of course, must still take care to respect the integrity of their texts. A critic, otherwise, might hammer a text into an inauthentic shape to better fit that critic's guiding theory. Close reading and attention to context help guard against this.

With this in mind, let us consider the approach suggested above—an ecocritical reading that uses eco-theology as the rhetorical screen (or critical lens). As Peter Barry observed, there is "no universally accepted model" for ecocriticism "that we have merely to learn and apply" (257-58). Rather, ecocritics unabashedly raid the cupboards of other schools of criticism and even other disciplines for anything that might serve as a useful screen. Ecocritics recycle. This ecocritical reading of the *Navigatio* highlights both behaviors and attitudes in the medieval text that resonate with modern environmental thought. This text, though, is a Christian monastic narrative. As such, Christian eco-theology is particularly useful as a screen. The Brendan legend, however, remains our primary focus. As such, this chapter does not attempt a full survey of eco-theology, but rather draws certain voices out from that conversation that are helpful for reading the

Navigatio. Most of these voices are significant eco-theologians. Occasionally, however, the perspectives of lesser-known scholars prove uniquely applicable to the medieval text. Using this basic method, then, we will examine episodes grouped according to the previously mentioned themes—the importance of water, the role of animals, and the vision of Paradise on Earth. Episodes involving potable water tend to strongly emphasize restraint, so let us examine these first.

Water and Self-Restraint

"Water, water every where," laments Coleridge's ancient Mariner, "Nor any drop to drink" (223). The *Navigatio* suggests that this ironic predicament—water abundant, potable water absent—was familiar to medieval Irish voyagers. The medieval tale pays consistent attention to water sources, and this is rooted both in the practical needs of ocean voyagers and in ancient spiritual tropes. As the hydrologist Francis Chapelle pointed out in *Wellsprings: A Natural History of Bottled Spring Waters*, religious associations with wells and springs predate Christianity's arrival in Britain and Ireland (23). Rather than abolish this connection, early Christians, including Ireland's Saint Columba, sought to "shift the worship away from pagan water deities and focus it instead on God" (Chapelle 24). Natural springs, Chapelle noted, are often a very clean water source—and as with deep wells, the water's origin is hidden from view. Thus the "traditional mythologies that surround wells and springs" are likely rooted in "this combination of necessity and mystery" (Chapelle 25).

Indeed, when an ethic of restraint asserts itself in the *Navigatio*, water is often involved. Consider the first island that Brendan and his monks visit. After sailing for forty days, they have run out of supplies. They cannot find a place to land on the "rocky and high" island, but do observe "a high cliff like a wall and various streams flowing down from the top of the island into the sea" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 30). The monks attempt to capture some of the fresh water, but Brendan chastises them, saying,

> Do not do that. What you are doing is foolish. God does not yet show us a place to land, and do you want to be guilty of plundering? The Lord Jesus Christ after three days will show his servants a landing-place and a place to stay, so that our harassed bodies will be restored. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 30)

This caution against "plundering" has not always survived the process of translation. For example, a Middle English version of the Brendan legend, although based on the *Navigatio*, offers this abbreviated description of the approach to the island: "And they sawe a grete rocke of stone appere above alle the water, and thre dayes they saylled aboute it or they coude get into the place; but at the last by the pourveaunce of God (*divine providence*) they fonde a lytel haven and there wente alonde everychone" (Barron 330). The *Navigatio's* warning was extraneous for the Renaissance translator, but it is quite significant for an ecocritical approach to the story.

Centuries later, a similar sentiment to the *Navigatio's* can be found in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*: "This sister [earth] now cries out

to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will" (145). Admittedly, the repetition of "plunder" is an artifact of the English translations. The *Navigatio* uses the Latin noun *rapina*, but the Latin version of *Laudato Si'* uses the verb *vastare* rather than *rapina's* parallel—*rapere* (Selmer 13, vatican.va). Nevertheless, the sentiment resonates even if the word choice differs. These reprimands by the saint and the pope suggest that the natural world is not simply a resource to exploit for human utility, but has value independent of human needs. Of course, the level of ecological harm that the pope criticized, including water-related harm, was unknown to the *Navigatio's* author. The Catholic theologian Sean McDonagh, in his commentary on *Laudato Si'*, pointed out the incongruity between water as a cleansing symbol of life and water's polluted condition in much of the world (84). When we look at the excerpts from the *Navigatio* and *Laudato Si'* together, though, both clearly attribute an integrity to the created world that demands human restraint.

Restraint is certainly not a surprising theme in a work of monastic literature. Furthermore, there may be an innate potential within monasticism to pair an ethic of restraint with respect for the natural world. The ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Ruether certainly thought so. According to Reuther, early monasticism sought to restore the prelapsarian harmony of creation. Furthermore, the monastic ethos of restraint, she argued, runs counter to our current, ecologically destructive consumerist ethos (Reuther 228). Saint Francis of Assisi, in particular, has become an environmental icon since Lynn White Jr. nominated him as "a patron saint for ecologists" nearly half a century ago (30). Pope Francis even declared his namesake the "example par excellence of care for the

vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically" (150). As Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben noted, an ethic of restraint inspired the attempt by early Franciscans to renounce all property rights in favor of usufruct rights. Agamben observed,

> Use, being opposed in this way to the right of ownership, is not, however, in any way defined. It is not surprising, moreover, that … Hugh can present the Franciscan condition, even if perhaps ironically, in juridical terms, as the right to have no rights. … The Friars Minor, who have devoted themselves to following Christ in extreme poverty, had consequently renounced any right of ownership, while preserving, however, the use of things that others conceded to them. (124)

Similarly, Pope Francis asserted, "The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (151). This certainly reinforces Burke's claim that monasticism exemplified the moralizing power of the negative. Perhaps Brendan does not assert "the right to have no rights," but there is a sympathetic resonance between the values expressed in the *Navigatio* and those expressed by the friars several centuries later.

Brendan's monks finally land on the island, and a small dog leads them to a hall where they find a meal mysteriously prepared for them. Brendan's mealtime prayer, based on Psalm 136, is traditional: "Give praise to the God of Heaven who gives food to

all flesh" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 31). This invocation of divine care for all creatures, though, reinforces the sentiment of Brendan's earlier admonition. Brendan does not praise God for providing the natural world as a source to satisfy human needs. Instead, he praises God for looking after all creatures. He recognizes in non-human creatures an integrity that does not depend on God's relationship with humanity. Psalm 104 contains a longer version of the sentiment expressed in this mealtime prayer:

> Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
> creeping things innumerable are there,
> living things both small and great.
> There go the ships,
> and the Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
> These all look to you
> to give them their food in due season;
> when you give to them, they gather it up
> when you open your hands, they are filled with good things. (Psalm 104: 24-28)

In her book *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, eco-theologian Elizabeth Johnson examined Psalm 104, which "uses the diversity of species, including humans, to bless the extravagant greatness of God who creates and provides" (273). Within Psalm 104, she argued, humanity is not set above the rest of creation. Instead, the psalm emphasizes that all creatures, including humans, depend on that which God provides. If

there is a nod to human uniqueness, Johnson contended, it is the fear that our sin will disrupt the harmony of creation (275).

Like Psalm 104, the *Navigatio* also balances attention to creation with concern for the disruptive potential of human sin. Hostile powers unfortunately exist in Brendan's world. One monk, tempted by a demon, attempts to steal a silver bridle. Brendan performs an exorcism on the repentant monk, who loses his life but recovers his soul (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 32). The doomed thief motif is not exclusive to the *Navigatio*; it also appears the roughly contemporary *Voyage of Mael Duin* when a thieving warrior is killed by a flaming cat (Oskamp 122). However, whereas the *Mael Duin* episode has a comic tone, as does that work overall, the *Navigatio* episode has a pious tone. The monk's attempted theft is a failure of restraint, and perhaps even a failure to trust God to provide. Brendan's later warnings against theft echo his early warning against "plundering" the water. The stay on this island, then, is bracketed by two failures of restraint. In a work as carefully structured as the *Navigatio*, this is likely an intentional literary device. Since theft is clearly a matter of moral concern, the parallelism in the text suggests that human treatment of the natural world must also be a moral matter. The remaining monks seem to take the lesson of restraint to heart. Over the next stage of their journey, "they ate every second day. And so the boat was borne through various places of the ocean" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 33).

The link between water and self-restraint reappears in an incident several months later when they first reach the island of Saint Ailbe's community. This time, though, Brendan and his crew must circle an island not for three days, but for forty days before finding a place to land. Brendan's monks are desperate when they finally land and find a

pair of wells, so they rush to collect the water. Brendan once again restrains them, saying, "My sons, do not do this forbidden thing, that is something without permission of the elders who live in this island. They will freely give you the water that you now want to drink in stealth" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39). Indeed the monks of the island feed Brendan's crew, and the local abbot invites them to "drink in love now water from the well which you wanted to drink in stealth today! The feet of the brothers are washed every day from the other, muddy, well that you saw, because it is always warm" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 40).

According to J. S. Mackley, the island "is familiar and yet strange: it has life-restoring springs from which the monks are forbidden to drink" (134). Looked at through an environmental lens, though, Brendan's prohibition makes more sense. McDonagh observed that in locations throughout the world, the provision of water has shifted from being a public service to a private enterprise. A purely free market approach to water, though, puts the poor at a disadvantage, even when competing for their own local water resources (79-81). Indeed, people in poorer areas often pay a larger percentage of their income for water than people in wealthier areas, and for poorer quality water. The wealthier also consume far more water (72-73). According to McDonagh, this violates Catholic social justice teachings (85). With this in mind, let us reconsider the *Navigatio* passage. The story presents a simple but effective local water system, with drinking water segregated from bathing water. The island's elders, presumably, are ultimately responsible for this water's equitable distribution. Brendan forces his monks to learn and work within this local system; he prevents that system's disruption. As a result, everyone

receives what they need. The ethic of restraint, then, insures water justice for both the visitors and the locals.

On this island of two wells, only the abbot speaks to Brendan and his monks, for the island is governed by a rule of silence. Once Brendan realizes this, he warns his companions, "Keep your mouths from speaking lest these brothers be defiled by your garrulousness" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39). The one regular exception to this rule of silence is the Liturgy of the Hours, during which the monks chant Psalms. As the abbot explains to Brendan,

> It is eighty years since we came to this island. We have heard no human voice except when singing praise to God. Among the twenty-four of us no voice is raised except by way of a signal given by a finger or the eyes, and that only by elders. None of us has suffered ill in the flesh of from the spirits that infest the human race, since we came here. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 42)

As on the first island, the theme of restraint is introduced through water, but then reiterated in another form—in this case, restraint from speech. If the temptation toward theft emphasizes the moral dimension of restraint, the vow of silence emphasizes the spiritual dimension. Mackley also recognized the resonance between these two prohibitions, classifying both as uncanny. He described the mandatory silence as "the repression of the natural human instinct to communicate," but acknowledged that "the uncanny silence is also seen as the highest monastic ideal" (Mackley 134, 136). In

isolation, this episode does not convey an unambiguously positive attitude toward nature. When we pair it with the previous one, though, we discern the outline of a sensibility that combines spiritual discipline with moral care for the natural world.

Brendan and his monks later visit an island reminiscent of the island of the lotus eaters in the *Odyssey*, where according to Odysseus,

> Any crewman who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit,
> lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
> grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home
> dissolved forever. (Homer 214)

In the *Navigatio*, though, it is not fruit but a water source that proves dangerous. Once again, Brendan and his crew land on an island, their food and water exhausted. The monks rush toward the nearest water source—"a clear well, a variety of plants and roots in a circle around the well, and various kinds of fish swimming along the river-bed into the sea"—and Brendan offers this warning: "Brothers, take care that you do not use too much of these waters, lest they lie heavily upon your bodies" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 43). The monks each drink from one to three cups of water, and subsequently fall asleep for the same number of days. There is a poetic balance to this. Those who sleep cannot consume, and the monks are incapacitated in proportion to their consumption. Patriarch Bartholomew ecologically translated this cautionary tale of overconsumption when he wrote, "This asceticism requires voluntary restraint, in order to live in harmony with our environment … By reducing our consumption—what in Orthodox theology we call

enkrateia or self-control—we seek to ensure that resources are left for others in the world" (219).

Brendan exhibits a better memory than his monks. Earlier in the tale, on the Paradise of Birds, a steward warns them, "Do not drink from the spring here. It is strong to drink. I shall tell you what kind it is: if a man drinks it, sleep will overpower him and he will not awaken for twenty-four hours" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 38). The Latin text uses the word *fons* for the water source in both passages, so perhaps they have traveled again to the same island—its identity obscured for dramatic effect, and the birds absent due to seasonal migration (Selmer 26-27, 38). Conversely, this may be a compositional seam suggesting an earlier source in which the identification was explicit. Brendan laments his monks lack of self-restraint, saying, "Brothers, let us flee from this threat to our lives lest something worse happen to us. The Lord gave us sustenance, but you did yourself damage with it" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 44). Notably, Brendan does not find fault with the natural world, but rather blames the misuse of natural resources for their predicament.

A similar episode occurs in the *Voyage of Mael Duin*, but it resolves differently. Instead of spring water, Mael Duin samples the juice of an unfamiliar fruit that "cast him into a deep sleep from that hour to the same hour the next day. And they knew not whether he was alive or dead" (159). Mael Duin and his warriors react differently than the monks do to this turn of events. Rather than immediately fleeing, "they gathered and they mixed water with it to moderate its power to intoxicate and put to sleep. Then they gathered a great quantity of it and were squeezing it, and a great many vessels were filled by them" (Oskamp 159). Although the *Navigatio* and the *Voyage of Mael Duin* are

closely related tales, the character of Mael Duin is much closer to Captain Jack Sparrow, the trickster hero of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, than to Saint Brendan. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the proper response to misuse or overuse of a resource is not always abstinence. Sometimes the appropriate correction is more cautious use. The roguish Mael Duin may seem a strange exemplar for this lesson, but as the medievalist James Carney pointed out, he is "a nice mixture of the soldier and the saint" (47). The tradition of *peregrinatio* stands behind the *immram* genre as a whole; whereas Brendan is saintly from the outset, Mael Duin stumbles toward insight and grace.

This lesson of cautious use, though, requires a worldview that respects restraint. As Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, insisted, "The monotheistic religions preserve an appreciation of the natural reality that is not exclusively utilitarian. … The use of the world is not an end in itself for humanity, but a way of relating to God" (125-26). In the *Navigatio*, the monastic ethic of restraint is clearly applied to the natural world. Aside from Brendan's mealtime prayer, though, we have not yet seen that this ethic is rooted in a positive attitude toward nature. If that prayer is more than a mere convention, we should find a pattern of episodes in which representatives of non-human creation reveal positive and meaningful relationships with their Creator. Let us now consider several episodes that display this very sensibility.

The Liturgy of All Creatures

Two connotations of *ordo* or "order" are entwined in the *Navigatio*—the order or creation and the order of worship. German theologian Dietrich Ritschl provided an

example of the first in *The Logic of Theology*: "The doctrines of creation shaped by the concept of *ordo* in antiquity and the Middle Ages saw human beings as part of the *ordo* of the world, visible and invisible" (151). Alternatively, liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop provided an example of the second in *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology*: "Almost all Christian assemblies … have some contact with an *ordo* in which word, bath, and table—supported and surrounded by prayer—play at least some role" (22). As is clear from the title of his book, Lathrop was very aware of the potential resonance between these two connotations of *ordo*. Indeed, he explicitly acknowledged such a link in his call to "set eucharistic practice in dialogue with cosmology-as-ecology" (126). Lathrop's appeal, though, is far from isolated. Rosemary Radford Reuther argued that Christian theologies and liturgies have historically had a "creational/cosmological dimension," although the ecological implications of liturgy may be clouded by dominion theology or mechanistic metaphysics (231-32). Reuther, thus, recognized a link between the order of worship and the order of creation. Religion scholar Crina Gschwandtner not only considered the human attitude toward creation, but also creation's attitude toward God. With particular focus on an Orthodox rite, she suggested that human congregants join with the rest of creation to celebrate the Creator (191). This last idea, in particular, is prominent in the *Navigatio*, and it manifests most clearly on the Paradise of Birds.

In the Faroe Islands, Tim Severin found an island with "thousands upon thousands of seabirds, pouring out from the cliffs of Mykines: gulls, guillemots, razorbills, fulmars, gannets, puffins, skuas, and terns"; amazed by the multitudinous flock, he concluded that this island, if anywhere, "fitted the idea of a Paradise of Birds" (124). Although tales of this avian surplus surely influenced the *Navigatio's* Paradise of

Birds, the birds undergo a literary transformation: “Over the spring there was a tree of extraordinary girth and no less height covered with white birds. They covered it so much that one could scarcely see its leaves or branches” (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 36). Brendan is mystified by these birds, until one flies over to him and clarifies the situation. The birds, Brendan learns, are angels. Although they did not actively rebel against God, the messenger bird explains that “Lucifer’s fall and that of his followers brought about our destruction also” (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 36). In Dante’s *Inferno*, the angels who chose no side live just inside the gate of hell (Dante 21). In the *Navigatio*, though, they wander Earth and sky. The messenger bird clarifies,

> We endure no sufferings. Here we can see God’s presence. But God has separated us from sharing the lot of the others who were faithful. We wander through various regions of the air and the firmament and the earth, just like the other spirits that travel on their missions. But on holy days and Sundays we are given bodies such as you now see so that we may stay here and praise our Creator. (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 36)

Mary Low described the island as “a sort of lesser paradise” for the fallen angels, where “they take on bird-form and live a monastic life” (108). By ascribing paradisiacal qualities to the monastic lifestyle, the episode reinforces the ethos of restraint. The messenger bird also explains that Brendan will travel the ocean for six more years, celebrating Easter in the same place every year, before finally finding the “Promised Land of the Saints.” The bird who advises Brendan is a classical supernatural helper. As

Vladimir Propp suggested in *Morphology of the Folktale*, magical creatures often appear and assist the hero of the story (46). Yet like all else in Brendan's world, this creature acts under the direction of God.

Let turn our attention, though, to the birds' expressed desire to praise God, their Creator. The birds practice a form of the Liturgy of the Hours. The monks find the birds' vespers chant "in its sweetness like a rhythmical song" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 37). Peter Jacobsen noted that the avian form of worship is "adapted to their nature. They beat their wings to accompany their song" (113). Later, the two groups of worshipers participate responsively: "Waking, the man of God aroused his brothers for the vigil if the holy night, beginning with the versicle: 'Lord, open my lips.' When the holy man had finished, all the birds responded with wing and mouth, saying: 'Praise the Lord, all his angels; praise him, all his powers'" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 37). The birds also chant for an hour at dawn, terce, sext, and nones. Brendan and his monks certainly benefit from witnessing this cosmic liturgy, but the birds would have praised God with or without the monks. The humans are refreshed by experiencing this praise, but they are not the primary reason for it. Despite their exile status, the birds feel blessed by God, and are grateful that they can still "see God's presence."

Elizabeth Johnson found a precedent for this cosmic liturgy in Psalm 148. The psalmist, Johnson explained, has humanity join a liturgy of all creatures and elements (276). Psalms are also the foundation of the Liturgy of the Hours depicted on the Paradise of Birds and throughout the *Navigatio*. Gschwandtner, who made a similar observation about creation's role in worship, acknowledge the priority of the psalms in her work on Orthodox liturgy (188-90). She also noted that in some liturgical texts "non-human

creatures serve as an example for humans … especially when humans have obviously missed the point" (191). This echoes Brendan's conversation with the bird-angel, for the saint needed a non-human creature to explain what he could not understand. Although Johnson acknowledged that the depictions of creatures and elements praising God were metaphorical, she rejected the notion that this could be reduced to "poetic fancy." Instead, she insisted, "By virtue of their being created, of being held in existence by the loving power of the Creator Spirit, all beings give glory to God simply by being themselves" (276). Such a sensibility also seems to guide the *Navigatio*. We have in this episode, then, a strong resonance with Patriarch Bartholomew's claim that "the objects of natural reality bear the seal of their divine Creator's wisdom and love" (126). If we ask whether the *Navigatio's* author intended this episode to be realistic or metaphorical, though, we probably ask the wrong question. As noted in the last chapter regarding Paradise, literal and symbolic were permeable categories for the medieval imagination. Whether literal, symbolic, or both—for the *Navigatio's* earliest readers, the bird's worship was profoundly true.

We might still question, though, whether the birds, as fallen angels, can be treated as true representatives of the natural world. They are liminal figures, having crossed between supernatural and natural realms. As Patricia Rumsey observed after examining this episode's scriptural allusions, "Through this use of scriptural imagery, the birds become a liturgical symbol which encompasses all time, and spans the ages from Creation to Consummation, giving glory to God by their singing of his praises from the beginning of time to the end" (Rumsey 226-27). Of course, the line between natural and supernatural is firmer for us than it was for the *Navigatio's* original audience, and the

bird-angels are clearly part of God's creation. The Orthodox theologian Chrysostomos Koutloumousianos attributed the divide between natural and supernatural to to the scholastic theology of the later Middle Ages. Of the *Navigatio's* era, he insisted, "There is no trace of such a distinction in the early Irish and Greek patristic traditions: nature and history, corporeal and spiritual—everything that is *not* God—constitute an inseparable created reality that is entirely dependent on Him" (Koutloumousianos 337).

The Irish literature of the *Navigatio's* era includes many other examples of liturgical birds. For example, "Calendar of the Birds," which connects birdsong to several feast days, closes,

> Musical the melody they make
> praising God the King,
> the shining Lord of high heaven.
> Listen: wide and far the bird-choirs sing. (Riordan 19)

This motif also appears in other imramma. In the *Voyage of Bran*, the mysterious woman who lures Bran away sings,

> An ancient tree there is with blossoms,
> On which the birds call to the Hours.
> 'Tis harmony it is their wont
> To call together every Hour. (Meyer 6)

Kuno Meyer clarified that these were “the canonical hours, an allusion to church music” (6). The *Voyage of Mael Duin* offers two relevant episodes back-to-back. In the first, “they heard from the north-east a great cry and chant as if it were the singing of psalms there” (Oskamp 137). However, when they sail over to investigate, they discover birds of various colors “shouting and speaking loudly” (Oskamp 139). This comedic reversal of expectations is typical of *Mael Duin*; it suggests that both the author and original audience already knew the motif of psalm-chanting birds. Mael Duin next discovers a tiny island full of trees and birds. The island’s hermit explains that the birds are the souls of his family “who are yonder awaiting Doomsday” (Oskamp 139). *The Voyage of the Hui Corra* echoes both the *Navigatio* and *Mael Duin*, for birds appear both as angels and as deceased souls (Stokes, “Hui Corra” 33, 43). In *The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla*, the heroes encounter an island with a tree full of birds, reminiscent of the *Navigatio*:

> Atop of it was a great bird with a head of gold and with wings of silver; and he tells them tales of the beginning of the world, and tells them of Christ's birth from Mary Virgin, and of His Baptism and His Passion and His Resurrection. And he tells tidings of Doom ; and then all the birds used to beat their sides with their wings, so that showers of blood dropt out of their sides for dread of the signs of Doom ... Melodious was the music of those birds a-singing psalms and canticles, praising the Lord. For they were the birds of the Plain of Heaven. (Stokes, “Snedgus” 21)

Thus birds are liminal not only in the *Navigatio*, but also in other literature of its era—a bridge between physical and spiritual realms. Koutloumousianos noted that although birds are "part of the beautiful mosaic of creation" in Celtic literature, they have a special intermediary role and "participate in the hymns of the angels" (338). The *Navigatio*, though, also depicts non-angelic animals participating in worship. Let us now consider one such episode.

On the feast day of Saint Peter, Brendan's monks gaze into a deep, clear sea, and observe a vast school of diverse fish. The monks become frightened by the aquatic multitude, so they request that Brendan perform the mass silently. Brendan, though, asks them, "Is not our Lord Jesus Christ God of all fish?" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 53). He instead chants loudly, triggering a reaction from the depths:

> When the fish heard him singing, they came up from the bottom and began to swim in a circle round the boat—in such a way that the brothers could not see beyond the fish anywhere, so great was the multitude of the different fishes swimming. Still they did not come near the boat, but kept swimming at a distance in a wide arc. And so they kept swimming here and there until the man of God finished the mass. After this, as if they were taking flight, they all swam by different paths of the ocean away from the sight of the servants of God. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 53)

Clearly the fish, in their own way, are participating in the mass, rendering ridiculous the monks' fear of them as an alien and hostile force. Non-human creatures, once again, take

advantage of the opportunity to praise their Creator. The eco-theologian H. Paul Santmire, with his distinction between theologies of ascent and descent, provides a useful lens for thinking about this episode. In *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis*, Santmire asserted that Eucharist could be framed according to either the logic of ascent or descent. The former is implicit in the liturgical call to "lift up your hearts"; the worshiper symbolically joins the heavenly liturgy (Santmire 161). According to a theology of ascent, Brendan's mass provides a spiritual ladder for the fish, who symbolically rise to commune with their Creator. The concept of a human priestly function to lift up creation, as Gschwandtner noted, is an emerging theme in Orthodox eco-theology. However, unless balanced by other concepts, this emphasis on human priesthood risks a relapse into anthropocentrism. Gschwandtner, influenced in part by this concern, prioritized the praise of all creation (189).

Santmire, likewise, considered a eucharistic theology of descent more appropriate for an age of ecological crisis. Descent emphasizes the incarnational dimension of Eucharist. Christ descends to incarnate the elements, thus joining with the physical world (Santmire 162). Similarly, Lathrop insisted that God's love meets the material world in bread and wine. Thus, he argued, "This *ordo* does not lead individuals to techniques for getting out of here. Rather, it inserts a community into the concrete history, including 'natural history,' of the earth" (Lathrop 135). According to a theology of descent, the fish are not raised up to God, but rather the "God of all fish" descends to meet them. Although the human ritual still serves as the point of contact, humans do not "lift" the fish according to a theology of descent. Rather, humans and fish alike receive the God who descends to them. A theology of ascent, then, is implicitly more hierarchical than a

theology of descent. Even with the latter, though, the order of creation is still not as flat as it seemed on the Paradise of Birds. When reading the *Navigatio*, we lack clear-cut textual grounds for preferring either ascent or descent. One may even argue that they coexist in tension within the narrative.

There are echoes of this episode in other works of medieval Irish literature. Mael Duin's secular warriors encounter a clear green sea, but they see "no monsters or animals therein" (Oskamp 145). It seems strange to explicitly note the absence of animals, so this could be a case of the *Mael Duin* author intentionally subverting a familiar trope. This is common for *Mael Duin*; another episode inverts the typical Otherworld flow of time for comedic effect (Oskamp 157). We find a later, partial parallel to the fish mass in an apocryphal tale from the Middle Irish *Psalter*. As David Greene explained,

> Adam, after his expulsion from Paradise, fasts against God to forgive him, for you will remember that ceremonial fasting against a person was a recognized legal procedure in Early Ireland … "Adam prayed a strong prayer then to the River Jordan, that it should fast with him against dear God, with all its numerous animals. The stream stopped its course, its restlessness; the royal river stayed from its running that he might give Adam forgiveness." And we hear further how the fish and animals of the Jordan gathered Adam in the motionless stream to join him in his prayers to Heaven. (81)

In the *Navigatio* the aquatic creatures join Brendan and his monks in celebrating the mass. Similarly, in the *Psalter* the former join Adam in fasting for forgiveness. In both cases, the water animals participate in a human religious ritual. The two examples are centuries apart, and so may reveal a persistent stream in the medieval Irish imagination.

We also find a more famous parallel to this episode in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Compare Brendan's attitude toward the fish to the Mariner's attitude toward the water snakes:

> Beyond the shadow of the ship,
> I watched the water-snakes:
> They moved in tracks of shining white,
> And when they reared, the elfish light
> Fell off in hoary flakes.
> … … … … … … … … …
> O happy living things! no tongue
> Their beauty might declare:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware:
> Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
> And I blessed them unaware. (Coleridge 233)

Both Brendan and the Mariner spiritually affirm the sea life, which triggers a cosmic response in both tales. In the *Navigatio*, the fish represent the larger cosmological order

that participates in worshiping God. In the Coleridge poem, the Albatross falls from the Mariner's neck, and he finally finds himself able to pray (Coleridge 233). According to literary critic Elliot Gose Jr., the sun represents God in Coleridge's poem. Gose explained, "The analogy of God's love affecting man as the sun's warmth affects nature was well established in Coleridge's mind" (240). If God's love descends and penetrates like the heat of the sun, this is not far from Santmire's incarnational theology of descent. Yet this scene also suggests a theology of ascent. By blessing the water-snakes, the Mariner takes on the priestly role of one who lifts up nature. The Mariner's broken and humble state, though, undermines any temptation to aggrandize humanity's place in the cosmos. As with the *Navigatio*, descent and ascent appear entangled in the Coleridge poem.

The resonance between the *Navigatio* and Coleridge might be genealogical. Alfred Siewers connected the Otherworld trope to the theology of John Scottus Eriugena, and noted that Coleridge was "an Eriugena fan himself" (Siewers, *Strange Beauty* 32-33). The Coleridge ballad clearly tells a novel story, but like the saint's legend it features a spiritual geography laid over an oceanscape. Although nineteenth century poets like Matthew Arnold and Denis Mac Carthy directly drew from the Brendan legend, it is difficult to determine whether the echoes of the medieval text in the Coleridge poem are intentional, unintentional, or coincidental (Arnold 86, Mac Carthy 83). Nonetheless, the parallels suggest that imagery reminiscent of the *Navigatio* can resonate in modern times.

When we consider the fish mass episode together with the Paradise of Birds, we find a pattern in the *Navigatio* of animals participating in the worship of God. Brendan's encounters with the great fish Jasconius offer a less obvious example of this pattern.

Jasconius first reveals himself on Easter Sunday, after the monks celebrate mass on an island that is "stony and without grass" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 34-35). When they prepare a cooking fire, though, the island begins to move, and the frightened monks flee. After they have sailed away, Brendan (who stays in the boat) explains,

> God revealed to me during the night in a vision the secret of this affair. Where we were was not an island, but a fish—the foremost of all that swim in the ocean. He is always trying to bring his tail to meet his head, but he cannot because of his length. His name is Jasconius. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 35)

A year later, they return to Jasconius, and even find "the pot they had left behind" in their prior frightened flight. As long as the monks refrain from lighting fires, Jasconius seems content to let them celebrate the mass on his back. Regarding this, Brendan comments, "Reflect on how God has subjected the savage beast under us without any inconvenience to us" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 45). The *Navigatio* uses the superlative of *immanis*, a word that can mean either "savage" or "immense," to describe the great fish (Selmer 42). This emphasizes God's power, but also seems to confirm Lynn White's observation that "legends of saints, especially Irish saints, had long told of their dealings with animals but always, I believe, to show their human dominance over creatures" (29).

A later turn in the story, though, hints that Jasconius may be a willing rather than dominated participant. Every Easter thereafter, they return to Jasconius before continuing on to the Paradise of Birds. Apparently, Jasconius observes their itinerary, for the last

year he swims off after mass with the monks still on his back. Brendan assures his frightened monks that "help for the journey is upon us," and Jasconius indeed delivers them to the Paradise of Birds (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 62). With this, the great fish goes beyond tolerating their presence and actively assists their journey. If Jasconius ultimately affirms the monks' activities, as the impromptu assistance suggests, then his role as foundation for the Easter mass may be this sea creature's way of participating in the liturgy.

In these three episodes, the relationship between humans and animals varies. The bird-angels are clearly autonomous, the swarm of fish respond to human worship, and Jasconius is "subjected." What cosmological *ordo*, then, is reflected in this text, and what ecological implications might that cosmology hold? Several eco-theologians have insights that may help clarify this. Sallie McFague explicitly engaged medieval thought in her book *Super, Natural Christians: Why We Should Love Nature*. McFague proposed a relational "subject-subjects model" for our relationship with nature, rather than a mechanistic "subject-object dualism" (3). The medieval understanding of the cosmos, McFague explained, was an ordered hierarchy: animals above plants, humans above animals, men above women, angels above humans, God above all (53). This abbreviates centuries of human culture and variations occurred; the *Navigatio* itself only partially matches the above model. As McFague acknowledged, even within that hierarchical pattern there were "many, subtle forms of connection between and among the divine, human, and natural realms" (50). McFague also insisted that we cannot naively reappropriate the medieval worldview. She did, however, draw inspiration from the interconnected medieval cosmos, and sought "a way back to a reciprocal, subject-subjects

relation with nature, but one that is extroverted and horizontal, that respects nature's differences and lets things be what they are" (65-66).

Elizabeth Johnson's distinction in *Ask the Beasts* between the "dominion paradigm" and the "community of creation paradigm" complements McFague's work, although Johnson focused on biblical rather than medieval precedents. The dominion paradigm asserts that humans have the right to control nature. Even if we interpret dominion as an obligation to stewardship, rather than a right of ownership, Johnson feared we would succumb to the temptation to abuse this power over nature (266-67). She therefore preferred the alternative but equally biblical paradigm of a "community of creation." In this paradigm, all things share a certain equality as creations of the same God, a parallel to how all life emerges according to the same evolutionary processes (Johnson 267-78). The medieval worldview, as described by McFague, clearly reflects the dominion paradigm, whereas the community of creation paradigm offers a model for a horizontal understanding of interconnectedness.

These horizontal and vertical approaches, however, are not always cleanly separated. McFague attributed a "double vision—horizontal as well as vertical" to Saint Francis of Assisi (56). Pope Francis displays a similar double vision. Although Pope Francis rejected "every tyrannical and irresponsible domination of human beings over other creatures," he nevertheless asserted a special role for human beings as the medium for the natural world's salvation (185). According to the Pope, "The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things" (185). Catholic

theologian Denis Edwards, while examining the patristic theologian Athanasius, staked out a similar position; divine Wisdom leaves her imprint on every creature—on every animal, plant, human, and star. The incarnation, though, is more than an imprint, for Wisdom is fully embodied in the human Jesus (Edwards 57).

If all creatures equally bear the imprint of Wisdom, that suggests a horizontal order. Yet if the incarnation causes other creatures to move "through us" to achieve "transcendent fullness," that suggests a vertical order. The *Navigatio* offers evidence of both paradigms. The dominion paradigm comes across most clearly when Brendan claims that God has subjected Jasconius for the monks' benefit. When the monks share hymns with the bird-angels, though, they participate as equals in the community of creation. As for the fish mass, the fish participate in a ritual that a human mediates. This echoes the papal language of "with us and through us." Like Saint Francis and Pope Francis, then, the *Navigatio's* author may have had a "double vision" regarding the community of creation.

Beastly Battles

Not everything in nature is harmonious, though—a reality that surfaces in the *Navigatio* when monsters attack Saint Brendan and his monks. In the first such episode, a great sea beast follows, then charges at Brendan's boat: "He spouted foam from his nostrils and ploughed through the waves at a great speed. as if he were about to devour them" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 47). Brendan assures his monks that God will save them, but prays for protection as the beast draws closer. Then a fire-breathing monster

attacks the threatening sea beast, tearing it “into three pieces before their very eyes” (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 47). They find one of these massive chunks on a nearby island, and Brendan instructs his monks to secure a three month portion before animals devour the rest. He then directs his monks “to the southern part of the island” for water and vegetables (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 48). This scene likely draws on familiar sea lore, for it echoes a passage from Dicuil: “They say that when the sea is rough great monsters are cast up on shore; when they decay and rot, the whole island is filled with foul odor” (87). A Mary Low observed, for the culture that produced the *Navigatio* “water-monsters were certainly seen as one of nature's hazards” (75).

A similar beastly battle occurs in the air rather than the sea. The monks first meet their aerial champion in a non-combat situation. They have run out of supplies, but a giant bird brings them a branch of apple-sized grapes (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 51). Soon thereafter they find an island “covered completely with densely planted trees bearing the same crop of grapes”—an obvious parallel to the island of strange fruit where an intoxicated Mael Duin passes out (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 51). Brendan's monks have already learned their lesson about dangerous drinks, though, so the *Navigatio* makes no mention of inebriation. When they leave the island, a griffin attacks the monks, and the same bird flies to their defense—first blinding then slaying the griffin (O’Meara, “Latin Version” 52). As Moylan put it, the monks “face the dangers of nature when they encounter the gryphon but also discover God's protection, through … a theosophical ecology, when a bird arrives and tears out the monster's eyes” (251).

The creatures who rescue Brendan and his companions clearly participate in God’s providence, but what about the hostile beasts? Are they in rebellion against God?

If God creates and governs all, why would these creatures threaten the monks? For many contemporary Christian theologians, as we will see below, any attempt to answer (or reframe) these questions requires an engagement with the evolutionary thought. Behind the *Navigatio's* fantastic sea and air battles, lies something that even ancient observers knew about the world—animals violently struggle with each other. We have known since Darwin that the struggle for survival is necessary for the evolutionary process. As Darwin put it, "More individuals are born than can possibly survive. A grain in the balance will determine which individual shall live and which shall die,—which variety or species shall increase in number, and which shall decrease, or finally become extinct" (162). Evolution occurs because "better adaptation in however slight a degree to the surrounding physical condition" will increase one's chances of survival and reproduction (Darwin 163). Also since Darwin, evolutionary theologians have tried to explain, to justify, why God would create through a process that generates so much suffering (Southgate 11). For example, in an 1884 lecture, the Anglican bishop Frederick Temple acknowledged, "There is no waste like the waste of life that is to be seen in nature" (165). Nevertheless, Temple declared,

> But the doctrine of Evolution binds all existing things on earth into one. Every mineral, every plant, every animal has such properties that it benefits other things beside itself and derives benefit in turn. The insect develops the plant, and the plant the insect; the brute aids in the evolution of the man, and the man in that of the brute. All things are embraced in one great design beginning with the very creation. (122)

Temple, though, was not the final word on this topic, but rather an early figure in a conversation stretching to the present. A complete survey of contemporary evolutionary theodicy falls outside the scope of this project, but we can consider some valuable voices. However, this exploration of evolutionary theodicy is subject to this chapter's primary goal—to create a lens for reading the *Navigatio*. Some very important ideas from the contemporary conversation simply do not resonate with the medieval text. Perhaps the most significant example of this is one of the core concepts of process theology, a school of thought that has made major contributions to theodicy. It is worth addressing the specific dissonance with process theology, for doing so helps clarify this section's methodology.

We can see the early roots of process theodicy in philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's dictum: "To be an actual thing is to be limited" (145). Lest there be any doubt that this applied to God, Whitehead clarified,

> The limitation of God is his goodness. … It is not true that God is in all respects limitless. If He were, He would be evil as well as good. Also this unlimited fusion of evil with good would mean mere nothingness. He is something decided and is thereby limited. (147)

Inspired by Whitehead, theologian John Cobb argued that God need not be omnipotent in the classical sense. For Cobb, persuasion was a more noble form of power than coercion, and therefore appropriate for a supreme being limited by the very choice to create.

Persuasion, though, implies the potential for resistance and refusal, and therefore sin and suffering (Cobb 90-91). Arguably, it is easier to reconcile suffering in creation with the "One Who Calls" of process theology than with the omnipotent God of scholastic theology (Cobb 45). Nevertheless, although there is potential resonance between process theology and the *Navigatio* regarding God's guidance of creation, the medieval tale assumes a divine sovereignty dissonant with the process worldview. This is particularly apparent when Brendan, invoking the name of Jesus, commands demons to grant Judas an extra day of reprieve. When the demons threaten to increase the damned man's future punishment in compensation, Brendan replies: "You have no power over that, nor your chief: God will have the power" (O'Meara, "Latin Translation" 58). Here, the *Navigatio* presumes a coercive divine omnipotence that goes beyond persuasion. Since this is a literary study, we must emphasize perspectives that help illuminate the medieval text. Were this instead a constructive theology, the consideration of process thought would be substantial; it would certainly extend beyond Whitehead and Cobb.

As the conversation with Judas indicates, the beastly battles are hardly the only indications of violence or evil in the *Navigatio*. A tempting demon appears early on in the story, followed soon thereafter by the fallen bird-angels. The demonic imagery intensifies later when the monks sail past burning volcanoes, lose a companion to demons, and meet Judas Iscariot on a brief parole from Hell (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 55-57). Theologian Michael Lloyd, an Anglican priest and Oxford professor, proposed a theodicy that merged evolutionary thought with a mythos close to the *Navigatio's*. Lloyd acknowledged that humans appeared too late in the process of evolution to have triggered a universal fall, but maintained that predation, suffering, and extinctions in nature must

be the result of some rebellion against God (78-79). Thus Lloyd proposed that "the fallenness of nature is the consequence of the angelic fall, but its continued fallenness is the consequence of human failure to play its proper role in the purposes of God" (81). Whether or not we accept Lloyd's particular proposal, he has shown that a worldview close to the *Navigatio's* can fit into the contemporary, evolutionary conversation.

However, what the previous chapter noted about Paradise applies to demons as well—they could be simultaneously literal and symbolic in the medieval mind. A symbolic understanding of demons also appears in modern theology. In a 1966 dialogue with the psychologist Carl Rogers, theologian Paul Tillich explained that he did not believe in "little demons or a personal Satan running around the world," but nevertheless used the term "demonic" to describe "structures which are stronger than the good will of the individual" (7-8). These demonic structures could be psychological, like the struggle with alcoholism, or socio-political, like "class conflicts or … conflicts of great ideologies" (8). Santmire applied Tillich's concept of the demonic and Methodist theologian Walter Wink's related analysis of "powers and principalities" to environmental issues. According to Santmire, social structures obscure the human agency driving various forms of environmental destruction, creating the illusion that impersonal, "demonic" forces are responsible environmental degradation (16-20).

Lloyd, by suggesting that natural suffering and human sin were both caused by a fall, risked collapsing the distinction between suffering caused by innate limitation and that caused by human choice. The eco-theologian Elizabeth Johnson warned against just such a conflation (188). Lloyd's conflation, however, matches the *Navigatio*. Demons both throw slag from a volcano and tempt a monk into theft; suffering due to human

choices is not clearly distinguished from suffering caused by natural processes. This aspect of the medieval story, read through the lens of Johnson and Santmire, may better serve as a caution than a model. Like Lloyd, Pope Francis saw humanity's disobedience "to its vocation" as a source of suffering for the natural world. Unlike Lloyd, though, the Pope did not conflate this human failure with the activity of natural processes. Pope Francis claimed,

> The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. … It is significant that the harmony which Saint Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of that rupture. … This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature. (176-77)

This call to respect "creaturely limitations" resonates with the *Navigatio's* permeating ethic of restraint. It is an appropriate response to all forms of suffering caused by human excess. This does not, though, explain the *Navigatio's* beastly battles or evolutionary suffering.

Sallie McFague considered suffering in the context of ecology and evolution. The idea of letting "things be what they are" brought her close to an evolutionary theodicy. She wrote,

> The AIDS virus, just like the wood tick, is a subject in its own world. This does not mean, however, that when it attacks my body I should honor it or allow it to have its way. ... The subject-subjects model could, however ... help me see that the virus is not against me; as a subject, it is simply "doing its own thing" in its own world. ... [T]he world is not organized around me, for my benefit *or* my punishment. In an unbelievably complex world of billions of subjects, the sole criterion cannot be what is "good for me." In this instance, then, the model would operate to neutralize demonizing fantasies. (McFague 39)

With this last line, McFague was 180 degrees from Lloyd, but her perspective echoed the biblical Job who also found that the world is "unbelievably complex." In Stephen Mitchell's translation, following God's revelation of creation's complexity, Job declares,

> I had heard with my ears;
> but now my eyes have seen you.
> Therefore I will be quiet,
> comforted that I am dust. (Job 42: 5-6, Mitchell 88)

As Elizabeth Johnson pointed out, the biblical Job is comforted, in part, because he is able to situate his own experience within a more complicated whole—that is, he learns to see himself as part of the community of creation (271). There is an echo of this in the

Navigatio. As with Job, God reveals a portion of the cosmos to Saint Brendan. Job, Brendan, and McFague all contemplate with awe the complexity of creation. To recall Burke's phrase, they are all "moved by the sense of order" (16). In the case of the *Navigatio*, the tension between vertical and horizontal order subtly contributes to this moving complexity.

Three qualifications are necessary. As biblical scholar Carol Newsom pointed out in her commentary for the *New Interpreter's Bible*, the Job passage quoted above is one of the most ambiguous in the Hebrew Bible. Many of the Hebrew words have multiple meanings, allowing for several legitimate translations, some of which nearly oppose each other (628-29). This ambivalence was likely an intentional stylistic choice by the original author, but translators are forced to choose a meaning. The *Navigatio's* author would almost certainly have relied on Saint Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. In this version, Job does not declare that he is "comforted to be dust," but rather "*idcirco ipse me reprehendo et ago paenitentiam in favilla et cinere*" (German Bible Society). That is, "I restrain [or prosecute] myself and repent in embers and ashes." *Reprehendere* is less severe than *abhorrere* or its English descendant "abhor," so the Vulgate is gentler toward Job than the much younger Authorized Version (King James). The *Navigatio's* author likely read multiple creation-oriented texts such as Genesis, Job, the creation psalms, and Wisdom's creation hymn in Proverbs. If so, the tone of the medieval tale would reflect their collective influence, rather than that of a single creation text.

The second qualification comes from environmental writer Bill McKibben. In *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (a title based on Mitchell's translation), McKibben wrote of Job, "It is not simply his smallness in the face

of the infinite that shuts him up, it is his sense that infinity is somehow sufficient" (69). For McKibben, though, the modern environmental crisis adds another layer of complexity. Even when recognizing our smallness in the face of the cosmos, we must acknowledge our capacity to harm our home planet (70-71). This demands self-restraint, an active rather than passive humility. There is a permeating ethic of restraint in the *Navigatio*, but no looming threat of ecological destruction. We may be tempted, though, to conflate past and present in two ways—either by projecting our situation onto the medieval text, or by assuming that the medieval vision is sufficient for our time. Our task as careful readers is to navigate the tricky waters between resonance and difference.

Finally, religion scholar Lisa Sideris questioned the evolutionary adequacy McFague's approach in *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*. According to Sideris,

> The ecological model in which McFague identifies traces of the medieval view is, in fact, closer to the Romantic ecology of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries … than it is to a cutting-edge, postmodern scientific perspective she professes to adopt. Romantic accounts of ecology were themselves a conscious reappropriation of pre-Enlightenment views. (70)

As Alfred Siewers pointed out, those "pre-Enlightenment views" included a green world trope traceable back to Ireland of the *Navigatio's* era ("Desert Islands" 53). This romantic influence, then, may actually contribute to McFague's value as a screen for reading the *Navigatio*. Sideris also criticized McFague's call to love every creature according to its

unique characteristics. Sideris found this too vague to serve as a practical environmental ethic, and argued instead for defining ways to love larger classifications of creatures (252). The hidden God of the *Navigatio*, like the revealed God of Job, is certainly able to love each creature individually. It is not clear from the tale, though, whether humans are thought capable of replicating this individualized divine love, or merely of recognizing it. As a story rather than an ethical treatise, the *Navigatio* does not offer a precise stance on this issue; nor can the medieval tale adjudicate contemporary debates over evolutionary theory. Nevertheless, our engagement with evolutionary theodicy would still benefit from a more careful consideration of what Sideris called "conflicts that naturally exist in biotic systems" (218).

Biologist and theologian Arthur Peacocke took such biotic conflicts very seriously, and his evolutionary theology resonated with McFague's ideas. Peacocke, like McFague, was inspired by the diversity of the natural world. He wrote,

> The multiply branching bush of terrestrial biological evolution appears to be primarily opportunist in the direction it follows and, in so doing, produces the enormous variety of biological life on this planet. We can only conclude that, if there is a Creator, then that Creator intended this rich diversity, the *whole* tapestry of the created order in its warp and woof —and not simply as stages on the way to *homo sapiens*. (Peacocke 36)

Yet Peacocke also took the reality of suffering seriously. According to Peacocke, a side effect of increased biological complexity is an increased capacity for both suffering and

pleasure. This is particularly true for increases in an organism's ability to process information. The better an organism can recognize certain experiences as harmful and others as beneficial, the better that organism can avoid the former and seek out the latter (Peacocke 31). Peacocke acknowledged that "the ubiquity of pain, predation, suffering, and death in the creative evolutionary process" might prompt us to ask "was there not some other, less costly and painful way of bringing this about?" (36). He concluded,

> This is one of those unanswerable metaphysical questions in theodicy to which our only response has to be based on our understanding of the biological parameters … discerned by science to be operating in evolution. These indicate that there are inherent constraints on how even an omnipotent Creator could bring about the existence of a law-like creation that is to be a cosmos not a chaos, and thus an arena for the free action of self-conscious, reproducing complex entities and for the coming to be of the fecund variety of living organisms whose existence the Creator delights in. (Peacocke 37)

There is a certain circularity to this argument. Peacocke appealed to "biological parameters" as evidence of the "inherent constraints" that an "omnipotent Creator" must face. Yet the "biological parameters" that allow for "pain, predation, suffering, and death" are the very things that Peacocke sought to explain. Our inability to conceive of a world outside our own parameters does not prove that such a world is impossible. We are

somewhat like the denizens of Edward Abbot's *Flatland*, whose two-dimensional parameters did not allow them to conceive of the third dimension (109).

Peacocke acknowledged at the outset, however, that he dealt with an "unanswerable metaphysical question," so his explanation is better understood as a statement of faith. Christopher Southgate, like Peacocke a biologist turned theologian, made a similar statement: "I hold to the (unprovable) assumption that an evolving creation was the only way in which God could give rise to the sort of beauty, diversity, sentience, and sophistication of creatures that the biosphere now contains" (16). Thus both Peacocke and Southgate offered a hypothesis about God and biology, but acknowledged that they gazed into an unfathomable mystery. In the above comments by Peacocke and Southgate, certain words or phrases echo each other. On the one hand we have "inherent constraints" and "only way," while on the other we have "unanswerable" and "unprovable." Both pairs are significant, but the latter offers us a clearer path back to the *Navigatio*—an awe in the face of mystery that echoes the medieval tale's awe in the face of creation.

Later in his book, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*, Southgate openly acknowledged, "Theodicies never 'work' in the sense of solving the problem of suffering in the world" (132-33). Why then did he not just give the project up? Why not turn away from religion, or at least theism? In explanation, Southgate wrote of "a personal conviction that I have encountered … a God knowable—insofar as God can ever be knowable—in Jesus. … [A] conviction that in my case is held with all the existential doubt and struggle that any honest believer must expect" (22). The

philosopher David O'Connor offered a generalized equivalent to Southgate's personal conviction. He wrote,

> Out from behind the veil of ignorance, a believer's outlook may include a sense of divine presence in the world. … [F]ailure to understand why God might tolerate evil, or even to understand the concept of God, in light of so much seemingly pointless suffering, may no longer be a good reason to think belief in God is unreasonable or probably false. … [C]onvinced of having either direct or indirect experience of God, the believer may claim to have no expectation of understanding the ways of God. (O'Connor 218-19)

Both Southgate and O'Connor recognized that religious experience is larger than the problem of suffering. The latter is an unavoidable topic, but it is not the whole picture. That larger vision is the context in which theologians and lay believers alike pursue their faith journeys despite lacking perfect answers. The same is true for the *Navigatio*. Rumsey argued that the *Navigatio's* author "saw the presence of evil in creation; in the Christian community; and in the monastic community. But for him, all the instances of evil were made occasions for the compassion and forgiveness of God to manifest itself" (212). We do not need to find the tale's medieval demonography convincing; we just need to recognize that this demonography has a function similar to that of contemporary theodicies. Like the Darwinian struggle for existence, the *Navigatio's* demons and rebel beasts are only part of a larger cosmos.

Before we move with the monks on their final legs toward Paradise, let us consider a final contribution from evolutionary theodicy—an eschatological vision. In *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life*, Jay McDaniel considered the plight of a second-born pelican chick. As the "backup chick," the poor creature is driven from its nest and allowed to starve to death (19). McDaniel drew on both Peacocke and process theology in responding to the chick's suffering (25). Let us simply consider, though, his concept of a "pelican heaven." McDaniel suggested that the Christian hope for "renewal after death" could be extended to all of creation (45). He clarified,

> The hope is not that all creatures share in the same kind of fulfillment beyond death. Rather it is that all creatures share in that kind of fulfillment appropriate to their own interests and needs. What a pelican chick might know as fulfillment of needs would have its own kind of harmony and intensity, one quite different from what we humans might know. If there is a pelican heaven, it is a *pelican* heaven. (McDaniel 45)

McDaniel also insisted that fulfillment did not necessarily require eternal life, but rather an opportunity for completion and wholeness (46).

Elizabeth Johnson offered a similar suggestion when she expanded on Lutheran theologian Niels Gregersen's concept of "deep incarnation" by adding the corollary concept of "deep resurrection." If the incarnation is significant because the divine became fully embodied in matter, then the resurrection must also have meaning for the entire material world (208). In Johnson's words, "This person, Jesus of Nazareth, was

composed of star stuff and earth stuff; his life formed a genuine part of the historical and biological community of Earth; his body existed in a network of relationships drawing from and extending to the whole physical universe" (209). Thus the resurrection of Jesus points toward the ultimate transformation of all matter. If the pelican chick finds its appropriate fulfillment, according to this incarnational theology, it does so as part of that "deep resurrection." This does not solve the problem of suffering and evil—Johnson expressly disavowed seeking such a solution (187). Rather, deep resurrection offers an ecological and cosmological expression of Christian hope. As Johnson poignantly put it, "Christ is the firstborn of all the dead of Darwin's tree of life" (209).

How well, though, does this eschatological vision of deep resurrection fit what we find in the *Navigatio*? The medieval tale certainly makes no explicit claim for the resurrection of animals, much less plants or minerals. Yet Revelation's "new heaven and new earth" clearly influenced the *Navigatio's* vision of Paradise (Revelation 21:1). In the *Navigatio*, all of creation worships God and participates in the same cosmic order. This would strongly suggest that all of creation is moving toward fulfillment. Of course, there is room for damnation in this medieval vision. The fates of Judas and the damned monk are "fulfillment," in a sense, as the culmination of those men's choices. If we were to extrapolate a systematic theology from the narrative, based on the cosmic order previously described, we might posit a position similar to Johnson's deep resurrection. We cannot be certain, though, that systematic reflection governed the medieval author's sensibility toward nature. Rather than a doctrinal treatise, the *Navigatio* offers a story. This story, however, suggests a cosmological vision in which disharmony ultimately

resolves into a greater harmony. Indeed, after the monks sail past Hell, the tale moves toward that vision's final revelation.

The World as Revelation

The venerable hermit Paul that Brendan visits could be mistaken for a small yeti. His wintry white hair is so thick that "only his face and eyes" are visible (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 60). Brendan's visit to Paul's stony island, one of the last stops of the voyage, connects the ethic of restraint to God's providence while intensifying both. Paul's life story reflects this. Paul is 140 years old, ninety of those spent in isolation on his island. For the first thirty island years, an otter brings him fish every day; once again, an animal helper participates in God's design. After that, though, Paul reaches a state in which he no longer needs food, and he survives thereafter on well water. In O'Meara's translation, Paul declares, "For sixty years since, I have lived on this well without nourishment from any other food" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 61). O'Meara translated *cibus* as "food" to distinguish it from *nutrimentum* (Selmer 76). However, *cibus* can also simply mean "nourishment," thus Davies offered this translation: "From then on I lived for sixty years, as I still do, from spring water and nothing else" (187).

In Paul's presence, Brendan admits to feeling ascetic inadequacy. He laments, "Alas for me who wears a monk's habit and have many owing allegiance to me by virtue of being monks: Here I see sitting before me a man already in the angelic state, untouched by the vices of the body, though still in human flesh" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 60). Brendan's "habit" or *habitus* has multiple connotations. The *New College*

Latin & English Dictionary offers the following list of meanings for the Latin noun *habitus*: "condition *(of the body)*; physical make-up, build, looks, form, shape; circumstances; style, style of dress; character, quality; disposition, state of feeling; posture" (Traupman 196). Although Brendan's "monk's habit" literally refers to his "style of dress," the other meanings also resonate. As Giorgio Agamben observed,

> In the context of monastic life, the term *habitus*—which originally signified "a way of being or acting" and, among the Stoics, became synonymous with virtue … seems more and more to designate the way of dressing. It is significant that, when this concrete meaning of the word begins to be affirmed … it is not always easy to distinguish it from the more general sense. (Agamben 13)

Brendan does not merely envy Paul's *au naturel* attire, but his entire condition and way of being. Paul represents the quintessence of simplicity, asceticism, and restraint. Brendan was hardly the only one to aspire to this. A ninth century Irish poem opens,

> Solitary in a small cell,
> perfectly alone—
> I'd love such a pilgrimage
> before death calls. (Riordan 24)

Although the pilgrimage suggested in this poem does not require an ocean voyage, the fantasized destination echoes Paul's isolation. The poet, like Saint Brendan in the *Navigatio*, seems wistful about falling short of this ideal seclusion. We might also lament alongside Brendan, since the hermit could represent an impossibly high standard for sustainability.

Paul, though, does not accept Brendan's lament. Instead, he calls attention to the latter's own unique blessings:

> Venerable father, how great and marvellous are the wonders that God has shown you that he did not show to any of the holy fathers! You say in your heart that you are not worthy to carry the habit of a monk. But you are greater than a monk! A monk uses the labour of his hands with which to clothe himself. But God from his own secret supplies feeds and clothes both you and your companions for seven years. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 60)

This speech echoes a passage from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (paralleled in Luke chapter 12). Jesus tells his followers not to worry about food or clothing, pointing toward nature as a model:

> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of

> life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matthew 6:26-30)

Elizabeth Johnson and Denis Edwards both argued that this biblical passage suggests God's care for all creatures (Johnson 200, Edwards 102). For Santmire, the passage portrays birds and lilies (animals and plants) as innately valuable (120). Paul's speech and its scriptural inspiration reinforce the link between asceticism and God's providence. Not only that, but Brendan and his companions witness "great and marvelous wonders" while Paul must "sit here like a bird on this rock" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 60). To Paul, then, Brendan's experience is superior because it takes in a wider range of the natural world, and show's God's providence in multiple ways.

Paul's assertion that Brendan is "greater than a monk" mirrors Brendan's perception of Paul. However, this does not bring their fictional modes of living closer to our own. If anything, we most resemble those ordinary monks who labor for their living. Yet there are important differences between even the ordinary monks and us. Lathrop argued that "monasteries, at their best, have been places of sustainable agriculture, local networks of food, humanizing technology, and the remembrance of the poor" (149). This description echoes the kind bottom-up, local economy advocated by Wendell Berry—an economy that would "rest on only two principles: neighborhood and subsistence" (191). In Berry's local economy, a community would only import what it could not produce for itself, and would only export what no one from the community needed (192-93). Such an

economy, though, is background for the *Navigatio*, rather than its message. As Paul points out, Brendan's voyage represents an exception to the ordinary mode. The tale, then, seeks to reveal something that an account of daily monastic life would not.

The *Navigatio* does not depict a realistic mode of life, but rather tries to orient monastic aspirations. There is a huge difference between orienting toward Saint Brendan or Mother Teresa and orienting toward Donald Trump or Paris Hilton. Both types have their appeal, as the historian Jonathan Rose wryly observed in a commentary for *History News Network:*

> The charismatic leader may be a St. Francis committed to poverty, or he may be "a pirate genius" who has already stolen all the money he will ever need. Either way, he impresses his followers because he seems to have no mercenary motives. St. Francis and Donald Trump have only one quality in common, but it is crucially important: neither can be bought. (Rose)

With this granted, we must consider the crucial differences between these role models. Although most of us will not achieve either exemplar's mode of life, who we choose as our aspirational archetype can dramatically affect how we live in the world. Psychologist Tim Kasser noted that "it can be difficult to know whether to follow the sages or the celebrities," but a world full of aspiring Trumps would likely consume far more than a world full of aspiring Brendans (1). Mackley, likewise, argued that the *Navigatio* seeks to orient the reader through its juxtaposition of the "extremes of humanity"—Judas and Paul. By offering the fate of Judas as a warning, the tale encourages us to orient toward

the hermit (Mackley 221-22). In all four gospels Judas betrays Christ for thirty pieces of silver, and John's gospel depicts him as an untrustworthy apostolic treasurer (John 12:6). Thus, although Judas hardly embodies modern celebrity culture, he was an icon of greed for the early church. This juxtaposition, then, can reasonably be considered a warning against excess.

Social scientists like Kasser and Juliet Schor provided support for the *Navigatio's* anti-materialist intuitions. In *The High Price of Materialism*, Kasser explained that individuals with "strongly materialistic values" tend to be less satisfied with life and have poorer mental health than their less materialistic counterparts. This pattern holds across income brackets, age ranges, and even cultures (Kasser 22). Pope Francis offered a similar warning: "A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment" (252). The consumerist orientation of modern society, though, harms more than just humans. Kasser warned that "Earth's health suffers as these values lead individuals to consume at unsustainable and damaging rates" (95). In *Do Americans Shop Too Much?* Juliet Schor noted that "one can gain entry into social circles, or build lucrative business contacts, by revealing appropriate tastes, manners, and culture," but may also be penalized for displaying the wrong tastes and consumption habits (23-24). Out of social anxiety—the fear of falling behind peers—consumers participate in a cycle of competitive consumption that fails to raise their overall well-being (24). Conversely, we see "competitive asceticism" between Brendan and Paul, each convinced that the other has achieved a superior form of renunciation. Although reversing our culture's consumption polarity is quite unlikely, stories like the *Navigatio* might provide a partial antidote to the stimulated dissatisfaction

that drives hyperconsumption. The Anglican priest David Adam seemed to think so. In his spiritual meditation, *A Desert in the Ocean: God's Call to Adventurous Living*, Adam linked the *Navigatio's* monks to the "desert fathers and mothers" who "moved away from wealth and status … out of the ocean of hyperactivity and self-justification into the stillness and silence of the desert" (3). Regarding Brendan and his companions, specifically, Adam wrote,

> The sea is a place where you soon discover your own smallness and the mighty greatness of the elements that are around you. Time and again Brendan and his crew were brought to the limits of their own abilities. They could do no more and had to let go and put their trust in God. It is important to know that they had done their bit … they were beyond their own resources and needed a Saviour. (85)

If we accept and embrace the creaturely vulnerability of sometimes, most of the time, being "beyond our own resources," we might reign in our panicked consumption of the earth's natural resources. The *Navigatio's* predominantly joyful tone may even make monastic self-restraint seem more appealing, for the story's asceticism is not rooted in a rejection of the natural world, but rather the conviction that the world is full of "great and marvelous wonders." This perspective is reinforced when Brendan and his companions finally reach the Land of Promise.

After making the Easter circuit a final time, Brendan and his monks sail east for forty days, pass through a wall of fog, and finally set foot on "a wide land full of trees

bearing fruit as in autumn time" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). After exploring the land for another forty days, they reach an unfordable river. There they meet a youth, apparently an angelic messenger, who announces,

> There before you lies the land which you have sought for a long time. You could not find it immediately because God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean. Return, then, to the land of your birth, bringing with you some of the fruit of this land and as many of the precious stones as your boat can carry. The final day of your pilgrimage draws near so that you may sleep with your fathers. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63)

This passage, which might otherwise be opaque, is meaningful when read through an ecological lens. Whereas Jonathan Wooding complained that the disclosure of ocean wonders was "not really a reason at all" for the long journey, Patricia Rumsey responded that "this is precisely the significance of the seven-year journey, and the very reason that makes the author's purpose plain and brings out the theological meaning of the whole narrative: God reveals himself to the monks through a good and holy creation" (Rumsey 20). Of course, the monks of the *Navigatio's* era had no concept of ecology in the modern sense, but they had a concept of natural order under the sovereignty of God. The ocean was not merely a source of resources or a zone of transit, but was itself the journey's essential revelation. Brendan was invited to glimpse the natural world through God's eyes and recognize its innate value as the good creation. As Rumsey put it,

> The monk-author saw the whole universe in sacramental terms: the things he saw around him—the islands and their inhabitants, the ocean, the birds and beasts—became shadows of a higher reality which led upwards to the infinite source of all being, the Trinity. The whole purpose of the voyage of Brendan and his monks was that God would 'reveal himself in the wonders of the ocean.' (26-27)

Even though our concept of natural order, influenced by scientific ecology, is not identical to that of the *Navigatio's* author, his affirmation of creation's goodness still resonates with any who seek innate value in the natural world.

If we consider the revelation that "God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" central to the *Navigatio's* purpose, rather than incidental, it helps the story reach a more satisfying climax. As J. S. Mackley observed, "From a stylistic point of view, the description of Paradise in the *Navigatio* is weak and brings the narrative to an anticlimactic end" (228). According to Mackley, the *Navigatio's* author faced a conundrum—how to remain credible to the audience, and thus comprehensible, while depicting that which is transcendent, and therefore incomprehensible. The *Navigatio* errs on the side of comprehensibility, in part, because Barinthus describes Paradise early in the tale, before the reader is prepared for truly marvelous wonders. As a result, Mackley argued, "what should have been the final push across the boundary into the realm of the implausible is simply a return to that which is already familiar" (Mackley 228-29). Mackley's critique of the *Navigatio's* stylistic deficiencies is certainly valid. Withholding details about Paradise at the beginning of the story would have allowed for a more

vibrant revelation at the end. However, we should not ignore what the *Navigatio* does provide. The tale's climax is not simply a vision of Paradise, but more specifically, the angelic message. The declaration, then, that "God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" is extremely important, for it provides an interpretation of everything that has come before. If we overlook the tale's environmental spirituality, then this line feels extraneous, and the climax loses power. The sense of anticlimax readers may feel at the end of the *Navigatio* stems in part from stylistic problems, but also in part from overlooking one of the tale's central themes. The story reads better, then, if we recognize the centrality of its environmental dimension.

The final words of the angelic youth also have ecological resonances: "The river that you see divides this island. Just as this land appears to you ripe with fruit, so shall it remain always without any shadow of night. For its light is Christ" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). This reflects the "Orthodox ecopoetics" that Alfred Siewers discerned in Irish literature of that era ("Orthodoxy" 245). According to Siewers, the Irish medieval writers had an almost incarnational understanding of this uncreated light, for they saw "the world as sparkling with divine energies" ("Orthodoxy" 247). Brendan is not yet permitted to cross over the river to experience the uncreated energies or light of Christ in their pure form. One last time, piety demands restraint. This glimpse of Paradise reveals something fundamental about reality, though. Creation is permeated with divine energy, even if it rarely feels as intense as in the Land of Promise. Indeed, this light casts its sparkle back across the entire tale. The *Navigatio*, according to Siewers, reflected a recurring theme in early Irish theology that "compared the depths of the sea to the

mystery of the Trinity, a sea of divinity known only through energies interacting with human experience" (Siewers, "Orthodoxy" 249-50).

We find an earlier parallel for this theology of light in the patristic theologian Saint Diadochos of Photiki. Diadochos wrote, "When the north wind blows over creation, the air around us remains pure because of this wind's subtle and clarifying nature; but when the south wind blows, the air becomes hazy because it is this wind's nature to produce mist" (278). The north wind, Diadochos explained, was a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, whereas the south wind was a metaphor for error. Thus he urged that "we should try always to face towards the life-creating and purifying wind of the Holy Spirit … so that we devote ourselves unerringly to the contemplation of the divine, beholding the world of light in an air filled with light" (Diadochos 278-79). Not all of these naturalistic metaphors match what we find in the *Navigatio.* The mist Brendan encounters does not symbolize error, but rather mystery. Saint Brendan and his monks, though, do experience both helpful and troublesome winds. The former blow them toward island oases, the latter toward hellish volcanoes. The theology of light, however, offers the closest match between the texts; indeed, it testifies to the eastern influence on early Irish Christianity. The Land of Promise provides "an air filled with light"—the uncreated light of Christ. Thus Diadochos suggests a sensibility quite close to that of the *Navigatio*, which saw the ocean's wonders and the light of Christ as part of the same revelation.

Conclusion

Two threads contribute to the *Navigatio's* environmental sensibility. The first, an

ethic of restraint, frequently appears in episodes that feature drinking water. Brendan warns his monks not to "pillage" the fresh water flowing from an island, insisting that it is not theirs, but God's (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 30). Similarly, he restrains his monks from drinking the water on Saint Ailbe's island until after they have received the abbot's blessing (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39-40). This restraint from water is mirrored by restraint from theft and speech, suggesting that it has both moral and spiritual significance. In a third episode, the monks sleep for spans of time proportional to their consumption—perhaps a parable for respecting natural yield limits (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 43). Near the end of the *Navigatio*, Paul the Hermit and Saint Brendan express their mutual admiration for each other, hinting at a competitive asceticism that inverts our ecologically destructive competitive consumption (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 60).

The second thread, a positive attitude toward the natural world, manifests when various creatures participate in the worship of God. The bird-angels who chant psalms are the most obvious example (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 37). The fish who circle Brendan's boat during mass also participate in worship, as does Jasconius who provides his back for the Easter mass (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 45, 53). There were also demonic forces and hostile creatures in the *Navigatio*, for even before Darwin proposed his theory of natural selection, it was obvious that violence and struggle existed in nature. The *Navigatio* acknowledges this reality, but enfolds it in a larger, positive vision. Thus the youth and the end of the story can declare, "God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). In the same speech, the youth warns them to go no farther into Paradise, a final act of restraint. Thus the revelation in the Land of Promise ties together an ethic of restraint and a joyful affirmation of the natural world.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Saint Brendan and his monks sailed from the shores of Ireland, through a dangerous and wondrous ocean, toward the sublime Paradise that lay surprisingly close to home—"a *very short* stretch of water," as Jonathan Wooding put it ("Location" 110). For the last two chapters, we have imaginatively traveled with those monk on their legendary voyage. Like the monks, we must now arrive at some resolution. On the Promised Land of the Saints, the angelic youth helped Saint Brendan's monastic voyagers comprehend the cohesive purpose and meaning behind their amazing experiences in the vast ocean. Similarly, we must now synthesize the ideas and insights from the earlier, separate explorations of the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography and environmental spirituality. That is the first task of this chapter.

However, synthesis is not the only task of this chapter. Saint Brendan could not remain in Paradise, for as Steven Lewis warned, "The task, admittedly a difficult one, is to embrace the lessons learned from the mountaintop and apply them in other spiritual landscapes" (18). Similarly, although this project looks deeply into the Brendan legend's relevance for environmental thought, it hardly exhausts the topic. Therefore, we should briefly consider how to apply the "lessons learned" from this project to future scholarly work. Those future directions, ideally, would help bridge the gap between sentiment and action. In *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility*, Keith Thomas explored how the dislocation produced by the Industrial Revolution gave birth to a renewed affection for nature in Great Britain. His closing counsel remains relevant after three decades:

> There was thus a growing conflict between the new sensibilities and the material foundations of human society. A mixture of compromise and concealment has so far prevented this conflict from having to be fully resolved. But the issue cannot be completely evaded and it can be relied upon to recur. It is one of the contradictions upon which modern civilization may be said to rest. About its ultimate consequences we can only speculate. (Thomas 302-3)

Lewis echoed this environmental observation with a spiritual one, writing, "The gap between what we receive from mountaintop experiences and our ability to apply the blessings of life continue to grow" (25). We may find the *Navigatio's* environmental spirituality attractive while reading the text, but struggle to apply its lessons after setting the book down.

Admittedly, the question of applicability pushes us from the zone of environmental humanities scholarship into the zone of environmental praxis and policy. Nevertheless, there are valid academic tasks within the humanities that can stabilize such a push. Although this project emphasized the *Navigatio's* original era, the Brendan legend has enjoyed periods of significant popularity over the past several centuries. An intellectual history of the legend's interaction with environmental thought can provide a context for reclaiming the *Navigatio's* environmental spirituality in the present. These historical issues provide fertile ground for future research. However, global environmental problems demand intercultural efforts, so for the tale to speak to today's

situation, one must look for interfaith resonances. These historical and interfaith issues provide fertile ground for future research. After synthesizing the *Navigatio's* geographical and environmental features, this chapter will provisionally sketch that future work.

Synthesis

Four locations received special attention in the second chapter; these will also anchor this synthesis of the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography and environmental spirituality. Indeed, three of these locations were also covered in the last chapter. On the Paradise of Birds, where Brendan and his monks spend Pentecost, natural creatures praise their Creator. Thus an anchor point in the tale's liturgical geography also highlights an important environmental theme—the goodness of creation. On Saint Ailbe's Island, where the travelers spend Christmas, silence and restraint toward water are both forms of spiritual discipline. Again, at a liturgical anchor point we encounter an environmental theme—the ethic of restraint. Although the previous chapter did not examine in detail the hellish region of volcanoes, the discussion of evolutionary theodicy wrestled with the presence of suffering and evil. The problem of suffering continues to influence our perception of the natural world. Finally, at the Land of Promise, a place both near and hidden, an angelic messenger testifies to the goodness of creation. Using these four locations, then, we can tie together the geographical and environmental concepts from the last two chapters.

Regarding the *Navigatio's* liturgical geography, Thomas O'Loughlin observed, "Round and round they sail from one place to another and back again, round and round they also move in time from Lent to Easter to Pentecost to Christmas" (*Celtic Theology* 178). There are links between locations in this spatial calendar and in the real world—perhaps multiple links for some locations. Dicuil had heard of a mythic Black Sea island whose white birds served heroes, so the *Navigatio's* author could easily have heard of the same (Dicuil 87-89). Nevertheless, the Faroe Islands are clearly the primary referent for the Sheep Island and Paradise of Birds, placing Saint Brendan in an identifiable archipelago for his "Lent to Easter to Pentecost" swing (Wooding, "Date" 18). Conversely, the island where Brendan spends the Christmas season resists such a clear identification. For the *Navigatio's* author, though, the tales that inspired both locations may have had similar credibility. As Mackley observed,

> Historically, the encounter with the monastic community of Ailbe is possibly one of the most plausible of those described in the Brendan narrative. Ailbe is another Irish saint associated with the seafaring tradition. Indeed, the lives of both Brendan and Ailbe are bound together, for example in the *Vitae sanctorum Hibernae*. (131)

Taken together, then, these locations remind us that the *Navigatio's* geography refers to the real world, but does not perfectly replicate it.

The Paradise of Birds and Saint Ailbe's Island also reveal important aspects of the tale's spirituality. Like Brendan's monks, the birds celebrate a Liturgy of the Hours, singing hymns of praise throughout the day:

> When dawn rose they chanted: 'May the radiance of the Lord, our God, be upon us!' … Likewise at terce they chanted the versicle: 'Sing praises to our God, sing praises! Sing praises to our king. Sing praises in wisdom.' At sext the chanted: 'Shine your countenance, Lord, upon us, and have mercy on us.' At nones they chanted: 'How good and pleasant is it that brothers live together as one!' In this way, day and night, the bird gave praise to the Lord. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 37)

The bird-angels love for their Creator, despite their half-fallen status, reflects their place in a fundamentally good creation. Throughout the story, the actions of several other creatures also offer evidence creation's goodness—swarms of fish participate in a mass, Jasconius provides his back for Easter worship, an otter brings food to Paul the Hermit, a little dog guides Saint Brendan and his monks, powerful beasts protect them. We even see this goodness reflected in the Crystal Column episode, with an iceberg or glacial shelf reimagined as a holy wonder (Mackley 179). Although J. S. Mackley accepted "the hypothesis of the Crystal Column being a metaphorical description for a natural structure," he nevertheless observed, "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" (Mackley 180-81). However, as Chrysostomos

Koutloumousianos pointed out, the distinction between natural and supernatural creation is more an artifact of our time than of the *Navigatio's* (337). Thus even an object "specifically *created* for divine worship" may testify to the goodness of nature/creation. The Paradise of Birds episode vividly illustrates this good creation theme, but also connects the theme to one of the story's recurring liturgical location. As such, the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography and environmental spirituality are synchronized.

Just as the Paradise of Birds highlights the goodness of creation, Saint Ailbe's community highlights the ethic of restraint. This manifests as soon as Brendan's monks set foot on the island, when Brendan prevents them from using the local water supply without permission. They must wait until the island's abbot invites them to drink with "joy and fear of the Lord" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39-40). The theme of restraint is woven into the spiritual life of the island, as the monks have all taken vows of silence. Out of respect for their hosts, Brendan urges his monks to remain silent as well (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 39). This partially parallels the first island that Saint Brendan visits. While still in the boat, he chastises his monks for trying to scoop up fresh water. With the bridle theft on the island, the theme of illicit taking recurs. Brendan warns his monks, "Beware, brothers, lest Satan lead you into temptation. For I can see him persuading one of the three brothers, who came from our monastery to follow after me, to commit a bad theft. Pray for his soul. For his body has been given to the power of Satan" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 31). On these islands, restraint toward water echoes either moral or spiritual self-discipline. The first island functions as a narrative threshold, after which they enter, as Westphal put it, "a space governed by the liturgical calendar" (58). Saint Ailbe's island is one of the anchor points in that liturgical space. As with the

goodness of creation, the ethic of restraint clearly synchronizes with the *Navigatio's* spiritual geography.

The *Navigatio's* liturgical cycle is embedded in a narrative arc. As Tom Moylan observed, "The *Navigatio* is comprised of a series of episodes connected by a linking narrative that has both a cyclical and a linear motion" (250). The three spiritual landscapes proposed by Steven Lewis can help us map the latter (1). The story begins in a spiritual valley, the Clonfert monastery. Then the story moves through a spiritual desert, an ocean containing the liturgical cycle mentioned above. Finally the story arrives at a spiritual mountaintop, or to use Moylan's phrase, its "geosophical climax on the Promised Land" (Moylan 251). The Lewis schema parallels Joseph Campbell's "world of common day" and "region of supernatural wonder"; it also parallels Mackley's expansion of Todorov: mundane, uncanny-fantastic-marvelous, beyond comprehension (Campbell 30, Mackley 6). Just as there are locations connected to the *Navigatio's* cyclical motion, there are one's that drive its linear motion. Among these are the encounters with Hell and Paradise, for sailing through the region of Hell advances the *Navigatio's* narrative progression toward the Promised Land of the Saints. Certainly, Icelandic volcanoes inspired the hellish episodes, though as Margaret Burrell noted, Santorini is likely a secondary referent (42). As for the Promised Land of the Saints, it is located off the west coast of Ireland, but cannot be matched to any real world island (Wooding, "Location" 95, 105). This is theologically appropriate, as Paradise transcends our ordinary world. Again, the tale refers to real world geography without replicating it.

The monks encounter evil throughout the *Navigatio*. On the threshold island, Brendan witnesses a demon "joking" (*iocans*) with the monk tempted into theft (Selmer 15). On the Paradise of Birds, one bird explains,

> We survive from the great destruction of the ancient enemy, but we were not associated with them through any sin of ours. When we were created, Lucifer's fall and that of his followers brought about our destruction also. … We endure no sufferings. Here we can see God's presence. But God has separated us from sharing the lot of others who were faithful. (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 36).

The beasts that protect Brendan and his monks do God's will, but those that attack the monks seemingly do not. The latter catch our attention because they reveal the presence of violence in nature, a theme that has troubled theologians since the time of Darwin. Invoking Genesis, Christopher Southgate argued,

> God saw creation to be very good. However, the creation that science describes for us is one in which suffering in endemic, and intrinsic to its development, a creation moreover in which 98 percent of all species ever to have evolved are now extinct. It is a creation that will remind the scientifically aware Christian of the apostle Paul's description "groaning in labor pains" (Romans 8:22). Creation, then, is both "good" and "groaning." (15)

The *Navigatio*, however, wrestles most intensely with evil during a sequence of episodes from the last year of Brendan's voyage. After leaving the Crystal Column, Brendan and his monks sail into a hellish region of demons and volcanoes. One of the monks is even "carried off by a multitude of demons" (56). This diabolical realm does not overlay an unmapped part of the Atlantic, but rather a region where Dicuil's acquaintances "voyaged at a natural time of great cold" (Dicuil 75). This mappability would strengthen the sense of spiritual threat for the *Navigatio's* earliest readers. Even in this region, though, God's grace is present. The monks meet Judas Iscariot on a parole from Hell, and as Mackley observed, "Genuinely repentant, he is grateful for the mercy shown to him. … [A]lthough Judas is portrayed as the ultimate sinner, he acts as a means of blurring the boundaries between good and evil" (201-2). Judas remains damned, but he foreshadows the tale's impending turn back toward salvation. Even near Hell's mouth, the cosmos can still feel a breath of divine love.

The *Navigatio* reaches its climax at the Promised Land of the Saints, which Wooding located off the coast of Slieve League ("Location" 109). Brendan and his monks must sail through a mystical fog "where both time and space are beyond direct measure," echoing the Celtic permeability between this world and the Otherworld (O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* 194). Patricia Rumsey found continuity between this liminal zone and the earlier liturgical geography:

> The author of the *Nauigatio* saw the faithful celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours according to the regular cycle of the Church's day, week, and

> year to be preparation for Life in the Promised Land of the Saints … leading to an experience of the mystical presence of God, symbolized by the cloud which surrounded the *Terra repromissionis*" (218).

The *Navigatio's* environmental themes also recur on this island. Brendan and his monks once again face restraint—now in the form of a river that they are both forbidden and physically unable to cross. The messenger they meet at the river suggests that their ocean experiences are the true purpose of the long voyage: "There before you lies the land which you have sought for a long time. You could not find it immediately because God wanted to show you his varied secrets in the great ocean" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). Thus Rumsey insisted that "for the monks of the *Nauigatio*, God was to be found at the heart of this world with all its wonders, at which they marvelled with childlike awe" (71). Indeed, medieval Christians widely believed that they could glimpse the Creator by reading the "Book of Nature," an idea that contributed to the birth of modern science (Clingerman 74-75). The *Navigatio's* narrative climax emphasizes its environmental spirituality, and it does so at the apex of its spiritual geography. Although the tale's anonymous author would not have understood the phrase, we might now call the work an environmental adventure.

The cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argued that there is a spectrum in religious thought "from place to placelessness, from the magical and concretely specific to the (relatively speaking) rational and abstract" (ix). If so, the *Navigatio* lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, which allows physical place to connect with cosmic, symbolic space. This is particularly clear when the liturgical calendar maps onto specific islands—

real and imagined. In the *Navigatio*, diverse creatures participate in divine worship. The liturgical map suggests that place, that geography, also participates in this worship. All things in the cosmos are capable of responding to God. With this, our close reading of the *Navigatio* ends. We must now look forward—both forward from the Middle Ages and forward from our own ecologically precarious moment. When we do, we realize that the Brendan legend has had a complicated history in the intervening centuries. Those centuries have important lessons for us. So do other religious traditions—for in a global, interfaith age, religious environmentalism can hardly afford sectarian echo chambers. Although these are directions for future research, I will outline certain possibilities.

Ecology and Imperialism

We are over a thousand years removed from the *Navigatio*, and over five hundred removed from Columbus. The world has transformed far more in that time than a few pages can cover. However, the Brendan legend traveled through that history to reach us, and this temporal voyage is a promising topic for future research. We did not receive the Brendan legend from the medieval Irish untainted. Like all of western culture, it is snarled with colonialism. We must account for this when we study, interpret, and even retell the tale. This section is necessarily very selective; it only offers a few glimpses into one of the most important and troubling aspects of that long history—the entanglement of ecology with imperialism and racialized attitudes, and the Brendan legend's entanglement with both.

The problem of racialized attitudes is apparent even in the *Navigatio* itself. The demon who tempts a monk into theft resembles an "Ethiopian child" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 31). As Gay Byron explained in her book *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, the early Christians inherited the black-skinned demon trope from earlier Greco-Roman culture (37). In the second century, the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* described a female demon who looked like an Ethiopian (Byron 44). For the *Navigatio's* author, the black-skinned demon was an established literary trope, and did not necessarily reflect a hostile attitude toward actual black-skinned individuals. Such individuals were likely beyond the Irish writer's direct experience. This trope, however, modeled the denigrating attitudes that would eventually be integrated into Renaissance colonialism.

In *The Visionary Landscape of Christopher Columbus*, Valerie Flint noted three links between Columbus and Saint Brendan: Columbus traveled to Galway, the Brendan legend was widely transmitted in the later Middle Ages, and Saint Brendan's island was a very common feature on fifteenth century maps. Not only could Columbus "easily have had access" to the Brendan legend, but "to have avoided it would have been far more difficult"; thus the legend, Flint argued, may have had "a most profound effect upon Columbus's explorations, and especially upon his claim to have found the Terrestrial Paradise" (91). Other stories also clearly influenced Columbus. For example, he named the Virgin Islands in honor of Saint Ursula, who legend claims settled on an Atlantic island with 11,000 virgins (Flint 87). According to Flint, though, the *Navigatio's* themes of renunciation and fulfillment would have greatly resonated with Columbus, thus the saint's legend "may well have occupied a special place in Columbus's medieval

cosmology" (Flint 97). The Brendan legend almost certainly had some effect on Columbus, and therefore was entangled with the colonial imagination from the outset. We must acknowledge then, what Alfred Crosby wrote in *Germs, Seeds, and Animals* about European colonialism's impact on the Americas, "The metamorphosis was more than political or religious or intellectual or technological; it was biological. The biota of Mexico—its *life*—and, in time, that of the entire Western Hemisphere changed" (47-48). Crosby also suggested that the "Amerindian population crash" triggered by Old World diseases "was surely the greatest tragedy in the history of the human species" (25-26).

Even at the time, some Europeans displayed far more ambivalent attitudes toward colonialism than others, and this extended to environmental issues. According to Richard Grove in *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, encounters with tropical islands, and the ability to observe rapid changes on those islands, triggered ecological awareness and even early environmental activism among some colonialists. He wrote that

> tropical islands by the mid seventeenth century acquired a very specific role as the subject of a discourse based in large part on archetypal Utopian and Edenic precepts … [T]he hard reality of the destructive impact of metropolitan capitalism on the tropical island at the European periphery served to demonstrate the contradictions between capitalist development and the preservation of the paradisal vision. … Utopian aesthetic discourse was transformed into a far-reaching change in attitudes toward European-caused degradation in tropical forests and soils. (Grove 72).

Certainly the Brendan legend influenced this colonial discourse, with Brendan's island wandering across Renaissance maps (Babcock 48). Hence Tom Moylan argued that Brendan's Land of Promise anticipated the literary trope of utopian islands, for the *Navigatio's* "spiritual rather than material (much less political) yearning and anticipation … nevertheless occasion that attitude of discontent and aspiration that later will become so central to the modern utopian imagination" (263). This influence was especially clear in Renaissance works that explicitly invoked the Brendan legend.

In his 1621 cosmography, *Nova Typis Transacta Navigatio*, Caspar Plautius treated Saint Brendan's voyage to where "the citizens of heaven were reported to dwell" ("*quod caeli cives in ea ferebantur habitare*") as a forerunner of the voyages of Columbus (12). An unabashed defender of missionary colonialism, Plautius declared that Native Americans had been "ransomed from slavery to sin, perfidy, and the infidels of Babylon" ("*laudem dicant Domino Deo nostro Americani populi, qui redempti sunt a servitude peccati, perfidiaque infidelis Babylonis*") (101). For Plautius, the European colonizers were agents of God, and the liberators of otherwise damned indigenous souls. *Nova Typis Transacta* also included several botanical drawings (plate 9, between pages 52 and 53). As Grove observed, the interest in such drawings overlapped with the concerns that drove early environmentalism. Joan Huydecoper van Maarsseveen, an administrator with the Dutch East India Company, solicited both botanical drawings and detailed landscape sketches. The latter helped document the deforestation on Mauritius (Grove 138). The well-documented deforestation on Mauritius and Saint Helena, Grove argued, triggered "a coherent and wide-ranging critique of environmental degradation"

(6). A single text, then, *Nova Typis Transacta*, championed colonialism, Brendan's voyage, and proto-environmental scientific impulses. The Brendan legend may not have been an explicit source for environmental thought in this period, but it was nevertheless drawn into the complex, cultural tangle of colonialism, science, and environmentalism. As Grove argued (regarding the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries),

> The landscapes of island and garden were metaphors of mind. Anxieties about environmental change, climatic change and extinctions and even the fear of famine, all of which helped motivate early environmentalism, mirrored anxiety about social form (especially where the fragile identity of the European colonist was called into question) and motivated social reform. At the core of environmental concern lay anxiety about society and its discontents. (14)

Although the Brendan legend contributed to the European exploratory impulse, it hardly modeled the conquest of the Americas. Yet as Plautius revealed, colonialism clearly influenced how the legend was read and interpreted during the later Renaissance. The hermeneutical influence of colonialism did not weaken until the twentieth century.

The Irish poet Denis Mac Carthy published a long poem about Brendan's voyage in 1848, the heart of the Great Hunger (Mac Carthy vii). From the Norman invasion to the Ulster Troubles, Ireland suffered centuries of unfortunate imperialistic attention from its neighbor, Britain. The Great Hunger was one of the darkest chapters in that history. It began with an international potato blight, but metastasized into a tragedy under a British

government reluctant to take measures, even emergency ones, that violated free market principles (Green 234). Thus, despite mass starvation due to the failure of the potato crop, Ireland still exported "massive amounts" of other food crops (Kinealy 79). Furthermore, for several years support for famine victims was insufficient, work requirements for those starving persons seeking public aid were draconian, and work projects were intentionally designed to provide no lasting contribution to the public good (Kinealy 74-76). Ireland lost more than a quarter of its population during this period, as over a million Irish died and a similar number emigrated (Green 239).

We see the influence of this tragic, imperialistic history on Mac Carthy in a section near the end of his poem. In the original *Navigatio*, an angelic youth declares to Brendan, "After the passage of many times this land will become known to your successors, when persecution of the Christians shall have come" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 63). MacCarthy, though, offered a transformed and expanded prophecy. After describing Ireland as "the College of the Saints," the youth warns,

> But in the end upon that land shall fall
> A bitter scourge, a lasting flood of tears,
> When ruthless tyranny shall level all
> The pious trophies of its early years:
> Then shall this land prove thy poor country's friend,
> And shine a second Eden in the west;
> Then shall this shore its friendly arms extend,
> And clasp the outcast exile to its breast. (MacCarthy 105)

In Mac Carthy's poem, the Promised Land of the Saints is clearly identified with North America. The "persecution of the Christians" from the *Navigatio* has been replaced with the historical suffering of the Irish under British imperialism. MacCarthy dealt with this historical trauma by bracketing it. If America is the prophesied land of Irish refuge, and if this prophecy occurred early in Christian Ireland's history, then the tragic millennium of colonization was simply an interruption in the Irish people's longer saintly destiny.

Mac Carthy's critique of imperialism blended with a romantic appreciation for nature. Indeed, his romanticism was similar to that of his British and American contemporaries. According to the historian Carolyn Merchant, environmental destruction in the wake of industrialization triggered a strong reaction from romantics: "They began to tell a new story of what went wrong—a story of decline from pristine nature. Explorers, writers, poets, and painters proclaimed their love for untouched wilderness" (3). Alfred Siewers argued that the "early Irish stories of the Otherworld" influenced romantic authors like Samuel Coleridge and James Fenimore Cooper, who in turn provided "young Teddy Roosevelt an imaginative vision for America's national park system" (53). This medieval influence is also clear in Mac Carthy's poem through its use of the "desert ocean" motif, a Christianized version of the Otherworld overlay:

> We were alone—the pilgrims of the sea—
> One boundless azure desert round us spread;
> No hope, no trust, no strength, except in THEE, Father,
> who once the pilgrim-people led. (90)

These lines validate a claim by Siewers. Although the later medieval imagination turned inward toward the "cloister and cathedral," Siewers argued, and away from "the desert-ocean as the central environmental figure of Christian Europe … Early Irish stories of the Otherworld nonetheless lived on in their influence on the so-called green world of English literature" ("Desert Islands" 53). It is only fair, then, that an Irish poet reclaimed this tradition. Mac Carthy also frequently used paradisiacal imagery, such as when he invoked an "Elysian" land for saints:

> Where Nature's love the sweat of labour spares,
> Nor turns to usury the wealth it lends,
> Where the rich soil spontaneous harvest bears,
> And the tall tree with milk-filled clusters bends. (85-86)

Mac Carthy, in the tradition of the *Navigatio*, proved as willing to find the divine in the "boundless azure ocean" as under a "tall tree with milk-filled clusters."

According to Merchant, though, romantic ecology and the conservation movement had their negative side, as "Edenic spaces ostracized those 'others' of different classes and colors who did not fit the story. … The middle class appropriated wild nature at the expense of native peoples by carving national parks out of their homelands" (Merchant 3). Mac Carthy's poem, though infused with the Irish experience of colonialism, did not make the connection to the treatment of Native Americans. Indeed, it only briefly, indirectly referred to the latter:

> And other men shall preach the truths sublime,
> To the benighted people dwelling here.
> But ere that hour this land shall all be made,
> For mortal man, a fitting, natural home. (Mac Carthy 105)

"Benighted" suggests both darkness and moral ignorance. Thus Mac Carthy channeled the European colonial perspective that Roderick Nash described in *Wilderness and the American Mind*: "It was immense in area, and its Indians were regarded as a form of wildēor whose savageness was consistent with the character of wild country" (7). *Wildēor* is an Anglo-Saxon word for "wild animal" that etymologically contributed to "wilderness" (Nash 1). Ironically, the attitude that Mac Carthy reflexively displayed toward Native Americans mirrored traditional prejudices against the Irish. As Richard Hoffmann noted, these prejudices had medieval roots. Referring to Gerald of Wales, Hoffmann wrote,

> The Irish were in the eyes of this Anglo-Norman, not civilized. The Irish and their Highland Scots cousins, also more herdsman than cereal growers, were 'wild', in Norman French *sauvage*, in Latin *silvestris*. Although skillfully attuned to a well-populated pastoral landscape, the natives were matched to the literary stereotype of the wild man, the deviant epitome of *dis*order. And so in self-justified response, Anglo-

> Normans 'planted' English settlers in open-field villages in the eastern areas of conquered Ireland. (140)

When Mac Carthy wrote of the need to make the land "a fitting, natural home" for human habitation, the colonized Irishman once again adopted and projected the colonizers' mindset. As William Cronon noted in *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, "Indian villages moved from habitat to habitat to find maximum abundance through minimal work, and so reduced their impact on the land" but "the English believed in and required permanent settlements" (53). Both the disagreement over land use and the British response echoed the medieval Anglo-Norman encounter with the Irish. According to Cronon, "English colonists could use Indian hunting and gathering as an excuse for expropriating Indian land" (56). Despite lamenting the "lasting flood of tears" that had befallen Ireland, Mac Carthy seemingly accepted the colonizers' stereotypes when they were directed against a different culture (105).

That is, of course, a stern commentary on just four lines from a moving and beautiful poem, but those lines did channel widespread sentiments. In an early chapter of *Into the Ocean*, Kristjan Ahronson noted the influence of "diffusionist and racial determinist thinking" on much nineteenth century scholarship (18, 37). According to Ahronson, such thinking inspired the claim by French scholar Eugene Beauvois that the Irish settled Quebec in the early medieval period. For Beauvois, the Irish went "bravely into the unknown Ocean, because that is what Gaels do," whereas the Native Americans were "racially incapable of constructing the stone structures he had heard of along the

Saint Lawrence and in Newfoundland" (Ahronson 29). We see a similar racial bias in Denis O'Donoghue's *Brendaniana* from 1898. While building a case for pre-Columbian Irish missionary activity in the Americas, he made these remarks about the arrival of Cortes in Mexico:

> In the religion of the Mexicans the Spaniards found a strange and unnatural combination of what seemed to be Christian beliefs and Christian virtues and morality with the bloody rites and idolatrous practices of pagan barbarians. … [W]hatever was gentle and humanizing in the Mexican religion ... the Spaniards considered to be a survival of an early knowledge of the Christian faith … These doctrines and practices were attributed by the Mexicans to the teachings of Quetzatcoatl, who must, therefore, have been a Christian missionary from Europe. (O'Donoghue 322-23)

Apparently, it did not occur to O'Donoghue to question the conquistadors veracity and impartiality, nor to credit "pagan barbarians" with the capacity to develop anything "gentle and humanizing" on their own. In this, he was close to Plautius. O'Donoghue was also convinced by Dominick Daly's theory that Saint Brendan was the Quetzalcoatl of legend (O'Donoghue 324). Clearly, a blend of romanticism and racism influenced even careful nineteenth century scholarship in this area. Although later scholars, readers, and adventurers did not necessarily retain the earlier racial attitudes, they often romantically

adhered to a geographical schema originally shaped by "diffusionist and racial determinist thinking."

The above sketch offers an initial, very partial treatment of a complicated history, but there is clearly much work left to do. In addition to accounting for the past, though, we must also look toward the future. How might we pilot the tale's ecological potential, while scraping off the barnacles of imperialism? What role could the Brendan legend play in a global environmental conversation? The next section, in part, considers this.

Interfaith Environmental Ethics

The Cree theologian Stan McKay, a former moderator of the United Church of Canada, wrote of his native heritage and ecology,

> Our elders say say that when our thoughts and dreams are put into written form they lose life. … But the turmoil of these days has brought us to the point that our elders advise us to share the insights and even risk writing them. It is urgent for all people to come together for a healing vision for the earth, our mother. (519)

McKay, despite drawing personally from both Christianity and Cree spirituality, did not call for a synthetic world religion. Rather, he suggested, "Respect allows for diversity within the unity of the creator. Dialogue can then take place within a global community which does not develop defensive arguments to protect some truth. The situation will be

one of sharing stories instead of dogmatic statements and involves listening as well as talking" (521). Whether offering stories from our own tradition or borrowing those of others, we must hold two versions of the story in our minds at the same time. The first is the story in its original spiritual, linguistic, and cultural context. The second is the story translated into another worldview. The second story supplements but does not supersede the first. In this way, we can respectfully share stories. In the last chapter we carefully examined the Brendan legend with respect to Christian eco-theology, but how might it serve interfaith conversations? This is a future direction for research, but we may at least preview that future work by putting the *Navigatio's* lessons in conversation with two other spiritual traditions: Islam as a representative of monotheistic traditions and Confucianism as a representative of non-theistic ones.

We find a parallel to Brendan's ecological asceticism in what Fazul M. Khalid called the "responsibility principle" in Islam. Khalid explained,

> Humankind, like the rest of the natural world, was, as part of the natural patterning of creation, in a state of goodness with potential for good actions. It is inextricably part of this pattern, but is the only element of it with choice, that can choose to act against the divine Will using the very gift of reasoning bestowed upon it by the Creator. Submission to the divine will ... is the way to uphold our responsibilities as the Creator's Khalif. (339)

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), as explained by religion scholar Tazim R. Kassam, provides an example of this responsibility principle in action. According to Kassam, many attempts at rural development have promoted "glamorous megaprojects" and western-style consumption, while overlooking "fundamental needs … such as sufficient food and water, proper clothing, decent shelter, basic education, and primary health care" (485). This lack of attention to basic needs undermines both the well-being of poor people and their capacity to respond to environmental challenges. Conversely, AKDN supports grassroots structures that allow for local action (Kassam 486-87, 491-92). For Kassam, this is rooted in the same ecological ethos indicated by Khalid: "To squander and exploit the resources of the earth, which are limited and which are priceless gifts, is to 'sin' or transgress against the limits embedded in life systems, and thus to fail in one's trusteeship" (Kassam 493-94). Proper care for humans, then, is connected to proper care for the earth.

Stories can also stimulate the Muslim environmental imagination. The environmental planner Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn ecologically interpreted a nautical parable from the prophet Muhammad. Llewellyn suggested that we think of our planet as "an ark of Noah sailing around the sun with its precious cargo, the species of life, all interlinked and united in destiny" (185). On this planetary ship, though, a passenger desires drinking water—a scenario familiar from the *Navigatio*. Rather than work within the existing distribution system, this passenger tries to reach water by chopping through the ship's hull. Llewellyn concluded,

> "Now, if they were to hold back his hand," said the Prophet, "both he and they would be saved. But if they were to leave him alone, both he and they would be doomed." The passenger's attitude and behavior is that of modern humans, who have significantly diminished the capacity of the earth to support life. (185)

There are clear resonances between this story and the *Navigatio*. Muslims and Christians may share these stories with each other, and with members of other religious traditions, to stimulate a wider ecological conversation. A Muslim, though, would interpret the *Navigatio's* references to "the Lord Jesus Christ" differently than a trinitarian Christian. In Islam, Jesus is the penultimate prophet who, like Elijah, was raised by God into heaven (Ali 56-57, 93-94). For Christians and Muslims to share the Brendan story, they must maintain two different understandings of Jesus. This is possible if each faith respects the other's right to interpret the role of "the Lord Jesus Christ" according to their own doctrines. In this way, the story can be shared even if certain dogmas are not.

The ethic of restraint also resonates with the Confucian concept of *li. Li* is most often translated as "propriety," but as the philosopher Archie Bahm explained in his book *The Heart of Confucius*, "To learn the customary forms of external behavior without understanding their inner significance is artificial, not natural. To learn the social proprieties without learning why they are appropriate is to be misinformed. For Confucius, *li* consists in only those forms of propriety which are appropriate" (43). We find a clear example of the social significance of *li* in Bahm's translation of *Great Wisdom* (or *Great Learning*), one of the four Confucian classics: "When good will

prevails in one family, it influences the whole country, and when courtesy prevails in one family, the whole country becomes courteous. On the other hand, the selfishness and rudeness of one man can cause turmoil throughout the whole country" (Bahm 143). Similarly, in our modern, tumultuous world, with "rapidly changing societies where human interrelations are disintegrating," the philosopher Byong-ik Koh asserted, "Confucian moralism emphasizing the middle of the road, modesty, and a greater concern for the community and less concern for self-interest can constitute a force for social and personal restraint—a moral force of universal value in consolidating human ties and harnessing their excesses" (119).

The philosopher Robert Cummings Neville offered a psychological and ecological interpretation of *li*. According to Neville, a person is more than their "pure center." Rather than an isolated self, a person is a spectrum connecting the "pure center" to the "ten thousand things" to which that center must respond (268). In other words, we are both our core and our relationships. Neville identified this core self with *li* and suggested that we must train ourselves how to properly respond to the world. Applied to ecology, this requires an attention to nature that is not merely romantic, but also discriminating (Neville 268-69). That is, we cannot just respond to "nature" generically, but must respond to specific ecological niches and needs. The principle of *li* may lie behind the creative use of funerary rituals in Taiwanese environmental activism. Robert Weller and Peter Bol explained,

> The funeral symbolism furthers the image of filial piety, rebutting state and corporate worries about economic growth with classic Confucian

> values. Some funerals mourn the slain local land or water as if it were a dead parent and thus imply an accusation that the state or corporation has murdered the environment. (334-35)

For the Taiwanese environmental activists, as for the *Navigatio's* monks, proper behavior was connected to a proper understanding of natural order and relationships.

The religion scholar Michael Kalton explained that *Li* also means "pattern" in later Confucian thought. In this sense, *li* is associated with the Tao or the principle of heaven. *Li* is conceptually paired with *ch'i*, or vital force—the spiritual-material energy that constitutes "the stuff of the universe" (Kalton 80-81). *Li* manifests through *ch'i*, but also gives shape to *ch'i*. Kalton proposed a modern, scientific reconceptualization of this relationship: "The emergence and evolution of life is an energetic (*ch'i*) thrust toward systemic complexity (*li*)" (89). The metaphysical understanding of *li* supplements the ethical understanding, and so correct action is conceptually linked to interconnection. This makes the philosophy of *li* and *ch'i* a potentially potent source for environmental ethics. As Kalton put it, "The investigation of *li* reveals the necessity of tuning the rhythm of our desires to fit appropriately in a life-supporting way with the patterned processes of society, biosphere, and the earth" (99). The liturgical rhythm of Brendan's voyage resonates with the Confucian understanding of *li,* and Brendan's insight into God's will parallels a sage's understanding of the way of heaven. Through self-cultivation, Brendan and his monks achieve harmony with their universe. Understood in this way, the Brendan story can clearly be translated into Confucian terminology and thought.

Future work on this matter must be both broader and deeper—broader across more traditions, and deeper within each tradition. However, this initial comparison suggests that the Brendan legend, with its reverent environmental spirituality, might be shareable across religious lines. Can we share religious stories, though, without attempting to convert each other? Satis Prasad, a Hindu missionary, insisted that "there are no basic differences in the moral substance of Hinduism and Christianity," and so emphasized "the need to believe these moral teachings, by whatever name they go" (Cousins 248). Similarly, William James avoided the topic of conversions from one religion to another in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Instead, he focused on conversion experiences that stayed within a single religion, "these shiftings of character to higher levels" that "show a human being what the high water mark of his spiritual capacity is" (257). Elizabeth Johnson provided an ecological extension of James' core insight when she called for "a deep spiritual conversion to the Earth" (258). When we share stories to stimulate the environmental imagination, we do not seek to change another's religion, we seek to change each other within our religions—a reciprocal ecological conversion.

Stories grip our imaginations in ways that scholarly texts do not, so the more we have in circulation, the better. In an interview with the public radio program Living on Earth, Martin Palmer, the Secretary General of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, argued,

> Nobody was ever moved to change the way they live by a pie chart, but they are moved by a story. And in a sense, the environmental world has

> relied on science and facts, bald facts if I can put it that way, for the last 40 years and the end result is we're in a worse case than we were 40 years ago. ("God's Green")

Palmer also described the practical commitments made to combat climate change by the leaders of several religious organizations—from reducing meat consumption to printing holy books on recycled paper to empowering the poor to seek environmental justice. These religious leaders were able to use sacred stories as a stimulus toward action. As the sociologist Joseph Davis observed, "Narrative is a powerful concept, illuminating the interplay of agency and social structure … In the moral, emotional, rhetorical, and social control work of social movements, stories play a significant role" (27). The Brendan tale is one part of what we need—an ocean of multicultural, interfaith stories, all guiding us toward a sacred island of ecological care.

Science, Myth, and Ecology

In September of 2015, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) detected a gravitational wave, a ripple in the fabric of space-time, produced 1.3 billion years ago by the merger of two massive black holes. This confirmed both Einstein's general theory of relativity and the existence of binary black hole systems. After months of testing and analysis, LIGO scientists announced their discovery at a February 2016 National Science Foundation press conference. As David Reitze, the LIGO Laboratory Executive Director, explained,

> What LIGO does, is it actually takes these vibrations in space-time, these ripples in space-time, and it records them on a photo-detector, and you can actually hear them. So what LIGO has done—it's the first time the universe has spoken to us through gravitational waves, and this is remarkable. Up till now we've been deaf to gravitational waves, but today we are able to hear them. That's just amazing to me. (“LIGO”)

Similarly, Reitze's colleague Gabriela González remarked, “The frequencies of these waveforms are in the human hearing range. We can hear gravitational waves; we can hear the universe. That's one of the beautiful things about this—we are not only going to be seeing the universe, we are going to be listening to it” (“LIGO”). There is a resonance, perhaps unexpected, between LIGO and the *Navigatio*. Saint Brendan and his monks, like the LIGO scientists, explored a vast and mysterious cosmos. For both, their encounters provoked awe and joy. This does not mean that science and myth are fundamentally the same—such a claim would do justice to neither—but both may provide access to our innate human capacity for wonder. Despite their wide travels, Saint Brendan and his monks only witnessed a fraction of what their universe held; certainly the bird-angels traveled more widely through “regions of the air and the firmament and the earth” (O'Meara, “Latin Translation” 36). Nevertheless, the roar of oceanic waves was as sublime for Brendan and his monks as the chirp of gravitational waves is for us.

Confronted with the vastness of the universe, and our slightness within it, we might suspect that contemporary environmental concerns are mere human hubris. We

might assume that our species could leave, at most, a negligible mark. But we must distinguish between the universal scale and the local scale, while acknowledging that the planetary scale falls between these. Although our stature in the cosmos is humble, we have the capacity to greatly harm both ourselves and other life on this planet. A single person can tear apart a room, or even a house; six billion people can significantly affect our globe. The British Royal Society and the U. S. National Academy of Science remind us of this in *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes*:

> Already, record high temperatures are on average significantly outpacing record low temperatures, wet areas are becoming wetter as dry areas are becoming drier, heavy rainstorms have become heavier, and snowpacks (an important source of freshwater for many regions) are decreasing.
>
> These impacts are expected to increase with greater warming and will threaten food production, freshwater supplies, coastal infrastructure, and especially the welfare of the huge population currently living in low-lying areas. Even though certain regions may realise some local benefit from the warming, the long-term consequences overall will be disruptive. (*Climate Change* 19)

The report warns, "Further climate change is inevitable; if emissions of greenhouse gases continue unabated, future changes will substantially exceed those that have occurred so far" (B9). In response, we can change how we produce and consume energy, or "seek as

yet unproven ‘geoengineering’ solutions,” or even “accept the losses, damage and suffering” associated with our present course. The moral hazard of apathy is high, though, “because in many cases those communities that are most vulnerable control few of the emissions” (B9). This holds true beyond the human sphere. A legitimate respect for our cosmic smallness should not blind us to how our choices affect diverse forms of vulnerable life.

The *Navigatio's* ethic of restraint and joyous affirmation of creation’s goodness suggest a mindset that could benefit our time. Hyperconsumption imagines the natural world as an impersonal, exploitable object, yet simultaneously a conquered foe (conquest of nature) from whom we might extract tribute. Conversely, the medieval tale treats the created world as a divine revelation and a subject worthy of respect. Saint Brendan and his companions have no illusions about their smallness in the midst of a great and wondrous cosmos. Certainly the *Navigatio's* author would have known Genesis 3:19:

> By the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread
> until you return to the ground,
> for out of dust you were taken;
> you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Paul the Hermit seems to echo this passage when he declares, “A monk uses the labour of his hands with which to feed and clothe himself” (O'Meara, “Latin Version” 60). We can assume, then, that the *Navigatio's* monks are very aware that they “are dust” and “to dust

shall return." They do not, however, treat their humbleness as a pretext for recklessness. To the contrary, an ethic of restraint permeates the tale, as is appropriate for a work of monastic literature. The Vulgate use of *pulvis* (dust) to translate the Hebrew *aphar* echoes the famous declaration by Roman poet Horace: "Mere dust are we, and shade" (German Bible Society, Horace 172). This hints at the medieval understanding of the Genesis passage. As biblical scholar Theodore Hiebert pointed out, however, Genesis links *aphar* to *adama*—arable and therefore life-giving soil (139). An agricultural monk may quite plausibly have read this into the text, thus inferring a tone of both death and resurrection. Saint Brendan and his monks tread lightly on a world that they did not create, and which they will eventually exit through death. Death is a necessary part of the life cycle, and the *Navigatio's* author did not forget this; the story's last words say of Saint Brendan, "For when he had made all arrangements for after his death, and a short time had intervened, fortified by the divine sacraments, he migrated from among the hands of his disciples in glory to the Lord, to whom is honour and glory from generation to generation. Amen" (O'Meara, "Latin Version" 64). As much as anything else in the tale, this is an ecological sentiment. With death, we surrender our own matter back to the earth.

Any study of an earlier age is a product of its own, and the present work is certainly no exception. To perceive environmental themes in a medieval text, one must first have the concept of "environment." As the previous pages make clear, the perception of creation-friendly themes is strongly supported by the *Navigatio's* contents. Nevertheless, this project interprets as much as it excavates—it is about the present century as much as centuries past. To a certain extent, this is unavoidable. We cannot have a conversation with the past unless we participate in that conversation, but we must

take care not to drown out those historical voices. Quantum physics and evolutionary biology were not even murmurs on the conceptual horizon when the *Navigatio's* author set his pen to a spiritual adventure tale. Although we can appreciate the *Navigatio's* mythos, we must bracket the story in ways that the original audience did not. Even if we cannot recreate the legend's cosmos, though, we could greatly benefit by reclaiming part of its ethos. In a world unquestionably governed by God, the notion of an "anthropocene" would seem obscene. Pope Francis invoked the *Navigatio's* ethos when he called for "an alternative understanding of the quality of life … a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption" (252). Saint Brendan and his monks celebrated the natural world without seeking to possess it, for just witnessing the wonder of life was enough. A story like the *Navigatio* invites us to imagine different lifestyles, values, and structures. True, we cannot draw back our harm to this blue-green world through stories alone, but we also cannot do so without them.

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