

DID AN IRISH MONK “DISCOVER” AMERICA?

BY CHRISTOPHER KLEIN // MARCH 17, 2014

In the sixth century, Ireland’s St. Brendan embarked on a legendary voyage that some believe took him to North America nearly 500 years before the Vikings and 1,000 years before Christopher Columbus. Is there any truth in the theory or is it just a bunch of blarney?



Fifty years after the death of St. Patrick on March 17, 461 A.D., another Celtic saint continued the work of converting pagan Ireland to Christianity. Born near Tralee in County Kerry in 484 A.D., St. Brendan the Navigator traveled tirelessly to evangelize and establish monasteries following his ordination to the priesthood at age 28. The sixth-century monk frequently sailed the high seas to spread the gospel throughout Ireland as well as to Scotland, Wales and Brittany in the north of France.

According to a 1,500-year-old Irish tale, however, St. Brendan embarked on one particularly epic journey in the winter of his 93-year-old life. According to the story, St. Barinthus told St. Brendan that he had just returned from a visit to Paradise, a land that lurked far beyond the horizon. For 40 days St. Brendan fasted and prayed atop a mountain on the rugged Dingle Peninsula, a spindly finger of land on the west of Ireland that points directly at North America. The octogenarian squinted out at the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean in wonder of what was out there before deciding to go in pursuit of the fabled Garden of Eden.

St. Brendan crafted a traditional Irish round-bottom boat, shaped like a canoe and called a curragh, with square sails and leather skins stitched together to create a watertight seal over the vessel’s wooden skeleton. Along with a crew of anywhere between 18 and 150 according to the differing accounts, the saint sailed off into the cobalt ocean. As the fragile craft beat against the waves, St. Brendan encountered towering crystal pillars afloat in the oceans, sheep the size of oxen, giants who pelted the ship with fireballs that smelled like rotten eggs and talking birds singing psalms. Finally, as the boat drifted through a fog, it landed at what the Irishmen thought was Paradise [the Garden of Eden], a land lush with vegetation, fragrant with flowers and abounding in fruit and colorful stones. After staying for 40 days, an angel told the men to return home. When St. Brendan came back to the Emerald Isle after the seven-year voyage, pilgrims who heard the sensational story flocked to his side in remote County Kerry until he died around 577 A.D.

Much like with St. Patrick, the line between the history and legend surrounding St. Brendan has been blurred. The account of his voyage passed from lip to lip for generations until a ninth-century Irish monk finally put it to paper in a Latin text entitled “*Navigatio Sancti Brendani*” (“The Voyage of St. Brendan”). The book was among the biggest page-turners of the Middle Ages and became so widely known that cartographers began to include Paradise, recorded as “St. Brendan’s Island,” on maps. Christopher Columbus was aware of the elusive island—which was drawn everywhere from the southwest of Ireland to near the Canary Islands off the African coast—as he embarked on his own voyage across the Atlantic in 1492.

Most scholars consider “The Voyage of St. Brendan” to simply be a religious allegory, but some believe that the tale was based on an actual voyage, albeit with some Irish embellishment. When

Columbus and succeeding explorers failed to find the mythical island drawn on their maps, a new theory arose that perhaps St. Brendan and his crew had actually sailed clear across the Atlantic and that Paradise was in fact North America. Proponents pointed to Scandinavian sagas that mentioned that the Irish had already visited North America by the time the Vikings landed there around 1000 A.D. The Vikings referred to the lands south of their settlement in Vinland as “Ireland it Mikla,” or “Greater Ireland.”

In addition, the fantastical sights encountered by St. Brendan, although exaggerated, could be matched to actual stopovers between Ireland and North America on a similar North Atlantic route taken by the Vikings. The crystal pillars could be icebergs, the Faroe Islands are home to large sheep and a chorus of squawking birds and the foul-smelling fireballs could correlate to the sulfuric dioxide spewed by Iceland’s volcanoes, minus the giants.

But would a trans-Atlantic voyage have even been possible in the sixth century? In 1976, modern-day adventurer Tim Severin attempted to answer the question. Based on the description of the currach in the text, he crafted an identical vessel and cast off from the Dingle Peninsula with four fellow explorers in the shadow of the same mountain where St. Brendan had been enraptured in prayer prior to his voyage (now named Mount Brandon in the saint’s honor). Following the prevailing winds across the northernmost part of the Atlantic Ocean, they crossed it using landing points such as the Aran Islands, the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland as stepping stones before arriving in Newfoundland.

While Severin proved that a trans-Atlantic voyage was possible during St. Brendan’s day, no archaeological evidence of an Irish settlement in North America before the Vikings has ever been unearthed. Nor would discovery of such artifacts prove that St. Brendan was the first Irishman in North America. After all, in the tale itself, St. Barinthus had first set foot in the distant land.

Everything described in “The Voyage of St. Brendan” could be complete blarney, but for centuries numerous scholars also discounted the Vikings sagas of their voyages to the New World as legends. That all changed with the discovery of a Viking settlement on the northernmost tip of Newfoundland in 1960, and Irish eyes would be smiling if any artifacts connected to St. Brendan are ever found in North America.

Source: Klein, Christopher. “Did an Irish Monk Really Discover America?” www.history.com

ARTICLE QUESTIONS

1. Based on this article, do you think Saint Brendan really discovered America? Explain.
2. In one part of Brendan’s account of his voyage, he and his fellow sailors are in the middle of the ocean and decide to go ashore on a small island to celebrate Easter. Once out of the boat and celebrating on the island, they realize that it is really the back of a whale—and not an island. Later, they encounter Judas Iscariot chained to a rock in the middle of the ocean—his eternal punishment for betraying Christ. How do details like this hurt the credibility of Saint Brendan’s story?
3. If you were going to research the validity of Saint Brendan’s voyage, what other sources would you seek out to prove or disprove his story? Explain.