

Nicholas Holterman  
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 Prof. Peggy McCracken  
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### Achipelagus Brendani: St. Brendan's Archipelagic Voyage

40 years ago, Tim Severin constructed a wood-framed, ox-hide boat (*curragh*, in Old Irish), sold all of his possessions, and set out from Ireland with 4 crewman to retrace the voyage of St. Brendan across the North Atlantic in *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*.<sup>1</sup> Severin's goal was to demonstrate that it would be possible for the seafaring saint to have traversed the Atlantic and reach North America. Along the way, Severin and his crew stopped at the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland before finally arriving at Peckford Island, off the coast of Newfoundland.<sup>2</sup> Severin was, of course, well versed in the Brendan legend and I find his notion of North America as the destination for Brendan's crew to be an interesting one, but rather than the intended destination, be it Paradise or Newfoundland, the most compelling details about this trans-Atlantic voyage are, first and foremost, the islands Severin (and Brendan) visited and the ox-hide ship that allowed for such passages. And although the inspiration for Severin's route comes from the Latin *Navigatio*, I turn now to the Anglo-Norman version, *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Gildea, "Across the Ocean in a Leather Boat," *The Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), July 9, 1977. See, Tim Severin, *The Brendan Voyage* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). I am interested in Severin's recreation of this and other ancient/mythical voyages. This practice aligns nicely with other scholars' attempts to overlay narrative places, like Brendan's islands, with "real" geographic places.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. For more on the possibility of North America as Brendan's destination, see Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West: St Brendan's Voyage to America* (London: Collins, 1962). While I am skeptical of these scholars' assertion of Brendan's voyage to N.A., it is nevertheless interesting to consider these arguments alongside conversations about the *Vinland Sagas*.

<sup>3</sup> Extensive comparative work between the Latin and Anglo-Norman versions can be seen in JS. Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). See also *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, eds. Glyn S Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

Dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and attributed to a clerk named Benedeit, *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* stands separate from the *Navigatio*. While both texts belong to the larger corpus about St. Brendan, the vernacular, Anglo-Norman version opens the possibility to wider access by both medieval and contemporary audiences.<sup>4</sup> *Le Voyage*, as E.G.R. Waters argues, is “by no means a close translation from the Latin, and its dependence on the *Navigatio* is not so obvious as in the case of most other renderings.”<sup>5</sup> And, if Benedeit’s Anglo-Norman version presents a world more replete with the fantastic, then it is clearly the appropriate text for my analysis of the fascinating beings that inhabit the islands in Brendan’s sea. Although *Le Voyage* is not a direct translation of the *Navigatio*, the two texts are similar enough in narrative to be able to compare their general themes and formats.

A brief summary of the narrative will allow me to better situate my reading of the islands in *Le Voyage*. In Ireland, Brendan prays to God to allow him to see Paradise where Adam was in the Beginning.<sup>6</sup> After hearing a tale from the local hermit, Barint, whose godson went on a mission to find Paradise, but stayed on an island that was not Paradise itself, but very close in proximity that it was practically the same.<sup>7</sup> Brendan builds a boat (*curragh*) from wood and ox-hide and sets sail with fourteen monks, heading westward.<sup>8</sup> The crew sails around the sea(s) to different islands, which include the Isle of Sheep, Whale-Island, the Paradise of Birds, and the Isle of Ailbe. The monks

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<sup>4</sup> Mackley argues that the Anglo-Norman version, in comparison to the *Navigatio*, emphasizes the fantastic while excising the ecclesiastical, 11.

<sup>5</sup> E.G.R. Waters, *The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St. Brendan* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928).

<sup>6</sup> “Que lui mustrat cel paraïs / U Adam fud prime asis,” l. 49-50. For this project, I have used both of Short and Merrilees’s critical editions: Benedeit, *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan*, eds. Ian Short and Brian Merilees (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006); *The Anglo-Norman Voyage of Saint Brendan*, eds. Ian Short and Brian Merilees (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> “Ço fud en mer en un isle / U mals orrez nuls ne cisle, / U fud poüz de cel odor / Que en paraïs gettent li flur, / Quer cel isle tant pres en fud, / U sainz Mernoc esteit curud : / De paraïs out la vie / E des angeles out l’oïde,” l. 93-100.

<sup>8</sup> “Le orrez lur veint de l’orient / Quis en meinet ver occident,” l. 211-12.

establish an annual route where they visit each of these islands once a year for an additional six years. But, more on this later. After voyaging for a total of seven years and after sailing near the fiery, smelly entrance of Hell, visiting an abandoned, gemmed city, witnessing a couple clashes between monsters, and running into Judas on a rock, Brendan and his crew arrive at Paradise. They return to Ireland with stones as souvenirs and Brendan continues on to become a great and revered saint.

One of the most remarkable details Severin's journey across the North Atlantic maintained from Brendan's voyage is the attention to islands. The islands played as large a role to Severin as they did to Brendan and his crew in allowing for rest and the restocking of provisions, although for the modern navigator, the route was carefully planned according to charts and atlases as opposed to faith in God.<sup>9</sup> Severin's dedication to mapping out the correct route is attributable to his wife's scholarly remarks. She notes that "the story has a remarkable amount of practical details, far more than most early medieval texts. It tells you about the geography of the places Brendan visits. It carefully describes the progress of the voyage, the times and distances, and so forth."<sup>10</sup> That is what is so interesting to me about *Le Voyage* and the way the islands play an a critical role in the narrative.

Other scholars have also analyzed the Brendan texts' attention to geographic detail and transpose the voyage into known geographic frameworks. Barbara Freitag, for example, situates St.

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<sup>9</sup> ". . . on the way out [Brendan] would experience great difficulty, battling his way from island to island and working his way west by stages. Excitedly I consulted the navigation charts that marked the winds and currents of the North Atlantic. The logical route leaped off the page. Using the prevailing southwest winds, one could sail north from Ireland and up to the Hebrides. Then north again, slanting across the westerly winds to the Faroes. From there lay a tricky passage to Iceland, but after that the currents were all favorable, helping the boat across from Iceland to South Greenland, and then sweeping down to the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, or beyond," Severin 15. Severin is skeptical of Brendan's voyage, doubting that the ox skins would last 7 years at sea, but *Le Voyage* notes repairs and replacements of the skins throughout the journey: "De quirs de buf la purcusent, / Quar cil qu'i sunt a plein usent," l. 597-8.

<sup>10</sup> Severin, 10.

Brendan’s search for terrestrial Paradise as a search for an island known as Hy Brasil.<sup>11</sup> In one of her chapters, Freitag discusses medieval and early modern maps that identify the islands Brendan visited as being located in different parts of the sea(s), from Canary Islands to Newfoundland.<sup>12</sup> Freitag also discusses “phantom islands” known as St. Brendan’s Isles which are found in different locations on various medieval maps, and which became known as Brasil.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Benjamin Hudson notes that St. Brendan’s Isles were thought to be located roughly Madeira Islands in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, according to the Hereford Map, but had moved to the coast of North America by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Cabot and Ortulis maps.<sup>14</sup> One could argue that in the medieval imagination it seems as though islands may not be fixed geographic features since St. Brendan’s Isles, The Fortunate Isle, Hy Brasil, or Paradise—all the same island(s)—are mapped out so differently.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, for all of its geographic specificity and attention to detail, *Le Voyage* is not simply a navigation manual for sailing from Ireland to Terrestrial Paradise. It is here, I think, that Severin’s island-hopping across the Atlantic missed the mark slightly. While the Brendan and the monks’ destination was Paradise, it is critical to remember that they remained at sea for seven years, following an annual course, before reaching their journey’s end. John Anderson amusingly notes, “Actually, the *Navigatio Brendani* is not a AAA triptik to the New World, nor is it baptized pagan literature. . . . [it] is hagiography whose purpose is to model virtue and promote the worship of God.

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Freitag, *Hy Brasil: The Metamorphosis of an Island from Cartographic Error to Celtic Elysium* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013). See also, Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West: St Brendan’s Voyage to America* (London: Collins, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Hudson, ed. *Studies in the Medieval Atlantic* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 8.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to see if the mobility of islands is more common in medieval maps than I had thought. In what little I know about medieval cartography, maps weren’t strictly geographical, but were also religious, philosophical, etc., so perhaps that plays a role in the flux of islands.

Its author did not try to relate a factual story, but to expound moral doctrine.”<sup>16</sup> I agree that both the *Navigatio* and *Le Voyage* serve a morally didactic purpose and, of course, extol the virtues of Christianity. I do not think, however, that it is wise to disregard the geographic, seafaring aspects of the texts. The details of the islands are what set the Brendan legend apart from so many other medieval narratives, and I am unwilling to accept *Le Voyage* as either purely hydrographic or hagiographic: it functions on more than one level.<sup>17</sup>

Since Benedeit’s text is one that serves more than one purpose, it also seems to possess unclear boundaries and resist categorization. Other scholars have labeled *Le Voyage* as akin to the Old Irish *immram* (“rowing about”), as well as a saint’s life, a romance, and even a travel narrative. With such different possibilities, the story seems to echo St. Brendan’s Isles themselves: the text is seemingly in flux and avoids fixity, with borders that seem clear, but also permeable. As St. Brendan and his monks navigate the islands and seas of the text, it becomes clear that their movement through, and presence in, the world demonstrates a connectivity with their environments and the bodies and elements that inhabit them. I want to suggest that *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* is an archipelagic text. It draws connections between the nautical and the spiritual, the human and the nonhuman, the land and the sea. The monks’ movement between islands establishes relationships that gesture toward an archipelago rather than discrete, solitary islands. I do not intend to argue that the islands Brendan visits form an archipelago in the strictly geographic sense like the Philippines,

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<sup>16</sup> John D. Anderson, “The *Navigatio Brendani*: A Medieval Best Seller,” *The Classical Journal* 83, no. 4 (1988): 315-22.

<sup>17</sup> Glyn Burgess also believes that even after a “superficial reading,” it is clear that *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* is simultaneously a story about a group of monks’ adventures at sea and a spiritual journey during which their “movement from place to place and the encounters with a variety of obstacles can easily be viewed as man’s journey through life with all its vicissitudes,” Glynn S. Burgess, “*Savoir and Faire* in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage de St Brendan*,” *French Studies* 49, no. 3 (1995): 257.

Greece, or Hawaii, but rather that the relationships created on the voyage connect human and nonhuman beings, because and in spite of the text's islands.

The notion of an archipelago is important because it underscores connectivity between islands, rather than emphasizing that one island has defined, yet permeable boundaries. For instance, Michelle Warren posits that,

On an island, the landscape metaphor is fraught with paradox because the shore forms an immutable yet permeable boundary: the land definitely ends, but ships carrying new settlers from overseas easily land. The shore embodies the general paradox of boundaries, where absolute differences occupy the places of most intimate contact.<sup>18</sup>

Islands are therefore always defined in terms of the land-sea relationship, with shores that signal both a boundary and an access point. Once again, I am reminded again of my initial research question: "Why islands?" Surely the St. Brendan narrative of obstacles and travel could have been similarly achieved by crossing terrain. I cannot know for sure, but it seems that there is something unique about sea travel among islands, then, that is not available on terra firma. Matthew Goldie and Sebastian Sobocki recognize this quality when they write,

From a perspective on the sea, a large landmass can be a haven, danger, or obstruction. Smaller islands might not only block travel, but they can also offer the interactive space of a shore combined with a more accessible interior. Islands may also reticulate in a variety of forms, sometimes presenting series of lands that offer waystations for sea travel.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Michelle Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain 1100-1300* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Boyd Goldie and Sebastian Sobocki, "Out Seas of Islands," *Postmedieval* 7, no. 4 (2016): 471.

Their maritime perspective underscores the idea that islands provide a space of interaction, a connection, because of their “paradox,” as Warren says. If islands reticulate, then they allow for connections with other islands, with the sea, and with human and nonhuman beings.

### The First Island

To demonstrate the archipelagic characteristic of *Le Voyage*, I will now turn to several examples from the text and explore the various manifestation of islands Benedeit has created. After sailing from Ireland for one month and fifteen days, the monks arrive at mountainous island.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, the crew cannot go ashore:

Mais n'i truvent nul' entrethe

U lur nef fust eschipe.

Quer de rocheiz ert aclose

U nul d'eals entrer n'ose.

...

Des creis desuz la mer resort,

Per quei peril i at mult fort.<sup>21</sup>

It is not the shore or necessarily the nature of the island that prevents the monks from mooring, but rather the rock wall and the cracks on the ocean floor. They sailed around the island for three days in search of a harbor, and ultimately find a port carved into the pale limestone.<sup>22</sup> This scene

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<sup>20</sup> The crew had a favorable wind for just over 2 weeks, “Si cururent par quinze jurs,” l. 219, but then had to row tirelessly for a month “Un meis sanz vent nagerent tut plein” l. 235. For a future project, I would love to see how the islands are represented visually in manuscripts and in other media, and do an analysis of how the visual representation affect my notion of archipelagic relationships.

<sup>21</sup> l. 251-8

<sup>22</sup> “Amunt avalt port i quistrent / E al querre treis jurs mistrent. / Un port truvent, la se sunt mis, / Qui fud trenchéd al lioit bis, / Mai n'i unt leu fors de une nef; Cil fud faitiz en le rocheit blef,” l. 259-264.

demonstrates that the island is simultaneously impenetrable and able to be accessed by a ship. And, of course, the ship is the means by which—other than the sea—lands are connected, but the subject of my analysis is not the ship since in many ways it stands as metonymy for the monks. The interior of the island is accessible and holds an abandoned palace made of crystal, marble, and gems where Satan possesses one of the monks, which shows yet another iteration of permeable boundaries. Before they leave, the monks are met by a messenger who brings them bread and beverages and tells them they should not fear the upcoming journey because God will protect them and that they will not lack provisions until they can take on fresh supplies.<sup>23</sup> This first island provides for the monks on two levels: they receive sustenance for their nautical journey and also they are reassured about God’s protection, which is a type of spiritual sustenance.

### Island of Sheep

When the monks leave their first “waystation,” it takes them the better part of a year to arrive at the Island of Sheep.<sup>24</sup> Upon disembarking from their *curragh*, the monks see a peculiar sight:

Lascent cordes, metent veil jus;  
 Ariverent e sailent sus.  
 Veient berbis a grant fuisun,  
 A chescune blanche tuisun.  
 Tutes erent itant grandes  
 Cum sunt li cers par ces landes.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> l. 356-370.

<sup>24</sup> “Curent par mer grant part de l’an” l. 37.

<sup>25</sup> l. 385-390.

The crew encounter giant sheep, the likes of which they had never seen before.<sup>26</sup> They decide to take one of the sheep and prepare it for an Easter feast. This scene is similar to the first island because acquiring food and sustenance seems to be the main objective of visiting the island, and before they take the sheep, Brendan says, “A Deu cunçé de ço ruvum, / Altre quant nus or n’i truvum.” They ask God’s permission to take the sheep because there are no humans around to ask. I want to suggest that this moment is archipelagic. If we consider the monks (human) and sheep (nonhuman) to be islands in their own right, then God serves as a connector between the human and nonhuman and thus establishing a relationship.

Yet, on the last day of their sojourn on the Island of Sheep, the monks are visited by another messenger who tells them that whatever food they should require would be given to them.<sup>27</sup> And when Brendan remarks on the sheep’s size, the messenger says, “. . . N’est merveille: / Ja ci n’ert traite öeile; / L’ivers n’en fait raëncune, / Ne d’enfertét n’i mort une.”<sup>28</sup> The sheep’s size and nature are defined in terms of their relationship to beings, needing (or not) to be milked and lack of contagions, and their relationship to the island’s mild climate. One cannot know for certain whether the messenger is the only other human on the island, but now that the island will become part of the monk’s circuit, one has to wonder in the sheep will be milked, if opening the island to contact will introduce disease, and if eating sheep at Easter will affect the sheep population. Such a line of inquiry indicates a negative—if I am able to qualify it—aspect to archipelagic relationships.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Severin remarks that this is like the Faroes, since the Old Norse name for the islands were *Faer-Eyyjaer*, or “Sheep Islands,” Severin, 106. I remain partly skeptical about this conclusion since it took nearly a year for the monks to travel from Ireland to the Island of Sheep, but it’s possible.

<sup>27</sup> “E si lur falt nule rien, / Tut lur truverat, ço promet bien. / . . . / Ço respundit: “Assez avum / Quanque des quers penser savum,” l.411-416.

<sup>28</sup> l. 419-422

<sup>29</sup> I am thinking here of Mel Chen’s notion of toxicity and Stacy Alaimo’s idea of the toxic body in trans-corporeal relationships.

## Whale-Island

When Brendan and his crew leave the Island of Sheep, the messenger tells them to go to another island that is visible from the shore and there they will celebrate their Easter feast.<sup>30</sup> The next island's proximity is already a remarkable difference from the first two islands.<sup>31</sup> When they arrive, the monks say their Easter mass and prepare their feast by gathering firewood and cooking the meat they had brought with them—presumably the sheep from their previous stop.<sup>32</sup> But when the meal is cooked and ready, something unexpected happens:

Quar la terre tute muveit  
 E de la nef mult se luigneit.  
 Enz en la nef entré sunt tuit.  
 Mais lur isle mult tost s'en fuit,  
 ...  
 Brendan lur dist : « Freres, savez  
 Pur quei poür oüt avez ?  
 N'est pas terre, ains est beste  
 U nus feïmes nostre feste,  
 Pessuns de mer sur les greinurs.  
 Ne merveillés de ço, seignurs !<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Entre en ta nef, Brandan, e va. / En cel isle anuit entras / E ta feste demain i fras,” l. 424-6.

<sup>31</sup> In future projects, I would like to explore why proximity matters in an archipelagic relationship.

<sup>32</sup> “Puis que unt tut fait lur servise / En la nef cum en eglise, / Charn de la nef qu’il i mistrent, / Pur quire la dunc la pristrent. / De la busche en vunt quere / Dunt le manger funt a terre,” l. 445-450.

<sup>33</sup> l. 455-472

To everyone's surprise, the island was a whale even before the crew's arrival.<sup>34</sup> The text disguises the whale as an island which ensures that the reader—with the monks—is unaware of the whale-island's true nature. The repetition of "terre," for example, solidifies the monks' understanding of the island as solid ground. Additionally, the messenger directs the Brendan to go "en cel isle," which indicates his knowledge of the whale-island, and is a function of his acting on God's behalf, aiding the spiritual education of the monks. Brendan, too, demonstrates his prescience when he calmly explains that they had just celebrated on the back of a sea animal; such marvels were intended to make the monks believe in God.<sup>35</sup>

Brendan echoes the words of the messenger on the Island of Sheep and invokes the idea that giant sheep and a Whale-Island are not *merveils*. These nonhuman beings belong to the world around the crew and play a significant role in their nautical and spiritual journeys and are not miracles. Yet, the Whale-Island obscures the boundaries between nonhuman, human, and the environment. The monks are able to gather firewood on the *pessums*, which may be the result of God's miracle, but demonstrates that a whale is able to sustain forest growth on its back in the middle of the sea. And, like the islands of medieval maps mentioned earlier, this particular island is able to move through space. Therefore, the Whale-Island is archipelagic not only in its proximity to the Island of Sheep, but because it erases the boundaries between, and connects, the nautical and the spiritual, the human and the nonhuman, the land and the sea.

### **Paradise of Birds**

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<sup>34</sup> My officemate asked whether or not the island transformed into a whale, or if it was a whale from the beginning. I read the island as having been a whale all along. Short and Merrilees write that this trope is also present in Physiologus as well as in *One Thousand and One Nights*, 75. They also indicate that this episode is most representative of the Brendan story in medieval iconography, 75.

<sup>35</sup> "Ses merveilles cum plus verrez, / En lui peuis mult mielz crerrez," l. 475-6.

After departing whale-island, or rather, after the island left the monks in their ship, Brendan sails the ship a great distance and reach another island.<sup>36</sup> When they arrive, they are eager to reach the island:

Venent i tost e arivent,  
 Ne de l'eisir ne s'echivent,  
 Ne pur altre rien ne dutent,  
 Mais a terre la nef butent.<sup>37</sup>

This arrival is noticeably different from the others. The narrator makes sure to say that the monks are not afraid as they had been in the past. Even the way they pull the ship on shore demonstrates a different way of accessing the island's interior. From the shore, the monks follow a stream, "un duit," to a huge tree, white like marble, with spotted red and white leaves.<sup>38</sup> A stream, connecting the tree to the sea, is another example of how island interiors are accessible in different way; the dividing/connecting water flows to the ocean, and human and nonhuman beings can use the stream to navigate.<sup>39</sup>

Once the crew arrives at the base of the tree, the notice that its branches are completely covered with white doves:

Li abes prent a merveiller  
 E priet Deu son conseller

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<sup>36</sup> "Quant out ço dist l'abes Brandan, / Bien ad curut de mer un grant pan. / Veient terre alte e clere, / Sicum lur out dist cil frere," l. 479-482.

<sup>37</sup> l. 483-6.

<sup>38</sup> l. 487-498.

<sup>39</sup> ". . . oceans are one of the four principal water ecosystems. The others are rivers, lakes, and wetlands, and each deserves its own particular attention because of its defining characteristics: rivers dividing and connecting, striating Britain on maps, and subject to control of a different kind from seas . . ." Goldie and Sobecki, 481.

Que li mustret quel cose seit,  
 Si grant peltét des oiseus que deit,  
 Quel leu ço seit u est venuz;  
 D'iço l'asent par ses vertuz.<sup>40</sup>

Now it is Brendan who is shocked by the marvel before him, and in order to get his bearings, he prays to God to tell him where he is. This prayer collapses the spiritual and the geographic for Brendan, and echoes the desire of scholars like Severin to locate the actual locations and names of the islands. But, Brendan's answer does not come from a map: "L'un des oiseus s'en devolat."<sup>41</sup> A bird flies down to the ship and speaks to Brendan, telling him how they were once angels and after foolishly following Satan, they live on the island: "Le num del leu que tu qesis / C'est as Oiseus li Parais."<sup>42</sup>

The bird's ability to fly down to the ship, a space that has been occupied only by the monks, further shows how the borders of an island are permeable; not only the monks have the ability to traverse the boundaries of the island. Furthermore, the birds can talk and sing. They later perform vespers ("Quant vint le jurn al declinant, / Vers le vespre dunc funt cant; Od dulces voiz mult halt crient")<sup>43</sup> and matins with the monks ("Matines dient ainzjurnals, / E as refreiz ensemble od eals / Respunt li cors de cez oisals").<sup>44</sup> This communal singing, in addition to the movement across and through the island's borders, is an archipelagic function because it bridges together human and nonhuman beings as the unfamiliar becomes familiar, the "merveil" becomes mundane. As the

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<sup>40</sup> l. 501-6.

<sup>41</sup> l. 508.

<sup>42</sup> l. 543-4.

<sup>43</sup> l. 555-7.

<sup>44</sup> l. 576-8.

monks take their leave, one of the birds says that they will travel for eight months to the Isle of Ailbe and celebrate Christmas there.

### **The Isle of Ailbe**

After four months of sailing, the monks see land (“Puis quatre meis veient terre”),<sup>45</sup> but did not reach the island until two months after that (“Al siste meis virent la fin”).<sup>46</sup> As the bird forewarned, the monks were not able to go ashore until the eighth month because rocks and mountains prevented them from mooring; the ship circled the island for forty days before the crew was able to put into a harbor that was created by a stream.<sup>47</sup> The approach to the Isle of Ailbe is reminiscent of the rock-surrounded first island of the abandoned palace, as well as the stream found on the Paradise of Birds. Despite the many differences, a reader can begin to see connections between the islands, and how these similarities might allow us to trace an archipelago between the islands, but more on that later.

When they disembark from the ship, Brendan and his companions find a peculiar spring: “E fontaine trovent duple, / L’une clere, l’autre truble.”<sup>48</sup> Brendan forbids the monks from drinking from the fountain and says, “Quel nature nus ne savum / Aieint li duit que trovét avum.”<sup>49</sup> Once again, the crewmembers find themselves in a position where an island is a contact zone in which they are ignorant of certain elements. Suddenly an older man appears, a monk who lives on the island, and guides Brendan to his residence. As they pass by groups of the island’s inhabitants, Brendan once again asks where he is: “Cume aloent, le abes ad quis / Quels leus ço seit u se sunt

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<sup>45</sup> l. 625.

<sup>46</sup> l. 628.

<sup>47</sup> “Virun en vunt .xl. dis / Ainz que en nul port se seient mis, / Quar li rocheir e li munz grant / A la terre lur sunt devant. / Puis mult a tart truvent un cros / Que fair uns duiz, qui lur ad os,” l. 631-6

<sup>48</sup> l. 643-4.

<sup>49</sup> l. 649-50.

mis.”<sup>50</sup> No one answers Brendan’s question, but instead, the host monk recounts the island’s history. He tells of the twenty-four monks who live on the island and of Ailbe who abandoned his previous life and who was led to the island by a “messenger.”<sup>51</sup> The monks, who learned of Ailbe decided to join him at the monastery: “Quant oïmes en plusurs leus / Que ci maneit Albeus li pius, / Par Deu ci nus asemlames.”<sup>52</sup> Language and fame are therefore able to travel across “plusurs leus” and bring together the monks on the island. This is yet another archipelagic function, showing the connection between discrete entities across space.

The episode on Ailbe’s island archipelagic for two reasons. The first is that the story of Ailbe echoes Brendan’s voyage. Both men, though separated by a period of eighty years (“Uitante anz ad que prist decés”),<sup>53</sup> followed a messenger across the sea for a spiritual purpose. If the messenger is the same, considering his seemingly otherworldly ability to travel between islands, then the messenger connects Brendan’s and Ailbe’s storylines. The second is that the monks on Ailbe’s Island seem to be sustained by the same salubrioness that is found on the Island of Sheep:

Deus nus as puis si sustenuz  
 Que nuls mals n’est sur nus venuz,  
 De nostre cors nul’ enfermetét,  
 Ne peissance ne amertét.  
 De Deus nus veint, el ne savum,

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<sup>50</sup> l. 665-6.

<sup>51</sup> “Nus sumes ci vint e .iiii.; / Ci conversum en cest atre. / Uitante anz ad que prist sa fin / A saint Albeu li pelerin. / Riches hom fud de muly grant fiu, / Mais tut guerpit pur cest leu. / Quant alat en tapinage, / Apparut lui Deu message / Qui l’amenat; trovet leu prest: / Icest muster que uncore i est,” l. 717-26.

<sup>52</sup> l. 727-9.

<sup>53</sup> l. 736.

La viande que nus avum.<sup>54</sup>

The monks belong to an ecology where they never get sick and where their food is provided for them. The connections between the Isle of Ailbe and the Island of Sheep is clear: despite geographic separation, God's protection passes through the insular boundaries, bridging these two communities. Certainly, the spiritual aspect of the journey is present here and it is impossible to ignore God's archipelagic function in *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan*.

### **Archipelagos and Temporality**

Upon leaving Ailbe's Isle, Brendan and the monks complete the circuit between the four main islands of the voyage. Glyn Burgess remarks the importance of this point in the narrative: "As they have progressed, they have acquired knowledge of the islands they have visited and at the same time acquired greater understanding of their journey as a whole. What is required now is a new context in which their faith can be put to the test: faith in God, in Brendan and in themselves."<sup>55</sup> The knowledge that the crew gain during their voyage allows them to better understand each of the discrete islands they have explored, the nature of those islands, and what and who inhabits them. Furthermore, the "greater understanding of their journey as a whole" can be described as an archipelagic mode of thought. Brendan and the crew will take their nautical, geographic, spiritual, and natural knowledge and connect them in order to understand their journey not as fragmented and independent, but as a chain.

So far, I have identified moments in *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* that are archipelagic, moments that, beginning with permeable insular boundaries, connect the nautical and the spiritual, the human and the nonhuman, the land and the sea. I have pointed to God as connector between the human and nonhuman on the Island of Sheep. Additionally, I have read the Whale-Island as a

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<sup>54</sup> 1.737-42.

<sup>55</sup> Burgess, 266.

site where nonhuman, human, and insular categories are blended together. On the Paradise of Birds, I explored the connective possibilities of verbal communication between the monks and birds, and the Island of Ailbe provided an instance of how similar storylines separated temporally may also be archipelagic. I want to suggest now that Brendan's movement between the islands, the repetitive, annual return to the Island of Sheep, the whale-island, the Paradise of Birds, and the Isle of Ailbe constructs a network between each of the sites, a physical archipelago.<sup>56</sup> This circuit also aligns temporally for the monks. They spend Easter at the Island of Sheep and Whale-Island, Pentecost on the Paradise of Birds, and Christmas and Epiphany on Ailbe's Isle. Therefore, this archipelago is reified in terms of frequency of visit and in terms of the ecclesiastical calendar.

Other scholars have identified archipelagic moments in medieval literature. Alfred Siewers identifies the archipelago as a function of the Otherworld trope:

The cultural combination of insular identity and connectivity parallels aspects of the doubled landscape of the Otherworld itself, as well as of the trope's geographical doppelgänger, archipelago. . . . The Otherworld trope extended the geography of the Irish Sea province into an archipelago of varied temporalities on land as well as across the sea.<sup>57</sup>

For Siewers, key to the Otherworld and to the formation of an archipelago is insular identity and connectivity, and a connectivity that spans different landscapes across time. Aisling Byrne has a similar conception of the relationship between the Otherworld and archipelagos within Irish literature, in particular, which is perhaps why both scholars align *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* with the

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<sup>56</sup> To clarify terminology here, I make no distinction between "island" and "isle." As an example of, I decided on "Isle of Ailbe" for the similar "e" ending and for no other reason.

<sup>57</sup> Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave, 2009) 8-20.

Otherworld.<sup>58</sup> While I appreciate their treatment of archipelagos and the spatiotemporal component of any archipelagic relationship, I find it difficult to reconcile the discussions about the Brendan journey as one into the Otherworld and the real-world alignment of geographic places with those in the *Voyage*. Perhaps that is just another way the Brendan legend is archipelagic—connected two seemingly different facets.

Moving away from the Otherworld as an archipelagic analogue, Jeffrey Cohen discusses England as an archipelago. He writes,

When England is tied more closely to distant nations and events than to the politics, people, and cultures with which the kingdom shared an island, and indeed a history, an understanding of the insular past in its full complexity can be constrained. Even in texts written within an England that might seem internally monolithic or homogenous, this book's authors find portals to strangely contiguous other worlds where recalcitrant differences, abiding possibilities, and alternative histories vivaciously endure.<sup>59</sup>

Cohen posits that a discussion of England's relationships with other "nations" may be more restrictive than tracing the textual and cultural connections within the borders of England. While I push back against his use of "nation," it is compelling to think about archipelagic texts which, like Brendan's voyage, expose readers and explorers alike to new knowledge so that they might create their own island chains.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England* (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 7.

<sup>60</sup> It is also interesting to think about internal archipelagos within different communities and how we might conceive of permeable borders of all kinds that simultaneously act as boundary and entryway.

## The Legend's Archipelago

If, as I stated at the beginning of this paper, that the *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* is an archipelagic text, how might we conceive of that notion in a larger sense? For example, how might this narrative form a textual archipelago? James Smith proposes an interesting answer:

As a medieval literary and (multi)cultural entity, Saint Brendan's isles have connected and expanded across the barrier-sea of mythic and topographical distance . . . Insular fictions are not only about islands connected spatially or geographically, but also about temporal connection. The Brendan texts participate in a constellation of words, ideas, and adaptations that are themselves a sea, connected across time despite existing as a collection of distinct nodes.<sup>61</sup>

By being translated into different languages from different places over many centuries, the different iterations of the Brendan legend are connected within an archipelago of their own.<sup>62</sup> Even the differences between the *Navigatio* and *Le Voyage* play into this archipelagic formation.

In addition to more traditional versions of the text, digital renderings, such as video games, are now part of St. Brendan's archipelago. For instance, I participated in the development of a computer game that used Benedeit's text to teach Anglo-Norman at the undergraduate level.<sup>63</sup> Lynn Ramey and Steven Wenz, the project designer and developer respectively, write, "We believe that a video game is an ideal medium to explore the notion of medieval travel. . . . Our video game allows for the interweaving of different times and spaces. . . . Travel is both circular and linear, and

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<sup>61</sup> James L. Smith, "Brendan Meets Columbus: A More Commodious Islescape," *Postmedieval* 7, no. 4 (2016): 530-31.

<sup>62</sup> I think that Smith missed an opportunity when he said "constellation" instead of "archipelago."

<sup>63</sup> A video preview of the Beta version can be found here: <http://www.discoveriesoftheamericas.org/explorers/brendan-of-clonfort/experience-brendans-world/>

the material needs of the travelers, and even Benedeit himself, are mixed in with the spiritual progress of the crew.”<sup>64</sup> Because this video game connects the medieval world with the contemporary, it numbers among the texts and translations of the Brendan legend in the same archipelago. Thus, the Brendan legend simultaneously presents numerous examples of archipelagic relationships and exists within a large textual archipelago.

### **Conclusion**

Outside of Brendan’s seven-year tour of the islands the crew encounter more islands, more human and nonhuman beings, and more travel that fit within the archipelagic model I have highlighted throughout this paper. When the monks finally arrive at Paradise they see it is guarded by dragons and surrounded by magnificent wall.<sup>65</sup> They are granted access and note the perfect climate of the island and revel in its splendor. Yet, they cannot stay and Brendan is told by the guide “Or t’en reva; ci revendras, / Le juïse ci attendras.”<sup>66</sup> Paradise is closed to them until they die and the borders of the island become immutable. The monks return to Ireland. With the end of their journey, however, does not mean the archipelago is lost, since they take stones with them (“De cez peres en fair porter / A enseignes de conforter”).<sup>67</sup> The archipelago remains in the memories of the monks and is materially present through the stones they have taken with them from Paradise.

An archipelago seems to be more about the movement and the journey rather than stagnation and destination. Michelle Stephens reminds us that an archipelago “retains the sense of islands as liminal spaces somewhere between land and water, defined by the relation between the

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<sup>64</sup> Lynn Ramey and Steven Wenz, “Immersive Environments for Medieval Languages: Theory and Practice,” *South Atlantic Review* 81, no. 2 (2016): 102-3.

<sup>65</sup> l. 1631-1804.

<sup>66</sup> l. 1797-8.

<sup>67</sup> l. 1799-1800.

territorial and the oceanic rather than by either alone.”<sup>68</sup> Archipelagos exist only in relation, and *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan* is a text about relationships, not about one person, one sea, one land, nor is it a work that is purely hydrographic nor hagiographic. It is my hope that, in many ways, my retracing of the voyage reifies St. Brendan’s journey and his archipelago in perpetuity.

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<sup>68</sup> Michelle Stephens, “What Is an Island?: Caribbean Studies and the Contemporary Visual Artist,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 2. (2013): 10.

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