

# St Brendan the Navigator

By Daniel Sullivan

Maps from the time of Columbus, included a small island called St. Brendan's Isle that existed somewhere west of Europe. It was also mentioned in a Latin text dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> Century titled Navigation Santi Brendani Abatis (Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot) It describes the voyage as having taken place in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Several copies of this text have survived in monasteries in Europe. It was an important folk lore in medieval Europe and may have influenced Columbus.

Historians relate that Brendan was born about 484 A.D. near Tralee Co Kerry in Ireland. He was ordained by Bishop Erc and sailed about northwest Europe, spreading the Christian faith and founding monasteries, the largest at Clonfert, Co. Galway where he was buried in 577 A.D. at the age of 93.



The account of Brendan's voyage contained a detailed description of the construction of his boat which was not unlike currachs still made today. Skeptics could not accept that such a small vessel could possibly sail in the open sea let alone accomplish such a voyage. Several passages in the legend also seemed incredible. They were raised up on the back of sea monsters, they passed crystals that rose up to the sky and were pelted with flaming foul smelling rocks by the inhabitants of a large island on their route. They finally arrived at a beautiful land they called the Promised Land of the Saints. They explored till they came to a great river that divided the land. The journey of Brendan and his fellow monks took seven years. The return trip was probably the longest part of the odyssey.

In 1976, Tim Severn, a British Navigator embarked from Brandon Creek on the Dingle Peninsula in a currach that he constructed using the details described by Brendan. His goal was to determine if the voyage of Brendan and his monks was possible. They tanned ox hides with oak bark, stretched them across a wood frame, sewed them with leather thread and smeared the hides with animal fat which would impart water resistance.

Examination of nautical charts led Severin to believe that Brendan's route would be governed by the prevailing winds and would take him across the northernmost part of the Atlantic. This would take him close to Iceland and Greenland with a probable landfall at Newfoundland, - St. Brendan's Isle. This

would have been the route Leif Erickson would have taken in the tenth century. Many of the Brendan's stops on his journey were islands where Irish monks had set up primitive monasteries. Many of the Norsemen that traveled on these waters visited these islands and recorded their meeting with Papers (Fathers)

Severin and his crew were surprised with how friendly the whales were that they encountered. The whales swam around and even under their boat. It could have been recognized as another whale by the giant mammals. The whales could have been even friendlier in Brendan's time., before motorized ships would make them leery of man. So friendly that they may have lifted the monk's boat in a friendly gesture.

After stopping at the Hebrides islands Severin proceeded to the Danish Faroe Islands. At the island of Mykines they encountered thousands of seabirds. Brendan called this island the Paradise of Birds. He referred to the larger island as the island of sheep. The word Faroe itself means sheep. There is also a Brandon Creek on the main island of the Faroes that local people believe was the embarkation point for Brendan and his crew.

Severin's route carried them to Iceland, where they wintered as did Brendan. The volcanoes on the island have been active for many centuries, and may well have been erupting when the monks stayed there. This could have accounted for the pelting with flaming, foul smelling rocks, referred to in the ninth century text. The monks had never seen icebergs before, so their description of them as towering crystals would make sense. Severin's boat was punctured by ice floating off the coast of Canada. They were able to make a repair with a piece of leather sewn over the hole. They landed on the island of Newfoundland on June 26<sup>th</sup> 1977. This might well have been Brendan's Promised Land referred to in the Navigation Text.

Severin's journey did not prove that Brendan and his monks landed on North America. However it did prove that a leather currach as described in the Navigation could have made such a voyage as mapped out in the text. There is also no doubt that the Irish were frequent seafarers of the North Atlantic sea currents 900 years before the voyage of Columbus.

More conclusive evidence of Irish exploration of North America has come to the fore in West Virginia. There stone carvings have been discovered that have been dated to between 500 and 1000 A.D. Analysis by Dr Robert Pyle and a leading language expert Dr. Barry Fell indicate that they are written in Old Irish using the Ogham alphabet. According to Dr. Fell, the West Virginia Ogham texts are the oldest in the world, outside of Ireland. They exhibit the grammar and vocabulary of Old Irish in a manner previously unknown in such early rock-cut inscriptions in any Celtic Language. Dr. Fell goes on to speculate that , it seems possible that the scribes that cut the West Virginia inscriptions may have been

Irish missionaries in the wake of Brendan's voyage, for these inscriptions are Christian. The early Christian symbols of piety, such as the Chi-Rho monograms (Name of Christ) and the Dextra Dei (Right Hand of God) appear at the sites together with the Ogham text.

The lack of any written account of this exploration could be explained by the explorers not being able to return to their homeland. If they indeed did reach what is now West Virginia, it would be extremely doubtful that they could manage to return to Ireland from an embarkation point that far south. The design of their currachs require favorable winds and currents in the right direction in order to navigate. Severin discovered it was extremely difficult to tackle as other sailing ships were able to do. Perhaps that is the reason it took Brendan seven years for his journey.

We can conclude that Brendan was not a mere medieval fantasy but a highly plausible tale. These were special men. They sought the land beyond the horizon, the wondrous realm to be revealed by God - The Promised Land.