

## **NAVIGATIO SANCTI BRENDANI ABBATIS: ALLEGORY OF THE CHARACTERS**

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**Abstract** *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* – a work whose manuscripts date to the 10<sup>th</sup> century – describes the voyage undertaken by Saint Brendan of Clonfert (cca 484–577) to find the so-called “Promised Land of the Saints”. Thus, the anonymous author of this writing reiterates a commonplace of classical literature, which he revisits from a Christian pastoral perspective: the mythical place of ancient Greek and Latin literature is now depicted as *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum*, thus a place destined to those who follow Christian teachings and the lifestyle promoted by them. The entire imaginary of this *Navigatio...* is constructed starting from both classical and Christian sources, within an osmosis of symbols, literary motifs, and philosophical topics through which the author aims to turn his work into a writing meant to be read by both Christians and those not affiliated to the Church. In my study, I propose an analysis of some of the characters (individual or collective) within *Navigatio...* My hypothesis is that, similarly to other aspects of the work, it does not exhaust its meaning from the narrative perspective, because characters can be interpreted from the perspective of the fundamental themes of the Christian doctrines. Obviously, the interpretation I propose does not exclude others, while sometimes this view seems to be confirmed by corresponding excerpts of *Vita prima...* or *Vita secunda...*, both of them successive re-elaborations (thus reinterpretations) of *Navigatio...*

**Keywords** allegory, symbol, Christian doctrine, collective characters, Brendan, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*

### **I. General considerations on the work. Framework**

*Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* relates the journey made by Saint Brendan of Clonfert (cca 484-577) in his search for the Promised Land of the Saints (*Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum*). The anonymous author reprises a commonplace of classical literature (*The Isles of the Blessed*) and manages to highlight it from a clearly

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Christian perspective: the mythical place of classical Greek and Latin literature<sup>1</sup> is described as a *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum*. In other words, it is depicted as a place prepared for those who embraced the true faith, by promoting a certain lifestyle, characteristic to Christianity.

Following the description made by Saint Barinthus – who, during a visit paid to Saint Brendan, related his journey alongside his disciple Mernocatus to an amazing island called *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* –, Saint Brendan decides to make the same voyage. After choosing fourteen<sup>2</sup> monks from his community to accompany him, and after fasting for 40 days, Brendan first heads towards the Island of Saint Edna. After constructing a small boat, the group chosen by Brendan includes three more monks, whose death Brendan foretells. The first stage of the journey (that would take seven years) occurred 40 days later, when they arrived to an uninhabited island, where they found a table that set itself and beds for all of them. On this island, one of the last three monks died. The journey continued to the Island of Sheep, and then the boat arrived on the back of a whale – Jasconius –, and subsequently on the Island of Birds, on the Island of Albe (whose community rigorously observes the vow of silence), as well as on an island where soporific water made Brendan’s crew fall asleep for a long time. Then, they crossed the frozen sea (*mare coagulatum*) and, upon arriving on the Island of Birds for the second time, they were notified on the mandatory phases of the itinerary. They watched the confrontation between two sea monsters; they arrived on the Island of Strong Men, where the second of the last three monks remained forever. Subsequently, they witnessed the fight between a Gryphon and a large bird. They crossed a sea so transparent (*mare clarum*) that they could see various kinds of creatures lying on the seabed. The crystal pillar and the net surrounding it represents the moment before arriving at the gates of Hell, whose presentation seems gradual: the Island of Blacksmiths, (where the last of the three monks was taken and tortured by the daemons) and the rock of Judas Iscariot. After meeting Paul the Hermit (except for the mandatory phases of the trip, which coincide with the most important holidays of the Christian calendar) they arrived to the *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum*. Following a short stay, they returned to their country, where Brendan’s earthly life ended, surrounded by his fellow monks and by his disciples (*inter manus discipulorum*).

## II. Allegoric levels

Despite a very simple framework and the linear structure of the work, the intertwining of various literary, liturgical and doctrinal themes and motifs conveys to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., for instance, Strabo, *Geografia*, I, 5; III, 2, 13; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, VI, 202–205.

<sup>2</sup> The first occurrence explicitly states *bis septem*, “two times seven”, which may indicate an allegory, as detailed later.

the text a suggestive force that represents the reason for which the text was analysed from different standpoints: in relation to Irish literature (mostly in relation with *immrama* and *echtrae*, which influenced it significantly<sup>3</sup>); in relation to Greek and Latin literature (from which it borrowed certain themes, as previously stated); in relation to Arabic literature (as proven by M. Asin Palacios<sup>4</sup>); as a narrative of the first journey beyond the Atlantic before the Vikings. My opinion is that the best interpretive key is the one of the allegoric reading, and various researchers<sup>5</sup> have already highlighted some of the interpretations for various fragments of the text. It is worth noting that the allegories of *Navigatio...* connect the text to the Latin Patristic literature, which means that the author of this writing had great insight into it. Hence, it is important to outline some common points between *Navigatio...* and the writings of the Holy Fathers.

For instance, the sea (beyond the fact that water is the symbol of purification) can be considered a symbol of our earthly life, a space that we must cross in our way towards the heavenly home. The thick fog that invades the “Promised Land of the Saints” can be seen as a symbol of our uncertainties and of our failure to identify the right path sometimes. Storms are the temptations and challenges that we have to face, while the calm and windless sea is the patience that we must show in our efforts of becoming saints.

We are on the way, *in via*, which means that we are in an uncertain condition, although we may be on the right path, because our efforts, indispensable as they may be, are yet insufficient.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. D.N. Dumville, “Echtrae and Immram: some problems of definition”, *Eriu* 27 (1976): 73–94; Corin Braga, “Chapitre 2. Les voyages initiatiques irlandais”, in *Le Paradis interdit au Moyen Âge*, vol. II, *La quête manquée de L’Avalon Occidentale* (Paris: L’Harmattan 2006), 79–191.

<sup>4</sup> In Miguel Asin Palacios, *Dante y el Islam* (Madrid, 1927 (Italian: *Dante e l’Islam* [Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2005])).

<sup>5</sup> See especially Dorothy Ann Bray, “Allegory in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*”, *Viator* 26 (1995): 1–10, but also, for instance, Cynthia Bourgeault, “The Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio* of Saint Brendan”, *Monastic Studies* 14 (1982): 109–122; Francesco Sarchi, “Ancora sulla leggenda di San Brendano”, *Miscellanea di storia delle esplorazioni* 18 (1993): 9–17 (he believes that the crystal column may be considered the symbol of *axis mundi* – but in this case, like *axis mundi*, it should cross the centre of the world; however, such detail is absent from the description of the crystal column in *Navigatio...*); J.S. Mackley, *The Legend of St Brendan. A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), etc.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, II, 2: “*Sic est enim tamquam videat quisque de longe patriam, et mare interiaceat; videt quo eat, sed non habet qua eat. Sic ad illam stabilitatem nostram ubi quod est est, quia hoc solum semper sic est ut est, volumus pervenire; interiacet mare huius saeculi qua imus, etsi iam videmus quo imus: nam multi nec quo eant vident.*” See also *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 76, 21.

The boat – the means we use to cross the sea – can be considered a symbol of the Church, of a monastic community or a symbol of a believer<sup>7</sup> in his effort of attaining the supreme purpose of life: eternal happiness. Even wood – the material of the boat – metaphorically represents the Saviour’s cross; the suggestion is that we cannot become saints; we cannot overcome the challenges in our way without the help of Christ,<sup>8</sup> because, in fact, there is no redemption without his death and resurrection.

Light is the symbol of the true faith or of the Saviour, while darkness symbolises Hell and sin.

Wind is a symbol of the Holy Spirit<sup>9</sup>, of the assistance provided by the Providence. Letting yourself go in the wind means, for the characters of *Navigatio...*, too, observing the divine will and ultimately ceding own will<sup>10</sup>.

“The Promised Land of the Saints”, *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum*, as the anonymous author often underscores, is Paradise. Its description features multiple common elements with the Eden presented in the Genesis (2, 8–14) and in the Book of Ezekiel (23, 13): the stream, the fruit trees, the precious stones, etc. Those who

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<sup>7</sup> Tertulian, *De Baptismo*, XII, 33–37: “*Ceterum navicula illa figuram ecclesiae praeferbat quod in mari, id est in saeculo, fluctibus id est persecutionibus et temptationibus inquietetur, domino per patientiam velut dormiente donec orationibus sanctorum in ultimis suscitatus compescat saeculum et tranquillitatem suis reddat.*” The reference is to Matthew 8: 23–27, and Mark 4: 35–41, which represent the origin of this metaphor which was also used by Augustine, *Sermones de Scripturis*, 63, 1: “*Etiam navis illa Ecclesiam figurabat. Et singuli quippe templa sunt Dei, et unusquisque in corde suo navigat: nec facit naufragium, si bona cogitat.* See also *Physiologus Latinus*, Versio B, IV. Serra: *Mare autem saeculi huius figuram gerit; naves vero iustorum habent exemplum, qui sine ullo periculo vel naufragio fidei transierunt per medias huius mundi procellas ac tempestates, et mortiferas vicerunt undas, id est huius saeculi contrarias potestates.*”

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, II, 2–3: “*Ut ergo esset et qua iremus, venit inde ad quem ire volebamus. Et quid fecit? Instituit lignum quo mare transeamus. Nemo enim potest transire mare huius saeculi, nisi cruce Christi portatus. Hanc crucem aliquando amplectitur et infirmus oculis: et qui non videt longe quo eat, non ab illa recedat, et ipsa illum perducet. [...]...quia hoc pro nobis factus est, ubi portentur infirmi, et mare saeculi transeant, et perveniant ad patriam.*”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. In., 3, 8: “*Spiritus, ubi vult, spirat, et vocem eius audis, sed non scis unde veniat et quo vadat; sic est omnis, qui natus est ex Spiritu.*”

<sup>10</sup> In the New Testament, adjusting one’s will to God’s will was either the only way for salvation (Mt. 7: 21: “*Non omnis ... intrabit in regnum caelorum, sed qui facit voluntatem Patris mei...*”), or a guarantee of obtaining divine assistance (I In., 5, 14: “*Et haec est fiducia, quam habemus ad eum, quia si quid petierimus secundum voluntatem eius, audit nos*”). At a pinch, this conformation to the Creator’s will involves giving up one’s personal will, like in *Oratio Dominica* (Mt. 6: 10: “*...fiat voluntas tua...*”) or like in the example given by Christ while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lc., 22, 42: “*Pater, si vis, transfer calicem istum a me; verumtamen non mea voluntas sed tua fiat.*”)

live here are always young and beautiful; they do not need to eat or drink, they do not know illness or physical pain or death – this idea is also present in the works of Augustine.<sup>11</sup>

This objective series does not stop here, either, considering that the numbers (forty, twenty four, twelve, eight, seven, six, four, three) used by the author of the text are not simply values that approximate distances or periods, define quantities or delimit groups. They are not random values, but in this context, they have a symbolic function; they do not inform, but they rather form, thus contributing to the didactic value of the text. Of course, various fragments of the Holy Scriptures feature occurrences of these numerical values, for which we may propose various interpretations. I believe it is far more relevant to compare the text under analysis with *Liber numerorum qui in Sanctis Scripturis occurrunt* written by Isidore of Seville,<sup>12</sup> where the Hispanic bishop synthesises the allegoric interpretations to be conferred upon numerical values. Among the numerous interpretations, I must mention the following: three, as a number associated with Trinity; four, the number of the Gospels preached in the four corners of the world; six, a number associated with Creation and with the ages of the world; seven, a number mostly associated with the Holy Spirit, through His seven gifts;<sup>13</sup> eight, a number associated with hope for the eternal things; twelve references the tribes of Israel, the Disciples or the twelve thrones of the Apocalypse; forty, as a symbol of the end of time and as a number related to the duration of the fast.

Even the hours have a symbolic connotation: they refer either to the Gospels,<sup>14</sup> or to the canonical hours; the divisions of the liturgical day are also suggested by the fact that, in *Navigatio...*, the day does not begin with the first hour of the morning, but (because it is the interval between two consecutive evenings) with the evening of the previous day.<sup>15</sup> By interpreting them, the numbers ascribe greater value to the text by connecting the literary genre of the work to the scriptural, dogmatic tradition, to the monastic environment in which it had been created.

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<sup>11</sup> *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 148, 5: “*Coelestia tranquilla sunt, pacata sunt; ibi semper gaudium, nulla mors, nulla aegritudo, nulla molestia...*”

<sup>12</sup> PL, vol. 83, coll. 179 sqq.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Isaiah 11: 2–3: “*et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini:/spiritus sapientiae et intellectus/spiritus consilii et fortitudinis/spiritus scientiae et pietatis/et replebit eum spiritus timoris Domini.*”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. for instance Matthew 27: 45–46: “*A sexta autem hora tenebrae factae sunt... usque ad horam nonam. Et circa horam nonam clamavit Iesus voce magna...*” (See also Mark 15: 33–34; Luke 23: 44). The third, the sixth and the ninth hour correspond approximately to 9, 12 and 15.

<sup>15</sup> This is based on the interpretation of the verses from Genesis 1: 5 (8, 13, 19 etc.): “*Et factum est vespere et mane...*”

Thus, in the text, the narrative level is based on surprising meanings and hidden connotations, behind a subtle weaving of parallel allegories. If this is the state of things, one may ask whether the characters (or at least some of them) had been invested with symbolical and allegoric values.

### III. The allegory of characters

Concerning the characters of *Navigatio...*, the first noticeable aspect is the absence of female characters. Not only are they absent from the framework (which may be explained by the exclusively male profession of navigator) but they are not even alluded as a paradigm of temptation and of fall into sin, implicitly;<sup>16</sup> as if the adventure of finding Paradise concerned human nature in its complexity before the creation of Eve. Hence, the characters within this book are all male; they may be classified, not only for practical reasons, into two categories: individual characters and collective characters.

Brendan – the main character – is the initiator and coordinator of the expedition. Paradoxically, the work does not feature any of his physical traits. The moral side is the only one that matters: of noble condition, “a man of a great abstinence and famous for his virtues, father (*pater*) of nearly three thousand monks” (chap. I<sup>17</sup>) – enough to note his persuasive force in matters of faith, his organizational capabilities and his piety. Such “virtues” would not have had much value for his journey in the absence of courage, based not on physical strength (though he seems to benefit from it, too), but on the trust in divine help. However, because only those who observe God’s will receive His help, Brendan struggles – mostly in the crucial moments – to know the divine will in order to subsequently model his own will and that of his companions. This is what he does, for instance, upon their first stop on an island: he forbids his 17 thirsty companions to fill their flasks before finding a harbour; “After three days The Lord Jesus Christ will show us a landing-place and a place to stay,” (chap. V), Brendan narrates. His prophetic spirit is the visible sign of holiness, a consequence of the long prayers and of the strenuous fasts – in other words, of piety seen mostly as mortification. Unlike *Vita prima...*, *Navigatio...* features a saint who does not perform miracles, if by miracles we

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<sup>16</sup> In chap. V of *Vita prima sancti Brendani abbatis de Cluain Ferta* (Ch. Plummer, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae partim hactenus ineditae*, vol. I, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910]), for instance, Brendan, as a child, refuses to play with a noble child (and even hits her) for fear of “*colloquia prava mulieris animam eius corrumperent*”; concerning the same hagiography, one can invoke as an antonym Saint Ita, as an image of the monastic virgin who cannot repress the feeling of maternity (*Vita prima...*, chap. III: *Hec enim virgo multos sanctorum Hibernie ab infantia nutrit.*): she will take care of Brendan during his early childhood and she will advise Brendan on the way to *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* (*Vita prima...*, cap. LXXI).

<sup>17</sup> The division of chapters follows the edition by G. Vincent: Anonimus, *Vita Sanctissimi Confessoris Christi Brendani*, G. Vincent, <http://www.utqueant.org/net/index.htm> (accessed on 15.05.2017).

understand a desirable change of the natural, normal and predictable course of the events: Brendan does not resurrect the dead; he does not make water stream for the rock and he is not visited by angels, as it occurs in *Vita prima...* (chap. XI, VIII and X, respectively); alternatively, he can command daemons, he can obsessively invoke the divine will (like the encounter with Judas: *Navigatio...*, chap. XXII) and he can correctly foretell the destiny, like in the case of the three monks who joined the expedition later. It is interesting that, from the perspective of the anonymous author, the gift of prophecy – granted only to those who deserve it – does not correspond with the idea uttered by Augustine in *Confessions*, XI, 18, 24. For the bishop of Hippo, prophecy – foretelling the future – cannot occur in the absence of God’s goodwill; essentially, it represents the future projection of the correct interpretation of a chain of present causalities. For the author of *Navigatio...*, prophetic time (a category of future-oriented, sacred time) is not a mere projection of the way we understand our present, but a renewal of the eternal present, where God governs the world, because the theft committed by a peer (chap. VII) is not deduced from his behaviour, but it is simply revealed beforehand. Whereas Brendan can foretell the fate of his peers or, concerning Jasconius, he can see the nature of certain realities (chap. XI), nothing can help him foretell his own life, the stages of his journey or at least its ending: to this end, Brendan asks for and nervously follows the advice given by a bird on the Island of Birds, by the administrator (a character who seems to embody the image of the Guardian Angel: he assists him in certain stages of the journey, by providing him with things necessary for survival and by accompanying him to Paradise in the last part of his journey), by Albe or by Paul the Hermit. Precisely this tension generated by the uncertainty concerning the unfolding of his own endeavour ultimately provides meaning to his efforts, which become as feverish as his desire.

However, Brendan is not only a seeker of Paradise lost, but also a skilful sailor; he pays attention to everything in his path, convinced that the entire creation shows the almightiness of the Creator and that details that may seem irrelevant in his way can prove to be a sign of the divine will, worth analysing. All his other companions are mere executants: patient, obedient, endowed with impressive physical strength, but also frightful, they follow Brendan because they freely made a commitment to do so. Just like their leader, they will only have to face the difficulties of the journey: the access to *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* is not conditioned by the passing of other tests – insofar as we are tempted to see “tests” in any critical moment of their path. Indeed, the entire framework of *Navigatio...* can be interpreted allegorically as man’s efforts to get to Paradise by living a holy life (in other words, by always fighting against sin).

However, the most surprising individual character is Paul the Hermit; there are enough elements relating the character of *Navigatio...* to Paulus Thebaeus, who had lived in Egypt between the years 227 and 341: longevity (140/114 years old), the 90/91 years spent as hermit, the frugal living standards, the physical features, the

lack of disciples etc, are all characteristics that connect him to Paul described by Saint Jerome in *Vita S. Pauli primi eremitaе*, which is considered a source for the author of *Navigatio...* His rather minute depiction (from the vision that made him leave his native community to the description of the lifestyle on the island) in relation with the economy of the entire work makes me believe that the author of *Navigatio...* intends to propose it as a model. Nonetheless, the fact that he is considered to be the descendent of Saint Patrick (cf. chap. XXXIII-XXXIV) seriously questions this, not only from a chronological perspective. Hence, insofar as he is not the image of a historical character whose memory was not conveyed,<sup>18</sup> maybe it is more natural to consider this character as a double suggestion: on the one hand, the hermitism of the island inhabitants originates in the activity of Saint Patrick (cca 385-461); on the other hand, the author of *Navigatio...* – by sharing Jerome’s belief regarding the origins of continental hermitism<sup>19</sup> – wanted to establish a direct connection between Paulus Thebaeus and the first Irish hermit by using the name and the depiction of the character. Furthermore, this view would fully correspond to the general intention of the work in presenting monastic life as a higher *status vivendi*, also assumed because of the example provided by certain saints – Patrick, Albe, Ende –, although some of them are erroneously presented<sup>20</sup> as having belonged to the same generation.

Even collective characters – merely outlined or depicted in detail: the three monks who join the group last – create a lack of balance that may endanger<sup>21</sup> the expedition itself. Taking into account the profoundly Christian tone of the text and the way everyone ended up, I could at least assume it was the figurative projection of the three possibilities that any Christian has beforehand: 1) upon sinning, to use the sacrament of confession and of the Eucharist and thus to earn, through divine grace, a place in the Heavenly Home – after stealing a golden necklace, the monk who dies on the island where they made the first stop acknowledges his sin and, after receiving the sacraments, angels carry him to Heaven (chap. VII); 2) by leading

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<sup>18</sup> The identification with Paulus (Paulinus) Aurelianus (who died around 573 and who therefore was a contemporary of Brendan) has been rejected, among others, by R.E. Guglielmetti (cf. *Navigatio Sancti Brendani. Alla scoperta dei segreti meravigliosi del mondo*, edited by Giovanni Orlandi e Rossana E. Guglielmetti [Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2014], LXXVI, n. 189).

<sup>19</sup> Jerome, *Vita S. Pauli primi eremitaе*, I: “*Inter multos saepe dubitatum est, a quo potissimum Monachorum eremus habitari coepta sit. [...] Amathas vero et Macarius, discipuli Antonii [...] etiam nunc affirmant, Paulum quemdam Thebaeum principem istius rei fuisse.*”

<sup>20</sup> I refer here to Saint Albe, who died in 528 (or 541), presented as being contemporary with Saint Patrick (cca 385–461; vezi *Navigatio...*, chap. XVIII); the author probably took over this mistake from *Vita Sancti Albei* (see Ch. Plummer, ed., *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae partim hactenus ineditae*, vol. I, 46–64), written in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century (or early 9<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>21</sup> See Anonymous, *La navigazione di San Brendano*, edited by Elena Percivaldi, preface by Franco Cardini, Latin text in the front (Rimini: Il Cerchio, 2008), 192–193, n. 31.

a life in full accordance with Christian morals, to be worthy of joining the groups that populate the Island of Strong Men; 3) a life lived in disagreement with the precepts of Christian ethics and unsupported by the power of the sacraments can only be worthy of damnation – this is actually suggested by the end of the last of the three monks, dragged by a multitude of daemons towards the depths of Hell (chap. XXXI). Moreover, this interpretation can be supported by the replies uttered by Brendan when parting with each of them: “Woe is yours, my brother, that you have received so evil an end to your life” (chap. XXXI), for instance, addressed to the last monk before going away from the island like a mountain “shooting up flames into the sky”.<sup>22</sup> If such was truly the author’s intention, then a *topos* of Celtic legends – of a preset number of navigators – substantially changes the role: the death of the three monks no longer restores that decisive balance, for the sake of the crew, of divinity and compromise through human will, but it reveals certain aspects of the Christian dogma, thus acquiring a didactic function. The presence of the three “intruders” no longer endangers the success of the expedition (as in the Celtic legends), just like their death is no longer a guarantee of victory.

The second of the “intruders” remained on the Island of Strong Men. However, who are they? Divided into three distinct groups – children, young people (adults) and elderly people –, the inhabitants of this island have no activity other than continuously venerate God. Nothing in their description refers to physical traits; hence, when one of the inhabitants offers Brendan some fruit of their land by saying “Take of the fruit of the island of strong men” (chap. XXIV), the reader has no physical feature to which to connect the *Insula Virorum Fortium*. Unless *fortis* does not refer to physical vigour, but to *fortitudo* – a cardinal virtue defined by the capacity of resisting to adversities and by constantly seeking the Good, which would suggest that we need this virtue (or all virtues, by extrapolation) to live our lives in accordance with the divine will in all three stages of life: childhood, maturity and old age. If we understand things this way, we also understand the reply that Brendan addresses to the one who remained on the island: “It was a good hour that your mother conceived you, seeing that you have deserved to live with such a community [...] Son, remember the great favours God conferred on you”.

Chapters XXXI-XXXII are dedicated to the description of unwelcoming places: the island of the ironsmiths who attacked the navigators; a high mountain,

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<sup>22</sup> *Vita prima...* notices this allegory and presents it more explicitly: in chap. XV, for instance, Brendan’s reply all three monks who were late (“*Iste frater bonum opus operatus est veniendo; quare Deus preparavit sibi altissimum locum. Alter vero veniam, licet Deum graviter offenderit, consequetur. Set tertius pro sua obstinatione dampnabitur*”), not only one of them, like in *Navigatio...*, chap. IV. *Vita secunda...* (Ch. Plummer, ed., *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae partim hactenus ineditae*, vol. II, 270–292) but innovates it: in chap. VI, Brendan foretells a favourable end for one of them, and a death followed by going to Hell alongside Dathan and Abiron.

covered by thick smoke, where the last of the three monks who joined the voyage later was taken by the daemons; the rock where Judas, with help from the divine grace, sends certain moments within the year by atoning for lighter sins than the one of having betrayed the Saviour. Were we to consider the statement made by Brendan while they struggled to escape the island of blacksmiths – we are on the border of Hell, chap. XXXI –, these three places may be seen as an expression of a tripartite view of Hell. The first level corresponds to the condition of wilderness (expressed by physical deformity and by the lack of language<sup>23</sup>) of those who, by not knowing or not cultivating the Christian doctrine, oppose it or are hostile towards it. Their hideous appearance and the horrible conditions in which they work (the brief presentation shows that this is their whole life) are an allegory of the hideous character and of the spiritual stiffness of those who cannot have a spiritual life precisely because they do not share the teachings of the Saviour. Reversely, the attitude of rejecting it (thus rejecting a spiritual life as well) turns against themselves, because exclusively material interests are ultimately self-destructive: by throwing fire from the blacksmith ovens, they only manage to set fire to their own island.

*Navigatio...* shows that, before starting his voyage, Brendan sought the advice of fourteen fellow monks. In fact, the first occurrence states *bis septem* (“two times seven”), an algebraic operation that could be the indicator of an allegory. Hence, two groups of seven, which could mean that the author wanted to suggest that the life of a person worthy of Paradise is based on both the virtues (four cardinal and three theological), and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (seven). Were we to rephrase, we are suggested that the individual effort (the exercise of virtues) is not enough for salvation, but that it must be completed by a concrete proof of divine kindness and support (the gifts of the Holy Spirit). Whereas when the text was written (whenever that was),<sup>24</sup> this thesis was not presented as a whole, it was expressed clearly in the writings of Saint Augustine and of Gregory the Great. For Lactantius, virtue meant “doing good and not doing evil”;<sup>25</sup> Augustine, on the one hand, defines virtues<sup>26</sup> as *habitus* and he relates them indissolubly to the act of

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<sup>23</sup> Although also featured in *Vita prima...* the idea that this island of ironsmiths is the border of Hell (*Vita prima...*, chap. LVIII: “*sumus modo iuxta os infernalis putei*”), the lack of language is a sign of their low spirituality of their savage character.

<sup>24</sup> Taking into account the importance given to the Epiphany Octave, first mentioned in *De ecclesiasticis officiis* (IV, 34: *De octavis Theophaniae*) written by Amalarius of Metz (*alias* Amalarius Symphosius, cca 780–850), or the possible allusion to the liturgical use of the organ (arrived in Western Europe in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century), I believe that the term *post quem* for this work should be around 830.

<sup>25</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, VI, 5: “*Virtus tota nostra est quia posita in voluntate faciendi boni [...] ita virtus est bonum facere, malum non facere...*”

<sup>26</sup> The four virtues mentioned by Plato in *Republica* and that Ambrosius (*De paradiso*, III) had called “cardinal”; cf. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, XXXI.

faith<sup>27</sup>, while on the other hand, by defining virtue as the “arts [...] which teach us how we may spend our life well”, he considers it indispensable for acquiring eternal/happy life.<sup>28</sup> In his turn, Gregory the Great considers that the theological virtues represent the foundation of spiritual life and he explicitly states that they are necessary for salvation.<sup>29</sup> Hence, in the third book of *De vitiis et virtutibus*, Halitgarius Cameracensis (who died in 830/831) approached faith, hope and love, as well as the cardinal virtues from the perspective of their indispensable character for salvation.

As for the doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, founded on the verses of Isaiah, 11, 2-3, it suffices<sup>30</sup> to mention the opinion of the same Gregory the Great. After associating the theological virtues with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit in *Moralia in Iob*, I, 27, 38, (thus interpreting the three daughters and seven sons of Job), in *Moralia...*, II, 49, 77, he relates these gifts to the four cardinal virtues. He believes that through his seven gifts, the Holy Spirit – by conferring upon us the exercise of moral virtues – instructs (*erudit*) the soul against any temptation.<sup>31</sup> Hence, both gifts and virtues are necessary for our efforts of becoming holy, whose direct consequence is salvation or, in other words, our access to Paradise.

If my supposition is correct – that the fourteen, divided in the first occurrence into two equal groups, are an image of the seven virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit –, the moment when Brendan asks for the advice of his fellow monks should be seen as an expression of his self-assessment, of a way to analyse his capacities in order to conclude this voyage successfully. Maybe this is the reason why the others follow their abbot in this voyage, because their will is actually God’s will (*Navigatio...*, chap. VI: *Abba, voluntas tua ipsa est et nostra. [...] Unam tantum queramus Dei voluntatem*).

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<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Contra Julianum haeresis Pelagiana defensorum*, IV, 19: *Ex hac enim fide prudenter, fortiter, temperanter, et iuste, ac per hoc his omnibus veris virtutibus recte sapienterque vivit, quia fideliter vivit.*

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24, 3: *...artes bene vivendi et ad immortalem perveniendi felicitatem, quae virtutes vocantur...*; See also *De Civitate Dei*, IV, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Ezechielem*, II, hom. IV, 4: *...tres sunt virtutes sine quibus is qui aliquid operari iam potest, salvari non potest, videlicet fides, spes, charitas...*

<sup>30</sup> For a diachronic presentation of the doctrine of gifts and of the concept of virtue, see A. Vacant, E. Mangenot, E. Amann, eds., *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, fourth volume, second part (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané), VI, 1924, sv “Dons du Saint-Esprit”; and fifth volume, second part, VI, 1950, sv “Vertu. Enseignement des Pères”.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, II, 49, 77: *Donum quippe Spiritus, quod in subiecta mente ante alia prudentiam, temperantiam, fortitudinem, iustitiam format, eandem mentem ut contra singula quaeque tentamenta erudiat, in septem mox virtutibus temperat, ut contra stultitiam, sapientiam; contra hebetudinem, intellectum; contra praecipitationem, consilium; contra timorem, fortitudinem; contra ignorantiam, scientiam; contra duritiam, pietatem; contra superbiam det timorem.*

#### IV. Conclusions

*Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* should be regarded as a Christian version of the old Celtic legends, whose fundamental *topoi* are preserved in the substrate. Hence, it should be seen as a synthesis of specific elements, for both Christian and “pagan” elements. Thus, the hermeneutics of such a text assumes the use of corresponding and mutually complementary interpretive keys, all the more as medieval literature always mingles genres. For instance, an autobiographic text such as the *Confessions* of Augustine can very well be considered a theological text, just as a historiographic text or the story of a real or imaginary voyage can be read as literary works that include moral, dogmatic, liturgical, etc. elements. Moreover, at least starting with the theorising efforts of Isidore of Seville, we note the integration of the doctrinaire heritage of pagan Antiquity into the epistemological system of the Western Church.<sup>32</sup> Hence, elements of the narrative (the sea, the wind, the wood, etc.) of Celtic legends acquire new meanings, just as some commonplaces (the preset number of navigators as a guarantee of the successful expedition) are given different meanings, which ultimately suggest diverse dogmatic aspects. Obviously, in numerous contexts of the framework (whether it is a symbol or an allegory<sup>33</sup>), the principle *aliud dicitur aliud demonstratur* is also verifiable in the case of the characters (at least in case of certain characters).

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<sup>32</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *Literatura și Evul Mediu latin. Excursuri* (Literature and the Latin Middle Ages) (Bucharest: Paideia, 2000), 88.

<sup>33</sup> For the lack of a distinction between symbol and allegory in the Middle Ages, see Umberto Eco, *Scrieri despre gândirea medievală* (Scritti sul pensiero medievale), trans. Cezar Radu, Corina-Gabriela Bădeliță, Ștefania Mincu, Cornel Mihai Ionescu, Dragoș Cojocaru (Iași: Polirom, 2016), chap. “Simbol și alegorie” (Symbol and allegory), 63–86; Johan Huizinga, *Amurgul Evului Mediu* (The Waning of the Middle Ages), trans. H.R. Radian (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1993), chap. “Declinul simbolismului” (The fall of symbolism), 328–347.