

## A SAILOR ON THE SEAS OF FAITH:

### THE CHURCH IN *THE VOYAGE OF MÁEL DÚIN*<sup>i</sup>

The early medieval Irish imagined a landscape that came into being through names, names that formed an historical palimpsest.<sup>ii</sup> Throughout the island ecclesiastical names coexisted, overlaid and sometimes replaced those of the pre-Christian past.<sup>iii</sup> But naming the land was not enough for, obviously, the island was surrounded by an ocean, one that was only partly known and whose limits receded far and away. Ireland lay at the gates of the unknown. The familiar world of classical geography, the globe made up of the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, was enclosed by uncharted waters and Ireland lay on their boundaries.<sup>iv</sup> These boundaries were open to exploration and Irish Christians assiduously set out to know and to name the seascape surrounding their island. Knowledge and naming went hand in hand.

They did so in at least two separate but inter-connecting ways: one empirical, the other imaginary. Thus, Irish clerics physically explored the north Atlantic. For example, the ninth-century Irish geographer Dicuil gives an important insight into the motivations and accomplishments of Irish clerical voyagers in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*.<sup>v</sup> In a famous and memorable passage, he depicts Irish monks on a scientific expedition to the then unsettled Iceland closely observing what they regarded as unusual physical and astronomical data.<sup>vi</sup> These and similar empirical observations fed into intellectual speculations and into explorations that took place in the imaginations of writers. Such writers constructed narratives that transmuted real events and actual maritime experiences. They wove together actuality with urgent religious and social concerns. These included, very broadly, the organisation of Irish

society, the role of the church within it and the duties of individuals and their kindreds towards the secular and ecclesiastical.

From as early as the seventh century, tales known as *immrama*, literally rowings-about, began to be developed in response to these concerns. *Immrama*, unlike many other Irish tale types, are of patently christian origin and the exploits of their heroes are set in the christian era.<sup>vii</sup> As a genre it draws on a variety of influences. Thus, the literary geography of the overseas paradise is influenced to some degree by christian apocrypha,<sup>viii</sup> and, in a very general way, by classical examples such as the *Aeneid* and, less directly, the *Odyssey*,<sup>ix</sup> as well as by native Irish otherworld tales known as *echtraí*.<sup>x</sup> In the *immram* the intrepid monastic voyager, not the pagan warrior, is usually the hero. The outlines of the *immram* genre can be clearly seen in Adomnán's tale of the cleric and voyager, Cormac, in the late seventh-century *Vita Columbae*.<sup>xi</sup> Cormac's quest for a *terra secreta* on the ocean is a deft blend of the believable and miraculous. Similarly, full-scale *immrama* drew creatively on the known and the imagined, albeit in very individual measures. The voyagers of these tales, starting from Ireland, 'row about' several islands before, generally, returning once again to Ireland. The structure is usually circular, the voyage bound in by a shared point of departure and destination.

While most of the extant voyage tales are written in Irish, the single most influential example is the Latin *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*.<sup>xii</sup> This polished narrative was probably written in Ireland during the second half of the eighth century, or at the latest towards the beginning of the ninth.<sup>xiii</sup> The *Nauigatio* is a *speculum monachorum*, a mirror for the ideal monastic life. Brendan visits islands that explore the best way for an abbot to create, and a monk to live in, the ideal monastic community. The saint's journey is measured by the canonical hours and the paschal

cycle. The text is structurally unified but appears to draw on a rich tradition. Beneath the apparently naïve surface, the *Nauigatio* treats land and ocean as allegorical and as essentially religious in nature: the voyagers' adventures point towards religious ideals and states.<sup>xiv</sup> This treatment of land and sea is a common feature of the voyage tale genre. Over time, the seemingly realistic element, which is prominent in the *Nauigatio*, was largely replaced by the fantastic and the obviously symbolic. The *Nauigatio*'s masterful mix of the real with the imaginary was replaced by one where the latter became dominant. Different islands came to stand in for differing social and/or religious experiences in ways that were clearer but not subtler. Through their idealised utopias or extreme dystopias, the writers of the *immrama* were able to express their ideologies and set up mirrors to the ordering of contemporary society. Islands were states of mind and cultural statements. They could also exist at the borders of this known world and other worlds. They faced at once towards earth, and towards heaven and hell.

*Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin* 'Voyage of Máel Dúin', the tale that I wish to examine, uses its ocean and ocean islands as a social laboratory.<sup>xv</sup> As its title suggests, *Immram Maíle Dúin*<sup>xvi</sup> is written in Irish. It more than likely dates from towards the end of the ninth century or the first part of the tenth.<sup>xvii</sup> Like other typical examples of its genre *Immram Maíle Dúin* draws on a variety of sources. The allusions to earlier tales within its narrative are often skilful and suggest a target audience that was familiar with the tales that generated these allusions. Its author was clearly steeped in christian texts, knew at least some classical literature and was very familiar with vernacular tales. *Immram Maíle Dúin* contains references to the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Psalms, as well as the *Aeneid*, *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* and the Irish tale *Immram Brain mac Febail*. These references range from the integral to the

superficial. The central role of borrowing and allusion combined with the episodic nature of the tale, something implicit in its very genre, may lead to a dismissal of the narrative as a hodgepodge. This is misleading, for *Immram Maíle Dúin* is well-worked out and thematically consistent. Despite verbal and thematic echoes of other works, it manages to avoid being merely slavish.<sup>xviii</sup> The narrative is profoundly textual and, in many ways, demonstrates the maturity of the genre. The author is confident enough to play with its *topoi* and he frequently subverts the expectations of his audience. Within its episodic framework, Máel Dúin's adventure is cleverly structured. This revolves around a series of opposing categories, usually expressed as different islands, very much in the structuralist mode. For instance, warfare is opposed to peace and virginity to sexual licence.

The tale takes its eponymous hero through many otherworld islands that vary from the fairly unremarkable to the outright fantastic. These disparate scenes are united by the intention of the author. This voyage tale articulates different ways of organising society, with Ireland as the always-implied point of comparison. Thus, it is no surprise that the narrative covers many aspects of early medieval Irish life, for this is a text that is pre-eminently concerned with society and the correct ordering of the communities within it. These aspects include the role of women, the relationship of the warrior to those in authority, and the place of the church. Its otherworld islands are not, in the main, places of mystical experience, but are the sites of social experiment. They exist on the borders between the real and the otherworldly; text and context are not collapsed but brought into a form of dialogue. This dialogue is externalised into an otherworldly island landscape.

The tale itself is long as well as episodic. It is not repetitious, for its conservative, almost certainly clerical, author had a large number of concerns. It is hardly surprising

then that Máel Dúin visits an almost Polynesian number of islands during his adventures. The theme that holds the tale together, however, is the role of the church in Irish society and here, the author shows himself to be both highly critical and deeply idealistic. It is useful to summarise the main points of the tale before looking in greater depth at the author's treatment of this theme.

Its hero, Máel Dúin, is the son of a nun raped by Ailill, a member of Eóganacht Ninussa. The latter were a branch of the ruling dynasty of Munster and were associated with the Aran islands.<sup>xix</sup> Ailill is eventually killed in battle, fulfilling the dictum that those who live by the sword die by it. The nun, however, is a friend of the wife of the king of Munster. The queen takes the child and raises him as one of her own children. A typical Irish hero, the young Máel Dúin outdoes the other young men at the royal court in prowess and appearance during his youth. In jealousy, one of his companions accuses the hero of not knowing his father, highlighting the importance of paternity in an agnatic society. Máel Dúin confronts the queen and she eventually tells him the name of his true father. But an ideal foster-mother, she regards Máel Dúin as one of her own children. Nevertheless, Máel Dúin travels to the territory of Eóganacht Ninussa and discovers that his father has been killed by marauders from over the sea. Máel Dúin is incited to seek vengeance by a cleric and with the help of a druid plans a murderous voyage. The druid hedges in this journey with a taboo: Máel Dúin must only take a certain number of companions with him to complete his mission of vengeance. However, three of Máel Dúin's foster-brothers accompany him against his will. As a result he is driven into the ocean by a storm. On the ocean he visits many islands—some horrifying, others paradisaical and some inhabited by clerics. It is an adventure of spiritual growth, in which Máel Dúin must escape, among other things, the pleasures of a land of women. Eventually, he meets a hermit, originally

from Tory island, who tells him that he must learn to forgive his enemies. Máel Dúin returns to Ireland and he and his enemies forgive each other. Thus, Máel Dúin reverses the violence and sins of his father and rejects the values of the blood feud. Overall, Máel Dúin's voyage is almost a *Bildungsroman* with the hero experiencing a spiritual growth. Ultimately, he accepts that his martial exploits must be dictated by the needs of forgiveness and peace.

A great deal of the narrative's organisation depends on the framing tale. This is made up of a long prologue, which tells of Máel Dúin's conception, youth and attempt at revenge and a shorter epilogue that acts as a brief but telling closure. The frame-tale bears a particularly important relationship to the rest of the narrative because the themes elaborated and developed throughout the text are first indicated in the prologue and brought to their highly ideological conclusions in the epilogue. For instance, in the prologue, Máel Dúin's special status as a hero is expressed through his parentage. His father is a violent warrior, whose epithet is *ochar agha* 'edge of battle'. Yet he is also a *tigerna* 'lord' and loyal vassal of the king of Munster. His non-violent mother is a *banairchinnech*, the female superior of a community of nuns.<sup>xx</sup> Máel Dúin, unlike the typical *immram* hero is a layman but his parentage sets him apart from his fellows. Already, at his very conception, there is a hint at the oppositions between secular and ecclesiastical that Máel Dúin will eventually mediate and transcend through his adoption of a christian ethic of living. The forced act of sex between his parents is a botched foreshadowing of this and Máel Dúin's father, Ailill, is perilously close to being labelled a *díbergach* 'bandit'. *Díbergaig*, described as 'sons of death', preyed off settled communities and are roundly condemned in ecclesiastical documents.<sup>xxi</sup> Ironically, the *díbergach*-like Ailill, who rapes a nun in a church, is himself killed by actual *díbergaig* in a church. Lay society, as such, is not

openly condemned, but the chaos resulting from an improper relationship between the warrior and the Church brings about the tragedy of rape and violent death. Much of *Immram Maíle Dúin* is concerned with strategies for avoiding this tragedy. The author seems to suggest that only people living life together in a truly christian community provide the solution.

The nature of these christian communities is of crucial importance within the tale. The old, long-established, churches are shown to be as much in moral decline as lay society. Decline is a major concern of this tale, for its pessimistic author views Irish society as violent, venal and chaotic. The Church, rather than acting against these trends is seen as contributing to them. Significantly, it is a member of a church community who sets in motion the action of the narrative. He is named Briccne, and is described as *nemthengthach*, ‘poison-tongued’. The name Briccne is reminiscent of the very similar Bricriu. Here is an obvious echo of Bricriu *Nemthenga*, the pagan ‘poison tongue’ who serves as a catalyst for conflict in several incidents associated with the Ulster Cycle, especially in *Fled Bricrend*.<sup>xxii</sup> The similarity of the name and epithet of both characters is too close to be coincidental. In fact, Bricriu is sometimes known as Briccne.<sup>xxiii</sup> Furthermore, they share the same function: they incite action. Briccne, contrary to the christian ethic of forgiveness, provokes Máel Dúin to avenge his father’s violent death in the following scene:

*I n-araile aimsir iar sin ro batar lín oclach i relic chille Dubchuana i cor liac. Arsised iarum a cos Maile Duin for folaig n-athloisce na hecailsi 7 ba tairrsi no leicedh an licc. Alaile fer nemthengthach do muindtir na cille, Briccne a ainm, asbertsidhi fri Male Duin, bad ferr ol se bad a digail dognethea inn fir ro loiscadh sund inas cor liac tara cnamaib loma loistighi.*<sup>xxiv</sup> [At another time, after

that, a group of warriors was in the graveyard of the church of Dubchluain, casting stones. Then Máel Dúin's foot was planted on the burnt ruin of the church and it was over it that he threw the stone. A certain poison-tongued man of the community of the church, named Briccne, said to Máel Dúin: 'It would be better', he said, 'if you were to revenge the man who was burnt there in place of throwing stones over his bare burnt bones'.]

These bones belong to Máel Dúin's father. The burnt church's very name, Dubchluain, can be translated as black meadow. *Chluain* is a common element in church names. Clonmacnoise and Clondalkin are examples and there are many more.<sup>xxv</sup> This suggests that Dubchluain could be interpreted as 'Black Church'. Briccne seems to inhabit an anti-church rather than a church and its name seems to function as the outward sign of Briccne's inner moral blackness. It is also possible to identify the Dubchluain of *Immram Maíle Dúin* with an actual place within the ambit of Eóganacht Ninussa.<sup>xxvi</sup> In fact, the presence of a real church of Dubchluain would strengthen the dichotomy between appearance and reality implicit in the entire episode. Dubchluain seems to be an ordinary west Munster church, but is really the locale for a moral vacuum. Dubchluain is both an actual and spiritual wasteland. It is the opposite of the bare desert-like place, the *deserta/dísert* where the holy man or woman seeks God.

In effect Dubchluain fails to fulfil the legal requirements of a church of good standing, for it is ruined and its community, if much of it is left, does not seem to be engaging in pastoral duties.<sup>xxvii</sup> Briccne's preaching is hardly of the sort envisaged in the vernacular legal material. He suggests that vengeance would be the proper course for Máel Dúin to follow. There is no hint, here, of a christian ethic of forgiveness.



Briccne is not without motivation, however. His church was destroyed by *díbergaig* from over the sea, and his inciting of violence between lay warriors may represent the universalisation of his feud with lay society. The cycle of feud is an important theme in *Immram Maíle Dúin*. Instead of attempting to end violence, Briccne tries to create more mayhem. The church's ruin dramatically highlights the results of *díbergach* violence, a violence that lies outside the social control of kingdom and kindred.

Additional implications swirl around Dubchluain. There is another word *cluain*, which has the meaning of deception, falsehood, and trickery.<sup>xxviii</sup> This is mainly attested much later in the history of Irish, especially from the seventeenth century, but there is a possible example in *Acallam na Senórach* and Carey has plausibly argued for its use in *Tochmarc Becfhola*.<sup>xxix</sup> Briccne is a member of the church of 'Black Trickery'. The name of the church may have evoked a whole range of implications for the audience of the tale. The Devil is the Father of Lies (Jn 8:44) and Dubchluain follows a devilish ethic of feud. It could be argued that the failed cleric Briccne tricks Máel Dúin, through a false moral authority, into following an ungodly quest for revenge. Máel Dúin's *immram* follows its course from the ruins of a spiritually sterile underworld into a limitless and liminal ocean back to the gateways of Ireland. The hero's quest begins in an echo of hell on earth.

Significantly, Máel Dúin's next visit is to a physical wasteland, the rocky and remote Burren in Corco Mruad. The Irish word *bairenn/boirenn* refers literally to a rock district. There, Máel Dúin seeks the advice of a druid, Nuca. Oskamp has argued that Nuca is simply a representative of the international type of the wise man.<sup>xxx</sup> On the surface, he does seem to fulfil this type for he is described as a *sénaire* 'seer',<sup>xxxi</sup> but this is undercut in the narrative. Nuca attempts to help Máel Dúin's quest for revenge, thus following the example of Briccne. The druid and the poison-tongued

cleric are equated and it is insinuated that the christian Briccne is in reality no different from the pagan druid. There are further possible interpretations. If the church of Dubchluain is a centre of 'Black Trickery' the druid's action in helping Máel Dúin might imply that he is following the work of the Devil. The Irish conversion to christianity is shown to be just skin-deep. This is one of the clearest signs of the author's disaffection with the Irish church.

This disaffection is partly expressed through the manipulation of various *topoi* of the voyage tale genre. In *Immram Maíle Dúin*, the hero's foster-brothers join the voyage, despite the druid's advice about the correct number of passengers. Here the author of the *immram* is particularly clever. In the *Nauigatio* and elsewhere the extra passengers are, by implication, a barrier to the will of God.<sup>xxxii</sup> In this *immram* they ironically open the way to God's will and stymie the actions set in motion from Dubchluain. The latecomers' presence in the boat insures that Máel Dúin's search for revenge will fail, because they break the magical number of passengers prescribed by the druid. By breaching the taboo the passengers open up the possibility for ultimate salvation. The narrative expresses itself with forceful dramatic irony when two of Máel Dúin's companions declare as they approach the fort of his enemies:

...as diriuch don-fuc Dia 7 ro ghab Dia ar crannán remoinn. Tiagam 7 orgem an dun sa oro foillsigh Dia duinn ar naimdiu.<sup>xxxiii</sup> ['...it is straight that God has brought us, and God was leading our boat before us. Let us go and destroy this fort since God has revealed our enemies to us'.]

In fact, God has had nothing to do with the proceedings. It is Briccne, the highly dubious cleric-trickster, who revealed these enemies, and it is Nuca, the druid, who

prepared Máel Dúin and his companions for the voyage. As the boat is suddenly swept out to sea, away from the fortress, Máel Dúin, unconsciously hits on the truth:

*Ba hand adbert Mael Duin, leicidh in noi ana tost cen imrum 7 an leth bus ail do Dia a brith, beraigh.*<sup>xxxiv</sup> [Máel Dúin said: ‘leave the boat at rest, without rowing, and wherever it should please God to bring it, let him bring it’.]

Máel Dúin, at this stage, is not aware of the full significance of what he is saying and he immediately blames his foster-brothers for breaking the druid’s prohibition concerning the number of voyagers. Yet, for the audience it is an important marker and introduces one of the central ideas of the tale: individuals should hand themselves over to God’s providence as opposed to seeking human-inspired revenge. The phrase *cen imrum* ‘without rowing’ is almost certainly a conscious reference to the Irish idea that a man may be set adrift on the sea for committing a criminal offence. Thus, judgement is left to God.<sup>xxxv</sup> The idea of setting adrift became a theme for representing submission to the will of God,<sup>xxxvi</sup> and *Immram Maile Dúin* is in this tradition. Máel Dúin’s offence is his obsession with *dígal* ‘revenge’. God’s judgement sees Máel Dúin encounter many islands and wonders on the ocean. The hero only returns to the shores of Ireland when he is converted from the ethic of revenge to one of forgiveness and trust in God.

Throughout his *immram*, the perfect life of pilgrim and penitent ascetics contrasts with the immorality of clerics such as Briccne and the barren land inhabited by the druid Nuca. The ascetics of *Immram Maile Dúin* appear to be influenced by the figure of Paul the Hermit from the *Naugatio*, a character who is indebted, in turn, to Coptic traditions of ascetic renunciation, perhaps via Jerome’s Life of Paul.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Máel Dúin

encounters three such on his journey. All three are clothed only by their hair like Paul the hermit.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The first two function as foreshadowings of the third, the hermit who originally came from Tory island.<sup>xxxix</sup> The resemblances between this hermit and Paul are obvious. Both are motivated to go on their journey by a voice from a grave; both set their boat adrift on the ocean and allow God's will to guide them to their island retreat; both are fed there by a friendly otter. Yet, as men they are different. Paul the hermit is a perfect ascetic. The hermit from Tory, although living a life of spiritual perfection when Máel Dúin meets him, was a sinful man in the past. His sin was *taiscid* 'hoarding'.<sup>xl</sup> Greed is an important motif in the narrative. One of Máel Dúin's foster-brothers is killed by a supernatural cat when he tries to steal a golden necklace that symbolises the temptations of worldly riches.<sup>xli</sup> Moreover, the hermit not only hoarded, he also stole church property. His sin mirrors the more obvious destruction of church property caused by *díbergaig* and men like Máel Dúin's father. The hermit's tale gives the themes of greed, theft, and redemption an added depth. The hermit's previous life had been as a dishonest and thieving monastic cook, but he has been converted to religious life. This hermit sums up the narrative thrust of *Immram Maíle Dúin* when he tells the hero:

*Asbert an senoir friusom iar sin: ricfaidh uile do for tír 7 an fer ro marb t'athairseo, a Máel Duin, fonngébaigh a ndun ar for cind 7 níro marbaigh, acht tabruidh dilghudh dó, fo bithin robar saersi Dia di morguasachtaib imdaib 7 basa fir bidhbuidh báis do chena.*<sup>xlii</sup> [After that the old man said to them: 'You will all reach your country and the man who killed your father, O Máel Dúin, you will find him in a fortress before you and do not kill him, but forgive him, for

God has saved you from many great dangers, and you too are men deserving of death’.]

Only in this way can Máel Dúin end the cycle of *díberg* and death. The hermit reverses the action of Briccne, a cleric who has allowed feud to take precedence over the christian ethic of forgiveness. Máel Dúin takes the hermit’s injunction to heart. Not long after leaving him the voyagers come to a fertile island and see a falcon ‘like the falcons of Ireland’.<sup>xliii</sup> Only one more island awaits them, that of the killers of Máel Dúin’s father. Máel Dúin overhears the leader of these men declare that he will welcome Máel Dúin. One link of the chain of violence is broken. *Dígal* ‘revenge’ is replaced by *dílgud* ‘forgiveness’. Máel Dúin’s potential enemies make the hero welcome and he responds in kind. The narrative ends when one of Máel Dúin’s companions, Diurán, visits Armagh and places the fragment of a silver net, a memento of the voyage, on the altar of the church there.<sup>xliv</sup> The action is a fitting symbol of the right ordering that is possible in Irish society; moreover, it rounds off a tale that had begun with an improper visit by Máel Dúin’s father to a church, resulting in rape; it acts as an effective foil to the actions of the failed cleric Briccne at the ruined church of Dubchluain.

*Immram Maíle Dúin* is a rich and complex narrative and my discussion of its treatment of the church in society is by no means exhaustive. This discussion leads on to the question of the tale’s social context and what, if anything, can be learned of its author. Its first editor, the great Whitley Stokes, remarked that the author must have been a layman, for otherwise he would not have criticised the church so trenchantly.<sup>xlv</sup> The criticism is trenchant, but this does not prove lay authorship. In fact, the author was almost certainly a cleric. The reference in *Immram Maíle Dúin* to the *Aeneid*, for

example, strongly points to a basic schooling in Latin, something that was available in a monastic environment.

During the eighth and ninth centuries the Céli Dé sought to reinvigorate the religious standards of the Irish church. Reformist circles were particularly strong in the southern half of Ireland.<sup>xlvi</sup> The church attacked in *Immram Maile Dúin* is the older church, which is portrayed as lacking in moral authority, and this older church was a focus for Céle Dé criticism.<sup>xlvi</sup> The hermit from Tory's description of his former church presents a picture of worldly wealth that contrasts with his life as an ascetic. The asceticism of the various hermits on the islands is praised unreservedly. The hermit from Tory, rather than Briccne, is the mirror of the perfect man of God. The author of *Immram Maile Dúin* suggests that asceticism is one of the important characteristics of the ideal church, and this is consonant with the Céle Dé philosophy. On the other hand, *peregrinatio* or overseas pilgrimage was criticised by the Céli Dé. The text implicitly praises Máel Dúin as a type of temporary *peregrinus* and the hermit from Tory as a permanent one. This implies that while the author of *Immram Maile Dúin* was heavily influenced by the Céli Dé, he did not necessarily buy the whole package.

Some consideration must also be given to the audience of this text, a consideration that might cast more light on the author. *Immram Maile Dúin*, like the *Nauigatio*, explores the idea of communities, what form they should take, and how they should function. The hero is an aristocrat who is literally at sea in a world suffering violent upheaval. The *immram*'s communities are both secular and religious. The church of Armagh and the court of the Eóganacht king at Cashel are the two centres of stability in the text. Francis John Byrne has argued that the tale may refer to events in the eighth century, when the Eóganacht kings were reasonably strong.<sup>xlvi</sup> This does not

convincingly match the state of social disorder depicted in the tale. Munster in the second half of the ninth century better fits the setting of this tale. Lawlessness and general instability seem to have followed in the wake of Viking incursions—a lawlessness exacerbated by the Eóganacht kings’ failure in dealing with the simultaneous threats of the Vikings, the breakaway kingdom of Osraige and the ambitions of the Uí Néill. The text conveys a powerful image of a disintegrating society at ecclesiastical and secular levels. The inhabitants of one of the islands that Máel Dúin visits react with terror to the approach of the voyagers’ boat.<sup>xlix</sup> The incident may be an exaggerated image of the disorganised state of Eóganacht Munster and its openness to Viking raids. Moreover, the idea that the raiders who killed Máel Dúin’s father came from across the sea makes sense in Viking age Ireland. The *Immram* suggests that a conversion to greater asceticism in the church, perhaps on a Céle Dé model, a willingness to forgive old enemies and unite against the forces of social disorder, and an adherence to the authority of a paradigmatic royal court provide the answer. The elitism of these suggestions is underlined by the fact that the only non-elite person specifically referred to in the narrative, an *aithech* ‘rentpaying peasant’ is described as both dead and a sinner.<sup>l</sup> Unfortunately, for the Eóganacht kings, for whom this text is arguably a piece of special pleading, chaos and decline continued, until they were supplanted.

Throughout this paper I have continually referred to the author of *Immram Maíle Dúin*. This is not to deny the multiplicity of narrative and performance, which lies behind any medieval Irish tale. *Immram Maíle Dúin*, for example, refers to two conflicting traditions regarding the number of the voyagers.<sup>li</sup> Yet, it seems to me that *Immram Maíle Dúin* is the unified composition of a single individual. Stylistically, it is unremarkable and does not attain the literary merit of either the *Nauigatio* or

sections of *Immram Brain*. Oskamp has concluded that *Immram Maíle Dúin* ‘is a literary text, and not the written form of an oral tradition, transmitted for ages and ages’.<sup>lii</sup> This is largely true. The author of the text has drawn on other *written* tales in his composition. It is this use of previous tales that elevates the quality of the narrative.

This quality is best seen in the tale’s thematic sophistication. Its author uses the voyage tale genre to express his concerns about the Church and its relations with lay society and the implicit participation of churchmen in lay violence. Through the adventures of Máel Dúin, a hero conceived in violence, he casts a critical eye on his contemporaries. The Church of *Immram Maíle Dúin* may dominate Ireland but it is in urgent need of improvement. Máel Dúin’s fateful voyage leads him to renounce violent values in favour of faith and forgiveness. Yet, these values are easier to find amid the dangers of the ocean rather than in the named and known landscape of Ireland and its churches.

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is a shorter version of a substantially longer piece that is planned for future publication.

<sup>ii</sup> There is a huge primary literature concerned with the naming of places in Irish. The best example is the genre of short anecdotes dedicated to explaining placenames, *dindshenchas*. For numerous instances see E. Gwynn (ed), *The metrical dindshenchas* iv, Todd Lecture Series 57, (Dublin 1924).

<sup>iii</sup> For instance, a remarkable number of placenames contain ecclesiastical elements. *Cell* ‘Kil’, signifying a church is very common. For examples see E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae* (Dublin 1910) 172–215.

<sup>iv</sup> A useful, is somewhat dated, study of classical geography is J. O. Thomson, *History of ancient geography* (New York 1965); the reception of this classical tradition by medieval christianity is studied in detail by N. Lozovsky, ‘*The Earth is our book*’: *geographical knowledge in the Latin West*



ca. 400–1000 (Michigan 2000); a good example of Irish knowledge of these traditions is found in the work of Dicuil, edited by J. J. Tierney, *Dicuili Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Dublin 1967) esp. I § 2.

<sup>v</sup> Edited by Tierney, *Dicuili Liber*.

<sup>vi</sup> Tierney, *Dicuili Liber*, VII §§ 11–13; for a re-edition of VII §§6–15 see D. Howlett, ‘Dicuil on the islands of the north’, *Peritia* 13 (1999) 127–34.

<sup>vii</sup> The origins of the *immrama* are discussed by K. Hughes, ‘On an Irish litany of pilgrim saints compiled c. 800’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 77 (1959) 305–31; idem, ‘The changing theories and practice of Irish pilgrimage’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11 (1960) 143–51; W. F. Thrall, ‘Clerical sea pilgrimages and the imrama’, in *The Manly anniversary studies in language and literature* (Chicago 1923) 276–83, is a much earlier statement of the idea; a more recent exposition of the christian nature of the *immrama* is D. N. Dumville, ‘*Echtrae* and *Immram*: some problems of definition’, *Ériu* 27 (1976) 73–94.

<sup>viii</sup> M. Esposito, ‘An apocryphal "Book of Enoch and Elias" as a possible source of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*’, *Celtica* 5 (1960) 192–206; Dumville, ‘*Echtrae* and *immram*’, 79, has noted the influence of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*.

<sup>ix</sup> H. Zimmer, ‘Keltische Beiträge II: Brendans Meerfahrt’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 33 (1889) 328–38, suggested that the Irish *immrama* were directly dependent on the voyages in *Aeneid* III–V; this has been demolished by W. F. Thrall, ‘Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the Irish imrama: Zimmer’s theory’, *Modern Philology* 15 (1917–18) 449–74.

<sup>x</sup> The priority of the *echtrae* is discussed by Dumville, ‘*Echtrae* and *immram*’, 73–94.

<sup>xi</sup> *Vita Columbae*, 1 §6.

<sup>xii</sup> The text has been edited, somewhat unsatisfactorily, by C. Selmer (ed), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis from early Latin manuscripts* (Notre Dame 1959); J. J. O’Meara, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (1976), is an excellent translation.

<sup>xiii</sup> Selmer ‘Introduction’, *Navigatio*, xxvii–xxix, argues for a tenth-century date and a continental origin in Lotharingia. However there is significant divergence in the tenth-century copies of the text and J. Carney, ‘Review of Selmer, *Navigatio*’, *Medium Aevum* 32 (1963) 37–44, suggests a date in the first half of the ninth century and an Irish origin; M. Esposito, ‘L’édition de la "Nauigatio S.

Brendani," *Scriptorium* 15 (1961) 288, also affirms a ninth-century date and an Irish provenance; I. Orlandi, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani: Introduzione* (Milan 1968) 72–3, 131–60, suggests that the tale dates from the second quarter of the ninth century and that it was written in Ireland; D. N. Dumville, 'Two approaches to the dating of "Navigatio Sancti Brendani"', *Studi Medievali* 29 (1988) 95–9, uses an ingenious genealogical political argument, centring on the Eóganacht Locha Léin, to date the text back to eighth-century Ireland; S. Mac Mathúna, 'The structure and transmission of early Irish voyage literature', in H. L. C. Tristram (ed), *Texte und Zeittiefe*, *ScriptOralia* 58 (Tübingen 1994) 315, fn 7, tentatively supports a continental origin.

<sup>xiv</sup> A classic examination, *inter alia*, is Carney, 'Review', 37–44; the monastic allegory of the text has been explored by C. Bourgealt, 'The monastic archetype in the Navigatio of St Brendan', *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983) 109–21, and D. A. Bray, 'Allegory in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*', *Viator* 26 (1995) 1–10; the most illuminating recent study is T. O'Loughlin, 'Distant islands: the topography of holiness in the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition England, Ireland and Wales* (Woodbridge 1999) 1–20.

<sup>xv</sup> The prose tale occurs in two recensions. The most important editions are W. Stokes (ed), 'The Voyage of Mael Duin', *Revue Celtique* 9 (1888) 452–95; 10 (1889) 50–95, and H. P. A. Oskamp, (ed), 'Immram Curaig Máele Dúin', in H. P. A. Oskamp, *The voyage of Máel Dúin: A study in early Irish voyage literature followed by an edition of Immram curaig Máele Dúin from the Yellow Book of Lecan in Trinity College, Dublin* (Groningen 1970) 100–85. I will adopt the following methodology: as both Stokes' and Oskamp's editions use the same section numbers, I will simply note *Immram Maile Dúin*, followed by the section number where appropriate. However, when I use direct quotation, I will cite Oskamp's edition as *Immram Maile Dúin* II, followed by section, page and line number, and the variants offered by Stokes under *Immram Maile Dúin* I, followed by section and page number(s).

<sup>xvi</sup> The tale is generally known in secondary sources by the shortened title *Immram Maile Dúin*, and I will be adopting this usage.

<sup>xvii</sup> A. G. van Hamel, 'The text of *Immram curaig Maíldúin*', *Études Celtiques* 3 (1938) 1–20, discusses the manuscripts and dating of the tale.

<sup>xviii</sup> Carney, 'Review', 41–3 made note, in particular, of the borrowings from the *Nauigatio* into *Immram Maile Dúin*. However, his conclusion, that the latter is a poor imitation is deeply flawed; more

recently T. O. Clancy, ‘Subversion at sea: structure, style and intent in the *Immrama*’, in J. M. Wooding (ed), *The Otherworld voyage in early Irish literature: an anthology of criticism* (Dublin 2000) esp. 203–9, goes some way to considering the text as a work of literature in its own right..

<sup>xix</sup> F. J. Byrne, ‘The Eóganacht Ninussa’, *Éigse* 9 (1958) 18–29. His identification of Eóganacht Ninussa is based partly on *Immram Maíle Dúin* itself.

<sup>xx</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, 100.19, declares that this is where Kildare is today. This statement appears to be a later addition.

<sup>xxi</sup> Examples given by R. Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the devil’s men’, *Ériu* 30 (1979) 75–92; one of the most cutting attacks on *díberg* in saga is surely E. Knott (ed), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin 1975).

<sup>xxii</sup> G. Henderson (ed), *Fled Bricrend: the feast of Bricriu*, Irish Texts Society 2 (London 1899). Examples of Bricriu’s function can be seen in §6, §§8–25; the relationship of Briccne and Bricriu was briefly suggested by Stokes, ‘Voyage of Mael Duin’, 449; followed by Oskamp, *Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 51.

<sup>xxiii</sup> R. Thurneysen (ed), *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 4 (Dublin 1935) §6, is an example of Briccne rather than Bricriu being used.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, 104.15–20. *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, 458, offers the reconstruction *athloiscthe* in place of *athloisce*.

<sup>xxv</sup> There are numerous examples in Hogan, *Onomasticon*, 253–71.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Hogan, *Onomasticon*, 371. The church could be identified with Dooglaun near Tulla Co. Clare or, perhaps, Dooghcloon near Loughrea in Co. Galway. Either would be within striking distance of Corcomroe, Máel Dúin’s next destination.

<sup>xxvii</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The pastoral role of the church in the early Irish laws’, in J. Blair, R. Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral care before the parish*, Studies in the Early History of Britain (Leicester 1992) esp. 69–74; D. Ó Corráin, ‘Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament’, in P. Ní Chatháin, M. Richter (eds), *Irland und die Christenheit* (Stuttgart 1987) 302.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Examined by M. Griffin-Wilson, ‘Cluain agus cluanaire’, in W. J. Mahon (ed), *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 9 (Harvard 1990) 31–42. She derives this *cluain* via the IE root \*klep-, meaning to steal.

<sup>xxix</sup> W. Stokes, (ed), ‘Agallamh na Senórach’, in W. Stokes, E. Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* 4 (Leipzig 1900) 15, refers to the hero Cailte as the *cleasach cluanuide* ‘devious trickster’ of Cluain Cesáin. *Cluain* may be acting as a pun. J. Carey, ‘Otherworlds and verbal worlds in Middle Irish narrative’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 9 (Harvard 1990), 36–7, suggests that an otherwise unattested placename in *Tochmarc Becfhola*, Cluain Dá Chailech, is a wordplay meaning ‘beguiling of the two cocks’.

<sup>xxx</sup> Oskamp, *Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 52.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §1, 108.11; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, 462.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Nauigatio*, §7, §24, §17.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §1, 106.2–4. *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §1, 462: *As diriuch don-fuc Dia 7 roghab Dia ar crannán remoinn. Tiagam 7 orgem an dá dun sa, o rofoillsigh Dia duinn ar naimdiu indiph.*

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §1, 108.7–9; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, 462: *Ba hand adbert Mael Duin: Leicid in noi ina tost cen imrum, 7 an leth bus ail do Dia a brith, beraidh.*

<sup>xxxv</sup> M. E. Byrne, ‘On the punishment of setting adrift’, *Ériu* 11 (1932) 97–102; F. Kelly, *A guide to Early Irish law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin 1988), 219–21, summarises the legal context; the earliest literary example is Patrick’s treatment of Mac Cuill in Muirchú’s *Vita S. Patricii*, in L. Bieler (ed), *The Patrician texts from the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 102–6.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> A famous historical example of this impulse is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* s.a. 891. This describes three Irishmen who reached Cornwall in a boat without oars and subsequently went to Alfred’s court.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> *Nauigatio*, §26; Jerome, *Vita Pauli*, PL 23, 17–28.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Nauigatio*, §26, *nihil aliud indumenti erat sibi iunctum exceptis pilis qui egrediebantur de suo corpore* ‘he had no other clothes on him except for the hair that grew from his own body’. Compare this with *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §19, 138.50, *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §19, 494: *7 a folt ba hedach do/ ba hetach dó* ‘and his hair was his clothing’; §30, 160.3/ §30, 72: *7 ro thuighestair a indfudh uile hé/ a fhindfudh uile hé* ‘and his hair clothed him completely’; §33, 168.56/ §33, 80: *7 se tuighthe o findfut giul a chuirp* ‘and he was clothed from the white hair of his body’.

<sup>xxxix</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §33.

<sup>xl</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §33, 168.8; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §33, 82.

<sup>xli</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §11; this is clearly influenced by *Nauigatio*, §§6-7.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §33, 172.30-4; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §33, 90, suggests *fonngébaid* in place of *fonngébaigh* and *marbaid* for *marbaigh*.

<sup>xliii</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §34 176.32; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §34, 90.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, §34, 178.1-3; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, §34, 94.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Stokes, 'Voyage of Máel Dúin', 447.

<sup>xlvi</sup> K. Hughes, 'The distribution of Irish scriptoria and centres of learning from 730-1111', in N. K. Chadwick (ed), *Studies in the early British church* (Cambridge 1958) 263; idem, *The Church in early Irish society* (London 1966) 182; Byrne, 'Derrynavlan: the historical context', *JRSAI* 110 (1980) 121.

<sup>xlvi</sup> The Célé Dé attitude is summed up in the collection of documents collected in E. J. Gwynn, W. J. Purton, W. J. (eds), 'The monastery of Tallaght', *PRIA* (C) 29 (1911-12) 115-79. See especially §4, §26, for attacks on the *sen-chell*, the old churches.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Byrne, 'Eóganacht Ninussa', 29-30, partially bases his argument on the identification of Máel Dúin's mother's church as Kildare but this identification is based on what is probably a later gloss. The fact that Máel Dúin was a common eighth-century name is neither here nor there; Zimmer, 'Keltische Beiträge II', 289-90, also argued for the eighth-century.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §24.

<sup>i</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §33.

<sup>li</sup> *Immram Maíle Dúin* II, 104.29-30; *Immram Maíle Dúin* I, 458.

<sup>lii</sup> Oskamp, *Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 72.