

The Voyage of St. Brendan Began European Interest in North America: Relevance to Oak Island

Now that Season Nine of The Curse of Oak Island is Drawing to a Close

Dr. Doug Symons, April 2022

In History Channel Series “The Curse of Oak Island” (COOI) ninth season there was a startling find revealed by the Laginas and their Team: a piece of wood they think is from a ship that is axe-hewn, likely by an iron axe. It was announced by Craig Tester to carbon date to 570 AD +/- 100 years or so, and the COOI room was gob-smacked. This the second time I have been flabbergasted by these “old dates. In the 7th season, they found evidence of “human activity” in the swamp dating to around 1120 AD. This led me to write the paper “Evidence Supporting the Theory That Vikings Walked on Oak Island” (Symons, 2020). So I took the new challenge to look into a legendary European voyage in that hard-to-fathom time frame of 570s A.D.. I have been struck by many things about the Oak Island (OI) search: But most importantly, there are the dates of artifacts and wood all over the spectrum including pre-Columbus, and the absolute lack of documented “History” of any of these activities. This means early OI activity was something done in complete secrecy until what I call the “press release” event of the “three boys” story in 1795. I came to realize that the History of OI may be integral to the European History of North America itself, which then could have contributed to the “who knows what” on OI later. And the most common theme that ties all OI artifacts pre-1795 is just that: secrecy from known History. But that secrecy I would attribute to peoples on the Island in the 1600 and 1700s A.D.. Potential Pre-Columbus peoples in North America did not have secrecy: they had a way of chronicling activity hard to recognize using modern historical methods of documents and corroboration.

There was such a mysterious European Voyage from Ireland in the 500s A.D.. It was undertaken by St. Brendan and his 16 other Monks, shockingly in the 560s A.D., the same carbon date range as that piece of wood. The goal of this paper is to review the Voyage of St. Brendan as the first known story to generate European interest in North America. This paper will try to make at least some sense of the original text, and then review another stunning story: the Voyage was recreated in the 1970s using the same ways of ship building from that ancient time. At the very least, this is another challenge to scholars that Christopher Columbus did not “discover America” (Merrill, 1935) and undocumented travels to North America by Europeans took place, such as the definitive archeological evidence of Norse at L’Anse Aux Meadows in Newfoundland (e.g., Wallace, 2009, 2012). In the famous sentiment of Irish author James Joyce, “Christopher Columbus, as everyone knows, is honored by posterity because he was the last to discover America.” Discovered meaning by European non-First Nations peoples, who lived here for Millenia. Even though Joyce would have said that in the early 1900s, he lived

in St. Brendan's homeland of Ireland in a town founded by Viking Norse: Dublin. Did he know something?

Who was St. Brendan?

We have all heard of St. Patrick as one of the "12 Irish Apostles" in the middle of the first millennium, but there is another equally revered: St. Brendan. While I will refer to him by that name, there are various additions to his name including "of Clonfort", "the Navigator", and "the Bold", and other derivations such as St. Brannon and St. Bran in Old Irish. This Irish Monk was born in some time around 489 AD in the province of Munster, which is the southwest region of Ireland. St. Brendan became a Catholic priest around age 26 and at a time when the Roman Empire was in decline but Catholicism on the rise in Ireland, and he passed away around 577 AD. He was an Abbott at a Benedictine Monastery in Clonfort throughout his life, but became famous for his travels, making voyages up the west coast of Ireland to the Shetland and Orkney Islands, and over to Brittany and Britain. He did so in skin-covered boats of the style of a *Curragh*, more about that later.

What St. Brendan became most famous for was a seven-year trip later in his life around 555 to 562 AD "to the West" in order to find "The Promised Land of the Saints", which sometimes is referred to as Eden or Paradise in some sources. This voyage was chronicled from oral tradition and whatever notes he took or wrote down after his return. As a Monk, he is presumed to be literate. Initial accounts were written in Latin and Old Irish within a 100 years of his death, and shortly thereafter another version written in Irish *Voyage of Bran* and *Voyage Mael Duin*. This ultimately led to the publication of the book *Navigatio Brendani* which translates to *The Voyage of Brendan* around 900 AD. This book came out in Latin as would be the religious language of Catholicism, but has also been translated into many languages including a recent English version by John O'Meara (1976) from the original Latin. O'Meara was a renowned Latin Scholar. This is the version I will work from, and it apparently was well-received on both sides of the Atlantic.

So why are we even talking about St. Brendan? Because in his seven-year voyage around the North Atlantic and perhaps further afield, he had run across various Islands including one he thought was The Promised Land. No one knows for certain where these are. There has been speculation for decades, including maps drawn in the 1400 and 1500s AD which inserted an Island west of Ireland named after him that we now know does not exist (Babcock, 1919). Others have pointed at other existing Islands including the Canary Islands, Azores, and Madeiras, as well as one near Fogo Island in Newfoundland, and even Islands in Virginia, Florida, and as far away as Jamaica and Brazil.

What about Indigenous peoples: The Mi'kmaq

The Mi'kmaq are the indigenous peoples living in NS and their history at that time was passed down through oral tradition, stories, and petroglyphs carved into rock. One spoke of a "blue-eyed people" sailing from the East or North before the later arrival of the French, British,

Portuguese, and others, although it difficult to source this quote. From the Mi'kmaq perspective, initial contact with Europeans would probably been with Norse Vikings (Paul, 2006), but I will address this later. They were hunter-gathers who typically spent summers on rivers close to the sea gathering bounty from the waters, and OI is close to both Martin's and Gold Rivers. Winters were spent in the interior of Nova Scotia where weather was more temperate, and hunting was readily available. For example, in the National Park Kejimikujik in South West Nova Scotia and elsewhere, many petroglyphs and Mi'kmaq archeological finds have been made in the form of stone tools and arrowheads of stone. However, petroglyphs largely consist of etchings on limestone, and thus rarely exist more than 500 years, so they provide no contemporaneous evidence of a possible presence beyond that date (Deveau, 2020). Most importantly, The Mi'kmaq did not use iron tools until contact with Europeans (Nova Scotia Museum, 2022), thus they cannot be used to account for the axe cut piece of wood found on OI, nor would they likely have gone there as habitation or construction, merely to hunt. But back to St. Brendan.

The Voyage of St. Brendan

There seems to be little dispute that St. Brendan was a real historical figure and an expert at sailing given his moniker and trips to the places mentioned above. When we get to The Voyage of Brendan, there are fantastical events described in the journey that immediately call into question the voracity of the voyage, until we realize he can only observe events at his level of understanding of the time when he sees things he has not seen before and thus comprehend. They are also suggestive of a northern route following currents that would take him past the Hebrides, Faro Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland. Here are some examples. When he reports "crystal columns" in the ocean, he could be describing icebergs, which are plentiful coming down from the Arctic and Greenland following the Labrador current North to South, a current which goes around NFLD and continues to Nova Scotia. I have seen icebergs myself miles offshore from St. John's NFLD's Signal Hill, the most Easterly point in North America and where Marconi sent the first Trans-Atlantic radio signal. From Signal Hill, you can also see whales, which are plentiful in the Grand Banks fishing grounds that occur from the nutrient-rich mixing of the cold Labrador current and warm Gulf Stream coming from the South. Whales could be some of the "monsters" of the sea and the "devouring beast" being reported by St. Brendan, as well as the "diving Island": Sperm Whales can be 16 meters long. When whales breach the surface and breathe, they could be described as water spitting monsters. The North Atlantic is also the range of the giant squid, which could also be seen as a sea monster and roughly the same total length as a Sperm Whale. The two creatures have been known to have altercations, as indicated by scratches from squid tentacles on the hide of a whale later caught by whalers, and such a battle between monsters is reported to be witnessed during the voyage. This led to the death of one and the provision of food to the travelers as part of the carcass had washed to shore. If brought to surface during an altercation, squids too would "spit water" as they eject water to escape, much like jet propulsion. Imagine witnessing such a fight between such mammoths when in a boat that

amounts to a large dingy. There are reports of a fiery mountain covered with smoke and spouting flames, and giants that spit rocks and breathe fire, which could be lava flows and active volcanos such as are in Iceland. There are reports of “Islands of sheep” and “talking birds”, and there are sheep on Islands they would pass, as well as great seabird sanctuaries on Island cliffs whose cacophony could be seen as “talking”, although not from the railing of the ship itself. There is an “Island of grapes”, although they turn out to be red and very large. I wonder if these were wild apples, which were much smaller than today as they were bred into modern bigger juicer varieties. There is a Coagulated Sea with no wind, which could be the Sargasso Sea and regions of fog common on the North American coast such Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. There are areas dense with fish, which British discoverer of Canada John Cabot in 1497 said of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland: Fish so dense you could walk across them. I wish to note that these kinds of explanations are not at all mine alone and similar ones are advanced by many others, for example, Brian (2022) and O’Meara (1976) himself.

There are other things reported that reflect the theological basis of the voyage and cannot be accounted for through changing the viewing lens. Some may have been inserted in the time between the voyage and the writing of the various accounts, which I believe the original is housed in the Vatican archive. For example, it was reported they saw Judas Escariot on a rock who was let out of Hell every Sunday at the mercy of Jesus Christ. There are various visions of hell and demons, encounters with angels, and an encounter with a Gryphon. A Gryphon is interesting because it is a Greek mythical creature with the head and talons of an eagle and body of a lion, both the top of bird and animal kingdoms. According to legend, Gryphons were known for guarding treasures and priceless possessions, which the Promised Land would be. It must be acknowledged that these were deeply devout men of faith in close contact with God, and I will not doubt the Divine inspiration that must have led to and perhaps even protected this whole voyage. It was a success, and a seven-year voyage is a long time for things to go wrong. The point of this section is simply to say some of the fantastical stories within the narratives of the voyage are actually explainable through modern insight and understanding this was a religious pilgrimage of Monks seeing things they could only explain from what they knew.

For those interested in theological meaning of his voyage, there are parts of the voyage that are hard to understand if the text is taken literally. One could conclude this was a voyage under God’s protection. For example, there are many landings on Islands in which they are greeted by Monks who provide them with safe haven and protection for a time, and then provide them with provisions to send them on their way. These landings revolved around important Christian events such as the Eucharist and Pentacost, in which there would be great feasts. Fasting and prayer are essential features of the story. What is striking from the narrative, is the complete devotion and respect for those they encountered, which always ended up being reciprocated. These peoples are quoted to speak in their native tongue of Latin (now translated). What they could have encountered was First Nations peoples landing on an Island throughout this Northern route, whose history notes were welcoming of strangers unless

the strangers turned out to be hostile. More than a dozen starving Monks in a skin boat with no weapons would hardly be threatening to those that met them on the shore, particularly if the Monks prostrate themselves on the ground upon meeting, as is noted in the narrative. There is mention of being given grapes by these peoples, which will become interesting when relating this to similar claims by Vikings 500 years later of discovering what they called Vinland. We all assumed they found actual grapes, but Vikings may have followed a story well known when the sagas were written: The Voyage of St. Brendan.

The voyage fits the Northern route of travel taking advantage of currents such as the Labrador Current, although they did have a sail and oars. And we know St. Brendan completed his voyage, returned to Ireland, apparently died 15 years after returning although there is debate how many years this actually was. He is buried at St Brendan's Cathedral in Clonfert on the west bank of the river Shannon (The Irish Times, 2001). If taken at face value, the whole voyage amounts to 17 Monks (three were lost during the voyage) drifting around for seven years in a leather-made boat, experiencing fantastical events, and some explainable through a modern lens, and some explainable from a theological lens, and others who knows. There are no maps of the trip, no known and provable landfalls, just circumstantial evidence so some of the narrative can be explained. In their time, there was little knowledge of latitude other than the Sun's depth on the horizon, and no knowledge of longitude. Near the close of their outgoing voyage, we are told they sailed "Westwards into the Summer Solstice", and the summer solstice reference could mean time: they left in the Spring with June 21st the next solstice. The documentation of their sail home is remarkable: there is none. But it is easy to sail offshore, strike the Gulf Stream, and that takes you home to Ireland. How was it even possible?

Proving Extraordinarily Mythical Theories of Travel are Possible

History is best when based on written confirmable records, but these only exist in the past three or four Centuries. Ancient history is a hard haul: rarely written records, the passage of oral history written down centuries later and thus potential for change, and the potential for embellishment and ethnocentric bias. For example, The Rosetta Stone and Dead Sea Scrolls both revealed how History sometimes need to be re-written, or at least reconsidered. Thor Heyerdalh showed that primitive vessels made of Balsa Wood (the Kontiki) and papyrus reed (the RA Expeditions) were capable of trans-oceanic voyages as celebrated by the Kontiki Museum. History is not about a fixed set of facts, because "facts" can change. What is startling about OI is History was created in 1795 with the story of the "Discovery" of the Money Pit by the three young men, except even this History is called into the question by the first edition of the History of Lunenburg in the early 1800s, which said there were four young men, including Samuel Ball that discovered the pit. It was in the second edition there were three, Samuel Ball was deleted. But all the dates and findings on OI that predate 1795 have no known history. There are some land ownerships that can be traced, but no "History" such as naval and military

records. But Leginas have finds that predate 1795 from a variety of colonization nations, all conducted in absolute secrecy with no records.

This story looks to the 500 A.D. period and St. Brendan. Was the voyage described above even possible? Let us be clear, it sounds unbelievable. But was it possible? In *The Voyage of Brendan*, readers are given details of the boat construction. According to the O'Meara (1975) translation, here is what we know of the boat's construction:

Saint Brendan and those with him got iron tools and constructed a light frame ribbed with wood and with a wooden frame, as is usual in those parts. They covered it with ox-hides tanned with the bark of oak and smeared all the joints of the hides on the outside with fat. They carried into the boat hides for the makings of two other boats, supplies for forty days, fat for preparing the hides to cover the boat and other things needed for human life. They also placed a mast in the middle of the boat and a sail and other requirements for steering the boat (p. 8).

The reader is not told the boat's dimensions, which should have been considerable to transport 17 passengers and additional hides and grease to repair or make further boats should this one founder. The modern equivalent to this boat is the Irish *Curraugh*. It is also construction known to Native peoples in the Arctic as they also make skin covered boats, in their case from Walrus hide and parts of whales, both plentiful. As St. Brendan reportedly sailed to various Islands and Normandy, we should assume the building of the boat for the Voyage of St. Brendan was not a "one-off": he had many relatively smaller Voyages around what is now the British Isles including mainland Europe, they knew how to build sea-faring craft in Ireland in 500s A.D..

So could such a boat be built and make a trans-Atlantic Voyage? Tim Severin (1978) showed that it could. In fact, he did it. Tim Severin has been described as an "experiential archeologist" (King, 2020), much in the fashion of Thor Heyerdahl, recreating ancient voyages using ancient technologies to show they were possible. Using only the above text, Severin sought to build the same kind of boat Brendan had described. This led to years of research in ancient ways of naval construction. Ultimately they made contact with local Master tanners and Harness makers in the UK and Ireland familiar with the old ways of tanning and stitching leather. Considerable testing took place, and they found that indeed oak-bark tanning and then application of grease produced the most water-impervious leather. The process is described in detail in Severin's book, and reviewed at Leathersmiths (2022). I was able to find one Leathersmith company in Britain who continues to make Oak-tanned leather to this day said to be "the best". Ox skin has a thickness of 1/4 inch, and the tanning process takes about a year of work, whereas the original text gives no time frame for boat construction and it is possible the creation of such leather was an ongoing process. The "fat" also took considerable research, and Severin ended up being advised to use "wool-wax", which is secreted by sebaceous glands in sheep skins to permeate their wool-coat. It is apparently almost pure lanolin and keeps a

sheep dry even during stormy weather. Once rendered the ox-skins are soaked in fat for months and binds with the fibers within the hide itself, yielding tremendous water resistance. And horrible odours by all reports. Severin had 57 ox hides prepared in this way for boat construction. Severin worked from scratch, St. Brendan worked from a lively ship-building tradition given his earlier voyages.

Severin (1978) provides more details of the creation of leather thongs or straps to be used to lash things together and the creation of multi-strand flax threads for stitching overlapping ox-hides together. Master saddle-makers were relied upon who were used to stitching leather using awls and needles. The boat frame and mast would have been made of the strongest hardwood, likely oak and ash, again readily available in Ireland. Over that the ox hides were lashed. In fact, you can find Youtube videos showing the construction of Severin's boat and voyage itself, the boat aptly called "The Brendan" (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB8Ya-jotGA&t=1556s>). It is quite a fascinating tale of construction, all using the means of the "old ways".

Severin (1978) then describes the voyage he undertook with two others, although there were apparently crew changes at times due to illness or injury. In 1976 they sailed the North Atlantic route past the Hebrides and Faroe Islands to Iceland in one summer, then wintered-over. The original text also speaks of stopovers on Islands, although time frames seem designed to reflect theologically meaningful Christian time frames and references to "40 days" (e.g., Jesus fasting 40 days in the wilderness). The next summer, Severin's voyage then passed Greenland, crossed the Davis Strait, and landed on Peckford Island off of the East Coast of Newfoundland. The boat had survived the trip although covered in barnacles, with the only damage being some to the hull from pack ice encountered along the way. As concluded by King (2020), "A successful voyage of course doesn't *prove* that Irish monks came to North America a thousand years before Columbus, but it does show that they *could have* using the technology available to them". Tim Severin apparently died at his home in West Cork Ireland in December 2020 (The Irish Times, 2020).

Where was the 570 A.D. Wood Found on OI?

The OI wood was found in an interesting part of the swamp just North of the road along the swamp. According to projected maps and research of Ian Spooner, the swamp was not always cut off from the sea. But in ancient times and with changes in sea-levels, the "swamp" was once open to the sea, with a small tidal inlet in the South East corner facing the sea, and the West side of what is now the swamp above sea level. What viewers saw on the COOI show was wood including this piece being found just West of where this South East Inlet would have been. That could be on what would have then been "shore" of the inlet of the time, although that would need to be confirmed with Dr. Spooner and Steve Guptill the GPS guru. And of course other wood found all in the same area of interest with interesting dates. I can not speak to this one: it is an area of potential inquiry.

Conclusions

The Lagenas and Team are commended for their deep appreciation of History, Science, and so many other areas of inquiry. To draw “Conclusions” is something all viewers of the Search want handed to them in a tidy bundle, but Oak Island is a messy and mysterious History. So let me draw some conclusions that come from this paper and reflect on others:

1. Was the Voyage of St. Brendan even possible? I believe the extraordinary work of Tim Severin shows it was using craft made as much as possible from that time. May he rest in peace and stand at eye level with Thor Heyerdahl. No doubt Severin had telecommunications and navigation materials St. Brendan did not have, so while the vessel was made “the old way”, he had resources they would not have had. They only had God and faith. For devout Monks, that may have been enough.
2. Does the text of The Voyage of Brendan make sense? Through the eyes of 570 AD, some things observed in a Northern Atlantic route can be explained, some mix in Monasticism doctrine and theology. Note that Tim Severin took the Northern Atlantic route. While the ships had sails and oars, it is assumed water ocean currents would play a significant role.
3. Was St. Brendan on Oak Island? This will never be proven scientifically. All we have right now is circumstantial evidence of a piece of wood being found in the swamp carbon-dated to around 570 A.D. that match the dates of the Voyage of Brendan. If it was cut with an iron axe, that rules out Mi'kmaq. It can never be “proven” St. Brendan was on Oak Island, but it is said St. Brendan took supplies to repair or make more boats on the Voyage. Such a stick could be leftovers from such an activity. If you look at pictures of Tim Severin’s recreated boat, it consisted of hardwood straps similar in width and shape to that piece of wood.
 If the wood can be identified, it may well be a hardwood such as Oak for maximum strength. If Oak, it would be important to know if it is *Quercus petraea* or Irish Oak, which is found throughout Ireland, Britain, and in some places in Europe. Oak indigenous to Canada and Oak Island is *Quercus rubra* which is Northern Red Oak. Either way, it could be a piece of a broken vessel being repaired or scraps from a repair with local wood. It is only the date that really matters.
4. What is the real meaning of the Voyage of St. Brendan for Oak Island and this paper? The beauty of the answer is not what you are thinking. It does not matter that it will never be known if he was the first European to set foot on some part of North America. It does not matter if St. Brendan can not be “proven” to be on Oak Island (although I would be all in on that piece of wood). It does not matter if he hid in a Monastery and dreamed this whole Voyage

story. What matters is that it is the first known record of a “Land to the West” of North America, real or imagined. Published in 900 AD but known long before that, Brendan’s close ties to Norse would have been shared and they too explored and settled Lands to the West. All we have left from these two events is that the Norse archeologically is a fact from L’Anse aux Meadows. The Norse did make it to a place they called “Vinland”, land of grapes, and in the “Promised Land” of St. Brendan, they were given grapes. In other words, real, unreal, or misinterpreted, The Voyage of St. Brendan is the first European record of a Land to the West, a land steeped in deep religious meaning. To repeat, The Voyage of St. Brendan is the first mention in European History of a Land to the West. The Vikings followed his lead, proven archeologically. But only to North America, not necessarily Oak Island.

5. The Dark Ages of Oak Island. So we have these known stories of St. Brendan and Viking Sagas, and then NOTHING until Christopher Columbus “Discovering America” in Caribbean Islands for the Spanish, and John Cabot actually landing on the mainland of North America and “claiming” what is now Canada for the English. Then Champlain making claims for the French down the St. Lawrence. And then all the conflicts and piracy to follow. I call this the Dark Ages with respect to Oak Island History, because surely Humankind did not “forget” St. Brendan and the Viking Saga’s tales about a Land to the West for 500 years. The “Land claim game” was on in the late 1400s early 1500s. But soon thereafter, on Oak Island, there is evidence of Spanish, English, French, and Portugese presence, but by this account, in the 1600s and 1700s. And all in complete secrecy: no records they were ever there pre-Money Pit “Discovery” 1795. Whereas COOI cast members get excited when artifacts are pre-1795, many get excited when they address this mysterious time period pre-Columbus. Artifacts like the lead cross and some carbon-dated wood. No wonder there has been scrutiny and controversy over Henry Sinclair and Templars, who actually fit into this pre-Columbus time frame.

6. What were “others” looking for? They were not looking for St. Brendan or Vikings, something must have happened in the “Dark Ages” time frame. Three colonial powers at various times wandering around Oak Island for whatever reason without records of doing so: why did this happen? Dates of Oak Island artifacts have actually shown this is the time frame of this searching for what remains to this day unknown. The role of religion needs to be considered. Even if you can not get your head around The Voyage of St. Brendan, it points to a religious pilgrimage “to the West” of Europeans to a place seen as Holy. One would imagine religious zealots would be motivated to find this place St. Brendan called “The Promised Land”. Templars were active during this time

frame, and certainly had the religious fanaticism and capability to make such a voyage. And keep a secret. And know of Brendan's story. And know Viking activity.

7. Whereas we often have theories in search of an artifact, sometimes we have artifacts in search of a theory, or at least an idea. My goal was to draw attention to The Voyage of St. Brendan given it took place around the same carbon-date as an iron axe-cut piece of wood revealed in the swamp in this season of COOI: 570 AD.

I would like to close with an old Irish Blessing, because, well, why not? Plus I write this on St. Patrick's Day:

*"May you have all the happiness and luck that life can hold—
and at the end of your rainbows may you find a pot of gold."*

The pot of gold is of course not literal. The "gold" is putting the pieces of History together in a story that makes sense and with at least some evidence of possible reality. Such a story, if supported, will enrich our lives. The OI search is sometimes for the "pot of gold", but increasingly turning to an understanding of History, gold or no gold. History is Gold. But a harder pull, even if by oxen. Oh there is evidence of oxen on OI. And evidence of Gold in groundwater. And Silver. It kinda gets your attention.

Notes

This report was written and revised throughout season 9 of the COOI. Teresa Pendleton is a brilliant background OI researcher thanked for her comments on a draft. Dr. Doug Symons is a Psychology Professor with a science background at Acadia University, Wolfville NS, B4N 2R6, Canada, and can be contacted at doug.symons@acadiau.ca.

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