

Imagine the Word: Art and Theology

St. Brendan was an Irish monk living in the 6th century. According to legend, he and fourteen monks set sail from Ireland in a small ship known as a coracle or *curragh*, in search of the legendary "Island of the Blessed." The details of his fantastic journey, recorded in the 9th-century tale, the *Navagatio*, or "The Voyage of St. Brendan," survive in 120 manuscripts and was immensely popular in Medieval times. The story is a spiritual odyssey, similar to those of the Greek *Ulysses*, the Latin *Aeneid* and later Arthurian legends of the search for the Grail. It includes several charming episodes, such as the time Brendan and the other monks stopped on an island to celebrate Easter Mass. But as soon as they lit a fire, the island started to move. Running back to the ship, Brendan and his companions see that they had landed not on an island but on the back of a whale! All told, his seven-year voyage took Brendan and company to Scotland, England, Iceland and Greenland, and perhaps even North America! Below are medieval illustrations and modern monuments to the great journey.



St. Brendan and crew celebrate Easter on a whale.

Whales: Anonymous after Hendrick Goltzius, Stranded Whale at Zandvoort, 1594



St. Brendan and his disciples letting the Spirit blow them to their place of resurrection. Icon writer unknown.



Brendan and his monks' ship is carried by a giant fish in a German manuscript.



Saint Brendan, 484-577, figurative map of St. Brendan's legendary voyage; shows Mass being said on the back of a whale



St. Brendan by Edward Reginald Frampton (1872-1903). 1908

This painting portrays St Brendan on one of his voyages when he meets Judas who, for a good act during his lifetime, is allowed one hour's release from hell each Christmas Eve."



St Brendan the Navigator Catholic Church, Ormond Beach, Florida



Statue of St. Brendan on Great Samphire Island, Fennit, Ireland

In keeping with the tradition of the Fianna, Brendan is depicted as following their battle strategy - *glún le glaoi agus troig le taca* (knee bent toward the battle tumult, rear foot against a support, so there could be no retreat); leaning into a force 10 storm, like those he must often have faced at sea on his own travels, with his cloak blowing out behind him, grasping the Gospel, pointing out to sea and urging ever forward to spread the word of God.



St. Brendan the Navigator, Knock Shrine, County Mayo, Ireland (part of three-part monument to Saints Patrick, Kevin and Brendan)



Bantry Bay, County Cork, Ireland

"Believed to be one of the earliest explorers to North America, St. Brendan stands upright on his ship with hands stretched forward to receive what challenges God has laid before him."