

St. Brendan the Navigator



What if someone said that he saw a person with a pig head running around? Chances are he is a liar, right? What if that person was someone trustworthy, say Honest Abe Lincoln (the man did walk through a snowstorm just to return a library book)?

That is the problem we have with today's story. St. Brendan is a monk that started many churches in the early 500s. Some of them still exist today. He is a person from history that would, at first glance, seem to be trustworthy. However, there is one journey that he made that seems to be a bit of a stretch to be believable. One reason for this is that the accounts of this journey were written down in the 1200s and *may* have been a bit stretched.

Here it goes:

St. Brendan, after many years of devoted service to God, is visited by an angel. This could happen for one of two reasons, either the angel is happy with him and wants to show him paradise, or the Isle of the Blest (which, incidentally, Spaniards named Brazil after) or the angel is mad at him because he burned a book because it had a truth about creation that Brendan didn't believe. Either way, the angel says (basically), "Go west, young man. Go west."

So off Brendan and a few of his favorite monks go in a little boat out to sea. The accounts of his journey have him seeing all kinds of wondrous things, such as swine headed men, an island of fire giants that hurl fire at them (well, duh, what else would a fire giant hurl), columns of crystal rising up to the sea, and a large fish named Jasconious that they mistook for an island until it swam down when they tried to build a fire on it.

You know, like in *Pinocchio*.

Eventually he winds up on land. His monks explore for 40 days and can find no end to the land. The angel then tells them to go home and they load up their boats with strange fruits and jewels (fruits are strange, not the jewels) and off they go.

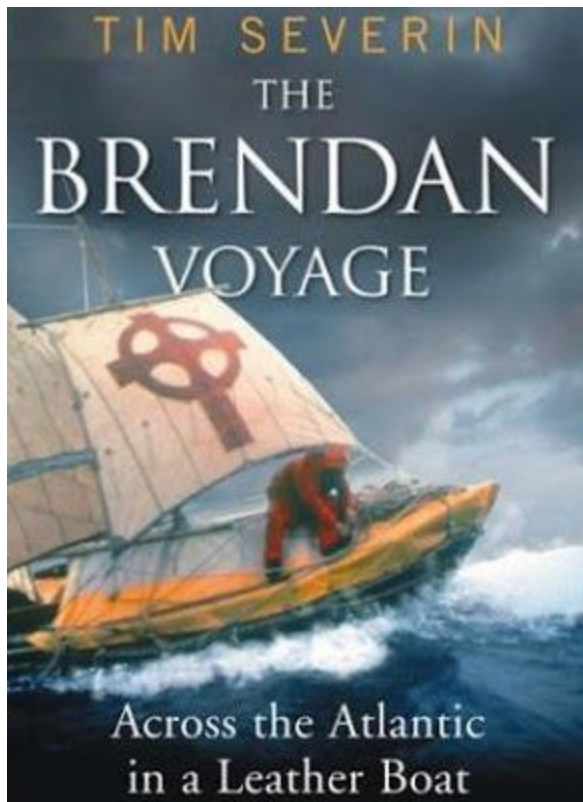


Great story and widely believed for a while. Many maps included St. Brendan's Isle (in various places, of course). It is even said that Columbus studied St. Brendan before his trip in hopes to land on the isle to stock up on supplies (remember, everyone knew that the world was round in Columbus's day - the problem was that it was too big to sail completely around (and would have been if not for America in the

way)). By Columbus discovering America (yeah, yeah, I know that Native Americans were here first), people then questioned whether or not Brendan's Isle was indeed America. Could America have been discovered as early as 521 AD?

In later centuries, we grew wiser and said that it was a bunch of baloney. Fire giants - pshaw! Even if all the stories were added later, he still couldn't have sailed in the North Atlantic in those little cow hide boats that Irish monks loved to sail in so much. Poor St. Brendan was reduced to being a fiction, a legend, a fairy tale - but not to everyone.

Many historians looked at it as just that - fantastic and nothing more. Just fiction. To the die-hards who wanted to believe it, they would merely say, even if you could explain all the mythical creatures, you still have the problem of an Irish curraugh (a canoe-esque type boat) being able to make it across the North Atlantic. Cannot be done. Historian Tim Severin said it could. Nobody believed him, so he set out to prove it.



Severin is one cool guy. He regularly risks his life retracing legendary voyages. He had already retraced Marco Polo's trip and later went on to retrace the Odyssey, Sinbad's voyage, and even searched for Moby Dick. He could not pass this one up. So in the 1970s, he and a few buddies built a boat, in the same manor that St. Brendan and his monks would have.

Upon finishing the leather and wood boat, he christened it *Brendan* and blessed it with the following chant: "Bless this boat, O True Christ/Convey her free and safe across the sea.../To go to the land of promise is your right/ You are like a guide of Brendan's time/Guide our boat now."

During his voyage, he found many things that was comparable to St. Brendan's story. Brendan mentioned seeing God's Stepping Stones - Severin found the Hebrides, the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland. Brendan wrote of crystal columns rising from the sea - Severin

found icebergs. Brendan had encounters with fire giants hurtling flames from their forge - Severin found volcanoes erupting in Iceland. Brendan had moving islands

Name: _____

like sea monsters - Severin said that whales often came and swam steadily beside the boat (maybe interested in the cowhide the boat was made of). Eventually Severin made it to America, proving that such a voyage was possible and moving Brendan out of myth and back into possible reality.

Borrowed from Bubo's Blog: <http://www.bubosblog.blogspot.com>

Answer the questions below on your own sheet of paper:

- _____ 1. What is the purpose of this article?
 - a. to entertain
 - b. to explain the dangers of sailing in the early ADs
 - c. to tell an interesting historical event
 - d. to bore the life out of high school seniors
- _____ 2. After reading the article, you can assume that the author:
 - a. absolutely does not believe that Brendan could have done
 - b. believes that maybe it could have happened, but probably did not
 - c. thinks it is quite plausible that this happened
- _____ 3. The angel that charges Brendan with this mission is:
 - a. pleased with St. Brendan
 - b. angry with St. Brendan
 - c. we are not told which one
 - d. I zoned out and missed the whole angel thing
- _____ 4. St. Brendan was, for the most part, discredited because:
 - a. people are suspicious of religiously inspired stories
 - b. he reported seeing some pretty wild things
 - c. he was found out to be a liar in other excursions
 - d. haters gonna hate
- _____ 5. On the first page, the line, "You know, like in *Pinocchio*." is an example of:
 - a. an allusion
 - b. a metaphor
 - c. verbal irony
 - d. symbolism
- _____ 6. Severin found that Brendan's columns were probably:
 - a. volcanos
 - b. whales
 - c. icebergs
 - d. he found nothing to support Brendan's column claims