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# Where were Middle Gaelic *Glenn na Leóman* and *Inis Salutóiris*?

An eleventh-century poem on Brendan's pilgrimages has recently been edited by Professor Thomas Owen Clancy, who draws attention to its outstanding interest and numerous problems. Earlier scholars saw the poem, beginning *Mochen, mochen, a Brénaind* 'Welcome, welcome, Brendan', and surviving in the Book of Leinster and Book of Uí Mhaine, as from a lost life of the saint.[1] But Clancy rejects that. He dissociates the poem from St Brendan almost entirely, taking it as a poem of welcome to an Irish king, or perhaps abbot, addressed allusively as 'Brendan', who had links with Clonfert (St Brendan's foundation), and who made (and returned from) a pilgrimage to Rome, Mount Zion, the Jordan, and even Taprobanê or Sri Lanka.[2] This amazing journey included *fuirech ic hÍ* 'staying in Iona', which supplies a convenient link with a journal of Scottish history, especially as it also helps shed light on the Latin life of St Serf of Culross.

Clancy has the advantage of two previous editions with commentary.[3] Yet the text still offers difficulties. This note discusses two of them, in stanzas three and seven (in Clancy's edition):

> *Dochúad co Glend na Leóman,*
> > *fúar mór tend sech cech n-érlam,*
> *fota úad ata m'ítto*
> > *im do thíchtu, im do thérnam.*

'You have gone to the Lions' Glen, you have found great hardship, more than every patron saint. Far is it from my desire, with regard to your coming and going.'

> *I trebaid Gréc ro gabais,*
> > *díb feraib déc dochúadais*
> *is mór n-insi ro fhégais*
> > *im Insi Salutóiris.*

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[1] J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929), 418.

[2] T. O. Clancy, 'Brendan's European Tour: The Middle Irish Poem *Mochen, Mochen, A Brénaind* and the Changing Nature of Pilgrimage in the Eleventh Century', in *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, ed. G. S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden, 2006), 35-52.

[3] Kuno Meyer, 'Ein mittelirisches Gedicht auf Brendan der Meerfahrer', *Sitzungsberichte der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 25 (1912), 436-43; H. P. A. Oskamp, 'Mochen, Mochen, A Brénaind', *Éigse* 13 (1969–70), 92-8.

'In the dwellings of the Greeks you have stayed, you have come
with twelve men; many the islands you have seen, around the Isle
of the Saviour.'

The text of stanza three's first two lines is clear, except for *érlam*
'patron saint', which is Meyer's emendation (accepted by Oskamp and
Clancy) for Leinster's *erdam* 'porch, vestibule' (considered meaningless
by Meyer) and Uí Mhaine's *eram* (also meaningless). Clancy suggests
that the Glen of Lions can perhaps be explained from a Latin life of St
Brendan. This tells how, after St Brendan met St Gildas, he went into the
wilderness and encountered terrifying lions, which at once became mild
and followed him like pet dogs: *sicut canes domestici solent dominos suos
sequi*.[4] Although it is true that the 'Glen of Lions' comes in the poem after
a reference to Brittany, site of a famous monastery of St Gildas, there are
difficulties. The pilgrim's route (unlike the saint's) took him in another
direction, across Europe to the Mediterranean and the East. A different
explanation thus not only makes better sense, but removes the need to
emend *erdam*.

The argument is as follows. Amongst the places seen by the pilgrim
were Rome and Tours; and pilgrims going from northern France to Rome
normally passed Lake Geneva and then went south over the Great St
Bernard Pass, thereafter following the old Roman road to Aosta, Vercelli,
and beyond. 'The Great St Bernard was much frequented in Roman times
and the route was often followed by pilgrims. At Aosta, the traveller
found himself safe from the terrors of the Alpine passes.'[5] These included
robbers, bears, wolves, avalanches, exhaustion, and hypothermia. In
France and Italy special *hospitalia Scottorum* were founded for Irish
pilgrims, who came in such numbers that Walafrid Strabo (d.849)
described pilgrimage as almost second nature to the Irish.[6] The route
across France to Rome over the Great St Bernard also left a mark on
English poetry in the form of the Vercelli Book, which surely belonged to
a senior ecclesiastic taking that route (and *not* one of the streams of
ordinary pilgrims he would pass), but was left behind in Vercelli for
reasons unknown.[7]

What, however, has this Alpine pass do with a 'Glen of Lions'?
Pilgrims travelling southwards to the Great St Bernard Pass skirted Lake
Geneva, known to the Romans as *Lemannus Lacus* and to speakers of
French as *lac Léman*, a form somewhat shakily related to Welsh *llwyf*

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[4] *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1910), i, 142.

[5] G. Hartwell Jones, *Celtic Britain and the Pilgrim Movement* (London, 1912), 72.

[6] Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), 40.

[7] Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), 116-17.

'elm' and Scottish Gaelic *leamhan* 'elm'.[8] If *Lemannus* was used of the region of the Upper Rhône and Val d'Entremont by which travellers reached the pass (8,100 feet up), this might account for *Glenn na Leóman*, 'Glen of Lions'. *Glenn* certainly describes the deep-cut Val d'Entremont, scooped out by a ancient glacier; and Romance *Léman* might by false etymology be taken as Middle Irish 'of lions', especially if one read it not as *Leóman* but *Léoman*, attested as a genitive plural form 'of lions' in the epilogue to *Félire Oengusso*.[9]

If so, the poem's mysterious 'Glen of Lions' vanishes. This also permits a *Rettung* for Leinster's *erdam* 'porch, vestibule'. Middle Irish *airdam* means 'any extraneous building attached to a larger one'. In the Annals of Ulster under entries for 996 and 1007, and in the entry for 1156 in the Annals of the Four Masters, the term *airdam* is used for buildings attached to other buildings.[10] Porches and vestibules are constructed for temporary shelter. This suits the context of travel. Even modern pilgrims or trekkers find temporary shelter useful in a biting wind or a snowstorm. But in medieval Switzerland such places may have been hard to find. That allows a translation of *fúar mór tend sech cech n-érdam* as 'you have found great hardship beyond every porch', i.e., you travelled on mountain slopes and elsewhere far from human habitation, without a porch or rough shed by a greater building to provide refuge from bad weather. This seems to make more sense than does 'you have found great hardship, more than every patron saint'. The relevance of 'patron saint' is not obvious; and why should patron saints suffer more than other saints? We may note in passing as regards the metrics of the passage that *sech* (which can be used with verbs of motion) probably lenites, as in Old Irish *sech thenlach* 'beyond the hearth'.[11] Lenition of the initial of *cech* is therefore perhaps taken as running together with the final of *sech*.

The metre of the poem strengthens the case for Leinster's reading *erdam*. Since the word rhymes with *thérnam*, it must have a long vowel. Although it is true that initial Irish *air-*, *aur-*, *er-*, and *ir-* are usually short, *érdam* appears thus at least once (in *The Vision of Mac Con Glinne*).[12] On this basis one may and perhaps must read *érdam* in the poem. If these arguments can be accepted, they remove lions (rare in European glens) and patron saints from the text. They provide instead an image of a steadfast Irish king, or perhaps abbot, and his party in the Alps, above the

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[8] Patrick Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor* (Oxford, 2006), 83.
[9] *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1913–76) [hereafter *DIL*], s.v.; Rudolph Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin, 1946), 214.
[10] *DIL*, s.v.
[11] Thurneysen, *Grammar of Old Irish*, 530.
[12] *DIL*, s.v.

8,000-foot contour, doughtily advancing towards Rome despite the bitter cold of such heights, even in summer.

Now for *inis Salutóiris* in stanza seven. Crucial here is a life of Patricia, a seventh-century Byzantine saint. On a journey by sea she fell ill when close to Naples, and was taken to die on an island called *Insula Salvatoris* 'where the body of our Lord was and is honoured, so that the place has taken from the church the name of Salvator.[13] This is identified as the small island of Megaris, off the rocky ridge and headland that divides modern Naples in two. The villa of Lucullus, the enemy of Pompey and fabulous epicurean, was sited there. It was long the home of the boy-emperor Romulus Augustulus, once he was deposed. Having had a luxurious villa and a monastery, the islet then became the location for a castle: when the Normans captured Naples in about 1130 they fortified it with the Castello dell' Ovo.[14] This is still one of the sights of Naples. With Vesuvius in the background, it features in countless tourist postcards; and the monastery preceding it would also be familiar to travellers.

Eleventh-century Naples, like much of southern Italy, was ruled by the Byzantine Empire. Yet Constantinople's political and ecclesiastical authority there was under threat, especially once Norman attacks had begun in mid-century. Nevertheless, the churches of southern Italy remained Greek in discipline and custom.[15] As for the Greek language, this survived the Norman Conquest by more than eight centuries. It was spoken in Apulia (the 'heel' of Italy) as late as 1807, in Calabria (the 'toe') to the 1950s and after.[16] This suits the poet's 'In the dwellings of the Greeks you have stayed, you have come with twelve men; many the islands you have seen, around the Isle of the Saviour.' Naples was a natural place to stop for any Mediterranean traveller, and the monastery of its *insula Salvatoris* doubly so for pilgrims. From it might be seen Capri and other islands. With Naples under Byzantine rule, the 'dwellings of the Greeks' were hence rather nearer to West Europeans than they are now.

That concludes analysis of these two place-names in the poem. If correctly located, they sharpen our focus on the travels of the so-called 'lord of Clonfert', addressed as *rí ruirech* 'king of overkings', who was a powerful ruler from Ulster or Connacht, whether king or abbot. (If he were a king from north-west Ulster, the *Ailech* mentioned with Iona in the poem's eighth stanza would be his traditional stronghold of Grianán Oiligh, a hillfort five miles west-north-west of Londonderry.) But these

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[13] R. L. Poole, 'Monasterium Niridanum', *English Historical Review* 36 (1921), 540-5.

[14] Adrian Murdoch, *The Last Roman: Romulus Augustulus and the Decline of the West* (Stroud, 2006), 82-6, plate 5.

[15] R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 68-9.

[16] Roberto Weiss, 'The Greek Culture of South Italy in the Later Middle Ages', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 37 (1951), 23-50.

two names also shed light on the twelfth-century life of Serf or Servanus, associated with Culross and the culdees of Loch Leven, Scotland, who (despite supposed links with St Kentigern) is now dated to the seventh century rather than the sixth.[17]

St Serf (which Jackson derived from Gaelic *serb* 'bitter', though Macquarrie's discussion shows others relate it to Latin *Servanus*) is a shadowy figure, and historians say little good of his Latin life.[18] It gives Serf a fabulous oriental ancestry and breathtaking ecclesiastical career (including a period as pope) before he settled down in Fife as the ecclesiastical authority of Culross. Nevertheless, the poem on Brendan clarifies two references in the life. The first is its 'isle of the Saviour', located in the Mediterranean somewhere between Constantinople and Rome. Clancy hesitantly suggests it was Patmos, off Asia Minor (cf. Revelation 1:9). Yet we have already argued that it was the isle of Megaris by Naples, which would be better known to seafarers bound for Rome, who put in at Naples just as St Paul put in at Puteoli (Acts 28:13) eight miles west of it. As a monastic site, the islet in the Bay of Naples would naturally appear in the life of a Scottish saint like Serf, as it does in that of a Byzantine one like Patricia.

The life of Serf also mentions his struggles *ad uallem qui dicitur Nigra, siue uallis Bestiarum* somewhere in the Alps. Clancy compares this to *Glenn na Leóman* or *Léoman*. Again, there is reason to take this as Val d'Entremont, north of the Great St Bernard. Lions in the Alps, too much even for the Scottish hagiographer's credulity, presumably mean we have 'valley of beasts' and not *Glenn na Léoman*. As for 'Black Valley', that also fits Val d'Entremont, a glacial chasm on the north side of a pass, which leaves its upper parts in perennial shadow. One might say further that the crossing of the Great St Bernard, on the normal route between Scotland and Rome, would be an apt locale for the tribulations of St Serf. As they panted in thin air over a mile and a half up, ecclesiastics would not forget it quickly. Hence its sinister reputation.

It is hoped that the above analysis of place-names, both of them known to Irish and Scots on the path to Rome, will prompt further research. A special point is the very identity of the *rí ruirech* to whom the poem is addressed. He must have been a powerful individual, possessing links with the west of Ireland and Iona, but also with Tours (described as *fot ainiuch* 'under your protection' in stanza eight, presumably no empty phrase). Clancy makes a strong case for identifying him as Máel Rúanaid

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[17] Simon Taylor, 'Place-names and the Early Church in Eastern Scotland', in *Scotland in Dark Age Britain*, ed. Barbara Crawford (Aberdeen, 1996), 93-110.

[18] K. H. Jackson, 'The Sources for the Life of St Kentigern', in *Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. Nora Chadwick (Cambridge, 1958), 273-357, at 295-6; Alan Macquarrie, '*Vita Sancti Servani*', *IR* 44 (1993), 113-52, at 138, 146.

úa Maíl Doraid, king of Cenél Conaill (the region of Tyrconnell in County Donegal). An entry for 1026 in the Annals of Innisfallen styles this ruler as 'King of the North', and describes him as making a pilgrimage in that year to Clonfert, Iona, and Rome. These places all figure in our poem. The poem may have been proleptic, that is, written before the event, like a 'famous expedition poem' addressed to Eoin Mac Suibhne, which describes graphically a voyage that 'almost certainly never took place'.[19] If the poem could be accepted as addressed to Máel Rúanaid úa Maíl Doraid, it would solve many problems.

In any case, few Irish poems have the appeal of this one: an address to a stalwart eleventh-century Gaelic ruler, imagined as seeing Brittany, the Alps, Rome, Naples, Jerusalem, and the Jordan, while making a fabulous pilgrim's journey from Ireland to Ceylon.

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[19] See Donald E. Meek, '"Norsemen and Noble Stewards": the MacSween poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1998), 1-49. Reference supplied by Thomas Clancy, whom the writer thanks for many suggestions incorporated above, as also the anonymous referee of this paper.